

The Critical Journal of the BSFA **Vector**

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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Editorial

The View from the Serendip Foundation

In the autumn of 2003 it became clear that the Arthur C. Clarke Award was facing a crisis. It's survived on a largely ad hoc basis, run by a series of administrators, a nebulous entity located somewhere between the BSFA, the Science Fiction Foundation and the International Science Policy Foundation who all supplied judges, and latterly between the BSFA and the SFF, with the Science Museum supplying a fifth judge.

The award has gone both to popular choices, and to controversial ones, but the event itself has increasingly acted as a focal point for fans, critics, academics, writers, publishers and the rest of the British science fiction community. The location in one of the world's leading museums, and the moves within that from wood-panelled lecture theatre, to the Wellcome Wing, to the IMAX auditorium have reflected the growth of the event.

But last autumn Rocket Publications – effectively Arthur C. Clarke's corporate existence in Britain – announced that it would no longer give the same financial support to the award as it had for the last decade. Paul Kincaid, current administrator of the award, gathered a few people together to discuss the way forward, and to begin planning the fund-raising necessary to make up any shortfall. The first concrete step was to set up a company, the Serendip Foundation, to give the award a legal existence,

complete with both BSFA and Science Fiction Foundation officials or ex-officials as directors or officials: Paul Kincaid and Maureen Kincaid Speller as co-organisers of the award, Paul and Elizabeth Billinger, Simon Bradshaw and myself representing the BSFA or SFF and Angie Edwards as a link to Rocket Publications.

Then came a second blow: the Science Museum raised the amount that they were charging for the hire of the auditorium, citing their own funding crisis. This left us with more money to raise, and the realisation that the Science Museum is unfortunately out of our league. The search for sources of money continues, as does a search for a suitable venue. A few places are already being looked at, and grant applications have been made.

Clearly the continuation of the Arthur C. Clarke Award as an event is dependent on the goodwill of the science fiction community, whether it is in the form of donations or suggestions for sponsors and other sources of money. If you have any ideas or can offer any help – and we have had much advice already – then please contact me and I will pass it on to the rest of the Serendip Foundation.

Meanwhile, back at *Vector*, this is my fiftieth issue of the magazine (if you count the reviews supplement that went with 188, it's Tony Cullen's fifty-first), and this issue is bulging at the seams with a look back at 2003. This has meant that I've had to hold the letters over to the next issue, but keep them coming.

by Andrew M. Butler, Canterbury, Spring 2004

The BSFA Reviewers' Poll: 2003

compiled by Paul N. Billinger

INTRODUCTION

This should be a straightforward task: *Vector* reviewers, BSFA committee members, staff on *Matrix* and *Focus* and so on are asked to choose their favourite five books of the year and explain why. So far so good; but this is not the five best sf/fantasy books of the year, it's the five best of any books read during the year, including novels, anthologies, graphic novels and non-fiction. And they don't even have to have been published in 2003, just read during the year. And having made your selection you still have to justify your choice in relatively few words. There was a lot of agonising going on all over the country.

Given this wide remit it should come as no surprise to see the range of books mentioned, with a total of 138 different books selected by thirty-six people. This is similar to previous years in the number of books/people but there is a marked difference in distribution between this year and last, with this year's poll being flatter and wider. In 2002, eighteen books gained more than one vote; M. John Harrison's *Light* came top with nine votes and only seven books attracted three or more votes. This year a total of twenty-two books got more than one vote; the top selection, Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Felaheen* (which entirely deserves this recognition), gained six votes but there were other books very close behind. All of this suggests that there is less consensus as to the 'best' book of 2003 than in some previous years. The selection to choose from was even wider: a good sign for the strength of genre fiction being published, with the often talked-about current 'British boom' in sf publishing being well represented in the list. Comparing the Reviewers' Poll with the awards shortlists shows good correlation with the BSFA Novel Award shortlist (unsurprisingly, as the selections for both come from BSFA members) but less so with the Clarke Award shortlist,

with one book from that list, Greg Bear's *Darwin's Children*, not being selected by anyone in the Reviewers' Poll. There are, however, two novels common to all three lists, Gwyneth Jones's *Midnight Lamp* and Tricia Sullivan's *Maul*. For me the one surprise is Justina Robson's *Natural History* not appearing on the Clarke Award shortlist, confounding one of the few predictions I made concerning the shortlists (time to give up my career as a pundit, then).

The Reviewers' Poll rarely has any consensus wider than genre novels but this year has proved an exception with both a mainstream and a non-fiction book gathering a significant number of votes. The mainstream one is Mark Haddon's award winning *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, brilliantly telling of a teenager with Asperger's Syndrome hunting for the murderer of his neighbour's dog. The non-fiction selection is Francis Spufford's *The Backroom Boys*, an inspirational account of the often-hidden influence of British scientists in recent world-effecting events. Spufford's book appears in the poll despite having only having been published in November, and I suspect that it may feature prominently in next year's poll too. Both are strongly recommended. The poll also shows that *Light* and Christopher Priest's *The Separation* continue to impress and with the republication of Priest's book by Collancz (see reviews section) this is likely to gain continued support during 2004. Also of note, and similar to previous years, is the large number of books on the list which are classed as 'young adult' with almost half of the reviewers selecting at least one (though *Harry Potter 5* is curiously absent): but why are 'adults' choosing books for 'children' over serious grown-up ones [discuss]?

K.V. BAILEY

My favoured five are chosen because, as well as being enjoyable reads, they have either added to an inheritance or have opened new doors. Some have done both. Alan Garner's microcosm is the Pennine valley of *Thursbitch* (Harvill Press, 2003). From there the eighteenth century packman, Jack Turner, crosses the hills, mediating the outer world, and in his shaman-like aspect transacts within his village universal and age-old rituals. Time-fused with this are the geological/archaeological explorations of, and meditations on, Thursbitch as a Jesuit and a scientist, both enduring twenty-first century angst. The synchronous factor perpetuates concepts of such earlier novels as *Red Shift*, while Jack's ultimate and holistic starry vision transcends them.

In *The Other Wind* (Orion Children's, 2002) Ursula Le Guin builds on her *Earthsea* inheritance, now more than ever in an adult vein. She overtly reprises that mythic complex of a deliverance from an Underworld as it appeared in *The Tombs of Atuan*. There it had hints of Persephone: here it has more the colouring of the Orphic myth, as the sorcerer Alder seeks counsel from the retired mage Sparrowhawk on bringing back his witch-wife from the walled citadel of death. This motif intertwines with that of the now territorially aggressive winged dragons, whose mode of being and whose flight on the 'Other Wind' marks their separation from the human path. They eventually assist in demolishing the wall, and their subsequent homeward flight resolves the plot's many ambiguities. *Gawain the White Hawk* (George Mann, 2001) consists of free-verse retellings of two Gawain legends: those of the Green Knight and the Loathly Lady. In them Marilyn Bechely gives poetic emphasis to the relationship between what is virtually ritualistic drama and the changing, dying and renewed seasons through which the action passes. Adding several pages of notes, she traces the survival of pre-Christian motifs and personae. Her verse is vigorous, by turns sparkling and sombre. It affected me much as it did Kevin Crossley-Holland, who, in a foreword, writes: "I read [the poems] with great joy, yet sometimes close to tears."

The Reliquary Ring (Macmillan, 2003) is itself a striven-for token of power in Cherith Baldry's novel set in an alternative Venice. It is pleasing for its realistic evocation of that wonderful city and remarkable for the adroitness with which it incorporates historic traditions and rituals of our actual Venice into the plot manoeuvres of the alternative one. That plot, however fantastic, has science-fictional substance where it concerns the attaining of equality and freedom for the 'genics', a manufactured, subservient, but essentially human species. The 'Forged' of Justina Robson's *Natural History* (Macmillan, 2003) have something in common with those Venetian genics, but their urge is to the stars and for separation from 'Old Monkey' man in his solar milieu. This results in contact with a fresh and disturbing evolutionary horizon. I loved the comforting realisation that Old Monkey politicians and civil servants still walked their dogs in a futuristic version of St. James's Park.

CHERITH BALDRY

Christopher Priest, *The Separation* (Simon & Schuster, 2002). A tour de force: what more can I say? I have an inbuilt resistance to books about World War II, but this overcame it. It's fascinating, and a worthy winner of its awards.

Diana Wynne Jones, *The Merlin Conspiracy* (Collins, 2003). A

welcome return for her to children's fiction, which in my view she does so much better than writing for adults. It's not one of her absolute best, but still very good indeed, with a variety of imagination and humour, but serious issues underpinning it as well.

Gwyneth Jones, *Midnight Lamp* (Gollancz, 2003). The next episode in the *Bold as Love* universe. I love this world and the people who inhabit it. Although this is set in the US, and so loses the characteristic Englishness of the two previous books, it's still a compelling read, and takes the central relationship to a new stage. It is also a finely imagined portrait of near-future America.

Ursula Le Guin, *The Other Wind* (Orion Children's, 2002). A new *Earthsea* book is bound to be an event. This – as was *Tehanu* – is aimed at an older audience than the original trilogy, and looks at the world in new ways. It didn't quite live up to my expectations or hopes, but it is still powerfully and elegantly written.

Terry Pratchett, *Monstrous Regiment* (Doubleday, 2003). Not as powerful as the previous year's *Night Watch*, but still well worth reading. Fascinating character interactions and commentary on war.

PAUL BATEMAN

The first two are works of non-fiction. The endlessly fascinating *Emergence* (Penguin, 2001) by Steven Johnson (no, not the disappointing novel by Ray Hammond) is a thought-provoking account of how changes occur from the bottom up, such that enough individual changes interact and organise themselves into a collective intelligence without a distinct director. This phenomenon occurs at every level of existence: such as how anthills arise, how neighbourhoods form, how Internet communities appear, how media frenzies occur and how a brain can be conscious even though no single neuron is. *Emergence* even offers a solution to the travelling salesman problem.

The second is *Stupid White Men* (HarperCollins, 2002) by Michael Moore. Perhaps a bit unbalanced, perhaps a bit over the top, but I found it to be refreshingly frank. Moore argues that nearly everything wrong in the world is because of the actions of the stupid white men in charge. No one is safe from them. Not even stupid white men like Moore

whose book was originally published weeks before the events of 11th September 2001 occurred and subsequently suppressed until the publishers gave in to public demand. This is a book to make your blood boil at what's wrong in the world. Science fiction has often warned about social injustices and deprivation. Michael Moore gives these warnings their true names and more. The world could do with more books like this.

In a world where books for younger readers are finally receiving

THE RESULTS

(titles with more than 1 vote)

6 VOTES

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Felaheen*
(Earthlight, 2003)

5 VOTES

Christopher Priest, *The Separation*
(Simon & Schuster, 2002)

4 VOTES

M. John Harrison, *Light*
(Gollancz, 2002)

Justina Robson, *Natural History*
(Macmillan, 2003)

Francis Spufford, *Backroom Boys*
(Faber, 2003)

3 VOTES

Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*
(David Fickling, 2003)

Ian R. Macleod, *The Light Ages*
(Earthlight, 2003)

Terry Pratchett, *Night Watch*
(Doubleday, 2002)

Tricia Sullivan, *Maul*
(Orbit, 2003)

2 votes

Stephen Baxter, *Coalescent*
(Gollancz, 2003)

Lian Hearn, *Across the Nightingale Floor*
(Macmillan, 2002)

Diana Wynne Jones, *The Merlin Conspiracy*
(Collins, 2003)

Gwyneth Jones, *Midnight Lamp*
(Gollancz, 2003)

Stephen King, *Wolves of the Calla*
(Hodder & Stoughton, 2003)

Ursula Le Guin, *The Other Wind*
(Orion Children's, 2002)

James Lovegrove, *Untied Kingdom*
(Gollancz, 2003)

Elizabeth Moon, *Speed of Dark*
(Orbit, 2002)

Richard Morgan, *Broken Angels*
(Gollancz, 2003)

Adam Roberts, *Polystom*
(Gollancz, 2003)

Richard Paul Russo, *Unto Leviathan*
(aka *Ship of Fools*) (Orbit, 2003)

Jeff Smith, *The Bone Saga/Bone: Out from Boneville*
(Cartoon Books, 1996)

Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*
(Pilot Books, 2003)

the status they deserve compared to books for their older counterparts, my next two reads of the year are children's books.

Across the Nightingale Floor (Macmillan, 2002) by Lian Hearn is the first part of a trilogy recounting the life of a boy orphaned during a massacre. A Lord, rival to the Samurai who murdered the boy's mother, adopts the boy, who in turn plots his revenge, learning many skills and also about his true inheritance and lineage. This is probably the best story immersed in Japanese folklore and culture involving Samurai, ninja assassins, war, honour, loyalty and love I've read since James Clavell's *Shogun*. I look forward to the next parts of the trilogy.

Noughts and Crosses (Doubleday, 2001) by Malorie Blackman is the second children's book on my list. Sephy is a Cross, born into a high-class family. Callum is a Nought born into the lower working class. Can they be friends when Callum's father is arrested for acts of terrorism? With *Noughts and Crosses*, Malorie Blackman has created a book discussing racial issues to rival *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Cry, the Beloved Country*, but the racial divide is cleverly made more explicit as the roles of black and white are reversed.

Finally, the Big Read didn't escape my notice and I was surprised to find myself agreeing with others that Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (Virago, 2003) had every right to be on that list. Usually I'm disappointed with either my mother's or my wife's recommendations, but *Rebecca* came as a complete surprise. Combining elements of mystery, suspense and even hints of the supernatural, this is without doubt one of the most deftly crafted thrillers I've ever read. The book is even more 'Hitchcock' than the Hitchcock adaptation. Few modern authors can compete with *Rebecca*, but many have a lot to learn from this classic.

ELIZABETH A. BILLINGER

The most compelling thing for me about both Jeffrey Ford's *The Portrait of Mrs Charbuque* (Tor UK, 2003) and Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Felaheen* (Earthlight, 2003) is the skill with which the authors portray an imagined world that is rooted in reality. Ford creates a dark, baroque New York of the late nineteenth century, a place of mysteries and murders, disguises and dissembling, the capture of snowflakes and the divination of truth in chamber pots, all revolving around an artist who accepts a commission to paint the portrait of a woman he can never look upon. Grimwood's alternate North Africa is hotter than Ford's New York but no less dangerous or convincing. The food, the smells, the architectural descriptions and cleverly sketched cultural details support the tantalising convolutions of the narrative. Both novels ask questions about identity: Ford's protagonist attempts to know someone who wishes to remain concealed, to give a true image from a voice and the stories it tells. Grimwood's protagonist is caught up in a search for his own identity, and perhaps his soul, as he and the reader unravel his past, the past of his country and try to discover what is real.

Victoria Finlay's journey is through a European paintbox, in her uncategorisable book *Colour* (Sceptre, 2002). Finlay presents a history of the principal pigment colours, but her journey is literal, taking her all around the world on some remarkable adventures, as she seeks out the original sources. That the best ochre comes from sacred and secret Aboriginal sites in Australia, that the indigo plant has all but disappeared from Bengal, that it is no longer economic to grow saffron in La Mancha are all things that Finlay investigates. Her book is part fascinating history, part travel memoir, and part a very personal account of what these pigments mean to the author. Charming and informative, with a surprisingly emotional edge, this book made a difference to the way I look at the world.

Kelly Link looks differently at the world in *Stranger Things*

(Small Beer Press, 2001). This collection of stories feels as though it has not a single misplaced or unnecessary word; the stripped down prose displays the anatomy of the writing, leaving the reader swept away by the story and breathlessly admiring the skill with which it was executed. Link is fanciful, funny, and horrific; she plays joyfully with language and fairytales, and always offers an unexpected view that is both challenging and exhilarating.

'We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck' is the irresistible opening line of *Feed* (Walker Books, 2003) by M.T. Anderson. It's a novel about teenagers, marketed at the teen reader. What happens to language and expression in a world where everyone has an implant – a feed – which delivers carefully tailored advertising and will offer an encyclopaedic definition whenever the individual encounters an unknown word or concept? A conspiracy is investigated against a background of diminishing language, limited choices, and a declining desire for free will.

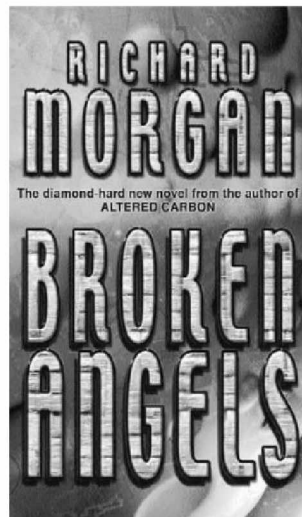
PAUL N. BILLINGER

Given the nature of the author's work it's apt to start my selections with an ending: Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Felaheen* (Earthlight, 2003) with its curved, interlocking non-linear narrative. The stunning conclusion to his Arabesk series, set in the near future of an alternate North Africa where the Ottoman Empire still exists, *Felaheen* finds our very modern hero Ashraf Bey pressurised into investigating an assassination attempt on the Emir of Tunis, who may, or may not, be his father. This is a more personal book than the preceding volumes and all the stronger for it, focusing on three generations of Raf's 'family'. Rarely has a concluding volume been as satisfying as this, making the series one you must not miss.

Justina Robson's *Natural History* (Macmillan, 2003) pushes space opera into an even more extreme form, with a far future Earth populated by both normal humans and the Forged, a mix of human and animal genes melded with advanced technology. The discovery in deepest space of a lump of strange grey 'stuff' appears to present miraculous and unlimited possibilities – or to precipitate the simmering conflict between Forged and humans. Each word is carefully considered to produce an intricate, dense novel with a rich vein of humour and wit. Tricia Sullivan's *Maul* (Orbit, 2003) was a surprise, not least because it has a cover that shrieks 'read me!' With an apparently conventional twin narrative, one a trip to the shopping mall that gets very out of hand, the other set in the near-future where the rare fertile males are closeted in castellations, part stud farm, part concentration camp, an uncouth 'real' male threatens the society's stability. The text just zips along, racing towards joint climaxes, with both strands containing some of the wittiest, funniest, lines around.

Garth Nix has been writing some of the best current Young Adult fantasy and *Mister Monday* (Scholastic Inc, 2003), the first of his new series, shows him just getting better. Arthur Penhaligon is saved from certain death by a bizarre key and creatures from another reality. But this has consequences: Arthur must protect the key and our world, which is threatened by an unidentified plague, by investigating a sinister old house – the gate to another world. The prologue alone should win awards, read it in a bookshop, recover breath, buy book. Nothing could be simpler.

My final choice is Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential* (Bloomsbury, 2000) which has little connection with sf, being the autobiography of a chef, albeit one who has run some of the top restaurants in Tokyo, Paris and New York. From his first experience of real food – vichyssoise on an ocean liner – through the diners of New York, Bourdain gives us his own view of both haute cuisine and the



restaurant business and his often painful journey through both. Both frighteningly honest and screamingly funny, written with a style and pace that most novelists would envy. Read this and find out when it's safe to eat fish in the best restaurants.

COLIN BIRD

As usual my reading horizon lags by about a year behind the rest of the sf world partly due to waiting for paperback publication and partly because I've been interspersing my reading with various great works of Literature which are now easily available on the internet (and at no cost, which helps). My meagre sample of genre fiction last year precludes me from any overall summary of current trends but my sf top five in no order consists of:

China Miéville, *The Scar* (Macmillan, 2002). It's getting harder to resist Miéville's richly layered stories full of a real sense of wonder contrasted with gritty realism. Has anybody sent these novels to Peter Jackson? Methinks they are just as 'unfilmable' as they said *Lord of the Rings* was.

David Brin, *Kil'n People* (Orbit, 2002). The title promises something strange and funny and this novel delivers entertainment aplenty. Full of riotous invention from an author normally associated with more ponderous fare.

Greg Bear, *Vitals* (Voyager, 2002). Far more convincing than anything by Mr Crichton. This novel is laced with fascinating science and a narrative which gradually becomes more unhinged (and enjoyable) as it races to a satisfying climax. Bear seems to have successfully reinvented himself as an author of biotech-thrillers and this one is his best so far.

Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt* (Voyager, 2002). Probably the least fun to read of Robinson's books (maybe in a tie with *Antarctica*). I have mixed feelings about this one from my favourite modern sf author. It's full of powerful writing but structurally awkward and with characters that are hard to get to grips with but then it is describing concepts which are rarely tackled in western fiction. A novel that demands further exploration and intense concentration.

Alastair Reynolds, *Redemption Ark* (Gollancz, 2002). A return to form after the messy *Chasm City*. More unfathomable aliens, huge spaceships and bizarre weapons built for planet stomping. It's not breaking any new ground but is well written and fills the increasingly long gaps between Banks' *Culture* novels.

LYNNE BISPHAM

In first place has to be *Castles Made of Sand* (Gollancz, 2002) by Gwyneth Jones, the follow-up to *Bold as Love*, which made my list of 2002 Books of the Year. I approached this sequel with some trepidation. So often the second book in a series is disappointing, but in this book (as always) Gwyneth Jones delivers a remarkable piece of writing, with strong characters inhabiting a highly original milieu, which is Britain, but not as we know it. This book could be described as science fiction, fantasy or both. Absolutely brilliant, and highly recommended. And fortunately the next volume in the series is already published.

Two fantasies that particularly impressed me this year, in no particular order, were Juliet E. McKenna's *Southern Fire* (Orbit, 2003) and Sarah Ash's *Lord of Snow and Shadows* (Bantam, 2003). *Southern Fire* is book one of The Aldabreshin Compass. Yes, it is the first volume in yet another fantasy series, but it is superior fantasy, is extremely well-written, and is set in a particularly rich and colourful world. *Lord of Snow and Shadows*, book one of The Tears of Artamon, is set in a world that has echoes of our own in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and yet manages to portray a fully convincing scenario in which magic is used to win battles or communicate over vast

distances. The old tale of an ordinary person who is unexpectedly informed that they are actually royalty is given a new slant when the main character discovers the true and abhorrent nature of his inheritance. Again well-drawn characters, originality, stylish descriptions and a strong sense of place make this book stand out from the crowd.

Manda Scott's *Boudica, Dreaming the Eagle* (Bantam Press, 2003) purports to be a historical novel describing the formative years of the warrior queen but it reads like a fantasy. As a child, the heroine wins renown by killing an enemy warrior. Later, she is sent to be trained in the Isle of the Dreamers (aka druids). So little is actually known of Boudica's early life that the author has been able to give her imagination full rein. Great stuff.

Finally, one book that really can be classified as a historical novel, despite one character being able to see into the future, is *Emperor, the Gates of Rome* (HarperCollins, 2003) by Conn Iggulden, which describes the early life of Julius Caesar. If you like your fantasy with swords and battles, you may well like this book.

CLAIRE BRIALEY

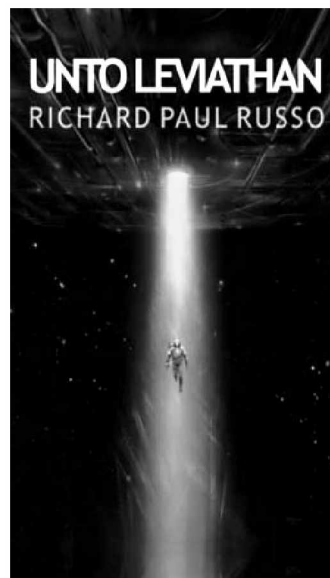
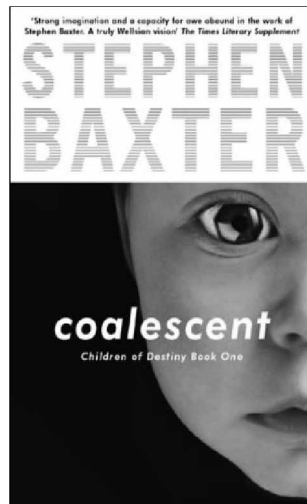
As ever, the choice of five books is so difficult that this might not be the five I'd have picked yesterday or would pick tomorrow. But I can't help noticing that this particular selection each contain a sense that the world is not as it should be – but that change is possible and sometimes worth the risk.

Margaret Elphinstone's *Hy Brasil* (Cannongate, 2002) is a fantasy set on a fictitious archipelago in the Atlantic which is the first assignment for a budding travel writer who won it on the basis of a fabricated application. The macro-politics of the islands' strategic importance have become entangled with the politics of personality within the community; their history is thus a series of family sagas from which the current inhabitants struggle to escape, while trying to avoid the incursions of modernity – and the tensions within society are matched by the seismic instability of the geography. The entry into this community of an outsider with a remit to discover its true nature is the spur for love, death, mystery, explosions, and the onset of free and fair elections.

Felaheen (Earthlight, 2003) was a strong conclusion to Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Arabesk* sequence. As ever, I was entranced by the vision of future local and global society, the intricacy of the alternate history that underpins it, the exquisite personal touch of the characterisation, the exceptionally deft depictions of sex and gender relations, the anger accentuated by humour and the elegant plotting of brutal events which marks out Grimwood's work. Oh, and the food. *Felaheen* contains some conclusions, some new perspectives on familiar characters, and some intriguing new questions which make me desperately impatient for the next novel.

Death and the Penguin (Harvill Press, 2002) by Andrey Kurkov is a compelling short novel set in post-Soviet Ukraine. The faintly surreal nature of daily life is satirically accepted as quite normal for this new society as the viewpoint character contends with the joys and strains of new friendships, potential romance, domestic problems, professional fulfilment, unwitting involvement in organised crime – and the daily needs of a pet penguin cast adrift from the zoo. To my great joy I've recently discovered a sequel is due out this year.

The Light Ages (Earthlight, 2003) by Ian R. MacLeod is a social science fiction which looks at how the world changes, and how people do not, in a world that's different in only one material – albeit fantastic – respect from ours. But, after the nature of fantastic materials, it twists so that it's difficult to pin down what else it is: a novel about society, seen through the stories of individuals caught up in – or attempting to provoke – a moment of



historical change; a narrative about economic and social orders and their resilience, or about the contrasted pettiness and greatness of the human condition; a series of connected personal stories set against a backdrop of a world in upheaval which mirrors the turbulence of people's lives; or all of these, and more.

Finally, Tricia Sullivan's *Maul* (Orbit, 2003) is the most thought-provoking book I read all year. Its dual narrative strands feature young girls struggling to preserve life, dignity, and fashion credibility – and to work out which is more important – in the urban battlefield of a shopping mall, while women and men take sides over freedom and fertility in a future society that's gone more badly wrong. One is imagining the other and yet, as the White King dreams of Alice in the looking-glass world, nothing is that straightforward.

There could be more. There could be others. But these are all books that made me think and kept me reading.

