

# **Vector**

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

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£2.50

*Air • The Algebraist • Banner of Souls  
Cartomancy • Century Rain • City of Pearl  
City of Saints and Madmen • Cloud Atlas  
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## **Review of 2004**

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Gods • Singularity Sky • Song of Susannah  
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Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases  
The Time Traveler's Wife • The Town that  
Forgot How to Breathe • White Apples  
The Year of Our War • Zatoichi*

# Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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All opinions are those of the individual contributors and should not necessarily be taken as the views of the editors or the BSFA

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Self-explanatory, I'd have thought...

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CB – Colin Bird; COMLB – Colin Odell & Mitch Le Blanc;  
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PB – Paul Bateman; PH – Penny Hill; PNB – Paul N. Billinger;  
PS – Pamela Stuart; PY – Pete Young; SC – Stuart Carter;  
SJ – Steve Jeffery; TH – Tom Hunter.

## Editorial

## The View from Alderney – Kenneth Vye Bailey (1914-2005)

As we look back over the year of 2004 with a packed issue of memories from page and screen, it is also our sad duty to look back on the life of K.V.Bailey, who died at the start of 2005. A few things things, and have invited people people pay their own tributes. There is some overlap between what we say – but it bears repeating. We hope to take a look at K.V.B.'s poetry in a future issue of *Vector*.

Back in *Vector* 119 (April 1984), under the editorship of Geoff Rippington, Paul Kincaid judged a competition for articles on sf. It was part of a wider promotion of the twenty best science fiction novels since the war selected by the Book Marketing Council, where the public got to win the book they had written an article on – or something.

The competition elicited ten articles by seven writers, mostly on *The Drowned World* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with a couple more on *The War of the Worlds* or *The Day of the Triffids*. Second place fell to Sue Thomason, L.J.Hurst and Chris Barker, but the winner was K.V.Bailey, with 'Evolution and Revolution: Some Theme-Origins in *The War of the Worlds*' and "There are no Nightmares at the Ritz": An Exploration of *The Drowned World*. The issue prints K.V.B.'s article 'Evolution and Revolution' – "There are no Nightmares" appeared in *V121* (August 1984) – situating the novel partly in ideas from T.H.Huxley, a savvy biographical move, but less obviously (and typically K.V.B.) in William Blake, and in Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution*. The same issue also includes an advert for a volume of poetry, *Other Worlds and Alderney*, written by K.V.B.

Paul Kincaid wrote that 'Bailey is a new name to me. I don't recall ever coming across an article by him, but on the evidence of these two pieces I can only hope that more from K.V.Bailey will be appearing in *Vector* in future' (27). Paul's recall may have been faulty, but his prophecy was not: there was a steady stream of articles – 'From Hell to Paradise: Dantean Motifs in SF and Fantasy' (V152, October 1989), 'Cyber – and some other – Spatial Metaphors' (V159, February/March 1991), "We, Old as History Now...": Henry Treece' (V180, August/September 1994) – and reviews of everyone from Michelle Abbott and Brian Aldiss to Timothy Zahn and Roger Zelazny. He reviewed science fiction, fantasy, children's books, non-fiction, poetry, criticism...

Meanwhile K.V.B. had been ploughing a distinguished furrow across in *Foundation*. In 1979 he had published 'A Prized Harmony: Myth, Symbol and Dialectic in the Novels of Olaf Stapledon' (*Foundation* 15), going on to write on 'Play and Ritual in Science Fiction' (F27), H.G.Wells (F33), *Earthsea* and *Narnia* (F40), Olaf Stapledon (F46) and so on, as well as reviews. In total he made about fifty contributions over twenty-five years to *Foundation* and was just outside the top five contributors to BSFA magazines – in fact, probably the most prolific contributor to both magazines who never held office in either of the journals' supporting committees and organisations.

The last time I edited him – and it was always a formidable act of paranoid fact-checking – was his chapter on Ken MacLeod's poetry for *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod*. K.V.B. produced the work to a ridiculously short deadline, and then never complained at the book's inevitable delays. The typical K.V.B. piece – as if there were any such thing! – might include a reference to astronomy, to a Romantic poet, to a nineteenth century political philosopher, along with alchemy and nature notes. He wore his eclecticism lightly – this was never showing off, just the sort of mind that shuffles from Dante via alchemical thought to Ursula Le Guin. It's obvious once he's thought it. We came from the same place, just half a county and half a century apart, and his Nottingham could be as vivid as my own childhood memories –

the inn carved into the Castle Rock, the abandoned upper and lower London Road Stations (now ignominiously renamed Hooters, a night club), the ghost of Victoria Station, now just a clock tower, a bricked gnomon licking up against the commerce of the shopping centre. (These days they leave the station in the shopping centre, but no one wanted trains in the late 1960s.)

I met him only the once – I was a youth not knowing the meaning of the word callow, he was approaching 80, but still remarkably, formidably sharp. I think it was at a Mexican, and we had time for one, maybe two conversations. I confess I forget what we talked about – but then it seemed there was time for a hundred conversations. We had them in places like Acnestis, and in *Vector* and *Foundation*, occasionally in *Focus*.

What struck me – aside from his encyclopedic knowledge – was his continuing enthusiasm for the genre. Every book that K.V.B. reviewed had some redeeming feature that he could point to and extract, something to glean from labours of love and commerce. All our sympathies here at *Vector* go to Janet and his family. The world will be a colder place for his passing.

— Andrew M. Butler, Canterbury, February 2005

**Andy Sawyer (librarian of Science Fiction Foundation Collection and former editor, *Paperback Inferno*)**

K.V.Bailey, who died on 3 January 2005 aged 90 following complications from a broken hip, was one of our most respected critics and reviewers, a very fine poet, and a friend to many of us. You had to love somebody who named their house 'Triffids', but K.V. was one of those wonderful figures who appear in the science fiction world and illuminate it.

An Oxford graduate, a World War Two veteran (working on the infamous 'Burma Railway' as a prisoner of war, an experience he rarely if ever mentioned to his friends in the sf world) and an Education Officer for the BBC, Kenneth Vye Bailey wrote several books on education and broadcasting, including at least one book for children about the solar system, *The Earth is Your Spaceship* (Faber, 1959). I never came across it as a child, but it would have been wonderful if I had, to have learned from its lucid enthusiasm and then as an adult to have counted its author as a friend.

K.V. turned to writing critical articles and reviews following his retirement. He appeared in *Foundation* with 'A Prized Harmony: Myth, Symbol and Dialectic in the Novels of Olaf Stapledon', (*Foundation* 15 (January 1979), pp. 53-66) and won a BSFA essay competition with 'Evolution and Revolution: Some Theme-Origins in *The War of the Worlds*' in *Vector* 119 (April 1984), by which time he was living in retirement in Alderney with his wife Janet. He wrote numerous essays and reviews for *Foundation* and *Vector*, and was also a regular contributor to *Paperback Inferno*, which I edited in the 1980s following Joseph Nicholas and Phil Stephensen-Payne who established the 'zine; and according to statistics was the sixth most regular contributor to BSFA publications – the others are 'uncredited', Paul Kincaid, Joseph Nicholas, Phil Stephensen-Payne, and er... oh all right: me. He was one of my most valuable reviewers although we only met once, at a conference on Olaf Stapledon at Liverpool University some years before the SF Foundation Collection came here.

His essays and reviews were marked by a deep knowledge and love of literature, particularly a strong sense of place which spilled over into his poetry. Reading K.V., you understood what the 'sense of wonder' which brings us into sf was: by no means something cheap and juvenile but something approaching the sublime. His poems evoked that sense of 'wild surmise' he recalls in a short poem on H. G. Wells's 'The Crystal Egg', but also included marvellously witty parodies of sf themes recast as nursery rhymes. They were also technically adept, using sophisticated verse forms like the triolet, an eight-line verse in which the first line is used

three times and the second line is repeated once. He published widely in both genre and non-genre outlets, and his poems were collected in at least seven self-published booklets of verse.

But above all it was his humanity which brought him so many friends. He knew much, loved what he knew, and shared this love generously. Through his contributions to *Foundation*, the BSFA magazines, and the *Acnestis* APA he enriched my life. I always felt encouraged by him. The announcement in the *Daily Telegraph* of 12th January says that he was 'writing book reviews until a few weeks before his death'. Almost certainly, one of these was his review of Paul McAuley's *White Devils*, published in the latest issue (92) of *Foundation*. Many of us will miss him immensely. I wish I could have said good-bye. – 21 January 2005

**Paul Kincaid (former reviews editor, *Vector*; former editor, *Steam Engine Time*)**

Back in the early '80s, when I was helping Geoff Rippington edit *Vector*, we decided to hold an essay competition as a way of trying to attract a few more contributors to the magazine. It worked; we added quite a few names to our roster of contributors and reviewers. But it was pretty clear, right from the moment we received it, which essay was going to win the prize. It was a piece about *The War of the Worlds* and it came from K.V. Bailey.

I remember crowing with delight when we published the winning essays in the April 1984 issue, only for someone from *Foundation* to point out that he'd already appeared in that journal. Okay, so he wasn't my discovery, but it was still good to find someone who would become one of our most reliable contributors.

It was the way he used language that made his pieces such a delight to read. He had a way with adverbs that had a pleasing and slightly old-fashioned feel to it (I did not know at the time that this wonderful new writer was already approaching 70), and as the reviews that now flowed steadily from him would demonstrate, he combined a lively interest in every aspect of the genre with an uncanny ability to say something fresh, revealing and usually positive about every book he read. His learning was broad, he could talk with equal facility about the Romantics and the cyberpunks, but it was always lightly carried and displayed only where it would enhance the point he was making.

After that first encounter with his writing I met him several times as he started coming over to conventions in Britain. I was surprised to discover he was a lot older than I had imagined, but I was not surprised to discover he was one of the most delightful of companions. If he was around I would always make a point of getting together with him, because the conversation was guaranteed to be witty, wide-ranging, and unfailingly fascinating.

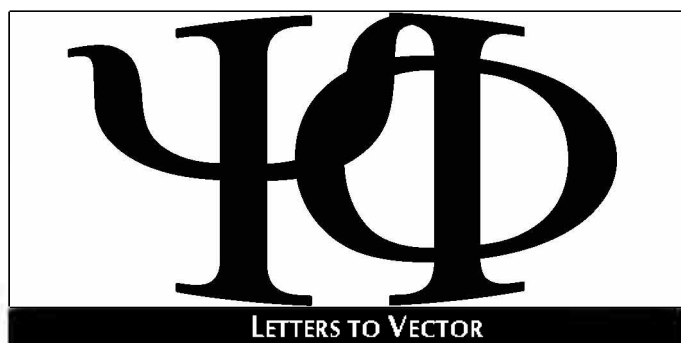
Even when age and health meant that he wasn't able to travel from Alderney as often as he had before, there was no diminution in the flow of articles and reviews. Right up until the end he was producing work that was required reading. I will miss his poetry, his precise observations of the changing seasons in the Channel Islands, and above all his lively and sympathetic reports on science fiction.

**Steve Jeffery (former reviews editor, *Vector*)**

It was a terrible shock to hear of Kenneth's death. Everyone who knew him will feel saddened and diminished by his loss. We have known Kenneth, mainly through correspondence, for nearly fifteen years, almost as long as we have been involved in fandom. He has been a constant presence in nearly all the fannish activities we have got involved in, from his learned and scholarly articles and reviews in *Foundation* and the magazines of the BSFA to APAs, fanzines and poetry magazines and anthologies. In between, although less so in recent years after his eye problems, a continual stream of long, delightful, eclectic, thought-provoking (and sometimes frankly intimidatingly erudite) letters, on subjects as diverse as William Blake, shamanism, music, poetry, Renaissance Hermeticism (we shared an appreciation of the works of Dame Frances Yates), the cabbalah, transport, Birmingham, stamps, and of course sf, fantasy and books. There didn't seem to be a single subject that Kenneth wasn't knowledgeable about, couldn't drop in an apposite reference or quotation to (he either had a frighteningly enviable memory, or a highly effective filing system) or an entertaining personal anecdote. We first encountered Kenneth back in 1988 or 1989 when Vikki and I were running the *Inception* magazine and fan club for Storm Constantine and Kenneth sent us a long letter – the first of many – that unfolded onto the complex interrelationship between hermaphrodism, alchemy, the tarot, different versions of the Adam and Eve myth and angelic lore, and thence to John Dee, Bruno, Pico della Mirandola, and Frances Yates. I don't think I'd ever had a letter like that in my life, and I knew, even before I discovered Kenneth's numerous other interests and activities, that he was someone special. We only met once that I can remember, at a convention – possibly an Eastercon or a Mexicon – around 1990 or '91, and he proved as delightful and charming in person as he was on the page. (At the time I probably struck him as young, gauche and tongue-tied, though he was kind enough not to mention it.) We always hoped to meet again, and had vague plans and an open invitation to visit him and his wife Janet on Alderney. Sadly, we will never be able to now. I was really pleased to be asked by Kenneth to illustrate his poetry collection *The Vortices of Time* and he proved equally astute in his comments and suggestions on how various different elements of various cover illustrations I supplied could be combined to echo lines and images from his poems.

Everyone, in their life, should know someone like Kenneth. It improves them immensely. Sadly, these days, such people are all too rare, and their stock has just been hugely diminished.

We will miss him greatly: those wonderful descriptions of the landscape and seasons, and the flora and fauna of Alderney; the always apposite quotations; and the freewheeling, eclectic, scholarly and, above all, generous and fun intellect that could turn itself to Egan and Baxter as readily as to Blake and Tennyson. There are people you envy, for their intellect and learning as well as their generous souls and their delight in the world around them. Kenneth was one of those, a rare breed.



In V238, Paul N. Billinger asked for feedback on his reviews policy.

**From Gary Dalkin**

Regarding your editorial in *Vector* 238, there's an interesting contrast with Karen Traviss's *Rage Against... snobbery!* which occupies the back page of *Matrix* 170. Traviss, fired up about wookie books, writes "Enter the New Snobbery: not all SF/F is equal. By creating an internal hierarchy, we the despised can find someone to actually look down upon within our own ranks." Well, of course not all SF/F is equal. Some of it is garbage, some brilliant, most, somewhere in-between. If it was all equal we would be as

well served choosing books by length or price, and there would be absolutely no need for reviews.

In your editorial you solicit our views on reviewing so much mainstream material in the current *Vector*. Well, given there is insufficient space to review everything, as editor you must to an extent prejudge the books which are submitted – or else pretend all SF/F is equal and allot as much wordage to the latest *Clangers* tie-in novel as to something by Banks, Hamilton, Baxter or an interesting 'mainstream' writer clearly working with genre elements in a way which will interest the membership of the BSFA. And therein lies the rub; judging the interest of the audience. Certainly there is a market for reviews of wookie books and routine formula fare, but I would argue that, given the limitation of space I have referred to, the task of a *Vector* book reviews editor is to determine how interesting each submitted book is likely to be to *Vector's* readership, and allot it the appropriate amount of space. Personally I am all in favour of more coverage of thoughtful, imaginative, intelligent, well written SF/F novels, regardless of whether they happen to fall within genre marketing categories or otherwise. As for wookie books. I don't despise them, but I don't have much interest in reading them.

I did find it a little odd that *Cloud Atlas* received two reviews, particularly when *The Dark Tower*, a summation of the career of one of the greatest fantasy writers ever, Stephen King, didn't so much as receive a Recommended Read award. For all its flaws *The Dark Tower* is a breathtaking piece of work, and when taken in the overall context of both King's career and American literature, a simply astonishing read. The ambition of the entire *Dark Tower* sequence is mind-boggling, and King's achievement one to be celebrated far and wide. Not since *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* has genre fantasy been so satisfying. ☐

#### From Steve Jeffery

I read your reviews editorial on the inclusion of 'mainstream' books within *Vector* with interest. Well, personally, I'm all in favour of casting the net wide to include works which aren't published as sf – especially in light of the fact that works that used to be listed in publishers' catalogues as genre items are increasingly being listed under a general fiction heading, which I think is more to do with marketing tactics than any change in their content. Of the UK houses, only Gollancz now seemingly acknowledge a specific genre arm.

And we've never been particularly exclusive, back to when Paul Kimcaid was editor (and probably beyond that). It's just that of late the left-field books seem to be getting more interesting (Mitchell, Carey, Ghosh, DeLillo, Chabon). While I hope *Vector* reviews would continue to cover the best new stuff more broadly than *Foundation* can, and in more detail than either *SFX* or *Interzone* (which now has only a 400 word limit), there's a lot of stuff out there that will find its own audience whatever we say, so my view is that the space is better used by concentrating on the more important titles (especially the BSFA/Clarke shortlists) and new works in and on the edge of genre that impress us and we hope will impress adventurous readers.

Also, I have no problem with duplicated reviews of the same work. It's carried perhaps to excess in *Locus* where three or four people might review the same book in the same or consecutive issues, but it's interesting when their opinions differ. Perhaps not so useful if both reviews say essentially the same thing (in which case second or third reviews might be better put on the web site and readers directed there). In this case though (with *Cloud Atlas*) I think it works. I'm still trying to find a copy of this in the local library (I daren't buy anything this close to Xmas) but it seems extremely popular as all the copies seem to have been out on loan for the last three weeks, ever since I read Paul Kimcaid's glowing review in *Acnestis*.

Likewise, Harvey's *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe*. Reading this review I had a clear sense of it being in Jonathan

Carroll territory, or possibly Jeffery Ford (I must find a copy of *The Physiognomy*) or, knowing Paul, between Millhauser and Erickson. ☐

*Paul N. Billinger responds:* I'm grateful for the comments from Gary and Steve as they do help me to formulate the editorial policy for the *Vector* reviews column, part of which is to be as inclusive as possible irrespective of what label any book is published under. I take Steve's point about the duplicate reviews being included when they have very different view points and opinions. Sometimes, however, an interesting review comes in when we've already commissioned our 'official' one and it's difficult to decide just to use one.

Gary makes a very valid point about King's *The Dark Tower* not being awarded a 'recommended read' for the issue. This was a difficult decision as it has been my policy to award no more than five each issue (sometimes fewer) and there was strong competition in V238. My intention with introducing the 'recommended reads' was to try to highlight not only books which the reviewer thought were especially good, but also to raise the profile of less established authors and publishers. When making the decision in this case I was mindful that I had made the sixth volume, *Song of Susannah*, a recommended read in V237, but this is always going to be a – my – judgement call. Certainly the reviews of *The Dark Tower* books, and the comments made on them in the Best Books of 2004 in this issue, make a compelling case for the quality of the series (one which I've been meaning to start since buying the first many years ago....).

We have been covering few wookie books in the main column, partly as a deliberate policy and partly as the publishers have been submitting fewer for review. But if we ever did have a *Clangers* tie-in novel then this would get significant coverage: I can think of a number of people – myself included – who would be clamouring to review it!

*But if anyone has other views please let me know.*

*And now a letter from closer to home:*

#### From Andrew M. Butler

I'm writing because I'm at my wit's end. I've been editing features for *Vector* since the Summer of 1995, and every time I've submitted an article or a review it has been signed 'Andrew M. Butler'. I have various reasons for this, including but not limited to the fact that there is actually an Andrew [no middle initial] Butler involved in Tolkien fandom who probably doesn't want to be confused with me (could you blame him?). I accept that in person people call me Andy or Andrew (despite the fact that I'm usually more likely to identify myself as the latter), but in print it is always Andrew M.

So imagine my horror, after nearly fifty-five issues with my name on it, to see that Andrew Butler has been given the blame for my contributions on the contents page of V239. Before that – and I mentioned it then – V238 apparently featured both of us. I know you are all doing this in your spare time, and you seem to be doing a marvellous job, but please get it right in future.

P.S. *Matrix* seem to have someone else listed as Orbiter co-ordinator from *Vector*. Will the real co-ordinator stand up?

*AMB responds:* I can only apologise, and suggest to the editors that they put 'Andrew M Butler' on the auto-correct feature of Word. My hope is that the printing of this letter will be sufficiently embarrassing that when everyone now turns to p. 2 to see who wrote the editorial, it will, miraculously, be....

Letters to *Vector* should be sent to Andrew M. Butler, Dept of Media, Canterbury Christ Church University College, Canterbury, CT1 1QU or emailed to [ambutler@enterprise.net](mailto:ambutler@enterprise.net) and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.

# Books of the Year: 2004

edited by Paul N. Billinger

## INTRODUCTION

Each year the Vector Reviews Editor conducts a truly unscientific, subjective survey to try to present an overview of the books of the last year. And it is a very inclusive survey as each person is specifically asked not to restrict themselves to 'genre' books but to consider all the books they read during the year, not limiting themselves to books first published during 2004. And it's not even accurate to call this the 'reviewers poll of the year' as, in line with our usual practice, I asked not only Vector reviewers for a contribution but also people involved in the running of the BSFA and even a couple of guest authors. So it's little wonder that the resulting selection is diverse. What's more surprising is that, given the – deliberately – wide criteria, there is any consensus at all. But there is, and perhaps more so than in other years.

Initially there was anything but consensus – early submissions appeared to support my feeling that 2004 had not been a year with just a few stand-out books but rather that the pool of excellent books was wide and deep. In the end the poll includes responses from thirty-two people who suggested 117 different titles, twenty-four of which received two or more votes. The number of people and the number of different books was similar to previous years but this year had a higher proportion of books with more than a single vote.

The final poll, however, did have a clear winner: Ian McDonald's brilliantly vibrant account of a near-future India, *River of Gods*. I have to confess to not being unbiased here. *River of Gods* pushes just about all my buttons: the proof arrived for review only a couple of weeks after Elizabeth and I returned from a trip to India where we had visited many of the places included within the novel – Varanasi today has just the same mesmerising effect that McDonald's future version has. I'm especially pleased that it has gained favour with a wide readership. *River of Gods* was reviewed in full in Vector 237.

In second place is *The System of the World*, Neal Stephenson's conclusion to his massive *Baroque Cycle*, of which the first volume, *Quicksilver*, won the 2003 Arthur C. Clarke Award. There are some competing arguments that this is just one – huge – book split into three, although having just started *Quicksilver* I'm less convinced about it being sf. *The System of the World* is reviewed in full in the main column of this issue

(and yes Stuart, you have finally persuaded me to start on the trilogy).

In third place is Susanna Clarke's debut novel *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, one which I always suspected would do well, and one which is fully justified in its high placing. Tom Hunter reviewed the book in Vector 238, where he was very impressed indeed. And in fourth place, despite only being published in November, is *Stamping Butterflies* by Jon Courtenay

Grimwood (who came top of last year's poll with *Felaheen*, which also won the BSFA Best Novel of 2003). This is a beautifully intricate novel and was reviewed in Vector 238.

Of the other titles with more than one vote we can see a varied mix between genre titles, 'mainstream' ones and some non-fiction titles (there are many other non-fiction titles within the full selection) although Young Adult titles are less noticeable this year. It's also encouraging for British sf that we continue to produce excellent 'new' authors who are starting to be recognised in the poll: for example Liz Williams (whose latest title, *Banner of Souls*, is reviewed in this issue's main column), Karen Traviss (despite not having a UK publisher) and Charles Stross (whose *Singularity Sky* very nearly made it into my selection). And our more established stars, Iain M. Banks, Ken MacLeod, China Miéville, Alastair Reynolds, et al, also continue to do well, again demonstrating the strength and breadth of British genre talent. The awards shortlists for 2004 are just as diverse and wide-ranging as the selections of our poll here, with only one common title, *River of Gods*, whereas in some years there have been four or even five common

## VECTOR POLL FOR BEST BOOKS OF 2004

(titles with more than 1 vote)

### 8 VOTES

Ian McDonald, *River of Gods* (Simon & Schuster, 2004)

### 6 VOTES

Neal Stephenson, *The System of the World* (Heinemann, 2004)

### 5 VOTES

Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (Bloomsbury, 2004)

### 4 VOTES

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Stamping Butterflies* (Gollancz, 2004)

### 3 VOTES

China Miéville, *Iron Council* (Macmillan, 2004)

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (Sceptre, 2004)

Geoff Ryman, *Air* (St. Martin's Press, 2004)

Jeff VanderMeer & Mark Roberts (eds.), *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases* (Macmillan, 2004)

### 2 VOTES

Iain M. Banks, *The Algebraist* (Orbit, 2004)

Jasper Fforde, *The Eyre Affair* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2001)

John M. Ford, *The Heat of Fusion* (Tor, 2004)

Mary Gentle, *1610: A Sundial in a Grave* (Gollancz, 2003)

Elizabeth Hand, *Mortal Love* (Morrow, 2004)

Stephen King, *The Dark Tower* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2004)

Ken MacLeod, *Newton's Wake* (Orbit, 2004)

Gavin Menzies, *1421* (Bantam, 2003)

Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife* (Cape, 2004)

Alastair Reynolds, *Absolution Gap* (Gollancz, 2003)

Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built* (Faber & Faber, 2002)

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

Charles Stross, *Singularity Sky* (Orbit, 2004)

Karen Traviss, *City of Pearl* (Eos, 2004)

Jeff VanderMeer, *City of Saints and Madmen* (Tor UK, 2004)

Liz Williams, *Banner of Souls* (Bantam, 2004)

titles. (Has there ever been a year when the BSFA and Clarke award shortlists have been the same?)

In conclusion I'd recommend that you don't just look at the books that came at the top of the poll but also study the individual selections from the reviewers. I know that whilst editing this piece I've been adding titles to my reading list (with *The Time Traveler's Wife* to follow should I ever finish *Quicksilver*...).

Paul N. Billinger – Vector Reviews Editor  
Everdon, February 2005



### CHERITH BALDRY

Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (Bloomsbury, 2004). This stands head and shoulders above anything else that I've read this year. The plot is complex and compelling, the characters are engaging, and the use of magic original. There's a perfect marrying of style and subject matter, and a wonderful wry humour.

Mary Gentle, *1610: A Sundial in a Grave* (Gollancz, 2003). This reads like a historical novel of the early seventeenth century, with the additional speculation of what might have happened if it were possible to predict and therefore manipulate the future. It has a strong plot and characters and a vividly realised background. Gentle's versions of real historical characters, particularly James I and Cecil, are impressive.

Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky* (Doubleday, 2004). Though I also read the new adult novel, *Going Postal*, I'm going to plump for the children's book because I think it's more successful of its kind. Pratchett never patronises young readers, and as well as telling an exciting and funny story he conveys difficult ideas – for example about death – in ways that are accessible to a young audience.

Brian Aldiss, *Affairs at Hampden Ferrars* (Little Brown, 2004). I don't really know what to make of this book. It's surreal, funny, creepy, and a perfect celebration of Englishness. A delight.

