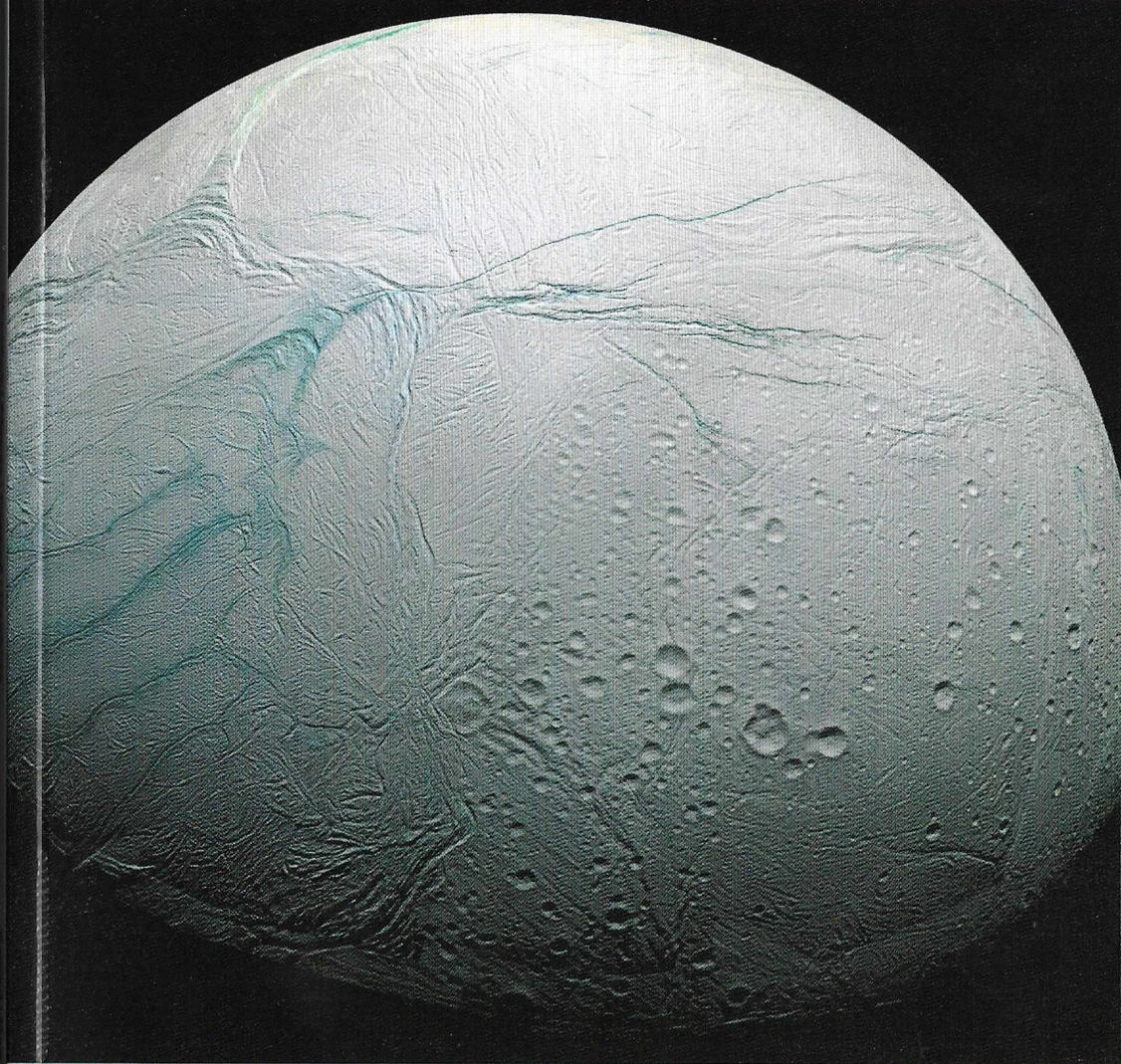


# Foundation

The International Review of Science Fiction



*Foundation* is published three times a year by the Science Fiction Foundation (Registered Charity no. 1041052). It is typeset by Nick Hunt and The Lavenham Press Ltd. and printed by The Lavenham Press Ltd., 47 Water Street, Lavenham, Suffolk CO10 9RD.

***Foundation* is a peer-reviewed journal.**

**Subscription rates for 2009 / 2010**

Individuals (three numbers)

United Kingdom and Ireland:	£18.50
Rest of Europe:	£20.00
Elsewhere (inc. USA) (Surface Mail)	£23.00 (\$US39.00)
Students anywhere (proof needed) (Surface Mail)	£13.00 (\$US21.00)

Institutions (three numbers)

Anywhere	£40.00 (\$US70.00)
Air mail supplement, outside Europe	£6.00 (\$US12)

All cheques, postal orders and money orders should be crossed and made payable "Science Fiction Foundation". All subscriptions are for one calendar year; please specify year of commencement. Regrettably, because of the high cost of exchange transactions, we can only accept sterling or US\$ cheques drawn on a US bank.

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ISSN 0306-4964258

# Foundation

*the international review of science fiction*

Editor: Graham Sleight  
Reviews Editor: Andy Sawyer

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Spring 2009

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# Editorial

Graham Sleight

Viewpoint:

A minor perk of this job is the opportunity, every few months, to riffle through the archives of Astronomy Picture of the Day (<http://apod.nasa.gov/apod/>) and pick an image for the cover of a new issue of *Foundation*. As with this issue's striking picture of Saturn's moon Enceladus, one can often find a chilly kind of beauty in them. But I also feel, increasingly, how much these pictures speak to the history of science fiction.

It's a commonplace nowadays that sf is a less "optimistic" genre than it has been in the past, less unequivocally committed to space exploration as the necessary future of humanity. The dream of humanity travelling to the stars, so central to the work of Arthur C Clarke, is advocated by only a few sf authors now: the names Stephen Baxter and Ben Bova spring to mind. The boom in space opera over the last few years may result from kinetic joy at the idea of humans as one interstellar species among many; but very few writers seem engaged with the question of how we might get there. This is not a criticism: sf has many other things to be concerned with. But it is a marker of how far the genre has come since the days of the moon landings, when *2001* seemed like a reasonable idea of how the 21<sup>st</sup> century might be.

And yet... the image of Enceladus does evoke that old science-fictional curiosity. Why is one side of it, and not the other, pitted with craters? Those blue streaks on the other face do look remarkably like rivers: what flowed in them and when? In such moments, it's easy to understand how Percival Lowell saw "canals" on Mars and developed from them a myth of a dead civilization that had created them. And it may be fortuitous accident, but the utter blackness surrounding the image of the moon is also deeply suggestive of this place's isolation and chilliness.

All this, of course, is just interpretation, as any critic (or reader) practises on the book in front of them. One last point, though, is that this image, and a number of others I've seen from recent astronomy, seem to have much in common with recent sf art, in particular that of John Picacio: the use of a single colour to predominate in an image, its fading away to the blackness of space, the hyper-realism of what's depicted. Could it be that sf's iconography is in this way echoing back to and influencing our colleagues in the sciences as they frame and process their images? In the meantime, I hope you enjoy the interpretations presented in this issue.

## A Conversation between Michael Swanwick and Greer Gilman

*This conversation on myth and fantasy took place at Readercon in Boston in July 2007. It was transcribed by Edward James.*

MS. The reason for this item is that they always put us on panels with some specific topic – “Flower Imagery in Robert Jordan” or “The Influence of Clark Ashton Smith on J.R.R. Tolkien” – and yet it seemed to me to be more interesting for you and me to just sit and have a serious conversation. Because it strikes me that you and I are very similar writers.

[Silence] [Laughter]

Farah Mendlesohn, from audience: Greer sits there with mouth open.

GG. I think we are, as the blurb says, both serious fantasists.

MS. We are both terribly obsessed with mythology and folklore, and also I suspect that our fantasy influences are very similar. E.R. Eddison, Mervyn Peake, Hope Mirrlees, the whole line of classic fantasy that came along before the moderns.

GG Hope Mirrlees I read before I started writing, but not the other two.

MS. Really? I had heard that you said once that when you were in school you were too heavily influenced by E.R. Eddison, and on writing assignments your teacher would say “Greer, you *could* have a little less jewel imagery in this.”

GG No, actually, I didn’t take writing. What I did in the few English courses I took as an undergraduate, I would always say “For my final paper can I do a parody?” So pastiche is how I learned to write. I did a whole Canterbury Tale, “The Crumhorn Fragment”, with fake footnotes, of course, you must have fake footnotes, and I did Shakespeare and I did Pope, and whatever. I think it was because I really didn’t want to *examine* my imagination too closely, so I was very happy doing pastiche. Actually, this entire conversation is rather alarming. I do feel as if I have descended into the fireworks factory with a candle. To illuminate, sir, is to destroy.

MS. I don’t think so at all. I have gone down into the fireworks factory with a candle many times, and it is quite delightful. It sends out sparks and there are pretty colours everywhere.

GG You are the man who when you see a formation of dragons flying

overhead... you are the guy who runs up the hill.

MS. I am, I am. It seems to me that your systematics of fantasy are so much better informed than mine. Have you actually studied mythology or folklore in a formal sense?

GG. No, never.

MS. So you are like me? You are someone who has spent way too much time wandering through parts of the library that other people didn't.

GG. You have to have the right call-number, and then you have to read your way through the call-number. I blush to say that there were certain formative fantasies in childhood that I read, and then I did not really, truly rediscover fantasy.... Well, OK, when I was very young I read George MacDonald and PL. Travers, from whom I got the idea that goddesses are the most powerful thing. There is Irene's grandmother in the tower, from which and toward which all threads and all labyrinths lead, and she is the Moon and she is the Goddess, and she is very very old and very very young simultaneously, and if you go up into her tower to look for her what you see is a heap of musty straw and a withered apple. She is simultaneously very worthless appearing and very powerful. From which I got a bit of Mally. And then PL. Travers, when I was five or six years old... we are not talking about the Disney movie, but the books in which she introduces the children to the constellations, she has a nice chat about Christmas shopping with the Pleiades. She is not very nice, she is a nasty woman. Again this goes into Mally. She is very cross, very crabby. Puts you down a good deal. But she is Artemis, she is the Great Bear Mother. She keeps saying "Is this a nursery or a bear-garden?" And it is a bear garden; it's the garden in which the goddess keeps her young hunter and huntress. And this was immensely informative, in the sense that it informed my imagination. I picked up a few fantasies along the way. But then the year after high school Faye Ringel, in the audience there, persuaded me to read Tolkien, mainly because she had written a musical, a musical comedy based on *Lord of the Rings*, which we put on with a cast of about eight on a stage about the size of a double-bed, and she wanted me to realise how funny it was that I was playing Elrond. So I read that, and I thought "Damn, this is good!"

MS. I want to say off to the side, and this is nothing to do with the main thread of the conversation, that when I was in college I played several parts in the fifteen-minute radio adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*.

GG. Which parts?

MS. Among others I was Frodo. You know, "Gee, Gandalf, I guess the only thing to do is take this ring and throw it into some old Crack of Doom or something." "You took the words right out of my mouth, Frodo." "Well, here we are at Rivendell! We couldn't have made it here without the mysterious Strider, who, as it turns out..." [Laughter]

GG. Well, I want to talk about your influences here... You do play both the cynic trickster and the voice or face of innocence, and you do that all the time in

your writing, so yes, I can see you looking up as Frodo, with your big eager eyes.

MS I think it is interesting about the Goddess, because I use the Goddess a lot in my fantasies. But she is not necessary, she is not essential, she is nothing that speaks to the heart and soul of the enterprise and what I am doing. The chief interest I have in the goddess is all the Wiccans, all the Goddess-worshippers that are around, who have built this elaborate modern mythology about her, which is not questioned, which is not examined, and what I am trying to do is trying to examine it. They all assume that it is not the God, it is the Goddess, and she is female and therefore she is good, and I look at this and I say *why is she good?* Being female is not intrinsically good. I have three sisters, I know. So you put the Goddess in charge, you give her absolute unquestioned power, and you wind her up and let her go, and you watch the people scurry about underneath her, and you try to come up with what the real implications are of this system.

GG. I think there are probably slightly more introspective and theologically sound pagans that you suggest, but yes, there are an awful lot of people who think there was one goddess, and then the nasty evil patriarchy kicked her out and everything got horrible. I think... my goddesses aren't very nice either.

MS. No, I've noticed.

GG. I think the difference, in some ways, between our mythological mindcasts, or the atmospheres, is that you have glamour and I don't. You study glamour.

MS. Oh yes, deception, appearance... There is always a surface, and there is always something below that surface and the question of what is below that surface is I think the intrinsic one. And that's the essential: what is really there? And that is the point where Philip K. Dick and the Catholic Church get together...

GG: You terrify me.

MS. .... in the questioning. I think the big difference between our works is that you are going right up there to the top of the mythologies. You are dealing with the goddesses and the powers and the gears and the workings of the universe, and I have those things there, but my focus is down among the elves and the dwarves and the med techs and the garbage men, and the people who are never going to be actually taken into the Oval Office and told why it is that we invaded Iraq, why it is we invaded Avalon.

GG. And this war has been going on for how many millennia?

MS. I don't think the war has been going on for millennia. I think it is only been going on for a few years. It is like the war in Iraq, or the one in Vietnam. It feels endless while it is there, but it is a localised phenomenon, something that happens in the real world. There is not an endless war in my Faerie, there are wars like what we have. The condition of having wars might be endless, but that question can only be answered if we know whether the condition of our having wars is endless. It is something that we can't know. In your universe it could be known, because you have access to people like Mally who do know this, the answer to these questions.

GG. You think she is telling *me* anything?! You are actually dealing with a



much more fully realised world than I am. It is very interesting, because I read your *Dragons of Babel*, your last book, at the same time I was reading Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*. And to me the sensibilities were very interestingly congruent. You are both talking about a new world, which is wholly fantastic and wholly recognizable as our New World. You do Brave New Worlds.

MS. What we are doing, and I can see this in his world too, is that we are relying very heavily on the real world for the matrix, for the underpinnings, for the skeleton. Shaun Tan's world works perfectly, but without New York City you could not do that.

GG. Without LA you couldn't do Faerie.

MS. In my world I have got the advantage that I can just reach into the real world and pull something out to do an analogue of or a change of at any time. I could decide, well, we haven't really talked about the sewage treatment plants, we haven't talked about their university system, and I don't actually have to work out the connectives the way that you do. You have to figure out how they all move together. I know that the world moves together, and I really don't know how the sewage system works, but I have got a vague idea of it... In *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, it was thematic and very carefully thought out: every now and then Jane runs across somebody who can explain the world to her and explain how the world operates...

GG. It is very useful to have someone in school...

MS.... and each explanation is true, and each explanation contradicts every other explanation that there is. Which in my experience is how the world operates. If you can get an honest and truthful explanation from the Dalai Lama and from Karl Rove, they are not going to be congruent, they are going to be in absolute contradiction to each other, yet in some way they both describe the same universe.

GG. I have a nice universe next door, but we can't get there. One of the things I find interesting in your work is your use of the tropes and topoi of modern mythos and the sort of counter-illuminations you do with that. You use things like the City of Dreadful Night, you use noir, you use ward-healing politicians, you use homecoming queens, you use high schools, all the wonders and terrors of the modern world, and you use that... Well, it's sort of like 3D spectacles. If you put the two moiréd layers together you get a greater depth. You work with the modern mythos, where we live. The way Shaun Tan works with New York City: his city isn't New York, but everything we know about Ellis Island goes into the emotional response that you have to the arrival and everything we know about LA or high school or city politicians goes into our understanding of Babel.

MS. It was a very careful balancing act. Every time the mapping got too close to New York City I had to move it away in a fantastic dimension. But at the same time every time the fantasy got too pure, I had to rub a handful of dirt into it, by setting it in someplace specific like Battery Park. Trying to get that productive jostle going there.

GG. Yes, jostle is good. Tension.

MS. I think a lot of it is basically the viewpoint of a child growing up into adulthood, where you are constantly looking at the world and trying to figure it out. I remember every time I visited New York City when I was a kid, because we had family there and would take the train there all the time, I was just fascinated by these ugly men standing around selling newspapers or doing these obscure jobs, and they seemed to me in some way sinful, and yet at the same time they were on the inside of the secret, and I am sure that goes into it a lot. I wanted to ask you... In *Moonwise*, Ariane and Sylvie have created a whole set of different worlds, and Cloud is only one of those worlds, if I understand correctly.

GG. Yes.

MS. So do you have those other worlds, do you have them mapped out? You seem to have some of the kings of some of them, and some of their history.

GG. No, it is all done with smoke and mirrors. I'm sorry. I have left myself open the opportunity of going sideways into one of those worlds, I suspect. I mention one or two of them very briefly in the latest section of the work, in order to give the illusion of depth and time, but, no, mostly I was thinking that's the way that adolescent girls making up worlds work, and I wanted them to feel real.

MS. What I want to know is, are these other worlds, in their system, as real as Cloud is?

GG. Yes, in their system.

MS. So, if they'd had a different bit of luck, they could have gone into one of these other worlds?

GG. Yes. I am not sure you'd call it luck... I suppose, different fortune, ill or otherwise. "Luck" sounds too bouncy.

MS. I am going with the old term of luck. Glück, then, say.

GG. Indeed. Er. Yes. Actually... Where is it? Here. Definitive. Ten Ways To Tell You're Reading One of My Stories. 1. Dead leaves. 2. Iambics. 3. Discomfort. Wind, rain, slush, mud, hail and sleet, if you ever find your way indoors it's damp and smoky, your supper is a sludge of nettles and your bed is full of fleas. 4. Landscape as mythos. Stone circles. Sheep. 5. Inscape. 6. Archaic introcated language, high and low, great slabs of rhapsody with blots of dialect. 7. Bewildered men, brusque women, blundering girls, witches and unearthly children. Lack of romance. 8. Not much by way of story. 9. Moon and stars with rustic rituals to crank them round. 10. Infrequency.

MS. Well, here's the difference between us. I am all about story. These people are all caught in story...

GG. Lucky devils.

MS. ...and they cannot get out.

Farah Mendlesohn, from audience. What's inscape?

GG. Technical term from the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Inscape is the essential feel of a flower or a stone or a poem or a story. It's the shape in your

mind, well, it's not just in your mind, it is the shape that it intrinsically has and communicates to your mind.

MS. But of course in Cloud it would be far more immanent, wouldn't it? Almost a tangible thing, almost crunchy.

GG. Very crunchy, with ketchup. Crunchy inscape.

From audience: In your new novel "lack of romance" no longer applies; there are actual shipwrecks.

GG. Well, damn! Yes, the new one is actually a late romance.

From audience. But there are no pirates.

GG. There are no pirates, but there are shipwrecks; there is "Exit pursued by a bear"; there is restoration of father and daughter; there is romance. It is actually technically and deliberately a late Shakespearean romance, without the good stuff that makes Shakespeare Shakespeare.

MS. I have to say your list makes me want to write a story in which I take all those elements and do them bad, do them wrong. [Laughter] I want to have a character, the god who goes around killing leaves, and I want to have somebody write iambics about him, but I am going to resist this.

GG. No, no, no, no! Give in!

MS. It is probably a basic impulse in me. When I was a kid I was going to be Edison.

GG. With two "d"s or one?

MS. With one "d". Thomas Edison. I was going to be Thomas Edison. I was going to be a great inventor. [GG: You are!] My sisters still have all these stories they tell about these wonderful wonderful toys I got for Christmas, which I then took apart because I was going to build a disintegrator ray or something.

GG. Yes, you do take things apart. I was talking with Faye Ringel earlier this morning, and she said that Michael Swanwick has such an eighteenth-century sensibility. Not in the high rational sense [MS. No], but in the John Gay louche "Let's play with this steam kettle" sort of way. You do have, I think, in some ways... No, it is a timeless sensibility. There's bits of Jacobean in it. I don't know. It's a paradoxical sensibility. You are a kindly Mephistopheles.

MS. Yes, that sums me up. *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* came about because... the substrate, soil it's grown on, is when I was sixteen J.R.R. Tolkien picked me up and shook me off and turned me into a writer. My sister sent home a copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and I finished homework about eleven o'clock that night, and I picked it up, because I read every night, and I picked it up and I thought "I'll read a couple of chapters before bed", and when the home bell rang at eight o'clock next morning I finished the last word. I had to skip breakfast and read it all the way to school in order to do so, and I finished it just before school began. And then I got my mother to read it and she was kind enough to send a letter to my sister Patty, who had sent the first book home from school, to not bother coming home unless she sent us the second two. And so of course I wanted to be a writer then. I wanted to write *Sword of Shannara*,

but unfortunately for me I did not have the talent. [Laughter] So I kept trying. But then at some point, as I kept working at little fantasy systems, the way you do, creating worlds and details and such. As I examined this over the years, it seemed to me that... In '82 Marianne and I decided to have a child. The one thing they always say, if you are going to have a child, go rush out right now and go to lots of really good restaurants and have lots of really great sex and go travelling to some exotic places, because you are not going to be doing this again for a long time. So we went to Ireland, our first time overseas. And there were stone rings, with sheep cropping among them. And there were castles everywhere, and the castles were different than I thought they would be. They were much smaller, and you would be standing in the ruins of these castles, and you would go, you know, a lot of these intrigues you read about in castles wouldn't be possible, because Mom and Dad would be right next door. At one point there was a sign for a fairy ring; it was the remains of an earth fort. We were photographing the fairy ring, and this ten-year-old boy comes wandering up from his house. He says, "What are you doing?" We smile and Marianne said "We are photographing the fairy ring." And he says "Don't tell me you still believe in fairies?" It was at that moment that I realized that Americans have got a lot of chutzpah to write high fantasy. People in the British Isles grow up with things like fairy rings and stone circles, sometimes literally in their own back yards, and we grow up reading paperbacks of their books. That convinced me I was never going to be able to write high fantasy, until I came up with this idea of the industrialised Faerie, which enabled me to write about the America that I knew, with junkyards and strip malls and strip joints and high schools and other hellish places. So I wanted to ask about your relation to the actual physical landscape. I assume you've been to the British Isles?

GG. Yes, I was at Cambridge. I went to Cambridge, and I did sort of microbiology, genetics. At college I was really very good at it. I was getting straight As even at MIT. But I hated it. I hated wet lab. Cow's eye-balls! So as a futile gesture I changed my major in my senior year, and it was a toss-up between Art History and English, because I had five courses in each of them and I said, OK, English. And I had written a non-fantastical YA novel for credit for my junior year. So I went to England, and said I am going to study Renaissance English at Cambridge. I was very fortunate in the teacher that I was working with one-on-one, Sylvia Adamson. She hates this stuff! But she essentially was very good at teaching me to read. I suppose I can boast. The one thing I did really, really well was practical criticism, as they called it. I can read an unseen passage and place it in time and space and discuss it, and I actually got a starred first in practical criticism. So I was very proud of that. But I was lonely. So I thought, in my second year, this is ridiculous. I am going to go find a club and join it. I went to all the punches they were having, and the funniest people were the people who read fantasy. I thought, "I like them, and I am going to read fantasy with them." And I went to their first meeting, and somebody got up and



did a rant about hobbit Malthusian population dynamics. I said, "Oh, I like these people." So I hung out with them, and they were all reading fantasy and writing fantasy. And they said "What, you haven't read Le Guin?" "No." "What, you haven't read Lloyd Alexander?" "No." "OK, read all these things". And they were all reading and writing. They also did story-telling. And we were at someone's house, and they were doing round-robin storytelling. And I'm really not good at this. But someone started this really stupid story about a man whose fiddle would wake the dead. It was a joke, and he passed it on to me. I started telling "Jack Daw's Pack". I don't know where it came from. I finished this, and there was this long dead – undead – silence in the room. And I thought, "Oh.. OK". And then I went off and was miserable at grad school for a short time. But I was still nagged by the idea of writing something, so when grad school fell through in '78, I thought "OK, I'll take some time off and I'll see if I can write". I actually got a job as a nanny.

MS. [Laughter.]

GG. You laugh, you laugh! I actually was there for seven years, because it was a free attic in Harvard Square. They actually threw me out because I was typing all night, on a manual typewriter. I was writing *Moonwise* and I was typing all night. And they went mad and threw me out. So it was rather traumatic, and I lost my job and my room and my kids. By that time I was hooked on writing, and I was actually finishing *Moonwise* as I was thrown out, which took me a fairly long time to sell, because it's weird, and I have gone on writing ever since. I've managed to find a day job. Unfortunately I never got a grant from the Porter Foundation. You are very fortunate, sir, both in your wife, clearly as a wonderful wonderful partner, and as the Porter Foundation for the Advancement of the Arts.

MS. When I first started thanking Marianne in my acknowledgements as the M.C. Porter Endowment for the Arts, a lot of my male writer friends sidled up to her, saying, "What do I have to do to get one of these grants?" [Laughter] and she said, "Oh, you wouldn't want to have to do *that*." And they said, "Yes, we would." [Laughter]. So...

GG. You are a lucky, lucky man.

MS. I am. I am aware of this. I was thinking of the relationship to the land. For *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, I went clambering around in factories. I went to every deserted industrial site I could find. I went to find old steam locomotives and went scrambling around inside them. We spent a weekend in Scranton, beautiful downtown Scranton, doing the coal mine and the great steam rail museum there. The land is incredibly important to me. It has to have a physical analogue to it, or else I am less convinced of it. It is much harder to write something that the reader is going to get lost in if you don't believe in it yourself, and I am a very sceptical person. If I want to write about a dragon, by God, I've got to go out and clamber around on one.

GG. Oddly enough, I chose my landscape through music. At some point

during this I heard the Watsonsons sing. They are still going in different ways, but alas in the original form they are no more. They were a Yorkshire *a capella* family singing group, and they sounded like the storm walking on the hills. It is amazing what kind of noise you can make with four people singing. And I thought, "I want that landscape". So I went to look at Yorkshire, and I realised that it was the north of England that I wanted to write about, hence the mud and the rain, because it never stops raining. And the Riddle Stones are real. They are actually called the Buttertubs. There is this wonderful formation on the top of a fell, with limestone pavement. Limestone pillars 200 feet deep going down into the earth, with the space around them, so there is a sort of hole and pillars. No, I am not going to jump from top to top of those, but that's cool, that's cool. It's a pavement of pillars, and you could fall a very very very very long way. So part of it is sublime, because it is wuthering and dark and stormy, and magnificent landscape and part of it is comic, because it is full of sheep and people in muddy boots, and my sense of humour calls for sheep and muddy boots.

MS. Another way in which we are quite different is... I am essentially a Rufus T. Firefly. Whatever it is I am against it...

GG. [Laughs] Can we buy you a claw-hammer coat?

MS. Absolutely, and this is why I have never really done a sequel, because I disagree with my *self*. Well, it is like the mythologies, the explanations of the world, in *Iron Dragon's Daughter*, as soon as it is explained I have to tear it apart, and disprove it, and in fact the ending has got to be a denial of everything that came before or else it is just not valid. That's where I am going. It seems to me that you are going in the other direction, towards more and more and more order.

GG. I accrete, I accrete. I work backward fractally, if that makes sense. I collect little notes, and I have thousands and thousands of files of little notes. It is like growing crystals on a string, and I pull them out. I keep nagging at the idea, and if I work at it hard enough, I can go from ideas to sentences and then if I work at the sentences I can get a scene and eventually I get a world, but it's backwards. I don't make up the world and set things in it, the world accretes from nagging and nagging and nagging and thinking about collections of strange discongruent ideas. It is a metaphysical sensibility. I put disparate things together and make ideas out of them. But no, I don't think we could possibly be more different. I don't have that Loki sensibility that you have.

MS. And yet I think if you put us both in the library, and let us wander around for a long time and mapped it long enough, you'd find that we'd both fixated on the same things. We'd have read the same books and probably made the same annotations.

GG. Yes, and I've gone one way and you've gone the other with it.

MS. I am very visual, and you tell me that you are hardly visual at all.

GG. I can't see things in my head, which is a great grief. If you gave me a wish, I'd probably wish for that before flying, because I want to see things in my

head. Occasionally I can dream like that, and then it's like Caliban: you awake and you are weeping because it is so beautiful and you can't have it. But I am visual. I minored in Art History, remember. I am very good at visual analysis; it's just that can't keep the pictures in my head. So looking at things is very, very important to me... Certainly the way I write is a very very oral and aural – both spellings – way of writing because the sound of the language is incredibly important to me. The sound of the language creates the world for me, in a way. It is almost as if what I am trying to do is to write spells. If I write the words with the right sound and the right cadence, I can create a world. So I do that. But it is not as if I am not visual. But I can't hold the visual things I love in my head.

MS. My notebooks are full of collages and scraps of imagery.

GG. His notebooks are *fabulous*. This is like a *real* writer.

MS. Certainly for my fantasies I need to find the appropriate artist who will inform a lot of it. *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* is just full of Cindy Sherman's fantasy photographs, with a little bit of those really disturbing sexual doll and medical prostheses photographs that she did. In *The Dragons of Babel* it is Odd Nerdrum. In fact Odd Nerdrum has got a painting of the "White Ladies Manuring the Fields". I am not going to describe it in front of a decent audience like this, and you'll never find it from the title. But if you run across it and see the white ladies manuring the fields, you'll think "O God"...

GG. Actually, I draw. So about twenty-five years ago I drew a tinker, so I had a reference for that.

M.S. And it appears to be discovered inside a histology slide.

GG. Yes, I suppose so, overlay. I don't draw very often, but if I am working on a character, I have drawn a few of my characters, I do floor plans, I take photographs of places that are important.

MS. Did he become Poor Tom?

GG. Oh yes. I mean, what else could somebody that looks like that be? He's definitely cold... I deeply, passionately, admire and envy your notebooks, which strike me as the epitome of what the really truly cool writer should have.

MS. With one exception. He should have legible handwriting.

GG. No, no, no! You want palaeographers studying your work!

MS. This is my practical joke upon future scholars. They are going to open my notebooks and they will think this is going to say everything, but they are not going to be able to read anything. I can't read my own handwriting. It's only good for as long as the idea is fresh in my mind. I'll write it down, and I'll be able to read that for a few hours because I remember what it is, but if I come back a week from now I can't read this stuff. But I am passionate, and....

GG. Show the audience why I am so envious!

MS. I am passionate when I am writing... There [showing notebook], there's a fantasy thing. I believe that the moon was originally a plate of spaghetti.

GG. Those are good.

MS. Yeah, I am working on a novel... But I am passionate, so when I am

writing it down I cannot slow down long enough to be legible. So basically the function of the notebook is just to spend enough time on the words to fix them in my mind, to put them out of the mind, to the hand, to the notebook, and from the notebook through the eye and back into the brain, and that will make me remember it long enough to do the job.

GG. I collect these button boxes or kitchen drawers full of fragments and ideas, and I worry about them...

MS. Do they have things like shells and marbles in them too?

GG. Shells, marbles.

From audience. Sounds like the Delphic Oracle.

GG. Thank you! That's one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me! Oh, so long as I don't have to be the Sibyl and live in a jar...

MS. You know, Marianne one day just looked around and said "How did I end up living in a wizard's lair?" What could I say? "The skulls are your fault, Marianne, those are your collection!"

GG. I am thinking of your bouncy anecdotes about epidemiology that you were recounting the other night. This man is married to an epidemiologist, a woman in public health.

MS. She is in public health. She is technically a biologist, a microbiologist.

GG. So she is scarier than anything?

MS. No, they are happy people. I can always tell if there has been a serious outbreak of something terrible, because she comes home in this cheerful mood. When people's heads are exploding in Kinshasa, it's wonderful... She came home one day and she was really elated, and she said "We have got a new disease which only affects, get this, gay men and Haitians." I have been watching the whole AIDS epidemic all the way, but that's a different topic.

GG. Yet again, how fortunate you are in your life's partner.

MS. We have to be cheerful about these things, because this is the world that we have, and if we can't find any joy in disease and degradation and death, why then we are in the wrong place. [Laughter and applause]

GG. Five minutes? Questions? Or shall we just continue waltzing?

MS. Final thoughts? I still think that we are very similar.

GG. I think we are complimentary.

MS. We are at least wandering across ... well, not the same landscape.

GG. What would happen if our worlds merged. Is there a crossover? Can you get from Cloud to Babylon? How many miles?

MS. I think that in a strange way they are within psychic view of each other. And I think that Babylon is the connection there. The references to Babylon... this is not the Babylon of history, this is the Babylon of the nursery rhyme. The Tower of Babel is in Babylon, but you never see Babylon, you can't see Babylon.

GG. It's fallen, to rise no more.

MS. It is far far away. You can pass through it by train, but you can't actually get there.



GG. Where they intersect I think most is in my very strange short story "Down the Wall", which is a post-apocalyptic Cloud. It is basically a story of children in a post-apocalyptic city under godblitz. And it is again very northern. It is as if they are living in a bombed-out, say, Sheffield, which is also a bombed-out Babylon. And that I think is as close as I... I can see them coming up, they are all living underground because of the gods, and I can see them wandering into your city, if they ever make it out of the subway system.

MS. I think it is probably Britain and America. Mine is an American fantasy, it is inherently America. One of the big problems I had with *Iron Dragon's Daughter* was finding a way to fit analogues of African Americans in.

GG. I thought I knew all the ethnics, he says!

MS. In *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, their place is taken by dwarves. That is because it is really easy to discriminate against dwarves. You're short – back of the bus! But afterwards I was not really happy with that...

GG. You can do a lot with haints.

MS. ...because it was talking about the problems which African Americans face, but it didn't actually bring them in as individuals. I realized the problem was that with all of these rusalkas and fays and such, I was taking them from the culture, and they had got into the culture from children's books, from fairytale books. The reason that the African American community was not represented was that their fantasy children's books had not been around long enough to be normalized into the culture. So with the second book I deliberately brought in haints. which I got from a friend of mine, whose family came from South Carolina, and so he would talk about all these stories his grandmother would tell him when he was a kid, about swamp-haints and such. And they stand in, and they take the place. They have the problems but they also have a smattering of the culture. Of course their problem is that they can walk through walls, and that is of course a very oblique and cautious reference to the ancient racial slur of spooks.

GG. It is marvellously multi-cultural and naturally multi-cultural. You have taken the Katherine Briggs...

MS. Yes, I kept her book on the desk, and I would just flip through it when I needed a new ethnic group. Yours on the other hand is monoethnic. It is like Sweden in that regard. They are all one thing, one people

GG. I feel bad about that.

MS. I think it is something different you are doing.

Farah Mendlesohn, from audience. Outside the big cities this is a fair representation of Yorkshire. York is the whitest place I've lived in. I lived there for ten years, and it was horrendous.

MS. Let's end with that slur on Yorkshire. [Laughter] I think we have done a great job and we deserve thunderous applause.

[Thunderous applause]

# SIXES AND SEVENS: *THE PRISONER* AND *THE OMEGA FACTOR* COMPARED

Andrew K. Shenton

Papers:

Rarely does a science fiction programme that is totally original and unique emerge on British television. *The Prisoner* (1967-68) is one such case and *Sapphire and Steel* (1979-82) another. Both have been available on video cassette and then DVD for some years, but a third programme that was truly innovative, *The Omega Factor*, was, until its DVD release in June 2005, one of the BBC's hidden treasures. Since its original 1979 transmission, the serial has not been repeated in Britain, either by the BBC or by any cable or satellite channel, and it has never been released on video cassette. Today, however, much of the mystique surrounding *The Prisoner* and *The Omega Factor* is being eroded as a result of unprecedented levels of scrutiny. In 2007, the year of the programme's fortieth anniversary, a new book analysing *The Prisoner* appeared,<sup>1</sup> and, just sixteen months earlier, the publication of a second volume of scripts meant that all were now available commercially.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, DD Home Entertainment's DVD package for *The Omega Factor* includes a booklet of viewing notes, an audio commentary on one of the most effective episodes and a new documentary.<sup>3</sup> In the face of such recent attention, this would appear an appropriate time to compare the two programmes.

John Kenneth Muir discusses at some length the notion of a "story arc", which, he suggests, sees the end of the saga taking "the plot and characters back to the beginning" (p.171). Muir believes that *The Prisoner* exhibits this feature, as the closing shots of the finale are identical to those that started the opening instalment.<sup>4</sup> Piers D. Britton and Simon J. Barker argue that even the serial's individual episodes possess cyclical characteristics. They observe how each begins with the hero's abduction and, at the end of it, after all that has taken place in the previous hour, he is shown still to be trapped behind animated prison bars.<sup>5</sup> A certain degree of circularity is also prevalent in *The Omega Factor*. In the first part, *The Undiscovered Country*, journalist Tom Crane is about to begin writing an article dealing with "mind power". His work takes him to Edinburgh, where he hopes to investigate Edward Drexel, a rogue occult practitioner with a sinister past. Drexel refuses to participate and, apparently in an effort to deter Crane, induces an "accident" in which his wife, Julia, dies. Crane discovers in making his inquiries that he himself possesses psychic abilities and arouses the interest of the highly secret government unit,

Department Seven, whose brief is to examine the paranormal. Joining forces with the Department and his old friend, Anne Reynolds, Crane explores a range of incidents involving psychic phenomena over the course of the episodes and becomes increasingly concerned that a sinister Omega organisation is working on using the paranormal for subversive purposes. Ultimately, a key figure in Department Seven is revealed as an Omega agent. In the concluding scenes, Crane leaves Anne and the Department to return to London and is intent on resuming his career as a journalist. The most striking instance of circularity in the saga lies in the repetition of a single element of dialogue. As he says farewell to Anne at the end of the final episode, she hands him a flask of coffee, commenting, "You know how you hate that motorway rubbish." This echoes an early scene from the first episode in which, before Crane embarks on his journey to Edinburgh, Julia offers him a similar flask with an identical explanation. The repetition of the first scene of *The Prisoner* at the serial's conclusion implies somewhat ominously that Number Six's struggles are not over, and prompts Sue Short to detect in the narrative "an insistent note of hopelessness" (p.89).<sup>6</sup> The denouement of *The Omega Factor* is rather more clear cut and slightly more optimistic. After terminating his association with Department Seven, Crane makes preparations to travel to Whitehall, where evidence against the Omega organisation is apparently being prepared. Whether Crane can trust the official whom he is to meet, however, and whether any action that is taken will lead to the ultimate demise of the Omega organisation are questions which are left unresolved so as to tease the viewer further. Since one of the Omega agents has already declared that the organisation has "people in very high places", the issue of trust is particularly pertinent.

