

Vector

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Cover: Geoff Ryman receiving the 2005 Arthur C. Clarke Award.
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Vector

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Way back in February, the guest at the BSFA's London Meeting was Steve Cockayne, author of the *Legends of the Land* trilogy (and, most recently, *The Good People*, reviewed by Elizabeth Billinger last issue). Instead of reading from a fiction work-in-progress, he read an unpublished autobiographical essay, about growing up with the sf of the 1950s, and in particular about the sf adventure his father created for his Pegasus Marionette Theatre. It was a lovely story, and we're pleased to be able to reprint it in this issue. Even better, Cockayne had some of the original puppets used in the production with him: they're the ones on the cover of this issue.

Originally, on our plan for the year, this issue was going to be *The One With No Theme*, the one where all the articles that didn't quite fit into other issues could go. But having acquired Cockayne's essay, we started thinking about what sort of thing might go with it. Things started to fall into place at Concussion last Easter. In her guest of honour interview, Elizabeth Hand talked about the ways in which she uses her personal experiences in her fiction, and in particular the differences between working on a fantasy novel and working on her forthcoming realist novel, *Generation Loss*. You can read her thoughts on 'Writing without a filter' in this issue, as well. There was another panel later on at the convention called 'Mining the Heart', which looked like it was going to explore similar issues; sadly neither of us were able to make it (send us a report, if you were there), but by now we had an overall theme for the issue: 'storying lives'.

The more we thought about it, the more facets this theme seemed to have to explore. Every day, we story our own lives, both internally and in how we represent ourselves to others. We story other peoples' lives, and use those stories as the basis for friendships and relationships. And clearly, writers are always going to draw on their experience when creating fictional stories. Take this year's winner of the BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction, Kelly Link's 'Magic for Beginners', for instance, which draws on Link's experiences of watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with friends. (The collection to which the story lends its title is finally due to be published in the UK next February, by HarperPerennial.) Or take one of the big books of this year, Julie Phillips' biography of Major Alice Hastings Bradley Davey Sheldon, PhD:

you could say that Sheldon had to create one story, that of being James Tiptree Jr, to be able to tell the other stories she wanted to tell.

But what is it that sf and fantasy, in particular, have to bring to the story of lives? That's the question we asked Gary K. Wolfe; his answering essay, 'Framing the Unframeable', leads off this issue. Our other articles take in a range of perspectives. In 'The Modern Storytellers', Jon Ingold outlines the quest for interactive fiction (for example, in computer games), a form which ultimately may come closer to capturing the experience of living than any prose or filmed narrative could. Speaking of filmed narratives, Alison Page looks at the first season of BBC television drama *Life on Mars* through an epistemological lens: more explicitly than in most fiction, the show's protagonist, Sam, is trying to find out what the story of his life is, and his uncertainty colours everything the show is and does. Of course, stories can be instrumental within lives, as well as applying to them. In this month's Archipelago section, Paul Kincaid looks at some of the moral stories we tell ourselves about human actions and societies, through the lens of Ursula Le Guin's ambiguously utopian tale 'The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas'. And in his regular column, Graham Sleight tackles the question of 'Storying Genres', otherwise known as that old definitions game.

So that's how this issue came to be. Or at least, it's one story of how this issue came to be. You see, the problem is that we're writing this in September, and we were commissioning articles between March and June, and it's hard to remember exactly what order things happened in. So maybe it was at Concussion that it all came together, but maybe it happened before or after. That's the other thing you realise when you start thinking about how to story something: there's always more than one way to do it.

This issue also marks the end of a story: it is Geneva's final issue as co-editor of *Vector*. Next issue will be the 250th *Vector*, and the start of a new chapter in the magazine's story, as Niall begins his solo stint as editor.



Torque Control

Editorial
by
Geneva
Melzack
& Niall
Harrison

Framing the Unframeable

by Gary K. Wolfe

"Unser Leben ist kein Traum, aber es soll und wird vielleicht einer werden".

("Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will.")

—Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenburg), as quoted in George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1859)

"And do not rely on the fact that in your life, circumscribed, regulated, and prosaic, there are no such spectacular and terrifying things."

—C. P. Cavafy, "Theodotus," as quoted in Elizabeth Hand's *Last Summer at Mars Hill* (1998)

When one looks at the published memoirs and autobiographical sketches written by science fiction and fantasy authors, mostly for the benefit of their fans – the sort of thing collected in Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison's *Hell's Cartographers* (1975) or Martin Greenberg's *Fantastic Lives: Autobiographical Essays by Notable Science Fiction Writers* (1981) – one is initially struck by the relative thinness and lack of genuine introspection of many of the essays. Typically, such pieces read as a variety of Augustinian conversion tales, depicting a precocious childhood, often solitary and bookish, sometimes sickly, sometimes featuring battles with parents to get into the adult sections of the library, and characteristically leading toward a moment of revelation: "And then came Hugo Gernsback" (Alfred Bester); "Then I saw and bought an issue of something called *Amazing Stories*" (Damon Knight); "So science fiction entered into and began warping my life from an early age" (Brian Aldiss)³ etc. In one of the still-comparatively rare autobiographies of sf writers, *Wonder's Child: My Life in Science Fiction*, Jack Williamson ends a chapter with the following cliffhanger:

Something else happened, however, in the spring of 1926, the first year I was out of high school. Something that changed my life. Hugo Gernsback launched a new pulp magazine, filled with reprinted stories by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells and A. Merritt and Edgar Rice Burroughs, stories he called "scientifiction."

The magazine was *Amazing Stories*.⁴

Following these road-to-Damascus moments, however, these memoirs and autobiographies seldom become genuine testaments, instead amounting to not much more than narrative resumé, filled with anecdotes of encounters with fellow writers and editors and often with almost obsessively detailed accounts of sales figures and payments; one comes away with the sense that (a) science fiction writers all clearly remember the first sf story they read, and (b) they keep really good tax records.

To be fair, Williamson does go on to describe his bouts of depression and his encounters with psychology – he may have been the first sf writer to undergo a full psychoanalysis – and he drops tantalizing hints as to how this may have affected the darker moments of his fiction. And the sf world has produced a handful of other genuinely thoughtful autobiographies, such as Brian Aldiss's *The Twinkling off an Eye* (1998). But the most famous of sf autobiographies, the fifteen-hundred-odd pages of Isaac Asimov's *In Memory Yet Green* (1979) and *In Joy Still Felt* (1980) are monuments to the unexamined ego, filled with astonishing details that reveal remarkably little about the man or

his fiction and seem almost intended to obfuscate; even the poem which provided these titles turns out to be a fake, written by Asimov himself specifically to generate the titles. Only much later, literally on his deathbed, did Asimov revisit his life in another massive volume, *I. Asimov* (1994), with fragmentary – but one feels more unmediated – meditations on his work and his career. Similarly, Robert Bloch's 1995 autobiography *Once Around the Bloch* is essentially an extended version of one of his legendarily funny con speeches, Frederik Pohl's *The Way the Future Was* is mostly an engaging insider's history of much of American sf, and Piers Anthony's 1988 *Bio off an Ogre* features more cranky score-settling than genuine introspection.

Perhaps we shouldn't expect more; after all, as I mentioned, for the most part these are celeb memoirs, written more to satisfy the curiosity of fans than to draw us deeper into the authors' works and worldviews. And we can, if we wish to play games of psychological criticism, draw our own conclusions, speculating for example on how Asimov's own self-confessed agoraphobia and love of Manhattan translated into the contained urban environments of *The Caves of Steel* or *The Naked Sun*, much as an earlier generation of psychological critics found sources for Kafka's 'The Hunger Artist' or *The Trial* in his vegetarianism or his stultifying office job. But I'm not certain this will lead us to understand the complex and often inchoate relationships between the stuff of an author's life and the stuff of his or her fiction, particularly when that fiction is cast in a fantastic or nonrealistic mode. We might have better luck if we look at those novels by sf or fantasy writers which we already know (from introductions, interviews, or self-evident subject matter) to be overtly autobiographical – J.G. Ballard's *Empire off the Sun*, for example, or Brian Aldiss's *Forgotten Life* or *Remembrance Day*, or Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*, or Joe Haldeman's *War Year*. The first of these certainly explains a lot about where all those drained swimming pools and low-flying aircraft in Ballard's fiction came from, just as the Bradbury reveals the sources of his Midwestern landscapes in his long-lost Waukegan childhood. The Haldeman novel, following the more or less traditional arc of the tour-of-duty novel, provides us a baseline account of the experiences in Vietnam that would inform so much of his later fiction. The Aldiss novels reveal much not only about Aldiss's landscapes, but about the sources of his characters (nearly all the major characters in *Forgotten Life* turn out to be avatars of Aldiss's own multiple identities as war veteran, writer, son and husband, and Oxford institution). But these novels are not even science fiction or fantasy, and what we can learn from them about how the stuff of writers' lives becomes the stuff of the fantastic is available to us only through inference, or through a kind of triangulation with what we already know of the author's other works. There are probably many seeds of doctoral dissertations here, and some have probably already been written, but such an approach still doesn't tell us much about the central question of what transformative mechanisms sf and fantasy in particular have to offer to the storying of lives.

One way to approach this question is to look at sf or fantasy stories that are self-consciously autobiographical, but are not fictionalized memoirs. There is an identifiable tradition of using devices of the fantastic to "thicken and intensify" (to use Rudy Rucker's phrase)⁵ the materials of lived experience, and from time to time this tradition has even given rise, as is sf's wont, to manifestos. In 1983, the *Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America* published Rudy Rucker's 'Transrealist Manifesto' (Rucker maintains it at <http://www.mathcs.sjsu.edu/faculty/rucker/transrealistmanifesto.pdf>), arguing for not only the use of personal experience in fiction, but for actually featuring the author – under his or her own name – as a character. This is something Rucker himself has done in *Saucer Wisdom* (1999), J.G.

Ballard in *Crash* (1974), and more recently James Patrick Kelly in 'Daemon' (1987), China Mieville in 'Reports of Certain Events in London' (2004), and Paul Park and Jeffrey Ford in a number of stories. (Damien Broderick later extended Rucker's ideas in a much more disciplined way in his 2000 academic study *Transrealist Fiction: Writing in the Slipstream of Science*.) More recently, the 'Mundane Manifesto' concocted by Geoff Ryman and a group of young writers at the Clarion Writers' Workshop seems intended as a kind of sf version of filmmaker Lars von Trier's 'Dogme' movement, eschewing such conventions and devices as interstellar travel, aliens, alternate universes, magic, or time travel, thus presumably forcing writers toward a discipline more firmly rooted in credible experience, and toward the use of fantastic elements clearly derived from such experience.

In an essay Kelly later wrote about his story 'Daemon,' which involves a strange encounter with a fellow student at the Clarion Science Fiction Writers' Workshop (which Kelly actually attended in 1974), he noted that the story confused many readers when it first appeared, because "in the foreground of this autobiographical structure, I presented an entirely fictional plot. Yes, I did go to the Clarion Writers Workshop in 1974, but I met no Celeste there. Nothing that happens in this story ever really occurred – thank God! But the challenge I set myself here was to imagine something fantastic that could realistically happen to a boring guy like yours truly." If we set aside writing challenges and the ego trip of writing about oneself, perhaps part of the instinct to lay fantastic structures over real life comes from the fact that the people writing them are genre writers who write about fantastic events that always happen to other (presumably more interesting) people. Kelly seems to suggest that one reason writers might include fictionalized versions of themselves could be due to a sort of character-envy—characters who, after all, get to live through more challenging, difficult, and powerful events in fiction than the presumably quotidian existence of the writer – particularly events that would be impossible in real life but possible in fantastic stories. These writers are asking themselves in print, "how would I react, how well would I hold up". But – as we shall see shortly – the reverse may also be true, with fictionalized versions of self sometimes functioning as a means of framing and ordering the challenging, difficult, or powerful events of the writer's own life.

Long before transrealist or mundane manifestoes, writers were drawing on autobiographical material for fantastic and genre fiction, and occasionally, like Kelly, they have written essays or books about it. In a remarkable but little-read book called *Algernon, Charlie and I: A Writer's Journey*, Daniel Keyes constructs what amounts to an autobiography of a single story, his classic 1959 'Flowers for Algernon.' In it, Keyes details how virtually every element of that story derived from particular events in his own experience – the trauma of dissecting what turned out to be a pregnant mouse in a college biology class, his discovery the same day of the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne, his work in a bagel bakery similar to the bakery his character Charlie Gordon works in, his frustration in dealing with psychology professors and analysts, and most tellingly an encounter with one of his students in a "special modified English" class Keyes was teaching in a Brooklyn high school in 1957: recognizing that he's been placed in a class for slow learners, the student plaintively tells Keyes "I want to be smart." By then, Keyes had already been toying with the idea of writing a story based on the notion of artificially increased intelligence, inspired loosely by H.G. Wells's 'The Man Who Could Work Miracles,' but what is particularly revealing is how this idea had repeatedly failed to jell. In retrospect, Keyes's trouble may have been partly due to his efforts to conceptualize it in terms of the

familiar conventions of genre fiction: in one iteration, the central character is the subject of a military experiment, in another he's a criminal who keeps getting caught because of his own stupidity, in another he's a punk school dropout. It wasn't until Keyes opened up the tale to his own experiences that the writing began to flow.

There are of course many examples from even earlier than this – Zenna Henderson's 'People' stories, for example, based on her own childhood in rural Mormon communities and her long-time experience as a schoolteacher in Arizona, or Clifford Simak's stories and novels featuring crusty individualists in rural Wisconsin settings similar to his own childhood home, or much of Theodore Sturgeon's fiction, such as the novel *The Dreaming Jewels* (1950), whose autobiographical elements didn't become fully clear until the publication in 1993 of his painful memoir of his step-father, *Argyll*. Even Paul Linebarger's bizarrely romantic far-future 'Cordwainer Smith' stories can be seen as outpicturings of his globetrotting childhood and colorful diplomatic and military career, especially when read in conjunction with his more directly autobiographical novels *Ria* (1947) and *Carola* (1949). But relatively few explications of source material for any given sf story are as comprehensive as Keyes's memoir.

None of these writers, however, took the interpenetration of the fantastical and autobiographical quite as far, or quite as explicitly, as did Philip K. Dick, whose increasingly self-obsessed work is the most likely model for the sorts of transformative fictions that Rucker calls for in the 'Transrealist Manifesto.' Dick is far too involved a subject to get into much detail about here – his later work may represent the most complex interpenetration of life and art in all of modern sf – but there is a certain irony in that, when Dick attempted to portray aspects of his life and relationships in realistic novels such as *Confessions of a Crap Artist* (1975), *In Milton Lumpy Territory* (1985), or *The Broken Bubble* (1989), he was unable even to get these novels published in his lifetime, while the same relationships and anxieties transformed into sf imagery yielded such novels as *Martian Time-Slip* (1964), *Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1964), *Ubik* (1969), and *A Scanner Darkly* (1977). By the time of the so-called Valis Trilogy – *Valis* (1981), *The Divine Invasion* (1981), and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1982, although Dick never intended this to be part of his original planned trilogy) – he was clearly seeking through fiction, and through fantastic fiction in particular, a means to order the increasingly disordered nature of his own self-perception following his famous visionary experience of March 1974. The character Horselover Fat in *Valis* – a punning translation of Dick's own name – can even be read as a kind of mediation between the ordering power of art and the dissociation of nightmare. But neither Dick's own philosophical meditations in his famous 'Exegesis,' nor his mainstream novels, nor even his earlier science fiction, could quite achieve the sense of transcendence (of both real life and of genre protocols) that emerges from this odd interpenetration of invented and personal fantasy.

But Dick, who in many senses lived inside a science fictional world during the last decade of his life, is hardly a usable model for exploring the conscious interface between the fantastic and the personal. As significant as his body of work is, much of its importance to our present discussion is in the manner in which it contributed to a broadening of the very nature of sf and fantasy, or at least in the potential of these genres to explore and interrogate more personal concerns. Some writers roughly contemporaneous with Dick may have used similar devices – Ballard in *Crash*, for example – but there was a certain self-conscious literary archness about such devices in the work of Ballard and other New Wave writers; with Dick we instead get almost a sense of desperation, as though narrative voice might

somehow provide a frame for the unframeable. And it is this *rawness*, this sense of ordered but not fully mediated experience, that it seems to me has become increasingly evident in the work of several excellent writers in the last couple of decades, although generally more evident in the arenas of fantasy and horror than in genre sf. It might, then, be useful to examine a few specific examples of how such frames might serve to mediate experience – including, in some cases, what horror writers (including Straub) have sometimes described as “extreme experience.”

Peter Straub initially gained fame as a writer of supernatural horror, although there have frequently been significant autobiographical elements in his fiction, and the murder-haunted city of Millhaven which recurs throughout his ‘Blue Rose’ series of novels and stories is a thinly disguised version of his childhood home in Milwaukee; in *lost boy lost girl* he even gives the terrifying house of his serial killer villain an address just around the corner from his childhood home. One event that clearly shaped his fiction, and that is described in his novels *Mystery* (1990) and *The Throat* (1993), was the experience of being struck by a car when he was seven, and the subsequent long hospitalization. But it wasn’t until Straub spoke about another experience in a July 2006 interview in *Locus* magazine that it became apparent that the disturbingly graphic child abuse which figured in two of his most disturbing short stories, ‘Bunny Is Good Bread’ and ‘The Juniper Tree,’ derived also from personal experience. In both stories, a boy who for different reasons in each tale spends many hours alone in a movie theater encounters there an older man who befriends and subsequently sexually abuses and threatens him. It may be of some significance that both versions of this boy experience troubled relations with their fathers, but that in ‘Bunny Is Good Bread’ the boy – whose home life is as nightmarish in its own way as his experiences in the movie theater – grows up to become a psychotic killer who eventually ends up in Vietnam, whereas in ‘The Juniper Tree’ – which far more graphically depicts the details of the abuse – he grows up to become a novelist. As Straub puts it in the interview, “Once I started writing, I realized I could put my hands on the levers of my own problems. I could manipulate them, play with them, spin them out and make them mine.”⁸ Although neither story directly involves supernatural agencies, each draws noticeably on the constricting structures of the horror tale, and each seeks a kind of transcendence, or at least accommodation, through confrontation.

Elizabeth Hand, whose initial reputation as a science fiction novelist has been nearly overwhelmed by the continuing popularity of her 1994 novel *Waking the Moon* and the critical praise earned by this and later fantasy novels, has also consistently located her fictions in transformed versions of her own places. Her childhood home in Yonkers, New York and the nearby village of Katonah became the Kamensic Village of the story ‘Last Summer at Mars Hill’ and the novel *Black Light* (which also draws on her experiences in the New York post-Warhol punk scene); her grandparents’ house in Yonkers became the rambling mansion Lazyland in the underrated millennial novel *Glimmering*; her experiences as a student at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. provided *Waking the Moon* with the convincing authenticity of a college memoir despite its spectacular return-of-the-goddess plot; her lakeside cottage in Maine became the setting for the novella ‘The Least Trumps’; the Camden Town neighborhood where she stays while in London figures prominently in *Mortal Love* and ‘Cleopatra Brimstone.’ It’s the latter novella, originally published in 2001 and later included in her collections *Bibliomancy* (2003) and *Saffron and Brimstone* (2006), which most tellingly examines how the devices of the fantastic might serve to frame extreme experience. Hand’s protagonist, a young woman fascinated by entomology, is

brutally assaulted while at college by a rapist who insistently orders her to “Try to get away.” Never fully dealing with the rape during her months of convalescence at her parents’ home, she eventually moves to London, where she volunteers as an entomology assistant at Regent’s Zoo while haunting the clubs of Camden Town in the persona of Cleopatra Brimstone, a name taken from a species of butterfly. In this transformed state, she captures a series of young men as though they were specimens, urging them to “Try to get away” as she magically causes them to metamorphose into varieties of moths and butterflies. It’s a beautifully dark tale, and in the note accompanying it in *Bibliomancy* Hand explains that it’s her first direct attempt to write about her own abduction and rape years earlier when visiting a boyfriend in the Washington, D.C. area.⁹ Hand had written explicitly autobiographical tales before this, by her own account – a road trip in ‘On the Town Route,’ the death of a friend in ‘Pavane for a Prince of the Air’ – but never in such an aggressively transformative way.

But this transformative function of the fantastic is not in any sense limited to cases of extreme trauma such as those mentioned by Straub or Hand. My final example comes from the work of Jeffrey Ford, a writer whose genre roots are so fluid that he’s managed to win both the World Fantasy Award and the Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America. Ford has also written explicitly biographical pieces, perhaps the most evident of which is his long story ‘Botch Town’ in his 2006 collection *The Empire off Ice Cream*, clearly intended as a celebration of his own childhood. But the story which to me most clearly demonstrates the ordering potential of the fantastic is ‘The Honeyed Knot’ (2001), included in his collection *The Fantasy Writer’s Assistant and Other Stories* (2002). Ford is a writing professor at a community college in New Jersey, and insists that this tale is “99.9 percent true.”¹⁰ His narrator, also named Jeff Ford and also a writing professor at a community college in New Jersey, recalls a student from years earlier who, while still in his class, raped and murdered a little girl, leaving Ford vaguely guilt-ridden over having failed to detect warning signs in the obscure symbolism of the student’s writing. Much later, a middle-aged woman, Mrs. Apes, enters his class, writing bizarre accounts of a magical world overseen by a spirit named Avramody. Pressed to write about issues in her own life, she describes two events: a brutal beating from her husband that led to a near-death experience in the hospital (wandering the hospital in a kind of spirit trance, she was saved by “a little girl down in the hospital morgue in the basement”), and the death of her own teenage daughter after being struck by a car. She also tells Ford that her writing tells her he’ll “find a buck in the road,” and that night, driving home, he indeed strikes and apparently kills a deer with an odd-shaped antler, which with its dying breath makes a sound eerily like a human word, but one which he can’t quite place. But he sees the exact word in the next essay from Mrs. Apes: Ayuwea, which she explains was the name of her daughter. Meanwhile, Ford’s son reports having seen a wild buck which eerily matches the description of the one Ford hit, and eventually Ford sees the animal himself near the college parking lot. And, adding to the mystery, the college librarian as a favor tracks down the name Avramody from Mrs. Apes’s fantastic cosmology, finding initially that it was the name of a 15th century cleric whose book *The Honeyed Knot* (the title a metaphor for the complex but ultimately beneficent tangle of human relations) influenced the Puritans – but also that it was the name of the little girl murdered by Ford’s student years earlier.

I’ve spent a bit more time describing this story because it seems to me to centrally concern some of the issues at the heart of this discussion, and because it specifically addresses the act of writing as framing. The magical world that Mrs. Apes concocts

in her formless essays – the narrator calls them “visionary testaments,” and they sound very much like a literary equivalent of the kind of obsessive outsider art associated with figures like Henry Darger – provides a means for her to cope with the tragedies of her own life, and we can guess that the little girl she met in the hospital morgue during her near-death experience might be the same little girl that Ford’s student had murdered years earlier, hence the coincidence of the name Avramody. The deer, killed like Mrs. Apes’s daughter (whose name it seems to pronounce) but living on in the tale, is at once fantastical and real, offering the narrator a kind of transcendent insight into the complex design of human relationships described by the 15th century Avramody as “the honeyed knot.” As true as the tale may be in Ford’s own view, it partakes both of the conventions of the ghost story and of the more mainstream tradition of the disturbed-student tale, the most famous example of which is Lionel Trilling’s 1943 story ‘Of This Time, Of That Place’ (in which the disturbed but brilliant student was long thought to have been Allen Ginsburg – who had been a student of Trilling’s though Ginsberg himself denied it). I’m not arguing that Ford’s story, which pointedly uses devices of the fantastic to move outside the frame of received experience, is necessarily superior to Trilling’s classic, which is a very different tale, but simply that it serves as an example of how the techniques and devices of fantastic writing can provide to the dissociations of raw experience a kind of narrative closure, or at the very least a frame – the honey in the knot, so to speak.