John Matthews, *Merlin* (Mitchell Beazley, 2004). A non-fiction book. Matthews can be a bit New-Agey, but this is a beautifully produced and illustrated overview of the various incarnations of Merlin, including a comprehensive section on modern versions, and the translation of some original material.

### PAUL BATEMAN

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon (Vintage, 2003) was 2004's second biggest selling book in Britain and it's a credit to the author and the readership that such a simple, but well-crafted tale of an emotionally detached boy investigating a dog's murder should be so successful.

Over the past few years J.G. Ballard has gained a position as one of my top 10 authors but, giving other authors a chance, I've restricted myself to just one Ballardian work, *Millennium People* (HarperCollins, 2003), simply because it's the latest. This completes his loose trilogy that started with *Cocaine Nights* and continued with *Super-Cannes*, concerning the increase in violence among the bored and disenchanted middle-classes, only this time in London instead of on the Continent. Like most of his work, it's about those who revel in the breakdown of society and the ensuing chaos, practically the same story he's been telling for over forty years: but since few dare to write it, few are so in tune with our society and even fewer can write so well, why shouldn't he keep warning us?

On the subject of violence and our consumer society, another favourite of others' lists last year rears its head in mine. Tricia Sullivan's *Maul* (Orbit, 2003), its double strands mirroring and inverting each other between chapters brilliantly.

Since reading the *Mars* trilogy I have been impressed with Kim Stanley Robinson's breadth of research, not just technological, but cultural as well, even if he seems to have an aversion to anything British. *The Years of Rice and Salt* (HarperCollins, 2003) was a refreshing change in the alternate history novel. Few could have considered an Eastern-based history so well, recounting the ages through the reincarnation of a handful of characters, in many ways following a pattern similar to our history of scientific discovery, trench warfare and the rise

of feminism, among others. Good literature not only entertains, it enriches our knowledge and place in the world. This book gave me a better understanding of how billions of people live and where they came from than a variety of sociological and religious texts ever could.

You know it has to be good when art imitates life: the great Chinese admiral and eunuch, Zhang He, turns up in *The Years of Rice and Salt* and features in my next recommendation, Gavin Menzies's *1421* (Bantam, 2003). *1421* is a work of non-fiction depicting how the Chinese were great explorers a good half-century before the Europeans, the author drawing heavily on his experience as a submarine captain to back up his arguments concerning navigation and maritime exploration where a boatload of scholars would be found wanting. Like *The Years of Rice and Salt*, *1421* has changed my naive and prejudiced view of world history and society.

### ELIZABETH A. BILLINGER

'In India' remarked Ian McDonald at the Cheltenham Festival 'everything is turned up to 11'. I've been there, and I've seen how right he is. I've read *River of Gods* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) and found that he sees India's future just as clearly as he observes its present. It's a big colourful country and McDonald gives it the big colourful book it deserves; both are crowded with larger than life characters, with complex systems of class, manners and religions, and with a jarring mix of advanced technology and abject poverty.

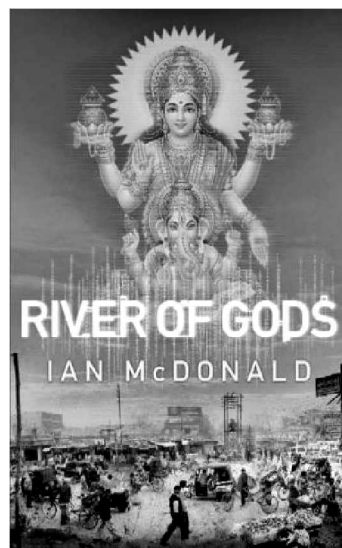
By contrast, Alice Hoffman's *Green Angel* (Scholastic, 2003) is a slim, cool book (a very beautiful book) that carries the weight and power of a fairy tale as it documents a girl's withdrawal after her family are caught up in the destruction of the nearby city, the toughened exterior she creates for herself with thorns and tattoos in order to face the lawless

world of survivors, and her slow, tentative rebirth. It's a post-holocaust tale, a post 9/11 tale, told by a poet.

*Shattering Glass* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) by Gail Giles is also a short book, the shortness a testament to the author's enormous skill. This is a tale of teenaged boys, of manipulation, peer pressure and inexorable consequences. Simon Glass is a textbook geek; Rob Haynes views life as game, a game he has to win, no matter what the effect on others. The book is narrated from a first person viewpoint, but each chapter is headed by a quotation from one of the other characters in the book, undermining the narrator and referring to events the main narrative has not yet revealed. From the outset we have a fair idea of the eventual outcome; the fascination is in watching how we get there.

Steven Sherrill's *The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break* (Cannongate, 2003) is a typical tale of small town America, of trailer trash and born losers. Well, it would be typical were the main character anyone but The Minotaur, not actually slain by Theseus but working as a cook in North Carolina. Sherrill mixes myth with a description of restaurant work as frenetic, seedy and unappetising as Anthony Bourdain's wonderful *Kitchen Confidential*.

It is surprising that *How I Live Now* (Penguin, 2004) was written by an American woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because Meg Rosoff has captured completely the tone and spirit of the British cosy catastrophe novel. This story is set in Britain in the present, but the country is subject to an invasion or occupation. We don't learn many details of the political situation, of who the enemy is, because the novel is narrated from the perspective of a young teenaged girl whose preoccupation is with herself, her newly



discovered family, and their survival. The return to an agrarian lifestyle, the struggle to remain hidden and avoid capture, the changes in human behaviour are all familiar territory, it's the unique and authentic voice of the narrator that makes this a moving and compelling book.

#### PAUL N. BILLINGER

For me there were two exceptional genre novels published this year, Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Stamping Butterflies* (Gollancz, 2004) and Ian McDonald's *River of Gods* (Simon & Schuster, 2004). Both have an amazing ability to project a time and place – Marrakech in the summer of 1969 in Grimwood's and India of 2047 in McDonald's – coupled with vivid characterisation, incredibly intricate plotting ... and advanced theoretical physics. But each approaches this very differently. McDonald throws in everything possible to produce a sprawling, overcrowded, richly chaotic novel, much like India itself. McDonald's narrative skill in controlling his multi-viewpoint cast and his use of complex, rhythmic language (just) manages to control the sheer amount of ideas to give a memorable and moving novel. Grimwood, however, uses surgical skill to interweave his three plotlines, which appear to be past (Marrakech), present (but not ours) and (far) future: but whose, and how do they interact? Grimwood resolves the many dilemmas using passion, anger and pain, and, like McDonald, comments as much on today's political events as those in his alternate vision.

I was greatly anticipating books from two of my favourite mainstream authors and neither disappointed. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (Sceptre, 2004) is a book of many middles: from a traveller crossing the Pacific Ocean of 1850, through Belgium between the wars and on into the future to arrive at a post-catastrophe civilisation. And then back again. The interactions and effects of each part on (all) the others is a joy to discover in a book that may infuriate some – but should be read by all.

*The Hungry Tide* (HarperCollins, 2004) by Amitav Ghosh is a very different book: restrained, subtle and small scale. The story may appear slight, using the search for the Irawaddy dolphins around India's Sundarban islands to tell the history of the people and the region. But don't be deceived: this is a beautiful, moving story from a stunning writer. It's also tragically poignant following the Asian Tsunami as it is the devastating effects of tides and floods that permeates the novel.

My final selection is Sarah Macdonald's autobiography of her return to India, *Holy Cow!* (Bantam, 2004). After giving-up a high-profile media job in Australia she finds herself compelled to experience and investigate the many faiths co-existing in India. The title and cover art might lead you to believe that this would be a superficial, light-hearted and condescending look at these religions. It's not. What we do have is a moving personal journey thought doubt and self-examination with no simple answers. At times the events appear almost too intense and fantastical – until you remember that this is India with all its extremes. Another book touched by tragic events, but laced with just the right level of humour to give a fascinating insight into a people and its culture.

#### CLAIRE BRIALEY

We all have our own definitions of science fiction, but mine hasn't followed the popular trend of expanding to include any literature of ideas which I happen to enjoy. So it's probably unsurprising that three of my favourite books from 2004 have in common an uncompromising genre identity.

The first of the others is *The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Joy Fowler (Viking, 2004). Here's an author who has on other

occasions written sf, and who includes amongst her cast of almost implausibly human characters a personable and unabashed science fiction fan. It's a very well-observed book, whether you're a fan of Jane Austen or someone who hadn't realised they'd probably like her novels too; it's well-paced, skilfully structured, edgily witty and shiveringly poignant. But you know what? It isn't science fiction.

Francis Spufford's *Backroom Boys* (Faber & Faber, 2003) provides a fascinating history of British ingenuity, tenacity and sometimes eccentricity without being overwhelmed by nostalgia for a past that we shouldn't be aiming to recapture or which never really happened anyway. It's about science. It quotes science fiction writers. It includes amongst its own cast people who have read or even written science fiction themselves. And it ends with a chapter on *Beagle*, published before anyone knew what would happen if it reached Mars, which moves me to tears for the future that wasn't to be. But it isn't about science fiction. At most it's a fellow-traveller: a book which many science fiction fans would also enjoy.

By way of contrast, *River of Gods* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) by Ian McDonald is a science fiction epic, constructed from the individual stories, fears, hopes and beliefs of a host of characters experiencing the centenary year of India's independence when the gods are very definitely within the machines. Its sense of place seems to appeal to those unfamiliar with the geography and culture of the Indian sub-continent as much as to those who recognise how McDonald has relished his research, while in this future characters grapple with the Otherness of artificial intelligence and neuter sexuality which have succeeded oppression through caste and Empire.

*Century Rain* (Gollancz, 2004) – the first of Alastair Reynolds's novels to truly stand alone – blends characters and plots from a near-future post-apocalyptic solar system with those from what appears to be Earth from a recent past following a curtailed and thus less devastating Second World War. Impossible to resist the mix of hard astronomy, parallel dimensions, time travel, detective fiction and jazz.

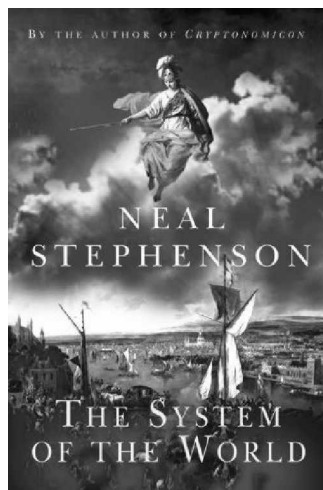
Finally, in *Stamping Butterflies* (Gollancz, 2004) Jon Courtenay Grimwood also delivers a stand-alone science fiction novel with several intertwining strands. In this case the full extent of the sub-plots' linkage, and thus the underpinning structure for the narrative vision, is revealed only gradually, as the action sweeps through time and space to take in the recent past of Marrakech, the near future of Europe and America, and the science fictional possibilities of space. There's so much in it and it's so compelling that I may have to break a self-imposed rule and read it again.

#### ANDREW M. BUTLER

With writing some encyclopaedia entries and a couple of articles and chapters, most of my sf reading has been re-reading older stuff rather than keeping up with the ongoing scene. Top of these re-reads were Joanna Russ and Gillian Rubinstein (aka Lian Hearn, or, rather, vice versa), but it would not be right to cite them. As usual I feel I need to reflect the children's and crime fiction I have also been reading rather than sticking to listing just sf, fantasy or horror.

So more or less the only new sf I've read was Karen Traviss's *City of Pearl* (Eos, 2004), a novel which I found satisfactorily complex and ambiguous in terms of first contact with alien civilisations.

In fact my fairly low total of roughly sixty books read in 2004 can be proven by the fact that one of the first books I completely read last year – having been bogged down in numerous (and





often frankly barking) biographies of local boy Christopher Marlowe – was Charles Butler's *The Fetch of Mardy Watt* (Collins, 2004), a Garneresque fantasy which I looked at around Easter. Butler's written several more, and I have now got a couple of them, and I look forward to finding the time to read these as well. I've had a pile of unread Clifford D. Simak for at least a decade now and treated myself to a couple, the best being *All Flesh is Grass* (Pan, 1968), an unashamedly old-fashioned, village isolated from world by alien weird stuff sort of thing novel. The hero wanting to beat people up every few pages was a little odd, but nobody's perfect.

I also treated myself to large swathes of the recent back catalogues of crime writers Val McDermid and Christopher Brookmyre, swallowing the latter's *The Sacred Art of Stealing* (Abacus, 2002) more or less in a single sitting in the back garden as the light faded. Any book featuring dadaist bank robbers gets my vote, and Brookmyre has clearly been watching Michael Mann's *Heat* as it's unclear whether you should be rooting for the cop or the criminal.

Finally, Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (Viking, 2004) is a moving, angry, savage and savvy meditation on life in the Bush Empire on and after 9/11; eleven tableaux printed on card which folds out to the size of a single broadsheet page, along with illustrated meditations on methods and inspirations from earlier comics. You know, not for kids.

#### STUART CARTER

Iain M. Banks, *The Algebraist* (Orbit, 2004). Surely if it's an Iain M. Banks year then you barely even need to read the book to know it's going to the top of the list? As usual I dropped everything to read *The Algebraist*, and as usual it was superlative: effortless sf, overflowing with ideas, humour and wondrous things. Nobody in the world is as good as Banks, nobody seems to have thought their universe through as thoroughly as he has, and most importantly, nobody seems to have so much unadulterated fun in doing so. We need to kidnap this man and force him to write more. Seriously...

China Miéville, *Iron Council* (Macmillan, 2004). Miéville's *Iron Council* only comes below *The Algebraist* in this list because it's not quite as effortless a read. It's just as gripping, perhaps even more fiercely intelligent, and leaks ideas all over the floor like an old dog, but it just loses out to Banks because Miéville's predilection for those lovely, obscure old words, whilst an essential aspect of his style, sometimes works to clog up the book's arteries a little. Otherwise, this howlingly political tale represents the very very best in fantasy writing today, and – fingers crossed – may serve to blow some more of the suffocating dust off those shelves buckling under the weight of inane decalogies in the nation's bookshops.

Neal Stephenson, *The Baroque Cycle* (Heinemann, 2003, 2004, 2004). A trilogy book, not science fiction, often barely even fiction – somebody call the genre police! If you have the time and the patience, and if, as I do, you like to be educated as you are entertained, then *Quicksilver*, *The Confusion* and *The System of the World* are the bona fide ticket. Nearly 3,000 pages long, a good 85% of the *Baroque Cycle* is very fine indeed – that still leaves an ordinary bookful of poppycock to get through, but it's not like it's all at once (as is so often the case...). And it won the Clarke Award, too, so stop arguing.

Ian McDonald, *River of Gods* (Simon & Schuster, 2004). A beautiful, complex, lovingly researched and written book about a near(fish) future India. Given that the Subcontinent is such a huge, varied and bizarre place it's incredible that it hasn't been seen more in sf before. McDonald is only just beginning to address such shameful ignorance here, and even that glimpse is overwhelming in its kaleidoscopic intensity. *River of Gods* is chockfull of beauty, mystery and horror in equal measure, not one sentence of which feels shoehorned in or excessive.

Richard Morgan, *Market Forces* (Gollancz, 2004). I almost feel embarrassed putting another white, male (and British) writer in this list, and it should be noted that *Market Forces* only just beat Justina Robson's *Natural History* into this slot; but beat her it did, because this is Morgan doing what he does so well, as usual (including a race sequence that Jeremy Clarkson must need smelling salts to get through). There's also a powerful political message, too – in a more obvious way than Miéville's, but no less welcome for that.

#### GARY DALKIN

Tony Ballantyne's *Recursion* (Tor UK, 2004) is the best debut sf novel I've read in a long time. A complex mix of cyberpunk and surreal space opera, the book twists and turns with the best of them, telling a tale across three different times, ranging from Britain to Australia to the far reaches of the galaxy, the adventure is never less than intricate, ingeniously plotted and witty. Imagine

Greg Egan and Douglas Adams writing together and you might just have something of the flavour of this exhilaratingly original piece of work.

Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2001) is a cracking fantasy debut, and the first of a series chronicling the adventures of Tuesday Next, a literary detective (literally) in a surreal alternative Britain. I'm not a great fan of humorous fantasy (OK, generally I loath it) but this works because story, character and invention predominate over bad puns and weak jokes. Tuesday Next is an engaging heroine, the supporting

characters are memorably eccentric and Fforde's world is richly detailed and complex, with a compelling stream-of-conscious logic of its own. Witty, well written and cunningly plotted, *The Eyre Affair* never lets up and leaves the reader with a big, silly smile. Fantastic fun.

Peter F. Hamilton's *Pandora's Star* (Pan, 2004) is only half a novel (*Judas Unleashed* completes *The Commonwealth Saga* later this year), but potentially half of the best thing Hamilton has yet done. This is real hard sf space opera adventure without the uneasy grafting-in of horror elements of *The Night's Dawn Trilogy*. The imaginative verve is breathtaking – best of all is the interplanetary rail network – but one terrific idea follows another, including a really boldly conceived main threat. The settings are equally imaginative and the plot is engagingly convoluted with a keen political edge. Human society may remain too contemporary but otherwise this is exceptional stuff.

Stephen King's *Song of Susannah* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2004) and *The Dark Tower* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2004) are the final two volumes in the *Dark Tower* septet, which has spanned King's entire writing career and must be seen as a summation of his oeuvre. Neither are standalone novels, simply picking up where the preceding volume left off. That said, the books do feel

#### BSFA AWARD BEST NOVEL SHORTLIST 2004

Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*  
(Bloomsbury)

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Stamping Butterflies*  
(Gollancz)

Ken MacLeod, *Newton's Wake*  
(Orbit)

Ian McDonald, *River of Gods*  
(Simon & Schuster)

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Forty Signs of Rain*  
(HarperCollins)

Alastair Reynolds, *Century Rain*  
(Gollancz)

very different. *Song of Susannah* takes place largely in a recognisable contemporary America over a short period of time. Susannah seeks a place to give birth, while Roland and Eddie go to meet Stephen King... A surreal metafiction, the book has the quality of a first class dream, or nightmare, taking narrative risks beyond the conception of lesser writers. *The Dark Tower* is a much longer volume, chronicling the epic final push for The Dark Tower itself. People die, stories end, the tone is dark, sombre. The set pieces are thrilling, but there's no traditional fantasy final battle. The world has moved on and ends with a whimper, not a bang. Some will find the ending infuriating. It seems to me entirely appropriate, perfectly completing one of the definitive fantasy sagas of modern times.

#### ALAN FRASER

Simon Morden's stories have been described as a 'chaotic mix of science-fiction, fantasy and horror, and sometimes all three at once'. In his collection *Brilliant Things* (Subway Writer's Group, 2004) few of the thirteen stories fall neatly into any category, but they all have overtones of something beyond the material or the present, delivering a collection of skilfully-written, thought-provoking and memorable stories.

Douglas R. Mason's *Tuo Yaw* (Golden Apple Books, 2004) is a very satisfying collection of stories written between 1964 and 2003, many first published in John Carnell's 1960s-70s *New Writings in SF* series. Mason lives in Wallasey, on the west bank of the River Mersey opposite Liverpool, and several stories are set in modern-day Merseyside, as well as a future 'Wirral City'. The stories have larky titles but they are all well-written, intriguing, and have an over-riding theme of alienation and escape from a constrictive society.

Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2004) is the seventh and final chapter in the *Dark Tower* saga, started in 1978. This is set in the alternate American West of Mid-World and various other realities of our world and features the gunslinger Roland of Gilead who is joined by three mismatched refugees from New York in various dates in our 20th Century. King is using the *Dark Tower* series to bind all his work together, and this book will delight his fans as it finally ties up all the plotlines and reaches the point where Roland stands at the foot of the Dark Tower (however, the ending may infuriate you!).

Gene Wolfe's new novel *The Knight* (Tor, 2004), the first of two, is narrated by a teenage boy from our world who wanders into a magical universe and is transformed by an elf queen into a powerful knight, Sir Able. Despite his looks and strength, he's still an inexperienced teenager inside, and has a lot of growing to do before he can fill the rôle. As with Wolfe's earlier work, this is not exactly easy reading – much of what's going on is obscure simply because Able himself doesn't understand it. This tale of knights, wizards, elves, giants and dragons sounds identikit fantasy, but Wolfe's alchemy transforms these ingredients into a compelling and challenging experience.

Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Runes Of The Earth* (Gollancz, 2004) is the start of *The Last Chronicles Of Thomas Covenant*. At the opening of this book, ten years have passed back on Earth since Covenant died. Linden, Covenant's companion in the *Second Chronicles*, finds her adopted son building images of the Land with blocks. She had thought that she would never again be summoned to the Land, but the Land is again threatened and although Linden knows Covenant is dead, he keeps sending her warning messages. This time Linden must save the Land and perhaps even restore her beloved Covenant to life. This is certainly not a stand-alone book, but none the less involving.

#### JON COURTENAY GRIMWOOD

Anyone who can riff off pirates, immortality, alchemy, the birth of capitalism and sex with Isaac Newton's niece gets my vote and so does any novel that can play with a version of British history

that, if not as it was, feels like it should have been. Neal Stephenson's *The System of the World* (Heinemann, 2004) closes the circle and makes sense of a plot line that he began with *Cryptonomicon* and traced through *Quicksilver* and *The Confusion*. For me it's Stephenson's best novel.

Okay, so the cover is dreadful and designed to fool the unwary into mistaking this book for one of those *Soddit* little pastiches (Gollancz think that is a good thing?) but Diana Wynne Jones's *The Tough Guide to Fantasy Land* (Gollancz, 2004; first edition 1996) is still brilliant and it is the only book I've read more than once this year. We all know the rules to Fantasy Land but half the fun is seeing them organised, cross referenced and put into print. It's enough to make anyone start writing three-volume epics.

Mary Gentle's hermetic thriller, *1610: A Summ'd in a Grave* (Gollancz, 2003), does many of the things Stephenson's *System* is attempting to do but with a very different sensibility. Gentle has an ability to inhabit a ghostly space between the fantastic, post-modern and historical and, I suspect, gets less attention than she deserves because of this. In Valentin Rochefort she produces the perfect disgraced aristocrat and her young duellist Dariole provides his near-perfect foil. Sexually ambivalent, politically complex and adult in the proper sense of the word.

If any book this year deserves to come with a free hard-hat it should be *Singularity Sky* (Orbit, 2004), because reading it demands that you dodge dangerous levels of cerebral shrapnel, while not losing sight of the plot. And I adore, and can forgive Charles Stross anything, for kicking off with the idea of a man trying to con an alien intelligence into swapping the post-Marxist theory of political economy for weapons (so he can start a revolution).

For me Ian Rankin proves that genre can take on the mainstream and win; not just in terms of sales or reviews but in seriousness of intent. *Fleshmarket Close* (Orion, 2004) is a brilliant and bitter crime novel, one that contrasts Inspector Rebus's continuing fall from grace and unwilling exile to a different police station with the exile to slum housing of refugees and asylum seekers condemned to work the modern slave gangs that currently provide us all with cheap food.

#### NIAL HARRISON

Every year at about this time I seem to find myself thinking that it's been a good twelve months for sf; this year is no different, and I suggest that the five books I recommend here all find their authors at the absolute top of their game.

If I had to pick one as the best, it would be Ian McDonald's *River of Gods* (Simon & Schuster, 2004). This is a novel that understands one of the central paradoxes of science fiction: that the future cannot be predicted, but that it must nevertheless be painted plausibly. Its solution is to build a world of sprawling complexity, with more ideas than I have words to describe them here. The result is a vibrant, dense, fantastically alive portrait of India, and the world, fifty years from now.

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (Sceptre, 2004) is one of the most talked-about novels of the year. It's a clockwork marvel of a book, a graceful dance in six parts, all interlinked in numerous ways. The stories it tells reach from our past to our future and back again, all fully displaying Mitchell's gift with a first-person narrative: inventive without being difficult, smart without being obscure, true without being pretentious. This book deserves every word of praise it has received (up to and including that Booker nomination).

Quieter, more thoughtful, and perhaps more moving is Geoff Ryman's *Air* (St. Martin's Press, 2004), which finally saw publication this year in the US. If *River of Gods* takes place at the epicentre of a moment of change, *Air* takes place on its fringes. It is beautifully, cleanly observed and Chung Mae, village fashion expert, is surely one of modern sf's great and memorable

characters.

The UK edition of Jeff VanderMeer's *City of Saints and Madmen* (Tor UK, 2004) contains two more stories than the US edition, but they don't make the book any easier to describe. All the material deals with the city of Ambergris – fantastical yet realistic, bustling home to artists and philosophers and theologians by the dozen. Some stories examine the city's inhabitants, some its customs, and some its history. Perhaps the principal character is the City, seen through the lens of a kaleidoscope. Whatever: these baroque, decadent, romantic, surreal, occasionally whimsical stories are remarkable for their richness, and deserve to be savoured.

This was a remarkable year for debut fantasy novels (slightly less remarkable for debut science fiction novels); the best I read, cliché though it may be to say so, was Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (Bloomsbury, 2004). Like *Cloud Atlas*, it deserves the praise it has received. Clarke's voice is a delight, lively, mannered, full of wit and elegance, and devoted to a larger-than-life excess of detail. And like *City of Saints and Madmen*, the true protagonist of the book is a thing: in this case, English Magic. It's why the book is so large. The ripples from the return of magic spread far and wide; they change some things not at all, and some things in every way imaginable.

#### LESLEY HATCH

Sarah Ash's *Lord of Snow and Shadows* (Bantam, 2003) is a story with so many different strands that you wonder how they're going to come together, starting with the death of the old Oan Lord. This is a novel full of intrigue and mystery, magic and the supernatural: read and enjoy.

*In the King's Service* (Ace, 2003) is Katherine Kurtz's long-awaited novel in her ongoing sequence about the Deryni (people with exceptional psychic powers) who are hated and feared by some, and trusted by others. You don't need to be familiar with the series as a whole to read this.

Mercedes Lackey's *Exile's Honor* (Daw, 2002) is a long-awaited Valdemar novel, telling the story of Alberich and how he came to be Weaponsmaster in Valdemar, far from his native land Karse. This is the first part of his story and is a well-written, enjoyable, story.

Jerry Olton's *Abandon In Place* (Tor, 2000) has a Saturn V launch itself from Cape Canaveral, go all the way to the Moon, and vanish at the point when it needs human action to begin guiding it, and when an astronaut goes along, things get really interesting: a nicely-done story. Another Jerry Olton title, *The Getaway Special* (Tor, 2001), features a scientist who develops the hyperdrive and leaves the plans on the Internet for anyone to use, to visit other solar systems and find habitable planets. The aliens encountered along the way all add to the enjoyment, with a twist in the tale.