TANYA BROWN

I'd been waiting for *Midnight Lamp* (Gollancz, 2003), the third novel in Gwyneth Jones's near-future rock'n'roll science fantasy series, ever since I read *Castles Made of Sand* in the summer of 2002. The ambience of the novel is quite different from its predecessors: *Midnight Lamp* is set in California, and the redoubtable trio at the heart of the series – Sage, Ax and Fiorinda – seem considerably less epic when they're away from the once and future England in which they played out mythic roles.

Diana Wynne Jones's *The Merlin Conspiracy* (Collins, 2003) is a delight: all the frivolity and invention of her books for children, bound up in a more subtle and complex magical setting. I'm particularly taken with her personifications of cities – especially Old Sarum, all bitter and flea-bitten, a rotten borough through and through.

Franny Billingsley's *The Folk Keeper* (Bloomsbury, 2003) was a chance find – I've been less adventurous than usual with unfamiliar authors, but I was lured by the blend of mundane and magical promised in the blurb. This is a charming book, though the romantic elements may alienate its intended juvenile readership. Key moment here? The narrator's sensation of 'turning inside out' as the tide turns. Definitely an author to watch, and one who has a good feel for British folklore.

M. John Harrison's *Light* (Gollancz, 2002) was probably the single traditional sf novel that I read and enjoyed. There's something about Harrison's prose that makes him a joy to read, and I loved the playfulness with which he subverted the whole space-opera genre. Proper science, too.

Last but not least, I was pleasantly surprised by Lois McMaster Bujold's *The Curse of Chalion* (Voyager, 2002). I've enjoyed almost all her science-fiction novels, but for some reason (the cover? the blurb? the odour of formulaic fantasy?) I didn't bother to look at this until I read an extended free preview in e-book format. I was hooked by the complex, likeable characters, the dry humour and the well-paced, multi-layered plot: really, none of this should have surprised me in a novel by the author of the *Vorkosigan* saga.

ANDREW M. BUTLER

2002 seems to have been a stronger sf year than 2003, and Christopher Priest's *The Separation* (Simon & Schuster, 2002) (rightly) won the Clarke Award amidst tough competition. It is a novel which demands rereading to decode precisely what was going on in the hall of mirrors of alternate history – when the Second World War really ended and what Rudolf Hess was up to when he flew to Britain from Germany.

Children's fiction, especially within the fantasy and sf genres, continued to flourish in 2003. Indeed, for professional reasons, most of what I read this year was children's fiction and non-fiction about children's fiction. It's hard to narrow down the field, but from 2003, S.F. Said's *Varjak Paw* (David Fickling Books, 2003) was the brilliant and sinister tale of a family of cats and the secret martial arts of the cat kingdom. From a couple of years ago I can recommend Louis Sachar's *Holes* (Bloomsbury, 2000). This is a series of interlocking narratives, centred on Stanley Yelnats, wrongly sentenced to a prison camp on the edge of a dried-up lake in Texas and forced with the other inmates to dig a hole every day in the harsh climate. Stanley is there because of events a century or more ago in the old country, when an ancestor failed to carry out his side of a bargain with a wise woman. And then there's the legend of the outlaw Kissing Kate who was last seen on the lake shore a century back. A fairy tale for the twenty-first century. The film was far better than we could have dreamt possible, being adapted by Sachar – whereas Sachar's other novels seem less interesting.

Finally, from the crime genres, two private eye novels with twists: Malcolm Pryce's *Aberystwyth Mon Amour* (Bloomsbury, 2001) and Eric Garcia's *Anonymous Rex: A Detective Story* (HarperCollins, 2000). In the former Louie Knight is a private eye in this Welsh coastal town which finds itself in the grip of a crimewave: some of our schoolboys are missing. Knight refuses to be employed by Myfanwy, a dancer at the local night club, to search for the missing Evans the Boot but someone clearly thinks he knows more than he does because his office is ransacked and before long someone makes him an offer he cannot refuse, and a donkey's head appears in his

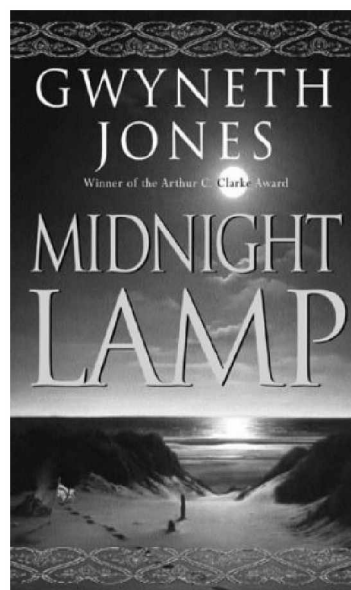
bed. Can he solve the crime, get the girl and stay alive? In the latter novel, there is a sense of familiarity in the set-up: a humdrum private eye is down on his luck and gets too deep into a case that has to do with his dead partner. What rescues the story from cliché is the fact that the dinosaurs did not actually die out, but have just lain low over the centuries and evolved a bit so they can pass among humans in suitable disguises. The central character is a dinosaur, cut off for now from his order. Pryce's novel has a sequel, and Garcia's is the first of a series, and I'm certainly looking out for them.

STUART CARTER

Francis Spufford, *The Backroom Boys* (Faber, 2003). Non-fiction that was occasionally so bizarre you wouldn't have been surprised to find it filed under 'Alternative History'. British space programs, computerised universes, scientists fighting global hegemony – and all in dear old Blighty. Spufford's deeply affectionate look back at some of the less well-known mad scientists from recent history highlights what's best about Britain and British people. A wonderful, heart-warming book to surely instil a bit of national pride in even the flintiest of anarchist hearts!

Richard Morgan, *Broken Angels* (Gollancz, 2003). A worthy follow-up to my favourite book of last year: hard-hitting, widescreen and again boiling with the kind of 'real' violence never normally seen in 'violent' books. *Broken Angels* took Takeshi Kovacs, the protagonist of *Altered Carbon*, out into the wider universe. If you thought twenty-sixth century San Francisco was a nasty place then think again – the galaxy is much, much worse. Much as I clung to the hope that humanity is better than this, a quick look around the world in 2003 often seemed to give lie to that hope. Nobody in my experience writes quite like Richard Morgan, with a quickness and tautness that simultaneously thrills and revolts you. It's enough to put you off becoming an intergalactic mercenary for hire!

Duncan Hunter, *A Martian Poet in Siberia* (1st Books, 2002). About as far away as it's possible to get from one of Richard Morgan's



books while still using paper and ink. A self-published debut that drew easily from orient and occident to create a restrained, intelligent tale that ranks alongside Kim Stanley Robinson both in terms of style and attitude (if not sheer page count). This book arrived without fanfare on my 'To Read' pile and stayed there for a while, an ugly duckling to judge from the outer cover, but inside, I can assure you, lies an elegant and beautiful swan of a book about loss, survival and, well, everything really.

Graham Joyce, *The Facts of Life* (Gollancz, 2002). My first foray into Joyce-land had me kicking myself that I'd never been there before. Warm, funny, eye-widening and occasionally even eye-moistening. *The Facts of Life* could so easily have been a dreadfully formulaic and twee Catherine Cookson-style novel...but isn't. In fact, it's so stuffed full of a healthy love for life that surely only a corpse could put it down!

Christopher Priest, *The Separation* (Simon & Schuster, 2002). Barely sf at all (hell, even Mrs C. read and enjoyed it), barely even released at all (boo Simon & Schuster!), *The Separation* still managed (and deservedly so) to take the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2003. This was one of those books where I had literally no idea what was going to happen – and for all the right reasons. I wasn't a Priest fan before (he always got too many of the 'wrong' kind of 'good' reviews for me) but in this his writing just slides off the page like butter from a hot potato, and tastes just as good.

GARY DALKIN

Dan Simmons, *Ilium* (Gollancz, 2003). In this, the first half of a duo, Simmons returns to epic space opera. The approach is essentially the same as in the author's *Hyperion Cantos*; a fusion of hi-tech adventurous space-opera with literature's greatest hits; Homer, Shakespeare, Proust, H.G. Wells. Much post-modern fun is to be had, and some of the invention is sheer delight; though the yarn goes one bizarre wonder too far. *Ilium* seems much more simply an ingenious and boldly conceived entertainment than *Hyperion*, wherein the narrative and literary structure were woven together with more serious intent and poetic ambition. Nevertheless the book is a polished romp filled with set-pieces which span the range between breathtaking and banal. Final conclusions will have to remain until the publication of the follow-up, *Olympus*.

Stephen King, *Wolves of the Calla* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2003). It's been a long road for King's Roland on his way to The Dark Tower, inspired by Robert Browning's 'Childe Rolande to the Dark Tower Came'. When he gets there will he find it already occupied by Dan Simmons's latest literature-plundering characters? This is the least exciting and action-packed of The Dark Tower novels, but it succeeds in deepening and enriching the saga in diverse and endlessly intriguing ways. King has long been weaving these books into the fabric of his entire body of work and the way he binds the latest tale to Salem's Lot is ingenious, suggesting we will soon have to go back and re-read King's entire output as one vast interlocked epic. A startlingly imaginative achievement which makes me greatly anticipate the final two volumes, both due this year.

Stephen Baxter, *Coalescent* (Gollancz, 2003). First volume of a new epic space opera telling two tales, one following a middle-aged Englishman searching for the sister he didn't remember he had and ranging from NASA to Rome, the other an adventure from the withdrawal of the Roman Legions from Britain to a strange new underground society in Rome. Of course the two plots become one

and there are added hints of war in the heart of the galaxy and a chilling far-future coda. Parts of this book contain Baxter's most intimately human and personal writing, while others are more detached and offer plot threads which strain credibility. Nevertheless, the mix of Roman history, biosexual horror in the tradition of *The Stepford Wives*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen* (though without the satanic elements) and *Starship Troopers* future war is intriguing and promises much for future volumes.

Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (Bodley Head, 1964). A compelling account of Chaplin's family life, early poverty, music hall days, silent cinema triumphs and political persecution. There's not much about the making of his films and his first marriage is swept firmly under the carpet, but this is engagingly written and very winning. It does though need to be balanced by a more objective volume which takes the less savoury aspects of the great man's life into account.

John Simpson, *Strange Places, Questionable People* (Macmillan, 1998). The first volume of BBC World Affairs editor John Simpson's autobiography. Not sf, but easily the most engrossing and enjoyable book I read in 2003. Calm, balanced and self-effacing, but also very honest. Remarkable adventures related with great humanity, humour, clarity, immediacy and craft by a fine writer and story teller.

ALAN FRASER

Robin Hobb, *Fool's Fate* (Voyager, 2003). The conclusion to the second series about FitzChivalry Farseer in which not only the latest plotline – the quest to kill a dragon who definitely should not be killed – but also the issues left at the end of the first series are finally resolved. I complained in my review of *Assassin's Quest* that Fitz got a 'Frodo' deal: he saved the world but didn't get the girl or happiness for his efforts. This book sets things right, as well as finally sorting out all the loose ends, including some you didn't know were loose! My other complaint at the ending of *Assassin's Quest* was that the ending was too rushed, a mistake that Robin Hobb didn't make at the end of *The Liveship Traders* and one she doesn't make here.

M. John Harrison, *Light* (Gollancz, 2002). *Light* is Harrison's first sf book since *The Centauri Device* in 1975, and well worth the wait. It combines a space opera set in 2400 with a 1999 story in which two physicists struggle with personal problems and at the limits of quantum physics to create the basis for interstellar flight. *Light* even has an unusual ending for Harrison – if not happy, then at least hopeful.

James Lovegrove, *Untied Kingdom* (Gollancz, 2003). I'd not read anything by James Lovegrove before, but this is a good one, an interesting update on those 1950s British disaster novels by John Wyndham and John Christopher. It's set in the near future after the United Kingdom has fallen apart – hence the perhaps too clever title. With the country's infrastructure gone, isolated communities such as the village of Downbourne have resurrected ancient traditions and myths to help them survive. A London-based gang raid the village and kidnap several women, including Moira, the wife of the schoolmaster

Fen Morris. Even though his marriage was failing, Morris feels bound to try to rescue her and sets off on a quest to get her back which takes him through the ruins of England, showing us how ordinary people find the strength to survive in desperate circumstances.

Stephen King, *Wolves of the Calla* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2003). I'm not a fan of Stephen King's horror work, but I have followed with interest his Dark Tower series, set in a parallel Wild West that has links to our own world. King notes in his introduction to this book



that if you haven't read the previous volumes this isn't the place to begin. He's right! Continuing the story of the gunslinger Roland of Gilead and his motley bunch of followers from our world, this book is not only a homage to *The Magnificent Seven*, but also packed full of references to virtually every popular novel or film in recent history, and even includes a character from King's own *Salem's Lot*. It doesn't advance the story as much as you'd perhaps like, but it's still a fascinating read.

Peter Crowther (ed.), *Cities* (Gollancz, 2003). *Cities* is the fourth of Peter Crowther's series of *Foursight* anthologies, each of which includes four novellas on a related topic. This volume has four stories on the theme of cities, from four big names in what I'd describe as 'more challenging' fantasy: Paul di Filippo, 'A Year in the Linear City', Michael Moorcock, 'Firing the Cathedral' (a Jerry Cornelius story), China Miéville, 'The Tain' (set in the world of New Crobuzon), and Geoff Ryman, 'V.A.O.' (Victim Activated Ordnance). Not every tale will appeal to all, but it's still far above the usual bookshop shelf-filling fare.

MARK GREENER

I distilled the best sf novels I read in 2003 to Brian Aldiss's *Super-State* (Orbit, 2002) and James Lovegrove's *Untied Kingdom* (Gollancz, 2003). For what's it worth, I consider *Super-State* to be a classic in the making: an intellectual, philosophical and serious novel. And because of its topical relevance (to the EU's squabbles and the Iraq quagmire) I think *Super-State* is probably the best sf book of the year. A good half of my fiction reading comes from the so-called 'literary' end of the mainstream: Amis, McEwan, Eco, and so on. Even against this benchmark, *Super-State* remains impressive. *Untied Kingdom* is a close second. It's a hugely enjoyable yarn reminiscent of Wyndham at his best.

Chris Bunch's *Storm of Wings* (Orbit, 2002) and its sequel *Knighthood of the Dragon* (Orbit, 2003) were easily the best fantasy books I came across in the last twelve months. Indeed, they're really one book, chopped more or less in half. Taken as a single book, the novels offer a compelling story of the development of character forged by war. This may sound un-PC; but these aren't books that glorify war. Indeed, the martial verisimilitude sets the novels apart from the usual sword and sorcery escapism. In many ways, the novels represent the fantasy equivalent of *The Forever War*. But I suspect publication in two parts may dilute its impact.

There were two contenders for the best short story collection – both from Elastic Press: Marion Arnett's *Sleepwalkers* (Elastic Press, 2003) and *Milo & I*, by Antony Mann. This was a really tough choice. *Sleepwalkers* won by a nose. It's more to my bleaker, melancholic, almost misanthropic taste than the cynical, worldly humour of *Milo & I*. But both are marvellous books that should be known to a much wider audience than just fans of slipstream, dark fantasy or crime.

For best horror book, I was tempted to suggest *Fast Food Nation*. A truly disturbing horror story – all the more so because it's real – that'll have you reaching for a sick bag. This aside, the best horror book was Mark West's collection *Strange Tales* (Rainfall Books, 2003). Overall, it's not as strong in a literary sense as Arnett's and Mann's collections. Nevertheless, it's still a cracking collection of stories for late night reading that tears at the horror envelope with savage, gore-encrusted claws. But only read *Strange Tales* (the title could perhaps have been better) if you don't shock easily. You have been warned.

NIALL HARRISON

2003 was a good year for sf, if perhaps not quite up to the stellar standards of 2002. The new Golden Age continues.

The best novel I read in 2003 was Ian R. Macleod's industrial fantasy, *The Light Ages* (Earthlight, 2003). Macleod's alternate England is a land in thrall to aether, a powerful and magical material that has fuelled the rise of great Guilds, encouraging social, economic and technological stagnation. The story concerns a coming of age and the turning of an Age, as Robert Borrows travels from rags to riches and towards the dreamers' revolution that might lie in his future. For the cynical reader, the novel offers an obvious and damning criticism of the laziness that characterises so many tales of the fantastic; but on a more immediate level it is simply a wonderful, vivid, absorbing book.

That said, my favourite novel of the year was Paul di Filippo's madcap cosmological adventure, *Fuzzy Dice* (PS Publishing, 2003). Down and nearly out Paul Girard careens through a succession of increasingly bizarre universes in search of the answer to the Ontological Pickle: Why is there something instead of nothing? The book comes on like pop-science infused with triple-strength acid, and is a masterpiece of concise worldbuilding. Girard's destinations run from a universe of cellular automata to a universe where the butterfly effect is devastatingly observable, and many more.

On a more sober tack, Stephen Baxter's *Coalescent* (Gollancz, 2003) spun out some of the ideas from *Evolution* into a more traditional sf form. The first book of a new series, *Coalescent* is nevertheless a more-or-less standalone work looking at how our social order is determined by our biology... and offering, in some of the year's most disturbingly memorable scenes, an alternative. Less extravagantly widescreen than the *Manifold* books, in terms of tone and structure this is still one of Baxter's most fully realised works to date.

Polystom (Gollancz, 2003) was Adam Roberts' fourth novel. Set in a solar system where a breathable atmosphere extends between worlds and the sun burns oxygen, where interplanetary flight is possible in nothing more than a biplane and society is still very much divided by class, it turned out to be probably his strongest book so far. The familiarly nasty characters, the fascination with war, and the smoothly elegant prose are all par for the course here, but *Polystom* concludes by delivering a philosophical kick to the head that would not disgrace Greg Egan or Philip K. Dick.

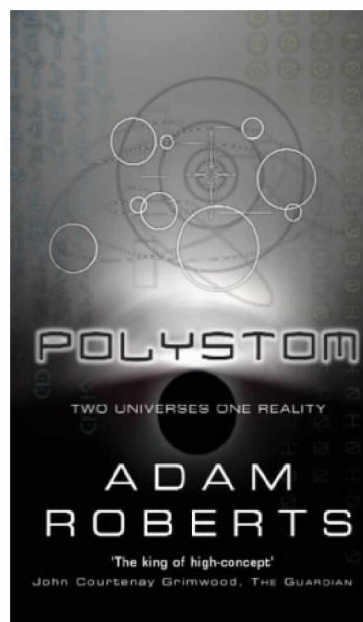
A different type of mind-bending is to be found in Justina Robson's *Natural History* (Macmillan, 2003). The Forged characters in her story have engineered personalities to go with their engineered bodies, and as you might expect are consequently not the healthiest group of minds you'll ever meet. I have one or two plausibility issues with how they ever got created, but as a pure thought-experiment it's a fascinating conceit that is well-mined by the story. The novel is also rich in wonder, written with an often-wicked sense of humour, and probably the best space opera of the year.

LESLEY HATCH

Cecilia Dart-Thornton's *The Ill-Made Mute* (Macmillan, 2001) is the favourite of my chosen five. It's the first in The Bitterbynde Trilogy, and in

it we get introduced to the main protagonist, who has no memory and forms a blank canvas on which the events in his life and the world take place. While it's a bit much to compare the author to Tolkien, it's a promising start.

Sara Douglass's *The Nameless Day* (Voyager, 2001) is the first in The Crucible Trilogy; it is set in an alternative medieval Europe, and is



primarily centred around a priest's fight against supernatural evil, but this does not detract from the story in any way.

And now for another alternate world, in Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Pashazade* (Earthlight, 2001). In this novel, Germany won World War One. Into El Iskandryia comes Ashraf Bey, whose 'aunt' arranged his release from prison; she is later murdered, and events take a few unexpected twists.

Tim Earnshaw's *Helium* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997) is my fourth choice, and chronicles the intriguing story of Gary Wilder, who finds himself becoming lighter in weight, quite literally, at the most awkward times, and then gaining it again, equally unexpectedly. It's not science fiction, but has an element of it.

Joan Aiken's *The Cockatrice Boys* (Puffin, 1998) is my final selection. The cockatrices in question are monsters who decimate Britain and its population, and the Cockatrice Corps is created to combat them. Although it's classed as a young adult book, it's still one to be read and enjoyed by adults, no matter how old they are.

CHRIS HILL

Deborah Moggach, *Tulip Fever* (Heinemann, 1999). Set at a time when trading in tulips was the way to make your fortune. A beautifully written moral fable that unfolds like a series of Hogarth paintings. My token non-genre book for this year!

Jeff Smith, *The Bone Saga* (Cartoon Books, 1996). A slight cheat as this is a series of eight graphic novels (with one more to go). Essentially an epic fantasy, but with great characters and beautiful crisp drawings. It is also extremely funny and one volume has one of the best visual pay-offs for a long-running joke I have ever seen.

Robert Holdstock, *Celtika* (Earthlight, 2003). The first volume of the *Merlin Codex*, dealing with Merlin's involvement with the quest for the Golden Fleece and what happens afterwards. A bit more straightforward than the Mythago books, but beautifully written and very compelling.

Richard Paul Russo, *Ship of Fools* (Orbit, 2003). In this Generation Starship story, the inhabitants know that they are on a ship but have no idea why. An investigation of a distress signal leads to a crisis. A mixture of straight sf and theological considerations this is Russo's best novel so far. Recently published as *Unto Leviathan* in the UK.

Neal Asher, *Gridlinked* (Pan, 2001). In a society in which people travel by a form of matter transporter, a special agent investigates the destruction of a world caused by sabotage of the local gate. I selected this one purely for entertainment value, one of the most important reasons for choosing a book. The most enjoyable piece of Space Operatics I have read in a long time.

PENNY HILL

Mark Dunn's *Elfa Minnow Pea* (Methuen, 2002) is great fun. It's a linguistic delight as the inhabitants of an imaginary island pass laws preventing the use of certain letters of the alphabet. As they attempt to keep communicating despite the ever stricter laws, their letters to one another get more and more cryptic. The only solution: to find a sentence containing all the letters of the alphabet that is shorter than the famous 'The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog'. Not sf or fantasy, but recommended for anyone who loves words.

Joanne Harris's *Holy Fools* (Doubleday, 2003) has an incredible battle of wills amid elements of magic – but is it real or just legerdemain? Set in a medieval convent, it has a skiffy sensibility (which the acknowledgements page bears out) without anything you could conclusively point to as fantastical. A fascinating and absorbing read. Joanne Harris's novels are always worth reading and this is one of the better ones.

Elizabeth Moon's *Speed of Dark* (Orbit, 2002) is a book that lingered in the mind after I'd read it. Much more than just an updating of *Flowers for Algernon*, it explores whether we should always

assume a 'normal' person is better off than one who is 'disabled' and what the benefits and drawbacks are of 'curing' mental imbalances, without being simplistic. Thought-provoking and liable to make you notice your own mental quirks.

Ann Patchett's *The Patron Saint of Liars* (Bantam, 1996), her first novel, explores life in an unmarried mother's home in the 1950s from the viewpoint of an outsider – a woman who has chosen to live there. Unsentimental, yet reminiscent of Fannie Flagg's work (such as *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Cafe*), this is an enjoyably unsettling work of magic realism. Despite lacking in resolution, this book left resonances long afterwards.

Jeff Smith, *Bone: Out from Boneville* (Cartoon Books, 1996). I picked this because it's the best place to start, being the first volume in the *Bone* series. I have really enjoyed the series this year – comic books that are funny, touching, scary and sad – and leave me desperate to find out what happens next. My write-up may sound clichéd but trust me, this series is anything but.

L.J. HURST

Not wanting to leave the house empty the weekend after it had been burgled I stayed in and rewarded myself by reading J.G. Ballard's *Millennium People* (Flamingo, 2003). Within a few pages I was laughing out loud, and it was not hysterical laughter. As *Millennium People*, Ballard's latest, is his 'terrorism' novel this might seem a surprising response, but I am sure it is what he intended. Some critics have carped that it does not deal with Islamic fundamentalism, but neither does it deal with professional burglars like those who visited me and more all on the same night, and they are just as much a criminal feature of today as Al Qaeda. There is a lot about London life in *Millennium People* that I hadn't thought Ballard would be up-to-date with, but contemporary life in the metropolis is something else recently forced on me and I have discovered that he is. The guy knows the way things are going.

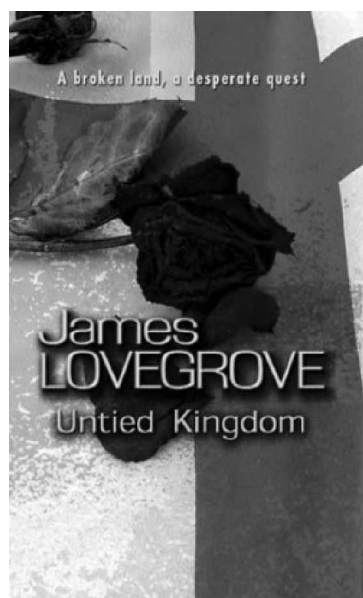
Henry Hobhouse's *Seeds Of Change* (Pan, 2002) was first published as *Five Plants That Changed The World* and has gone through various editions – the 2002 Pan edition that I finally read in 2003 is now *Six Plants* (Hobhouse has added Coca to Cotton, Sugar, Tea, Quinine, and the Potato). I may not agree with all his interpretations but Hobhouse's approach (he doesn't use Ballard's one-time instruction 'See yourself in a wider context', but it is relevant) is, I feel increasingly, the only one that anyone trying to understand the world can take.

EDWARD JAMES

Last year I taught a course at Rutgers in New Jersey called 'Medievalism in Fantasy and Science Fiction'. I was reading quite a lot of bad science fiction, and some even worse fantasy, and for relaxation dozens of mysteries (I don't have to take notes on those). I reread some historical mysteries, for instance (the complete Lindsey Davies, and Steven Saylor, and Peter Lovesey, and some Robert Van Gulik); all good books, but none of them individually outstanding, and none of them being of obvious interest to readers of *Vector*. Nor were any of the medieval history books I read in partial fulfilment of my contract of employment. But as it happens even the ones I have chosen are more or less peripheral to science fiction.

The first is Francis Spufford's *The Backroom Boys* (Faber, 2003) which explores (among other things) the ways in which British science fiction readers – or those of them who became scientists – helped bring Britain a little nearer to the future presented to fans of *Dan Dare* in the 1950s. It's good history; and it's told in a really engaging way.

The second is Suzy McKee Charnas's book *My Father's Ghost* (Penguin Putnam, 2003). The humour may be a surprise to some readers of her *Motherlines* sf books, but the sometimes brutal honesty won't be. It's an autobiographical account of her last years with her father. Robin McKee was a highly intelligent and deeply asocial painter and bum, who moved from Greenwich Village to live with



Suzy and Steve in New Mexico, and there remained for fifteen years. Suzy's sister thought of Suzy as a saint for putting up with this terrible self-centred man; but the levels of hatred and guilt which Suzy experienced show that she was anything but. Suzy wrote on the title page of the copy I read 'Now you'll know more about me than you ever wanted to'; but I would be happy to know more.

