



THE

# ALIEN

# REVIEW

Issue 1 : April 2021

# THE **ALIEN REVIEW**

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### **THE ALIEN REVIEW 1**

April 2021

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# Initial Thoughts

## by Perry Middlemiss

Every fanzine must have an origin point, that spot in a person's fannish timeline when the prospect of producing a new fanzine becomes seemingly inevitable. For me that occurred around September 2020.

David Grigg and I were about 18 months into our co-hosting of the **Two Chairs Talking** podcast and I was finding that I was reading more and more material that needed to be reviewed, beyond the discussions on the program. The first of these was an essay on the Hugo Awards of 1961. This covered the novels and shorter fiction published in 1960 that made the final award ballot, along with lists of works that might have made been nominated. That piece found a home at **Science Fiction Commentary** edited by Bruce Gillespie (not yet published as I write this).

That seemed to come out okay so I thought I might make a series of it and pitched Bruce the idea of covering the 1962 Hugo Awards. He wasn't interested. Fair enough, I thought, the 1961 awards had better material and unless I could commit to a regular Hugo Awards essay I could see that he wouldn't want the essays just to peter out after one or two (my thinking here, not Bruce's).

I then pitched an essay to him covering the major 2020 novel award winners in the science fiction and fantasy genres. Again Bruce didn't show any interest, which is also his prerogative. But this one keep on digging at me. I already had extensive notes on four or five of the winners and really only needed to read another three or four, review them, compare, contrast, and note any major similarities or differences and I was away. And if Bruce didn't want to publish it then I needed to find another home for the piece.

So I went hunting around and couldn't find anywhere. Maybe it was my lack of knowledge of the current state of sf fanzine publishing, or maybe it was a fact that Bruce's **SFC** is really the only one of its type still out there. In any event I was left with the question of what to do with a critical piece of writing I was planning that couldn't find a home.

There seemed to be little choice in the matter, and the result is what you are reading now.

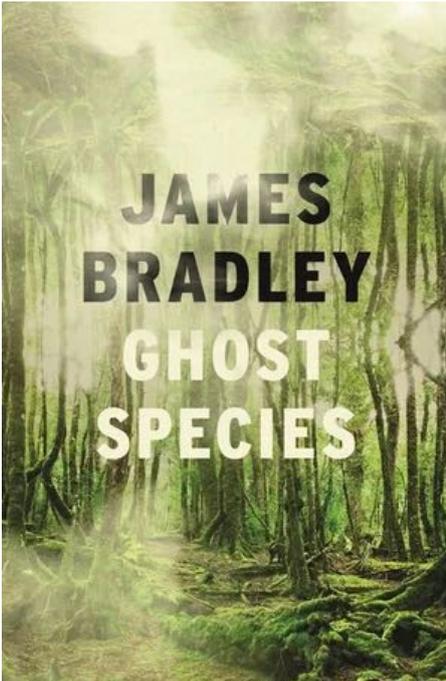
As usual with things like this it started small and just tended to grow the more I thought about it. Bruce Gillespie had hinted a few times on Facebook and face-to-face that he wondered if David and I were aiming to transcribe our podcast talks and to publish them in a fanzine. "Not in our plans," we replied. And yet it seemed like a reasonable idea. Which led me to thinking about and then writing up the "SF in Dialogue" article in this issue, and which may lead to other transcriptions in the future.

The book reviews and critical essays were always going to be included, and I always wanted to reprint a piece of old fannish writing, here written by Leigh Edmonds from 1971. Then, sometime at the end of 2020, Nick Price pitched an idea for the podcast which I thought would fit better here as a grouped set of small pieces that were written by people who were not otherwise represented in the issue. The end result is the section titled "I Remember Reading That". I think this idea a good one and I'm thinking that I will be able to adapt it each issue to cover a slightly different topic, but still by a variety of different people.

I had no real idea how this fanzine would pan out when I first starting thinking about it. It was just an idea, and a vague one at that. And yet here we are, some four or five months later with an issue at hand. Life, and fandom, are funny things. ◀◀

# SF in Dialogue

## W. H. Chong and Perry Middlemiss discuss *GHOST SPECIES* by James Bradley



*Ghost Species* by James Bradley,  
Hamish Hamilton,  
272pp, (2020)

**Perry:** I started by asking Chong why he chose to read this particular book.

**Chong:** In response to that question I want to read a little passage from *Clade*, his previous book. So this is from page 57. This man's talking about birds. "They might look fine but they've stopped breeding, or if they're still breeding, their eggs aren't hatching or the heat is killing the chicks. The ones you can see here are adults because they're all that's left, and when they're gone that will be the end of them. They're a ghost species."

**Perry:** Good pick.

**Chong:** How about that?

**Perry:** So that's the linkage from there into this particular book.

**Chong:** I think quite clearly. The author James Bradley says he has just been thinking about this stuff for ages and it just keeps going on. He made some remark, um, what was the one before this, *The Resurrectionist*?

**Perry:** Yes, there's a couple of a couple of young adult books in there, but just going on this style, it was *The Resurrectionist*.

**Chong:** Because it took him 9 years ago to get from *The Resurrectionist* to *Clade* and then another five years from *Clade* to *Ghost Species*.

**Perry:** Sounds about right. 2006, 2015. So, yes, nine years between those two.

**Chong:** You can speak to what *The Resurrectionist* is about because I didn't get right very far with that book, but he said somewhere in an interview that, after that book he got a bit burnt out or something and he just didn't feel like there was another book happening in him, and then he said it came to this thought that he would only write about something that really mattered to him, something that really mattered in itself. And clearly, currently, and since then that has been climate change or something to do with the way this world is falling apart. And that's how we get these last two books of his.

**Perry:** I think that you have to see these two as a thematic pair and you can see the threads through them even more so after having you read that passage

from the original book. But let's have a look at **Ghost Species** first. This is a very simple synopsis and there may be some spoilers in this. I should warn people that that might be the case, but that's what happens.

**Chong:** Do you allow that?

**Perry:** I don't think that's a major problem, as long as you tell people upfront they can just basically decide whether they going to carry on listening or not.

**Chong:** It's much more fun to have spoilers, but they're very painful if you haven't read the book yet.

**Perry:** Well, yes, but there's nothing in **Ghost Species** which I think you would find to be terribly spoilerfying.

**Chong:** It's not about the plot.

**Perry:** No, it's not about the plot at all. Well, let's just talk about what actually happens as a brief synopsis. So basically it depicts a world sometime in the future - 10-20 years. We don't know, and it doesn't really matter. It's just that it's a bit further down the track from where we are at the moment.

**Chong:** Can I correct you? Bradley more or less says that it's starting like now, in a fictional kind of a way.

**Perry:** So it's more like 5 minutes in the future? OK, so he's got this main character that's in the background of this book by the name of Davis Hucken who is a tech billionaire. He's basically an amalgam of Zuckerberg, Elon Musk and any of the others that you want to name, all rolled up into one, and he's created this social media site called Gather. Bradley doesn't go into any details about that, but I'm not really fussed about it. I don't really care. All you need to know is that this guy's made a motzer of money out of the tech industry. He, being a bit like some of the other tech billionaires, has a view of what he wants to see the world being like, and one of them is that he wants to be able to resurrect a number of extinct species. He contacts two geneticists who are a married couple, Kate

Larkin and Jay Gunasekera, and he employs them and brings them to what he refers to as his Foundation, which is based in southwestern Tasmania's wilderness. They get a bit of an idea about what he's doing because Bradley hints at a certain animal floating around in the bush in southwestern Tasmania. You only get told, much further down in the book, that this is a thylacine or Tasma-

nian Tiger. If you're an Australian and you read the description of the animal you know exactly what it is. So you get the hint very early about what it is that Hucken is trying to do, and it slowly comes out that Hucken has come to the conclusion that *homo sapiens* has basically decimated and ruined the planet. And for his own reasons, he believes that reintroducing the Neanderthal into the world would be a means of being able to bring it back to more of a pristine state. I don't know how he thinks that was going to happen or what he thinks was going to happen in terms of that, but he decides that he wants to bring back the Neanderthal.

So he's got these two Kate and Jay to run this foundation to basically create a Neanderthal.

**Chong:** I'm not sure that's what he is thinking. It seems to me unclear that Davis is anything particular, he's just some sort of cipher, really. He's a very unrounded character in formal terms and he says very explicitly right up front he thinks it would be good to have some other species looking back at us.

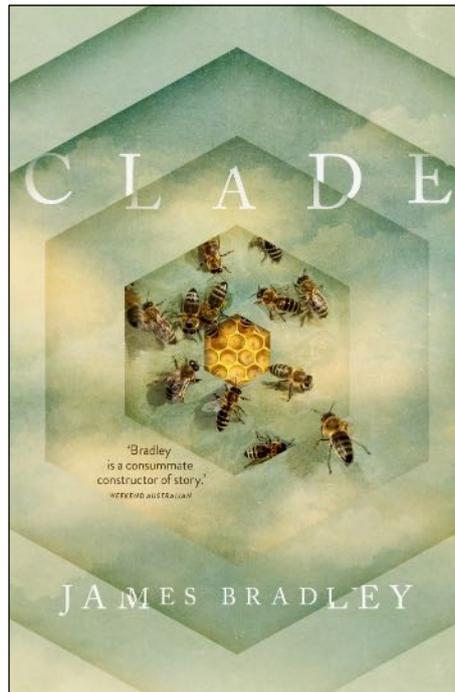
**Perry:** Another viewpoint, another way of looking at the problems.

**Chong:** ... another kind of us. I think that's taking some kind of thesis for the book, but they have really very little to do the whole Davis thing.

**Perry:** The whole Davis thing is really just to a setup at the beginning. As you say it's a cipher. He's...

**Chong:** ...very thin. Did you see the film *Ex Machina*?

**Perry:** Yes.



**Chong:** The whole style of this is just straight out of *Ex Machina*, the buildings, the station...

**Perry:** It reminded me of that completely. As soon as I started reading it and he was talking about this sort of isolated set of buildings somewhere in the back blocks of southwestern Tasmania. That's the first thing that I thought of and then, when he started talking about resurrecting species, I started thinking about *Jurassic Park*. But where *Jurassic Park* is very much a commercial theme park arrangement this is a lot more scientifically based, more based on the idea of we're just going to do this and keep it completely secret. Keep it away from everybody. And so the book ***Ghost Species*** follows the development of this young Neanderthal girl called Eve, of course.

**Chong:** There is an Adam in ***Clade***.

**Perry:** The main character in ***The Resurrectionist*** is called Gabriel.

**Chong:** It's very Biblical.

**Perry:** He takes a lot of effort in choosing the names that he wants to use. I mean, K&J, there's almost echoes of *Men in Black* here. You know, basically single word: Agent K, Agent J. He's probably not thought about that at all and I'm just bringing things in from my own my own background, but...

**Chong:** I never pictured you as a *Men in Black* kind of guy, Perry.

**Perry:** It's a fun movie. Just look at it as a fun movie and that's it. But I don't know why that just popped up in my head when that was happening. But I think that Bradley here is trying to look at a *Jurassic Park* style development of extinct species, but not for a major commercial basis, which is that one was.

**Chong:** Well, in *Jurassic Park* it's sort of like a capitalistic spectacle, profit motive. Here the setup is scientific philosophical, but obviously is a metaphorical theme for the book.

**Perry:** Yes, so the difference with this particular book is this has a solid philosophical background, as you say. His main aim here is to discuss the ethics and morals of producing a new species that hasn't been on the planet for five or six thousand years, or maybe longer. Is it ethical to be able to do this? It's an interesting scientific exercise, but what you're going to end up with here is an intelli-

gent sentient being. And they may be the only one of their species on the planet, in which case where does that leave you? Playing God and being an idiot or trying to do something that you really shouldn't be doing or...

**Chong:** We are talking about Zuckerberg, Musk and Bezos, of course they are playing God and of course they don't care about the consequences.

**Perry:** Well, this is the point. He doesn't really care terribly much about it.

**Chong:** I don't think the book cares very much about the ethical question about resurrecting Neanderthals. I think it's a metaphorical image, and it does something with the difference of having the "othering" effect of the Neanderthal character because in the book half of it seems to be from the mother's viewpoint or the foster mother's viewpoint and the other half is from the Neanderthal girl's viewpoint. So there is that kind of "seeing you seeing me" kind of thing, yes, but I don't think he actually cares about it. I guess he's not taking it literally because I think he's really saying it is very unlikely anyone can do this kind of thing because there isn't enough genomic information. So it's just a peg. I don't think that it is kind of a sci-fi sort of teasing puzzle question that you're supposed to think about very much.

**Perry:** I think you're probably right, but he does talk about the development of the child and how the child is impacted by the fact that she is different from everybody else around her, and the way that she gets bullied and treated, stared at by adults who don't want to say anything but are a bit shocked with what they see because she's got a slightly different skeletal structure. She's slightly bigger than a normal human baby, the face is just slightly flatter, the eyes are slightly further apart. So she is different, but children notice it a lot more than the adults do.

**Chong:** I read it in a kind of obvious way. This is about people not like us — migrants, they're migrants of a different of a genetic strain. I just don't think it's about a Neanderthal really. The ghost species is not the girl coming back from a dead species, it's about us vanishing into a ghost species because I think clearly the book's about us and the future is about now. It's all about now, it's all about us, we are the ghost in the machine and we are about to ghost away.

**Perry:** That's interesting. Yes, I can see that point of view though he's not trying to set up Eve as being the new "Master of the Earth" if you like. Not the first of a large race that they're developing, it's just a once-off. So you're thinking that it's a more of a metaphor of how we see ourselves and how we see our relationships with the Earth and what we're doing to it?

**Chong:** You would have to think that, in this context, the Neanderthal girl, and we see her growing up because it takes the first couple of decades of her life in this book, that she is a human creature that's closer to nature, closer to capital N nature.

**Perry:** Yes, that's the impression that I got. Hucken and was trying to get that point that he was thinking that he wanted somebody that was closer to the actual Earth as opposed to the rampaging cannibalistic ones that we've become.

**Chong:** Yeah, and we are eating ourselves. It's tricky because you know it's a sample of one and she's kind of like cast as this good, innocent. But what if she had been in a more like a "We must talk about Kevin" kind of girl where she was kind of a maniac. Well, that would give you a completely different cast to this thing. Her innocence is a requirement for this story, and, you know, to contrast with everything else that we are doing to the world. She's just trying to live in it, close to it.

**Perry:** You get that from the hint from the name as well. Even though Eve is the first woman. This is then also the first innocent woman as well.

**Chong:** She's first again. There's hints all the way through.

**Perry:** When I was reading this, I was thinking that "has he bitten off too much?" In this particular book, is he trying to cover too much territory.

**Chong:** So what do you think he's bitten off?

**Perry:** Well, the whole of the idea of the development of this woman from basically, prior to her birth, right through until she's probably mid 20s. At first off, I thought that he'd probably bitten off too much and he had spread the book over too a long a period of time.

**Chong:** *Clade* went over 70 years. That's three times as long.

**Perry:** I think that the way he handled *Clade* was that he broke it up into those small stories of people that are all basically connected and all came together. As I said, I was thinking about this that he had probably spread it out over too long when I first started reading it, but the further and further I got into it, I was thinking, "no, this is all right. This is now coming together." It was sort of holding together quite well and I could see that he was looking at a full life. I don't know why I had this feeling that he had bitten too much and the time period was too long.

**Chong:** Is it because of the preface? In the preface which only goes for just over 3 pages, Bradley actually sets up the scope of this kind of thing he's thinking about. In the preface, you don't know who the characters are. There's a mother and a child. The mother is telling the child something as the child falls asleep, so she's talking to herself. This is in the middle of it: "Sometimes, though, when the child is on the edge of sleep, she tells her one particular story, a story unlike others, a story about people long ago, a people who are not quite us. For as long as they could remember this people had lived on the plains in Africa, moving in bands through its vast spaces, hunting and singing...Millennia passed and the people were happy, until one day, some of them grew restless and decided to head north, through the mountains...There were new places, peopled by new creature-s...And then one day the snow began to creep south." So he's talking about the deep past. In the way, I guess he's also projecting. In *Clade* too, is the deep future because he talks about the stars in *Clade* towards the end. So he's reaching back to the past here, and *Clade* he's reaching forwards.

**Perry:** He's giving us a bit of a mirror there the other way. I took it that the mother here was a Neanderthal talking to her child and the people moving out of Africa were the *homo sapiens* coming up. So that it was told as a very quick vignette of the Neanderthal coming across the new species and this whole book is the *homo sapiens* coming across the new species.

**Chong:** Fantastic reading.

**Perry:** Maybe I'm reading too much into it. I just thought if you come across a book, when you get to the end of it, and you think he did well with this, he achieved what he wanted to do...