#### CHRIS HILL

Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built* (Faber & Faber, 2002). A book about the joy of learning to love books. Spufford talks about books in the same way as fans do and, despite a very different upbringing, his experience of becoming a reader is very similar to mine.

Neal Stephenson, *The Baroque Cycle* (Heinemann, 2003, 2004, 2004). A bit of a cheat as this is actually a trilogy, but I did read them all this year. Partly an adventure story, partly a

historical romance and partly a (slightly) alternative history of the rise of modern science starting with the founding of the Royal Society. There is a tremendous sense of joy in the writing; I cannot help but feel that Stephenson must have had a big grin on his face (albeit a very wicked one!) while he was putting this together. The fact that this is part of history I know little about is probably an advantage (although it does make me want to go out and read biographies of many of the luminaries mentioned).

Harlan Coben, *Gone for Good* (Orion, 2003). A new discovery for me, I read two Harlan Coben thrillers this year, both of which I thoroughly enjoyed; but this one just has the edge. What I liked about both of them was they had likeable lead characters, avoiding the borderline-psychotic hero that seems to dog the genre, and they had very satisfyingly complex plots that really did keep some revelations up until the last page.

Guy Guvriel Kay, *The Last Light of the Sun* (Simon & Schuster, 2004). Another example of Kay doing what he does better than anyone else: writing a slightly-fantastical historical novel using versions of real nations and historical events. As always fascinating, exciting and moving. This book is perhaps slightly more fantastical than some of his recent novels,

especially when the denizens of Faerie get involved in the story, but none the worse for that.

Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Fourth Estate, 2000). Two young men make their mark on the world of the American comic book by creating a wartime hero called 'The Escapist'. In part an affectionate look at the history of comic books (a few real people, for example Stan Lee, have a small rôle), the theme of 'escape' runs throughout the book: Joe Kavalier's escape from Prague and his subsequent efforts to rescue his family, Sam Clay's attempts to escape from

sexuality and so on. The book manages to be literary without ever being pompous.

#### PENNY HILL

If I can have all three of *The Baroque Cycle* (Heinemann, 2003, 2004, 2004) as one book, then they would be my first choice. Despite the length, these books just flew by as we switched from one convoluted plot thread to another. Possibly the single most enjoyable moment of all three was the assassination by smallpox. I now want to go and re-read *Cryptonomicon* in the light of the stories told here.

*Memory and Dream* (Tor, 1994) by Charles de Lint was a wonderful complex book drawing together magic and art in a rich and beautiful world. The beauty and the danger became real to me, even if I did get a little hazy about some of the plot turns soon after I'd finished it. I've not read much de Lint and this was a revelation.

Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (Bloomsbury, 2004) was worth holding back until I had some uninterrupted reading time to tackle it. Another long book that felt shorter while I was reading it. I loved the alternate Regency Europe in which theoretical magic is studied by gentlemen as an occupation. I can't believe this is a first novel and I wonder what else Clarke has up her sleeve.

*A Song for Arbonne* (HarperCollins, 1993) by Guy Gavriel Kay is the only book on my top five list that is a re-read. I'm very fond of his work and the complexities of the politics of this book, together with the gorgeous alternate medieval French setting

#### ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD SHORTLIST 2004

Ian McDonald, *River of Gods*  
(Simon & Schuster)

China Miéville, *Iron Council*  
(Macmillan)

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*  
(Sceptre)

Richard Morgan, *Market Forces*  
(Gollancz)

Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*  
(Cape)

Neal Stephenson, *The System of the World*  
(Heinemann)

make it one I will return to again. Having a good mixture of strong male and female characters, most of whom are likeable, is another strong pull. I may not always approve of these people, but I'm happy to spend time with them.

**The Child that Books Built** (Faber & Faber, 2002) by Francis Spufford. The shortest book on this list, and also the only non-fiction entry, merits attention for the theories it propounds and the ideas that it provokes. A book that resonated with me for a long time after I had read it, prompting me to seek out some of those shared books that also formed part of my early reading and re-examine them in the light of his comments. I also found myself examining the habits of fellow readers to see if I could discern what type of reader they were.

#### TOM HUNTER

Right now the first book in my selection would have to be **The Etched City** by K. J. Bishop (Tor UK, 2004). It's been nominated for awards and everything, you know, but that's not the reason I'm recommending it here. In fact I'm almost tempted not to recommend it at all. The reason being that while some books you find through friends, others via word of mouth, and some even arrive from *Vector* sporting a 'review me' label, this is one book that I've managed to find all on my own. Some people have compared reading this excellent fantasy to that first literate gut-punch of discovering China Miéville's *Bas-Lag*, only here the knotted fist of prose would probably be sheathed in a fetching silken glove.

**Banner of Souls** (Bantam, 2004) by Liz Williams is another book I'm listing simply because it was massively fun to read. The fun coming from its clever plotting, superb writing and its featuring my absolute favourite character of the year: the Martian Warrior Princess, Dreams-Of-War, with her sister-warrior Knowledge-Of-Pain running a close second. I categorically believe that every bookshelf should have one (a copy of the book that is, not a warrior princess).

I could have mentioned any Jon Courtenay Grimwood novel this year since, despite best intentions, I haven't read any until now. However it was seeing the palpable page-by-page excitement as certain others read their proof copy of **Stamping Butterflies** (Collancz, 2004) that led me to take the plunge. So if you've been meaning to discover what all the excitement surrounding JCC, and particularly this book, is all about, don't repeat my mistake, just go read it now. After all it's not long until 9 Tail Fox comes out.

Grant Morrison's **Arkham Asylum** (Titan Books, 1989) originally appeared in 1989, but that's not going to stop me including it here. Re-released in a hardback 15th Anniversary Edition, this definitive *Batman* graphic novel would feature in my top books of the year every year, since I read it that often, and that's before mentioning Morrison's original scripts and page layouts that DC have kindly added to this edition.

And finally, where would I be without my trusty **Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases** (Macmillan, 2004) – editors Jeff VanderMeer and Mark Roberts – resting snugly on my bedside table? Like any serious textbook that's being read for pleasure, this book should be approached as a treat for the brain and dipped into as and when the mood strikes. The question of what mood is most suitable for enjoying a fictional treatise on self-flaying sarcomas, third eye infections and the real reason why poetry is bad for you, I shall leave to the private judgement of the responsible reader.

It's probably inappropriate to use this choice as a stealthy vehicle for name-dropping those contributors whose work I've also enjoyed in 2004 but not had space to mention here. So with that in mind I'll refrain from mentioning Jeffrey Ford, Steve Aylett, Jay Caselberg, China Miéville, Neil Gaiman or even Jeff VanderMeer himself, here.

#### L. J. HURST

I started 2004 with Anthony Trollope's **The Fixed Term** (World's Classics, originally published 1882, the year of his death). This short but unsatisfactory work is a Swiftian satire about involuntary euthanasia which has echoes of More's *Utopia* but pre-empts *Logan's Run* as well, though Victorian gentlemen reasoning about their last years are better superseded by Jenny Agutter. It left me wondering why ideas can appear long before there is a literary style which can develop them in a readable way.

I spent the summer and autumn months with 2004's paperback edition of Christopher Priest's **The Separation** (Collancz, 2004). I don't know if this alternative account of World War Two is Priest's deepest work, but it is the one that leads to more sideways reading than any of his others. He quotes from the 'wartime diaries of Josef Goebbels', for instance, and then I found myself reading Goebbels' real diaries to make comparisons, astonished at Priest's sleight of hand in making Goebbels' work his own. It was, though, no more than chance that I came across a work published in 2003 which might have attracted more attention: **Adolf Hitler's Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf** (edited by Gerhard L Weinberg, Enigma Books, 2003). Perhaps I read that because I am a completist.

I was annoyed that nothing else by Christopher Priest can be found in the shops at the moment and that I will have to wait until mid-2005 for the revised edition of **The Affirmation** (Faber & Faber, 1981) – the last edition seems to have been remaindered and the copies sent to America. He has a wonderful website with a huge, annotated bibliography on the world of *The Separation* which is worth reading in its own right, but anyone who wants to know about the life of an author today should search the web-archives of *The Guardian* for Priest's article on claiming tax credits, published earlier in the year.

I found myself reading other alternative histories of World War Two and realising that they should be better known than they are: **The Occupation** (author anonymous, Anthony Blond, 1962) was one of these. So much time spent in the Second World War means that my to-be-read pile has grown high, and there are other worlds and centuries waiting for me: Neal, China, Susannah, your time will come.

#### EDWARD JAMES

As usual I seem to have read very few new books. But I did have to re-read most of Orson Scott Card, for an article I was doing on him, and I remembered what an incredibly good book, despite all its flaws, **Speaker for the Dead** (Orbit, 1987) was. Pity about all the sequels and prequels (of which the most bizarre, and yet fascinating too – like an exercise in a writing course – was *Ender's Shadow*, a re-writing of *Ender's Game* from a different point of view). Also in the course of writing articles, I re-read George Turner's **The Sea and Summer** (Faber & Faber, 1987), and remembered how impressive it was. Of the new books, I really enjoyed Susanna Clarke's **Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell** (Bloomsbury, 2004) and I found Karen Traviss's **City of Pearl** (Eos, 2004) science fiction of the kind that I most enjoy reading.

But out of sheer surprise, in some ways (and annoyance that as a 'children's book' – for reasons that escape me – it is going to be sidelined), I would put as my top book of the year Jan Mark's **Useful Idiots** (David Fickling, 2004), a wonderful study of archaeology and political intrigue in the Rhine Delta Islands (i.e. the submerged Britain) in the twenty-third century.

#### STEVE JEFFERY

Top of the list has to be John M. Ford's **The Heat of Fusion** (Tor, 2004) which, to my mind, rates alongside Ted Chiang's *Stories of Your Life* as one of the most impressive single-author collection of the last few years. Erudite, challenging and playful by turns, it mixes short fiction, pastiche (you have to read his take on Wile E.

Coyote and Roadrunner done in the style of Hemingway in 'For Whom the Bird Beeps'), poems and, in 'Erase/Record/Play', a complex, recursive play-within-a-play-within-a-play that unpacks to continuously challenge the reader's assumptions of character, motivation and intent.

John Crowley's *Novelties and Souvenirs* (Tor, 2004) is another essential single-author collection, combining the stories and novellas previously published in *Novelty* and *Antiquities* with a number of new pieces. The fifteen stories span some twenty-five years (like Chiang and Mary Gentle, whose retrospective collection, *Cartomancy*, also appeared this year, Crowley is not exactly prolific in this format.) Unfortunately, it doesn't include 'The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroine' from *Conjunctions* #39, but is nevertheless essential for one of the most impressive and intelligently worked-out time paradox stories in 'The Great Work of Time'.

Elizabeth Hand is perhaps the genre's other most accomplished literary stylist alongside Crowley, and I'm torn between the PS Publishing collection *Bibliomancy* and her novel *Mortal Love* (Morrow, 2004) but if pressed would have to plump for the latter. A beautiful, time-spanning novel about art, enchantment, jealousy and madness, it reads at times like a conflation of A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and Crowley's *Little, Big*. I can think of little higher praise.

Despite setbacks – the collapse of *Spectrum SF*, which serialised his first novel *The Atrocity Archive* and of Big Engine, which was due to publish his novel *Festival of Fools* – this was the year in which Charles Stross's hard-earned, twelve-year-in-the-making 'overnight' success finally came good with two sf novels and the first instalment of an intriguing science fantasy series. All worth reading, but my vote goes to *Singularity Sky* (Orbit, 2004) for its untrammelled gonzo bravura, invention and sheer entertainment.

Final choices are always difficult, no less so this year, but against stiff competition from Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Ken MacLeod and Gwyneth Jones, very impressive debuts by K. J. Parker, Steph Swainston and Susannah Clarke, and an excellent collection of Australian sf, *Forever Shores*, my final choice would have to be for Neal Stephenson's *System of the World* (Heinemann, 2004), which brings to a satisfying conclusion his astonishingly ambitious, if occasionally sprawling, *Baroque Trilogy*.

## VECTOR RECOMMENDED READS 2004

- Tony Ballantyne, *Recursion* (V237, Tor UK, 2004)  
 Terry Bisson, *Dear Abbey* (V234, PS Publishing, 2003)  
 Jonathan Carroll, *White Apples* (V236, Tor UK, 2004)  
 Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (V238, Bloomsbury, 2004)  
 John Clute, *Scores: Reviews 1993-2003* (V233, Becon, 2003)  
 Cory Doctorow, *Eastern Standard Time* (V236, Tor, 2004)  
 Paul Féval, *Knightshade (Le Chevalier Ténébreux)* (V234, Black Coat Press, 2003)  
 Paul Féval, *The Vampire Countess* (V234, Black Coat Press, 2003)  
 Paul Féval, *Vampire City* (V234, Black Coat Press, 2003)  
 Stephen Gallagher, *Out of His Mind* (V238, PS Publishing, 2004)  
 Mary Gentle, *Cartomancy* (V236, Gollancz, 2004)  
 Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Stamping Butterflies* (V238, Gollancz, 2004)  
 David A. Hardy and Patrick Moore, *Futures 50 Years in Space* (V237, Artists' and Photographers' Press Ltd., 2004)  
 Kenneth J. Harvey, *The Town that Forgot How to Breathe* (V238, Secker & Warburg, 2004)  
 Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (V235, Cambridge University Press, 2003)  
 Stephen King, *Song of Susannah* (V237, Hodder & Stoughton, 2004)  
 David Langford, *Different Kinds Of Darkness* (V235, Cosmos Books, 2004)  
 Stephen Laws, *Spectre* (V234, Telos, 2003)  
 Ken MacLeod, *Newton's Wake* (V235, Orbit, 2004)  
 Ian McDonald, *River of Gods* (V237, Simon & Schuster, 2004)  
 William Meikle, *Watchers: The Battle for the Throne* (V233, Black Death Books, 2003)  
 David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (V238, Sceptre, 2004)  
 Christopher Priest, *The Separation* (V234, Gollancz, 2003)  
 Kim Stanley Robinson, *Forty Signs of Rain* (V236, HarperCollins, 2004)  
 Mark Samuels, *Black Altars* (V235, Rainfall Books, 2003)  
 Lucius Shepard, *Floater* (V234, PS Publishing, 2003)  
 Francis Spufford, *Backroom Boys; The Secret Return of the British Boffin* (V233, Faber and Faber, 2003)  
 Neal Stephenson, *The Confusion* (V238, Heinemann, 2004)  
 Neal Stephenson, *Quicksilver* (V238, Heinemann, 2004)  
 Steph Swainston, *The Year of Our War* (V236, Gollancz, 2004)  
 Ian Watson, *Mockymen* (V237, Golden Gryphon Press, 2003)  
 Mark West, *Strange Tales* (V235, Rainfall Books, 2003)  
 Gene Wolfe, *The Knight* (V235, Tor, 2004)  
 Stuart Young, *Spare Parts* (V235, Rainfall Books, 2003)

## CAROL ANN KERRY-GREEN

Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Stamping Butterflies* (Gollancz, 2004). I found this a very powerful tale of morals and how one event can have an impact on others over many years (the butterfly effect). The character of Prisoner Zero was extremely well presented and the way the Darkness manipulates him and the Chuang Tzu to get to its desired outcome is very well portrayed. There is much to think about in this book.

Neal Stephenson, *The System of the World* (Heinemann, 2004). The final novel in Stephenson's *Baroque* sequence. Here we have the return of Daniel Waterhouse to London and his return to intrigue. A wide canvas again, this novel takes us from London to Hanover in the time when Queen Anne was dying and the question of who would inherit her throne: her younger brother James in exile in France or Sophie the Winter Queen. And in between Jack the Coiner masterminds a brilliant break-in to the Tower of London.

China Miéville, *Iron Council* (Macmillan, 2004). In the city of New Crobuzon, a likely revolution is brewing. Is this the time for the Iron Council to return? Gradually as the book unfolds, the reader becomes aware of just what the Iron Council is, how it was formed, and how it will return to New Crobuzon. But, will it return in time, or will it have missed the opportunity of an era?

Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife* (Cape, 2004). As a child growing up, Clare receives visits from Henry, a mystery man who appears in the meadow near her home naked and alone. Henry is an unwilling time traveller; ripped from his present with no warning, he finds himself somewhere in time, alone, naked, and often in danger. The times he spends with Clare are an oasis; aware that in his present she is his wife, he tries not to intervene in her childhood too much. There are many questions about time paradoxes that are unanswered, but to me that did not detract from the story in any way. A beautiful love story.

Ian McDonald, *River of Gods* (Simon & Schuster, 2004). On the eve of India's 100<sup>th</sup> celebratory year, ten people leading very different lives begin to find themselves becoming entwined with the others. From Mr Nandho, a Krishna cop, to Thomas Lull, a once-famous scientist, events begin to unfold that could change the world. Amongst them is Aj, a waif alone, who is befriended by Lull who agrees to take her on a journey to find out who her parents were, and who begins to suspect that she isn't quite what she seems.

## PAUL KINCAID

The Book of the Year was, without doubt,



**Cloud Atlas** by David Mitchell (Sceptre, 2004). I can't remember the last time I was so excited by a work of fiction: the fascinating construction, pitch-perfect tone and total mastery of the different narrative styles he took on, from 19th century diary to 1970s noir thriller, all made this a book to be relished. And the near-future dystopia and far future post-apocalyptic vision that lie at the heart of the novel make it an extraordinarily powerful work of science fiction.

Next to that even excellent works pale in comparison, but I'm sure that in any other year my list would have been topped by Ian McDonald's **River of Gods** (Simon & Schuster, 2004), easily the best thing he has done, a richly-imagined and populous near-future India in which all the plagues of our modern civilisation – global warming, balkanisation, runaway computer technology – come home to roost.

I was also very impressed by Audrey Niffenegger's **The Time Traveler's Wife** (Cape, 2004) because of the rigor with which she follows through on all the consequences of her invention, and because of the way she conjures such an affecting love story without ever quite descending into sentimentality.

I read **Set This House In Order** (HarperCollins, 2003) by Matt Ruff because it won the Tiptree Award, and I am heartily glad that I did because it is an amazing novel, going so thoroughly into the mind(s) of its schizophrenic narrator that its vision of the world is both dizzying and dazzling; it is a sad commentary on the state of British publishing that no-one has so far brought the book out on this side of the Atlantic.

I think I have read more really good books this year than in the last two or three years combined, and it is hard to make my fifth selection simply because of the works I must therefore exclude. I would, without a moment's hesitation, recommend strongly that you read **The Plot Against America** by Philip Roth, **The Jane Austen Book Club** by Karen Joy Fowler and **The Truth About Celia** by Kevin Brockmeier. But I think that just edging in to fifth place on my list is **The Town That Forgot How to Breathe** by Kenneth J. Harvey (Secker, 2004), simply because of the way he juggles possible explanations for the strange events in a beautifully drawn Canadian fishing town – the supernatural, the science fictional, the psychological – without ever letting you settle comfortably on just one of them.

#### MARTIN McGRATH

My favourite book of the year was **Air** (St. Martin's Press, 2004) by Geoff Ryman. I think he's a terrific writer, capable of writing in a very wide range of voices and yet maintaining a distinctive style. I particularly like the way he refuses to write in a single universe or genre or sub-genre – you never know quite what you're going to get with a Geoff Ryman book, which no doubt makes them a pain in the arse to sell but it also makes things more interesting for the reader willing to take a few risks. I think **Air** has surpassed both *"Was..."* and 253 on my list of favourite Ryman novels, it is a pure piece of science fiction with some interesting speculation about technology and its impacts. At the same time the real strength of the piece is in the human story – Chung Mae is a fantastic, complex central character full of endearing strengths and infuriating flaws and Kizulrah felt more like a real place than some towns I've actually lived in.

Close behind **Air** was **Iron Sunrise** (Ace, 2004) by Charles Stross. It is a fine example of modern hard sf and entertaining from first page to last. A sequel to *Singularity Sky*, **Iron Sunrise** doesn't quite have anything to match the lunatic inventiveness of *The Festival* but, taken as a whole, it is a better novel.

I'm rather embarrassed to admit that **The Algebraist** (Orbit, 2004) was the first Iain M. Banks novel I've ever read. I've read his short stories and a number of his M-less novels but rather missed the start of *The Culture* and never got around to catching up. I picked up **The Algebraist** because it wasn't *Culture* and seemed like a good jumping-on point. I really enjoyed it, though

I think a less established novelist would have had some of the more rambling passages (enjoyable though they were) blue-pencilled by his editor. Now I have a pile of Iain M. Banks novels to read.

I'm not sure who Michael Marshall is trying to kid, but he really wants to write sf. **The Lonely Dead** (HarperCollins, 2004) might be marketed as a thriller, but it's got psychic sasquatches for God's sake! And it's full of little asides pondering the nature of the universe which are the mark of a true sci-fi geek. With or without the Smith, Michael Marshall writes smart, tight stories that I can't put down and **The Lonely Dead** is no exception.

The best comic I read this year was **Y: The Last Man** (DC/Vertigo, 2004) written by Brian K. Vaughan with art by Pia Guerra. The premise – all the male creatures on Earth are suddenly killed by a terrible plague – is hardly new but Vaughan's storytelling is fresh, intelligent and frequently very funny.

Outside my top five I also enjoyed **Newton's Wake** by Ken MacLeod, Jon Courtenay Grimwood's **Stamping Butterflies**, Alastair Reynolds's **Century Rain**; and I thought Martin Sketchley's **The Affinity Trap** was a promising first novel with an unforgettable sex scene.

#### FARAH MENDLESOHN

This year my picks are less about being 'the best' than those that, on reflection, I most enjoyed out of the books I considered the best. It isn't quite the same thing, but I can't see a way to argue 'the best' out of my total mental list of eleven. So, for sheer enjoyment factor:

Steve Cockayne's **The Seagull Drovers** (Orbit, 2004) finished off his *Legends of the Land* trilogy in the way I've come to expect from him – total unpredictability. The trilogy stayed weird to the last, and an author who can dig up the Holy Islands for fuel has the kind of disrespect for religious fantasy I can work with.

Ken MacLeod's **Newton's Wake** (Orbit, 2004) is a romp full of unnerving sly digs and some of the best sf theatre written. I want to see *The Tragedy of Leonid Brezhnev* staged at Paragon 2 please.

More seriously, Geoff Ryman's **Air** (St. Martin's Press, 2004) – a story of humanity, new technology and fashion – blew me away. Ryman never forgets that the world is a complex place. The book's premise is simple: Air (a net in the head) is about to arrive in the last village in the world not to be on the net. The first test is a disaster but leaves one woman, Chung Mae, still connected. She begins to explore its consequences for her village and herself. This is a beautifully written book and I never forgot that the people being described weren't white westerners.

Also beautifully written is Andrew Greig's **In Another Light** (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2004). Andrew Greig is MacLeod and Bank's 'third school-friend' so anyone interested in a little triangulation should check him out. Greig's work is not technically fantasy, but he has written a couple of slipstream novels and his style has resonances with M. John Harrison's most elegiac work. **In Another Light** is a quiet tale of love and loss and redemption and there isn't a sentimental line in it.

My final choice is Elizabeth Hand's **Mortal Love** (William Morrow, 2004). OK, I'm biased, she'll be one of our guests at *Concussion* in 2006, but Hand's work is always fascinating and this is her best book yet. **Mortal Love** is written in the lush velvets of pre-Raphaelite London and tells three stories; one of a struggling young artist who takes work in a nineteenth century lunatic asylum, one of a twentieth century writer living in Camden, and the other of something unearthly searching for memory and a way home.

And, if the Editor will let me, I would just like to say that Iain M. Banks, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Joe Haldeman, Peter Straub, Audrey Niffenegger and Susannah Clarke all nearly made my list.



## SIMON MORDEN

Having spent much of this year trying to write one of the best books of 2006, my reading has suffered somewhat. But thanks to that Billinger bloke, I've managed to squeeze in a few good reads.

Max Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide* (Duckworth, 2004). This book just arrived one day (cheers, Duckworth). By the end of that day I was planning how to fight off the undead armed only with my sledgehammer and the carving knife (note to self: must get axe). Everything about this book – concept, execution, art, packaging – makes it seem strangely real. At the time, I said of it: 'Brilliantly written, morbidly funny, completely convincing.' Go on, get a copy. Before it's too late.

Adam L. G. Nevill, *Banquet for the Damned* (PS Publishing, 2004). In my review of this, I called it: 'a very great book, a novel of complexity and shadow.' I haven't changed my mind. I'm still haunted by it, both the story and the imagery. For Nevill, whose previous books have been pseudonymous erotica, this marks a breakthrough into the big time. Not without flaws, but if he can do better than this, I'll certainly be reading it. A must for fans of M. R. James.

Mark Samuels, *Black Altars* (Rainfall Books, 2003). *White Hands*, his latest collection from Tartarus Press, has received critical acclaim from many and diverse places. Fortunately, I've been convinced of his talent for a lot longer, and have therefore had the chance to read more of his work. This earlier selection of bleak, chilling horror is simply stunning. Samuels' universe is uncaring, impersonal and casually brutal, the stories exacting and disturbing.

Francis Spufford, *Backroom Boys* (Faber & Faber, 2003). I appreciate that I was probably the last person in the country to read this, appearing as it did in most of the Vector reviewers' 2003 lists. A book about how a bunch of nerdy eggheads changed the world would clearly appeal to the nerdy eggheads amongst us, but I was quite unprepared for how compelling and brilliant it all was. The chapter on Elite should be stapled to Bill Gates' forehead.

Steve Savile, *Houdini's Last Illusion* (Telos, 2004). I've rarely enjoyed a novella more than this. Savile picks his words like a prize gardener picks ripe fruit. His characterisation is convincing, his attention to detail meticulous, and he tells a damn fine story. Just excellent.

## MARTIN POTTS

In 2005 I read quite a lot of hard sf, including my first choice, *Pandora's Star* (Macmillan, 2004) by Peter F. Hamilton. In AD 2380 humanity has settled on numerous planets, helped by rejuvenation techniques and both FTL and wormhole technology. An astronomical anomaly sparks an expedition which, as the title reference suggests, sets off a chain of events which unleashes a threat to all life in our galaxy. The book has some excellent characters and in true *Night's Dawn* tradition, a feeling of menace and dread throughout the narrative. However, for me, this novel was memorable for the fact that it includes so many classic sf elements that it is almost a case of 'what will he bring in next?' and yet all become integral to the main plot line in ingenious ways. An excellent read and the 880 pages are bursting at the seams.

