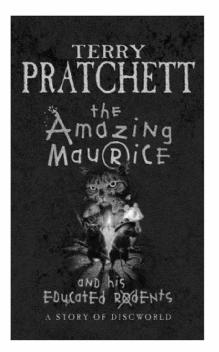
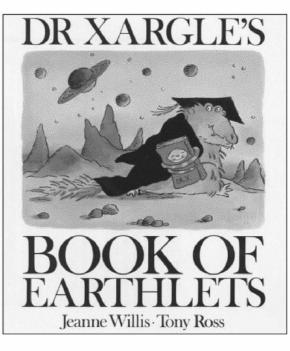
# Children's

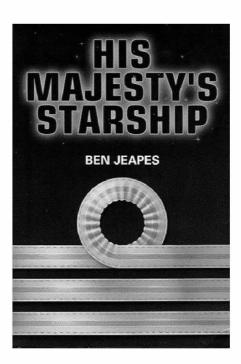




# Science

# **Fiction**





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The Critical Journal of the BSFA

# Vector 2/7

## THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BFSA

## **CONTENTS**

- 3 Editorial The View from the Children's Lit Section by Andrew M. Butler
- 3 TO Letters to Vector
- 4 Catching 'em Young
  Farah Mendlesohn on picture book sffor the under sevens
- 8 How I became a children's author

Ben Jeapes on his career as an author (so far)

## 10 'A Story about Stories'

Andrew M. Butler on Terry Pratichett's The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents

## 12 The Games

Gwyneth Jones delves into computer games

## 17 Beyond the Scientific Romances

Andrew M. Butler on five early H.C. Wells novels

20 First Impræssions Book Reviews edited by Steve Yeffery

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## **Editorial** • The View from the Children's Lit Section

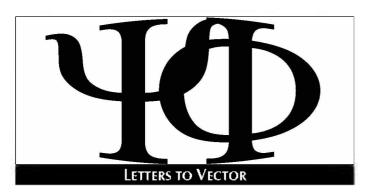
t can't have escaped anyone's notice that we are surrounded by Harry Potter. Books, toys, games, mugs, bubblebaths, notebooks, diaries, calendars, all manner of memorabilia and merchandising. The fourth novel has long since gone into paperback and there's no sign of the fifth title (perhaps he's proving particularly stubborn as he hits puberty), and it seems as if every third cinema screen is showing the second movie. Meanwhile Philip Pullman pops up everywhere — on the programme which isn't Kaleidoscope, on Desert Island Discs — and he seems to have gone back to the earlier version of Count Karlstein rather than the illustrated version. I like to think we got to him pretty early at Vector — Justina Robson did an appreciation of Northern Lights before The Subtle Knife had appeared.

But meanwhile much is going on in the children's literature section of bookshops. There were the Web novels a few years ago, which attracted authors like Stephen Baxter (author of Omegatropic), Ken MacLeod and Pat Cadigan, but more recently Neil Gaiman and Clive Barker have written for children, and Terry Pratchett has written an eighth novel for children (see my piece on it in this issue). Gwyneth Jones who features in these pages - has long maintained a successful alter ego of Ann Halam; Halam, having produced interesting fantasy and horror, has for now moved into science fiction, exploring issues around vivisection and genetic engineering. (And as she discusses in her article here, she's taken an interest in computer games in recent years.) Darren O'Shaughnessy, author of Ayumarca (1999), is about eight volumes into his alter ego Darren Shan's vampire novels.

At the same time there are a whole series of writers who are primarily writing for children. Ben Jeapes is published by Scholastic, having more or less fallen into writing children's fiction - a story he recounts in these pages. Philip Reeves is another Scholastic discovery, his Mortal Engines offering a steampunk future. The Borribles trilogy has been revised and re-released. The (alas pseudonymous) Lemony Snicket is taking us through the traumatic life of the Baudelaire children in the multi-volumed A Series of Unfortunate Events - and who dares say that this is mainstream or historical or horror or fantasy fiction? Meanwhile British ex-pat Gillian Rubinstein has been producing novels of genre interest for over fifteen years, sometimes quietly, sometimes controversially, and now may (or may not) have achieved paydirt after a bidding war for Lian Hearn's Across the Nightingale Floor. She even achieved the dubious honour of a review in Private Eye, where her originality is called into question (as if any of her alleged models were entirely original) by someone who had a rather confused notion of her publishing history.

From picture books (see Farah Mendlesohn's article in this issue) to Young Adult fiction, there is something to read in sf, horror and fantasy – and you don't have to acquire a child to read it. Things seem to be booming, as the pendulum swings back from the new realism of the 1970s and 1980s to a modified fantasy. We hope to come back to children's fiction in the near future – if only because a number of pieces never quite made it in time for this issue (not that there was any spare space). Feel free to send ideas, comments and articles to the editorial address.

## Andrew M Butler – Winter 2002



## From Brian W.Aldiss

The review in *Vector* 225 [by Jon Wallace] of my new novel *Super-State* is a bit adrift.

Your reviewer wastes much of his time trying to establish a category of book he dubs 'English'. I certainly am English but, as for categorisation, how come my novel is full of foreigners – blacks and Muslims as well as a plentiful array of Europeans, since much of the narrative is set in Europe? I wonder what other 'English' novel is so decidedly European – and is currently enjoying a warm reception in France.

The claim that 'nothing really happens' is absurd. The following incidents occur: a wedding party is broken up by a stampede of wild horses; the western coasts of France, Ireland and Britain are inundated by a tsunami, where a

loving inter-racial couple (among many others) is drowned; an immigrant is kidnapped; two subversives murder each other in the presidential palace; an unmarried mother commits suicide; the EU declares war on an eastern country, and its Rapid Reaction Force is massacred to a man; another officer is shot in his hotel at Christmas; a ferocious-seeming dragon arises from the swollen waters of the Seine. And so on. The claim that nothing happens is totally false. There is also a polemic running through the novel, which seeks to prove that the human species is a few apples short of the tree of knowledge. Evidently your reviewer did not notice that. There is also an attempt to improve the lot of the poor by mathematical process. Your reviewer is entitled, through limitation of intellect, to find that boring. But it beats me he finds the disastrous space expedition to Europa 'strangely uninteresting'. I found it strangely compelling; I was on the edge of my seat when writing it!

The reviewer concludes with a cliched insult, suggesting I should get out more. In this last year or two I have been places he has never dreamed of!

Letters to Vector should be sent to Andrew M Butler, D28, Dept of Arts and Media, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, High Wycombe, HP11 2JZ or emailed to ambutler@enterprise.net and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.

SCIENCE FICTION IS AVAILABLE FOR PEOPLE OF ALL AGES – AND FOUNDATION EDITOR FARAH MENDLESCOHN NOW EXAMINES THE LOWER AGE RANGE, LOOKING AT SCIENCE FICTION PICTURE BOOKS.

## Catching 'em Young: picture book science fiction for the under sevens by Farah Mendlesohn

Imost every panel I have ever been on which claims to be about children's science fliction and fantasy has turned to an exclusive discussion of fantasy. This turned to an exclusive discussion of fantasy. This turned to an exclusive discussion of fantasy. There title of the panel omitted the word 'fantasy'. There simply isn't much science fiction for children around. Curious about this, I started on a project exploring what is out there, and why there is so little of it. I've actually found quite a lot, enough to begin thinking about the structures of science fiction and how to map it onto children's cognitive development and, perhaps more importantly, what writers expect of children's cognitive development. This essay,

however, doesn't really treat this idea. It considers only children's picture books in an attempt to find a few that qualify as 'real' science fiction and which can be used to corrupt our own children in their pushchairs and make sure fandom survives a few more generations.

So first, what definition of science fiction am I using to assess these books, what do I mean by 'real' science fiction? A science fiction tale is more than a collection of icons. Heinlein complained bitterly about the kind of science fiction which merely substituted the likes of 'maarwg' for 'rabbit' and then proceeded to become a standard boys' adventure story. A science fiction story needs to posit a 'what if', to have some sense of cognitive estrangement, and preferably to have a sense of consequences. In a lot of the children's science fiction (for all ages) I've read recently, this last is missing, instead we have the kind of return and healing that John Clute has suggested is fundamental to much fantasy. Because there is very little science fiction for the youngest age group (I found only seventeen books) I will discuss everything I found, however dismal and misguided. One thing to note: in the title I have added the qualification 'for the under sevens'. A lot of these books are American and in the U.S. it is not usual to expect all seven year olds to be reading on their own. Although many of course can do this, in Baltimore in 1999 the city set this as a goal for all nine year olds. This might explain why the pictures in, for example Company's Coming by Arthur Yorinks (ill. David Small), seem rather scary for a small child.

With one exception, a book recently written by a friend who is an active science fiction critic, all the books discussed here were discovered by spending an afternoon at Borders in Oxford Street, surrounded by lots of brightly coloured picture books, and several hours in the wonderful children's book store, Books of Wonder, in New York. Oh, bliss it is to be an academic.

For small children, the world is a playground to explore, so that it is no surprise that the idea of exploration is central to a number of the picture books | acquired, but different writers have conceptualised discovery in diverse ways some of which are more challenging than others, and some of which are more intrimsically sf-nal than others.

At the weakest end are Shana Corey's First Graders from Mars: Episode 11, Horus's Horrible Day (New York: Scholastic, 2001) and Dan Yaccarino's Blast Off Boy and

Blorp: First Day on a Strange New Planet (New York: Hyperion Books, 2000). Although Dan Yaccarino's work is distinguished by its artwork (Corey uses a rather fune thatoonist called Mark Teague) both books are equally limiting both in terms of strettching the imagination of a child and in their conceptualisation of what sf is. The 'playground' they present to children is just that: the alien in First Graders from Mars is starting his first day at 'Martiangarten' and discovers there are no 'slime tables', no 'snooze mats' and no snacks (12). Similarly Blast Off Boy goes to his exchange school on the planet Meep in a big yellow space bus, no different to the yellow school buses which operate

throughout the US (1). Both stories, such as they are, lead the child through the negotiation with a new environment solely in terms of analogy and with the intention to comfort rather than disconcert. These books clearly do not need to be science fiction, and in fact are so only to the extent that the pictorial representation in

Yaccarino's book, for example, is of aliens, instead of foreign exchange students. In addition, even if we accept them as sf, they are sf in only the most limited sense analogous with the earliest material published in the genre: the explorer goes out, learns and comes back. There is no sense of consequence or change in either of these books.

There are numerous indicators that these books, for all their non-imimetic setting, are essembliably mimetic books attempting to reproduce the recognisable and to 'relate' to children's already existing emotions. Apart from the recognisable equipment of a kindergarten and a classroom (although the blackboard seems to contain quadratic equations) First Graders from Mars falls into the trap – either to reassure or from simple laziness – of clothing its aliens in recognisable analogues of human clothing, even to the point that females wear skirts. Blast Off Boy has the yellow space bus, already mentioned, little girl aliens wear skirts and Blast Off Boy discovers that the zipper on his space suit was down (the result is embarrassment, rather than sudden death). The only real dissonant note is with the food which in both books fights back, a favourite childhood fantasy.

The problem is not that the authors wish to set their books somewhere familiar, nor that they have a message they wish to put across. School-based sf can be done for this age group. Kevin Boos and Bill Clemente's Visitor Parking (Nebraska City: Table Creek Publishing, 2002) is a very simple Thanksgiving tale. A class of school children are visited by aliens who work out where to park by the sign 'Visitor Parking' and turn out to have come to admire the curly red hair of the school teacher, just like their own. They are sent home with pumpkin pie and candy corn, reinforcing the Thanksgiving message of sharing. There is plenty of mimesis and relevance here, but the aliens are allowed to be themselves, they are not presented as analogues of themselves and in fact remain pretty mysterious throughout.

All of the limitations in *Blast Off Boy* and *First Graders* from *Mars*, and more, are present in the, at first sight, more imaginative and challenging *Nova's Ark* by David Kirk (New

York: Scholastic, 1999). Nova's Ark begins promisingly. To begin with the artwork is stunning. The spaceships on the inside cover are a delight, and the vivid artwork inside makes an immediate impact. The problem is what happens when you begin to consider the contents of those pictures and the story which they are illustrating. But let us begin with the story, because as I have already hinted, not all of these books construct story.

On Roton there is a little robot called Nova, who lives with his mother, Luna, and his father, Taspett. Nova owns a wooden Noah's Ark which has come down from the age of men. Taspett is an explorer looking for the legendary planet of Zyte which contains a source of power crystals. On one expedition Taspett is delayed. Meamwhile Nova and his classmates go on a trip to the Space Centre. Nova, for whom "Exploration is in your wiring!" (13) accidentally takes off, takes a month or so to learn to steer the ship and then lands

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on a barren planet where he takes his worn out ship apart to build robot animals for company. His father then crash lands on the planet and Nova rebuilds him from parts donated by the animals. They take off together having discovered that they are on the planet Zyte and have found the crystals.

So far so good: we have an idea, a planet now peopled by robots, which provides also the estrangement, and a plot which is about

the discovery of a planet, the changing of that planet and bringing back something that will change the homeworld. But at each stage Kirk denies us the estrangement (and the imaginative challenge) that this plot outline suggests. To begin with, there is this issue of Nova, the boy robot. Nova is a boy. He is not a newly-built robot who has yet to learn his capabilities, he is a robot sized to be a boy and with the large eyes we associate with children. His mother cooks oil broth. He goes to school with a teacher, and is told that he will grow up. The other children around him are carefully divided by sex, with of course only the female robots bearing gender markers (skirts, 'hair'). Similarly, all the adult females are in indicative costume. This isn't a criticism about sexism, simply about lack of imagination. Why nuclear families? Why gender divides? Clearly the 'why' relates to providing children something to identify with, rather than challenging them with something that they might have to work at. Nova's existence on the barren planet reinforces this. Faced with isolation he builds animal shaped robots (although with some interesting twists). Iromically, this is less intellectually challenging than a child with a DNA kit might have been. But more significant is the resolution of this story; the change that takes place is personal. Taspett declares he will stop exploring and take his family with him when he travels. The much bigger consequence of their travels, that the planet Roton now has all the power it needs, is elided. The book is essentially circular: it begins with the disruption of family and ends with the reconstruction of family, all else is embroidery.

Although my main criticism of Nova's Ark is that it too slavishly tries to parallel a simple boy's adventure story which has no need of being sf, it is perfectly possible to do this and still produce something dashing, challenging to the imagination, funny and much more understandable as science fiction. Graeme Base's The Worst Band in the Universe (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1999) is a delight, told in verse and wild illustration to rival The Butterflies' Ball. On the planet Blipp music rules but music is controlled by the government and the playing of new music is strictly banned. Sprocc, a young Splintwanger player, cannot play on Blipp and flees to Squaag where music is licensed, regulated and driven off the streets. In desperation he and his friends enter and win the Worst Band in the Universe competition. When the trip to Alpha 10 they are awarded turns out to be a trip to exile, on a planet where the predators hunt by sound, all the exiles conspire to build a music powered space ship although 'The task was huge, the concept vague, the physics somewhat moot.' (29) They return to Blipp, prove that the Inquisitor cannot play music, and bring down the system. Innovation rules. Even though a splintwangler is unashamedly an electric guitar, this book works as sf. It has the estrangement of a planet in which music rules, the what if created by the repression of innovation, it posits a problem and implements a solution, and accepts with irony all the mangling of the physical world

> needed to make the conceit work. Although the hero returns to his starting place, thanks to his actions it is a different world. We have the sense of consequence intrinsic to sf, we have an awareness of what sf is. And it's a beautiful

> My next four books are all, technically, fantasy, but one is about robots and could not be omitted from the catalogue, one is about an alien and delightful, and the others all make far

greater demands on a child's imagination than (with the exception of The Worst Band in the Universe) the books I have discussed so far. The first book, another by Dan Yaccarino, is If I Had a Robot (New York: Viking, 1996). This came highly recommended by Books of Wonder. The fly leaf describes the illustrations as 'exuberant' a term which better applies to Nova's Ark. In reality the pictures look most like children's paintings, which is not a criticism, but this isn't a book I found visually exciting and I suspect this was because | expect more from pictures of robots (both Yaccarino and Kirk are of the square head school of robot art). More disappointing is that this is only barely sf. A child imagines what it would be like to have a robot and can only come up with the idea that a robot could take his bath, eat the vegetables and do his piano practice. Bill Watterson's Calvin (of Calvin and Hobbes) can manage better than that. And iromically it seems to limit the child's imagination, because the robot can only emulate the child, it cannot stretch the bounds of possiibilities.

In Nick Butterworth's Q Poot/e 5 (London: Harper Collins, 2000). Q Pootle 5 is an alien on his way to a party when the rocket booster on his space ship breaks down and he is forced to land on Earth for repairs. So far so sf. Unfortunately Q Pootle 5 gets his assistance from three birds and a cat all of whom can speak to each other, and one of whom, Colin the cat, is eating his dinner with a spoon. Colin also seems to get along very well with the birds. The book does have sf images but its fundamental limitations as science fiction are revealed by the final poster page in which the aliens happily breathe vacuum on the moon and eat party food instantly recognisable to any child, but with labels such as 'Moon cheese balls'. The book is wonderful, but it only just slips into this article.

Stretching the bounds of possibilities was what made Maybe One Day by Frances Thomas and Ross Collins (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), and Rosie's Zoo by Ailie Busby (London: Scholastic, 2001) stand out. Rosie's Zoo is clearly fantasy but I wanted it here because of the rocket ship and the way it uses that rocket ship. Rosie decides to play zoo but can't see her favourite animals. 'Something red shone brightly from the corner of the room and caught her eye... her space rocket! (1) "I know." said Rosie. "I will go to the moon, the only sensible place to find missing toys." (3). Rosie flies to the moon where she finds four Elephants in a line, zooms back to earth and lands in the sea and is rescued by a ship full of penguins, and travels on picking up animals, all of whom are bribed to join the zoo with promises of cheese pizza or pink custard. At the end of the story Rosie falls asleep, her animals back to their own size, lined up on the bed. "But we haven't played zoo yet." said the little green elephant...' (30) One problem with the pictures in this book is that Rosie flies on the rocket ship, rather than in it and I find myself wondering if this is because it is a little girl's book and little girls aren't expected to know that this is wrong - but counterbalancing this is the way the book makes exploration a cognitive experiment. The question 'what will we find?' structures every page, and incongruities are there to be questioned (the giraffe on the ice floe, wearing a scarf, for example). There is also the sense that Rosie is in control of the adventure. She knows how to manage her exploration and in that sense has the kind of competence within her own universe that Nova lacked. Finally, this is a book that children are expected to negotiate, Rosie's bedroom is its own universe for when we return to it we can see where the toys were. The book unpacks as a problem: where are the animals, how to find them, how to persuade them and what their opinion of the whole matter is. And although the animals are clearly toys, there is that bit of ambiguity at the end, when the elephant replies to Rosie which functions as a nicely dissonant closure.

Maybe One Day is another journey in the imagination and I almost didn't add this to the collection because on the surface it is just a little boy's imaginary journey through fantastical space, only the boy is a little monster. A closer reading of this book, however, revealed that something slightly different is going on, and although not precisely sf, Maybe One Day is one of the best books covered here. Thomas and Collins, like Busby, have given their child character imaginative control over the fantasy but Little Monster must contend with a rival storyteller, his father. The tale begins with Little Monster declaring that he has a problem, he wants to be an explorer and this will mean leaving his parents behind. "Maybe we could come with you." (2) his father says, "Don't be silly," said Little Monster, "Explorers don't take their mummies and daddies."(3) This sets the tone. Daddy will propose something preposterous and Little Monster will correct him. Little Monster explains that on the moon one can jump as high as a house, Daddy says "You might bounce all the way back into space", (6) but Little Monster correctly says no, for that is physically impossible. When Daddy warns him about Martians, Little Monster denies their existence. Daddy warns him not to slide off the rings of Saturn, but Little Monster focuses on the dangers of the meteorites. Throughout, Daddy keeps trying to impose a fantasy narrative onto the adventure, while Little Monster is resolutely in favour of science fiction. This is an important leap forward in what is expected both of the child character and the child reader. Neither the character nor the reader is expected to be passive. There is even space for the reader to correct the Little Monster or to add knowledge. Little Monster knows that Jupiter has sixteen moons. How many does Saturn have? The world of the imagination and the world out there is to

be challenged and defined, *made knowable*, and it can be made knowable, subject to understanding through evidence and knowledge, one of the central conceits of sf.

