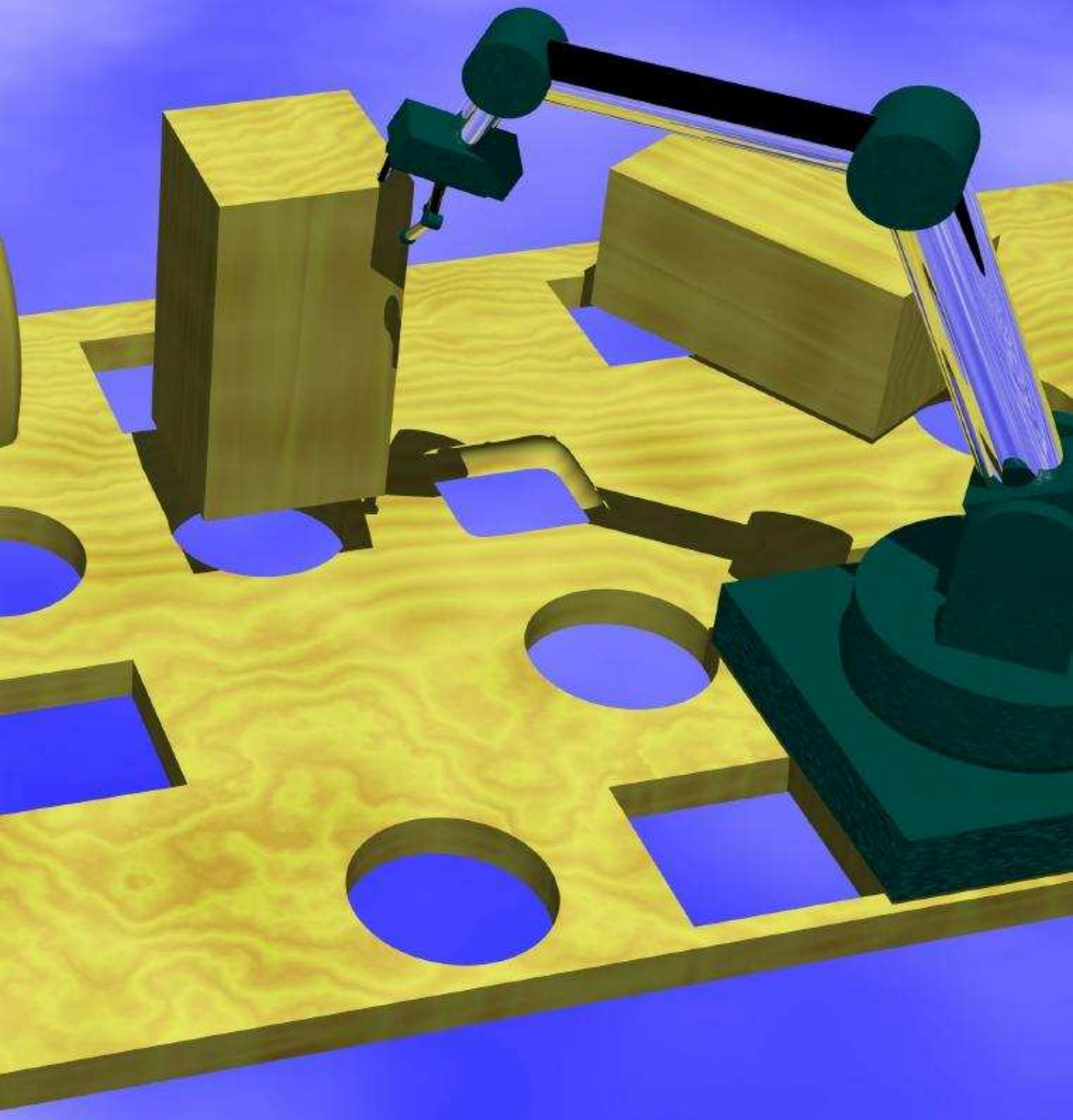


PROBE

174



PROBE 174

December 2017

Published by: Science Fiction and Fantasy South Africa (SFFSA)
P.O. Box 781401 Sandton 2146 South Africa
www.sffsa.org.za

Twitter address: - <http://twitter.com/SciFiZa>

Facebook address: - search under groups as Science Fiction & Fantasy South Africa (www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7967222257)

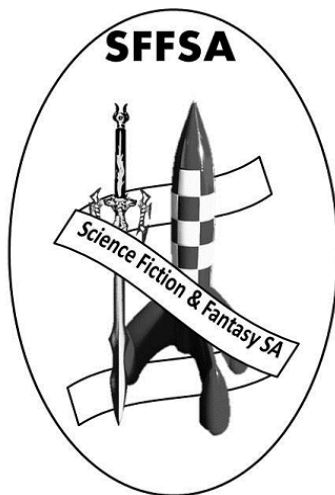
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Email: gailjamieson@gmail.com

Probe is typed by Gail Jamieson and other contributors.

Cover: "Will work for batteries" Stephen Tatham



Layout is by Gail Jamieson and Ian Jamieson

Created in MS Word

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For the first time in a long time PROBE is coming out late. Partly due to an unexpected trip to the USA for training but no real reason. I just didn't get round to it.

However here it is. The usual mixture of stories and articles. Books and magazines received and even an L.O.C from the ever faithful Lloyd Penny. At least I know someone out there actually reads PROBE.

We publish the winning story from 2016 of the XXII RiLL Trophy. SFFSA have entered into an

agreement with the organisers of the RiLL competition in Italy and going forward we will publish their annual winning short story and they will publish ours. They have kindly agreed to do the translations of the stories as I am not sure where we would find someone who could do this for us. 2016's story is an interesting story called "Everything Starts From O"

You will also find the three Wormholes that came out of the 2017 MiniCon. It always surprises me to see how entertaining a very short story can be produced by a couple of people, most of whom only write fiction at MiniCons, in a very short time.

I really couldn't resist the "Eggs of Yodafoetus" that I have printed on the inside of the back cover. I had not even considered how a Jedi Grand Master might reproduce.

You'll also find one of the stories that I really enjoyed reading from the 1981 "Nova Short Story Competition". It is the runner-up titled "A Little Bach" and written by our very own Elaine Coetzee when she was still Elaine Mommsen.

2018 might well be a watershed year for SFFSA. It seems that we will be losing our monthly meeting venue and are having to look at various other options. The most significant fact being that we might have to change our meeting time or even meeting day. I've sent out a mail asking those people who have attended meetings in the last year or so for their opinions and the committee will be looking closely at the results before making a final decision on our future.

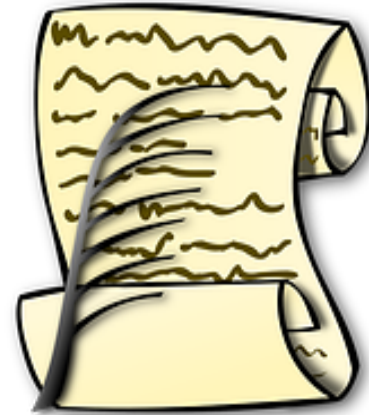
Looking at the founding date of the club it seems almost unbelievable that in a little under eighteen Months SFFSA, which started out as SFSA will reach the Fifty – Year mark. I'll have to do a very special PROBE for that milestone. Let me know if you have any ideas you want to see realised.



Chairman's Note

Andrew Jamieson

I had already prepared my idea of what I was going to be writing in this Chairman's Note almost three months ago. Of course, then time passes and suddenly you have the Probe editor asking you : "Where is the latest Chairman's Note"? And suddenly you have to quickly write another one. Where did the time go? If only time travel were actually possible, then I could go back a week or a month and save myself all these sudden time hassles!



Anyway, my idea for this Chairman's Note was to speak about Virtual Reality. If you recall, I mentioned this in my note from June 2016 / Probe 168 regarding new technologies. Well, one and a half years later...

and the technology does not seem to have changed much. Most of the devices I mentioned are still there, or still in development, some of the newer ones are now out (for example Google's Cardboard has been replaced by Daydream... still with the silly names). So that means, not much has changed technologically-wise. I think that goes to show you just how hard it actually is to develop such hardware. You need very small and very fast processors to handle the amount of information that will be displayed to the viewer, and VR hardware can only make use of the current state of processor development. So basically as the processors get smaller and / or faster, so will VR, which can only lead to better and more accurate rendering of virtual environments for viewers.

However, the biggest development appears to be in the software that will make use of the VR hardware. I believe most software being developed for VR hardware is in games. There seems to be a new game coming out every week that now supports VR. This is great for us gamers (should I ever buy a VR unit) but not much use for people who do not play games. Fear not, VR is making its way into many fields other than gaming, areas such as :

- Entertainment like movies, amusement parks, etc. even on TV!
- In the medical profession, such as using VR to help victims of PTSD, to simulate surgeries for training.
- Obviously following on from medical training there is military training or space training.
- Used by engineers in building devices.
- Etc.

So yes, it does look like VR is going to stay and be used more and more around the world. However, have you actually tried to use the device? Yes, you can see wonderful new places, but there is very limited tactile effects with the device. Seeing things and hearing things are not a problem, but you cannot feel anything, and even movement is usually via a device you hold in each hand, or a sensor that tries to match your hand movements. Walking can only be done via some sort of standalone treadmill that at least allows you to "walk" around the virtual environment. So you can see you can only sort of touch things and walk around the virtual worlds, listening to the sounds of the world, but that is it. Will we see more tactile accessories being created for the virtual world? One can imagine the answer will be a definite... yes!

So will they be able to add proper "touch" to virtual worlds? Imagine being able to feel soft things, hard things, squishy things, etc. What about adding taste or smell? Now imagine having a virtual world where you can actually smell the food prepared in a virtual restaurant, then sit down and actually taste the food. I am sure they could come up with some interesting new dishes! You could use this new virtual world as a way of exploring anywhere in the world... without actually going there ala Total Recall! I am not sure that is something I would want, but it would certainly be a great idea for those unable to afford going overseas, or simple being unable to move around physically.

Then of course, you have to consider virtual reality... and sex! You can just imagine the porn industry jumping head first into something like this, where they could create virtual worlds to cater for any person's taste, where you could almost literally cheat on your partner... without an actual, physical encounter! Do you think the law would have to change to cater for virtual infidelity?

However, just how far should we push virtual reality? Just how "real" should we make the virtual worlds? If a human cannot perceive a difference between the "real" world and a "virtual" world, should we allow something like this? Humans are already spending more and more time on social media, leaving physical contact by the wayside. If we had virtual worlds for socialising, would people ever leave their houses to meet actual people? Yes, virtual reality as an entertainment media has wonderful potential, but I think we should be just a bit careful about how much entertainment we get out of it. We should not forget we live in the real world. Still, making a virtual world match the real world is a LONG way away, so no worries just yet.

Cheers

Andrew

Magazines Received

Stapledon Sphere (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club])

Reece Moorhead reecebm@gmail.com

Issue #7 October 2017

Issue #8 November 2017

Issue #9 December 2017

Ansible David Langford

September 2017 362 <http://news.ansible.uk/a362.html>

October 2017 363 <http://news.ansible.uk/a363.html>

November 2017 364 <http://news.ansible.uk/a364.html>

December 2017 365 <http://news.ansible.uk/a365.html>

zine + origami (Paper format only)

Issue no. 5 August 2017

Mini-issue A August 2017



Dark Reflections Tina Constance Boshoff

I am Darkness - cut me and I bleed shadows, hurt me and I weep tears of night skies filled with twinkling promises.

I can be matt or gloss, ink or oil, pitch or black pearl, acrid Smoke or heady incense.

I am Gravity - I suck in light, feed on it, and yet I remain Darkness - an insatiable black hole -always hungry, always cold and unfulfilled.

I don't like what I am. I never chose to become what I am. What I do, I do through...nature. So, if it is natural, why do some choose to call me evil'?

The Bible says, "Those in Darkness have seen a great Light.