During the year I also caught up with Alastair Reynolds's Inhibitors series by reading both *Redemption Ark* (Gollancz, 2002) and *Absolution Gap* (Gollancz, 2003). Both were extremely involving reads, with concentration necessary to

follow plot events and the technological and astronomical detail included. Reynolds, like Hamilton and Gemmell (below) uses characters brilliantly in that they drive the plot(s) but never slow the story down and as a result I found the pages turning easily. Both books tell a tale that spans many star systems and the scope is itself enjoyable even as certain events (particularly at the start of *Absolution Gap*) are very difficult to bear given the involvement with the characters which the author has cultured in previous instalments.

As a contrast to Reynolds and Hamilton's hard sf I dipped into David Gemmell's fantasy Drenai world once again and *White Wolf* (Bantam, 2003) and *The Swords of Night and Day* (Bantam,

2004) did not disappoint. These tales tell the story of Skilgannon the Damned, Gemmell's latest 'hero' who I am sure will become a favourite with Gemmell fans. *White Wolf* tells the tale of Skilgannon's origins and for me had the edge over *Swords*. *Swords* however, works well as a sequel, having a more linear narrative than its predecessor but breathing more life into its supporting cast, since it could afford to concentrate less on Skilgannon as his tale had already been told in exhilarating fashion. Gemmell uses gentle humour skilfully in bringing the reader into the story, especially in the sequel, when the final battle becomes particularly poignant for one character due to the empathy created with the reader earlier in the tale. Additionally, both novels have that little extra magic with the inclusion of Druss the Legend. However, Gemmell never lets his famous creation overshadow his new one and

the interplay between the old warrior Druss and the brooding but determined Skilgannon are the high points of both novels. These two books hit their target with a bullseye.

## DAVE M. ROBERTS

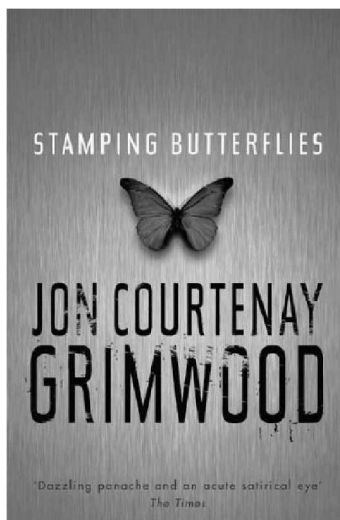
After *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar*, I had high expectations of China Miéville's new novel, *Iron Council* (Macmillan, 2004) and I was not disappointed. The story of revolution in New Crobuzon, it brilliantly emphasises the power of myth to inspire action. The story of the formation of The Iron Council itself and the eternal railroad, which forms the backbone of the novel, is particularly gripping.

*The Light Ages* (Pocket, 2004) by Ian R. MacLeod is another novel with a political heart. Exploring the effects on ordinary people of an industry on which the whole of a civilisation rests, it uncovers the dark and corrupt underside of an industry with that much power. Particularly when it starts to come under threat, and the resource on which it depends is starting to run out. This was a dense and fascinating read, bringing to life a industrialised world that is supported by magic (in the form of aether) in such a way that the magic itself becomes as mundane as coal.

Stephen Gallagher has quietly been turning out excellent short stories for more than twenty years and a collection of these stories was long overdue. *Out of His Mind* (PS Publishing, 2004) was very welcome indeed. Bringing together the best of his stories from throughout his career, this was a powerful collection, each of the stories was memorable, and many were extremely good.

The best non-fiction book I read last year was *From the Beast to the Blonde* by Marina Warner (Chatto & Windus, 1994), an investigation into the history of fairy stories with particular emphasis on the rôle of women in the stories. This is a very well researched, in-depth and illuminating study of both the stories and their tellers.

Finally, the best book of the year was one I came to read because of the music of folk-punks Blyth Power. *The Cornish Trilogy* by Robertson Davies (Penguin, 2004), consists of *The*



*Rebel Angels* (1981), *What's Bred in The Bone* (1985) and *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988). It is not so much a trilogy as a triptych with the biography of reclusive academic and artist Francis Cornish as its centrepiece in *What's Bred in The Bone*, being informed and enhanced by the first and third books. *The Rebel Angels* tells the story of the immediate ramifications of his death, and the transferring of his estate into a trust fund for artistic endeavour. *The Lyre of Orpheus*, the last and most entertaining of the novels is about the first such endeavour, the staging of an opera based on the Arthurian myths from a scrap of libretto by E. T. A. Hoffman. With hints of the fantastic, the trilogy is erudite, funny, complex and quite outrageously good.

#### ESTELLE ROBERTS

*The Broken Sword* (Del Rey, 1977) by Poul Anderson, admittedly not a recent novel, is simply one of the finest representations of the world of Faerie that I have yet encountered. It is bloody, nasty, and should be repellent, yet there is also love and genuine emotion. The story seems to draw the reader in and will not easily let go. The depiction of the old folk as being similar to humans in many ways, and yet also something entirely alien is, perhaps, the novel's greatest strength.

Reading *Cowl* by Neal Asher (Tor UK, 2004) is an entirely different experience. This is a real adrenaline rush of a novel, a high-tech future thriller, whose pace rarely lets up. It is, however, also gifted with an intelligent plot and strong, vivid characterisation, and examines the nature of – and motivations for – good and evil within both the individual and society, particularly one where strength and intelligence are valued above all else, and the weak are expendable.

*Muezzinland* by Stephen Palmer (Cosmos Books, 2002) combines the fantastic and the technological in the tale of a future Africa where old beliefs and mythologies are overlaid by an almost unbelievably advanced communications system. The basis for the story is the journey undertaken by Nshalla, a Ghanian princess, and her companion, a tribal woman, to find her missing sister, who, Nshalla believes, has been drawn to the mystical Muezzinland of the title. The two female lead characters are wonderfully drawn, and the skilful blending of the ancient and the futuristic makes this a highly enjoyable read.

There is one simple thing to say about *The Darkness That Comes Before* by R. Scott Bakker (Simon & Schuster, 2004): if you haven't yet read it, then you should go and do so forthwith. I had the pleasure of reviewing this novel earlier in the year, and found it to be one of the most intelligent and absorbing pieces of fiction that I have read for a very long time.

Finally there is *The Scar* (Macmillan, 2002) by China Miéville. Much seems to be expected of any novel by this author, and *The Scar*, while having a very different feel and pace from his wonderful and much lauded *Perdido Street Station*, really does deliver the goods. A complex tale of a rogue society on a floating city that is still organised along very recognisable lines, the range of emotions caused by forced displacement and relocation, but primarily about obsession, this story stays with you long after you close the book.

#### ANDY SAWYER

As usual, several of the most-awaited fiction books of the second half of the year will be read sometime, but it seemed to be a good year although this list accurately reflects the division in my reading between fiction and non-fiction.

Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (Bloomsbury, 2004) was my most-anticipated book of the year. Pleased and somewhat surprised by the publicity and critical response it received, for me it lived up to the wait: a beautifully sharp, brilliantly judged ironic voice telling a remarkably imagined story. It was an interesting experience a few months ago introducing Susanna as 'someone who has been one of my

favourite writers for several years', even though (*all together*) 'This is NOT Harry Potter for adults!' – can people who use that expression point out *one* similarity?

Susan Price's *A Sterkarm Kiss* (Scholastic, 2004) is an interestingly-conceived sequel to her time-travel border-ballad-flavoured *The Sterkarm Handshake*. Not only does Price use its time-travel scenario to say mature and important things about economic exploitation, her heroine Andrea is a character well aware of her own damaged lust for a world in which she is not an overly-plump figure of fun but a sexually-glamorous Elf-maid, but also unwilling to do anything about it. We watch the train of events with exasperated horror, full of sympathy with (almost) all of the characters.

Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples* (OUP, 1999) discusses the Victorian fascination with fairy lore. Ranging from anthropology to literary and artistic incorporations of 'fairy' imagery, this covers responses such as spiritualism, evolutionary theories, and themes such as changelings and abduction. As such, it is one of the best books I've read about the roots of modern fantasy in a culture which was developing an increasingly ambivalent response to the worlds of folklore.

A long time ago in the 1960s a young British sf fan named Peter Weston published a fanzine named *Speculation*. Now, *With Stars in My Eyes: My Adventures in British Fandom* (NESFA Press, 2004) is his 'fannish autobiography' and is a must for anyone interested in the history of British sf fandom, an important and inseparable part of the history of science fiction. Many of the names mentioned in this book will be unfamiliar to many readers of science fiction. Others will be recognised as major authors. This is a thoroughly entertaining read from someone who knows that the former as well as the latter created what we read today.

From the indefatigable researches of Mike Ashley (with Robert A. Lowndes) came *The Gernsback Days* (Wildside, 2004) just as I realised that I knew nothing about Gernsback's early days in Luxembourg – and there it was! This is the sort of research the field needs and so often doesn't get. Whether you approve of him or not, Gernsback was important to science fiction and this is the fullest and best account of him yet.

#### PAMELA STUART

Juliet Marillier, *The Dark Mirror* (Tor UK, 2005). A historical fantasy, which could so easily be true, it is the best book I have read for several years. This is the first in a trilogy *The Bridei Chronicles*, set in Northern Britain and what is to become Scotland, and I cannot wait to lay hands on the next one. Juliet Marillier has the gift of making every scene come alive, her characters ring true and arouse the reader's empathy. She has a magic touch.

Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson, *Dune, The Machine Crusade* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2003). Another of the *Legends of Dune* series in which the legacy of Frank Herbert's work is kept alive and expanded. The new authors manage to stay completely in his style, but sensibly have gone back, rather than forward in the time-line, to fill in the background to the *Dune* series. I find this whole series fascinating.

David Zindell, *The Broken God* (Voyager, 1998). An intriguing mixture of science and magic, primitive tribes and space-travel and a man-engineered plague which will kill off whole tribes unless some way to introduce an immunity can be found. A thrilling book, but I found the explicit sex-scenes unnecessary. They seem to have been introduced to please either publisher or agent and can be skipped without losing track of the story.

Zenna Henderson, *The People Collection* (Corgi, 1991). Since I first read one of the stories of the *People* in a magazine years ago I have been trying to find the rest; a difficult task when the magazine was lost and titles and author's name forgotten. The actual story about these people, exiles from their own ruined

planet, trying to live unnoticed on Earth, hiding their secret powers of levitation and telepathy, had stayed with me, vividly. Finding a collection of most of the stories was a happy chance, but there are still a couple out of print. I keep hunting. They fascinate me.

Judith Tarr, *Queen of The Amazons* (Tor, 2004). This fantasy history is so well written I would have considered it a historical novel until almost the end, and even then; who is to say spiritual transfer between bodies is impossible? The detail about life among the Amazons, and how they came to be involved with Alexander the Great, is very believable, and one's sympathy is aroused, not so much for Etta, the main character, but for her nurse and carer, Selene. I enjoyed every word of it.

#### SUE THOMASON

The best sf book I read in 2004 (and possibly the best book, any genre, of the decade so far) was John M. Ford's *Heat of Fusion and Other Stories* (Tor, 2004), a frighteningly superb collection of sf short stories and poems. I will certainly re-read it repeatedly. Jennifer Stevenson's *Trash Sex Magic* (Small Beer Press, 2004) was undoubtedly the best fantasy I read last year; completely cliché-free, life-affirming, non-judgmental without being complacent, powerful, magical, and transformative. I don't normally buy new hardbacks, and read both of these to review them – a privilege and a delight.

Best humorous book was forced unwillingly on me by my reading group. I laughed myself sick over Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (New English Library, 2001), and read the three sequels as fast as I could order them from the local bookshop. You do need a certain familiarity with the classics of Eng. Lit. to enjoy them, and to have a taste for Zany English Humour... I still can't get over the episode in which Miss Havisham leads an Anger Management session for the entire cast of *Wuthering Heights*...

*1421: The Year China Discovered the World* by Gavin Menzies (Bantam, 2003) convincingly rewrote history for me, and reminded me that much 'historical fact' is fantasy, myth, political propaganda, or a mixture of all three. (I'm used to trying to keep this in mind when learning about contemporary events, but had somehow filed 'history' in a different box.)

*Into the Silent Land* by Paul Broks (Atlantic Books, 2004) is... I guess it's a memoir. Someone (who happens to be a neuropsychologist) writing about what's important to him; consciousness, identity, death, personal experience, honesty, compassion... I deeply value books that show me strange new worlds in what I would have dismissed as old and familiar.

Almost making the list were William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, which is brilliantly, believably weird, a great story (fictional), and has an immensely engaging heroine, and Marcus du Sautoy's *The Music of the Primes* because it's brilliantly, believably weird, a great story (factual), and makes the world of mathematical theory feel accessible and exciting to this nonmathematician (it's about the Riemann hypothesis).

#### IAN WATSON

Multiple sf prize-winner Johanna Sinisalo's *Not Before Sundown* (Peter Owen, 2003) won Finland's equivalent of the Booker – imagine this happening in Britain. Her novel is about trolls, real ones, an intelligent non-human species only recently discovered in the past century to have been coexisting furtively with humanity in wild places all along. The invented folk-tales, poetry, and documents are wonderfully convincing. A gay photographer's attempt to keep a young troll in his flat is fraught

with peril – and with sex and death – just as an attempt to keep the god Pan there might be. A host of very short chapters propel the pace. A powerful, dangerous, ingenious book.

Liz Williams's *Banner of Souls* (Bantam, 2004) is a harrowing and gorgeous tale of an attempted invasion of Mars and Earth by the vicious dead (a bit like in Peter Hamilton's vast saga, except that his dead aren't from the future) and of She Who Can Stem the Tide, if only she can succeed. Harsh landscapes, sentient armour, copulation with a sort of robo-scorpion, and dark and bright miracles of bio-engineering, including a heroine who grows up in a trice, make this is a very adult sf fairy tale, not without humour, if often black. Questions of consciousness loom fascinatingly.

You'll need to get Italian sf surrealist Robert Quaglia's *Bread, Butter, and Paradoxine* (Delos, 2004) through [www.delos.fantascienza.com/international/](http://www.delos.fantascienza.com/international/) until I persuade a UK publisher. Two linked books in one, this is a fabulous and hilarious satirical metafiction about reality, distorted reality, and unreality by an admirer of Robert Sheckley who writes the introduction, featuring detective James Vagabond up against cosmic problems, provided he can discover what those problems are. Among a thousand wonderful notions, how about that of relocating Japan to Switzerland? The translation delightfully captures Quaglia's demented discourse.

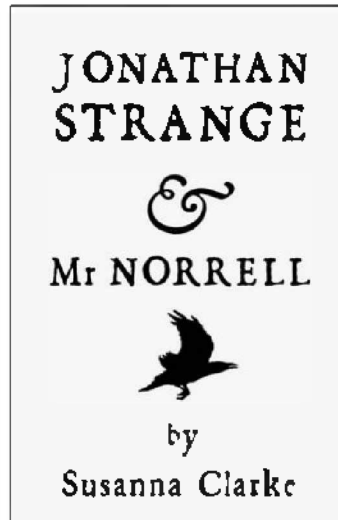
Many of us know that Maxim Jakubowski owns *Murder One* bookshop with its big sf basement in Charing Cross Road, but do we also know him as the 'King of the Erotic Thriller'? *Confessions of a Romantic Pornographer* (The Do-Not Press, 2004) isn't his autobiography but a very lively though also wistful tale of a hit-woman cum book collector hired to hunt a dead philanderer's last manuscript. Books and Bonking beats Sex and Shopping.

Remember the Jeremy Irons twins' array of gynaecological instruments for imaginary anatomies in *Dead Ringers*? In *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases* (Macmillan, 2004), various noteworthy physicians such as Dr David Langford, Dr Neil Gaiman, Dr Miéville, and Dr Stableford discourse in Borgesian vein on such afflictions as Reverse Pinocchio Syndrome, Third Eye Infection, and Internalized Tattooing Disease. A masterpiece of book production and surreality, edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Mark Roberts.

#### CLAIRE WEAVER

For me, 2004 was a year of buying more books than I could possibly read – but then, what's new about that? There are lots of unread tomes still sitting on my shelf, but one can't read everything published each year – um, right? Out of the many books I did get to read, Liz Williams's *Nine Layers of Sky* (Tor UK, 2004) stood out above all else. *Nine Layers* is an astoundingly imaginative, truly touching and dangerously familiar tale about reaching for your dreams and falling into other worlds. The story follows Elena Irinovna, a former Soviet scientist who now cleans office buildings. Her life dramatically changes when she crosses paths with Ilya Muromyets, an eight-hundred-year-old hero turned heroin addict who dreams of a death that never comes. They are brought together by a strange object that offers a glimpse into another dimension, creating a dangerous breach in a world Elena thought was tediously, frustratingly fixed. Fighting their own inner demons as well as those from across the breach, Ilya and Elena – the man of myth and the woman of science – discover that they have a dream to defend, and even die for.

Jeff VanderMeer's *City of Saints and Madmen* (Tor UK, 2004), is an artefact of cross-over tales, novelettes, encrypted passages and great artwork that makes it more objet d'art than



straight-forward book. Set in the bizarre world of Ambergris, it paints the picture of a world occupied by Gray Caps, troubled artists, fungus and the Festival of the Freshwater Squid, and reads like the weirdest guidebook you've ever had the fortune to see.

**The Thackeray T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases** (Macmillan, 2004) edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Mark Roberts, is another wonderfully strange novel, laid out like a medical journal and penned by 'professionals' such as 'Dr' China Miéville, 'Dr' Neil Gaiman, 'Dr' Jeffrey Ford, and so on. A mixture of the abstract, surreal, hilarious and serious: take two pages daily to cure boredom, malaise and cynicism. It worked for me!

2004 also saw the English translation of **Ring** (HarperCollins, 2004) by Koji Suzuki. This is the book the movies were based on, and although not as terrifyingly creepy as the films it does convey a spooky presence that had me hiding under the bed covers reading by torchlight.

I read **Altered Carbon** (Gollancz, 2001) by Richard Morgan for the first time last year and was so impressed it had to go on my list. Set in the far-future, firmly embedded in a cyberpunk-esque world, *Altered Carbon* is a twisting, fast-paced story that kept me entertained from beginning to end, and beyond. The inventions and ideas Morgan explores with the vast scope of his imagination stuck in my mind long after finishing the book, and have me hoping I'm somehow still around when the 26th century dawns.

#### PETER YOUNG

Picking the five best sf novels out of the sixty-or-so that I read in the previous year is a surprisingly easy task this time, mostly because the top three are already big hitters who just came up with the goods. By the beginning of 2004 Alastair Reynolds's **Absolution Gap** (Gollancz, 2003) was already a couple of months old, but it remained a memorable read that for the rest of the year was hard to beat. Set in one of the best-realised universes around, it is a story that finally gives voice to the gnostic themes Reynolds has been skirting around since *Revelation Space*, and his depiction of a train of cathedrals endlessly circling an ice moon in pursuit of scientific/religious madness deserves to be referenced for years to come.

I also devoured Ken MacLeod's **Newton's Wake** (Orbit, 2004), a space opera whose political flavours taste good, go

down well, and don't take a great deal of internal digestion to make for a very satisfying read. Probably the most well-balanced and well-aimed book I read in 2004.

Book of the year for me has to be – and not just because Niall Harrison insists – Ian McDonald's **River of Gods** (Simon & Schuster, 2004). For this novel McDonald seems to have shifted up a couple of gears and produced a rather elevated stylistic experience; this is a descendent of John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* in more than just prose, though it strikes me as a wholly original work nonetheless, and one that says meaningful things that leave you with the rare impression that says this must be the future, even if it's not my future. It's perhaps not surprising we didn't have to get very far into the twenty-first century for Brunner's masterwork to find a worthy possible heir.

It's also been something of a *Doctor Who* year, catching up on old TV stories on DVD, sampling the Big Finish audio adventures (*Lubbilee* is superlative comedy) and taking on some of the more recent – and, it must be said, rather sophisticated – literary offerings. Top of that particular list is Jonathan Blum and Kate Orman's **Fallen Gods** (Telos, 2004), one of Telos Books' highly collectible series of fifteen novellas. Some of these books push the *Who* canon in unusual directions and this one goes several degrees further than most with a mythological story set in ancient Greece, and it garnered Blum and Orman the 2003 Aurealis Award for best novella. I prefer my *Who* to be serious, thoughtful and forward-looking and *Fallen Gods* is a bounty of surprising riches: complex, energetic and magical.

My best non-fiction read of the year was Lucy Jago's **Northern Lights** (Hamish Hamilton, 2001), a biography of Kristian Birkeland, the visionary Norwegian scientist who established the facts and dispelled the myths behind the atmospheric phenomenon. It's a tale of obsession and a sacrifice of love for science, and Jago gets under the skin of her subject by presenting a sympathetic portrait of a flawed but dedicated scientific hero: they simply don't make them like this anymore.

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## Nonfiction of 2004

compiled by Paul N. Billinger

As an experiment we also asked our contributors to choose their favourite piece of criticism that read last year. There's a fascinating range – rock music, politics, meat, stand-up comedy, oh, and the odd bit of science fiction criticism as well,

#### PAUL BATEMAN

**The Great Rock Discography** (7th Edition) by Martin C. Strong (Cannongate, 2004). Over 1200 artists of Rock listed! (Blue, Take That and the Osmonds can take a hike!) Band histories! Line-up changes! Career milestones! UK and US chart positions for every release! A foreword by John Peel! What more could you want? This is my Rock Bible. Bloody good for the *NME* and *Mojo* crosswords too.

#### CLAIRE BRIALEY

Nalo Hopkinson contributed 'The Profession of Science Fiction #60: Sometimes It Might Be True' to *Foundation* #91, contemplating authors whose perspective on science fiction includes empathy with the 'alien'. This series of articles is always

good value, but this was something fresh and challenging and (characteristically) beautifully put.

#### GARY DALKIN

Jack Huberman, **The Bush Hater's Handbook**. The subtitle says it all, *A Guide to the Most Appalling Presidency of the Past 100 Years*. An A-Z, read and weep, Orwellian nightmare; here in unbiased digest form is a large selection of the make-the-rich-richer and kick-the-poor-lies, hypocrisy and naked corruption of the war-mongering junta currently running America.

#### NIAL HARRISON

If I could recommend all of The Mumpsimus, Matthew Cheney's thought-provoking blog, I would. One essay from 2004 does stand out, however: 'American Gods in a High School Classroom', which describes what happened when Matt, an English teacher, included Neil Gaiman's novel as part of a syllabus on American Literature.

<http://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/2004/11/american-gods-in-high-school-classroom.html>

**STEVE JEFFERY**

My non-fiction vote for 2004 goes to Damien Broderick's *x,y,z,t: Dimensions Of Science Fiction* (Bongo/Wildside Press, 2004), more accessible for the lay reader than his more academic *Reading By Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*, a personal, eclectic and occasionally iconoclastic selection of essays and reviews that should be a necessary addition to every sf critic/reviewer's bookshelves.

**PAUL KINCAID**

I was considerably less impressed with *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (CUP, 2003) than most commentators seem to have been; there were several lack-lustre articles and far too much was left out. Nevertheless, it did contain one stand-out article: 'Marxist Theory and Science Fiction' by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr, which manages to make a complex topic absolutely crystal clear.

**MARTIN McGRATH**

William Gibson's brief introduction to the 20th Anniversary Edition of *Neuromancer* made me feel old. His thoughts on how young people must view the book today – on the crudeness of his technology and how a television tuned to a dead channel means something entirely different for them – caught me by surprise.

**SIMON MORDEN**

In *Uncommon Sense* (SPCK, 2001) John Peck and Charles Strohmers manage not to tell you what to think, but how to think about everything more coherently and deeply – then leave the rest up to you. Eye-poppingly, mind-alteringly profound. This may be the first time that a book of theology gets a big-up in an sf magazine.

**DAVE M. ROBERTS**

The most intelligent thing I've ever read about the ethics of meat-

eating, the introductory essay, 'Meat and Right', from Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's *The River Cottage Meat Book* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2004) explores the human relationship with the animals we eat and the rights and wrongs of meat eating. It strongly argues that with the rise of intensive farming this is a relationship that has gone seriously wrong.

**ESTELLE ROBERTS**

My non fiction choice is *Love All The People*, the letters, lyrics and routines of the iconic comedian Bill Hicks. While this is not sf, Hicks's riffs could at times travel into the realms of surreal fantasy, and this is a fascinating study of an ascerbic, impatient but also very human character.

**SUE THOMASON**

I nominate *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World*, by Francis Wheen (Harper Perennial, 2004). Wheen champions Enlightenment values (reason, liberty, progress) against a swamping tide of 'Cults, quackery, gurus, irrational panics, New Age mysticism, [and] moral confusion'. He trashes homeopathy, astrology, Reaganomics, structuralism and Princess Diana. Read it and think for yourself!

**IAN WATSON**

Robert Irwin, author of the exotic and intricate fantasy novel *The Arabian Nightmare*, decodes the only surviving medieval Muslim palace in *The Alhambra* (Profile Books) as a 'machine for thinking in' designed by mystical intellectuals, but also reeking of blood. Much of what guidebooks tell us is tosh – the lovely gardens wouldn't have looked like that; the harem isn't a harem. We see a shadow of a shadow, but Irwin interprets the secrets illuminatingly.

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## Films of the Year 2004

by Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc

Another year has whooshed by, like a probe on its way to Titan. Genre-wise we've had more of the same: blockbusters, lots of CGI, and remake upon remake. However, a few gems have slipped in under the mainstream carpet. So, was 2004 any good?

**AMAZING ANIMATION*****The Incredibles***

Brad Bird, veteran of *The Simpsons* and the man behind the criminally underrated beatnik Miyazaki homage *The Iron Giant* (1999) joins the Pixar stable for his second feature. Superheroes have protected society from crime with their incredible abilities... that is until a series of lawsuits (including one from a suicidal man who didn't want to be saved) have forced them into retirement. Now Mr Incredible and his wife Elastigirl have to live ordinary lives under a government protection scheme, their superchildren forced to suppress their powers. But when Mr Incredible is sent on a secret mission it becomes clear there's a new supervillain at large and the time for anonymity has passed. Brimming with excellent visual gags and witty dialogue, there really is something for everybody. Again Pixar have created an exemplary rendered universe that is internally consistent in design and execution. Technically the film is astonishing but this proficiency is used as a tool rather than a means to an end – it is the design (at times perfectly reflecting Fleischer Superman cartoons) and execution

that make this exciting, witty and intelligent. It is also proof that animation can work beyond the eighty minute barrier if the material is strong enough.

