

# Vector

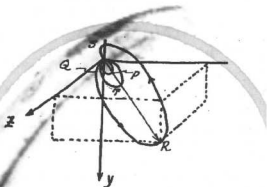
The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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**Please note:** The advertisement on page 18 (and the one on page 8).

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I have this image in my head of the perfect editorial. It sets up the relevant issue, but also looks outwards. It's both engaging and enlightening, witty where appropriate but not grandstanding; it generates a response of some kind in the reader. It comes out in one draft, in one sitting even, to exactly the right length. It's easy.

Much like the image I have in my head of the perfect issue of *Vector*, I suspect that reality is never quite going to match up. Cold-start soap-boxing is something I've never quite managed to get the hang of – I feel much more comfortable when I have a hook to hang my thoughts from, which is one of the reasons I've been so keen on themed issues of *Vector*. Unfortunately, this time around there's nothing to tie the contents of the issue together except Gabe Chouinard's rather fine cover.

And I have more to introduce than usual, since you'll notice – or may already have noticed – that this issue we don't have any book reviews. There's an Archipelago essay (my review of some British short fiction magazines, held over from last issue), but no full reviews column. The reason is simply that the magazine schedule slipped slightly at the end of last year; to get back on track we've put together two issues more or less in parallel, but (alas) reviewers can only review so fast.

Originally, this was going to be an issue about Cities. From Trantor to Midgar to Hav, the cities of sf and fantasy have fascinated me for years, and these days the pickings seem to be as rich as they've ever been. In 2006 alone I travelled to Kevin Brockmeier's city of the dead, Jeff Vandermeer's Ambergis, Will Self's present and future Londons, Alan Campbell's Deepgate, Scott Lynch's Camorr, M. John Harrison's Saudade, and several others. (I even acquired an album by a band called Cities. It wasn't great.) And they offer, at least to me, a wide variety of topics to write about. But the best-laid plans, and all that: a couple of articles fell by the wayside, and a couple more fell into my lap, and in the end all that remains of Plan A is a fascinating transcript of a panel from Interaction, featuring Jeffrey Ford, Michael Swanwick, Ian R. Macleod, and Claire Weaver discussing 'Fantastic Cities'.

I suppose, if I really wanted to, I could draw some sort of line from 'Fantastic Cities' through James Bacon's interview with Anton Marks – which discusses both a future London, and some things that sf should be doing but isn't – to Ken MacLeod's essay 'The Human as Alien', which was first aired as his Guest of Honour speech at last year's Novacon, and which makes an argument not just for what sf should be doing, but for what *only sf can* do. And then I could direct you to Adam Roberts' argument for science

fiction as a 'Leibnizian' genre, in which the parts recapitulate the whole. And since he explores this idea by looking at the nature of a fix-up, which takes Stephen Baxter's recent book *Resplendent* as its inspiration. And then there's a brilliant essay by Stephen Baxter, exploring the work of Nevil Shute, fifty years after the publication of *On the Beach*.

But all that is more than a little forced, so what I should really do is send you off into the issue to explore it for yourselves. I do want to talk about one of this issue's features, though, which is an extended discussion of what the BSFA does or should do to recognise non-fiction writing. The discussion – which includes contributions from Paul Kincaid, Farah Mendlesohn, Adam Roberts, Graham Sleight, and many others – sprang up on the *Vector* blog (<http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/>) after it was announced that this year the BSFA was presenting a Recommended Reading List of non-fiction, but no overall award. The category has been in flux for a few years now: it was first introduced, as a voted award, in 2001; declining voting numbers led to its suspension in 2004; for 2005, a combined nominations-from-members and decision-by-judged-panel approach was tried, selecting a winner and a companion recommended reading list; and this year, as I already mentioned, there's a recommended reading list based on nominations from members, but no overall winner.

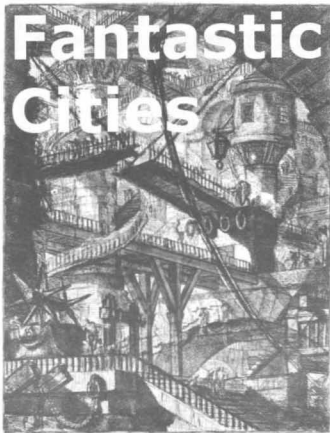
Why this last change? Largely because of the criticisms levelled at the 2005 award. I'm not going to try to summarise the discussion it provoked here, since it explores many and varied topics more thoroughly than I have space for here, but what it comes down to are two key questions: should the BSFA be recognising non-fiction about sf? And if so, how? As you'd expect, many suggestions are thrown out in the course of the discussion, but – to be blunt – most of them come from people who have a dog in the fight. We need more feedback, from as many people as possible, so please read the discussion and send your thoughts to [vector.editors@gmail.com](mailto:vector.editors@gmail.com), even if it's just a note in favour or against an Award. I hope to be able to continue the discussion in a letters column in a couple of issues' time.

To a large extent I've resisted getting drawn into the discussion myself, largely because I don't think I have any original ideas to put on the table. I'd love to see the BSFA recognise non-fiction in some way – although bear in mind that I also have a dog in the fight, at least technically – but I'm damned if I can work out what the fairest solution is. I'm sure there is a perfect system out there, to go with my perfect *Vector* and my perfect editorial, and I'm sure all three are unattainable; but I also think all three are worth trying for.



# Torque Control

Editorial  
by Niall  
Harrison



The follow is a transcript of a panel held at Interaction back in 2005. The remit was "A celebration of all the many wild, wonderful, vibrant, dangerous and exciting cities of fantasy literature"; the participants were Jeffrey Ford, Ian R. Macleod and Michael Swanwick, and the moderator was Claire Weaver.

**MICHAEL SWANWICK:** The thing about cities is they allow you to leave out all the dull stuff. All the marching around over nondescript landscape, avoiding the armies of Hell and the like. You can just go next door.

**JEFFREY FORD:** The thing about fantasy cities is decrepitude. You see it in science fiction too, especially Ridley Scott's vision in *Blade Runner*, which is a classic, but I think it plays more in fantasy. The precedent is *Gormenghast*. If you see paintings by science fiction artists they're these gleaming *Metropolis* visions, you know what I mean? With spaceports and big highways. Whereas I think fantasy lends itself more to the decrepit city. There's more of a sense of romance to it, there's more of a sense of melancholy to it, that for some reason seems to play better in fantasy than in a science fictional world.

**MS:** It's the feeling that there was greatness in our past, but it's over and gone. That was an 18th century discovery, made when they started going to look at all the Roman ruins. And that's melancholy, but also strangely satisfying, this mournful feeling of glory lost.

**JF:** The historical part of cities really interests me too. One of the reviewers said *The Portrait of Mrs Charbuque*, which takes place in New York City, was like Edith Wharton's New York, but with somebody lurking behind every hansom cab, some evil presence round every corner. So it was really a fictional city that I created, but the way I did it was that I went to New York, and as I was walking around I tried to see some of these places from a turn of the century perspective. I realised that every city is really a palimpsest of history. When you're walking through the city, you see things that have been there since the 19th century, like an old lamppost, and right next to it will be the latest greatest architecture. Cities are historical wreckage in and of themselves. I noticed it in London when I was there – the very modern, and also very old, together at the same time. And that's why if you're writing a novel and you're trying to create a culture, the city is really the place to go, because you can embody a culture by showing one of its cities. It has all the different influences and complexities of that culture.

**MS:** There's also a strange kind of richness to it. I'm working on a fantasy novel set in the Tower of Babel – so of course I've been going to New York City a lot and talking to people there about what it's like. I asked one of my friends what he liked best about New York City, and he said, "Forty-five different kinds of mustard". If you live out in the country and you want a choice of forty-five different kinds of mustard, you'd better be rich. But you can be blue-collar in New York, you can be just getting along and still have a choice of mustards.

