

PROBE 182

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY SOUTH AFRICA



PROBE 182

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Editorial

Gail

It is almost the end of another year, and six months past the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the club. The Top 10 short stories of Nova 2019 are being finalised and will be given to this year's final judge, Digby Ricci. We will have the announcement of the results at the AGM in January.

In this issue we have winning story from the 2017 International competition Trofeo RiLL XXIII. We are delighted to have this collaboration with this Italian club, as they publish the winner of our Nova competition in their magazine in return..



Our Blast from the Past comes from 1978, 41 years ago and our first Convention. We had amazing speakers from Science and Literature and still managed to charge a stunning R4.00 for a full day's entertainment. It was incredible to see the large number of people pouring down the stairs of the Senate House Basement at the Wits University. Pity those days, and our youth, have long disappeared!

There are a couple more stories from Nova 2018 and two L.O.C's from Lloyd Penney. The post takes ages to deliver PROBE to Canada.

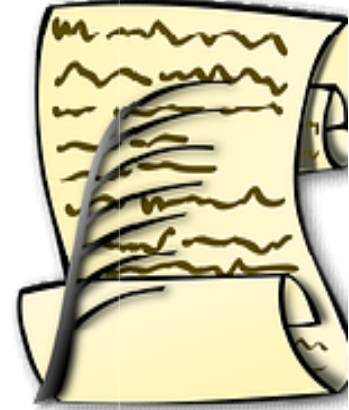
There are also the wormholes written at our annual Mini-Con. It still surprises me to see that a group of different people each year still manage to write a 99-word story in around an hour. Each entertaining, in their own way. See what you think.

Finally on the back page are a couple of pictures from the 50th Anniversary Bash. We had a large group of SFFSA members, old and new who joined us to celebrate this occasion. Unfortunately Tex and Rita Cooper, the longest standing SFFSA members were not able to be with us in body but joined us in thought. Ian Jamieson, the next longest standing member, conducted the proceedings. We had short recollections of our membership of SFFSA from Ian and me as well as James Dryja, Carla Martins, Cedric Abrahams, Arthur Goldstuck, Ahmed Wadee and others, recalling early meetings, and outings; watching Haley's comet at 2 a.m. in the morning; 27 of us going 500km to see the Total Eclipse early in the new millennium; our first convention; showing the 1st and 3rd reels of a 16mm film and not bothering with the 2nd; using a car battery to get the projector going in order to watch "The Green Slime"; the friends we have made over the years; the fun we have had in our enjoyment of Science Fiction and Fantasy. And then a really good meal and lots of conversation to complete a great evening.

Chairman's Note

Andrew Jamieson

Sigh, I've got to admit, I'm really not in the mood to write a chairman's note this month. I mean, having to constantly come up with things to write every time. Making sure I don't repeat myself. Try to make it interesting so that you readers will actually want to read it, instead of simply bypassing this because it isn't your thing. SigSo what should I write about this month? Aliens? Other planets? Parallel worlds? Hmm... perhaps too much science fiction there and not enough fantasy. So if I were to write about fantasy, what would the topic be about? Are barbarians better than elves? Or are elves better than dwarves? Or in other words which classic fantasy race is the best? How about fantasy worlds themselves? Nah, maybe leave that one for another time again. Still, lots of things in fantasy like magic, other times and places, illusions, strange species, etc. So why have my notes been dominated by science fiction or reality lately? Guess I should really do something fantasy soon. You know dear reader, you could always send me an email (easy to find my



address on the website) and perhaps suggest something, or any sort of feedback, would be kinda nice.

Ok, on to movies, so what science fiction or fantasy movie have you seen lately? I'm not going to mention TV series again as really, the SF and Fantasy series are just continually coming out: The Mandalorian, Gogol, See, Zomboat, Daybreak, Living With Yourself, and so on. Movies on the other hand that I really want to see are few and far between. Yes the occasional blockbuster is fun to switch the brain off and just enjoy the spectacle, but there are not many SF or Fantasy movies that pique the interest. I watched the Chinese movie The Wandering Earth which was quite good. Yes totally over the top, but so what, it was fun, they tried to be sort of realistic, though I don't know why considering some of the situations they put the characters in. Then there was Godzilla: King of Monsters, Brightburn, Alita: Battle Angel, Astro Kid was actually quite fun as was Missing Link. Plenty of horror movies that came out, but not much on our front that seems worthwhile, a pity. Guess I'll go back to those many TV series I've fallen behind on.

It seems age is catching up to me, unfortunately. Turns out I have to start wearing glasses again. Been over 15 years since I had my eye operation fixing both my eyes so I wouldn't need glasses. The years were great. I knew I would one day have to wear glasses again, and sigh, so it has come to pass. My main annoyance is that I used to be short-sighted, now I'm long-sighted, meaning reading is becoming more and more difficult without glasses. Darn it, I preferred being short-sighted, long-sighted to me is just more of a pain as most of the time you can make out whatever it is you are looking at, comic book, phone, small labels, but when the writing is just too small... you have to go fetch those glasses. It is amazing how much they help, just wish I didn't have to start them again.

Speaking of comics, seems my main distributor for getting comics has shut down. They have been having problems for many months now and I have not been getting them, so now with

this bit of information I have to decide: Should I source my physical comics elsewhere, or should I join the modern evolution and go digital? I'm not really sure. I do like holding a physical comic in my hands and reading it whilst leaning back and relaxing on my couch. However, if I get a tablet the same size, then isn't it quite similar? Also, I would no longer have to worry about adding even more to the already 60 boxes of physical comics I keep all over my place. It would certainly help there, but are all the comics I want available digitally? And at what price? I've checked, and it annoys me greatly that a digital comic is exactly the same price as a physical copy, say what? No printing costs and no shipping costs, so how can they charge the same price? Greedy buggers. Anyway, I'm thinking about it and doing some checking, and I've already started reading the short stories on my computer, so I suppose there is a good chance I might. You readers can send me your thoughts on that too if you want.

Times up, this is my final note for the year, so I hope you all have a relaxing holiday, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Cheers

Andrew

Books Received

JonathanMallPublishers

J.R. Ward Blood Truth Little Brown R325.00

Jay Kristoff Darkdawn HarperCollins UK R305.00

Rena Barron Kingdom of Souls HarperCollins UK R305.00

Jodi Meadows As She Ascends Harper Collins US Children R190.00

Lana Popovic Fierce Like a Firestorm Harper Collins US Children

Sarah Henning Sea Witch Harper Collins US children

Brent Weeks The Burning White Little Brown R370.00

Sara Raach These Rebel Waves HarperCollins US Children R205.00

Terry Goodkind Wasteland: Children of D'Hara Head of Zeus R180.00

Wormhole

Carla Martins, Brett Ward, Gail Jamieson. The Noise Was Ended Now

The Yellow Preach Corporation had finally hit on the perfect strategy. During their sojourn on Earth after many years of study it had become apparent that human beings were sheep. Human history of totalitarianism had borne that out.

They just needed the right sheepdog. What media to use? U-tube, music videos could be hypnotic with swirly coloured patterns. It had been decided to use a fake figurehead – females reminded them of their mothers.

An Ad champagne would be needed – they were in for the long haul – “Very well”, said the Chair. “Let's upload “The noise was ended now”

In Front of the Mirror

Valentino Poppi

Winner of the XXIII Trofeo RiLL (2017)

(Translated by Paul Vigo)

The social worker paused on the landing of the second floor of the old building. She checked the information in the inspection document she had with her, then rang the bell. No one opened the door.

“Gianni, it’s Clara. I know you’re at home. Please let me in.”

The old man inside didn’t answer, but this time the woman had no intention of going away. Only after several minutes did the man open the door, but only as far as the security latch would allow.

“What do you want? You know I don’t like visitors”.

“Gianni, you’ve been refusing to have your council flat inspection for two months. If you don’t let me in and I don’t fill in the forms, you risk getting evicted”.

The man studied her carefully through the space between the door and the frame.

“Show me what you’ve got in your hand”.

A little surprised by the demand, the woman took a step back and showed him the folder with the documents and her handbag. He stared for a few seconds more, then he unlatched the chain and let her in. He quickly closed the door behind her.

The small living room had a corner kitchen and it was very simply furnished. A table, three or four chairs, all different to each other, an armchair, an old television on a cabinet next to a heater and a small fitted kitchen completed the furnishings.

It was obsessively tidy. The walls were completely bare, except for a calendar hanging next to the window. There was no sign of paintings or ornaments.

“Sit down,” he said to her. “Let’s try and get this red tape out of the way quickly”.

As she was sitting down, Clara looked at the man’s clothes. His suit was clean and his general appearance was smart. When his trousers rode up as he sat down, revealing his ankles, she noticed that he was wearing odd socks.

She took the forms out of the folder, put them on the table and started to fill them in.

“Has anything happened to you recently, Gianni? The neighbours say you hardly ever leave home any more”.

“Tell them to mind their own business. Just show me where I have to sign and go”.

“All right. I wanted to be polite and have a chat with you, but, being as you prefer to get on with it, I’ll have a quick look around the apartment, as the rules say, and I’ll leave at once”.

She raised her gaze from the documents and she saw that the man was staring at her shoes.

“Is something wrong?”

He hesitated before answering.

“No, everything’s fine. Do what you have to do”.

Clara got up and had a look inside the cupboards. The plates and glasses were all different to one another. They seemed to have been taken from at least 10 different sets. It was the same thing with the cutlery.

“You’ve recycled a few dishes, Gianni? If you make a request, we could buy new plates. It would cost just a few Euros”.

“The ones I have are fine. Finish the work you have to do, please”.

The woman fell silent. Her host did not seem to have anything against her, but he was irritable and being short with her. She decided it was best to get on with the routine checks and go away. She opened the fridge and looked inside, without noticing anything special. This was perfectly tidy too. The variety of products inside seemed a little strange to her. Two different cartons of milk, of two different brands. One apple, one pear, a banana and a lemon in the fruit compartment. Several packets of cheese, jars of jam and pickles, all different brands.

“So? Are you satisfied? Will you tell the council that I’m making good use of the little bit of money they give me?”

Clara looked at him, holding her gaze on him just a moment longer than necessary.

“Yes, everything’s fine,” she replied as she closed the fridge. “I’ll have a look in the bedroom and I’ll be off”.

The bedroom was even barer. There was absolutely nothing on the furniture, except for a lamp on the bedside cabinet.

First she opened the wardrobe and then one of the drawers in the bedside cabinet. She was astounded by the variety of colours of the vests, the socks and the rest of his underwear. As she closed the first drawer, she noticed a deep notch on one side, perhaps made by a knife. The second had two and the third three.

“What are these marks on the drawers?” she asked.

“They were like that when I came here,” he replied.

Apart from the notches, the furniture was in excellent condition and looked after with care. The woman went back into the kitchen, picked up the signed documents and headed for the front door.

“Goodbye Gianni. See you next year”.

He mumbled something incomprehensible and closed the door behind her.

The inspection of the apartment on the third floor brought things back to normality. The old lady living there had everything that could come from a life full of memories. Ornaments on the shelves, pictures and photos on the walls, everyday objects spread out pretty much all over the place.