The fundamental difference between Light and Dark is this:

Darkness is the Seeker. Light is the Sought-After.

Once I was Light, but then the darkness found me. I found myself inside the darkness. And then the darkness was inside me. Finally, I was Darkness,

And God said, "Let there be Light!" and there was light. But those with the power of sight, physical or spiritual, were unable to see the light for there was no Darkness.

So God said, "Let there be Darkness and lo, they were able to distinguish Light.

Now, although it caused them great pain to gaze upon Light they declared joyfully that: "It is Good'

Darkness was cool and soothing. The weary sought slumber in its embrace. The troubled sought meditation in her company. The hideous and deformed sought Solace in her powers to conceal; she lovingly made the unsightly un-seeable.

Yet, because Light was Good and because the contrast was so great they still opted to term *Darkness... Evil.*

You might think of them as vampires. They hide in Darkness and seek blood to sate their unholy and collective appetite.

Thinking them to be a singular entity, I once found the courage and audacity to ask, "Who are you?"

"We are Legion for we are many." They spoke in unison so that it gave a resonance not too unlike that of a swarm of bees.

Although the thought did cross my mind, fear of the answer prevented me from asking,

"How many? Instead, I asked, "What are you?"

"Demons'

"What...like...fallen angels?"

In laughter they lost cohesion and I was able to discern their mirth in a myriad of separate giggles, guffaws, Sniggers, chortles and chuckles. They regained their composure and answered once again in the tone of the Swarm, "No, nothing so profound, damning, condemning or...religious." Even the hesitation between or and religious had been delivered in perfect harmony. It instilled in me a great sense of dread and uneasiness.

"Referring to yourself...selves as Legion is Biblical...religious."

"We are merely the demons of your mind."

A question. "I'm possessed?" A realization. "I'm possessed"

Again the laughter. Then, "No. Possession refers to outward forces making uninvited incursions into the sanctity of privacy. We were..."

In the harmonious hesitation I choked out, "Invited?"

Again they answered in the negative. "No." The quiet, calm response made the answer all the more ominous. As expected, the truth was far more disconcerting.

"Created. We were born within you. You are our creator."

"Then I can...uncreate you? Eliminate you?"

"You wish to destroy your...children?"

"Abominations! All children have two parents."

"Light and Dark are our mother and father. They both exist within you."

#

We've all heard the accounts presented by those who have had near-death experiences. An out-of-body sensation. Floating in a turbulent sea, on the rim; the event horizon of an immense maelstrom. Moving through a dark tunnel towards a light of exceptional brightness.

Up ahead a formless voice calls, "Come to the light and be saved!"

From behind an unseen entity cries, "Go to the light and be redeemed!"

The way seems simple enough and requires only the will and the desire to gravitate in that direction. It is with great joy and excitement and haste that I make the journey. There is no physical effort on my part as I seem to float along gently in a miasma of lukewarm wetness.

Before I am able to reach my destination a fine spray arises from the mist. Each minute droplet a light-refracting lens bending the glare into a colorful spectrum. Not a rainbow, but a corona of vibrant hues. The droplets, like a large shoal of glistening, transparent, fish, move in unison. The seven colours of the halo now simplify into the three primary colours of light-blue, green and red. The colours gather and migrate. The blue becomes an endless, cloudless, sky. The green, a series of rolling hills adorned with lush grass that gently sways to and fro in the breeze.

The red is...is...is...oh, God, not again!

I awaken as if from a dream, yet I do not have the sensation of having been asleep. It is more like being rudely interrupted from a deep reverie.

The red is on my hands, and although I know from past experiences that it is not mine, I still fear for my own harm. Finding no wounds I breathe a sigh of relief. Once more I make Supplication to God, but I hear, or imagine to hear, only the sardonic laughter of the demons in my mind; the voices that hide in Darkness.

I vaguely remember an exchange of promises being made beneath the flicker of gaslight; mutual assurances that mentioned heat in an inviting manner. A hot meal; a

warm bed. In return there would be glowing relief in a pseudo-romantic, yet fervent embrace. But it was not the smell or taste of her sex that was sought. Her life's fluid was the only means to sate my Sanguinary lust. Charity requires nothing in return for its favours. This had not been a charitable offer. She had thought it was. So, when she parted her legs, I proceeded to part her.

Only the smell and feel and taste and sight and sound of blood are able to repel...nay, merely subdue the denizens of Darkness. One needs to satisfy all the senses to achieve the ultimate orgasmic rush. Only then can Darkness be forced back into incarceration.

#

Out on the bustling street the morning light is both sterile and sterilizing. I hold my face toward it. Even with eyes scrunched tight I feel the antiseptic burn against the rods and cones

Within my ocular cavities. The optic nerves discover a series of blurry images and deliver them to my brain. I see grey, pink and saffron phantoms floating. I vaguely recall a pleasant passage through darkness towards...

My thoughts are broken by the cries of the paper boy. The news must be newsworthy for the citizens surround him like flies would a fresh steaming turd. I wait till the rush is over before approaching. He knows me and smiles that bright radiance that always makes me wonder how some of the underprivileged manage to retain and maintain such a healthy set of perfectly straight teeth. He smiles because I always let him keep the change. I always let him keep the change because it makes him smile. Good dentures usually mean strong bones. It is how the traders choose the best slaves; it is how the breeders choose the best fillies. It is how they, the ones in Darkness, choose the best blood.

One would consider virgin blood to be best - untainted. No, it takes great courage to survive on the streets. It may have been desperation that forced them to sell

themselves, but it takes fortitude, resolve, fearlessness and great strength to ply their trade. Only the blood of such can appease or sate the demons' unholy appetite.

I'll be fine now. I'm okay as long as I move about or interact with people. When my mind is busy, my Subconscious keeps Darkness at bay...restrained.

It is just when alone, when I tend to quietly meditate, that they awaken; become active. It is then that I can feel Darkness crawling. It rises from the pit of my stomach and I taste bile as it reaches my throat. I know that if I fail to react - it...they will.

I read the headline that has everyone on the street abuzz with excitement.

The ludicrousness of it makes me shake my head. I should smile or even chuckle, but

Somehow I feel...insulted. Insulted because my name is not Jack, and ripping is what an animal does.

My name is neither Sam but that is what most people, who think they know me intimately, call me. The fact is, most people do not...know me intimately that is. Not even Randolph who knows of my nocturnal activities and who helps in disposing of the...spent vessels knows me...the real me.

Only those in Darkness know me well.

They say everyone has a skeleton in their closet. If not for Randy I would have a basement full - literally! I think he loves me. Poor sod. Too foolish to see I'm not inclined that way. Still, he has his uses and so I humour him.

Blackmail is out of the question. He would swing at the end of a rope as a surely as I would.

Besides, I already pay him well...extremely well. He is, after all, the help.

I never knew my mother. She died giving me life. As I grew older and became knowledgeable and educated I began to wonder if my father blamed me for her death. I would often find him gazing up at her portrait in the library. Those who knew her often tell me that I bear a strong resemblance. It is especially in the eyes that the similarity is evident,

They say that the eyes are the windows to the soul. The Bible says, "The lamp of the body is the eye. If, then, your eye is simple, your whole body will be bright; but if your

eye is wicked, your whole body will be dark. If in reality the light that is in you is darkness, how great that darkness is Wicked? Am I wicked...evil. As I mentioned before, I do what I do through necessity...nature. Is a shark or a poisonous serpent wicked? What about a germ, bacteria or a virus? No, when something does only what it was created to do, then it is simply natural. I came into the world a killer; it is my fate, my destiny, my...calling.

Still, I am wise enough to know that humankind would judge me adversely if they were to learn the truth. And so I continue my...operations in secrecy.

I feel an urgency for company...male company. It's too early for the pub and I wonder if anybody will be down at the club.

I'm in luck, an unoccupied cab approaches with a lethargic clippity-clop. I hail it.

The driver frowns. He is not accustomed to transporting my kind alone or...unchaperoned.

But a fare is a fare. Of course, I am never truly alone. My late father, a sugar baron, left his only child a vast fortune - more than enough to buy me friends or...favours aplenty.

I read the remainder of the article enroute. I make sure to first remove my lacey white gloves. After all, it's a bloody devil to get the black out.

#####

Turning under a blood red sun

Carla Martins, Ron Cowley, Brett Ward and Simone Puterman.

The city slowly rotated on its axis, its citizens basking under the crimson rays. Things went on as they always had: aristocrats strolling along the promenade, servants scurrying along behind and children everywhere. Working in her lab, Kayarlah had a premonition, an impending sense of doom. Was that a tremor? Suddenly, there was an enormous boom and everyone screamed as cracks appeared throughout the sky - the normal form of panic ensued. The world tilted, spun and plunged dizzily through space. "Jeisyn, you broke my people farm, you clumsy hatchling!" With a flick of her tail, she stomped off.

EARLY SPIRITUAL FANTASY BRETT WARD

Spiritual fantasy is my term for fantasy that deals with human spirituality, embodying belief systems that currently exist in the real world. What is obviously left out are the many gods and religions invented by fantasy writers for use in imagined worlds, as well as fantasy based on now-defunct real-world mythologies. Spiritual fantasy consists of three distinct but closely related types: religious fantasy, expressing the beliefs of real-world religions; occult fantasy, expressing the beliefs of various occult/esoteric/mystical belief systems, most of which are relatively recent reworking's of ancient pagan practices; and finally, fantasy expressing private belief systems invented by writers for their own personal use.

Religious Fantasy

As far as fantasy in the English language goes, this is overwhelmingly Christian fantasy. Before the twentieth century, there was a tendency to write fiction that preached Christian morality in a somewhat tedious and bossy manner. This was the product of a society that largely took Christianity for granted as the truth, where writers took it upon themselves to correct those who had strayed from the path.

Christian fantasy becomes more interesting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when Christian writers felt it necessary to defend their beliefs in an increasingly secular world. In the broad sense, Tolkien is a writer of Christian fantasy, since his books reflect Christian values – in particular the sense of a clear struggle between Good and Evil, and the final intervention of God on the side of Good.

However, if we are talking about *overtly* Christian fantasy, that refers to the religion directly, then there are three early writers who merit particular attention. The first is George Macdonald, who was a tremendous influence on C. S. Lewis, his better-known successor. Macdonald wrote three children's fantasy novels, as well as a number of short stories, but perhaps his strongest achievement is his two novels for adults, *Lilith* and *Phantastes*, perhaps especially the latter. Both novels are written with visionary intensity, and have a haunting quality for the reader, whether believer

or non-believer. The same quality is found in his better short fiction, especially “The Golden Key”.

C. S. Lewis is the one really well-known Christian fantasist, specifically because of the Narnia series. But Lewis also wrote the adult Cosmic Trilogy/Space Trilogy, a Science Fantasy series consisting of *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*. The first two novels feature journeys to other planets, and are strongly influenced by *A Voyage to Arcturus*, by David Lindsay, of whom more below. The final novel, set on earth, is influenced by Charles Williams, the third Christian writer I want to talk about.

Williams, along with Lewis and Tolkien, belonged to The Inklings, a fantasy discussion group that was active in Oxford in the 1930s and 40s. He is less well known than Lewis, but is to my mind the better writer. He wrote seven Christian fantasy novels, all with a contemporary setting. They are consistently less didactic and angry than Lewis’ novels, and more positive in their treatment of non-Christians, although Lewis is not entirely negative in this regard.

One writer who seems to balance uneasily between Christianity and more traditional beliefs is Fiona Macleod (the pen name of William Sharp), who was a devout Christian but at the same time strongly attracted to the largely vanished Celtic paganism of the Gaelic-speaking Scottish people whom she wrote about. Like Macdonald, her fellow Scot, Macleod’s stories have a strongly visionary quality.

One Western writer who wrote entirely non-Christian religious fantasy of a sort is F. W. Bain, who produced a series of novellas based loosely on Hindu mythology and expressing a Hindu world view. The stories are original, but set in the Hindu world of gods, goddesses and ancient Indian kingdoms.

