

crabgrass. I tell you, my lawn is so beautiful that neighbors have taken to walking by it just to look and shaking their heads as if to say they could never hope to achieve a lawn like that themselves. I have even heard rumors that the neighborhood is so envious that they are thinking of pooling their money and buying my

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house.

So I think I can count myself something of an expert on lawn decoration, but I am somewhat bewildered at the new lawn decorations that are coming out these days. All over my neighborhood I am seeing wooden sheep grazing. We are, I think, living in the age of the artificial animal. As we kill off the real thing, technology is rushing to our aid to create artificial surrogates. the wooden lawn sheep is only the latest in a long and proud line that includes everything from clockwork nightingales to the artificial owls outside of Lincroft. (Yes, I am proud to say that AT&T has been a leader in the artificial animal field. Of course, we all know about Holmdel's--and apparently Lincroft's--styrofoam swans. And who can forget Middletown's stuffed Christmas pony?)

But even the styrofoam swans are there for a purpose, however demented and pitiful that purpose is. They are fulfilling a function you might like real swans to do if you could get them there. They are scaregeese. (that is the equivalent for geese of a scarecrow.) The geese, of course, find them a big joke and have been seen using them as pool toys, but at least they are there for a purpose.) But what purpose would a sheep have on the lawn that the surrogates could possibly perform? Have you ever seen a lawn that has had a real sheep on it? You know sheep eat grass right down to the roots. That's why we had sheep wars in the American West. After sheep have grazed on the lawn you might as well start over. If you are going to put artificial sheep on your lawn, you might as well put plastic gypsy moths in your trees, plastic fleas on your dog, that sort of thing. Have you ever smelled a lawn that has had sheep grazing on it? Uf-da to the max! I cannot possibly imagine why anyone would want their lawn to look as if it had had one of these disgusting things besieging it. Yet there they are, wooden sheep all over the neighborhood.

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It has even been said that the greatest praise of God
lies in the negation of the atheist, who considers
creation sufficiently perfect to dispense with a creator.

-- Marcel Proust

GAMEARTH by Kevin J. Anderson
A book review by Jerry Ryan
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It is disappointing to see an excellent story idea butchered. It is even more disappointing to see something start out good and then get bad. And there's more frustrations in the packaging that the publisher chose for the book... but I'll get to that later. That's the story of G_a_m_e_a_r_t_h, a "Fantasy Novel" by Kevin Anderson.

G_a_m_e_a_r_t_h starts off with a great idea. Four teens get together every week for a session of "The Game," a fantasy role-playing walk through Gamearth. Melanie is the inventor of Gamearth. She has created The Rules, and The Map, and she runs the game. We find out after just a few pages that the characters in the game have taken on a life of their own. Vailret and Delrael are in the middle of a quest to rescue their half-sorcerer friend Bryl from an ogre. As the story progresses, the reader begins see a few interesting quirks. The characters in the Game refer to traveling a certain number of "hexes" in a day. They decide that they have to investigate a strange occurrence because it is "in the

rules." Pretty soon, you realize that the features of the map exist on Gamearth exactly as they appear on the map. There are "hex lines" that mark land boundaries, and abrupt changes in terrain at the boundaries. The characters know that they are in a game! What's more, they complain about the arbitrary nature of some of the rules, and they are aware of the players ("the Outsiders" and "The Rulewoman Melanie") playing the game.

After a brief quest in the first few chapters of the book, we shift back to the kids playing the game, where we discover that David, one of the players, has become bored with playing every week. He is persuaded to continue playing, but decides that he will do his level best to wreck the game and destroy Gamearth. The characters living in Gamearth become aware that The Outsiders have become bored with the game and that they are fighting for their own existence. At this point I'm settled in for what looks to be a good read. There's lots of interesting things that can be done with this!

And now we hit Gripe Number One. The contrasting scenes with Gamearth characters and then the Players just dry up; in fact, once things are set in place, we go more than half the book without a look at the players of the game. This in spite of the fact that the actions of the players are very much evident in the game, and that changes in the game begin having an effect on the outside world. For example, there is a scene in the book where the players come across a character who has been struck blind because he has caught a glimpse of The Outsiders. The characters are told that two of the Outsiders have been living in Gamearth for "centuries" and are now conspiring to destroy it. There is actually a confrontation between the Outsiders and the players in the

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game! Then there's a cut to a one-page scene with the players saying "it's only a game..." and then back into the thick of Gamearth. It's as if the author set up a structure in which to tell the story, and then just changed his mind and decided not to use it.

