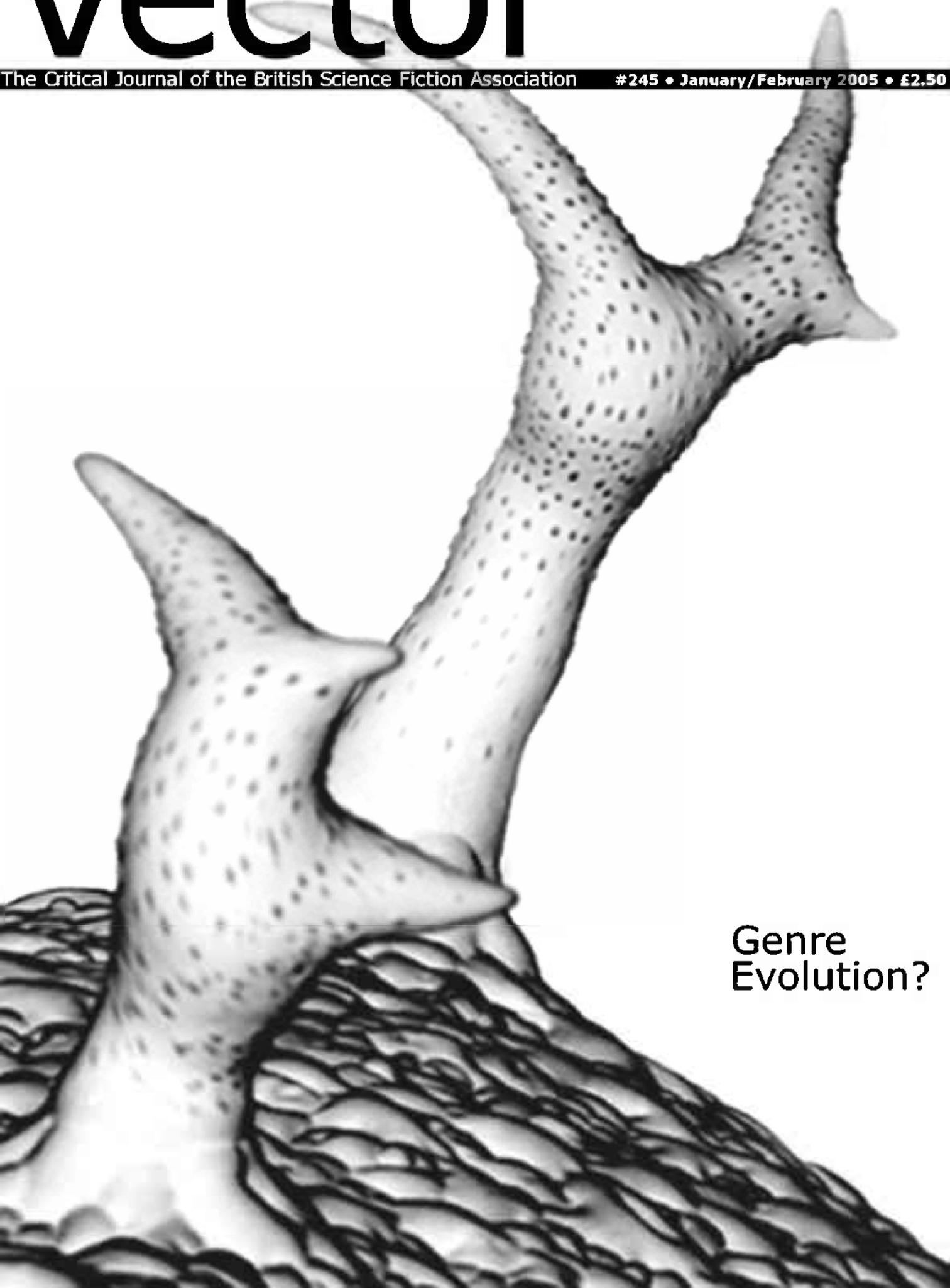


Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

#245 • January/February 2005 • £2.50



Genre
Evolution?

Contents

Torque Control	3
Editorial by Niall Harrison & Geneva Melzack	
The Mundane Manifesto	4
The Mundanes set out their stall	
Frequently Asked Questions about Mundane SF	5
By Trent Walters	
A Refusal to Sign the Mundane Manifesto	7
By Ian McDonald	
No More New World Orders	9
By Martin Lewis on movements in sf	
Not Really New, Not Really Weird	12
Norman Spinrad on a recent 'movement'	
Infernokrusher: A Brief and Terrible History	16
An elegy by Meghan McCarron	
The New X	17
A column by Graham Sleight	
Archipelago	19
Reviews of short sf	
First Impressions	23
Book Reviews edited by Paul N. Billinger	

Cover: SEM image of Distorted trichomes in the *distorted 1 Arabidopsis* mutant. Image © Jaideep Mathur

Vector

Editors

Features, Editorial and Letters

Geneva Melzack & Niall Harrison
Flat 6, Arvon House, 3 Boyn Hill Avenue,
Maidenhead, Berkshire, SL6 4ET
vector.editors@gmail.com

Book Reviews

Paul N. Billinger
1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry
NN11 3BE
paul@everdon.enterprise-plc.com

Production and General

Tony Cullen
16 Weaver's Way, Camden, London
NW1 0XE
vector.production@googlemail.com

Associate Editor

Tanya Brown
amaranth@amaranth.aviators.net

Published by the BSFA ©2006 ISSN 0505 0448

All opinions are those of the individual contributors and should not necessarily be taken as the views of the editors or the BSFA

Printed by PDC COPYPRINT (Guildford), Middle Unit, 77-83
Walnut Tree Close, Guildford, Surrey GU1 4UH

The British Science Fiction Association

Officers

President	Sir Arthur C. Clarke, CBE
Vice President	Stephen Baxter
Chair	Pat McMurray bsfachair@gmail.com
Treasurer	Martin Potts 61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton, Near Tamworth B79 0JJ mtpotts@zoom.co.uk
Membership Services (UK & Europe)	Estelle Roberts 97 Sharp Street, Newland Avenue, Hull HU5 2AE estelle@lythande.freeserve.net
US Agent	Cy Chauvin 14248 Willfred Street, Detroit, MI 48213, USA

Membership fees

UK	£26 pa, or £18pa (unwaged) Life membership £260
Europe	£31 pa
USA	\$35 pa (surface mail) \$45 pa (airmail)
Rest of the World	£31 pa (surface mail) £37 pa (airmail)

UK and Europe, make cheques payable to: BSFA Ltd and send to Estelle Roberts at the address above. US cheques payable to: Cy Chauvin (BSFA)

The BSFA was founded in 1958 and is a non-profitmaking organisation entirely staffed by unpaid volunteers. Registered in England. Limited by guarantee. Company No. 9215000.

Registered Address: 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry NN11 3BE

Website

www.bsfa.co.uk

Webmistress

Tanya Brown
amaranth@amaranth.aviators.net

BSFA Awards

Claire Brialey
59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES
awards@fishlifter.demon.co.uk

Orbiter Writing Groups

Gillian Rooke
Southview, Pilgrims Lane, Chilham, Kent,
CT4 8AB

Other BSFA Publications

Matrix: The news magazine of the BSFA

Commissioning Editor

Tom Hunter
46 Saltwell Street, London, E14 0DZ
matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk

Features & News Editor

Claire Weaver
17 Clandon Street, St Johns, London SE8 4EL
matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk

Production & Media Editor

Martin McGrath
48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St Albans,
AL2 2HL
martinmcgrath@ntlworld.com

Focus: The writer's magazine of the BSFA

Editor

Simon Morden
13 Egremont Drive, Sherriff Hill, Gateshead
NE9 5SE
focus.editor@blueyonder.co.uk

At last year's BSFA AGM, Ian McDonald gave a talk on genre manifestos. We'd just been asked whether we'd be prepared to take over as editors of *Vector* and, having said yes, we were pondering what to do with our first issue. Running an issue on manifestos seemed like a good way to look at how the field has been and continues to be shaped by visionaries within its ranks, the sort of shaping process that is perhaps not too different from the shaping work that an editor aspires to do. As a statement of intentions, a manifesto is not a million miles away from an editorial stance. So it seemed an appropriate topic for our first issue. And since one of our editorial stances with *Vector* is that we'd like to use it to bring more of the BSFA's London-based events to the rest of its membership, when Paul Billinger suggested asking McDonald to write up his talk, we took the idea and ran with it.

Although McDonald talked about manifestos in general, he illustrated his argument by examining one particular recent example – the mundane sf manifesto, as proposed by Geoff Ryman – and that's what his write-up here addresses. To balance McDonald's refusal to sign the mundane manifesto, despite the fact that some of his books could be characterised as mundane, we decided to also include the case in favour of the movement, as put forward by one of its most enthusiastic advocates, Trent Walters. And since mundane is a movement that has been, to date, primarily discussed in online venues, this issue opens with the full text of the mundane manifesto itself and some links to further commentary of interest.

Together we think McDonald's and Walters' articles outline many of the pros and cons of aligning oneself with a particular cause – a question examined further by Martin Lewis in 'No More New World Orders', which asks more generally what movements in science fiction have ever done for us, by looking at some famous examples through their most prominent texts. Moving from this sort of historical overview to focus in a little more on the contemporary scene – which is something we'd like to be doing in *Vector* on an ongoing basis – in this issue we're also including a piece by Norman Spinrad, in which he considers a number of recent titles in light of that other major contemporary movement, the New Weird. And Meghan McCarron provides a brief and terrible history of infernokrusher, perhaps the shortest-lived but most explosive movement that the sf community has ever seen.

But before you go and read everyone else's manifestos, we thought we should set out our own. After all, although you may recognise our names from the reviews sections of this

magazine and *Matrix*, we're still relative newcomers to the BSFA, and we're only just joining the *Vector* editorial team with this issue, following in the illustrious footsteps of Andrew M. Butler, under whose guidance *Vector* was the sort of magazine we discovered we wanted to read – and edit. We are conscious of the journal's history and eager to carry on its tradition of informed critical debate. Of course, at the same time, part of maintaining the standard of a magazine of this sort involves innovation, and with that in mind, in addition to our already-stated goals of reporting from BSFA events and encouraging discussion of contemporary sf, we'd like to introduce two new features. 'Morning Children' is the first instalment of *The New X*, a regular column from Graham Sleight, the incoming editor of *Foundation*, whose other criticism and reviews have previously appeared in a wide range of venues. This issue he's looking at movements as well, and asking how the internet might affect the way they develop.

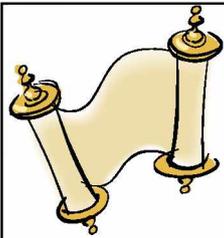
In the past, *Vector* has featured magazine reviews, but we hope the new *Archipelago* section will provide a forum for detailed analysis of individual stories. We are, however, launching it in sad circumstances. If you hadn't heard, by the time you read this, *SCIFICTION*, Ellen Datlow's Hugo- and Nebula-award winning online short fiction magazine, will have been closed down. To celebrate the magazine and its editor, writer Dave Schwartz called for appreciations of all the many excellent stories published there over the past five years. We're proud to be able to reprint a selection of these appreciations in this issue of *Vector*, by Claire Light, Abigail Nussbaum, Campbell Award-winning author Elizabeth Bear, and Arthur C. Clarke Award administrator and critic Paul Kincaid. We're particularly happy to be able to include something by Paul in our first *Satellites* section, since Paul was the original editor of *Barbed Wire Kisses*, *Vector*'s earlier magazine review column.

As well as these new features, we'd also like to make sure our *Vector* is a magazine the next editors want to read, and we can't think of a better way of doing that than encouraging your feedback and your contributions. Praise, vitriol and ideas for future articles should be sent to vector.editors@gmail.com. To spark some ideas off in you, later this year we're planning issues focusing on internationalism in sf and on twenty years of the Arthur C. Clarke Award – and of course, next issue is the regular *Vector* review of the previous year in sf. We look forward to hearing from you. **V**



Torque Control

Editorial
by
Geneva
Melzack
& Niall
Harrison



The Mundane Manifesto

The undersigned, being pissed off and needing a tight girdle of discipline to restrain our sf imaginative silhouettes, are temporarily united in the following actions:

The Mundanes recognize

That interstellar travel remains unlikely. Warp drives, worm holes, and other forms of faster-than-light magic are wish fulfilment fantasies rather than serious speculation about a possible future.

That magic interstellar travel can lead to an illusion of a universe abundant with worlds as hospitable to life as this Earth. This is also unlikely.

That this dream of abundance can encourage a wasteful attitude to the abundance that is here on Earth.

That there is no evidence whatsoever of intelligences elsewhere in the universe. That absence of evidence is not evidence of absence – however, it is unlikely that alien intelligences will overcome the physical constraints on interstellar travel any better than we can.

That interstellar trade (and colonization, war, federations, etc.) is therefore highly unlikely.

That communication with alien intelligences over such vast distances will be vexed by: the enormous time lag in exchange of messages and the likelihood of enormous and probably currently unimaginable differences between us and aliens.

That there is no evidence whatsoever that quantum uncertainty has any effect at the macro level and that therefore it is highly unlikely that there are whole alternative universes to be visited.

That therefore our most likely future is on this planet and within this solar system. It is highly unlikely that intelligent life survives elsewhere in this solar system. Any contact with aliens is likely to be tenuous, and unprofitable.

That the most likely future is one in which we only have ourselves and this planet.

The Mundanes rejoice in

The bonfire of unexamined and unjustified sf tropes that these recognitions piles up and sets alight. This bonfire of the stupidities includes, but not exclusively:

- Aliens: especially those aliens who act like feudal Japanese/American Indians/Tibetan Buddhists/Nazis or who look or behave like human beings except for the latex
- Alien invasions
- Alien Jesus/enlightened beings
- Flying Saucers
- Area 51
- Any alien who is a vehicle for a human failing or humour
- Aliens who speak English
- Devices that can translate any language
- Radio communication between star systems
- Travelling between galaxies without relativity effects on a consistent scale
- Slipping sideways into worlds other than this one where just one thing or all of history is different only the clothes look a bit better, the hero is more powerful, the drinks are more delicious and Hitler...
- Continue at will

We also recognize

The harmless fun that these and all the other Stupidities have brought to millions of people.

The harmless fun that burning the Stupidities will bring to millions of people.

The imaginative challenge that awaits any sf author who accepts that this is it: Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?

The chastening but hopefully enlivening effect on imagining a world without fantasy bolt holes: no portals to medieval kingdoms, no spaceships to arrive to save us or whisk us off to Metaluna.

A new focus on human beings: their science, technology, culture, politics, religions, individual characters, needs, dreams, hopes and failings.

The awakening bedazzlement and wonder that awaits us as we contemplate the beauties of this Earth and its people and what will happen to them in time.

The relief of focusing on what science tells us is likely rather than what is almost impossible such as warp drives. The relief will come from a sense of being honest.

An awakening sense of the awesome power of human beings: to protect or even increase their local patrimony ... or destroy it.

The number of themes and flavours open to Mundane fiction including robotics, virtual realities, enhanced genomes, nanotechnology, quantum mechanics ... Please continue

The number of great writers or movies which independently work within these guidelines, indicating that the Mundane Manifesto produces better science fiction. These works include:

- The greater part of the works of Philip K Dick.
- *1984*
- *Neuromancer*
- *Blade Runner*
- *Timescape*

The Mundanes promise

To produce a collection of mundance science fiction consisting of stories that follow these rules:

- No interstellar travel – travel is limited to within the solar system and is difficult, time consuming and expensive
- No aliens unless the connection is distant, difficult, tenuous and expensive – and they have no interstellar travel either
- No Martians, Venusians, etc.
- No alternative universes or parallel worlds
- No magic or supernatural elements
- No time travel or teleportation
- Not to let Mundanity cramp their style if they want to write like Edgar Rice Burroughs as well.
- To burn this manifesto as soon as it gets boring.

Further reading:

- <http://www.mundanesf.com/>
- <http://mundane-sf.blogspot.com/>



Frequently Asked Questions about Mundane SF

by Trent Walters

1. What is Mundane SF?

We're a group of writers who think sf is presently too much like fantasy, who'd like to create fiction about the future without psychic powers, FTL, messianic aliens, unlimited energy/resources, and so forth. For more detail, see Geoff Ryman's serious if tongue-in-cheek manifesto elsewhere in this issue. Essentially we ask, "Does this speculation have either evidence to support it or similar precursors observed in the universe?" This excludes, for example, all-purpose magical nanobots but allows some practical and projected uses of the technology.

The term 'Mundane' refers to our reality, to the real, and to "of or pertaining to this... Earth." It is, of course, not without irony, tongue firmly placed in cheek, for we hope that our work will prove that real science can be every bit as wondrous as the less probable. Or to put it another way: Must we only lie to the genre to excite it?

(Some members of our group insist on calling Mundane SF 'Real SF,' as in, "We're using real science to examine the future"; or 'No Exit,' as in, "Science may force us to examine real futures on Earth and perhaps the local solar system if humans are able to incorporate themselves into the ecology of Earth first." But they all amount to the same thing.

Ian McDonald has asked whether we're really technological sf. This is a good insight; however, MSF writers can speculate, as intimated above, on parallel developments. For example, given a recently detected, novel virus, we can speculate on the existence of a similar virus for the purposes of MSF. To speculate more wildly, while necessary, risks gambling upon our future.

2. Why do we need it?

Are we really refusing to speculate? If so, why would we do such a horrible thing to sense-of-wonder sf? We've all grown up with the current forms of sf, and some of us will continue to write them. But we believe that the genre's enthusiastic speculation, while harmless – even laudable to help us think outside normal parameters – has in some ways contributed to a devil-may-care atmosphere; an attitude of we'll-invent-something-someday-that-will-cure-global-warming-in-two-minutes-so-let's-ignore-it-for-now. Even looking at our near-term sf, it's as if sf writers are unaware that the consequences of global warming will be with us for centuries. (This isn't to say that MSF is just environmental, but it is one of our major justifications.)

Some writers think that since they've set their sf on

Earth in the near term using realistic characters and mostly realistic science, they've written MSF. Indeed, the novels closest to MSF that I've seen are Gregory Benford's *Timescape* (1980), which uses realistic scientists in a very probable future on Earth (although it also uses the rather less probable tachyons), and Geoff Ryman's *Air* (2004), which has some of the finest character examinations in the field, but which also has an internet that connects straight to your head. The point is this: we're not forsaking sense-of-wonder. Science has so much mind-boggling sense of wonder coming down the pipeline in the near future that unravel for some time into the future, not to mention such pressing real-world questions facing us, that it's surprising that even our most plausible sf keeps resting on improbable-trope crutches. Mostly realistic is not enough. We want to stretch for more.

3. Is it possible?

One common if bizarre complaint about MSF has been that placing/creating movements is the job of the academic, not the writer. Certainly, that's true in a few cases, but pull your copies of *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* and *Poems for the Millennium* (or equivalent) off the shelves. Now blow the dust off and look up Creationism, Imagism, and Surrealism. In all three cases, poets created the movements. In all three cases, the movements preceded a body of notable and influential work.

Imagism's conception came about as Ezra Pound revised a poem (yes, that's one poem) by HD, probably sitting on the pot, the throne, the john – somewhere undistinguished, unsurrounded by scholars and great tomes. While it metamorphosed into other movements and wasn't followed exactly (see 'In a Station at the Metro'), it was probably the most influential movement of the twentieth century.

Surrealism died and was reborn into new forms. Surrealism has little to do with the genre called 'surreal', by which is generally only meant 'not real'. Instead, it sought to break away from connections to the everyday world to arrive at some ultimately truer reality. Often this goal manifested as a revolutionary zeal.

Creationism was founded and followed by one writer, Vicente Huidobro, who integrated Neo-Platonism and the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson to produce a philosophy of poetry in which "the poet is a small God." In this movement, man's independence from God was seen as a precedent, and the aim was the creation of truly new poems for their own sakes, and

not as commentary.

Minimalism, on the other hand, in which art is stripped down to its most fundamental features, was the greatest American fiction movement of the late twentieth century. This time an editor – Gordon Lish, that rare genius – invented the genre by hacking up the prose of a young and impressionable Raymond Carver. (Lish was unpopular for some reason, so Minimalism was beloved until someone suggested that Lish was responsible for the movement.)

Shall I go on? I think the point has been clearly established that one does not need a PhD to map out a movement, but there is a trap that such movements fall into: the poetics or the theory often overshadow the art itself. *Poems for the Millennium* demonstrates many failures of creative permutation that attempt to make it new.

Is failure inevitable? Of course not. All that's needed is pointing an eye towards what makes the final product (be it poem or fiction) satisfying. We think we can evoke the satisfaction and sense of wonder of old sf without resorting to pulling a magical sf trope out of a top hat. In fact, both R.R. Angell and Anil Menon seem to be doing well for themselves already, pounding out this new form for major genre magazines (although their more MSF-flavored tales are still pending at the writing of this article).

4. Isn't author X already writing it (or, isn't Mundane SF just another name for Hard SF)?

Apparently, it has been said that *Analog* has been doing Mundane SF all along: it's Hard SF.

Certainly MSF shares similar interests with and may cross into Hard SF territory, but we're actually interested in the entire spectrum of science fiction – once all the speculative switches have been toggled from 'probably not probable' to 'probable.' This includes hard, soft, and social sf. Toggling these switches creates an entirely different sensibility, one different to that of hard sf. Kathryn Cramer writes in *Ascent of Wonder* [1994]:

"What we call hard sf is more precisely technophilic sf... One is more likely to identify a story as hard sf – regardless of the amount of actual science it contains – if the narrative voice is pragmatic, deterministic, and matter of fact."

She goes on to argue that this brand evolved into "right-wing power fantasies about military hardware." Somehow, by deciding what got included (or excluded), a certain sensibility evolved. Granted, a political sensibility, but it would be dishonest to claim that any fiction could be completely apolitical. In his review of *Ascent of Wonder* in the 1994 Oct/Nov *F&SF*, John

Kessel, surprised by Hartwell's claim that Golden Age Hard SF was apolitical, pointed out John Huntington's discovery in *Rationalizing Genius* that the Golden Age "is predicated on certain unexamined political assumptions... [and] is based on a technocratic faith that social problems are amenable to 'scientific' solutions."

We of MSF believe this technocratic faith is the same that allows us to wait for future solutions that may not exist. Our future knowledge may be no better or different from what we currently know, and may need to be resolved by the scientific knowledge that we have now. This, then, is our examined political assumption (though we, too, will unavoidably have unexamined assumptions as well).

So did you write your story sharing our assumptions? If so, you may well be Mundane.

5. What are the politics of Mundane SF?

Everyone is political: We all have examined and unexamined beliefs. Yet a few writers – writers whose work is far more political than our own – while wishing us well, have shied away.

Our ethos isn't polemical, and it isn't partisan. We embrace any and all political sf examinations willing to look at a probable future. Some believe an entrepreneurial spirit will be required (democracy gives the freedom to see the problems and create solutions). Others think only a communist spirit will (obese corporations will deny and never submit to change). Yet others believe all governments and anarchies are problematic and will have the exigencies of change thrust upon them (we will change or die). [Insert your politics of choice here.]

But these examined and unexamined beliefs are the strength of every movement. Campbellian sf was so powerful that generations of writers used it to define themselves, either by embracing it or reacting against it – from the New Wave to the Cyberpunks to the Humanists. Our ethos will share ideals with and oppose all of these, which is exactly what any movement does: redefines itself against the past. This ethos will probably only become apparent when the stories are gathered in one place as a few stories from our group have already penetrated the sf system but appeared without comment – just as the Campbellian varieties were not immediately or singly visible without grouping. We're in the early stages of planning an anthology, so keep an eye out – or join us [email blzblack@yahoo.com]. Whatever your reaction, keep the dialogue running. 

Trent Walters is a Clarion graduate whose work has appeared or will appear in Fantastical Visions and The Pittsburgh Quarterly. He reviews for The SF Site and is one of the main contributors to the mundane sf blog.



A Refusal to Sign the Mundane Manifesto

by Ian McDonald

I like the sound of that. It has a good, stern Covenanting ring to it. I have stern Covenanting Irish Presbyterians a couple of links down the gene line, so I have an infallible ear for cant. And make no mistake, we discuss cant here.

A genre like science fiction has few enough joys but one of them is that it is a set of discourses with and within itself, through time and across space. The interweb resounds with it (Richard Morgan's recent and valiant attempt on the *Asimov's* forum to map the US neocon mindspace entertained me greatly, not least in the Pavlovian responses: we're not neocons, we're just realists, unlike you lefties.) I haven't done the sums but I feel in me water that a disproportionate amount of global web-commentary is F&SF-related. We like to chatter. Writers, if not readers now, have been readers and because ours is a small genre, one you can sail around in a single year of key conventions, it's easy to spot the landmarks. In a sense, every book and story is knowing: commentary on what has been written or chatted before and agenda setting for the future.

In small genres like ours and poetry and crime, movements become particularly important. It's another argument that the history of F&SF is the history of its movements, whether these be grassroots, retrofitted, marketing ploys or aesthetic manifestos. New Wave, Cyberpunk (the most successful, in that it redefined sf both inside and outside the genre), Radical Hard SF, New British Space Opera, New Weird. And the new New: Mundane SF; F&SF's equivalent of the New Puritans.