There are, of course, literally dozens of other writers who have employed the resources of fantasy, horror, or science fiction as means of framing experience, and sometimes in radically different ways from those I’ve described here. Some who come immediately to mind – and this list is deliberately wildly diverse – are Graham Joyce, whose childhood and family figure prominently in *The Facts of Life* and *The Limits of Enchantment*; Kim Stanley Robinson, whose near-future science fiction in *Forty Signs of Rain* and *Fifty Degrees Below* draws on his own experiences as a father and his awareness of the workings of the Washington science bureaucracy; Harlan Ellison, who transforms pieces of his life and career repeatedly, notably in stories like ‘Jeffty is Five’ and ‘All the Lies That Are My Life’ – and who sometimes would publish the same narrative as a story in one context and a memoir in another; Thomas M. Disch, whose Midwestern boyhood provided the template for fantasy in *On Wings of Song*; even mainstream novelists like Doris Lessing, who (in a Worldcon guest of honor speech) described her tale of a decaying near-future England *Memoirs of a Survivor* as an “attempt at an autobiography,”¹¹ or Philip Roth, whose *The Plot Against America* details his own childhood – using his real family names and narrated by an adult named Philip Roth looking back – transferred into a world in which Lindbergh was elected President and Nazi-style anti-Semitism begins to infect the U.S.

At the beginning of this essay are two quotations on the transformative nature of art, chosen not by me but by prominent fantasy writers who, a century and a half apart, found in them a particular resonance. George MacDonald, heavily influenced by German Romantics like Novalis and their fervent notions of art as literal transcendence, spent most of his writing career and gained most of his contemporary fame as what we would describe today as a Scottish regional novelist. Today, he is almost entirely remembered for two remarkable fantasy novels which he wrote at the very beginning and very end of his career – *Phantastes* (1859) and *Lilith* (1895). Both embodied deeply felt and profoundly poetic versions of episodes from his own life that never achieved such transformative expressions in his more realistic novels; both expressed an inchoate desire, expressed in the words of Novalis, that art might literally make life more dreamlike. Elizabeth Hand, of course, we’ve already discussed,

but her choice of the Cavafy poem suggests a different strategy: art, instead of changing life into a dream, can unpack what is already “spectacular and terrifying” within it. These are very different uses of fantasy, to be sure, but in each case the devices of the unreal can frame experience in ways otherwise unavailable to the writer, otherwise invisible to the reader, otherwise merely the stuff of life.¹²

Endnotes

1. ‘My Affair with Science Fiction,’ *Hell’s Cartographers* (London: Orbit, 1976), p. 47
2. ‘Knight Piece,’ *Hell’s Cartographers*, p. 102.
3. ‘Magic and Bare Boards,’ *Hell’s Cartographers*, p.183-184.
4. New York: Bluejay Books, 1984, p. 46.
5. ‘The Transrealist Manifesto,’ 1983 (<http://www.mathcs.sjsu.edu/faculty/rucker/transrealistmanifesto.pdf>.)
6. http://www.jimkelly.net/pages/pay_no_attention.htm§Daemon
7. *Algernon, Charlie and I* (Boca Raton, FL: Chalkcrest Press, 1999), p. 96.
8. ‘Fearful Places’ (interview). *Locus*, 546 (July 2006), p. 79.
9. *Bibliomancy* (Harrogate, 2003), p. 289.
10. ‘The Honeyed Knot,’ *The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror*, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002), p. 88.
11. ‘Guest of Honor Speech,’ in *Worldcon Guest of Honor Speeches*, edited by Mike Resnick and Joe Siclari (DeeField, IL: ISFIC Press, 2006), p. 192.
12. My thanks to fellow critic Amelia Beamer for her generous suggestions, additions, and revisions throughout this essay.

Works Discussed

- Aldiss, Brian W. *Forgotten Life* (1989)
 —. *Remembrance Day* (1993)
 —. *The Twinkling of an Eye* (1998)
 Aldiss, Brian W., and Harry Harrison. *Hell’s Cartographers* (1975)
 Anthony, Piers. *Bio of an Ogre* (1988)
 Asimov, Isaac. I. Asimov (1994)
 —. *In Joy Still Felt* (1980)
 —. *In Memory Yet Green* (1979)
 Ballard, J.G. *Crash* (1973)
 —. *Empire of the Sun* (1981)
 Bloch, Robert. *Once Around the Bloch* (1995)
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<http://www.mathcs.sjsu.edu/faculty/rucker/transrealistmanifesto.pdf>
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 —. ‘The Juniper Tree’ (1988)
 —. ‘Fearful Places’ (interview). *Locus*, 546 (July 2006), 7, 78-79.
 Williamson, Jack. *Wonder’s Child: My Life in Science Fiction* (1984)

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Writing Without a Filter

Elizabeth Hand interviewed by Graham Sleight

GS: *Generation Loss*, which you've just read from, is a mimetic novel set in New York and Maine, albeit with some elements of the thriller genre. Having written seven or more novels with a fantastic component, you're not missing that?

EH: It was very difficult... I did not set out to write this book as a thriller or a noir novel. The original version of it that I began three or four years ago was going to be a contemporary fantasy novel more like *Waking the Moon*. And over the course of a year or so it went through three very radical drafts where, in one way, nothing about the book changed. The characters remained the same, the plot remained the same, the setting was exactly the same, everything was exactly the same except it went from being a fantasy to being a mainstream novel. And I found it was very difficult to write, I found that it was very hard to do without the trappings, the sort of safety net that you have with fantastic writing – that I have – and this book, *Generation Loss*, is autobiographical, in the same way that many of my other books are autobiographical, but with this one there was not a supernatural element to soften the blow or to make the process of writing it pleasurable. So I found I really did miss writing fantasy, it's like the special effects, you know? When you go to a movie and see things blow up. I missed seeing things blow up.

GS: In terms of autobiographical material, there are some links between this and things you've written before. I'm thinking in the first instance of the New York punk scene, which you've talked about before, and which to some extent is where 'Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol' comes from.

EH: Right.

GS: You were around in New York at that sort of time?

EH: Yeah, I was, I grew up just outside of NYC, and spent a lot of time there, high school, college; I went to university in DC, so I had been introduced to what was the then-nascent punk scene in New York in the mid-70s. When I went off to college in 1975 I spent a lot of time shuttling back and forth between there and New York, and was not involved as a participant. I was a participant-observer, insofar as I was there and taking in the music, but I was not a performer, I was not on stage, I very much wanted to be writing about it the way people like Lester Bangs were writing about that scene, but I had no entry to that. And I'm certain I wasn't good enough to do it. But I was there taking it all in for quite some time which I feel very lucky about. It was a great time, a great scene.

GS: And the other obvious thing to me, which looks back to *Mortal Love*, your previous book, is that from what you've read already *Generation Loss* seems to be similar – Cassandra's a creator, she's an artist, and she's very much talking about the process of how you do that, how the process matters to her, what in the process is important to her – which is a set of questions that *Mortal Love* addresses in a very different kind of way.

EH: Because Cass is a photographer and an artist, yeah... I'm fascinated by outsider artists. She is not an outsider artist in the sense that somebody like Henry Darger is, but the figure who she ends up confronting, one of the figures she ends up confronting is in fact a true outsider artist. And some of these people, they tread a very thin line between madness and not. And not all outsider artists are mad or schizophrenic, but there are some who are, and those happen to be the ones that interest me. Cass herself is a profoundly damaged, not very well-balanced person. I was

speaking about this, and I think what happens with my books, with the themes I come back to again and again, is – there's a line the classicist Jane Harrison uses, she says that Maenads are basically the darker faces of the muse. They're the same faces, they're probably the same people at some point in time if we go back thousands of years, the muse becomes the Maenad who tears Orpheus apart and carries his head around. And I think I shuttle back and forth between writing books about or from the point of view of the muse, and this one's definitely the maenad. Which is very cathartic – I found it exhausting and kind of depressing to write, it certainly was nowhere near as much fun to write as *Mortal Love*.

GS: I think the very first thing of yours I read was actually a story called 'The Bacchae' in *Interzone*, a while ago. That's... not a happy, fun story for a man to read.

EH: No, no... the year it came out it was voted the most hated story of the year by the readers of *Interzone*.

[applause]

EH: But, anyway, I did not set out to write that story but that's what *Generation Loss* became. Maybe that was in reaction to having spent five years working on *Mortal Love*, which has a much more sort of ethereal view of women and creation.

GS: *Mortal Love* is not totally ethereal – it's very down to earth, very sensual in lots of respects, it's very rooted in the history. I mean, there aren't any lives in there like you've given Cassandra, but it's not scanting on the sense that creativity or muses or whatever can be a difficult or a damaging thing.

EH: They're not tax-deductible. [laughs] But yes, I like to write in a somewhat realistic way. I've never really been very comfortable with secondary worlds, completely imagined worlds. I tend to like the little glimpse of them, and show, if I'm writing a fantasy, that something transcendent and strange is immanent, and probably very dangerous. And would undermine one if one was actually confronted with it. I think M. John Harrison's *Signs of Life* was, for me, a real watershed book, to see how he really captured that, which is something that I've always felt – that if you were ever to have an actual numinous encounter with the other world, or the supernatural, it would not be the easy transit to Narnia and back that we get in much fiction. It would be much more frightening and horrifying, and would probably come very close to ruining your life, if it didn't do so outright.

GS: Which is something that works itself out in differing ways in the two time-strands of *Mortal Love*, which is very much a book about the cost of that, and as you say there's plenty of outsider art in there as well. How did you get into outsider art?

EH: I don't know if you have this over here, in the States there was a series of books published by Time Life in the early 1960s, and they were 'The Body', 'The Blood Cell' and so on – they weren't for kids, but they were accessible to children. And there was one called 'The Mind', and it had a chapter about drugs. At that time things like LSD were just hovering on the horizon, being used and talked about a lot, and the book had a chapter on schizophrenia with a section on Louis Wain, the illustrator. They showed a series of cat drawings, beginning with these very cute Edwardian cats that he drew, and then gradually as his illness progressed showing how they kind of changed into these very frightening, fractal images of cats. And I was about 8 or 9 years old, and I was just enthralled by this – and frightened by it, but after that I started actively seeking out similar works of art. It became known as the art of the insane, there was a book by John M. MacGregor, a very influential book that came out in the early 80s called *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, about art brut and how works like that came to be collected and recognised. First in asylums, later by art collectors. So it's something I've been thinking about for a long time.

GS: And hooked into that again is something Cassandra talks about in the extract you read, the idea of art as a way of fixing a

sensation or a moment in time. I mean, is that a motivator for you when you write – do you feel there's a particular sensation you want to capture and set down?

EH: Oh definitely. And I think less so with this book in some ways, because this is more plot-driven. But I think in novels, and also in short stories, what I've tended to be more concerned with in some ways is exactly that, capturing an emotional experience. The idea that somebody will read it and go, "ok, *this* is what it's like to have sex, *this* is what it's like to have this drug, *this* is what it's like to have this sort of a confrontation." Obviously that has to be harnessed to a narrative, but to me that is sort of the heart of what I try to write about. And with outsider artists, because with so many of them their work is inexplicable to us – you can look at something by Henry Darger and say, "ok, this is a very interesting, strange work," but really have no clue what it would have been like to be this terribly damaged, brilliant strange lonely person, to experience this. And it's the closest I think we can get, in a way, to being inside another person's head. To look at these pictures and think, "this is what it's like to be him." You have a much surer sense of that than you would from reading about him, or probably than you would have gotten if you knew him.

GS: You've sort of anticipated my next question, which is that you seem to be particularly interested in talking about extreme or transgressive states of mind. Whether or not caused by an intrusion of the fantastic, as you were saying when you talked about *Signs of Life*.

EH: I'm not sure why, I actually had a very happy childhood. I've always been very attracted to people like that personally, but also just in terms of writing I think that Cass in this book is a direct line from, could almost be the same character as, Wendy in my first novel, *Winterlong*. So you know, on the one hand I'd like to expand my range of the sort of characters I write about, but on the other hand I recognise that there are people I return to again and again. And for whatever reason that sort of person, who is living on the edge, may have started out to live on the edge as a vacation and ended up having to do it as a vocation because they can't get out, I've always been drawn to that.

GS: And also maybe to belief systems or structures of thought which are arranged around extremities? I'm thinking for instance of all the millennial stuff in *Glimmering*, which I suppose you could say builds itself around an extreme idea of what might have happened at the millennium. Or the cults in *Waking the Moon*.

EH: I think what we see now is that it's kind of difficult to think of things any more that are genuinely transgressive. Lily Tomlin said the hard thing about being cynical is it's so hard to keep up – it's kinda like that. There's so much now. Being in Camden Town in London, what's transgressive when every weekend the place is flooded by tens of thousands of tourists, kids who are all pierced and tattooed, wearing bondage gear – if that's not transgressive I don't know what is, but...

GS: You talked about how *Generation Loss* winds up in Maine, and bits of *Mortal Love* and *Black Light* happen in Maine as well. One of the things I always associate with your writing is a very strong sense of place. Clearly, as you said, you live in Maine, but is there something particularly about that place that you find appealing to talk about?

EH: It's a very beautiful place. I don't know how many of you have been there, but probably the closest analogue here is West Penrith and glens and regions of Cornwall... like that, somewhat remote, although there's a lot of artists, lot of tourists in the summer months. But it's still a fairly isolated place in a lot of ways, or was until recently. And I lived in Washington DC for 14 years, and I loved living in the city – I wasn't in a particularly beautiful place, but I loved that city – and I moved to Maine in 1988. In a way it's good to be bored, because there's not a lot going on, not a lot out there to tempt me away from working. But what there is tends to be very very beautiful. And it's also a place that

has a lot of old hippies who moved there in the 60s and 70s who remain, neopagans, and a lot of people retired from the CIA – really, there's a whole other subculture there. So it's an interesting place insofar as there are people who you would certainly have in any big city, but Maine as a state only has about a million people total. And it covers a very large area. So to have all these oddball interesting people in this very rural landscape is interesting. You meet them in a different way than you would meet them in the city. You know, you meet them when you're at the dump, or when you're buying firewood. And also in Maine I have a sense, much more, of living on the edge of something. You have to bring in firewood to heat your house – if you don't bring in your firewood, you will get very very cold. The pipes will freeze and burst. You have to be aware all the time of your environment, the natural environment – obviously in the city you have other concerns, but you're much more in touch with things like the weather. And bugs.

GS: And you get that also in one of my favourite stories, 'The Least Trumps', where you have both this retired children's author from a generation or so back, and a tattoo artist, and again you have an unusual mix of people.

EH: The tattoo artist in that story is based on someone I met in Maine, I got my first tattoo several years ago from them. She's this artist in this neighbouring town, Belfast, I went up, I knew who she was but I'd never met her before. It turned out she was my age, and she had been in several punk bands in DC and New York, and here she was, she'd washed up in Maine all these years later, like me, and this is what she did. She's a tattoo artist now. And you know, you'd meet a lot of tattoo artists in a place like New York, but to find somebody like that living in the middle of nowhere... it's interesting. What motivated her to make the choice to go up there? I find a lot of incipits in Maine, you're always wondering why the hell would anybody live here? And you have to sort of trace that thread to figure out why.

GS: You talked a bit about the relationship between, let's say, autobiography and story. Do you consciously set down and say, "right, I'm going to write an autobiographical story," or do you find material transforming itself as you write, or do you think, "oh, I can use the time I visited place X" and plug it in?

EH: Well, I'm not good at making stuff up. I'm really not. But I've got a very good memory. So I like to experience things so that I can then use them for work. I think all writers and artists do that. But for me, I really am not able to just make things up out of whole cloth, which is why I don't think I'd ever really be able to write a successful secondary-world fantasy or science fiction book. And the things that I've tried that are like that are not successful. I think what I can do is tap into my own experience or story and change the details enough to make a narrative out of it. And when I'm not doing it for myself I'm doing it with other people who I know. So I'm very big on mining friends, not family so much, but friends... I find it much easier to remember them, I have a good ear for dialogue and can remember how they talk, and what they look like. I started out wanting to be a playwright. I was a terrible playwright, but I pay attention to how people speak, just sort of the habit of listening to the rhythms that people fall into when they're speaking and use those.

GS: You wrote some plays while you were at university?

EH: I wrote three or four plays in high school that were produced by a troupe, and then went to university to study drama and playwriting and realised after three years that it was really really hard to write a good play. So hard, that there are very few in the modern canon, a very finite canon. And I just thought, there's no way I'm going to be able to do this, so I thought, well, I knew I'd always wanted to write. Plays had been something I'd got into as a teenager, so I went back to wanting to be a science fiction writer.

GS: Which is something you'd wanted to do for a while?

EH: Not science fiction so much. I grew up wanting to write, since

I was very young. I loved fantasy and fairy tales, when I was growing up, but I didn't start to read science fiction really until I was about 18. And then that was a great time to be reading science fiction, the mid-70s, there was the new wave, and Delany, and all kinds of stuff, wonderful writers out there. So that was what I read – I never read a Heinlein juvenile, I've still never read a Heinlein juvenile. And so that kind of writing was very sexy in the 70s, in New York, where I grew up, it was a very cool thing to read. So I thought that's what I'll do, I'll write that kind of stuff.

GS: So what books do you remember reading? Delany, would that be *Dhalgren*?

EH: Yes, I remember *Dhalgren*. I remember reading the review of *Dhalgren* in the New York Times Book Review, basically talking about how much sex there was in it, and I thought that sounds good! So I ran out and bought it, read that, and then backtracked, read everything I could get my hands on by Delany, and Angela Carter. I had, at university, I traded with a guy I was going out with for a while. He took my copy of *Dhalgren*, and he gave me in return Gene Wolfe's *Fifth Head off Cerberus*, so then I started reading Gene Wolfe. But all the stuff that was around then – Ursula Le Guin, some John Brunner, probably anyone you could think of. Then later, by the eighties, I was reading people like M John Harrison, and John Crowley, people I'd missed earlier.

AUDIENCE: I was intrigued by your comments about writing autobiographically, with and without fantasy, and I was wondering if writing in the two kind of ways, drawing on autobiography with and without fantasy, led you to think about different things. Or led you to different understandings of the same things you were drawing on.

EH: It was... I don't know that I would go tomorrow and start writing another non-fantastic novel. I think I will at some point, but I feel like I need a break from that. It's hard to describe. I thought about it constantly when I was doing it, about why is this so hard? Why is this so much harder than writing *Mortal Love* was? And part of it was that the material, which-was difficult, a lot of it, and autobiographical, was difficult for me to use and write about. And like Cass, when I was 21, I was abducted and raped, and this was something that has been dealt with obliquely in a lot of my work, it's been there in a lot of my stories, some of the stories deal with it more directly than others, but it was not something that I ever sat and wrote about bluntly. And in this book – the book is not about that, it's sort of a precipitating event, and it's one of the things that damages this protagonist, so the book is not about that experience – but it's the deep background, and it's kind of foregrounded in her experience of the world. So I really had to think about why it was that I had never – it sounds like being an actor, but that's the easiest way for me to describe it – why I had never gone that deeply into my own motivation for doing things. So I basically was creating a character who was like me with the brakes off. If I had gone off the rails twenty-five years ago, this could have been me. Whereas before, anything that I had written, even if it had dealt autobiographically with real experience, I was able to give it a happy ending. Or I was able to make it happen to somebody else. There was sort of a filter there. And with this book there was no filter there. It was much more raw. That's not on the page – you know, you're probably not going to see that. The book functions as a straightforward thriller, it's a psychological thriller, but in order for me to produce that, especially having a first-person narrator, I had to constantly fuel the sort of rage that that character fed on, that kept her going. I dealt with damaged first-person narrators before, I've had characters like that before as the narrators of book, but because they were characters in a fantasy or science fiction book it was a lot easier to pretend that it wasn't real. I think you get that in things other than books as well, you get it in film – it's much easier to watch a terrible thing happening in *The Lord of the Rings* because it's not real life. When it's a movie that's been filmed outside your

street, when the novel is taking place in your back yard, about your neighbour being killed, or your neighbour's child going missing, it's a much different thing than if you're reading a book in which a child wanders off and has an adventure somewhere.

GS: But there's some of this material in 'Cleopatra Brimstone', which is ostensibly a fantastic story but still a fairly raw experience for the reader.

EH: Right, yes, it is, but that was a story that had that filter there. Because in fact I have never, even though I have tried, I have never been able to turn a man into an insect. So there is that, there's a safety net there when you're working with fantasy or science fiction. But I found I missed that, I found that I enjoyed writing that, that that was the part of writing that I really liked. I really liked the special effects. I was able to work some of them into *Generation Loss*, but now that it's done, and I'm starting on new projects – I recently did a straightforward fantasy novella, and I'm starting work on a new book – and unless my publisher offers me a huge amount of money to do more *Generation Loss*, I want to go back to writing fantasy again. At least for a bit.

GS: The other thread to your career that I haven't asked about is your career as a critic, in that you write regularly for *F&SF* and for *The Washington Post*, and you seem to be more engaged with that than it seems you would have to be for the money, as it were. You do seem really to be thinking about these books' places in the genre, and your experience of reading them. How can I put it? Would you still do that if you weren't doing it...

EH: for money? Yeah, I think I would, because you know I started out doing it for free, I wrote for *Science Fiction Eye* twenty years ago, and through that got a gig writing for *The Washington Post* which I still do, and I've written for a lot of places over the years. I have a fairly regular gig at the post, and I do a column for *F&SF* magazine. And yeah, I do like it, I like the engagement, I like being assigned books by editors, because I read things then that I wouldn't necessarily pick up on my own. You know, most of the work I do for *The Washington Post* is not genre-related – when I started eighteen years ago, most of it was science fiction or fantasy, now I hardly ever review genre work for them. Which is not my choice, and I don't miss it only because I do it in other places. But I really enjoy doing it, it's fun, it uses a completely different part of the brain. And it's also one of those things where, you know, no matter how bad a day is, if I'm reading a book, no matter how bad the book is, I can think "well, I'm getting paid to read this." Maybe not a lot, but when I was in college, one of the things I did to get by was that I would write term-papers for people. And there was a class that was science fiction and fantasy books. Which I did not take, but a lot of friends of mine took it, and were like, "aargh, I've got to read this book called *Dune*, and write a paper on it, but I can't do it – will you do it for me?" And I was like, what kind of an idiot can't read *Dune*? I would charge them a dollar a page, a six-pack of beer, and a carton of cigarettes, because I smoked. And I would sit down, read *Dune*, smoke the cigarettes, drink the beer, and then I would write the paper. And then the next person would come along – "I have to read *The Hobbit*!" – and I'd be like, I'm so sorry. And I'd already read that one. So that probably prepped me.

Graham Sleight lives in London, and writes for The New York Review of Science Fiction, Foundation, Locus, and SF Studies. He will become editor of Foundation from the end of 2007.

Elizabeth Hand grew up in New York, and published her first novel, *Winterlong*, in 1990. She won the James Tiptree Jr. Award in 1995 for her novel, *Waking the Moon*, and has won Nebula, World Fantasy and International Horror Guild Awards for her short fiction. Her latest book is *Saffron and Brimstone: Strange Stories*. She currently lives in Maine.

Journey into Space

by Steve Cockayne

As well as going to the theatre, the Cockayne family would occasionally make trips to the cinema. I can recall random images of Charlie Chaplin, as well as some of Disney's cartoon characters, but the first film that really stuck in my mind was *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. The battle with the giant squid had me hunched white-knuckled in the corner of my seat and, even today, the sequence works just as effectively as ever.

