

The Critical Journal

of the BSFA

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

CONTENTS

- 3 **Editorial: The View from Erasmus** *by Andrew Butler*
- 4 **ΦΦ** *Letters to Vector*
- 4 **Altias: The SF Steppenwolf** *by Mark Greener*
- 8 **Addressing The White Goddess** *Mark Greener interviews Adam Roberts*
- 12 **Reading 'Red': Portrait of a Fairy Tale** *by Andrew Butler*
- 18 **First Impressions** *Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger*

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Artist's concept of Galileo entry probe separation from heatshield (JPL ref. 4S30599); original artwork by C. Kallas; Date: Mar 22, 1989.

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Editorial

The View from Erasmus

Sometimes I think I'm living in the future, sometimes I think I'm living in the past. Yesterday (which means two months ago, or maybe three), I was walking home from work and noticed a crowd of young youths huddling in the shadows. Smoking dope? Shooting up? Drinking alcopops?

Nope, they were transfixed by an expensive looking laptop.

I'm not entirely sure whether they were in a wireless reception zone – it's just too far from the Andy and Robert pub (known to the rest of the world as The Two Sawyers) but presumably they were swapping MP3 files, illicit tracks ripped off from dubious sites, or maybe even sharing downloaded porn. As anti-social behaviour goes, it's not too bad. But clearly their machine was much faster than the one I'd been using earlier that day.

I used to have a reasonably fast machine, although sometimes it chugged a little, and the screen was always that little bit out of focus. The real bane of my life was the printer, which would get halfway through printing out a sheet of A4 and decided it had had enough and would shoot out the paper. That was in a shared office, which afforded me a rather good view of the back end of the cathedral, particularly when standing on the desk trying to reach my bookshelves. The view of the cathedral enabled me to slip a gag about getting rid of turbulent priests into an article, although strictly speaking I should change that now I've moved offices.

I've moved from the Powell Building, named in honour of the Canterbury film maker best known for *Peeping Tom*, *A Matter of Life and Death* and *A Canterbury Tale*. The latter should not be confused with the poem written by Chaucer which, splendidly bawdy that it is, doesn't actually get its characters to the cathedral, let alone back to Southwark. Geoffrey himself, according to a leaflet about local literary worthies, must have (or didn't) passed through Canterbury on his way to the continent. If he didn't go via somewhere else. If he went. That doesn't stop us having a Chaucer Hotel or a Canterbury Tales experience, mind you, and while I'm on the subject, I hardly feel the Church of England's reputation is being done any good by having most of the local halls of residence named after former Archbishops. "There's trouble up't Runcie..."

Now I'm in the Erasmus Building, with a view of what we proudly describe as the only listed wall surrounding a university in Britain. Technically speaking, I think my office is actually in a World Heritage Site, and so I ought to be more careful about filing. Beyond the wall are the remains of Augustine's abbey. I'm disappointed to discover that this is nothing to do with the wonderfully named St Augustine of Hippo, who wrote at great length about masturbation and argued that evil entered into men via their genitals. Instead it's named for St Augustine of ... Canterbury. He didn't seem to be trying hard enough, I feel.

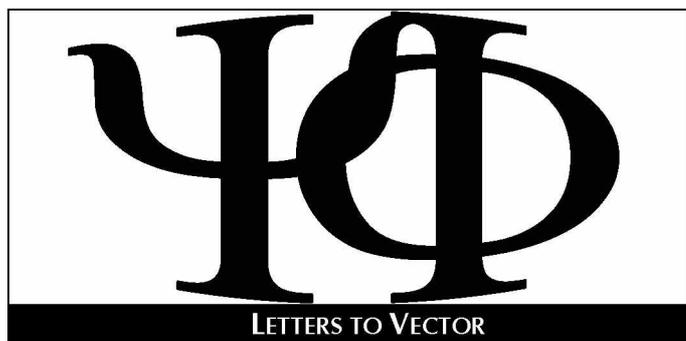
In the office, which is all my own, there is a very slow computer. So slow that it sprang into life after an hour to print out a page of a PowerPoint presentation I wanted a hard copy of. I know the file was big, but not that big. The second and third pages are yet to emerge. I'm left with the sense that I've been sold a lemon.

The office belonged to someone who went to a better place (Birmingham, since you ask), and my memory of the computer was of a sleek, shining machine, with stereo speakers, top of the range memory, rewritable DVD drive, memory stick, enough USB ports to dock a whole flotilla of boaty devices at... Given he was Italian it was beautifully designed and placed on the desk, and came complete with its own internal espresso machine, which operated via a heat sink and gave a choice of three beans and several roasts. You could grate Parmesan down the edge of the monitor.

The machine I have now is a paperweight. It appears to be running Windows NT, and isn't managing particularly well with that. When I log on it offers me a choice of NT or NT, chugs through a blue screen, and asks me if I want to download a local profile. Having tried that, it insults me about some process having failed, sniggers at my roaming profile, and only then lets me log in. I wouldn't mind getting the warning about running out of virtual memory and having to close applications if I'd been able to open applications in the first place. And I've had more abnormal terminations than you can shake a long pointy thing made of wood at.

I get the feeling that that glorious machine has been taken and swapped with some reconditioned hand-me-down. It sits there on my desk and hums, menacingly, because it doesn't have enough memory to know the words. It even takes an age to get to the point where you can turn it off – indeed you seem to be able to turn it off at any point with no ill-effects. It's probably even being bullied by the few machines still running 3.1 on the network.

On the whole, I'd rather be out on the streets, with the ringtones burners, the seedy CD-ROM swappers, the txt msg psse. I guess as long as they're playing Grand Theft Auto, the car owners of Canterbury are relatively safe. I know your character can be sent to prison as part of the game, although I'm not sure if you released after three months for good behaviour or if you have to play the whole sentence. Perhaps you even sent on safari for some virtual rehabilitation. Some of the others, meanwhile, are swapping copies of MicroShaft Pusher (enabling them to calculate prices per ounce or gram in an instant, recommended cutting levels of heroin, and pills at a glance) – the software is all pirated of course. You can't trust the dealers these days.



From Sandra Unerman:

I enjoyed the interview with Karen Traviss in *Vector* 237 and I am looking forward to reading her novels. But she has been reading the wrong stuff about dragons. For fantasy fiction with dragons which explores characters and emotions as intriguingly as any science fiction, try Michael Swanwick's *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* or R.A. McAvo's *Tea with the Black Dragon*. Or there is Ursula Le Guin's *The Other Wind* or George R.R. Martin's *Song of Fire and Ice* novels, although I would admit that the dragons play a fairly minor part in those so far. ☐

Karen Traviss responds: I admit I have a bad attitude to dragons and Sandra's point is well made. But I still feel that writing about dragons should involve a licensing system, administered by me, with a £100 processing fee, cheques made payable to K Traviss, c/o the Dragon Pate and Pie Company, Geneva. Or I'll take cash.

From Neal Asher:

Reading the Karen Traviss interview was a joy. It was so refreshing to hear from an author who does not have pretensions of being an important artiste, and who is not po-faced about the serious literary work they are producing. I was glad to see she does not feel the need to impress with her obscure literary intelligentsia influences, and shows no danger of disappearing up her own fundament, as so many do. Any writer who lists *Bill the Galactic Hero* as a favourite, apparently enjoys *Babylon 5*, writes books to entertain many rather than impress a few, and is not another pseud who received their left-wing indoctrination in uni and failed to grow out of it, has to be worth reading. I intend to buy some of her books. ☐

Karen Traviss responds: Thank you, sir. That's praise indeed. But what do you mean, 'some of her books'? You can afford all three in MMPB, methinks...

From Chaz Brenchley:

Merely to note – pedant that I am! – that your definition of a blue moon is based on an error perpetrated in *Sky & Telescope* magazine in 1946. It may have become the common currency for this generation, but given that the phrase dates back centuries, I'm not sure that's good enough. Besides, it fails the fundamental test – it ain't rare (although the sums by the good people at <http://www.obliquity.com/astro/bluemoon.html> suggest once every two-and-a-half years, rather than annual). I'd sooner stick to a definition that encompasses a truly rare event that really does make the moon look blue; there's more detail – and much, much more besides – at the site mentioned above, but my *Chambers* defines it as 'when the moon appears to be blue because of dust particles in the atmosphere'. That's good enough for me. What do I know? All I know is that *Chambers* opened a bracket at that point and failed to close it then or later. Sigh.

If the question had been about 'Blue Moon' by Rogers & Hart, now, there I could be authoritative... ☐

AMB responds: Are you questioning the accuracy of the Lemony Snicket calendar, a calendar which on the day of the US election states 'On this day, Americans try to choose the least troublesome candidate for the President of the United States', and one the following day notes, 'Troublesome things tend to remain troublesome no matter how many times you do them'? Shame on you!

The origin of the Blue Moon as extra full moon seems to be sourced to the Maine Farmers' Almanac, which declares the blue moon to be the third in any season which contains four... I checked in my battered Brewers' which describes it as the rare occurrence of the moon turning blue, and gives a date which is clearly unlikely to be the second of a given month.)

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THIS YEAR BRIAN ALDISS WILL BE 80 – MARK GREENER LOOKS BACK AT HIS CAREER SO FAR.

Aldiss: The SF Steppenwolf

by Mark Greener

Sometimes, you can judge a book by its cover. I was about eleven or twelve years old and a voracious reader of anything to do with biology, astronomy and history. But not fiction. I found the novels aimed at my age group patronising, boring and facile. Then I saw a rack of sf books – I knew that *Doctor Who*, my other great passion, was sf. So I glanced at a few and

gambled my allowance on two.

One was by Moorcock. The other novel had an impressive robot rising from a volcano. That book was Aldiss's *Earthworks* (1965) and, with *The Knight of the Swords* (1971), my life was literally and literarily changed. I found the story – a man unwillingly becomes part of an assassination conspiracy to save an

environmentally decimated planet – utterly compelling. *Earthworks* was a revelation. And I'm not alone: as we'll see later, Aldiss opened the eyes of other impressionable readers, some of whom are now noted sf writers themselves.

Thirty years later, Aldiss retains that revelatory potency. Despite reading most of his prolific output, I still never quite know what to expect from a new Aldiss novel. Indeed, I find that some of his most recent books – including *Super-State* (2002) and *Affairs at Hampden Ferrers* (2004) – are among his strongest. So what's the secret of his longevity?

I suspect it's because, for around fifty years, Aldiss has been something of a rarity among sf writers. His work belongs on the shelves alongside Amis, Burgess and Orwell – serious writers who use sf when the narrative demands – rather than beside the space operas or sword and sorcery sagas. He carries on the legacy of Huxley, Wells and Stapledon; writers inspired by the socio-political Zeitgeist rather than feeling confined by the strictures of the pulp tradition or, more recently, the pervasive intellectual and artistic imperialism of films and television. Aldiss's championing of that tradition is one reason why he's not just a great sf writer. He's a great writer. Period.

A brief history of Brian

Brian Wilson Aldiss was born on 18 August 1925 in Dereham, Norfolk, a predominately rural part of England. Life sowed the seeds of his subsequent development as a writer early. In his autobiography, *Twinkling of an Eye*, Brian relates how as a small boy he lived under his mother's psychotic fantasy that she had had a daughter who briefly lived. "It made life hard for me," Brian told me. "I had no choice but to believe it. Yet at the same time and in some way I felt wordlessly I was being deceived. This led me early to the suspicion that the world was not as others pretended: an ideal prescription for a certain kind of sf."

Perhaps literature offered the young Aldiss an emotional and intellectual sanctuary. By the age of four years, Brian was writing and illustrating short stories, which his mother bound in pieces of wallpaper and put on his nursery shelf. As a child, he read Murray Roberts's stories of *Captain Justice* written in the 1930s, Aldous Huxley's novels and essays – which he says "taught me to think" – and all of Hardy's novels over a couple of years. He lapped up Eric Linklater's novels, Freud, art history and later became addicted to Sophocles' plays, particularly *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. Brian believes that this omnivorous reading assisted his literary development. Certainly, diverse influences pervade his writing.

After leaving the army – Aldiss served in the Royal Signals between 1943 and 1947 – he spent almost a decade working as a bookseller in Oxford. His

experiences formed the basis of *The Brightfoot Diaries*, his first book, published in 1955. Aldiss's first sf novel, *Non-Stop* (1958) followed three years later, while he was literary editor of the *Oxford Mail*, one of the city's newspapers.

Non-Stop tells the story of hunter Roy Complain, a member of the Greene tribe, who live in cramped quarters on a generational spaceship. The tribe is fearful of outsiders and discourages speculation about what lies beyond their territory. After a personal tragedy, Complain joins a small group who decide to see what lies "forwards".

Non-Stop is a hugely entertaining action-adventure story. But it also works at a much more profound level. Thought-provoking details pervade the narrative, such as the game Travel-up: a metaphor for our obsession with the trivia and superficial. Indeed, the Greene tribe seems a metaphor for many people in modern society, trapped in a world they do not understand, but are too timid to explore. At heart, *Non-Stop* is myth: a quest for meaning, personal transformation and the reclamation of a birthright. *Non-Stop*, in common with all serious literature, offers an opportunity to reflect on our society and ourselves.

Numerous other books followed and Aldiss became a central figure in the 'New Wave' during the 1960s. His experimental work – such as *Report on Probability A* (1968) and *Barefoot in the Head: A European Fantasia* (1969) – and interest in the ecological concerns reflect some of the intellectual issues that characterised that tumultuous decade. In *Greybeard* (1964), for example, atomic weapons lead to sterility with the elderly inheriting the earth. In *The Dark Light Years* (1964), aliens worship excrement – allowing Aldiss to satirise our values.

"We graduated to the front room – along with the porn" Throughout his career, Aldiss remained closely tuned to political and societal trends. Nevertheless, there's been a marked change in attitudes to sf over the time Aldiss has been writing. "Time was when sf's two central subjects were space travel and nuclear warfare," he remarks. "Now the pictorial has overtaken it; sf movies form a significant part of the universal box office take. You can't help being pleased."

"In the nineteen-fifties, there was a bookshop in Cecil Court, London, where the porn was in the front room and the dirty-mack brigade had to sneak into the back room for the sf," Brian recalls. "At least we have graduated to the front room – along with the porn."

Over that time, Aldiss has had a marked influence on the genre's development generally and on many of the best writers of the generation after Brian in particular. For example, James Lovegrove – the British author of *Worldstorm* and *Untied Kingdom* – told me that: "*Hothouse* [1962] was, along with Bradbury's 'The

I still never quite know what to expect from a new Aldiss novel.

Veldit', one of the stories that turned a ten-year-old who'd always believed sf was something a bit dirty and shabby, a thing to be frowned upon, into a ten-year-old who knew that sf could be, and was, a literary art form. Even now, twenty-eight years on, I can conjure up images of the novel's opening scenes, with the plant/children hybrids racing around the branches of those immense trees, and images of the sentient morel gradually taking over the minds and bodies of the central characters, offering purpose in return for submission. Some books stay with you. *Hothouse's* supernova-saturated jungles are a part of my inner landscape."

Lovegrove adds: "Early Aldiss infected me with a reason to do what I do now, and later Aldiss continues to give me inspiration. The realistic near-future of *Somewhere East of Life: Another European Fantasia* (1994), for instance, is no less impressive and affecting than the imaginistic far future of *Hothouse*. Both show worlds in decay, humankind in decline, a sense of fate and oppression overshadowing everything we do – a vision far removed from fashionable cyberpunk cynicism or the shiny intergalactic false promises of space opera."

Similarly, Adam Roberts – author of *The Snow and Salt*, as well as a leading critic of sf and Reader in Nineteenth-Century Literature at the Royal Holloway University of London – cites Aldiss as an influence. "Aldiss was a writer I read intensely and omnivorously when I was growing up; he helped kindle my love for the genre. Aldiss is a magnificent writer, a genuinely great writer, but he's so productive and so influential that we, in the world of sf, have become blasé about him. We take him for granted; he's so ubiquitously good that we do not even bother to remind ourselves how good he is. A strange and lamentable state of affairs."

Roberts remembers his "astonishment and delight" when he first read *Hothouse*. "I had never read anything like it before; and the sheer brilliant, mind-gripping, sparkling oddness of this book is still there on adult re-reading. Looking at it now in context it seems to me only to grow in stature. It's also a much more thorough-going literary experiment, a bold attempt to rethink what a novel might be, than it is usually given credit for." Adam comments that Aldiss deliberately breaks down the more coherent conventions of 'adventure narrative', "hurling a seething mass of imagery and novelty at the reader, and using [the posthuman protagonist] Gren's humble consciousness as a means of emphasising the mental crush of sensation".

"This sort of hallucinatory writing works because much of the novel is so precise in its delineation of its future environment that it reads as real," Adam adds. "This vividness depends, in large part, on the expertly realised childishness of the posthuman consciousnesses Aldiss creates: indeed, though violent, sexual and

bizarre, *Hothouse* seems to me one of the great evocations of what it is to be a child. Furthermore, Aldiss deconstructs thought itself; a startling and brilliant strategy that goes far beyond the *avant garde* literary tinkering with conventional plot or prose style of the 1960s *nouveau roman*. As the novel dramatises, most of life is unthinking, and there is nothing intrinsic to 'thought' that means it ought to be privileged: it is only one evolutionary strategy amongst many."

As Adam notes, Aldiss is an immensely precise, superlatively careful writer. In some ways, Brian took this precision to its ultimate in the three *Helliconia* novels [1982 to 1985]. Aldiss consulted numerous experts in planetary physics and biology, including James Lovelock who devised the "Gaia" theory. This care makes *Helliconia* a masterpiece, by any criteria.

"*Helliconia* had a juggernaut effect on my sensibilities when I read it in my late teens. I think there is something genuinely 'classic' about this large book," Roberts adds. "One of the things I especially admire is the way it expresses the dialectic between materialism and mysticism. On the one hand, the myriad details are rendered with an extraordinary and vivid sense of verisimilitude, as actual possibilities. On the other, *Helliconia* possesses a dimension of soul, or spirit including an underworld afterlife."

Aldiss unbound

Not content with being one of the most important sf writers, Aldiss is also a major critic of the genre, which he describes as "Hubris clobbered by Nemesis, the lesson sf ought to carry since the early days of H.G. Wells". His history of sf, *Billion Year Spree* (1973, revised, with David Wingrove, as the *Trillion Year Spree* (1986)) is a landmark in the genre's critical development. It's also worth, however, tracking down *The Shape of Further Things* (1970) and the Bram's Head pamphlet *Science as Science Fiction* (1978), both of which illuminate sf's development, idioms and place in modern society.

Some of Aldiss's fiction continues the critical exploration crystallised in *Billion Year Spree*. Aldiss argues that sf formally begins with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). "*Frankenstein, Or The Modern Prometheus*, to give it the full title, has some shades of Gothic: it is, to my belief, a significant point where Enlightenment meets Romantic age," he told me recently.

I've re-read *Frankenstein* once every couple of years, since I was about fourteen. Each time I find something new – and I have a shelf full of critical books on gothic stories. Yet when I re-read *Frankenstein Unbound* (1973) recently, I saw Shelley's novel in a new light.

