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Cover: Montage of some of the stuff of 2005

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As a community, it's fair to say we like lists, and never is this more evident than in the first few months of a new year, with its rush of best-ofs and award nominees and general stocktaking. Already the Arthur C. Clarke and BSFA Award shortlists have been announced – there'll be a discussion of the latter at the BSFA London meeting on March 22nd. The nomination deadline for the 2006 Hugos is almost upon us (Interaction members, don't forget you can nominate!) and the joint BSFA/SFF AGM event has been scheduled for May 13th, at Conway Hall in London. It's all go.

Awards such as the BSFA and Clarke are the crystallised consensus opinion of the previous year's sf, and as such are a tool for canon-formation, for describing the official history of the state of the genre in 2005. But they're not the whole story, or even the most interesting part of the story. Hence, alongside awards we have best-of anthologies and reviews of the year such as this one, in which it's possible to offer a broader and more nuanced overview of the shape of the field at a given moment, giving more weight to a variety of individual perspectives, and not simply distilling an entire year into a handful of titles.

So what kind of year was 2005 for sf?

From the perspective of two neophyte *Vector* editors from the UK, something of a mixed bag, and then only when we look beyond UK shores. We saw only a few standout novels, and of our personal favourites one – Ian Macleod's *The Summer Isles* – was only published as an extremely limited edition in the US while the other – Geoff Ryman's *Air* – was at least published in the UK last year, but had already been available across the pond in 2004. As usual, we asked the *Vector* reviewers to come up with their own favourite reads of the year, and *Vector*'s review editor Paul Billinger presents the results of the survey. (A detailed list of all the nominated titles can be found on our new website, at www.vector-magazine.co.uk.) It seemed a better year for single-author collections, from Kelly Link's *Magic for Beginners* to Joe Hill's *20th Century Ghosts* and Michel Faber's *The Fahrenheit Twins* – although again, only two of these were published in the UK, and only one by a major publishing house. On the plus side, *Interzone* re-established a regular publication schedule, even if the quality of the contents was sometimes variable, and the PS Publishing quarterly *Postscripts* seems to be doing well. In this issue's 'Archipelago' section, Matthew Cheney gives us some 'Confessions of a Short-Story Burnout', considering the state of

sf short fiction publishing in 2005, and discussing his picks of the year.

It was a similar story (for us) on the big and little screens. As Colin Odell and Mitch LeBlanc reflect in 'A Year in the Dark', 2005 gave us a rather disappointing clutch of remakes, franchises and adaptations. The only truly impressive film to make it to our screens was one that went mostly unnoticed – the low-budget, one-man driven *Primer*. Most of the rest of the year's special effects extravaganzas paled in comparison to this film's quiet originality; the only blockbuster worth mentioning alongside *Primer* was Joss Whedon's big-screen directorial debut, *Serenity*. On TV, the Big British Event was the much-anticipated relaunch of *Doctor Who*, although overall pickings for sf fans remained relatively slim. The show that's generating the most noise (the atmospheric *Carnivale* having been cancelled at the end of its second season) seems to be Ronald D. Moore's remake of *Battlestar Galactica*. Mattia Valente gives his own take on these and a number of other shows in 'TV 2005: the Good, the Decent, and the "Why, Dear God, Why?!"'.

Of course, it was also a year with a British Worldcon, and a year which saw about half the Hugos go to British winners. As first-time Worldcon attendees, we managed to avoid feeling jaded about either the awards or the convention, and the whole experience – seeing so many fans, authors, critics and editors gathered together and passionately discussing sf in all its forms – was a definite highlight of the year. In 'Best Related Relatedness', BSFA Awards Administrator Claire Brialey talks a bit more about Worldcon, and considers how the ongoing conversation about sf was represented in the world of publishing, from fanzines to critical studies. Last but not least, Graham Sleight takes a longer perspective in his regular column, this time wondering what happened to 'The Vanishing Midlist, revisited'.

So that's our perspective, the perspective of the *Vector* reviewers, and the perspectives of a handful of other commentators. But a review such as this can never hope to be complete, so if you think we've missed or misjudged something, be sure to let us know – and cast your votes for your own favourite things in the BSFA Awards. You can either write to us at the email or postal addresses given opposite, or drop by the website mentioned earlier – that URL again is www.vector-magazine.co.uk. That Worldcon wasn't called Interaction for nothing. ▼



Torque Control

Editorial
by
Geneva
Melzack
& Niall
Harrison



Letters to Vector

FROM STEVE JEFFERY

A splendid inaugural issue from new Vector editors Niall and Geneva. The theme issue on manifestos and movements is an excellent idea. Well done. My only minor criticism of an otherwise nice and clean layout is the abrupt shift in font size between Spinrad's cogent and densely argued article on the New Weird (which I'd not seen previously in Asimov's – thanks for reprinting that) which, for reasons of age and failing eyesight, is set in a size just slightly too small to be entirely comfortable (it's a greying of fandom thing) and that which follows from Graham Sleight, which looks (perhaps by comparison) rather widely spaced. I know the temptation is to start each article on a new page, but in this case it might have wiser to let them run into each other for the sake of a more balanced typography. As I say, it's my only minor criticism in what is otherwise a fascinating issue.

– Steve Jeffery, Peverel@aol.com

Thanks Steve. We're still ironing out some of the wrinkles in the new layout and agree that the font size for the Spinrad article turned out a bit too small for comfort. Hopefully this issue is easier on the eye.

FROM BRYN LLEWELLYN

I read Vector 245 with great interest. I would like to offer a short work which I thought might act by way of reply (or at least response) to the articles published in the last issue. It is certainly time for writers and readers of all persuasions to proffer their manifestos.

A New Gothic Manifesto For Speculative Fiction

1. We are all people. We are all human beings.
2. I hope that the artificial separation of people into groups will end. It only exists because of the patriarchal ways we have grown used to.

2a. The Mievillesque Theorem

We are all readers. I hope that the artificial separation of speculative fiction into "science-fiction" and "fantasy", and thence into sub-genres, will end. I hope that the

modern proliferation of small presses will allow speculative writing to flourish as a diverse phenomenon, whose artifacts – short stories, novellas and novels – will be imprecise at the edges, and so remain ill-defined. Speculative fiction is a wide open moor across which many winds blow. Let us not retreat into our cities.

3. I hope that the way we organise ourselves, by external qualities not those inside, will be forgotten.

3a. The Byronic Theorem

We are all romantics. At heart, we do not wish to be judged according to appearance. If we are deemed fat, we do not wish to be derided. If we are skinny, we do not wish to be mocked. If we are considered ugly, we do not wish to be spurned. I hope that the organisation of our creative work will be according to emotional response, not according to surface criteria. A vogue for "space-opera" is the fetishisation of grandeur for its own sake. A vogue for supernatural fiction is nothing but the fetishisation of ignorance. Such vogues are driven by commercial pressures. Let us put emotional heart back into speculative fiction.

4. I hope that the obsession we have with recording everything – at the expense of experience – will be stopped.

4a. The Siouxsique Theorem

We all feel. Though we write, using words, as authors we hope to stimulate an emotional response in the reader. I hope that the way we have used words, and use words now – rearranging them to pretend that thoughts are being deployed in the construction of novel concepts – will cease. When we go abroad, why must we take a camera? We should not fetishise the recording of life, for it trivialises reality. Instead we should experience life with all our senses. Let us record only when we need to.

5. We are all people. We are all human beings. We are all readers – but above that, we all feel.

– Bryn Llewellyn,
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So how was it for you? The year in books, that is. Well, to try and make some sense out of all the genre books (and others) published last year *Vector* has again conducted its poll to find those books that the reviewers, BSFA committee and others, loved – and, crucially, why. This year's call for suggestions resulted in ninety-one different books being nominated by twenty-four people, with seventeen books receiving two or more votes. Compared with the last few years, this gives a very consistent proportion of books with more than one vote. The difference this year is that proportionately fewer books gained more than two votes. But do these results tell us anything about the state of sf or genre fiction in general?

For me, the wide spread of the selections supports my feeling that 2005 was not a great year for sf. Yes, there were some excellent books, the poll winner *9tail Fox* being one of them, but there was little which created real surprise or excitement, like Ian McDonald's *River of Gods* did in 2004 or Tricia Sullivan's *Maul* the year before, and there was nothing like the debate surrounding Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle*. I'm wondering if we are reaching one of those pivotal moments in sf where one – maybe minor – thing happens to send us in a new direction? Or is it that the success of the British-led New Space Opera has given us such high expectations that nothing stands out? And what of the New Weird? Is it about to deliver, or will mundane sf be the movement of the moment (and if it is then I'm joining the revolution against it)?

Of course, I could just be wrong, but at least one of the new *Vector* editors seems in agreement. When Niall Harrison said of last year that "it was not the banner year for sf that 2004 was. Finding five books to recommend was still relatively easy, but finding five more would be challenging." For the *Matrix* view of last year we turn to editors Tom Hunter and Claire Weaver: "our reading theme of 2005 was often about going back over old favourites, back catalogues and those convention-bought cheapies that seem such a great idea at the time but you never actually quite get around to. As such we have a whole stack of recent releases that we'd probably be recommending right away any other year but haven't actually read yet because we were off reading something else (although any back issue of *Matrix* should give you a clue as to the kind of books and writers we thought it was important to tell people about)".

Niall's comment about there being a small(ish) pool of recommended books from 2005 to select from is supported when the poll results are compared with the shortlists for the two premier British sf awards, the BSFA Best Novel and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Three titles appear on all three lists – *Accelerando*, *Air* and *Learning the World* – and a further two, *9tail Fox* and *Pushing Ice*, appear on two lists. Of the other award-shortlisted books it's great to see Liz Williams getting a Clarke Award nomination for *Banner of Souls* (although I preferred *Nine Layers of Sky*) and Justina Robson a BSFA Award nomination for *Living Next-Door to the God of Love*. And as we have almost come to expect, the Clarke Award has again nominated a supposedly 'mainstream' title, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (which is next on my reading list so the Clarke Award does have an effect). And what will win

the awards? Well, I'll leave that up to the judges (which remember is all of you for the BSFA Award, so get voting).

Back to the BSFA poll for the Book of the Year 2005: were there any surprises? Well, not in the ones that did well, given the showing of both Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Charles Stross in past polls. The surprise is that there were a number of books that I expected to do better: Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys* may have done okay in this year's poll, but I still expected more – possibly a win – given both the popularity of all things Gaiman and the fact that *American Gods* topped the 2001 poll. Most surprising was Justina Robson's *Living Next-Door to the God of Love* getting only a single nomination. Okay, so it was only published in October, and the publisher has not promoted it well, but even so this is still a title we should all be reading. Tricia Sullivan's *Double Vision* also only gained a single nomination, from Steve Jeffery, and again I would have expected more after the success of previous last novel, *Maul* (although this could be the problem, given the number of people – including me – who commented that they liked *Double Vision* ... but it just wasn't *Maul*).

So what about the books the reviewers did like?

Poll winner

We have been fortunate over the last few years that the reviewers' poll has always had a clear winner, and this year is no exception with Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *9tail Fox* topping the poll (just) ahead of Charles Stross's *Accelerando*. This is a result I was especially pleased with, since *9tail Fox* is also my personal selection for genre novel of the year (although this was the only one of my selections that was in agreement with anyone else). Grimwood has always mixed strong crime



Vector Reviewer's Poll Best Books of 2005 Compiled by Paul Billinger

elements in with his science fiction but here the novel is almost all crime with only a little sf. Nevertheless, others were just as impressed as I was, Claire Brialey declaring it the best novel she read last year. I agree, in particular, with her comment that "it's almost a simple story, in which a man gets the chance to investigate, and perhaps avenge, his own death, and finds in it the chance to atone for the rest of his life".

The view of our *Matrix* editors, Tom and Claire, was equally complimentary; they found *9tail Fox* "an unusual lean away from Grimwood's usual hard-boiled punk style. To date, his novels have been near chaotic (in a good way) with wild plots, dancing timelines, dizzying character motivations and diverse, ever-changing

settings. But with his ninth novel, he changes course to stick with just one protagonist throughout almost the entirety of the book. They concluded that "it may not be Courtenay Grimwood as we know it, but we still clear a loving space for it on our bookshelves". I may not totally agree with the first part of that sentence, since the book does retain some of Grimwood's trademarks, but I fully support the rest. And another member of the *Matrix* team, Martin McGrath, was of the opinion that it was Jon Courtenay Grimwood's best work (so far?) He said that "*9tail Fox* is a really good detective story, with all the pieces of the puzzle neatly laid out before you and still managing to deliver a definitive 'D'OH!' moment when you realise what you missed. Grimwood's writing is smooth, his characterisation precise and his plotting tight – you really can't ask for more".

Steve Jeffery liked the way *9tail Fox* "freely mixes the genres of sf, police procedural and Chinese folk/ghost tale (echoing writers like Haruki Murakami) and murder mystery." L.J. Hurst also liked the book enough to select it but with the caveat that "for an author with a lot of clever friends his copy-editors are terrible: knickers, suspenders, fridges? In San Francisco? Really?" He isn't the only person to reflect on this but I don't necessarily agree, since Grimwood's reality is always his own twisted version – I suspect the vocabulary is deliberately there to remind us that this is alternate reality.

Runner-up

The runner-up this year is Charlie Stross's *Accelerando*, a fix-up of linked short stories. As a result of this Niall Harrison

Poll results 2005

6 votes

9Tail Fox – Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz, 2005)

5 votes

Accelerando – Charles Stross (Orbit, 2005)

4 votes

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell – Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury, 2004)

3 votes

Anansi Boys – Neil Gaiman (Headline, 2005)

River of Gods – Ian McDonald (Simon & Schuster, 2004)

2 votes

The Algebraist – Iain M. Banks (Orbit, 2004)

Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land – John Crowley (Morrow, 2005)

Vellum – Hal Duncan (Macmillan, 2005)

1610: A Sundial in a Grave – Mary Gentle

(Gollancz, 2004)

Judas Unchained – Peter F. Hamilton (Macmillan, 2005)

Magic for Beginners – Kelly Link

(Small Beer Press, 2005)

Learning the World – Ken Macleod (Orbit, 2005)

Cloud Atlas – David Mitchell (Sceptre, 2004)

Market Forces – Richard Morgan (Gollancz, 2004)

Pushing Ice – Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz, 2005)

Air – Geoff Ryman (Gollancz, 2005)

City of Saints and Madmen – Jeff Vandermeer

(Tor UK, 2004)

found it perhaps "a cheat to pick it as one of the best books of 2005, since I read the stories as they appeared in *Asimov's* over the past few years; but if so it's a cheat I'm going to take advantage of. It's a novel filled with wit and (deeply geeky) humour, a density of invention matched by few, if any, other writers working today, and marked by an acutely perceptive commentary on the implications of our technological present for human interaction".

Stuart Carter selected *Accelerando* as one of his top five "even though there were large stretches of this superdense fix-up that went so far over my head that they're probably still circling the earth as we speak". But then he goes on to explain why we

should read it: "for me, this is what proper, grown-up, hard sf should be like: splitting radioactive nuggets of ideas into a barely sub-critical seething core of more ideas so that the whole thing goes into an incandescent chain reaction, and then not being afraid to look directly into the monstrous inferno you've created to describe what you see there". Which was a problem for the other books published this year as "unfortunately *Accelerando* made almost everything else feel tame by comparison..."

Chris Amies commented on the significance of *Accelerando* to Stross's career so far: "after so many years in the wilderness Stross is now a Name to be reckoned with. *Accelerando* is bizarre and inventive, a family saga seen by an unusual central narrator. This is a Big Future and things happen in it. Despite the gung-ho high tech and the things that go fast and explode he never loses his grip on the stories at the core of the book". Martin McGrath has this to add about *Accelerando*: "I'm not sure this fix-up really works as a novel – it's not got great characters or a particularly gripping plot – but in terms of beating you over the head with future shock, *Accelerando* is in the same league as *Stand on Zanzibar* and *Neuromancer*. It gave me an enormous headache, but I couldn't put it down." Steve Jeffery has similar feelings to Martin: "this shouldn't work – thin on characterisation, with plots which essentially serve as vehicles on which to hang large chunks of dizzying speculation into physics and information theory – it's like a breathless roller-coaster ride to the Omega Point of geek heaven". I'd agree with these comments about it not really working as a novel, but for me the ideas and geekiness were not enough to compensate.

Other multiple nominees

Next in the reviewers' poll, with four votes, is the immensely successful *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke, which also came third in last year's poll. Dave M. Roberts got right to the point: "there is probably not much to say about the book that has not already been said. It is an absorbing and highly entertaining alternate history where magic is real and is an integral part of our history. The story is of the re-emergence of magic and the rivalry between the two most powerful practitioners; it paints a vivid picture of its world and is a delight from start to finish." Chris Hill echoed the sentiment, calling it "a beautifully written story... perhaps a little longer than it really needs to be and not to everyone's taste, but a fine fantasy". Martin Potts had a very personal take on the novel: "I had the great pleasure of meeting Susanna Clarke at Worldcon and listening to her read an unpublished footnote featuring John Uskglass which was worth going to Glasgow for alone". Finally, Alan Frazer had an observation about some of the publishing hype that accompanied the novel "I was amazed to hear *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* hyped as an 'adult *Harry Potter*'. Such a comparison is incredibly crass, it's much better described as a 19th century novel in the style of Jane Austen or William Thackeray, but set in an alternate England where magic works."

Following *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, with three nominations each, are Neil Gaiman's follow-up to *American Gods*, *Anansi Boys* and Ian McDonald's BSFA Award-winning novel *River of Gods*. Chris Amies commented that "Gaiman may be taking a risk writing a novel whose main characters are black but in *Anansi Boys*, and perhaps more successfully than in the earlier book, he reimagines a mythology, here the myth of the Trickster, for the 21st century", to which Penny Hill added that the book is "mostly a light-hearted tale, although it has darker elements". Martin McGrath concluded that the book is "just too funny and smart and plain likeable to leave out of my list".

And then we have Ian McDonald's wonderful *River of Gods*, which was only omitted from my top selection for the year because I included it last year when it topped the poll (and on re-reading it this year to run a book group on it at Worldcon it became even stronger). Tanya Brown brilliantly summarised this multi-faceted novel as "wide-screen, cast-of-thousands sf with joy and verve, and an apparently endless wellspring of invention. The plot alone would have enthralled me: but McDonald's ten protagonists are finely drawn, multi-dimensional and uniquely damaged. A novel about incarnation and reincarnation; popular culture and the cult of Celebrity; artificial and emotional intelligence; men, women and others; emergent evolution; gods and mortals; betrayal

and abandonment; parents and children; escape". To which Chris Amies added a reflection on the book's Indian ancestry, saying it was "like a companion to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* set a hundred years later... science fiction should be about imagining other cultures in the ascendant, but recently this mission has been in eclipse. McDonald's future India though, and the world around it, is a bright, shining and scary world full of colour, event, violence and intrigue". Again Martin Potts was able to bring in a personal dimension with *River of Gods*, the book reminding him of his "own trip to India (taken too many years ago now). Accentuating India's extremes of beauty and barbarity and grace the novel will appear on must-read lists for years".

Books with two nominations

Next we have those novels, in alphabetical order, which each gained two nominations apiece, starting with Iain M. Banks's *The Algebraist*, which Alan Frazer said "was a fine return to exotic space opera but not in the Culture universe this time.

This story of an unlikely hero trying to find an ancient secret amongst the inhabitants of a gas giant and rescue his solar system from an incredibly evil enemy is unmissable". Martin Potts "loved the protagonist's journey through the gas giant's environment and indigenous society" and found the imagery "excellent, the concept and significance of gas giant entities very interesting and the journey undertaken communicated a very real sense of wonder".

John Crowley's *Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land* was described by Steve

Jeffery as "a tour de force of literary impersonation on a number of levels. The central conceit is the discovery, by researcher Alex(andra) Novak, of an enciphered manuscript which turns out to be a thinly disguised 'lost' autobiographical novel, cast as a gothic romance, written by Byron and annotated (and enciphered) by his daughter Ada Lovelace. A third, surrounding narrative frame is Alex's own troubled relationship with her estranged father, which parallels both Ada's and the story recounted in the manuscript." Paul Kincaid concurred: "John Crowley has to be one of the most consistently satisfying writers working in the genre today, and this re-creation of the romantic novel that Byron might have written at the Villa Diodata is vivid, exciting, and pitch-perfect, making this one of his most accessible and straightforwardly enjoyable novels".

Stuart Carter was succinct about Hal Duncan's *Vellum*: "come on, this is on everyone's list, isn't it? Of course it is". Well, not quite, and it certainly didn't make it onto mine (I always either strongly agree or completely disagree with Stuart), but this could just be me, as Matrix editors Tom and Claire called the book "both hotly anticipated and well worth

BSFA Best Novel shortlist

9Tail Fox – Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz)

Learning the World – Ken Macleod (Orbit)

Living Next-Door to the God of Love – Justina Robson (Macmillan)

Air – Geoff Ryman (Gollancz)

Accelerando – Charles Stross (Orbit)

Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlist

Never Let Me Go – Kazuo Ishiguro (Faber & Faber)

Learning the World – Ken Macleod (Orbit)

Pushing Ice – Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz)

Air – Geoff Ryman (Gollancz)

Banner of Souls – Liz Williams (Tor UK)

the wait, and full kudos to Macmillan editor Peter Lavery for taking it on. It's a long and complicated story, which has frustrated some readers and reviewers, but its breadth, imaginative scope and quality of prose make it a must-read for anyone seriously interested in reading anything seriously interesting".