**IAN R. MACLEOD:** I think one of the important things about cities, the way we've talked about them, is that they're organic. And in a way, they're far more organic and evolving than the countryside. The scope for a writer, from the point of view of describing 'A Desert' or 'A Forest', be it beautiful English scenery or Scottish Highlands or whatever, is actually quite limited. Once you've described the mountains, the lochs, the deer running away from you or running towards you, where do you go? At the very least you need to add a shepherd's hut and go into it. You need the works of man, I think, to be able to create interesting fiction, because fiction is almost always, if not invariably, about human

being, not simply about landscape. A landscape people have moulded is what's interesting. And cities – yes, they're a landscape that has been moulded, but in a sense the landscape of a city is out of control. If you wander around Glasgow, or as Jeff was saying, New York or London, you don't have a sense of any great overriding theme or plan. The city has developed in various ways according to the half-formed wishes of our forefathers, and then gone off in other directions again. And I think the changing and organic nature of cities – the sense that they have a presence of their own and a purpose of their own – combined with the fact that they are a far more interesting and varied reflection of human nature, and what humans are trying to achieve, than a more rural setting, always makes them a far bigger draw in terms of depicting human activity.

**MS:** There's also the fact that every city – every real city – has its own personality. If you look at the great Renaissance paintings, you'll see the same models popping up in works by different artists. The woman who was particularly beautiful, who really had that allure the artist wanted. And what we have now instead is we have cities working in the same way. How many fantasy novels have there been set in London, which presume London to be one of the great treasures of the world? Of course, so is New York...

**JE:** I don't know if you guys have this show over here – when I was a kid there used to be a show on television called *The Naked City*, and it had a line, the beginning of it was – and this is going back to what Ian said – “There's a million stories in the naked city.” I remember when I was a kid, that just blew my mind – when you go through the city and look at every lighted window, there's something going on in there. It's like a collection of stories. And as Ian said, it really is the people that make it, that you're writing about, that give it its culture.

**CLAIRE WEAVER:** When you're writing your fantastic cities, how do you research them? How do you map them out?

**MS:** I always start with a map. That's the very first thing. Maps will tell you strange stuff. When you have a map, you can say, hey, there'd be a view from there, and people would be using this road... a city map is like a launching board for a story. The city starts telling you things about itself, and it's really quite exciting.

**IRM:** Interestingly, because I think – well, let me ask you, Mike – would you want readers to see these maps?

**MS:** Oh sure. Look at the maps for Lankhmar, and Ankh-Morpork, they're similar maps. People put

them up on their walls. Despite the fact that Terry Pratchett said he would never do a map because that would limit him, this fannish madman did a beautiful map, and as far as I know that didn't dismay him at all, that just filled him with excitement about new possibilities.

**IRM:** I think you do end up having to do a map. But when I first start writing something, I think I'd rather be surprised. In some sense I think you could argue that cities are un-mappable. That's part of the appeal – you've always got to allow room because there always is more room, the basement or the alleyway or the hidden courtyard or the ruined palace. And for that reason I avoid thinking in terms of maps, until I get to a certain point, and then in terms of practicalities you realise, well, you have to keep it straight. The reader isn't necessarily drawing the map in their mind, but I think if you don't have a relatively clear idea – “it's three blocks and left” – then they'll notice. So I avoid big maps, I guess for the same reason Terry Pratchett avoids them, because potentially they're limiting, but at the same time I think they have to be there. It's really about what level of priority you give them. On the question of sharing them with your readers – I personally have seen too many maps in books. Of all kinds. I'd rather build a city up in my head.

**MS:** I think Mervyn Peake, in the *Gormenghast* books, he must have had some kind of map somewhere, because the distances between different places were always consistent. People would be climbing over roofs and they'd come down here or there, but you never got the feeling that something was closer one day and further away the next. The whole series of books were so wonderfully consistent that if he didn't have a written-down map, he must have had one in his mind.

**JE:** I created one fantastic city, the Well-Built City, in *The Physiognomy*. Compared to *Mrs Charbuque* it was much more fun in a way, because I could just make stuff up as I went along, which I enjoyed. And *Mrs Charbuque* was much more work because it was set in a real city – I totally agree with what Ian and Michael were saying about that. I found this book called *Moses King's Diary of New York* – something like that – maybe it was *Almanac of New York* – and it had everything in it, and it was for the year that the book was set. I found it as a reprint in Barnes and Noble, and then I could find out how much a cup of coffee was from a stand on the street, where all the statues were, where the department of health was, who the head of the department of health was that year, all this information. And you'd think that would make me stick to the facts, and that it would be very cut and dried, but really it gave me much

more of an opportunity to spin off in my own way. And in a way the New York of *Mrs Charbuque* is more fantastic than the Well-Built City – which I made up, it was like, oh yeah, you’ve got the ministry of physiognomy over here, and the ministry of that over there – but New York was more fantastical because of the roots it had. You find those things, like Ian said, those things you could never have imagined, and then you take off from there.

**CW:** When you’re basing a city on a real city, how do you justify what you leave in and what you take out?

**JF:** Well one of the things about all my books that are based in a specific time in history is I always have a note in the Acknowledgements where it says, “I’m not a historian, I don’t pretend to be”. I’ll always play it fast and loose to get the fiction across. So if what’s there gets in the way of the plot, to hell with it, I just throw it out and move on. I want the story. Unless it’s something crucial – you know, I can’t blow up the Empire State Building unless I’m going to do an alternate history – I just kind of ignore it and move on. I’m not that concerned about it.

**MS:** Kafka handled this brilliantly at the beginning of *Amerika*, where his immigrant hero looks up and he sees the Statue of Liberty, holding high a sword... After the reader’s gotten past that, they have no excuse to complain about anything.

**IRM:** There’s also the question of knowledge – I suppose it’s similar to the question of maps in a way – which is, how well do you need to know something to write about it? The reality is that you don’t need to know very much at all. In fact, maybe living in London or New York doesn’t leave you best-placed to write about London or New York. It’s certainly been my experience that the best sort of knowledge for a city, the most appealing, comes from having had some sort of relationship with it, but that can be in your imagination, you don’t necessarily have to have lived there. Because what you’re creating at the end of the day is not the city itself, but the place in your head. Talking about real and imaginary cities, I wrote a novel called *The Summer Isles*, which is basically about an England which lost the First World War and succumbed to Nazism – so the Oxford that’s described is inherently an alternate Oxford anyway. I did use maps and everything else, but between starting the book and finishing the book I didn’t actually go to Oxford. I decided to write the version in my head.

**JF:** I find that to be true writing anything that deals with a historical element. A little historical detail

goes such a long way. Everyone’s inclination is to put all their research into their story, and it just chokes the plot. You’re much better off being sparing with the facts and the details.

**MS:** The reader is already on the writer’s side, they’ve already forked out twenty-five bucks, so they want to believe you! You can’t talk them into believing you, you can only fail to do a good job and lose their good faith.

**IRM:** Yes. And to take London as an example again, there are 1930s films set in Hollywood’s version of London – we wouldn’t want to do without those, but the real London, the mundane London, we hope, is always going to pale compared to the London we try to create. The whole point about fiction is creating another version of reality. At some point you’ve got to cut the ties in some way.

**CW:** So once you’ve built your fantastical city, are you responsible for its population, as creators?

**IRM:** I think that’s always a big issue for me as a writer. I suppose the fantastical city people are most likely to be familiar with from my work is the London of *The Light Ages*, which is basically an alternative England where late in the Age of Reason magic was discovered, so although the Industrial Revolution took place it developed in a slightly different way. And I think the questions I’m continually asking myself are things like – socially, economically, what would it be like for people sitting in a room like this, with whatever changes I’ve introduced? How does it work? It’s easy to do one person in a cottage, but when you step outside and go into the town, how are people reacting in the larger mass? I think those are the situations that are likely to put your invention to a stronger test.

**MS:** I don’t see myself so much as *responsible* for the population as I see myself as their persecutor. I spoke to Carol Emshwiller when she’d just finished a novel, and she was in mourning. She said that all these people she’d lived with for the past couple of years and known so well were all gone, as if they’d died, and she asked me don’t I feel that way? I said no, when I close the book I picture them saying “We’re free! We’re free of him!” Waving arms in the air, “I’m going to get a job as a dentist! I’m going to eat a hamburger! And nothing bad is going to happen to me!”