**Chong:** Quite good? (laughs)

**Perry:** Yes, you can always pick on me for saying “quite good”. Sorry it's just an affectation of mine, but I think this book is very good. This book is even better than quite good. I think that when you get to the end, and the author has written a preface, it's probably a good idea to go back and read the preface again. Just to see how it all sort of fits in together and just you reading that particular section of it reminded me that that's what I had thought of the preface first off. Now I knew that this particular book, before I even started reading, and I'm not giving away the plot here in any way shape or form, to basically say that the whole story is about the development of a young Neanderthal girl.

That's well known and it's out there. Any reviews you read you can't get away from that. So I knew that was going to be the case and reading this and the section with the people millennia ago moving out of Africa, that reminded me that the

Neanderthals went out first, and then the *homo sapiens* came out afterwards and then moved up into southern parts of Europe and basically pushed Neanderthal all the way right down through to the southern parts of the Iberian Peninsula. And he actually talks at one stage there about somebody finding an underwater cave where they have found the last remnants of the Neanderthal in Europe. So, your overall impressions. What did you think? Do you think that Bradley set out to achieve something and got there?

**Chong:** Oh yes, I'm sure he set out with something in mind. Though, you know, writers always say that they don't have a program, but also at the same time he writes quite a bit of journalism, very explicitly about the issues of climate change and the apocalypse we are facing. Apocalypse, being the Greek or Latin for revelation. So these are kind of apocalyptic fictions in the sense of revelation. And he obviously finds it a very urgent topic for himself, as he seems to be not thinking about very much else. In his own personal situation is that he's got young kids, both his parents have recently died, so I guess there's quite a lot on his mind about survival. How do you survive something? How do you survive something in the sense of being what's left after something else is gone? I don't know what his mission was and I don't

know whether he would be willing to put it into such a blunt language. But if he's trying to make something that feels atmospherically bleak about our sort of future on this planet, if he's trying to give a sense of how much the world is surely and not so slowly falling apart, if he's trying to provoke a sense of dread in the reader, he's certainly succeeded with me.

**Perry:** He tells the story against the background of environmental collapse. You get snippets of things that are happening in the background of the collapse of a large ice shelf in Antarctica, the breakdown of governments, but he doesn't dwell on that because he's more interested in the personal story, and the personal journey of Eve, and Kay for that matter.

**Chong:** He puts in plenty in those small snippets, so you get the sense very clearly that the world is no longer in any sense normal.

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**“They might look fine but they've stopped breeding, or if they're still breeding, their eggs aren't hatching or the heat is killing the chicks. The ones you can see here are adults because they're all that's left, and when they're gone that will be the end of them. They're a ghost species.”**

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**Perry:** He's reached the point where there's no question that this is going to happen. It's just a part of the background of the future timeline that he is outlining. And there's no debate about it. This is what's going to happen, but it's the ramifications of it and how it impacts the characters here that he's interested in rather than the bigger picture.

**Chong:** Here are two bits I marked which speak of that kind of thing and they are 2 pages apart. So on page 166 one of the characters talks about the death of a parent. “You think, because you know it's coming it will be easier, that you'll be prepared. But you're not. It's like one day you're somewhere you know and the next day you're standing on another shore looking back at this world.” Then 2 pages later, Kate, who's the foster mother, has this going through her head: “There is something numbing about this process, a sense that with each new diminution the world slips further out of alignment. Yet while Jay and Cassie and many of her colleagues feel the same, few of them talk about it, except in the most guarded terms, and out in the street or the supermarket it is as if nothing has changed. Do people not feel it, the way death shadows them? This sense the world is coming apart? This sense that they are all a part of it?” So these things just kind of run right through the whole book, you

know, like walnuts in a brownie and you just can't get away from them. Every time you turn a page it crunch on a walnut of grief, of incipient horror.

**Perry:** Yes, he's aware of that and but he doesn't beat you over the head with it, but it is there the whole way. You can tell that it's there and it's a very quietly written book and it gradually builds the whole picture.

**Chong:** Did you find yourself moved or did you feel emotional about any bits of the book?

**Perry:** Yes, reading bits like that part about losing a parent, after losing a parent about two weeks before I read it. Yes, there are some parts that were emotional in it but there weren't any that I "no, I can't read this, I have to put this down". You know, sometimes I've read books where you get the point when I just can't go on with this at the moment I'm going to put this aside and then come back to it when I'm in a better frame of mind. I didn't have that, but there's that whole thing that people have said to me, for example, about parents dying; not about my father recently, but my mother a long time ago, somebody asked me once whether I was over my mother's death and I just said, "well, you never get over it you just learn to live with it. It just becomes part of you, it's part of what you are and that's a part of this whole book as well. You can see it flowing all the way right through and I think that's what rounds this book out to make it quite a good science fiction novel and quite a good literary novel as well.

**Chong:** Oh, you are saying you didn't put them into two separate baskets?

**Perry:** No, I'm putting them in together. Although Bradley has said that he read a lot of science fiction back in his teens, as a lot of us did. But when he started to write, he wasn't writing in that particular way. I think he did an English degree at the University of Adelaide and he was there at the same time as Sean Williams, who is the South Australian science fiction writer. And so they only found out that they were writing in the same sort of genre later on, when they met up again. But he is very definitely in the science fiction field.

**Chong:** Do you think so?

**Perry:** I think so, he is.

**Chong:** I don't think so.

**Perry:** I think he is. I think he's very definitely in there. But he's writing in that part of the field which, I just know this might sound terrible, is acceptable to the general reader. The general reader coming and picking up a James Bradley book is going to be able to read this and not read this as science fiction at all, but people that are in the science fiction field can read this and go, yep, I know exactly what he's going on about here.

**Chong:** I think, nowadays, or maybe for the last five years or 10 years or 15 years, the young folk aren't drawing those categorical lines anymore, they just write stuff. So Scribe Publishing in Melbourne has recently published two books which titles escaped me, one's got a kind of deforestation setting, and the other has to do with animals and they just publish this as literary fiction. [Editorial note: Michael Christie's *Greenwood* and Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals In That Country*.] There is no kind of frame around it. Robbie Arnot's new book from Text *The Rain Heron* has a fable as the central structure. And it's set in some kind of future not too far away from us in a place that's not named but is not in any way set up as science fiction. The one that came out that made some waves quite long time ago now in Melbourne, which is called *Things We Didn't See Coming* was one of the early climate fiction books. It was entirely sold as literary fiction.

**Perry:** *Clade* reminded me very, very much of that book. And I really liked that Stephen Amsterdam book, I thought it was great.

**Chong:** These books are mostly set in some kind of very near future. I don't think that writers or publishers think about that division anymore, unless they're writing about, you know, space opera things, or obviously squids in space or whatever.

**Perry:** Talking squids.

**Chong:** Even when people nowadays buy Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction, they're not thinking about it as sci-fi. They're thinking this is a Margaret Atwood book, which is a parable about patriarchal control. The whole notion that there is now a science fiction and not, I think it's very old fashioned.

**Perry:** It is.

**Chong:** All these literary authors who want to talk about it that way, in a sniffy tone of voice

like Ian McEwan and so on, they are just wrong. They are way out of the stream, really...

**Perry:** They are. I think that's right. That there are a lot more of this style of book coming out...

**Chong:** And publishers are placing them within the mainstream, they're just doing it right out.

**Perry:** Yeah, well, there's nothing on this book at all that you could even possibly construe as being a pointer to say this is a science fiction novel, not a thing. There's nothing on **Clade** that would do that. There's nothing on **The Resurrectionist**, although that is almost a horror novel...

**Chong:** We're now talking about the framing of the book. OK, here's the first part of the blurb on the back of **Ghost Species**: "When scientist Kate Larkin joins a secretive project to re-engineer the climate.." (Is that SF or not?) "...by resurrecting extinct species," (and that?) "she becomes enmeshed in another even more clandestine program to recreate our long lost relatives, Neanderthals." So you know, they tell you straight out this stuff, what would that be in the old days of science fiction. But it's just set out like, here's a bit of fiction that involves this stuff because, you know we're going to talk about climate. I think we're in a space now in every conceivable way that is no longer concerned with the idea of normal. Now there is no normal. Literature, there's no normal world left.

**Perry:** Especially when you get a year like 2020. You get a year like this one and we didn't really see this one coming exactly as this played out. We sort of had almost an inferno apocalypse across south-eastern Australia in late last year, early this year, and then this virus pandemic hits. So there's a lot happening. There's a lot going on. And I think Bradley, especially in Australia, I think he's in the forefront of looking at this particular set of questions. And I think he's doing a very good job of it, and so I'd recommend this book.

**Chong:** Well, if Apocalypse means revelation than this book is a worthy champion of the theme.

**Perry:** I think we'll leave it there. Sounds like a good spot, thanks Chong.

**Chong:** Thank you Perry.◀◀

### Books mentioned in this dialogue:

GHOST SPECIES by James Bradley, Hamish Hamilton, 272pp, (2020)

CLADE by James Bradley, Hamish Hamilton, 239pp, (2015)

THE RESURRECTIONIST by James Bradley, Faber & Faber, 352pp, (2008)

GREENWOOD by Michael Christie, Scribe, 512pp, (2020)

THE ANIMALS IN THAT COUNTRY by Laura Jean McKay, Scribe, 288 pp, (2020)

THE RAIN HERON by Robbie Arnott, Text, 288pp, (2020)

THINGS WE DIDN'T SEE COMING by Stephen Amsterdam, Sleepers Publishing, 174pp, (2009)

### Notes on Contributors

**W. H. Chong** – is a book designer and artist based in Melbourne. He has written art criticism and reviews for Crikey.com.au and dailyreview.com.au. His 2015 post for the Australian Book Designers Association blog (ABDA.com.au), "How to Deconstruct a Science Fiction Cover" was picked up by the genre website io9.

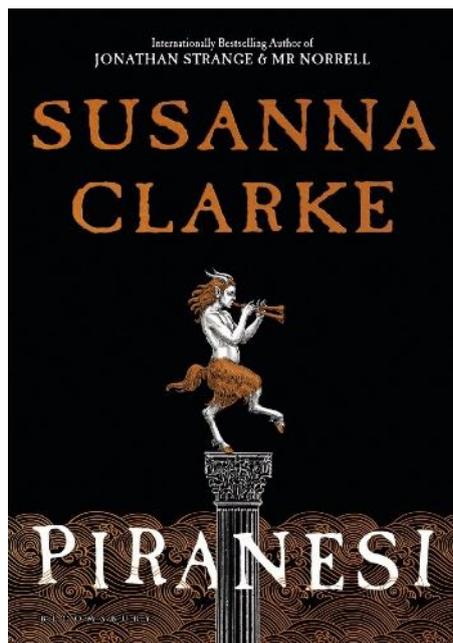
**Perry Middlemiss** – is a retired IT Business Analyst and 1.5 times Worldcon Chair who now finds himself reading too many books, talking too much, watching too much television and producing far too many fanzines. (Also, see note re David Grigg below.) At his age he should know better.

**David Grigg** (*next article*) – David is a retired software developer who lives in Melbourne, Australia. He worked in the field of interactive multimedia for over two decades, and has also worked in public relations and as a journalist and sub-editor. In recent years he has collaborated with Perry Middlemiss to produce a fortnightly podcast called *Two Chairs Talking*, in which they discuss books, movies, science fiction fandom and a great many other topics. ◀◀

# In My House Are Many Mansions

## *PIRANESI* by Susanna Clarke

Reviewed by David Grigg



*Piranesi*  
by Susanna Clarke

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, 272 pp.

I've said elsewhere that *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke is one of my favourite books. So when I heard that another novel by Clarke was coming out, 14 years after *Jonathan Strange*, I was delighted and immediately placed an order for it.

It appears that after the worldwide success of *Jonathan Strange*, and the round of touring and interviews Clarke undertook to promote it, she fell victim to a form of chronic fatigue syndrome and found it very difficult to write, made worse by several failed attempts to put together a sequel to *Jonathan Strange*. Finally, Clarke returned to an idea she had had nearly 40 years previously, and that became this book, *Piranesi*, which has no direct connection to her earlier novel, though there are a few themes in common.

Right from the first few lines of *Piranesi*, we know that something odd and very interesting is going on. It's written as a first-person narrative in the form of a series of journal entries, and the first entry we read is dated in this striking way:

### **Entry for the First Day of the Fifth Month in the Year the Albatross Came to the South-Western Halls**

And the entry itself begins:

"When the Moon rose in the Third Northern Hall, I went to the Ninth Vestibule to witness the joining of three Tides. This is something that happens only once every eight years."

So right from the start we are presented with several puzzles. Who is writing the journal? Where on Earth (or elsewhere) is he? Why are the journal entries dated in this unusual way? How long has he been there?

As we get further, we learn that the journal writer is living in a vast building, which he calls simply "The House" and which he describes in loving detail. The House is composed of an enormous number of interlinked stone halls and stairways leading to several levels. I say "an enormous number" of halls, but the narrator tells us that on his travels he has never discovered an end to them. The House, for all he knows, goes on forever. For him, it is the entire world.

The upper chambers of the House are cold and often filled with clouds. The lowest levels are flooded, and swept by tides which come at different times from various directions. When these tides coincide, the water

can surge upwards from the lower levels to flood even the middle levels where the narrator is usually living.

The halls are not empty, but are populated with thousands of beautifully carved marble statues of various figures he names in descriptive terms such as “the Statue of a Woman carrying a Beehive”.

The narrator spends most of his time alone in the House, fending for himself. But there is someone else in the House, who he calls simply The Other, and who he considers to be his friend and colleague. The Other calls the narrator “Piranesi”, but the latter says this “is strange because as far as I remember it is not my name”\*. Piranesi meets The Other at regular intervals (“on Tuesdays and Fridays”) and assists him in pursuing his quest for a Great and Secret Knowledge which he says will give him miraculous powers.

Early on in the book, Piranesi tells us that there are only two people, himself and The Other, alive in the world (by which he means in the House, because he cannot conceive of anywhere else). However, he has evidence that 15 people have lived in the world before him, because he has found human bones and skulls, which he treats with great reverence. He imagines and hopes that one day he may encounter another living human being, whom he thus calls simply “16”. The Other, however, strongly cautions Piranesi against any such other person. He tells Piranesi that such a person will be evil and will try to drive him mad.

All this is very puzzling. Indeed, it’s worth thinking of the book much more as a mystery novel than as a fantasy. In fact, other than the bizarre and otherworldly *environment* in which Piranesi lives, there are almost no fantasy elements to the book. But there are certainly mysteries, and, we discover, actual

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\* Piranesi’s name is of course no coincidence, but reflects that of the 18th Century Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi, who made many engravings of huge classical buildings and vast imaginary Roman prisons in his book *Carceri d’Invenzione*. The Other has named our protagonist after the artist as a kind of malicious joke.

crimes which have occurred.

What are the mysteries? Well, for example, where on earth **is** the protagonist? How did he come to be there? Did he have a life before this? Is he mad, perhaps just imagining the House and all it contains? Is he in fact in some kind of mental asylum? What are the motives of The Other and is he really Piranesi’s friend? It becomes obvious that there’s some kind of gateway or connection to our modern everyday world, because whereas Piranesi is in rags, The Other is always well-dressed in a clean suit and polished shoes. At one stage Piranesi tells The Other that he can’t quickly make a long expedition through the House because he no longer has any shoes, as his old ones have fallen apart. Shortly afterwards, The Other brings him a new pair of shoes: a modern pair of sneakers in what we would consider a perfectly ordinary cardboard shoebox. So if

the modern world exists nearby, where is Piranesi living? And how can The Other come and go so readily? These mysteries are intriguing and it’s not at all easy in the early

parts of the book to see how they will be resolved.

Before we move on, let me look at what I think are the major themes of the book.

Most importantly, you must understand that Piranesi is *happy* in the House. He has no sense of being trapped or of being a prisoner. On the contrary, he frequently tells us “I am the Beloved Child of the House.” To external observers his life would seem very hard: he’s dressed in rags, he’s often cold and hungry, he has to spend time fishing or collecting shellfish to eat, he has to gather great quantities of seaweed and dry it out to make kindling and twine, and so on. Nevertheless, he is happy, content, and as far as he is concerned, he is at home. He regards the House as a benevolent entity, providing him with all he needs and giving him comfort. One could choose to consider this to be a religious attitude, though I don’t think that’s the reading Clarke necessarily intended.