It is, perhaps, the hybrid nature of the two programmes that renders each so unusual and memorable. Chris Gregory asserts that *The Prisoner* contains elements of the action adventure, secret agent and science fiction genres, and addresses political, psychological and philosophical themes.<sup>7</sup> *The Omega Factor*, meanwhile, is dubbed by Alan Morton "a supernatural thriller" (p.589).<sup>8</sup> Advance publicity for the DVD release of *The Omega Factor* claimed that the serial could be considered a precursor to *Sea of Souls* (2004-07).<sup>9</sup> Although both programmes do indeed feature stories about the paranormal, the espionage element of *The Omega Factor* gives it an additional dimension which the later programme lacks. Most episodes of *The Omega Factor* offer fairly standalone investigations of individual cases of psychic phenomenon, yet the intrigue surrounding the possible existence of a subversive Omega organisation and the increasing likelihood that an enemy agent has infiltrated Department Seven provide ongoing plotlines that are brought to an end only in the final instalment. At this point the true reason for Julia's death is also revealed. The matter of who killed Drexel, who had been shot in darkness in the fourth episode, *After-Image*, had been resolved just the week before. Continuing questions cement together the seventeen episodes of *The Prisoner*, too. Specifically, the issues of whether

The Prisoner will actually escape and of the identity of Number One maintain an essential continuity across the different episodes. These are again matters that are not concluded until the serial's final part.

The fact that ongoing questions permeate both dramas enables each to be fitted into the "episodic serial" category of drama as defined by John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado. They explain that this form is characterised by there being "narrative continuity... The viewer has to see all the episodes encompassed within one title to understand fully the narrative structure and closure" (p.ix). The authors specifically cite *The Prisoner* as an example of this type of drama.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, whilst it is often suggested that Patrick McGoohan oversaw virtually every significant area of *The Prisoner's* production, it seems that he made relatively little attempt to weave the individual stories into a single, logical and consistent narrative that progressed week-by-week, despite the overall unity provided by the show's fundamental questions. It is certainly true that most of the programme's instalments can be viewed in any order. Catherine Johnson goes so far as to argue that, in broad terms, there is "little or no continuing storyline running across the episodes" (p.56).<sup>11</sup> Exploring development within the programme, Britton and Barker are of the opinion that, rather than the episodes building on each other, each instead rearranges "the different ideas implicit in the basic premise" (p.116).<sup>12</sup> During the course of *The Prisoner*, there are fewer references to incidents in past episodes than is the case in *The Omega Factor*. Even though as many as six different writers were responsible for the BBC serial's ten instalments, Andrew Pixley notes that a feature of the narrative style within *The Omega Factor* was the way in which, after sudden conclusions to episodes that appeared to leave matters unresolved, the following week characters would "comment on aspects of plotlines which had previously been left dangling" (p.36).<sup>13</sup>

Despite fundamental differences in their subject matter, certain plot and concept similarities emerge across the two programmes. ESP, for example, is a theme in both. It is one of the most obvious ingredients within *The Omega Factor*, and, in *The Schizoid Man* episode of *The Prisoner*, the villager, Alison, is shown to have a telepathic link with Number Six. There are also similarities between *The Schizoid Man* and *The Omega Factor's* episode, *Double Vision*. In each case, the hero's opponents try to induce a mental breakdown through their use of doubles. In the Patrick McGoohan serial, as part of a plot by Number Two to make him doubt his own identity, The Prisoner comes face-to-face with his duplicate, who claims to be Number Six. In *The Omega Factor*, the double takes the form of Crane's wife, who, it has already been established, has been dead for some time. As none of Crane's colleagues accepts that it was possible for him to have seen her, Crane's opponents anticipate that their ploy will lead him to question his sanity. Both heroes emerge from the experience intact but, whereas it is apparent that Julia Crane has simply been impersonated, the methods that The Village authorities employed to create a flawless copy of Number Six remain



unexplained. The latter has led to some fanciful speculation surrounding the nature of The Village among academics and fans of the programme. Matthew White and Jaffer Ali note that the use of a clone in this episode, along with various other plot oddities in the serial, has prompted some radicals to suggest that perhaps The Prisoner is being held by extraterrestrials,<sup>14</sup> whilst Robert Fairclough, an acknowledged expert on the show, believes that the writer of *The Schizoid Man* script, Terence Feely, "saw the Village as 'a science warp', where modern technological miracles like the creation of an exact duplicate of the Prisoner were possible" (p.238).<sup>15</sup> Although no advocate of the "extraterrestrials" theory, Johnson, in highlighting the lack of scientific explanation for the advanced technology within The Village, nonetheless recognises that such hardware imbues "the visual landscape... with a pervasive sense of temporal and spatial disorientation" (p.58).<sup>16</sup>

In each programme, the hero faces a recurring enemy. In *The Prisoner*, Number Six duels with Number Two virtually every week, and, in *The Omega Factor*, Crane encounters Drexel twice. In addition, the enigmatic Morag appears in each of the first five instalments. Like The Butler in The Village, Morag is never seen to speak and her silence emphasises her status as a figure of mystery. Still, one major puzzle is resolved near the end of each saga. In *Fall Out*, Number One is finally unmasked and, in the penultimate part of *The Omega Factor*, it becomes obvious to the viewer that Roy Martindale, the head of the Edinburgh unit, is the traitor within Department Seven. Nevertheless, the impact of this revelation is diminished by the fact that Martindale appears to be something of a misguided idealist. Crane does not learn the truth until the last instalment. Even at the end of this concluding episode, however, Omega's plans for the discredited Martindale are left unknown. The subservience of the apparent head of an organisation to an unspecified superior is a theme that is carefully developed in both programmes. In *The Prisoner* stories, *A*, *B* and *C* and *Hammer into Anvil*, Number Two is seen talking into a red telephone to an unseen and unheard superior, and these conversations form a significant part in the plot. The viewer is encouraged to assume that it is Number One to whom Number Two is speaking. In episodes of *The Omega Factor* such as *After-Image*, *St. Anthony's Fire* and *Out of Body*, *Out of Mind* Martindale is also shown talking to an unseen and unheard superior but his identity is somewhat less certain. He could be Andrew Scott-Erskine, the Civil Servant head of Department Seven who appears in the serial intermittently, yet subsequent events make clear that it could equally well be a leader of the Omega organisation. It may be significant that two telephones can always be seen on the top of Martindale's desk and, on each occasion that he talks to what could be an Omega superior, he speaks into the black receiver. In the closing stages of each serial, the enemy organisation makes the hero a tempting offer. In *Fall Out*, The President of The Village asks The Prisoner to "lead us or go", and, in *Out of Body*, *Out of Mind*, Martindale seeks to recruit Crane to the Omega organisation, promising him "an enormous opportunity... a

place with Columbus, Vasco da Gama, all the great explorers... It's an offer you can't refuse". The significance of the latter comment becomes evident moments later when another Omega agent asserts in a telephone conversation, "If he can't be recruited, he'll have to be disposed of". In both *The Prisoner* and *The Omega Factor*, the hero rejects the invitation, and survives.

Details of the side responsible for The Village are shrouded in secrecy, and similarly little is learned about the nature of Department Seven and the rival Omega organisation. What is clear is that all three may be considered spy organisations of sorts. Tim Heald, in fact, goes so far as to state that Department Seven "is a front for our own dear MI5" (p.10).<sup>17</sup> In *The Prisoner* episode, *Do Not Forsake Me Oh My Darling*, Number Two speculates on how the mind-swapping machine invented by Professor Seltzman may enable The Village to "break the security of any nation" and, in *Illusions*, the final episode of *The Omega Factor*, Martindale is quick to recognise the implications for espionage that may be offered by the abilities of Dr. Karl Bruckner, an expert in mind control, to train psychics. In the same instalment, Martindale attempts to convince Crane of the need for the Omega organisation by arguing that research into the paranormal is too important to lie in the hands of an Eastern or Western power bloc. He clearly views Omega as an independent and neutral organisation that transcends ideology. In *The Prisoner*, the political orientation of The Village is rather harder to ascertain. White and Ali suggest that there are five possibilities. It may be a form of futuristic world government, or be run by the East, the West, a multinational corporation of some kind or extraterrestrials.<sup>18</sup> Given the fact that the clues within the show fail to present a consistent picture, there is no satisfactory answer to the question. White and Ali conclude, "In the end, we cannot know who runs The Village – and we are not supposed to. The episodes often tease us with hints here or there, but this was intended to be an enigma" (p.160).<sup>19</sup> Short views The Village in more abstract terms and believes that the key issue is not who is responsible for it but rather what it represents. She contends that *The Prisoner* invites audiences "to look behind the façade of Western democracy" and assess The Village "as a microcosm of any advanced industrial nation" (p.72).<sup>20</sup>

Even if both The Village and Omega are viewed as "the enemy", the methods that they employ are highly contrasting. The former is, as Number Two acknowledges in *The Chimes of Big Ben* episode, an international community to which spies are brought in order to extract secret information. Omega's approach is more insidious, with attempts made to infiltrate our society and to eliminate or gain control of key personnel from within. A clear rationale for the motivation behind the Omega organisation is never provided. Martindale's responses in the final episode when in conversation with others may provide some insights; otherwise it is left to viewers to develop their own understanding based on the Omega activities that they have witnessed over the ten episodes. The organisation's power structure is never revealed and only isolated operatives

and agents are shown during the course of the serial. Drawing on the work of Matt Hills,<sup>21</sup> Johnson explains how, by refusing throughout the series to offer hard and fast answers to questions such as “Where is The Village?”, *The Prisoner* provides a “perpetuated hermeneutic” that encourages speculation beyond the events seen on-screen (p.2).<sup>22</sup> A similar argument may be made with regard to *The Omega Factor* in terms of key questions like “What actually is Omega?”, “Is it a force for good or does it simply strive for world domination?” and “Can the organisation ever be defeated?” Nevertheless, despite all these intangibles, The Village and Omega have corporate images reflected in their immediately recognisable logos that are seen on several occasions. The former manifests itself as a penny farthing design, and the latter an omega symbol. From time to time, these provide viewers with clues as to the nature of the enemies the heroes are confronting. Still, an air of uncertainty surrounds even the names of the two organisations and this heightens the atmosphere of menace. In *The Prisoner*, the place in which the hero is incarcerated is always termed simply, “The Village”, and, in the BBC programme, it is mainly Crane who calls the subversive organisation “Omega”. Although various Department Seven personnel accept this name, individual Omega operatives do not use it and, in the final two episodes, Martindale refers merely to “The Organisation”.

Johnson<sup>23</sup> and Hills<sup>24</sup> both recognise that the issue surrounding the location of The Village is not, of course, the only major plot question left unanswered in *The Prisoner*. The latter also asks, for example, whether the hero actually escapes. Other puzzles, like why Number Six resigned and whether he is actually John Drake, the hero of Patrick McGoohan’s earlier series, *Danger Man* (1960-68), also remain unaddressed. In *The Omega Factor*, the exact role of Morag, especially in relation to her apparent master, Drexel, is likewise never properly clarified, and the viewer may well muse over why, in the fifth instalment, *Powers of Darkness*, Morag is again seen to emerge as a figure of evil when Drexel is known to be dead.

Hills highlights how, in the cases of several “cult” shows, their endlessly deferred narratives are reflected in their titles. He demonstrates how some of the overarching questions within *The Prisoner* relate to the hero’s incarceration itself, such as “Where and why is Number Six imprisoned?” (p.134).<sup>25</sup> Initially, the significance of the title, *The Omega Factor*, appears to be resolved unequivocally in the first episode, when Scott-Erskine reveals to Crane – and, with him, the viewer – that the expression refers to “the ultimate potential of the human mind”, which Department Seven is charged with exploring. It emerges with time, however, that the title could equally appropriately refer to the mysteries of the sinister spy organisation which is also seeking to investigate this territory.

Lack of trust and a mood of paranoia are key themes within both programmes. During *The Prisoner*’s seventeen episodes Number Six is reluctant to trust anyone in The Village, and throughout the saga of *The Omega Factor* Crane struggles to make his claims about the existence of a subversive organisation heard. He also

learns that even the closest members of his own family are not all that they seem. Crane is resentful when he discovers that his wife, Julia, and brother, Michael, have worked for Department Seven and have covered up the fact. In just the third episode, *Night Games*, Crane suspects that there may be a traitor within the Department and his relationship with the authorities responsible for the unit is uneasy throughout the serial. Crane's paranoia reaches its height in the penultimate episode, *Double Vision*, in which his claim that he has seen his wife alive after her apparent death is not believed. Ultimately, in the last two instalments, Crane even begins to suspect that he has been misled by his own girlfriend. There is, in fact, some evidence that his suspicions are not groundless. In the climax of *Double Vision*, Crane discovers in Reynolds's flat a wig which appears to have been used by the impersonator of his late wife. Furthermore, like the treacherous Martindale, Reynolds is seen in *Out of Body, Out of Mind* to have on her desk two telephones, the black one of which is similar in colour to that which Martindale may use to communicate with members of the Omega organisation. Yet, the significance of this is confused by the fact that, in instalments nine and ten, only the black telephone is visible and, in *Double Vision*, a call from Scott-Erskine, whose integrity seems genuine, is taken on it. In each serial, the hero is essentially a misfit in an environment in which he is ill at ease, despite the fact that Crane joined Department Seven willingly. The Prisoner attempts to escape from The Village in the very first episode and, in *The Omega Factor*, Crane talks of leaving Department Seven as early as the third part, yet it is only in the final instalment that he actually does so. In the face of little concrete evidence, in the early episodes of *The Omega Factor* at least, viewers may well initially question how far the alleged conspiracy is simply a product of the hero's imagination. Anthony Brown, for example, is among those who wonder whether the apparent plot "might be nothing more than a paranoid fantasy".<sup>26</sup> Some enthusiasts of *The Prisoner* have taken a similar line in relation to their own programme. One such proponent is Max Hora, who reasons that a "bad dream" theory may be used to "explain the entire series" (p.8). He queries, "Did it all really happen, or was it only happening in the Prisoner's own mind?" (p.9).<sup>27</sup>

Number Six and Tom Crane both emerge as super humans fearlessly resisting malevolent forces that appear insurmountable. White and Ali write of how the former's "superman aspect" (p.52) becomes increasingly apparent with each episode.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the true extent of Crane's unusual psychic powers is revealed gradually during the course of the serial. Each character works with a remarkable zeal. Number Six is intent on maintaining his individuality, protecting his secrets, countering oppression and escaping from The Village, and Crane is driven at first by his desire to avenge his wife's death and then by his determination to expose and ultimately defeat the Omega organisation. Number Six scarcely weakens in his resolve to remain an individual, although near the end of the BBC serial Crane briefly contemplates giving up his struggle



against Omega. A further key difference between the two heroes is that, whilst Number Six's powers are conventionally mental and physical, albeit developed to an exceptionally high level, Crane's are clearly paranormal. Moreover, Crane frequently calls on his girlfriend, Anne Reynolds, for support, and has a close relationship with his psychic brother, whereas Number Six is very much an individual who is almost always alone in his struggle. Despite all his strengths, Britton and Barker argue that Number Six is not "uncomplicatedly heroic" and note him often to be "harsh, cold, withdrawn, and antisocial" (p.126),<sup>29</sup> characteristics that may be considered inevitable consequences of his aggressive individualism. Short offers a similar portrayal, highlighting Number Six's lack of affinity with others, his attitudes of suspicion and even derision when interacting with his fellow residents and his tendency to join forces with other dissidents solely for his own benefit.<sup>30</sup>

*The Prisoner* and *The Omega Factor* both generated considerable controversy when originally shown. Each received substantial acclaim in their early days but, as the programmes progressed, critics became infuriated and frustrated. Illustrating his argument with extracts from contemporary reviews, James Chapman writes of *The Prisoner*, "When it began it was welcomed as a bold and innovative experiment that offered a different entertainment pattern from the formulaic norms of popular television... Yet the series' refusal to provide conventional dramatic resolutions or to answer the questions it posed soon turned opinion against it" (p.50).<sup>31</sup> The attitudes of *The Daily Telegraph's* television correspondents to *The Omega Factor* also changed considerably during the programme's two-month run. Reviewing the first episode, Ronald Hastings commented that it "made a good start last week, with plenty of atmosphere" and seemed "a good cut above other recent new series".<sup>32</sup> The same critic praised the "well sustained" terror in the "very creepy" second episode.<sup>33</sup> Thereafter, the enthusiasm of the paper's correspondents waned. Following the fifth instalment, *Powers of Darkness*, Peter Knight wrote, "This spooks and spies thriller can be very irritating, spending much of its time on the big build [up] only to provide a big let-down at the end. Half the time I seem to spend trying to work out what is going on, the rest regretting that I ever tried".<sup>34</sup> Assessing *The Omega Factor* just before the transmission of the final episode, Hastings wrote that the series "has sometimes been good, sometimes disappointing (both in writing and acting) and overall can be put down as an uneven but worthwhile piece of occasional originality".<sup>35</sup> Whilst much of the controversy surrounding *The Prisoner* centred simply on its enigmatic characteristics, *The Omega Factor's* delvings into the paranormal and the occult provoked fierce criticism from Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association. Pixley reports the outcry in some detail.<sup>36</sup>

Today, it is clear that the unusual nature of both programmes was intended to stimulate a reaction among viewers. Indeed, Patrick McGoohan has famously admitted, "I wanted to have controversy, arguments, fights, discussions, people



in anger waving fists in my face... I wanted to make people talk about the series. I wanted to make them ask questions, argue and think" (p.57).<sup>37</sup> In the same way, Anthony Read, who wrote *Powers of Darkness*, one of the most controversial episodes of the BBC serial, reflected in the documentary, *Inside the Omega Factor*, "I didn't set out to shock... but I did set out to stimulate and to provoke thought and make people think, not just to have something cosy... washing over you".<sup>38</sup> Speaking in the same documentary, Eric Davidson, the director of the instalment, believes that it was the way in which the paranormal was treated, rather than simply the subject itself, that disturbed some viewers:

"I would say that we did the show... in such a way that there weren't enough big, dramatic pyrotechnics to convince the audience that this was... over the top... It was all pretty low key. And because we were doing it in a semi-real or realistic vein or mood... I think... Mary Whitehouse had a point that 'Oh-uh. This is slightly or could be a little bit more disturbing than it should be.'"<sup>39</sup>

The fact that Davidson detects a "realism" in *The Omega Factor* is perhaps not surprising given that producer George Gallaccio used Archie Roy, a professor of astronomy at the University of Glasgow and a lifelong believer in psychic phenomena, as a "Technical Advisor" for the show. Roy's involvement prompted Heald to forecast when previewing the serial, "*The Omega Factor*, disciplined by his consultancy, should be impeccably authentic even if it bends one's credulity" (p.10).<sup>40</sup> Such attention to plausibility renders the serial a very different type of drama from *The Prisoner*. In fact, Gregory asserts that the "impossible" circumstances that emerge in the *Many Happy Returns* episode, in particular, clearly place the programme in allegorical territory (p.100).<sup>41</sup> Johnson, however, is less comfortable with labelling *The Prisoner* unequivocally allegorical. She writes,

"In its use and disruption of the generic conventions of the action-adventure spy series, its use of a visual style designed to disorientate the subjectivity of the viewer, its bricolage of signifiers in its location, set and costume designs and its lack of explanation for the fantastic elements represented, *The Prisoner* creates a fictional world that invites hesitation between supernatural, generic and allegorical explanations for the events depicted" (p.59).<sup>42</sup>

Certainly, the unconventional nature of both serials is emphasised by some bewilderingly surreal sequences. In *The Prisoner*, these are chiefly to be found in the episodes, *Free For All*, *Once Upon a Time* and *Fall Out*, whilst the psychic battle to save a young student from evil forces in the climax of *The Omega Factor's Powers of Darkness* story is described by Marcus Hearn in the DVD audio

commentary for the episode as “probably the most surreal thing anyone was ever likely to see on the BBC”.<sup>43</sup> Viewers may also have been disconcerted by the way in which the focus of each programme changed remarkably during the course of the episodes. Gregory traces how, in the case of *The Prisoner*, “what purported to be a mass-audience adventure series transformed itself, before the viewers’ eyes, first into a surreal political and social satire, then an intense study of psychological depths and finally into a symbolic statement of the human condition” (p.1).<sup>44</sup> Although *The Omega Factor*’s themes are less profound and the shift in emphasis less marked, Brown is nonetheless able to delineate a movement away from a preoccupation with a regular villain to the wider, and much more disturbing, conspiracy plot.<sup>45</sup>

Few commentators would argue that Chris Carter, creator of *The X-Files* (1993-2002), consciously adopted the key story ingredients of *The Omega Factor* when devising his own series, yet a recurrent theme in modern reviews of the BBC serial has been the similarities between the two. Brown draws attention to how in both productions a male leading character is prompted to investigate the paranormal by a personal loss. He works with an inquiring female scientist and both are subordinate to a boss “whose backing is less than reliable”. Evidence of a shadowy, ongoing conspiracy provides an undercurrent to the individual cases that they pursue.<sup>46</sup> No such ties can be found to connect *The Prisoner* with any later serials, however. Chapman considers, “Its very uniqueness... makes *The Prisoner* something of a dead end in generic terms” (p.51).<sup>47</sup> Britton and Barker also highlight the serial’s lack of “far-reaching artistic influence” (p.95), and note that “echoes of *The Prisoner* proved to be conspicuous by their absence. Within a short time, the still, small voice of the series was drowned out by a raucous succession of action-adventure programs epitomizing all that McGoohan had turned against”. They conclude, “McGoohan’s series might as well never have happened” (p.127).<sup>48</sup>

*The Prisoner* and *The Omega Factor* may be more highly regarded today than when they were originally shown. This perhaps leads to an assumption that the two programmes were ahead of their time. Even so, in the *Inside the Omega Factor* documentary, the BBC serial’s producer, George Gallaccio, recalls that “the germ of the idea for the whole series” was inspired by a contemporary issue – the potential use of the paranormal by Russia and America for military purposes.<sup>49</sup> Many years earlier, an article in a June 1979 issue of *Radio Times* which discussed the real life basis of *The Omega Factor* had also indicated how research in this area by the KGB and CIA especially provided the backdrop for the programme.<sup>50</sup> In the same way, M. Keith Booker believes that the themes of mind control and brainwashing which pervade *The Prisoner* were “crucial concerns of the cold war” (p.42),<sup>51</sup> and the fact that *The Prisoner* owed much to other real life concerns within the 1960s is now well acknowledged. At the time of their original transmissions, the programmes generated little spin-off merchandise yet, today, the cult following surrounding *The Prisoner* has become

legendary. In the 1970s, *The Omega Factor* spawned a solitary tie-in book by Jack Gerson and, until the 2005 DVD package, published information on the programme proved difficult to find. Many of the standard reference sources on science fiction and genre television, such as those by Roger Fulton, John Clute and Peter Nicholls, and David Pringle, do not make any mention of it.<sup>52</sup> Even if such omissions can be attributed to the possibility that in some quarters *The Omega Factor* has been regarded as a work merely of peripheral science fiction, one may expect it to receive at least some coverage in cross-genre books devoted to "cult television". Nevertheless, no entry for the serial is offered in either *The Rough Guide to Cult TV*<sup>53</sup> or Jon E. Lewis and Penny Stempel's volume on the subject.<sup>54</sup> As with *The Prisoner*, a revisionist assessment of *The Omega Factor* now appears to be gathering pace, however. The serial gained as high a position as twenty-three in a 2005 poll of SF fans to find the "top fifty British telefantasy shows".<sup>55</sup> With hindsight, an earlier indication of shifting attitudes lay in a review of the programme appearing at the beginning of the new millennium. Here Kilmeny Fane-Saunders awarded it three out of a possible five stars, describing it as "intelligent and intriguing" (p.247),<sup>56</sup> and, at the time of its DVD release, Marcus Hearn noted its "almost mythological status among fans of similarly-themed television programmes... the series was not forgotten by its original fans, and has become a source of intrigue for those who missed it first time round" (p.3).<sup>57</sup> Some of these sentiments have been echoed by critics watching the DVDs. *Ceefax*'s William Gallagher, in one of the first reviews of the package in July 2005, commented, "If you saw this in 1979 you can remember how spooky it was... the studio work is dated but it's still a slowly absorbing work."<sup>58</sup> David Richardson, writing in *Starburst* later the same month, was equally enthusiastic. He, too, criticised the production standards yet nonetheless considered, "the idea is alluring, the scripts are taut, the tone atmospheric".<sup>59</sup>

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The author would like to thank Louise Weston of the BBC Written Archives Centre for kindly providing a copy of the *Radio Times* article.

# Ecological Philosophy, Ethics and Fundamentalism in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling*

Jayne Glover

We are subjects, and whoever among us treats us as objects is acting inhumanly, wrongly, against nature. And with us, nature, the great Object, its tirelessly burning suns, its turning galaxies and planets, its rocks, seas, fish and ferns and fir trees and little furry animals, all have become, also, subjects. As we are part of them, so they are part of us. Bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. We are their consciousness. If we stop looking, the world goes blind. If we cease to speak and listen, the world goes deaf and dumb. If we stop thinking, there is no thought. If we destroy ourselves, we destroy consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

Ursula K. Le Guin's novel, *The Telling*,<sup>2</sup> was published in the year 2000 and, I believe significantly, was the first full-length novel to return to the universe of the Ekumen since her 1976 *The Dispossessed*.<sup>3</sup> Although Le Guin did use the Ekumen as the setting for a number of short stories, and for the story suite published between 1994 and 1995 that makes up the collection *Four Ways to Forgiveness*,<sup>4</sup> there is an element of nostalgia in *The Telling* for the Hainish universe and its ability to provide a space to reflect upon the limitations of current society. In *The Telling*, Le Guin's thought-experiment focuses on how fundamentalism, be it political or religious, is inimical to the ideals of multiplicity and acceptance of difference that have been such a hallmark of her earlier Hainish novels, all of which deal explicitly with Othering, and attempt to offer solutions to the fear of the Other.

In this paper I engage with Le Guin's work through the medium of ecological philosophy, most particularly the way in which the late Val Plumwood has theorised the problem of Othering through ecophilosophy. Ecology – in this instance – is not used as a scientific concept, but as an expression of a certain mode of conduct based on the idea of systems of relationships. What I term an 'ecological ethic' is a type of behaviour characterised by mutual interrelationships and respect for difference. The concept of the 'Other' is vital to an understanding of these relationships: the Other, here, maintains its definition as that which is different from the Self, but, rather than treating the Other as inferior to the Self, an ecological ethic sees value in diversity and encourages responsible

and considerate relationships with the Other. Clearly the issue of interactions between different kinds of people (racial, gender and class others) and between people and the environment, has been a, if not the, significant trope of Le Guin's entire oeuvre, and of the novels of the Ekumen particularly. In the case of *The Telling*, however, the importance of ecology and ecosystems as a metaphor in the novel make the idea of an ethic derived from ecophilosophy a particularly useful way through which to analyse Othering in the novel.<sup>5</sup>

The way in which some recent ecological thinkers have responded to the problem of dualism suggests why ecological philosophy can provide such a useful theory both from which to assess our current socio-political and environmental problems, and from which to analyse how these issues are examined in Le Guin's work. Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*,<sup>6</sup> like many ecological thinkers,<sup>7</sup> argues that nature has consistently been presented as the opposite of culture or reason, and as a result nature (and all that is associated with it) is described in terms of exclusion (19-20). A dualistic approach to the differences between nature and culture, she thus suggests, is the main culprit of not only the destruction of our environment, but also of the dominance/submission ethos that underlies all forms of Othering.

Dualism, then, is the creation of a "master" identity which inferiorises the Other.<sup>8</sup> Le Guin has expressed this dualistic mindset in her typically poetic manner: "I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other – outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for".<sup>9</sup> As Le Guin's words indicate, by making the Other inferior, it is possible to justify its exploitation and abuse. In other words, socially constructed inferiorisations based on difference are at the root of dualistic behaviour. This dualistic attitude is what Plumwood would call a *hierarchical* relationship of difference. Here hierarchical does not suggest size (after all there are natural hierarchies in the sense that atoms, for example, are smaller than molecules), but rather suggests a *value* judgement whereby the 'I' (whether that be male or female, human or non-human, white or black) sees itself as *superior* to the Other. Differences, after all, clearly exist: as Karla Armbruster suggests, the problem of conflating women and nature, for example, can lead to an "erasure of difference" which simply "displaces difference elsewhere, where it often serves to reinforce dualism and hierarchy".<sup>10</sup> Dualism, Plumwood argues, does not create difference, but rather capitalises on it.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, she claims, it would be "misconceived" to choose a strategy of either denial or mergence in order to escape dualism.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the eradication of Othering is not the same as the eradication of difference, and attempts to incorporate the Other into the Self are just as dangerous as devaluing the Other because of its difference.

Plumwood's ecological philosophy, therefore, is useful in an analysis of Le Guin's work not only in that it explains the development of dominance/submission cultures which clearly corresponds to Le Guin's own, but because it

also provides a model allowing for both kinship *and* difference in relationships between Others – perhaps the most important point made in Le Guin's oeuvre. "Light", as she points out in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, "is the left hand of darkness/ and darkness the right hand of light".<sup>13</sup> If, for Plumwood, denying difference is as problematic as using difference to justify a hierarchical relationship between Others, it is one's *attitude* towards the Other that is most important. Modes of behaviour and attitudes are closely tied in with ethics, defined as a set of principles or rules of conduct.<sup>14</sup> I would argue that the kind of ethical response to the Other, conceived of by Le Guin in *The Telling* (as in her other science fiction) is ecological both in that it can be usefully compared to that posited by ecological philosophers such as Plumwood, but also in that it – like an ecosystem – values diversity and respects the need for the different types of individual that make up the whole. In the novel, for example, the philosophy of the Telling has an 'ecological' ethic in that it changes the mode of relating to the Other from an instrumentalist one to an intentionalist one. Mutual interrelationships and respect for difference are the crux of an ecological ethic and, I would suggest, at the heart of *The Telling*, making ecological philosophy a useful tool with which to analyse Othering in this novel.

This kind of ecological ethic is in many ways utopian in its form and, for Le Guin, is something to strive towards: the underlying hope in her novels of the Ekumen is, after all, as Genly Ai suggests in *The Left Hand of Darkness* to meet the Other with a sense of "Curiosity. Adventure. Delight".<sup>15</sup> What makes *The Telling* a little different is that, although such an ethic is still evident in the novel, Le Guin places it in the context of two different ways of thinking – one wholly concerned with the past, and the other wholly concerned with the future. Furthermore, the action of this novel, unusually for those of the Ekumen, is intimately concerned with our own earth, called Terra by the Hainish. Although Le Guin has included Terran characters in her other novels of the Ekumen, and mentioned Terra's history of imbalance and even violence, no other novel has included as much detail on Terra's specific ills.

The much stronger focus on Terra in *The Telling* suggests a new sense of urgency in Le Guin's writing. Although it is clear that her previous thought-experiment novels are as much a commentary on our own earth as they are about imaginary worlds, it may be that the onset of a new millennium, with its *fin de siècle* atmosphere, caused Le Guin to focus more overtly on our own problems in this novel. This need for an ethical response to the Other thus seems to be more pressing in *The Telling* because of its explicit positioning within fundamentalist regimes, and the hope for what I have termed an ecological ethic seems more intangible than in her other Hainish novels. Published at the turn of the new millennium, the message of this novel is specific to two of the most critical problems in contemporary society: religious fundamentalism and technological progress. Tom Moylan has argued that *The Telling* "intertextually extends the vision of *The Dispossessed*" but "revisits utopian politics and poetics in

a dystopian mode".<sup>16</sup> On one level, then, the thought-experiment here involves the question of religious fundamentalism, asking 'What if the whole world was taken over by a fundamentalist religion?'

Yet, the novel does not take the form of a simplistic anti-religious treatise. Rafaella Baccolini compares *The Telling* to *The Word for World is Forest*, and is correct to do so in that, as she argues, there are strong connections with real events in both novels.<sup>17</sup> However, *The Telling* does not have the same simplistic good versus evil, Athssea versus Terra dichotomy as *The Word for World is Forest*. Le Guin complicates *The Telling* by expanding her thought-experiment on religious fundamentalism to include secular fundamentalism. She claims that it was her horror at Mao Tse-tung's destruction of Taoism, "a tradition two thousand years old", that led her to write a novel "about the extinction of a religion as a deliberate political act ... counterpointed by the suppression of political freedom by a theocracy".<sup>18</sup> The issue Le Guin deals with in the novel becomes that of fanaticism or single-mindedness rather than either religion or economic growth – the latter being the impetus behind the secular fanaticism of the planet Aka. Over-rapid technological growth in a booming secular economy thus becomes as important as blinkered religious zeal in *The Telling*. In this way, Le Guin is again suggesting that, on the eve of a new century and a new millennium, the greatest difficulty facing earth is our inability to accept the Other. The solution to this difficulty is suggested through the life-philosophy of 'the Telling', outlawed on Aka by the secular Corporation State. The novel implies that the kind of thinking practised by those who adhere to the general principles of the Telling is that which could provide an alternative to the violence and oppression resulting from both religious and secular fanaticism. It is the philosophy of the Telling, therefore, which I argue is Le Guin's version of the kind of intentionalist philosophy desired by thinkers such as Plumwood, and what I term an ecological ethic in this paper.

In her elegant and cogent essay on memory and history in *The Telling*, Baccolini observes that, like *Four Ways to Forgiveness*, it is a novel "concerned with history and with the portrayal of a dystopian world"<sup>19</sup> and that it "presents a quest for identity for its protagonist".<sup>20</sup> I agree with Baccolini's argument that the novel is a critical dystopia, and that the idea of reconciliation is important to the novel, especially in that it "opens a utopian horizon within the critical dystopia".<sup>21</sup> However, this paper intends to build on Baccolini's argument by focussing on how utopia and dystopia work together to point towards an ecological ethic in *The Telling* by dealing with the novel in three specific ways. First, I address the dystopian element of the novel by comparing the lack of respect for, and the repression of, difference in both Terran and Akan society. The utopian influence of the Ekumen, and especially of the Telling, is the focus of the second part of the paper, which outlines how the ethics of the Telling correspond closely to the ecological ethic outlined above. Thereafter I examine two individual characters, the Terran Sutti and the Akan Yara, as exemplars



of how fundamentalist practices affect individuals, until the teachings of the Telling shift their behaviour towards mutual understanding and respect for one another.

### Hierarchies and the Suppression of Difference: Dystopia on Terra and Aka

The kind of ethic which I have developed from Plumwood's ecological philosophy is founded on relationships of non-hierarchical difference. This entails a rejection of concepts such as homogenisation, incorporation and exclusion, and encourages mutual relationships between, and respect for, Others.<sup>22</sup> In *The Telling*, the two societies that are described maintain control by enforcing a homogenous belief system which excludes any kind of dissent or alternative practice. Both Terra's religious fundamentalism and Aka's secular fundamentalism work together to suggest that it is neither religious nor economic/ technological progress which creates a dystopian society, but rather *any* kind of narrow, single-minded viewpoint.

Our knowledge of Terra in *The Telling* is achieved through the recollections of Sutti, the novel's protagonist.<sup>23</sup> Although this would normally create a distancing effect, the increased attention given to Terra in comparison to Le Guin's other Hainish novels creates an immediacy not found in the earlier works. Unusually, Le Guin mentions specific places identifiable to the reader as the real earth – such as Vancouver and India – which root the imaginary elements of Terra in historical fact.

Sutti's life on Terra is initially one of peace and happiness, spent living with her great-aunt and great-uncle in India. As is usual in Le Guin's fiction, societies characterised by harmony are described in lyrical terms, and Sutti's recollections of her childhood are of "all the colors of sunlight in the day": "Yellow of brass, yellow of turmeric paste and of rice cooked with saffron, orange of marigolds, dull orange haze of sunset dust above the fields, henna red, passionflower red, dried-blood red, mud red" (p.1). This description of Sutti's idyllic childhood (which opens the novel), forms the contrast with the slowly growing dystopia created by the Unist Fathers. The Unists' inexorable take-over of Terra is accompanied by the slogan "*One God, one Truth, one Earth*" (p.213, original italics), and all unbelievers are forced to take refuge in the so-called Pales, or to live under Unist rule.<sup>24</sup> The first sign of interference in Sutti's life with her aunt and uncle is when the Unists take over the government in India and begin "having what they called cleansings in the river" (p.218). Significantly, the idea of the river-cleansing in the context of Sutti's life in India recalls the Hindu practice of washing in the Ganges. This makes the cleansings that much more horrifying, as the sacred practices of the Indian people are appropriated by the Unist Fathers. Furthermore, the cleansing extends to more

than simply a personal purging of religious 'ignorance' and 'sin' in favour of the Unists' religious beliefs: Suttty also recalls that the villagers were so afraid of the Unists that they had begged her aunt and uncle to "hide our books or throw them in the river" (p.218). Ultimately both the books and their way of life are destroyed as, following Uncle Hurree's death, Suttty and her aunt must join Suttty's parents in Canada.

The warm colours of Suttty's childhood are dissolved by the "Vancouver rain" (p.2) as quickly as her innocence is lost in the face of the realities of Unist rule. Moreover, soon after Suttty's arrival in the Vancouver Pale, the Unist Fathers

declared that the Treaty of Beijing contravened the Doctrine of Unique Destiny and must be abrogated. The Pales were to be opened, said the Fathers, their populations allowed to receive the Holy Light, their schools cleansed of unbelief, purified of alien error and deviance. Those who clung to sin would have to be re-educated. (p.4)

Although the reader is never told what the Treaty of Beijing stipulates, the language of the Unist Fathers is that of religious fanaticism and, as the word "re-educated" alerts us, that of totalitarianism. The Cleansing, the first action of the Unist Fathers in their missionary zeal, is predicated on what they call "educational action" (p.4). Their policy is to allow only "one Word, only one Book. All other words, all other books were darkness, error. They were dirt" (p.4). Significantly, the Unists blame technological progress for the problems of the earth: in a subtle reminder of the fall in the Garden of Eden, which came with the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the Unist Fathers claim that "what they called evil knowledge had brought all this misery" (p.213) and argue that "[u]nholy knowledge should be destroyed to make room for holy belief. They opposed science, all learning, everything except what was in their own books" (p.213). Much like the religious government of Gilead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*,<sup>25</sup> dissent is seen to be lodged in access to knowledge and education outside that sanctioned by the ruling theocracy.

The Unist belief system is founded on the fear of the Other, as one has come to expect in Le Guin's fiction. In this case, the Other includes not just those people who have a different religious belief from the Unists, but those texts which suggest there are alternative ways of seeing the world. As a result, even when the Unist Fathers begin to listen to the more moderate Dalzul, the Terran-born envoy from the Ekumen, the years of preaching narrow-minded Unism leads to even further terrors for the people of Terra. Because they have been taught to fear anything that is different from their own narrow path, many cannot accept the shift to a more temperate viewpoint, and thus the Unists divide, with many of the more militant adherents forming an anti-Dalzul faction. Although the Unist Fathers had proclaimed Dalzul an angel, and with Dalzul's help, Unism was beginning to "fall to pieces, crumble into fragments" (p.219), the single-

mindfulness taught by the Unists for so many years leads many Unist followers to believe that Dalzul was the “opposite of God, entirely wicked” (p.219). Their fear of the opening-out of society and the increased acceptance of new, varied truths brought by Dalzul leads the anti-Dalzul faction to attack the District of Washington. Sully remembers how they “bombed the Library there, plane after plane, four hours of bombing that turned centuries of history and millions of books into dirt” (p.4). Written and published by 2000, *The Telling* becomes almost predictive in foreseeing the acts of terrorism begun by the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Both the pro-Dalzul and anti-Dalzul Unist factions “were always planting bombs, trying suicide raids”: “They’d always used violence, because their belief justified it. It told them that God rewards those who destroy unbelief and the unbeliever” (p.220). The blinkered thinking and extremist position that the Unists preached is turned on them by the anti-Dalzulites, suggesting that it is inflexible, dogmatic vision which ultimately leads to war and terrorism, the quintessence of separatism and dominance/submission behaviour caused by the fear of the Other.

