

# PROBE

177



## PROBE 177

September 2018

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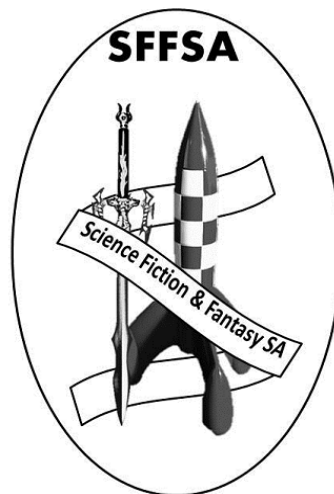
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# PROBE 177

September 2018

- 3. Editorial**
- 4. Chairman's Note – Andrew Jamieson**
- 6. Magazines and Books Received**
- 7. Nov 2017 Finalist Jill Morsbach – A Secret Life**
- 31. Nova 2017. Editor's Choice. Duncan Park**  
**An Organic Mythology**
- 38. Wormhole #1**
- 39. Book Reviews. The Jamiesons**
- 44. Wormhole #2**
- 45. Blast from the Past. From PROBE 135 Nov.**  
**2007. Michael Lohr. The Harry Harrison**  
**Interview**
- 51. from The Daily Galaxy**
- 53. "Wanted – Undead or Alive" Gary Kuyper**
- 53. Wormhole #3**

# Editorial

# Gail

This PROBE, issue 177 is almost ready to go to the printer. A bit of a mixed bag this time. Another story by the winner of Nova 2017, Jill Morsbach, called “A Secret Life” which was a finalist as well.. A choice of mine from the 2017 entrants, “An Organic Mythology” from Duncan Park; The Wormholes from this year’s MiniCon: we were given the sentence “The light of the murdered sun still burns me.” and had to write a 99-word wormhole. There was a lot of muttering but the three groups finally came up with the wormholes scattered around this issue. Maybe not surprisingly similar in theme.



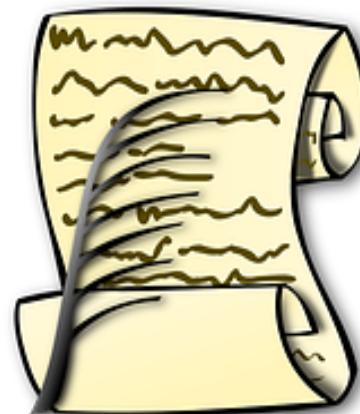
The usual Book Reviews, and as a Blast from the Past. I chose the interview that was conducted by Michael Lohr with the late Harry Harrison. Sad to see that we are losing more and more people who were big in Science Fiction when I started reading. I remember listening to Harry Harrison at the Bucconeer WorldCon in Baltimore in 1998 and finding him a most entertaining speaker.

There is also some information on a book, written in Screenplay style, by our own Gary Kuyper. It is available in paperback as well as Kindle form. I suggest that you read it.

And interesting, to me, an article from the Daily Galaxy. An Interview with Martin Rees, among other positions, the Royal Astronomer, who shares his views on other life in the Galaxy. Wouldn't it be great if we could get someone like him to come along and give us a talk?

I see ComicCon is on soon in our area (Midrand) and “rAge” not too long after that. So I guess that Science Fiction and Fantasy are alive in some form at least in South Africa.

Last time I wrote "that in general, my notes are pretty much just about what I find interesting, and what I feel the readers might find interesting as well". This seems too often relate to current technologies, or possible technologies, and usually something with a science fiction bent to it. Seems I don't often write about fantasy stuff, I guess because there is not a lot of "fantasy" in the real world. I think I will have to come up with something in a future note.



Anyway, I have been wondering lately: Do the readers of Probe actually read this note? Find it nice? Great? Useful? Rubbish? Wish someone else wrote it? Or none of the above? I must admit I don't get much feedback on

these things so I really have no idea what the readers think about it. Well, the editor asked me to do this, I said yes and as you can see, still going strong.

So things have been a bit quiet in the club lately. At our mini-con a couple of weeks ago we had the usual assortment of stalwarts, which is very much appreciated that they all take the time and energy to come to the events. However we don't really see many new faces in the club, or at the monthly events much anymore. Not that they aren't out there, I'm pretty sure there are quite a few members of the club I have never, or only very infrequently met at these meetings. It would be nice to see them more often. As for getting brand new members into the club, well, we have certainly tried just about everything we could to entice new members into the club. Like I said last time, unfortunately South Africa is just not the best place to try and promote science fiction or fantasy. Most of the population just really isn't that interested in science fiction at all, and those that are, get enough from TV and movies nowadays. Couple that with the rather unfortunate fact of life of the rather high crime rate in South Africa, and you can see why our meetings just don't garner the numbers they used to.

I look at what the cons overseas draw in and we really have nothing even close to compare. I mean going to <https://www.upcomingcons.com/science-fiction-conventions> shows 114 different conventions coming in the next year, and that is only in the United States alone! Wow. I mean, the Worldcon in two years' time will be held in Wellington, New Zealand, I mean it is six times smaller in size to South Africa and yet they are

able to hold Worldcon. Yes, South Africa really is a much different place compared to so many other countries when it comes to anything science fiction or fantasy related. Still, we have been going for around 50 years now, smaller, but still quite strong thanks to our wonderful members.

My best friend has just left South Africa to move to the United Kingdom, London to be precise. Just four years ago it held the Science Fiction World Convention there. South Africa in comparison started a convention called rAge (Really Awesome Gaming Expo) and he and I would often go there, simply because it was held at The Dome, Northgate, which was literally just around the corner from both of us. Thinking about London now, how great would it be to be able to simply pop onto a tube, travel across half of London and end up at a Science Fiction World Convention?! Wow, something really awesome to look forward to, and perhaps sometime in the future he can do that! Ah, I am envious and will miss going to rAge with him.

Sigh, the... challenges of running a science fiction and fantasy club in the current South Africa is not an easy task. Still, we have been here a long time, still have plenty to offer, and thus are likely still to be around for some time. I hope you will be along for the ride.

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](mailto:reecebm@gmail.com)

Issue #15 June 2018

Issue #16 July 2018

Issue #17 August 2018

**Ansible** David Langford

June 2018 371 <http://news.ansible.uk/a371.html>

July 2018 372 <http://news.ansible.uk/a372.html>

August 2018 373 <http://news.ansible.uk/a373.html>

# Books Received

**JonathanBallPublishers**

Ben Kane. Clash of Empires Orion UK R285.00 (Historical)

Antonia Fraser The King and the Catholics Orion UK R325 ( Non-Fiction)

Victoria Aveyard War Sorm Orion UK R225/00

Paul French City of Devils Quercus R325.00 ( Not SF)

Ed Mc Donald Ravencry Orion UK R315.00

Anthony Ryan The empire of Ashes Little Brown R325.00

Christopher Rucchio Empire of Silence Orion UK R325/00

Anna Stephens Darksoul HarperCollins UK R305.00

Dale Lucas The Fifth Ward: Friendly Fire Little Brown R215.00

## Nova 2017 Finalist Jill Morsbach A Secret Life

I had no idea my husband was different. He'd always been the easy-going, dead normal South African guy with an Afrikaans background that I'd been married to for the past ten years: happily, without issues or any major disagreements. Our six-year-old daughter Lee-Anne and our four-year-old son Ross thought Magnus van Huyssteen was a great dad. So did I. My background was English, three generations back, but this had never mattered. We spoke both languages at home and the children were growing up with a balanced view of life.

We lived on the lower slopes of Table Mountain, in a large rambling old house we'd done up ourselves. The big garden rambled as well, a place of infinite delight for children, with a shrubbery, large sweeps of terraced lawn for playing ball games, and plenty of trees. From a huge ficus, Magnus had hung a wooden double swing he'd made.

He and I worked shifts: he in the mornings at his office in town, the headquarters of the NGO he ran called Rural Upliftment, and I in the afternoons on my study computer. I did freelance editing of reports and project plans for various companies. While I worked, Magnus played with the children. As dusk settled they would come running inside, bright-eyed and red-cheeked, to tell me fascinating things like "Daddy and I played with the fairies" (Lee-Anne) and "Daddy and I play pywits" (Ross, who was going through a pirate phase). I was pleased and grateful to have a husband who had an imagination and who could relate so well to our children.

Not only was he a good father. He was the most practical of men in fixing things around the house. It was old, so things needed fixing quite often. But I just had to



say, “The geyser’s leaking” or “The window catch is broken” or “Some of the roof tiles may be loose — I can hear them rattling” and they would be attended to in no time. He did everything himself. I would leave him to it while I got on with other chores, and he would pop his head round the linen cupboard door or wherever I was occupied and say, “It’s done, Linda. No prob.

“You work amazingly fast,” I would say, giving him a kiss. “Who needs a handyman when I’ve got such a whiz for a husband?”

Those blue eyes would light up with his smile and he would say, “Ag, it’s nothing. I learned all that stuff at the Tech.”

My life was pleasant, comfortable and on an even keel. My children were healthy and intelligent, learning to respect other people and other languages and never to judge a book by its cover. Which in hindsight may be a little ironic, because their mother tended to take things pretty much at face value. I was just a dead normal person like my husband, only maybe more trusting, more unsuspecting.

One late summer afternoon that changed.

Just before seven o’clock I’d finished what I had planned to get through that afternoon on my computer. My head was full of cobwebs but it was still light, so I thought I’d go into the garden to get some fresh air and to see what Magnus and the children were doing. Usually they were back inside by this time, so I rarely caught them at their play.