Both Penny and Chris Hill nominated Mary Gentle's *1610: A Sundial in a Grave*. Penny described it as "an alternate-history romp, but that only gives one element of the book. There is also a more serious philosophical side and some gloriously complicated gender issues and sexual politics" to which Chris added that it is "an exciting and funny (and sometimes rather naughty) swashbuckler but also a meditation on love and the cost of blind loyalty".

Next up is *Judas Unchained*, the second half of Peter F. Hamilton's Commonwealth Saga which began with *Pandora's Star*. Gary Dalkin described it as "compelling sf political thriller meets full-blown space opera, the plotting is astonishingly complex and well conceived - imagine if 24 was ten times as complex and actually made sense - and the action rousing and thoroughly exciting". Martin Potts was similarly effusive, discussing the book's "fast-paced action, widescreen canvas and huge cast", but also warning that this saga is really a single book and should be read as such.

Kelly Link's *Magic for Beginners* was the only book Niall Harrison read in 2005 that earned an unequivocal recommendation; he felt that, compared to Link's earlier collection *Stranger Things Happen*, the stories were "richer, more emotionally satisfying (without bowing to convention), and as charming, funny, eerie and beautiful as ever. The first story in the collection, 'The Faery Handbag', deservedly won a Hugo last summer, and if there's any justice in the world the title story, which captures perfectly what it's like to be a part of the communities that shared stories create, will be voted Best Novella in 2006". Paul Kincaid included *Magic for Beginners* as the best collection of the year, noting that it features Link's "trademark twisting of what seem like traditional fairy story elements into something surreal and disturbing. Nothing in any of these stories makes sense, but they have the cumulative effect of making you feel you have glimpsed something dark and true at the heart of our imaginative landscape".

Martin McGrath described Ken MacLeod's *Learning the World* as "probably the best thing MacLeod has written. A really smart first contact story with convincing economic and political details threaded through it and held together by two core characters that are engaging and fully realised. One of the very few novels that I've wished was longer". John

Newsinger puts the novel in the context of MacLeod's other books "how does he do it? This is his ninth novel and not a dud there. *Learning The World* is a novel of first contact with a difference, beautifully written (I think Macleod's literary strengths are sometimes underestimated) and wonderfully inventive. A real pleasure."

Both Paul Bateman and Colin Bird picked one of last year's successful novels, the Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlisted *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell, with Paul describing it as "masterly multi-genre" and Colin as a "slipstream book claimed by the mainstream although two of the strands are clearly sf". Another of last year's Clarke Award shortlisted novels, *Market Forces* by Richard Morgan, was selected by Martin Lewis, who saw it as a radical departure from Morgan's Takeshi Kovacs novels that "brings the same blend

of sex, violence and righteous anger to the question of global capitalism. It undoubtedly has a silly premise but I liked this ambiguous and confrontational novel a lot more than I thought I would". Ian Watson also noted that "after the first two ultra-tough and commercially right-on futurescapes, [Morgan's] third novel is a brave (and tough) assault on capitalism. Global corporations compete to promote and grow rich from Third World miniwars. In a Britain where the prole majority fester in ghettos, executives duel to the death on the motorways for conflict investment contracts. A passionate and angry novel; and another where what seems at first a conceit is sustained at length with horrifying plausibility".

And one more of this year's Clarke Award shortlisted books

also made the poll. With *Pushing Ice*, for Stuart Carter, Alastair Reynolds has finally got it just right: "for years he's been regularly supplying us with darkly wondrous novels like *Revelation Space* and *Chasm City*, books with incredible ideas, beautifully applied and, more to the point, books that stick within the rules of relativity! They have the chilling essence of a universe on an actual cosmic scale in which humanity feels as small and ineffectual as we really are, giving the lie to all those grandiose, but unreal, dreams of galactic empires. Somehow, though, Reynolds' plotting skills always failed him at the final hurdle; rushed resolutions and some unbalanced plotting had always left me ever so slightly disappointed. Not this time though. This time he balances the technical, the personal and the cosmic with storming aplomb". To which Paul Kincaid added that the novel is an "excellent illustration of the way that the very best hard sf writers can wring something original and exciting out of the most traditional science fiction elements".

Claire Brialey was "amazed that Geoff Ryman's novel *Air*

**VECTOR REVIEWERS' POLL:
RECENT WINNERS**

2004

WINNER: *River of Gods* – Ian McDonald (Simon & Schuster)
RUNNER UP: *The System of the World* – Neal Stephenson (Heinemann)

2003

WINNER: *Felaheen* – Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz)
RUNNER UP: *The Separation* – Christopher Priest (Simon & Schuster)

2002

WINNER: *Light* – M John Harrison (Gollancz)
RUNNER UP: *The Scar* – China Mieville (Macmillan)

2001

WINNER: *American Gods* – Neil Gaiman (Headline)
RUNNER UP: *Look to Windward* – Iain M. Banks (Orbit)

didn't find its way onto the Hugo shortlist last year. It's a novel about ideas that can change the way the world works, about forces that people can't control, about challenges to everything they thought they knew and believed. I read it nearly a year ago and it still held off the more recent competition to make this list". A view generally shared; although it may have been published late in the UK, it's clearly strongly supported, here having made it into this poll as well as onto the Clarke and BSFA shortlists. Steve Jeffrey wondered "how much it fits Ryman's conception of mundane sf (having two people living in one head seems just as improbable as aliens or FTL) but the story of Mae Chung's desperate attempt to prepare her remote Karzistani village for the arrival of a new information technology that will change their lives forever serves as proof (if any is needed outside the closed mindset of mainstream critics) that the genre is fully capable of supporting novels of character and emotion".

And finally we come to Jeff Vandermeer's *City of Saints and Madmen*, another book which took some time to be published in the UK. Dave M. Roberts attempted to summarise it: "there is no easy way to describe *City of Saints and Madmen*, a sort of story collection-cum-novel-cum-post-modern fantasy artefact thing. It collects in one place most of Jeff Vandermeer's writing about the city of Ambergris, a dark, dank mushroom- and squid-infested place. The stories create a history of Ambergris, frequently making comment on themselves, the book as a whole and the sanity of the author. Indeed the book itself makes regular appearances. The vision of Ambergris created is a wonderfully complex world and utterly compelling". Chris Amies was similarly convinced by Ambergris, arguing the book was "not so much a fix-up as an exploration of a world very different from our own with the main character being the squalid eternal city of Ambergris with its mushroom dwellers, lunatics, lovers, poets, and squid. It is a book about the boundaries of fiction and the real, and about the joy of creating through language. You'll believe you've been to Ambergris".

Selected other books

Many other books were nominated for inclusion in this poll. We don't have space to discuss all of them but highlights of other books published during 2005 are included here. A full list can be found on the Vector website.

Gary Dalkin nominated *Transcendent* by Stephen Baxter, which he found a strong conclusion to the Destiny's Children sequence "and in many ways the best, filled with wonders, strongly characterised, exhaustively imaginative and thoughtful, even if you don't always agree with Baxter's conclusions. As the title suggests, mystical concerns are to the fore in a hard sf drama which successfully builds on the English sf tradition of Stapledon and Clarke". For Paul Kincaid the book of the year was *Our Ecstatic Days* by Steve Erickson. A sequel of sorts to his last novel, *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, Paul described the books as "a gloriously rich and mysterious vision of a near-future America in which Los Angeles has been drowned beneath a strange lake where his characters pursue their oblique relationships".

The enfant terrible of contemporary French fiction, Michel Houellebecq, produced a weird sf novel in 2005, *The*

Possibility of an Island, which was nominated by Ian Watson. The book is "inspired by the real-world Raelian cult which believes that aliens created life on Earth, claimed a couple of years ago to have created the first human clone, and engages in lots of sex. In *The Possibility of an Island* intense eroticism and philosophy interweave in a mordant counterpoint of a no-holds-barred alternative comedian in the present and his post-armageddon 24th clone in an eco-catastrophic future where the remnants of the human race as we know it have reverted to bestial primitivism. Possibly a masterpiece, and compulsive, if none too cheery".

Justina Robson's *Living Next-Door to the God of Love* was, for Niall Harrison, "remarkable on several counts. There is the care Robson takes in relating her sf conceit (worlds that can be remade by dream or will) to human situations; there is the vibrancy with which she portrays those situations; and there is the skill with which she unravels her characters, to force them and us into understanding. The novel is not perfect – the writing can be ungainly – but it is absorbing, with an ending that is nothing short of miraculous".

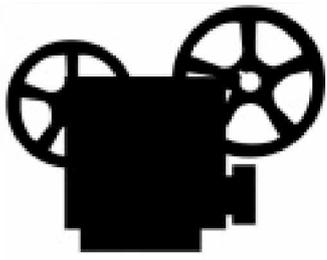
Claire Brialey nominated *Double Vision* by Tricia Sullivan, saying that it "creates a tantalising network of experience; and that's not just a description of how the narrative works; it's a major part of the landscape. Her protagonist is an unreliable narrator in an unreliable world, and she's a realistically-drawn science fiction fan to boot. It's not flawless: there's too much in this novel to avoid a few mixed messages. But it goes beyond the usual sfnal technique of making the reader question observed reality and makes you think about how much reality can be real at once".

We had a good number of short story collections nominated this year, both single-author ones and anthologies. Of these the Neil Williamson and Andrew J. Wilson edited *Nova Scotia: New Scottish Speculative Fiction* was, for Tom Hunter and Claire Weaver, the must-have item of the Glasgow Worldcon. And why? Well, "not only is it a gorgeous object in its own right, should you care to take it out of its protective covering you'll also find a superior selection of fiction as well. If you're one of those people who's inclined to preach about short fiction being the lifeblood of the genre, you couldn't ask for a better example to back up your case than this".

So that's *Vector's* year in books – but as ever, if you disagree, or think the real standouts have been missed then please let us know. 

Paul N. Billinger is *Vector's* reviews editor.

The criteria for inclusion in the poll are deliberately, wide and inclusive. The brief given was that Vector wanted to know the best five books read during 2005 and the reasons. Preference should be given to sf/fantasy/horror/slipstream etc books published during the last two years (both fiction and non-fiction). Non-genre and older books can be included but should be of interest to BSFA members. Unsurprisingly, many people (including me) made good use of this last sentence to include a fascinating range of titles. – Eds



A Year in the Dark Movies of 2005

by Colin
Odell
& Mitch
LeBlanc

It looks as though the blame lies on the shoulders of Tim Burton. The legacy of 1989's *Batman* was the marketing boys' realisation that bubble-gum cinema franchises could reap extra profits by being dark. In marketing terms, dark equals mature, and mature equals kids thinking they're hard, and kids thinking they're hard equals wads of cash at the box office. Dark is the new black, so to speak. Even when something is not dark and mopey its very lack of darkness and mopiness is also a marketing strategy – *The Fantastic Four* was marketed as “look folks, it's not dark and what's more there's not a tedious single-use-of-the-f-word-12-rating either”. So ultimately we can blame Tim Burton for the “now with added darkness” *Batman Begins* and the “increasingly grim” *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, ironic in a year when Burton himself produced two of his most light, frothy and family-centred films. Even if they have a dark side...

It really was a war of the worlds when it came to the summer's two biggest sf blockbusters and, despite being set a long time apart in galaxies far, far away they shared similar themes of broken families amidst a background of turmoil. If you subscribe to the view that Hollywood films somehow mirror the concerns of the world (the hedonistic capitalism of the 1980s film, the grim Vietnam era horror film etc) then both *Star Wars Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith* and *The War of the Worlds* both seem to address concerns about America's current political climate – a powerless military against a destructive alien invader. Indeed, *Star Wars* is now to be found “with added gloom” and a 12A rating. What this means is

more hacked limbs and some “intense sequences,” as they like to call them. But *Star Wars* was always gruesome; Episode 3 merely foregrounds these elements to fit with its tragic tone. Altogether, though, the film's technical achievements are impressive, Lucas's recent penchant for overfilling his canvas is given full rein. And Anakin's descent to the dark side the result of a bad dream? Hmm.

Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* starts with a bang but its final whimper is pretty pitiful. Mercifully it lasts but a few minutes, unlike the excruciating ending of *A.I.* (2001). Once you get over the initially clichéd premise (another estranged father reclaims his place in the hearts of his kids) the film neatly rollercoasters from action set-pieces to family drama. The initial scenes of Martian destruction are breathtaking, but more disturbing are the scenes of societal breakdown and panic. The ultimate message of reconciliation and a brave new world is a nice thought but comes across as cynical and ultimately a big cheat.

Then there was Joss Whedon's *Serenity*, the mid-budget contender and spin-off of the ill-fated (or rather ill-exposed and quickly cancelled) series *Firefly*. The crew of *Serenity* are on the run again, but this time the full story of their mysterious passenger, River Tam, is to be revealed. The film is unshackled from the restraints of the 44-minute format and we have the luxury of a plot that is given time to mature and conclude. It's by no means perfect but at least the characters are memorable and the action is plot-driven and exciting. Hell, it's even got some martial arts that don't look too lame or too edited; what more could you want?

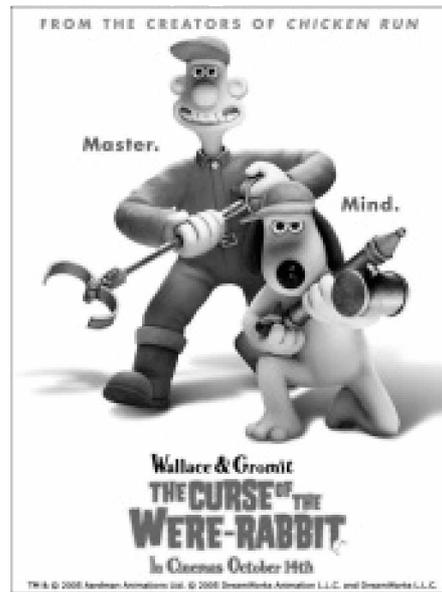
In contrast to all the doom and gloom the long-awaited big screen version of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* finally arrived and, while eschewing the grit-faced determinism of *The War of the Worlds*, it did show that the Vogons could do what the Martians couldn't: destroy the Earth. The crew of *The Heart of Gold* don't quite make the ‘family’ unit that *Serenity* does but their encounters are of a more surreal kind. The film was never going to get an easy time from devotees of the radio and TV series and the books, but viewed in context of its cinematic contemporaries it holds its own, despite its many faults.

The Island starred Ewan McGregor who, along with Scarlett Johansson, has discovered that he's a clone living in a hi-tech futuristic compound and has to escape to save those left behind. Lots of action combines with lots of product placement and, being a Michael Bay film, the message is transparent with little room for introspection. We also finally got to see the Russian blockbuster *Night Watch* (*Nochnoi Dozor*) on the big screen, complete with novelty arty subtitles to make you forget you were watching a film where everyone spoke Russian. Reportedly costing a pittance, *Night Watch* has really got something for all genre fans – you want horror, vampires, demons? You got it. Apocalypse? Yep. Fantasy warriors of the past? Mysticism? Funky gadgets? Dark and broody moments? Basically everything, including the kitchen sink, is thrown into a convoluted plot, allegedly the first of a trilogy. Yes, it's loud and filled with cliché but it has some inventive shots and a few moral dilemmas. Sometimes it is more fun being messy.

It was great to see two stop-motion films vying for the family market. Both are distinctly quirky and steeped in the trappings of the horror genre. *Wallace and Gromit in the Curse of the Were-Rabbit*'s combination of Hammer Horror and mild Carry On humour is distinctly British, the popular duo surviving the translation to feature-length intact, complete with quirky gadgets and framed holiday snaps. Vermin controllers Anti-Pesto face a new and devastating force, the result of bizarre experimentation, threatening the annual Big Vegetable competition and the local countryside. Class considerations are at the forefront with inventor Wallace (Peter Sallis) falling for the aristocratic Lady Tottington (Helena Bonham-Carter) while trying to contain his inner beast and foil smarmy Victor Quartermain's advances towards 'Totty.' Ms. Bonham-Carter also voices a more complex love triangle (more of a love square really) in Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride*. Again, class divide is the reigning subtext as nervous, nouveau-riche Victor Van Dort (Johnny Depp) is to be wed to posh but impoverished Victoria Everglot. Unfortunately the nervous groom accidentally weds the tragic corpse Emily (Bonham-Carter) leaving his would-be bride facing the advances of lecherous, money-grabbing toff Barkis Bittern. *Corpse Bride* is a feast for the eyes and ears with breathtaking model animation and a superb Danny Elfman score. Funny and moving, it's a true fairytale for the big screen. Both *Wallace and Gromit* and *Corpse Bride* rely on the other-worldliness generated by their use of model work and are tactile creations in a world ruled by ones and zeros.

It says a lot that traditional forms of animation have mostly fallen out of favour with the studios when it comes to big-screen fare. At least in the West. What is interesting about the work of Korean and Japanese animators is the lack of demarcation between animation techniques where CGI complements or enhances elements of production in a more transparent way than their western counterparts. This year has seen the long-awaited return of Otomo Katsuhiro with *Steamboy* and the Korean-made *Sky Blue*. And 2005 also brought back the familiar face of Miyazaki Hayao and Studio Ghibli with a stunning adaptation of Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle*. Miyazaki's dogmatic use of traditional animation seems as defiant as ever (although he does integrate some CGI). What separates Ghibli from other studios is the way that charm and threat co-exist and there is no compromise in characterisation or ambiguity. Young milliner Sophie is transformed into an old lady by the Witch of the Waste and the familiar themes of environmental concern, the loss of youth and the exhilaration

of flying combine to create a magical and complex work where the overriding plot has to be derived by the viewer rather than spelt out to them. Miyazaki's world is a mixture of cruelty and compassion, where forgiveness is as powerful as vengeance but there is no guarantee of happiness without sacrifice.



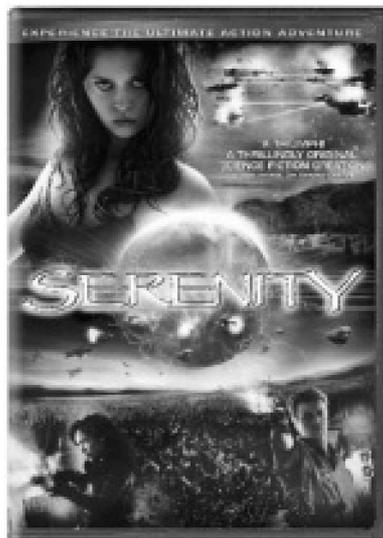
diverting viewing. There were two attempts to kick-start a new superhero franchise in 2005. *Batman Begins* went down the "dark and brooding" route having forgotten that was where it probably would have been heading in the 1989 Burton film had it not been hijacked by Jack Nicholson. Christian Bale is the new, glum-faced caped crusader – trained in the Himalayas to be a lethal martial arts assassin, haunted by the murder of his parents and psychologically



empowered by facing his childhood bat trauma. All earnest stuff and well-disguised by director Chris Nolan as a piece of revenge tragedy rather than a geekboy action film. The problem is... it's a superhero film. With silly costumes and bad guys. The antidote, we were reliably informed, was *The Fantastic Four*, a family film set – get ready for a shock – during daylight hours. The special effects work is more than adequate but, even more than *Batman Begins*, it really suffers from the "is that it?" syndrome that plagues first installments of superhero franchises. So much time is spent establishing the characters' origins that there are only a few minutes left for a quick brawl before the closing credits. Having four unlikeable characters only makes matters worse. Mr Wotsisname Stretchy Bloke is dull and pious, Invisible Girl is next to useless, The Thing may look cool trashing Buicks but he's horribly self-obsessed. And then there's flame-on Johnny Torch, an arrogant thrill-seeker who we are apparently meant to admire, not want to smack in the chops.

The world of the comic-book hero is often viewed as inseparable in the mainstream from that of comics in general, to the extent that the media often replace the word comic with

"graphic novel" as a way of distinguishing perceived quality from pulp. This change was partly brought about through a comics renaissance in the 1980s, particularly associated with the works of Frank Miller and Alan Moore. The coincidence that two of Miller's more famous works make up the "dark hero" trend shown in *Elektra* and *Batman Begins* is compounded by his debut behind the camera as co-director of *Sin City*. A more comic-book film would be hard to imagine (even Romero's *Creepshow* (1982) couldn't push it this far) with stark angles, harsh black-and-white with streaks of occasional primary colour, exaggerated movements and impossible actions. The material is deliberately pulp and trashy, imbued with the kind of hard-boiled dialogue that's been absent from the screen for a good while (although lightning struck twice this year, with the deliciously dark thriller *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*). The characters are two-dimensional and better for it. Miller's partner-in-crime Robert Rodriguez is one of the few mainstream directors to utilise CGI and digital photography for both budgetary and aesthetic reasons.