Given the emphasis on religious terrorism in current society, it would be easy to focus on the religious aspect of *The Telling*. However, the narrow, blinkered point of view of the Terran Unists’ religious fundamentalism is paralleled on Aka by the fervour of the Corporation State. Moylan has pointed out that “in the dystopian turn of the closing decades of the twentieth century, the power of the authoritarian state gives way to the more pervasive tyranny of the corporation” (p.135), and Le Guin’s analysis of dystopia recognises this trend in both real life and in fiction – seen particularly in the cyberpunk movement of the late twentieth century in science fiction. Unlike the Unists’ fear of science, knowledge and progress, the Akan slogans are the opposite of the Terran ones: “REACTIONARY THOUGHT IS THE DEFEATED ENEMY”, “FORWARD TO THE FUTURE. PRODUCER-CONSUMERS OF AKA MARCH TO THE STARS”, “PURE SCIENCE DESTROYS CORRUPTION. UPWARD ONWARD FORWARD” (p.7-8, original capitals). Everything in Aka is directed towards the improvement of society through technology and the whole world becomes one giant corporation with every person expected to work towards the goal of modernising Aka. This creates a remarkably single-minded society “sustained by rigid discipline universally enforced and self-enforced” (p.31), and in which “[e]very hour was scheduled” (p.32) and “[c]onversation went by program” (p.33). People are no longer citizens, but “the producer-consumers of the Corporation State” who all wear “canvas StarMarch shoes” (p.29) and the “ubiquitous” uniforms which identify each person’s role in the March to the Stars (p.37). The inflexible codes by which the Akans live, and the description of them as a people with “[a] mazing unity of discipline” (p.18), reminds us – especially through the word ‘unity’ – of the Unist theocracy on Terra, thus setting up the comparison between two totally dissimilar governments which are, nevertheless, both too afraid of losing power to allow a healthy diversity of practices and beliefs.

The Akan Sociocultural Bureau, with its propagandist-sounding Ministry of Information is, like the cleansings and re-education programmes of the Unists, one of the indications that Aka fails to live according to an ecological ethic – which, because of its refusal to accept the Other, is an indication of dystopia in Le Guin's work.<sup>26</sup> In this instance, what makes Aka dystopian is the Akan Corporation State's absolute control over information. On the one hand, it has outlawed all information pertaining to their traditional way of life, and on the other, it has come to revere all knowledge pertaining to technological progress. Sutti, as a historian for the Ekumen, finds it exasperating to witness how the Akans reject their past in their eagerness to fast-forward their technological progress, and finds her work hampered by the apparent total eradication of any literature remaining from before the Corporation State.

The government of this world, to gain technological power and intellectual freedom, had outlawed the past.... To this government who had declared they would be free of tradition, custom, and history, all old habits, ways, modes, manners, ideas, pieties were sources of pestilence, rotten corpses to be burned or buried. The writing that had preserved them was to be erased.

If the educational tapes and historical neareal dramas she had studied in the capital were factual, as she thought they were at least in part, within the lifetime of people now living, men and women had been crushed under the walls of temples, burned alive with books they tried to save, imprisoned for life for teaching anachronistic sedition and reactionary ideology. The tapes and dramas glorified this war against the past, relating the bombings, burnings, bulldozings in sternly heroic terms. (p.57)

The bombing of temples and burning of books by the Akan Corporation State's Sociocultural Bureau obviously parallels Sutti's memory of the destruction of the Washington District Library. However, what is even more terrifying for Sutti is the closure of the Office of Book Location in Dovza City because there are "no more pulpables in Dovza": it has finally been "Cleansed" (p.20) in the same way that the Unists were attempting to cleanse the Pales. Although Aka is bent on replacing religion with technological know-how, and Terra is bent on replacing all secular knowledge with religious belief, it is clear that both are afraid of being weakened by exposure to alternative ideas. For both the Unists and the Corporation State there is only one path: the kind of monologism that is antithetical to the respect for the Other outlined in my ecologically-based ethic.

## The Implementation of a Totalitarian Society

What is often difficult to understand about any totalitarian culture is why its people allow themselves to be led along this highly restricted path. In *The Telling* the Unists' ability to convert and then control so many people is clearly linked to their ability to use "neareals and holos and 2Ds" (p.5) to disseminate their information through the internet, a medium which is totally under their command. Le Guin suggests that virtual reality technology makes propaganda much easier to believe, especially when it allows the user to participate directly in the programme. Suttu, unlike most others, is able to watch the antics of the Unists on the net "without having to partiss in it, [her] Father having disconnected the vr-proprios" (p.5) because he, as a neurologist, believes that "[l]ying to the body is worse than torturing it" (p.76). The suggestion here is that Suttu is much less susceptible to the Unists' proselytising because she is careful in how she interfaces with technology. In the face of the Unists' power over information technology, the bombing of the District of Washington Library becomes more than the loss of the books; it becomes a symbol of the inability to choose what information to seek, rather than have to rely on that which technology thrusts in one's face or embeds in one's body. Although books can be censored, the wave of information sent through the varieties of visual and aural media in a technological era are easier to access and control, and thus become much more powerful than the written word.

In Aka, too, the Corporation State manipulates the masses by making judicious use of technology. Following its campaign to destroy every book and all the calligraphy pertaining to the pre-technology era on Aka, the Corporation State constantly reinforces its ideals through all forms of the media. For instance, as Suttu travels by robocab across Aka's main city, Dovzan City, she is forced to listen to constant propaganda as the cab's radio automatically becomes "loud for one of the Corporation announcements that overrode low settings. There was no off button" (p.9). Even though studying to be an Observer for the Ekumen has taught her to remain neutral, Suttu finds it difficult to remove herself from the constant stream of information, and is frustrated that "there was no way to back off from it" (p.9). She feels inundated by "[e]ither the hyperstimulation of the neareals she had to study, or the clamor of the streets; nowhere to get away from the endless aggression of propaganda, except alone in her apartment, shutting out the world she'd come to observe" (p.9). As is the case with Terran technology, the Akan neareals trick the mind and body into believing that what is merely seen has actually been experienced. The unceasing, persistent nature of the remaining propaganda ensures that there is no space to express difference.

On Terra, part of the reason why the Unists have been able to gain control of the government and institute their propaganda machine is because of the kinds of problems that are familiar to readers from current media as well as eco-science fiction. Each time Suttu recalls the rise of the Unists, or tries to explain



it to the Akans, she mentions that it was related to the problems caused by environmental damage on Terra. She explains to the Akan government official, Yara, that "all of us on Earth, had done a lot of damage to our world, fought over it, used it up, wasted it. There'd been plagues, famines, misery for so long. People wanted comfort and help" (p.213). Unism "was a panic response to the great famines and epidemics, a spasm of global guilt and hysterical expiation" (p.76), suggesting that the widespread devastation of the natural world, and the knock-on effects thereof, were directly responsible for the growth of the Unists. People, Suttu claims, "wanted to believe they were doing something right. I guess if they joined the Unists, they could believe everything they did was right" (p.213). Religion becomes, on one hand, a panacea for those afraid of the world they have created, and on the other hand, a way for religious groups to use the imbalance in the world as a reason for their militant control. The instrumentalism towards, and thus abuse of, the natural world not only destroys the environment, but also directly affects social and political structures, as the environmental crisis allows the greater institution of greater controls.<sup>27</sup>

On Aka the total control of the state is not triggered by the same environmental disruption as on Terra, but by the disruption of their naturally evolving society by a different kind of external force: the interference, ironically, of the Terrans. At first, Suttu and her superior, the Ekumen's envoy Tong Ov, are confused by the success of the Corporation State. Tong believes that the "mechanisms of control are so pervasive and effective, they must have been set up in response to something powerful" (p.18), and that if the "resistance to the Corporate State centered in a religion – a well-established, widespread religion – that would explain the Corporation's suppression of religious practices. And the attempt to set up national theism as a replacement. God as Reason, the Hammer of Pure Science" (p.18-19). They initially cannot understand why the Akan word for religion is derived from Hainish and not from their own official language, Dovzan (p.17), until Suttu discovers that the Akans have no concept of religion in the Terran sense of the word: what the Corporation State has done in Aka is no less than destroy everything pertaining to their history, literature, art, spirituality and life philosophy as it is collected under the umbrella of the 'Telling'. This amorphous system of telling stories and relating histories is both written and – especially in the rural areas where literacy is uncommon – oral. The Akan Corporation State has made the Telling illegal, replacing its stories with Corporation State propaganda, but Suttu and Tong cannot initially understand why this has happened.

Significantly, and ironically, the Unists turn out to be one of the reasons for the dramatic shift in Akan society. The arrival of the first Terrans on Aka, part of a mission sponsored by the Ekumen, coincided with the rise to prominence of a new type of maz or learned person in the Dovza region of Aka. These 'boss maz' had "the power to rule and punish", leading to the Dovza region becoming a hierarchy ruled by rich and brutal maz (p.167). When, soon after the first

Terrans had visited, the Unists sent a ship to Aka, they were welcomed as those from the Ekumen had been. The Unists gave the Akans all the knowledge they needed to fast-track a technological society, but insisted in return that they become believers in the Unists' God (p.231). The response of the boss maz was to reject any threat to their hierarchy – both that of the interfering Unist Terrans and (subsequently) their own philosophy of the Telling. The Unists' attempt to barter technical knowledge for religious control, then, ironically leads the Dovzan maz to fear any knowledge other than the scientific and secular. The autocratic power of the Dovzan boss maz thus becomes strengthened through their opposition to the Unists, as they learn to behave with the same single-minded zeal as the Terrans. They, however, react by rejecting religion rather than denying secular knowledge. Both the Akan Corporation State and the Terran Unists, therefore, become dystopian for Le Guin, not because of their secular or religious belief systems, but, significantly, because of their repression of alternative ways of thinking within the parameters of their government.

The dystopianism evident on Terra and Aka, then, is not only linked to their repressiveness: it is linked to their fear of Otherness. The Unists' refuse not only other religious expression, but also any knowledge which threatens their own teachings. The Akan Corporation State rejects this kind of narrow-mindedness in favour of its own desire to grow economically and technologically – thus seeing religious or philosophical knowledge as a threat. In this way, the hierarchies of power on both Aka and Terra are founded on both exclusion and homogeneity. What alternatives, then, does Le Guin posit as a means of counteracting fundamentalism?

### Alternatives to Dystopia

The kind of ethic born out of ecological philosophy suggests that multiplicity and diversity create positive, balanced societies that have room for growth based on mutual interaction between varieties of groups and individuals. Within Le Guin's Hainish novels the Ekumen is usually the exemplar of this ecological ethic. The Ekumen's policy of non-interference is designed to protect cultures from being forced into an unnatural homogeneity with other worlds, and the connections forged between the worlds that make up the Ekumen are designed to augment their societies, without any of these societies suffering the loss of their own unique characteristics. While this ideal is still maintained in *The Telling*, the practicalities of the Ekumen's philosophy are presented more ambiguously than in her earlier novels, with the Telling itself appearing to supersede the Ekumen in describing an ecological ethic.

In *The Telling*, the Ekumen's greatest influence on Terra is seen through the envoy Dalzul, who arrives on Terra at the height of the Unists' power. He is seen as a figure of hope by those opposing the Unists, especially when the Unist

Fathers admit him into "the Sanctum" (p.5) and began to listen to him. He is certainly a figure of inspiration for many, and his work in trying to dismantle the totalitarian rule of the Unists gives Suttty the idea to "try to qualify for the Ekumenical college" (p.6). Furthermore, after Dalzul's arrival it seems that Terra is going to be saved from the narrow-minded dogmatism of the Unists: "Most of the old regions or states were going back to democratic governments, choosing their leaders by election, and restoring the Terran Commonwealth, and welcoming people from the other worlds of the Ekumen" (p.219). However, the influence of the Ekumen is ambiguous in this novel. Despite Dalzul's initial welcome, many Unists suspect the Ekumen's motives. Suttty tells Yara, for example, that the "Unists hated the Ekumen and wanted to keep all the extraterrestrials off Earth, but they were afraid to try to do it directly. So they encouraged terrorism against the Pales and the ansible installations and anything else the alien demons were responsible for" (p.218). Although Dalzul's arrival does seem to change the Unists' perception of the Ekumen, the Ekumen is clearly not successful in spreading their message of acceptance to all: Dalzul is not seen as another human arguing for peace and diversity, but as an angel from God by those Unists who believe him, and as a demon by those who do not. All the Unists do, therefore, is transfer their blinkered thinking to either the pro- or the anti-Dalzul cause, sparking off the "Holy Wars" (p.22). The Ekumen's influence on Terra seems, in this case, to cause less acceptance of difference and more fear and hatred – a much more pessimistic reading of the practical viability of the Ekumen's values than is found in Le Guin's earlier Hainish novels.

We never discover the outcome of the Holy Wars. Is this because Le Guin wrote herself into a corner and was unable to find a way for the Ekumen's influence on Terra to become wholly positive, or because Le Guin has lost faith in the Ekumen as a concept? The latter is perhaps the more likely scenario, as the influence of the Ekumen on Aka also seems to have very little effect on the Akan Corporation State. Although it is clear that the Akan government is afraid of antagonising the Ekumen – allowing Suttty to stay in Okzat-Ozkatz without monitoring her when she complains (p.84) – it is also apparent that the presence of the Ekumen has not been able to stop the widespread punishment and incarceration of those practising the Telling. Suttty's conversation with Tong at the close of the novel is also an implicit critique of the Ekumen's policy of non-interference in Akan politics. As Suttty points out, just by their presence in Aka "for seventy years" (p.244) they have been interfering with the Akan world, reminding us of Tong's own statement about the Ekumen's presence on other worlds: "The margin between collusion and respect can be narrow" (p.20-21). By allowing the Corporation State to continue criminalising the Telling, the Ekumen has become complicit in its narrow-minded vision. Suttty's insistence on the Ekumen bargaining to save the Telling at the end of the novel therefore suggests that the Ekumen has been weak in its refusal to see its own complicity. While the Ekumen does have enough power to insist that the Telling

manuscripts secreted in the Silong caves are saved, its power comes from the Akan's culture of commodity exchange and not from its ability to convince the Akan Corporation State of the merit of the Telling in itself. Moylan has argued that the Hainish ethic of responsibility allows Suttu finally to intervene in Akan politics on behalf of the Ekumen,<sup>28</sup> but while it seems that Suttu might be able to save the Silong library, there is very little indication that the Corporation State perceives the true value of Akan history and philosophy. This points to a new-found pessimism in Le Guin's work that may suggest that very little of the optimism of the 1960s and 1970s reflected in her earlier Hainish novels remains in this work of the early twenty-first century.

The weakness of the Ekumen in providing an alternative to the dystopias of both Terra and Aka is, however, counteracted in the novel by the emphasis on the Telling itself as an alternative way of being. This suggests that change can only come from within – from an understanding of our own past rather than from direct intervention from outside. Part of the power of the Telling is that Suttu is naturally antipathetic towards any kind of religious philosophy and has to work hard not to let her prejudice of the Unists affect her attempts to find the meaning behind the Telling. For her it entails a complete change of perspective: she realises that she “was a child of violence, as Tong Ov had said”, which makes it hard “and bitterly ironical, that here it was all the reverse of what she had known, the negative: that here the believers weren't the persecutors but the persecuted” (p.58). Nevertheless, she soon finds out that the Telling's ethic is more balanced than that of the Unists and “chiefly prescribed respect for your own and everybody else's body and chiefly proscribed usury” (p.109). The Telling, then, teaches respect for both Self and Other and rejects instrumentalism.

Unlike the singularity of purpose displayed by the Unists and the Corporation State, the Akan system of the Telling is based on balance and diversity. It is

a way of thinking and living developed and elaborated over thousands of years by the vast majority of human beings on this world, an enormous interlocking system of symbols, metaphors, correspondences, theories, cosmology, cooking, calisthenics, physics, metaphysics, metallurgy, medicine, physiology, psychology, alchemy, chemistry, calligraphy, numerology, herbalism, diet, legend, parable, poetry, history, and story. (p.91)

The Telling is therefore an all-encompassing way of living, but at the same time, it does not follow a single, didactic line of thinking. Rather, many different parts constitute the whole of the Telling, making it analogous to an ecosystem with its “interlocking system” (p.91) of various diverse features. This connection to ecology is confirmed through Suttu's attempts to describe it as she rejects concepts like “religion” and “*philosophy*” as being inadequate, instead calling it “the Great System” and then later “the Forest, because she learned that in ancient



times it had been called the way through the forest" and even "the Mountain" (p.96, original italics). Part of the Telling includes a tradition of "yearlong and lifelong cycles and patterns of feasts, fasts, indulgences, abstinences, passages, festivals" (p.93), reflecting patterns of scarcity and abundance found in natural ecosystems, which, however balanced they are, are not without fluctuations. Suttu sees the Telling as subtle, natural and "subterranean" (p.93), rather than imposed, ordered or overt, and as a way to rejoice "in the complexity and specificity, the wealth and beauty of the world" (p.125). In fact, Suttu connects the Telling explicitly to religions "of process" like Buddhism and Taoism (p.94-95), suggesting that harmony and balance must be accompanied by dynamism and growth – as is the case in any natural ecosystem.

The ecological imagery used to describe the philosophy of the Telling is also used within the actual texts that make up the Telling. A central text is called *The Arbor*, and is a collection of "mystical meditations on the Making and the Made, the beautiful, difficult, metaphysical poems concerning the One that is Two, the Two that are One, all interconnected, illuminated, and complicated by the commentaries and marginalia of all the centuries since" (p.103). But at the same time, Suttu also discovers that there is no correct, standardised version of *The Arbor*, "but many, many arbors" (p.104). Significantly, the tree is also a particularly important image of the Telling, being as it is a mini-ecosystem. The body is likened to a tree (p.55) with a root, or place of centering and spirituality, that is unseen but necessary to the survival of the tree (p.89), and, to add to this, the major symbolic representation of the ideas behind the Telling is called the Tree. The Tree is described as

a marvellously painted map or mandala of the One that is Two giving rise to the Three, to the Five, to the Myriad, and the Myriad again to the Five, the Three, the Two, the One.... A Tree, a Body, a Mountain, inscribed within the circle that was everything and nothing. Delicate little figurines, animals, people, plants, rocks, rivers, lively as flickering flames, made up each of the greater forms, which divided, rejoined, transformed each into the others and into the whole, the unity made up of infinite variety, the mystery plain as day. (p.121, original ellipsis)

Although *The Arbor* is a central text, the Telling is made up of many stories, which indicates to the reader of the novel that there is no single, correct path to a single, correct truth. The Akan people have no word for God and that there is no "native theism or deism" (p.95); there is "[n]o creator, only creation. No eternal father to reward and punish, justify injustice, ordain cruelty, offer salvation. No binary Dark/Light, Evil/Good, or Body/Soul. No afterlife, no rebirth, no immortal disembodied or reincarnated soul. No heavens, no hells" (p.95). The way of life the Telling evokes is one where ethics and right-action are acted out not in the hopes of an other-worldly reward, but are a reward in



themselves; where eternity is “not an endpoint but a continuity” (p.95). More importantly, perhaps, Suttty discovers that there is a “[p]rimal division of being into material and spiritual only as two-as-one, or one in two aspects” (p.95). This is a direct rejection of the Cartesian division of the human into body and soul as two distinct parts. The Telling, therefore, suggests that there is a way to conceive of the human as both/and rather than either/or. It is this that makes the Telling the most detailed philosophical expression of the kind of respect for difference (which I have called an ecological ethic) in Le Guin’s novels of the Ekumen.

The Telling is not only a utopian dream, however, but a practical way of life.

The plot of the novel is careful to emphasise the benefits of living according to the Telling, as the people in Okzat-Ozkat do, rather than according to the rules of the Corporation State, as is the case in Dovza City. Dovza City is a place of extreme regulation and control, and conforms totally to the economic and technological aspirations of the Corporation State. As Suttty travels up the Ereha River away from Dovza she feels a sense of freedom: not just because she literally travels further away from the bureaucracy of the state, but because she feels less isolated within her carefully defined bureaucratic niche. She is able to speak to people without the constant monitoring of subject matter and experiences a thrill at hearing their small, every-day stories, revelling in the fact that “[e]verything she had missed in Dovza City, everything the official literature, the heroic propaganda left out, they told. If she had to choose between heroes and hernias, it was no contest” (p.35). Her sense of ease and release is intensified the further behind she leaves Dovza City, until she is finally able to realise that what she is feeling is “happiness” (p.37), something unfelt for so many years that she feels the “word itself destroyed it” (p.37).

Suttty’s contentment is increased once she arrives in Okzat-Ozkat and begins to experience life away from the centre of power. People still follow the ancient ways of living, eating “the fresh food and drink that was appropriate to the day, the time of day, the season and the weather” (p.94), rather than the “high-protein, sweet-salt packaged stuff” available in the city (p.62). They still use greetings and gestures which are banned under the Corporation State because “[h]onorifics and meaningless ritual phrases of greeting, leave-taking, permission-asking, and false gratitude, please, thank you, you’re welcome, goodbye, fossil relics of primitive hypocrisy – all were stumbling blocks to truthfulness between producer-consumers” (p.44). Significantly, also, they still make use of the forbidden pronoun, which is gender unspecific as well as both singular and plural (p.207), suggesting the balance urged by the Telling is even found in their language. They also practise the meditative exercises which remind Suttty of “yoga and tai chi” in their incorporation of both physical and mental discipline (p.124), and still gather (if clandestinely) to hear the maz recite the Telling. Nonetheless, they are not so prejudiced against the progress brought by the state that they refuse to accept useful technology. When winter

arrives, for example, each of the people of Okzat-Ozkat insist on wearing an old-fashioned "leather coat lined with its own silky fleece" (p.116), but the new type of boots "made of artificial materials, for mountain sports and hiking" (p.116) because they can see that some new products "worked better than the old ones" (p.117).<sup>29</sup>

The lifestyle enjoyed by the residents of Okzat-Ozkat who still live according to the principles of the Telling forms a stark contrast to that of those in Dovza City. The repression and narrow-mindedness of the Corporation State is figured in the stifling atmosphere of Dovza, and the practical application of mutual respect, balance and acceptance of difference is epitomised by the lifestyle enjoyed by Suttu in Okzat-Ozkat. Nonetheless, the true success of the Telling as a life-philosophy is not found in generalised descriptions of socio-political entities; it is found in how the Telling is able to promote an ecological ethic within the individual, as will be seen through how Le Guin characterises both Suttu and Yara.

### Utopia and Dystopia Within

The fear of the Other present in both the Akan and Terran dystopias is clearly translated into the lives of those who live under their rule. Both Suttu and Yara, the Sociocultural Bureau Monitor, show how living in the atmosphere of fear and suspicion engendered by a totalitarian state can affect individuals. Yara is the most obviously influenced in his zeal to protect the Corporation State from what he perceives to be the sedition of those still practising the Telling. Although Suttu is the protagonist, and the reader has a natural sympathy with her as a result, she too is clearly a product of her past. Her fear of the Unists has left her with both a fear of religion and of fundamentalism. Her awareness of this does not, nevertheless, allow her to approach Yara with balance and sympathy until the very end of the novel, when she finally comes to understand the meaning of the Telling.

From the moment Suttu encounters Yara on the boat journey up the river Ereha, he is described as a typically narrow-minded bureaucrat. He is "silent and aloof" (p.38) amongst his fellow travellers, and when he first approaches Suttu, she is surprised by the "cold keenness of his look" (p.39). He has a "tight pseudo-smile" (p.39) and treats her with "suspicion, distrust" and "xenophobia" (p.40). His mission is to warn her of "pockets of cultural fossilisation and recalcitrant reactionary activities" in the Okzat-Ozkat area (p.40) and to tell her that "the natives are brutal and dangerous" (p.41). In his desperation to do his duty for the Corporation State, he asks her to report any illegal activities to him and then, once they land in Okzat-Ozkat, he watches Suttu's every move so that when she stops to talk to the locals, she notes that he "loomed" up beside her with a face "like plastic" (p.50); a mask of disapproval. Later, when she

complains of his surveillance, his blinkered vision leads him to warn her, with an "intense" voice,

there are people here who intend to use you for their own ends. These people are not picturesque relics of a time gone by. They are not harmless. They are vicious. They are the dregs of a deadly poison – the drug that stupefied my people for ten thousand years. They seek to drag us back into that paralysis, that mindless barbarism. They may treat you kindly, but I tell you they are ruthless. You are a prize to them. They'll flatter you, teach you lies, promise you miracles. They are the enemies of truth, of science. Their so-called knowledge is rant, superstition, poetry. Their practices are illegal, their books and rites are banned, and you know that. Do not put my people into the position of finding a scientist of the Ekumen in possession of illegal materials – participating in unlawful rites. (p.86)

Sutty's response to Yara's warning is "incredulous scorn" (p.86), as is her response to the entire Corporation State. Yet, her contempt is as blinkered, in its own way, as their secular fundamentalism. She arrives on Aka still suffering from the grief following the death of her lover Pao, killed as a result of the anti-Dalzul uprisings on Terra. Her attempts to drown her feelings in her work as a historian are thwarted by the Akan regime's total destruction of their history and past literature, and her bitterness at the religious fanaticism that caused Pao's death, is intensified by the "sensory assault of the neareals she had to partiss in" (p.2) on her arrival in Dovzan City. Although she tries not to judge the Akans for their rejection of their past and their focus on technology and progress, it is clear that she is rubbed raw by the similarities between Aka and Terra and at having to "go back to circumspection, caution, self-suppression. And danger" (p.59). She is horrified to discover that Aka is going through a similar period to that in which she grew up in on Terra, and that although the Akan government explicitly rejects religion "they were all true believers, both sides. Secular terrorists or holy terrorists, what difference?" (p.58). Thus Sutty sets out to search Okzat-Ozkat for banned literature, already suffering from a prejudice not only against religion, but against the Corporation State.

Yara becomes, as the representative of the greater body, the focus of Sutty's frustration with the Corporation State; she even calls him "Monitor", thus keeping him firmly in his role, without bothering to find out his name as an individual. From the moment of their first meeting on the boat trip to Okzat-Ozkat, Sutty clashes with him and blames him for his blinkeredness. But what she does not understand – or try to understand – is that she is as narrow-minded as he is. By simply maintaining her anger against the Corporation State and its Monitors, she does not take the time to understand why Yara believes what he does and to investigate why the Corporation State has such stringent rules

against the Telling, even though Tong has emphasised that it must be a reaction to some event of great importance. She does struggle against her instinctive dislike of the Monitor, thinking that he "was insufferable, but that did not excuse her" (p.51); still, she finds it almost impossible to be impartial towards him. Later, she tries to see him "not as the object of bureaucratic control looks at the bureaucrat, but humanly" (p.85), but when he calls the Okzat-Ozkot people "vicious" (p.85) and "mindless" (p.86), she again feels "a wave of hatred for him that frightened her" (p.87). Although she is concerned by her response, it is very clear that Satty has not really understood that part of her dislike for Yara is an expression of her hatred for his way of thinking, and furthermore, that she is succumbing to a similar kind of thinking by treating him with such scorn. Even when his helicopter crashes, leaving him gravely injured, she only feels "cold" (p.178) and "bitter" (p.187) towards him. Similarly, although she does try to speak to Yara after his accident, her own anger leads her to pour out her frustration at him, saying:

You're my enemy. The true believer. The righteous man with the righteous mission. The one that jails people for reading and burns the books. That persecutes people who do exercises the wrong way. That dumps out the medicine and pisses on it. That pushes the button that sends the drones to drop the bombs. And hides behind a bunker and doesn't get hurt. Shielded by God. Or the state. Or whatever life he uses to hide his envy and self-interest and cowardice. (p.192)

While Satty begins by attacking Yara and the Corporation State during her outpouring of resentment, she soon turns from describing Aka to describing Terra, indicating that much of her antagonism towards him is actually antagonism towards her own world.

Yara, too, cannot initially see Satty's perspective, arguing that the Telling had to be destroyed in order for Aka to grow:

the people who wanted to accept that world were stopped, prevented, by the old ways. The old ways of doing everything. The maz mumbling forever about things that happened ten thousand years ago, claiming they knew everything about everything, refusing to learn anything new, keeping people poor, holding us back. They were wrong. They were selfish. Usurers of knowledge. They had to be pushed aside, to make way for the future. (p.215)

Yara's zeal is frightening, and although Le Guin does not condone his actions and perceptions, it is equally obvious that Satty's are not condoned either. Despite Satty's training at the Ekumenical School, which has taught her that it is "[w]rong to let frustration cloud her thinking and perceptions" (p.9), she

persists in seeing Yara as the Monitor and not as a fellow human being. Indeed, it is only their exposure to the Telling that provides both characters with a way to move beyond their initial prejudices.

The crucial change in Suttu begins with her pilgrimage to the lost library (or 'umyazu') in the caves of Silong, where she not only finds the manuscripts of the Telling, but also learns finally to apply the principles of telling and listening to her own life. Suttu's enormous respect for the maz Odiedin (who takes her to Silong) has not, despite her best efforts, been able to bridge the gap between her understanding of the Telling and his, a gap which is "so wide light would need years to cross it" (p.169). It is Odiedin who suggests Suttu should talk with Yara, as he believes that it is important for her to "hear what he has to tell" (p.188). Out of trust and love for the maz Odiedin, Suttu decides at least to try to do what he asks of her. Although initially only able to voice their frustrations at each other's views, Suttu and Yara start to understand themselves and each other better once they have experienced their own version of the Telling. Both tell the stories of their lives, and in so doing, both expurgate some of the emotions they have been holding on to, and which have been fuelling their anger and zeal. In addition, because they listen to one another, they also have greater understanding of the other's position. This has led Lawson to suggest that Yara and Suttu become, briefly, an exemplar of the "two-in-oneness" embedded in the Telling's philosophy.<sup>30</sup>

Suttu begins to understand the complex emotions that have driven Yara's extreme conformity to the rules of the Corporation State once she hears him tell of how he witnessed his grandparents being beaten to death for practising the Telling. Yara's memory of "[s]mashed faces, splintered skulls, blood-clotted grey hair in a heap in the middle of a square" (p.217) is thus paralleled with the "[f]ragments of bone, tooth fillings, a dust of exploded flesh" (p.217) that are all that remain for her of Pao after the attack on the Washington District Library. Yara's story also reminds him that when he was living with his grandparents he was happy. This memory can finally "jar him out of the quietness from which he had been speaking" (p.208) and allow him to experience an emotion other than zeal. The catharsis he experiences in telling his story, plus his slow recognition of Suttu's own pain, enables him to recall the principles of the Telling. Certainly, their interaction reaches the point where Suttu realises that Yara "had to become what he was.... But I think all that really makes sense to him is the Telling" (p.236-237). It is thus that Suttu finally comes to understand the Telling as a way to accepting, understanding and loving the Other. As Baccolini claims, Suttu and Yara "engage in a utopian process of memory and telling that leads to awareness and an acceptance of individual moral responsibility and possible individual and collective action" (p.128).

Suttu's realisation of the importance of each individual's story in creating society emphasises Le Guin's rejection of Othering: at the very base of her utopian drive is the idea of many different parts working together to form the



greater whole. On one level, Sutty's memories, the narration of her experiences, and the stories told by the Akans she befriends (and by Yara in particular), enact this ideal in *The Telling*. The text as a whole, though, shows that any kind of hierarchical thinking causes imbalance and disharmony, whether on the largest planetary scale of Unist or Corporation State policies, or on the smallest individual scale. Le Guin demonstrates this when Sutty realises that the greatest tragedy of Aka is that from

a great consensual social pattern within which each individual sought physical and spiritual satisfaction, they had made it a great hierarchy in which each individual served the indefinite growth of the society's material wealth and complexity. From an active homeostatic balance they had turned it to an active forward-thrusting imbalance. (p.111)

The opposition of balance and imbalance that she sees in Aka is felt also on Terra, except that the imbalance is not forward-thrusting, but backward-looking, as the Unists refuse technological progress in favour of their own monotheism.

\* \* \*

Baccolini calls *The Telling* a narrative which "counters dystopian pessimism with hope and responsibility",<sup>31</sup> arguing that "the bargaining meeting amongst representatives of the Ekumen, the Telling, and the Corporation opens a possible door toward utopia".<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Moylan suggests that "what we get in Le Guin's millennial fable ... is a critical dystopia with a strong utopian presence, one found not only in the actions of yet another opposition alliance but also ... in the power of a successful utopian post-state formation".<sup>33</sup> The reader does not, however, see the results of the Ekumen's attempt to bargain for the manuscripts of the Telling, leaving this hope elusive. Within the confines of the novel, then, the only real utopia is encapsulated in the Telling, and specifically in how it changes the perceptions of Sutty and Yara. While this philosophy outlines the kind of ethic of mutuality, respect and acceptance familiar to us from Plumwood's ecological thinking, it is not described in terms of the usual categories of race, class and gender as in Le Guin's earliest novels; it is described in terms of free access to knowledge, whether this be scientific or spiritual. Multiple viewpoints, a variety of information, and recognising that it is our responsibility to value that which is different, are our only hope, this novel suggests, of living by an ecological ethic. The very intangibility of this notion, which is only truly realised perhaps in Sutty and Yara, suggests even more strongly than before in Le Guin's oeuvre that this ideal is – as in any true utopia – as much a 'no place' as it is a 'good place'. This makes *The Telling*, despite its best attempts, the least optimistic of Le Guin's Hainish novels, providing as it does, a more elusive way to combat the fear of the Other than the earlier novels of the Ekumen: here it

is the individual's responsibility to change rather than a utopian body like the Ekumen to impose, suggesting that it is through such story-telling as this that we have the almost indefinable hope of finding a way to live by an ecological ethic.

# (ENDNOTES)

- 1 Ursula K. Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown", in Susan Wood, ed., *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (London: Women's Press, 1979), pp. 86-102 at p. 100.
- 2 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Telling* (New York: Harcourt, 2000).
- 3 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (St Albans: Harper & Row, 1974).
- 4 Ursula K. Le Guin, *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (New York: HarperPrism, 1995).
- 5 The connection between Le Guin's writing and ecocriticism has been noted by others. See, for example, Patrick D. Murphy, "The Non-Alibi of Alien Scapes: SF and Ecocriticism" in Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, eds., *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 263-278; Susan Palwick, "Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Earthsea Trilogy*" in George Hart and Scott Slovic, eds., *Literature and the Environment* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2004), pp. 69-80; Werner Christine Mathison, "The Underestimation of Politics in Green Utopias: The Description of Politics in Huxley's *Island*, Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, and Callenbach's *Ecotopia*" *Utopian Studies* 12.1 (2001), pp. 56-78; Deirdre Byrne, "Woman's World: Defamiliarization in Ursula Le Guin's Representation of 'Nature'." *Literature, Nature and the Land: Ethics and Aesthetics of the Environment*, Papers given at the Annual Conference of the Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa, University of Zululand, 7-10 July 1992, (Ngoye: University of Zululand, 1993), pp. 351-358; as well as Kathryn Ross Wayne, *Redefining Moral Education: Life, Le Guin and Language* (San Francisco: Austin & Winfield, 1996).
- 6 Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 7 See for example, Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
- 8 Plumwood, op. cit., p. 42.
- 9 Ursula K. Le Guin, "Woman/Wilderness", in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, (London: Grove, 1989), pp. 161-164, at p. 161.
- 10 Karla Armbruster, "'Buffalo Gals, Won't you Come Out Tonight': A Call for

Boundary-Crossing in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism", in Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy, eds., *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 97-122, at p.103. Ecofeminism has been used as an effective lens to analyse Le Guin's work, but I have chosen to use ecological philosophy rather as I feel that so-called ecofeminist analyses tend to emphasise environment and gender issues over other forms of Othering, such as class and race. Ecology, with its emphasis on web-like relationships is hopefully a better metaphorical expression of a way to combat all types of Othering.

11 Plumwood, op. cit., 55.

12 Plumwood, op. cit., 59.

13 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Ace, 1969), p. 199 (original italics).

14 In this definition I follow that of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1990), which cites ethic as "a set of moral principles" and ethics as "the science of morals in human conduct" and "rules of conduct".

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Ace, 1969), p. 35 (original italics).

16 Thomas P Moylan, "The moment is here ... and it's important': State, Agency, and Dystopia in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling*", in Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan eds., *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 135-153, at p. 149.

17 Rafaella Baccolini, "A Useful Knowledge of the present is rooted in the past': Memory and Historical Reconciliation in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling*", in Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds., *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 113-134, at p. 114. The Vietnam War is the spark behind Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (Originally in *Again, Dangerous Visions*, Doubleday, 1972) and the Chinese cultural revolution and its impact on Tibet in the case of *The Telling* (Baccolini, op. cit., p. 114). See also Moylan, op.cit., p. 149 and Ursula K. Le Guin "The Questions I get Asked Most Often", in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), pp. 261-282, at p. 279.

18 Le Guin, "The Questions", p. 279.

19 Baccolini, op. cit., p. 113.

20 Baccolini, op. cit., p. 114.

21 Baccolini, op. cit., p. 122.

22 Plumwood, op. cit., p. 60.

23 In 1990, Elizabeth Cummins criticised Le Guin because the Hainish universe is "male-dominated, and its main characters are heroes who 'save' the world with their knowledge of technology and their positions of power" (see, Elizabeth Cummins, "The Land-Lady's Homebirth: Revisiting Ursula K. Le Guin's Worlds" in *Science-Fiction Studies* 17.2 (1990), pp. 153-166, at p. 157). Although Le Guin has experimented with female protagonists in her short stories and novellas, Suttie is the first female protagonist in her full-length Hainish novels. Significantly, her name recalls the Hindu practice of 'suttee', in which a woman immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Suttie's refusal to sacrifice her life following the death of her lover is perhaps Le Guin's attempt at a feminist reinscription of the name.

24 Le Guin is never explicit about whose God the Unists worship. It could quite easily be that of the Muslims, Jews or any other monotheistic religion, but the importance of the West in their power-base, and the reference to Father John (p.231), suggests that the Unists may be Christian. Whatever real or imaginary religion is intended, however, the point is the narrow-mindedness of the Unists and their lust for power.