***A Shark's Tale***

Scorsese, de Niro and Will Smith in the same film! And it's a gangster film! In CGI! With fish! What's more it earned a pile of cash at the box-office. Must be pretty good right? Well, no. It has poorly structured direction, mumbly dialogue and tedious film references that give postmodernism a bad rap. The time when anything CGI is automatically 'good' is long gone – something Pixar realised right from the start by concentrating on scripting and coherent cinematic language over look-at-me visuals and a billboard-friendly named cast.

***Shrek 2***

The happy couple are back in da swamp and ready to enjoy a life of domestic bliss. However there is the slight problem in that hot-headed Shrek has yet to meet the in-laws, so he and Fiona set off, accompanied by hyperactive Donkey, to the land of Far Far Away. Naturally father-in-law disapproves of Shrek and wishes to return the princess back to her former, more conventionally beautiful, self. *Shrek 2* provides a steady stream of gags, doing its job well because its scattershot (rather than focused) approach to jokes

means that while some fall flat, others work well, and are pitched at many different age groups. Antonio Banderas steals the show as Puss in Boots, purrrrfectly sending up his *Mask of Zorro* (1998) persona with a wicked streak of amoral, typically feline humour.

### **Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow**

Like the strange offspring of George Lucas and Guy Madden, *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* revels in its retro *Fantastic Stories* look, impressive but deliberately over-stylised machinery and film technique that harks back to earlier eras. Lovers of Saturday morning serials will be right at home as Skycaptain (Jude Law) must save the world from a terrible fate. Quite simply stunning to look at, the design is amongst the finest of this year's films. The insanity of the decision to make this virtually all CGI works in its favour because the whole film is internally coherent but basically preposterous, the combination of old fashioned and distinctly cutting-edge making for ideal bedfellows. Our science-fiction yarn was truly ripped.

### **Looney Tunes: Back In Action**

It looked so good on paper. Joe Dante is, after all, the world's most vocal Chuck Jones aficionado and long-time purveyor of irresponsible anarchic entertainment. And modern cinema's favourite whipping boy Brendan Fraser has taken almost as many knocks as Jackie Chan in the cause of making people laugh. This pairing in a re-run of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) (let's forget, please, *Space Jam* (1996)) but with more violence seemed a sure winner to succeed. Sadly the plot to reinstate Daffy as a bona fide star and Fraser's search for his dad feels tacked on. Although there are gags aplenty (including a great sequence in the Louvre), Steve Martin exterminates any pleasure from the proceedings. Looney Tunes work best as short cartoons (see the excellent *Wizard of Oz!* which precedes the film) – stretching them to feature length makes it all seem increasingly tiresome.

### **IF IT'S WORTH DOING ONCE...**

...it's worth overdoing. This year has seen huge numbers of sequels and remakes, particularly within horror, shocking people too ignorant to rent the original. In some ways this is a hypocritical view – *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* films are perennial after all – but something about direct remakes seems somehow... well, pointless. Sometimes the originals are bad films (as in Tobe Hooper's recent remake of the notorious, and still heavily censored, *The Toolbox Murders*), but remaking a classic seems tantamount to asking for trouble. We await the proposed remake of Argento's *Suspria* with utter dread...

### **The Grudge**

Here's a remake conundrum – director Takashi Shimizu has virtually remade his own film (*Ju-On*) in Japan a few times, but here he is doing it again for a Hollywood audience. What is surprising is how much of the low-key, constantly creepy, motiveless shocks and almost total absence of humour has made it into the westernised version. Even more surprising is the sheer amount of money it made in the box office despite no expensive pyrotechnics and half the dialogue being subtitled. This is a great scary movie of the kind we have rarely seen since *Halloween* – not overtly gory but plenty of jumps. When bad things happen at a place, the spirits live on to be nasty to people for no discernible reason. Classic scary camp-fire nonsense. But... what was the point of remaking?

### **Texas Chainsaw Massacre (remake)**

What, precisely, was wrong with the original? Well, apparently a creepy policeman was needed and, er, there just wasn't enough gore first time round. Tobe Hooper's 'less is more' approach

(hoping the film would get a PG rating – it was banned for 25 years here in Blighty) created one of the most tense black comedies around, but this time prosthetics and shock tactics go straight for the so-called 'hard-R'. It's not all bad, the book-ended grainy footage is a nice touch and there are a few unexpected twists. The decision to keep it firmly in the 1970s jumps on the retro bandwagon but frees it from post-*Scream* (1996) knowingness. Mildly diverting.

### **Dawn of the Dead (remake)**

Romero's classic 1978 sequel (to *Night of the Living Dead* (1969) which was remade by Tom Savini before remakes became fashionable, allegedly as a way of maintaining copyright) relocated the haunted house to a shopping mall in order to criticise consumerism while providing plenty of splattery entertainment. In this version the mall setting is retained... until script-writer James Gunn (*Tromeo and Juliet* (1996) [top dog] and *Scooby Doo* (2002) [dog]) gets bored and runs riot with the characters' predicaments. The result is less a rerun or re-imagining (ugh... please let the phrase die...) than a springboard and it's all the better for it, especially having zombies that can move at pace rather than just shambling about.

Realising that today's popcorn junkies don't give a stuff for messages we just get a cracking horror-action yarn packed with clichés and imaginative grue. Add a real early-1980s-style ending and the package is complete – not art but an ideal 'Friday night with beers' film. Interestingly the proposed sequel will be *Dawn of the Dead 2* and not *Day of the Dead*.

### **Van Helsing**

Perhaps fearing that milking Universal's back catalogue of monsters one at a time was going to take a while, Stephen (*The Mummy*) Sommers has just thrown loads of 'em together in one film. Van Helsing is now an ass-kicker more akin to pantomime gothic pro-wrestler rather than man of medicine. His sidekick for this mission is Kate Beckinsale wearing her Kate Beckinsale Impractical Tight Black Number.™ The bad guy is none other than Count Dracula who is after Frankenstein's creative spark in order to give birth to thousands of kids, spawned by his three brides in a huge cave beneath his interdimensionally cloaked castle. And then things get silly. Sommers throws everything at this one, homages to Whale and Polanski, the less obvious Hammer films (*Kiss of the Vampire*, *Vampire Circus* etc) as well as James Bond-style gadgets and hair-raising chase sequences. However, there is a problem. Many films can sustain slightly shabby effects, but Sommers's brand of downright entertaining nonsense requires a certain verisimilitude that is lacking here, with some of the CGI lacking that difficult-to-depict quality – weight. But it doesn't stop the film being a good laugh.

### **Alien vs Predator**

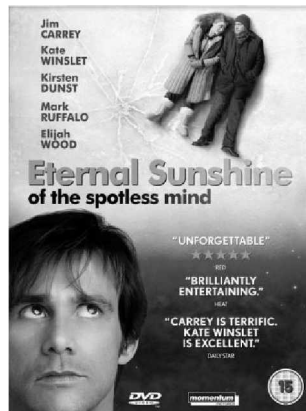
*Alien* (1979) – gruesome star of a series of splatterific sci-fi films splashing the walls with giblets and mutilated acid-scarred bodies.

*Predator* (1987) – gruesome star of a series of nasty splatterfilms so unpleasant that they remain heavily censored in some countries for their disturbing content.

*Alien vs Predator* – rated PG-13 (in the US) to get the kids in. Whoever wins, we lose. Ne'er a more apt tag-line.

### **Resident Evil 2: Nemesis**

Paul Anderson's *Resident Evil* was a dumb but fun action flick. But he was too busy making *Alien vs Predator* (hahaha) to make the sequel, so we have this dreary affair instead. Stupendously violent but virtually bloodless, this is the antithesis of the Capcom games where stealth and a dwindling supply of ammo make every bullet





count and the deaths all have a visceral impact. Carrying on from part one Alice (Milla Jovovich) faces the normal array of zombies with a new group of dumb-talking misfits for company. Those naughty blighters at Umbrella Corp have an über-zombie/hybrid/thing that, it turns out, is actually... no that would be telling (like you care). Waves upon waves of faceless hordes get mown down, our heroes get trapped, they escape, waves upon waves of faceless hordes get mown down, our heroes get trapped, they escape, waves upon... you get the idea. There are no jumps, no scares (the games are genuinely scary) just plodding, senseless, sanitised violence. More second-rate schmup than survival horror. Dreadful.

### **The Chronicles of Riddick**

When, in polite company, say at a little party somewhere, you mention that you like science-fiction films, a common response implies that you have rabies and a taste for human flesh. Science fiction, you see, is a genre (apparently) that consists of people with stupid names, wearing stupid costumes, travelling to stupid 'high concept' planets, talking pish and pontificating cod-Nietzsche while pointing a laser super destroyer ray at you that looks like a tinsel-covered twig. If you can be bothered you normally protest, spraying a mouthful of half-chewed Twiglets in their direction crying 'no, no, it's not like that'. Then they mention *The Chronicles of Riddick* and you know you are on to a loser. The unpretentious combination of insectoid splatter and low-budget thrills of *Pitch Black* (2000) has somehow spawned this high-budget abomination of a sequel – all portentous semi-transparent Judi Dench and clenched-jawed macho gibberish from quite possibly the least charismatic screen antihero of the last decade.

### **Thunderbirds**

'Thunderbirds are Nooooooooo!!!' Normally the expression 'no strings attached' is a positive thing; sadly this is not the case here. Insert additional witty comments as necessary ('Thunderbirds are C.R.A.P.', 'No M'lady', wooden acting analogies etc), something anyone who reviews *Thunderbirds* is compelled to do. Jonathan Frakes continues his long and unimpressive run of films devoid of any directorial interest and in the process has created a virtual vacuum of cinematic technique. Good job, Commander Riker...

### **Blade: Trinity**

Parker Posey, in full panto *Josie and the Pussycats* (2001) mode, and her vampire buddies raise the original vampire from his sandy tomb somewhere in the Syrian desert. The purpose? To kill off stony-faced funmeister Blade (scourge of vamps the world over and, of course, part-vamp himself) and turn the humans into living bloodbags. To make matters worse Blade is filmed bumping off a human (wearing fake fangs) so now has the police on his tail. Then Whistler is killed for, oh, about the thirtieth time in the series, and Blade's forced to team up with a bunch of green-under-the-collar vampire hunters to defeat the new super daywalking shapeshifting über-vamp and develop a vampire-killing virus. Phew! Utter nonsense of course, but who cares? *Blade: Trinity* marries one action scene after another and a lot of amusing mumbo jumbo. Scenes of carnage follow like clockwork but each set-piece is at least recognisable from the previous one. As vacuous as outer space but entertaining nonetheless.

### **Spider-Man 2**

Superheroes all go through the 'disillusionment phase', especially in the acne-spattered angst-ridden world of Marvel. Forget the litigious futurist world of Mr Incredible, Peter Parker has real problems – he can't hold down his pizza delivery job, is less than attentive at his studies and he's broke. Why? Because he goes around saving dumb people from horrible people and gets diddly-

squat in return. He even lost his girl to some astronaut. But before you can say 'hang up your fetish wear', along come a couple of miffed super-villains; the son of Norman 'Green Goblin' Osborn and the recently mutated Dr Otto 'Doc Ock' Octavius. The joy of *Spider-Man 2* lies in the juxtaposition of the mundane and the extraordinary – of holding a lousy minimum wage job and yet fighting a madman with giant metal tentacles, or visiting your aunt but also fitting in time to face a misguided nemesis. It's these human elements that make the fantastical ones so exciting. Again Raimi has pulled out all the stops visually. While this may not seem so groundbreaking in the light of many recent blockbusters, it's worth noting that Raimi has been perfecting his camera techniques for over twenty years.

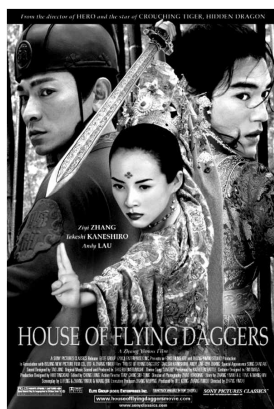
### **Haunted Mansion**

Workaholic estate agent Jim Evers's (Eddie Murphy) wife Sara receives an offer to view a highly desirable property providing she attends alone. But Jim tags along with the kids anyway. Just as well; sinister butler Ramsley (Terence Stamp) plans to use Sara to revive his dead master. Disney plunder another theme park ride in an attempt to swell the coffers (we await the film version of the one with the spinning tea-cups with some trepidation) but the result are more a series of gentle undulations than a rollercoaster. There are some nice set pieces and the design is suitably overblown. Ultimately though, it is as transparent and wispy as its many spirits.

### **IT'S LIKE, YOU KNOW, FOR KIDS**

### **Around the World in 80 Days**

That Phileas Fogg bloke (you know, the guy who invented unusual snacks in the 1980s) is played by Alan Partridge and his sidekick, Passepartout (or Biyometrik Eyedecard as he will be known in the 2008 remake), by gummy-faced kung-fu buffoon Jackie Chan. Together they follow in the footsteps of Michael Palin, only a century earlier. Or something. Fogg's crackpot ideas have led to a potentially career-mauling wager in which he must, as the title so succinctly suggests, traverse the globe in less than three months. Chan's aboard, off for a free trip back to China (save the village, stolen ancient Chinese artefacts – the usual JC Macguffins) – so the recipe is set for an episodic travelogue peppered with star cameos, sweeping international vistas and slapstick. The design is suitably unrealistic, the brief fight-scene in a Paris gallery a slight return to form for Chan and, overall, proceedings tick by on auto-pilot... just no more.



### **Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban**

Chris Columbus retains producing credit but hands the directorial reins to Alfonso (Y Tu Mama!) Cuarón, who gave us an excellent version of *The Little Princess* (1995). *The Prisoner of Azkaban* is a far more morbid affair than its predecessors – not only with the first appearance of the Dementors (a great scene aboard the Hogwarts Express) but even in the more overtly humorous sequences such as Harry's breakneck journey on the Night Bus. Given that *The Prisoner of Azkaban* started the climb into phonebook page counts that turned (particularly) the fourth book into a cumbersome bore, it's amazing how much they've crammed into the running time. Primarily the Harry Potter films are aware of their target audience and play to it – they look great, are exciting, occasionally scary and show the tribulations of school friendships and rivalries in an fantastical context. *The Prisoner of Azkaban* manages to succeed its predecessors as superior diverting children's entertainment. We do, however, await with dread the prospect of Mike 'Four Weddings' Newell's *The Goblet of Fire*, a task that would appear nigh on impossible to do with any conviction. Unless, of course, Harry wakes up exclaiming "fuckity fuck I'm still at the Dursleys'..."

**Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events**

We were very concerned that this would turn into a saccharine franchise. Based on the first three books, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* tells the awful trials of the Baudelaire children, sorry, Baudelaire orphans – owing to the fact that their parents perished in a mysterious fire. Seeking custody of the siblings is the iniquitous Count Olaf (Jim Carrey) – ‘iniquitous’ here meaning ‘liable to bump off orphans in order to get his hands on their inheritance’ – who will try any disguise to grasp the three plucky, intelligent and moderately good-looking children and pinch their cash. Making the books into a feature was always going to be problematic – children like gross things, but parents don't like them seeing them – so while horrible and unfortunate events occur with alarming regularity, they are occasionally a touch less macabre than the books allow. Carrey is alternately brilliant and irritating as the malevolent Olaf, a word here meaning ‘evil and gurning simultaneously’, and his impossibly lanky stature matches the books' illustrations perfectly. The design looks fabulous thanks to Rick Heinrich's impeccable art direction. The script cleverly places the second and third books in the middle of the first one and includes many Snicket eccentricities (he is an omnipresent narrator) but the result is that the final act is a touch rushed. By no means perfect, but better than we could reasonably expect. Oh, and the end credits (which should be at the start) are fabulous.

**13 Going On 30**

This year's ‘child in an adult mind’ comedy (see the *Freaky Friday* remake for last year's) sees schoolgirl Jenna Rink wishing she was no longer 13. Bingo, a sprinkle of magic dust later and she awakes to find herself head magazine design guru, with a very buff bloke in the buff in her bedroom. Yikes! Unfortunately it also transpires that, not only have the seventeen years made her rich and famous, they've also made her a total bitch. Naturally her good-natured self tries to rectify all this. Jennifer Garner ditches the tough kicking sf of *Daredevil* and TV's *Alias* and proves more than up to the job of feel-good fantasy comedy. What could easily have strayed into murky waters proves an easy to watch (but consequently easy to forget and wafer thin) comedy of manners and situation.

**WHAT, SOME REAL SCIENCE FICTION? NAAAAHHH!****I, Robot**

Bzzzzzzhhhttt. Not the sound of servos kickin' into action on a super-advanced android, but the sound of spinning from six feet under. Onomatopoeia is so difficult. So here we have a high-concept title and a marquee star battling with the famed ‘Laws of Robotics’. Oooooooo. Anyone expecting a faithful Asimov adaptation was clearly delusional so just forget about it, alright? Instead we get trainer-wearing Luddite Will Smith who's deeply suspicious about the androids created to serve us. But as there has never been a single case of robots harming humans surely the guy is nuts and not suitable for a police career? And you'd be right, everything's fine and there's lots of hugs and feel-good man-android interaction in this beautiful utopian future. Oh, all right then, no-one would pay to see robots being nice so of course there's murder, conspiracy and shed-loads of well-choreographed action. Jolly fun it is too and there's surprising depth in the arguments about humanity and the nature of self that means we have this year's ‘not as dumb as the sticker suggests’ award for surprisingly decent sf. Not thesis material but at least it attempts to pitch at a level above Janet and John.

**Paycheck**

If you want to see a Philip K. Dick film you're better off catching up on anything written by Charlie Kaufman (see *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) than something supposedly based on the man's actual work. Sure, *Total Recall* is a great film, but it's only tangentially related to Dick. Along comes *Paycheck* and initially it looks hopeful – Michael Jennings (Ben Affleck) reverse-engineers products for sneaky companies, earns shed-loads of cash but has all his work memories wiped to prevent him spilling the beans. Inevitably the ‘last big job’ comes up, it's dodgy, he wakes up with a year missing from his mind and a set of clues left to him by himself. And everyone wants him dead. And he's in love with Uma Thurman. Twice. There's a lot of easy-on-the-eye action (a ridiculous, pointless but energetic motorcycle chase being a highlight) and blah-blah technobabble but ultimately, like its hero, once the job's over you've forgotten all about it. John Woo is slowly crawling back from the travesty that was *MI:2*, but it's a far cry from the majesty of *Bullet in the Head*, *A Better Tomorrow* or *Hard Boiled*.

**The Village**

In the village they keep things to themselves. That's no going outside the borders (or the bogeymen will savage you) and, naturally, the colour red is strictly forbidden. It's all very puritanical in a founding-fathers kind of a way but for the most part it seems to work. Except some people want to know what lies outside the borders. What is the secret of the village? M. Night Shyamalan returns with another creepy-twisty spook tale and this time, to keep you on your toes, he has a number of (un)expected events take you by surprise. Didn't see the Joaquin Phoenix bit coming! It is, of course, utter hokum but when has that ever prevented a film

from being enjoyable?

**The Day After Tomorrow**

A-ha. Remember that dreadful term they used for *The Core*? Well it's back! Science faction, or using technobabble to give an air of respectability to your ludicrous premise. Sincerity in the face of the absurd has always been Roland Emmerich's modus operandi and here is no exception – *The Day After Tomorrow* comes with doomsayer prophecies of imminent environmental despair and a plea for liberal (well, alright, democratic) politics in the crucial US election year. Anyway, the environment's gone to pot and our scientist hero tries to warn everyone. Who, of course, don't listen. It's very cold. And he has to go find his son because he feels guilty. Basically this is just a wafer-thin premise for seventies-style disaster movie pyrotechnics. Except there's never any doubt who is going to live and who is going ‘the way of the extra’; the characters have the emotional thickness of a Rizla and the foreshadowing is signposted in letters a mile high. ‘Hey! The wolves have escaped from the zoo! I SAID THE WOLVES HAVE ESCAPED FROM THE ZOO!’ Wonder if they'll be turning up later then?

**Stepford Wives**

Bryan Forbes's fairly misogynist version of Ira Levin's very misogynist book gets the ironic modernisation touch from Muppet man Frank Oz. Joanna Eberhart (Nicole Kidman) is the family breadwinner and the face behind a hugely successful TV station, but she is having a nervous breakdown. Hubby Walter finds the perfect place away from the hustle and bustle – a house in the high security, multi-amenity, big buck town of Stepford. There's something strange though – all the men are geeky and devote their lives to leisure while their wives are pretty, docile and domesticated. Wisely Oz ditches the shock twist of the original, figuring that the audience will already be aware of it and



concentrates on the revelations as seen by our heroine. Things are certainly played for ironic chuckles this time round and, while the film keeps its subversion tuned to mild, there's much to enjoy.

## OFFBEAT

### Azumi

Kept away from the world, ten kids have been trained from birth by an elder samurai to become hardened warriors. Their mission: to stop a devious plan to usurp the current shogun. Their samurai master trains them so hard that half of them fail the entrance test. One who does pass is destined for greatness: Azumi. Kitamura's films, despite their reliance on stock Japanese stories/manga/history, are more easily defined by western pop influences than on traditional Japanese film-making which has its own style of editing and composition. Instead MTV and advertising inform the restless camerawork, Raimi and Romero the visual style. Azumi unashamedly plays to the stalls – its lead is kawaii idoru Aya Ueto who spends much of the film chopping hundreds of people into little pieces while the camera blurs in a free-wheeling burn of motion-tracking and CGI-gore excess.

### House of Flying Daggers

To expect one wu xia 'martial arthouse' film from a respected film-maker may seem presumptuous (Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Wong Kar-Wai's *Ashes of Time* (1994)); to expect two seems downright greedy. But following on from his multiple-viewpoint, breathtakingly colourful *Hero*, Zhang Yimou has come up with another slice of exemplary swordplay: *The House of Flying Daggers*. The House in question is an underground bunch of Robin Hood types – a group the authorities want dead. Both sides fight dirty. The police plant their best man as a mole in the Daggers' camp by trying to get him to earn the trust of blind swordswoman and dancer Mei and lead them to the Daggers' secret lair. With plenty of twists and turns, *House of Flying Daggers* has it all – intrigue, betrayal, plot twists and doomed, inevitable, love. Quite simply stunning to look at, with some of Ching Siu-Tung's finest wirework yet (and that is saying something!), you'll gasp in amazement and weep with sadness. Magical.

### Bubba Ho-tep

With the exception of an odd handful of films, genre tends to favour the young and able-bodied for its heroes. Bubba Ho-tep not only challenges this narrow-minded view but also answers one of the two most nagging questions of last century – did Elvis really die, and is Bruce Lee travelling incognito on a philosophical journey of enlightenment? Well, we're not sure about the Dragon but the King is definitely alive, infirm and incontinent in a rest home. Where he resides with a guy who swears he's JFK. There they end up battling an evil Egyptian undead spirit who also wants a bit of TLC in his twilight years. Okay it's a bit of a one-gag premise and the budget limitations are quite apparent, but the sight of a Vegas-era suited old Elvis (a role Bruce Campbell was born to play) shuffling down corridors with a Zimmerframe trying to defeat the undead menace is a hard image to shake. Disreputable fun from Don (Phantasm) Coscarelli

### Finding Neverland

Johnny Depp's mighty CV notches up another winner (for such a popular star he has a frighteningly good batting average) as he tackles the role of J.M. Barrie, specifically his relationship with widowed Sylvia Davies (Kate Winslet) and her children, and the writing of *Peter Pan*. The strains of the budget show occasionally and there's a valiant attempt to rein in the sentimentality, but the delightful blurring of fantasy and reality, the genuine warmth of

character and the desire to, if not break with convention, but at least bruise it, is all in its favour.

### Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

Like David O. Russell's existential detective comedy *I Heart Huckabees*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* comes in decidedly left-field of the usual Hollywood fare. Once again screenwriter Charlie Kaufman has created a distorted, hallucinatory world of paranoia and the bizarre in which his perpetually confused characters must somehow pick their way towards some semblance of sanity... usually unsuccessfully. Joel (Jim Carrey in not-irritating mode) is having a hard time coming to terms with the fact his kooky girlfriend Clementine (Kate Winslet) has had all memory of their relationship whipped from her mind. Depressed, he seeks to erase his own recollections of their vibrant but unconventional relationship. But matters don't quite go to plan and past, present, reality and fantasy become increasingly difficult to distinguish in Joel's anguished and addled brain. This is as near to Philip K Dick as you are likely to see at present and at the same time a melancholy romance for our times. Great stuff.

### Zatoichi

Narrowly clipping *De-Lovely* at the post for the Year's Best Tap-dancing Routine award comes Takeshi 'Beat' Kitano's *Zatoichi* – an updating of the popular Japanese film series. The premise is breathtakingly simple – Zatoichi, a blind wandering masseur, arrives in town. People ignore him because he's blind. Some bad guys appear and rough people up. Zatoichi then unleashes a blur of deadly skill with his mighty katana. Heads roll. Blood spurts. People get miffed. A final confrontation beckons. Kitano is wise enough not to deviate too wildly from genre conventions but at the same time makes the film his own with painstakingly composed shots, his renowned use of periods of introspection followed by bursts of extreme violence and an expert knowledge of the way sound and vision harmonise. The use of music is at once relational, breathtaking and witty as percussive tracks are mirrored in intricate agricultural work or a construction site becomes the Edo equivalent of an avant-garde orchestra. A marvellous blend of intelligent art film and pulp entertainment, this is, remarkably, the only Kitano directed film to have had any impact on its national box office.

### Kill Bill Vol 2

Not the all-out fantasy bloodbath of *Vol 1*, *Vol 2* is included here more for completeness, although the training sections with Gordon Lau add a sense of Shaolin surrealism to proceedings. The Bride is back with only three names left on the list. And that's it – two and a half hours of the kind of dialogue missing from *Vol 1* fly past. For Tarantino aficionados this makes up for *Vol 1* – for the rest of us it is an equally good but different approach. Still, it could do with another Crazy Fists massacre...

### Gozu

It's a yakuza flick. With a big killer monster born out of some kinky sex. It's Miike Takashi. It MUST be good.

### Zebraman

Spiderman? Batman? The Hulk? Nah. Zebraman. Schoolteacher by day, crimebustin' Zebraman by night. It's got giant intergalactic crayfish in it! It's Miike Takashi. But for kids. It MUST be good.

