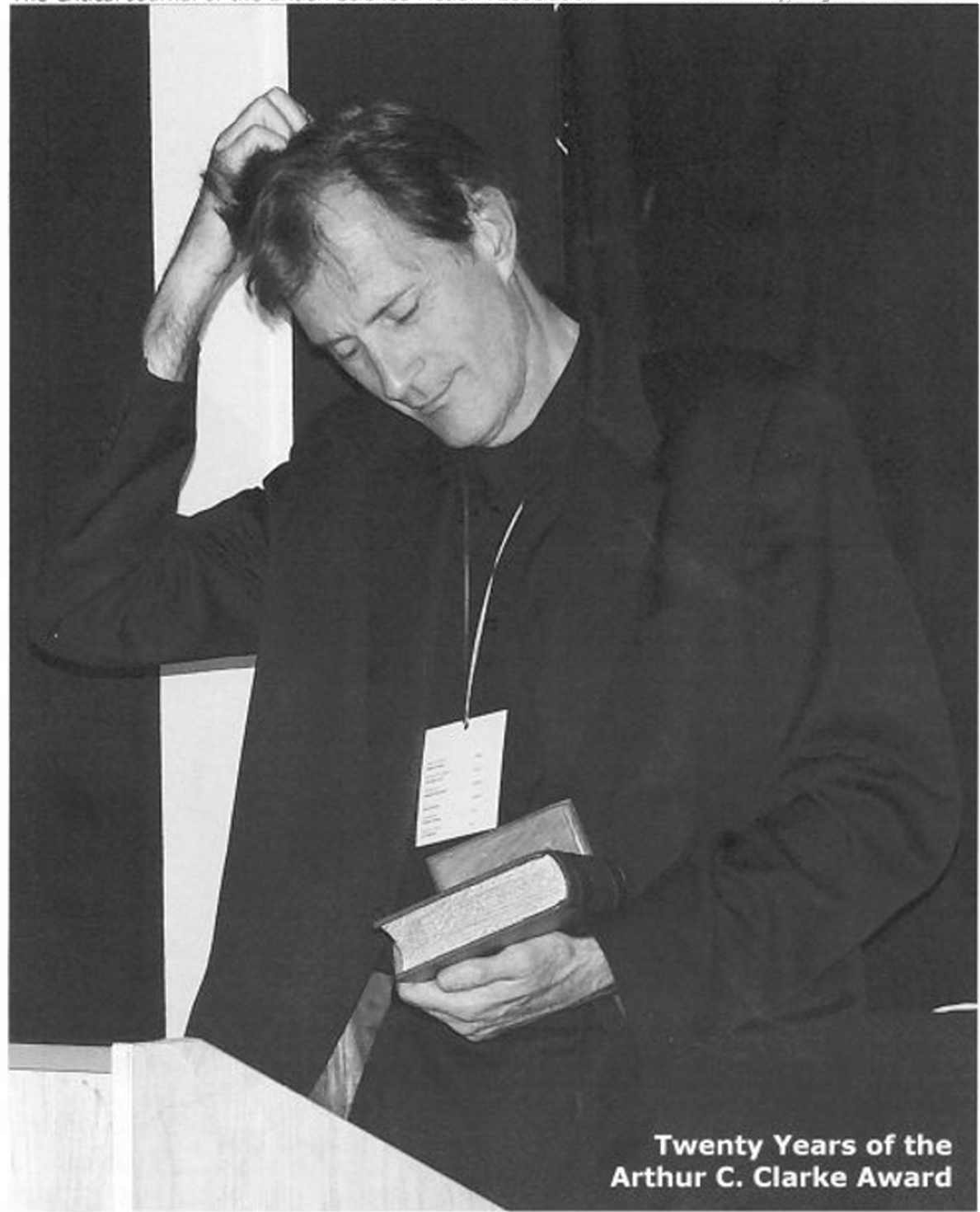


# Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

#248 • July/August 2006 • £2.50



**Twenty Years of the  
Arthur C. Clarke Award**







An explanation is due first. One of the problems with a bimonthly magazine (we have discovered) is lead time, particularly when something goes wrong. We were running a little late anyway, but just before Easter this year, the company that sent out the BSFA mailings went bust. Because it happened at pretty much peak time for British Fandom – especially this year, when Eastercon, the Clarke Award, Sci-Fi London and *two* London Meetings happened in the space of about three weeks – it took a little while to line up a replacement. In the meantime, *Vector* 246 sat at the printer for the best part of two months – and by the time we'd realised the delay was going to be long enough that it needed explanation, *Vector* 247 was finalised as well. So, this is our first chance to reiterate that no, the BSFA hasn't died. In fact, without wishing to tempt fate, we're hoping that by the time you receive this you'll have received three mailings in relatively quick succession.

Of course, part of the problem was that in the absence of the mailings, too often there isn't an obvious route of communication between the BSFA committee and the membership. We're hoping to be able to change that somewhat. As we mentioned a couple of issues ago, *Vector* now has an excitingly shiny website (<http://www.vector-magazine.co.uk/>) to go along with the equally shiny *Matrix* website (<http://www.matrix-magazine.co.uk/>). Moreover, we have set up a *Vector* editorial blog, at <http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/>, where we'll be announcing new website content (including online reprints from past issues, and articles we didn't have space for in the print magazine), as well as posting reviews, links and news. If the mailings go astray again, and there's nothing on the main BSFA website, you can check out the blog for the latest status report. And of course, we welcome old-fashioned letters of comment, to the address opposite or to [vector.editors@gmail.com](mailto:vector.editors@gmail.com).

Thanks must go to Claire Weaver for creating and setting up the website for us. So much of fandom is built on the efforts of volunteers; this issue of *Vector*, as the cover indicates, is celebrating twenty years of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, an enterprise that – as Angie Edwards, Sir Arthur's niece, explains – only exists at all as a result of the work of some very dedicated volunteers. Foremost among these is Paul Kincaid, who retired as Chairman and Administrator of the Award at this year's Ceremony. In 'Twenty Years After', Paul reflects on how the Clarke came to be, and what it's achieved in its time.

Paul ends his article by posing a question: of the twenty books that have won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, which one is your favourite? Which one is your 'Clarke of Clarkes'? We were inspired to ask as wide a cross-section of British fandom as possible, from academics to authors to former judges to fanzine editors, to give us their take on what the Clarke means to them and, if possible, to answer Paul's question. (Our answers are in there too.) Later in the issue we have longer reflections by Neil Gaiman – whose preface to *The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Anthology* we reprint here – by Tom Hunter, who is taking over one-half of Paul's duties, as the new Clarke Award Administrator, and by Geoff Ryman.

Ryman, of course, is the author of the novel that won this

year's Award – in the process becoming one of the few books to 'do the double', having already won the BSFA Best Novel Award – the magnificent *Air*. Andy Sawyer provides us with an in-depth review of that novel, exploring how and why it does what it does, and what we mean by a 'Clarke novel' anyway. Meanwhile, this issue's Archipelago section focuses on the short fiction of some past Clarke Award winning authors, while Graham Sleight wonders whether 'All Shall Have Awards', and whether that's a good thing.

We've finally managed to leave enough space to fit in some Particles this issue. For anyone who's recently joined the BSFA, Particles are capsule reviews with bite, designed to give you a flavour of what books are out there on the shelves for you to investigate right now. But in truth, we hope all the articles and reviews in this issue will do the same; that's one of the things awards like the Clarke Award are designed to do, after all: promote great books to readers.

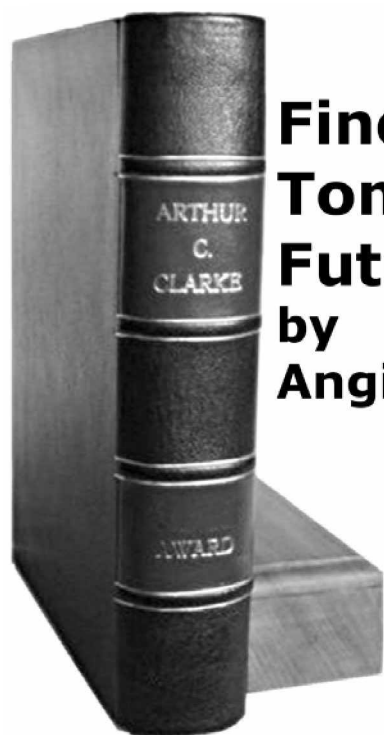
One of the other purposes of awards, though, is to reward those who have contributed great work to the field. The Clarke Award is given to an author for a book. In recognising the book in and of itself the award effectively recommends it as a book worth reading, but in recognising the book as the work of an author the award recognises the contribution an individual has made to the sf genre. We hope that as well as pointing you towards good fiction, this issue of *Vector* will also serve as a recognition and an appreciation of the work of the people who made and are making the Clarke Award the success it is.



# Torque Control

Editorial  
by  
Geneva  
Melzack  
& Niall  
Harrison





## Finding Tomorrow's Futures by Angie Edwards

**M**ore than 20 years ago my father, Fred Clarke, was talking to George Hay about The Future of Science Fiction. To quote Fred, they recognised the fact that "the great writers were already piling on the years and to keep the profession alive it was obvious that one day we would need new blood". George came up with the idea of an award and asked if Arthur would be prepared to sponsor it. This he readily agreed to. He had always tried to encourage the young writers who were constantly approaching him with ideas, and he has always been privately very generous, so it seemed a natural extension of his activities.

Originally it was mooted that the Award should be confined to British writers, but Arthur's reputation was already acknowledged worldwide, so it was decided to take books published in Britain. A team was set up to publicise the Award, read the recommendations, select the shortlist and organise an award ceremony. A small but enthusiastic group thus started the ball rolling. Fred, very wisely, at this point withdrew from all organisational duties and confined himself to designing the Award (a leather-bound book end – still given each year) and waiting for the invitation to the ceremony to drop onto his mat each year.

My own involvement with the award started the year it was held at the Groucho Club, when I attended as a guest at the awards ceremony. Several venues had been tried, and several more (including the Irish Centre in Camden Town and once even at Arthur's birthplace of Minehead) were still to be tested. Every year was a terrible struggle for the Administrator (then Dave Barrett) to find a venue which was not ridiculously expensive but which would hold a growing number of fans and publishers.

Paul Kincaid took up the mantle of Chair of Judges and Administrator in 1996. A breakthrough came when we were generously given wonderful (free) space at the Science Museum in the Space Galleries and Theatre. Their involvement meant that we could afford modest catering, and the whole tenor of the ceremony was instantly lifted. This continued for several years until in 2003 we suffered a cruel double whammy. Until this point Sir Arthur had personally paid for everything involved in the Awards. This included the Award money, the venue when necessary, the catering and the occasional judges' expenses, plus

printing, postage and most advertising. It became clear that he could not sustain this generosity much longer, so in 2003 his company, Rocket Publishing, had to make the difficult decision to keep funding the prize money but not the ceremony costs. Unfortunately in this same year the Science Museum found itself unable to carry on generously providing a venue. This was our lowest point. After years of struggling and touting the Award around we felt we had finally got to the stage where it was recognised as not only the largest and most prestigious SF award in the UK, but had developed a gravitas which meant that the publishers and nominees were very happy to attend. Poor Paul nearly had a heart attack. For the next couple of years we had a real struggle to try and find affordable venues and rustle up sponsorship to pay for it. This has been the most dispiriting and frustrating exercise. However, the recent collaboration with the Sci-Fi London, Britain's premier science fiction film festival at the Apollo Cinema, was a great success, and the generous sponsorship by Cobra Beers was hugely appreciated.

The fact remains, however, that the Award is still on very thin ice. Many people have absolutely no idea that no-one is paid to keep this Award going. The Administrator works for nothing. The judges receive nothing either, and they have to wade through a huge number of nominated books to get to the shortlist stage before re-reading the six finalists. They usually attend one shortlist meeting and one final choice meeting on the day of the ceremony. Many of the judges over the years have not only generously given their time but have not claimed for the many phone calls and even travelling expenses they have incurred. They really are the unsung heroes of the Award.

But from my own perspective, this is part of what makes this Award so very special. The fact that the judges support us so staunchly and obviously love the genre and have an incredibly deep background knowledge of it means that we really do have a group of people debating the outcome with great passion. The fact that authors have always been very proud to be nominated and to win the Award is due in no small measure to the effectiveness of the judging. It may not always be predictable, but it is *always* properly and thoughtfully debated and democratically decided. Amazingly, although the Award has got bigger and bigger, the core of the original ceremony guest list is unchanged, which means that we get to see the same people year after year. It is always a great pleasure to see them, and I hope their continued appearance can be interpreted as a vote of confidence in the Award.

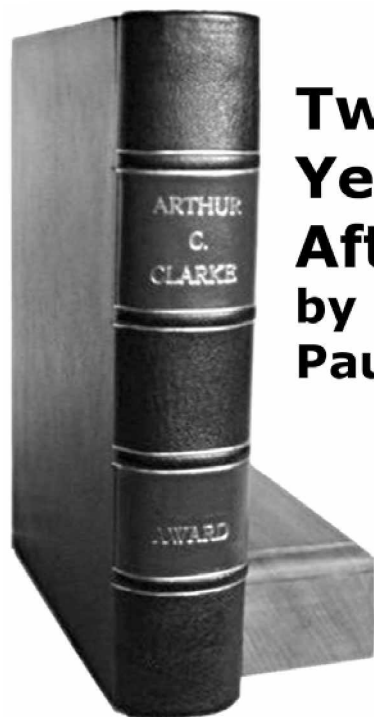
The Administrator's job, latterly undertaken by Paul Kincaid, has grown in scope and influence. He can have had no idea when he took it on how much of his life it would consume. Without his tireless efforts over the last ten years there is no doubt in my mind that the Award would have folded.

But this very special Award should be allowed to live on. Sir Arthur's philanthropy needs to be supported. Paul's incredible vision and hard work need to be acknowledged and built upon. I am convinced that with the right support we can safeguard the future of the Award while never forgetting its original ethos and *raison d'être* – an encouragement from one incredibly lucky, incredibly gifted and incredibly generous man to future generations of visionaries.

It has been an enormous privilege for me to be associated with this prize and everyone who has worked tirelessly to make it a success. Let's keep it going and make it even better.

*Angie Edwards, of Rocket Publishing, is Sir Arthur C. Clarke's niece. She sits on the Serendip Foundation, which administers the award.*





## Twenty Years After by Paul Kincaid

**W**e didn't know what we were doing. Or, to be fair, we knew what we wanted to do. We just weren't too clear about how to go about achieving it.

The goal was to promote British science fiction. That was the aim laid down by Arthur C. Clarke when Maurice Goldsmith approached him for funds. What that might entail was less clear. A new magazine? But there was already *Interzone*. So, an award? But there was already the BSFA Award. Would a juried award be different enough? But if we are promoting British science fiction, should this be an award for British sf only? At the time that was unrealistic. Besides, how do you promote British science fiction by fencing it off from the whole of the rest of the world?

So we ended up with a cash prize (to make sure it was worth winning) for the best science fiction novel receiving its first British publication during the calendar year. We were very careful not to define 'best' or 'science fiction' or 'novel', which has led to a number of fairly intense jury discussions in the years since then, though I think it has also led to the variety and the vitality of the award. (More recently, in these days of print-on-demand, internet publication and e-books, 'first British publication' has also become a problematic term in ways we certainly didn't anticipate back in the mid-1980s – but that is an issue for the future.)

If the Arthur C. Clarke Award began in uncertainty, hesitation and ill-definition, however, what it has achieved in the twenty years of its life is clear and beyond question.

For a start, the award has indeed managed to promote British science fiction. I first became aware of this not long after I took over as administrator, when I started getting contacts from a number of agents who specialise in selling books into overseas markets. It seems that winning the Clarke Award was already invaluable when it came to selling translation rights. Then came the so-called 'British renaissance', and suddenly the whole world was taking notice of British science fiction. There were far too many causes for this upswelling of quality, involvement and excitement to enumerate here, but the Clarke Award was undoubtedly one of them. Whatever the cause, the end result has been that this year we could have had two totally different high-quality shortlists made up entirely of British authors.

That, however, is to take a rather parochial view of things. The Arthur C. Clarke Award is now recognised as one of the most prestigious awards in the world of science fiction. The first time I ever saw a bookshop display of the Clarke Award shortlist was at a university bookstore in Seattle. The American Library Association recently compiled a list of recommended science fiction by the simple expedient of bringing together the winners of the major sf awards, Hugo, Nebula, Tiptree, etc. The only award on the list that is not based in America is the Clarke Award.

Above all, the Clarke Award has compiled a list of winners that stand out as among the most significant works of science fiction of the last 20 years. Add in the shortlists, and anyone who read all 127 titles would have received a superb introduction to the key developments in science fiction during that time.

As I write this, there is a little over a month to go before the 20<sup>th</sup> winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award is to be decided and announced. Whichever of the six shortlisted authors carries away the engraved bookend and the cheque for £2,006, they will be joining an exclusive and very prestigious club. Membership of that club has not always come without controversy, the choice of the jury has been met with dismay and on at least one occasion with cat-calls from sf circles ~~in this country~~. It's easy to understand: the heated jury debates and even the make-up of the juries (which have nearly always included at least one person from outside the usual science fiction world) have encouraged bold and distinctive choices. Clarke Award juries have never settled for a safe, traditional, comfortable view of what science fiction is, or could be. They have always pushed at the envelope, which has meant that popular favourites have often lost out to work that is more challenging, more unconventional, or simply different. But looking back with the benefits of 20-20 hindsight, it is amazing how significant those unconventional, unexpected winners have been in shaping our ever-changing views of what science fiction can do.

The very first book to win the Clarke Award, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, set the tone for what was to come, though not in ways that critics have assumed. Those who have simply remarked upon the 'controversial' decision have presented it as the Clarke jury turning its back upon traditional science fiction, a stance that they see replicated throughout the Award's history in the crowning of Marge Piercy and Amitav Ghosh, or more recently in the shortlisting of works by David Mitchell and, this year, Kazuo Ishiguro. That couldn't be further from what actually goes on in jury meetings. The judges have always been eager to applaud good, traditional science fiction, and you can see that reflected in every shortlist. But time and again, as the arguments turn about the fine distinctions which separate the books, the question is raised: is doing well what science fiction has always done enough to carry off the prize? Once or twice the answer might well be yes, but more often it is no, more often some extra ambition or daring in the work, something novel or unexpected, will make the difference when it comes to the final vote.

After twenty years my memories of that first judging meeting are somewhat hazy. I would, however, be surprised if, at some point during the day, we did not discuss how the shortlisted titles might be presented to a non-sf reading audience. That would be a dreadful reason to award a prize, but an awful lot of ideas and comments go into the melting pot that is the jury system. And looking at the books from outside the genre can be a useful way of deciding what the book is doing with genre, how it



is using the devices of science fiction. I've deliberately used such strategies in the judging meetings I've chaired since then, not because I think the winner should serve as an ambassador for the genre to those who know little and care less about science fiction (if that happens, it's a bonus not an intent of the award), but because it highlights whether faster than light travel appears in the book simply for the sort of gosh-wow effect we expect of science fiction, or for some other and perhaps more interesting reason.

In the end, then, that first jury awarded the prize to Margaret Atwood not because we were trying to ingratiate ourselves with the mainstream, but because we felt that the mainstream sensibilities informing the book brought something new to science fiction. Since then, of course, Atwood has used sf devices in several of her novels and stories and, fatuous remarks about 'squids in space' aside, has often written in an informed and intelligent way about science fiction. And *The Handmaid's Tale* has gone on to be acclaimed as one of the finest science fiction novels to come out of Canada, has become the subject of endless critical studies, and has become so significant a part of the history of science fiction that it's difficult to see what all the fuss was about twenty years ago.

For the last several months I've been busy editing an anthology of critical essays on the first 18 Clarke Award winners. It is an experience that has forced me to look again at each of these books. Some seem destined to remain high profile, books such as Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* or China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* which still keep being mentioned in serious essays and passing conversation. Others seem to have slipped from our consciousness (I strongly suspect that Elizabeth Billinger's essay in the anthology is the first critical attention Rachel Pollack's *Unquenchable Fire* has received since it was published). But all excite an interesting response, and all are very different from each other. When you actually look at the books which have won the prize you realise that it is impossible to identify a typical Clarke Award winner.

It used to be said that the award went to science fiction books with mainstream pretensions, a statement that doesn't hold up even when you look at those books to which it was especially applied, Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass*, say, or *The Calcutta Chromosome* by Amitav Ghosh. But it is even less true of such exuberant and overtly science fictional works as Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty* (a novel which dug back into science fiction's hoariest past in order to reinvent the genre – I am on record as saying that I believe the so-called British renaissance began with this book) or Jeff Noon's *Vurt* (which finds an unlikely home for the tropes of cyberpunk in the grittiest streets of Manchester).

Even when books have taken similar topics or ideas there is no uniformity in the result. Can you imagine two more different ways of examining the impact of the past than Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver* or Christopher Priest's *The Separation*? (I recall one judge remarking of *The Separation* that where a good book can be read differently every time you approach it, with *The Separation* every time you approach it you approach a different book. True, I think, but true of many of the winners, it is one of the qualities that make them stand out to the jury.) And the political novel finds radically different expression in, say, *Bold As Love* by Gwyneth Jones and *Iron Council* by China Miéville.

This difference is something that the judges have to confront every year. How do you compare books that are as contrasting as those on any of the Clarke Award shortlists? Even more difficult,

how do you then decide that one is best, whatever we might mean by 'best'? Certain things are a given, of course; you look for writerly skills, interesting prose, vivid characterisation and so forth; and you look for fluency in handling the devices of science fiction. But by the time a book has made the shortlist, we can pretty much take those for granted. What then makes the difference, as often as not, is 'difference'. Something bold and new in the novel, a sense that the writer is stretching after something fresh, interesting, exciting. That, of course, is exactly how we would describe those key works which shape the course of a literature, which stand out as the books anyone should read for a basic understanding of what a literature is about and how it has changed over time. In other words, though it is a concept I dislike: the canon.

It's not so easy to spot, year in, year out. Though I would hesitate to suggest that any jury got it wrong, I suspect that several could have made other choices and got it just as right. But on the whole, and in retrospect, the list of Clarke winners provides a pretty canonical list of the key works of science fiction over the past twenty years.

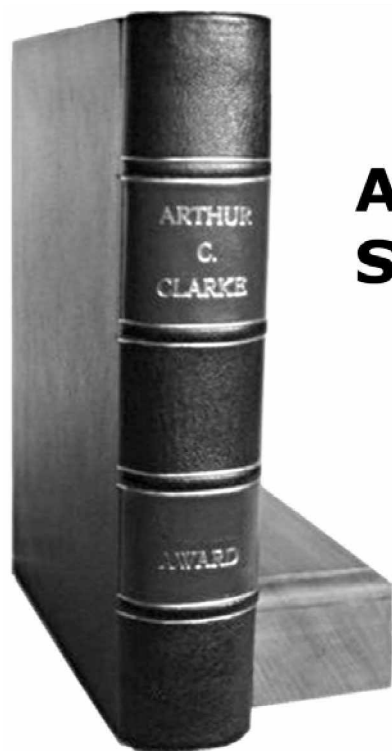
But that raises one final question: of these twenty books which one stands out as the Clarke of Clarks? We have a shortlist of twenty titles. You are the jury. Which are you going to pick as the most significant work of science fiction in the last twenty years?

## The winners of the Arthur C. Clarke Award:

- 1987: *The Handmaid's Tale* — Margaret Atwood**
- 1988: *The Sea And Summer* — George Turner**
- 1989: *Unquenchable Fire* — Rachel Pollack**
- 1990: *The Child Garden* — Geoff Ryman**
- 1991: *Take Back Plenty* — Colin Greenland**
- 1992: *Synners* — Pat Cadigan**
- 1993: *Body of Glass* — Marge Piercy**
- 1994: *Vurt* — Jeff Noon**
- 1995: *Fools* — Pat Cadigan**
- 1996: *Fairyland* — Paul J. McAuley**
- 1997: *The Calcutta Chromosome* — Amitav Ghosh**
- 1998: *The Sparrow* — Mary Doria Russell**
- 1999: *Dreaming in Smoke* — Tricia Sullivan**
- 2000: *Distraction* — Bruce Sterling**
- 2001: *Perdido Street Station* — China Miéville**
- 2002: *Bold as Love* — Gwyneth Jones**
- 2003: *The Separation* — Christopher Priest**
- 2004: *Quicksilver* — Neal Stephenson**
- 2005: *Iron Council* — China Miéville**
- 2006: *Air* — Geoff Ryman**

*Paul Kincaid administered the Arthur C. Clarke award for 11 years. He is also an esteemed reviewer and critic, and has just been awarded the 2006 Thomas D. Clareson Award, for "outstanding service activities – promotion of SF teaching and study, reviewing, editorial writing, publishing, organizing meetings, mentoring [and] leadership in SF/fantasy organizations." He also edited The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Companion, Neil Gaiman's preface to which appears elsewhere in this issue.*





## A Brief Survey

### Stephen Baxter

I've been nominated several times for the Clarke, beginning with my first novel *Raft*, which I regard as a very kind tribute to my work. I met Sir Arthur himself at 1992 ceremony following that first nomination. The Clarkes are a splash of colour and controversy each year. My Clarke of Clarkes – McAuley's *Fairyland*.