Finally we turn to the very small group of books that seemed to work as full science fiction texts, that is they had a idea, contained cognitive estrangement and consequence. In total I found eight, which was rather more than I anticipated. I have already suggested that for children, the notion of exploration is central to their cognitive development and all these books are explorer books of one kind or another, but two are quite abstract, while the others are about meeting other people and shift the cognitive ground somewhat. Both of the two abstract books are pop-up books. First we have Bugs in Space, by David A. Carter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997). Bug Rogers and Robobug take off for space where they meet UFBs (unidentified flying bugs) and the Wishing Bug, dock with a space station and discover that the Red Spot of Jupiter is a large red bug. This is a very simple version of the formula, and only just makes it into this category (the only consequence is telling their tales when they get back) but it has an internal consistency and it is definitely about space exploration. The second book, Ken Wilson-Max's The Big Silver Space Shuttle (New York: Scholastic, 2000) is even less complicated. It 'makes storyable' the take-off of a space shuttle. Children are invited to release the external fuel tank and the solid rocket boosters, to keep the aircraft steady and manoeuvre the orbit before launching the satellite and returning home to land. One warning to the buyer for children however, is that both of these books are too fragile. The tabs are thin and the popups too delicate. My copies were already torn when I bought them.

The next six books are all, in one way or another, about aliens, and because grouping them by type is difficult, here I will divide them simply into which are the most successful as science fiction. The first three work well, but only if you don't look too closely. Tony Ross's I'm Coming to Get You, (London: Puffin, 1986) tells us all about a Monster who invades and eats planets. The trappings of this book are clearly sf-mal. There is a rocket ship, the monster is clearly an alien, and we see other planets and their inhabitants even if they are essentially nursery rhyme characters. Eventually the monster turns his attention to Earth and finds little Tommy on its radar. This is the first oddity and the 'clue' to the story. Why would a monster who eats planets want a little boy? Of course the monster turns out to be minute. To get to grips with this story the child has to understand the concept of relative size. However, I suspect that the author does not consciously think of himself as an sf writer: if the issue is relative size, then the reader is played with. We see the monster against the planets, and against the aliens, each time huge, but in order to do this the planets would be too small to support life and therefore make this text fantasy. Alternatively, one can read it as a dual game into which we are clued by the existence of the banana people and the jellyfish. Their size may be the clue that all is not quite right. But this, of course, is placing adult demands on a text for children, and in the end this is a successful sf book because it relies on cognitive dissonance, expressed in the understanding of perspective and relative size.

Babette Cole's, *The Trouble With Dad* (London: Mammoth, 1985) and *The Trouble With Gran* (London: Mammoth, 1987) are both hugely enjoyable but they feel limited. Dad makes robots which we see in various scenes of wreaking havoc or performing their duties. The media gets

interested but the baby sets the robots off and they cause lots of damage. Eventually they are bought by a rich Arab who puts them in the desert as works of art. Now both Dad and son make robots. The trouble with Gran is she is an alien and on the old folks outing she causes chaos by changing shape (into a glamorous granny for the contest, or an alien to freak people out) and inviting the aliens from the local exhibit for tea. At the end she sweeps everyone off to a nice hot planet using the bus shelter as a space ship, where the inhabinatnts all look like her ('Planet Gran'). At the end they return to school and Gran opens a travel agemicy. In both cases we end more or less where we started and neither Dad's robots or Gran's alien-ness have a sense of context within the books. They just are much as magic just is.

My final three choices, and my favourite books on the pile, are all very different from each other. One is a pop-up book almost without words, one a picture book and one a story picture book. What they all have in common is that they ask the question: how shall we meet the alien?

Company's Coming by Arthur Yorinks , ill. David Small (New York: Hyperion, 1988) tells the tale of Shirley and Moe, a small town American couple who have invited relatives for dinner. As Moe is tinkering in the yard, a barbecue-shaped space ship lands, decanting two very small and rather frightened-looking aliens. They declare they come in peace and then ask to use the bathroom. While they are away, Moe begins to panic but Shirley decides to make friends with them and asks them for dinner. They depart to return at 6. Moe, unknown to Shirley, calls the FBI. By 5:45 the house is surrounded. The aliens arrive with a package, disconcert the terrified relatives by saying they are looking for a planet as theirs is overcrowded, and trigger the entry of the soldiers when they present Shirley with their gift. It turns out to be a blender.

Two things make this deceptively simple book stand out. First is the language. In this book the word alien is never used. The space men are 'visitors', 'foreigners', 'strangers' or simply 'the men'. In other words they are people, and this book is fundamentally about people and how we all act together. Secondly, the artwork. I've said little about the artwork up to now, because until these three books, the artwork often seemed peripheral, but here (and in the next two books) the illustrations are crucial to the dissonance which drives the story. The aliens are tiny, but what Moe sees is their helmets and guns. Moe and Shirley are incredibly ordinary and made to look more vulnerable in their glasses, while the vulnerability of the aliens is emphasized by their big eyes and fragile extremities. Ordinariness is underlined repeatedly: in the phone call to the FBI from the bedroom; the cat licking up spillages; the vulgar relative asking the strangers if they have visited Venus which is 'hot for in the summer'. Most significantly however, the ordinariness is stressed by the juxtaposition of weapons of war against a tiny suburban home. When the house is surrounded we see it as if we are perched on one of the tanks outside, we loom over the house and watch the helicopters gather. As we enter the house with the visitors we are the hint of guns in the darkness and we know it is us that the guests are frightened of. And when the guns burst in, they do so over the laid table, destroying the domesticity that the blender will restore. At the end of this book 'us' are those of us who welcome strangers. Shirley invites the army to dinner and we have moved on from our initial state of suspicion.

Alien Opposites, by Mathew Van Fleet (New York:

Hyperion Books, 2000) has a similar theme but is meant for much younger children and anyone with a sense of the absurd. It's a pop-up book, but this time the tabs are big and sturdy and when they pull out they have pictures on which extend the universe of the story. On the cover for example, is an alien in a saucer. Pull the tab upwards and it is an alien with a huge mouth sticking his tongue out, in a saucer. The story is simple. Aliens come to check out a little boy's room and the tale is told by opposites. To begin with, Aliens in (the toy box); Aliens out (outside the window). Aliens whisper; and then under a tab, Aliens shout, waking the boy. The rest of the book has the aliens inadvertently tormenting the boy as they explore the touch and especially taste of his room. My favourite pull-out reveals the dog clinging to an alien tongue. And at the end the aliens and the boy make friends and they all clean his room together before they depart. It is a very simple tale, but it is told in terms of the aliens as the explorers, encouraging children to move their cognitive position.

This challenge to be in someone else's head is achieved with greatest panache by Jeanne Willis (words) and Tony Ross (illustrations) in Dr Xargle's Book of Earthlets (Eondon: Andersen Press, 1988). This is my favourite sf book for young children because it absolutely relies on dissonance, and that dissonance or estrangement is encoded in the relationship of the words to the pictures. The alien Dr Xargle is instructing his young charges before they begin a visit to Earth and most of the book is dedicated to describing Earth babies (there are another two in the same series about pets), and the misinterpretations are glorious. To give just two examples: 'To stop them leaking, Earthlets must be pulled up by the back tentacles and folded in half. Then they must be wrapped quickly in a fluffy triangle or sealed with paper and glue.' The accompanying picture shows a very disconcerted child covered in brown paper and tape. 'After soaking, Earthlets must be dried carefully to stop them shrinking. Then they are sprinkled with dust to stop them sticking to things', accompanied by a picture of a child apparently drowning in talcum powder. In order for this book to work with a child she must be aware of what is actually happening in the pictures, how it would be described, the literal meaning of Dr Xargle's description, and the concept of metaphor. Most importantly, like Maybe One Day it encourages children to move on from simple recognition, to recognition that something is wrong. Read with a straight face, I can imagine a child having great fun correcting the reader. It's a very complex book with a very simple paradigm, an sf classic.

These are all the books | found, but there must be more out there and recommendations of more sf picture books would be grattefully appreciated.

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Further suggestions can be sent to the features editor, at the address on p.2, from whom details can also be gained about joining the Science Fiction Foundation, which publishes Foundation

This review article is part of a longer work in progress on the structures and limitations of children's science fiction. Working title "There Aim't No Such Thing as Children's SF" — Eds.

BEN JEAPES IS TURNING INTO ONE OF THE UNSUNG HEROES OF THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION SCENE, PUBLISHING BOOKS AND NOW AMAGAZINE, AND ALSO, QUITE BY ACCIDENT, ACHILLOREN'S WRITER. BEN TELLS THE STORY OF THIS LATTER EXPERIENCE...

## How I became a children's author (technically)

## by Ben Jeapes

## c. 1983

Have the misfortune to read Robert A Heinlein's 'Number of the Beast'. Memo to self in future lives: don't. Experience inspires me to read E.E. 'Doc' Smith's Lensman series. Even bigger mistake. BUT: am left with the idea of a Royal Space Force. A seed is planted...

### **Early 1990s**

 Start selling stories. Seem to be reasonably good at it. Think I'll write a novel.

## Slightly later in the early 1990s

- Not quite that easy. Novel about what? Put the idea on hold while various ideas, plots for other stories, themes I would like to explore come together.
- Read the Hornblower series in its entirety for the first time. Struck by an aspect of Hornblower that eluded me as a child: his self-loathing. He is a hero and can never believe it. Every mission he is convinced will be his last. That's my hero! Blissful ignorance of works of David Feintuch and David Weber, or that the phrase 'Hornblower in Space' is destined for cliché.
- Identify other themes I want to explore:
  - the United Kingdom in space (see above);
  - an alien race with a psychology unlike ours in one partificular way, that becomes key to the plot;
  - making the switch from reasonably realistic future technology (à la 2001) to whiz-bang future technology (à la Star Trek et al.), all in the course of one book.
- I have my novel!

## January 1993

- Have basic plot in my mind. The UK in space. The aliens. Their invitation, and motivation for same. Most of the title suggests itself at once, with one difficulty: *His* or *Her Majesty's Starship?* Eventually decide on His, and hope this will be the hardest part.
- It isn't.
- Mental image of aliens is ridiculous: men in rubber suits.
   Dwarves in rubber suits. Deformed dwarves in rubber suits.
   Decide to make them quadrupeds.
- Sit down to write opening chapter: washed-up, or burntout, or both, spaceship captain Michael Gilmore arrives on Mars at invitation of Mad King Richard, ruler of the UK – a pressurised crater – and is offered command of UK delegation starship *Raptor*. (Trekkies, note subtle pun or play of words on 'Bird of Prey'.)

## 1993-1994

- Novel takes shape. UK moves from Mars to an O'Neill-type spacestation. Comment from colleague: 'O'Neills are passé'. UK-11 becomes a spaceship.
- Opening chapter: depressed Gilmore arrives at UK-11 at end of his last voyage before early retirement, summoned by king, offered command, etc.

• Raptor renamed Ark Royal. More fitting and increases the word count.

## Autumn 1994-Summer 1995

Contact agent: expresses interest.

## August 1995

• It's finished! 113,000 words of prose insecticidal in its purpleness. Send it off to agent.

#### September-December 1995

Waait...

## January 1996

 He takes me on! With apologies for keeping me waiting so long. Enjoy dropping the words 'my agent' into conversations with friends, family and strangers.

#### June 1996

- Scholastic express an interest in the book. Scholastic? A bloody children's publisher?? Mortal outrage, but what the heck, I'll meet them.
- Sufficiently impressed. They're looking for something meatier than their usual teen fare for a new imprint. David Fickling, publishing director, thinks the book is bogged down with too much detail. Go into meeting forewarned of this point of view and determined to refute it. Leave meeting agreeing with him.
- Here's the kicker: if he suspects for a moment that I'm just agreeing with him to get the book published, rather than rewriting with my heart in it, he's not interested. Not that I would just agree with him to get it published... but it concentrates the mind.
- Begin the first of quite a few rewrites: new opening chapter, throwing us straight into the action and highlighting hero's tactical ability. Space battle, kill a few people. All good stuff. Also a bit of intrigue added in later chapters.

## **Early 1997**

- The \*&~!!£\$ git doesn't like the rewrites! Huge despondency, but begin to see the problem. I added more plot, but left the excess verbiage in as well. Hugely helped by David's recommendation to read Patrick O'Brian's Master & Commander. O'Brian's characters just slide into the action: Aubrey has been through some considerable scrapes prior to the novel's opening and we only hear about these second-hand.
- Also cut anything that doesn't directly relate to the action, including (though it breaks my heart) chapter 8, where the alien Arm Wild interviews the crew. Novel now down to 92,000 words.

## November 1997

 Meeting at Schollastic... They lay on sandwiches for lunch, which | take as a good sign. Thrash things out with David and his assistant, Ben Sharpe. Comment by David: 'don't | remember a chapter where Arm Wild interviews the crew? I quite miss that...'

- Restrain homicidal impulse. Eyes opened to the principle that anything that develops the characters is acceptable, even if it doesn't contribute to the action. Interview reinstated.
- Decide on final look and feel of novel. If I can do a satisfactory rewrite, they'll publish it... D. Fickling once again uses his amazing powers to convince authors he's right.
- Still believe this. How does he do it?

## January 1998

 Send in final draft, 100,000 words. Slightly altered ending from the original, but still conveys the gist of what I wanted. And to my amazement, it really is the story I originally wanted to tell. The man's a marvel.

## Slightly later in 1998

• Proof stage! And – bloody hell – it's one signature too long for its price range. Choice: cut sixteen pages, or put it up by a pound. I cut the sixteen pages. Humiliating to realise your book has sixteen dispensable pages in it, but an invaluable exercise.

#### December 1998

His Majesty's Starship hits the bookstands.

## No, but seriously...

My agent's precise reason for sending the book to Scholastic was, and I quote, "Gilmore seemed to me a sort of modern day Biggles and the level of sex and violence would not have raised the collective eyebrow of readers of Captain W.E. Johns." As Gilmore, in the draft he read, was a divorcee from a group marriage with a teenage son, and there is an alien sex scene in chapter 16, I disputed this point of view, but it's amazing the effect having a publisher actually express interest will have on you.

I stayed with Scholastic for my next novel, Wingèd Chariot, and took my third novel The Xenocide Mission to David at Random House when they took him on as a necessary adjunct to acquiring Philip Pullman. He now has the MS of my fourth. Given my initial feelings about being a children's author, what changed?

First of all I had been put off Scholastic by horror stories from Molly Brown, whose novel Virus was published by Scholastic's imprint Point SF and systematically neutered to make it suitable for a young audience. (Or rather, one suspects, for the young audience's parents.) Practically my first card on the table when I met David was that the alien sex scene stayed. 'Absolutely,' he said cheerfully. (He says a lot of things cheerfully, including his careful enumerations of your novel's precise faults.)

And I was struck by all the plusses of dealing with David, as opposed to the horror stories I had heard of other publishers. Incompetent editors who want to be writers themselves and fiddle at every stage; who have no idea of science fiction beyond *Star Trek*; who bow to the High Priests of Marketing and tell you to put the sex here, the extra two hundred pages there, and where's that dragon when we need it? And all for a product that ultimately will have a life expectancy that makes a mayfly look good, because that's how the bookselling system works.

I was bowled over by an editor who encouraged me to cut. Not willy-nilly, but surgically. Cut this, yes, but expand that, because you leave off just when the reader's getting interested ... you see? And yes, I did see. David never lifted a finger to fiddle with the science fiction – that was entirely my own. He just concentrated on the story, and I came out the other end of the process a convert to the demands of children's publishing: proper children's publishing, not plot lobotomy as is sometimes practised. Just tell the story, then stop. That's it. No more. Eet it be as long as it needs to be. And you end with a story to be proud of: the story you wanted to tell.

I still had to stay on my toes; there were those within the

Scholastic empire who clung to the old ways, and David couldn't control everything. Like, a frowning copy editor changed one character's 'Sod it!' to 'Damn it!' We compromised on 'Nuts!' (I had a vision of the guy wandering the corridors of New Commonwealth House muttering 'Sod it. Damn it. Nuts. Sod it. Damn it. Nuts...', perhaps looking to see which of his colleagues swooned at what.) Strangely, the occasional utterance of 'Christ!' caused no upset at all; a sad reflection etc. etc.

But with all these pluses, there is a big downside, and that is that your book goes straight into the children's section of the bookshops. Anyone who comes in on a whim to buy an sf novel is more likely to head home clutching a tired spinoffery hackwork piece than your own magnum opus, and all your friends and relations will search for it in vain in the sf section. (Also, Wingèd Chariot was saddled with a hideous Janet-and-John cover that I believe seriously damaged its credibility when more grown-up readers looked at it.) But there is a plus side to being in the children's section too – your shelf life is much longer than it would be upstairs. Go into a bookshop looking for this book that you've heard of, now out a few months (because that's how long the reviews take to get into print), and it might actually still be there.

In short, here are the pros and cons of being a children's writer. The pros: you're writing for an audience that can appreciate good writing but gets immediately restless with waffle. You learn to get the story-tælling right. The cons: you have to work twice as hard yourself to get your book noticed by the people you want to notice it – the science fiction community.

Ultimately I'm neither an adults' nor a children's writer – I write to please myself. But if, in the real world, that translates as 'children's writer' then I'm quite happy with it.

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Ben Jeapes tries not to be bitter about being the same age as J.K. Rowling, and for having been a writer longer.

His books, His Majesty's Starship and Wiimged Chariot are both published by Scholastic and The Xenocide Mission and The Ark by David Fickling Books, a division of Random House. More details are available on Ben Jeapes's website, http://www.jeapes.ndirect.co.uk/. He is also the founder of the small press Big Engine (http://www.bigengine.co.uk) and publisher of 3SF.

I SEEM TO BE DRAWN BACK TO TERRY PRATCHETT EVEN WHEN I THINK I'VE SAID ENOUGH: AN ARTICLE IN FOUNDATION, THE GUILTY OF LITERATURE COLLECTION, THE POCKET ESSENTIAL, AND A RECENTLY WRITTEN ARTICLE ABOUT ONLY YOU CAN SAVE MANKIND AND OTHER WAR NOWELS WHICH I HOPE WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THE NEAR FUTURE. BUT A DISCWORLD NOWEL FOR CHILDREN SEEMED TO WARRANT DISCUSSION IN THIS ISSUE...

## Story About Stories': Terry Pratchett's The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents

by Andrew M. Butler

Rats! They fought the dogs and killed the cats, And bit the babies in the cradles.

Robert Browning, 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin'

ike a number of writers of fantasy, Terry Pratchett has been considered suitable for children. Peter Hunt has the litheofisttles titles asleneasle most in the strip in the strength in the stren unpacking, but while the books do not exclude the child reader (whatever that may be) it seems clear that children are not the primary audience." In turn that 'whatever that may be' points to a certain uncertainty (as it were) within the critical community as to what children's literature actually is, and indeed whether such a beast exists. The possessive apostrophe might indicate it is a literature that belongs to children, but given the editors, bookshops, librarians, teachers and parents that may stand in the way between author and reader, ownership would hardly come into it. But there is clearly something we can point to and say is, well, writing which appeals to children.

Hunt helpfully suggests that Terry Pratchett's choice of heroes is one thing which might make his novels attractive to

One key point at which children's books and fantasyadventure frequently overlap is in the use of central characters who are anti-heroes - apparently powerless, marginalised people, who nevertheless triumph. This is the fantasy of many adults - and the fantasy that many adults construct for childhood.ž

Even in this brief quotation there is a slippage between suggesting that this is a childhood fantasy, and suggesting it is a fantasy that adults perceive children have. Even without this ambiguity, Pratchett's choice of heroes is perhaps more complex than this interpretation of power suggests. Since Pratchett is in part parodying fantasy-adventure, from Howard to Tolkien to Leiber and beyond, he is clearly going to undermine our expectations of the heroic. Conan (or, rather, Cohen) has gone on and gone to seed. That the coward or the powerless should triumph is meant to be comic rather than part of a wish fulfilment adolescent power fantasy - although sometimes we want that fantasy as well. But Pratchett also taps into that bedrock of myth, folk tale and fairy story that was once property of us all, and only in the last two hundred years has been sidelined and sanitised as only fit for children. The fairy tale almost always features the orphan, or the third son, or the wood cutter's child.

Whilst Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, and The Dark Side of the Sun (1976) and Strata (1981), were primarily aimed at adults but can be read by children, Pratchett has written books for children which have also been read by adults. His first novel, The Carpet People (1971; revised

edition 1992), is one such; as John Clute and Cherith Baldry have pointed out, this is in part a parody of The Lord of the Bings, but it also offers a kind of cognitive estrangement for its readers: 'There's [...] a great delight in the working out of logical systems [...] Child readers have to work out for themselves what the land of the Vortgorns is [...]\*3 After that there was a large hiatus until the Bromeliad (Truckers (1989), Incased offeat, that, some conditionistic of stilled Edisc Wisdow or tolder logically or logically offer and wings (1990)) and the Johnny Maxwell Bromeliad is told from the point of view of the Nomes, little people who live in a condemned department store, who first journey to a new location before discovering their extraterrestrial original. The Johnny Maxwell trilogy features various adventures of a teenager called Johnny, which needn't all be in the same imagined universe: 'the third volume includes the Trousers Of Time, a concept of the parallel world, and so these are presumably alternate or parallel Johnnies, in different versions of Blackbury, none of which, as far as we know, contain nomes."