It occurred to me very recently that there’s an echo of Piranesi’s situation—someone living in an environment and situation which we would expect to make them feel miserable

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**The World feels Complete and Whole,  
and I, its Child, fit into it seamlessly.**

— PIRANESI

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and oppressed but who is paradoxically happy—in the stunning final line of Albert Camus’ book *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus, you will recall, is in Hades, condemned to forever push a huge rock up a hill only to see it roll all the way back down again as soon as he reaches the top. Yet Camus concludes the book by saying: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” In fact the whole last paragraph of that book seems to remarkably foreshadow Piranesi’s situation:

“I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain. One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself, forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

To an external observer, Piranesi might well seem to be insane. He is amazingly naive and innocent. The Other tells him, to his astonishment, that he has forgotten important previous discussions they have had, so does he have dementia? He holds conversations with birds, skeletons and statues. Yet despite all this, I would argue that Piranesi is more sane than any other character in the book: he’s one of the most well-centered characters I’ve encountered. Like Camus’ imagined Sisyphus, he is content. He glories in the wonders of the House.

The Other, however, finds the House dreary, cold, wet and boring, and he is only interested in using it, with Piranesi’s aid, to find the Great and Secret Knowledge. But Piranesi himself becomes disenchanted with that search:

“I realised that the search for the Knowledge has encouraged us to think of the House as if it were a sort of riddle to be unravelled, a text to be interpreted, and that if ever we discover the Knowledge, then it will be as if the Value has been wrested from the House and all that remains will be mere scenery.”

And that’s the major idea of the book, I think, these two ways of looking at the world: either to experience what it offers with acceptance, joy and fascination; or to treat it as hostile, cold, mechanical and only of interest from the point of view of what it can do for us. There’s no question that Clarke wants us to sympathise with Piranesi’s point of view, to

celebrate the world as it is—not just Piranesi’s world, but *our* world—to glory in its mysteries and to be grateful for our existence. To treat living in the world as a dialogue, not a monologue. This is the real heart of it, I think. In an interview, Clarke mentions being influenced by the ideas of Owen Barfield, one of the Inklings group at Oxford in the 1930s along with C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. She says:

“One of Barfield’s ideas was that people in the past related to the world in quite different ways than we do now. Ancient peoples did not feel alienated from their surroundings the way in which we sometimes do. They did not see the world as meaningless; they saw it as a great and sacred drama in which they took part.”

That’s certainly Piranesi’s attitude to his beloved House, which isn’t merely a place to live for him, but an entity in itself, nurturing and loving, with which he is in dialogue. “I am the Beloved Child of the House”.

The truth of Piranesi’s situation only begins to emerge when he discovers scraps of paper torn from a notebook, used as a nesting material by seagulls which populate one of the halls. He realises that the handwriting on

*One of the engravings of imaginary prisons by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778)*



the paper is his own and in fact they are pages from his own earlier journals, pages he does not remember writing, and therefore that his memory must be defective. He makes an extended effort to collect as many pieces of the journals as he can and through these, he begins to piece together his own story.

Ultimately, someone else—"16"—does arrive in the House in search of Piranesi, a woman called Sarah Raphael. She tries to contact him but at first he hides in terror, bearing in mind The Other's warning. But eventually he understands that The Other has been lying to him all along, and that 16 is trying to save him, which she eventually does. At the end of the book, Piranesi has re-discovered his name and has returned to the "real" world, but not without great regrets. At the end of the book he tells us of his longing to return to the House forever. This passage reminded me greatly of the last lines of Yeats' well-known poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", which tells of the poet's longing for a simpler, isolated life. If you recall, it ends:

"I will arise and go now,  
for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping  
with low sounds by the shore  
While I stand in the roadway,  
or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core."

There's a lot of that feeling at the end of **Piranesi**.

There are links and references throughout the book to other literature. Sometimes the statues give these links, such as Piranesi's favourite statue, "the Statue of a Faun, a creature half-man and half-goat... He smiles slightly and presses his forefinger to his lips... I dreamt of him once; he was standing in a snowy forest and speaking to a female child." That leaps out as an obvious reference to C. S. Lewis' **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**. But there are many other, more subtle references throughout if you read carefully. There's even a Doctor Who reference!

Susanna Clarke has given a number of interesting interviews about **Piranesi**, its themes and inspirations. One of the best and most in-depth of these appeared in the [Hindustani Times](#) on 20 September 2020.

One influence she mentions is the short story "The House of Asterion" by Jorge Luis Borges, in which the narrator roams a vast stone

building with many halls. At the end of that story it becomes obvious that the narrator is the Minotaur and the building is the Cretan Labyrinth. No surprise, then, that one key location in **Piranesi** features several huge statues of Minotaurs. Labyrinths, of course, are also a major theme of the book; both metaphorically and literally.

The other strong influence on the book which Clarke mentions is the writing of C. S. Lewis, in particular his Narnia books. I've mentioned **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe** already, but an even stronger influence is **The Magician's Nephew**, which is chronologically the first book in the Narnia series, though not the first written. It's certainly my favourite of those books. Set in the Edwardian era, it tells how two children, Digory and Polly, are tricked by Digory's evil uncle Andrew (whose surname is identical to that of The Other) into being guinea-pigs for an experiment which takes them out of their everyday world, initially into a place they call The Wood Between the Worlds, a pleasant forest which contains many shallow pools of water. These pools, it turns out, are portals to yet other worlds.

One of the worlds the children go to via The Wood Between the Worlds is a place called Charn, which is a dying world with a bloated red sun, and its destruction is imminent. It consists mostly of a vast, almost endless city composed of interlinked stone halls, obviously yet another an inspiration for Piranesi's House.

One of the characteristics of The Wood Between the Worlds, though, is that if you stay too long there, in this transitional place, you start to forget everything including who you are. That is a key characteristic, we find, of Piranesi's House, which accounts for why he has utterly forgotten his previous life.

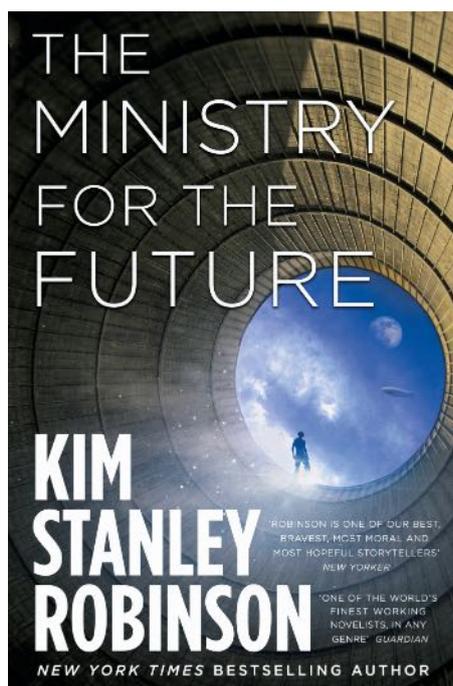
I love this book. It's beautifully written. We're very quickly drawn in by the unusual, inexplicable setting and the fascinating character and experiences of the protagonist, and we are made aware very slowly and subtly of the intrigues that lie behind his situation. It forces us to think very deeply about the world and our place in it.

And the last couple of pages of the book just make me sigh and want to start reading it all over again. ◀◀

# The Once and Future Planet

## ***THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE*** **by Kim Stanley Robinson**

Reviewed by Perry Middlemiss



*The Ministry for the Future*  
by Kim Stanley Robinson

Orbit, 2020, 576 pp.

It is generally considered that inviting a science fiction or fantasy writer to be Guest of Honour at a World Science Fiction Convention is akin to presenting them with a lifetime achievement award. Such writers will have been working in the field for over thirty years and will have produced a substantial body of work. I was lucky enough to be co-chair of Aussiecon 4, the 2010 Worldcon held in Melbourne, and was able to extend such an invitation to Kim Stanley Robinson. To our delight he accepted.

Robinson began writing science fiction back in the mid-1970s and prior to 2010 he was best known for his Three Californias Trilogy (*The Wild Shore* (1984), *The Gold Coast* (1988) and *Pacific Edge* (1990)), the Mars Trilogy (*Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993), and *Blue Mars* (1996)), and for his standalone alternate history novel *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002). During this pre-Aussiecon period he had won Hugo Awards for *Green Mars* and *Blue Mars*, and a Nebula award for *Red Mars*. For many writers that might have constituted a formidable resume, almost enough to consider that their best work was behind them.

But not Robinson. Since 2010 he has produced a half-dozen novels that may well be thought of as being his most innovative and thought-provoking: *2312* (2012), *Sharman* (2013), *Aurora* (2015), *New York 2140* (2017), *Red Moon* (2018) and now, what may well be his last novel<sup>1</sup>, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020).

Told in 106 small, and sometimes very small, chapters the novel starts with a harrowing account of an environmental disaster in a small city in Uttar Pradesh in India in the summer of 2025. Frank May is a young American working as a volunteer with an NGO. He wakes one morning in the middle of a heatwave to discover that the pre-monsoon temperature is continuing to climb along with a commensurate rise in the humidity. The power fails in the city but Frank is able to get a small air conditioner working with the aid of a home generator and then invites several families into the NGO offices out of the heat. But the generator makes a lot of noise and the local thugs arrive and take off with both the AC unit and the generator at gunpoint.

Before long the heat in the office becomes unbearable, people leave to go to the local lake in an attempt to cool down, and Frank follows; he has no other solution available. Yet the heat and humidity are relentless and soon the water temperature is higher than that of the bodies floating in it. And it becomes impossible for a human



Kim Stanley Robinson speaking at an event in Phoenix, Arizona in 2017. Photo by Gage Skidmore. Rights: CC BY-SA 3.0.

body to expel the excess heat, and people start to poach. By the next day they are all dead, except for Frank who stayed out of the water, and who is later discovered by a recovery team.

Read on its own this is a very disturbing horror story. There are no external monsters, no vampires descending in the night. This is a just a case of nature out of control, and of the humans' inability to cope.

Robinson here is describing weather reaching a dangerously high wet-bulb temperature of 35°C – equivalent to a relative humidity of 60% and an air temperature of 42.2°C (108°F)<sup>2</sup>. These levels are likely to be fatal even to fit and healthy people – the Indian citizens in Robinson's book are neither.

Not possible you think? Unfortunately such levels have already been reached in the UAE, Pakistan, India and Australia, though, luckily, only for an hour or so at a time. The massive heat wave in Europe in the summer of 2003 killed ten of thousands across the continent, and this with only high temperatures (up to just over 40°C) but with low humidity<sup>3</sup>. Robinson just stretches those weather conditions a little, pushing the time scale for high web-bulb temperatures out to just over a day, and postulating the consequences. Predictably they are dire.

In his recent novels, **Aurora** and **New York 2140**, Robinson has been examining the climate change problem by looking at its impacts and implications rather than tackling it head-on. In **Aurora** he takes aim at the notion that we can safely avoid the climate impact by migrating to some as-yet undiscovered Planet B. Even if this worked it would only be for a minuscule percentage of the human race and, with all the inherent problems associated with long space travel, it is just too risky and doomed to fail. In **New York 2140** the climate change impacts are in full effect and yet people survive. New York is surrounded by high sea walls and has become a modern Venice with its streets flooded and its buildings sitting in water, and still the city goes on. It's all about learning how to cope on a local level with a global catastrophe.

In **The Ministry for the Future** Robinson takes a very different path. The main thrust of this novel follows the Ministry for the Future<sup>4</sup> of the novel's title. It is created in Switzerland in January 2025 as a UN agency, just prior to the big heat wave that struck India at the start of the book. Head of the Ministry is Mary Murphy, an Irishwoman and ex-minister of foreign affairs in the Irish Republic.<sup>5</sup> Initially treated as something of a joke by the world's governments and big business Murphy and the Ministry gradually begin to change the minds of governments and world banks through hard work and subtle persuasion. This is, of course, a very slow process and hardly riveting material for a novel. So Robinson sets it in the background, returning to it several times as Murphy attends various meetings around the world. In the foreground is Murphy's relationship with Frank May. The two collide after May is, at first, moved to Glasgow after his Indian ordeal. He then moves to Switzerland where he accidentally kills a man in an altercation and he later waylays Murphy in the street, forcing her into her apartment where he forces her to listen to his demands. He is later arrested and sentenced to some years in prison. And it is here that Robinson sets May up as the conscience of the book. Murphy goes to visit him in prison, intrigued by his arguments to her in her apartment, and by his survival of that devastating heatwave. His health and mental problems, and Murphy's interactions with him over the course of the novel become a metaphor for the Ministry's interactions with the planet as a whole, offering a glimpse of what might have been if one climate change path had been followed. The

relationship between the two begins as violently confrontational and moves through quiet conversation, mutual respect and finally to acceptance and a level of understanding. Almost a metaphor for humanity's "battle" with Nature in the novel – though I'd be perfectly willing to accept the point that this might be stretching things a tad too far.

Robinson not only looks at the climate problem from the intimate human level but he also examines mechanisms for making some incremental and important environmental changes via the use of technology. He begins with the Indian Government deciding to intervene in an attempt to alleviate their own heatwave problems by injecting vast amounts of aerosol particulates into the upper atmosphere over the Arabian Sea with the expectation that the clouds of material would drift over the Indian sub-continent, effectively deflecting the sunlight. Their aim is to simulate the effects of a major volcanic eruption such as Pinatubo in 1991.<sup>6</sup> India's actions are condemned by the international community, though it seems to work, for a while. In the Antarctic a small pumping project begins to pump glacial meltwater, from the bottom of the glacier, back to the surface where it is sprayed over the top of the glacier to refreeze. The aim of this is to reduce the water, which acts as a lubricant, in the interface between the glacier and the bedrock, thereby slowing the advance of the ice sheet into the warmer ocean, and lowering the glacial mass to the point where it re-bonds with its rocky foundation. Similar efforts begin in the Arctic in an attempt to expand the winter sea ice, which by 2032 in the novel, has disappeared completely.

Robinson is fully aware that these projects will not solve the problem on their own, but they form an integral part of his overall solution picture. Interestingly he does not play the part of an omnipotent magician here; there are no magical rabbits pulled out of magical hats. All of the projects he discusses are extensions of existing technology. Expanded in scale, with reductions in product sizes and power packs, increases in efficiency and reductions in power usage. All advances that we have seen in other

technologies over the past decades, extrapolated by twenty to thirty years. There is nothing new here, which just goes to make his proposals all the more credible, and his overall scenario all the more optimistic.

And that is the overlying sense that I get from this novel: the problems are hard and look almost insurmountable, each minor action humanity takes appears to have little or no impact, and people have seemingly given up hope of ever making any change. Yet there is a feeling of hope evident here. A feeling that there is a path through the maze of problems that will lead us to a better outcome. It won't be cheap and it won't be easy. The geoengineering projects that Robinson outlines here are not intended to be silver bullets. There is little chance of that given the long time spans of each project. A lot of work needs to be done and every little bit helps.

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**“We did the right thing. I must admit, I sometimes shout at people if they deny that. I damn them to hell. Which is a place we in India have already seen. So I have no patience for people who object to what we did. They don't know what they are talking about. They haven't seen it, and we have.”**

— THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE, P.38

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Each of the projects that Robinson outlines is given a starring role in one of the 106 chapters of the book. Told from the point-of-view of a project worker or of the omnipotent

narrator, Robinson's fills in the backstory of each of them at a very personal level. The author has been accused in the past of being overly keen on the concept of an "infodump",<sup>7</sup> pouring some large slabs of background research material onto the reader as a means of skipping ahead in the story. In this novel he uses a fragmented narrative style previously used by John Dos Passos in his U.S.A. Trilogy and by John Brunner in novels such as *Stand on Zanzibar*. In various chapters he defines wet-bulb temperatures, provides a description of extinction rates, introduces the 2000 Watt Society, defines and lists the various indexes (financial, health, environmental, happiness etc) that can be used to define the current state of the world, and outlines how perceptual illusions can distort our understanding of the world, among many others. Each of these chapters goes to flesh out the whole world scenario that Robinson is attempting to paint here. He also utilises this point-of-view approach to reveal the impact that various natural and man-made objects and concepts (such as the sun, history, a photon, financial markets, the earth and blockchain) have on humanity and the climate problem at hand. I find the technique

effective and informative, mainly, I suppose, because he keeps the pieces rather short – generally only a page or two. I’m sure it will turn off some readers who are mainly interested in the narrative thrust of the book. Yet without those expository chapters something would be missing here. The scope of the novel is just too large for it to be reflected in a personal relationship between two people and their other interactions with their wider circles.