### Elizabeth Billinger

I've always had a bit of a list habit. It all started way back in the mists of time, when I was 14 and the older friend I travelled to school with was issued with a Sixth Form Reading List. When she gave me a copy of my own, it was like Moses coming down from Ararat with a tablet of stone: for years it never even occurred to me to wonder who had drawn up the list or what their criteria were. I ploughed my way through those books, getting bored, being moved, convinced I was achieving something. It was the first time in my reading career that I'd found anything or anyone to guide my reading. Meandering my way, unsupervised, through the public library had led to many wonderful discoveries and some things that would have horrified my parents, but the list became a security blanket. It was transcribed a number of times, with added tick boxes (for those I'd read and those I owned), and stayed with me for decades.

Later, when my reading became more focused on sf and fantasy David Pringle's *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels* and *Modern Fantasy: The 100 Best Novels* were turned into similar lists. And after that, came the discovery that literary awards can function as reliable recommendations. The list of Clarke Award winners is not long, but the shortlists are a wonderfully fruitful addition to my habit.

### Paul Billinger

I suppose I've always been aware of sf book awards: when I first became interested in the genre they did help direct my reading (even if quite *why* some of the some of them won tended to baffle me). But it was to The Arthur C. Clarke Award that I paid most

attention, as this was the one with interesting, and different, winners and shortlists. By the early nineties I was trying to read the shortlists before the winner was announced, so that I could form my own view. So for the 1997 Award I'd read the – very strong – shortlist and was clear about my favourite book, and equally clear that it would not win. Which just goes to show you can't second guess the Clarke: Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* did win, and that for me shows the strength of the Award. It is inclusive, imaginative and has the conviction to choose what it believes is the right book. This continued during my time as a judge and I hope will continue now that I have taken over as Chair of the Judges.

### Claire Brialey

I miss it now. Judging the Clarke award enabled me to feel temporarily confident that I knew and understood science fiction – or at least that brand of it then being published in the UK. Reading a whole year's output in a concentrated way also revealed trends in what got sf authors thinking. Thus 1998 saw a boom in virtual reality, alternate history and time travel, post-cyberpunk and sf thrillers. 1999, by comparison, was big on the themes of genetic manipulation, lost children, and the nature of artificial intelligence.

Yes, I miss it. But without the obligation and the incentive of over 50 free books thumping through the letterbox in several months it seems impossible, now, to read that widely in the field. So I compromise by making sure I catch up with the shortlist, enabling me at least to enjoy having an informed opinion about how wrong the judges are these days. Doubtless we were wrong too, but I'd still happily recommend *Dreaming in Smoke* or *Distraction* – and several others from those shortlists – to virtually anyone. And having once been involved, I feel an enduring connection to the award; whatever else I do, I'll always be a former Clarke judge.

### Tanya Brown

When I first heard of the Arthur C Clarke Award, it was a grand and distant concept, awarded to books I'd never read (I only bought paperbacks, back then) by authors I'd often never sampled. As I made more friends within the SF community, and found myself discussing books more frequently and more thoroughly, I began to look forward to the Clarke shortlist as a shortcut, a recommended reading list of what was new and interesting in the field.

Then I became a Clarke judge myself, and that gave me quite a different angle on the Award. I hadn't realised just how many sf novels were published in the average year, or what a broad field they covered. And I learned that there was no such thing as an average year: instead, there were clusters of exceptional novels, and years where good new fiction was thin on the ground. Most intriguingly, I began to notice trends and movements in the genre, in a way that I hadn't appreciated when I read a mere handful of fresh novels. That appreciation has stayed with me, even though I don't read a tenth of the current sf that I did as a judge.

### Stuart Carter

Gwyneth Jones has been receiving Clarke nominations since the award's inception, but that's not the reason I'm going to have to plump for *Bold As Love* as my own favourite winner of the Award. It's to my mind very much an underdog tale, a story that shouldn't really work. Just try explaining the plot to non-genre folk – "Well, these rock stars end up running a collapsing United



Kingdom ... actually, forget the 'United' bit ... er, it's sort of *Bill & Ted* without the time travel" – and see how fast the pitying smiles bloom. But *Bold As Love* still works magnificently, beautifully and heart-breakingly well. Anyone who can achieve these heights with what would seem such potentially preposterous material more than deserves a Wyld Stallyns guitar flourish.

On a wildly off-message note (is that my pager I hear beeping...?), I can't help but look askance at two decades of judges when Iain M. Banks has troubled the shortlists so little, let alone won (he was nominated once, for *Use Of Weapons*, in 1991). The Clarke Award is a vitally wonderful institution and its quixotic eccentricity a very British joy to behold, but Banks' omission from its ranks still strikes me as moving beyond mere English eccentricity towards a full-blown Alzheimers diagnosis.

## Colin Greenland

How did I feel about winning the Arthur C. Clarke Award? Startled. Thrilled. Elated. I felt a bit drunk, to tell you the truth. I had one arm around my agent, the other around a large whisky. After the celebrations, when I'd sobered up, what I felt was: confirmed. Legitimated. I'd done a lot of research before attempting a space opera – audience research, much of it, talking to fans. They'd all told me space opera wasn't legitimate, wasn't worth writing. None of them had convinced me. I'd written one anyway, it had been hard work, however much I'd enjoyed it, and now here was a jury of my peers – writers, editors, reviewers – proclaiming it the best book of the year. When, at the next Eastercon, I won the BSFA Award, an award voted for by fans, people who'd actually gone out and bought the book, or borrowed it – hell, stolen it for all I cared – then I really knew it was true. But that's another matter.

The Clarke Award established me as a writer. It gave *Take Back Plenty* a valuable distinction in the larger world where people can't tell one sf book from another. And it gave me a platform, a lofty, dizzily orbiting platform, for the work I wanted to do next.

## Niall Harrison

I can tell you more-or-less exactly when I started consciously following the Clarke Award. As I was growing up and discovering sf, it was just *there*, in the background. (*The Handmaid's Tale* won when I was six.) Occasionally I was vaguely aware that one book or other had been nominated; and sometimes well-meaning relatives used it as a guide, as when one of my uncles bought me *The Star Fraction* for my sixteenth birthday on the basis of the 'runner-up for the Arthur C. Clarke Award' tagline. But it was *The Sparrow* that finally did it. When I went to university and joined the sf society, I was informed that I was entitled to choose a book that they would buy to add to their library. Mary Doria Russell's novel – the Clarke winner that year – sounded sufficiently intriguing, so I picked it. I was blown away. Nothing since has had quite the same impact, but these days it's still the Clarke list that, for me, defines the year's best science fiction. More relevant to me than the Nebula; more reliable than the Hugo; usually more interesting than either. The best part is that there are still winning books that I haven't read yet, that I can look forward to. No, wait: the best part is looking forward to the winners still to come.

## Steve Jeffery

One of my main memories from my first year as a Clarke Award judge was the sense of rising panic around the end of October when, with only a few months to go before the January shortlist

meeting, only a dozen of so of the promised fifty to sixty books had so far dropped through the letterbox. This, our Administrator, cheerfully announced, was not untypical. Panic does concentrate the mind wonderfully.

I look back on those two years with mixed feelings. I'm glad to have done it; being chosen was something of an honour, a feather in the cap of your sercon credibility (at that stage in my fannish career that sort of thing mattered rather more than it does now). I also discovered a number of interesting new authors, particularly Patricia Anthony and Jonathan Lethem, while new kid on the block Ken Macleod's *The Star Fraction* impressed us so much we revived the position of Runner-up.

One of the criticisms often made about the Clarke Award, invariably from people who've never been on the judging panel, is that sometimes the judges make a left-field choice, choosing a work published outside the genre in a bid for 'literary respectability'. I have to say I have never heard that argument from anyone who's been involved in the selection. We know enough (you only need to read Ansible's 'As Others See Us') to know that any such move is self-defeating. The winner has to be, and is, selected purely on merit of what we, as judges, consider to be good science fiction.

## Tony Keen

The Clarke Award has only recently become a significant factor in my sf reading. Though I was aware, and have even read, some of the books that were recognised in the first twelve years (Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty*, Jeff Noon's *Vurt*), that they were Clarke winners more-or-less passed me by. As I started moving in the circles of literary fandom, I had a better idea of the buzz when Tricia Sullivan won with *Dreaming In Smoke*, and Bruce Sterling with *Distraction*, but I must confess I only really started paying attention when I began being invited to the Awards ceremony. Since then, the Clarke winners and shortlists have, together with the BSFA shortlists been a guide to what I ought to be reading. I can't say I've read every Clarke winner in the last five years, but those I have – China Miéville's engrossing *Perdido Street Station*, Gwyneth Jones's neo-Arthurian *Bold As Love*, Geoff Ryman's humanitarian *Air* and my favourite, Christopher Priest's challenging *The Separation* – have given me a great deal of pleasure. The Clarke, a jury award to complement the popular vote of the BSFA, is an essential part of the UK SF world, and now an important part of my own life.

## Dave Langford

My memories of Clarke Award judging sessions have somehow become crosslinked with Randall Garrett's little parody of Doc Smith, 'Backstage Lensman'. This story's bad guys are endlessly in committee: "And so it went, through member after member of that dark Council. How they arrived at any decision whatever is starkly unknowable to the human mind."

I've never been much good at predicting the Clarke winner, even when I was one of the judges. How on earth did the judicial gestalt fail to shortlist Greg Egan's *Permutation City* as I (a mere cell in that particular Borg collective) urged in 1995? It remains starkly unknowable to the Langford mind.

Embarrassingly, I still haven't read *all* the Clarke winners, and would feel a bit of an idiot trying to name the best of the best. Instead, I recommend looking at the whole shortlist for each year. The record at [www.clarkeaward.com](http://www.clarkeaward.com) is full of fine, strong SF novels that nevertheless didn't earn the coveted Clarke bookend. Some of them should have.



## Geneva Melzack

The Arthur C. Clarke Award was shaping my reading before I'd ever even heard of it. I only became explicitly aware of the Clarke relatively recently. Its credentials as an award became established in my mind when I took a look at the past list of winners, only to find that it contained some of my favourite science fiction novels from the last few years. The funny thing is, I'm sure that one of the reasons I ended up discovering those books, those books whose names on the past list of winners made me think that here was an award to take notice of, was because they were Clarke winners in the first place.

I'm sure my local book shop (where Jeff Noon had once worked) would have promoted *Vurt* anyway, but the fact that it was a Clarke winner must have made them even more eager and proud to do so. I might have been turned onto *The Sparrow* by word of mouth anyway, but the buzz wouldn't have been quite so alive had it not won the Clarke.

That's what I like about the Clarke: the simple fact that it gets people reading good books. Whether readers are aware of the award or not, it does get the books out there in front of them.

## Simon Morden

The Clarke Award has always had both kudos and controversy attached to it – from the very beginning. Having awarded Margaret Atwood the first ever novelty bookend, she then turns on our beloved 'squids in space' genre. There's the perennial criticism of 'it's not proper science fiction', levelled at both China Miéville and Chris Priest. And the 'pandering to the literati' murmurings as the award goes to the art-house choice.

As part of this year's record-winning team of judges who almost managed to miss their own ceremony, I say a pox on your grumblings. It's an almost impossible decision, going from 2005's case, forty-seven novels, to just six, and then to just one. Treat past and present judges kindly, for they have laboured hard in the word mines.

And what gems they have discovered: my unashamed favourite is Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*. Spiritual, passionate, disturbing, alien – a phenomenal book for a modern age. I'd have loved to have been a fly on the wall for that judges' meeting...

## Caroline Mullan

Memories of the winning books from two decades: The appalling realisation reading *The Handmaid's Tale* that yes, it could happen, you could wake up one morning to find yourself no longer a person. The strange America and Americans of *Unquenchable Fire*, the strange London and stranger Londoners of *The Child Garden*. The many literary planets of *Take Back Plenty*, and the pure old-fashioned science fictional pleasure of *The Sparrow*. The changing old world of *Quicksilver*, and the changing new worlds of *Distraction*, *Bold As Love*, and *Air*. And from the shortlists too, too many to detail: *Ash and Coalescent*, *Speed of Dark*, *Kil'n People*, *Pashazade* and *Passage*, *Silver Screen*, *Parable of the Talents*, *Snow Crash*, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, *Red Mars* and *Blue Mars*, *Use of Weapons*, *Grainne*, *Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand*...

I travel in these worlds, then and now. Their characters speak to me, their landscapes and ideas furnish my mind. Will you ask me to choose between fear and wonder, irony and exploration? I cannot, and nor can anyone, for who can separate these qualities from our lives and minds?

But if there is to be a Clarke of Clarkes, let it be given to Geoff Ryman, for his books reconcile all of these, and show we can remain human, and hope.

## Mark Plummer

The Arthur C. Clarke Award was, conveniently, introduced at about the time that I began to take a serious interest in sf, so for me it's been an enduring constant of the genre, an ongoing series of guidebooks to science fiction as it is now. It's not that the other awards – Hugos, Nebulas, the BSFA's own awards – don't highlight the good stuff, but the Clarke Award has been particularly valuable to me because of its 'rough guide' qualities: it doesn't exactly ignore the genre heartland, particularly not in recent years, but it's not afraid to wander off the track every now and then to draw our attention to a first novel or an unprepossessing paperback original or a fringe sf work, carving a path through to this fascinating artefact hidden in the genre jungle which we might otherwise have overlooked because it's not on the tourist trail. A Clarke Award short-listed book is reliably worth a look, and even when it isn't some previously unnoticed astounding palace of science fictional wonderment then at least it will rarely, if ever, turn out to be an abandoned and rusting oil drum – or when it does, it'll be a kinda fascinating and quirky abandoned oil drum all the same.

## Adam Roberts

Do the Clarke Award judges always get it right? No, not always. Of course often they do: only an idiot would disagree (to consider only those awards made in the present century) that *Perdido Street Station*, *The Separation* or *Air* are amongst the very best genre novels of their respective years. But can it be right that Stephen Baxter, Octavia Butler, Kim Stanley Robinson or Ursula LeGuin have never won a Clarke? And there – right there, in posing that question – I put my finger on precisely what's so important about the Clarkes. Because of course it goes without saying that making 'The True Judgement' about literature is beyond any literary award; and the Clarkes certainly doesn't pretend otherwise. SF is too broad a genre, and there are just too many excellent writers publishing novels in it, for there ever to be consensus on what the very best is. What the award *can* do is set in train a wide range of passionate and engaged debates about what is best in our genre, and where it is going. Of all the many awards in SF, the Clarke shortlists are the ones that are the most stimulating, the most provoking, the most surprising (in a good way). It's the main fiction award of the year and remains as unmissable an event now as it did in the '80s. I always read all the books shortlisted every year; not because I have to (although I do review the list for the infinityplus website). I'd read them all even if I weren't reviewing them. There's no better way to stay abreast of where the genre is.

My Clarke of Clarkes is Paul McAuley's extraordinary *Fairyland* (1995; Clarke winner 1996), a work which seems to me as close to total fiction (on the analogy with Cruyff's 'total football') as any I've read. It manages to be a flawless near-future cyberpunk novel about the uplift of monkeys into blue-skinned human slaves and their subsequent development into posthuman 'fairies' whilst also being, with no contradiction, a Fantasy novel about a character in thrall to Spenser's Faery Queene. How can it be both at once? It sounds an unlikely balance, but McAuley manages it. *Fairyland* is a gritty dramatisation of urban life and its a paean to the Muse; its realist and poetic all at the same time. This book is exquisitely, near-flawlessly written; it's thought-provoking; it's a page-turning read; it leaves you with all sorts of haunting and powerful images after you close the final page. Above all it does what I'm always trying to do (although I've not even come close to McAuley's success here); to write a novel that brings a shaping metaphor properly alive, *la métaphore vive*, in the



## Maureen Kincaid Speller

Over the last twenty years, I think the great strength of the Clarke Award has been that you've never known what's going to happen once the judges disappear into conclave. It has made surprising choices on occasion – the most terrifying moment in the ceremony is that pause just after the winner has been announced and while the audience is still processing the fact – but I think every choice made has withstood subsequent criticism and done its bit to prompt people to think a little harder about what, exactly, science fiction really is.

The novels I remember most clearly are of course those I had a hand in, particularly the selection of Jeff Noon's *Vurt*. I don't think it would threaten the judging process to say that we all knew the moment we sat down to make the decision that year that we'd all been blown away by the same novel. And everyone else felt the same when the award was announced. It's rarely that simple, of course. I was also involved in the selection of Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* the previous year, and was profoundly disturbed by the negative response to that announcement. And no, I don't regret it. Hindsight is always 20/20, but I stick by that decision.

An overall favourite from among the winners? No, not really. As a group, I think they represent the finest that sf has to offer, and reading any of them would be a great introduction to the genre.

## Ian Watson

Personally I was very chuffed that my *Whores of Babylon* was a finalist for the Clarke since his *Childhood's End* made such a deep impression on me as a kid of 13 or so, and the idea of him being one day associated with a book written by me would have filled me with an equivalent, um, sense of wonder. And I'm very pleased years later to have been part of the jury that honoured Paul McAuley's splendid *Fairyland* and then Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* – viewed at first perhaps as an eccentric choice, but not later by those who read the book, which I'd say is one of the reasons for giving an award rather than rubber-stamping an already laureated title; the Hugo for Harry Potter was ridiculous. An appropriate choice too, Amitav Ghosh, in that, although a general (not genre) writer, he relished his Clarke Award – unlike Margaret Atwood who, so I'm told, ignored it loftily.

## Claire Weaver

The first time I attended an Arthur C. Clarke Award ceremony was in 2003. It was the year Christopher Priest won for *The Separation*, when the award was still at the Science Museum. I was new to the science fiction scene; I knew just a handful of people and had no idea of what went on at a Clarke Award ceremony. I remember sitting a few rows behind China Miéville and being wowed by such close proximity to Real Live Author. The location was so wonderfully fitting, and everything just seemed so glamorous and exciting.

But turbulent times were ahead, and by the following year the ACCA had been forced to find a new home (and give up the free bar). I'd just started editing *Matrix* – I'd been to cons and I knew a hell of a lot more people, and I was no longer awestruck by every author that happened to wander past. But I was also very aware of just how much the Clarke Award meant to everybody, and how much support had been rallied to keep it going.

Now it's 2006 already. The Clarkes are still going strong

(stronger perhaps thanks to all that concerted effort and generosity) and I'm reading my way towards helping select a short list and eventually a winner. As to who that person will be of course, you'll just have to wait and see...

## Pete Young

I've come to look towards the Arthur C. Clarke Award as Britain's best benchmark for the highest quality in science fiction and fantasy writing. My own comparatively recent entry into fandom can be explained by the 1998 Clarke Award-winning book, Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*, which I discovered by chance on a bookshop's mainstream fiction bookshelf, and became the first SF novel I had finished well, devoured, actually in well over ten years. It was the right book at the right time, for the right reasons: the evident ease of Russell's storytelling and the fluidity of her writing restored my faith in SF as a meaningful and socially relevant literature (and is probably the book most responsible for every SF and fantasy novel I have bought since, thereby making it something of a life-altering book). This illustrates precisely why the Clarke Award is so important. Not only does it recognise SF and fantasy that can comfortably straddle the divide between genre and mainstream fiction as well as recognising more directly science fictional works, it also acknowledges the strongest genre writing of the year as represented in the annual shortlist which is guaranteed to offer a wealth of challenging reading to anyone interested in SF. I fully expect people will increasingly look towards the Clarke Award for its judicious recognition of notably important, imaginative literature.



**Preface to The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Companion**  
by Neil Gaiman

All awards are weird but some awards are weirder than others, and there was always a particular oddity to the Arthur C. Clarke Awards that, in the beginning, made people talk about them and, later, made the same people respect them.

I was, for two years, an Arthur C. Clarke Award judge, and I learned then just how odd they were. For a start, as Clarke Award judges, we were sent all the SF published in the UK in that year. Everything. And we did our best to read them all, because you never know where the undiscovered gem is hiding.

(I don't say yes to judging awards any more. I read every SF book published in the UK for two years, thirteen years ago, whether I felt like it or not, and have comparatively recently, found myself able to read science fiction for pleasure once again.)

The way that the awards worked at the time, the judges came from three different bodies: the British SF Association, the SF Foundation and the Science Policy Foundation. Now, judging an award is difficult if you're all agreed on what it is you're judging (imagine the judges at an Olympic Figure Skating event, all watching for the same things), but here you had at least a couple of different criteria for excellence – imagine that one set of figure skating judges didn't much care for the moves but would be awarding marks based on costume, or smiles, or choice of music, and then imagine that the judging of the gold needed to be unanimous.

The Clarke award was contentious: that was, frankly, part of the fun of it (the other part was the Arthur C. Clarke donated cheque that accompanied the award), not to mention one of the reasons it was discussed in pubs and fanzines and in the proto-online communities of the time: it had been given, in its first two years, to Margaret Atwood and to George Turner, and just as the pundits had concluded that it seemed to be an award that was given to mainstream authors who had written SF, the award went to Rachel Pollack for her *Unquenchable Fire*, an uncompromising piece of magical realism, and the pundits scratched their heads and continued to argue.

It was about this point that I noticed that the Arthur C. Clarke Award was being taken seriously – or as seriously as SF awards are taken. It occupied its own unique niche, and now, after almost twenty years, it is still in its own niche.

My own Clarke award judging experiences, over two years, were about as different as they could possibly have been. In one of the years blood was spilled, horses were traded, and six judges faced off and fought for their books, each judge having a completely different idea of what the awards were, what kind of book they should be given to, what kind of shortlist they wanted to see, what kind of book should ultimately win. In the other year an IRA bomb threat made it impossible for half the judges to get to

the shortlist judging, and made for a very easy and quiet judging process for those who were there. Looking back at the books that won, I'm satisfied with both of them, not least because neither of them was like any other book that had won.

And then my judging time was done and the awards spun on with, for a few more years, the Science Policy Foundation, and then after that with the Science Museum, and now without either. I hope it gets another 'science' leg of the tripod again soon – the awards for the last couple of years have been much harder to argue about, and honestly, I think it's probably a good thing to have at least a couple of judges looking at the figure skaters quite differently to their fellows, because the Clarke Awards are, I suspect, ultimately about bridge-building, which may be one reason why they are, although a British award, recognised and respected internationally. The Arthur C. Clarke Award is the award that the world of SF offers, each year, to the world outside as an example both of what SF is and what it can be.

The perfect Arthur C. Clarke Award winner has little in common with any of the other winners except, perhaps, that in the places where people gather together to argue, a Clarke shortlist and a Clarke winner will give them plenty to talk about.

*This article was written as the Preface to The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Companion, a collection of critical essays on Clarke award winning novels. Neil Gaiman is the author of numerous science fiction and fantasy comics, novels and short stories.*



**An Extended Review of the 2005 Arthur C. Clarke Award Winning Novel: *Air* by Geoff Ryman  
By Andy Sawyer**

The success of *Air* in the latest Clarke award is nothing less than an act of magic.

The shortlist as it stood presented a number of problems which potentially could have wrecked the credibility of the Award at this rather troubled stage of its existence. It consisted of two novels (Geoff Ryman's *Air* and Kazuo Ishiguru's *Never let Me Go*) which by anyone's standards (though see below) should be considered outstanding, and four also-rans of varying quality from excellent to enjoyable-but-forgettable which suffered from being read in the shade of Ryman and Ishiguru but which were on the face of it considerably more science-fiction-ish. "Also-rans" sounds harsh, so I must qualify that by saying that I mean no insult to Ken MacLeod's *Learning the World*, Alastair Reynolds' *Pushing Ice*, Charles Stross's *Accelerando*, and Liz Williams' *Banner of Souls* by saying that they did not move and excite me in the way *Air* and *Never Let Me Go* did. Were those two not on the shortlist I would have been considerably less disappointed if one of the other four had won, if any of them had – if that makes sense. But with the short-list as it stood a decision to honour any other than Ishiguru or Ryman would have been a travesty.