Aldiss's careful research shines through, illuminating the complexities and subtleties of Shelley's novel and

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the tempestuous relationships that formed the Zeitgeist from which it emerged. Aldiss's Mary comes over as intelligent and attractive as well as intellectually, politically and socially rebellious – a daughter who carries the intellectual and political memes of her parents as much as their genes.

Like its inspiration, *Frankenstein Unbound* offers a powerful warning against scientific Hubris – a telling reinterpretation of the Prometheus myth that's a leitmotiv in much serious sf: "We are suffering from the curse that was Baron Frankenstein's ... by seeking to control too much, we have lost control of ourselves," Aldiss writes. Such insights are as relevant today as they were for Shelley's world, still reeling from science's first tentative steps into areas traditionally considered religion's preserve. Frankenstein's persistence as story, myth and metaphor testifies to its relevance to issues facing us today.

Frankenstein Unbound also perfectly exemplifies Aldiss's brilliance at characterisation. The Baron comes over as a man teetering on the edge of melancholic madness, acerbic and arrogant. In appearance, manner and psychology, Frankenstein is "a man distraught". This masterful characterisation illuminates the first-person narrative in Shelley's original. For example, Victor's fiancée Elizabeth – far from being the paragon of virtue as seen through Victor's eyes – comes over as manipulative, cold and something of a shrew, with "a pinched look about the mouth, which a younger man might have missed". *Frankenstein Unbound* is profound, subtle and moving. In *Science as Science Fiction* Aldiss comments that Frankenstein is an "engaging book written with learning and spirit". That comment applies equally to *Frankenstein Unbound* and, indeed, Aldiss's corpus generally.

Not more angry – more judgemental

Aldiss continues to write some of the most thought-provoking sf today, continuing his exploitation of global socio-politics. *Super-State* is an overtly political sf book in the tradition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), *Brave New World* (1932) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). It is uncompromising, intelligent and provocative; a timely and thought-provoking analysis of the political zeitgeist. Its literary merit ensures that – like those iconic books – it will not date.

Super-State bites and, with pit bull tenacity, holds on to your intellect. Indeed, the strength of that bite, frankly, surprised me. The book carries a punch you'd normally attribute to angry young writers. Aldiss told me that he's "not become angry with age. I am more judgemental."

Super-State contains several plot strands. In one, the

West invades a little Eastern nation and gets a bloody nose. In another, Aldiss offers a somewhat ambiguous view of a united Europe: neither a dystopia nor a utopia, but a flawed actualisation of honourable intent. In others, "good people are helpless under the cloven hoof of history," Brian says.

The "judgement" and anger Aldiss displays in *Super-State* typifies some of his best work, such as *The Dark Light Years*. "It took only a month to write; I secluded myself to live off pork pies, whisky and coffee. The typescript took much longer to correct, not to mention correcting my diet. The guy who proposed that dolphins were as intelligent as humans, having the same brain/body ratio, was the same guy who hauled them out of their natural element, tied them to a lab bench and proceeded to sink electrodes into their brains. My god! What kind of a sensibility was that? There was no general outcry. People thought it was a great idea."

This emotional honesty sets Aldiss apart from many sf writers. For example, in the *Supertoys* (2001) sequence of short stories, an android, David, believes himself to be a real boy. But those closest to him reject David's love. Using man-made creations to explore the nature of humanity is nothing new in sf: consider Frankenstein or *Star Trek's* Data. However, Aldiss achieves an almost unprecedented intensity, poignancy and emotional impact. I've refused to see *AI* just in case it dilutes the original's emotional impact.

Similarly, *Super-State* contains emotionally powerful scenes drawn in vivid detail, allowing you to share the experience. "The vivid scenes in my novels – and you will find them in *Somewhere East of Life*, which marked a turning point for me – are intensely lived: more drawn from imagination than from life in many cases. But I have had a tremendously varied life," Brian says. "This is possibly why few of my books do not have scenes set in foreign lands – *Cities & Stones: A Traveller's Jugoslavia* (1966) and the second two books in the Horatio Stubbs series are set entirely abroad – or have foreigners playing crucial roles, for example *Life in the West* [1980] and *Remembrance Day* [1993]."

In February last year, Aldiss released another brilliant novel that draws on that varied life. *Affairs at Hampden Ferrers* concentrates on people living "humble, humdrum lives". Five years ago, the local paper declared the Oxfordshire village of Hampden Ferrers "absolutely average". Now, the village church – St Clements – is about to celebrate its 1,500th birthday and some of the villagers want to mark the anniversary. Meanwhile, Chinese students, an Italian TV celebrity and several other foreigners arrive in the village. Around the same time, several love affairs break out and St Clements' vicar makes a startling discovery. Suddenly, Hampden Ferrers is anything but average.

"The vivid scenes in my novels ... are intensely lived: more drawn from imagination than from life in many cases."

Affairs is just as powerful as *SuperState*, although it's more subtle, restrained and understated. Perhaps that's why it might be even more subversive. Lies, hypocrisies and petty deceptions pervade the narrative: untruths, ranging from the societal to the mundane, act as *Affairs'* leitmotif.

For instance, in a predominantly secular England, the church remains at the centre of village life. The committee formed to celebrate the anniversary consists of "Jews, atheists, a Hindu and a Chinese lady". Among the committee members only the vicar is Christian – and he knows that the celebration is built on a lie. Fittingly the "poor church, greatly in need of repair, stands like a metaphor for [village] life". Tellingly, when the architectural rescue comes, it's funded with foreign money. "And it's funny, isn't it? Good old funny – we'd die without it!" he says. Certainly, *Affairs* is a comically rich novel.

Brian isn't about to rest on his laurels any time soon. Recently, Aldiss finished *Walcot*, an ambitious novel spanning a hundred years. "*Walcot* represents two years' work," he told me. "It's the history of a family, more particularly of Steve Fielding, over the course of the twentieth century." Puzzles in his life accumulate and Fielding concludes that chance dominates character." Aldiss is also compiling a collection of short stories (*Cultural Breaks*) and contemplating a new omnibus for Penguin to replace the legendary *Penguin Science Fiction Omnibus*, which remained in print for thirty-five years. His *Jocasta* (2004), set in Ancient Thebes, was due to be published near Christmas.

The Steppenwolf in sf

Fittingly, Aldiss has had critical successes outside the genre. Yet Aldiss remains loyal to the genre that made his name. "sf made me; sf has been my lifeblood," he says. It's an ideal form for his writing that he says is "designed for the underdog. sf is an Outsider's literature and I saw myself as a Steppenwolf."

In *Science as Science Fiction*, Aldiss comments that in *Frankenstein* Shelley pleads with us "to get ourselves together, and to unite head and heart in the creative act, to digest our complex world". For almost fifty years, Aldiss's sf has often made the same plea.

In *Science as Science Fiction* Aldiss comments: "sf has all the vital juices in which that act can take place. The act will take place more frequently, to the benefit of all, when the nature of sf is better understood. That understanding, which has to flow from the writers, as well as readers and critics, concerns the new ambiguities of time as well as the ancient craft of story-telling. It is capable of achieving a status by which our epoch can be interpreted anew to itself and light what would otherwise be darkness 'for want of moral faculty'." Brian added recently: "Though it's sometimes a trick to be pro-technology and anti-materialist at the same time..."

Elsewhere in *Science as Science Fiction* Aldiss notes that sf is a "negotiator" between the scientific and the artistic, between the left and right brain. Most people predominately exhibit one side or the other; they are either scientific or artist. SF writers and readers are almost unique in hybridising the two aspects to create a singular chimera. Inevitably this promotes a freedom of thought, a rebellious nature and, therefore, a degree of isolation. (The latter might help explain fandom's appeal.)

Indeed, Aldiss believes that isolation is one theme that pervades his work over the decades. "Although I have engendered a wonderful family – two boys, two girls, all now adult and married to excellent spouses – and I have a truly adorable lady friend, I still regard myself as a Steppenwolf. It's not a pose, but something deeply ingrained".

Long may he continue to explore the isolation that lies at the heart of the human condition for many of us. As Lovegrove concludes: "Aldiss doesn't offer baseless optimism. Instead, he gives us the truth, dispiriting and unpalatable as it may be. That makes him an author, as opposed to a writer, and means his work will live on rather than being consigned to the bargain bin of history where most pop fiction ultimately comes to rest."

This essay first appeared in a slightly different form in the PhilCon 2004 convention booklet – Eds.

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ADAM ROBERTS HAS FOUND TIME TO WRITE NUMEROUS NOVELS, COUNTLESS COLUMNS AND A ROUTLEDGE VOLUME ON SCIENCE FICTION, AS WELL AS OCCASIONALLY (ONE HAS TO PRESUME) CONTINUING HIS UNIVERSITY CAREER (JEALOUS? MOI?). WE THOUGHT IT WAS ABOUT TIME HE SPOKE TO VECTOR

Addressing The White Goddess

Mark Greener interviews Adam Roberts.

Adam Roberts's *The Snow* is one of this year's sf highlights: a compelling, often thought-provoking story, with well-realised characters. And, yes, it has Roberts's trademark high concepts, although sharing the McGuffin with Vector's readers would spoil

it. Suffice to say that *The Snow* is far more than "just" another addition to the recent spate of environmental disaster novels. Roberts is now set for a busy 2005. He's planning a comprehensive critical history of sf and a new novel that is different to anything he's done before.

Of Ballard and Wyndham

As I was reading *The Snow*, it struck me as deliberately written in both the Ballard tradition, where the environment is a metaphor for internal states, and in the Wyndham tradition of human fortitude in the face of disaster. And, of course, it's appeared around the time of spate of 'environmental disaster' films and books. "It's one of those accidents of composition and publication," Adam says. "Usually, I write my novels in a year or less. This one took nearly two years and was accordingly that much more carefully pondered and revised."

Indeed, Adam says that book began as "a riff on a theme by Ballard. I'd re-read the whole of Ballard because a PhD student of mine was working on him. I was struck by how good his 1960s disaster novels were, especially *The Crystal World* and *The Drowned World*. I liked the way he treated his central metaphor as a 'pataphysical compendium rather than as a pofaced allegorical or symbolic 'this is the way the world actually is'. Ballard's earlier novels seem to me almost endlessly fertile, imaginative, wonderfully odd: these are books that creatively wrong foot the reader, and I love that. But I tried to grow the premise in non-Ballardian ways."

Roberts comments that the use of the environment as a metaphor "draws on a lot of associated mythology, which is used both to wrong foot the reader and to build up a variety of arguments that support the more fundamental ideas of the book". The environment acts as an external force to force society and culture to change: to make the known world unknown again. "Humans confine and repel the natural world. So I had it break free again – from a human perspective anyway – to see what changes as a result. I'm not saying *The Snow* 'is' a disaster novel, but the weather and idea of an environmental disaster is more than a catalyst and adds depth to the narrative".

Snow's many colours

The book's leitmotif is not really snow as such, but rather whiteness: as colour, as race, as blankness, as memory. "As I wrote, the resonances of whiteness proliferated by being tied to the concrete situation I had conjured (planet-wide snowfall). I found myself fascinated by, for instance, the way whiteness is opposed both to 'blackness' (especially by racists), and to 'multicolour' (white light broken into rainbow spectra). In both idioms there are senses in which whiteness doesn't exist; but in both the symbolic weight of the terminology is inescapable," Adam comments.

Tellingly, Tira the lead character is non-white and the only character identified by name. These twin narrative devices allow Roberts to make some telling points about

colour and race. To do this, Adam converts the world into a white canvas and reintroduces colour from underneath, the submerged urban environment. "Psychologically, it's interesting that the city, commerce, dirt and darkness is all buried beneath the snow and has to re-emerge," he says. Of course, humanity also need to re-emerge from the cities beneath, or find innovative ways to remain atop of, the snow.

Nevertheless, Adam's discussion of race and colour is deliberately ambiguous. On the one hand, the submergence of colour underscores the causes and creation of racism. Roberts argues that the snow and, by inference, racism is unnatural. On the other, Adam admits that the metaphor "buys into, rather than overturning or forcing a critique, of current attitudes." For example, rather than "reconsider issues of colour, in a negative sense a snow-filled world has removed them."

This ambiguity derives, perhaps, from Roberts's aim – which he largely fulfils – to write about race in a non-polemical narrative. "Because I was writing about race, I had to dramatise the way racism involves an objectification of other people as 'Other,'" he says. "The great science fiction version of Otherness is, naturally, the alien; but if you're going to have an alien you really must (it seems to me) have one that is actually Other, not just a human with funny ears or an extra arm on their torso. The classic sf trope for the encounter with the Alien is, for good reasons, Imperialism. I'm thinking of *The War of the Worlds*, for example: it's not a coincidence that Wells wrote the book while the British Empire was expanding. I could, I suppose, have set the novel in the past, set it among the British imperialism, but I chose to dramatise the more nebulous 'American imperialism' of today."

Roberts also reflects the pervasive nihilism, cynicism and apathy around mainstream politics, even among many of those engaged in political activities, such as the anti-war coalition or the anti-globalisation movement. Many characters in *The Snow* withdraw from the "official" world – itself a political act.

Nevertheless, Adam doesn't consider *The Snow* "to be an especially relativist or even political work". I don't agree. I found his analysis of race and American neo-con imperialism telling and timely. But the political themes are integral in the narrative, rather than being overt. Too often sf books wear their politics on their sleeves: the political agenda is tacked onto the story rather than being integral to the narrative. Furthermore, the sf world – and by that I mean the general readers rather than fandom per se – often seems strangely apolitical. Books such as *The Snow* and some of China Miéville's oeuvre could, I hope, act as catalysts to bring the wider sf readership to their political senses.

"I think you're spot on about the strangely apolitical

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nature of much of the sf fan base; indeed, there's often an outright hostility towards politics which strikes me as odd," Adam adds. "Perhaps it's that I'm so saturated by politics that what seems to me a necessary background level of political engagement strikes others as 'explicit politicisation'." But he adds that his new novel – *Gradisil*, discussed further below – is about the formation and birth of a new nation, and engages much more directly with the political process, such as speechifying, ideology, and leadership.

Whether such an overt engagement will engender or alienate a wider readership remains to be seen. Many general readers use sf and fantasy as a refuge. I wrote an editorial for *Matrix* a while back pointing out that when I first started reading sf, it was almost underground. Now it's mainstream. And I don't like that. I want sf to be subversive, politically challenging and intellectually dangerous! Yet I suspect that most of the non-fandom sf readers read the novels and films as others watch soap opera.

"The intellectual challenge and marginality is exactly the reason I got into sf," Adam says. "Yes, a large part of sf is bought by an audience who are really only comfortable with the novelist equivalent of Saturday-morning-TV-pap that reminds them cosily of their childhood. But there are enough things going on in the genre, enough interesting if often ignored writers, to make it the most interesting field of literature. The best sf written today is just better than the best mainstream lit."

Strong characters

Tira struck me as an especially strong and iconic character: she faces numerous set-backs, but has the guts and ingenuity to survive. She's pragmatic, feisty yet also vulnerable. And sometimes she gets things wrong – sometimes very wrong. In other words, Tira is like the rest of us.

"I find myself genuinely more interested in ordinary failure and ordinary endurance than in success and triumph," Adam comments. "I'm more interested in underachievement, in the ordinariness and the impotence of most people. Big Successful People are all more or less the same. Small-scale failures, in contrast, come in an endlessly fascinating variety of forms. 'I never did get to be an opera singer; now I work in telemarketing in Hull instead.' 'I always wanted to be a pop star, and I've still got my Fender in my den, but I don't seem to get the time to play it much since I got married.' There's strength in this, resilience, as well as melancholy. It's the taproot of human experience." And that, for me, is a great description of Tira: strong, resilient, but a little melancholy.

Adam comments that this philosophy follows in the tradition of Beckett, Tolkien and even Gervase. "It's this interest in ordinary people and their underachievement

that makes Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov so interesting as writers. It's the overarching theme of *The Lord of the Rings* – Frodo goes all that way, endures so much, achieves so much, only to fail at the vital moment. It's what makes Ricky Gervase's *The Office* a better drama for me than *The West Wing*, good though *The West Wing* is. There's a horrible overcompensation, I think, in American culture: the fact that one of their most withering terms of abuse is 'loser'. Why is that necessarily such a terrible thing?"

Adam points out that if ten people run a race, nine are "losers". So most of us are losers in one way or another. "Many people are drawn to sf because they're outsiders; they're not the ones who win all the sports prizes at school, they're not the ones with gangs of dedicated friends, they're more likely to be the ones slightly on the margins, a bit nerdy, a bit picked on," he says. "And sf remains interesting because it is a marginal literature; I think it would be a shame if the Literary Mainstream did embrace us to their breast, with sf writers suddenly winning Booker prizes and Nobel prizes. At its best, sf's very marginality enables it to be a more interesting, experimental,

challenging literature, to play with ideas outside the scope of the mainstream. Yes, but it also means when something challenging, different and engaging does come along the point of it is missed by almost everyone because it's frequently read from the wrong perspective." Nevertheless, as mentioned, above much of sf and fantasy are, he comments "nothing more than compensatory fantasies for geeks, 'you too can be the lantern-jawed Space Hero, super-confident, super-competent and guaranteed to get the girl!'"

Recurring themes

Adam believes that certain recurring themes emerge from his work. "I am drawn, rather, to bleakness; to depression and emptiness. I'm drawn to whiteness and blankness, to cities exclusively filled with emptiness, and that actively push 'things' out. It's almost like having a book where the white space has forced the words to the margins of the page. These and other fascinations, of course, relate to my own experience of what it means to be alive. Another is 'precariousness', which I examine in detail in *On*, but which is also present in most of my writing. I'm fascinated by how difficult it is to pin things down, how awkwardly intractable existence is – the way it is so difficult, but not quite impossible, to parse. And I'm interested in relativism, and the discourses of relativism – politics, for instance."

Adam also identifies a link between *The Snow and Salt*, his first novel. "This was only partly deliberate," he says. "I set out, in writing the book, to see if the trope of desolation means the same things to me now that it did then. I don't think it does."

...in American culture... one of their most withering terms of abuse is 'loser'.

Salt, Adam comments, examines depression and was written from the breakdown of his then marriage. Think of the salt in tears as one example of the numerous ways the metaphor intertwines with the way depression can exert a savage dominance over your mental, physical and psychic life. Both leave you with an unpleasant taste in your mouth, both can leave you desiccated, dried, a shell of your former self. As these examples suggest, the metaphoric levels run deep in *Salt* as they do in *The Snow*.

"*The Snow* is about whiteness and about surfaces, in a way that seems to me rather postmodern; blankness, white-outs, surface/depth, all that sort of thing. I wanted a book that came as close to actual blankness and actual stasis as possible. In the end, I chickened out. I put in terrorist plots, bombs going off, arrests etc. to keep readers interested. All this was overlaid on a deliberately white, deliberately blank, deliberately frozen and trapped environment. That, in an important sense, is what the book is about. But unlike *Salt*, which presents a blank white surface, this is a surface with depth: it's a three-dimensional whiteness and blankness in which things are literally going on beneath the surface, and are buried beneath it. The use of whiteness makes the world itself the most effective character of the book, in some senses, and a metaphor for the culture and the individual at the same time. It ties in with the idea of re-emergence as well; connecting geology with personality and memory."