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (David Fickling, 2003) has had a lot of publicity, and deservedly; and there's something very science-fictional about this first-person account of a strange alien world which operates according to rules which the narrator cannot understand; but, of course, that's because the narrator is an autistic boy, who sets off on a Holmesian quest to discover why someone put a garden fork through his neighbour's dog. The reader can pluck the clues out rather more quickly than the narrator; after all, we live in the world that is so alien to him.

Another book I was very impressed by, and moved by, was an old Peter Straub, *Mystery* (HarperCollins, 1990); I have only just started reading the various Straubs that I have missed over recent years. I loved his creation of a Caribbean island, with its mixed Anglo-German culture; and the characters are beautifully drawn. The whole book lurks in the memory months after I finished it.

None of these books would work without skilled use of the comma and the apostrophe; which is why I have set up a Web site for my students devoted to these splendid creatures, and why, as a fully paid-up pedant, I must choose Lynn Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (Pilot Books, 2003) as my fifth book. It's amazing that a book on punctuation should become a runaway bestseller before Christmas, but, then, it's amazing too that a book on punctuation should be so funny. I wish I could get all my students to buy it, and learn from it.

BEN JEAPES

Lee Weatherly, *Child X* (Corgi, 2003). Jules is a normal, only slightly snotty, suburban teenage girl, whose life goes to hell overnight as interesting aspects of her parents' marriage hit the tabloid headlines. Suddenly Jules is Child X in all the papers. Paparazzi lurk in every bush, and her picture appears in every red-top tabloid with a tasteful black stripe over her eyes. Everyone knows who she is but no one can say it; worse, everyone knows what's going on except her. Of interest to *Vector* readers might be that during the story Jules auditions for, and gets, the role of Lyra in a youth theatre production of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights*. The role gives her insights into coping with her real life situation. The author gives special thanks to Pullman for letting her use his characters, and she obviously knows and loves *Northern Lights* herself.

Lian Hearn, *Across the Nightingale Floor* (Macmillan, 2002). Once we learn that young Takeo comes from a tribe of hereditary assassins, and once we learn that the evil Lord Iida is protected in his apartments by a nightingale floor, we can put two and two together and work out that Takeo will one day cross that floor and confront Iida. As indeed he does, only when he gets there, everything is completely different to how we expected it because of the twists and turns the plot has taken. Every time it is proceeding nicely towards a logical conclusion, Hearn takes some matter that arises naturally from the story so far and feeds it back in, thus sending the plot in a completely new direction towards another apparently obvious conclusion, until... and so on. Masterfully done and compulsive reading.

Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (David Fickling, 2003). A detective story, kinda. Fifteen-year-old Christopher has Asperger's Syndrome and only thinks he's investigating a case. In fact he's just digging deep into a pile of very dirty parental laundry and innocently bringing sordid secret after

sordid secret into plain view. Christopher is essentially an alien: his values, mindset and thought processes only intersect with ours by coincidence rather than universal law. Any sf writer who wants to construct an alien that readers will still understand could do a lot worse than start here.

Orson Scott Card, *First Meetings* (Subterranean Press, 2002). This collection of three novellas is probably just one for Card completists, but I mention it anyway. 'The Polish Boy' is an insight-free description of the boyhood of Ender's father and how he specifically *didn't* make it to Battle School. 'Ender's Game' is the original novella, which all Card fans will have read anyway. But worth the whole price of admission is 'Investment Counselor'. It shows how Ender first meets the prickly A.I. Jane; but also, it's an entertaining skit on how the whole premise of pensions, investment trusts and annuities might be handled in a universe with slower-than-light relativistic interstellar travel.

Terry Pratchett, *Night Watch* (Doubleday, 2002). When Pratchett was writing this book, you wonder why he thought the points he makes about human rights, the undesirability of secret police etc., needed making. Then history got in the way and we got the world we live in now. A stand-out scene is where Vimes refuses to hand over some prisoners to the dreaded Unmentionables without a receipt. In just a few short paragraphs, Pratchett says more about the necessity of *habeus corpus* than my history teacher ever did.

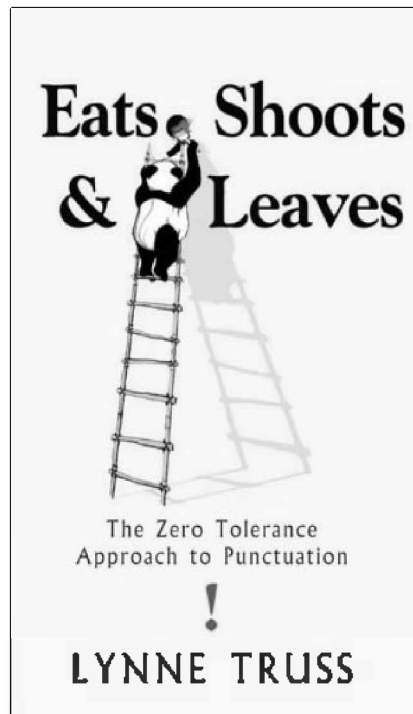
STEVE JEFFERY

Christopher Priest, *The Separation* (Simon & Schuster, 2002). This narrowly escaped being one of my best books of 2002. I finished it in Jan 2003 and then re-read it during March for the Eastercon 'Not the Clarke Award' panel. It's an absorbing, complex and challenging alternate history novel based around the roles of the twin Sawyer brothers, Joe and Jack, in the Second World War, in which the reader needs to pay careful attention to fact, fiction and point of view. Magnificent.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Felaheen* (Gollancz, 2003). Concluding Grimwood's first *Arabesk* trilogy in which Raf (Ashraf Bey) resolves (sort of) the mystery of his parentage, and his troubled relationships with both one-time fiancée Zara and his frighteningly bright and precocious nine-year old niece, Hani. This is a vote as much for the whole *Arabesk* sequence as the concluding novel. (*Effendi* was one of my choices from last year.) It's the acute and sympathetic observation of the complex familial relationships that make this special, and disproves the charge that 'sf writers don't/can't do real people'.

Edward Carey, *Alva and Irva: The Twins Who Saved a City* (Picador, 2003). This is something of a left-field entry but – like Steven Sherril's odd, haunting *The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break* – quickly became one of my favourite books of the year, about which I would, over subsequent months, stoppeth one in three to enthuse about it. This is Carey's second novel (after the darker, but equally surreal *Observatory Mansions*) and is a delightful mix of legend, history, travelogue, and obsession in the relationship of two sisters, one agoraphobic, one adventurous, who recreate their home city of Gondal in miniature, in plasticine, in their attic. The Picador hardback is beautifully illustrated with the little buildings.

William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (Penguin Viking, 2003). It may not be science fiction anymore, Toto, but when Gibson pulls off something like this, does it really matter? *Pattern Recognition* may be one of the books that best exemplifies Gibson's notion (recounted in John Clute's *Scores*) that while sf can no longer be read except, perhaps, as an exercise in nostalgia, we must now read non-genre novels as sf. There is little overtly generic in *Pattern Recognition* (the technology sits exactly on the cusp of now) but it couldn't have been written by anyone who didn't understand and appreciate sf, and how it operates.



Neal Stephenson, *Quicksilver* (Heinemann, 2003). Likewise *Quicksilver*, Stephenson's novel, in parts picaresque adventure, alternate history, and a little bit of just about everything else, rather dauntingly subtitled 'Book One of the Baroque Cycle'. (In which he appears to be doing for the scientific and intellectual history of the West what William Vollman did for the history and mythology of the United States.) Ranging from London to Massachusetts, Amsterdam to the court of Versailles, via the Plague and Great Fire of London to the Jacobite rebellion, and the invention of the calculus, the stock market and digital cryptography (based on binary arithmetic and the *I Ching*), this is a playfully anachronistic and magnificent achievement.

CAROL ANN KERRY-GREEN

The one book this year that really blew me away was Alastair Reynolds, *Absolution Gap* (Gollancz, 2003), a masterpiece of Space Opera. Can the colonists rescued from Resurgam keep clear of the pursuing Inhibitors? And on Hela, as a strange caravan of travelling cathedrals circles the globe hoping to catch sight of a vanishing, what will happen when the largest and oldest of them all, the Lady Morwenna, heads for Absolution Gap? This is a brilliant novel, full of intrigue, suspense and wonder.

My second choice would have to be Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Felaheen* (Earthlight, 2003). I found this fast-paced and breathtaking in places. Though this is the third in the series, my reading enjoyment of the novel didn't appear to suffer from not having read the previous two books. Ashraf Bey came across as an interesting character with a past that was gradually released to the reader over the novel as he strove to discover whether he really was the son of the Emir of Tunis, or of a Swedish backpacker as his mother had always insisted. The book drew me easily into its story where the characters came alive.

Tricia Sullivan's *Maul* (Orbit, 2003), on the other hand, exploded into action. With teenage girls, fashion, guns, and rival gang shoot-outs in the shopping mall. Meanwhile in another time, a human male guinea pig is incubating a new virus as part of an experiment by his female watchers. To escape the pain and distract himself, he retreats into the game of Maul. As the two stories collide, what is reality, what the game? Combining two worlds, one where teens roam the malls looking for excitement and another where men are in short supply and women risk all to have a natural child.

Richard Paul Russo, *Unto Leviathan* (Orbit 2003). The colony ship Argon has been out in space a long time when they come across a deserted planet where all the inhabitants appear to have been brutally murdered. Looking for answers, the ship follows a signal sent from the planet and discovers an alien ship that is lying inert and dead in space. As exploration of the ship continues, it starts to reveal its grisly secrets. A masterpiece of suspense, which is brilliantly written, it pulled me in from the beginning with its characterisations and plot tension to the point where I didn't want to put it down.

And last, but not least is Freda Warrington's *The Court of the Midnight King* (Pocket Books, 2003). This is an alternative story of Richard III, told from the perspective of Lady Katherine, one of Queen Anne's waiting women, and her lover Raphael who is one of Richard's faithful knights. It also encompasses the story of August, a student studying medieval history and her fascination for all things Richard, and the strange dreams she has of an alternate history. In this Richard's world, the Mother Goddess is worshipped alongside the Christ (though the bishops would like to destroy the cult) and Richard has the backing of the adherents of the Goddess. This is a novel of what could have been during Richard's reign, at Bosworth and beyond, and maybe what should have been. Brilliant alternate history that pulls together the threads of its story in a tightly woven tapestry.

MARTIN McGRATH

I have a pile of 'to read' books that stares at me balefully from the corner of my office and, normally, I'm years behind. Still, I've made an effort this year so there are some new books on my list, but books by Bob Shaw and James White nearly sneaked in instead.

An old book first, however. Three years ago I picked up John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* when Millennium reprinted it in their SF Masterworks series. I was going away for a few days and I wanted a chunky book to keep me occupied. I read it. Liked it. Put it aside. Then, six weeks later, I had to read it again. And then I read it again. It has become my favourite sf novel. Since then I've been looking out for Brunner's books, and while many are very good, none were quite as good as *Zanzibar*. Then I came across a copy of *The Sheep Look Up*, (Benbella Books, 2003) and had my head blown off all over again. This is an amazing, perceptive, intelligent, cunning, scary, science fiction book. The writing isn't as highly stylised as *Zanzibar*, but it remains a challenging read and, while I may be the only person in the BSFA who hasn't already read it, I still have to recommend it.

On an entirely different tack, Neil Zawacki's *How to be a Villain* (Chronicle Books, 2003) made me laugh out loud a number of times.

It's a self-help guide for the would-be supervillain. There's help on choosing your secret lair, picking henchmen and selecting a career path (evil mystic, mad scientist or lawyer?). Not all the jokes are wildly original, but it is nice to have them all in the one place (to keep an eye on) and the little hardback edition has some smart illustrations by James Dignan. It spoofs both sf and those maddening self-help guides without ever getting too heavy. A great stocking filler – if Christmas wasn't long gone.

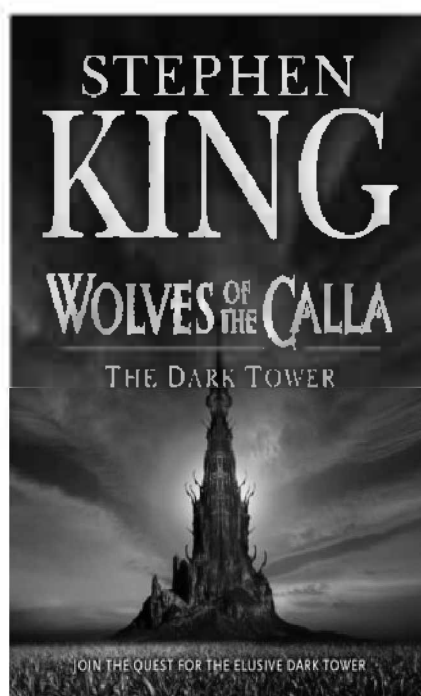
I finally got around to reading *Light* by M. John Harrison (Gollancz, 2002) and, with the greatest of respect to the authors who won, I just can't believe this didn't sweep the awards board last year. For me its great strength is that it manages to make a vast, idea-packed story emotionally gripping and understandable on a human scale. It is, I think, one of the best novels (of any genre) I've ever read.

Of the gang of newish British writers who are producing good books these days (stand up Alastair Reynolds, Ken MacLeod, Richard Morgan, Jon Courtenay Grimwood and the rest) there are two who frustrate and engage me in equal measure. Justina Robson and Adam Roberts drive me nuts – they have such tremendous ideas but, so far, have failed to tie them into a really compelling narrative. Still, *Natural History* (Macmillan, 2003) and *Polystom* (Gollancz, 2003) are, respectively, their best works yet. Justina Robson is getting better with every novel and one day soon she is going to write something outstanding. If *Natural History* isn't quite it, it is another big step in the right direction. I think Adam Roberts is one of the best world-builders in modern sf; he has that knack of making the extraordinary seem perfectly reasonable, and the universe of *Polystom* is his best creation yet. But the book is only really here because I couldn't get the idea of the place out of my head. As with his earlier books (for me) his plotting isn't as strong as his ideas.

JAN A. MALIQUE

My best reads for 2003 are an eclectic mix of (mostly) esoteric subjects. I have read these books for various reasons – research, fascination with the subject matter and personalities dealt with, interest in the authors, etc. The books have in their particular ways opened doorways into different realities and the landscapes were worth exploring. Some of the landscapes being those of the inner self, the turmoil of the self as it stands in the middle of light and darkness, between balance and chaos, disintegration and re-integration.

J.H. Brennan, *Occult Tibet* (Llewellyn Publications, 2002). An informative account of ancient magical and mystical techniques (some are included as exercises in the book) which are a melding of Tibetan



Buddhist and Bon practices (Bon being the main spiritual path of Tibet before Buddhism took root, shamanic in nature). Tibet is a fascinating country with a fascinating people and we are given a little glimpse of its rich culture in Mr Brennan's book. I could say a lot more but then I would begin to bore you all with my enthusiasm about this subject matter.

Merlin has perplexed, maddened, fascinated and bewitched us for centuries. Whether he is fact or fiction matters little I think, his persona taps into some very deep seams within our psyche. Ancient shaman, magician (in the truest sense of the word...), mystic, philosopher, he is the call of the natural world, ancient mysteries and ancient knowledge. Merlin's journey is the initiation into true wisdom and insight and we are given a glimpse of that in two books. In *The Mystic Life of Merlin* (Arkana, 1986) R.J. Stewart explores a twelfth-century biography of Merlin, called the *Vita Merlini*, in some detail, expounding upon the systems of magical and spiritual development contained within the text. This is accompanied by commentaries on each section, giving especial emphasis on practical application of Merlin's initiatic journey. The same author's *The Prophetic Vision of Merlin* (Arkana, 1986) is, for various reason, a rather complex text. Merlin's seership is laid open (to a certain extent) for us to glimpse and perhaps divine some truth from. Mr Stewart explores the prophecies from historical and mythical viewpoints and asserts that "...they illuminate certain key issues within Arthurian lore, ...the means whereby Merlin acquired his vision, his power, and his ultimate relationship with the land of Britain". I wish I could have put it in such clear terms.

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Collins Modern Classic, 2001). Worth reading, may not be everyone's cup of Darjeeling/PG tips/hot chocolate/cappuccino but who cares? Fantasy on a grand scale and perfect opportunity for the imagination to take flight and oh, for the chance to go to New Zealand (yes, I did go and see the film trilogy).

Billie Walker-John's book *The Setian: The Mysteries of the Shadows* (ignotus press, 2003) is about the Egyptian Mysteries and in particular about one of its most misunderstood gods (or 'neter') Set. An ancient, primeval energy Set is in the early part of his worship an exalted deity but through the political and social upheavals his land, Khem (Egypt), undergoes over vast periods of history, vilification replaces respect and love. The book is based upon sound research which has produced not a dry, dusty tome but one which speaks of veiled mysteries, hot sun, red-gold desert, vast temple complexes – housing equally complex personalities.

FARAH MENDLESOHN

Five books out of a year's lengthy reading (most of it work, honest) is really tough, but my list this year doesn't have a single sf book on it. This is not a comment on this year's sf – there are a number of books I've liked very much, many of which I suspect will be on other people's lists and which I've nominated for the BSFA award – but I'm currently writing about fantasy so that's what I'm reading with the most intense concentration.

And hey, prejudices are being demolished almost as fast as Birmingham's Bull Ring. There is some astonishingly fine fantasy fiction out there on the frosty edges of genre: work which twists the palaeontology of the field; forces us to pay attention not just to parallel plots, but to two and three interlocking positions of fantasy. The three I enjoyed most were Peter Straub's *Lost Boy Lost Girl* (Random House, 2003), Steve Cockayne's *The Iron Chain* (Orbit, 2003) and a children's book by Robert Townley, *The Great Good Thing* (Simon & Schuster, 2002). Peter Straub's horror story casts

doubt on the nature of reality and of reading: our expectations are being politely mocked and as with some of the best edge of genre fantasy, we are refused resolution. Steve Cockayne's *The Iron Chain* is a sequel to *Wanderers and Islanders* but takes the concept of the 'middle book', transmutes it into a metaphor for middle age and asks us to consider the fate of the sidekick and what takes place off stage. Robert Townley, apart from demanding that you know your fantasy, challenges the prison of text. *The Great Good Thing* explores the nature and mutability of fantasy space. If Straub asks us to consider the relationship of author to text, Townley considers the relationship of character to the reader. Jan Mark, when reviewing this book, argued that it was definitely a children's book, but I'm not so sure. It may not speak over the heads of children, but this is a book that has meaning for adults, or at least those adults Francis Spufford wrote

about in *The Child that Books Built* in 2001. But that isn't my fourth choice.

We seem to be living through a golden age of non-fiction writing, and Francis Spufford is one of the brightest stars on my moonlit non-fiction shelves. In November Faber and Faber published Spufford's *The Backroom Boys* (Faber, 2003), a lyrical account of the survival and re-emergence of British boffinry. It won me over as a tale of high romance, made me laugh and weep. I can't think of a fiction title that did that for me this year. Finally, and only just added to my reading journal, is Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (Pilot Books, 2003), not only the funniest account of how to punctuate I've ever read, but also just plain useful. To my surprise, I actually remember the advice she gave. I'm thinking of it as I write this

end of year summary. My writing may never recover.

SIMON MORDEN

G.P. Taylor, *Shadowmancer* (Faber, 2003). The Yorkshire vicar writes up a storm with this tale of angels and devils, pirates and priests, and gets in more bang per buck than a certain boy wizard manages in seven hundred pages. *Shadowmancer's* strength lies in its uncompromising world view and compassionate heroes.

Gary Greenwood, *What Rough Beast* (House of Dominion, 2003). An extraordinary tale of the Second Coming, set somewhat unpromisingly in small-town Wales. Everyday folk are joined by the weird and the wonderful for a genuinely original take on life, death and beyond. Greenwood contrives to be funny, thought-provoking and thrilling all at the same time. I am so jealous.

Stephen Laws, *Spectre* (Telos, 2003). This is a classic, revamped and reissued. Bloody, frightening and relentless, it shows wannabes how to write proper horror. Laws evokes both chills and pathos in a top-notch supernatural tale set in and around Tyneside.

Bryan and Cherry Alexander, *The Vanishing Arctic* (Checkmark Books, 1997). I got this book out of the library for research and fell in love with it. It marries beautiful full-colour plates and elegant essays that allowed both the dignity and the plight of the arctic tribes to shine through.

David Whiteland, *Book of Pages* (Ringpull Press, 1999). A Zen graphic novel about a monk who goes to the big city to discover the meaning of life: machines, numbers, bureaucracy and chance fall under the spotlight. Elegant line drawings of the futuristic metropolis contrast with the naïve text to form a perfect whole.

JOHN NEWSINGER

Both of the best books that I read in 2003 were MacLeods, by Ian and Ken respectively. Ian MacLeod's *The Light Ages* (Earthlight, 2003) was the best novel published in 2003, a tremendous work of imaginative fiction that was in places quite overpowering. His fantastic version of Dickensian Britain is a tremendous achievement and hopefully will be

BSFA AWARD BEST NOVEL SHORTLIST 2003

William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*
(Penguin Viking)

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Felaheen*
(Earthlight)

Gwyneth Jones, *Midnight Lamp*
(Gollancz)

Alastair Reynolds, *Absolution Gap*
(Gollancz)

Justina Robson, *Natural History*
(Macmillan)

Tricia Sullivan, *Maul*
(Orbit)

successful enough to prompt the reissuing of his earlier (1997) novel, *The Great Wheel*.

The other MacLeod is, of course, the great Ken MacLeod, whose *Engine City* (Orbit, 2002) I read a bit late. The man gets better and better and is undoubtedly one of the giants of contemporary British sf. He well deserves the critical attention accorded him by Butler and Mendlesohn's recent volume, *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod*.

I also thoroughly enjoyed Richard Morgan's *Broken Angels* (Gollancz, 2003), a first-class sf thriller that seemed to effortlessly push all the right buttons. This is an extremely exciting, thoughtful, well-crafted action novel that is head and shoulders above its rivals. Hopefully Morgan will be keeping us entertained for years to come.

Not one of the best, but arguably one of the most significant works I have read this last year is Steve (S.M.) Stirling's *Time Travel Trilogy* (Roc, 1998); *Island In The Sea of Time*, *Against The Tide of Years* and *On The Oceans of Eternity*. Stirling is arguably the best writer of US military sf (his collaboration has actually made Jerry Pournelle readable!), although admittedly there is not much competition. In this trilogy, the island of Nantucket finds itself transported to 1250BC and inevitably its inhabitants set about imposing a new world order. American marines machine-gunning rioting crowds in ancient Babylon seems remarkably prescient in a novel first published in 1999. Stirling has produced an intelligent and quite compelling example of the Imperial daydreams of our American masters. Imagine George W. Bush with access to a time machine – or 'magic doorway', as he would call it. Only Tony Blair could possibly approve.

Putting Stirling to shame in many ways is my last choice, Susan Price's amazing *The Sterkarm Handshake* (Scholastic, 2000). Although originally published in 1998 I have shamefully only just read it. Supposedly a juvenile novel, this is fiction of the highest order, recounting the encounter between twenty-first century big business and the sixteenth century Sterkarm clan. The contrast with Stirling is instructive: whereas the past has nothing whatsoever to teach his Americans, Price's Sterkarms, while not romanticised, are fully realised, with some values that put the future to shame. Pity about their smell, of course. I have just started the recently published sequel, *The Sterkarm Kiss*, which will probably be one of next year's top five.

One last point: there are on my shelves volumes by a number of my favourite authors (Justina Robson, Adam Roberts, Jon Courtenay Grimwood and others) that I never had time to read in 2003. This is a very healthy sign: too much good stuff to get through.

MARTIN POTTS

Many of the books on my shelves had been shouting at me to read them for years and in 2003 I could turn a deaf ear no longer – so there won't be anything new in my list for most of you but there is quite a mixture.

I rediscovered David Brin's *Uplift* series by reading his 1988 Hugo winner *The Uplift War* (Bantam, 1987), a story of guerrilla warfare, political intrigue and true valour on a planet named Garth where the validity of humanity's stewardship is challenged by more 'advanced' species. Brin's ability to create diverse alien characters and cultures and the excellent pace with which the narrative proceeds ensures a read that is never dull. I will definitely catch up with more recent instalments of the saga in 2004.

Tim Powers is always a fascinating read but his *Declare* (HarperCollins, 2000) is a masterpiece. Perhaps because it is set in Europe and the Middle East I found it more accessible than his recent California-based sequence (*Earthquake Weather* et al). Once again I

marvelled at how he can weave fact with fiction and combine such diverse subjects as the Cold War, the Arabian Nights, and the story of the Flood! I put *Declare* on a par with his brilliant *The Stress of Her Regard*, a feat I never expected him to surpass.

Now then, I hate long books (because I read so slowly): anything with more than six hundred pages has to be a pretty sure bet before I pick it up. With my summer holiday approaching I finally got up the courage to give Peter Hamilton's *The Reality Dysfunction* (Macmillan, 1996) a go – and what a pleasant surprise! The plot's cracking pace kept me turning the pages and halfway through I had to concede that here was a space opera with sufficient scope to warrant the thousand-plus pages. I reached the end of August contemplating the timing of tackling book two with less trepidation, despite having to buy a second copy of *Reality* as my first had fallen apart by page two hundred (which supported my original conviction that novels were just not supposed to be this long).

Not specifically sf, but I'm sure it will be of interest to some, is Laurie R. King's *The Moor* (Bantam, 1999). This is a Sherlock Holmes pastiche set after Holmes 'retires' and has married Mary Russell, an Oxford student whose intelligence and curiosity matches his own. This, their fourth recorded investigation, finds them on Dartmoor – the scene of Holmes' notorious encounter with the Hound – investigating new ghostly apparitions and the latest resident of Baskerville Hall. King writes an intelligent mystery which respects both the original canon and the heroine, Ms Russell.

I love reading David Gemmell for pure escapism. Of the three I read this year one was *Winter Warriors* (Bantam 1997) a tale of adventure from his *Drenai*

sequence. The story follows three old warriors who, despite being put out to pasture, help a young queen flee from danger and in the process attempt to foil a prophecy that would plunge the world into chaos. Gemmell exposes all the human frailties of his characters during their trials and tribulations and yet the tale is tightly told in 315 pages and is genuinely a page turner. There is no doubt that David Gemmell writes excellent heroic fantasy.