“Agnese, tell me what you think of Gianni?” she asked while she was filling in the forms for her.

“Oh, he’s a good man. It’s a shame that he’s closed in on himself a little recently. He was very sociable up to a year ago – he went out often, chatted with everyone. Now I only see him fleetingly in the bakery or in other shops while he’s doing the shopping. I have to say that, if I didn’t run into him every now and again on the stairs, you wouldn’t know that there’s anyone in his apartment”.

Clara finished filling in the documents and put them in front of the old lady for her to sign them. She kept talking though.

“I remember that he got some canaries for company a few months ago. Then, all of a sudden, he closed himself up inside his house and didn’t want to talk to anyone ever again...”

The social worker looked at the clock. She didn’t want to interrupt her while she was talking. She reckoned that she probably didn’t have many opportunities to have a chat with someone, so she let her carry on while she thought about something else. It was her last visit of the afternoon and she wasn’t in a big rush.

“...Then there was the episode with the plates. Me and the woman from the first floor were worried because we thought he’d hurt himself. But it was nothing serious. When he took out all the bin liners, we could see that he was fine and we stopped worrying”

Clara, who was listening distractedly, started paying attention again.

“What was the episode with the plates?”

“Ah, didn’t you know? It was at the beginning of March. We heard loud noises, like someone smashing dishes. We went over to ask what was going on and he said that a shelf had collapsed with all of his dishes on while he was cleaning. He explained that the noise had continued because he was breaking the plates that were damaged. We asked if he need help, but he sent us packing. He smashed plates, glasses and other stuff for hours, then he brought out two sacks. A little while later he threw away a load of linen and food. The woman from the first floor went rummaging through it and recovered lots of new stuff and perfectly intact food packages from the bins”.

Clara was even more curious now.

“So he threw away two sacks of clothes and new food?”

"Exactly. But he kept taking things out to the bin over the following days too. He threw away pictures and ornaments. There, you see that decorated wooden picture on the wall? There were two identical. Me and the other lady salvaged them and hung them up in our homes. He threw away the canaries' cage that he'd only bought the month before in the shop here on the corner".

"And what happened to the canaries?"

"He told us they got out and then politely asked us to mind our own business. We were a bit upset but we thought he must have had some bad news that had put him in a bad mood. You can speak to the other lady, if you like, although I haven't seen her for a few days".

Clara went shortly after. Gianni's strange behaviour, the way he kept his apartment and the things Agnese had said had left her somewhat perplexed. She took to the street and stopped outside the pet shop that the old lady had mentioned and, after a moment of hesitation, she went in.

"Good afternoon miss, how can I help you?"

A middle-aged man, probably the owner, had welcomed her in.

"Hello. I wanted some information about canaries. What advice would you give someone who wants to have them as a pet for company? Is it difficult?"

"Well, they're not very expensive but you have to dedicate a little time to them, like most pets. Anyway, if you do, you should buy a pair, because they get lonely. And then you have to keep the cage clean and change the food and the water every day..."

She had a quick look around while the man was speaking. She had never wanted a pet and didn't ever go to shops like this one.

"Listen... there's an old man who lives in a council house near here. It seems he came here three or four months ago to buy some canaries. You don't happen to remember him, do you?"

"Don't tell me that you're coming here to complain again for that man who found an extra canary in his cage".

"What? What do you mean?"

"About four months ago that man came in asking for two yellow canaries. I prepared a cage for him with a pair of splendid birds, a bright yellow male and a female whose colour was a little lighter. I explained how to keep them clean, feed them and other stuff like that. He went off happily and then a few days later he called me on the phone saying there were now three canaries. I told him that it wasn't mating season and that it takes time for them to breed, but he replied that there were three yellow canaries, all the same as each other. I told him that this wasn't possible, but he lost his temper and insisted that he had three canaries. I told him to bring them in so I could take a look. He came with the cage and inside there were, indeed, three canaries, the female and two identical males. At that point, I thought someone had played a joke on him by putting another bird in the cage. I told him so and I explained how to differentiate the female from the other two before he left. He called back a

few days later and told me that there were two canaries once again, but added that now they were both females. I told him to bring them back and when he showed them to me, there were indeed two females identical to the one that I'd sold him. At that point I started to think that I was the victim of the joke and he was making fun of me. He told me he wanted to give them back, but our shop doesn't take back live animals and, what's more, I pointed out that I had sold him a male and a female. He went off in a rage and I haven't heard from him since".

"Do you still think it was a joke?"

"Of course. And it was a well thought-out one. The extra canaries in the cage were identical to mine. It might have been a prank devised by another pet-shop".

Clara was deep in thought as she left the shop. What she'd just heard was absurd. Gianni certainly wasn't the sort of person to organize pranks like that and no one would break into that council flat with the sole aim of swapping over the canaries in the cage. What's more, only another pet shop would have been able to get hold of two birds identical to the one he'd been sold.

She thought about the broken plates and the stuff salvaged by the neighbours from the bin. Then she thought about the contents of the fridge and the drawers again.

There was something strange that she still couldn't put her finger on and it brought together everything she had seen. Then suddenly she realized what it was.

Clara found herself on the landing of the second floor of the building again. She had to ring three times before Gianni decided to open up. He peeked through the opening left by the security chain again.

"What do you want now? You said you'd be back next year".

"I just want to ask a few more questions. Can I come in for a moment?"

"No" he replied, moving to close the door. She slid in her hand to win some time before the man could stop her.

"Where did the canaries go?"

"They got out" he said, trying to close the door again.

"Both? Or were there three?"

Gianni paused. Clara pressed on with what she'd managed to work out after a long, hard think.

"Why are there no two objects the same in your home? Even the socks you wear are different from one another."

The man stared at her through the opening without saying anything, no longer trying to close the door. They stood in silence for a while, then he unlatched the chain and let her in. They sat on the kitchen chairs again.

"Why are you so persistent?" he asked. "You said everything was all right before"

"I'm worried. I don't think it's normal to have a completely bare home like yours. Just like it doesn't seem normal to break plates and glasses and throw new things in the bin, especially if you are someone who can't afford to buy replacements".

He leaned an elbow on the table and laid his hand on his face, covering his eyes.

"What do you want from me?" he asked in the end.

"Tell me why you're behaving like this".

He paused for a few seconds before answering.

"You wouldn't believe me".

"Let me decide. Why don't you explain why you threw away those dishes and glasses, just keeping ones that are different from the others?".

The man shook his head in silence.

"Can you at least tell me what happened to the canaries?".

"The mimic ate them," he replied.

His tone as he answered was resigned, as if he'd been forced to say something that he would never have wanted to.

"The mimic?"

He nodded.

"Why don't you tell me what a mimic is? I might learn something new."

The man raised his gaze, staring at her in the eyes for a few moments. He tried to smile, but failed.

"You want to make me talk so you can see whether I'm capable of looking after myself alone in this apartment. You think I've got some sort of disorder than makes me behave weird."

"Gianni, try and look at things from my point of view..."

"It doesn't matter," he interrupted. "It's better if we clear things up at once. Sooner or later, I would have to anyway".

Clara waited without saying anything, fearing the man might close in on himself again.

"A mimic is a sort of lizard that can take on the form of things that are near it. It's almost impossible to see it in its original form, except in the moments when it is changing appearance. Being as it's a primitive animal, it can't remember the forms it had previously, so it can only copy the shape and colour of the things surrounding it at any given moment".

He looked at her to see what her reaction would be. She realized that if she wanted him to continue, she had to say something to him.

"I'll be honest with you Gianni, it sounds very strange to me".

"I don't doubt it".

"How do you know about this animal? I've never heard of it".

"My grandfather told me about it when I was a boy. I thought it was a fairy tale, like the other ones he used to tell me from time to time, but he said that I'd be able to recognize a mimic right away, and have no doubt about it, thanks to what he had told me. You can only understand if you know they exist. Even if other people see one, they think that it's just an impression, because when they look more carefully, they see what looks like a normal object. Naturally, he told me all this in a simple way, like any other farmer would do with his small grandson."

"And you still remember something like that after all this time?"

"I'd completely forgotten until I saw the mimic in the cage".

"The canaries' cage?"

Gianni nodded.

"I don't know how it got in, but the day I realized there were three canaries in the cage, I took them to the pet shop to see. Naturally, the extra one was the mimic that was imitating one of the two, but I didn't know that then. The shopkeeper said someone was playing a joke on me and, when I found there were just two females in the cage a few days later, I almost convinced myself that this was true. I took them back to him, but he probably thought that I was the one having fun at his expense and he sent me packing. But what happened was that the mimic had eaten the first canary and, being as it could not imitate it any more, it took on the appearance of the female. It was only when I saw a strange movement in the cage from the reflection of the glass on the cupboard that I sensed something funny was going on. I turned around immediately, but the canaries weren't there anymore. Instead, there were three feeders rather than two. Even more taken aback, I opened the cage and emptied it, putting everything that was inside on the table. Then I saw it, just out of the corner of my eye. The mimic probably sensed that it had been found out and changed form, taking on that of my favourite glass. But it made a bad choice. That glass was unique. An old friend of mine had decorated it by hand, so there couldn't be two that were identical. That's when the story of my grandfather came to mind and everything became clear. I took out a ladle that I had next to the heater and I tried to hit what I thought was the mimic. But I got the wrong one and smashed the glass. In the confusion, I nearly knocked over the table and all the dishes that were on top fell off. The mimic fell off along with the other stuff, but, being as it couldn't copy the glass any more, it turned into something else. After that I never found it. The only way to be certain that I could recognize it was to avoid having two identical things in the house. Now I'm certain that, if I see two things that are the same, one is definitively the mimic".

Clara waited for the man to stop talking. Although he didn't come across as a person with psychological problems, what he was saying was not the stuff of a sane person. And, if that was the way things were, according to the rules, the man would have to leave the apartment and move to a rest home. She tried to find a way to get him to continue.

“So the mimic is like a more evolved form of chameleon?”

“Miss, I don’t even know what a chameleon looks like. There aren’t any where I come from. I only know that that thing is like a lizard, like one of those green lizards that you see in the countryside in the summer. At least that’s what it looked like in the moments it was changing shape.”

“Listen Gianni... Let’s suppose that there really is a mimic around here. Why should a lizard trouble you? You come from the countryside, you are used to stuff like that”.

He looked at her with scepticism. “So you’re saying that you’d be happy to have a big lizard that eats your canaries hidden in your house? And what happens when it doesn’t find any canaries to eat? The mimics in my granddad’s stories grew fast and got big enough to eat cats. I wouldn’t want to sit on a seat only to find out that the thing was waiting to bite me”

“But you haven’t seen it since you threw away all the identical things, right?”

“That’s right. I hope that it ended up in the trash canister and was minced up by a rubbish truck along with all the other stuff it made me throw out. I took out lots of stuff at night too, in secret. I dumped all the ornaments too, even though none of them were identical to each other. It would have been easier to find it without anything for it to imitate. I even made notches in the drawers of the bedside cabinet to stop him imitating one without me noticing”.

Clara sighed.

“Gianni, your neighbours went through the bins and salvaged some of the things you threw away and they didn’t find anything unusual. The food, the linen, your wooden pictures... There was nothing like what you are describing or any other animal”.