**JF:** Yeah, I don’t want to take responsibility for the people in the Well-Built City, I mean the physiognomist, Cley, he’s a real schmuck. And this is going to contradict what I said before about creating fantastic cities, but to me this side of cities can be like accessing somewhere that already exists. What you do when you’re doing that is basically

looking in at them. I don't really feel I have that much control over it – I wish I had more control sometimes, but once it's up and running I feel like I'm just peering in and it's all happening without me.

**IRM:** One thing I've recently done is I've taken the step of moving into the countryside after living in the city for all my life, and subconsciously in all sorts of ways you can't actually quantify it does make quite a big difference. So I'm interested, in general, how you feel about where you lived and what you made up, how it influences what you write?

**MS:** I grew up in small towns and suburbs, almost country places... When I was a kid I could disappear into the woods for a day, feed myself there. But I wanted to grow up into the big city, because it was where everything was happening. It had mortal peril every day of your life, and big buildings. It was cooler. Where I grew up, every so often the people there tried comparing it to New York and it always came off worse... I love cities, they're in my veins.

**JF:** I grew up in suburbs on Long Island, but by the time I was in my early teens we were in New York all the time. And then I lived in Philly and worked in New York for quite a while. I liked the city when I was younger, I felt comfortable – I felt the way about cities then the way I feel about the more suburban places I live now. Now, for me to go to the city – don't get me wrong, I really dig New York, I go into Philly sometimes, I really loved London when I was there, I haven't seen Glasgow much because I've only been here a day – but now they seem a lot of work to me. I don't like to take the subways in New York any more, I just take a cab. Gordon van Gelder busts my chops over this, I'm such a tourist now because I take cabs everywhere.

**MS:** Lucius Shepard had a comic called *Vermillion*, which was really terrific, and he created for this a ring city around a star. I forget how wide, but it's several hundred million miles long so it's effectively infinite, it never ends, you can just start taking the subway around it and a lifetime wouldn't be long enough to get all the way around. I think there are basically two groups of people: one group would feel this is a vision of hell, and the other group would think, wow, I'd love to be able to live there. I'm in the second group.

**CW:** Shall we take questions from the audience?

**Audience:** When do you have to escape the city? When does the story go outside the city?

**IRM:** One of the great things about writing about cities is that cities give you contrast. You can have

different quarters, different scenes, different settings. But I think – from the point of view of telling a story – there can be a sudden release from being away from a city, it gives you a sense of escape. If you really want to write a rural idyll, the way to do it isn't to write a story set entirely in the countryside, it's to write a story where you leave the city, for the contrast. The idea of fleeing through the final gate and setting out through the terrain beyond... quite often it's the end of the story.

**MS:** You can't really write about nature in a city. Well, you can, but half the time it's a trick and the other half it's a book like Robert Sullivan's *Rats*, which is this very careful investigation of the lives of rats in New York City. This guy is constantly climbing over walls into vacant lots full of rats, and going down into tunnels with hundreds of rats... and I'd much rather read about bears or mountain lions or something, quite frankly.

**Audience:** How would you say it affects the story if the city is shown rather than written? Say for example you have a city which is written about, like Lankhmar, it's textual... and then there's a series of French-language graphic novels published in Belgium, *Obscure Cities*, and those are all shown, and they all have very different styles. I was wondering if you feel that affects the way the story is told, or changes the effect of the story on the characters.

**MS:** A lot of the time with that sort of thing, the impression I've gotten is that the art, which is quite wonderful, is supporting an inadequate story. Or implying a good story that you can't actually get out of the text. The best example of this would be *Metropolis*, which is a really great movie with a really dumb plot. If you're watching the movie, though, it would be scurrilous to complain about that. I mean, here's this fabulous Art Deco city with slums, class struggle, robots, women showing their breasts... it's everything that you want!

**JF:** You know where that worked well, I thought – remember in the old Superman comics, the bottled city of Kandor? Whenever something took place in that city it would just be on a street somewhere, but in the back of your mind you had that bottled city, so it's like you can only get so far without thinking, oh yeah, they're in that city, that's a hell of a city in that bottle. I liked the play of those two things, a city contained. But a lot of times I find the depictions unsatisfying, I guess just because I'm a text guy, I like to read about these things. I'll tell you what's a great city book – *Arabian Nightmare* by Robert Irwin. It's fantastic. And I think it's just Cairo, set in the late 19th century, but it's a magical, amazing place. I think it really works well.

**Audience:** I was curious, there's a lot of cities you haven't mentioned that I think of as prototypical science fiction, techno-future cities... I was wondering why? Something like Coruscant, why do those George Lucas-type cities not really resonate with you?

**JF:** Well I don't know, George Lucas doesn't really resonate with me at all. But those gleaming cities... you know, it's a drag, it's a bore. It's so much more interesting to go to Dickens' London or one of the others we've talked about, cities that have all these nooks and crannies and you never know, shit could happen, it could all fall apart at any time.

**CW:** If you're writing a science fiction city, do you feel guilty for breaking something?

**JF:** I don't know what it is, it's just something stainless steel about it – like, everything working? We know that's not going to happen.

**MS:** John Brunner had a story, I forget the title now, where some urban analysts go to a city that's not working. Crime is up in this arcology and there's vandalism everywhere. And what they eventually conclude is that the city is too perfect, it doesn't feel human. And it's not what people want. People want that comfy armchair, that shabby bar. They don't want Trantor, they want the Sprawl. In the Sprawl you can find the things you really want. In Trantor there's nothing you'd be ashamed to show your mother.

**IRM:** I think the stainless steel city only works as a small sector of the city, really – I mean, here we're in the stainless steel monorail bit of Glasgow, aren't we? But you can see it's always struggling against everything else. I think the idea of the purity of the

city is interesting, it's an archetype, there is something there that appeals to us. It's a bit like when you buy a new car, you Hoover it for a while and then crisp packets start to seep in. Something like that, a perfect city, would be an interesting idea to explore. But the idea might be that the city is in some sort of control of us, rather than the other way around.

*Michael Swanwick has received the Hugo, Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, and World Fantasy Awards for his novels and short stories. His books include The Iron Dragon's Daughter, Stations of the Tide, Jack Faust, and most recently, The Periodic Table of Science Fiction (PS Publishing, 2005).*

*Ian Macleod's novel-length version of The Summer Isles recently won the Sidewise Award for alternate history. He has also won the World Fantasy Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Award, and been nominated for the Hugo and Nebula Awards, for his short fiction. His most recent book is the short story collection Past Magic (PS Publishing, 2006).*

*Jeffrey Ford's most recent book is also a short story collection, The Empire of Ice-Cream (Golden Gryphon, 2006), which collects stories including the Nebula Award-winning 'The Empire of Ice Cream' and the Fountain Award-winning 'The Annals of Eelin-Ok'. He has written six novels, including a trilogy set in the Well-Built City.*

*Claire Weaver is Production Editor of Matrix and a judge for the 2006 Arthur C. Clarke Award.*

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## The Science Fiction of Nevil Shute by Stephen Baxter

### INTRODUCTION

2007 is the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute (1899-1960).

To sf fans of my generation and younger, Shute's name is mostly associated with *On the Beach*, especially through Stanley Kramer's 1959 movie. But to older generations Shute was an extremely successful and much-loved popular novelist – his *The Chequer Board* (1947) was my father's favourite book, for instance.

And as it happens *On the Beach* wasn't Shute's only foray into sf, even if his works were never genre-packaged. Brian Aldiss, in *Trillion Year Spree* (1986) referred to Shute's *No Highway* (1948), *On the Beach* and *In the Wet* (1953) in a list of post-war popular novels which were 'kissing kin with sf' (246), along with works by C.P. Snow, Kingsley Amis, Anthony Burgess, William Golding and others: "All of [these novels] look towards a definition of man and his status. All of them approach the science fiction condition..." To this list Aldiss could have added Shute's *What Happened to the Corbetts* (1939), *An Old Captivity* (1940), *Round the Bend* (1951) and possibly others. Like Arthur C. Clarke, another engineer turned writer, Shute shows a fascinating tension between rationalism and mysticism.