I didn’t sneak up on them at all. It just so happened they didn’t see me as I approached because they were in the shrubbery. I heard Lee-Anne talking and smiled as I stopped on the outskirts, behind a tall hibiscus bush, to listen.

Her high-pitched voice carried through the foliage. “Your dress, it’s all shiny, like butterfly wings.”

And a light little voice answered, “It’s silk from the cocoon of a silkworm. We are pleased you have a mulberry tree. That’s what silkworms eat.”

I heard Magnus say, with the characteristic smile in his voice, “You weave the cocoons, or do you use your wand to magic them into dresses?”

“We use magic, of course. We are — ”

I didn’t hear the rest of the answer from this mysterious person, because I’d parted the branches of the bush and was peering through, trying to see what was going on. Did Lee-Anne have a friend to play — the little girl over the road? It sounded as if they were at their usual game of fairies. Was the friend dressed up like one?

Magnus was bending forward, hands on knees, and Lee-Anne was sitting on the ground in front of him. They were both looking at some small object peeping out from a camellia bush. All I saw was that it looked like a small bright bird, but in that same instant it flashed away into the air and Magnus turned abruptly to stare in my direction.

Puzzled but not unduly alarmed, I stepped round the hibiscus to join the family. As I did so, I glimpsed beyond the shrubbery, amongst the trees, a tall object sticking up that looked like a mast. The wooden mast of an old-fashioned sailing ship, with furled sails and a crow’s nest at the top. I stopped, blinked and looked again, and it had gone.

Magnus and Lee-Anne, hand-in-hand, were approaching. Sparkling with excitement, my daughter said, “Mommy, our fairy friend makes dresses from silkworms!”

I said, “You mean, from their cocoons,” and looked at Magnus. He gave me a bland look back and said, “You finished for the afternoon, skat?”

“Y-yes. I – I thought I’d come and see what games you are playing.”

“Fairies,” he said, smiling, “and pirates. Soos gewoonlik. Ross is on the pirate ship right now.”

I wanted to say, absurdly, “I saw it”, but the words stuck in my throat. There was no sign of any fairy or pirate ship, not any more.

Magnus said, “You look like you could do with a drink. It’s after seven already, so let’s have a glass of wine while the kleintjies get ready for supper.” He turned and called, “Ross!”

Our son appeared from the far side of the shrubbery, waving the little wooden sword Magnus had made for him. “Mom,” he called, trotting towards me, “pywit captain got a pawwot. It say, ‘Howdy, Woss’.” He stopped and threw back his head, laughing from deep in his stomach.

It had always been an infectious laugh, bubbling over like a pot on the boil. I had to smile even if I’d been temporarily thrown — and was beginning to worry I was working too hard. Maybe I hadn’t seen, or heard, anything at all. The big insurance project I’d been working on was demanding and tight on schedule. Because of the responsibility the project had placed on me I hadn’t been sleeping all that well. I resolved to take a sleeping pill that night. Some people, I thought, begin to fantasize — weirdly — when they’re stressed.

Magnus and I sat on our patio sipping wine and looking over the twilit garden, below and beyond which we could glimpse the spangle of lights pricking out in the city. It was one of our favourite times, when we could relax and talk about the day’s events

knowing Miriam, our elderly live-in Xhosa maid who'd been with us forever, was seeing that the children scrubbed their hands and packed away their toys before supper.

That evening I made an effort to close out the disquieting scenes in the garden. I was scared if I mentioned them Magnus would become anxious about my mental state. As I already was. That thing on the branch could have been a butterfly; the light little voice only in my head. And the "mast" was surely nothing more than a tree top.

Magnus made no mention of what I thought I'd seen. He talked about his latest project at Rural Upliftment.

"We're trying to crack down on the scourge of quack sangomas," he said. "I'll probably have to spend time in the Eastern Cape and Natal next month, to lead a team of our people to investigate what's happening in some key villages."

"I thought all sangomas were quacks," I said.

"Many of them are. But some have genuine powers. They're the ones who are losing out. The quacks trade on superstition and tribal fears, and enrich themselves as a result. They're the ones who kill birds and animals for muti, which is an evil my organisation would love to stamp out."

"How can you tell the difference between the genuine sangomas and the quacks?" I asked, momentarily diverted from my own problem.

"Dis maklik genoeg, as jy weet hoe."

"Do *you* know, then?"

He smiled. "I've picked up enough experience of these guys, in my life with Rural Upliftment. I can usually see through the bullshit."

“Like when they start throwing bones around?”

“Depends on how it’s done. Nog wyn?”

“No thanks, love. I’ll go see how the kids are doing, and what they want for supper.”

He nodded, poured himself another half glass and sat back in his chair, stretching out his long legs and looking over the garden, now deep in blue shadows. A place, I thought suddenly, where anything could hide. A place of mystery.

I left Magnus seeming perfectly at ease and went to attend to my children.

Miriam was ushering them through to the kitchen. Asking, please, for peanut butter and golden syrup sandwiches, they seated themselves at the nook table where they ate their supper. While they argued about which bedtime story I had to read to them, a family ritual, Miriam and I made their sandwiches.

Under cover of the children’s amicable squabbling, I said, “Miriam, do you believe in the sangomas?”

“Oh, yes, Ma’am. They have strong magic.”

“All of them?”

She pondered the question. “Maybe not all. Some, they treat the people wrong.”

“Why do the people allow them to?”

“They do not want to go against the tribal ways.”

“You mean, if they pull out the rotten bricks, the whole wall will collapse?”

She wrinkled her brow. “Ma’am?”

“Never mind. I know what you’re trying to say.”

She went on to something more immediate in her present world. “The globe in the children’s bathroom, he is not working. I took it out and looked, and saw the wires, they broken.”

"I'll ask Mr Magnus to replace it. I think there's still a spare globe in the store cupboard."

"They finished, Ma'am."

"Maybe he'll find one, somewhere in his workshop."

While Lee-Anne and Ross tucked into their sandwiches I conveyed this message to Magnus, still relaxing on the now lamp lit patio. He said, "I'll see to it in a mo."

Which he did, with his customary swiftness. After their supper I took the children upstairs for their bath and saw the new globe shining in its Mickey Mouse shade. Magnus appeared after the bathing to help me with the drying, amid much tickling and laughter.

"Thanks for the light," I said, towelling soapy water off Lee-Anne's back. "The spare globes were finished. Where did you find one?"

"In my workshop. Stand still, you little bliksem," (this to Ross) "so I can dry your ears."

"I not stand still if Daddy always tickling!"

Which was pure logic.

But what wasn't pure logic was when I discovered later from Miriam that Magnus hadn't been out to his workshop at all. I'd asked her if he'd hung up the workshop key again, in the back porch, because sometimes he forgot to. She'd looked surprised and said, "He didn't go outside, Ma'am. He only go to the bathroom, to fix globe.

I'd frowned. "To *fix* it? You can't fix a globe when the filament's gone."

"Mr Magnus, he fix anything," she'd answered with simple pride.

That night I didn't take a sleeping pill, tired and somewhat wrought-up as I was. I lay in the big double bed next to Magnus, listening to his regular breathing and doing a lot of thinking.

I remembered all the times he'd fixed things, when I'd never seen him carry tools around. When the job had been done in a jiffy, however time-consuming it should have been.

Eventually I crept out of bed with my torch and went along to the children's bathroom, where I closed the door softly and unscrewed the globe from the Mickey Mouse shade. It wasn't a new globe. It was the old one. I had written the date of purchase on the glass, in Koki pen. But now the filament was whole. There was no break in any of the wires.

I put the globe back in the shade, sat on the loo seat and stared at my bare toes. There had to be an answer, somewhere. I was darned if I could see it. I remembered how Magnus's late father had always done conjuring tricks at children's parties. He'd been much in demand as a magician. Maybe some of that skill had rubbed off on his son, although Magnus had never done conjuring tricks himself. At least, not at children's parties. Possibly he reserved them for his own children, and then only in our garden ... and sometimes in the house?

I should of course have confronted him. But I said nothing. I guess I was hoping there would be no more signs. That everything would go back to normal, as it had always been. At least, as I thought it had always been.

But the very next night my world turned topsy-turvy again. And this time there was no mistaking what was happening; had been happening, under my eyes, and no doubt for all of the past ten years.



I'd been restless again, partly because my head was still busy with the insurance reports and partly because it was hot, but mainly because I was still wondering what was going on with Magnus. We'd had a normal day, so far, but I was wide awake when I heard him creep out of bed, a minute after one. I could see what he was doing in the backwash of the night light we left on for the children, in their room over the passage.

My enigmatic husband wasn't just heading for the loo. I watched, covertly and with bated breath, while he put on his black tracksuit. He was tiptoeing out of the room when I sat up and said, "Magnus, what's wrong?"

He turned quickly in the doorway. "Ag, sorry, Linda. I thought you were asleep."

"I was. Where are you going?"

"I've just had a call from my office. There's been a break-in. I need to go see what's been lifted. The cops are already there."

"I didn't hear your phone."

"No. It was an sms."

I hadn't heard the message beep, either, or seen the small light shine from his screen. But I let that pass. I said, "Sorry to hear you've had trouble down there. I hope there's been no major damage."

He came back and pecked me on the cheek. "Sien jou later."

I waited till his car had driven off before I scrambled out of bed, put on my own dark tracksuit, checked on the sleeping children and went quickly down the stairs and out of the back door. I crossed the paved yard and knocked on Miriam's door, where a rim of light was showing. To my relief she opened up almost at once, wrapped in her dressing gown.