Oooh. A new movement. Why did nobody tell me? Who's in it what's it about is it a dark and sexy beast, does it come with wallpaper like cyberpunk or biceps like China Mieville? Well, first of all, it's not that new. Mundane SF obligingly gives a potted history of itself on its site:

Mundane SF grew out of a series of discussions between author Geoff Ryman and some members of the Clarion East class of 2002 although, to date, our discussion group has expanded to include graduates from Clarion West and Clarion South as well as academics and established authors.

I love it when they do my work for me. And even more obligingly, they have a Manifesto, as reprinted elsewhere in this issue. I like to think I'm an open-minded guy, so I approach such policy statements with three questions.

Is it needed?

Is it fruitful?

Is it true?

Then I will ask, is it something to which I can intellectually subscribe?

Let's open 'needed' first. The perception is that written science fiction has been taking a bit of a kicking of late. Fantasy is in the ascendant (witness two out and out Fantasy novels taking the Hugo this decade; a privilege the Hugos extend to Fantasy that the World Fantasy award has yet to reciprocate). Imaginative literature has always been cyclical: the horror bubble rose and burst, and certainly Fantasy itself has been undergoing a period of hefty reimagining. It's popularly

acceptable: sf remains too heavily tarred with *Star Trek/Star Wars*/SciFi channel imagery and geek-boy tech-ery associations. I suspect Fantasy's current dominance may be a hangover of millennial angst: the future isn't what we were promised and the view from halfway through the first decade is not one we want to contemplate too closely. SF has failed us, fantasy is more acceptable to the cosy, introverted, me-me-me conformist culture we've had since the end of the Nineties. Archetypal values need restating and reformulating at the beginning of a new decade, let alone a new century. Conspiracies and secret histories abound: nothing is as it seems to be: history itself must be reinterpreted.

I see Need One here.

So, what about the science fiction we have? Big Brit Space Opera dropped into the orbit ten years ago when Peter Hamilton Went Large. The fun was back into sf: this was the pure lode; cosmos-spanning plots, Big Ships and FTL, space wars, Big Dumb Objects, star empires and federations and pitiless aliens. Classic stuff that tapped into a public consciousness Science-fictionalised by George Lucas' relentless mythologising and the *Star Trek* franchise. This is what people think of when they think sci-fi and it's much easier to form opinions about than the more diverse tropes of fantasy. But I also sensed that British sf writers were being forced off-planet into distant futures because there was no economic alternative place for them to go. Part of this was a reaction against cyberpunk (most movements begin as reactions against what has gone before them) but I also sense that same future-angst: the near-future doesn't seem like a fun place, and it's hard to envision one where you aren't writing about America America America. (Though of course I beg to differ.) Future Britain just seems unmarketable, especially in the vital US market that seemed to be turning its back on the rest of an unpredictable planet.

Is there a need here for a new sf? A better science fiction, as the Mundanes would claim? It's clear that the bulk of the Mundane Manifesto is aimed at Trekism and unthinking space opera, but this is reactionary rather than revolutionary. As a writer I've never been drawn to interstellar far-future sf (though I've done it). I've always tried to depict space travel as slow, uncomfortable and bloody expensive. I do believe sf needs to come down from the stars and address this world and it's people and attract general readers to futures that feel real, feel lived in, have as much of the essential world-building as Far Future epics, but feel relevant and human.

In this way I'm not entirely unsympathetic to the Mundane Manifesto: I just feel that it is incapable of producing 'better' science fiction. It will not reinvent the genre. Science fiction is an imaginative literature, not a realist one. Much of its strength and power lies in its ability to mythologise – the Manifesto condemns as stupidities many of the genre's most powerful myths: the alien, time-travel, the artificial intelligence made in our own image. The fact that these have endured so long and are so deeply engrained into our popular cultures is a tribute to their strengths and worth. The power of the genre has always been its mythological aspect, not its prophecy. But the Manifesto gives us neither inspiration nor mandate to find new

myths. We can attempt prophecy but not mythology. At its worst that generates the nuclear-nightmare fiction of the Cold War – at the time a probable future. The real future constantly confounds our futurology. And if the Manifesto insists on realism in subject matter, why not realism in every other part of the process? Realistic characters, realistic sense of place, realistic dialogue, plot: Near-future mainstream literature.

The title is a problem itself. "This is a masterpiece of mundane science fiction" is not going to drive books off the shelves. Of course, it's a game – as Geoff Ryman himself said at Interaction in Glasgow. Certainly it's part of that ongoing dialogue of sf with itself and as a tool for questioning it's produced more (and probably better) writing counterblasts than this from other writers. My own first piece about this on my weblog generated a hundred replies. But it is a genre game: a book written to the Mundane Manifesto may sell – may even achieve that all important cross-over that publishers pray for every night – but it won't be because it is Mundane SF. This is a game we play amongst ourselves. Of course the Mundane Manifesto has generated any number of playful counter-manifestos but I can't take any of them seriously. (A lot of them I suspect I'm not supposed to take seriously). I look forward to a well-argued, creative counter-Manifesto that actually produces some work.

Because now we're on to my second question: is it fruitful? I've argued that science fiction is in need of a reformation, but Mundane SF is not powerful or distinctive enough to achieve that. So it's not needed: but is it producing works that are changing the genre? Where are these pieces of better science fiction?

There's a piece of litmus in the Manifesto itself: To produce a collection of mundane science fiction consisting of stories that follow these rules. Now, this was 2002. Plenty of time for this anthology to be commissioned. Plenty of time for books to be consciously written to the manifesto. Are there such books? You would at least expect Geoff Ryman, as an originator of the game, to have written to his own Manifesto-driven novel. Certainly *Air* admirably demonstrates a this-worldliness that leaves the Space-divas looking a little silly, like superhero costumes at a wedding. But the central conceit (we all have 'em, it's the nature of the genre) of *Air* itself, a kind of telepathic internet, should have any manifestista raising an eyebrow. Likely technology? I don't think so. But the book does wonderfully face the issues that interest me in this-world science fiction – futures outside the Western/US cultural and political sphere. I see nothing inherent in the Manifesto that challenges US-Centric, Western-oriented tech fiction.

Because deep down, I suspect the Manifesto is guilty of tech fiction. Technology is the science we get and therefore defacto the most likely science: is the whole plethora of near-future war-tech fiction (super stealth planes, super stealth cruise missiles, you name it) the apotheosis of Mundane Science fiction? Michael Crichton as great a Mundane god as Philip K Dick (the bulk of whose sf adamantly does not fit under the Mundane banner).

Perhaps the Mundanes don't need to actually write anything. There is a grace clause in the Manifesto: The number of great writers or movies which independently work within these guidelines, indicating that the Mundane Manifesto produces better science fiction. So one does not need to subscribe to the Manifesto to write Mundane science fiction. The movement doesn't need to write, it can convert extant pieces of work.

This is pleasingly hubristic but it simply won't do. It's a neat pomo finesse on the interpretability of text, but it turns the central momentum of the movement away from writing to interpreting. It becomes a sterile Deuteronomical exercise laid

down by a priestly elite. Anyone can write according to the Manifesto for the rules are there – but not anyone can interpret. The mainstream New Puritans were, pre-eminently, a writing group as opposed to a group that sat around playing kiddies posting-box games with literature. Kim Stanley Robinson's current Science in the Capitol trilogy would certainly seem to tick the Mundane boxes, but I'm equally sure KSR did not write it with a copy of the Manifesto on his desk. It's easy then for a movement that, like ichneumon wasps laying their eggs in other insect's bodies, gets other writers to unwittingly do its writing for it. (The immediate image, of a Mundane Manifestista bursting out of John Hurt's stomach, is proof I've been at this keyboard too long)

So: is it fruitful? In stimulating debate within the genre, I would say yes. In expanding awareness of the genre beyond the ghetto walls, I would say no; in fact, I believe that the name itself a genre in-joke, and would be death to sales. Is it producing stories novels, books? As a Manifesto, I don't see it. I would like to. I'm prepared to be astounded by the Mundane equivalent of *Mirrorshades*. To argue that others commit mundanity whether they want to or not is a non-argument at best and an abrogation of responsibility at worst.

So: is it true? Does it do what it says on the tin: produce better Science Fiction? There are some crackers on the list of permitted books. There are a lot of equally good books – if were talking PKD, *The Man in the High Castle* comes immediately to mind – that couldn't be on it. In the absence of a literature written to the manifesto, it's hard to say. I've mentioned the New Puritans, but the most immediate parallel is with the Dogme 95 movement in film, which eschewed separate sound, SFX and genre plots in order to challenge Hollywood conventions. Unlike Mundane SF, Dogme never claimed to produce better films and in fact, it didn't. It produced Dogme films, with the same spread of excellence, mediocrity and shit as any other movement. Likewise, however rigorously you apply the Manifesto it won't improve your characterisation, verbal style, ear for dialogue or insight into the human condition. And a Science Fiction that has nothing to say about these primary elements of writing cannot claim to be better.

So, can I sign the Mundane Manifesto? There is much in it to commend it as a game (but is it? Read the blog; some of the posters are arguing that only science fiction that can call itself such is that based on likely science: this is can't indeed: science does not make such limitations of itself: time-like loops in relativity, many-world theory in quantum mechanics) and as a gadfly to the unworldliness of contemporary sf. But it smacks of preachiness, and I was never one for the pulpit. And it doesn't give me what I want; it makes foreground what, to me, is background. Of course near-future sf must deal with global warming every bit as much as with a possible Vingean singularity, but in the same way as Cyberpunk disappeared because it became part of the general scenery. But when I think of the Mundane Manifesto, I feel like Homer Simpson (in whom every man sees part of himself) eating a rice cake and exclaiming, Where's the taste? Too mundane, but not worldly enough. Reality constantly surprises us: a Mundane Manifesto of the '50s could not have dreamed of this 21st century.

So I cannot sign the Mundane Manifesto. Time then, as it says in the final clause, to burn it when it gets boring? Not yet. Not until there is a viable, cogently reasoned, coherent alternative. Over to you guys. **V**

Ian McDonald's first novel, Desolation Road, was published in 1988. Since then he has published many more, including the winner of last year's BSFA Award, River of Gods.



No More New World Orders

By Martin Lewis

"There have always been Young Turks outside the gates of the City of sf, banging their swords against their shields and clamouring for entrance. Every ten years or so, since the hedonistic heyday of science fiction in the Golden Age of the dimly-recalled Forties and Fifties, a movement cruises through the streets of genre, all a-fire for a revolution, eager to see the blood spilling down the pavement in rivers. And every time, the revolutionaries eventually win out over the out-going Old Guard. And every time, the revolutionaries claim the throne, spike their flag into the earth, and proceed to mill about, wondering what to do now that they've gained the City."

Those words were written in 2002 by Gabe Chouinard, the closest thing the modern genre has to an iconoclast, as the opening salvo of his essay 'The Long Road to Nowhere'.¹ They suggest that the concept of movements within the genre excite a certain amount of passion. Of course, it was ever thus. Chouinard's opening is essentially an ungainly retread of the opening of Michael Swanwick's famous essay 'A User's Guide To The Postmoderns', written almost two decades earlier.² But for all this excitement and all the sound and fury they have generated, what good have movements ever done for us?

Swanwick's essay is predominately about two warring factions of the early Eighties – cyberpunks and humanists – but he starts by talking about the most famous revolutionary movement in science fiction history: the New Wave. As he puts it:

"On one side were the new writers entering the field who were not willing to abide its traditional restrictions (no graphic sex, a plain, 'naturalistic' prose style, emphasis on idea to the exclusion of character) and on the other side their predecessors, suddenly labelled Old Wave, who objected to the new influences tainting their literary water hole (graphic sex, 'experimental' prose, emphasis on mood or character to the exclusion of idea)."

The main organ of this movement was Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds*. Moorcock's swansong to his magazine, *New Worlds: An Anthology*, was published in the US for the first time in 2004. (Despite several Americans being prominently involved in the movement this long delay in publication is not entirely surprising.) Moorcock cautions that this collection is not a 'best of' but rather a representative sampling, concentrating "on writers perhaps more typical of those we published in the years when, much to our surprise, we scandalised various establishments."³ So it may usefully stand for the whole of the movement but if Moorcock found the shocking elements of his magazine hard to spot then, they are even harder to find today.

In his essay, Swanwick puts some measure of ironic detachment into his words so his own views on the debate he is summarising are slightly obscured. Regardless of this the definitions he gives have clear problems. It is not true to suggest that the stories in *New Worlds: An Anthology* are lacking in ideas, rather they represent a different sort of ideas; socio-political and philosophical ones, instead of flat 'What If' speculation. This can be just as much to the exclusion of character as any Old Wave story. In fact, of all the traits identified by

Swanwick, experimentalism is probably the movement's most defining feature. The first substantial story in the collection, Barrington Bayley's 'The Four-Colour Problem', is a good example of this. It mixes a hard sf idea about the topology of the Earth with counter-culture sentiment and wilfully post-modern literary touches, such as: "The president went through the stock motions that link together dialogue in novels – lit a cigarette, bit an apple, stroked his chin and drummed his fingers on the table." Bayley even inserts an eight page lecture on the mathematics behind the Four-Colour Problem with the warning – or is it a promise? – that "readers who are uninterested in mathematics may omit this section without much loss."⁴ This may be bold but the end result is messy and unsatisfying. Which is not to say experimentation cannot produce good work. Pamela Zoline's remarkable 'The Heat Death Of The Universe', also included in the anthology, has stood the test of time and is rightly regarded as one of the best stories of the period. Taking entropy as her overarching theme Zoline produces a psychological profile that blends together a study of domestic isolation and an obsessive-compulsive chronicle of everyday minutia with cosmological angst.

Looking backwards, though, too often experimentation is just that. J.G. Ballard, one of the most (if not *the* most) important writers to emerge from the period is a case in point. He is represented by 'The Assassination Weapon', a condensed novel that went on to form a chapter – if it can be called that – of his infamous 1970 novel *The Atrocity Exhibition*. It highlights the problem with the anthology: as interesting as *The Atrocity Exhibition* is it is hard to claim it as the best of Ballard's work. Compared to work from any other period of his career – his early disaster novels such as *The Drought*; the cold, urban alienation of *Crash*; the fabulation of *The Unlimited Dream Company*; even his most mainstream work, his fictionalised autobiography *The Empire of the Sun* – it comes off as unsatisfying, its density and repetition wearying. In his canon it can be relegated to the level of curiosity. The cumulative effect of the stories assembled in the anthology is similar. Instead of presenting a showcase of supreme artistic achievement it is a historic document showing many authors doing important groundwork, both for themselves and the genre as a whole. As Matt Cheney puts it in his review of the anthology:

"Any young writer who desires to bust open the gates and locks of sf should pay close attention to this book, because much of the preliminary work has been done here. There is a reason many of these writers later did excellent work: they had to do what was here first. They had to see what would happen."⁵

The next major, 'Capital M' Movement did not develop until the early Eighties with the advent of cyberpunk. Although Bruce Sterling's *Mirrorshades* anthology might provide a better overview of the movement there can be only one choice for a core cyberpunk text: William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. A debut novel, it became one of the most popular works of science fiction ever written. Like *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Dune* and *Dhalgren* before it, it crossed over into popular culture in a way few sf novels have ever achieved and Gibson's vision became the default

future for a generation. It was a long way from what Ballard had in mind when he claimed Earth was the only truly alien planet but it rejected the *ad astra per aspera* spirit of the Old Wave just as strongly.

Case is a former cyberspace 'cowboy' who has been neurologically crippled by his previous employers for stealing from them. This leaves him unable to re-enter the virtual reality matrix he considers his true home and instead he is reduced to slumming around Chiba City, a Japanese freeport, in a drugged daze. Then, faced with a combination of the threat of death and the reward of the matrix, he is persuaded to carry out One Last Job. There then follows a fairly routine techno-thriller heist plot that takes him across the globe and finally into orbit. By the end of the novel we are left with a race-against-time espionage novel with added commodity fetishism and a ticking (digital) clock.

As with the New Wave, Swanwick provides a handy summary of the cyberpunks: "their fiction is stereotypically characterised by a fully-realised high-tech future, 'crammed' prose, punk attitudes including antagonism to authority, and bright inventive details." Again we can quibble with this. While most of these things are true of *Neuromancer* – indeed "bright inventive detail" is main reason the book is still worth reading, for all its flaws – Case does not display any punk attitude. Where punk celebrates the flesh Case cannot wait to escape it for the "bodiless exultation of cyberspace."⁶ Neither is he driven by antagonism, he is simply not driven at all; his defining characteristic is apathy. At the end of the novel he uses his wealth to return to the slum existence he had been living when we first met him. What is needed is some of the characteristics Swanwick ascribes to the humanists, writers of "consciously literary fiction, focusing on human characters who are generally seen as frail and fragile, and using the genre to explore large philosophical questions." Case may be frail and fallible but his characterisation is woefully lacking and any humanity he might possess is suppressed. The same can be said of all Gibson's characters, mostly egregiously in the case of *Neuromancer's* sole female character. Molly, a cybernetically-augmented assassin, is originally introduced as Case's minder. Within ten pages she is fucking him. In much the same way as in Hollywood blockbusters mere proximity is deemed sufficient for a relationship to form and showing character development is considered superfluous.

As with New Wave, for all that cyberpunk aimed to be an assault on the staid conventions of the genre, concentration on characterisation still takes a back seat. If the problem with sf is that it lags anywhere from twenty to a hundred years behind the mainstream, *Neuromancer* does little to address this. Likewise just as the New Wave contained the seeds of its own destruction so too did cyberpunk, and the book's success has been its own worst enemy. Reading *Neuromancer* today, twenty years after its release, it is clear that it is all surface, no depth, and no matter how intricately that surface is etched after constant exposure and imitation the original seems slightly tarnished.

Which brings us back to Chouinard. Never one to rest on his laurels he revisited the theme of 'The Long Road To Nowhere' a year later in an essay called 'Minor Futurism: Where SFF Is Headed.'⁷ It appeared in *Locus Online*, the electronic sister magazine of the venerable periodical, enabling him to reach a far greater audience than Swanwick (and probably greater than any previous critic) and in it he stated:

"Most people agree that SFF has been adrift, directionless and Movement-less since the Cyberpunks."

It is a bold, baseless contention using that old chestnut of spurious rhetoric "most people agree". However even if it is true that sf is Movement-less is this any reason to be concerned? Why should we be striving for the Great Leap Forward? For this article I have through necessity only selected one book each to represent New Wave and Cyberpunk. Obviously this gives only a partial glimpse of each movement but both *New Worlds: An Anthology* and *Neuromancer* can be considered exemplars for their respective movements. Further, both suggest that such self-conscious movements have a tendency to suffer from tunnel vision. In fact the best movements are those that do not exist. For example, when Iain Banks published *Consider Phlebas* in 1987 he had no idea he had written a work of New Space Opera.

Consider Phlebas is the first of the Culture novels, which soon become some of the most popular works of British science fiction ever written. The Culture itself is a vast post-scarcity society where resources are so abundant that no one need work or want for anything. Rather than being expansionist or militaristic it is content to simply relax and enjoy the fruits of its technological achievement. It is clear that Banks approves strongly of this, though it strikes some readers (particularly Americans, with their strong libertarian and protestant traditions, it seems) as an unconscionably hedonistic utopia. Throughout the Culture novels Banks repeatedly concentrates on the margins of his society because, let's face it, utopia is boring. In *Consider Phlebas* he chooses the most marginal protagonist possible: Bora Horza Gobuchul is an ally of the opposing side in a war between the Culture and a religious society called the Idirans, who morally object to artificial intelligence. (In a rather good coinage, that looks like it has stuck, he calls this 'carbon fascism'.) It is a clever device, both showing us his society from the point of view of an outsider and pre-empting (or at least trying to pre-empt) those critics who claim the Culture is nothing more than a benevolent dictatorship.

The Culture series has evolved to become a battlefield for arguments about the limits of liberal interventionism – arguments that have emerged in parallel with those that have taken place in the real world – culminating in *Look To Windward*, a novel that some argue undermines the very nature of the series. At the time, though, this was a clear subversion of the imperialistic tendencies of what I suppose we now have to call Old Space Opera. At the same time the ambiguities of his society's interaction with other, less advanced, cultures point to the fact that while he is clearly a political writer he is not operating within a prescribed framework. So whilst Banks was reacting to some features of traditional space opera he did not have a check list of heterodox tropes that a New Space Opera cabal commanded that he purge from his writing. Primarily he was writing what he wanted to write. Instead it was left to critics to piece together a movement from the tangle of texts that shared obvious influences but to differing degrees and effects. The term 'New Space Opera' was not even codified until 2003 in a special issue of *Locus*, with an editorial by Gary K. Wolfe and Russell Letson, that collected articles by Ken MacLeod, Paul McAuley, Gwyneth Jones and M. John Harrison (more on him later.) It appeared at around the same time as a separate essay by David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer at SFRevu.⁸ While Wolfe points to New Space Opera writers as having "a very deliberate dialogue with each other and with space-opera form itself"⁹ this dialogue took place almost entirely through published fiction. This is as it should be.

The same phenomenon can be seen even more clearly when faced with the New Weird. This is a movement so nebulous that no one could agree on a name for, let alone a definition and its practitioners often deny they write it. The two writers probably

most associated with the idea – the pulpy but serious China Meville and the literary but playful Jeff VanderMeer – use shared genre antecedents to produce very different results. Editorials on the New Weird penned by Meville, Justina Robson and Graham Joyce did appear in *The Third Alternative* but these, and the thrashing out of ideas on various internet message boards, only reinforced the lack of commonality. This is mutual respect, mutual ancestry and mutual interests but not anything you could call a manifesto.

Swanwick talks of Lucius Shepard as being something of a locus of praxis between the cyberpunks and humanists. Although he does not mention it, such praxis is also to be found in his own work; his industrial wildwood of a novel, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, melds together many elements in a way which anticipates New Weird. However even those most strongly one camp or the other found it hard to stay there. If you look at the career of Bruce Sterling, the most talented and vocal of the cyberpunk writers, his most interesting and successful work has not been in the subgenre he helped birth. The year after *Neuromancer* he published the brilliantly fertile *Schismatrix*, another key text of the New Space Opera, and a book that stretched far beyond the boundaries of cyberpunk. Perhaps this isn't so surprising. This is after all the man who invented and simultaneously derided slipstream before many years later going on to write *Zeitgeist*, a perfect example of the subgenre.

It might be even more instructive at this point to look at the career of another writer who has escaped these boxes and whose influence runs through all the examples of movements so far given: M. John Harrison. His short story 'Running Down' is one of the best collected in *New Worlds: An Anthology* and yet placed in those surroundings it seems almost conservative. As is clear from his non-fiction of the time (recently collected in *Parietal Games*) he was every bit as revolutionary-minded as his peers but there is none of the excess of experimentation on display elsewhere. It is for this reason that it fitted very well into his recent, highly acclaimed collection, *Things That Never Happen*, and it is no coincidence that the concerns and execution of 'Running Down' line up very strongly with contemporary literary fantasy. The same year as that story he published *The Centauri Device*, an angry, hollow, raging novel that would become one of the proto-texts of the New Space Opera. The recent Gollancz SF Masterworks reprint carries a glowing cover quote from Banks, who has named it as one of his ten favourite sf novels. Ken MacLeod, who also cites the novel as an influence, goes so far as to suggest it anticipates cyberpunk. Simultaneously Harrison was writing what would become the *Viriconium* sequence. Along with Melvyn Peake's *Titus Groan* this would become a template for fantasy writers who rejected the Tolkien orthodoxy and chose to plough a different furrow. The particularly fecund millennial strand of this is what would eventually end up being labelled New Weird. And then, as if to be wilfully contrary, at the height of interest in the New Weird he published *Light*, a triumphant return to space opera which was rapturously received by critics (if not by the average punter.) This is not the career of someone subordinated to a dogma. Harrison is his own man:

"I'm not interesting in planting any flags – just in making sure no one else's flag gets planted in me."¹⁰

It is understandable that Harrison can be a touch fractious on

the subject. A writer of any skill strives to escape such chains and it must be galling to see each free generation approaching, desperate to slap on the irons. More galling still to see some writers rushing to embrace their jailers. The history of people like Harrison and Sterling suggests that there is very little point in manifesto-building apart from at best, a critical propaganda organ, and at worst, a platform for posturing. Of course, neither of these have anything to do with producing fiction. With this in mind the Young Turks would do well to burn their manifestos, throw away their flags, cast off their hair shirts and get on with the business of producing art. That's the hard part: leave the petty squabbling to the critics. ■

Martin Lewis lives in East London. His reviews have appeared in The New York Review of Science Fiction, The SF Site, The Alien Online, and Interzone.