Keeping pace with the technical advances in the medium, my father was developing a taste for the new large-screen formats. The next item on the family agenda, therefore, was a trip to the Swiss Cottage Odeon to see *Around the World in 80 Days*. This film was shot in the new Todd-AO system, and the screen was, apparently, the largest in the country. When Cinerama appeared in the 1960s, we made the pilgrimage to the Leicester Square Odeon for *How the West was Won*. This was photographed and projected by an extraordinary, cumbersome process that involved three cameras, three projectors, and a huge, curved screen. Many of the shots were composed with trees, the corners of buildings, or other convenient vertical objects, positioned to conceal the joins between the three pictures and this, rather than any narrative content, is what remains in my mind. There was even, briefly, Circlorama. This used no fewer than eleven projectors, to create a composite picture that completely surrounded the viewer. And then, of course, there was *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

By the time that Stanley Kubrick's epic production was released, most of the early wrinkles had been ironed out of the Cinerama process. The number of cameras had been reduced from

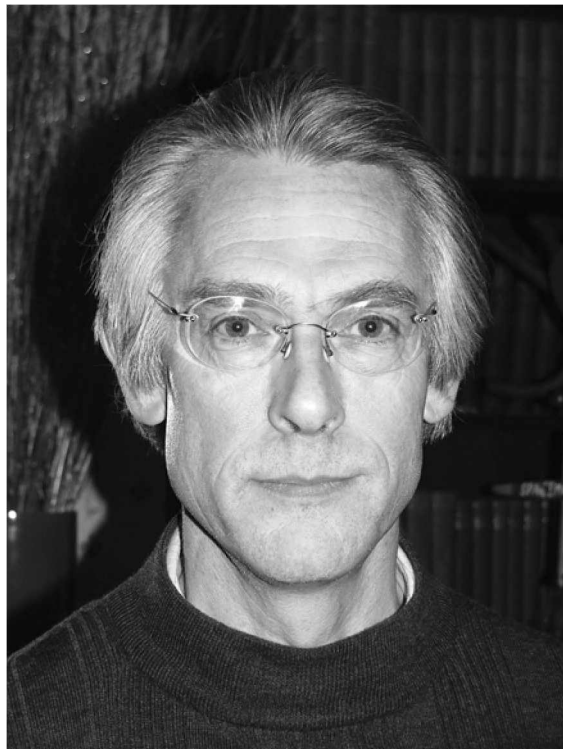
three to a more manageable one, so that the curiously-positioned vertical objects no longer formed an essential part of the cameraman's compositions. The screen, however, remained curved and, as we could not afford to

pay for the best seats, we were forced to view events from a sidelong angle. This led to an alarming degree of distortion in the projected image so that when, for example, the giant stone monolith drifted through outer space, it seemed to take on the appearance of a huge, black banana.

The most striking feature of the film, though, was Kubrick's use of classical music. The stone age sequences, in which the cavemen first learn to use weapons, were accompanied by the stirring fanfare from Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, while the images of the space station cartwheeling across the galaxy made use of the lilting strains of *The Blue Danube*. Kubrick's music score was hailed as daringly innovative. Perhaps it is not widely known, though, that the concept had

been pioneered, at least ten years earlier, by the Pegasus Marionette Theatre.

The nineteen-fifties had been the first golden age of science fiction and, although America led the way, both on the printed page and in the cinema, Great Britain had its own, more homely, contribution to make. There were the novels of John Wyndham, such as *Day of the Triffids* and *The Kraken Wakes*. Featured in the *Eagle* was Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future. The iron-jawed hero was accompanied in his comic-strip adventures by the avuncular Digby and the youthful, freckle-faced Flamer. The BBC's contribution to the genre was the radio serial *Journey into Space*, written and produced by Charles Chilton. The cast included Andrew Faulds, Guy Kingsley-Pointer, Don Sharp and David Jacobs, as well as my mother's old friend Alfie Bass. The stirring incidental music was provided, astonishingly, by a live studio orchestra directed by the composer, Dan Phillips. The Pegasus Marionette Theatre soon had its own version, entitled, rather cheekily, *Our Own Journey*



into *Space*, and using much of the same futuristic jargon as its distinguished original.

The production begins in darkness, with an audio sequence depicting the launching of spaceship *Pegasus*. The take-off routine is voiced by my father, representing the Spaceship, and Uncle Norman, representing Earth Control. Their voices are rather similar so that, at times, it is hard to work out who is saying what to whom. I think, at any rate, that it is Uncle Norman who intones the final countdown: "Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One! CONTACT!"

To represent the ship's engines, there follows a sequence of strange noises. These were created from one of our many sound-effects records, this particular one being a collection of percussion effects that included an extended cymbal roll. John Livingstone's thumb was pressed against the edge of the disc to vary the pitch of the cymbals as the ship's engines strained towards full power.

With the *Pegasus* invisibly launched on its maiden voyage, the stage curtains slowly part, with a subdued clicking of runners on track, to reveal the pockmarked surface of the moon. The cut-out mountains and craters are lit in eerie blue, and the atmospheric opening theme of Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture* swells up to create a chilling, other-worldly atmosphere. After a few moments of this, the undercarriage of the spaceship *Pegasus* descends into view, with appropriate sound effects, and the craft, cut out of hardboard and glittering with silver paint, makes its precarious touchdown. After a few more bars of the *Hebrides*, an elevator descends between the legs of the *Pegasus* and, after a carefully-milked dramatic pause, the Spaceman steps out.

This character was dressed in an intricately designed space suit. Each piece – the gauntlets, the boots, the collar, the breastplate – was carved from wood and painted in a functional matt colour. In one hand the Spaceman carried his indispensable ray gun, and on his back he wore his twin oxygen cylinders, one red, the other green. His most striking feature, though, was his space helmet. This was a clear plastic dome, adapted by my father from a baby's rattle that he had found in a toy shop. Holes had been

drilled, with astounding accuracy, in the crown of the helmet, so that the strings could pass through unimpeded, and the Spaceman's craggy, moustached head could move about inside.

After a brief exploration of the lunar surface, the music abruptly swells to its first climax, and the Moon Monster appears. The Moon Monster was a tripod-like construction obviously inspired by the Martians in H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. It had three long, spindly legs made from

lengths of quarter-inch brass rod, each terminating in a grubby white rubber sucker. Its barrel-like body was made from an old tin can that had once held pickled gherkins. This was painted an unearthly shade of green. On top of the can sat a flashing light encased in translucent plastic.

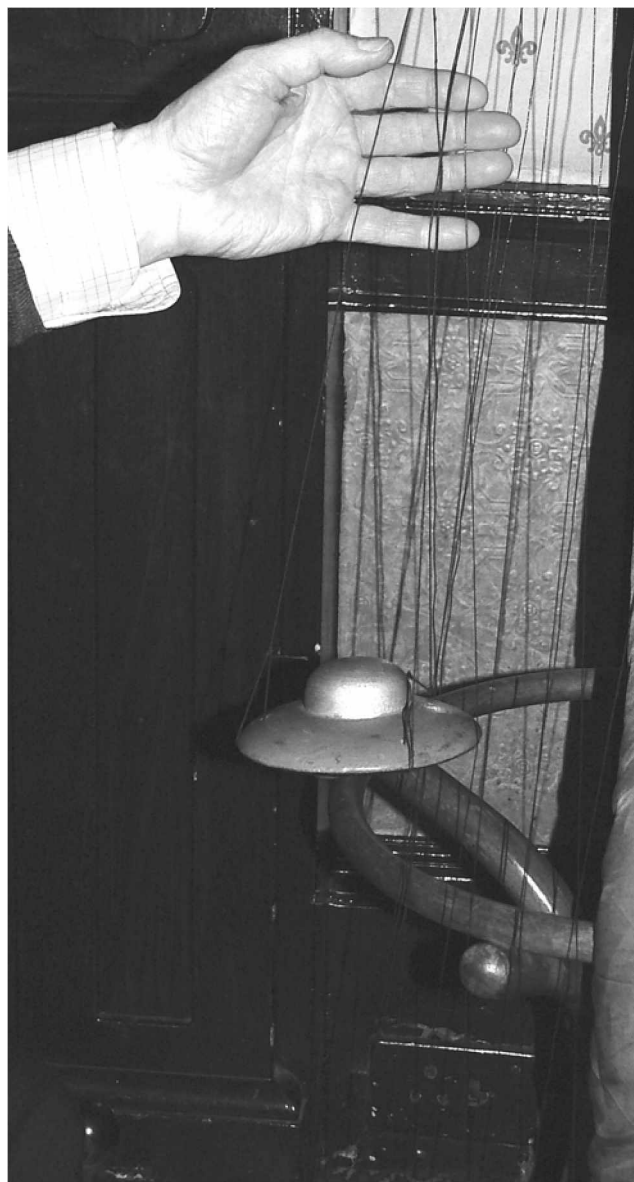
There follows a battle, accompanied by more of Mendelssohn's turbulent orchestrations, in which the Spaceman eventually gets in a good shot with his ray gun. The Moon Monster falters, sways uncertainly, then topples over into the nearest crater, and its light goes out for the last time. Pleased with his afternoon's work, the Spaceman gets back into his space ship and sets off home for Earth.

This is not quite the end, though. In a rather poetic coda, *The Hebrides Overture* returns to the gentle mood of its opening, and a nattily co-ordinated trio of flying saucers – red, green and blue – appear. They circle round the fallen Moon Monster, perhaps checking that it is really dead, then, apparently satisfied, they fly off about their business. The curtains close, and the production ends with a final exchange between Spaceship *Pegasus* and Earth Control.

"Spaceship *Pegasus* calling Earth from free orbit," says my father. "Mission completed. Return journey begun."

Perhaps *Our Own Journey into Space* was not quite as sophisticated as the science fiction of today. Perhaps the technology was primitive. Perhaps the storyline was simplistic. But the audiences of children, in the North London parks of the nineteen-fifties, were held spellbound for every last moment.

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The Modern Storytellers: In Search of Interactive Fiction by Jon Ingold

Interactive Fiction (abbreviated IF), although a debated and ill-defined term, can at least be unarguably described as a goal and not yet a genre. It represents the aim of a handful of game designers over the last three decades to produce fiction in which the audience is an active, culpable participant. The paradigm lies somewhere between a D&D-style role-playing game and an improvised bedtime story: the participant wishes total freedom to imagine himself in the part of the protagonist, but a story cannot happen without a gentle authorial voice to move things along. No game has yet achieved this balance, and it is still impossible for a player to 'lose himself' within a game in the same way as a book or a film – but even so, there have been some glorious moments.

Those of us who cracked the mystery in *The Witness* (Infocom, 1983), turned lead into gold in *Tomb Raider* (Eidos, 1996), outwitted the Sword Master of *Monkey Island* (LucasArts, 1990), or rescued the girl in *Ico* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2001) know that there are moments when a computer game transforms from an electronic adjudicator of dexterity into a communication between player and designer. In short, for a brief moment, a game can become *alive*. Interactive Fiction, in my view, should not refer to the fact that an interface controls the delivery of the story (Conan Doyle never wrote Interactive Fiction, despite the fact that originally his readers had to go out and buy the next issue of the Strand Magazine for the next instalment). IF is about those moments when the interactive process allows us to consolidate our imagination of a story. In a book we form an impression of the characters, what they care about and how they feel: only in IF can we test our ideas by provoking them to see how they react.

The term Interactive Fiction was first coined in 1981 by the American company Infocom in an effort to sell text-based computer games to a market dominated by platform games, beat-'em-ups and flight simulators. Their unique low-tech interface – plain-text output and a (rather stupid) natural language input – was well-suited for the purpose. A story could be as varied or action-packed as it liked without the extreme cost of extra graphics, and the relatively large set of commands available for controlling the game's protagonist made it possible for a player to have 'moments of inspiration', coming up with unobvious yet successful actions. But the demands on a player were high. "The only limit is your imagination," claimed the packaging: but most players were unwilling to provide one. Despite some snappy writing (and serious space limitations), processing the text of a game was tiresome, and even more so was learning the phrases which the game could understand. The lack of any time-pressure made tension difficult to sustain. The frequent unintelligent error messages were frustrating. There were not enough thrills, and the games were too hard. By 1989, the company had been bought out, and its line discontinued.

In the 90s games became synonymous with graphics. Using mouse-driven interfaces the adventure games of the period were more accessible for players, and more straightforward for coders, allowing for a greater wealth of responses to incorrect or

outlandish suggestions by the player. Popular titles such as LucasArts' *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) and *Indiana Jones: The Fate of Atlantis* (1992) were entertaining and often hilarious.

But there was no scope for role-play. Whereas Infocom demanded players imagine their way into the setting, the point-and-click interaction put a distance between the participant and the protagonist. These games had no simulated elements at all which meant no complex or emergent behaviour. Controlling Rincewind in Psygnosis' 1995 *Discworld* had none of the magic of Infocom's *Enchanter* series (1983-1985): given no opportunities to wield powers or ideas outside of the game's fixed structure left the story as static as that of a book. The participation of the player became nothing beyond the search for the correct combination that would allow the page to be turned. Whilst these sequences would often be entertaining in their own right, the potential of Interactive Fiction – to *involve* the player in a story – was put aside.

Just as cinema only began to flourish as a medium once sufficient technology was in place, it is only very recently that the full potential of on-the-fly photorealism has really begun to be tackled by game designers. After something of a slump, Interactive Fiction – specifically, Interactive Cinema – is back, as the clearly-expressed aim of many mainstream developers. 3D games, previously confined to caves and metal corridors by the need for as much repetitive art as possible, can now choose their settings freely. Detailed replicas of London and New York have been used. Releases such as *Tomb Raider: Legend* (Eidos, 2006) and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft, 2003) place great significance on their stories and their scripts, and quite rightly: both were well-written, well-acted and clever. The 24 (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2006) and *Matrix* (Atari, 2003-2005) games capture both the look and style of their respective franchises.

All the old questions, the ones tackled in the 80s by Infocom, are being asked again. How can you make a story responsive without an explosion of different narrative paths? How can you encourage the player to take the steps you want? How can you threaten a player who does not play by your rules? How can a sense of danger be maintained when any mistake can be replayed? How can a player be made to care about the other characters in a story, when the AI-programming required for them is still utterly primitive?

At its heart, Interactive Fiction is a dilemma between the two imperatives of involvement and completeness. A game designer must ensure his player is being forced to think within the context of the gameworld, otherwise the story will pass by unnoticed. However, he must also ensure that an unlucky or inattentive player is not be able to run the story aground by missing crucial information or getting himself stuck. A balance must be constantly maintained between the game's requirement of active participation and the game's sitting the player down to tell him how things stand.

The prevalent model separates these two processes completely, ensuring completeness at the cost of involvement. A game starts with a pre-rendered video setting the scene, after which control is handed to the player for a succession of narrative-free challenges that require manual dexterity or careful resource management to complete. A successful play will reward the player with another section of video during which he can rest his thumbs. There is little or no variation between the stories different players experience: an adept Lara Croft will see the same events as a clumsy one who consistently runs into walls. Most RPG-style games, which pride themselves on epic storytelling, allow players

the freedom to specialise and adapt their characters (and even name them): however, these adaptations have little effect on the tale delivered and are reserved for the numerical mechanics of gameplay. Players expect to approach games like *GoldenEye* (Nintendo, 1997) in the same way they approached *Lemmings* (Psygnosis, 1991), learning the controls and 'becoming good at it'. The story is of as little relevance as that underlying the board-game *Cluedo*.

Perhaps narrative cannot avoid being an intrinsically passive experience: perhaps audiences wish to be the *played*, rather than the *player*, lying back and letting someone else guide their imaginations for a while. But one could imagine a game dedicated to drawing the player in, in which previous decisions (blowing up the rope-bridge to keep back enemy hordes!) become precisely what endangers the protagonist later (you are now trapped on the slopes of the erupting volcano!) If the game allows the player to take this decision independently – either by offering a choice of alternatives, or letting the unlucky player be overrun by vicious hordes time and again until they figure something out – then the consequences become the player's responsibility. The interactive context allows designers to make the player complicit in the otherwise purely authorial business of What Happens Next.

This is not about giving the player choice. Choice is expensive in design terms, and is not rewarding in of itself. *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks are full of choice but the outcomes do not personalise the experience. *Deus Ex* (Eidos, 2000) offers players the opportunity to defect from one side to another in a conflict, but since the player at the keyboard has no motivation either way, any decision is rendered arbitrary. The Star Wars game *Jedi Knight II* (LucasArts, 1997) builds up to a light side/dark side decision that leads to two different conclusions as a result. But a choice this obviously presented is equivalent to picking a short story to read from an anthology, or an alternative ending on a DVD. The player is not being asked to involve himself in the world and if *Jedi Knight's* sequels had employed the same gimmick it would have quickly become uninteresting and hence a waste of design time.

In fact, if a story is to surprise, tease, frustrate and reveal, then short of constructing some kind of storyteller-AI a game must keep its audience on track. It is not genuine freedom that players respond to – there is no genuine freedom within the restrictive model of a computer game, only the *sensation* of freedom. If every way of keeping back the enemy hordes results, somehow, in your being trapped on the volcano, the player must be allowed to feel it was their mistake – or their bad luck – that left them stranded there.

Consider the Japanese game *Ico* (2001). The player is cast as the protector of a confused girl whom he must lead through gameworld by the hand (literally: there is a button for this; let go, and the protagonist lets go too). She cannot climb as well as you, or run as fast, and frequently you will find yourself forced to look for alternative routes to accommodate her. But at one point progress is impossible without leaving her alone for a while. Being away from her is worrying and there is a strong urge to turn back and look harder for alternative ways to proceed. The decision to leave her was ours; any consequences will be *our* *fault*. By this stage, the game has engendered a genuine concern in the player for another's welfare, purely by harnessing an unusual kind of interaction: hand-holding.

One of the best examples of Interactive Fiction to date is the 1999 game *Thief* (Eidos). By a clever choice of protagonist the game manages to invest all of its interactions with character. A successful thief must role-play – move carefully, avoid knocking

things over, seek out quiet floor surfaces and shadow. Doors must be opened slowly. The inability to see around corners means that listening is as crucial as seeing. The micro-narrative – the moment by moment events that form the action – is as tense as a Hitchcock thriller, and worse because it is *our* *problem*. This is no longer a game, it is far more serious than all that.

However, on the wider level the game fails. Firstly, the challenges become repetitive. Secondly, there is no continuity – the decisions and short-cuts taken on one level have no ramifications for the next. The first map is broad and cunning, but the only reason to delve its (difficult) depths is the non-narrative impulse to discover the game's limitations. There is no encouragement to complete a level without killing any guards beyond the fact the main character is not very good at fighting. A player who murders everyone in sight without sneaking around at all may succeed, even though the story will not.

Computers are becoming clever: they can remember more, communicate more, calculate more. But if they are to engage us in stories and begin co-authoring narratives instead of merely revealing them, they must begin to *understand* more. The basic interactions of most games – forwards, backwards, fire – have been in place ever since the creation of *Space Invaders* (Midway, 1978). They are not expressive: it is hard for designers to construct games in which these actions have meaning. Games must also understand higher level actions: a player who kills all the guards should return to find them better armoured, forcing more difficult tactics. A player who successfully defeats the hordes without destroying the rope bridge should find the rope cut by a retreating enemy, who returns to taunt him.

Games are perhaps the only medium left where storytelling is not a solved problem. There are no time-tested formulae and no guaranteed successes, and whole new directions open up every two or three years. Experimentation is rife, from the hobbyist developers using the text-interfaces of Infocom to the concept teams of the largest software houses. The results may yet be weird and wonderful, but only if designers are willing to let us get involved.

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Jon Ingold has been writing text-based adventure games for eight years, and his works have won several awards and accolades for their rich stories and innovative design. He also writes prose fiction and script for his amateur production company, *Absent Sam*, and works as a film critic for the website *musicOMH.com*. His games can be found at his website, www.ingold.fsnet.co.uk.

Good Cop/Bad Cop

A Review of *Life on Mars* by Alison Page

Sam Tyler (John Simm) appears in every scene of every episode of the recent BBC series *Life on Mars*, just like you appear in every scene of your life. And just like you, he doesn't have a clue what is going on.

Uncertainty about the nature of reality is a common (perhaps necessary) feature of human life, but it is a rare choice for a TV show, particularly a cop show. In this review I look at the ambiguity about truth which characterises *Life on Mars*. Neither the realist or idealist notion of truth is fully supported by the plot. The role of the 'father figure', who guarantees the ground of reality in many TV shows, is compromised. I suggest that when the nature of external reality is cast into doubt, then the nature of the self is also brought into question, and the lines between self and others become blurred. My conclusion is that *Life on Mars* demonstrates that it is in our love and concern for others that we find out what is important, though not what is definitively real.

What has happened to Sam Tyler?

Sam Tyler is a character in a 21st century cop show. He is hit by a car and 'wakes up' to find himself a character in a 1970s cop show, with all the nostalgia and brutality (and nostalgia for brutality) that would imply.

Life on Mars is all about the 1970s: but not the 1970s as they really were, nor even how we remember them, but how they were on television. The colour-scheme is brown, and the facial hair is ludicrous. Everyone smokes. The beer is in party cans. The sex and the violence are more explicit, but more innocent, than they are nowadays. The police can denigrate prostitutes, because nobody knows about the botched Yorkshire Ripper enquiry yet. The corruption is overt, because nobody has learned to hide its nakedness yet. Nobody knows how badly they are behaving. Sam Tyler is bewildered at first, and then he does the only thing he can – he inhabits his role. He acts like a copper. He tries to solve crime. He tries to reform the police force, one case at a time. Hey – why don't we, you know, record interrogations on cassette tapes? Try to put witnesses at ease? Stop hitting the suspects?

And at the same time, almost despite himself, he is attracted to the rawness and vitality of the old days. He is attracted to the people, with their funny clothes and flabby-tough bodies. And so are we.

Is Sam Tyler in a coma? Has he traveled back in time? Has he been transported to a fictional world? He never knows. And neither do we, the viewers. *Life on Mars* is a rare example of a story with no fixed ontology. It subverts both the realist and idealist concepts of world and self.

Most fiction isn't like this. Almost every story has its ontology, its true ground of being. Sooner or later the reader comes to know this truth. Usually the hero does too. The story is the process of coming to know. In knowing the truth, the hero knows himself.

Realism

The idea that there is a real world 'out there' independent of our minds and perceptions, is known as 'realism'. The detective story (or cop show) embodies 'realism' explicitly. The cop show sets up a mystery which is solvable, and which is then solved. A 'crime' violates the order of the world, and introduces uncertainty. The uncertainty may be about the nature or motive of the crime, but



typically about its perpetrator. The hero collects evidence, and eventually constructs a model of reality. Crucially (perhaps after some false starts) his model is true: the bad guy is identified, the truth is established. In modern cop shows the emotional payoff is often ambiguous – the detective regrets what he has found, or the baddie goes unpunished. However the intellectual payoff remains unambiguous – the tension of the story is uncertainty about what is real – this tension is resolved by determining reality.

The medical drama *House* (2004-present) has the 'realist' plot structure of a cop show. The name of the hero suggests the archetypal detective (Holmes), in a conscious acknowledgement of this debt.

Idealism

In the idealist story there is no world 'out there', just ideas in someone's head. The world is, perhaps, a dream. The hero masters this type of story by realising the world is a projection of himself. He 'wins' by subverting or exploding the imaginary world, by refusing to play by its rules.

In *The Bridge* (1992) by Iain Banks a coma patient wanders through a city-within-a-bridge which doesn't really exist. The main library is on fire. All the records are being destroyed. In 'Intracom' by Ursula Le Guin (written 1974, collected in *The Compass Rose*, 1995) the crewmates of a vessel not wholly unlike the starship *Enterprise* are revealed to be parts of a single mind: Captain Cook, Mr Balls, the Insane First Mate and so on. Perhaps all spaceship-set stories have this tinge to them. The crew are unreal. The hull is the skull.

A watered down type of idealism is the less-satisfying 'virtual reality' story. The film *Vanilla Sky* (2001), the Spanish film *Abre los ojos* (1997) that it was based on, and the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003) present a man coming to realize that his life is based in virtual reality. Once again, in contrast to the detective story, plot resolution is found by rejecting the world, by refusing it, rather than by embracing it.

We don't know

Although *Life on Mars* is not 'realist' it is not unambiguously 'idealist' either. We never know which interpretation is true, and neither does Sam Tyler. Sometimes he hears the voices of doctors trying to wake him up, and we think we understand; this is all in his mind. But then the story wrests itself free of this model.

A common plot resolution in 'idealist' stories is for the Hero to throw himself from a great height. In this way he 'proves' that reality is a fake. The hero of *Vanilla Sky* does this, for example, and the strategy works very well for him. Neo in *The Matrix* rarely does anything except throw himself off high buildings. But when Sam Tyler attempts to throw himself off a roof to demonstrate that 'this world is not real' we doubt his judgment, and so does he. He stays on the roof. He isn't sure.

Exactly the same uncertainty afflicts Hurley in Season 2 of *Lost* (2006). He decides that the island is his private delusion. He stands at the top of a cliff. He resolves to throw himself off. He can't do it. He doesn't know what's real.