The White Goddess

Roberts adds that all these diverse facets of whiteness unify in the White Goddess of Robert Graves. "I consider myself a materialist and an atheist, very drawn to rationalist explanations," he says. "It's a bit tricky for such a person to say that books get written via the Muse, and trickier still to explain the precise sense in which that is true. But, having said all that, one of the most important books in my own development as a writer is Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (1948), his "historical grammar of poetic myth" which sees all poetry in the widest sense as grounded in "a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess or Muse." This "remains the language of true poetry."

Adam came across Graves's book via the poetry of Ted Hughes, who was obsessed with *The White Goddess*. "I used to love Hughes's poetry as a teenager. That love has transmuted into a rather more cautious admiration, but I'm forever grateful that he turned me on to Graves's work. My adult response to *The White Goddess* (as opposed to my hectic and passionate younger response) is sceptical in lots of ways. It is, often, a batty book; weird and off-the-wall, tough reading, intractable, with only occasional moments of lucidity

and inspiration. The best way to approach it is as conscious myth-making for the twentieth-century, rather like Yeats's *Phases of the Moon* (only, I think, much better). But it is too deeply under my skin now for me to purge myself. Writing, for me, is female. What Graves calls the 'mixed exaltation and horror' that one feels in the presence of the Muse describes effective art very well as far as I'm concerned. The people who matter most to me in the world right now are women (no disrespect to my various male friends), my wife and my daughter foremost. About a third of the way through the novel I understood that I was writing something addressed to the White Goddess; and this is what *The Snow* is, much more so than my other books."

This comment explained a feature of the book that I'd picked up: much of the story is about rebirth of people, society and the world. In other words, *The Snow* is a modern myth. "*The White Goddess* is a reductive key with which to decode *The Snow*. Underneath its surface narrative, there is a buried symbolic narrative about the dying king being killed and a new king set in place while the Moon Goddess, in triple form endures. The snow reflects the barrenness of the Waste Land that is renewed by the sacrifice of the lame [Fisher] king (also known in myth as 'the hanged man'), and that this fertility is connected to the Goddess," he says. Nevertheless, as with the political subtext, Roberts never allows the mythological aspects to get in the way of telling a good yarn. But these elements give *The Snow* a depth that is unusual and refreshing.

The mythological element means that despite the bleak world Roberts creates, *The Snow* is ultimately optimistic. As Adam concludes: "*The Snow* seems to me a much more hopeful book than any I've written so far. Of course, I want my books to be readable, approachable. But this is the book in which I've come closest to saying, in effect, if the Muse likes it then it doesn't matter what anybody else says, especially anybody male."

Hard sf up a tree

Roberts aims to deliver his latest work *Gradisil* to his publishers in the spring. "I try to do something different with each novel," he says. "At the same time I try to make my writing distinctive, so that people get a Roberts flavour from what I do."

Gradisil is Adam's version of a hard science fiction mainstay: the colonisation of space in the near future. "Its premise is a ground-up technology that enables cheap access to space," he says. "This means that a new 'upland' is colonised by various well-off individuals, rather than by governments or corporations, although they soon try and get in on the act. But I'm not writing it as a gung-ho exercise in Ben Bova, Larry Niven or even Kim Stanley Robinson hard sf."

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Adam explains that "Gradisil" is the name of the main character, named from a misunderstanding of the word Yggdrasil. (This was the sacred tree in Norse mythology; Odin hung on Yggdrasil for nine days to gain the ability to understand and use runes.) "Gradisil is about trees: the Earth's magnetic field as a type of Yggdrasil for one, on whose branches people climb into orbit," he says. "Family trees for another – it's a novel that spans several generations. The novel explores the way generations of a family relate to one another, how the stories and mores of the older generations are taken up, or not, by the younger. But above all, it's a novel about the way big things grow from small things. It's a 'Birth of a Nation' story."

A critical view

By day, Adam is a Reader in Nineteenth-Century Literature at the Royal Holloway University of London. He's written an excellent introduction to sf (published by Routledge). Now he's just finishing a "comprehensive critical history" of sf. The 150,000 word book traces the genre's development from ancient Greece to the present day. "As far as that goes, there are two main camps: some people say sf begins with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (that's Aldiss's influential position); some say it begins with Gernsback in 1926 (Westfahl). Everybody admits that there's stuff that sort-of resembles sf published before the 19th century, possibly going as far back as Ancient Greece, but most don't think of that stuff (let's say, *Gulliver's Travels*) as real sf."

"If you think sf begins in the nineteenth century then you tend to think it's bound up with issues of the development of science, of technology (industrial revolution), monstrosity (alien-mess) and so on. If you think it doesn't really start until the twentieth then you tend to think its bound up with issues of modernity, of 'the future' etc.," Adam comments. "I think a lot of what's called 'proto-sf' gets dismissed because people don't enjoy reading it today – whereas people still enjoy reading E.E. 'Doc' Smith, even though it's dated. But I don't think that's a good enough reason to dismiss centuries of prolific work."

In the new book, Roberts dates the genre's origins to 1600. "Specifically I say that the genre emerges as a

function of the Protestant Reformation; that as the Catholic counter-reformation clamped down on science (killing Bruno, forcing Galileo to recant, etc.) Protestant traditions were more amenable to scientific speculation. I think these are the deep reasons why sf and fantasy take the form they do today: fantasy, with its emphasis on magic, is at root a Catholic, mystical idiom (Tolkien = Catholic); and sf with its emphasis on science/technology is a Protestant or Deist materialist idiom. This has lots of consequences for the way we read sf today, and explains (I argue) why sf is bound up with issues of transcendence, atonement, the saviour as hero, ontological questions and so on."

Roberts also develops Brian Stableford's notion that late twentieth century sf shifts from being predominantly a prose idiom, a literature of ideas, into being predominantly a visual idiom, a culture of visual spectacle. "*Star Wars* started this, and if you really want sf to remain a literature of ideas this transformation is a Bad Thing. There are very few new ideas in *Star Wars*. But although I like ideas, and although I write prose sf, I must reluctantly concede that prose sf is a vigorous but minority interest, whereas cinema sf and tv sf are worldwide mainstream phenomenon – of the fifteen top-grossing films of all time only *Titanic* is not *stiff*. Also graphic novels and video games are doing interesting new things with sf, whereas too many sf novels are just rehearsing old tropes."

New ideas abound, however, in Roberts's books. Indeed, the cause of the environmental devastation in *The Snow* was, for me at least, entirely unexpected. Adam's deep thinking about the nature, meaning and influence of sf pervades his work. This fusion of a remarkable ability to weave a good yarn, high concepts and a deep affinity for the genre's history and potential makes him one of the most exciting sf writers around.

Elements of this interview originally appeared, in a much abbreviated form, on The Alien Online (at www.thealienonline.net/).

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ARE YOU SITTING COMFORTABLY?

Reading 'Red': Portrait of a Fairy Tale

by Andrew M. Butler

There is a moment in an anthology of fairy tales when Angela Carter reflects upon the continuity of narrative: "My grandmother told me the version of 'Red Riding Hood' which she had learned from another, followed almost word for word the text first printed in this country in 1729." This is remarkable in at least two

ways: first that there could be such a chain of repetitions across two or so centuries of telling a particular story, and secondly, given the variety of versions there exist of the tale, that the game of Chinese Whispers has had so little noise in its transmission. The recent appearance of two radically different versions² of "Little Red Riding

Hood" provides an opportunity to think about fairy tales in general and this tale in particular.

One of the earliest surviving versions is believed to date from the middle ages and features a mother who instructs her daughter to take her grandmother a hot loaf of bread and a bottle of milk. The child meets *byzou* the werewolf, who enquires as to her destination and manages to get to the grandmother's house ahead of her, kills the grandmother, and puts some of her meat and a bottle of her blood in the cupboard. The child arrives and eats and drinks some of the grandmother, before talking to the wolf. The wolf persuades her to undress and she goes through the now familiar litany of dysrecognition off the grandmother/wolf. The child becomes suspicious and asks to be allowed out to urinate. The wolf ties a piece of wool to the girl's foot to try to keep hold of her, but she is cleverer and reties it to a plum tree. The wolf "saw that the little girl had escaped. He followed her but arrived at her house just at the moment she entered."³ It may be called "The Story of Grandmother", but it is clearly about a child who can look after herself; she might have been distracted by the needles on the path of needles, but she has been travelling on her own terms. She also outsmarts the (male) werewolf.

The origins of fairy tales lay in the oral narratives told in various contexts around the world as far back as we can trace. Despite the designation "fairy", the tales rarely feature those twee characters; indeed, whilst talking animals and transformations are common, magic does not seem to be a necessary factor of the genre. They survive in Aesop's *Fables*, and other brief classical narratives. Arguably they are there in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. They may have been told around fires, or after meals, in sermons, or during work hours.

What should be made clear is that there was no automatic assumption that these were stories for children, although it is likely they took on particular significance when transmitting advice between generations. As medieval secular narratives show time and again – and indeed as some of the comic relief of mystery plays confirms – there is a thread of bawdy and violence running through folk narratives. The variety of ages addressed should not be surprising, since children were not necessarily thought of as being particularly different from adults until some time in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, especially in the age of Romanticism.

Whilst the oral tale continued to thrive into the twentieth century, some tales became transformed into literary fairy tales during the seventeenth. This was particularly true in France, where stories became a form of competition between women in salons: "The literary

fairy tale was first developed in salons by aristocratic women as a type of parlour game by the middle of the seventeenth century. It was within the aristocratic salons that women were able to demonstrate their intelligence and education through different types of conversational games."⁴ Fairy tales were effectively women's tales, competing for quality, imparting female wisdom, and resisting male ideas of what a woman should be – indeed, offering a female view of the possibilities for women.

As these became told and retold in an upper class and bourgeois context, so they became tempting to write down. There were early collections such as Mademoiselle L'Héritier's *Oeuvres meslées* (1696), Madame D'Aulnoy's *Les Contes des Fées* (1697-8), Mademoiselle La Force's *Les Contes des Contes* (1697), Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé* (1697), Chevalier de Mailly's *Les Illustres Fées* (1698), Madame de Murat, *Contes de Fées* (1698) and Jean de Prédhac's *Contes moins contes que les autres* (1698). It is Charles Perrault (1628-1703) who is the most significant collector, although he published his collection under his son Pierre's name. Here

the narratives began to be tamer and have overtly moralistic endings – the educational function came to the fore.

Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" features the girl being sent with biscuits and butter to her sick grandmother and encountering the neighbourhood wolf. Having told the wolf where she is going, the granddaughter dawdles, allowing him to get there first and devour her grandmother. Little Red Riding Hood is fooled into thinking she is talking to her grandmother, and gets into bed where, after the litany of dysrecognition, she is eaten up:

One sees here that young children,
Especially young girls,
Pretty, well brought up, and gentle,
Should never listen to anyone who happens by.⁵

The story has the air of a public service announcement: don't talk to strangers. Whilst Little Red Riding Hood had avoided being eaten by the wolf earlier thanks to some nearby woodcutters, at her grandmother's house there is no one to help her.

The psychologist Bruno Bettelheim objects to this version of the story, feeling the obviousness of the moral spoils the story. He also objects to the portrayal of the child: "Since in response to such direct and obvious seduction Little Red Riding Hood makes no move to escape or fight back, either she is stupid or she wants to be seduced."⁶ Bettelheim sees being eaten as a metaphor for sex, indeed a metaphor for rape, a motif which

The literary fairy tale was first developed in salons by aristocratic women as a type of parlour game

haunts several critics of the various versions of the narrative. For him, either Little Red Riding Hood is dense, or she has given her consent to be raped. Ignorance or lust are clearly sins to be punished – as the moral points up.

Two versions of the “Little Red Riding Hood” story passed to the Brothers Grimm a century later, via Jeanette and Marie Hassenpflug, Germans of French extraction. Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Carl Grimm (1786-1859) had been raised as Calvinists rather than Catholics and had had a difficult upbringing due to the early death of their father, Philipp, in 1796. They were left poor and dependent on the rest of their family, in desperate need of an income. They began training as lawyers but were acutely aware of the common German people, who they saw as hard workers improving themselves from lowly origins. The Grimms wished to preserve German folklore and literature as one means of uniting Germany into one country and finally seeing off the French. In 1806 Jacob abandoned law to concentrate on folklore and got a job with the Hessian War Commission; he and his brother began gathering tales. However, Jacob’s job was only to last for a year, and rather surprisingly, after the French invasion of Kassel, he became private librarian to King Jérôme Bonaparte.⁷

The first volume of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children’s and Household Tales*) was published in 1812, a second followed in 1815, and this first edition comprises around two hundred stories. They had taken down stories from people who had come to visit them, and had even borrowed stories from other literary volumes. In writing down the narratives, they clearly worked on them, and a process of selection was going on. For one thing, the sexual content was played down but, if anything, the violence was built up. A second edition of the stories appeared in 1819 and a third in 1837, and Jacob kept working on them until their final, seventh, edition of 1857. By then they had also managed to get up to the entry for “fruit” in the German dictionary they were working on in parallel. The tales were increasingly literate, and the gender rôles more and more normative, with the too-sexual narratives being omitted in favour of new stories.

They collected two versions of what they dubbed “Little Red Cap”. In the first she is sent with cake and wine to her sick grandmother in the forest, and is waylaid by the wolf. Distracted by picking flowers, she does not realise that the wolf has got to her grandmother’s ahead of her, and eaten her up. Little Red Cap is confused by her grandmother’s appearance, and is eaten up. Fortunately a huntsman has been on the trail of the wolf and slices open the sleeping wolf rather than shooting him, because he suspects the wolf has eaten the old woman. After the two are saved from the wolf’s

belly, the wolf is filled with stones and is unable to move. He dies on the spot. “Never again will you stray from the path by yourself and go into the forest when your mother has forbidden it”, Little Redcap thinks to herself.⁸

In the second version, effectively a sequel, she avoids the wolf and barricades herself into the house with her grandmother. Realising the wolf will get her granddaughter if she tries to go home, the grandmother persuades Little Red Cap to fill the trough in front of the house with water in which sausages have been cooked. Lured by the delicious smell, the wolf falls into the trough and drowns.

In the first version, at least, female agency is replaced by male – as well as it carrying the strong message of obeying parents. For Bettelheim it is a Freudian drama which “deals with the child’s ambivalence about whether to live by the pleasure principle or the reality principle”,⁹ in other words the conflict between self-indulgence and the morals of society. Morals clearly win out – as does going straight to the house. Further, “It is as if Little Red Cap is trying to understand the contradictory nature of the male by experiencing all aspects of his personality: the selfish, asocial, violent, potentially destructive tendencies of the id (the wolf); the unselfish, social, thoughtful, and protective propensities of the ego (the hunter).”¹⁰

Erich Fromm, in contrast, is horrified by the feminist message he sees in it: “This fairy tale, in which the main figures are three generations of women (the huntsmen at the end is the conventional father figure without real weight), speaks of the male-female conflict; it is a story of triumph by man-hating women, ending with their victory, exactly the opposite of the Oedipus myth, which lets the male emerge victorious from this battle.”¹¹

Writing in the early 1970s, Susan Brownmiller explores the story as a parable about rape: “Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother, we learn, are equally defenseless before the male wolf’s strength and cunning ... The wolf swallows both females with no sign of a struggle ... *Red Riding Hood* is a parable of rape. There are frightening male figures abroad in the woods – we call them wolves, among other names – and females are helpless before them. Better stick close to the path, better not be adventurous. If you are lucky, a good friendly male may be able to save you from certain disaster.”¹²

By the end of the nineteenth century, the fairy tale had been transformed into a genre dominated by a canon of literary fairy tales, which benefited the literate and reinforced male values at the expense of the female. Fairy-tales endorsed an ideology of self-improvement as they were taken up by ballet, plays and opera, as well as parodies and pantomimes.¹³ Walt Disney’s embracing of

The story has the air of a public service announcement: don’t talk to strangers.

fairy tale narratives from the early 1930s onwards – especially with the 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* – at least returned the narratives to a mass audience, but in the guise of selling them an ideology. The stories were further normalised in terms of gender politics, and taken up with technology, with music and song and pictures making them memorable. Whereas the folk tales had been communal property, the specific teller usually forgotten, in the twentieth century the narrative got subsumed under Disney's own signature, his workers forgotten. As Jack Zipes argues: "The power of Disney's fairy-tale films does not reside in the uniqueness or novelty of his productions, but in Disney's great talent for holding antiquated views of society still through animation and his use of the latest technological developments in cinema to his advantage." And: "Exported through the screen as models, the 'American' fairy tale colonizes other national audiences. What is good for Disney is good for the world, and what is good in a Disney fairy tale is good in the rest of the world."¹⁴

The twentieth century did provide some alternative Little Red Riding Hoods – James Thurber's "The Little Girl and the Wolf" (1940) features a girl who realises what is going on for once: "So the little girl took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead." There is even a moral: "It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be."¹⁵ Roald Dahl's *Revoltin' Rhymes* includes "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf" with another armed girl, who rather fancies a fashion accessory:

But what a change! No cloak of red,
No silly hood upon her head.
She said, "Hello, and please do note,
"My lovely furry WOLFSKIN COAT."¹⁶

In Matthew Bright's film *Freeway* (1995) Little Red Riding Hood is the streetwise and barely literate Vanessa, played by Christina Ricci, complete with a boyfriend called Chopper. Hitch-hiking, on the run from the police and an arrested mother and abusive stepfather, she is picked up by Bob Wolverton (a pre-24 Kiefer Sutherland), who is apparently a child psychologist. She quickly realises that he is a serial killer, and tries to get away, but he tells her that they will believe the story of an intellectual over white trash. She escapes, leaving him for dead, but he has survived and comes after her. Several complications later, she seeks refuge at her grandmother's, but alas the murderous Bob has got there ahead of her. Fortunately she can look after herself.

Freeway would only play to a late teen or adult audience, but Gillian Cross's *Wolf* (1990)¹⁷ is aimed at children and young adults, Cassy has been living with her paternal grandmother, troubled by dreams of someone (a male presence? a wolf?) in the night, but is

sent away to live with her mother, Goldie, in a squat. Here she becomes involved with a drama troupe that performs in schools, and is working on a play about wolves – a play sympathetic to wolves and dedicated to cutting through people's preconceptions. But any pleasure she can take in her theatricals is threatened by the inevitable return to her grandmother's and the encounter with a deadly male figure – her father, her grandmother's son. The whole is intercut with a retelling of the "Little Red Riding Hood", as nightmare. According to Kimberley Reynolds: "Cassy has learned that wolves are more than this [ferocious killers] – that their public image is largely false. Wolves are also good parents, and never attack needlessly [... The novel] tries to show that the things which happen to us in childhood don't simply disappear with age".¹⁸

Much lighter, but no less complex, is John Scieszka and Lane Smith's "Little Red Running Shorts", where Jack the Narrator inadvertently gives away the end of the story – not to mention the start and the middle. Disgusted with the ruining of the suspense, the wolf and Little Red Running Shorts walk out, leaving gaps in the next illustration and a blank page as the story is curtailed. Nevertheless, it is another Little Red Riding Hood with spirit.¹⁹

Perhaps one of the best known late twentieth century versions of the story comes towards the climax of Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984) which draws upon Angela Carter's story of the same name from *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and "The Werewolf" and "Wolf-Alice", also in the collection. Situated as the present day dream of Rosaleen, a girl on the edge of puberty, the film interweaves various folk tales, fairy tales, old wives' tales and piece of ancient wisdom, situating it in medieval villages and late seventeenth-century palaces, leading up to the encounter between Rosaleen and a werewolf disguised as her grandmother. In the book, the grandmother verges on the smitten with the man in his physicality, and the familiar litany of questions from the here unnamed Little Red Riding Hood becomes the promise of a seduction: the big arms are "All the better to hug you with",²⁰ and finally we see her: "sweet and sound [sleeping] in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf."

