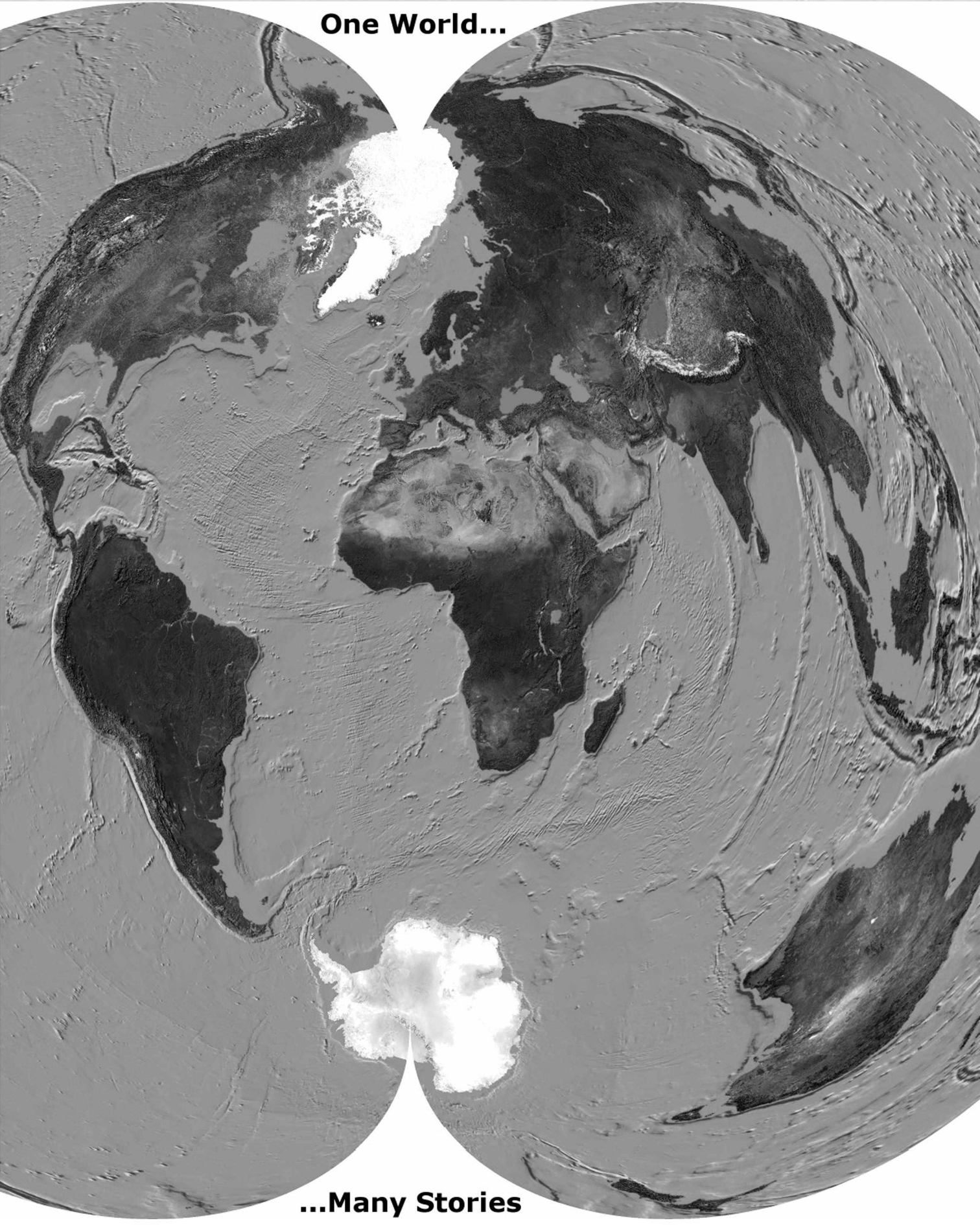


Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

#247 • May/June 2006 • £2.50

One World...



...Many Stories

Contents

Torque Control	3
Editorial by Geneva Melzack & Niall Harrison	
Che Guevara on a Greyhound Bus	4
Ian Watson interviews Marcial Souto	
The Future That Never Began	8
Michael Froggatt on Soviet SF	
Colorful Stories	13
By Nisi Shawl	
The Search for South African SF	16
By Nick Wood	
Bears, Bombs and Popcorn	17
Judith Berman on cultural source-mining	
Archipelago	20
Dan Hartland on the stories of Zoran Zivkovic	
First Impressions	23
Book Reviews edited by Paul N. Billinger	
The New X	36
A column by Graham Sleight	

Cover: Where you live. Map of Earth in a Bonne projection.
Produced by Tony Cullen using ESRI ArcMap software

Vector website:

<http://www.vector-magazine.co.uk/>

Vector

Editors

Features, Editorial and Letters

Niall Harrison & Geneva Melzack
Flat 6, Arvon House, 3 Boyn Hill Avenue,
Maidenhead, Berkshire, SL6 4ET
Vector.editors@gmail.com

Book Reviews

Paul N. Billinger
1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry
NN11 3BE
paul.billinger@gmail.com

Production and General

Tony Cullen
16 Weaver's Way, Camden, London
NW1 0XE
vector.production@googlemail.com

Associate Editor

Tanya Brown
amaranth@amaranth.aviators.net

Published by the BSFA ©2006 ISSN 0305 0448

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

Printed by PDC COPYPRINT (Guildford), Middle Unit, 77-83
Walnut Tree Close, Guildford, Surrey GU1 4UH

The British Science Fiction Association

Officers

President	Sir Arthur C. Clarke, CBE
Vice President	Stephen Baxter
Chairs	Pat McMurray & Julie Rigby bsfachair@gmail.com
Treasurer	Martin Potts 61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton, Near Tamworth B79 0JJ mtppotts@zoom.co.uk
Membership Services (UK & Europe)	Peter Wilkinson 39 Glyn Avenue, New Barnet, Herts EN4 9PJ bsfamembership@yahoo.co.uk
US Agent	Cy Chauvin 14248 Willfred Street, Detroit, MI 48213, USA

Membership fees UK

£26 p.a., or £18p.a. (unwaged), or £28
(Joint/Family membership), Life
membership £260

Europe USA

£31 p.a.
\$35 p.a. (surface mail)
\$45 p.a. (airmail)

Rest of the World

£31 p.a. (surface mail)
£37 p.a. (airmail)

UK and Europe, make cheques payable to: BSFA Ltd and send to Peter Wilkinson at the address above. US cheques payable to: Cy Chauvin (BSFA)

The BSFA was founded in 1958 and is a non-profitmaking organisation entirely staffed by unpaid volunteers. Registered in England. Limited by guarantee. Company No. 9215000.

Registered Address: 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry NN11 3BE

Website www.bsfa.co.uk

BSFA Awards

Ian Snell
BSFA.Awards@gmail.com

Orbiter Writing Groups

Gillian Rooke
Southview, Pilgrims Lane, Chilham, Kent,
CT4 8AB

Other BSFA Publications

Matrix: The news magazine of the BSFA

Commissioning Editor Tom Hunter
46 Saltwell Street, London, E14 0DZ
matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk

Features & News Editor

Claire Weaver
matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk

Production & Media Editor

Martin McGrath
48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St Albans,
AL2 2HL
martinmcgrath@ntlworld.com

Focus: The writer's magazine of the BSFA

Editor Simon Morden
13 Egremont Drive, Sherriff Hill, Gateshead
NE9 5SE
focus.editor@blueyonder.co.uk

When we sat down to think about what sorts of topics we wanted to cover in our first few issues of *Vector*, we quickly became attached to the idea of an issue about 'international sf'. Unfortunately, we have to introduce it with the sad news of the deaths of two world-class science fiction authors. At the end of February we lost American author Octavia E. Butler, and a month later we also lost Polish author Stanislaw Lem. As some of the contributions to this issue indicate, they were both authors who had a profound impact on science fiction readers and writers, in their own countries and abroad. The international sf community will miss them both a great deal.

One of our aims with *Vector* is to use its pages to bring news of the BSFA's literary events, usually held in London, to the rest of the BSFA membership for whom these events are not particularly accessible. Last October Marcial Souto, who translates English sf into Spanish, came to speak to the BSFA's London meeting about his experiences as an sf reader, writer, editor and translator. The transcript of Ian Watson's interview with him offers a fascinating personal perspective both on what it means to work as a linguistic intermediary between the author's original words and the text that readers of other languages end up holding in their hands, and on the sf community beyond the anglophone world.

It's a community whose works, if they come to us at all, must come to us via translation. Michael Froggatt, in his article 'The Future That Never Began: The Golden Age of Soviet SF', traces the history of Russian sf in the 1950s and '60s, exploring the cultural and political influence of the form. It's a story that makes a fascinating contrast to the US Golden Age that we all already know about.

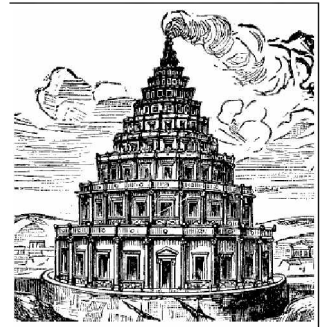
But international sf – to us, at least – does not just mean sf written in other languages or other countries; it also means sf from a variety of cultures, and not all cultures are contained by languages and national borders. Nisi Shawl's exploration of some 'Colourful Stories: Fantastic Fiction by African Descended Authors' is as clear and vital a demonstration of this fact as you could ask for. Shawl explores the common themes and concerns in science fiction written by North American writers of African origin; her article is followed by a short meditation by Nick Wood on 'The Search for South African Science Fiction,' as he considers the questions

of whether science fiction is culturally specific and what the same sort of literary tradition might look like if it were to grow out of another culture entirely.

For many English language writers, however, tackling cross-cultural settings and issues can be challenging. Judith Berman, whose debut novel *Bear Daughter* draws on Native American myths and stories, wonders about 'Bears, Bombs and Popcorn: Some Considerations When Mining Other Cultures for Source Materials', and relates some of the complex and sensitive cultural issues she had to consider while researching and writing her book. Her article confronts head on the responsibilities that authors from colonial cultures should shoulder when they choose to engage with and write about colonised peoples and cultures.

We return to foreign-language sf once more in this issue's *Archipelago*, with Dan Hartland's appreciation of the unusual short fictions of Serbian author Zoran Živković. Thanks to the publication of many of his stories in *Interzone*, Živković perhaps enjoys a higher profile in this country than many of his European contemporaries; which is one reason why, for this issue's *First Impressions*, Paul N. Billinger commissioned reviews of recent work by, among others, Finnish author Johanna Sinisalo and German author Andreas Eschbach, which help to bring our picture of international sf up to date. And of course, last but not least we have Graham Sleight's column *The New X*; this time out he argues that 'The Walls Are Down, Unfortunately'.

Of course, an issue such as this is only a starting point. Every year, sf becomes a less parochial, more truly global tradition, something which can only be a good thing. There are many more international members of the sf community, all of whom produce their own literary, televisual and cinematic sf traditions, that we could have considered – such as Japan, for instance, which will be hosting its first Worldcon in 2007. So we'd love to hear your international sf recommendations; drop us a line at vector.editors@gmail.com, and let us know what else we've been missing.



Torque Control

Editorial
by
Geneva
Melzack
& Niall
Harrison



Che Guevara On A Greyhound Bus

Marcial Souto
interviewed by
Ian Watson

Ian Watson: When you started reading science fiction, it meant American and British authors, because there weren't yet any important Spanish-speaking science fiction writers. How soon did important Spanish-speaking science fiction writers emerge?

Marcial Souto: Well, there were some writers, some great writers doing science fiction by other means. People like Borges for instance, wrote some of the best science fiction stories ever, but he never thought they were science fiction and he didn't care, of course. More professional science fiction authors started to appear in the seventies or something like that, two or three in Spain, two or three in Argentina. But they didn't make a living out of it, they just published a handful of books.

IW: You actually learned English in order to become a translator, rather than becoming a translator because you were good at English.

MS: Among the first books I read, there was an Argentinian translation of *Childhood's End*, Arthur Clarke's novel, which amazed me because of the way it was written. It was beautiful prose, and then I discovered other translations. The only difference between that book and other books by Arthur Clarke was the translator, and I immediately started to buy more books done by that publisher, Minotauro. They had done not more than twenty books at that time, and I read them, and I decided to do two things: to study English, to read books which had never been translated into Spanish at that time, and to become that which I thought was fascinating. And that's what I did.

IW: When you were 21, you won a prize as Best Student at

the English Institute in Montevideo, and this let you go to the World Science Fiction Convention, at Berkeley in California, in 1968. This was a travel grant to go anywhere in the English-speaking world?

MS: That Institute was something new, and just to sell themselves they gave that prize only once. Just to get it you had to do many impossible things. The whole exam lasted for ten hours. There were too many people trying to get it, and of course I got it because I needed it. The prize was a trip to the United States and \$200, which at that time was quite an amount of money. With those \$200 I bought a Greyhound ticket for two months. The trip was to Miami, and from Miami I took a Greyhound bus, and four days and four nights later I arrived in Oakland.

IW: My god.

MS: Yes. And mine too.

IW: Okay, this is Spanish dedication, note this well. I imagined that possibly you went by aeroplane from Montevideo to California, but instead you took a bus all the way up through Brazil, Central America...

MS: No no, I took a plane from Buenos Aires to Santiago in Chile, and another one from Santiago to Miami, and in Miami I started using my Greyhound ticket.

IW: Thank god, I was imagining Che Guevara as a science fiction fan in a Greyhound bus, going all the way from the bottom of South America to get to a World Science Fiction Convention. So, who did you meet at your first world science fiction convention?

MS: Well, many many people really. I even met Ray Bradbury, who appeared on the second day, and he's been a friend all these years and now I am his translator. Frederick Pohl, Fritz Leiber, Bob Silverberg; Roger Zelazny appeared on the last day to get the Hugo for *Lord of Light*; Phil Dick, Phil Farmer. I even met John Campbell.

IW: Wow.

MS: Yes.

IW: Now this is 1968, so presumably there were not more than one thousand people at the World Science Fiction Convention?

MS: Not much more, probably 1,500 people. It was a very successful science fiction convention apparently.

IW: OK, let's talk about translating. It seems to me that the sentence structure in Spanish is just the opposite to the sentence structure in English. I think this is because of reflexive verbs. This is probably wrong. Do English sentences, to you, seem the wrong way round?

MS: Not exactly. They are wrong, and you have to get them right. That is what translation is. But of course every language has a special architecture and you have to dismantle that and it is like those things they have done in the Nile where you have to dismantle a huge work of art and transport it, to cut it in little pieces and number them, and translate it somewhere else. But in a translation, what happens is that on your way to the new site you lose all the things you have taken, and you have to reinvent them on the other side with some other materials. And that's it, you have to use different words, you have to wield them in a different way, and you have to say something that means and sounds and looks like the original source text. So it is pure magic.

IW: It is alchemy. It is a transmutation of the lead of English into the gold of Spanish.

MS: Yes, and the opposite most probably.

IW: I have a growing suspicion that Spanish can convey more nuances than English, more shades of meaning, because

of the widespread use of the subjunctive in Spanish (or in Castilian). Now the subjunctive hardly exists in English (only as "If I were King" instead of "If I was king"), it is dying in French, but it seems to be all over the place in Spanish. Do you agree, and is the subjunctive commonly used in Latin American Spanish?

MS: It can be confusing if you do not use it very well. Spanish language is quite complicated. It is more abstract than English, it uses long words and sometimes that's a problem. Even visually you have to cut many words on the right side of the page. So having more resources sometimes is not richer. Sometimes you use more things because you cannot make something work with less resources. English is a language where you can use some words in many positions, and that is richness. Short words, very concrete and quick words. Sometimes it is very difficult to make something sound right and be believable in the Spanish language. You have to do it very well to take advantage of all its resources.

IW: You once had to translate an autobiographical essay written by Borges in English for *The New Yorker*, into Borges' own native Spanish. You have said that Borges writes a rich and special sort of Spanish. Did he write a rich and special sort of English, and how did you translate English by Borges into Spanish?

MS: Well, because I am very daring. Borges wrote that essay with his then-translator, his main and best translator, whose name is Norman Thomas di Giovanni. He lives in the south of England. They worked on that text for several months. Borges was not a very organised man, he didn't care to say anything about his life and his family and all that, but since Norman was living in Buenos Aires, he lived there for five or six years, working with Borges every day. Norman made a kind of a scheme to take from Borges all that information; they worked on it for several months, and it is very well structured. It tells very simply Borges' life, from the moment of his birth up to that time when he was about 70 or so, and it was published in *The New Yorker*. *The New Yorker* had a contract with Borges and with Norman di Giovanni, to publish all the things they were translating into English. Borges never normally gave dates about his life – that is the only time, I think he gave only six dates, so it is an important source about Borges. And then Borges did not want it to be translated into Spanish, I don't know for what reason, because he was a very shy man, and he didn't want other people to know about his life, I suppose that was one of the reasons. The English world was something far away and something that he thought was just a fantasy world, but in 1999, when it was soon to be Borges' centenary, Norman got an Argentinian publisher interested, a known publisher, to do this autobiography, and he wanted me to translate it. Of course I reread everything I could lay my hands on, not only his books, his stories, his essays, but also interviews, everything, because he really invented a kind of Spanish inside Spanish. His way of using Spanish is unique. He reinvented his language completely, and I wanted to find a perfect way to say the first sentence. A first sentence is extremely important in anything. If you do it right you can listen to it as you go along.

Well, I spent a few months thinking about that, but I finally came out with something that I thought would work. Borges used very simple words, sometimes in a strange new order, and that's part of his style. And sometimes he used an old word in a phrase, and it ran like something new. So I think I found a formula for that first sentence, and a couple of years later I found exactly the same sentence in an interview

Borges gave more or less at the same time. As you know Borges was a blind man, and when somebody asked for something from him, a poem, an essay, or an interview, he thought about that for hours, because he was living alone with his mother. His mother died at 99, and then he was living alone for some years. He reused some formulae he found that worked, so that was a good solution. But, after working for several months on that translation, that publishing house was sold to some oil tycoons, who were investing in new things and knew nothing about publishing.

And they put two people there, just to run the publication of this book, it was going to be the only book they did because it was Borges' centenary. And the man who was about to act as an editor there decided that this was his great opportunity in life to be able to collaborate with Borges. So he changed as many things as he could, starting with the first line, and they never showed us proofs. That book, we saw it after it was printed, a lot of copies, and I am so ashamed of those results. Borges' father, who he said was a philosophical anarchist, became an anarchist philosopher. All the jokes were ruined, and the first line, which starts, "I cannot tell whether my first memories go back to the eastern or to the western side of the slow muddy River Plate". Borges was born in Buenos Aires, on the western side of the River Plate, but he had relatives in Montevideo on the eastern side, and he was doubting, he didn't really remember which were his first images. This editor changed that going back to an impossible and absurd Spanish word that instead of place means time, the eastern or western side became just one side... it is very confusing and stupid. But, apparently, nobody noticed, no critics, they praised the book. It sold well, I still can't believe it.

IW: You spent 12 years in Montevideo, before you moved to Argentina, to spend 18 years in Buenos Aires, and in Argentina you edited two science fiction magazines, *Minotauro*, and *El Pendulo*. Now Sam Lundwall, whom we all know, said that *El Pendulo* was the best science fiction magazine in any language, anywhere, ever! Did Sam read Spanish, or did he just like the appearance of the magazine? Why was it called *The Pendulum*? Is this because of the story by Edgar Allen Poe?

MS: Yes, at first we could not register the name *El Pendulo*, and we had to use *El Pendulo: entre la ficción y la realidad*, *The Pendulum: between fiction and reality*. After a year or so, having no opposition from other people, we could shorten it to *El Pendulo*. But, what I think Sam said is that he saw the list of contents, he saw the illustrations, he saw the design and he judged it, and he judged it very well.

IW: Well, Sam was very experienced, and I believe him.

MS: When I saw that it was part of a chapter in Sam's history of European science fiction, the publisher had decided to discontinue *El Pendulo*, and I showed him that line, and he decided to continue. We had five more issues, and then some other things happened with those five issues. Among the things I published there was a short novel by a writer who lives in the north of Argentina, who is a quite strange writer, and I published most of his things. And that short novel, which was very strange and beautiful, won a prize as best short novel of the year. I had the trophy with me for about a year, and from time to time someone would come from his town, and ring me and say "I want to take back that trophy", and for some reason we never got to meet with those people, and a year later a young woman appeared with the intention to take that trophy back, and finally she stayed in Buenos Aires. She even married me.

IW: Well that's a wonderful story. The guardian of the

trophy. And you still have the trophy, I imagine?

MS: Not the trophy, and not the wife. We have split, and with the trophy as well.

IW: As well as translating, you write stories, and you published one collection of your own stories in 1985, *To Go Down a Well of Stars*, and also another collection.

MS: *Trampa Para Pesadillas*, *Trap for Nightmares*.

IW: Were these stories first published in magazines?

MS: Some of them, but there were other short things where I tried to push the Spanish to the limit, and tried to say things impossible to say.

IW: Experimental in language?

MS: I don't know if that's experimental. It is really trying to use the language in a new way, otherwise it doesn't pay to work so much.

IW: Have any of these stories been translated into English or other languages?

MS: Yes, Borges' translator Norman Thomas di Giovanni did the first volume but we have still done nothing with it. I think a couple of stories have appeared in anthologies here.

IW: How many books have you translated, and are they all science fiction?

MS: Well, I have translated well over 100 books, and not all of them are science fiction. I have done many essays, and I have translated many, many other things. But I have translated mostly science fiction, and in science fiction most J.G. Ballard and Ray Bradbury. I am their translator.

IW: You've become friends with many authors. Does this include Ballard?

MS: Yes, of course, I've known him for close to 40 years.

IW: I usually tell foreign publishers who buy my books to tell the translator to contact me if they want to. Some do and some don't. From my point of view this leads to friendships, and also possibly to better translations, because I don't think that a translator, however good, can solve every single problem of slang, or dialect, or local or cultural reference. Also I try to get in touch with translators, because they are not valued as much as they deserve, I have discovered. So they appreciate some contact with the author. Some translators have no time to be perfect, because they have deadlines, and aren't paid enough. What do you do about textual problems, if any? Do you ever ask the authors?

MS: Yes, sometimes I do. But now, with the internet, you can solve most of the mysteries in your translation. An author can help you with a word, or a concept, but the real problems of translation, you have to solve them. No author can help you to do the real work. It is just a little bit of information, sometimes that is very important. Sometimes I find mistakes, errors, in a text, and I check that with the author. Sometimes they are very surprised.

IW: This is one of the other reasons why I like to contact translators, because over the years translators have discovered mistakes in my stories which are not necessarily typing errors, they are mistakes that I have made. One of my stories, 'The Very Slow Time Machine' has been translated into many languages and reprinted many times, yet it was only two years ago that my Romanian translator discovered a completely stupid mistake in the story.

MS: There is something very important here. It is that a translator does a better reading than a writer can ever do of his text. You see everything. You have to turn around every little stone and see what is under it. An author projects many things on a work, but a translator is free to take some distance and check everything.