“Ma’am? Ross, is he sick? Lee-Anne?”

“No, they’re both fine. I’m so sorry to disturb you. I know it’s very late but I have to go out for a while. Will you keep an eye on the children till I’m back? I’m not sure how long I’ll be. Put on the TV and make yourself some tea.”

Obliging old Miriam came out of her room at once, no questions asked. “I was waking now anyhow,” she said. “Sometimes when it’s hot I wake and do the knit.”

“Take your knitting in with you,” I said, gave her shoulder a squeeze and left for the double garage where my own hatchback was parked.

The city was quiet, with hardly any traffic. Ten minutes later I was in Darling Street where Magnus’s office building was, opposite the seventeenth century Castle. I parked in a side road further up the street and walked the rest of the way, keeping to the night shadows. A thin sickle moon — the new moon — hung in the dark velvet sky. A lone taxi cruised past but otherwise there wasn’t a soul to be seen.

Outside Magnus’s building there was no sign of a police car, or any cars. I wondered where Magnus had parked. As I stood irresolute in the shadow of a doorway not far from the building, I saw its front door open and a small group of men emerge. All wearing, for some unfathomable reason, long dark cloaks. Magnus was one of them, unmistakably a head taller than the others. His cloak was also dark, with a silver pattern that glittered as he walked. I stood absolutely still and watched as they crossed the road to the Castle.

The road was empty at that moment. I saw them stop next to a large round manhole on the pavement running past the Castle. They linked arms and Magnus pointing downwards with a free hand, the index finger extended. The next moment there was a blue flash and all disappeared down the manhole as if sucked into it by a wind.

Only there was no wind. I blinked, and looked again. The manhole cover didn't appear to have been removed but the men had gone. Through solid metal?

My heart was beating uncomfortably hard as I crossed the street in turn and bent to examine the manhole. The cover was still there. An entirely normal, impenetrably metal, manhole cover. As I straightened in utter perplexity, I felt a hand touch my arm and almost jumped with fright.

A man was standing next to me, also wearing a dark cloak. I hadn't seen him arrive. I could have sworn there was no one in sight when I crossed the street.

Under the nearby streetlamp I could see he was middle-aged, with greying hair, and frowning. "Are you coming to the meeting?" he asked. "You aren't wearing your cloak ... Do I know you?"

I swallowed. "No. I — uh — my husband's down there. Magnus van Huyssteen."

"Did he invite you to come, or did you ask if you could?"

I wanted to answer "not on your life" to both questions and then run like blazes up the street but instead I said, "Yes, he invited me. I'm ... sorry I'm late. The children kept me busy."

I sensed him relax, just a fraction. He said, "I suppose Magnus has the right, even if no women are normally allowed. Give me your arm, then, and I'll take you down."

I had to know what was going on, so with a helpless sense of fatalism I did as he said.

The stranger tucked my arm under his, extended his other arm and pointed at the manhole cover. Just as Magnus had done. A blue flash emanated from the index finger and struck the cover, which seemed to dissolve ... and then I was falling into blackness. I had enough wit not to scream.

Two seconds later I found I was standing in a brick tunnel with an arched roof, bathed in a blueish light. In the middle of the stone floor was a furrow with water trickling along it.

"I'm ... under the ... Castle," I gulped. "I know about this tunnel. It was built to carry water from the mountain, centuries ago. Now they take tourists along here."

"That's right," said my companion, releasing my arm. "We use the underground system for our meetings."

"What makes ... the blue light? There are no lamps."

"We do. Come on. We're late."

Whisking his black robe round him, he led the way along the tunnel. What Magnus was going to think and say when he saw me turn up at his cloak-and-dagger affair, I hardly dared contemplate. Had he joined a secret society? A new Broederbond? A lodge of the Freemasons? Or something entirely different?

We must have walked under the moat and into the heart of the Castle grounds. I saw the blue light brighten to white and heard murmuring voices ahead. The tunnel opened up into a large, well lit vaulted chamber (once again without any visible lamps), filled with black-cloaked men. There must have been over a hundred of them. They were seated in rows of chairs in front of which was a raised platform. On this sat Magnus and three other men, evidently the committee. Or whatever it was. Now I could see Magnus's cloak had, of all things, silver dragons embroidered on it. My companion indicated I was to sit in a vacant chair at the end of the back row. Which I did, uneasily aware I had to be the only woman present, and the only one not wearing a cloak. I watched him walk up the aisle to the platform, bend and murmur something in Magnus's ear, and then take his place in the front row of seats.

Was Magnus going to evict me? I steeled myself to deal with the embarrassment — and the possible repercussions back home. But he stood up, smiled at me over everyone's heads and said, "My wife Linda has joined us tonight. I hope she will be entertained by what she sees. And, have no fear, she is perfectly trustworthy."

While I was trying to work out the meaning of this there was a faint ripple of amusement through the chamber. I sensed rather than heard it. It wasn't at my expense. It was more like something they were sharing. Something secret.

Only later did I realise what it meant.

Right then I didn't know whether to be relieved or sorry that Magnus hadn't asked me to leave. Whatever was about to happen, I wasn't sure I wanted to witness it.

He said, in his pleasant, relaxed way, "So welcome, all of you, to our annual Western Cape New Moon Convention. Baie welkom, almal. I am glad so many delegates have been able to join us. It is not always easy to — uh — slip away from our families to attend our meetings. Let me put up the agenda, for those who may not have brought copies along."

He turned and pointed at a white screen behind him. There was the same blue flash from his index finger and on the screen appeared the agenda, in an old-fashioned curly script.

I sat as if stunned, not only by his action but by the fact the agenda was headed: "Point 1: Rules for Wizards."

Magnus said to the audience, "You will know that certain amendments to our rules have been ratified by our international headquarters in Romania. Number one: the old-fashioned use of wands is to be discontinued. By now most of us, in any case,

have adopted the finger-tip spell method. It is recommended, therefore, that all existing wands be burned. Any objections? Enige kommentaar?”

One man got up and said, “Mr Wizard Chair, recently my young daughter borrowed my wand to use as a horse switch in a riding lesson, without my knowing. She told me when she smacked the beast on the rump with it, a shower of toffees poured out of the tip. She and her horse-riding pals were very happy to collect them all.”

Amidst laughter, Magnus asked, “I hope you put the girls right afterwards?”

“Oh, yes. I’m just angry I didn’t clear that spell from the wand before my daughter borrowed it. I’d wanted to make a quick toffee batch for sale at her school bazaar. And don’t worry, the wand has been destroyed. I’ve been working on the finger-tip method and it’s progressing.”

“Dis goed so. Anyone else want to say anything? ... On to rule number two, then.”

The rest of the rules must have been discussed but I was no longer listening. I was trying to come to terms with the fact my husband was a wizard. Either that or I was actually still in bed and all this was a bad dream. But there was the damp smell of the underground chamber, the warmth from the many bodies seated in it, the bright light, the hard stone floor under my feet, the sweat pricking out under my tracksuit. All of it was real enough.

I sat, numbly, and thought about how Magnus had always fixed things. Not with non-existent tools — were there in fact *any*, in that workshop I never went into? — but with the flash of a fingertip. That must have been how he’d made the tree swing and Ross’s sword and other playthings over the years, because they’d been completed in record time, always without the sound of a drill, or a circular saw ... or anything in the way of machinery. And I’d accepted it all without question.

What about the fairy in the bush, and the pirate ship? I hadn't imagined them. In the world of wizardry, and of small children, they existed. Even I, living in the sceptical adult world, had had a glimpse of them. A privileged glimpse, for they had done my children no harm. Ross had been delighted with the parrot and Lee-Anne with the fairy.

And yet, according to the story books, wizards could also be evil. I stared at the backs ahead of me and wondered if they were all the benevolent-looking men they appeared to be. Men with a sense of humour, and of camaraderie.

Magnus answered my question. Or part of it. They seemed to have moved on from the rules and he was saying, "Our mandate, as you all know, is to work for the good of the human society in which we live. But it has been reported to me that Wizard Jannie le Roux of Grabouw has lately not complied with this." His voice was suddenly stern, the blue eyes flashing anger. "Staan op, Jannie."

A tall man just ahead of me got up.

"You face the charge that your dragon-cum-poodle burned down your neighbour's house," Magnus shot at him. "Wat het jy te sê?"

"Die man skuld my. It's a lot of money," protested the accused. "I can't wait forever to be repaid. I just got gatvol with all his procrastinations."

"That's no excuse for over-kill," Magnus retorted.

"He's insured," came the reply, with a shrug. "He'll be okay."

"Nevertheless you have broken our code of ethics. You will do two months' community service in Khayelitsha, starting on Monday at eight o'clock. Report for duty to the sangoma who runs our Rural Upliftment office in the township. G'n verskoning, Jannie."



The tall wizard sat down again without demur. Evidently Magnus's word was law.

What followed was a discussion of the sangoma problems in the Eastern Cape and Natal that Magnus had mentioned to me earlier. The meeting delegated him and his Cape Town office colleagues to book flights to visit those areas, and then to do a report-back.

I was tempted to get up and ask why they didn't fly there on broomsticks to save on airfare, but thought better of it. Maybe only witches used that mode of transport. If there were wizards, surely there had to be witches? I wondered how many of those creatures were living out there, looking perfectly ordinary ... like my next-door neighbour, Betty? She had a black cat. And a black cooking pot ... But then plenty of people had black cooking pots, for making potjiekos. Harmless pots. Used by harmless cooks.