Another reason to doubt that the world of *Life on Mars* is all in Sam Tyler's head is the vitality and independence of its inhabitants. Fictional idealism is a form of solipsism. If life is a dream, then people are just projections of the dreamer. But the people in *Life on Mars* don't seem to be just aspects of Tyler's mind – the anima, the id. They seem too lively and interesting for that.

Yes, Sam Tyler encounters the stock characters we find in every ensemble-show: the cute girl, the dumb one, the wise black

dude. But he also encounters Gene Hunt, an old-school cop with an antediluvian attitude. Gene Hunt is the alpha male, the sheriff of a bad town; all he wants to do is make sure bad people go to prison so that good people can live their lives. Gene is most vital and exciting character in the show. He resists classification as a mental archetype or symbol. He's fantastic fun. He doesn't do what he ought to do. He gets pissed and he punches people in the face. But to Sam he also functions as a touch-stone of reality, a father figure when all other such figures have failed.

The Failure of the Father Figure

In the realist world of the typical cop show, the Father Figure restores order by discovering the true ground of being. God or Science (in the person for instance of Gil Grissom from *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*) restores order by finding out. In *The Shield* the father beats out reality; in *Columbo* he tricks it out; in *Sherlock Holmes* he figures it out.

Sam Tyler is looking for just such an external source of authority. In 'real life' Sam lost his father in 1973. Now here he is 'back' in 1973, looking for an identity. Sam-in-2006 had, as his source of authority, 'the Book' of police procedure; his journey into the past starts to undermine that. In Episode 7 a prisoner dies in custody and Sam tries to get to the bottom of the ensuing cover-up. He systematically interviews all of the people around him to build up a solid case (i.e. to get a true and unambiguous version of what happened). When the Chief Superintendent destroys the tape of evidence which Sam has handed over, Sam is directly confronted with the ramifications of the absence of any external authority upon which he can rely. The most senior police officer is prepared to lie about the truth, is prepared to destroy the precious 'evidence' which is supposed (in the cop show) to prove what is real. This prefigures what Sam learns about his father in the final episode.

Loss of self

When we don't know the nature of reality, we also have no self-identity. Everyone knows that the monster you dreamed about last night is an aspect of yourself. But if the monster is you, then who experienced the dream? If part of you is projected into the Dream, the Other, the Bad Cop, or even the murderer – then what are 'you'?

In *Life on Mars*, Sam Tyler is our only point of reference. There's at least one shot in Episode 7 where he's shown as completely fragmented. Sam is standing in the toilets; he can hear the voices of the doctors trying to get him to respond to the tests – he is shown in multiple reflections in the mirrors, and he's shouting, "Get me out of here!" But nobody does. Sam is only a character in a TV show. He has no inner life. He and his companions are constructs, and their experiences don't even reflect reality. The two worlds between which he passes reflect nothing more than two sets of dramatic conventions – the violent hyper-masculine conventions of *The Sweeney* (1975-78) and *Get Carter* (1970; Bharat Nalluri, the director of *Life on Mars*, has identified this film as the main influence on the show's style), and the cool, socially diverse, and procedural conventions of *Silent Witness* (1996-present) and *Waking the Dead* (2000-present).

In *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode 13 'The Big Goodbye' (1988) Captain Picard decides to take a fantasy vacation as a fictional detective: Dixon Hill, a hard-boiled detective in the 'noir' genre. Like Sam Tyler he moves from one genre into another, like Tyler he has to solve crime, in a world which is more macho and violent than his own. The difference is that this is all 'for fun', and Picard knows that it isn't real. But nobody is laughing at the end, when Picard has to explain to the other characters in the fictional world that they have no real existence, and they will be snuffed out like candles as soon as he loses interest in their detective story.

Sam Tyler seems to have an intimation of his own nothingness.

The only moments of true horror in the series are when he confronts The Television, the Eye which looks back at him. The Test Card Girl – that icon of the 1970s – comes to him in a dream state between sleeping and waking. What is her message? He wakes himself up before he can hear it. But we know her message. Sam has no soul, no existence, and his world is empty and meaningless. And we are watching him.

Cruelty and compassion

One response to uncertainty about your own reality and that of other people is disengagement, even psychopathy. The psychopath is not concerned at all with the reality or suffering of others, and this makes him alienated and brutal. He moves through a world which lacks depth. He's like a character in a 1970s cop show, or a 1970s gangster film.

Sam Tyler's father is revealed towards the end of the season to be a psychopath. In *Get Carter*, arguably the most brutal British gangster film ever made, Michael Caine's character becomes a killing machine after he sees his daughter in a porno movie. Jack Carter is a psychopath, he is dead inside in a way Sam never is, and never relates to any human being in a human way. He doesn't know how.

Sam Tyler hits rock bottom when he sees his father making a porno movie. Like Carter he realises that there is no innocence or truth in the world. Unlike Carter he does not destroy himself. Somehow he pulls through with his innocence and dignity intact.

How does he do this? By his relationship to the other characters in the show. By finding that there are some things – suffering, friendship, help for pain – which transcend questions of reality.

In the *Malunkyaputta Sutta*, the Buddha dismissed the premise of the detective story altogether. He said 'Imagine someone who gets shot with an arrow, and is lying wounded. A surgeon comes to pull the arrow out, and the man weakly looks up at the surgeon and says: 'Before you pull the arrow out, can you tell me who shot it? And what type of arrow was used?' The Buddha said, 'He would be dead before he found the answer.' So much for CSI. From this perspective, you don't need to solve the murder mystery; you just need to care for the wounded. This is the pragmatic or humanist point of view – that regardless of the nature of reality, the important consideration is our mutual well-being. As the Buddha concludes 'Speculating on these questions does not help to live the life that we want.'

Sam Tyler's girlfriend in the 1970s, WPC Annie Cartwright, is not just a pretty face; she embodies this pragmatic, humanist, perspective within *Life on Mars*. Annie doesn't dispute with Tyler about the nature of reality; when he says he is a time traveller in a coma she doesn't believe him, but that's not important to her, she just worries that he is unhappy. Her priority is not whether the world is an illusion, but how to make it through the days and nights. In this she reflects the role of women in the pre-Cagney-and-Lacey cop show; they do not ask who shot whom, they just tend to the wounded.

So it is in his relationship with Annie and with Gene, and with the rest of the rogue's gallery of cops and robbers, that Sam Tyler finds some ambiguous relief, because he comes to appreciate that while they might not be real, they are important.

As the last scene of the series confirms, you can postpone finding out the meaning of life:

Sam: I want to go home

Gene: Don't be such a Jessie. You can go home later.

Ray: So what do you want to do now then Guv?

Gene (thinks): Pub!

Sam (struggles briefly, then smiles genuinely): Pub.

Alison Page lives in Coventry with her partner and her two kids. She works for a government computer agency.

Founded on the shambles

by Paul Kincaid

In July 1515, Thomas More took a break from trade negotiations in Bruges to visit his friend Peter Gilles in Antwerp. It was there, by his account, that he was introduced to the traveller Raphael Hythloday and learned about the South American realm founded by King Utopus. Responding to More's questioning, Hythloday was scathing about the state of Britain and described in loving detail all the perfections that made life in Utopia so good. More, a trained lawyer, was forensic in his questioning, but there was one thing that, curiously, he never asked. So it is that we shall never know the most intriguing thing about Utopia: why did Hythloday leave it?

This is such an intriguing question because it is so little asked. Time and again in the five centuries since More introduced us to the idea of Utopia, travellers have bounced back with news about one version or other of this perfect place. Details vary, the perfections are chosen depending upon the particular political, moral, social, religious or scientific bent of the author, but the general tenor is the same: here, things are awful; there, things are wonderful. Yet none have thought to tell us, if such is the case, why anyone in their right mind would ever want to leave Utopia and return to our imperfections with this news.

We are used to seeing the faults in our own society, we have become good at describing them. Dickens was far from the only author to build an entire career on what we might call the dystopic visions he saw around him every day. Against this, I suppose, we need the idea of perfection as a contrast, an ideal, a target towards which we might strive. In such circumstances we may not look too closely at what constitutes that ideal, so it took a long time to come up with the notion that perfection might have its own faults. It was William James, psychologist and philosopher, who wrote in his most important book, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), that 'our civilisation is founded on the shambles'. That is 'shambles' in the old sense of slaughterhouse. Seventy years later, in a story subtitled 'Variations on a Theme by William James', Ursula K. Le Guin finally gave an answer to the question Thomas More had not asked.

A little context by way of digression. 1973 was an extraordinary year in American science fiction. The genre was enjoying something of a boom. For the first time ever, more stories appeared in original anthologies than in the magazines. And what stories they were. A taste of the year can be found in Terry Carr's Best of the Year anthology covering 1973, an anthology which brings together more 'classics' of the genre, I think, than any similar anthology before or since. The 11 stories in the volume include Bester's 'Something Up There Likes Me', Lafferty's 'The World as Will and Wallpaper', Vance's 'Rumfuddle', Ellison's 'The Deathbird', McIntyre's 'Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand', Wolfe's 'The Death

of Doctor Island', Farmer's 'Sketches Among the Ruins of my Mind' and Tiptree's 'The Women Men Don't See'. Most if not all of these are still read, still rated, but perhaps only the Tiptree has the same resonance, the same vibrant immediacy, as Le Guin's short fable.

'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' breaks every rule. There are no named characters, indeed no real characters at all. There is no story, at least in the sense that we follow characters through a series of incidents and events towards a climax. There are only two lines of dialogue, unconnected to each other, in the entire piece. There isn't even much in the way of authorial certainty: 'I do not know the rules and laws of their society' (274) she confesses at one point, and at another, having listed some of their technologies, she retreats: 'Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it' (275). And the very subject of the story, that which gives it its title, appears only in the very last paragraph.

We don't read 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' because of these storytelling quirks, but because these storytelling quirks throw the theme of the story so much into focus. Omelas is Utopia, that is the first thing we must understand. Not More's Utopia, though a modern-day Hythloday might well recognise the place, or Bacon's Atlantis, or any of the utopias by Henry Neville, William Morris, H.G. Wells or the like. Rather, Omelas is all of these and none; it is our personal, private utopia. Which is why Le Guin takes such trouble constructing it to our tastes and whims: 'Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all' (275). And again, 'But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate' (276). Omelas is flexible, variable, an every-Utopia for Everyman. Le Guin addresses her audience as Hythloday addresses More, relaxed and confident, happy to help us see this Utopia in any way that will seem most utopian to us.

It is, to some extent, a place out of a fairy tale, because all our notions of utopia grow to some extent from faerie. The city is described only in the most general terms: 'In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved' (273). This is a bucolic neverland upon which we can add whichever of our own fancies will turn it into our own ideal state: Le Guin suggests the absence of kings and temples, the presence of public sex and (remember this was written at the end of the 1960s)



Archipelago

Short Stories

recreational drugs. Certain technologies are denied: 'I think that there would be no cars or helicopters' (275), perhaps because they have military or oppressive overtones (she does not say); while others are possible: 'they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvellous devices not yet invented here, floating light sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold' (275). All of this is peripheral to the main point, that the people of Omelas are happy. 'How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naïve and happy children – though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle!' (275)

Utopia is a strange place upon which a succession of authors have imposed a succession of notions. Most have seen a better society as achievable only through the imposition of strict order, as for instance in Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905) or its dystopian counterpart *We* (1924) by Yevgeny Zamyatin; though others have imagined a functional anarchy, as in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) or Samuel R. Delany's *Triton* (1976). Since More himself was a churchman, his own Utopia, and that of most of his successors, such as Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602-23), were based on notions of strict religious observance; but as utopian thought developed into a political philosophy, most notably in the work of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, it became more usual to present Utopia as an atheist, or at least areligious, foundation. And if Morris presented Utopia as a pastoral idyll, the majority of writers have preferred to present the ideal state as the product of advanced science, whether it's the precursor of the Royal Society in Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) or the extension of behaviourist psychology in B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948). Utopian writers have, in other words, chosen any number of different routes, whether living in harmony with Nature in W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887) or in harmony with the opposite sex in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), but each is directed in its way towards the one end: our happiness.

Le Guin, in contrast, ignores the process of utopia (what change to imperfect humanity would achieve perfection?) in favour of the end result (happiness); in other words this is not a story about how to achieve utopia, but about what utopia means. And she is very clear about what constitutes happiness: 'One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt' (276). She lies.

Of course Utopia is a state we may yearn for, but we don't really believe in it. We are too sophisticated for that, and the idea that some inspired social system has been put in place which allows imperfect humanity to live a perfect life is just too simplistic a notion for us to take. Le Guin recognises this, comes back to it repeatedly as she stresses: 'They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy' (274). But in the end, and this is the crux of the matter, she addresses it directly: 'Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.' (277) At this moment the major chord modulates to a minor key, the palette of lights and colour is swapped for one of darks and shadow. What we see now is a dim, dank little cellar room deep below the city, not a prison cell but a broom closet, yet it is in this lightless and frightening room that a child is imprisoned. 'It might be a boy or a girl. It looks about six but actually is nearly ten' (278). We never know why this particular child is held here, abused, never spoken to, never seeing the daylight, but we know why some such child has to be here:

This child, then, is the shambles upon which the civilisation of Omelas is built. And this, somehow, endorses their happiness: 'Theirs is not vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science' (280). The child is an emotive symbol, what it represents is that the happiness of the many, even in Utopia, must be built upon the misery of the few. There is a philosophical issue here: the founders of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, argued that a moral society is built upon the greatest good for the greatest number. Among academic philosophers that theory of morality was quickly replaced by other, more complex and subtle theories. Outside academia, however, and particularly during the hedonistic sixties, that simple utilitarian prescription enjoyed a popular vogue. Le Guin here presents us with the other side of the equation: how do you weigh the undeniable happiness of everyone else against the 'abominable misery' of just one?

Le Guin does not directly address the issue of utilitarianism, but it is the calculation which clearly underpins the final anti-utopian thrust of this excellent story. She does, however, address it obliquely: 'To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed' (279). Guilt is the random factor which throws the smooth calculation of utilitarianism off rail. Most of us are able to keep guilt away by temporizing: 'as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom' (279). But guilt is within the city walls, and some do not push the knowledge of the child away: 'Each alone, they go west or north, toward the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back' (280).

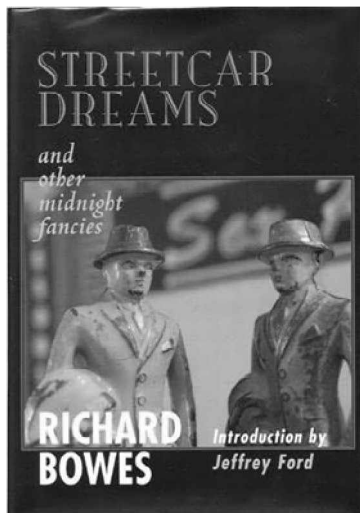
If the sum of utilitarianism does not add up, if the equation does not balance, then we (and it is always reassuring to imagine that we would be among those who walk away from Omelas) cannot accept the happiness that ensues. But the question remains: where do they go? Le Guin leaves it mysterious: 'The place they go toward is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist' (280). There is the implication that they head towards yet another utopia, a different model of perfection. But I suspect that what Le Guin is really suggesting here is that they are heading to a place that we do not imagine because it is all around us, a place of relative not absolute moral values, of good and bad in approximate balance and liable to change position at any moment, a place that might become utopian if we sincerely wished, but probably won't.

From Raphael Hythloday to the ones who walk away from Omelas, they return with news of utopia because utopia is not really a place you would want to stay.

Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' (1973) in *The Best Science Fiction of the Year #3* edited by Terry Carr, New York, Ballantine Books, 1974, pp273-280.

Paul Kincaid should need no introduction here. Most recently, he is the recipient of the 2006 Thomas D. Clareson Award for distinguished service, and co-editor of *The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Companion*.

Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery. (278-9)



Richard Bowes – *Streetcar Dreams and Other Midnight Fantasies*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 184pp, £25.00, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-904619-39-8

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

I read an advanced review copy from PS Publishing, so I can't

comment on the introduction by Jeffrey Ford (not included), and I offer up the hope that the proof readers get to it before the final version. Broken paragraphs, sets of inverted commas that don't open or don't close... not a lot, more than there should be. But for all that...

There's a line that has stayed in my memory since I first read it in *F&SF*, and it's here too. The narrator remembers getting rid of his toys when he thought he had become grown up. In fact, "all that had happened was a grown-up had sex with me". It's a line about innocence not just lost but wasted. Now the character doesn't have it anymore, he just has to get on and do without it. That is a typical Richard Bowes character. Readers will probably emerge a little less innocent too.

These stories are worlds of three levels. There is here, the normal world – respectable, middle class, tax paying, and based around the author's own stomping grounds of New York or Boston. Then there is a level running parallel to that, of drugs and prostitution and gay hustling. Some of us will be strangers to that world, though you get the feeling Bowes certainly isn't. And it is this level that acts as a gateway to the third, where the really weird stuff happens.

Sometimes that third level is incarnate in one person, like the doppelgänger Shadow that dogs the life of Bowes's semi-autobiographical Kevin Grierson. The Shadow is a walking, talking picture of Dorian Gray – when Kevin is doing okay in life the Shadow's life disintegrates, and vice versa. Sometimes there's doubt in the reader's mind, and in Kevin's own, as to which of them is which.

Alternatively, the third level can be a completely different fantasy world, like the world reached by failing hippy Chris(tine) in 'Someday I Shall Rise and Go', reached through the portrait hanging in an office. Chris is a wimp who can't even drop out properly – pushed around and exploited by her boyfriend but finding strength and worth by going on a quest into said portrait. Most of her life is spent in a pleasantly drug-induced haze, and the story is sufficiently surreal that the reader would probably feel likewise, if Bowes didn't make you feel every stabbing hunger pang of a starving drop-out in NYC.

Or the third level can be pretty well intertwined with the second, as in the touching 'Circle Dance' – a

sort of Shadowish story, except that the two men are actual brothers, one dying and the other not – or the thoroughly unpleasant 'Transfigured Night.' The latter is the one story with no redemptive feature whatsoever – there's probably a point to it that I'm not getting, but it came across as snuff fiction at its worst and at the end I was very close to giving my regrets to the reviews editor. But I was glad I progressed because I went on to read the World Fantasy Award-winning 'Streetcar Dreams' – sadly the only Kevin Grierson story in this collection – and the collection's finale, 'My Life in Speculative Fiction', which I suspect may be the most straightly autobiographical. Like 'Circle Dance', it adds further layers to the story by making the central character a writer and including snatches of his fiction, but we also get the character's fantasy monologue as he inflates and transposes the events of his life to the life of an imaginary alter ego.

Bowes's characters tend to be recovering, discovering inner strength, working their back to normality against the odds. A lot of stories are told in flashback or retrospect, mixing the present and the past. Bowes makes no excuses – each and every one has failed through their own immaturity and they pull themselves back through their own effort. That's *if* they pull themselves back. They all pass through the fire and the depths; some choose to stay there. But none chose to start their journey in that direction and the fact that it happened to them, and that we identify with them so easily, gives a good jolt to any complacency the reader may be feeling when they start to read. To use another memorable Bowes line, you will lose virginities you never knew you had.

Chris Bunch – *Star Risk*



Orbit, London, 2006, 340pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-453-4

Chris Bunch – *Star Risk: The Scoundrel Worlds*

Orbit, London, 2006, 341pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-454-2

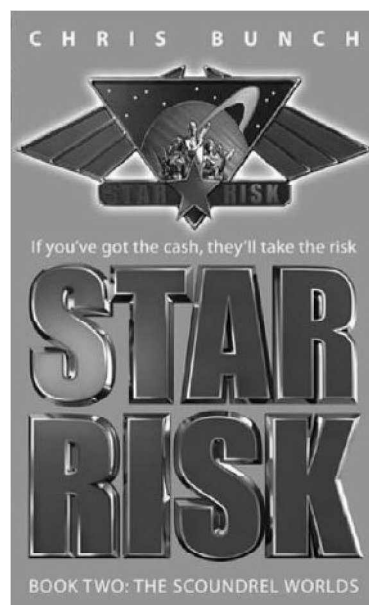
Reviewed by Colin Bird

Military sf – the bastard child of Robert Heinlein and Gordon Dickson. Carried into the eighties by, amongst others, Jerry Pournelle and David Drake where it exploded in popularity due to cross-fertilisation with various proprietary wargaming brands. Although military sf now forms a largely juvenile, if lucrative sub genre linking with successful



First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger



computer games like *Halo*, it has also produced more literary works such as Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* and Lucius Shepard's *Life During Wartime* (now released as part of Gollancz's Masterworks series – see Particles column).

Chris Bunch already has quite a long list of military science fiction and fantasy books to his name, being co-author of the Sten series, and this new series is already up to book four. In Book One (first published in the US back in 2002) we are introduced to the titular mercenary team

comprising Friedrich von Baldur (head of Star Risk: a scam artist who left the Alliance prior to being court martialled on charges of theft); M'chel Riss (gorgeous ex-Alliance Marine major); Grok (furry alien cryptanalyst and financier of Star Risk); and Jasmine King (gorgeous office manager and possibly a sophisticated android but she's not telling).

Transkootenay Mining owns the rights to exploit rich mineral resources in the Foley system. Recently they have been having trouble with pirates and their local executive needs help in tracking down the raiders and closing down their illegal operation. Star Risk's freshly employed bunch of rogues sense a big pay day and a chance to steal a major contract from under the noses of their devious rivals, Cerberus Systems. But they need to steal a march on the opposition to swing the deal and it happens that the system chief's brother is awaiting a death sentence for attempted robbery on the brutal planet of Tormal. Star Risk set out to spring the bio-modified commando (and convicted cat burglar), Chas Goodnight, from his cell as a gift to win them the security contract for the Foley system.

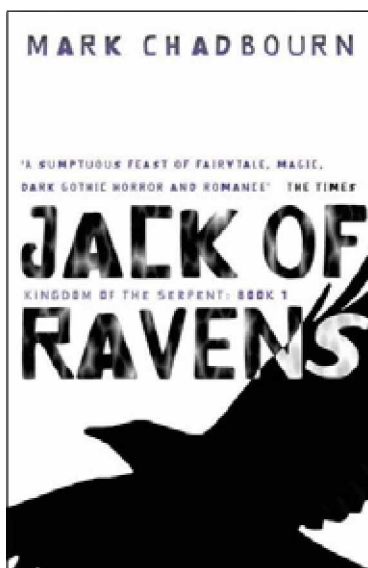
That's just the first few pages of book one – in fact the team succeed and Goodnight soon completes the Star Risk staff roster as they head to the Foley System to take on the raiders in the main plot thread of the novel.

In book two, *The Scoundrel Worlds*, the Star Risk team take a contract to protect referees in the violent Skyball league (an interstellar variation of Rollerball) where top team Cheslea take on their bitter rivals United (I kid you not!). Again this episode becomes merely a taster for a larger story of diplomatic rivalry between the two systems of Dampier and Torguth. There is a war brewing over disputed ownership of three planets and Star Risk are hired to free an intelligence officer who is accused of selling state secrets to the Torguth homeworld. The gang soon get drawn into a tangled web of espionage and intrigue which they have to blast their way through, all guns blazing.

Chris Bunch clearly knows his science fiction and references to his predecessors, like Alfred Bester, Robert Heinlein and E.E. 'Doc' Smith, are scattered throughout the text. This is space opera with the Big Dumb Objects and sense of wonder stripped away and what we have left is lean, rather lightweight and enjoyable in an undemanding way. Fans of military sf would probably rate this series a tad higher than I would but, for me it provides little more than another competently told adventure yarn with undeveloped characters.

[Volumes three and four in the series, *The Doublecross Program*

and *The Dog From Hell*, have also now been published – details in the Particles column]



Mark Chadbourn – *Jack of Ravens*



Gollancz, London, 2006, 374 pp,
£12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07800-6

**Reviewed by Ben
Jeapes**

Tim Powers does Forrest Gump, and I mean that nicely. Any hack could probably link, say, the Templars to the JFK assassination. Making these just points along an arc that extends from pre-Roman Britain to the present day, via other points including the Ninth Legion and the

Roanoke colony (disappearances of), Spring-Heeled Jack and Dr Dee, Timothy Leary and Kit Marlowe, the Summer of Love and the Blitz – that requires talent.

