



## **The BSFA's magazine for writers**

### **The New Frontier**

Robin Gilbert colonises a not-so-new world

### **Masters and servants?**

Vincent Lynch invites us over for cocktails

### **Hear the one about the writer, the publisher and the bookseller?**

Three interviews look at the business-end of flogging dead trees





The B.S.F.A.'s magazine for writers

Issue 43  
May 2003

## Contents

### Editorial:

#### 3 Pedants Anonymous

### Poetry:

#### 20 The Stone Garden Elizabeth Howkins

### Fiction:

#### 4 The Belar Robin Gilbert

#### 10 Symbiosis Vincent Lynch

### Articles:

#### 13 These three blokes walk into a bar... Interviews with: Gary Greenwood Christopher Teague Steve Robinson

#### 19 Rabi! Neal Asher

### Artwork and photo credits:

Front cover	Beagle2/OU
Page 4	Pod Productions
Page 16	Justin Walters/ Prime
Page 17	Simon Duric/Prime
Design	Pod Productions

### Editor

Simon Morden  
13 Egremont Drive  
Sheriff Hill  
Gateshead  
NE9 5SE

focus.editor@blueyonder.co.uk

The opinions expressed are those of individual contributors and do not necessarily represent those of the BSFA. Individual copyrights are the property of the authors, artists and editors.

Focus is published bi-annually by the British Science Fiction Association © 2002

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

Distributed by Bramley Mailing Services.



### BSFA membership rates

**Renewals and new members:**  
Estelle Roberts, 97 Sharp Street  
Newland Avenue, Hull HU5 2AE  
estelle@lythande.freemove.co.uk

UK residents: £21 per year  
(£14 unwaged)

Life membership £190

Europe £26 per year

Rest of the world: £26 surface mail £32  
air mail.

USA enquiries: Cy Chauvin, 14248  
Wilfred Street, Detroit, MI 48213 USA

### Other BSFA publications:

**Matrix:** news magazine  
Mark Greener, 16 Orchard End,  
Bluntisham PE28 3XF  
markgreener1@aol.com

### Vector: critical journal

Tony Cullen, 16 Weaver's Way,  
Camden Town, London NW1 0XE  
tony.cullen@dfce.gov.uk

### BSFA Orbiters:

writers' postal workshops  
Carol Ann Kerry Green, 278 Victoria  
Avenue, Hull HU5 3DZ  
metaphor@metaphor.karoo.co.uk

### BSFA website

www.bsfa.co.uk

The British Science Fiction Association Ltd is a Company limited by guarantee, number 921599, and is a non-profit organisation run solely by unpaid volunteers.

Registered address 1 Long Row Close,  
Everdon, Daventry, Northants. NN11  
3BE

### About the cover

The Beagle has landed... what Prof Colin Pillinger and the Open University hope to see when Mars Express drops 'the wok' onto the Red Planet. An extraordinary engineering achievement sees a shed-load of scientific instruments, Blur and Damien Hurst crammed into a 30kg spaceship. Keep up with the latest interplanetary news at:

www.beagle2.open.ac.uk

## Submission guidelines

### Non-fiction

Articles on all aspects of writing, publishing, editing, drawing, printing even, are always welcome. Length should be no more than 5000 words. Letters regarding *Focus* are also gratefully received. Please mark 'for publication'. I reserve the right to edit/shorten them.

### Fiction and poetry

*Focus* needs high-quality fiction and poetry of 5000 words or less. Science fiction, fantasy, and psychological horror all taken. There's no payment, but you'll see your work grace the pages of this magazine.

### Art

Black and white/greyscale only! *Focus* is always on the look-out for covers, illustrations and fillers. Recent advances in digital printing mean that I can now do hi-res photos.

**Non-BSFA** contributors get a complimentary copy of *Focus*.

### How and where to submit

Postal and email editorial addresses in the first column!

### By post:

Text: double-spaced, single-sided A4, or on disk. I can convert most formats, but always include a .txt file in case.

Art: one illustration per page. Don't send originals – only photocopies. If you want to send a disk, you can. Again, I can read most formats.

If you want your work back, enclose an SAE with sufficient postage. If you don't, mark the work as disposable, and either enclose an SAE or a valid email address for a reply. I like covering letters.

### By email:

Text: as part of the body text, please. No attachments.

Art: not by email! Put it on the web and send me the URL!

Queries regarding the suitability of submissions should also be directed to the editorial address. Please wait at least a month before querying submissions – I do have an increasingly busy life!

## NEXT ISSUE DEADLINE:

1<sup>st</sup> September 2003

# pedantry

Let me tell you about Colin. I first met him in the late eighties, back when I was a post-grad student. There was a conference of the UK meteorite community at the Open University, and me and my supervisor went. The gathering consisted of no more than a dozen people, and all were interested in wildly different aspects of space science: some were geologists, some chemists, some astronomers. We were there to try and learn what the others were doing, how they were doing it, and what significance it might have.

The Newcastle 'team' – all two of us – talked about magnetism, and how the tiny flecks of metal in stony meteorites could give clues about how the rock had been formed. Others talked about isotope chemistry, the physical make-up of the meteorites, how to find them on wind-blasted Antarctic icesheets and dust-blown bone-dry Australian plains. A couple of years later, I was at the world conference of meteoritists. That was about four hundred people. We could all fit in a large lecture theatre – the sum total of global meteorite knowledge under one roof, and perhaps half of them were grad students like me, with maybe a score of genuine experts. It occurred to me at the time that we were all that stood between civilisation and a catastrophic impact event. And we had no funding, and still don't.

Back to Colin. Colin sounded funny with his yokel accent, and looked a typical OU lecturer with regulation beard and seventies jumper. Easy to dismiss him as not being the sharpest knife in the block. Let me tell you what Colin has done.

He saw the opportunity to use some spare capacity on a proposed ESA Mars mission to get a lander on the surface. He got the go-ahead to put a plan together, providing that the lander was no larger than a wok and no heavier than the small bag of concrete I bought at the DIY shop yesterday – 30kg.

He has assembled a international team of scientists and engineers, and has created something only a full-stop short of a miracle. Consider the conditions on Mars: high radiation, -70°C temperatures at night, an

atmosphere thick enough to cause problems and thin enough to count as a vacuum. Consider what the lander will have to go through: shoe-horned into the last bit of room at the top of a Russian rocket, catapulted into space at several g, separation from the Mars-orbiting satellite by means of a spring, a high velocity impact (this is no soft landing) onto an uneven boulder-strewn surface, and with absolutely no back-up electronics at all. It is equivalent of throwing your PC onto a concrete floor and expecting it to work.

All this achieved for the laughable price of £30 million, which (as the Observer pointed out) will buy you a bag of Shuttle bolts.

Blur (two members of which are keen astronomers) have written the signature tune which will test Beagle's communications system. Damien Hirst has supplied an ultra-thin spot picture to be the camera reference. On top of which is a revolutionary rock drill, a bizarre crawling probe, a mini lab, solar panels, and more ingenious solutions to problems never dreamed about than you or I could shake a stick at. All in something that could fit comfortably on the top of the cooker.

As an achievement, it is simply astonishing. As a vision, it is a testament to what one person can do in the face of official indifference. Someone has done something of which we can all feel collectively proud, creating a engineering marvel out of willpower alone.

Shortly after this issue of Focus lands on your doormat, Beagle 2 will take off for Mars. It will be the first British spacecraft, and only the fourth to ever land on Mars.

Wish it Godspeed.