My reverie was interrupted by Magnus closing down proceedings. And then he said, "It is customary to end our New Moon meetings with a sound-and-light show. As you were notified, the theme the committee chose for this year is a dragon war. I hope those of you who have dragons have prepared something exciting for us to see."

The white light went out abruptly. The place was in total darkness, but not for long. The vaulted roof lit up with a shimmer of rainbow colours, and coming together overhead from all parts of the chamber were scaly dragons, their wings flapping and their nostrils snorting flame. Some were gold, some bronze, some marked with shiny patterns, but all of them glittered and their eyes shone fierce and red. They were so three-dimensional, so real, it was staggering.

I sat back and watched them, entranced in spite of all my reservations. They circled one another, spitting flame, ducking and weaving, their roars echoing off the roof.

Whenever a dragon was struck in the face by a jet of flame, it dissolved. It was something like a computer game but here there were no computers, just arms extended, directing the movements of the mythical beasts with blue flashes.

At one stage I leaned towards the man next to me, who wasn't involved in the directing, and asked above the roars, "Won't the Castle authorities come down here to find out what's going on? There's the devil of a din."

He cupped his hands and shouted back, "They can't hear a thing. The chamber is magically soundproofed."

I might have guessed.

At last there was only one dragon still sweeping round above us. Magnus's voice declared him the winner. As the bright light came on again and the dragon image was quenched, the owner stood up to hearty applause. Beaming round at everyone, he declared, "At home my real dragon's normally a bull mastiff. Maybe that's what gives his image a fighting edge."

Mystified by this, also by the earlier reference to a dragon masquerading as a poodle — however improbable that sounded — I resolved to clear everything up with Magnus, before we went home.

Which happened a few minutes later, after the meeting had broken up. This time it was Magnus who came down off the platform and took my arm to lead me back along the tunnel. There wasn't a chance to talk amidst the throng of men making their way to the exit, all chattering together in the best of spirits. Below the manhole, illuminated by the blue light of the tunnel, they exited in threes and fours, shooting up the shaft and appearing to dissolve through the metal cover, which shimmered and shivered each time, like blue jelly. When it was my turn, Magnus held my arm and I

squeezed my eyes shut, hoping I wouldn't as a non-magical entity be brained before I could get out.

I wasn't. After the sudden whoosh of the upward flight I opened my eyes and found I was standing on the pavement — this time across the road from the Castle. Dark figures were hurrying away along the opposite pavement. I saw Magnus, next to me, smiling benignly under a streetlamp. He wasn't wearing his cloak but carrying the old rug he always kept on the back seat of his car.

I said, "You magic that rug into your cloak?"

"Of course, but only for meetings. Where's your car?"

"Further on, up a side road. And yours?"

He put a hand into his tracksuit jacket pocket and pulled out a small object. I stared at it, nestling in the palm of his hand. It was a dinky car, an exact replica of our family sedan, complete with the right number-plates.

He said, "Instead of parking the car in the road I always shrink it and keep it in my pocket. I never know when it's going to be stolen, or vandalised." "When will you unshrink it?" I breathed, now way beyond being surprised

"When we get home, in the garage. We'll go back in your vehicle. I'll drive."

"You'd better," I retorted, fumbling the keys from my pocket and handing them to him. "I'm so gobsmacked I'll probably crash into the nearest lamppost."

He chuckled. "Come on, then. Tyd vir 'n nightcap."

A nightcap? I was ready to down the whole bottle.

When we were in my car I put on the small roof light so I could study his face, and said, "Before we leave, Mr Clever Secret Wizard, I have some questions. Understandably. Miriam is looking after the children so we've got a bit of time."

He leaned his broad shoulders back against the door frame, folding his arms. "Okay. But first my question: I think you glimpsed the fairy and the pirate ship in the garden. Is that why you followed me?"

"Yes. And because of the globe you 'fixed' in the bathroom. The *old* globe."

He smiled, seemingly unperturbed. "You saw that? I'm getting careless."

"How long has this wizard business been going on with you?"

"You are born a wizard, my skat. It's been in my family as far back as the Great Trek, and possibly even further. I know that when my ancestor grandpa and his family were on the Trek their wagon's disselboom broke, and that he fixed it with a blue flash. When no one was looking, natuurlik."

"Naturally." I took a breath. "Are you telling me Ross is going to turn out a wizard as well?"

"Possibly. I haven't seen any signs of it yet. I'll be watching him."

"So will I, my love," I snapped back. "Like a hawk."

"The southern African wizards are the good guys, Linda," Magnus said soothingly.

"It's only up there in Romania that they've got some bad eggs."

"I'm supposed to be cheered by that?" Trying to swallow the sarcasm, I said, "Explain the dragons. And their link with dogs."

"Most wizards own dragons. Obviously they can't keep them at home in their original shapes, so they metamorphose them into their pets. They can be turned back into dragons whenever there's a security threat, like a break-in. Then it's pretty handy to have them shooting flames at an intruder."

"I am devoutly thankful," I said dryly, "that we don't have any pets."

“Not yet. I’d like to get the kleintjies a dog when they’re a bit older ... Don’t look so alarmed. It will be plain dog. We’ve got too many shrubs and trees. I can’t risk a fire hazard.”

Small comfort. I said, “Those blue flashes you guys send out. What are they?”

“Electric impulses. It’s been scientifically proved that the circuitry of wizard brains carries far more current than ordinary brains. We’ve got a lot of electricity we can play with. It’s our own powerhouse. With that we can summon up fairies, and create pirate ships ...”

“And fix unfixable light bulbs,” I said. “Next question: if there are wizards, aren’t there also witches?”

“Sure. Plenty.” A look brimful of laughter. “Relax. There aren’t any in our immediate neighbourhood.”

“Thank goodness.” That meant next time I chatted with Betty I wouldn’t have to go on to high alert.

Magnus settled forward in his seat, switched off the roof light and started the engine.

“If you’ve got any more questions they can wait till later. I have a meeting back here in a few hours, to finalise our travel plans to the eastern provinces. I’d like to snatch a bit of sleep before then.” I caught his sideways grin. “Even if you can’t.”

I didn’t comment on that.

As we set off along the quiet road I asked, “Are all your co-workers at Rural Upliftment wizards?”

“Ja. Some are sangomas, like the guy at our office in Khayelitsha. Proper sangomas. They can teach us a thing or two. They usually come to our AGM mid-year, and give valuable input.”

After a loaded pause I said, “Magnus, do you expect me to keep quiet about all this?

“If you can. I know I haven’t taken you into my confidence but I trust you.”

I was slightly mollified. “You said so, at the meeting. For now I won’t say anything to anyone, but I’ll have to think about it.”

“Good girl.” Magnus squeezed my hand and we travelled home in a more or less companionable silence.

He parked my car in the garage but I didn’t stay to watch him magic his sedan back to full size. I’d had enough wizardry for the night. Miriam reported that all was well before she left the house for her room. My husband and I had a tot of brandy on the patio, where the night warmth still lingered, after which we turned in. He was soon asleep but I lay for a long time mulling everything over.

He was out of the house by seven. After I’d breakfasted with the children and settled them in their playroom, I went back to the kitchen where Miriam was washing the dishes.

“I think you know more about Mr Magnus than I do,” was my opening salvo.

She turned from the sink in surprise. “Ma’am?”

“How do you think he always fixes things so fast, even things like light bulbs that normally can’t be fixed? And makes toys without using any tools? How does he play fairies and pirates with the children, *real* fairies and *real* pirates?”

She stared at me, and then said, “You find out Mr Magnus is a wizard.”

I said triumphantly, “So you’ve acknowledged it. I mean, you are telling me you knew all the time.”

“Yes, Ma’am. But *you* didn’t, till now. So I say nothing. My people, they don’t talk about these things.”

“Evidently not. When did you find out?”

“Oh, when Lee-Anne, she only a baby. Mr Magnus, he fix the tokoloshe then.” She smiled reminiscently. “I always have the bricks under the legs, of the bed, but one day when tokoloshe hiding in my cupboard Mr Magnus come in and tell the tokoloshe, ‘You voertsek or I make you into a pink lizard.’ Then tokoloshe, he run away. So I take bricks and put them outside. No more tokoloshe try to climb on my bed, after that.”

I strove for calm. “Miriam, this is all very well but how can I live with it? It’s not *normal* to have a wizard for a husband.”

“You will forget,” she said. “Mr Magnus, he will make you. Wizards and sangomas often make people to forget, when they find out. They not wanting trouble from people.”

“I — see.” I thought I did. The reference to my being “trustworthy”, that had amused the gathering; Magnus asking the wizard whose daughter had borrowed the wand if he’d “put the girls right” afterwards ... So this was the explanation.

“How will Mr Magnus make me forget?” I demanded.

“He will give you magic potion.”

I snorted. “He jolly well won’t. I’m not going to drink any funny stuff he can offer me. Green liquid bubbling in a glass, or a purple syrup that smokes ...”

In apparent sympathy, Miriam merely nodded.

“Anyway, thanks for the warning,” I said. “Will you get on with the ironing just now? I’ll look after the children.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”



I went up to the playroom, where Lee-Anne and Ross were happily building Lego houses. I sat and watched them, half absently. I was working out my next move.

Before Magnus could try any of his magic tricks on me, I was going to write everything down, in story form, on my computer. Starting with “I had no idea my husband was different” and ending with Miriam’s warning. Then I would print it out and take it to my bank, where they could seal it into a bank deposit box, with the instructions to make it available to my children in, say, fifteen years’ time. At that stage they would be old enough to understand. If Ross hadn’t cottoned on before then. He looked so like Magnus. For all I knew, I thought wryly, their brain circuitry matched as well.