The film pushes it further, and the young woman is clearly moved by the plight of the wolves, singing in the cold, and then by the pain of the young man transformed into the wolf. She appears to join him as a wolf, electing to run with the wolves, with the dogs crashing literally through the layers of the film's realities. Throughout the film there has been the sharing of women's knowledge, with the underlying moral that men are more to be feared than wolves, that the really dangerous wolves are hairy on the inside. Rosaleen's transformation undercuts the possibility of misanthropy by embracing the wolf, and becoming like it, liberating

**"It is not so
easy to fool
little girls
nowadays as it
used to be."**

the sexuality. Sara Martin, who notes this ending was scripted by Jordan rather than Carter, worries that it is "a fall into monstrosity".²¹ She only avoids being eaten, Martin argues, because the seduction is reciprocal.

To bring the account right up to date we must pass over hundreds of examples – but it is impossible to ignore Nalo Hopkinson's Caribbean-inflected "Riding the Red" (1997). As the story is told from the point of view of a grandmother, worried about her unworldly daughter and naive granddaughter, there is very much a sense of interchanges between generations of women. The grandmother had been Little Red Riding Hood in her time: "I cried then, down in the dark with my grandma, until the woodman came to save us, but it came all right again, didn't it? [...] I grew up, met a nice man, reminded me a bit of the woodman, he did, and so we were married."²² As in *The Company of Wolves*, the story is definitely about coming of age, and coming to terms with male sexuality and female responses to it, with a sense like never before of the inside of the wolf as being a womb from which Little Red Riding Hood can be (re)born: "They say it's the woodman saves us, me and my daughter's little girl, but it's wolfie that gives us birth, oh yes."²³

There have been at least two versions of the story appearing in 2004. Gregory Maguire has built his career for adult readers upon rewriting other people's stories: *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* (1999), which retells the "Cinderella" story from the point of view of the stepsister, and *Wicked* (1995), a fantasy around the life of *The Wizard of Oz's* Wicked Witch of the West. Whilst those novels would only really work for an adult audience, the eight stories of *Leaping Beauty* (2004) work on several levels, with a range of references for adults and an underlying punningness for children even visible in the titles – "Leaping Beauty" which involves a frog, "Hamster and Gerbil" rather than "Hansel and Gretel", "Cinder-Elephant" and so forth.

"Little Red Robin Hood" retells "Little Red Riding Hood" as a story of a bird. Little Red Robin Hood is sent by his mother with a basket of wormy goodies to help his grandmother who lives in a retirement village in another part of the wood. He is warned to follow the telegraph wires, but, being a bit of a superhero – it's a red cape, not a hood – he is distracted by a mockingbird captured by a cat. Little Red Robin Hood needs all of his wits to effect the rescue, and thinks he has seen the last of the cat – except, inevitably, the cat has gone after his grandmother and got there first. Once more we get the litany of questions, and both birds survive. Alongside the transformation of little girl into male bird, wolf into cat and so forth, there is actually a moral for the adult listeners rather than one pointed at the children: "Mothers, they always worry [... Y]ou have to learn to let go"²⁴

...you probably would not want your children to read these...

Irene Radford's "Little Red in the 'Hood" is one of seventeen contemporary, urban retellings of fairy tales in *Little Red Riding Hood in the Big Bad City*. The stories perhaps bring us full circle – you probably would not want your children to read these; they are adult in tone and subject matter. The stories draw very loosely on the canonical tales, with Jack's magic beans and cow transformed into guitar plectra and a leather jacket or a talking cat involved in international conspiracies. The remit is expanded to include *Peter Pan* and "The Pied Piper of Hamelin", tales of a more recent vintage, and even *Dr Faustus*. In some cases the original is less familiar, in others characters are borrowed from several stories, such as the multiple wolves in Jean Rabe's

"Trading Fours with the Mouldy Figs". It perhaps says something about the tradition of literary fairy tales that thirteen of the seventeen contributors are women.

Here Red is doing community service for Mobile Meals, delivering hot meals to charity cases. She had been arrested for stealing a red garter-belt and teddy to match her "Red coat, red leather pumps with a sensible two-inch heel, red print skirt and blouse. [...] Her undies were also red."²⁵ She is delivering a meal, not to a grandmother this time, but to an old man who had tried to molest one of the other volunteers, and is known by the charity as Hannibal the Letcher – a reference to the dark fairy tales of Thomas Harris. Red is confident she can defend herself and in fact is delivering a warning: after all, she is a werewolf. The only reason the chastened Hannibal survives being eaten is that it's a Friday, and she does not eat fish on a Friday. There is a hint of sexual ambiguity about her or him as she walks away, admiring the punks stood by her car: "I let my finger trail down the arm of the biggest of the boys as I fluttered my eyelashes at him. He looked like such a tasty hunk."²⁶ Whereas in the early versions of the tale being eaten up becomes a metaphor for sexual intercourse and rape, here there's the sense that sex becomes a metaphor for eating: he is tasty in more ways than one.

It seems unlikely that these narratives will stop being retold, and reillustrated, for children. Equally, having been so thoroughly road-tested, it is difficult to believe that writers will ever get tired of trying to rewrite them for adults – Simon Nye's televisual updating of "Beauty and the Beast" as *Beauty and the Beast* and the film *A Cinderella Story* being cases in point. Some of the stories in *Little Red Riding Hood in the Big Bad City* are clearly going after shock tactics of flinging the grimly contemporary at what we associate with the nursery and children's bedtime stories. The irony, of course, is that they have always been contemporary.

Notes

1. Angela Carter, ed. *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*

- (London: Virago, 19910, xv.
2. Specifically Gregory Maguire, *Leaping Beauty and Other Animal Fairy Tales*. Illustrated by Chris L. Demarest (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) and Martin H. Greenberg and John Helfers, eds. *Little Red Riding Hood in the Big Bad City* (New York: DAW, 2004).
 3. Reprinted in Jack Zipes, ed. *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 348. It can also be found in Maria Tatar, ed. *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1999), 10-11.
 4. Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 20.
 5. Zipes, ed. *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 93, Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales*, 13.
 6. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1989 [1975]), 169.
 7. For more on the Brothers see Jack Zipes, "Once There Were Two Brothers Named Grimm", in *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. Ed. Jack Zipes. (New York: Bantam, 1992), xvii-xxi, Jack Zipes, "Once There Were Two Brothers Named Grimm: A Reintroduction", *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (London: Palgrave, 2002), 1-23 and Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
 8. Zipes, *Complete*, 104, Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales*, 16, and also in *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*.
 9. Bettelheim, 171.
 10. Bettelheim, 172.
 11. Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths* (London: Gollancz, 1952), 241.
 12. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 333-334.
 13. See Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, especially 75-76.
 14. Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, 94.
 15. In Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales*, 17 and also in *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*.
 16. Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales*, 22.
 17. Gillian Cross, *Wolf* (London: Puffin, 1992).
 18. Kimberley Reynolds, *Children's Literature in the 1890s and 1990s* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), 63.
 19. In Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (London: Puffin, 1993).
 20. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Vintage, 1987), 118.
 21. Sara Martin, "Little Red Riding Hood Meets the Werewolf: Genre and Gender Tensions in Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves*", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* (2001) 12(1): 20.
 22. Nalo Hopkinson, *Skin Folk* (New York: Warner, 2001), 3.
 23. Hopkinson, *Skin Folk*, 4.
 24. In Maguire, *Leaping Beauty*, 24.
 25. In Greenberg and Helfers, eds. *Little Red Riding Hood in the Big Bad City*, 197.
 26. In Greenberg and Helfers, eds. *Little Red Riding Hood in the Big Bad City*, 204.

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First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

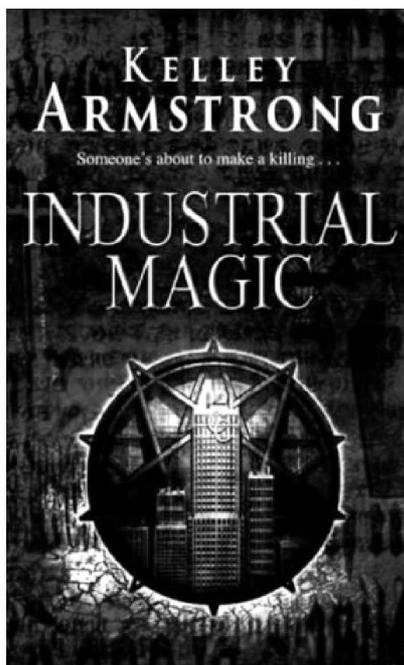
Kelley Armstrong – *Industrial Magic*
Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Orbit, London, 2004, 528pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-340-6

Paige Winterbourne is a witch. She enjoys a pleasant domestic life with her young witch ward, Savannah, and even has a hunky boyfriend in the shape of Lucas, a sorcerer who just happens to also be a lawyer. Now normally witches and sorcerers don't get along, let alone witches and lawyers, but Lucas is a bit different from the stereotypical view of either group. Unfortunately he is also the heir to a powerful cabal of sorcerers and, much to his legitimate half-brothers' chagrin, rather wishes he wasn't. Instead he'd prefer to be the nice lawyer, taking on cases for poor 'umble supernaturals who can't afford to pay him, such is his philanthropic nature. He and Paige seem to be making a fair go at playing happy families especially now Lucas has adopted the policy of ignoring his father's constant calls about fulfilling his destiny and embracing the esoteric rituals of the cabal. However a number of young supernaturals connected with the cabal are found murdered, placing pressure on him to act. When a young witch is also killed it becomes clear that Paige too must become involved.

Industrial Magic is the fourth book in the *Women of the Otherworld* series, another in the line of trendy F⁸

(Feisty Ferocious Faux-Feminist Female Fantôme Fighting Fictions™) books. This one is a direct sequel to *Dime Store Magic* (reviewed in *Vector* 235), following Paige and developing her relationship with Lucas. *Dime Store Magic* had some problems but *Industrial Magic*



seems to have overcome these. In a first-person narrated novel, it's very difficult to initiate a sub-plot, especially one unbeknownst to the narrator, and as a result the story is necessarily linear. This is okay, but other devices have to be used to maintain the reader's interest. *Dime Store Magic* failed because it was too intense; pretty much focussing solely on Paige and Savannah, with some of the burgeoning relationship with Lucas included to provide a diversion. *Industrial Magic* doesn't make that mistake because it brings in plenty of other characters, many of whom are already familiar from the previous novels (Elena the werewolf, Cassandra the vampire) and some new to this volume (Jaime the party animal showbiz necromancer). Again the

format involves a mystery but, being more of a character piece, doesn't fall into the realms of the whodunit; whether you spot the solution before it's revealed will not indelibly alter your enjoyment of the book. The

characters are likeable and, laudably, feminist in their outlook (certainly the most feminist of the F⁸™ novels we've read so far) – there's not too much in the way of girlie descriptions of clothing (although the Nike swoosh does get a mention – aaaarrrrrgggggghhhh, Laurell K. Hamilton has a lot to answer for) and Paige doesn't feel

the urge to describe constantly how she manages to cope with the 'burden' of being a woman who "has it all... and more".

Overall, the series has picked up to produce an easy-to-read and enjoyable adventure. Roll-on volume five!

**Stephen Baxter – *Mayflower II*
Paul Park – *No Traveller Returns***

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2004, 88pp, £10.00, p/b, ISBN 1-904619-16-9

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2004, 74pp, £10.00, p/b, ISBN 1-904619-02-9

Here are two refreshingly brief new novellas from PS Publishing, from whom it's always a pleasure to receive anything: even more so if Stephen Baxter is involved. Paul Park I know rather less about, but hey, a life with no surprises is no life at all, eh?

Mayflower II follows an otherwise fairly minor episode from Baxter's Xeelee sequence, one that sees five generation ships launched following the ousting of the Qax (for those who know their Xeelee sequence). One of these ships, in a colossal act of hubris on the part of its captain, is placed on a heading that leads clear out of the galaxy for a voyage the crew estimate will take 50,000 years.

Mayflower II continues Baxter's current fascination with human evolution (his latest *Destiny's Children* sequence has similar concerns). One member of the initial crew is given a form of immortality so that he can watch over the 'transients' during the voyage. As you might expect, these best-laid plans go totally awry. Our immortal narrator, Rusel, is worn down by the weight of the passing years, and his charges are shaped rather than worn by a combination of those same years and their strange environment, becoming both increasingly estranged from each other and from the wider universe.

It's a well told and poignant tale, the ever-increasing speed at which narrative time passes making events seem at once tragic and horrifying. You can't help but wonder at the transient state Baxter reveals our present humanity to be in. The story is a genuinely chilling knock to our (usually unstated) assumptions that humanity is somehow the pinnacle, the teleological end-product of evolution – not to mention being a fine piece of science fiction that H.G. Wells would probably have appreciated. If you are reading Baxter's *Destiny's Children* series (and I know I am) then *Mayflower II* is a brief but worthwhile footnote to that far larger story.

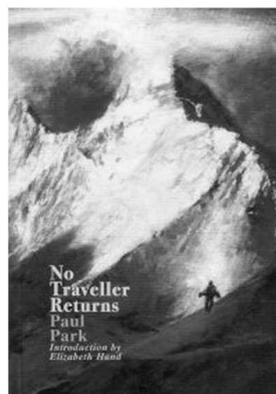
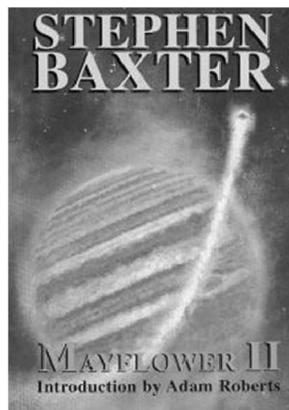
And a mention must also go to Adam Roberts, whose nine-page introduction to *Mayflower II* is, as ever, a stimulating hors d'oeuvre to the main course, helpfully raising nuances and elements that you might otherwise overlook. I was certainly glad of his guiding hand during

my reading.

Paul Park's *No Traveller Returns* is a rather Kafkaesque trip into the afterlife – slipstream (or New Weird, if you must) rather than sf or fantasy. The central character, Paul, is an unfulfilled traveller, a lonely wanderer who returns home to the US when he discovers Jim, his old teacher, is dying. However, when Jim breathes his last Paul's own meagre investment in this life seems to be insufficient to keep him here and he follows Jim into a bizarre world of the afterlife. There he encounters harsh mountains, crazed nuns, fascist authority figures and a host of unpleasant ape-like creatures.

Sad to say, *No Traveller Returns* did nothing to shed any light on either the afterlife or this life for me. I found it rather flatly written and lacking any real passion or feeling – rather like its protagonist. Despite being a story about lack and loss, I wasn't moved to feel for Paul at all. In fact, I was rather confused as to what I, as a reader, was supposed to make of a book in which things just seemed to happen, particularly in the afterlife, to no discernible end. Initially, in the real world, Paul and the story seem to be going somewhere – nowhere earth-shattering admittedly, but somewhere worth following. When we enter the afterlife this direction is almost entirely lost in a blizzard of gratuitous strangeness (strange in a rather listless and unconnected way though, as when someone else tries to tell you about this really *really* weird dream they had – does anyone ever find other people's dreams as interesting as the dreamers themselves do?). The closest literary comparison I can think of is Steve Aylett's *Accomplice* series, but without the ruthless lunatic humour of those books.

It's perhaps a strange confession to have to make, but for all that *No Traveller Returns* suggests itself as the more overtly 'spiritual' book, I couldn't help feeling that I learned more about the human condition from Baxter's vision of evolutionary pressures at work in a lost starship. I was also more entertained at the same time.



Marion Zimmer Bradley & Diana L. Paxson – *Ancestors of Avalon*

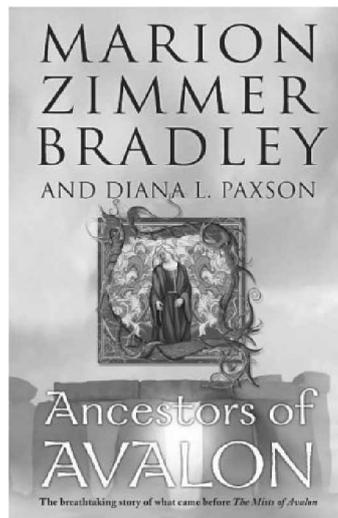
Voyager, London, 2004, 363pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 0-00-713843-1

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The *Mists of Avalon* was a successful Arthurian novel, exploring concepts which were original at the time and casting an intriguing light on what the story of Arthur might have been. Marion Zimmer Bradley herself wrote sequels, and since her death the series has continued under the authorship of Diana L. Paxson. This particular book is a prequel, describing how Atlanteans, fleeing the destruction of their own land, arrived in Britain and established what would develop into the Goddess-worshipping community of Avalon.

The novel opens with the destruction of the island in a volcanic eruption. The High Priest and Priestess, who are also husband and wife, escape on separate ships and come to land in different places. Neither knows that the other is still alive, and the book follows both of them as they try to come to terms with their loss and build what come to be two very different communities.

The opening chapters refer back to earlier events, which in an afterword Paxson tells us are drawn from Bradley's first book, *Web of Darkness*. I haven't read this; the story as referred to here is easy to follow, but unfortunately for this book it appears to be much stronger and more interesting. *Ancestors of Avalon* suffers from the besetting problem of prequels, that we know what the upshot will be, in this case that the community at Avalon will be successfully established, that the two central characters will inevitably find each other, and that they will probably survive. It's hard to



arouse suspense in the reader when so much is already given.

I didn't find a great deal in the novel to compensate for this. The characters are all nice people, and worse still they are all nice in the same way. They share a similar outlook and sense of humour, and any conflicts between them are soon resolved because they all try very hard to be understanding. Instead of Atlanteans, deep and mysterious and heirs to a doomed history, they come across as just plain folks. Even the central conflict between the two communities when they eventually meet has the air of being manufactured rather than arising from qualities inherent in the characters.

Another area that I found disappointing was the way the Atlanteans establish themselves in their new home. The potential for 'culture shock' in the transition from a highly sophisticated civilisation to a primitive one is never fully developed. We're told that they don't like the cold and the rain, and that it's hard to find food, but that's about all. There are no real problems with the indigenous people, who don't seem to object to these newcomers moving into their land. There's also far too much resemblance between their beliefs and modes of thought than I suspect would really be the case.