Endnotes

1. Gabe Chouinard, 'The Long Road To Nowhere' (Dead Cities: <http://deadcities.crimsonzine.com/20020727-1183.html>)
2. Michael Swanwick, 'A User's Guide To The Postmoderns' in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, Vol. 10: No. 8
3. *New Worlds: An Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. by Michael Moorcock (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005) p.ix
4. Barrington Bailey, 'The Four-Colour Problem' in *New Worlds: An Anthology*
5. Matthew Cheney, 'New Worlds: An Anthology' (SF Site: <http://www.sfsite.com/02b/nw194.htm>)
6. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: HarperCollins, 1993) p.12
7. Gabe Chouinard, 'Minor Futurism: Where SFF Is Headed', (*Locus Online*: <http://www.locusmag.com/2003/Reviews/Chouinard01.html>)
8. David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, Space Opera Redefined: How Shit Became Shinola: Definition and Redefinition of Space Opera, (SFRevu: <http://www.sfrevu.com/ISSUES/2003/0308/Space%20Opera%20Redefined/Review.htm>)
9. Gary K. Wolfe, *Locus*, Issue 511, p.40
10. M. John Harrison, Night Shade Books Message Board <http://www.nightshadebooks.com/discuss/messages/270/1171.html>

Works Cited

- Bayley, B. 'The Four-Colour Problem' (1971)
 Ballard, J.G. 'The Assassination Weapon' (1966)
 – The Atrocity Exhibition (1970)
 – Crash (1973)
 – The Drought (1965)
 – The Unlimited Dream Company (1979)
 – The Empire of the Sun (1984)
 Banks, Iain M. Consider Phlebas (1987)
 – Look To Windward (2000)
 Delany, Samuel R. Dhalgren (1975)
 Gibson, W. *Neuromancer* (1984)
 Harrison, M. John 'Running Down' (1975)
 – *Parietal Games* (2005)
 – *Things That Never Happen* (2002)
 – *Viriconium* (2005)
 – *The Centauri Device* (1975)
 – *Light* (2002)
 Heinlein, R. *Stranger In A Strange Land* (1961)
 Herbert, F. *Dune* (1965)
 Moorcock, M. *New Worlds: An Anthology*, 2nd Edition (2005)
 Peake, M. *Titus Groan* (1946)
 Sterling, B. *Schismatrix* (1985)
 – *Zeitgeist* (2000)
 Swanwick, M. *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1993)
 Zoline, P. 'Heat Death of the Universe' (1967)



Not Really New, Not Really Weird

By Norman Spinrad

While back, I was pondering when there would be a new literary 'Movement' with a definite capital M within science fiction or, to be expansive about it, within the expanded literary universe of speculative fiction.

The last one was 'Cyberpunk,' and that was something like two decades ago – a Movement of the second kind, if you will, the earlier 'New Wave' being a Movement of the first kind. In those days, there was much critical and theoretical attention paid to just what Cyberpunk was, no little of it written by myself, and much of it by Bruce Sterling, without any lasting definitive conclusion being reached. But for present purposes, let us at least agree that it was a Movement initially defined by content alone.

The novel that started it all was William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, wherein he coined the phrase "The street finds its own uses." What this meant was that outlaws, the underground, revolutionaries, whatever counterculture might exist, would or should use cutting edge technology for its own illicit, illegal, or revolutionary purposes.

At the time, in the backwash of the expiring Counterculture with a definite capital C, this was a revolutionary notion, both within the sf microcosm and the cultural macrocosm. Thanks to several things, but chiefly the Viet Nam War, the 'underground,' the 'counterculture' – call it what you will – of those bygone days was relentlessly technophobic, science and technology being seen as the tools of the fascist Establishment, weapons of the Pentagon and the political right, and its champions 'pigs' at the worst, 'nerds' when merely deluded.

That much of this was expressed via a musical form that could not exist without electric guitars, synthesizers, and amplifiers, was overlooked. For, as Gordon Dickson had observed earlier, every culture, countercultures included, has cultural blindnesses, which they may even require in order to continue to exist at all.

The literature of speculative fiction and the subculture accreted around it was as deeply and passionately split as the political and cultural macrocosm. The technophobic countercultural left regarded the technophilic traditional hard science fiction and its practitioners as right wing crypto-fascist, and the Old Guard regarded the Young Turks as drug-addled Luddite hippies verging on out-and-out commies.

The Cyberpunks, though, were technophilic, politically left, countercultural outlaws.

That was the punk of it and that was revolutionary.

The Cyber of it was perhaps by chance. Gibson's novel, the flagship that launched the Movement, was centered on the technology of the internet and the web before that technology actually existed, even though, as he once confessed to me, he knew very little about actual computers and wrote the whole thing on a manual typewriter.

Bruce Sterling, not Gibson, swiftly became the main guru and theoretician of the Cyberpunk Movement, and curiously enough, did not write what he preached in his own novels until quite recently. Gibson, Sterling, and Rudy Rucker and Pat Cadigan, who became major Cyberpunk figures, might have been cultural revolutionaries in a certain sense, but were never political in a conventional sense, though John Shirley was.

Then a couple of cabana boys (I am not making this up) latched onto a quarter of a mil of a rich dentist's money, spent one hundred thousand dollars buying the rights to *Neuromancer* for a film that never got made, and the rest of the money on professional PR promoting 'Cyberpunk,' and the rest is marketing history. Cyberpunk became co-opted into a generic brand to sell everything from rock groups to high-end sneakers, just as 'Sympathy for the Devil' and 'Blowin' in the Wind' have long since been remixed into politically caponized elevator muzak and a recent Shell Oil commercial has co-opted the Summer of Love into a signature for its greener-than-thou solar electricity program.

Thus Cyberpunk – a science fictional literary movement based on content and theme, with no regard one way or another for literary angle of attack, form, or prose style, transmogrifiable, therefore, into marketing iconography.

Sic transit gloria mundi.

A Movement of the second kind.

To see what I mean by a Movement of the first kind, have a look at *New Worlds*, a retrospective anthology of stories, poetry, essays, and criticism, edited by Michael Moorcock, editor of the British magazine of the same name through many incarnations, and with a memoir-cum-history of the whole strange trip to date by Moorcock himself.

This book is, well, staggering. There has never been anything like it. Because there has never been anything like *New Worlds*, the magazine, or the movement that it spawned, championed, and molded, before or since, and certainly not within the realm of science fiction. Moorcock has delivered up a perfect, if hardly complete, sample of what the so-called 'New Wave' was about, along with his masterful, gossipy, ruthlessly honest, and occasionally catty global overview. Even I, who was a significant figure in the story, thanks to the six-part serialization *Bug Jack Barron* in *New Worlds*, was poleaxed to be reminded of who Moorcock had published when and what they had written and, yes, drawn and painted.

J.G. Ballard's 'condensed novels,' the short stories which made his transition from an author of merely excellent sf disaster novels into the major stylist, formalist, and literary figure he is today. Early poetry by D.M. Thomas. Brian Aldiss' stylistically revolutionary Acid Head War stories, collected in the Lysergically Joycean, metaphysically Gurdjieffian novel *Barefoot in the Head*. Mervyn Peake when he was languishing in obscurity. The first art by Escher ever to appear in an English-language publication. Dick, Brunner, Ellison, Delany. Thomas M. Disch's *Camp Concentration*. The early stories of M. John Harrison, John T. Sladek, James Sallis. Apparently the very first Gene Wolfe story ever to be published. The Jerry Cornelius Cycle. Art criticism. Literary criticism by John Clute and diverse hands including Moorcock, and even Ballard on *Mein Kampf*.

On and on and on.

Obviously not all of the above could be included in the anthology. Moorcock apologizes in some detail for what and who isn't, and, amusingly and amazingly enough, even admits to publishing a few things really not to his own personal taste as a reader, as a sigil of the catholicity of his and beyond his – the magazine's and the movement's – literary intent.

And *New Worlds*, Moorcock, and the literary movement in question, did have a literary as well as a cultural intent, a mission so enormous that it could never have been realized in its entirety.

Moorcock himself describes it at greater length and in finer detail in his introduction, and probably better, too than I can do here. So, briefly and simply, Moorcock and the rest of us believed that the cleavage between so-called 'serious literary fiction' and so-called 'popular fiction,' even greater in Britain with Leavis's official 'canon' than in the United States, was not only artificial and false, but detrimental to both. What had been popular fiction in the mode of Dickens and Hemingway and Melville was degenerating into empty genre formula, and serious literary fiction had lost its appeal to general readers thanks to deconstructionism, slavishness to academic formal norms, a disinterest in telling real stories, and a loss of the courage to tackle the great themes and questions of the age.

Or, as I said somewhere, "science fiction treats the great issues in a trivial manner, while so-called serious literature applies its great literary powers to the contemplation of the lint in its own navel."

Little, unfortunately, has changed in so-called serious mainstream literature between then and now, but it is hard for the reader of today to understand what science fiction was like at the turn of the 1960s. Science fiction was regarded by publishers and librarians as 'Young Adult Fiction.' The critical contention in the genre at the time was that it should be written in 'transparent prose' – that is, 'style free' prose that disappeared from the reader's consciousness entirely in order to convey the events of the plot in clear simple terms, à la literary television. It could not be specifically or passionately political, not engage. No four-letter words. No sexual description.

To see what I mean, you could read *Bug Jack Barron*, which has

just been reissued thirty-five years later, and try to imagine in a present context why it was excoriated as perverted and degenerate in 1968, when it was a cause célèbre. I doubt if you would find anything particularly shocking now, except, perhaps, the prose style.

All this *New Worlds* set out to change, by publishing fiction open to stylistic experimentation, and freed from any taboos as to content. Moorcock also had a theory about the uses of prose itself, too complex to go too deeply into here or even in his introduction to the anthology. Briefly, rather than being confined to 'transparent' narration of the surface phenomenology of the story, the prose line could skip allusively along its surface or swim in the iconographic and archetypal imagery beneath it, rather in the manner of poetry. Which perhaps was why the magazine paid serious attention to serious poetry, too.

Since *New Worlds* began as a science fiction magazine and the writers in question mostly began as 'science fiction writers,' the fusion between 'serious literary fiction' and 'science fiction' that it sought to attain, the new literature that it sought to call forth, was a fusion between 'sf' and serious literature at large.

In that, unsurprisingly, the revolution failed, although these days many so-called 'mainstream writers' are attempting some sort of science fiction. But because most of them are willfully ignorant of three quarters of a century of what has been done with the thematic material – indeed, that writers fully their equal have been using it for decade – most of them are even ignorant of what the material is. Most of what they are writing is well-written, but otherwise primitive, versions of what the better sf magazines were publishing in the 1950s, as if painters of great technical skill and even genius were trying to reproduce the work of Renaissance and Baroque artists without ever seeing any of their work or even realizing that their techniques already existed.

But within the field of science fiction, which has now become the expanded universe of speculative fiction, or just 'sf,' the revolution succeeded hands down. All you have to do is read a random sample of what was published as 'sf' before 1965 or so and what is being published now and you'll see what I mean.

A revolution of the first kind. Mao's notion of the permanent revolution as an ongoing process without an end product. Unlike Cyberpunk, not based on any specific imagery or iconography or content, and therefore incapable of becoming a mainstream generic marketing brand, but for the same reason incapable of co-option. A genie that cannot be stuffed back in the bottle.

And now we may have the beginnings of another one.

Not in science fiction, but in fantasy.

The so-called 'New Weird' – apparently dubbed so by China Miéville, its Gibson and Sterling rolled into one.

Okay, it's a dumb name on more than one ground. An adjective used as a noun. And after all, there's nothing exactly new about things weird, literary or otherwise. On the other hand, the Cyberpunks didn't like being called Cyberpunks, and everyone dubbed a 'New Wave' writer insisted that he or she wasn't, and by now we are probably stuck with it.

Nevertheless, I do believe that Miéville is onto something.

Something big.

But weird has nothing to do with it, and needless, or apparently not so needless, to say, 'The New Weird' is an oxymoron. There is nothing new about weirdness, and far less so in the literary realm of speculative fiction. Take Rudy Rucker, for example; there's no writer of any sort of speculative fiction who can top Rucker for weirdness. How can there be?

Look at *Frek and the Elixir* for a typical example. Colin Greenland, Roland C. Wagner, and others have revived space opera as a literary form by inventing a kind of post-modern space opera; space opera that admits it's space opera, which is to say a form of fantasy that uses the old space opera tropes, imagery, set-ups, and situations to tell 'weird' science fiction stories that more or less admit that they don't give a damn about existing in the realm of the possible. Rucker goes this one better by using his alternate incarnation as a mathematician to set his stories within multiple and endlessly mutating literary realities that a reader can barely even comprehend without equivalent mathematical knowledge.

Well, not quite. Rucker is also perhaps the best explicator of abstruse theoretical math for the mathematically unwashed masses, and he does this by using his skill as a science fiction writer to concretize theory into alternate realities that the non-mathematician can inhabit in the imagination.

In novels like *Frek and the Elixir* he does the reverse; putting his

viewpoint character, and therefore the reader, through seemingly endless realities within realities within realities that would be pure fantasy of the weirdest possible sort were they not conjured up out of theoretical mathematical systems that have no possible 'existence' in the phenomenological realm, and are therefore even weirder.

Frek is a kid on a future Earth where biotech has reduced the biosphere to a few brand name organisms, a society secretly ruled by a brain-like thingy. A tiny flying saucer, made so by dimensional manipulation, appears under his bed, an alien emerges, escapes, transmogrifies into various dimensional and physical avatars. Frek follows as it is chased by the avatars of the authorities. It turns out that various aliens from various planets and dimensions are vying to become the exclusive producers of a kind of telepathic television whereby the doings and minds of the inhabitants of Earth become a reality TV soap opera for the delectation of the galactic and transdimensional masses.

Off Frek goes in a space, time, and dimension-warping living alien flying saucer with one of the would-be producers, pursued by others, through endlessly varying and mutating mathematically constructed space-time dimensions, seeking out the elixir of the title that will somehow recreate the terrestrial biosphere, while also pursuing a mission to rescue humanity from being reduced to playing reality TV in transgalactic prime time.

I will not attempt to summarize any further. It would be futile; *Frek and the Elixir* basically uses the hoary save-the-universe plot skeleton to run Frek and the reader through endless mathematical-based schtick that gets phenomenologically weirder and weirder as the mathematical systems upon which it is based get more and more abstruse. It's great good fun, but the problem is that at 475 pages, it's way too long for such a simple story to keep holding at least this reader's interest to the very end.

Flatland on Lysergic Acid.

Rucker has called this sort of thing 'Free Form,' but that's exactly what it isn't. The form here is mathematical, and it is quite rigorous, the mathematical rigor being used to give some form of coherence to the utter weirdness. At shorter length, and with better story, this has worked well for Rudy Rucker, but form is not story, and in *Frek and the Elixir*, at least for my taste, there is not enough of it to carry the weirdness to the end.

Nevertheless, if you will grant mathematics the status of a science, and there are people who will claim it is the 'hardest' science of all, since without it the so-called 'hard sciences' could not really function, this is science fiction, not fantasy. And it proves that science fiction can be weirder than any conceivable fantasy, 'the New Weird' included.

There is nothing new about weirdness in fantasy either, nor is it really possible to top, say, Jack Vance in this regard, though with *Black Brillion* Matthew Hughes comes pretty close to equalling him. "A witty new adventure in the gorgeous, ironic style of Jack Vance," sez the blurb on the galleys, and for once the copy writer has got it just right.

Vance made his reputation with *The Dying Earth* and much later wrote a sort of sequel called variously *The Eyes of the Overworld* and *Cugel the Clever*, both set so far in the future that the distinction between 'science fiction' and 'fantasy' becomes utterly moot, as witness that Vance's 'science fiction' or 'space opera' is entirely of a piece with this 'fantasy.'

Weird aliens or weird conjured creatures, what is really the literary difference? Made up far-future science or made up magic function exactly the same literarily; after all, Arthur C. Clarke has proclaimed that "any science sufficiently advanced will seem like magic," and so any magic can easily enough function as bullshit-super science within the confines of a story.

In phenomenological terms, Vance's settings, worlds, science, magic, are really no weirder than the usual sort of such stuff. But from the beginning, Vance has realized that nothing can be as weird or outré as the possible twists, turns, warp-ages, ironies, delusions, religions, and quirks of consciousness, human or alien, that exist outside and beyond any material phenomenology, and the cultures, societies, and political systems they therefore create.

Vance's story lines generally consist of roguish scams, counter-scams, and counter-counter-scams by roguish, likeable, but generally unprincipled characters, or characters laboring under an arcane set of cultural and political assumptions, often based upon the ironic education of some naff.

Vance is an ironist, but not of the Swiftian variety; he's a good-natured, good-humored ironist, a warm-hearted ironist, perhaps

ironically in spite of himself, thus proving that such a thing is possible. This is one of the weirdest angles of attack in all literature, and therefore immensely enjoyable even when the story line is thin, for what he writes is character-based fiction despite its mordant seemingly surface tone.

Made even more so because Vance is not only a master stylist whose prose line would be entertaining were he knocking out novelisations of *Star Trek* or *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, but because his style, with its baroque structure and cadences and uncommon word choices, its sly orotondness, is the perfect and perfectly tuned instrument on which to play his chosen music.

Whether Hughes is deliberately mimicking Vance's style only he knows. But while he is not quite up to Vance as a stylist, he's chosen the right sort of instrumental voice for *Black Brillion* – ironic like Vance only somewhat less so, mordant but a bit more mildly, less baroque – to tell a Vanceian sort of complex double-dealing caper story set in a Vanceian sort of future world and replete with Vanceian rogues and a Vanceian naïf, while making it all his own by delving rather deeper into psychological and metaphysical depths.

What *Black Brillion* proves is not only that this mode does not have to be the exclusive literary property of Jack Vance, but that there is really no new weirdness under the speculative fictional sun.

China Miéville has proclaimed that at least one purpose of the New Weird is to free fantasy from the conventions of the usual stuff – the elves and magicians, the medieval social and political structures, the neo-Arthurian and neo-Tolkienesque givens. But he doesn't seem to acknowledge that while such conventional genre fiction is indeed what dominates the fantasy racks in the book stores and the fanaticism of the fans, this literary mission has long since been accomplished by the urban fantasies of Harlan Ellison, and Fritz Leiber years before him, and a host of others, not to mention such obscure fantasists as Stephen King, or Peter Straub.

But there does remain one thing that fantasy needs to be rescued from in terms of content; the simplistic moral dualism that seems to reside at the core of most of it, that which is most often and most loudly proclaimed on book packages and in the PR – the time-honored 'battle of Good Against Evil.'

The Battle of Good Against Evil is a bore. It is unreal. It is uninteresting. And in human terms, it is a lie.

There is a wonderful moment in Poul Anderson's *Three Hearts and Three Lions*, itself a wonderful genre-bender that combines hard science fiction and 'high fantasy.' The hero, champion of the cause of Order against the Chaos of Faerie in which he has long lingered, looks back on Elf Hill wistfully. I am on the side of Order, he finally decides.

I think...? he then asks himself before he rides on into his destiny.

I have said and written often enough that the interesting stories, are never about the Battle Between Good and Evil but about the conflict between different concepts of good, whether in the world, or within the same human heart.

China Miéville doesn't, to my knowledge, pay significant attention to this in theory, but it is certainly there in his fiction. Vance, Hughes, and others realize this on a fairly ironic and good-natured level, but in Miéville's novels it is deeply formative and central, and in contemporary fantasy, certainly in what is published as genre fantasy, that is newer and far more significant than any amount of 'weirdness.'

As I said in my review of *Iron Council*, the third book in his New Crobuzon (or Bas-Lag) series, I had read and reviewed the first one, *Perdido Street Station*, but not the second. Now I have read *The Scar*, and to me, and from this peculiar perspective, the progression in this regard is interesting and somewhat peculiar.

Perdido Street was set mostly in New Crobuzon, and although the main characters were not simplistically portrayed as 'good' heroes versus 'bad' villains, it was essentially a story about a conflict with those between whom the reader could sympathize and identify with and 'evil' forces.

But by the time Miéville got to *Iron Council*, we have a passionately political advocacy novel about a revolution against a thoroughly evil system, and while the characters have admirable and slightly ambiguous psychological depth, it most certainly is a story about the battle between good and evil, and you know who you are rooting for as surely as if the protagonists and more or less faceless collective antagonists were wearing team jerseys.

Iron Council has a thematic and plotwise closure with which one might argue on emotionally aesthetic terms, but which works on a structural level. *Perdido Street Station* did not; the characters and

their personal stories were left hanging in mid-air, and it seemed like a transparent set-up for an inevitable sequel, which is what I assumed *The Scar* would be.

But it is not. Nor is *Iron Council* a sequel to *The Scar* any more than *The Scar* is a sequel to *Perdido Street Station*. This is a most peculiar trilogy, if that is what it is, though I am beginning to think that Bas-Lag is an open-ended series format, the continuity of which resides entirely in the imaginary world. There are no continuing characters. Major characters from *Perdido Street Station* do not appear either in *The Scar* or *Iron Council*, and their stories do not resolve. Bellis Coldwine is the main viewpoint protagonist in *The Scar*, and she does not appear in *Iron Council* either.

Bellis flees some vague political hot water in New Crobuzon via river and ocean ship toward a far distant colony of the city. But her ship is attacked by pirates and she and others aboard are taken to Armada, a vast floating and mobile pirate city continually cobbled together through the centuries out of captured vessels, and told they are never going to be able to leave.

The Armadans have also hijacked a kind of New Crobuzon drilling platform, not to bring up oil, but rather rockmilk, a magical substance with which to fuel an apparatus to control an *avanc*, a huge creature from another dimension or something, which they plan to capture and use as a mighty underwater tug to allow their pelagic city to move at will and at great speed over the great Empty Ocean.

The powerful navy of New Crobuzon has long been out to get the pirate city for obvious reasons, and the theft of their drilling platform exacerbates their ireful determination. There is a secret New Crobuzon agent aboard Armada, and he enlists Bellis in a plot to get a message to the city government by dangling the possibility of rescue before her. Later he reveals that he has discovered a plan by the grindylow, a race of mysterious, magically powerful, hideous, voracious aquatic monsters to invade New Crobuzon by sea, river, and waterway, and that he knows their invasion plan and if he does not transmit it back to the city, it and its inhabitants are surely doomed.

Most of the pirates aboard Armada believe or just assume that the Lovers, leaders of the dominant faction, want to harness the *avanc* simply to increase the speed and mobility of the pirate city, the better and safer to pursue the business of piracy as usual.

But it turns out that the Lovers are pursuing a mystical quest to have the *avanc* drag Armada to the Scar of the title, a kind of magical dimensional rent far away in the Empty Ocean and therefore otherwise unreachable, where they will gain some apotheosis and/or super-puissant powers never really defined, something like Ahab harnessing Moby Dick, rather than slaying him, to haul the *Pequod* to the mystical ultima thule of his dark vision quest.

Well, it would be giving away too much to go a lot further. For present purposes, the point is that while the outlaw floating multi-species pirate city mirrors and foreshadows the revolutionary mobile multi-species railroad city of *Iron Council*, here none of the main characters, Bellis included, are without their central moral flaws, paradoxes, and ambiguities.

In the end, Bellis opts to try to save the city that she has fled and both loves and hates, betraying Armada, which she has begun by detesting and comes to identify with. The grindylow turn out to be something other than what they are painted as by the spy. The Lovers betray Armada, not for evil purposes, but in the pursuit of a mad mystical good.

And Armada is both an egalitarian utopia, at least in terms of the rest of Bas-Lag, and, after all, a society of piratical thieves ready, able, and more than willing to kill the innocent in the process of pursuing its own predatory self-interest.

The real stories are not about the conflict between Good and Evil but about conflicting concepts of good, or at least self-interests, enlightened or deluded. In *The Scar*, Miéville admirably demonstrates that he knows this and has freed his fantasy from that genre convention. In the light of this retrospective discovery, consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds, I must confess that, for me at least, *The Scar* casts the ardent revolutionary dialectic of *Iron Council* in a different light, particularly since its protagonists are hardly simple exemplars of good in their personal lives. Okay, sometimes a story of the conflict between Good and Evil is a valid one, particularly when the distinctions are specifically and analytically and passionately political, and the characters are not Pure Knights or slaves of Sauron.

But is this not simply good writing, whether 'science fiction,'

'fantasy,' or 'mainstream'? What, you may ask, does this have to do with 'weirdness'?

Yes it is, and not very much.

Miëville has indeed liberated fantasy from its set of political, moral, and social medievalist conventions, but 'weirdness' has nothing to do with it. Miëville has a genius for beautifully rendering truly bizarre fictional fantasy realities with total literary verisimilitude. But, as I hope I have adequately demonstrated earlier, anyone doing this is already standing on the shoulders of giants, and 'weirdness' in terms of content and worldbuilding, going as far back at least as Homer as it does, is something that can never be 'new.'

However, in purely literary terms, in terms of technique and the deepest root concept of fiction itself, or at least speculative fiction, something 'new' does seem to be aborning. As I said before, what Rudy Rucker called 'Free Form' really isn't, but what Miëville calls the 'New Weird' is approaching this. And what it is approaching can perhaps be further clarified by looking at a novel like *The Year of Our War* by Steph Swainston, who, at least according to the blurbs, and the easily enough discernable influences, is party to this new 'Movement.'

Here we also have a fantasy world seemingly entirely dissociated from our own space-time continuum, unless some sequel or sequels to come will end up proving otherwise. It's called the Four Lands, and it's a rather small pocket universe floating in what seems like purely literary space-time, where god, with a deliberately small 'g' and 'it' for a pronoun, has supposedly departed, leaving the set-up in the care of the Eszai, a small circle of immortals, led by an immortal emperor with the power to make Zascaï, ordinary humans, immortal, or bust immortal Eszai back to mortal at will or whim.

The political situation is a lot more complex than that, for the lands are ruled by mortal kings or queens who gain their thrones more by skullduggery than lineal descent, and while the Emperor and the Eszai are not supposed to 'rule,' they don't exactly take the Prime Directive any more seriously than George W. Bush does.