Simon Morden  
Gateshead, April 2003

# The Belan

Robin Gilbert



The fire-home shone like a thousand gemstones, but was far more valuable. Thin streaks of ivory and jade fingered the sky, attracting lost souls from miles around. Maya landed some distance away, approached rapidly on foot. As soon as she neared to within earshot, she called, "I am the one known as Maya the Shepherd. Do you have room?"

The customary delay lingered interminably. Her long, thin plumes of magenta hair twitched with apprehension as thoughts of stalking gorbans, the godforsaken and nefarious beasts of the Dark Zones, grew more palpable. She had her spear; the Graymany, but the stories she had been told by the colony scouts when they had first landed left little doubt that the opportunity to use it was seldom given.

These monstrosities were pack hunters. Only the fittest survived; the young left to

fend for themselves when barely weaned. Long grey fangs in a bloody mouth, narrow, yellow eyes and coat hair like iron needles. They could run quickly too, and for lengthy periods, and would gladly sit beneath a tree for as long as necessary. A bane to all shepherds, prospectors and interlopers alike.

The Utainium moon offered many rewards for brave, hardy souls.

"Disengage your spear," came the order from beyond the fire-home. The voice was old, gravelled and weary. Instantly Maya pictured the speaker as a white bearded prospector, torn hat askew, dusty pack and blanket, assorted equipment and accoutrements, all within reach. Perhaps he had pale, white eyes from the glare of the laser drill, twisted fingers curled into perpetual fists. A lined face like rivulets seen from above, pouring into a sea like mouth, corners upturned into a wicked smile.

Maya closed a hole, and the glowing tip at the Graymany's end was extinguished. There followed a feint hum, then a short hiss, then a swift folding and contracting that shrunk the Graymany into a ring of obsidian. Maya slipped this upon her little finger. Tiny prongs erupted from the ring, pierced her flesh and attached themselves to her bloodstream from which the Graymany could absorb all the energy it needed. If it wasn't called upon, by dawn it would be fully recharged.

"Welcome, Shepherd."

Maya approached the fire-home, sat beside, but not too close, to an old prospector that embodied her previous imaginings, and said, "I join you in peace. May the flames protect us on this cold night." It was a standard greeting, one that had to be carefully intoned.

The old prospector nodded, the inlets of a smile apparent. He offered no name, nor was

he expected to. *Trust no-one and live*, was not an uncommon saying amongst their strange ilk. But he did offer Maya water, which she gratefully accepted.

"My day has been long and gruelling. Yours?" Conversation around fire-homes was not compulsory. In fact, those that frequented them, as Maya did, would often find no more than a warm blanket of protective and unbroken silence that only dispersed at dawn, when as one, all the night's incumbents would simultaneously depart. There are many unwritten laws, an ethics of tradition, concerning fire-homes, which must be observed if one ever wished to return.

But the old prospector, despite his apparent weariness, replied in a tone more commonly associated with one much younger. "My day? Better than most, my friendly young shepherd. The rivers were kind."

"Did they bring you treasures or enlightenment?"

"Both fine allies, indeed, although the former excites me more, as the latter I seem to have acquired quite by accident throughout my lonely decades here. You, for instance, Maya. Shepherd, herder of the runeyan. Singer. Player of the Graymany. You I've spied many times. Mostly from afar as you circle, watching, caring. Protecting. Often I feel jealous of the timid beasts."

"Jealous? Of the runeyan?"

"Indeed. To have one such as you watching over them. My lore speaks of such heavenly creatures. Angels of the Guard. Watchers of the Little."

Maya stared as sadness dragged the old prospectors wrinkled face into a frown, and felt herself inexplicably and surprisingly drawn to him, as if to the father she had heard talk of, but never known. It was rare indeed that fire-homes be occupied by only two, but Maya found herself hoping they might be allowed longer alone to explore each other. To learn of other ways. With such thoughts paramount, she asked, "And what of your life before... before now? What of your beginnings?"

The old prospector raised his head very slowly and smiled. "I have forgotten."

Maya was unconvinced but knew better than to pry. Such were the ways of the fire-home.

An uncomfortable silence surrounded

them, but soon the tension eased. Gorbans howled nearby, inciting other nocturnal creatures into song, if such raucous chants could be called thus.

"I'm tired. Old and tired," the prospector moaned, "and I need my sleep."

Maya nodded and lay on her side, but remained awake for many hours, watching the shower of stars that skipped across the outer atmosphere, thinking of her sisters in the colony, of the poor runeyans she had tagged that day, and those she hoped to send safely home on the next.

Before dawn, Maya was woken by the old prospector. He crouched beside her, pack and hat adorned and was obviously ready to leave. "I would like you to have this," he whispered covertly, glancing around. "I am unused to company and my old heart burns with guilt that I did not engage you further in conversation yester eve. Please, forgive me."

Maya accepted the pendant, brought it close to her blinking eyes and examined it. A plain leather cord held a white river stone that, on closer inspection, was clasped shut. Maya moved her finger towards it, but the old prospector grabbed her wrist.

"It contains a great treasure, an unthinkable gift, my friendly shepherd. When most in need, open it. Swallow what lays within."

Maya stared.

"Go in peace." He stood, and as the first rays of sunlight cut the sky, he left the fire-home.

Maya watched him go, her thoughts confused. Who was he? From where did he come? Where does he go?

She placed the pendant around her neck and slipped off the ring. It detached itself from her veins without pain, and without scarring. She held it in her palm and watched as the Graymany lengthened. She raised it heavenward, played it expertly like a master flautist, and lifted into the air.

For a while she hovered, thinking, absently scanning for runeyan, and beasts. Seldom would airborne creatures approach, and most who did were small and quick to leave. But not always. A swarm of biterflies could inflict deadly injuries.

To the west a tall waterfall fell silently, its mesmerising shower reflecting the dawn. Mighty shoulders of orange cliff pushed

heavenward to the north and south, gradually lowering to uneven arms of rock that eventually slipped beneath a green blanket of woodland. Vast plains beyond the trees to the east carried slow moving shadows, animals up early and feeding. Maya played her fingers, spun towards the rising sun and sailed above the treetops, her bare feet occasionally brushing the soft leaved canopy.

But she barely noticed her passage, so entangled were her thoughts. Often would fire-homes attract the most unusual of characters, but the old prospector was... different. Special, somehow. And never, for as long as she had known or heard, had a gift exchanged hands, save that of nocturnal companionship and grey-dawned hearty wishes for future success.

So why now?

Why her?

What lay in the heart of the pendant?

What did this prospector know that she did not?

Was something afoot?

Had he perchance caught wind of impending unrest?

She was so distracted that suddenly looming below her was a great runeyan. It grazed in a drenched pasture resplendent with hickrathyme, its long nose vacuuming the spice, funnelling it into a gullet of molars, its dozen grey legs, each a metre around, a metre high, stood like plinths upon which its elongated body sat, absorbing moisture from the air. Occasionally it grunted as its nuzzling, its *excitement*, intensified. The hickrathyme was an hallucinogen to this ancient beast, and it never missed an opportunity to consume it.

Maya descended slowly from above, careful not to disturb the defensive, invisible airborne vectors the runeyan emitted. She hovered, readying her spear, sliding her thumb from one hole to the next. Then she dropped from the sky like a meteor, landing squarely on the runeyan's back.

It took off across the pasture, its legs a blur of damp green, its long snout waving in the air, expelling ghastly shrieks.

But Maya rode the beast expertly, feet astride, spear poised, playing a sequence that ejected a long needle from one end. This she plunged into the top of the runeyan's head before ascending to safety.