IW: This is very useful, because no matter how many

times I read a story or a novel of mine, there will always be mistakes somewhere which I do not see, and a translator sees those because of the different vision.

MS: Of course. It is very simple, the author still has part of the book inside, projecting it into the page, and the translator has nothing inside, you take it for what it is. You see, really.

IW: You've been living in Barcelona in Spain since 1991. What have you been doing there?

MS: Well, it is very mysterious, but... translation. No, I have edited many books, and have translated many books too, and have given talks and translation workshops, and had coffees and beers.

IW: You've just been at a translation workshop. Is this practical? Do people have to compare translations, or is it theoretical? Was it about literary translation?

MS: Well, this is interesting, last weekend there was the annual meeting of the Spanish Translation Association, about three miles west of Barcelona in a small town, and every year there are workshops about fiction from several languages, and this year I had to do the English one. And I talked about science fiction. I used a story by Cordwainer Smith called 'Scanners Live in Vain' because I thought it was interesting on many levels. Sometimes you translate a couple of pages and try to analyse which problems you are finding, but this time everybody wanted to talk about it and not to analyse it. They just read a couple of pages, which I thought was the perfect place to get the tone, because tone is almost everything in most fiction, and after that what I tried to convey was that in that type of story, you have to be very careful, because there are so many references to things you do not know, you have to read many other things by that author, and you have to find a way of translating perfectly the way the text is written. Cordwainer Smith as you know wrote a very far future from an even farther future, and he treated those stories as bits of legends and ballads, and that gave it a lot of verisimilitude because he was talking about very approximate things. And he said he was pre-Cervantean – as you know Cervantes was the first author to use that idea for an introduction, complication and resolution, and what Cordwainer Smith did was to look through a window and see a small scene with no beginning and no end. And so what I was trying to show them is that science fiction can be extremely profound and literary. I told them who Cordwainer Smith was, and I think they were really fascinated, because science fiction is part of literature. It can be as good as anything done in mainstream, and it gives something else. It demands more from a reader and it gives more to a reader, it takes into consideration nothing less than the universe. Mainstream does not usually go beyond your...

IW: ...little life? It's parochial, I say.

MS: Me too.

IW: What are you translating at the moment?

MS: I have been translating a novel and an essay, that is a good balance. There is a piece by a South African writer who has Canadian nationality and lives part of the year in Barcelona. I found a book of hers at a friend's home and I discovered that they were friends, and I found a publisher for her. I think she's really good, she has done a book about food, a book about fate, and this book I am doing, which is a book about a small Italian church. It is called *The Geometry of Love*. It is a beautiful and wise book.

IW: What is her name?

MS: Margaret Bisser. She is very famous in Canada, she speaks on the radio, and she gives lots of conferences, every two years, she is really a wonderful person and I am very glad

I met her. I am translating Peter Straub's new novel. I met him last year in Florida and he wanted me to be his translator, and I am trying to be.

Roger Robinson: Do you find it easier to translate short stories or novels? Which is easier, but which do you prefer?

MS: To translate stories or novels? It is a wiser investment to translate novels, because while you have some queries about a text, you just go on, and if you translate a short story collection you are finding too many different problems.

IW: You can get ten stories by the same author and they have a different mood, a different vocabulary...

MS: I usually need at least 100 pages to find the right tone of a novel, and then I go back with all the necessary information about that special living being and after that I can go and that is final text. But with a short story, you are starting every ten or twenty pages. I have just done that with a Ray Bradbury story collection called *The Cat's Pyjamas*. It was a difficult title to translate.

Caroline Mullan: You are a translator for Ballard and Delany, both of whom I think of as immersive science fiction; they are people who make their worlds out of the words they use. Did you translate those two because you have a choice about who to translate, or did they happen to come to you?

MS: I love just that, working with words. That's the only thing we have, words, and I have done only one novel by Samuel Delany, which is *The Einstein Intersection*, which is almost a poem. In fact, he told me that the first draft was 1,300 pages long. He rewrote it ten times, and what he finally got was a tenth of that. By Ballard I did many books, most of his short stories and some of his novels, and I am fascinated by that. His sentences are perfect small clockworks. Maybe you remember Yves Klein's paintings. He has used a few of the titles from those paintings, where there is a horizon but you never know where it is. Usually there is a horizon and a shoreline, and some objects lain somewhere in between, and you never know if they are on sand, on the water, or if they touch the sky. It is a very confusing line. I think that is unconscious, and I see Delany's prose that way, and he can pack so many things in a short sentence. There is a new book called *Quotes*, the quotes are taken from some of his interviews and some of his fiction, which is an amazing book.

Dave Clements: Have you ever translated from Spanish into English?

MS: Well, I have tried, that is a very humbling experience. When you translate into your own language, if you need some information, if you do not understand something factual or just a construction, you can ask somebody and get some information, and then you can turn that into your own language, of which you are the supposed master. But when you work the other way around, you can understand perfectly the source text, but then which turn do you take? There are so many things open there, and if you do not live and breathe and read in a language, you cannot use it to write. So what I did was to stand at every turn and see it as a garden of branching paths, and decided which one shall I take. The next day or week, the final translator would send back a few pages or a chapter and I would be amazed by all the freedom he used, how being so unfaithful to the original text he could really recreate it, and that is something interesting. You cannot write in a language unless you live in it for a long time. I don't know Nabokov managed. For me he is one of the two or three greatest writers in the English language, and I don't know how he did it. Conrad, also. They translated their minds into English.

Geneva Melzack: You talked a bit earlier about how the

process of translation is a process of breaking down on one side and rebuilding in the other, and I wondered, at what sort of level do you try to rebuild? Obviously you can't rebuild at the level of words, but can you ever do it at the level of sentences, or is it at the level of paragraphs, or the level of the whole story?

MS: You try to reconstruct it in the paragraph level, in the word level it is impossible and it would be false because you have to use a different, much different, strategy than the one used by the author in a different language. Words are more different than we think. English and Spanish are very different, very difficult. French and Spanish, are very close sometimes, that can be very misleading. Many errors are made because of that. So, you do what you can. You just try to listen to what that author, the words that author would use if he had been born and were writing in your own language, so I see that Jim Barrat's passive voice becomes active voice in the Spanish language because otherwise it would be false. It would be too long, too slow, and too obscure.

Questioner: Who are the most important Spanish science fiction writers, both the classic ones, and the contemporary ones? Not necessarily translated into English.

MS: Well, there are some new writers in Spain, I do not think they have reached their highest level, they are working, there are 5 or 6 writers which I think are interesting. We have an annual prize now, a contest in fact, and I am one of the judges so I have read many books lately, but none of them is a masterpiece.

IW: This is the Premio Minotauro, worth 18,000 Euros.

MS: But I think there are a couple of Argentinian writers who I think are quite good. Angelica Gorodische is the author of *Kalpa Imperial*, a very good book, which was translated into English by Ursula Le Guin, and published by Small Beer Press in the United States. I edited that book in Buenos Aires. It had been rejected by several publishers, I don't know why, and it won a prize as the best novel published in Argentina that year, outside any category.

Natasha Mostert: Is there an author of which you are so in awe that you would actually be intimidated by his text?

MS: Well, I suppose any book can be translated, maybe not well, but there are daring people everywhere. Many times I feel like that, probably every day, but when you start translating something, you get big surprises. Something which apparently is very difficult, you can do it right. Sometimes I find that the most innocent sentence is the most difficult to translate, and sometimes I spend a whole afternoon thinking how to translate this sentence, which is apparently very easy, but sometimes a language finds an easy and elegant and apparently simple way of saying something, and that cannot be said in another language. There is not that idea, sometimes for cultural reasons, sometimes for linguistic reasons. After all, all the things we use in a language were discovered by somebody with talent sometime, that is why the work of some authors is so important historically, because they fix a way of expressing something in a language. But we have to think that things as simple as (this is something Borges used to say) that the person who sees the moon does not see the same thing as the person who sees la luna. It's so different, it is a different object, and there is a long chain of associations behind it. You are trained to see something else. We are language, really.

This interview was transcribed by Liz Batty.

The Future That Never Began

The Golden Age of Soviet SF by Michael Froggatt

"SF is heavy artillery: you don't use it for shooting sparrows... SF is a socially active genre, it teaches citizenship, responsibility for the future; for that reason it has many admirers."

Arkadii Strugatskii, Interview (1988)

Introduction

During the tense years of the Cold War, Russian was the second language of the future and the Soviet Union was the largest contributor to science fiction outside the English-speaking world. The genre had immense popular appeal in the USSR, and its exuberant utopian spirit won it many admirers – often for ideological rather than aesthetic reasons – in translation abroad. Science fiction was to become central to the popular culture of the Soviet Union in the two decades after Stalin's death in 1953, and some of the most prominent Soviet science fiction authors, such as Ivan Efremov and the Strugatskii brothers, became minor celebrities in the USSR and developed a cult following.

During the 1950s and 1960s the Soviet authorities officially endorsed science fiction, and allowed the genre to flourish. This was largely for ideological reasons: the majority of Soviet science fiction provided a positive, uplifting vision of the future which was congruent with the Communist Party's official Marxist-Leninist ideology. Darko Suvin has argued that a crucial characteristic of Soviet science fiction was a "blending of the rationalist utopian trend (largely of West European impulse) with the vital folk longing for abundance and justice."¹ Marxism-Leninism could itself be described in the same terms. The predictions of an abundant and just society provided by Soviet science fiction could also be used to appease those dissatisfied by the hardships and injustice endemic to Soviet society; Patrick McGuire has thus termed Soviet science fiction the regime's "promissory note" to its population.²

However, Soviet science fiction of the 1950s and 1960s was not simply 'propaganda': the more thought-provoking its imagined futures became, the more troubling they proved to official ideologues and political watchdogs. Officially, Marxism-Leninism pointed the only acceptable path to a rational, egalitarian future and science fiction writers were forced to take account of this. Thus, some standard tropes of Western science fiction (interstellar warfare or invasion, nuclear apocalypse) were effectively prohibited, while others ('sentient' robots, time-travel) had to take account of the dictates of Marxism-Leninism, which boasted its own 'dialectical materialist' philosophy of science. Censorship, whether self-imposed or demanded by editors and ideologues, was a fact of life for Soviet science fiction authors. However, this often encouraged writers to resort to Aesopian metaphors, while fans were left to read between the lines.

Science fiction had not always been so openly endorsed by Soviet ideologues as it was in the 1950s and 1960s, and its right to survive as a genre had been called into question. Science fiction had to exist uneasily alongside the dominant artistic genre in the USSR: Socialist Realism. This was a genre in which uncomplicated, positive heroes struggled to fulfil the tasks put before them by the Communist Party; Socialist Realism was

intended not as mere entertainment, but as a means to educate readers and inspire them to ever greater efforts in the construction of communism. Socialist Realism explicitly sought not to reflect present realities, but to project a utopian vision of the future backwards onto the everyday life of Soviet workers and peasants. Thus it was questionable whether Soviet science fiction, also intended to be utopian, had the right to an independent existence, and before the genre could enjoy a 'golden age' in the 1950s and 1960s it had to undergo an extremely long and torturous period of gestation. This article aims to provide a brief account of this gestation, before discussing the ideas, some inspirational and some controversial, which provoked so much interest and discussion at the dawning of the space age.

Soviet Science Fiction before the Space Age

The intimate connection between science fiction and Bolshevism was demonstrated even before the October Revolution of 1917. The ideologue and author Aleksandr Bogdanov used his 1907 science fiction novel *Red Star* and its 1912 sequel *Engineer Menni* as vehicles for Marxist utopianism, at a time when he was second only to Vladimir Lenin within the Bolshevik Party hierarchy. *Red Star* sees a Russian proletarian transported to Mars, where advanced technology and socialist central planning have combined to produce a harmonious and rationalist utopia. While largely devoid of plot, the novel's awe at the vast Martian technologies on display was characteristic of the way in which Bolshevik leaders fetishised science and technology. Following the revolution *Red Star* was staged by the radical cultural group Prolet'kult, but Bogdanov, having feuded with Lenin, found himself increasingly marginalised amongst the Bolsheviks; he died in 1928 during an experimental blood transfusion, and his works of science fiction were no longer republished within the Soviet Union. However, these early works demonstrated how seriously even a prominent Bolshevik leader and ideologue took science fiction.

The 1920s, after the bloodshed and destruction of the October Revolution and ensuing Civil War, saw a comparatively relaxed cultural environment associated with Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). Inspired by the Bolshevik enthusiasm for technological progress and radical cultural transformation, many authors and artists seized upon science fiction as an ideal genre for combining ideology and popular entertainment. Indeed, the critic Ian Christie has described science fiction as "perhaps the dominant genre of Soviet literature" during the NEP period.³ Popular enthusiasm for science led to many idiosyncratic works devoted to the topic: one 1922 play, for instance, was simply a dialogue between a blood-cell and a bacterium. Other authors produced more approachable and populist works, such as *Engineer Garin and his Death Ray*, a satirical espionage romp penned by Aleksei Tolstói (a distant relative of the author of *War and Peace*) which was the model for much later Soviet science fiction. The story tells the tale of a gang of Nietzschean capitalists who smuggle the plans for a revolutionary laser-gun out of the

Soviet Union and use it to establish a short-lived fascist dictatorship in the USA, which is soon overthrown by a workers' revolt. During the 1920s translations by Western science fiction authors also won considerable, and enduring, popularity: alongside the socialists Jack London and H.G. Wells, one of the most popular foreign authors was Edgar Rice Burroughs. One further effect of widespread interest in science in the 1920s was the flourishing market in popular science works, especially those devoted to space, and the establishment of societies devoted to rocketry and space exploration.

The 1920s also saw the appearance of the first Soviet science fiction film, 1924's *Aelita*, directed by Iakov Protozanov and based upon another story by Aleksei Tolstoi. The film took Tolstoi's original Martian adventure and transformed it into the fevered dream of a Soviet worker who is disgruntled and alienated by the corruption and worldliness of NEP Russia. The dreaming hero travels to Mars where he meets, and woos, a beautiful Martian princess (whose palace and costumes are triumphs of 1920s Constructivist design); however, when she reveals her true colours she is overthrown in a bloody proletarian uprising. The critic Eric Naiman argues that the film "projects contemporary ideological anxieties onto the Red Planet" and condemns it for its undeniable misogyny.⁴ That said, the film is a fascinating, visually stunning and often amusing spectacle, and though it was ridiculed by contemporary critics, cinema audiences flocked to see it, encouraged by innovative advertising in the Soviet mass media.

However, science fiction also provided rich material for those who wished to subvert the ideals of official Bolshevik ideology. Mikhail Bulgakov, probably the best-loved Russian novelist of the twentieth century for his later satire *Master and Margarita*, in 1925 penned two satires which provided an ironic inversion of the values of official propaganda. 'The Heart of a Dog' portrays the misguided attempts of Professor Preobrazhenskii (a pun on the Russian for 'transformation') to elevate a dog to rational humanity by implanting it with the testes and pituitary gland of a common criminal. Instead the dog proves to be a rude, offish drunk, and demonstrates no ability to comprehend basic Marxist texts; Preobrazhenskii is eventually forced to overpower him and transform him back into a mere animal. The tale not only ridicules the scientific sensationalism of the 1920s, it also critiques the Bolsheviks' plan to radically transform the 'dark', ignorant masses of Russia (here represented by the dog). Bulgakov's second novella, 'The Fatal Eggs' narrates the discovery by Professor Persikov of a miraculous red (and hence 'Bolshevik') 'ray of life' which rapidly accelerates the growth process. However, illiterate peasants turn the ray on a batch of snake eggs and produce a brood of murderous giant reptiles which rampage through the streets of Moscow, and Persikov is lynched as a result. Bulgakov, like many science fiction writers of the 1920s, clearly associates science with Bolshevism; however he suggests that the Bolsheviks are conducting a woefully misconceived experiment on Russia's economy, culture and people. Only his reputation and his personal favour with Stalin would later save him from the Gulag.

Another trouble-maker was Evgenii Zamiatin, a trained

engineer who had served a prison sentence for his illegal activities with the Bolshevik Party prior to 1917. His anti-utopia *We* was initially published in Russia in 1920, after Zamiatin had become disillusioned with the Bolshevik revolution, but it only attracted the attention of the authorities when republished by an émigré press in Prague in 1927. Zamiatin's novel portrays a ruthless dictatorship where the faceless, nameless masses worship an all-powerful Benefactor, where every aspect of human activity, including procreation, has become regulated and 'rationalised' and where the natural world has been excluded beyond a 'green wall'. The hero, a mathematician, falls in love

with a member of the underground resistance and eventually participates in a doomed uprising. The novel's obvious parallels with the Soviet dictatorship led to Zamiatin being subjected to a storm of criticism in the late 1920s. He was forced into exile in 1931, and *We* was not to be officially republished in the USSR until the late 1980s, although it provided one of the inspirations for George Orwell's 1984.

The intolerance shown to Zamiatin was symptomatic of the cultural politics of the 'Great Break', a renewed turn in the late 1920s towards radical economic, social and cultural transformation that provoked political crisis, social upheaval, famine and bloodshed. The vision of science promoted by Bolshevik propaganda now focused less on the Promethean utopias which had prevailed in the 1920s and more on the immediate utilitarian goals of technological progress. Simultaneously, what cultural diversity had been tolerated in the 1920s was brutally choked off, and many of the artistic intelligentsia, whether 'bourgeois' or 'radical' found themselves persecuted, sent to the Gulag or even executed. Soviet science fiction was transformed by the radical changes going on around it. Utopian visions for a communist future were now monopolised by Party ideologists, while science fiction writers were encouraged to limit themselves to stories of the 'short view', in which resourceful young workers made prosaic technological improvements (in one typical story, to a concrete mixer) on the basis of existing scientific knowledge. Such stories were really a vehicle for scientific education, and blurred into the 'boy-meets-tractor' genre of Socialist Realism. Space travel and political speculation disappeared from science fiction, replaced by adventure stories set amidst the ruins of Atlantis or spy thrillers in which capitalist agents sought to sabotage or steal Soviet scientific discoveries. Soviet science fiction, which had seemed so promising in the 1920s, appeared to have effectively expired by the middle of the 1930s.

"This was the generation that gave the world the amateur song and ejaculated the first sputnik – that four-tailed spermatazoon of the future that never began – into the dark void of cosmic space."

Viktor Pelevin 'Generation P' (1999)

The 'Golden Age' of Soviet SF

The death of Stalin in 1953 led to a gradual abandonment of the worst features of the one-party dictatorship. Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, initiated a sporadic process of 'destalinisation', which led to the condemnation of many of



Stills from *Aelita*

assumptions and practices of the recent past. Part of this process was a hesitant and incomplete relaxation of restrictions in the cultural sphere, as the artistic intelligentsia were called upon to help rejuvenate Soviet society. Science fiction writers and editors were to play their own part in this process, as they set about "destalinizing the future".⁵ The 1954 Second All-Union Congress of Writers heard calls for the revival of many fictional genres, amongst them science fiction, in response to the stifling monopoly granted to Socialist Realism by the 1940s.

The next decade saw science fiction flourish in popular science magazines, in short-story collections, in full-length novels and on the big screen. Interviews and discussions with science fiction writers began to appear more often in serious literary periodicals and the 'broadsheet' press, indicating the genre had regained official respectability. This was accompanied by the increased visibility of science in the mass media, especially after the Soviet space program achieved early successes with the launch of Sputnik and the flight of Yuri Gagarin. The apparent vitality of Soviet society in the 1950s, supposedly demonstrated by such technological marvels, gave birth to a widespread mood of scientific utopianism, which was very reminiscent of the 1920s. Scientists became the stars of numerous 'serious' non-SF works, such as Vladimir Dudintsev's controversial 1957 novel about a persecuted inventor, *Not by Bread Alone*, and Mikhail Romm's classic 1962 film about young nuclear physicists, *Nine Days of One Year*.

While the Soviet science fiction of the late 1950s and 1960s was characterised by an exuberant utopianism, it had to observe certain doctrinally-imposed limitations. Atomic war was a virtually prohibited theme, for fear that it would encourage public unease, and because it contradicted the Party line was proletarian internationalism would prevent Western militarists initiating a nuclear holocaust. The march of progress and Enlightenment values must always triumph: socialist man would be a healthy, well-adjusted individual, free of the alienation induced by capitalism. He would be capable of conquering nature, as well as his own ignorance, prejudices and fears. Futuristic tales had to be fitted into a Marxist teleology in which socialism triumphed, united the nations of the world and smoothly accomplished the transition to a fully egalitarian, communist society (somewhere along the line the state should 'wither away', although authors tended to avoid dealing with this issue). The inhabitants of the future might well encounter alien races, but they would inevitably be benign, as only civilisations advanced enough to have progressed to communism would be sufficiently technologically-sophisticated to have conquered space.

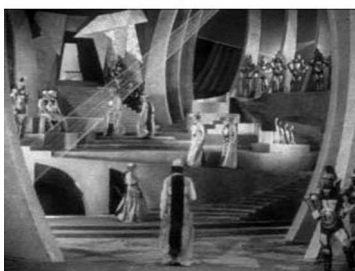
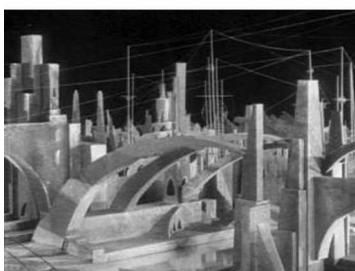
The rebirth of Soviet science fiction was heralded by the 1957 publication of *The Clouds of Andromeda*, by the palaeontologist Ivan Efremov. The utopia presented by Efremov was to be enormously influential, providing a model of the future for both Soviet readers and authors; one critic later noted that for the generation growing up in the 1950s it was "the encyclopaedia of the future of our planet".⁶ Its popularity can be judged from the fact that 40% of those studying physics and astronomy at Moscow State University in the mid-1960s admitted they had

been inspired to do so by reading the novel. The popularity of the novel derived from its breath-taking scope and youthful optimism, as the writing is undoubtedly stilted and the characterisation at best simplistic. The novel is set in the far-future Great Ring, where peaceful and harmonious alien civilisations, although light-years apart, communicate effectively and pool their collective knowledge. The Earth has been radically transformed by the creation of artificial suns to thaw the tundra (a long-running Russian obsession), while the economy is governed by a giant computer known as the Prophetic Brain.

Children are raised collectively, with families a thing of the past, while euthanasia is permitted if approved by a vote of a selected medical council. Bizarrely, for a socialist utopia, the novel displays a strong streak of biological determinism; individuals have their career selected for them on the basis of genetic suitability, while those predisposed to criminal or asocial behaviour are isolated on the Island of Oblivion. Despite its popularity, *The Clouds of Andromeda* did provoke a critical and ideological controversy: some critics praised it as the first 'scientifically-determined' utopia, firmly grounded in Marxist-Leninist ideology, while others criticised it for containing elements (such as 'the demise of the family' and euthanasia) which had no place in the Soviet Union's vision of communism.