Nor are the Zascaï exactly humans. There are several subspecies, including winged but flightless humans, and all are engaged in a Forever War against the Insects, never-ending swarms of, well, voracious and apparently mindless giant bugs. The story, as the title implies, is that of the war against the Insects, period, with, however, many interesting Machiavellian subplots among the Eszai and the Zascaï.

Thus far Swainston would seem to have carried what Miëville has done to a further level of purity that illumines and clarifies exactly what is most new about the misnamed 'New Weird' on a purely literary level. This is not science fiction, because this literary universe has absolutely no connection with our own, and there is quite a bit here that violates its laws of mass and energy, conspicuously the square-cube law that makes giant bugs a physical impossibility within them. Nor is it fantasy by the usual definition, for while various Eszai may have supernatural powers, 'magic' is never invoked. Nor is it 'alternate history' or 'uchronie' as the French have it, for, there being no point of tangency with our real world, there can be no point of departure from it.

Jant Comet – the 'Messenger,' for all immortal Eszai inhabit such functional avatars – is the viewpoint character. He is a rare hybrid of flightless winged human and another lightweight subspecies, and therefore the only person in the entire literary construct who can fly.

He is also a junkie, and called exactly that by other characters, addicted to a drug called 'cat.' More often than not this merely fucks him up severely and leaves him with withdrawal symptoms when he comes down, leading of course to the next shot, and he does shoot it – with a spike. But sometimes it transports him to another reality or dimension or something called 'the Shift,' inhabited by humans and by a panoply of bizarre and often horrific sentient creatures that put the denizens of Bas-Lag to shame.

So what we have here, however tentatively, however imperfectly, is an even purer example of what Miëville has done, and what I would contend is the true revolutionary core and import of what Miëville has misnamed the New Weird.

This is not science fiction or fantasy or uchronie or historical fiction or contemporary fiction, or anything that tries to follow or invoke any consistent set of mimetic laws or parameters, be they that of science, pseudo-science, or magic.

One might call it a subspecies of speculative fiction, mainly because it is being published as such, and for want of any other taxonomic genus to put it into. This, tentatively and imperfectly, is something quite new – fiction that exists on a literary level only, as a

purely literary construct.

This is a very difficult concept for me to even attempt to describe. Small wonder then that what may be these early attempts at actually writing such stuff are somewhat tentative and imperfect.

But to give it the old college try...

Prior to the development of photography, painting, at least in the west, evolved, and strove to develop, more and better techniques to achieve 'realism' or 'mimesis.' Perspective, chiaroscuro, even the use of the camera obscura; the ultima thule, arguably finally best attained by the Dutch realists, being to be able to use paint on a flat surface to create the most perfect illusion possible in the eye of the beholder that he or she is seeing a frozen slice of actual reality in three dimensions.

Photography does this much better and instantly, and we have long been conditioned to see photographs as doing this perfectly. Early on, there were those who moaned that photography would kill painting, but that is not what happened.

Instead, photography liberated western painting from the goal of producing, well, photo-realism, revealed its true nature as in fact pigments applied to a flat surface, nothing more than that, but nothing less either, unbound, free to explore anything and everything that might be produced by paint on canvas – impressionism, cubism, expressionism, abstraction, abstract expressionism, pop art, whatever.

Whether this has been a good thing or a bad thing or both is a good argument, but one that is irrelevant for the present purpose, which is to use it as an analogy for the essential true nature of writing as words on paper, period.

It's easy enough to see this when it comes to poetry, especially 'modern' poetry, or so-called 'free verse,' which can exist without rhyme or meter or in extreme cases even coherent imagery, purely as aesthetically pleasing (or not) ink patterns on paper.

Fiction, though, must at minimum at least convey a meaningful series of events, must tell some kind of story, or it isn't fiction. Attempts to write so-called 'fiction' that does not do this results in, not to put a fine line on it, gibberish and crap.

Speculative fiction, in its incarnations as both science fiction and fantasy, is free from the stricture to deliver a series of such events, to tell a story, in a setting, world, or context that mirrors existing reality, but thus far it has been confined to a kind of mimesis in terms of 'world building,' setting its stories in fictional constructs that recreate, if not mimic, our coherent phenomenological reality by constructing literary universes that at least are internally consistent – that cohere, like our own, around a coherent set of physical or magical laws or a combination of both, however different, however outré, however 'weird.'

Miëville's Bas-Lag trilogy, with its cavalier use of magicks that are conveniently pulled out of the magician's rabbit's hat at any plot turn, goes a long way to freeing itself from that constraint – whether by entirely conscious intent or not it is thus far difficult to tell – to become a purely literary construct, words on paper with no external referents, and no internal restraints either save purely literary aesthetics.

In *The Year of Our War*, Swainston is doing much the same thing but carrying it even further, unless she is just being sloppy. Perhaps she is doing both, for unlike Miëville's Bas-Lag trilogy, this novel is full of words, minor artifacts, locutions, even a dating system, that seem straight out of our own contemporary culture, even pop culture, and therefore are quite jarring.

Whether this is just sloppy prose in need of more careful editing or whether it is deliberate, I cannot tell, and maybe, once it is pointed out, it doesn't matter. If it is deliberate, it would seem to be Swainston reminding the reader that this *is*, after all, not only a purely literary construct, but one that *knows* it's a purely literary construct, and wants the reader to realize it too.

And if it is the accidental result of sloppy prose, well, the effect is no different, and once having been pointed out, can become self-consciously applied by anyone who wants to.

And this, I would contend, is the most basic aspect of the New Weird and the most revolutionary: speculative fiction that exists as a self-consciously pure literary construct, words on paper that knows they are words on paper, as modern painting knows that it is paint on canvas.

But there is a problem with such stuff, which has to some extent been written outside of speculative fiction as so-called 'post-modern' fiction, largely under the baleful influence of deconstructionism, and what is usually lost in the deconstruction is *story*. A good deal of the fiction in the old *New Worlds* suffered from this, too, much of it

more interesting to writers as lab experiments than to readers as satisfying and entertaining fiction.

Moorcock, in his introduction doesn't quite acknowledge this, but he is adamant that lack of storytelling is the major flaw of much 'serious literary fiction,' which is why it needs a healthy dose of same from so-called 'popular fiction' if it is to be meaningful to the general reader. Which may also be why such fiction that knows and proclaims that it is a pure literary construct can most likely, and indeed perhaps only, succeed as speculative fiction. Speculative fiction at least forces attention to theme and content and, to a lesser extent, setting, without which it cannot be speculative fiction.

Swainston succeeds in this regard up to a point, because the main story is that of a war, which forces an action-based plot if nothing else. She also does well with the character-based subplots. Miéville likewise succeeds in all three books of the Bas-Lag trilogy, more or less in like manner. But all four books suffer from a lack of satisfying closure, and for the same reason.

Iron Council at least brings the story to a thematic closure, but does so by arbitrarily pulling the necessary rabbit out of Einstein's hat at the conclusion. *The Year of Our War* does something similar.

Perdido Street Station concludes the action plot well enough, but leaves the characters hanging in mid-air without resolution either in that novel or in *The Scar*, and *The Scar's* conclusion is a great sequence for a silly movie.

Is this an inherent weakness in a literary form which eschews not merely mimesis but internal consistency? Miéville and Swainston have demonstrated that it is possible to tell a satisfying story in this mode up until the conclusion. But can one create a satisfying conclusion to a story without any constraints at all, or are constraints an absolute necessity of story-telling?

This is not a question that has been answered yet, and I don't have the answer either. Time will tell. Or not. The only thing certain is that the New Weird has embarked on a voyage to the very essential core nature of fiction itself. **V**

Norman Spinrad is the author of numerous science fiction books and short stories, the most famous of which is his novel Bug Jack Barron. This article first appeared in the October/November 2005 issue of Asimov's Science Fiction.



Infernokrusher: A Brief and Terrible History

by Meghan McCarron

A little context: half-way through last year, David Moles made an innocent-seeming post on his blog, Chrononautic Log, about the way the definition of slipstream has changed since Bruce Sterling coined it. Some way into the discussion thread – which included comments from Ted Chiang, Christopher Rowe and Benjamin Rosenbaum – Meghan McCarron nailed down the problem with term when she said, “Slipstream, ultimately, is just a wussy term. We should be drawing names less from wishy-washy words (slip, stream) and more from monster trucks (krusher, inferno).” And so, a movement was born, as a quick google or reading the Notes Towards an Infernokrusher Manifesto (<http://www.chrononaut.org/log/archives/000581.html>) will demonstrate. But that was months ago, and as Graham Sleight points out later in this issue, the conversation moves fast online. So we asked the Ignitrix to explain: whatever happened to infernokrusher?

Infernokrusher is dead; we have marked its grave with an eternal flame. Well, not a proper eternal flame. We are writers, not the US government, and our bank accounts reflect this. But the tire fire seemed more appropriate, anyway.

Infernokrusher's corpse is buried in a NASCAR coffin.

It started as a joke and ended as... a very large joke, and like all fires (and jokes) it burned hot and bright and fast, and afterwards people gaped at the ashes and the poems and the 9,800 Google hits and asked, how did this happen? But as its flames leapt our burning hearts did too, and we poured fuel on the fire with abandon, though we knew that any more than a prudent smoulder would never survive. But we did not love prudence. We burned with passion and lighters and rocket guns. We wanted our fiction not slippery but dangerous, not wishy-washy but hot. We infernokrushed. Our prose burned shit-hot, and yes, we drove

I blew up the plums
that were in the
icebox
and which you were
probably saving

a monster-truck or two. When fires rage out of control, we don't put them out. We stoke them. Forgive us. We like fire.

We feel kind of bad about the tire fire – we don't truck much with eternity or environmental hazards – but oh, was it beautiful on that last warm night. So we greet Infernokrusher's death not with sadness but with joy, for like a phoenix it will rise again, under different guises and different names but with flamethrowers hidden under its overcoat of resurrection. And we have not

forgotten. Each year we will journey to Centralia, PA, where the world's largest coal fire still burns beneath our feet, and burn Science Fiction in effigy, to show the world we still remember. And we still care.

Join us. There's a space in the monster truck for you. **V**

While not exploding or burning things, Meghan McCarron has graduated from Clarion West and sold stories to Strange Horizons and the All-Star Stories anthology Twenty Epics.

Morning Children

I don't think there's been a movement in sf with which I've had more sympathy than "Mundane SF", or which seems to me more doomed. To summarise the Mundanes' arguments: sf should work with tropes which can be directly derived from our present state of knowledge, since "the most likely future is one in which we only have ourselves and this planet." That's a proposition which, in some moods, I could see myself getting behind. There's a serious political agenda in the Mundanes' thinking: as a species, we face global problems in a way we've never done before; science fiction is uniquely placed to articulate solutions to those problems; it amounts almost to a kind of immorality to dodge those problems and write the kind of escapist claptrap that has gummed up the genre for too long.

The Mundane website went live in December 2003, and over the next eighteen months a variety of people in the sf community set out their objections – including Ian McDonald, Patrick Nielsen Hayden, Ken MacLeod, and Charles Stross. McDonald is a particularly interesting case, as his fine recent novel *River of Gods* could arguably be seen as Mundane. His original LiveJournal posting made very similar arguments to his piece in this issue of *Vector*, about the restrictiveness of the Mundane prohibitions on what is appropriate for sf. Or, as Patrick Nielsen Hayden put it, one objects to "art as tick-box": the debate is about whether the aesthetic or the political should take priority in sf. I don't want to get into a detailed discussion of the pros or cons of the Mundane argument, but to make a different point: that the speed of the response to the manifesto, and the extent to which the debate has already percolated through the world of sf, is something pretty new. And this is why I think the movement is doomed.

Every one of the responses I mentioned above was published online, in the authors' blogs or LiveJournals. All of these authors have comment sections

in which others can and did join in the discussion instantly. This is a huge step from the previous 70 years of sf as a self-conscious genre, in which debates were conducted via the letters pages of magazines and fanzines (including this one). For a start, an exchange of letters in a paper magazine could take three or four months per response if you were lucky. Secondly, there was always a gatekeeping function: you couldn't guarantee that your letter would be the lucky one to appear in print. It's pretty difficult to get your comments barred from an online forum unless you overstep basic bounds of courtesy. Lastly, once a debate happens online, it remains available (technical glitches permitting) to anyone who wants access to it. You don't have to subscribe to anything, or to choose to do anything beyond clicking on a link, to see it. You just need a computer and a modem – which, these days, pretty much everyone in English-language sf does except Howard Waldrop.

So debates happen more quickly and more publicly, and remain on record for all to see. (This is also true of the 2003 TTA Press discussion board thrash about the 'New Weird', though it disappeared into the ether due to a server glitch.) Put another way, the sf community gets to make its mind up about a new proposition, to arrive at a version of conventional wisdom about it, with a speed and thoroughness that are wholly new. (And I don't think it's unfair to say that the conventional wisdom about Mundane sf has pretty rapidly settled into the view that it's a dead letter: too restrictive, too specific, not enough *fun* for us wacky sci-fi types. Individual authors, such as Kim Stanley Robinson, may continue writing work which meets the mundane criteria, but that's different: all movements have to cope with cases of people who are doing what they prescribe but weren't in the initial affinity group.) Of course, conventional wisdom in a field as wilfully contrary as sf isn't going to be homogenous. But one can, I think, usefully talk about currents of opinion.



The New X

by
Graham Sleight

Anyhow, if the lead-time for debate has radically shortened, writing and publishing lead-times haven't. This is the other side to the effects of the internet. Movements in sf have tended to go through a particular life-cycle. Ian McDonald suggested that it looks something like this: origins, core text, manifesto, theme anthology, wannabes, poor imitations, rediscovery fifteen years later as 'retro'. The core point is that emblematic works are written, published and recognised as part of a movement that is still alive. That takes time: consider, for example, cyberpunk. When you date its public origin is a matter of taste, but you could choose 1981, when Gibson's first Sprawl story 'Johnny Mnemonic' appeared, or 1983, when the first edition of Bruce Sterling's pseudonymous polemical zine *Cheap Truth* appeared. Defining events of its course would include the publication of *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Schismatrix* (1985). If you want to point to events suggesting that cyberpunk was for its founders a completed subject, you might look at Michael Swanwick's ground-mapping essay 'A User's Guide to the Postmoderns' in 1986, the death of *Cheap Truth* in the same year, or Sterling's canon-forming anthology *Mirrorshades* in 1987. Personally, I'd date its end as 1988, when *Mona Lisa Overdrive* closed down Gibson's Sprawl series. Certainly, by 1991, core movement writers like Sterling and Shiner were referring to themselves as former cyberpunks, and were looking back on the movement as something that was no longer to do with them. Sterling's column 'Cyberpunk in the 90s' (*Interzone* 48, June 1991) is an almost perfect articulation of what happens when revolutionaries storm the castle and find the halls empty, the throne vacant. Nowadays, to borrow from Tennyson, cyberpunk has become a name, an adjective lazily applied by marketing departments to any sf featuring computers.

Any movement, I'm arguing, has only a limited time in the air before it gets either assimilated into the mainstream (cyberpunk) or shot down. If it's going to have meaning and influence, it needs to achieve some of the things that, say, cyberpunk did. It needs to have a novel or two published which are identifiably part of the movement and meet with acclaim. (Although influence doesn't necessarily require broad popular acclaim: as Elizabeth Hand has suggested, Hope Mirrlees's enormously influential *Lud-in-the-Mist* was like the Velvet Underground's first album – only a thousand people bought it, but all of them started bands.) Movement-themed anthologies are also a touchstone for influence, provided they come out when the movement is still live. Pat Cadigan's *The Ultimate Cyberpunk* (2002) is a far more balanced survey of the

movement than Sterling's *Mirrorshades*; but because the Cadigan came out a decade too late, the Sterling is the book everyone refers to. Time is always short for movements; what I'm arguing is that the internet has compressed the timescale for movements' lifecycles so radically that in future it's going to be difficult for them to put down any achievements – which in this field means books – before gravity pulls them down. As China Mieville said in *Matrix* 169,

New Weird not only will become cliché, it already has started to become cliché. Without turning my back on it, this is partly why I'm not going to talk about New Weird any more (as I explain in the forthcoming Nebula Anthology). You can already see books which are second generation riffs on some of the stuff that's been coming out over the last five years. And it doesn't mean they're all bad - standing on the shoulders of what's gone before is part of what we all do. But the point at which it becomes a mannerism, and we're like 'Oh god, another fantasy-sf-hybrid-with-dark-gothic-grotesque-lovecraftian-monsters, yawn,' fine - then, time to write something else: history's moved on.

History moves on more and more quickly, but writing and publishing take the same amount of time. In thinking of the influence the internet has had on our genre conversations, I find myself remembering the character in Gardner Dozois's story 'Morning Child' who ages from boyhood to senescence in the course of a day and then wakes the next morning as a child again. When the cycle is so accelerated, it's hard to get things done, particularly when they require sustained effort. (There's also a tendency to repetition of the same patterns, and I admit to getting kind of frustrated at endless internet debates rehashing, say, the aesthetics of sf from the ground up without any reference to the work that Knight or Delany or Russ did on this in the past. That's why gatekeepers are sometimes useful.) Anyhow, to return to Mundane sf, I reserve the right to be surprised if Trent Walters and his colleagues get a new burst of inspiration. In many ways, I hope they do prove me wrong; what they're arguing for is too important to fall by the wayside. But when argument can happen so much faster than achievement, I doubt that they – or many other proponents of movements – are going to leave a mark behind. ▼

Graham Sleight lives in London and writes for *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and *Interzone*.

In November 2005 it was announced that *SCI FICTION*, the fiction section of the *SCI FI* channel's *SCI FI.COM* website, was to close down. Since 2000, under the guidance of editor Ellen Datlow, *SCI FICTION* had been building a reputation as a groundbreaking online publisher. Stories from the site have garnered recognition from a variety of awards over the years, and the site as a whole won the Hugo for Best Website just last summer, with its editor Datlow simultaneously winning the Hugo for Best Editor. The response to the announcement of the site's closure has been Dave Schwartz's *ED SF Project* (the Ellen Datlow/*SCI FICTION* Project). The *ED SF Project* has provided *SCI FICTION*'s many readers with a forum for showing their appreciation for the site and its editor, by allowing them to post reviews and personal reflections on each of the 350+ short stories published on *SCI FICTION* to a dedicated weblog. The following four appreciations first went up on the *ED SF Project* weblog (<http://edsfproject.blogspot.com/>) in November 2005.

'Amnesty' by Octavia Butler An appreciation by Claire Light

In trying to create an egalitarian civil society, we deliberately lose, or avoid learning, the ability to understand the master/slave relationship. In America especially, we also avoid understanding oppressive relationships built on cultural, racist, classist, and gendered divides. We seem to convince ourselves that not knowing somehow protects us from becoming. Even as veins of all of these dynamics run through every part of our society, we deliberately blind ourselves.

Octavia Butler's project in over a dozen books of fiction has been to look hard at these relationships in all their brutality and cold comfort. Entering a Butler story is a process of falling in love and then steeling yourself for pain; the payoff is fascination, a view of life you never wanted to see, but can't look away from. However you proceed from the experience her stories offer, you're left with a gratitude towards Butler herself, that she was brave enough to put herself through such a shocking reckoning, and to record the event so the rest of us can follow from a safer distance. I imagine that Butler herself might feel some gratitude towards her protagonists, who are always balanced between two hostile cultures, and who choose to absorb that hostility to create a bridge. They allow her to put them through hell, so that she can report on what hell is like, and maybe report a way out of it.

Butler pursues this project through an essential plot construct, repeated in different ways throughout her oeuvre: a character, almost always a woman, emerges from violent, invasive captivity – captured first by foreign invaders, then by her own people, now suspicious of her relation to aliens. Ironically, it is this experience of being a captive of both cultures that gives her power over both. She is the only one who can bridge the two. Fearful of both, and not forgiving either, she still inserts herself – her body and her heart and mind – into the gap, knowing that either or both may hurt or kill her for her generosity. It is not all heroism; she has nowhere else to go, and if she fails, humanity may not survive.

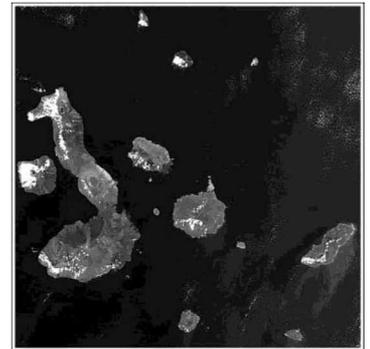
'Amnesty' distills the essential Butler

moment. Noah was kidnapped and experimented upon as a child by recently arrived and technologically superior aliens. When she was released, the US government held her captive for several years, torturing her for information. Now she works for the aliens, recruiting humans to serve in their now-harmless experiments.

Almost the entire story is a dialogue between her and the six human recruits. The protagonist, heroic as she is, is also calculating, revealing her story to her hearers slowly, tactically reassuring them, shocking them, arousing their anger and their pity and their fear. Her personal goal, beyond the aliens' instructions to "calm" the humans, is to convince her afraid and hostile or self-deluding hearers of her essential message: you don't have to like it, you don't have to forgive, but if you want to survive you have to deal with it. The end of the story is not a win or a loss, but simply the end of the dialogue.

Reading 'Amnesty' recalls for me every traumatic and wonderful Butler book I've read, and reminds me, again, of how much reading Butler has changed my view of my world and my place in it. What changed me was Butler forcing me to root for characters who didn't stand up for their rights (because it would have gotten them killed) but rather compromised out of necessity. She forced me to look at myself, at my often silly insistence upon abstract rights in the face of daily, unbearable, soul-destroying compromise. Would I be able to be a slave? Could I do what was necessary to save not only myself but my entire community? What would I do in a situation in which I had no good choices?

What Butler does is to take a 'minority' experience – an experience of being unbearably helpless and compromised, a frightening experience, an experience of taking power when you have none, and making choices when no one gives you any, of ignoring the drive toward triumph because there's no victory to be had, and living without joy because grief has crushed it – and make us want to know about it. It's not feel-good multi-culti boosterism. It's the complex and painful truth, told imaginatively and with respect for your intelligence and choice. I'm grateful for these stories.



Archipelago

Short Stories

'Russian Vine' by Simon Ings**An appreciation by Abigail Nussbaum**

So the aliens come. They take one good look at humanity and come to the obvious conclusions – we're violent, self-destructive, out of control. Give us a couple more decades and we'll bomb ourselves back into the stone age. And then we'll really get to work.

Cue the exploding national monuments, right? Or the armies of implacable, green-skinned killing machines, or the shadowy groups who quietly take over the government? How about 'To Serve Man'?

Not according to Simon Ings in his 2001 story, 'Russian Vine'. Ings' aliens, the Puscha, aren't interested in conquest or destruction. They like things to be quiet, orderly, beautiful, and a war-like Earth doesn't fit in with their plans.

So they eliminate our ability to read.

The elimination of literacy naturally leads to the collapse of the planet's larger institutions, the global economy, and most governments.

Rob a culture of literacy, and rumour replaces record, anecdotes supersede annals. The drive to cooperation remains, but cooperation itself, on a grand scale, becomes impractical. The dream of universal understanding fades. Nations are reborn, and, within them, peoples – reborn or invented. Models of the world proliferate, and science – beyond a rude natural philosophy – becomes impossible. Religions multiply and speciate, fetishising wildly. Parochialism arises in all its finery, speaking argot, wearing folk dress, dancing its ethnic dance.

Ings avoids the cliché of the jack-booted alien invaders, but he also refuses to tell a story about the benevolent parent race who save us from our own weaknesses. 'Russian Vine' is told from the point of view of Connie, a Puscha bureaucrat stationed on Earth, who can't himself decide whether he's an invader, an imperialist, or a savior. The marvel of Ings' story is that neither can we. Nor can we decide whether the Puscha were right to act as they did.

But what's most surprising about 'Russian Vine' is that, at its heart, it is a love story, albeit a very sad one. The aimless, rootless Connie lives among humans but constantly at a remove from them. He tries to make connection – with the human Rebecca, whose meeting with Connie has the distinct undertones of both the *resistance* member who seduces a German officer and the young native who allows herself to be seduced by an aging colonialist, and with a nameless young Parisienne with whom he has a brief affair – but ultimately he is alone, a middle-aged imperialist straight out of Graham Greene, who doesn't understand the society he lives in but can't find in himself the strength to leave.

Through Connie, through his relationship with Rebecca, and through the Puscha's actions on Earth, Ings conflates the personal and the political. Did the Puscha render humanity illiterate because they are indifferent guardians of life, conscientious gardeners? Or was their true, unacknowledged motivation a desire to encourage the balkanization of Earth's society – as Connie puts it, "We are good gardeners, but we are too flashy. We succumb again and again to our vulgar hunger for exotica. ... We have made this place our hothouse"? Does Rebecca

betray Connie out of racial pride, or does she do it because he's been unfaithful to her?

'Russian Vine' is a story that will leave you with more questions than answers. Sad and haunting in all the best possible ways, it has lingered with me for nearly five years because of its terrifying premise (what could be worse, after all, for a voracious reader?), its beautiful prose, and the unanswerable riddles it poses.