While I have not read all of Robinson’s back catalog as yet I do feel that this is probably his most important book, maybe even his best. It is one that, of present day sf writers, only he could have written. I consider it to be the most important sf novel to have been published in 2020. And I can only hope that, come 2021 awards time, other readers will see it in a similar light. ◀◀

#### Notes:

1. Robinson mentioned that this might be his last novel in an interview with Jonathan Strahan and Gary K. Wolfe on [The Coode Street Podcast Ep 528](#), dated 27 September 2020.
2. Wikipedia definition: “The wet-bulb temperature (WBT) is the temperature read by a thermometer covered in water-soaked cloth (wet-bulb thermometer) over which air is passed. At 100% relative humidity, the wet-bulb temperature is equal to the air temperature (dry-bulb temperature); at lower humidity the wet-bulb temperature is lower than dry-bulb temperature because of evaporative cooling.”
3. Wikipedia: “The 2003 European heat wave led to the hottest summer on record in Europe since at least 1540. France was hit especially hard. The heat wave led to health crises in several countries and combined with drought to create a crop shortfall in parts of Southern Europe. Peer-reviewed analysis places the European death toll at more than 70,000.”
4. The name of the Ministry was created by someone in the press, “the name stuck and spread, and became what the new agency was usually called.” (p 16)
5. I wondered while reading this if Robinson based this character on Mary Robinson, the seventh President of Irish Republic (1990-97) who then went on to serve as the United

Nations Commissioner for Human Rights (1997-2002).

6. Mount Pinatubo, on the northern island of Luzon in the Philippines, erupted in June 1991. It ejected approximately 20 million tonnes of SO<sub>2</sub> into the upper atmosphere, reducing global temperatures by 0.5°C in the years 1991-93.

7. Wikipedia: “An information dump (or ‘infodump’) is a large drop of information by the author to provide background he or she deems necessary to continue the plot.”

# Fannish Reprint

## George by Leigh Edmonds

First published in BOY'S OWN FANZINE 1, March 1971

If, like me, you are a public servant, it is quite possible that you and I suffer from the same occupational hazard — boredom. You arrive at work and find yourself confronted by a full day of just about nothing to do. With luck somebody might require your services for an hour or so but what do you do with the other six hours and twenty-one minutes? If you are anything like me you feel like tearing sheets of paper into exceedingly small pieces. You also feel like going home where you can be bored in comfort.

One day a couple of years ago I sat down and tackled the problem of my boredom logically; there wasn't anything else for me to do that day. The easiest way to overcome the problem would be to read a book but the people who are in charge of the office don't appreciate that kind of thing, I could possibly read fanzines. That had definite possibilities but it had to be considered carefully. If I were to be able to conduct any outside activity I had to contrive to make it appear as if I were actually working.

It occurred to me that since fanzines are printed sheets stapled together all I had to do was to pull out the staples and read the single sheets as if they were official reports or something of that nature. There was, however, a significant drawback to this scheme — I refer in particular to the distressing habit that most faneds have of printing illustrations. It might be possible to convince the people at work that a page out of a fanzine was a report on the underground piping installations at Sydney Airport, but my efforts would be strained beyond reasonable limits if the sheet had a picture of a half-naked woman engaged in combat with some ugly monstrosity. So that little scheme was out unless faneds cooperated by producing illustrationless fanzines and unfortunately Bruce Gillespie

does not produce SF Commentary often enough for me to have something to read every day.

Writing letters offered a possible source of occupation but nobody can read my handwritten scrawl and even I don't have that many people to correspond with when I can't have copies of fanzines lying around to write letters of comment on.

So fanac appeared to be out of the question.

Very well then, I reasoned, I am here in this office to work for the Department of Civil Aviation therefore it is my duty to work for them even if they don't seem to want it. The statement of my duties indicated that I am supposed to be a gatherer and collator of statistics to be used in the planning of airports, but nobody seemed to be interested in such things. So I reasoned that it was up to me to find and collate my own statistics. I felt that I had made a major breakthrough until I discovered that there is one complete floor of our office building filled with people who do nothing but gather and collate useless statistics, and they had the game already sewn up. The only set of figures I could discover which remained untouched was a list of the arrivals and departures at Melbourne Airport. It was quite possible that they also did things with this weekly set of figures but I wasn't able to discover anything so I went ahead and devised a most skilful method whereby, from one foolscap sheet, I could fill up four sets of columns of figures every week and draw three cunning little graphs — all of obviously no use to anybody.

What fun! At first this task occupied lots and lots of time while I devised and improved my system but, after a month or so, I found it increasingly easy to manipulate the figures and draw the graphs so that it

only took a couple of hours and there was all the rest of the week stretched out before me, barren and lifeless. I tried my utmost to derive more columns of figures from the list but there was a limit to the trivia that even I could derive from it, even in my desperate condition.

The future looked incredibly gloomy and each day I was going further up the wall in my bored frustration until, one day, inspiration struck.

The Department has files that it uses to dug up its workings and keep people occupied. There is a floor of people who do nothing but play with them all day. In my blindness I had never realised the full potential of the file until that day. Sure, I had used them before after a fashion, moving them around on my desk to form various geometric patterns, but it was child's play when compared with the revelation I had. The basis of my discovery was quite simple – there are lots of sheets of paper on a file and most of them have writing on them and this writing can be read. Of course, most of the writing is incredibly boring, but that is beside the point. It seemed to me that if I had to spend the entire day sitting around doing nothing and being bored it would be no harder and potentially a great deal more enjoyable to sit around and read files and not be quite so bored,

Now I'm not claiming any special intelligence but it occurred to me that if I were to begin occupying my time with files I might as well do it in a proper manner – a devious and intricate manner as befits a public servant.

Before I began to use files to occupy myself I spent a little time in studying my prey. My extra care and diligence were well rewarded. I discovered that the figures by which each file was identified were not, as I had previously imagined, just random numbers. The numbers are carefully selected by a system that some extremely devious public servant had figured out many years ago – no doubt in the hope of occupying himself. Thus, if you came upon a file upon which a '6' was the first number you would find that the file invariably

dealt with an aircraft accident at some time and some place (I suspect that the numbers following '6' would tell you the time and the place, but as yet I have not been able to crack the code.). If you saw a file with the first two numbers being '67' you would find that the file dealt with an airport somewhere in the state of Victoria; '66' numbers deal with the state of New South Wales and '65' numbers deal with airports in Queensland and even though I have not, as yet, discovered the files or the numbers for the files on airports in other states I know that there are airports in those states somewhere and thus there must be files.

When I tell you that what I have related about file numbers above is a mere scraping of the surface you will understand something of the excitement I sometimes feel, and I'm still learning. These days, when I feel particularly adventurous I simply pick up my telephone and ask the people who look after the files to send me one, the number of which I simply pick out of my head. Then I sit back and wait to see what discovery I am about to make. On the other hand, if I feel more formal, I can use one of several methods I have devised to choose the number through a series of random mathematical manipulations.

Oh yes, I could go on and on about the wonderful discoveries I have made in the last couple of years. Unfortunately Don Symons' article\* has taken up too much of my room and I find myself a little cramped. I'm sure that there are many useful tips that I could pass on to you if you find yourself in a position similar to mine. I am also sure that you are far more likely to find yourself working for a public service department than flying as a steward on a flying boat. Come to think of it, you are far more likely to find yourself working in a position similar to mine than you are to find yourself skipping stones across country streams with Lee Harding – that article should go and it would if only John Foyster weren't so strong-willed.

John and I aren't co-editors for nothing so that there is no possible way in which he

can take this page away from me and I intend to fill it up the way I see fit – in explaining my latest discovery concerning files.

In one of the more obscure corners of our office building there is a Xerox machine. The connection between files and Xerox machines is that if I see a particularly interesting sheet of paper on a file I can go down to the copying machine and get some copies made of it. When I first started this practice I considered the possibility of starting my own filing system but the space that such a thing would need was a little more than I could afford – the carbon paper that I've collected over the last five years is a little too bulky and a little too near my heart to be thrown away for mere photocopies and mere pieces of ordinary paper. My alternative is to get the copies and then go around trying to give them to somebody.

I've found this a most socially rewarding occupation. Through it I have discovered a man who can whistle all the classics but who doesn't know the name of any of them and I have also discovered his associate who can't whistle a note but who can name them all. I have come to meet a Victorian League footballer and a professional boxer who makes money on the side at the office. Other interesting characters include a skydiving freak who has a great gash across his throat which he collected when he almost decapitated himself with his reserve 'chute, a clerk who claims to have been in a group that played Creedance Clearwater Revival music before they were ever heard of, a most attractive young woman – who is unfortunately married – and a long-haired hippie weirdo who turns on with alcohol. I have talked to people who have told me what it was like to be in the bomber streams over Germany in the last World War, what it is like to watch the surf come in at Big Sur or the difficulties of building airstrips in New Guinea.

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\*Editor's note: Leigh here mentions another article in that issue of BOY'S OWN FANZINE, an Australian fanzine co-edited by Leigh Edmonds and John Foyster.

Unfortunately none of these people have shown much interest in the copies I've tried to fob off on them. Either they are lacking in a proper sense of what the Department of Civil Aviation exists for or they are far too busy trying to keep themselves occupied with their own little tasks.

It may sound vaguely heretical to call a \$50 million airport something that somebody uses to fill in time between 8.30 and 4.51 but if you are to survive in the public service this is the perspective that you have to take. The only difference between myself and the engineer who designs the airport is that before he joined the public service he spent a few years in a university combatting boredom. ◀◀

## Notes on Contributors

**Leigh Edmonds** – is a mumble years old semi-retired science fiction fan. He stumbled across fandom in the mid 1960s and did a few things like help bid for and run a Worldcon, set up ANZAPA, win DUFF, help establish GUFF, run a few conventions, publish hundreds of fanzines, and committed numerous other indiscretions. In the 1980s he drifted into universities where he studied, taught and became a historian. At the 2010 Worldcon he was talked into writing a history of Australian fandom which he now works on in his spare time. He currently lives in an echoing house in suburban Ballarat with his partner of mumble years, Valma Brown, and two wilful cats. ◀◀

# The Alien *Review* of Books

At one point in the conception of this fanzine I had a thought to name the whole thing *The Alien Review of Books* - a riff on *The New York Review of Books*, or the *London Review of Books*. I still like the idea but thought it might be a little unwieldy, or pretentious, or more likely both. So I've relegated it to this section of the fanzine, the section where we will only be carrying reviews of books, none of that overarching commentary or fannish nonsense. Just plain old book reviews.

I don't want the books under discussion here to be restricted in any way so it is quite likely you will find new and old books, sf and crime and literary, novels and novel-las. Sometimes these will fit into a specific set, such as the reviews of the five 2020 sf&f novellas below, and sometimes it will be a random selection of what I, and others, have been reading.

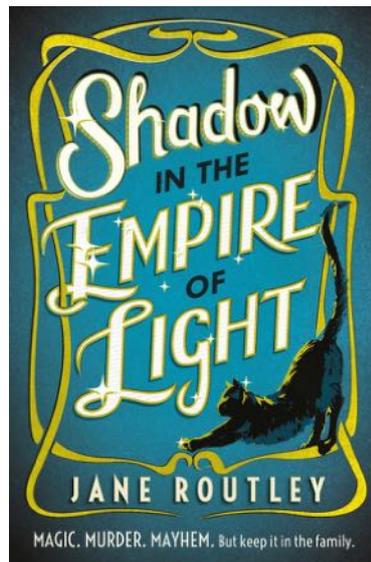
In this first section of novel reviews you will find one dealing with ***The Raven Tower*** by Ann Leckie, and if you have read my essay on "The SF&F Award Winners of 2020" elsewhere in this fanzine you will recognise that book as being mentioned a few times there. As it happens, the Leckie novel appeared on the final ballots of the Locus Fantasy Award and the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel and would have appeared on the final Hugo Award Ballot for Best Novel as well if the author had not withdrawn it from consideration. So it nearly made it, and it was one of the few books in the genre to get that many mentions without actually winning an award (***The Light Brigade*** by Kameron Hurley was the other one with three ballot appearances, and I've had my say on that one elsewhere). It didn't quite fit into the earlier essay though I really wanted it to appear somewhere.

## **Shadow in the Empire of Light** by Jane Routley

*Solaris 2021, 339 pp.*

Reviewed by Perry Middlemiss

Australian author Jane Routley is the author of six novels prior to this: three in her Dion Demonlayer series; two in the Tari series (as by Rebecca Locklsey); and one other stand-alone novel also under the Locksley pen-name. Her novels ***Fire Angels*** and ***Aramaya*** won her back-to-back Aurealis Awards for Best Fantasy Novel in 1998 and 1999, so we can be assured that we are in safe hands as we tackle this new fantasy novel.



Shine is a non-magical young woman who is part of the Imperial Household of the Empire of Light, the Lucheyart Family. She lives and works on a farm (the Eyrie) with her aunt Effulgentia (commonly called "Auntie Eff") and this novel deals with the arrival of Shine's Imperial and magical relations for the annual Blessing Festival. Usually a period of rejoicing, feasting and fornication, this time things do not go as planned.

But some background first. The inhabitants of the Empire are a dark-skinned race prejudiced against the white-skinned people from over the Bone Mountains in the west. Most of the peasants in Shine's country believe them to be escapees from the land of the dead and are liable to kill them on sight. In addition the Imperial Government keeps a close eye on any visiting "Outlanders", worried that they may attempt to change the status quo in the Empire. Shine is the product of a union between her missing mother and an Outlander, hence her very light skin and lack of any form of magical powers. She does, however, have a telepathic cat.

Shine's cousin Bright is in disgrace with the rest of the family due to him being a "man-lover", and gives her the task of protecting Shadow, a white-skinned "ghost" from the neighbouring country, which leads to all sorts of room and hiding place hopping throughout the novel. In addition, another cousin, Klea, appears to have major secrets she is trying to hide as well as staying away from the rest of the family. The arrival of the vast set of relations, hangers-on and servants causes mayhem in the household, but it's generally all fun and games (some rather lusty) until Shine's Aunt Blazeann is found murdered and things threaten to get totally out of control.

This is a light fantasy with a large number of characters utilising a magical system subject to reasonable rules. It takes a while to get going, especially when a large number of characters is introduced to the reader over a very small number of pages yet comes together reasonably well at the end.

Told in whimsical and comic style by Routley this is a good example of this style of novel. It leaves itself with plenty of room for sequels.

### The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again

by M. John Harrison

Gollancz 2020, 219 pp.

Reviewed by David Grigg

It's really hard to know how to begin to describe or discuss this book. Though I enjoyed it greatly, and in fact read it twice within a month, there's a great deal in it which remains baffling even after a second read, and I think that's by design.

We can start with the basics. It's a novel set in modern-day England, with two primary characters who are fairly ordinary middle-aged people, each going through a kind of crisis or inflection point in their life.

Alex Shaw is in his fifties and going through what he calls "a rough patch". He is now unemployed and living in a cheap rented room in suburban London. He strikes up a relationship with Victoria (whose surname he mishears and gets wrong throughout the book), a 40 year-old woman who announces that she works in a morgue and saw her first corpse at the age of 14. It's not clear whether

this is true or just her ploy to open up a conversation.

These are the two people whose lives we follow in interleaved segments of the novel. The relationship between Shaw and Victoria is a fairly lukewarm affair, and they drop in and out of contact.

Victoria moves out of her suburban house near London to live in and renovate her mother's house in a small town on the banks of the Severn in Shropshire. Her mother died recently of some strange illness, before which she had been exhibiting signs of mental illness including paranoia. Shaw's mother, by contrast, is still alive in a nursing home with a form of dementia which makes her treat Shaw with total scorn and always fail to remember his name. His visits to her are amusing records of deep frustration.

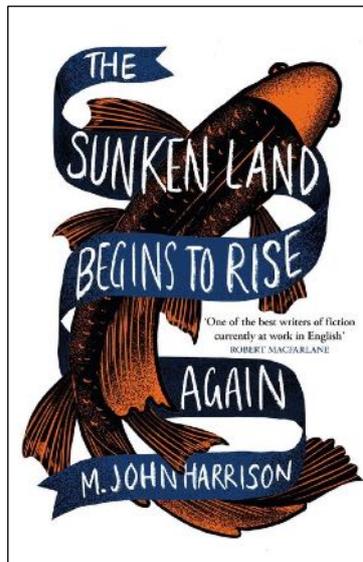
So far so ordinary. But extraordinary things begin to occur to both of them. Throughout the book we're made aware of the strong and increasing presence of water.

The rivers Thames and Severn; frequent downpours of rain; ponds and gardens flooding. Water is everywhere. It's not so much the sunken land starting to rise as the waters rising and bringing with them... strange things. Such as reports of embryonic forms floating in toilet bowls; shadowy pale people seen running and diving into the rivers at night, greenish body parts washed up on shore.

One night Shaw meets a man called Tim who is scooping murky water from a pool into bottles. Tim offers him a job, which involves working in an office on a moored barge, and

also frequently making trips with Tim to deliver mysterious boxes which sometimes contain bottles of the murky water and sometimes books titled **The Journey of Our Genes**. Tim seems to be running a conspiracy-theory website, among other things obsessed with the Aquatic Theory of human evolution, which proposes that humans passed through a phase where they lived largely in the water, like seals. Are there still such humans? Are they returning?