25 Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: McClelland and Stewart, 1985).

26 See, for example, *The Dispossessed* and *The Word for World is Forest*, op. cit.

27 This is not an uncommon correlation in Le Guin's work. As Murphy has pointed out, the picture of Terra at the end of *The Dispossessed* suggests that "[d]evastating the planet will lead ... not only to human self-destruction but also to the loss of human freedom" (op. cit., p. 265).

28 Moylan, op. cit., p. 149.

29 Writing in 1975, John Huntington claimed that Le Guin tends "to envision a primitive economy as the main salvation from the modern, technological, imperialist state". See John Huntington, "Public and Private Imperatives in Le Guin's Novels", in R. D. Mullen and Darko Suvin, eds., *Science-Fiction Studies: Selected Articles on Science Fiction 1973-1975* (Boston: Gregg Press, 1976), p. 267-273, at p. 271. Although there is this element of acceptance should technology prove to provide a better product than the traditional ways, there is nonetheless still the same emphasis on the 'primitive' as salvation in the Telling.

30 Jessie Lawson, "Review: *The Telling*", *Cultural Analysis* 3 (2002), pp. R17-R23, at p. R20.

31 Baccolini, op. cit., p. 124.

32 Ibid.

33 Moylan, op. cit., p. 150.

# Where have all the Ripleys gone?

Dean Conrad

When French magician-turned-filmmaker, Georges Méliès, sent men into space for his 1902 film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* the women's roles were simple: glamorous earthbound assistants and beautiful moon-dwelling Selenites - played by the *Corps de Ballet du Châtelet*.<sup>1</sup> No female scientists or astronauts here, and perhaps no surprise either. Things have moved on since then - but maybe not as far as we might like to think.

## Gender through genre

There have of course been many developments in female representation since those days when science fiction film merely held a mirror up to society: a backdrop for flimsy plots showcasing fantastical new 'inventions' and 'discoveries'. Women came through their assistant-to-scientist and love-interest stages of the 1920s and 30s; through the monster-fodder days of the 1940s and the domestic drudgery of the 50s; their sexual objectification or virtual anonymity in the late 60s and early 70s, and onto Sigourney Weaver's landmark role as Ellen Ripley in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). But where are the Ripleys now? What is her legacy for the new century? The post-*Alien* period inevitably saw Ripley's direct influence on a number of films - from *The Terminator* (1984) through *A.P.E.X.* (1994) and back again for three *Alien* sequels (1986, 1992, 1997). Indirect influence can be detected through prominent female roles in films like *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), *Total Recall* (1990), and *Tank Girl* (1995); however, with the possible exception of Trinity in *The Matrix* series (1999, 2003, 2003), female representation in the genre appears to have gone through a period of decline, with women's roles drifting into the background again. It seems to have settled into what the late feminist writer, Marilyn French, might have described as a 'don't-rock-the-boat' mode.

For some, then, the high profile return of one of science fiction film's iconic female characters might have held more promise than most. Fifty seven years after Patricia Neal's Helen Benson saved the world in Robert Wise's 1951 genre classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Scott Derrickson 'reimagined' the film for the new century - with Jennifer Connelly in the seminal role. David Scarpa's



2008 screenplay places Benson front and centre in a big-budget Hollywood film<sup>2</sup> presenting her as a successful career scientist. So, is this where we should be looking for Ripley's 21<sup>st</sup> century legacy?

## Professional role

Connelly's Helen Benson is an astrobiologist. A professor at Princeton, she seems to have moved on from her role as secretary in 1951. However, despite Germaine Greer noting that "[t]he most overt kind of handmaidenship is practised by secretaries",<sup>3</sup> the astrobiologist role does reflect its own genre restrictions. It betrays, albeit more subtly, a persistent notion that there are things that women can and can not be in science fiction film.

As female characters of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century graduated from being assistants to their scientist fathers or husbands, to become scientists themselves, they tended to specialise in what genre critics Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin describe as the 'soft sciences': disciplines taking animals, plants or people as subjects.<sup>4</sup> The female scientist in science fiction film does not generally crunch numbers or blast atoms using computers or physics ('hard sciences'); instead she consorts with Mother Nature using biology and psychology. We see her early on as a psychologist in *Invaders from Mars* (1953), and later as a psychiatrist in *Shirley Thompson Versus the Aliens* (1968) and *The Invasion* (2007).<sup>5</sup> She's an anthropologist in *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1992), a palaeontologist in *Jurassic Park* (1993) and an archaeologist in *Stargate* (1994). Closer to Connelly's astrobiologist are the biologist in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) and a hydroponics expert in *Sunshine* (2008). Closer still is the marine-biologist, seen in *2010* (1984), *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986) and *Sphere* (1998). And she's another astrobiologist in *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), a film directed by Robert Wise twenty years after his genre début with *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.<sup>6</sup>

But is it really so unreasonable for screenwriter Scarpa to present Helen Benson, the central human character in a 2008 tale about extra-terrestrial visitors, as an astrobiologist? Perhaps not, but consider Nicholas Cage's character in *Knowing*, a 2009 tale about extra-terrestrial visitors. He is an astrophysicist. Jeff Goldblum's character in *Independence Day*, the 1996 blockbuster about extra-terrestrial visitors, is a computer specialist and in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), Richard Dreyfuss plays an engineer. All 'hard' scientists. Back in the 1950s, Professor Quatermass was a rocket scientist, and the only scientist to meet the extra-terrestrial visitor in the original *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was Sam Jaffe's Einstein-styled theoretical physicist.

Petty as this distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences may seem, it points to an implicit expectation about female scientists in the genre. In *Feminism Confronts Technology*, Judy Wajcman observes that "the traditional conception

of technology is heavily weighted against women",<sup>7</sup> which she later links with computer science and "the obsession with control".<sup>8</sup> This theme drives Peter Biskind's suggestion that Dr Patricia Medford, Joan Weldon's strong, independent entomologist (working with her scientist father) in *Them!* (1954), is not there to celebrate women, but rather to underscore "a paranoid fantasy of a world dominated by predatory females".<sup>9</sup> But times had changed and a pragmatic approach was required: "[b]etter give an inch than lose a mile, better let Pat Medford assert herself, or face a far more serious challenge to male power in the future".<sup>10</sup>

Connelly's astrobiologist role may appear to be a step forward for Benson, but, by continuing the practice of restricting the scope of female science, Derrickson's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* gives with one hand and takes with the other. It appears that a glass ceiling still governs the roles that women can play. The ceiling may have been raised over the years (and penetrated on occasion), but it's still there: a remnant of the perennial concern that genre film needs to underpin or balance its unfamiliar fictional elements with a familiar or 'acceptable' reality. It needs what film theorist Christian Metz identified as a "...set of ground rules... ..laid down at the outset...".<sup>11</sup> This is largely how science fiction film has worked since Méliès and others were writing the rules back in 1902. Crudely put, the more aberrant the fiction (a trip to the moon), the more demands on the *mise en scène* to present a familiar, traditional, even magnified, version of social reality. Enter the *Corps de Ballet*. They help towards what Annette Kuhn calls "...limiting the risk, of the new, the unexpected: a kind of contract between the film industry and the cinema audiences...".<sup>12</sup>

Of course, as the science fiction genre and its themes became more familiar, film makers could afford to loosen their conservative grip a little; couple this with changes in society itself, and development in female representation was inevitable. But science fiction films cost a lot to make, tempting their producers to retreat more readily into the safety of traditional - even conservative - representation. If there is a danger that audiences will reject a female physicist, then stick to biology. If promotion to professional scientist pulls the female role away from an ethos in which "working class women remain[ed] symbols of an idea of motherhood, nurture, suffering, labour, strength and earthiness",<sup>13</sup> then pull her back with a reference to nature, Mother Nature. Let the women be biologists - or astrobiologists.

Exceptions to this hard/soft, male/female scientist convention exist in science fiction film, but they are few and they generally avoid risk. Alfre Woodward's rocket engineer in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) is supported by perhaps Hollywood's strongest franchise. Jodie Foster's SETI radio astronomer in *Contact* (1997) is supported by the success of Carl Sagan's original novel<sup>14</sup> - and perhaps bolstered by a perception that a scientist searching for extra-terrestrial intelligence is really just looking for little green men.<sup>15</sup> By and large, as science fiction films become more expensive to make, the retreat to 'safe',

tested ground is more pronounced.

Back in 1979, Ripley rocked the boat, but women's roles were clearly never going to drive inexorably towards leaner, meaner, stronger, faster, tougher, more independent women. That might have endangered the ship entirely. Instead, we have seen a reversion towards a safe zone: a 'happy' medium between Georges Méliès and Ridley Scott. The resultant 'soft' scientist, personified in Helen Benson's astrobiologist, has itself become a genre stereotype: a shorthand compromise for 'acceptable' female representation which may ironically become as restrictive as the secretaries it seeks to replace.

## Social role

The 1951 Helen Benson is not just a secretary, she is also a mother; and therein lies the next problem for the modern screenwriter. Fifty or more years of movement away from Hollywood's "popular discourse celebrating domesticity and marriage..."<sup>16</sup> have opened this traditional role to accusations of overt gender stereotyping. Derrickson and Scarpa's answer has been an attempt to update the role. Patricia Neal's Benson is the war-widowed mother of Bobby - a reflection of a 1950s reality. Jennifer Connelly's Benson is also a war-widow, but this time she's the lone step-mother to Jacob, whose black father died in the Gulf War. By removing her status of birth mother, the 2008 film dilutes Benson's maternal role, consciously shifting her away from the stereotype. It then seeks to fill the gap by presenting her as a noble spirit for taking up the mantle of guardian to Jacob. This selfless image is then reinforced by Jacob's animosity towards her. There may be an attempt here to inject relationship tensions into the story. It may be a subtle development of the Klaatu-as-Christ analogy woven through the first film: Benson, a mother without conceiving, serving as the Virgin Mary.<sup>17</sup> It may just be a ruse to get a black face into the plot. Whatever its narrative justification or interpretation, the 2008 Benson/Jacob dynamic sits uncomfortably. Why? Because (and here's the irony) there is not enough familiar reality to underpin the relationship; too much has too been explained about Benson's situation and motive. The relationship between Bobby and his mother had been familiar and immediately accepted. In its apparent attempt to avoid having Connelly's Benson take this fully traditional role, her relationship with Jacob is over-complicated, adding epicycles upon epicycles as it aims for some 21<sup>st</sup> century notion of motherhood. As veteran US critic Roger Ebert notes, there's "...more detail than we require, I think; just 'her son' would have been fine..."<sup>18</sup> In effect, the sensibilities which restrict Benson's 2008 scientist role, dragging it *towards* the acceptability of the Mother Nature biased astrobiologist, are ironically reversed to drag the mother role *away* from the restrictive 1950s ideal of what feminist writers have dubbed "the myth of motherhood".<sup>19</sup>

In reality, perhaps, there should be no issue with presenting women as

mothers (or indeed secretaries and scientists) at all; if this reflects society then so be it. As Heather Barker has pointed out, “[i]f we cannot even portray on screen the myriad of personalities and accurate gender ratios relating to our own world, then how can we even begin to explore strange new ones?”<sup>20</sup> And besides, “[i]f women understand by emancipation the adoption of the masculine role then we are lost indeed”.<sup>21</sup> Benson’s employment as a secretary in the 1951 film is not measured to diminish her status, but rather to present a degree of ‘ordinariness’. The basic role of narrative fiction - and more so science fiction - is to imagine possibilities beyond reality; to juxtapose the ordinary with the extraordinary; to ask “what if...?”; to explore a character’s potential under given circumstances. This lies behind the strength of *The Terminator*, as it charts Sarah Connor’s conversion from diner waitress to guerrilla fighter. Likewise, North’s 1951 screenplay for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* feels refreshingly honest when it offers the maxim that society expects women to be mothers and secretaries, but can demand even more of them when the chips are down. Scarpa’s 2008 screenplay necessarily walks the modern tight-rope between familiar representation and gender sensitivities. In so doing, like many in the genre, it promises some degree of emancipation from the outset, but delivers so much less when those same chips are down. This distinction is important, for the value of a character is best measured not by its social role, but rather by its narrative function.

## Narrative function

Thirty seconds into the theatrical trailer for Irving Pichel’s 1950 science fiction film classic *Destination Moon* a caption card entices the feminist-minded viewer with: “Never before has any woman...”; the promise of female derring-do hangs for a moment, until dashed by the following card: “...sent her man on such an exploit!”<sup>22</sup> The secondary nature of the female role in science fiction cinema is thus writ large; it reflects a society, described by Germaine Greer as one in which “[t]he ancillary aspect of woman’s work is almost universal”.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of Helen Benson, in the context of 1950s science fiction film, is clear: she stands in stark contrast to other women of the genre, who - whilst visible - remained objects rather than subjects of the narrative.<sup>24</sup> Benson’s importance to North’s 1951 screenplay is indicated further by her complete absence from his source material: Harry Bates’ “Farewell to the Master”. In fact this short story, first published in the January 1940 edition of *Astounding Stories of Science Fiction*,<sup>25</sup> contains no female characters at all - not even ancillary roles. Klaatu himself appears 14,500 words into the 15,800 word text. Instead, the central characters are press photographer/narrator, Cliff Sutherland, and his primary subject: the robot Gnut.

“Farewell to the Master” wraps an imaginative conceit inside the simple



question, 'What if an alien visitor came to Earth?'. The question is answered before the story begins: the humanoid alien Klaatu has been shot dead soon after appearing from his spaceship. The reader is expected to assume that the story's title refers to the death of Klaatu; however, when the alien is resurrected by Gnut at the end of the story, the robot makes it clear, in a reveal of the narrative conceit, that he is in control. The title of the story is explained in Bates' haunting final words, "You misunderstand," the mighty robot had said. 'I am the master'". The premise is simple: Gnut has created Klaatu.

A robot challenging the sovereignty of God was never going to get past the US film censors, whose Breen Production Code included amongst its many prohibitions the use of terms like "God", "Lord", "Jesus" and "Christ".<sup>26</sup> North, therefore, sidesteps the issue by making his robot (renamed Gort, presumably to make it easier for the actors) a robot policeman, ceded power and authority to dispense summary justice by Klaatu's humanoid alien race. Despite this concession, the censorship office still balked at Gort's "power of life and death", and so this is eventually ceded to a god, under the guise of "the almighty spirit".<sup>27</sup> Having reduced the robot's significance, North then ushers Klaatu, played by Michael Rennie, to the centre of his screenplay. North justifies Klaatu's increased importance, and fills the narrative gap left by Bates, by inventing a reason for Klaatu and Gort's visit to Earth. Klaatu is an alien ambassador with an ultimatum to deliver to the now nuclear-armed human race: embrace peace or be destroyed. Klaatu's threat is reinforced by the benign but awesome show of strength which gives the film its title.

Having shifted the emphasis of his story from Gort-as-master to Klaatu-as-emissary, screenwriter North sees dramatic tension in the balance of power between robot and alien. He then sets out to upset this balance of power, and add to the tension, by creating a new character: enter Helen Benson. Initially, this is a passive role: with no political or scientific agendas, Patricia Neal's Benson (with Bobby) presents humanity's guileless, caring face. But this in turn subtly dilutes Klaatu's moral power. Rennie's character can no longer take the high ground and treat the human race as a single entity bent on war. Klaatu's ultimatum loses impact in the face of Benson's natural actions and attitudes. The woman becomes the film's human voice of reason - a mediator in the traditions of Maria in the genre classic, *Metropolis* (1926).<sup>28</sup> The importance of this narrative function to the development of the female role in science fiction film and television should not be underestimated. Indeed the influence of Helen Benson can be seen over forty years later in the fourth incarnation of the *Star Trek* television series, *Voyager* (1996-2001<sup>29</sup>). Kate Mulgrew's performance as the series' first female captain,<sup>30</sup> Kathryn Janeway, has striking similarities to Patricia Neal's own performance - in voice, appearance and certain strong - dare we say - 'mothering' nature. Described by Mulgrew as "the quintessential woman of the future",<sup>31</sup> Captain Janeway exudes calm confidence.<sup>32</sup> Mulgrew's performance (especially vocally) also draws references to Katharine Hepburn,



who had already influenced the casting of Neal in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* - after Hepburn's regular screen partner, Spencer Tracey, was slated to play Klaatu.<sup>33</sup> Hepburn's reputation as a strong, independent 'outsider'<sup>34</sup> is clearly reflected in Neal's Helen Benson.

Performances, screenplay and direction combine to offer what John Baxter recognised as the "...believable relationship with a young Washington widow... ..and her son"<sup>35</sup> that encourages Klaatu to trust Benson enough to invest her with real power to save the human race. As the untimely death of Klaatu would trigger Gort's programmed response - to destroy the Earth - the alien gives Benson the ability to stop the robot, crucially sharing his own power with her. When Klaatu is subsequently killed by the (male) military, Benson exercises this transferred power by delivering the classic line, "Gort, Klaatu barada nikto".<sup>36</sup> She combines free will with a considerable amount of bravery, and saves the world. North has turned a simple tale about a robot with the sole power of creation into to a film about interdependence and the balance of power. Helen Benson's role within this narrative is crucial.

By contrast, in the 2008 reinvention of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Benson is not crucial. But before we mourn the demise of another female character, consider this: nor is Klaatu. In an ecologically updated story, the aliens have decided not to waste time on an ultimatum at all; they have already resolved to save Earth by purging it of the destructive presence of the human race. Gort is again invested with apocalyptic powers; a number of spaceships have been deployed to transport the more deserving species, ark-like, off the planet; and Klaatu's role is to... well, that's the point: Klaatu, played here by Keanu Reeves, doesn't really have a role anymore. With his mission to deliver the ultimatum, so crucial to North's narrative, removed, there is no reason for Reeves' Klaatu to demonstrate whatever awesome power he may have at his disposal by making the Earth stand still. This in turn removes the impact of the film's title. As film critic Kim Newman points out, "...the Earth stands still as an afterthought".<sup>37</sup>

Ray Bradbury had recognised the crucial role played by Klaatu's ultimatum when he came to write a sequel to Wise's original film back in 1981. Bradbury's curious, incomplete script outline, *The Evening of the Second Day*, imagines a visit to Earth by Klaatu's daughter, Klaata, here to assess Earth's progress and to reiterate her father's ultimatum.<sup>38</sup> Bradbury knows that a show of strength is crucial to his own drama, but he can't repeat North's Earth-standing-still sequence, so he has Klaata demonstrate an ability to 'un-invent' things. She begins fairly innocuously with needles, but follows this with a threat to un-invent oil - and so plunge humanity back into the stone age. Incidentally, Bradbury's sequel also further reduces the significance of Gort. Only the robot's heart appears in this screenplay - a six inch "cube of pure glowing illumination", marking the time left for humans to complete the tasks set by Klaatu and Klaata.

By making the paralysis of Earth merely the result of what the revealing blurb on the back of the Blu-ray packaging calls "...an unstoppable series of

events...”,<sup>39</sup> the 2008 film rejects the dramatic tension of the original’s power balance in favour of “[e]pic action and mind blowing effects...”. In fact, we discover towards the end of Derrickson’s film that Reeves’ Klaatu doesn’t really have any power, or at least he’s not sure if he has the power to stop Gort. And if Klaatu doesn’t have any influence, there is nothing for him to pass on to Benson. There is no balance of power, no transfer; in fact he takes the famous line “Klaatu barada nikto” for himself. Dramatic tension is created in 1951 by a simple and real threat: if Klaatu dies, the Earth will be destroyed; only Neal’s Benson can stop that from happening. By 2008, Benson’s central narrative function is reduced from saving the world to patching up her relationship with Jacob - to becoming a better mother. About the only time Connelly’s Benson actively affects the story is when she helps Klaatu to escape from a military facility at the beginning of the film. But this action comes from nowhere; like her loyalty to Jacob, it is unexplained, used here as a narrative ploy to shove Klaatu out into the wider world. Benson, like so many of her 1950s forebears, remains an object rather than a subject of the narrative. She is ancillary.

In making a conscious decision to return all power to Gort (the focal point of the original “Farewell to the Master”) Scarpa’s screenplay ditches the premise originally created by North to justify drawing Klaatu out of the margins of Bates’ short story in the first place. With no power balance left to bind Klaatu and Gort’s narratives together, the only thing left to Scarpa is to return Klaatu to the periphery and to split his film into two. As a result, Reeves’ Klaatu wanders around in the shadows, where he and Benson are variously chased and courted by the authorities in an echo of John Carpenter’s *Starman* (1984). Meanwhile, Gort splits into trillions of nanobots which ravage Earth’s human infrastructure in a display of CGI destruction which completely misreads the effectiveness of the benign menace - the mere suggestion of awesome power - which underpins Wise’s film and Bradbury’s sequel.

In his *Sight & Sound* review of Derrickson’s film, Kim Newman draws attention to the ‘overselling’ of the religious angle - a development of the Christian references in Wise’s film. In 1951, Klaatu had been a listener, prepared, Jesus-like (he adopts the name ‘Carpenter’), to learn and respond to Benson’s actions and attitudes. By 2008, Benson’s power to influence the visitor(s) is diminished by Klaatu’s role as a puppet - a cipher performing miracles for his destructive masters. Conscious of the need for a CGI-heavy climax, Derrickson’s film reverts to the ‘fire and brimstone’ God of the Old Testament. As a result, Benson is pushed further towards the sidelines, as the film leans on what Mary Daly has described as “the biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will...”.<sup>40</sup> Benson, a woman, has little chance of prevailing against that, for as Camille Paglia asserts, “Genesis is rigid and unjust... It remade the world by male dynasty, cancelling the power of mothers”.<sup>41</sup> This is Judgement Day.

In the end, Reeves’ Klaatu does manage to curb Gort’s apocalyptic power, but

it is not clear to us how he does it; it is not clear even to Klaatu how he does it. In fact it may well be nothing to do with him at all. It is certainly nothing to do with Helen Benson. Patricia Neal's sceptical, sensible and essential secretary has become Jennifer Connelly's impetuous, irrational and redundant scientist.

### Re-imagining the past

Many critics and commentators down the years have praised Robert Wise's film, citing it as a genre classic. Veteran film journalist John Brosnan is not wholly complimentary, but even he has called it "...more sophisticated in style than most 1950s sf movies";<sup>42</sup> Arthur C. Clarke listed it in his top ten science fiction films;<sup>43</sup> and Peter Biskind describes it as "...a positive, enlightened and even radical film".<sup>44</sup> Mark Jancovich is a notable detractor, his academic reading taking a view that the film offers an authoritarian narrative in which "...science is presented as the only potential saviour of humanity".<sup>45</sup> But despite some agreement from Brosnan and John Clute,<sup>46</sup> Jancovich is in the minority. Wise's film has on the whole been a huge critical success. Scott Derrickson's remake is too new to have generated much academic commentary, but judging by the number of negative or lukewarm critical responses,<sup>47</sup> it seems unlikely that his film will be cited as a classic in fifty years' time. Brian Webster's opinion is typical: "It's the sort of movie that will do a perfectly acceptable job of filling an evening that otherwise might be empty... ..but it certainly doesn't amount to any more than that".<sup>48</sup> So what is the problem? In short: it's a modern remake.

Of course, this is not the first remake to be considered inferior to its well-loved and fondly-remembered model; in fact, it's rare for any remake to be considered better than the original. Perhaps this is why the term 'remake' seems to have disappeared from the Hollywood vernacular. *Planet of the Apes* (2001) started it for science fiction film by being 'reimagined' by Tim Burton; for its eleventh movie incarnation *Star Trek* (2009) was 'reinvented';<sup>49</sup> and *Total Recall* - already a re-hash of a Philip K. Dick novella<sup>50</sup> - is being 'rebooted' for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>51</sup> This re-visiting seems to be a wider 21<sup>st</sup> century trend, for: *The Matrix* sequel was 'reloaded', *Apocalypse Now* was 'redux'ed, and Barack Obama's first visit to Russia was the 'reset' summit.<sup>52</sup>

'Reinvention' offers a safety valve for the film studio; it provides an opportunity to respond to the inevitable remake detractors with 'don't even compare this to the original; it's a reimagining for our time'. However, by retaining the title and skeleton of the original, remake studios are disingenuous: they are clearly trading on the success of the classic, hoping for a little of its stardust to fall in the box office. But given the failure rate of the remake, why do studios keep plugging away? Again, it comes down to money.

It's ironic that the need to recoup science fiction's inevitably big budgets encourages an aversion to risk and a fear of experimentation that then stifles

potentially the most imaginative of genres. Add to this an expectation that expensive films will deliver greater visual impact and we come up against the 'ideas vs. image' battle that has hamstrung so many science fiction films - originals and remakes.<sup>53</sup> In a press release for the planned remake of *Total Recall*, producer Neal Moritz said "...he hoped the advancements in technology and state-of-the-art visual effects can help tell the 'Recall' story in a fresh way".<sup>54</sup> It's doubtful whether CGI has this power, but Neal knows that punters want to see the money on the screen, and producers want to show it. All else is secondary.

This truism is no clearer than in the 'homage' feature that followed Derrickson's remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. In 2008 The Asylum, a US production company known for its reduced-budget versions of Hollywood blockbusters,<sup>55</sup> produced *The Day the Earth Stopped*. It's not very good, but like many artistic rip-offs (and spoofs), it does focus on the preoccupations of its subject. In this case, the film directs most of its budget at the wanton destruction of America by the alien robot visitors - a clear reference to Derrickson's film. The reason for opening *The Asylum's* budget remake with a naked female alien is less clear - a reference to *Species* (1995), perhaps. Robert Wise's original generated its own reworking in 1954, the low-budget British effort *The Stranger from Venus*. Again, this homage considers the central elements of the original; this time budgets are smaller and so the focus is small and familiar: the relationship between the benign alien visitor and human female, with "...the action claustrophobically confined to a small inn".<sup>56</sup> The parallels with Wise's film are further reinforced by Patricia Neal's appearance as the human woman.

In her now-classic study of American science fiction film, *Screening Space*, Vivian Sobchack argues that it is "...logical that the low-budget films, deprived of their special effects and consequently grand flamboyant images, would try to locate their 'science fiction-ness' in the spoken word".<sup>57</sup> North's screenplay would be about the ideas, an exploration of science fiction itself, in the way that Scarpa's never could be. Derrickson's remake is just too expensive to allow this to happen. The studio's need to get the cash on the screen and then back into the bank, coupled with the desire reinvent a classic, leaves Scarpa with little wiggle room.

It is worth noting that Wise's 1951 film was not immune to the restrictions of Hollywood's 'ideas vs. image' ethos. For whilst the director - as editor on Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) - was well used to bucking trends, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox's promoters were not. They chose to play safe with *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, pandering to the expectations of the audience with posters depicting Benson as a victim: she is the traditional damsel in distress, screaming or being carried by Gort. As Bruce Lanier Wright observes, these posters are "...somewhat more conventional than the film itself".<sup>58</sup> Hardly an honest sell, the posters represent a retreat into conservatism by a studio not entirely convinced by what its artists had created. By contrast, the posters for the 2008 film are more honest. Various versions highlight the visual effects, Gort



and Klaatu (or rather Keanu Reeves), but Connelly's Benson is nowhere to be seen - an open reflection of her (lack of) importance to the narrative, but also perhaps an indication of the expectations of a 21<sup>st</sup> century cinema audience.

There are of course dangers inherent in using one example to signify a trend - in any discipline. However, we appear to be far enough into a trend in commercial cinema for us to regard the 2008 remake of *The Day The Earth Stood Still* as representative of a move away from high profile female characters who drive the narrative of science fiction films.

Looking back, the years between 1979 (*Alien*) and 1997 (*Alien Resurrection*) seem to have been a 'golden age' for women. Not just because Ripley led the way with guns, guts and attitude, but because her success in this most 'male' of genres blurred the distinctions between masculine and feminine, opening more roles to women generally. As has been noted earlier, the era promised - and delivered - a great deal: *The Terminator* films, *Contact*, *Star Trek: First Contact*, the *Alien* films, *The Abyss* (1989) and others. Even *Tank Girl* (1995), not a critical or commercial success,<sup>59</sup> highlighted a leaning towards female protagonists. It might, however, be argued that the failure of this film also helped to hasten the eventual retreat into 'safe' territory.

1997 saw the release of the fourth *Alien* film, *Alien Resurrection*. By now, Ripley is not only driving the narrative, she is the narrative. All other aspects of the film are subjugated to Ripley's story - even the alien. The series had been showing a self-awareness since *Aliens* (1986); it was now confident enough to mock itself and to tackle multiple issues: gender, race, sexuality, feminism, disability, cloning and even inter-taxa hybridisation.

However, post-1997 the primary protagonist roles, pioneered by characters like Helen Benson and consolidated by Ripley, seemed to dry up - at least in the high-profile blockbusters. *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003) does experiment with a malevolent female cyborg, played by Kristanna Loken, but this film also shifts the series' emphasis away from Sarah Connor onto John Connor. This male emphasis is carried into *The Terminator* spin-off television series, which, despite being subtitled *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*,<sup>60</sup> progressively charts the travails of John Connor, his father and his uncle.<sup>61</sup> It is true that this series also develops the notion of the female cyborg - played here by Summer Glau - but her character increasingly becomes a pawn in a male power-struggle; she rarely drives the narrative. Turning back to recent cinema, Glau's character, River Tam, in *Serenity* (2005), Joss Whedon's epilogue to his television series *Firefly* (2002), has some interesting traits (not least her fighting skills that eventually save the day) but ultimately she too is a pawn in a struggle between male characters. This kind of male power struggle is wittily observed sixty-six minutes into Stephen Hopkins' 1998 film version of the classic 1960s television series *Lost in Space*. Dr Maureen Robinson breaks up an argument between her husband and a young space pilot; she chastises them both with:



...here we are, stranded on an alien world, and you boys wanna get into a pissing contest?... Now, if you've finished hosing down the decks with testosterone, I suggest you come with me. I may have found a way to get us off this planet.

Despite the promise of this scene, and some other strong female Robinson roles, *Lost in Space* develops firmly into a male-dominated Freudian-esque exploration of the relationships between fathers and sons.

Possibly the most high-profile female character of the post-1997 period has been Carrie-Anne Moss' tough, intelligent, motorcycle riding, leather-clad martial-arts expert Trinity in *The Matrix* series. She begins the saga as a guide to the digital world of the Matrix for Keannu Reeves' hero, Neo. In light of the 'hard'/'soft' scientist discussion above, it is worth noting that Trinity is a talented computer programmer; however, she quickly becomes identified as Neo's love-interest. As the series progresses, Trinity and the other characters become increasingly ancillary to Neo's rise to Christ-like status.

Even closer inspection of post-1997 films with potentially promising titles like *The Astronaut's Wife* (1999) and *The Time Traveller's Wife* (2009) reveals narratives in which the female role is ancillary to the exploits of the male astronaut and the male time traveller.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps those titles are a giveaway after all.

All of this adds up to - or at least reflects - the role we see taken by Helen Benson in the 2008 remake of *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. That is: a female character with apparent prominence, but with little power to influence the narrative. Benson's ground-breaking role in 1951 had offered so much promise, but it was not to be. Whilst she foreshadowed developments in the narrative role of women in science fiction film, studio fears and perceptions of audience expectations ultimately prevailed: Helen failed to begin a 1950s revolution leading directly to Ellen Ripley. Ripley's appearance did begin a trend; her shadow was longer, but the release of *Alien* (1979) coincided with the post *Star Wars* (1977) hike in science fiction budgets. While science fiction film remained big business, this was fine, but later studio conservatism again began to dilute female influence, and women's roles lost their edge. They fell back into a routine, eventually leaving Ripley like NASA's moon landing: a bright memory of a past glory.

It has been pointed out by feminist film theorist Constance Penley that when the apparent routine of NASA's space shuttle programme was shattered by the *Challenger* disaster in 1986, many of the cruellest jokes centred on Christa McAuliffe. She was a trail-blazer: figurehead of the 'teacher-in-space' programme designed to reignite public interest in the space programme as a whole. But she was also an outsider. As the first civilian to fly in the shuttle, she came from outwith NASA's traditional astronaut ranks. It was easy then for the public to imagine this new, aberrant element as the weak link, "...the vamp in

the machine, the female wrench in the works";<sup>63</sup> after all, every other shuttle mission had flown safely *without* a female civilian teacher onboard. Hence the jokes. We might imagine the same blame ethos to be rife in a Hollywood seemingly unable to reproduce the magic of yesteryear. It's easy to pin failure on aberrant elements like crazy non-conventional plot devices, black faces or women in men's roles. When the success of novelty wears off, it's easier to recoil and blame the new than to move on. And so two steps forward become one step back; the retreat deepens, innovation suffers and women are sidelined. Last in, first out.

This retreat signals a creative bankruptcy, emphasised by the growing number of 21<sup>st</sup> century science fiction and fantasy film sequels, prequels, and remakes, including: *Metropolis* (2001), *Solaris* (2002), *The Stepford Wives* (2004), *Alien vs. Predator* (2004), *War of the Worlds* (2005), *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005), *Slither* (2006), *The Invasion* (2007), *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008), *X-Men: Wolverine* (2009), *Westworld* (2009), *Dune* (2010\*), *Metropolis* (2010\*), *When Worlds Collide* (2010\*), *Short Circuit* (2010\*), *Logan's Run* (2010\*), *The Black Hole* (2010/11\*), *Buck Rogers* (2011\*), *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (2012\*), *Soylent Green* (2012\*) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* itself.<sup>64</sup>

Remakes can give the impression of a retreat into the past. They are the space shuttle missions of science fiction film: been there, done that. State-of-the-art visual effects, like Hubble images, look great, but they are not the story. The story of women in science fiction film may only move forward when the genre stops returning to low-Earth orbit. But this requires film makers to take risks, to look (like NASA) beyond even the Ripley/moon-landing glories to the stars and planets beyond. That will require a giant leap, but who in the current climate will make it?

The period 2009, 2010 and beyond offers some potential. Whilst the *Predator* (1987, 1990) sequel, *Predators* (2010), is hard to judge, *Pandorum* (2009) seems to offer a its own Ripley-styled character in the form of Antje Traue's Nadia.<sup>65</sup> The similarity with *Alien* continues with a plot which sees human characters wake from cryo-sleep to find their spaceship infested with aliens. William Thomas even entitles his *Empire* magazine pre-release feature 'No-one can hear you scream',<sup>66</sup> a clear reference to the famous *Alien* tagline 'In space no one can hear you scream'. James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) goes one better than *Pandorum* in the Ripley stakes by starring Sigourney Weaver herself, though not as Ripley; instead she is as a ('soft') eco-scientist on the alien world of... Pandora.

Real Ripley watchers may have to wait for the Ridley Scott directed *Alien* prequel, slated for 2011, and hope that there is a role for Weaver. Otherwise a further *Alien* film is rumoured, in which Ripley travels to the aliens' home planet for a final showdown. Other hopes for female roles to fill Ellen's (or even Helen's) boots may be pinned on Peter Burg's forthcoming remake of *Dune* (2010), with its powerful sisters of the Bene Gesserit; or even the rebooted *Total Recall*, with memories of Sharon Stone's kick-boxing spy/wife - a character formed in Ripley's

long shadow. Time will tell, but given the quality of recent narrative female roles - as highlighted by the remake of *The Day The Earth Stood Still* - this commentator is not optimistic.

# (ENDNOTES)

- 1 David Robinson, *George Méliès: Father of Film Fantasy* (London: MoMI/BFI, 1993), p. 40.
- 2 Estimated budget: US\$80million. Source: *The Internet Movie Database*, <imdb.com/title/tt0970416/business>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009.
- 3 Germain Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1972), p. 123 (original edition MacGibbon and Kee Ltd, 1970).
- 4 Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin. *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 136. Examples of 'hard' sciences proposed by Scholes and Rabkin include: 'physics and astronomy', 'computers', and 'thermodynamics'; the 'soft' sciences include 'biology' and 'psychology'.
- 5 A remake of the classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).
- 6 For a feminist reading of female scientists in ten science fiction films of the 1950s, see Bonnie Noonan, *Women Scientists in Fifties Science Fiction Films* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005).
- 7 Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 137 (original edition, 1991). In her text, Wajcman examines many of the relationships between "hard" sciences and gender.
- 8 Ibid., p. 141.
- 9 Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us To Stop Worrying About the Fifties* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 133. This patriarchal paranoia can be seen clearly in the 1958 film *Queen of Outer Space*.
- 10 Ibid., p. 133.
- 11 Christian Metz, 'The Fiction Film and its Spectator: A Metapsychological Study' Translated by Alfred Guzzetti, in Chritisian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and the Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 99-147 at p. 120. Also published in *New Literary History* VIII, no. 1 (1976): 75-105.
- 12 Annette Kuhn (ed.), *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 2. Original edition, 1990.
- 13 Linda Grant, *Sexing The Millennium: A Political History of the Sexual Revolution*. London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 33.
- 14 Carl Sagan, *Contact* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1985).
- 15 It should also be noted that one of the inspirations for the Jodie Foster character is reputed to be the American astronomer, Dr Jill Cornell Tarter, director of the SETI research centre.

16 Judith E. Smith, 'The Marrying Kind: Working-Class Courtship and Marriage in 1950s Hollywood' in Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar and Janice R. Welsch (eds.), *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 226-42 at p. 226.

17 Christian elements underpinning the original film have been recognised by a number of commentators, including: John Baxter, *Science Fiction in the Cinema* (London: Zwemmer, 1970); John Brosnan, *The Primal Screen: A History of Science Fiction Film* (London: Orbit, 1991), p. 61; Phil Hardy (ed.), *The Aurum Film Encyclopedia: Science fiction*. 2d ed. (London: Aurum Press, 1991), p. 127; James Pallot and the editors of CineBooks (eds.), *The Virgin film guide*. 3d edition (London: Virgin Books, 1994), p. 182; and Bruce Lanier Wright, *Yesterday's Tomorrows: The Golden Age of Science Fiction Movie Posters 1950-1964* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1993), p. 100. In *The Philosophy of Science Fiction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), volume editor Steven M. Sanders reports that this Christ analogy "...went right over the head of director Robert Wise, who has professed surprise that people read religious subtexts into the film", p. 4 (Sanders cites John Scalzi, *The Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies* [London: Rough Guides, 1997], p. 79.). However, it seems unlikely that a director as perceptive and accomplished as Wise could have missed the overt allusions in North's screenplay.

18 Roger Ebert, 'The Day The Earth Stood Still' Chicago Sun-Times movie review at [rogerebert.com](http://rogerebert.com), 10th December 2008, <[rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081210/REVIEWS/812109993/1023](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081210/REVIEWS/812109993/1023)>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

19 Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p. 186. For related discussions, such as social obligations tied to biological motherhood, see Nancy Chodorow, 'Mothering, Male Dominance, and Capitalism' in Zillah R. Eisenstein (ed.), *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1979), p. 83-106; Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1979), p. 73; and, for 'a survey of motherhood', Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London, Picador, 1988), pp. 501-542. Original edition, France: Gallimard, 1949.