Another important influence on Soviet science fiction came from abroad, as Soviet readers and authors were now able to read foreign science fiction for the first time since the 1920s. Ideologically acceptable foreigners, such as Clarke and Asimov, were regularly translated and won a sizeable following, while the works of Poland's Stanislaw Lem were immensely popular and influential (although his *Solaris* had many of its dream sequences and philosophical discussions censored in translation). Authors whose works were more politically 'questionable', such as Heinlein, Ballard and Bradbury, were also translated, partly to demonstrate that Western science fiction was obsessively militaristic or hopelessly pessimistic. Such stories even inspired ideological counter-blasts from Soviet authors: for instance, in Efremov's tale 'Cor Serpents' Soviet cosmonauts dismissively discuss Murray Leinster's 'First Contact' before themselves making peaceful first contact with aliens. However, foreign science fiction, with its treatment of otherwise forbidden themes, won a devoted following in the Soviet Union: illegal, hand-typed copies of Orwell's 1984 began to circulate during the 1970s, while *The Martian Chronicles* remains a firm favourite in Russian translation to this day, and Ray Bradbury is regarded as the leading US science fiction author.

Most Soviet science fiction from the late 1950s and early 1960s continued to be dominated by the one-dimensional and ideologically-approved positive heroes of earlier years. Cosmonauts provided the most convenient moral template for Soviet readers: they were shown to be disciplined, stoic, courageous and always ready to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Henrikh Al'tov, Valentina Zhuravlyova and Georgii Gurevich all wrote tales in which selfless cosmonauts sacrifice themselves to the forces of nature in the pursuit of knowledge, while the cosmonauts and engineers of *The Clouds of*



Andromeda are described as having only half the expected lifespan of their less committed, Earth-bound comrades. Such positive heroes were intended to be 'fully-rounded' individuals, as befitted the communist future; they were always presented as erudite and cultured, in implicit contrast to the gung-ho machismo of American astronauts. The characters in *The Clouds of Andromeda* spend much of their time discussing the arts, and rubbishing the 'modern' works produced by 'degenerate' capitalist societies, while a hero in Al'tov and Zhuravlyova's 'Ballad of the Stars' ponders: "Cosmonauts – with extremely rare exceptions – do not go around shooting blasters. They do not run and jump. They think." Space is to be civilised through importing the works of Tolstoi, Dickens, Tchaikovsky and Pushkin.

Soviet science fiction, in this sense, had a nostalgic, conservative streak which was at odds with much of its utopian, progressive rhetoric. The stories of Gurevich and Zhuravlyeva are populated by profoundly lonely and isolated cosmonauts, who long for home; in Zhuravlyeva's 'The Cosmonaut' travellers in space suffer mental disorders and breakdowns due to their inherently unnatural environment. Efremov took this view even further, arguing that human beings were organically, almost mystically, bound to their own planet and would be forced to undergo a fundamental, spiritual transformation as they colonised space. It is striking how much time fictional Soviet cosmonauts spend nostalgically dwelling on their homes, their families and their native soil: the message is very often that 'there's no place like home'. Soviet cosmonauts seem to parallel the Russian political radicals of an earlier age; they demonstrate their commitment to the nation and 'the people' by enduring their expulsion from both.

Alongside utopian stories of the far future, political parables remained a popular theme in Soviet science fiction, often utilising the model of the espionage yarns of the 1930s and 1940s. Anatolii Dneprov specialised in such stories: a characteristic example is 'The Maxwell Equations' in which a naive West German scientist discovers that ex-concentration camp guards are conducting scientific experiments using human subjects as 'computers'. Although the hero shuts down the experiment, the Nazis are quickly spirited away, obviously to be employed by the 'fascist' West German government. Aleksandr Kol'tsov's 'The Secret of the White Devils' reports the (allegedly) true story of an American Negro recruited to pilot an experimental American missile, its ex-Nazi designers having failed to perfect adequate navigation systems. Fortunately he manages to escape to communist Cuba. Both Dneprov and Sever Ganovskii penned stories in which crazed capitalist militarists test wonder-weapons on Pacific atolls and fall victim to their creations. Ganovskii's 'Poligon' revolves around an automatic tank which homes in on the fear of its prey: it turns on its awe-struck American designers, but leaves the peace-loving natives totally untouched. Religion and mysticism were favourite targets of such propagandistic fiction; Dneprov's 'Direct Proof' relates the 'discovery' that the human soul, composed of neutrinos, is experimentally proven to exist. Organised religion experiences a massive revival and the government has to intervene after dead souls begin to communicate from the 'other

side'. Inexplicably, the whole world-wide phenomenon is eventually exposed as a fraud. Dneprov's parody of religious hysteria in the story was part of a vigorous anti-religion campaign being pursued by the Soviet government at the time.

This is not to say that all Soviet science fiction was so ponderously self-important or politically motivated. Humour and satire played an important role in the Soviet science fiction tradition, although it always had to be careful upon what and whom it focused. Il'ia Varshavskii and the Strugatskii brothers specialised in playful short stories that satirised the tendency of both the Soviet bureaucracy and the general public to hunger after scientific novelty and swallow pseudo-science wholesale. The Strugatskii brothers parodied the pretensions of the scientific community in their 1966 novel *Monday Begins on Saturday*, set in the Scientific Research Institute for Thaumaturgy and Spellcraft, in which researchers perfect djinn-bombs and train Maxwell Demons to automatically operate doors. Varshavskii was one of many others who utilised to full comedic effect the potential of idiot-savant robots in their works, at a time when the moral and philosophical dilemmas raised by artificial intelligence remained a taboo subject due to the strictures of Soviet dialectical philosophy.

While published science fiction enjoyed a renaissance in the late 1950s the genre also made a return to the big screen: however, most of the science fiction films of the period were uncomplicated interplanetary romps such as *Road to the Stars*, *We Go to Meet Dreams* and *Planet of Storms*. These films combined scientific education on the basics of rocketry and astronomy, the cardboard characterisation typical of much written science fiction and innovative special effects (some scenes from *Road to the Stars* had an obvious influence on *2001*, sometimes shot-for-shot). Adaptations of older works were also popular: the most popular film of 1962 was *Frog-Man*, based on a much-loved children's novel by Andrei Beliaev, in which a tyrannical scientist (here part-Stalinist patriarch, part-Bond villain) saves his son's life by transforming him into an amphibian, not realising he has condemned him to a miserable life in isolation from human society. Most Soviet science fiction films remained simplistic and angled towards a young audience, although obvious counter-examples are provided by Andrei Tarkovskii's 1970s adaptations of a Stanislaw Lem novel, *Solaris*, and a Strugatskii brothers screenplay, *Stalker*. The political and moral subtexts of these two elegiac films greatly troubled the authorities, but when they were eventually released they won more critical praise abroad than they did popularity amongst the Soviet public.

Troubles in Paradise?

Despite the fact that science fiction had received official endorsement in the 1950s it continued to trouble the authorities. Most adult science fiction readers were highly-educated, usually being drawn from the scientific and technical intelligentsia, and they were accustomed to reading all forms of fiction for implied dissidence and social critique. There were limits to how far independent visions of the future and the present could be developed: alternate histories, or even time-travel stories in which history was tampered with, were almost unknown in the



Soviet tradition, which had to acknowledge that history was determined by the economic forces inherent in society. History developed along a preordained course, and to suggest otherwise was heresy. However, in the 1950s one of the discussions which troubled the Eastern Bloc was whether there were 'alternative roads to socialism' or if all socialist countries should follow the lead of the USSR. The debate was reflected in Soviet science fiction and commentary, as authors engaged with the issue of whether all societies were forced to evolve along the same lines. Efremov took the line that they did; his aliens are all essentially humanoid and capable of meaningful communication with humanity, and he suggests that all societies evolve through similar stages. Al'tov and Zhuravlyeva, took the opposite position, as one of the inhabitants of their imagined future comments, having read *The Clouds of Andromeda*: 'Communication between two worlds was not just a technical problem, the way the novelist thought. There were incomparably greater problems caused by the fact that on each planet evolution over millions of years had followed its course and therefore it was difficult to find some point on contact.' The 'aliens' in this case could easily be taken as metaphors for the populations of Poland, Hungary or Yugoslavia. The essentially imperialist mode of Efremov's thought is demonstrated in his story 'Cor Serpentis'; when a human spacecraft does encounter silicon-based life-forms, with whom communication initially appears impossible, the captain's first thought is how to biologically-engineer the alien life-forms so that humans can interact with them more effectively.

Implied doubts about official ideology were typical of the maturing Soviet science fiction of the 1960s. The work of the Strugatskii brothers, while uncharacteristic in its brooding, nuanced style, was indicative of the increasing disillusionment of many writers. Simplistic utopias play no part in their mature work; the future portrayed in 'Destination: Amaethela' is plagued by petty, squabbling cosmonauts, profiteering, smuggling and cantankerous life-support systems. Their disaster novel *Far Rainbow*, in which an inexplicable energy wave destroys almost all human life on a colony world, dispenses with the positive hero in favour of a ruthless protagonist whose sole interest is in saving his own skin and that of his lover. Other novels, such as *The Snail on the Slope* and *Hard to be a God*, suggest that humans are incapable of comprehending or manipulating the implacable forces of nature and history. *The Second Martian Invasion*, which can be read as an anti-Soviet satire, sees Wellsian Martians invade Earth; rather than resist their new masters the human slaves, harvested for their bodily fluids, take the path of least resistance and come to unquestioningly accept their new life. However, the Strugatskiis claimed such works were not 'anti-Soviet', but were directed against *meshchanstvo*, a term which roughly translates as 'petit-bourgeois philistinism'. This claim is quite justified, as their works have universal relevance, condemning apathy, ignorance and stifling social conformity, while criticising those who surrender their humanity through their failure to face up to the moral and philosophical choices before them.

The subversive potential of some science fiction did not go unnoticed by the authorities. During 1959 the popular science journal *Znanie - Sila* [Knowledge is Power] published an article by the science fiction author Sergei Al'tshuler arguing that scientists were failing to promote science amongst the general public, and that science fiction authors should instead be entrusted with the task. Party officials regarded this as a slur on the Soviet scientific community, and ordered all copies of the journal to be pulped and the issue to be reprinted without the offending article, at the cost of 80,000 roubles. The editors of *Znanie - Sila* were already under suspicion for publishing science fiction which allegedly contained 'political allusions'. During February 1964 a meeting of the Communist Party's Ideology Commission criticised the science fiction author Aleksandr Kazantsev for using his works as

a vehicle for the theories that the Earth had been settled from space and that the Tunguska meteorite of 1907 had been an atomically-powered spacecraft. Supposedly such theories undermined a rationalist, materialistic worldview and hindered the Party's attempts to stamp out popular religion and superstition.

Such sporadic interventions eventually led to a comprehensive critique of Soviet science fiction, in a report for the Central Committee of the Communist Party, dated 5th March 1966. This noted "serious deficiencies and errors in the publication of science fiction literature" and especially criticised science fiction of the "social/philosophical" direction. Making examples of Lem and the Strugatskiis, it stated that much science fiction was characterised by a "lack of perspective on the further development of human society, the rejection of ideals, the degradation of morality and the collapse of the personality". The Strugatskiis were held to be guilty of "complete pessimism and a lack of belief in the force of reason." The report concluded that science fiction had become subject to "ideologically hostile influence, idealistic philosophical concepts and a pessimistic mood" and ordered that criticism of such trends be printed in the Soviet press. Following the report, regional small-press journals which published the work of the Strugatskiis were admonished and the authors were forced to publish some of their later fiction abroad. It should also be noted that the 1966 report was accompanied by a memo noting the number of troublesome science fiction writers who had Jewish surnames, an anti-Semitic aside typical of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Given this mounting hostility, it is hardly surprising that the public profile of science fiction began to decline in the Soviet Union after the 1960s. Following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 attempts to reform socialism ground to a halt, the intelligentsia fell under ever greater suspicion and public discourse was gradually stifled. Science fiction fell out of favour with cultural mandarins as the Soviet Union witnessed a boom in 'village prose', which celebrated the eternal, conservative values of the Russian countryside and displayed a general malaise with modernity. Tellingly, influential figures within the science fiction community, such as Efremov and the editor Iurii Medvedev, became increasingly associated with the semi-official Russian nationalist movement. Efremov, whose views on genetic determinism have already been noted, now became interested in theories of the 'Aryan origin' of the Russians, perhaps a surprising development for an author who had conveyed the ambitious visions of the 1950s better than anyone else. Soviet science fiction had flourished in the atmosphere of utopianism that had followed the death of Stalin and Soviet successes in the space race; however, as the Soviet Union sank into political stagnation in the 1970s that 'golden age' was already drawing to a close.

Mike Froggatt recently completed a doctoral thesis on science in Soviet propaganda and popular culture, and is now Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Durham. He is currently rewriting his thesis for publication (due 2007-8), and trying to postpone rewatching "Solaris".

1. Darko Suvin. 'Introduction' to Suvin (ed.) *Other Worlds, Other Seas: Science Fiction Stories from Socialist Countries* (Random House, London 1970), pp.xi-xxxiii, at pp.xiv-xv.

2. Patrick L. McGuire *Red Star: Political Aspects of Soviet Science Fiction* (Bowker, London 1985), p.26.

3. Ian Christie 'Down to Earth: *Aelita* Relocated' in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds.) *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema* (Routledge, London 1991), pp.80-102, at p.87.

4. Eric Naiman *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton, 1997), pp.200-2.

5. Patrick Major 'Future Perfect: Communist Science Fiction in the Cold War' in *Cold War History* Vol.4, No.1 (October 2003), pp.71-96 at pp.92-3.

6. S. Gladkova 'Gorizonti Fantastiki' in *Roman-Gazeta dlia Lunoshestva*, No.6-7 (July 1989), pp.442-6.

Colorful Stories

Fantastic Fiction by African Descended Authors

by Nisi Shawl

So rich a sea, so broad the currents... in exploring fantastic literature by African-descended authors, where do we start?

"Begin at the beginning" is standard advice for writers. "Begin where you are" is more my style. Where I am at the moment, where I've been most of my life, is North America. Though I know there are many other schools of African-descended writers out there, myriad fabulists swimming in gorgeous array, I'm at my best talking about those with whom I've had the most contact, those about whom I have something substantial to say: those who inhabit the Western Hemisphere. In the course of this essay, then, I'll focus on 'New World' writers of fantastic fiction whose ancestors came from Africa. I'll talk about specific works by them and also touch a bit on what I see as a commonly shared theme.

Just as important as my location in the three dimensions of physical space is my location in a fourth, time. When I am is one week out from learning of the death of my friend Octavia Estelle Butler. So despite the fact that her fiction's far better known than that of some of her colleagues, it's to her work I'll turn first.

Octavia, as almost anyone who knew her will tell you, was not *quite* a recluse, but someone who valued her loneliness very highly. Yet a major concern of the heroine of *Fledgling*, her last complete book, is building a community. Shori belongs to a sentient species known as the 'Ina', and must consume human blood to live. In other words, she's a vampire – but a scientifically plausible one. At its best, the Ina/human relationship is symbiotic, and Shori, survivor of a vicious, lethal attack on her original family, instinctively seeks to reconstruct what she has lost: a feminist-oriented blending of species and sexual preferences that might be the envy of a Utopianist visionary.

Shori's other quest, of course, is to bring to justice those who murdered her mother, her sisters, and the humans they had gathered into their extended family. The killings may have been 'racially' motivated; that is, though Shori's not human, she has been genetically altered so that her skin is as dark as most blacks, and the tactics her enemies use are those of the Klan and other racist lynchers.

While it's these last points that will probably impress most readers as drawing on African American culture, the book's concern with social and familial structure shares the same roots, I would argue. Historically, most New World descendents of Africans came to this hemisphere as victims of the slave trade. This means that a large percentage of the cultural artifacts that survived that trauma are non-material. And even these were difficult to retain, subject to enormous stresses under the system of chattel slavery. Language, genealogy, occupational associations: all vanished or were transformed beyond easy recognition. It seems to me that a longing for these lost inheritances underpins the frequent tendency of New World African descendents to write what's known as 'third order' stories.

(There are three 'orders' of fantastic fiction: In a first order story, plot and action focus entirely on the advent of a technological innovation, or of a magical or supernatural device or event; in a second order story, an elementary plot appears in which said innovation, device, or event plays a key role. Third order stories are concerned with the effects on societies as a whole of these things. Isaac Asimov came up with a narrower set of classifications along these lines in his essay 'Social Science Fiction,' published in Reginald Bretnor's anthology of

essays *Modern Science Fiction*. In it, Asimov refers to "gadget science fiction," "adventure science fiction," and "social science fiction." I've adapted these terms, expanding them to include all forms of fantastic fiction.)

Thus in Delany's *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, the far future's informational density and modes of information distribution form the bases of two contemporary and conflicting socio-political structures, one hierarchical and one egalitarian. This conflict lies at the novel's heart; its crisis is a tragedy that divides star-crossed lovers.

Of course there are concerns other than social or cultural issues driving the work of Delany and Butler and their lesser-known black contemporaries. And not every African-descended author of the fantastic writes what Butler called "save-the-world fiction." However, it's still possible to trace the influence of this tendency.

To take an extreme example, African-Canadian Minister Faust's *The Coyote Kings of the Space-Age Bachelor Pad* reads for the most part as a light, fun adventure. Heroes Hamza Senesert and Yehat Gerbles find themselves drawn into a highly atypical Grail Quest, hunting the sacred relic through the wilds of Edmonton, Alberta while pursued by pretentious academics and gift shop owners. Wonderfully witty and full of inside-the-genre jokes (the encounter between Hamza, Yehat, and a cop unfazed by Jedi mind-control techniques alone is worth the book's price), *Coyote Kings* still keeps social concerns in mind. No isolated knights errant, Hamza and Yehat run a summer camp for neighborhood kids and do their best to stay in contact with their own immediate families, dysfunctional though they often prove to be.

The Good House, by Tananarive Due, sits solidly in a subgenre where family matters traditionally hold full sway, for horror literature is rife with intergenerational curses. Due's genius lies in tying this familiar trope to some of the particular societal problems of the African diaspora: ostracization by members of dominant white culture, marital instability, and the heartbreaking vulnerability of young black men. Her most recent novel, *Joplin's Ghost*, takes on added depth because the protagonist is part of an interracial family.

Due's husband Steven Barnes, a renowned science fiction writer, has also published two alternate histories. They're set in a timeline in which the number of deaths from Europe's Medieval plagues are so greatly multiplied that colonization of the Western Hemisphere falls to Egypt, Ethiopia, and China rather than to England, Spain, and France. Here the connection to socio-cultural issues is clear from the beginning, and clearly exciting to the author. Both *Lion's Blood* and *Zulu Heart* explore the outcomes of this branch of imperialism's probability tree with infectious glee at the upsetting of historically entrenched white privilege. Barnes reprises the battle of the Alamo with African heroes, and reinvents submarines courtesy of a black female engineer. Beneath all the action and impish revisionism, though, lies a thoughtful re-examination of the moral and ethical dimensions of slavery. By reversing traditional racial role assignments he throws revealing new

light on them; it's as if one were watching a negative of a black-and-white film.

Of course, race is not a chiaroscuro. Some of the most telling instances of its multiplicity come from Caribbean-born authors. Nalo Hopkinson, raised in Jamaica, Guyana, and Trinidad and now living in Toronto, depicts East Indian traditions as part of her fascinating creation Toussaint, a planet colonized by non-white settlers. In *Midnight Robber*, Toussaint's culture is 'creolized' in the sense that it's a mix of African, Island aboriginal, European, Asian, and other influences, all unobtrusively credited for their individual contributions in the text, all stunningly evident in the colony's language, music, dance, food, and community institutions.

After creating this carefully planned near-paradisiacal society, vibrant, vital, balanced yet dynamic, Hopkinson transports her pre-adolescent heroine Tan-Tan to Toussaint's prison world, by contrast a chaotic and treacherous milieu. Here, among convicted murderers (including her own father) and living legends (including talking lizards and giant, flightless, carnivorous birds), Tan-Tan comes of age and gives birth to her own legend. "My father, Lord Raja," she declaims at a festival, "was the King of Kings, nemesis of the mighty. He command the engines of the earth, and they obey him. My mother, Queen Niobe, cause the stars to fall out the sky at her beauty and the wind to sigh at she nimble body as she dance. How I could not be joyful? How I could not be blissful?" The gorgeous rhythms of Caribbean speech animate this triumphant claiming of Tan-Tan's heritage.

Hopkinson's work as an editor is as noteworthy as her fiction. Beginning with *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*, an anthology of fabulist fiction by Caribbean-connected authors, through *Mojo: Conjure Stories*, to *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, which she co-edited with Upinder Mehan, she has consistently selected the best stories by authors established and emerging, familiar and unknown. I'll further discuss these anthologies later in this article; for now, I mention them because they serve as an introduction to some newer writers.

Tobias Buckell, who appeared in all three of these anthologies, has just released his first novel, *Crystal Rain*. Once again we're in a far-future multicultural milieu extrapolated from Caribbean roots. But conditions on Nanagada are nowhere near as ideal as those on Hopkinson's Toussaint. Refugees rather than settlers, Nanagadans have gradually declined from the technological peak which allowed them to travel to the planet in the first place. The immortality of the so-called "oldfathers" is failing, the terraforming projects incomplete. The oldfathers and their short-lived descendants are caught in the crossfire between two warring alien species known to humans as the Teofl and the Loa, names referring to divinities of Aztec and Haitian religions. A harrowing quest for a hidden piece of oldfather technology plays out against this socially variegated background, making for a dizzyingly kaleidoscopic tale.

Hopkinson selected Andrea Hairston's 'Griots of the Galaxy,' a futuristic tribute to the traditional West African musicians who "stand between us and cultural amnesia", for *So Long Been Dreaming*. Prior to this, though several of Hairston's SF plays had been performed, her only genre publication had been in 2004, in the form of an excerpt from a forthcoming novel. The novel, *Mindscape*, has just been released from Aqueduct Press. Set a little over a century in our future, it depicts a world where strange force fields reminiscent of the Berlin Wall divide warring geopolitical entities. Harsh class distinctions (some people are openly labeled "Expendables") and deliberately reconstructed ethnic traditions intensify the heady richness of *Mindscape's* socio-cultural potpourri. Heroine Elleni, one of the few who can travel across the force fields, struggles to hold together a treaty hammered out by her mentor Celestina, who was assassinated before the peace plan could be put in place. In Elleni's attempts to make good on Celestina's work there are echoes of the African spiritual tradition of doing more than nullifying an ancestral curse - of actually *redeeming* it. By her extraordinary efforts, Elleni changes history as well as the present and the future, giving the dead past life and meaning.

Having reached the midpoint of this article I return to its beginning and my assessment of my position. I've covered 'where' and 'when' I am. Now for 'who.'

I am a writer: African-descended, enamored of speculative fiction in all its sub-genres, professionally published (short fiction, book-length nonfiction). In the school of African American SF authors, I'm a definite swimmer.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of what I've published validates my theory that African-descended writers of the fantastic often gravitate towards familial,

social, and political themes and issues. My story 'Cruel Sistah,' which first appeared in *Asimov's* and will soon be reprinted in the 2005 Datlow/Link/Grant *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, is a good case in point. On its surface it's a simple murder story, what I've often half-jokingly called "the Ebonics version of an old British Isles ballad." But in making the familiar tale's cultural milieu 1960s black Seattle instead of feudal Britain, and the specific traits marking the preferred sister straight versus kinky hair instead of blonde versus brunette, I've tapped a rich mine of cultural referents. All the slain girl's family, all her social surround, are responsible for her death—not just the sister who actually does the deed, but everybody who bought into a white ideal of beauty. All are guilty, and all suffer.