Meanwhile Victoria is finding her neighbours in Shropshire very odd, and keeps emailing Shaw about her experiences. Why does



almost everyone who Victoria meets keep trying to foist a copy of Charles Kingsley's **The Water Babies** on her?

She befriends Pearl, the waitress of a coffee shop, and then is stunned to find that Pearl claims she knew Victoria's mother well, but describes her in terms Victoria cannot recognise. Pearl bathes naked in a pool in a field and keeps trying to entice Victoria to join her. Finally, Victoria follows Pearl unobserved and watches her descend into the pool as "if descending a short, invisible flight of stairs" until her head is underwater. She does not re-emerge. Panicked, Victoria rushes into the pool to find it only a few inches deep. Pearl is nowhere to be found.

Increasingly incomprehensible events occur to both Shaw and Victoria. They never fully understand what is going on, and neither do we, and that's definitely the author's intention. Throughout there's a sense that the world (or certainly contemporary Britain), has escaped our understanding, that we are being drawn in by events we can't quite grasp and certainly can't personally control. There's not so much a feeling of dread as one of bewilderment and impotence.

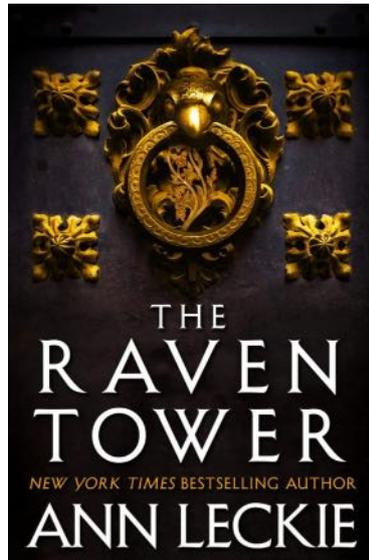
It's definitely no coincidence that one of the books owned by Shaw, mentioned several times, is William Golding's 1956 novel **Pincher Martin**, about a naval officer whose ship has been sunk by a destroyer and who manages to cling to life on a tiny piece of land in the middle of the ocean, though he starts to hallucinate. Here's a relevant quote: later in the book Martin says "There is a pattern emerging. I do not know what the pattern is but even my dim guess at it makes my reason falter." That's the situation exactly with the characters in Harrison's book. And for the same reason? In Golding's book, we eventually discover that Martin drowned when his ship went down and all of the book has been an exploration of his increasingly bizarre close-to-death experiences.

It's also worth thinking about the relevance of Charles Kingsley's **The Water Babies**, the book everyone keeps forcing on Victoria. In this children's story, Tom, a boy chimney-sweep,

falls into a river and drowns and then is changed into an aquatic creature, a water-baby, and begins a new life underwater.

Surely it's significant that late in **Sunken Land**, Victoria hears someone loudly shout angrily right outside her window: "You're dead, you're fucking dead!" So is Victoria dead when she hears that? That seems too trite a reading, and doesn't appear to apply to Shaw. But both are certainly in a very strange state of mind by the end of the novel.

This is a fascinating book, written in a very plain and accessible style which pulls you in from the very first page. That simple, clear style makes the bizarre events observed by Shaw and Victoria all the more extraordinary by contrast. Like those characters, we readers grasp for a pattern but either we are too stupid to find it, or there is no pattern there. I couldn't put it down, even on a second read. Highly recommended.



### **The Raven Tower** by Ann Leckie

*Orbit 2019, 407 pp.*

Reviewed by Perry Middlemiss

Ann Leckie debuted in the sf genre in 2013 with her novel **Ancillary Justice**. To say that it made something of a splash would be an understatement as it went on to win the Hugo Award, Nebula Award, Arthur C.

Clarke Award, and BSFA Award for Best Novel in 2014. That book was followed by two sequels, **Ancillary Sword** (2014) and **Ancillary Mercy** (2015), to form what became known as the Imperial Radch trilogy. Her next novel, **Provenance** (2017) was set in the same Imperial Radch universe but was not a direct sequel. In 2019 Leckie published her first fantasy novel, **The Raven Tower**.

Leckie's first foray into fantasy earned enough nominations to make the final 2020 Hugo Best Novel ballot, but she declined the offer of the nomination. Later in 2020 it appeared on the ballot for Best Novel for the World Fantasy Award.

In the kingdom of Iraden transactions with gods are a complex business with the god known as the Raven, and a nearby forest god, guarding the city of Vastai. The Raven's will is

enacted by a chosen human, the Raven's Lease, and it is powered by the self-sacrifice of the Lease. That is, when the Raven dies (it is a god in physical bird form) the Lease must commit suicide in a specific chamber at the bottom of a tower in order for the new Raven to be born. The Lease's designated heir then takes on the role.

As this novel begins the current Raven has just died and Mawat, the eldest son of the Lease, hurries back to the city to assume his new role. But now a usurper, the heir's uncle, has taken the Lease's place and the designated heir is struggling to make sense of it all. His uncle should be dead as no man may sit on the bench, who is not the designated heir, and live.

Meanwhile the city is threatened by enemies and it seems to have lost protection from its gods.

In a separate novel timeline two Ancient Ones, the Myriad and the Strength and Patience of the Hill, are gradually increasing their power over the local inhabitants. And, as we come to discover, it is the god Strength and Patience of the Hill who tells the story of Eolo, Mawat's friend and advisor, in the second person – a strange linguistic device which seems to work here – as he attempts to reconcile Mawat's dilemma and manoeuvre him onto the bench. Reminiscent of the plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with heavy overtones of the Tower of London and its raven myths.

An intricate and detailed fantasy novel by a renown sf writer. Interesting characters though you do wonder at times why some of them are so unbelievably dumb. On the evidence of this work it seems that this writer is at home on both sides of the sf&f genre.

## 2020 Novellas

All reviews by Perry Middlemiss

Around this time each year I start thinking about possible stories to include on my Hugo Award nomination form. The

vast amount of sf&f being published these days means that I can really only dip into the novellas (17,500 to 40,000 words). The Locus recommended Reading list for 2020 lists 36 novelettes and 69 short stories, way too many to work my way through. On the other hand they "only" recommend 19 novellas, a number that is almost possible to survey.

But I can't see myself getting through all of them, even 19 is too many. So what follows is a brief review of five novellas published in 2020 as a start. Well, actually six. Emily Tesh's 2020 novella *Drowned Country* is a direct sequel to her 2019 novella *Silver in the Wood*, so it seemed reasonable to put the two together.

By the time the second issue of this fanzine is published the Hugo Award voting ballot will have been released and I'll be able to concentrate on those stories. Meanwhile..

## THE GREENWOOD DUOLOGY

### *Silver in the Wood* by Emily Tesh

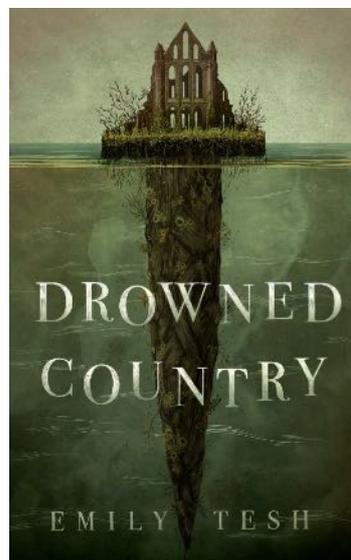
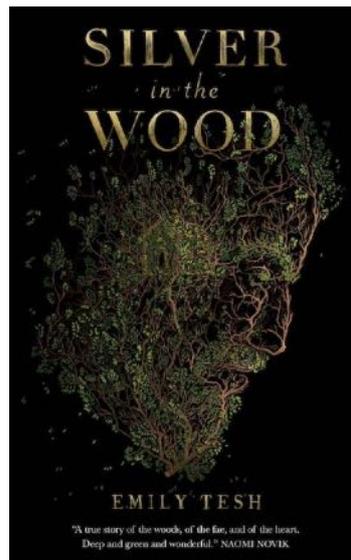
*Tor.com* 2019, 112 pp.

### *Drowned Country* by Emily Tesh

*Tor.com* 2020, 176 pp.

Emily Tesh's first story, *Silver in the Wood*, won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novella in 2020 and she followed up with a sequel a year later with *Drowned Country*. Both are worthy of your attention if you have any interest in current fantasy writing.

In the first of these we are introduced to Tobias Finch, who is a four-hundred-year old Green Man living in and protecting Greenhollow Wood. He meets and befriends the new owner of the local manor house, Henry Silver, and his whole life begins to change. There are other forces in the woods, more malevolent forces, such as the Lord of Summer who takes a shine to Silver and takes him out of this world. Finch, along



with the formidable and knowing Mrs Silver, Henry's mother, must make some radical decisions and actions in order to get Henry back.

The sequel moves us to a period two years on from the previous novella and Henry Silver is still in the manor house attached to the Greenhollow Wood, while Tobias Finch is working with Henry's mother. Unexpectedly, Henry is called into his mother's service to help find a missing young woman, Maud Livingston. He and Tobias track her down to the local ruined abbey where they find she has murdered an ancient vampire and is using his body magic as a means of entering fairyland. Maud is obviously not the shy waif they have been lead to believe as Henry and Tobias discover when they follow her into the desolated land of the fairies.

The first novella here is written in the classic woodland British tradition of Robert Holdstock, with the forest and its trees acting as home and sanctuary to a number of mythical creatures, including dryads. The author does not allow the woodland or fantasy setting to be the major driver of the story, rather it is the characters that propel the plot to a satisfactory conclusion.

The second moves the element of the *fantastique* out of the woods and forest and into that other major location of fairyland, "beyond the fields we know". But this is not the home of the light, wispy creatures at the bottom of the garden.

### **Prosper's Demon** by K. J. Parker

*Tor.com 2020, 104 pp.*

In April 2015 it was revealed that the writer "K. J. Parker" is in fact a pseudonym of the British author Tom Holt. As Holt, he writes historical novels and others which parody or use various mythological themes. As Parker, he writes fantasy, often dark, mostly tragic and usually only a step or two beyond the known historical world in a quasi-Renaissance faux Europe.

The unnamed narrator of this K. J. Parker novella is an exorcist, a good one too, if rather morally ambiguous. He is certainly

able to extract a demon from a human host though not necessarily leaving the host alive. But the demon is gone, and that's the main thing. At least in his eyes. His clients' views may vary a little.

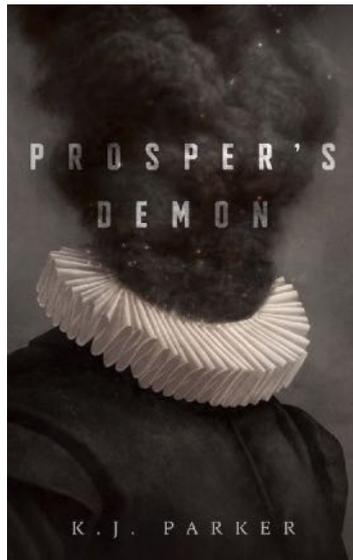
He wakes up at the start of this story lying in bed next to the dead body of a young woman whose throat has been torn out. Along with his ability to exorcise demons is his rather unfortunate tendency to become the demon's next host. As a result he tends to commit some rather atrocious acts after an exorcism, such as the brutal murder of the innocent woman mentioned. But the demon doesn't inhabit him for long. Just enough to make matters a little sticky with the local authorities and then it's gone. The consequence of all that is that he usually doesn't stay in one place very long..

So our narrator sets off to find the demon, who he suspects is now aiming to inhabit the soon-to-be-born child of the local Royal Princess. Our narrator, of course, now comes across as one of those television profilers of serial killers, the ones who do their job so well because they think like the killer. Or the demon in this case.

Overseeing the birth, and aiming to oversee the child's upbringing, is Prosper of Schanz, described as "the finest painter of sculptor of his age, even though rarely finished anything". The Prosper doesn't believe in demon possession, being a man of science and all, so our narrator needs to find a way to

wheedle his way into the Prosper's good graces, stop or deflect the demon before it can set up residence, and, at the same time, keep his own head on his shoulders.

Parker's fantasy work is funny, sprinkled with caustic commentary on science, art and politics and it always feels like there is more material here than readily meets the eye. This novella may not be up to his usually very high standards but it certainly passes muster.



## Dispersion by Greg Egan

*Subterranean 2020, 160 pp.*

Greg Egan is arguably Australia's greatest ever hard sf writer. Since 1983 he has produced some 14 novels and 8 collections of his shorter fiction. He has won the Hugo Award, the Locus Award, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and the Japanese Seiun Award for Best Translated Fiction on seven occasions.

I'm sure it's just a personal preference but I have always felt that Egan is a better writer at shorter lengths. His novels tend to be rather over-egged with too much scientific detail or mathematical modelling implications to carry the story.

The world of this novella is composed of material that is made up from one of six different "factions" that can only interact with each other momentarily. In an unknown country six villages are representatives of one faction each, but there is a new factor at play, a virus or flesh-eating cancer called the Dispersion that impacts all six factions and which each village blames on the others. The novella's main character Alice works to understand the interactions between the factional materials and thereby hopefully find a cure to the spreading disease.

This is a very peculiar world-view and probably only one that Egan could come up with. It reads rather like a model of a mathematically plausible system superimposed on the human world. The end result is rather cold and, while interesting, is not up to Egan's usual high standard.

## Coming Tumbling Down by Seanan McGuire

*Tor.com 2020, 208 pp.*

This is the fifth novella in McGuire's *Wayward Children* sequence following *Every Heart a*

*Doorway, Down Among the Sticks and Bones, Beneath the Sugar Sky, and In An Absent Dream.* These are variants on the "portal fantasy" theme in that they feature various

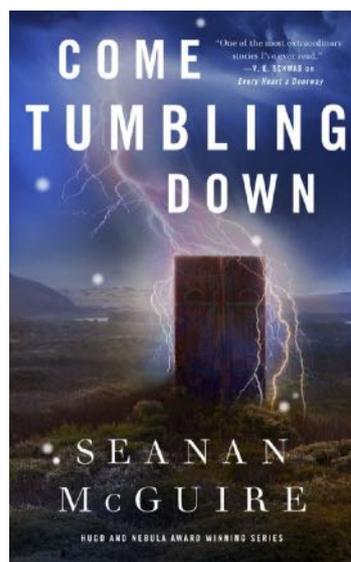
children who have wandered through a mysterious doorway, ended up in one of a myriad of fantastical worlds, and then, somehow, have found themselves back Here. These maladjusted children are then placed at Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children by their troubled parents. And from there all the children want to find their way back to their adopted fantasy lands.

This novella continues the story of the Wolcott twin sisters, Jack and Jill, twin sisters, who travelled to the same land, the Moors, but who then followed different paths: Jack as the

apprentice to scientist Dr Bleak and Jill as "child" of a master vampire. This backstory has been built up in *Every Heart a Doorway*, and *Down Among the Sticks and Bones*, and it helps to have read the previous entries in this series before tackling this one.

The story opens with the unexpected and sudden arrival of Jill into the basement of the school, through a lightning-powered door. But things are not as they first seem. The new arrival is actually Jack, in the body of Jill, accompanied by her lover, the twice-resurrected Alexis. Jack has returned in order to marshal his strength and his friends for a return to the Moors, where she aims to retrieve her body, swap back with Jill if possible, and to resurrect the recently murdered Dr Bleak. And if it's possible to exterminate Jill's vampire Master as well along the way then that will be an added bonus.

This strange little story of swapped bodies, Frankenstein re-incarnations, goblins, lost boys and Drowned Gods continues the fine quality of this fantasy horror series. No-one writes quite like McGuire when she is near the top of her form, as she is here, and if you have the slightest interest in this sort of



material then I recommend you check out this series of novellas.

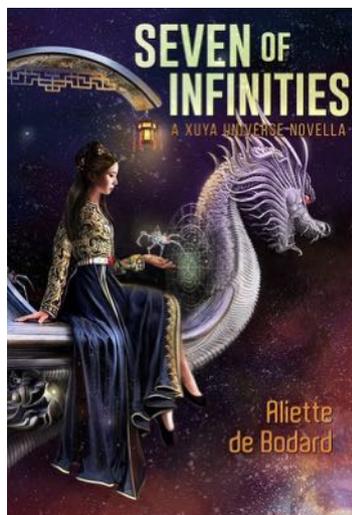
### Seven of Infinities by Aliette de Bodard

*Subterranean 2020, 176 pp.*

This is a novella in the author's Universe of Xuya series of novels and stories. This Universe depicts an idealised pre-communist Vietnamese society set in the far future in a section of the galaxy known as the Scattered Pearls Belt. This series now comprises four novellas (*On a Red Station, Drifting; The Citadel of Weeping Pearls* and *The Tea Master and the Detective*, plus this one) and around 30 shorter stories. Each of the novellas has received multiple award nominations with *Tea Master* winning the Nebula Award for Best Novella in 2018. It is a formidable recent record.