His looked at her in alarm.

“Did you say pictures?”

“Yes, the decorative ones you threw out. The ladies that live here took one each”.

“I only had one wooden picture, not a pair. I threw it out so the walls were bare”.

Clara entered the first-floor apartment with a municipal police officer. It took three days to get the authorization for an extraordinary inspection, even though she had insisted it was an urgent case due to the strange absence of the woman who lived there.

There was a strange smell inside, and the laid table, the switched-on television with the headphones plugged in and the unmade bed made the woman’s absence even stranger.

Worried, she looked at the three chairs, two armchairs and two bedside cabinets in the bedroom. She turned around suddenly when she seemed to glimpse a movement, but it was just a dressing gown hanging on one of the two clothes horses. Maybe it was just an impression, but she had only noticed one when she came in. And where had the police officer got to?

She turned around again, seeing her own reflection on the door of the wardrobe, and only a few seconds later did she realise that there was no mirror. The mimic was looking back at her, motionless, with her own face.

Valentino Poppi was born in 1968 in Bologna, where he lives with his family. A graduate in electronic engineering, he works in the telecommunications sector.

He has been writing stories for several years and some of them have won (or reached the final) of literary competitions for speculative fiction and-or have been published in anthologies by numerous Italian publishing houses.

He won the XXIII Trofeo RiLL with "In Front of the Mirror", which came first out of the 350 stories submitted.

In 2018 his science fiction story "Questioni d'onore" (Question of Honour) was one of the three finalists for the Urania Short prize, run by Urania (Italy's top science-fiction magazine). The Trofeo RiLL is an Italian literary award for budding speculative-fiction writers. The contest has been run since 1994 by RiLL - Riflessi di Luce Lunare, a non-profit club based in Rome. Each year the Trofeo RiLL features around 300-350 short-story participants, from Italy and other countries. The winning entries are published annually in MONDI INCANTATI, anthologies that are edited and published directly by RiLL.

The Trofeo RiLL final awards ceremony takes place at Lucca Comics & Games, Italy's most important festival for festival of comics, illustration, speculative fiction, games and animation (it attracted more than 250,000 visitors in 2018). Info: www.rill.it; info@rill.it



Odelle Coetzee The Last Water Dancer

The full moon's glow reflected on the river's ripples as crickets chirped and frogs croaked. All the creatures along the water's edge were unperturbed by the nearby dancer, who moved like a shadow. Moonlight bounced off her dark bronze skin as she shifted into and out of the shadows.

A thousand stars bore witness to her carefully executed movements. Sinews and muscles tightened, twisted and released, allowing for numerous leaps, twists and landings.

Binah took a moment to regain her breath. Her calf muscles ached and her thighs trembled from the effort. She needed to get it right. Everything depended on that. She was tired of everyone laughing at her, which was why she practiced alone, at night, when no one could see her.

She moved into position, looked out over the water and started anew. Her hands swirled as she counted the steps, twirling twice before throwing out her arms wide. While each dancer's dance was unique, graceful, hers remained simple.

With a large circular gesture in front of her she gathered up the water. Turning her palms upward she lifted it free and allowed it to ripple and swirl. She liked it when the water did that.

Moving onto her toes, she made the first twirl: the water followed. The moonlight reflecting from its various surfaces transferred it into two glowing ribbons.

Binah leapt and landed with a slight jar then pulling her hands apart, elongating the water. She could feel the weight of the water as it parted. Others thought her crazy for claiming to, but she knew different. She waited a moment and then started on the series of twists that followed. The water twisted and spiralled as Binah counted the steps. She ensured that she landed on the balls of her feet, but her last landing was off. Her foot twisted and her body contorted. She fell without grace or resistance, like a lumbered tree. The sand cushioned her fall but not her dignity as the water rained down over her. That was why she no longer trained with the others.

Grunting more from frustration than pain, Binah sat up. Her shoulders drooped as she lowered her head into her hands and mumbled, "I'm the clumsiest dancer ever."

"I will not let this beat me." She said with renewed determination and got up again.

She peered into the depths of the water. The dark tumbling mass was hypnotic, calming. It drew her, focused her attention. Manipulating water was easier when she stood still, so she closed her eyes and slowed her breathing. *Focus and feel the movements.* Her arms swept out and with her palms faced down, her fingers lowered and met. She lifted her hands and again pulled two slim ribbons of water from the river. Using random hand movements, she watched as the water danced, creating a hypnotic show.

A nearby twig snapped and shattered her concentration, causing the water to fall again.

"I thought it might be you," said a familiar, unwelcome voice.

Clenching her hands, Binah turned towards her unsolicited observer and flatly demanded, "What do you want, Kasim?"

Kasim firmly retorted, "That is not how you address your future husband!" then looked her over in a manner that instantly made her uncomfortable.

Binah knew better than to challenge him on his presumptuous and unsolicited chauvinism, everyone did. It however did not mean that she would yield. Firmly she stated, "We are not married."

"We are not married – *yet*," corrected Kasim, "And it is not long before take that which you taunt me with."

Binah's heart thudded, because his words rang with a truth she chose to ignore. He terrified her and she disliked the way he made her feel: as if she was a mere possession.

Binah's palms turned sweaty as she hung onto the only defence she had, "You have not paid the bride's price."

Deprecatingly Kasim said, "When you fail at the festival, you will be almost worthless. I doubt your father could then give you away."

Binah decisively contradicted him and said, "I will not fail!"

"But you will," Kasim said, walking around her, "Because you are too clumsy and distracted to be a true water dancer."

Binah's anger rose anew and she vehemently contradicted him, "I have something far more important than that."

Condescendingly, Kasim challenged, "Really?"

"Yes. I have motivation to succeed."

“Perhaps you should be more motivated into becoming my wife. You will be expected to keep good home and birth me many sons.”

Rage, anger and frustration got the better of her as she started to move her hands up. Binah knew that one should never draw on water in anger but she did not care. She would soak Kasim. Only her hands would not move. The weight of the water seemed impossible to lift.

Kasim noticed her struggles and burst out laughing. “I would say that day is quickly approaching. You cannot even lift water anymore.”

Despair, equal to the weight of the world, descended upon Binah as she loosened her fists and lowered her head in defeat.

Kasim sneered as he said, “That is more acceptable behaviour towards a husband.”

“Then you also know that you will be denied her hand if it became known that you accosted her like this.” Jaafan’s familiar, yet stern tone infringed. Relief flooded Binah but it was only temporarily as Jaafan continued, “One may even come to the conclusion that you are attempting to seduce her before the wedding night.”

Visibly angered, Kasim retorted, “I could say the same for you.”

Jaafan countered. “But I am not the one who professed to all that Binah was to be mine.”

A heavy sensation to settled around Binah’s heart, knowing it to be true.

“Your childhood friend’s fate is already know,” Kasim taunted Binah, “...but like you he chooses to defy it.” Kasim then glared at Jaafan and demanded, “What do you want?”

“I came to check the river. My grandmother said she feels a great sadness.”

“A river cannot be sad,” mocked Kasim, “...it’s just water.”

“So too are tears.” countered Jaafan. “But unlike you, I respect the river.”

Kasim made to reply but then waived his hand at Jaafan and said, “Continue to believe those childish tales, they mean nothing.”

Jaafan firmly instructed, “Return to the others or I will disclose your actions.”

Kasim at looked Binah then said, “I would not want lies told.” Then said to Binah, “Enjoy the company of your childhood companion. Once we are married, I will forbid it.”

Once Kasim was out of hearing range Binah seethed. “I hate him! I absolutely hate him.”

"I know," said Jaafan, soothingly.

"I am no good at this, I should just give up and accept that I will end up with a impertinent husband."

Jaafan said nothing but instead placed his hands on her shoulders, stating, "That attitude will resolve nothing."

His touch both calmed and exited her. It was as if his energy passed to her. It drew her away from her thoughts and concerns.

"Come," Jaafan said turning her towards the river. "Close your eyes and clear your thoughts. You can do this. Focus, and then lift the water."

She tried, but as with the last time the water resisted, it seemed to pull on her instead. The more she tried the heavier it became.

Binah dropped her hands in defeat and said, "I cannot."

"Yes you can," insisted Jaafan.

Binah's response forgotten as water splashing and a loud, painful moan caused them turn in alarm. Jaafan held his finger to his lips and then asked in a hushed tone, "Why can't I hear any frogs?"

Binah stood still for a moment before softly replying, "I cannot hear them either. You think something is eating them?"

Jaafan shook his head.

The water again splashed and was followed by another pitched moan.

"That sounds like someone in trouble." Binah said, and then moved towards the sound.

Jaafan tried to stop her, stating, "It is the man's duty to investigate dangers."

Binah stopped in her tracks and urgently shouted, "Run Jaafan! Run now!"

Confused and apprehensive Jaafan demanded, "What, Why?"

"Go fetch your grandmother, I think she is very sick. And bring something to cover her!"

Jaafan turned and ran as quickly as he could.

Binah's heart thudded in her chest as she approached the petite figure wriggling in the mud. The woman had no obvious injuries yet appeared in excruciating pain.

Binah laid her hand on the woman and waited, uncertain of what she should do.

Amai's stern words of rebuke announced their arrival, "You had better not be playing any tricks, boy."

“This way Amai,” hastened Jaafan. Twigs snapped underfoot as they approached. The night creatures remained silent, unmoving.

Binah received a squeeze on the shoulder, a silent cue from the aged healer to step aside. The healer lowered to her haunches and reached out to touch the woman. Amai turned to look at Jaafan then at Binah, her expression notably sad as she took the cover from Jaafan and cast it over the woman.

Pointing at Jaafan, Amai said, “You must take her back to the village, lay her on the grass mat in my hut. I must go speak with the elders.”

Without question, Jaafan lifted the woman from the mud and carried her to the village. He lay her on the mat as his grandmother had instructed and then left Binah to watch over her for the remainder of the evening.

Large-scale hysteria erupted the following morning. Binah listened as the others bemoaned the loss of their water skills. She rose as the elders entered Amai’s hut, only to lower on her one knee as the chieftain entered.

“Rise, Binah,” he said but remained within the doorway as the elders looked over the woman. The one elder shook his head, which caused the chieftain to look at Binah. It was the first time Binah had ever seen him hesitate. He however drew in a deep breath and said, “As one moves on we can only prepare.”

Binah immediately insisted, “But we must do something.”

Amai stepped forward and in a soft, soothing voice said, “The woman is the water goddess Oba. The river has poisoned her as others have poisoned it. She is dying.”

One of the elders added, “And with her our ability to shape water.”

Visibly distressed Binah said, “We need to take her back to the river, she needs to maintain contact with the water.”

The elders shook their heads, as Amai spoke, “It cannot save her.”

“It is as it is.” The chieftain said before turning from the room. The others followed, until only Binah and Amai remained.

Amai turned to Binah and said, “You, child, are to remain with her.” Then Amai also left.

Binah sat beside the mat, uncertain as to what she should do.

When Oba opened her eyes they were pale, glassy. She reached out to Binah.