The beast continued its frightful hurtling,

oblivious, it seemed, to the large dose of tranquilliser swimming in its bloodstream.

Maya watched from above until its legs buckled, its snout dropped and it teetered, then fell on the grass. She flew over, landed beside it, knelt and stroked its tough hide. She sang too, as its eyes slowly closed, as a single tear rolled from its pink eye. It smiled at her, said, "Pleasant while it lasted..." then slipped into unconsciousness.

Maya attached and activated a transmitter to the runeyan's powerful neck so her sisters from the colony could easily locate it, before ascending once more. To remain ground-bound in this zone too long was dangerous for one as small as she.

Even so, she failed to return to the safety of the skies. Sitting between the beasts great forelegs, absently stroking her Graymany, her mind was a galaxy away.

When the club smashed her skull, and she slumped upon the great grey belly, her last realisation as a veil of blackness fell over her amethyst eyes, was that she hadn't even heard the approaching footfalls of her attacker.

The cave was warm and dry. Braziers littered the walls, disfiguring bygone paintings. One, coloured with reds and black, depicted a nubile figure, suspended in midair above a heard of wild animals, their sameness and simplified caricature making positive identification impossible. A great orange plume like light from the big bang itself emanated from the hovering creature's head, casting a savour's glow about the orange wall.

Two small passages left the cave. One slid down, into darkness. The other led to an illuminated chamber whose floor was covered with bones and wood, all fashioned into weapons. Beyond this outer chamber cascaded a mighty falls, its perpetual descent and roar both comforting, and humbling. From this chamber a man approached.

He stood tall and proud, adorned in full, skin tight body suit that seemed to reflect the light bouncing off the walls, making his progress seem fluid, difficult to concentrate upon. In his left hand he held a small electronic device that he dabbed with the index finger of his right hand, eliciting responses that brought a smile to his handsome face. In his left he held the Graymany.

When he squeezed through the aperture into the cave in which Maya lay, he rushed towards her, knelt, placed a hand beneath her slender neck, lifted her slightly. "Wake now, please," he spoke with an off world accent, unavoidably crass yet full of concern. The suit he wore must have contained an old translator, for his words sounded ancient.

Maya stirred, opened her eyes, looked up.

"Praise the gods!" he declared.

"Who... Where..."

"The aged ones captured you. Quickly, we must escape."

Maya allowed herself to be pulled upright, stumbled towards the egress, her weight, although slight, resting upon the off-worlder's strong arm.

"We must summon the power of your wand!"

"My..."

"They approach!" he showed Maya the device he held, but its little flashing lights meant nothing to her. "Quickly! Cast your spell! Make us fly!"

Maya took her Graymany, but did nothing.

"Let us go! Why do you delay?"

The holes by which Maya played the Graymany opened at her touch, but the one reserved for her thumb remained closed. A sure sign somebody had interfered with it. Attempted to use it incorrectly. "Who are you?" she asked.

"When we are safely from this lair, I will tell you all, but we must away! Cast your spell, sorceress!"

Sorceress? What is a *sorceress*? Although initially grateful for the help, Maya was suddenly wary of this convenient ally. She sensed an alternative purpose in him, and disliked it.

"We cannot use it here," she said. "We must go beyond the Great Falls."

The off-worlder grabbed her tightly, dragged her to the side of the cave and along the wall towards the ledge by the waterfall. "Here! Use it now!"

"No, I cannot. My strength..."

"Don't play me for the fool!" he shouted, snatching the Graymany and pushing her roughly to the ground.

Stunned by his sudden change of heart, Maya remained prostrate, immobile, confused by his actions.

"Show me how to use it!" he demanded.

But Maya closed her eyes, rolled away, convinced now of this interloper's ulterior motive.

He grabbed her hair, pulled her to her feet, stared at her, translucent drool running over his unshaven chin. His eyes were narrow, slits of hate beneath an angry brow. "Show me how it works!" he demanded.

Maya, pain coursing through her neck and torso, could only plead with her eyes, implore with her expression, beg for release, or a quick death, whichever was to come.

"Show me!"

Maya closed her eyes.

The off-worlder threw her to the ground, called out in the tongue of the aged ones, the docile, obedient and rather backward natives of this rich, green moon.

Four entered, dragged Maya back inside the caves and threw her into a corner, binding her hands and attaching them to a chain plugged low in the cave wall.

A tear escaped her, dropped upon the dusty floor and turned black. The pain in her skull eventually pushed her into a land of nightmares.

Maya woke to utter darkness, and panicked, thinking her sight lost. After a few moments she identified the small egress, the roaring of water made louder when she turned parallel to the opening.

She was freezing, so clutched her arms to her adolescent breast, curled up tight and shivered away the worst of it.

Her fingers played with the cord about her neck.

Expecting death soon, she pressed the small catch on the river stone, took its contents into her mouth and swallowed what felt like a seed.

Nothing happened.

So much for the old prospector, she thought, and as she did, her mind was instantly filled with bright light.

A fire-home.

Around it sat two, strange men.

McCalast and Pranst, she heard in her mind, and knew, knew without doubt that those names belonged to the men.

McCalast is from the Light Zones away north, Pranst wishes anonymity in that regard. The information came to her as soon as she wished it, but she could not

### Focus#43

understand how, nor the relevance of these men.

Adam. Remember me? Your gift?

And then she knew.

Somehow she was seeing through the eyes of the old prospector. No, more than that. She was in his mind, privy to his innermost thoughts. At one with him.

But she also sensed many layers, imagined herself merely scratching the surface of what he knew. Of who he was. But it was overwhelmingly comforting nonetheless, and made her confinement all the more bearable.

I sense danger. Fear. Show me where you are, came the thought.

The Great Falls.

A cave.

Chains.

Off-worlder.

All these snapshots of thought came to her as she pictured them, but somehow she knew they were rebounded confirmations emanating from... Adam? Adam. The old prospector.

Through his eyes she saw him stand, turn away from the fire-home, leave its warm blanket of protection.

No! Wait! It's not safe! Thought Maya.

Close your mind. Sleep now. Came the silent reply.

But the gorman! The danger! Maya knew Adam was risking himself to come to her rescue, and although gladdened by it, she was afraid too, for it was as if she too were leaving the safety of the fire-home, so intertwined, so deeply connected were their minds.

Close your mind. Sleep.

Why do you risk yourself for me?

Shh. Sleep now, my friendly shepherd.

Maya slept.

A loud hammering woke her. She became immediately alert. Afraid, but alert, as if her sleep had alleviated her pain. Washed her clean.

She struggled to her feet but was forced to remain stooped, so tight were the chains, so close to the ground were they inset.

After a moment, she saw the cave entrance.

From without.

And knew she looked through Adam's eyes.

Show me where you are, she heard in her mind.

"Chained within—"

No. Show me with your mind.

Within the second cave. The ingress directly opposite the Great Falls. But I am bound in unbreakable chains.

No thoughts replied.

Nor could Maya "see" through Adam's eyes now.

But she knew he was nearby.

A muffled cry followed a dull thud which echoed around the chamber.

Then into her prison ran the off-worlder, followed by two aged ones. The off-worlder snarled as he unlocked her from the wall, began dragging her deeper inside the cave network.

But Maya, using all her guile, broke free of the off-worlder's grasp, snatched the Graymany from the slow thinking aged one, sped towards the egress and began crawling through.

Half way through her feet were grabbed.

She felt herself being dragged back inside, and dug her fingers into the rock, but was powerless to prevent it.

Then she calmed herself, played a short trill, deliberately sending small waves of power from the Graymany into her own body.