*Air* took the award, of course, and this means that the science fiction writer, as opposed to the 'mainstream' writer with something which looks like science fiction, was the success. In what follows I am, I hope, going to suggest why I feel uncomfortable writing a sentence like that, but also why it's good for both the Clarke award and that collection of extremely different texts that we point to and call science fiction that it was Ryman who won the award. This is not to say that *Air* is the obvious compromise choice, a charge which is laid against just about every juried award at some time or another. I don't know, or care, what happened in the discussions, but there's no sense in *Air* that justifies this. In not giving the award to an outsider-sf text in favour of a book which must be sf because it has also won the BSFA award (as well as a number of other sf awards including the Tiptree), the jury has given first prize to a book that deserves it. As well as being central-sf, *Air* is also stunningly written; inventive and open, as sympathetic to the human costs of change as, without the darkness and claustrophobia of, *Never Let Me Go*. But why should I be presenting this as an ideological conflict as much as a simple decision between which of two books is the better?

Partly, of course, because it's something that arises from the our-gang tribalism that is still a feature of the science fiction world. Ishiguru's *Never Let Me Go* is one of those novels from 'outside' which often appear on the Clarke shortlist and sometimes carry off the prize. Ishiguru has never denied that he did not intend the novel to be science fiction, that he has little interest in futuristic technology except as metaphor, and that he finds writing futuristic fiction uncongenial. M. John Harrison, reviewing *Never Let Me Go* for *The Guardian*<sup>1</sup>, argued that despite a motif which we would find science fictional, it was more centrally a "sleight of hand" novel of contemporary identity, how we unquestioningly accept the lives our parental, educational and political authorities give us and in doing so, experience the "steady erosion of hope". I'd suggest that (if we must do so) it's certainly possible to read *Never Let Me Go* as one of those rare but essential sf texts which give us an alternative world from the inside. We accept one novum – that a technology has been developed which means that certain things common in sf novels can be done – and then explore the consequences. And one of

these consequences is that although we may find the effects of that technology horrible, for people living in that world they would be as normal and natural as – I don't know – the assumption we all make that living with a mode of transport that kills or injures thousands of people a year is natural and normal. In other words *Never Let Me Go* is an alternate history (not a future) involving a technology which most people, including those most intimately involved with it, never even think about but live with the moral consequences of as if there were no moral question whatsoever. Which makes it science fiction, in my book, and gets over what we may see rather too sensitively as the author's problem with the form.

(Above, I wrote "by anyone's standards" and five minutes ago I read Adam Roberts's thoughtful survey of the complete shortlist in the May *New York Review of Science Fiction*<sup>2</sup> in which *Never Let Me Go* is described as "passionless and chilly" with characters who "sail past the zeitgeist". Roberts, I think, is right in the effects he describes, but he is as wrong, I feel, in the conclusions he draws from them as he is right when he enthuses over *Air*. Without banging on at a sidebar area of disagreement, this is not our world, nor our zeitgeist, and so perhaps we have a case where calling something science fiction strengthens its literary qualities. That should scupper the book's reputation in the Sunday heavies...)

This rather strained definition of sf is something that has traditionally caused some people some problems with the Clarke, so I should lay my cards on the table and say I'm not one of them: whatever the merits of individual books may be, the Clarke tradition of including books which may not be published as sf or even read as sf (but which the jury can argue are sf) is one I'm happy with. Indeed, if we want to be even more pedantic, *Air* is not sf in a strict sense either, even though Ryman takes a more confident and assured stance towards the fantastic than we find in *Never Let Me Go*. In *Air*, what we read as the sf element, the new development in communications technology, appears from the start; the novel is quite clearly about that fundamental sf theme, change, and Ryman's technique of identifying what is causing this change could not be more different from Ishiguru's oblique, rather gothic approach. Nevertheless, Ryman's Web-substitute, 'Air', is essentially as hidden and 'magical' as Ishiguru's off-stage technology, and if we want to know how this actually works we're going to be disappointed. If Ryman wasn't known as a science-fiction/fantasy writer but had written only his more mainstream works, *Air* may have been as outsider a text as *Never Let Me Go*. But this particular identification of the novum is, I think, important. If sf is what we point to when we say it we can point to *Air* with more confidence than to *Never Let Me Go*. *Air* checks more boxes if we want to be compulsive about definition. *Air* also reminds us, however, that there actually is something that we call science fiction, that deals with specific questions using specific literary techniques and conventions, and that we do not have to be defensive about it. *Air*'s victory in the Clarke Award is good for the award, and sf, simply because, as I have said, it is a deserved victory.

While change was also a foregrounded feature in at least two of the other shortlisted novels, it was social or species change: the collective march towards the Singularity or the awareness that we are not alone in the universe. In *Air*, change is culturally focused around a single individual and her family and friends. Chung Mae is a small-scale entrepreneur in a remote central Asian village. The world is about to change from the old-fashioned Web to Air, which will link minds: "They will give us TV in our heads, all the knowledge we want." Following a world-



wide test, Mae is left with a permanent link to the mind of an old woman, Mrs Tung, who is one of the experiment's casualties.

Mae moves from village 'fashion expert' to a player on the world scene; a *small-scale* player, true, but a player on a larger scale than otherwise could be possible. But there are other changes as well. Her marriage breaks down following an affair with her neighbour Ken Kuei. In her traditional society this is a serious matter. Her imposed memories make her realise the likelihood of a flood, like one which devastated the village in the 1950s. She becomes pregnant, and the nature of this pregnancy is perhaps what changes *Air* from being a straightforward sf novel to something more explicitly symbolic. Nothing necessarily wrong with this, but the story seems to be *telling us* it's symbolic. 'Walked together into the future' are the novel's last words, which somehow – perhaps it's just the common image of the 'baby' – in their evocation of an open, uncharted future remind me of the last words of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968): 'but he would think of something'. Clarke/Kubrick's 'Star Child' is powerful, perhaps even ominous. What do we make of *Air*'s blind, crippled 'Formatted' child, though? A symbol of the future, but what kind of future?

The first chapter, set just before the Test which is going to change everything for Mae, ends with an equally evocative question: "How dare they call us have-nots?" Mae's people are backwoods, peasants, remote, 'the last village in the world to go online', and ignorant and at times petty. Mae herself is illiterate. Her husband Joe is stupid enough to be swindled by Haseem, a local moneylender. But none of this means that Mae and the people she lives among are bad people who deserve what their future might be – colourful 'primitives' exploited both by the affluent richer nations and the powerful centre of their own country, Karzistan (an imaginary Central Asian country bordering China, Tibet and Kazakhstan). No one, after all, appears to have asked them if they *want* Air or not. But volition has nothing to do with change. Change is coming whether Mae and her friends, family, enemies and companions want it or not and it is up to Mae to ride the wave. If science fiction's strength is that it is the 'literature of change' that may be its weakness as well. Far too often sf fails to uncritically examine change: to celebrate it is not to engage with it. Ryman is giving us the opportunity to face this question, and that he does so without patronizing his characters or his readers is yet another strong point for this marvelous book.

Assimilating the memories of Mrs Tung, Mae realises the impossibility of conventional phrases like "she led a full life" to sum up a human being, a half-forgotten grandmother who made love in the rushes and hid guerillas in the school during the revolution. Her angry words "Why do people treat the past as if it lost a battle that the present won?" are partly spurred by this realization of human worth, but they are also from the same anger that protests against being called a "have-not". In hanging on to this, Mae does what so many people in science fiction *don't* do: she neither celebrates change nor attempts vainly to reverse it but she takes control, aware that she is only a bit-part player, with no real decision-making powers, but more and more determined to make a difference in the small world around her.

And, of course, with the technology of 'Air' the difference between the local and global does become more blurred. Mae's village is after all a small remote village in a 'backward' country, but she is able to gain the knowledge to communicate with a fellow entrepreneur in New York. The *global* village is taking shape: but more on that later.

*Air* is beautifully written and its remoteness from the

technology gives us a focus on its effects – the 'Air' system itself is in truth as magical as birth through the throat, and although 'Air-mail' is a neat conceit for a science fiction novel, the engineer Sloop's explanation in the first chapter, involving dimensions "left over after the Big Bang" and the "Lightning-Flow, Compass-Point Yearning Field" is deliberately arcane. Mae doesn't understand a word of it and neither do we. In a Terry Pratchett novel, someone would inevitably describe it as "quantum" (and actually, someone does). There are jokes: one of the tribes of Karzistan (itself almost certainly a joke, especially to anyone of a military or Cockney background) is the Eloï, seen in a government film as happy folk in tribal costumes relocated to shiny new apartments. This Wellsian reference has to be a sly insert from Ryman, but there's a suggestion that it's there to suggest a wider, less Arcadian back-story. "They call it 'information'," says Mae. "That does not make it true." (This is a book of wisdom: that is not the only such aphorism.) Even later on, when we learn more about the new technology of this world and a rationale is given of how Mrs Tung remains with Mae after the "Air Test", we have singing food and a talking dog and a sense that there is much more happening on the governmental and international level than we (or Mae) are privy too. Mae – and this is one of the strengths of Ryman's characterization here – is smart enough to work this out. As a result, she is neither confident in nor wholly accepting of this new world, and this balancing act between the Old and the New offers us what new technologies always give us. Sezen (the village 'bad girl') 'was someone who wanted Air. Mae was afraid of it.' Air offers instant worldwide communication, new art forms, ways of being other than yourself in a manner we can hardly dream of. It will be, in a sense, the Rapture. Mae's self-imposed task is to prepare her people for something that they cannot escape, even though the experience of the flood of information which will come their way has already changed her in ways which have alienated many of the villagers from her.

But it's the *small*, narrowly focused elements in *Air* – the changes in Mae herself and the effects they have on her family and friends – which make the novel so wonderful to read. Unlike any other of the books on the shortlist – even Ishiguro's, which creates its effect by precisely *avoiding* identity – it is about a person, an individual human being whom we get to know, contradictions and all; and about how that person's internal and collective worlds have been transformed. Ryman manages to be comic without putting his characters down. There are characters who are stupid, malicious, ragged-arsed poor, vain and with every shade of small-village clownish incompetency: they are never sneered at and even when Mae's personal fortunes are at their lowest we can sympathise with her without being judgmental about her enemies. In her review of *Air* in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, Joan Gordon uses a telling word: "respect"<sup>3</sup>. In a world linked by Air, the story seems to be saying, the hackneyed old metaphor of 'global village' is literalised: if village life is to work, everyone – good, bad, old, young, weak, strong – needs to be respected, and technologies like Air bring village closeness to everyone. And of course, this can be 'just a metaphor' for the communications technologies we already have and misuse, and after all we already are – and always have been – close to the paradigm shift a new technology brings to the way we live together. At the same time, if my reading of the backstory in the previous paragraph is correct, this is not a feelgood, heartwarming story of how little people take hold of a new technology and make good. Ryman is too good a writer, too expert in the nuances of character for that. Gernsbackian sf may



go Gosh! Wow! at smart shiny new technology, but Ryman is surfing the boundaries here. Change always comes at a cost.

But what makes *Air* a justifiable winner of so many prizes is the pleasure of its telling. It would be easy to back up that statement by quoting passages; every chapter is full of little epiphanies which build until you realize how *orchestrated* these effects are. The conceit of 'Air' itself becomes more of an extrapolation – of, naturally, the Web but something more tenuous and pervasive and connecting than mere 'web' – than an image which is central to the novel itself. The school Mae establishes is called the 'Swallow' school, to teach people to soar in the Air (and there are other bird images which play with multiple meanings of their specific motifs). The atmosphere itself, in creating the conditions for another event which is both symbolic and concrete, the flood, plays a role in events. Through the air, the waves are carried which to our ears become music – I did say 'orchestrated', after all. And *Air* is, of course, only one of various elements in both Oriental and Occidental pre-scientific world-views. *Air* is a novel to be read slowly, not because it is difficult to tease out the meaning, but because the beauty of the form with which this meaning is expressed needs to be savoured. Virtually every sentence plays a part, becomes a light into the soul of a character or a wry comment upon events. *Air* wins the Clarke Award not simply because it is the best of a shortlist but because it is an outstanding work: a novel which matches any test which could possibly be given to a novel and comes up triumphant.

*Andy Sawyer is Librarian for the Science Fiction Foundation Collection at the University of Liverpool. He is also a critic, a reviewer, and reviews editor for the journal Foundation.*

#### Endnotes:

1. M John Harrison, "Clone Alone: review of *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro", in *The Guardian* 26/02/2005. Online at <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,,1425209,00.html>>
2. Adam Roberts, "The Arthur C. Clarke Shortlist 2006", in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* 213, pp1, 8-15. Also online at Infinity Plus: <<http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/clarkes2006.htm>>
3. Joan Gordon, "Review of *Air*", in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* 200, p. 4-5



## The Clarke and Me

By Geoff Ryman

How does it feel to win the Arthur C. Clarke Award?

Well, like winning anything, it feels just fine.

The first time, all those years ago when I won it for *The Child Garden*, I was on Ascension Island in the middle of the Atlantic. As one is. I rang in to Unwin Hyman expecting the deflating news, and my editor's coworker sounded so cunningly glum that I was sure I'd lost.

I almost just hung up, but Jane Johnson got on the line and said, that, actually, I'd won. I got very drunk in a tiny bar, Ascension being essentially a military installation, and surprised my government colleagues by chasing a lady PR person round the room on my knees. My being drunk was not the surprise, but me chasing a female may have been.

You'd think that being nominated a second time, I'd be blasé. But no, I wanted, I needed to win. *Air* nearly didn't get published at all, and its publication in America had been delayed. Winning the Clarke would make me feel that all that work writing it and selling it was worth it.

At the pre-Award party, the judges tease you mercilessly. You nervously sip wine, and really don't want to talk about the Award, because you're convinced you've lost. 'Oh, we did have a discussion,' a judge might say with a grin. 'There is a winner.' I don't want to know! Don't tell me!

When you sit down in the front row, you and the other nominees shake hands and wish each other well. Some may be so successful in terms of sales and fan response that they are not nervous. Or maybe they are simply wiser and more philosophical.

Personally, I chewed my knuckles when no one was looking. I already knew the book had won other awards. I should have been calm and kindly. Any thoughts such as no, no, Charlie deserves to win or Gosh I hope Liz gets it were simply a prophylactic against disappointment. To be honest, I wanted that award. The lights went down and Paul began his review of the nominees.

When they do say your name, something prickles in your tummy. You go up, grateful that you have an opening and closing line for a speech in your head. You say your piece, hoping you sound gracious, squinting at the lights, not really able to see faces.

You do feel bad for the other nominees. Liz Williams and I have applied together for jobs on a time-share basis. What do you say when a buddy loses and you win? None of the usual platitudes really help. It is true that all the nominees wrote fine books. It is true that the difference between winning and losing any prize can be down to a difference of a few votes or a catspaw of argument during the last moments of debate. It's easy to say that kind of stuff. It's just a bit harder to live through it, or listen to someone else say it.

You feel delight at how the Award has grown. This year it joined forces with the SF film festival. They basked in our intellectual credibility; we basked in their glamour. The party held in a West End cinema with canapés and free drinks felt as exciting as any I'd been to. It seemed a long way from (I believe) the community centre that the awards were announced in some old year like 1994, when Jeff Noon won for the wonderful *Vurt*.

How much of that is due to Paul Kincaid? We'll miss him now he's gone. Paul has steered the award through crises of confidence, cash and venue. Not just the recent funding crisis, but going farther back to just before the time of *Vurt* to the charge that the Award was no longer going to SF, and was not scientific

enough. That resulted in the relationship with the Science Museum and new panel arrangements. Paul was a steady, practical presence through this and probably many more difficulties.

The test of the award is does it spark controversy and discussion? Oh, yes, does it ever. Does it inspire people to go out and buy, not just the winner, but the nominees? Certainly I would like to be reminded on the cover of a book that it was shortlisted for the Clarke, in the same way that you sometimes see that a book was nominated for the Nebula or the Booker.

I was recently at Wiscon, and in the hurly-burly of that delightful convention, people still found the time to be gracious, appreciative and once, shocked, about my winning the Clarke. Certainly among that audience of writers, Space Babes, avid fans, and people with clear political and artistic standards, the Clarke carries weight.

Does it always get it right? Well, the Award infallibly goes to a good book. It has recently helped revive the publishing fortunes of Chris Priest's *The Separation* and has frequently honoured authors who move between between SF and mainstream such as Amitav Ghosh, who wrote *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Other times, as with *Vurt*, it picks an SF book that later becomes a mainstream sensation. The year I helped judge, the winner was Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver*, a novel of genius that many knowledgeable people don't agree is SF. Or even like.

The Clarke is a panel award and quirkiness and surprise are one of the delights of getting five people shut up in a room to decide nominees and winners. The discussion can be, um, lively.

It's not a desire to be different that means that the Clarke award so often goes to a different book than the BSFA award. The procedure is entirely different. BSFA members and Eastercon-goers vote for the BSFA award. For a start it helps if they've already heard of the authors – and have been able to get hold of the book.

Clarke judges are force-fed a cross section of what's good and what's not in a given year, sometimes from small presses, and even complete unknowns. They usually have to read most of the submitted novels in the last month, a bit like gorging on too many cakes. Say about 50 of them. It's surprising that the choices of nominees and winners don't differ more from the BSFAs.

The Award casts a wonderful glow on the following few weeks of an author's life. It can extend the life of the book itself... or at least give the mass market edition an extra jolt of PR. It can even make you feel that you didn't make such a silly choice of careers back in the day.

Has it always, infallibly, honoured the books that are still read and discussed years later? Has it honoured every British SF writer who should have been honoured? I'm not well enough read to say. In a climate that is not kind to literary science fiction, the Clarke draws attention to good stuff. For that, authors and readers owe the administrators and judges thanks.

And on to next year!



## Clarke Award Has Winner Written All Over it By Tom Hunter

Awards are habit-forming.

At last count I've read over half of the current list of Arthur C. Clarke Award winners, and am familiar with even more titles if I start factoring in the shortlists as well. I won't tell you which ones specifically or in which order I read them (although I'll mention a few as I go along here). What I will say is that I rate at least two of the winning authors as among my personal favourite writers of all time and there's at least one year where I wildly disagree with the final result. Not for any legitimate, or even tangible, reason you understand, but simply because I'm a blind slave to one particular shortlistee and haven't yet got round to reading the actual winner, let alone admitting they'd ever be better that year than my personal top-tip.

Awards like the Clarke are habit-forming precisely because you can't predict what is going to happen. The rules of logic don't apply. In fact no rules seem to apply, and sometimes the book everyone thinks is going to win, deserves to win and therefore won't ever win, goes and does the impossible and actually does win. Controversy is a habit that the Clarke Award has been nurturing since its inception, and I for one wouldn't have it any other way.

Let me tell you about my first taste of award-rage.

We were studying Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (that's one I've actually read, for those still keeping count) as one of the syllabus texts at college. My tutor was a massive fan of the book and Margaret Atwood, and was noticeably thrilled to be teaching it, and even though my teenage self would have denied it I was quietly looking forward to studying something within my own range of interests as well.

How wrong could I be? I hated studying the book. Not the book itself – in fact I quite enjoyed it (eventually), although that didn't stop me finding a whole tonne of reasons to argue against it during group discussion time.

I don't think anyone else in the class had read it, at least not properly, and by 'properly' I mean in the kind of way you might read a book for fun rather than in little homework snippets on the bus on the way to college just so you don't get caught out when teacher asks a question.

I was arguing my case from the point of view of a genre reader, even if I didn't know it at the time, echoing arguments already well-aired in fandom circles when the first Clarke Award results were announced; and since I still hear those same lines of debate going round even now perhaps I was on to something.

That something was an entirely moot point to the rest of my class though, although they were happy to come along for the ride and cause enough educational chaos we all almost got suspended from class. I managed to resolve my own differences with our teacher by carting in armfuls of other sf writers as examples of my case, and she reciprocated by reading some of them and then pointing me in the direction of a few of her favourites as well.

At this point I hadn't even heard of the Clarke Award. There was certainly no mention of Margaret Atwood winning it in class, although I don't know whether knowing this would have lent extra ammunition to my argument or blindsided it completely. Even so, when I think of the ACCA now I can't help but think of this first, accidental, introduction and how it might help me now as I step up to the role of administrator.

You have to fast-forward a couple of years to get to my first proper encounter with the Award itself, and it happened in a way that many people have told me is flat out impossible. I was

in a bookshop and I spontaneously bought a book because it had 'Winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award' written on the front cover.

At this point I still hadn't really heard of the ACCA beyond the occasional front cover blurb, but I'd certainly heard of Sir Arthur and so reasoned that if he had lent his name to an award then it must be an award worth winning, and any book that had won must be a book worth reading.

The book in question was *Vurt* by Jeff Noon (that's two), and I enjoyed my chance purchase so much I've been repeating the experiment with other winning books ever since.

At that point I was still at university, and the sudden disposable income afforded me by a swift student loan application marked a shift in my reading patterns from borrowing whatever I could from friends or the library over to buying my own books and actively seeking out new writers and new works; always following my own weirdly logical chain from book to book to book as I went.

Fortunately for me, my previous experience with *The Handmaid's Tale* had inspired me to change my subject major from English Literature to a subject that, while still in the Arts, left me free to pick my own required reading list. The closest I got to academic influence on my genre reading was discovering that one of my lecturers had as big a jones for William Gibson novels as I did. A lucky discovery that meant while other applicants for my course were forced to expound their theories of avant-garde performance, Lacanian language games or whatever in front of a jaded teaching staff, I got to sit around chatting about why *Neuromancer* was so cool.

Did science fiction change my life? Who knows. What I will say is that science fiction, and now specifically the Clarke Award, has just made my life a whole lot busier.

I'm thinking about the future of the Clarke now, where it's going and how we're going to get it there, but it's these first memories of the ACCA (its story, its history) that make me feel honoured to be a part of that journey.

*Tom Hunter edits Matrix Magazine for the BSFA and has now joined the Serendip Foundation as the new administrator for the Arthur C. Clarke Award.*



**'The Last Ten Years in the Life of Hero Kai' by Geoff Ryman**

**Reviewed by Niall Harrison**

Perhaps because of its relative infrequency, it has been too easy to overlook the short fiction output of Geoff Ryman. To date only one collection has appeared (1994's *Unconquered Countries*), and although stories such as 'V.A.O.' (2002) and 'Birth Days' (2003) attracted a reasonable amount of notice on publication, there is a sense that they are seen as anomalies, and not part of a body of work. This is a shame, since Ryman's most recent story, 'The Last Ten Years in the Life of Hero Kai', like many of his other short works, fits interestingly alongside his novel-length tales.

In particular it is a fantasy, more or less, that tackles some of the ideas examined in the science-fictional *Air* (2004) and the mimetic *The King's Last Song* (2006). Kai lives in the poorly-ruled kingdom of Kambu, which may or may not be a displaced Cambodia, surrounded by Neighbours and Others and Westerners. We are told that his last ten years are "considered to be a perfect act of Heroism", because each year embodies one of the Ten Rules that describe a heroic act. In Kai's case his heroism is in saving his people, at least for a while, from the groups surrounding them – and moreover in taking their tools and adapting them for his peoples' use. He is somewhat like *Air's* Chung Mae, then, although Chung Mae and her friends never fought like this:

The ten acolytes of Hero Kai leap from the battlement walls onto the single silken threads, and they slide down. They balance holding out two singing swords in each hand, outstretched like wings. They somersault onto the ground.

The battle scenes are heavily stylised, almost ritual; the obvious comparison is with Ang Lee's film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), although Ryman's story is more extravagantly fantastical. And the formality is carried through to the rest of the story, both in its overall structure and how the characters act within it. Like the 12th-century Buddhist king Jayavarman in *The King's Last Song*, Hero Kai is in an important sense an archetype, and not a character. Indeed, it's possible to read the story, which we are told is about how Kai mastered the art of being a hero, as being about the process of becoming an archetype; about learning how to act as the story requires you to.