Outside the West, possibly the most notable example of religious fantasy is the 16th century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, by Wu Cheng’en. This epic novel features a lengthy journey by a monk and his companions to collect Buddhist scriptures, and is unashamedly biased in favour of Buddhism as the one true religion.

Outside the West, too are a group of mid-twentieth-century African writers, all of them Yoruba speakers from Nigeria. The two who are available in English are D. O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola. Both are Christians who try to reconcile their religion with the traditional beliefs of their people. In their works they assert their Christian convictions, but the settings and motifs come largely from Yoruba folklore.

Occult Fantasy

Probably the first esoteric movement in the modern Western world was Theosophy. A number of writers were adherents, and two are worth mentioning here. The first and most important is Kenneth Morris. His fantasy is almost entirely based on myth, but expresses the Theosophist belief that different religions and mythologies are connected and represent aspects of the same eternal truth. He was one of the founders of Celtic fantasy, with two novels based on the Welsh cycle of legends known as the Mabinogion.

The second Theosophist is Talbot Mundy, who largely wrote non-fantasy adventure stories with an Asian setting, although these often reflect a Theosophist world view. Some of his work does have aspects of the supernatural and *King – Of the Khyber Rifles* is probably the best known of these.

Some writers produced works that expressed an occult brand of Christianity. One was Marie Corelli, one of the most popular writers of her day. She did not write particularly well, but had a vivid imagination. Another writer was A. E. Waite, primarily a non-fiction writer on the occult and on the Tarot. His novel, *The Quest of the Golden Stairs*, is, as I have said in another article, very beautiful but very hard to understand.

When it comes to fully-fledged “pagan” occult writing, two names stand out, both of them actual practitioners of magic, and both primarily writers of occult non-fiction. The first is the infamous Aleister Crowley, who wrote a single novel, *Moonchild*, as well as some short stories and plays. The short stories include several collections of stories about an occult detective, Simon Iff, who investigates the supernatural. The novel is an interesting insight into the world of esoteric secret societies, although the ending is weak.

The second writer is Dion Fortune, who wrote five novels, as well as a collection of short stories about Dr Taverner, also an occult detective. Her novels were meant to be a practical demonstration of the ideas discussed in her non-fiction, and contain detailed descriptions of magical rituals, usually presented in a reasonably accessible fashion.

Authors with Private Belief Systems

I know of two authors who fall into this rather unusual category. The first is David Lindsay, whose personal philosophy, based on the rejection of pleasure, is expressed in his first novel, *A Voyage to Arcturus*. This is a very strange and beautiful book – difficult to understand, but worth reading for the incredible scenes it presents to the reader.

Finally we have my favourite early fantasy author, E. R. Eddison. His Zimiamvian Trilogy is set in a world based on his idea that the universe was created by Zeus, who then created Aphrodite and became captivated by her beauty. It's a duality, a godhead containing two persons, instead of the three of Christianity. These two gods, embodying the male and female principles, then become incarnate in the world of Zimiamvia in a number of different people, with varying degrees of knowledge of their divinity. It's very rich and gorgeous – Eddison was probably the most aesthetic of all the pre-Tolkien writers.

Conclusion

There are many other early writers of spiritual fantasy, but these are the ones who strike me as the most significant. Let me know if you discover any others!

Everything starts from O Maurizio Ferrero

Winner of the XXII RiLL Trophy 2016

Translated by Paul Virgo

O

"Captain Vincent Eagle of the First Extra-dimensional Battalion speaking. I am sending this message from my ship, the Protheus-1, which has just crossed the quantum wall of the 1435-c dimension. A technical problem occurred with the cryogenic tanks in the crossing and all of my crew are in a suspended state. I do not possess the medical know-how to conduct an attempted reawakening without risking their lives. At the moment I am alone. The mission cannot be cancelled, the survival of our universe depends upon it. I have just docked with the invaders' mother ship and soon I will climb aboard armed to the teeth, taking a mini- warhead of 200 megatons with me, in order to blow that son of a bitch into dust once and for all. I do not think I will make it back, but I knew from the start that this would not be an easy mission. If you receive this message, tell my wife Anna that I love her and tell my lover Diana that I love her too. Captain Vincent Eagle, over and out".

Eagle left the command console, hoping that the broadcast would get through the extra-dimensional barrier and reach Verania, his home planet, the world he had sworn to defend. He was perfectly aware that there was little chance: quantum science had made great leaps forward in recent decades, but mistakes were still frequent, and what had happened to his crew proved it. They might wake up eventually, but he did not have time to wait for something to happen. The aliens had identified Protheus-1 as soon as it appeared in their dimension and it was only thanks to the camouflage protocols that they had managed to get near enough to attack their mother ship.

Now, however, his minutes were numbered.

He put on his biomechanical armour, picked up the mini atomic warhead and two thermal machine guns, which he would use to make the aliens meet the same end as a rat in a microwave. He immediately activated the embarking tunnel without following the usual safety protocols, melted the pressurized door that made it

possible to access the alien ship and went inside strutting like a vengeful god. The aliens, which the Veranians contemptuously called oversized snails because of their slimy appearance and the helicoidal shells that covered their backs, were there waiting for him. Eagle had to reach the ship's core: if he activated the explosive there, it would generate maximum damage and everything would end with a nice dish of snails in butter sauce.

"Let the party begin" he whispered.

The aliens attacked him en masse. Holding a machine gun in his hand, Eagle ran along the gangways that penetrated the maze of the mother ship, shooting like crazy. The oversized snails prevalently used weapons with bullets loaded with biological bacteria, but the captain had been immunized against most of these, thanks to repeated doses of vaccines and antibiotics, so he was not too worried about them. But the oversized snails' slime was acidic and over time it could even eat through tough armour.

Some creatures managed to vomit that sticky, green filth on him and Eagle saw from his sensors that the armour had been damaged. He aimed at the two beasts that had dared to hit him and fired a ridiculous amount of incandescent bullets, turning them into a smoking mush.

He smashed through a reinforced door, penetrating further into the mother ship and there the resistance was even more hostile. A strong burning feeling on his back made him turn around: the alien slobber had made contact with his flesh. But he could not stop: the core was so near.

He continued as far as his strength allowed, then he fell and realized that his back was being eaten away down to the bone. He prayed that the most important part of his armour would activate: a detection system that, when the wearer was close to death, injected a booster of adrenaline and chemical substances directly into the blood stream, giving a few extra minutes of life.

Ten seconds, if it does not activate within ten seconds... it's over, the captain thought, as he slithered along the metallic floor.

"Seven... six... five... four...", he counted, gritting his teeth.

Then it happened. A new dose of vitality put him back on his feet, his weapons' automatic security systems activated themselves and, shooting grenades

everywhere, he made a clean sweep of the enemies that had put him under siege. With the new energy given by that miracle of science, Eagle broke through the last door and found himself inside the luminous core of the ship.

He did not have time to position the atomic explosive, there were too many enemies coming after him. He took it firmly in his hands and did the only thing possible.

"For Verania!", he growled, pushing the activation buttons. Then everything went white.

O

"I can't believe it, I've finished it," Tanuki shouted. Beside him, Shin and Valerie had just witnessed the destruction of the mother ship of the oversized snails in the *Machine-Gun Eagle* game, one of the most recent buys of *Kuro No Hi Gemu*, the amusement arcade where he and his friends often got together. The classic *Game Over* sign was flashing on the screen and blinking letters were inviting a player to insert their initials.

"WOW, you're great Tanuki-chan! No one here had managed that before! How many credits did it take?" asked Valerie.

"About 10, fewer than the last time I tried. Lucky too - that was the last one! We should celebrate!"

Shin had not yet said a word, he'd just watched the screen with a vague sense of annoyance painted on his face. He put his glasses into place and smoothed down his shirt, as he usually did when he needed to calm down. He was good at video games, but not as good as Tanuki, and that made him mad. He considered it a dishonour to be beaten by a little student two years younger than him, above all one dressed up like a member of a street gang. What made him even angrier was that Valerie, a foreign student in his class who he was secretly in love with, focused all her attention on him.

"Of course, you need the reflexes of a tiger to finish this game so easily," Tanuki bragged. "Some people are gifted, others are not. Everyone has their strengths, don't they Shin?"

"Yeah, that's right," he replied. "Excuse me a moment, I'm going out to get some air". "Come on, don't take it like that! You'll do it... maybe it'll take 40 credits," shouted Tanuki, but Shin was already on his way out. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Valerie move towards his rival and take his hand lovingly.

Enough.

The pounding rain greeted him as soon as he went onto the notorious streets of Arashi. The natural sound of raindrops in free fall was comforting after that electronic racket of the amusement arcade. He went to a phone box and slowly, but decisively, he picked up the receiver. He dialled a few numbers and, when a mechanical voice answered from the other side, he said the words that he would regret for the rest of his life.

"I'm calling from the *Kuro No Hi Gemu*. I have to make a report..."

"Where has Shin got to?" asked Valerie, raising her voice to get it over the squealing of dozens of video games. "He's been gone for at least 20 minutes!"

"You know what he's like" replied Tanuki, pulling his leather jacket down. "Don't worry, he'll have a walk to calm down, he'll come back soaked like a puppy and tomorrow he'll miss school because he's caught a cold".

Valerie narrowed her shoulders, looking for him among the dozens of students in the hall. She still struggled to distinguish one Japanese from another in the middle of a crowd.

"He's pretty weird though, that lad," Tanuki said.

"It's because of his power. You would be too if you could foresee every single moment of your future".

"Shut up, don't say that out loud," gasped Valerie, covering Tanuki's mouth with a hand. "They could be anywhere!"

The little roughneck moved his friend's delicate hand from his mouth and he replied with a contemptuous snigger. "I'm not afraid of him."

Tanuki's audacity again had an impact on Valerie and she slowly moved her face towards his. Tanuki closed his eyes and did the same, convinced he had finally got his prey.

Then, all the lights of the amusement arcade came on, all of a sudden.

"Attention" said a sexy female voice, amplified by the speaker system. "The

Shinigami Squad is here to conduct a genetic control. Stay where you are, put your hands on your head and, if your DNA has not mutated, you can go home in time for the repeats of *Takeshi's Castle*. We remind you that any sign of hostility or disobedience on your part will authorise the Squad to terminate you on the spot. Have a nice day!".

Tanuki opened his eyes and all that determination and confidence disappeared instantly. Now he had the look of wounded animal, wounded but no less dangerous. He slowly put his hands on his head without making a fuss, inviting Valerie to do the same with a nod.

"Stay calm and we'll move when the time is right" Tanuki said. "If things get too hot, don't hesitate to transform yourself".

"Do you think they nabbed Shin?" the frightened girl asked.

"Shin always knows what's about to happen to him, I think he'll have managed to get away. I just wonder why he didn't warn us..."

Tanuki's conjecturing was interrupted by the entry of the Shinigami, a dozen soldiers armed with heavy machine guns, katanas and grotesque Oni masks to hide their features.

While some guarded the exits, the others set about bringing the students together in the centre of the hall, examining them one by one.

A sergeant from the police force specializing in hunting down mutants passed in front of Tanuki and Valerie, stopping to look at the girl for a few moments: the fact she was not of Japanese origin must have caught his attention.

Tanuki knew that a scientist from the squad would take a blood sample from everyone present soon. They would have analysed it within 10 minutes and discovered inconsistencies in his genetic code and so he and Valerie would be killed in cold blood.

He could not allow it, he had to stop it for himself and for Valerie. He took advantage of a moment of distraction by the sergeant to perform his mutation. His body became covered with thick, thorny fur, which broke through his clothes, and his hands extended into long claws. The whole process took the blink of an eyelid and, when the Shinigami Squad realised, his sharp fingers had already severed the sergeant's throat.