## HINTS OF HORROR AND FINALLY, FANTASY

### Phantom of the Opera

Dramatic Chromatic! DAAAAAA. Da da da da DAAAAAAAAAAAA. Da da da da DAAAAAAAAAAAA. He's the Phantom, a kind of Elephant Man-lite driven into the opera house catacombs, who falls



in love with a chorus girl and demands the staging of his own pompous music... or else. Joel Schumacher brings plenty of visual flair and necessarily ostentatious showmanship to Gaston Leroux's classic tale of dark romance, putting its moderate budget right where it counts – on the screen. However, no amount of inventiveness and flair can compensate for a dire score that consists of three songs and a load of random notes (and no, the 'DAAAAAA. Da Da Da Da DAAAAAA. Da Da Da Da DAAAAAA' riff repeated as a 'Look out! He's behind you!' pantomime leitmotif does not count). Add to that a phantom who: a) isn't very frightening and b) can't sing, and you have a pile of drivel.

### **Gothika**

Mathieu (La Haine) Kassovitz gets a stab at the US market with a supernatural-horror-thriller starring Halle Berry. Berry is slammed up in an asylum for a brutal murder, the irony being that she used to be one of the psychiatric nurses dealing with patients' recollections (or are they?) of satanic rape. Thing is, with all the hallucinations, the communal showers and the appalling catering, she can't be sure she didn't commit the crime. *Gothika* has a sense of preposterous logic that only a horror flick can get away with and has the prerequisite pointless jumps and strobe punctuated nightmares. This got panned by everyone but is actually a reasonably-shot piece of campfire drivel.

### **Catwoman**

Taking on Garfield at the feline end of the box office we have Oscar-winning thesp Halle Berry in what could be the most staggeringly, 'Halle-iously' inept superhero film of all time (and that's saying something). Our frumpy fashion designer heroine is almost bumped off but revived by cat dribble and driven to licking her own butt in front of houseguests (or something...) before facing the real nasty cat Sharon Stone in a tedious showdown atop a glassy building. The resulting film is, frankly, an embarrassment with some of the most atrocious CGI ever committed to film. Treats its audience with an unprecedented degree of contempt.

### **Shaun of the Dead**

Here we have a very British take on the zombie film – 'Spaced with the living dead' is perhaps the easiest pitch. Taking the premise that if the country were overtaken by shambling, incoherent braindeads we'd probably not notice until they bit us (quite literally), Simon Pegg's constantly hung-over antihero gathers together his acquaintances and family in the only place they can feel truly safe... the pub. Full of in-gags for the zombie connoisseur (Dylan Moran's evisceration is straight from *Day of the Dead* for example) but with plenty of humour directed at the British way of life, at last we have a national film that's entertaining and doesn't involve Victorian/Regency toffs, navel gazing gloom or Hugh Grant.

### **Hellboy**

Cigar-chewing red guy with sawn-off horns battles against tentacular demi-gods and clockwork Nazis. What's not to like in Guillermo del Toro's gleefully irreverent comic book horror? So maybe things can't quite live up to the prologue – Nazi occultists raising demons from another universe in the Hebrides – but it's still two hours of damned fine entertainment with wise-cracking Perlman at his best (outside the Jeunet films). Great action, a

budget that's all on screen and some genuinely disturbing bits amidst the carnage. Like Cthulhu. For kids.

### **Open Water**

Couple go out scuba diving. The boat that drops them off goes back to shore. They bob about and shout a lot. Cheap and tense, *Open Water* has a lot to offer – postage stamp plot, sudden scary bits, high concept.

### **Big Fish**

Burton springs back to form after the mediocrity that was the 're-imagining' of *The Planet of the Apes* but doesn't quite hit the highs of, say, *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). Billy Crudup plays William Bloom, who's fed up with his dying dad Ed's preposterous tales of rescuing conjoined singers in the Far East, being a human cannonball for love, detachable-eyed witches and a huge BFG called Karl. Perhaps most absurd is that Pop claims he met someone who looks like Steve Buscemi. Perpetually-grinning Ewan McGregor plays the younger Ed Bloom in a story of a man who outgrows his little town and goes out in search of love and adventure. Burton's film is filled with the visual warmth and storybook logic that permeates his best work; the relative limitations of the budget (funded from Europe, fact fans) work the

kind of tactile magic that total CGI can currently only dream of. So what if it's basically a thinly related series of absurd vignettes – it still has more imagination than most other films this year.

### **Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid**

How could anyone top king turkey *Anaconda* (1997)? Jon Voight in a career-defining role. Eric Stoltz in a coma. J-Lo. Ice Cube. Breathtakingly stupid and a lesson in how not to continuity-edit, *Anaconda* has achieved cult status due to tacky

gore, a hilarious script and a staggering degree of laugh-out-loud ineptness. No film could possibly follow that. Certainly not one PG-13'd to get the kids in.

### **The Polar Express**

Tom Hanks controls the Polar Express where he takes Tom Hanks on a magical journey. On the way Hanks meets with Tom Hanks and, among others, Tom Hanks. And some dancing waiters. Or something. A 'storybook come to life'. Or something.

### **The Punisher**

As judge, juror and executioner, Frank seeks to rid America of crime after the tragic loss of his family. A comic-book film with an 18 rating? Can't remember seeing one of those since Raimi's *Darkman* (1990).

### **The Forgotten**

Almost forgot about this one. Julianne Moore can't mourn the loss of her son because, according to everyone, he never existed. Interesting concept, but quite forgettable.

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Colin and Mitch are the authors of the *Pocket Essentials* on David Lynch, Jackie Chan, Vampire Films, Horror Films, John Carpenter and Tim Burton, several of which are now in second editions – so you should go out and buy them again. They are also frequent contributors to Vector – Eds.

## **AND THE WINNERS ARE:**

**Best Fantasy: *The Incredibles***

**Best Fantasy: *Zatoichi***

**Best Fantasy: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind***

**Best Fantasy: *House of Flying Daggers***



# First Impressions

## Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

☞ = eligible for the 2005 BSFA Award for Best Novel

☛ = contains stories eligible for the 2005 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction

### Iain M. Banks – *The Algebraist*

Orbit, London, 2004, 334pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-155-1

Reviewed by Pete Young

These shores are seemingly churning out more quality space opera than ever, much of it original, thoughtful and well-considered, and Banks's much-anticipated new standalone title will likely give British space opera yet another push to keep it ahead of the game. *The Algebraist* is a complex story in terms of interlocking detail, though its internal structure appears surprisingly simple. Many thousands of years in the future the galaxy's ascendant society is the Mercatoria, a union of thousands of alien species connected by artificially produced wormholes. The Mercatoria has a wealth of interweaving societies and taxonomies, is self-righteous and aggressive in its approach to the galaxy's wealth, possesses an ideology despised even by its own citizens, and is under attack from a very large and capable rebel group known as the Beyonders, who sabotage wormhole connections to remote parts of the galaxy before moving in to destroy them. Alongside the Mercatoria, though occupying a completely different mindset, are the Dwellers, a pan galactic, gas giant inhabiting species so mind numbingly long-lived that they hunt their young and treat war as a bit of good-natured sport. This most long-lived of the galaxy's species seem to be bluffing everyone into thinking they are little more than an extended clan of argumentative relatives who have little interest in the outside universe, but student Mercatoria Fassin Taak needs somehow to find the location of the rumoured Dweller wormholes if his corner of the galaxy is to survive the coming Beyonder attack.

In both the Mercatoria and the Dwellers we see Banks reducing the galaxy to an often bickering galactic village. There are great technological advances aplenty but, to compare with another notable Banks universe, there are no Excessions here, no subliming Culture minds to push the singularity envelope. The next step for all the galaxy's technological civilisations has by default been that of Artificial Intelligence, which has turned out to be the 'ultimate evil' that all species agree must be wiped out, for good or bad. This conveniently

lets us keep the streets to ourselves for our own sport, our own selfish and cruel and unreasoning gang wars.

The cumulative effect of the first hundred and fifty pages of *The Algebraist* is one of culture shock: it is sometimes hard to keep up with all the detail of the galaxy's multiple baroque civilisations, and this effect is repeated in miniature when Fassin is sent back to the Dweller world of Nasqueron to establish the truth about the Dweller wormholes. It also doesn't take long for some present-day parallels to sink in: probably modelled on the current militarist ascendancy of the United States, the Mercatoria also happen to be engaged in their own galaxy-wide War on Terror.

The search for the locations of the Dwellers' wormhole system is something of a McGuffin: it's important to the story's resolution but somehow not so much that Banks can't ignore it for long periods or occasionally take long and complex routes in coming to the point. Hence the success of *The Algebraist* becomes a question of poise for both the reader and the book itself: if approached in the right way it comes close to being a rock 'n' roll read from start to finish, one that is sufficiently intelligent and self-aware to throw out the tropes that prevent it from becoming anything remotely like *Deep Space Nine* writ large. Alternatively, if some of the book's indulgences leaves you wishing a blue pencil had been more liberally employed it's probably because the detail sometimes seems either disconnected from the overarching story or, on occasion, appears out of step with what surrounds it. The perennial question of which utopian future science fiction fans wish to inhabit usually elicits the 'C' word, and for better or for worse this will be one yardstick by which *The Algebraist* is measured. The Mercatoria certainly has an equivalent air of permanence about it despite the internal factionalising, and the comparative foil of the Dwellers' society is both apposite and well realised, though the Dwellers' physiology is often hard to visualise and the Beyonder

warrior priest, the Archimandrite Luseferous, a very deliberate villainous caricature, sometimes seems grafted on to the story to add necessary nastiness.

Banks is still thinking big and talking largely in veiled allegory about the real world, much as he did in *Look to Windward*, but the story itself remains the important thing. This book is for the most part as fun, as sophisticated and as detailed as the galaxy it describes, and

once again Banks has made it look easy.

[A CD version of *The Algebraist* is also available, abridged on six discs, and read by Anton Lesser, one of the best Shakespearian actors around (but not The Best: that would be Simon Russell Beale). Published by Time Warner AudioBooks, London, running time approximately 7 hours, £14.99, ISBN 1-4055-0078-6]

## Clive Barker – *Abarat: Days of Magic, Nights of War*

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

HarperCollins, London, 2004, 485pp, £20.00, h/b (ill.), ISBN 0 00 710045 0



I have been feeling anxious for two years awaiting a return to *Abarat*, probably Clive Barker's greatest creation since *Weaveworld*, but at the same time wondering uncertainly if the second part of *The Abarat Quartet* would live up to my expectations.

Like many of his works, Clive Barker has written another tale on the theme of the search for Paradise, the search for acceptance in a carnival of freaks, but with Barker's exotic imagination I never tire of it. After all, so few do it with such a kaleidoscopic vision, such unhinged flamboyance.

This second instalment continues where the last left off. Candy Quackenbush and the geshrat, Malingo, are still travelling from Hour to Hour in Abarat, pursued by Christopher Carrion's henchmen, including Otto Houlihan, the Criss-Cross Man. What does he want with her? Why is she such a threat? And how come she can speak Words of Power with no training?

The plans of the repugnant and skeletal Carrion are further afoot. In the Great Pyramids of Xuxux, Carrion has bred the Sacbrood, insectile monsters soon to be unleashed, eager to swarm and feast. His wretched Grandmother, Mater Motley, riding a giant hand, endlessly sows Stichlings from dead men's skin to be set upon the world. Other characters return from the first book: Kasper Wolfswinkel the Magician, imprisoned for killing five people for their hats, is released from the tarry cats' guard by Mater Motley and her stitchlings; John Mischief joins a band of sailors; and there are further hints of media mogul, the Commexo Kid, a potential rival of Carrion for the domination of the Islands of Abarat.

The second book extends the cast further, adding more wondrous and vile characters. To name a few: Vol, a man with three mouths, whose body is home to a variety of insects; Finnegan, whose wife-to-be, Princess Boa, was eaten by a dragon on their wedding day; and the boy, Letheo, in thrall to Carrion whose draughts suppress the beast within.

Like the last instalment, this one is vibrantly illustrated throughout.

One interview claimed that Barker made the paintings first then wrote the book based on them. I do not know whether he employs this method with other work, but it would certainly be interesting if fully illustrated versions of his other books were to become available. Admittedly graphic versions of his early work are available, but rarely illustrated by Barker himself. Nevertheless, the pictures in this book certainly enrich rather than detract from his writing. I'd urge you to read it now in hardback, as the paperback version is unlikely to have the colour illustrations.

Some may say that illustrations are best for fiction for younger readers, but to say Barker has ditched horror for children's books is absurd. In this second book of *The Abarat Quartet*, as with the first but to a greater level, the dread elements of his imagination are still very much present. The only difference compared with his 'adult' fiction (mainly read by adolescents, no doubt – like me over a decade ago) is the lack of sex and swearing, neither of which are absolutely necessary for creating visions of terror. The Sacbrood are no less formidable than the Nightbreed in *Cabal*, and Carrion himself, a skeletal creature whose nightmares slither and swarm in a transparent collar around his neck, is not exactly a cuddly version of *Hellraiser's* Pinhead.

The only worry now is how long will it be before we are treated to the third part. I suspect that the Commexo Kid will play a larger role in the next two books. After all it is not unusual for Barker to have two villains in his work, one a monster or demon, the other a businessman, who makes the monster seem loveable in comparison.

It may, however, be some time yet. Reports suggest that Barker is returning to more adult themes with an anthology similar to *The Books of Blood*, not to mention any film work he may be involved with. Whether the Master Fabulist (as some have called him) keeps up this level of work remains to be seen. Nevertheless, with *Abarat: Days of Magic, Nights of War* from his paintbrush and pen has flowed another fabulous fable.

## John Barnes – *Gaudeamus*

Reviewed by Tom Hunter

Tor, New York, 2004, 317pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30329-9

So, you've heard of that guy John Barnes, right? Yeah, that's him, the writer guy. American. Lives in Colorado. Wrote *The Sky So Big and Black* and *A Million Open Doors* and a bunch of other stuff which went down well with both sf readers and fans. Even got his stuff compared to Heinlein, and yes I think we can assume that whoever suggested it was intending to be complimentary.

Well anyway, this book isn't about him. Not exactly anyway, although he is in it a lot. Who this book is really about is his old campus buddy Travis Bismarck, and no I don't know what he thinks he's doing hanging about with a blatantly fictional surname like that either. I guess it's just one of those genre things people keep telling me about.

There's a whole bunch of other stuff in this book too, a lot of it called *Gaudeamus* in one way or another, but I'll get on to that in a moment.

So anyway after college Travis and John sort of went their separate ways, as you do. I mean, heck, I just heard via my old alumni network that one of my university housemates (the lesbian experimental artist

one who could use words like metafictional and postmodern without flinching) is going to be a genuine mother by the time this piece is published. Now I don't know what that means exactly but I know it means something, which is why I thought I'd mention it here.

By the way, John ended up teaching Theatre Studies in Colorado (coincidentally the subject that both my former housemate and I also studied), which is where he started all the writing on the side.

Meanwhile Travis went into the Private Eye business working defense contracts and the industrial espionage beat when he could, and paying the rent with the usual adulterous meat and potatoes work the rest of the time. Seriously though, what other line of work was he going to get with a moniker like Bismarck? I mean it's like visiting a counsellor called Darth Vader or hiring a lawyer called Keyser Soze or something.

Travis still likes to stop in on John from time to time, though mostly so he can get John to drive him places, but in between cadging favours he also gives him the inside track on all the latest cases, which the inner-writer part of John can't help but appreciate.

Don't take my word for it though. This book wouldn't even have come about if Travis hadn't turned up on John's porch raving a text-



book conspiracy story about aliens, teleportation, psychic drugs and the internet while looking for a quick, low-key ride out of town, and if John hadn't had the sense to write some of it down.

It seems like *Gaudeamus* is one of those of-the-minute buzzwords that gets itself attached to every project, secret or otherwise, and starts cropping up all over popular culture. How it gets there, of course, and what it all means is what this story is mainly all about. There are a lot of divergences of course, because this is one of those stories about

being told a story (even if the listener actually ends up being part of the action) and like all good mysteries it doesn't make much sense at first. And yes, that was intended to be a compliment.

Now, after all of the above, please don't go telling me you've still not got any idea what *Gaudeamus* is/are?

Uh huh.

Well, I guess you'd better do the sensible thing and go and buy the book then.

## Stephen Baxter – *Exultant*

Review by Gary Dalkin

Gollancz, London, 2004, 490pp, £12.99, hb, ISBN 0-575-07429-9



*Exultant* follows *Coalescent* (reviewed in Vector 232) as the second volume in *Destiny's Children*, the latest sequence from Stephen Baxter. Where the previous book was set entirely on Earth in the past and present (bar a far-future coda), and was a mixture of historical adventure, personal drama and biological sf, *Exultant* is hard sf space opera set some 20,000 years hence. Unusually for a

series book, it stands entirely alone from its predecessor and can be read quite happily with no knowledge of *Coalescent*. It is set in the same fictional universe and shares a few reference points with the earlier book, but the characters and story are completely separate, and the feel and tone of the novel are very different. The intimate contemporary sensibility of the modern-day sections of *Coalescent* here give way to old-fashioned space opera, turbo-charged by a healthy dose of the sort of staggering vast cosmological visions and hard science we have come to expect from Baxter. Oh, and the title slots into the Xeelee sequence with which Baxter made his name, first in short stories and then in the novels *Raft*, *Timelike Infinity*, *Flux*, *Ring* and the collection *Vacuum Diagrams*. Not that it is necessary to have read these to enjoy *Exultant*, though it did make me want to go back to those titles and read them again.

As for the story... *Exultant* makes no secret of paying homage to the WWII movies Baxter must have grown up with, those same movies which in part inspired George Lucas to create *Star Wars*. *Exultant* is *The Dam Busters* in space, or *Star Wars* stripped of its mythopoetic resonances and bolstered by hard physics. It is the story of a pilot, Pirius, who goes on a journey of discovery from the heart of the galaxy to the inner and outer reaches of the solar system and back, becomes a leader, builds a new squadron, overcomes technological challenges, and eventually leads his crews on a bold assault on the enemy's ultimate stronghold. Pirius is of course Guy Gibson, or Luke Skywalker... Filling in for Barnes Wallis, or Obi Wan Kenobi, is Nilis, who comes across like a cross between Slatibartfast and The Doctor as originally played by William Hartnell. The German Dams/The Death

Star, is played by the black hole at the centre of the galaxy. The bad guys are the Xeelee, who predate *Babylon 5* by some years, but who these days seem to ominously prefigure the coming of The Shadows.

Baxter has fun playing imaginative snail games with stock clichés, including the seemingly obligatory two pilots involved with the same woman. The twist here being that due to time travel both pilots are the same man, dubbed for sake of clarity Pirius Red and Blue (and enabling Baxter to give us Red and Blue Leaders...)

What saves *Exultant* from merely being a posh *Star Wars* wannabe is the story-telling verve and range of invention on offer. *Exultant* reveals a universe of considerable complexity which both revisits aspects of the previous Xeelee novels and stories and recomplicates what has gone before. There is some telling political commentary on the benefit to politicians of maintaining a state of perpetual war, with influences drawn from the trenches of 1914-1918, and the caustic dystopia of 1984. Given our current phoney, and implicitly endless, 'war on terror', Baxter turns his pessimistic eye to power structures with appropriate cynicism.

The tale itself is essentially a turning point within the midst of the overall Xeelee sequence, one both comparatively small in the overall scale of the series, yet with implications as broad as anything in Baxter's oeuvre. As recounted here, the entire history of life in the universe up to humanity is dazzling, and few writers create such convincingly alien aliens as Baxter.

If finally *Exultant* lacks the visceral excitement we might expect from such a story, this is down to the author fundamentally being more concerned with ideas than character, even to the somewhat anticlimactic finale in which action gives way to one more over-riding cosmological concern. Ultimately Baxter is far more interested in the fate of the universe than the fate of his characters, yet *Exultant* delivers a real sense of wonder and an unfolding drama on multiple scales which is often exhilarating. An odd mix of the wildly imaginative and the deliberately formulaic, *Exultant* is a far more satisfying read than *Coalescent*.

## Stephanie Bedwell-Grime – *Fallen Angel*

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

Telos, Tolworth, 2004, 216pp, £9.99, pb, ISBN 1 903869 69 3

From the tacky back cover of a blond in a PVC jumpsuit I thought I was going to get something overly salacious requiring frequent cold showers. Luckily for the reservoirs of Britain, I did not. There's not even much, if any, swearing let alone sex, reminding me of the old adage that I shouldn't judge a book by its cover, even with an author whose suggestive surname surely has to be a pseudonym for a *Black Face* writer. I just say this as a warning to those who, like me, may be easily taken in by pictures of blondes in clothing revealing much in form if not flesh.

Anyway, away from the discussion concerning skimpy clothes to skimpy plots. Porsche Winter is a fallen angel, banished from Heaven and forced to live on the Earthly plane for reasons covered in the previous novel, *Guardian Angel* – no, I haven't read it either, and probably won't (but it was reviewed in Vector 231 with an equally unenthusiastic outcome). She lives in sin in a Toronto Penthouse Suite with Alex Chalmers, a stockbroker and also from the previous book. She's a bit down; getting used to all this more mortal stuff and all, until she spots none other than Naamah, head she-devil and right hand of the Devil himself. Porsche sees other omens like a plague of locusts

and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, dressed as mounted riot police. Then Alex is fired for embezzlement activities occurring in the previous book even though he put the money back, and it looks as though the black leather-clad Naamah might be seducing him. Oh, and Armageddon might be about to kick off. What can Porsche do? After all she's not really in favour with the Arch-Angels and shouldn't really be getting involved, but what's a girl to do, stand by and let the demon hordes spread across the Earthly Plane as a diversion while Lucifer sorts out his stock and the legal indictments of his hostile takeover of Heaven Inc.

Well I think you can guess, can't you? Porsche may be a girl with more spunk than others and may not play by the rules, but she's a little too goody-two-shoes for me. I'd like the half-demon in her to let rip. Alex is a bit too sweet for his tall, buff, black-haired looks, never mind that he's a stockbroker and possibly should be without any humanity whatsoever. But then again I'd like the Devil not to have horns and cloven feet and I'd like the full-blooded demons be a bit more menacing than Ewoks, possibly more like stockbrokers or corporate lawyers. The youths that mugged me on New Year's Eve were more

threatening and their brain cells could barely wave to each other.

Also, could I have a 'comic' fantasy (I emphasize 'comic' rather than comic, as light-hearted doesn't mean funny) that doesn't involve the destruction of Life as We Know It, please? This is okay as

knockabout Demon-Lite reading, but not scathingly fiendish. The Devil's in the detail for comedy but this is a fallen creation. (I think that's enough puns for now...)

## Trudi Canavan – *The High Lord*

Reviewed by Andrew A. Adams

Orbit, London, 2004, 642pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-315-5

This is the final part of Canavan's debut series, *The Black Magician Trilogy* (the earlier volumes were reviewed in *Vector* 235 and 237). While not quite a tour de force, it is an impressive conclusion to a very good series. Canavan has created a compelling world which has been gradually explored through the three books. Information is revealed when it is necessary and without information dumping, but naturally as various characters find it out for themselves. Her characters are some of the most natural, convincing and vivid I've read in a long time. They really come alive off the page. The primary viewpoint of Sonea is counterpointed by the other magicians and her childhood friend Cery, now an important thief.

The development of the plot through the three books has been exceptionally well-paced. Mysteries, both personal and political, set up in the first book are paid off in this last one. All the action is derived from appropriate and consistent character interactions, without any apparent forcing. The pacing of the revelations of the answers to the mysteries, the developing crises that form the climax of the sequence, and the character development is just about perfect.

The finale follows the logic of the world and its magic and of the characters and is quite moving. War is bloody and horrible and people

die. Canavan makes you care about the characters and is then willing to rip their hearts from their chests if that's the situation they're in.

The only criticism I would make is that there is a lack of a fanaticism in any of the 'good' characters – only the 'evil' characters turn out to be fanatics. Given the set-up, one or two might have been expected to resist the 'lesser of two evils' choice they are presented with. However, this only strikes me when reflecting on the book, so perhaps none of the characters was suitable for such a development.

While Canavan isn't much of a stylist, her descriptions get the job done. The sense of place is sufficient, though not always completely clear. Her characterisations make up for this and the descriptions of physical and magical activity do help create that 'inner movie' feeling. Accordingly, this is quite a page-turner and the accelerating speed of the plot draws the reader in, so that even the six hundred pages don't drag at all.

I heartily recommend reading the full trilogy – though as usual the later books won't stand alone that well. It will be interesting to see where Canavan takes us next.

## Mike Chinn – *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel*

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

A&C Black Publishers, London, 2004, 130pp, £14.99, h/p, ill., ISBN 0-7136-6998-5

With the subtitle "Everything you need to know to create great works" you certainly can't accuse Mike Chinn and his publishers of lacking ambition. In attempting to cover the jobs of artist and writer (and even of letterer, colourist and inker) and with a chapter devoted to selling your masterwork, *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel* is galloping across an awful lot of ground with only 130 text-light, illustration-heavy pages.

Of course the book can't succeed in such an over-hyped enterprise, but that's not to say that *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel* doesn't have things going for it. It is a very prettily designed book with lots and lots of illustrations to enliven the pages and, though the information in the book tends to be presented in the form of attention-deficit-disorder-friendly bite-sized pieces, the advice it offers seems sound.

The weakest chapter is the final one, on selling your work. The sad fact is that almost none of the large comic book publishers will even look at an unsolicited submission from a writer – in America Marvel, DC, Dark Horse and GrossGen will bin them without a glance. In the UK 2000AD accepts unsolicited submissions from new writers, but only for their five page 'Future Shock' stories. As an unpublished or relatively new writer you stand as much chance of winning the lottery as you do of selling an unsolicited graphic novel.

My main problem with *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel*, however, stems (I confess) from a personal prejudice. I have always disliked the phrase 'graphic novel'. It panders to those who wouldn't deign to be seen reading anything as juvenile as a comic book but who consider it acceptable to read a 'grown up' novel onto which some pictures might accidentally have fallen.

In *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel*, Mike Chinn argues that monthly comic books are like self-contained episodes of a TV series in which, when each episode closes – no matter how crazy things have been during the episode – order is restored. By contrast graphic novels are like movies or novels: "by the end there will have been major changes in the main characters, as well as the status quo." (p. 6)

This is a neat analogy, but it is also misleading. When Chinn gets around to recommending works as examples of graphic novels that give an insight into the best of various genres, many of those he

chooses were first published as monthly titles in episodic form (*Top 10*, *Hellblazer*, *100 Bullets*) which somewhat blurs his earlier distinction. It also reveals a rather old-fashioned attitude towards comics. It might have been true that, in the 1930s, 'Golden Age' heroes lived unchanging lives in their secret lairs. However, at least since Stan Lee's creation of the Marvel Universe and certainly since the work of writers like Chris Claremont (*X-Men*) and Denny O'Neill (*Green Lantern/Green Arrow*) in the 1970s, the modern comic book is likely to include more deaths and disasters, divorces and addictions than the average soap opera.