The lack of psychological realism is both intimate and distancing. As in Ryman's first novel, *The Warrior Who Carried Life* (1985), we are not invited to *care* about the protagonist; but the terms in which their story is told nevertheless makes it feel fundamental, like some ancient history we knew but have forgotten. The heart of the story comes in a conversation between Kai and Mala, the World, half-way up a mountain. In contrast to all the other characters, Mala speaks casually – in the context, dissonantly:

"Look, I'm the entire world and I have many places to be at once. So I'll say this once only and quickly. Your aim was *not* to destroy Magic. Your aim was to free your kingdom from the Neighbours. I'm sorry to have to make this clear to you, but the only way to do that in the World is to destroy the Neighbours. So why not take the most direct and intelligent route? Destroy them through magic?"

This is a temptation – for Kai, magic is a denial of enlightenment – but an unavoidable one. One of the Rules instructs, "become evil to do good", and so he does, taking the

magic with which the Neighbours have cursed him (he is constantly on fire; only by an effort of will does he prevent his fat from bubbling under his skin) and turning it to his purpose.

Most stories would end here. The Hero has adapted the tools of the outsiders for his own people: as in Ryman's recent novels, a new way has been found, and tentatively explored. There is one more year left in the story, though, one more Rule for Kai to fulfill before his act of heroism is complete. It involves a great steam engine torus in a distant valley, and the draining of magic from the world; it reminds us that every new way, in its time, becomes old. This is how our world works. This is how our world was made. True heroism renders itself obsolete.

**'Creeping Zero' by Jeff Noon**

**Reviewed by Geneva Melzack**

'Creeping Zero' was published in Jeff Noon's 1998 collection *Pixel Juice*. Though it's not entirely clear what *Pixel Juice* is a collection of, exactly. Should its contents be construed as short stories, poetry, linguistic experiments, or all three? 'Creeping Zero' is definitely more short-story-like than some of the other offerings in *Pixel Juice*, but it does possess certain qualities that make it a less than typical example of that form. It doesn't have much in the way of narrative plot, for example, and the non-specificity of its setting and action turn it into something more akin to poetic metaphor than story.

'Creeping Zero' is a sort of diary – or maybe just a daily tally with annotations – kept by a young member of the Creeping Zero Crew. Each day's entry (although the text is not explicitly divided up into separate entries) begins with the repeated phrase "Today we caught..." followed by a



# Archipelago

**Short Stories**



number. What the crew goes out to catch each day is never revealed, and the reader spends most of the story trying to guess, from the folk-lore-ish rules about how many can be found together at any one time, which areas they frequent, how to go about tracking them, and how to tell when you've found some, exactly who or what the crew is hunting.

Like much of the rest of Noon's fiction, 'Creeping Zero' is an urban story, in a number of ways. Firstly because it demonstrates Noon's interest in the genre of 'urban' music, its rhythms and its processes of mixing and remixing. He has explored this interest further in the experimental novel *Needle in the Groove* (2000) and then in his curious collection *Cobralingus* (2001), but it is in *Pixel Juice* that this interest first started to emerge as an explicit theme in Noon's fiction. The constant repetition of the refrain "Today we caught ..." throughout 'Creeping Zero' establishes a rhythm, creating an underlying tempo for the story. The rest of the prose provides a similar rhythmic beat, consisting, as it does, of mainly monosyllabic words and very short sentences. These associations with urban music go some way towards the characterisation of the narrator and the crew he belongs to. The monosyllabic language fits with the narrator's characterisation as a confused and surly teenager, and the rhythmic nature of the language may also be a reference to the violence and gangs of the youth culture with which that music is often associated.

'Creeping Zero' is urban in another way too. Urban in the sense that the story takes place in an urban setting – the events of 'Creeping Zero' unfold, like the stories of Noon's earlier novels *Vurt* (1993), *Pollen* (1995), and *Nymphomation* (1997), on the streets of Manchester. This is established on the second page, when we're told that the crew "work in the Levenshulme area" rather than in "Gorton" [pg 248] – two fairly deprived inner-city regions in South and East Manchester, respectively. But despite being given a very precise location, the story's setting still feels unspecified and generic. Apart from the names of areas, we are given no other information about the world 'Creeping Zero' takes place in, there are no descriptions of the urban environment the crew hunts in, and as such the setting becomes an abstracted universal one, an every-city.

Even for those who know Manchester, and who know Levenshulme and Gorton, the use of those names will not conjure up a specific setting for 'Creeping Zero' because it is abundantly clear that the city the crews hunt in is not the Manchester that presently exists. Somehow, the urban environment in 'Creeping Zero' has created gangs like the Creeping Zero Crew, with bosses and drivers and trackers and guns and apprentices, a social structure and a mission, who spend their lives going around hunting who-knows-what on a daily basis. Using our

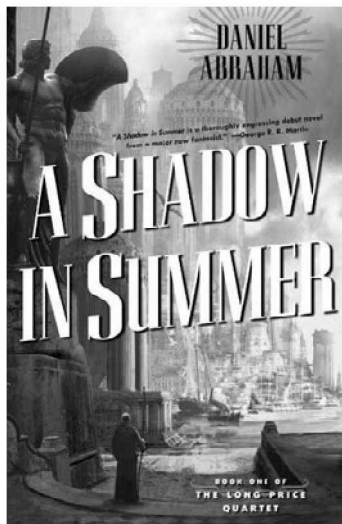
background knowledge of Manchester, or of cities in general, may help us to speculate about why the crews exist and who they're hunting, but such phenomena can only be the product of an alien city environment, which we're not told enough about to be able to deduce much at all about the crews and their victims.

It is in its refusal to answer the question of who or what the Creeping Zero Crew are hunting that the story's real strength lies. In refusing to name the crew's prey, 'Creeping Zero' forces readers to confront their own prejudices. The narrator refers to his crew, the hunters, as "we" while their victims, the hunted, are only ever referred to as "they". Us and them. When, as readers, we try to guess at who the victims of the crew might be, we reveal something about how we see ourselves and about what sort of people we would put into a 'them' category in relation to that. We reveal who we see as Others.

The reasons this can happen is because the characters in 'Creeping Zero' are as unspecified as its setting. The narrator is a teenager; his personality is still developing, so he comes across as relatively unformed, and therefore acts as a blank template, representing anyone and everyone. His youth and inexperience also mean that he is less than astute when it comes to assessing the characters of his crew members, and since we only learn about them through him, they also remain mostly unknown to the reader, functioning as generic ciphers.

What do we learn about these Others and about how we relate to them? There are clues scattered throughout the text. The fact that they are hunted like animals, and indeed, are killed and skinned when caught, [pg 249] reveals that the Others are seen as less than human, not worthy of human respect and human life. We also learn, however, that they appear human. The narrator says: "I thought that close up it would be easy to tell, but it wasn't. Because she looked just like the rest of us." Even though they seem human enough the reason given for not affording them the same rights as humans is that "looking just like us is only the disguise." [pg 250] So although they *look* like us, they're not *really* like us. The boundaries begin to blur and then blur further, when we learn that it's possible for crew members to leave their crew and get lost, to become one of 'them'. In fact, it's necessary, because trackers are crew members who once got themselves lost, lived as one of 'them', and then came back to find their crew with insider knowledge of their prey. Trackers have to become their prey in order to hunt it. 'We' have to become 'them' in order to know them. So 'they' literally *are* 'us', or could be, and we are them. If they are not fully human then maybe we aren't either, or if we *are* human then surely they are too. By the end of 'Creeping Zero' we're left with the question: who is the Other now?





## Daniel Abraham – *A Shadow in Summer*

Tor, New York, 2006, 331pp, \$24.95, h/b  
(reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-31340-5

**Reviewed by Cherith Baldry**

*A Shadow in Summer* takes its readers to the world of the Khaïem, a federation of cities whose wealth is in trade. The city of Saraykeht, where the bulk of the novel takes place, relies on the power of the *andat*, an embodied spirit, to ensure its prosperity. And a

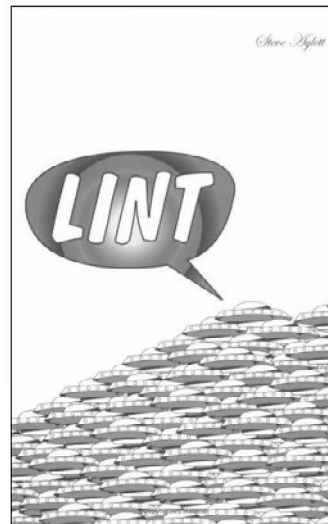
plot to destroy the poet-magician who controls the *andat* will leave the city vulnerable.

The story is intricate and satisfying, but what impressed me most about this novel was the depth and variety of the characters. The poet himself, mostly seen through the eyes of his young apprentice, is a fascinating creation, deeply flawed and yet sympathetic. I also liked Amat, the overseer of a foreign trading house, a courageous older woman caught up in the plotting against her will. All the characters are real people rather than stereotypes, driving the plot rather than being driven by it, and explored in much more detail than the inhabitants of typical genre fantasy.

The other aspect of this novel which impresses me is what I can only describe as the writer's moral awareness. In some types of fantasy, acts of mind-boggling atrocity scarcely raise an eyebrow. Not here. There's never any doubt that actions carry a cost. The central event, which fuels the plot, shapes the destiny of the characters and ultimately leads to the fall of the city, is the abortion of a wanted child. The reader is never allowed to believe that this is trivial, and it carries more power than wholesale slaughter in a more run-of-the-mill novel. Later, we're shown the pain of all three characters in a young woman's betrayal of her lover with his best friend. This is not to say that Abraham is heavy-handedly moralistic. The characters are shown to have strong motivations; we can understand why they behave as they do. Even the *andat*, beautiful and evil, consumed by hatred, can arouse pity because it longs so desperately to be released from bondage. But understanding isn't the same as minimising a destructive act.

The fantasy world is finely imagined, although the areas beyond the Khaïem are only sketched in as yet. I imagine that other places will be investigated in future books; the title of the next in the sequence, *Winter Cities*, implies as much. The world comes to life in outward appearance – there's some vivid visual writing – and in the description of the formalities of society. There's an Oriental flavour, yet the background remains original. It's very easy to become immersed in it and to feel what it would be like to live there. The style is elegant and dense with detail, creating the richness of the world.

*A Shadow in Summer* is the author's first novel, and also the first volume of The Long Price Quartet. The question in any reviewer's mind must be whether a new writer will be able to sustain a long sequence, and having read this first book my hopes are very high indeed. I recommend it, and I'm looking forward to the next instalment.



## Steve Aylett – *Lint*

Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, 2005,  
223pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN1-56025-684-2

**Reviewed by Claire Briailey**

Who was Jeff Lint? If you need to ask, this is the book for you. If Lint needs no introduction, this is the book for you too. You could always check out the fan site [<http://www.jefflint.com/>] but it's no substitute for reading Steve Aylett's book.

But who was Jeff Lint? As this book explains, he was the author of some of the strangest and most inventive satirical sf of the late twentieth century. The bibliography lists nearly two dozen titles by Lint himself – including *One Less Bastard*, *I Blame Ferns*, and the avowed genre classic *Jelly Result* – but scanning the index and the list of illustrations provides a richer and more bewildering indication of the diversity of Lint's work.

Aylett takes an approximately chronological approach to Lint's career, although inevitably it's not possible for a linear approach to do any justice to Lint's creative approach – although it's equally arguable, as this book shows, whether justice is any part of what Lint and his reputation deserves. The sections dealing with Lint's early work in the pulp magazines will perhaps be most familiar to a science fiction-reading audience, but



# First Impressions

## Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger



the existence of his never-filmed script for an episode of *Star Trek* may come as more of a surprise; others may have suspected traces of Lint's influence in the fields of comics, cartoons, film screenplays, the Beat scene, psychedelia and rock music.

We read here that Jeff Lint died in 1994, his death both preceded and followed by persistent rumours that he was in fact dead. Lint's own autobiography (*The Man Who Gave Birth to His Arse*) apparently remained unfinished at his death; but Lint's voice is nonetheless strong throughout this biography. As well as a specific section of what may be the more memorable quotations from Lint's works, Aylett loads his text at all stages of his story with an extensive array of quotes attributed to Jeff Lint himself.

So who *was* Jeff Lint? Occasional readers of Steve Aylett's novels might have been surprised that Steve Aylett had embarked on a biographical project, even of so unconventional, baffling and infuriating a character as Jeff Lint. Regular readers of Steve Aylett's novels, however, would have expected from the outset that Jeff Lint is a fictional creation of Steve Aylett's, who thus enables him to take a sideways look at all of the creative fields through which Aylett chooses to let Lint meander like a river in a china shop.

Aylett clearly revelled in the opportunity to invent not only Lint's life, friends, lovers, enemies and incoherent parties to lawsuits but also his various works (including book covers) and autobiographical notes. The novel contains many of the hallmarks of Aylett's recent work: disconcerting syntax, disturbing mental images, thoroughly illogical protagonists, and an impression that your brain needs to be in a slightly different gear or possibly a slightly different dimension to entirely comprehend or believe what you've just read. And I don't mean that in a bad way. Yet this novel arguably goes beyond what Aylett has attempted before: it pastiches and parodies most creative movements of the last two-thirds of the twentieth century, in a way that would be convincing if you could avoid being distracted by the sense that someone has dislocated your mind.

All that said, this is a book best taken in small doses. A combination of too much Jeff Lint and too much Steve Aylett consumed at one sitting would diminish the impact of the later episodes; getting too much into the rhythm of reading either Aylett's prose or Lint's reported dialogue allows it to gather momentum without conveying meaning, and the satire begins to blur into a carnival of grotesques. A couple of chapters a night before bedtime would make for a weird and wonderful fortnight, some rather strange dreams, and a compelling desire to check in obscure book shops just in case Steve Aylett hadn't made it up after all.

to recapture the full story from some of the nodding allusions to earlier episodes. Reading it without having read the rest of the series at all could be unfulfilling.

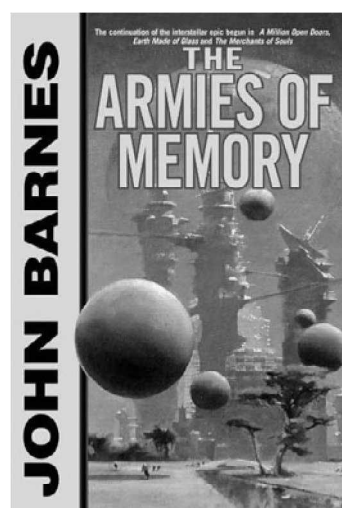
It would also deprive a reader of a generally engaging, unpredictable, intelligent and thought-provoking story. Don't assume that I am discouraging anyone from reading this volume; I'm simply pointing out that to get anything worthwhile from it you really need to read *A Million Open Doors*, *Earth Made of Glass*, and *The Merchants of Souls* first – ideally in a shorter space of time than I did. This book forms a good conclusion to the story, providing resolution, explanations, and – arguably unusually for science fiction – a real ending, albeit one that also looks forward beyond the limits of the written narrative.

The book follows the latest mission of Giraut Leones, special agent for the Office of Special Projects in the Thousand Cultures. The humans of the Thousand Cultures have arguably conquered death, with most people able to back up onto a psypyx and eventually download into a new body; they also have a long-standing aversion to autonomous AIs, which experience has taught them are ready, willing and able to supplant humanity and suspend humans in a protective exile from participation in the running of the world. The fact that many humans, faced with the way that modern life needs to be lived in a crowded universe, have chosen such an exile for themselves doesn't make anyone less hostile to artificial intelligence or to what they see as perversions of their preferred approach to extended life.

Now the Thousand Cultures are faced with the evidence of a threat more significant, and perhaps at least as immediate, as rogue AIs: historical records of alien cultures, far advanced beyond anything humanity has yet accomplished, and at war with one another. One or both of those aliens could be coming back. Meanwhile, Giraut as ever has his own problems to deal with: a partner who can't share his life, parents who want to share one another's but can't, friends and colleagues whose ideology he may not be able to share, a former boss who needs to share his head, and a current boss who is also his ex-wife and with whom therefore he has already shared too much.

There has always been a musical background to these novels; Giraut is a musician and, in addition to his characteristic creative desire to express his experiences in songs, his musical career has provided part of his cover as an OSP agent. The novel opens with an anniversary concert, well-observed in its description of the tension between the audience's wish to hear the songs that has made them support the artist over the years and his wish to move beyond an over-familiar journey through his past career and try out something new. Barnes has conveyed something of a similar feel in this narrative, with reprises of strands of familiar stories, guest appearances by a range of characters, and a reminder of all that's gone before and everything we liked about it, as well as moving on. Sometimes it feels a little too familiar; sometimes it feels as though we're waiting for the track we can't believe he'll miss out. But there is a lot here that's new, or revisited from another perspective – and a lot which shows that all of the characters have learned and grown as individuals from their earlier mistakes and even from actions they deemed to be successes. Perhaps it should be seen more as variations on a theme than as a Greatest Hits album or a final encore.

In the end, this book reminded me of all the things I enjoyed about the earlier volumes as well as managing, in the end, to do something new and different. And it made me want to read, and reconsider, the whole of the series again. That has to count as a hit in its own right.



## John Barnes – *The Armies of Memory*

Tor, New York, 2006, 426pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30330-2

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

This is not a book which stands alone. It comes as the conclusion to a four-book series which began in 1993; maybe it's just a sign of my own failing memory, but having read the three previous volumes at around the time they were published I was left struggling





**Kevin Brockmeier  
– *The Brief History  
of the Dead* 📖**

John Murray, London, 2006, 272pp,  
£12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-7195-6818-8

**Reviewed by Claire  
Brialey**

In the beginning is the city. Although you might not call it the beginning, or the end, or either a customary combination of the two. But there is a city, and it is where people go when they die – at least for a time. Literally, at least, it is an

afterlife, but it is not a mythic existence; in the city, people are still people and they still think and feel and behave and – to all intents and purposes – live as people do in cities everywhere. And just as this is a sort of living, so there can come another sort of death; at least, sometimes people disappear from the city, and it's a popular belief that this happens when even their memories have faded away from the original world. When no one alive can remember you, it's time to move on again – or, perhaps, to finally really just disappear. This is, then, the brief history of the dead. And now the city is becoming crowded, as an epidemic sweeps the world and more and more people are dying.

Meanwhile, Laura Byrd is dying too; she just doesn't know it yet, and even when she does there's no way she's going to give in and accept it. Laura is in the Antarctic, cut off from the epidemic and from virtually everyone else in the world. When she finds herself cut off from the rest of her scientific expedition, she resolves to save herself. As she struggles through the remainder of the world alone, she reflects on the story of her life; this, too, will soon be the brief history of the dead. Meanwhile, all of the people who feature in her memories live on, in the city.

The stories of the years of Laura's life, the final days of her life of earth, and the changes that face the cast of her life story in the city are elegantly woven to present a compelling and moving account of the journeys that all the characters take towards the moment of Laura's death. And we grow to know Laura through all these stories, from the memories others have of her as much as through her own memories or her actions and thoughts as she travels alone across a harsh and beautiful land.

This book, like both the Antarctic wilderness and the otherworldly city it describes, has a beauty all its own. It's a novel that invites engagement, but which also provokes reflection in the reader. How much do we think or care about how we appear to other people – not just those we know well and see frequently, but those with whom we have only occasional, casual or passing encounters? How would it feel to have our lives described by the meaning we have given to everyone we meet – especially when

that meaning is another, albeit brief, slice of life? Figuratively speaking, this is the legacy that the living give to the dead and which readers give to writers: to have their brief histories recognised, and given new life through each retelling.



Campbell nominee Tobias Buckell. It essentially concerns the battle between two very different cultures on Nanagada, a far distant planet, colonised by humans many years before. The two main modern societies are very recognisably based on actual Earth groups – Aztec and Caribbean – and are situated on either side of a vast mountain range. Hostilities are nothing new, and mistrust is rife, but it is when the Azteca Gods order them to invade the others' territory and subjugate them,

that the situation worsens drastically. The capital city is seriously threatened for the first time, and the public mood there is definitely not helped by the common knowledge that the Azteca priests, like their Terran forebears, sacrifice prisoners of war in religious rites. This is naturally regarded as extreme barbarism.

Unwillingly caught in the middle of this is the enigmatic John deBrun. Missing one hand, now replaced by a hook, and robbed of most of his memories, he has been living a fairly contented, quiet life on the coast with his wife and son for over ten years, despite being haunted by the unanswered questions about his background and true identity. He is believed to be the only person who can potentially save the situation, since, locked in his brain, he has the codes that will operate the Ma Wi Jung, an ancient, highly technically advanced device believed to be hidden in the frozen north, on which the hope of defeating the Azteca rests.

The main thread of the story follows John's involvement in the coming battle, the saving of his life by an Azteca, who informs on them for the other side, and who has a dark agenda, his meeting with Pepper, an unsettling former comrade, of whom he has no recollection, and his highly eventful journey to the north to try to find the Ma Wi Jung. This is interspersed with descriptions of the concurrent political and social happenings in Capital City, as well as what happens to his teenage son after they are separated.

There are many things to commend this novel. It holds its pace very well, sometimes almost hurtling along, but even the slower-paced scenes keep the attention. The trials and tribulations of Dihana, the leader of Capital City as the threat from the Azteca increases, are well, and at times almost poignantly, described. Her frustration, the true loneliness of power and the limited number of people who can be trusted in a crisis situation are combined with the fact that she cannot allow herself to be overcome by her own fear to engender a lot of sympathy for her. DeBrun's character is also well drawn, with Buckell using his protagonist's amnesia to good effect, putting across the anxieties and frustrations of the situation as well as DeBrun's emotional dependence on his family, who provide a solid base for his life. Buckell's use of Caribbean-style dialect and language does help to bring the characters to life, as well as emphasising their Terran origins. The description of the planet's history, advanced technology arriving many years before with the old fathers (colonists) only to be lost in time, is not a new idea, but fits the story well. The main criticism is that the very short chapters, whilst not actually effecting the pace, are sometimes in danger of interrupting the narrative flow.

This is a fast-paced page-turner of a novel with some

**Tobias S. Buckell – *Crystal Rain***

Tor, New York, 2006, 351pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-763-31227-1

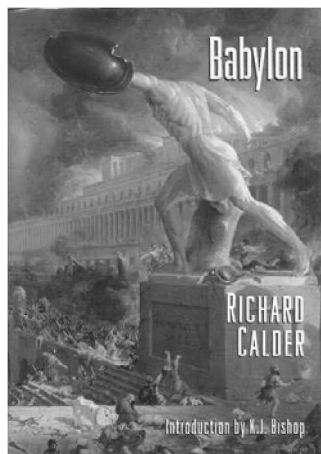
**Reviewed by Estelle Roberts**

This is the debut novel by Clarion graduate and John W.





genuinely original elements, as well as some fantasy standards, and is one many fantasy fans should enjoy.



## Richard Calder - *Babylon* 📖

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 247pp, £25.00, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-904619-57-6

**Reviewed by Steve Jeffery**

Richard Calder has always been an edgy writer. The dark, decadent worlds he creates, and the characters who move through them, are steeped in a underworld miasma of sexual repression in which the twin Freudian poles of sexual desire

and the longing for death are tightly wrapped, like a caduceus, around each other. To make matters worse, Calder invades that taboo territory, at once so fascinating and terrifying to *fin-de-siècle* Victorians, of pubescent or prepubescent sexuality and morphs it through a Symbolist Gothic sensibility where images of the child as sexual being become, terrifyingly, child as both victim and predator.

As K. J. Bishop points out in her introduction to this volume, "It is this world of the libido... where sex and death go hand in hand, into which Calder gives his characters particular insight. More aware of their own fantasies than most real people are, if we look to where they point their torches we may see some hitherto unsuspected regions of ourselves illuminated."

In *Babylon*, setting, atmosphere, subject matter and character collude and collide to reinforce the point.

Madeleine Fell, bluestocking schoolgirl in late nineteenth century London, dreams of becoming a Shulamite novice, a handmaiden and priestess whore of the Babylonian goddess, Ishtar. There is one problem (well, apart from the fact that someone is stalking the streets of Whitechapel at night, mutilating and murdering Babylonian whores): Maddy is white and from a respectable family who would be horrified and refuse their permission. Even her fellow would-be novitiates, who have names like Cliticia, Fellatia and Scarlett, regard her with suspicion.