Whatever the case, I wanted Ross and Lee-Anne to know about their father. It wasn’t right for Magnus to withhold his secret life from his family, however well-intentioned it was. He might be able to erase memories — but he couldn’t erase print safely hidden away in a bank box that he didn’t know about ... surely?

Although probably not perfect, it was the best solution I could think of. I worked my way mentally through my story, recalling all the details, only getting up from my chair when Miriam came into the room with biscuits and cold drinks for the children. I hadn’t realised it was already mid-morning and left rather hurriedly for my study.

I had just sat down and switched on my computer when I heard Magnus’s voice, calling from the bottom of the stairs. “Linda?”

I went out to the landing and said, “Yes? You’re home early.”

He came up the stairs, put his arms round me and gave me a kiss. Guilty conscience? He said, “Our travel arrangements are done and I’m taking the rest of the day off. You been in all morning?”

“Yes. I’ve spent some time with the kids and was just about to do a bit of work. My deadlines are squeezing me.”

“Worse than I’m squeezing you?”

I disentangled myself, not without reluctance, and said with a smile, “That’s a little different, love.” He was acting so normally I couldn’t help a momentary doubt that what I’d seen the night before had actually happened.

“Waar’s die kleintjies?”

“In the playroom, with Miriam, having their morning tea break.”

“I’m making a pot of tea right now. I can bring you a cup, if you’re going to be busy?”

Whatever else my husband was, he was handy in the kitchen. And thoughtful. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d brought me a cup of tea while I was slaving away editing annual reports and other time-consuming documents.

Buoyed by the idea of my secret plan, I said, complacently, “No, that’s okay. I’ll join you on the patio for a while. It’s a beautiful morning.”

“Ja, dis pragtig. I’ll take the tea tray outside, then.”

I went back into my study and put my computer on “sleep”. My work could wait — and so could my story. I had the whole afternoon to write, edit and print it out, while Magnus played with the children in the garden. Right then a cup of tea sounded like just what I needed.

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## **Nova 2017 Editor's Choice**

### **An Organic Mythology Duncan Park**

I pressed my body into the dust and the stones as I looked out to the night sky. I lay on my back frozen in terror by the abysmal yawn of space through which we constantly hurtle. I felt that if I did not force myself into the sand I would fall into the star speckled void of darkness that envelops us all.

I felt initially that the sky, so rich with galaxies and suns unfathomably distant from our own, was nothing more than a painted canvas suspended above me. Some nights it looked as though the canvas was being swung on the strings of its suspension. Sometimes it made me claustrophobic in the fear that those strings would snap and it would crush me.

But tonight I felt that I would at any instant tumble into that cold and immense universe of the unknown.

Qâi had made me burn the possessions of those travellers that passed through our valley earlier that morning.

He would always do it silently, while I was asleep before sunrise.

Qâi has told me stories of the time before time when people could travel into the skies and visit new worlds. People had once lived in great hives... He says millions of people! Millions of people living together in a space as big as our valley. I don't believe him, but the thought of so many human bodies piled on top of one another, writhing and seething in a mass of humanity, made me smile. I had never been in the presence of, perhaps more than eight people at a single moment in time.

But these people from the past, crawling over one another in their closeness had built great ships that first traversed the skies above us to get from place to place here, on this planet. As the hives grew more numerous they built even greater ships to take the excess of humanity to the moon, then to the neighbouring planets and finally, to the stars. New suns and new planets where new hives could be established.

A great network of hives through the abyss which now threatened to swallow me.

Representatives from these hives scattered throughout the galaxies would return to our planet and bring gifts from the outer reaches of space. New plants to feed us, new animals to labour for us, and new ideas to educate us. But these new plants, animals and ideas were not compatible with the precarious balance we maintained with our own planet. The new creatures devoured the bears, lions and tigers we had once feared. They became wild and rogue and spread across the face of the planet we call home.

When we passed through the forests during my childhood we encountered on such creature – an Alzabo. It devoured my mother and still I have nightmares of the beast whispering to me in her voice, through its spear like teeth and putrid breath. From whence these beasts came, I do not know, but I am glad we live in a desert now where the heat is unbearable for their thick fur.

I am also told that where we live was once the floor of the ocean. I do believe it's true. Our valley would not look out of place beneath the thrashing waves I saw as a child. Sand and rocks and sparse, rugged shrubs. That's pretty much what I found when I swam in the ocean, and that's what we're surrounded by today.

The Valley of Desolation. That's what the people we found here called it. In their rotting, rusted, dust encrusted hovels. They had piped water. But the water was unclean. They would first burn it, then boil it, and only then drink it. I remember in my youth being excited at seeing a man pump the water up and proceed to set the gushing stream that cascaded forth on fire. The blue flames frantically scrambled up the stream of water as it continued to stream out the faucet.

But those people all died. They had no children (apparently the poisons in the water had rendered them infertile, and those few who managed to conceive found that the environs were too harsh for babies), and age withered them away. When they passed, Qâi and I prepared their bodies as our ancestors had done; we removed their organs and placed them in clay receptacles designed and baked by ourselves. We shaved their hair and dismembered their bodies. We prepared a fire and burned all of their possessions. Once the pieces of their bodies were drained of fluids we roasted them over the fire, nourished by the few possessions they had owned at the end of their lives. Once roasted we ate their flesh so their memories could live on within us.

Qâi has told me that there is a gland in the Alzabo which produces the substance that allows the Alzabo to assimilate the memories, personality and voice of that which it consumes. If that gland can be harvested and its fluid consumed, then one can consume the flesh of another and be forever bound with the consumed individual's memories, fears and passions. Qâi tells me that he is filled with the thoughts of others; recollections of the lives they lived, privy to their darkest secrets. We have had no way of accruing this substance in my lifetime. However, in some

ways I am glad that I am alone in my body. I would rather my consciousness escape the organic shackles of my body than remain trapped inside it with the memories of others.

There had been only seven people living in the remnants of the town below our valley when we first arrived here. When a resident would pass away we would go about our tradition in secret, fearing that the others would view us as savages if they knew our practices. On one occasion we were found out. Hunness was his name. He found us stripping the flesh off a body and hanging it to drip. I will never forget how still his eyes were as Qâi gently slit his throat.

That was how it began.

We had always said we simply buried the bodies. This is not entirely untrue. We did bury the bones.

For you see, our appetites were only truly sated by the feast which followed the death of one of our companions. Aside from this we lived on tubers which we dug from the ground, and whatever small lizards and hares we could catch. Rarely could we gorge ourselves on a banquet of flesh.

On occasion, travellers would pass through the valley, making their way east into the mountains where plants, animals, and thus food were plentiful. Sometimes they were going south to the coastline, hoping to survive off fish and the wide rivers that met with the ocean there. Once the final seven residents we dwelt with had passed, and we had gorged ourselves on the flesh of our friends, Qâi (as well as myself, I must confess) began to turn his eyes to these travellers.

I had no constitution for killing. I even struggled to strangle the hares we managed to catch. Qâi seemed to almost enjoy it.

The first travellers that came through the valley were a family of some eight people. We watched them from the top of the cliff which looked over the valley and the lower plains, and did not make our presence known. They passed through unharmed.

Days passed and eventually a lonely couple wandered into the valley. We watched them all day. Eventually Qâi said to me, "Should we wait for darkness?"

"Will you be able to do it alone?"

"Ja."

"Ok. Wait for night."

"You have to burn everything afterwards."

"Ok."

"Ok."

Qâi waited for the final hours of darkness, just before the sky began to warm with that initial, faint orange glow. He didn't wake me, but crept out of the wooden skeleton of a house we slept in and went down into the valley, after the lonely couple.

He returned with their naked bodies. They hadn't woken; he had killed them silently in their sleep. Their faces were peaceful as I shaved them and began preparing the flesh. I asked Qâi what I should do with their organs, for we had no receptacles. He told me to bury them with the bones, and I saw no fault with that. That this was an option had simply never occurred to me. Traditions can be broken and myths deconstructed.

In the blistering midday sun I went out to where they had camped. Qâi had left their meagre possessions lying in the sand. I gathered them up and walked back to our



house where the bodies were hung to drip. In this sun I thought we should possibly make biltong.

I built the fire and kept their possessions, bones and organs to one side to burn when I would actually roast their flesh. I took two strips of meat. I think one from each individual's body, but I cannot be certain. I salted the meat and found a draughty crack in the cliff face of the valley where flies would not land on the meat. I hung the strips to dry here.

Qâi and I roasted their flesh together and then ate in silence. After we had feasted we slept.

For how many solar cycles we have done this I do not know, but weary travellers became our principle diet. Qâi grew to be braver and I rationalised that this was our means of survival. Alone in my mind, I built a new mythology for what we did.

But my boneyard was growing, and my conscience with it.

Today, before I lay in fear of the night sky which glared down upon me and into which I feared I might fall, I had prepared the flesh of a family of eleven. The largest number which Qâi had successfully slain in silence. Amongst them were children, mothers and fathers. I looked into the face of that peacefully deceased child and felt a calm within me as I had never known. But such stillness may simply act as a prelude to great violence.

I had burned their waggon where they were slain, as I could not pull them alone and ultimately, we had no use for them. As the flames danced and reached out to the cloudless sky I was reminded of the water which had amazed me so as it produced those beautiful dancing flames of blue. I sat before the brazen waggon and wept.