> And so to The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents (2001), subtitled A Story of Discworld on the front, described on the dustwrapper as 'the first for young readers set in the Discourant universe. 15 This presumably locates the problematic #aust Eric (1990) - seemingly written as a series of opportunities for Josh Kirby paintings and excluding from the numbering of Corgi paperbacks for a number of years as an adult book after all. But what makes The Amazing Maurice a children's book? To be pragmattic, the book has chapters like the Bromeliad and the Johnny Maxwell trilogy, whereas the adult books do not. It has a child protagonist, like the Johnny Maxwell trilogy (but not the Bromeliad), and like several of the early Discworld novels such as Mort (1987).

> The child - or childlike - figure had earlier taken centre stage in Equal Rites (1987), Sourcery (1988), Wyrd Sisters (1988) Pyramids (1989), Guards! Guards! (1989) and arguably the first novel where Susan appears, Soul Music (1994). With a presumably intentional double entendre, John Clute has mapped this use of the virgin youth protagonist through Pratchett's novels:

> Many of the mid-period novels tells [s/c] the story of an adolescent boy or girl who must achieve some goal. [...] Each is the same child, passing from our ken as soon as s/he finds out how to fit the slipper. And in the next book, it is the same child who returns, intact and innocent and pert (and sexless) and lured, to re-enact the comedly.8

> Susan comes back, of course, as a governess and then as a teacher, Magrat gets married, and Carrot is a regular of the City Watch. But this only comes as the Discworld sequence progresses, and as Pratchett seems more interested in adult characters such as Virnes and Granny Weatherwax, not to

mention the undead characters such as those who inhabit Überwald, especially vampires, zombies, and Igor.

In The Amazing Maurice we have 'a fair-haired young man' (10) or 'the stupid-looking kid playing the flute' (18) whom we eventually learn is called Keith ("Keith is not a promising name-start [...] It doesn't hint of mystery. It just hints of Keith" (65)). Keith had been found gurgling in a basket with a blanket and a note (for strawberry yoghurt and nineteen pints of milk) on the doorstep of the Guild of Musicians (presumably in Ankh-Morpork but this is never stated). Hie has subsequently been taken in by the cynical, but amazing and intelligent talking cat, Maurice, and travels with Maurice and a number of intelligent rats (who have been nibbling magic books). Together they've performed a series of stings with Maurice as the criminal mastermind: the rats pretend to infest a town, and Keith persuades the town to pay him to rid the town of the rats with his flute. So far, so Robert Browning.

Sometimes it isn't quite so successful, and they've come to a town in Überwald because it is a very long way from their last con. Unfortunately Bad Blintz is in the middle of an apparently genuine plague of rats (although there are none to be seen alive) or at least is paying lots of money to people who produce rat tails. There is clearly a con trick going on, which interferes with Maurice's schemes. Meanwhile they have been rumbled by Malicia Grim, the mayor's daughter, who lives in a whole series of stories.

The name Grim, perhaps rather too obviously, reminds us of the Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, who were German philologists and collectors of folk tales and fairy tales in the early nineteenth century. In an alteration to reality, Malicia is the granddaughter and grandmiece of Agoniza and Eviscera Grim, famous Überwald story-hellers. Malicia is a voracious reader, and a spinner of her own tales, locating herself as a Cinderella who is forced to do all the housework and has two ugly sisters (although this is later revealed to be a lie). The point of her story is to gain power over her identity: "If you don't turn your life into a story, you just become part of someone else's story" (148). As a female character in a narrative, this is a very real issue, since women are often sidelined from stories; she risks being part of Keith's story or Maurice's story.

She is aware, of course, of other stories that include children having adventures: "Of course, it would be more... satisfying if we were four children and a dog, which is the right number for an adventure, but we'll make do with what we've got." (86) She has a point, of course, but is rather less ironic than Kirsty is in *Johnny and the Bomb*: "Oh dear, it's going to be *that* kind of adventure after all," she hissed, sitting up. "It's just the sort of thing | didn't want to happen. Me, and four token boys. Oh, dear. Oh, dear. It's only a mercy we haven't got a dog."" Presumably even today's children would be familiar with the allusions to Enid Blyton.

Keith, meanwhile, is constantly on the edge of being part of a story. As a foundling, particularly if he was found in Ankh-Morpork, then the logic of narrative demands that he is the long lost heir to a throne of one kind or another – just as Tomjon in *Wyrd Sisters* is the rightful heir to the throne of Lancre, or Carrot may be to Ankh-Morpork, and other characters are in later City Watch novels. As I've written elsewhere: 'For a place that has not had kings for three hundred years, Ankh-Morpork seems to be acquiring lost heirs at an alarming ratte.' As always Terry Pratchett avoids giving in to this narrative pressure: to exercise power, even to have power thrust upon you, is at best an ambivalent

experience. Certainly anyone who seeks it is not to be trusted; Darktan the successor to Hamnpork, the leader of the intelligent rats, is careful to keep any ambition in check, save for when safety dictates he should question his leader, and on his succession he is careful to keep his actions limited in scope. The powerful heroic figure is hardly comic.

A further story cuts through the narrative: Mr Bunnsy Has An Adventure. This appears to be the kind of Victorian or mock-Victorian talking animal whimsy that many of us have had the misfortune to have had inflicted on us. It is in part a pastiche of the Beatrix Potter flopsy bunny stories. A section of it starts each chapter, and we learn that the rats carry the book around with them like some kind of relic. As it depicts talking animals, and animals in various kinds of clothes, it offers them a model of intelligent animals. It is also a model they learn to reject.

For stories are double-edged things. As Malicia argues: "There are two kinds of people in the world. There are those who have got the plot, and those who haven't", to which Keith responds, "The world hasn't got a plot [...] Things just... happen, one after another" (106). Given these plots, little white lies, big lies, confidence tricks, and ideology, there is a sense by the end of the book that people have to lay down stories, and turn to dialogue. Not for the only time in recent children's fantasy does an author appear to reject fantasising in favour of the real world: "Stories are just stories. Life is complicated enough as it is. We have to plan for the real world. There's no room for the fantastiic." (266) Perhaps we are meant to take this as ironic.

The novel ends, as I shall, with the Amazing Maurice. He is clearly a successful planner – more so than his cartoon forebear Sylvester, and he has scruples enough not to eat anyone who is intelligent. He even is able to behave nobly when not scheming to cheat his friends. But it seems likely that he would come out the poorer in an encounter with Greebo, and he's no Gaspode the Wonder Dog. He leaves this reworking and abandonment of the Pied Piper narrative in favour of the Dick Whittington myth. Some stories do go on, and on, after all.

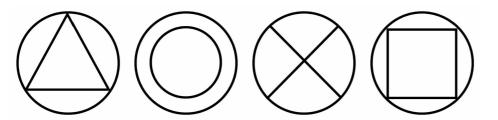
## **Notes**

- 1. Peter Hunt. 'Terry Pratchett.' Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction. By Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz. London: Continuum, 2001.86-121, at 91.
- 2. Peter Hunt. 'Terry Pratchett.' 94.
- 3. Cherith Baldry. 'The Children's Books.' *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature*. Foreword by David Langford. Ed. Andrew M. Butler, Edward James, and Farah Mendlesohn. Reading: SFF, 2000. 20-34, at 21.
- 4. Andrew M. Butler. *Terry Pratchett*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001. 74.
- 5. Terry Pratchett. *The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents*. London: Doubleday, 2001. Quotations from this will be referenced in the text.
- 6. John Clute. 'Coming of Age.' Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature. 7-19, at 15.
- 7. Terry Pratchett, johnny and the Bomb. London: Corgí, 1997.
- 8. Andrew M. Butler. Terry Pratchett. 35.

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The Pocket Essential Terry Pratchett is available from all good bookshops, defining 'good' as a shop which stocks it. You could always try ordering it — Shameless Ed.

I recently interviewed the Clarke Award winning Gwyneth Jones for Another Journal, and she said, "the real 'enemy' of children's fiction writers and variety in the bookshops is not Rowling, it's the games. My son reads a fair amount, but it's playing Final Fantasy that engrosses him. The result is that though he's sophisticated about plot devices, dramatic structure and subtext, and metaphysical speculation (I'm not kidding. Have you played *Final Fantasy*?) his vocabulary is poor." Here Gwyneth takes up her own console and explores these games for us.



# The Games

by Gwyneth Jones

One highly influential attempt at a logical interpretation of 'fun' has been made by psychologist Mihaly Cskszentmihalyi, with his concept of 'flow'. Cskszentmihalyi was interested in the fact that musicians, rock-climbers, chess-players and other people engaged in very complex tasks reported an experience of ecstasy or bliss, losing track of time and losing the sense of self. He decided that although on the face of it each activity was markedly different, all his subjects must be having the same sort of experience, which he termed 'flow'...

## Steve Poole, Trigger Happy (London: Fourth Estate; 2001)

...You see, whatever you 'see', whatever you 'hear', whatever you 'touch', etcetera, what your brain experiences is a pattern of fire. See that? How it washes over the whole brain, like, mm, a cloud of sparks? When I write my immersions I copy those patterns, and make your brains believe they've had the experience. I do it visually, and I'll explain why that works best in a moment. I write the code, and I deliver it on a carrier wave of visible light. I don't even have to fake the patterns very well, because brains love being fooled... yeah, what?

## Gwyneth Jones, Castles Made Of Sand (London: Gollancz; 2002)

n the screen, a cartoon-style landscape stretches into the faux distance. Centre screen-right, foreground, stands a child-like figure with a big head, painfully cute features and a peculiar hairstyle; he's hefting an enormous sword. Two other cartoon characters stand with him. They face another group, these figures not humanoid but garishly coloured monsters: giant insects or maybe insectoid machines. Everyone is moving slightly, marking time as in some slow folkdance. The cartoon child springs forward. Fireworks flash from the blade, two or three digit numerals leap from the monster's flesh, it quivers and reforms not visibly the worse for wear, and then everyone's back where they were. Another champion springs forward; and back. A monster ripostes... And so on, until one by one the monsters turn pale scarlet, become transparent and disappear. It's really nothing like a fight. The scene resembles (as much as it resembles anything natural on Earth) the display behaviour of certain ground-living forest birds. This is a dancing ground, a lek where candidates show each other their DNA poker-hands and the loser folds, bowled over by colour and movement.

I wonder, what is so fascinating here? If play is practice for life, what exactly am I training myself for? Why am I doing this?

### Once Upon A Time

Once upon a time, long ago, there were no videogames. Young human animals played like kittens or puppies blundering around, climbing, tumbling, fighting, finding out what their bodies could do: gradually building stronger muscles and bones, sharper responses, through the selective power of successful accident. After the first year or so, they would progress (as kittens or puppies progress within days or weeks) to imitations of adult behaviour; sometimes with overt adult instruction, sometimes not. The little girls (predominantly) played 'house' and 'mummies and daddies' - practising scraps of overheard dialogue on each other, miming the fascinating actions of the adult world, putting imaginary clothes in the toy washing machine, pouring imaginary tea... The little boys (predominantly, allegedly) preferred to continue running around, but now with the addition of imaginary or facsimile weapons. Children of both genders moved on up to traditional family leisure pastimes card games, board games, model making; and whether or not they had the aptitude, they were forced to continue their physical education – swimming, gymnastics, team sports; the various forms in which weapon training and survival training had endured into the predominantly urban, peaceful, developed world of the twentieth century. Around the time that they progressed to the card and board games they also learned to read, a practice which had become the main medium for social transfer of culture and knowledge, supplanting previous traditions. Reading was a vital, functional social skill, but to some (though not all!) of the children it became a particularly seductive form of play: a strange activity which consists entirely of sitting still, alone, and letting your eyeballs rove to and fro, with some slight movement and weight-bearing involving the hands.

Then, a few years later, the games came to a halt. A minority of the children would grow up continuing to practice some organised sport or craft, either professionally or as amateurs: playing Sunday football, painting watercolours, maybe a Bridge Club or a Chess club membership. Maybe board games would persist, played with relatives, at Christmas or on a rainy holiday. A substantial minority would continue to practice the solitary vice of reading. Nearly all would become the passive, though often thrilled and emotionally involved, audience for the mass-market drama of tv and the movies. But no one could play make believe, the way children were allowed to play. No cowboys and indians on the street corner, no mimed-out murder and mayhem, no imaginary acts of courage and prowess. That had to stop. You can watch fantasies played out, or read them in print, but after puberty you can't enact: that was the message. This is not acceptable behaviour for adults or even teenagers. This is likely to result in a referral to a psychiatrist.

## **Personal History**

I was born into the strange world I've just described. I can remember it clearly. I can't remember exactly when I played my first game of make-believe. Arguably I was fantasising before I could talk: certainly by the time I was two (you can read about this on my webpage) I was following my six yearold sister in imaginative play that involved me as Sherpa Tenzing Norgay and herself as Ed Hillary, climbing Everest up the stairs to my parents' bedroom; over the furniture to the final push, the steep ascent of my father's tall desk. We always played make-believe. We were never content to climb a tree or cross a stream, we had to be explorers, naturalists; or characters from our favourite fantasy fiction (Narnia, Tolkien, Robin Hood, William Tell). When I was a little older, maybe six or seven, my older sister dropped out, and my younger sister and I (not such proto-Lara types) invented the concept of an ensemble of fantasy characters, and choreographed their adventures indoors. First we had a cast of toy cars, who had homes in nooks around the floor of our family living room; we'd enact soap opera stronylines with them. I remember Vauxhall Victor, a likeable rogue. always in scrapes... Better still, there were the characters we

made out of coloured Plasticine, a group that remained stable for years. They operated in units of three: a main character, a sidekick and a strong beast of burden, who would also have a voice and a personality. There was Bumfit and Pedro, with their pony Gress. Nerissa the mermaid, whose maidservant's name | don't remember; and her steed, a plastic toy camel; there was Lancaster Sprite, who rode around on a flat pebble | had taken as a souvenir from Lancaster Castle (a pebble | treasured because | believed it was stained with the blood of tortured

witches). Most of the characters had tails rather than legs, like the tail a genie has when rising from the magic lamp, because tails are more easily kept in repair.

These games were intense. Some of you may have come across the story of the Brontë sisters and their brother Bramwell, and the make-believe games they played with tiny toy soldiers, through their childhood and adolescence, in the isolated parsonage at Haworth. Our scenarios did not become so complex: we did not invent coherent countries like Gondal and Angria, we didn't devise political systems or hold revolutions. Exploration was our simple template. The Plastiicine people made enormous journeys around the furniture, on which they faced perils and battled monsters. It was very real. Emotions ran high, tempers were lost; tears were shed, the hideous murder by squashing of someone else's characters was not unknown... This was my first world of the imagination. It was untaught. We didn't pick it up from the tv. It was only many, many years later that I realised that I'd come across the whole set-up in folktales and myth: the hero with his ensemble of companions and his epic adventures, Gillgamesh, Arthur, Fin MacCool: somehow, we plugging-into the cultural unconscious, recapitulating the evolution of strong.... It was from this world of physical, kinetic enactment that I descended (maybe!) or retreated, into the practice of building imaginary worlds

from words alone – when childhood was over, and I was no longer permitted to create and enjoy fantasy the way that came naturally.

The ability to build an imaginary world in your mind, and have a set of characters who live and breathe there, is immensely seductive. The action is physical, you can feel it in your heartbeat, in quickened breath, in tears that rise to your eyes, in stomach-gripping tension. It's wonderfully barely-recognised. addlictive. as sensual as the polymorphously perverse sexual fantasies of early childhood. I had the innate tendency, so I was probably bound to become a fantasist in this sense. I became a writer of fantasy fiction, because it was a permitted outllet... and becoming a film or theatre director would have taken a far greater leap of self-belief, for someone of my class and gender, in those times.

## **Everything's Different Now**

There are fights, with

a truly amazing

variety of demons,

insectoids, robots,

malignant pumpkins,

infectious frogs,

rocking horses.

caterpillars, giant

locusts.

When I was a child, the explosion of leisure as a concept, as an industry, had barely begun, even in the developed world. Freed from industrial slavery, and with religious duties slipping away into oblivion for most, we often literally didn't know what to do with ourselves. Families would sit looking at each other through the desert wastes of an English Summday.... maybe go for a drive in the afternoon? We'd watch

the sober, improving television that was bestowed on us by the great and the good, and it never entered our heads that we could talk badk... But then mass-market affluence came along, and everything is different now. In the last twenty years every kind of play has undergone a huge change of status. Organised sports are big business, transformed by the dead, Midas touch of major investment from passion into product. Young people who never go near a gym or a playing field – and adults old enough to remember the time when they'd have considered such behaviour bizarre – throng the shopping malls dressed in sports

training wear: Adidas, Nike, Reebok. Primetime tv viewing is dominated by masochistic quiz shows and very strange trials of daring (eat the live worms to win a holiday in Jamaica). As the work ethic finally releases us, the buried instincts of our hunter-gatherer past rise again, and *shopping* (roaming around, collecting desirable objects, foodstuffs, trade items) becomes a pleasurable activity, an end in itself. Elaborate sex-games once hidden away in shame and embarrassment are served by high street retail outlets for bondage gear and bizarre lingerie. Even our legendary workaholics freely admit that the work they do has little intrinsic value: the sixteen hour a day executive is performing status-establishing display, like the spread of antlers or a peacock's tail.

This bizarre cultural shift, this commodifying of the imagination, began when I was growing up: and continues today. But arguably strangest development of all, the phenomenon that isn't just a swollen, steroid-pumped version of previous activities, has been hidden away, unregarded, in the evolution of the with the same.

## Personal History #2

By the time I was an undergraduate, fantasy gaming had appeared, Dungeons and Dragons style. It was too late for me to be ensnared. Dungeons and Dragons seemed to me no more than a game of chance, played with dice:

essentially just a kind of Monopoly (which bores me stupid), with the added attraction of being ordered around by a megallomaniac. There was nothing for me, there, compared with the worlds and the dramas in my head. As far as I recall, the first time I played a computer game was in 1980, when I came back from a three year trip to Singapore, and played Pong, in a friend's house in Bristol. I remember being mildly scandalised by the way this minimalist tennis rudely took over the television screen -the sacred hearth of the modern home, and mildly amazed that I found the game enjoyable. One big reason why I liked make-believe as a child was that I was hopeless at all forms of sport, and therefore totally uninterested (I'm never one to try to fit a square peg into a round hole, me)... but somehow Pong seemed able to access an avid desire to hit a moving object with a moving bar, at a level before (in neurological terms) my pitiable hand-eye coordination kicked in. A couple of years' later I met the primitive adventure games. You are in a maze of twisty passages all the same, became something of a favourite epigram, a life statement: but I wasn't hooked. I preferred to drive myself crazy as a Pacman munching dots and dodging ghosts: hunting beasts and gathering berries. I continued to play puzzle games and abstract games throughout the eighties: tetris, aquanoids, lemmings... But I had become a professional writer of science fiction and fantasy: and in this capacity, I was very interested in the concept of computer gaming. I wasn't alone in this, of course. William Gibson, the writer of Neuromancer, famously claimed that his idea of cyberspace was based on watching kids playing arcade games, and becoming convinced that they desperately wanted to project themselves into some imaginary space inside the machine. I never played arcade games. But (like many other sf writers) I spent my life sitting in front of a computer screen. When I wanted to write about my own activity (creating adventures in imaginary worlds) in futuristic terms, it was natural to invoke the games:

'My heart pounded, my mouth hauled air. Across my shoulders a line of terrific tension knit my muscles, engaging in force with those other muscles, thrusting pistons of bone wrapped in blood and glistening hide. The pack surrounded me in thunder and bodiily heat, little cold gouts of animal spittle hit my cheeks. I felt the thighs —my thighs- clench in a compulsion more violent than any amorous climax; and an enormous surge under me. I bowed my cheek against grey flesh running with a hot gloss of sweat, making myself light as air, standing on my toes, floating, no longer tense... Everything slowed.

Ah. Good ome...'

(Gwyneth Jones, Escape Plans (London: Unwin, 1986))

That's an extract, in fact it's the opening, of my computer-world novel, Escape Plans. It was written about 1984. What's happening is that the privileged race-goer, up in the private members stand, is plugged-in to the jockey on the winning horse. The jockey, a member of the underclass, wired for other people's delectation of her skill and her emotions, is being consumed. It's a sensual, intimate form of chattel slavery; and a metaphor, in Escape Plans for what the first world does to the third, or what the rich north does to the poor south. In later books I used the games in different ways. They became the major social and cultural activity of my future: trivial and important games, all kinds of games.