DAVE M. ROBERTS

Picking the best five books I read last year is not really going to give any kind of insight into the best of last year's books. It is unusual for me to get to read books as soon as they appear, but I have attempted to select the best of those recent books that I have read. This list absolutely has to include *The Separation* (Simon & Schuster, 2002) by Christopher Priest, a remarkable alternate history that considers both the questionable morality of much of the Second World War, in particular the bombing raids on civilian areas, and the impact of individual people on the course of history. This is both a compelling and a greatly rewarding read. My list would also have to include *Dear Abbey* (PS Publishing, 2003) by Terry Bisson. This is a time-travel tale stripped of that conceit's paradoxes and shows how, on a large scale, the future of humanity and the Earth are affected by one another. It is a deceptively simple and very affecting tale.

Another book that connects humanity firmly with the planet we live on is *Muezzinland* (Cosmos Books, 2002) by Stephen Palmer. I'd never read anything by this author before, but I was greatly impressed by this book. The mix of high technology and African myth and legend is a fascinating backdrop for a story where the journey matters more than the arrival.

Earlier in the year I read a great deal of Will Self's work. Ostensibly a mainstream writer, he has occasionally been saddled with the label of 'Urban Gothic'. I think this means he writes dark fantasies. Certainly his writing, particularly the novels, frequently strays into the realms of science fiction and fantasy. I could have

ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD SHORTLIST 2003

Stephen Baxter, *Coalescent*
(Gollancz)

Greg Bear, *Darwin's Children*
(HarperCollins)

William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*
(Penguin Viking)

Gwyneth Jones, *Midnight Lamp*
(Gollancz)

Neal Stephenson, *Quicksilver*
(Heinemann)

Tricia Sullivan, *Maul*
(Orbit)

selected any of a number of them for this list, but in the end I would have to pick his 1998 story collection **Tough Tough Toys for Tough Tough Boys** (Penguin, 1999). This successfully combines humour with the paranoia of contemporary life and is certainly his best collection. The stories are dark, slightly deranged and often very funny. This collection also contains, in 'The Nonce Prize', what I think is Self's most powerful story.

Finally, a book first published in 1989. **No Laughing Matter – The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien** (New Island Books, 2003) by Anthony Cronin. As the title suggests, this is a biography of the great Irish comic fabulist Flann O'Brien (also known as Myles na Copaleen). O'Brien was best known for his regular column in *The Irish Times*, 'The Cruiskeen Lawn' (1940–1966). He also wrote wonderful complex fantasies such as *At Swim-two-Birds* (1939) and *The Third Policeman* (1967). The novels never gained the mass recognition that they deserved and he was for many years an alcoholic, which did nothing to help his writing. Cronin paints a vivid picture of the man and of life in Dublin in the middle of the twentieth century, which he combines with some dispassionate criticism of his writing. This is a very sympathetic and moving account of O'Brien's life by someone who knew him well for many years. If I'd re-read *At Swim-two-Birds* this year it would almost certainly be on this list. As it is, this will do nicely instead.

ANDY SAWYER

I have at least six novels on my 'to read' list which I suspect are to be scattered around everyone else's 'best' lists. But for the record and in no order:

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, **Felaheen** (Earthlight, 2003). Arabesk 3, and the whole trilogy is on my 'to re-read' list. Wonderfully conceived future, and a remarkably enigmatic main character. Grimwood's alternate history is very much to my taste.

Laurence Durrell, **The Alexandria Quartet** (Faber, 1960). I hadn't read this for decades and then people started talking about it with relation to Grimwood's Arabesk trilogy. I couldn't put it down, although I suspect that it's not so much the city as the way Durrell makes us re-enter situations which is the link with Arabesk.

Robert Meadley, **Tea Dance at the Savoy** (Savoy, 2003). Bizarre stuff, with the usual Savoy fascination with Lord Horror and popculture. A beautifully produced book. In *The Alien Online* I wrote: "Meadley is almost certainly the best essayist writing in Britain today, a sharp observer with a well-stocked mind who takes his writing close to the edge, circles about a bit, and, shouting a few choice obscenities, leaps joyfully over the abyss to see what might happen."

Frances Spufford, **The Backroom Boys** (Faber, 2003). Spufford 'came out' as a fan with the extraordinarily good *The Child that Books Built*. Here he gives us the secret history of the British boffin, from the post-war Space Race, via the mobile phone, computer games, to Beagle 2. It's all down to Dan Dare, really. Enthusiastic, intelligently observed, and it's a Real Shame about Beagle.

Edward James & Farah Mendlesohn (eds.), **Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction** (Cambridge University Press, 2003). Sounds like one branch of *Foundation* puffing another, but everything aside this really is the one-volume, relatively inexpensive, up-to-date and authoritative book on sf which addresses sf as a literature of today that – as a teacher of the subject – I've been wanting for some time.

ANDREW SEAMAN

First, **The Jerusalem Quartet** (Old Earth Books, 2002) by Edward Whittmore. A cheat, but this sequence of four novels (*Sinai Tapestry*, *Jerusalem Poker*, *Nile Shadows* and *Jericho Mosaic*), originally published between the late 1970s and 1980s, are of a piece, featuring recurring themes and characters. In them Whittmore's intent is to create nothing less than a coherent history of the Middle East, its peoples, politics and religious history, from antiquity to the Six Day War, and he succeeds brilliantly. These novels, by turns fantastical, surreal, tragic and hilarious, could have been a complete dog's dinner, but are instead compelling reading. The phrase 'neglected masterpiece' is probably overused, but undoubtedly applies here.

If aliens exist, then where are they? A question most sf readers have probably asked themselves. In **Where is Everybody? Fifty**

solutions to the Fermi Paradox and the problem of extraterrestrial life (Springer-Verlag, 2003), Stephen Webb presents possible solutions to the famous paradox, first articulated by physicist Enrico Fermi, grouped into the broad categories of: 'they are here', 'they exist but have not yet communicated' and 'they do not exist'. Webb knows his sf and includes quotes about (and possible solutions to) the paradox from authors such as Baxter and Benford. A thought-provoking read, which I won't spoil by revealing Webb's own convincing solution to the problem.

For proof that the alien can be found deep within ourselves, not just in deep space, look no further than Elizabeth Moon's **Speed of Dark** (Orbit, 2002). In the memorable character of Lou Arendale, a high-functioning autistic, this novel fascinatingly explores the idea of what it is to be human. Although it does have its flaws (its chief villain is a little too cartoonishly evil to be entirely credible) it's still a narrative tour-de-force. Compare Mark Haddon's Whitbread Award-winning *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* for another fascinating take on this theme. Just remember: 'Normal is a dryer setting'.

Mortal Engines (Scholastic, 2001) by Philip Reeve is a work of young adult fiction that puts the work of some so-called adult authors to shame. Set in a shattered post-apocalyptic world where mobile cities prey upon each other in a ruthless struggle for survival, Reeve's imagination is vivid and his central characters, Tom and Hester, engaging. Stirring action is balanced by moments of genuine emotion and exacting moral dilemmas. Besides, who could resist a novel that begins with the intriguing opening line: 'It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring, and the city of London was chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the old North Sea'? The sequel, *Predator's Cold*, is equally good, deepening and developing what has gone before and leaving the reader eager for the final volume in the trilogy.

Finally, the narrative of **Nine Layers of Sky** (Bantam Spectra, 2003) by Liz Williams shifts effortlessly between post-Soviet Russia and a parallel dream version of it, populated by refugees from 'our' reality. A compelling blend of sf and the fantastic that has much to say about the human impulse to spin utopian dreams and, equally, our failure to bring them to fruition. On the basis of it I've made a mental note to pick up and read her other novels as soon as possible.

PAMELA STUART

Joel Rosenberg, **Not Really the Prisoner of Zenda** (Tor, 2003) was by far my favourite. Sent to me for review, I took it away as my holiday reading. It has everything a fantasy reader desires and manages to maintain the suspense to the last word.

Raymond E. Feist, **Magician** (HarperCollins, 1983). An old book from 1983, I picked it up as a battered paperback for 20p on a charity book-stall. A bargain! I had no idea when I picked it up that it would explain all the details I found puzzling in the *Servant of the Empire* series Feist wrote with Jammy Wurts. I had never understood where the magician Pug came from or why the others hated him, and there was a great deal about the Rift War that I felt was lacking in detail. If only I had found this book before I read the others, it would all have been clear.

Anne and Todd McCaffrey, **Dragon's Kin** (Bantam, 2003). A book that I have been awaiting for a long time, filling in some of those tantalising gaps in the development of Pern. The watch-whers were previously seldom mentioned, except casually in their role of watch-dog; now it turns out that they are by no means dumb animals but really have many things in common with the dragons. After all, they were genetically engineered as part of the experiments to grow the dragons; perhaps a relationship similar to that between the apes and Man. My only criticism is that the book was too short. Hopefully there will be sequels.

Robert Silverberg (ed.), **Legends II** (Voyager, 2003). A collection of eleven short novels by well-known fantasy writers, all original to this collection. There was only one I did not like, 'The Happiest Dead Boy in The World' by Tad Williams, and that was probably because I am not 'into' the web (I am only computer semi-literate) and I have not read his *Otherland* series. Of the others my favourite was 'Beyond Between' by Anne McCaffrey. It fills a gap left at the end of *Moreta*, *Dragonlady of Pern* explaining how she went *Between* on the wrong dragon, but was always down in the history as having ended her days

on her own dragon. It also gives some tantalising ideas about the afterlife, although all religions were outlawed from the original Settlers' Charter on Pern. The remaining stories are all linked to the author's popular series, but can be read and enjoyed without having read the other full-length books.

Terry Pratchett, *Night Watch* (Doubleday, 2002). As an ardent Terry Pratchett fan, I loved it, my only worry being that it seemed to be tying up so many loose ends, and have a sense of finality about it. I was afraid all the way through that it was going to be the last Discworld book. Fortunately a new one, *Monstrous Regiment*, has been published, so I can breathe again!

SUE THOMASON

Ursula Le Guin, *The Birthday of the World* (Gollancz, 2003). Because I love short stories, am fascinated to learn more about the strange and familiar worlds of the Ekumen, and value Le Guin's insight into human nature.

Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built* (Faber, 2002). Subtitled 'a memoir of childhood and reading', this is an intelligent and sympathetic look at most of my childhood favourite reading (including Le Guin, C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and Laura Ingalls Wilder), full of interesting critical and psychological observations.

Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (David Fickling, 2003). Funny, positive, heartwarming account of an alien's experience of contemporary England – the alien in this case being a fifteen-year-old boy with Asperger's Syndrome. It's also a very good detective story.

Terry Pratchett, *Night Watch* (Doubleday, 2002). Chilling book about the failure of (a) revolution, and what happens when there's nobody but yourself to rely on...

Roger Deakin, *Waterlog* (Vintage, 2000). Another 'contemporary Britain from an alien perspective' book, this time written by a 'wild swimming' enthusiast, i.e. swimming in rivers, lakes, tarns, the sea – anything but swimming pools. Reveals a collection of magical, secret landscapes (waterscapes?) alongside/beneath the surface of many places familiar to me. A great sensawunda-awakener.

GARY WILKINSON

W.E. Bowman, *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* (Pimlico, 2001). An obscure humorous mountaineering tale that verges on fantasy as it describes the adventures of a team of plucky Brits as they try to make the first ascent of Rum Doodle, the highest mountain in the world. Of course the Brits are useless and the Sherpas do all the work, especially Pong the cook who literally climbs mountains to bring them the worst food imaginable. Bill Bryson provides the introduction telling how he discovered and got this underground classic republished. It's not quite as funny as *Three Men in a Boat* which it closely resembles... but then again what is?

Stephen Hunter, *The Day Before Midnight* (HarperCollins, 1989). A Cold War thriller from the mid-80s that, like Clancy, shades into sf at points. Terrorists capture a nuclear missile site and the good old USA has to get it back. It may be macho gung-ho nonsense but it's damn good macho gung-ho nonsense. Took me a long time to track it down after I saw a vampire character reading it in the *Preacher* comic series. Rather appropriately I started reading this one afternoon and did not put it down until I finished it as the sun came up.

John Wagner & Colin MacNeil, *Judge Dredd: The Complete America* (Titan Books, 2003). Classic later Dredd, showing the comic strip at its best. Unlike the typical American superhero Dredd remains a bastard more than a hero and most of the interest is in the side-characters. The plot is Megacity One at its wackiest – a bloke loves a woman who dies because of his love, so he transplants his brain into her body so he can have their baby... but also strangely moving. And it has real things to say about immigration and terrorism (or should that be freedom fighting?)

Andy Winter & Natalie Sandells, *Devil Child* (A Winter, 2002). A cracking graphic novel... that proves comics are a real hotbed for innovation. Four stories; the longest, 'Devil Child', is real bawdy irreverent anarchic fun where the Antichrist has risen except he's a part-time waiter from Camden with two sexy female angels to look after him (it's complicated). 'Velocity Girl' is a very biting satire on the

superhero and the other two stories are equally good. Even more impressive when you realise this is self-produced. A labour of love by its creators, it's as good as, if not better than, any 'professional' work I've read this year.

Iain Banks, *Raw Spirit* (Century, 2003). First book of non-fiction by the popular and prolific writer who already straddles two genres. A *grande tour* of a whole lot of distilleries is a kicking-off point for meditations, anecdotes and out-and-out rants on, among other things, Scotland's national drink, football, food, geography, big fast cars and the Gulf War. (Though it is odd that he does not put the latter two together... it was all about oil, that war, right?) Possibly most interesting for me where the insights into his own fiction writing (who would have thought that *Complicity* does actually have a happy ending – even if it's for another novel!)

PETER BRYKOUNG

The books which stood out for me last year are about as diverse as I could hope for in a year in which sf and fantasy didn't quite reach the dizzy heights of 2002. On the one hand, for me the best sf of 2003 was Robert Charles Wilson's *Blind Lake* (Tor, 2003). I mused on how he could top the excellence that was *The Chronoliths*, but it seems he has done it with verve, notwithstanding the grotesque (but very apt) Jim Burns cover. *Blind Lake* is a more inward-looking story, with all the trademark, fault-driven characterisation that Wilson excels at, and his gift for making small, personal stories resonate with something very much bigger is again in evidence. As a story about surfaces and the mysteries that lie beneath them, this is as multi-layered an sf read as you will ever find.

M. John Harrison's *Light* (Gollancz, 2002) also made an impression but for reasons other than the story itself. As one of the most confident novelists around, beneath the tale of Billy Anker, Annie Glyph & co. Harrison gives us a cryptic journey into parts of his own psyche – there are some very internal things going on in *Light* which ultimately seem to dictate the story's direction, and I was often puzzled trying to figure out why *Light* takes the turns that it does. All the more enigmatic, certainly, but somehow *Light* actually hits all its targets even when you think it's going somewhere totally different.

I found Steve Cockayne's fantasy *Wanderers and Islanders* (Orbit, 2002) to be especially absorbing (as, I am told, is its sequel *The Iron Chain*). This book takes the reader into mysterious depths of a different kind, and Cockayne seems to have a tap on the collective memories of twentieth century British boyhood, with all the far-reaching adventures we could have had if reality hadn't got in the way. Cockayne has distilled these particular fantasies and memories in such a way that you keep getting the feeling you've read this adventure before, even when you know you haven't.

Also impressive were Roger Levy's two novels, especially this year's offering, *Dark Heavens* (Gollancz, 2003). As another relatively new novelist on the Gollancz list, Levy seems to have been eclipsed by the stellar Richard Morgan, though Levy deserves critical attention as his prose carries no hint whatsoever of writing to formula. *Dark Heavens* is set some years after the events of *Reckless Sleep* and the world is in even worse shape, with a dystopic London once again the scene for a tale with even stronger religious and gnostic overtones than its predecessor. Levy shows no signs of 'second novel' hang-ups, is as a strong an sf voice as any writing in Britain today and deserved his BSFA Award nomination for *Reckless Sleep*.

My most poignant non-sf read of the year has to be Marina Benjamin's *Rocket Dreams* (Chatto and Windus, 2003) which, I quickly discovered, I was buying at the same time *Columbia* was disintegrating in the upper atmosphere. As a commentary on cultural aspirations towards space travel and the disappointment we feel in that regard I found it particularly telling, and more so since the loss of our own *Beagle 2*. Necessarily pessimistic in places, it would seem idealism is dead and we are not where we thought we'd be... well, we all knew that, but Benjamin spells it out in a very readable mix of reportage and personal travelogue.

OUR REGULAR FILM CORRESPONDENTS COLIN AND MITCH EXAMINE THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF GENRE FILMS OF THE LAST YEAR.

Films of 2003

by Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc

Another year has whizzed by and Sci-Fi is still pulling in the punters at the Box Office. Genre movies seem to have polarised this year – science fiction gets the big budgets and whizzy special effects, while horror films have tended to lurk in the darkness, veering towards the cheap, nastier and grimmer end of the market. And sadly there were fewer cult specials or fantastic foreign films this year.

YEAR OF THE MATRIX

Matrix Reloaded/The Matrix Revolutions (The Wachowski Brothers)

2003, we were reliably told by those happy souls at Warner Brothers, was The Year of The Matrix. Or the year of two Matrices, a pile of anime, some dodgy sunglasses and a bug-ridden (or was that meant to be ironic) computer game. Neo and Trinity are back for four-plus hours of slow-mo, gravity-defying fisticuffs and embarrassing smooching. The residents of fashion-conscious woolly-jumper-clad Zion are still concerned about the imminent destruction of their frankly rather grim city by machines intent on using them like giant Duracell batteries. It's up to messiah-in-waiting Neo, aided and abetted by various cohorts, to wrestle with existential cod-philosophy, cryptic mythical character names and multiple copies of panto-cackling MIB Agent Smith. Although the wire-work has become ubiquitous over the past few years *The Matrix* (1999) still packs a punch visually.

Underworld (Len Wiseman)

Hey, it's got vampires and, get this, werewolves too. And they don't like each other. Add some weapons, lots of gothic sewers and some fashionable industrial-metal music and entertainment must surely follow. It's not art but it sounds pretty cool. Sadly, the end results are cool in an entirely different way. Sub-*Matrix* slow-mo shrapnel vies with Goth-chic *Crow*-style sets and lighting. The results are messy, the effects average and even an occasionally easy-on-the-eye cast in tight leather can't generate more than a modicum of enthusiasm. Half the time the editing is so sloppy you don't know what's going on, the other half of the time you wish you didn't know as risible dialogue puts the final stake into the heart of this limpid effort. Grief, the vampires hardly even feed and half the time they just shoot at each other. They are supernatural creatures, let's have some shape-shifting and razor sharp teeth not Uzis with 'special ultra-violet, steeped in garlic and covered in hawthorn' bullets. Waste of time.

The Returner (Takashi Yamazaki)

With a list of influences as long as the arms of that stretchy guy from *The Fantastic Four* (more on that next year... maybe) *The Returner* is a pot pourri of science fiction and action clichés wrapped in a bundle of garish time-twisting effects and gratuitous violence. Hit-man (or Returner) Miyamoto (check: cool shades; check: trenchcoat; check: cool guns and slow-mo wirework) accidentally shoots a girl from the future and has two days to sort out this conundrum whilst falling in love and shooting lots of people. Cool, surprisingly poignant and just cracking good entertainment – what popcorn blockbusters are meant to be... minus the price tag.

Equilibrium (Kurt Wimmer)

Trench-coats. Shades. Guns. Lots of guns. Slow-mo wire-work. Expressionless faces. Sound familiar? 2003, year of the *Matrix* rip-off, although this time blended with some Orwellian-lite society and a nod towards *THX 1138* (George Lucas, 1970). And having a 'society without emotion' does not 'explain' the quality of the acting.



HEROES, VILLAINS AND THOSE WHO ARE QUITE UNDECIDED

Daredevil (Mark Steven Johnson)

He is Ben Affleck aka Daredevil – blind super-lawyer by day defending the weak and victimised against corporate criminals, blind leather-clad super-hero by night defending the weak and victimised against any sort of criminals. Worst of this dastardly bunch is Kingpin, the city crime, er, kingpin who probably bumped off Daredevil's parents. Before you can say 'angst-ridden multi-millionaire' we're into a hotchpotch of superhero modus operandi – *Crow*-style city and bar fight, *Spiderman*-style swinging around, *Batman*-style OTT super-villains and misunderstood love-hate nemesis side character with spin-off potential. It's all fine and dandy in a 'Goth-chic constantly raining city' kind of a way and everyone wanders around with either po-faced severity or in panto-villain mould, which is pretty much expected. But therein lies the problem; there's nothing wrong with

Daredevil per se but nothing particularly noteworthy either. Diverting but no more.

Bruce Almighty (Tom Shadyac)

Jim Carrey, a newscaster whose dream job of lead anchorman is dashed by some upstart at his TV station, is having a not-good day. Being set upon by street punks, losing his job and crashing his car are only the start. Then it rains on him. Our hero blames the only entity he can – God – claiming he could do a better job. Unusually God, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Morgan Freeman, gives the disgruntled Bruce divine power and promptly nips off for a well-earned vacation. At first all is fine; he can metamorphose those pesky punks, make love like a sex machine and part soup in bowls with his celestial vigour. But naturally, as is inevitable, it's not all rosy – omnipotence has its downside. So far so *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) with a different prime concept but, rather like this year's other big Hollywood comedy *Anger Management* (2003), once the concept has been gleaned the script plods along with clockwork tedium. And despite the 12 rating (one single use of the f-word, stop this madness please, that's you *Master and Commander* (Peter Weir, 2003), too) there is nothing dangerous to edge the comedy. You could set your watch by it.

Hulk (Ang Lee)

Word of mouth caused *Hulk* to be the biggest week-to-week drop of any film this year. The general consensus was that the graphics were rubbish, the action unbelievable and it took far too long for anything to happen. Piffle. Perhaps people just aren't used to films with scripts, characterisation and dramatic tension anymore. Emotional vacuum Bruce Banner (confusingly played by Eric Bana) wrestles with his angst and tries to come to terms with the psychological scars of his childhood. Naturally he's a scientist and a shocking accident results in

unusual side effects. These side effects, as fans of the popular TV show will no doubt fondly recall, result in muscle gain, wrecked clothes and a tendency for skin tone to head towards the green side of the spectrum whenever he gets riled. Where the TV show adopted a low-tech approach to transformation, Ang Lee's *Hulk* is all multi-million CGI, leaping from mountain peaks like an elephantine gazelle and hurling military hardware about like a kid with the wrong Tonka toy at Christmas. All top destructive stuff but the complaints came nonetheless – apparently the effects weren't realistic. Excuse me? It's about a giant green bloke who rips all his clothes off bar the ones covering his modesty and goes on city-trashing benders – realism isn't built into the concept. *Hulk* is all the better for stylising its mayhem, externalising its character's psychological hang-ups and painting them in large expressionist brush-strokes. Ang Lee's deliberate comic-book framing and editing, his expert use of character development and uncluttered focus have turned what could have been a by-the-numbers comic-book film into a pulp drama.

***Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Jonathan Mostow)**

Wouldn't you know it – the revolution against the machines is in trouble again? So is John Connor, again. So they send another machine back in time to protect him again. It still looks like Arnie and it's still several models down from the 'unstoppable beast of liquid metal blah blah blah' that those naughty robots have sent from the future. Again. Only this time the unstoppable mecha is a chick. With the largest green-lit budget of all time it would have been nice to have had a script in there, but you can't have everything. This time round Johnny boy needs help; mommy's dead and there's no suitably empowered female to replace her. Instead we are, for the most part, in whimpering abused-woman territory here except, of course, for the sexy robot woman because all women who look like that are clearly evil. And thus one hundred minutes of boys jumping from exploding stuff unravels in a mildly diverting manner while Arnie delivers a 'side-splitting' collection of 'hilarious' quips. The film is rarely dull but ultimately you're left with a huge portion of 'what's the point?' with a side order 'been there done that'. And as for the 12 rating, what did they think they were doing?

***Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Cradle of Life* (Jan de Bont)**

One time cinematographer Jan de Bont takes the reins for Lara's second big screen outing. Angelina Jolie's Dunlop lips and pneumatic add-ons appear, much like her digital counterpart, to be growing substantially between sequels. Perhaps if there is a Part 3 someone should coax Russ Meyer out of retirement. This time Lara's quest is to thwart more ancient machinery shenanigans being planned by a mad despot. This time the crucial 'bad idea' is to introduce an ex-lover and full-time scallywag into the equation to help/hinder her in her globetrotting excursions. This undermines the whole 'one woman defeating a world of scurrilous men' concept that made the first one so enjoyable. That said, the film is dynamic and pretty to look at. The stunts are impressive and tactile, something many of this year's blockbusters have failed to address – if you have a car chase, film it using cars (that's you, *2Fast2Furious2Tedious2Mucheftort*).

Ultimately though, *Tomb Raider* doesn't quite make the grade for all its side-saddled gunplay and tourist-friendly Britishness, because of haphazard pacing and lazy peripheral characters.

***The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Stephen Norrington)**

If the much-publicised rifts are to be believed, this should perhaps have been titled *The Beleaguered Film of Not-So-Gentlemen* as Stephen 'treat them like cattle' Norrington and Sean 'I'm an A-list star, young whippersnapper' Connery slugged out the artistic differences. In the end fans of the comic are likely to be perturbed by the Americanisation of the League (box office, you understand) and everyone else by the general pace. It certainly looks the part, dark and

fantastical, with the Nautilus in particular being a triumph of design over practicality; but this is very much a film that foregrounds the design over the substance and revels in its eccentric anachronisms. All very nice but the character interaction is all based upon event rather than any tangible emotion. That said, there's always something to look at; the snow sequences are marvellous, the action suitably grandiose and there's even time for Nemo to let rip with some wacky martial arts. Somehow you can't imagine James Mason doing that...

***X-Men 2* (Bryan Singer)**

Apparently they are still not what they seem as the plot opens out from what, in part one, was effectively a one hundred minute prologue. X2 (as it apparently likes to be called, quicker to text probably) opens with a tight combination of suspense, action and intrigue as an audacious assassination is perpetrated by a mutant that can seemingly teleport at will, leaving just a whiff of smoke in its gargoyle-looking wake. But naturally things are not as simple as they first seem. Rather like the Nazi connections in part one (which also strain to Singer's *Apt Pupil* (1997)) X2 doesn't hide from 'big issues', acting as a metaphor for society's treatment of race and disability and, more importantly, the ways that society's underdogs react to their predicament. Magneto is not so much irreconcilably evil as reacting against a society that persecutes him; fellow Shakespearean heavyweight Dr X(avier) prefers a softer approach. Ultimately the real evil is humanity and politics, grabbing for power while honest mutants struggle to understand their roots and their place in a world that doesn't trust them. Overall, the combination of action and emotion with a script that has at least some intelligence (in other years, one might veer towards the

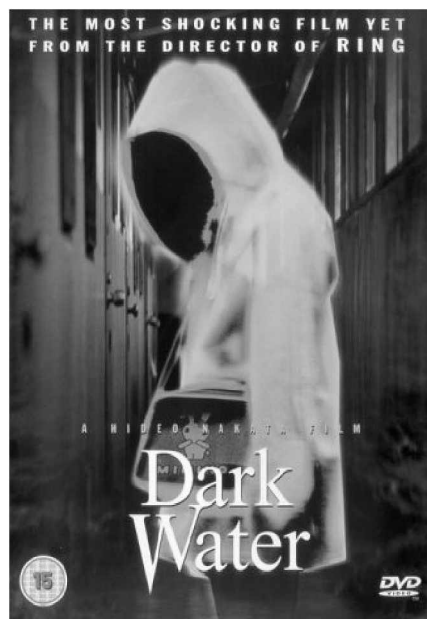
expression 'pretentious' but 2003 was 'Year of the Matrix' so we'll let it pass) is something to welcome in the vacuum that is the modern tentpole flick.