Madeleine solves one problem by absconding and faking a letter from her parents and another by promising to coach Cliticia through the exams. Cliticia, in return, dresses Madeleine in her clothes and takes her out to learn the more practical arts of coquetry. It's on one of these jaunts, that they are abducted by Cliticia's latest beau, Mr Malachi, and his employer, Lord Azrael, and transported to the great city of Babylon, which lies not on Earth, but on a parallel world ruled by the priestesses of Ishtar.

It's here the plot takes a chilling turn as Azrael treats the two (still virginal) proto-whores to a full-on rant about conspiracies, the inferior and soul-less nature of the female sex, and his plans to overthrow the temple, exterminate the followers of Ishtar and restore his (male) race to its former glory. This repellent pastiche of Aryan supremacism and gender hatred is all the more horrifying in that Maddy's and Cliticia's reaction to it is to swoon with admiration and lust at this unbridled display of masculine power. It leaves (as is no doubt intended) a bad taste about the nature of self-deception and complicity inherent in sexual and power fantasies of domination and submission.

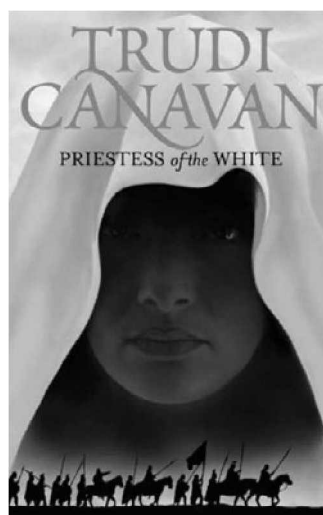
That recognition comes too late for Madeleine.

"There are some men, it seems, whose only contribution to society is the ability to create delusions. Whether they are mad or sane, good or evil, seems hardly to matter. We crave their rhetoric, their dithyrambs, their romantic charisma, because they revive deep buried longings that make ordinary people feel part of a universal significance.

"They seduce us all. And we are party to these seductions, just as we are complicit in our own deaths. We crave their mystique, just as we crave disaster and war. Political extremists, religious fanatics, incendiaries of all persuasions, bestow on us the rational fabrications that justify our own increasingly irrational behaviour. We subscribe to lies cant and hysteria, because such things sanction our unconscious minds."

Calder's vision of total gender war is as bleak and unrelenting as anything since Russ's *The Female Man*, all the more so that it is, as with much of his fiction, highly eroticised. *Babylon's* message to us, and much of the imagery that surrounds, is, it must be said, unsubtle to the point of being polemical. It's not a comfortable, or even a particularly enjoyable book (if it was, I think I'd start to worry).

It's been said of science fiction that it isn't so much about predicting the future as holding up a distorting mirror to the present, and the reflection *Babylon* throws back is not a pretty one.



## Trudi Canavan - *Priestess of the White* 📖

Orbit, London, 2005, 659pp, £7.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-386-4

**Reviewed by Carol Ann Kerry-Green**

*Priestess of the White* is the first in a new series by Trudi Canavan, Age of the Five, the 'Five' being gods Chaia, Huan, Lore, Yranna and Saru, who have survived the wars of the gods and chosen the Juran, Dyara, Rian, Mairae and the last chosen, Auyara, to serve them

as the White. Given powers by the gods, the White can read people's minds and use the magic in the air around them.

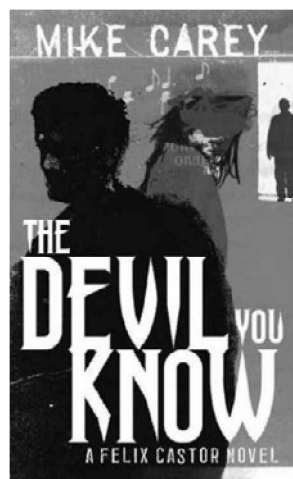
At the time that Auraya is chosen to be the last of the White, the land of Northern Ithania, the home of the White is following the gods' wishes and making peace and alliances with their neighbours. That peace is not to last, however, for sorcerers from Pentadria who control beasts and birds are making ingress into their land and not even the gods' chosen can beat them. When Auraya, still getting to grips with her new powers, is confronted by a Pentadrian sorcerer at Caram, she only escapes with her life when she is given a new gift by the gods, that of flight. Loath to enter into a war, nonetheless the Five begin gathering their army and joining with their allies, from the Somreyans from the North to their latest allies, the Siyee, who were 'gifted' with the ability of flight from Huan years ago, they are small and slight and able to act as scouts.

As well as negotiating the alliance with the Siyee, Auraya has started to persuade her fellow White to enter into a truce with the Dreamweavers, healers, herbalists and non-believers in the



Circelian gods, untrusted by the White since the time of their leader Mirar, whom Juran had killed over a hundred years ago. As a child, Auraya had received lessons from Dreamweaver Leirard and now she is hoping that Leirard's agreement to act as Adviser to the Five will bring about a closer harmony between them and the Dreamweavers – but Leirard carries memories that are not his own, link-memories from Mirar which begin to have more of an influence on him, as he sees things through the other man's eyes.

Trudi Canavan has created a world where the gods appear to their priests and bestow gifts on their chosen, gifts that are needed to fight enemies and make peace with neighbours. Canavan skilfully weaves several strands together, the White, the Dreamweavers and the Sorceress Emerahl who prefers to take the shape of a hag, but through necessity has taken the shape of a young woman, a prostitute in the caravan following the armies, whilst trying to hide from the god Huan, and whose true place in the story line hasn't yet been revealed. Will the White be able to defeat the strong Pentadrian sorcerers who appear to have their own five gods to worship and who are determined to destroy the White? A satisfying novel that leaves many questions unanswered that will hopefully be explored further in the next two volumes.



## Mike Carey – *The Devil You Know*

Orbit, London, 2006, 384pp, £6.99, p/b  
(reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-84149-413-5

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

Who you gonna call? Fix Castor!

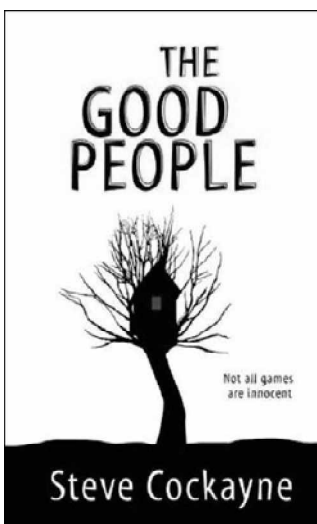
Felix Castor, exorcist and part-time children's entertainer with a natty way of sporting a tasteless green suit, has his share of problems. The main one seems to be the rent, hence the need to amuse vicious little brats for monetary remuneration. Although conjuring

goes some way to provide a meagre income it isn't really what Felix (Fix to his friends... both of them) does best. No. What Felix does best is deal with dead people. For a grand a pop. You see, the dead walk among us, or rather we've recently begun to see that they walk among us. Some people spot them more easily than others and some, including Felix, can get rid of them. Felix's weapon of choice is a long, shiny, deadly... whistle; a far cry from the esoteric necromancy that some exorcists use. Felix is retired, or rather he was. The threat of eviction has tempted him into taking on 'one last job', which, unfortunately, could prove to be his final one. On the surface it seems so easy – a mysterious, once chatty, presumably Russian, ghost is haunting the Bonnington Archive. Normally such an apparition would add a bit of character to the old place, especially in the dusty rooms where they are currently cataloguing some old Russian letters, but lately the spirit has turned silent and violent. A simple case of whistle a happy tune and everything will be just fine? Would that it were so. The case leads Felix on a deadly path involving hired werewolves, strip-clubs and wedding receptions, rival exorcists, new girlfriends (human and not so human) and some shocking revelations. If he's lucky he'll get out alive, if he isn't he'll wind up dead, or worse...

Fans of John Constantine and *Hellblazer* will no doubt spot some similarities in the basic premise of *The Devil You Know*: the

exorcist, bound to see the supernatural world to a greater extent than ordinary folk, getting on with vanquishing demons. Fortunately *The Devil You Know* makes good use of the novel form (as *Hellblazer* did the comic form) by not concentrating on an increasing escalation of large-scale encounters. Indeed it is a far more low-key affair and better for it, laced with sardonic and self-deprecating humour that creates a likeable, if unconventional, hero. As a result the moments of horror appear a lot more immediate and real than the string of atrocities that many books feel obliged to pile on these days to overcome the perceived attention deficit problems of their readership. Also in its favour is the inherently British tone of the book – yes, the public know that creatures from the netherworld walk in their midst but are they perturbed? For the most part no, they just choose to ignore it if it doesn't affect them personally. They limit discourses to the media and political circus. Should the dead have rights? What happens with inheritance tax? It's a lot more humdrum and down-to-earth than the crash-bang hysterics of the normal action hero. This contrast between the mundane and the supernatural is what really makes *The Devil You Know* an enjoyable read and also makes the revelations uncomfortably believable, even in what is ostensibly a far-fetched fantasy-horror.

*The Devil You Know* is everything you could ask for in an entertaining novel – witty, easy to read with memorable characters and engaging plotting. It ain't art, it's not meant to be, but it's a fast and fun ghost-cum-detective soap opera full of dark humour and grimy horror. Whether this will develop into a series (it does leave itself wide, wide open for a sequel) remains to be seen but, in the meantime, if you fancy a top-notch light read look no further. The only negative note is that the title unfortunately reminds one rather too much of a Kylie Minogue song. Now that is scary...



## Steve Cockayne – *The Good People*

Atom, London, 2006, 343pp, £12.99, h/b,  
ISBN 1094233627

**Reviewed by Elizabeth  
A. Billinger**

War

What is it good for?

Absolutely nothing!

This is the story of a boy growing up in rural Leicestershire in the 1940s narrated by the same character when he is a man of almost eighty. It is bookended by two camera script extracts which

might be read as offering an objective view in contrast to the first person narration, a contrast acknowledged within the text when the old man sees himself on TV and recognises that the world sees him as a 'wild man in a tree, a crazy old fool in a tin hat'.

Kenneth the old man, directly addressing the child to whom he writes, is also able to recognise that the history of his childhood is one familiar to readers of children's fiction. He and his older brother, Robert, have access, through an old door in the garden wall, to the land of Arboria where the adjacent wood is a forest and the pond a deep lake, and where Robert is High Lord and armies are theirs to command. As war spreads in the rest of the world, the fear of invasion by the Barbarians from across the Lake increases in Arboria. The brothers are forced to share their



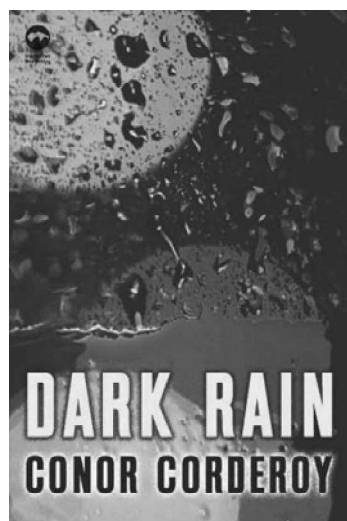
faerie world with two evacuees, first Janny who is pale and almost invisible in the house, whose eyes are perpetually red from crying and who only comes alive when she is in Arboria, and later Nadia with weak legs and a strong accent, whose family having escaped the Nazis have now been interned in England.

Eventually all the children are literally or functionally orphaned and their only adult supervision is Kenneth's grandmother. Sitting in her private parlour smoking her pipe and drinking her never-ending supply of green tea she is an adult who has not lost touch with the faerie. She knows that there is something odd about the girls, knows that Kenneth is different from Robert, and passes on to him the family book that attempts to record all scraps of knowledge about Arboria, though some of it so old it is illegible and other parts are written in a runic script that none are able to translate.

The real world becomes increasingly unmanageable for Kenneth, with the challenges of rationing, the threat that he may lose his home – and Arboria with it – and the onset of puberty. (The references to sex are sly and surprising, almost sliding past or leering outrageously before batting modest eyelashes and accusing the reader of having a filthy mind.) Robert leaves to work with his Uncle and for Kenneth the solution to all ills becomes a mission to achieve Robert's return to Arboria.

Of course, we know that Kenneth is the one telling this story, and we also know that first person narrators are notoriously unreliable, so there is a constant process of re-evaluation, wondering whether these adventures with the faerie are actually an account of the breakdown of a mind unable to cope with tragedy on a personal level and the wider horrors of war. When, shockingly and at an unexpectedly late stage, the novel pins its colours to the gothic mast, the reader's doubts multiply.

This is a clever, compelling novel and I'd love to have more time and words to analyse it, but disappointingly its joys are all intellectual. Skewered by its own structure, it faithfully retains the voice of the adult narrating the experiences of the child and in so doing keeps the reader at a distance, and stops the engagement being a visceral one. It is a book I plan to reread but not one I ever expect to fall in love with.



## Conor Corderoy – *Dark Rain* 📖

Macmillan New Writing, London, 2006, 243pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-230-00010-X

**Reviewed by Ben Jeapes**

I wasn't expecting to enjoy *Dark Rain* because it looked horribly like a case of a non-sf author having a bright sf-ish idea and re-inventing the wheel. I'm still not sure I was wrong, but he does it damn well.

There's a certain misleading familiarity early on:

a hard-boiled detective novel™ in a Blade Runners non-stop rainy universe™ where the gruesome murder of one of the privileged class™ acts as a maguffin for all kinds of adventures and revelations. The population of Britain is rigidly divided into the Wets (the unemployed proletariat who have to live in shanty towns in the rain), the Drys (the impoverished middle class who can at least afford a roof over their heads) and the rich, pampered

Domers (who live luxuriously in ... now, let's not always see the same hands). Meanwhile there's a fleet of alien ships heading towards Earth, and the truth about them which has evaded every one of Earth's eight billion people occurs to the reader halfway through the sentence where we learn of their existence, on page 2.

Hard-living, smoking and drinking Inspector O'Neil is called in to investigate the murder of a Domer, which really was quite imaginatively gruesome – especially when, later on, we learn exactly how it was done – and then thrown off the case for refusing to swallow the sheer preposterousness of the official line. In fact, not just thrown off but dismissed from the force altogether – no small matter as it means he can now precisely number the days in which he himself will have to make the one-way transition from Dry to Wet. But help is at hand, because the widow of the deceased dons the garb of femme fatale and hires him privately to ferret out the truth.

And this is where I began to sit up and pay attention, because the case is nicely complicated, with twists and turns that I didn't see coming, and when the action starts it never lets up. O'Neil follows a relatively easy set of clues to Set Piece #1, leading on to torture and more gruesomeness and dropping of clues, and then a fight with some near-invincible bad guys that goes on until he seems to have got away, and then goes on some more until he really must have got away, and then bloody hell, it keeps going on and he *still* hasn't got away. A lesser novel would give you a nice quick resolution to this bit after putting up some token resistance, ending with a nice quip from the narrator, but no. From here the plot ricochets chaotically off into the distance, with O'Neil hanging on for dear life, and the reader is swept up with him all the way to the plot climax. What seemed nice and predictable is suddenly anything but.

If Corderoy knows this kind of universe has been done once or twice before, he doesn't show it, and his unfamiliarity with the familiarity works strongly in his favour. His look at it is new and fresh. The novel is rich in sensory data, giving you input from all five senses and placing you exactly in the world he has imagined, with every plot nuance followed through with rigorous logic.

If the book has a weakness it's in the sheer barkingness of the bad guys; O'Neil never really has a chance of using traditional police work and deduction to find them out, because they are basically bonkers and way too complicated for their own good. You have to wonder why the first ritual murder was performed in the privacy of the victim's home whereas for reasons of plot the next has to be performed at Baddies HQ. Like all arbitrarily stratified societies, it's never quite made clear why the huge down-pressed majority don't simply arise and overthrow the people at the top. Or what the people at the top actually do to make their livings. And, though it seems a picky point, the editing could have been better – there are just enough small slips to start being annoying, like the resistance organisation 5C turning into C5, not once but often.

But for all that, *Dark Rain* takes a fresh look at tropes you thought were long past their best-before; the plot is cunning and unexpected; the characters are vibrant; and the whole novel simply revels in the fantastic experience of being human and alive.



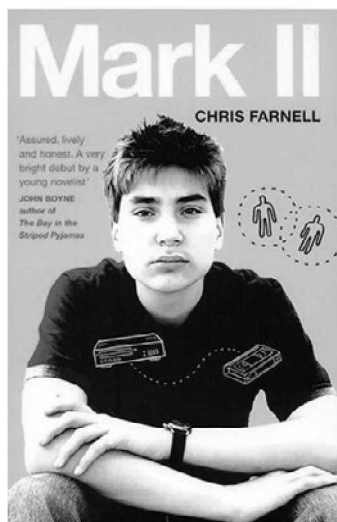
## Chris Farnell – *Mark II* 📖

Tindal Street Press, Birmingham, 2006, 164pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0954791398

**Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger**

In his first novel Farnell mixes the familiar world of the high school with an examination of the ethics and social ramifications





of cloning. The premise here is not what has become the usual: cloning for spare parts and thereby creating an underclass and raising all manner of questions about what it is to be human. In this novel the technology can deliver a clone, free from serious genetic defect, within six to eight weeks, allowing a family to replace a child almost as soon as the original has died. Restrictions in the accelerated growth process mean that this can only be done for children under the age of fourteen.

Mark Self (that punning name is something of a blunt instrument) died just before he reached fourteen, of an illness which had confined him to a wheelchair, excluded him from many of the activities of teenaged boys and left him with a bitter but amusing wit. Mark is quickly replaced by a clone to the discomfort of everyone but his mother. The progress of the clone, who comes pre-programmed with many of the memories of the original, is largely observed through the eyes of his best friend – or rather the best friend of the original Mark – Phil, and these are the sections of the novel that work well. The relationship and interactions between the two boys have a snap and an awkwardness that make them believable. Other parts of the novel are narrated from the perspective of either Mark's sister, or Kirsty a too well-meaning classmate. It may be the switch from Phil's first person narration to the girls' third person passages, or perhaps it is the change of viewpoint character gender, but the girls' narrations seem hurried and lacking in insight.

Despite this narrative weakness, the novel remains interesting because of the way it handles the issue of cloning. Mark II is aware of his nature from the outset, but with substantial memories of the experiences of the original Mark and knowing he exists as a replacement, he has few initial doubts about his identity. He is, however, a fourteen year-old who has only lived for about six weeks, and his memories are limited to information, lacking any element of feeling. The effect of this is conveyed as something like Asperger's Syndrome. For his friends and sister this brings the dissonance of dealing with someone who looks like the original, remembers shared experiences, but behaves like a stranger. For the reader it raises questions about how identity and personality are comprised, how we are shaped by

environment and circumstances, and whether replacement can ever be a successful treatment for the misery of bereavement.

### Raymond E. Feist – *Flight of the Nighthawks*

Voyager, London, 2005, 420pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN: 0-00-713374-X

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

This latest offering from Ray Feist starts another new series, The Darkwar, set as always with Feist, in Midkemia.

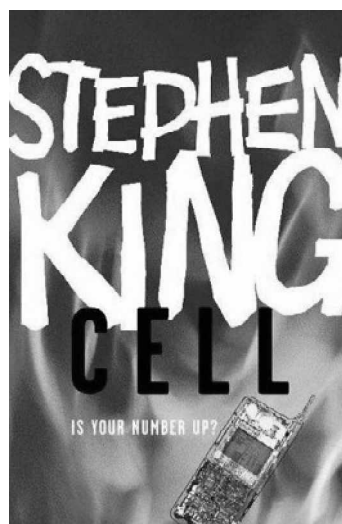
Three top agents of the Conclave of Shadows, namely; Pug's son Caleb, Talwin Hawkins (aka Talon of the Silver Hawk) and Kaspar, the reformed ex-despotic Duke of Olasko, are sent to the southern Empire of Great Kesh to expose and destroy a new nest of Nighthawks. They slowly uncover the nest, and, in the process, discover a far-reaching dastardly plot to wreck the whole political stability of Midkemia – engineered as usual by the renegade Magician, Leso Varen, who has again taken over someone else's body to wreak his own particular brand of nastiness. The question (as always) is who?

Meanwhile, Pug, his wife Miranda, and the increasingly irritating Nakor, are trying to solve the mystery of the 'Talnoy' – an apparently indestructible race of alien warriors first discovered in the previous trilogy, Conclave of Shadows. When news reaches them from Kelewan (where the Tsurani 'Great Ones' are studying a Talnoy with Pug's other son Magnus) Pug's efforts and resources are dangerously divided.

There is one further maguffin to toss into the mix of this latest offering, and that is a new character called Ralan Bek. When Nakor meets with Tomas (ex-human, now Elflord) at the cavern where the dormant Talnoy army are hidden, they are confronted by bandits. The leader challenges Tomas and very nearly bests him – which shouldn't be possible at all as Tomas' background makes him more than just a little bit special in the area of swordplay. In true Feistian storytelling fashion, the young man ends up tagging along with Nakor and is the main riddle remaining unsolved at the end of the story.

I've read all of Feist's books over the years and have reviewed several, and still think he is consistently up there with the best when it comes to telling a damn good yarn. The general feel of late for me though, is that some of his characters and situations are getting just a little too homey and comfortable, and the direst of evil becomes less worrisome when you know the characters and their capabilities so well that you simply don't worry for them anymore. They will overcome, and someone may even be sacrificed to enable new characters to be added to an already bulky cast-list. The evil will never really be vanquished as someone or something inevitably slips through the net to start threatening all over again in the next volume.

I don't mean this to sound damning because in the style of Ray Feist this is another page-turning romp that's as consistently enjoyable as any of his previous books – and will not disappoint a single one of his army of fans. It is not, however, cutting-edge or particularly original (Ralan Bek appears to be modelled on Vain from Donaldson's Covenant books), just very entertaining.



### Stephen King – *Cell*

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2006, 420pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 0-340-92144-7

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Stephen King hates mobile phones: he doesn't own one, and thinks that the way most people use them is inexcusably rude to the people around them. This book, dedicated to Richard Matheson and *Dawn of the Dead*'s George Romero, is his revenge on everyone who uses a mobile phone, and gives him the chance to treat them very nastily indeed! *Cell* is stand-alone,



but people on the net have already spotted several references to *The Dark Tower*.

At the start of *Cell* we're introduced to Clayton Riddell (Clay), a young artist from Stephen King's home state of Maine who is separated from his wife. In Boston to sell some work, he is on a city street when what becomes known as The Pulse affects every mobile phone in the world. Everyone who takes a call immediately becomes homicidally insane, and one of the book's most bloody passages occurs right here as previously cultured Bostonians start literally tearing each other apart in front of the horrified Clay. Like King, Clay doesn't own a mobile, but his estranged wife has one, and his young son has recently celebrated a birthday, and received a shiny new must-have phone as his star gift. Clay meets up with a couple of other people who haven't been affected, and they find refuge from the 'phone crazies' (King's term) in a small hotel. Fortunately, the crazies go to ground at night, so after a terrifying ordeal trying to keep them out of the hotel, Clay and his companions are able to leave the wreckage of Boston city centre, and head north – Clay is desperate to get home and see if his family has survived. On their trip the small band of companions must avoid both the crazies and also some unaffected people who are determined not only to survive at the expense of others but also to use the mayhem to their own nefarious ends.

Clay doesn't find out exactly how the Pulse came about – it could have been a terrorist act, or it could have been the computer intelligences of the phone network itself coming to life and attacking the users. Long-lasting backup power supplies mean that the phone network remains active (and deadly) when all other communications and power have failed. Even though this starts as a killer-zombie story, it soon becomes clear that what's going on is not quite that. The phone crazies initially have their minds wiped by the Pulse, but the individually non-sentient crazies develop a hive mind, with direction and purpose. There's a blood-chilling scene where Clay sees the crazies line up captured 'normies' (again King's term) and present them with baskets of mobiles – either you make a call and join us or else you get torn to pieces... Throughout their journey north, Clay and friends see the message "KASHWAK NO FO" scrawled on walls – Kashwak is an area of rural Maine where there's no mobile phone coverage, so it should offer some refuge for any surviving normies. However, when they reach Kashwak they find that they're faced with their worst challenge since the crisis began.

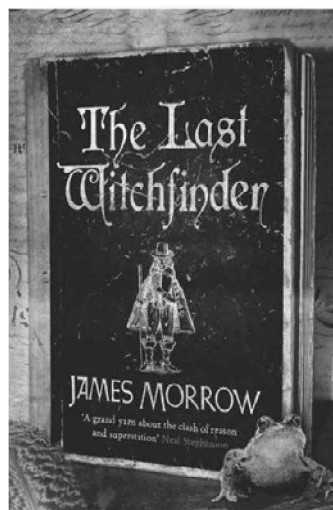
The ending is deliberately left open as Clay makes a go-for-broke gamble that may or may not offer a way forward for what's left of the human race. My personal guess is that King is not going to write a sequel – he wants you to conclude the story using your own imagination. At the end of the book are twelve pages from King's new novel *Lisey's Story* in his own handwriting – this again appears to be stand-alone and is not connected to *Cell*.