There was a whole imaginary development of the technology, culminating in a games-emvironment that's delivered to your brain in molecular code, as eyedrops (this is because I, personally, want wrap-around virtual reality, but I hate the idea of being dunked in a vat of flotation gel, with electrodes all over me; as in the universally popular standard prediction).

Computer games in fiction can simply be a means of accessing a seamless Namia, or a Star Trek holodeck, where fancy dress and make-lbelieve can be enjoyed without consequences for future episodes. In the mid-eighties Ender's Game (1985), massively successful at the time, Orson Scott Card came up with an eight year old boy whose freakish skill at playing the videogame dogfights is used in the real interstellar war Earth is fighting the insectoid Buggers: and the game scenario emphasises Ender's corrupted innocence. In Candas Jane Dorsey's angry, feminist story, '(Learning About) Machine Sex' a young woman programmer in search of vengeance writes the ultimate masturbation software, which she knows will have every male user instantly hooked, helpless and fucked over. (In real life, of course, virtual sex never took off. The simulation is just too complex, and genuine (well, sort of) human sexual partners are very readily available, both consensually and commercially.)

But though many sf writers have been intrigued by videogames, the imaginary games in the books/tv//movies work the way they do for fictional reasons: to make a point, to advance the plot, to carry a metaphor, to display some ingenious fantasy psychology; or some cool fantasy technology. What has happened to the games themselves, now that the future is upon us, is something different.

## **Final Fantasy**

The game goes like this. You are the cartoon character with the questionable haircut and the enormous sword. Your name is Cloud Strife, but if you want to give the character a different name you may. This isn't like reading a book. Final Fantasy VII is in many ways only minimally 'intuitive'; most of the scenery is just painted flats. But your gameplay, within the elaborate maze that the writers have devised, will be unique. Here you are, in a shabby inner city environment that strangely favours Walt Disney more than Blade Runner. You meet a girl, a flower-girl, her name is Aeris and she's going to be very important... Then you're off, with other members of the terrorist resistance group Avalanche, to launch an assault on one of Shinra's main reactors in the city of Midgar. Shinra are the bad guys. They are sucking the lifeforce out of the planet, with these Mako reactors. You, Cloud, know that you were once a member of the Shinra elite militia, called Soldier, but you have changed your allegiance. Your new friends tell you they can see the Mako gllow in your eyes. Members of Soldier are exposed to Mako energy when they're recruited, and it never leaves them... The simple and direct strong man Barratt is suspicious of you at first, but easily convinced; the hard-fisted bar girl, Tifa, was your childhood friend. There are other characters you will meet along the way, but you will always travel in a team of three. Choose your partners and away you go... There are fights, with a truly amazing (unrivalled in the annals) variety of demons, insectoids, robots, malignant pumpkins, infectious frogs, rocking horses, caterpillars, giant locusts. There are puzzles, kinetic and numerical, for you to solve. There are stray items of value lying around; or inside chests that you can open (the fossilised traces of ancient adventure game lineage lies here): there are minor figures who will

divulge vital information if approached in the right sequence, their dialogue and yours presented in lines of white type in blue boxes... There are captivating little interiors, full of doll's house furnishing which is mostly fake (like plaster hams and pies in The Tale Of Two Bad Mice). There are hotels, tents, caves, hostels, where you will find a room with three little beds or sleeping mats where you can 'spend a night', and restore your strength; to the tune of a little lullaby of which I have become very fond. There are the Chocobo, giant birds that can be trained and ridden and bred and raced. There's a casino called the Golden Saucer, where you'll ride in your first Chocobo race; there are friendly enemies and treacherous friends. There is a remarkably convoluted plot, which is revealed to you through cut scenes, in flashbacks, and in extended passages of idiosyncratic and character-driven dialogue. You don't have an over-reaching mission, your quest grows on you as the action unfolds: and as it does, you discover things about yourself that bewilder and terrify you...

In 1994, I was invited to speak at a conference on Digital Futures at Sussex University. I gave them a paper called 'Living In The Machine', which was mainly an overview of

cyberspace as it has (or had, at that point) appeared in fiction; but in the question and answer session I was asked to speculate about future hypertext novels. Now, I did not know from hypertext novels, but I speculated anyway. 'Sometime soon', I said, 'The software will become easier to use. The clunky "horseless carriage" entities of today will evolve into

vehicles capable of modelling, in electronic data storage, the true complexity of the novel as it exists in my mimd... There may be tools that allow each individual to read actively, to explore or fail to explore the different layers of creation at choice, to blunder or to forge new pathways; to re-form the book plhysically, permanently. We can envisage an artform of the future in which every reading of a "novel" creates (something that happens inevitably, in the cyberspace of the mind) a subtly or radiically customised unique artefact.' The term 'can be read on many levels' will have concrete meaning at last. We can imagine readers asking each other, did you get to the metaphysics yet? You reach them from the murder sceme... | think | was, er, mistaken about hypertext novels. So far, I know of only one online, hypertext novel that really works, Geoff Ryman's 253: and I've become convinced that this is not the way forward. Yet the artform that replaces the novel is already with us, growing up beside us, like Austen's novels beside the last, popstar-famous epic poetry-

When I decided to look at videogames again, I started with Eidos's Lara Croft Tombraider series. I soon discovered two things. The first was that I didn't have the game play skills to get Lara off the ground (the poor woman! I gave her such a hard time, getting nowhere!). The second was that Lara, alluring though she is, was essentially an elaborate counter, marking spaces on a board. The 'plot', carried in computer generated FMV scenes (full motion video) isn't part of the game, it's a series of more or less interesting interruptions. Steven Poole, the author of Trigger Happy, one of the few analytical studies of videogaming so far available, would agree. In his view, the raison d'être of a videogame is the gammeplay; the skills you need to develop and the hits you rack up... Forget the new drama form: a game that tries to be fiction is making a mistake, and is doomed to fail.

But then I turned to Final Fantasy VII, on my fourteen

year old son's recommendation, and immediately, I knew I'd found what I was looking for. It was an extraordinary moment, actually, when I took the console in my hands, when I took my three oddly assorted characters off on their adventures; and saw them merge into one, into the single self from which they came, as 'I' left the fighting-lek, and set off into the cartoon landscape.

Final Fantasy VII (FFVII) can only be described as an epic experience. To complete the three discs is going to take you anything from fifty to ninety playing-hours, depending on how much of the sub-plots you decide to explore: and though it is now so ancient its graphics seem utterly bizarre, (the strange little megacephallic cartoon characters; the dollhouse furnishings) it is still deservedly rated as something very special. It came out in 1997, as the first Englishlanguage Final Fantasy game [1-6 never made it out of Japan]; was released near the launch of Playstation 2 [Sony's then current game console], and entranced the fantasy gameplaying public -many, though not all of them, children under the age of fourteen. 'It took me about as long as reading Philip Pullman,' said one of my child-respondents (I asked around). 'It's a lot of hours...' When I asked one of my

son's friends to tell me the difference between

complete a Final Fantasy game.'

playing FFVII, and reading a big engrossing book, the child said, 'In FFVII you have a personal experience when playing... When two people read the same book they read exactly the same words, and meet the same characters. In a Final Fantasy game there are a lot more things to do. Only the most dedicated player would completely

Perhaps only the most dedicated reader could extract the whole meaning from a novel of comparable length and sweep. I don't suppose I'll ever 'completely complete' War and Peace, or A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu. But though many readers of large, commodious science fiction or mainstream novels might be startled, I think the comparison is just.

## **Imaginary Worlds**

**Fairytales** 

do not

foment

revolution

Animals and humans like to play: it makes them feel good. There's a reward of pleasure, we could say, which reinforces our desire to jump and run and fight; and to practice hitting the target. There's another reward of pleasure to be gained from mastering any complex tasks to the level where we can smoothly and intuittively: as perform in Cskszentmilhallyi's 'flow'. As conscious animals we are, parradioxically, always trying to subsume the conscious into the unconscious. Every time you reach the level of intuitive expertise in something technically challenging, whether it's craft work, playing a piece of complex music, or getting Lara's jump and roll to take her exactly where you want her to go, your brain issues the pleasure, under the impression (so to speak) that by getting this new skill locked down you will be increasing your chances of survivall... which is why people will go on driving their cars, until the planet is paved over. The brain doesn't have any moral objection to your 'heathen joy in destruction', and doesn't know or care if you are playing a game for fun, so you get the pleasure anyway, even if you're just powering Lara through another level (although, arguably, videogames skills are transferable, and maybe you deserve the pleasure).

Human interaction techniques (listening to what people say, realising what they mean, observing their actions, calculating their trustworthiness, spotting their alliances) are

equally survival skills: indeed, it may be that our particular brand of intelligence was honed and developed by a feedback loop between the individual and the human group. The natural environment of people is people. Therefore it makes sense that we should take pleasure in reading a novel. following a soap opera, or playing an rpg. What amazed me, was to observe how closely the game play of Final Fantasy VII mirrored the naked processes of make-bellieve that underpin my fiction. This is exactly the way I go to work: this story that moves from one cluster of vivid incident to the next, with spaces in-between where my readers must wander, admiring the décor and following my clues, while they gain the experience and prowess they need for the next boss-fight of elucidation I have waiting for them (and I know from anecdotal evidence, this punctuated narrative development is to say the least, fairly common: we set out with a handful of dreamlike moments, we stitch them laboriously together). I know there'll be sections of any novel of mine that some readers will never reach, because they'll never find their way to the metaphysics from the murder scene. I know that there will be a linear plot that must be followed, and the reader will be guided along this groove, while given (ideally) an illusion of the free interplay of incident, error, confusion and coincidence in a real world. My son and his friends make an interesting distinction, on this point, about the character-oriented Final Fantasy series. You get annoyed because Lara has to go off and hunt for a key: you want to know why she can't use her bazooka to blast the door down? But if Cloud can't do something naturalistic, that's part of the strong.... | know that there will be significant secondary characters, the same kind of ensemble-playing, and for the same reasons, as in the most ancient human myth, and there will be the protagonist -"not the biggest or the best person,' explains one of my young respondents, 'but the person the story's about.'

I even know how the dialogue works. My dialogue, just like the lines of type in the little text boxes in FFVII, is actually a set of instructions, carefully embedded in a matrix of hopefully natural seeming conversation. (I will craft a whole scene around one line that I know must be spoken, for the sake of my characterisation or my plot. My triumph is when you, dear reader, can't tell the difference...) In short, I realise that FFVII had both a single author and a string of developers: that decisions were made in committee, that hordes of people were involved. But it plays like a child's game of make believe: the germ plasm of all dramatic fiction.

Our themes and plots are standard. Nobody invents them, they have all been used and reused thousands of time. The story that I write is a transcription of the imagined scenes that I have lived, vividly, in my imagined world: an observer magically able to experience the viewpoint and the emotions of the characters. The plausible, smoothly connected plot, the agreement with the conventions of mimesis: these are illusions, laboriously created after the fact. And finally, when my story pauses, when one of those climactic action points is over (or about to start), I will relax, and gather my forces, in the stillness of a passage of pure description. Another quote from one of my young teenage players: 'You really look forward to the cut-scenes, because they are things of beauty...'

At first glance it is startling to find the mighty Sony corporation peddling a passionate plea against the brutal over-exploitation of natural resources; and that validates the Gaia theory through Shinto religious beliefs. Stranger still to

find them openly confessing their more intimate thievery. When Cloud discovers the secret of his origins, this is what he is told:

you don't belong to yourself, son. You belong to the corporation. Everything you do, everything you think, everything you think you want: the corporation did it to you. You have no free will.

It's quite remarkable, isn't it? Sony need have no fear. Fairytales do not foment revolution, fairytales do the opposite. They are the opium of the people... (see my 'Introduction' to Seven Tales And A Fable). However, FFVII is one of those stories that acknowledges the evils of the world, and redeems them (whether or not they deserve redemption) by weaving them into a rich tapestry of heightened experience: and this complexity itself is a corrective. Just giving the players more to think about, more alternatives, more chances to lose their ego in sheer delight, might have some effect on the brutal ideology of our century; without even reducing profits.

The watchdogs of society should certainly be paying attention to videogames, because a generation of young people (predominantly, not exclusively, the boys) is growing up, has already grown up, addicted to ultra-wiolent interactive cartoons. Waste your enemies, collect tokens. The heathen joy of destruction: that's all there is. The games did not invent the ideology, but they re-imforce it, in the lab rat sense of the term, like nobody's business, and they support, inexorably, the spread of that ideology into other media: it's not an accident that fans of sf print fiction today are greedier for torture and brutality than ever in the genre's history. Steven Poole suggests as a corrective that players of violent games should be made to suffer the consequences of their actions if you betray a friend, if you leave your wounded behind, if you kill without reason, or do anything in contravention of the Geneva Convention, the game will swing around and give you a heavy shot of instant karma; and you'll know not to do that again. 'Doing wrong should hunt...' It's nice idea, and intrinsically it should be acceptable to the players (good deeds are just a different form of currency, aren't they?). Sadly, I've a feeling you'd have to change the assumptions of your society first, or nobody would buy your sissy game. But I don't know... There could be something in it.

## **End Here, It Sounds Hopeful**

I don't know if I'll ever play through VIII, IX and X. I don't know where I'd find the time, and I never did care for sequels. From what I've seen of them, VIII may have some merit, but X is nothing more than a watered-down version of VII, with 'proper' human figures and voiced acting, a computer generated movie you can play; and as slight as the movie itself (Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within). But FF VII convinces like a clunky form of Al, that looks like a shoebox and talks like a duck, and yet, discernibly, the team is on the right track this time. And it cuts both ways. How often now. when I come to a fight-action sequence in an sf or fantasy novel, I find myself flipping through: not interested. What's the point in this in print? It ought to be game play. Huge special effects sequences have the same effect (notably, the last battle in The Amber Spyglass (2000))... On the other hand, apart from FFVII, all the games I've played have been grossly deficient in dramatic content, both in the detail of interaction between characters and in the intensity of the

emotion. The plots are devoid of the essential pleasure of unexpected yet satisfying resolutions. But somewhere up ahead, along this track, there's a game which is going to be as different from a novel as a novel is different from an epic poem, yet it will be a complex and satisfying work of art. One day soon, the games will be able to tackle the viciously complex variables of human emotion and motivation as fluently as *SSX* handles absurd snowboarding tricks. I don't know what that will look like, or how we will play: but it will be an unstoppable revolution. What's more, it will genuinely be an advance on the project of bringing works of the imagination intact into the real world. It will be a story full of deceptive 'simplicities' that conceal multiple tricks of

the trade, but much closer to the original, endogenous virtual-experience. The message will be very old, it just took a long time to get through.

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Gwyneth Jones's Bold as Love and Castles Made of Sand are available from Gollancz; Taylor Five: The Story of a Clone Girl is published by Dolphin as by Ann Halam. Her webpages can be accessed at http://homepage.ntlworld.com/gwynethann/index.html — Eds

# Beyond the Scientific Romances: Five Novels by H.G. Wells by Andrew M. Butler

H.G. Wells, *The Sea Lady* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2002) ISBN 0-7551-0419-6 £7.99 156pp

H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2002) ISBN 0-7551-0414-5 £9.99 318pp.

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H.G. Wells, *The Dream* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2002) ISBN 0-7551-0399-8 £9.99 290pp

confess that I'm only really familiar with the early works of H.G. Wells, the scientific romances, although I know I moved my eyes from side to side through *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) during my late teens, and I've seen both film versions (neither really films of the book). But in a half-dozen or so early novels he more or less outlined the genre to be, as Poe had outlined detective fiction at the other end of the nineteenth century. There was time travel (*The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895)), mad scientist (*The Island of Dr Moreau*, 1896 and *The Invisible Man: A* 

Grotesque Romance (1897)), alien invasion (The War of the Worlds (1898)) and space travel (The First Men in the Moon (1901)). Having now had a chance to read some of the novels written after these – helpfully brought back into print by House of Stratus – it is fascinating to watch Wells attempt to ring the changes.

The Sea Lady (1902) is a social comedy, perhaps needing to be read in the context of Wells's shift to writing more social realism after those first sf texts. There is a strong element of satire in its curiously distanced account of the

meetings of a ruling class family with a mermaid in Folkestone. The account is given by an unnamed narrator, a cousin of Melville (one of the participants in the story), and has the air of revealing gossip about a senior British family.

The Randolph Buntings are engaged in that dangerously indecent fad of bathing in the sea when a woman is spotted in difficulties some way out to sea. Randolph and Fred Bunting rescue her, nearly drowning themselves in the process, and it is some time before the family realise they have fished out a mermaid. This is potentially a cause for scandal, partly through the very existence of such a mythical figure and her attitudes and partly through the family's

connection to a prospective parliamentary candidate and nephew of an Earl, Mr Harry Chatteris, himself recently embroiled in a scandal over his breaking off of an engagement to a millionaire's daughter in the United States.

There is much satire at the expense of sensationalist journalism, with the sense that nothing much has changed in the century since. It is remarkable how easily the mermaid passes as normal, as people are all too willing to edit out the apparently impossible. The journalists and newspaper editors are perhaps believers that an extraordinary lie may be more convincing than an extraordinary truth. Meanwhile I'd not known Wells could do comedy so adroitly.

A Modern Utopia (1905) offers a curious hybrid of descriptive philosophising and novel, without really ever being comfortable as a novel of ideas. The cover, the sun shining across the sea, contains the word 'H.G. WELLS DEBATES' with no further explanation – is this part of some debate about (by?) H.G. Wells? Does he debate A Modern Utopia? This is, after all, a follow-up to other non-fiction works, Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Human Progress upon Human Life and Thought (1901) and

Mankind in the Making (1903) – will editions of these be similarly labelled? And whom is he debating with?

This label is all the more strange, given Wells's attempt to distance himself from the story's narrator, who is 'a whitish, plumpish man, a little under the middle size and age, with such blue eyes as many frishmen have, and agile in his movements and with a slight tonsorial baldness – a penny might cover it – of the crown' (v), and is sitting on a stage, reading a book about utopia. Aloud? Or to himself? This reading in turn

generates a companion, a botanist, who will be in some dispute with the narrator. The narrator begins by discussing what a modern utopia would be, and moves him and the botanist into the utopia, but a utopia which seems to shift as the narrator thinks through his premises.

Thus the utopia might appear more outopian (no place) than eutopian (good place), although it acknowledges spaces of both kinds created by Plato, More, Bellamy, Morris and others, not to mention libertarian thinkers such as Wordsworth Donisthorpe, a northern textile industrialist who shared a publisher with Wells and who just might have invented cinema in 1890. In anticipation of that other



socialist thinker Bertholt Brecht's alienation technique, every time you settle in to reading the book as a novel, the narrator speaks about his act of creation and how it fits together. Another aspect of this is that I was never quite convinced it was a eutopic location, although certainly it is more eutopian than the narrator and Wells's present:

Men die of starvation; people die by the hundred thousand needlessly and painfully; men and women are lashed together to make hell for each other; children are born – abominably, and reared in cruelty and folly; there is a thing called war, a horror of blood and vileness. The whole thing seems to me at time a cruel and wasteful wilderness of muddle (103).

The utopian inhabitants, of course, don't believe such a world could be possible – something Wells returns to in *The Dream*, discussed below.

Utopia seems to amount to opportunities for free love, with rigid rules to cover child maintenance, and exiling the criminal and the mad to somewhere else (even though the utopia is meant to cover the whole world), plus an opportunity to join a *samurai* elite. Meanwhile everyone is identifiable by their thumbprint, with records being kept on everyone in the entire world in a series of buildings on one side of Northumberland Avenue, or possibly in Paris. All these records seem to me to be too much like an opportunity for Big Brother. And I don't get the sense of utopia as a lived-in space.

In the Days of the Comet (1906) was presumably looking forward in some sense to the re-appearance of Halley's Comet in 1910, and again has a peculiar framing device. An unidentified figure (Wells?) sees an old man at a desk in a tower, writing. Engaging him in a brief conversation, he discovers that the old man is writing about the Change – whatever that is – and is then able to read the old man's account. It is made clear from the start that this future (or this

past) is a utopian one – to be more specific, a eutopian one – although the account itself points towards a coming war with Germany (still eight years in the future for Wells, but long since anticipated).