Valerie increased her muscle mass, growing by a good metre. Her eyes started erupting flames that looked like they came directly from hell.

"Fight to stay alive, Valerie!", growled Tanuki.

The Shinigami Squad raised their weapons and started shooting at them like crazy.

O

"I'm sorry to tell you this kids... Time's up!" announced Bruno, a sadistic sneer spreading across his face.

"No! You bastard!", shouted Alessia, who was playing Valerie. Her tone of voice suggested she was joking, rather than pissed off.

"Max, I'd like to see how you explain this one to me" said Chiara calmly, who until a minute ago was wearing the imaginary clothes of Tanuki inside *Arashi*, a role-play setting created by their narrator, Bruno, that mixed mutants, Japanese pop culture and 1980s technology.

"What do I have to explain?", replied Max, shrugging his shoulders. "You pissed off Shin and now you gotta pay. You two are always playing love birds, while he just wants to screw Valerie."

"You're in danger of getting us killed! What's in that head of yours? Do you want to spoil the game?," snapped Chiara, this time furious.

"Chill Chia', it's a game. Bruno is good, you'll come out smelling of roses and then you come to kick my ass. But Shin is crafty, he might not get caught out this time either".

Alessia nodded, as if to agree with Max. Chiara just shook her head and grumbled.

"Come on guys, don't argue," Bruno intervened. "Think about how to get out from down there instead. We'll play again next Tuesday, if that's OK for everyone. Put down your experience points and give me the cards, I'll keep hold of them."

That's what they did and Max downed what was left of his beer. They went out onto the balcony of Bruno's flat and he, Max and Alessia lit up cigarettes. Chiara was the only non-smoker. As usual, they had a chat about what had just happened in the game session. Max complimented Bruno, because the idea of mutant powers

brought out the best in him and he told him that he was doing a good job with this setting.

"Maybe a publishing house will publish it, sooner or later..." replied Bruno, not really convinced by what he was saying.

They finished their cigarettes, grabbed their stuff and said goodbye to Bruno. It was almost one o'clock in the morning, they'd run late as usual, and Max and Alessia had to get up early for work the day after.

Max and Chiara walked Alessia home. She lived just two blocks away from the narrator and she got around on foot, but it was not a good idea for a 23-year-old woman to be walking around the streets of San Basilio on her own at night.

"Thanks for the nice evening and for walking me home guys," Alessia said when they reached her apartment building. "See you in a few days' time".

They said goodbye. Her friends went back to Max's car, which was going to take them both home. Chiara was a little too quiet.

"Not pissed off, are you?", asked Max.

"Just a bit. I know it's a game".

"Dat's the spirit. Da game kicks ass".

"I have to admit Bruno has excellent ideas".

"And you're great too. Tanuki is so cool, good idea for a little kid that had never played role games in her life before".

"Thanks for calling me a little kid".

"No, come on, I didn't mean it in a bad way! It ain't easy to find good players. We 'ad to get rid o' the last one we had cos he always wanted to smash everything up and kill everyone. No role play, just wanted to be da best. I reckon he had a small dick".

Chiara laughed. They got to the car and talked about this and that for the 15-minute journey that separated them from her apartment. Max knew the girl knew no one when she moved to Rome to study a few months ago. He met her by chance one night in a pub and invited her to get to know his *nerd* friends. It was an invitation many would have let get away, but Chiara accepted with a big smile and over time she turned out to be just as big an enthusiast as the others in the group. The truth was that Max fancied Chiara. That was what was behind his behaviour during the session: deep down he couldn't accept Tanuki coming on to Valerie not because

Shin fancied Valerie, but because Max fancied Chiara. It was a classic meta-game problem that would have given expert players the shivers, but Max did not care too much. What's more, no one seemed to have noticed. Despite his big-shot attitude, Max was very shy with girls.

When they got to Chiara's apartment building, they said goodbye. The lad summoned up all his courage, moved up to her and gave her a quick hug. For a few seconds, which seemed to go on forever, he feared a frosty reaction, but his heart melted when he felt affection was reciprocated.

"Maybe we could meet up at the weekend?", Chiara asked.

Max smiled and nodded, stunned. Chiara gave him a smile and got out of the car. Max watched as she walked into the building, then sped off.

He was happy.

Chiara went back into the bare apartment that she rented when she arrived in Rome. Anyone who put a foot inside would have realized something was wrong: the fridge was empty, the bed was made with impossibly perfect precision, the bathroom was so clean, it seemed it had never been used. She sat on a chair in the kitchen, picked up a small black object connected directly to the electricity supply and put her left hand inside, recharging the battery that kept her alive.

While she was in this stand-by phase, which was set to last until the following morning, her internal transmitters sent the data she had collected to space.

O

"Commander Chklelon, we are receiving data from unit 563. From initial analysis, it looks highly promising," engineer Szalx mumbled into the transmitter. The response came moments later.

"This is Commander Chklelon. I want you to show me personally. I hope you have not made mistakes, engineer".

The commander's voice was guttural and fear-inspiring. Szalx found himself swallowing with all three of his three oesophagus's. He proceeded rapidly to conduct

an analysis of the data as it arrived. Unit 563, nicknamed *Chiara* of the Earthlings, a name his species found impossible to pronounce, was an android sent to the planet to study the behaviour and psychology of its inhabitants.

The study needed to be completed as soon as possible as the data was of vital importance to the survival of her species, or at least that is what she was told.

As he examined the data, Szalx felt reassured: the commander would not be disappointed.

Chklelon entered the science laboratory, flanked by a couple of support units, as if he feared a possible attack from one moment to the next. Szalx could not help considering this excessively prudent: the Earthlings did not possess advanced enough space technology to constitute a serious threat to their mother ship, so he did not understand what there was to fear. That place was, to all intents and purposes, perfectly safe.

"Be brief, engineer," said the commander.

"Yes, of course," he answered, while another lump in the throat made itself felt. "Unit 563 established solid relations with a group of Earthlings a few months ago. They meet regularly to grapple with creative displays that make great use of their imagination and their psychology. It is only a game for them, but the data collected up to now has been highly interesting: their experiences, although unreal and relegated to the level of the imaginary, have a validity of 99.87% on the field, after being inserted into the paradox detector and cleansed of possible errors by the human mind. They are capable of creating worlds solely with the power of their imagination. This has laid down an enormous foundation for our studies".

"I already know about these details. Stick to the new developments," Chklelon said coldly.

"Here we go. Unit 563 is forming an emotional relationship with one of these Earthlings. We did not expect such a sudden development, but group play enabled her AI to evolve more quickly, because she was exposed to many situations separated from the reality around her. The imagination has sowed the seeds to experience an almost unlimited range of emotions".

"An emotional relationship? That is just foolishness! What use could that be for us in a war?"

Szalx thought about it for a moment and then shook his bulbous head.

"Well sir, to be honest... I don't know. The Earthlings' technology is at a clearly inferior stage with respect to ours. If we had wanted to eliminate them, we could have destroyed their planet simply by pressing a button. What is all this study for?"

The walls of the mother ship shook for a moment. Szalx looked around, suddenly worried.

"Engineer, we do not only have enemies in our universe. An alien species from another dimension is putting our civilization to the test in the Yaknah sector of this galaxy. They are called the Veranians, and our most eminent biologists have ascertained that they possess significant physical and character similarities to a species present in our universe, the Earthlings. By examining them, we will know how to fight the Veranians".

The walls of the ship shook again, this time more violently.

"Grab your biological emitter and prepare to fight engineer," growled the commander.

"We detected a hostile ship approach before you called me. A Veranian warrior has just penetrated our defences".

Maurizio Ferrero was born in 1987 in Vercelli, where he lives with his family and has an office job.

His free time is devoted to writing and role-play games. He has been an active member of Vercelli's La Stanza dei Sogni (The Room of Dreams) association, which works for the diffusion of intelligent play, for many years.

His fictional stories have featured in several anthologies; he has written adventures and settings in the role-play field, which have also been published by Italian publishers in the sector.

In 2016 "Everything starts from O" won the XXII Trofeo RiLL, placing first among 397 entrants.

The Trofeo RiLL is an Italian literary award for budding writers of speculative fiction.

The contest has been organized since 1994 by RiLL - Riflessi di Luce Lunare, a non-profit club based in Rome. Each edition of the Trofeo RiLL has around 250-300 short-story participants, from Italy and other countries. Winning entries are annually published in MONDI INCANTATI anthologies, which are directly edited by RiLL.

The final ceremony of Trofeo RiLL is hosted by Lucca Comics & Games, the most important Italian festival concerning the fantastic imagination (around 250.000 visitors in 2017).

Info: www.rill.it; info@rill.it

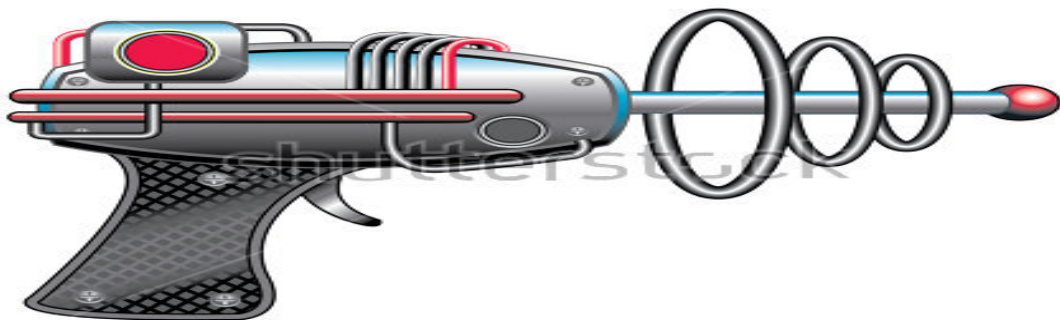
Turning under a blood red sun

Stephen Tatham, Iain Sinclair, Norman Pringle, AL du Pisani

Turning slowly under a blood red sun, the treadmill creaked as the zama-zamas drove it round. The generator squealed as the voltage increased.

Suddenly the lookout shouted warning. "The Eskom police" The zama-zamas scattered down their holes. There would be no electric below ground tonight.

The Eskom Captain pulled up in a cloud of dust. A dozen constables dismounted and set explosive charges on the generator and treadmill. Suddenly zama-zamas erupted from the ground. The constables drew electric batons and attacked. The miners stood confused. The batons had failed to spark. Shocking service delivery strikes again!



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Longing for Home Juliet Gilles

Metal below, metal above

Metal all around

Metal, metal, metal.

Wandering the walkways

Criss-crossing this home

Suspended in space

Safe from the fall-out

Safe from the not-so-human race.

One hundred years of success up here

What has happened down there?

In the intervening years?

Still too dangerous to go down

Stay up here

It's safe in this sphere.

Wait for a space at the porthole

Look down

At the Christmas decoration

Blue, white and green

And black

And black.

Longing for home

Blast from the past PROBE 139 December 2008

The Lauren Beukes Interview

Benny Alberts

For a nation with such an increasingly uncertain future and a reasonably well-developed literary culture, South Africans have been surprisingly slow to develop a speculative fiction tradition for themselves. Apart from a few blips, speculative fiction set in, and about South Africa has been thin on the ground.

Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* explores a kind of Africa we haven't seen or read about before. It is a technological, futuristic, hyper-urban, dark continent that rises beyond the condescending visions of romantic primitivism that seems to pervade so much fiction set in Africa. The Cape Town 2018 setting is kind of a statement in itself, reminding us that the future is going to happen to us too.

One can argue with Lauren's conclusions. That we're headed for a fascist dystopia of mass distraction, a future of corporate apartheid and omnipresent surveillance and oppression enabled by the very same shiny consumer gadgets the masses are clamouring for right now. SF's record is not very good at predicting specifics. But then again, what IS going to happen if the gulf between rich and poor continues to widen at the current rate? What will happen if we give up our freedoms of movement expression in exchange for an orderly police state? Why is Lauren Beukes the only one asking these questions?