***The Core* (Jon Amiel)**

The Core suffers from a number of fundamental flaws. Firstly, a film full of woolly democratic-republicanism was never going to win the 'hearts and minds' of a deeply polarised public just prior to a war starting. Secondly, the film took itself far too seriously and advertised itself (you may want to sit down at this point) as Science Faction (geddit?). When boiled down you have *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) inside the Earth with a cast of highbrow Hollywood actors hamming it up in a ship, while every twenty-odd minutes some form of groovy new catastrophe hits a major world landmark. Get the oddball crew together, spot the flawed but decent character who's inevitably going to redeem themselves by self-sacrifice, then add touches of seventies disaster flick and *Fantastic Voyage* (Richard Fleischer, 1966). So there's more cod than the North Sea (but then that's not too tricky), but at least for once the heroes rely on brainpower, not macho posturing. The opening is a real oddball puzzler with people just dropping dead and a *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1962) rip-off in Trafalgar Square sets things up nicely. It becomes formulaic and 'deadly grim 1950s scientist' serious after that but at least they tried. Hey, the French guy kicks the corporate Coca Cola machine too.

***Adaptation.* (Spike Jonze)**

Films about writers, particularly Hollywood screenplay writers, have long been a small but defined genre-ette. In *A Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), *Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945), *Paris When It Sizzles* (Richard Quine, 1964) the formula is simple – writer, normally alcoholic, struggles in vain to realise his (always his) former potential whilst wallowing in self-doubt and misery, normally uplifted by female level-headed intervention at some point. It's easy to see why – these are written by Hollywood screenwriters struggling in vain to



realise... etc. etc. Charlie Kaufman has, however, gone one step further by putting himself into the script as the central character with a (fictional) brother, both of whom are writing very different screenplays. Charlie's trouble is that he is basically adapting an unadaptable book about illegal orchid hunting. The film is about the book, adapting it and not adapting it, and about how reality and Hollywood clash. Whether this is clever or not is hardly relevant because it feels clever. Cage gives flawless performances as the two brothers and the self-references to Jonze/Kaufman's previous film *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze, 1999) is a nice touch.

Solaris (Steven Soderbergh)

Bizarrely, despite the brief impressive effects shots with their oh-so-processor-heavy volumetric renderings, *Solaris* is basically a chamber piece, with four people in a drawing room (albeit one millions of miles from home) where people sit and ponder as though in a Chekhov play, and loads of weird stuff happens, involving spirits that seem to be recreating important individuals in their past lives. And, wouldn't you know it, the guy sent to investigate these spooky-but-oh-so-existential psychological projections is none other than, you've guessed it, a Chris Kelvin, who's lost his wife and is going a bit loopy. Now, Tarkovsky fans may bemoan the lack of a ten-minute single take around a ring road or the savage bisecting of the three-hour-plus running time, but this is a big studio production with a big star that dares to be intelligent, thoughtful and languidly paced. It's (please sit down) a real science fiction film. From Hollywood no less! You should be rejoicing. Rated 12A for one use of the 'f' word and George Clooney's bottom.

Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle (McG)

Apparently the general consensus was 'silly'. It's *Charlie's Angels* you know! More high-octane, gratuitously over-the-top action with totally unnecessary glamour shots and innuendo assault the eyes, while the ears take a pounding from the pick 'n' mix MTV soundtrack. That hair-sniffing fruitcake from part one returns, although sadly Bill Murray has been replaced by the decidedly inferior Bernie Mac. But who cares as the bubbles get unleashed, bombs explode, wirework kung-fu goes even more slow-mo and there are really stupid motorcycle fights to contend with? Somewhere in all this there's a plot but frankly we've forgotten it. Not as riotously fun as the first film but still a big bundle of low attention span eye-candy that never gets bogged down in real world physics. As predicted last year, the trend for women who fight was just that and any hope of equalling Hong Kong's impressive range of female fighting flicks has been drained away by *Charlie's Angels* lack of box office clout. C'est la vie.

Shanghai Knights (David Dobkin) / The Medallion (Gordon Chan) / Tuxedo (Kevin Donovan) – A Jackie Chanathon

Shanghai Noon (Tom Dey, 2000) remains Jackie Chan's only half-decent Hollywood outing, mainly due to the interaction with Owen Wilson and a discernable Hong Kong feel to the fight scenes. Second time round and things ain't so rosy. Transported to a bizarre alternative Victorian London complete with characters both fictional and real, the bungling buddies are out to save Wang's sister and inadvertently prevent the devious massacre of the royal lineage to appoint that bloke off *Queer As Folk* as king. All very alternative history but B-movie acting, an incomplete script and some fairly lacklustre fight scenes take their toll. What's more, the chemistry between the two leads in part one has evaporated. What's more bizarre is that, as bad as this is, it is still head and shoulders above Jackie's other two outings this year. The hugely-delayed *The Medallion* (originally *Highbinders*) is a laughably inept fantasy outing with ludicrous wirework and ropey effects [and Lee Evans, for light

relief. Be afraid, be very afraid... AMB]. Meanwhile, *The Tuxedo* is one of the most painfully embarrassing pieces of celluloid tosh ever to grace a cinema as Chan becomes a spy by donning a high-tech, James Bond gadget strewn dinner jacket. It's virtually impossible to describe the sheer awfulness of this loathsomely unfunny venture into science fiction.

THE HORRORS, THE HORRORS

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Marcus Nispel, remake)

A slight change in the title spelling and a bit of trendy 'retro seventies' styling can't disguise that this is a pointless exercise on par with the van Sant remake of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960/Gus van Sant, 1998). Here the gore is laid on to 'hard-R' levels because the kids

need viscera (apparently) without realising that the whole point of seventies horror cinema was its intense inescapability. The original film was banned here for two decades not because of gore, but because there was nothing that could be cut without intrinsically ruining the film. First time round you covered your eyes when you *thought* you saw the hook go in; here you see the hook, the shock's over in a blink and you're left with an average slasher at best, a blasphemous travesty at worse.

Wrong Turn (Rob Schmidt)

What with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake trying to bring back the mid-seventies horror (unsuccessfully), *Wrong Turn* looks, oh, a few years later to the time of hideous mutants gorily dispatching their nubile victims in some backwater inbred part of the Southern states. Here *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) meets *TCSM* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) meets *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1980) as Eliza Dushku (you know, Faith from *Buffy*) and her cohorts are hunted like

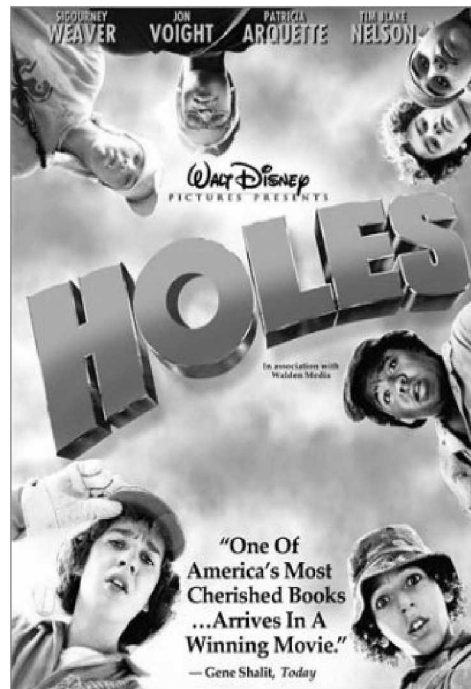
animals by skilled, but oh-so-ugly, crossbow wielding cannibals. Gasp as bits are hacked off, shudder as they have to stay quiet as their friend is being carved up on the table and marvel at the number of sudden shocks that you knew were coming but made you jump anyway. Lowest common denominator film-making but done with a sense of gleeful nastiness and gratuitous early-'80s teen nudity all too often absent from modern horror.

Cabin Fever (Eli Roth)

The Fangoria revival, where the make-up crew are more important than the cast, is well and truly upon us. A group of youngsters go for a holiday in a remote cabin in the country (can you see where this is going yet?). There they set light to a diseased raving nutter who manages to slosh around vast quantities of pus-laden blood over the car, the house and them before running off and, unbeknownst to them, contaminating the water supply. Soon the youngsters start falling foul of a hideous flesh-eating disease, have to contend with the world's most insane cop and a community of, yep, you've guessed it, creepy yokels. A love poem to exploitation slashers, *Cabin Fever* is a delirious, unrepentant, gross horror nasty that knows its sources and adds some touches of its own. However the BBFC must have nodded off for about half of the film because how this ever got a 15 rating is anyone's guess.

Freddy vs Jason (Ronnie Yu)

Take one inexplicably successful '80s to '90s horror pop icon who's never been in a half decent movie (except that 3-D bit with the bloke's eye in Part 3 (Steve Miner, 1983). Add one inexplicably successful '80s to '90s horror pop icon who's only starred in one decent film (if you don't count *New Nightmare* (Wes Craven, 1994)). So that's about 15 films between them. Not great odds, especially as crossovers are notoriously contrived and rather dodgy. And yes



Freddy vs Jason is convoluted, base and shamelessly exploitative. But it's also a Ronnie Yu film, he who managed to turn the *Child's Play* franchise from sub-Freddy tedium to the deliriously ludicrous heights of *Bride of Chucky* (1998). And he doesn't disappoint here. There are enough bizarre dreams, blood-gushing walls, OTT wirework fights (might be *de rigueur* in Hollywood now but remember Yu was doing *Bride With The White Hair* (1993) years ago), needless heavy petting, massacres, twists, deaths and corpses to fill a trilogy. Yu knows he's making popcorn-fodder pure and simple, this is flamboyant but unpretentious film-making, albeit one with a deeply pongy screenplay...

The Ring (Gore Verbinski, remake)

Why, oh why, oh why? That's the question, when faced with a US remake of yet another non-American language film, in this case the 'so recent the original had barely finished shooting' *Ringu*. It could never have lived up to its slow-burning creepy low-budget predecessor. To be fair, it is effective in some places and nowhere near the unmitigated disaster it so clearly might have been. It succeeds with the newly added material that has nothing to do with the original; where it falls badly is in the recreations of *Ringu*'s key scenes. All the gore and make-up effects in the world can't match the frisson of the original.

Ghost Ship (Steve Beck)

This haunted house film on the high seas sank without a trace at the box office which is a shame as, despite shameless nods to *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), *Ghost Ship* has all the trappings of sick and silly horror with the requisite number of jumps and plot holes the size of ocean liners. If the deliriously tasteless opening never really gets topped, there are still enough pacey shivers to keep you amused, as a team of renegade ship salvagers make the savage mistake of trying to plunder an eerie cruise ship filled with the souls of the damned.

Dark Water (Hideo Nakata)

The thing about haunted houses is that it's usually obvious that you shouldn't go inside one. They look big, gothic and generally have creepy butlers so are a bit of a giveaway really. But change the setting to a block of flats and suddenly it doesn't seem so implausible. Yoshimi is the woman in terror trapped in her own home, haunted by fleeting *Don't Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973) style visions of figures in the rain. And it even rains inside, dark mucky water that envelops the sound and drips with creepy intensity constantly keeping the viewer on edge. To add to her phantasmagorical problems she's also trying to maintain custody of her daughter, protecting her from... well, that would be telling. Hideo Nakata stirs up the creeps yet again in another understated, slow-burn high-shiver masterpiece. Await the 'pointless Hollywood remake™' with the same dread as all of his other (superior) films.

FANTASTIC FANTASY

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (Gore Verbinski)

Aye, aye, me hearties. Shiver me timbers. Ooh arrr yer scurvy dog, etc. The box office disasters of huge-budgeted flicks such as *Pirates* (Roman Polanski, 1986) and *Cutthroat Island* (Reny Harlin, 1995) had put the cutlass well into the dead man's chest. Until now. Mercifully, the pirate film is back with a vengeance and a yo ho ho. Prepare to have your buckle well and truly swashed for over two hours of zombie ghost ships and sword fights. The scripting is great, the undead angle inspired, the action is old school meets new and the

whole thing zips along at a tidy pace. Johnny Depp shows his mettle with this year's most barnstorming performance but Geoffrey Rush holds his own in true eye-rolling fashion. Gore (the bloke behind the pointless remake of *Ringu*) Verbinski has come up with the summer's best popcorn flick by a mile. Based (improbably) on a fairly lacklustre Disney World ride, we await with eagerness the inevitable spin off 'It's A Small World'. With multinational zombie children of course...

Holes (Andrew Bergman)

Prison dramas are nothing new. You know the genre conventions—someone is shoved in the slammer for a crime they didn't commit and the new fish has to cope with the prison hierarchy, the sadistic guards, the 'food rations knocked to the floor' and the regular punishments. And normally there's forced labour too. All these elements are present and correct but with a twist because this time it's a kid cast into a hard-labour camp for juvenile delinquents on trumped-up charges pertaining to the stealing of some charity training shoes. And work he does, digging huge holes in the desert heat day after day, watched

over by the guard under the command of the mysterious and cruel warden. Naturally there is a nefarious plan afoot and some poisonous lizards to contend with. With a fragmentary structure that slowly reveals a superbly constructed plot, excellent scripting and uniformly consistent acting, this is unpatronising, thoroughly engaging and dramatic. An intelligent film for families? John Voight acting? Whatever next...

Snake of June (Shinya Tsukamoto)

It's Shinya Tsukamoto. It's cheap, black and white and has a central love triangle with two men and a woman, one of the men played by Tsukamoto-san himself, who also edits, writes, shoots most of it and probably makes the lunchtime ramen for everyone too. Here the central character is eventually empowered by initially humiliating erotic blackmail games involving highly dubious technology in an outpouring of orgone energy that threatens to disrupt the whole fabric of the film. Kinky, controversial, underground cinema at its best but not recommended for those of a delicate disposition or a tired desire for films that

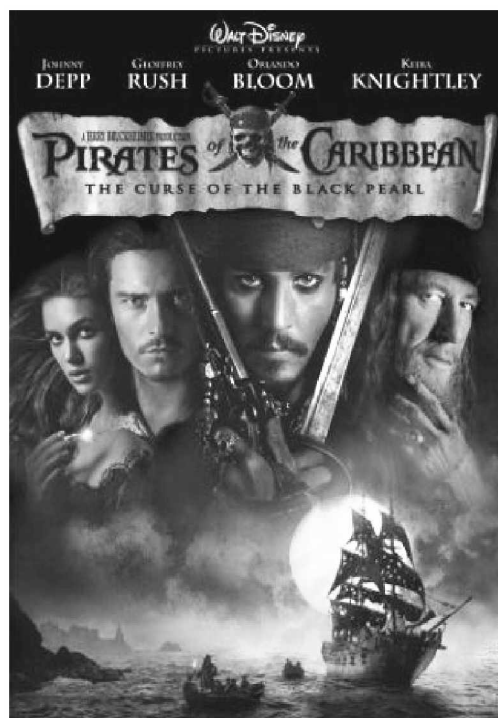
equate cutting edge with the size of the budget rather than the quality of the imagination. This year's 'must see' cult film...

Finding Nemo (Andrew Stanton)

There he is! Film over. Nope, seriously, Pixar's latest offering is as delightful as you'd expect although unfunny clownfish Marlin's constant self-loathing can grate a bit, as can the repetition and the repetition. The usual collection of easy-to-identify characters with bizarre traits, microsecond-perfect comedy timing and fishy gags make this a true family film in the best sense of the term. Surfer turtles, sharks trying to beat their carnivorous habits in self-help groups and a tankful of idiosyncratic sea-life populate all corners of the film. Marlin's son Nemo has been fishnapped by an Australian dentist and it's down to the widower (he lost his wife and his other few hundred kids in a brutal pre-credit attack) to get him back, aided by Dory, a fish with a memory as long as a... sorry what was I on about?

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (Peter Jackson)

So Peter Jackson finally reaches the final hurdle, galloping past the three hour mark and annoying Christopher Lee in the process. So is it any cop? Well it's spectacular to be sure, those dollars have been well spent (*T3* looks crap: \$180million=100mins; *LOTR* looks fab: \$300million=600mins. You, as people with different usage of the English language might hypothetically say, do the math) and Jackson sure knows how to fill the screen. However leaving Lee out was a BIG mistake. Ultimately the threat of hordes of horrible beasts is pitched



right and the scale and detail of the battles is very succinct, but there is no real adversary that the audience can relate to. It's all too abstract, just some flame-eyed wotsit on a stick and some blokes so scary they are hidden by big cloaks. The running time fair whizzes by but there is a feeling that perhaps the *Star Wars* style ceremony should have concluded proceedings, leaving those of us who imagined the Shire being ravaged by old Sharkey still a distinct possibility. They could even have stretched out a straight-to-video coda for that. Still we're nit-picking, because ultimately this is a tremendous achievement.

Dracula: Pages From A Virgin's Diary (Guy Maddin)

Imagine pitching this one to Jerry Bruckheimer: 'Jerry, you're gonna love this – it's *Dracula*, you know, that old book, done properly but like, get this, entirely through the magic of ballet. That's right, ballet Jerry, and what's more we'll set it to the music of that foot-tapping master Gustav Mahler. And film it like a silent film with super 8 stuff and everything! Jerry? Jerry?'

Insane Canadian genius Guy Maddin's intense reworking of Bram Stoker's novel is based upon the production by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Before you turn away this is one of the films of the year, a dizzying blur of fast editing, stylised sets and black and white photography emphasised with crimson-tinted blood. Quite simply stunning. Maddin has transformed the, let's be frank here, mad concept into a rare beast – a rollercoaster of an art film. Exquisite cinematography mix with distinctive use of sound (you can hear footsteps when they are relevant but all the characters speak through title cards) to make, and we don't use this term lightly, a unique cinematic experience. Another classic from one of the world's most distinctive auteurs.

Peter Pan (P.J. Hogan)

Wiping forever (hurrah!) the rancid memory of that Spielberg atrocity *Hook* comes P.J. Hogan's take on the Peter Pan story complete with curious Mohammed al Fayed involvement. So what do you get? You get a pile of visually arresting special effects, wire-work and sword-play that goes together to make a coherent and internally consistent film. Shock. This is what effects are meant to do – take you to another place, one that's *not* like the real world at all. We are in CGI Mary Poppins land here, albeit with a darker edge, big fluffy clouds you can bounce on, whole years mirrored in a day and fjords of fairies (fjord, of course, being the collective noun for fairies) sprinkling glittery magic dust on the land. Fabulous. Tinkerbell is morally confused. Peter is suitably hedonistic, wondrous and a little bit creepy. Richard Briers is an excellent Smee and Hook is a perfect combination of evil, dastardly and conniving. Wendy's turn 'to the dark side' (so to speak) is both believable and frightening. Visually gorgeous, imaginative, exciting, emotional, literate and fun. No modern day re-imaginings. No Robin Williams. Just great entertainment with a heart and soul. And, in case you're asking, we DO believe in fairies. Yep, we do. We do.

Freaky Friday (Mark S. Waters, remake)

Not only a remake but also a pop-friendly reinterpretation of the classic Cartesian mind-body problem *Freaky Friday* scores many plus

points for its deconstruction of modern society and the rocky relationships between children and parents. Jamie Lee Curtis is a popular author and psychoanalyst who becomes swapped in mental form with her hard rocking grungy-but-with-a-heart-in-there-somewhere teenage daughter. This allows for that rarity in family films – one in which the kids can rightly bemoan their parents' behaviour and vice versa. That it manages to debase the two scourges of modern society – mobile phones and psychoanalysis (daughter dispenses with all the analytical crap and just tells it like it is) is merely the icing on the cake. Good solid fun, it's not the greatest thing since unsliced bread but is a cracking romp nonetheless.

Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over (Robert Rodriguez)

Three evil Sylvester Stallones are responsible for an insidious plan to rule the world through an interactive immersive video game platform that is, apparently, impossible to win. Yuni must take on the game and reclaim his sister's life! Think *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999) but like, you know, for kids. Oh, and you get cool but headache-inducing 3-D glasses to don at appropriate moments (in fact most of the film). Not up to Rodriguez's first *Spy Kids* films but a lot of fun nonetheless, with relentless action and constantly impatient but coherent camerawork (Rodriguez, like Tsukamoto above, edits his films, shoots, does the music etc – he just has more money). It's fast, short, frothy and fun and you can play the 'spot the cameo' game too. Also from Rodriguez this year, the bizarre *Once Upon A Time In Mexico*, a distillation of Mexican spaghetti westerns with some delirious imagery and 'man of the year' Johnny Depp in fine form.

Kill Bill Part I (Quentin Tarantino)

The Bride has been put in a coma for six years following a massacre on her wedding day that left everyone dead, apart from her. Naturally she's not impressed with events, but rather than seek therapy she takes matters into her own hands.

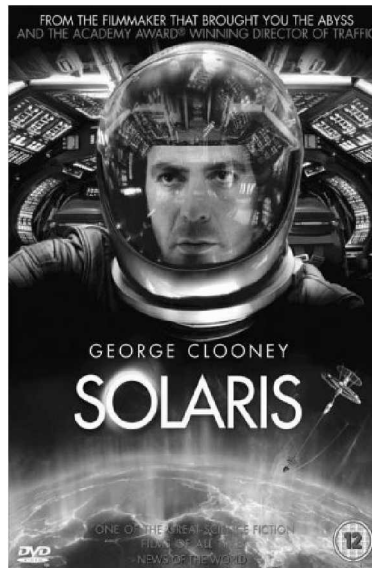
You see, Bride was once part of an elite gang called the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, so she's not someone to cross lightly. Problem is the very people who instigated the hit are her ex-comrades and their boss Bill. Now Bride has made a list of who's been naughty and she's working her way towards killing Bill. First, let's get this straight: there

is one big, big problem with *Kill Bill* – it's only half a film. That said, it is a very good half, packed to the gills with cool stuff and more exploitation classic references than you can shake a bo stick at. For those of us weaned on Shaw Brothers films, *Baby Cart*, Jack Hill, Larry Cohen and Kinji Fukusaku this is like the cinematic 'best of' cover-version of your favourite gleefully unsound films. There's an anime section, silhouette scenes and lots and lots of cherry coloured blood gushing in torrents over the beautiful oriental sets. It's got Sonny Chiba in it! Its got snow, zen gardens and The 5678's. It's got the music from *Battles Without Honour and*

Humanity (Kinji Fukusaku, 1973) in it. Some day all entertainment will be made like this, only three hours long.

Timeline (Richard Donner)

Oh my God! It's Billy 'Oh my God!' Connolly. Saying 'Oh my God!' A lot. Exploiting (as you do) a wormhole to fourteenth century France,



And the winners are
(paradiddle pur-lease):

Best Horror: *Dark Water*

Best SF: *Solaris*

Best Fantasy: *Holes*

Special Yo Ho Ho Award for Most Enjoyable Romp: *Pirates of the Caribbean*

Smug Award for Best Film Last Year:
Spirited Away

what better bunch of people to check out the retro-warfare action on offer than a troupe of military grunts and an ark of fresh-faced archaeologists? A 'fax machine for objects' has the side effect of journeying people to the aforementioned French countryside but, wouldn't you know it, travelling too many times makes your arteries go skew-whiff. Billy 'Oh my God!' Connolly has got himself stuck in the past and it's up to his son and a variety of companions to get him back. Cue wildly fluctuating accents, the entire cast insisting at every turn that they are not English and a case of *Star Trek* 'spot the red shirt' that pretty much decides who gets it when from word go. By no means a total disaster, this is cod-strewn light entertainment with most

of the action taking place in-camera rather than in-computer and is the better for it. Oh my God!

Treasure Planet (John Musker and Ron Clements)

This updating of *Treasure Island* in a sci-fi setting is a jolly good ride marred only by irritating Ben the robot, but mercifully his unfunny mannerisms don't see the light of day until two thirds of the way through. Inventive, spectacular and fun, it was, of course, a flop. Like *Atlantis* (Gary Trousdale, 2001).

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An Interview with Ray Harryhausen

by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Some people judge a film by who directed it. Others look out for the starring actors. Even though special effects and the promise of spectacle saturate the summer blockbuster schedule it is rare that people choose to see a film on the basis of the person who created the effects. Partly this is a result of the huge production teams required to realise the impressive, but often faceless 'money shots' that are required to sate the appetite of short attention span thrill-seekers. These days the Hollywood special effects business is worth many millions of dollars. However, one man has always managed to draw audiences on the basis of his effects work – Ray Harryhausen, creature creator extraordinaire and producer of some of the most memorable and loved scenes in fantasy cinema. He is the man who put the 'special' into special effects. His name was a guarantee of a quality film, even when the restricted budgets did not extend as far as A-list actors. Who can forget the giant crab in *Mysterious Island* (1961), the Selenites of *First Men in the Moon* (1964), the Cyclops in *Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (1958) or the plethora of creatures and gods in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963)? At last the whole story of these wonderful creations is told in *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life*. We were delighted to have the opportunity to talk with Mr Harryhausen over coffee and cookies, surrounded by bronze statues of his most famous scenes – a tribute to Willis O'Brien in the shape of a *King Kong* sculpture in full wrestling mode and, looking somewhat artificial amongst all this wonder, a special Oscar™ for his contribution to cinema. We discussed his films, his influences, dinosaurs, science fiction fandom in the 1930's and the state of special effects today. Along the way there was even time to debunk the *auteur* theory of film criticism.

Mitch & Colin: Congratulations on your book.

Ray Harryhausen: Well thank you, we launched it at the NFT. It was a big success. More people bought it than we ever imagined.

C: One of the things we had wanted to ask was about how some of your extraordinary creations came to be and how you achieved your special effects, but then we realised we didn't have to.

RH: It's all in the book!

C: We've been watching some of your films recently and still wonder 'How did he do that?' The films still hold up even today. We saw *Jason and the Argonauts* in the cinema about 8-9 years ago and there were some children in the audience who, at the moment the skeletons appeared, were on the chairs waving magazines as though they were imaginary swords. They loved it.