Binah's skin tingled at the touch, which lasted only a moment, before Oba's body rippled, as water would. Without hesitation Binah lifted her hands and caught the water as Oba's shape dissolved. Binah's heart thudded in her chest, she remained ever mindful of her gauche movements as she turned her hands and lifted the water. She exited the hut, oblivious of her onlookers who stood on either side of the doorway. They made a path that led towards the river. As she passed them they fell in behind her until reaching the river's edge. There they remained as she waded into the water, until it reached knee-height. She stopped and carefully lowered the water she held. It joined that of the river and then glimmered as it moved to surround her.

"Binah!" Jaafan called as he rushed to the edge. His father, the chieftain, reached out to stop him.

Binah looked at him and then to the water.

"No, you can't! You can't leave. You are the only one who can shape water. You are supposed to stay and become my wife now."

"Hush boy!" his father commanded, "She is the one that was chosen."

She turned to face the onlookers, confused when they bowed before her.

She made her way to the edge and held out her hand to Jaafan.

Confused, he looked at it and asked, "You want me to come with you?"

He reached out to her the same time as his father grabbed his other arm. Jaafan shrugged off his father's grip and angrily said, "Let me go! It is my decision."

Jaafan took Binah's hand and entered the river.

Binah looked at him, she smiled and then said, "You are to carry me from it."

Confused, Jaafan asked, "Why?"

"Because even though I can shape water, it will not let me leave."

Jaafan made to lift her, asking, "But then anyone could remove you?"

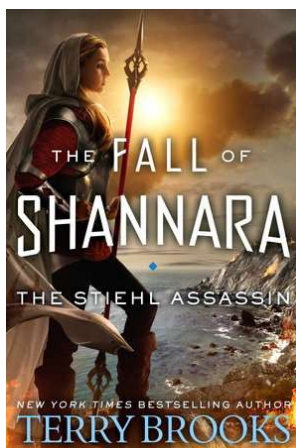
Binah shook her head, "It has to be someone I love and trust, someone who has done it before."

Once they reached the shore, several of the young women stepped forward. The first slapped her hard and arraigned before everyone, "How could you! You have taken from us all!"

Ami stepped forward and calmly said, "Do not ask of another that which you do not show. You do not respect her so why should she consider you. She is the last water dancer, and rightly so."

Book Reviews Ian Jamieson

Terry Brooks – The Fall of Shanarra Book 3 – The Stiehl Assassin



The Sklaar badly need a new home but peaceful co-existence is not in their nature. They have gathered at the borders of the four Lands, having determined that all out conquest is the way to solve their problem. A token force has also established a foothold, under the leadership of Prince Ajin, and not far behind is the full Sklaar army. But the Druid Drisker Arc is determined to halt their advance, and with the aid of his student, Tarsha Kaynin, and her powerful Wishsong magic, he will do everything in his power to succeed. But (there's always a "but", isn't there) against them is Tarsha's

brother Tavo, who has gone violently insane and carries the Stiehl blade, and the vicious druid, Clizia Porse, who has already defeated Drisker in a battle of magic.

This is book three in a series of four, so it does not end happily.

Brooks writes well enough but I feel there is too much sketching of the story making it at times, boring, and the covers are bad, having nothing to do with the stories.

2/5 Ian

Neal Asher – Shadow of the Scorpion



Ian Cormac's (call me Cormac) story skips between his childhood and his first missions for ECS (Earth Central Security).

He is raised to manhood at the end of the war between the human Polity and the vicious alien race called the Prador. He is haunted by memories of a Scorpion shaped war drone, and by the fact that parts of his own memories are missing. As he finds out later, this was done by his mother. On his missions for ECS to help restore order and peace on worlds devastated by war, he discovers that some humans are far more dangerous and treacherous than the Prador.

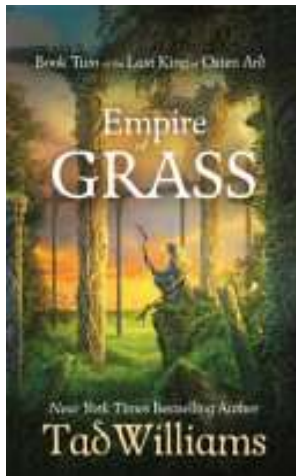
Cormac finds in himself an extreme capacity for violence, which stands him in good stead when he sets out on a mission of vengeance. Cormac's search for one of the human separatists, at one time his friend, is mixed with his search to understand his own past.

A story of semi-sentient AI's, robot sex, violence and dangerous weapons.

Very entertaining

3/5 Ian

Tad Williams - Empire of Grass- Book 2 of “The Last King of Osten Ard.”



Simon and Miriaméle, royal husband and wife, have ruled the peaceful kingdom of Osten Ard for decades, but now, as is usually the case in these books, they are threatened with danger from all sides. Their allies have turned against them, allowing the Queen of the Norms and her armies' access to human lands. The once peaceful nations of Nabban are heading for bloody civil war. And the nomads of the Thrithings are slowly gathering together, united by their hatred of city dwellers. Prince Morgan, Simon and Miriaméle's grandson and heir to the throne is missing and thought to have been kidnapped.

Miriaméle is caught up in a vicious uprising far from home, leaving Simon to deal with the chaos around him. It gets difficult to follow the multitude of characters in their various settings, and once again the author tends to use ten words when one would probably do. And there is no satisfying ending; the book just stops.

Nevertheless this is excellent epic fantasy over 600 pages and Williams' followers will put up with this in their wait for the next volume

3/5 Ian

Baoshu (translated by Ken Liu) The Redemption of Time – A Three-Body Problem novel



When Yun Tianming first died he was put into cryo-sleep, and then launched into deep space to intercept the Trisolarian First fleet, in the very small hope that the aliens would find him, bring him back to life and give him information useful to Earth. And it happened! Yun spends considerable time detailing his experiences as “the greatest spy in the history of the human race.” He is constantly scheming to outwit the powerful aliens, but there is little action and lots of words. (Why did the aliens keep him?) And it really does not improve when he becomes involved in a conflict between cosmic beings called the Seeker

and the Lurker, who have the power to destroy the whole universe. Really?

Possibly the translation has something to do with the fact that this novel is overlong and mainly boring, but I feel the author got carried away with himself and uses too many words.

1/5 Ian

Susan Denward – Bloodwitch –The Witchlands Series Book 3



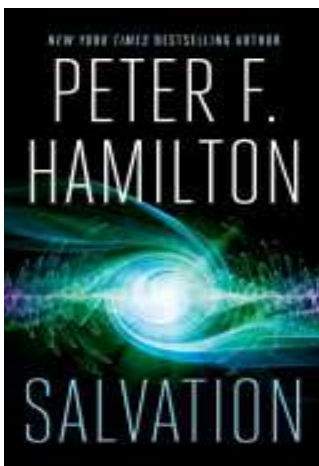
The Bloodwitch, Aedvan, is running for his life from the Raider King, who just happens to be his father. With him is Iseult, the threadwitch, and together they have to escape, and then find a way to stop the wave of destruction. Merik is captured by the Fury, and then escapes and then is captured again, and allows himself to be killed in order to save some of the ones he loves. (He is resurrected of course). Meanwhile Safi, the Truthwitch and blood sister of Iseult, must help the Empress to uncover a hidden rebellion in

her own capital, only to find that the leader of the rebellion is the Empress' s own father. And of course there is the magical girl Owl, with her large bat known as Blueberry. There are various other stories as well, all running at the same time, and all heading for a variety of disasters. But they will eventually all come together, but without a major happy ending.

Although it does not say so, this book is for teenagers, and I am sure they will love it, but though entertaining enough it is just too mixed up for me.

2/5 Ian

Peter F. Hamilton – Salvation – Book 1



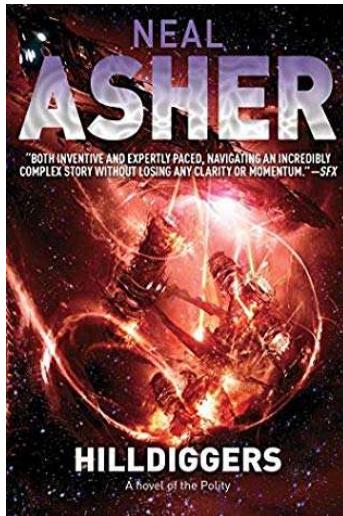
A new form of technology, jump gates, has rendered most forms of transport, including starships, completely obsolete. Every place on Earth and every planet settled by mankind is merely a step away. The jump gates, or portals have revolutionised technology for mankind. They are being used for renewable energy, waste disposal, and have also given man the ability to travel to the ends of the universe. At the same time a race of hyper religious aliens called the Olyix enter the solar system and meet with mankind. They swop technology with each other and both sides benefit. The aliens are on their way to the end of the Universe to meet with

their God. When an ancient alien space ship is discovered many light years away, and it is found to contain a very disturbing cargo, five of the Earth's greatest minds are sent to investigate.

In a separate storyline set in the future, gifted humans are preparing to set out to destroy their ancient alien enemy. Very well written and enjoyable

3/5 Ian

Neal Asher - Hilldiggers



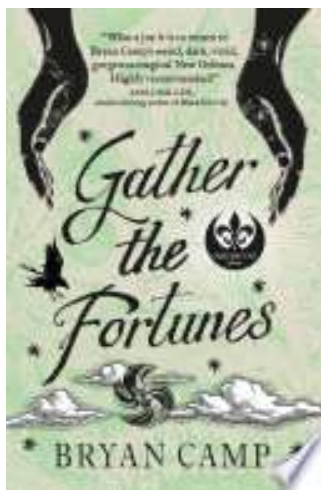
Two planets inhabited by adapted humans, in the same solar system, are at war. An alien artefact is discovered, a cosmic superstring, It is cut into four pieces and then stored in Ozark cylinders at a massive and very secure space station. Each piece contains superior technology, or some kind of life. A female researcher at the station falls pregnant and gives birth to quads. Shortly afterwards, for no apparent reason she commits suicide, and no-one knows who is their father. By the end of war one of the planets has been devastated by Hilldiggers, great space dreadnaughts with the power to raise mountains. hence their name. In the meantime

the quads have been growing up, and it is quite obvious that each, in his or her own way is a genius. Each one quickly gains power in the post war society, but one gains control, through the space navy, of all the Hilldiggers, and not for a good reason. But the Polity has sent an ambassador, a Hooter, to assess the situation.

Well written and enjoyable enough but a bit too convoluted for my tastes.

3/5 Ian

Bryan Camp - Gather the Fortunes



Renaissance Raines was murdered five years ago, and since then she has found a job as a psychomp, a guide who leads the souls of the dead through the Seven Gates of the Underworld. It is a nice easy job, until a young boy manages to avoid his foretold death, and one of the Gods asks her to look into it. Renai (that's what people call her now) doesn't have too much choice, when a God says "jump" you ask "how high?" But Renai is no ordinary ghost. Known only to herself she carries inside her a tempest, a whirling power that responds to her feelings. It is a destructive force, but also a purifying cleansing kind of energy

Someone has taken a calculated risk in saving the boy, in hopes of stealing a larger slice of power for themselves. Renai goes hunting, and there will be hell to pay, because death is the least of anyone's worries down in the Underworld.