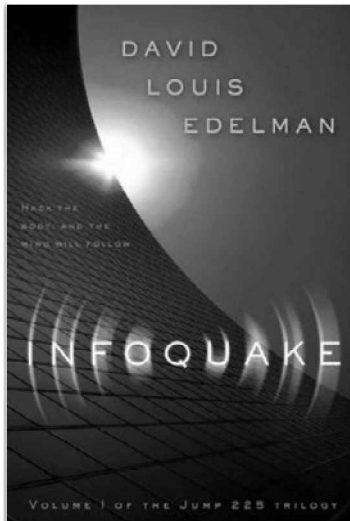
An evil has arisen in the present day and is working back through time to secure its position. Advancing through time to meet it is archaeologist Jack Churchill, Church to his friends, who finds himself mysteriously in Iron Age Cornwall just in time to become the proto-King Under the Hill, defeat evil, form a band of heroes who will do battle against the dark throughout the ages, lose them to a time travelling murderer, become embroiled with a queen of the fey... that's chapter one. Fast-forwarding through time by side-stepping into fairyland, he re-emerges to do battle with evil at different periods of history. Having travelled via fourth century Rome, Elizabethan Europe and Virginia, Flanders, Blitz London and 'Nam, he comes full circle to a satisfying denouement in a claypit north of St Austell, otherwise known as the Eden Project. After which he's told that now he's got that formality out of the way it's time for some real work. Yes, this is Book One.

Book Ones really should stand on their own; however I gather that if you've read earlier works then you'll know how Church came to be in Iron Age Cornwall in the first place. This would have helped because he has nothing but the vaguest memories of his earlier life, and that makes it very hard to get a handle on him. Apparently he was madly in love with a woman he barely remembers; his amnesia robs us of the cues of fondly remembered smiles, caresses, intimate moments to make us feel they really were an item. This is only exacerbated by Chadbourn's writing style which can best be described as brutalist. Chadbourn tells. He very rarely shows. When Church is sad, we're told he's sad. When fighting for his life, we're told he's fighting for his life. His thought processes continue to be described in exactly the same dispassionate style, regardless of circumstances, and the viewpoint flops about like a stranded fish. Some may like it that way; some may not.

Other quibbles: Church is an archaeologist, apparently, but very rarely takes any real interest in the living history around him. His speciality was fourth century Rome, so when did he learn ancient Celtic? He can recall the background to the Roanoke colony in perfect detail (which is more than most people can) but forgets that the colony famously disappeared (which is all that most people know). He and his friends are trapped behind iron

bars, and at considerable personal risk they blow a hole in the wall with some handy gunpowder. So why not just blow the bars? All logical hiccups that mar what should be a wonderfully smooth read.

Maybe I'm missing a point. The correct way to read *Jack of Ravens* is to find a comfy chair and several free hours, open your mouth to somewhere between one and two inches, and start. Be amazed at the story; be astonished that anyone dares to try and bring so much together, let alone brings it all off so well. Just don't read it for the prose.



**David Louis Edelman –
*Infoquake***

Pyr Books, New York, 2006, 421pp,
\$15.00, t/p, ISBN 1-59102-442-0

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Natch is a snake oil salesman, and his snake oil is software in the human body that 'improves' the human experience – improves your night vision (NiteFocus 48) mental arithmetic (Mento Calc-U-Later 93.9) and sexual performance (only joking,

which is one of the significant flaws in Edelman's structure) – using the science of bio/logic. Natch is ambitious, even for a snake oil salesman, and that ambition gets him into trouble with his friends, his competitors, the authorities, just about everyone you can imagine. This may be because the plot demands it, or it could be because Natch is the most unprepossessing hero you have ever met. He is so devious he outwits himself, so cowardly he is sometimes brave. He is entirely lacking in empathy. Jara, his marketing consultant, is so hot for him she is virtually ablaze – not that they ever meet other than virtually.

I did not find Edelman's writing style particularly attractive, and sometimes the disjointed phrasing can get in the way of comprehension. Which is a problem with a narrative that is not so much fast as break-neck. Still, it kept me reading right until the story stopped on page 380, so, obviously, he got something right.

What he doesn't get right is the structure of his future. The only people we meet are software geeks and authority figures. Where is the economic base that keeps the beautiful people and cops in their toys? An economic collapse is described yet the recovery is skated over. There is a suggestion that it is a grand scale New Deal, but ignores the question 'what do the cops do when they have shot all their bullets and nobody is making anything any more?'. Almost every major feature of Edelman's world is borrowed from some other 'great work' of sf. Most of the time, this doesn't matter – he's not the first and he won't be the last – but having bio/logics invented by S(h)eldon Surina is going just one step too far.

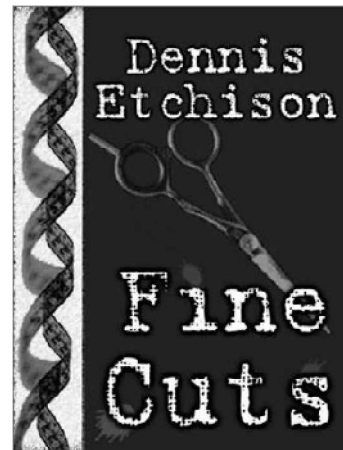
Nevertheless, he kept me turning the pages, wanting to know how he would resolve his conundrums, which of his workers would slit Natch's throat. On page 380 everything just stops. The story doesn't, but the telling does, and goes into 40 odd pages of appendices. Appendices! David, if you need 40 pages to explain your story you haven't told your story well. Appendices! Who do you think you are, David, Tolkien? You aren't that bad, David, and they are totally unnecessary. Those 40 pages could have been

better filled with storytelling to take it to a more felicitous stopping point.

This technique irritates the hell out of me. I didn't like it when Gene Wolfe pulled it with *Book of the New Sun*, and at least he spared us the appendices (appendices!). I like it very much less here. I dislike it so much that I doubt I will seek out Volume 2 of the Jump 225 Trilogy (of course it is a trilogy).

Which is a pity. As I say, I kept turning the pages. His 'something borrowed, something blue' future raises a lot of questions and he makes an attempt at answering some of them.

He does get one thing absolutely right. His info sphere – like today's Web – is a thing of spectacular possibilities (and even a few achievements), but most of those involved in it are interested in two aspects only – espionage and selling snake oil.



**Dennis Etchison –
*Fine Cuts***

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 208pp,
£25.00, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-904619-81-1

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

I have never been to the USA, yet through television, film and books I have the idea that I know many of its cities intimately. They're not communities or centres of commerce, they're movie stars –

no more substantial and no less the fruits of conscientious image manipulation. And like John Wayne or Clint Eastwood they may appear in different stories, they may get cast in different roles, but they always play themselves.

I have a soft spot for New York, a braggart that blusters and boasts to disguise a sentimental core. Washington's capitol might shine like a beacon but it can't disguise the fact that its foundations are in the swamp. Las Vegas would fiddle while Rome burned if it wasn't busy looting everything not nailed down.

But, of all the American cities, Los Angeles has the firmest grip on my imagination. It shines like a jewel in the films of Michael Mann (*Heat* and *Collateral*) but, like a dame in a Chandler story, it's really as dangerous and duplicitous as Jake Gittes's *Chinatown*. Los Angeles burns through natural resources (oil on its freeways, human talent in its business) with a reckless disregard for renewal while poverty and racial tension gnaw at its foundations.

It's a terrible place and yet it is also fascinating.

In story after story throughout *Fine Cuts*, Dennis Etchison captures this weird, scary but compulsively irresistible place perfectly.

I must confess that I was completely unaware of Dennis Etchison before receiving this book to review so I should point that many of you may already be familiar with the stories contained here. *Fine Cuts* contains no new work by an author whose output falls a long way short of what anyone might regard as prolific. The twelve stories included in this PS Publishing volume first appeared between 1973 and 2001 and most (perhaps all) have previously been collected elsewhere.

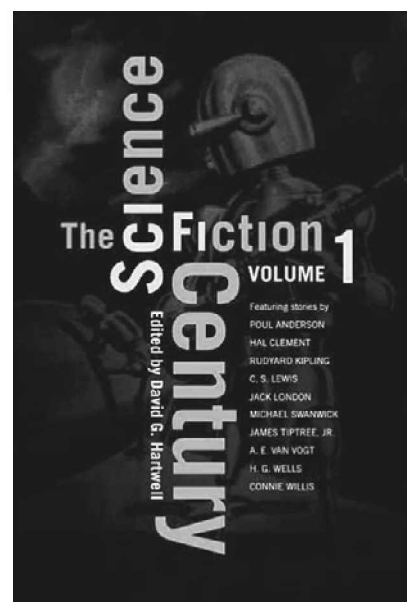
Still, as a jumping off point for new readers, this volume is very rewarding and I think even those familiar with Etchison's work may find the decision to group these particular stories – all of which share Hollywood and the associated media industry as a setting or theme – rewarding.

There is nothing gothic about Etchison's writing style – his prose is spare, almost invisible – but his stories have a knack for getting under your skin, upsetting your equilibrium and re-emerging from your subconscious days later in disturbing and unexpected ways. Perhaps my favourite of all these stories is 'The Dog Park' which, on the surface, is simply about a man returning to a park to look for his lost pooch, but Etchison invests it with a powerful sense of loss and desperation.

That idea of having lost something – missed opportunities, wasted talent, vanished innocence – and being unable to escape the consequences of that loss permeates these stories. In 'Deadspace', 'When They Gave Us Memory', 'Inside the Cackle Factory', 'The Spot' and 'Deathtracks' the characters become trapped in relationships or patterns of living from which they cannot drag themselves free. In 'Calling All Monsters' and 'The Late Shift' Etchison traps his characters in their own bodies, to quite chilling effect. This is a landscape where no one wins, even those that have made it big – like the former child-star in 'The Last Reel', the actress in 'I Can Hear The Dark' or the game show host in 'Gotta Kill 'Em All' – soon come to realise that success is fleeting and that it is without substance or worth.

Like the sun-bleached skull of a steer in the Californian desert, Etchison's characters are stripped bare, their pretensions torn away, their hopes shredded until all that's left is a brittle shell. But these aren't dour stories. I found that I read most of them with a grin on my face – Etchison has a sardonic wit that surfaces (albeit sometimes quite nastily) in almost every tale.

The humour is one key factor in leavening what might otherwise be a rather stodgy collection. The other is that no matter how much Etchison highlights the soul-sucking banality and insincerity of Los Angeles, he returns again and again to describe in intimate detail the city and its people. He is clearly, in his own way, in love with this city and seems no more capable of escaping Los Angeles than the characters in his stories.



David G. Hartwell (ed.) – *The Science Fiction Century Volume One*

Orb Books, New York, 2006, 511p, \$21.95, h/p, ISBN 0-312-86484-1

Reviewed by Kevin McVeigh

This anthology was first published in hardcover in 1997, a decade later it has been divided into two volumes for paperback (volume two is forthcoming next year). Although not compiled in chronological order

volume one basically focuses on the earlier years, dating back to H. G. Wells, Kipling and Jack London.

In an acknowledgement at the start David G. Hartwell states that he has previously used stories by Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein in earlier anthologies as examples to make his point. In this volume he "chose the work of other major writers, some of them less familiar so as not to allow my argument to get lost in the particular aesthetic of sf that is so dominant in their work." This immediately raises the question, how can you proclaim a historical

anthology of Twentieth Century sf without those big three, or Bradbury, Bester, Le Guin or their ilk? The answer ought to lie in Hartwell's introduction, in his stated theme. He quotes selectively from Edmund Cooper "science fiction offers the less cosy landscape with figures" and Tom Shippey "many [science fiction stories] may be trying to solve a question for which many people this century have had no acceptable answer". He outlines the history of popular sf and talks of the "amusement and frustration" in the public consciousness of sf. Yet his primary assertion is that "Science fiction is the characteristic literary genre of the century. It is the genre that stands in opposition to literary Modernism". This is what his anthology seeks to demonstrate.

What it actually demonstrates is hard to say. In the context of this partial volume it occasionally offers clues to the subsequent development of the genre. The James Tiptree jr story 'Beam Us Home' is an unusual choice, but in its engagement with *Star Trek* is there a precursor of Kelly Link's engagement with *Buffy* 35 years on? On the other hand the only example of sf entering a critical dialogue with Modernism is from the Modernist side with E. M. Forster's annoying 'The Machine Stops'.

Another quote from Brian Aldiss asserts that "science fiction is no more written for scientists than ghost stories are written for ghosts". Yet stories such as Hal Clement's 'Hot Planet' seem to be just science stories. Whilst A. E. Van Vogt's 'Enchanted Village' is clumsily written fantasy with barely even an attempt at pseudo-scientific rationale. Frank Belnap-Long applies more scientific rigour to 'The Hounds Of Tindalos' yet it remains sub-Lovecraft horror.

It is also hard to see how stories never previously published in English enlighten Hartwell's theme. Adam Wisniewski-Snerg's 'The Angel Of Violence' is a good story, predating Cronenberg's *Existenz*, but as a story specially translated for this book, his only English translation, what does it say about sf in the 20th century?

As a whole, *The Science Fiction Century* was an interesting anthology, worthily reprinting genuine classics such as Charles Harness' 'The Rose', Philip Jose Farmer's 'Mother' and Margaret St. Clair's 'Brightness Falls From the Air' alongside neglected stories by William Tenn, James Blish and Algis Budrys. It was broad enough to bring in C. S. Lewis (the thoughtful 'Ministering Angels') alongside the generic (Edgar Pangborn, Poul Anderson) and in its second half a fine selection of more recent writers. Unfortunately, divided as it is, this volume feels dated. Only Michael Swanwick, Connie Willis and James Morrow might be considered contemporary. The likes of Michael Shaara and Mildred Clingerman are curiosities only, sadly. This partial volume hasn't even the benefit of any updating from the original, at least four contributors have died since publication, yet the biographies don't show that.

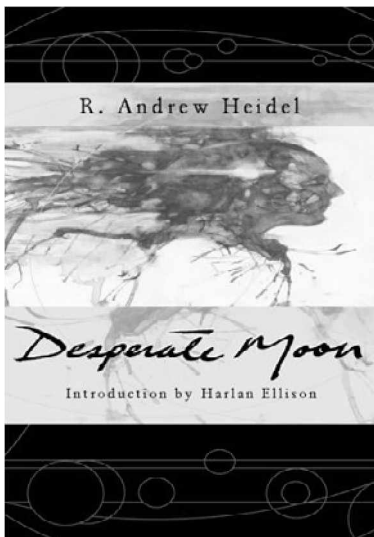
I am loathe to condemn a selection which reprints obscurities such as these, that keeps St. Clair, Jeschke and Farmer on the shelves and has stories as good as Swanwick's 'Ginungagap', Willis' 'Firewatch' and those by Lewis, Snerg and Tiptree. It's just that I feel that it fails to do what it claims, Hartwell's premise is neither confirmed nor refuted, and as a straightforward historical anthology it ought to have been so much more.

R. Andrew Heidel – *Desperate Moon: Three Collections*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 281pp, £25.00, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-904619-28-2

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Desperate Moon collects *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* – a chapbook of fiction and verse that appeared in 1998, *Angry Sunflowers* and



Weep. Angry Sunflowers is subtitled 'A Collection of Metaphysical Wonder Tales 1997-2000', while *Weep* is described as 'A Collection of Dark Things' and though undated contains stories again from the late 90s. To read some of Heidel's fiction autobiographically he appears to have had problems which have caused him to question the direction of his life, so much so that one wonders what happened after 1998, when reviewers of *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* were hoping for his

first novel, that has led to his first book being this collection of fantasies, meditations and William S. Burroughs-type routines. More recently, events seem to have delayed publication of this book since at least 2004, and it was only as it went into proof that Harlan Ellison's Introduction was confirmed.

Heidel's two admitted influences are Ellison and Ray Bradbury, and they stand out, because if you like Bradbury you'll like the mixture to be found here. On the other hand you will not find much advance on what Ray Bradbury was doing in mixing fantasies and horror stories in his collections in the 1950s. You will also find some stories remind you of other works within sf ('The Thing-In-The-Back-Yard' is reminiscent of Philip K. Dick's short story 'The Father-Thing', for example) and outside of it ('Dead Drunk', in which a character meets Death, echoes Woody Allen's sketch 'Getting Even').

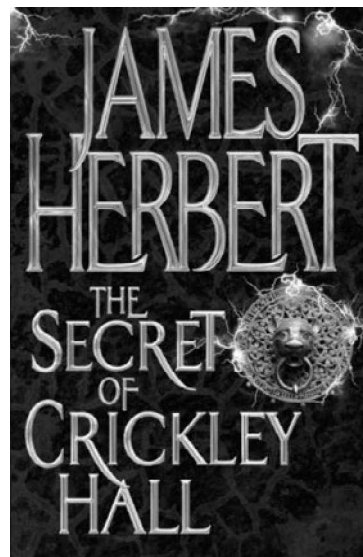
Contrary to the Lovecraftian title of the first section, the main influence there is religious, seen in titles such as 'The God Makers', 'Faith', 'Solace', and 'Interview With God'. On the other hand the effect of the stories is to deny any solace, most notably in 'The God Makers', a parable set among primitive fishermen who try to understand why one of their number is more successful than the rest, but which ends with their offering him in sacrifice. 'Interview With God', where God gives everyone a final interview before they are sent to Earth as souls and tells the protagonist "Earth is a crash course on life", ends on an uncertain note. One would assume that God knows what he means to say and what he said implies to me that something is crashing on life, not that our experience on Earth is a crash course in living. No wonder He is more interested in evolution on Pluto.

The 'wonder tales' in the central section are the most science fictional: 'Collect Call' has a moon base becoming conscious, while 'Chryst' and 'Everyday Messiah' have people discovering that time travel and walking through walls is possible but an ultimate cause of inconvenience. The most original story here is 'The Lazarus' – the dead are sent to be zombie workers on distant planets, except that the narrator is alive and conscious in a zombie body. The longest story, 'Liar's Fate', inspired in some unclear way by Neil Gaiman, is a story-within-a-story, and a modern Munchausen's tale.

Weep, which occupies the last half of the book, is more concerned with horror. 'Bestseller', perhaps inspired by Heidel's days in the publishing trade, is the most successful: what better way to promote a new horror title from an author whose sales have been falling than to have him suffer the horrors described in his book? 'Hush' has a possibly abusive father finding his

daughter hiding herself in a bird cage, catatonic, while 'Smokes and Mirror' might be describing drug-induced psychosis, or involuntary self-poisoning, as the protagonist tries to clean a basement and then renovate an ancient mirror, using powerful paint-strippers, but it is clear that we, like him, cannot trust our senses. In an earlier story, 'Mirror, Mirror', another character manages to see or not see what he wants to see or not see, while in 'Fall' characters manage to look through their room to a garden where a boy is stoning a monster he cannot see at the bottom of a well.

Reading *Desperate Moon* set me remembering, and not just about authors from the fifties and later; it set off memories of pre-Great War British authors such as Arthur Machen ('The Novel of the White Powder' – actually a long short story, could be compared and contrasted with 'Smokes and Mirror') and Oliver Onions in his most-famous short-story, 'Widdershins'. And my examination question after re-reading those authors would be, how has R. Andrew Heidel advanced what they did?



James Herbert – *The Secret of Crickley Hall*

Macmillan, London, 2006, 600pp,
£17.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN
1-4050-0520-3

**Reviewed by Dave M.
Roberts**

The Secret of Crickley Hall is James Herbert's take on the traditional ghost story, and to a large extent it is very traditional indeed. A family with two daughters moves into an isolated West Country house for the father's work. A year earlier the couple's son

disappeared and no trace of him has yet been found. The house, of course, has its own history. It is big and gloomy and cold. It was also used during the Second World War as a temporary home for a group of evacuees who were all killed, along with one of their teachers in The Great Storm of 1943. The pair that acted as guardians at that time were also clearly tyrannical and brutal disciplinarians. Construct your own ghost story from the above and you probably won't be all that far off the mark.

Therein lies the problem. The set-up is simply too obvious, and the development of the story does very little that we would not be expecting. The plot has been meticulously constructed in order to bring all the various elements to the climax of the novel, but this has been done with the development of the plot and constant drip of information being allowed to take precedence over atmosphere. A particularly stark example of which is when we are told a good deal of the actual events of 1943 by a character reminiscing to himself over a brandy.

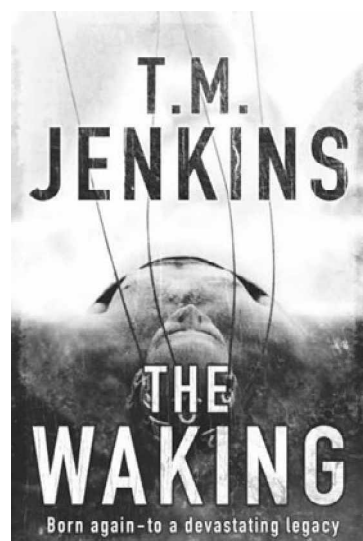
Although the story is all told in the present, there is a second plotline, told mainly by characters reminiscing, of the events of 1943. It is these events which are clearly at the heart of the present day happenings, and the details of them are drip-fed through the course of the novel. There is a fundamental flaw in the way these events are related to us. The villains of the piece are flagged early on as being so utterly monstrous, that none of the later revelations of their actions, while shocking, can be considered in any way particularly surprising.

The fact that the family at the centre of events has recently lost

a child means that the psychological state of the various characters is affected, and so any slightly out of the ordinary events might be expected to play a larger role than would normally be the case. This loss does play on the mother, and her outward behaviour is affected, but the rest of the family comes across as being largely unaffected. The result is the family fall into a useful set of stereotypes, with the mother the emotional one, the Father the pragmatic and practical one and the children as the ones around whom the strange events appear to be centred. This is the only nod that the events may possibly be something other the obvious supernatural one. Although the characters do have some emotional depth, there is the definite feeling that they are there to serve the plot.

All of this means that the most powerful element of a good ghost story, the developing sense of unease, is lost and what we are left with is more of a supernatural thriller. None of this is to say that this is a bad book. It is a page-turner, and although there is nothing that really takes us by surprise, there is still a strong desire to see how the situation plays out. The climactic sequence is also genuinely tense.

For the aficionado of the ghost story, *The Secret of Crickley Hall* does not really have a great deal to offer that has not been seen countless times before. The James Herbert fan, on the other hand, is going to find another solid slab of entertainment.



**T. M. Jenkins –
*The Waking***

Macmillan, London, 2006, 376pp,
£12.99, h/b, ISBN 1-4050-8987-3

**Reviewed by Alan
Fraser**

T. M. (Tina) Jenkins has a background in British Fleet Street journalism, and is now based in the USA. This book, her first novel, is not being marketed as sf but as a futuristic medical thriller, described as “a cross between Tess Gerritsen and Philip K. Dick”. I hadn’t heard of Tess

Gerritsen before, but she writes homicide thrillers with a medical slant. PKD you all know.

2006: Dr Nate Sheehan is murdered in an apparently random shooting in Los Angeles – his pregnant wife Mary, also a doctor, believes passionately in cryogenics and has his head preserved until he can be revived. She and their son are sadly lost in the great earthquake of 2012, along with a large part of Southern California. Nate’s head ends up in a private cryogenics laboratory in Phoenix, Arizona.

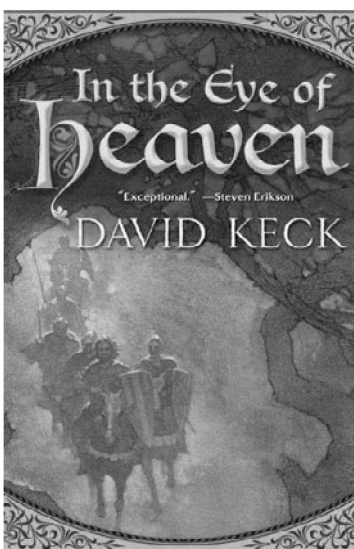
2069: Convicted rapist and murderer Duane Williams is executed in California. His body is taken away for medical research.