Fantasy, it's the new Sci-Fi. Outright SF from the major studios has been slowly receding in the light of competition from the superhero and fantasy genres where graphics advances have made spectacle once again the dominant force in mainstream cinema. What's interesting is to see how these genres run the whole gamut of budgets from straight-to-video to state-of-the-art cinema releases. Fantasy used to lie in the realm of the low budget film-maker but now it comprises massive armies of clashing beasties, mile-high towers with swirling flying things and more pointy ears than a *Star Trek* convention. This year's main contenders were both aimed at the family market but even Mr Potter and his chums have, you guessed it, gone the "dark and brooding" route. Harry, you see, has "grown up with his audience", presumably a reference to the fact that people only ever watch films or read books when they are released, never discovering them at a later point. To be fair to *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* it is a far better film than it has any right to be and Mike Newell does hit his stride after a



murky start. But try as it might (getting rid of 200 pages of waffle in the first 15 minutes, for example) it can't escape being based on the weakest and most bloated of the Potter books – the structure makes events inevitable rather than surprising with only the ending pulling things out of the doldrums. Meanwhile, with *The Lord of the Rings* finally over, a new fantasy franchise was born – *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* was both beautifully realised and box office dynamite.

Also in the world of the fantastic was Tim Burton's "re-imagining" of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. This is less a rework of the inexplicably popular Gene Wilder film than a return to Dahl's original text, mocking Oompa Loompa chorus segments and all. As seen through the eyes of Burton it has grandiose sets, a sense of the macabre, eye-searing colours and a lavish, if over-eclectic, score. There is little concession to realist film-making and no-one is more abnormal than Willy Wonka, a Howard Hughes meets Marilyn Manson figure. The dogmatic use of studio-bound sets over green-screen may well have given the financiers worries, but it's a sumptuous treat that delights and unnerves in equal measure. More conventional beasties were to be found in Terry Gilliam's long-delayed *The Brothers Grimm* where the two anthropologists are shown to be pantomime confidence tricksters, creating beasts merely to destroy them... for a price, of course. Naturally, there are genuine supernatural beasts to contend with and our cowardly duo must battle the real forces of evil. Gilliam's love of in-camera effects and scale are tempered slightly by some forced post-

production gloss, but that doesn't stop *The Brothers Grimm* being a good yarn. It's the "dark and moody" (darn, there we go again) answer to *Shrek* (2001), but not as good as vintage Gilliam.

And then there was the remake to end all remakes: *King Kong*. Yes, it was spectacular, brilliantly made, moving and exciting. But why remake, when the original is spectacular, brilliantly made, moving and exciting? Peter Jackson's

argument that he was updating the 1933 classic for a modern audience probably does hold. After all, how many kids would bother to see an old black and white film? It displays a clear love of the original and shows Jackson's cinematic roots. But does it also point to a lack of original ideas in Hollywood? Well, there were some truly quirky films released last year, most notably Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, starring the usual suspects (Bill Murray, Angelica Huston, Owen Wilson). Oceanographer Steve Zissou sets off to search for a mythical shark that killed his partner

with his estranged wife, a pregnant journalist and an airline pilot who may or may not be his son. The diegesis is convincingly preposterous, just crossing the border to the fantastical, and the overall product is thoroughly engaging and slightly whimsical with a very dry sense of humour. Also of note were *Ong Bak* and *Kung Fu Hustle*, martial arts without the pretensions of art and superior entertainment in every way. Similarly Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *A Very Long Engagement* was set in a wonderful sepia Brittany, proof that

with a bit of imagination it is still possible to inspire a sense of cinematic charm that is genuinely original.

One advantage that the horror film has over rival genres is its ability to reflect trends quickly. The horror film is one of the largest niche markets but can only occasionally match the box office of family orientated or spectacle based pictures. The horror film also relies on tried and tested marketing formulas – the message or tone of the film may well change in order to react to external social conditions but the emphasis is still generally aimed at young people as prime consumers. Recent trends have altered this perception slightly – the effect of the creepy film in the light of *Ringu* (1998) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999) have held up the horror film as something that can be enjoyed by a different audience even though the basic principle remains. The continued Asian horror influence has seen the release of Hideo Nakata's *Ring Two*, a fairly average sequel to Gore Verbinski's remake of Nakata's own *Ringu*. Nakata had, bizarrely, already made a different sequel to *Ringu*. He also directed the updated haunted house film *Dark Water* (2002) which got a pointless but passable remake this year at the hands of *Motorcycle Diaries'* (2004) director Walter Salles. *Skeleton Key* was also heavily influenced by Asian horror and had muted success. Continuing with more existential horror we finally had the opportunity to see Paul Schrader's version of *Exorcist: The Prequel*, now renamed *Dominion* (Schrader had had his version shelved and the studios brought in Renny Harlin to direct a wham-bam-popcorn-man version using the same sets and cast). More a meditation on the loss of faith with grisly bits and theological imagery, the film is an unsettling look at man's evil towards fellow man. *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* seemed as though it was trailed for a year, like some ghastly recurring nightmare and was ultimately a John Grisham film with priests and devils. *C'est la vie*. At least at the less worthy end of the market we could hope for some brainless splat befalling some pretty young teen with an attitude. But then came George A Romero's *Land of the Dead*. Romero's films deliver the gore and grue but, crucially, are also critiques on society and its attitudes. Whilst current slasher flicks are happy to reflect contemporary culture as an in-joke to an audience with perceived low memory retention, Romero actively attacks what he sees as wrong with society. In a sense *Land of the Dead* could not be better timed in its criticism of US militaristic attitudes and society decaying from within. Sadly the studios seemed to realise that Romero's films are heavily politicised and gave him a third of the budget that they gave last year's *Dawn of the Dead* re-make and buried the film with a lacklustre release. Instead bus-shelters around the country urged us to see *The Devil's Rejects* which, like Rob Zombie's previous *House of 1000 Corpses*, wallows in 1970's knowingness and a plain adoration for the genre. It was *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* meets the Mansons out on the road and in the sunshine.

House of Wax ticks all the teen requirement boxes and has the most obviously signposted last girl (and perhaps boy, we'll let you find that one out) for many a moon. Rejecting the plot and 3-D of the original, this covers all the brainstorming basics that the title allows, e.g. the house literally is wax. So far, so tedious, but it's all pulled back by some genuine sadism (the first waxed victim is still alive as people start picking chunks out of his molten face – this has a 15 rating, remember) and a truly surreal climax that at least puts its relatively substantial budget to good use. More gore in *Saw II*, the hurried sequel to last year's sleeper hit. Predictably more gruesome goings-on than first time round, it mercifully doesn't descend into postmodern self-reflexivity but, frankly, the first played a decent hand, so it should really have quit while it was ahead. Horror has a tendency to reflect the mood, normally by producing straight-to-video theme-a-likes, of what the

Best films of 2005

Best SF
Serenity

Best Fantasies
Howl's Moving Castle
Corpse Bride

Best Horror
The Descent

larger productions are doing. These often aim at different markets by grossing out the PG-13 crowd or toning down the R rating to create a similar but distinct product. Bizarrely, this year that battle came to the big screen with the "spot the difference" trailers for *The Cave* and *The Descent* – a group in a cave get mashed by monsters. *The Cave* goes for the PG-13 with "intense creature violence" while *The Descent* doesn't hold back and goes straight for the blind, sonar-sensing, cannibal humanoid approach. Ultimately the latter is more successful, as a group of female friends go caving together. The tension is built on the fact that for much of the film the threat is either the environment or their own egos, a sort of *Deliverance* (1972) for the Noughties, but it quickly spirals into examining human nature, betrayal and trust in the face of adversity. As an old-fashioned thrill ride it builds up admirably and delivers the scares and shocks but is made all the more palatable by understanding the motivation of the main protagonists.

2005 has seen an increase in designer gloom in the film world but frankly most of it is as morbid as a living-dead doll – bubblegum depression for a News 24 culture trying to understand a world of fear while sipping their Starbucks lattes and upgrading their mobile phones. Film can as much reflect the perceptions of market research as it does society's attitudes, and it seems that as the world becomes homogenised so do its fears, threats and media responses. Thank heavens then for the quirky moments amidst the gloom with a few personal visions slipping beneath the corporate net. **V**

Colin and Mitch are the authors of the *Pocket Essentials* on David Lynch, Jackie Chan, Vampire Films, Horror Films, John Carpenter and Tim Burton, several of which are now in second edition – so you should go out and buy them again. They are also frequent contributors to *Vector* and have been writing our annual film round up since 1997.



The good, the decent, and the "Why, dear Lord, why?"

TV of 2005
by
Mattia Valente

TV. It's a medium I cherish. It allows the telling of the sorts of tales and the kind of character exploration that's practically impossible to do in feature films. A continuity of plot, character and style that is rarely found outside the pages of pages of a book. It's accessible; you can watch and discuss shows with friends, colleagues, maybe family, without the need for them to invest a great deal of time or effort. You might be moved to tears – sometimes of joy, sometimes of sorrow – and if you're lucky, and the network Gods gracious (and the writers skilled), you can be so moved for years at a time.

To give you an idea of what it is I'm looking for in a TV show, I'll tell you this: above all else, I want good writing. Good acting, casting and production may help tell a powerful story, but it's writing that sells a show. I like it smart, I like it sassy, I'm not averse to humour where appropriate (and sometimes where it's not), and while I'll forgive clunky dialogue if the content warrants it (I am a *Babylon 5* fan, after all), I'd rather not have to. The fine art of creating characters is an essential component of good writing; three-dimensional, complex, real, maybe really messed-up people, that I'll tune in for. I don't have to like them, but I do have to care. And then I want them used, or rather, I want them to be an integral part of a story that's worth telling. That's not asking much, is it?

The Rules

A few things before I delve into the wonderful (and sometimes rather less than

wonderful) worlds of TV in 2005, though. Firstly, when I say 'SF TV', I'm using the term fairly broadly. For the purposes of this review, I get to decide what is and isn't SF TV. Drawing the line isn't always easy (why mention *Medium*, but not *Alias*?), and firm inclusion criteria are a touch difficult to draw-up (but anything science-fictional, speculative or fantastical was considered). Secondly, while I've tried my best to at least mention all 'genre' shows that aired new episodes in 2005, try as I might, I haven't managed to watch episodes of each one, and there's always the chance that I may have managed to miss a show altogether. Then there's the question of air dates versus calendar dates; since the US TV season runs from September to May, we're looking at, for most shows, two half-seasons rather than one full season. That's weird, slightly annoying even, but more or less inevitable.

Only the 20 or so scripted shows that aired new episodes somewhere around the globe in 2005 are included – a surprising quantity, given the dieback we've seen over the past few. That said, I can't not mention one weird, wonderful, insane and hilarious reality show: *Space Cadets*. It's too crazy not to mention: a bunch of gullible, easily-led people were fooled into thinking they would be the first British Space tourists, whisked off to a fake Russian cosmonaut training camp, brainwashed into believing artificial gravity is real (among other things), and then sent up into 'space'. I hate reality TV as much as anyone (with a fiery, fiery passion, in fact), but this one had to be seen to be believed. So what of the rest?

Overall, 2005 was a fairly average year for quality, but a surprising one for quantity; while few of the shows on the air impress, or tickle my inner fanboy even a little, the sheer number of new SF shows is something to write home about. The empires of Whedon and Roddenberry may have fallen (or are at least slumbering), and nothing's quite risen to take their place (unless, I suppose, you're a *Stargate* and/or *Doctor Who* fan), but I can't help but find the increase in the number of scripted TV shows to be a very positive sign. Who knows? Reality TV may not be the scripted-TV-killer it was made out to be.

The Good

Let's start with the good stuff: *Battlestar Galactica*, *Medium*, *Carnivale* and *Veronica Mars*. (Wait, SF shows. Scratch that last one – but do yourself a favour and buy the DVD set). *Battlestar Galactica* is, hands down, the best SF show currently on the air. A complete reinvention of the 1970s original, it owes little save a few names and the basic shape of the ships to its ancestor, and makes for an altogether more satisfying viewing experience on every level. It's a deftly written show about survival, religion, faith, politics, and humanity; the themes resonate strongly in today's political climate, and they are handled with admirable subtlety. The characterisation is largely excellent, the visuals are often stunning (and are there to serve the story, not steal the show). It has its flaws, of course. There's the dithering, inconsistent-seeming Cylon Master Plan, the plot-McGuffin idiocy (albeit with good emotional underpinnings) of episodes like 'Flight of the Phoenix', and the overly black-and-white portrayal of certain characters in 'Pegasus', which was particularly disappointing

given that one of the show's strengths has always been the exploration of moral grey areas rather than the absolutes. But overall, the show is a dark, gritty, real, gripping drama.

It's also core SF, unlike some other shows. Take *Medium*; is it SF? Since I don't believe in psychic visions foretelling the future or revealing the past, I'll say yes, but if there ever was such a thing as Mundane Fantasy, this is it. Patricia Arquette plays Alison Dubois, happily married mother of three daughters, living in Phoenix, Arizona. She has prophetic dreams, visions of dead people, and ends up working for the District Attorney who, while sceptical about the whole thing, simply can't deny the results. Essentially, this is a simple procedural show; Alison has a vision which leads to a crime being solved. But it's mostly a show about Alison, her husband, her daughters (more or less the only TV children I don't find annoying), how her gift affects them, and how she deals with the fact that she sees dead people from time to time. The first season started off slowly, building up to a fairly tense cliffhanger. The second season opened where the first left off, and proceeded to go from strength to strength, better and more daring than the first season by a fair bit. The show is sometimes visually stunning (a comic-book-style dream sequence, for instance, or a 3-D glasses-enhanced episode), the characters are real, sympathetic and three-dimensional, and the stories satisfy. It's episodic, with no plot arc to speak of, but the characters draw me back in every time.

Carnivale is one of those shows that got cancelled too early. The original story called for three seasons and they only got two, so we were left with something substantially less satisfying than we might have had. An epic tale of Good vs. Evil, set in America during the Great Depression of the 1930s, it stays with me as one of the most beautiful, haunting TV shows ever made. Every frame is beautifully detailed, every shot a feast for the eye, with a musical score to match. The plot in the second season, sadly, doesn't quite manage the agonizingly tantalising, ponderous build-up of the first season, and we almost run from episode to episode, discovering all sorts of strange and disturbing things about Ben Hawkins and his nemesis, Brother Justin (gotta love a quasi-demonic preacher, right?). It's still good TV, another HBO masterpiece, but I can't help but feel it didn't quite live up to what it could have been. And that's a bit of a shame.

The Decent

We'll start with the big one: *Doctor Who*. To make things clear:

before 'Rose', I'd only ever seen little snippets of *Doctor Who* as parts of documentaries about classic TV shows. I've never even lived in a country where *Doctor Who* was being aired while I was there, so I have no cultural or nostalgic baggage. But I am a fan of Russell T. Davies and Christopher Eccleston's work, so I was at the very least intrigued by, if a bit sceptical of, this whole Doctor Who thing. So I watched. I was pleasantly surprised by the production values, by Billie Piper's ability to act, as always quite taken with Eccleston's screen presence, and I ended up enjoying the show, at least on a very superficial level. But the more I considered it – the more I looked at the stories – the more my ambivalence grew. The episodes ranged from quite good ('The End of the World', 'The Empty Child') to scraping-the-bottom-of-the-barrel unwatchable ('Aliens of London' and 'World War Three'), but throughout, there was a sense that it was all a little too silly. The plots too often seemed to exist purely to serve the

characters, making them feel contrived. Worse, the ease with which logical holes could be poked in them (in particular the rather literal *deus ex machina* at the end) left me somewhat disappointed. To put it another way: the show never really managed to either excite or annoy me (except for, as mentioned, 'Aliens of London' and 'World War Three'). I simply can't bring myself to care about *Doctor Who* one way or another. It's OK, it's a great technical achievement for British TV, it's got some very strong performances, but without the nostalgia factor weighing in, I don't think it's anything to write home about.

In terms of ratings success, there's no bigger SF show on the air than *Lost*. It started out fantastically. A beautiful pilot, interesting characters, fascinating back-stories, and a spooky, mysterious Island. But as the first season progressed, the plotting got increasingly patchy, and the characters' stories (with a few notable exceptions) seemed to be standing still. Somehow it stumbled along into a cliffhanger of massive proportions. The opening 15 minutes of the second season then suddenly promised something of what had originally made the show so appealing, but unfortunately it was not to be; with a few exceptions, the second season bumbled on in the same directionless, the-writers-aren't-sure-where-they-want-to-go-with-this-manner that had defined the second half of the first. It's a show I keep watching because I hope the story will sort itself out, will end up going somewhere, but I'm not really holding my breath, and it may lose me before too long.

Then we come to *Stargate*. I'll confess at this point that before being asked to write this article I hadn't watched any

BEST EPISODES OF 2005

1. *Battlestar Galactica*, 'Kobol's Last Gleaming, part two'

The colonial fleet is divided, as Roslin embraces her role as religious leader and Adama relieves her of office

2. *Medium*, 'Coming Soon'

Alison's visions convince her that the 'Good Samaritan' helping the district attorney is a serial killer... but things aren't as simple as they seem.

3. *Carnivale*, 'Damascus, NE'

The mysterious relationships between Ben, his father, and Management begin to unravel.

4. *Lost*, 'Numbers'

We learn Hurley's secret, and the numbers 2, 4, 8, 15, 16, 23 and 32 show their mysterious power ...

5. *Doctor Who*, 'The Doctor Dances'

The Doctor, Rose, and Captain Jack discover the origins of a mysterious disease, and reunite a family.

SG1 since about season three. I picked it up again with some late season eight, about ten of season nine, and a half-dozen *Stargate: Atlantis* episodes. I think what struck me most was not the huge changes to the trappings and mythology since last I'd seen it, but rather the utter lack of significant change or growth exhibited by any of the main characters; they had remained virtually unchanged in the five seasons of TV I'd given a miss. I can't shake the impression that *Stargate* has fallen entirely too much in love with its mythology. It's become vast and convoluted, and is still constantly being added to in order to give the relatively static characters new Quests to go on, and new Adventures to experience. And it's a fun mythology, I'll grant you that (though some of the metaphors are about as subtle as Times Square is sedate), but entertaining though the ride is, it's ultimately unfulfillingly fluffy. Good enough to watch once, but there's not enough there to really get invested in, and certainly nothing worth re-watching. (I'll get to *Stargate: Atlantis* a little bit later on.)

Similarly to *Stargate*, *Smallville* has a tendency to go mythos-heavy, but in this case they're building on decades upon decades of established comic book lore, albeit while giving it their own spin. After a mediocre-to-terrible fourth season (depending on which bit you're watching), we're now half-way into a mediocre fifth. Notable points include bringing Lois Lane on board as a permanent character, starting the season in the Fortress of Solitude, having Aquaman show up (as the Flash did, earlier on), and *finally* having Lex Luthor slip towards the dark side. The show's candy-coloured as ever, full of pretty people (who at least exhibit minimal growth as characters), and it's a bit of a guilty pleasure: it's not very good, but it's such fun to watch.

The 2004 miniseries *The 4400* (4400 abductees from various eras reappear one day on the shores of a lake in the Pacific Northwest) combined the feel of *Taken* with an X-filesian 'Freak of the Week', episodic structure focusing on the strange powers the 'returnees' seem to be endowed with, and managed to weave in a satisfying mythology. Season Two continued along that same route, providing a solid, quality SF show (and featuring guest stars from almost every other SF show you can think of). It wasn't quite as fresh as the first season, but it's still good TV, doing a solid job of combining a story arc and an episodic format.

Of the new shows, the decent ones are *Invasion* (*Body Snatchers* type storyline; something odd is happening to a small Florida town in the aftermath of a hurricane) and *Surface* (giant deep-sea monsters are suddenly appearing, and may be a threat to

humanity, so there's the obligatory Government Coverup and the sexy Marine Biologist heroine to fight it). In the 'stupidest plot' stakes, they beat *Smallville* and roughly tie with *Stargate*, but entertainingly so. *Surface* takes itself altogether too seriously, which sometimes makes it unintentionally hilarious, but it's entertaining enough if you like monsters from the deep with quasi-magical powers and weird conspiracies. *Invasion* is better, wearing its pulp sf credentials on its sleeve, and managing to create the unsettling, paranoid atmosphere that's required for a show of its kind to work. They're both they're a decent enough way to pass the time (*Invasion* being the stronger of the two), but they aren't even close to being 'must see TV'.

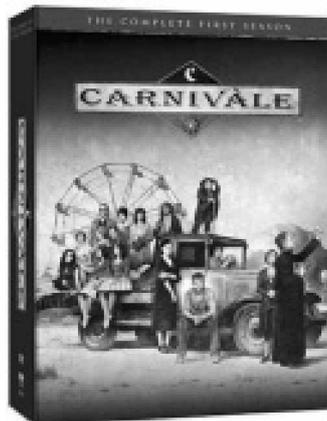


The "WHY, DEAR LORD, WHY?!"

And then there's the suck. Let's start off with a long-time offender: *Charmed*. The show gets dumber every time I watch an episode (quite an achievement in and of itself), the mythology more preposterous, the themes and metaphors (insofar as they even exist) floundering in a parade of tacky SFX and large-breasted women. I mean, they're witches. And they're now working with the department of Homeland Security. Okay then... The show's high points, in days of yore, were when it badly rehashed plots that other shows (like, say, *Buffy*) had already done better. Over the years, the show descended further and further into the realm of 'trash without any redeeming features', but still it got renewed. It's currently in its eighth, and probably final, season.