Shute's work was very embedded in its times, and is slipping into history. But its importance is that Shute's huge popularity brought sf materials and sensibility to a wide audience, readers who may have read no other sf than Shute's.

The purpose of this essay is to explore Shute's sf in the context of his wider writing. I have drawn principally on the novels published during his lifetime and on his autobiography, *Slide Rule* (1954), which covers Shute's life up to 1938. For details of Shute's later life I have referred to a 1976 biography by American academic Julian Smith, as far as I know the only full-length study of Shute's work. The website of the Nevil Shute Foundation (listed in the endnotes) is also a useful resource.

I make what I believe is a new suggestion that Shute's use of the device of 'time travel through mental transference' may derive from his boyhood reading of Algernon Blackwood.

### EARLY LIFE AND WRITING

Nevil Shute Norway (he later used his Christian names as a pseudonym) was born in 1899 in Ealing, west of London. His background was conventional British upper-middle-class. He was raised a Protestant; though Shute doesn't seem to have been religious himself, he would in later life show a religious sensibility in his books, and used lines from school hymns as epigraphs.

Shute grew up immersed in an atmosphere of writing; his grandfather, grandmother, father and

mother were all published authors. But we know little of Shute's reading. Shute says that his brother Fred, three years older, introduced him to the work of English writer Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951). In later life he read A.P. Herbert during airship flight trials (*Slide Rule*, 102), and his early novels of adventure seem strongly influenced by John Buchan, for whom he expressed admiration (Smith, 58). SF fans would be interested to know if Shute read H.G. Wells, for instance. In fact Shute said that as a boy he was more interested in making model aeroplanes than in reading.

Shute attended school at Hammersmith and Oxford. A lifelong stammer gave him some problems, causing him to play truant. In 1912 Shute's civil servant father was posted to the Post Office at Dublin, and in 1916 Shute found himself caught up in the Easter Rising.

With the coming of the Great War Shute joined his school's Officer Training Corps. At first war was glamorous, but as the death toll mounted among the school's old boys the mood became sombre. Then Shute's brother Fred died aged just nineteen, in the trenches in France. "I was writing poetry in the last year that I spent at school," Shute says, "all of it very bad" (*Slide Rule*, 25). In the event he served three months on defensive duties in the Thames Estuary in 1918, and later worked on military funeral parties during the influenza epidemic. As for his brother, Shute would say of him, "If Fred had lived we might have had some real books one day. Not the sort of stuff that I turn out, for he had more literature in his little finger than I have in my whole body" (*Slide Rule*, 24).

Shute went up to Balliol College, Oxford, to read engineering. In his vacations he learned seamanship on a friend's yacht, and worked, at first unpaid, with an aircraft manufacturing company called Aircro based in Hendon. Here he met the designer Geoffrey de Havilland, whom he followed when de Havilland left to start up a company of his own. Living through a time of rapid innovation and lax regulation in the industry, Shute later wrote that "aeroplanes have been the best part of my life" (*Slide Rule*, 10). And from the beginning he formed a deep admiration for private enterprise: "A man [like de Havilland]... can look back on his life and feel that it has been well spent" (*Slide Rule* p44).

After graduating in 1922, Shute bought a typewriter and began to take his writing more seriously. He gave up on his poetry, and in 1923-4 wrote two short novels which were both rejected (published after his death as *Stephen Morris* (1961)).

In 1924, Shute left de Havilland to join Vickers Limited, where he would work with Barnes Wallis (later of Dambuster fame) on the design of a new generation of airships, then the only aircraft capable of a transatlantic service. The new Labour government ordered a public-private competition between Vickers, who would build the R100, and the Air Ministry, which built the R101. Shute began as the 'chief calculator' on the R100 project, ending up in a senior position. It took



To Travel Hopefully

The Science Fiction of Nevil Shute by Stephen Baxter

six years to complete the craft. The R100 flew successfully, but the R101 notoriously crashed in France. The fiasco ended airship production in Britain. Shute had no doubt that the blame was to be attributed to civil servants and politicians, of whom he always remained sceptical.

It was during his airship years that Shute became a published novelist, using his Christian names as a pseudonym: "Hard-bitten professional engineers might well consider such a man [who wrote novels on the side] to be not a serious person" (*Slide Rule*, 62).

Shute's early novels, with a cast of recurring characters, were thrillers with no great depth, evidently strongly influenced by Buchan, and with backgrounds drawn from Shute's own early experiences; there are plenty of boats and planes. The first, *Marazan* (1926), is a story of drug-running by Italian Fascists. Gradually Shute became more interested in his characters than in his somewhat unlikely plots. One notable recurring type was the tragic figure of the downed aviator, stranded on the ground after the war – a figure like the stranded Moonwalkers of our own times, perhaps. Shute's second novel, *So Disdained* (1928), features one such troubled aviator who, longing only to fly again, is drawn into spying for a then-new Soviet Union. These early books could be forward-looking: *Disdained*'s spying by aerial photography would have been impossible only a few years before.

In 1930 Shute, a casualty of a dead-duck industry, tried his luck with his own start-up aeroplane manufacturing company called Airspeed Ltd. However, the depression winter of 1930-31 was a bad time to be seeking investors, and he turned again to writing. In *Lonely Road* (1932) an embittered WWI veteran and a 'dance hostess' stumble on a conspiracy to turn a coming general election against the Socialists. Its complicated plot reminded Julian Smith of Graham Greene's

contemporary work.

Shute wrote no more novels for five years: "It did not seem fair to [my shareholders] to be doing another job in the evenings" (*Slide Rule*, 154). However, Airspeed continued to make a loss. In 1934 Shute worked on a new public stock issue, but "at this time I was acquiring a reputation with my co-directors and with my City associates for a reckless and unscrupulous optimism that came close to dishonesty..." (*Slide Rule*, 181). In the end "war came eventually to clean up the position for us" (*Slide Rule*, 186), by

creating a demand for Airspeed's products. But Shute was bought out of the company in 1938. He would write that his proudest achievement was selling an Airspeed Envoy to serve as part of the King's Flight.

By this time, however, Shute's writing career was gathering momentum. In 1936 the film rights to *Lonely*

*Road* were sold to Ealing Studios.

His fourth novel, *Ruined City* (1938), marks significant shifts in both mood and subject matter. Set in 1933, it is a parable of the Depression in which Henry Warren, a wealthy but bored banker, pulls off a fraudulent deal in order to revive a shipyard in a northern town. Warren's actions are presented as thoroughly moral; clearly ghosts from Shute's own career are being exorcised here.

And for the first time, in *Ruined City* Shute uses quasi-religious elements, especially Christian symbolism, which would figure in his later writing: Warren's change of heart comes when he falls ill during a Damascene walk in the country; his banging-up in prison for fraud is more like a monastic retreat. This tendency – to reach through capitalistic and engineering good works to the numinous – would come to a culmination in *Round the Bend* (1951).

*Ruined City* became Shute's first major commercial success, and film rights were sold immediately in America, where writers like Ayn Rand would write similar fables of righteous capitalism. Genre readers might be reminded of Heinlein's 'The Man Who Sold The Moon' (1950), in which entrepreneur Delos D. Harriman likewise breaks the law for the sake of a greater good. Brian Aldiss, in fact, compared Heinlein to Shute, "who also loved machines and added mysticism to his formula. Like Shute, Heinlein can be highly readable. Unlike Shute, Heinlein is often verbose and pedantic. Shute, however, is not as interesting as a character..." (Aldiss, 268). And, unlike Heinlein's sometimes rather brisk views of his fellow man, Shute's work always remained grounded in humanity.

Shute's next novel was his first written as a professional writer – and the first to contain overtly sfnal elements.

#### AWFUL WARNINGS AND BAD DREAMS

Shute's fifth novel *What Happens to the Corbetts* (1939) is a kind of abstracted fantasia of the war that was only a few months away, in which the Corbetts, a family in Southampton, are bombed out by unheard aeroplanes from an unnamed enemy. The Corbetts are a new type of character for Shute, but would become typical of the protagonists of his later books: 'ordinary', stoic, uncomplaining, likeable. And the depiction of the shattering of the routines of their normal lives, straightforwardly told, is harrowing at times.