Gripe Number Two is probably not the author's fault, but it definitely contributed to my feelings toward the book. The paperback copy that I have has a tag line on the front that says "...when the game was over their creation refused to die!..." and that's not what happens at all. That little bit of false advertising is made much worse by the

cover art. There's a picture on the cover of two pint-sized characters (that you eventually realize are Bryl and Delrael) inside of a hot air balloon, floating around the den of someone's home. This scene n_e_v_e_r happens in the book; the players never actually get out of the Gamearth world. Now I grant you, I probably shouldn't be putting that much stock in what I see on the cover (caveat emptor, and all that), but it is dishonest of the publisher to present the package this way.

And then there's Gripe Number Three. The author introduces this "horrible evil in the east" that is going to be placed into Gamearth by the Outsider who want to stop the game. The quest begins to try and find and eradicate this unspeakable evil. And then in the midst of the unfolding of the plot, the author decides to turn G_a_m_e_a_r_t_h (the novel) into a "first in the something-or-other series" book. The Gamearth characters meet up with a Wizard, and he sends them on a Quest to rescue his daughter from a Dragon. He uses his magic to create a giant river across Gamearth to cordon off the evil and give the players time to complete the Quest for the Wizard's daughter. (By the way, this river appears on the Map that the Players are using: the board suddenly has a sequence of hexes turn blue when the river is created. We get a one-page scene with the players looking at the board and saying "wow," then back to Gamearth). The rest of the book is taken up with this rescue Quest, and they never get back to their original quest. In fact, once they get cranking on the quest for the Wizard's daughter, they barely mention the Outsiders at all. These "Nth in a series" books are fine with me if each of the books hangs together, but I don't think this one does. The way that the diversion is introduced almost makes it seem that this change of direction was an afterthought, a way to squeeze more books out of the whole Gamearth concept. Kind of a cheat, if you ask me.

There were a few scenes in the book that were slightly enjoyable. One part of the quest passes through a region where magic doesn't work, but science does. The name of the town is Sitnalta (Atlantis backwards, ick!), but aside from that there are some fun scenes with magic wearing off as they approach town, and the distress that this causes. You'd think that the characters would realize that Sitlantian things that rely on science to work would become useless as they left the town, but they didn't realize that. The submarine that they borrow to continue their quest ends up at the bottom of the sea once the influence of science wanes.

All in all, I found G_a_m_e_a_r_t_h a disappointment. Not just because it was bad, though I thought it was bad... more because it could have been so much better.

Short Fiction Reviews
by Kimiye Tipton
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After making a valiant attempt to find some decent science fiction (for that matter, any fiction) on television for our Orlando clubzine review column, I finally threw up my hands and decided to be an intelligent voter this year. I started looking up all the short fiction nominated for Hugos. At least with a short story, I can pick up where I left off, instead of having to come back into the room and ask, "What happened while I was unloading the laundry?" (My toddler hasn't got the hang of synopses yet, and my husband sleeps through everything but reruns of "Platoon".)

It's not the same thing, though. At its best, an average television program might provide grist for an office conversation over the coffee pot, or waft a gentle bit of nostalgia into one's dreams, or hold up a mirror of tears for someone else's heartache. These mass media shows are made to have instant impact and be as instantly forgotten, so the worker bees can get a good night's sleep.

But the written story--especially the best of a year's worth of science fiction--digs a little deeper into the the reader's mind. It's not good to read too many of them too fast, not even one a day. This is not the part of s-f with the reputation of being mind candy, quickly consumed and easily digested.

Within as many days, I read four stories that keep coming back. The first is "Kirinyaga" (F&S_F Nov. 1988), a short story by Mike Resnick. An amazingly gentle tale of a people trying to return to a traditional tribal way of life on a colony planet. There is no overt violence, hardly any action--but somehow the tale evokes great unrest and foreboding. This one grows tendrils in the back of the mind, and the fruit it bears are questions about the meaning of being human or animal, free or suppressed; about what has controlled the course of humanity, and what should control it. Highly recommended.

The second work (a novella) is "The Function of Dream Sleep" by Harlan Ellison (A_s_i_m_o_v'_s mid-Dec. 1988). Well, no Ellison story is fit to go to sleep on, anyway, but this one deliberately engenders nightmares, and postulates that those night sweats have a useful purpose. This story is far more violent than Resnick's (well, it i_s Harlan, after all), but the resolution is atypically happy for both the s-f genre and this particular author.