The novel very much falls into two halves, or rather the first two-thirds and the final third. The first two thirds is set Before It Changed, and is a psychological thriller of sorts, centred on Willie Leadford. Like a character in an Arnold Bennett novel – *Anna of the Five Towns* had appeared in 1902 – Leadford lives in a thinly disguised version of the Potteries and the towns around Stoke-on-

Trent. Dissatisfied with his job, he still lives at home with his kindly mother who struggles to understand him, and who rents out a room to the Reverend E. B. Gabbitas. Leadford is a committed socialist, converted to the cause by his friend Parload, although that latter is now more interested in science and the approaching comet. As a novel of ideas, Wells therefore presents Leadford as torn between science and religion (his mother is religious) although he is never offered the option of a scientific socialism (Leadford had come to socialism from Christianity).

This debate is interrupted by his semi-illicit romance with Nettie Stuart, who as the daughter of a head gardener is his social superior. Their romance is conducted through the mails, but having broken it off, Leadford goes to visit Nettie only to find that she is also conducting an affair with Edward Verrall, son of a wealthy capitalist. As Nettie and Edward scandalously elope together, with no intention of marriage, Leadford buys a gun to shoot them both and commit suicide with – this motif of the gun in the hands of the jealous lover occurs in two other of the novels under consideration here. But this coincides with the outbreak of war with Germany and the Earth passing through the comet's tail.

It would be unfair, perhaps, to say much of what happens next, save to note that a utopia results, which undercuts the hierarchical British society where the same kind of people rule: 'Eight of the fifteen [men in the Cabinet] went to the same school, had gone through an entirely parallel education [. . .] they had been passed from nurse to governess, from governess to preparatory school, from Eton to Oxford, from Oxford to the politico-social routine.' (216,

217). Things have perhaps changed in a century, but not by that much. At the same time, Wells's utopia is not entirely a pipe dream, as he notes the possibility of a utopian capitalism which was already in existence in 1906: 'This Bourneville [we passed through] was germane to that matter. It had been an attempt on the part of a private firm of manufacturers to improve the housing of the workers' (256). On the other hand it carried the risk of turning workers into debtors to their employers.

The War in the Air and Particularly How Mr Bert Smallways Fared While it Lasted (1908) also

anticipates hostilities with Germany, although these are speedily overcome by a yellow peril and an Asiatic horde that can barely be stopped. Written in 1907, the novel was serialised in the *Pall Mall* magazine in 1908, and offers a warning about the unpreparedness of European countries and the USA for the coming conflict that had threatened the real world since the 1890s or earlier. The setting for the novel is unclear – about seventy years after the Crimean War, so presumably some time in the 1920s; an epilogue

takes up the action some thirty years later than that

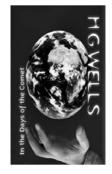
Bert Smallways is an Everyman, more specifically an Everycockney, and Wells insists on spelling most of his dialogue phonetically, which rather demeans his position. Bert is no great hero, certain not a man of action, but he does have the fortune (or misfortune) to be in the right place at the right time. In other words, he is accidentally swept up by a balloon belonging to Mr Butteridge, an inventor, and drifts helplessly, if conveniently, towards Germany. Having found the plans for a flying machine in Butteridge's

coat lining, Smallways decides to pretend to be Butteridge. By the time the Germans have penetrated his disguise, he is on their airship, travelling across the Atlantic towards a sea battle and New York.

Given the events of 11 September 2001, there is chilling familiarity to the attack on New York:

The City of New York was in the year of the German attack the largest, richest, in many respects the most splendid, and in some, the wickedest city the world had ever seen. She was the supreme type of the City of the Scientific Commercial Age; she displayed its greatness, its power, its ruthless anarchic enterprise,





and its social disorganisation most strikingly and completely. She had long ousted London from her pride of place as the modern Babylon, she was the centre of the world's finance, the world's trade and the world's pleasure; and men likened her to the apocalyptic cities of the ancient prophets. She sat drinking up the wealth of a continent [...]

For many generations New York had taken no heed of war, save as a thing that happened far away, that affected prices and supplied the newspapers with exciting headlines and pictures. [...] They felt as secure as spectators at a bull-fight; they risked their money perhaps on the result, but that was all. (155, 157)

For that matter, Bert is hardly familiar with war himself prior to these experiences. As the narrator states: 'Hitherto he has rather liked the idea of war as being a jolly, smashing,

exciting affair, something like a Bank Holiday on a large scale, and on the whole agreeable and exhilarating' (149). Indeed many people felt this until they got to the Western Front in 1914. It was not war that was the awfully big adventure. Here people die, and the war is followed by misery upon misery. This is Wells in a rather pessimistic mode.

The Dream (1924) also looks back to that war:

I can still recall the scared excitements of the August days when the war began and how incredulous we English were when we heard that our own little army was being driven back before the German hosts like a spluttering kitten pushed by a broom, and that the French lines were collapsing. Then came the rally of September. At the beginning we British youngsters had been excited spectators, but as the tale of our army's efforts and losses came home to us we crowded to the recruiting offices, by thousands and scores of thousands, until at last our volunteers could be counted by the million.

Harry Mortimer Smith survives the war, if not the peace, and his story is told from the perspective of Sarnac, two millennia later. To Sarnac the twentieth century is a vivid

dream, if not a nightmare, of a time before eutopia has been established. Aldiss and Wingrove suggest that *The Dream* is 'an interesting reversal of the situation in *In the Days of the Comet*' (160). Indeed it does look back to the misery Before It Changed from the perspective of eutopia.

The dream is of turn of the century Folkestone and environs (thinly disguised), then afterwards Pimlico and the publishing scene. Sarnac is Harry Smith, son of a greengrocer in Cherry Garden, and nephew of a gardener who supplies them with vegetables on the side. Their precarious life begins

to unravel when Harry inadvertently lets slip the arrangements for obtaining vegetables, and is made more scandalous by the elopement of his sister Fanny, who has no intention of marrying. Harry has wanted to improve himself

by education – Wells again uses phonetically rendered dialect – but it is a struggle to convince his family that the expense is worth it. Still, he has great expectations.

The dual perspective of Harry's life and Sarnac's description of it, along with his auditors' reactions to it, allows Wells to transform a miserable, Dickensian tale into a satire. The attitudes towards money, class and sex can suggest that Wells's immediate past was foolish: "The human mind in those days was always complicating and overlaying its ideas, forgetting primary in secondary considerations, substituting repetition and habit for purposive acts, and forgetting and losing its initial intentions" (31). Most scorn is reserved for the education system, with its rote learning of times tables and coronation dates of the Kings and Queens of England. The lessons Harry learns later because he has sought them out are more valuable – and they get him a publishing job ahead of those from supposedly better schools.

Aside from some awkwardness in A Modern Utopia, each of these was a pleasing and relatively easy read. One thing to note is that these are obviously reading editions, of a very comfortable weight and size, mostly well printed. Unlike, say, the Millennium/Gollancz Masterworks they don't seem to have been scanned and reprinted from earlier editions, but entirely reset. From a scattering of typographic errors, I guess that the proof reading is dependent on spellcheckers as much as human agency, as the errors are words rather than strings of

nonsense. It would have been nice to have more information about which editions have been used as the base text – I've not seen the same publisher's editions of *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Dr Moreau* or *The War of the Worlds*, all of which have had controversial 'corrected' or variorum editions. There are no explanatory notes, or introductions, so the student reader may wish to turn to the Everyman editions where these are available (and not all the titles are). But for making these available, House of Stratos needs commending.

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Non UK readers are advised to check the website and email Tom Baldwin for precise details as postage will be charged at cost.





# First Impressions

# Book Reviews edited by Steve Jeffery

All novels marked: 🚨 are eligible for the 2002 BSFA Award for Best Novel All collections and anthologies marked: 🖋 contain stories eligible for the 2002 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction

Douglas Adams - The Salmon of Doubt

Macmillan, London, 2002, 299pp, £16.99 ISBN 0-333-76657-1

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

Sanity notwithstanding, there are many of us who find forty-two to be one of the most enjoyable (and amusing)

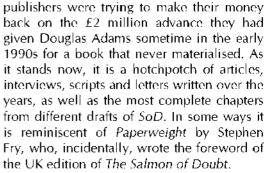
numbers in life, the universe and everything – apart from, of course, sixty-nine. And those of us were saddened to hear when Douglas Adams, author of the hugely successful *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and the originator of much mirth surrounding the number forty-two, died over a year ago.

The problem with the success of *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide* is that it made Douglas Adams a little unhappy. It turned him from being a scriptwriter, working with large numbers of people on a regular basis, to a novelist working in relative solitude, which he didn't enjoy half as much. He became

progressively less prolific to such an extent that he became infamous for missing deadlines for well-overdue books.

The last of these was *The Salmon of Doubt*, the third Dirk Gently novel. I first knew of its existence in 1994 and have waited patiently ever since. What was

published eight years later isn't what the author originally intended the public to read, and one feels that the

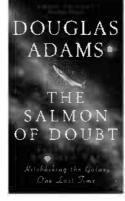


The book is grouped into three parts.

First is *Life*, which includes the author's first publication, a letter to the *Eagle* comic

when he was twelve and a number of amusing essays on subjects as diverse as his nose, P.G. Wodehouse, international differences in driving laws, Bach, hangover cures and scuba diving with manta rays in the Great Barrier Reef.

Part two is The Universe, which contains witty



observations concerning computers – he was a huge Apple Mac fan, and not just because they now come in a variety of colours.

The third section is *And Everything*, which includes two short stories, one of which was based on a sketch he wrote with *Monty Python* Graham Chapman while the other concerns a young Zaphod Beeblebrox, a character from *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide*, and finally, the best of the draft chapters of what was to be *SoD*.

Though incomplete, the published chapters of *SoD* are highly entertaining reading. Dirk Gently, the holistic private detective refuses to help a woman find the other half of her cat – the first half doesn't need finding and appears to be perfectly content. He is surprised to discover that for the first time his is in the black, which leads him to Santa Fe by a variety of routes too complex to discuss here. Oh, and there's a rampaging rhino put in for good measure. But, alas, it ends – or doesn't end at all – far too early.

Perhaps The Hitch-Hiker's Guide will forever remain Adams's greatest work (though his underrated travel book Last Chance to See...comes at least a close second), but The Salmon of Doubt is certainly worth the effort. Few others have managed to succinctly craft words together with such clarity and insight into the human condition as:

Normally she would ask her husband, only he recently died bungee jumping, which he shouldn't have been doing at his age only it was his seventieth birthday and he said he'd do exactly what he wanted even if it killed him, which of course it did, and though she had of course tried contacting him through a medium, the only message she'd got from him was that he didn't believe in all this stupid spiritualist nonsense, it was all a damned fraud, which she thought was very rude of him, and certainly rather embarrassing for the medium.

## Kevin J. Anderson – Hidden Empire: The Saga of the Seven Suns 💷

Simon and Schuster, London, 2002, 679pp, £10.99/£17.99 ISBN 0-7432-2044-7

Reviewed by Scott T. Merrifield.

Not content with writing in universes developed by other writers (Star Wars, X-Files and, most recently, the Dune saga) Anderson is going one step further and creating his own fictional universe, one of political intrigue and resplendent with exotic worlds and peoples. Anderson's Saga of the Seven Suns initially promises depth and complexity, a series that reminds the reader of the space operas of E.E. Doc Smith's Skylark and Lensman series. For that is exactly what *Hidden Empire* promises to be, a sheer indulgent "dazzling space opera fit to stand with the classics of the genre", as the cover blurb enthusiastically states.

As bookshop shelves are groaning under the weight of

a glut of science fiction trilogies and tetralogies what does Anderson have to offer that these existing series don't? The answer, it has to be said, is not much. There is no mistaking that this is an piece impressive of work: characterisation and intricate plotting abound throughout Hidden Empire. This will no doubt appeal to Anderson's large following, but this reader cannot shake the sense that Anderson is trying to find his own literary voice, but succeeds in merely echoing those series within which he has worked previously. This does not help when the book's cover happily draws comparisons between Anderson's Hidden Empire, Dune and Star Wars. The reader is left with the unpleasant

sensation that one is reading a Dune/Star Wars hybrid, in which characters and places have merely been re-worked and dumped into the Saga of the Hidden Suns.

Earth has acquired the knowledge of the stardrive to

achieve faster-than-light travel from the Ildiran civilisation, allowing them to establish colonies throughout the galaxy. Thanks to this technology two xeno-archaeologists have discovered a technological weapon which once belonged to the insectoid Klikiss race. This weapon, the Klikiss Torch, has the power to create suns which would allow human colonisation further into deep space. By turning the gas planet Oncier into a sun, thereby allowing terraforming of Earth-like colonies, unwitting genocide is committed when a race living inside the gas planet is wiped out. As a result the 'deep-core' aliens declare war on humanity.

Anderson's book can be very rewarding in places The

most exciting parts of the text lay with the xeno-archaeologists, but the novel loses momentum rapidly when Anderson starts dealing with the political machinations of the various planets and planetary systems that he is seeking to establish. This becomes more annoying when Anderson feels compelled to go into 'Star Trek mode' and offer the reader moral and philosophical soundbites on subjects such as ecological matters and the nature of warfare. These soundbites are patronising and merely serve to detract from the story.

Overall, this is a lengthy text that takes immense concentration to get through. I began to get tired of the book a quarter of the way in. The moralisation is over-thetop, and the political structures Anderson

is trying to set up become heavy-handed. In this first book, he is trying to establish too much too soon. Anderson has written better works and seems better suited to working within pre-established franchises. Perhaps that is perhaps what he should continue to do.



## John Gregory Betancourt - Roger Zelazny's The Dawn of Amber 💭

iBooks, London, 2002, 299pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-7434-4552-X

## Reviewed by Carol Ann Kerry-Green

John Gregory Betancourt has set out to answer some of the questions of the world of Amber; how it came into being, who created the Pattern, how Oberon became the ruler of Amber and why the Courts of Chaos and Amber are at war.

Anyone who has read Zelazny's Amber series will be immediately at home in this first part of this prequel trilogy, as Dworkin manipulates Shadow and uses Trumps to move between places. For those not familiar with it, this might be a starting place, though I think it is more likely to appeal to those completists who wish to know more about the beginnings of Amber and the Pattern.

Obere is a guards captain fighting in the Army of his King, Elnar, to deliver his land of llerium from the hell-creatures that have been attacking relentlessly for the last year or so. Dragged from his bed late one night by Dworkin, a friend and mentor from the past, Obere is thrust into a new world. He learns that the sole reason for the hell-creatures attack on Ilerium is to kill him, and that he is, in fact, Oberon, son of Dworkin, Prince of Chaos. Plunged into Shadow in company of his new-found father and sister, Freda, Oberon tries to come to terms with what is happening.

On arrival at Juniper, Dworkin's current base, Oberon learns more about his new-found family and he meets

several of his brothers and sisters. Dworkin is gathering all his living children to him in an attempt to ward of an attack by enemies he has gained in the Courts. All of Dworkin's children have at one time successfully traveled the logrus which gives them power over Shadow and the ability to manipulate it. Some of them, including Dworkin himself, had a difficult time in traversing the logrus and Dworkin's own brother was killed in the attempt. When Dworkin examines Oberon's mind he finds that he will not be able to travel the logrus, the ability is there, but the Pattern is different, and if he attempts it he will die.

After his initial disappointment in Oberon's inability to traverse the logrus, Dworkin becomes convinced that Oberon has the power to create a new Pattern, a new logrus that the children of Dworkin will be able to follow. As they begin to experiment with this, the long-awaited attack begins and Oberon is thrust into a new fight against the hell-creatures. The idea of a new Pattern and his ability to manipulate it will have to wait.

I found this a very easy and quick read, though it hasn't Zelazny's depth of vision to it, it makes an interesting, if brief read about how the whole story of Amber started. Hopefully in future volumes Betancourt will go into further detail about the Courts of Chaos and the feud that Dworkin is involved with.

## Charles de Lint – The Onion Girl

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The onion girl is Jilly Coppercorn, an artist in the Newford community de Lint has used frequently in his novels. She feels that if the layers of her life were to be peeled away there would be nothing at the core. Outwardly successful and popular, with a genuine warmth of character, she considers herself inwardly barren. She is forced to confront her past and her damaged personality when she is physically injured by a hit and run driver, and the repercussions of that process affect all those around her.

The Newford setting, and the various excursions into the otherworld, will be familiar to readers of de Lint. Although he is a writer I respect and enjoy tremendously, there were times when I was tempted to think that this book is too much of the mixture as before, in the use he makes of animal spirits and the locations of the otherworld. What made it different and compelling for me is de Lint's description of Jilly's sister Raylene.

The two sisters share the same 'white trash' background, and the same problems. While Jilly escaped, Raylene was left to face life alone, and the process has embittered her and left her with a hatred for her older sister. Much of her story is set in the real world, and when she eventually crosses into the otherworld, it is as a force of destruction. Her character and her redemption form the most powerful strand of the book. De Lint doesn't compromise in showing the evil she suffers as well as the

Gollancz, London, 2002, 508pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-575-07272-5

evil she does, and although he leads his readers to expect that she will attempt to destroy Jilly, it's impossible not to understand her or feel some sympathy with her. For me at least she's a stronger and more interesting character than the book's protagonist. Jilly has the support of friends, helpers and potential lovers, while Raylene works out her own salvation essentially alone. For both of them, although magic operates, the solutions to their problems lie within themselves. The ending, where the two women move towards a reconciliation and face different futures,

is satisfying and without sentimentality.

De Lint writes superbly, evoking the realistic settings of this world as well as the beauty, the majesty and the danger of the otherworld. He's equally good at describing the forests and mountains of a fantasy landscape as the back streets of a modern city. The story is told from a variety of different viewpoints, and moves back and forward through time as de Lint examines how his characters' past experiences have formed what

they are in the present.

Although I mentioned above the danger of his work becoming repetitive, his use of the same settings and magical beings in more than one book allows him to explore themes in more depth or from different angles; he extends and develops his worlds and his ideas, rather than remaining static. I look forward to each new de Lint book as it appears, and this wasn't a disappointment.

## Charles de Lint – Tapping The Dream Tree

Tor, New York, 2002, 541pp, \$26.95 ISBN 0-312-87401-4

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Tapping The Dream Tree is a collection of eighteen short stories set in and around the magical but modern Canadian town of Newford. One is previously unpublished, five have only been previously published (individually) as limited edition chapbooks, the rest were first published in magazines or anthologies. Readers who already know de Lint's Newford work will come across many familiar characters (and some new ones) in these pages; readers who haven't previously visited Newford will find the stories engaging and accessible without needing to refer to the earlier novels.

"Canada isn't a melting-pot, it's a mosaic", and these stories are tiles in the pattern, each coloured with a different culture's mythology, but combining harmoniously to support an overarching theme. There are

stories featuring Native American characters (both human and non-), stories reaching for their Black roots, stories of European extraction, and stories about living Canadian, a comparatively new culture distinct from its multiple parents but not completely replacing them. There's a werewolf story, a bargain-with-the-devil story, a story that turns out *not* to be a bargain-with-the- devil, a hob story, a fallen-angel story, a ghost story... an excellent pick-and-mix selection, in fact.

Newford and environs, the setting for these stories, gives us a clear picture of de Lint's idea of the Good Life. It contains plenty of Nature, both wild and farmed, and also all the pleasanter amenities of a good-sized town: bookstores, cafes, relaxed drinking establishments with live music, and a general population large enough, well-off enough, and appreciative enough to support a sizeable community of visual artists, writers, small-press publishers and musicians. de Lint tries hard to keep his Utopian optimism and idealism in check by conscientiously working in the seedy side of town – the

dumpsters, the burned-out quarter, the street people – but he doesn't always succeed. Similarly, his interest in character is much more slanted towards Good than Evil, and his plots are driven by an interest in problem-solving and reconciliation rather than an interest in underlying conflict for its own sake. Fantasy – even "urban fantasy", or whatever they're currently calling contemporary-setting-with-magic – is a deeply moral genre, founded on Good, Evil, and making the right choice between them. I don't think any individual story in this collection allows the homily to displace the narrative, but because the stories were made as individual works, not as a collection, their cumulative effect leaves this reader feeling slightly hammered with the message that we should all get on with being nicer, more caring, sensitive,

giving, people.

**Dream Tree** 

**CHARLES de LINT** 

The further, rather paradoxical message of these stories is that Magic, with its accompanying joy, awe and wonder, is given to those who seek nothing in return. Over and over again the stories tell us not to ask favours from Faerie, not to bargain with the Otherworld – they tell us that only those who are perfectly content with their mundane lives can deal well with such powerful stuff. This is difficult, because people who read fantasy are not perfectly content with their mundane lives.

We are looking for Magic, and won't necessarily take kindly to being told that because we want it badly enough to ask for it, we can't actually have it. Fantasy stories that tell us to get on with being nice in Reality (as opposed to "pure escapism") are certainly a legitimate use of the genre, and warnings to be careful what we ask for are certainly appropriate (a surprising number of people end up *getting* what they ask for, and being pretty disconcerted by it). But searching for wonder is also legitimate – sometimes people who look for things, find them.