Conclusion: It's very gory – much more so than *The Dark Tower* series. I've read little of King's horror work but I'm sure he can write this sort of book in his sleep. It's still a fast-paced, gripping read with vivid imagery and an action-led plot – ideal for screen adaptation, of course!

## James Morrow – *The Last Witchfinder*

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2006, 494pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 10-0-297-85258-2  
**Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts**

It is now almost seven years since James Morrow completed his *Godhead Trilogy*, which took on the death of God and its



implications as its subject matter. *The Last Witchfinder*, his first novel since then, is no less ambitious, taking on the battle between scientific reason and superstition and fear of the unknown.

The witchfinding mania that blighted Europe and America was taking place during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, roughly the same period as the birth of modern science, and it can be seen that the rise of the age of reason was instrumental in bringing to a

halt this practice, which had its roots in superstition. *The Last Witchfinder* follows the life of Jennet Stearne, who as a young child sees her aunt burnt as a witch by her father because of the natural philosophy experiments she is doing. That these experiments were intended to find a scientific proof of witchcraft made no difference. Jennet is then fixed upon overturning the Witchcraft Act of 1604 that was used to justify the trials. Inspired by a letter from Isaac Newton, which implies he has a proof that demons exist only in the mind, she determines to do this by developing a disproof of witchcraft based on the principles of Natural Philosophy, an *Argumentum Grande* that could not be gainsaid in an age of reason. Her life can only be described as extraordinary. She is variously shipped out from England to the New World, witnesses the Salem Witch Trials, lives with Indians after her village is raided, undertakes a marriage of convenience, becomes romantically involved with Ben Franklin, being shipwrecked and eventually puts herself on trial as a witch in order to prove her refutation of the existence of witches. Jennet's brother takes the opposite course, taking over from his father as Witchfinder Royal and becoming a spur to Jennet as he undertakes to purge the New World of witches.

There is a significant cast of real historical figures, whose role is much expanded by our knowledge of these people and what they stood for. We are reminded, for example, that while Newton was the father of modern science and the champion of reason, he never abandoned his religion. The juvenile feud between Newton and Robert Hooke can be seen as triggering the events of the book, the unreasonable behaviour eventually leading to the spirited defence of reason. The historical characters are not there merely as place-markers, but as real people loaded with historical and intellectual resonance. The climactic trial, with Reverend Samuel Parris and Abigail Williams from the Salem witch trials acting for the prosecution, becomes a recasting and re-examination of those trials. With a substantial legal defence from Baron de Montesquieu, this allows for the possibility that the trial could become a real debate and confrontation between reason and superstition.

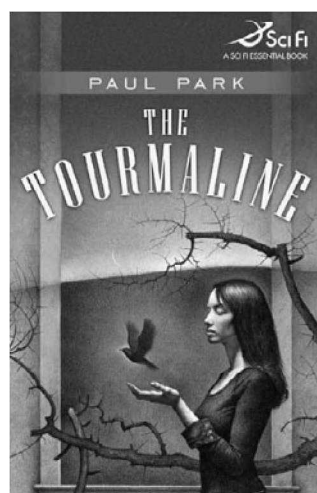
The story of Jennet's life is narrated not by the author James Morrow, but by Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*. This narration shines a light on a whole new world of books, existing as intelligent entities existing separately from their physical manifestations. Their world is constantly in conflict, with books opposed to one another. Most specifically, *The Principia* is in a constant battle with *The Malleus Maleficarum*, otherwise known as *The*





Hammer of the Witches, the most influential treatise on witchfinding and so the *Principia's* mortal enemy. As the *Maleficarum* is an attempt at a rationalised approach to witchfinding, it suggests that the objection is less that witchfinding is born of superstition, as might be expected, but that it uses a spurious science to justify itself. Satan places a witchmark on his followers that will not bleed, so finding a blemish on a victim that doesn't bleed when pricked proves guilt, fresh water cannot abide a witch, so if a victim floats they must be a witch. Faith is not the problem for the *Principia*, it is this misappropriation of scientific principle to justify an end. In the telling of the story there are numerous shifts where the narrative moves from telling Jenet's story to an aside from *The Principia* expounding on some point. These are presented in such a way, embedded in the flow of the narrative, that the reader is constantly being reminded of who is telling this tale, and that what we are being told is not as simple as a straight conflict between reason and superstition.

*The Last Witchfinder* is a magnificent combination of high entertainment and intellectually demanding story telling. The life and travails of Jenet prove to be compelling; the tale fair gallops along and is packed with incident as well as engaging and intriguing characters. It is a tremendously satisfying read, which offers much to be considered long after the book is finished. Has it been worth the seven-year wait? Damn right it has.



## Paul Park – *The Tourmaline*

Tor, New York, 2006, 352pp, \$24.95, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-31441-X

**Reviewed by Tanya Brown**

*The Tourmaline* follows *A Princess of Roumania* (reviewed in *Vector* 244), and will make no sense to anyone who hasn't read the previous instalment. Even those who *have* read it might flounder: this is the second half of a book intended as a single volume, split at what initially seems an

awkward point. The end of *Princess* had great dramatic impact, but the logical division seems to be about a hundred pages into *The Tourmaline*, when Peter and Andromeda – last seen on a river-bank in upstate New York – undergo a transformation, a translation, as radical as Miranda's own.

In *The Tourmaline*, the focus changes from the wilderness of North America to Europe; to Roumania, a country torn by war and looking to the White Tyger for salvation. Miranda, reeling from an abrupt arrival, doesn't know what's expected of her, or even what she's capable of doing. And perhaps everything she's been told is false, because there is already a White Tyger in Roumania; Nicola Ceasescu has claimed her country's love and loyalty, and is determined to prevail by any means necessary, magical or mundane.

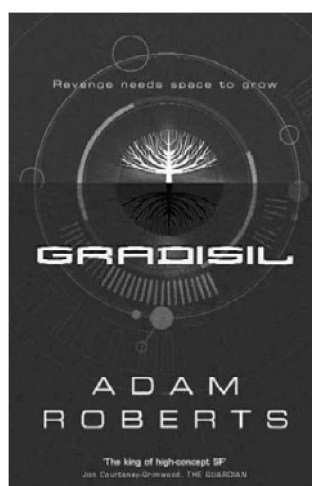
Peter, still travelling with Andromeda (who's also been transformed by her experiences) is no longer the rather diffident teenager of *A Princess of Roumania*. With the help of a mysterious African woman – she seems a child, but there is nothing childish about her – Peter's found his way to Europe, and he and Andromeda are making a living, searching for Miranda, searching in fact for some *meaning* to this extended stay in a world that's not their own.

Park draws back, showing us a broader world: a world in which Africa is technologically superior to Europe; in which barrels of a secret substance, labelled 'nepenthe', come north by train to aid the former Baroness Ceasescu in her covert war against the Germans; in which King Jesus crucified the generals before the walls of Rome, and remnants of an older race of humans roam the forests of Roumania. Magic works, here, though it's a strict and rigid discipline as full of theories and standard texts as any science. Nicola Ceasescu's methodology, her scientific magic, gives new dimension to the pre-Copernican cosmology of the first novel: she sets a spell that's also a trap, asking for help, and it seems that she is answered.

Yet all the world's a backdrop for Miranda's story, and the stories of Peter and of Andromeda. None of the three is especially likeable as a character: that's one way in which Park subverts the tropes of genre fantasy. He's iconoclastic, too: the Magic Jewel? A fake. The letter from Miranda's dead aunt Aegypta? Lost before it's read. There's no logic to the Subterranean Portal (the weakest element of the novel, but I trust the author to explain it when the time's right). And the white tyger, that rare and special creature of the Roumanian countryside, turns out not to be a fearsome legend: it's no larger than a lynx.

Many readers seemed to misunderstand *A Princess of Roumania*, reading it as a YA novel (which it isn't, though it concerns Miranda's coming-of-age) or a historical fantasy (it's almost certainly set in the present day, albeit in another universe). I suspect this novel, with its broader view of the world in which Miranda, Peter and Andromeda find themselves, will confuse the issue further. Paul Park's clear, precise prose doesn't prevent him from clouding the issue with maddening scene-changes just as some vital crux is reached; with occasionally-clumsy obfuscations ("the soldier talked for a long time," without reporting what was said) and a presentation of this new world as is, unexplained.

Something's hidden in plain sight, here, and I'm very much looking forward to finding out what it might be.



## Adam Roberts – *Gradisil*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 458pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07587-2

**Reviewed by Paul Bateman**

In the future, governments have given up on space and the bohemian rich having taken up the challenge, building homes in the upper atmosphere free from the constraints of gravity and law. *Gradisil* follows three generations of Uplanders in the creation of a new kind of country. In the first

part of Adam Roberts' new novel, one of the first bohemian inhabitants of the Uplands, Klara, recounts her adolescent affairs in the Uplands, the brutal murder of her pioneering father at the hands of the world's most wanted psychopath, and her revenge. The second part concerns Klara's illegitimate daughter, Gradisil, named after Ygggradsil, a tree of Norse myth, and a symbol of the lines of electromagnetic force that the Uplanders ride into space. Her loyal yet cuckolded husband, Paul, tells the story of her rise and fall as the first President of the Uplands and the first US-Uplands war. The third part concludes the novel with Gradisil's two sons, Sol and Hope.



In this novel, Adam Roberts has played to his greatest strength shown in much of his previous work, such as *Salt* and *Polyston*: the examination of human folly against a background of conflict and war, how an individual's misunderstandings and prejudices and pride can shape world events, taking in strands of extended plots concerning murder, rape, betrayal and revenge. There are points where he seems to be commenting on America's War on Terror and the Iraq War, although oddly Islam isn't heavily featured and China is more or less ignored. He knows people are fallible, illogical; stupidity and greed often triumph, and he isn't afraid to show us how far. This could be his best book yet. Better still, unlike some of his previous works, he doesn't appear to be paying homage to other authors. The ideas are original, and like in his previous works, the concepts stick in the mind, in this case the possibility of living in low Earth orbit as a distinct community and even a country in its own right. He has thrown off the shackles of acknowledged influence to generate his own voice, to become an author others will try to imitate in future and plunder his ideas. His parodies like *The Sodditt* and *Sellamillion* help pay the bills, save him from the impending pensions crisis and possibly satiate his lust for imitation, but the serious works will be what he will be remembered for.

But *Gradisil* probably won't be his classic. As good as it is, it hints at something better on the horizon. This successive generational structuring didn't make for a fulfilling novel. The first act peters out as Klara has little impact on the next part, while the *Gradisil* section doesn't conclude satisfactorily and the final part reads like an over extended epilogue. The second part contains the major plot of the book and possibly should have been the focus of the novel and would have been a more enjoyable story in itself if the other two parts hadn't been there. If necessary, the first act could have been woven in and out the book as flashbacks and back-story. The characters for the third act should have been developed more in the second act so that the third act could have been shorter and had more impact. Maybe this is more conventional method of structuring a book, but it's one that might have made the end result seem complete rather than three vaguely related tales pressed together to make up a word count.

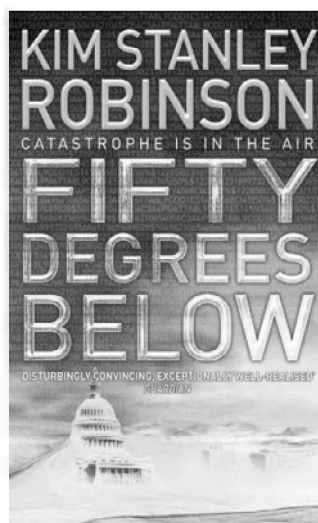
Another gripe is that each act is linguistically stylised to emphasize change over the years, for example, in the second section ships 'dok' rather than 'dock', but I wasn't convinced these differences were extreme enough. This is something very difficult to pull off and Roberts doesn't manage it to the brilliant standard that Tricia Sullivan set with *Maul* and David Mitchell furthered with *Cloud Atlas*. His approach is too subtle, too conservative, too conventional. This is particularly noticeable as much of the book is told in the first person and a bit more flair with language would have given each of the narrators more character, more of a distinct voice, rather than being different shades of Adam Roberts.

In the final analysis, *Gradisil* is a good book, with a number of interesting concepts and fully-fleshed characters, but it's not a great book. The plot doesn't follow a compelling line from start to finish. Some books don't need this. They can be in distinct, unrelated sections but the overall effect can be greater than the sum of its part. *Gradisil* doesn't manage that. But then again would a better book have given me the delights of 'poodle-hoops'?

## Kim Stanley Robinson – *Fifty Degrees Below*

HarperCollins, London, 2006, 520pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-714891-7

## Reviewed by Claire Brialey



Until a year ago, any review of Robinson's previous novel *Forty Signs of Rain* was likely to include a comment about the implausible wish-fulfilment of flooding Washington DC in order to demonstrate to the (fictional or actual) US federal government that they should in fact take climate change seriously. Since the spectacle of New Orleans under water hit TV screens around the world, any review of that volume or its sequel, *Fifty Degrees Below*, is now virtually statutorily obliged to begin with a comment about

how much more credible and relevant it all seems.

In fact, this novel, as much as its predecessor, explores ground which should be familiar to anyone who's been paying attention for the past ten years or so. After the rising water levels could come the shutting down of the Gulf Stream, and the consequent major drop in temperature which renders the description 'global warming' inadequate. In practice, this would affect the UK just as much as the US Eastern seaboard, and for that reason alone I would advise everyone in both countries to read the book and start modifying their personal and professional behaviour right now.

That said, this is fiction and it does not purport to be a handbook for averting, mitigating, or surviving climate change at either an individual or governmental level, although it does paint a convincing picture of successes and failures in both respects. The strengths of this novel include its stories of personal engagement with the changing climate. The new world is drawn as a harsh paradise, at least in those areas where nature remains in charge. The possibility of adaptation to this world is offered, initially, through the experience of Frank Vanderwal, who returns to the trees in a local park to adopt a prehistoric lifestyle with twenty-first century building materials, with passing wildlife escaped from the nearby zoo to complete the picture.

But this is an illusion. Frank's new (ice) age lifestyle is made possible only through the continuing existence of the old, failing world on which he retains at least one foothold at all times: he maintains his personal hygiene as much as his physical condition at the gym, in centrally-heated warmth. As well as specialised warm clothing and camping equipment, he relies on the continuation of the catering industry and its huge supporting infrastructure for sustenance, being able to afford both to support himself and to exhibit generosity towards other, less affluent, park-dwellers because of his saving on housing costs. He retreats on occasion to his van, which is kept both mobile and warm only by the continued availability of fossil fuels. None of these ironies are hidden in the narrative; Frank is a character much given to musing on both the human condition and the adaptive nature of the ecosystem, and his work is partly driven by his awareness of the need for a solution accessible to the masses, or at least the masses who can survive the current crisis.

Thus the National Science Foundation is an agency whose time has come although, it being a US government agency and this being a novel by Kim Stanley Robinson, we have to see its leaders negotiate the maze of acquiring both political and



financial capital before we have any opportunity to see whether scientists can set aside their personal, professional and national differences. And then we may have to suspend disbelief a little further: solutions often seem less plausible than problems, and in any case we'll have to wait for the next volume – a wait possibly prefigured in the announced title, *Sixty Days and Counting* – to find out what happens to the world next.

Similarly we'll have to wait to see what happens to the characters in this novel: Frank, and his mysterious girlfriend Caroline, who introduces a sub-plot of secret services and shady speculation in personal futures; his boss Diane Chang, who joins Frank in passing the time between work and working out by toying with the idea of being attracted to one another, but of whom we see no other personal side; Frank's brilliant colleague Anna Quibler, her husband Charlie – part-time political aide to the rising star Senator Phil Chase – and their sons Nick and Joe; and the refugees flooded out of the island state of Khembalung: a likeable, albeit insufficiently independently characterised, collection of characters who unfortunately seem to have been unimaginatively gifted by either the author or his more credulous characters with unspecific eastern mysticism.

These are not faceless characters. Their thoughts and feelings are often depicted in a way that invites empathy and engagement. But the big picture is so much bigger than any of their individual stories that the narrative conveys a certain disengagement with any individuals. This novel, too, is only one episode in the bigger story, ending (as its predecessor did) rather abruptly with much left unresolved for individual characters. Tune in next time to see whether they, or we, can save the world.



**Karen Traviss – *Star Wars Republic Commando: Hard Contact***

Orbit, London, 2006, 293pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-524-7

**Karen Traviss – *Star Wars Republic Commando: Triple Zero***

Orbit, London, 2006, 403pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-525-5

**Reviewed by Martin McGrath**

In interviews and on her blog Karen Traviss casts herself as an outsider from UK fandom – she's not liberal or left-wing, her writing doesn't aspire to be 'Literary' and she indulges in that most despised of activities – she writes tie-in novels. Add the fact that her novels belong to that most American sub-genre – military sf – and that her work was first published in the US, and you can, perhaps, see her point.

And I should be the last person she wants reviewing these novels. I'm a *Guardian*-reading lefty. I haven't picked up a media tie-in novel since I was eight. And

my experience of the military, which includes having drunken Geordie soldiers piss on my trousers while their mates pointed their SLRs at my head (what a New Year that was!), is almost entirely negative.

Despite all that, I've enjoyed Traviss's wess'har novels (*City of Pearl*, *Crossing the Line* and *The World Before*) and I'm going to recommend these books, especially the first, *Hard Contact*. Traviss writes an excellent adventure story, her style is muscular and direct and in *Hard Contact* she grabs the reader from the first moment and maintains a relentless pace throughout. *Hard Contact* is the story of Omega Squad, four republic commandos, specially bred and trained elite members of the 'Clone Army' created in the *Star Wars* prequels. Dropped behind enemy lines Omega Squad are joined by Etain, a novice jedi, and attempt to destroy a secret military base.

*Hard Contact* zips along but what is impressive is that alongside the action Traviss constructs complex and believable characters. Four of her protagonists might be clones of the same man, but she cleverly distinguishes them from each other and makes them each uniquely likeable. She also finds time to consider some of the issues raised by the use of the clone army – their artificial lifespans, their pre-programmed sense of duty and their lack of rights.

*Triple Zero* is still enjoyable but I found it less successful – it takes longer to get going, has a much larger cast of characters, and a more convoluted, less satisfying plot in which the commandos combat terrorism on Coruscant, capital of the Republic. Sadly the UK edition – unlike the US version – does not include the short story 'Omega Squad: Targets' (originally published in *Star Wars Magazine*), the events of which are referred to throughout the novel. It is possible to enjoy the book without reading the story, but many of the relationships in *Triple Zero* make more immediate sense if you've read 'Targets' first.

There's a powerfully blue-collar quality to Traviss's writing. Her intense empathy with the military men and women that civilian society asks to do its dirty work comes across on every page and her focus is always on the grunt at the sharp end. The result is that, even when I found myself disagreeing with her (the "kill them all and let god sort them out" approach to terrorists in *Triple Zero* was hard to stomach at times), I still find myself liking and even admiring her characters.

Traviss's understanding of soldiers and her strong sense of technical know-how allied to her ability to tell a ripping yarn creates a winning package. Whether or not you regularly read media tie-ins, if you liked her wess'har books, you'll enjoy these.

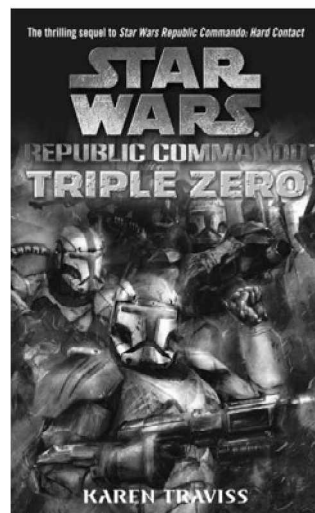
**Ian Watson – *The Butterflies Of Memory***

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 453pp, £25.00, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-904619-49-5

**Reviewed by L. J. Hurst**

Is it any wonder that the Southampton SF Writers' Group has produced no sf but tales of orgies, madness and strange uses of everyday objects, when their tutelary figure, Ewan Hotsun, has driven his perverse imaginings so far into their minds that when he picks those brains for ideas he finds he is harvesting exotic and erotic fruit on which to quench himself? Well, yes and no.

The title story in this, Ian Watson's tenth collection, provoked that thought. The eponymous butterflies are super mobile telephones – in fact, they can fly, making them super-mobile, as well; 'phones' (or 'fones' as mobiles seem to be called throughout this volume) which can not only predict what number you want to call, they can read your mind, remove your memories, and





leave you with others. Tom Cavendish goes seeking treatment for amnesia and finds, almost immediately, recollections of an affair with his psychiatrist, an affair that was someone else's. Not dissimilarly, Kate Quantrell, in 'Man of Her Dreams', in her eagerness to progress in the company takes on the company's dream implants. Unfortunately, she has not bargained on the need to make the dreams pay – it is difficult to meet your dream lover when you have to click through the advertisements to reach the next stage of happiness – Kate's mind, like her entertainment, is now in the hands of someone else.

Another Kate, in 'A Free Man', thinks "I hope this isn't badly written porn about me" but it is not because of the eroticism implied that I link 'The Butterflies of Memory' with 'Man of Her Dreams' but because they are some of the stories in this collection that had input from workshops or collaborators. Kate's mind and love were not only in the hands of her employers, they have been manipulated by sf writers, for as Ian Watson has found, we cannot escape the invasion of other things.

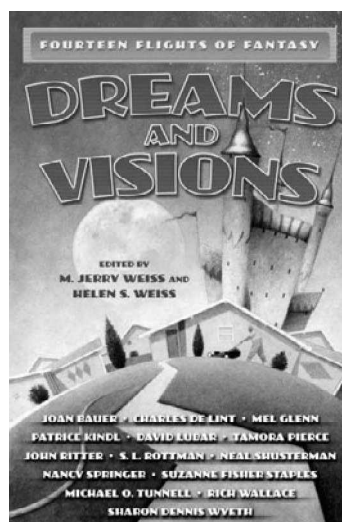
Included here is 'Hijack Holiday' which could be misread as a pastiche of the Twin Towers 9/11 attack, were it not made clear that it was written a year before. Or consider 'How to be a Fictionaut' (both this story and 'Hijack Holiday' first appeared in *Interzone*), with its "subconscious plagiarism. Thirty years ago, you read a story. Suddenly you come up with a brilliant idea. Unfortunately your brilliant idea is exactly the same as in that story, but you don't remember this." It seems to be a comment on this year's scandals in US publishing – indeed, it seems it has either been plagiarised or it plagiarises many a broadsheet column commenting on the scandals, except that it was published in 1996, ten years ago. I could mention the mind-stealing 'fones' anticipating Stephen King's *Cell*, but chance reproduction is not the most significant aspect of Watson's work. Rather it is the realisation that the world of Ian Watson is an Escher-like world, and everyone's observation is necessary to another's display.

If you wish Watson will transport you around the universe; he will descend on planets with wooden surfaces sailed by yachts on wheels; he will introduce you to beasts from other dimensions in an Oxford Common Room; he will take you through invisible walls to meet Centaurs; he will take you underground, and there he will introduce you to time-travellers, time-travelling Nazis at that, in 'Giant Dwarfs', the fifteenth of the seventeen stories here. And perhaps those Nazis will take you back to the first story, 'An Appeal to Adolf', which may be the last thing I discuss. It is certainly concerned with the end of Dieter Schmidt, its unhappy protagonist, who makes the appeal to Fuhrer Adolf Hitler, yet, oddly never mentions in the story nor in the story notes at the end of the book, that his is a 'final appeal'.

On the face of it, 'An Appeal to Adolf' is a simple alternate history, in which the Nazis are winning, and a battleship large enough to bridge Calais to Dover is sailing up from Africa with the Fuhrer on board. In his note Ian Watson discusses the history of Hitler and Wittgenstein's schooldays and then diverges again: of course, Wittgenstein did not broadcast war propaganda, but he did not sit in Cambridge decrypting with Alan Turing, either, as Watson implies (he was a hospital porter in Newcastle-on-Tyne). Hitler, on the other hand, made a broadcast to Britain – in fact, he made 'A Last Appeal to Reason', as the speech was titled when the Luftwaffe dropped copies over this island in the late Spring of 1940, offering a negotiated peace, or surrender as it usually called in English. That is the appeal, and that is what Ian Watson does not mention – he has taken an appeal by Adolf and reversed it, to become an appeal to Adolf.