Vân, the main character here, is a scholar eking out a living working as a tutor to a rich family. At some time in the past she has manufactured an illegal memory implant that provides her with vast literary knowledge, thereby allowing her to obtain her current teaching position. One day, she is visited by an avatar of the mindship *The Wild Orchid in Sunless Woods* who is a fellow member of a local poetry club. *Sunless Woods* has come to inform Vân that the other members of the club consider her "vulgar". Coincidentally another woman comes to the house, ostensibly to see Vân's student Uyên, and drops dead for no apparent reason. And then Vân's past threatens to overwhelm her as *Sunless Woods* offers to help her with her problems. This turns into them following a trail of greed and murder from local teahouses to the ruin of a wrecked mindship in deep space.

Very much an homage to Banks's Culture series, with its orbitals and mindships interacting with humans via their avatars, this is a very entertaining and award winning set of stories told from a unique cultural perspective. This one is a tad long in parts and it tends to wallow a bit much in the romantic side of the story for me. Still, it should be a contender for various sf awards this year.◀◀



### Where Star-Cold...

Where star-cold and the dread of space  
in icy silence bind the main  
I feel but vastness on my face,  
I sit, a mere incurious brain,

under some outcast satellite,  
some Thule of the universe,  
upon the utter verge of night  
frozen by some forgotten curse.

The ways are hidden from mine eyes  
that brought me to this ghastly shore:  
no embers in their depths arise  
of suns I may have known of yore.

Somewhere I dream of tremulous flowers  
and meadows fervent with appeal  
far among fever'd human hours  
whose pulses here I never feel:

that on my careless name afar  
a voice is calling ever again  
beneath some other wounded star  
removed for ever from my ken:

vain fictions! silence fills my ear,  
the deep my gaze: I reck of nought,  
as I have sat for ages here,  
concentred in my brooding thought.

—Christopher Brennan 1897

# Fandom Inc.

## Fanzine Reviews

by Irwin Hirsh

**Best. Trip. Ever.**, John Coxon's report of his 2011 TAFF Trip, arrived the day after Perry asked me to review fanzines for his new venture.

Over the past decade or more my involvement in fandom has progressively declined. Not a complete gafia but close to it. For instance, in the ten years between the end of Aussiecon 4 and the beginning of ConZealand I attended just one day of one convention. My genre reading has reduced significantly, which causes my podcast listening and blog reading to go in directions that aren't science-fictional. And these days I get very few fanzines (both physical and electronic) and barely respond to those I do receive. But one constant I hold to is an interest in fan funds; voting when I know a candidate or two, maintaining an archive of details about Australian connected Funds, and making an effort to get my hands on Trip Reports.

So it was appropriate and timely that John's report came in the mail when my mind was in reviewer mode.

Before sitting down to read the report, I flicked through its pages to get a feeling for it as a publication. Nice and slick, my first impression is that John had made good use of Lulu.com's production facilities. A great cover, by Alison Scott, is the opening to a nicely laid out publication and lots of photos. There's nothing fancy about the lay-out but there is a nice consistency throughout. I particularly like John's decision to use a different colour for the page borders of each section of the trip – green for his Toronto stay, yellow for Seattle, etc.

The written aspect of the report also works well, with a nice mixture of short narratives and longer descriptive passages. The longest section is John's report about Renovation, the

69<sup>th</sup> Worldcon, which travels the highs and lows of attending a Worldcon. One aspect of the report is that John has reprinted convention reports by six others, and it was good and interesting to see the intersection of the different views on some of the events at the convention. For instance, John presented the Hugo for the Best Fan Writer, and later in the report is Claire Brialey's description of being presented with just that award. [The title of Claire's piece, "Chris Garcia's Warm-Up Act," is a pointer to the very next Hugo awarded and Chris Garcia's emotional response to being a winner. The presenter of that Hugo was DUFF winner Dave Cake. I look forward to reading Dave's DUFF Trip Report and his reprint of Garcia's reflections on the event.]



As I said **Best. Trip. Ever.** has a lot of photos but no identifications. When reading the report I was often stopping at the photos and asking some variant of "Who are these people? Why hasn't John told us?" I know some of the people and in some cases the text helped me attach names to faces, but there were many times when neither of these helped me and it would be nice to put names to faces.

Thinking about the second of my questions, I came up with two broad reasons why photo identifications aren't provided. The first is a current-age concern for privacy, and the second is that John simply didn't think to do so. The privacy issue is one I can appreciate it, but my sense is that a note in the report saying this would be sufficient and appropriate. The second reason had me wondering about the process in which a report-writer does or doesn't put a reader's hat on and what their reactions are to a similar situation.

One aspect about my "who is that in that photo?" reaction is a memory that I'd gone through this recently when reading another fan fund trip report, so I pulled up/out some recently published reports to renew acquaintance with that feeling. The culprit was Paul Weimar's **What I Did On My Summer Vacation**, his 2017 DUFF Trip Report.

Paul's trip provides a picture of just how far I have moved away from the worlds of science fiction fandom. I'd never heard of him before he stood for DUFF, nor two of his North American nominators. And while I knew

something of his two Australasian nominators, at the time of the vote I'd never interacted with either. (Still haven't for one.) I wasn't at either of the conventions he attended (the New Zealand and Australian national conventions) and of the people he mentions meeting when Down Under only three where people I knew in 2017 (and each I know only vaguely). When looked at from a perspective of describing a visit to a fandom that was new to the reader, for me Paul's report is the closest to those of reports of Fan Fund trips from before I got into fandom. In both 2017 when it was published and recently when re-reading it Paul's report I was conscious that I was reading about travels to fandoms that were foreign to me.

The Report can be looked at being in two halves. And in two ways. The first is that the narrative takes the reader to two countries and their National SF conventions. The second is that the reportage of the travel when not at the conventions is very different to the reportage of those conventions.

The writing of travels is fine, ably describing the challenges that befell Paul, the reasons for the choices he made and impressions of the sights that he aimed for. All this is enhanced by a lot of good photographs of what took Paul's eye. The writing and the photos do a good job of describing Paul's adventures and interest.

There is a quirk, which has to do with the way Paul laid-out the publication. Quite often the writing related not to the photo immediately above on that page but to a photo that is presented after we traverse some white space and the turn/scroll to the next page.

When Paul gets to Lexicon, the NZ con, I found myself getting disappointed. I come away with little sense of the convention and the fandom Paul found himself in. Too often Paul would say something, and my reaction was one of "... and ...", "What was said?", or "who is that?" For instance, on page 91, Paul mentions chatting to an expat SF fan, and I'm wondering who that person is. And on panel 106 he discusses "Our panel"; he describes the themes of the panel, but doesn't tell us who the rest of "Our" are. And between pages 92 and 112 (the NZ con) here are many photos of panels, Vogel Award winners and so on and we don't get told who these people are. We're told that Lee Murray won the Vogel for Best Novel, but not the novel's title. If the intention of a fan fund trip report is to give a

snapshot of a convention my feeling is that Paul has provided a blurry picture. I wasn't expecting this after the lead up that was getting to the convention.

After the con Paul continues his travels (more good reading and photos and layout quirks), aiming for Melbourne and Continuum 13, the Aussie Natcon. Here Paul isn't as constrained as he was with his Lexicon reportage. People in some of the photos are identified (though not those in the photos of panels) and the descriptions of panels are a bit more enhanced. I got more of a sense of how the convention was for Paul and the effect of attending while combating a virus, though I still had those lingering questions about the context. What, for instance, was Seanan McGuire's explanation of the 17% rule (mentioned on page 198)? On page 201 he mentions a link between a panel at Lexicon and here at Continuum, but beyond making this note there was no compare and contrast. And on page 213 Paul mentions attending a live recording of the Galactic Suburbia podcast, has a nice photo of the podcasters, but doesn't tell us who is who in that photo. And so on.

One of the impressions I came away from Paul's report was that he was writing for an audience that already knew him and not for a wider audience that include those who were being introduced to him because of the fan fund connection. Certainly, when reading these two reports, I was conscious of the fact that I had only acquired them because they were fan fund trip reports. ◀◀

### Publications reviewed:

John Coxon's **Best. Trip. Ever.** is available in paperback (GBP20) and PDF, EPUB, and MOBI (GBP5) editions/versions. Purchase of the eBook versions can be made [here](#). Once there you can find a link to buy a physical copy. All sale proceeds (less what lulul.com keeps) go to TAFF.

Paul Weimar's "What I Did On My Summer Vacation" is available as a PDF. Purchase a copy for US\$7 [here](#). All sale proceeds go to DUFF.

For more information about Fan Funds please check out:

[www.ozfanfunds.com](http://www.ozfanfunds.com)

<https://taff.org.uk/>

<https://fanac.org/fanzines/TripReports/>

# The SF&F Novel Award Winners of 2020

An analysis by Perry Middlemiss

## Introduction

In this article I aim to give an overview of some aspects of the science fiction and fantasy genres, as it appeared in 2019, by examining those 2020 awards in the field that covered publications from that year. It will by no means be comprehensive as it only attempts to look at the winners, and of necessity, only covers those books I have actually read. A full-blown study of all winners and all shortlisted works would be far too long to fit here and far too much work for me to contemplate.

Any survey of the novel awards presented in the sf&f genres is bound to leave out one or more that some readers will consider to be vital for a proper understanding of the field as a whole. Take it as a given that I have left myself open for just that sort of criticism.

In narrowing down my focus on specific awards here I have taken into account such aspects as longevity, scope, and acceptability to come up with the following list: Hugo, Nebula, Locus (Science Fiction, Fantasy and First Novel), BSFA, Arthur C. Clarke and World Fantasy.

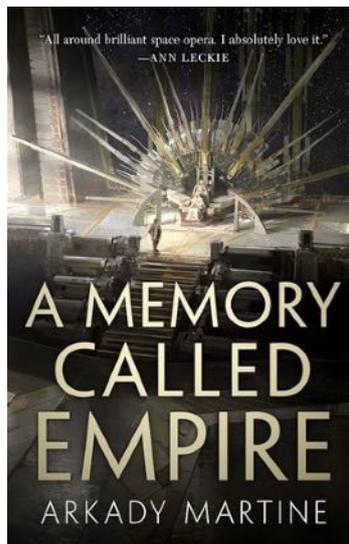
Why not the Philip K. Dick Award you may ask? In normal years I may well have included this, but the 2020 winner was ***Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea*** by Sarah Pinsker, a short story collection, not a novel.

Or the John W. Campbell Memorial Award? Again yes it should be here, but there doesn't appear to have been an award presented in 2020 for a 2019 work, which easily rules it out.

And any of the others (Shirley Jackson, Bram Stoker, James Tiptree Jr (now known as the Otherwise Award), Prometheus, Sidewise, or any of the country based awards) seemed to

me to be too limited in scope to be included. Your feelings on this may vary.

I am indebted to the Science Fiction Awards Database website (sfadb.com) as developed and maintained by Mark R. Kelly, and to the 2019 Locus Recommended Reading List (<https://locusmag.com/2020/02/2019-locus-recommended-reading-list/>) for the genre. Both are invaluable and worth seeking out.



## HUGO AWARD

Winner: ***A Memory Called Empire*** by Arkady Martine (Tor; Tor UK)

Within a future galactic empire the independent space station of Lsel controls access to two important jump-gates. As such it is aligned to the empire without being totally subservient to it. And in order to keep this fragile alignment in place it has sent an ambassador to the Empire's home-planet. The current ambassador, Yskandr Aghavn, has been in place for twenty years but has not returned to Lsel in the past fifteen. At the

beginning of the novel the Empire has requested the appointment of a new ambassador, without explaining what has become of the old one.

In addition to the station's strategic positioning within the galaxy it has also developed the ability to record the memory and personality of valuable citizens in an imago machine which can be implanted into the body of their successor, thereby merging the two personas into one, and allowing for the complete transfer of knowledge from the dead to the living.

The new ambassador Mahit Dzmare, a young woman with a vast knowledge of the Empire, is hastily implanted with the most-recent imago from the previous ambassador, which is now fifteen years out-of-date. Shortly after she arrives at the Empire's heart she learns that her predecessor has been murdered, but

there appears to be no investigation undertaken and no explanation given. It soon becomes clear that Dzmare must not only attempt to solve the murder of Aghavn, but also find her way through the intricate palace manoeuvrings of the various political factions and maintain her space station's independence.

In addition to all this politics and detective work the Ambassador discovers that the Emperor is getting old and has yet to nominate a successor. She then finds out that the Emperor has a ten-year-old clone and she begins to suspect that the secret imago memory technology may not be all that secret after all. Is the Emperor attempting a form of immortality by using the technology? How was the previous ambassador maintaining a delicate balance of forces which would ensure his station's independence, and indeed survival? Did this balance tip to one side and lead to his murder? And will the revealing of the answers to these questions lead to further death and destruction?

Dzmare's slowly revealed understanding of the forces acting against her and her station, of the short and long-term politics of the Empire and the high-level ambitions of all she meets is handled with a deft touch by this debut author. The pacing is adroit and the plots and subplots intertwine to keep the reader guessing. The novel ends in a satisfactory conclusion, neatly tying up the plot strings, with enough indications that a sequel is planned and would be welcome.

### Other nominees:

***The City in the Middle of the Night*** by Charlie Jane Anders (Tor; Titan)

***Gideon the Ninth*** by Tamsyn Muir (Tor.com)

***The Light Brigade*** by Kameron Hurley (Saga; Angry Robot UK)

***Middlegame*** by Seanan McGuire (Tor.com)

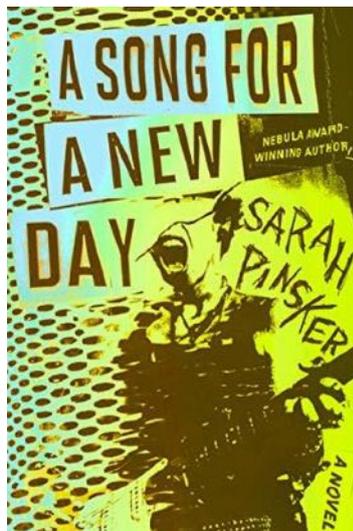
***The Ten Thousand Doors of January*** by Alix E. Harrow (Redhook; Orbit UK)

### Notes:

Works are nominated by members of the current and previous Worldcons, and voting is by members of the current Worldcon only.

In 2020 1339 nominating ballots were cast for 508 nominees, 16 of which received over 50 nominations. The eventual winner received the highest number of nominations with 319. ***The Raven Tower*** by Ann Leckie received the third-highest number of nominations but the author declined the nomination and the work did not appear on the final voting ballot.

1852 votes were cast, 21 of which were for No Award. ***Middlegame*** by Seanan McGuire received the highest number of 1<sup>st</sup> preference votes (512 to 455 for the winner) but finished second after the distribution of preferences.



### NEBULA AWARD

Winner: ***A Song for a New Day*** by Sarah Pinsker (Berkley)

In a near-future USA – say mid to late 2030s (it isn't specified) – a wave of terrorist attacks, followed by a virus pandemic, has forced local and state governments to impose limits on crowds. At the start of the novel this imposition has been in so long that most people stay at home or in very small communities and undertake all their work and daily activities via the web. Sound familiar?

Luce Cannon (for that is her name) was the last musician to play live at anything approaching a medium sized venue before all such live performances were shut down. Now everything has to be performed in a clandestine, underground manner.

Rosemary Laws is a small-town country girl working for Superwally (which seems like an all-in Walmart delivering everything by drone). She comes across a job vacancy in the music industry with SuperHolo – a large corporation that delivers “live” music performances over the internet. She applies, is employed and finds that she is now a music recruiter, with no idea of how to go about doing the job. The job initially starts out as being a dream for her – she is able to travel to new places, meet new people, find new bands and musicians and then recommend them, or not, to her employers. But, as with

all such good things, the real truth is revealed to her which turns the whole experience sour.

The novel is told from the points-of-view of both characters who start very far apart, meet in the middle, go apart again and then reconnect at the end. The book asks the questions: how do you perform live music without a crowd, what happens when big business steps in and tries to take control, and how you as an individual could fight back against that? Is it better to fight a corporation from the inside or to not compromise your ethics and resign? A lot of us have faced such decisions from time to time so this major theme of the novel is nothing especially new. Pinsker allows her characters to work through these dilemmas as best they can without presenting any revelatory solutions.

Competent and obviously showing the author's experience in the music industry this is an interesting book without reaching great heights. Better than most but a bit heavy on the performance detail.