Although the novel is readable, and I'm sure *Avalon* fans will love it, I can't honestly recommend it. The *Avalon* franchise is growing very thin; it's time to stop.

Eric Brown – *New York Dreams*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 325pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07494-9

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

I suppose the first thing I have to do is confess that I haven't read volumes 1 and 2 (*New York Dreams* is the conclusion of the *Virex* trilogy). The second thing is to say that it isn't necessary to read the first two to get something out of this one.

Without the usual wedges of infodumping (you know, where one character spends a chapter explaining the previous events to someone who should be well aware what happened...) we're shown the lead character – PI Hal Halliday – and the fact that his partner is dead, his girlfriend has left him and that the only way out (he thinks) is to get addicted to VR (well, you would, wouldn't you?). All this is done smoothly enough to be unobtrusive, with sufficient detail doled out to let us



read this novel without being forced to rush out and buy the other two (while leaving out enough info so that buying the other two wouldn't be a waste...)

But the plot is just a veneer over the real heart of the story. Don't get me wrong. It's not a bad veneer, and the core isn't chipboard (reviewer hastily backs off from a metaphor that's beginning to fall apart...). But it is a thin veneer. The basic plot – lost genius, lost girlfriend, murder attempts – are straightforward and are the ingredients of your standard thriller/mystery. On the other hand, the first time we meet Halliday's wasted body as he is decanted from his VR tank-fantasy into the reality of New York in 2041, we are given a clear indication what the main thrust of this book is.

Eric Brown has taken the two genres

(mystery/thriller and sf) and fused them together. Is it successful? Does he follow the rules? Any mystery fan will tell you that it is a cardinal sin to suddenly spring the ending onto the reader without them having, as Ellery Queen says, "all the clues". And Brown does follow this rule, perhaps a little too well. There are places where you have to wonder why Halliday can't see what's happening.

The answer, of course, lies in the sf half of the equation. You're allowed to hide things from the reader (and the hero) in sf, because they're either unimaginable ("the colour out of space...") or the writer tells us, the reader, about developments, but "forgets" to let our hero find them out until it's time for him/her to be told...("yes,

we can do this, didn't you know?").

This duality is the flaw in the book. The mystery is secondary to the moral dilemmas posed by VR. The reader is shown the cards too soon, the detective not soon enough.

Is this a bad book? No, of course not. The texture and the society is plausible. The pros and cons of VR use, and its logical next steps, are unfolded as we go along, not slapped in our face. The mystery is mysterious enough to keep our interest. And, most importantly, if you've read the first two volumes, you'll want to read this one, and if this is your first, then you may well want to see how we got here...

Chris Bunch – *The Last Battle*

Orbit, London, 2004, 326pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 1-84149-179-9

Reviewed by Mark Greener



The brutal war with the Roche is over. But Dragonmaster Hal Kailas, despite his wealth, is bored, unfulfilled and listless. His victorious country, rather than being a land fit for heroes, marginalises, ignores, even despises dragons and their fliers.

Then Hal discovers that his arch-nemesis – Bayle Yasin – survived the war only to be arrested smuggling food to feed starving people in a neighbouring land. Meanwhile, corpses of dragons are washing up on the shoreline. When his wife cuckolds Hal, he resolves to rescue his old enemy and travel into uncharted territory across the sea to determine the cause of the dragons' demise ...

The previous books in the *Dragonmaster* trilogy, *Storm of Wings* and *Knighthood of the Dragon* are among, for me, the greatest fantasy books ever written. I don't make that claim lightly. On *The Alicorn Online*, I argued they were the fantasy equivalent of Haldeman's *The Forever War*. And they get better with re-reading.

Storm of Wings and *Knighthood of the Dragon* chart Hal's evolution from country boy to Dragonmaster. Apart from being a great read, the depth of characterisation emerged as a key strength of the first two books. Unlike so many fantasy books where characters remain more or less the same despite what should be life-changing experiences, the war altered Hal fundamentally. He changed emotionally, politically and psychologically. The war stripped away his naivety and idealism, scarring Hal deeply, mentally if not physically. *Storm of Wings* and *Knighthood of the Dragon* were, to all intents, a single book. I suspect that division is one reason why they've not been widely recognised as a modern fantasy classic. *The Last Battle* is, in contrast, a

proper sequel.

Bunch, part of the first troop commitment into Vietnam, served as a patrol commander and combat correspondent for *Stars and Stripes*. He writes about war with verisimilitude and credibility: he takes you inside a soldier's mindset and mentality to an extent and degree that I've never come across before in fantasy novels. This makes the *Dragonmaster* trilogy work on an intellectual as well as emotional level.

In particular, Bunch continues to make numerous analogies with 'Nam in *The Last Battle*. Hal's marriage falls apart; the war changed him too much and the couple grows apart. Many fliers scratch a living in dragon circuses, while the beasts starve. Once freed from fighting, Hal finds that "nothing much mattered to him these days", that "a gray gauze veil [was] between him, his mind, his thoughts and this world of peace". Bunch indicates that – as with many returning home from the armed forces – Hal's greatest battle might be: "learning how to master, or at least live with, people". The war made Hal. The peace could break him.

Essentially, *The Last Battle* is about Hal's struggle to find meaning in a world where the simple certainties of war – kill or be killed – no longer apply and where his training no longer matters. The analogies to the problems faced by returning vets are clear. Hal and his colleagues find meaning through action. But rather than being a mercenary, Hal finds self-actualisation through political action – freeing a prisoner he feels is wrongly accused and campaigning for animal (dragon) rights. As such, *The Last Battle* is ultimately optimistic. Hal discovers that he can carve a new role for himself, that he can recapture at least some of the idealism that once seemed a casualty of war.

But is this really Hal's last battle? I hope not.



John M. Ford – *Heat of Fusion and Other Stories*

Tor, New York, 2004, 364pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-85546-X

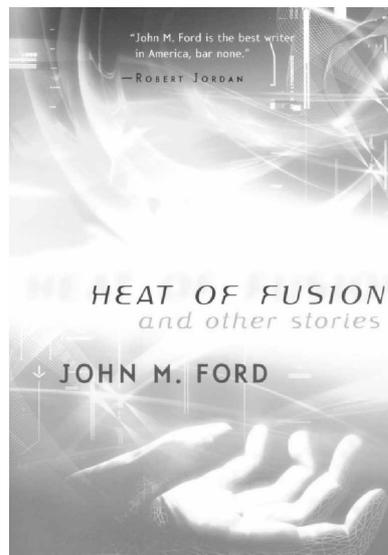
Reviewed by Sue Thomason



If you want to know how good sf can get, read this book. They're the best poems and stories I have read in years, leaving me moved and amazed and baffled and delighted and hurt...

Take the title story, 'Heat of Fusion'; a journal whose author is dying of radiation poisoning after a physics experiment goes horribly wrong. At first glance it's merely the skeleton of a story – the characters are identified by initials, the experiment is a nebulous mystery, actions and their consequences are left for the reader to infer from the sketchy text. At second glance, it's a story which examines the following themes: love, death, loyalty, honour, physics, truth, the ethics inherent in research and the scientific method, interactions between science and politics, interactions between personal and transpersonal values... I've probably missed a lot more important stuff. And it's also a story in which the vocabulary, the syntax, the omissions and evasions of the text, pick out the narrative and its setting more clearly, like shadows defining light. Not bad for 17 pages.

I could enthuse at similar length about the other twenty two items in this collection, all but one of them previously published elsewhere (though some very obscurely). 'The Persecutor's Tale' is both an alternate Christmas Eve ghost story with a delightfully fantastic setting, and a terrifying examination of the role-switching interdependence of persecutor and victim,



players of the same game, by the same rules. 'Erase/Record/Play' explores this theme from another perspective, along with the intertwined strands of theatre, memory, and healing – what is role-playing all about? What is personal identity? What is reality? Who can take responsibility for what? Is all drama psychodrama? What use are recovered memories? How much of everything depends on context? And if that isn't enough for you, the skeleton *this* story hangs on is a very, very interesting production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Every one of these damn stories is much bigger and more dangerous than it looks. You open it up, and find that it has opened you up.

On the other hand, if you simply want to laugh like a drain for a page and a half, read 'For Whom the Bird Beeps', a section from 'The Hemstitch Notebooks'.

And I haven't yet mentioned the story that redefines/renames the colours of the rainbow (revolution is another major theme). Or the story written by Autonomous Exploration Vessel *John M. Ford*, "one of the first private citizens to undergo cortical shift, first to a netlinked mainframe, passing through a series of mobile installations to an AEV hull." Or any of the metrical stories (poems), whose settings range from Camelot to New York, with nods to Shakespeare, Dumas, Milton, etc. etc. Knowing some literature certainly deepened my enjoyment of this book, though I suspect many of the stories would work without picking up their literary references – I've probably missed some. I used to worry whether fiction based on secondary sources – other fiction, other works of art – could ever be as powerful, as original/new/unique, as fiction created solely from experience of the primary ('real') world. Ford brushes aside my concern.

Please read this book. You won't be disappointed.

M. John Harrison – *Things That Never Happen*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 436pp, £8.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07593-76

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In a wholly inadequate blurb, the *Times Literary Supplement* is quoted on the cover of this book declaring that "Harrison is a visionary writer"; a partial truth, at best. Like many of Britain's better writers, I am sure that Harrison was inspired by the mad genius of William Blake, but his aesthetic is entirely other, his refrain is the glory of decay, defeat and failure, the petty achievements that mark our going down, the mordant compromises we laud as victory. If Utopia is not a place but a process, if we humans could not stand the perfection of achieving utopia, then he might far better

be described as a utopian writer. His characters are desiccated by their dreams, the whispered land of Egnaro or Viriconium or London whose promise is forever out of reach. The stories are peopled by men – in the earlier stories, at least, it is practically always men; the few women are hard and bitter, regarding the men with a sudden accusation the men cannot understand or cope with – whose loneliness drives them always to implicate some other in the disintegration of their dreams. These are tales of resentful acquaintance that masquerades as friendship.

They are not easy stories to read; they are not meant to be. They are tangential, allusive, inviting us in to some realm of undeserved disappointment whose psychogeography we cannot share and may never fully understand. God is a giant beetle situated at the end of a mist-bound motorway. Curious, half-forgotten rituals promise access to some undefined pleroma, but we see only an aftermath in which it is never clear whether the ritual was a success or not, or what, indeed, might comprise success. Egnaro is a place that is known only through mishearing and misreadings, but its chimerical figure clouds and colours the rain-washed streets of a Manchester that is, if anything, hyper-real. In 'Old Women' he describes artless, amateur paintings: "Curious failures of perspective led your eye into impossible positions behind or to the left of each scene, suggesting that the real world lies oblique to our own" (p121). He is describing the curse and promise of his own fiction.

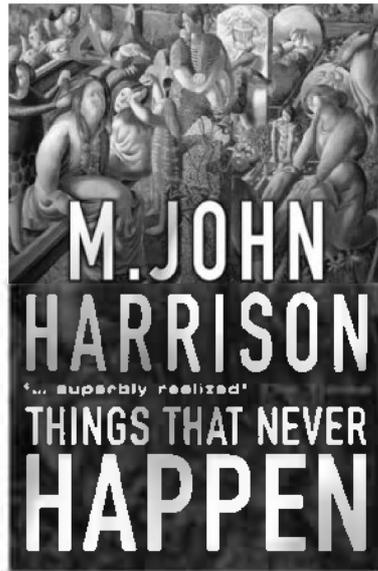
These stories are full of secrets that are "meaningless before you know it ... and worthless when you do" ('Egnaro', pp114-5). And yet, again and again his characters find themselves impelled by such secrets. This is not so much a quest for meaning – typically, Harrison's characters have given up any notion that there might be such a thing as a meaning in life – but rather a desire for something drab and insubstantial that might still, paradoxically, lend substance to the world. The way to Viriconium – or 'London', as it has here become – is through the mirror in a Gents toilet in a Huddersfield café.

There is an urge to escape – the crags of northern England feature regularly as some sort of counterweight to the dispirited cities where so many of the stories fail to achieve their apotheosis – but never any real awareness of what to escape from, or where one might escape to. A daredevil rock climber, paralysed in a road accident, buys a high-powered motorbike he could never hope to ride. These are autumn stories, cold and rain-sodden, pregnant with death and the dark turning of the year. Even if a story is set in summer, as 'Running Down', for instance, the heat is stultifying and unnatural.

The twenty-four stories gathered here, in other words, provide an incomparable glimpse into the entropic mystery that is M. John Harrison's fiction. But it is not a new glimpse, there is no story here that will be

unfamiliar to anyone with even a passing acquaintance with Harrison's work. Rather this book gathers together all seven of the stories previously collected as *The Ice Monkey* (1983), and all 14 of the stories previously collected as *Travel Arrangements* (2000). Only three stories were not in either of these two collections: 'A Young Man's Journey to London' which, as 'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium', was first collected in *Viriconium Nights* (1985); 'The Great God Pan', which grew into *The Course of the Heart* (1992); and 'Isobel Avens Returns to Stepney in the Spring', which grew into *Signs of Life* (1997). The truth is that, despite a back cover blurb which talks of Harrison inspiring readers on both sides of the Atlantic, he never really made an impact in America until *Light* (2002). This collection was originally put together by an American small press, Night Shade Books, in 2003 as an attempt to break him in the American market. Now republished by Harrison's usual British publisher it has been shorn of all the introductions that might have provided valuable insights into this most enigmatic of writers, as well as a reason to buy a collection of already collected stories.

It is, perhaps, a failure of nerve that has so denuded this collection, but it is a really sad loss, and a wasted opportunity. With authorial or critical guidance we would have had a wonderful chance to see the changing patterns over the years in Harrison's work. The odd specialist knowledge of plants and flowers displayed in the early stories is replaced (except in the beautiful and atypical 'Seven Guesses of the Heart') by an odd specialist knowledge of fast cars. There is a similar transmigration in setting: Peckham and Barnes replacing Huddersfield and Stalybridge, while the wild places in 'Anima' and 'Empty' have now become symbolic more of loss than of escape. And the men, despite flexing their machismo in loud fast cars, have become passive and helpless in the face of such incomprehensible women as Isobel Avens. Harrison is a fascinating writer, not a visionary, he is too bleak and too humane for that, but still a writer with a distinct and moving vision. He is one of the essential writers of British fantastic literature; anyone who does not know his work cannot know what the genre is capable of, and for them this is a book they must have. But for everyone else this book can only serve as a reminder of stories we already know well, and the absent introductions represent a loss that may be apt, but is nevertheless deeply regrettable.



Greg Keyes – *The Charnel Prince*

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

Tor UK, London, 2004, 516pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-4050-3353-3

This is the second part of the *Kingdoms of Thorn and Bone* quartet, continuing the tale begun in *The Briar King* (reviewed in *Vector* 231). Again there is courtly

intrigue and romance, and the ongoing story of a young princess and her servant, who, having survived the assassination of nearly every other member of her

family, manages at one point to run away from the very person charged by her mother with bringing her safely home from her hiding place. This is followed by an extremely long and adventurous journey, as they attempt, with the help of others, to find their way back. Asper White, the King's forest keeper, or holter, still has to take the role of the reluctant hero, fighting mythical beasts within the forest of the apparently evil entity known as the Briar King, and is still grumbling incessantly all the way.

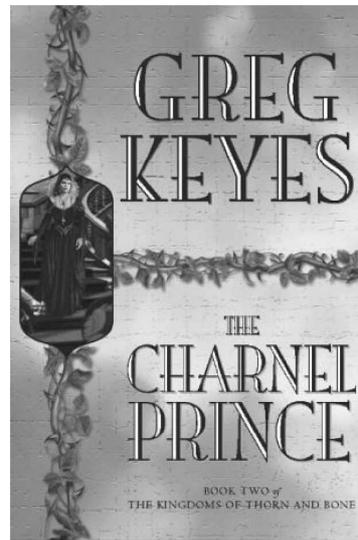
A fair proportion of the narrative concerns the young composer and new character, Leoff. On his way to take up a position at the court of Crotheny, he finds himself helping to foil a plot to drown an entire town built below sea level, this despite being a self-professed coward. He becomes a hero, but this is of very limited use when it comes to playing court politics, or standing against the all-pervading power of the church. He incurs the wrath of the religious hierarchy by composing a new form of music, essentially operatic in nature, which is held to be blasphemous, and by so doing, puts himself in great danger, but, like all true artists, he is driven to do this. However, he does not expect others to share the danger without fair warning, something which endears him to the reader, and makes any suffering that he endures that much more effective.

Some of the characters are given a genuine opportunity to develop in the course of the novel. Austra, Princess Anne's servant, becomes increasingly

inclined to speak her mind as the story progresses. This is largely due to the sometimes extreme hardships and emotional distress that she is forced to endure, and also to the fact that she has fallen in love for the first time. However, her love and loyalty to her mistress actually remain unchanged, and it is made clear at the end of their travels that she must be prepared to accept Anne's authority without dissent or leave her service. Anne, in true fairy-tale style, is growing from a spoiled, wilful child into a strong and purposeful young woman, capable of accepting her destiny, which is to sit on the throne of Crotheny and thereby save the world as they know it. Some such as Asper White are so set in their ways that they seemingly remain the same for eternity.

The novel's strongest element, however, is in its treatment of organised religion as an instrument of power and social control. While this is not an original concept, it is well handled. Corruption and decadence are rife among the clergy's higher echelons, and even the worship of evil deities is accepted by some as a route to spiritual power. Meanwhile, ordinary citizens who dare to break the church's rigid strictures or challenge the status quo are branded heretics and face torture and execution.

This novel is written in a readable and accessible style, and, while there is a depth to the narrative, particularly within the ecological and religious storylines, it is also a page-turner. Keyes leaves several loose threads to tempt the reader into venturing further, and, for fans of high fantasy, the series so far is a definite recommended read.

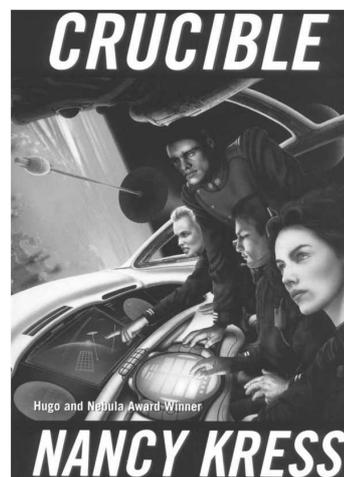


Nancy Kress – *Crucible*
 Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Tor, New York, 2004, 384pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30688-3

Crucible is the second of Nancy Kress's novels set on the planet of Greentrees. The story of this lush, beautiful world's colonisation by Terrans was told in *Crossfire* (reviewed in *Vector* 230), in which the settlers found themselves in the middle of an interplanetary war between two species of aliens that they named the Vines and the Furs. That book ended with a number of individuals carrying a virus manufactured by the Vines into space to infect the Furs, and in *Crucible*, Lucy Laski and Karim Mahjoub return to Greentrees to find that in their absence many changes have occurred. For Karim and Lucy, travelling through space, only a short time has passed, but on Greentrees fifty years have gone by since the First Landing. Jake Holman, the leader of the original expedition, is now an old man, wheelchair-bound and prone to falling asleep

at odd moments, much to his irritation. Children have grown up on Greentrees, 'Greenies', with no memory of, and little interest in, Earth, not realising how fortunate they are to be living on such a bountiful world



when so much of Earth has been devastated. However, Greentrees is not quite the idyll it appears. The various family, religious and ethnic groups who made up the colonists have tended to specialise in different roles on Greentrees, and the younger generation of Chinese settlers are growing resentful of what they perceive as their place in Greentrees society. The dissidents have set up their own town, Hope of Heaven, away from Mira City, the planet's capital, and it seems that their resentment is about to

spill over into violence.