RH: I hope we haven't created some delinquents! Many of the modern pictures will. There's got to be a generation of delinquents with some of the modern pictures. Some people promote a picture by telling you it's obnoxious.

M: We're here on behalf of the BSFA. One thing we thought was very interesting when we read the book was that you were part of the LA Science Fiction League.

RH: Yes, very early way back when it started in the 1930s. That's where I met Ray Bradbury and Forrest Ackerman.

M: What sort of activities did you get up to?

RH: We had meetings every Thursday night at the Clifton's cafeteria

down in Los Angeles, the Little Brown Room I think it was called. We had people who were interested in Egyptology, we had people who were experimenting with rockets. We had a variety – it was a little group who got together to talk about space platforms and going to the moon and Mars. When we came out people – shall we say normal people – thought we were a little peculiar.

M&C: I think that still happens now!

M: You're a lifelong friend of Ray Bradbury and I believe that *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) was based on a short story of his.

RH: Well it was a short story, it wasn't big enough for the whole picture. The lighthouse sequence was the main thing taken from this.

M: That was the closest you ever came to collaborating together?

RH: Yes, we used to talk on the telephone for hours, when it only cost 5 cents. He used to say 'I wanted to write the greatest dinosaur story' and I'd say 'Good, well I'll animate it.' We'd talk about plots and things, but those were the good old days.

M: Did you ever come close to realising this?

RH: No, we never actually got to work together. Except indirectly on *The Beast*. But we both had such an intense interest in dinosaurs.

M: Was it dinosaurs that attracted you to the fantasy/science fiction genre?

RH: I never cared much for the future frankly, because it ends blowing each other out of the universe. It doesn't look very attractive to me. I like to look to the past – legends and concepts like that. I got tired of destroying cities. I destroyed New York and Rome and I destroyed San Francisco. It got repetitious, so I latched on to the legends, like Sinbad, which I thought would open a whole new avenue, and it did. The next step was Greek mythology.

M: Your science fiction films also looked back to older literature – you've made films based on the books of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

RH: *The First Men in the Moon*. That was the closest. I tried to get a Wells story off the ground right after *Mighty Joe Young* (1949) – *War of the Worlds* – but unfortunately no one was interested. I did eight big drawings and kicked them around Hollywood for years. Jesse Lasky Senior, who founded Paramount, he was interested and had them for 6 months, but nothing came of it. George Pal did a modern version of it. I wanted to keep it in the Victorian period, as Wells wrote it. We wanted to do that with the *First Men in the Moon* – we didn't want to modernise it. But Nigel Kneale came up with the idea of a prologue where a present day rocket discovers that someone had landed on the moon in the Victorian age.

M: It was a great idea. What's also fascinating is the machine that went to the moon – the way it landed on the surface was very similar to the way many Mars missions landed. They basically had a great big inflatable ball that bounced across the surface until it came to a stop.

RH: Well, I tried to stick to Wells's description of this contraption. It sounds so practical to have something that would alleviate gravity but I don't think anybody knows it. I think the ancients must have known it. All this discussion about how they built the pyramids – moving giant blocks from one place to another. They must have known something about how to alleviate gravity. I don't see ten thousand

people pulling a big stone up a hill.

C: I suppose in your own way you've put up buildings yourself, albeit to scale – with all the models you've made.

RH: Well I built the house for *Hansel and Gretel* (1951), from my early fairy tales. I built it out of real cookies and real candy. I didn't want to have to cast it. I went to the market to get cookies and candy and glued them on the basic structure of the house. I stored them in the garage after the film and pretty soon they were all eaten away by mice. I hope to put a DVD out of my *Fairy Tales*.

C: We've been wanting to ask you about those. They look fabulous.

RH: I want to put them all out. They've been on the market for years, but mostly to schools. But the black market was taking over too, which destroyed them.

C: In some respects a nice DVD edition negates the need for a black market.

RH: They were all dupes of dupes. That's the way the cookie crumbles.

M: You've just finished *The Tortoise and the Hare* (2002).

RH: Yes, I finished that after fifty years.

M: The tortoise finally crossed the finishing line.

RH: That was the last. I was doing a series of six, and I had shot four minutes of animation and then my features came along and I never went back to them. Two young men wrote to me and told me they'd like to finish the picture and I saw some of their work and decided to loan them the puppets and they finished it in their spare time in their garage, just as I started out. I don't think you can tell where one left off. They studied my technique. I rewrote the script and directed it by telephone but they did all the work and they did a marvellous job.

C: Do you think that makes it the longest film production in the history of filmmaking?

RH: For a ten-minute film, it was fifty years in the making. Of course it was in limbo for a good few years. The film business was a lot of fun and I'm glad I got in on it even though it was the last of the golden age of Hollywood. I'm grateful. It was a different business than it is today. I'm amazed when I look at the credits at the end of modern films – eighty people doing the special effects.

M: It feels as though these days Hollywood has money to throw at projects, but not time.

RH: They've got no imagination because they keep remaking things. But then of course they say there are only seven possibilities of drama.

M: How involved were you within the whole filmmaking process? You used to work alone when you were doing the animation, but would have had a lot of involvement with the scripting and shooting.

RH: People think I'm just a special effects man who was handed a script and told to "put this on the screen". I was always involved with the writing right from the beginning. The director doesn't know what I can do and our pictures were always on such tight budgets. I don't like to use the word 'cheap'. We tried to make them look more expensive than they actually were. *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*, the whole picture only cost \$200,000; you can hardly buy a costume today for that.

C: The catering budget for a week is sometimes more than that.

M: A lot of people focus on the animation, which is of course astonishingly good, but there are other elements to film than simply visual. Sound is an area that tends to get neglected, yet the sounds of your creatures are so distinctive – I can hear Talos even now.

RH: The creaking? (laughs)

C: And the Medusa's rattle and the sound of the flying saucers in *Earth vs the Flying Saucers* (1956). The sound is such an important element.

RH: It helps bring things to life.

M: And were you involved with the creation of the sound?

RH: In the studio system you have the sound effects department. They made up two or three sounds then we picked out the one we felt fit.

But most of them are so experienced they know pretty well when they see something on the screen it needs a certain type of sound, so they go in that direction. *Earth vs the Flying Saucers* we shot in a sewage plant, so the sound effect you hear of the saucers is actually the goo of sewage going through the pipes. We don't like to tell that, but in this age of vulgarity I don't mind disclosing it.

M: Which is your favourite creature?

RH: I can't have one because the others get jealous. I like the more complicated ones like the seven-headed Hydra and the skeletons... and Medusa. They were a big challenge. I guess those are the ones I most enjoyed animating.

M: That leads on to the next question – which was the most challenging creature?

RH: Seven skeletons (*Jason and the Argonauts*) took four months to do that five minute sequence. Or rather, put it together, because it had a lot of cuts. You had to match the source and count every frame so the sound effects department could put in the crash of the swords.

M: Which film was your personal favourite?

RH: I think *Jason's* the most complete but every other one has certain elements in it. Sometimes we had to compromise terribly because of weather, because you can't get the people you want at that time. There are many compromises when you are making a low budget film. You have to. It's not just like you read about where some directors can sit and wait for a cloud to be just in the right place for that particular shot. We had to shoot in rain or dry. Most of our films were very low budget. I wanted to put impressive visuals on the screen so it didn't look like it was made by Republic Pictures or something.

M: They still do inspire people.

RH: I'm so grateful that they do. When I go to these conventions a whole family of three generations will come up and say 'my father saw your films and taught me to see them and I'm teaching my son.' He'll probably teach his son. So I'm glad that Charles Schneer and I have left a positive impression. So many films today I think leave a negative impression. I don't like to go to a film and come out hating my fellow man. But seeing some of these dreadful things – every film seems to say you can only solve your differences by your fists or a gun. That's terribly dangerous particularly with television brought right into your house. And people ignore this and that's the whole reason why I think our society's falling apart. Young people grow up without wanting a continuity of story. *King Kong* (1933) has the

most perfect development of story. They took you by the hand from the mundane world of the Depression and brought you to a world of fantasy that was outrageous. Really, for its time.

C: It still has a sense of wonder.

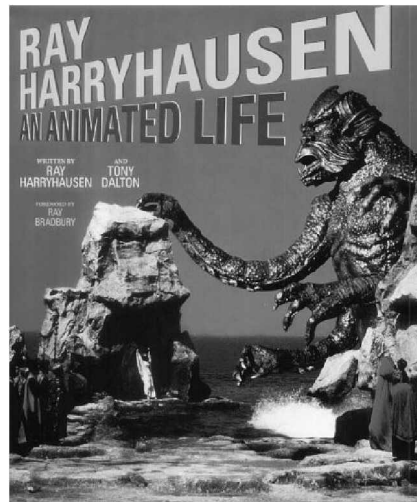
RH: We tried to keep that. The more spectacular images you see put on the screen with CGI – even for a thirty second commercial – you see the most amazing images. They used to be unique. Now the amazing image is mundane.

M: There's less soul in a computer generated image, because so many people are involved. You were manipulating the creatures by hand.

RH: Yes we tried to put ourselves in. When you're animating say, Mighty Joe, you have to sit on the floor and go through the motions with a stopwatch. You try to put yourself in the place of the creature.

C: When you look at your films, there's still a sense of personality that you get in all the creatures and you engage with what is happening on the screen. Because you believe in the story and characters, you believe in the creature you're seeing. In films nowadays you see something that looks photographically real at any moment, but it just seems to be a cinema of attractions where there's spectacle rather than something fantastical.

RH: Well, we tried to put a simple story in all our films, and many times the critics criticised us – that our stories were too simplistic. But you can't put a complicated story in a fantasy. It's mainly visual. That's why music was so important and we had some of the best composers to do our scores. Bernard Herrmann fit our pictures



beautifully. He did 4 pictures for us. Miklós Rózsa who did *Golden Voyage [of Sinbad]* (1974). Jerome Moross did *[The Valley of] Gwangi* (1969). Laurence Rosenthal did *Clash of the Titans* (1981). All musicians who have wonderful imaginations, and fitted the audio image to the visuals. And that is a lost art today. You see so many films where the music just goes merrily on and has no relationship to what you're looking at on the screen. We tried to get the best imaginative musicians. Sometimes the budget couldn't afford it, so we used to use canned music a lot. In as much as the films are visuals, they really start from my drawings because the plots – do you understand some of the pictures today – they don't have a continuity.

C: There are two problems these days. If the studios think that a film is too basic they throw lots of extraneous plot in to try and make it look as though it's clever...

RI: Pseudo-intellectual, yes. They try to make it look good as intellectual.

C: ...Or they have a prime concept which suddenly gets greenlit and they throw lots of money at it, but they haven't actually got a completed script. So they start to make a film and do the effects, because all they've decided upon is the basic premise and the effects. They write a script while they're making the film.

RI: And that's very costly. We go out of our way to make our final script as close to what you see on the screen as possible.

M: Your storyboards are very detailed – works of art in themselves.

RI: It's very important. My drawings influenced art directors and influenced everybody down the line. That's why our pictures are not what you'd call directed pictures in the European sense of the word. The director's main job on our films was to get the best out of the actors and that's not always that easy. In fact one critic said 'Mr Harryhausen should have animated the actors.' It was very flattering to me but as for the actors... This was on some of our earlier films. We always tried to have very competent actors but *Clash of the Titans* was the only one where we had stars. Today the word 'star' means nothing; every Tom, Dick and Harry off the street is suddenly called a star, just because he screams into a microphone. The word has no meaning nowadays. The word 'art' has no meaning. When they give somebody £25,000 to cut a cow in half – God made the cow, all they did was freeze it and cut it in half. And they call it conceptual art. It's ridiculous.

C: Your work is very much cinematic art. Nowadays you don't have cinematic art, you have movies. Part of it's down to the studios themselves being businesses. Hollywood was always there to make money, but in the Golden Age the people at the top cared about what they were making. Now it's all corporate.

RI: That shows. People don't emphasise that today. Something that I've always felt happens with stop motion is that it gives a fantasy dream quality to a film. With a subject like *Sinbad* or *King Kong*, even though the gorilla was kind of jerky compared with standards today it doesn't matter, because it has that quality of dream. You lose that if you try to make things too real, for a fantasy. Then the spectacular becomes mundane.

M: Just one more question. Of all your unrealised projects is there another film you would have loved to have made, a story that never was?

RI: I wanted to make *Dante's Inferno* at one point. In the early days it would have involved censorship because you can't go to hell with your clothes on. But I liked Gustav Doré's drawings – I was very influenced by them – so I wanted to make *Dante's Inferno*. When I got deeper into it I thought how can people sit through an hour and a half of tormented souls, writhing in torment. But today they sit through three hours of it. So I've never felt that going to pay £10 or whatever you have to pay today, to sit through somebody in the process of dying is very attractive. After all I think the film was made for fantasy. In the book there's a long listing of films never realised.

M&C: *Sinbad on Mars* sounded brilliant!

RI: (laughs) Everybody smiles whenever that gets mentioned. We had a unique way of getting him up there that would have been dramatic, but when he got up there we had two versions of the script and it turned out to be Ming the Merciless, destroying the world or wanting to rule the world and the writers couldn't seem to get away from that. We never made the film.

M&C: Such a shame. Mr Harryhausen, thank you so much for your time. Good luck with the book.

RI: Thank you. I don't know if it'll ever get on the bestseller list as there's no scandal in it – who's interested in naked dinosaurs?

Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton, *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life*

Aurum 304pp Hardback £35 ISBN 1-85410-940-5

For those of us of a certain age, the words 'Ray Harryhausen' almost define your childhood. Well, the good bits at any rate. His use of stop-frame animation to create mythical creatures, monsters and aliens took us to worlds we could otherwise only dream about. Think of the skeleton fight from *Jason and the Argonauts*, Medusa from *Clash of the Titans*, the Beast From 20,000 Fathoms or the pteranodon whisking away Raquel Welch in *One Million Years BC*. Nowadays the credits on most Hollywood films list hundreds of people responsible for the effects work – twenty people rendering the heroine's hair, lit by ten others and textured by a team the size of an average classroom. In this digital age of so-called photo-realistic CGI it's hard to see how all the incredible effects on *Jason and the Argonauts* were the work of just one man.

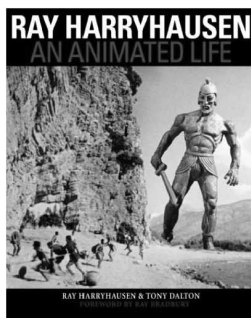
Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life is no standard autobiography. Sure, it covers his life story from his first viewing of that masterpiece of fantasy cinema *King Kong*, but more than this it is about his work, of one man's lifelong dedication to the art of stop-motion special effects. All Harryhausen's films are covered, from the large-scale fantasies to the more intimate fairy tale short films that have delighted children and adults for decades, the latest of which *The Tortoise and the Hare* has finally been completed, having been started fifty years ago. The creation of these special effects is examined in detail, from the exquisite pre-production sketches, through the animation process to the finished result (viewed with copious thumbnail stills).

This is a film-buff's delight in that we can see the whole

Dynamation process from start to finish, learn how the models are armatured, how the animator moves each little intricate piece and also grasp the overall scale of these creations. In many respects you would think that this de-mystification of the process would somehow take away the charm and awe of the films (after all, the quick fix thrill of a Hollywood fx-movie has diminishing impact when you've watched the fifty-third DVD featurette) but paradoxically the opposite is the case. You look on them with renewed enthusiasm when you realise the sheer attention to detail and painstaking, often crafty, methods of production. In *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* each exploding building was hand animated, brick by flying brick, the wires hidden by painting them to match the background... frame by frame. Think about that for a moment and consider that one error, at any moment, would have meant re-shooting every single frame all over again. The secret of Harryhausen's patience is revealed early on, a necessity for the animator.

Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life is a solid book over three hundred pages of full colour high-quality photographs and sketches accompanied by detailed text. This is no mere coffee table book but an indispensable look at one of cinema's greats, profusely illustrated and a cracking read to boot. But be warned – you'll need to work out before dipping in, as it's a behemoth of a tome requiring Talos levels of strength to hold it. And how can you not want a book that has a quote from Kermit the Frog on the back? Essential for all lovers of fantasy cinema and those interested in the history of special effects.

© Colin Odell, Mitch Le Blanc and Ray Harryhausen





First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

All novels marked: are eligible for the 2003 BSFA Award for Best Novel

All collections and anthologies marked: contain stories eligible for the 2003 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction

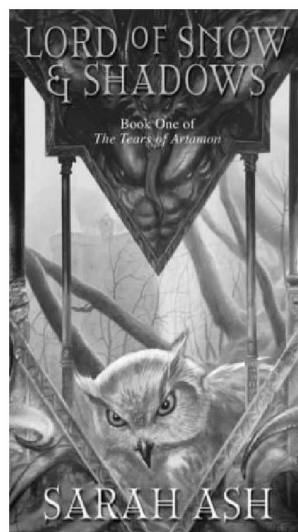
Sarah Ash – *Lord of Snow and Shadows*

Bantam, London, 2003, 703pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-553-81470-2

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

There have been countless fantasies in which the main character, believing themselves to be just an ordinary person, discovers that they are actually the heir to a kingdom or that they possess amazing supernatural powers. In *Lord of Snow and Shadows*, Book One of *The Tears of Artamon*, this old archetype is given a new and original lease of life, the action of the novel taking place on a broad and richly coloured canvas, with the various strands of the plot skilfully interwoven to make an utterly compelling read. Gavril Andar, a young portrait painter living in the Smarna, a warm southern land of sun and blue seas, is astounded by the arrival of a group of clan warriors from the kingdom of Ashkendir in the north. The leader of these men, Bhogatyr Kostya Torzianin, informs Gavril that he is the son of the Drakhaon, Volkh, who has been betrayed and murdered, and that he, Gavril, has inherited the throne and must avenge his father's death. Gavril's mother, Elysia, when confronted with this information, admits that it is true, and that she had fled Ashkendir when Volkh's impulsive nature had been revealed as hiding a savage cruelty. Gavril is reluctant to leave immediately for Ashkendir, but is given no choice, for he is

abducted by the warriors and taken forcibly to Kastel Drakhaon. Here in the frozen north, in a land of forests, snow, and vengeful spirits who can possess the living, Gavril's appearance, and his blood, gradually alter, and he begins to understand his true and terrible nature.



Meanwhile, Elysia determines to rescue her son from his abductors, and travels to Mirom, the capital city of Muscobar, to seek the aid of the Grand Duke. In contrast to the blood-feud-riven Ashkendir, Muscobar is portrayed as an elegant land that has echoes of our own world in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, but where magic exists and can be used to create armies. Unfortunately the Grand Duke's regime is under threat. Elysia becomes a pawn in the politics and intrigues of the court, and falls victim to the territorial ambitions of Prince Eugene of Tielen, whose plans include invading Ashkendir and placing his own candidate on the throne. Before long Elysia finds that she too has been betrayed.

While the main plotline is resolved by the end of this novel, there are still threads that need to be tied, and enough tantalising hints as to the way the story may develop to make me eager to read the next book in the series.

Neal Asher – *Cowl*

For UK, London, 2004, 406pp, £17.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-4050-0137-2

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Neal Asher has made a name for himself writing highly entertaining, fast moving and frequently violent novels. In this regard, *Cowl* is not really any different, although this one does inhabit a different universe, as there is no mention of The Polity, the governance system that links his previous three novels.

In the far future there is an ongoing struggle for domination of the Solar System. As a part of this struggle *Cowl*, an artificially evolved human, has been created and has travelled back in time to The Nodus. This is the point in time at which life first appeared on Earth and the point past which it is not possible to go. *Cowl* has a pet, the Torbeast, which travels through time shedding its scales. These are organic time machines which are being used to harvest people and drag them back to the Nodus. The Torbeast is a truly monstrous creation, so big it doesn't just fill space but time as well. The sheer scale of many of the constructs, the Torbeast, the means of providing energy for the time travel and even just the time periods involved are quite awe-inspiring.

However, all that comes later on. The novel opens with Polly, a prostitute in a not-too-distant future. She is hired, under duress, by Nandru to collect an object on his behalf. The pick-up goes wrong and Nandru is killed in a surprising and somewhat unpleasant way, but not before his personality is downloaded into a device he had implanted onto Polly's chest. Polly ends up with the object firmly attached to her arm and is thrown back in time to the Second World War. Tack, a genetically programmed hunter, now programmed to track and kill Polly, has a fragment of the object attached to him and he too is thrown back in time, just not to the same time period. Now the story can get going.

The first half of the book is mainly concerned with Polly and Tack as they are continually dragged further back in time. Polly with Nandru's personality attempting to figure out just what the hell is going on, and Tack as he encounters and joins a strange traveller who seems to know rather too much and is conveniently able to mess with Tack's programming. This section could almost be described as leisurely (at least by Mr. Asher's standards) and it shifts easily between the humour and intense danger of the characters' changing situations.

As with his previous novels, Neal Asher has used chapter headings to provide background to the novel. In this case, these headings become rather more pertinent as they provide the reader with important plot elements. Although initially these do appear to be completely disconnected from the main story, the significance of this thread becomes steadily more apparent. The scale and pace of events both increase in line with one another, moving from the straightforward and personal and growing to encompass all of time and most of the solar system. The novel rapidly accelerates as we learn more about what is really happening and get further back in time closer and closer to the Nodus. It is told in short passages, rapidly shifting between viewpoint characters in a way reminiscent of A.E. Van Vogt, which makes for an intensive read. It can also make it a little confusing, as the constant shift of viewpoint, given the scale of events, occasionally makes it hard to keep tabs on what is happening. In spite of this, *Cowl* is another highly entertaining, fast-moving and frequently violent novel. With dinosaurs in it. Sit back and enjoy the ride.

Terry Bisson – *Dear Abbey*

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2003, 108pp, £10, t/p, ISBN 1-902-990-75-7 (also h/b, £25, ISBN 1-902-990-76-5)

Lucius Shepard – *Floater*

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2003, 154pp, £10, t/p, ISBN 1 902880 79 X (also h/b, £25, ISBN 1 902880 80 3)

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts



The novella is a literary form that rarely gets seen on the bookshop shelves. This is a shame, as I believe that some of the best fiction ever published is written at this length. PS Publishing seem to be attempting to redress the balance by largely specialising in novellas.

Dear Abbey by Terry Bisson is probably the most beautiful time travel story that I've ever come across. It's also one of the simplest. Cole, an American Studies Professor, shares an office with Lee, a Chinese Maths professor and a political exile from his own country. They share a taste for the writer Edward Abbey and not much else. The *Dear Abbey* of the title is an underground environmental program that would effectively end the human race in order to save the Earth. One evening the two travel forward in time to retrieve a gene patching formula that will halt Humanity and its destruction in its tracks. The two move forward in ever increasing time periods, 10 years, 10 thousand, a million and so on until they reach the end of the Earth.

The two are very passive travellers, stopping off at each period, meeting small groups of people who all appear to be expecting them and generally getting to understand the effect that time and humanity has had on the planet. The cumulative effect is far more powerful than any of the individual stops. That Cole and Lee are travelling in order to obtain something that could bring the human race to an end adds an entirely new perspective on the worlds that they are shown. Cole must decide, once he returns, whether or not to use the knowledge of how to end the human race, and whether it would ultimately matter if he did or not. The technology of time travel is almost entirely peripheral to the story. It is accomplished with the use of just a palm-top computer and

higher maths. What is learned about our planet and our place upon it is what really matters here. There is a real affection for it that shines through. Simultaneously, Cole comes to understand and appreciate Lee, a man whose existence was almost inconsequential to him previously, and his motives for taking him on the trip in the first place.

For such a simple tale there is a tremendous amount going on, a lot of which is not readily appreciated until the story is complete. In his introduction, Brian Aldiss describes this as a masterpiece and I think he might just be right.

The second novella, *Floater* by Lucius Shepard, is an altogether darker affair. William Dempsey is a detective who has just gone through a long homicide trial for the part he played, with two other officers, in the shooting of an Haitian immigrant. The shooting itself was an extreme incident, with the officers having fired a large number of rounds at an unarmed civilian. The event and the trial have clearly taken their toll. One of the officers has committed suicide and Dempsey himself has a 'floater' in his eye. This is a small bit of protein, a medical condition that could well have been brought on by stress.

Making efforts to understand what happened, and to deal with his own guilt, Dempsey carries out his own investigation. He finds the victim had links with a Voodoo church and also that Pinero, the third officer, appears to be connected to both the victim and the church. Part of the Voodoo myth system allows for the Black Sun, a sort of God-in-waiting to challenge the other gods, and the warrior god Olukun must defend them by fighting in the physical world via a possessed acolyte. Dempsey comes to believe that Pinero is carrying the dark god and he himself is carrying Olukun, and the floater in his eye is part of that physical manifestation. It is unusual to find portrayals of Voodoo in fiction that do not succumb to the popular image of zombies. Lucius Shepard succeeds in giving a

more believable portrayal, although in some scenes where Dempsey is being lectured about the religion it starts to feel like the reader is as well.

The floater in his eye becomes worse the more obsessed he is with establishing what really happened, and can also be seen as a physical manifestation of his guilt. What really takes place, whether a duel between Pinero and Dempsey, battling gods or even just vivid hallucinations, becomes secondary to Dempsey

and his own fight to understand and come to terms with what it is he has done and what it has made him.

These novellas are both deeply affecting works and either one could justifiably turn up in one or more of the 'best of year' anthologies. On the strength of them, it would seem that PS Publishing is most definitely a small press to keep an eye on.

[Available from www.pspublishing.co.uk]

Andrew M. Butler and Farah Mendlesohn (eds) – *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod*

Science Fiction Foundation, Reading, 2003, 136pp, £15.00, h/b, ISBN 0-903007-02-9

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

The first thing you notice about this third volume in the Foundation Studies in Science Fiction series is the cover. Designed by Colin Odell and now shortlisted for the BSFA art award, it's strongly reminiscent of the old Soviet-style industrial posters, albeit with an intrinsic science-fictional element; it's both a striking image in itself and, with its juxtaposition of politics and sf, an excellent scene-setter for the contents of the book.

Those contents are an eclectic mix of contemporary reviews of MacLeod's novels, subsequent analysis of his themes and messages, and critical commentary on his influences and motivations and the uses to which he puts them, alongside two interviews with the author and two articles of his own. Contemplation of MacLeod's contributions and challenges to the canon thus intermingle with consideration of his methods and techniques.