I'm not against comic book creators stretching the limits of the artform, nor am I against people creating mature and complex pieces of literature using the comic book medium. There are some genuinely outstanding literary graphic novels – Art Spiegelman's peerless *Maus*, the works of James Sturm (*Revival*, *Golem's Mighty Swing*) – that have been designed from the start to be read as novels. But it is also true that many of the works that most people regard as outstanding examples of the graphic novel format (almost everything by Alan Moore, Frank Miller and Neil Gaiman, for example) were first created as episodic comic books. Attempting to define such works as graphic novels and mark them as somehow distinct from the rest of the medium seems, to me, to be both futile and arbitrary. One is left with the feeling that the real line is between the works that the author approves of and those he does not, and here we come back the snobbery about 'ordinary' comics that I have always found so annoying.

In the final analysis, however, it is not the fine points of comic book theology that prevent me recommending *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel* but simply that I cannot imagine who would find it useful. In presenting advice to both writers and artists it admirably covers a lot of ground but the resultant treatment of both is quite shallow and it cannot compete with the many specialist guides on writing and drawing comic books.

**Peter Crowther (ed.) – *Postscripts* #2**

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2004, 175pp, £6.00, pb, ISBN 1904619215

**Reviewed by Niall Harrison**

The second issue of *Postscripts* opens with a non-fiction column by Robert Silverberg, titled 'Worlds Apart'. It is, essentially, a piece of writing about fandom; Silverberg recounts tales from the 1957 Worldcon – the first time Worldcon visited Britain – and looks forward to Glasgow this August. It's a good column, and interesting, not least because it's not the sort of thing I'm used to seeing in a UK-published magazine. Occasionally in *Analog*, maybe, and *Asimov's* has just started a new occasional column called 'Thought Experiments', with a not-dissimilar piece by Roger Ebert; but I can't recall having seen anything of this ilk in *Interzone*.

I mention this because it's one of two things that demonstrates that *Postscripts* is already finding its own niche; the other thing is the fiction, of course. The mix of stories in this issue has its own flavour, distinct from that of other magazines.

Take the issue's best story, for instance. 'Compartments' is by Zoran Zivkovic, whose elegant cycles of interlinked short stories were a defining feature of the last few years of Pringle-era *Interzone*. It is different to those. For one thing, it's much longer – almost a novella – with the added complexity that brings; for another thing it stands alone. And it is full of the overt strangeness that characterises Zivkovic's other work, yet feels at the same time more expansive.

It begins with a man running to catch a train, chasing the last carriage down the platform. The conductor, standing at the back of the train, reaches out a hand to help him, and pulls the man onboard. But he dismisses any thanks, and also the man's apologies for being without a ticket, saying, "the ticket isn't important. The essential thing is that you made it." He then introduces the man to a succession of passenger compartments, each of which contains unusual passengers and unique objects. The writing is in the quasi-formal style familiar from previous works, but what makes this story special is the way it defies explanation. It's about a journey, and when it ends, the reader is left with the feeling of passing through the shadow of some wonderful or terrible thing; and that is a feeling to be appreciated.

The title story, Rhys Hughes' laboriously entitled 'The Old House Under the Snow Where Nobody Goes Except You and Me Tonight', takes a similar form. Two treasure-hunters melt a tunnel through the snow that takes them to a mansion that, they believe, is the last hideout of an apocryphal Baron. It turns out that this is only the first of several levels, however; when they take advantage of the house's piped heating system, it melts the snow around it and they begin falling again, only to land on another, bigger, house. The cycle repeats, and civilisation retreats. We discover that the Baron was hiding from the

Devil, and the two travellers begin to take on the two personas. The ending of the story doesn't feel as complete as that of Zivkovic's, but the heady acceleration of the journey makes the reading worthwhile.

So far, so similar. But the issue also carries a plainspoken hard sf-like tale, Brian Stableford's 'A Chip Off The Old Block'. This is the story of eleven year-old Stevie, and it takes place tomorrow, or maybe the day after. There is no particularly speculative technology; only a society in which genes, and gene patents, are big business. It turns out that Stevie has a rare allele, the product of which can repair damage caused by free radicals (which, of course, has implications for the aging process. I'm not familiar enough with Stableford's *Emortality* sequence to say with confidence whether or not it fits into that timeline, but it deals with some of the same ideas). There's a complicating factor, though: Stevie's parents are divorced, and Stevie is in the custody of his Mum ... but the allele he carries can only have been inherited from his Dad. So who gets the rights to the product? Stableford's story is a thoughtful, plausible look at a premise that could become a major issue in the near future, and is well worth reading.

And there are also two retellings of mythological stories. Jeff Vandermeer's 'Shark God Versus Octopus God' is a modern telling of a Fijian myth. It is perhaps the issue's only real disappointment; not a bad story as such, but curiously unambitious, and it's hard not to hear unfortunate echoes of Disney in some of the pronouncements of the anthropomorphised ocean inhabitants. Better is Michael Marshall Smith's 'Getting Over', in which an unnamed narrator finds himself in a landscape that seems to consist entirely of one rock, one hill, and a lot of mist. He can't escape, and simply sitting around is too mind-numbingly boring to be endured for long, so he decides he's going to push the rock up to the top of the hill. This, obviously, is a Sisyphian task, but what makes the story work, and makes it genuinely moving, is the way Smith adapts it into a tale of emotional acceptance; through the insurmountable struggle, the narrator eventually comes to terms with his inner demons. Also of note is Iain Rowan's 'Lilies', a dark but beautifully detailed story about a city at war, whose dead are not moving on.

So what is a *Postscripts* story? It's hard to say. But the *Postscripts* mix is identifiable, I think, in that I can't bring to mind any other magazine in which surrealism and plainspoken hard sf would be published next to each other, and next to an article about fandom. Roll on issue three.

**Cecilia Dart-Thornton – *The Iron Tree***

Tor LK, London, 2004, 425pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-4050-4710-0

**Reviewed by Lesley Hatch**

This is the start of a new trilogy, *The Crowthistle Chronicles*, by the author of *The Bitterbynde Trilogy*, and the first thing to say is that she has maintained the high standard she set with the first series.

Told in the form of a chronicle written by a druid, it tells the story of Lilith and Jarred, marsh-dweller and desert inhabitant respectively, who meet and fall in love when Jarred and his friends pass through her village on their way to Jhallavad, capital of their homeland, to make their fortune. Jarred lives at home with his mother (his father left years ago) and is in the owner of an amulet which supposedly renders him invulnerable to illness and injury, but which he is required to keep secret.

For her part, Lilith also has a secret in her life – a curse which descends on her family in the form of its female members being pursued by footsteps only they can hear and which their mother suffers from. Lilith is resigned to remaining single and never having a child until Jarred finally discovers that his father was the son of a sorcerer who ensured through magic that his heirs would not be harmed by anything, except for one thing that he omitted. So as the sorcerer's grandson, he cannot be harmed by the curse and they can be married, as their children will be immune also.

For a time, life runs smoothly for them, but this does not remain

the case for long – the time comes when word of Jarred's existence leaks out in the capital and a search is launched for him so that he can unlock his grandfather's fortress. This results in his daughter having to flee for her life, accompanied by her uncle, and in possession of an artefact created by her great-grandfather, and this is where the first volume ends.

There is a lot more to this story than the events outlined above – all the people we meet have different traditions and legends, and charms against the various fairy folk who live in and around their homes, and the marsh people have many different festivals and rituals. There are various other races living in the world the author has created, all of whom we meet during the course of the novel, and who add to the interest. She also includes some traditional songs and spells describing and dealing with the fairy folk and other supernatural inhabitants of the land, whether desert, marsh or town, which adds to the world's realism.

If there is one failing, and this is a minor point, it is her tendency to describe the surroundings the people live in and travel through with just a little too much detail. Having said that, this does not detract too much from the events of the novel, and I cannot fault her masterful storytelling. Highly recommended.

**Tanya Huff – *Blood Price*****Tanya Huff – *Blood Trail*****Tanya Huff – *Blood Lines*****Tanya Huff – *Blood Pact*****Tanya Huff – *Blood Debt*****Reviewed by Paul N. Billinger**

Vicki Nelson – invalided out of the Toronto Police Department's detective because of a degenerating eye condition – is now struggling to adapt to being a solitary private investigator. Cases are routine and just about pay the bills – at least until she discovers the body of a murder victim on the platform of an underground station. Others follow and the press are soon claiming *VAMPIRE STALKS CITY*. Which is both correct and very, very wrong. There is a vampire living in the city, one Henry Fitzroy, bastard son of Henry VIII, but he didn't do it: so who is responsible and why so bloody and in just those precise locations? Vicki and Henry both start to independently investigate the murders but soon become aware of each other and, unsurprisingly, a relationship starts to form. This growing relationship is further complicated by their involvement with the person officially assigned to investigate, Michael Celluci, Vikki's former lover and partner on the TPD Homicide squad. Vikki slowly comes to realise that the world around her is not as she thought...

Which, in a simplistic way, sets up the scene for all five books: Vicki discovers more about Henry, they investigate some strange event, normally involving death and a monster-of-the-week – vampires and demons in *Blood Price*, werewolves in *Blood Trail*, the Mummy in *Blood Lines* and so on – with Celluci becoming more and more jealous of Henry, all using a police-procedural structure. But this simplistic summary would be to do these books a great disservice as the series is much better than this implies and, atypically, becomes stronger and more convincing as it progresses, primarily because of the developing relationship between the three leads and the sexual tension between them all (yes, that includes between Celluci and Henry, but in a very manly way). It is also over-simplistic as the series does a number of things that just don't happen in contemporary vampire stories, including possibly the ultimate transgression (which I'm not going to

Orbit, London, 2004, 330pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1 84149 356 2

Orbit, London, 2004, 343pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1 84149 357 0

Orbit, London, 2004, 358pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1 84149 358 9

Orbit, London, 2004, 376pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-359-7

Orbit, London, 2004, 362pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-360-0

reveal) which in other books/series is often threatened but always avoided, unlike here when it comes as an inevitable but shocking event. The series is also the stronger for being a *PI/crime* story first and vampire story second, giving drive and motivation to the narrative which is far more credible than many novels of this type.

The series is clearly grounded within the F8 genre (Feisty Ferocious Faux-Feminist Female FantOme Fighting Fictions™, used by kind permission of the authors) populated by books from the likes of Laurell K. Hamilton, Kelley Armstrong, Charlaine Harris et al – although Huff's real-world setting is rather more convincing – and it does fit neatly into this category. But despite these being first published in Great Britain in 2004 they precede the popularisation of the genre, for which we have *Buffy* to thank (drat – was hoping to avoid the 'B' word), by some years. *Blood Lines* was published in 1991, some two years before *Guilty Pleasures*, Hamilton's first Anita Blake novel, and a good six years before the series one opener of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The remaining Huff books were published steadily until the final one, *Blood Debt*, in 1997 (plus a few related short stories). Huff has said that she has no intention of returning to the series, which in many ways is commendable although I suspect it could easily have supported a few more (which I would have eagerly devoured).

Given the quality and sheer enjoyment of the Vikki Nelson books, and the popularity of the genre, it is quite remarkable that it has taken so long for them to be available here. Now that they are, I'd strongly recommend this series, which is thrilling, engaging, surprising and shocking.

**Juliet Marillier – *The Dark Mirror*****Reviewed by Pamela Stuart**

For UK, London, 2005, 556pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1 4050 4105 6

A magical history set in what later became Scotland, this is a must for all readers of this genre.

Bridei, son of a Welsh king and a Pictish princess, is brought, when barely five years old, to the home of Broichan, a powerful Druid, who is to train him as a candidate for future kingship in the Pictish Kingdoms which are sorely beset by internal strife and the incursion of Christianity on the Old Religion. The child is given no reason for his removal to the far northern Pittnochie; his orders from his father are to study hard and not weep. Dutifully, he studies, with Broichan and his various tutors.

Forbidden to wander even to the nearby settlement, and denied all child companionship, he is desperately lonely for several years. During one of Broichan's absences at Court, where he is advisor to the King, Bridei is woken by the Moon Goddess on the night of the Winter Solstice. He finds a fairy child in a tiny cradle on the doorstep, whom he is convinced has been given him for company.

Knowing Broichan will refuse to take the child in, he casts a simple spell to endear it to the house-staff, so that when Broichan returns, the child, a girl named Tuala, is alive and thriving. Broichan allows the infant to stay, on his conditions, but constantly tries to break the tie between the two children, keeping Tuala's existence hidden from the other members of the Secret Council who are planning Bridei's future. Tuala is watched by two of the Forest Folk, who also have their

intentions for the Kingdom's future.

The children remain inseparable until Bridei, reaching manhood, goes to fight in a battle intended to prevent the Christianised group from seizing the Kingship. During his absence Tuala is coerced into entering an enclave of Wise Women, and Bridei falsely told it was her free choice. This is disastrous for both Bridei and Tuala, and almost ends the Council's plans, with their candidate repeatedly attacked by enemies, and, having discovered Broichan's perfidy, refusing to cooperate unless Tuala is found and returned as his bride.

With Broichan still trying to prevent their union, Bridei and Tuala must fight for their lives and their future, standing against supernatural powers and human poisoners; and time is running out for Bridei to present himself as a candidate to replace the dead King. Only their combined strength can bring them through.

The main characters are taken from ancient Pictish history, and events could have happened this way, in those days of Druids and magic.

Once started on the book, it is impossible to put it down until sleep-deprivation sets in. The only disappointment is that it ends at all, but as it is the first of *The Bridei Chronicles* trilogy, it is just a matter of waiting patiently for the next to be published.

**L. E. Modesitt Jr – *The Ethos Effect***

Orbit, London, 2004, 579pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-322-8

**Reviewed by Colin Bird**

Modesitt has made a name from the sprawling *Reduce* and *Spellsong* fantasy sagas which attempt to reconcile science and magic in a logically structured universe. He has also previously published science fiction novels, and *The Ethos Effect* is a self contained novel which is set in the same universe as *The Parafith Wars* but some two hundred years after the events in that earlier novel.

The book is in three distinct parts: we are introduced to Commander Van C. Albert, of the Republican Space Force of Taran, as he takes his space cruiser, *Fergus*, on a mission. His military career has stalled after an incident where, in foiling a terrorist attack, Van inadvertently caused the deaths of a large number of civilians caught in the crossfire. After a series of dull assignments he finally receives new orders to give up his command and head to the planet Gotland, in the Scandya system, where he is assigned as a military attaché to the Taran ambassador. Whilst investigating the mysterious death of his predecessor Van foils a plot to assassinate the Scandyan leader and is critically injured. Evidence points to a religious race, the expansionist Revenants, who were the villains of *The Parafith Wars*.

After a long period of recovery Van finds himself honoured and pensioned off. Attempting to return to a career as a pilot, Van finds himself either too old or overqualified for any available opportunities. Soon he is recruited by the mysterious IIS (Integrated Information

Systems), an organization sponsored by the Eco-Tech Coalition which deals with specialist trade deals in galactic trouble-spots. Although at first the IIS seems a benevolent organisation, albeit with a suspiciously wide brief to interfere in human affairs, Van soon discovers the organisation is supported by the Farkhans (the only alien race in the known universe) and is being used to carry out a more sinister mission.

The above summary doesn't really do justice to Modesitt's complex novel and wide-ranging narrative which, while far from original, is never less than entertaining. However, the author does have an unfortunate habit of pausing the action whilst delivering interesting but narratively damaging lectures on issues such as race, religion, philosophy and ethics. I can't help feeling the editor's scalpel should have seen some action here. Dogma never is much of a page turner.

If you're seeking space battles and diplomatic intrigue within a well thought-out universe then Modesitt delivers in patches, just be prepared to skip through the sermons.

[US edition also available: Tor, New York, 2003, 509pp, \$27.95, H/B, ISBN 0-765-30802-9]

**Elizabeth Moon – *Moving Target***

Orbit, London, 2004, 438pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-169-1

**Reviewed by Alan Fraser**

Elizabeth Moon is a writer new to me, although her novel *Speed of Dark* was short-listed for the Arthur C. Clarke Award. She was once an officer in the US Marine Corps, and now mainly writes space opera featuring strong independent women with a military background.

This book is called *Marque and Reprisal* in the USA, and has had its title inexplicably changed for the UK market. It starts immediately where the first book of Vatta's War, *Trading in Danger* finished. I think you need to have read the first book to get the most out of this one, so to remove any bafflement I bought it! Kylara 'Ky' Vatta is the daughter of one of the powerful dynasties in her part of the Galaxy, and her father leads Vatta Enterprises, one of its largest interstellar companies. Ky was a military cadet who was duped into helping a friend bring the Academy into disrepute. Because her actions were innocent, she was allowed to resign rather than be court-martialled and dismissed. To get her away from their homeworld for a while, her father gave Ky the job of taking a small elderly trading vessel on its final cargo trip before being taken to a scrap yard on a distant world. Ky, however, saw an opportunity to carry out some private trading in order to make enough extra profit to refit the ship and save it from being scrapped. This she managed to do, although not without getting into serious danger along the way by becoming involved in a system-wide war, and getting out of it only by using her military training.

In *Moving Target* Kylara Vatta has saved her ship and is now ready to work as an interstellar trader. The book's US title refers to the fact that her homeworld (which has a silly name I won't pass on) has issued her with a letter of marque to act as a privateer against their enemies,

just like in the old days of the Spanish Main. However, events are about to take a much nastier turn as her family's homes, buildings and ships are destroyed in a series of coordinated attacks. Ky is on her own in her bid to keep herself and her crew alive, although a new character is introduced in the shape of her 'black sheep' cousin Stella, who has survived the attacks by being well separated from the family, and who joins her in trying to find out what's going on. For someone with a bad reputation, Stella proves to have unexpected skills that are of great help to Ky.

I read both of these books extremely quickly – there's no character depth or complex plotting, but once the book takes off the events, some of which are very bloody, occur at breakneck speed. At the end of the book Ky has dealt with her immediate threats, but the final solution to who has declared war against the Vattas is still to be found. There's no romance in this series, by the way – Ky's Space Academy boyfriend dumps her cruelly, and a man introduced in the second book as a possible love interest is on the receiving end of some nifty martial arts when he makes a pass!

Elizabeth Moon has used this scenario before – in her series *The Serrano Legacy*. So far there have been seven books in that series. Obviously a case of sticking to what's been proven to get them off the shelves and through the till!

**Stel Pavlou – *Gene***

Simon &amp; Schuster, London, 2005, 376pp, £12.99, h/b reviewed in proof, ISBN 0-7432-0859-5

**Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc**

New York. Another hostage situation to deal with for Detective James North – this time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Just what he needs, a culture vulture criminal. He's a touch surprised, however, when the apparently pernicious perp calls for him by name and then releases the abductee. North is determined to get to the bottom of these bizarre events and sets about apprehending the hostage-taker – a man called Gene who, for some inexplicable reason, he feels an untameable desire to kill. Confronting Gene does not improve matters – North is injected with a strange substance and begins having disturbing, vivid hallucinations. Or are they hallucinations? Could the drug in fact be releasing deeply buried memories of previous lives? North and Gene both have souls that stretch for thousands of years,

entwined in repeating battles, triumphs and failures. Cyclades fought in the Trojan wars and is fated to return seven times to battle the Babylonian magi Athanatos. These two (partly) mortal enemies are now North and Gene – but which is which? In the meantime, the world has moved on. Technology can now discover which of Gene's genes allow his soul to achieve effective immortality.

Pavlou's novel is a contemporary narrative sprinkled with series of vignettes (although that is perhaps too delicate a term) describing the various incarnations of the pair and their encounters through the ages, a sort of multi-millennial *Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*. It is deliberately kept ambiguous as to who is whom to further the blur between actuality and hallucination, identity and destiny. As readers



we sympathise more with North because, like us, he is more in the dark and discovering his identity for himself – we are placed in the same position of discovery. These scenes allow a pause in the basic thrust of the story and give Pavlou the opportunity to describe historic or mythical events from an individual's point of view. For example we catch a glimpse of the pair in Nero's Rome, where the gladiator Cyclades' life is spared because he calls out for Nero's physician Athanatos. Cyclades was one of the Greek warriors inside the wooden horse when it was wheeled into besieged Troy, ready for a good hard night's sacking (mind you, although the Greeks had a point, I always

felt sorry for Aeneas, especially when he lost dear old Creusa, and well, the Greeks cheated). So it was always about *cherche la femme*...

Though the story is freewheeling and broad in its approach there are plot strands that are left undeveloped. A particularly interesting one involves the Druze people of southern Lebanon, who believe in reincarnation and remain independent to this day, is left needing more detail. As an introductory device to the many subjects and periods of history, Pavlou raises more interest than he's prepared (or has a chance) to follow through in the text, which leaves the book wanting in some minor areas. Intriguing and engaging, but not quite thrilling.

## Robert Reed – *The Well of Stars*

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Orbit, London, 2004, 474pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-256-6

*The Well of Stars* is a sequel to 2001's *Marrow*, though it is difficult to speak of sequence when dealing with millennia and humans capable of being recreated over vast distances. Time and causality seem to change their meanings. The Great Ship – a Jupiter-sized vessel that was found to have a second vessel the size of Mars within it in the earlier novel – has continued to cross the universe under the control of Washen and Pannir. The First Captain and her partner, like all the controlling officers on the ship, are, or were once, what they consider human, and as it was humanity that first discovered The Great Ship and still refuses to relinquish control to their co-voyagers, might be expected to encounter trouble or rebellion. Luckily they do not, for that alien life they direct tolerates the status quo.

Where *Marrow* was concerned with the discovery of the world within the world and its threats, now *The Well of Stars* concerns itself with the threat from outside. The voyage to The Ink Well, the distant pan-galactic destination, seems to start as one of discovery, but then the polyponds, life discovered on the way, become an evident threat. Not only are they an alien life form, their understanding of ontology – the philosophy of being – is rather at odds with humanity's continuing understanding of the same thing. Only one letter different, oncology is the science of cancer: to the polyponds there is almost no difference between being and cancer, both are better eradicated; 'nothing' is better than 'being'. Humanity, which prefers to 'be', is a vector of this cancer and therefore needs to be excised. The polyponds attempt to wipe out the Great Ship. The Great Ship in return attempts to heal itself, the way it has survived for millennia – yet it is not omnipotent, healing takes time, during which it is liable to further damage.

Preventing that damage is the responsibility of the Captains, defeating the polypond attack becomes their *raison d'être*.

Als, the artificial intelligences which follow every human like a guide dog, are one aspect of the non-humans on the ship, while the Remoras who live on the skin of the ship, mutating as it passes through different parts of space, are another. They live not just here but in Robert Reed's shared universe, described for instance in his short story collection *The Dragons of Springplace*, where the Remoras have an eponymous story to themselves. Not having read it myself I am still at a disadvantage to appreciate their demmic life – the treatment of the Remoras, despite the page count in this novel, is thin. Similarly I remain unclear whether Als came aboard with humanity or existed aboard before the human occupation.

This novel has only five major characters and one of them – a sort of Trickster named O'Leayle – may not be human, yet we learn little about the personalities of these characters. Their lives are measured in years counted in five and six digits, yet they remain as fixed in their roles on the bridge as if there were only minutes to portray them. This is most extraordinary in the character of Mere, a xeno-anthropologist, a sort of Margaret Mead, someone who has been married to an alien, yet seems to exist solely to be a suffering gatherer of factual experience. As I read about Mere and her relationship with the Great Ship I found myself remembering James White's *Hospital Station* with longing. Robert Reed himself seems full of the cold of space, empty of human feeling, and that vacuum permeates *The Well of Stars*.

## Neal Stephenson – *The System of the World*

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

William Heinemann, London, 2004, 624pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 0434011770

First off: have you read *Quicksilver* and *The Confusion*? If the answer is 'No' then I suspect you're reading this review to find out whether or not to bother even trying to read the *Baroque Cycle* in its entirety. Here's a very quick review especially for you.

The *Baroque Cycle*, though a very good read indeed, is without doubt not for the intellectually or literarily faint-hearted. Think hard about your future calendar before launching upon such an endeavour. Now off you go; those of us who have read the first two books have things to discuss.

Right, well, *The System of the World* rounds off the stories of Jack Shaftoe, Daniel Waterhouse, Isaac Newton, Eliza and Leibniz. It would seem somewhat pointless to trace the arc of the story here: given the great multifarious reams of story that have already passed, either you're going to read this book or you aren't. I rather doubt many are wavering now, not since we've come so far. Let us say that matters are, by and large, brought to a highly entertaining and satisfactory conclusion. There are thrills and spills, daring plans, awful bloodshed, strange secrets, inspired lunacy, pyrotechnics that Hollywood would be proud of, vengeance served both hot and cold, the fruition of plans long laid and even a spot of naughtiness. Which is to say, there is once again something for everyone here. *The System of the World* is an easier and more entertaining read than the aptly-titled *The Confusion*; less burdened with quite so much exposition of matters contemporary than *Quicksilver*; and even wittier than those two exceedingly witty books. Stephenson seems to have really hit his stride here.

All three sections of the *Baroque Cycle* have, for me, cast a

positively revelatory light upon certain developments of this civilisation we now live in and, mostly, regard as an inevitable outcome of history. This, I think, has been Stephenson's triumph: the way it has revealed, in a jolly, rollicking, rip-roaring narrative, some of the more complex steps that lay behind History with a capital 'H'. If only school history lessons could have been so easily digestible. Thanks to him I feel I'm now far better informed about the past than ever before, more respectful of its achievements and better able to comprehend how it worked – its system, if you will. I've read interesting and educational books before now, of course, but none of them have ever had quite such breadth and given quite the same feel of dirt beneath the fingertips. Far from laughing at how incredibly dull and superstitious our ancestors sometimes seem to have been, I now have an inkling of how remarkably clever and tenacious and inventive and original they were; I now have some greater comprehension of 'why things are as they are', which I hope you'll agree is not something you come across every day, and even less seldom in a piece of fiction.

In this sense *The System of the World*, and indeed all of the *Baroque Cycle*, is a glorious triumph of popular science and history. In the sense of being an intensely entertaining piece of fiction, it is less of a triumph – but not very much less. Only in a third sense did I begin to feel this monumental work had failed somewhat in its promise, a failure ironically stemming mainly from its tremendous size. The *Baroque Cycle* has taken up a significant chunk of my reading time in 2004 – a very significant chunk. Had it taken up less I would be inclined to be less strict with it, but the problem is that having now



emerged, blinking, into the sunlight from between these well-separated covers I'm wondering exactly what the result of my labours is. How has my time been repaid? What has the *Cycle's* denouement taught or revealed to me? And the answer is: not much. This may sound a little churlish given that I've just been praising its educational value and wit to high heaven, but having spent so long saying *not-quite* incomparable things *not-quite* incomparably, what I wanted from Stephenson was some kind of disclosure – or at the very least some kind of closure – and in truth there is a distinct lack of the former and hardly a surfeit of the latter.