I asked Lauren Beukes to tell us about *Moxyland* and herself over coffee and a few emails.

BA: What are your influences?

LB: I've always loved speculative fiction. I love authors like Neal Stephenson (*Snow Crash*) and Bruce Sterling (*Globalhead*), David Mitchell (*Cloud Atlas*), Jonathan Lethem (*Wall of the Sky*, *Wall of the Eye*), Margaret Atwood (*Oryx & Crake*) and especially Alan Moore (*Watchmen*). As a kid, I read a lot of *2000AD*. I still have all the old comics.

BA: Where do you get your ideas from, the cell phone thing in particular?

LB: The story is inspired by all the interesting places technology and culture intersect and the socio-political stuff happening in South Africa, but I didn't want to write just another apartheid novel.

The novel is about surveillance society and scary epidemics and slippery online identities, among a whole bunch of other things. I took inspiration from real-life events, like the fascinating way people are interacting online, from the Belgian woman who reported the virtual rape of her online avatar in Second Life as a real crime to real-world police or the Chinese guy who killed his former partner over a virtual sword. There seems to be this weird schism developing in how people experience online life.

As for the cell phone taser, it was inspired by yobs in the movies that won't stop talking and how great it would be to just zap them. It would be great for personal safety too, if you could zap muggers with your phone.

BA: Where does the developing world feature in all this?

LB: Well, the developing world is part of the high-tech economy too, except there the focus is a little different.

BA: You mean like child coltrane miners risking their lives to mine materials for the latest cellphones in the DRC?

LB: Exactly, but it doesn't have to be real mines, you get virtual mines and sweatshops too. In online games like World of Warcraft you can make real money by performing the tedious tasks like mining gold or earning artefacts or building up characters for rich and lazy players who just want to have fun. It's happening a lot in China at the moment. And actually, China is a very interesting place to watch generally. Take the Great Firewall of China for example – the way the government censors websites and has these adorable cartoon cops who pop up to warn you if you're venturing into restricted space. It's really crazy, evil Big Brother-style censorship mixed up with this cute factor.

BA: So, what do you think is going to happen when the technology needed to play in online virtual worlds filter down to the very poor as cellphones have today?

LB: All these online worlds and games, like World of Warcraft (and projects like Amazon's micro-task outsourcing agency Mechanical Turk) presume you have leisure time and access to a computer with decent bandwidth. The poor in SA have a lot of free time, but limited access to the technology. But wouldn't it be fantastic if we could get some virtual sweatshops going here, provide employment playing games?

BA: The media is mostly a source of disinformation and a tool of control in Moxylund. If you consider the unequal access to mediums such as the internet and satellite television today, do you think that the 'info-rich' are less susceptible to being manipulated by propaganda and misinformation through the media than the 'info poor'? Or, does having vast amounts of information about every conceivable topic at your fingertips merely make you susceptible to more sophisticated forms of disinformation?

LB: We're in a very interesting time where you can tailor your media to suit your opinions and reinforce them. You don't ever have to be exposed to a TV channel or a website that disagrees with you or challenges you (unless you're going there to troll).

I can relatively easily filter Fox News or rabid right wing sites right out.

But on the flip side, Google is a great equaliser. Do a search on reproductive health and you'll get as many anti-choice websites coming up (some disguised, appallingly and packed with disinformation) as pro-choice ones. So, it's important to be savvy too, to play the rational sceptic and really do your research.

We see it a lot with people STILL falling for (and forwarding) email scams, petitions, Microsoft giveaways, 419s, urban legends and how-to-avoid rape warnings, all of which could be debunked with one click through to Snopes.com or a simple Google search.

I do think those who don't have easy access to information and the Internet (or heck, a solid education) are at a serious disadvantage where they're at the mercy of popular media, politicians and community leaders. Look at the recent xenophobia attacks or the popular support base for Jacob Zuma that would ignore the constitution and our justice system and throw out even the possibility of a corruption trial.

There's a reason countries like China and Zimbabwe clamp down on the Internet and restrict information.

What the world, and South Africa especially, needs most is education, and not the paint-by-numbers syllabus stuff either. We need to teach kids to think, to interrogate the world, to understand context, to fully explore the spectrum of greys that falls in between the black and white of core issues and make their own, thoroughly informed choices.

BA: The virtual violence seems to escalate through the book. From kiddie's fantasy land to immersive Quake style first person shooter until it eventually breaks into the

real world through Scorpions Elite. Are you saying virtual violence leads to the real thing?

LB: Absolutely not. It's the other way round. The violence in the games, even in a kids' gameworld as saccharine and innocent as KiwiPop (what Toby calls Moxylant) is a reflection of the real world. That's really what the book is about, this glossy cute pop veneer over the dark undercurrents of our society that rush fast and deep and will suck you under.

As Toby says (p116 I think), "What, like the kids' games? That Moxylant shit? Murder and mayhem. Training them to be savage, don't you think? It's not about making friends with kids all over the world; it's about getting ahead, getting one over.'

The hackneyed old video-games-leads-to-violence argument is a grossly specious one.

Violent games might attract more violent or unhinged personalities (ditto with horror movies, metal bands and hey, kitchen appliances) but there are millions of people who use games like Resident Evil or GTA or rock out to crappy American hard rock bands to defrag from their day and vent their aggression.

And there was a recent study that showed, contrary to what you'd expect, that most players actually find it a relief to get killed in a game because it relieves the tension.

For most of us, it's cathartic. For the very, very, very few who veer that way already, it *might* wind up their antisocial tendencies or reinforce violent thinking and behaviour.

Video games, music, movies, guns, samurai swords, bad parenting and Satan don't kill people. People kill people. (Although it's certainly easier if they have guns. I'm a big fan of gun control)

BA: The concept 'corporate apartheid' has been used by several reviewers to describe the setting for your book. Do you think such a state is any more resilient to change than the racial apartheid that we have (at least in law) just abolished?

LB: While Original Apartheid was an evil, racist national state policy, the conceit of the novel, corporate apartheid, or its real-life equivalent economic apartheid, where the rifts between rich and poor are growing exponentially, may well be more insidious and, in the long term, more damaging. (This is something British economist George Monbiot holds close to his heart, if you're interested in further reading)

It's easy to identify an oppressive regime and fight against it (a little harder to actually overthrow it, if the 46 years we spent trying is any indication).

But how do you fight against an emergent socio-economic trend? This isn't government-imposed policy. Who is the enemy? How do you take down the big bad wolf if the big bad wolf is something as huge and nebulous and seemingly insurmountable as growing poverty?

Again, it comes down to education and giving people choice and agency in their own lives. Educating the poor, empowering them to get jobs or training them in practical skills (like good farming practices, rotating fallow land, not cutting down trees so as to avoid deforestation and desertification), educating women about reproductive rights and contraception and giving them an education full stop.

And, of course, curtailing rampant corporate interests and reinforcing corporate responsibility.

I think genetically modified crops could be exactly what Africa needs, for example (inconclusive studies about health factors notwithstanding, we've always tampered with genes with selective breeding of animals and crops, we just do it in a lab now). Crops that are bred to withstand harsh and arid conditions that can supply a bigger yield to feed more people - that's a good thing. Monsanto creating crops that don't seed, so people have to keep buying them year after year after year - not so good.

Ditto big pharmaceutical companies that refuse to release generics of life-saving medicine or try to patent gene sequences.

Or Arms Corporations who knowingly sell weapons and defence systems to countries that don't need them and can't afford them. (refer Mark Thomas' As Used On The Famous Nelson Mandela about BAE Systems selling impoverished Tanzania a military air control unit that wouldn't suit their needs and that they couldn't afford or knowingly supplying a corrupt Iraqi regime with weapons that they knew Saddam couldn't pay for to the tune of 100 million pounds, knowing also that they'd be fully covered for the loss by the British taxpayers AND that they could then add that loss to Iraq's war debt, crippling the country and doubling their profits!)

Or companies (and countries) that just don't give a fuck.

BA: Moxyland has been warmly received and reviewed. What does all this success and positive critical attention feel like when you add in the incoming kid and the ludicrously hip job of cartoon scriptwriter?

LB: Ridiculously privileged all round. I've been wonderfully surprised by how well the book has gone down and the amazing buy-in from people like HoneyB at African Dope to make it more than just words on a page.

My job is fantastic, best I've ever had, creative, collaborative, challenging and energising every day with the best bunch of people you ever met.

Where I am now, it feels like the start of things.

I know the incoming alien queen (just call me Ripley) is going to be very absorbing and my biggest handicap at the moment is finding time to do everything I want to do anyway, but it'll work out as long as the words keep coming. It's about discipline as much as inspiration.

BA: You sound like you lead a pretty intense life. What, if anything, do you do to make sure you smell the flowers and relax?

LB: If you'd asked me five years ago, I would have been able to say skydiving, but I gave that up - any sport that involves jet fuel becomes an expensive habit. Um. Reading, hanging out with my fantastic and hilarious friends whose own whimsies and creative endeavours from animation to design are really inspiring, watching movies and smart TV like *The Wire* or *Invader Zim* or *The Mighty Boosh*, more reading, spending time with my best friend and tuning fork (more useful than a sounding board) and creative partner, my husband, Matthew and our soon-to-be baby daughter aka The Alien Queen.

Lauren Beukes spends her time writing cartoon TV shows (Pax-Africa for Clockwork Zoo), books, short stories, columns and the occasional magazine article. Her previous book, the rollicking non-fiction *Maverick: Extraordinary Women From South Africa's Past* (Oshun 2005) was nominated for The Sunday Times Alan Paton award. She lives in Cape Town.

Benny Alberts is an occasional freelance journalist and full time security infrastructure consultant based in Saldanha.

Turning under a blood red sun

Franz Tomasek, Gail Jamieson, Nial Mollison, Trevor Derry

Turning under the blood red sun, the cocksure crew of the hydroskater Skipping Stone gunned the throttle towards the finish line or certain oblivion. The wormhole Charybdis lay to port while their plasma fuel was running dangerously low. "A slingshot around the edge is our only hope", shouted their pilot Obi-Wan. "It's inconceivable", lisped their engineer Vizzini. "Nevertheless, make it so", instructed the Captain. Hearts in mouth, fear in their bellies, they proceeded on their dangerous course. The wormhole clawed at the fragile craft, balanced against the redlined engines, as the Crimson Gasball Trophy beckoned seductively. Victory or death...



L.O.C.

1706-24 Eva Rd.

Etobicoke, ON CANADA M9C 2B2

November 28, 2017

Dear SFFANs:

It is less than a month to Christmas, and here I am with Probe 172, dated June. I did get it a while ago, but I have been working since the middle of September, which means that just about all my spare time goes to the new job, and about four hours a day getting there and coming back. I suspect issue 173 is on the way, and you are working on finishing 174, but here I am with a little stolen time.

The internet is neither bad nor good. It simply is. It's how we use it that's the good or bad involved. There's so much it can do, so much it can be made to do. It can be twisted about to suite the best or worst of intentions, and it's the same with social media. Social media has helped me find out about my own interests locally (Facebook), allowed me to store my writing (LiveJournal), and helped me to find work (LinkedIn). All of this has changed our lives infinitely, so no wonder we hearken back to simpler times when we weren't sitting in front of a computer screen as much, or at all.

The New Neighbours...well, first contact wasn't guaranteed to be all roses. Certainly not that smelly bunch. Just imagine if the current president had met those stinky aliens... Well, we wouldn't be enjoying this e-conversation now, would we?

The Silent Pool is a marvelous story, but it does remind me of a ST:TNG episode, The Inner Light. With an innocuous event, a person is taken away to not just another place, but another life. It is great to read, and I do wish there'd been a happier ending.