'The Discharge' by Christopher Priest**An appreciation by Paul Kincaid**

Sometime in the mid-1970s there was a change in Christopher Priest's writing. It was signalled by a pair of short stories, 'An Infinite Summer' (1976) and 'Paley Loitering' (1979), atmospheric tales whose emphasis on psychology and strangeness was a move away from the overtly science fictional pieces that had preceded them. His novel of that period, *A Dream of Wessex* (1977), in retrospect, can be seen as a harbinger of the themes and manners of his later work. But it was the stories set in the Dream Archipelago that really trumpeted the fact that here was something disturbing, challenging and new. There were only five stories, the first appearing in 1978, the last in 1980, but they must loom large in any appreciation of Priest's subsequent writing.

The Dream Archipelago stories are set in a world in which the large continent in the north is home to sophisticated nations whose technology and culture are roughly on a par with our own. The two largest of these nations are engaged in a seemingly endless war, which is fought out in the barren and largely uninhabited southern continent. The sea between the two continents is dotted with a string of islands so profuse that there is no island from which it is impossible to see several others. The islands of the Dream Archipelago have maintained a strict neutrality, though the terms differ from island to island. Some allow no outsiders to land, others allow no outsiders to leave once they have landed, still others allow troopships to visit for the purposes of rest and recreation. There are many whores in the Dream Archipelago.

Overtly based on the Greek islands, just becoming a popular but still exotic package holiday destination at the time the stories were being written, the islands of the Dream Archipelago are presented as warm and alluring. But for the visitors we follow in four of the five original stories (in 'The Negation' (1978), the Dream Archipelago is an aspiration that is never achieved), it is a place where sexual dreams become nightmares, where the desirable becomes a trap, and where perverse psycho-sexual dramas are played out to a generally fatal conclusion. The Dream Archipelago sequence reached its climax with *The Affirmation* (1981), which revealed our world to be a psychotic echo of the Dream Archipelago, and vice versa, a self-deluding mobius strip of realities which drained the setting of all further figurative and psychological value. After that stunning tour de force of a novel, it seemed, there was nothing more that could possibly be said about the Dream Archipelago.

Then, in 1999, twenty years after his first visit to the islands, Priest gathered the Dream Archipelago stories (all revised to some extent) into one volume, with a linking thread of narrative. The enterprise clearly reawakened the narrative energy that the setting had once provided, and he followed the collection with a new Dream Archipelago story, 'The Discharge.' With such a genesis there is one inevitable question: has the Dream Archipelago emerged

intact from its twenty-year hiatus? To which the answer has to be: yes. The sheer nastiness of the fate that awaited visitors – the islands can feel like a sort of Venus fly trap, tempting their victims in to a sweet and sticky end – is no more. Indeed the story ends, if not with a note of redemption, then at least with a sense of continuity, of survival, possibly even of some sort of achievement. But if that is different, the casual cruelty of the islands along the way is the same as ever, and the perverse, unsettling, psycho-sexual overtones remain dark and foreboding.

'The Discharge' – as in so many of Priest's fictions, the title is a simple declarative that yet hides a dizzying multiplicity of interpretations: electrical discharge, military discharge, ejaculation, pus, among others – is a story of lost identity, of the uncertainty of our place within the world. One of the things that the Dream Archipelago allowed was the displacement of the individual, the cutting loose from context. When, in *The Affirmation*, that displacement became possible within our contemporary reality, it opened up the road that Priest's fictions have followed ever since. As our unnamed narrator "emerge(s) into my memories" in the very first line of the story, it places him immediately in the company of Peter Sinclair in *The Affirmation*, Richard Grey in *The Glamour* (1984, revised 1996), and J.L. Sawyer in *The Separation* (2002), all characters whose memory is unreliable, hence weakening their grip on who they are.

Our narrator is, we discover, a new recruit in a northern army marching down to the troopship that will take him away to the battlefields of the southern continent. But as the troopship carries him past the mysterious islands of the Dream Archipelago, the litany of their names found on an illicit map (maps have been a recurring feature of Priest's work since at least the one found in *Inverted World* (1974)) reawakens something in our narrator's fragmented memory. It seems he was an artist, or at least had an interest in art, or at least in the works of one particular painter, Rascar Acizzone, from the Dream Archipelago island of Muriseay. Acizzone was a leading exponent of an art style known as 'tactilism,' which employed a new technology, "ultrasound microcircuitry." Like the scintilla in 'The Watched' (1978), this new technology is used within the Dream Archipelago to lay bare the sexual self and then entrap the user within that sexuality. In this instance, Acizzone's paintings are layerings of colour that more than anything seem to resemble the work of Rothko, but when anyone touches the paintings the ultrasound reveals a representation of their deepest sexual imagining. Over time, we discover later in the story, the ultrasound can also destroy one's memory, which probably explains what happened to our narrator (and almost certainly explains why Acizzone's paintings have now fallen out of fashion and are all but forgotten).

Then the troops are given shore time in Muriseay. The narrator goes in search of Acizzone (and, implicitly, his own memory), but without success, and in the end finds himself drawn to a nightclub already crowded with soldiers. He is targeted by the whores in the club and led away into a dark labyrinth of rooms and corridors where, inexplicably, he finds himself witness to sexual tableaux which recreate two of the most charged images he had

found in Acizzone's paintings. Then, abruptly, he escapes and returns to the troopship which takes him on to the war zone. During the years he spends in the army in the freezing wastelands of the southern continent, he experiences an almost constant diet of fear and boredom, but no actual fighting. The war itself seems to be always somewhere else. But as the three-thousandth anniversary of the start of the war approaches, the troops become convinced that a major push is about to happen. On the eve of the campaign, the narrator deserts. By giving over all his accumulated army pay, he persuades a group of whores to smuggle him across to the Dream Archipelago, only to discover he is just one of a very large number making the same journey.

Since the Dream Archipelago is so clearly identified with sex, at its most alluring and its most threatening, it is inevitable that it is a network of whores who provide his safe refuge on island after island as he makes his way across the Dream Archipelago. He discovers, or rediscovers, an artistic talent of his own, and funds his journey by painting for tourists along the way. His destination, inevitably, is Muriseay, where he starts to experiment with ultrasound. Eventually he produces a series of pictures whose hidden sexual imagery is overlaid with images drawn from the fear and isolation he



experienced in the army. To store his pictures he rents an abandoned building which contains a curious labyrinth of corridors and rooms, and which is surely the same night club where he experienced the strange sexual visions on his journey to the war. Then military policemen catch up with him at the store house. They are here to give him his discharge – a euphemism for beating him up and perhaps killing him – but though injured, the narrator escapes because the policemen accidentally touch the paintings, and the images they contain prove too powerful for them. A fire starts, caused by the use of

their electric batons against the paintings; but even if they were not killed in the fire we might safely assume that they had been destroyed by the images in the pictures.

And our narrator flees to another island, to face more mysteries of the Dream Archipelago. For once, the islands have not killed the one caught in their sexual trap, but for all that they remain as potent and disturbing as ever. 'The Discharge' is a measure of how far Priest has come in the last quarter century. The evocation of islands with a beautiful surface but which are considerably less beautiful underneath, is perhaps more subtle. These are real, working places, as contradictory as anywhere else we might visit. But what is really interesting is how the familiar setting proves so adept at staging a story of fragmentary identity, uncertainty of self, the sort of theme that has become more and more central in novels such as *The Prestige* (1996), *The Extremes* (1998) and *The Separation* (2002). In the early stories the exotic landscape of the Dream Archipelago was a place where the sexual imaginings of the characters could be made visible and then turned against them. In 'The Discharge' these same sexual imaginings serve a more subtle purpose, not to establish an identity – the narrator remains as unknown and unknowable at the end of the story as he is at the beginning, even to himself – but to make a damaged personality whole enough to survive. It is more positive

than we are used to in the Dream Archipelago, but it forms a fascinating development in the way Priest is exploring how our sense of identity shapes our understanding of and our engagement with the world about us.

'Bears Discover Smut' by Michael Bishop An appreciation by Elizabeth Bear

Michael Bishop's 'Bears Discover Smut' is a farce, a fantasy, a fable, a story of social and personal change that, not incidentally, also happens to be a sort of responsorial to Terry Bisson's award-winning 1991 farce, fantasy, fable, and story of social and personal change, 'Bears Discover Fire.' (The Bishop story is dedicated to Bisson.) But it also stands on its own quite beautifully as a tale of loss and failure and unrecognized hypocrisy – both a parable of tolerance, and a dissection of false faces.

'Bears Discover Fire' is the story of Uncle Bobby, a 60-year-old man concerned with his dying mother, in a world where bears have, as the title suggests, discovered fire. The bears of the title are mostly backgrounded, irrelevant to the narrator's life except in terms of a background curiosity, a type example of the manner in which the true marvels of the world are lost in daily concerns and the everyday need to get the children fed and the dishes washed.

Use of fire is perhaps the strongest Western symbol of civilization – even of intelligence. Our classical gods of home are gods of the hearth and the forge, and we speak popularly of the mastery of fire as the defining moment that separates humans from the animal kingdoms. (Coyotes will reportedly put out small fires, in the obvious coyote-approved fashion, but their mastery of Kipling's Red Flower is generally considered to be of a different order – more practical in the short run, perhaps, but less visionary.) H. Beam Piper gives us the 'talk-and-build-a-fire' rule of thumb for determining the intelligence of alien species; Prometheus gives us fire from the gods.

Fire is humanity, on a deep cultural level.

As the bears evolve a sort of civilization and community, Uncle Bobby attempts to protect his mother, accept her going, and ease her passage from the world – while simultaneously struggling to civilize his nephew, to teach him practicality and logic – and morality, as well. As the human culture seems to be slipping inexorably into barbarism, the bears are founding a society. "Looks like bears have discovered fire," Bobby's brother Wallace drawls at the end of Bisson's story, a dry anticlimax that condenses the story's many complex ironies into a final, crowning indictment of the willful blindness of so many of its characters. Bears have discovered fire. And people have lost it.

'Bears Discover Smut,' on the other hand, offers the revelatory sentence in the first scene:

"Well," said Snooky, "looks like bears have discovered cheesecake."

"Smut, you mean."

"Call it what you like. It keeps me in beans and grits." Snooky shook his head. "I just never thought a dumb beast would stoop so low."

And by contrast to Uncle Bobby and his domestic concerns, Tommy Kyle, the narrator of 'Bears Discover Smut,' is a self-described hypocrite. A Testifier – a conservative preacher – with an illicit smut habit and a tendency to minister to the waitresses at girlie-themed restaurants in preference to the poor or misguided, a father and husband who avoids his wife and two children while mouthing platitudes about 'sacrifice.' He is as unlike Uncle Bobby in as many ways as it is possible to be, while still

remaining a white, Southern, socially conservative male. Additionally, the Eponymous Bears of 'Smut' are far more central to the plot than those of 'Fire,' and they are genetically engineered – a created, even imposed social change rather than an organic and natural evolution.

That contrast is helpful, I think, to a rounded understanding of the story. Because while the evolution – and I choose that term advisedly – of 'Fire' is elegiac and inexorable, the process by which the protagonist of 'Smut' is forced to adapt to change is a sort of personal and political catastrophism – deeply appropriate to a fire and brimstone preacher.

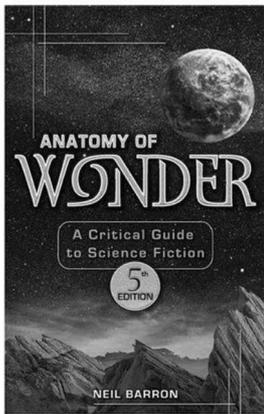
The Smut Bears are portrayed as animalistic, grunting, licking and chewing on the centerfolds of girlie magazines. Where the Fire Bears are noble savages, the Smut Bears are nasty and brutish, a despised slave class facing intense legal and personal discrimination. They move through human society, but they are not protected, and Tommy Kyle doesn't think that they have souls. "Bears die forever," he says, "and probably deserve to."

He has no evidence for this conclusion, however, beyond rhetoric, and for this reader, it's suspicious that his justifications serve to assuage whatever scraps of conscience he maintains. He refuses responsibility for his own failings – "I love my wife. I love my children. But Satan and our fun-worshipping society – devilry and greed in evil cahoots – have conspired to drag me sinward, and that summer I often stumbled toward it." – and places the blame instead on anyone and anything he can locate. Bishop provides in the character of Tommy Kyle a powerful portrayal of hypocrisy and sanctimony, and he doesn't stint in bringing it to its inevitable conclusion, as he slowly alienates (in all senses of the word) his family and his ministry. It's significant in the symbolic structure of this story that Tommy Kyle at one point speaks of men and women as separate species. In this metaphorical scaffolding, his comments on the bears as 'animalistic,' his refusal to admit that they could have souls (even when his freshly unemployed brother-in-law appears at his church with the bear who took his job in tow, seeking his ministry), and his addiction to smut (like the titular bears) coupled with his comparison of his wife to a different species make it very plain that Tommy Kyle considers himself a sort of elite, and he's comfortable using the rhetoric of racism, sexism, and oppression to enforce that position.

Other characters see him more clearly, however. Minerva, a hostess at one of the strip clubs Tommy Kyle attends services at, points out his likeness to the grubby male bear who seems to follow him through the story, from blue newstand to smutty bar, until, in the end, proving the catalyst of Tommy Kyle's self-provided ruin... and his eventual salvation, in reduced but far more honest circumstances.

Like 'Fire,' 'Smut' is a story that works because of its layered ironies and deft symbolism. Tommy Kyle the liar and hypocrite finds himself, eventually, reborn into a bearish existence, and in that existence – where he, fallen, finds himself living on the same level as the animals whose humanity he has so consistently denied – he comes to an understanding of himself as human. It's a lingering image, and a powerful one; a story of redemption through loss without sugary overtones.

And when Tommy Kyle finds a sort of tattered decency by accepting and transcending the truths he sought to deny, he also becomes sympathetic, a transformation of a more evolutionary sort. **V**



**Neil Barron –
Anatomy of
Wonder: A
Critical Guide
to Science
Fiction, 5th
Edition**

Libraries Unlimited, Westport
CT, 2004, 995pp,
\$80.00/\$45.99, h/b, ISBN 1-
59158-171-0

**Reviewed by
Steve Jeffery**

This is the fifth, and judging by Barron's valedictory Preface, possibly the final edition of *Anatomy of Wonder*, and has been substantially updated, revised and enlarged from its 1995 predecessor and now weighs in at over twice the length of its original incarnation in 1976. The first and third editions of this Guide were previously reviewed in *Vector* by Brian Stableford (Nov 1976), and Paul Kincaid (April 1988) who are both contributors to this volume, alongside an impressive list of critics, reviewers, academics and commentators.

Anatomy of Wonder, its editor tells us, is intended for a broad and overlapping readership, ranging from academics and teachers, scholars and librarians, to the sf reader, fan and the 'casually curious' (non-genre) reader, although I suspect that the price of this edition may put it beyond the reach of all but the most devoted of the latter.

The work is divided into three main sections (it is rounded off by over 100 pages of indexes, by author, title and theme, of which more later). Part I, 'The Primary Literature – A Critical History', is an overview of the history and development of the genre, divided chronologically into five chapters. Brian Stableford opens with 'The Emergence of Science Fiction, 1516-1914' (Stableford starts, for argument's sake, with More's *Utopia*) and 'Science Fiction Between the Wars, 1915-1939'. On the very first page, though, we encounter one of those niggling problems that are bound to beset critical guides intended for a wide ranging readership: that of definition. Stableford largely sidesteps the issue, referring the interested reader to Wolfe's *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide* (1986), which may be the better part of valour, but is not entirely helpful in a volume intended, in part, as a teaching guide. The issue of definitions is tackled later on, in Part III, but since there is no subject index, you have to read the whole work to realise this, which rather negates the point of a reference work. The lack of a proper subject index is, however, possibly the only criticism I have of *Anatomy of Wonder* for how it works on its own terms.

Paul A. Carter takes up the story in Chapter 3, 'From the Golden Age to the Atomic Age: 1940-1963' while Michael M. Levy

brings us up to date with 'The New Wave and After, 1964-1984' and 'Cyberpunk and Beyond, 1984-2004'. On the whole, the coverage is well balanced between developments on both sides of the Atlantic, and nods towards the British Boom in a short section 'Space Opera Redux', the increasing genre-mainstream crossover, and the advent of the New Weird. At barely 85 pages, the critical history presented cannot be as detailed or comprehensive as more specialised works, such as Stableford's *Scientific Romance in Britain* or Edward James's *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, but serves as a useful adjunct to these and others.

Part II, 'Primary Literature – Annotated Bibliography', takes up the largest chunk of the book, with some 1400 titles, alphabetically arranged by author and also indexed by theme and references to similar works. In this it follows the model of M.H. Zool's *Good Reading Guide to Science Fiction and Fantasy* (although *Anatomy of Wonder* largely excludes generic fantasy) and David Pringle's *The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction* (although the latter is arranged alphabetically by title). This is also the part, one suspects, that gave the publishers most grief, as the temptation is to add ever more up-to-date titles. The latest reference I can find is a note on Stephen Baxter's *Exultant* (2004).

Part III, 'Secondary Literature – Annotated Bibliography', serves a similar purpose for critical and reference works on or about science fiction, but is necessarily more of a catch-all, including publishing and magazine statistics, online resources (expanded from the previous edition), library collections, media (including radio), illustration and awards. The division between general reference (37 titles) and history and criticism (251 titles) seems somewhat arbitrary, but as a whole the list feels comprehensive. Along with annotated references to a further 173 author studies, it included all of the titles (3 dozen or so) on my own shelves, apart from those specific to fantasy, including both the Zool *Reading Guide* mentioned above, Andrew M. Butler's *The Pocket Essential Cyberpunk*, and (pleasingly) fan studies such as Harry Warner's *All Our Yesterdays*.

The selection of 'Best Books' chosen by the contributors, in Chapter 16, 'Listings' (along with a miscellany of Awards, Series and Young Adult Books and Translations) is the one most likely to provoke disagreement and debate, but then, fans being what they are, that is an almost inevitable result of any published list.

If it wasn't for the price, I'd have little hesitation in recommending this to anyone with a serious interest in sf criticism, but if your budget doesn't stretch that far, badger your central library to add this to their collection.



First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger



Ray Bradbury – *R is for Rocket*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 227pp, £25.00
h/b, ISBN 1-904619-77-0

Ray Bradbury – *S is for Space*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 217pp, £25.00,
h/b, ISBN 1-904619-80-0

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst



PS Publishing have done something wonderful, but it is almost impossible to tell – they are not blowing their own trumpet. In these two re-publications they pre-sent Ray Bradbury's 1962 and 1965 collections (the text possibly revised), with the original magazine illustrations, and jacket illustrations too: so here are 'The Fog Horn' along with a leviathan towering across two pages that appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* on June 23, 1951 when the story was called 'The Beast From Twenty Thousand Fathoms', and here is the wash illustration for

'The Trolley' from *Good Housekeeping* in July 1955, while from the pulps are the coarser line drawings that accompanied 'Chrysalis' in *Amazing Stories* in July 1946 or 'Dark They Were, And Golden Eyed' in *Thrilling Wonder Stories* in August 1949. There is scarcely one story that does not have an original illustration. I'm slightly more confused by the covers: from a search on the web for first editions, *R is for Rocket* has kept Joe Magnaini's original oil of a spaceman standing by the base of a rocket, a nebula in the distant sky behind him, but the original cover seems to have been printed as a blue monochrome – now the jacket is in full colour. *S is for Space* also comes in a Joe Magnaini cover, though I cannot find a copy of that original, and Bradbury had moved to another publisher – had he kept the same cover artist?

The strangest thing about PS Publishing's silence, though, is in something they print. The cover blurbs are clearly the reprints of the original editions, nothing is added. On the rear fold-over you can read the original blurbs praising the educational value of Bradbury's stories from the *New York Times* and High School recommendations. Like Bradbury's own fictions, these books have passed through a time-warp unchanged.

R is for Rocket promised "seventeen of his most popular science fiction stories, including several that have not appeared before", though some had been collected and re-collected in different volumes and fix-ups, but as his introduction dedicated this collection to all boys, "the stars are yours", it must have been aimed at a young adult readership, for whom Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov had been writing novels throughout the fifties; perhaps even as a school reader. Three years later the twenty-two stories of *S is for Space* promised "not only *S is for Space*, but *D is for Dread* and *T is for Terrifying*, or *D is for Delight*". More interestingly, perhaps, is a division which does not appear in this book at all, but stands out when checking a bibliography (these books come without one): *R is for Rocket* is the 'slick' collection and *S is for Space* is the 'pulp' collection. I am

talking about the magazines where these stories first appeared. *R is for Rocket* collects stories from the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, *Maclean's* and *Collier's* among others, while the main sources of *S is for Space* are *Amazing Stories*, *Planet Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Galaxy* and *F&SF*. It is not a pure division – *R is for Rocket* also includes contributions to *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, *Super Science Stories* and *Planet Stories*, while *S is for Space* has stories from *Good Housekeeping* and *Mademoiselle* amongst others – but it is a reasonable division.

After seventy pages of rockets, when readers opened 'The Sound of Thunder' (Bradbury's 'treading on a butterfly in the past' story) did they realise they were reading a story that dates back to the myth of Prometheus and passed through Dr Faustus and Victor Frankenstein? Or another third of the way through, after the three page 'Gift' (boy on rocket is shown the stars on Christmas Day, shining like the lights on a Christmas Tree), when they read the long 'Frost and Fire' did they realise that they were reading another Promethean tale disguised in a dystopian de-evolved cave man journey? 'The Gift' and 'Frost and Fire' also make an interesting pairing because in their way they deliberately avoid conceptual breakthroughs. In the last sentence of 'The Gift' the child is looking into the enormities of space but he sees in it only candles burning, while in 'Frost and Fire' the troglodytes reach an abandoned spaceship and become space travellers – their previous life, which metabolises from birth to death in seven days, becoming a dream as they take off. Both stories manage to drop other interpretations as easily as spent fuel tanks are detached.

Throughout these collections children both yearn for the easy life of Mid-West America and wish to pass through the gates of the rocket ports that stand on the edge of their towns. Often enough their destinations in space already are, or become, the towns they have left behind. Parents are neither forceful nor reactionary – if your father is a spaceman then you don't see him very often, but then neither did Arthur Ransome's Swallows see their father in the navy. Meanwhile parents want their children to be happy, as in arranging for the portholes to be opened to see the Christmas 'Gift'. At least, that is in the world of 'the rocket man' (and woman, though women pilots never appear).

On the other hand what if childish wonder is exploited along with childish ignorance? In 'Zero Hour' Mink and her friends are playing hide-and-seek along with her new friends from the 'dim, dim, dim'. She cannot say 'another dimension'. Her parents, not realising until it's almost too late, just have time to hide in the attic. Then "the lock melted". There is something seminal about entrances in sf and fantasy – "the lock melted" requires no more words than Delany's "the door dilated" and both are redolent with unspoken meaning. The same theme of unwitting opening has appeared in John Twelve Hawks' *The Traveller* in 2005, but he is going to need another seven hundred pages and two more volumes to do what Bradbury captured in ten pages.

(A three volume set containing both *R is for Rocket* and *S is for Space*, along with a third volume of original material, *Forever and the Earth: Yesterday and Tomorrow Tales*, is also available, as are slip-cased editions of these two volumes. See the PS Publishing web-site).



Ramsey Campbell – *Secret Stories*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 418pp,
£25.00, h/b, ISBN 1-904619-51-7

**Reviewed by Dave M.
Roberts**

There is a school of thought that those who write horror must to some extent enjoy the pain that is inflicted upon their characters. There must be turn of mind that allows them not only to think these things but also to put them on paper. Ramsey Campbell takes this one stage further in *Secret Stories*. Not only does the

writer enjoy the pain, but he has also inflicted it.

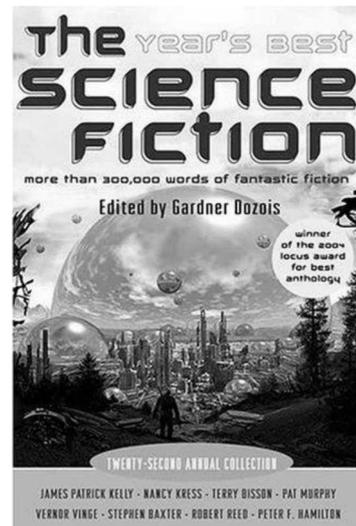
Ramsey Campbell imbues his central character, Dudley Smith, with a good many of the clichéd stereotypes regarding horror readers. He is socially inadequate, resentful and unattached. He takes refuge in the power fantasies in which those he (always he) blames for his current circumstances get a well deserved come-uppance. Smith, however, doesn't read the stories. He writes them. He also writes them sufficiently well for one to win a short story competition which is intended to seek out new talent for the launch of a Liverpool-based arts magazine. The decision, of course, splits the judges between those who see the story as a powerful and affecting piece and those that view it with some disgust and regard it as little more than an almost pornographic portrayal of a woman being terrorised. What they can agree on is that it stays with them after reading it. The editors choose to publish it, partly as they believe that at the very least it may stir up some controversy and hence increase sales of the magazine, another common cliché regarding the production of Horror fiction. Those most appalled by Smith's story are portrayed with a world view less harmful than Smith's but equally blinkered. This makes for one or two of them being more caricatures than characters, although this may well be a deliberate attempt to undermine the views they express.