The author writes well and in the main the book is entertaining, but he lets himself get carried away with words and descriptions. A good editor should have chopped the book by at least one quarter.

2/5 Ian

Magazines Received

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

Reece Moorhead reecejb@gmail.com

Issue #30 September 2019

Issue #31 October 2019

Issue #32 November 2019

Ansible David Langford

September 2019 386 <http://news.ansible.uk/a386.html>

October 2019 387 <http://news.ansible.uk/a387.html>

November 2019 388 <http://news.ansible.uk/a388.html>

zine+origami (available in paper format only but zine.origami@gmail.com for submissions)



Eben David November

Planet of the hydroez: Voyage of the Oannes

SeaVerse. They called it the aquatic attraction park to end all such parks. Animal rights protests and visitor boycotts against the captivity of sea life in small tanks and pools had led to closure of smaller parks. But SeaVerse did things differently. For one thing, it used lagoon-sized tidal pools with multiple oceanic thoroughfares that meant tht the animals were free to come and go as they pleased.

Rapid sea level rise caused by climate change meant that beachfront property no longer suited residential purposes. Of course, it took the vision of Geoffrey Charleston Vanderbilt to see landmass loss due to sea level rise and the anti-animal captivity movement as a business opportunity. After walking away from the oil industry where he made his fortune, SeaVerse fit Vanderbilt's new business ethos of giving back to the planet. Vanderbilt even used stones from one of his rehabilitated mining operations to construct the tidal pool wall. His other new ventures included reforestation initiatives in former logging areas, cloud-seeding programmes to induce rain in the world's drought-stricken zones, conservation tourism, and solar power plant development. Vanderbilt's about turn came so abruptly and dramatically that some began calling him *Guilty Conscience* Vanderbilt.

SeaVerse was the place to be during the summer of 2034. It set new attendance records for its first sixty two days. But then on the sixty third day, an incident occurred.

Staff members were diving with whales, the crowd following their underwater progress on giant screens and any breach of the surface directly with their own eyes. Somewhere amid the excitement of the show a young man got past security and dove into the tidal pool.

Chaos reigned as SeaVerse safety divers searched the tidal pool for him. After a minute and a half, the divers pulled him from the water. An examination revealed that he had been wounded around the rib area. Doctors could not assess whether the wound was a jagged laceration or a bite. Therefore, they transferred him to the park's medical centre Footage revealed that there were no sharks or other predators

detected within the porous borders of the tidal pool. It did show that another unidentified swimmer entered the tidal pool after the young audience member dove in on a dare. However, this mystery man did not make his entrance from the audience seating. He swam in from the ocean, crossing robust currents through an opening in the tidal pool wall.

While the debate regarding how such a swim could be possible continued at security hub one, a security alert sounded.

"It's coming from the park's med centre! Get a team out there now."

When a trio of security officers arrived at the med centre, the automatic glass doors lay smashed on the paved path and spotted with a black substance. Something had crashed through faster than the automatic door sensor could detect, the three agreed.

They stepped inside and witnessed a scene from an abattoir not a medical centre. Lights flashed on and off, creating shadowy after-images in the officers' minds. Blood decorated the reception counter like streamers at a party. There was no sign of the receptionist and quick search of the rest of the centre delivered a grim discovery. Two doctors each had their throats and their innards ripped out, the security team observed. They found no trace of the rest of the staff.

Abruptly, their two-way radios went crazy with dispatch orders from all four of SeaVerse's security hubs.

"Team beta, come in. Security incident at gate four. Please attend."

"All teams to west viewing atrium. Possible crowd control situation developing."

"All teams, be on the look-out for team alpha. Last known location: tidal pool control centre. I repeat, be on the look-out."

"Possible violent incident in progress at the shopping cove. Nearest teams please investigate and restore order."

"SeaVerse fire fighters requesting assistance to restore a perimeter around fire rescue operation at gate six."

"What the hell is going on?" one of the security officers asked. "We need to report this bloodbath and—"

A set of teeth tore into the officer's throat before he could finish his thought. The other officers recognised his assailant as the man who dove into the tidal pool. His skin appeared a sickly grey.

They stood stunned for a moment before the attacker's growl snapped them into action. They unloaded their guns into him, only stopping him after each firing ten rounds.

The dead security officer's two-way broadcast, *"All teams, Security hubs two through four have been overrun. My god, surveillance is showing...zombies?!"*

SeaVerse staff did not know it at the time, but what was happening at their beloved park was also happening all over the world.

Aquaticus Reanimus was born.

If you weren't eaten, you ran the risk of infection via a bite or the contaminated drinking water supply. If infected with the virus, the disease ran a consistent course. It took approximately twenty to thirty minutes to turn Joe Public into Joe Zombie. Twelve hours later, precursors of fins, gills, and webbed extremities started to show. Before full metamorphosis, instincts would drive hydroez to large bodies of water such as rivers, lakes, dams, and the ocean. Within eighteen hours, the transformation into full specimens of Aquaticus Reanimus (popularly known as hydroez) will be complete. Of course, by that stage most hydroez had already killed or infected dozens.

#

The speedboat cut through the waves under cover of darkness, carrying two nervous explorers.

"Remind me, why I let you talk me into this again?" Kyle asked.

"Because you believe with all your heart that we're going to find proof that drilling in the Atlantic created the hydroez?" Tayla asked.

"Wrong. I just didn't want you coming out here alone. We should turn back. There could be hydroez lurking beneath the waves."

"The sea is far safer than lakes and rivers."

"Less risk of infection maybe, but no less dangerous. Sure most fresh water sources carry the virus, but the hydroez themselves can survive saltwater just fine."

"Did you bring enough soda?"

"Don't change the subject," Kyle said. "Anyway, what will proving who or what's responsible bring us? Most of the world's population has been turned into Hydroez, others have been eaten, and civilization has all but collapsed. There aren't any courts to charge whoever's responsible."

“At least, we’ll know. I thought you were a scientist.”

I’m an *environmental* scientist. I’ve fought against the impact of human behaviour on the environment for years. Now, that human impact has dropped to near zero. Maybe something like this was bound to happen. Maybe everything is exactly as it should be.”

“Can’t believe you just said that.”

“I don’t know why I said that. Maybe it’s my inner pessimist.”

Tayla rotated the searchlight across the dark horizon in a slow, deliberate manner.

“There it is.”

“It’s a lot smaller than the ones I saw on the news growing up,” Kyle said.

“That’s because that oil rig is mobile and perfect for illegal night-time drilling operations.”

“It’s still more than three miles out, I reckon. We’re going to cut it close in terms of fuel on the way back.” Kyle steered the powerboat toward the oil rig.

“Baby, they don’t use miles to measure distance out at sea.”

“Well, excuse me for not being Captain Ahab.”

Movement in the dark choppy waters breached Tayla’s peripheral vision. No one other bodily movement gained such a dreadful connotation in so short a time. It was unmistakeable breaststroke of a hydro. Their ray-like wings, webbed claws, and fins made the breaststroke the perfect swimming technique for hydroez to launch themselves into a pouncing manoeuvre, well suited to knocking a person off their boat into the water.

“Kyle! It’s a hydro!”

“Where?!”

“Nine o’ clock!” But by this time, Tayla was wrong. The hydro had changed course a second earlier and now approached from six o’ clock.

“I don’t see it! You sure it’s at nine?”

An almighty thud drew their attention to the rear of their boat, just quick enough to see two halves of the Hydro launched through the air to a distant one and three o’ clock respectively.

“Oh my!” Tayla said as she took in what killed the hydro.

“What the hell?!”

Before them, what could only be described as an armoured wheel floated in place while spinning at such a tremendous rate that Kyle and Tayla were being sprayed a with drops of seawater. Soon, the spinning slowed and a few seconds later came to halt.

"Kyle," Tayla whispered. "You think it's a UFO?"

A swishing sound arose, followed by a hatch opening at the top of the wheel.

A middle aged man of south Asian descent climbed out of the wheel. He wore a navy blue jacket that seemed a size too big for him. "It's not safe here. You must come aboard. Please hurry."

#

Once inside, they got a better look at their rescuer. Estimating his age proved difficult as his hair held no grey yet had begun balding. His tall frame managed an air of athleticism, but bore signs of rapid weight loss. His eyes projected kindness yet stood sunken.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"Yes, thank you for saving us out there," Kyle said, scanning the interior of the vehicle he mentally named the wheel.

The white walls held many strange symbols and drawings etched in what appeared to be copper. Even the hatch above them displayed symbols.

"No thanks needed. I was simply doing what anyone in that situation would do. My name is Doctor Vijay Prasad, but everyone usually just calls me Prasad." He coughed, hunching over slightly. "Excuse me. Sea air does this to me now and then...And that's PhD not MD, if you were wondering. Before the hydroez destroyed civilization, I was a historian, specialising in the history of science."

"I'm Tayla. I'm an eco activist."

They shook hands. "Nice to meet you, Taylor."

"That's Tay-la," Tayla said, correcting him as she had done so many times during her life before the hydroez when the spelling of names still held importance.

"I'm Kyle. Environmental researcher and still thanking my lucky stars you saved us. If you don't mind me asking, what is this...submarine?"

"I've been trying to figure that out for two weeks now, but I call it the Oannes."

“Wait, what do you mean you’ve been trying to figure it out?” Tayla asked. “Are you saying this isn’t some military vehicle or a Silicon Valley project?”

“Not as far as I know. I can tell by your expressions that I’m not making a lot of sense to you. I think you’ll understand if I simply show you. Please follow me.”

Prasad led them away from the hatch, through automatic doors into another circular room. The walls held dozens of pictorials consisting of three diagonally descending trapezium-shaped copper plates. These pictorials differed from the ones near the hatch in one obvious aspect – they contained depictions of humans.

In the centre of the room stood three upright metal rings, each ring about seven foot in diameter. Each of the three rings contained a smaller metal ring. Inside each smaller ring, there was a space for a head as well as gauntlets to hold wrists and ankles.

“Thanks again for saving us,” Kyle said. “Really appreciate it, but you can just drop us off at the nearest landmass. I’m sure you throw an underwater bondage party with the best of them, but that’s not our scene.”

Prasad chuckled before coughing in spurts. He placed his hand on his chest, which seemed to stop the coughs. “Those are controls, not restraints.”

“Controls, restraints, pleasure shackles...Call them whatever you like, it’s still a ‘no thanks’ on any hogtie sex party plans you might have.”

“No, you misunderstand,” Prasad said, fighting back a smile. “They’re controls like a car’s steering wheel or the reins of horse-drawn carriage. I use them to control the Oannes.”

Tayla and Kyle both gave Prasad glazed-over looks.

“I should really just start at the beginning...Please sit down.” Prasad motioned towards benches towards the edge of the chamber.

Tayla walked over to a bench and plonked herself down on it. “Don’t mind if I do.”

“I’ll stand,” Kyle said. “Thank you.”

“I can’t say I blame you for not trusting me immediately,” Prasad admitted. “The non-infected are turning on each other out there, squabbling over uncontaminated water, and some even killing over it.”

Prasad sauntered over to a bench and sat. An awkward moment later, Kyle followed suit somewhat begrudgingly.