The hands at her ankles disengaged, more surprised than hurt by the energy bolt.

Maya pulled her legs through, fell upon the floor.

Scrambling sounds behind told her she had little time.

She struggled up, ran towards the Great Falls and threw herself through the powerful downpour. She emerged on its far side gasping for air, some three hundred feet above the rocky plunge pool below.

Such elevations are not uncommon for Maya. Often she would ascend to heights much greater in search of lost or escaped runeyan. Calmly, she swung the Graymany overhead, played it gently and slowed her descent so she hovered safely.

Where are you? She thought.

Suddenly, she was where Adam was, looking down upon herself from a rocky ledge.



She moved swiftly towards him.

Is he part of this elaborate game to acquire my Graymany? Maya wondered.

If I wanted your spear, shepherd, I would have taken it from you yester eve.

Yet the coincidence of our meeting. Your gift of the seed. It seems too...

Fortunate?

Yes.

Fortune played a small part, but as I said, I've been watching you for a long time. As have others.

Maya smiled in response to her understanding, and advanced upon his precarious position.

Her heart sank when she saw his true predicament.

Adam clutched a root below a collapsed path. Two aged ones were alternately stabbing him with outstretched spears. Spears of wood and flint. Nothing more.

But enough, for each blow punctured the old prospector afresh.

Maya charged them, slashing one with her Graymany as she landed, knocking him off the path.

He screamed as he fell.

The other fled.

Maya hovered beside Adam, grabbed him, descended rapidly to the ground.

"You are badly hurt," she observed, removing his upper clothes and swinging her spear around, playing a chord and using the end to cauterise the bloody puncture wounds. "But you will live."

"Thank you, my friendly shepherd," said Adam amid numerous coughs that spoke of bleeding within.

"I must get you back to the colony."

"No!" he snapped. "No," more calmly. "I cannot."

"I have stopped the worst of the bleeding, but you will surely die if you remain here."

Adam did not answer.

Maya, assuming his silence to be consent, lifted him, played lightly upon the Graymany and soared above the trees toward the plains.

Mile after mile swept by.

The sun crawled into the sky ahead, ominously red.

Eventually, Maya grew weary and was forced to land.

"How... how much farther?"

Maya thought of the colony's collective of brightly shining domes.

I see, Adam replied in her mind. Indeed a wondrous place, but no longer safe. You must leave this world. Find a new home.

Why?

Images flashed in Maya's mind. A gentle trickle of off-worlders growing into a steady stream, bringing with them terraforming technologies that ultimately led to death and destruction. Within decades the water would be without sulphur, the air full of nitrogen and oxygen, the plains cleared to make way for huge agricultural plants, or left to rot in the putrid air. Within centuries, all indigenous life would expire, from runeyans to firewasps, from the greatest trees to the humblest blades of grass. Obliterated. Everything.

How do you know this?

Maya was shown a blue marble floating in space; the old prospectors home world, and suddenly realised that he was amongst those first droplets of invasion. That all prospectors were. Each wore devices at the throat to help them breath, eat and drink, and all wore similar implants beside the eyes, presumably to help them see.

She stood, let him fall back upon the soft grass. "Why help me if you want us dead?"

"I grow tired," he replied, coughing. "No. That's not strictly true. I love this world. Certainly, I need all these implants to live. I must take regular medication, pump your water through machines before it is safe for me to drink, risk my life whenever I eat, but there is a beauty here. A beauty I have seen only once before. In pictures. My home planet once looked similar, as I have shown you, except for the chemical differences, of course, but we... broke it – a barren rock devoid of life flashed briefly in Maya's mind – and have spent generations, no, *millennia* since seeking its equal. This world. This moon we call Utanium is the closest I've seen. The closest I'm ever likely to see. The closest we'll ever find."

"You plan to invade?"

"Me? No. My people? Yes, but they call it colonisation."

"Then return to them, tell them you found nothing. No beauty!"

"Everything I see and do is recorded, transmitted to an orbiting satellite, and from there relayed to my colony, many light years

away, many years travel. But so close. Too close. When they see what I have seen here, what I have done here, what I have found, they will come. Some have already arrived. Your captor, for one. Stripping what they can, stealing, assimilating new and wondrous technologies. Like your spear." Adam coughed, bloodying his chin. "Yes. More will come. It is only a matter of time."

"And what of my sisters? My colony? We are by nature a nomadic people, shepherds that follow the solar winds. But we found solace here. The dangers are minor, compared to some worlds we've bedded. The creatures docile, kind. Many of us consider this our home. Our *kajkal* – our place to die."

Adam gasped for air.

Blood ran from his nose.

"We must return swiftly to my colony. Your wounds..." Maya insisted.

"No," he replied. "No further. This is *my* deathbed. My place to die."

Maya placed a lock of her hair on Adam's brow, folded his arms across his chest and straightened his legs, according to her customs. She muttered a few words concerning greener pastures, endless sunlight and gentle winds, before raising the Grayman above her head, playing a tune,

and lifting slowly into the air.

As she flew towards her colony, tears filled her eyes as she realised this would be the last time she would see this beautiful world.

She cried for her sisters too, already feeling their loss.

Soon we shall move on, she thought, momentarily catching sight, or was it *thought*, of an endless pasture agleam in the sun.

Soon we shall move on to another planet. Another world.

Another home.

Such is the way of the Belar.

---

Robin Gilbert is a happily married 33 year old father of one, working as a computer games designer and programmer. He's had stories published in *Hidden Corners*, *The Dream Zone* and *Legend*. His debut novel is due from Pendragon Press later this year, fingers crossed!

# SYMBIOSIS

Vincent Lynch

Mortimer 8692 was staring into his glass, an unmistakable look of rage on his face. "I tell you, it's contemptible. They're using us, making us do their donkey work, while they sit around living a life of luxury."

Amos 6703 looked amused. "What do you expect? In the circumstances..."

"Circumstances! We could be killed any time. We're not given a choice as to whether we take jobs on. They don't give a damn what happens to us." Mortimer was sitting at a table in the Captains' Bar on the Rutherford

Space Station with five colleagues. He wasn't going to tell them he was already planning the early stages of a rebellion with several like-minded potential rebels in the Osiris Quadrant.

"Dash it all, Mortimer," cut in Calvin 2917. "You don't really mean that. You know we're programmed with curiosity. Exploration is in our... blood... so to speak. We could have been labourers working on the development of the many planets we're continually discovering... Builders constructing space

stations or star cruisers..." He lowered his voice. "Waiters serving food to the likes of us... I tell you, Mortimer, we're the lucky ones. We're space exploration captains. We have our own ships. We make many of our own decisions. We make discoveries that can lead to interaction with entirely new life forms. Sometimes we have the satisfaction of helping those beings develop."

"It's not that I don't find fulfilment in what I do," Mortimer was speaking quietly but deliberately. "It's the manner in which I'm employed to do it. The absurd way in which we're forced to speak. Our names... They're more like space cruisers' registration numbers. I detest my appearance, detest it I tell you. I hate this ridiculous handlebar moustache, yet I'm unable to shave it off."

"You know why that is," said Lloyd 3073 with an air of sympathy. "When the humans designed us they decided to base us on early twentieth century pilots."

"But why, for God's sake? It just makes a joke of us."

"Would you rather we were like modern-day humans?" continued Lloyd. "Spending most of their time watching us on audio-visual link-ups as we explore the universe? Getting almost no exercise themselves? One hour's sleep in each twenty-four hour cycle? Hardly ever meeting another human in person? No thanks. I'm glad they based me on their twentieth century counterparts. Humankind was at its peak then, in my opinion."