Dudley Smith has always been very secretive about his stories and it is his mother who shines the public spotlight on them by entering the story for the competition. Smith's grip on reality, never that strong, is loosened by the publicity and it becomes even more tenuous when work is started on a film of the stories. To do this, the unnamed killers from each of the stories become merged into one who takes on an a distinct identity. Dudley is unable to distinguish between the personalities of the actor and the character, or even himself and his character. He somehow cannot comprehend why the actor comes out of character whenever he his not actually performing.

Central to the story's development is Smith's relationship with two women, his mother and Patricia, an editor on the magazine who initially felt that the story was powerful and affecting. Dudley's mother, of course, cannot conceive that there is anything wrong with him. Even when confronted with almost irrefutable evidence of his actions, this just raises her level of self-delusion and denial to epic proportions. It is Patricia who supports Smith in getting his stories into print. She is also instrumental in persuading him that he should allow his other work to be made available. This is most useful when it discovered that the original story is rather too close to the real events of the death of a local woman. The encouragement that she provides differs from that of Smith's mother. His mother will just leave him alone to write, but persuades him to publish. Patricia actively wants to help him overcome his writer's block, as a result of this Smith decides that she can help with his research. This decision makes for easily the most powerful and disturbing sequence of the book.

The story takes us some way into the mind of the psychopath, but what we get to see is little more than might be expected: a high level of self-justification, especially once he has come to terms with his stories being in the public domain, and the general belief that anything that goes wrong cannot possibly be his fault. This does have the effect of strengthening Smith's character as stereotypical Horror fan. Unfortunately it also means that we lose any kind of real moral complexity within his justification for his actions. Dudley Smith is simply doing research and, since he unable to feel any empathy with anyone (including his own Mother), as far as he is concerned this is quite enough.

Ramsey Campbell has, with some degree of success, attempted to both satirise popularly held views of the horror genre and to take us some way into the mind of a psychopath. The result a is gripping and effective crime thriller.



Gardner Dozois (ed.) – *The Year's Best Science Fiction Twenty-Second Annual Collection*

St. Martin's Press, New York, 2005,
\$19.95, 664pp, t/p, ISBN: 0-312-
33660-8

**Reviewed by Alan
Fraser**

This book has taken me months to read: not only is it nearly seven hundred pages of close type, but the material is densely written, requiring concentration of a much

higher order than that usually required to read novel-length fiction. I can consume the average door-stopper of about the same size in far less time. After finishing it, I can say I've had a unique experience of a world I normally ignore, with Dozois' summary of 2004 full of publications, authors and stories I've never heard of. Although sf periodicals continued to wane in 2004, the expanding Web publishing scene brought in many newcomers, and many of the stories here are from new authors and were first published online.

My favourites from the dazzling list of authors like Vernor Vinge, Terry Bisson and Nancy Kress, included a cheeky story called 'The Third Party' by David Moles, set hundreds of years after the collapse of humanity's Golden Age. Members of the Outreach department of a civilisation called The Community, with starship names like Solidarity, are working undercover on an isolated lost colony planet called Salomé, which has raised itself back to 1930s level technology. Unfortunately a second human civilisation called The Association, with starship names like Elastic Demand, is also vying for the loyalty of the Saloméans. The political structures of both are obvious... The satisfying outcome is that the Saloméans rumble both of them, pit them against each other, and send them packing.

I also liked 'Investments' by Walter Jon Williams, a novella-length real space opera of interstellar skullduggery with a challenging scientific puzzle to solve in order to save a colony world, and James Patrick Kelly's 'Men Are Trouble', a noir detective story set in an all-female US city a generation after conquering aliens killed all the men on Earth. The race still continues, with the aliens selecting women seemingly at random to become pregnant with clones of themselves. The PI narrator, Fay Hardaway, was 'seeded' herself, but has just had an abortion to get rid of it, not wanting to bring up a child in this world. The seemingly routine case she's investigating

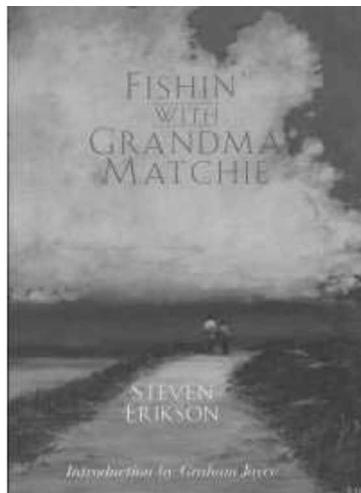


turns out to be both politically sensitive and to involve the winged 'devils' that now run Earth.

British authors get a small look-in, with M. John Harrison, Stephen Baxter, Colin P. Davies and Peter F. Hamilton. The latter contributes a delicious story called 'Footvote' in which an eccentric inventor, Bradley Murray, has discovered a wormhole to a planet he's named New Suffolk, and which is run by a set of rules that will bring delight to Middle England. New Suffolk is to be an English monoculture for 'decent people' with no compensation culture, Imperial measures and a long list of banned people including anyone who's ever belonged to a political party, journalists, EU bureaucrats, stockbrokers and traffic wardens. Murray even bans the casts of TV soaps and call centre managers! One point I found false – New Suffolk is to be a democratic republic, but surely the people it would attract are staunch Monarchists? Needless to say, England is emptying at a rate which is damaging the country as the population floods to New Suffolk. Jannette is totally opposed to everything New Suffolk stands for, but is placed in an impossible position when her estranged husband Colin snatches the kids and joins the emigration queue at the English end of the wormhole.

I was unhappy with Stephen Baxter's generation-starship story, 'Mayflower II', well-written though it is. The idea that someone from the start of the voyage has to stay alive to guide the 'transient' humans throughout the millennia-long journey to another galaxy sounded unique, as an immortal melds himself with the ship to live for thousands of years. Unfortunately it still ended negatively as almost all generation-starship stories do, with the ship's inhabitants gradually losing everything that makes them human, starting with literacy, while the immortal is powerless or disinclined to save them.

All in all, I can recommend this book almost unreservedly. A fantastic selection of the latest sf writing including many new authors and definitely material I would not otherwise have read.



**Steven Erikson –
Fishin' With
Grandma Matchie**

P.S. Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 90pp,
£10.00, p/b, ISBN 1-904619-12-6

**Reviewed by Estelle
Roberts**

Jock junior has an overwrought imagination, at least that's how many of the adults in his life try to rationalise his exceedingly surreal tales when asked that perennial favourite question

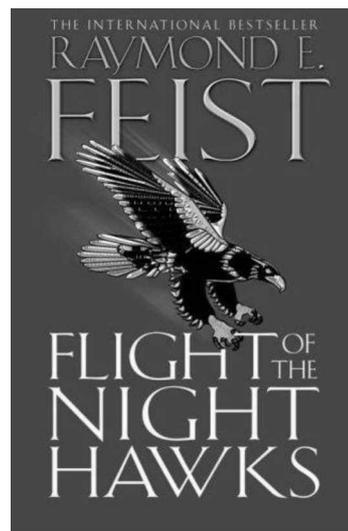
of teachers, what did you do during the holidays? As far as Jock is concerned, having adults disbelieve him is one of a long list of prepubescent problems, including a nuisance of a sister, a pair of eccentric parents, an overbearing teacher and great difficulties in dealing with girls. However, as he himself says, just because school has started, it doesn't mean that that things that were true in the summer aren't true now.

The tale of Jock's summer vacation is a dreamlike, helter-skelter ride involving kidnap and heroic rescue and a bizarre cast of characters, most of whom live underwater at least for part of the time. For Jock, and for most readers I would imagine, the most amazing is the eponymous Grandma Matchie herself. She is the kind of elderly relative that most children would give their right arm to have, adventurous, absolutely unafraid of anything, but also caring, albeit in a slightly grumpy manner at times. Jock adores her, even though, in typical childish

fashion, he finds the idea of her having a suitor difficult to understand and accept. She also lives underwater, and it is the depths of seas and lakes that much of this adventure takes place.

It is the style of this book as much as the story, however, that makes it an absolute delight to read. In a way reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky, Erikson introduces a large number of made-up words, which add to the surreal flavour, but this is done so that the meanings are very obvious to the reader, who may not even pay attention to a certain number of them. In fact some of them are actually recognisable words in a misspelled, elongated or other altered form, but they enhance the feeling of the narrator being a youngish boy. There are also some lovely small touches, for example, Jock's sister's hair changes colour and style as her mood alters, his mother fanatically sweeps the area where their holiday residence is located, and his father has a penchant for sitting in his home-made jacuzzi for days, watching films and drinking beer. Jock at one point regards himself and his grandmother as being the only sane ones in the family. His descriptions of those around him are also entertaining, the only thing he really notices about his teacher's physical appearance is her nose, in fact he regards her as one huge nose, and his father he sees as a bear due to his very hirsute body. The ending is satisfying in a way that doesn't jar with the rest of the story, and is a heartfelt call to continue using your imagination in the face of conformity.

This is a wonderful adventure that truly has the feel of being narrated by a child, but will appeal to fans of offbeat fantasy of all ages. It is the second story by Steven Erikson that I have read and reviewed, and I look forward to reading whatever he writes next.



**Raymond E. Feist
– Flight of the
Nighthawks**

Voyager, London, 2005, 420pp, £18.99,
h/b, ISBN 0-00-713374-X

**Reviewed by Vikki
Lee**

This latest offering from Ray Feist starts another new series, The Darkwar, set in Midkemia as always.

Three top agents of the Conclave of Shadows, namely; Pug's son Caleb, Talwin Hawkins (aka Talon of the Silver Hawk) and Kaspar, the reformed ex-despotic

Duke of Olasko, are sent to the southern Empire of Great Kesh to expose and destroy a new nest of Nighthawks. They slowly uncover the nest, and, in the process, discover a far-reaching dastardly plot to wreck the whole political stability of Midkemia – engineered as usual by the renegade Magician, Leso Varen, who has again taken over someone else's body to wreak his own particular brand of nastiness. The question (as always) is whose?

Meanwhile, Pug, his wife Miranda, and the increasingly irritating Nakor, are trying to solve the mystery of the 'Talnoy' – an apparently indestructible race of alien warriors first discovered in the previous trilogy. When news reaches them from Kelewan (where the Tsurani 'Great Ones' are studying a Talnoy with Pug's other son Magnus) Pug's efforts and resources are dangerously divided.

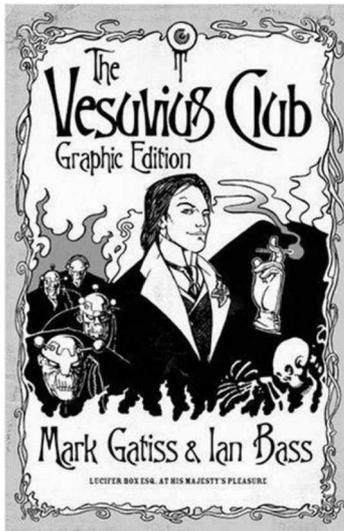
There is one further maguffin to toss into the mix of this latest offering, and that is a new character called Ralan Bek. When Nakor meets with Tomas (ex-human, now Elflord) at the cavern where the dormant Talnoy army are hidden, they are confronted by bandits. The leader challenges Tomas and very nearly bests him – which shouldn't be possible at all as Tomas' background



makes him more than just a little bit special in the area of swordplay. In true Feistian storytelling fashion, the young man ends up tagging along with Nakor and is the main riddle remaining unsolved at the end of the story.

I've read all of Feist's books over the years and have reviewed several, and still think he is consistently up there with the best when it comes to telling a damn good yarn. The general feel of late for me though, is that some of his characters and situations are getting just a little too 'homey' and comfortable, and the direst of evil becomes less worrisome when you know the characters and their capabilities so well that you simply don't worry for them anymore. They will overcome, and someone may even be sacrificed to enable new characters to be added to an already bulky cast-list. The evil will never really be vanquished as someone or something inevitably slips through the net to start threatening all over again in the next volume.

I don't mean this to sound damning because in the style of Ray Feist this is another page-turning romp that's as consistently enjoyable as any of his previous books – and will not disappoint a single one of his army of fans. It is not, however, cutting-edge or particularly original (Ralan Bek appears to be modelled on 'Vain' from Donaldson's Covenant books), just very entertaining.



Mark Gatiss and Ian Bass – *The Vesuvius Club* Graphic Edition

Simon & Schuster, London, 2005, 116pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-7432-7600-0

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

Apparently this graphic novel is an adaptation of the first novel in Mark Gatiss's Lucifer Box series. Set during the Edwardian era the story involves musing scientists, beautiful boys and girls and dastardly plans to cause massive volcanic eruptions. The

hero, Box, is part Oscar Wilde, part Sherlock Holmes and part James Bond but *The Vesuvius Club* is an example of when the whole falls some way short of being equal to the sum of the parts.

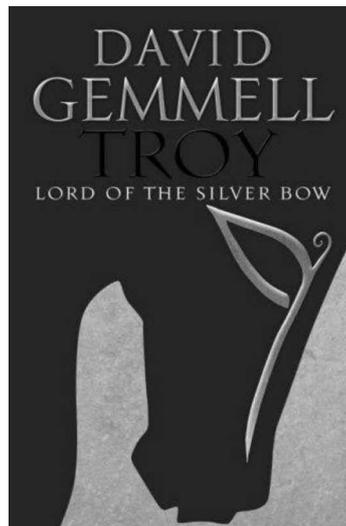
Gatiss's writing is lazy. There is no discernable effort expended on creating characters that could rise above their obvious stereotypes. Nor does the book contain anything to suggest that Gatiss was genuinely interested in telling a story, the plot stumbles from set-piece to set-piece via a handful of unlikely coincidences and unapologetic *dei ex machinis*. Instead Gatiss seems content to use *The Vesuvius Club* to show off – look at his characters' funny names: Lucifer Box, Bella Pok and Tom Bowler (I like a pun more than most but even I couldn't raise a grin at these). Then see how cleverly he subverts your bourgeois expectations: The hero is a homosexual! There's a woman with a penis! Except, of course, that not even the Telegraph-reading Tufton Bufton's of this world are shocked by that sort of thing anymore.

Sadly Ian Bass's art also fails to convince. There are places where his art nouveau-ish pretensions work – perhaps predictably in the bacchanalian scenes that introduce Club Vesuvius – but overall the draftsmanship is too variable, the backgrounds too empty and his characters too flat to keep the reader engaged throughout the story.

Gatiss is obviously a fan of genre material – particularly *Doctor Who*. Before becoming famous with *The League of Gentlemen* he wrote four fannish spin-off films starring Caroline John as Liz Shaw and, of course, was responsible for 'The Unquiet Dead' one of the better episodes of the reincarnated

Doctor's first season. Despite this, *The Vesuvius Club* has the feel of one of those stories written by someone who has had mainstream success and then decided to write a science fiction story without doing any research on the genre. Gatiss is either unfamiliar with the many different ways genre authors have already mined the foundations out from under the classic stiff-upper-lip British spy or he doesn't care that he is reworking material that has already been used extensively. His literary targets have been more successfully harpooned by Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius novels (and all those that followed Cornelius) while the graphic novel (fake adverts and all) suffers appallingly alongside comparison with Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's far superior *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* stories.

In the end *The Vesuvius Club* feels a bit old-fashioned and more than a little smug. Everything from the supremely self-satisfied protagonist to the "we're the masters of the world" haute-Imperial setting set my teeth on edge while, here at least, Gatiss provides no evidence that he has any right to feel so pleased with himself.



David Gemmell – *Lord of the Silver Bow*

Bantam Press, London, 2005 475pp, £17.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-593-05219-6

Reviewed by Susan Peak

This book is not science fiction; it isn't particularly a fantasy novel. It is pretty much straight historical fiction – set in the time of Troy – with the only non-realistic element being dreams (e.g. Cassandra's) that actually forecast events.

This story, set in the period before the siege of Troy actually happens, is well written and with quite convincing characters. David Gemmell has taken the people of the time – Aeneas (known as Helikaon), Andromache, Hektor, King Priam, etc – and built a very readable story around them. The actual plot is rather slight: the main events are the princess Andromache, being forced to leave the temple where she was happy for marriage to Hektor, and Helikaon's adventures on the 'Great Green' – the Mediterranean ocean – ending with his becoming a king. The main dramatic event is a failed attack on Troy which is intended to destabilise the kingdom, but which is not the historic siege itself. Stories of various minor characters are told as well, such as Odysseus, Xander, a young boy who joins Helikaon on his sea travels, Laodike, one of King Priam's daughters who finds unexpected happiness. Andromache is an interesting character; the temple where she had been a priestess was women-only, and they were encouraged to become self-reliant and independent-minded, so she causes some scandal in Troy when she lives there, awaiting Hektor's return from battle. Helikaon is mainly a trader, having given up his claim to a throne in favour of a younger half-brother, but he is in the end forced to take on the kingdom. A shadowy character in the book is Kolanos, a Mykene (Mycenean) pirate/soldier, whose raids in various places affect the lives of several characters, mainly Helikaon's. He is not seen clearly until the end, but influences the whole book.

While the book is indeed well-written, and with good characters, it is curiously lacking in plot. Not much actually happens during the story and, although it is set in the time of Troy, it is not at all clear how close to the siege the story is at the end of this volume. It certainly doesn't happen here. So the book is a little slow, and has also a faint sense of pointlessness – why, exactly, are we being told the story of these various people? What

is their significance? It might have helped to have a brief summary of the Trojan war and its key characters in some sort of foreword – the historical novel equivalent of a map, perhaps. (And an actual map would also have been useful.) The book failed to evoke any real sense of reading about a very different culture – there is more alienness in Patrick O'Brian's stories of Napoleonic naval warfare than here.

Probably more for David Gemmell fans than anyone else.



**Richard Kadrey –
Blindshrike**

Infinity Matrix, 2005, 249pp, free
(creative commons licence), e-book

**Reviewed by Kev
McVeigh**

Richard Kadrey's debut novel *Metrophage* was one of Terry Carr's Ace Specials series in the mid-80s and has become something of a cult favourite. His second, *Kamikaze L'Amour* (1995) seemed to disappear without trace. *Blindshrike* is his third novel and is available to download free from

www.infinitematrix.net/stories/novels/blindshrike.html.

Spyder Lee and his friend Lulu operate a tattoo and piercing parlour in San Francisco and get very drunk together. One night Spyder is attacked by a demon outside the bar, only to be rescued by a blind woman with a white stick that doubles as a sword. She tells him her name is Shrike and his apparently meaningless tattoos have summoned the demon. Then she disappears into the night.

The next morning Spyder thinks he is hallucinating as he heads to work. There are mysterious creatures, strange buildings, and surreal sights on every corner. In the tattoo parlour he sees Lulu as she really is, with parts of her face missing and her skull exposed. She explains that this is how the world really is, that she has given away parts of her flesh in an arcane debt repayment, and that demons are everywhere around.

From a beginning that reads as though it may be headed towards a twisted version of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* as written by John Shirley, Spyder is recruited by Shrike for a voyage into Hell and Lulu comes too.

Kadrey has created a universe where different spheres of existence interact, but most humans forget the outlandish sights instantly. Nothing is what it seems, but all is surreal. And everyone, it seems, is out to get the band of adventurers, even those who are helping them, such as the mysterious bible-quoting Count Non. Can their employer, the decaying and decadent Madame Cinders, be trusted? Will the Black Clerks seek payment of Lulu's final debt before Spyder can find an alternative payment? Spyder lurches from brashly taking it all in his stride, via thoughts about obscure Orson Welles films, to total confusion, and back again.

Superficially, then, *Blindshrike* becomes a standard quest novel. Its setting and Kadrey's clever and surreal scenarios such as Berenice, the city of memories, distinguish it, whilst the sharp and witty dialogue brings the characters to life. Spyder and Shrike's awkward flirting, Lulu and Spyder arguing about Elvis and Tom Jones, Count Non's oblique philosophising, the brief individual histories characters tell as the journey progresses are all entertaining and add a balance of realism to the weirdness around.

Blindshrike takes from Aztec, Hindu, Christian, Greek and many other pantheons for its mythological wallpaper, but its real journey is through the subconscious. Reminiscent at times of John

Shirley's *A Splendid Chaos* and the paintings of Goya and Breughel it is also very much of its own kind. New Weird perhaps, surreal fantasy certainly. A deserving and enjoyable read. I'd recommend you buy it, but its free. A true bargain.

ED LARK



Ed Lark – *Grief*

Reverb, Oxford, 2005, 149pp, £7.99,
p/b, ISBN 1-905315-02-3

**Reviewed by John
Newsinger**

Grief is a magnificent novel. Only 149 pages, but certainly one of the best books I have read this year. It is a satire of quite astonishing originality, written with style, passion, wit and intelligence. To reach the sort of audience it deserves this book is going to require word-of-mouth recommendation. But don't take my word for it, hunt it down, read it and pass it on.

The story's main protagonist is Juan. He has moved to the city to embrace a post-modern consumerism that is superbly realised. Juan undergoes a remarkable makeover that transforms him into one of the city's Shapers. He starts out as a trader in some niche commodities, 'unemployment, schizophrenia and impotence', although there are hopes of breaking into the incontinence market. When he and his fellow traders want to relax, they do some 'war'. He is on the way up to media celebrity status.

Someone in his position obviously has to find his reflection in an appropriate art package. Juan is introduced to Box, the most successful artvertiser of the moment :

"Box took us into another white room on the right. It was completely empty... After a while he said 'This is called *The Inability of the Artist to Say Anything*'"

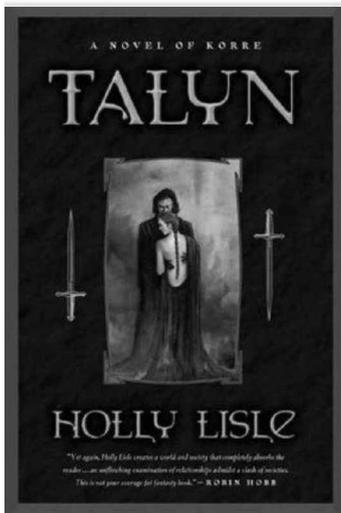
Juan is shown a number of other rooms before Box and his two assistants show him / perform his climactic achievement :

"In the next room Hans, Debrinn and Box walked into three small cubicles placed in the corner of the room. The artvertisers turned their backs on us and began to masturbate ... After a few minutes three climaxes had been reached and the trio returned ... 'What's that called?' I asked Box. 'That, that could not take a name. It is such a total summary of my work'."

So much for conceptual art.

My favourite section of the novel involves one of the four harlequin characters who are searching for Juan, a friend who has gone astray. The philosopher, Louis, laments his lot. All his effort at learning the world was intended to seize hold of history's contradictions so as to 'wrench it towards justice' and eliminate 'the ignominy of poverty and the ignorance of wealth'. But the world has changed: "They would have me join a quango..." He said the word in the way a wanted thief might say 'dungeon'.

This is wonderful stuff, deadly serious and yet amusing and playful at the same time. There is a richness to the writing, a successful combining of thought and expression, that is tremendously effective. With *Grief*, Ed Lark has pulled off a powerful and original satire that completely won over this reader. Certainly a writer to look out for.



Holly Lisle – *Talyn*

Tor, New York, 2005, 524pp, \$26.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30993-9

Reviewed by Penny Hill

Compared with the other Holly Lisle book I've read, I was surprised by how good and enjoyable this stand-alone novel is. She is still keen on making various characters suffer unspeakable physical torture but fortunately no longer feels the need to describe it in great detail, making it easier to accept as part of the

events of the narrative.

Talyn, the career soldier, is an interesting heroine. She is not entirely likeable, being arrogant and occasionally humourless. She is necessarily blind to some of the emotional truths around her – to enable the romantic tension to continue.

Despite appearing to be a fairly generic fantasy work, I did enjoy the unusual approach to sexuality – seen in Talyn's putative love triangle and her inability to understand the complications more conventional women experience (for example the experiences of her colleague Pada). I did find the different words for different types of love-making to be essentially silly – neither poggng nor lufferring sound like activities you would really throw yourself into.

The whole rationale of the plot can be viewed as an allegory of anti-imperialism and anti-interventionism. Our two warring countries are forced to make peace by a third, more powerful, nation, whose strategies of disarmament read worryingly like asset stripping – and that's before we even get close to what is really going on.

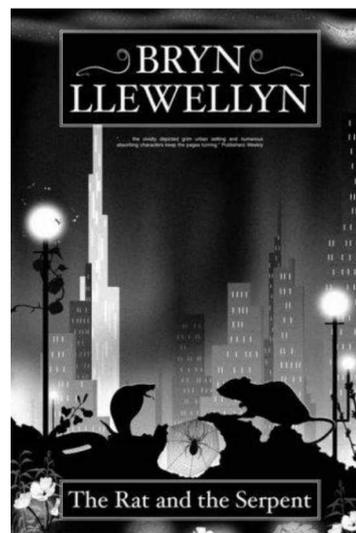
It is refreshing to find a work of this type that is not a hymn to the importance of a monarchy. The monarchist Eastils are seen as deluded by Talyn and her fellow Tonk countrymen. We feel a stronger narrative acceptance of Talyn's viewpoint, because her narrative is told in first person and that of the Eastil Gair is told in third person. With the Tonk emphasis on independent city states loosely allied, the political affiliation shades more towards libertarianism – although how the taakmen (city or tribal leaders) get their power is skated over and none of them appear to be female.

The other philosophical anchor is an emphasis on individuality. While Tonk society is pre-industrial in the stereo-typed genre fantasy manner, there is also a William Morris style emphasis on independent and empowered craftsmen. Talyn's second career is that of jeweller – a luxury craft that relies on rich patrons to provide custom.