But Shute didn't get the flavour of the coming war quite right. Under the bombing British society breaks down with remarkable ease; the book actually feels more like the novels of atomic war that would be written fifteen or twenty years later, including Shute's own *On the Beach*. Shute underestimated the sheer stoical resilience of British and other societies.

Shute was motivated to write the book to make a point. At the time, the great fear about aerial warfare was of gas attacks. Shute pointed out the physical



damage that could be wrought by high-explosive incendiary devices, though in a foreword added after the war he admits he overlooked the devastation caused by fire. Perhaps the book had some cautionary value; Shute says in his foreword that a thousand copies were distributed to workers in Air Raid Precautions – “not as reminders but on publication day”.

*Corbetts* might be classified in a sub-genre of ‘coming war’ fiction, including for example S. Fowler Wright’s *The Four Day War* (1936), which featured aerial bombardment with poison gas. But I know of no evidence Shute read any such books; throughout his career there is no sign that he was consciously working in an sf tradition.

The novel was another great success in the United States, and Shute travelled there in 1939 to promote his book and lecture against isolationism. But in the same year Shute’s life was punctuated by the first of what would be several apparent heart attacks. He was forty.

His next book was intended as light relief from all the wartime bad news, and again contained fantastic elements. In *An Old Captivity* (1940), Ross, another stranded aviator, takes an archaeologist and his daughter on a seaplane expedition to Greenland. This book’s heroic long-range flight, of a sort Shute had been writing about since *Marazan*, is depicted in close detail: “Great flights were made by men who kept their heads” (138).

But *Captivity* takes a turn into the fantastic when Ross, exhausted, falls into a drugged sleep and has a vivid dream of being a Scottish slave, Haki, bound to Leif Erikson, the Viking explorer who first landed in North America a thousand years earlier. Shute, drawing from a book of Arctic legends by Fridtjof Hansen (Smith, 38), was playing on a legend of Vinland then known only from the sagas; the archaeological remains of a Viking settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows would not be discovered until 1963.

So another element of the mystical enters Shute’s work here. His use of what he would call ‘flashbacks’, the notion of transference of identity and memory especially at times of stress and exhaustion or when dying, would be revisited many times during his career, most notably perhaps in *In the Wet* (1953).

It is intriguing to speculate that the use of this device might date back to his boyhood reading of Blackwood, who spun stories such as ‘The Willows’ (1907) from the ideas of his friend J.W. Dunne. Dunne (1875–1949) was in fact an aircraft engineer and writer, like Shute, but he is best known for his theories, summarised in *An Experiment in Time* (1927), which described time as not a linear flow but a sort of landscape which might be explored by the dreaming mind. His ideas influenced, among others, J.B. Priestley. (See relevant entries in the Clute and Nicholls *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993).) However I know of no direct evidence that Shute was influenced by Dunne either directly or through Blackwood’s work.

## WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

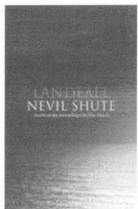
The Second World War was the making of Shute the popular novelist.

During the war itself Shute felt he had a patriotic duty to inform his readers and to maintain morale, and he did this most effectively by writing about ‘small people of no great significance, caught up and swept together like dead leaves in the great whirlwind of the war’ (*Landfall*, 240). *Landfall* (1940), written in the war’s uneasy first months, is the story of an RAF officer engaged on coastal patrols in Wellington bombers, who appears inadvertently to have sunk a British submarine. The book is full of behind-the-scenes details and is gritty, featuring the flyers’ boredom and rivalry between Navy and RAF. George Orwell hailed it as one of the first of a new literature of the war (Smith, 45).

But Shute also served. From 1938 he worked, unpaid, on novel weapons designs with old colleagues from the airship days. And in 1940 Shute joined the Navy to ‘work on the design of unconventional weapons’ (*Slide Rule*, 8) including anti-aircraft weapons, and a submarine rocket that took out a U-boat on its first live firing. He continued to write however, publishing three successful novels in his three years with the Navy.

*Pied Piper* (1942) is one of Shute’s most popular books. In spring 1940 an elderly English solicitor is caught up in France’s bewildering collapse, and must find a way to take home two English children. This book’s story strategy became characteristic of Shute, built around a self-imposed quest undertaken by an ‘ordinary’ person, made epic by circumstances of place and capability. And its telling relied on a technique Shute would use repeatedly, a narrative frame; in this case the main story is told within the frame of a conversation taking place late in the war in a London club during an air raid.

In the context of its time, the book showed how moral courage could be drawn even from defeat; it describes one man’s small Dunkirk. This is Shute somewhere near his very best. *Most Secret* (1942) draws heavily on Shute’s own wartime work, and for that reason its publication was banned until the war was over, much to Shute’s displeasure. It is the story of a pinprick military raid against German-occupied Brittany, using a disguised fishing boat bearing a flame-thrower. There is a remarkably apocalyptic tone; the Germans are depicted as hell-born, and fire as the instrument of God. 1942 was not a year for moral subtlety. *Pastoral* (1944) is a love story set among the absurdly young pilots and ground crew of an



English bomber station. Shute always had a fascination for what was new in the world; this book is about the strangeness of a new kind of war in which you could live in the bucolic English countryside, flirting with ground crew girls and planning fishing trips, while nightly being transported to a hellish war zone.



Shute travelled as a correspondent for the Ministry of Information aboard the D-Day invasion fleet of June 1944, and in early 1945 he was sent to Burma. The latter trip informed his first post-war novel. *The Chequer Board* (1947) is the story of a war veteran whose rather worthless life is to be ended by the aftermath of an old wound. Facing imminent and certain death, he prefigures the characters of *On the Beach*, and he reacts as they do: by getting to work, tracking down his companions

from a wartime prison flight. Shute could be technically ambitious. In this book he uses multiple narrative frames that overlap; the voice slips easily in and out of the interwoven stories of the characters, thus illustrating the interconnectedness of our lives. The structure is actually quite complex, and it's a tribute to Shute's skill that his readers think of him as 'an easy read'.

His next novel, *No Highway* (1948), is the next of Shute's 'kissing kin' of sf. It might today be called a technothriller, and is based on a classic what-if premise. Shute knew of problems of metal fatigue in bridges and railways; what if, he asked, the same issues showed up in aircraft? The story concerns a scientist at an aeronautics research establishment at Farnborough, who struggles to get his point across to the bureaucrats and

airline fat cats. Shute's predictions proved unpleasantly accurate when metal fatigue caused fatal crashes of the de Havilland Comet just a few years later.

But elements of the mystical cropped up even in this most technical of Shute's books. The protagonist's daughter displays apparent ESP powers, which help unravel the central conundrum.

#### AUSTRALIA AND APOTHEOSIS

Shute had long nursed an ambition to make a long flight. So in 1948-9 he embarked on a six-month flight to Australia and back. From this would emerge the raw material for his next two novels – and the journey presaged a change in Shute's own life. He was becoming disillusioned with Britain, and would soon leave for Australia for good.

*A Town Like Alice* (1950) springs from a true story Shute heard in Sumatra, on his way back from Australia, about a band of women and children on forced marches

under Japanese occupation. The novel is a sort of first-draft reaction by Shute to the conditions and possibilities of Australia; it is probably Shute's best-loved work. His next novel, however, was considerably more ambitious.

His 1951 novel *Round the Bend* is the story of a holy prophet among aero-engineers. Tom Cutter, another of Shute's wounded aviators, starts up a post-war air charter company based in Bahrain. Connie (Constantine) Shak Lin, a British subject but of mixed race and religious background, is an unusually conscientious aero-engineer who begins to preach that to do one's work well is a new sort of devotion to God: "But we are different, we engineers. We are called to a higher task than common men, and Allah will require much more from us than that... Got a five-sixteenth box there? Thanks. Now hold it, just like that..." (107). The narrative is drawn with consummate skill, with Cutter himself as a thoroughly reliable and indeed sceptical narrator – he is the first to call Connie 'clean round the bend', like the toilet cleaner Harpic (106). The book is laden with Shute's Christian symbolism. Cutter is Connie's Peter, for he denies Connie's holiness to a British official three times, just as Peter denied Christ (249-251). At the close of the book we discover that what we have been reading is a kind of gospel, the 'Book of Cutter' (363). Thus we are led step by step from the mundane to the numinous; as Cutter comes to believe in Connie, so do we.