The arrival of another spaceship from Earth, the eponymous *Crucible*, is welcomed by the colonists, mainly because the ship's Captain, the charismatic Julian Martin, has the military expertise and technologically advanced weaponry to devise and direct Greentrees' defences against possible future attacks by the Furs. Julian is soon regarded with adulation by the Greenies, particularly Alex Cutler, who, while being responsible for the allocation of resources for the whole planet, sees herself as an unsophisticated provincial, and is quickly swept off her feet by Julian's charm. Jake Holman is less impressed by Julian, as is the reader, who cannot help

but suspect that this heroic figure, genetically tailored to physical perfection, just has to be too good to be true. Almost imperceptibly Julian manoeuvres himself into a position of power on Greentrees, the arrival of a Fur ship aiding his plans, and by the time Alex realises that her trust has been betrayed, it is almost too late to prevent his taking over the planet.

This is very traditional sf, with spaceships and guns and furry aliens, and a small band of characters who 'save the world', but, if the coincidence of the *Crucible*, the Fur ship and Lucy and Karim's all arriving in orbit at the same time is accepted, it succeeds on its own terms.

James Lovegrove – *Worldstorm*

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Gollancz, London, 2004, 453pp, £10.99, tp, ISBN 0-575-07388-8

In a part of the world routinely devastated by a huge, permanent *Worldstorm*, the people are born with various powers depending on their Inclination: Air, Water, Fire or Earth. A small percentage of people have no Inclination at all and are referred to, somewhat ironically, as Extraordinaires.

Elder Ayn has the relatively useless skill of prevision: he can see the future but only his own. He has foreseen his own murder but also sees himself on a quest which he believes may see the end of the *Worldstorm*. Leaving his home, together with a scribe, Khollo (whose power is perfect recall), he sets off to find the two people he needs to put his plan into action.

While the above description may sound like a fairly generic quest fantasy, that presumption would do *Worldstorm* a great disservice.

The story is told from three viewpoints: Ayn's account (with occasional interjections from Khollo); Gregory, who comes from a long line of Fire-Inclined but who, to his father's shame, turns out to be Earth; and Yashu, apparently an Extraordinary in an archipelago dominated by Water-Inclined.

I was quite far through the book before I noticed that each viewpoint was in a different voice. This is, at least in part, from necessity: without Ayn's first person viewpoint he could seem to be a standard 'wise wizard' of generic fantasy instead of the rather vain, arrogant, possibly insane (but not necessarily unsympathetic) person he is. Yashu's story is a personal one which benefits from the close camerawork (so to speak) of limited viewpoint third person. On the other hand, it quickly becomes clear that Gregory's story is a large-scale tragedy, benefiting from the multiple viewpoint of omniscient third person.

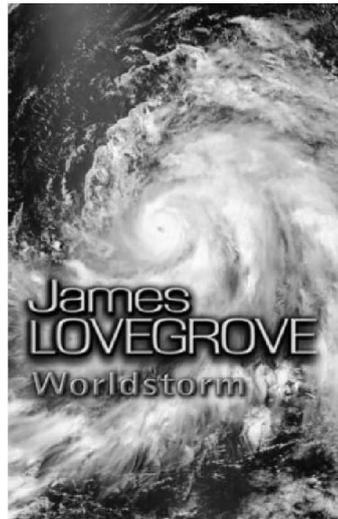
In fact, the central quest is more or less a McGuffin hunt; Ayn's plan is mainly a device to allow the other stories to be told. If I had to pin down what the book is actually *about* I would say that, like much British fiction, class prejudice is at its heart. This is particularly evident in Gregory's story where the misunderstandings and presumptions that lead to unprecedented violence and destruction are almost totally inspired by the assumed superiority of the Fire-Inclined over Earth.

Of the central characters, it is the relationship between Ayn and Khollo that holds the most interest. Khollo's 'after-the-fact' asides regarding the narrative Ayn is dictating add some necessary humour, but also show some sympathy for his doomed employer. Also strongly defined is the relationship between Gregory, his brother and his adopted family. Unfortunately a downside of the structure of the book is that some of the main characters do not spend enough time together to develop strong relationships. In particular this means that an important romantic

relationship late in the book does not quite convince.

The book does have some other small faults: there is a certain amount of trekking around a fantasy world that never really quite comes to life, the real reason for the foreseen murder of Ayn seems fairly obvious from early on and the nearest person the book has to a villain is rather a two-dimensional character compared with the rest of the principal cast.

Overall the book is extremely readable and offers a different sort of story from the standard fantasy. Certainly, although the book does not necessarily need a sequel, I would enjoy finding more out about the world Lovegrove has created.



Juliet E. McKenna – Northern Storm

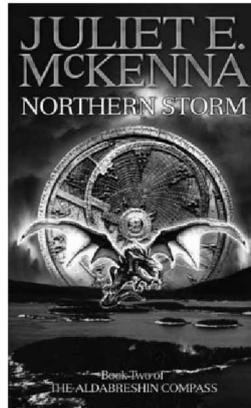
Orbit, London, 2004, 596pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-167-5

Reviewed by Andrew A. Adams

This is the second of what I assume will be four books in *The Aldabreshin Compass*. In my review of the first, *Southern Fire* (Vector 234), I was somewhat critical of the lack of sympathy engendered for any of the main characters. In particular, *Southern Fire* was quite difficult to get into, past the internal monologue of Kheda, the principal viewpoint character. Now, while the main characters in *Northern Storm* are mostly the same, and Kheda still the principle viewpoint, his internal monologues are not as off-putting. The constant reminders that he is a vicious bigot (just less vicious than most of his fellow Aldabreshi) are now mostly missing from his exposed thoughts. Many of the other characters are softened somewhat, either by character development or by leaving out their less acceptable thought processes.

So, what of the plot? Since the main theme of the sequence seems to be the understanding of different cultures by those forced into experiencing them at close quarters, there has to be a reason to bring those otherwise categorically opposed social groups into contact without the usual bloodshed of each other that such contact would ordinarily produce. So, as with the first one an external enemy must be created. Rather than simply retread *Southern Fire's* invasion by an implacable human enemy, McKenna finds a new twist to essentially the same story of "the enemy of my enemy won't be

killed out of hand". In doing so, she also sets up an interesting puzzle of magical research which takes place on the main continent. The race to find the solution introduces a suitable tension of timing – will the solution be found before the new peril devours those involved in the main strand of the book?



The nature of the elemental magic of the 'normal' mages of this world is investigated further and the psychology of the various mages we encounter is interesting. We have Dev, whose base physical nature is paralleled by his self-centred approach to his affinity with fire. His rather hot-headed nature is also in keeping with that affinity. Velindre, whose affinity is air, is more ethereal in some ways. More intellectual than Dev (who is by no means stupid) she is selfish and arrogant but desires the approval of others.

Finally Azazir, with his water affinity, is almost completely consumed by his affinity but flows from this emotional state to that, finding equilibrium for a time before being upset by a change in the wind. We've seen little of those with an affinity to earth in any of her seven books so far. Such may or may not feature in the remainder of this series.

A more readable book than *Southern Fire*, which promises an interesting continuation to the plot in the rest of the sequence.

Julian May – Conqueror's Moon

Voyager, London, 2004, 502pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-712320-5

Julian May – Ironcrown Moon

Voyager, London, 2004, 502pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-00-712321-3

Reviewed by Andrew A. Adams

These are the first two in a new fantasy series by Julian May called *The Boreal Moon Tale*. May is well known for her science fiction, the *Saga of the Exiles* (and related sequences), and has also written another fantasy trilogy (the first of that being a collaboration with Norton and Zimmer Bradley).

The tale here is, in some ways, heavily influenced by Scandinavian myth concepts but is in no way derivative. May's inventiveness is ever-present, from the methods of magic to the bizarre corporeal and non-corporeal inhuman creatures present. It combines feudal political intrigue with magical high adventure to create a compelling tale. There are, unfortunately, a few negatives to report as well.

Each book starts with a short segment of a framing tale. These present the main books as the memoirs of the one-time Snudge (personal spy) Deveron Austrey. Unfortunately this makes the books somewhat difficult to get into. As well as spoiling the character development of Austrey (one of the main characters) the short introductions are not sufficient to tell a real tale.

Just as one begins to get into that story, it is cut off and the reader must start again with the main one. In addition, the implication of a personal memoir by Austrey is rather undermined by the literary format of third person narrator including first person viewpoints and thoughts of a variety of characters. I think one of the problems I encountered in trying to immerse myself in these books was this shift in expectations. The 'chronicle' approach to storytelling can be pulled off, as amply demonstrated by Glen Cook's *Black Company* series, but May does not succeed here, so the frame is a distraction rather than an addition to the books.

The other problem is a distinct lack of humour. May's most recent sequence (*The Rampart Worlds*) was a classic space opera romp with a wonderfully amusing main character and some slapstick comedy. While the *Boreal Moon Tale* doesn't lend itself to this sort of amusement there is a bleak feel to the writing that could have used some leavening with the odd bit of humour. Even the characters seem pretty humourless, except for vicious amusement at the discomfort of others.

Conqueror's Moon is the story of the king of one nation, on an island of four, forcing his way into a High Kingship over the other three. This is carried out very much with the assistance of a young lad with a 'wild talent' for magic (Deveron Austrey). This magic takes a number of forms, but is primarily split in two: wind-talent (clairvoyance and long distance telepathy) and use of talismans with specific powers. These talismans rely on the provision of power by the Coldlight Army, a very nasty bunch of supernatural beings somehow connected with the Aurora Borealis. These talismans must be empowered and attached to a single wizard – they're virtually indestructible when empowered and cannot even be touched by others. They can be very powerful but that power comes with a terrible price. The Coldlight Army "eats pain" and demands a significant payment for use of the more powerful sigils. There are some hints in the first book about a layer behind the purely political struggle for power involving Conrig and his faithful spy Deveron. The costs of success in securing the High Kingship set up the main storyline of the sequel *Ironcrown Moon*.

We move forward about five years to the start of the

second book (with the brief foray to the framing story set in Deveron's old age). Conrig's first wife (thought to be barren but actually in the early stages of a pregnancy throughout the first book) was set aside as part of the deal to secure the high Kingship. Having been saved from an apparent suicide attempt by a wizard of her home kingdom, she and her son (the legal heir to Conrig) have been kept in hiding by Red Ansel Pikan, a very powerful wizard, who appeared in the first book but has quite a mysterious background. In this book we learn more of what drives him, primarily the machinations of a supernatural entity he calls 'The Source'. This turns out to be a being opposed to the Coldlight Army's interference with mortal beings and determined to sever the link between earth and sky, which sets the scene for the rest of the series (probably only one more book).

Overall these are a cut above the normal fantasy in inventiveness and May's writing is rich and readable. A bit of humour to lighten the mood occasionally wouldn't have gone amiss, though.

Simon Morden – *Brilliant Things*

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Subway Writers' Group, Bristol, 2004, £7.99, 160pp, p/b, ISBN 0-9544931-5



Simon Morden is, of course, the editor of the BSFA's writers' magazine *Focus* and has had a novel published (*Heart*) and a previous book of short stories (*Thy Kingdom Come*). His second novel, *Another War*, will be published in 2005.

Brilliant Things is Morden's second collection, with stories dating from 1998 to 2002, and only one, 'Are You Ready to Receive', receiving its first publication. This story was destined for the magazine *Noesis*, which folded before it appeared. Morden's stories have been described as a "chaotic mix of science fiction, fantasy and horror, and sometimes all three at once", so it is no surprise to find that few of the thirteen stories here fall totally into one of the sf, fantasy or horror categories, but they do all have overtones of something beyond the material or the present. They are divided here into four sections: 'War Stories', 'Devices', 'Phobias' and 'Seeing God' with their settings ranging from an undefined mythical past ('The Northman's Shroud') via the present day to a future in which Earth and its colonies are under attack by aliens ('Empty Head') – or are they?

'Brilliant Things' is the first story in the book, in the section 'War Stories'. Recently I have been spending quite a lot of time on genealogy, and have been amazed at just how many young men from both my father's and mother's families fell in World War One. This story, in seven pages, captures exactly what you imagine the horror of the trenches must have been like, with just a hint of the spiritual to bring hope. The second story 'Bon

Homme', about a French peacekeeper in Rwanda, is achingly sad, and stays in the memory long after you've finished the book. 'Taiga Taiga Burning Bright' tells how the sole survivor of a Soviet submarine, beached on the Siberian Pacific coast during the Cold War, is helped by a native shaman to prevent the American Navy from plundering his boat.

The first story of the 'Devices' section, 'A Forgotten Corner of Hell' (previously published as 'Another War') is a real creepy story, set in a dilapidated English mansion in the 1920s, with a guest who brings home some nasty artefacts from Ancient Egypt and sets in motion a chain of events worthy of the best horror films. In 'Phobias', the tale 'Hollow' is about discovering that the Earth really might be hollow, with an interior world just like Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Pellucidar*. 'Terra Incognita' is an account of an eighteenth century Royal Navy ship finding a remote island on which there really are dragons, while 'Xenonoma' is a terrifyingly personal account of humanity being felled by a plague of mutagens. The 'Seeing God' section comprises three stories with broadly religious themes, but exactly how this fits in will surprise you. Two of them, 'Bell Book and Candle' and 'St. Joan', previously appeared in *Thy Kingdom Come*; the concluding story, 'Whitebone Street', is a disturbing tale of a street which seems to attract the dead.

Short story collections can be problematic to review because they often contain misses as well as hits, making an unreserved recommendation difficult. No such problem here! Simon Morden has delivered a collection of skilfully-written, thought-provoking and

memorable stories.
[For more information about the book see [www.subway-](http://www.subway-writers.org.uk)

[writers.org.uk](http://www.subway-writers.org.uk) or www.bookofmorden.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk]

Adam L. G. Nevill – *Banquet for the Damned*

Reviewed by Simon Morden

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2004, 492pp, £35.00, h/b, ISBN 1-902880-92-7



Dante and Tom are musicians. They should have hit the big time with their band, but somehow their talent has gone unappreciated outside of Birmingham. They've burnt out: the drink, the drugs, the groupies, the fights, and above all the grinding poverty of living

below the breadline for years, has taken its toll. It's time to give it all up.

But there's one last throw of the dice – a concept album based on Eliot Coldwell's seminal book *Banquet for the Damned*, charting a new philosophy based on the duty to experience absolutely everything. Dante is offered the chance to work as Coldwell's research assistant at the venerable St. Andrew's University, and he and Tom head north, ready to study, to write and compose a masterwork worthy of their inspiration.

On arrival, they head straight for the beach, and a chance to clear their lungs of industrial Midlands air. The small crowd of people they find behind the police tape are watching a severed arm being retrieved from the surf. It's a less than auspicious start to their stay, and it signals a descent into madness and depravity that threatens to destroy the whole town in a single night of terror.

This book is brilliant, and you should read it even if you've only a passing interest in supernatural tales. Nevill has constructed a work of literary (and literate) fiction very much in the tradition of M. R. James, and then added to it: there's a layer of rich sensuality and sexuality that's underpinned by corruption and decay, and another of abject, immediate terror and panicked

action that has its roots much closer to the modern day.

Dante is an excellent hero – flawed, torn, tempted, jealous, terrified and ultimately righteous. This story is his story by rights, even though Nevill flirts with other characters, notably the alcoholic Hart, whose research into night terrors gives the university town its only hope. It is Dante who is the object of fascination to Beth, Coldwell's young lover, and it is Dante who finally forces the truth from a cabal of secretive St. Andrew's staff.

Where Nevill really scores is the way he writes. His telling is full of vivid sensation and emotion that pull the reader, willingly or not, into a world where sanity is in short supply and death comes for you in your sleep. His description of the night terrors are the most evocative passages of English that I've read in a very long time; heart-stopping, sweaty, sheet-twisting nightmares that can't fail to move or linger long in the mind.

The book isn't perfect: Hart is underused, and some more exploration of his quixotic nature would have served the story well. There are many asides – minor point-of-view characters brought into the plot for one scene and then dismissed – when the main narrative thrust would have served better. These aren't nit-picks, but what flaws there are forgivable when compared with the whole.

There's a dizzying, devilish plot and a breakneck ending that I have no intention of spoiling for one moment. Suffice to say, it's satisfying, apocalyptic and just. Adam Nevill has written a very great book, a novel of complexity and shadow. I enjoyed the feast. Come and join in.

Stan Nicholls – *Quicksilver Zenith*

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

HarperCollins, London, 2004, 327pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-00-714151-3

This is the second book of the *Quicksilver* trilogy, in which the story of political repression and resistance within a highly magic based society begun in *Quicksilver Rising* (reviewed in *Vector* 236) is continued. To assist the reader there is, helpfully, a précis of the story so far at the beginning of the book.

As this part of the tale begins, the main protagonists are all working in various capacities for the resistance movement in the small island state of Bhealfa. The rebel leaders have found a suitable, remote island, on which they intend to establish a democratic utopia free from tyranny, but, naturally, much remains to be done before this can take place. To complicate matters further, the paladin clans, a group of highly unpleasant mercenary knights, are absolutely determined to crush the

resistance, with their would-be leader, Devlor Bastorran, having his own very personal reasons for becoming involved in political affairs. These appear to centre on Reeth Caldason, the enigmatic central character, a loner and the reluctant hero of the previous novel, who humiliated Devlor publicly by besting him in a swordfight. Finally, there is the thorny issue of the two superpowers, between whom Bhealfa is trapped, and who could threaten both the island's fragile independent existence and the plans of the rebel forces.

The narrative has certainly picked up pace since the first novel, and the story fairly whips along in places. However, the relationships between the characters introduced in the first novel are also given the opportunity to develop. This is particularly evident in the

relationship between Reeth and Serrah, the former military officer inducted into the resistance; a strange mixture of, at times almost grudging, respect and gruff affection, as well as a certain mutual attraction. The friendship between Serrah and the former prostitute, Tanalvah, also deepens significantly as they help each other through their separate emotional traumas, which have taken both of them to the limits of their endurance. Nicholls uses many of the elements of a classic fantasy adventure; kidnap and torture, characters showing unexpected fortitude and courage, as well as others having to learn to trust their own abilities and strengths and, of course, the overcoming of adversity in the nick of time. Also, as the main characters are involved in a clandestine organisation, there is much potential for

intrigue, treachery and betrayal, something that is not ignored by Nicholls. Several narrative threads are left loose; one assumes they will be tied up when the series is completed. However, *Quicksilver Zenith* appears to have avoided the potential pitfall of the middle book in a trilogy, a form of narrative sag, where the only apparent aim is to get the characters where they need to be so that the story arc can be completed in the final novel. Although this story has little that differentiates it from many other fantasy novels of a reasonably high standard, I did enjoy it, actually more than its predecessor, and am looking forward with a certain interest to the conclusion of the tale.