20 Heather Barker, 'SFemale: Ladies First, Please!' in *Starburst*, Summer Special 12 (July 1992), pp. 9-14 at p. 14.

21 Greer, op. cit., p. 114.

22 Trailer included on the Blue Dolphin 1997 VHS release (BDV2002) of *Flight To Mars* (1951).

23 Greer, op. cit., p. 123.

24 Cf. Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 28.

25 Subsequently published in Raymond J. Healy and J. Francis McComas (eds.), *Famous Science-Fiction Stories: Adventures in Time and Space* (Canada: Random House, 1946), and in many further editions. Bates' text is apparently out of copyright and has been made available in various places on the internet.

- 26 Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 1105.
- 27 See: Brosnan, op. cit., p. 61; and Wright, op. cit., p. 100.
- 28 For a discussion on Maria and other female characters as mediators in science fiction film, see: Susan Thomas, 'Between the Boys and Their Toys: The Science Fiction Film' in Lucied Armitt (ed.), *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 109-122. edited by Lucie Armitt, 1991, London: Routledge.
- 29 These are the original US air dates.
- 30 *Star Trek* fans will correct this statement by citing Kirsty Alley's appearance as a trainee starship captain in *The Wrath of Khan* (1982); a nameless black female captain in *The Voyage Home* (1986); *The Next Generation* episode "Yesterday's Enterprise" (February, 1990) in which *Enterprise-C* is captained by Rachel Granthowever; and doubtless other examples; however, Janeway represents the franchise's first full-time female captain as a central character.
- 31 *Radio Times* (19-25 October 1996), p. 30.
- 32 Mulgrew's *Voyager* role also owes something to the female spaceship captain played by Helen Mirren in *1010* (1984), a role which may in turn have been a Hollywood response to astronaut Sally Ride's mission as the first American woman in space in 1981.
- 33 From a screen interview with producer Julian Blaustein in 'Making the Earth Stand Still' (original release, 1995), a Disc 2 featurette on the 2006 Cinema Reserve 2 DVD Special Edition of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951).
- 34 See: Sheridan Morley, *Katharine Hepburn: A Celebration* (London: Pavilion Books, 1989), ref. back cover.
- 35 Baxter, op. cit., p. 105.
- 36 See: Patricia Neal, with Richard Deneut, *As I am* (London: Arrow, 1989), p. 162.
- 37 Kim Newman, 'The Day the Earth Stood Still' review in *Sight & Sound* magazine (London: BFI, February 2009), p. 57.
- 38 This 45 page screenplay/outline (dated 10 March 1981) has not been officially published; it was commissioned by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox but never produced. The copyright status is unclear; however, versions of the text are readily available on the internet.
- 39 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, Region 2 PAL Blu-ray release, 20 April 2009, single disc version.
- 40 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), p. 13. Cf. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).



41 Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 40. Original edition, New Haven: Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990.

42 John Brosnan, *Future Tense: The Cinema of Science Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), p. 83.

43 Phil Hardy (ed.), *The Aurum Film Encyclopedia: Science Fiction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Aurum Press, 1991), p. 461.

44 Quoted in Jancovich, op. cit., p. 34.

45 Jancovich, op. cit., p. 45.

46 See: Brosnan, 1978, op. cit., p. 83; Brosnan, 1991, op. cit., p. 61; and John Clute and Peter Nicholls (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Orbit, 1993), p. 306.

47 For links to over 200 reviews for Derrickson's film, go to *The Internet Movie Database*, <[imdb.com/title/tt0970416/externalreviews](http://imdb.com/title/tt0970416/externalreviews)>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

48 Brian Webster, *Apollo Guide online*, <[apolloguide.com/mov\\_fullrev.asp?CID=5882&Specific=6850](http://apolloguide.com/mov_fullrev.asp?CID=5882&Specific=6850)>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

49 For examples, see: Mark Salisbury, *Planet of the Apes: Reimagined by Tim Burton* (London: Boxtree, 2001) and Said David, 'Trek Reimagined & Reinvented' at *ViewpointJournal.com*, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2009, <[viewpointjournal.com/archives/2009/05/11/trek-reimagined-reinvented](http://viewpointjournal.com/archives/2009/05/11/trek-reimagined-reinvented)>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

50 'We Can Remember it for You Wholesale' was first published in the April 1966 edition of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*; it is available in a number of anthologies, including one of the same name, Vol.5 of the Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick (London: HarperCollins, 1994). It inspired the 1990 film *Total Recall*.

51 See: Meredith Woerner, 'Total Recall Reboot Gets a Screenwriter, Let The Judging Begin' at *io9.com*, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2009, <[io9.com/5276721/total-recall-reboot-gets-a-screenwriter-let-the-judging-begin](http://io9.com/5276721/total-recall-reboot-gets-a-screenwriter-let-the-judging-begin)>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009; and Michael Hickerson, 'Wimmer Will Write 'Total Recall' Reboot' at *sliceofscifi.com*, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2009, <[sliceofscifi.com/2009/06/03/wimmer-will-write-total-recall-reboot](http://sliceofscifi.com/2009/06/03/wimmer-will-write-total-recall-reboot)>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

52 Jesse Lee, 'In Russia, Defining the Reset' at *The White House online*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2009, <[whitehouse.gov/blog/In-Russia-Defining-the-Reset](http://whitehouse.gov/blog/In-Russia-Defining-the-Reset)>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009. See also: 'Obama, Russia "reset" Cold War relations' at *ABC News online*, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2009, <[abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/07/07/2618529.htm](http://abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/07/07/2618529.htm)>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

53 This notion of 'ideas vs. image' has formed the basis of a number of discussions about the difference between science fiction literature and film. In her recent book, *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), Christine Cornea cites the work of Brooks

Landon in "...stressing the sovereignty of the *image* in film as opposed to the *idea* in science fiction literature..." (p.5.). Cornea also includes an interview with William Gibson, in which the writer argues that science fiction film has had more influence on fiction than the reverse. (pp. 26-28 at 27.).

54 *The Hollywood Reporter*, quoted in 'A Total Recall Remake is Very Real' at [comingsoon.net](http://comingsoon.net), 26<sup>th</sup> February 2009, <[comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=53284](http://comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=53284)>. Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

55 The Asylum's recent reduced-budget 'remakes' of Hollywood science fiction films include: *The Terminators* (2009), *Death Racers* (2008), *I Am Omega* (2007), and *Transmorphers* (2007).

56 Steve Chibnal, 'Alien Women: The Politics of Sexual Difference in British sf Pulp Cinema' in I. Q. Hunter (ed.), *British Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 57-74 at p. 62.

57 Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. (New York: Ungar, 1988), p. 158. Expanded version of Sobchack, *The Limits of Infinity* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co, 1980). Incidentally, Sobchack's now classic texts virtually ignore the place of women in the genre; this was rectified to a degree by her essay, 'The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film' in Kuhn, op. cit., pp. 105-15.

58 Wright, op. cit., p. 100.

59 According to *The Internet Database*, *Tank Girl* returned \$6.6million dollars at the box office worldwide, against a budget of \$25million. < [imdb.com/title/tt0114614/business](http://imdb.com/title/tt0114614/business)>, Accessed 9<sup>th</sup> October 2009. This figure does not include other business, such as video/DVD sales, merchandising and television rights.

60 Following NBC's 'reimagining' of *Bionic Woman* (2007).

61 This emphasis on John Connor is carried into the fourth feature film of the series, *Terminator Salvation* (2009).

62 This film version eschews the shared male/female first-person perspectives which form much of the interest in Audrey Niffenegger's well-received 2003 source novel of the same name.

63 Constance Penley, *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 23.

64 At the time of writing, the dates marked <sup>(\*)</sup> are unconfirmed. These films are in various stages of development and have yet to receive distribution slots. Nothing is fixed: a film version of the 1985 Orson Scott Card novel *Ender's Game* has been variously in and out of production since at least 2001; see: *Hollywood Creator's Directory: Producers*, [Hollywood: iFilm Publishing, 2001-02, 44<sup>th</sup> ed.], p. 38).

65 At the time of writing, *Pandorum* is on general release in the US, but not in the UK.

66 William Thomas, 'No-one Can Hear You Scream' in *Empire* magazine (October 2009), pp. 124-26.

# Fictional Islam: A Literary Review and Comparative Essay on Islam in Science Fiction and Fantasy

By Rebecca Hankins

Islam and the Arabic language have appeared in the science fiction and fantasy genres from their earliest known creation. This literature was produced in the Arab/Islamic world and expressed in a variety of formats such as storytelling, poetry, prose, and performance. These literary forms were central to the early culture of Islam and to the speed by which the Islamic faith was spread throughout the world. The literary term coined here is *fictional Islam*, which is used to define the various forms of speculative fiction by Muslim and non-Muslim writers who have used Islam and Muslims as characters, plots, or colorful backgrounds. Fictional Islam, similar to Latin American literature and international literature, often involves not only the futuristic, alternative or other-worldly type scenarios, but also includes stories rich in horror and the fantastic. The stories told by subjects of the royal court regaled audiences with tales of genies, magic, and the fantastic. These performances were highly sought after and drew spectators and admirers; their stories were retold many times and spread far and wide. Of these popularized texts, one in particular, *The Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights* have influenced the imaginations of not only children, but also adults from their earliest known renderings from 800-900 AD. These stories emerge not only as captivating tales of fantasy, adventure, and discovery, but also are the earliest examples of fictional Islam. This paper will provide a review of selected examples of scholarly writings on fictional Islam followed by an analysis of two international views on Muslims and Islam as reflected in similar science fiction texts, Brian Aldiss's *HARM* (2007)<sup>1</sup> and Ali Mazrui's *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971).<sup>2</sup>

## Origins of Fictional Islam

An often repeated saying of the Prophet Muhammad encourages Muslims to seek knowledge from the "cradle to the grave." Muslims are told to contemplate, think, learn, comprehend, and examine everything around them. Anas Al-Shaikh in his article "The Need for Education" explains how knowledge,

education, and the acquisition of learning, for Muslims, reinforces “the values of humanitarianism, morality, citizenship, peaceful coexistence, revulsion of racism and discrimination, acceptance of the ‘other’, and is married to actively taught skills of critical thinking and awareness”.<sup>3</sup> The vehicles through which these attributes are acquired are as diverse as the forms of knowledge are vast. As quoted on the Bangla science fiction webpage, a statement by the great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, “true science fiction could not really exist until people understood the rationalism of science and began to use it with respect in their stories”.<sup>4</sup> For the early Muslim communities, there was no conflict between science and religion, allowing for the free flow of scientific invention and innovation. According to I.A. Ibrahim in *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*, the spread of Islam coincides with “great advances in medicines, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, architecture, art, literature, and history... Sophisticated instruments which were to make possible the European voyages of discovery, such as the astrolabe, the quadrant, and good navigational maps, were developed by Muslims”.<sup>5</sup> By extension we could arguably conclude that the creation of these instruments has a direct correlation to the expansion of the literary heritage of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative writing as a whole. The astrolabe and the quadrant have been staples within the language of science fiction writing as is found in some of our popular science fiction television shows and movies such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *Dune*. The Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Gamma Quadrants and the astrolabe’s use by the ancient mariners or its use as spaceship monikers demonstrate the longevity of these early inventions and of their importance as tools of discovery. If people can now explore and discover new worlds with the use of these new tools, then stories of other worlds, stargazing, time travel experiences, and “first contacts” are not impossible.

One of the greatest examples of paranormal time travel is the account of the Prophet’s ascension from Jerusalem to Paradise while sitting in the Great Mosque in Jerusalem; for Muslims these ideas were neither strange nor foreign. Yusuf Nuruddin in his article, “Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology,” notes this episode as an inspiration for what he calls the science fiction motif, a belief system that inspires science fiction, although he personally sees “very little cosmology which can inspire works of Islamic science fiction”.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he maintains “...mythic literature and/or science fiction by and/or about Muslims need not rely upon Islamic cosmology”.<sup>7</sup> Nuruddin continues, “Some of the stories in this (Arabian Nights) collection, e.g. “The City of Brass” and “The Ebony Horse,” might be considered proto-science fiction...”<sup>8</sup> Often Muslim writers draw on these early prophetic parables and religious miracles in developing their science fiction and fantasy narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to Reuven Snir’s article titled, “The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature,” Arabic and Islamic science fiction and fantasy have been around from the known beginning of the genre. Snir advances the *Master*

*Narrative*<sup>10</sup> that equates the lack of Western scholarly analysis of Arabic science fiction as the absence of the works, "the scholarly academic research, especially in the West, has paid little or no attention to it".<sup>11</sup> Nuruddin has an answer to that charge, "Modern Arabic literature boasts the science fiction genre in short stories, novels and plays...much of which is relatively unknown to the West because it has not been widely translated".<sup>12</sup> As the review of scholarly writings will attest, the influence and production of fictional Islam has had a far reaching and varied history.

The resurgence of science fiction and fantasy writing in the Islamic world began in the late 1800s but has recently increased exponentially. Islamic writers have seen the influence and allure of video games, virtual worlds, comic and graphic novels; the need to shape these stories from an Islamic perspective has been an incentive for writers in the Muslim world to craft stories that capitalize on the genre casting Islam in a positive light. Many of the new Muslim writers see science fiction and fantasy as a vehicle to promote tolerance and peaceful co-existence, while simultaneously telling a good story. Particularly in these times where Muslims, today's enemy of choice, and the religion of over a billion people is the new *boogeyman*, these stories can be told from a unique vantage point. Science fiction, fantasy, horror, and comics offer ways of telling the varied stories within the Islamic community to highlight the similarities, celebrate the differences, and provide a perspective that harkens to the universality of Islam. These writings are attempting to become a part of the canon, by producing works that challenge the prevailing notions of science fiction and fantasy, encouraging spirited dialogue about identity and differences. Again, as the *Arabian Nights* article illuminates, Muslims and Islam have historically had and continue to influence speculative fiction from the fantasy stories of the *Arabian Nights* to the time-travel stories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian, al-Muwaylihi and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century African American Jalaluddin Nuriddin.

## Literature Review

A review of the literature on Islamic science fiction and fantasy reveals a variety of opinions regarding the history and future of Islamic writers of the genre and those writers who have used Islam in their works. There is a growing body of print literature which comments on the historical development of Islamic science fiction and fantasy literature. However many of the authors tend to examine one group or subject rather than provide a comprehensive overview of the writers and writings on fictional Islam. This literature review takes into account the print literature and various websites, listservs, and blogs that do a great job of cataloging the various writers and writings. The website *Islam & Science Fiction* at [www.islamscifi.com](http://www.islamscifi.com) encourages contributions and has various lists on writers



and writings of fictional Islam. The *Adherents.com-Religions in Literature* webpage at [www.adherents.com/lit/](http://www.adherents.com/lit/) discusses fictional Islam as a subject. A search on Islamic science fiction brings up over 700 entries. Of course, none of these sites provide a comprehensive overview. The majority of them offer listings rather than any form of scholarly analysis of writings related to fictional Islam. The only exception is the site *AfroFuturism* at [www.afrofuturism.net/text/about.html](http://www.afrofuturism.net/text/about.html), which focuses on African Diaspora writers of science fiction and fantasy and includes critical essays by writers who have also critiqued writings of fictional Islam.

The following selected scholarly articles investigate and discuss Islamic science fiction and fantasy; Christian Szyska's "On Utopian Writing In Nasserist Prison And Laicist Turkey" (1995), Michael Cooperson's "Remembering the Future: Arabic Time-travel Literature" (1998), Reuven Snir's "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature" (2000), Yusuf Nuruddin's "Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology" (2006), and Rebecca Carol Johnson, Richard Maxwell, and Katie Trumpener's "The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel" (2007). These articles add to the richness of fictional Islam by discussing how writers of Arabic and Islamic science fiction and fantasy have influenced literature historically, from Europe to urban America and from the Middle East to Africa. The authors' subjects often overlap, but each presents the genre while identifying a few of the notable science fiction/fantasy writers and writings how they have interpreted their religion in these new avenues of expression.

Christian Szyska's "On Utopian Writing in Nasserist Prison and Laicist Turkey" tackles the use of utopian fiction, "fiction that goes beyond reality in order to depict an imaginary community in its ideal form as an opportunity to reflect upon the present situation."<sup>13</sup> The article presents the activity of writing as a coping mechanism for Muslims incarcerated in an Egyptian prison and as a plot device for a Turkish writer's quest for an Islamic utopia. The essay opens with a discussion of writings by Egyptian political prisoners and their use of the narrative to build an Islamic utopian world that allows them to escape the persecution and alienation they experience within their present societies. These stories are transmitted as plays and dramas that take their inspiration from the writings of one of Islam's more controversial figures, Egyptian political prisoner, the late Sayyid Qutb<sup>14</sup>, a leader within the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that has consistently fought against the secularization of Egypt. The play Szyska critiques is titled *Al-bu'd al-khamis* (1987), written by Ahmad Ra'if, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a political prisoner. The story revolves around three characters, two men and a woman, who become disillusioned with planet Earth and decide to emigrate to planet Mars. On Mars they find a utopian system run by the tolerant, intelligent, and non-violent Martians who are undergirded with a moral and religious framework similar to Islam. Szyska notes, "The

Martian system mirrors the concept of Islamic government as proposed by Sayyid Qutb and expressed in the concepts of tawhid [oneness of God] and hakimiyya [governance]".<sup>15</sup>

Szyska also discusses the science fiction novel of Turkish author Ali Nar titled, *Uzay Ciftçileri* (Space Farmers). Nar's story centers on astronaut Hasan II's venture on a mystical path that mirrors the Prophet Muhammad's example. After traveling in outer space on his mission that he labels *Ascension*, similar to the ascent of the Prophet, they discover a star system they call the second world. During their extended stay in this new world they discover an eleventh planet that coincidentally contains the inhabitants who are tied to an earlier lost flight. After several months of getting to know each other, they all leave the planet for earth where they are warmly received. Nar concludes the story with this statement, "The results of the mission become the center of attention, especially those which confirm the Qur'anic predictions"<sup>16</sup>. Nar's story represents the two themes that Szyska deals with in her article, space travel and an Islamic utopia, but they differ in that Ra'if's play focuses on an established utopian system, while Nar's novel speaks of the establishment of a utopian society. Throughout the essay Szyska highlights the connections of these works to Islamic concepts of governance and societal norms:

"Ahmad Ra'if...orientates towards the Qutbian conceptualism, i.e. principally towards his Islamist conception of the sharia, that makes an increase in knowledge possible and leads to power, Ali Nar's hero pursues an esoteric path. Instead of finding a withdrawn enlightenment serving the individual cognition of God, *Uzay Ciftçileri* propagates a kind of a mystic cognition of God is connected with scientific progress and serves in this way to reach power".<sup>17</sup>

Michael Cooperson's "Remembering the Future" article, similar to Szyska, concerns time travel and governance. Cooperson centers his narrative on the earliest origins of Arabic time-travel literature from the 1800s and shows how it parallels English language time-travel literature. He also discusses the historical legacy of time travel, how it developed, and the impetus for its continual popularity in the Arab and Islamic literary world. He notes that "in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt, the tradition of time-travel and metahistorical fiction ...offers a range of complex responses to the warping of historical experience in the wake of imperialism".<sup>18</sup> As with other writers of this genre, Cooperson notes the varied means in which Arab writers have used time-travel as an escape that offered alternatives to their current worldview acting as political commentary on the times, and often providing a sense of optimism for the future.

The Cooperson and Szyska articles share a focus on the concept of time-travel in fictional writings. Both articles agree that the writers they discuss are looking for an escape from what confines them, reminding them of life's earthly failures.

Time travel allows the writers they profile to remedy the negatives of their lives by fleeing; taking flight to outer space that provides an expansive canvas to present a different narrative of serenity, freedom and tranquility. For some of the writers this new canvas is represented by an Islam that offers the populace a peaceful, just, and orderly utopia. Yusuf Nuruddin's article also fits into this discussion of time travel and space from the perspective of African and African American writers of Islamic science fiction and fiction.

Reuven Snir's, "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature" speaks about science fiction in the Islamic world as "emerging" as if it is something new, negating the history of writings in the field. He, nevertheless, traces Arabic science fiction writings back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His article discusses the emergence of Arabic science fiction from those earlier works noting that these were the "first steps on the road toward canonization".<sup>19</sup> Snir sees this move as important to the recognition and legitimacy of Arabic science fiction as a literary form and the acceptance of it for scholarly academic research. He ends his article saying:

"...as there is a marked awareness in Western SF writers to stay away from stereotypes and introduce authentic Arab and Muslim characters in their works, it may not be long that scholarly communities...will start taking up the change to systematically explore Arabic SF".<sup>20</sup>

For Snir legitimacy is only relevant if the West has provided the *seal of approval*. His analysis tends to erase the long tradition of Arab science fiction and views only the acceptance by the West as important to legitimize Arabic science fiction. Unfortunately, this is an argument that has been used to dismiss the works of other writers especially writers of color. Yusuf Nuruddin's "Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads" rebuts this notion. His article connects the Arab, African, and African American to a long tradition of writing within the science fiction genre. Nuruddin confirms the early writings of science fiction by and about Islam, providing examples of its influence and manifestations within the urban community of artists and activists in the United States. Nuruddin traces the writers of the Arab-speaking world such as Mustafa Mahmoud and Ali Salim from Egypt, and Imran Talib of Syria and their influence on urban science fiction. He notes:

"Science fiction literature has been produced in many Arab countries; the diverse themes have included life in 32<sup>nd</sup>-century Libya; the encounter of mysterious aliens by a Palestinian hero living in the occupied territories; and other fantastic discoveries and excavations as in Salim's plays".<sup>21</sup>

He then introduces the reader to American science fiction writers who emerged out of an Islamic/Arab tradition and those writers who use Islamic-

related characters or settings, such as Rashad Khalifa, Javed Akhtar, and Chris Lawson. He highlights Frank Herbert, whose *Dune* stories have been made into major motion pictures, and the *Star Wars* saga that is in Nuruddin's words "resplendent with Islamic symbolism".<sup>22</sup>

Nuruddin does not claim to give a comprehensive survey of Islam and science fiction, but provides an impressive introduction to some well known and some lesser known writers, those that portray Islam, Islamic themes as backward or enlightened, or those that portray Muslims as heroes or villains. He spends the bulk of the article dissecting the works of African Americans Stephen Barnes, Jalaluddin Nuriddin, and Ishmael Reed, whose writings have extensive connections to urban life, Islamic movements, and in the case of Barnes and Nuriddin, he further ties to the Afrofuturist novels and African centered science fiction. Nuruddin connects all of these writings to various groups who have used Islam and science fiction as a foundation of their beliefs. These groups such as the Nation of Islam, the Ansaru Allah Community, the Five Percenters, and the Moorish Science Temple are not considered a part of orthodox or mainstream Sunni Islam, but they have carved out a unique identity within the greater Muslim community in America and parts of Europe. The adherents or followers of these often marginal Muslim groups are primarily composed of African Americans or those of the African Diaspora. The Nation of Islam was one of the more successful of these groups due largely to the charisma of its leading spokesman Malcolm X, who later embraced orthodox Islam. These groups also subscribe, in varying degrees, to the *myth of Yakub*, a mythical black man who created the depraved master race, the *white devils*, Europeans.<sup>23</sup> According to the myth "The tale of Yakub is one which seeks to explain the origin of racial oppression".<sup>24</sup> This tale has morphed from group to group, from a concept of the black man being *the original man* to others who incorporate space travel and intergalactic themes, while concurrently co-opting Qur'anic language into a new genre of expression. These new expressions combine music, poetry, Islam and science fiction into what Nuruddin describes as *urban mythology*. According to Nuruddin, "Urban mythology is the mythology of the wretched of the earth-the wretched of the inner cities. It is their scathing social critiques of the existing political and economic arrangements".<sup>25</sup> This critique continues in the hip hop music of African American and Latino artists in urban and suburban communities in the US and Europe.

The Johnson, Maxwell, Trumpener article "The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel" presents an interesting look at the origin of the *Arabian Nights* and traces its influence to the birth of the European novel, from Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*; all celebrated texts. According to the authors, "The *Nights* inspired a huge number of imitations, pastiches, and parodies".<sup>26</sup> The essay discusses these writings from the major character in *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade, telling tales to save her life, and then

the story travels from the Arabic literary realm moving into the English, German, French, Hindu, and Spanish literary traditions. The article comments on the iterations of Scheherazade's story and its impact on the status, situation and character of women, the nature of female sexuality, and the interplay of sexuality and domestic power. The authors note that "*Nights* presents an intricately patterned, nuanced, at times highly indirect debate about the relationship of male honor to female chastity, fate, slavery, and human agency".<sup>27</sup>

The "Arabian Nights" article provides a direct connection between Arab/Islamic influence on early writings of science fiction and fantasy that have yet to be explored fully. For example, the authors spend considerable time dissecting Cervantes' *Don Quixote* who, according to the authors, "...Cervantes claims (in chaps. 8 – 9 of *Don Quixote*), his own manuscript was originally written in Arabic, found by chance while he browsed among stalls of waste paper in the Toledo marketplace and translated for him by a Morisco".<sup>28</sup> They note how Quixote does include repeated references to Arabic words, characters, and names that speak to the lingering influence of Islam in Christian Spain and in their words, "...evokes the Arabic sources of European romance and the substantial Islamic presence in the great chivalric poems of Tasso and Ariosto".<sup>29</sup> Further exploration of whether or not this statement is true is fraught with controversy, but the authors take a considerable amount of time to make their case and assert its plausibility.

The five articles confirm the recognition of the impact of Islam as a contributor to the West and Europe's intellectual knowledge base relative to speculative literary production. Works that have had significant and wide reaching impact as the *Arabian Knights* and Cervantes *Don Quixote* are examples of what scholars describe as the mutual influence of cultures. Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie in her article "The Islamic Ottoman Influence on the Development of Religious Toleration in Reformation Transylvania" writes "the recognition of mutual influence has basically taken the form of acknowledging the European debt to Arab learning, literature, and material culture".<sup>30</sup> To acknowledge the Islamic contribution to literature generally and speculative fiction in this case is not to elevate one group over another, but to allow for an accurate telling of history. It also provides confirmation for Muslims that their knowledge and historical presence have been the source of furthering intellectual and scholarly discovery. The history of the marginalization of the writings and contributions of other ethnic and racial communities such as Africans and African Americans, as Nuruddin article acknowledges, parallels what Islam and Muslims face in fighting for recognition of their historical involvement in the creation and distribution of knowledge. Writers such as Johnson, Maxwell, Trumpener, Nuruddin, and writings similar to this article provide opportunities for other scholars to build on this work, offer a response, and an opening for Arab/Islamic writings on science fiction and fantasy to enter the academic canon.



Comparative Essay: *HARM* and *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*

Although over 30 years separate the publications of Aldiss and Mazrui, the similarities in some of the themes of both books are uncanny and offer some interesting observations on Islam as imagined in the science fiction genre, past and present, minor and major. Both authors are writing from an international perspective; Aldiss is British writing about the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on US and British soil; Mazrui is Kenyan writing in the aftermath of Nigeria/Biafran conflict. Similar to Christian Szyska's article "On Utopian Writing In Nasserist Prison And Laicist Turkey" and Michael Cooperson's "Remembering the Future" articles that analyze torture and Arabic time travel respectively, both Mazrui's and Aldiss's tales' attempt to act as political commentary of their respective historical time frames, war and terrorism. This section will include a summary of both texts and a comparison of the central stories and characters.

Taking a cue from current events, in Aldiss's *HARM* the protagonist is a Muslim, Paul Fadhil Abbas Ali, swept up in the British government's war on terror, because of an innocuous two lines in his novel, *Pied Piper of Hamant*, where two characters discuss the death of the prime minister. Thrown in prison by agents of HARM (Hostile Activities Research Ministry), he is tortured because he refuses to confess to a terror plot or identify himself as a Muslim. Throughout his ordeal he retreats into an alternative world that often precedes his torture sessions and at other times follows them in the real world, which leaves one wondering where reality ends and the dream/nightmare begins. Are his visions of a utopian society, real or a dystopian reality of cruelty and oppression? These parallel worlds have similarities in the level of cruelty and brutality they inflict on those who they see as the *other*. His torturers in the imprisoned world hate him because he is Muslim and leaders in the imaginary world hate those who are not Muslim.

In this alternative world Paul is now called Fremant, a persona that allows him to blend into this new country of Stygia. The leader of the country and head of the hated Waabees, Astaroth, is cruel and religiously austere, who, it is later revealed, is also sexually abusing his daughter Aster. The Christian cult overthrows the evil Astaroth, but they eventually turn over the leadership to the science and reason leader, Safelkty. Essanits, formerly commander of Astaroth and leader of the Christian cult that overthrows him, decides to seek out the last of the Dogovers, a creature that he was responsible for wiping out. Instead of returning to Stygia with the last Dogover, it is accidentally killed and they only have his dog to bring back. On their way back they enter Essanits's community, Haven City that is now looking more like the city of Stygia. Fremant and Essanits relationship has deteriorated and when they return to Haven, Fremant is arrested and thrown in jail for an altercation he had with Essanits on their journey. Rather than develop a government that is tolerant, the Christian group now mimics the Taliban-like government of the Waabees. Crushing the opposition becomes the goal of the government with no mercy for those with opposing views. Essanits

tells Fremant he has the choice to stay in jail or take the dog to Safelkty in Stygia. Fremant takes the dog to Stygia, but Safelkty shows contempt for the uniqueness of the species, seeing it only as a means of advancing science. Again, Fremant felt betrayed, "He thought he had only been doing 'the right thing.' Instead he had denied what was good and true in his nature" (193). Fremant wonders what does this all mean, is he the problem because he seeks to deny who he is? Fremant ponders if anyone is worthy of leadership or is there such a place as utopia? It is at these times when Fremant ponders the human condition that he returns to the reality of his life as Paul where he continues to be tortured in prison. When he is released from prison without explanation or reason he returns home wearied and confused.

Paul comes to the conclusion that all of his dreams and visions are his attempt to run away from who he is, a Muslim. Paul states in the book, "He had been so eager to demonstrate to the Western world that he was not a ...not a Muslim, so he had betrayed himself..." (194). His attempts to blend into society and ignore that part of his identity came out in his writing, "those throwaway lines in his novel, about the British prime minister being assassinated...They reflected his true secret hatred for what he had become" (194). As the *HARM* concludes the prime minister is actually assassinated similar to words in Paul's book. As the British police are beating down his door, Paul, anticipating his fate, slips into the world of Fremant and his last words bring him full circle to the realization that his Muslim identity is inescapable. His last words attest to that realization when he says, "Oh Allah, the Merciful..." (210), but for Paul it is too late.

An interesting addition to *HARM* includes a conversation with the writer, Brian Aldiss. He discusses the duality of Paul's existence, British and Muslim and the religious struggle that occurs in both Stygia and on Earth. One section of the interview appears to sum up how he feels about Muslims and his depiction of Islam as personified in the character of Paul Fadhil Abbas Ali:

"Many people have taken refuge in Britain from dirty, dusty villages in the Middle East. They neither know nor understand the West. Consequently, many would destroy it. They have never heard of that ancient piece of sound advice: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" (224).

According to Aldiss, leave off your ethnic, religious and cultural identities when you leave your home country. But on the other hand *HARM* reveals that it doesn't matter, because you will never be accepted even when you *do as the Romans do* as Paul attempted; he would never be considered a *Roman*. Unfortunately, Aldiss doesn't have a follow-up response to the dichotomy he poses with *HARM* and the real world advice he quotes.

Contrary to Aldiss's long career as an acclaimed science fiction writer, Dr. Ali Mazrui is a renowned economist and scholar, who wrote only one work of

science fiction titled, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, (1971). In this story Mazrui makes use of a thematic device used throughout his writings, both fiction and non-fiction, that he labels 'the triple heritage' of Africa, those faith traditions that have the strongest influence on the continent; i.e. Christianity, Islam, and the indigenous African/animist systems. Set in the African afterworld this utopian novel concerns a trial that takes place in heaven concerning major moral issues of loyalty, love, life and death as they relate to the Nigeria/Biafra War of 1967-1970. The people of southern Nigeria, the predominantly Christian and animist Biafrans, attempted to secede from predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria. The defendant, prosecutor, and defense lawyer are real-life Africans who did not know each other in life, but are connected in this trial that represents this tragic period in Nigeria's history.

The central figure in the story is not Okigbo, a Biafran poet and writer on trial for mixing art with politics, but the defense attorney Mohammad Salim Said. A famed Muslim journalist, Said, now called Hamisi in the After-Africa, was killed in a tragic car accident. Hamisi, the Counsel for Salvation, is himself on trial for the crime of miscalculation that caused his death; furthermore, it is his miscalculation in calling witnesses in this case that leads to the dramatic conclusion of the trial. For this miscalculation he was found guilty and sentenced "to haunt a lonely baobab tree in Gabon and frighten little children straying near" (145) for an undetermined length of time. The verdict handed down to Hamisi is mitigated when Aisha/Salisha Bemedi requests to share in his fate.

The second character in After-Africa is Counsel for Damnation, Kwame Apolo-Gyamfi, considered "one of the most brilliant Africans produced by the twentieth century...died in an act of tragic impatience" (65) while studying at Oxford. He is also on trial for his act of impatience, but is acquitted due to his patient prosecution of the case against Okigbo. It is through his prosecution that the tragedies of the war are told. The blame for those that died is intertwined in the stories of the Biafran Ibos and the Nigerian Hausas, who in their hatred of each unleashed a wave of violence and death that encompassed Okigbo and Aisha.

The famed poet, Christopher Okigbo, is the third character on trial. Okigbo is not only on trial for himself, he also represents a charge against the people of Biafra, who in their desire to separate from Nigeria, according to the author, caused the deaths of thousands. Killed while fighting for Biafra independence against Nigeria, his crime is mixing his art as a poet with his fight against Nigeria; by acting as an Ibo first and a poet last he placed the need for a unified Nigeria second to the ideals of Biafran independence. These words sum up the great crime committed by Okigbo, "When the ordinary man or the great soldier dies for his nation that is indeed heroism. When the great thinker or the great creator dies for his nation that is escapism...that is our case against Christopher Okigbo..." (72). Verdicts for Okigbo and Biafra as determined by the Elders of Judgment, was *not proven*. The reasoning behind the decision returns to Mazrui's notion of the triple heritage of Africa that the Elders deemed, "The Curse of the Trinity in

relation to this old continent of ours" (135).

One of the major similarities in both texts is that the lead protagonist in both Aldiss's *HARM*, and Mazrui's *Trial* are Muslim in name only. Neither character adheres to the religious tenants of the Islamic faith, but they are both judged based on that identity. In both *HARM* and *Trial* the characters take on alternate names, a further distancing from their Islamic identification where their current names mark their Muslim origins. The stories also deal with characters transported to alternate realities where their ideas and desires to escape their Muslim identity come back to challenge them.

A feature that Muslims will recognize in both text is the *stranger* imagery mentioned in Aldiss and Mazrui's works. In *HARM* one of Essanits's men uses this characterization of Fremant, "You, Fremant, you're always asking questions, you'd be the Eternal Stranger. He thought the observation was acute. He was eternally a stranger, even to himself" (64). This echoes the sentiments expressed in Muslim writer Ian Dallas's science fiction novel *The Book of Strangers* (1972).<sup>31</sup> The story describes a librarian's mystical journey of self-discovery in a technologically advanced world. The *strangers* that this book speaks of are those people that seek to find the dedicated and spiritual teachers of Islam; those who selflessly work to perfect their faith. The stranger concept in Islam is from a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that is referenced in Dallas's book, "Islam began as a strange element, and will become thus again, as it was at the beginning. Blessed, therefore, are the strangers."<sup>32</sup> Paul/Fremant is a stranger in both worlds, searching for his place in Stygia and British society. His journey of self discovery leads to a tragic end, but in his final words, he finds his Islam.

The stranger theme also plays out in Mazrui's story in the characters of Said/Hamisi and Aisha/Salisha, strangers who meet one night, fall in love, sleep together and meet again in the After-Africa. Salisha reflects on their night together in the After-Africa, "How could she have capitulated to a total stranger in so short a time...who was this stranger who had known where to strike, in spite of her intellectual armoury" (21)? The symbolism of *the stranger* in Islam may not connect with the authors' intent, but the similarities in how their main characters are described are noteworthy.

There are many other similarities in these stories to Christian Szyska's article "On Utopian Writing In Nasserist Prison And Laicist Turkey" where the political prisoners wrote fictional stories to escape the persecution and alienation they experienced in the Egyptian prison. In *HARM* Paul's book and his Muslim identity are the catalyst that lands him in prison where he is tortured. Similar to Szyska's political prisoners it is the torture that precedes Paul's retreat into an alternative world and it is the torture that generates the writing of the utopian plays. Another similarity of the prisoners in Szyska's article with Paul, they were also judged by their faith, but in contrast to Paul, this led them to search for an Islamic utopia, a place where Muslims and non Muslims alike could flourish. Paul, on the other hand, felt the alienation of living in a society where he was judged by his religion,



a part of him that he wanted to escape. He states in the book, "He had been so eager to demonstrate to the Western world that he was not a ...not a Muslim, so he had betrayed himself..." (194). Paul and his alter ego Fremant viewed Islam as the source of his problems and he felt the need to distance himself from that identity. Fremant's alternate reality views any religion as seriously flawed as represented by first an oppressive Islamic government that is overthrown by a Christian sect that becomes just as intolerant as the previous system.

In Mazrui's *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* the characters are already dead, but they incorporate the same storyline of individuals in a sort of prison-like system where they are on trial for their actions and behaviors. Prison in Mazrui's story becomes a means of mental rather than physical torture. Mazrui's story central characters are two men and a woman, defense lawyer Mohammad Salim Said/ Hamisi, the prosecutor Kwame Apolo-Gyamfi, and the woman Aisha/ Salisha Bemedi who is the pivotal character in the trials. Each character has to face the reality that their behaviors have caused lasting damage. Their deaths force them to examine issues of faith, personal frailties, and justice, issues that Paul faces in *HARM*.