2070: Nate’s head is ‘defrosted’ and transplanted on to the body of Duane Williams. Separated from his loved ones by decades, Nate is awakened by scientists Persis Bandelier and Garth Bannerman of the Icor Corporation into a USA that climate change has made almost uninhabitable and where frequent biological plagues and fuel shortages mean there’s almost no interstate travel, let alone international. (Garth is normal, but Persis is physically perfect – she’s a ‘genetic’, an extremely intelligent and beautiful woman whose parents had her created as a designer baby.) Nate feels very disorientated and isolated in this

harsh world without many things we take for granted in 2006, but worse is to come. A journalist investigating the story of Duane Williams discovers the truth about what’s happened to his body, and this leads to revelations both about the Williams case and why Nate was murdered.

Coincidentally there was a programme on Channel 4 TV at the time of writing called ‘Mindshock: Transplanting Memories’, examining the apparently bizarre idea that recipients of transplants can acquire memories, habits and tastes of the donors of their organs. An example is a woman who received the heart and lungs of a biker killed in a road accident, now likes beer which she previously hated, and has dreams of riding a motor bike which she has never done in her life. In *The Waking* not only does Nate now have Duane’s entire body, but Nate’s brain stem has been damaged and the revival surgeons retain Duane’s, something not originally intended. This does of course have consequences... Nate has been told his donor body was a college student killed in a sports accident, but it tells him the truth! However, Nate needs Duane in order to survive – his murder in 2006 wasn’t random and someone in 2070 wants him dead again.

Tina Jenkins has written a tense thriller with believable extrapolated science set in a very believable, nasty future. Her muscular prose carries the reader effortlessly on through the pages to the end of the book. My only gripes are that every plot revelation has been well set up beforehand and is therefore not as much of a surprise as it should be, while the ending feels rather rushed and is therefore not entirely satisfactory. Even so, this book is still an exciting read and addresses issues that concern us all – I wouldn’t be surprised to see it made into a film.



**David Keck – *In
the Eye of Heaven***

Tor, New York, 2006, 412pp, \$25.95,
h/b, ISBN 0-765-31320-0

**Reviewed by Cherith
Baldry**

In saying this is a fantasy set in a medieval-style world, it would be easy to give the wrong impression. Magic or the supernatural exists, but there are no wizards in pointy hats. The focus is not on the courts of princes – though these have their place – but the much tougher world of the man at arms or landless knight.

The central character, Durand, has grown up believing that he will be the heir to an estate. When the real heir unexpectedly turns up, he is thrown on his own resources in an essentially hostile world. Earning his living with his sword, he is plunged into a conspiracy of rebellion in which he has a pivotal role to play. His fighting skills, and more important the integrity of his character, are what bring him through.

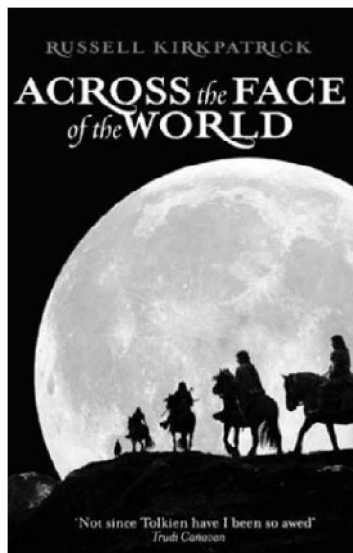
I was impressed by the authenticity of the background, but I have to say don’t read this book if you’re not interested – as I am – in the mediaeval tournament: not just the individual jousts on beautifully caparisoned horses, but the muck and confusion of the *melee*. Several of these occur along the way, and though they do have an important part to play in the progress of the plot, the constant repetition makes for a lack of variety.

Another area where I would have liked to see more contrast is in the characterisation; by far the majority of the characters are

fighting men of one sort or another. Again, the plot dictates this to some extent, but I found many of the characters similar and hard to distinguish from each other, and with a few exceptions, notably Durand himself, not very interesting. All but one of the non-combatant men are servile or downright evil, and there are very few women. I'm not someone who wants a gender balance for the sake of political correctness, and female swordpersons leave me cold, but even in the masculine environment of the tournament there were more women than this in the historical Middle Ages.

The novel is made more realistic by the weight of history, myth and legend that lie behind the events. The material witnesses to Keck's imagination, but I wish he could have made this wealth of background detail clearer to the reader. I also have a more minor niggle: the ethnicity of the names, which doesn't seem to follow a particular pattern; for example Durand (French-sounding) has a brother Hathcyn (Old English).

All this sounds as if I didn't like the book; in fact, I did. I thought the story is compelling, and the style is powerful. I'll certainly look for more work by this writer. However, it could have been a great deal better.



**Russell Kirkpatrick –
Across the Face of the World □**

Orbit, London, 2006, 554pp, £7.99, p/b,
ISBN 1-84149-463-1

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Across the Face of the World is the first book in a new trilogy entitled *The Fire of Heaven*, and although this is its first publication in this country, it was originally published in Australia in 2002 by Voyager, the well-known imprint of HarperCollins.

This is a quest novel, and follows the exploits of a family in Loulea. Indrett is struggling to bring up her two sons, Hal and Leith, after their father goes off on a mysterious mission for the King, and fails to return. Some two years after his departure he suddenly (and secretly) reappears. He barely has time to share his tale with his family when four evil Bhrudwan warriors (Lords of Fear no less) burst in on them capturing Indrett and Mahnum, and leaving Hal and Leith for dead in their burning home. The boys are not dead of course, and are rescued by the Haufuth (Town Leader) who, displaying remarkable insight for a man who is completely ignorant of what is going on, keeps their survival secret and conducts their funeral in front of the rest of the village next day. This enables a rescue attempt to be undertaken, although there is far more than just rescue at stake – Mahnum's tale was one of total horror, and presages an invasion from Bhrudwo led by the now almost mythical 'Destroyer'.

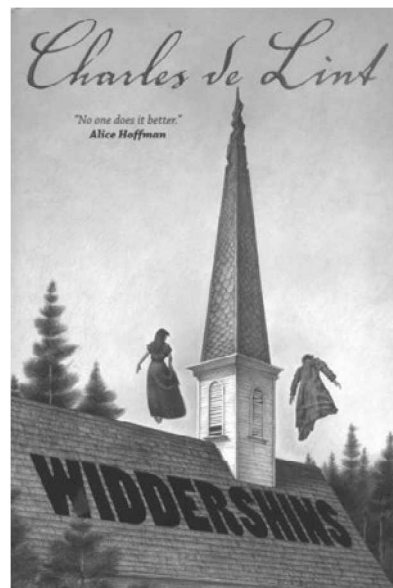
The plan, when a small group sets out, is to rescue Indrett and Mahnum, get to the Capital of Instruere and persuade the various powers to prepare for war – oh, and capture one of the Bhrudwan warriors to give their story validity when they get there. The boys, by the way, are both teenagers – the youngest, Leith, is only fifteen.

What follows is, in true Tolkienesque fashion, 500 odd pages of traipsing around the world in the middle of a very cruel and bitter winter, facing adversity at every turn, and collecting various

useful additions to the group along the way.

To be honest I was not overly impressed with this novel. Although a couple of the characters are interesting, I could not actually engage with several of them, particularly the fifteen year old Leith who behaves, well, like a fifteen year old teenager throughout (and he is apparently marked by the Gods as something special). The enormity of the quest, and the inexperience in all areas of the questors, is just a recipe for one unbelievable event after another. I can see where this novel is going in the greater scheme of the whole trilogy, but the frustration of it not getting very far, and not revealing very much at all – and then just stopping, makes me question whether I'm interested enough, or care enough, to read the next book when available.

It's not a bad book at all, but I honestly wouldn't recommend it and feel I shall very quickly forget it.



**Charles de Lint
– *Widdershins***

Tor, New York, 2006, 560pp,
\$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31285-9

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

New readers, start somewhere else: this is the continuing story of Jilly Coppercorn (see *The Onion Girl*) and Geordie Riddell (only mentioned as appearing in 'Timeskip', the first story set in the fictional Canadian city of Newford – I haven't read *The Onion Girl*, so I don't know if he appears in it).

Widdershins also features a number of other characters, settings, and references to incidents from previous Newford novels. I think one of de Lint's characteristic failings is his inability to ever let go of a good idea – and he has many, many good ideas. Thus *Widdershins* contains the familiar de Lint chowder of Native American animal people, immigrant Celtic fairies both seelie and unseelie (some dressed as punk skateboarders, which says a lot about his target audience), parahuman emanations, folk musicians, writers, artists, and talking dogs. Unsurprisingly, this lot don't blend together too well. In fact, the situation is more like gang warfare, with a lot of nasty name-calling, territory defending, and tit-for-tat violence.

The rather disconnected background is echoed by the narrative structure; a series of short sections each focused on the experience and viewpoint of a specific character or group of characters. There are four different first-person viewpoints (Jilly, Geordie, Grey (a bird person), and Christiana Tree (a woman formed from a set of personality traits discarded by a boy)); and twelve third-person viewpoints (several of whom appear only once – this is much less confusing for established de Lint fans who've met many of these characters before than it would be for a first-time reader). Characters hunt one another through a series of Otherworld realities, pocket universes and worlds-inside-minds while attempting to find love, overcome childhood abuse, and end war. By the end of the book, justice is done, war is averted, reconciliation is made, loving relationships are established, the oppressed are freed, evil is thwarted, and Jilly's physical disabilities are miraculously healed. Morals are drawn, and a

small sermon is occasionally preached.

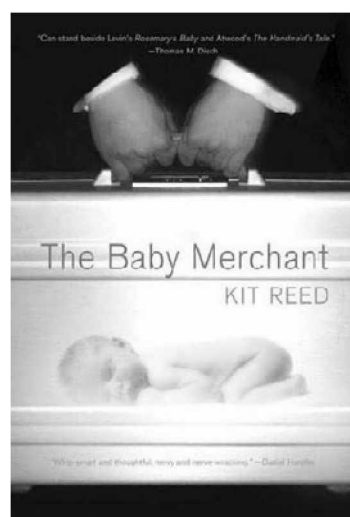
As I read, I kept feeling that I *ought* to be loving this book, but... It's a fascinating mixture of Magic In Everyday Life stuff; just the kind of thing I'm interested in, and it seriously promotes a set of values I strongly support. So what went wrong?

Partly I think there is now just too much in the mix, leading to a loss of clarity and shape. Juxtapose two cultures, and you have a potentially interesting harmony, or contrast. Put too many colours together and the result is muddy.

Partly, and I think I've said this before when reviewing de Lint, he's not good at Bad Guys. This novel has too many targets – the anger and self-aggrandisement of a buffalo warrior, the obsessive thirst for vengeance of a salmon, the mindless mob violence of a gang of bogans, the distrust and lack of understanding between the Celtic fairy court and the skinwalkers... And some of the targets are made of straw, set up simply to be Bad and to be demolished – Jilly's abusive brother, the paedophile priest. (This section feels uncomfortably like it's jumping onto the currently very popular Abuse Survivors' bandwagon, and I simply don't believe the causal link between Jilly's handling of her encysted memories of abuse, and her *deus ex machina* physical healing at the end of the book.)

And finally, I think the book gets didactic.

An interesting venture – very interesting, but not entirely a success for me.



Kit Reed – *The Baby Merchant*

Tor, New York, 2006, 334pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31550-5

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

The Baby Merchant is a psychological crime drama with a modicum of science fiction, reading with the page-turning magnetism of Stephen King, Thomas Harris or Michael Crichton. It is set among the East Coast states of the USA a short undefined number of years into the future.

Sufficiently far that the birth rate is in serious decline, experiments in human cloning have resulted in ill-formed children, America has, in the interests of 'Homeland Security,' effectively closed its borders and, ditto, mandated all babies be chipped with RDIF tracking devices in their skulls. Otherwise the America of *The Baby Merchant* could be now.

Tom Starbird steals babies for A-list clients who have put career before family for too long. He is young, professional and successful, discreetly providing a service for those who have almost everything. Starbird delivers top quality product... objectifying everything in business terminology to prevent himself becoming emotionally involved, and justifying his actions by believing he is doing good. Taking babies from those who do not want them and relocating them in the arms of those who do. Because Tom Starbird knows what it is to grow-up unwanted. His poet mother, Daria, has always resented the way she imagined he prevented her from becoming a celebrated writer. Tom is not a kidnapper, he is preventing others enduring his own damaged childhood.

Sasha Egan is an artist, early 20s, inadvertently pregnant. A baby will ruin her chance of study in Venice so she is in the

Newlife home for unmarried mothers – her lapsed Catholicism will not condone termination – waiting to have the baby and give it away. But the father turns up with offers of marriage, and Sasha suspects he has been sent by her deeply estranged grandmother. Sasha panics and flees...

Jake Zorn is the public conscience of Boston, whose TV show *Expose* unveils the corruption of the great and the good. For ten years he and his wife, top attorney Maury have tried to start a family. Now biology, age and a mental breakdown have ensured every legitimate avenue to parenthood is closed.

The Baby Merchant is about what happens when these characters intersect. Delivered in slick prose easily switching between present and past tense, between various character's points of view, and in the first third, partly narrated by Tom Starbird, the book is as gripping as they come. Though it reads with the compulsiveness of a thriller almost all the action is internal. Comparatively little happens and the book does not have the plot of twists and turns of a thriller. Rather it is about what happens when good, intelligent people are driven to extremes, even outside the law, by their own barely comprehended but furiously undeniable psychological and biological needs. The main characters, particularly Starbird and Sasha Egan are superbly evoked. There are no clear villains here. Just people surprised by themselves, forced to realise they have become something completely alien to their own intent. On that level, as a completely absorbing character drama which is also a crime story *The Baby Merchant* is first rate.

There are numerous small problems which I don't have space to detail, but which could easily have been fixed with more attentive editing – one example: chapters 7 and 11 are functionally identical, the phone conversation in the former being essentially replicated face to face in the latter. Calling a male anti-hero Starbird not only has unfortunate connotations for UK readers of the less salubrious press, but recalls memories of John Rainbird, the terrifying villain from Stephen King's *Firestarter*.

More of a problem is that Reed doesn't once address how this America of chipped babies has been accepted without, in this narrative at least, a single hint of discontent. Liberals would reject chipping-tagging as an invasion of civil liberties, Conservative Christians would brand it the Mark of the Beast, and concerned parents of all persuasions would balk at the unknown health implications of having a wireless transmitter inserted permanently in their offspring's skull. It is a plot catalyst which needs far more scene-setting than it is ever given here.

Because it is a drama that reads like a thriller *The Baby Merchant* ultimately lacks a sufficiently satisfying punch to fulfil the relentless suspense of the preceding 300 pages. It may be what would happen in 'real life', but it's a disappointment on paper. Nonetheless, this is a very entertaining novel, exactly the sort of high concept tale Hollywood loves. Just expect LA to turbo-charge that ending.

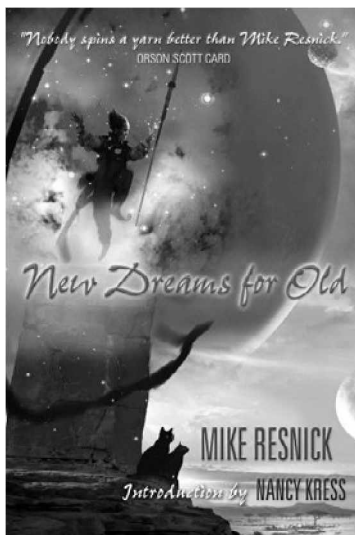
Mike Resnick – *New Dreams For Old*

Pyr Books, New York, 2006, 417pp, \$15.00, t/p, ISBN 1-59102-441-2

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts.

This is a collection of some twenty stories by award winning genre stalwart Resnick, an author with an impressively large back catalogue of work, including two hundred short stories. Here, each of the selected stories is accompanied by a short, but generally highly illuminating preface by the writer on its background, genesis and





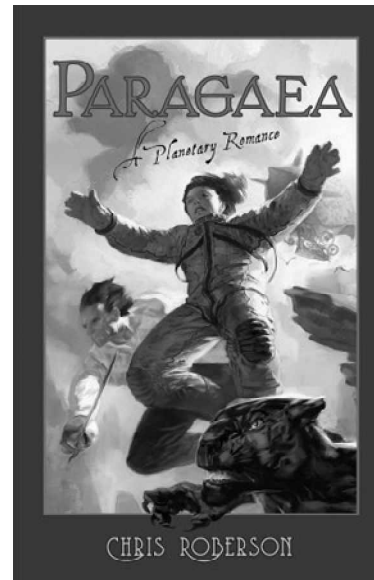
intentions, while the book as a whole is prefaced and introduced by Nancy Kress.

There is an impressive diversity of theme and character within these stories. Three take their inspiration from Resnick's love for Carol, his wife. 'Travels With My Cats' explores the idea that the person that you are meant to be with, your soul mate, is actually alive a century before your birth, combining it with the idea that, as an author, you are in some way immortal, as long as someone continues to

read your work. 'A Princess of Earth', which features Rice-Burroughs' John Carter of Mars, shows how far someone is prepared to go for the impossibly slim chance to be reunited with a lover who has died. Finally, 'Down Memory Lane' examines one person's reaction to losing the person they love in almost the cruellest way, to dementia, which leaves them physically almost the same, but robs them almost completely of their personality. Other stories are written in a very different vein. A Chanderlesque journey into the well-described squalor of the alien ghettos of a future galaxy sits alongside a story about butterballs, animals scientifically designed and bred for extremely rapid, high-yield meat production. There is only one problem, they talk, and appear to some to have a degree of sentience, even though this is vehemently denied by their breeders.

Resnick is also unafraid to tackle social or political themes, particularly, within this collection, in relation to Africa, a continent for which he has a great fondness. 'Mwalimu in the Squared Circle' tells of a fictional boxing match between Idi Amin and Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere (the premise is based on Amin's apparently genuine challenge to his political adversary). What began as a humorous tale was rewritten as something much more profound and moving, as Nyerere enters the ring in an incredibly noble but seemingly insane attempt to save his bankrupt and beleaguered country and people. Meanwhile, 'The Burning Spear at Twilight' is a dark study of perceptions of civilization and barbarism through an alternate history where Jomo Kenyatta was not confined to a jail cell during the Mau Mau uprising, but was actually the general the British thought him to be. There is, however, also humour in these stories. Fans of *Casablanca* should enjoy the wry wit of 'Here's Looking at You, Kid', where, with each showing of the movie, 'Rick' attempts to alter the tale to make it a little more to his liking. John Justin Mallory, investigator and, apparently, Resnick's only continuing fantasy character, makes a couple of very entertaining appearances, particularly when attempting to avoid the amorous attentions of a sentient broom.

This is a highly enjoyable collection of stories, with more than enough variety in content and tone to keep the reader entertained. One or two are somewhat oversentimental, but they still manage to avoid descending into mawkishness. The characters are generally well-developed and engaging, and the situations described in many of the stories are those to which many people can relate, particularly the loss either of a loved one or an item of great sentimental value. The style is highly readable, but it does not detract from the emotional depth or socially satiric nature of many of the pieces.



Chris Roberson – *Paragaea: A Planetary Romance*

Pyr Books, New York, 2006, 399pp,
\$15.00, t/p, ISBN1-59102-444-7

**Reviewed by R. J.
Burgess**

Apparently, in *Paragaea*, Chris Roberson has created for himself a "sweeping planetary epic in the same vein as the old swashbuckling pulp adventure stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Alex Reynolds et al". In this case,

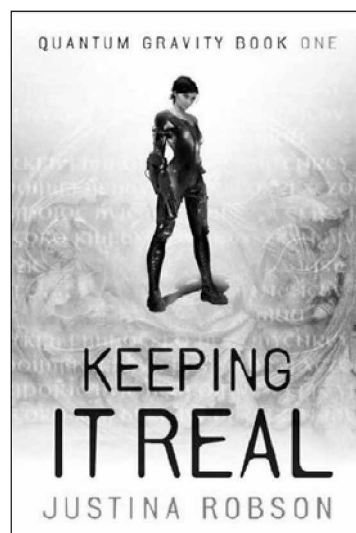
the action is set on the strange world of *Paragaea* – an ancient, Earth-like world populated by all kinds of human-animal hybrids called Metamen.

Akilina 'Leena' Chirikov is a Russian cosmonaut from the late 1960s. After embarking on her first solo flight into space, she encounters a wormhole that sucks her into the parallel world of *Paragaea*. After crash-landing, it isn't long before she is joined by some companions: Hieronymus 'Hero' Bonaventure, another time-lost person from Britain during the Napoleonic war and Balam, a deposed prince of the Jaguar people, who longs to recover his throne. Both agree to help Leena find her way back home, agreeing that her best hope lies in making the long trip across continent to the city of Lisbia. Thus, the story gets under way.

People might argue that this book is a lot of fun and doesn't take itself too seriously, but while this is true, I found it very difficult to buy into Roberson's portrayal of a parallel Earth. There are a lot of fights and a huge number of deaths throughout the book's course and yet we never really fear for the heroes' safety. Every time the heroes get into a difficult situation, they are rescued through a series of annoyingly convenient plot points. They're about to be killed by some giant ants... nope, they get saved at the last moment by some alligator people. They're about to be driven out of a town by an angry mob... nope, a boat in harbour just happens to allow them safe passage across the river for no apparent reason than because it can. There's a lack of tension as a result without which the entire plot dissolves into little more than a road trip. They encounter an enemy; they run away. They encounter another enemy; they run away again. It's good for a while, but after 400 pages, it borders on headache-inducing.

In fairness, the plot does pick up considerably towards the end – the last 100 pages going as far as being genuinely tense as Leena's struggle to get home culminates in her discovery of *Paragaea's* origins. It's just a shame that the entire novel leading up to this point is a meandering series of contrived events held together by a cast of cliché-riddled archetypes, a thin veneer of pseudo-science and a sloppy writing style that does nothing to endear to us the world of *Paragaea* or the people within it.

Fans of Planetary Romance might find much here to get excited about, but it is precisely this habit of Roberson's of continually nodding to followers of the genre that prevents *Paragaea* from standing on its own as a work of genuine merit. This is a shame, because with a bit more work there might have been something really good here.



Justina Robson – *Keeping It Real*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 279pp, £10.99,
t/p, ISBN 0-575-07862-6

**Reviewed by Paul
Bateman**

In 2015 the Quantum Bomb explosion in Texas changed everything. Magic was real. There were no longer physical barriers between our world and worlds of elves, demons, faeries, elementals and the land of the dead. For humans the existence of these other worlds was quite a shock even though

the other races had known about Earth (now called Otopia) for quite some time. However, by 2021 the Elves were closing off their world of Alfheim from the others in a similar way that feudal Japan was closed from the rest of the world.

Special agent Lila Black used to be human, but after a previous disastrous mission parts of her body had to be replaced with carbon metal alloy machinery and an AI with a mind of its own. It won't be long before the AI and her own mind merge and there won't be any distinction between her and machine. She also has a keen dislike of Elves because of what they made her become which is a bit of a problem as Lila is charged with protecting Zal, an Elf who's now a rock star in Otopia. Zal isn't in the Elves' good books, particularly as he's been consorting with demons, some pretty sassy ones at that, and they believe him to be a threat. Furthermore, Zal has drawn Lila into a Game which, if lost, could lead to a life without love for eternity.

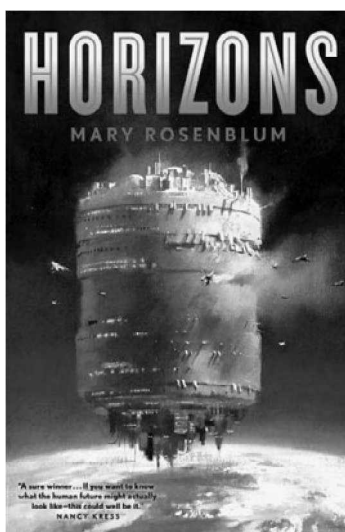
This is a lighthearted romp combining elements of science fiction and fantasy, which should have appealed to my sense of humour but for a number of reasons didn't.