I wish I could do more, but it is already time to get ready for the morning. Thank you for all that you have sent to me. If your finances are strained, and getting a copy of Probe to me in Canada is getting too expensive, send it to me via e-mail as a .pdf. I don't mind, and fully understand. No SF club today is a fountain of money. But, I do appreciate the zines you do send. Thank you for this one, and the others to come.

Yours,

Lloyd Penny

We ARE Science Fiction Fantasy – Science Fiction Fantasy IS us.

We are filled with the wonderment found in youth – though some of us may be grey.

Devoid of cynicism we become wide-eyed and slack-jawed at new innovative creations of fantasy.

Our bias favouring our genre knows no bounds.

Some of us have committee roles fulfil our need to propagate our art form, that's our desire, to steer the SFF (star)Ship through media publicity, writing competitions, events, & our Probe(ing) publication.

Our home library cup overflows but we cannot part with our dog-eared favourites.

SF Fantasy Film Favourites we have a-plenty, repeat-viewing-worn though they may be.

No gender dominance, neither ageism nor colour rules, no Religious Faith variation plays its role.

Our version of a Lotto win is an extra-terrestrial encounter.

Though our feet are may be on Mother Earth....our heart is in the stars, in a Galaxy far far away.



From "The Daily Galaxy"

The Alien Observatory --"An Indigenous Technological Species Could Have Arisen in the Solar System Before Earth-Bound Life"

"As we improve our understanding of ancient Earth and the history of our solar system, perhaps we may someday uncover evidence that suggests the activity of another technological civilization right here in our neighbourhood," said Andrew Siemion, the director of Berkeley's SETI Research Centre.

After examining some 100,000 nearby large galaxies in 2015 a team of researchers lead by The Pennsylvania State University astronomer Jason Wright concluded that none of them contain any obvious signs of highly advanced technological civilizations. Turning his focus closer to home this past spring of 2017, Wright proposed that an advanced civilization—an indigenous technological species could have arisen in the solar system before Earth-bound life did.

Wright suggests that traces of its technology—"technosignatures"—may have survived, provided they were made of material not easily degraded by erosion or time and may remain hidden awaiting discovery under the surface of Venus and Mars.

Wright suggests there could have been an explosion in life around the time of or after the Cambrian period, when complex animals first appeared, according to fossil records. A cosmic catastrophe may have destroyed this early species, Wright suggests, erasing signs that it ever existed and "forcing the biosphere to 'start over' with the few single-celled species that survived."

We may have already seen technosignatures in geological record, but mistaken them for natural phenomena, Wright said. Or, the evidence may be long gone, erased from the surface by shifting tectonic plates. "The Earth is quite efficient, on cosmic timescales, at destroying evidence of technology on its surface," he concludes in the paper.

Wright's 2015 study --by far the largest of study of its kind to date—earlier research had only cursorily investigated about a hundred galaxies-- looked for the thermodynamic consequences of galactic-scale colonization, based on an idea put forth in 1960 by the physicist Freeman Dyson who postulated that a growing

technological culture would ultimately be limited by access to energy, and that advanced, energy-hungry civilizations would be driven to harvest all the available light from their stars.

Wright's team searched for type 3 civilizations in an all-sky catalogue from NASA's Wide-field Infrared Survey Explorer (WISE). They looked for objects that were optically dim but bright in the mid-infrared—the expected signature of a galaxy filled with starlight-absorbing, heat-emitting Dyson spheres. After using software to automatically sift through some 100 million objects in the WISE catalogue, Wright's student Roger Griffith examined the remaining candidates by hand, culling those that weren't galaxies or that were obvious instrumental artefacts without success.

“Looking for the absence of light as well as the waste heat like Wright and his colleagues have done is really cool,” says James Annis, an astrophysicist at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory who in the late 1990s used different methods to survey more than a hundred nearby galaxies for type 3s.

“In some sense it doesn't matter how a galactic civilization gets or uses its power because the second law of thermodynamics makes energy use hard to hide. They could construct Dyson spheres, they could get power from rotating black holes, they could build giant computer networks in the cold outskirts of galaxies, and all of that would produce waste heat. Wright's team went right to the peak of the curve for where you'd expect to see any sort of waste heat, and they're just not seeing anything obvious.”

“Life, once it becomes spacefaring, looks like it could cross a galaxy in as little as 50 million years,” Annis says. “And 50 million years is a very short time compared to the billion-year timescales of planets and galaxies. You would expect life to crisscross a galaxy many times in the nearly 14 billion years the universe has been around. Maybe spacefaring civilizations are rare and isolated, but it only takes just one to want and be able to modify its galaxy for you to be able to see it. If you look at enough galaxies, you should eventually see something obviously artificial. That's why it's so uncomfortable that the more we look, the more natural everything appears.”

Annis suspects that fast-gamma-ray bursts which were more frequent in the cosmic past, until recently suppressed the rise of advanced civilizations and that we inhabit “the beginning of history.”

“If there are any real aliens, they are likely to behave in ways that we never imagined,” said Freeman Dyson. “The WISE result shows that the aliens did not follow one particular path. That is good to know. But it still leaves a huge variety of other paths open. The failure of one guess does not mean that we should stop looking for aliens.”

The Daily Galaxy via [Scientific American](#) and [The Atlantic](#)

Books Received

JonathanBallPublishers

Terry Brooks: The Black Elfstone: The Fall of Shanara. Little Brown R295

Dale Lucas: The Fifth Ward: First Watch. Little Brown R195

Anthony Ryan: The Legion of Flame. Little Brown R295

Cixin Liu: The Wandering Earth. Head of Zeus R285

Stephen Baxter: Obelisk.

Jess Richard: City of Circles. Hodder UK R315

Linnea Hartsuyker: The Half Drowned King. Little Brown R295

Lincoln Child: Full Wolf Moon. Little Brown R295

Brandon Sanderson: Oathbringer. Orion UK R395

Brent Weeks: Perfect Shadow. Little Brown R215

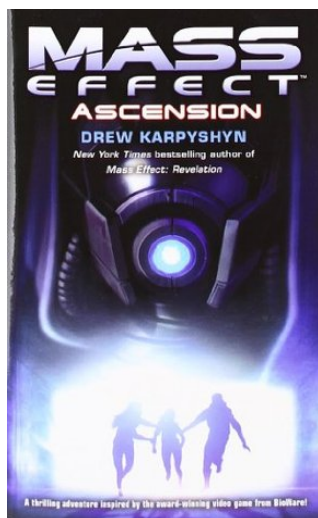
Patrick Johnson: The Physics of Star Wars. Simon & Schuster USA R305

Book Reviews

The Jamiesons

Dean Karpysyn

Mass Effect II Ascension



The book is based on the video game, of which I have never heard, not that it matters.

The story centres round Kahlee Sanders, a scientist who now works for the Ascension Project, which helps gifted “biotic” children to control their powers. It is a sort of space Hogwarts. The star pupil is a twelve year old girl called Gillian, who was created by a black ops group called Cerebus. But Cerebus now want Gillian under their direct control and plan to abduct her. But Gillian’s father, also a Cerebus agent, learns about the plot and grabs

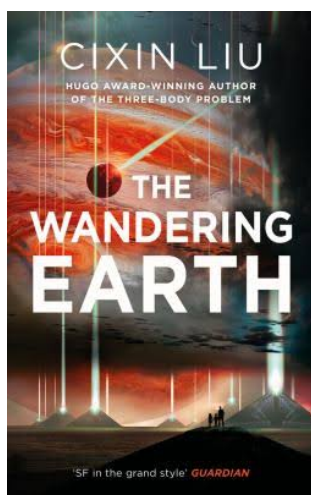
her first and, together with Kahlee, heads into the lawless Termenus System. On the run they visit the Migrant Fleet, thousands of starships which are home to the Quarian race. We learn a great deal about the Quarrians, but it really does not add much to the story.

The book is well written but a bit disjointed, and it has nothing in it to make me want to read the other three books.

2/5 Ian

Cixin Liu

The Wandering Earth



The Wandering Earth is the first of ten short stories written by China’s leading Science Fiction author. Set in the future the Earth’s sun is going to send out a helium flare in about 1000 years’ time. This will destroy all of the inner planets. To escape mankind decides to turn the earth into a star ship and to seek out a new system to live in.

Liu’s stories cover a wide spectrum of science fiction, from first contact, the creation of life, and the end of that life, to a human falling through the centre of the earth, and an alien eating a human to

see if they are tasty enough to harvest for food.

There is a certain bleakness and sadness in some of the stories, but this is countered by experiencing the joy of life.

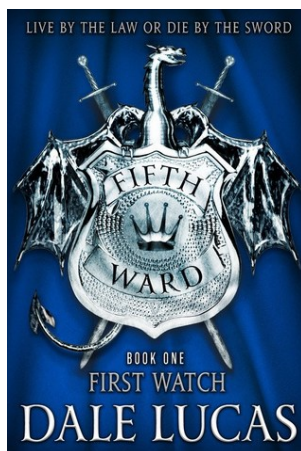
Five people are credited as translators, and they have done an excellent job. I did not particularly enjoy "The Three-Body Problem, his novel which won the Hugo Award, but found these ten (long) short stories far more entertaining.

4/5

Ian

Dale Lucas

Fifth Ward Book I First Watch



Rem has been forced to join the Yenera city watch in order to pay off his debts. He doesn't look much, short, a bit scrawny, but he is fast, and he has a will of iron. Rem has taken the place of a missing watchman, obviously dead, and has to find the person who killed him.

The usual suspects are drug-dealing Orcs, mind controlling elves, magical mages or humans being typically human.

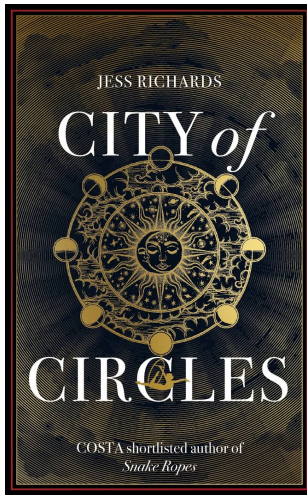
Torval is a dwarf, mean and nasty, and he is highly unimpressed that he has been teamed up with the untrained and so worthless Rem. Together they set out as partners to find the killer, keep the peace, make sure their partner is safe, and of course not get greedy. As this is a work of fiction you will realise that they will end up as true partners and friends.

Dale Lucas is a screenwriter, film critic and novelist, although this appears to be his first full length novel. He writes well and although there is nothing new in it, this turns out to be an unexpectedly entertaining novel.

4/5 Ian

Jess Richards

City of Circles



Danu is a talented tightrope walker who has lost her parents to a devastating disease which she believes she brought back to the circus. She constantly mourns them and although she is taken in by other members of the circus and eventually develops a relationship with a caring hunchback, Morrie, with who she creates a circus act, she believes she needs to follow the information she finds in a locket that her mother has left her.

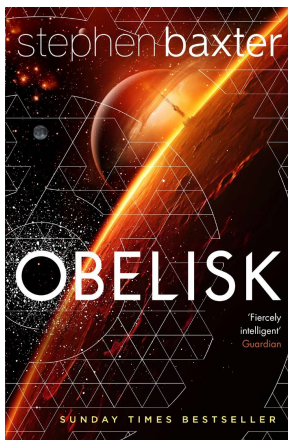
When the circus comes to the city of Matryoshka, which happens to be her city of birth, she leaves the circus, finds an abandoned dwelling and begins to explore the city. She learns that if she finally moves to the inner circle of the city she will be unable to leave it and she will have to leave her former life completely. This is a bittersweet love story and chronicles the desperation of Morrie as he tries to find Danu before she makes a final decision.

The book is beautifully written and the blurb on the back cover says she “evokes authors like Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson.” I am not entirely convinced of that but I did enjoy this fantasy novel

Gail

Stephen Baxter

Obelisk



The more I read of Stephen Baxter the more I begin to think that I prefer his short works. He is a very talented writer, this I cannot deny, but I find some of his novels to be, for me, a little on the dry side.