Slowly, the boneyard I had cultivated began stirring a tempest inside me. While Qâi was filled with the memories and minds of countless others, I was alone. My body had become an echo-chamber of thought and desire. My own inadequacies within myself rattled around inside me, never settling, never finding resolve.

The organic mythology is that the tangible is all that is real. That something needs to be seen, touched and tasted in order to be deemed truly existent. The intangible is a construction. A construction of our minds. A construction which we are taught. That this... this physical reality which we experience around ourselves and engage with every day, is all that there is. That there is nothing behind this curtain of our physical existence. That our dreams are just our minds detangling the tangible realities that enslave us.

And slaves are what we are. I may be considered free – I do not labour for any man against my will, and I roam the land as I please, taking from it what I desire – but I have no choice in this existence. When I awake and cannot escape this organic mythology which devours us all, I am not free. We are all slaves to the organic mythology.

But regardless of the organic mythology, why have the boneyard and its inhabitants stirred this tempest within me?

Today, after I burned the waggon, I walked slowly home. My skin glistened with a sheen of sweat in the scorch of the sun. I wanted to find Qâi.

Qâi lay in the shade of the cliff face outside the ribbed, wooden shell which had become our home. His eyes were closed as they so often are, and he no doubt was swimming amongst the multitude of personalities which lived within his mind. He told me once of the memories of a nobleman he had eaten as a youth. How the

memories of this man had taught him how to grow up. Another had been an assassin of sorts. He said he channelled this personality when he killed for our food. He had also eaten a great many women. He claimed that one had been a ruler of one of the hives of humanity that supposedly still exist. A “queen” as she was called.

Qâi was never lonesome. He was never trapped in the impenetrable vault of an individual mind as I am. A jail in which I am eternally imprisoned. Sometimes I feel like I exist only to haunt and torment myself.

I found Qâi’s knife next to where he sleeps. It had been cleaned. I crept up to him. His eyelids twitching and flies hovering around his lips. I plunged the blade into his throat ripped the knife through the side of his neck. Blood splattered onto my hands and forearms and as I severed the jugular a fountain sprayed into the air and drizzled down onto the two of us.

Qâi’s eyes had opened as I brought the knife crashing down onto his neck. And they twinkled with a joyous insanity as his lips curled up into a smile. I felt like I was his protégé, having crossed over to become the new practitioner of his art of death. The thought curdled inside me and I vomited onto the open wound of his neck. I stood up and I ran. I went eastward to where the mountains rise from the earth like waves in the ocean.

But the desert is a vast territory, and though I ran until nightfall, as the cold descended I fell onto the ground and the violence of my breath rattled my body. I had not stopped running for hours.

And now I lay, staring at the stars, into the abysmal void that threatened to devour me so that I would fall into eternity.

The organic mythology had broken.

## **Wormhole 1**

Success.

We are restored.

The sun we have harvested makes new our existence.

The cycle is revived, and we have hope. Our fields newly febrile.

The console signs for attention, a bounced garbled signal, weeks old.

Attend and translate.

xxxxyyafssstatic - help – the horror – the horror - both moons are blazing - the seas are boiling – the sky is burning – run – hide – save yours.... xxxxxxxyrtstatic

-

From the source of our saving light, now we know it's not just noise.

'Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.'

The light of the murdered sun still burns me.

Cammi Mitchell, Gail Jamieson, Niall Mollison, Ron Cowley

### **Best of SFSA Volume III**

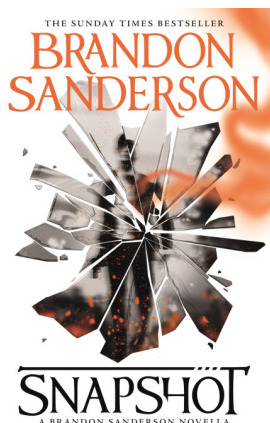
**The Best stories from the Nova short story competitions in the 1990's.**

**If you don't yet have a copy contact the secretary and we will send you one.**

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# Book Reviews Ian and Gail Jamieson

## Brandon Sanderson Snapshot



Davis and Chaz are two detectives working in a complex city which is recreated day by day to allow them to solve crimes committed in the past. In a city of twenty million, they were the only real people. The two cops have been doing this for three years but are coming to realise that the crimes they are asked to solve are simple and tedious, until they stumble upon a series of grisly murders. Their boss orders them not to investigate, but

being more than a little insubordinate, they set out to do so.

Although this is a fake city with fake people, the incidents that happen are very real, and can be just as dangerous as in the outside world.

The city is identical to the original version, down to the microscopic level. The exceptions are the two detectives themselves who can cause what are called deviations, upsetting the order of things.

Sanderson has written an entertaining SCiFi detective story, but the twist at the end was too obvious and made the story rather disappointing.

3/5

## Neal Asher The Soldier – Rise of the Jain Book One



Orlandine is tasked with keeping a swarm of Jain technology under containment. The technology, mainly weapons, could destroy all the various civilizations, and with them all sentient life forms. She is assisted by an alien intelligence called Dragon, but Dragon has a different agenda to Orlandine, and has to be watched carefully.

In the meantime humanity and the Prador Empire are also watching this sector of space, as neither can allow

the other to claim its power.

But some believe they can control and exploit the ancient weaponry, and they are prepared to do almost anything to get their hands on it.

For a long time Neal Asher has been one of my favourite authors and in "The Soldier" he writes as well as ever. It is unfortunate that he has taken what appears at best to be a Novella and turned it into a full length novel

Too many word.

Boring

2/3

## **Dominic Dulley**

## **Shattermoon**



Aurelia "Orry" Kent and her father and brother, Ethan are the best con artists in the galaxy. They make a good living by targeting the decadent rulers of the Ascendancy until a ploy goes horribly wrong. A young aristocrat is killed, and a mysterious pendant is stolen, and Orry and her family are on the run, accused of a murder they didn't commit. When Orry's father is killed she has to increase her skills and take care of

her brother. They have various adventures, always managing to escape in time. What they don't know is that the stone in the stolen pendant was created by a long dead race, and can be used as a planet buster, capable of killing billions of people. Oh, and the alien Kadiran are also after it to use for their own evil ends.

This is pure space opera, and has a brave and resourceful heroine, evil aliens, a sentient spaceship, and a long dead and powerful race.

Reasonable writing and entertaining enough but a bit patchy in parts.

3/5

Ian

**Stephanie Garbel**

## **Legendary**



Started reading..... And gave up after reading 50 pages of a total of 415.

This book is written for teenage girls.

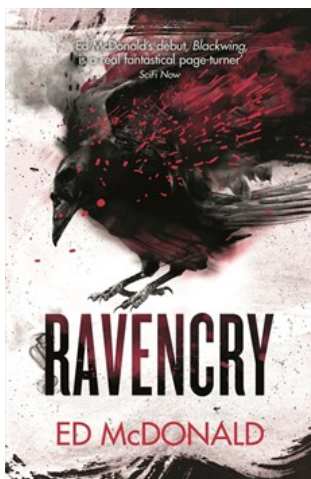
There is no mention of this anywhere.

Read at your own discretion.

Ian

**Ed Mc Donald**

## **Ravencry The Raven's Mark Book 2**



It is four years since the Deep Kings were driven back from Valengrad, but now they are back, and hurling fire from the skies. A ghost known as the Bright Lady has manifested across the city, and a worshipping cult has formed.

Gallenharrow and his Blackwings are forced to search for a weapon of terrifying power, stolen by an unknown enemy. Their search will take them into a twisted and dangerous place, where only the

strongest can survive.

And don't forget the war between the Nameless, and the Deep Kings. Each side has their own type of sorcerer.

This book is in some respects quite different from Book 1 in that some of the mystery and wonder has gone, especially round the "Mystery", that twisted place we read about before.

A brutal book, gritty and twisted, with excellent characters and realistic combat scenes. Although there is nothing that is particularly new, it is a very entertaining book

4/5 Ian

## Brandon Sanderson The Stormlight Archive Volume Three –

### Oathbringer



Humanity faces a new Desolation with the return of the Voidbringers, a foe whose numbers are as great as their thirst for vengeance.

The Alethi armies commanded by Dalinar Kholin won a fleeting victory at a terrible cost: The enemy Parshendi summoned the violent Everstorm, and now its destruction sweeps the world and its passing awakens the once peaceful and subservient parshmen to the true horror of their millennia-long enslavement by humans. While on a desperate flight to warn his family of the threat, Kaladin Stormblessed must come to grips with.

the fact that their newly kindled anger may be wholly justified.

Nestled in the mountains high above the storms, in the tower city of Urithiru, Shallan Davar investigates the wonders of the ancient stronghold of the Knights Radiant and unearths the dark secrets lurking in its depths. And Dalinar realizes that his holy mission to unite his homeland of Alethkar was too narrow in scope. Unless all the nations of Roshar can put Dalinar's blood-soaked past aside and stand together - and unless Dalinar himself can confront that past - even the restoration of the Knights Radiant will not avert the end of civilization.

As usual Sanderson is a brilliant writer and the story draws you deeper and deeper into the events of the Stormlight Archive. I will say that, having waited about 4 years for volume 3 it took me a little while to get back into the story, especially as there are so many stories that make up this very large volume, over 1200 pages.

But most of the story belongs to Dalinar and follows his internal struggle to overcome his sense of guilt in order to take his rightful place. We also follow the difficulties that Shallan has in deciding which one of the characters she takes on she really wants to be. There is also the story of Kaladin, whom has gone from being slave to soldier in search of his family

And of course the parshmen, who are finally realise the miseries they have been subjected to and struggle to be a free people.