Zal is evidently a star influenced by the Robert Plant era of rock. Given today's love of *Pop Idol* and R'n'B I doubt if such stars will exist in twenty years' time. His band, The No Shows, sounds as contrived as On A Friday before the band decided Radiohead was much better name. Furthermore, with a title like *Keeping It Real*, I'd expect Zal to be more hip. References to Pink Floyd are just not cool anymore (apart from the Syd Barrett years), and despite what a number of readers may think, they are not timeless classics, and I'm a Floyd fan. There was a perfect opportunity to quote the Prodigy's *Firestarter*, but instead we got the hackneyed Crazy World of Arthur Brown. I much prefer Jeff Noon's ability to mix acid house raves and retro-psychedelia.

In line with my dislike of Pink Floyd quotes, the Elves find references to *The Lord of the Rings* deeply unfunny. The irony being that I found the Elves not to be interesting. They behaved as if they had poles stuck up their bottoms. Robson even said as much. There was also too much Elven lore and cultural niceties that started to have a feeling of plot fixing. I'm hoping that future books in this series (this is Quantum Gravity book 1) play down all these rites and rituals. Furthermore, I hope they concentrate on the demons. The demons were sexy and cool, more like creatures you'd invite to a party than the Elves, even though you know they'd spike all the drinks.

Finally, to end the rant, which isn't just directed at this book but others of its ilk as well. Science fiction and fantasy are meant to deal with the strange and the exotic yet often deal with white Western myths and legends. What should be a wild ride through the bizarre and fascinating often turns out to be a conservative

jaunt around Hull. A plethora of travel literature shows us what exoticism really is. We live in multicultural world; *Keeping It Real* is one of many books inhibited by its own outdated cultures, pandering to an audience who still think the use of a mellotron is breaking down barriers.



Mary Rosenblum – *Horizons*

Tor, New York, 2006, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b
(reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-31604-8

**Reviewed by Paul
Raven**

Ahni Huang, grade 9 empath and scion of a Taiwanese ruling family, is *en route* to the orbital platform *New York Up* by space elevator, to avenge her brother's murder. The political climate on the platforms is heated, and increasingly volatile. Their citizens are resentful of what they see as overbearing and restrictive control from the

'downsiders', and of what they perceive as the callous bigotry of the tourists who contribute to their fragile economies. Tensions are running high, and everyone has a secret to hide – especially Dane Nilson, the platform garden's bio-engineer, who is also playing politics behind the scenes as he tries to facilitate the eventual independence of his people. Ahni quickly discovers that nothing is quite as she thought, regarding her brother, the platforms, and the politics in which her family are embroiled. She is soon neck-deep in a web of intrigue, secrecy and double-dealing – a precarious situation that threatens to unbalance the social stability of not only the orbitals, but the entire world.

Horizons is a brisk story, and its themes address the current Zeitgeist issues effectively; terrorism, ecological politics, genetic modification and the near-future destiny of the human race are all dominant tropes in a tale with a fast-moving plot replete with betrayals and reversals of fortune. There's also plenty of bells-and-whistles sf-nal extrapolation filling out the scenery, without being too overbearing and stealing the show.

Despite these excellent foundations, however, it's a little disappointing. The plot twists are plentiful, but they never seem to really distress the leads quite as much as they should. The reader *cares* about the fate of the characters, certainly, but is never truly concerned or worried for them. Ahni's empathic abilities and nanoware brain enhancements are a convenient get-out-of-jail-free card on a few occasions, weakening a lead character that already possesses a few Mary Sue-ish qualities. The story would benefit from her being more convincingly imperilled from time to time. Ahni's indefatigability, combined with the largely problem-free technological background, makes for a work somewhat lacking in shadows and dark corners, which seems to jar slightly with what comes across as a potentially gritty post-cyberpunk plot. The cardboard cast doesn't help – angry characters seem to be going through the motions, and the motivations of the bad guys seem brittle and contrived. Believable human viciousness doesn't make much of a showing.

That isn't to say *Horizons* is a bad book, however. On the contrary, the plot alone is a superbly constructed piece of work, and demonstrates that Rosenblum knows how to keep a reader's interest piqued. What it lacks is the courage of its own convictions – it seems to constantly shy away from becoming as nasty and

thrilling as it deserves to be. The world-building is excellent stuff, ripe for enjoyable continuations. The characters may be a little thin, but no more so than those of other writers far more feted than Rosenblum. It seems likely that they, and their creator, will develop further as time goes by.



Mario Routi – *Orizon, the Flame of the White Sun*

Livani Publishing Organisation, London, 2006, 398pp, £8.99, p/b, ISBN 960-14-1186-0

Reviewed by Tony Keen

This novel is a best-seller in its original Greek version (first published in 2003), and comes with glowing recommendations from the likes of Tom Conti and Vasilis Vasilikos (author of *Z*). I mention this to make clear that

this book is popular amongst many people, and my viewpoint is not shared by all. Because I really didn't like this, and found it very dull.

Partly, it may be Eugenia Kolli's translation. The English is quite bland and colourless, and didn't engage me. That may be different in the Greek. But mostly, the novel's form deters me. Rebecca Newton, relatively ordinary English girl (except that she excels at everything and never gets sick) discovers her parents are Orizons, immortal humans from a parallel dimension, inhabited by Greek mythological creatures. Rebecca travels to the Land of the White Sun, and learns that the Orizons, as well as trying to secretly sort out Earth's problems, are locked in a carefully-regulated war with forces of Evil, over control of the immortality-granting White Flame. Rebecca has to choose whether to join the Orizons.

This fairly straightforward plot gets buried in a form that owes more to Platonic dialogue than to the traditional fantasy novel. Most of the book is taken up with people talking to each other, often in long speeches, sometimes for pages at a time, as the speaker's philosophical position is set out. Anything actually happening seems rare, though there is development in the war in the Land of the White Sun, and a brief Earth-bound excursion towards the end where the novel unexpectedly turns into a Steven Segal movie.

The philosophy is, frankly, pretty trite. There are no insights into the human condition not seen a hundred times before. The novel is anti-war; war is a bad thing. Well, no-one would disagree, but it's not really news. Sometimes the philosophy is confused; Rebecca bemoans the loss of learning and history through such events as the burning of the library at Alexandria (the historicity of which, incidentally, is doubted by many scholars), yet her grandparents, with whom she is in sympathy, express the view that archaeological investigation is a waste of time. Perhaps this is simply the particular investigation into the origins of man, because, of course, the archaeology tells a false story in a world where mythological gods (and a Judaeo-Christian-style Creator) are real. But other statements by Orizons give the impression of being intrinsically anti-technology. It would not be unreasonable to conclude that they wish to preserve old knowledge, but not add to it. Orizon philosophy is certainly 'small-c' conservative, as shown by speeches favouring the traditional family unit.

I kept expecting, and hoping, that the novel would live up to the cover blurb's comment that Rebecca 'gradually discovers the terrible truths that hide behind destiny', and that there would turn out to be some dark corruption beneath the Orizons' smug self-righteousness and lecturing. But, though Rebecca recognizes that the Orizons are trapped in a behavioural pattern that overlooks an injustice, and should sort their own situation out before interfering in Earth's affairs, no such revelation comes. Good and Evil turn out to be pretty decent all round, and it's just been a bit of a misunderstanding.

The book is aimed at an early teen audience, but I can't help but feel that they would be alternately bored by the lack of action and the excess of talking, and patronized by the obvious philosophy.



Lilith Saintcrow – *Working for the Devil*

Orbit, London, 2006, 400pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-466-6

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

It's only fair to Lilith Saintcrow that I begin this review by admitting that I fall well outside the target demographic for *Working for the Devil*. This novel's tale of spunky women battling/shagging demons is targeted precisely at a post-Buffy market from which I am excluded

by gender, disposition and, probably, age. Even allowing for that, however, this is not a good book.

In *Working for the Devil* the protagonist, Dante, is a necromancer who deals mainly in legal negotiations but who has an unlikely sideline in bounty hunting and private investigation. Dante lives in a world where magic and high-tech weaponry co-exist but, for some reason, people still carry swords (I say: hokey religions and ancient weapons will never match a good blaster, but I'm old-fashioned). Dante is summoned to hell by Lucifer and given the task of hunting down a psychopathic-mass-murderer/escaped-from-hell-demon called Santino and Vardimal who, it transpires, killed Dante's former lover and permanently scarred Dante. Lucifer gives Dante a demon aide and she teams up with a ragbag of associates – including her former lover, Jace – on a tale of entirely predictable love, adventure and stuff.

Working for the Devil's greatest weakness is the quality of Ms Saintcrow's writing. At best this book plods, at worst it clots and clogs and drags the reader down into a mire of repetition and over-elucidation that stretched my patience beyond endurance.

Take, for example, Dante's asthma. Our heroine must have some sort of respiratory disorder, because whenever anything happens in the novel everything stops so Dante can tell herself to "breathe, just breathe." And, when she's not gasping for breath, she's fighting off inappropriate fits of giggles. Then there's the demon's "laser-green eyes" – a phrase that is repeated again and again. There are sunrises that happen twice, constant sword stroking, repeated actions, it's sloppy and annoying.

Worse, though, is the banality of the prose. Hell is a badly decorated hall with obsidian floors and red walls. Evil men cackle maniacally and the devil is reduced to a humdrum, third-rate gangster. Nowhere does the writing rise to convey any sense of

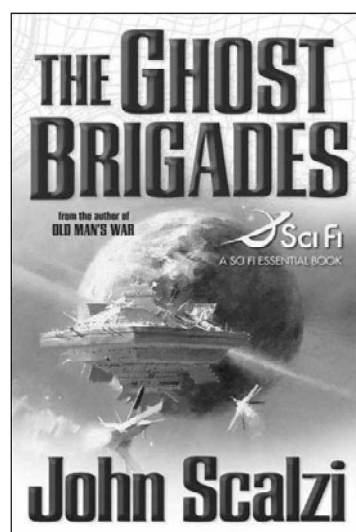
the extraordinary – this is mundane fiction of the worst sort.

And finally there is the crude characterisation. Dante has had it tough. How do we know this? Because every element on the plot is intimately tied to Dante's ludicrously tortured personal history.

Born with a genetic twist that makes her part of a hated minority, she was sold into slavery by her parents. In a terrifying orphanage she was beaten and tortured. She befriended one teacher, who was murdered in front of her by drug addicts. After graduating as a necromancer she is tortured by a gang of rogue magicians but saved by Doreen, a prostitute (heart of gold, obviously) who Dante then rescues and they fall in love. Doreen is slain by a homicidal maniac. Dante meets Jace – who doesn't tell her he's actually the son of a Mob boss and eventually disappears without explanation.

It's one thing to give a hero a tortured secret that haunts them or drives them on, it is quite another to have the protagonist of a novel incapable of connecting emotionally with the world without some overwrought drama in their past. Rather than adding to the relationship between the reader and the protagonist, Dante's Pythonesque history (missing only life down the pits and eating gravel) accelerates across the line of believability and keeps going to the point where the reader can't help but feel demeaned by these lazy attempts at emotional manipulation.

In this book's 'Acknowledgements' Ms Saintcrow thanks those who "read her work and call it bad" because we inspire her "to keep going just to prove you wrong". Good for her. And good luck with that. I fear she has a long way to go.



John Scalzi – *The Ghost Brigades*

Tor, New York, 2006, 317pp, \$23.9, h/b, ISBN 0-756-31502-5

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Jared Dirac is having an interesting day. He has been killed, born twice, learned his first joke (it's the one about Sherlock Holmes and the missing tent), made a friend and an enemy. It's also his birthday; Dirac is less than twenty hours old.

Jared Dirac is an inductee in the Special Forces of the Colonial Defence Force, vat grown and radically enhanced soldiers, genetically engineered from the DNA of the dead – hence their nickname the Ghost Brigades – who protect human outposts in the war with the Raey, the Eneshans, and now, it appears, the Obin. The latter is a particularly worrying development. The enigmatic Obin are usually content to keep to themselves, leaving other races to war amongst themselves, but when they are provoked, or decide they want something, they go about it with – literally – single-minded thoroughness, exterminating everything that stands in their way. And now, according to a recently captured Raey scientist, it appears a human traitor, a scientist named Charles Boutin, has fled to the Obin home world to create an alliance between the Obin, Raey and Eneshans against humanity.

Jared Dirac himself is an experiment. The pebble-sized nanocomputer, dubbed a BrainPal, in his head, carries the stored consciousness of Charles Boutin. Initially it was hoped that when he awoke he would be Charles Boutin, with Boutin's memories and motivations, so that he could be interrogated. When this

didn't happen, the body and its new-born, but fully-functioning, consciousness was given over to Special Forces, given a new name (all Special Forces are randomly named after Earth scientists), to be trained but also closely watched for any signs of the emergence of Boutin's latent personality. Meanwhile a raid on the Obin homeworld is planned, to recapture the real Charles Boutin.

So far, *The Ghost Brigades* presents itself as a fairly typical example of the sub-genre of military sf, albeit one spiced with post-cyberpunk questions of what constitutes consciousness and personality when everything that makes up an individual can be changed, enhanced, transplanted or grown anew, including the brain state. In case the inattentive reader missed the point, it is rather rammed home early on at the point where, during their induction, Dirac's fellow Special Forces trainees discuss various military sf novels and movies, from *Starship Troopers* to *Ender's Game* and *The Forever War*. It is hard not to hear the author's own voice coming through the comments of his characters to throw *The Ghost Brigades* positioning of itself within this sub genre into sharp focus.

To underscore the point, the publishers have chosen to feature on the back cover a quotation from *Publishers Weekly* that makes specific comparison to Scalzi's previous novel, *Old Man's War* (to which this is a sequel) not just carrying on the tradition of Heinlein as almost channelling the late Grand Master. This is dubious praise at best, and almost bound to polarise opinions, but also seems to deny Scalzi a voice of his own.

That comparison with the past masters of the so-called Golden Age comes out in the text in other ways, not all of them favourable. Heinlein, that exemplar of the 'show don't tell' school of working sf novums and cognitive dissonance into his works, might well have winced at the amount of blatant and longwinded "As you know, Bob..." infodumping that occurs in the first sixty or so pages of *The Ghost Brigades*, where the origin of Special Forces, and the mechanics of vat-grown soldiery and BrainPal downloads are explained at length.

Thankfully, once this extended *longueur* is over, the second half of *The Ghost Brigades* shapes up as competent and engaging story which, if not particularly original, keeps the pages turning. But overall, in the first decade of the twenty first century, *The Ghost Brigades* feels like something of a throwback, and Scalzi will definitely have to sharpen his skills to compete with what's happening at the vanguard of modern sf.



Karl Schroeder – *Sun of Suns*

Tor, New York, 2006, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-31543-2

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

What sprang to mind when I first started reading *Sun of Suns* was Bob Shaw's *The Ragged Astronauts*; not so much the concept, but the way it fired my imagination. Bob Shaw's novel is set on two planets that have a shared atmosphere but no metal, and people could travel

between the two worlds by wooden spaceships. In the *Sun of Suns*, Karl Schroeder hasn't created a copy of this at all: far from it. But in

a similar way he has come up with something so different from the standard sf that it is difficult not to find this appealing. The novel is set in Virga (not to be confused with Virgo, Virgin or Viagra), a fullerene balloon three thousand kilometres in diameter, filled with water, air and rock. The inhabitants live on wooden and rope towns spun to give gravity and orbit man-made fusion suns for warmth and light. Virga is a place of fierce air currents, darkness, mist and cold.

The novel begins with the murder of Hayden Griffin's parents, rebels intent on creating their own sun so that their city can be free from the nation of Slipstream. The action then takes us to Hayden six years later and in the service of Lady Venera Fanning, the wife of Admiral Chaison Fanning, who headed the fleet that killed Hayden's parents. Hayden is desperate for revenge, but before he can fulfil his murderous intention, Slipstream is attacked. The Slipstream fleet is launched and Hayden finds himself accompanying Venera on the Admiral's vessel, but the vessel doesn't go with the rest of the fleet and separately heads out to Candesce, the Sun of Suns, but few aboard know why. This is a mission with risks not just from the enemy but from pirates as well, pirates Hayden was enslaved by in his adolescence.

This should be swashbuckling, melodramatic pulp, but the concept of Virga and some of the characters stop *Sun of Suns* being just another run of the mill adventure, another quasi-*Pirates of the Caribbean* in space. To me, the most interesting characters were Lady Venera Fanning and Aubri Mahallan. Venera has motives of her own, being from an aristocratic family and schemed into marrying the Admiral. Aubri is the enigmatic armourer, who originally came from outside Virga. Aubri enjoys being in Virga, a place where there is still room to create and understand things, free from the outside world where Artificial Nature does all of Mankind's thinking, but the real reasons for Aubri being in Virga are not known, not even to herself.

Altogether, with the intrigue, the political struggles, the bloodlust, the revenge and so on, this should make for a thrilling, roller coaster of a read, but for some reason doesn't, at least not for me. Part of this is possibly due to marketing and the central protagonist. The blurb proclaims that Hayden is 'young, bitter and friendless... a very dangerous man'. Unfortunately, he's not particularly dangerous or bitter after the first few chapters. Furthermore, his time with the pirates could have been expanded more (possibly another book in the series?). The problem isn't that Hayden is a badly drawn character as such, but at the same time he didn't come across as dark and brooding as he could have been portrayed. Usually, I find that men can't write female characters, but in this case, Schroeder has created better female characters than male. Ultimately, Hayden is not charismatic or compelling. Aubri and Venera are more interesting characters, but unfortunately *Sun of Suns* is not their story. Perhaps, theirs will be told in other books in the series. I can only hope this is true and Hayden either develops and grows or takes a backseat to more interesting characters.



Osamu Tezuka – *Buddha: Kapilavastu (Volume 1)*

Harper Collins, London, 2006, 400pp, £10.00, t/p, ISBN 0-00-722451-6

Osamu Tezuka – *Buddha: The Four Encounters (Volume 2)*

Harper Collins, London, 2006, 416pp, £10.00, t/p, ISBN 0-00-722452-4

Reviewed by James Bacon

There is a deep complexity, and much to be contemplated, in this simply-told story that amalgamates the religious mythos of Buddha with a series of exciting fictional stories.

I was wary as I approached these books, as mentally it was reminiscent of the atrocious pseudo comics that would appear in catechisms of my school days. Despite this, I was quickly turned by the beauty of this Manga, the artistic line a perfection, with great dialogue and a story that doesn't set out to give some sort of pontificated lesson, but rather takes the reader on an adventure in ancient India, that delights.

The story is told over eight graphic novels, each of about 400 pages, so this is a long story and the culmination of one man's vision, his view of the life of Buddha, Prince Siddhartha Guatama, as he achieves enlightenment, and the work of a lifetime. Osamu Tezuka spent ten years bringing this story to fruition and he began before I was

born in 1974. He is now dead seventeen years but hopefully the teen readers who have pushed Manga into the high street will appreciate someone who has left a lasting legacy.

The adventures begin as we follow the destinies of a variety of characters and at first I thought that these would permeate the whole story but they are bit parts in the overall arc of stories as we follow the heroics and adventures of characters who are mortal. Chappra could be considered the main protagonist of the first book where we are introduced to a plethora of others (interestingly, one of the characters Tatta is the image of another of Tezuka's creations, *Astro Boy*). Chappra's story is wonderful, as he goes from being a slave to the adopted son of a general. Adventures follow, and of course it is only time before his identity is discovered, but not before he falls in love with a princess and raises the ire of a challenger. Despite the time since the story was written, and that the caste system that it describes that is centuries old, it rings through to modern Britain. Enlightenment is not as simple as waking up in the morning.

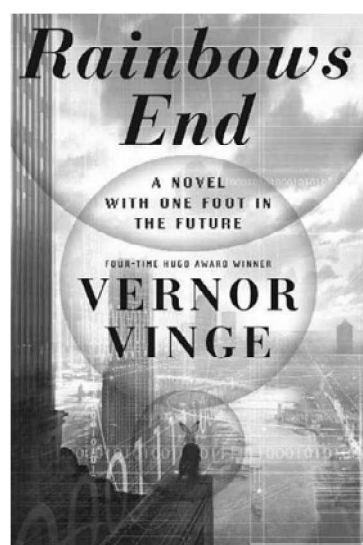
This formula works well, with the stories intermingling intermittently, characters appearing with depth and substance, sometimes in the background, other times in the forefront, as we follow the story of Buddha, though initially one wonders how an obtuse difficult child such as Prince Siddhartha could find enlightenment at all. The story grows and as one follows these adventures they all have some sort of influence: some mild, some like a ripple on the historical pond, others with great impact.

The artwork in the Manga style is what would be expected, but it is a style that Tezuka actually fathered, so it's really a Tezuka Style, and all Manga follows this. Tezuka's animals are rather stylised in a Disney aspect, and it is recognised that he had appreciated Disney's style. The story is all beautifully woven together and the artwork is



the cream of Manga; it is a demonstration to all comic artists of how a masterpiece can be produced.

(The concluding six volumes are also now available from HarperCollins: details in the *Particles* column.)



Vernor Vinge – *Rainbows End*

Tor, New York, 2006, 364pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-85684-9

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

San Diego 2025. Robert Gu is recovering from the depths of Alzheimer's. Once a celebrated poet, advances in medicine mean Robert even functionally regains his youth. The only thing that doesn't come back is his poetic muse.

What has returned is the mean-spirited personality

which delights in damaging others so much and Gu is largely alienated from those he knew before his illness. With relationships tense between Robert and his son's family, he goes back to school to learn the skills necessary in a world which has changed radically in the decade he has been out of circulation.

Gradually Robert begins to bond with his granddaughter, Miri, and a young student, Juan, and to explore new technologies, including the all pervasive electronic networks which have developed from the current internet: *Rainbows End* is dedicated "To the Internet-based cognitive tools that are changing our lives – Wikipedia, Google, eBay, and others of their kind, now and in the future".

Before this is a prologue in which an EU intelligence agent uncovers a trial of an engineered virus targeted to make people behave in a certain way (in this case buy a particular confectionery) upon viewing a visual trigger (a TV commercial). The implication is either a nation or terrorist group is planning to use the technology to apocalyptic ends – we are told in a casual aside no major city has been lost to a nuke in 5 years. The probable source of the virus is tracked to a laboratory in San Diego.

Robert was once a professor at the University of San Diego – Vernor Vinge is currently a professor at the same institution – where he becomes involved in a protest against the digitization and destruction of the library. And here Robert's path intersects with the world of international espionage. This is inevitable given his son is a senior Homeland Security officer who when not supervising the defence of America's western seaboard, is away on covert counter-terrorism missions around the globe. And if that wasn't enough, Robert's daughter-in-law regularly has her mind reprogrammed – shades of *Joe 90* – with whatever special JITT (Just In Time Training) is required to save America from the latest international threat.

Central to all this is enigmatic cyber entity 'Rabbit', who may be one of the established characters in the novel, an AI, or well... and herein lies the major flaw of *Rainbows End*. Much is made of not knowing who might be behind what persona on-line, so that as with the on-line world today Vinge's protagonists may ultimately never know what is really going on. Which might be realistic, but leaves a plot riddled with absurdly improbable coincidences for want of the twist, the revelation, the narrative U-turn, which would tie the disparate yet interconnected narrative threads together in a convincing way. The result is a sprawling,

highly imaginative novel in which all the many elements fail to resolve into a satisfying whole. From family drama to techno-thriller, from tragic love story to tale of personal redemption, the narrative collapses around a rabbit-shaped hole.

Rainbows End is partly a book about old folks learning new tricks. Given that Vinge's previous novels, such as the superb *A Fire Upon The Deep*, were immensely satisfying epics of space and time it would appear he is trying some new tricks himself with this near future 'realistic' sf. The book is subtitled 'A Novel With One Foot In The Future', yet with trickster 'Rabbit' and even a character called Alice, it is also a book with one foot in the past. The last time we went down this particular metaphorical rabbit hole it was called *The Matrix*.

There are certainly many intriguing imaginative details in the world Vinge has conceived, and after a two thirds set-up the final third unfolds as an exciting and occasionally moving adventure. Yet it doesn't convince. There is too much plotting of convenience. The execution of the climatic action seems highly contrived – is it really that easy to gain access to state-of-the-art biological research labs? – while a major subplot concerning the rivalry between 'belief circles' (fans) of competing virtual realities quickly becomes tedious. *Rainbows End* tells us little more about tomorrow than that if we live long enough we'll all face future shock, and offers no more insight into the unending War on Terror than a Hollywood adaptation of a Tom Clancy novel. As for the curious lack of punctuation in the title, you'll have to read the book. Sad to say there's no pot of gold awaiting the reader at the end of this particular rainbow.