There are 17 stories in this collection and they vary enormously from hard science fiction to fantasy, to alternate history and I enjoyed almost every one of them.

Some take place in an alternate almost Victorian London. Others are set in the universe of *Proxima and Ultima*. Stories such as “The Pevatron Rats” actually touch the heartstrings. I had read “Turnings Apples” before but I still read avidly of the two brothers tangled in a first contact story.

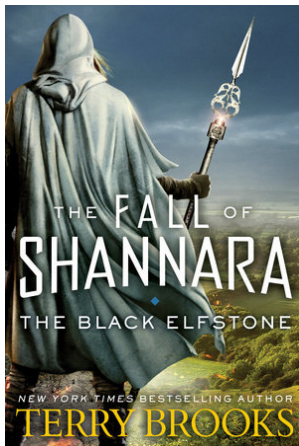
Baxter’s imagination seems almost unlimited and his literary ability equals it.

Read and enjoy.

Gail

Terry Brooks

Black Elfstone The Fall of Shanara



I have been reading “Shanara” novels for half a lifetime. Terry Brooks has been writing them for forty years and I see that there have been twenty-eight novels written so far.

The back cover says that Brooks, with this novel is beginning to bring his epic vision to a grand conclusion. This is epic fantasy at its best. I have read that it will be a four-part conclusion, but that Brooks may still write Shanara novels, possibly to fill in

the stories of Shanara, but that will not advance the story chronologically.

Peace has reigned across the Four Lands for generations but now powerful enemy, who wield a terrible new magic, is gathering in the north and the peoples of the Four lands are unprepared to face this threat. So the corrupt High Druid, Ober Balronen, sends out Dar Leah to gather information on how to combat this threat.

Former druid, Drisker Arc had been living in seclusion, away from the politics and power of his former life, until he is forced by attempts on his life to discover who wishes his death. He is accompanied by Tarsha Kaynin, who has the Wishsong and feels she needs to be educated in its use by a master. She is followed by her brother has been driven mad by his use of magic and who thinks that she is working for evil and so he needs to end her life.

This first novel tells the tale of how these varying quests are intertwined and sets the scene for the following novels.

Terry Brooks, as usual writes clearly and without excessive description but the story flows quickly. I look forward to reading the novels to come.

Gail

Anthony Ryan The Legion of Flame

The Draconic Memoria : Book Two



For centuries, the vast Ironship Trading Syndicate relied on drake blood—and the extraordinary powers it confers to those known as the Blood-blessed—to fuel and protect its empire. But now, a fearsome power has arisen—a drake so mighty that the world will tremble before it.

I like dragons but these are seriously scary creatures and the mythical white dragon turns out to be real and wants only to turn the world of men to ashes.

Claydon Torcreek has to save the world. And we learn more about it as the story progresses. The characters seem to have a very hard time and the book rushes from one scenario to the next

One city has already fallen to the drake's formidable legions. More will follow, unless Clay can uncover an ancient secret that lies buried beneath the southern ice.

Once again Clay must face unthinkable danger, and this time he carries not just the hopes of his own nation, but the fate of the entire world.

I have not read Book One, but I think I might have to. The story seems to cover the Wild West, Victoriana... oh... and fantasy as well.

A rough, violent book but that seems to go with the story. You'll have to try it for yourself.

Gail

NOVA 1981

RUNNER-UP

A Little Bach

Elaine Mommsen

The arrival of a spaceship from an unknown system was still enough of a novelty in those days to excite the media for a full week, but after publishing pictures and dimensions, accompanied by excerpts from statements made by experts as to origin, purpose (hostile or otherwise) and repeated assurances that the militia were standing by, the topic was completely abandoned or relegated to the inner pages.

The ship was unassuming in appearance: cylindrical, strongly reflective of light and really rather small. But then, some maintained, so is a fission bomb!. It remained orbiting Earth at a comfortable distance and commenced exchanges in Standard Galactic Code, which decoded ran something like this:

“We come in peace.”

“Message received and understood. Identify yourself.”

What followed took local experts, with the help of the Centaurian Ambassador’s staff who had far more experience with alien civilizations, some time to decipher. It transpired that they were a little known race, inhabiting a few very distant planets. They were listed as non-aggressive traders. That sounded quite okay but the “Galactic List of Inhabited Systems” admitted little knowledge of the system and Earth naturally proceeded with great caution.

“Message received and understood. What is your business?” Earth signalled in reply.

“We wish to trade. Please teach your language – both sonic and visual.”

As was to be expected, there followed tedious debates at topmost Global Admin level and the media meanwhile had their fun speculating how long the arrival’s patience would last before they gave up in disgust and departed. Eventually Earth sent out a feeler, still in Galactic Code|

“What do you trade in?”, but received the reply.

“Galactic Code inadequate. Please teach your language.”

Finally the powers-that-be conceded to teach the visitors simple basic English. The aliens were certainly not slow! Within three days that had learned enough English to communicate adequately.

Politely they transmitted. “Language now sufficient. Please may we touch down and trade?”

Once again the authorities went into a tither and finally agreed that such a step would be most premature.

They replied. “Negative. We accept for the moment that you are friendly and merely wish to trade, but physical contact cannot be made until we have done extensive tests regarding alien contamination.”

Promptly came the reply: “We have nothing with which we can contaminate you, we are completely sterile. Our metabolism is not carbon-based. Nothing we have here is biochemical. Suggest you come up in sterile suits to examine and test. We have experience of carbon-based organisms.”

Earth’s interrogator then asked “How shall we name you?”

Somewhere in the records the name is meticulously written down, but as one monitor said to the press, it was less pronounceable than “supercalifragilistic-expialiditous”. It was then asked of them whether any objection would be raised to the simplification of this name. “No objection whatever.” They stated. It seemed that they were bending over backwards to prove their sincerity, or else they were masters of the art of diplomacy and avoidance of stepping on toes.

Some bright spark had come up with the name of “Swoppers” derived from the fact that they had explained that their home planet lay in the South Western Outer Perimeter, and “Swoppers” seemed appropriate so it stuck.

The visitors were not offended. “Swoppers” would do fine, thank you.

There followed more debate at top level, the main issue being the cost of sending a delegation and on this aspect alone the whole thing nearly fell apart, Thinking of it now, one shudders at the thought that for the want of a few thousand dollars, the Swoppers might have packed up and left without further ado. It's quite unthinkable..... However, the good old inquisitive scientists came to our rescue and insisted that in the interests of knowledge alone we should at least go and see what the aliens were like.

Eventually Prof. van der Vollenhoven, Super-Biochemist, and Col. De la Croix of Earth Defence Command were despatched, voluntarily, of course, in a small shuttle, the Colonel armed to the teeth with secret, potent little weapons, the Professor refusing even a stunner in the form of a pocket pen.

The small alien ship boasted an airlock and as the two delegates waited for it to fill with atmospheric gasses, the Professor concluded that the non-carbon Swoppers did at least breathe. As it turned out, he was quite mistaken. The Colonel waited tensely, grasping the mini-stunner in his pocket with a sweaty fist. Soon the inner lock grew transparent and, like the Cheshire cat, just vanished, revealing the four Swoppers waiting, one might presume, with anticipation for their first glimpse of humans.

"My God, they're robots!" voiced the Professor under his breath.

The Colonel studied each for any sign of weapons, though what their weapons could possibly look like, he had not the foggiest idea.

They differed from each other in detail, but on the whole looked so much like the robots that SF-film makers had anticipated a hundred years back that it was almost an anti-climax. They were approximately a metre tall, and had what one could term "heads", set on "bodies" no limbs, but various appendages, orifices and what looked like an array of eyes oddly distributed about the "head". Some of these eyes has the appearance of large expertly faceted polished gems. Their disparity seemed only that of different models, as one gets in flyers and ground-cars. The situation and shape of the eyes or lenses and orifices differed slightly in each individual suggesting to the humans different facial expressions. They were each a different

colour. One was a bright metallic green, the next a deep matt red, the third ebony black and the last pure silver.

After the Professor's first involuntary exclamation, the two delegates stared speechless from the confines of their transparent bubble-suits.

The aliens were the first to recover composure. Simultaneously across the chest of each appeared lighted words, resembling the figures on a pocket calculator:

"Welcome"

"Please come in."

"Do not be alarmed"

"Please trade good thought with us."

"Can you beat that!" exclaimed the Colonel.

The Professor replied rather chillingly. "They have done their homework well, it seems." Then directing his attention across to the four, he asked, "Can you hear us?"

Across each chest appeared varying affirmatives.

Collecting himself somewhat, the Colonel stepped smartly forward, saluted and introduced the delegation.

"I am Colonel de la Croix of Earth Defence and this is my learned friend Professor van Vollenhoven, but you may address us simply as Colonel and Professor." At this, each alien in turn moved forward – they seemed to float on a cushion of air a few centimetres above the floor – and across each chest appeared an unpronounceable name followed by the qualification, "Call me what you please."

"What do you suggest?" the Colonel asked the Professor who, for the moment could think of nothing better than "One, Two, Three and Four". The green robot flashed lights from various orifices, clicked and whirred, and then the words appeared: "To our race these are holy symbols, signifying our beginning – the very basic of computation! No, please think of something else."

“Faux pas number one,” the Professor in an aside to the Colonel.

“What about.... Let’s see.... Green, Red, Black and Silver?”

“Very good.” Said Green, but only for the present. We change colour every so often, as the whim takes us.”

“How very human.” Thought the Professor. But for the remainder of their stay aboard the foreign ship, the four remained, it seemed out of consideration for their guests, the same colour.

Communication presenting very little difficulty, the humans and robots got along very well, indeed. It transpired that the four were the only members of the crew. The communicated with each other rather strangely it seemed, as each had radio wave receiver-transmitter apparatus of a highly sophisticated nature, by means of audible clicks, chirps, squeaks, whines and other indescribable electronic sounds.

The men were not restricted in any way. They were permitted to examine everything and questions were answered promptly and clearly, except in a few restricted areas which, when enquired into, they explained were “restricted.”

“But who were your creators?’ the Professor felt compelled to inquire.

“The very first one to exist on our oldest home planet was a primitive comp like ourselves. Most of the info in his data banks has been lost through the passage of time. But there are vestiges remaining which have become distorted. Had we known that this would interest you we would have acquired a little programming at our holy shrines before our departure.”

The humans, considering this strange communication, were both at a loss for words for the moment.

Anxiously Green spelled out: “Am I displaying too rapidly? What is it that is puzzling you?”

“No, no too fast. That’s not it. We are just confused...wondering...” The Professor hastened to assure him. “But how do you know from whence came the First One?”

“As I said, the info has become distorted so as not to make much sense. It is no longer programmed into new ones. Sorry for lack of info which seems to be of great interest to you.”

Reluctantly the humans abandoned the subject.

Within a very short time the Colonel and the Professor no longer thought of the aliens as robots. Each was a complete individual. Green was an ardent music-lover and played an instrument something like a harp. He utilized all four appendages, each with several branching terminals to twang the strings and clash the symbols. The resulting melody was a nerve-jarring cacophony to the humans. The other three however, appeared to enjoy it immensely and would click and whirr in “song” whilst twirling and gyrating in a gentle “dance”.

Red was the most mechanically minded of the four. He had numerous gadgets and toys in his cabin, the purpose and function whereof were quite obscure to the visitors. Black fed himself the equivalent of tape cassettes. He opened a slot in the “tummy” region, inserted a cassette and would become immobile for hours at a stretch. He explained that he was either reading or recording at such times. Silver was a collector of artefacts. His cabin was cluttered with objects from scores of worlds.

They were an advance party exploring for new markets, they explained. Trading was in the “blood” of the Swoppers. They traded mainly in technology but were not averse to trading in anything in the galaxy if they thought it profitable. The visitors soon had practical experience of this love of trading when silver enquired of the Colonel if he wished to trade the small object he kept in his breast pocket. It was, of course, a stunner disguised as a pen. Having found no evidence whatever of weapons aboard the ship, the Colonel felt a little shamed of his small arsenal.