Dating back to *Lonely Road* there had been a sense of the numinous in Shute's depiction in the sheer rightness of enterprise and technical work. Shute wrote of his time working on the R100 that "My own work in the calculating office led at times to a satisfaction almost amounting to a religious experience" (*Slide Rule*, 72). This trend in his thinking now came to a head. While vicars of the time used Shute's work in their sermons, however, modern readers might recoil from the preachiness.

Shute seems to have been very proud of *Round the Bend*, which he described as his best book. You can see why he was so pleased. For a self-professed serious engineer Shute seems to have been heavily drawn towards mysticism and the supernatural; even his little scientist of *No Highway* studied ouija boards. Shute's daughter would say that he didn't believe in mystical and religious ideas, but "probably he would have liked to believe, and might have done had he been introduced to them earlier" (Smith, 79). This polarity might remind genre readers of Arthur C. Clarke, another engineer turned writer who in books like *Childhood's End* (1954) expressed a longing for a higher meaning. In *Round the Bend* Shute took the themes that had dominated his life's work, the aircraft and the business-building and the devotion to careful work, and imbued them with a literal holiness, thus resolving the contradictory strands in his character.

While he worked on *Round the Bend* in 1949-1950, Shute was in the middle of a family move to Australia. He had become increasingly disillusioned with post-war



Britain, with its high taxation and pettifoggish restrictions; the bureaucrats seemed to him to have won. He was welcomed in Australia, but back home questions about his exile were raised in the House. Thereafter the settings and culture of 1950s Australia strongly influenced Shute's work. A mild heart attack in 1951, however, forced him to give up flying.

Shute's next novel *The Far Country* (1952) is the pot-boiler story of a young girl, Jennifer, who through a legacy escapes the grim, rationed, bureaucratic post-war England of the early 1950s to go live among sheep-rearing relatives in Australia. But this slight book, a snapshot of Shute's emigrant mood, is essentially a prelude to Shute's next novel. *In the Wet* (1953), one of his most overt works of sf, is spun out of Shute's conviction in the decline of his home country.

In *Far Country* Shute had put the boot into his homeland: "the Socialists scuttled out of India" (53), "this horrible National Health Service" (55), and so on. At one point Jennifer's father muses, "Where would it all end, and what lay ahead of the young people of today like Jennifer?" (87). In *Wet*, Shute offered an answer of sorts. Published in the year of Queen Elizabeth's coronation, it depicts a 1983 in which a young Australian pilot commands a 'Queen's flight' funded entirely by the countries of the Commonwealth. Shute draws on his own experience of selling an Airspeed aircraft to the King's Flight in 1937.

The Britain of this future is a dismal projection of the immediate post-war period, in which bureaucratic Labour governments rule, there is still rationing after thirty years, and there has been a massive flow of emigrants to the Commonwealth. Shute's future is sketchily drawn, with hints of economic collapse in 1970, and a 'third war' with Russia. In the midst of this, the Queen (with bit parts for Philip and Charles!) is a symbol of hope and unity. A crisis comes in the form of a monarch-led constitutional coup, when the Queen flies to Australia and announces that she won't return to Britain until the electoral system is reformed to a meritocratic model: one man one vote is an "outmoded political system... that kept them in the chains of demagogues" (66).

To modern eyes it is all disturbingly undemocratic, of course, and the political and economic tensions of the time were surely not all the fault of the post-war Labour government. But Shute, still only fifty-four, had lived through two world wars, and was seeing the Empire dismantled around a grey, hungry England. I read this rather odd book as a nostalgic fantasy born out of tension between bleak post-war reality and Dan Dare technocratic dreams. All of this is crystallised in the person of the young Queen. Shute seems to be in love with her; even in 1983 she is 'still beautiful' (101).

The most successful element of the book is Shute's characteristic framing narrative, in this case set in 1953, in which an old drunk lies dying 'in the wet', the Queensland rainy season, and is subjected to a Shute-ish

dreamlike transference of identity. There are hints that his next reincarnation will be as the captain of the Queen's Flight, and there is real poignancy when he is dragged back from his glittering future to a ruined, dying body. As in *Round the Bend* Shute adds to the mythic plausibility of the vision by using Christian and Buddhist symbols: in the wet, animals draw around the dying old drunk just as they drew around the birth of Jesus in his stable.

In 1954 Shute turned to autobiography, which he titled, with an engineer's forthrightness, *Slide Rule*. A follow-up volume would have been called *Set Square*. The book's epigraph, by Robert Louis Stevenson, refers to the central images of many of Shute's books, of epic journeys and characters hard at work: 'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour'.

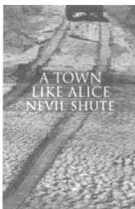
Shute the fiction writer returned to his best form in *Requiem for a Wren* (1955). It is a character study of a 'Wren', a woman in a support role in a naval gunnery unit, who is left bereft when her wartime career ends; a victim of war's aftermath she is a remote descendant of the downed aviators of Shute's first books, and of characters even in his wartime books such as *Pastoral* who were not eager to return to their humdrum peacetime lives. In contrast, *Beyond the Black Stump* (1956) is much thinner, the story of a love triangle in the Australian outback between the daughter of a tough Irish family, an English immigrant, and an American geologist. But *Stump* was essentially the product of Shute's research in America for *On the Beach*.

#### CROSSING THE TUMID RIVER

Shute's most famous sf novel was another Awful Warning.

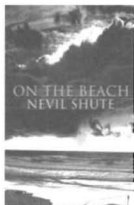
In *The Far Country*, the heroine Jennifer muses on the blessings of Australia: "It's a lovely country... Secure – I suppose it is. Nobody seems to be afraid an atom bomb is going to land next door tomorrow, like we are in England" (231).

Shute's idea for *On the Beach* grew out of this wishful thinking, and initially he planned a story of how Australia might survive with the northern hemisphere destroyed (Smith, 126). But his research showed him this was a vain hope; by the mid 1950s it was becoming clear that everybody should be 'afraid' of nuclear war. The book Shute finally wrote reflects this grim prospect – and its mood may have been tinged by his own life's darkening; he suffered another heart attack in 1955. The very title of *On the Beach* (1957) is a statement of intent, a



quotation from T.S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men', which spoke of "this last of meeting places... gathered on the beach of the tumid river..." before the world ends "with a whimper".

Following nuclear war in the northern hemisphere in 1961, a war so sudden and complete its only records are



seismographic, Australian society stoically waits for annihilation by fall-out. Melbourne will be the last city to succumb, and the schedule of annihilation is well understood and relentlessly followed: "After we've gone Tasmania may last another fortnight, and the South Island of New Zealand. The last of all to die will be the Indians in Tierra del Fuego" (215). In the beginning everybody is healthy, but we see a gradual winding-down of society, ending with Melbourne dirty, shabby and abandoned. As in *Corbetts*, this war is reduced to lethal abstractions: the

atomic detonations are out of sight, and the Corbetts' silent bombs are reflected in the invisible creeping menace of the radiation.

The plot is given some momentum by the voyages of the USS *Scorpion*, an American nuclear submarine, as she sails north in hope of evidence that humanity might yet be spared radioactive doom. There are eerie scenes of a lifeless America, and there are snail touches, such as the establishment of a library of glass books on a mountain peak, for the benefit of any intelligences that might follow us. But the novel is essentially a study of character and mood.

Those who gather 'on the beach' include Dwight Towers, captain of the *Scorpion*, Peter Holmes, a young Australian navy officer assigned as Towers' liaison, Moira Davidson, a 'girl' acquaintance of Holmes, and John Osborne, a young government scientist. From the beginning all these key characters know that they have only months left to live, and we study their reactions. Osborne is coldly truthful; he knows what's coming better than anybody else, and hides behind cynicism. Towers and Moira have a diffident sort of love affair that can never be consummated because of Towers' loyalty to his dead wife back in America. Moira is a wild (and liberated) woman given to mood swings, reckless drinking and partying. She is the most interesting and complex character in the book, and, without Osborne's sheltering cynicism, the most sane, perhaps.