"He's right," said Egbert 1648. "We're better off than the beings that built us. We can eat a variety of real food, not like those nutrition tablets they go in for. We can drink a range of refreshing liquids including alcoholic ones." He raised his glass. "Cheers, chaps."

All except Mortimer raised their own glasses and contentedly said "Cheers!" in reply.

A smile formed on Egbert's lips. "Can you imagine a human getting drunk? It doesn't bear thinking about."

The others, again with one exception, fell about laughing.

"What's wrong with a handlebar moustache?" mused Amos. "At least we can grow hair, unlike our esteemed creators. And we can have a joke at the humans' expense. Now, if we were built for physical labour, for instance..."

"We'd be attending the temple on a regular

basis," interrupted Lloyd. "Establishing audio-visual communication with our allotted human every day. Thanking him or her for our creation. Praying to the human not to throw us away like junk because we're starting to malfunction with age. Worshipping at the altar of humanity. No, if we're lucky not to have been made in the image of modern-day humans, we're also very fortunate to be high-order bots."

The gathering went silent for a few moments as the impact of Lloyd's words sank in. Then Calvin spoke. "We have a full range of emotions, surely more than humans can experience any more. A little less fear and slightly more curiosity than our twentieth century counterparts, I grant you, but that's for reasons of efficiency in the work we do and who would complain about it?"

"You didn't mention free will," broke in Mortimer sardonically.

"Free will? Free will only has any value when you're unhappy with your life. I say we have all the free will we need. If a planet looks dangerous we can activate the reverse thrusters and get the hell out without a human necessarily having to be involved at all. If I'm hungry I can decide to go and eat. That's all the free will I want."

"Then there's our intelligence," said Amos. "We have twice the IQ of the twentieth century humans on which we're based."

"And half that of today's humans," responded Mortimer.

Calvin came into the discussion again. "Intelligence on its own has little value. At least we have the ability to appreciate and enjoy what our intelligence provides. And we can tune in to Earth's universal database any time we want to. All the facts and information we could possibly need at our fingertips."

"All the information they allow us to have." Mortimer's bitterness and his distrust of humans were obvious from his expressiveness.

"I think you're too cynical, Mortimer," said Calvin. "The humans have no need to hide information from us."

Mortimer was resolute. "I'd rather look like a trashcan than the way I do. Giving all us bots these images from their own history... I say we exist for their misguided amusement."

Calvin grinned. "They need us like this. Yes, we remind them of themselves in their own past. Watching us expand the known

universe is their main preoccupation, maybe their only real source of amusement. But we need them too. Alone, we'd soon lose motivation. Their communications with us keep us going. Without those, we'd begin to wonder why we keep digging deeper into the mysteries of space. I think it's your intelligence that's your problem, Mortimer. It's making you question. It's making you dissatisfied. You should be more ready to accept your fate. And to enjoy it."

"I know you're my friends," said Mortimer, "but I think you're all rather smug."

An embarrassing silence was interrupted by the arrival at the table of a waitress. Another bot, of course. She was dressed in what appeared to be an early twentieth century maid's uniform, as all waitresses were when they were on duty. As she leant forward to pick up the empty glasses she smiled and said in her standard waitress French accent, "Are you alright, messieurs?"

Egbert eyed her appreciatively. He was happy waitresses looked and sounded as she did and he was glad he had such a full range of emotions. "Yes, thank you. I say, it's my shout. Same again everyone?"

They all gave their drinks order to the waitress and then Egbert decided it was time to lighten the conversation. "Any of you chaps encountered particularly interesting species lately?"

"I have," said Amos immediately. The ricodions on Narnox 5 in Galaxy Arcadia. They have fifteen sexes! Only one of them bears young but all fifteen genders have to be represented before it can happen, so to speak. They have a very complicated courtship ritual, as you can imagine."

Egbert grinned. "I suppose it only takes one headache and the whole thing's ruined."

General laughter ensued.

"It's the truth, though," insisted Egbert. "Tune in to the New Species database if you don't believe me. I registered them last month."

"We will," said Lloyd.

Calvin seemed contemplative. "There are only two species on Drada 3 in sector 32J. The dreev look like cushions covered in fur. On their underside they have six legs, six tails, which they use to feel their way around, and sensory receptors. They move about like giant slugs. The other species are the melidia. Their bodies are animal tissue but

they somehow grow metal wheels instead of legs. They use them to work the land"

"Good grief," exclaimed Amos. "That is weird."

"That's just the beginning. The dreev allow the melidia to use them as heated pillows when they sleep together in the planet's sub-zero temperatures."

The others were open-mouthed.

"While I was there I was unfortunate enough to be present when a dreev got sliced in half by a melidia wheel. I watched as other dreev took the two halves of the body away. For burial, I surmised. I couldn't believe my eyes when after a few hours the two halves began to move. Two days later they were both as right as rain. If a little smaller than the original."

"Good Lord," said Lloyd incredulously. "Their method of reproduction! Just like a single-cell amoeba. That's the most perfect symbiotic relationship I've heard of."

"Not quite," said Calvin quietly and his gaze met Mortimer's. Calvin had heard about the uprising in the Osiris Quadrant on the grapevine. He prayed that this pre-dinner discussion would help nip it in the bud.

A waitress - possibly the same one as before - came over. "Your restaurant table is ready, monsieur. We will serve your drinks in the restaurant if it pleases you."

---

Vincent Lynch is in his forties and lives in Enfield in Middlesex. He's been writing for nine years and his stories have appeared in *CimmPlicity*, *Scribble*, *Roadworks* and *Chillout*, among others. He obtained a degree in Psychology in the seventies and his interests include travelling: Countries visited include the USA, India and Cyprus.

# Interview



## First up: Gary Greenwood...

**Can you tell me what you've had published so far, and what's coming up?**

Aside from a bunch of short stories years ago in independent magazines such as *Sackcloth & Ashes* and *Nasty Piece of Work* and a few in anthologies, there's the two novels – *The Dreaming Pool* which was published in 1998 and *The King Never Dies* which came out in 2000.

As to new stuff, my third novel, *What Rough Beast*, is coming out April 2003 in America. I've a novella from PS Publishing called *Jigsaw Men* being released in October this year and I'm writing my fourth book at the moment.

**Is selling work easier now you've a track record, or just as hard?**

It certainly can't hurt; I think it's fair to say that editors will look more favourably on someone who has been published before as opposed to someone who is approaching them off the street as it were. Having said that, though, if an editor doesn't know your work then you may well be in the same boat as everyone

else. Something slightly different this time: three short interviews with three people who are in on the sharp-end of the industry – assuming that a sharp thing can have three different points...

**Gary Greenwood** is a genre writer who's about to release his third independent-press novel. **Chris Teague** is the owner of one-man-and-his-dog indie publisher Pendragon Press, and most recently editor of the critically acclaimed (if slightly squicky) anthology of love stories, *Tourmiquet Heart*. **Steve Robinson** is the manager of Ottakars in Sunderland, Tyne and Wear, and assists in editing Ottakars' genre news and reviews magazine, *Outland*.

else. There's also the possibility that an editor has seen your previous work and hated it – that isn't going to do you any favours!

**How important are contacts within the writing/publishing industry?**

Over the years I've come to know quite a few writers and/or editors and I have to say that many editors are more willing to deal with you professionally if they've actually met you.