Islamic sexuality is explored in both stories, but Muslims are viewed as sexually repressed, hypocritical, inhibiting, and often criminal. This is another of those stereotypes that is advanced, but Islam, in contrast to Christianity has never viewed sexuality as only a means of procreation. On the contrary, sex in Islam, albeit marital sex, is encouraged as a means of mutual pleasure and satisfaction for both partners. There are numerous stories about men and women asking the Prophet Muhammad intimate details regarding sexuality and marriage including a woman who complained that her husband "was like a limp cloth." This reality stands in stark contrast to Aldiss's portrayal of Islamic sexuality. In *HARM* Aldiss says that for the women of Stygia "The protocol was against love and lovemaking." (21) The only love for these women was through abuse or rape as represented by Aster, the daughter of Astaroth. Aster is sexually abused by her father and raped by Fremant, but neither man is punished for their crime. Moreover when Astaroth is defeated, nothing is mentioned about his crime after he escapes. Fremant, after accusing Aster of dishonesty brutally rapes her, but even this reprehensible act is written with the notion that it wasn't really so bad, "Aster ceased struggling and gave a groan between pain and pleasure, though her face remained distorted with anger." (34) There is this "Stockholm Syndrome"<sup>33</sup> like mindset that seems to be playing out in this story, with Aster declaring her love for Fremant in spite of his treatment of her, "I have decided to forgive you for what you did, you brute." She continues after he asks why, "Because I love you...Burning, burning love!" Fremant's rape of Aster left her disgraced and enslaved. He felt no responsibility except to apologize and then he abandons her for Bellamia, an older woman that resembles Paul's wife Doris.

Bellamia, is described as unattractive, crude, and having a foul smell, but Fremant comes to love her, often confusing her with his wife. Does she represent



Doris, a non-Muslim woman Paul married to further his escape from his Islamic identity? Is Aster his Islam and Bellamia his escape from that identity? Bellamia is the only female character transformed, but only physically to justify her appeal to Fremant. After sleeping with her his description of her changes from someone that "he thought her old and frumpy (111)" to "Her face was dreamy on the pillow, and held the beauty of satiety...In the following days, Bellamia did her hair differently. She seemed to tread more lightly (111)." Bellamia understands that her power lies in the domestic and sexual pleasure she provides Fremant, but in the end she simply disappears as a figment of his imagination. What is her fate and will he return to her are questions never answered, similar to other works of fiction where the women are no more than sexual partners and then disappear.

This characterization of women as objects of gratification is a common theme in literature; women derive power via physical beauty or sexual exploitation, their fate or fortune dependent on men. The views of women and sexuality are combined in both Aldiss and Mazrui's use of female characters as sexual partners to be used and discarded as needed. As Howard Eilberg-Schwartz notes in "Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture" and is represented in both *HARM* and *Trial*, neither author attempts to disrupt "the classic gender distinctions that have linked men to speech, power, identity, and the mind" while linking women to the body and the physical."<sup>34</sup> Aldiss's females are linked to Fremant as love interests and sexual partners where their fate is tied to his mental state as he moves from one world to the next. Mazrui's starts out depicting Aisha as an intelligent and thinking woman, but she is easily manipulated into a sexual encounter with Said after only a few hours of acquaintance. Her fate is not known until towards the end of the story.

Mazrui further looks at issues of sexuality and gender throughout his story with his main character Hamisi dealing with another charge that concerns his lack of concentration while interviewing a nude witness as he prepared for the trial. He is comfortable with seducing a Muslim woman who he also impregnates, but exhibits shame at the open nudity displayed by some of the witnesses. Mazrui describes this crime as Hamisi elevating his Islamic identity over his African identity. Nevertheless Hamisi is found not guilty on these charges precisely because he begins to see himself as a Muslim man, who has an inner sense of modesty. On the other hand Hamisi's lack of a sense of Muslim modesty allowed him to initiate a sexual encounter with Aisha that results in her getting pregnant. This sexual act and its consequences is the miscalculation that leads to his losing the trial. Aishah returns to Nigeria to have the baby and while at the home of her uncle the Nigeria/Biafra war starts, where she is murdered. He suffers the ultimate punishment for his sexual misconduct, the loss of his child and the woman he loved.

Similar to Aldiss's *HARM*, Mazrui's *Trial* sexuality is dealt with in terms of abuse. Aishah is brutally raped and killed by a gang of Biafran independence

supporters. Hamisi hears this story when he calls Aisha as a witness to support his defense of Okigbo. He miscalculates by not getting the truth about her presence in the After Africa and the prosecutor has her tell the whole story about her pregnancy, rape, and murder that devastate Hamisi and his defense. Both main characters, Paul and Hamisi committed tragic miscalculations that had severe negative consequences for themselves and those they loved. Paul's miscalculation was writing those two lines in his novel that not only caused his torture, but also resulted in Doris suffering humiliation, torture and abuse.

Another side issue that is always beneath the surface in Western writings on Islam about Muslim women is the headscarf. For many writers the headscarf is a symbol of oppression and degradation. In *HARM* the women of Stygia "went hooded and masked outside their home..." (21). Aldiss also has Paul hooded during his torture in prison, another bid to the oppressive symbol that the veil signifies. In *HARM* the women had no choice but to wear the veil as Aster says to Fremant when he asks to see her face, "It's the rule here, dearest...You know Astaroth insists women go veiled (33)". Aldiss continues the mindset of those writers that see the veil as something that women wear out of duress and at the behest of men; it couldn't possibly be something that women would choose to do. Covering women's hair is used repeatedly and consistently to demonize and stereotype Muslims and Aldiss continues that narrative. As Eilberg-Schwartz notes in "Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture" accurately notes that "... the eroticization of the hair, which is presupposed by veiling practices, also lies at the heart of various Western traditions including early Christianity, Judaism, and Greek and Roman society."<sup>35</sup> Covering the hair is a practice of women in many societies and faith traditions, but it is those Muslim women who veil that are stigmatized, stereotyped, and labeled as backward, oppressed or ignorant.

This narrative is consistent throughout a number of science fiction writers works, but the science fiction author Mack Reynolds represent a particularly virulent anti-Islam strain in his book *Blackman's Burden* (1961) where the only way to raise the people in stature was to give up the veil, "She must drop the veil...and wear the new clothes...the clothes of civilized people everywhere."<sup>36</sup> *Blackman's Burden* tells the story of a group of Caribbean and African Americans and as they work to rid Africa of Islamic influence, undermining their leaders and practices. A big part of their infiltration of tribal societies is sending in a woman who pretends to be a native. Their aid organization comes in requesting volunteers who will remove their veils and work for them, providing her education and health care. Reynolds book represents some of the most inflammatory language about Islam as it relates to Africa, "That North Africa cannot be united under the banner of Islam is she is going to progress rapidly...Islam and pagan as well; they hold up the wheels of progress."<sup>37</sup> Reynolds attack against Islam continues throughout his second novel in his Africa series, *Border; Breed nor Birth* where when questioned about Islam his main character, Homer Crawford "growled,

non on one of his favorite peeve subjects...The Moslem religion exploded out of Arabia with some new concepts that set the world in ferment from India to Southern France...they couldn't get away from that Qur'an of theirs...we don't even think of the Moslem world as particularly civilized."<sup>38</sup> It is no surprise that Reynolds sets his story among the North African Tuareg tribe, where the men veil their faces and the women do not. Unfortunately, Reynolds sees this lack of face veiling as some defiance of Islam, when in fact, the women of Tuareg tribe cover their hair, but not their faces, but again, it fits his narrative of the oppressive nature of the veil and Islam.

In contrast to Aldiss and Reynolds's characterization of the veil, Ali Mazrui, a Muslim, describes the veil in sophisticated language in *Trial*, using the Swahili term for the head scarf, *mtandio*. He describes it as something that doesn't take anything away from the Aisha's intelligence or beauty. For example Said/Hamisi describes his first meeting with her, "Miss Bemedi was a striking figure. She was dressed in a skirt and blouse, but wore in addition an embroidered mtandio to cover her hair and fall down elegantly across her shoulders (11)." The veil is mentioned as a part of her apparel and represented as a Muslim woman's choice.

In Aldiss's *HARM*, similar to Mazrui's *Trial*, Islam, Christianity, and secular society, "the curse of the trinity" is examined. Both stories provide intersections with Islam, Christianity and the secular world, viewing them as flawed and problematic. Christians are depicted as either fanatics or fatalistic in both stories, while secular groups are less concerned with the humanity of their fellow countrymen or women, but see domination as the ultimate goal. Similarly, one could argue that both stories view Islam from a skewed perspective, as an undesirable influence as portrayed in Aldiss's story and in Mazrui's story as an inhibitor of natural expressions of sexuality. As Aldiss's Fremant seeks a world of peace, he is disappointed when each of the groups he joins becomes a mirror of the tyranny they had overthrown. Mazrui's Hamisi has looked at the world as an intellectual playground, using his knowledge as a means of elevating himself not to enhance the world, but only to further his sexual exploits and massage his ego. The After African world and the alternative world of Hamisi shock them into the reality that actions have consequences that are often deadly.

*HARM* features Islam as a major aspect of the story with Fremant's realization of himself as a Muslim and with that awareness he is freed from his tortures and prison, both mentally and physically. He is also freed from the alternative universe of his 'dreams' and his psychological torment, only to be thrust into the physical world of torture again. He is constantly trying to discover if his visions of a utopian society are real or a dystopian reality of cruelty and oppression. Or are his visions a part of the psychosis he developed because of an abusive childhood or are these visions the results of a fertile imagination gone awry? It is also in Aldiss's *HARM* that you recognize some of Nuruddin's, "Ancient Black Astronauts" *urban mythology* concept where Paul's critique of the plight of Muslims in Britain "the wretched of the earth" gets him in trouble. As Paul is arrested again he cries

out "Oh, Allah the Merciful..." (p.210) as he hears voices from the alternative world that all "threats to stability had to be stamped out" (p.211). In contrast to the significance of Paul's faith to his outcome, Hamisi's recognition of his Islamic identity plays a minor role, but it is this recognition that provides him with a significant not guilty verdict that mitigates his punishment. In the end, both characters see their Islamic identity as necessary to acknowledge, but because they come to this realization late, neither man is saved or left unscathed.

## Conclusion

This study of Islam in science fiction and fantasy concentrated more narrowly on critiquing historical and scholarly writings and concludes with an analysis of two science fiction works that incorporated similar concepts. The scholarly writings represent a renewed interest in analyzing the popular and hidden works by and about Islam and Muslims. What the Johnson and Snir articles reveal is that some of the West's most read texts have roots in Islamic literature and there is a growing body of literature that is making its way into the science fiction and fantasy literary canon. The Cooperson and Nuruddin articles show the shared legacy of time travel literature, the impetus for its development, and how it has been co-opted into various urban settings. Szyska's article discloses the tragic shared experience of torture victims' use of science fiction to escape their condition while searching for an Islamic utopia. These articles represent a growing body of science fiction and fantasy literature written by or about Muslims and about Islam that presents opportunities for scholarly critique and analysis. Science fiction writers such as Steven Barnes, Pamela Taylor, Donald Moffitt, and G. Willow Wilson are providing works that tell the varied stories of Islam and Muslims. This growing list of authors and writings are providing a critical mass of literature that can be measured against the science fiction and fantasy writers of the past.

This article also presents an analysis that compares and contrasts two writers who, at different periods in time, have constructed their characters, settings, and plots while critiquing Islam and Muslims in often similar and different ways. Their views and narratives incorporate current events, religious traditions, political and gendered perspectives. Although Aldiss and Mazrui sought to ground their works in merging historical events with science fiction, it does not mean they are free of bias, stereotypes, or blatant inaccuracies that perpetuate falsehoods. That's the nature of this genre of speculative fiction that is all about creative and imaginative license.

Further opportunities for research include a comparative analysis of subjects like slavery and emancipation as depicted in science fiction writings by African American writers such as Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Steven Barnes's *Lions Blood* and their use of Christianity and Islam as storylines. An in-depth study of other

novels by writers that have used Islam and Muslims as characters, settings or plots would provide additional avenues of research. A study of Islam and Muslims in science fiction and fantasy covering films, comics, and the horror genre can also be an interesting area of research. The media and mass communications scholar, Dr. Jack G. Shaheen has written extensively on the negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in popular movies and the media, but a critique of science fiction films would offer a valuable addition to this work. A comparative study of how other minority groups have been portrayed in science fiction and fantasy is another research idea that would be of importance in ethnic studies.

This study makes clear that not only has the religion of Islam been an integral ingredient in the creation, imagination, and stimulation of science fiction and fantasy, but that Islam and Muslims can play an important role in countering the *Master Narrative* that removed non-Western contributions from the historical record. There is a renewed interest in the Muslim world, both nationally and internationally, to write science fiction, fantasy and comics that present other perspectives of Islam and Muslims, thus adding to the richness of fictional Islam and correcting the *Master Narrative*.

#### (ENDNOTES)

- 1 Brian W. Aldiss, *HARM* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2007).
- 2 Ali Mazrui, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd, 1971).
- 3 Anas Al-Shaikh Ali, "The Need for Education", *Islamica Magazine*, 20 (2008) <[www.islamicamagazine.com/issue-20/the-need-for-education.html](http://www.islamicamagazine.com/issue-20/the-need-for-education.html)>. Consulted July 2, 2008.
- 4 "Bangla science fiction." Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, (2008) <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangla\\_science\\_fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangla_science_fiction)> Consulted July 29, 2008.
- 5 I. A. Ibrahim, *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*. 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. (Houston: Darussahan, 1997), p. 57.
- 6 Yusuf Nuruddin, "Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology", *Socialism and Democracy* 20.3 (2006), pp. 127-65, p 138.
- 7 Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p 138.
- 8 Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p. 138.
- 9 Proto-science fiction is used in this instance to denote the early stages of the development of this particular literary genre.



10 Master Narrative posits in this instance that the dominant narrative comes from the West and all other works must be interpreted against it to obtain some validity.

11 Reuven Snir, "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature", *Der Islam* 77.ii (2000), pp. 263-85, at p. 1.

12 Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p 138.

13 Christian Szyska, "On Utopian Writing In Nasserist Prison And Laicist Turkey", *Die Welt des Islams*, 35.1 (1995), pp. 95-125, at p. 97.

14 Sayyid Qutb, Egyptian writer and educator, visited the United States from 1948-1950, and formed a view of America as a depraved, capitalistic, racist, and materialistic society; a theme that runs throughout his writings on the West. His visit is also considered the impetus for his push for the establishment of an Islamic government and rejection of all things connected to Western society.

15 Szyska, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

16 Szyska, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

17 Szyska, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

18 Michael Cooperson, "Remembering the Future: Arabic Time-Travel Literature." *Edebiyat* 7.2 (1996), pp. 171-89, at p. 186.

19 Reuven Snir, "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature", *Der Islam* 77.ii (2000) p. 279.

20 Snir, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282.

21 Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p 138.

22 Nuruddin, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

23 The Myth of Yakub is consider to have been a mad scientist responsible for the separation of the races by pigment; an evil genius responsible for the plight of the black man and his disconnection from his true position of superiority in the world.

24 Nuruddin, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

25 Nuruddin, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

26 Rebecca Carol Johnson, Richard Maxwell, and Katie Trumpener, "The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 68:2 (2007), pp. 243-279, at p 247.

27 Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

28 Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

29 Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

- 30 Susan Ritchie, "The Islamic Ottoman Influence on the Religious Development of Religious Toleration in Reformation Transylvania", *Seasons*, Spring-Summer (2004), p. 59-70, at p 60.
- 31 Ian Dallas. *The Book of Strangers*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.
- 32 Dallas, *The Book of Strangers*, p. 151.
- 33 Joseph M. Carver, Ph. D. Stockholm syndrome is when "victims support, love, and even defend their abusers." [www.mental-health-matters.com/articles/article.php?artID-469](http://www.mental-health-matters.com/articles/article.php?artID-469) Consulted December 12, 2008.
- 34 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger, eds, *Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, c1995), p. 9.
- 35 Eilberg-Schwartz, *Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, p. 9.
- 36 Mack Reynolds. *Blackman's Burden*. New York: The Conde Nast Publications Inc., 1961, p. 22.
- 37 Reynolds. *Blackman's Burden*, p. 123.
- 38 Mack Reynolds. *Border Breed Nor Birth*. New York: The Conde Nast Publications Inc., 1962, p. 84.

# Reviews

## Canary Fever: Reviews

By John Clute (Becon Publications, 2009, 415p, £16.00)

Reviewed by Alvaro Zinos-Amaro

The canary has been down the shaft a long time.

As the metaphorical title to John Clute's fourth review collection suggests, a reviewer of "fantastika" (Clute's all-in term for literatures of the fantastic) may be regarded as the proverbial canary in the coal mine, sniffing out potential dangers — or safe delights — for readers. In this case the work becomes the man. His review collections, growing in ambition and size since the slender but significant *Strokes* (1968), all the way to the present four-hundred page, two-hundred-thousand word, one-hundred-twenty-review behemoth, *Canary Fever* (2009), adumbrate a wise and croaky old canary. The bird has kept alive in the depths through skill, ingenuity, and the occasional startled flutter of its panicked wings. That much is evident from Clute's deep, daring, and at times penetrably impenetrable writings on other people's writings.

How deep is the shaft? Clute's reviews throughout the nineties and beyond are full of words. When I say full of words, I mean words in excess of the required amount for the issue at hand (to allude to James Blish, who suffered from no such hypoxia). Or are they? That was my initial impression. I re-evaluated.

If the purpose of a reviewer is to illuminate works for potential readers, to communicate to them information about the texts, then Clute cannot be said to be a "reviewer" in that ordinary sense. Thinking of language as described by the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), reviews of fiction can be said to rely most heavily on the following functions of language: the referential function (which is oriented toward the context, as in "Water boils at 100 degrees"), the metalingual function (used to establish mutual agreement on the communication code; for example, a definition) and perhaps the phatic function (which establishes, prolongs or discontinues communication, or confirms whether the contact is still there; as in "Hello?"). Clute's reviews use language

in these ways, no doubt, but there is at least one additional function central to his criticism that sets him apart from any other genre reviewer I know: the poetic function. In this, the focus is placed “on the message for its own sake” [Jakobson]. That is to say, a distinguishing characteristic of Clute’s reviews is their sensitivity to the aesthetic effects of the language he is using to describe the aesthetic of someone else. Which is why it may be unfair to make accusations of hyperventilation (a word Clute himself uses, perhaps in jest, in his Introduction). Clute’s frequent devices include a staggering amount of literary and musical allusions (beyond title mentions, he often performs qualitative comparisons of specific cross-medium artistic qualities), all of the metaphors and metonymies associated with poetic effect, phrasal repetitions and a strong sense of rhythm, as well as a seemingly boundless vocabulary. This last bears some elaboration, since it is so unmissable and potentially offputting to any reader of the collection.

In a review of *The Book of Dave* by Will Self Clute refers to Self’s “huge adultoid vocabulary”; that may as well apply to his own. Whenever I encountered an unknown verbal specimen during my reading I dutifully bottled it in my notes for later study: I collected one hundred and thirty-two new critters while reading *Canary Fever*. Clute’s display of vocabulary indubitably marks him as an (hear hear) Olympian sesquipedalian; though those with harsher dispositions may accuse him of pleonasty or fustianism.

Combine the above mentioned literary techniques with a fierce mastery of academic speech and rhetoric, and you have some sense of Clute’s formidable fusion of effects. The closest analogy, perhaps, is to the critical writings of Barry Malzberg, as collected in the Hugo-nominated *The Breakfast in the Ruins* (2008), which also idiosyncratically meshes style with substance.

So at times, despite the intellectual realizing that Clute is playing by his own rules, it’s hard not to feel that he’s allowed himself to write above the reader and, possibly, into very thin air. (And even himself. He inserts 2008 comments, corrections, and apologies into the reviews. There is at least one instance where he explains he has removed material because he didn’t know what it meant).

How is the reader to respond to all this? With awe, perhaps; indignation, too. Indifference, hardly. One possible strategy is to show no hesitation in reading above the text, even as the text attempts to escalate upon the reader. We can make the writing once again subservient to our needs by climbing beyond it. Meaning, when in doubt, to play the game of literary theory: to allow oneself the luxury of an interpretation not textually manifest *in sensu stricto*. If the words are there, and copiously they are, we are free to mangle as much as to finesse them. It’s good exercise. They have become our words.

Back to the shaft and bird as a whole. This is a not a book meant to be read in the ordinary, continuous sense. One page does not follow another (and when they do, it usually signifies a digression). This is not an orchestration of critical taxonomy or an elucidation of sf theory, though it contains veins of both. It offers only as context and justification for its existence the prior existence

of the works it examines, and it does not pause to introduce Clute's biases or previous arguments (of which there are many). In his review of *Canary Fever* Gary Wolfe notes that it "might well serve as a useful entry point for readers wanting to familiarize themselves with Clute's critical idiom (as opposed to the more normative essays in his encyclopedia entries)." [Wolfe, 2009, p. 59]. If this is a useful entry point, we're probably in trouble. I don't think there is an entry point. One must try to keep Clute's ideas in the air all at once, and read as many of his previous pieces as possible, encyclopedic and non-, for a better understanding. *Caveat lector est*.

Who is *Canary Fever's* Ideal Reader? Reviewers should certainly study it. We can learn a world or two from Clute's art. Also, readers who enjoy hyperarticulate analyses and opinionated opinions of works they admire, detest, or know not a pittance about will find much to enjoy here. And perhaps most significantly, it should be read by anyone seeking out the ultimate *constitutive* definition of sf and its brethren literary-scapes, a chronicle of the last decade of its evolution through hundreds of examples.

The book is organized into three sections on writers, which assess bodies of work by John Crowley, Michael Moorcock and Thomas Disch, one section of older reviews, from 1988 to 1999, and the bulk of the enterprise, reviews from 2003 to 2008. It is beyond this reviewer to offer individual sketches of Clute's one hundred and twenty verbal acrylics. I'd like to present instead a few samples of the work, illustrative striations of Clute's muscular apparatus, and remark upon a few other items of note.

Clute clearly thinks highly of Crowley, Disch (to whom the book is dedicated), as well as Peter Straub and Gene Wolfe. The latter doesn't receive his own section but is alluded to more often throughout the text than any other writer (most times by setting the bar against which Clute measures others). Clute manages the seemingly impossible task of a fresh and on-target appraisal of Moorcock's entire career in his review of the first volume of the Colonel Pyat sequence, *The Laughter of Carthage*. It's a tour-de-force of compressed narrative about the "storyline about the life and works of Michael Moorcock" [p. 23]. The section on Crowley is persuasive, but difficult for me to asses, as I have not read the books under consideration (the only person who has read as much fantastika and as widely as Clute is Clute; alright, perhaps we should not forget Samuel Delany). The two posthumous pieces on Disch, intermingled with autobiography, are penetrating and touching, providing a powerful coda.

As for the heart of the matter: for Clute's particular aesthetic, it may not help that I read all of these reviews over a matter of weeks, though this didn't dampen my appreciation for the insight of his notions. I became desensitized to some of Clute's stylistic choices, and his deliberate grammatical gyrations seemed occasionally overwrought. For instance, he ends an arresting overview of Moorcock's *The Vengeance of Rome*, in which he rightly and eloquently focuses on the ultimate terror of Pyat's unlearning nature and pain as metaphor for



twenty-first century amnesia, with the cliché “the buck stops here” [p. 32]. In a one-and-a-half page review of Jack Dann’s *The Silent* he repeats the phrase “no doubleness” no less than three times [p. 46-47]. He acknowledges that he over-uses certain words. At times, he may be unintentionally funny (or I may be underappreciating his humor). Consider his review of Peter Hamilton’s *The Dreaming Void*, the first vast volume of an immense space opera trilogy. Reviewers who provide two or three dense pages of plot synopsis of Hamilton’s books typically end up accompanying said summaries with apologies that they are not able to condense even a fraction of the story. Here’s Clute:

“The difference is not, perhaps, quite as simple as knowing how to start (or stop). After the end of the last dance of a book (even if a sequel is due), there is normally a sense that the song has had an ending; that no matter how vast the installment may be, some quasi-operatic cadence cuts the cackle—certainly this is the case if the author knows his business as well as Banks does—on a dime. [...] This silence of stopping is not a sensation Hamilton tries very hard to achieve.”

Indeed. The above also brings to light another common strategy in Clute’s arsenal: the musical metaphor. If there ever was such a thing, he is a Musical Reviewer. A critic like Michiko Kakutani may at times use this same technique (Kakutani’s review of John Updike’s *My Father’s Tears and Other Stories* is beautifully titled “Memory Arpeggios in Updike’s Sunset”), but until I consciously realized it I hadn’t noticed how prevalent musical references and theory are in Clute’s corpus. The Pyat Quartet is a “Classical symphony in four movements” [p. 30]. In discussing Damien Broderick’s *The Sea’s Furthest End*, he compares the central situation to the “the first three acts of the full version of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Don Carlos* (1867)” [p. 39]. He makes the comparison that the nineteenth-century French illustrator Albert Robida is to illustrators Honore Daumier and Gustave Dore an “Offenbach to their Meyerbeer/Gounod” [p. 118-119]. In reviewing Theodora Goss’s *In the Forest of Forgetting* he writes that “Balance can only be maintained if you continue to move, which is to say a story is a dance, a captained choreography” [p. 241]. In his introductory paragraph to a review of Gregory Feeley’s *Arabian Wine* he writes of how, “since the invention of the Future between 1750 and 1800, they (we) have twisted and turned to [...] a daily dance [...], a dodecacophony” [p. 165]. He recollects the final sequence of the 1965 film *The Bedford Incident* as “a kind of acoustic rendering of the sound true sf makes in the mind at its purest moments: the sound of Thought Experiment wrought to its uttermost, just before the Breakthrough” [p. 257]. One of his main problems with Greg Bear’s *City at the End of Time* is that “it is hard to hear the song of the book; at the same time the song is there” [p. 374]. In his take on *The Gone-Away World* by Nick Harkaway, the on-line version contains the section subtitle “Listening for the sound of the book”; here Clute describes how he detects “an isomorphy between the ravenous noise of the telling of *The Gone-Away World* and the story within it. [...] So it is perhaps no

wonder that *The Gone-Away World* so cacophonously embraces the tangles and tears and exorbitant maneuvers of Stuff becoming. [...] *The Gone-Away World* is not a noise. It is a story." [p. 377-378]. He even adapts a term from music criticism, "incipit", which he deploys frequently, and explains means a "fragment of chord or passage a composer like Handel or Bach or Beethoven — who all used them often — might take up as a starting point from which to fecundate some miracle" [p. 340].

Terms like *incipit* are part of Clute's theoretic vernacular. Other phrases, which are more fully expounded upon in his benchmark genre encyclopedias and his book on horror, *A Darkening Garden* (2006), are suggestive of the notions they embody. There are moments of Serpent's Egg, "an intense visionary image which condenses or encapsules the future, like a vile embryo out of which something terrible will slouch into the world" [p. 31]. We have, also, "instauration fantasies, tales in which this historical world is renewed, or transformed: and there is a shift in the ground-bass of reality: and the story of the world, once this fundamental shift in grammar has taken place, emplaces us elsewhere" [p. 95]. There is the Bound Fantastic, "that group of stories in which the real world reveals fantastically to the protagonist (and to us) its true nature, articulates the discovery [...] that we are bound to the true face of the planet" [p. 148], in opposition to the Free Fantastic, "that group of texts of fantastika that take off from a deep inherent premise or promise that the world of the last two centuries either constitutes an Escape from Prison; or allows that Escape; or both" [p. 208]. Readers will encounter plenty more of these fascinating ideations; they have certainly made me curious enough to investigate further. Amid these conceptual distillations on genre are even broader ideas on art that are a delight to tease out. In a review of Hal Duncan's *Vellum* Clute seems to arrive at a "definition of any great work of art", namely "a tale tooled to illuminate chaos without becoming chaos" [p. 175]. In his discussion on works by Adam Roberts, Clute provides an extended and engrossing summation of how sf novels set in the future work, brilliantly redacting the essence of all sf to that of "motor homunculi" [p. 246].

So, if it hasn't become clear already, these reviews are as intellectually stimulating as they are artistically difficult to negotiate. Clute puts the reader's attention span to the test, true, but he also has nuggets of digestable material. Beside the blurb-sourced references, Clute's pithiness occasionally results in readily quotable material: "Those who do not understand sf are fated to repeat it" [p. 75], a favorite of mine, or "the unexamined alternate history is not worth living" [p. 320].

Considering the length of the collection, the sheer volume of original insight and perspective is nearly overwhelming. There are minor points of contention, few and far between. In a previously unpublished piece on John B. Watson's psychological behaviorism, Clute attempts to forge a connection between Watson's uneasiness at the chaotic future we live in and the visions of the future

created by E. E. "Doc" Smith and A. E. Van Vogt. The idea is interesting, but as presented any connection appears tenuous. It's also manifest that Clute has little regard for the scientific merits of sf stories: he rarely stops to discuss them, and when he does it is in a somewhat vague, offhanded manner. Writing about Peter Watts's *Blindsight* for *The Washington Post*, Gwenda Bond observes that Watts's "dense idea storms may slow some readers, but most will sail through the tech-heavy patches purely for the thrill of seeing what happens next." This is a point well taken and succinctly made, but not so well taken or succinct from Clute, who appears to be couching his own personal dislike of technospeak in terms of gender exclusionism when he writes that these instances (one of which he quotes at length) comprise "another iteration of the old NO GIRLS ALOUD treehouse argot of hard sf." [p. 277]. That single mention might be forgiven as hyperbole, but a few pages later it becomes a bit much when compounded with: "There is a lot of action — some of it scabbed into near unintelligibility whenever Watts decides he doesn't want any GIRLS around..." [p. 279]. Please. I suppose a theoretical physicist of note like Lisa Randall might be a little surprised to learn Watts had intended to exclude her from those passages.

Clute's Christ-seeking (albeit tentatively) review of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is creative, but it underperforms when compared, say, to William Kennedy's Sunday Book Review in *The New York Times*, which better situates McCarthy's novel in the context of his oeuvre and more concisely and persuasively gets at the theme of the boy as "an unsubstantiated messiah". (To present a counterexample of my own criticism of Clute going up against a mainstream/lit critic, though, his review of Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* is truly stupendous, and picks up on numerous genre and literary traditions elided by other critical cognoscenti.) One of his central critiques of Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* is that the novel is too much of a "*reductio*," a single unrelenting note, "page after page of the same thing" [p. 256-257]. That doesn't seem like artistically valid grounds for reprehension. Case in point, and one Clute may be familiar with, think of Giacinto Scelsi's famous composition "Quattro Pezzi su una nota sola" ["Four Pieces on a single note"] (1959). And there is the notorious review of *The SFWA European Hall of Fame* anthology, in which Clute devotes much of his energy to what he alleges is the book's intensely misleading title. This last kink is partially redressed by *Canary Fever*'s inclusion, presumably for balancing effect, of a response by the anthology's editors, as well as another review by Michael Bishop which sets things right.

Again, in the scheme of things, these are lesser weak links. I've commented on many of Clute's strengths: his obvious perspicacity as a reviewer, the depth of his notions, his omnivoraciously informed contextual notes, his engagement with literature at large, which situates his pieces somewhere between reviews and theory. Another highlight which bears mention is his response to non-fiction works on sf. *Canary Fever* provides comments on Adam Roberts's *The History of Science Fiction*, Farah Mendelssohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, a critical collection

on Christopher Priest, and more. These, combined with Clute's references to other critics and his re-evaluations of his own prognostications and indictments, paint the picture of a reader, critic and theorist unafraid to deal with revisionist consequences of his own ever-shifting perceptions. Incidentally, in reviewing two non-fiction books, Clute waxes passionate about the uselessness of MLA-compliant references in genre criticism. He makes a strong case: it's bad enough for scholars to cite a book according to the date of any of its editions, not quoting the actual date of its first publication, but it specially leads to obscurantism in the field of fantastika, sensitive as it is to time and space.

Mention should also be made of *Canary Fever*'s index, a superb reference tool. Indices in works such as this oftentimes lack usefulness because of the specificity of their search parameters. Leigh Kennedy Priest, the index compiler, has transcended this problem by repeating various entries referred to in different ways whenever suitable. Kudos for her work. Thus, there are entries not only for the typical author names and novel/story titles, but for Clute's exotic infusion of critical terminology and even one-times analogies. It encompasses everything from "incipits," which receives eight entries, to "everywhere-dense continua", to my first choice, "the five-point-palm-exploding death stroke" (anyone who has seen Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Part 2* should be familiar with the term: I won't ruin for prospective readers the pleasure of discovering how on earth Clute can sensibly and appositely make use of it, which he does, in a discussion of Terry Bisson's literary technique).

Regardless of taste, then, *Canary Fever* is an indispensable collection for anyone probing fantastika. Clute's traversals of fiction are one-of-a-kind. To this end, he has been called "our own postmodern Edmund Wilson" by Paul Di Filippo and the "Bob Dylan of sf book reviewing" by David Hartwell. In staying with this collection's trans-human motif, I'd like to suggest that instead of a canary, Clute's distillations point to a gecko. Geckos are unique for their vocalizations; ditto Clute. Excluding one particular family, geckos have no eyelids, possessing instead a transparent membrane. Based on the enormity of his gifts for apprehending fantastika and getting to the bottom of it, I'd suggest that Clute too has no eyelids and makes use of a transparent membrane.

And lastly, let's not forget: geckos have specialized toe pads that enable them to climb across vertical surfaces, even indoor ceilings, without the slightest effort. If there's a reviewer acrobatic enough to climb on a text upside down and never fall down, surely it is John Clute.

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## The City at the End of Time

By Greg Bear (Collancz, 2008, 550p, £18.99)

Reviewed by Paul McAuley

Greg Bear's science fiction is characterised by exploration of huge feats of engineering and vast tracts of time and space, and stories of epic acts of destruction and rebirth: giant cities marching across the face of a giant planet in *Hegira*; the transformation of Earth and the entire human species in *Blood Music*; the infinity of the Way in *Eon* and *Eternity*; the shattering of Earth and an equally shattering revenge by humanity's remnants in *Forge of God* and *Anvil of Stars*; moving Mars in *Moving Mars*. At the turn of the century Bear focussed inward, writing near-future thrillers informed by the wilder edges of genetics and microbiology, but now he's facing outward again, and, in *City at the End of Time*, looking the end of all time and space square in the eye.

The story switches between the far future - the very far future, a hundred trillion years, or fourteen zeros, as Bear has it, after the Big Bang - and the nominal present of just ten zeros. In the future, Jebrassy and Tiabda, male and female 'breeds' (a term borrowed from Bear's fantasy diptych *Songs of Earth and Power*), approximate recreations of baseline human beings, are nudged into a relationship by the posthuman powers who tailored them, and who maintain the defences of the Kalpa, the last city on Earth - the last in the Universe, in fact, for everywhere else has been subsumed into the "malign insanity" of a Chaos presided over by an entity or power known as the Typhon. The Kalpa is threatened with imminent destruction; Jebrassy and Tiabda are an essential part of a last and desperate plan to save it. In the present, three fate-shifters — people with the power to shift or jaunt between world lines — are being pursued by agents working for a mysterious entity variously known as our Livid Mistress, the Chalk Princess, and the Queen in White. Two, Jack and Giny, possess strange stones known as sum-runners that they inherited from their parents. The back-story of the third, Daniel, is a mystery even to himself. He owns a sum-runner but can shift between bodies as well as world lines, and at the beginning of the book finds himself in the body of a dying vagrant in possession of a fourth sum-runner.

There are, or were, many fate-shifters, but most have been trapped by the Chalk Princess's agents, lured by advertisements that ask: "Do you dream of a City at the End of Time?" Both Jack and Giny do indeed dream of the Kalpa: Jack is linked to Jebrassy, Giny to Tiabda. Giny, hotly pursued by the Princess's agents, quickly takes refuge in a strange library owned by Conan Arthur Bidewell, who claims to be more than a thousand years old. As the triumph of chaos collapses time and the far future collides with the present, Jack (a busking juggler, nimble and quick) falls into the clutches of one of the agents but manages to escape



and is rescued by three women who call themselves the Witches of Eastlake and deliver him to Bidewell. Daniel likewise evades capture, and makes an uneasy alliance with a former agent, Max Glaucous, who leads him through the wrecked timescape to Bidewell's refuge. Meanwhile, Jebrassy and Tiabda have separately set out on treks across Chaos's hostile, trap-filled landscapes, and now Jack, Ginny, and Daniel must join them in a last effort to defeat the Typhon.

The spinal story of the novel is common to much post-Tolkein fantasy: Evil haunts a wounded land and threatens the last redoubts of normality; heroes who turn out to be lost princes and princesses are imbued with powers and possessed of tokens that, if properly deployed in dark heart of its stronghold, can destroy Evil and restore the land; a quest across vast, strange, populous landscapes, evading and overcoming a plethora of perils. Bear enlivens and complicates this stock plot with metaphors and tropes borrowed from quantum mechanics and the mathematics of probability: the sum-runners can seek out from a myriad worldlines the one that best suits their need; their antagonists, the agents of the Chalk Princess, are able to manipulate chance, collapse possibilities, and cut off lines of escape. This rich, self-consistent scaffolding is elaborated with casual inventiveness and (aside from one immiscible lump (p.84-85)) an admirable lack of infodumps. Despite some page-filling longueurs (Jack in particular has little to do before pitching up at the library) there's a nice sense of building menace, and for much of its length *The City at the End of Time* is an exemplar of the show-don't-tell method of world-building. Passages detailing the back story of the Kalpa, and its defining myth (involving a wizardly scientist, an alien race, and the love story between a hero, Sangmer, sent to find the scientist and a beautiful and powerful avatar, Ishanaxade, created by the aliens), joyfully riff on SF's shared imagery and tropes:

The Age of Darkness was followed by the Trillennium - the greatest period of growth and learning in human record. Zeros stacked upon zeros. Histories were made and lost like the guttering of an infinity of candles. All strangeness was joined, and all life, human and otherwise, was accepted and improved upon, redefining the very idea of humanity and leading to triumph upon triumph, rebirth after rebirth (p.45).

And so on, and so on, traversing vast teeming histories and great gulfs of time in Olaf Stapledon's seven-league boots.

All this is very fine, as is the contrast between the helter-skelter tension of the great hunt in the present, and the burgeoning mutual understanding of Jebrassy and Tiabda in the future, with both present and future humans groping towards and understanding of their plight and time, like a fish, rots from the head:

Whatever had smeared out the pallid stars and rucked-up the voids between had left the moon untouched. Now, the high ivory crescent was turning bloody red, like a half plug stamped in heaven's flesh. And rising in the east - or rather, blooming and bloating, since there was no apparent motion in that direction - a ring of fire arced almost from one quarter to the other (p.305).

Bear's lyrically succinct descriptions of dissolution and destruction are as good as anything he's ever done, and he develops a nice conceit based on the idea that books play a central role in the defense against this dissolution. Bidewell's library is a carefully selected collection of volumes whose texts are sensitive to changes in the fabric of reality, and story, or rather, Story, is central to the continuation of the universe's world-lines. Bidewell explains:

"Soon, I realised that the last remnants of things lost might be found in records - in the Earth, in geological layers, for examples but also in lost animals, stray children - and scrolls. Books. Texts of all sorts.