Kit Whitfield – *Bareback*

Jonathan Cape, London, 2006, 384pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-224-07864-X

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Every full moon night Lola Galley, armed with catching collars, tranquilisers and silver bullets, can be found on patrol pursuing lycanthropes – colloquially known as lycos. She works for DORLA – the Department for the Ongoing Regulation of Lycanthropic

Activity – and any lyco caught roaming outside instead of being safely locked up on all fours with a saucer of milk, faces the full weight of the law. Lola's also a lawyer who's qualified to deal with errant lycos once they're captured and often finds herself defending them in court – for better or worse. Thing is, though, lycanthropes represent the majority of the population and DORLA is seriously understaffed. Being lyco is not genetic, it all boils down to which way in which you emerge from the womb – feet first and you'll get furry once a month, head first and you're disdainfully referred to as a 'bareback', destined to work for DORLA. You'll also spend two nights of every month until adulthood locked inside a crèche-cum-pound so that your parents and siblings don't get night-time munchies and eat you. Lycanthropic activity, however prevalent, has to be regulated – so say DORLA and they should know, they have hundreds of years of murky past behind them to justify their regime, a regime that is causing



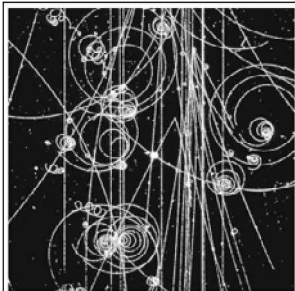
continued resentment among the majority. The non-lycos naturally need to be protected but there are other implications for a society dictated by a combination of lunar insanity and hard-nosed bureaucracy. There are even treaties in place to prevent countries starting wars with each other on full moon nights – after all, with international time zones, it would be easy to attack a country where the majority of the population were metamorphosing, a few hours before your country ‘got furred up’.

Lola’s job is difficult and dangerous at the best of times, but things have been thoroughly lousy lately. A good friend and colleague was recently killed by a lyco and her young trainee got mauled, his throat ripped open, whilst on patrol on her watch. It’s touch and go as to whether he’ll live. Things get worse when another trainee is killed outright, apparently with a DORLA-issue silver bullet. It seems as though there’s a lyco out there that doesn’t want to stay put and also has a point to make. And it looks like Lola could be on its list of things to do.

Bareback takes a standard noir thriller story and gives it a big twist, with nods to *I Am Legend* along the way. Kit Whitfield has created a fully coherent and consistent world that is strangely believable – a blend of the fantastical invading the mundane world

of red tape and ‘normal’ living. This is, in part, thanks to the matter-of-fact way the story is narrated. Lycanthropes aside, the characters and organisations feel thoroughly realistic. Our heroine Lola is smart, but exhausted. It’s refreshing to have a female protagonist who doesn’t have time to worry about her clothes or indulge in lengthy navel gazing about how great her life could be. Circumstances, biology and fate have determined her character and her role in society; she is in that sense as much a victim as anyone, lyco or otherwise, in a world struggling to understand the random order of being. As the story progresses our understanding of her character changes, both as a result of the developments in her situation and in her trying to look beyond the preconceptions the world has burdened her with. She has to fight the establishment as well as the lycos and as a result she isn’t always a sympathetic figure. She does what she has to and sometimes doesn’t like herself for it. Normally such a situation would cue lots of gothic angst and ‘woe is me’ posturing but Whitfield instead offers a character whose faults are all too human.

Bareback is the first novel from Kit Whitfield. It’s intelligent and engaging as well as being an unpretentiously enjoyable read. Recommended.



Parties

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*

Kevin J. Anderson – *Of Fire and Night* ☐

Simon & Schuster, London, 2006, 708pp, £12.99, h/p, ISBN 0-7432-7542-X
This is the fifth volume in the massive space opera series *Saga of the Seven Suns*. Now surely no one is even going to contemplate starting here? For the uninitiated I suggest you go back and read Scott T. Merrifield's review of the first volume, *Hidden Empire*, in *Vector* 227 and Pete Young on the second volume, *A Forest of Stars*, in *Vector* 231 (but neither of them was very impressed).

R. Scott Bakker – *The Thousandfold Thought* ☐

Orbit, London, 2006, 503pp, £12.99, h/p, ISBN 1-84149-411-9
Third, and final, volume in Bakker's *The Prince of Nothing* series. The preceding books, *The Darkness That Comes Before* and *The Warrior-Prophet* have both been reviewed by Estelle Roberts (in *Vector* 235 and 243 respectively) where she found them a vast improvement on much of the vast amount of heroic fantasy currently being published, describing them as "extremely well-written, highly intelligent and complex". Strongly recommended for fantasy fans.

Greg Bear – *Quantico*

HarperCollins, London, 2006, 439pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-712979-3
Techno-thriller set in the near-future where the war against terrorism has been lost and radical groups have both nuclear and biological weapons and the fate of the world is in the hands of three young agents just finishing their training at the FBI Academy in *Quantico*. I'm sure there will be a logical explanation for this as Alan Fraser, in *Vector* 247, found the book to be "well-plotted and exciting, with characters who aren't just devices to further the story" and despite the underlying assumption that the FBI is a Good Thing the book is "more subtle than a mere pro-America tract". Sounds well worth a try (but then I'm a sucker for near-future thrillers).

Max Brooks – *World War Z* ☐

Gerald Duckworth, London, 2006, 342pp, £12.99, h/p, ISBN 0-7156-3596-4
This is, apparently, a "factual, compelling, and moving account of one survivor's extraordinary journey around the globe to document the ten-year *Zombie War* that almost caused our extinction".

Huh? Hasn't Brooks already done this joke with *The Zombie Survival Guide* (which was reviewed favourably by both Simon Morden and Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc in *Vector* 237). Well, clearly someone thinks this one-shot joke is good for another go (and Hollywood are in agreement as there has already been a bidding war for the rights to film *World War Z*. Ah, but that just proves I'm right and that it's a date-expired joke).

Chris Bunch – *Star Risk: The Dog From Hell* ☐

Orbit, London, 2006, 307pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-456-9

Chris Bunch – *Star Risk: The Doublecross Program* ☐

Orbit, London, 2006, 346pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-455-0
These are volumes three (*Doublecross*) and four (*The Dog*) in this military sf series... and if you want to know more go and read Colin Bird's review of the first two volumes in this edition's main column (not very impressed but could have been much worse). *The Dog From Hell* (note 'Dog' not 'Dogs') is a pretty good title but nowhere near as good as the one from Christopher Moore (see below).

Arthur C. Clarke and Stephen Baxter – *Sunstorm*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 332pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07801-4
When Claire Brialety reviewed *Time's Eye* in *Vector* 242, to which *Sunstorm* is the sequel and second book in the *Time Odyssey* sequence, she made it clear that despite some appearances *Time's Eye* was not a sequel to *The Light of Other Days*. *Sunstorm*, however, is clearly labelled as Book Two but appears to have little in common with Book One. *Time's Eye* is initially a multi-stranded narrative, introducing characters in the north-west of India across history (but then introduces aliens and a near-future 2037 timeline) whereas *Sunstorm* appears to be classic hard sf with a sun flare in 2037 almost destroying civilisation and preparations needed for the next one in 2042. Okay, I need to read these (to find out just how they relate).

Phillip K. Dick – *The Zap Gun*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 252pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07672-0
Return to print for this 1965 novel from Dick which although written when he was probably at his peak is a relatively minor novel (compared to, say, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* which preceded it). Rated 3/5 by Andrew M. Butler in his *Pocket Essential* book on the author, he describes *The Zap Gun* as "casually inventive". Still, that's more than can be said for many books.

Cory Doctorow – *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town*

Tor, New York, 2006, 320pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-31280-8
In the words of the publicity pack this is a novel "of wrenching oddity, heartfelt technological vision, and human pity set on the streets of Toronto" which is easily enough to sell it to me (marketing working? Will never catch on). Fortunately we have a much more balanced opinion from Niall Harrison who reviewed the book in *Vector* 244 and concluded that although it is "not a safe book, and there are moments of alarming darkness" it is, however, "a thoroughly modern book; its polished-up geek lives are instantly recognisable". The book is also blessed with a gorgeous Dave McKean cover and is strongly recommended: you may not like it, but you may just love it.

Mick Farren – *Conflagration*

Tor, New York, 2006, 400pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31363-4

The sequel to 2004's *Kindling* continues the story of four youngsters drawn together to form a supernatural entity: The Four. Sounds like run-of-the-mill fantasy but this is set in an alternative world (read America) where The Four are fighting to save the world from the Mosul, a ravaging horde directed by a fanatical priesthood (erm? I think we are starting to see the parallels here?). In a world populated by familiar but different real historical persona (al la Kim Newman) The Four travel to London where Prime Minister Jack Kennedy is assassinated.

Sounds promising, but when Paul Bateman reviewed *Kindling* in *Vector* 240 he found it a "fairly mindless guns and bonking romp" with The Four being "whining, naïve and immature" and let's not explore the books East/West propaganda. As this is book 2 of The Flame of Evil series I suspect we will see more of this.

Michael Gerber – *Barry Trotter and the Shameless Parodies*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 574pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-57507894-4

Some things in the publishing world are just plain wrong: publishing supposedly 'comic' parodies being one. But there are worse things: HARDBACK OMNIBUS EDITIONS OF THREE 'COMIC' NOVELS.

Which, unfortunately, is what we have here as this edition contains *Barry Trotter and the Shameless Parody* (2001), *...the Unnecessary Sequel* (2003) and *...the Dead Horse* (2004). Bloody hell, as if that damned Boy Wizard isn't enough we have this which appears to think that just having vaguely 'comic' sounding versions of names from the source material is amusing: Lon Measley, Lord Valumart, Bumblemore and so on. Well, I suppose putting them all together like this makes it as thick as a Potter book. But then Mr Gerber (and Gollancz?) must be making money from books of its ilk as Mr Gerber has also written *The Chronicles of Blarnia* (which I suspect is another 'hilarious' parody. And, by the way, even the publisher has reservations as they describe the books as "hilarious").

You have been warned (that I am very, very biased).

Terry Goodkind – *Phantom* ☐

Voyager, London, 2006, 587pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-00-714563-2

Terry Goodkind – *Phantom*

Tor Books, New York, 2006, 672pp, \$29.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30524-0
Simultaneous UK and US editions of this, the eleventh volume of the best selling *Sword of Truth* fantasy series. The good news is that this is the concluding book of the series (oh yeah, we've heard that before: doesn't matter if you kill off your hero which isn't a spoiler as I've no idea how *Phantom* ends – there is *always* a way to bring them back if the incentives are worth it).

The bad news is that the film rights to the whole series have been optioned by Sam Raimi's production company. I can only hope that this is the usual "option everything but never make

it" approach that Hollywood normally takes.

Laurell K. Hamilton – *Danse Macabre* **III**

Orbit, London, 2006, 483pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-474-7
Volume thirteen of the series and Anita Blake gets hard.... back edition for the first time in the UK (I think?). You know the score by now (well, it is volume thirteen for goodness sake!) but this time Anita has one additional, trifling, problem: she may be pregnant. And she isn't sure whether the father is a vampire, a werewolf or something else entirely (well, this is an Anita Blake book so what did you expect?). If you have read this far then you'll be interested to know that in the US *Danse Macabre* is volume fourteen, and not thirteen as it is here, with *Micah* being number thirteen, and featuring the wereleopard Micah (keeping up with me so far?). No sign of a UK edition for *Micah* but you can always visit the large South American River on the web for a paperback copy of the US edition.

Shaun Hutson – *Dying Words* **III**

Orbit, London, 2006, 358pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-432-1
Dying Words is a book that takes two fairly interesting ideas. First, that the gift of artistic creativity is balanced by suffering, creating a sort of cosmic balance and second, that an artist, in whatever medium, is able to enter the world that they have created. In the hands of a gifted Horror writer, such as Ramsey Campbell, it is likely that these ideas would produce a very powerful story. Unfortunately, at least on the evidence of this book, Shaun Hutson is not such a writer. Written in clunking wooden prose, these ideas are used only to produce a series of graphic and violent deaths occurring in a fashion that cannot be explained by normal means. The characters involved are so shallow and unbelievable that there is no chance of feeling empathy with them, which means that where there should be tension there is usually only tedium. The agency of the murders is flagged so far in advance that by the time we reach the denouement it becomes just plain silly.

Dying Words is exactly the type of badly written gore-soaked nonsense that gives Horror a bad name. Avoid.

(Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts)

Gwyneth Jones – *Band of Gypsies*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 297pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07645-3
Fourth volume in the ongoing saga of Ax, Sage and Fiorinda, the first of which, *Bold as Love*, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award. In this volume our three heroes return from the US so that Ax can take up the Green Presidency and with the political story running alongside the personal one. As Cherith Baldry points out in her review of the book in *Vector* 243 'don't start here' but go back to the first volume. For those waiting for this paperback they won't be disappointed with Cherith concluding that Jones' presents a "detailed world and her imaginative force is equally vivid in the various overlapping areas which make up the whole: the futuristic society, the life and work of the rock star characters, the realities of power politics, and the way all of these are laced with resurgent magic".

Brian Lumley – *Necroscope: The Touch*

Tor, New York, 2006, 448pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31609-9
A new *Necroscope* novel which features a guest appearance from the original *Necroscope*, Harry Keogh. Also featuring "a fledgling *Necroscope*, a telepathic wolf, a beautiful woman from beyond the stars and the ghost of Harry Keogh [so that's his cameo]". Well, if there are any fans this side of the

Atlantic then this will have already sold the book to you. For the rest of us, let's just move on.

Julian May – *Sorcerer's Moon* **III**

Voyager, London, 2006, 645pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-00-712324-8
Third, and final, volume in May's Boreal Moon series. The preceding books, *Conqueror's Moon* and *Ironcrown Moon* have both been reviewed by Andrew A. Adams (in *Vector* 239) where he found they "combine feudal political intrigue with magical high adventure to create a compelling tale". In contrast to the Bakker series mentioned above these did have some drawbacks with the books "somewhat difficult to get into" and occasionally needing "a bit of humour to lighten the mood". So better than average but not great.

Anne McCaffrey & Elizabeth Ann

Scarborough – *Changelings* **III**

Bantam, London, 2006, 273pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 0-593-05612-4
I'm sorry, there is absolutely no way I can get past the unbelievable cute tweeness of the cover – it's in pastel colours and it's got baby seals on it (which it makes me want to club it to death)! – or that the name of the planet 'Petaybee' just makes me cringe (this is book one of The Twins of Petaybee). This is a ~~cash-in~~ follow-up to McCaffrey and Scarborough's earlier series set on Petaybee (the Powers Trilogy) but I think I'd better stop here.

Fiona McIntosh – *Betrayal* **III**

Orbit, London, 2006, 521pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-457-7

Fiona McIntosh – *Revenge* **III**

Orbit, London, 2006, 533pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-458-5

Volumes one (*Betrayal*) and two (*Revenge*) in the Trinity Trilogy (I'm sure there is no irony here as it would be just too much like Douglas Adams to have a series called Trinity with four books). Sounds exactly what you would expect from a fantasy trilogy.

L. E. Modesitt – *The Hammer of Darkness*

Tor, New York, 2006, 288pp, \$13.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-31567-X

Now this is real sf! Our hero, Martin, must "challenge the supremacy of the gods to defend his life, love and the fate of mankind". And it's got a big spaceship on the cover! What more could we want (well, given that I'm not sure this prolific author has ever had a good review in *Vector*, then probably rather a lot).

Christopher Moore – *Coyote Blue*

Orbit, London, 2006, 340pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-448-8

Christopher Moore – *Bloodsucking Fiends*

Orbit, London, 2006, 344pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-449-6

Christopher Moore – *Island of the Sequestered Love Nun* **III**

Orbit, London, 2006, 403pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-450-X

And the prize for the best title in the issue goes to... *Island of the Sequestered Love Nun*. Can it get any better than that? Well, possibly, as the next volume in the series, due January 2007, is *The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove* (close but no cigar).

Anyway, enough about brilliant titles, what about the books? Well, these are volumes two, three and four (*Coyote*, *Bloodsucking* and *Island* respectively) in Moore's comic horror series. Now you all know that I don't do 'comic' but there is something about these that sound very appealing (beyond just having *that* title), for example "Coyote, the trickster, has arrived to transform tranquillity into chaos, to reawaken the mystical storyteller within Sam... and to seriously screw up his existence in the process". No, not great, but still...

One odd note: all these are marked as 'first published in Great Britain 2006' despite *Coyote Blue*

and *Bloodsucking Fiends* having been published by Black Swan in the UK in 1994 and 1995 (*Bloodsucking Fiends* was even reviewed in *Vector* 188 by Liam Proven). It does appear, however, that this is the first UK publication for *Island of the Sequestered Love Nun* (and hence eligible for this year's BSFA Award).

EDIT: having now read part of the first title, *Practical Demonkeeping*, I can confirm that on this evidence they don't live up to *that* title – hardly surprising – but they are rather good, lightweight, fun.

FURTHER EDIT: I finished the book, enjoyed it and am even contemplating reading the next. In the great cosmic scheme of things I think we'll call this result a success (although what it does to *what* remains of any credibility I may have had is anyone's guess).

Lucius Shepard – *Life During Wartime*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 418pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07734-4

And yet again it's left to Gollancz's SF Masterworks reprint line to raise the standard of the books in this column with the return to print of Shepard's truly masterful exploration of the consequences, both personal and global, of a drug-fuelled, near-future, dirty war in the jungles of Guatemala.

First published in 1987 *Life During Wartime* was reviewed by both Maureen Porter and David Hodson in *Vector* 145 (August/September 1988) and if you only read one book from this issue of *Vector* then this should be the one (and that includes from the main reviews column).

Osamu Tezuka – *Buddha: Devadatta* (Volume 3)

HarperCollins, London, 2006, 336pp, £10.00, t/p, ISBN 0-00-722453-2

Osamu Tezuka – *Buddha: The Forest of Uruvela* (Volume 4)

HarperCollins, London, 2006, 384pp, £10.00, t/p, ISBN 0-00-722454-0

Osamu Tezuka – *Buddha: Deer Park* (Volume 5)

HarperCollins, London, 2006, 350pp, £10.00, t/p, ISBN 0-00-722455-9

Osamu Tezuka – *Buddha: Ananda* (Volume 6)

HarperCollins, London, 2006, 368pp, £10.00, t/p, ISBN 0-00-722456-7

Osamu Tezuka – *Buddha: Prince*

Ajatasattu (Volume 7)

HarperCollins, London, 2006, 429pp, £10.00, t/p, ISBN 0-00-722457-5

Osamu Tezuka – *Buddha: Jetavana* (Volume 8)

HarperCollins, London, 2006, 362pp, £10.00, t/p, ISBN 0-00-722458-3

Volumes 1 and 2, *Buddha: Kapilavastu* and *Buddha: The Four Encounters* respectively, of Osamu Tezuka's Manga retelling of the life of Buddha are reviewed by James Bacon in this issue's main reviews column. These six volumes complete the epic story.

Timothy Zahn – *Dragon and Herdsman*

Tor, New York, 2006, 320pp, £17.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31417-7

Fourth in the Dragonback series – following on from *Dragon and Thief*, *Dragon and Soldier* and *Dragon and Slave* – which continues the adventures of fourteen-year-old Jack Morgan and Draycos, his symbiotic dragon partner. Here the duo, ably assisted by the reluctant mercenary Alison Kayna, discover a small lost colony of Draycos's own race, of which he believed he was the only survivor. Elizabeth A. Billinger reviewed the first two books in the series in *Vector* 238 concluding that they are "good, old-fashioned, sf thrillers aimed at teenagers but recommended to readers of all ages looking for a fast, suspenseful romp". With *Dragon and Herdsman* the series continues on strong form.



The New X

by
Graham Sleight

Storying Genres

Storying lives, eh? Okay, here's a story: I saw Steven Spielberg's *AI* twice in the cinema. The first time was July 2001, in a sweltering cinema in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As far as I remember, the audience's reaction was quiet, attentive, a little bemused by the shifting tone of the film. The next time was four months later, in a cold and rainy London. The reaction was much the same, except for one shot, which provoked gasps of surprise. When we approach the film's frozen Manhattan, we see the towers of the World Trade Center trapped in the ice. Their windows are missing, parts of the structure are gone, but both are clearly still intact. Even then, a month or two on from the terrorist attacks on Manhattan, it was clear that whatever replaced the WTC towers, it would not be an exact replica. So, apart from the shock of having the attacks referenced by accident, as it were, I think the audience was responding to the fact that the film was now *wrong*, that it was telling a story about the future which (in this small respect) could not be true.

I found myself thinking, afterwards, about whether that wouldn't make a useful definition of science fiction: sf stories are those that advance hypotheses about the world that might become true but which are falsifiable. (Alternate-world stories are those which might once have been sf by this definition, but which are now falsified: we know now that Hitler didn't win WWII, but he could have.) I was thinking of Karl Popper's definition of science: that scientific experiments are those which can be falsified. We construct a hypothesis that gravity works in a certain way, and drop a ball off a table to see if the hypothesis will be disproved. This rattled around in my head for a while before I came to the conclusion that, while it might be a workable definition of sf, it wasn't very useful. It didn't particularly explain why, for instance, far-future space opera is sf: many of the technological advances put forward in such stories are so far removed from our present state of knowledge that one can't begin to say whether or not they might be possible.

I have to say, in general, that debates about the definition of sf (or fantasy, or horror) don't exercise me very much – though of course that may reflect a lack of rigour on my part. I am quite taken by Samuel Delany's view that we should not try to define genres – because, for instance, definition inevitably means concentrating on boundary cases at the expense of the core of the genre, because it sets up a target which critics and writers can *game*, and so on. But there are plenty of people

who do try to define sf in radically differing ways, and I thought it might be useful to try and sort some of those ways out:

1. **Trope-based.** "Science fiction is that which contains robots/spaceships/ray-guns." Probably the commonest, but also the most flawed way of creating definitions. It leads you into just looking at the surface of stories, and into errors as a result. For instance, it means you wind up thinking of Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* as fantasy (because that's where its props are from) rather than as sf (because all its fantasy tropes ultimately have underlying sf justifications, as do the large-scale moves of its story.)

2. **Effect-based.** "Science fiction is that which induces sense of wonder", "Horror is that which makes you experience horror", and so on. Darko Suvin's famous definition of sf as a literature of cognitive estrangement within a 'novum' probably belongs here. The problem is that such definitions tend to land you with a single aesthetic criterion by which to judge whether a work of sf is any good.

3. **Architecture-based.** I recently read Farah Mendlesohn's excellent book on Diana Wynne Jones, in which she attempts to define and classify fantasy stories based on what might be called the macro-structure of each story. Similarly, one could come up with an obvious architecture-based definition of the detective story – a crime happens, and the large-scale plot of the book is the action of solving it and bringing about some kind of restitution.

4. **Move-based.** I'm thinking here of what John Clute, in particular, has wound up creating through his encyclopedias and other critical work: a sense of what's most characteristic about sf or fantasy through small or mid-scale moves of story. A Clute term like, say, 'thinning' doesn't define the whole story, just describes a part of it.

5. **Market-based.** Science fiction is that which is marketed as science fiction – the pure Marxist definition, if you like. The problem is that plenty of sf has been written using the tropes and techniques of the genre but published outside it: and even if Margaret Atwood wants to exclude *The Handmaid's Tale* from the canon, I don't want to.

6. **Tradition-based.** Damon Knight's famous statement that "...it will do us no harm if we remember that [science fiction] means what we point to when we say it" (*In Search of Wonder*, 3rd edn, 11) is basically an assertion that sf is a tradition or genealogy, and that those sufficiently acquainted with the tradition can say what falls into it.

I suppose the Knight definition is the one I feel closest to, if pushed. Sf in particular is a peculiarly time-bound conversation, texts responding to each other in a way that also embraces, for instance, our critical discourse, the conversations we have at conventions, and increasingly the online world as well. But it seems to me that the most interesting development of the last decade or so is the extent to which genre boundaries are being gamed and subverted: which I'll talk about next issue.