Stargate: Atlantis is another one of those shows I can't figure out. Why is it popular? Is it just the pretty people? Just the *Stargate* brand? Because when it tries to be funny, it's flat, the stories are nonsensical, the characters caricatures, and the villains are hive-minded Space Vampires, for crying out loud! And not in an interesting way. Much like *SG1*, it's purely about the 'exciting stuff' - but unlike *SG1*, it's incredibly boring 'exciting stuff'. So much so that I had to struggle to get through the five or six episodes I watched, whereas *SG1*'s annoying propensity for cliffhangers had me at least caring enough about the story to want to watch the next episode.



There were a couple of Freshman Fantasy dramas that started out quite promisingly (as in, the pilot episodes were good), but soon outstayed their welcome: *Supernatural* and *Night Stalker*. *Supernatural* is a classic WB product, full of pretty people hunting demons. The pilot featured some truly scary, disturbing imagery, provided the kind of shivers I rarely if ever get from a network TV show. Unfortunately, subsequent stories

devolved into clichéd predictability and the two leads managed to annoy more often than engage. Judging by the ratings, however, it's faring quite well. I'm not sure why; it has your standard-issue production values, canned Monster-of-the-Week plots, and nothing distinguishing to offer. *Night Stalker* was a remake of 1970s show *Kolchak, the Night Stalker*. *Kolchak* inspired *The X-Files*, and unsurprisingly its new incarnation has a similar kind of feel to that show, only the pair of investigators here are journalists, not FBI agents. The acting in the pilot was solid, the judicious use of music, voiceover and montage set a tone which carried me into the story, whet my appetite for more, but after the pilot... it all just got dull. I'm not sure why. Maybe it was the sudden overuse of those style elements that had made the pilot interesting. Maybe it was the lack of mystery to the mysteries. Either way, ratings plummeted, and it was cancelled almost as soon as it had started airing.

The Ghost Whisperer, Jennifer Love Hewitt's new show, looked to ride on the coattails of *Medium*'s success, but failed to create anything worth writing home about. Predictable plots, stock characterisation, and lots of shots of JLH demonstrating the fine art of Joey Tribbiani 'smell the fart' acting (not necessarily a bad thing, but it doth not great TV make). Somehow, it's still on. I suspect a certain male demographic is watching for reasons other than the content, or simply hoping for rather more *Charmed*-esque wardrobe decisions.

It's not, however, the worst show of 2005; that dubious honour belongs to Brannon Braga's *Threshold*, which lasted a full nine episodes before the network came to their senses. The pilot was a portent of terrible things to come: the worst B-movie plot you can imagine, complete with atrocious dialogue, technobabble that would make a trekkie blush, stereotypical characters of the worst kind, and a surprisingly good cast (including Brent Spiner and Peter Dinklage, to name but two) who tried their utmost to turn the horrible script into something not quite so unwatchable. In terms of plot, well, a crazy n-th dimensional fractal alien ball of light is infecting people, and the Threshold team is there to save the day! Cue an assembly of the SuperFriends, plus crazy plot McGuffins, and you've got yourself one very justifiably cancelled show.

So what's it all mean, doc?

By the numbers, a good year. A lot of new genre shows. Save *Enterprise*, no major players got the axe (compared to 2004, which saw the demise of Whedon on TV, and the final sputters of life from *Farscape*). And what's more, relatively few of the newcomers got cancelled.

But what about quality? Was it a Good Year for SF TV? I'd have to say no; it was mediocre at best. Yes, *Battlestar Galactica* is fantastic, but even there the second season, while very strong, wasn't quite as powerful as the first. *Medium* is less awe-inspiring, but is a good example of an intimate, personal, slightly fantastical TV show; genre without massive mythological baggage is a rare beast indeed in TV land, and I

find it refreshing. On the downside, it doesn't make for a show that SF fans are likely to get terribly excited about. It's also the only SF show that aired last year (other than *Battlestar*) that I'd buy on DVD, which is my litmus test for differentiating between 'Good' and 'Okay'.

The rest of the pack is nothing to write home about;

impressive though *Stargate*'s growing franchise is from a marketing perspective, it's a pulp adventure show with little depth that's entirely too hung up on expanding and expounding on its mythology, right down to creating fairly dire spin-offs. Shows like *Charmed* continue their downward spiral into ludicrous plotting and mediocrity, while newcomers like *Invasion* and *Surface* simply don't feel like they've got the kind of quality or staying power to let them survive several seasons, let alone create the kind of fanbase that surrounds

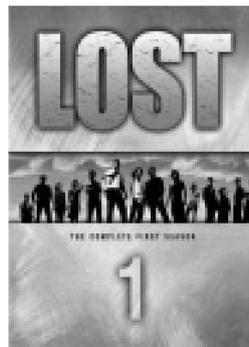
shows like *Babylon 5*, all of the Treks prior to *Voyager*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* – even *Firefly*. The closest we get to that is Abram and Lindlehoff's *Lost*, which has a marketing team so adept at generating spin that they've got highly vocal fan communities dissecting the show's mythology into tiny pieces, losing sight of the big picture. The big picture for *Lost*, sadly, indicates that Abrams has fallen into the 'Chris Carter trap' very early indeed; fans of *The X-Files* may recognize the hallmarks of off-the-cuff plotting. It's not that I necessarily expect there to be a grand master plan from the beginning, but I do expect a coherent, consistent narrative, and at least the illusion of control.

The 1990s were, in many ways, a Golden Age for SF television. The last greats of that Age hung on until as late as 2004, in the midst of an explosion of reality TV, and an apparent decline of scripted drama. Thankfully for those of us who, despite the best efforts of the networks, still enjoy that sort of thing, the emergence of shows like *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives* (which has a dead narrator, after all), along with the slow realization that most reality TV shows have practically no value in the long run (after all, who wants to watch syndicated episodes of Pop Idol?

I mean, really? Who wants to buy DVD boxed sets?) has led to a resurgence of scripted shows that are at least watchable. I sincerely hope this will continue, but right now, short of some startling new production talent bursting onto the scene, or a dramatic change in market conditions, I don't foresee another Golden Age for a while to come.

But that's fine. I'll go watch *Battlestar Galactica*, and keep pimping *Veronica Mars* to everyone who hasn't seen the light quite yet. There's always the bright side, though; this leaves us with more time to read more of the wonderful new books hitting the shelf year after year... 

Mattia Valente is a dreamer, med student, and guitar builder, and makes a mean pizza. He speaks five languages, has two nationalities, a BSFA membership, and thoroughly enjoys quality speculative fiction on screen and in print. He has reviewed for Strange Horizons.





Best Related Relatedness

by
**Claire
Brialey**

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times: it was a British Worldcon year.

Regular readers of BSFA publications cannot fail to be aware of the fact that Interaction, the 63rd World Science Fiction Convention, was held over five days in Glasgow at the beginning of August 2005, featuring well over a dozen streams of programming. This included about 150 hours of literary discussion in addition to a dedicated academic track, which ran for the middle three days of the convention. The academic track was sponsored by the Science Fiction Foundation, who intend to publish proceedings, including a number of the key papers given, later this year. It took the overall theme of 'The Matter of Britain'; this was reflected in several sessions explicitly exploring new readings of Arthurian legends and other medieval and folklore influences on fantasy, although the majority of papers seized the wider challenge in the brief, leading to sessions addressing post-colonialism in science fiction, the impact of Britain's geography on sf and fantasy, alternative visions of the nations of the United Kingdom, ideas and reality in sf, and what lies beyond British influence on the genre. The academic track also featured two discussion panels, covering children's fantasy and the value of archives, and a keynote mutual interview conducted by John Clute and Gary K. Wolfe.

The literary programme, with approximately eight times the number of items featured in the academic track, is virtually impossible to summarise; since no one could attend all of the items – even the programme team found it impossible to attend all of the items they had most wanted to make

happen – the best way to get a flavour of the literary programme may be to track down the subsequent blog and LiveJournal postings in which, amongst reflections on the venue and the scheduling, a variety of Worldcon attendees produce a useful summary and critique of the items that stood out for them.

The trend towards online reviews of the event may be only a part of the perceived trend towards online reviewing, criticism and discussion of the genre; but it seems too early to say whether 2005 will be celebrated or lamented as a point in that trend. It was a year in which the Worldcon chose once more to include a special Hugo Award category for best website – with a shortlist including Locus Online, Strange Horizons and Emerald City as well as the fannish resource eFanzines and the eventual winner SciFiction – and the extensive arguments that this sparked may yet lead to lasting future changes in how writing and publishing online are compared to similar activities on paper. And yet it was also a year in which The Infinite Matrix announced its closure (only a month or so after SciFiction was also served notice). It was launched in 2001 with what was expected to be its last as well as its first issue, but secured further funding and went on to feature some very enjoyable columns, articles, reviews, and stories. Eileen Gunn wrote at the end of December that 'The Infinite Matrix will present a final fireworks of stories, essays and columns, and then will cease publication. The site will stay up for a year or so, although older work may be removed as the rights run out.' It almost seems to be tempting fate to state that Strange Horizons, at least, has secured its funding for another year and continued strongly throughout 2005 with weekly editions including a diverse and engaging range of articles, and reviews in addition to fiction and poetry. It even demonstrated one advantage of online over paper publishing by providing its own review of 2005 on 2 January...

Turning to another ambiguous trend, there's an ongoing debate within science fiction fandom about whether paper fanzines are as unlikely to be totally supplanted by online competitors as paper books, whether the field is dwindling for other reasons entirely, or whether it's actually dead but the message just hasn't reached all the extremities of the organism yet. Nonetheless, many fanzines now published predominantly or entirely online still seem intended to be given paper existence by their readers, if not their editors, and it's interesting that a number of the best fanzines remain dominated by writing and thinking about sf.

In the UK, the popularity of Pete Young's *Zoo Nation* (which only very narrowly missed a Hugo nomination) and *Meta*, edited by Geneva Melzack, may indicate a renewed willingness amongst sf fans to read, watch, read about and discuss science fiction. In Australia, Bruce Gillespie's mighty publishing engines might have transferred to the virtual world of eFanzines, but *Science Fiction Commentary* remains a standard towards which other sercon (serious and constructive) fanzines should continually strive; and Bruce also contributed to a trans-Pacific revival of the critical fanzine *Steam Engine Time*, the previously trans-Atlantic title he had helped to found in 2000.

Meanwhile, Cheryl Morgan, who featured in more different categories than any other Hugo nominee in 2005 (three: fanzine, website and fan writer), chose the interval between the close of voting and the announcement of results to declare her fanzine *Emerald City* to be a semi-prozine for future purposes; this was followed by considerable activity including an impressive revamp of the supporting website and an appeal for online subscriptions to support the whole

project. *Emerald City* had been beginning to feature a growing range of contributors before this point, enabling Cheryl to broaden her coverage of the sf and fantasy field; the semi-prozine incarnation of the title is increasingly including articles from other writers as well as reviews and interviews.

Back with the old technology, paper journals continue to hold their own. Some of the strongest criticism of the year has been found in the *New York Review of Science Fiction*; nominated for the semi-prozine Hugo in 2005 (alongside *Ansible* – the 2005 winner – *Interzone*, *Locus* and *The Third Alternative*), it appears monthly and this undoubtedly gives it a very strong basis for a lively and topical interchange of ideas. During 2005 *NYRSF* covered a mind-expanding range of perspectives on the genre, a blend of contemporary and retrospective articles with interviews and reviews, and provided an edgy but informed forum for debate. Features of particular note included, for me, the introduction to Samuel R. Delany's new collection *About Writing* (October), Michael Swanwick's appreciation of Eileen Gunn's *Stable Strategies and Others* (February), Damien Broderick on 'The Afterlife as Science Fiction' and the occasional 'Two Views' juxtaposition of reviews. Back in the UK, *Foundation* opened the year with a strong special issue of the proceedings of SFF's 2001 conference, 'A Celebration of British Science Fiction'; this was published jointly as the fourth volume in the occasional 'Foundation Studies in Science Fiction' series. The second issue focused on alternate histories and alternate science fictions, and the year closed with a strong general issue with a Hugo on the cover. Because this was a year in which the Hugo award for the 'Best Related Book' of the previous year was won by *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, causing one of the highly surprised editors to demand whether the assembled voters knew it was actually a text book.

And so we come nearly full circle, to the dealers' hall at the 2005 Worldcon, just down the corridor from the programme rooms and featuring as much engagement and enthusiasm for sf. It's been said in the past that a Worldcon in Britain is most significant to British authors and publishers for the books they can sell and launch there rather than the work that might be being celebrated. By that standard alone, 2005 was a good year for writing about sf. The SF Foundation launched a volume of criticism on the work of Christopher Priest (one of the Worldcon Guests of Honour), called *The Interaction*, and also published *Parietal Games*, a collection by and about M John Harrison, one of the Guests of Honour at the forthcoming British national sf convention (which coincidentally will also be held in Glasgow). Publication of *The Sex Column And Other Misprints*, a collection of Dave Langford's columns in *SFX* magazine provided a personal overview of the past ten years. And *Soundings*, Gary K Wolfe's collection of reviews from 1992 to 1996, was published to an enthusiastic welcome from the audience at the pre-Worldcon London BSFA meeting as well as in Glasgow, prompting calls for follow-up volumes covering later years.

But this opportunity to cover highlights of the year in criticism shouldn't exclude works not launched at the Worldcon, including the second volume of Michael Ashley's history of sf magazines. *Transformations* covers the years from 1950 to 1970, picking up from *The Time Machines*. And while Mike is taking three volumes to cover the history of science fiction magazines, Adam Roberts has attempted an imposing single-volume history of science fiction as a genre. This followed the publication of Roger Luckhurst's *Science Fiction*,

which might be argued as contributing not only to the study of the genre but to the liveliness of *NYRSF*, where Farah Mendlesohn's review in the September issue sparked considerable further debate within the sf community.

So it's been a good year for the field, and it seems fitting that the BSFA has revived its own recognition of sf criticism – or, as we broadly define the category, writing about sf and fantasy – with the relaunch of the BSFA award for non-fiction. It seemed to us that the best way to attempt to compare all the types of writing about sf mentioned in this brief round-up would be to move to a jury-based award; this is also a system that we hope will enable the best writing about sf to be recognised in future, even in years where fewer forces are colliding to produce such a strong field. **V**

Resources mentioned

Ansible (ed. David Langford): 94 London Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 5AU – <http://news.ansible.co.uk/>

The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction (ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn): Cambridge University Press, 2003 – www.cambridge.org

Christopher Priest: The Interaction (ed. Andrew M Butler): Science Fiction Foundation, 2005 eFanzines (ed. Bill Burns): www.efanzines.com

Emerald City (ed. Cheryl Morgan): www.emcit.com
Foundation: The International Journal of Science Fiction (ed. Farah Mendlesohn): editorial address foundation.sf@gmail.com; address for subscriptions 75 Rosslyn Avenue, Harold Wood, Essex RM3 0RG (for website see Science Fiction Foundation, below)

History of Science Fiction (Adam Roberts): Palgrave, 2005 – www.palgrave.com

The Infinite Matrix (ed. Eileen Gunn): www.infinitematrix.net/
Interaction website (including Hugo nominations and results and other historic information): www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk/

Interzone (ed. Andy Cox): TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambridgeshire CB6 2LB – www.ttapress.com/IZ.html

Locus (ed. Charles N Brown): Locus Publications, P.O. Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661, USA

Locus Online (ed. Mark R Kelly): www.locusmag.com

Meta (ed. Geneva Melzack): 5 Brooklands Avenue, Withington, Manchester M20 1JE

Parietal Games: critical writings by and on M John Harrison (ed. Mark Bould and Michelle Reid): Science Fiction Foundation, 2005

The New York Review of Science Fiction (ed. Kathryn Cramer, David G Hartwell and Kevin J Maroney): PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570, USA – www.nyrsf.com

Science Fiction Commentary (ed. Bruce Gillespie): 5 Howard Street, Greensborough, VIC 3088, Australia – www.efanzines.com/SFC/index.html

Science Fiction Foundation: 28 St John's Road, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7UH – www.sf-foundation.org/

SciFiction (ed. Ellen Datlow): www.scifi.com/scifiction – 'appreciation site' <http://edsfproject.blogspot.com/2005/11/list.html>

The Sex Column and Other Misprints (David Langford): Cosmos Books, 2005 – www.cosmos-books.com/

Soundings: Reviews 1992–1996 (Gary K Wolfe): Becon Publications, 2005 – 75 Rosslyn Avenue, Harold Wood, Essex RM3 0RG

Steam Engine Time (ed. Bruce Gillespie and Janine Stinson): address as for *SF Commentary* or PO Box 248, Eastlake, MI 49626-0248, USA

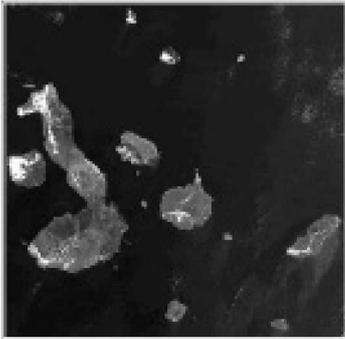
Strange Horizons (editor-in-chief Susan Marie Groppi): www.strangehorizons.com

The 3rd Alternative (ed. Andy Cox): TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambridgeshire CB6 2LB – www.ttapress.com/publTTA.html

Transformations: The Story of Science Fiction Magazines from 1950 to 1970 (Michael Ashley): Liverpool University Press, 2005 – www.liverpool-unipress.co.uk

Zoo Nation (ed. Pete Young): 62 Walmer Road, Woodley, Berkshire RG5 4PN or email peter.a.young@macunlimited.net

Claire Brialey is the outgoing awards administrator for the BSFA and was instrumental in organising both the academic and literary programme streams at Interaction; she also reviews for Strange Horizons and Foundation, was a contributor to Damien Broderick's Earth is But a Star, and co-edits the SF fanzine Banana Wings. She works as a civil servant for the UK Government



Archipelago

Short Stories

Confessions of a short-story burnout: notes from a survivor of the year 2005

by Matthew Cheney

1.

I spent much of 2005 reading stories from 2004, because I was on the jury for the Speculative Literature Foundation's Fountain Award, and so by the time I was ready to catch up with the short fiction of 2005, half the year's stories had already appeared, and I couldn't bear to wade through all the competent-but-not-much-more-than-that stories in search of a few gems. Now and then I gave in to the exhortations of friends and read things they were particularly excited about, but for the most part I focused on novels, until in the autumn I read a few collections and a couple of issues of magazines. But the idea of trying to catch up with all the short fiction flooding the SF field in 2005 was nauseating, and I didn't give in to it.

This is not to suggest that 2005 was a bad year for short fiction. It seems to have been as scattered and diverse a year as any other, and, following recent trends, probably more scattered and diverse than ever before. Various small publishers are finding odd, interesting work, and more and more people have discovered the range of fiction available. This has caused some geezers (young and old) to grumble about boundaries being eroded and genres being miscegenated, but such changes seem healthy to me, because diversity is better than stagnation. Diversity doesn't mean there will be mounds of great work published; it just means various types of writing will mingle, opening wider possibilities for how stories can achieve excellence.

It may be that too many stories are being published. Most of the magazines and anthologies I've read over the past few years have all felt like they would have been stronger with half the material in them. The SF field is caught in a bind, though, because we all want to provide opportunities for writers to be published. We like writers, and we don't want them to get too discouraged. (I could say we don't want them to go broke, but they've all gone broke already.) Mix the desire for diversity with the desire to publish as much as possible, and what you get is a lot of dull stories told in a wide variety of styles. If anything, the SF field provides numerous opportunities for us to discover all the ways that short fiction can be unexceptional.

These are, of course, the words of a burnout. I'm being intentionally vague and not naming names, because it's a new year now and there's no need to beat up on stories that are most likely to be forgotten anyway. But you can try this test at home: choose the magazine or anthology that you most respect, and read all of it. All of it. Every word. Then tell me I'm wrong and why. I will be grateful to you, because I would like to be able to believe in short stories again.

2.

The best service that someone who reads a lot of short fiction can perform is to find the gems in the mud and explain why these gems glitter and shine. I'm certain there are plenty of good stories I have not yet read from 2005, but two gems most impressed me this year, despite my burnout: 'Heads Down, Thumbs Up' by Gavin J. Grant and 'There's a Hole in the City' by Richard Bowes, both published online by SciFiction.[1]

2005 saw the unfortunate end of SciFiction when its sponsor, the SciFi Channel, withdrew support. Despite this loss, SciFiction, edited by Ellen Datlow, must be seen as a success: it lasted longer than many online magazines, it paid relatively high rates for fiction, and it showcased quite a few excellent stories. It was also one of the most diverse venues in its content, publishing traditional stories alongside innovative stories, core genre stories next to the most bent of genre-benders. In 2005, the quality was, to my mind, wildly uneven. The unevenness was wild because along with some clunky clunkers appeared the two truly extraordinary stories mentioned above.