Online you can find other examples of this tendency in my work. In 'Momi Watu' I depict an iatrogenic plague in terms of how it warps the daily life of the single mother of a mixed-race child. In 'Wallamelon' a young girl uses newly acquired magical powers to protect her neighborhood from the forces of gentrification.

In print currently you'll find 'At the Huts of Ajala' in the first of the *Dark Matter* anthology series and 'Maggies' in the second, as well as 'Tawny Bitch' in Hopkinson's *Mojo: Conjure Stories* anthology, and 'Deep End' in her more recent *So Long Been Dreaming*.

So Long Been Dreaming brings together re-visionings of science fiction and fantasy tales ordinarily written from a colonialist perspective. All the contributors descended from or were themselves members of colonized populations, including the African diaspora. In addition to the contributors I've already noted (myself, Andrea Hairston, and Tobias Buckell), I'll briefly go into the work of Chicagoan Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu. Her 'When Scarabs Multiply' is a glimpse into a near-future Africa where bombs and climate change compete for weirdness points with transdimensional warrior queens. Okorafor-Mbachu's excellent recent YA novel, *Zahrah the Windseeker*, also takes place in Africa. There's a tenuous narrative thread connecting the two - in an expanded version of 'Scarabs' to be published as *Ejii the Shadow Speaker*, the heroine travels to Zahrah's world. San Francisco's third Poet Laureate devorah major, and Sheree Thomas, editor of the aforementioned *Dark Matter* series, also make appearances in *So Long Been Dreaming*, along with several other African-descended authors to be discovered and enjoyed.

For the *Mojo: Conjure Stories* anthology, Hopkinson sought out stories based on African-derived magical systems from writers of all racial backgrounds. It's a harmonious blend of diverse voices, some new, some familiar. Of the lesser-known authors, Jarla Tangh is well worth watching out for. Though 'The Skinned,' her tale of a guilty African immigrant facing down undead canine vigilantes, is her only published work to date, it's a strong debut that leaves its readers wanting more.

Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root is both narrower and broader in focus. Drawing exclusively from the repertoires of Caribbean writers, Hopkinson included stories with much

more varied themes. From the poetic hyperbole of Jamaica Kincaid's 'My Mother' to Geoffrey Philp's wryly humorous 'Uncle Obadiah and the Alien' to Hopkinson's own deeply unsettling 'Glass Bottle Trick,' a host of styles and topics abound. About half the stories were reprinted from a wide range of anthologies and literary journals.

Like *Whispers*, the *Dark Matter* books include both original and previously published stories, and take their material from one particular group of writers: the descendants of Africans. Sheree Thomas's monumental editing accomplishment encompasses early science fiction by noted activist W.E.B. DuBois as well as groundbreaking newer work by up-and-comers such as Kevin Brockenbrough and David Findlay. At the end of the first volume three definitive essays appear: 'Racism and Science Fiction' by Samuel R. Delany, 'Black to the Future' by Walter Mosley, and 'The Monophobic Response' by Octavia E. Butler. *Dark Matter I* and *II* are essential reading for anyone who wants a basic understanding of speculative fiction of the African diaspora.

Those who know Walter Mosley primarily as a mystery writer may be surprised to find him mentioned in this essay. But the author of the Easy Rawlins books has also written two science fiction novels (*Blue Light* and *The Wave*) and a collection of SF stories (*Futureland*).

Sometimes speculative literature by writers of African descent is marketed as mainstream fiction, as in the case of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, or Nega Mezlekia's *The God Who Begat a Jackal*, both extremely powerful fantasies. Many of Toni Morrison's and Ishmael Reed's works could also be categorized as fantasies, or at least as magic realism. The same could be said of Virginia Hamilton's novels, usually considered simply 'young adult.'

Whether familial, social, and cultural concerns are addressed directly and at the work's outset, as in the case of *So Long Been Dreaming*, or are intrinsic to the make-up of particular characters, as in the case of the conlure women of *Mama Day*, whether they provide a carefully constructed backdrop for the action as they do for *Crystal Rain*, or represent the conflicting forces at a story's heart as in *Stars in My Pocket...* or Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, the frequent presence of these concerns is of arguable importance, denoting as it does both a loss of a former social structure's sufficiency and stability, and often, that absence's fulfillment. Keeping in mind the idea that writers of African ancestry are more likely to reflect concerns of these sorts in their work may render visible to readers from other races depths they otherwise might miss. I hope that this essay will attract more readers to fabulist fiction by blacks, and that the possibilities inherent in the perspective I've sketched above, that which gives pride of place to family, society, and culture will allow them greater enjoyment of its riches.

Claiming the waters in which the school of African-descended speculative fiction writers swims from those who see it as the territory of European-descended authors only is a project I and others are deeply involved in. The Carl Brandon Society formed in 1999 to "address the representation of people of color in the fantastical genres..." In 2006 we're giving two \$1000 literary awards, the first of an annual paired presentation. The Parallax Award will go to the best speculative fiction by an author of color, the Kindred Award to the best speculative fiction by an author of any extraction that explores and expands our understanding of racial issues. The awards will be announced at WisCon 30, held in Madison, Wisconsin in the United States during the weekend of May 26-29. By drawing attention to work by genre writers of the African diaspora, our colleagues of color, and our allies, the Parallax and Kindred awards will increase this work's recognition and acceptance, and perhaps even stimulate its creation.

With Octavia's passing, the Carl Brandon Society and several of her publishers were moved to start a scholarship fund in her name. Beginning in 2007, each year the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship Fund will enable a student of color to attend either the Clarion or Clarion West Writers Workshops, held in East Lansing, Michigan, and Seattle, Washington, in the U.S. Soon we hope to extend the scholarship offer through Australia's Clarion South also.

So I end where I began, mourning and accepting Octavia's death. And moving on.

To learn more about the Parallax and Kindred Awards, the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship Fund, and other projects of the Carl Brandon Society, visit the Society's website at <http://www.carlbrandon.org/>.

You can join the Carl Brandon Society no matter what your race, career, or avocation. Readers are as welcome as writers, as is anyone interested in this or related schools of fantastic fiction. Come on in; the water's fine.

Nisi Shawl is the co-author, with Cynthia Ward, of Writing the Other: A Practical Approach, published in December 2005 by Aqueduct Press. Her short stories have been published widely, including in Asimov's SF, Strange Horizons, and Infinite Matrix. Her reviews and essays have appeared regularly in the Seattle Times since the turn of the millennium, and she is a contributor to The Encyclopedia of Themes in Science Fiction and Fantasy and to The Internet Review of Science Fiction. In 2004 and 2005 she edited BEYOND magazine, an online magazine of Afrocentric speculative fiction by teens. Nisi is a founding member of the Carl Brandon Society, and is currently a board member for the Clarion West Writers Workshop. She has been a guest lecturer at Stanford University and at the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame. She likes to relax by pretending she lives in other people's houses.

Bibliography

- Asimov, Isaac - Social Science Fiction." Bretnor, Reginald, ed., *Modern Science Fiction*, Chicago, IL, Advent Publishers, 1979.
- Barnes, Steven *Lion's Blood*. New York, NY, Warner Books, 2002.
- Zulu Heart*. New York, NY, Warner Books, 2003.
- Buckell, Tobias *Crystal Rain*. New York, NY, Tor Books, 2006.
- Butler, Octavia E. *Fledgling*. New York, NY, Seven Stories Press, 2005.
- Delany, Samuel R. *Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand*. New York, NY, Bantam Books, 1984.
- Due, Tananarive. *The Good House*. New York, NY, Atria Books, 2003.
- Joplin's Ghost*. New York, NY, 2005.
- Faust, Minister. *The Coyote Kings of the Space Age Bachelor Pad*. New York, NY, Random House, 2004.
- Hairston, Andrea. *Mindscape*. Seattle, Washington, Aqueduct Press, 2006.
- Hopkinson, Nalo. *Midnight Robber*. New York, NY, Warner Books, 2000.
- Hopkinson, Nalo, ed. *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*. Montpelier, Vermont, Invisible Cities Press, 2000.
- Mojo. Conjure Stories*. New York, NY, Warner Books, 2003.
- Hopkinson, Nalo and Mehan, Uppinder, eds. *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Vancouver, BC, Canada, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004.
- Mezlekia, Nega. *The God Who Begat a Jackal*. New York, NY, Picador USA, 2002.
- Mosley, Walter. *Blue Light*. New York, NY, Warner Books, 1998.
- Futureland*. New York, NY, Warner Books, 2001.
- The Wave*. New York, NY, Warner Books, 2006.
- Naylor, Gloria. *Mama Day*. New York, NY, Ticknor & Fields, 1988.
- Okorafor_Mbachu, Nnedi. *Zahrah the Windseeker*. New York, NY, Houghton Mifflin, 2005.
- Eji the Shadow Speaker*. (Forthcoming.)
- Reed, Ishmael. *Mumbo Jumbo*. Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1972.
- Shawl, Nisi. "Momi Watu." *Strange Horizons*, August 2003, <http://strangehorizons.com/2003/20030818/momi_watu.shtml>.

"Wallamelon." *Aeon Magazine*, Issue Three, May 2005,
<<http://www.aeonmagazine.com/>>.

"Cruel Sistah." *Asimov's SF Magazine*, October/November 2005.

Thomas, Sheree, ed. *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*.
New York, NY, Warner Books, 2000.

Dark Matter: Reading the Bones. New York, NY, Warner Books, 2004.

The Search for South African Science Fiction

by Nick Wood

science fiction book within an *integral* South African setting, it's a rare beast indeed. There have been a few Afrikaans science fiction books by authors such as Jan Rabie and John (not John M.) Coetzee, but these have tended to follow well-worn Euro-American sf themes from the past, e.g. inter-galactic travel and alien plants.

In English, Claude Nunes and Dave Freer have published science fiction books as South African residents. Again, though, South African settings do not appear to be integral to these books, so they do not seem to be strictly *South African* science fiction.

Nobel laureate John M. Coetzee's work, on the other hand, is largely set in a South African landscape. An early work of his, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), involves a mythical 'Empire' and a magistrate caught between the oppressive and brutal forces of Empire and the 'barbarians' supposedly waiting to invade. (At the time the book was politically controversial as the 'barbarians' were thought to be a thinly veiled allusion to the propagated political stereotype of 'die swart gevaar' (the black danger), with the forces of 'Empire' perhaps being the apartheid state.) This was and is an absorbing and disturbing fantasy, beautifully written, but is not science fiction.

With regard to science fiction in South Africa, the Science Fiction Society of South Africa (SFSA) has published two volumes of *Best of South African Science Fiction* and is currently compiling a third volume. These compilations have been based on their annual short story competitions called the 'Nova', run since the nineteen seventies. Fiction from local writers is also published in the club magazine *Probe*, which has reached issue number 129 to date. Thus, there are some representative local short stories in these publications, but not a complete book written by a single author.

Black membership of SFSA has also been extremely limited thus far. Thus, when I attempted to find a publisher for my own YA sf book *The Stone Chameleon* in South Africa, I was initially told by a potential publisher that marketing was a "problem", as there was a perception that "black people don't read science fiction". (It was eventually published in 2004 after it had been 'passed' by designated black township readers.)

Black South African fiction until the end of apartheid had largely been in the area of 'protest' or 'Struggle' writing, i.e. fiction focused on the inequities of the political system, by authors such as Alex la Guma and Can Themba, amongst others. However, this literature was largely banned and not published or easily available locally. Furthermore, black education was geared towards ensuring cheap manual labour and not literacy, so access to reading materials – which were also expensive on top of daily living needs – was generally limited. Magazines such as *African Drum* and 'politically safe' scripted adventure photo-comics were available to read in township shops. (Mobile libraries would also pay sporadic visits but were poorly stocked.)

With the demise of apartheid there was a freeing up of available literature, some focusing on the pain of local historical reconciliation. In

have been on the lookout for years for South African science fiction

books, but, in 'pure' form - i.e. a

2004, I decided to run a writing workshop under the auspices of the South African Environment Project, at a 'black' township secondary school called Oscar Mpetha High in Cape Town – mostly isiXhosa speakers, although preferring to work in English. When I asked about literary genres, the students revealed awareness of poetry, romance and crime novels, but not science fiction.

We had a discussion about science fiction and speculative fiction and spoke about the advances the country had made since Nelson Mandela became president. I then asked them to write on how the country might be in the future, say fifty years from now. Most of the students wrote short personal pieces not reflecting this theme, but were still poignant pieces reflecting relationships, ethnic identity and environmental concerns. Two students wrote present-day stories; the third, Nolutando Roxwana (17), wrote a story with a 'leap' to a monochromatic 'racial' future, exploring what loss of diversity might mean.

What was the 'engine' for the time leap?

A dream.

No, this was not a hoary use of a dream where all is restored on waking. The dreamer woke a changed person towards the end of the story. (I was also aware that dreaming amongst traditional amaXhosa can be a sacred vehicle for change, where contact can be made with ancestors, and, in this story, the future can be shown.)

What a wonderful time machine.

Perhaps the beast I've been hunting is not so rare after all; it just looks a little different to what I was expecting. Okay, so it may be speculative fiction then, not science fiction, but I'm not going to quibble with labels when the animal is this good.

And it's true *South African* sf.

For Octavia Butler.

Nick Wood is a South African sf writer. Nolutando's story 'The Drama of School and Home' can be read under 'Oscar Mpetha' on his website at: http://nickwood.frogwrite.co.nz/index_2.htm?blog.htm

Bears, Bombs and Popcorn

Some considerations when mining other cultures for source materials

by Judith Berman

[The cover] painting is a made-up decoration merely done in Pacific Northwest style... meant to

say to a reader "This novel is based on the mythology of the Pacific Northwest," just as covers for other kinds of fantasy use images from Celtic, Norse, or Japanese mythologies to signal 'pick me up' to the right kind of reader. ([Name withheld], p.c. Feb. 9, 2005)

In the background of the cover for my novel *Bear Daughter* sits an object that resembles a piece of Native American art. It looks, in fact, quite a bit like a painted wooden screen made by a Tlingit Indian artist in the early 19th century to represent the hereditary Bear crest of the Tlingit Naanyaa.aayí clan. That screen, now in the collections of the Denver Art Museum, formerly embellished the Ground Shark House in what is today Wrangell, Alaska.

Having worked for a number of years with traditional Tlingit art, I immediately recognized the resemblance of the cover image to the Naanyaa.aayí Bear screen. It also resembles, to a lesser degree, two other screens. The first of these, likely a copy of the Naanyaa.aayí screen, was made for the Killer Whale House of the Kaagwaantaan clan of Klukwan, probably in commemoration of the genealogical links between that house and Ground Shark House. The second, which the Naanyaa.aayí screen likely copied, is known only from a fragment preserved at the Burke Museum in Seattle.

Upon seeing the cover, my first concern was that the background object might be another related Bear screen, one I didn't know about. Tlingit clan heirlooms like these screens are the focus, today as formerly, of deep emotions about one's connections to past and future generations. The right to display such heraldic designs is a hereditary prerogative often acquired – 'paid for,' as it is sometimes said – through the blood of one's ancestors. In earlier times wars were fought over misuse of crest objects. A validated Tlingit crest object, as I wrote to my publisher, is...

...like a national flag, a trademarked product logo, a memorial to dead relatives and ancestors, and a family heirloom with strong emotional associations, all rolled into one. There is variation across the [northwest coast] region in what these objects mean and how they are used, but the notion that they are in some fashion property and 'copyrighted' is near-universal.

Some crest heirlooms remain in Native custody, like the Klukwan Bear screen. Many others, however, have found their way into museums and private collections. The means by which they have done so are frequently not pretty, and the objects have been the subject of repatriation claims and other legal actions. Given that the cover artist had likely used photographs as the source for the cover image, US copyright law, which extends to so-called 'derivative' images of copyright materials, might also have been called into play. In short, using an image of genuine crest art on my book cover could have been problematic.

The publisher, agreeing with many of these concerns, queried the cover artist. As it turned out, the artist had worked from photos of several objects. The resulting design differed sufficiently from the originals that, the publisher was satisfied, no copyright would be violated.

Part of my concern with the cover image arose from the fine line I felt I was walking with the novel itself. *Bear Daughter* is based on Native oral traditions – myths and clan histories – from the North American northwest coast. These stories, so rich in drama and invention, have occupied a central place in my imagination since I first encountered them via my academic specialisation in oral literature. They played a crucial role in opening my eyes to just how limited our ideas about myth are, in Western culture generally and specifically

in genre fiction. The Native literatures differ not just in their story lines and the attributes of their supernatural actors, but in underlying notions of self, society, spirit, body, virtue, fulfilment, life, death, the place of humanity in the world, and the moral nature of the cosmos itself. Once I had begun to understand them, I found it impossible to conceive of writing mythic fantasy using only the much-recycled European and Near Eastern materials.

The northwest coast stories are, however, the very subjects that crest art like the Bear screen illustrates, and everything that can be said about crest objects, including indigenous notions of ownership and 'copyright,' can apply to the stories as well. In writing the novel, I tried to go further than the cover artist had, and to render the specific sources unrecognizable. But my unease remained, and does so to this day. The alterations did not erase all the ethical issues that arise from using these stories – or source materials from other indigenous or colonised cultures.

At one point in our correspondence over *Bear Daughter's* cover, the publisher equated the cover design to fantasy-novel covers using images drawn from Celtic, Norse, or Japanese mythologies. The comparison seems to me to encapsulate a viewpoint common not just in mainstream US society, but quite widely outside the US as well. This viewpoint – which for lack of a better term I'll call the mainstream viewpoint – forms the framework within which *Bear Daughter* was published and marketed, in which most readers will experience the novel, and even in which, to some extent, the book was written. As uncontroversial as the viewpoint may seem, the assumptions underlying it go straight to the heart of my unease.

First of all, the mainstream viewpoint assumes there is no difference, for the purposes of commercial publishing, between stories belonging to cultures far-off in time (the ancient Celts or Norse, or medieval Japan) and those belonging to contemporary cultures (for example, many Native American ones). Or it fails to recognize that any Native American cultures are still alive.

Second, the viewpoint assumes that no distinctions need be made, for these purposes, between cultures ancestral to the dominant North American cultures; cultures ancestral to other developed nations (which, however, have minorities living, sometimes uneasily, in North America); and stories from colonised, often endangered cultures, whose people were the object of intended or accidental genocide, and whose colonisation is the *sine qua non* for the existence of the US and Canada.

A third assumption embedded in the mainstream perspective would have mythologies – those of our own as well as of other societies – as a type of source material no different from any other domain of culture. I am using the term 'mythology' here in the anthropological sense: a body of stories about the non-human, superhuman, or idealized human, set in an earlier era, in which the world as we know it is established, and which are often deeply felt as sacred. Such stories lie at the roots

not just of religions and worldviews, but often of social and political institutions as well.

Cultures can vary widely in how such charter stories are conceived of, and the degree to which prohibitions limit their use. Some groups may have few concerns about what other people do with their myths. Often, however, mining the myths of living religions for source material can pose what Laguna Indian poet Paula Gunn Allen delicately refers to as "special problems." Fatwas and burning embassies make the news internationally, but the consequences of other profound conflicts over the meanings of stories may never break the surface of mainstream cultural consciousness. Traditional Laguna Pueblo Indians, for example, attributed years of devastating drought, the radioactive tailings of a uranium mine, the nearby development of nuclear weapons, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons' publications on Keresan (Laguna and related pueblos) myth and ceremony.

We may not all subscribe to a world-view in which misuse of sacred stories causes nuclear holocausts, but we can acknowledge potential effects on the psychological health of individuals and communities. Even when a group's charter myths do not form part of a religion in the usual senses of that term (as is true on the North American northwest coast), misuse of them can trigger a powerful sense of violation. And value conflicts over the meaning and proper function of stories are particularly fraught in the case of colonized and minority cultures, because generally their members have fewer avenues of recourse, and their voices and concerns are often drowned out. Laguna author Leslie Marmon Silko's widely praised *Ceremony* has accreted a secondary literature authored by white academics referencing Parson's publications. But the short article by Allen is to my knowledge the only publication to discuss the dismay traditional Laguna feel when sacred stories are exposed to the wrong people.

Another assumption of the mainstream viewpoint is that the expressive products of other cultures – traditional art styles, specific designs, stories, music and the like – are, in the absence of patents, trademarks, or copyright, free for the taking. But consider some examples outside the arts. A Mexican doctor patents the traditional method of processing tepezcohuite bark, a medicine used by Mayan Indians in Chiapas for centuries to treat skin lesions. The industrialist to whom the patent is licensed acquires not only a government monopoly over production, but control over part of the limited territory where pharmacologically active bark can be found. As time passes, tepezcohuite is used ever more widely in cosmetics and skin creams marketed internationally, but for Chiapas Indians, access to the wild tree is limited, its stocks are depleted, bark prices have soared, and meanwhile they receive no compensation.

Or a non-Native company called 'Kokopelli's Kitchen' markets 'Hopi Blue' popcorn – Hopi Blue Corn being a group of maize varieties selected and propagated over centuries by the Hopi Indians. This company is profiting from the labour, the name and whole-earth, mystical cachet of the Hopi, and from the name and distinctive image of a mythic character also of indigenous origin, and again the Hopi receive nothing (they may have to *compete* to sell their own product).

These instances of cultural appropriation – where members of a dominant culture appropriate and profit from a part of the cultural 'capital' of a colonized minority – deal with the material realm. Such cases have received some media attention, especially in regard to patent issues. There is less awareness of the arguments many indigenous peoples have put forth for intellectual property protections for their traditional art and literature. This position is spelled out in article 29 of the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the most recent version of which was submitted to the UN Human Rights Commission in March of 2006:

Indigenous peoples are entitled to the recognition of the full ownership, control and protection of their cultural and intellectual property. They have the right to special measures to control, develop and protect their sciences, technologies and cultural manifestations, including... oral traditions, literatures, designs and visual and performing arts.

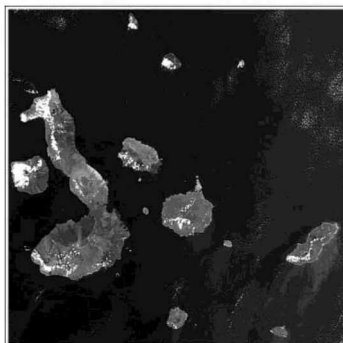
form in which, say, a version of Cinderella is written down, but not the Cinderella story itself. (Although one US firm, Knight and Associates, is currently seeking patents for 'storylines'.)

Writing fiction is one way in which we in the West exercise one of our foundational values, freedom of expression. At the same time, in our economic systems, fiction is also a commodified product to be packaged, marketed and, hopefully, profited from just as are snack foods and skin cream. To the extent that bodies of folk literature are repositories of centuries of accumulated cultural invention and wisdom, we would have to see them as not all that different from bodies of traditional medicinal or agronomic knowledge. In this view, fiction based on other cultures could be a theft of someone else's intellectual capital. Many Native Americans feel that when a member of the dominant culture uses *any* piece of their culture as the basis of an academic career, a novel, or other venture leading to personal gain, without corresponding benefit to Native people, it's just another form of exploitation. Sentiment on this topic runs particularly strong in cultures like those on the northwest coast, where traditional notions of proprietary rights are well-developed.