Lucius Shepard – *Trujillo*

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2004, 682pp, £35.00, h/b, ISBN 1-902880-85-4



Trujillo is Lucius Shepard's first major collection for almost a decade. It highlights how remarkable his output is in terms of both quantity and quality, not least because despite its size (and it's a *big* collection) there remains at least an equal volume of stories uncollected, and

deserving of collection. Indeed, just such a second book is due in late 2005 or early 2006, also from PS Publishing.

In the meantime, *Trujillo* collects seven hundred pages of fiction, or 300,000 words, or six novellas, four novellettes and one short novel. The emphasis is on fantasy, and occasionally horror; of the eleven stories, only three have any science fiction elements, and two of those still carry strong fantastical elements. Five of the stories take place in and around the titular town, located on Honduras' Mosquito Coast; the other six skip around from post-9/11 New York to post-communist Russia, via Iraq, Africa and Florida. There are very few disappointments. Perhaps only the future-Iraq of 'A Walk in the Garden' and the carnival showman who stars in 'Senor Volto' are below par – but the highlights are more than enough to compensate.

My single favourite story in the collection is the first. 'Only Partly Here' sounds, when you describe it, like a disaster: it's a ghost story set in the days after September 11th, focusing on one of the workers helping to clear Ground Zero. It's hard to believe the story can sidestep mawkish sentiment, but it does, perhaps because Shepard doesn't force anything. He knows that the location is quite powerful enough to stand alone, so he offers only a portrait of an intimate encounter, a tale of two people trying to understand, to make a connection. The understatement makes 'Only Partly

Here' beautiful, and deeply affecting.

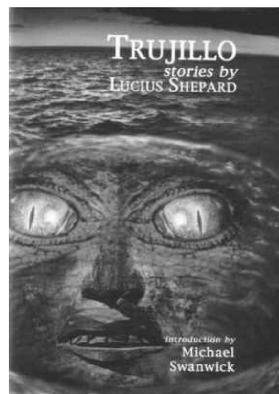
Another highlight is 'Jailwise', which first appeared on SCIFICTION last year, and was collected in Jonathan Strahan's *Best Short Novels: 2004*. It examines the mindset of a convict, Tommy Penhaligon, through the lens of a mysteriously open prison, Diamond Bar. The prison turns out to be a literal embodiment of Michael Foucault's ideas on penal reform, which allows Shepard to expand the scope of his story, exploring the relationship between the individual and society, and asking what it means to be free. I also liked 'The Same Old Story', a slick metafiction about how difficult, but how cathartic, it can be to tell stories. The tale has particular resonance when compared to the rest of Shepard's oeuvre, much of which is deeply political, even if it focuses on matters or areas that fly below the mainstream radar.

At one point, as the final and most impactful clause in a long description of the Mosquito Coast, Shepard

writes that this is the place "where the privileged world in which we live has the reality of a science fiction film" (p.462). Perhaps this is one reason why so many of his stories are set in similar locations – they are in deliberate pursuit of that particular perspective. If you like, it's an understanding of place as one of the central elements in stories; how a place informs the stories that are set there. It's a principle that the other stories set in and around *Trujillo* demonstrate most effectively. In 'The Park Sweeper', America and Iraq are

both distant destinations from which equally unreal news reports originate. In 'The Drive-In Puerto Rico', the protagonist is a national hero – arguably *the* national hero – and when he confronts his enemy, it's not just his own life at stake, it's the character of a nation.

The title story, 'Trujillo', is the aforementioned short novel, and is original to this collection. Many of



Shepard's stories invoke a uniquely masculine perspective of the world, but this is the most direct, and darkest, examination of such in the book. It's also the only time in the collection when two distinct voices coexist within the same story. The two protagonists – Dr Arturo Ochoa, a middle-aged psychologist, and his patient, a young, wealthy, handsome American by the name of William Stearns – are marked by the differing ways in which they treat women. One is respectful, cautious, careful never to cause offence; the other is callous, cold, and values only his own needs. As events progress, however, there is an inversion of sorts. This is possibly, but not certainly, the effect of a malign demonic presence; in either case the result is a disturbing, at times incredibly sad, portrait of how some men (all men?) can too easily confuse the effects of sex,

love, power and intimacy.

I can't comment on how this collection holds up to Shepard's earlier work, because I've not read enough of it. What I can say is that, on their own terms, most of the stories here are very good, and fully half of them are outstanding. Sometimes the stories are obvious; sometimes they are oblique. Always, they are powerful and intense and rewarding, written vividly but with a steely control of structure and tone. Even with the hefty price tag, this is a book that I have no qualms about recommending.

(Note: as I was reading the collection I made more detailed notes on every story, and these can be found online here: <<http://www.livejournal.com/users/coalescent/137097.html>>)

Karen Traviss – *City of Pearl*

Reviewed by Peter Young

Eos, New York, 2004, 392pp, \$6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-06-054169-5

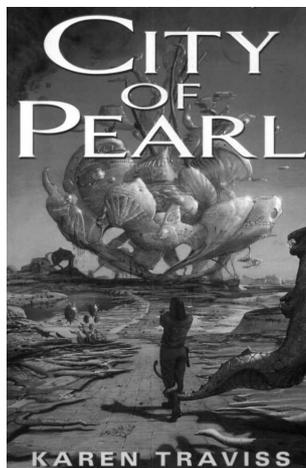
City of Pearl is the first title in Karen Traviss's very promising trilogy (the later instalments are *Crossing the Line* and *The World Before*), and it's a pleasure to have been so impressed by a debut novel from someone who is so prolific that she has issued two further novels in the US (one a *Star Wars* tie-in) this year alone.

Underpinning the entire story arc is the near-symbiotic arrangement of two species from neighbouring worlds in a distant solar system: the marine, squid-like bezeri of Bezer'ej, who need the protection of the ecologically-minded and formidable wess'har, from Wess'ej, who are predisposed to provide it and will obliterate any dangers or ecological threats to the world, even if that threat may take the form of a small human colony. The story itself begins with Environmental Hazard officer Shan Frankland, up for retirement at last but who is, against her will, drafted to lead a mission to Bezer'ej to urgently re-establish contact with the previously established colony. The reasons behind her mission are initially concealed from her, and only revealed when certain stimuli she encounters release the information to her conscious mind from a mentally-suppressed briefing. Arriving on Bezer'ej, Frankland learns that the colony has only been allowed to stay by the wess'har because of the benign principles they live by. For hundreds of years the planet's designated wess'har guardian, Aras, has accepted and lived alongside these colonists, whose tenure on Bezer'ej is always under constant review from Aras's matriarchal leaders. A third alien race from the same system, the isenj, has already been erased from Bezer'ej by Aras himself when their territorial claim to Bezer'ej began upsetting the planet's ecological balance; the isenj therefore have a major score to settle with Aras dating back hundreds of years. Aras also has a blood

secret that he cannot afford to let fall into the hands of any alien race, humans included. Just what kind of minefield are Frankland, her scientists and crew walking into to complete her unknown mission, and what will it take before the humans on Bezer'ej suffer the same fate as the isenj?

It becomes immediately apparent that Traviss is very comfortable working with words. They flow easily, and *City of Pearl* is certainly a stronger and more fluid debut novel than any sf fan could reasonably ask for. Also a graduate of the Clarion workshop who has in her time worked as a defence correspondent, copywriter and press officer, there are absolutely no 'first novel' nerves on display, and she gives us a convincing and insightful story that asks hard questions and often has genuinely useful things to say. The storytelling is refreshingly straightforward with very little inclination towards the trappings of abstraction or artistic overindulgence – there may be echoes of Le Guin, but not overly so. She knows her subjects well and they are treated with the minimum of sentimentality: the environmental, colonial and animal rights subtexts could easily be overworked in a less well-informed writer's hands.

I would have liked more background on the wess'ej obsession with ecological balance which, when it does recur in the narrative, occasionally reads as little more than an aesthetic desire rather than a valid enough reason to commit genocide. But Traviss clearly knows how to smooth over the complexities of plot, of which there are several, as well as how to dovetail into an established story certain topical themes that do, over time, take on central relevance to the story itself. She crafts familiar tropes to her own ends rather than grafting them on in the familiar shape we usually find; it's very



hard to see the join because all aspects of the story – the plot and its resolution, the characters (especially the flawed protagonist duo of Frankland and Aras), the conflicting politics, even the world of Bezer'ej itself – are genuinely interesting and also have relevance to the here and now. I also suspect the territorial situation described is loosely modelled on the Falklands conflict,

an event which inspired the book's dedication.

This is a notably strong start to a full-time writing career and she deserves to receive a UK book deal to add to her US success, something that will bring her more into the fold of better known, identifiably British writers.

Harry Turtledove – *Settling Accounts: Return Engagement*

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2004, 623pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-340-82685-1

Reviewed by Colin Bird

You don't need me to tell you that this is an alternative history novel and that's it's part of a massive series (volume eight by my count) because the words 'Harry Turtledove' on the cover tell you pretty much what's going to be in the tin. In fact this book is almost review-proof because Turtledove fans will lap it up and non-Turtledove fans will be mystified by the author's impossibly dense and meticulously researched narrative.

The *Settling Accounts* series follows on from two previous trilogies: *The Great War* and *American Empire*, which examine how history may have shaped up had the South won the Civil War. The new series features a world where the Confederate States of America (CSA) and United States are still battling for control of North America as the events of the Second World War continue around them.

This volume features the beginnings of insurrection in the CSA as the Negroes react to disturbing accounts of 'population reduction' in the work camps. Meanwhile CSA forces, using their barrels (tanks) and mules (air support), strike deep into US territory dividing the beleaguered country in two. The US also has to deal with terrorists in occupied Canada (The Republic of

Quebec remains neutral) while ill-equipped Mormon separatists still prove a handful to the stretched federal forces. The focus is exclusively American-centric with a fascist Britain under Mosley fighting the Kaiser's forces in Europe getting a few brief mentions.

Turtledove has a formula that seems to work for his many fans: epic alternative history seen through the eyes of a huge cast of disparate characters, meticulously researched and scrupulously fair to all sides of the conflict. The problem for me is that the story is delivered in bite-size chunks – just as you get interested in one character's storyline you get unceremoniously dumped into another, less interesting, narrative thread. Very little happens in each segment although they do add up to an impressively detailed and consistently believable alternative history. In particular, the relocation of The

Holocaust to a fascistic CSA where blacks are disposed of with little opposition, is disturbingly convincing.

I find these books hard to get involved in: they read like a novelised wargame with detailed accounts of where all the pieces are on the board, and I think this book is more likely to appeal to history fans and military fiction buffs than a general science fiction audience. But judging by the author's sales figures there are plenty of people who have an appetite for this series and its like.



Peter Watts – *Behemoth: β-Max*

Tor, New York, 2004, 300pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30721-9

Reviewed by Colin Bird

I picked up Peter Watt's first novel, *Starfish*, on import a couple of years ago and was mightily impressed, even including it in my *Vector* books of the year. So I was pleased to receive *Behemoth* (subtitled *Book One: β-Max*) to review and then disappointed to find it was the third book in a trilogy, the second of which, *Maelstrom*, had slipped under my radar. More curiously, the author's apologetic note further explains that the third book of his *Rifters Trilogy* has been split into two volumes "due to recent changes in the publishing industry". Books by midlist authors will not receive wide distribution if they cost too much to print (i.e. if they are more than about 110,000 words). So Watts has made the economic decision to split *Behemoth* into two

volumes; *β-Max* soon to be followed by *Seppuku*.

The *Rifters Trilogy* began with *Starfish*, where we met up with the dysfunctional maintenance crew of a geothermal energy plant who are bioengineered to survive the relentlessly toxic environment of the deep ocean floor. A pathogenic primeval life form called *Behemoth* emerges from the rift valley to threaten humanity. Watts' future is not the most appetising prospect in fiction but he details mankind's woes in admirably lean, believable detail in a fine first novel. *Maelstrom* takes up the story as the corporation which employed the rifters tries to remove the threat from *Behemoth* with an underwater nuclear strike. The tidal wave triggered by the explosion wipes out the American

Pacific coast, leaving a scene of devastated cities soon crowded with hungry refugees. Out of the ocean comes embittered rifter Lenie Clarke, bringing the Behemoth plague with her to wreak havoc on the world.

Behemoth: β-Max continues the story five years later. The world is a dark place; civilisation has all but fallen on the surface of the Earth. Lenie Clarke and her rifter colleagues eke out a life on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean, sharing an uneasy alliance with a group of technoindustrial 'corpses' who require hi-tech habitats to survive the hostile environment. Somebody on the surface seems to be tracking them down, causing a rising tide of paranoia and infighting. And then a new infection

arrives on the scene, a more deadly cousin to Behemoth, sparking theories about just who had been tampering with the genetic structure of dangerous microscopic organisms.

This volume is not the best place to enter Watts' dark, claustrophobic vision of the future. However, it does continue the saga in fine style with the author's dazzling invention and uncompromising characterisation well utilised in a gripping story. Watts' future has that believably messy quality rather than the ordered progression often used by other genre writers. Shame about the dead halt at the end of this book – but blame that on the American publishing industry.

John C. Wright – *The Last Guardian of Everness*

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Tor, New York, 2004, 332pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-84871-4

Praise for John C. Wright on the dust-jacket of this book refers to his sf trilogy (*The Golden Age*, *The Phoenix Exultant*, *The Golden Transcendence*). However, this first part of the *War of the Dreaming* is high fantasy, set in the contemporary USA. (There is at least one further book planned, but whether the War will be won or merely continued in *Mists of Everness* remains to be seen.)

I was initially intrigued by the dust-jacket's plot resumé, which suggested a new take on the 'endless war between Darkness (Bad) and Light (Good)' theme. In Galen Waylock's America, "The so-called Power of Light is hostile to modern ideas of human dignity and liberty. No matter who wins the final war between darkness and light, mankind is doomed to either a benevolent dictatorship or a malevolent one. And so Galen makes a third choice..." As fantasy generally doesn't do politics, and high fantasy is dominated by feudal settings ruled by an absolute monarchy, I thought this sounded a fascinating premise.

However my initial enthusiasm was quickly dampened by meeting, in the first few pages, a Portentous Prophecy, a poem with faulty scansion, incorrect/inconsistent use of thee/thou, weird verbs ("I have tread the peaks of Zimiamvia and tasted from the ever-falling waters of Utterbol", and a lot of name-dropping... the aforementioned Zimiamvia, Tirion (*Silmarillion*), Sulva (*That Hideous Strength*); this man has certainly read his fantasy classics.

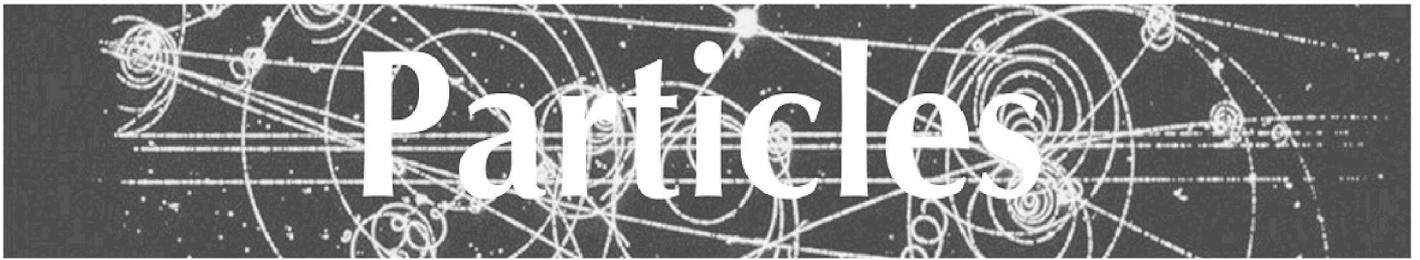
Plot? Galen Waylock is a nice well-meaning American boy who just happens to be in line to become the Guardian of the dream-gate between contemporary reality and All That's Mythic. In a dream, he believes he has received the sign to blow the Last Horn-Call and awake the champions of light to fight the last battle, during which Earth will be destroyed, but the Good Guys will get to live on in a post-holocaust New Jerusalem of some kind. Because his grandfather doesn't believe him, Galen sets out into the Dreamworld to talk to (or possibly rescue) the Founder of his line. The Founder turns out to be named after the Muslim Angel of Death, and to be... not a Good Guy. Galen probably

dies during his dream-journey (or maybe not), leaving Democracy and America to be saved (or possibly not) by a ditsy-cute fairy and a young Titan, both of whom are unaware that they are anything other than human. The Titan, by the way, was rescued from Georgia (the Russian one) as a baby (by Prometheus), which explain why he talk in funny foreign syntax, not?

However, the point at which I *really* lost patience with this book was a scene closely paralleling one in *That Hideous Strength*. In C. S. Lewis' novel, a trainee damned soul is asked to trample on a crucifix. He refuses, and this marks the beginning of his return to Christian faith and salvation. In Wright's parallel scene, the new recruit cheerfully tramples the crucifix, but refuses to spit on a copy of the American Constitution. Late in the book, storm-demons are driven off by the sound of church bells, but it's the trappings of Christianity that are effective, not its essence. The True Faith is in fact Democracy; as the surviving heroes take up their hard-won magical talismans, they each invoke (and quote) a different clause of the American Constitution.

At that point I finally realised what this book actually is. It's a post-9/11 fantasy. The protagonists' skin colour is (carefully?) never mentioned, but they all feel Caucasian to me. The mythology that is plundered to furnish the book is Northwest-European; Native American and African-derived images are conspicuous by their absence. This book assumes that Men are Strong (and gun-toting), and that the token woman is nauseatingly flittery-feminine (and not much else). It assumes that everything outside the USA is unimportant chaos. And it assumes that only America can save the World (i.e. America) for Freedom, because only America is truly Free. Hey guys, you'd better express some Aryan solidarity here, because the Forces of Darkness/Evil Empire are all around us, and he who is not with us is against us!

The *really* scary thing is, this fantasy may be coming true. Be very afraid.



Particles

These are some of the other books we have seen recently. A mention here does not necessarily preclude a full review in a later issue of Vector.

Piers Anthony – *Current Events*

Tor, New York, 2004, 336pp, \$24.95, h/b,
ISBN 0-765-30407-4

More Xanth. Yes, really, Anthony is still pursuing this (supposedly) humorous fantasy series, of which this is the twenty-eighth volume. Just to scare you even more I'll quote from the author's end note: "This is the first novel of the second Xanth magic trilogy, which of course is three cubed. That is, the twenty-eighth Xanth volume, duly recorded by Clio, the Muse of History. Whether Xanth will reach the fifty-fourth volume, completing the trilogy...". Fifty-four? Fifty-four! No, this is a use of bad maths to justify something which just should not exist. Even though I quite enjoyed some of the early volumes (well, I was sixteen) I soon gave up and moved to Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant* books. Still, this is a "beloved bestselling fantasy series" so there is a possibility that I'm wrong (don't think so though).