These two stories demonstrate that diversity does not have to be a false dichotomy between obscure art and easy drivel. 'There's a Hole in the City' is the sort of story that gets called "accessible" by people who want everybody to write and read in the same way (thus ensuring "accessibility"), because it is told in the standard form of most short fiction these days, with prose that does not call attention to its artificiality and a structure that is similar enough to the structures of other stories to seem normal to a basically literate reader. I don't mean to cast aspersions on normalised fiction – it's what I most often enjoy reading – but such normality is not some grand Platonic idea, and its presence or absence is neither a positive or negative thing. The beauty of the story lies in its careful conjoining of the reality of life in Manhattan after September 11, 2001 with a subtle ghost story. The effect could have been mawkish, but the restraint of the writing and the clarity of the details make 'There's a Hole in the City' a deeply affecting tale.

'Heads Down, Thumbs Up' is not a normal story. Anybody could tell you this. It is bewildering, contradictory, full of odd images, and seems to be making up its structure as it goes along. (Again, this is not a positive or negative fact.) The story's real oddity, though, comes from its content and subject matter; the world of the story is reflected in the language and form. The

world is one where nothing is solid, where identities and locations shift with the wind, and rather than explain and explore this idea in a ploddingly expository manner, Grant lets the story embody what it is about, creating an effect for the reader that demands an open mind and some careful attention. The open-minded and attentive reader is rewarded with a story of great depth and suggestion, a story that cannot be reduced to summary.

These two stories, one normal and one not, are both excellent because they evoke emotion without demanding it, they present vivid and unfamiliar imagery, they wield language with care and exactness, their strengths are destroyed when summarized rather than experienced, and they provoke the reader to reflect and reread. These are good values; their opposites are, in most cases and in the aggregate, negative values.

3.

I ruffled some feathers at the end of 2005 when I defended Eliot Fintushel's story 'Bone Women', published online by Strange Horizons.[2] Like many magazines, Strange Horizons hosts a message board where people can post thoughts and questions about what they read, and 'Bone Women' was condemned by Strange Horizons readers on the message boards for being self-indulgent, masturbatory, pretentious, meaningless, and literary. This was not a story readers merely disliked or didn't connect to, this was a story they loathed.

I enjoyed the story for a variety of reasons, and found the hatred of it frustrating. That frustration prompted my defense of 'Bone Women' to be at times overwrought. In the comments to what I wrote, far more people condemned the story, including leading editors and writers in the SF field, than defended it. Most of these condemnations were simple statements that defied argument: "I didn't like it," or "I got bored."

I won't rehash my defence of the story here; it worked for me, it made me laugh, and I thought every "self-indulgence" necessary to the way I understood how 'Bone Women' conveyed its purpose and meaning. I certainly can understand the story not grabbing some readers' attentions, and wouldn't blame anyone for giving up on it. It was unfortunate, though, that most readers transferred their own anger at not understanding and appreciating what the story was doing onto the structure and purpose of the story itself, thereby creating and perpetuating misreadings of the story that made it more and more difficult to see it on basic terms of language, narrative, and character, the terms under which a story's value can best be argued. (One or two people did engage the story at this level, and though I disagreed with their assessments, those disagreements did not involve wilful misreading, and they were more than hollow pronouncements of like or dislike.)

The SF field has long been aesthetically conservative, perhaps because of a sense that strange subject matter needs to be presented in as familiar and unchallenging a manner as possible. Such writers as Alfred Bester rejected this idea, as did the various writers of the New Wave, many of whom applied forty-year-old techniques of Modernism to gloomy presentations of SF tropes, but as a popular literature SF has, with rare exceptions, stuck to narrative forms developed in the 19th century, which, through reiteration, have become the

most familiar, least challenging forms for written storytelling. Fintushel's story is not in any way particularly innovative – its techniques would seem conservative to readers of such early-20th-Century writers as Gertrude Stein and William Faulkner – but it is quite different from most SF stories in that it melds the interior, subjective, and even unconscious perceptions of the narrator to the mode of expression itself. This brings us close to the realm of stream-of-consciousness, a technique seldom used in SF because it tends to make a plot more difficult to separate from characterisation. Plot and character are both expressions of the writer's language – the diction, phrasing, and paragraphing – and stories such as Fintushel's heighten the reader's awareness of that language, then heighten awareness of the character's viewpoint, and only then allow some consideration of plot. This is a reversal of the more familiar and normalized hierarchy of popular fiction.

The discussion of Fintushel's story particularly disappointed me because I wish the Strange Horizons editors would publish more difficult, challenging fiction, and I don't want them to become discouraged. Strange Horizons is funded through grants and donations, much like a literary journal, and does not need to rely as much on the whims of readers' and advertisers' tastes as do commercial magazines. A magazine can educate its readers by continuously publishing surprising fiction of high quality, and it is unfortunate that Strange Horizons often settles for publishing somewhat bland stories instead. 'Bone Women' may have been controversial, but such controversy can create valuable discussions that open new ways of perceiving stories, and such controversies may be one way we can combat the flood of mediocrity that has drowned all of the outlets for SF short fiction.

4.

Realms of Fantasy is a magazine that publishes more good fiction than it gets credit for, perhaps because the covers and advertisements seem to be aimed at adolescents, gamers, and aspiring knights, maidens, and fetishists. Something is working within this combination, though, because the magazine continues to survive and to publish a remarkable array of stories.

Let's consider two stories, 'A Bedtime Tale for the Disenchanted' by Amy Beth Forbes and 'Lavender's Blue, Lavender's Green' by Patrick Samphire. Both are tales of loves lost and yearned for, of mistakes made, of magics implied and stated. Both are short and efficient, though 'A Bedtime Tale for the Disenchanted' is fragmentary, nonlinear, and epigrammatic, while 'Lavender's Blue, Lavender's Green' is more straightforward. The stories approach the idea of fantasy differently: Forbes's story has a man who turns into a tree and roads that liberate themselves; in Samphire's story the fantasy element may be a matter of madness, and the story could be read as a mainstream, non-fantastic tale. Both stories are grounded in a world of real emotion: for all its absurdities, 'A Bedtime Tale for the Disenchanted' is an affecting allegory of how much we want the ones we love to remain with us, and the emotional core of 'Lavender's Blue, Lavender's Green' does not change whether the ambiguities of the fantasy are resolved as real or imagined. Samphire lets

dialogue carry the weight of his tale, and he does so in a way that undercuts potential sentimentality by maintaining an objective tone and avoiding prolonged scenes, instead allowing what is not stated to be richer than what is. Forbes, on the other hand, fills an extremely short story with a wide range of imagery, myths, and imaginings – the story feels unhinged, wild, zany, and yet the brilliance of the execution is that every sentence comes back to the very simple predicament of the main characters, the conflict of one person who moves and another who will do anything to get him to stay still.

Interzone and *The 3rd Alternative* both published some interesting stories this year (and I was excited to discover that the design of both magazines seems more consistent than in some past issues, with the truly extraordinary artwork and layout now seeming to enhance the fiction rather than distract from it). Vandana Singh's 'Thirst' in the Winter issue of *The 3rd Alternative* is a remarkably vivid story, one paced in a slow, deliberate manner that makes the events of the tale all the more powerful. There is nothing particularly innovative about Singh's story, and yet I don't doubt that some readers had as strong a negative reaction to it as did the readers of Eliot Fintushel's 'Bone Women', because though the language is precise and exact, it is also lyrical; this is a story that needs readers who can appreciate the fine balance of its sentences and paragraphs as much as the breathtaking imagery and complex, heartrending characters those sentences and paragraphs create.

Nothing in *Interzone* struck me with the same force as 'Thirst', but I particularly enjoyed Will McIntosh's 'Soft Apocalypse' in *Interzone* 200. Like so many of the stories that most appealed to me in 2005, 'Soft Apocalypse' is a tale of yearning, grief, loss, and love that links these emotional elements to other elements of the story, in this case the setting and plot. McIntosh uses a familiar apocalyptic scenario to heighten the resonance of his protagonist's emotional life, and both the characterization and setting gain depth from this pairing.

Fantasy Magazine was a new venture this year from Prime Books, and the premiere issue, published in the fall, was stronger than many issues of more established magazines. The stories tended toward the mythic and lyrical, and the story that most appealed to me was Nick Mamatas's 'At the End of the Hall', wherein a hospitalised woman's sense of failure, rage, and helplessness finds expression in a remarkable way. Once again, we have a writer handling material that could have been sentimental in a manner that avoids sentimentality through careful control of tone and

spacing, and through a willingness to allow some ambiguity to the fantasy, to let the reader decide where the line between the real and the imagined exists.

5.

These are some of the stories that broke through my burnout in 2005. There were others, but these are representative. There is diversity of technique and subject matter here, as should be expected and demanded, but there is a unity of effect: each of the stories I have discussed links ideas, emotions, events, and characters in a way that respects a reader's intelligence and avoids easy effects. Each of these stories seeks to appeal to the reader's sense of language and narrative, as well as both the mind and heart.

It probably says more about my moods and tastes than anything else that these stories all utilise some of the traditional (and traditionally innovative) techniques of mainstream fiction along with techniques of fantasy and surrealism. None of these stories create fantastic situations or worlds for their own sake; all create a space wherein readers can think about their own worlds, their own lives, and the wonders and mundanities of things that lie outside and beyond the text. None of these stories take their sentences and structures for granted. Each is an event of language first, and the stories that are told in the most normalised way do so because it is a good option, not a required one.

The future of SF short fiction will remain bright so long as writers are encouraged to care about language, structure, and emotional honesty while being discouraged from settling for familiar effects, sentimentality, clichés, and manipulation. More great fiction exists now than any one person could ever read in a lifetime; there is no need to settle for anything that aspires to be less than great. **V**

BSFA Award short fiction nominees

'Bears Discover Smut' – Michael Bishop
(*SCIFICTION*, 26 October)

'Bird Songs at Eventide' – Nina Allan
(*Interzone* #199)

'Guadalupe and Hieronymus Bosch' – Rudy Rucker
(*Interzone* #200)

'I, Robot' – Cory Doctorow
(*Infinite Matrix*, 15 February)

'Imagine' – Edward Morries (*Interzone* #200)

'Magic For Beginners' – Kelly Link
(*Magic For Beginners*; also *F&SF*, September)

'Soft Apocalypse' – Will McIntosh
(*Interzone* #200)

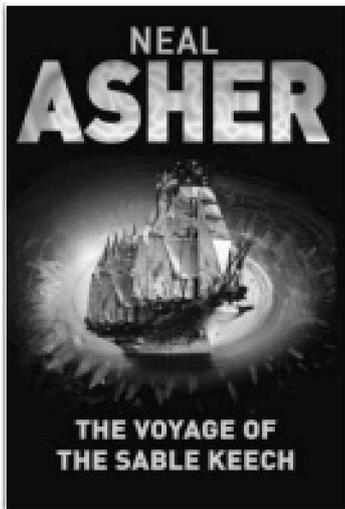
'Two Dreams on Trains' – Elizabeth Bear
(*Strange Horizons*, 3 January)

Endnotes

[1] At http://www.scifi.com/scifi/originals/originals_archive/grant3/index.html and http://www.scifi.com/scifi/originals/originals_archive/bowes3/index.html respectively.

[2] The story can be found at <http://www.strangehorizons.com/2005/20051212/fintushel-f.shtml> and my defense of it can be read at <http://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/2005/12/bone-women-by-eliot-fintushel.html>

Matthew Cheney's work has appeared in a wide variety of venues, including Locus, Strange Horizons, SF Site, Rain Taxi, and English Journal. He writes regularly about SF and literature at his weblog, The Mumpsimus <<http://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/>>, which was recently nominated for a World Fantasy Award.



**Neal Asher –
The Voyage of
The Sable
Keech** 

Tor, London, 2006, 506pp, £17.99,
h/b (reviewed in proof),
ISBN 1-4050-0140-2

**Reviewed by Dave
M. Roberts**

The Voyage of The Sable Keech is a return to the world of Spatterjay, which featured in Neal Asher's earlier novel *The Skinner*. Spatterjay is most notable for the level

of violence inherent in the local fauna and flora. Much of the way the ecosystem is put together is fascinating, but there was a tendency in *The Skinner* for this violence to start to get in the way of the plot. In this novel the interaction of the world with the main thrust of the plot is much more controlled, with the result that the violence far more effectively adds a certain tense edge to the story. In fact, the fauna has been incorporated into the main thrust of the story, with one thread following the progress of a giant whelk (and I mean a *really* big whelk). Although this is a sequel, with a good many characters from the earlier novel, it makes no assumptions that the reader is familiar with the earlier book and stands alone very effectively.

In the earlier book the re-animated Sable Keech becomes the only truly resurrected corpse. This is believed to have been as a result of the Spatterjay virus, a nasty little thing that doesn't kill its host, but effectively repairs any damage it detects to the host cells. Unfortunately it does this in its own way, using the leeches and shellfish of the planet as models. If controlled properly, the virus can have positive effects, making its host near-indestructible. It can, however, easily overcome the host with really unpleasant results. One consequence of this resurrection is that a quasi-religious cult has grown up around the event. The ship *The Sable Keech* is being built and is to undertake a voyage to retrace Keech's journey a decade earlier in *The Skinner*. The passengers will be mainly reifs (re-animated corpses) who want to follow in his footsteps, become infected with the virus and so become fully alive again. The cult represents one extreme of what constitutes a person, as a part of their belief is that if a person does not inhabit their original body, then they have ceased to be that person. This partly explains the desire to go about as a re-animated corpse. At the opposite end of this particular spectrum are the hive minds who exist in an almost total disassociation from the body.

Deep under the ocean there is a Prador, whose ship has badly damaged in the earlier war. The Prador are an insect-like race whose young are held in thrall effectively as slaves to the father. The Prador was an adolescent who seems to have broken this thrall (the Spatterjay virus again?), and he sets out to gain vengeance. Taylor Bloc leads the reifs, but also has two other reifs he controls using thrall units also used by the

Prador to hold humans as slave units. The idea of minds being divided in some way is one that recurs throughout the novel with a good number of the characters either having minds split in some way or being controlled to a greater or lesser extent by other characters and effectively becoming an extension of these characters. This question of identity, and how far the characters are able to control their own actions, let alone their destiny, is key to this novel.

In many ways *The Voyage of The Sable Keech* is fairly typical Neal Asher. It is a fast paced and highly enjoyable, albeit fairly violent, action thriller told from rapidly shifting viewpoints with complex plotting. As with most of Asher's work, there is something about this novel that lifts it well above the run of the mill. Existing fans will certainly not be disappointed, and for anyone who hasn't read Neal Asher yet, this is not a bad place to start.

**James Barclay –
Cry of the
Newborn**

Gollancz, London, 2005, 818pp, £12.99,
t/p, ISBN 0-575-07620-8

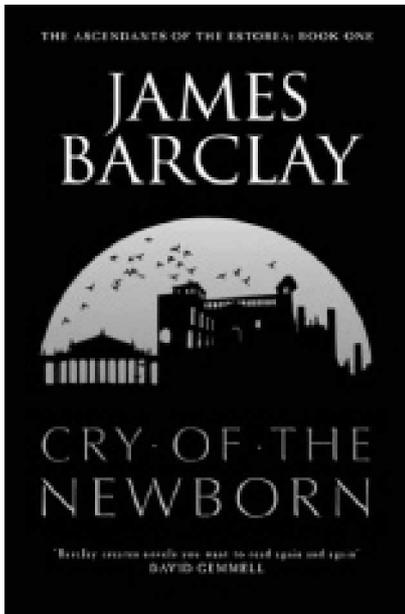
**Reviewed by Susan
Peak**

The story has two main strands: the lives of four children, known as the Ascendant, who have extraordinary powers, and an empire under threat from invaders and unstable client states. The plot, which is essentially quite simple, concerns the role of the children in helping to save the empire.

The children's strand shows them from birth, through their growth into



First Impressions
Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger



power where they are able, until their early teens, to manipulate the elements: weather, fire, moving earth. From early on one child is arrogant and unpleasant; he is eventually exiled after a rape and murder. The children have to flee their home because their existence is regarded as an evil by the empire's state religion, to the extent that the head of the

religion, the Chancellor herself, comes to oversee the attack on their home.

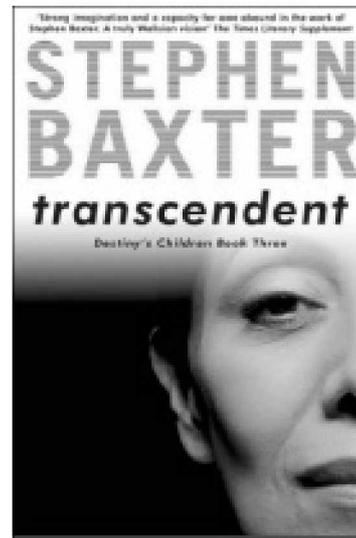
The other strand shows the empire, the Conquord, starting with its latest conquest, Atreska, restless and under threat from another country, the Tsardon. The Conquord is loosely modelled on the Roman Empire in style, its mission being to bring peace and stability to all the lands it conquers. Its work is strongly associated with a state religion, that of a single deity called the Omniscient. The leader of the Conquord is called the Advocate, another woman.

The Tsardon invade, via Atreska, attacking by both sea and land, getting as far as the Conquord's capital. At the height of the invasion, the remaining three children, linking up with the army, use their power over the elements to help drive the invader back.

At the close of the book, only a few loose ends remain: what will happen to the exiled child, Gorian, who has allied with a leader in Atreska, and will the battle against the Tsardon will finally be won, and Atreska retaken. It is hard to see what a further volume will cover.

The book is pacy and well written, although with some anomalies in language, for example the use of Latin words (*levium, extraordinarii*), and familiar if differently used titles (Chancellor) but with no apparent connection to our world or its history. In fact, there is almost no backstory present at all. Nor are there any info dumps; the reader is expected to pick matters up during the reading, and information is passed on quite naturally through, for example, conversations and there is some interesting material on the effect of distance in governing a vast empire.

James Barclay's strength lies in describing battles; these are very convincingly tackled and cover about half of the book. The earlier half, without battles, sags a little. Characterisation is less good: the people tend to be a bit black/white, for example the Chancellor is presented solely as someone who hates the Ascendant children, while the Advocate is sometimes startlingly omniscient. The characters also tend to sound rather alike. In summary, this an engaging read, but a little thin for its size.



Stephen Baxter – *Transcendent*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 489pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07431-0

Review by Gary Dalkin

Transcendent is the third and final novel proper of Stephen Baxter's four book Destiny's Children trilogy: which is to say a fourth volume, *Resplendent*, a fix-up of related stories, is to follow. Refreshingly, for a series novel, *Transcendent* can be read without

knowledge of its predecessors, which include not just the other Destiny's Children volumes but also Baxter's Xeelee Sequence.

As usual there are alternating narrative strands. The main one, if only for being told in the first person and located in a more easily identifiable near future, concerns Michael Poole. Not the Michael Poole of the Xeelee novels, but one of his ancestors, and nephew of the George Poole who was the present day protagonist of the first Destiny's Children novel, *Coalescent*. George does make a guest appearance as an old man, for now we are fifty years in the future paying the price for the licence-expired age of the automobile.

When his estranged environmentalist son, Tom, narrowly escapes death in a 'methane burp' caused by melting tundra, Michael finds himself reunited with Tom and his brother John, with whom he also has a fraught relationship, to find a solution to a newly realised environmental threat. Which would be enough story for most, but Michael is a reluctant Great Man of history, and the future has eyes on him.

Half a million years hence, humanity is a vast and peaceful civilisation spread across the galaxy. Material needs are no longer a concern, but every citizen has an obligation to Witnessing: observing the life of a selected person from the past (there are shades here of Baxter's collaborative novel with Sir Arthur C. Clarke, *The Light of Other Days* (2000)). Alia is a young woman assigned to Witness Michael Poole, and the second strand of the novel joins her story when she is approached as a possible new member of The Transcendence.

Inevitably the two strands of the book tie together, and in a much more intricately satisfying way than in many other recent novels. And of course all this might be enough for most authors, but Baxter adds a conundrum. Michael is being haunted by the ghost of his wife, and the haunting began when Michael was a boy, years before he ever first met the now seventeen years late Morag.

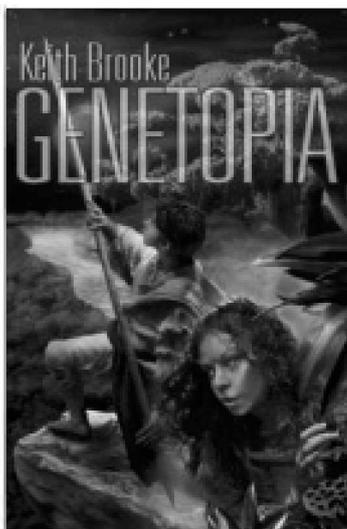
There is a lot to *Transcendent*, and one of its main pleasures is the working-out in great detail of the two futures Baxter has conceived. And that pleasure remains even if the fundamental assumptions are deeply questionable. The book presents a post-oil, post-automobile near future, with an



America which has not only given up the car but is leading the world in environmental action. Such a vision doesn't convince, especially as in Baxter's future hydrogen-powered vehicles are available, and we are never told why everyone isn't just running their SUV's on corn oil. And that said, for a world in which international travel is almost a thing of the past, Baxter contrarily constructs a narrative filled with just such travel. And this journeying is inessential, for fifty years hence virtual meetings have all but eliminated the need to go places. These are the central, and unavoidable, contradictions of the otherwise richly drawn near future strand of Transcendent.