Publishers who deal frequently with Native issues are increasingly recognizing indigenous concepts of ownership; the University of British Columbia Press, for example, now asks authors wishing to use contemporary images of Native crest objects to obtain written permission from the current holders of the heraldic prerogatives. Requiring permission for the use of clan-owned stories would be a logical next step.

At least one further mainstream assumption about using indigenous source materials is relevant here: that distinctions need not be too finely drawn as to the precise claims being made regarding the authenticity or accuracy of a book. An analogy with food labelling might clarify this point. In some parts of Africa, images on food packaging are expected to be literal representations of the contents (and thus smiling children or beautiful women are avoided). In the West, on the other hand, we might find images of, say, cherries not just on crates of fresh cherries, or on bottles of cherry juice, but also on products like Cherry Coke. A Western consumer will not necessarily expect that either the name or the image of cherries on a food label indicates any genuine fruit content. The cherries on a Cherry Coke label are essentially metaphoric, linking what's there – the liquid in the can – with what's not – actual cherries. (Cherry Coke does claim unspecified "natural flavors," which, according to US food and drug regulations, are any "flavoring constituents" derived from plant or animal materials.)

A similar range of meanings can be signified by markers of 'Indianness' on a book or in its content – markers which might include not just cover art and copy but indigenous names, terms, images, mythic characters, and more. Such markers might, at one end of the range, be literal signifiers, a claim to a completely authentic Native viewpoint and accurate Native cultural, historical or biographical content. Farther along, the markers might be a claim that the book contains – with processing and additives possible – some degree of accurate information, of an



Archipelago

Short Stories

The Stories of Zoran Živković

by Dan Hartland

How should we negotiate with our environments? In a modern world apparently designed to confuse, which is the best path through? How may we best cope in a reality which bombards us with contradictory information and can create despair from that confusion? The history of literature dealing with precisely these questions might suggest that all generations have felt themselves to be careering, terrified, through a landscape of contrary change. Stories have always sought to negotiate that landscape, to fashion from its competing shapes, and often using a liberal dash of the fantastic, a truth other than the top-down consensus. Perhaps it could be called the literature of the subjected – fiction as existential cartography, drawing democratic lines and communal directions for people expected to follow someone else's.

It is in this tradition in which the Serbian writer Zoran Živković sits. Winner of the World Fantasy Award for his collection of bibliophilic short stories, *The Library*, Živković is simultaneously a unique and deeply indebted writer. Editor of his country's Encyclopedia of science fiction, he nevertheless resents being labelled an sf writer; compared frequently with Borges and VanderMeer, he lacks those authors' penchant for flowery verbiage. His work is a focussed corpus of neatly observed and closely written stories, tales which seek to tease out the metaphysical from the everyday. His tight, concise style rarely wastes a single word, and deals always with ordinary people in extraordinary contexts: a watchmaker going back in time, or an undertaker being led on a merrily surreal chase.

"The world is full of inexplicable wonders," observes the narrator of 'Home Library' early on in the story. "It's no use trying to explain them." (p244) In this way, each of Živković's characters is challenged to accept the fantastical as real, to come to terms with the confounding and confused. The narrator of the short novel *Compartment* is bundled through a moving train, meeting a cast of bizarre characters and participating in a series of still stranger (and on the face of it meaningless) tableaux. Likewise, the characters in the stories which make up the *Time Gifts* collection are each visited by a mysterious stranger and offered the

chance to travel in time – for a price. A paleolinguist is allowed to visit the far past to confirm her theories, but suffers the torment of being unable to interact with the people she meets (thus depriving her of the tea to which she is addicted); a medieval astronomer is given a choice between life and death at the stake, but must also choose between future anonymity or the glory of eternal fame and acclamation.

In his short story 'The Telephone', an author (narrated in the first person) receives a phone call from the devil and is offered a choice similar to the astronomer's: success in life and obscurity in death, or vice versa. "Everything has its price," says the Devil (p376). Never is this more true than in Živković: in his work, knowledge and understanding only make things more complicated and painful. The most innocent are synonymous with the least comprehending, and are always the least troubled. Thus, in 'The Whisper', a teacher of autistic children goes to such lengths in manipulating one of his pupils to scribble down for the second time a longer version of the eight-digit fine-structure constant that he realizes the only decent thing to do is let the child be. Having allowed the boy's nose to bleed all over his writing paper, the teacher accepts that "the best he could do for Philip at this moment was to forget the whole incident." (p155)

The incident had been precipitated, of course, by art – the teacher had chosen, for the first time, to play music during class. Art in Živković is the path-finder, it is what leads us to further understanding (and thus, in heightening our confusion, leads only to further art). Fittingly for an author so steeped in scientific philosophy (whole sections of his collection *Steps Through The Mist* deal with the quantum theory of parallel worlds), this interpretation of art makes it the poetic sibling of scientific inquiry: a search for meaning, the analysis of flawed data. Thus, as we follow the narrator along an interminable hall in 'The Window', he notes, "Only the portraits disturbed the endless monotony of the corridor." (p81)

It is this concern with the scientific, mirroring Damien Broderick's stated desire to unite high art with hard science, which has perhaps led to Živković being so readily identified with the science fiction and fantasy community. Certainly he has affection for it: in his delightful post-modern novel, *The Writer*, a priggish and self-involved professor of literature, made a figure of some fun by Živković, refuses to "tolerate science fiction in any form, not even the parodic, which (subject to a number of rigid constraints) he regarded as the only permissible approach to genre literature." (p51) To his nameless friend's dictum *science fiction delendum est* the tale's

narrator replies simply by writing yet more science fiction.

Živković's work can be usefully compared to VanderMeer's metatextual extravaganza, *City of Saints and Madmen*. In 'The Artist', part of the *Time Gifts* series, a young woman confined to a mental hospital reveals to her doctor that their world is merely the creation of a writer (or, as the doctor casts him, the Devil). "This is not reality," she insists as her doctor still finds himself incapable of accepting the logical conclusion. "This is also one of his stories." (p69) In VanderMeer's 'The Strange Case of X', a patient is interrogated by a psychiatric doctor, and explains how his act of literary creation has in fact created a world: "I felt like a sorcerer summoning up a demon." (p287) But VanderMeer's Ambergris is a classic fantasy city; Živković, on the other hand, writes about the world we know, in which what is assumed to be unreal confounds us. Thus, in his novel *Hidden Camera*, Živković assails both his narrator and his reader with an ever increasing retinue of absurdities. At first convinced that he is part of an elaborate candid camera episode, the narrator takes part in increasingly surreal episodes, each designed by his anonymous tormentors. The identity and motives of these hidden antagonists are never revealed, since what matters to Živković is how to survive problems rather than how to solve them. "Not a single strand [of history or future] is without suffering, misery and hardship," insists a character in his story 'Hole in the Wall' (p320).

It is in these sad examinations of consensus reality that Živković perhaps finds his best use for the fantastical. His work looks to the speculative in order to make plain the ways in which reality plays with us, twists and weaves to avoid our grasp. Most of Živković's characters are decidedly confused by life, even by its simplest processes. *Compartments* opens with the narrator wondering in paralyzing detail how to jump aboard a train: "Was I first supposed to jump onto the step on the platform of the last car and then grab hold of the handrail, or the other way around?" (p5)

Živković's characters cling to their routines in order to make sense of the world. Miss Margarita of 'Alarm Clock on the Night Table' leads "an orderly life consisting of a well-established round of obligations." (p352) Likewise, the narrator of *Hidden Camera* relies entirely on the orderly, else becoming caught between action and inaction, balanced on the agonising precipice of confusion: "Things [...] have to be done systematically, otherwise you can easily overlook what you're searching for." (p50) Via a clutch of recurring motifs – the anonymous note, mysterious package, or enigmatic stranger – each of Živković's characters are pitched into a reality that shifts rather than stands still, dramatising the negotiations we must all make as the earth continually shifts beneath our feet.

Živković does not reject quotidian reality in the manner of most science fiction writers – all of his stories are intimate pen portraits of a very normal person with a very normal name and job. But what he *does* do is ask why the assumption is that quotidian reality never changes. In so doing, he engages with science fiction's essential component – change – whilst retaining the accessibility of mimesis. There is little doubt that Živković is sometimes impenetrably dense in his ideas and imagery – he uses dreams extensively, and they are agonisingly difficult to interpret – but in remaining so rooted in the 'average' and 'ordinary' he humanises the philosophical debates which represent the core of his work. His earlier work is more obviously parabolic – *Time Gifts* and *Impossible Encounters* are to some extent fables of the old fashioned variety – but as Živković has developed as a writer, he has become more opaque. The experiences of the narrator in *Compartments* – chess-playing singing monks, the ancient cannibal and his loving wife attended by a caring nurse – clearly have symbolic as well as actual value, but Živković has left behind Aesop in favour of Dali. It is in his fierce allegiance to the Everyman that Živković's literature is saved from preachy dullness.

His fiction, then, shares a purpose with science fiction, but perhaps not the means of its execution. Paul di Fillipo, attempting to position Živković's work in the introduction to PS Publishing's new omnibus

of his short story collections, thus casts his net wider than the genre, drawing in Kafka, Borges and Calvino as comparators. These are all very well – yes, the narrator of *Hidden Camera* resembles no one so much as Josef K from *The Trial*, whilst Živković's metafiction certainly owes much to Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, and the title of his award-winning novella to Borges's famous tale of Babel – but they are rather obvious antecedents. Few writers may mix reality and fantasy in pursuit of time, truth and identity without being influenced by Borges and Kafka. So dominant are their visions – for instance, Borges's unfortunate who may forget nothing in 'Funes, The Memorius' reminds us of Živković's watchmaker, who is allowed to return to his past and save his wife from death, but saddled forever with his memory of fifty years of anguish over her original death – that to compare a writer to these giants of the surreal tells us little about the particular character of his work.

It is easy to concentrate on such comparisons as di Fillipo makes (here're a few more – Poe, Murakami, Powers). To some extent, however, such attempts at positioning miss the point of Živković's fiction, which is to defy boundaries and barriers, to emphasise the fundamentally unclassifiable nature of existence. "Only in my own name do I speak," the narrator of *The Writer* insists (p11). With Živković, we can only hope for contexts – the content of his work defies easy comparisons.

In this way, it is worth abandoning for a moment the quest to further identify Živković with science fiction, and turn, fittingly for an issue about international sf, not to his modal allegiance but his geographic origin. Eastern European literature has a long history of rejecting consensus reality, of preferring the stories of the people to the imposed truth of the elite. From the Ottoman Empire to the Soviet Union, countries such as Serbia have often had reality imposed upon them – rarely has it been democratically defined. In common with its neighbours (Bulgakov slyly undermining Stalinism in *The Master and Margarita*, Albania's Ismail Kadare underlining the evils of all-controlling dictatorships in the hallucinatory novel *The Palace of Dreams*), Serbia has a long tradition of the folk and fairy tale, the encoding of truths in the fantastic. Fantasy represents a tacit rejection of whatever reality we are told is 'real', empowers the teller to impart dangerous stories and messages. Even now, eastern Europe is asked to behave in ways it may not like – and so Victor Pelevin composes the genre-bending *The Clay Machine-Gun* to satirise crime and corruption in the 'new' Russia, or Zoran Živković writes *Hidden Camera*, which asks how desirable rampant and media-driven commercialism really is.

We thus find in his native context a further reason for Živković's adoption of the science fictional and the fantastical: he is using it, as his forebears did, to question and undermine the imposed truths of eastern European (and other) elites. This is a deep cultural trait of literature from his region, both fantastical and otherwise. Ivo Andrić's classic *The Bridge on the Drina* concerned itself with Serbian identity at a time when Serbia was resolutely part of Yugoslavia, not by depicting his nation subsumed by Soviets but instead by Ottoman Turks. Mesa Selimović's *Death and the Dervish* features one man resisting a punishing Ottoman system, a Sufi mystic divorced from reality being faced with the impossibility of divorcing oneself from reality. In the stunning *Dictionary of the Khazars*, Molorad Pavić turned to the history of its eponymous ethnic group to ask questions about memory, history and identity. "We live in a time that is not particularly predisposed to the past," opines the title character of 'The Paleolinguist' (p27), voicing a quintessential complaint both of all post-modernists and, more particularly, current eastern European writers. Serbia's reality has been a turbulent one over the last two decades (Živković himself, for example, was present in Belgrade during the 1999 NATO bombings); it is only natural that the confusion and disorientation of its populace, its disconnect from what it once was and what it may one day be, finds its way into the work of the nation's writers.

Živković fits neatly, then, into a tradition of rejection. Some of our earliest secular Serbian writings are folk songs, and the cornerstone of modern Serbian writing, Petar II Petrović Njegoš's *The Mountain Wreath*, was itself based on the rhythms and content of Serbia's folk heritage. Živković's own emphasis on the ordinary and average despite his insistence on the dynamism of the fantastic thus makes a great deal of sense, since Njegoš's was agreeing with Živković as far back as 1847: "What is man? (And it's his fate to be man!) / A small creature deceived off by the earth."

Writing is thus a means to understanding, a kind of revelation, a sort of salvation. The writer is cast by many of Živković's characters as a divine being of one type or another, one of those characterisations going so far as to draw the writer almost as an inverted Christ figure: the empathy he chooses for his characters bringing him "redemption, by making him identify with those he had transgressed against." (p76) Similarly, the dreamer in 'Disorder In the Head' insists that, when she leaves the room, everyone else in it will cease to exist. This is imagination as creator – of worlds, people, of avenues of understanding.

Yet despite the insistence in 'Infernal Library' that the world would be a better place were the failure to read made a sin, Živković is far from puffed-up and proud about the importance of Art. In *Compartments*, the ridiculous questions asked of a subject by a painter ("Do you like to trample strawberries?" "Have you ever dreamed of snails swimming upstream?" (p52)) force us to ask just how close art can ever come to sensible truth. In *The Writer*, we are presented with the agonising and boring life of the author, see other writers ask him questions almost as foolish as the painter's, and are admitted to a world which gives us little confidence in the ability of art to save us. And yet. We are told that literature opens us to "all the worlds which are separated from us only by space and time." (p55).

Where does this ambivalence leave us? If the writer is as confused as we are, what use his insights and fabulations? It is characteristic of Živković to offer us no easy answers, no real means of escape. Of course art is not redemptive – it is in itself a product of the very reality Živković does so much to undermine, interrogate and question. Arriving almost at the endpoint of his nonsensical sojourn, the narrator of *Hidden Camera* laments, "This was the only place I dared hope to get some answers, yet I simply couldn't think of the right questions to ask." (p201). We are prisoners of our confusion, and we make do – we fashion our coping strategies, our novels or our routines, and struggle through. Crucially, though, we retain hope. It is the very act of devising new coping strategies which gives us an opportunity to keep going

despite the confusion. In her afterword to PS Publishing's comprehensive collection, *Impossible Stories*, Tamar Yellin perceptively notes that it is in *Compartments* where we are told "not to lose hope, that is what is most important." (p89).

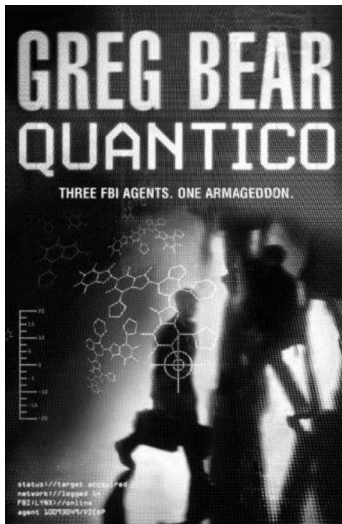
This is not merely stoicism, nor a high-falutin' call to 'keep on keepin' on'. The coherent vision at the heart of Živković's work is that reality is shifting, confusing, imposed, but that individuals – ordinary men and women like you or me – can, like the narrator of 'Home Library', grow accustomed to wonders. We can, through reading and writing and telling stories, come to terms with reality each time it decides to change on us. Živković gives us fantasy as necessary triage, as invaluable paper over consensus reality's confounding cracks. Ultimately, we find our own way – but we find it through story, through imaginative inquiry. "The world that suddenly appears in your consciousness," we are told in 'The Bookshop', "is no less real than your own." (p110).

Bulgakov, Živković's predecessor in story-as-survival, famously wrote, "Manuscripts don't burn." A happy coincidence – without them we'd be lost.

Dan Hartland writes various words, including some reviews for Strange Horizons. He has been known to say that he comes to sf from outside the genre, with an attitude of 'well-wishing frustration'.

Works cited

- Zoran Živković, *Compartments*, Polaris, 2005
- Zoran Živković, *Hidden Camera*, Dalkey Archive Press, 2005
- Zoran Živković, *Impossible Stories*, PS Publishing, 2006
- Zoran Živković, *The Writer*, Polaris, 2002



Greg Bear – *Quantico*

HarperCollins, London, 2006, 440pp,
£17.99, h/b, ISBN 0-00-712978-5

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Quantico is the location of the FBI's Academy in Virginia, where Greg Bear has lectured, and this book is about three graduates from the Academy, who are thrown into a world in turmoil. Not only is the FBI facing an unequalled domestic challenge, but also it is under threat from political opponents who want to use its lack of success as an excuse to close down the Bureau. This is a political thriller with only a seasoning of sf, brought about by its setting in "the near future – sooner than you might

hope". That translates as the second decade of the War on Terror, a time when America is not only losing, but has nearly lost the 'war'. This time gap gives Bear the opportunity to introduce a lot of new technology, perhaps more than will actually have been developed in that period, but this extrapolation isn't central to the plot, and means you can lend the book to your friends who like thrillers but don't like sf.

The years between now and then have been extremely nasty. Jewish extremists have blown up the sacred Muslim site of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and the Muslims have retaliated with a second attack on the USA that killed thousands, on 4th October, and since known as '10/4'. The three *Quantico* graduates this novel focuses on are Rebecca Rose, William Griffin (son of another FBI agent who features in the story, Erwin Griffin), and Fouad Al-Husam, a Muslim American. Their differing personalities and skills are important to the story.

The most urgent threats here come not just from Muslim fundamentalists, but also from Christian fundamentalists, who not only believe we are living in the 'End of Times', but also that their destiny is to hasten the Second Coming by precipitating the End of the World. How they plan to do this is the meat of the book, with rumours circulating of a plague that can target ethnic groups such as Jews or Arabs. At the beginning of the book Erwin Griffin is part of a team maintaining surveillance on a remote farm in Washington State, home to a known Fundamentalist Christian extremist called 'the Patriarch', suspected of planning one or more devastating attacks within the USA, using not explosives but a bio-engineered plague more deadly than anthrax. A known associate of the Patriarch was intercepted driving a truck in Arizona, and after a shoot-out the fiercely defended truck was found to contain a cargo of... inkjet printers! Their significance is revealed... eventually. The various strands and characters mesh together and drive towards a heart-stopping conclusion in Saudi Arabia during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

The book is well-plotted and exciting, with characters who aren't just devices to further the story and who face real danger, both to their lives from the various terrorist groups, and to their continued existence as a Bureau from the politicians in Washington. Obviously the underlying assumption is that the FBI is a 'Good Thing', on the side of the good guys, but Bear's book is more subtle than a mere pro-America tract. With much less sf content than *Darwin's Radio*, this is a tense techno-thriller that's highly recommended.

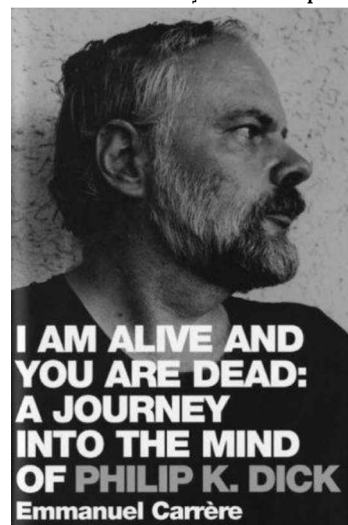
Emmanuel Carrère – *I Am Alive and You Are Dead: A Journey into the Mind of Philip K Dick*

(translated by Timothy Bent)

Bloomsbury, London, 2005, 336pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 0-7475-6919-3

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

There is something dreadfully circular about literary biography. We presumably are interested in an author's life because we want to know what kind of experiences, what kind of mind, shaped those fictional or poetical words we have shared. The problem is then that much evidence for the personality is to be gleaned from their literary output. The life we discover about can come from two poles. On the one hand, the author can draw upon their own lives – in which case their genius seems to be little more than putting "he said" after the bon mots of their acquaintances. On the other hand, it may all be pure



inspiration and perspiration, in which case the biography is likely to be: "Monday: Typed. Tuesday: Typed some more. Wednesday: crossed



First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

out what I wrote. Thursday: typed again." Most authors lead lives of quiet desperation.

Philip K. Dick's insertion of himself into his own late fiction, especially in the *Divine* or *VALIS* Trilogy but also in *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* and *A Scanner Darkly*, makes him a particularly tempting target for the biographical treatment. His own endless speculations about a break-in at his house in November 1971 formed the basis of Paul Williams's seminal *Rolling Stones* profile and the biography/transcript *Only Apparently Real*. Lawrence Sutin produced a single-volume biography, and Gregg Rickman wrote the first volume of a two- (or will it be three-) part biography, before apparently falling silent. Rickman's allegations about child sexual abuse and diagnosis of possible multiple personality disorder are both to be "proven" by regard to the books he produced (read *The Cosmic Puppets* or *Mary and the Giant* and play Spot the Little Green sf Writer) and to be used as a means of interpreting the work. Meanwhile ex-wives – in particular Anne Dick – have written their own accounts. And authors who knew or respected him (or both), such as K. W. Jeter and Michael Bishop, put him into their fiction. Dick's life is the stuff of fiction, especially the central theophany of February and March 1974, the basis for his late novel *VALIS* after a couple of dry runs, which largely divides his readers into those who think he was a genius or that he was insane.

So Emmanuel Carrère's account is perhaps less radical than may at first appear, and certainly less radical than it would have felt on its first publication in French in 1993. The volume is deliberately unclear as to whether it wants to be viewed as a novel or another biography in addition to Sutin et al. However, it does offer a commentary on its own structure – the phrase "If this were a novel" knowingly appears a few times. With the freedom of a novelist, Carrère is liberated from strict objectivity and can offer us what pass for Dick's innermost thoughts, as well as putting words into his mouth. This is, of course, not new for biographies, which frequently reconstruct conversations, but perhaps it is more common a decade or more on. At the same time, Rickman, Sutin and Williams all tried to empathise and think themselves into Dick's position. Writing like a novelist, Carrère is able subtly to anticipate events in Dick's life before they happen, or rather before they need to be recounted. The life can be given a shape that reality denied it.