The book closes with a hard-to-bear litany of final bits of business and suicides. Towers scuttles his sub – the US Navy wouldn't want him to leave "a ship like that, full of classified gear, kicking around in another country. Even if there wasn't anybody there" (217). But he has presents for his dead kids on board. John Osborne puts his beloved Ferrari racing car in storage before popping his suicide pills in the drivers' seat. Moira drives to the coast to be as close to Towers as she

can, before taking her own pills. The Holmes family mothball their clothes and tidy up their house – "Remember to turn off the electricity at the main... I mean, mice can chew through a cable and set the house on fire" (259) – before delivering a lethal injection to their baby and going to bed.

It is a tough, unforgiving book. Mainstream writers venturing into end-of-the-world sf, from George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949) to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), seem to give their readers a harder time than genre writers. In *Beach* there is no comforting million-year-hence distance, as in Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895); there is no hint of escape, of a struggle for life continuing in a post-apocalyptic future, as in say Miller's *A Canticle For Leibowitz* (1960). Here there is only the reality of death.

Although *On the Beach* is Shute's most famous book, it is actually untypical, and deliberately so. As with *Corbetts*, the tale is told very directly: there is no narrative frame, for there is no 'after' in which the story can be told. There is no questing journey, save the submarine's pointless jaunt to America. And, significantly, there are no Christian allegories or symbols; there is no hint of any consolation, nothing but the people and their dismal terminal beach. It must have been very shocking for Shute's readers; *Beach* is almost anti-Shute.

As an Awful Warning *Beach* was forward-looking; it would be decades before Carl Sagan and others promulgated the idea of 'nuclear winter', the global climatic and ecological catastrophe that would likely follow a major nuclear exchange. Shute didn't blame individuals but society at large for its nuclear folly: 'The only possible hope would have been to educate them [the masses] out of their silliness' (258), which was perhaps the book's purpose. And the warning was effective. Shute's biographer claims that the novel and the movie spurred anti-nuclear-weapon sentiments.

But the subtext of this novel about nuclear war is of course how we cope with the certainty of individual death. As Moira says, "None of us really believe it's ever going to happen – not to us. Everybody's crazy on that point, one way or another" (100).

The stoicism of Shute's characters in the face of extermination offended some readers, and viewers of the movie. Peter Nicholls, in his review in *Clute and Nicholls* (of a movie in which he appeared as an extra), said, "[The movie] has not weathered well; seen today it appears slow, mawkish, ludicrously stiff-upper-lip, and unrealistic in a sanitised way: no riots, no looting, just chaps feeling miserable and driving racing cars in a reckless manner."

But it isn't as simple as that, and we should be wary of retrospective judgements. Shute came from a generation which had faced huge emergencies, the world wars, in which British society had not broken down in rioting, looting and the rest, even despite Shute's own predictions in *Corbetts*. To dismiss such

books as this as 'cosy catastrophes' seems unfair. Shute's generation may not *actually* have behaved this way in the face of the ultimate catastrophe, but in books like *On the Beach* we glimpse how at least some of them *imagined* they would behave.

And Shute had, after all, been shaped by the First World War. He says of his later schooldays, after the death of his brother Fred in 1915, "I don't think I had the slightest interest in a career or any adult life; I was born to one end, which was to go into the army and do the best I could before being killed. The time at school was a time for contemplation of the realities that were coming and for spiritual preparation for death..." (*Slide Rule*, 24). This stoical bleakness, astonishing for a schoolboy, found expression in the calm acceptance of Shute's characters in *On the Beach*.

In the end there is something uplifting about it all. When Moira says, 'If what they say is right, we're none of us going to have time to do all that we planned to do. But we can keep on doing it as long as we can' (175), genre readers might be reminded of the epilogue of Wells's *The Time Machine*, when the narrator describes how the Time Traveller regarded "the growing pile of civilisation [as] ...only as a foolish heaping which must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so."

Shute didn't expect his 'serious' books to be big hits, but *Beach* was his widest success to date. And in 1959 *Beach* was famously filmed by Stanley Kramer. The movie captures the mood, though the characters are generally given different endings: Towers, stoutly played by Gregory Peck, says goodbye to Moira (implausibly played by an ageing Ava Gardner) in order to take his machine to sea, not for duty but so its American crew can get as close to home as possible. Osborne, also played by a too-old actor in Fred Astaire, doesn't preserve his car but uses it to gas himself with carbon monoxide. This sort of change infuriated Shute (Smith, 140). The pace is slow, and maybe the jutting-jaw stoicism is easier to swallow on the page than on the screen. Though some scenes work very well, in general the book is better than the movie.

After *On the Beach*, Shute wrote two more novels. In both, he nostalgically reverted to the themes of his earlier life. *The Rainbow and the Rose* (1958) is another tale of a post-WWI stranded airman, whose tangled life story is told through dreaming 'flashbacks' by a pilot struggling to rescue him from a plane crash. The book's best section is a telegraphic memoir of a WWI aviator: "The fun of that early summer, and the laughter, and the deaths" (85). *Trustee from the Toolroom* (1960), more deeply nostalgic yet, opens in the very house in Ealing where Shute grew up. A semi-retired engineer, making model engines in his basement workshop, takes on a typical Shute quest to travel around the world to retrieve his dead sister's fortune, aided by a global network of Shute-like middle-aged engineers.

Shute suffered a stroke in the course of writing this last book. He died, in January 1960, before it was published. However, he was working on a more ambitious novel. A return to his mystical side, it would have concerned a Second Coming in the Australian outback.

#### CONCLUSIONS

By the time he died, Shute was a popular bestseller, with several of his books filmed. He is certainly remembered fondly by my parents' generation. And as another engineer-of-a-sort turned writer, I suppose I'm drawn to Shute, though my accomplishments in engineering hardly compare to his. As it happens, the Farnborough establishment of *No Highways* sponsored my own research into aircraft acoustics a few decades later, and when I later read Shute's books I was able to recognise the type of Shute's intense, unworldly civil service researcher.

Shute's works are strong on characterisation if less so on action; his sense of humanity was always deep, and his narrative skill seamless. Always a strongly moral writer, he was prone to use Christian symbolism to add mythic depth to what on the surface could appear mundane tales. Sometimes his writings seem stereotypical of a middle-class Protestant of his times – they can preach, though never directly – but their uplifting nature won him great popularity. And in his stories of war and its aftermath Shute developed his most characteristic story-telling technique, of great upheavals folding down into small lives, of personal quests made epic by the context and character of their protagonists, and of goodness achieved through conscientious work.

Regarding his methods, he was distrustful of literary establishments; he was a self-avowed popular writer. He told an Australian Rotary club in 1951 (Smith, 100) that his books were built on four foundations: information, love, heroism, and a happy ending. It's a simple exercise to see how most of his novels tick all four of these boxes. It even works for *On the Beach*; the ending is about as happy as it can be, as all the lead characters at least control their own demises, rather than succumbing to the radiation.

As for his raw material Shute's work was full of the stuff of his own life, the planes and boats and engineers, the Australian settings. Gary K. Wolfe's interesting essay in *Vector* 249 ('Framing the Unframeable') is a discussion of "the complex and often inchoate relationship between the stuff



of an author's life and the stuff of his or her fiction". This relationship is strong with Shute, and his books serve as an insight into the mindset of the early and mid twentieth century. Perhaps for its very specificity, though, Shute's work lacks the universality and timelessness of truly great fiction.

The one recurrent element in his work which does not have an obvious root in Shute's own life is his use of 'flashbacks', mental transference in time, which may derive from the work of J.W. Dunne, perhaps via the stories of Algernon Blackwood. A deeper investigation into the influences and context of Shute's interest in 'dreaming time travel' is recommended.

Shute's huge popularity ensured that his works of sf probably reached more readers than any genre novelist of his time – even if they didn't know they were reading sf, and the author may not have recognised it either – and

therefore surely shaped the perception of and reaction to the literature.