Other nominees:

***Gideon the Ninth*** by Tamsyn Muir (Tor.com)

***Gods of Jade and Shadow*** by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (Del Rey)

***Marque of Caine*** by Charles E. Gannon (Baen)

***A Memory Called Empire*** by Arkady Martine (Tor; Tor UK)

***The Ten Thousand Doors of January*** by Alix E. Harrow (Redhook; Orbit UK)

Notes:

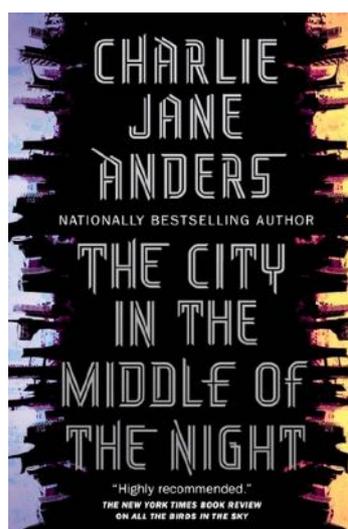
The administrators of the Nebula Awards don't release their voting statistics so there is no way to determine the final ranking of the nominees within this award. It is interesting to note that the winner was only nominated for one other award, the Locus First Novel Award.

## LOCUS SF AWARD

Winner: ***The City in the Middle of the Night*** by Charlie Jane Anders (Tor; Titan)

Charlie Jane Anders's second novel is set on the planet of January which is tidally locked to its parent star. Between the hot day side of the planet, and the very cold night side, lies the twilight region where humans have settled in a number of places over hundreds of years. One major city, Xiosphant, has grown up in the shadow of two mountains and another, Argelo, is deeper into the twilight, towards the dark.

The novel begins with student Sophie taking the blame for a theft committed by her friend Bianca. Sophie is exiled from the school into the darkside and left to die. She survives after contacting the planet's intelligent indigenous telepathic inhabitants, called "crocodiles" by the humans who treat them as monsters. Sophie comes to call these creatures the Gelet.



In another storyline Mouth is the sole survivor of a group of nomad traders who now lives in Xiosphant, scrounging a living as best she can. The two protagonists gradually come together through their mutual friend Bianca. The city authorities undertake a purge of political dissidents and the three friends flee and end up in Argelo.

Sophie stays in contact with the Gelet and during the course of the novel it becomes clear that they, the Gelet, have been gradually geo- and bio-engineering the planet for millennia.

In many ways this can be considered a "first contact" story with an interesting alien life-form. Unfortunately the novel stays away from the implications of the aliens' activities and concentrates on the revolutionary actions and sociopolitical and inter-personal discussions between the main protagonists. This tends to get repetitive and the same topics are talked about again and again without anything being resolved.

There is the germ of a good novel in here that may have become more evident if it were shorter by about a quarter.

Other nominees:

***Ancestral Night*** by Elizabeth Bear (Saga; Gollancz)

***Wanderers*** by Chuck Wendig (Del Rey; Solaris)

**The Light Brigade** by Kameron Hurley (Saga; Angry Robot UK)

**The Future of Another Timeline** by Annalee Newitz (Tor; Orbit UK)

**Empress of Forever** by Max Gladstone (Tor)

**The Rosewater Insurrection/The Rosewater Redemption** by Tade Thompson (Orbit)

**The Testaments** by Margaret Atwood (Nan A. Talese; Chatto & Windus)

**Luna : Moon Rising** by Ian McDonald (Tor; Gollancz)

**Fleet of Knives** by Gareth L. Powell (Titan)

#### Notes:

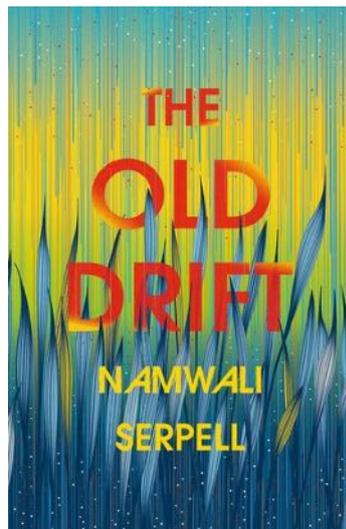
As alluded to elsewhere in this article, this award was possibly skewed by the Locus policy of putting debut novels into their own category, and not having them compete in more than one in any given year.

#### ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD

Winner: **The Old Drift** by Namwali Serpell (Hogarth)

Namwali Serpell was born in Lusaka, Zambia, and now lives and works in the USA. Which is an important point to remember as this novel is an attempt at an inter-generational novel that outlines the history of Zambia from white settlements in the early 1990s to a near-future 2023.

Written as a set of slightly inter-connected novellas rather than a single plot-line novel **The Old Drift** follows the fortunes of three families inter-related over four generations. The book is split into three main sections, each with three chapters dedicated to the grandmothers, the children and to the grandchildren. Each of the novellas are interesting in themselves but it is difficult to see the connections between them and, with a distinct lack of dramatic tension, hard to get a view of the overall thrust of the novel. There is a family tree included in the book and it may well be worthwhile copying this and using it as a bookmark in order to keep track of where you are on the tree in each story; it can be very easy to lose sight of the connections between family members.



There are some interesting characters among these stories: a woman covered in hair, rather like Cousin Itt from the Addams Family; the blind ex-tennis player from England; a young revolutionary who becomes involved in Zambia's doomed 1960s space agency; and many more. Each flits quickly across the stage and is gone, barely referred to again leaving the reader wondering where this novel is heading.

The science fictional element of the novel only becomes apparent in the last 100-150 pages as the search for a cure for the AIDS virus centres on the unique genetic code of one of the family members, and later with the introduction of the concept of the "Bead", basically a smartphone embedded in the hand with all the functionality you'd expect, including camera, screen and internet connections. This is an interesting idea and could well have formed the basis of a novel of its own, but set at the end of a long, long novel it tends to get lost.

The novel is ambitious in scope, maybe too ambitious, as it includes a lot of excellent writing and a lot of workmanlike prose that just seems to be filling in background to no major effect. With the episodic nature of the story-telling and the lack of an over-arching dramatic direction I found this a very difficult book to read.

#### Other nominees:

**Cage of Souls** by Adrian Tchaikovsky (Head of Zeus)

**The City in the Middle of the Night** by Charlie Jane Anders (Tor; Titan)

**The Last Astronaut** by David Wellington (Hachette)

**The Light Brigade** by Kameron Hurley (Saga; Angry Robot UK)

**A Memory Called Empire** by Arkady Martine (Tor; Tor UK)

#### Notes:

A strange winner in that it is not your typical science fiction novel of recent years. Here you could be forgiven you were reading a novel not of this genre for the first 80% of the book.

It is also interesting that it did not make the shortlist for the Locus First Novel Award.

### BSFA AWARD

Winner: ***Children of Ruin*** by Adrian Tchaikovsky (Pan Macmillan)

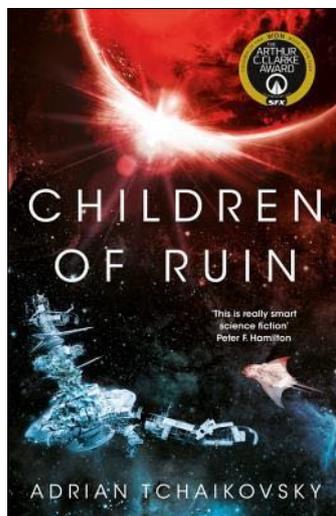
This is the second novel in the author's Children of Time series, following ***Children of Time*** (2015), which won the Arthur C. Clarke Award. The series is set in the distant future when Earth has sent out terraforming ships to the stars.

In the first volume a team, led by Dr Avrana Kern, has terraformed a planet to make it habitable for human life. Kern has developed a nanovirus with which they intend to uplift a colony of monkeys, depositing them on the planet and waiting, in cold sleep hibernation, for the monkeys to reach a level of intelligence when they can usefully interact with the humans. But the mission is sabotaged, the monkeys are killed and the virus infects a jumping spider which, over the ensuing centuries, becomes the dominate intelligent life on the planet.

***Children of Ruin*** follows a second terraforming ship which finds a planet teeming with life, along with another planet in the system that could possibly be made habitable. Originally the human team believes the life forms are rather primitive until an unfortunate accident disproves that thought. The humans on the planet become infected with this new life-form which starts utilising the new technology and knowledge as a means of infecting and taking over all life on planet.

Thousands of years later the human/arachnid partnership from the first novel arrives at the new system only to encounter a well-developed space-based society of octopi, descendants of a similar uplift experiment based on the second planet. They have been forced into living in space after the lifeform of the first planet has also infected their own. The arrival of the new humans and the spiders at first gives the

octopi hope of decontamination but a misunderstanding leads to some possibly dire consequences for all.



This novel is a further examination by the author of variations of high-functioning species intelligence that is not based on the old sf trope of humanoid body shapes. The inter-play between the different intelligences (human, spider and octopus) is extremely well handled here, and lifts this book above the normal run of space opera novels.

This is an intriguing, though rather long novel. It is probably best to read the first book in the series to get the most from this one.

Other nominees:

***Atlas Alone*** by Emma Newman (Gollancz)

***Fleet of Knives*** by Gareth L. Powell (Titan)

***The Green Man's Foe*** by Juliet E. McKenna (Wizard's Tower)

***The Rosewater Insurrection*** by Tade Thompson (Orbit)

### Notes:

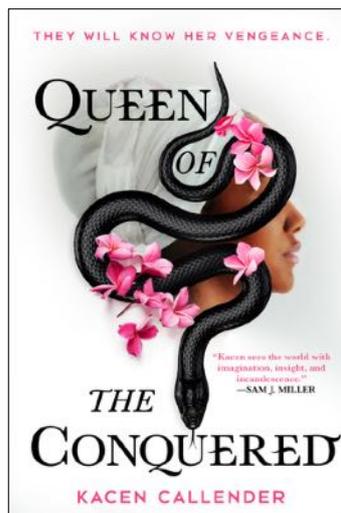
The British Science Fiction Association wears its major priorities in its title and so it is little wonder that a solidly modern space opera should win this one. Only the Thompson novel appears on any other shortlists.

### WORLD FANTASY AWARD

Winner: ***Queen of the Conquered*** by Kacen Callender (Orbit)

Sigourney Rose is a daughter of a family of noble lineage on the islands of Hans Lollick. She is also the only survivor of her family's massacre at the hands of the islands' colonisers. After escaping with the help of a local slave she comes into her power, known in the novel as "kraft", to

enter and control minds when she reaches puberty. Needless to say she plans revenge on her enemies and sets out to get it.



When the childless king of the islands announces that he plans to choose a successor from among the most eligible noble families she uses her power to manipulate her way into their company. Based on a Caribbean-style landscape and society with the aristocracy supported by a vast network of slaves, the novel is rather brutal in its depictions of punishments meted out for the slightest of slave infractions. Rose has risen from these slave ranks through the intelligence and industry of her mother and the use of her magical power until she is able to manipulate one of the families' dying matriarchs to allow her to marry an eligible son. From there she is able to attend the king's retreat with the other families and attempts to plot her way onto the throne. But she is rather naive at the games these people play and is out-manoeuvred at each turn.

Repetitious in parts this novel is just too long, and the actions of some of the characters seem more manipulated by the author to her own ends rather than being a natural progression from their previous actions. In the last quarter of the novel I found myself wondering why the narrator was still alive, and couldn't come up with a satisfactory reason. She had placed herself in so many dangerous positions, and associated with so many other characters who just wanted her dead that it appeared that the author must have some overarching reason for her survival. And so it proves, as she makes to the end of the book more through luck than good judgement.

This is a novel that just needed more work, and maybe a sharper editorial pencil.

Other nominees:

***Gideon the Ninth*** by Tamsyn Muir (Tor.com)

***The Memory Police*** by Yoko Ogawa (Pantheon; Harvill Secker)

***The Raven Tower*** by Ann Leckie (Orbit)

***The Ten Thousand Doors of January*** by Alix E. Harrow (Redhook; Orbit UK)

#### Notes::

It is almost a clean sweep for debut novels in this award shortlist. The stand-out being ***The Raven Tower*** by Ann Leckie, and that is her first pure fantasy novel. (You can find this novel reviewed elsewhere in this issue.)

#### LOCUS FANTASY AWARD

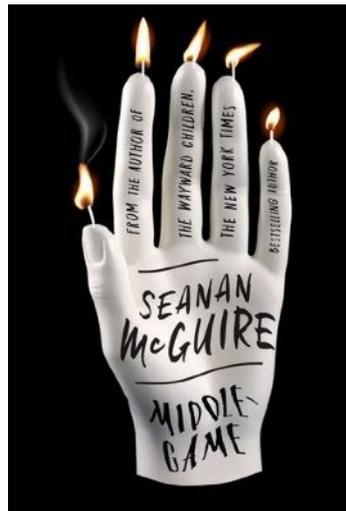
Winner: ***Middlegame*** by Seanan McGuire (Tor.com)

Seanan McGuire continues her fascination with children in this novel about the twins Roger who is good with words and the art of convincing people to do his bidding, and Dodger who excels at maths. The two are separated at birth and adopted by different families on opposite side of the US, but find they are able to communicate telepathically. They appear in each other's lives initially as imaginary friends, he in Massachusetts and her in California.

Hovering over both children is James Reed, their creator, and a member of the Alchemical Congress, a mysterious group of scientists and magicians who have been undertaking a long-term breeding program in order to produce just such a set of children as Roger and Dodger. The ultimate aim of the Congress is to gain control over time and space and thereby to bend the whole world to their command. So far, so not so new.

Reed is a rather flat character, acting as the malevolent force in the novel. He might have been fleshed out rather more but McGuire seems much more interested in the children, as she has been for some few years with her *Wayward Children* series of novellas. She isn't wrong in focusing her attention to the twins as that is where the interesting fun is.

At first neither of the twins has a clue about their origins, what Reed and his nasty assistant Leigh, have in store for them. The two of them go through school and meet up in college where their full powers begin to develop. Dodger's ability with maths starts to allow her manipulate both space and time and these gifts along with Roger's communication skills begin to seem like magic to the reader. There appears to be little they cannot



do in unison and the reader will start to wonder why they just don't take control of the situations presented to them rather than allowing events to batter them left and right.

The twins are destined to confront their creators, and they do in the closing 100-page chase and battle that finishes the book.

Competently written and engaging, the book is too long. I found myself with too much free space to ponder what might have been if the main characters had used their powers whenever required. If it had been 100 pages shorter that might not have occurred.

Other nominees:

**The Raven Tower** by Ann Leckie (Orbit)

**Gods of Jade and Shadow** by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (Del Rey)

**Storm of Locusts** by Rebecca Roanhorse (Saga)

**Jade War** by Fonda Lee (Orbit)

**The Iron Dragon's Mother** by Michael Swanwick (Tor)

**Ninth House** by Leigh Bardugo (Flatiron; Gollancz)

**Dead Astronauts** by Jeff VanderMeer (MCD; Fourth Estate)

**A Brightness Long Ago** by Guy Gavriel Kay (Berkley; Viking Canada; Hodder & Stoughton)

**The Starless Sea** by Erin Morgenstern (Doubleday; Harvill Secker)

### LOCUS FIRST NOVEL AWARD

Winner: **Gideon the Ninth** by Tamsyn Muir (Tor.com)

In Tamsyn Muir's debut novel, set in some time and in some place – probably the far-distant future in a distant part of the galaxy – where an interstellar empire is ruled by an Emperor presiding over a control system that consists of nine houses with their own separate rulers. This is a system that utilises necromancy as an overall power structure with each house specialising in a slightly different form of the art: the ability to talk to ghosts, the ability to extract the soul from a living being etc.

Gideon Nav is an 18-year-old orphaned girl, ward of the Ninth House, smart, mouthy and desperate to escape the confines of a life she sees as over-bearing and boring. She has been trained as a master of the sword, in many varieties, and her service is committed to Harrowhawk, the 17-year-old heir to the House and Gideon's nemesis.

After a failed attempt to escape her home planet, Gideon is offered her freedom if she will perform one final act of service to Harrowhawk, to accompany her to the long-abandoned planet of the First House and act as her cavalier (a combination of bodyguard, personal assistant and dog's body). Each House has been summoned to the planet to choose a replacement Lictor, an immortal servant and adviser to the Emperor. They find, on arrival, that the choice will come down to the first House that can solve the puzzle of the castle, their only clue being the directive

that they "never open a locked door unless you have permission." Muir handles the ensuing puzzle and exploration plot with obvious joy. The inter-House rivalries and alliances shift and twist as required and she delineates her various characters with aplomb bringing this first volume in a proposed trilogy to a satisfying, in unexpected conclusion.

There are overtones of Gormenghast hanging over this book which is not to its detriment. Muir utilises the influences without letting them overwhelm her. My one concern with the book is the first section leading up the

departure of Harrow and Gideon from the planet of the Ninth House. The author takes some time to find her voice and some of the early internal monologues come across as being rather forced. Once that settles down the book flows in a very readable fashion.