However, the framework of novelistic convention here – though it need not – precludes the listing of sources and evidence that might allow the reader to make an informed choice as to the chance of what he is writing being anything like reality. The lack of an index prevents this from being used as a reference work – although that might be just as well. But given the nature of Dick's mystical experiences, the uncertainties about the order in which they happened let alone their causes, and the retrospective rewriting of his own life that Dick engaged in letters, interviews, the exegesis and even novels to explain them, the seeking for the One Truth is almost futile. Perhaps we need a number of these novels, as Carrère's faction offers too linear a narrative to allow for alternate lives which may have happened. Carrère ignores – or didn't know about – Rickman's contention that Dick was sexually abused as a child, and largely focuses on the major novels as representations of Dick's life. Unfortunately he has little left to say about *VALIS*, and this is a pity. The work is an experiment that does work in a fashion, but anyone wanting in-depth details should turn back to Sutin and Rickman.

Donna Maree Hanson (ed.) – *Australian Speculative Fiction: A Genre Overview*

Aust Speculative Fiction, Murrumbateman (Australia), 2005, 230pp, A\$45.00, p/b, ISBN 0-9757217-0-4

Review by Zara Baxter



Australian Speculative Fiction: A Genre Overview is intended as a snapshot of the Australian sf scene but feels as though the book hasn't quite decided who its readership is. The title suggests an academic or critical work, but the editor, Donna Maree Hanson, views it primarily as a celebration of Australian sf. As Van Ikin puts it in the foreword: "a coffee table book and guide to further reading". Hanson has collated the book from interviews and questionnaires from authors, illustrators and

magazine publishers. From this, she divided the book into three sections.

The 'Authors' section is the largest of these, and dedicates a single page, in alphabetical order, to authors writing in Australia today. There are eight illustrators profiled in the centre section, each with a double spread that highlights four or more recent works, and the back portion covers the Australian short fiction markets and publications from 2000 to 2005. The coverage is reasonably comprehensive, and an appendix provides a thorough index of the fiction published in most Australian magazines and short fiction venues. Among those omitted from this index, however, are *Ideomancer*, *Ticonderoga Online* and *Shadowed Realms* and the no longer published *Eidolon*, *Wine Dark Sea* and *Harbinger*.

Even though the novel coverage is most thorough, there are gaps for novels produced in the years 2000-2005. Margo Lanagan's 2003 young adult novel, for example, is missing from her bibliography. For a scholar, the omissions reduce the book's value as a bibliographic reference. But it's the success of the authors section that decides whether or not *Australian Speculative Fiction: A Genre Overview* fulfils its goals as a guide for further reading.

Each author page has around five hundred words covering a small biography, a summary of major works to date, a bibliography of novels produced between 2000 and 2005, a photo, a book cover shot and some author quotes on writing, genre or Australianness. The material is light, and in some places uses quoted book reviews rather than a sample of fiction or the author's own words. One of the more successful entries is Paul Brandon, an Irish immigrant and folk musician. He's compared to Charles de Lint because of his use of music and Celtic themes, and his latest novel *The Wild Reel* is described in a short but evocative synopsis. The entry works because the author's background and interests are aligned with his work, he's compared to an author that readers may be more familiar with, and the novel teaser is effective. There are less successful entries, though.

These provide only vague descriptions and no clear sense of the author or their fiction. As an example, in Tess Williams' entry, the author describes her book *Sea as Mirror* as: "I am a whale, a real 'alien' in a completely different body and different environment". This is a lovely book to dip into thanks to the design, full colour illustrations and plentiful photographs, but ultimately, the entries are about equal parts hit and miss.

From the perspective of a reader looking for further recommendations, it's worth noting that the works of half the included authors may be difficult to locate. Advice on how to find more small press publications would be a useful addition. The book may assist with name recognition, but without any real detail of an author's style or quality, it would be hard for a reader to select new material to sample.

Apart from the usefulness of the entries themselves, there's the question of how the authors were chosen. The main qualification for inclusion is publication of a novel, including self-published works, but there are notable exceptions – Gillian Rubenstein *aka* Lian Hearn (*Across the Nightingale Floor*) doesn't appear, and several writers listed have produced only short fiction. These include relative newcomer Lee Battersby, and the widely acclaimed Terry Dowling. There's no obvious correlation between which authors are chosen and their output, critical acclaim, or professional publication. For example, what was the rationale to include Dirk Strasser, last published in 1993? What we have is a scattershot collection which captures most of the top tier mainstream authors, the majority of those who produced a novel of any calibre in the last five years, and a hotchpotch selection from the masses of Australian short fiction writers.

Australian Speculative Fiction: A Genre Overview never really finds its mark, either as an academic resource or as a taster for an enthusiastic genre reader. It is, however, a Who's Who of current Australian writers, a lovely coffee-table book, and will be useful for those wanting a bibliographic reference to novel and short fiction published within Australia from 2000 to 2005.



Andreas Eschbach – *The Carpet Makers*

(translated by Doryl Jensen)
Tor, New York, 2005, 300pp, £24.95, h/b,
ISBN 0-765-30593-3

Reviewed by Paul N. Billinger

This is the story of a question: why is there an obscure, isolated planet whose entire existence is devoted to the production of carpets made from human hair?

We start our examination of this 80,000 year old mystery in the small, desert house of Ostvan the weaver. Here we see the process of weaving

a carpet from the hair of Ostvan's wives and daughters, his wives having been selected exclusively on the basis of what their hair colour will contribute to the overall design. We come to realise that the weaving of these carpets is a detailed and laborious task as the weaver will only make one carpet in his lifetime and the fate of his family relies on the revenue and status he gains from the sale of the completed carpet. We also realise that the production of these carpets has badly warped the morals of the society: on the birth of a child, the father casually kills his firstborn son, as there can only be one weaving frame and so the father's son, who has disappointed him, must inherit the father's perpetuate this stagnant system. Ostvan tries to justify this as "it was always this way, and it will always be so" (p15).

All this is contained in the short, atmospheric, opening chapter¹ – only seven pages – with the next chapter focusing on the arrival, some years later, of the

hair carpet traders and the story of the trader's daughter Dirilja and her search for her lost lover. We slowly learn more about the society of the hair traders and their devotion to the apparently immortal Emperor and, critically, the possible role of the planet in the wider universe with hints about 'distant places', 'every world' and 'Imperial Shipment'. This chapter appears unconnected with the previous one until we learn that Dirilja's missing lover is Abron, Ostvan's now dead first son. The rest of the book has a similar structure, with only subtle connections or associations between the chapters but ones which culminate in a detailed and vivid picture of a planet approaching apocalyptic revelations. The structure has some similarities with David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (Sceptre, 1999) which also has apparently unconnected chapters – much longer in Mitchell's case – but with a (sometimes) obscure link leading to a conclusion to the whole novel. To use a rather obvious metaphor, the chapters are like the threads of a carpet which individually convey little of significance: it is only when they are woven together that the picture becomes clear.

This unfolding of the planet's desert culture through the individual threads/chapters continues for some length revealing, in particular, the role of religion in society until, almost brutally, we are shown that the planet (whose very name is still shrouded in mystery) is part of a wider galactic civilisation and is being studied by a small spaceship. Although we then return to the planet, where it becomes clear that the population know they are part of a wider world – the carpets are taken away by spaceship – but are so focused on the carpets that they are uninterested in anything else, which goes some way to explain the ease with which filicide is used to maintain the status quo. From now on the life of the carpet makers is interspersed with the consequences of a rebellion against the Emperor and we belatedly have some recurring characters, notably the hunchback, ex-archivist Emparak and his usurper the beautiful Lamita (whose most striking characteristic is, of course, her long blonde hair).

This widening of the scope from the planet surface, although vital in explaining the mystery of the hair carpets, makes the novel less interesting as the off-planet sections effectively cover much more familiar genre material – rebellions, hidden archives, space portals, nanotechnology – than the intricacies of the carpet makers' society. And the more knowledge the reader gains about this society the more enthralling, original and frightening it becomes. Despite looking for parallels with the current conflict(s) between Christian and Islamic cultures in the Middle East none are readily apparent, illustrating Eschbach's success in the creation of an original world that is so convincing that it must be real and hence must be related to our world. Eschbach has clearly avoided any heavy-handed moralising or unsubtle allegories,

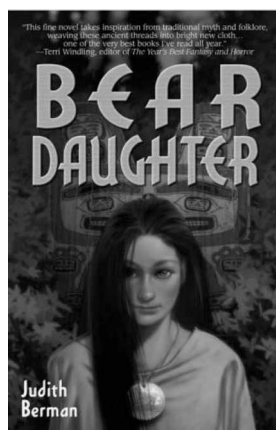


¹ Which can be read at <http://www.tor.com/eschbach/excerpt.html>

avoiding the demonisation of Islam – the religion here is probably closer to old Testament Christianity – which could have been all too easy (given the tension in Germany from Turkish – read Islamic – immigrants at the time the novel was written in the mid-nineties).

The Carpet Makers is Eschbach's first, of seven novels, but is the only one to be translated into English, published in German in 1995 as *Die Haarteppichknüpfer* when it won the SFCD-Literaturpreis for Best Novel. Given the strong and original writing style of the novel here it must have been difficult for translator Doryl Jensen but the result feels authentic, and clumsy phrasing is rare.

But to return to that original question, about the origins of the carpet makers' society, does the novel deliver on the answer? Well, yes, but it would be difficult for any final revelation to do justice to the weight of the build-up, so almost inevitably there is some feeling of anti-climax. But don't let this dissuade you from trying one of the most fascinating sf novels I have read for some time. I can only hope that more of Eschbach's novels are translated into English.



Frances Hardinge – *Fly by Night*

Macmillan Children's Books, London, 2005, 304pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 1405020784

Judith Berman – *Bear Daughter*

Ace Books, New York, 2005, 422pp, \$16.00, p/b, ISBN 0441013228

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

So here we have two interesting (and good) first novels. They can be (and not unfairly) compared: beyond their debut status, both are tales about girls finding their place in the world, although only one is readily called 'young adult'; both create analogues of worlds-that-weren't, and less familiar ones than are standard; and both are most fairly called fantasies – although both have a faint science-fictional sting in their manner. And both begin unpromisingly.

Frances Hardinge's *Fly by Night* opens with a Note, then a Prologue, and then eighty pages of utterly predictable young-adult character arc in which Mosca Mye escapes from her dank village home on the coat-tails of a thief and wordsmith by the unfortunate name of Eponymous Clent. We are told the history: Mosca and Clent live in the Shattered Realm, a kingdom pretending to be whole but in reality flying to fifty flags and worshipping who knows how many gods (here

called Beloved). The requisite encounters with brigands and noble ladies follow, and eventually they end up in the city, Mandelion. Here the Guilds, in particular the Locksmiths and the Stationers – the real powers in the realm – are engaged in a mutually agreeable stalemate. In this the book echoes *The Light Ages*, although Hardinge's deftly playful voice is a million miles away from the density of Ian R. Macleod, and as in that book (and despite the names) we are in an alternate England: this time, an eighteenth century in which the Restoration never happened.

And Mandelion is where things take off. Those unpromising early pages are told entirely from the perspective of Mosca who, though smart and capable and almost feverishly active, is of a type that is just a little too familiar, at least since Lyra Silvertongue, if not for longer. But once in the city, Hardinge seems to recognise that Mosca alone cannot see far enough for us to see the shape of her world, and so, like the realm, the narrative shatters. Not forever, and not enough for us to come to care about any of the other viewpoints we gain – the book is still Mosca's story, through and through – but we are already hungry for the information they can give us, eager to see a bit more, so we don't mind.

Mandelion is consequently a dazzling city on the cusp of change, bubbling with squabbling humanity and a full measure of plots and counterplots. The Stationers, who control the books, want to track down a rogue printing press, which they believe is being operated by their arch-rivals, the Locksmiths; in addition there are radicals with their own agendas, and a less-than-sane Duke trying to reshape the city, and the threat of the remnants of the terrible Birdcatchers, waiting for an opening. It's a mess, but an instructive one: each side differently demonstrates the good and the evil that can be done in the service of impersonal forces that shape our lives, from religion and rationality to commerce and education. It is, in a sense, the story of a world that's growing up, at least as much as it's the story of a girl who's growing up – and it's in those less personal moments that it feels most like sf. Those moments when the narrative opens out; when Hardinge dramatises the complexity of progress; when we feel the birth pangs of a modern world.

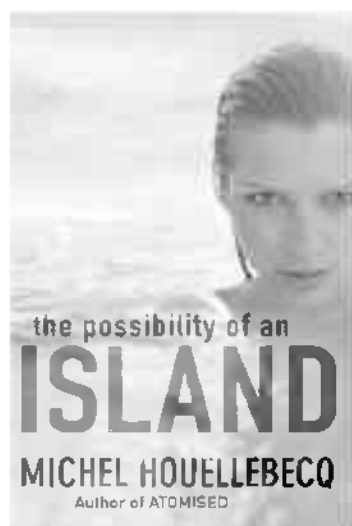
In *Bear Daughter*, by contrast, Judith Berman locks us pretty firmly into the viewpoint of her titular heroine, Cloud, a bear who wakes up one day to find that she's a thirteen year-old girl with no idea what being a thirteen year-old girl entails. The network of tribes and families into which she is thrust is complex, and take several chapters to come clear, but it's obvious enough that Cloud's mere existence is causing problems. Driven from her home early on, she wanders the world in search of the truth about her upbringing and about herself. As in *Fly by Night*, there are the obligatory surrogate parent figures to help Cloud on her way, although they are dispensed with relatively quickly; but there are no cities here, and compared with Hardinge's novel, Berman's has a much more traditional fantasy arc. Cloud's world is out of balance, and she must heal it. Cloud herself is out of balance, and must reconcile her competing identities – as a person, as a bear, as a woman.

But at the same time, *Bear Daughter* holds true to one of the more sfal qualities of *Fly by Night*, which is that it too believes in the discoverability of the world. Berman isn't stingy with her fantasy – spells and spirits permeate the story – but it's all part of normal for Cloud. Built on a loose mix of Native American and Western myths, Cloud's world is emphatically not ours. The manner in which it is presented, however, is so matter of fact that it feels, to us, as much alien as it does fantastic. There's always a sense that the rules by which it operates can be (indeed, should be) found out and understood. Cloud's story is also told in a less flirtatious manner than Mosca's; Hardinge can be charmingly witty, but also irritatingly arch, while Berman is more consistently sober (sometimes, it must be said, to the point of plainness). The result is that while Hardinge's non-magical but off-kilter England often sparkles, it never quite becomes more than a stage for her yarn; and Berman's

landscape with bones of myth is, in the end, utterly convincing.

The effect does take time to build up, however. The development of Cloud's world is strongly rooted in her experience of it, in the ways she looks at it, senses it, and thinks about it. Even in the houses of the gods, which are beyond beautiful, Cloud's bearish senses tingle at the coppery scent of blood; elsewhere, for instance riding across a wild sea on the back of an orca, the profusion of scents and sensations can be almost miraculously powerful. As a side-effect, Cloud does spend perhaps too long reacting instead of acting. Her stubbornness can be enjoyable, but certainly the first hundred pages could be cut by half, and even after that the plotting can be bumpy and episodic, alternating introspection and travel and explanation a little too mechanically. When Cloud does act, however, with all the capabilities and smarts and strengths she's been given and learned, the results are decisive. And, equally importantly, they are realistic.

The key to both these books is that although they may do different things to their worlds – Cloud eventually does restore hers, of course, while Mosca all but kick-starts a civil war – neither of them are so naïve as to be about making things better, only about making them *right*. And both of them, in the end, recognise that such a struggle will never be over. For Cloud, even having acknowledged that there is and always will be pain in the world, it comes as a surprise that her story isn't done when the book is; by contrast, Mosca actively resents the ending she can see lurking ahead of her. What *she* wants, above all, is more story. In the end, after both these books, that's all we want too.



Michel Houellebecq – *The Possibility of an Island*

(translated by Gavin Bowd)
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2005,
345pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-2978-5098-9
Reviewed by Ian Watson

In the present an alternative comedian called Daniel gained a lot of money and notoriety out of specialising in bad taste – Islamophobia lite, misogyny, a sprinkle of anti-Semitism, general violation of taboos; but his star's waning, and he's getting sadly older, and always he was the weeping clown. In the arid Almería region of Southern Spain (where a lot of your salad ingredients come from, thanks to irrigation

under the plastic sea which stretches for miles) Daniel falls in with the Elohim cult, based on the real-life Raelians who believe aliens created life on Earth, have lots of sex, and who claimed in 2003 to have cloned a human baby.

Although thoroughly pissed off with existence, Daniel does have a frustrated craving for love, perhaps most effectively provided by his pet dog.

The upshot a thousand years ahead, after calamities and convulsions have reduced our human race to a few primitive bestial doomed survivors, are the 24th, then 25th, iterations of cloned Daniel who mull over their source's life record – chapters of which alternate with Daniel-clone chapters – trying to understand the significance for a late 20th century person of such bygone things as emotion, love

and sex – in company with successive clones of the pet dog. Finally Daniel25 abandons the safe, though sterile and solitary, redoubt that clones of the cult all inhabit and sets out on a desolate, if in the end ambiguously affirmative, journey to what's left of the evaporated Med.

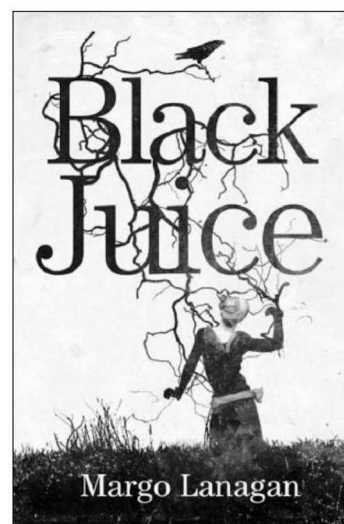
If you're feeling a bit depressed or suicidal (and even if you're not), it's a good idea to read *The Possibility of an Island* to provide an illuminatory intellectual context for despair, rather like a halo around a nihilistic martyr, and a realization of how much worse everything could be (or perhaps already is). It's remarkable how exhilarating such a pessimistic novel can be, which is

perhaps the paradoxical key to Houellebecq's *tour de force*. Welcome to a world where life is quite simply a mistake, with which we are stuck, and where this situation even occasions a perverse kind of rapture; hence the bikini-clad young women on all Houellebecq's book covers. He himself has said how it gets on his nerves when publishers tell him they laughed a lot when reading his books, whereas he wants people to cry.

Possibility is a very deep book. Or is it perhaps a manipulative conjuring trick, as sectors of the French press now complain of Houellebecq, determined to slay the *enfant terrible*? (A desire shared by Islamists, who have fatwa-ed Houellebecq, so that he now lives in Ireland.) An academic conference held in Edinburgh last November took the deep approach, with a Freudian-Lacanian paper on, for instance, 'The Abject Dick of Houellebecq.' Actually, *phallus*, but here in *Vector* we have an sf agenda, so it's worth mentioning how strongly influenced Houellebecq was by Simak's *City*, the dog utopia in which only dogs and robots survive. Personally I think that *Possibility* is one of the most remarkable mainstream sf novels of the 21st century (which is perhaps easy to say when scarcely six years have elapsed), and that Houellebecq is France's Ballard, only more so, with a Gallic sensibility which involves lots of philosophy. Oh, and lots of sex.

"Nothing exists, in the personality, outside what is memorisable (be this memory cognitive, procedural, or emotional); it is thanks to memory, for example, that the sense of identity does not dissolve during sleep." That's worth remembering, just for a start!

Possibly a masterpiece, and compulsive, if none too cheery.



Margo Lanagan – *Black Juice*

Gollancz,
London, 2006,
230pp, £8.99,
h/b, ISBN 0-
55707-781-6

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

If you're planning to read this book, you might not want to read this review. If you aren't, do.

A family who sing a daughter to her death; a young man who has to endure a terrifying ordeal in order to usher in the spring; a lost bride with paper shoes; a lad who has to face an angel to give his



grandmother a decent burial and free himself from oppression. In many great novels it is a subsidiary character who can often have a profound effect on the reader – the companion, sibling or even an acquaintance of the protagonist, someone whose arc in the overall story touches the reader in unexpected ways – either by the suddenness of their absence or through a change in their lives. *Black Juice* is filled with scenes of the subsidiary character's defining moment; the moments that turn a good novel into a great one. However *Black Juice* is not a novel but rather a collection of short stories, all of which reach out to the reader because they breathe beyond their limited page count, hinting of their part in a greater whole and all characterised by a rare intensity. These are glimpses of ten other worlds – worlds into which we are invited for a brief, pivotal moment. No background information is given; we are only given precise and lucid details of events that are happening at that time. As such each story feels like the middle of a greater whole, without a real beginning or end; although they have internal conclusions, the overall sense is that of time continuing outside the story space. This in turn makes the characters well rounded though fleetingly defined – you need to fill in the back stories for yourself and can only imagine what the future holds. Sometimes you need not even know the protagonist's name or even if they are human, but you are drawn quickly into their environment, however otherworldly, and come to empathise with their situation. Lanagan expertly guides us through each tale, dropping mere hints as to the person or creature's background, yet gives us a deep insight into their lives, rituals and societies. Where they do depart from a sustainable novel mould is in their use of the first person perspective to allow instant access into each world on offer. This means that explanation can be, for the main part, dispensed with because the perspective allows a precise and immediate viewpoint on events. It also creates a sense of ambiguity as to where and when each tale is set – the characters' familiarity with their own environment and culture means any indications of time or place need to be derived rather than spelled out explicitly. The book's great trick is to relieve the reader of any preconceptions leaving them to form the images, the background and the setting for themselves. Knowing any background information at all can subtly alter the reader's perception of the tale. Lanagan lives in Australia and it is only as the book progresses that images of Australia seep into the reader's consciousness. Because the tales give impressions of colonialism, wild animals, fantastical events or creatures as they progress, many of the stories could have been set in Africa, India or a parallel world. It is only the rare use of a specific word, in one instance 'aboriginal', which could pin down a location to Australia and even then, that assumption is dependent on the reader's perception, not the author's. This doesn't detract from the enjoyment of the book, quite the opposite in fact. Similarly, that this collection is marketed as children/young adult material does change the reader's understanding of the characters and their motivations. It's unfortunate that publishers have to be so definitive in their categorisation of a book's suited age group or genre. *Black Juice* defies genre definition and doesn't offer childish pursuits to the adult reader either.

All the stories are exemplary but perhaps the most outstanding is the first, telling the tale of an execution of a young woman. She simply has to walk across a tar pit and just remain there until the sticky black mire engulfs her, sucking her into its pitch-black depths. Her family are allowed to be present at her slow, agonising and excruciatingly inevitable demise, encouraging and aiding her to a better death. We know her crime, but her motives are never made clear. She remains both defiant and brave, eliciting much empathy from the reader despite our lack of understanding of the wider cultural picture and having only the perspective of a sympathetic observer. We know too how the various other members of her family have reacted to her crime, her punishment, and we are party to

the emotions of all involved. It's at once moving, sad and yet strangely uplifting.

Black Juice is a marvellous collection of tales and a remarkable read, don't let its bookstore categorisation convince you otherwise. Savour these, don't rush them.