“The day of the Hydroez outbreak, I was...exploring a seaside cliff. I had heard that there were some cliff-face caves, so I thought I’d have a climb down. Somehow, a cable broke and I fell fully expecting to die. That’s when the Oannes shot up out of the water and broke my fall halfway up the cliff. The metal outer shell of the Oannes felt like a flexible net with lots of give, but without the elastic bounce you’d expect from say a trampoline. In fact, I recall it cradled my body. The top of the Oannes returned to the flat shape you saw today and then the hatch opened.”

“Who came out?” Tayla asked.

“That’s just it. *No one* came out. After half a minute I mustered enough courage to crawl closer and peer inside. I saw no one. I decided to go look for the person who rescued me inside, expecting to find a billionaire adventurer like Bronson Tusk or some military personnel. I searched the entire vessel, but I found no one.” His cough returned, but he managed to stop it at a pair. “Anyhow, I came to the conclusion that the vessel was either remotely controlled or possessed some form of artificial intelligence. Since then I’ve settled on the latter, but this AI seems bent on not controlling the Oannes. It appears to prefer a human crew at the helm.”

“How do you come to that conclusion?” Kyle asked.

“Look around you. All these copper pictorial plates joined in sequences of three are all aimed at teaching us how to operate the Oannes in the simplest way possible. The illustrations show control actions and their effects from top to bottom in such a way that literacy or specific training is not a requirement. It’s as if whoever designed the Oannes expected people to stumble upon it and had a low opinion of the average person’s intelligence. Monkey see. Monkey do.”

“There’s something I don’t understand, Doctor Prasad,” Tayla said.

“Please call me Prasad.”

“Why do you call this wheel vehicle the Oannes?”

“Well, as you can imagine, I wanted to find out who built this marvel. I spent several hours just examining all the pictorials and even the blank wall to find a clue related to its origin. Unfortunately, to date that answer has eluded me.” Prasad took a few deep breaths. “The only writing I found was some ancient Babylonian script that I couldn’t decipher. I knew the symbols were Babylonian, because I had once dated an archaeologist who specialised in ancient Babylonian artefacts. Heather. She was very pretty.” Prasad got a faraway look in his eye.

“Umm...Prasad,” Kyle said.

“My apologies for that. I haven’t thought of the lovely Heather in years. Anyway, the *dumbed down* teaching methodology and finding Babylonian symbols reminded me of the myth of Oannes. According to legend, Oannes was a creature with the head and feet of a man, but had the body of a fish and a tail. This strange amphibious creature who spoke like a man emerged from the sea beside Babylon and taught the locals writing, science, construction, and laws. Upon leaving, Oannes left his human students a book with all his teachings.”

“I suppose that make sense,” Tayla said. “What’ve you been doing since you came across the Oannes?”

“It came across me,” Prasad said. “First, I tried to make sense of some of the pictorial instructions. Once I mastered the main instructions especially those concerned with steering and offensive manoeuvres, I decided to search for uncontaminated water sources and uninfected survivors in trouble.”

“Like us?”

“Yes. I picked up your signatures as well as those of that lone hydro from about ninety miles away. The Oannes can really move—”

“Picked up our signatures?”

“Ah yes, let me show you.” Prasad got up and moved towards the wall at the front of the room, his pace markedly slower than when they first met him. Kyle and Tayla followed him.

Prasad touched a copper plate with a circle on it. Suddenly, one quarter of the circular white wall became a giant monitor containing a black interactive map of a section of the Atlantic and the west coast. The ridges of the coastline stood out in white. There were also some oceanic details in grey relief.

“The centre point is the Oannes,” Prasad explained. “There.” He pointed to a red V on the map. “It took a while, but I deduced that the red symbols are Hydroez. The two of you displayed as green Xs, because you’re uninfected humans.”

“What’s that then?” Tayla asked, pointing at an orange triangle.

“I’ve been detecting those consistently since the day I learnt to use this signature map. They’re drones, apparently capable of high altitude flight. At first I thought they were military, but the military would launch drones from Navy carriers and there have been no navy vessels in the area of ocean I’ve been exploring.”

“So, privateers are launching these drones from a private vessel?” Kyle asked.

“The drones travel back and forth at regular intervals. And there are so few vessels sailing the world’s oceans in general and this patch of ocean seems to be particularly void of traffic. Taken all of that into account, it’s hard to believe they’re being launched at sea.”

“You suspect the launch platform is on an island?” Tayla asked.

“I’m beginning to think so, but for what purpose I don’t know. By the way, forgive me for prying, but what were the two of doing so far from the mainland?”

“Tayla wanted to find and search a small mobile oil rig. We’d heard about a possible illegal drilling operation from informants before the world went all ‘night of the swimming dead’ and wanted to organise a marine protest, but now Tayla is convinced there’s a link between drilling and the rise of the hydroez.”

Prasad smiled through a sudden burst of coughs. “Excuse me. Must be my allergies...Well, Tayla, your theory makes a lot more sense than the pirate curse theory.”

Tayla and Kyle looked puzzled.

“Right after the first hydroez report, some crazy person broadcasting on radio claimed hydroez were created when people broke the chains on the locker belonging to one Davey Jones. Of course, a month ago I would’ve called the idea of a wheel-shaped, amphibious submarine crazy.”

“And four months ago, water-zombies would’ve sounded even crazier.”

“Exactly... You know, I could take us to that oil rig, if you still want to check it out. The Oannes can detect any hydroez in the area. It would give me the opportunity to demonstrate how some of its controls work.”

#

After climbing into the circular control ring, Prasad looked like someone attempting to turn the da Vinci’s Vitruvian man into a coin. At once, many copper pictorial plates on the wall switched their positions. Five pictorials came to rest directly in front of him.

“Those are the main instructions for steering,” Prasad explained. “The mysterious engineer who built the Oannes had little faith in the ability of humans to learn and recall.”

Prasad mimicked the pictorial in the centre position. The Oannes cut through the depths in surprising silence. Kyle and Tayla stared at a monitor displaying what lay in

the direction the vessel travelled. Next to the live video monitor, the interactive map that Prasad had shown them earlier tracked their progress. It was clear that the Oannes was travelling at a tremendous speed, because the map showed the oil rig getting bigger by the second.

The Oannes came to a gentle stop.

"We've arrived," Prasad said. "The map shows no red symbols, so it's safe to explore the oil rig. One moment, please." Prasad followed the instructions of another copper pictorial.

His fellow travellers felt a faint jolt reminiscent of an elevator powering its way upward.

"We're hovering in midair parallel to the rig's platform," Prasad revealed. "That should make it easier to board the oil rig."

"Are you *absolutely* sure this isn't a UFO?" Tayla asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Unfortunately, I've yet to discover a means of communication between the Oannes and an *away team*, if you'll excuse the use of the sci-fi concept. I have, however, discovered the equivalent of a loud car horn. I'll use it if hydroez breach the map's sensory radius. You'll recognise it when you hear it. I'll be up here waiting."

"I suppose you haven't found any weapons we could use?" Kyle asked.

"No, but I did discover these a while back." Prasad moved his arm holds away from the inner ring into a forward position, bent his elbows, pointed his hands up, and then pulled them in front of his face.

A panel in the wall opened, revealing a large drawer. Inside, Kyle found three visors and three bodysuits. The visors were completely transparent and could cover a face from forehead to chin. The bodysuits could sheath the rest of one's body.

"As far as I can tell, those visors work in similar fashion to the map except they detect micro-traces. The first time I put one on, I saw traces of my skin cells and prints where I'd touched the plates, etcetera. Since then, I've also found two uncontaminated water sources using it. It should help detect any hydro genetic materials on the rig."

#

"Do you think we can trust Prasad?" Kyle asked, entering the automatic doors of the rig station. "I mean he could just leave us here."

"I don't think we have a choice," Tayla said. "Besides, if he wanted to, he could've left us to die at the incisors of that hydro earlier."

Darkness encased the interior of the oil rig station, but the couple's visors illuminated all that they saw. Signs that the people operating the oil rig departed quickly dotted the station. The crew hadn't bothered to secure equipment worth millions. They hadn't switched off the public announcement system, evident by the audible static echo.

Level by level, section by section, room by room, the explorers found no signs of hydroez. No genetic traces. No sign that the infected had rampaged. Tayla and Kyle merely unearthed traces of the panic that the news of *the watery graveless* had created.

"I don't think we're going to find anything," Kyle said, flipping through the documents he found on a desk.

"I guess I shouldn't have expected a smoking gun to be in some filing cabinet," Tayla said, a degree of dejection evident in her tone. "Maybe it's time I accepted that an evil corporation might *not* be responsible for the water-zombie apocalypse."

"Not finding evidence here just tells us where the answer isn't and actually brings us closer to the real answer," Kyle explained.

"Nerd." Tayla smiled.

An almighty bugle sound reverberated through the oil rig.

"That must be Prasad's car horn!" Kyle said. "Let's get out of here!"

When they reached the exterior platform of the rig, the Oannes no longer levitated alongside it.

"Please tell me the Oannes can turn invisible," Tayla said, anxiously scanning the edge of the platform.

"We better get inside before *those* hydroez reach the rig." He pointed across the waves toward the four terrifying breaststrokes visible in the light of dawn. "Damn it, Prasad! Where are you?"

Just then the water between the hydroez and the oil rig churned up like a witch's brew. The Oannes shot up from beneath the waves while spinning in place. Before the hydroez could react, the Oannes hit the undead things like they were targets in a pinball machine. Some hydroez catapulted through the air and others split into bloody halves.

The Oannes slowed to a non-lethal pace and levitated to Kyle and Tayla's level. The hatch opened, but strangely Prasad did not meet them at the entrance as he did previously. The danger trumped their surprise, so they scurried inside.

They found Prasad passed out still in the steering ring. They removed Prasad from the ring, but could not wake him.

Tayla felt his neck for a pulse. "It's there but faint."

Pictorial copper plates on the circular wall changed their mounted orbits. One pictorial plate rested on a spot on the wall in front of them, isolated from the other plates. The first parallelogram showed a human figure doubled over. The second depicted another human figure in the control ring to the right of the centre steering ring. The third portrayed a human figure laid on a table with some sort of spray dropping on him.

"Somehow the Oannes detected Prasad's loss of consciousness and switched to auto-pilot," Kyle deduced. "I think it wants us to follow these instructions."

"Let's do it."

#

Prasad awoke and sat up on the dark metallic table. "Too consistent," Prasad muttered. "Their paths are too consistent!" His eyes darted around the room.

"Prasad, thank goodness you're conscious!" Kyle said.

"Where am I?"

"We found you passed out in the...uh...control room," Tayla said.

"Bridge," Kyle said. "On a ship, they called a bridge."

"The Oannes showed us a new pictorial. We followed the instructions and then a door just formed in the wall. It opened and as per instructions we put you on this table in this room."

"I've never been in this room. Didn't even know it existed."

"Tayla, you're leaving out the most incredible part. Once we placed you on the table, hundreds of little spheres dropped on top of you. They sort of looked like ball bearings. Anyway, instead of rolling off of you onto the floor, the tiny spheres levitated and collected in that container over there." Kyle gestured towards an inverted black cone mounted on the wall. "How do you feel?"