Sanderson takes us into a completely different world and way of life among its people and I hope that we will not have to wait as long for the next volume

Gail



# **50 YEARS OF SOUTH AFRICAN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY**

**SFFSA TURNS 50 IN JUNE 2019 AND PROBE ISSUE 180 WILL CELEBRATE THIS MILESTONE.**

**HELP US TO MAKE 180 A VERY DIFFERENT ISSUE. I HAVE ALREADY STARTED AND WILL CONTINUE TO REACH OUT TO INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF SFFSA TO ASK FOR THEIR RECOLLECTIONS OF THE CLUB. IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A LONG MISSIVE BUT I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW HOW THE MEETINGS, THE SHORT STORY COMPETITIONS, THE CONVENTIONS AND THE COMPANIONSHIP OF FELLOWS SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY FANS HAS IMPACTED YOUR LIVES. WHETHER YOU ARE A LONG TERM MEMBER OR SOMEONE VERY NEW WE WOULD STILL LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.**

**YOU CAN CONTACT ME DIRECTLY ON [GAILJAMIESON@GMAIL.COM](mailto:gailjamieson@gmail.com)**

## **Wormhole 2**

### **Flight**

We are a tiny speck in the vastness of space, moving out of the solar system. Sol's glimmer still follows us after it was destroyed by the Nyx's ultimate weapon, the sol crusher, forcing us to leave our beloved Earth to find a new home. I failed in my quest to stop the Nyx but we had prepared for our flight in case of failure, and so I find myself drawn to the viewing deck looking back towards our lost home.

The light of the murdered sun still burns me as it follows us onwards to our new home.

Carla Martins, Jan Benvie, Andrew Jamieson, Gavin Kreuter

# Blast from the Past

From: Probe 135 November 2007

## The Harry Harrison Interview

### Michael Lohr

What constitutes a pop culture legend? What criteria can one establish that defines the guidelines for being a legend? My safe guess is that no matter what criteria you establish to define a legend, Harry Harrison will fit the mold. He's been writing and publishing novels since 1962, that's forty-four years and counting folks. Pretty impressive by anyone's standards.

I first picked up one of Harry's novels, a tattered and worn copy of The Stainless Steel Rat is Born, in high school. Just like Fahrenheit 451 and R Is For Rocket years before, it was a novel that captivated my imagination. Harry's novels have been on my science fiction reading list ever since.

Born in 1925 in Stamford, Connecticut, Harry began his science fiction career as an illustrator for Flash Gordon comics and the Rick Random comic strip. One of his first novels was Bill the Galactic Hero, a satirical spoof of the Robert A. Heinlein novel, Starship Troopers. His first novella, Make Room, Make Room, was the inspiration the seminal science fiction movie Soylent Green.

One of the more interesting causes that Harry promotes is the language of Esperanto. He used the language in both his Stainless Steel Rat and Deathworld series, among other novels. He is the former honorary President of the Esperanto Association of Ireland, and has held memberships in other Esperanto organizations such as the Esperanto League for North America and the World Esperanto Association (Universala Esperanto-Asocio).

**ML:** So tell me about the situation with Mel Gibson buying a movie option to one of your novels, holding that option, then the deal falling through.

**HH:** He very much wanted to do a film adaptation of one of my novels. A perfect role for him it would have been indeed. Marshall Brickman did a really good script. Then the project was shelved and the option not renewed. Since then it was optioned in London, then dropped. Now it's being opted in Hollywood once again. Keep those fingers crossed—but this is the film business.

**ML:** Though for legal reasons Harry wasn't able to mention the title of the movie Mel Gibson originally optioned. I heard through secondary sources that the movie/novel/script in question was either Bill the Galactic Hero or The Stainless

Steel Rat but that Mel dropped the project so he could do his The Passion of the Christ movie instead.

**ML:** Will we then ever see a Stainless Steel Rat movie in the future?

**HH:** Indeed! Optioned for over 20 years now, it's been through 16 screenplay rewrites. The SSR project is still in the works, still making rounds.

**ML:** Harry once said that his ideal actor to play the Stainless Steel Rat would have been Steve McQueen. When asked off the record about it, he wouldn't offer up a name as to who he envisions in this role now.

**ML:** Of all the bizarre episodes that have occurred with Hollywood getting their hands on your novel Make Room, Make Room, and somehow metamorphosing it into Soylent Green, what occurrence was the most artistically grotesque?

**HH:** For starters the title. In the book I refer to soylent steaks. A vegetarian dish made of soy beans and lentils. The moron script writer refers to "Soylent Green—the miracle plankton food..."

**ML:** Do you approach writing a screenplay differently than writing a novel?

**HH:** Yes. A screen play is far shorter than a novel. And one must think in scenes rather than chapters. And the visual side is of utmost importance. In a novel you have dialog and fiction. A screenplay is divided into visual affects and dialog. Each must support the other.

**ML:** John Updike once argued that "science fiction relied only on spectacle for its entertainment value," implying that it didn't really take talent to write in the genre, what is your opinion of this statement?

**HH:** Updike is a literary snob. I imagine he never read a science fiction novel and refers only to film science fiction. Imagine what a disaster a science fiction novel by him would be!

**ML:** I have previously asked this question to several writers over the past year, including a couple who are household names on many continents, and Harry was the only one who had the balls to answer it. Bravo Harry!

**ML:** How important do you believe it is for a writer to learn the economy of dialogue?

**HH:** Dialog is so important. Not only economy but personality of speaker, idiom, punctuation, the works.

**ML:** What motivated you to get involved in the noble cause of saving the Esperanto language?

**HH:** It was such fun to learn a new language so easily. Then to travel the world meeting Esperantists—tre bonega!

**ML:** For those who are interested, the Esperanto language is an auxiliary language created by Ludovic Lazarus Zamenhof of Poland. The word Esperanto, essentially translates as *hopeful* and was first published in 1887 by Zamenhof. Today, several major works including Tolstoy's War And Peace and the Holy Bible have been translated into Esperanto. It was originally created by Zamenhof to be a universally used language.

**ML:** Throughout your illustrious career, what novel did you find the most difficult to write?

**HH:** The last one is always the most difficult ☺

**ML:** What actually inspired the creation of your Bill The Galactic Hero series? Was this an attempt at pure humor or was this a response to something?

**HH:** It began as a short story. Then another. Which formed the basis of a novel. Then I had the idea for *SEWUEL*. Then another. Then I turned my head and there were ten of them...

**ML:** From 1958 to 1964 you were the primary writer for the Flash Gordon newspaper comic strip. Did you find this artistic medium worthwhile?

**HH:** I find it interesting, but simple and fairly juvenile. But as a beginning freelance author I needed money. Instead of a job I wrote what came easily to support my major works.

**ML:** You recently held a temporary appointment as a visiting writer at the University of South Florida. Do you enjoy academic assignments such as this?

**HH:** I taught a graduate degree course in science fiction at San Diego State University some years ago. Then I taught writing classes at the University of South Florida at Tampa. Plus a good deal of lecturing on science fiction. I find it quite satisfying with good return for the effort involved.

I want to thank Harry for the good conversation and for taking the time to do this interview. While it may appear that Harry was brusque during this interview, nothing could be further from the truth. Harry Harrison is a congenial, professional and down right friendly person. During the many telephone conversations and email exchanges we had, I couldn't have asked for a more jovial, entertaining person. Of the conversations we had and of the topics we covered, a majority of which was off-the-record, I could not have enjoyed myself more.

Also, I want to thank Bruce McAllister for the suggestion to interview Harry in the first place.

Harry's short story *A Criminal Act* will be adapted for the new Masters of Science Fiction television series. The series is being produced by IDT Entertainment.

Learn more about all things Harry Harrison at his official website:  
<http://www.harryharrison.com/>

To review Harry's manuscript collection online at the University of South Florida please go to: [http://web.lib.usf.edu/usflibraries/special\\_collections.html/](http://web.lib.usf.edu/usflibraries/special_collections.html/)

Harry Harrison has a substantial collection of early novels and short stories on electronic tap at the Internet Speculative Fiction Database: <http://www.isfdb.org/>

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Michael Lohr is a professional journalist, outdoorsman, treasure hunter and adventurer. His writing has appeared in such diverse magazines as, Outside Magazine, Southern Living, Cowboys & Indians, Sailing World, Caribbean Travel & Life, Canoe & Kayaking, Outdoor Life, and Adventure Sports, to name a few. He contributes regularly to Bluegrass Unlimited magazine and Persimmon Hill, the Journal of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, and also had a few dabbings published in Rolling Stone and Esquire.

His webpage can be found at: [http://www.internet.is/artist/writer/michael\\_lohr.htm](http://www.internet.is/artist/writer/michael_lohr.htm)

# L.O.C

1706-24 Eva Rd. Etobicoke, ON CANADA M9C 2B2

Dear SFFSAns:

Hello!, but not from Etobicoke, or even Canada...right now, I am in the lobby of a

Sheraton hotel in Novi, Michigan, just northwest of Detroit, and today is the day of preparations for a big steampunk convention here. Yvonne is taking part in a pre-convention sewing lesson day, and I nearby, writing this letter on my tablet and keyboard. Great fun! Here goes with comments on Probe 175, with its great 2001 overall cover.