James Barclay – *Demonstorm*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 438pp, £18.99, h/b,
ISBN 0-575-07332-2

This is the third and concluding volume in Barclay's *Legends of the Raven* series, which followed his earlier *Chronicles of the Raven* trilogy. The other volumes of this series have been reviewed by Vikki Lee, the preceding volume, *Shadowheart*, covered in Vector 232 and the first, *Elfsorrow*, in Vector 226. Barclay is described by his publisher as their "most successful UK fantasy author" which is encouraging as Vikki describes Barclay's work as "the very best of today's heroic fantasy which should not be missed by anyone with the slightest interest in fantasy fiction". This volume even comes with another striking, atypical, cover design.

Jacqueline Carey – *Kushiel's Avatar*

Tor UK, London, 2004, 702pp, £12.99, t/p,
ISBN 1-4050-3414-9

Concluding volume in the *Kushiel's Legacy* trilogy, the other volumes being *Kushiel's Dart* and *Kushiel's Chosen*. Steve Jeffrey reviewed *Kushiel's Dart* in Vector 218 and was very, very impressed, with the books venturing into places not normally expected of generic fantasy. I suspect one of these areas is that the heroine of the series is a masochist both by inclination and training, resulting in, according to Steve, some parts getting disturbingly sexually graphic. He does note that the

book is rather too long, a view which another reader concurs with, describing it as an interesting book trying to escape the excessive detail. Carey knows all the minutiae of her world, and she wants the reader to know just as much. So everything goes in, leaving nothing to engage the imagination. Carey has now started a new, unrelated, series, *The Sundering*, the first volume of which, *Banewrecker*, will be reviewed in a future issue of Vector.

Storm Constantine – *The Shades of Time and Memory*

Tor, New York, 2004, 448pp, \$27.95, h/b,
ISBN 0-765-30347-7

The second volume in Constantine's new series, *The Wraeththu Histories*, which in turn follows the original *Wraeththu* series started in 1987 with *The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit*. The first volume of the new series, *The Wraiths of Will and Pleasure*, was reviewed in Vector 231 by Sue Thomason who was not impressed finding that it "doesn't have a plot, so much as a whole lot of stuff tumbling over itself to happen" and at the end "being left with a whole bunch of unanswered questions, dangling plot strands, and baffled frustrations". Which may be answered by this volume. I've always rather liked Constantine's work especially the under-valued *Hermetech*.

David and Leigh Eddings – *The Treasured One*

Voyager, London, 2004, 519pp, £18.99, h/b,
ISBN 0-00-715761-4

Volume two of *The Dreamers* series (with no indication of how many are to come) which started with *The Elder Gods*, reviewed in Vector 231. Vikki Lee found that it wasn't a bad book, just one that she had read many times before and which offered nothing new to the fantasy genre. I suspect that there is little likelihood that the authors will have dramatically changed to a winning formula with this volume.

Robert Heinlein – *Glory Road*

Tor, New York, 2004, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b,
ISBN 0-765-30691-3

New hardback edition – the first since original publication in 1963 – of what is described as Heinlein's one 'true' fantasy novel (whatever 'true fantasy novel' means). 'Scar' Gordon, recovering after a tour in Southeast Asia (that's as in 'war', sorry 'police action')

and not rock), answers an advert offering "high pay, glorious adventure, great danger" and meets Star, the beautiful Empress of twenty universes (which moves it towards what is now familiar Heinlein territory). This was another one of those books that I first read from the library as a teenager and I must have been impressed as I then started reading lots of Heinlein; rapidly finding that much of his later work was rubbish. This edition contains an afterword (first written in 1979) by Samuel R. Delany. The publicity material describes Heinlein as being "widely acknowledged to have been the single most important and influential author of science fiction". Which sounds like it should be followed by a thesis proving why this is wrong. Does anyone agree with this?

Robert Holdstock – *Lavondyss*

Tor, New York, 2003, 414pp, \$15.95, t/p,
ISBN 0-765-30731-6

This appears to be the first US paperback edition of Holdstock's 1988 sequel to what is probably his masterwork, *Mythago Wood*. *Vector* reviewed *Lavondyss* on its original UK publication, way back in 1989 in issue 148. The story follows young Tallis as she sets out to discover the secrets of the forest, to which she has lost her brother. Strongly recommended, and if you want a paperback edition this has the usual high production standards that we have come to associate with Tor.

David J. Howe and Arnold T. Blumberg – *Transcendental Toybox: Dr Who Merchandise 2003*

Telos, Tolworth, 2004, 104pp, £7.99, p/b,
ISBN 1-903889-57-X

This is an update to Howe's *Transcendental Toybox* covering all the *Dr Who* merchandise produced during 2003. This brings home quite what an effect the series had, with an amazing amount and variety of items available for a series that started in 1963 and has been off our screens for some years. In addition to the expected merchandise you can get talking Daleks and a Tardis etched cube. Apparently the most valuable piece of *Dr Who* merchandise is the Bally *Dr Who* pinball machine, estimated at £3,250 (but check eBay for current availability). Still, roll on Russell T. Davies' *Dr Who* later this year!

Ian Irvine – *Chimaera*

Orbit, London, 2004, 836pp, £12.99, t/p,
ISBN 1-84149-324-4

The fourth and concluding volume of the *Well of Echoes* series, with the Council's one remaining hope trapped in a burning watchtower and hunted by both the scrutators (that's Irvine's bad guys) and his former lover. But as it's the final volume of a fantasy series I suspect he'll get out of it and save the day.

Robert Jordan – *New Spring*

Orbit, London, 2004, 423pp, £6.99, p/b,
ISBN 1-84149-261-2

Part of the Author's massive *Wheel of Time* fantasy

series this is a prequel to the main event, revealing the origins of the epic quest for the Dragon Reborn (which I'm sure will mean something to fans of the series). This could almost be seen as a disappointment, coming in at only 400+ pages rather than the 700 to 800 pages fans have come to expect. Lesley Hatch reviewed *New Spring* in *Vector* 235 finding this (unsurprisingly) only for existing fans of the series, unlikely to convince newcomers to try the full sequence. Also unsurprisingly *New Spring* left many options for sequels to the prequel.

Anne and Todd McCaffrey – *Dragon's Kin*

Bantam, London, 2004, 363pp, £6.99, p/b,
ISBN 0-552-15150-5

The *Books of Pern* continue with this volume filling in gaps in the existing series, which was reviewed favourably in *Vector* 234. The next volume *Dragonsblood* (and you knew there would be more didn't you?) is published in April 2005 and will be written by Todd McCaffrey alone, the "approved heir to Pern". Not a bad inheritance.

Robert Newcomb – *The Gates of Dawn*

Bantam, London, 2004, 655pp, £6.99, p/b,
ISBN 0-553-81454-0

Robert Newcomb – *The Scrolls of the Ancients*

Bantam, London, 2004, 531pp, £12.99, t/p,
ISBN 0-593-04963-2

Books two and three of the *Chronicles of Blood & Stone* trilogy, the first volume of which was *The Fifth Sorceress*. Traditional fantasy, but at least it does have pirates in it.

Gary Russell – *The Art of The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*

HarperCollins, London, 2004, 224pp, £25.00, h/b,
ISBN 0-00-719192-8

The title says it all, this is a lavishly produced book with various types of artwork from the films: sketches, conceptual art, designs, sculptures, digital paintings etc. Accompanying the pictures are comments and discussions from the artists. There is some fascinating work here, such as the various watercolours of Minas Morgul (although these are let down by the figures in the pictures) but much of this is routine, looking much better when it's up on the big screen.

Vernor Vinge – *Marooned in Realtime*

Tor, New York, 2004, 269pp, \$13.95, t/p,
ISBN 0-765-30884-3

Sequel to Vinge's earlier *The Peace War* (also re-published by Tor, see *Vector* 236) which together are titled *Across Realtime*. Both these books have been out-of-print for over a decade and it is very welcome to see them back, as this is real sf of the first order. *Marooned in Realtime* takes us forward to the Earth of fifty million years from now, using the investigation of the last twenty-first century detective's hunt for a murderer. Highly recommended – but do go for both books.

John C. Wright – *The Golden Transcendence*

Tor, New York, 2003, 384pp, \$25.95, h/b,
ISBN 1-765-30756-1

Book three of *The Golden Age*, following *The Golden Age* and *The Phoenix Exultant*. I reviewed the first book, *The Golden Age*, in *Vector* 224 and was very disappointed. The book had many strong, positive reviews (as have the subsequent volumes) but I still cannot see why. I found that from the very first page the prose was intrusive, annoying and completely over-stylised. If you can get beyond the first chapter (and I only did because I was reviewing it) there is the thinnest of plots surrounded by extensive deliberations on the nature of the far-future society, but by end of the book little of substance has occurred, being flat and lifeless throughout. The quotes with the book – from some very eminent and respected people – really do make it sound like a completely different book from the one I read.

May be it's just me? Wright has now moved on to fantasy with *The Last Guardian of Everness* which is reviewed in the main column of this issue. Looks like I've found another person who is very unimpressed with this author's work.

Jenny Wurts – *Traitor's Knot*

Voyager, London, 2004, 531pp, £11.99, t/p,
ISBN 0-00-710113-9

I know it's getting towards the end of the magazine but you need to concentrate here: *Traitor's Knot* is volume four of the *Alliance of Light* series but is also volume seven of *The Wars of Light* and *Shadow* series. Clear? Good. This is traditional fantasy at its most traditional, complete with map, what-has-gone-before and a glossary.

American fantasy round-up**Sara Douglass – *God's Concubine***

Tor, New York, 2004, 610pp, \$7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-765-34443-2

Sara Douglass – *Sinner*

Tor, New York, 2004, 464pp, \$26.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-87046-9

Sara Douglass – *The Nameless Day*

Tor, New York, 2004, 416pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30362-0

Elizabeth Haydon – *Elegy for a Lost Star*

Tor, New York, 2004, 464pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-87883-4

Elizabeth Kerner – *Redeeming the Lost*

Tor, New York, 2004, 400pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-89065-6

Juliet Marillier – *Foxmask*

Tor, New York, 2004, 464pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30674-3

L. E. Modesitt – *Scepters*

Tor, New York, 2004, 656pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31042-2

Mel Odom – *The Destruction of the Books*

Tor, New York, 2004, 384pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30723-5

Laura Resnick – *The Destroyer Goddess*

Tor, New York, 2004, 608pp, \$7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-765-34796-2

Lawrence Watt-Evans – *Dragon Venom*

Tor, New York, 2003, 416pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30279-9

Sarah Zettel – *The Firebird's Vengeance*

Tor, New York, 2004, 400pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30812-6

A selection of fantasy novels recently published by Tor in America, all of which are parts of multi-volume works and, to judge a book by its cover – and cover-blurb –

there is very little to differentiate between. We have previously reviewed a number of these in *Vector* (in UK or hardback editions), for example *The Destroyer Goddess* (*Vector* 235) and *Sinner* (*Vector* 215). Despite some of these being entertaining, they do little to develop or breakaway from the standard traditions of the sub-genre of heroic fantasy, although *The Nameless Day* (*Vector* 218) tries hard, veering into the detailed historical territory of, for example, Mary Gentle's *Ash* (which to many is a good thing... but to me?). Tad Williams has recently been using the term 'deep fantasy' (coined by this wife) as a preferred descriptor for this type of novel (rather than 'epic' or 'traditional') when discussing his new novel *Shadowmarch*. He explains this as the "immersive nature of the stuff, the fact that what most of us who keep coming back to fantasy fiction love about it is that 'sinking-in' feeling, that thrill of sliding into a new and convincing world that exists side-by-side with our own". This quote perhaps starts to explain the popularity of the genre and how a publishing industry can support the number of similar seeming works – which as you can see from both this column and the main reviews section occurs on both sides of the Atlantic.

...and coming soon

THESE ARE JUST SOME OF THE BOOKS THAT YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE REVIEWED IN FULL IN FUTURE ISSUES OF *VECTOR*.

Neal Asher – *Brass Man*

Tor UK, London, 2005, 485pp, £12.99, t/p,
ISBN 1-4050-0138-0

Asher returns to the world of his earlier novel *Gridlinked* – which I still think is his best so far – to tell of the creation and resurrection of Mr. Crane, an extremely violent golem fairly comprehensively destroyed in *Gridlinked*. This is hugely enjoyable, no-nonsense action-packed sf with a brain.

Iain M. Banks – *The Algebraist*

Orbit, London, 2004, 534pp, £17.99, h/b,
ISBN 1-84149-155-1

Banks' return to sf after four years – well, he did manage to fit in Iain Banks books and one about whisky – is a sprawling tale of universal conflict inside gas-giant societies.

Ben Jeapes – *The New World Order*

David Fickling Books, Oxford, 2004, 442pp, £12.99, h/b,
ISBN 0-385-60686-5

The First English Civil War has started – and visitors from another World have arrived. With airships. Which should be enough to persuade anyone to rush out and buy this book. Jeapes has written a number of excellent YA novels – *Winged Chariot* is especially good – and *The New World Order*, is his best yet.

Alastair Reynolds – *Century Rain*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 506pp, £14.99, h/b,
ISBN 0-575-07436-1

Reynolds new book is his first novel away from his *Inhibitor* sequence (started with the wonderful *Revelation Space*) and is all the stronger for it. The later books in the series were feeling somewhat tired but *Century Rain* has all the pace and invention of his earlier work that was still apparent in the later novella ‘Diamond Dogs’. Here we have two strands; one set three hundred years in the future following the near-destruction of the earth following the Nanocaust,

interwoven with a noir-Paris of 1959.

Neal Stephenson – *The System of the World*

Heinemann, London, 2004, 894pp, £16.99, h/b,
ISBN 0434011770

Can the third volume of Stephenson’s *Baroque Cycle* really justify this massive work, which is effectively one story spilt into three books? Stuart Carter will answer this when he concludes his review of the series, after the first two volumes, *Quicksilver* (winner of the 2003 Arthur C. Clarke Award) and *The Confusion* were covered in *Vector* 238.

Tad Williams – *Shadowmarch*

Orbit, London, 2004, 656pp, £17.99, h/b,
SBN 1-84149-288-4

A massive new, deep fantasy novel from Tad Williams, which is being promoted hard and getting some very good reviews. Despite appearing to be routine high fantasy this is likely to be far superior to much of the other fare on Ottakars’ shelves.

Vector 239 – Index of Books Reviewed

Piers Anthony – <i>Currant Events</i> [P].....	33	Juliet Marillier – <i>Foxmask</i> [P].....	35
Kelley Armstrong – <i>Industrial Magic</i> [COMLB].....	18	Julian May – <i>Conqueror’s Moon</i> [AAA].....	26
James Barclay – <i>Demonstorm</i> [P].....	33	Julian May – <i>Ironcrown Moon</i> [AAA].....	26
Stephen Baxter – <i>Mayflower II</i> [SC].....	19	Anne and Todd McCaffrey – <i>Dragon’s Kin</i> [P].....	34
Arnold T. Blumberg & David J. Howe – <i>Transcendental Toybox: Dr Who Merchandise 2004</i> [P]... 34		Juliet E. McKenna – <i>Northern Storm</i> [AAA].....	26
Marion Zimmer Bradley & Diana L. Paxson – <i>Ancestors of Avalon</i> [CB1]... 20		L. E. Modesitt – <i>Scepters</i> [P].....	35
Eric Brown – <i>New York Dreams</i> [JW].....	20	Simon Morden – <i>Brilliant Things</i> [AF].....	27
Chris Bunch – <i>The Last Battle</i> [MG].....	21	Adam L. G. Nevill – <i>Banquet for the Damned</i> [SM].....	28
Jacqueline Carey – <i>Kushiel’s Avatar</i> [P].....	33	Robert Newcomb – <i>The Gates of Dawn</i> [P].....	34
Storm Constantine – <i>The Shades of Time and Memory</i> [P]... 33		Robert Newcomb – <i>The Scrolls of the Ancients</i> [P].....	34
Sara Douglas – <i>Cod’s Concubine</i> [P].....	35	Stan Nicholls – <i>Quicksilver Zenith</i> [ER].....	28
Sara Douglas – <i>Sinner</i> [P].....	35	Mel Odom – <i>The Destruction of the Books</i> [P].....	35
Sara Douglas – <i>The Nameless Day</i> [P].....	35	Paul Park – <i>No Traveller Returns</i> [SC].....	19
David and Leigh Eddings – <i>The Treasured One</i> [P].....	33	Diana L. Paxson & Marion Zimmer Bradley – <i>Ancestors of Avalon</i> [CB1]... 20	
John M. Ford – <i>Heat of Fusion and Other Stories</i> [ST].... 22		Laura Resnick – <i>The Destroyer Goddess</i> [P].....	35
M. John Harrison – <i>Things That Never Happen</i> [PK]..... 22		Gary Russell – <i>The Art of The Lord of the Rings Trilogy</i> [P]... 34	
Elizabeth Haydon – <i>Elegy for a Lost Star</i> [P].....	35	Lucius Shepard – <i>Trujillo</i> [NH].....	29
Robert Heinlein – <i>Clory Road</i> [P].....	33	Karen Traviss – <i>City of Pearl</i> [PY].....	30
Robert Holdstock – <i>Lavodyss</i> [P].....	34	Harry Turtledove – <i>Settling Accounts: Return Engagement</i> [CB2]... 31	
David J. Howe & Arnold T. Blumberg – <i>Transcendental Toybox: Dr Who Merchandise 2003</i> [P]... 34		Vernor Vinge – <i>Marooned in Realtime</i> [P].....	34
Ian Irvine – <i>Chimaera</i> [P].....	34	Lawrence Watt-Evans – <i>Dragon Venom</i> [P].....	35
Robert Jordan – <i>New Spring</i> [P].....	34	Peter Watts – <i>Behemoth: β-Max</i> [CB2].....	31
Elizabeth Kemer – <i>Redeeming the Lost</i> [P].....	35	John C. Wright – <i>The Golden Transcendence</i> [P].....	35
Greg Keyes – <i>The Charnel Prince</i> [ER].....	23	John C. Wright – <i>The Last Guardian of Everness</i> [ST]..... 32	
Nancy Kress – <i>Crucible</i> [LB].....	24	Jenny Wurts – <i>Traitor’s Knot</i> [P].....	35
James Lovegrove – <i>Worldstorm</i> [CH].....	25	Sarah Zettel – <i>The Firebird’s Vengeance</i> [P].....	35

Reviewer’s Key: AAA – Andrew A. Adams; AF – Alan Fraser; CB1 – Cherith Baldry; CB2 – Colin Bird; CH – Chris Hill; COMLB – Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc; ER – Estelle Roberts; JW – Jon Wallace ; LB – Lynne Bispham; MG – Mark Greener; NH – Niall Harrison; P – Particle; PK – Paul Kincaid; PY – Peter Young; SC – Stuart Carter; SM – Simon Morden; ST – Sue Thomason.