I also enjoyed the depiction of the related realms of magic and spirituality. In the spiritual realm, the monotheistic yet diverse religion of the Tonks contrasted with the laissez-faire polytheism of the Eastils and Feegash. One illuminating side note was the Tonk use of temples as repositories of knowledge and learning. My first inkling that one morally ambiguous character was not all he claimed to be, was that Talyn notices his house contains no books.

On the side of magic, there was a nice dichotomy of the balance between power and control and the associated costs. The different cultural perceptions of the realm of magic and how it should be used, set up the underlying power struggle of the novel and lead to the hard-fought for resolution.

This is the most fun review book I've read in a long time. It's not serious or important but it is downright enjoyable.



Bryn Llewellyn – *The Rat and the Serpent*

Prime Books, Holicong, 2005, 271pp, \$17.95, p/b, ISBN 1-930997-84-1

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Urban Gothic young male power/revenge fantasy, set in the black and white (and I mean that quite literally) cityscape known as the Mavrosopolis, Stamboul, Constantinopolis, and Byzann. The centre of attention (I'm

not sure 'character' is quite the right descriptor here) is Ugli the cripple, shaman of the Rat, a homeless outcaste ('nogoth') who survives, barely, on the streets of the Mavrosopolis by begging and scavenging. He encounters a strange mentor, Zveratu, who encourages him to attempt to rise in the social hierarchy and become a citidenizen by passing a series of tests. During this phase of the book he is opposed by Atavalens, shaman of the Panther, and sexed up by Raknia, shaman(ess) of the Widowspider (her main plot function is to wear very tight shiny leather bodices and kill people). Despite the scorn and injustice with which he is treated by just about everyone, Ugli becomes a citidenizen -- only to discover that citidenizens are in turn ruled by counsellords... who are ruled by an elite council of magicians, dominated by the Serpent cult... who are ruled by a single man, the Goth. The Serpent, also known as the obfuscating one, is the god or force of stasis, and the book identifies this power with both the Abrahamic religion(s) originating in Ur, and with the Zoroastrian evil serpent. It will come as no surprise (but SPOILER ALERT anyway) to learn that Ugli does indeed eventually become the Goth and defeats the Serpent; he goes on to destroy the existing rigid social order, all existing magical items, and every scroll and book, maintaining "I hate order, I hate stupid rules ... I hope that the artificial separation of people into groups will now end. ... I hope that the way we used to organise ourselves, by external qualities, not those inside, will now be forgotten. I hope that the obsession we had with recording everything – at the expense of experience – will be stopped." (Hnm; a Goth Manifesto?)

So; stock characters, wooden plotting, and a basic ethical message with which I profoundly disagree. (I like order, and I like writing things down...) The book is also unthinkingly sexist and racist (especially in the handling of Karanlik, a dark-skinned tribal woman whose help is essential to Ugli's rise, who is killed off for no apparent reason, and whom Ugli promptly forgets.) However, the book is well-written, with a lot of original and imaginative background world-building and many very vivid descriptive passages which I thoroughly enjoyed. I am, as the saying goes, not the target audience for this book; by now I hope you'll know whether you are or not. Even if not, it might be worth trying this one to broaden your experience...



**Frank Ludlow and
Roelof Goudriaan
– Emerald Eye:
The Best in Irish
Imaginative
Fiction**

Aeon Press, Dublin, 2005, 293pp, £6.99,
p/b, ISBN 0-9534784-4-0

**Reviewed by Martin
McGrath**

One of the difficulties with reviewing *Emerald Eye* is to resist the temptation to criticise the book for what it is not. Partly this is the editors' fault –

subtitled the book 'the best in Irish imaginative fiction' and then producing a volume that fails to include contemporary writers like Ian McDonald or Eoin Colfer and historic figures such as Flann O'Brien, Bram Stoker, Lord Dunsany, Oscar Wilde, WB Yeats, Samuel Beckett... (the list could go on and on), is just asking for trouble. The presence of stories by Anne McCaffrey, James White and Bob Shaw, while welcome in terms of their quality, only serves to highlight the many other authors who are missing.

Emerald Eye's editors can fairly argue that their book wasn't meant to be an academic overview, it is also meant to promote current writers. Here *Emerald Eye* has been unfortunate. *Nova Scotia*, the Scottish speculative fiction collection (reviewed later in this edition) was published almost simultaneously with *Emerald Eye* and it significantly raised the bar for expectations about this kind of book. Comparisons are unfair. *Nova Scotia* is a collection of specially commissioned material designed to capture (or perhaps create) a zeitgeist. *Emerald Eye*, by contrast, reprints material from a variety of sources and some of these stories are thirty years old.

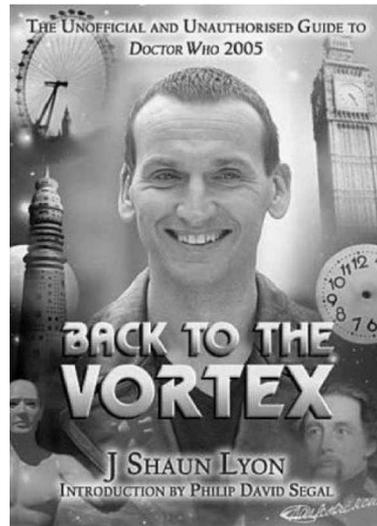
The presentation of *Emerald Eye* also creates confusion. The cover, featuring a wistful cailín whose hair braids into traditional celtic knotwork, might lead the casual reader to expect 'traditional' and perhaps even stereotypical Irish stories full of blarney and fey folk. Such readers would be disappointed. *Emerald Eye* is a volume of urban landscapes and its recurring themes (fame, art, sex, child abuse) are dealt with in dark and unflinchingly modern ways.

Ultimately the only fair way to judge *Emerald Eye* is to cast aside preconceived ideas and judge it by its contents. The stories by McCaffrey ('Velvet City'), White ('Custom Fitting') and Shaw ('The Gioconda Caper') stand out as the only examples of traditional sf in this volume. They sit a little uncomfortably amongst what is otherwise a collection of pretty grim horror and very dark fantasy stories but they are excellent.

This not to say that the other, darker, stories are weaker. Two of my favourites open and close the volume and reflect the editor's recurring concern with art and fame – Mike McCormack's 'Thomas Crumlesh 1960-1992: A Retrospective' and Fred Johnston's 'Bolus Ground' both take the Damien Hirst school of narcissistic art to its natural and chilling conclusion. Michael Carroll's 'In Dublin's Veracity' also stood out (not just because of the great punning title) alongside Dermot Ryan's 'The Burnished Egg'.

However, the bleakness of the majority of tales does make the book as a whole hard to swallow. I have to confess that, reading it in one sitting, I would happily have swapped some of the stories about abused children or murdered prostitutes for more light-hearted tales.

I found plenty to enjoy while reading *Emerald Eye* and, despite nagging concerns about what the book isn't, there is plenty between its covers that warrants your attention.



**J. Shaun Lyon –
Back to the
Vortex: The
Unofficial and
Unauthorised
Guide to Doctor
Who 2005**

Telos, Tolworth, 2005, 430pp,
£12.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-78-2

**Reviewed by
Martin McGrath**

Facts are fantastic, aren't they? They're what fans really want. They want to reduce everything down into neat categories that

can be wrapped in laminated plastic and store for eternity. Take the thing you love, eviscerate it and pin it down so that it can never move and never change.

That's why so many fans react so badly to changes in 'their' worlds. It's why the people who write *Star Trek* stories have to have manuals hundreds of pages thick on how warp engines work, so that they don't contradict something that Kirk said a hundred years ago about the melting point of dilithium crystals. It is why so much science fiction simply retreads what has gone before rather than risk upsetting the expectations of fans who know how these things work and don't want anyone challenging their preconceptions.

Of course it isn't just in science fiction that breeds this kind of interest in categorising, enumerating and delineating the world – there are plenty of fans of sport, music, soap operas and, for all I know, knitting, who share precisely these characteristics.

Back to the Vortex is a perfect example of a book designed to serve a market that cares how many times someone says the word "fantastic" in the new series of *Doctor Who* or the number of people who die in each episode. As such, the author, J. Shaun Lyon, should be congratulated. I can't imagine a more comprehensive volume. But it is not without flaws.

The first half of *Back to the Vortex* is devoted to the story of *Doctor Who's* return to television screens. It explores in impressive detail the rumours that emerged during the planning and production of the new series. Unfortunately *Back to the Vortex* does not offer any unique insights – there is little, if any, original research on display here. This is disappointing. Some basic journalistic techniques could have helped cast light on some of the incidents behind the stories. Instead, the first half of *Back to the Vortex* consists of the regurgitation of material from a variety of previously published (print, television, Internet) sources. No fair judge could criticise the scale of the research or the obvious devotion with which Lyon approaches his task, but the result still feels shallow – like an immense Who-obsessed gossip column. A fact not helped by Lyon's own sometimes breathless writing style.

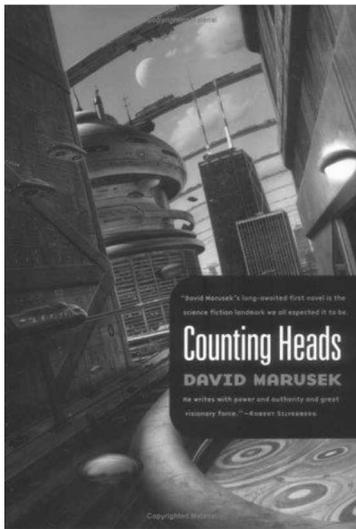
The second half of *Back to the Vortex* features a chapter on each episode of the new series. It is in these episode guides that the fan facts machine really takes off, with Lyon breaking down elements such as the aforementioned "fantastic" count and 'Bad Wolf' references under recurring subheadings in each chapter. There are brief attempts at a more serious critique of each episode under the section 'Theme Analysis' but these are so brief and so poorly defined that they add little to our understanding. Then each episode is reviewed by a number of fans and finally by Lyon himself.

As an extended episode guide and gossipy look at the production of the new *Doctor Who*, *Back to the Vortex* is perfectly acceptable – even though the writing is sometimes awkward and the text is crammed pretty tightly into the four-hundred-odd

pages, making for a rather uncomfortable read, it will find a welcome place on many fans' shelves next to the new DVD boxset.

It isn't, however, as publishers Telos claim on the back cover an "incredible critical analysis" of the new *Doctor Who*. Indeed it offers almost no critical analysis of the Doctor's reincarnation at all. Despite the fact that *Back to the Vortex* is a hefty book with tightly-packed text it remains on every page determinedly shallow. There is no attempt to explore, for example, the differences between the modern Who and his earlier incarnations, or to look at sexuality in the new series (this Doctor is, for example, plainly in love with his assistant in a way not previously seen), or to consider the themes of violence, loneliness and loss that seem to be at the heart of writer/director Davies's vision of this Doctor.

Back to the Vortex is a potentially useful piece of reportage (though its usefulness is significantly diminished by the unforgivable absence of an index) but it is in no sense a serious attempt at critical analysis of the new *Who*. This is a book for fans – and that's okay – but anyone looking for something more than this must look elsewhere.



David Marusek – *Counting Heads*

Tor, New York, 2005, 336pp, \$24.95, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-31267-9

Reviewed by Simon Bisson

The rapture of the nerds may be a wonderful thing: if you can afford it. Nanotech, life-extension, everything you want at the touch of a button or the wave of a hand. But what if you're a have-not in the world of the have-it-alls? *Counting Heads* is a look at the nanotech revolution from the underneath, from the

viewpoint of those just struggling to survive and make it through another day.

Extending his short story 'We Were Out Of Our Minds With Joy', and embellishing the world shown in other short works, *Counting Heads* is the story of Samson Harger, a man who has everything and suddenly loses it. Never quite rebuilding his life, he finds himself a pariah, a part of the underclass, in a world tied down by the trappings of the security state, just struggling to make it through each day. Marusek builds an ensemble cast around him: the boy who's stayed a child for as long as possible to help with demographic research, the clones who aren't entirely sure if they're meant for their pre-allotted roles, the wealthy and their employees, and the artificial intelligences that make the world work. Teeming billions fill the world, most struggling to find meaning in their circumscribed lives.

When Samson's patrician ex-wife and not-quite daughter are in a space-plane accident, it's time for things to change. His wife is dead, and Ellen nothing more than a stolen head. Plot and counter-plot struggle for control of Ellen's unconscious head. The accident is part of a scheme to control a commercial empire that has become unprofitably altruistic – designing starships to take away the billions and planning the re-terraforming of Earth. There's more at stake than mere money.

As a rag tag bundle of misfits struggle to find the missing head, Marusek juggles several linked plots, skilfully tying them into a coherent whole. Flashback and machine-eye views expand on the story, adding texture to

what could have been a straight-forward caper.

Marusek's warts-and-all approach to his future mixes skilful world-building with an understanding of the stresses and fractures that distort the fabric of society. This is no utopian future. Underneath his story of a quest for a missing head lies the classic 'if this goes on' theme, stretching the fledgling security-industrial complex growing in the West and showing it full blown – along with the corruption and inefficiencies such massive systems always engender.

Perhaps best thought of a mash-up of Kathleen Ann Goonan's *Queen City Jazz* with Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, that's been filtered through the blue-collar sf of William Barton and the social critiques of China Mieville, *Counting Heads* is a compelling and powerful read. Marusek isn't afraid of asking hard questions – nor is he afraid to try and find answers.

One of the best sf novels of this (and perhaps any year), *Counting Heads* gives us a rich mix of social commentary, speculation, and adventure, all garnished with a tiny pinch of hope.



Vera Nazarian – *The Clock King and the Queen of the Hourglass*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 124, £10.00, p/b, ISBN 1-904619-22-3

Jeffrey Ford – *The Cosmology of the Wider World*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 173pp, £10.00, p/b, ISBN 1-904619-82-7

Reviewed by Niall Harrison



Early in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Mars*, there is a scene that has stayed with me. Sax Russell, the archetypal scientist, is trying to teach some children. What it is he's trying to teach doesn't much matter, because having wised up to the sort of person Sax is pretty quickly, the children decide that it's going to be a grand game to ask, "Why?" of any statement he gives them. Sax, not wanting to disappoint, finds himself giving increasingly broader answers until – and every time they play the trick it ends the same way, no matter where

they start – he finds himself saying, "Because that's the way it came out in the Big Bang!" The protagonists of these two PS Publishing novellas are those children, but in the absence of teacher they have to find another target for their questions.

In *The Clock-King and the Queen of the Hourglass*, Vera Nazarian initially seems to tick all the boxes required of a deep future story – say hello to a last heir to the human race, an emptying city on the edge of a drying ocean, a bloated sun, relics of technology wonderful but no longer understood – but in the end, gradually unpicks our preconceptions about what they mean. Liaei is that last heir, a throwback, created from failing stocks of ancient ovums and sperm. She is born in Basin City, from a glass womb, into an attenuated world where sexual dimorphism is all but gone. The differences between the sexes are increasingly vestigial, both in biology and in temperament; evolutionarily implausible, perhaps, but dramatically interesting. Liaei's adolescent turmoil



provides a strong contrast to the intellectual loves that define a world with no place for passion. She is vitality personified: lively, curious, alive. Nazarian develops her story sedately, starting with Liaei's childhood, which only makes her uniqueness more obvious. For fifteen years, Liaei is the only person to change.

Eventually, Liaei has to leave her home, and travel to another city (following the most wondrous of those technological relics, The River That Flows Through The Sky), for a fated encounter with the Clock King. Like Liaei, the King is ancestral stock; unlike her, he is not engineered, he is travelling forward in time through periods of cryogenic suspension. He is the sleeper waking, and would be someone for the reader to latch on to if his appearance was not delayed until nearly the end of the novel. The King and the Queen must mate, of course, to produce an offspring that can reinvigorate humanity, but the encounter, when it comes, is both perfectly realistic and completely unexpected in a story of this kind. It is a demonstration that Nazarian is not interested in telling a story about humanity, nor even about (despite the title) the Clock King and the Queen of the Hourglass. No, it is about Liaei first and only.

The mystery of the River comes into play again too, of course, and that, combined with the story's exploration of male and female relationships in a world where they are all but irrelevant, recalls some aspects of James Tiptree Jr's novella, 'Slow Music'. Nazarian's story doesn't have the impact of Tiptree's (few do), and she's asking a different question, but there is a similar grace in their development. For the most part, the writing is precisely poetic (if that's not a contradiction in terms), although occasionally there are stumbles. In particular, the dialogue is too full of colloquialisms – "I feel like crap" (p31) opines one character – that throw the reader out of the story. And though in the end the story embraces change in a satisfying manner, not lamenting the passing of humanity but celebrating the fact that, if you are willing to look, there is always something more to explore, these flaws and the predominantly cool tone make it a story for the head, not the heart.

The reverse is perhaps true of Jeffrey Ford's *The Cosmology of the Wider World*. This is a book that cheerfully identifies its travelling companions: on the wraparound cover, among other things, there is a bookcase, and in the bookcase are some books mentioned or alluded to in the course of the story – such as *Frankenstein*, Aesop's fables, Dante's *Inferno* and *Riddling Men for Glory and Sport* by the Sphinx – alongside a number by Ford's contemporaries. Among others, there's *Vintor* by Lucius Shepard; *The Etched City* by K. J. Bishop; and *The Fourth Circle* by Zoran Zivkovic. They're as reasonable guides as any to the colourful, surreal tone of this fantasy.

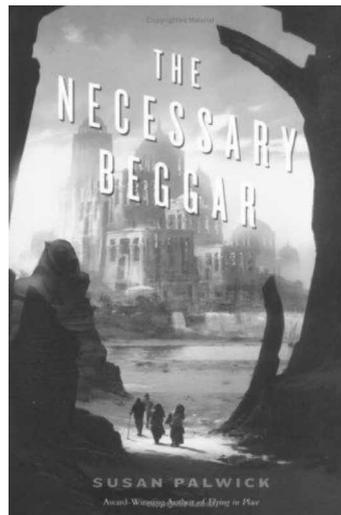
It's about a minotaur, Belius. He lives in the Wider World, a place where every creature accepts every other; a place with a yellow sky and purple beaches; a place where his emotions manifest themselves physically. Surrounded by a menagerie of friends and associates – including Vashti the owl, Shebeb the ape, Pezimote the tortoise, and most delightfully, Thip the flea ("He was handsome as fleas go, with an aquiline frontal notch and unexaggerated antenna grooves", p43) – Belius has nevertheless fallen into a malaise. Shebeb diagnoses it as physical, Vashti as spiritual, and both try, in their way, to help. Along the way the narrative meanders across the Wider World, and back, through memory, to Belius' time in the Lesser World, his childhood and the circumstances that drove him away from human society.

The Cosmology... is a long novella, and a large part of the joy that reading it provides come from the wealth of elaborate details. Given the relatively quiet nature of novels such as *The Portrait of Mrs Charbuque* and stories such as 'The Empire of Ice-Cream', it has perhaps been too easy to forget what a tremendously inventive fantasist Ford can be. Here his talking animals are charming, and the dark moments in the story (which are not only in Belius' memories), are balanced by doses of brilliant absurdity. And as with Liaei, a large part of what makes Belius such a sympathetic character is his desire to understand –

although in his case that desire comes not just from an honest desire to grasp the world but from a need to prove, both to himself and others, that he is not a monster.

The Cosmology of the Wider World is both the book Belius has been writing and his attempt to define himself. 'Cosmology', we are told, is both the set of culturally-specific myths by which people understand the world they live in, and the *personal* myths by which people understand their place in that world. Belius has to invent his own cosmology, caught between the Wider World and the Lesser, between human and animal. He has to understand what it means to be a minotaur; to be himself. Such is the skill with which Ford dramatises this (ultimately universal) search, it seems a little churlish to complain about the predictability of the plot, a little unfair to observe that the ending is abrupt and not entirely satisfying. The suggestions made to account for Belius' disorder – he needs a mate; he needs to come to terms with his past actions – seem strangely trivialised, and his scholarly inquiries never reach conclusions. At the end, he seems to be at peace once more, ready to resume the writing he had given up on, but it's hard to know exactly why. It is, as I mentioned, perhaps a book to love passionately, rather than intellectually.

Two loners, then, and two stories. Belius has nobody to answer his questions but books; Liaei has people and computers she can ask, but they don't know how to reply. Belius looks inside himself for answers; Liaei looks to the world. Passion and reason may dominate in one story or the other, but in the end, both can teach us: about change; about love; about life. About how it's all come out since the Big Bang.



Susan Palwick – *The Necessary Beggar*

Tor, New York, 2005, 316pp, \$24.95, h/b,
ISBN 0-765-31097-X

Reviewed by Carol
Kerry-Green

When Darroti-Frella Timbor is exiled for killing a Mendicant, his whole family are exiled with him. In the city of Lemabantunk the punishment for murdering someone is exile to another dimension, and the law of hearts say the family is exiled as well. So when the door into exile opens for Darroti, it also opens for his family, including his father, Timbor, his two brothers their wives and his young nieces and nephews – all they know is that the land they will arrive in will be one in which they can survive: what they do not know, is that the land they will arrive in is the United States, in Nevada, in a refugee camp.

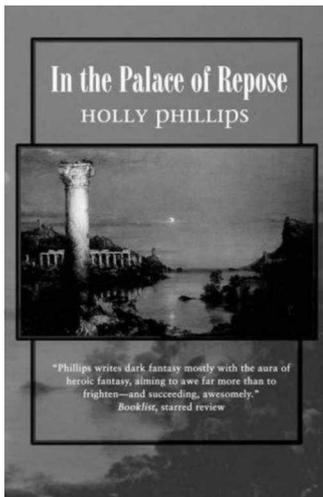
The family, having nowhere else to go, are taken into the refugee camp, where they cannot speak the language, nor know the customs – where even the basic medical check is totally foreign to them. Gradually, the family begin to learn English and to learn where they are, and that without papers, they will not be allowed to leave the camp and commence a new life in America. With the help of one of the volunteers at the camp, Lisa, they escape in the confusion after a bomb goes off (not all Americans wish to welcome the refugees with open arms), and begin their new lives using false papers.

The adults have problems adapting, their way of life has changed completely, they are baffled as to why Americans do not bless their food before they eat it, they are baffled by the fact that the Americans do not revere their beggars, their mendicants, the way they do in Gandiffiri. Zama, Darroti's niece, under the pressure of a secret she can not share with the adults, is

determined to fit in to the American way of life, believing it is her job to become American, go to school, to college and get a good job to help the family.

But, when Zama's American boyfriend asks her to marry him, Zama insists that they have to have the old customs of her homeland for her wedding, the blessing of the Necessary Beggar. In Lemabantunk, many men and some few women spend a year on the streets as a mendicant. On deciding to wed, a couple go out into the streets to find their Necessary Beggar, who will perform the marriage blessing, that can absolve many crimes, and it is this that Zama seeks, to bring peace to her family after Darotti's actions. But in America, beggars are not revered by society and those who live on the streets are being removed to the refugee camps.

Susan Palwick has created an intriguing land in Lemabantunk, a land that the exiles cannot return to, but which continues to affect their lives as they try to fit into a different way of life in post 9/11 America. She has created a world and belief system that permeates the book without quite overwhelming it, it gives the reader an understanding of why Darotti did what he did, and why his family had to join him in his exile. I was very impressed by this novel and its premises, though there are places where the story falls into place too easily, and places where your emotions are manipulated, but the tale of Zama's quest for redemption for her family is a very human story. I will be looking out for future books by Susan Palwick and cannot recommend this book highly enough and hope that you will enjoy it as much as I did.



Holly Phillips – *In the Palace of Repose*

Prime Books, Holicong (USA), 2005, 224pp, \$15.00, t/p, ISBN 1-894815-70-X

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

It is perhaps only in the sf field that a debut short story collection consisting mostly of original stories might be greeted with suspicion. Where, we wonder (I wonder, before I catch myself doing it) are the publication credits? Why were these stories not published in the magazines?

What's wrong with them? And yet to think along such lines is, increasingly, to miss out: here is a debut collection where the majority of the stories are making their first appearance, but which without a doubt marks the arrival of an interesting new voice.

There are rough edges, no question. At times, *In the Palace of Repose* reminds me of Kelly Link's first collection, *Stranger Things Happen*, as an example of work by a writer exploring her options and her strengths – although where Link was perhaps exploring the possibilities of story structure, Holly Phillips is more concerned with tone. Her great gift is her ability to capture the feel of things: the smells and textures of places, and the nuances of moods. The stories in *In the Palace of Repose* are linked by some shared concerns, such as the experiences of young women and the appeal of the fantastic, but most of all by the intense sensory experiences they evoke. Unusually, it is not a richness born of lyricism, for the most part; rather, it comes from her ability to pick exactly the right word or phrase for the job at hand.

Perhaps the best showcase for this is 'One of the Hungry Ones', a story about a homeless girl, Sadie, who gets sucked into a recurring wild rumpus. What makes the story is the sharply defined contrast between the mundane emptiness of Sadie's street life ("she haunted lit sidewalks", p149), and the

extravagant, manic cruelty of the hunt (with "the blood leaping wine-bright in her veins," p141). Another such contrast is found in the collection's title story, in which Magic has been kept contained by a bureaucracy now on the verge of forgetting what it is holding. Edmund is the sole civil servant who remembers; he knows what the shutdown of his department might mean, and his frustration is clear. But when he visits the King in his Palace of Repose, the world he encounters is authentically dreamlike, from the shifting seasons to the glimpsed light at the story's end, and the more so because of the utter normality of his daily life.