"Better than I have in months," Prasad said. "My breathing is less laboured."

"Months?" Tayla asked.

Prasad averted his eyes for a moment, sighed, and looked at his fellow travellers. “I haven’t been completely honest with the two of you. When I came across the Oannes initially, I wasn’t *exploring* a cliff side. In truth, I stood at the edge...and at the end of my rope. Doctors told me I had ten months to live and that was two months ago. My lungs. It was going to get rough and I was going to end it that day before the Oannes saved me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kyle said.

“Me too.” Tayla felt her eyes getting moist.

An uncomfortable silence lingered while Prasad got off of the table.

“Prasad,” Kyle said. “When you woke up just now, you weren’t completely lucid, but you mentioned something about ‘their paths are too consistent.’ What did you mean by that?”

Prasad looked at Kyle in a quizzical fashion, but then it came back to him. “It was something I dreamt while I was under. I dreamt that I was looking at the signature map, but time was compressed somehow. I was seeing the drone flight paths for each day, perhaps two weeks’ worth, displayed a few seconds apart. That’s when realised that their flight paths are too consistent to be steered by human hands.”

“What do you mean by consistent?” Tayla asked.

“Even the very best human drone pilots make micro-corrections of a degree or two to stay on their assigned flight paths. This is especially evident after making a turn. I didn’t notice this earlier, but these drones make no such adjustments, meaning they are always precisely on the correct flight paths. The only way that is achievable is if the drones are piloted by artificial intelligence.”

“Should we really believe something that you dreamt?” Tayla asked. “Isn’t that...um, I don’t know, whacky?”

“There are historical precedents for such dream-assisted insights,” Prasad said. “For example, a chemist name Kekulé discovered that the benzene molecule has a ring-like structure after dreaming of a snake eating its own tail. I think it’s at least worth investigating whether my dream memory matches the actual signature map.”

“And if it does?” Tayla asked.

“Then we track the drones back to their base,” Kyle said. “The drones and the hydroez might be connected somehow. You might get your evil corporation, after all.”

#

They followed a drone for thousands of miles in a southerly direction, passing Terra del Fuego, and then heading northwest into the Pacific. The Oannes glided beneath the waves, a precaution felt necessary by its makeshift crew. “The drone’s keeping to international airspace,” Prasad noted. “I suppose that’s logical if the drone flights began before the day of the hydroez.”

The drone landed on an island, which the interactive map depicted as possessing an almost perfect crescent moon shape. A small bay at the northern tip of the island represented the only deviation from a full crescent.

Prasad energetically searched for a particular copper plate pictorial on the wall.

“What’re you looking for?” Kyle asked.

“The instructions for doing a subterranean scan,” Prasad said. “Found it. We need to see what secrets the island is hiding.” He rushed to the control ring on the left of the centre steering ring and climbed into position.

With a few movements of his hands, the signature map transformed into a side-on view of the island above and below the water. The image changed, removing vertical layers of land and ocean. It paused whenever notable features were uncovered.

The scan revealed the small bay to be a caldera. On land, the scan highlighted some mining infrastructure. Finally, the drone base came into view.

The island drone base stood deserted, the interactive signature map told them. The waters surrounding the isle also registered as hydro-free.

“It’s time we ascended,” Kyle said.

“Yeah,” Tayla said. “We need to find out what the drones are for.”

“We should be careful,” Prasad said. “Someone might not like us snooping around. On the other hand, it’ll give me the opportunity to show off the amphibious capabilities of the good ship Oannes.”

“After we disembark,” Kyle said, “we should suit up again. We’ll also need those visors in order to receive site-specific data in real time.”

“Agreed. I’ve been onboard for weeks and I’m still blown away by the level of engineering evident in the Oannes and its tools.”

Tayla mused at the giddiness Kyle and Prasad displayed during their current island expedition planning session. “Nerds,” she muttered.

#

It took quite some convincing, but Kyle managed to persuade Tayla to stay onboard. At first, he appealed to her sense of logic. As scientists, Prasad and Kyle were best qualified to observe the drone base and determine its purpose. That didn't sway her at all.

Eventually, Prasad giving Tayla a crash course in controlling the Oannes did the trick. If the men encountered trouble, Tayla would be their only hope, Prasad insisted.

The Oannes came ashore and the men disembarked on the beach. The drone base lay less than a mile inland, so the men decided on a gentle pace. Prasad soon overtook Kyle, the latter bemoaning his lack of fitness.

"Kyle? Prasad? Can you hear me?"

Both men froze in their tracks.

"Tayla?" Kyle asked. "How are we hearing you?"

"If you can hear me, press the visor over your left temple," Tayla said.

Both men complied with Tayla's instructions. "I guess you didn't hear me the first time, so I'll repeat. How are we hearing you?"

"I found a pictorial that showed me that if I donned a visor as well, I could communicate with the two of you."

"Remarkable," Prasad said. "Perhaps you should be in charge of steering the Oannes in future."

"Thanks, but that's not all. If you press your right temple, then I can see what you're seeing."

"It would be good to have another set of eyes," Prasad admitted.

Kyle pressed the right side of his visor.

They proceeded in a deliberate fashion through a line of trees until a large patch of overgrown grass lay ahead of them.

"There!" Tayla said. "Just beyond that ridge I think I see the top of a fence."

Prasad approached the ridge with Kyle close behind. "Good eye. It *is* a fence, an electrified one by the looks of it. Probably solar-powered, if it's been running since the outbreak."

"Tayla, we're going to look for a way in," Kyle reported.

"Perhaps we'll find an entrance by following the fence," Prasad suggested.

"Sounds like a plan," Tayla said. "Kyle, keep me...sighted."

“You’re enjoying this too much,” Kyle teased.

They hiked for seven minutes as fast as the variable terrain allowed them. The fence winded down and around a gully before ascending back to the previous level. For the first time during their terrestrial expedition, the explorers could see the drone launch facility.

“We’re getting close.”

“Look.” Prasad pointed toward a line next to the drone launch facility. Initially, Kyle struggled to see anything where Prasad’s finger aimed. Suddenly, movement close to ground caught his eyes. A train, a third of the height of a regular train and pulling five containers, came into view. The *kid’s train* sped towards the drone launch facility, only stopping when about ten feet away from the entrance.

Every three minutes the train moved forward, allowing one train car at a time to enter. Once the entire train disappeared into the facility, they stood transfixed. After five minutes, the train departed just as quickly as it had arrived. Soon after, a drone launched every thirty seconds or so.

“That train is heading back in that direction,” Prasad said. “That’s where that mining operation is located. Strange. Perhaps we should...”

“What is it?”

“I’m picking up microscopic traces of hydro genetic material as well as a greyish yellow powder on the tracks.”

“Are those traces hydro blood from an attack?”

“I doubt it. More likely the traces are microbes.”

Not far from their vantage point, Kyle spotted a sign on the fence and rushed towards it. The sign read: *Vanderbilt Industries cloud-seeding project. Authorized personnel only.*

“Einstein’s comb!” Prasad exclaimed. “We need to get back to the Oannes. I’ll explain everything once we’re back onboard.” Prasad raced back the way they came. Kyle, nearly twenty years his junior, struggled to keep up.

#

Kyle and Tayla sat on the benches in the circular room aboard the Oannes awaiting Prasad’s words.

The mining operation, the cloud-seeding operation, and the hydroez – they’re all connected. I think it’s fair to deduce from what we saw on the island that the

Vanderbilt cloud-seeding project is using mined minerals and an inorganic compound called silver iodide, which is the greyish yellow powder we spotted on the tracks. In terms of success rate, cloud-seeding has a spotted history. That's partly why those in the field are always experimenting to find a cloud-seeding mix that will produce a greater rainfall yield."

"Makes sense," Tayla said. "Vanderbilt was going green across many of its business units. I wrote a think piece on it a year ago."

"You recall the Oannes revealed that the small bay at the northern most edge of the island is in fact a caldera...a dormant volcano filled with water?"

"Yes."

"Well, volcanic activity has a way of moving things around in the deep earth. Bear with me here. What if the hydroez or more specifically the hydro virus is a microbial extremophile that has been buried here for billions of years?"

"What's an extremophile?" Tayla asked.

"I speak under correction," Kyle said, "but extremophiles are organisms that survive in adverse conditions that would kill most other animals. For example, extreme temperatures, lack of light, lack of organic nutrients, etcetera."

"That's quite an accurate definition," Prasad said. "Let's imagine a time, perhaps millions of years ago, when volcanic activity formed this island. Let's suppose that an eruption pushes the hydroez microbes that have survived as an extremophile species closer to the surface without exposing them to the air. At the same time, we should recognise that on isolated islands like this one evolution takes strange and often unique turns. Fast forward to five years ago, when mining operations extracted minerals on the island, they might also have extracted the hydroez microbes. Fast forward to six months ago and Vanderbilt converts his mine into the cloud-seeding project to counter drought weather patterns, inadvertently distributing the microbes."

"I think you're on to something," Kyle remarked. "It would explain the contamination of the fresh water sources quite elegantly."

"Okay, now so we think we know what happened," Tayla said. "What can we do about it?"

"I have no clue," Prasad said.

#

After they had captured a hydro with a neural scrambling weapon that the Oannes gifted to them, they treated the creature on the table that had brought Prasad back to consciousness. Next, they set the Oannes down within the grounds of the drone launch facility and waited.

The train arrived on schedule as if it transported impatient passengers with important appointments to keep. Once it stopped, the suited trio added the new Oannes spheres to the loads of the train cars.

The first germ of the idea came when Tayla remarked that there was more colour in Prasad's face. This made Prasad, a man often drowning in thoughts of historic epochs, think about his present condition. He hadn't suffered a coughing spell, which had been an hourly occurrence for months, in nearly a day. His other symptoms, including a chronic lack of energy, had also vanished. In all the excitement of their voyage, he hadn't drawn the conclusion that his body had been screaming.

The Oannes had cured him and, in so doing, gave him a future. With some luck, the great teacher from the sea could do the same for all of humanity.

L.O.C's

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

July 26, 2019.

Dear SFFSAns

I am probably way behind with this, but I have here issue 178 of Probe, and it is dated December of 2018. Am I really late, or did it get sent out late, or has the global post office sent it around the world a few times before mailing it here? No matter, a letter of comment, and I will see what I can say.

An extremely detailed and interesting wraparound cover. Excellent work, Gary Kuyper! Great colour in it, too

We are having a warm summer here in Toronto, but it has seldom gotten above 32°C, maybe once or twice. I see that Europe is having an unprecedented heat wave, with some places suffering under temperatures above 40°C. That means fatalities, both human and animal, and scenes of people trying to escape the heat in public fountains. There are more than three coins in the fountains

I see that SFFSA had its 50th anniversary in June! Congratulations! I did send in some good words for it. But, it was to go into issue 180? Either I am way behind, or there are issues 179 and 180 coming here via the post office sometime in the future.

Mech for Life is an excellent story, even with the difficulty of getting through what the author calls New-Spel. I suspect the language will go that way in the future; it's heading that way now, and I am stubborn in the English language I learned being used correctly.