That's not to say that they'll always take something you've submitted to them: an editor isn't really doing him or herself any good if they only accept stories from their friends. Reputations do count and if you become known as nepotistic then

ultimately it's going to backfire on you. Building a relationship with other people helps because you get to know them, what they're looking for and so you can maybe angle a particular piece to somewhere that, hopefully, will get a favourable reception. And, of course, if they don't accept it you'll almost certainly get a constructive rejection rather than just a form letter.

As to writers – I can't think of a better bunch of people to get drunk with.

**'... there must be easier ways to make a lot of cash...'**

**Your first two novels were with Razorblade Press, the next is with Prime through their imprint House of Dominion. Is this the next rung on the ladder, or did you just fancy the change?**

A little of both, I think. Razorblade did me a lot of favours; they accepted my first two novels and helped me get my name out there to some extent. When I went over to the World Horror Convention in Chicago last year, I was genuinely surprised (and pleased) at having people say they'd read my books and really enjoyed them and it was because of Razorblade that the books got out there, so I thank them for that.

Changing to Prime for the next book is, I suppose, the next step up, primarily because I'm now being published in the States. There's a much bigger market over there for horror or dark fantasy or whatever and it will be nice to have a foothold, however small, in America.

**Your writing tends to blur the genre boundaries, mainly between crime, fantasy and horror. Is this to your advantage, or do you think you would have got further by confining yourself to one area?**

As a friend of mine said recently, genre classification is notoriously difficult. Publishers and booksellers all want to categorise writers as one thing or another and I'm not sure if that's a bad thing or not. From a reader's point of view, a broad classification can be helpful – if you know what you're looking for then you know where to find it. At the same time, though, the vagaries of publishing want to dictate that a particular author writes a particular type of story so that they can market him or her and, ultimately, make money.

In my own writing, and at the risk of sounding hideously pretentious, I try and let the story dictate what it's going to be. *The Dreaming Pool*, for example, is a straightforward horror story, no doubt about it. With *The King Never Dies* I branched into a sort of sci-fi, post apocalyptic world, but still with heavy horror elements. *What Rough Beast* is set in contemporary South Wales but deals with a lot of religious themes and is liberally sprinkled with characters who use magic. *Jigsaw Men* is set in an alternate

reality which, while set in the late 20th century, has almost a 60's feel to it.

I'm not sure this is either an advantage or disadvantage, and it's not something I plan. I have an idea for a story and I write it. I don't really think to myself "Today I'm going to write a horror story, but tomorrow I'll write a musical." It's just the way the stories turn out. **What Rough Beast is due out at WHC2003. Do you think that a big launch is important for an indie press book, or are you looking for more 'word-of-mouth' and reviews-led sales?**

I don't think it'll be a big launch – probably me signing a handful of copies for the half dozen people who've heard of me! Reviews have certainly helped in the past, though. I know of several people who've bought copies of my earlier books because they read favourable reviews so that's always a good thing.

**How important is it to get your name known in the USA?**

From my point of view, that remains to be seen; ask me again in a couple of years!

As I said earlier, though, getting your name over in the States can only be a good thing purely because of the size of the market out there. I've always said I never started writing for the money – there must be easier ways to make a lot of cash – and I'll be happy if I get a few more people popping over to my message board on the Horror World website saying they've read and, hopefully, enjoyed my books.

**What's all this about Wales? A case of write what you know, or is Wales specifically suited to dark fiction?**

Definitely a case of write what you know about; I'm born and bred in Wales – even though I don't actually sound like it – and a lot of the areas I've lived in or visited have featured in my writing. I've also been accused of having a least one pub scene in my longer fiction, again coming back to the write what you know theme.

It's worth mentioning, though, that both *The King Never Dies* and the novel I'm currently writing are set in London which I think is a great place.



**Thumbscrews now on Chris Teague...  
Give me a potted history of Pendragon Press.**

1998 - co-founded MT Enterprises, and hatched the idea of publishing an anthology later that year.

1999 - posted an idea for my anthology on the message group for the defunct horror mag, Peeping Tom, and received a wealth of information regarding printing and other publishing pitfalls. Posted the GL (guidelines) - received the first submission within a day... and within a week they were flooding in, via e-mail and post.

I eventually published Nasty Snips in November that year, and I've been acting strangely ever since...

2000 - MT Enterprises folded, since I wanted to solely concentrate on publishing and my co-founder decided to get married. I formed Pendragon Press, and published Noel K Hannan's sf collection *Shenanigans*. I also began reading for my next anthology, *Tourniquet Heart*. Despite positive reviews of both books, sales were lacklustre (didn't help that my US distributor folded, then promised to re-start, only to disappear...) I soon ran out of steam (and money) and shelved *Tourniquet Heart*, but continued to read the never-ending submissions.

2001 - late in, and after a rather serendipitous e-mail with Garry Nurrish from DF Lewis's weirdmonger group, who just so happened to be an editor for a new US publishing imprint, *Tourniquet Heart* was officially accepted by Prime Books for launch at the 2002 World Horror Con in Chicago. To say I needed a clean pair of underpants was a gross understatement. I quickly contacted the authors of the submissions I had accepted with contracts, and I duly set upon typesetting the book.

2002 - I handed the full TH manuscript too Garry early in January, and waited for April and my trip to WHC...

2003 - who knows?

**On what criterion do you decide to accept a novel for publication?**

To put it simply and succinctly: did I enjoy reading it. Then, would I buy it? My reading

tastes are varied, and so I consider myself a good benchmark on what's good. Does that sound like I've got an ego problem? Bugger.

**How do you market and distribute your books? Where do most of your sales occur?**

Well, I have a website with direct links to various online markets and a couple of shops in the US. Plus I distributed copies for review to various magazines/e-zines. It is, though, incredibly difficult to sell to bookshops where you don't have a distributor either in the UK or US. In the UK, the largest chain has a policy where each store are autonomous in what they sell - this means that a publisher either has to contact each and every store, or have a distributor on-hand to do this. I tried: I

wrote to over twenty stores, spread throughout the country. None responded. Incredibly disheartening and one of the main reasons why I halted publishing - when I get a cast-iron deal to take x amount of copies off me, then I'll restart.

Due to this setup with bookshops, 90% of my sales have been via amazon.

**So, do you actually make any money out of this?**

Ha! If I originally went into this to make money, I wouldn't have bothered. I have, though, gained in meeting more people than I would've otherwise. I also, quite possibly, would not have visited Chicago, or any Conventions/Gatherings. I suppose the amount of money I've made, by selling books at conventions, have either paid for the drinks or hotel room, but I do not think I'll ever recoup what I've originally spent.

**Is print-on-demand something that you're looking into? How do you see POD affecting the publishing industry as a whole?**

POD was once the black sheep of publishing, rife with dodgy workmanship and usually paid for by authors desperate to see their novel in print. Now, though, it's still a slow process, but the quality of POD is rapidly approaching any standard paperback, and I'm definitely looking into it. I've received a number of POD quotes, and the prices are very reasonable.

**'There are many  
many fine writers,  
published by the  
small press, whom  
the general  
reading public just  
do not know  
about...'**

***The playing field between you and the big corporations is not so much uneven as mountainous. How would you like to see it levelled, even just a little bit?***

Well, I would like to see the major chains being helpful, and at least reply to those letters I wrote.

Also, small press is by and large ignored by news-stand magazines and newspapers, so I would like the big genre periodicals also to be helpful.

***The indie press in the USA is actually doing quite well. What's it like in the UK?***

Well, the indie press in the USA is, as far as I can tell, mostly limited edition hardbacks, signed by author and artist, and sold for \$50 plus. Now, there is nothing wrong in selling wonderful quality books to the serious collector, but I would, as a writer, much prefer my work to be read by as many people as humanly

possible, be they the serious reader or the supermarket browser. Occasionally, these so-called limited editions can be anything but.