Some of the longer pieces in this volume were originally presented as papers at the SF Foundation's '2001: A Celebration of British SF' conference or the Science Fiction Research Association conference in 2002. Often authored by academics, inevitably these are at the harder academic end of the Foundation's sf criticism; but, beyond the conventions of title, they are entirely accessible to the non-academic reader. 'Nothing is Written: Politics, Ideology and the Burden of History in the Fall Revolution Quartet' by John H. Arnold and Andy Wood – also up for a BSFA award, in the non-fiction category – and 'Not Losing the Plot: Politics, Guilt and Storytelling in Banks and MacLeod' by James Brown have both been expanded for this volume from the original papers, and stand out as engaging and thought-provoking pieces of analysis which provoked in me, at least, a desire to re-read the source material in order to engage with these readings. Adam Frisch's 'Tension and Progress in Ken MacLeod's Engines of Light Series' provides a creditable overview of the big themes in the later novels but seems almost introductory in its scope; it perhaps lacks the benefit of chronological distance from the source in order to step back and apply more targeted analysis. A piece new for this volume from K. V. Bailey, 'A Planet Engaged: Lived Through/Ironically Observed: Poems of Experience in a Polemical Setting', explores a lesser-known side of MacLeod's

work; this examination of his self-styled poetry and polemics reveals familiar themes but also uncovers more directly some of the anger and inspiration which underpins the fiction.

The reviews are interesting in a different way. While being generally positive and enthusiastic that MacLeod is tackling political topics only rarely considered in sf, and overtly exploring the effects of particular movements and ideologies, reviewers including Neal Baker, John Newsinger and anthology co-editor Farah Mendlesohn usually concluded that an initial promise was unfulfilled. Their main source of disappointment appears to be not so much that MacLeod enables characters with ideologically impure viewpoints to air their views, but that he sometimes seems to allow the narrative momentum to confirm or validate their prejudices, taking a lazy way out which impacts on the credibility of both the story and the authorial voice. As co-editor Andrew M. Butler notes in the introduction, these reviewers seem to have felt, on first reading, that MacLeod could do better. Again, critical and chronological distance lend perspective to an assessment of what he has achieved within the field.

In the end, though, a particular strength of this book is that it includes a 360° picture of the artist, with Ken MacLeod's own contributions providing a vital piece in the jigsaw. Opening – after the introduction – and closing the volume, they provide some subtle parameters to this evaluation of what Ken MacLeod's science fiction is all about and why it matters. We know enough, especially when reading a volume like this, not to believe that the author automatically has all the answers or even that he can't be wrong; but neither of MacLeod's own pieces are set up to serve such a purpose or be knocked down accordingly. Instead he tells us about the possibilities of sf, and about the realisation of some of those possibilities; and thus, like the rest of the analysis in this volume, points to some ideas against which his own realisations can be considered.

Anyone who has read and enjoyed, or been challenged by, Ken MacLeod's novels should consider reading this book; and be prepared to then want to re-read all of the novels again.

[Available from www.sf-foundation.org]

Lin Carter – *Tolkien: A Look Behind The Lord of the Rings*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 188 pp, £6.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07548-1

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

First published in 1969, this is a revised edition (by Adam Roberts) of one of the earliest books on Tolkien, written at a time when there was a certain need for an explanation of how and why Tolkien wrote his epic fantasy. In some ways, it's an odd book. Lin Carter's scholarship has both the virtues and failings of fan-scholarship. He was enthusiastic, committed, knew a lot, and tended to believe (or seem to believe) that being passionate about something meant that it was therefore good. He was capable of crassly dim judgement (such as an apparent belief, stated in chapter sixteen of this book, that E.R. Edlison's use of quotations from Sappho, Homer, Donne, Herrick, Webster and Shakespeare in his books is 'internal self-contradiction') and as a fantasy novelist was himself – well, let us say, not of the first rank. Yet he

was the general editor of the Ballantine 'Adult Fantasy' series which, in the immediate wave of Tolkien's mass popularity, reprinted many of the field's most significant works, many of which had been virtually unobtainable, and anyone who discovered fantasy in or after the Seventies owes him a debt of immense proportions. Without Carter, people like me who discovered Tolkien and then tried to search out more of the same (of course, you can't look for 'more of the same' in effective fantasy, and whatever he said, Carter showed us that) would have had a far smaller pool of material to search through.

Whether there's a need for this particular book at this particular time, even at a bargain rate of £6.99 for a hardback, is a moot point, but the success of *The Lord of the Rings* as a film has

meant that there must be many thousands of people tempted to try the book with, like we neophytes in the late Sixties had, only a very hazy idea of where and why it came about. The slim summary of Tolkien's biography in chapter one has been superseded by various other works, as has the chapter on Tolkien's sources. For anyone other than the reader who wants the most basic of information, there is a whole range of other material available, both scholarly and popular. Several chapters are just plot summary – useful for the novice who wants to remember exactly what happened when, but of little basic use otherwise. There is, however, an interesting reminder, in the second chapter, of the critical reaction to *The Lord of the Rings* on first publication. While nowadays it seems to be a story many Literary Folk love to hate, it's fascinating to be reminded that a number of reviewers were certainly enthusiastic about the book, but were slightly *confused* about it, with its roots in romance, fairy-tale, mediaeval epic, or whatever category they considered it to possibly be. (Naomi Mitchison's 'super science fiction' which one 'takes... as seriously as Malory' swung it for me, I remember). Part of the reason for Carter's book was to explain, maybe for readers like me searching for the spaceships and robots, just where *The Lord of the Rings* came from. His idea of the 'tradition'

of heroic fantasy is only partly helpful and in some cases only helpful at all if we forget ideas of 'tradition' as direct influence and consider fantasy instead as a mode of storytelling; you certainly need fairy-tale and mediaeval romance to understand Tolkien but it's arguable whether *Ariosto Furioso* (wonderful though it may be) will heighten your understanding of Tolkien enough to warrant reading it, while although Dunsany *must* be read he is coming from a rather different strand of fantasy. There's also an interestingly ironic paragraph in the chapter on mediaeval romance, where we are told that because of each writer's need to outdo the other in audience-hooking marvels 'the whole romance genre became corrupt very quickly'. I'm sure I need say no more...

Despite this, there's a useful bibliography which will provide guidance to the necessary further reading. Adam Roberts's revision updates the text at times (e.g., there's a reference to Christopher Lee as Saruman) and occasionally seems to clear up what Carter is saying: for example Carter on page 166 identifies Gandalf as Tolkien's version of Odin but the rest of the paragraph cites *The Silmarillion* for Tolkien's rather different, although not necessarily uncontradictory, explanation of Gandalf as one of the Maia.

Hal Clement – *Noise*

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Tor, New York, 2003, 252pp, \$23.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30857-6

Hal Clement died on October 29th 2003, a month after *Noise* was published, so it is likely to be his final work. It features a major trope from his earlier oeuvre – a journey through a strange new world, in which problems have to be overcome by the protagonists – but is unsatisfactory.

The story describes the voyage of Mike Hoani, a research linguist, through the seas that cover Kainui, a waterworld which has been settled by descendants of Polynesians, trying to re-create something of their ancient lifestyle. Much must have already happened on Kainui before Mike's landing, because the oceans are destructively alkaline and devoid of life. Now, though, floating cities exist and traders cross the seas, harvesting the pseudo-life which collects the minerals and riches of the seas (as Polynesians would have harvested sea cucumbers, or others spermaceti).

I would have liked to know more about the pseudo-life. Each one – I thought of them as giant jellyfish-like, but that could be just me – must at some time have been set going by the original Kainuins. I would have liked to know more – some must have had an original purpose, others may have evolved into an ecological niche – but Mike and his two hosts never seem interested, while the child with them is more interested in becoming a Polynesian Hornblower. On the other hand, Mike never develops his interest in language either. This has the consequence that if the significance of the title was ever mentioned it escaped me.

The one strong scientific point seems to be made only indirectly: when pseudo-life has been invented it will occupy ecological niches and mutate just as life has done. And humans will live on alkali seas on distant planets in their best equivalence to life in the seas on earth, exploiting their surroundings.

With the long obituaries in the broadsheets (and another good one on Radio Five Live) all mentioning Clement's tendency to play up the hard science and play down his characterisation I read with a particularly open mind. However, the evidence is against him. It also shows in the lack of copy-editing. Tor must have been very liberal with the manuscript he delivered, because in some places it does not make sense (on page 156, for instance, there is a six line sentence beginning "They were relieved..." that shows this at its worst), while the style throughout the book is to throw sub-ordinate clauses into the middle of sentences, when clarity would have demanded that each be re-phrased. Consequently, this reads like a first draft in which Hal Clement tried to catch his ideas, and which he never reworked.

Ten years ago Robert Silverberg's *The Face of the Waters* was a good fantasy about a waterworld, while since I first saw it at the cinema I have been a fan of Costner's *Waterworld*. I would have liked this to be an equivalent in hard sf. It is not, and it is a poor tribute to a major figure in sf.

Paul Féval – *The Vampire Countess* (adapted by Brian Stableford)

Black Coat Press, Encino (USA), 351pp, \$22.95, p/b, ISBN 0-9740711-3-3

Paul Féval – *Knightshade (Le Chevalier Ténébre)* (adapted by Brian Stableford)

Black Coat Press, Encino (USA), 176 pp, \$16.95, p/b, ISBN 0-9740711-4-5

Paul Féval – *Vampire City* (adapted by Brian Stableford)

Black Coat Press, Encino (USA), 200 pp, \$19.95, p/b, ISBN 0-9740711-6-1

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc



The Vampire genre has long been established in folklore, literature and cinema and these days its conventions are almost rigidly defined. The vampire is a bloodsucker, active only by night and has aversions to stakes, garlic and crucifixes. But these conventions have largely been defined by the 'mother' of all vampire novels, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and

enhanced by his plethora of cinematic incarnations. Indeed nowadays these conventions are implicit for most vampire books/films, unless the author goes to tremendous lengths to dispel the myths. So then, it comes as a refreshing change to be able to read stories about vampires before they were famous. Hair transplants, bandits, multiplicity, scalpings, an opulent city of mausolea, animal vampires, hallucinations, avarice and love are amongst the many themes and ideas used within Paul Féval's trilogy of vampire tomes. Writing in mid-Nineteenth Century

France, Féval was not specifically a genre writer, but he was prolific – his output was enormous, and many of his works fall into the ‘penny dreadful’ mould or were published as partworks. Although neglected compared to, say, Dumas, he is still read and his works (most notably *Le Bosu*) have been adapted for cinema. These books do not merely contain horrors, they are also tales of adventure, crime and comedy – a melange of styles, flitting from one to another.

Seduction, conspiracy, and betrayal are the key themes of *The Vampire Countess*. Set against a seedy Paris backdrop, the young René de Kervoz rejects the love of his life, Angela, seduced by a beautiful woman. It's not really his fault however, as this woman just happens to be Madam La Comtesse Marcian Gregoryi, a notorious vampire whose life is extended by scalps, ripped from her victims, her hair acquiring the colour of the poor unfortunate's very own tresses. Such a tragic fate befell young René's true love, Angela. Moreover the fiendish countess also gets him hooked on opium and tricks René into betraying his uncle for the dual purposes of revenge and greed. Féval uses real historical personages along with his fictional characters to produce a ripping, if slightly confusing, yarn. Reminiscent of Erzsebet Bathory, who bathed in the blood of virgins to maintain her youth, La Comtesse is truly terrible, her powers of seduction magnificent – once trapped, poor René doesn't have a hope – he is kept under a spell, a slave to her whims.

Knightshade is a tale of phantoms and brigands, admittedly with more brigands and less vampirism than expected. Events take place at one of Archbishop de Quelen's soirées. His distinguished guests are amongst Paris's most eminent citizens and they demand a story. Amongst these Parisian partygoers lurks Monsignor von Altenheimer who has quite a tale to tell... of the notorious Brothers Ténébre, ‘two of the dead’, one an oupire, the other a vampire. Their graves had been opened many times over the course of 400 years; sometimes there were bodies inside, one large, one small, and at other times the graves were found to be empty. This notorious pair were villains in every sense of the word, outlaws and thieves who terrorised most of Europe. But the hero in this tale is an unlikely one and may be just as supernatural as the villains. The structure unfolds tales within tales and several plot twists, as all good pulp should.

Now *Vampire City's* story is a quest as young Anna (a heroine

based on popular Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe), runs to the aid of her childhood friends, who have fallen foul of notorious vampire Monsieur Goetzi. Along with her faithful servants she pursues the errant fiend across Europe and catches up with him inside Selene, the magnificent and malevolent Vampire City, an architectural wonder full of mausolea, temples and sarcophagi; all utterly awe-inspiring but devoid of life... until the vampires awaken. Féval really lets his imagination run riot in this book – anything is possible. M. Goetzi's vampirism involves hair transplantation and the ability to reproduce by turning his victims into exact copies of himself. Anna is a feisty heroine; although she doesn't get too heavily involved with the physical side of vampire slaying, she leads the party of vampire hunters and makes all the decisions concerning how to thwart Goetzi's insidious plans.

Although cracking yarns, these books are not the easiest of reads as the plot structures and extensive list of characters demand a good deal of the reader's attention if progression is to be made with any sense of coherence. Much of Féval's work was serialised and this is often reflected in the narratives – a chapter may end on a shocking revelation, then the next few chapters go back in time to explain events before the story gathers pace again. Additionally, there are many references to contemporary people and events; but fear not, each book bears a handy set of endnotes that provides much needed background material. Particularly praiseworthy is the fact that the forewords serve as an introduction to Féval himself, his oeuvre, his contemporaries and literary movements of the time, while the afterwords discuss the themes and ideas within the story. The foreword for the *Vampire Countess* is particularly helpful as it provides a lot of historical information, essential to understanding the underlying events of the narrative. This use of notes is a great move, and means you can read the book from start to finish without running the risk of ruining any surprises, as there are effectively no spoilers. The books are exciting and inventive, as all good popular fiction should be, but they are also rewarding, fascinating and delightfully translated. A great twist on the vampire genre and welcome revival of an author who has been overlooked in favour of his contemporaries.

[Available from www.blackcoatpress.com]

Mary Gentle – 1610: A Sundial in a Grave

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

Gollancz, London, 2003, 594pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07251-2

After the monumental *Ash*, Mary Gentle turns again to alternate history. And, once again, what she presents in *1610* is also a secret history: a story concealed in a past which appears nonetheless to have led to something very like our own present.

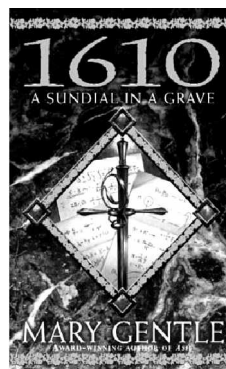
The Stuart dynasty seems popular at the moment, with an abundance of biographies, TV documentaries, and novels focused on the middle of the seventeenth century. *1610* starts earlier (the clue really is in the title) and thus features James, the king who first held the thrones of both England and Scotland, beset by conspiracies to hasten the succession and save the future of the world.

Here, however, the story is also something of an alternate fiction: a precursor to and pastiche of Dumas, featuring as protagonist one Rochefort whose fictional future seems destined to include a best supporting role in *The Three Musketeers*. This novel is set within a framework of the discovery by a modern translator of the nearly complete original memoirs whose fragments had previously served as the source for both French and English language popular novels and several subsequent film adaptations. The novel thus sits within its own history, albeit one which has long held its subject-matter to be –

at several removes of complicity and disbelief from the book we are reading – fiction.

As one might expect with *Mary Gentle*, there's still more in the novel than this: rational magic, as practised by Robert Fludd, a physician and scientist who has pursued astrology to its very logical extremes; homo-eroticism, sexual deviance, and unrequited love; squalor, and cruelty, and a powerful social historical imagination; diplomacy, and violence, and a lot of swordplay; and manifestations of the alien within. One of the most striking of these comes in the form of a Japanese warrior, nobleman, and ambassador who is drawn into the intrigues of the English court through his friendship and bonds of honour to two French swordsmen. This element is perhaps the only way in which the author seems to have succumbed to a desire to include all her research and interest in the subject at virtually any cost to the story.

Notwithstanding the lure of the east, this time she mostly gets the length right. The narrative, told predominantly through the rediscovered ‘memoir’, is broken in several places and then supplemented by letters or memoirs from other characters – thus neatly allowing for viewpoints to switch when the characters and



action are separated. And at the point where events seemed almost resolved, and yet it was clear from the 200 pages of novel remaining that in fact everything was about to be shaken up again, Mary Gentle inserted the single additional fragment most inclined to make me, at least, continue reading with joy rather than disappointment: scenes from her own Jacobean tragedy, already referenced in the plot, and containing overt and glorious homage

to Shakespeare, Marlowe and Webster. What more, possibly, could a girl want?

For a full immersion into the seventeenth century, I suggest reading this alongside the D'Aulagnan novels, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver*.

Rob Grant – *Incompetence*

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Gollancz, London, 2004, 291pp, £9.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07419-1

Terry Pratchett is certainly on top form here in the latest instalment from his brilliant *Discworld* saga. I particularly enjoyed the scenes of Rincewind and ...wait a minute – I'm reviewing the wrong book!

Let's begin again. *Incompetence* is a comic novel by Rob Grant (co-writer of *Red Dwarf*). Although it should be filed under 'Humour', it could be argued that this book is legitimate speculative fiction. Grant has extrapolated trends of political correctness to the nth degree, and sets the story in a near-future EU where no person can be prejudiced from employment by reason of his or her incompetence. The theme is rammed home by the incorrect spelling of the title on the cover, the author's bio is of Mark Twain and the prologue appearing several chapters in. So far so funny, especially with Grant's manic prose detailing several witty tirades against particularly daft manifestations of incompetence: my favourite being the hotel switchboard operator

who always puts you through to the restaurant.

The problem is that *Incompetence* drapes its amusingly silly knockabout stuff around a tired gumshoe plot so clichéd that you skip past all the plot exposition to get to the next funny bit. The bland protagonist, detective Harry Salt, tracks down a serial killer and uncovers a political conspiracy along the way. Ho hum! Does a comic novel need a coherent and original plot? I guess not if it only aspires to be occasionally funny rather than satisfying as a novel.

On this evidence Grant's talents are clearly better suited to comedy routines or thirty minute sitcom scripts where success is rated by laughs per minute. This novel, while sporadically funny, fails to hold the attention.

Elizabeth Hand – *Bibliomancy*

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2003, 296pp, £35.00, h/b, ISBN 1-902880-73-0

Bibliomancy collects four novellas by Elizabeth Hand, all published within the last four years, and repackages them in a faintly luxurious hardback with an introduction by Lucius Shepard. All four are more or less realist tales (I'm strangely reluctant to call them 'stories' in this particular genre) with fantasy elements impinging to greater ('Cleopatra Brimstone') or lesser ('Pavane for a Prince of the Air') degrees.

Before we go any further, let it be noted that I am going rather against the critical grain here. I suffered an attack of chronic reviewer insecurity after finishing *Bibliomancy* because having read some good things about Elizabeth Hand I found myself peculiarly unmoved by all of the stories in this collection. They were well written, well observed – but interesting, engaging or memorable? No. Was it just me, I asked myself? Had I been desensitised by too much fan-boy space opera in 2003?

Fortunately help arrived, in the unlikely form of the annual *Vector* request for a list of my five favourite books of 2003. I happened to notice that only one out of my five choices was at all space-operatic and the rest were a right old jumble of genres. It wasn't necessarily my narrowness of taste, then. And so I shall say loudly and proudly that I didn't enjoy *Bibliomancy* much at all, and that it seemed full of meandering and rather limp tales.

The first tale, 'Cleopatra Brimstone', follows a quiet and intense young American woman who grows up to be a lepidopterist. In the aftermath of a rape she goes, alone, to London to housesit for a family friend and gets very much into clubbing whilst working at Regents Park Zoo during the day. Her chance discovery of a strange club in Camden somehow awakens a strange latent ability in her – one that she indulges – throwing herself with absolute abandon into a new sybaritic life. I couldn't help thinking that every Goth I've ever met would love this story, what with its dark vampiric undercurrents, 'alternative' fashion sense and its being set in Camden Town.

'Pavane for a Prince of the Air', by far the shortest member of this collection, is a slight, cathartic tale of love and death amongst the hippies. It follows (though at a respectful distance) a close group of friends when one of them is dying, and dying rather

unpleasantly. There's only the faintest wisp of the fantastic here, a bright endnote at the closing of an otherwise sad story. This is probably the best novella in the collection, dealing with a difficult subject without becoming overtly maudlin. That said, it perhaps errs in the other direction, giving us too little of Cal, the cancer victim, and too many supporting characters to really feel for any of them.

The longest tale of all, 'Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol', possesses elements of *A Christmas Carol* but not to excess, I'm glad to say. Brendan, a beaten-down everyman, is just trying to hold things together in the face of a mediocre job, a divorce and a mentally disabled son who seems completely alien. This is a closely observed tale of redemption – or as close to redemption as most people ever get, via family, work, friends and memories. There are some great moments in this piece, and some great pieces of characterisation as well: Brendan, basically a good guy who's been slowly ground down to nothing by bad luck, and his friend Tony, a chirpy middle-aged optimist with apparently nothing really to be optimistic about. But the roughly 4-5 pages of brightness are left washed out by the 128 other pages that seemed to spiral around endlessly with no direction or likelihood of resolution.

'The Least Trumps' is the affected tale of a tattoo artist who lives alone on an island. Discovering a lost set of tarot cards, all but two of which seem to have been worn away by time, she copies the design of one onto her own skin. Things get a bit strange then à la Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*.

I hate to dismiss the whole thing so brusquely but this seemed like another story for our Goth friends, and arriving, as it does, at the end of this collection it left me feeling simply relieved to finish *Bibliomancy*. Elizabeth Hand can craft a fine individual sentence, but I remain unconvinced as to her ability to engage as a storyteller.

[Available from www.pspublishing.co.uk]

David J. Howe & Stephen James Walker – *The Television Companion (The Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to Doctor Who)*

Telos, Tolworth, 2003, 751pp, £14.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-51-0

Reviewed by Gary Wilkinson

What is it to be a critic then? I found myself asking myself this whilst I was reading the introduction to this weighty tome because in it the authors say: "Like most critics we have no desire to impose our will on others." Right, I had thought the whole point of criticism was to provide a, hopefully informed, opinion on the subject being discussed. Well, given their approach, what do the authors bring to *Dr Who* with their *Companion*?

Structurally, *The Television Companion* (and could they have not come up with a better, snappier, title than that?!) is divided into yearly sections with brief introductions to each season, then further subdivided into subsections on each individual story. Interspersed among these are short essays on each Doctor (well, the careers, up to the point that they were hired, of the actors who played him) as well as one-offs on topics like the series' origins, the famous monsters such as The Master, Cybermen and The Daleks (who merit an extra one on the 'Dalekmania' of the sixties) and the spin-off, *K9 and Company*, as well as pieces about the seasons that were themed around one long-running story like 'The Key to Time' and 'Trial of a Timelord'.

For each story we have detailed cast and crew, shooting times and locations, transmission times, viewers, and chart position (a surprising reminder on just how popular it was when it first started... top ten!). As well as a brief plot summary we have notes on 'Popular Myths' i.e. misconceptions about the story (which tend to be a bit spidish with the typical nitpicking over story titles), trivia lists like 'Things to look out for' and 'Things you might not have known' and 'Quote, unquote' which are somewhat eclectic choices.

A notable addition that I've not seen elsewhere is a sentence or two on the cliff-hangers which ended each of the episodes within each story. A nice reminder of just how many the later episodes (like just about all of 'Trial of a Timelord') end with a crash zoom on the Doctor's face looking 'shocked', 'concerned', 'defiant' or 'constipated'. Oh, okay, I made the last one up.

We then get a longer 'Analysis' section. As with *Liberation*, the programme guide to *Blake's Seven*, from the same publisher which I reviewed in *Vector* 233, this is all 'unofficial and

unauthorised'. So no interviews or direct insights from any of the actors, directors, writers, production staff or anyone involved with the show. This is sadly missed. What we get instead in the 'Analysis' sections are a lot of quotes from (mainly) various fanzines – some insightful, some frankly trivial. Keeping with the authors' agenda, these are selected to show opposing points of view unless it's a stone cold classic like 'Genesis of the Daleks' or a stinker like 'Horns of Nimon', but even then they will go out of their way to find at least one dissenting voice. Whilst this did provide some interesting points on a couple of stories I've recently rewatched, I found the analysis somewhat uninteresting when reading about stories that are dim and distant memories or not seen at all and found myself skipping over it.

We close on the infamous McGann 'Television Movie' and such spin-offs as *K9 and Company* (again) and fluff (where the writers get more than a bit po-faced) like the Comic Relief one-offs and, I'm sure you remember this, 'In a Fix with Sontarons' from an episode of *firm 'til Fix It*. There is also an availability checklist of the episodes' appearances in various media (that is updatable when new stuff comes on the market). The overall design is even more stripped of its origins than *Liberation* – there's none of the *Dr Who* logos or typefaces, no pictures (the cover is a murky, swirly, spiral which with a squint looks slightly like the vortex from the title sequence). Note also, hidden in the copyright notices: 'Previously published in a different form by BBC Worldwide, Ltd 1998' so Who completists may already have it. I can't bring myself to recommend this, but at long last Telos seemed to have at least adopted a sensible pricing policy. It's certainly better value than the forty quid official beeb book (even if that has got lots of pictures and may actually be a better read).

[Available from www.telos.co.uk]

Gwyneth Jones – *Midnight Lamp*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 326pp, £10.99, tb, ISBN 0 575 07471 X

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Midnight Lamp continues the series of novels in the *Bold As Love* universe, this time taking Ax, Sage and Fiorinda to the United States. They are persuaded into making and promoting a movie; at least, this is the cover story, though it will surprise no one to learn that there are hidden agendas and unexpected pitfalls, and they face the possibility of a monstrous magical threat to their world.

Although part of *Castles Made of Sand* took place in the US, this is the first time that Jones has given us a full length portrait of this area of her near future world. It works extremely well. The physical background, particularly the Mexican beach setting in which the book opens, comes across vividly. The values and attitudes of the present day – particularly in the movie industry – are adapted convincingly to the new technology, and the technology itself is presented in precise, believable detail. However, because the society has not experienced the same crash that has taken place in the British Isles, the setting is less individual, less special to Jones herself. This is perhaps another way of saying that Jones isn't repeating herself, yet I found that I wanted to know more about how the situation is developing on this side of the Atlantic.

The relationship of the three central characters develops

further in this book. For much of the time Jones is charting the process of healing after the physical and emotional trauma of the previous novel. There's added pressure in the way that Ax, Sage and Fiorinda must face the new threats when they are still in no fit state to meet them. The Arthurian themes, which came over so strongly in the two previous books, are less important here; I'd be sorry to think that Jones is leaving this aspect of her work behind.

The style, as always, is lucid and precise, and in spite of the serious themes of the book there's a great deal of humour. I particularly enjoyed the satire of the movie industry, and the scene towards the end of the book where Sage faces the powerful Internet Commissioners and with a concise elegance gets them to do what he wants: the humour serves to enhance the crucial importance of what is happening. There's also a strong sense of healing which runs through the book, not only for the three central characters, but elsewhere, shown most strongly of all in the way in which the threat of the magical monster is eventually contained and made harmless. Taking similar themes, another writer could have produced a horror novel, and how much weaker it would have been.