Meanwhile, as the title implies, the ultimate concerns of the novel are quasi-religious. Baxter is akin to Arthur C. Clarke in that both writers' work often contains a mystical longing to escape the bounds of hard science. Here Baxter's lapsed Catholicism comes to the fore, and the far future strand of the novel offers no less than a massively ambitious programme for the redemption and transcendence of humanity. The result is a far-future civilisation which is often externally impoverished, as all concerns turn inward. And ironically for such an inward journey, as with the near future storyline, Alia's story embarks her on a travelogue, in her case a sense-of-wonder space odyssey across the galaxy. The whole has clear echoes of Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), with even Alia's mentor, Reath, paralleling that novel's Overlords in his own inability to join The Transcendence.

Baxter's novel has more compelling imaginative detail and scale than Clarke's far more resonant and moving forbear, but it is a worthy tale in its own right, and for all its flaws the most satisfying of the *Destiny's Children* novels. And who after all could resist a book which begins, "The girl from the future told me the sky is full of dying worlds."



Keith Brooke – *Genetopia*

Prometheus Books, New York, 2006, 304 pp, \$25.00, h/b, ISBN 1-59102-333-5

Reviewed by Ben
Jeapes

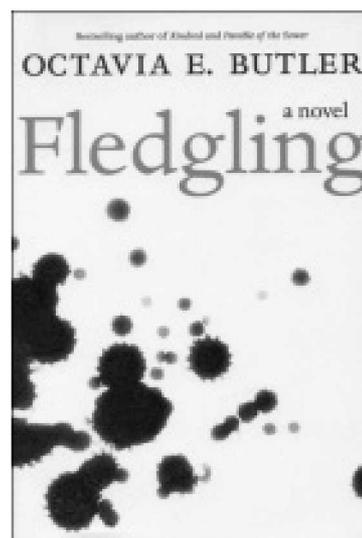
Genetopia is set in a low-tech world of genetic engineering gone bonkers, and it is convincing precisely because it's so low tech. The simplest effects available to the people of this world are way in advance of anything we can do now, but they are still very hit and miss. You expose

people to changing vectors, maybe pray a little, and see what happens. But under such conditions, armed with nothing more than folklore and traditional knowledge and instinctive skill, you can achieve much. Someone from 2006 wouldn't last five minutes in this world where even an innocent walk in the forest could result in on-the-spot mutation, but our distant descendants handle it without thinking because this is all they have ever known.

Distinctions between animal and vegetable are fluid in *Genetopia*; distinctions between the different levels of humanity are even more so. At the top of the tree are the True, pure human genetic stock. At the bottom are the mutts with a mostly inbred devotion to their True masters. But in between are the more ambiguous Lost, who have somehow changed, inside or out. Even being born of True stock isn't the guarantee it ought to be because you can come out Lost, or become Lost later. It's never made clear here how you know someone is Lost, but the True do when they see them. Or say they do. And if there's someone who is just borderline, and you fear them and want them gone, then passing them off as Lost and selling them into slavery is very easy.

Flint is a young man whose younger sister Amber meets just that fate. Nominally, *Genetopia* is the story of Flint's search for her. More accurately, it's the story of someone with fixed notions having to survive in this world where everything is so changeable. Your humanity is what is in your heart, not your genes, and it's mutations of the heart that should be feared. Though Brooke is far too subtle to state it in such crass Trek terms.

Flint does come across as a bit bland – his search for Amber becomes obsessive but never had any real passion behind it to start with. He looks for his sister and shelters a guilty secret, and at first that seems to be it. Every now and then Brooke teases us with a chapter describing what is happening to Amber, each one told from the point of view of an observer character, and it is these one-off characters who are vivid and well defined. But maybe Flint himself needs to be more low-key so that the changes in him are gradual and insidious, just like some of the mutations that everyone fears so much. The other characters are quirks and oddities of *Genetopia*'s world, just as much as the scenes and the strangenesses that Flint encounters, working their effect on Flint and on the reader alike.



Octavia Butler – *Fledgling*

Seven Stories Press, New York, 2005, 317pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 1-58322-690-7

Reviewed by Niall
Harrison

There's something appealing, for a science fiction reader, about trying to justify vampires. They drink blood, perhaps, because they can't synthesise haem; they avoid the sun, maybe, because they have extreme xeroderma pigmentosum;

it's possible their extended lifespan is conferred by an improved form of telomerase; that sort of thing. (You can even pretend that these benefits could all be conferred by one handy-dandy blood-borne retrovirus. Is my inner biochemistry geek showing?) Other writers have played these games to update classic vampire stories. A notable and

relatively recent example would be Joe Ahearne's *Ultraviolet* (1998) or Scott Westerfeld's *Peeps* (2005), but writers as diverse as Suzy McKee Charnas and Brian Stableford have got in on the act at various times. In her latest novel – her first this century, as it happens – Octavia Butler seems at first to be doing the same sort of thing. But, as we might expect from the author of stories like the Nebula-winning 'Bloodchild', it turns out that her real interest lies elsewhere, in questions of social dynamics, prejudice, and justice.

Fledgling is a book of two halves. In the slightly ramshackle first half, we get to know the narrator, and she gets to know herself. Waking in a cave, alone, naked, injured and amnesiac, Shori has no idea who or what she is. We can make a pretty good guess when she tears out the throat of the first animal that wanders by, and bewitches the first man, although we don't get the whole truth until she tracks down her helpfully explanatory father a few chapters later. They are Ina: members of a long-lived, blood-drinking, sunlight-phobic and biologically distinct species who've lived among humans for thousands of years. Most Ina are tall, ultrapale, lean, and wiry; Shori has the last two of those down, but she's small (mostly because she's only 53), and being genetically engineered for greater daytime survival, she's also black. Someone or some group seems to have taken exception to this pollution of Ina blood. Hence the initial attack and hence, shortly after his exposition is done, Shori's father is also killed. One more attempt on her life later Shori is on the road, seeking sanctuary in another Ina community; once installed there, the second and more interesting half of the book, consisting of the process of identifying and bringing Shori's persecutors to justice, can begin.

One of the problems for any writer working with the baggy vampire canon is the need to spell out which bits of the mythos they are keeping, and which they are discarding. Butler establishes the physical traits of her Ina briskly, and dismisses most of the mystical baggage. She also establishes Ina as Other. The book avoids human society almost entirely – bar some observations about the human need to make up "fantasy safeguards, little magics [...] that would somehow keep them safe from my kind – or from what they imagined my kind to be" (p95) – but Shori's status as an amnesiac and as an experiment still leave her stranded. She is at once part of the tribe and an outsider, and it is this tension that drives the plot.

Yet even when Butler is describing the nature and habits of Ina society there are precedents to be overcome. For anyone with ingrained knowledge of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, for instance, observations (of Shori) such as "you still have at least some of the morality you were taught" (p72) take a little getting used to. The Buffyverse soulless (evil)/souled (not-evil) framework is a powerful one for stories centred around moral choices, even if it's not entirely coherent; any other attempt to tell a vampire story of similar consequence, particularly one where the central character is a preternaturally powerful young girl, will likely linger in its shadow. (Although it should be said that Shori is emphatically not either Buffy or Angel. For one thing, she is completely comfortable with her power, right from the get-go.) And for all that the Ina are established as a separate

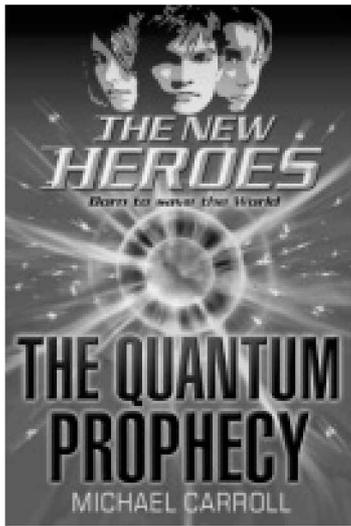
species to humans, they never seem alien; their secret society, nested inside human culture, is consciously constructed, just as Whedon's vampires are, to highlight our flaws.

The care with which Ina society is developed, however, eventually pays off. While the history of the Ina is only serviceable – it's tricky to swallow the idea that the Ina were well on their way to gene sequencing before we'd even had an industrial revolution – their present-day culture is fully fleshed out, grounded in the ways in which the Ina are different to us, and to standard vampires. Ina do not hunt to kill; they do not kill when they feed; and they cannot make humans become Ina. What they can do instead is bind humans to them. The feeding process is extremely pleasurable, and addictive, for both parties (if perhaps not for the readers; there's only so many times you can read about 'licking' and 'lapping' before it starts to seem like the characters are just going through the motions). Before too long, neither party wants to survive without the other, or indeed can survive without the other. These sorts of bonds, and the intense and controlling devotion they inspire, are common enough in vampire stories, but Butler engages with the implications of the arrangement for free will in some depth. The Ina insist it is a true mutualistic symbiosis: both partners dependent on and benefiting from the other. To feed sustainably, however, a single Ina must be accompanied by a minor gaggle of humans, and in arguments about their proper care and feeding, it is Ina voices that carry the greatest weight. Even more tellingly, it is only ever the humans that are referred to as 'symbiotes'.

Combine all this with the fact that Ina are strongly sexually territorial, and the fact that female Ina are usually more powerful than the males, and you have a biological basis for a communal, matriarchal society. Add in the fact that Ina live more intensely than humans – greater pain, along with greater pleasure – and you have a natural setting for a severe judicial system, ready for the high-stakes morality test case that Shori's existence provides. The identity of Shori's enemies is fairly quickly established and never seriously in doubt, not least because they are never developed beyond the level of cartoons; they don't literally start frothing at the mouth at the very sight of Our Heroine, but it doesn't take much to get them started. They are mere mouthpieces, representing (as one character puts it) weeds of racism growing in what they claim is the previously clean Ina garden. Despite Shori's desire for vengeance, however, her relatives counsel her to go through the correct channels, to "use the truth intelligently" (p245). The question therefore quickly becomes not whether Shori will be eventually vindicated, but how her vindication will be achieved: within the system, or without it.

In her appreciation of Butler's 2003 story 'Amnesty', printed in *Vector* 245, Claire Light identified a recurring plot in Butler's fiction: the story of a woman caught between two cultures and driven to insert herself into the gap between them. *Fledgling* represents another variation on this theme. Considered as a story it is uneven and, beneath the vampiric trappings, curiously dry. As a thought experiment, however, it is telling and eloquent, an examination of how well an imagined society might accommodate otherness, and by

extension a forceful criticism of our own society. It's impossible to read the book and not to be reminded, with some clarity, of how much room we have for improvement; and because the reasons for the Ina's successes are rooted in their biology, and not just their culture, it's hard not to wonder if there's only so far we humans can go.



**Michael Carroll –
The Quantum
Prophecy** 

HarperCollins Children's Books, London,
2006, 320pp, £5.99, p/b,
ISBN 0-00-721092-2

**Reviewed by James
Bacon**

I have been reading both comics and sf books for a long time now, and there is always some sort of special connection between fans of both media. Although there is probably little reason for the link, there still is a strong

connection between these two media. Fans of sf/fantasy more often read comics, than say fans of Bridget Jones, the crossover is quite prevalent and it's not uncommon to find the graphic novels next to the science fiction in a modern Waterstones.

Larry Niven wrote what is perhaps the funniest literary story set in the world of comic book superheroes with 'Man of Steel Woman of Kleenex' (1971) (and available on his website www.larryniven.org). Since then there have been some good literary superhero tales and of course the Wild Cards series, initially edited by George R. R. Martin, who was himself a comic fanzine contributor in the sixties, which is a series that continues today, some seventeen volumes later.

So I approached *The Quantum Prophecy* gently. Not having any expectations nor prejudgements.

The book is about a young fella Colin Wagner, a young teenage boy, growing up normal, with normal friends. The world is a normal world: once there were superheroes and super villains, but one day, and one explosion later it seems that they were all obliterated or at least retired.

The story starts to find its pace as Colin and his friend Danny first find they may have powers themselves and get embroiled in a kidnap plot in order to sterilise these powers so as to protect humanity (or not, as the story develops). Other characters are introduced and the plot twists quite a bit, with some nice touches and nods to the world of comics.

I immediately found the book enjoyable. Aimed at the young teenage market, I was worried I would find it boring, or just dumbed down, but it was it was written in a way that was not tedious and I found my imagination in tune with this world, where Superheroes once were. The background was good, with the main protagonists given a very credible grounding and portrayed as I have found teens to be: smart-arsed little bastards at times.

I am very particular about how comic characters are portrayed and filled out, and here there is some effort and research made into the world of superheroes. Although one can find similar characters in any mainstream comics book, what makes this different is the world these characters inhabit and the

brilliant story that takes us on a journey of discovery: of the world, of what happened and of what might and will become. This book could so easily be a clone of a comic but rather it's a brilliant story set in a genre that comics dominate, but far better written than many dozens of comics published every month. The important factor here is that this is a unique and well-told superhero story with its own history and characters and with that virgin canvas in mind; the author has done superheroes justice.

There are some rather brutal and vivid images in the book, and one does not usually expect patricide to feature in a novel for young teens, but I think I should resist the patronising trap, of believing I know what others should read. To be honest, I really enjoyed it and felt it was totally realistic given the situation and only added to the story, so I expect most teenagers will enjoy it too.

The blurb says it's the first of a trilogy, which is good, but its definitely a standalone affair, with no cliff-hanger, but so many threads that could be followed or woven into something more.

My only fault is that I wanted more immediately after the read. In the world of comics, I am able to pick up my next issue in a matter of four weeks, and that's how I felt when I came to the end of this book, I wanted more. I also wanted a Who's Who and schematics of various things mentioned in the book, but that's just an indication of how far I became wrapped up in it.



**Ellen Datlow,
Kelly Link and
Gavin J. Grant
(eds.) – The
Year's Best
Fantasy and
Horror:
Eighteenth
Annual Collection**

St Martin's Griffin, New York, 2005,
480pp, \$19.95, t/p,
ISBN 0-312-34194-6

**Reviewed by Geneva
Melzack**

When you open this book to start reading you know two things about the stories contained within its pages: that they are classifiable as either fantasy or horror, and that they are good enough for someone to have considered them the best stories of 2004. Whether knowing these two things enhances the stories collected in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* depends very much upon the individual story.

For the stories that are merely good rather than outstanding, the appellation 'best' probably does them a disservice. A good story that sits alongside stories that really are the best may not come off quite as well as it perhaps did in its original context of publication. Simon Brown's 'Water Babies,' for example, is a well-written and engaging story that unfortunately reads as being a little bit flat in comparison to some of the more innovative and imaginative stories in the collection. But this is a minor hazard for this sort of anthology, and I would rather be given the opportunity to encounter these stories than not, because they are indeed worth reading, and the odds are you wouldn't come across them at all if you were reading independently. The diversity of the markets from which the stories have been collected is striking, and the fact that the collection is edited by

three people only emphasises how difficult – perhaps impossible – it is for a single reader to keep up with all the short fiction being published at the moment.

The classification of these stories as being fantasy and/or horror could be seen as a narrowness of scope, an attempt to wall fantasy and horror up into the genre ghetto. But again, the diversity of the markets these stories have been taken from belies this argument. Datlow, Link and Grant haven't just looked at fiction published under the banner of fantasy and horror; they've also included stories originally published in mainstream or young adult markets. Indeed, publishing stories such as Chuck Palahniuk's 'Guts' – originally published as mainstream fiction – in a fantasy and horror collection actually adds an extra layer to the story, which provides a new method for appreciating it. In any other context I think I may have been tempted to dismiss 'Guts' as just a shock-piece, out to disgust readers for no good reason. But publishing the story as horror made me appreciate that sometimes the very point of fiction is to provoke extreme emotional reactions in readers – that's what horror fiction is fundamentally about – and reading 'Guts' in this light helped me to find some value in what it was trying to do.

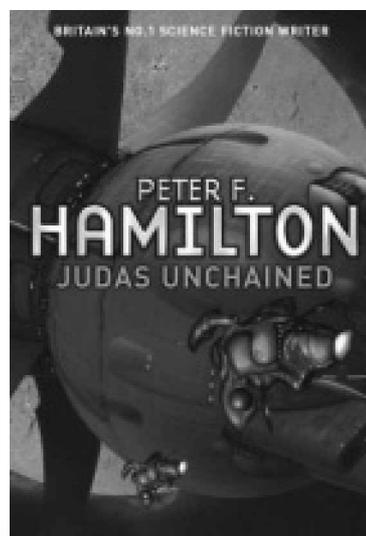
Some of the best contemporary fantasy and horror fiction, it seems, is being written for young people. A couple of the most striking and effective stories in the collection are stories that were written by authors who mostly write for a young adult readership, or at least, that is the audience their writing is targeted at. Margo Lanagan has two stories in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, 'Rite of Spring' and 'Singing My Sister Down,' both from her young adult story collection *Black Juice*. Children's author M. T. Anderson's story 'Watch and Wake' is also included as one of the best fantasy and horror stories of 2004. There's something particularly visceral about these three stories, a physicality in the way the worlds of the stories are imagined and in the way the fantastic/horrific elements emerge out of those worlds. They are stories that pull the reader in, vividly situating them inside the experiences of the protagonists. This sense of tangibility is highly effective at engaging the reader, making them feel the sadness or the fear that the characters in the stories are feeling, creating an atmosphere in which the fantastic or the horrific flourishes.

There is still some exciting and innovative fantasy and horror fiction being written for adults, though it seems to be rarer than one might hope. The two stories here that are most interesting and imaginative are China Miéville's 'Reports of Certain Events in London,' which is an account of the movements of 'feral streets' and Stepan Chapman's 'Revenge of the Calico Cat,' a surreal story set in a world populated with plush toys.

The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror isn't just a short story collection, however, it is also a comprehensive survey of the fantasy and horror genres in 2004, covering novels, films and television, comics and graphic novels, anime and manga, music, and obituaries, as well as a full index of notable fantasy/horror publications, and as such is as much of a reference book as it is a fiction one. As with the short fiction presented here, editors Datlow, Link and Grant have taken a very broad approach, and the works reviewed come from a wide variety of markets and sources.

This collection succeeds on the basis of its openness and willingness to embrace a diverse range of exciting fiction, whatever its supposed target audience. The bulk of the stories in the collection that come from established fantasy and horror authors and markets can sometimes feel repetitive, giving the

impression that the genres are stagnating somewhat. However, this sense of malaise is transcended by a clutch of individual stories that succeed on the strength of the skill and artfulness with which they're written, or because of their spark and originality, regardless of the market they were originally written for or targeted at.



**Peter F. Hamilton –
Judas Unchained**
Macmillan, London, 2005, 949pp,
£18.99, h/b (reviewed in proof)
ISBN 1-4050-0036-8
Reviewed by Martin Potts

Peter Hamilton's *Judas Unchained* is the second and final part of the Commonwealth Saga commenced in *Pandora's Star* (reviewed in Vector 238). Hamilton's novel *Misspent Youth* is a short novel set in the same universe but pre-

dates events to such an extent that it is not essential reading before starting these two. *Judas Unchained* picks up immediately from the end of *Pandora's Star* and I would recommend they are read back-to-back as the intricacies of characters and plot lines are so numerous and intertwined that even a twelve month delay between them caused me to reach back for *Pandora's Star* to remind myself of certain catalyst events which were seeing fruition in this book.

Pandora's Star introduced us to the Intersolar Commonwealth, the result of humanity's expansion amongst the stars via wormhole technology rather than spaceship exploration. As a result humanity has expanded far into the Galaxy but when an alien presence is detected logistics dictate that a 'traditional' spaceship is despatched to investigate. Inadvertently, the Commonwealth ship releases the alien entity which had hitherto been confined to the Dyson Alpha system by a force field of unknown origin. In this second instalment the gloves are off in the conflict between humanity and the alien, MorningLightMountain and, as the technologies of war escalate, the conspiracy theories suggested in *Pandora's Star* gather pace and the protagonists hunt for the Judas in their midst. The frenetic activity culminates in traitorous revelations during a trans-planetary chase with plenty of explosive action set-pieces along the way in the tradition of the best wartime thrillers. Its wonderfully exciting stuff and, as with *Pandora's Star*, the pages turn effortlessly.

At times, as many plot elements were intertwining, I felt the wheels were going to come off the main storyline but of course that's where Hamilton's skill as a storyteller comes to the fore in that the author has it all well under control and the layered tapestry weaves together wonderfully – the need for two thousand pages becomes self evident.

As well as the fast-paced action, widescreen canvas and huge cast, these books have notably introduced the character of Paula Myo to sf. A genetically-created investigator, her relentless pursuit of The Guardians



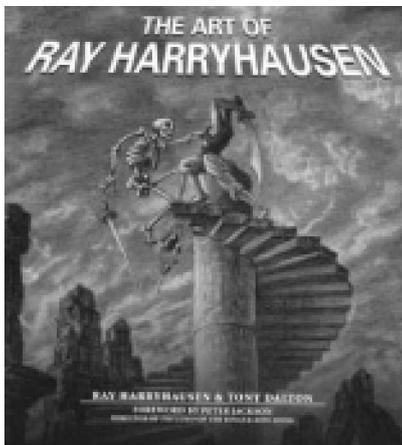
terrorist organisation is a pivotal element to the story but she is a character of such demeanour, style and page presence that I'm sure she will become a classic sf figure and will become what these two novels are remembered for.