## Lynn Flewelling - The Bone Doll's Twin: Book I of the Tamir Triad

Voyager, London, 2001, 438pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-00-711308-0

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

This fantasy hooks the reader from the first with its prologue, a "Document Fragment Discovered in the East Tower of the Oreska House", scattered with tantalising hints about the tale that will unfold in the novel, including "an act of cruelty that altered the course of history."

It has been prophesied that so long as a daughter of Thelatimos's line defends and rules, the land of Skala shall never be subjugated. But now, after centuries of rule by a line of queens, a king, Erius, has usurped his mother's throne, and the land is blighted by drought, famine and war. Erius, meanwhile, is murdering his female relatives who are rivals for his power. When his sister, Ariani, gives birth to twins – a boy and a girl – her husband, Duke Rhius, and the wizard lya persuade a hill witch to perform a horrific ritual that will sacrifice the boy

to save the girl, and give her the use of her brother's body to disguise her until she can claim the throne and restore Skala's prosperity. The ritual goes disastrously wrong, and the participants will have to live with the guilt and honor of what they have done.

The surviving child, Tobin, is raised as a boy in an isolated keep, well away from Erius or anyone who might discover 'his' true identity, never knowing that "he" is in fact "she". He has a lonely childhood, with only servants for company, and living in dread of his mother who has been driven mad by her memories of the night of the birth. Tobin is also haunted by a demon, the ghost of his dead twin, who only he can see, and to whom he is irrevocably bound. His life improves after the arrival of lya's apprentice, Arkoniel, who arranges for him to have a companion who, when he becomes a knight, will be his

squire. However, after the suspicious deaths of his parents, he is ordered by Erius to return to the capital, and is in greater danger than before.

This is an exceptionally well-written novel, in which fantastical happenings are portrayed convincingly. The

fearful atmosphere of the haunted keep is almost tangible, and the reader is made very aware that Tobin is living on a knife's edge in Erius's palace. Above all the novel is original and leaves the reader eagerly anticipating the next book in the series.

## Ian Graham – Monument 🚨

Orbit, London, 2002, 373pp, £10.00 is8N 1-84149-102-0

## Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Monument is a first novel by author lan Graham and appears to be a stand-alone story – rare in these days of fantasy trilogies and multi-book series.

This is the story of a drunken vagrant called Anhaga Ballas. Living on the streets of Soriterath, he relies on his wits and petty thieving to survive from one whisky flagon to the next, with the occasional whore thrown in whenever he can afford one. It is his thieving which finally begins his downfall. Having been rescued by a priest from a severe beating, Ballas abuses this act of charity by stealing from the priest. Armed with information gained from the priest, Ballas then commits burglary to steal a trinket studded with jewels. All goes well until Ballas attempts to fence the trinket and is offered far less than his booze-fuddled mind reckons it is worth. Ballas takes the trinket back, intending to find a higher price, but he is stalked by the original bidder and his cronies, and in a confrontation Ballas kills the man. Unfortunately for Ballas, although a rogue himself, this man was well-regarded by the ruling Church, and Ballas is arrested and sentenced to the Penance Oak despite his protestations of innocence and self-defence.

Facing execution, Ballas watches a man die before

him at the Penance Oak and decides this most gruesome death is not for him. His strong instinct for survival affords him his escape, but not without committing further crimes against the Church – crimes that the Church cannot ever forgive or forget. Ballas now has knowledge that can bring about the fall of the Church and the Blessed Masters who run it – not that he actually realises this of course. Thus begins a chase across the whole of Druine....

I struggled all the way through this book. It's not that it's badly written or anything, and not that the story isn't engaging in its way, but the character of Anhaga Ballas simply has no redeeming features whatsoever. He may have been wronged, and certainly didn't deserve what happens to him, but as a reader, I couldn't engage with or care a jot about someone so morally destitute. In fact, it's not just Ballas, but Graham seems to have concentrated solely on the failings of human nature for this tale.

Personally, I couldn't recommend this book to anyone. It's a dour read that really needs a hero, and unfortunately Anhaga Ballas (despite a past hinted at only at the end of the book) is not one.

## M. John Harrison – Light 🗐

Gollancz, London, 2002, 320pp, £10.99 iSBN 0-575-07026-9

## Reviewed by Stephen Jeffery

At a pre-Millennium dinner party at which he has become bored, Michael Kearney takes a woman he has known for a short time downstairs, quietly and efficiently kills her, and then leaves.

It is not his first murder. Throughout his adult life Kearney has left a trail of bodies in attempted propitiation to a horrific apparition he believes is pursuing him, and which he refers to as the Shrander.

Kearney is a brilliant mathematician, who, with his partner Brian Tate, is working towards a form of quantum computer, if they can stabilise the decoherence patterns long enough to enable information to be processed. It is the first steps of a discovery that that will be enshrined, four hundred years later, as the Kearney-Tate

transformations, in the self-aware mathematics that enable the K-ships to navigate between the stars.

Seria Mau Genlicher is a renegade freebooter pilot of a stolen K-ship, the *White Cat*, her broken body cored, drugged and wired directly into information space of the ship. Seria Mau has bought a package of alien technology from gene tailor Uncle Zip, but all it does when opened is discharge white foam and ask for someone called "Doctor Haends". Uncle Zip has no idea what it does either, he bought it in turn from a prospector called Billy Anker, on Redline, on the edge of the vast Kefahuchi Tract, and besides, he doesn't do refunds.

In a third narrative strand, Ed Chianese is brutally evicted from his dreams in a run-down 'twink' tank run by 'New Man' Tig Vesicle by the arrival of the Cray Sisters, Evie and Bella – New Venusport gangsters in tight skirts and secretary blouses, with Chambers pistols in their matching handbags. Ed and Tig escape and hole up in the New Men's warren, until the Crays find them again and Ed meets Annie Glyph, a genetically enhanced rickshaw girl working on commission for Madam Shem's circus, where Ed finds a humiliating job as a 'seer'.

Such a potted synopsis does little to explain the extraordinary depth and psychological complexity of Harrison's radical transformation of the space opera genre, as these three narratives wrap around each other, each linked, eventually, through the mysterious figure of the Shrander, an alien being in a stained maroon coat, topped with the stripped and varnished skull of a horse. It's a familiar, and resonant and disturbing image for anyone familiar with Harrison's work, from the Viriconium stories to 'The Horse of Iron, And How We



Can Know It', originally in Tarot Tales (1989, ed. Caitlin Mathews and Rachel Pollack) and collected in *Travel Arrangements*. In fact, a transformed version of 'Horse of Iron' forms a key section of *Light*, and there are scenes, images and fragments of conversation that recur from many of Harrison's others stories and novels – as well as between the different sections of *Light* itself – folded into the interstices of the novel. Indeed (and braving the risk that this reviewer will plant himself firmly in Pseud's Corner), *Light* is something of a fractal novel, one that unpacks in a wealth of self-similar referentiality upon reading, and also one in which the fractal metaphor of the Kearney-Tate mathematics is a central plot device.

All three of its central characters are, like the Dr Haends package, 'damaged goods'. All three are running away from themselves, unwilling to face up to their actions, motives and consequences. Both Kearney and Seria Mau commit casual murder, while denying their own responsibility. (Ed too, but his as the result of one of those ultimately pointless acts of misunderstood violence that run through *Viriconium*.) And at the end, even the running away is ultimately pointless. Only Billy Anker has

grasped it. As he tries to explain to Seria Mau on Redline, in a universe of wonders beyond the reach of human intellect for aeons to come, and the immense, glorious swirl of the Kefahuchi Tract filling the sky, "We're here to look, and be amazed. We're only here once. Look at this. See that? Look!" And it is a universe of wonders. Even as he takes it apart to reveal the trappings of space opera (even to the point of parody - there's more than a hint of Eddy the Shipboard Computer from Hitch Hiker's Guide the Galaxy in the boastful and enthusiastic mathematics of the White Cat), Harrison shows it to us: a million mile long Ghost Train of ancient, immense and abandoned alien ships, strung out in orbit between two suns, space battles compressed into nanoseconds of incandescent violence, alien technologies and weird science, clones, cultivars and shadow operators. "Everything was out of the box ... everything worked. Whereveryou looked you found."

Light is a stunning triumph; a novel that combines the genuine sense of wonder (and of the ridiculous) of sf space opera with psychological depth and drama. Undoubtedly one of the best sf novels of the year.

promoted in her place. Now faced with a life of constant

pregmancy and child-rearing, Tiaan escapes Tiksi.

prisoner.

## Ian Irvine – Geomancer 🚟

## Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Geomancer is the first book in a new series (The Well of Echoes) by this successful author of the View Erom the Mirror quartet, and is set in the same world some 200 years later.

Following the destruction of the Charon in the previous series, the Forbidding (which protected humanity from the void) was destroyed. Humanity is now fighting a desperate battle for existence against the very forces that destroyed the Charon.

On the slopes of the great mountains at Tirthrax, a manufactory is working at full tilt providing machines for the war effort. It produces Armopeds, or 'Clankers' as they are more commonly known, and these (to my mind) resemble the machines from The War of the Worlds with lots of legs and things. This story follows a talented young girl called Tiaan who makes the controllers (psychomechanical constructions – the fantasy-equivalent of the computer) for the Clankers. Her talent is to mentally align the power of crystals to control the Clankers, and she is very good at it, until for no apparent reason the controllers begin to fail in battle. It falls to Tiaan to discover the reason for their failure, as the Clankers are the only weapons that seem to make any difference against the invading hordes of Lyrinx.

Unfortunately for Tiaan, life itself at the manufactory is not simple, as she is constantly challenged and undermined by a fellow Artificer, Irisis, who is jealous of Tiaan's position at the manufactory and her 'special' talents. Eventually, Irisis's plotting and scheming bears fruit; Tiaan is banished down the mountain to the breeding house at Tiksi to begin a new role of producing the soldiers of the future – the only other useful thing women can apparently do. Tiaan had partially solved the problem of the failing controllers, but her ideas were stolen by Irisis who has now taken the credit and been

Orbit, London, 2002, 621pp, £11.99 isBN 1-84149-209-4

There is one other thread to this complicated plot that is important. Amidst all her trials and tribulations at the manufactory, Tiaan is also having some very vivid dreams of a young man trapped somewhere and facing almost certain death. She becomes enamoured of this unknown man and determines to find a way to rescue him. Unable to return to the manufactory, and unwilling to stay in Tiksi, Tiaan determines to follow her dream and rescue the man who has become her dream-lover. However, the Lyrinx are closing on the manufactory in an attempt to halt Clanker production, and Tiaan is captured and taken

I have to say that right up to this point this is an engaging story indeed, but from here on in one begins to notice distinct similarities between this new series and the last. Once again we have a heroine on the run, chased by all and sundry through all sorts of life-threatening situations which, against all the odds, she always overcomes and survives. Aíded by her own naiveté and ignorance she is unwittingly setting up the end of humanity she has been helping to prevent.

I'm disillusioned already after this one book. Although this is a good read in itself, I really can't see myself reading any of the following volumes if it's going to follow the formula of the previous series. It appears that Irvine has but one real story in his head, and is quite prepared to change names and situations and churn it out ad-imfinitum. I think I'll wait a few years for his next series and see if the first book promises anything different.

I would be prepared to recommend this as a standalone novel if it had any resolution at all to the plot-lines within it, but it appears just the first part of another series which threatens to re-tread the same old ground, and I really want to read something with new ideas in it.

## Nancy Kress - Probability Space

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Tor, New York, 2002, 367pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-765-30170-9

At the start of *Probability Space* several years have passed since humanity took an ancient alien artifact from World (possibly destroying their civilisation at the same time) and brought it home to protect the solar system. Tom Capelo is still working on the mathematics that underlies the artifact's functions and there is increasing unrest about the way the war against the alien Fallers is being fought.

When Capelo is kidnapped for unknown reasons his fourteen year old daughter goes on the run, ending up on Mars. Meanwhile Lyle Kaufman, the person responsible for taking the artifact from World, is trying to return to rescue the two members of the expedition left behind. But there is a revolution brewing in the solar system and the new leader does not believe in the dangers of using the full power of the artifact and is determined to end the Faller war once and for all.

Probability Space is a very slick book; critical thought almost slides around it, so smoothly does it do the job it sets out to. The main characters' fates are determined and all of the plot threads are tied up neatly. Therein lies one of the problems with the book: to round off the various stories there are times when it feels as if the characters are being moved around a chessboard. For instance, the return to World serves little purpose in itself (aside from showing our heroes that they should not feel too guilty about destroying the Worlders' civilisation and abandoning several colleagues...) but is required to get Lyle and an inhabitant of World near the spaceship guarding the entrance to the space tunnel.

Similarly, a large portion of the book concerns itself with the travails of Capelo's

daughter which seem designed merely to get her in a place where she can send an important message near the end of the novel.

The book also relies on a massive *deux* ex *mathematica* (if that makes sensel) which renders much of the drama pointless.

I am aware that this is all coming across as extremely negative which is a trifle unfair. The

book slips down easily and makes an entertaining read but I cannot help but feel that it is all rather unnecessary. All of the really interesting things happen in *Probability Moon*, much of that involving the life of the Worlders. The other two volumes feel like afterthoughts.



## Juliet E. McKenna – The Assassin's Edge Reviewed by Andrew A. Adams

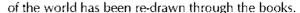
Orbit, London, 2002, 550 pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-84149-124-1

This is the fifth and final Tale of Einarinn. While the author may return to the world she's created, this initial tale has been completed. This isn't a book that's going to make much sense without reading the earlier ones. Too much of what's going on, both in terms of plot and in terms of character interaction, depends on the subtleties of the previous books in the sequence. McKenna does well, however, in gently reminding the reader of past

events without doing an info dump ("As you know, Bob..."). The reported thoughts of the characters naturally turn to the pivotal events of the prior books and remind you without wasting time on the detail.

As a final book to what's been a good series so far, this isn't a disappointment. This story finishes off by completing the circle. The first book set up various mysteries which have been paid off through the series, sometimes setting up further questions which in turn have now been answered. Both the personal and the political agendas are brought to a

conclusion, though it isn't too pat. As with the previous books, there is a price to be paid for victory, both personally and politically. Few of the characters come through unscathed and unchanged and the political map



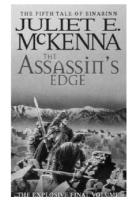
The system of magic is well worked out, and the ramifications of the discoveries of the characters continue to have effects on the plot and the expectations of the characters. Despite following the rather cliched principle of a magical catastrophe sometime in the past which led to a collapse of magic and knowledge, McKenna pulls this off far better than most and explains how and why the

collapse occurred, and why the rediscovery can now happen. A rare occurrence that justifies the use of an overused plot device.

As with the previous books, the characters all have good reasons for their aims and goals, and the ways and means they choose to use. There are no 'Dark Lords' – evil for the sake of evil – though there are certainly bad guys. The good guys have their doubts, their qualms, and their desires for revenge. Saint or sinner, the characters come alive on the page and make you believe in them and their world.

McKenna has said she'll continue writing stories set in this rich world she has created

and we may well come across some of our favourite characters again, especially those who are politically powerful. A wonderful conclusion to a great fantasy series.



Mark Morris – The Uglimen

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2002, 144pp, £8.00 (tpb, signed, limited edition of 500) ISBN 1-902880-42-0

Ramsey Campbell – The Darkest Part of the Woods

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2002, 350pp, £35 (hc, signed, limited edition of 500) isBN 1-902880-38-2

## Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

A novella can sometimes be neither one thing nor the other; too long for the precision of the short story, too short for the expansiveness of the novel. However in the right hands they can be just as effective as shorter or longer works. PS Publishing has been producing a number of novellas from many British fantasy, sf and horror writers, with many more to come.

In Mark Morris's *The Uglimen*, Rob Loomis has just about everything going for him: girlfriend, an okay job, a London flat, plus he's a key member of an up-and-coming band. Then his mother rings up and tells him his father has hung himself. Before he has even begun to come to terms with this he gets a phone call from a stranger who hisses that actually the "uglimen" murdered his father and that Rob is next. But if his father really dead? Who's that standing in the trees watching the funeral – a phantom, or had his father faked his own death to escape a terrible retribution? To discover the truth Rob delves into his father's past, in partiicular what happened in California at a time when the hippy dream was starting to become a nightmare.

Morris has produced an effective work here that pulls off several interesting twists; some I saw a mile off but others caught me completely unaware. Perhaps he could have delayed revealing whether we were dealing with real or supernatural horrors for longer than he does but it kept me reading and at the end wanting more. The characterisation is solid, in particular those parts that flash-back to Rob's father encounter with a Waco-like cult in the Sixties.

I wish I could have enjoyed Campbell's The Darkest Part of the Woods as much. I've never been too happy with dark forests, can never get rid of the feeling that someone or something out there in the trees, that I cannot see no matter how many times I glance round, is watching me, just waiting for its opportunity.... Pity I didn't get that

feeling reading this.

This is about a farmily, the Prices. The main character is the dowm-to-earth Heather. The rest of the farmily are far more troubled. Lennox, the grandfather, is incarcerated in a mental hospital. In the first chapter he breaks out and leads a group of patients to he ancient ruins at the heart of the adjacent wood. He's not the only one with troubles. His artist wife is having trouble with her wooden sculptures. Heather's sister Sylie returns from America, pregnant via a mysterious father. Sam, Heather's son, experiences blackouts if he travels too far from the trees.

However the novel's biggest and most important character is the wood itself. Unfortunately, this is to the detriment to the book as I found the human characters to be completely unengaging. This is probably deliberate as these are people who supposed to alienated but it hardly helps reader identification with characters so, well, wooden. Indeed, Campbell never misses the chance to use an arboreal metaphor or simile; plenty of book pages rustling like leaves and things being as solid as oak. To me, this soon became irritating, and yet another barrier to becoming absorbed in the story.

Heather and all the rest of her family are affected by a number of supernatural events including a freaky Christmas tree and a half-seen stickman. We learn the history of the woods which includes a Dee-like medieval magician and the discovery of his evil writings, and then on to his lair complete with remains of Lovecraftian semi-human creatures and on amd... but by that time I was past caring. Everything in the book leads to the dark heart of the woods; unfortunately it's not a journey I enjoyed.

(Available from: PS Publishing, Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave, Harrogate HG2 9BQ)

## Nigel Quinlan & Dermot Ryan – This Way Up Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Aeon Press, Dublin, 2002, 92+85pp, £7.99 ISBN 0-9534784-1-6

The tile refers teasingly to the format of this new collection from Aeon Press, publisher of speculative fiction magazine *Albedo One*, which packages four stories (although one subdivided as 'A Limerick Trilogy') each from writers Nigel Quinlan and Dermot Ryan in a back-to-back 'double' format.

The stories are variously offbeat, strange, disturbing and touching by turn, where the fantastic and the mundane slide across each other as in the works of the great Flann O'Brien (Myles na Gopaleen) and James Joyce, but also tinged with elements of Borges and Gaiman

This feel is exemplified by Ryan's 'The Burnished Egg', which is worth the price of admission alone. It is a near-

perfect gem of a story, in which the unexpected talent of a young boy for "Lucid Reading" can bring scenes and characters to life, projected in glowing egg-shaped orb above his head. Liam's Uncle Hugo, after the initial shock, books him into a series of public readings at the Apollo, where a reading of *Treasure Island* packs the hall to standing room only as Liam's talent grows stronger and more vivid with each episode. It is when Liam elects to embark on a reading of Milton's epic *Paraudise Lost* that his visions take on a threatening life offtheir own.

'Thank You For This Day', in which a beggar receives a series of unexpected and increasingly generous gifts in a single day, suffers somewhat by comparison, since it becomes easy to guess the probable ending before the end. In 'Isolating an Element' a middle-aged music teacher, still living with his mother, and wracked with guilt about his feelings for a young student, finds his tangled emotions given physical form when he plants the small seed-like wooden tears left on his pillow one morning.

'The Last Laugh' is the most personal of the stories in Ryan's half of the collection, in which a man struggles to come to terms with the last days of his father in hospital after a severe stroke.

Nigel Quinlan's stories are darker in tone. The three enigmatic short stories that make up the opening Limerick Trilogy ('A Golden Thread', 'Java', 'Black Hole Road') are set in a seedy criminal world where violence and magic stamp the authority of fear on the adventures of underworld 'fixers' Mackey and Joe. In 'The Invisible Man Game', severely myopic Michael Riordan lives in constant fear of the anger of the "Masters", while idolising his best friend, the older and extrovert Jimmy. But there's

a very dark secret in Jimmy's past.