As I said when I reviewed *Castles Made of Sand*, the place for

new readers to start is at the beginning, with *Bold As Love*. Too much has happened, the situation is too complex, and the characters have acquired too much emotional baggage, for a new reader to appreciate either of these sequels fully without having read what has gone before. This is even more true of the present book. To understand what is happening in the new US setting,

and how each environment reflects the other, it's essential to pick up the references to the situation in Britain. So if you don't know this series, go out and get *Bold As Love* right away.

The final sections of the novel set up a return to Britain for another sequel and a new development. I'm looking forward to it.

Sue Lange – *Tritcheon Hash*

Metropolis Ink, Cave Creek (USA), 2003, 228pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 0-9580543-8-X

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

It is 3011 and, though a maverick, Tritcheon Hash is the finest test pilot on Coney Island, the all-female colony created light years from Earth when women had got fed up with men and decided to leave them once and for all. That is until Hash is called upon for a covert operation to Earth to witness how men have progressed over the millennium the women have been away and to ascertain whether reunification is a viable option. No sooner than she arrives, she's captured and her cover blown. Soon she has to confront her feelings for, of all things, a man. Can she remain faithful to her wife and children back home on Coney Island? More to the point do we care?

This is a difficult question to answer. Certainly the first half was entertaining though not necessarily amusing; possibly, not being a woman, I missed the feminist jokes. However, by the time the action moves from Coney Island to the male-dominated Earth the plot falters. Having men and women separated by the gulf of space is a tricky concept to pull off, even harder when marketed as humour. But Sue Lange falls short of creating a fully satisfactory read. My major problem with this novel, other than the unsatisfactory resolution in the last 30 pages or so, is that the women in *Tritcheon Hash* are too vulnerable compared to the men. In an all-female world, women would take on the more traditionally male roles; this is evident in any all-girls school. Sue Lange tries to develop this idea with the central character of

Tritcheon Hash, but ultimately flinches at the crucial moments. For example, Hash lacks skill in hand-to-hand combat against men and is emotionally weak. Why can't we have more all-round strong female characters like Ripley in *Alien*? The women in *Tritcheon Hash* may be essentially peace-loving, but I can think of a number of women that would have beaten men to a pulp when necessary, including Queen Boudica, the Amazons, Maggie Thatcher (complete with handbag) and Sharon Osbourne (I feel a mother-in-law joke marching this way – in army boots). Comedy is often the best medium to deal with various issues, but Sue Lange doesn't delve into the differences between men and women far enough. There are hints of perception and insight, but *Tritcheon Hash* lacks the necessary daring and intelligence to explore such issues to the same level as already shown in the Series II 'Parallel Universe' episode of *Red Dwarf*.

Despite this I feel an odd loyalty to the book, possibly as it began reasonably well, though I think a number of jokes were lost on me, if they existed at all. I would be interested in how Sue Lange progresses as a writer, particularly as there are so few women working in science fiction. But if you want sf to discuss feminist issues this isn't the best place to start.

[Available from www.metropolisink.com]

Stephen Laws – *Spectre*

Telos, Tolworth, 2003, 249pp, £9.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-72-3

Reviewed by Simon Morden



Once upon a time, there were seven friends: six of them grew up together in Byker, east Newcastle. They knew all about each other, all their hopes and fears, and they vowed to stay in touch forever. The seventh, Pandora, was a Cornish girl, newly arrived in the city to go to university. During the last week of the last term of the last year, the

inseparable Byker Chapter simply fell apart, and none of them knew why.

Years later, Richard Eden is descending into a hell he believes to be of his own making. He's drinking too much, his wife has left him, and he's in danger of losing his lectureship. He starts to sink deep into a malaise that will end in tragedy – spending his nights in the Imperial nightclub, his days hungover. His one connection with the halcyon memories of the Byker Chapter is the photograph of them all taken one drunken night. Except that Phil Stuart's image has now been magically erased.

Stunned, disbelieving Richard then hears of Phil's bloody murder. Derek is the next to vanish from the photograph, and it becomes clear that something ghastly is picking off the Byker Chapter one by one. Diabolic forces are at work, and though the erstwhile friends are scattered the length and breadth of the country, the focal point of the evil is very close to home.

Spectre is the second of the Telos Classics (the first being

Graham Masterton's *Manitou*), and classic it is indeed. First published in 1985, Laws has updated the text, added some previously cut scenes, and penned a second epilogue – though if you want the colour plates of earlier *Spectre* covers, you'll have to buy the hardback. Laws had, and still has, an excellent grasp of what makes people frightened, and here he uses his full arsenal to chilling effect. The sheer banality of the Byker Chapter's later lives serves to make the supernatural threat stalking them all the more shocking. Events that might turn out ridiculous or comical in the hands of lesser authors are written with skill, verve and above all, confidence. You're left with the unshaken conviction if this happened to you, you'd be scared witless – just like Law's characters.



Familiarity with the horror genre has done nothing to blunt the sharpness and originality of *Spectre*'s twists and turns. The denouement is inevitable and gruesome, appropriately cinematic and pulls no punches. The only weak link is the somewhat convenient Diane. Whilst not a criticism of the character herself, her psychic sensitivity is a touch too handy at times: fighting hidden monsters and guiding others to look in the right places for clues are her forte. Having said that, without her, Richard and the others would have been slaughtered to a man, ignorant of the spell woven around them – and we wouldn't have the fine, fine book that is *Spectre*.

I thoroughly enjoyed the guilty pleasure of wallowing in this genuinely scary supernatural horror, and trust you will too.

[Available from www.telos.co.uk]

Anne & Todd McCaffrey – *Dragon's Kin*

Bantam Press, London, 2003, 292pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 0-593-05287-0

Reviewed by Pamela Stuart

Just what the fans have been waiting for: a book filling in one of those long silent gaps in the history of Pern. It is not clear which of the 'gaps' the story hails from – only that it is sixteen years to the next expected Thread fall, and many of the easier, shallower, coalmines are almost worked out, and the deeper, more dangerous, ones must be opened up. It is possibly intended for the younger readers as there is no 'love interest' (after all, the hero is only eleven Turns old), but it will appeal to all fans whatever their ages.

The watch-whers have always been something of a mystery. They seemed to have started off as an experiment that went wrong when Kitty Ping and her daughter were developing the dragons. They are mentioned in most books as being present in the courtyard at night, acting as watchdogs, but apart from the fact that they are nocturnal and ugly, not much information about them has ever come out. Now we find that they can be blood-bonded to a handler, and used as a cross between a guide dog and a police-dog down in the mines, leading the way through the dark, and sniffing out bad air. They can also fly short distances at night, and can go 'between'. Unlike their dragon-kin, they do not suicide if the handler dies and can be re-bonded to someone else.

In this book, the hero, Kindan, loses his father and most of his

family in a mining disaster, in which the watch-wher also dies. The mine-manager spends a whole year's earnings to obtain a watch-wher egg, and Kindan, as the son of a watch-wher handler, is expected to raise and train it. Poor Kindan had wanted to train as a Harper, but dutifully does his best to bond with the watch-wher and train it. No-one seems to know the full potential of these creatures and even the Harper is not able to find much in the Records. Luckily Nuella, a young girl with a handicap her parents are afraid to have revealed, turns out to have a natural affinity with the creature and in helping Kindan with the training and studies, is finally able to help him follow his own destiny while her own life also changes dramatically.

While the young people are struggling with their unwieldy charge, the adults are engaged in plots and counterplots to ruin the mine-manager, and give the mine to his jealous rival. This faction are also against the presence of the watch-wher whose talents they scoff at, and never miss an opportunity to belittle the creature or its handler, while secretly sabotaging the workings.

This collaboration between Anne McCaffrey and her son has given us a really good tale, and it seems that there will soon be another, from Todd alone. I look forward to it.

Juliet E. McKenna – *Southern Fire*

Orbit, London, 2003, 608pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-166-7

Reviewed by Andrew A. Adams

This is the first of a new series by now-established author Juliet McKenna. It is set in the same world as her earlier *Tales of Einarinn* five book set (but with no indication how many will be in this series). Despite being set in the same world, you really do not need to have read the earlier series. Some of the events of one of the earlier books are mentioned, but a sufficient overview of them is presented naturally within the book as the main character is provided with the information. Those who've read the earlier book will remember the details without feeling bored by the exposition. Those who haven't get enough explanation to follow the current tale.

I found this new beginning rather more difficult to get into than her first novel *The Thief's Gamble*. The main problem is that the society of the Aldabreshin Archipelago is rather nasty. The main character of this book is one of the better ones of the breed but his attitudes still grate from a modern viewpoint. The narrative is written from inside his skull, as it were, and I think this contributes to the difficulty in becoming absorbed in the story, which is actually quite similar in initial structure to the first series: strange magical attacks from a previously unknown source. I have faith that McKenna will bring enough twists and turns into things to prevent this being a repeat performance, however. This similar

starting point is probably (hopefully) a deliberate trick, playing with naive reader's expectation of a *Belgariad/Mallorcan* repetition, lulling them into a false sense of familiarity before hitting them with the unexpected.

By about halfway through, the pace finally picks up enough to distract one from the nature of the society and of the main character (and we meet an old friend along the way). Here again, though, the old 'friend' is not a particularly likable character, which contributes to the disjunction between reader and characters. The finale is predictable in terms of the society presented and does follow a logical narrative flow, leaving an interesting situation to be reconciled. The main thing that's needed is a viewpoint character that one can like and identify with sufficiently. Even Livak's tendency to amorality in the *Tales of Einarinn* was the likable rogue sort. Everyone in this one is a bit too harsh and lacking in modern sensibilities to be truly likable. A good read overall and worth persevering with but not as attention-grabbing as her earlier books: reach exceeding grasp again but then, as JMS once said about *Babylon 5*, if you never fail you're not pushing the envelope hard enough.

Richard Morgan – *Market Forces*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 385pp, £9.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-575-07512-0

Reviewed by Paul N. Billinger

When corporate traders talk of 'making a killing' we assume they are talking metaphorically. But what if they aren't? What if you have to arrive at work, not only early, but with blood on the tires and the only way to gain promotion is to kill those above you? This is the future we are heading for in Richard Morgan's new novel, a departure from his first two, *Altered Carbon* and *Broken Angels*, in that it does not feature Takeshi Kovacs and is set in the mid-twenty first century, not the twenty-sixth.

England, and the world, is splintering: the 'haves' live in idyllic, gated villages and work in the City of London, travelling between them on near-empty motorways in armour-plated

vehicles as road rage has become the norm for both recreation and career progression. The 'have-nots' live in rundown ghettos plagued by crime and drugs, where the main authority figures are the Ganglords. Chris Faulkner is a rarity: not only has he found a way out of the ghetto but he has been taken on by Shorn Conflict Investment, one of the most ruthless financial firms in the City, making money from investing in, and controlling, the many global conflicts and small wars. Being the high-flying new boy Chris is naturally resented by his colleagues, particularly the junior partner Louise Hewitt, with only the violent trader Mike Bryant potentially on his side. Chris has to continue killing to stay in the game, but he has a conscience: his wife Carla. As Chris's involvement with a

power struggle in Central America intensifies, and his relationships with all those around him become more unstable, he is forced to make some hard choices about who he is and what he wants.

Morgan's vision of the way the world, and specifically England, is heading appears depressingly plausible and although the political points he makes are deliberately unsubtle they can be seen as an extreme distortion that is all too easy to extrapolate from the current commercial squabbling over the reconstruction of Iraq. Morgan is very up-front about the politics even going as far as providing a list of books consulted (ranging from Chomsky, to Pilger, to Michael Moore, and covering topics from the future of capitalism to the roots of terrorism). Morgan also acknowledges the influence of films – specifically *Mad Max* and (the original) *Rollerball* – on his vision of the near future, and *Market Forces* could make an equally great film. Expect *Matrix*-style car chases and gunfights crossed with a classic post-apocalypse look.

This is a very skilfully constructed narrative, needing no McGuffin to drive the plot: rather it flows naturally from the events and consequences of the characters' actions. That this works is surprising given the nature of the characters: nasty, scheming, psychotic, self-obsessed and with no restraining

influences. Equally, they are almost all male and all dropped in from a Hollywood action flick. The few female ones are either trying to out-macho the males or are porn star substitutes. The one exception to the predominant female type is Carla who does try to break from the stereotype. The role of the UN throughout the book is underdeveloped with more needed about the motivation and methods of the ombudsmen, global civil servants altruistically trying to help the down-trodden despite being under-resourced and under-appreciated. It is only towards the conclusion that the author's control threatens to collapse with a frantically paced finale, that leaves a number of plot threads poorly resolved.

Morgan's first two novels gathered almost universal praise. Vector 229 was one of the few dissenting voices with Billinger and Mendlesohn describing *Broken Angels* as 'a depressing and soulless read', although they did comment that Morgan could do much better, and indeed he has with this book. The author is very sure of what he is doing, producing a book that has no pretensions to 'art' but is a stylish, frantically paced thriller with even the political polemic well integrated.

Christopher Priest – *The Separation*

Reviewed by Mark Greener

Gollancz, London, 2003, 328pp, £9.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07002-1



Twins Joe and Jack Sawyer return from the 1936 Berlin Olympics with bronze medals for rowing and Birgit – a young Jewish woman, the daughter of a friend of their German-born mother – hidden in their van. During the Second World War, Jack becomes an RAF bomber pilot. Joe marries Birgit, becomes a conscientious objector and joins the Red Cross. He's as much a

'hero' as Jack, saving numerous lives during the Blitz.

Although inseparable in earlier life, the twins are psychologically discordant. Jack is relatively insensitive to the world. Joe is more empathic and thoughtful. Jack isn't told of the plan to smuggle Birgit from Berlin and their paths begin to part significantly at the Olympics. They diverge further once war breaks out. And as their life paths separate so does history. One twin experiences history as we know it. For the other, war ends in 1941 with a Red Cross-brokered peace agreement.

The Separation, originally published by Simon and Schuster as a trade paperback in 2002, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award and BSFA Award but despite this critical success, *The Separation* went out of print almost immediately. The small print run meant that many of us – myself included – couldn't get a copy. Priest bought the book back, and Gollancz republished it. And it's a good thing they did. Priest's work never yields fully to a single reading and *The Separation* demands to be read and re-read. My first impression is, however, that it could be Priest's most mature work.

The Separation is a complex, multifaceted, many-layered novel that defies simple summary. The novel's ambition and scope in carefully unpicking the threads of the web of history is staggering. Indeed, many authors would be overwhelmed trying to communicate that complexity. (God knows, I felt overwhelmed trying to convey the book in a review.) Not Priest: his narrative style is crystal clear. He writes with a light stylistic touch that effectively conveys this often moving story.

This simple style augments the temporal and psychological ambiguities that pervade the book. You can read the narrative in many ways. Is the 1941 time line an idiomatic sf alternate reality following temporal fission? Or is the sense of an alternate history, the feeling of a blurring of reality, a result of traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder?

The separation refers not only to the twins personally, but also to the demarcation between internal and external reality. Unlike many 'alternative histories,' Priest doesn't rely on a sense of time as external to perceptions. He places less emphasis on the visible manifestations of altered history. Rather he focuses on human nature existing beyond and within time. Again, this helps drive the ambiguity. In common with an equivocal gothic, you never quite know whether the fantastic is 'real,' the result of psychological disturbance or both. Indeed, Priest highlights the subjective nature of time and experience lending the book a distinct Proustian feel.

Kierkegaard commented that life can only be lived forwards, but must be understood backwards. And one twin embarks on a protracted bout of bibliotherapy to understand the past and attempt to capture and codify time's subjective nature. I found myself wondering to what extent is this a confabulation: a means of making the past more palatable, if only to himself? As all this suggests, this is a remarkably 'deep' novel.

Unless you're looking for escapism, the main reason to read historical and alternate histories is to gain an insight into current issues. *The Separation* counters the 'conventional' view of Churchill's greatness. Priest neatly encapsulates Churchill's personality and, in particular, his restless energy and larger than life presence. In doing so Priest raises some provocative thoughts.

Roy Jenkins concluded his masterful biography of Churchill by suggesting Winston was the greatest prime minister we've ever had. I can't agree. And Priest challenges the convention, highlighting Churchill's hubris and martial tendencies. (Churchill was, for instance, largely responsible for the slaughter at Gallipoli.) Arrogance, self-confidence and martial prowess were, perhaps, the qualities that made Churchill a 'great' war leader (if that's not an oxymoron). But Priest raises the provocative question about how long these tendencies extended the war. Priest seems to agree with the conclusion I drew after reading Jenkins that the war loaned Churchill a platform from which he could make his mark in history. If Chamberlain had attained peace in our time, would Churchill have become a minor footnote in British political history? Do we regard Churchill as 'great' solely because we defeated the Third Reich, rather than because he was *ipso facto* a great man?

I'd finished Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog* a week or so before I read *The Separation*. Both are set in alternate realities; both deal

with the fallibility of perception and the impermanence of character. Amis has a linguistic virtuosity that Priest lacks. But *The Separation* might be the better book: it's deeper, more profound,

more thought provoking and ultimately more unsettling. *The Separation* isn't just a good sf book. It's a moving and powerful novel from one of the UK's leading writers.

Dan Simmons – *Ilium*

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Gollancz, London, 2003, 576pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07260-1

"O brave new world, That hath such people in it." (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act V)

People have grown so used to their sf in serial form that publishers no longer feel obliged to declare anywhere on a book that it is not complete. So it was with growing despondency that I read the closing chapters of *Ilium*, gradually becoming aware there was no space remaining to conclude the tale; this current volume is the first of a duo which will end with *Olympos*, published later this year. Not that there's so much as a 'To Be Concluded' after this volume's final chapter.

It's therefore impossible to come to any definite conclusions about *Ilium* right now. What can be said is that after six years away from the genre *Ilium* marks Dan Simmons' return to sf, wherein he made his name with the *Hyperion* and *Endymion* books. The approach is essentially the same; a fusion of hi-tech adventurous space-opera with literature's greatest hits.

Previously Simmons grafted a concern with the works of Keats onto the structure of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This time it's Homer's *Iliad* and Wells's *The Time Machine* garnished with Shakespeare's 'Sonnets', characters from *The Tempest* and thematic ideas from Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. There is a lot going on and it takes a lot of pages to begin to get a grasp on events. A multiplicity of characters doesn't make matters easier – as the author acknowledges in his foreword, and by providing a four page *dramatis personae*. So many characters are there, and so many settings, technologies and ideas to introduce, that several hundred pages pass before *Ilium* begins to really ensnare the reader with a sense of urgency. Imaginative, witty and intriguing *Ilium* may be, but it only becomes really engaging and compulsive in the final third.

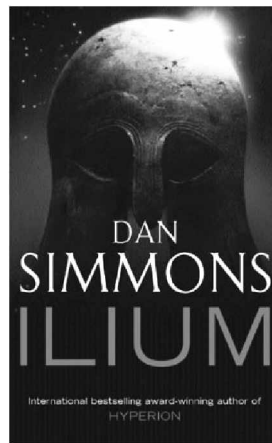
Thomas Hockenberry, a 20th century American academic and expert on the *Iliad*, is essentially a slave to the Greek gods, who for reasons known only to themselves require him and other scholastics to observe and report on the Siege of Troy. Hockenberry can't trust his own faint memories, but believes he has died and been recreated from his DNA sometime in the far future. Quite what the battle is that he is observing only gradually becomes

clear, while the true nature of those taking the roles of the Greek gods is not revealed at all. Certainly they have an array of high technology which suggests their powers are not divine.

On a post-apocalypse Earth the remaining survivors live in luxury; a round of endless parties, sex and social gatherings, their every whim catered for by voynix and servitors as they fax themselves from around the globe with no thought to the purpose of their lives. Harman, who is close to the end of his fifth twenty, and therefore soon due to ascend to the orbital rings to live forever with the post-humans (amid shades of *Logan's Run*), has learnt to read, walked part way through the Atlantic, and is on a quest to find the Wandering Jew. With his companions he wishes to extend his allotted life span (evoking ghosts of *Blade Runner*).

Starting on the moons of Jupiter a party of morovecs (pacifist cyborgs with a fascination for Shakespeare and Proust) set out on a space voyage, which eventually leads to an epic ocean voyage echoing Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity*, to discover the source of dangerous quantum interference in space-time focused on Mount Olympus on Mars. Our two main morovecs, Mahmut and Orphu, have a bantering, playful friendship which cannot fail to remind anyone of R2D2 and C3PO.

Much post-modern fun is to be had, and some of the inventiveness of the story is a sheer delight; though the little green men on Mars are perhaps just one bizarre wonder too far. *Ilium* seems much more simply an ingenious and boldly conceived entertainment than *Hyperion*, wherein the narrative and literary structure were woven together with more serious intent and poetic ambition. Nevertheless the book is a polished and remarkable romp filled with set-pieces which span the range between breathtaking and banal, with some sequences too close to Hollywood formula blockbuster fare for comfort. And perhaps our 20th century academic viewpoint-character having a one-night-stand with Helen of Troy is a bit too much of a tongue-in-cheek wish fulfilment fantasy? *Ilium* doesn't appear to be the great comeback some have suggested, though we shall have to wait until *'Ilium Revolutions'* to know just how good the whole saga really is.



Scott Westerfeld – *The Killing of Worlds*

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Tor, New York, 2003, 336pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30850-9

First up, a warning: if you haven't read *Book One of Succession*, *The Risen Empire* (reviewed in Vector 230), then you need to stop reading this review now and go and read it. I'll see you in a couple of days.

OK, read it? Good. *The Killing of Worlds* takes up exactly where *The Risen Empire* left off and continues in an identical vein, which is to say juxtaposing some hardcore, hard-science, hard-vacuum Golden Age sf with just a little bit of girlie kissing and talking about feelings and sensitive stuff. This is not science fiction for people who don't really like science fiction. If you don't feel a slightly guilty thrill as the cutting edge of scientific extrapolation is heated to a white heat over the Bunsen flame of a cracking story then this is not the book for you. If, however, (like me) you consider yourself a decently intelligent reader in need of

some good old-fashioned pulp heroics then you've come to the right place.

As recounted in *The Risen Empire*, the Empire frigate *Lynx* was just about to make a probably suicidal last stand against a vastly superior battleship of the cyborg Rix in order to stop them revealing the ultimate secret of the Risen Empire – a secret the Emperor is now prepared to sacrifice an entire planet to protect if the *Lynx* should fail (hence the title of this book). But now, as the *Lynx* battles both to complete its mission and to survive, light-years away upon the capital world of the Empire, Nara Oxham – empathic beloved of Laurent Zai, the *Lynx*'s captain, and coincidentally (and most fortuitously) a dissident member of the Senate – is making some discoveries of her own that might just do the Rix's work for them. And about time too, since something is

seriously rotten in the Empire.

Westerfeld has spent a not inconsiderable amount of effort setting up an interesting and believable stage for all this action to take place upon, a stage that many other writers might take significantly more time decorating – and not unjustifiably, since the Risen Empire is only a small (if disproportionately hubristic) part of the small area of the galaxy that has been settled by the varied descendants of humanity. That Westerfeld feels confident enough to use it and apparently discard it now (there is no *Book Three of Succession* planned) suggests either some similarly proportioned hubris on his part or a stunning body of work to

come...

My critical faculties were utterly helpless in the face of Westerfeld's high-tension, jet-propelled narrative. It's just full of straightforward, quick-thinking good guys (and gals!) giving admirable displays of stoical heroics in the midst of savage destruction. Don't spend too much time on the two *Succession* books, but just one or two days ripping through each of them is a pure mainline of entertainment that will make you feel 10 years-old again. Which isn't to say they're simplistic or uncomplicated – far from it: they're just beautifully straightforward.

Walter Jon Williams – *The Sundering*

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Earthlight, London, 2003, 452pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0 7434 6125 8

In the second volume of Williams' space opera series *Dread Empire's Fall*, the Shaa have now gone and there is a civil war between the Naxids and the rest of the Empire over who should rule. The hero of the first volume, Lord Gareth Martinez, starts the book by arranging another brilliant victory for the fleet, which leads to a promotion and resentment amongst some of the Peers.

Meanwhile, the Lady Sula, actually the commoner Credel who has supplanted the real Sula, awaits Martinez's arrival on the capital Zanshaa. A misunderstanding seems to remove any chance of their getting together, but not before they devise a plan to save the capital of the empire from Naxids.

Those with long memories may remember that I was less than enthusiastic about *The Praxis* (see Vector 226), the first volume of the sequence (and indeed seemed to be almost a lone voice amongst reviewers in this): and *The Sundering* has the same strengths and weaknesses. The highest praise remains for the space battles, which take good account of real physical wars. The jockeying for power and patronage within the empire is also rather enjoyable.

Sula/Credel remains the more interesting of the two main characters, having to deal with a past that she is not proud of. Alas, Martinez gets the lion's share of attention in the novel and he really does not improve with closer acquaintance. He is smug,

ambitious, seems never to have met a woman that did not want to sleep with him and is never less than brilliant. I am afraid that an unworthy part of me wanted to see one of his great strategic plans turn into a disaster. Indeed, there is a strange conflict in approaches to the two lead characters: Sula's plans are allowed to fail, grimly and dismally, while Martinez goes from shining success to shining success.

I still have serious problems with the political setup. The Shaa empire was based on terror; worlds were forced to join or be annihilated. After the last of the Shaa dies there is a civil war over who should rule the empire. Nobody ever stops to wonder if the empire is actually worth preserving. However, the title of the sequence is *Dread Empire's Fall*, so maybe Williams plans to address this point later, but there is absolutely no evidence so far.

Still, I am left with a feeling of curiosity about what happens next, as much as anything to see if Williams, a writer I usually admire, will address any of these problems in the future. At the moment the series is distinctly lacking in moral complexity, a situation that I probably would not have minded when I was a teenager, but I now find too simplistic to be satisfying.

(FOR REASONS OF SPACE, THERE IS NO 'PARTICLES' SECTION IN THIS ISSUE OF VECTOR.)

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Reviewers Key: AAA – Andrew A. Adams; AS – Andy Sawyer; CB1 – Cherith Baldry; CB2 – Claire Brialey; CB3 – Colin Bird; CH – Chris Hill; COMLB – Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc; DMR – Dave M. Roberts; GD – Gary Dalkin; GW – Gary Wilkinson; LB – Lynne Bispham; LJH – L.J. Hurst; MG – Mark Greener; PB – Paul Bateman; PNB – Paul N. Billinger; PS – Pamela Stuart; SC – Stuart Carter; SM – Simon Morden.