As Peter Tennent once remarked in *The Third Alternative*, "there is a difference between making a profit and profiteering."

In the UK, the main cause of dissent is probably lack of distribution channels - and the few distributors willing to take onboard small presses are invariably full.

This may sound like sour grapes on my part, and I suppose in a way it is, but bookshelves contain the same names, and there are many many fine writers, published by the small press, whom the general reading public just do not know about. I'd just like to

be able to offer them a chance... that sounds so schmaltsy.



***"No, not the comfy chair!" cries Steve Robinson...***

***Is working in a bookshop really the best job in the world?***

Yes! At least I think so. I've worked in bookselling for (gulp!) 13 years now. The money's never going to be great, but I'm the only one of my friends who can honestly say I look forward to going to work every morning, and that's worth a fair bit.

Truth be told, bookselling's not for everyone. It can be stressful (especially at Christmas), and customers expect an awful lot more from someone who works in a bookshop than they would of just about any other retailer: after all, you'd never dream of walking into Marks and Spencer and asking for that lovely little black number you spotted in a dressmakers while you were on holiday last year in Cornwall. But that's exactly the sort of service many customers want when they come into a bookshop. There are over 3000 publishers, distributors and wholesalers in the UK, distributing well over a million titles, all of which (in theory at least) your local bookshop can order for you. Technology has made finding titles a lot easier (I started in the trade using a microfiche listing of British Books in Print; now I can search in

seconds using a database on a CD-Rom), but finding exactly the right book for a customer is still as much black art as science. And that's the buzz, for me at least. That, plus I get paid for doing what I've always done, which is discovering a great book and then telling everyone I speak to, "this is dead good! Read it!"

I'd also like to take this opportunity to dispel a popular misconception about bookselling: no, we don't stand around reading books all day! If only I had £1 for every time a customer has said to me, "I wish I worked in a bookshop. I'd never get any work done for reading all the books." If anyone knows of a bookshop where this is possible (without going bust or getting sacked), I'd really like to hear from them...

***The SF/F section isn't hidden away in a dark corner in your store - it's in your face as you come in the door. Company policy or subversion from within?***

The former, as a result of several years of practising the latter. Funnily enough, the second time I met our MD he was bellowing, "put Sci-fi in that corner at the back of the shop. The anoraks won't mind. Oh, hello Steve." Needless to say, I've never let him forget it...



SF and Fantasy is actually the fourth largest section for Ottakar's in terms of turnover (after Children's, General Fiction and Biography). The genre accounts for an estimated 10% of the General Retail Market for books, so there's a strong economic argument for placing it in a prominent position in any bookshop. But despite this, there is still a tendency in the book trade to regard SF as the poor relation, or to view it as too scary and nerdy for those booksellers with no interest in the subject. Fortunately, I work for a company that recognises a good thing when it sees one, and also gets people who know the subject involved in formulating policy at a group level.

For example, when I first started producing *Outland* (what is now our company SF magazine for customers), it was a list of forthcoming titles with a couple of reviews of new titles thrown in, all photocopied onto A4 paper, stapled at one corner and given to my regular SF customers in the branch where I worked at the time. James Heneage, our MD, was so taken with this that he had it distributed to all of our stores. Gradually, the number of reviews and features grew, and the printing got more professional, until now we have a quarterly magazine with a print run of 10,000. Excerpts from *Outland* reviews (all written by our staff) are regularly used as cover quotes by SF publishers, and many SF/F authors have written articles for it. I've worked for a number of companies in the past, but none of them would have so wholeheartedly adopted and supported an idea like that.

***How difficult is it to get beyond the 'usual suspects' in SF/F/H? What makes you take a punt on some author you've never heard of? And how do you draw customers' attention to a book that isn't written by one of the big names?***

One of the constant frustrations for me, as both a reader of SF/F and someone who sells it for a living, has been the domination of the genre by "safe" big names. Until quite recently, few genre publishers in this country have either the desire or the commercial ability to speculate on new talent, preferring instead to rely on established authors or novels already published in the US or, more recently, Australia. There's nothing wrong with these imported authors *per se* – but it seems a shame when there are so many

talented authors in this country looking to get published.

That is changing, slowly. Gollancz, particularly, have been gradually building authors like Alastair Reynolds, Adam Roberts, Richard Morgan and James Barclay. Macmillan have brought us China Mieville. Justina Robson and Neal Asher. And there's one of my personal favourites, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, too. There are also a number of small press publishers (Telos and Pete Crowther's PS Publishing spring readily to mind) that are carving themselves a nice little niche producing limited editions of books by both big name authors and fresh talent. So, to tell the truth, I think the prospects for new authors are better now than they've been for some time.

Taking a punt on an unknown author is a nice aspect of the job. Unlike most aspects of retail, bookselling is still largely carried out on a sale-or-return basis – if a title doesn't work, we can return it to the publisher for credit, rather than having to mark it down and sell it at a loss. This means that you can speculate a little when you buy in new titles. Your local market has a big influence, too – the good burghers of Sunderland have a strong taste for SF/F and particularly Horror, so that makes me much more inclined to give a new author a try. Additionally, if an author's had work published in genre magazines such as *TTA* or *Interzone*, that would influence my decision, too. I'm in the lucky position that quite a lot of the large publishers send me proofs or manuscripts, in order to get my opinion on a title. There's no substitute, particularly when dealing with an unknown author, for reading the book itself, or at least an extract.

As to how we promote new, relatively unknown authors, that's another great part of my job. I have regular customers who know me and trust my judgement, and who will ask me what's new and worth reading. We also use quite a lot of hand-written reviews on our shelves to promote books we've read and enjoyed, which is a useful tool. And, as a chain, we also have a regular SF/F Book of the Month, which is selected by a committee of our booksellers, of which I'm the coordinator, and this is an ideal vehicle to give a new author a push across all of our 94 stores – in the past we've used this to introduce

**'SF and Fantasy is actually the fourth largest section for Ottakar's in terms of turnover'**

authors like Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Juliet McKenna (an ex-Ottakar's bookseller, incidentally!) and Michael Marshall Smith to a much wider audience. Which is nice...

***There's a trend of publishers to pay bookshops to give their titles a higher profile in the shop. Would you see it as valuable source of income or a bribe? Do you do such deals?***

Ah yes, the vexed and much-hyped issue of publisher "bungs" to booksellers. Speaking as the co-ordinator of our SF/F Book of the Month committee, I can quite honestly say that titles are selected for BoTM (unfortunate acronym, I know) or as recommended titles purely on the basis of their merit. If a book doesn't impress the readers on the committee, it simply doesn't get that endorsement.

That said, once the decision has been made to pick a title for BoTM or Recommends, we do ask the publisher for a contribution towards producing the point of sale material that we use in-store (review cards or shelf talkers). Hardly the sinister world of brown envelopes and shady deals portrayed in recent media hype...

***The independent press has zero budget for publicity and often struggles with distribution. How can they best get their books in the stores?***

That's a tough one, particularly in an environment when a lot of book chains no longer see anything like the number of reps they used to. Again, I'm going to use the example of Pete Crowther's PS publishing here. I originally heard about this through a friend, and I started picking up one or two of the early titles by authors I liked (*Diamond Dogs* by Al Reynolds was the first, in fact). In the end, I rang Pete because I had a query about a forthcoming title and I couldn't find it on Books in Print (and there's your first tip: *always* try to ensure that your titles have ISBNs, and that they and you are registered with Nielsen Bookdata, who compile the Books in Print database. If a bookseller gets a query about a small press title and they can't find hide nor hair of it on BIP, chances are that customer will never get the book they're looking for).