Amidst the varied plotlines the characterisation is by no means left behind. His characters don't have time to lose in the inane navel gazing experienced in some other long novels (which feel like the character passages are just padding). In Hamilton's books we learn about the characters naturally and the pace is never sacrificed. This is one of the key elements that is so enjoyable about Hamilton's style of writing: the careful balance maintained between events on the macro- and micro-scales gives his space epics their wide appeal.

It should be mentioned that Jim Burns has provided a beautifully provocative image in deep oranges and purples which perfectly evokes feelings of barely contained ferocious energy and is definitely an eye-catcher in the bookshops.

This Commonwealth Saga is far more of a combination of sf and thriller rather than sf and horror (as is the case with the Night's Dawn trilogy) with of course the elements of galaxy-wide conflict and individual dramas which Hamilton plays out so well. At its heart this book is a thriller, a full throttle race against time and if that's your recipe for a good read, you won't be disappointed.

Hamilton's website has stated that the Commonwealth Universe is planned to be revisited by the author in a new sequence set one thousand years after these events (current working title Void Trilogy). With the publication success of this first story sequence, the anticipation for a return must be high amongst fans.



Ray Harryhausen, Tony Dalton and Peter Jackson – *The Art of Ray Harryhausen*

Aurum Press, London, 2005, 240pp, £25.00, h/b, ISBN 1-84513-1142-2

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

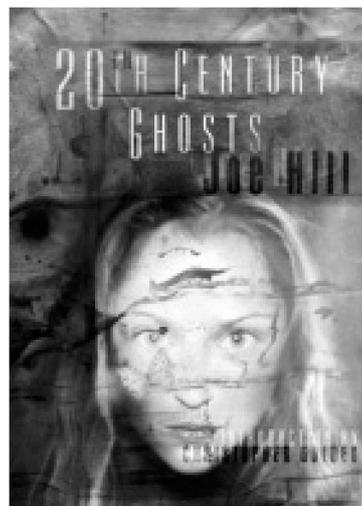
In 2003 *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life* was released; a sweeping coffee-table book offering a fascinating look at the career of one of the most influential special effects artists and animators, the creative force behind such fantastic films as *Jason and the Argonauts*, *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* and *Earth vs The Flying Saucers*. Profusely illustrated and with detailed text, Harryhausen revealed many of the secrets behind his revolutionary animation work. As such it seemed to be the definitive word on its subject and a 'must have' for any serious fans of fantasy cinema. It comes as some surprise to find another coffee-table sized work has now been released, but this one is less of a sequel and more of a companion piece. *The Art of Ray Harryhausen* takes a different approach to its forebear, looking at the art behind the films from the perspective of Harryhausen's own artistic endeavours and those of the artists who influenced him. Less concerned with the animation process the focus rests on the soul of the creation, the concept drawings and paintings that pre-visualised

Harryhausen's fantastical worlds.

The narrative follows Harryhausen's artistic development as well as his close friendship with Willis O'Brien (Obie), creator of *The Lost World* and *King Kong*, and the man who would have the most influence on the young animator's career. These days the chances of you being able to phone up your hero and not only get to meet them, but be offered the chance to work with them falls into the realms of fantasy – but not then! The book shows us many images of O'Brien's production sketches that were used in a number of his films. Also of interest are Harryhausen's own drawings for some of these films, brilliantly realised but, sadly, ones he never dared show O'Brien himself.

In many respects the narrative is secondary, and it is the illustrations that are really the focus of this book. We are given many an opportunity to enjoy work of the artists that most influenced Harryhausen. These include Gustav Doré, the 19th Century artist who illustrated over 200 books, including Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with incredibly detailed imagery. Charles R. Knight, famous for his depictions of dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures, also features – effectively the man who put flesh and skin onto fossilised bones to bring them to vivid life. His influence on Harryhausen's work cannot be underestimated – from *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* and *Mysterious Island* to, of course, *One Million Years BC*. Then there is the artwork of Harryhausen himself – from rough concept sketches to storyboards and photographs of his most famous creations, many depicted as full page illustrations showing minute attention to detail. Also featured are some of Harryhausen's work in sculpture and bronzes.

This is another heavy tome but, like many art books, necessarily so. Although perhaps not as insightful as *An Animated Life*, its different and enlightening perspective makes it an essential purchase for fans of Harryhausen's remarkable work.



Joe Hill – *20th Century Ghosts*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 341pp, £15.00, p/b, ISBN 1-904619-46-0

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

20th Century Ghosts is one of those books that comes with Hype. For starters, it's had one of the largest and most reasonably priced print runs PS Publishing has put out so far: 1000 copies of a £15 trade paperback, over and above the hardback and slipcased editions. That speaks to Pete

Crowther's confidence in the book. And since the collection was launched at last year's World Fantasy Convention, there has been no shortage of people lining up to praise its contents. Jonathan Strahan picked it as one of the best collections of 2005. Ellen Datlow has said it "may be the most important horror debut since Glen Hirshberg" which, to be fair, only makes it the most important debut since 2002, but coming from an editor of Datlow's calibre it's not an insignificant statement.

The collection proper begins with 'Best New Horror'. Eddie Carroll is the editor of *America's*



Best New Horror, and has been for sixteen years. Perhaps not surprisingly, he's a little jaded; not by the form itself, but by the great swathes of mediocrity filling most of the market. So when he receives a particularly nasty story that nevertheless grips him from start to finish, it's a cause for celebration. He decides he has to have it for the next *Best New Horror*, but tracking down the author proves more challenging than he expected. You know how it goes from here, and so does Joe Hill. 'Best New Horror' is a basically conventional horror story that cannot succeed without a baseline jaded expectancy on the part of the reader. It relies on your knowingness to pull you in on an intellectual level, and then gradually drags you in further until you're invested in the situation in a more visceral way.

It is, perhaps, a necessary interrogation of the conventions of horror, because it allows you to approach the rest of the collection with a certain level of trust. This is repaid: the next two stories are the finest in the book. '20th Century Ghost' is the first, but not the only, story in the book to mine the ambience of the shared setting that small-town America has become. It is a deeply nostalgic story about a legendary ghost at a local cinema, capturing the magic of the silver screen with a heartfelt sentiment that never becomes cloying, and building to a climax of melancholy romance. 'Pop Art', meanwhile, tells the story of Arthur (Art) Roth, the narrator's best friend and the only inflatable boy in the neighbourhood. That's right: Art is made of plastic and filled with air. It's a ludicrous premise, and seems the more so because the previous stories used far more traditional horror tropes, but it works beautifully. The friendship between the two boys is developed with a deft awareness of how teenagers interact, while creating an intimacy that never lets us forget Art's condition. We should know that Art cannot live: all it will take is a sharp branch, or a cat's claws and, well, that will be that. And Art knows it too, since death and the afterlife are often on his mind. But we disbelieve it, because Art's life is hard enough. To use hope as a tool of disquiet is a ruthless trick indeed.

After the opening trio, the collection settles down a little, and becomes something more like what we thought we'd signed up for. Hill rattles through his reference points. In 'You Will Hear The Locust Sing', it's not Gregor Samsa who wakes up as a giant cockroach, but a boy raised on the nuclear paranoia of B-movies like *The Fly* and *Them!*, and who regards the change as much as an opportunity as a curse. The costs of the transformation are not overlooked, but where Kafka's outsider was crushed by his alienation, Hill's is energised by it. A comparable riff can be found in 'Abraham's Boys', from which the fantastic is entirely absent, but in which it is made quite clear that the titular Abraham is *the* Van Helsing, having moved to the New World. His boys, Max and Rudy, from whose point of view the story is told, aren't allowed out after dark; the story is about how sons challenge the authority of their fathers, and about how wrong fathers can be when they're trying to protect their sons.

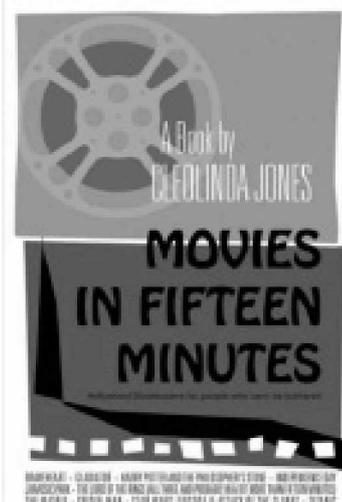
There's no fantasy in 'Better Than Home', either, even external to the main story. Rather, it's a sad study of a kid with problems, whose life, we gradually realise, is not sustainable. Escape is possible, for a little while, but in the end he doesn't fit – or, we suspect, is not allowed to fit. A similar approach characterises 'The Saved', 'The Widow's Breakfast' and 'In The Rundown'; they reflect the cruelty of the world. A large number of Hill's protagonists are teenage boys, trying to come to grips with the world. Rarely do they succeed. Often the deck is stacked heavily against them; if they are not explicitly handicapped, they are usually, at the very least, desperately insecure. But in most

cases, we want them to find their way out of the hole they're in; we want them to rise to the challenges that face them. In 'The Cape', for instance, Eric seems regular enough. He's not too bright, not too malicious; not too much of anything, really. There are hints that he dreams, and hints that he is unstable, so when magic enters his life it's hard to get enough of a read on Hill's intentions to guess which way he will fall before he actually does.

A number of stories demonstrate that Hill doesn't reinvent the wheel when he doesn't have to. 'The Black Phone', in which a teenage boy is abducted, is a story you've read before, and it stands or falls (mostly stands) with its atmosphere: a tense, claustrophobic closeness. 'Last Breath', similarly is a classic dramatisation of an idea, in this case a museum of silence, full of the captured last breaths of notable and obscure people. But there is also 'My Father's Mask', the least traditional, most surreal story in the book. In some ways it recalls Kelly Link's more disquieting stories, with a sense that reality is perhaps just too far off course to wrench back to normality, and an ending that we are almost glad un-tells the story, even if we aren't sure why. Last is the longest story in the collection, 'Voluntary Committal', a novella featuring a teenager led astray by a misjudged friendship, and a younger brother whose mental illness is somehow connected to a magical talent, the ability to build portals to elsewhere and escape. The execution of the story is memorable, but the content is frustrating. It seems too simplistic for a writer of Hill's calibre.

This – the feeling that only in about half the stories is Hill really pushing himself – is probably the biggest caveat I have about the book. That aside, however, it is still clearly a notable debut, with a flair that at times recalls Michael Marshall Smith's *What You Make It*. What truly makes these stories, however, is a quality that Eddie Carroll comments on when reading 'Buttonboy': they are about "the bread of everyday life" (p12). They are not just about the moment of horror, they are about what leads up to it, and what comes after it. They take their time. Perhaps that's why, although this is a dark collection, and a disconcerting one, it is not depressing: Joe Hill helps us to understand. Especially when we don't want to.

[An expanded version of this review is available online at the Internet Review of SF www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10245].



Cleolinda Jones – *Movies in Fifteen Minutes*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 400pp, £8.99,
h/b, ISBN 0-575-07687-9

Reviewed by Pete
Young

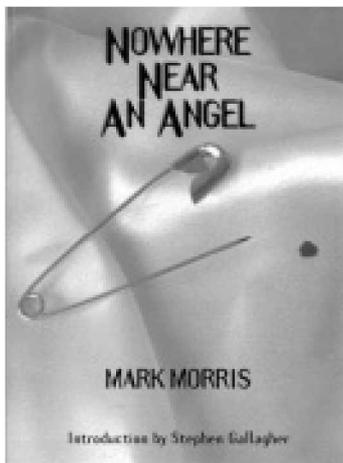
One question always precedes the purchase of a book such as this: "Will I find it screamingly funny for my nine quid, or will I file it under 'you obviously had to be there'?" Enough people have found the mocking humour of Cleolinda Jones a

pseudonym for a Net-obsessed American post-grad student to be something worth keeping an eye on, and her infrequent movie parodies of 'Hollywood blockbusters for people who can't be bothered' that have appeared on at least one of her many websites have prompted enough enthusiasm for Gollancz to

boldly enshrine them in a 400-page hardback.

Essentially here's how it works: take ten big films of the last decade or so, most of them science fiction or fantasy, and pare them down to something that could be read in (well, considerably longer than) fifteen minutes, while telling their stories with as much gag-reel humour as possible. The end result of each is identifiably that of a 'Cleolinda' parody, more *Mystery Science Theater 3000* than Mel Brooks, more *Mad* than *Airplane*, all affectionately done and with an obvious respect for their subject matter. All of them without exception are translated into current American idiomatic English, even those movies that possessed plenty of that in the first place such as *The Matrix* and *Independence Day*; therefore we have *Braveheart*'s William Wallace, *Gladiator*'s Maximus and our blessed Gandalf reduced to talking like the kids from *South Park*. One could say that particular joke is funny once and it might certainly struggle to find fresh ways of coming across to a non-American reader, but get used to it because that's just the context for all the other, less subtle literal slapstick. Scenes are reduced to, essentially, a cartoon script without the pictures; therefore, deprived of the sight gags or the allowance of any space or time for exposition, much of it is forced to rely on minimalist typographic netspeak to get the humour across. Speaking as one who was not in on the joke from the beginning, it's nevertheless easy to see the cleverness of some of the cultural reinterpretations and creative thought that has obviously gone into these parodies, but unless they arrive fresh in front of a receptive reader's eyes they'll probably do little more than raise a titter here and there, which suggests maybe the internet was always the best home for them unless of course the reader loves heavy doses of screaming caps, multiple exclamation marks and one endlessly repeated joke told with a humour that is so Totally Not Mellow, Dude.

Parodies of sf movies performed at science fiction conventions will always come across better even if the humour isn't shared, and because of the deliberate in-yer-face unsubtlety of *Movies in Fifteen Minutes* this collection will possibly appeal more to US readers than those in the UK, who might find the repetitive nature of the end result a tad irritating: they require much subjective indulgence from the reader, and to do them justice they each really have to be enjoyed in one sitting which indicates this is probably one for the bathroom.



Mark Morris – *Nowhere Near An Angel*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 367pp,
£25.00, h/b, ISBN 1-902880-99-4

**Reviewed by Martin
Lewis**

This is Rob Swann's autobiography. More than just being a first-person narrative, the story plays out in the amiable, rambling manner of a bloke in a pub unspooling his life over a tape recorder and a

pint. The memories are vivid but never before vocalised; instead they are examined as they spoken, leading Swann off down new paths: "But there I go again, veering off at a tangent, or even several. I ought to stick to straight lines, but the problem is, life isn't lived in straight lines." (p22)

Whilst Swann's delivery is amiable, his story is decidedly less so. The tone is set early on when he outlines a particularly vile episode of abuse meted out to him as a child by his father. By the time he has left school – thrown on the mid-Seventies unemployment scrap heap – he is on the verge of suicide. In an act of intervention that for Swann is semi-divine, the sound of The Sex Pistols' 'Anarchy In The UK' on the John Peel Show at the very instant he is about to kill himself stops him in his tracks. Suddenly his life is given purpose. He gets the first train to London.

What happens next is the best section of the novel. Morris perfectly captures a character caught between youth and adulthood, afraid of being rejected by the sub-culture he wishes to join. When Swann enters the 100 Club for the first time he is "fully expecting to be sent packing with my tail between my legs, accompanied by the contemptuous laughter of those around" (p70). In a brilliant detail he orders bitter at the bar because he is too embarrassed to order the coke he would prefer. However the punk section doesn't last too long before it morphs into something rather more unusual. This is a bit of a problem for the book: Swann's life is far too interesting. For punk to literally save your life and for you to then be on the scene for its defining moments is one thing. To do this, then become drugged and enslaved by a bunch of psychosexual proto-goths before becoming a gangland enforcer is quite another. This is without even mentioning the complex revenge scheme that takes up the present day portion of the story. It's a risky business but what stops the book from becoming preposterous is Morris's firm grasp of Swann's voice.

There's another problem, though not one with the book itself. PS Publishing has a remit covering sf, fantasy, horror and crime/suspense; *Vector* does not. *Nowhere Near An Angel* is a dark thriller in the vein of Iain Banks' *Complicity*. In his introduction to the book Stephen Gallagher says "This book isn't, by any obvious definition, a horror novel, but I'd be willing to contend that it's the kind of novel only a born horror writer could have produced." That's debateable but it is certainly true that no definition used by the BSFA would encompass it. Still, if a book like *A Thread Of Grace* by Mary Doria Russell can get reviewed in these pages then there is definitely room for *Nowhere Near An Angel*. Anyway, enough of this fretting about categorisation.*

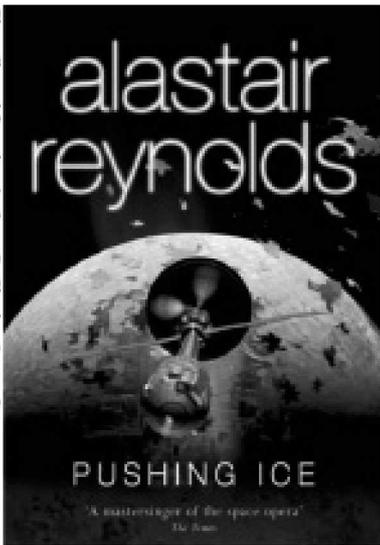
Morris tries to introduce a vein of ambiguity towards the end of his story; is Swann the person he believes himself to be? It is not really successful and nor is it necessary as there is already enough ambiguity in his actions. Swann is sinner and sinned against. He is a man with both the capacity for violence and the self-awareness to reject it. The idea of violence – as well as the actuality – figures prominently in the book and the fetishistic way it is treated by several characters is the closest link to the horror genre. Books by men about violent but sympathetic men are not exactly rare, they almost constitute a subgenre of their own, but Morris has crafted a particularly good example.

By the time we meet Swann he hopes this violence is behind him; he is content in his conventionality, understandably so given the excess of his early life. The fact that he remains something of an everyman with a taste for simple pleasures suggests an ability to internalise and compartmentalise. Indeed almost the final words of the book are "the past is the past" (p367). A seemingly contradictory thought for a character who has just given us their life story but perhaps it indicates the past can only be put away once it has been documented. I'm glad this past has.

* Editor's note: I have a very wide view of what should be included in the

reviews section – hence the inclusion of both *Nowhere Near An Angel* and *A Thread Of Grace* and others such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and John Connolly's *Bad Men*. I aim to include not only ones that are clearly in the sf/fantasy/horror genre but also slipstream and, crucially, other books that I think may be of interest to BSFA members.

Shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award



**Alastair Reynolds –
Pushing Ice**

Gollancz, London, 2005, 458pp,
£14.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07438-8

Reviewed by Chris Hill

It is 2057 and the *Rockhopper*, captained by Bella Lind, locates comets in the outer solar system and steers them towards the inner planets, an activity called 'pushing ice'. But something strange happens: Saturn's moon Janus suddenly

moves, leaves its orbit and starts heading out of the solar system; it is obviously not really a moon but a vessel of some kind. As the only ship close enough, the crew of the *Rockhopper* is asked to catch-up with Janus and investigate what is happening while the 'moon' is still within range. The crew narrowly votes to follow, but then an accident causes one of the senior engineers to suspect that they cannot actually make the journey and return. When they finally catch up with Janus things get even stranger...

Pushing Ice may belong firmly to the traditional 'Big Dumb Object' sub-genre of science fiction, but it is a superior example. Cheekily, it starts with a prologue that seems to give away far too much of the story but much later in the book, when this section is finally put into context, you realise that it really does not tell you anything very much at all.

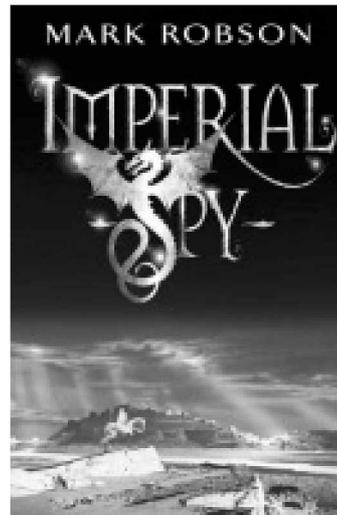
As the novel goes on, the science fictional content concerns itself with an unprepared crew finding ways to survive in a hostile environment and making discoveries about Janus, and the people who built it. Sensibly, Reynolds keeps the creators of Janus off-stage and leaves their motivations a subject for debate. Often sf of this type falls flat as soon as the super-powerful aliens and/or their reasons are revealed (c.f. the Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee Rama books and the later volumes of Frederik Pohl's Gateway saga).

In fact, the situation the crew find themselves in is really only a side-show to the real core of the book: the relationship between the original captain, Bella Lind, and Svetlana Barseghian, an engineer. They start the book as the closest of friends but it is Svetlana who suspects that there is not enough fuel to return after the accident, and worse, that the Company that owns the ship is fixing the data so that the crew should not notice. Bella examines the evidence and decides the Svetlana is wrong, and from then on their friendship is destroyed. The way they manoeuvre their way around each, sometimes Bella in charge and other times Svetlana 'winning', drives much of the novel from then on. This relationship does not always make comfortable reading; both characters' unwillingness to be reasonable is frustrating and the failure to mend the friendship upsetting. Svetlana can never accept that Bella made the best decision she could, based on the

information available, and Bella is continually forced to act in a harsher manner than she would like.