In the final notes Ian Watson includes one of his poems. It

ends: "From our cage, into otherness." And he is taking others with him, though perhaps not as they would have expected.



## M. Jerry Weiss and Helen S. Weiss (eds.) – *Dreams and Visions*

Tor, New York, 2006, 252pp, \$19.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31249-2

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger

This is a collection of short stories that seems determined to protect the reader from any kind of surprise. The dust jacket lists each story with a one sentence summary, the editors' introduction is largely plot synopsis, and each story is prefaced with a short synopsis that spoils what for me is the greatest pleasure of a short story to plunge into a situation *in media res* and for a brief spell to be transported elsewhere or elsewhere.

In the introduction the editors try to evoke a childhood experience of reading that enthralls and allows the imagination to fly. The sf and fantasy genre, they suggest, offers a similar experience. It is unfortunate, then, that their choice of material for this collection rarely captivates, excites or even interests.

The highlights:

'Dharma' by Charles de Lint is another Newford story. It is a sweet, compelling story about hippies in 1967 and Dharma who is discovering music, himself and love. The style appears simple, but is effectively evocative. The fantasy element is appropriately gentle and ambiguous, though the unnecessary coda attempts to create a tidy ending.

Patrice Kindl skillfully tackles the postmodern fairy tale in 'Depressing Acres', in a delicious story that plays with our knowledge and expectations of fairy tales, and stirs in the compelling tropes of children who can see the truth where adults are blind, and a child-eating witch. The story is short but sweet, with a satisfying final bite.

John H. Ritter's 'Baseball in Iraq (Being the True Story of the Ghost of Gunnery Sergeant T. J. McVeigh)' manages to be an anti-war rant and a powerful tale of redemption. The focus of the story is the tragedy of the young soldier trained to do things that are inhuman, witness to and perpetrator of horrors, who is then expected to fit smoothly back into society when his war is over. The story relates the experiences of one recently-dead gunner as he is guided through InDoc by Sgt T.J., examining his sins, his regrets and his feelings for his fellow soldiers.

The might have beens:

Rich Wallace has a completely gripping opening to his story 'Allegro'. It conveys a vivid sense of the spirit and music of running and hurdles, as well as something of the obsession and commitment needed for competitive sports. Sadly, the fantasy element is slight, seems to be building to something interesting, but dissipates unexamined, giving the impression that it has been bolted on in order to meet the brief for this collection.

'Red Sky' by S. L. Rottman has a similarly powerful opening and disappointingly dull ending. The world is on fire and Rottman's descriptions are disturbing, conveying the hopelessness of trying to outrun the fire perpetually. It is easy to



empathise with the weariness of those who give up as well as the necessary ruthlessness of those who leave the weak and injured behind. The fire turns out to be the equivalent of a Biblical flood, sent by ancient, watery dragons to cleanse the world, but the denouement reads like a weak attempt to add plot to a vivid vignette.

The interesting:

In 'The Hidden Girl' Tamora Pierce tackles a difficult subject, writing from the point of view of a teenaged girl in a culture that requires women to be completely veiled and denies them education. There are voices in the story that represent the veil as evil and oppressive, and other voices that characterise it as powerful and liberating. The practices that restrict the freedom of women are analysed within the story as stemming from a fear of the powerfulness of women, but the ending of the story can be read as undermining this stance, since the teenaged protagonist can only speak with a voice of power by concealing her identity and adopting a new persona.

The downright dull:

It seems unnecessary to waste energy on describing the particular triteness, banality and poor writing of each of the remaining stories in the anthology.



## Robert Charles Wilson – *Spin*

Tor, New York, 2005, 364pp, \$25.99, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30938-6

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

One night a few years from now the stars go out. Or so it appears to three young people in the garden of 'The Big House' in Washington DC. Jason and Diane Lawton are 14, their father a pioneer in a fledgling communications technology and junior Washington power player. Together with Tyler, son of E. D.

Lawton's former business partner, the trio are inseparable. Narrated by Tyler, *Spin* chronicles the complex relationship between the three over the next several decades and three billion years.

The stars haven't gone out. Rather, with parallels to Greg Egan's *Quarantine*, the Earth has been enclosed from the wider universe. The event gradually comes to be known as the Spin; the enclosing 'barrier' is permeable to sunlight, which is being processed and filtered to create a perfect image of the real sun. And solar radiation has to be filtered because in the universe outside time is flowing 100 million times faster than on Earth. The Spin can only be the deliberate action of a vastly advanced and powerful intelligence, the evidence of such entities being entirely implicit in their actions, such that they are dubbed the 'Hypotheticals'. So the scene is set for a hard science fiction story almost as much about faith as science, for might not the 'Hypothetical' intelligence be God, the world in the End Times on the edge of Apocalypse.

### Particles

These are some of the other books we have seen recently. A mention here does not necessarily preclude a full review in a later issue of *Vector*.

Tyler becomes a doctor and is sufficiently an everyman to provide a clear reference point, the still centre of the spinning world, for Robert Charles Wilson's literate, educated readership. Tyler loves Diane, and his feelings are not unreciprocated, but Diane embraces an emergent hedonistic Christianity called New Kingdom, marries and moves far away. Jason proves to be a scientific genius, and is soon a leading figure in the US government's investigation of the Spin and the Hypotheticals, devising an ingenious plan taking advantage of the time differential to terraform and colonise Mars.

While maintaining an intermittent, distant friendship with the faith-driven Diane, Tyler becomes the personal physician to the scientifically motivated Jason, the three friends a world in microcosm, so much so that what follows might be dismissed as didactic, were the characters and struggles not so humanly and realistically depicted. And as the years pass the ever-expanding sun beyond the Spin barrier promises to gradually make the Earth uninhabitable, civilisation begins to decay and Jason is beset by a chronic, progressive disease extrapolated from MS.

This personal epic unfolds with rich imagination, laced with a powerfully emotive sense of impending fate (complete with explicit references to *On The Beach*). Occupying perhaps one seventh of the page count are intriguing intermittent chapters set time a little further into the future: Tyler and Diane are fugitives from the American administration, hiding in Indonesia, where Tyler injects himself with a drug the benefits of which are uncertain, but which might destroy his memory... these sections are, probably entirely coincidentally, reminiscent of Christopher Priest's *The Affirmation*.

*Spin* is the fifth novel I have read by Robert Charles Wilson, and by far the best. The book is a marvel of construction on so many levels, the diverse parts gradually brought together with the skill of a master so that the whole resonates with rare complexity and beauty. It is a first rate hard science fiction novel filled with strong ideas and bold, original extrapolation, based on a startling premise which works effectively on the level of pure story but also functions as a powerful metaphor for the inevitability of both individual and species mortality. Yet *Spin* is more besides; it is a moving story about several kinds of love, a complex and mature examination of relationships and motivations, a realistic drama of political and social upheaval, a tense and gripping thriller. It is refreshing in featuring a scientist hero who may be able to save the world but sometimes cannot stand up unassisted due to his disability. And *Spin* is written in such beautiful, expressive and poetic language I found myself repeatedly stopping simply to linger over a phrase, to savour the eloquence of the prose.

I predict *Spin* will be soon be on every significant science fiction award shortlist; it would be a worthy winner of any trophy. Beyond that *Spin* is the ideal book to give to friends whose only knowledge of sf comes from Hollywood. Indeed, in a rave Washington Post review Paul Di Filippo has already found *Spin* guilty of literature\*. I will certainly feel fortunate to read a better new novel of any sort this year. Sometimes guilty pleasures are the best.

\*<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/19/AR2005051901382.html>



### Kelly Armstrong – *Broken* ☐

Orbit, London, 2006, 444pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-342-2

The sixth volume in Armstrong's *Women of the Otherworld* series sees the return of the werewolf Elena Michaels, last seen in the second volume, *Stolen* (reviewed in *Vector* 233). This one sounds fascinating with Elena



persuaded to steal Jack the Ripper's 'From Hell' letter from a collector, which inadvertently opens a portal back to Victorian London. Oh, and our hero is pregnant. Which has sold it to me. Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc have reviewed much of this series, finding it at the front of this *Buffysque* genre and strengthening with each volume.

### Catherine Asaro – *The Final Key*

Tor, New York, 2005, 352pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31353-7

Another volume in the on-going Skolian Empire series, this is the 'second and concluding' part of the Triad story arc, that began with *Schism* (which translates as one story artificially split into two – see also the Peter F. Hamilton, Dan Simmons and Scott Westerfeld books below). Space cadets, interstellar empires and all the normal trappings of space opera (See also Hamilton below. And the Westerfeld... but not really the Simmons).

### Neal Asher – *Brass Man*

Tor UK, London, 2006, 568pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-4159-4

Asher's fifth proper novel (after a number of small press publications) is a sequel to his first, *Gridlinked*, telling the continuing story of the unpredictable golem Mr Crane – which is rather tricky as he was comprehensively destroyed in the earlier novel. Dave M. Roberts, in *Vector* 241, liked this a lot, finding it much more than just Mr Crane's story and concluding that it is "hugely enjoyable, no-nonsense action-packed sf with a brain". Recommended.

### Kage Baker – *The Children of the Company*

Tor, New York, 2005, 304pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31455-X

Further novel in Kage Baker's Company series. Well, not so much 'novel' as fix-up since most of the book was published as short stories in *Asimov's* (between 1999 and 2001). Baker's Company are, in essence, the time police – turning mortal children into time-travelling cyborgs (yes, that's what all books need!) who are sent to harvest now-extinct animals and plants and to preserve human culture from the follies of war and disease. Not quite as much fun as it sounds – some of the earlier ones got rather bogged down with the historical details – but well worth a try (although go back to the first *In The Garden of Eden*).

### Ashok K. Banker – *Bridge of Rama*

Orbit, London, 2005, 448pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-330-9

### Ashok K. Banker – *King of Ayodhya* ☐

Orbit, London, 2006, 501pp, £8.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-331-7

And so Banker's massive re-imagining of the classic Indian epic comes to a conclusion with the publication of the fifth and sixth volumes. This should be so good, with great source texts and surprisingly good cover art but even this self-acknowledged India-obsessive could only struggle through the first volume, *Prince of Ayodhya* (reviewed way back in *Vector* 229 by the much missed K. V. Bailey), as the writing was just so turgid and overblown. Just because the original texts are very, very long there is no justification for failing to edit this series. This may be the end of The Ramayana but Banker's introduction to the sixth volume has "here's the good news, next stop Hastinapura", which could mean he's moving on to The Mahabharat?

### Ben Bova – *Titan* ☐

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2006, 502pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-340-82396-8

Tor, New York, 2006, 464pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30413-9

English and American hardbacks of Bova's latest volume in his ongoing The Grand Tour series which takes us out to one of Saturn's moons (but you knew that didn't you?). It's 2095 and the gigantic colony ship Goddard has reached Saturn with a mission to study Titan and carrying a population of 10,000 "dissidents, rebels, extremists, and visionaries seeking a new life" (not quite Adam's Golgafrinchan Ark B then?). And what follows sounds just what you might expect...

### Ray Bradbury – *Something Wicked This Way Comes*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 262pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07874-X

Number 49 in the ongoing Gollancz Fantasy Masterworks series and another book that deserves the label. The mysterious Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show arrives in Green Town, drawing two young friends, Jim and Will, irresistibly to it...

Strongly recommended (and I wonder just how much of an influence this had on the makers of the *Carnivale* TV series?)

### Jim Butcher – *Storm Front*

Orbit, London, 2005, 341pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-398-8

### Jim Butcher – *Fool Moon*

Orbit, London, 2005, 391pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-399-6

### Jim Butcher – *Grave Peril*

Orbit, London, 2005, 426pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-400-3

### Jim Butcher – *Summer Knight*

Orbit, London, 2005, 405pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-401-1

### Jim Butcher – *Death Mask*

Orbit, London, 2005, 408pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-402-X

### Jim Butcher – *Blood Rites*

Orbit, London, 2005, 452pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-403-8

### Jim Butcher – *Dead Beat* ☐

Orbit, London, 2006, 498pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-528-X

Rapid UK publication of the Dresden Files series (so far up to seven volumes, in series order above) featuring Harry Dresden (surprise) as a down-at-heel Chicago wizard. Yes it's yet another one of those modern gothic horror stories where we have vampires, monsters, ghosts and magic in a 'real world' setting, as found in *Buffy* and the numerous literary equivalents such as Hamilton, Armstrong, Huff, Harris etc. The main difference here is that our hero is male, which will inevitably invite comparisons with Mike Carey's *The Devil You Know*, reviewed in this issues main column, and featuring a male exorcist in London. This is somewhat unfair on Butcher's series as his was first published in the US in 2000 but if the two are compared then Carey's is the one to go for. The Dresden Files are not exactly bad, just rather dull, with no real pace and predictable monster-of-the-week formula: vampire, werewolf, ghost, faerie queen etc (why is the second volume always werewolves? Tanya Huff's vastly superior Vicki Nelson books – which were reviewed in *Vector* 240 – also had werewolves in the second volume). Worth it for a quick, light read but they never rise above the average in this very competitive sub-genre.

### Ramsey Campbell – *Secret Stories*

Tor, New York, 2006, 400pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31616-1

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts in *Vector* 245, when published in the UK by PS Publishing, this is the story of Dudley Smith a socially inadequate, resentful and unattached horror writer who is always secretive about where his ideas/stories come from. When a story is published in a magazine the readership is split, some hate it, others are repulsed. When it then starts being tuned into a film Smith's fictional and real worlds start to mix. Roberts found the book to have "some degree of success, attempted to both satirise popularly held views of the horror genre and to take us some way into the mind of a psychopath" concluding that "the result is a gripping and effective crime thriller".

### Jeffrey A. Carver – *Battlestar Galactica*

Tor, New York, 2006, 320, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-31541-6

No, this can't be right. Someone is actually publishing a novel based on "the exciting SCI FI channel miniseries". And it's the first in a series. Now I know there a significant number of wrongheads out there but really, why? This is a TV series where nothing happens and just keeps going on about some plot of the Cylons to, well, do something: if only they *would* get on and do anything! Given that I packed in watching the series before the half way point I'm not going to read this (although it can't be as slow or uninteresting as the TV series can it?). It's a cruel world when wonderful series like *Firefly* don't even make it halfway through a series before being cancelled and rubbish like *Battlestar Galactica* has three series (so far). [Now we'll see about editorial control!]

### Arthur C. Clarke – *Rendezvous With Rama*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 252pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07733-6

### Arthur C. Clarke and Lee Gentry – *Rama II*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 495pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07722-0

### Arthur C. Clarke – *The Deep Range*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 224pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07711-5

Gollancz are rightly keeping Sir Arthur in print with new editions of the first two Rama books, with *Rendezvous With Rama* (originally published in 1973) being SF Masterwork number 65, and *The Deep Range* (1954) looking inward rather than spaceward with a 21<sup>st</sup> century exploration of the oceans.

### Susanna Clarke – *The Ladies of Grace Adieu*

Bloomsbury, London, 2006, 50pp, no price, p/b (proof), ISBN none

"Magic, madam, is like wine and, if you are not used to it, it will make you drunk"



Bound proof copy (think Penguin 60s) of 'The Ladies of Grace Adieu' plus an introduction (from a Professor of Sidhe Studies at the University of Aberdeen) published as advance publicity for a short story collection of the same name (due October 2006). The collection features seven stories, none original to the collection, and featuring the return of two characters from *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*: Strange himself and the Raven King.

This will be an essential purchase as I suspect that Ms Clarke's style will, for me, work better in the short form. Although I liked *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* I never loved it, finding that the parts, and the writing, worked brilliantly but there was just not enough plot to sustain the complete book: something that the short fiction should overcome. If you want to try an example before buying then 'The Duke of Wellington Misplaces his Horse' is available at [www.jonathanstrange.com](http://www.jonathanstrange.com).

### David Gemmell – *Troy*

Corgi, London, 2006, 624pp, £6.99, p/b ISBN 0-552-15111-4

Gemmell's epic retelling of the myths and legends surrounding the siege of Troy is now out in paperback. Reviewed by Susan Peak in *Vector* 245 she found this very nearly a straightforward historical retelling with very few genre element (only some prophetic dreams). Although the book was well written and with good characters it was rather lacking in both plot and any sense of place and, ultimately, had little to recommend it.

### John Grant – *Sci-Fi Movies: Facts, Figures & Fun*

AAAPPL, London, 2006, 96pp, £5.99, h/b, ISBN 1-904332-35-8

A curiously attractive little book which appears, well, rather pointless? The book has a number of sections, such as 'Scaring Your Pants Off: Sci-Fi Meets Sex' and 'Return of the Living Remake' with lists of suitable films, a brief outline and (for a limited few) some facts (read 'trivia') to go with them. Why? Isn't this what we have the interwebs for?

### Laurell K. Hamilton – *A Stroke of Midnight*

Bantam, London, 2006, 523pp, £6.99, p/b, 0-553-81633-0

Paperback edition of Hamilton's fourth Meredith Gentry novel with the Private Eye/Farie Princess (depending which world she is currently in) locked in a prison cell whilst her cousin tries to bring down the Queen of Air and Darkness (who is also Meredith's aunt). I suspect she won't be in the cell for long in this novel which is described as "where the erotic and the exotic, the decadent and the deadly come together". A guilty pleasure? (Sorry, getting my series intermixed).

### Peter F. Hamilton – *Judas Unchained*

Pan, London, 2003, 1235pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-49353-1

Now this is better: massive space opera as it should be done. After having some (sort of) time out from his traditional genre with the Arthur C. Clarke Award nominated *Fallen Dragon* and the rather less successful *Misspent Youth*, Hamilton has returned to what he does best with this, the second volume of The Commonwealth saga (following *Pandora's Star*).

In truth *Pandora's Star* and *Judas Unchained* are one book sensibly split into two (as at a combined page count only just under 2,400 I don't think it could be manufactured let alone read). Both volumes have already been reviewed by Martin Potts (in *Vector* 238 and 246 respectively) where he loved every minute of them. Strongly recommended.

### Robert A. Heinlein – *Glory Road*

Tor, New York, 2006, 320pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-31222-0

### Robert A. Heinlein – *Space Cadet*

Tor, New York, 2005, 224pp, \$23.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31450-9

More reprints of Heinlein, one, *Glory Road*, being his only 'true' fantasy novel and the other, *Space Cadet*, being one of his juveniles. I remember reading *Glory Road* from the library many years ago and thoroughly enjoying it (so who says I don't like fantasy?). Mind you, I may hate it now.

### Barb and J. C. Hendee – *Thief of Lives*

Orbit, London, 2005, 472pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-365-1

### Barb and J. C. Hendee – *Sister of the Dead* ☐

Orbit, London, 2006, 438pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-366-X

Volumes two (*Thief of Lives*) and three (*Sister of the Dead*) of this series described as "a mix of *Lord of the Rings* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" following the first book, *Dhampir* (reviewed in *Vector* 241). And that tag-line really does describe the books accurately: so by know you will know if you are tempted or not to read them. Alan Fraser found that the first works well as a "slam-bang good-versus-evil actioner with some

genuinely poignant moments and recommended to those who like a light read about the undead". I would not go quite that far, in fact I'd go very little distance at all. This should have worked – well, it has got vampires with swords – but just turned out dull and overlong. As with many vampire series it suffered from constantly referring to the backstory and hinting about the future – both of which sound much more interesting than the present we are being told about. A serious disappointment.

### Frank Herbert – *The Great Dune Trilogy*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 912pp, £14.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07070-6

Or one great novel (*Dune*) plus the next two (*Dune Messiah* and *Children of Dune*) which probably seemed a good idea at the time, all packaged together into one volume that is so large it's impossible to read. It's not even that cheap so I can't see what the market for this is as it's easy enough to go in to a second handbook shop and buy them. Better still, go into a new bookshop but remember to just buy the first volume.

### S. E. Hinton – *Hawkes Harbor*

Tor UK, London, 2006, 251pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-43760-7

This is only Hinton's eighth book since the publication to great acclaim of *The Outsiders* in 1967 and her first specifically aimed at adult readers. This book tells the story of Jamie Sommers from bullied schoolboy to asylum patient via apprentice to a charismatic con-man. Elizabeth A. Billinger reviewed the hardback in *Vector* 243 where she quickly realised that this was the story of Sommers as Renfield to the con-man's Dracula. She found many problems with the book: from the language which she described as "choppy, the sentences ugly, the whole novel an unsatisfying exposition – this happened, then that happened, and the other thing had happened, that fails to build characters". And then it gets worse: "it abandons the genre reader without any kind of pay off at all, introduces an outrageously unexplained McGuffin, and decides that it is a simple tale of Stockholm syndrome, the restorative properties of group sex, and the possibilities of redemption for those who had a bad start in life but find an open-minded community". One to strongly avoid.

### Tom Holt – *You Don't Have to be Evil to Work Here, But it Helps* ☐

Orbit, London, 2006, 346pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-283-3

... but you do have to be seriously wrong and misguided to want to read about it.

### Robert E. Howard – *The Complete Chronicles of Conan*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 925pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07766-2

Now this is what the World needs: a massive, faux-leather bound tome of the complete Conan stories, collected together for the first time in chronological order (it says here) and published to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Howard. Plus there is (a little) new art work by Les Edwards and a forward and afterward by Stephen Jones. Pity it's too big and heavy to open and read.

### James Kakalios – *The Physics of Superheroes*

Duckworth and Co, London, 2006, 364pp, £9.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7156-3549-2

In the abstract this does rather appeal to me: using current physical theorems to 'explain' the reasoning behind Superman's strength, how Storm from the X-Men could control the weather or whether Spiderman's webs would be strong enough to support him. I say in 'abstract' as I can't actually imagine ever sitting down and reading it. Still, the author is a professor in the School of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Minnesota so the arguments have a chance of standing up.

... and it does have a section called 'Me Am Bizarro!' which discusses some of those superhero powers which just can't work no matter how many miracle exceptions one is willing to grant.

### Stephen King – *'Salem's Lot: Illustrated Edition*

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2006, 594pp, £20.00, h/b, ISBN 0-340-92127-7

Now this is a *very* handsome edition. A new version of King's second novel, first published in 1975, and now presented with a new introduction from the author, fifty pages of deleted scenes, two related short stories and a selection of fantastically atmospheric photographs from Jerry Uelsmann – the literary equivalent of a DVD Special Edition.

The novel itself sounds straightforward – vampires in a New England town – but is much, much more than this and for me is probably King's



second most successful novel (the most successful being *The Stand*, which you will realize when you get to the piece below on *The Complete Stephen King Universe*). But I suspect this is for completists only (but do read the paperback if you haven't already).

**David Langford – *The Wyrdest Link: Terry Pratchett's Discworld Quiz***

Gollancz, London, 2006, 289pp, £7.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07704-2

Very interesting I'm sure...

Does have an introduction from The Man Himself so all you sad completists will want this book. Otherwise, why?

**Charles de Lint – *Moonlight and Vines***

Tor, New York, 2006, 384pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-30917-3

This is another book in de Lint's Newford series, first published in hardback in 1999 and only now available in paperback. This is a collection of 22 short stories, with only one, 'Sweetgrass & City Streets' original to the collection. Essential reading for anyone following de Lint's work.

**Delos W. Lovelace – *King Kong***

Gollancz, London, 2005, 201pp, £6.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07876-6

Yep, it's the novelisation of Peter Weir's Peter Jackson's film, telling the story of a giant ape, the girl he loves and their tragic New York holiday. But (again) you knew that didn't you?

**Brian Lumey – *Tarra Khash: Hrossak!***

Tor, New York, 2006, 256pp, \$23.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31075-9

Wow, what a great title! One that has three meaningless collections of letters, and an exclamation mark. The story itself is described as "classic Lovecraftian horror" (the cover kind of gives this away) and is the second part of the Tales of the Primal Lands series, following on from *The House of Cthulhu* (so it has got something to do with Lovecraft then?).