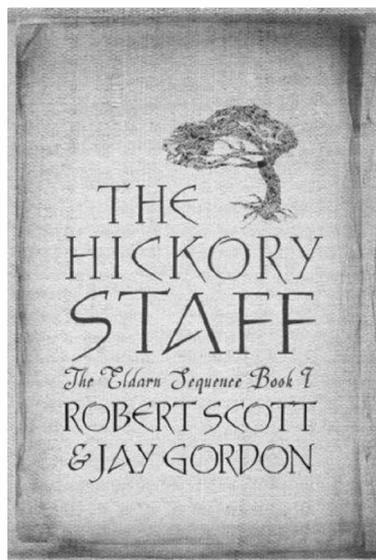
Both 'One of the Hungry Ones' and 'In The Palace of Repose' end with their protagonists choosing to engage more fully with the fantastic: in one case the choice is terrible but understandable, while in the other it is, perhaps, a sign of hope. Similar choices are found in other stories. 'A Woman's Bones' is a tale familiar in outline, with blundering Westerners digging up tribal burial grounds, and being warned that dire consequences will result. Once again, the protagonist is caught between two worlds – but this time the difference is human culture, and the fantastic represents a third choice, a statement of personal intent. In 'Variations on a Theme', the intertwining tales of Berenice and Brona, musical geniuses separated by ninety years, there is a sense that neither of the story's protagonists will be able to achieve peace until they accept the unavoidable magic of their lives.

Such endings, though, are risky. A touch of the transcendental is a hard thing to convey, and when it falls flat it can make a story's flaws cruelly obvious. However, Phillips succeeds perhaps half the time, which is good enough, and even her failures are of interest. 'By The Light of Tomorrow's Sun' is set in the collection's most separate fantasy location, a sort of nexus between worlds known as End Harbour. The story doesn't work, because it relies on its narrator withholding information for shock value, and because it is too short to fully develop the relationships it describes. But the evocation of End Harbour itself, a chill, foggy outpost, adrift from reality, is memorable: "As a blank space at the edge of the world, it would have been beautiful" (p160). 'The New Ecology' and 'Pen & Ink', meanwhile, are both hampered by one-note adversaries (respectively, a Nerd and a Curator). But 'The New Ecology', in which life begins to develop from urban detritus, is creepy, and meaningful in its examination of what it means to be an individual, as opposed to a freak; and 'Pen & Ink' features a mother-daughter relationship that is electrically believable, and in the descriptions of the paintings that the curator is collecting, showcases Phillips' ability to create vivid vignettes.

For every rough edge *In the Palace of Repose* contains a moment of rare skill, to be treasured. Perhaps the two most successful stories in the book are the two least speculative – although it is possible to argue that part of their success comes from their surroundings. In 'The Other Grace', a young woman wakes to a life she doesn't know, amnesiac. It's the second such story I've read this year; but where Daryl Gregory's 'Second Person, Present Tense' (*Asimov's*, September 2005) is a rigorous, almost Egan-esque examination of identity, 'The Other Grace' is concerned more with how it would feel to be that new personality. The new Grace is scared; learning a world she doesn't recognise with halting, hesitant steps, afraid at any moment that she might be supplanted and cease to exist. It's not fantasy. It's a stronger story both because of that fact, and because we know that Holly Phillips writes fantasy and find ourselves waiting for an intrusion (the closest it actually comes is when our Grace thinks she sees the other Grace in her room at night). Consequently, Phillips' portrayal of an unfamiliar but mimetic world has some echoes of William Gibson's portrayal of a science-fictional present in *Pattern Recognition*.

'Summer Ice' (reprinted by Sean Wallace in the first issue of his new *Fantasy Magazine*) similarly leaves the reader waiting for the other shoe to drop. Manon lives in an unnamed city that's on the slide from 'continental wealth to continental poverty' (p179).

It is hot, and dirty, and dismal, and very different to her memories of her home and her youth in Canada. Manon is an artist, but she's having trouble making art; more often, these days, she is working on reclamation projects, tearing up tarmac or installing a roof-garden. Such ecologically sound projects, and the smooth, highly descriptive prose, recall a book like Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*. The tone of 'Summer Ice' is radically different, though; in place of Robinson's brimming optimism, Phillips' story echoes with quiet despair. Looking at the torn-up city, Manon thinks that 'it is hard to look at the rubble street and not think of armies invading'. These and other faint hints of a near-future setting play a trick on the reader. They ping eager sf antennae, but the subsequent story conspicuously avoids doing what we expect sf stories to do. There is no explanation of the world, no uncovering; instead, the plot follows an arc more associated with fantasy, using its setting to create a sense that the events happening are slightly exaggerated, slightly unreal, on the edge of hallucination. There is no magic, save the kind attributed to artistic creation, and nothing about the story is shallow or trivial. Like the truest fantasies, it is simply set in a world that shimmers: our world, as seen by a dreamer.



Robert Scott & Jay Gordon – The Hickory Staff

Gollanz, London, 2005, 577pp, £14.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07607-0

Reviewed by Carol Ann Kerry Green

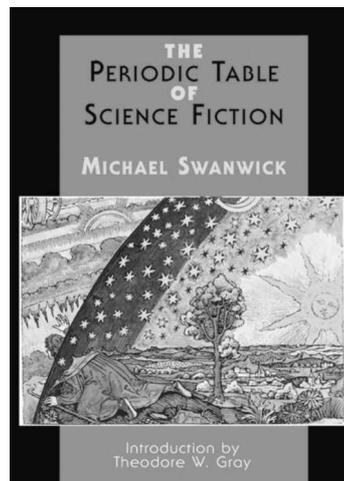
Eldarn is a land dominated by Prince Malagon, who is controlled by the evil Nerak, and who caused the royal families of Rona, Falkan, and Pragan to be destroyed hundreds of twinmoons ago, and where its people are only now beginning to fight back.

Steven Taylor discovers a tapestry and a stone in a safety deposit box in the bank where he works in Idaho Springs; a safety deposit box that has never been opened in the 135 years since it was deposited. With his roommate Mark Jenkins, Steven finds himself transported by the tapestry to the land of Eldarn. They find themselves in Rona, one its provinces, there they team up with a small band of partisans who are determined, with the guidance of Gilmour, once a Larian Senator (known for their wise ways and magical powers) to free their land from the yoke of Nerak's power.

As Steven and Mark journey with Gilmour, Brynne, Garec and the others, he begins to be able to wield magic more and more, and he believes that the hickory staff that Gilmour gives to him after an encounter with a group of almors (soulless warriors controlled by Nerak) is responsible. The hickory staff appears to enhance whatever powers Steven possesses and the longer he is in its presence, the stronger his powers become. Steven's group are racing against time and Nerak to reach Orindale where they hope to find another tapestry that will allow Steven to cross back to Idaho Springs, back to his apartment, where the stone he took out of the safety deposit box with the tapestry is, the stone that is known in Eldarn as Lessa's Key, the stone that is coveted by Nerak for the power it holds.

In places, this is a fast-paced fantasy novel, with believable and sympathetic characters and a truly nasty enemy. Yet, in others it drags and the tension built up over the last few pages and deflates and I found myself quickly scanning the pages looking for the next bit that would excite me again, make me care

about the characters and whether they made it to Orindale or not. Overall, it's a book that I enjoyed, but there were places where a judicious bit of editing wouldn't have gone amiss, it could quite easily have lost 100 pages or so without losing any of the plot or interest in the characters or their plight. I would like to find out if Steven manages to locate and transport Lessa's key to Eldarn, but I'm not sure if I'll be in a hurry to find the next book in the series.



Michael Swanwick – The Periodic Table of Science Fiction

PS Publishing, Homsea, 2005, 274pp, £25.00, h/b, ISBN 1-904619-00-2

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

When Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleev first formulated the periodic table of the elements, in March of 1869, it didn't take long for the world at large to realise the importance of his work. From

the vantage-point of the early twenty-first century, however, we can safely say that it has had at least one consequence that Mendeleev and his contemporaries never imagined: it has spawned a thousand online variants. These days there's a periodic table of everything: of mixology, of haiku, of dessert, even of perl operators. In such a context, a periodic table of science fiction was surely inevitable, and between 2000 and 2004 Michael Swanwick rose to the challenge, penning a series of weekly short-short stories for *Sci Fiction*. The original table is still online (<http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/periodictable.html>), but now PS Publishing have collected the stories into a handsome book.

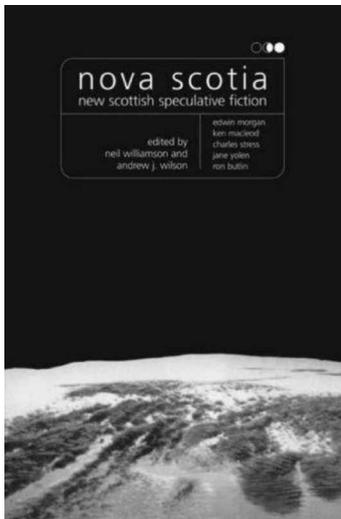
Reviewing it is problematic. This is not a deep literary endeavour like Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table*; it is a game. It's a challenge Swanwick set himself, with the possibility of a very public failure – in his afterword to the book, he describes it as "the literary equivalent of a trapeze artist working without a net". As a result, critical analysis is somewhat beside the point. If nothing else, whatever you think of the stories themselves, you have to take a moment to applaud the accomplishment. Compressing a moment of story into a wordcount not much greater than that of this review is one thing; doing it every week for one hundred and eighteen straight weeks is as much a feat of endurance as anything else. Perhaps rather than a trapeze artist, we should be comparing Swanwick to David Blaine and his perspex box.

But no, that would be unfair, because while there are inevitably some stories that fall flat, for the most part *The Periodic Table of Science Fiction* is a delight – witty, subversive, and imaginative – and that is a testament to Swanwick's skill as well as his persistence. The project works because... well, it works because it has stories about comics artists who test-drive giant titanium robots to understand their characters' motivations, and about how money and antimony must be kept in balance to ensure the smooth running of the economy. But it also works because of its breadth of reference. Swanwick knows science fiction, and riffs off just about every trope going, but he also researched the chemistry – there is more hard sf here than you might expect – and unearthed some truly mind-boggling facts to drive his stories.

If you wanted to criticise it, you could say that perhaps Swanwick doesn't take his geekiness as far as he could. When Mendeleev put together the original table of the elements, he was guided by the available data. The table's rows and groups represent collections of elements with similar properties. As a

result, where there were gaps in the table, Mendeleev could and did make predictions about the type of element that would fill them, and the subsequent verification of the table through the discovery of exactly the right elements is one of the most satisfying proofs in the history of science. Within *The Periodic Table of Science Fiction* there are also groups. There are stories whose punchlines are terrible puns (nitrogen is a particular offender); stories that play with older sf by C.S. Lewis, Orson Scott Card, Terry Bisson and others; stories that spin common knowledge about their elements into sfnal ideas (lithium, aluminium, fluorine, potassium); stories that take the *Call My Bluff* approach ('A tellurium is a variety of orrery'). Some stories are more than jokes – meitnerium brings attention to the historical short-changing of Lise Meitner, while pieces like mercury and phosphorus carry a surprising amount of imaginative weight. There's even an Asimov-esque sequence of economic puzzle stories centering around the enterprises of Summergarden Speciality Ores. But, sadly, unlike Mendeleev's, all of Swanwick's groups are scattered, and there is no way of following the threads of association through the table.

More genuinely disappointingly, perhaps, is the lack of a periodic table in the book, or even a more normal contents listing. While most people surely know the order of elements up to boron, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, by the time you get to lead, bismuth, polonium, it's hard not to feel a little lost. The online version, obviously, could avoid this problem, because each story was linked from an index table, but in this edition finding a particular story or element can take longer than it should. That's a shame, because while the jacket blurb is laughably hyperbolic ('Life, Chemistry, and Science Fiction will never be the same again') this is a much less disposable book than it has any right to be. You're likely to find yourself wanting to dip into it more often than you might expect. If anyone's looking for a present for the sf fan who seems to have everything, this could well be it.



**Neil Williamson
and Andrew J.
Wilson (Eds.) –
*Nova Scotia***

Crescent Books, Edinburgh, 2005, £9.99,
p/b, ISBN 1-84183-086-0

**Reviewed by Niall
Harrison**

There's something missing from this anthology. Within the greater community of writers who might be part of that nebulous thing we call the British Boom, there is an identifiable subset of writers who hail, by birth or by

association, from North of the border. You can read *The Algebraist*, *Newton's Wake* and *Iron Sunrise*, and come away with a sense that they are parts of the same conversation. In such a light, and with newer writers such as Hal Duncan to add into the mix, *Nova Scotia* – 22 pieces of 'new scottish speculative fiction', mostly by Scots, mostly by men – must have seemed like a sure-fire tie-in for a Glasgow Worldcon. Indeed, it's not a bad book. But in the finished product there is something missing: the very sense of community that you might expect this anthology to demonstrate.

The suspicion is there even before you open the book, since the contents listing on the back page has no entry for Iain M. Banks, and it's strengthened by reading Ken Macleod and Charles Stross' stories – surely the ones most readers will turn to first. Of the two, Macleod's 'A Case of Consilience' is stronger, posing the central dilemma of James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* to a presbyterian minister. It's a minor story, but well crafted.

Stross' 'Snowball's Chance', by contrast, is a thin joke – the devil matches wits with a Scottish rogue, and, of course, comes off worst – and far too pleased with its own cleverness. What's striking is not just how separate the stories seem from each other, compared to novels by the same authors, but also how separate they seem from the rest of their writers' oeuvre.

Other stories feel similarly inconsequential. Hal Duncan's 'The Last Shift' is set in a post-industrial Scotland in which magic has also been beaten down, made mundane. The atmosphere of mournful decline is skillfully evoked, but there is little more to the story. Jane Yolen's 'A Knot of Toads', meanwhile, presents the sort of cosy Scotland we expect from BBC1 Sunday evening dramas. A Cambridge woman returns to the island where she was raised to set her father's affairs in order: some of the story's clichés are subverted, but not enough to lift such a self-consciously romanticised tale above mediocrity. These stories gain little from being read in the same context, let alone demand re-reading; it is almost as though their authors submitted what they happened to have available, rather than writing to meet this specific commission.

The better stories in the anthology come mostly from writers I am less familiar with. Hannu Rajaniemi's 'Deus ex Homine' is an energetic, enthusiastic and engaging look at a typical dysfunctional relationship: a boy who used to be infected by godplague, and a girl who went to war to fly an angel. Both of them find being only human again something of a challenge, and their tentative reconnection is gracefully handled. Marion Arnott's 'Lest We Forget' offers a touching portrait of an elderly Scottish veteran, as seen through the eyes of a daughter who knows exactly what the differences are between what he tells the papers and what he really remembers. The fantastic element here, involving vengeful ghosts, is less convincing than the character work. Mike Cobley's 'The Intrigue of the Battered Box' is a vivacious, steampunkish alternate history in which Edinburgh is the capital of the Empire, and the country's greatest Diagnostic Investigator has another mystery to solve. Ron Butlin's 'Five Fantastic Fictions' are exactly what they claim to be, and sharply funny to boot. And Angus McAllister's 'Running on at Adventures' is a thoughtful piece, revolving around a classical conceptual breakthrough, that makes the point that some people might be happier with the world they know. It's an interesting look at a plausible human reaction to a situation that sf holds dear.

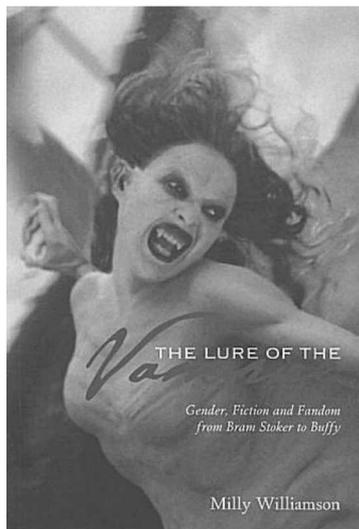
How far any of these represents a distinctively Scottish sensibility, though, is open to debate. The parallels that editors Neil Williamson and Andrew J. Wilson (both of whom, perhaps unwisely, also contribute stories to the book) draw in their introductions seemed to me often slightly strained, and the sense of 'scottishness' carried by individual stories is often perfunctory. There is little insight, for instance, into Scotland as a place – certainly not in a way that would bear comparison to the use of place by writers such as Kim Stanley Robinson or Lucius Shepard. The story that comes closest to bringing its landscape alive is John Grant's 'The Hard Stuff', in which a damaged US Iraq veteran travels with his Scottish wife back to the old country, to meet his in-laws. The relationship between the veteran and his wife – who turns out to be as magical and symbolic as some of Shepard's less convincing female characters – is well handled, and the tourist's perspective allows Grant to paint a more detailed portrait of Scotland than most of the other contributors attempt. However, the story is derailed by an astonishing lack of subtlety; the sense of outrage at current US political trends is palpable, and Scotland ends up being defined more as 'not America' than as a place in its own right. Similarly, in 'The Bogle's Bargain' Stefan Pearson undermines his story by underlining his message (that fathers can't and shouldn't try to stop their daughters growing up) at every opportunity.

Of the stories that clearly take their riffs from Scottish culture, several are diverting, but few leave a lasting impression. 'The Vulture, 4-17 March', by Harvey Welles and Phillip Raines, takes

the form of a newspaper, complete with personal ads and cinema listings, and sketches a rivalry between two post-Glaswegian communities. Gavin Inglis' 'Pisces Ya Bas' is a fun vignette about a foul-mouthed fish who takes up residence in Glasgow's Queen's Park pond; Andrew C. Ferguson's 'Sophie and the Sacred Fluids' is a very modern, very frank, and quite ruthless tale of office witchcraft; and although William Meikle's 'Total Mental Quality, By The Way' employs some irritatingly magical biotechnology, the remixed world it offers a glimpse of is colourful and lively.

And if the collection never conveys a sense of community among its writers, the diversity of the work on display is nevertheless impressive. In addition to the above, there's a striking poem by Edwin Morgan, and a tale written entirely in Scots by Matthew Fitt (which I admit I bounced off). A. J. Macintosh's Boswell-and-Johnson-make-first-contact story is enlivened by some blunt, brusque humour; and the anthology is brought to a memorable close by Jack Deighton's 'Dusk', which describes in evocative detail a journey across the face of a far-distant futurity where the light is dying all around.

Nova Scotia is an uneven book. It has little to say about Scottish sf or the writers who produce it, and its views of Scotland often feel, even to an outsider, curiously out of date. Despite the high proportion of frustrating failures, it does contain a number of stories worth reading; it's just a shame that it's more likely to be remembered by association with a brilliant Worldcon than as a brilliant anthology in its own right.



**Milly Williamson
– The Lure of the
Vampire:
Gender, Fiction
and Fandom
from Bram
Stoker to Buffy**

Wallflower Press, London, 2005,
224pp, £15.99, p/b, ISBN 1-904764-
40-1

**Reviewed by Colin
Odell and Mitch Le
Blanc**

Appropriately titled, *The Lure of the Vampire* seeks to address the questions of the

continued popularity of the vampire in the modern psyche, particularly those in the fan community who are obsessed with vampire culture. It's a relevant focus of study, the (al)lure lying in the vampire's elasticity as a mirror for our own desires and fears. Compared with other super/extra-natural creatures the vampire has two of the most powerful pulls in cultural interest: sex and death. Williamson follows the popularity of the vampire through these two strands – from sexualised Victorian cadaver waxworks to the fear and desire surrounding the infamous exploits of Lord Byron. Although there is an acknowledgement that the sympathetic vampire is a more prevalent model in contemporary fan identification, there is a sense in which, through Byron, the draw of the taboo, the vampire as lover or bohemian outsider is one that has run parallel to the thought of vampires as simply

monstrous. Williamson examines the roots of the genre's masculine fear of female sexuality (particularly in the brutal violation of Lucy's corpse in *Dracula* – punishment or group penetration for Lucy's perceived wantonness) but also acknowledges that the novel, and subsequent works about vampires, falls into the realm of melodrama and to some extent women's fiction. This is the contradiction inherent in much of vampire fiction – particularly in the reluctant/sympathetic roles increasingly apparent in the work of Anne Rice. Some attention is also given to the vampire/Dracula as foreign rapacious devil or disease (a link most clearly made in Guy Madden's exemplary *Dracula* interpretation *Pages From a Virgin's Diary*).

As with much contemporary interest in the subject a large emphasis is placed on the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* phenomenon, its relationship to its audience and the increasing paradox of the sympathetic vampire. It is noted that the boundaries between the actors and their roles are blurred in published interviews, as is the way the studios use the predominantly intelligent fanbase to encourage analysis of subtext. That *Buffy* appears so ripe for analysis is seen as partly the intention of the programme's marketing strategy aimed at the affluent, white, middle class – particularly given its oft espoused leftfield leanings; empowered female and lesbian characters whilst being funded by a distinctly capitalist studio. Overall the first half of the book provides a succinct argument linking many disparate strands of academic research and associating the role of the viewer/fan with his/her relationship to the material. With a little more breathing space to expand on the multitude of issues raised this could have made a superb book in its own right. But Williamson has a wider net to cast – the focus of the second half turns to fandom itself. While there is no overriding glorification of fandom as a whole (indeed there is criticism of its intrinsic conservatism) the author clearly has some personal affiliation with fan culture but one she admirably keeps, for the most, at arm's length. On one hand fandom is viewed as a community of likes, on the other there is the documentation of ad hoc fan interviews that appears mean-spirited (was it necessary to quote someone who mistakes Nosferatu and Nostradamus – it may well be amusing but it doesn't quite feel right). More interesting is the analysis of fandom as subsets of communities – the internal factions, the distancing the fan sees from 'mundania' (whilst generally being a product of it), the value of cultural commodity and the kudos/elitism of interaction directly with the works' creator. Most fascinating is the chapter discussing the various relationships in New Orleans based vampire fandom focussed on Anne Rice – the split between official and unofficial fan groups, arguments over money, cynicism at merchandising and the fall-out over the Mennoch Ball, home of many a fan gripe that will be familiar to convention goers and organisers the world over. Later chapters touch on fannish appearance, the dressing up culture and the occasionally murky area of fan fiction.

There is much to *Lure of the Vampire* that appeals, even if you have only tangential (or should that be fangential) interest. It is a good starting point as an introduction or distillation of academic research on vampires and their relationship to contemporary popular culture. As an examination of fan communities and the relationship between personal and commercial ownership of its subject it provides a valuable insight and is a fascinating read.

Vector 245 – Index of Books Reviewed

23 Neil Barron – <i>Avonture of Wonder</i> [S]	27 David Gemmill – <i>Lord of the Silver Bats</i> [SP]	21 Vera Nazarian – <i>The Clock King & the Queen of the Hourglass</i> [NH]
27 Ian Bass & Mark Gatiss – <i>The Watson Club</i> [DMB]	34 Jay Gordon & Robert Scott – <i>The Hickory Staff</i> [CAKG]	32 Susan Palwick – <i>The Necessary Beggar</i> [CAKG]
24 Ray Bradbury – <i>R is for Rocket</i> [LJH]	30 Roelof Goudriaan & Frank Luuflow – <i>Emerald Eye</i> [MMG]	32 Holly Phillips – <i>In the Palace of Repose</i> [NH]
24 Ray Bradbury – <i>5 is for Space</i> [LJH]	28 Richard Kadrey – <i>Bludsvibe</i> [JNY]	24 Robert Swan & Jay Gordon – <i>The Hickory Staff</i> [CAKG]
25 Ramsey Campbell – <i>Secret Stories</i> [DNJB]	28 Ed Lark – <i>Griff</i> [JN]	24 Michael Swannick – <i>The Periodic Table of Science Fiction</i> [NH]
25 Gardner Dozois – <i>The Year's Best Science Fiction #22</i> [AF]	29 Holly Lisle – <i>Talyn</i> [PH]	26 Milly Williamson – <i>The Lure of the Vampire</i> [COMLB]
26 Steven Erikson – <i>Fishin' With Grandma Matchie</i> [ER]	29 Brian Llewellyn – <i>The Rat and the Serpent</i> [S]	32 Neil Williamson and Andrew J. Wilson – <i>Nova Scotia</i> [NH]
26 Raymond E. Feist – <i>Flight of the Night Hawks</i> [VL]	30 Frank Luitlow & Roelof Goudriaan – <i>Emerald Eye</i> [MMG]	
31 Jeffrey Ford – <i>The Cosmology of the Wider World</i> [NH]	30 J. Shaun Lyon – <i>Back to the Vortex</i> [MMG]	
27 Mark Gatiss & Ian Bass – <i>The Venusian Club</i> [DMB]	31 David Marisek – <i>Counting Heads</i> [SB]	

Reviewers: AF – Alan Fraser, CAKG – Carol Ann Kerry Green, COMLB – Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc, DMB – Dave M. Roberts, ER – Estelle Roberts, JN – John Newsinger, KMV – Kev McVeigh, LJH – L.J. Hurst, MMG – Martin McGrath, NH – Niall Harrison, PH – Penny Hill, SB – Simon Bisson, S] – Steve Jeffery, SP – Susan Peak, ST – Sue Thomason, VL – Vikki Lee.