The novel is not without its faults. To start with the reader has to accept is that in only 50 years time, full exploitation of the resources of the solar system is in progress. This seems doubtful given the current state of commitment to space exploration. Also, the evil corporation content to sacrifice its employees for the sake of the company has long been a cliché.

Reynolds' first series of novels (the Inhibitor series starting with *Revelation Space*) are of a piece, but his last two, *Century Rain* and *Pushing Ice* are very different, both from the earlier books and from each other. Reynolds is rapidly becoming one of the best writers of the 'big idea' hard sf novel around at the moment and is becoming ever more confident in his handling of the people who inhabit his universe.



**Mark Robson –
Imperial Spy**

Simon & Schuster, London, 2006, 373pp,
£5.99, p/b, ISBN 1-416-90185-X

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Mark Robson does good plot, but putting it on paper lets him down.

The plot follows straight on from his previous Darkweaver Legacy series. The new Emperor of Shandar wants to mend the rift with the neighbouring kingdom

Thrandor that arose due to an unprovoked war during the earlier series, so dispatches his trusted young spymistress Femke as ambassador with instructions to strike up an entente. Unfortunately, as a by-product of the previous series's events, Femke has made an enemy of arch-assassin Shalidar and no sooner has she arrived in the Thrandorian capital than she is framed for the murder of a pair of noblemen. Obviously she compounds the appearance of guilt by making a run for it, and she has the rest of the novel to find, prove and publicly identify the real assassin before the two states fall into war again.

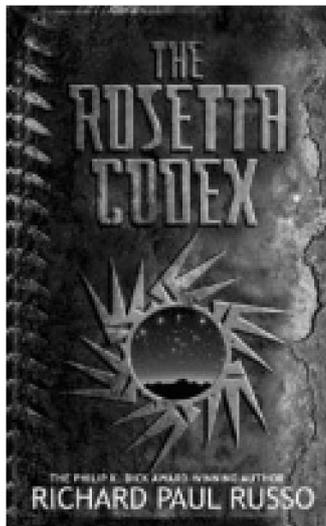
The novel stands entirely alone, not relying on knowledge of the earlier books, and there were some pleasantly unexpected twists along the way. Like every good whodunit, all the key details are fully disclosed by the author and in plain view, but need a bit of detection to pull together. Even the involvement of Shalidar isn't as clearcut as you might have expected. The full facts become apparent in a courtroom denouement that combines alchemy, Ally McBeal and Douglas Fairbanks, and there are plenty of strands left dangling for the next book in the series.

That's the plot, when it happens, which unfortunately is after a lot of quite plodding set-up by a bunch of tin-eared characters who frankly can only be distinguished from each other by their names. Apparently they turned up at the start of the novel looking for work, and the author told them what parts to play. They are good, or bad, or honest, or crooked, or bright, or dense, when and as the author tells them to be. They fall in love, or not, on a similar basis. Occasionally the author inserts his own voice so that we can be sure we know what's happening to them. Meanwhile they say things like "Okay" and "Maybe I'm paranoid" and "I've been framed." Then there's "Let's go

through the plan again" (twice), and, in a society that doesn't have gunpowder or projectile weapons, there's "staring down the barrel" and "in the line of fire". And the great courtroom scene is conducted with exactly the same procedure and terminology that you would find in any American TV courtroom drama. Either it hasn't occurred to Mark Robson that the manners and mores of the English speaking early 21st century western hemisphere are not the be-all and end-all of a decent civilisation, or he doesn't care, or he doesn't think his readers will.

Any good fantasy city nowadays has to stand up to Ankh-Morpork or New Crobuzon, with their heaving masses, a sense of history that stretches back for centuries, and smells that you can reach out and touch. The capitals of Shandar and Throndor are about as antiseptic as Center Parcs.

So, if you want a fantasy with glowing writing, vibrant characters and settings that make you feel you've visited another world then this isn't the one for you. But if you just want plenty of twists and turns and a decent level of complexity, then that is certainly Mark Robson's strength and you could do worse than look here. But turn to page 83, which is when the first murder is discovered, and start from there.



Richard Paul Russo – *The Rosetta Codex*

Orbit, London, 2005, 375pp, £6.99, p/b,
ISBN 1-84149-298-1

Reviewed by Paul
Bateman

Richard Paul Russo won the Philip K. Dick award with *Unto Leviathan* (originally *Ship of Fools*) and has written a number of other books. If *The Rosetta Codex* is anything to go by it's a shame Russo's other novels aren't so readily available.

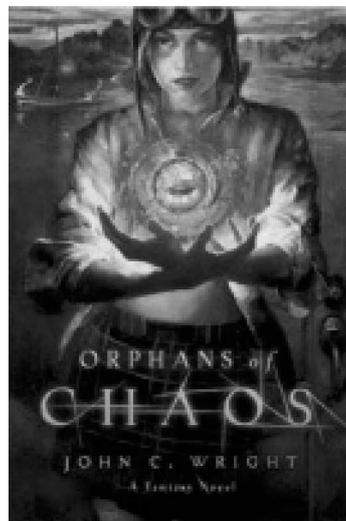
The novel begins when Cale Alexandros is five and from a wealthy, influential family. His father takes him to Conrad's World a planet with one major city, Morningstar, and where all criminals are exiled beyond the Divide outside of Morningstar's borders. Cale's ship is attacked en route to Conrad's World and Cale escapes. He crash-lands beyond the Divide and is rescued by nomads, but made into their slave and victim to their torture. Years later he escapes but becomes a slave elsewhere, until Blackburn, a sympathetic but shadowy trader, sets him free. Cale then begins a journey to Morningstar to eventually be reconciled with his family. On his way to Morningstar, Cale discovers a metal book written in the language of an extinct alien race. Later, he comes to understand the true worth of the book, *The Rosetta Codex*, the key to understanding alien languages and the resurrection of the alien race. Others, however, others are also in pursuit of the Codex and have very different plans.

The Rosetta Codex had a few niggling things for me. Conrad's World does not feel original. A land of outlaws feels like just too many other things I have read or seen. The Alexandros family feel like a pale imitation of the House Atreides in Frank Herbert's *Dune* sequence. And how many times do we come across dead alien races?

The good points are that words are not wasted; situations are

not dwelt upon. The period in which Cale grows up hardly covers forty pages. We are not subjected to the endless beatings and humiliations Cale undergoes. Other writers could have spent hundreds of pages, if not an entire volume on it, but this would be pointless. We are simply told that they happen and move on. This book was quick to finish and I could go back to what I was originally reading almost uninterrupted.

The Big Plus: I often find books start well, then get overlong and peter out at the finish leaving me wondering why I bothered in the first place. *The Rosetta Codex* didn't. At first I thought this was just another drab read following a hackneyed plot, but it got better the more I read. Maybe the final revelation wasn't unexpected, and the book is hardly going to set the world alight, but I didn't find it in the least bit dissatisfying and it was a bit of fun. Maybe Russo will win the Philip K. Dick Award for this novel as well.



John C. Wright – *Orphans of Chaos*

Tor, New York, 2005, 317pp, \$24.95, h/b,
ISBN 0-765-31131-3

Reviewed by Penny
Hill

This novel is an intriguing blend of fantasy and science-fiction. The initial tone is that of an old-fashioned boarding school adventure, an Enid Blyton story with a hint of magic. The setting and character arcs feel very much like a fantasy – five teenagers with extraordinary abilities are

being brought up alone in a boarding school somewhere that is nearly England but nowhere you can pin down on a map. The plot shows them learning more about themselves and each other and the conspiracy that is keeping them there. On the other hand, the paradigms they come up with to explain their circumstances are distinctly hard science-fictional – and different from each others' – a fact that proves to be important later on.

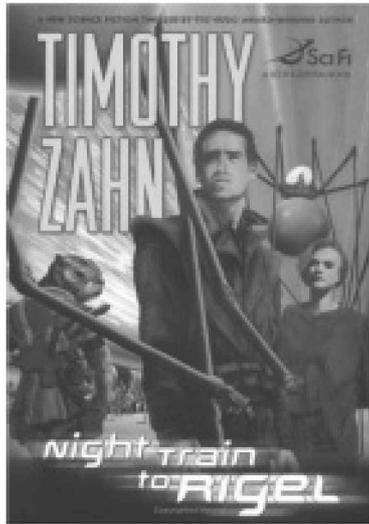
Amelia, the narrator, has a clear and distinctive tone that successfully conveys what she has learned about the world without making her seem either too precocious or an authorial mouthpiece. The awkwardness of her adolescent sexuality is captured in her crush on Victor (the older sensible one), the teasing scenes with Colin (whom she consciously dislikes) and her conflicting feelings towards Boreus. I found the scene where Boreus explains how he will humiliate her by publicly spanking her deeply embarrassing and uncomfortable, although mercifully we are spared the spanking scene itself.

Throughout the book wisps of mythology and folk tradition are hinted at. The housekeeper, Jenny Wren, is effectively a personification of the widowed bird from the nursery rhyme 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' whereas the gardener turns out to be Grendel. The blend of different myths is later subsumed by the Greek Pantheon – although I found it rather disconcerting that the Roman names were used instead.

The tone is well-balanced between clarity and obscurity. I held my breath when two of the children were eavesdropping and one of the adults started to recap the situation so far for the benefit of the readers. I was pleasantly surprised when this

narrative cliché was subverted by the others refusing to let him tell them what they already knew. The sense of place is strange too. The country is described as being England, but Amelia talks about it as if it is a foreign country to her and the location doesn't quite match up with anywhere you'd find on a map. On the other hand, the fact that maps cannot be trusted is another point in the novel.

I enjoyed this book. I was keen to find out what would happen next and in the early sections I was suitably misled about the true nature of what was going on. As the beginning of "an ambitious new saga" I think the core ideas will carry this story for more than one volume and the characters are interesting and engaging enough for us to want to accompany them.



**Timothy Zahn –
Night Train to
Rigel**

Tor, New York, 2005, 349pp, \$24.95,
h/b, ISBN 0-765-30716-2

**Reviewed by
Andrew A. Adams**

Night Train to Rigel is, as the name suggests, something of a homage to the hard boiled detective novel. Unlike many such pastiches, however, this one involves a real Space Opera background to go with the clichés of the beautiful

woman, the convoluted plot twists and the gun play.

We start with the almost-obligatory corpse. Not only is this in complete keeping with the hard-boiled genre, but it provides the staple start to the story with the hero knowing a lot less than everyone supposes (allowing the author to keep us, as well as the main character, in the dark) while providing the other characters

with a certain amount of suspicion and distrust. Frank Compton is an engaging principal character whose own present agenda is kept nicely hidden from the reader while his background and character are revealed in just enough detail to flesh him out. His James Bond antics are believable given the sacked government agent background, and his connections at the highest level of this multi-lifeform society provide enough clues and red herrings to keep the reader guessing about the main plot until the end.

In fact, the whole book is a nicely judged balance of detail and broad brush, explanation, obfuscation and revelation. Building not just a single new world but a number of them, complete with faster than light transit system between them. This would be enough for several books for many authors but Zahn presents a mostly convincing past, present and potentially holocaust-riven future in a mere 350 pages while bringing the plot along at a fair clip. In scenes reminiscent not just of books from the forties but a the whole sub-genre of film noir, too, a substantial chunk of the action takes place aboard a nicely imagined interstellar train service, allowing for the usual sense of isolation yet urgency this provides. In a nod to his own inspirations, even, the principal character realises the parallels between his own situation and classics such as *The Lady Vanishes*.

The final exposé of the plot is a satisfying explanation of the underlying mysteries of everyone involved; the bad guys are given both justification and a measure of pathos to round things out, while the good guys have their own moral dilemmas and secrets, so neither side are cardboard cut-outs.

We may see Frank Compton back on the interstellar rails again at some point in the future, gumshoeing his way around the galaxy, but then again, after saving not one but several space-going civilisations, how could he top this? Given the skill with which Zahn presents a whole new world in one reasonable length volume, he could go on to a whole new set-up each time.

Definitely worth catching, if you like any or all of rip-roaring space opera adventure stories, hard boiled sf or futuristic train travel.

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Reviewers Key: AAA – Andrew A. Adams; BJ – Ben Jeapes; CH – Chris Hill; COMLB – Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc; DMB – Dave M. Roberts; GD – Gary Dalkin; GM – Geneva Melzack; JB – James Bacon; ML – Martin Lewis; MP – Martin Potts; NH – Niall Harrison; PB – Paul Bateman; PH – Penny Hill; PY – Pete Young; SP – Susan Peak.

The Vanishing Midlist, revisited

The problem with having lots of magazines in the house is that you wind up reading them. I was digging through a pile of old *Interzones* the other day, trying to find a quotation which had eluded me when I was writing my column for the last *Vector*. (If my memory isn't tricking me, it was Geoff Ryman, in his interview in *IZ33*, arguing for "good-faith sf" – which sounded remarkably like his prescription for Mundane sf fifteen years ahead of time. That was, naturally, the one issue I couldn't find.) Anyhow, I ended up reading Charles Platt's column, 'The Vanishing Midlist', in *IZ 29* (May-June 1989), and Platt's response to some disagreements from Darrell Schweitzer (*IZ 32*, Nov-Dec 1989). These pieces floored me because the conversation seemed to have predicted many aspects of where sf publishing is in 2005, and it's instructive to look at where Platt and Schweitzer went right and where they went wrong.

A quick summary of Platt's argument: interesting written sf is primarily a phenomenon of trade publishers' midlists, and midlist publishing looked (in 1989) in crisis. (Terminology: at the top of a publisher's list are the books on which they pay huge advances and spend vast amounts in marketing; at the bottom are, as Platt says, "westerns, cheap romances, and other types of formula fiction mass-produced with minimal expectations." Midlist is the stuff in between.) SF publishing, Platt argued, owes its modern shape to the boom initiated by *Dune* and *Stranger in a Strange Land* and, later, *Star Wars*. It has tended to be created as mini-lists within larger houses which don't really understand it. When cutbacks hit, or when economic hard times beckon (as they did in 1989), the midlist gets hit. In support of this argument, Platt adduced the inability of various US sf authors to get published, the then-new phenomenon of sf writers sharecropping their work to produce new frontlist titles (Robert Silverberg reifying Asimov's 'Nightfall', for instance), and a remark by Greg Bear – then SFWA president – to the effect that midlist publishing might be dead within the decade.

Well, any reasonable observer would have to conclude that the worst of this hasn't happened. I'll look at US publishing because it's a bigger and more well-chronicled field. According to the *Locus* statistics, 1417 new books were published in the field of fantastic literature in 2004, compared with around 1100 in 1989. The shift that has taken place is within that area. In 1989, roughly equal numbers of sf and fantasy novels were published; in 2004, it was 253 sf versus 389 fantasy. And a significant number of both are midlist titles: a publisher like Tor, say, uses the success of its Robert Jordans and Orson Scott Cards to enable it to do more commercially marginal books. Yes, imprints have died since Platt's original column (the disastrous downsizing of Bantam Spectra in the early '90s, or the more recent loss of the Earthlight list here). Some of Platt's complaints have substance now: some well-known sf authors don't get published by trade houses, and collections are almost entirely the province of small presses. But the midlist survives.

So why look at these columns? (I certainly don't mean to take Platt to task for getting his predictions wrong: I would like pretty much everything I wrote in 1989 entombed in concrete, and Platt's non-fiction – recently collected in *Loose Canon* – is well worth rereading.) In *Interzone 32*, Platt published a follow-up to his original column, quoting a letter he'd received from the writer/editor/book-dealer Darrell Schweitzer, broadly agreeing with Platt's doomy words about the midlist but proposing a solution: "It's profoundly important [wrote Schweitzer] that sf conventions and the circuit of specialty stores and mail order dealers in the field have grown to the point that they are an alternate distribution system for books. Nowadays a specialty-press book can sell a couple thousand copies at least entirely through conventions and specialised outlets. This makes it, as we Americans say, an entirely new ballgame." Schweitzer was prescribing, in short, publishing and distribution of otherwise marginal speculative work to folk who would self-identify as sf fans. Platt agreed that this would help get work into print, but viewed it as a dead-end similar to, say, the contemporary classical music infrastructure: "it consists of dedicated, poverty-stricken musicians performing obscure works by publicly-funded composers, at concerts which only other musicians bother to attend."

This is, apart from the "publicly funded" bit, pretty much what's happened in the last decade. Short-run digital printing technology, for all

of its drawbacks, has put running a small publishing company within the financial reach of many more people. And the rise of internet bookselling has made it much easier to market niche books to those who already know that the niche exists. The result has been an unprecedented boom in small press works of speculative fiction – almost entirely under the radar of culture in general. (Once in a while, an exception achieves escape velocity: I'm writing this just after Kelly Link's superb *Magic for Beginners* (Small Beer) was listed by *Time* as one of its five books of the year.)

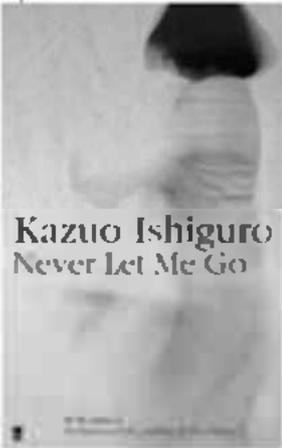
There are two big problems with this. The first is that the quality of small press work can be variable. I have been more consistently disappointed buying small press books from writers I didn't know than buying books from trade publishers. (I've been more consistently surprised, too.) Given the necessarily higher prices of shorter print-run books, this is going to start exhausting peoples' goodwill at some point; and my feeling is that the current small press boom is going to be followed by some kind of dieback. The second problem is what Platt pointed out back in 1989: it abandons the idea that odd or marginal sf – he cites Philip Dick as an example – could be a popular literary form. And it's certainly true that the very healthy trade publishing figures I quoted contain a pretty small proportion of genuinely weird work. Pick your metaphor: the small presses could be a writer's apprenticeship before graduation to 'real' publishing; they could remain a ghetto for the ghetto, the place where everyone knows you can go for your fix of short fiction; or short-run print costs could drop further, prices could drop, and a further dot-commish expansion could be on the way. Frankly, I don't know which of these paths is likeliest; but I do think we need a more nuanced and careful vocabulary to describe this bit of the world. 'Print-on-demand publishers', for instance, confuses a tool with an activity like "stethoscope doctors", and it's silly to describe a professional-level organisation like, say, NESFA as a 'small press.' The best of these publishers, the Small Beers and Golden Gryphons, are not about to replace the midlist, nor do they need to. But something strikingly new is happening, and it's no help to talk about it in terms which are decades old.



The New X

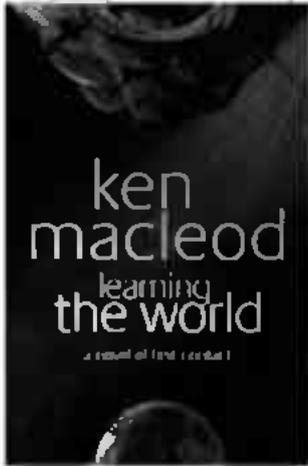
by
Graham Sleight

the arthur c. clarke award



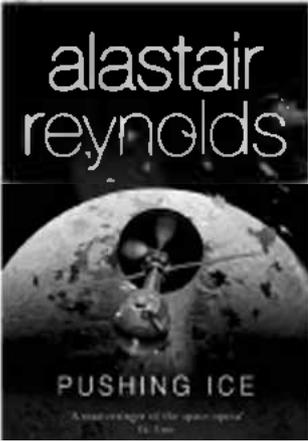
Kazuo Ishiguro
Never Let Me Go

NEVER LET ME GO
Kazuo Ishiguro
Faber



ken
macleod
learning
the world
a novel of love & death

LEARNING THE WORLD
Ken MacLeod
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ACCELERANDO
Charles Stross
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AIR

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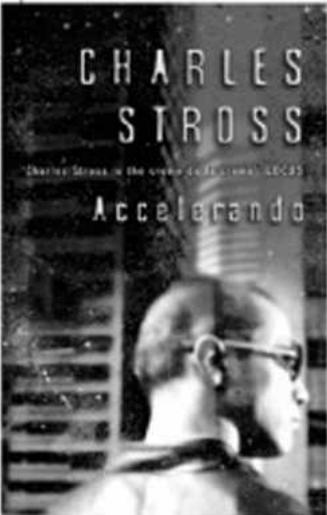
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Geoff Ryman
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BANNER OF SOULS
Liz Williams
Yor



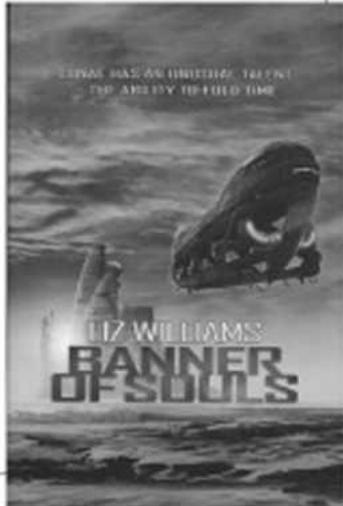
CHARLES
STROSS
Charles Stross is the author of 'The Windup Girl', 'Leviathan', and 'Glass Heart'
Accelerando

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and judged by representatives of the British Science Fiction Association,
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LIZ WILLIAMS
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