A Dublin hospital is overwhelmed by the results of a war between gods and heroes in 'Another Thing Coming', much to the exasperation of put-upon cleaning lady Molly, as she struggles to keep the floors and corridors free of blood, ichor, severed heads and discarded armour and sharp-edged weapons. She's not being paid enough for this, she decides, and it's definitely the last straw when the two warring sides decide to move their battle to a different plane and expect someone else to clean up the mess they leave behind.

All but three of the stories, two of which are original to this collection, have appeared in issues of *Albedo One* between 1997 and 2002, which suggests this is definitely a magazine to look out for.

(Available from: 2 Post Road, Lusk, Co. Dublin, Ireland)

Scribner, London, 2002, 464pp, £10.99 ISBN 0-7432-2033-1

## Christopher Priest - The Separation

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

aid

Caveat emptor: This novel is dedicated to me. I don't believe that this has affected my critical judgement, but you might want to bear it in mind.

In printing, a separation is one of four variants of a page, identical except that one is yellow, one cyan, one magenta and one black. Bring them together, and these four monochrome separations produce the four-colour final page. I am pretty sure that this is not a metaphor that Christopher Priest had in mind when writing his new novel, but it works. Throughout the book we are presented with separations of the pages of history, or rather one particular page; monochrome perspectives that seem to make perfect sense until we lay them one upon another and realise that the register is disturbingly off. All

that we know is suddenly made to seem weird, distorted, alien.

This is a technique that Priest has used before: the sudden, unsettling shift in perspective that makes reality less secure beneath our feet. It was there in the flip from one Peter Sinclair to the other in *The Affirmation*, in the switch from one twin to the other in *The Prestige*; now it is in the discontinuity between one J.L. Sawyer and another. Two characters who share the same name, and who are twins, for anyone familiar with Priest's work the alarm bells are ringing; but where in earlier novels this would make us question identity, here it questions the very nature of history.

Joe and Jack Sawyer are rowers who win a bronze medal for Britain at the 1936

Berlin Olympics, and here Joe, always the more politically aware of the two, falls in love with a Jewish girl he smuggles out of the country. This is where the twins

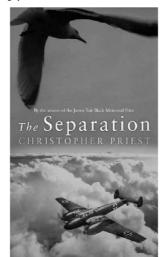
start to separate, and the pages of history begin to peel apart. Five years later, Jack is a bomber pilot. On a raid on Hamburg in May 1941 he and his crew watch while German fighters attack and destroy a Messerschmitt then, moments later, an identical number of German fighters attack and fail to destroy a seemingly identical Messerschmitt. This double event is something we see several times, then, on the way home, the Wellington is shot down. In Jack's account he survives, but another reliable witness reports that he is killed.

One Messerschmitt, it is implied, carries Rudolf Hess, the other carries his double. But which one reaches England? Jack, upon recovering from the crash, is involved in interrogating the fake Hess. Joe, meanwhile,

is a conscientious objector who drives an ambulance during the Blitz. Wounded himself, he is killed in an ambulance crash. But in his own account there is no crash and, under the auspices of the Red Cross, he becomes involved in the peace negotiations initiated by the real Hess and which end the war in 1941.

This is, by some way, the longest book Priest has written, and the most ambitious. With its doubles and deceptions, (far more and far more intricately constructed than there is room to suggest in so short a review), with its hallucinatory misdirections and its insistence that nothing is true, nothing is real, it is a difficult book to get a grip on.

But the lucidity of the writing keeps you on a clear path through all the complexities, and in the end the effort of reading is well rewarded, the daring of the author pays off to breathtaking effect.



## Jessica Rydill – The Glass Mountain 🕮

Reviewed by Penny Hill

## Orbit, London, 2002, £6.99, 469pp ISBN 1-84149-112-8

This book looked intriguing and promising – a magician who carried a world in a suitcase could be the start of an exciting story of the kind that Diana Wynne Jones tells so well.

I hoped this would be an intelligent tale for children or young adults, but the language and activities of the

main characters seemed inappropriate for that, whereas the level of story-telling seemed too simple for an adult work.

The rest of the book failed to live up to the one big idea and the story was fairly standard fantasy fare. When the suitcase and its contents were finally brought centre stage we found ourselves in a setting all too clearly and poorly stolen from Swift.

The main world was not so much built as badly ripped-off from our own. The heroes and heroines belong to a cast-out sect called the Wanderers who speak Ebrew and follow a different, stricter religion from the ordinary Franj, Sklavans or Eustrians. Every-day items are also phonetically spelled, Kava & Chai for coffee and tea, tabak for tobacco or written in German/

Yiddish so we have sprechen for telepathy, Kinder for relations. Yes, let's wander through central Europe in the fake moustache of bad spelling and see what an impenetrable disguise it forms.

We also had different groups of people sharing the same land with widely different levels of technology, to the extent that it was impossible to believe that they hadn't wiped each other out, given the unfriendly state of relations between them.

The feisty female magic users were all so similar that I

had problems telling Yuste from Annat, never mind Huldis, the sister to the bad guy. This was particularly a problem in their relationships to Yude, who is rival twin, father and love interest respectively. The only interesting character development was that of the Magus, who went from powerful evil man to pathetic also-ran in the power struggle, and who finally realises that his only hope of surviving is to join with the good guys.

The identikit female characters were not aided by being split up early on so that we could lurch between narrative tracks. The position of this work as a sequel was made clear by the strong relationships everyone had with Aude, the key figure who died in the last volume. As a result this book had a slightly unfinished feel, and I'm not sure it stands alone particularly well.

Overall, I found this a frustrating read – it nearly worked but just felt a bit too thin somehow. From the blurb, I wanted to like it much more than I was able to.

## E. Rose Sabin – A School for Sorcery

Tor, New York, 2002, 318pp, \$17.95, ISBN 0-765-30289-6

## Reviewed by Carol Ann Kerry-Green

Sixteen year old Tria Tressell is offered a place at the Lesley Simonton School for the Magically Gifted. Having always lived on her father's farm and been forbidden to use her magical powers, this is a wonderful opportunity for Tria, one that her mother is determined she will not miss.

Set in an alternate world where modern technology is just beginning to flourish, *School for Sorcery* is aimed at

the young adult audience. Though there will be the inevitable comparison with J K Rowling's Harry Potter books (and indeed the quote from Andre Norton on the back cover mentions this), School for Sorcery is probably aimed at older teenagers.

Tria arrives to find that the school isn't quite what it says in the booklet she has been sent. Instead of grand edifices she finds run down

buildings; her room is dirty and dusty and looks like it's not been cleaned in ages. Depressed, but determined to get on with it, Tria sets about tidying up and making it more comfortable. So engrossed is she in what she is doing that she doesn't realise how much time has passed until the bell for supper rings. Wishing she had another hour to get ready, she stares at her clock and feels herself getting dizzy, then looking at the clock again the time is an hour earlier, and the sound of students rushing to

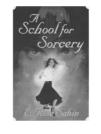
supper has gone. Amazed at what she has done, Tria is upset to be told by the Headmistress that manipulating time is against the school's rules and that one day she will be expected to pay back the hour she has stolen.

Forbidden to use her powers except under supervision, Tria starts classes and begins to get to know her fellow students. However, on returning to her room, she finds her new roommate Lina has arrived. Lina has

never let rules stop her before and she's not intending to let them stop her now. Against her better judgement, Tria enters into a power contest with Lina. Both are well matched, but Lina is determined to cause trouble. As term continues, Lina's trouble-making leads to two boys, Oryon and Kress, vying for her attentions, but when her plans go awry, the two boys team up against both her and Tria. Oryon, in particular, is very

powerful, and at the Midwinter ball he summons the Dire Women, commanding them to abduct two fellow students, Gray and Wilce, and take them back to their dimension.

Oryon flings a challenge at the Headmistress to retrieve the abducted students. Unable to do so, it falls to Tria and Lina to accept the challenge and restore Gray and Wilce within the year, but even as Tria's powers grow and she advances up through the levels of magic, Oryon seeks to thwart her at every turn.



## William Shatner with Chip Walter - I'm Working On That: A Trek From Science Fiction To Science Fact Pocket Books, August 2002, 392pp, £12.99 ISBN No. 0-6711-04737-X

## Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

Where do I begin? The subtitle of this book – A Trek From Science Fiction to Science Fact – is as good a jumping-off point as any, in that it sums up the authors' intentions. Basically, they are investigating whether the technology used in the Star Trek series (in all their various incarnations) is possible and, if it is, how long it will be before, as an example, space-going vehicles will have warp capability.

In his prologue to the book, Shatner explains how he and his co-author set out to visit various eminent scientists and obtain answers to their questions. He points out, for instance, that we already have mobile phones which resemble (in some ways) the communicators used in the original *Star Trek* series. So, he asks, how far along the line are we in the development of the remaining imagined technology: transporters, holodecks, talking computers, and so on? It is at this point that Shatner freely admits he is intellectually challenged when it comes to understanding all these new technologies, and consequently we are (and I quote) "going to get the common man's viewpoint of cutting edge science".

On that basis, the book succeeds in its aim, and succeeds admirably. The fact that we are still some way from most of the imaginary technology is well-documented. The chapters on robots and computers and

their development are exceptionally well-written. I had no idea, for example, that the Smithsonian institute has its own talking robot guide, or that there is a home for the elderly that has a robot nurse. Clearly, computer science has come a long way since the development of computers that can not only play chess, but also soundly beat Grand Masters at their own game.

However, the book does have a downside, for all the optimism it generates about the future and advances in technology that have been, and are being, made all the time. In his prologue, Shatner assures his readers that the book is not a scientific treatise. Somehow, despite all his good intentions, the book has become, in part, exactly that, even if it is interspersed with his memories of *Star Trek* and instances of his having problems with new technology, and the two do not fit together comfortably. This is not meant as a criticism, just an observation: some of the science included is far too complex for the ordinary person to understand.

Having said that, I think the book will appeal to fans of *Star Trek*, in all its incarnations, and to those with an interest in the advances science has made over the years since *Star Trek* made its first appearance all those years ago. Give it a fry.

## Neal Shusterman – The Shattered Sky: Book 3 of the Star Shards Trilogy

Tor, New York, 2002, 414pp, \$15.95 ISBN 0-312-85508-3

## Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

The basic premise of this series is that when a star, in this case Mentaras-H, goes supernova its soul shatters into fragments. These shards transformed the souls of six children into living star fragments. The children gained unique powers each of which originally manifested itself as a warping, a physical or emotional disfigurement. In the earlier books these children grew, learnt about their power and used it. They became revered or feared as gods, and some misused their powers.

The *Shattered Sky* picks up in the aftermath of some great event. Events are filled in gradually for new readers, and this combined with the multiple viewpoints can make it difficult for a new reader to become involved in the story. As the story progresses these 'shards' are gradually reunited, and with the help of a supporting cast, brought ready to face an alien foe that seeks to take over the earth.

The book is smoothly written, and if the gifts seem implausibly godlike they are

occasionally put into some kind of perspective by the behaviour and reactions of the supporting cast. Despite the smooth writing and a few powerful scenes, for the most part this book is firmly in the superhero genre, with the overwhelming superpowers matched by adolescent anguishes and 'relationship' issues. This is occasionally acknowledged by the author; at one point one of the shards refers to some of the others as "the Fantastic Four". To me, few of the characters seemed three-dimensional, and their interactions relatively simplistic. The charismatic personalities of Dillon and Tessic are too often used as a reason why others are brought on board and for the most part that along with 's/he loves them, that's why' seems to

take the place of any more any complex motivation.

Although the overall plot is moved along by the 'destiny' of the shards to recombine, Shusterman does introduce a couple of moral issues or ambiguities. One is the presence of Okoya, a demon-like character who, to Dillon, has the mastery of manipulating his options; the other concerns Tessic, and his aims for the group.

If you have read the first two books in the series you will undoubtedly want to read this one to find out what happens in the end. If your

tastes run to this type of story, you could do much worse than this, though I would suggest starting at the beginning. I found this book not really to my taste, neither light and humorous enough for mind candy nor exceptional enough to be recommended.



## Robert Silverberg & Karen Haber (eds.) – Science Fiction: The Best of 2001

ibooks, London, 2002, 496pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-7434-3498-6

## Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

There can only be a finite number of stories published in one year, and given that there are already three "Best of" collections available (Dozois; Hartwell; Datlow & Windling), do we really need a fourth? The editors tackle the point in their introduction and give their selection criteria as the "the science fiction stories of 2001 that gave them the greatest reading pleasure". Given that one of the editors is Robert Silverberg and probably not easily impressed, that seems fair enough.

The editors provide us with a modest eleven tales, of which there were three especial stand-outs for me. This year's short story Hugo winner, Michael Swanwick's 'The Dog Said Bow-Wow', is so gloriously irreverent of our monarchy it would make even a die-hard republican reach for his sword in defence of our dear Queen, God bless her. Nancy Kress's 'And No Such Things Grow Here' starts apparently as a woman's quest for justice for her wrongly imprisoned young sister but ends up saying far more about the woman's own, less obvious problems. And Dan Simmons's 'On K2 with Kanakaredes', the best and last story in the collection, is a getting-to-know-thealiens-by-suffering-together story in which the forces of ignorance and incomprehension are as solid and elemental as the forces of nature atop the deadly peak of K2.

The book is let down by some frankly appalling copy editing – or perhaps just the total lack thereof. I lost count of the number of missing or misplaced full stops, commas and quote marks. The Kress story, according to the running header for 50 pages, is 'And No Such Things Grows Here'. On the plus side, page 105 treats us to a contender for Thog's Dept of Autophagic Cuisine: "Mrs Sunguist pureed her lips with a moment's thought

I couldn't get into Michael Blumlein's 'Know How, Can Do', but then the man has always been a closed book to me. Stephen Baxter's 'Sun-Cloud' is an everyday tale of an amoebic civilisation on an asteroid orbiting within the photosphere of a red giant; absorbing in places, but let down with an intrusive omniscient narrator's viewpoint. More positively, lan Watson's 'One Of Her Paths' is one of those stories that make you suspect he doesn't even break into a sweat when having really good ideas; being Watson, what would be the denouement in a lesser story is only the end of the first act here. And the rest? Well, entertaining, yes. The best of 2001? Only perhaps. But it's cheap. Skimping on the copy editing will do that.

## Lawrence Sutin - Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley

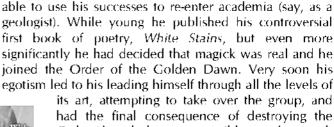
St Martin's Griffin, 2000, 483pp, \$17.95 ISBN 0-312-28897-2

## Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

After completing Divine Invasions, his biography of Philip K. Dick Lawrence, Sutin spent ten years researching the life of Aleister Crowley, and gave the resulting book one of Crowley's best known mottoes as a title. There have been biographies of Crowley before, as well as his own autobiographical writings, and he has featured in the

works of modern commentators such as Colin Wilson. Whether it was Sutin's intention or not, Do What They Wilt leads to only one conclusion. At best, Crowley's life was one of intense self-delusion, that would be best described as pathetic if he had not made so many other people miserable along the way. At worst, he led many people close to criminality. Oddly, however, Crowley was never a Satanist, and never claimed to have taken the left-hand path in magick; in fact, he rejected that, though he never claimed to be a white magician either.

Crowley came from a wealthy brewing family, though they belonged to one of the minor separatist Christian sects. It was his small acts of childhood rebellion that lead his mother to call him "The Great Beast", a title he took to heart and started to live up to in his teens. He went to Cambridge University but never took a degree. He took up mountaineering but fell out with the mountaineering establishment, so that he never obtained reasonable subventions for his expeditions, and equally he was never

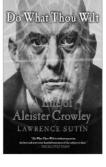


had the final consequence of destroying the Order (though the more sensible members such as W.B. Yeats had already got out).

And basically that's it. After 1900, when he was twenty-five, Crowley did no more than repeat himself until he died in a nursing home in Brighton in December 1947. He travelled around the world, took lovers of both sexes, and in the last third of his life he was a heroin addict. His magickal operations produced nothing - at least, the evidence is that it produced no change in Crowley if magick is

subjective, and it produced no change in Crowley's circumstances (or those of his relatives, friends and acquaintances) if magick is objective.

The interest in Crowley for the science fiction community, apart from the general one, is two-fold: Crowley attempted to create his own successors to the Golden Dawn, and the only one that sustained itself was in California in the 1930s, where a central figure was Jack Parsons, the rocket engineer friend to Robert Heinlein,



Anthony Boucher and perhaps acquaintance of Ray Bradbury, and Parsons' houseguest at the time, L. Ron Hubbard (who subsequently ran away with Parsons' wife). Crowley had spent all his inheritance by the time of the First World War, which he passed in New York City writing propaganda for the Germans, definitely for the money, and perhaps with the intention of subverting their other propaganda by the ridiculousness of his own (at least, he was not prosecuted after the war), and in the nineteen-thirties his main income was donations from California. (Sutin does not say what happened after Parsons died when his house in Pasadena blew up; presumably Crowley still received some donations from fans and former followers.) At any rate, this means that a large proportion of golden age sf authors moved in an environment where Crowley was held in esteem by their

common friends, even if the authors were not believers themselves.

The second connection with sf, and perhaps more particularly fantasy, is, of course, through the still-common, and now perhaps growing, idea that magick is real and has physical powers. If the producers of the American syndicated shows in which teenage girls manage to meet beasts with strange eyes and tendencies to throw household furniture about read Sutin's biography they might reconsider the glamour and consequences of magick. Unlike a stage conjuror who makes cards, coins, doves and rabbits disappear, the best that Crowley could do was to lose his wealth and his happiness. There may be magic in the world of fantasy, but the results of magick are not fantastic.

## Keith Topping – Ghost Ship ...

Telos Publishing, Tolworth, 2002, 104pp, £25.00 (deluxe h/b) ISBN 1-903889-09-X / £10.00 (standard h/b) ISBN 1-903889-08-1

## Reviewed by Jon Wallace

OK, a couple of things to get out of the way first.

Price. I know that this is expensive, but the deluxe, signed copy I have is a beautifully produced book. Whether it is worth £25 is up to you (although a collector would probably say it is). A cheaper 'standard' hardback edition is also available.

Doctor Who. Hands up all those who haven't heard of the Doctor. Thought so. Speaks for itself really. So all that character thing that reviewers use to plump out their reviews can be taken as read. Good.

This slim volume takes up the story of the Doctor immediately after the events on Gallifrey wherein the Master has contrived the death of the President and subverted and killed Chancellor Goth. (You will either be going "Ah, Tom Baker!" or "uhnnn?" at this point...). The Doctor finds himself companionless and depressed in the TARDIS. The sturdy machine, knowing just what he needs, takes him to Earth and materialises on board the Queen Mary.

Topping has placed his Doctor in a deep depression. The events on Gallifrey have taken their toll; the Doctor feels that things should have gone better and that he is somehow responsible. He also feels acutely the lack of companionship as he drifts through space alone in the TARDIS. This mood is complimented wonderfully by the

dreary atmosphere aboard the liner, with its complement of strangely philosophical characters and phosts...

The novella itself is written first-person from the Doctor's point of view and is divided into the same sort of parts that we expect from Doctor Who. A bit where he arrives and wanders aimlessly about, trying to figure out what's going on. (Here is where the unexpected happens). A middle bit where people die mysteriously, then the end bit where we find out what's happening and what the Doctor's going to do about it. Where this diverges from that is that the writing is far darker than the TV version. Because we can see into the Doctor's head, his depression is tangible (we're not relying on Tom Baker's acting skill to show it to us) and we share in the thought processes which lead him to the ultimate resolution.

Is it any good? That's a difficult question. The story is complex enough to capture the intellect, but the Doctor's mental state is oppressive and goes on just a tad too long. Yes, I think that it is a credible attempt to uplift a character born of the thirty-minute serial to real status. Would I have bought it? As I said at the start, a collector would, and who else buys Doctor Who books? I would borrow it from the library though.

## H.N. Turteltaub – The Gryphon's Skull

Forge Books, New York, 2002, \$25,95 ISBN 0-312-87222-4

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

In this work of historical fiction, a sequel to *The Wine-Dark Sea*, the temperamentally contrary cousins, extrovert Menedemos and introvert Sostratos, set out again two years later (in 308 B.C.) from their native Rhodes, co-commanding the forty-oar trading vessel *Aphrodite*. Whereas on the former venture they traded in Magna Graecia, getting entangled in the naval war between Syracuse and Carthage, while following the route of Odysseus (and matching it with quotes from *The Odyssey*), now they trade among the Cycladean islands of the Aegean Sea. (Still with scope for relevant quotes from Homer). Their cargo is much the same: silks, perfumes,

papyrus, ink. But where formerly a unique trading item was a family of peacocks, here it is the fossil skull of a dinosaur, which Sostratos believes to be that of a gryphon, and hopes to sell to, and have discussed by, the philosophers of Atthens.