**Ian R. MacLeod – *The House of Storms***

Pocket Books, London, 2006, 457pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7434-6247-5

A Vector Recommended Read when reviewed by Stuart Carter in hardback in *Vector* 241 this is a sort-of sequel to *The Light Ages* (reviewed in *Vector* 232). MacLeod's re-imagined Edwardian period has now largely dispensed with any real claim to alternative history and is a history of its own, albeit with some familiar geography. Here we have the story of Great-Grandmistress Alice Meynell and her teenage son Ralph and the interaction of their lives, leading to Alice engineering her own aether-based equivalent of 9/11 and England collapsing into a Great War no less cataclysmic for being civil, rather than between states. Carter describes this book as showing that MacLeod's already strong writing is "taking another notable step forward. It moves far faster and far more fluidly for the most part, sucking the reader in and whisking him along in its wake". He concluded that *The House of Storms* is a "strikingly enjoyable and well-thought-out novel, which has something for absolutely everyone. Its fast-turning pages brim with joy and pain, love and war – in short, with humanity, a bit of everyday magic that shines brightly amongst the rather less common variety".

**Ken MacLeod – *Learning the World***

Tor, New York, 2005, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31331-6

Orbit, London, 2006, 398pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-344-9

American hardback edition and UK paperback of MacLeod's latest work, of which the UK hardback was reviewed in *Vector* 244 by Steve Jeffery. This is a stand-alone first-contact story with a very big world-ship *But the Sky, My Lady! The Sky!* Which Jeffery described as "a wonderful sf construct: more than a ship, slightly less than a world". This Arthur C. Clarke Award short-listed novel is strongly recommended.

**John R. Mason – *Return to Olympus***

Golden Apple, Wallasey, 2005, 202pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-904073-55-7

Sequel to the *Kronos Factor* which was reviewed, not very favourably, in *Vector* 238. Since the earlier novel our heroes – apparently the descendants of the members of the Greek pantheon – have been exiled from their home-world to prevent a reoccurrence of the war with Chaos. But something has gone wrong, the solution of which may just allow Ion, Cappella and Dee to return home to Olympus.

**Christopher Moore – *Practical Demonkeeping***

Orbit, London, 2006, 280pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-447-X

This appears to be the first British edition of this 1992 novel (that can't be right? I'm sure this has been out before but I can't find any details). The book introduces us to the miss-matched pair of Travis O'Hearn, one-hundred-year-old ex-seminarian, and Catch, a demon with a nasty habit of eating most of the people he meets plus the other inhabitants of Pine Cove, California. The author describes the book as mixing whimsy and horror which sounds intriguing. An early entry into the a *Buffyesque* genre (but with added whimsy)?

**K. J. Parker – *Devices and Desires***

Orbit, London, 2005, 706pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-276-0

Paperback edition of the first volume in K. J. Parkers new Engineers Trilogy. In some ways a typical fantasy set in a medieval type world but it is Parker's acute attention to detail which raises this far above the mass of such books (depending on whether you like detail or not). When Susan Peak reviewed the book in *Vector* 242 she found the writing "quiet, tending towards the understated and restrained, with a nice line in dry humour" and summarised it as "an unusual, slightly disturbing, yet enjoyable read". Not everyone will like this but it is definitely worth trying. And it's one of the most attractive paperbacks published in the UK for sometime.

**Christopher Priest – *The Prestige***

Tor, New York, 2005, 416pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 0-312-85886-8

This is the first US edition for this 1995 book (the delay is baffling) exploring the intertwined lives of two stage magicians in 1878, viewed from a contemporary narrator. Classic Priest which no one should miss. This handsome edition comes proclaiming the planned film version to be directed by Christopher Nolan and starring Christian Bale, Hugh Jackman and Michael Caine. This may just sound like fantasy casting but it is reported to start shooting in 2006 (we know that most planned films don't make it to the screen – but I certainly hope this one does). Essential reading.

**Steve Redwood – *Who Needs Cleopatra?***

Reverb, Oxford, 233pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-905315-03-1

Steve Redwood's *Who Needs Cleopatra?* is a comic novel of time travel. There are some ok jokes, but the writing is not tight enough and too often Redwood seems to be unaware of the difference between funny and silly. It is, of course, quite likely that a lot of people will think this book absolutely wonderful and side-splittingly hilarious. Well good luck to them, but it doesn't work for me I'm afraid.

(Reviewed by John Newsinger – who clearly has a very similar view on comic novels to your Reviews Editor)

**Alastair Reynolds – *Century Rain***

Gollancz, London, 2005, 532pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07691-7

Standalone novel from this award winning author featuring a far-future strand mixed with the exploration of an unstable alien transit system, which leads to the discovery of the possibility of travel back to an alternate mid-twentieth century earth. The book is described as "not just a time-travel story, nor a tale of alternate history but part hard sf thriller, part interstellar adventure, part noir romance" and for a change this is just what it is. Probably Reynolds's most successful novel since his debut *Revelation Space*, only let down by a too rapid, simple conclusion. There is the vague possibility of an opening for a sequel... but I suspect not.

Strongly recommended.

**A. R. R. Roberts – *The Va Dinci Cod***

Gollancz, London, 2006, 180pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07771-9

"Sponsored by *Coddy Delight*, the cod-flavoured fruit drink. Serve it to your children, and serve them right".

If you want more in a similar vein then there is now a paperback of this, clearly published to coincide with the release of the film version, although this book clearly proclaims itself as being "NOT the film tie-in edition" but then nothing is true is it? I really can't be bothered wasting more words on this.

**John Scalzi – *Old Man's War***

Tor, New York, 2006, 320pp, \$12.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-31524-6

This debut novel, which owes a huge (acknowledged) debt to Heinlein, has been very well received in America. Using a very familiar sf scenario – defending humanity from alien races – we follow John Perry as, on his



retirement day, he signs up with the Colonial Defence Force to, in the words of Alan Fraser (*Vector* 241) "kick alien butt". To be fair Fraser does point out that there are moral perspectives, just that Scalzi doesn't dwell on them, with one character stating "why negotiate and get part of what you want, when you can hit the other guy with overwhelming force and few casualties on your side, and get everything that you want?". That aside the book is "exciting, written well enough to induce a genuine sense of peril for the well-drawn characters, and has a hopeful if not yet happy ending". Scalzi's second novel, *The Ghost Brigades*, is just out and will be reviewed in a future *Vector*.

### Andy Secombe – *The Last House in the Galaxy*

Tor UK, London, 2006, 385pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-43189-7

This is a "hilarious sf adventure from the new master of humorous fantasy". So I'm not going to like it then am I?

For a rather more balanced view: Paul Bateman reviewed this in *Vector* 243 finding the end result "an occasionally amusing romp with sideward glances to other contemporary comic fantasy/sf writers" but wishing that it was just that bit more fulfilling.

### Dan Simmons – *Hyperion*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 473pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-57507-637-2

### Dan Simmons – *The Fall of Hyperion*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 535pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-57507-638-0

New paperback editions of these classic novels and I really do mean 'classic' (why are these not published in the SF Masterworks series?). Possibly some of the best hard sf ever published with *Hyperion* described as a science fiction version of *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Fall of Hyperion* taking the tale on to what happens after they get there. The books discuss the possible implication of the singularity some twenty years before it became today's hot topic.

Essential reading but be aware that this is another one of those books which is effectively one book split into two (so just get both of them).

### Martin Sketchley – *The Destiny Mask*

Pocket Books, London, 2006, 369pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7434-6844-9

Sketchley's sequel to *The Affinity Trap* makes few concessions to those who have not read the first volume, diving straight in to the story. Chris Hill, when reviewing *The Destiny Mask* in *Vector* 243 found that this is not necessarily a bad thing with the second book being both "a great improvement on the earlier volume and not as good as it could have been", the improvement being primarily due to improved characterisation. Hill concludes that despite his doubts about *The Destiny Mask* he does want to know what happens next as this book feels like it is marking time before more major events of the next (final?) novel of the series, *The Liberty Gun* (due this year from Pyr and in 2007 in the UK from Simon & Schuster)

### Roger Stern, Alan Grant and Nancy Holder – *Smallville Omnibus 1*

Orbit, London, 2006, 649pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-499-2

### Deal Wesley Smith, Nancy Holder and Diana G. Gallagher – *Smallville Omnibus 2*

Orbit, London, 2006, 649pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-500-X

Two new omnibus editions of these *Smallville* novels unashamedly published to cash in on coincide with the release of the new *Superman Returns* film. The first contains, *Strange Visions*, *Dragon and Hauntings* and the second *Whodunnit*, *Silence* and *Shadows* (excellent brevity in title selection). Now I may just be reading too much into this but the possibility of writing to a very strict formula appears to be at work here as both these omnibus editions come in at exactly the same page count? Either that or it will all be explained in the next Dan Brown book (or possibly is in A. R. R. R. Robert's latest?). On the basis of reading part of one of these they have been described as being very dull indeed and the perfect books to use to teach a creative writing course; as they get everything precisely wrong. They are good value though at only £7.99 for three novels (but if you are that desperate then just go to your local charity shop).

### Charles Stross – *Accelerando*

Orbit, London, 2006, 433pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-389-9

This multi-award nominated novel (Arthur C. Clarke, BSFA, Hugo etc) was reviewed by Paul Kincaid in *Vector* 244 as being very difficult to summarise, although Kincaid does well with: "welcome to the science

fiction of the twenty first century. On the whole it's pretty much like the science fiction of the twentieth century, there's an alien encounter, the end of the world, and even posthumanity has been around for twenty years at least". The novel collects and (somewhat) integrates a number of novellas and short stories published separately over the last few years. This gave me some problems as the success of the first section 'Lobsters' lead to real problems with the following ones, resulting in the book not working for me as a whole with just too many ideas crammed in. But back to Mr Kincaid who sums up this ideas/plot issue with "you do not read this novel for story. What you read it for is the world, which is hip, glossy, startling, ludicrous and convincing, and that is mainly contained within the info-dumps".

This is one of those novels which you may not end up loving – but it is one of those novels which you must read and form your own opinion of.

### Tricia Sullivan – *Double Vision*

Orbit, London, 2006, 377pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-173-X

Sullivan's first novel since 2003's awesome *Maul* has gained mixed, and conflicting, reviews. Utilizing a similar two strand narrative to *Maul* this novel intertwines the near-future life of Cookie Orbach working for a rather odd marketing company with her virtual life in The Grid. Few people appear to have found both strands convincing with some finding the real-world parts weak, others the virtual. I was much more interested in the real and consequently found the virtual rather superficial and intrusive. Steve Jeffery, in *Vector* 243, did find both parts convincing, but especially the virtual describing it as a "well-told sf story in itself" and that Sullivan "ties these two stories together, keeping the reader vacillating between alternative explanations, even as she makes some sharply observed comments about sf fans' ability and willingness to suspend disbelief".

Clearly any book which arouses this type of divergent view must be interesting so, as with Stross's *Accelerando* I'd recommend that you read it and decide for yourself.

### Charles Vess (illustrated by) – *The Book of Ballads*

Tor, New York, 2006, 192pp, \$14.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-31215-8,

Paperback edition of this graphic novel which takes English, Irish and Scottish folk songs which are then re-interpreted by a selection of modern fantasy authors (Neil Gaiman, Jane Yolen, Charles de Lint for example) and drawn by Charles Vess.

There is so much going on here take I can only refer you back to Steve Jeffery's very well informed review in *Vector* 240.

### Scott Westerfeld – *The Risen Empire*

Orbit, London, 2005, 704pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-372-4

Originally published in the US in 2003 as two volumes, *The Risen Empire* and *The Killing of Worlds*, they were issued as a single trade paperback volume by Orbit in the UK in 2005. Which sounds a tortuous history to finally arrive in the most appropriate format: a single volume paperback as this is classic pulp space opera. Stuart Carter reviewed the American editions in *Vector* 230 and 234 making it clear that this was one book, and a fantastic romp to boot. But be clear, this is not 'art' and Stuart found that his "critical faculties were utterly helpless in the face of Westerfeld's high-tension, jet-propelled narrative", advising that you "don't spend too much time on the book, but just one or two days ripping through *The Risen Empire* is a pure mainline of entertainment that will make you feel 10 years-old again". I agree (although it may be just a bit long).

### Stanley Wiater, Christopher Golden and Hank Wagner – *The Complete Stephen King Universe*

St Martin's Press, New York, 2006, 510pp, \$21.95, t/p, ISBN 0-312-32490-1

Originally published in 2001 this a updated guide to all things Stephen King: books, short stories, films, TV etc which now includes commentary on the complete Dark Tower series (the completion of which, justifiably, appears to be the reason for this revised edition). What you actually get is, according to the editors, "in-depth story analysis, character breakdowns, little-known facts and startling revelations on how the plots, characters and conflicts intertwine".

Now, given that King's first novel, *Carrie*, was published in 1974, and he has maintained a prolific output ever since, this is an ambitious claim to pack into 510 pages and one that is not really justified. For example *The Stand* (which, possibly worryingly, would be one of my desert-island-



books) gets scarcely two pages of discussion before starting on another few pages of characters and finishing on adaptations (a very effective four episode ABC miniseries) and some trivia. Which is just not enough when even the editors acknowledge the book's important role in the Dark Tower universe.

So what is here is interesting but the subject needs more, there could easily be a book of this length on just the Dark Tower series alone (I'd be surprised if one did not appear soon but in the meantime the fascinating website [www.thedarktower.net](http://www.thedarktower.net) will have to do).

### Liz Williams – *Banner of Souls*

Tor UK, London, 2006, 440pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-42690-7

Paperback edition of this Arthur C. Clarke Award short-listed novel which was reviewed by Penny Hill in *Vector* 240. Classic far-future sf set on a lightly-terraformed Mars and interweaving the lives of three characters: Yskatarina, an assassin from Nightshade, Dreams-of-War, a Martian warrior and Lunae, the possible future saviour of the world. Hill was not quite convinced by the novel: "while it is wonderful to find a good writer who never writes the same book twice, this brilliant hard sf lacks the emotional involvement I have come to expect". The book is, however, redeemed by the "intellectual fun she has playing with our myths and expectations of Mars which make fascinating reading".

Still strongly recommended.

Daniel Abraham – *A Shadow in Summer* [CB] ...

Kelly Armstrong – *Broken* [P] ...

Catherine Asaro – *The Final Key* [P] ...

Neal Asher – *Brass Man* [P] ...

Steve Aylett – *Lint* [CB2] ...

Kage Baker – *The Children of the Company* [P] ...

Ashok K. Banker – *Bridge of Rama* [P] ...

Ashok K. Banker – *King of Ayodhya* [P]

John Barnes – *The Armies of Memory* [CB2]

Ben Bova – *Titan* [P] ...

Ray Bradbury – *Something Wicked This Way Comes* [P]

...

Kevin Brockmeier – *The Brief History of the Dead* [CB2]

...

Tobias S. Buckell – *Crystal Rain* [ER] ...

Jim Butcher – *Blood Rites* [P] ...

Jim Butcher – *Dead Beat* [P] ...

Jim Butcher – *Death Mask* [P] ...

Jim Butcher – *Fool Moon* [P] ...

Jim Butcher – *Grace Pent* [P] ...

Jim Butcher – *Serious Front* [P] ...

Jim Butcher – *Summer Knight* [P] ...

Richard Calder – *Babylon* [SI] ...

Ramsey Campbell – *Secret Stories* [P] ...

Trudi Canavan – *Priestess of the White* [CAKG]

Mike Carey – *The Devil You Know* [COMLB] ...

Jeffrey A. Carver – *Butterstar Galactica* [P] ...

Arthur C. Clarke – *Rendezvous With Rama* [P] ...

Arthur C. Clarke – *The Deep Range* [P] ...

Susanna Clarke – *The Ladies of Grace Adieu* [P] ...

Arthur C. Clarke & Lee Gentry – *Rama II* [P] ...

Steve Cockayne – *The Gowl People* [EAB]

Conor Corderoy – *Dark Rave* [BJ] ...

Chris Farnell – *Mark II* [EAB] ...

Raymond E. Feist – *Flight of the Night Hawks* [VL] ...

Diana G. Gallagher, et al – *Smallville Omnibus 2* [P] ...

David Gemmell – *Troy* [P] ...

Christopher Golden, et al – *The Complete Stephen King*

*Universe* [P] ...

John Grant – *Sci-Fi Movies: Facts, Figures & Fun* [P] ...

Alan Grant et al – *Smallville Omnibus 1* [P] ...

Laurell K. Hamilton – *A Stroke of Midnight* [P] ...

Peter F. Hamilton – *Judas Unchained* [P] ...

Robert A. Heinlein – *Glory Road* [P] ...

Robert A. Heinlein – *Space Cadet* [P] ...

Barb & J. C. Hendee – *Sister of the Dead* [P] ...

Barb & J. C. Hendee – *Thief of Lives* [P] ...

Frank Herbert – *The Great Dune Trilogy* [P] ...

S. E. Hinton – *Hackers Harbor* [P] ...

Nancy Holder, et al – *Smallville Omnibus 1* [P] ...

Nancy Holder, et al – *Smallville Omnibus 2* [P] ...

Tom Holt – *You Don't Have to be Evil to Work Here. But it Helps* [P] ...

Robert E. Howard – *The Complete Chronicles of Conan*

[P] ...

James Kakalios – *The Physics of Superheroes* [P] ...

Stephen King – *Cell* [AF] ...

Stephen King – *'Salem's Lot: Illustrated Edition* [P] ...

David Langford – *The Wyrddest Link: Terry Pratchett's*

*Discworld Quiz* [P] ...

Gentry Lee & Arthur C. Clarke – *Rama II* [P] ...

Charles de Lint – *Moonlight and Vines* [P] ...

Delos W. Lovelace – *Kung Kong* [P] ...

Brian Lumley – *Tarra Khush: Hrossak* [P] ...

Ken MacLeod – *Learning the World* [P] ...

Ian R. MacLeod – *The House of Storms* [P] ...

John R. Mason – *Return to Olympus* [P] ...

Christopher Moore – *Practical Demonkeeping* [P] ...

James Morrow – *The Last Witchfinder* [DMB] ...

Paul Park – *The Tourmaline* [TB] ...

K. J. Parker – *Devices and Desires* [P] ...

Christopher Priest – *The Prestige* [P] ...

Steve Redwood – *Who Needs Cleopatra?* [JN] ...

Alastair Reynolds – *Century Run* [P] ...

Adam Roberts – *Gradisi* [PB] ...

A.R.R. Roberts – *The Va Dinci Cod* [P] ...

Kim Stanley Robinson – *Fifty Degrees Below* [CB2] ...

John Scalzi – *Old Man's War* [P] ...

Andy Secombe – *The Last House in the Galaxy* [P] ...

Dan Simmons – *Hyperion* [P] ...

Dan Simmons – *The Fall of Hyperion* [P] ...

Martin Sketchley – *The Destiny Mask* [P] ...

Deal Wesley Smith, et al – *Smallville Omnibus 2* [P] ...

Roger Stern, et al – *Smallville Omnibus 1* [P] ...

Charles Stross – *Accelerando* [P] ...

Tricia Sullivan – *Double Vision* [P] ...

Karen Traviss – *Star Wars Republic Commando: Hard*

*Contact* [MMG] ...

Karen Traviss – *Star Wars Republic Commando: Triple*

*Zero* [MMG] ...

Charles Vess (ill. by) – *The Book of Ballads* [P] ...

Hank Wagner, et al – *The Complete Stephen King*

*Universe* [P] ...

Ian Watson – *The Butterflies Of Memory* [LJH] ...

M. Jerry & Helen S. Weiss (eds.) – *Dreams & Visions*

[EAB] ...

Scott Westerfeld – *The Risen Empire* [P] ...

Stanley Wiener, et al – *The Complete Stephen King*

*Universe* [P] ...

Liz Williams – *Banner of Souls* [P] ...

Robert Charles Wilson – *Spin* [GD] ...









# The New X

by  
Graham Sleight

## All shall have prizes

I have long held the view that everyone should have in their conversational armoury a couple of stop-them-dead-in-their-tracks lines: conversation-stoppers so effective that you can be assured that your interlocutor will be left slack-jawed in shock. It's getting tougher, though. In most polite company, for instance, "I'm gay" is now an encouragement to further conversation, and even the formerly effective "I'm a member of the Conservative Party" is, I'm told, no longer a one-way ticket to social outsiderdom. The one surefire line, though, in almost every circumstance, is "I read and review science fiction books". The problem, of course, occurs when you try to use that within the sf community. In which case, I suggest two alternate lines guaranteed to get the sf fan you're talking to boggle-eyed at your irredeemable weirdness. One is "I don't drink alcohol", and the other is "You know, I can't get that worked up about awards."

Which is true, sort of: I don't, and I find the extent to which the rest of the community does a bit weird. A couple of disclaimers first, though. I was on the jury for this year's Clarke Award and will be for next year: it's a job which I've found stimulating and worthwhile, and I'm extremely happy with the shortlist and winner we chose. More generally, I think that the Clarkes' 20-year history of recognising the best sf published here in Britain is a significant achievement. I recognise, too, that as a critic I'm biased: there are almost no awards for achievement in non-academic sf criticism, and I'm working on the assumption that whatever validation I get in my career won't come from awards. And, of course, I don't want to denigrate the achievements of those who win awards or who work unrewarded to administer them. Nor do I think that awards are without value: I'm particularly keen on awards-as-advocacy, such as the Tiptree. It's just that, for a relatively small field, science fiction has a hell of a lot of them; and they define the field's calendar and its sense of itself to an extent that I don't think is healthy.

Step back a moment. When I say "science fiction", I'm conflating at least three interdependent entities. The first is the aesthetic enterprise of writers writing what they most want to for their presumed audience. The second is that vague thing called "fandom" – meaning, in this case, not just those who go to cons or read *Vector* but anyone who has any kind of interest in sf. And the third is the commercial enterprise of publishing writers and getting their work out to fandom. Awards look like they're a simple transaction between fandom and the aesthetic world: a way of marking (and maybe canonising) works of high quality. But they also, of course, have an impact on the third sphere, the commercial – both for the publisher and the individual writer's career path.

What distinguishes sf's culture from that of other literatures is, I think, the extent to which these three communities are intertwined and self-conscious. In particular, that self-consciousness means that sf has vastly more means than other fields of working out what its meta-story is: what works are viewed as worthwhile, what authors are flavour of the month. It's not just that we have a

magazine like *Locus*, whose remit – more or less explicitly – is to articulate that meta-story of the field getting a sense of itself: a journal like *Publisher's Weekly* does the same for the more general field. But look at, for instance, the proliferating number of Year's Best anthologies we have now – about half a dozen for sf alone, by my count, and maybe another dozen more for the rest of the field. As a culture, we clearly want, more than other cultures, to have presented to us tools for figuring out the meta-story.

What might be called the density of sf awards is a symptom of this need for meta-story. Another result, I think, is the degree of emphasis in the community on award processes – on nomination procedures, on eligibility, on predictions – which seems to me not so much unhealthy as *beside the point*. Awards are a means, not an end. To put it at its simplest, time spent worrying about awards is time spent not reading (or writing) books.

It's also worth saying that awards can be well-run or poorly-run. Every decision made by an awards jury or electorate has an effect on its legitimacy. When juries make dumb decisions – as they do, not infrequently – there tends to be an undignified shimmy as controversy erupts and they say, "Well, our intention was to create debate, and that's what we've done." It's perfectly true that good awards create debate just as bad ones do; but that doesn't mean that any decision that creates controversy is a good one. Anyone can see where a decision is so dumb that it undermines the currency the award has accumulated.

All this begs a couple of questions. If, as I'm arguing, awards aren't perfect and excessive interest in them damagingly privileges the secondary over the primary in our field, just where do I draw the line around "excessive"? And what do I propose to make things better? Well, for a start, I'm not suggesting an end to all awards, or even to the establishment of new ones. But I am suggesting that we need a renewed awareness of the primary sources of sf – the original anthologies, the first-time novelists, the magazines – and to see how important it is to support (say) a magazine like *F&SF* rather than waiting for some fraction of what it publishes to be blessed by awards or reprinting.

And to make things better? Well, in a field as crowded as this, we all know each other too well. Awards administrators need to be much more robust than they have been in the past about excluding or disinviting jurors from taking part in decisions where they have a conflict of interest either personally or professionally. And in popularly voted awards such as the Hugo, we need much greater transparency about how eligibility decisions are taken: as a nominator last year, I was genuinely unclear (until I enquired of a friendly SMOF) whether I could nominate Gene Wolfe's two-volume novel *The Wizard Knight*. As I said, the currency every award has is legitimacy, and everything that happens in the name of the award affects how much of that currency it has. So I'm not saying abolish all awards; I am saying we should run them better, and care about them less.