Rain Maker...I have recently read that plants can feel pain, and the smell of freshly-cut grass is actually a symptom of that pain and distress. It does make me wonder if, for example, a maple tree would feel pain when it is tapped for its sap to make maple syrup? Alama seems to feel something when the tribesmen cut into it, but what it is looks more fulfilling than painful. We are learning more and more that we have ruined our planet, and the demand for money and power will ensure that those who care, those who want to save what little we have left, will be thwarted at every turn, and pushed aside by the powerful.

Just some days ago, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first manned Moon landing. We watched various documentaries, saw something about the restoration of Mission Control for Apollo 11, and saw people talking about those days past. And we are back to our usual racist/sexist/anti-non-Christian nonsense. Those days 50 years ago brought so many of us together in a heady time of adventure. I think we could use some adventure these days.

I found The Cloaker as an interesting mystery, but I cannot offer any more comments than that. And, I will wind this up, and get it to you as soon as the Web allows. Many thanks, happy anniversary, and I hope more issues are coming soon.

And

Dear SFFSAns:

Many thanks for issues 179 and 180 of Probe, and congratulations on your 50th anniversary. I apologize for being so late with this, so I will get moving.

179...your 50th anniversary is definitely something to celebrate, and cultivate for future years. Science fiction and fantasy has brought us all together, generations of us, and we have a need for friends and acquaintances in this community that keeps us together. In this era of miniscule attention spans, the appreciation for imagination, wit and competence sets us apart from the average person. I wish we could break bread with you at a big braai, but there is far too much geography in the way. Still, I celebrate with you.

Fifty years is a long time for anything these days, but the love of imaginative genre is especially binding. Bruce Gillespie has issues his 50th anniversary zines of SF Commentary, which includes his 100th issue. The modern SF we enjoy goes back to 1929, so our SF is 90 years old, fandom is about 80, and I track my own involvement back to a club on the Canadian west coast in 1977, so that's 42 years for me.

Sheryl's loc...I find work regularly? If only that were true. My work is usually in editorial and publishing, and I have had too many jobs treat me as a liability, rather than an asset. The last job I had, the bulk of my salary came from a government programme, and as soon as the programme ended, so did my job. That job ended a year and a half ago, and on the advice of my financial planner, I applied for my government pension, so you could say I am involuntarily semi-retired. However, the job search does continue, and in the meantime, I am trying to establish myself as a book and magazine editor. I have worked on four issues of the relaunch of Amazing Stories Magazine, and I have done some work on two books. Wish me luck on this.

I did see that this letter in this issue is on Probe 175...if you did not get previous letters, for the intervening issues, please do let me know.

180... The big issue, the 50th anniversary issue, is here. Once again, congratulations to all of you. Hello, Gail and Andrew, you must be proud of this club, and where it has gone over the decades. And, greetings to Tex Cooper who has probably wondered why he's been seeing my name all over this zine for too many years. Hello

to Tony Davis, just over in Thornhill!, and there's Yvonne and me, Yvonne as Queen Victoria. What a great photo you used. It was a pleasure to see so many of you at the Worldcons in Baltimore and Toronto. I still have the t-shirt from Torcon 3 with your flag on the back.

What a great collection of memories, and now, I know what many of you look like. (Remember, I don't always wear a top hat, although my Facebook page might convince you otherwise.) Grant, haven't seen you in some years. So many covers mean so many memories, for I am proud to say I have a good run of this title. This is an issue worthy of .pdfing, and sending around the world. I hope you told File 770 about the anniversary.

Anyway, it is getting close to dinner time...I hope issue 181 is on the go, for it is time to start up the next 50 years for the club. Many thanks for this, and I hope to see the next issue soon. Many thanks for including me with your club all these years.

Yours, Lloyd Penny

Wormholes

Norman Pringle, AL Du Pisani, Eileen Jamieson.

He had done all that was ordered. The transmissions that carried the instructions had driven him almost mad because the constant hum in his senses never let up., even when he was performing the necessary actions. He had grown the viruses for the plague and made the arrangements to distribute it through unwitting international travellers. As a disease carried on the breath, it spread lightening rapidity. After a year –long contagious stage, it struck down four-fifths of the Earth's population. Civilization collapsed. The Earth was now ripe for conquest by his own trace. The noise was ended now

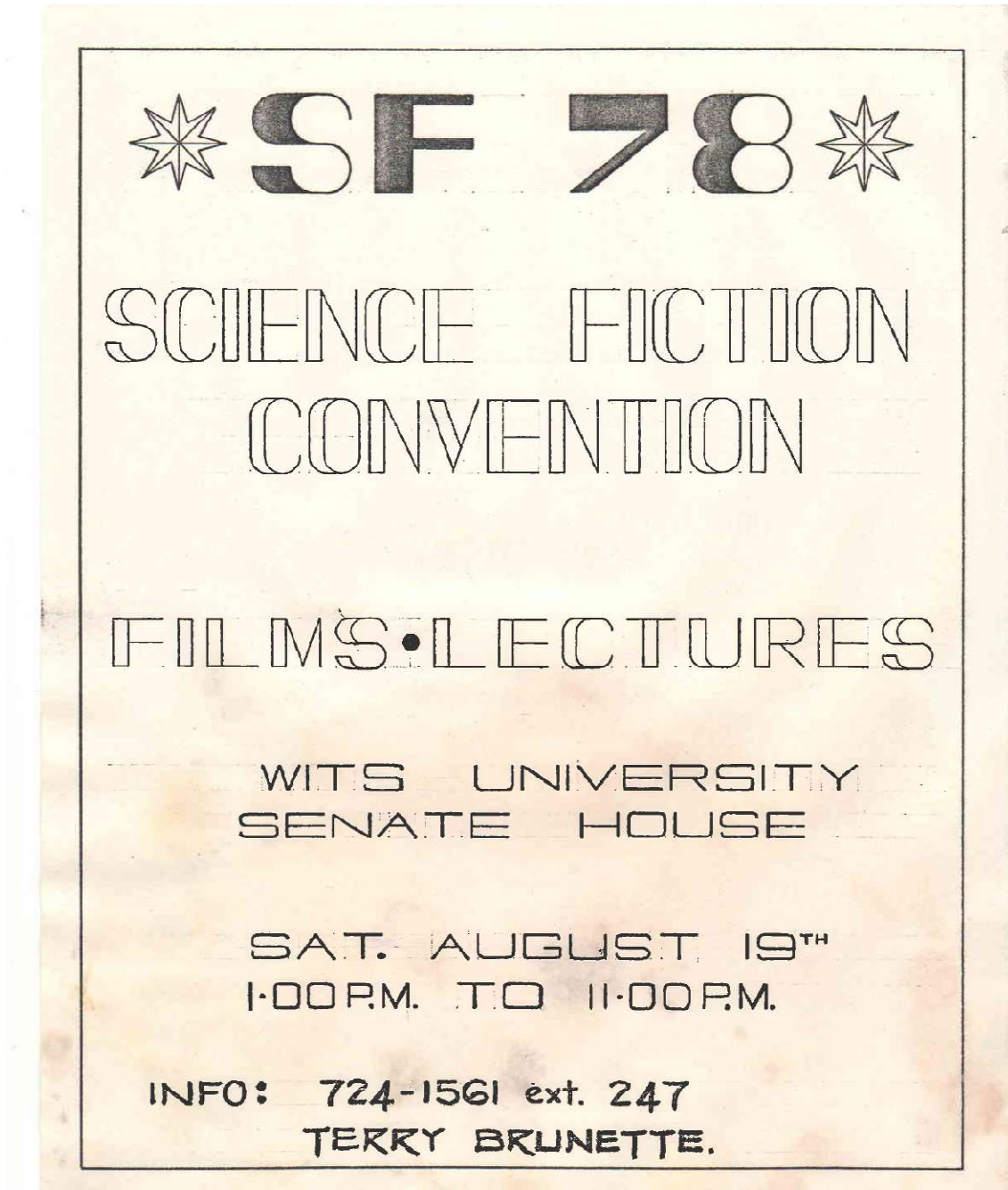
Andrew Jamieson, Ron Cowley, Nial Mollison, Gavin Kreuter

The troubled space ship slipped out of hyperspace. Multiple alarms blaring, the mental fog of the transition, no-one knowing which alarm was going off. As reality returned which alarm would trigger in instant transition to normal space. The transition safety flux capacitor identified by the glaring red light made this obviously the cause. The Captain calling Engineering shouted down the intercom "Please check circuit 22B-8-9-23". The still dizzy engineer stumbled to the panel and with a

broad smile identified the problem. As he pulled the fried mouse by its tail from the circuitry the noise was ended now.

Blast from the Past – SFSA's First Convention

August 1978



science

fiction

SF78

science

fact

FIRST S.A. S.F. CONVENTION

SATURDAY, AUGUST 19, 1978 from 13h00 to 23h00

SENATE HOUSE BASEMENT, UNIVERSITY OF WITWATERSRAND.

GUEST OF HONOUR : NIGEL KANE

SEMINARS : SCIENCE DISPLAYS : ONGOING FILMS

PROGRAMME :

Registration	12h30 - 13h00
Opening (Nigel Kane)	13h00 - 13h15
Seminar :	
Literature	13h30 - 14h30
Panel Discussion	14h45 - 15h45
Seminar :	
Astronomy	16h00 - 17h00
Panel Discussion	17h15 - 18h15
Seminar :	
Medicine	19h00 - 20h00
Panel Discussion	20h15 - 21h15
S.A. 2000	21h30 - 23h00

WRITING SEMINARS : 14h30 - 16h00 and 20h00 - 21h30

Admission : Adults R4,00 Children R1,00

More details obtainable from SFSA, Box 27435, Sunnyside, 0132.

SCIENCE FICTION

SCIENCE FACT

WITS UNIVERSITY SENATE HOUSE BASEMENT
SATURDAY, 19TH AUGUST, 1978
1 p.m. - 11 p.m.

Ongoing films throughout Convention

Science Displays

- Lectures and Seminars:
1. "Science Fiction as Literature"
- Barry Ronge
 2. "Space - the Final Frontier"
- Jack Bennett
 3. "Cloning"
- Prof. Nancy von Schaik
 4. "South Africa in the Year 2000"
- Keyan Tomaselli

The Master of Ceremonies is the noted Broadcaster
and Journalist, Nigel Kane.

The timetable will be as follows:

Registration: 12,30 - 1,00
Opening : 1,00 - 1,15 by Nigel Kane.

<u>Lectures</u>		<u>Films</u>	
Literature	(L) 1,20 - 2,30	1,30	Zardoz
	(P) 2,45 - 3,45	± 3,10	Time Machine
Astronomy	(L) 4,00 - 5,00	± 4,50	Dark Star
	(P) 5,15 - 6,15	± 6,30	Soylent Green
		± 8,30	The Power
Medicine	(L) 7,00 - 8,00		
	(P) 8,15 - 9,15		
SA 2000	9,30 - 11,00		
(Lectures = L)			
(Panels = P)			

Presented by SFFSA - The Science Fiction Club of South Africa.

Pictures from the 50th Anniversary Dinner



SFFSA



James Dryja, Ian Jamieson, Gail Jamieson



Digby Ricci, Mark Sandham, Nial Mollison