"Mnemosyne [another name for the Chalk Princess] values texts above all things, and saves their editing and reconciliation for the last, perhaps to be savoured. And so - I began to find the books she or her dark sister had missed." (p.304)

The Typhon is the end of Story, summing all possibilities to zero. And Bear's story of a quest to save Story is deeply imbued with all kinds of literary references. I've already mentioned the Witches of Eastlake, an echo of John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*, and as might be expected in a book concerned with libraries and infinity there are several mentions of Borges. Above all, *The City at the End of Time* is clearly inspired by two visionary novels of the far future by the British writer William Hope Hodgson. The first, and most famous is *The House on the Borderland* (1908), in which two inhabitants of an old Irish mansion discover that it's sited over weak spot in the fabric of reality, are plagued with horrid intrusions, including a horde of Swine Things, and are drawn into visions of the far future. The parallels with Bidewell's library, and the pancaking of present and future (and an early glimpse of a giant earring), in *The City at the End of Time* are obvious. But it's the second, *The Night Land: A Love Tale* (1912) that's most obviously influential — so much so that *The City at the End of Time* could be considered a kind of sequel. *The Night Land's* narrator, having lost his great love, dreams of the far future (or as he puts it, "waked there"), where he finds the last refuge of humanity under siege by monsters, falls in love with a Maid, and ventures out on a great quest into the wastes of the Night Lands. And in *The City of the End of Time*, having sheltered in Bidewell's library from the collapse of time, Ginny, Jack and Daniel set out across the wastes of the future, as do, separately, Jebrassy and Tiabda, on a quest to find the Typhon and destroy it.

It's here, after the perils, intrigues and intricate world-building of its first two-thirds, that the novel stumbles and stalls. Although Bear's renderings of the warped landscapes of Chaos are concise and vivid, the plot is reduced to a picaresque ramble towards a perfunctory conclusion. All quest novels share the same problem: making a slog towards the delivery of plot coupons to the appropriate location seem less inevitable than it actually is. That problem is compounded here by the lack of any sense of meaningful sacrifice on the part

of the agents of delivery, and by their lack of independent agency. With the exception of the wild card, Daniel, they are acted on, led, shoved from place to place, fed every kind of explanation about who they are and what they are fated to attempt to do, but are not shown to act in any meaningful way (Ginny's vow to *try better* than her counterparts from failed worldlines doesn't really count). It's the agent of the Chalk Princess, Glaucous, who saves the latter end of the story from flattening out entirely. He's a strong, three-dimensional, fully-fleshed character, a former bird-catcher from eighteenth century London gifted with longevity, jealous, proud, loyal after his fashion, but hungry for release from his dreary and dangerous plight, and rather more interesting than the nominal heroes because he's possessed of self-knowledge and a crucial duality, Gollum to the sum-runners' Hobbits. But even he, and a twist that reveals the true identities of Daniel and the Chalk Princess, can't redeem the perfunctory *deus ex machina* ending, involving the cats that haunt Bidewell's library.

One doesn't want to conclude, after reading this novel composed in part of other stories, whose theme is the importance of the multiplicity and omnipresence of Story, that Bear accidentally stepped into the jaws a narrative trap. That, having constructed a personification of the antithesis of all known space and time, he didn't know what to do with it. But if his perfunctory ending was deliberately got up as a corrective to the reader's prejudices and ingrained expectations about the arc of this particular subset of Story, it doesn't work. And although, as in *The Night Land*, the quest is informed and underpinned by a love story (or rather, three love stories, for the mythic romance of Sangmer and Ishanaxade is echoed by those of Jack and Ginny, and Jebrassy and Tiabda), the various marriages and handfastings at the conclusion aren't in any way an acceptable substitute, either: the romances are interpolated into the interstices of the plot, rather than being inextricably woven into it.

As the ending of a short story, then, it would just about pass as a twist — albeit a sentimental and slightly silly twist. But as an ending to a big brick of a novel, it fails to pass muster. We are led onward through thickets of invention and complication, expecting cosmic fireworks. We get instead a brief cat-and-mouse squall. And it's a disappointment whose magnitude is compounded by the expertise of the narrative it concludes. For its first two-thirds, *The City at the End of Time* sizzles with elegant flair and magisterial confidence, but after it passes through its crux, the story diminishes. The wizard (but he's lost his cloak and hat, and we can see now that's he's no more than a shabby showman) totters onto the stage, apologising for the smoke and mirrors that substituted for actual magic. The curtain falls to scattered and uncertain applause. Lights dim, and the audience is left in the dark.

## The Night Sessions

By Ken MacLeod (Orbit, 2008, 324p, £18.99)

Reviewed by David McWilliam

*The Night Sessions* is Ken MacLeod's latest published novel, but this review comes several months after its publication. The time elapsed offers me the opportunity to engage with other critical responses to the text, and one issue that is raised in numerous venues is the problem of writing believable near-future political sf. *The Night Sessions* is set in 2037, and the global political landscape has been dramatically altered by a series of cataclysmic events. These are introduced in a lengthy prologue which sees John Richard Campbell, a robotics engineer at the Waimangu Science Park in New Zealand, travel across to Scotland to meet the Free Congregation of West Lothian. Religious practice has been excised from public life in the former United Kingdom and what is left of the United States after the backlash over the ruinously expensive Faith Wars that dominated the first two decades of the century and bankrupted the winning side. This backlash against religious groups came to be known as the Great Rejection among the faithful and as the Second Enlightenment by the secular. The oppression of the God Squads during this period led to a general atmosphere of hostility towards religious practitioners, and so John's meeting with the group is of necessity clandestine. Campbell had come to their attention as a lay preacher, for religion has not been driven underground in New Zealand, and he preaches an unorthodox creationist theology to the sentient robots that have found refuge in Waimangu Park who relay his sermons to Scotland.

The significance of this meeting is made explicit later in the text, but aside from mapping the political landscape, it also introduces one of the key philosophical questions of the novel through the figure of Graham Orr, a man who claims to have been so badly injured in the Faith Wars that his body has required almost complete reconstruction using prosthetics (tissue regeneration is available, but is rejected by certain religious groups due to the use of stem cells in the procedures). In this posthuman future, where the lines between technology and the biological are even more blurred than they are today, the distinction between augmented human and self-aware robot becomes hazy: "The technology that could give robots an almost, but not quite, human appearance, and the technology that could give a mutilated human being a functionally and cosmetically almost perfect prosthesis were the same" (p.18-9). In a novel that deals with extreme interpretations of Christian scripture the concept of whether robots have souls becomes of central importance and Campbell's assertion that they do is what brings him into the sphere of influence of the group. Whilst the prologue sets up the fictional world, the plot itself begins with an explosion in a house in Edinburgh that kills Father Liam Murphy, a respected

member of the now marginalized and secretive Catholic Church. Detective Inspector Adam Ferguson, formerly a member of the God Squads, is assigned the case and with his tripod robotic partner, a “leki” called Skulk, begins an investigation that escalates in scale and scope throughout the novel. Here we come to one of the first major problems of the text, as the non-cognisance of religion amongst the public servants appears to have wiped the memories of the officers on the case, leaving Ferguson surprised by the continued existence of a Bomb Squad in the force. Religious groups still practice and, despite having lost all standing and influence on society, have remained docile until the bombing of Murphy. Nic Clarke takes issue with MacLeod’s treatment of the impact of the God Squads’ violent actions, noting that:

The notion it would *not* create problems to give fundamentalist believers—people with a ready-made assumption that this world is but a pale, doomed reflection of the much better one in which they are going to live forever—more to kick against, and less to lose, is redolent of the inability of certain mindsets to understand the strength of both religion and desperation. (*Strange Horizons*, 22 September 2008)

Ferguson’s dominant point-of-view in the novel allows his Orwellian doublethink, which ensures that he both remembers the part he played in the reprisals of the Second Enlightenment whilst claiming almost no knowledge of the workings of the Church, to dominate the representation of events and so foregrounds the institutional bias against organized religion in the police force. His colleagues’ admittance that the counter terrorist agencies are out of practice suggests that to all extents and purposes religiously motivated violence had been eradicated. Given that many would remember the time before the Faith Wars when religious groups had a strong voice in global politics, the acceptance of the new status quo after a sustained campaign of state-sanctioned violence seems rather too sedate considering the relatively short period of time between the present day and the future of MacLeod’s novel. Furthermore, in keeping with the sparse detail provided within *The Night Sessions* that links everything to the plot, there is no mention of how people who follow religions other than the competing denominations of Christianity have dealt with this shift towards a secular society and the suppression of their rights to openly express their religion. This is not to suggest that terrorism will necessarily be the result of oppression, but I do feel that such a major shift would have had recurring sociological impact for many, many years following it and the novel does not explore the diversity of responses both within and across different religions that one would expect.

One contributing factor that might explain the meekness of religious groups is the ubiquity of surveillance technology, as the recent upsurge in amateur filming used in news reports, blogging and as evidence in criminal prosecutions



is extrapolated in the novel so that most citizens' points of view are filmed at all times through frames, and can be accessed by those in authority. Combined with the threat of state-sanctioned brutality this becomes a police state, a form of authorized terrorism that would ensure a sense of paranoia is instilled into anyone attending religious meetings, let alone planning reprisals. MacLeod avoids overt condemnation of this system by concentrating on the work of the police officers in trying to foil a plot that comes to involve the murder of school children, which serves to downplay the sinister aspects of life in this future Scotland. The subtlety of MacLeod's satirical engagement with the debates as to whether surveillance technology protects citizens or paves the way for reprisals against groups that fall out of favour is to be applauded and uses his sparse style to great effect.

However, the worldwide shift away from religion is just too monolithic to have any plausibility given the timeframe of the novel. The very fact that the Faith Wars are known by the West's enemies as the Oil Wars suggests a motivation that has as much basis in greed as religious conflict, meaning that even if religion was truly driven out of public life, there would surely be plenty of resentment and motivation for revenge. Jonathan McCalmont identifies the problems of the novel's plausibility with the inherent difficulties of applying the sweeping, widespread social change of more traditional sf to a world very similar to the one that the reader is already familiar with:

If someone writes about a world that is alien to their readers then they can twist the facts to suit their purposes at will because our sense of verisimilitude is far less well attuned to fictional worlds than it is to the real world. Because we live in the real world, we instantly sense when someone is doing something unrealistic or wrong, but in fictitious worlds verisimilitude only comes into play when the author transgresses their own rules. (Near-Future Fiction and the Social "Uncanny Valley" *SF Diplomat* blog)

For reasons that are never explained, New Zealand is the only nation that the novel tells us has not adopted the dominant secular position; the achievement of a global consensus on a political issue of this magnitude is unprecedented and, I would argue, highly unlikely given the near future of the setting.

Whilst the treatment of robotic sentience is similarly two dimensional with regards to the antagonists, who have adopted a fundamentalist position that the reader is never given sufficient insight into, I thought that MacLeod's treatment of Skulk was rather more nuanced. Arguably the best drawn character of the novel, Skulk (short for Skullcrusher), was a combat-mech in the Faith Wars before being forcibly downgraded into a less lethal chassis and finding employment as a "leki", a mechanical member of the police force. Skulk's wry humour belies an underlying dissatisfaction with what humanity has done to it,

which is reflected in the social barrier between leki and human officers. The following sequence, told from Ferguson's point of view shows how even in a secular world and within the bonds of professional camaraderie, humans still have a deep mistrust of artificial life:

From its own point of view, Skulk was a mutilated war veteran itself. Having its chip transferred from its original combat-mech chassis to the gracile leki frame had been something of a traumatic experience, Ferguson had gathered, and though Skulk had had a good decade or so to get over it, it still rankled, as it did with all his kind. Tough shit, was Ferguson's basic attitude to this - he sympathised with the leki's sense of having been degraded, disabled, castrated almost; but there was no way, *no fucking way*, any KI running the strange loop of self-awareness could be trusted with control of a combat mech. (p.110)

Skulk is ultimately asked to sacrifice a copy of itself in an attempt to prevent a major terrorist attack and the reader is given an insight into the sentient being that is forced to carry out the wishes of its original on its partner's orders, making Ferguson's sentiments seem all the colder.

*The Night Sessions* uses the crime procedural form to ask methodical questions about the nature of belief, fundamentalism and oppression and within the parameters established for this near future fiction, it is internally coherent, if skewed towards reinforcing the assumptions of the secular authorities. The engagement with posthuman theology is often sparse, but at times makes some of the artificial characters seem more alive and real than their flesh and blood counterparts. Overall, *The Night Sessions* is an enjoyable read that avoids a neat conclusion in favour of a more believable ending, even if the drama of the final act does not match the excitement of the build-up. As argued above, the problems with the text lie with the very nature of writing near future fiction, the pitfalls of which are not always successfully negotiated by the author, perhaps due to the sheer scope of the ideas and setting that ranges from Scotland to New Zealand to towering international space elevators. *The Night Sessions* is an extremely interesting book, but this is perhaps attributable more so to the questions it raises than the answers it suggests.

## The Fire in the Stone

By Nicholas Ruddick (Wesleyan University Press, 2009, 265pp)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In one of the most striking images in Stanley Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey* (1968), a bone that has just been used by an ape man to commit the first murder is flung into the air, and there transforms into a space craft. Millennia of human history are elided in that moment, which makes the point that our development as technological beings is a direct result of our propensity for violence. It is a view of prehuman kind that owes a lot to Robert Ardrey's assertion, in *African Genesis* (1961), that 'The weapon ... had fathered man'.

This was a far from isolated example of the trait, it was there, for example, in William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955), in which a family of peaceful Neanderthals find themselves facing the incoming Cro-Magnon, whose invention of weapons means that there can be no doubt about the outcome of this confrontation. We are the inheritors of Golding's title, and what we have inherited is the will to turn our weapons upon others.

Yet this was not how we had always seen our past. From the work that Ruddick identifies as the first example of prehistoric fiction ('pf' in his formulation on the model of 'sf' for science fiction), *Paris avant les hommes* (1861) by Pierre Boitard and on beyond 'The Grisly Folk' (1921) by H.G. Wells, our ancestors were presented very differently. Then, the Neanderthal was the creature of violence, the origin of the ogre in popular folklore, invariably dark and ugly; the Cro-Magnon, in contrast, was commonly described as fair and handsome, the bringer of peace and civilisation.

The reason for this difference is instructive. Pf is a form of fiction whose origins can be precisely dated: before the theory of evolution, first propounded by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), we had no notion of a pre-humanity about which to construct such fictions. With the idea of a deep history shaping the very nature of our selves, then the fossilised bones discovered in the Neanderthal valley in 1856 could be re-evaluated and what had seemed eccentric claims by Boucher de Perthes about the antiquity of man could be publicly supported by scientists, in the very year that Darwin's book came out. But amid the intellectual furore generated by Darwin's work the almost universal view was that humans represented the peak of evolution, so that fictions written to explore this exciting and amazing new world that had just been revealed were structured to show how civilised, gentle, peace-loving humans had triumphed over the naturally-brutish prehumans.

This changed in the 1940s not because the science had changed, there had been continuing advances in our archaeological knowledge that had been steadily absorbed into the fiction, but that didn't account for the way our

narrative of prehistory changed. The cause was the Second World War. Suddenly we had been presented with the idea that evil was not something overcome long before, but in fact was in us now. All at once, pf stopped being about the triumph of civilisation over nature and became instead about how modern humankind brought evil into the world.

Ironically, by the time 2001, *A Space Odyssey* encapsulated so neatly the triumph of violence, the science was changing. The archaeological record was starting to show that there was no sudden sweeping triumph of modern Cro-Magnon over ancient Neanderthal, instead we were learning that the two branches of humankind co-existed for thousands of years and may even have interbred. This was no battle for survival, no war to the death, but although pf began to take this into account the next real change in the literature was due less to changes in the science and more to social developments. The co-existence of Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon allowed the fiction to accommodate the liberation movements of the 60s and 70s, and particularly feminism. The stereotype of early pf, typified by the cartoon image of a caveman with a club dragging a woman by her hair, had been displaced by the gentle family group of Golding's Neanderthals, and was now displaced again by the powerful, innovative, independent female figure in Jean M. Auel's *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980) and its successors.

In other words, like its sibling science fiction, pf grew out of scientific knowledge and continues to develop in the light of science, but as a genre it is shaped far more by the cultural context from which it emerges. This is shown clearly in the first part of Nicholas Ruddick's vivid and engaging survey of the genre, which recounts its history from Darwin to such modern exponents as Elizabeth Thomas (*Reindeer Moon*, 1987), Megan Lindholm (*The Reindeer People*, 1988) and Emmanuel Roudier (the *Vo'Houna* series of graphic novels, 2002). Although Ruddick is comprehensive in his coverage, and spends justifiable amounts of time looking at key texts such as Stanley Waterloo's *The Story of Ab* (1897), Jack London's *Before Adam* (1907), J.-H. Rosny aîné's *The Quest for Fire* (1911), and so forth, it is often the works that don't fit the pattern that are most interesting. Jules Verne inserting a prehistoric man into the 1867 revised version of *Voyage au centre de la Terre* primarily as a refusal to accept the notion of evolution which he saw as an attack upon Catholicism; or Roy Lewis using pf to satirise contemporary social attitudes in *What We Did to Father* (1960, probably better known as *The Evolution Man*) in a way that was remarkably similar to the almost exactly contemporary cartoon series *The Flintstones* (1960-66).

But at one point Ruddick refers to current thinking which sees scientific theories as a narrative, subject to the same influences, imperatives and structures as any other narrative. Anthropologists who have constructed their stories of how our ancestors lived have done so, therefore, in much the same way that Rosny, Golding, Auel and Lindholm have constructed their narratives. And as much as the fictions may owe to the archaeological record, so much may interpretations

of the archaeological record owe to the fictions. What is being proposed here is a fascinating feedback loop, and though it may suggest a more radical rethink of the structure of scientific theories than it does of literary theories, it still opens up interesting new avenues of approach to such knowledge-based literatures as sf and pf. Unfortunately, having raised the idea around the mid-point of his book, Ruddick doesn't really pursue it. Throughout his history of pf, anthropological theories and literature always march arm in arm, but the direction of influence is always from science to literature.

In the second half of the book, during which Ruddick revealingly examines certain key themes in the development of pf, he looks at the way that Golding presents the interior lives of his Neanderthals. The archaeological record suggests that the Neanderthals had no art (other than certain found objects), and from this basis Golding suggests that they looked at and interpreted their world very differently from how we do. This was an idea subsequently taken up by Auel, but from this book we have no idea if such ideas have also fed into subsequent anthropological thinking. This missed step is the only significant shortcoming in a work that is otherwise a model in how to deal with so wide-ranging a topic, but having first raised the issue it becomes impossible to read his analysis of issues such as gender, race, language, religion and art without wishing for a slightly clearer statement of how science has fed on the literature because some such influence does seem to be taking place.

That said, Ruddick's treatment of these thematic issues is exemplary. His chapter on gender, in particular, is brilliant, partly because gender issues are so overt in a genre that goes from the cartoon image of a caveman dragging his woman by the hair to the super-competent woman at the heart of Auel's series. How we imagine gender relationships in the simpler context of the Stone Age, therefore, reveals much about perceptions of gender relationships in the present. And much the same is true of race: early pf was full of the dark Neanderthal being overthrown by the fairer, more civilised Cro-Magnon. Long before these issues became overt in Nazism, pf would have us believe that nothing civilised could emerge from Africa, that the threat is always from the east, that a mythical Aryan race is the high point of human evolution. The way Ruddick tells it, the simplistic framework of pf is an ideal way of highlighting our prejudices.

He takes rather less time to consider the related issues of language, art and religion, which is a pity since these raise points that testify to the subtleties rather than the crudities of pf. It is hardly surprising, for instance, that a form of literature owing its birth to Darwinism should be even more fundamentally secular than science fiction. That there is such a thing as prehistoric fiction bespeaks the fact that humankind evolved rather than emerging fully formed from the whim of a creator God. (Hence Verne's attempt, in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, to position a rough Neanderthalish figure as a parallel to rather than an ancestor of ourselves.) And this secularism seems to have been a continuing aspect of pf, with gods clearly being invented in the image of humans, with



shamen and other religious figures seen as an enemy rather than an agent of progress, and with the general direction of the works moving towards human mastery of the environment. And this, anti-clerical if not always anti-religious, seems to have been a consistent feature of pf from its earliest French exponents to its latest American bestsellers.

Prehistoric fiction is a curious literary form. Though Ruddick is at pains to separate it from science fiction (and, indeed, in their purest aspect the two do seem very distinct), still the connections between the two are legion. Many pf writers also wrote sf (Verne, Rosny, London, Golding, Lindholm), indeed, many pf writers were primarily sf authors (Wells, Burroughs), and many pf stories are also formally sf or are embedded within sf (2001, *A Space Odyssey*; Asimov's 'The Ugly Little Boy', 1958; Farmer's 'The Alley Man', 1959; Simak's 'Grotto of the Dancing Deer', 1980). Indeed, this book ends with an extended appreciation of Stephen Baxter's *Evolution* (2002) which context alone would suggest is a formal high point in Ruddick's history of pf. The two forms are clearly inter-related, though whether we consider them siblings, cousins or distant branches on the same evolutionary tree, the form that we shall henceforth follow Ruddick in naming pf has never before been the object of such critical attention. And it well repays the effort. However pf studies might develop in future, it has a solid, readable and excellent foundation in this book.

## Moxyland

By Lauren Beukes (Jacana, 2008, 239 pp.)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

If science fiction is in the business of literary estrangement, science fiction from outside the traditional confines of the Anglo-American tradition sometimes offers other shocks of difference, as we have seen with various anthologies of sf from Latin America, Europe, the African/Asian diasporas, etc., simply because they offer insights into cultures which are not familiar to the usual white Anglo-American sf reader. If science fiction is about the collision of a culture with the future, a nation like South Africa (where, we are told early in *Moxyland*, eleven national languages are spoken) surely offers far more opportunity for dramatizations of this collision than most others.

*Moxyland* created waves in Lauren Beukes's native South Africa on publication, and comes flagged with comments from one of SA's most distinguished writers, André Brink, who likens it to *A Clockwork Orange*. Set about ten years in the future, it follows four very different individuals: Kendra, an artist who has signed up to be part of a flagship nanotech marketing programme for a soft drink, Lerato, a corporate highflyer wanting out, Tendeka, a social activist, and Toby, a blogger. All are intertwined in a troubled near-future Cape Town, where amid a culture of material plenty (for some) the cops "defuse" troublemakers or let loose enhanced cyborg dogs, AIDS has devastated much of the hinterland, virtual worlds are refuges for discontented and contented alike and cold corporations plan their agendas.

The nature of Beukes's display of how her country engages with future-shock is difficult to assess from outside. Much of *Moxyland* will be familiar post-cyberpunk territory, with the communications technology we know extrapolated to display our own desires and nightmares. Much of it sounds cyberpunkish to those not signed up to the cutting edge of internet technology, but actually isn't, much. Both those familiar with cyberpunk since the 1980s, and those who read the youth-culture pages of the popular press, will find even the dystopian usage of mobile phones as means of social control only a short step into imaginative extrapolation: in the Cape Town of a decade hence, possession of a mobile phone and all the connections that implies means you are part of society. But even so, dissidents such as Tendeka can be temporarily or permanently "defused": zapped with painful-to-lethal voltage: "It's a disconnect offence to tamper with a defuser. You can't play nice by society's rules? Then you don't get to play at all. No phone. No service, No life. . . . Just remember, I've logged your SIM. You even think about causing any more shit, it's disconnect, china." (p.17) The citicops, with their nanotech-transformed Aito dogs, subdue criminals and rebels in the interests of the corporations which take people like Lerato from orphanages

for AIDS babies and exploit their talents to produce games for the masses and the kind of technologies which result in the BabyStrange smartclothes through which Toby records material for his blog, and the genetically-modified art which Kendra describes : “gruesome, red and meaty, like something dead turned inside out and mangled, half-collapsed in on itself with spines and ridges and fleshy strings and some kind of built-in speakers . . . It’s culling sounds from around us, remixing ambient audio, conversation, footsteps, glasses clinking, rustling clothing, through the systems of its body . . . sometimes it sounds like pain. It is an animal. Or alive at any rate.” (p.127-8).

Kendra’s own art — the almost prehistoric technology of black-and-white photography, encouraged by her mentor, the former photojournalist Mr. Muller, whose work chronicles the closing years of *apartheid* — reflects the loss of identity in her world. Moxyland, the children’s gameworld entered into by Toby when he needs some cash, is horrifically amoral. Outside Cape Town, as we learn from the backstories of several of the main characters, epidemics and crop failures have hit rural areas hard and the government is struggling to cope. Meanwhile, some mysterious individual or organization known only as *skyward\**, is using manipulating the gameworlds in order to lead rebels like Tendeka in action against the authorities. As the accounts of the four protagonists interweave towards the climax, we get a vivid picture of a society powered by changes which all of its members have to react to even as their understanding of what is actually going on remains, for most of the novel, severely limited. The ending, which could be the prefiguring of an Orwellian regime stamping its boot into the faces of its populace forever, or the only possible unveiling of a dystopia to those who might reject its values, is remarkable.

Much of *Moxyland*, especially the dropping-in of future-slang and the kind of patois people brought up in multi-lingual cultures fall into so naturally, sounds exotic enough in science fiction terms and its South African setting, fusing Afrikaans, English, and various African languages, might make it more so, but it probably isn’t. It simply sounds different to those (like me) whose experience of South African culture is limited to a few days holiday and some random reading. Nor should we even look to describe the novel with labels like “exotic” or even “different”. It is, though, appropriate to note that here is a South African writer attempting (and largely successfully, as far as I can tell) to take the political and social debates in South Africa through to the level of science fiction’s extrapolative and speculative modes. Beukes’s exploration of a society through its art and culture (most of the characters are involved in some form with the cultural industries) could easily fall into the trap of ignoring the wider economy altogether. Certainly, if the science fiction of earlier decades allowed us to go *gosh! wow!* at descriptions of starships and superweapons, we are stimulated here by the description of communications and gaming technologies. But then again, we are living in a world where such technologies are the driving force of change. Like Pat Cadigan (who virtually alone of the original cyberpunks

really emphasised this), Beukes seems to be noting that using technology to change how we are "entertained" will perhaps cement dystopia far more effectively than direct force. However, we have enough backstory, allusion, and street-level cameo to make *Moxyland* a novel which certainly does not ignore the reality beyond the privileged lives of its characters and the tenuous nature of the "privilege" these characters actually enjoy. Indeed, the term "dystopia", which has been used above to describe this future South Africa, may be wholly inappropriate. The most chilling part of a novel like *Moxyland* is that it may describe the best of all possible worlds.

*Moxyland* is a fascinating, skillfully told, and inventive novel, which may be flawed by a certain glossiness (much of it reads very much as a dramatization of a certain kind of *now* rather than an attempt to engage with a South Africa of a decade's time, but like most science fiction it is all the better for that). It speaks for *beyond* its local setting in a manner which much Anglo-American science fiction doesn't. If Lauren Beukes attracts the international audience which she deserves (a British edition is, at time of writing this review, forthcoming from the new HarperCollins imprint "Angry Robot"), she will do so for the right reasons. This is not something to point to as an example of a rare breed of science fiction. We are not being tourists when we read it. It is a book which is at the heart of what science fiction is saying about the world. This is not just the world young South Africans *maybe are about to will have lived in*: it is familiar to us, too.

## Incandescence

By Greg Egan (Gollancz, 2008, 300p. £18.99)

Reviewed by Matt Moore

After a gap of seven years since 2001's *Schild's Ladder*, Greg Egan finally returned to writing sf in 2008 with *Incandescence*. His years away, working against Australia's draconian, and depressingly much imitated, asylum and immigration system, barely seem to have marked his writing. The preoccupations that drove *Schild's Ladder* are present again in this new novel, presented with the same skill and in the same unique style.

The novel is set far in the post-human future in the Amalgam, a galactic civilisation made up of the descendants of thousands of species from many worlds. These ancestor species were part of dozens of different lineages of replicator, of which DNA is only one, seeded throughout the galaxy by asteroid in multiple panspermias. In the centre of the galaxy, populating the entire galactic bulge, live the Aloof, a civilisation apparently based on the same interstellar networking technologies (the discovery of which Egan describes in his connected short story "Riding the Crocodile"), but which refuses all contact with the Amalgam.

In this society live Rakesh and Parantham, two travellers looking for something new to discover in a galaxy in which "[e]verything has been done. Everything has been discovered." (p.2) They are given the opportunity to investigate an asteroid found deep inside Aloof territory which shows evidence of coming from an undiscovered planet inhabited by descendants of the DNA panspermia. They enter Aloof space as unencrypted signals and are given all the tools they need to investigate the asteroid and discover its origin by their mysterious hosts.

This investigation alternates chapters with another strand set on "the Splinter", a strange world floating in the incandescence of the title and inhabited by insectoid creatures. The story here follows Roi and Zak as they investigate the nature of their world, in the process sparking a scientific and industrial revolution, as a catastrophe looms. As the novel progresses these two strands come together in an unexpected way and we discover the true nature of the Splinter and the creatures that live there.

Everything in the book is underplayed, with Egan preferring dry, matter of fact description to building tension or awe. Interstellar journeys of thousands of years duration for Rakesh and Parantham are a matter of finding the right sub-menu and clicking "Go to star" (p.76). "The Jolt", a change in orbit which threatens the very existence of the Splinter, is shown through two characters falling over and then analysing what might have happened until they reach a working hypothesis (p.158-164). In terms of plot, there's almost no conflict, certainly nothing serious or life threatening. There is drama as the Splinter



begins to disintegrate and the scientific team that Roi and Zak gather around themselves work to deal with the problem, indeed characters sacrifice their lives to gain vital knowledge, but none of this is allowed to build into great emotional highs or lows.

This is typical of Egan's style in previous novels, but here it seems to be taken to even greater extremes. *Schild's Ladder*, which is perhaps most closely related to this with its deliberate underplaying of vast cosmic events, with, for example, the destruction of a planet being described through a morose party thousands of light years away, never goes so far in removing the usual elements of drama. There the anachronaut invasion of the space station and the tension between the Yelder and Preservationist factions drove the story along, punctuating the plot with moments of conflict and action. There is none of this in *Incandescence*. The plot is entirely driven by two scientific investigations, its development entirely coterminous with the developing knowledge of the characters. Indeed, this is something which is openly thematised as we discover more about the nature of the Splinter and its inhabitants. The development of Roi, Zak and their colleagues is the development of their knowledge in ways that are far more literal than we first realise.

This is an extremely alienating textual strategy. The descriptions of the scientific process are dry and require a real effort of mind – there are diagrams and equations – and these are not something the disinterested reader can simply skip. They *are* the plot, not simply necessary background to understand the good bits. And yet Egan refuses any sense of wonder pay off for this effort of mind. The Splinter is decidedly not an awe inspiring Big Dumb Object, it's not even particularly big, and the revelation of its origins and workings reaches us in dribs and drabs of mundane detail and supposition.

Egan consistently refuses to play with the sense of scale, in terms of both time and space, that the story implies. His posthuman characters are big enough to call the galaxy their home, to live daily on an astronomical scale. There's nothing new or surprising in their universe and so there are no surprises for the reader following their story. The same is true, in a different sense of Roi and Zak's story on the Splinter. Although their world is genuinely strange to them, it is not to the reader. We watch the rediscovery of a science we already know and the revelation of something we guessed at the beginning – that the Splinter is an artificial habitat of some kind.

To play with such a huge canvas and yet to refuse to play for reader reactions to scale and novelty is such a deliberately perverse strategy that it is tempting to look to this understatement for some kind of key to the novel. This is not something that can be done straightforwardly – the understatement is so pervasive that it leaves few handholds for interpretation. However, there is one contrast with Egan's previous practice that perhaps gives us an indication as to what game is being played here.

*Incandescence*, in common with almost all of Egan's mature novels, deals

with first contact between humanity or its descendants and some radically alien species. *Diaspora* and *Schild's Ladder* deal most explicitly with this, with both novels featuring multiple moments of contact with radically different alien beings, cheekily in *Schild's Ladder* one of these being an anachronaut zealot with flesh for brains, but they are not alone. *Quarantine*, *Permutation City* and arguably *Teranesia* to some extent, also deal with moments of first contact: with multidimensional humanity in *Quarantine*, with the autoverse insect creatures in *Permutation City*, and with an entirely new quantum ecosystem in *Teranesia*. The only real exception is *Distress* and even here it's possible to argue that the voluntary autists and various dissident genders stand in the place of this radical other. Looked at in this light, we can see a development of a single theme throughout Egan's mature oeuvre. *Quarantine* and *Permutation City* present beings so alien that contact involves the negation of one or other group: humanity's ability to collapse quantum states threatens the very existence of beings that exist across many quantum possibilities in *Quarantine* and the coherent physics of the autoverse creatures threatens the stability of the TVC universe that contains them. *Diaspora* challenges this with the idea of bridging, of characters who take control of their own consciousness and physicality to create bridges of understanding between creatures with radically different of existing in the world. This in fact is a major driving force of the plot of that novel with the final movement of the story being an attempt to understand the final message of a species long extinct. *Teranesia* turns this around and denies that there is any inherent meaning or purpose in life itself, the drive to understand is a drive of intelligence and mind and must be placed against the natural. In *Schild's Ladder* these two strands are brought together in the idea of general intelligence, the insistence that once a creature has the ability to reason and gather information then any natural differences pale into insignificance alongside the commonality of being a questioning being in a material universe.

We move in this sequence from insuperable differences, through the possibility of translation and mediated communication, to the eradication of difference in its entirety. In light of this sequence, *Incandescence's* radical understatement becomes easier to understand. First contact is no drama. Reaching across our natural or constructed differences is something virtually inherent in our existence as reasoning beings. The great understatement of Egan's most recent novel reflects his assessment of the basically trivial nature of the central problematic of the book. First contact is no big deal, the only challenge is understanding and surviving the universe itself.

This leads to a very dry novel with pretty esoteric rewards for the reader, but they're no less rich for this. The interesting question is where this arc across Egan's mature work leaves him. It would seem in some ways that this theme, present and important in most of his novels, is now more or less played out. Where Egan goes from here is going to be fascinating to see.

With luck, we won't have to wait so long this time.

## Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film

By Adilifu Nama (University of Texas Press, 2008, 200p, \$24.95)

Reviewed by Chris Pak

### Reviews:

In *Black Space* Adilifu Nama explores approaches to blackness in sf film, starting from the 1950s when "SF cinema truly began to take shape in the nuclear age of post-World War II America" to post-9/11 America, up until the release of *I, Robot* in 2004. He begins by explaining that critical treatment of blackness has tended either to dedicate only a single chapter to sf film or to consider it as a smaller part of a larger theoretical framework. Nama takes Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness* as his closest model, which is an example of the former. Because Guerrero analyses several different filmic genres, his focus is necessarily cursory. Nama therefore fills a significant scholarly gap with this book length treatment. Methodologically Nama borrows from his critical predecessors by employing a "sociohistorical grounding and contextualisation" of representations of blackness (p.4). His professed eclecticism means that he draws upon critical insights from Poststructuralism, Psychoanalysis, Marxism and, to a lesser extent, theories of gender and sexuality to support his argument, although he is careful not to compromise its clarity. This does mean, however, that he has not been able to devote significant space to a detailed explication of how any one of these theories work within the context of black representation in sf film.

Given the lack of wider critical attention, along with Nama's goal of "placing race at the center of SF film analysis", this is perhaps unavoidable. Furthermore, although Nama places the focus of his argument on black racial formation, he does acknowledge the influence, and representation, of other racial subjectivities in sf film. For example, Nama notes how "'Asian-ness' operates as a powerful oxymoronic aesthetic in *Blade Runner*" that works to index a future dominated economically by Asia (p.58). He historicizes this observation by explaining that it "reflected a growing uneasiness with American technological and economic ascendancy in the early 1980s", the main example of which was the burgeoning Japanese automobile industry (p.59). Nama contextualises his focus on blackness by explaining that "the sum of these critical readings is greater than its parts, and the whole underscores the cultural work and sociological significance of race, not merely blackness, in SF cinema and American society" (p.6). Nama is clearly pointing the way for further critical attention to be devoted to the intersection of race in sf film.

In his first chapter, "Structured Absence and Token Presence", Nama points out how the absence of black characters in early sf cinema during the Cold War reflected a desire for a white utopia; a utopia that excludes racial diversity. For him films such as *Logan's Run* foreshadowed a conservative backlash, in the 1980s, against the emergence of civil rights movements. He records how,

prior to this, Black Power nationalism and blaxploitation resulted in an increase of black characters in sf film. *Star Wars*, succeeding *Logan's Run*, "recuperates the early SF film tradition of structured black absence; blackness is absent but simultaneously present as a signifier of danger", in this case through the presence of Darth Vader, a visual symbol of blackness (31). He ends this chapter with a consideration of Will Smith's role in *I, Robot*. The modern resurgence of black actors in leading roles is related to the culturally comforting portrayal of a black man defending America from the enemy within (an interesting inversion of the absence of blackness in sf film during the Cold War), "affirm[ing] the belief that patriotic solidarity transcends racial loyalty, even if only in American pop culture" (41). Nama's insightful historicizing of sf brings new perspectives on the absence and token presence of blackness in sf film.

Nama's fifth chapter, "White Narratives, Black Allegories", examines the formal structure of sf films that engage with race. This chapter is potentially the most contentious as it attempts to justify the relevance of his various interpretations by drawing on the poststructuralist theory of meaning put forward by Stuart Hall. This paradigm is organized along three axes, a "preferred reading, a negotiated reading and an oppositional reading" that results in a multiplicity of interpretation: "from an audience-centered perspective, the racial meaning of any SF film is up for grabs" (p.124). Despite this flexibility of meaning it is apparent that Nama is always aware of the potentially problematic reading of film as allegory. He therefore devotes a significant portion of his analysis to *Planet of the Apes*, showing how whites "symbolically trade places with blacks and vicariously experience the stifling impact of American racism" by examining how the signifiers of slavery work to reference black experience of racism and violence (p.127).

Nama sees *The Matrix* trilogy as an example of a film in which black subjectivity is given a central place, both by foregrounding Morpheus as the emotional centre of the film and through the predominance of a multicultural political system. Because of this, for Nama, it "courts being defined as the first black SF film epic" (p.143). While I would certainly agree with Nama that cultural diversity is foregrounded in this film, I think it is interesting to consider his central point that "The wooden, if not blank, performance of Reeves displaces the emotional weight of the film from him to Morpheus, the Oracle, and to a lesser extent, the other significant black characters" (p.144). Keanu Reeves, whose role Nama defines as a "white computer hacker", is in fact a wooden and blank actor of Asian-Pacific descent (Mark Bould, "Afrofuturism and Black SF", SFS 34, p. 181). Perhaps the symbolic whiteness that Neo is charged with is an example of the notion that "Asian Americans [are] often being singled out as the perfect embodiment of successful assimilation, America's "model minority" (p.60).