Scott Lynch – *The Lies Of Locke Lamora* ☐

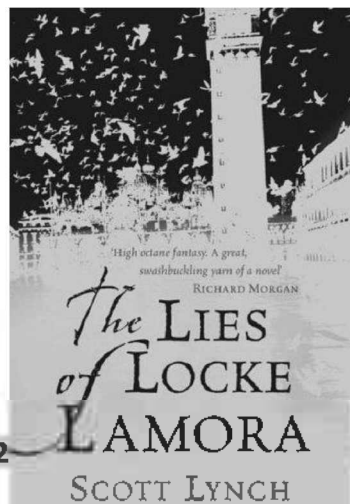
Gollancz, London, 2006, 645pp, £12.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-575-07802-2

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

As this is the first novel of the Gentleman Bastard sequence, it could perhaps be surmised, given the slightly outdated terminology, that the main protagonist is either an immoral aristocrat, or someone from the lower echelons of society whose behaviour reflects that of a different class. Neither is actually completely true. Our eponymous hero is an orphan – initially taken under the wing of a Fagin-like character – who shows an incredible natural talent for thieving and pick pocketing. He is both highly precocious and extremely reckless, and when his master can no longer cope with him, he finds himself sold to Father Chains, ostensibly a priest of one of the twelve recognised gods, but actually a worshipper of the little-regarded thirteenth, the god of thieves. This is an alternative to having him killed, and turns out to be the making of Lamora. It is Chains who educates him and his fellow students in the ways of the different levels of society and even sends them as novices to the temples of other religions, so that they may be able to emulate other people when necessary, the easier to part the unwary from their riches. Ironically, when they do become successful at this, they cannot spend very much of their ill-gotten gains, as they are pretending to be much less adept than they really are to avoid paying too much to the local crime lord. Much of the humour in the story comes from their relationships, their preposterous ideas, and the scrapes they invariably get into.

The story shifts between Lamora's early life and the main plot, set when he is an adult. The Gentleman Bastards, a gang made up of several of Chains' former pupils, has been formed, and is about to embark on Lamora's most elaborate and risky scheme yet. They find themselves involved, very reluctantly, both in political machinations at high level and the forceful and barbaric overthrow of the city's crime lord. These things are set to have a profound effect upon all the members of the close-knit group.

The story is entertaining and does carry the reader along without dragging. There is a strong sense of place; the city is very well described and easy to envisage. The shifting of the story between the two time periods also works very well. However, the characterisation, particularly of Locke Lamora, can be somewhat two-dimensional.



When Lamora is grieving, his focus on revenge rather than feeling may be deliberate and understandable, but it does alienate him to a certain extent from the reader. The basis of the character, a criminal with a conscience he would sometimes rather do without, is one that has been used many times before to varying effect. In fact, the other members of the group actually seem to be more endearing to the reader. Shadowy controlling figures appear to abound in his life, some of whom are genuinely disturbing. The magician hired to ensure his obedience is one such, even while you search for the chink in his armour.

Overall this is an enjoyable and entertaining read, which has a humorous edge, as well as being, at points, quite moving. It ranks with most other examples of the fantasy genre, but is not particularly outstanding.

Mark Morris (ed.) – *Cinema Macabre*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 232pp, £25.00, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-904619-44-4

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

"Do you like scary movies?"

It is perhaps a sign of the times that Wes Craven's once lauded *Scream* has not made it into this selection of bite-sized essays about horror films. Post-modern is, after all, so dated. But *Scream* jolted the genre out of the doldrums and it became okay to talk horror: knowing, intelligent but with shameless 'chumminess' that comes from much heated debates over beer and pork scratchings. *Cinema Macabre* was born out of chance discussion at a convention and as a prime concept it's a good one. Fifty writers pick fifty horror films a bit like those Channel 4 *100 Best* programmes. But with half the entries. And no winner. Everyone likes lists because everyone enjoys disagreeing with them – what's in, what's out and "what do you mean they haven't included *Shivers*?" *Cinema Macabre* differs slightly from the list format because it doesn't purport to discuss the 'best' horror films but rather ones that have had an impact on the person writing about them – whether it's their favourite, a bona fide classic or one that triggers memories of youthful love or sneaking into films certified as unsuitable for their age. The book is ordered chronologically by film and the essays range from analytical to factual, biographical to historical in an almost haphazard fashion. This is both its strength (it doesn't become a predictable stream of reviews) and its weakness (the tone can shift wildly).

Naturally one can applaud or bemoan omissions, and mercifully we are spared another piece on the vastly over-rated *Exorcist*. James Whale's marvellous *Old Dark House* (Basil Copper) is a welcome addition alongside his more well regarded *Bride of Frankenstein* (Neil Gaiman). Simon Clark argues for *The Unknown* over Browning's more familiar *Dracula* or *Freaks*. While Franju's *Les yeux sans visage* is absent, the baroque shock of *Les Diaboliques* (Brian Aldiss) and the cerebral surrealism of Cocteau's *Orphée* (Peter Atkins) cover the French strand of horror that deftly runs from exquisite thrillers to art-house. It is encouraging to see how many of the films have come from an earlier era, be it Polanski's claustrophobic *Repulsion* (Lisa Tuttle rightly noting that only the external world threatens to shatter the foetid sexual tension of the piece) or the truly gruesome *Carousel*. Now, this may seem an unlikely choice for a horror film but what is perhaps surprising about Jo Fletcher's analysis is that the full awfulness of the film's disturbing redemption theme, the lauding of a thug and the glorification of violation as acceptable behaviour is, to some extent, toned down. Nevertheless its addition is welcome to help remove the rose-tinted view of the film that people generally have (hell, even the songs are bad by Rodgers & Hammerstein's standards!). Also of interest is the number of British films that make the list – from Hammer (*The Reptile* and the Cornish capitalist critique *Plague of the Zombies*), *The Wicker Man* and *Don't Look Now*, which establishes the genre's worldwide appeal and ability to be both universal and local. Indeed while the focus of the book is inevitably English speaking or Euro-centric (Japan's *Ringu* is the sole exception) it still has an international feel – Italy, France, Australia (China Miéville stands up for that Australian film about pigs... *Razorback*), New Zealand and Belgium all get a look in. This diversity is what

has given the horror genre its longevity, something reflected in the authors' occasionally eclectic choice of subject matter.

There are a couple of minor niggles but ultimately the passion of the authors writing about what they actually love rather than what they are expected to like makes for a welcome antidote to worthy criticisms or juvenile gore-counts. Hopefully someone will pick this up because it has their favourite author in it and discover the horror genre without preconceptions. And the book includes *Daughters of Darkness*, truly one of cinema's most sublime experiences, so it must be worthy of your time and money.



Albert Sánchez Piñol – *Cold Skin*

(translated by Cheryl Leah Morgan)
Canongate,
Edinburgh, 2006,
233pp, £9.99, t/p,
ISBN 1-84195-688-0

Reviewed by
Elizabeth A.
Billinger

"We are never very far from those we hate. For this very reason, we shall never be truly close to those we love. An appalling fact, I knew it well enough when I embarked. But some truths deserve our attention; others are best left alone."

This is the opening observation of *Cold Skin*'s nameless narrator, a man who has chosen to be stranded on a tiny, equally nameless island on the edge of the Antarctic circle as the weather official. His narrative acknowledges that the job is both pointless and monotonous and, given the harsh conditions, not one that would be undertaken for money alone, but it never reveals the reasons behind his desire to isolate himself from human contact for a year. He writes of bargaining with the past for our future, and of "the devastating failures that came before" but no detail is forthcoming, no personal information, no history, so that he functions as a troubled everyman, voyaging half-way round the world in order to undertake a journey of self-discovery. Michael Eaude, reviewing the book in *The Independent*, regrets that around 15 pages of the original, giving some extra background to the weather official, have been omitted from the translation, but the blankness of the character seems to be one of the book's strengths.

At the end of the very first chapter, he declares that his "description isn't trustworthy", something which combines with the narrative style to scream 'gothic' at the reader. Part of the delight of this

novel, however, is that it turns out not to be what it first appears, but actually draws skilfully and convincingly on many different genres – horror, science fiction, magical realism – in a way that demands comparisons with Wells, Lovecraft, Kafka, Borges, Poe, B-movies and other things besides, to create something that feels both familiar and new.

It is perhaps in this tension between the familiar and new that the horror of the novel lies. It is clear from the outset that the sailors transporting the weather official are not comfortable with the idea of leaving him there, the narrator himself feels a great unease about the island as soon as they land, the previous incumbent has vanished, there is a naked madman in the lighthouse – these things seem comfortingly predictable, imbued with an air of nostalgia. That the narrator's cottage is besieged on his first night by terrifying, amphibious monsters things still seems entirely to be expected, as is his decision to go and take refuge with Gruner, the madman in the lighthouse. What disturbs the reader, moving things away from the comfort of these well-rehearsed tropes is the unflinching details the narrator reveals about his observations, feelings and actions, and the tenderness that underlies his descriptions of his battles with Gruner and with the relentless hordes of monsters. Nothing is withheld in the interest of presenting him in a better light; he does not construct himself as either likeable or admirable.

Gruner has captured a monster of his own, a female he describes as the mascot. Always treated badly by Gruner, she acts as his housekeeper and concubine. The weather official records in minute detail the sounds and rhythms of Gruner's daily liaisons with the mascot, which last for anything up to four hours. He is simultaneously repulsed and compelled by the creature and eventually embarks on his own secret affair with her that transcends any prior sexual experience and further unsettles his relationship with Gruner and with the monstrous hordes. The narrator seeks a peaceful resolution but in this place of madness and terror he is doomed to failure, and all the while the monsters keep appearing from the sea, advancing on the lighthouse to be slaughtered in massive numbers, their only advantage a seeming disregard for their losses. This irresolvable struggle reminded me again and again of Edwin Muir's poem 'The Combat' about a fight "not meant for human eyes", its closing stanza in particular:

"And now, while the trees stand watching, still
The unequal battles rages there,
And the killing beast that cannot kill
Swells and swells in his fury till
You'd almost think it was despair."

It is indeed a beautifully written and seductive novel of despair, of failure, and the horror of being unable to isolate oneself from the madness and contradictions of being human.

Justina Robson – *Living Next-Door to the God of Love*

Macmillan, London, 2005, 480pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-4050-2116-0

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

There's a bubble universe next door to Blackpool. One of an unspecified number of 'sidebars' which exist some 500 years hence, a quarter-century after the events of Justina Robson's previous novel, *Natural History*. 15 year old Francine is a runaway to Sankhara, where she falls in with a benign but dull religious cult and is befriended by Damien, a gay elf and 'Stuffie' agent of the Engine which governs the structure of Sankhara and periodically remakes it in 'Engine Time'. So far, so *Dark City*. But recently, in a rundown district on the edge of town, a bubble has appeared within the bubble, housing a vast park, a

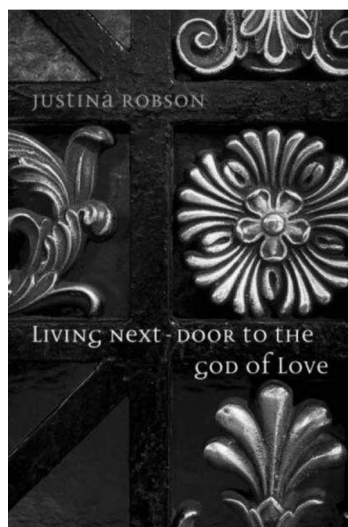
surreal replica of Catherine the Great's Winter Palace, surrounded by an ever-changing wild wood which owes more than a little to Robert Holdstock's Mythago novels. All this is the brilliantly realised setting for the story of Francine's love for Jalaeka, friendship with Greg and conflict with Theo.

It begins with a superbly constructed set-piece with all the hallmarks of a blockbuster movie pre-credits sequence. Jalaeka is on the rooftops of the Metropolis sidebar, watching the roleplaying superheroes and having an assignation with Angel #5, when the agents of Unity track him through the 7D. He escapes the destruction of the sidebar only by an 11D translation into Sankhara. There the oldest story starts to play itself out as boy meets girl, except that Jalaeka is an incarnation of Eros, the god of love, and Francine may have been a Geisha in a *faux* Roman Empire on a world far, far away a long time ago. Greg is the academic researching the increasingly bizarre situation, and Theo is the principal 4D incarnation of the 7D entity known as Unity.

Living Next-Door to the God of Love is a hard book to write about without giving away its manifold secrets, and to do so would be to do the novel a disservice, for the greatest pleasure it holds is in the gradual uncovering of the extraordinarily detailed and original fictional universe Justina Robson has created. A world which encompasses the legacy of the Brontes and the spirit of *Apocalypse Now* alongside 'Forged' biotek humans and assorted AIs and virtual realities, but which is focused essentially on the nature of love, and on the search for identity and meaning in an ever more confusing world. It is a book in which the extraordinary, an elf, sits with complete comfort with the mundane; the elf eats a packet of crisps. The minutiae of life coalesce with the apocalyptic.

Key to the narrative is the conflict between Jalaeka and Theo, the former representing individuality, yet paradoxically defined by those whom he loves and who love him, the latter equally paradoxical, an individuation of a homogenous group mind of billions. One can read into the book's symbols many things – and doubtless academic writers will be doing so for years – but this central battle might be taken as a choice between Western and Eastern religious philosophies, the individual personal God of the Judaic/Christian/ Islamic lineage, against the ego transcendence of Buddhism.

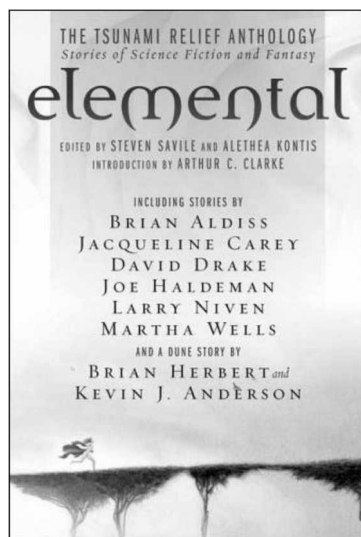
But it's not that simple, for how much is real and how much is the result of Francine's psychological drives is another story. Or perhaps is the story. There are times reading *Living Next-Door to the God of Love* when it feels like a Christopher Priest novel, perhaps *The Glamour*, which has spent the evening taking far too many class A drugs then gone to the strangest club in the universe.



Justina Robson crafts marvellous prose. Much of the book is wonderfully well written. It is filled with striking sentences, shot through with penetrating character insights, and littered with gloriously imaginative ideas which are regularly cast aside in a few words as incidental background, out of which lesser writers would build an entire story. That the novel sometimes becomes easier to admire than to enjoy is due to a lack of strong narrative drive. This is especially the case in the first half, where after the bravura opening, the tale becomes mired in lengthy sequences in which little, in an external sense, happens, but the world is laid out in elliptical asides from which the reader has to construct everything from its often elusive context. It can be hard and frustrating work. Things pick up considerably in the second half and the writing exerts real grip. The large scale finale certainly holds the attention, though seems less original than what has led up to it, as if Robson struggled to resolve the vastly strange tale without resorting to regulation special effects. Given the feeling that anything can happen in Sankhara it ultimately becomes a little hard to care what does. Still, the reader is kept guessing till the final line, the coda being inevitably layered with fascinating resonances of its own.

Living Next-Door to the God of Love is sf which – for all it successfully creates a future in which science for all practical purposes is indistinguishable from magic – feels like fantasy. As original and challenging as anything I have read in a long time, it is a work some will love, others hate, and which personally left me feeling it was in the end rather less than the sum of its parts. Perhaps a second reading is necessary to appreciate the full achievement.

There are two things to point out. This is a difficult book to get to grips with, and though it works as a self-contained novel set within the same future as *Natural History*, reading the previous volume first would probably make this current novel more accessible. It is dishonest of Macmillan to deliberately not mention anywhere that the book is related to *Natural History*. Are they embarrassed about it, or do they think it will lose the new novel potential readers who haven't read the first title? Secondly, there are two sequences of unflinchingly described rape and sexual degradation which some readers may prefer to be aware of before deciding to part with their £17.99.



Steven Savile and Alethea Kontis (eds.) – *Elemental: The Tsunami Relief Anthology*

Tor, New York, 2006, 384pp, \$24.95, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-31562-9
Reviewed by Paul Bateman

In the wake of the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami that took the lives of hundreds of thousands and destroyed millions of others around the Indian Ocean, Steven Savile and Alethea Kontis set to work putting together an anthology to raise money for the Save the Children Tsunami Relief Fund. *Elemental* is the fruit of their labour, a collection containing contributions from an

impressive array of authors in the science fiction and fantasy community, spearheaded by an introduction by Sir Arthur C. Clarke, who – being resident in Sri Lanka – was affected firsthand by the disaster. Just a note of clarification: there are a variety of stories here and are not necessarily 'inspired' by or are about the tsunami itself.

Reviewing such an anthology is a daunting task. It's like criticizing a chocolate box bought by a well-meaning relative raising money for charity: there's always chocolates that never really take your fancy – for me, strawberry creams are a case in point – plus you have the added burden of wanting to be nice because it's all for a good cause and giving it a thorough slagging off means this could impact negatively on a number of people in need of food, water and shelter. Apart from a few of those strawberry creams, this collection

contains a remarkable number of my favourite praline or caramel-centred chocolates. I have a particular soft spot for the ones with hazelnuts.

Here is a selection of my personal highlights:

David Gerrold, scriptwriter of the *Star Trek* 'Trouble with Tribbles' episode among other things, tells a tale of Californian gridlock waiting to happen and the disaster and regeneration that follows. Adam Roberts, unfortunately probably more widely read now as A. R. R. Roberts, parodies a bored Macbeth as an invincible warrior unable to be killed. Brian Aldiss suggests how one of the English language's greatest poems came into being. Joe Haldeman gives an account of what children may eat in future food shortages. Juliet Marillier makes fun of the absurdities of a writing class in 3001. Lynn Flewelling recounts the travails of an architect building the Emperor's dream palace. Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson give a taster of how they will complete Frank Herbert's *Dune* sequence. Syne Mitchell questions death as an art form when immortality is the norm. And the mint crisp for me was Nina Kiriki Hoffman's 'Sea Air', a story of an adolescent coming to terms with the origins of his adoption and his phobia of the sea.

The advantage of an anthology of this high standard is being able to sample a variety of writers one may be reluctant to commit to in a novel or series length format. The problem I've now got is that I want to fill my ever-burgeoning bookcases with books from a number of authors I've discovered from reviewing this collection. Maybe Syne Mitchell's longevity treatments should become reality so I can fit all this reading in.

As with me, I'd expect not all the stories in *Elemental* will be to everyone's taste, but I reckon that many will make the vast majority happy, if not ecstatic. This is a collection filled with skill and variety; I can't recommend it enough. *Elemental* is easily one of the best books I have reviewed over the past few years. And it's all for a good cause.



Johanna Sinisalo – *Not Before Sundown*

(translated by Herbert Lamas)
Peter Owen Publishers, London, 2003, 236pp, £12.50, t/p, ISBN 0-7206-1171-7

Reviewed by Geneva Melzack

Not Before Sundown has also been published under the title *Troll: A Love Story*. The alternative title is, in some ways, a literal description of the book. The first chapter opens with photographer Angel stumbling across a sick

creature near his home. It is a troll, and Angel takes it back to his flat and nurses it back to health. The rest of the book explores the consequences of having a wild troll living in close proximity to and interacting with human beings (and whether or not some of those interactions constitute a love story is perhaps a matter of interpretation).

The two prizes *Not Before Sundown* has found favour with reflect two major aspects of the novel. The Finlandia Prize reflects the book's roots in Finnish culture and folklore, while the James Tiptree Jr Award reflects the way it explores issues of identity and sexuality. The best way into both aspects of the novel is through its structure. *Not Before Sundown* utilises a very unusual narrative technique. The story unfolds through a series of relatively short (a couple of pages or less, and sometimes no more than one or two lines) first person narratives, as well as 'extracts' from texts on Finnish folklore, newspaper reports, and various other sources dealing with the history, biology and mythology of trolls, some real (most of the folklore extracts are genuine), some not. Thinking about these extracts and the role they play in the story is a route into understanding the book's Finnishness, as well as the place it inhabits in the field of fantastic literature.

The purpose of the extracts is to explain what trolls are and how they have related to humans through recent history. The combination of fake scientific and genuine mythological sources of information on trolls convincingly creates an alternate history in which Finnish troll traditions are not merely folklore, but are in fact based on the reality of a large native carnivore that didn't officially get 'discovered' by scientists until 1907. In *Not Before Sundown* Sinisalo has given us a science fiction explanation for what is usually taken to be a fantasy creature.

The insertion of these extracts into the text could have felt like a series of interruptions, but Sinisalo manages to avoid this since the narrative structure of the book is pretty fractured already. This fracturing is due to the frequent switches in narrative perspective. The sections of the novel which aren't extracts (which is the majority of them) are written in the first person, most frequently from the perspective of Angel, but there are four other characters who also get their turn to tell bits of the story at various points throughout the novel. This constant switching of narrative perspectives gives us a route into understanding the second side to *Not Before Sundown*, the side that deals with identity and gender and sexuality.

That the story is built from a multiplicity of perspectives suggests that the characters' identities are also complex and multiple. We come to know the character of Angel both from inside his own head, through his own first person narrative, and also through the eyes of the other characters. In part because it turns out that humans can be affected by trolls' sexual pheromones, all Angel's interactions have some sort of sexual element to them, and in that respect the identity that's being explored through the multiplicities of narrative perspective here is a sexual identity as well as a more complete personal identity.

Angel's public sexual identity as a gay man – as seen through the eyes of the other characters – is shown to be a social identity, an identity rooted in Angel's interactions with other people (and in particular with other gay men). In contrast, Angel's private perspective on his sexuality shows us how his actual attractions – or rather, his actual physical sexual responses – are attractions that cannot translate into a public sexual identity. This is partly because the effect the troll's pheromones have on him fall into the realm of social taboo (bestiality is a big no-no, regardless of folk tales about humans who fall in love with trolls)

but also partly because there is no social signification for the hormonal and physiological responses he experiences in the troll's presence. It's not that a public sexual identity is socially unacceptable, it's that there is no public sexual identity that fits Angel's private experiences.

These two aspects of the novel, the folklore mythos and the exploration of sexual identity, are all rolled together in the symbolic figure of the troll. The troll is a wild creature. It is untamed. It is this wildness that humans make into mythologies, telling tales to convince ourselves that nature is predictable and comprehensible. Folk stories are a way of taming the natural world by naming it, structuring it, shaping and defining it with language and narrative. Similarly, our sexual desires are often thought to represent our base natural instincts, and the construction of sexual identities is also about naming those desires, taming them with stories about how human sexualities work. The troll is the wildness of nature and sexuality embodied. He has stepped out of the wilderness into the constructed world of urban Finland, and the only way he can be dealt with and understood is by taming him as story.