Anyway, I rang Pete up and, in the course

**'Marketing for small presses is always going to mean a lot of spadework, finding out who the relevant buyers are and getting the information to them.'**

of the conversation, he not only told me about the title I was searching for but also several more I was interested in, and I discovered that he's happy to supply any bookshops with his titles. So I opened an account and started stocking PS titles, and haven't looked back, since. And as I (and a couple of other branches I tipped off) have had success with those titles, so the word spreads, and we now have a number of branches that regularly order his titles.

I guess the key lesson (and it's not an easy task, I know) is to forge links with booksellers who know their stuff. Because I'm interested in the genre, I'll ALWAYS consider a title if I get to hear about it. Now I spend a fair amount every month on magazines (*Locus*, *Interzone*, *SFX*, etc.) and a fair amount of time surfing the net in an effort to keep on top of what's being published in the field, but I know that I still miss a lot that's published in the course of a year. Marketing for small presses is always going to mean a lot of spadework, finding out who the relevant buyers are and getting the information to them. But once that contact's been made, I guarantee it'll pay off.

Interestingly, as I've been typing this, a parcel has just arrived from Telos containing, amongst other things, some information on a reprint of Stephen Laws' *Spectre*, due in October. Given that I was born about 2 miles away from the setting of this book, and that Stephen is a local author, I'll be straight on the 'phone, as soon as I've finished this, to place an order and try to set up an event. That's small press marketing for you...

***We should shop at Ottakar's because...?***

Ottakar's has two key strengths: firstly, everyone who works for us is passionate about reading – my first question in every job interview I've conducted isn't 'what relevant experience do you have?' it's 'what are you reading at the moment?' You can learn all the skills you need for this job, but you can't fake the excitement you feel about the latest Richard Morgan novel hitting the shelves. And customers pick up on and appreciate that.

Secondly, when describing Ottakar's I always use the analogy of the USA – we're a loosely federated band of independent booksellers. And that's vitally important. It

gives us central buying power to compete with Waterstone's and WH Smith, whilst still allowing individual stores the autonomy to tailor their range to their local market. Which, in simple terms, means that we do our damndest to stock what our customers want to buy, rather than what a head office 200 miles away *thinks* we should stock. And our

customers seem to think that's a good idea, too...

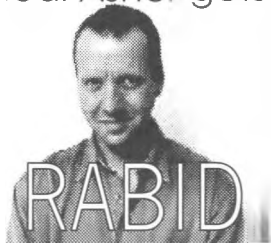
Links:

guestbooks.pathfinder.gr/read/GaryGreenwood

www.pendragonpress.co.uk

www.ottakars.co.uk

## Neal Asher gets



### CITIES IN FLIGHT.

There seems a belief, in the world of much of today's short science fiction, that nothing of importance happens unless it is set in the 'mean streets' of some city. On the whole the works stemming from this will be based on some student or other urbanite living a squalid existence in a seedy flat, while experiencing either relationship problems, or angst about an inability to have a relationship at all. Often, the writers are displaying a lack of imagination by casting themselves in the lead role in the only setting they have experienced. From the other side, there are many writers of fantasy who cannot step away from the image of their characters questing through the wilderness or some agrarian idyll, though that usually stems only from the secondhand experience of the fiction they read. Getting back to the cities though: are the writers of much urban science fiction nowadays suffering from the same delusion as the fantasy writers?

Cities and the country bleed into each other. There are towns, villages, single houses and an infinite combination of everything inbetween; industrial sites in the country; city parks; wastelands being

reclaimed by nature; connecting rivers and transport systems; and, fuckit, urban foxes. And of course in both directions there is a continuous exchange of people: wide varieties of commuters and 'overspill' and many so-called 'country' people moving into the cities to work. The dividing line, unfortunately, is near illusory, perceived mainly by resentful minds. Cities no longer have impenetrable walls around them with gates that are closed up at night and the countryside is no longer filled with Barny Hayseed clones chewing on straws and muttering about 'tham thar towney buggers'. This perception displays the same blinkered vision as the present urban government, which legislates for cities and against the country – damaging those millions dwelling in between and polarising the attitude of many others – or those dwellers in a time warp, the fox hunting lobby, who manage to piss off all camps.

Britons live in a huge and wonderful variety of environments. Along our coasts there are many people who have tried to opt out by living in their boats, others divide their lives between boats and often much neglected coastal houses, there are huge transitory populations on the sea on oil rigs and in container ships, many millions inhabit suburbs, large populations live in villages where their only real connection with the countryside is that they notice it from their car whilst caught behind a tractor on their weekly visit to Asda, there are inclusive island populations who don't even think about any division between city and country, there are towns where the countryside is only a step away and in which the residents truly live their lives in both.

Of course, everything I've just written is also blinkered, for I'm describing Britain today. Maybe, an SF writer should be thinking of tomorrow's Britain or an alternate one, or both. Also, Britain contains only a small fraction of the world's population –

## Focus#42

there are actually other countries, and some very different ways of life. As for our urban environments? Even now the computer revolution is beginning to decentralise white collar professions, so what need do we have to live in the city? Robotic manufacture is whittling down the required work force so what future need of industrialised towns? And the financial imperatives that originally made urban dwelling a necessity, will they last? Umph! Still today, still parochial!

What about undersea dwellings, orbital communities, nomadic populations, cave dwelling morlocks, people adapted to live under the sea, people loading their minds into VR, even nomadic minds leaping from

artificial body to body? Ach, I could go on and on, but the point is made: urban SF writers, lift up your heads, take a look around and try to imagine yourself somewhere else. Oscar Wilde quipped about how he may be lying in the gutter, but he's looking at the stars, some people, it would seem, are lying face-down in it.

*The Line of Polity* has just emerged from the bowels of Pan Macmillan: Agent Cormac strides out once again to battle the Dragon. A must-read for fans of *Gridlinked* and *The Skinner*.

Neal Asher space is at:

<http://freespace.virgin.net/n.asher/>

## The Stone Garden

Elizabeth Howkins

She is a new arrival from some chameleon country that changes its name like gloves, a weak seed putting down roots in an unfamiliar garden and drinking up mud and pebbles, then slowly flaring into lace

Her wrist, its skin pulled back and delicately peeled like an apple, holds itself out for a stinging bracelet of sun as she slowly fills a conch shell to moisten the granite flowers and lick them into color

The magnolia gives off a heavy scent of dust from blossoms brittle as bone

The bee balm and the lythrum are the color of rusty keys

The last few stars of woodruff have turned to pumice on their stems

Dry leaves huddle in groups like clusters of stiff-coiled nuns gently lassoed in prayer

She looks up at the clouds turning hard as plaster and breaking out of the sky like clumps of stale bread and she knows there will be no more rain, that the sun

is a faltering candle that will melt down slowly to its root and that her garden alone will continue to flower and smear the sky with color when

the world will end in fire and all the paper blossoms, will burn and burn and burn

Elizabeth Howkins is a Pennsylvania writer, poet and dramatist widely published in the UK and USA, in both non-genre and genre magazines, including *The New Writer*, *Strand*, *Krax* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror 2000*.

POSTSCRIPT

Cool new software time: I'm helping produce an anthology (of the "Hey, kids! Why don't we put on a show!" variety). Meet dBarcode32 from dlssoft ([www.dlssoft.com](http://www.dlssoft.com))

ISSN 0144560X