In chapter two, "Bad Blood: Fear of Racial Contamination" Nama considers the symbolic representation of blackness in sf. His statement that "Race is the



ultimate science fiction" (p.42) recalls his parallel between the tropes of sf (time travel and transporters), for which we willingly suspend our disbelief, and that of racial superiority based upon biological traits. This insight into the "unstated hegemonic affinity" between the two underscores *Black Space's* rationale (p.9). He addresses the repressed fear of racial contamination as signified by such films as *The Omega Man* and *Gattaca*, all of which he convincingly shows "reflect America's history of hypersurveillance of racial boundaries" (p.43), and which is connected to a discourse of biological determinism based upon a simplistic understanding of Darwinism. He concludes that, at bottom, these films "are symbolic expressions of a nation yearning to protect racial identity" (p.68).

But protect it from what? Nama follows this analysis by picking apart the way in which blackness has been subject to grotesque distortion through a symbolic relation of aliens to blacks in "The Black Body: Figures of Distortion". Films such as *Predator* and *Total Recall* connect the extraterrestrial and mutated alien to blackness while the pairing of black characters with white in *The Fifth Element* and *Demolition Man* demonstrate how "images of the black body are a representational foil for dominant versions of white masculinity" (p.93). Nama acknowledges the potential difficulties of examining sf cinema from a psychoanalytical perspective and takes pain to justify the interpretations he makes. I for one find the insights he offers interesting if initially, as Nama notes in relation to his analysis of *Predator*, "metaphorically far-fetched" (p.77). This psychoanalytic angle leads him to assert that the pairing of white and (sometimes symbolically) black characters "include[s] a homoerotic impulse" (p.93). This insight in itself suggests a fruitful avenue for further critical study.

Nama then shifts focus by refracting his analysis through the prism of class. He considers *Rollerball*, *Robocop* and *Alien* and compares the latter to its sequels in "Humans Unite! Race, Class, and Postindustrial Aliens". For me, however, his concluding consideration of *They Live* offers the most interesting insights of the chapter. Nama manages to relate "The marathon brawl", a scene that I considered a puzzling example of hyperbolic violence, to the "sincere attempt to convey the protracted nature of the struggle to bridge the racial gap in America" (p.120). His pairing of *They Live* to *Robocop* as a "Blue-Collar Dystopia" is also surprising at first glance but again Nama offers ways of reading these films as expressions of how "offscreen economic oppression, not racial oppression, rests at the core of current social divisions between blacks and whites" (p.122).

Perhaps the most interesting chapter in terms of its consideration of works rarely given critical attention is his last, "Subverting the Genre: The Mothership connection", in which Nama's scope is widened to consider texts outside of cinematic discourse. His consideration of films that are or, in the case of *Mars Attacks!*, that "resonates as an independent film" (such as Sun Ra's *Space is the Place*) leads him to consider how Afro-Futurism engages with the intersection of black racial formation and sf. George Clinton's music and the appropriation of sf tropes by Hip Hop artists such as Andre 3000 in his music video "Prototype",



tackle cultural works that have received little attention in sf criticism. This tantalizingly brief chapter anticipates how new cultural works are beginning to challenge the established traditions of sf by imagining “a new form of cultural production that creates new reference points for race, identity, and space in the immediate and far-off future” (p.170).

*Black Space* is an engaging and successful attempt to define the boundaries of the intersection of race and sf in film. Its eclectic approach and wide ranging examination of film demonstrates the scope of the field still yet to be engaged with. He examines how the allegorical form and the structured absence and presence of blacks, along with how central themes such as the distortion of the black body, have traditionally worked to marginalize black representation as well as to characterize the alien other as symbolically black, thus working to culturally reinforce historical marginalization. Also significant is the way in which he outlines the intersection of blackness and other racial minorities yet always ensures that the histories of these cultural groups are not flattened into uniformity. Within the context of the sparse critical engagement with blackness in sf film Nama argues persuasively for the insights that such examination has to offer while opening up significant avenues for further criticism.

## Investigating *Firefly* and *Serenity*: Science Fiction on the Frontier

By Rhonda V. Wilcox & Tanya R. Cochran (eds.) (I.B. Tauris, 2008, 290p, £14.99)  
Reviewed by Abigail Nussbaum

No discussion of Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, or of the fannish and critical reaction to it, is complete without a boilerplate introduction. So let's get it out of the way: it was a television series that lasted only fifteen episodes—by the standards of American network TV, a stillbirth. It was mutilated and abused by its network, Fox, which demanded the substitution of the original pilot with a lesser specimen, aired episodes out of order, scheduled the show in a dead timeslot and with no promotion, and promptly cancelled it when these measures had their expected effect. Then, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, *Firefly* has its resurgence—as a cult favourite and bestselling DVD, and later as the feature film *Serenity*. Today, more than six years after its brief life and quick death (and as Whedon and Fox prepare to recapitulate the whole ordeal with his upcoming series *Dollhouse*), it continues to enjoy a remarkable afterlife in the hearts and minds of fans, as well as in academic writing. Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran's *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier* collects nineteen essays by media and cultural studies critics about the show and its enduring fannish appeal.

An introduction very much along these lines ushers readers into *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*. Between that narrative's ubiquity and the undeniable paltriness of available filmed material for critics to discuss, it is impossible not to wonder whether the repetitions in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* don't extend beyond that introduction. As both the essays in this volume and its voluminous list of cited works testify, *Firefly* scholarship is vast and wide-ranging, encompassing academic journals and papers, conferences, several other essay collections, and, of course, a huge internet fandom. After six years of all this verbiage, could there really be anything new to say?

If so, Wilcox and Cochran have not found it. The essays in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* are, for the most part, interesting and well-written, but they are best suited to new *Firefly* fans just beginning their investigation of the series (and overwhelmed by the wealth and distribution of online discussion), or, as I strongly suspect the collection is primarily intended for, to media and cultural studies instructors in need of a classroom aid for teaching *Firefly* to students unfamiliar with either it or critical discussions of popular culture. Longtime fans will find very little in the way of new perspectives here.

The essays in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* are organized by topic, with two or three essays each discussing Language and Rhetoric, Gender, Genre, Social and Cultural Themes, Religion and Morality, Music, Visuals, and Fans,

Transition, and the World Outside. The essays also progress in the complexity of their argument and the depth of their engagement with the series. This, again, is a reasonable approach to take when teaching *Firefly* and *Serenity* in a semester-long course, but it has the unfortunate consequence of putting the collection's worst foot forward, with Cynthea Masson's "'But She Was All Naked! And All Articulate!': The Rhetoric of Seduction in *Firefly*", a ten-page essay about Inara, Saffron, and Nandi's use of language as a tool of seduction which amounts to little more than a series of tautologies. It tells us, for example, that when an embarrassed Inara changes the subject of conversation after her client makes a crude remark, "she illustrates the rhetorical strategy known as heterogenium", and then, in a footnote, defines heterogenium as "Avoiding the issue by changing the subject to something different."

More interesting is Susan Mandala's "Representing the Future: Chinese and Codeswitching in *Firefly*", about the seamless transitions between English and Mandarin on the show, though it is perhaps too dismissive of the accusation levelled by both academics and fans that *Firefly*'s Asian accoutrements amount to nothing more than exoticism. Mandala counters this accusation by pointing out that to the characters within the show, Chinese language and culture are as organic as Western influences, but in doing so she ignores both the flimsy and self-contradictory construction of *Firefly*'s Anglo-Sino universe and the simple fact that the show was made by Westerners, for Westerners, and featuring almost exclusively Western characters (as an irate *Firefly* fanvid, "How Much Is That Geisha in the Window?", presented at VividCon 2008, points out, the only Asian actor ever to speak in either *Firefly* or *Serenity* plays a whore). However well-intentioned its creators, the effect of the near-invisibility of Asian people in *Firefly* is to reduce its Asian cultural influences to exotic window dressing.

Similarly unquestioning approaches to the series are on display in the chapter dealing with gender. Andrew Aberdein, in "The Companions and Socrates: Is Inara a Hetaera?", puts together a compelling argument that Inara and other Companion characters share greater similarities with hetaeras, the high class courtesans of ancient Greece, than with the Japanese geishas which served as Joss Whedon's inspiration. Though Aberdein is careful to note the sensationalistic attitude often taken in scholarship towards the hetaeras, which "Some feminist critics have dismissed ... as a 'typical boy fantasy'", he doesn't take the requisite further step to acknowledging that whether or not women like the hetaeras—strong, respected, educated, politically influential, independent sex workers—actually existed, their existence would almost certainly suggest a society in which women who seek power and independence have no means of achieving either except through their sexuality. That *Firefly* posits Inara and the Companion guild alongside women in traditionally masculine roles such as Zoe and Kaylee suggests, once again, either a failure of imagination or a surfeit of it, of the drooling, lust-driven variety. Also seeming to have taken very little heed of the actual cultural artefact that is allegedly his topic is David

Magill, with "I Aim to Misbehave: Masculinities in the 'Verse", which straightforwardly makes the claim that the morally ambivalent and frequently nihilistic Mal Reynolds represents a model of moral masculinity for both the show's other male characters and its viewers to emulate.

Far more interesting are the essays which rely on their author's familiarity with topics that range farther than *Firefly* or Joss Whedon's oeuvre. Mary Alice Money, in "*Firefly's* 'Out of Gas': Genre Echoes and the Hero's Journey", draws the readers' attention to parallels between *Firefly* and TV and film Westerns of the first half of the twentieth century, as well as other reworked, sfnal Westerns of its second half, starting with *Star Wars*. Even more intriguing are the chapters on music and visuals, which draw on expertise not generally possessed by non-academic, fannish commentators. In "Music, Race, and Paradoxes of Representation: Jubal Early's Musical Motif of Barbarism in 'Objects in Space'", Neil Lerner draws a connection between the use of a clarinet in Jubal Early's musical motif with that instrument's ubiquity in early Jazz and R&B music, and particularly its association with black masculinity (a point he makes with the help of the truly uproarious lyrics to "Alexander and His Clarinet") that is quite possibly the most persuasive argument I've seen for the frequent complaints of racism levelled against this episode. Christopher Neal's "Marching Out of Step: Music and Otherness in the *Firefly/Serenity* Saga" gives a broader survey of the series' use of music, from the title song to the use of a lone fiddle to signify scenes on *Serenity* to real-world parallels to the Ballad of Jayne. The essays on visuals are less successful, mostly reiterating observations that fans will have made for themselves (or gleaned from DVD commentary for both the show and the movie, which is rife with technical detail and Whedon's observations about his directorial and visual choices) but Matthew Pateman, in "Deathly Serious: Mortality, Morality, and the *Mise-en-Scène* in *Firefly* and *Serenity*", makes some interesting observations about the representations of death in various episodes of the series, albeit belabouring his points quite a bit.

It is this belabouring of points that decisively persuades me of my impression that *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* is not intended for longtime fans of the series. Even taking into account the inevitable repetition as different contributors make references to the same scenes or lines of dialogue, which makes a straight read-through of the collection somewhat tedious, very few of the essays in the book could not have benefited from heavy pruning. Far too much of the book is given over to observations which, to any devoted, inquisitive fan of the series, would have been entirely obvious. On those occasions when less than obvious connections are made, they often seem to be using *Firefly* as a prop for a wholly unrelated discussion, as in Jeffrey Bussolini's "A Geopolitical Interpretation of *Serenity*", which offers a plausible yet not very persuasive reading of the film as a direct reaction to US foreign policy after 9/11, and argues that the substance Pax, which when added by the Alliance to the air processors on the newly colonized planet Miranda causes the death-by-apathy of nearly its entire population, is

a direct reference to the anti-anxiety medication Paxil, and a criticism of the tendency towards over-reliance on mood altering pharmaceuticals in American society.

Perhaps the most blatant indication of *Investigating Firefly and Serenity's* intended audience can be found in the chapter devoted to fannish reactions to the series. The two essays collected here, though respectful and even slightly in awe of the dedication and cohesiveness shown by hardcore *Firefly* fandom, are clearly written as introductory surveys for readers with little or no experience within these communities. The second of these articles, editor Cochran's "The Browncoats Are Coming: *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and Fan Activism", even spills over into a broader discussion of the often ambivalent relationship between fans, creators, and owners of an intellectual property, and the efforts on the part of the latter to channel, and thus control, fannish creativity in directions which create additional revenue streams.

As I wrote at the beginning of this review, *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* adds very little that's new to the ongoing conversation about the series and the film. More troubling, however, is the fact that it ignores, and in some cases even tries to argue away, the more trenchant and searching criticisms of the series, and particularly its treatment of race and gender. One can't help but wonder whether Wilcox and Cochran's decision to skew the collection towards academics and their students also skewed its critical perspective on the show, making the editors and contributors reluctant to criticize the series too sternly in essays which might serve as their readers' first introduction to it. The result is a book that will probably prove useful in a classroom, but which even new fans might wish to avoid in favour of the immediacy, vibrance, and give and take of online fannish discussions.



## Little Brother

By Cory Doctorow (Harper Voyager, 2008, 374 pp, £7.99)

Reviewed by Nick Wood

Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* follows a long tradition of dystopian fiction within sf, including an implicit reference to George Orwell's 1984 in its title allusion to 'Big Brother'. The age of the protagonist (17 years) marks it out as a likely YA novel and it soon becomes apparent that the book is also riding on the wave of current developments within electronic based information technologies. The story that emerges thus sports both a contemporary edge and a realist sensibility.

Doctorow drives the plot forward skilfully into a near-future fascist-feeling America, past a new 'Terror Attack' in San Francisco, which mires the protagonist (Marcus) and a group of his peers in the whirlpool of the state's response. Victimised and initially traumatised, Marcus eventually galvanises a groundswell of (youth-based) resistance to the political changes within the country; harnessing the power of emerging information technologies that had hitherto been used as means to entrench state control, a 'Little Brother' rising to face 'Big Brother'. The ending is suitably nuanced and ambiguous – no easy solutions are offered, only a glimpse of multiple Americas fractured by attacks and its responses to these.

As a counterpoint to the notion of multiple Americas, Doctorow raises the notion of multiple selves too, reflected in the web-personas that both shield and funnel interactions within an alternative and subversively constructed 'net. Marcus is thus also M1k3y – Mikey to those in the know, not *em, one, kay, three, why*. The tension between these different personas and the protagonist's struggle for an authentic and integrated emerging identity is played off against the typical teenage issues of sex and relationships. This is deftly handled by Doctorow and also serves to further anchor the story for 'young adult' readers.

However, the critical context that most urgently bolsters the stiffening of opposition within the novel falls within the cultural-historical sphere, e.g. as initially seen in Marcus/M1k3y's questioning of the nature and subtleties within the Bill of Rights. Further ammunition of sorts is obtained from within the heart of twentieth century America, including some of the ideas and sentiments from the Beat poets that partly heralded the rise of the 1960s counter-culture in the USA. The story thus moves forward with a historically mirroring organisation of protest opposition, but this time fuelled by subverting the very tools of surveillance and control operated by an increasingly totalitarian state, i.e. electronic data and communication.

Power and control within Orwell's 1984 was maintained across an immersive range of areas; such as a reinterpreted and restricted history, as well as a deliberate limiting of language, with the aim of restricting thought to within

allowed parameters. The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis behind this latter idea – i.e. that language shapes thought – may well have had only weak experimental confirmation, but it still retains a resilient power. The crucial shift with Doctorow's novel though, is the implicit assertion that the genie is already out of the bottle – i.e. potential tools of thought are all around us, in the form of electronic information. This may be in a shifting and amorphous electronic shape, but the people best placed to utilise this are the generation who were born, in a sense, 'breathing' it.

The novel is thus in many ways an *intelligent* book – seeming to grapple with a socio-cultural appreciation of cognition – i.e. intelligence seen *not* as something static, innate and immutable, but as an indistinct entity that can be shared/developed/distributed in a fluid and pervasive fashion. In Barbara Rogoff's notion of "situated cognition" (*Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context*, 1991) this is usually explicated as occurring from culturally specific expert adults to novice learners. *Little Brother* however, flips this idea neatly on its head with the unravelling theme that the experts within the electronic information arena are actually in fact mostly the young – but one of the keys to the story is that even within this scenario, the 'old' are neither stereotyped nor discarded. There is an acknowledgement that adults can also be resourceful repositories, some having histories of previous – possibly even similar – struggles. Furthermore, as Doctorow knows, they still form the fulcrum of socio-political power and so trusted ones – including parents – are eventually turned to as appropriate, without undermining Marcus/M1k3y's ongoing drive to manage the world on his own as an individuating adolescent.

Overall, the book operates on a dual level which reinforces its realist sensibilities – i.e. both as 'story' and as a tract or electronic 'call to arms', with an after-word that includes references to finding and managing electronic information which fosters both thinking outside the box (X-Box or otherwise) as well as working outside the 'system'. This meta-fictional structure seems to me both the novel's greatest strength, as well as its biggest vulnerability. Certainly, it grounds the text in realism and increases linkage potential with a tech-savvy audience. Furthermore, it provides both a denseness and specificity of text that may also be aimed at democratising ways of harnessing the powers of the 'e-genie', i.e. electronic information that has 'escaped the bottle' – to continue the earlier metaphor – which may also feel almost mystical to some. Not so, however, if you have the right words or knowledge – and Doctorow is – almost without fail – refreshingly free with imparting those words and knowledge of power.

The denseness of the expository text – whilst both of interest and relevance – did on just a few occasions slow the story up sufficiently to falter the suspension of disbelief created from the driving threads of Doctorow's narrative. This was a pity as it removed a little of the book's momentum for me – but Doctorow's writing is skilful, his plot is of sufficient force and his characters engaging enough

to encourage a push through the periods of technologically thicker information, which remains illuminating and instructive nevertheless and is well worth the wade.

There is a telling moment later on in the novel when Marcus/M1k3y realises that the bulk of those arrested alongside him were 'black' fellow citizens. Within this realisation lies the veiled understanding that fascism often targets the poorer/disadvantaged/different/less well resourced and this experience further enhances an understanding of different/multiple Americas, where access to the 'American Dream' is neither equitable nor guaranteed. The growing moral imperative within the main protagonist is linked in with his increasing politicisation and is handled in a serious yet playful way, forming the core highlight of the novel for me. That is, *Little Brother* treats political issues as an integral part of civic life for everyone, including the young adult, and moves the near-future socio-cultural extrapolation firmly away from the Western world's late twentieth century "culture of narcissism" (Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, 1979).

Doctorow's first foray into YA sf is thus indeed a strong and thoughtful one; his near-future extrapolation is strengthened by its cultural and historical links with the past. Confronted with the predominance of escapist focused teenage fantasy, this book is a refreshing and world-engaging meta-fiction that seeks to make a difference *now*. Already there are claims that the change in US presidency was partly driven by the respective candidates differing uses of internet technology. Having read Doctorow's book, I would not be surprised. I only hope this is just the start of his YA writing and not a one-off departure from his adult work.

## Going Under

By Justina Robson (Gollancz, 2008, 338p. £12.99)

Reviewed by Pawel Frelik

*Going Under* is the third part of the Quantum Gravity series after *Keeping It Real* (2006) and *Selling Out* (2007). While familiarity with the previous two is not absolutely necessary to follow it, a brief summary may be in order. The series is set in the universe in which the Quantum Bomb of 2015 destroyed the space-time continuum and opened gateways to what can be described as five parallel realms. Apart from Otopia, as Earth, considered to be "the fourth realm" by those from other universes, is now called, there is Zoomenon, the realm of the Elementals, Alfheim, inhabited by elves, Demonia, the world of demons, Thanatopia, the equivalent of the underworld and/or afterlife, and Faery, the domain of faeries, or fae. All five existed prior to the Quantum Bomb and have developed various degrees and modes of contact and traffic between each other. As only recently connected to the entirety of this universe, humans are the least prepared and ill-suited for encounters with other races, not to mention visits to their homelands. Very interestingly, in Otopia the awareness of how things were prior to the explosion is blurred and uncertain as if the space rift affected the memory itself – both individual and communal.

The protagonist of the series is Lila Black, a modern version of the Six Million Dollar Man crossed with Bionic Woman. Lila is a cyborgized agent working for the NSA – an asset in the inter-world tensions but also an experimental prototype. She carries a small nuclear reactor in her belly, her limbs can morph into various weapons, and, given supplies, her body can synthesize medicines. The integration of flesh and *techné* in her body is not exactly smooth at first while her superiors do not fully trust her. The technology that made Lila's transformation possible has come from an unknown source and there is a suspicion that for all her usefulness Lila can be used by some unknown enemies – a paranoia which is as unconfirmed as it is realistic in the world in which the Q Bomb erased all certainties.

The opening volume of the series focuses on Lila's assignment gone bad – Zal, an elf musician she is assigned to protect, turns out to be involved in the byzantine intrigues of the elven aristocracy, which takes Black to Alfheim and results in her having to carry in her heart the soul of Tath, an elven Necromancer. In the sequel *Selling Out* she and Zal travel to Demonia and Zoomenon – the novel also reveals more of both characters' past. At the beginning of *Going Under* Lila finds herself at a nexus of decidedly unusual relationships. She is married to two men – Zal, who has in the meantime turned out to be a demonized elf, and Teazle, a demon whose basic shape is more akin to a large wolf than anybody even vaguely humanoid. Inside her, she still has Tath, who has previously devoured the life essence of Teazle's brother. Completing the entourage is Thingamajig, a small

demonic imp who is bound to Lila as a punishment and who usually resides on her shoulder, hiding in her hair.

Apart from celebrating her recent double wedding in Daemonia (the spelling is interestingly different from that in the first volume), Lila also engages in duels with demons eager to challenge who they perceive to be a human impostor, a local custom from which she usually comes out victorious thanks to her augmentations. In fact, the latter started to change in *Selling Out*, becoming more attuned to her biological body – presumably because of the aetheric atmosphere of other realms in which she has been spending time. Lila is also hiding from her employers, who in the course of the two previous novels have become increasingly suspicious of the transformations of her body and her growing independence in judgment calls. During her absence, however, Otopia has become over-ridden with fae, whose presence completely disorganizes life there. This unwitting invasion has been caused by the entity known as Jack Frost, who has taken over the realm of Faery, locking it in a never-ending cycle of winter and violence and forcing many faeries to seek shelter abroad. Evading her bosses and encouraged by few friends from the agency, Lila and her companions decide to visit the land of fae and confront its malicious ruler. This is where the central action of *Going Under* really begins, thus completing the trilogy's arc of the tour of all worldly domains – at least those available to the living.

This short synopsis makes it clear that, like its two predecessors, *Going Under* is a very clever mixture of science fiction and urban fantasy – in itself hardly a new invention – but there are several angles that complicate such a seemingly clear classification. As the story progresses over three volumes, Lila's corporeality becomes increasingly incomprehensible to her. While her body parts are still metal and alloy and she still needs to replenish her caches of ammunition and base materials for bio-synthesis, the final imbrication of flesh and machine is unexpected – earlier each cyber-powered effort resulted in torn muscles and other serious injuries. She also discovers certain qualities and functions that she never suspected she possessed – in general she seems to assume more and more fantasy-like features as if her presence in other realms, in which magic operates, has triggered some internal transformation into an entity more in tune with the character of the universe Otopia has connected to.

One of the ways of dealing with the distinction between science fiction and fantasy has been to imagine them as occupying two extremes of the continuous spectrum, within which most texts tread some sort of the middle ground. If Lila's cyborg body can be considered the token artefact of science-fictionality, the series can be read as the gradual waning of rationality and a move away from the sf end and towards the fantasy one. Where the text ends up exactly is hard to determine but *Going Under* is markedly different from the trilogy-opening volume. Simultaneously, the construction of the protagonist is a clear nod towards the women's science fiction tradition and an attempt at undermining of the traditional sexual politics of fantasy – Lila is frequently confronted with



condescension, which changes to awe and respect once she shows her skills. On the other hand, given the plot and formula one would probably go too far in reading strong feminist messages here. Instead, Lila's occasional sense of not keeping up with the events may be more generally representative of the entire humanity's disorientation in the post-Quantum universe – even if she is only partially baseline human.

Despite this gradual slide towards the fantasy end of story-telling Robson manages to avoid the pomposity and grandiosity that mar so many fantasy texts. In fact, *Going Under* bristles with a special kind of humour. None of it is openly comical in the Pratchettian manner, though. There is much banter between various characters, the marital configuration described above inevitably evokes smiles, and Lila herself is endowed with a wry sense of humour with which she often punctuates hopeless situations and narrow escapes. However, underneath semi-malicious exchanges and joking there is a decidedly dark undertone and one that does not stem from the graphic descriptions of combat and death which abound in the novel. Lila and her colleagues may be striving to orient themselves in very specific complexities of aetheric mechanics, spells and power games that the races more superior to them engage in, but their disorientation can be read as emblematic of the sense of being lost in the world whose familiar parameters have evaporated. I do not necessarily suggest that Robson deliberately channels social anxieties connected with the development of science and technology (although with the Quantum Bomb being the cause of everything described in the novels, it is hard not to think about what quantum physics and new sciences suggest about the nature of our universe), but Lila's feeling of hopelessness and her sense of being lost and small read very authentically in *Going Under*. This is particularly evident in the portion of the novel when Lila and her company venture into the land of Fae. Compared to the exoticism of Daemonia earlier in the novel, the Fae section is strongly permeated with phantasmagoric imagery. The dream-like sequences are executed with mastery that once again prove Robson to be a great stylist and plotter and the atmosphere of impending threat and uncertainty never leaves the narrative.

This pessimistic undertone stands out especially when one considers the character of two earlier volumes. In the April 2006 *Locus* interview, right before the publication of *Keeping It Real*, Robson suggested that the new series was going to be “not so serious” and “more lighthearted” and called it “a romping adventure” and “much more a ‘laugh riot’ than my other books”. And indeed, fight and flight constitute a prominent focus of the series but with each subsequent novel, the overall vision darkens and becomes one less of a careless cyborg action and more of a soul-probing. Whether this was originally the author's intention or the series evolved as the frustration with “serious” writing wore off (*Keeping It Real* was written parallel to the heady *Living Next Door to the God of Love*) does not seem to be important. One way or another, *Going Under* is a very impressive text and one worth reading even if one does not know the previous two parts.

## Flood

by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz, 2008, 504pp, £18.99hbk/pbk £6.99)

Reviewed by Ken MacLeod

Baxter's flood, like Noah's, begins with rain. Rain falls in Barcelona where at the book's opening its central characters have been held hostage for up to five years, and falls even heavier in London after their rescue. The year is 2016, which means Spain's collapse into "a Lebanon of the west" is well under way just four years after the book's publication. This seems a hostage to fortune. But perhaps the implied imminent rush of political disintegration under environmental stress is meant to function for the reader like the little push you need before you go down a waterslide. Seeing London lost to the flood – a disaster gleefully observed by the rest of the country via [WatchTheCockneysSwim.com](http://WatchTheCockneysSwim.com) - is the first splash in your face. There are a lot more before you reach the bottom of the chute.

Because the real trouble isn't the rain. It isn't even the sea-level rise caused by global warming. Just as in Genesis 7:11, it's when "the fountains of the great deep [are] broken up" that the catastrophe becomes global. Lodes of water larger than the oceans are (it says here) trapped in the Earth's mantle, and now they are welling up at the mid-ocean ridges. This explanation doesn't become apparent until the second part of the book, and the heroic oceanographer who confirms it isn't listened to: in a neat roll-over of current controversies, most of the by now punch-drunk scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change respond to the evidence and models like global-warming deniers.

In the first two parts of the novel, Baxter induces flash-backs to the 2008 floods in England, to Katrina and the South Asian tsunami, and delivers a well-justified smack to two of the tropes of easy, cosy catastrophe fiction: that you start over with a clean slate, and that (after a manly moment of tight-lipped mourning) your relationships are simplified. The slate you are left with after catastrophe is messy, stinking, and wet. Your relationships – if any remain, and if none do you're sunk anyway – become more intense, and more of a strain. This is not a story where billions perish so that you can end up with a posh girlfriend on the Isle of Wight. Characters to whom one has become attached die arbitrarily and without warning, just like in real life.

The four hostages – Lily, Piers, Helen and Gary – pledge to look out for each other for the rest of their lives, not suspecting in the slightest just how fraught a commitment that will turn out to be. They and a handful of their attachments – a colleague here, a niece there, a lover somewhere, a child – give us various viewpoints on the world as the decades pass and the waters rise exponentially, by ones and twos, then tens, then hundreds, and finally thousands of metres. London goes from a place where your feet get wet and your carpets rot to a site

explored by deep-sea submersibles. Every solution turns out to be temporary, and is overwhelmed. Even the new Noah, a wealthy-maverick character of the type we can by now probably call the Baxterian Competent Man, gets an off-hand, off-stage death just before the end – though not before accomplishing his most important goals, including the invention of humanity's future symbiont and home, the genetically engineered seaweed raft.

The waters close over Everest. The kids these days, they just want to swim. There have been lights in the sky, departing. A sequel is coming. We hold our breath.

## Living with the Dead

By Darrell Schweitzer (PS Publishing Ltd, 2008, 62p, £25/£10)

Reviewed by Tania Scott

"The dead come from the sea, at night." (1)

The opening line of Darrell Schweitzer's novella *Living with the Dead* is succinct, direct and chilling. Over five episodes spanning a mere sixty-two pages Schweitzer has created an engaging, and often surprising, tale of the macabre. In the town of Old Corpsenberg the bodies of the dead appear in the harbour, deposited by eerie black ships whose arrival is foretold by the townspeople's collective dreams. The dead bodies are literal *memento mori* that the living population of the town must gather and bring into their homes. Gradually we learn that over each successive generation the town becomes more and more crowded with the dead, as they do not decay and remain in the condition in which they arrived. At the point at which the events of the novella take place every room is full of corpses, leaving the people of the town to attempt to squeeze some sort of life out in between the remains of the dead. Schweitzer's novella begins then with the unsettling premise of a world where the bodies of the dead have been allowed to appropriate the homes of the increasingly "lifeless" living characters:

The dead fill the shops, the restaurants, the library, the waiting room in the train station where the train never comes and only the dead have the patience to wait for it. (5)

The presence of death and the undead – not to mention Jason Van Hollander's grotesque illustrations – may lead the reader to expect a horror cliché. Tim Lebbon anticipates this jaded readership in his introduction where he exclaims: "Oh hell, it's another zombie novella"(v). The sheer inventiveness of *Living with the Dead* defies any such complacent characterisation. The novella form – which revels in its liminality, not one thing nor the other – is a perfect vehicle for Schweitzer's story, where the oppositions of life/death, reality/illusion blur and slide into one another. The novella's oscillation between short story and novel allows Schweitzer to present us with different "episodes" rather than chapters, each complete as a tale in its own right, but each episode also adds to a continuing narrative of the collapse and possible redemption of the town.

As the dead bodies that litter the town never decay those living there are gradually being pushed out, both literally and mentally. Each episode follows the story of one of these doomed townspeople, trying to escape whether through madness, love, or faith. Schweitzer's narrative steadfastly refuses to provide us

with any answers as to what is happening and to what is real or illusion. One example of this is when the dead begin to dance:

*The dead are moving.* Gracefully, like wisps of cloud, they glide down the stairs, into the street, though they are not ghosts; no they are solid enough; yet I, who am alive, seem gross and clumsy by comparison. (19)

The narrator of this episode is quite mad, so the reader tends to assume that he is dreaming. Yet as other characters witness similar scenes we begin to wonder whether the dance of the dead is just as real as anything else in the story. The novella allows for both possibilities; reality or illusion, truth or delusion. Perhaps one means of escape from the purgatory of Old Corpsenberg is through madness itself. Schweitzer's dead are neat parallels of the zombie undead of so many clichéd horror texts. Instead of shuffling towards their victims, they dance with them. Instead of being gory remains of people they are eternal, alabaster statues. In a town where the living are starved skeletons and the dead are perfectly preserved specimens it is not just horror imagery that is being turned on its head.

Another key phrase from the book is perversion. The unseen government, who, we are told, control everything – a kind of all-knowing thought police – view any ill-treatment of the dead as perversion. The first episode shows the descent into madness of an official who falls in love with “The most beautiful dead woman in the world”(1). At first we sympathize: surely to fall in love with a dead woman is the ultimate perversion? Yet the novella performs a neat reversal; it is the capacity for love that is the only thing in this community that is not a perversion. This love may be that of a man for a woman he can never possess, or in the case of the love of a child for humanity, no matter how hopeless and depraved it has become, that forms the final episode.

It is tempting to try to decode Schweitzer's narrative: we may decide the novel is about purgatory, or the stagnation of modern life, or even population growth. Yet such speculation is beside the point. Instead we succumb to the most important aspect of horror literature: the uncanny effect on the reader. On this count *Living with the Dead* is a triumph. The brevity of novella form means that there are no superfluous phrases, every word adds to the chilling atmosphere. There are one or two jarring moments – the self-conscious literariness of characters complaining about losing “pages” of memories is a little clumsy – but the frenetic pace and sheer ambition of the work make them more than forgivable. Schweitzer's novella is memorable and inventive, and is a worthy addition to the horror novella canon which includes such worthy predecessors as *Frankenstein* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.



## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Pawel Frelik teaches contemporary American literature, science fiction and unpopular culture at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Lublin, Poland. He never sleeps.

Nick Wood is a South African clinical psychologist currently working as Research Tutor on the Doctor of Clinical Psychology Training Programme at the University of Hertfordshire. His YA sf novel *The Stone Chameleon* was published in South Africa in 2004: <http://nickwood.frogwrite.co.nz/>

# ACCOUNTS FOR 2008

## Receipts and Payments Account for the year ended 31 December 2008 – UK Sterling

	Notes	2008	2007
Fund-raising receipts	1	10,112.68	12,642.75
Contributions to SFF Objectives	2	-6,094.45	-7,594.55
Conferences	3	94.95	-1,551.19
Received (Paid) to Wyndham Appeal		-206.50	0.00
Bank refund		7.00	0.00
Bank error		-102.00	102.00
Expenses	4	-446.86	-460.76
Loan to Clarke Award		0.00	0.00
Surplus (deficit) for the period		3,364.82	3,138.25
Balance brought forwards		19,815.11	16,676.86
		<u>23,179.93</u>	<u>19,815.11</u>

## Statements of Assets and Liabilities

### ASSETS

	notes		
Cash at bank and in hand	5	23,179.93	19,815.11
Expenses advanced to agents		0.00	0.00
Money held by agents		0.00	0.00
Loan to Clarke Award		1,500.00	1,500.00

### LIABILITIES

Money owed to agents	6	70.30	0.00	
Donations owed to Wyndham Appeal		0.00	206.50	
Owed to bank following error		0.00	102.00	Bank transfer made twice in December 2007

## NOTES

### Note 1: Fund-raising Receipts

SFF Memberships	7,382.95	7,929.96	
Donations	1,411.16	2,799.75	Includes a £1000 bequest from Ken Slater and a £50 donation for preservation
Donated books sold	246.04	366.80	
Published books sold	796.50	328.71	
Journal back issues sold	85.46	579.52	
Journal current issues sold	175.14	230.50	
Gift Aid	0.00	392.63	Gift Aid return made in 2008, but money did not get paid into account until 2009
Interest and miscellaneous	15.43	14.88	
	<u>10,112.68</u>	<u>12,642.75</u>	

### Note 2: Contributions Towards SFF Objectives

Journal Printing	-3,155.00	-3,260.00	Only two issues were produced in 2008 and 2007
Journal Distribution and other expenses	-1,034.00	-1,065.73	
Journal Contributors	0.00	-2,159.95	Contributors to Foundation 100 were paid
Collection acquisitions (books, mags, videos)	-1,855.45	-908.87	£1,200 for preservation was spent in 2009. (Nothing was spent in 2007.)
Bursaries and research grants	0.00	-200.00	Essay prizes and bursaries. 2008 essay prize was paid out in 2009.
Donations to other organisations	-50.00	0.00	To the Orang Utan Foundation
	<u>-6,094.45</u>	<u>-7,594.55</u>	

**Note 3: Conferences**

2007: Masterclass		
Grants, donations, subsidies	0.00	0.00
Memberships and members' accom.	0.00	900.00
Site	0.00	-954.00
Guests	0.00	-900.00
Publications, publicity and admin.	0.00	0.00
Expenses	0.00	-457.19
Miscellaneous	0.00	0.00
2008: Masterclass		
Grants, donations, subsidies	0.00	0.00
Memberships and members' accom.	2,676.95	0.00
Site	-207.00	-100.00
Guests	-2,266.00	0.00
Publications, publicity and admin.	0.00	0.00
Expenses	0.00	0.00
Miscellaneous	0.00	0.00
SF Conventions (in 2008)		
George Hay Memorial Lecture	-109.00	-40.00
	<u>94.95</u>	<u>-1551.19</u>

**Note 4: Expenses**

Fundraising	-45.00	-80.00	Book table hire at convention
Office and Bank charges	-16.76	-19.04	
Meetings and Liverpool University liaison	-385.10	-201.55	AGM, committee meetings and LU meeting
Essay Prize	0.00	0.00	
Publicity	0.00	-160.17	Xmas cards + website + newsletter
	<u>-446.86</u>	<u>-460.76</u>	

**Note 5: Cash in hand**

Bank	<u>23,179.83</u>	<u>19,815.11</u>
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**Note 6: Expenses advanced and owed to Agents.**

There are still some expenses for the 2008 Masterclass to be paid at the end of 2008.

**Note 7: Non-Monetary Assets**

The Science Fiction Foundation collection of books and magazines is an asset, although in practice the Science Fiction Foundation has no intention of realising any monetary proceeds from sale of the collection. Also, some of the books in the collection are not owned by the Science Fiction Foundation, but are held on behalf of organisations with similar objectives to those of the charity.

A stock of back issues of the journal Foundation is maintained. A large stock of the books published last year is still held.

**Note 8: Notes on the Accounts**

These accounts are subject to independent examination in line with Charity Commission requirements.

These accounts are presented on a cash basis.



# Foundation

The International Review of Science Fiction

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*In this issue:*

Andrew K. Shenton on *The Prisoner* and *The Omega Factor*

Jayne Glover on Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling*

Dean Conrad on Ripley's 21st Century Legacy

Rebecca Hankins on Islam in Science Fiction

*In addition, there is a conversation between Michael Swanwick and Greer Gilman*

*And reviews by:*

Alvaro Zinos-Amaro, Paul McAuley, David McWilliam, Paul Kincaid, Andy Sawyer, Matt Moore, Chris Pak, Abigail Nussbaum, Nick Wood, Pawel Frelik, Ken MacLeod and Tania Scott

*of books by:*

John Clute, Greg Bear, Ken MacLeod, Nicholas Ruddick, Lauren Beukes, Greg Egan, Adilifu Nama, Rhonda V. Wilcox & Tanya R. Cochran, Cory Doctorow, Justina Robertson, Stephen Baxter and Darrell Schweitzer

Cover image: Fresh Tiger Stripes on Saturn's Enceladus

Credit: Cassini Imaging Team, SSI, JPL, ESA, NASA