John Sladek – *Keep the Giraffe Burning*

Cosmos Books, Rockville, 2004, 151pp, \$15.00, p/b, ISBN 1-58715-419-6

John Sladek – *Alien Accounts*

Cosmos Books, Rockville, 2005, 139pp, \$15.00, p/b, ISBN 1-58715-442-0

John Sladek – *The Lunatics of Terra*

Cosmos Books, Rockville, 2005, 149pp, \$15.00, p/b, ISBN 1-58715-410-2

John Sladek – *The Steam-Driven Boy and Other Strangers*

Cosmos Books, Rockville, 2005, 145pp, \$15.00, p/b, ISBN 0-8095-5096-2

Review by Andrew M. Butler

John Sladek was a humorist, parodist, satirist, professional sceptic and anagram of Daleks who could barely be contained by science fiction. From *The Reproductive System* (1968) to *Bugs* (1989) his narratives were digressive, preferring to squeeze in another off the wall cameo of everyday madness than an extension to the laws of physics. He had the good fortune – for us at least – to come to fruition as a writer in the era of the New Wave, and with compatriot expatriate Thomas M. Disch found a niche in magazines like *New Worlds*, *Ambit* and, later, *Bananas* and *Interzone* which would accept stories which were Oulipo exercises in structural limitations, or took the form of forms, or masqueraded as articles. In addition he wrote



two detective novels, *Black Aura* (1974) and *Invisible Green* (1977), several works of pseudo-pseudo-science (sic) and several computer manuals. He had taken the Ballardian mantra that the only alien planet is Earth to heart, and knew that the only aliens were humans: "these here humans are aliens". The shorter length perhaps plays to his strengths as a master of the paranoid vignette – secret codes found in pi, anagrammatical acrostics, palindromes, spoonerisms, filthy words to type on your calculator, Daliesque tableaux – but perhaps the joys of his baroque narrative architecture.

The four volumes of short stories published in his lifetime seem deceptively slim in these glossy new Cosmos/Ansible E-ditions editions, but David Langford should be commended for his ongoing work with Sladek that has seen the uncollected stories of Sladek brought together as *Maps* and another piece called *Wholly Smokes* released by Big Engine and Cosmos respectively as well as the books under review here. (Nevertheless I will continue to treasure my battered paperback editions of the earlier three collections for their covers by Peter Goodfellow and Chris Foss which allow them to pass for science fiction, and for the memories of unearthing them.) It might have been nice to see a single book collecting these four volumes – as far as I can see only "The Secret of the Old Custard" was repeated between them – but each has a subtly different flavour which may have been lost. The transfers and resettings are largely clean with only a couple of typos, and Sladek's diagrams are preserved. Most pleasing of all is the listing of original appearances for the stories, sometimes offering more detail than the original volumes.

The Steam-Driven Boy and Other Strangers (1972) is the most straightforwardly parodic, with a section actually labelled 'The Parodies'. Here we have skewerings – some affectionate, some less so – of Poe, Wells, Gernsback, Heinlein, Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Dick, Cordwainer Smith and Ballard. The Asimov story – as by Iclick As-I-Move – begins a dialogue with the Three Laws of Robotics and their flaws which Sladek was to develop in the two Roderick novels and *Tik-Tok* (1983), as laws designed to stop robots from harming humans paradoxically almost oblige them to do so, although a twist in the tale makes this a positive thing. Dick, at least, seems to have taken his parody in good part, and later wrote that 'The Poets of Millgrove, Iowa' "changed in a flash my entire conception of what a good science fiction story is". The influence of Dick (along with that of Wells and Swift) can be seen in some of the stories not explicitly labelled as parodies, as Sladek develops Dick's theme of what defines the authentic human being – although he uses it more to satiric than philosophical effect. Curiously this means that this collection contains the short fiction by Sladek which is most straightforwardly defined as science fiction – complete with aliens and time travel – but the elements of parody and pastiche call that into question.

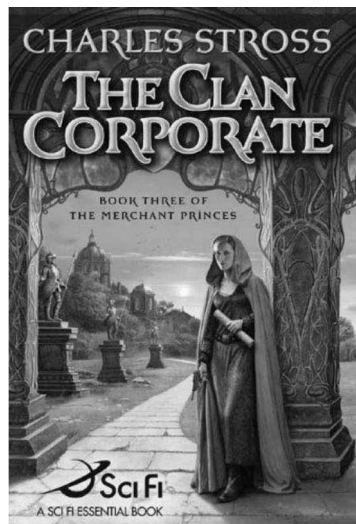
Keep the Giraffe Burning (1978) contains elements of surrealism – as the title might suggest – and is the most experimental and fragmented. Some of the stories feel as if their protagonists are ciphers, named for letters in the alphabet as much as an identity, and some of the stories definitely do that. The relationships from Andrews to Yoniski in 'The Design' are literally mapped out for us in a design. (There is no Z –.) In 'A Game of Jump' we have Ann, Bill, Clara, Dot, Eddie, Felix and Granada as characters, and the whole is limited otherwise to the seven hundred word vocabulary listed in an old Ladybird dictionary for young children. Other stories are mosaics of vignettes – the nested storyline, typographically distinguished, of 'The Master Plan' (eat your heart out, David Mitchell), the reviews of not quite the same book in 'The Commentaries' and the not-quite or not-at-all utopias of 'Heavens Below'. In 'Undecember' we have a parallel to Sladek's pseudonymous *The Thirteenth Zodiac* and a description of a missing month from the year and descriptions of the anniversaries it (does not) contain(s). Pleasingly the volume includes the surreal afterword as by Cassandra Knye (a pseudonym used for the gothic horror novels *The Castle and the Key* (1966) and *The House that Fear Built* (1967) by Sladek and Disch), which makes graphical and diagrammatic links between the stories, well, because.

Alien Accounts (1982) is composed in the key of Kafka, with Charles Dickens's Circumlocution Office visible over his shoulder. In 'Masterton and

the Clerks' the same forms are written, read, rewritten, amended, corrected, voided, stapled, uncoupled, resorted, erased and circulated around the same nine desks, only occasionally leaving the loop, a loop increasingly cursed by entropy as economic realities bite. 'Name (Please Print):' is a cautionary tale even more appropriate in the age of identity theft and over-reliance on biometric ID: the fall of a man who cannot prove his bureaucratic identity, and who has disappeared from the books. 'The Interstate' is perhaps more of a Dischian tale, reminiscent of 'Descending', an seemingly endless escalator ride. Here it is an infinite bus ride and the parade of photofit fellow passengers and off the peg service stations. The most laugh out loud pieces for me remain 'New Forms' and 'Anxietal Register B'. In the former we see 'The Corresponding Choice Test', with MENSAs style questions: "(a) is to (b) as (c) is to: (a) (b) (c) (c) (b) (d) (a)" (answer on page 37), the "Indiana Name Opinion Register", an "Individual Bend Record", "Poetry Itemization", "Character Simulation Form" and a table of letters "A... AB BA... ABC ACB BAC BCA CAB CBA..." which may prove useful in some bizarre circumstances I can't immediately imagine. 'Anxietal Register B' is an increasingly personal questionnaire, posing such questions as "Do you feel sexual desire for, about, during: a) Those of your own sex b) Those of both sexes c) Children d) Your mother e) Your father ... bo) The act of filling out a form". Don't let your human resources department know about this one.

Finally, *The Lunatics of Terra* (1984) was the last collection to be assembled during Sladek's lifetime. In many ways this is the least experimental, and the least dependent on the voices of others. There is, however, perhaps the sense that Sladek was recycling himself – I'm sure I recall a variation on the riff on Macintosh (the unnamed guest at a funeral in *Ulysses*) from a novel; 'Absent Friends' draws on a deleted sequence from *Tik-Tok*; the computer filth of 'The Next Dwarf' also appears (was to appear?) in *Roderick*; one of the allegedly unpublished fables in 'Fables' is a section from 'Heavens Below'... Of course, Sladek has reused material before, so this is probably to carp, but there is perhaps a sense here of flagging invention – although the exegesis on the seven dwarfs as the seven deadly sins is more than worth a look. His interest in science and antipathy to pseudoscience comes to the fore in many of the pieces here, again themes explored previously. But the old faultless (and yet fallacious) logic is there, especially in 'An Explanation for the Disappearance of the Moon' and its abolition of circles and 'How to Make Major Scientific Discoveries at Home in Your Spare Time' with its refiguring of pi: "From now on, all circles are going to be a whole lot rounder." An innovation here is that Sladek provided afterwords to each of the stories, although we learn more about him than the stories, or they provide a vehicle for more deadpan irony.

At the end of the day I perhaps still feel that whilst the stories are worth seeking out, it is to the novels I will return. Paradoxically, Sladek needed the length of the novel to cram in his playful digressions; he needed the discipline to usurp. But there is much to discover here, and anyone who likes their science fiction comic, or wants to see the interstitial before it was soft and cuddly, should start here. The best single collection is *Alien Accounts*, still making me laugh – and still disturbing me – twenty years after I first read it. Indeed, in some places it feels truer than before. That cannot be science fiction.



Charles Stross – *The Clan Corporate*

Tor, New York, 2005, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b
(reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-30930-0

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

In this, the third book of Stross's series *The Merchant Princes*, former investigative journalist Miriam (revealed as Countess Helge voh Thorold d'Hjorth in the alternate world she has fallen into) is displaced from the centre of the action for much of the time, largely due to her incarceration by Duke Angbard's security. This virtual house arrest, ostensibly for her own protection, is more to rein in the streak of wilful independence and mercantile adventuring

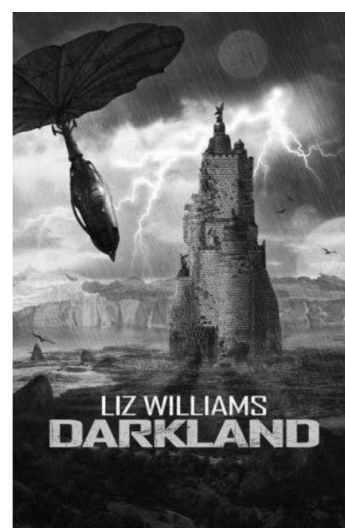
(the second book in the series, *The Hidden Family*, could quite easily have carried the subtitle 'A Young Lady's Guide to Entrepreneurial Capitalism') that threatens the Family's plans for her.

However, even while Helge/Miram is cooped up in her apartments, all hell is breaking loose elsewhere. Angbard's former security captain, Matthias, after betraying the Clan and escaping into our own world, has delivered himself into the hands of Mike Fleming of the US Drug Enforcement Agency and spilled the beans on the Family's cross-world drug smuggling operation. The DEA's understandable initial scepticism that tons of high grade heroin and cocaine are being smuggled across their borders through a parallel world evaporates when a captured courier literally disappears before their eyes from inside a locked cell. When Matthias produces his trump card, in the shape of a lump of plutonium (quite how he manages this while in custody of the DEA is a something of a lacuna in Stross's otherwise tight plotting) the proverbial really hits the fan, and faster than it takes to say 'terrorist threat' Mike and his partner are seconded to a covert grey ops project run jointly between the FBI, CIA and National Security Agency. (Stross, here as elsewhere, revels in the sort of government agency speak in which entire sentences and conversations can be constructed almost wholly out of acronyms: ANSIR, DOJ, PCR, NSA/CSS, NIRT, FINCEN and OCDTF – and which this reader, for one, recognises all too accurately as true to his own workplace.)

Helge's future is being mapped out for her by the Clan grandmothers, a coven of embittered old women whose task is the preservation of the world-walker bloodline through a complex system of arranged marriages. The choice is unenviable: marriage to either of the royal princes, Egon or Cleon, nicknamed the Pervert and the Idiot respectively. Egon has already threatened to kill her, while Cleon, victim of a debilitating childhood illness, is beyond notice of any but his basic needs. Helge's own plans, which involve destabilising the Clan's reliance on mercantilism and drug running and moving them on to a more open, non-feudal economy, are starting to look even more out of reach, although it's a fair bet that Stross is not going to abandon his independent and resourceful heroine to a life of changing nappies and wiping drool off her babies' (and quite likely also her husband's) faces.

The *Merchant Princes* is an intelligent, fun and very self-aware mix of sf, fantasy and procedural thriller elements (though with something of a penchant

for cliff-hanger endings) that understands and enjoys its genre conventions to the full, and it will be interesting to see where Stross takes it from here.



Liz Williams – *Darkland*



Tor, London, 2006, 308pp,
£10.99, t/p,
ISBN 1-4050-4125-0

Reviewed
by Penny
Hill

Ever since Liz Williams's excellent debut novel *Ghost*

Sister, I have been hoping she would someday tell us more stories set on Mondhile and this novel fulfils that hope. The reader's realisation that we know this world and some of its rules comes gradually as we read Ruan's story. Our understanding of the background gives a different dynamic to the progress of the novel. We know what Vali is unable to interpret from the notes she finds and we therefore contrast our anxious wait for the up-coming climactic and disruptive festival with Vali's expectation of a tame folk celebration.

The pre-defined rules of this world – the inhabitants' links to the energy lines and the real meaning of the bloodmind state – form the bedrock for important beats in the narrative.

Although the action centres on Mondhile, Williams' creativity also introduces new worlds for us to explore. The aquatic planet Muspell contains both the Icelandic and feminist influenced society of Skald, and the mystic and misanthropic Vishtie. This world contrasts with the desert planet of Nhem with its overwhelmingly repressive patriarchal regime. I did enjoy the way Williams has set her story far in the future, transposing the richness of our myths – such as the selkie – from a fantasy setting to her warmly rationalised science-fiction universe.

The split narratives start on separate worlds; however, the two threads cohere earlier than expected with our protagonists Vali and Ruan meeting up, giving us a rare chance to see overlapping events from each protagonist's perspective.

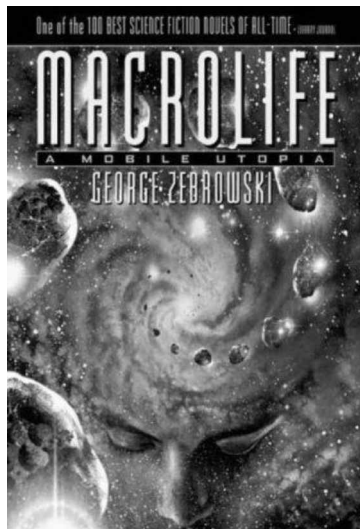
It was refreshing to find principal characters that were essentially likeable, even after their character-defining traumas. This is especially impressive when you consider the alienating initial presentation of Vali as an avenging feminist assassin, who uses the experience of being raped as the assassinating weapon.



The depth of the presentation of sexual politics across the four different cultures would make this novel suitable for consideration for the Tiptree award. There are disturbing and provocative messages here about manipulative and destructive sexual relationships and the power they can exert long after the events are over. The history of Vali's previous damaging relationship with Frey, a Vishtie adept, is gradually revealed to us in flashback. The influence this still has on her psyche permeates the narrative. Her urge to self-harm and the placebo she has found to contain this craving are shown to be coping mechanisms, that hint at the depths of the damage and make it clear that there will be no simplistic healing process available. Likewise Gemaley's sexual power over Ruan reduces him to the status of an addict unable to reject the source of his desire even when he becomes aware of its destructiveness.

Although *Darkland* is built upon the foundations of *Ghost Sister*, the narratives are not linked so it can be read independently. Familiarity with *Ghost Sister* will enable the reader to feel a rewarding additional layer of tension in the narrative. Likewise, this new story is completed in this novel and can be read as a stand-alone work. The epilogue however, opens up new questions and narrative threads, leading us forward to the sequel and whetting our appetites for it.

This is an excellent, well-constructed novel with plenty to offer new readers and existing Williams fans alike. It has warmth, depth and complexity while remaining fast-paced and enjoyable.



George Zebrowski –
Macrolife: A Mobile Utopia
 Pyr, New York, 2006, 384pp \$15.00, t/p,
 ISBN 1-59102-341-6

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

First published in 1979, *Macrolife* has regained its utopian sub-title, which has appeared and disappeared over the years. Zebrowski has coined or popularised various neologisms here – ‘sunspace’ as another name for the solar system, for instance, but if he means anything by ‘macrolife’ he means ‘macro living’ rather than one big life – living throughout huge distances as humans move into arcologies scattering from the Earth and Moon to

colonise ultimately all of the solar system and then the whole universe. On the way humanity will divide and reform before it encounters alien intelligences, and will encounter alien intelligence before it has an equal in artificial intelligence.

This first work set in the macroworld covers a huge time and distance, though in a few sections and with massive elisions. In part one a catastrophic technological collapse on Earth in the near future, when a few asteroids have been hollowed for colonisation, leads to ‘Asterome’ turning itself into a spacecraft heading outwards from the sun; the disproportionately large second part describes the life of one man a thousand years hence; and in the short final section, an observer discusses the end of the universe before the big bang resets everything.

This is also a family saga, as the novel follows the members or clones of the Bulero family. The founder has made Bulerite the basis of all earthly development, allowing massive building on the Earth; unfortunately, Bulerite proves inherently unstable, releasing huge amounts of energy when it cracks. Fortunately, it has hardly been used on the satellite arcologies, and the Bulero family are among the lucky few who escape from the Earth and then from

sunspace. The protagonist of the second section is a Bulero clone, and so is the observer of the third.

By the time John Bulero goes exploring in 3000 CE worlds have been explored, settled, abandoned; even worse, whole societies have been abandoned. Bulero returns to an older girlfriend on Asterome with few signs of changing his personal morality after one excursion planet-side leaves his woman and her family dead. He continues to explore space, though, even while he continues to explore what it means to be a Bulero. Being human does not mean being a missionary helping redeem the de-evolved Crusoes in the planets of the macroworld.

Zebrowski's work has been criticised for his lack of plot, and *Macrolife* shows this weakness. It also means that the novel becomes a tract in which unthinking expansion is taken as a norm, even while there is almost no movement in inner space, that is, in individuals considering themselves. Those two oppositions would create tension even if they did not constitute ‘plot’, but they are missing. The other unspoken element in the book is the unquestioning acceptance of destiny in the cloned family line. It seems an unhealthy acceptance of ‘nature’ that in every Bulero clone the rightness of Bulerotude should emerge. One would think that in a thousand years, perhaps just once or twice, ‘nurture’ would bring up a clone who showed a divergence from a near-divine right to rule and be. Zebrowski may have been the first but he was not the last to include this sort of logic – it re-appeared as recently as 2002 in John C. Wright's *The Golden Age*. There seems to be some innate correlation between the distances of hard sf and the necessity for a family line even if cloned.

Inside, the text is prefixed and divided by pages of quotations from extropians such as Gerard K. O'Neill, Carl Sagan and Dandridge Cole (who coined the term ‘macro-life’); comes with both the original and a new author's conclusion; and has an enthusiastic introduction from Ian Watson. Finding Watson's enthusiasm at odds with the inhumanity (if not inhumanity) of *Macrolife* I went looking for Zebrowski's own opinions and found interesting interviews with him on the Infinity-Plus and Wigglesfish web sites. He cites Fred Hoyle: “a superior human type would not be unrecognizable to us today. The concept of a ‘gentleman’ is one such notion”, and elsewhere Zebrowski says “as long as we remain unchanged human beings, as we have been for much longer than recorded history, then every danger imaginable hangs over us, including destruction by our own hand”. Surely, then, cloning is the first thing to abandon if we are to create those superior, greater, macro-lives? Perhaps Zebrowski will set you, like me, on a wider search to answer that question.

The walls are down, unfortunately

I recently visited a friend of mine, a contemporary from university, who has at the age of 30 earned a fellowship at an Oxford college. His rooms have, if not the best view in England, then certainly one of the top ten. He's working in the bit of his subject he wants to. He has the brightest pupils to teach and ample opportunity to do research. The odd thing was that, as I talked with him about my fledgling career in sf criticism, he seemed more and more enamoured of the idea of working in such an unploughed field. Talking about his own work, he said words to the effect of: the thing about writing in academia is that it's only slightly to do with saying what you want; it's very much more about *authorising* yourself in relation to your predecessors and peers. That image – of academic writing as being 90% an exercise in beating out a clearing in the jungle before you spend 10% of your time pitching camp – has stuck with me. Academic writing is, in that sense, a heavily gatekept activity, one in which your credentials, and the pheromone-pong you give off through your references, matter enormously.

I suppose you could summarise my previous two columns for *Vector* as saying that the field of sf has more and more regions without gatekeepers. It's very much easier than it was ten years ago to get your work into print if you're willing to use small presses, and to get your opinions into a visible public forum online. This, of course, reflects the much wider democratisation of information that digital technology in general and the internet in particular have brought. For all its drawbacks, for all the ways in which that democratisation is still controlled and used and at risk of *ownership* by the forces that have always wanted ownership, this is still something new and worth celebrating. I don't propose to rehearse here the argument about the virtues of gatekeeping that's played out increasingly frequently as, say, political bloggers vs mainstream media. But there are some particular implications for sf.

From the start, sf has always been an open and democratic field, pretty much to a fault. Even now, a smart teenager can read (say) China Mieville's work, form intensely felt disagreements, get themselves to the nearest convention, and within 12 hours be buttonholing the author in the bar. (I saw this happen to Hal Clement at Readercon in Boston, a few months before he died; it was like seeing the apostolic succession.) And, within the limits required to keep themselves sane, authors in general make themselves available for such conversations. This is, to put it mildly, not the sort of behaviour one might expect from a Martin Amis. Much as the boom in literary festivals is to be welcomed, they're heavily gatekept and controlled events. The interaction there is far more like a seminar or lecture than a conversation. This partly explains why the conversation about sf has moved so readily online. (The other part of the explanation, I guess, is the predisposition of sf folk to the techie skills needed to set up and run websites; but that's a whole other column.)

The problem with an un-gatekept world of reading and talk about reading is an old problem, hugely amplified. Life is short, and there are more things to do and read than anyone will have time for. (I still remember one of my 10-year-old death-awareness revelations: I will die *without having read all the books I want to*. I was, perhaps, a freakish child). I'm usually no fan of invoking Sturgeon's Law, and certainly on convention panels it's the equivalent of the neutron bomb: it destroys the evidence and just leaves the assertions standing. But here it applies and needs to be dealt with. The un-gatekept world is full of stuff that's not worth spending time on: novels whose writing only benefits

the writer, serialised in 84 parts online, or pointless flamewars fanned by Ellison imitators who don't have a tenth of Ellison's talent. And, despite the freedom of a world where anything can be said to anyone, sf seems more and more to be sorting itself into affinity groups or niches. The great bounty of the internet is that these no longer need to be geographically bounded. The downside is that affinity groups tend to face inwards, to talk about what they know to the people they know. (The Footage:Fetish:Forum group in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* is a wonderfully well-observed view of how such communities work.) Hence, as this issue of *Vector* demonstrates, the near total invisibility of non-English-language sf in the Anglophone world. It's not that many people consciously set out to suppress sf from India or anything. But if you have a choice between talking about stuff you know, quite possibly by people who are friends, and stuff you don't know, by people in a faraway country of whom we know little, then it's not surprising if taking the first option is easier.

So if we're going to avoid an sf community whose freedom of expression has become its greatest burden, what's the way out? As anyone who owns Google stock (not me, sadly) will know, value on the internet resides not in information *per se* but in organised information: information whose relation to other information is describable. The task of a critic these days, or a reader, or an anthologist, or a magazine like *Vector*, seems to me to be that of the organisation of information. The sf community wants to know what's good and what isn't; without being about authorisation, such work can be a kind of *advocacy*. (That's also the task of awards, but that's slightly more political and so I'll deal with it next time.) We're never going back to the days of paternalism, of a canon handed down from on high; but at the same time, an ungatekept world will not be an equal one. Some works will still be overhyped, some will be undeservedly forgotten. What I want from the conversation about sf is actually not a million miles from what I want from sf: to tell me truths that I don't know yet.



The New X

by
Graham Sleight