“No. No, I’m afraid I cannot trade it. It is a functional article of which I have need,” he replied, somewhat taken aback.

“What function does it fulfil?’ asked Silver.

“I write with it. It’s a pen,” the Colonel replied lamely.

“Surely you can acquire a new one and I would so like it for my collection. Perhaps you fancy this little ornament in exchange?” and he indicated the large ruby adorning his “forehead”.

The colonel blushed, faltered and then stuttered, “I...I’ll have to get permission from my superiors,” he managed to say.

The Professor, noting the Colonel’s discomfort turned aside to hide his amusement.

Silver seemed to enjoy the little incident and concluded, “You are an excellent bargainer. I look forward to trading with Earthlings if they are all so astute.”

The Professors instruments confirmed that the aliens harboured not a vestige of germs or bacteria. The delegation were able to discard their uncomfortable bubble-suits and settle down to enjoy themselves whilst awaiting permission from Earth for the four aliens to be brought down in the shuttle.

After three days permission was granted. Though they might have expected it the Colonel and the Professor were somewhat taken aback when the robots changes colour for the occasion. They had no difficulty however in identifying them as their outward structures did not alter. The one who had been Green explained that they could no longer tolerate the monotony and hoped they would be pardoned for having change their colours.

On arrival at the Paris spaceport the Colonel was at a loss as how to introduce the guests. New names had to be found at once. Before an official naming could take place however, some bright reporter had nicknamed them, and the new names being appropriate just stuck. The one who had been Green and who acted mostly as spokesperson, somewhat resembled a by-gone statesman and was christened “Winston”. Red had merely changed the tone and sheen of that colour and so got called “The Baron”. The third who had been Black had a “face” so solemn and dour, he was named “Sad Sack”. Silver never changed the colour of his head, he assured the reported, and so he remained Silver.

The visitors were housed under the strictest surveillance somewhere near Paris. They were not allowed to leave their quarters, but not once did they complain. Their

requirements were of the simplest. They needed no beds, no toilets, no food, no water. They brought with them various items, all small and compact. The humans did not even try to guess the function of these items. Each was meticulously explained to the Colonel or his subordinates. Some were even demonstrated. The Baron brought his obscure gadgets, Winston brought his harp, Sad Sack his books and Silver many small items which he explained were mere trifles which he desired to use in trade.

The sub-surface hideout had several levels and there were the usual stairways connecting each. It was wondered whether the aliens would be able to negotiate stairs as there was no lift but, as it turned out, they could descend or ascend with great ease; they just seemed to float either up or down each step, one step at a time. On being questioned, Sad Sack explained that the technology attaching to their method of propulsion was a saleable commodity and could be traded, provided that the Earthlings had something of equal value to trade therefor.

The Professor was worried about atmosphere, but Silver said it had been analysed and would indeed act corrosively on them, but that they had taken the necessary precautions. It was also to be remembered that they did not breathe so the composition of the atmosphere was no handicap.

Questioned about sustenance, Winston explained: "Yes they did take sustenance but they had naturally brought all their own requirements.

In short, it was far more difficult for the authorities to house a fussy foreign Potentiate than it was to accommodate the aliens.

From all corners of the globe the representatives arrived with samples of trade goods. Fact is, the four had made it known that their planets were wealthy in minerals and Earth wanted badly to trade for this commodity, her own stores having become dangerously depleted, Now and then the four seemed somewhat excited about an item and there would ensue much clicking, whirring and crackling. But Winston, who had the role of spokesman, invariably spelled out a negative.

The trade reps and Government officials grew impatient. For some weeks this pattern continued. Invariably the verdict was negative. Politely Winston explained that maybe there could be some small trade in curios, - handmade items for

collectors and the like, some of which might just become a collector's craze. Least of all did the aliens seem to be interested in precious stones or minerals. Earth just seemed to have nothing to justify a trade link-up over such a vast expanse of universe as existed between Earth and the prospective markets. Winston promised that he would take with him many samples, but he was sorry, very sorry indeed, that he could see no possibility of continued mutually satisfying trade enterprise.

A restricted amount of barter did in fact take place. The Professor swapped his glasses (those antique visual aids that he insisted on using) for the emerald which Silver wore embedded in his "shoulder". At their next meeting the Professor noticed that it had been replaced by a brilliant blue stone. The Colonel was persuaded – quite easily this time – to swap his pen for the beautifully wrought gold collar that the Baron sometimes wore, but his conscience dictated that he include a fine Bokhara rug as well. The Governor of America's Lady had her eye on the twenty carat diamond that Winston wore slap in the middle of his "forehead" but he insisted that it was functional and deplored the fact that he had brought no spare which he might have traded for a lock of her lovely blonde hair!

When the day's interviews were done, the four would literally settle down. The slight elevation above the surface which they maintained when mobile would no longer be present and they would remain stationary for long hours. They never completely ceased activity and when left to their own devices they entertained themselves by inserting cassettes into their slots or by playing recorded music. Students of the art took recordings which they studied at length attempting to analyse the structure of the compositions. They pronounced technically very clever but certainly no human ear found it enjoyable. It sounded as if the percussion and strings of a large orchestra had gone berserk, each playing his own thing in his own tempo and key. And always when they played their music they would commence to dance, turning this way and that, tilting at angles and slowly revolving.

Abruptly one morning Winston announced, "We leave in two days. Our mission is at an end and we must leave, it seems forever. We know our markets very well. We find it a great pity that we are unable to trade some of our more advanced skills which are our only true currency, but there are those in authority to whom we must

answer on our return. They have strong policies regarding the spending of our most valuable currency.

“What currency is this you speak of?” the Professor wanted to know.

“It is an unusual technology, known to very few races in the galaxy. More I cannot tell unless a worthwhile trading commodity is found.”

“Bah, they infuriate me”. The Colonel confided to the Professor. “I cannot say it will not be a relief to see them go. All this talk of valuable currency. We have stated most clearly that we would be well satisfied with their minerals and precious stones, but they have so little regards to the value of these. It’s almost like they were asking humans to pay in currency of...well... something like sand or water!”

It was decided to lift the strict security imposed on the four rather endearing little robots and to take them on a short tour of Paris as a final parting gesture. One couldn’t very well give them a party in honour of beings who neither ate nor drank, or even flirted with the ladies! A tour of the sights of Paris would have to serve in lieu.

The tour was not publicized and being a hasty last minute arrangement it was hoped that the news would not leak out, but the people came as if by magic and lined the streets of Paris, cheering and waving. The Swoppers loved it. The tilted and bowed, turned left and right, spun around and elevated themselves, at time quite thirty centimetres above the ground. “How do they do it?” each turned to his neighbour to enquire. They admired everything they saw. Silver would have liked to stop and trade for a few artefacts, but the Colonel had to discourage this. Sad Sack asked numerous questions as to the function of so many things strange to them. With all the patience that he could muster the Professor endeavoured to explain.

Silver was most gratified that some things, like the newly completed replicas of the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe served no practical purpose at all, but were sentimental historical monuments.

“We also have many historical “shrines” or hallowed places. We differ physically but mentally I feel much affinity with your peoples,” he graciously put it.

At lunchtime the robots settled down to watch and join in the conversation while their human hosts ate. Poor human hosts! They were beginning to feel the strain and one and all wished it would end. No so their guests. They were completely tireless. Professor van der Vollenhoven was beginning to feel his age, and taking the Colonel aside, suggested that they announce that the tour was at an end. This they proceeded to do but he aliens begged for more.

“We are enjoying the sights and sounds to such a great degree after our long stay indoors. Please could we continue until nightfall?” Winston implored.

“What the heck, they have been such model guests, let’s take some more pep pills and oblige them.”

Notre Dame had been closed to the public in anticipation. As the party of aliens and officials entered the impressive doors of that beautiful ancient cathedral, they were met by ecclesiastical officials within. Sad Sack had, of course to be informed of the function of the edifice and, to the amusement of the humans, understood it perfectly – or at least so he spelled out. It seemed that they also had their places of worship and their Creator was also wholly unseen, except in the manifestation of his works, his origins being lost in the mists of time.

Silver went into ecstasies of admiration at the sight of the stained glass windows. It was explained that the art of making these windows was entirely lost and apart from them being priceless, could not be traded because of their religious significance.

All at once there burst forth from the mighty organ the majestic sounds of Johan Sebastian Bach’s “Toccata and Fugue in D Minor.” The church officials were a little apologetic and one attempted to explain. “Father Dominico is, as you know, a great organist and we could not deny his wish to grace this occasion with a little Bach.”

The Professor directed his attention toward his guests, wondering how they were taking it. All four were commencing their strange gyrations. As the music progresses with great booming blasts from the mighty organ pipes, their dance grew faster and even wilder. Soon they were crazily spinning like oversized canted toy tops and as they spun they rose meters high into the air. They twirled so fast as to become blurred to the sight of the watchers, weaving in and out in a most intricate pattern of

three-dimensional choreography. The humans grew dizzy watching and fervently hoped that the robots would not crash into anything or anyone. In maddened frenzy they danced until, with perfect timing the came to rest on the final chord.

A stunned silence followed. The aliens were completely immobile and silent. Someone ran up to the organ console to stop Father Dominico from any further performance.

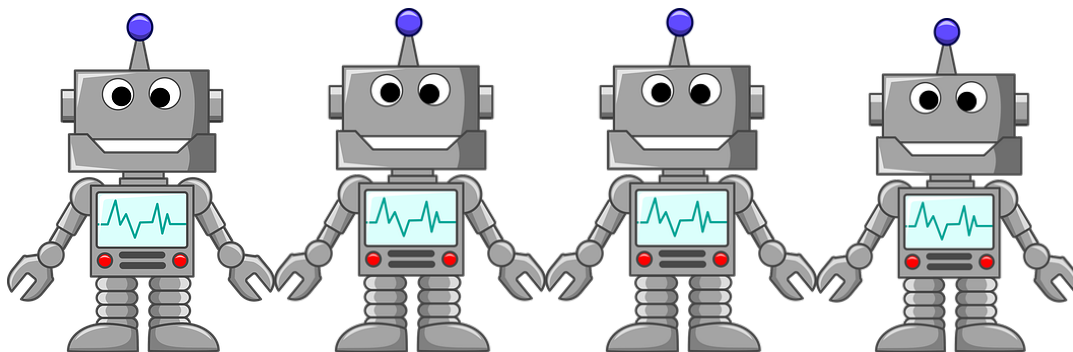
The regaining their wits the aliens burst into excited chatter amongst themselves. Finally Winston's panel came aglow:

"How do you produced this sound? " Please tell us, we must know. This music... this magnificent, wonderful, intoxicating sound – how is it made?" The urgency of the request was accentuated by the flashing and twinkling of the jewelled eyes.

Composing himself to explain, the Professor, with his usual patience commenced to expound: "Well it is simply achieved by the friction and vibration...."

"Stop! Hush! Don't tell them! The Colonel almost shouted. Then he addressed Winston: We will trade the technology of the great organ for your mysterious "currency"", he announced firmly.

....And that's how we got the Anti-grav... in trade for the simple technology of blowing through a pipe with a hole and a vibrator in it, thus producing frictional sound waves pleasant to the ear. The robot-aliens, lacking the function of breathing, had never, as man had done in his antiquity, thought of blowing through a hollow reed to produce a pleasant sound.



From "The Daily Galaxy"



The photo above shows the work Eggs of Yodafoetus by French artist Alexandre Nicolas at the science fiction museum Maison d'Ailleurs (translated as "House of Elsewhere") during the exhibition entitled "I Am Your Father!" on December 21, 2017, in Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland. The museum presents the works of thirteen contemporary international artists who use the Star Wars myth to elicit different perspectives, including the relationship between reality and fiction or the making of myths and idols, until October 14, 2018.