These books gallop along leaving enlightenment and wit in their wake, leading the reader expecting to encounter the source of such wisdom and humour, when sadly there is no such thing. Again, this might seem a rather petty complaint, and post-modernists amongst you might be gearing up to argue that fiction is essentially its own meaning, but Stephenson's intelligence throughout these books seems always to suggest that there is more, that he had something up his sleeve...and

yet perhaps one of the real reasons he has appeared quite so clever was with the benefit of 300 years of hindsight.

If you can be post-modern about it though, and simply enjoy the moment of the story and the lessons of the history then *The System of the World* will not disappoint. And to give a more generous reading in conclusion, the events and story depicted therein do not, as we know (from *Cryptonomicon*) simply end, they are unwinding now, as we speak. History is still being extruded and perhaps it is not such a bad thing for authors to reach back, gather it up and re-present it here in our seemingly eternal 'now' for us to reconsider. If there is no conclusion, no wrapping up and no careful putting away of all the elements of this story, then maybe that's because this is how history really is – it's unwilling to be 'finished', and Stephenson is trying to be as true to life as possible. I'm not convinced that this is the case here, but I'll forgive Stephenson quite a lot for keeping me so formidably entertained for such a length of time.

## Charles Stross – *The Family Trade*

Tor, New York, 2004, 303pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30929-7

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Take equal parts *Cinderella* and *My Fair Lady*, season heavily with H. Beam Piper's *Paratime* and Roger Zelazny's *Amber* series, and decoct into a mixture of *Coolfellas* and *The Mouse that Roared*. Sprinkle with hi-tech anachronisms and allow a good period of ironic cool before dividing into four (or eight?) equal parts.

The resulting confection is light and frothy over a surprisingly dark centre and (to abandon the somewhat overstrained culinary metaphor for the moment) something of a departure for Stross, previously known for uncompromising hard-edged technology sf of his *Accelerando* stories, mixed with Lovecraftian occult horror in *The Atrocity Archives*, the gonzo surreal humour of *Singularity Sky*, and the hard space opera of *Iron Sunrise*. Or perhaps it shouldn't be too much of a surprise. If you chart Stross's sudden – albeit hard-earned – success through three (now four) novels and several dozen stories (a selection of which are collected in *Toast, and Other Rusted Futures*), although a number of themes recur, he's never been content to repeat the same formula. In fact it seems as if Stross may be carrying out a classic sfnal *Cedankensexperiment*, examining the collision of technology, information and political and economic systems across a number of diverse settings.

The setting for *The Family Trade* is an alternate world which mixes Dark Age feudalism for the masses and privileged access to 21st century comforts and technology (Chanel and Armani suits, machine pistols, and episodes of *Dallas* as the height of sophisticated evening entertainment) for the ruling Clans and families, whose wealth and power is derived from a world-walking recessive gene maintained by a system of cousin intermarriage known as 'braiding'. Into this, by

accident, falls investigative journalist Miriam Beckstein, an adopted foundling whose mother was killed under mysterious circumstances, and who has just been summarily sacked for digging too deeply into a million-dollar money-laundering scandal. Amongst her mother's personal effects Miriam finds a locket whose Celtic scrollwork embeds a semiotic trigger that gives her a splitting headache and dumps her from her apartment into a wood where she is chased by mounted medieval knights sporting M16s. Unfortunately she leaves a couple of items behind when she exits back to her own world – a pair of pink fluffy slippers and the twisted office chair she had been sitting on – and before she can experiment further she is abducted by a snatch squad from the other side. Miriam, it turns out, is a long lost cousin and potential heir to the Family Trade (which turns out to be based on a morally dubious between-world courier service). Her sudden reappearance disrupts a number of vested interests, which turns out to be dangerous in a power structure modelled somewhere between the Mafia and the Medicis. Even if she survives, Miriam, as a resourceful and independent woman, can hardly relish a future as a pampered brood mare to maintain the precious family bloodline, and starts to make her own plans while trying to keep one step ahead (or sideways) of a series of elaborate assassination attempts.

If there's one problem with *The Family Trade*, it's that after setting up an intriguing and thought-provoking world, a racy plot, and introducing an engaging (if at times improbably accomplished) heroine, it ends rather abruptly *in media res*, leaving this reviewer eager for the next part.

## Keith Topping – *A Vault of Horror*

Telos, Tolworth, 2004, 400pp, £12.99, p/b, ISBN 1 903889 58 8

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

The tradition of the British horror film is very much buried in the country's literary and gothic heritage, the result of which is a long line of fantastical melodrama epitomised by the success of Hammer studios. In this book Keith Topping takes Hammer's glory years from *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1956) to their penultimate theatrical horror *The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires* (1974) as the basis for describing 80 key films that somehow typified the often maligned British film industry at a time when we could still export more than one or two half-baked costume dramas every year.

Topping's choice of films is occasionally bizarre – he freely admits that the *Frankenstein* films are under-represented – resulting in the absence, for example, of *Dr Phibes* but room for its (admittedly superior) sequel *Dr Phibes Rises Again*. While this is not a great issue in itself, it seems that with 400 pages to play with there could have been more scope for a definitive look at the period as tackled by Fenton and Flint's opinionated but exhaustive study *Ten Years of Terror: British Films of the 1970s*. Instead we have an infuriating set of reviews that range from the insightful and fascinating to the crass and pretentious. It's annoying because there is an awful lot of good material

but also a sizeable chunk of what feels like padding or lame attempts at laddish humour. While it is always nice to answer the inevitable "where have I seen her before?" questions that accompany any late night viewings, the pages of what are essentially credit listings are heavy going. However they are enlivened by scattershot collections of miscellanies that explore how and why a particular film was made (including a fascinating insight as to the inclusion of *Strange Love* – the single most appalling song in the entire history of horror films – onto the soundtrack of Hammer's cheesecake classic *Lust for a Vampire*). While the notes about the inevitable 'sinister animals' are amusing, the details about 1960s life that we 'don't see today' are notable more for their obsession with reel-to-reel tape recorders. Aside from this, the examination of themes covered and critical responses to the films provides a useful context to the proceedings. It's particularly interesting with the horror genre, as recognised classics were sometimes ruthlessly dismissed at the time of their release.

Although Topping's taste is occasionally questionable he at least qualifies his opinions. Matters are not so well served, however, when the book on one hand castigates a film for misogyny and then later

describes with evident relish the merits of a leading actress's cleavage. Dubious.

Overall a mixed bag; at times enlightening, at times irritating, and a book that could easily have been half the length or have included a

more definitive range of films. A useful addition to any horror fan's reference collection, though those seeking a broader view of the British horror film should perhaps look to Andy Boot's *Fragments of Fear*.

## Dr Jeff VanderMeer & Dr Mark Roberts (eds.) – *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases*

Macmillan, London, 2004, 297pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 1-4050-4960-X

Refereed by S. Jeffery, M.D. (forcibly retired), BSFA, Member of the Romanian Society of Cataloguers



When the package containing the 83rd edition of Dr Lambshead's celebrated *Pocket Guide* arrived on my desk with a note from the reviews editor asking if I would referee it for Vector, I eagerly agreed, thinking that a journal devoted, as its title clearly implied, to the study of the transmission of infectious diseases would be the ideal forum to challenge some of the more outrageous

claims being made on behalf of this work – often from quarters that have only the most tenuous connection with the field.

You can imagine my shock in learning that this once-esteemed journal appears to have been taken over by a cabal of editors (only one of whom is a doctor, and whose medical credentials are at best dubious since, by his own admission, he doubles as a stand-up comedian at conferences) more interested in little green men and space-going squids than the fascinating lifecycle of the Algerian toenail fluke (a topic to which I have devoted a lifetime's study, and one which only pains me now on especially hot days). However, since I had already hawked the book, after a cursory glance, to an avid and discreet collector of medical curiosities, there was nothing for it but to accept.

Worse is to come. Despite a grudging approval by Dr Lambshead in his reluctant introduction as torchbearers to carry on his work, I can find no reference to Drs. VanderMeer or Roberts in the BMA or AMA, and it is presumably fear of prosecution that forces them to disguise this edition of the *Guide* as a work of fiction. Dr Lambshead, for all his faults (among them arrogance, pride, gullibility, sheer wrong-headedness, and a refusal to publish any of my submissions to previous editions) deserves better.

Still, it has to be said that Drs. VanderMeer and Roberts have made a handsome job of this current edition, imposing a degree of order in their cross-references of more than 80 increasingly bizarre and improbable case histories from nearly 60 contributors. It is also something of a landmark edition, bringing the *Guide* back again under the wing of a reputable publisher for the first time since the late 1950s and the 600-page Chatto & Windus 'collectors' editions, an occasion which the editors celebrate with a generous 'Autopsy' containing a history of the *Guide*'s somewhat chequered publishing career, reminiscences of its founder from various contributors, and selected contributions from previous editions. (There is also a welcome reprint of Nathan Ballingrud's paper 'The Malady of Ghostly Cities' from the 1977 *The Pocket Guide to Metaphysical Diseases*, edited by Dr Lambshead's Argentinian protégé Jorge Luis Borges.)

The present lavishly – if at times a little stomach-churningly – illustrated incarnation of the *Guide* in both its UK and US editions (from Night Shade Books) is thus a triumph of persistence and determination (often, it must be admitted, over financial sense and

good taste) that only a few years ago would be hard to credit. From its start in the 1920s as a few stapled hectograph pages (dare, might one suggest, almost a fanzine?) it has grown through a series of publishing adventures no less bizarre than its contents into the most wide-ranging and authoritative reference to medical curiosa since *Dr Mudthumper's History of Forgotten Oriental Diseases*.

It is not, though, without its critics and detractors (not helped by Dr Lambshead's tendency to refer to his peers in the medical profession as 'quacks' and 'incompetents'). As with all visionary projects, even the byways of medical arcana are not free from some quite bitter (and often libellous) outbreaks of professional jealousy, much of it, it has to be said, directed at one Dr Sarah Goodman for her refusal to countenance any physiological basis for male sexual problems (q.v. *Wife Blindness*, *Penzler's Lubriciousness*); although her comments on Fintushel's *Chronic Zygotic Dermis Disorder*, do, for once, seem sound... Equally contested are a number of diseases that seem to owe their genesis more to works of sensational fiction than *bona fide* case histories (Dr. Miéville's *Buscard's Murrain* and the Rev. Moorcock's *Samoan Giant Rat-Bite Fever*) while others seem merely improbable (the messy *Ballistic Organ Syndrome*) or, in J. Topham's study of the form of projected figurative synesthesia labelled *Logopetria*, suggest the compiler has been hoodwinked by a particularly skilled prestidigitator. (It is a shame, and a mark of the editors' laxity, that they did not submit this latter entry for peer review by Dr C. Priest before inclusion.)

Less controversial, if only for the reason that they are frequently self-documenting (although sometimes only *post mortem*), are a number of bibliographic diseases, from *Bibliophagia*, *Menard's Disease* and *Printer's Evil* to *Castic Pre-Linguistic Syndrome* and *Internalised Tattooing Disease*.

Equally self-documenting, though, is the tragic posthumous entry from Dr Gaiman on *Diseasemaker's Croup* whose infectiousness is such that it has cross-referenced itself to every other entry in the book and should not be read without extreme protective eyewear. (It goes without saying it is the height of folly even to transmit the name of this disease in electronic format.)

It is to their shame, though, that Drs. VanderMeer and Roberts have not seen fit to acknowledge, let alone include, my own submissions on Reverse Logorrhoea (Reviewer's Paralysis or White Paper Fever), Wordcounter's Compulsion or Pathological Parenthetical Syndrome, on which I pride myself on being something of a world expert. Nevertheless, despite these flaws, this remains a valuable volume for the professional and concerned layman alike, and one that will repay many hours of study, interested browsing or, to be honest, sick and morbid curiosity.

## Charles Vess – *The Book of Ballads*

Tor, New York, 2004, 191pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31214-X

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery



"A man should try everything once – with the possible exception of incest and folk dancing" (Arnold Bax)

If fantasy is the maligned poor relation of literature, then its musical equivalent is almost certainly folk music. A combination of the two thus has the danger of being doubly marginalised and indeed, until the revival of interest in folk music and folktale/fantasy

literature in the late 1960s and 1970s, both were largely the province of historians, cataloguers and researchers.

Foremost amongst these was Harvard scholar James Francis Child whose *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* collected several hundred songs in five volumes between 1882-1897. Child's main interest was in folklore – he was inspired by the example of the Heidelberg Circle of European folk and fairy tale collectors which included the Brothers Grimm. Child's work on preserving traditional ballads work was later taken up and complemented by Cecil Sharp, a musician and an active field researcher rather than an historian, who between 1914-1918 collected nearly 1000 songs on field trips in *English Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*.

The work of these two collectors proved invaluable for the folk

revival of the 1960s, with many of these traditional songs being given new life by bands such as Fairport Convention, Pentangle and Steeleye Span and singers like June Tabor, Sandy Denny and Martin Carthy.

The rediscovery of old narrative ballads and folk songs from these artists in turn provided inspiration for a number of fantasy writers, several of them also musicians, using folk and fairy tale elements in their own work, revised and re-imagined in the light of subversive, darker and feminist retellings of traditional stories by writers like Angela Carter and Tanith Lee. Charles de Lint, Ellen Kushner, Pamela Dean, Jane Yolen, Midori Snyder, Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling reintroduced a new generation of readers to old ballad poems and stories such as *Thomas the Rhymer* and *Tam Lin*.

From 1995 to 1997 artist Charles Vess, perhaps best known for his work with Neil Gaiman on the award-winning *Sandman*, illustrated a number of these tales in a series, *The Book of Ballads and Sagas*, published by Green Man Press (Bristol, VA) run by Charles de Lint and Karen Shaffer.

This 2004 edition from Tor, re-titled as *The Book of Ballads*, collects all the stories first published in the four volumes of those small press editions together with two tales reprinted from other sources, Vess's 'Alison Gross' (from *The Forbidden Book*) and Emma Bull's 'The Black Fox' (from *The Firebird*, edited by Sharyn November) and two new stories, Lee Smith's 'The Three Lovers' and Jane Yolen's 'The Great Selchie of Sule Skerrie', fronted by an introduction from Terri Windling, and rounded out with a discography of various recorded versions of each ballad, and notes of both performers and the contributors.

It is difficult, and probably not very useful, to review the ballads as stories in their own right. If you have more than a passing acquaintance with folk music and stories you will know many (if not all) of them already – if not in the version here, then in some variant. One of the

strengths of the ballad oral tradition and re-interpretation by different performers is its fluidity (I have at least four different versions of the Reynardine story by artists as diverse as June Tabor and Sheila Chandra). As singer Martin Carthy notes, quoted by Terri Windling in her introduction, "[T]hey're fabulously resilient. I really do believe there's nothing you can do to these songs that will hurt them – except for not singing them."

The classic themes of the English and Scottish ballad tradition include female transvestism (de Lint's 'Sovay'), spurned love and deathbed revenge (Snyders's 'Barbara Allen' and Vess's 'Alison Gross'), fairy abduction and tests (Lee's 'Tam Lin', McCrumb's 'Thomas the Rhymer' and Gaiman's 'The False Knight of the Road'), shapechangers (Sherman's 'The Daemon Lover' and de Lint's 'Twa Corbies') and the supernatural (Bull's 'The Black Fox', Yolen's 'The Great Selchie'). Each of these is beautifully illustrated by Vess, and concluded with a version of the original ballad lyrics. De Lint's interpretation of 'Twa Corbies' (Two Crows) updates the tale so that its protagonists become incarnations of the two crow girls of his own urban fantasy works, while Lee's bloody and doomed 'The Three Lovers' is set as a play, framed within a proscenium arch and opening and closing curtain.

A lighter note and a different, more comic style is provided by the collaboration of artists Charles Vess and Jeff Smith in the Irish tale of the hapless 'Galtee Farmer', following up on the success of their collaboration on the prequel to Smith's *Bone* comic book series, *Rose*. My only disappointment is the absence of spooky classics like 'Reynardine' or 'The Gay Goshawk'.

Overall, this is a splendid collection from a number of talented and award-winning writers and artists, gorgeously produced by Tor. And not a "hey nonny no" in sight.

## Liz Williams – *Banner of Souls*

Review by Penny Hill

Tor UK, London, 2005, 426pp, £12.99, h/b, reviewed in proof, ISBN 1 4050 4124 2

*Banner of Souls*, the latest sf novel by Liz Williams, is as cold and brilliant as the future world it is set in. The bleakness of the lightly terraformed Martian landscape is reflected in the emotionally distanced principal characters. In this far-future world an extinction event has wiped out all male humans in the solar system. I could not help but notice my own sexist assumptions that minor characters such as doctors and sailors were male, assumptions that were constantly challenged by the text. Whilst this setting might suggest an old-fashioned feminism, the strength of my assumptions indicates that there is still a place for it in today's sf.

All the affection that the principal characters have appears to have been artificially induced. Yskatarina, the assassin from Nightshade, discovers that the love and loyalty she has for her aunt Elakii was implanted. At the earliest opportunity she has this artificial emotional bond surgically removed and spends the rest of the novel feeling the hole where the emotion used to be. She also has an Animus – a specially created male creature with whom she is closely bonded and shares the most disturbing sex scene I have read for a long time. This relationship is also artificially created. To explain fully would involve revealing far too much of the mechanics of the plot, but let me just say that it appears to be based on an idea from Plato's *Symposium*.

The opposing principal character, Dreams-of-War, is a Martian warrior who has been taught loyalty and respect for her fellow warriors and the matriarch who runs Martian society. Part of her preparation for the job of bodyguard to Lunae (the future saviour of the world) is having maternal love for her charge implanted in her. She feels the artificial presence of this emotion as strongly as Yskatarina feels the absence of hers.

Lunae's nursemaid figure is a kappa, one of a servant class whose genetic modifications make them less than human. Although the kappa

appears to feel genuine protective emotions towards Lunae, her lowly position within the novel reduces the impact of her warmth. I could not help but wonder if the name was an homage to the stratified society of *Brave New World* in which children are also grown not born.

There are no aliens here, but genetic modifications make the occupants of this world more alien from us than any man in a rubber suit or squid in space. The sequence with Prince Cataract, which shows us ruined glories, is a strange interlude that does not otherwise appear to connect to the rest of the novel.

One weakness of the novel was Lunae's lack of knowledge about her role – it all carried on being vague for just a little bit too long. Everyone knows that somehow she will have to make a choice, the outcome of which will save or doom the universe, but no-one knows from what she will save it or how. There is no explanation given for her ability to fold time, moving herself and others through time and space. As a result, there is a sense that a lot of the novel is spent waiting for the climax to happen and hoping the protagonists will recognise it when it arrives.

I must confess to a tinge of disappointment when I read this novel as it is not what I look for from Liz Williams. While it is wonderful to find a good writer who never writes the same book twice, this brilliant hard sf set in a far-future solar system lacks the emotional involvement I have come to expect from her. On the other hand, the personal politics governing the motivations of the different characters cause conflict and compromise in a way that makes an episode of *The West Wing* look like *The Waltons*, and the intellectual fun Liz Williams has playing with our myths and expectations of Mars make fascinating reading.

## Tad Williams – *Shadowmarch*

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Orbit, London, 2004, 656pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1 84149 288 4

Beyond the boundary of mist that is the Shadowline lie the lands of the Qar, lands of perpetual twilight ruled by the blind king Ynnir. Two

hundred years ago the Twilight People, the immortal fairy folk, were defeated in battle and driven from the lands of humankind, but now

they seek to regain the lands they have lost. Led by the fearsome Yasammez, Lady Porcupine, the Scourge of the Shivering Plain, their armies gather and ride to war, their victory made more certain by a child carried across the Shadowline into the sunlight lands.

Immediately to the south of the Shadowline lies Southmarch, sometimes called Shadowmarch, the strongest kingdom in the north, but currently threatened by the territorial ambitions of the Autarch of Xis, and by the absence of its King, Olín, captured and held to ransom by the ruler of the more southerly land of Hierosol. The murder of Olín's heir Prince Kendrick, apparently and shockingly by Shaso, Southmarch's master of arms, leaves the royal twins Barrick and Briony as regents for their father; but with Barrick beset by fever, haunted by terrifying dreams and fearing incipient madness, Briony finds that the burden of rule in the face of the imminent invasion by the demonic fairy folk falls upon her. Briony is unable to trust anyone at court, not even the men who were her father's closest advisors, for fear that they may be scheming to seize the throne for themselves, and those advisors make it very clear that they have little faith in the ability of a young girl like her to act as regent.

Meanwhile, further south still, in the kingdom of Xis, another girl, the humble acolyte, Qinnitan is summoned, much to her astonishment, from her position in the Temple of the Hive to become the bride of the Autarch Sulepis, Living God on Earth. Qinnitan finds that life in the Sedusion, the home of the Autarch's wives and brides-to-be, is perilous

indeed. It is not uncommon for the intrigues and rivalry between the wives and their factions to result in murder, and the fact that the chief of the Autarch's royal guard is determined to make Qinnitan his own places her in particular danger.

As *Shadowmarch* is the first book in a trilogy, it may be presumed that in future volumes Qinnitan's story will be joined with the main tale of events further north. The world of this novel is brought vividly to life by a host of well-drawn characters whose paths cross as the main plot is developed. In Southmarch, there are not only the human inhabitants of the Castle and the town, men like Captain Ferras Vansen who narrowly escapes entrapment forever in the Qar lands, and the court physician Chaven, who is more than he seems, but also various peoples such as the miniscule Rooftoppers, whose name is self-explanatory, and the Funderlings who live underground and work stone with great skill. *Shadowmarch* takes traditional ideas of mortals entering 'fairyland', what might happen to them while they are there and what they might find when they return to the lands of men, and gives these ideas a totally original twist. The Qar, glimpsed through shadows and mist or on the battlefield, are convincingly strange and terrifying.

This is epic fantasy of the most superior kind and it is highly recommended.

## Gene Wolfe – *The Wizard*

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Tor, New York, 2004, 477pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31201-3

*The Wizard* begins where *The Knight* ended, without pausing for breath (see Vector 235 for a review of *The Knight*). Sir Able of the High Heart, who began as a boy from America, remains in Skai, the third of the seven realms; beneath him in the fourth, Mythgarth, his sometime companions head towards a potential conflict with the giants from the North. We know it cannot be long before Able returns, however. Apart from anything else, he still has a message to deliver on behalf of the Aelf – though he doesn't yet know himself what that message may be.

Be clear: this is a second half, not a sequel, and unless you have an extraordinary memory for detail you will want to have *The Knight* fresh in your mind before tackling this book. It cannot be skimmed. There are many long and subtle conversations, which not infrequently contain throwaway details whose illuminatory powers remain shrouded until, much later, they are suddenly revealed. The effect can be dazzling, but is surely not unexpected. After all, such is the way of Gene Wolfe, master puzzle-builder; and such is the way of *The Wizard-Knight*.

In addition, to read *The Wizard* is to read the purest form of epic fantasy. It is a bold, brilliant story, built, like its predecessor, from the genre's elemental particles. The narrative is liberally sprinkled with familiar icons made fresh: not just *The Knight* and *The Wizard*, but *The Quest*, *The Magic Sword*, and more. Wolfe's Aelf are true elves; his dragons are true dragons; and his heroes are true heroes.

So despite the fact that the publication of *The Wizard-Knight* has coincided with a sudden bounty of artistically fertile fantasies, it is a book that has curiously little in common with most of its contemporaries. It contains dream sequences, for example, but they do not try to match the extravagant surreality of, say, Stephen Swainston or K. J. Bishop; they are more subtly disordered. And Wolfe's reference points are old: Tolkien, and before him Dunsany, and before him the mythology of the Norse and the Celts.

The latter heritage lends the book a clean-cut moral landscape. This is perhaps unfashionable, but the presence of creatures who are absolutely good and absolutely bad (or very nearly so; it is said 'that being horrible is like being like the Angborn', for instance, and that Michael is 'good the way a good blade is good' (both p279)) here provides a framework within which the dilemmas of the more human characters can be judged.

Purity of purpose, a commitment to honour, the will to fight simply because it's the right thing to do: these are traits of Norse heroes, who know that they are flawed, and so for whom heroism is the most pure,

arguably the only pure, form of good. It was clear from *The Knight* that Able is a hero in this tradition, but we are not allowed to forget it here. Rhetorically, he asks, "why do we fight, if not to purge our evil?" (p308). Later he explains to his squire that becoming a knight is a matter of nature, not choice: "I wanted to become one – not because I chose to be one, but because of the things I did and the way I thought." (p393)

Despite these mythic influences, however, the realms Wolfe travels in this book do not have the depth of reality of Middle Earth, or *The Fourlands*, or the England of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Or maybe it is not despite those influences but because of them, and because of the surfeit of icons; the world of *The Wizard-Knight* is in some sense literally made of other stories, and many of the characters behave as if, on some level, they know this. Perhaps Able is a knight, and perhaps his squires and servants offer him the deference due to him in that capacity, because those are their roles in the story.

Supporting this, in a way, is the fact that the walls separating Mythgarth and America seem thin. Of course the entire novel is an enormous 'letter home' to Able's brother Ben; but, in *The Wizard*, characters whose previous existence seemed confined to memory or dream arrive in the narrative without fanfare. And in one remarkable sequence, Able's dreams call into question the reality of his adventures, leading him through a forest and into sight of a highway streaming with cars, trucks, SUVs – even an ambulance. "Able – the real Able – was in that ambulance," insists the wizard knight. "I knew that, and I wanted to help him." (p459)

At the end, *The Wizard-Knight* (I can't consider the two books as separate novels) is both satisfying and frustrating. For a grand adventure tale, the climax is appropriately thrilling; for a hero's journey it is appropriately soul-testing; and for a literary puzzle, it is appropriately unifying. It is a book that demands re-reading, but I think that most if not all of the questions Wolfe raises in the course of his tale are answered. And yet the completeness of the work is also its frustration: this is fantasy feeding back on itself, answering itself, looking inward and trying to understand itself. For all its elegance, intelligence, and literary virtuosity – and have no doubt, its store of all three qualities is vast – it is a novel that feels, in some ways, like an evolutionary dead end.

FOR REASONS OF SPACE, THERE ARE NO PARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE. THE INDEX OF BOOKS REVIEWED CAN BE FOUND ON PAGE 2