The well-researched historical setting is that of the Diadochi Wars, territorial rivalries consequent on the division of the empire of Alexander the Great among his generals. Ptolemalos rules Egypt, but has moved his fleet into the Aegean, confronting Antigonos, the ruler of the Macedonian mainland and the Asiatic lands bordering the Mediterranean. The islands around which the Aphrodite

trades are pawns in the war. Rhodeans, however, claim neutrality, which is advantageous, save when – as can be the fate of neutrals – the cousins are suspected of being spies. A fair amount of the narrative is taken up with bargaining with trading clients, interesting in detail but somewhat repetitive. The action, when it comes, is fast and furious: storms, collisions at sea, pirate attacks, and, on land, explicitly observed and recorded amorous episodes. A main plot-strand is a mission undertaken for Ptolemiaos – to sail to Khalkis on the Gulf of Euboia and bring back Antigonos's treacherous nephew, Polemaios, to him on the island of Kos (Ptolemiaos base for besieging Antigonos in Halikarnassos). The naval and navigational hazards encountered are vividly described, but it does

add to interest and comprehension if you have a largish scale map of the Aegean to hand. Unfortunately, the book has no maps, though there are useful conversion tables for Hellenic weights and measures.

The cousins are so unlike as to complement each other, quick to take a rise, but essentially comradely. Their verbal jousting is one of the novel's pleasurable features. Another is the experience of sea and sun that the descriptive passages convey. Return to Rhodean domesticity seems anticlimactic, but there is a welcome hint of future trading eastward to the Phoenician shore. As to the fate of the gryphon's skull, you must read the book to discover that.



THESE ARE SOME OF THE OTHER BOOKS WE HAVE SEEN RECENTLY. A MENTION HERE DOES NOT NECESSARILY PRECLUDE A FULL REVIEW IN A LATER ISSUE OF VECTOR.

Douglas Adams - The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Gollancz, London, 2002, 178pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-575-07484-1

Douglas Adams – The Restaurant at the End of the

Douglas Adams – The Restaurant at the End of the Universe

Gollancz, London, 2002, 196pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-575-07486-8 Douglas Adams – *Life, The Universe and Everything* 

Gollancz, London, 2002, 184pp, £5.99 ISBN 0-575-07485-X Small format hardback reissues under different (black and white) covers of Adams' *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* trilogy. These were previously released in the same small hardback format by Orion Millennium in 1994.

## Tom Arden - Empress of the Endless Dream

Gollancz, London, 2002, 592pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-575-60196-5 The fifth and concluding volume of Arden's Oroken series, in mass market paperback edition (the hardback edition was noted in V221). Prince Jemany returns from the hunt for the lost crystals of Oroken to a kingdom ravaged by terrorism and the threat of war where he must make a stand against the anti-god Toth-Vexrah.

## Margaret Wander Bonano - Preternatural<sup>3</sup>

Tor, New York, 2002, 335pp, \$24.95 ISBN 0-312-87760-9 Kidnapping, neo-Nazis, the possible illegitimate daughter of Joseph Goebbels, jellyfish, a race of aliens stranded between dimensions, and a housewife and struggling science fiction writer all add up to the concluding volume in Bonano's distinctly odd Preternatural trilogy. Andrew M Butler reviewed the previous volume, *Preternatural Too: Gyre*, in Vector 221.

### Steven Brust - The Paths of the Dead

Tor, New York, 2002, 430pp \$25.95 ISBN 0-312-86478-7 Book One of The Viscount of Adrilankha, and a seguel to The Phoenix Guards and Five Hundred Years After. Two hundred years after Adron's Disaster and the Fall of Empire, most of the aristocrats of the Dragon and Phoenix houses are convinced the age of adventures is over and have settled into cosy (albeit centuries-long) middle age. Although not all; the ambitious Dragonlord Kana is starting to expand his control into neighbouring dominions with the aim of rebuilding at least a part of the Empire. Meanwhile, an unexpected Phoenix Heir is revealed, one who might rightfully reclaim the lost Orb from the gods and restore the full glory of the lost Empire. What sets Brust's work apart from so many other works of fantasy is the sheer wit and style of both his characters and storytelling (here recounted by the irreverent historian Paarfi of Roundwood, author of Five Hundred Years After), which owes as much, if not more, to Dumas and Oscar Wilde than to Tolkien and his copyists. An absolute delight and a treat.

## James Clemens – Wit'ch Storm 💷

Orbit, London, 2002, 630pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-84149-151-9 Book Two of the Banned and The Banished, and sequel to *Wit'ch Fire*, which was reviewed by Andrew Adams in V225. Although listed as first British publication, this is copyright 1999 (there are three further books in the series, and a brief, 4 page teaser for the next, *Wit'ch War*, is included at the back.). Errant apostrophes also scatter the map in the front of this book, with place names like Gul'gotha and the Bay of T'lek, which also features names such as The Great Ocean, The Northern (and

Southern) Wastes, the Great Bog, the Boiling Seas and The Stone Forest.

## Candas Jane Dorsey - A Paradigm of Earth

Tor, NewYork, 2002, 336pp, \$15.95 ISBN 0-312-87797-8 Trade paperback edition of Dorsey's first reviewed as harback by Sue Thomason in V222.

A 'first contact' novel in which aliens send down humanoid (albeit blue and androgynous) beings or avatars whose minds are wiped so that they can be raised by humans, as humans, before returning for their knowledge and experiences to be 'processed'. "Deeply thought, deeply felt, beautifully and sensitively written, stuffed with fascinating ideas, intelligent discussions and wonderfully perceptions" wrote Sue Thomason in V222. Dorsey's novel is not so much about what it means to be alien, but what it means to be human, and, at the same time, to be treated as not-quite-as-human as other people. Though not, as Sue points out, without flaws, including a rather crucial oversight in the plot. But that aside, "a wonderful book."

## Paul Fraser (ed.) - Spectrum SF 9

Spectrum Publishing, Glasgow, 2002, 192pp, £3.99 ISSN 1468-3903 A somewhat belated issue which also announces that from now on Spectrum SF will be an "occasional publication", with a reduced schedule of 2-3 issues a year. Issue 9 contains the last part of Charles Stress's impressive serialised novel, The Atrocity Archive, plus novelettes from Eric Brown and Adam Roberts and shorter fiction from Chris Lawson and Sarah Singleton. As ever The Archive, is a comprehensive round up of new and forthcoming books and magazines. Minor production and copy editing problems plague this issue; there is a blank page 157 and the contents page has the wrong page numbers for the fiction. It will be a shame to see such an interesting venture founder from lack of support, so contact Spectrum at 53 Waverley Park, Kirkintilloch, Glasgow G66 2BL or via www.spectrumsf.co.uk

## Maggie Furey - The Eye of Eternity [f]

Orbit, London, 2002, 550pp, £12.99 ISBN 1-84149-115-2 Book Three and conclusion of The Shadowleague, following on from *Spirit of the Stone*, which was reviewed by Vikki Lee in V219. The Curtain Walls that protect the kingdom of Myrial threaten to give way. If they fall, the world of Myrial will be swept away. The Shadowleague, who are sworn to protect the Wall, have their own problems with the return of the renegade Amaurn – a man who once betrayed the Loremasters – claiming his place as their leader.

## Harry Harrison - 50 in 50

Tor, NewYork 2002, 619pp, \$18.95 ISBN 0-312-87790-0 Trade paperback reissue from Tor of a retrospective collection of Harrison's shorter fiction. Fifty titles, grouped by theme, one from each year of his career (from 1951, with 'Rock Diver', to 2001), and including the classic religious fable 'Streets of Ashkelon' (1962). Unfortunately, as L.J. Hurst commented, reviewing the hardback edition in V220, the collection lacks a bibliography or acknowledgements, and the stories are not arranged in chronological order, making this a

volume perhaps more for fans of Harrison's work than for researchers and scholars.

## Harry Harrison - Stars and Stripes Triumphant

New English Library, London, 2002, 340pp, 6.99 ISBN 0-340-68922-6 Third and concluding, volume of Harrison's alternate history of the United States from the time of the Civil War. The series started with Stars and Stripes Forever and Stars and Stripes in Peril (these first volumes reviewed by Paul Kincaid in V2011 and V212 respectively).

## Robin Hobb - The Golden Fool

Voyager, London, 2002, 632pp, £17.99 ISBN 0-00-716038-0 Book Two of The Tawny Man, following on from *Fool's Errand*, which was first reviewed here by Lesley Hatch in V224. Best check the page count, as some early copies may have a missing chapter.

## Tom Holt - The Divine Comedies

Orbit, London, 2002, 614pp, £8.99 ISBN 1-84149-145-4 Paperback omnibus edition which collects two previous humorous fantasy novels, Here Comes The Sun (1993) and Odds and Gods (1995).

## Stephen Jones and David Sutton - Dark Terrors 6

Gollancz, London, 2002, 499pp, £12.99 ISBN 0-575-07249-0 "The Gollancz Book of Horror" according to the subtitle on the cover. Thirty three original stories of horror and dark fantasy from luminaries including Ramsey Cambell, Tanith Lee, Michael Marshall Smith, Christopher Fowler, Graham Masterton, Richard Matheson, Nicholas Royle, Kim Newman, Caitlin Kiernan, Nancy Kilpatrick, David Schow, Joel Lane and (perhaps surprisingly) Stephen Baxter. The Dark Terrors series is a British Fantasy Award and International Horror Guild winner. If you like your fiction with bumps and chills, then this is definitely the one for you.

## **Graham Joyce - Smoking Poppy**

Gollancz, London, 2002, 279pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-575-07304-7 Mass market reprint of Joyce's story of fractured family relationships. Midlands electrician Danny Innes, along with his Christian evangelist son, Phil and his friend and drinking partner, Mick, set out to track down Danny's missing daughter, Charlie, who has disappeared on a trekking holiday in the Far East. The journey becomes a psychological and spiritual odyssey for all three, and an examination of fatherhood from the perspective of a man struggling with children he loves but no longer understands as they venture ever deeper into the political and moral turmoil of the jungles of Thailand. "Quite simply a beautifully written and powerful work offiction," concluded Andrew Seaman, who reviewed this in the Gollancz trade paperback edition in V221.

## Leigh Kennedy - The journal of Nicholas the American

Big Engine, Abingdon, 2002, 193pp, £9.99 ISBN 1-903468-11-6 First published 1986, and a welcome reissue for Kennedy's story of émigré Nicholas Dal, an empath who tries to dull the pain of his inherited 'gift' by solitude and drink – until he falls in love with a fellow student, and meets her dying mother. A Nebula Award nominee in its year of publication and rated with Silverberg's Dying

Inside as one of the best novels about what it feels like to know the thoughts and emotions of others.

## Ursula Le Guin - The Telling

Gollancz, London, 2002, Opp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85798-332-7 The world of Axa is a corporate totalitarian state like something straight out of a capitalist-consumer version of Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four (1948). History is expunged and denied, religion banned, literature controlled by the State Ministries. To this dystopian world comes the Ekumen envoy Sutty Dass as an observer (and herself observed by a Corporate Monitor) for the last remaining practitioners of Axa's old culture, living far outside the cities, up in the mountains. If somewhat didactic and preachy at times, The Telling is redeemed, in Lynne Bispham's review (in V222) by "beautifully and lucidly written prose" and the message – of the attempt to reconcile conflicting ideologies – "is, sadlly, particularly relevant to the twenty first century."

## Ken Macleod - Dark Light

Orbit, London, 2002, 368pp, £6.99 ISBN 1-84149-109-8 Mass market edition of the second volume in Macleod's Engines of Light sequence, following Cosmonaut Keep. The action shifts initially to the backwater planet of Croaton, where the Cairns' ship, Bright Star, makes an unexpected and dramatic appearance, and precipitates something of a technological and social revolution. Macleod has great fun in deconstructing both gender roles and a whole number of classic sf tropes and some knowing nods towards the genre (with chapter titles like 'The Gods Ourselves'), while never losing sight of the story and the overall direction of the trilogy (due to conclude with Engine City), which may be "arguably the best work of his career," according to Andrew Seaman, who reviewed this in V222.

## Michael A. Martin and Andy Mangels - Cathedral: Mission Gamma 3

Pocket Books, New York/London, 2002, 401pp, £6.99 ISBN 0-7434-4564-3 Third instalment in a four part Star Trek: Deep Space 9® adventure (we haven't seen previous volumes). The DS9 crew are facing the collapse of the Bajoran- Cardassian peace settlement, and see an opportunity in an alien religious alliance. That is, until something goes wrong and plunges the station into chaos. The publishing details state that this series continues in the wake of DS9: Avatar and takes place outside the scope of the TV series. The concluding volume, Lesser Evil, is due in December.

## Graham Masterton – *The Manitou*Telos, Tolworth, 2002, 209pp, £9.99 (pb) ISBN 1-903889-70-7. £30

(limited edition hb) ISBN 1-903889-71-5 A 25th anniversary edition of Masterton's classic debut novel of horror and haunting, in which an ancient Native American medicine man is reincarnated in modern day New York and endeavours to take back the land of his ancestors from the white usurpers. The book's ending was changed after the publication of the first hardback edition, and both endings are included here. This edition has a new introduction by the author and a number of illustrations from the pre-production sketches of the 1978 film by William Girdler. Also available as a limited

edition hardback.

#### L. NWeill Smitth - The American Zone

Tor, New York, 2002, Opp, 15.95 ISBN 0-312-87526-6 First paperback edition, tagged as a Prometheus Award finalist, and sequel to Smith's *The Probability Broach*. Set in a free (libertarian) American Confederacy of the future where there is little government and even less crime "because everyone who want to carries a gun, and isn't afraid to use it." Yeah, right. But someone has the temerity to disrupt this armed utopian vision by carrying out a bomb attack on the Endicott Building, and Win Bear, the sole licensed detective in the confederacy, is called in

Stuart Carter was not convinced, "That awful whining sound you can hear the whole time you're reading *The American Zone* is the sound of a large axe being ground." You can probably find a copy on Charlton Heston's bedside table. If you can prise it from his cold, dead hands

If this is what the Prometheus jury is looking for, how on earth did Ken Macleod's *The Star Fraction* end up as a winner?

## Brian Stableford - The Omega Expedition

Tor, NewYork, 2002, 544pp, \$27.95 ISBN 0-765-30169-5 Sixth and final volume in Stableford's impressive sf 'Emortality' series, which has still to see British publication. The Omega Expedition is a sequel to the hugely impressive The Fountains of Youth and tells the story of Adam Zimmerman, the man who developed the first emortality technology, and his awakening in the 35th century, attime of true immortals.

## Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen - Wheelers

Earthlight, London, 2002, 498pp, £7.99 ISBN 0-7434-2902-8 A first sf novel from mathematician Ian Stewart and biologist Jack Cohen, although they have collaborated before on popular science books *The Collapse of Chaos, Figments of Reality* and, with Terry Pratchett, *The Science of Discovanttd*.

In the 23<sup>rd</sup> century, a half-century technology freeze in the wake of anti-technology riots has left the Earth inward-looking and under-populated, and interplanetary exploration left to eccentric outcasts and loners. One such is Prudence Odingo, who returns to Earth with a report of millennia-old wheeled artifacts under the ice of Callisto, Jupiter's moon. Disbelieved, even about to jailed for criminal fraud, the 'wheelers' come to life, altering the course of several Jovian satellites and propelling a comet on a collision course to Earth.

There are, as Gary Dalkin pointed out in his review in V200, several longeurs in both the plot and internal chronology which tend to undermine the scenario, with "an ambitious hard sf strony.... and some interesting speculation" struggling to get out.

## Sheri S. Tepper - The Visitor

Gollancz, London, 2002,465pp, £5.99 ISBN 1-85798-325-4 After a couple of dissapointing novels, Tepper comes back to form with *The Visitor*, first reviewed here in trade paperback by Vikki Lee in V225. No big surprises, all the

typical Tepper elements (or targets) are here, a cruel and repressive regime, religion and social engineering and a warning on the errors of humanity's ways. In the wake of a devastating asteroid impact, much of humanity is destroyed, the scattered survivors struggling to rebuild and preserve civilisation. Outside the walled cities, hidden in a fortress cavern, a group of scientists from the

21st century who have cryogemically survived the cataclysm are monitoring and secretly guiding the slow recovery. One of these is Nell Latimer, whose many-times grand-daughter, Dismé, is one of those engaged in the outside struggle. Highly recommended by our reviewer as "everything you expect of a Tepper novel...womderful prose and sheer scope of imaginattion... a joy to read."

## Vector #227 - Index of Books Reviewed

Douglas Adams – Life, The Universe and	Leigh Kennedy - The Journal of Niicholas the
Everything [P] 33	American [P] 34
Douglas Adams – The Hitch Hiker's Guide to	Nancy Kress – Probatility Space [CH]
the Galaxy [P] 33	Ursula Le Guin - The Telling [P]
Douglas Adams – The Restaurant at the End of	Ken Macleod - Dark Light [昭]
the Universe [P] 33	Andy Mangels & Michael A. Martin – Cathedral:
Douglas Adams – The Salmon of Doubt [PB] 20	Mission Gamma 3 [P] 35
Kevin J. Anderson – Hidden Empire: The Saga of	Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels - Cathedral:
the Seven Suns [STM] 21	Mission Gamma 3 [P] 35
Tom Arden – Empress of the Endless Dream [[P]] 33	Graham Masterton - The Manitou [P]35
John Gregory Betancourt – Roger Zelazny's The	Juliet E. McKenna - The Assassin's Edge [AAA] 26
Dawn of Armber [CAKG] 22	Mark Morris - The Uglimen [GW]]
Margaret Wander Bonano – <i>Preternatural 3</i> [P] 33	L. Neil Smith - The American Zone [P]
Steven Brust – The Paths of the Dead [P]	Christopher Priest - The Separation [PH] 28
Ramsey Campbell - The Darkest Part of	Nigel Quinlan & Dermot Ryan - This Way Up [SJ] 27
the Woods [GW] 27	Dermot Ryan & Nigel Quinlan - This Way Up [SJ] 27
lames Clemens – Wit'ch Storm [P]33	Jessica Rydill - The Glass Mountain [PH]]29
lack Cohen & Ian Stewart - Wheelers [P]]	E. Rose Sabin - A School for Sorcery [CANC]
Charles de Lint - Tapping The Dream Tree [STIW] 23	William Shatner & Chip Walter - I'm Working On
Charles de Lint – The Onion Girl [CB]	That: A Trek From Science Fiction To
Candas Jane Dorsey - A Paradigm of Earth [P] 34	Science Fact [LH] 30
Lynn Flewelling – The Bone Doll's Twin: Book I of	Neal Shusterman - The Shattered Sky: Book 3 of
the Tamir Triad [LB] 23	the Star Shards Trilogy [KT] 30
Paul Fraser – Spectrum SF9 [F]	Robert Silverberg & Karen Haber – Science Fiction:
Maggie Furey – The Eye of Etternity [P]	The Best of 20001 [B.] 31
lan Graham – Monument [[VII]]24	Brian Stableford - The Omega Expedition [P] 35
Karen Haber & Robert Silverberg – Science Fiction:	Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen - Wheelers [門] 35
The Bestof2002 [B.J] 31	Lawrence Sutin - Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of
Harry Harrison – 50 in 50 [[P]]	Aleister Crowley [LJH] 31
Harry Harrison - Stars and Stripes Triumphant [門] 34	David Sutton & Stephen Jones - Dark Terrors 6 [P] 34
M. JollohnHallarisison+ Łigʻilgih[S[\$J]24	Sheri S. Tepper – The Wisittor [P]]
Robin Hobb - The Golden Fool [P] 34	Keith Topping - Ghost Ship [DWG]
Tom Holt – The Divine Comedies [P]	H.N. Turteltaub - The Gryphom's Skull [KWB] 32
lan Irvine – Geomancer [WII]25	Chip Walter & William Shatner - I'm Working On
Stephen Jones & David Sutton - Dark Terrors 6 [P] 34	That: A Trek From Science Fiction To
Graham Joyce - Smoking Poppy [P]	Science Fact [LH] 30

Reviewers Key: AAA – Andrew A. Adams, BJ – Ben Jeapes, CAKG – Carol Ann Kerry-Green, CB – Cherith Baldry, CH – Chris Hill, GW – Gary Wilkinson, JW – Jon Wallace, KVB – K.V. Bailey, KT – Kathy Taylor, LJH – L.J. Hurst, LH – Lesley Hatch, LB – Lynne Bispham, P – Partiicle, PB – Paul Bateman, PK – Paul Kincaid, PH – Penny Hill, STM – Scott T. Merrifiield., SJ – Steve Jeffery, ST – Sue Thomason, VL – Vikki Lee.