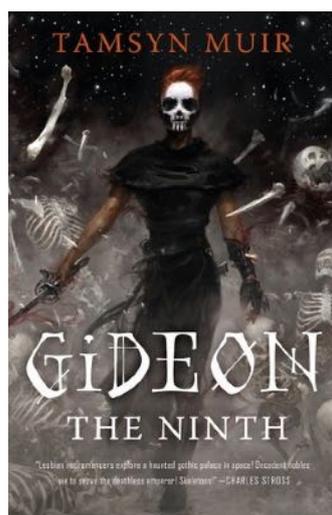
Other nominees:

**The Water Dancer** by Ta-Nehisi Coates (One World)

**Magic For Liars** by Sarah Gailey (Tor)

**The Ten Thousand Doors of January** by Alix E. Harrow (Redhook; Orbit UK)

**A Memory Called Empire** by Arkady Martine (Tor; Tor UK)



**Infinite Detail** by Tim Maughan (MCS x FSG Originals)

**Finder** by Suzanne Palmer (DAW)

**A Song for a New Day** by Sarah Pinsker (Berkley)

**Waste Tide** by Chen Qiufan (Tor; Head of Zeus)

**The Luminous Dead** by Caitlin Startling (Harper Voyager)

2019 may be seen, in future years, as the start of a new expansive wave of sf; a wave that will be gathering pace and strength for many years to come..◀◀

### Notes:

In a year such as 2019 Locus's tradition of only nominating novels for one category (ie First Novel, but not either of Best Sf Novel or Best Fantasy Novel) skews the final outcomes in all three categories.

### Conclusion

The most obvious point of difference for the novels of 2019, compared to some previous recent years, lies in the number of debut novels of such high quality. The Hugo Award winner by Arkady Martine, the Nebula Award winner by Sarah Pinsker, and the Arthur C. Clarke Award winner by Namwali Serpell are all debuts, and debuts by women. And if you then add the debut novels by Muir, Maughan and Harrow, that are listed here as nominees or winners, or any of the others on the Locus First Novel Award shortlist, you begin to see a pattern of great science fiction novels by novelists at the very start of their careers.

If I had any general criticism of the novels under consideration here it would be regarding their length. Most are just too long. The well-known "bloat" that infected the epic fantasy sub-genre some years back appears to have worked its way over into the science fiction section. Sharper editing might well have condensed and concentrated the good work that is the base for each of these novels.

In any estimation 2019 can only be considered as a great year for science fiction and fantasy genre, especially where novels are concerned. The number of new voices, the diversity of cultures, genders and sexual orientation, indicates that the field prior to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak was in a remarkably healthy state. It can only augur well for the future of the genre.

# I Remember Reading That



Back in December 2020 my friend Nick Price pitched me an idea that he thought might be good for *Two Chairs Talking*, the podcast David Grigg and I produce on a fortnightly basis. He noted the following in an email:

Back in March I found a copy of TV chef Nigel Slater's 1998 book **Real Food** (he was one of Nigella Lawson's contemporaries in case you hadn't heard of him) going for £1 (!) on a Charity Shop bargain table. My mother's a big fan so I lashed out and got it. It was a well used first edition hardback but every recipe page had some sort of food stain on it. She thought it was a fantastic because you could see how much it had been used and loved.

Maybe there's a podcast topic in there for you and David. Books that remind you of a period or event of your, or people you know, lives.

It seemed like a good topic but not, I thought, for the podcast. But I couldn't let it go and asked Nick if he was to write something about his topic then maybe I could ask a few friends to supply their version. He did, and they did, and here we are. Thanks Nick.

[As an aside: I knew of Nigel Slater as he was one of the big celebrity chefs on British television when I lived in the UK in the early 1990s.]

## Good Story And Good Reading by Nick Price

Reading papery things while travelling was not such a novelty in the past as it is today. In the mid '90s I went on a holiday trip to Bali. As part of that trip, I took a ferry out of the Balinese port of Padang Bai over to the island of Lombok. I remember that crossing for allowing me to read **The Bridges of Madison County** by Robert James Waller.

After getting off a bus to Padang Bai, I made my way down to the ferry. Between the bus stop and the dock there was a book stall selling backpacker book discards. Ever the optimist, I foresaw a longish trip and stopped for a browse. I knew of **Bridges** vaguely as a 'should read' work of recent years and so I purchased it.

I like ferry journeys. Maybe too much. The ferry boats were slower and much less sophisticated then. There's something assured however about their ponderous throbbing trudge across a stretch of water; be that across the English Channel, the Solent, the Cook Strait, Hong

Kong or Sydney harbours. The passenger is left free to entertain themselves.

Once aboard I took up a shaded seat on the passenger deck outside. I settled down and kicked off into the book. It engaged me from the outset. I recall my focus needing a rest and my attention bubbling up a few times from the pages but wasn't clock watching.

I came up more fully to the surface of the book when I realised we had come to a full stop. The throbbing engine had also gone quiet. This wasn't on any timetable I had seen. We turned out to have broken down.

From the malaise of the crew, and as the life jackets didn't look they were in any threat of being deployed, more reading time seemed to be available (I later reflected though that perhaps there hadn't been any lifejackets at all.) At that break point though I hesitated and took the time to look out at the sea.

We had come to a halt in the middle of a small fishing fleet. A gathering of single-sailed small open boats. Every one of them had a different coloured sail. We were a metal giant from the industrial age surrounded by a swarm of small wooden things from the agricultural one.

The beautiful novelty of the setting wore off and back down I went beneath the papery waves. Time crept on and the engine throbbed to life again. By the time we reached Lombok I had finished the book.

For the many others who have read the book, or seen the film, the air they associate with Madison County, Iowa USA might be that of a warm, green, wooded mid-country state. The sensations I associate with the book though are the smells of diesel and the sea, and the sounds of seagulls and the deep throb of a diesel engine.

I didn't put the book back into backpacker circulation and I still have it somewhere. While it is a good story, for me it is a greater memory of reading.

### **Shades Of Memory by Tineke Hazel**

*These Old Shades* by Georgette Heyer was one of the first books I was able to take home from the Eudunda Area School library. The very mention of Georgette Heyer's name reminds me of this book as it was read during that time of being an adolescent at "Anlaby"

the state's oldest Merino sheep stud. This is sixty five or more years ago and it was a time of innocence.

We lived in a beautiful South Australian stone home, the stone quarried on the property by long dead craftsmen. The kitchen was the hub of our family life and in the winter especially I sat by the wood stove and read. My mother would be sitting at the table with her wooden work box, darning socks or sewing on stray buttons. My father was sitting reading the Dutch paper "Elsevier" at the other end of the long table which was covered with a typically Dutch plush table cloth with Persian type patterns.

My little dog "Tor" would be in his box at the other end of the stove, or if I had forgotten to feed him he would pitter-patter from my chair to the fridge, till I realised he had not had his mutton shank and gave it to him.

The story of *These Old Shades* was set in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and told of an English Duke in France rescuing and buying a young lad, body and soul, from an abusive older brother who ran a dive of a pub in some back street in Paris. The Duke makes him his page and as the lad has amazingly red curly hair, he attracts a lot of attention by the nobility into which the Duke takes him.

It turns out that the lad is really a girl and the Duke adopts her as his ward.

He takes her to England and places her in the care of a female cousin to train her in being a "Lady" so he can present her to Society. He has a hidden motive for this which is part of an interesting plot.

The book is well written in a beautiful old English style. The story is quite silly of course by modern standards as the girl is 19 years of age and unbelievably naive and the Duke is in his 40ties.

They end up living happily ever after....

I re-read it some weeks ago and I still find it charming and a wonderful escape from the age of Trumpism... and taking me back to that warm, country kitchen.

### **His Dark Materials In Byron Bay by W. H. Chong**

A year into the new relationship we took our first holiday together. It began with a two and a half day road trip in his sports car from

Melbourne to Byron. I dislike driving so during my turns at the wheel I exceeded the speed limit by non-trivial amounts, yet to realise he was a stickler for The Law. We had rented a house that was luxuriously just behind the dunes. Sunset strolls on the water's edge came with panoramas that demolished the notion of 'cliche'. He had brought a stack of historical texts and superior literature, and I had a handful of fat books.

I had a long history of reading SFF, he disdained Fantastika. **The Amber Spyglass**, the final book of **His Dark Materials**, had come out a couple of years before and I lay on the divan under the window and delved into the trilogy's 1144 pages of high tension pleasure. Some afternoons that week it was between a beach walk with him or Philip Pullman's multiverse – to his deep frustration I'm afraid to say that Pullman won. I should have read at night of course, but that summer a whole shimmering world of ideas and feelings pressed its subtle knife into my consciousness and I bled.

And what of *him*, you ask? Reader, I married him.

### Diary Entry by Jenny Ackroyd

Why do memories of the past always come with a mixture of graphic focus, fuzzy edges and impenetrable void? I can see myself seated in the lounge room of my childhood home, a safe and comfortable home. I can see myself seated in the lounge chair that is my domain when I read – a dark green, velvet to the touch, wingback chair – from which I can sit transfixed watching Doctor Who battle Cybermen, Daleks and Yeti, from which I can cuddle/share with a skinny, black and tan mutt called Rivke, and from which I spent many hours immersed in a particular book.

That girl seated in this chair has all the angst and disdain that comes with her teenage years. She is self-absorbed, anxious, critical, nihilistic, and wondrous. She reads and reads and reads. **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe** by C.S. Lewis / **The Silver Brumby** by Elyne Mitchell / **The Exorcist** by William Blatty. And on this particular day, this girl is crying. Completely, unreservedly, painfully. And all because of a book.

Diary entry – Saturday June 16th, 1973

"This day I finished the book **Dune Messiah**\* which was so sad and moving I cried. Mum asked me why I cried for something in a book and I couldn't explain. How, to one such as Mum, could I explain that I had fallen in love with the hero, Paul, and his wife, Chani. How when they died, I felt that I had lost something... I don't think Mum will ever understand me – the real me."

(\* F. Herbert – author)

Memory is fixed on this book, targeting the characters and storytelling that sprang to life in my imagination from the author's words and took me from suburban, brick-veneer Rosanna to the sands of Arrakis, with heroes, battles and sand worms. A touchstone for my understanding of why I read and how books can provide magical transformations and sublime experiences. My hero is American librarian, Nancy Pearl, who created The Four Doors to Reading – through Story, Character, Setting and/or Language. I have learnt to use these doors to engage with readers and provide new book suggestions. And, to this day, I am still trying to explain why books matter to me, to my family, friends, and other readers. So, my memory of reading **Dune Messiah** is an important part of why I became a librarian – as well as showing me how mothers can love their children but never understand the secret life they have with books.

### The Box Is Only Temporary by Marc Ortlieb

*You stand at the blackboard, daddy, In the picture I have of you.*

There are probably better books than to be reading while sitting alone in a cold sound-shell in a strange country town at 4:00 am while waiting for dawn. I didn't have one of them. I was limited to what I'd brought with me.

*The train leaves a line of breath.*

*O slow*

*Horse the colour of rust,*

The night train from Adelaide to Mount Gambier was an ancient rattler that stopped every twenty miles or so to uncouple sheep carriages. It had stopped at the Naracoorte Railway Station to drop off a newly qualified English teacher making his first visit to the town that would be home for the next two years.

*I remember a blue eye,  
A briefcase of tangerines.*

And so my choice of literature was limited. The little case that I'd brought also contained a map, my lunch, my book and the paperwork that I needed to show to my new principal.

*One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow heavy  
and floral*

Fortunately I did open my case to get the book out. As I did a large brassiere fell out. Issy's idea of a joke. She and her partner Rob had seen me off at Adelaide Railway Station and she'd secreted the underwear imagining that it would fall out in front of my new principal when I came to present my documents.

*This is the light of the mind, cold and  
planetary.*

*The trees of the mind are black. The light is  
blue*

Naracoorte at night is a cold place even in mid-December, built around a mainstreet that divides to encompass a small park wherein lies the sound shell where I was reading. Certainly there was no one else awake or active in the town, though I'm sure that some of the farmers just outside of town would have been waking for their morning chores. All I could do was read, with occasional glances at my wristwatch to see how many hours it was until dawn. This was 1973 and well before even the most primitive of Sony Walkmans. No music then.

*One curtain is flickering from the open window*

I would come to know that street well as, for most of the next two years, I lived in a strange little flat – four unconnected rooms that opened out onto a verandah and a carpark behind the mainstreet pharmacy. But, in the predawn chill it was a strange and lonely place to be.

*Stasis in darkness.*

*Then the substanceless blue*

*Pour of tor and distances*

Finally the dawn came and I could see more clearly the town from which I'd publish my first fanzines, where I'd establish myself as a teacher, where I'd take my first guitar lessons. My first edition copy of Sylvia Plath's **Ariel** is still with me. I note that a Very Good copy is being sold by Burnside Rare Books for \$A1,130.76. My copy is far from Very Good. It

has a torn and weathered dust jacket and some underlinings and annotations, but it can still conjure up memories of that chill Naracoorte morning.

*Dawn says, with its blood-flush*

*There is no terminus, only suitcases*

*Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit*



## Notes on Contributors

**Jenny Ackroyd** – bemoans the quote, “so many books, so little time”. Starting as a young child with the stereotypical book worm label, she borrowed two books a week from the local public library. She then studied hard and became a librarian to enable her to have continuous access to as many books as she can handle. Thirty years later, she has retired, putting her feet up, brandishing a bubbly glass of prosecco and is reading another book.

**Tineke Hazel** – was an Alien Immigrant at the age of 16. She then became an Australian citizen at a Naturalisation Ceremony in the Kapunda Institute in the presence of the Mayor and representatives of the Good Neighbour council.

She swore allegiance to the British Queen. There is a certificate to prove all this and say was no longer an Alien, though some of her friends may disagree. Being widowed a second time she is now more interested in gardening and writing Haikus which are published as blogs. She lives in a very beautiful area of Willunga among stunning vineyards and near the wonderful beaches of Aldinga and Sellicks. Close to her home the amazing eateries, wineries, boutique beer, gin and whisky breweries are her playground now.

**Irwin Hirsh** - is a semi-retired accountant, who has also worked as a factory hand, NAPLAN marker, and in film post-production. He discovered fandom as a teenager and around the time he turned 30 was on the road to gafia. In his time he's published a few fanzines, worked on some conventions, and administrated a couple of fan fund races. At one stage he held the honour of having received the most Ditmar nominations without having ever won the award.

**Marc Ortlieb** – was one of many Australians for whom Aussiecon in 1975 was his first

encounter with that strange phenomenon that is science fiction fandom. For several years after that he made fandom the central interest in his life, including marrying co-ANZAPA member Cath Circosta in 1984. More recently he's poured all that effort into the Scouting Movement, apart from brief forays back into ANZAPA. He still reads Sylvia Plath's poetry but only in houses without gas ovens.

**Nick Price** – has said to have been seen at Science Fiction conventions but responds to these claims as “having wandered in by mistake” or “just looking for someone he knew he thought he saw going in there”. When challenged about going into a movie theatre showing a rerun of *Silent Running*. Claims he got the queue wrong and was looking for the *The Remains of the Day Redux*. Works behind a keyboard and screen. ◀◀

## Final Notes by Perry Middlemiss

Firstly, I need to thank all the contributors to this issue. It seems like stating the bleedingly obvious that I couldn't have done it without them, but that thought is still true.

I was also very grateful that they were able to produce their pieces on time, in stark contrast to myself who got a bit bogged down in the reading for, and writing, one piece that took me right up to the absolute final deadline.

Special thanks, though, have to go to David Grigg for the cover, the layout and the kind ear as I discussed my ideas and his critical eye as he reviewed some of the work I completed. Without him I think I'd still be working on this issue for months to come.

Next time (yes, I am looking at another issue at least): we'll be covering a lot of books again – more novellas from 2020 and hopefully some sf&f novels from that year as well; a few essays on Russian SF films – one recent and others not so recent; hopefully another fannish reprint and other sections that have appeared here.

That issue has a tentative publication date of July 2021 so you can assume the overall schedule will be quarterly. I can't see myself being able to get the material together any quicker than that, especially given the other projects I'm working on.

In the meantime, stay well and safe, and keep reading. ■

**In this issue:**

**SF IN DIALOGUE: GHOST SPECIES**

Discussed by W H Chong and Perry Middlemiss

**IN MY HOUSE THERE ARE MANY MANSIONS**

David Grigg reviews PIRANESI

**THE ONCE AND FUTURE PLANET:**

Perry Middlemiss reviews THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE

**THE ALIEN REVIEW OF BOOKS**

**FANZINE REVIEWS**

by Irwin Hirsh

**FANNISH REPRINT : GEORGE**

by Leigh Edmonds

**THE SF&F AWARD WINNERS OF 2020**

by Perry Middlemiss

**I REMEMBER READING THAT**

**...and much more!**