I also read "Our Neural Chernobyl" (F&S_F June 1988) by Bruce Sterling, a contender for Best Short Story. I wasn't very impressed with this clever little piece of sarcasm, full of in-jokes (I can recognize them even if I don't get them). The story includes misleading

statement that infers that the AIDS virus is transmitted by saliva (specifically biting and l_i_c_k_i_n_g). This is not substantiated by anyone's research, and I hereby award a "Skrif and Bolognium" boo-hiss to Sterling for unnecessarily adding to the confusion about the deadly disease. This error clouded my perception of the story so much that I may never be able to appreciate it, as so many obviously have.

Finally, I really liked "Ripples in the Dirac Sea" (A_s_i_m_o_v'_s Oct. 1988) another short story nominee by Geoffrey A. Landis. The author blends a time travel tale with Sixties nostalgia of the most poignant yet unsentimental kind. It's rare to see such well-wrought emotion in a "hard" science story--and this one also treats time travel as intelligently as it probably ever can be handled outside of pure fantasy. A real contender.

One nice thing about short fiction is that you can start reading at 9 p.m. and get to bed at a reasonable hour. Another nice thing was my discovery that we have a breath-taking selection of work in this year's Hugo nominees. Has it always been this good? What have I been missing all these years?

Lucius Shepard's long-winded prose must be an acquired taste, but I've got to admit I can see why his work is so highly rated. "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter" (A_s_i_m_o_v'_s, Sept. 88) is a fantasy version of the Everyman tale, albeit with a woman whose life has been cursed/blessed by the dragon's body on which she lives. This novella has as much story packed into it as most novel-length books. If your brain doesn't freeze up on the 75-word sentences, you've got a real treat in store, especially since Shepard is continuing his "Dragon Griaule" theme in other short works.

"The Calvin Coolidge Home for Dead Comedians," by Bradley Denton (F&SF, Jun 88) is a fine, traditional purgatory story that would do well as an hour-long Twilight Zone episode. Unfortunately, my familiarity with the comedians portrayed (especially "Leonard") took some of the zing out of the revelation of their identities in the denouement. Although I enjoyed Denton's execution of Hell for comics, I was left remembering the quote from Milton's Satan in P_a_r_a_d_i_s_e_L_o_s_s t, so badly reiterated by Captain Kirk in "Space Seed" -- "I'd rather reign in Hell than serve in Heaven." Milton did not intend for us to admire Satan for

this particular quote, but pity those whose tragic faults leave them with no choice. It was apparently not Denton's intent to make me pity some of our more devilish comedians, but that's what happened. This does not detract from the story much at all, but probably changes what the author meant to say.

Walter Jon Williams' "Surfacing" (Asimov's, April 88) is replete

with diagrammed whalesong, shape-shifting aliens and one hell of an anti-hero. Williams' portrayal of a misfit genius on a collision course with his own destiny is particularly apropos as a current day character study. You probably know this guy, even if you don't want to. You

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might be this guy, and in that case, this story should be a mirror. The ending of this novella was not particularly ingenious, but getting there is a fascinating ride.

In "Peaches for Mad Molly" (novelette, Analog, Feb. 88), Steven Gould combines urban skyscraper growth gone wild with "human fly" stunt climbing and creates a new ghetto of expatriates who live on the outside of a miles-high monolith. Ye must be mad to live there, and fresh fruit is one of many scarcities. Herein lies the tale of one man's search for a birthday present for a friend.

"Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance?," by Howard Waldrop (Asimov's, Aug 88) is an entry for the Hugo Best Novelette, but I'm not too sure why. What was this doing in an s-f magazine? It didn't qualify as evocative sixties nostalgia and/or history in my opinion (just a reminiscence of a bad trip). The only fantastic story element was tacked on to the very end, and made the whole novella seem like an acidhead's flashback. Genuine flashbacks are both rare and highly overrated, and this fictional one got on my nerves.

On the other hand, Connie Willis' "The Last of the Winnebagos" (Asimov's, July 88) is a jewel of a story. Turning each page is like shifting a brilliant gem; new facets gleam with every paragraph. I'm hard pressed to think of anything that this novella doesn't have-- 3-D characters, a sharp and twisting plot, believable s-f extrapolation (both technical and social), a wry eighties nostalgia, and, by golly, a moral to boot! I am frankly astounded at Willis' deft and total control

of story-telling. "Winnebagos" won the Nebula for Best Novella, and if any of the other Hugo entries can beat it on merit, I can't wait to read them. Do yourself a favor and _ f _ i _ n _ d this one.

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