Congratulations on your upcoming 50th anniversary! Ever thought the club would last this long? Seems lots of SF organizations have some measure of longevity, mostly because of a handful of fans who were aware of the history of fandom. We're all getting a little long in the tooth, so I hope the club might outlive us. Fingers crossed.

The passing of Ursula K. Le Guin is now followed by the deaths of Gardner Dozois and Harlan Ellison. Our favourite authors and editors are passing, which serves as a reminder of our own ages. All of you stay healthy, okay?

When I first starting reading SF mumblety-umptein years ago, the idea of time travel fascinated me. Part of early SF's attraction was the exercise of the mind, with new ideas to wrap your brain around. Paradoxes just added to the exercise. But, we have gotten older, logic rears its unfortunate head, and we have trouble with those paradoxes as they multiply. As scientific people, we wonder if there is a physical timeline that we are following, or if there is simply the awareness of being, and time simply being our internal concept of passage. Going back in time gives credence to the former, while the latter may be all there is. We may never know for sure, but our speculation provides lots of brain candy for us to chew on.

We've had the ideas of settling the Moon and Mars for a long time now...I wish we could do it. We're too busy fighting with one another to have any such dreams become real. With we finish ourselves fighting over a chunk of territory, or simply fall to fascism from the most unlikely of places. Our world is looking more and more dystopian all the time, and I desperately wish I was wrong; I want to be more optimistic.

I am still hopeful that we will continue to have the technology that will protect us from small asteroids. The bigger ones may come along to make all of us a galactic footnote. Some measure of protection from the larger asteroids may be the only reason to have nuclear weapons, in my humble opinion. If this must happen, let it long after we're gone. In the meantime, interesting stories such as *The Last Baby* can remind us that we need to be vigilant, yet optimistic about our future if we seize it, and not let small-minded politicians keep us from rising above the battles for ideology and bits of land.

I know there has been criticism of some high fantasy stories of being simply a rewrite of anything by Tolkien, who created the heroic quest sagas. Perhaps the best way to see the other roots of modern fantasy is to explore Tolkien's peer group, especially the other members of the Inklings, some of whom advised Tolkien on his writings, and who definitely influenced the history of Middle-Earth. I liked the old Joe Mayhew cartoon, and Joe is still missed after all these years.

Enjoyed the other stories, but I have no comments on them...great to see that article from the *Daily Galaxy*, and see that the University of Toronto is still influencing space news, and they are making an impact. All the people I knew in the local space sphere are largely gone, or moved further into the industry professionally. My short time within the local space group was interesting, but as in many activities, the human part of things kinda spoiled things for me. Politics reared its head, and it became an old boys' group, and I was on the outside looking in.

Time to go, things are starting to happen here, and the convention here may start a little early for me. Thanks for this issue, and more issues leading up to the 50th anniversary...well, I look forward to them, and I hope to celebrate with you. Take care, all!

Lloyd Penny

## From: The Daily Galaxy

*"Just because there's life elsewhere doesn't mean that there is intelligent life. My guess is that if we do detect an alien intelligence, it will be nothing like us. It will be some sort of electronic entity."*

The following is an extraordinary interview at Trinity College, Cambridge with Martin Rees, Emeritus Professor of Cosmology and Astrophysics at the University of Cambridge, also the Astronomer Royal, a member of Britain's House of Lords, and a former President of the Royal Society. The following interview was conducted by Matt Warren, who opens with the question: how big is the universe ... and is it the only one?

A: Our cosmic horizons have grown enormously over the last century, but there is a definite limit to the size of the observable universe. It contains all the things from which light has been able to reach us since the Big Bang, about 14 billion years ago. But the new realization is that the observable universe may not be all of reality. There may be more beyond the horizon, just as there's more beyond the horizon when you're observing the ocean from a boat.

What's more, the galaxies are likely to go on and on beyond this horizon, but more interestingly, there is a possibility that our Big Bang was not the only one. There may have been others, spawning other universes, disconnected from ours and therefore not observable, and possibly even governed by different physical laws. Physical reality on this vast scale could therefore be much more varied and interesting than what we can observe.

The universe we can observe is governed by the same laws everywhere. We can observe a distant galaxy and see that the atoms emitting the light are just the same as the ones in the lab. But there may be physical domains that are governed by completely different laws. Some may have no gravity, or not allow for nuclear physics. Ours may not even be a typical domain.

Even in our own universe, there are only so many ways you can assemble the same atoms, so if it is large enough it is possible that there is another Earth, even another avatar you. If this were the case, however, the universe would have to be bigger than the observable one by a number which to write down would require all the atoms in the universe. Rest assured, if there's another you, they are a very, very long way away. They might even be making the same mistakes.

Q: So how likely is alien life in this vast expanse?

A: We know now that planets exist around many, even most, stars. We know that in our Milky Way galaxy there are likely millions of planets that are in many ways like the Earth, with liquid water. The question then is whether life has developed on them – and we can't yet answer that.

Although we know how via Darwinian selection a complex biosphere evolved on Earth around 4 billion years ago, we don't yet understand the actual origin of life –



the transition from complex chemistry to the first metabolising, replicating structures. The good news is that we will have a better idea of how that happened within the next ten or 20 years and crucially, how likely it was to happen. This will give us a better understanding of how likely it is to happen elsewhere. In that time, we will also have technologies that will allow us to better search for alien life.

If we look at our history on Earth, it has taken about 4 billion years to get from the first protozoa to our current, technological civilisation. But if we look into the future, then it's quite likely that within a few centuries, machines will have taken over – and they will then have billions of years ahead of them.

In other words, the period of time occupied by organic intelligence is just a thin sliver between early life and the long era of the machines. Because such civilisations would develop at different rates, it's extremely unlikely that we will find intelligent life at the same stage of development as us. More likely, that life will still be either far simpler, or an already fully electronic intelligence.

Q: Do you believe that machines will develop intelligence?

A: There are many people who would bet on it. The second question, however, is whether that necessarily implies consciousness – or whether that is limited to the wet intelligence we have within our skulls. Most people, however, would argue that it is an emergent property and could develop in a machine mind.

Q: So if the universe is populated by electronic super minds, what questions will they be pondering?

A: We can't conceive that any more than a chimp can guess the things that we spend our time thinking about. I would guess, however, that these minds aren't on planets. While we depend on a planet and an atmosphere, these entities would be happy in zero G, floating freely in space. This might make them even harder to detect.

Q: How would humanity respond to the discovery of alien life?

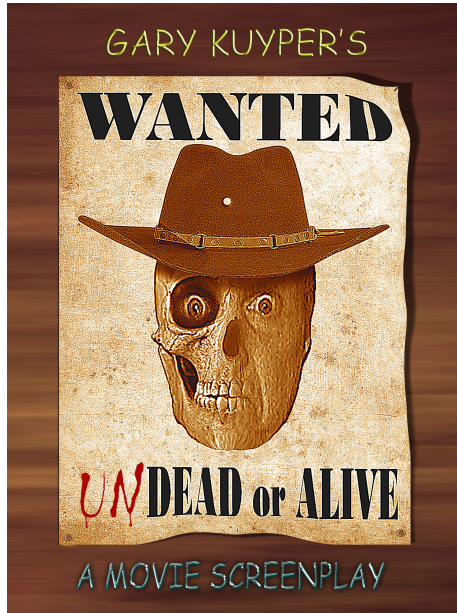
A: It would certainly make the universe more interesting, but it would also make us less unique. The question is whether it would provoke in us any sense of cosmic modesty. Conversely, if all our searches for life fail, we'd know more certainly that this small planet really is the one special place, the single pale, blue dot where life has emerged. That would make what happens to it not just of global significance, but an issue of galactic importance, too.

And we are likely to be fixed to this world. We will be able to look deeper and deeper into space, but travelling to worlds beyond our solar system will be a post-human enterprise. The journey times are just too great for mortal minds and bodies. If you're immortal, however, these distances become far less daunting. That journey will be made by robots, not us.

Q: What scientific advances would you like to see over the coming century?

A: Cheap, clean energy, for one. Artificial meat is another. But the idea is often easier than the application. I like to tell my students the story of two beavers standing in front of a huge hydroelectric dam. “Did you build that?” asks one. “No,” says the other. “But it is based on my idea”. That’s the essential balance between scientific insight and engineering development.

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Wanted: Undead or Alive is a rootin, tootin' but mostly shootin' wild west adventure of epic proportions. During a botched bank robbery, Sheriff Will Blake's brother is killed by the notorious Morgan gang. Will vows to stop at nothing to exact revenge, and so all hell breaks loose - literally! Undead outlaws terrorize the good folks of El Paso, Texas in this black comedy featuring Lazy-Eye Lazarus, the fastest gun alive...or dead. If you like Westerns and Zombie flicks then this is definitely your roll of chewin' tabaccy. In fact, this one is guaranteed to have something for everyone. Although written in Screenplay form, the narrative is just as enjoyable as if you were reading a novel or munching on a tub of hot buttered popcorn in your favourite cinema theatre. All it takes is some imagination sprinkled with a little prairie dust, pardner – heeyah!

### Wormhole 3

When the people of Earth realise what we have done, our names will be hated forever.

The experiment was conducted in solar orbit, for safety's sake. We were constructing a black hole in orbit in order to collapse it into a wormhole.

But the mass of the black hole was so much greater than calculations showed, that the sun's gravitational pull wrenched it from its orbit.

It fell into the sun three days ago. It will sink to the centre and eat the heart of the sun, dooming future life on Earth.

The Light of he murdered sun still burns me.

Norman Pringle, Iain Sinclair, Eileen Jamieson



## In The Beginning