But despite this, just as Nevil Shute is generally neglected by students of mainstream fiction of the period (Smith, 153), so he is not necessarily treasured by historians of our genre. His name doesn't appear in the indices, for example, of Paul Kincaid's *A Very British Genre* (BSFA, 1995) or Adam Roberts' *A History of Science Fiction* (Palgrave, 2006), though as noted earlier he has an entry in Clute and Nicholls and is mentioned in Aldiss's survey. (Also Gary K Wolfe used *Beach*, "deservedly classic", as a point of reference in a recent review of McCarthy's *The Road* (*Locus*, December 2006).)

Of course Shute himself would not have described his books as sf. From the beginning of his career Shute had been fascinated by the social and technological transitions he saw around him, which naturally led him to project some of his work into the future. His tales could be simply told depictions of possible futures deriving from technological developments (*What Happened to the Corbetts*, *No Highway*, *On the Beach*) or could be told through his 'flashback' mechanisms (*An Old*

*Captivity*, *In the Wet*). But Shute was isolated from the genre and its traditions. I've seen no record of him reading any sf, save only Blackwood; he seems to have discovered this mode of storytelling for himself, driven by the logic of his own concerns.

But Shute's work is of enduring interest precisely because of his isolation. I have argued elsewhere ('Children of the Urban Singularity: The Industrial

Landscape of Britain and the Science Fiction Imagination', *Foundation* 98) that the early twentieth century saw such extraordinary upheaval and change that it's a surprise that sf was not the default literature of the age. Shute is a prime example of the argument that if sf had not already existed, it would have been necessary to invent it; for Nevil Shute seems to have done exactly that for himself.

#### ENDNOTES:

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*So Disdained*, Cassell 1928.  
*Lonely Road*, Heinemann 1932.  
*Ruined City*, Cassell, 1938.  
*What Happened to the Corbetts*, Heinemann 1939.  
*An Old Captivity*, Heinemann 1940. Page numbers from the 1965 Pan edition.  
*Landfall*, Heinemann 1940. Page numbers from the 1962 Pan edition.  
*Pied Piper*, Heinemann 1942.  
*Most Secret*, Heinemann 1942.  
*Pastoral*, Heinemann 1944.  
*The Chequer Board*, Heinemann 1947.  
*No Highway*, Heinemann 1948.  
*A Town Like Alice*, Heinemann 1950.  
*Round the Bend*, Heinemann 1951. Page numbers from the 1968 Pan edition.  
*The Far Country*, Heinemann 1952. Page numbers from the 1967 Pan edition.  
*In the Wet*, Heinemann 1953. Page numbers from the 1953 Ballantine edition.  
*Requiem for a Wren*, Heinemann 1955.  
*Beyond the Black Stump*, Heinemann 1956.  
*On the Beach*, Heinemann 1957. Page numbers from the 1966 Pan edition.  
*The Rainbow and the Rose*, Heinemann 1958. Page numbers from the 1973 Pan edition.  
*Trustee from the Toolroom*, Heinemann 1960.  
*Stephen Morris*, Heinemann 1961.

#### Autobiography:

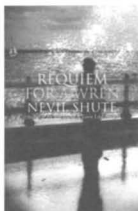
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- Julian Smith, *Nevil Shute*, Twayne Publishers 1976.  
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# The Human as Alien

by  
Ken  
MacLeod

The business of writing often begins with days of staring miserably at a blank screen or a smudged sheet of paper with a few pathetic scrawls on it. Well, it does for me, and I imagine it does for many other writers. And then, when the story comes into shape, we spend weeks and months bashing away at a keyboard. And what do we produce? Mainstream fiction writers produce stories of things that never happened. Science fiction writers produce stories not only of that but of things that never will happen. Why do we do it? What's the point of it? What good does it do?

At the Edinburgh Book Festival earlier this year I was on a panel with Charlie Stross, and he did a very impressive Charlie-style riff on how sf is actually the agitprop department of an early 20th-century totalitarian movement that never made the big time with the flags and uniforms and revolvers and never got a mound of skulls to call its own. Technocracy, the movement in question, has dwindled to a handful of old men in Oregon, busy putting the *Northwest Technocrat* on the Web after decades of cyclostyling, but sf soldiers on. It's as if collectivization and the Five-Year Plan had never happened but there was this genre, socialist realism – SR – that kept going on and on and on about tractors.

Now as it happens, a few days earlier I'd been at the Book Festival interview with Lewis Wolpert, who was plugging his latest, *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast*. One of the many things Professor Wolpert said that struck me as interesting was "Causal belief is what makes us human". And, he said, an understanding of cause and effect is itself a cause and a consequence of tool-making. Now that is one of the most distinctively human activities of all. As Douglas Adams put it, for all the rest of you out there, the trick is to bang the rocks together. Whatever may be said for the tool-making abilities and causal cognitions of African Grey parrots, New Caledonian crows, octopuses, and your cat – not to mention the dreaded six-fingered opposable-thumbed moggies that Leslie Fish is supposedly breeding to have a back-up race that shall rule the seavagram and do all the technocratic stuff in case the human race snuffs it – the fact of the matter is that humans have this ability and this cognition in a way and to an extent that no other species on Earth has.

More importantly, in humans the ability is cumulative, it's self-critical, it's a runaway feedback, it's progressive, and the chains of cause and effect are indefinitely extendable. We build on the work of previous generations, and when we don't we build on their ruins. I mean, I really hope I don't need to labour the point that there's a qualitative difference between a beaver dam and the Hoover Dam. You can make all the claims you like about how intelligence is required by the beaver, but the Hoover Dam or a watermill for that matter is a product of something more. It's what Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen call extelligence. We have it in spades.

So what I was thinking as I was listening to Charlie hold forth so plausibly and amusingly on sf as the pamphleteering of Technocracy was: No! Science fiction is far more significant than that! Let's not sell ourselves

short, especially not in front of a Book Festival audience. In fact, let's make the most extreme claim we can think of for science fiction. And my candidate for the most extreme claim is this:

Science fiction is the first human literature.

What I mean is that science fiction is the first literature that is primarily about what is most distinctively human, in the sense I've just described. Not to be too disparaging of mainstream literature, but the mainstream is mostly about things we share with other animals – love and hate, war and peace, dominance hierarchies, sex and violence. Science fiction of course includes these, but they are not what it's about. It's a literature of causality, a literature of consequence, a literature of human activity and human agency. It's not primarily about science and technology, but about "if... then". A literature of "what if...?" and "what about...?" and "suppose..." and "if this goes on..."

And it goes about it in a particular and distinctive way, which is itself tool-using and problem-solving, a hands-on can-do approach to the universe, which is why sf's impulse can be mistaken for technocratic, and why it is not mistaken to call it American. "In the beginning all the world was America," John Locke said – a new world, and in the end it is all a new world still. If the basic attitude of science is, to quote Douglas Adams again, that "any idea is there to be attacked", the basic attitude of science fiction is that any problem is there to be fixed. If it deals with a problem that can't be fixed, that is almost always seen within the story as a defeat, a failing, a crushing even – but not as a tragedy or an inevitability or, God help us, a *vindication* of the story's philosophical premises about the nature of existence. If the problem can't be solved it's because we got the chains of causation wrong, we had mistaken causal beliefs, or the problem was so big it simply overwhelmed us. Better understanding or greater power could, in principle, have overcome it.

I would suggest, by the way, that this is the real distinction between on the one hand sf and on the other mainstream literature set in the future or on other planets or about technological developments and scientific discoveries. Every sf reader knows, I think, the disappointment, the sense of something missing, when they read a novel like that, usually about clones. Some chromosome hasn't been copied correctly. It's not the material, it's the attitude to the material. Margaret Atwood could write about talking squids in outer space and still not be writing sf. So I don't resent that defensive response, that cloud of squid ink as they jet away, from mainstream writers as much as I used to. We have to acknowledge that yes, they aren't writing sf and they are across the road from our gutter, coming from somewhere else and going somewhere else.

(As another aside, it may be that the same attitude prevails in certain other genres such as crime fiction and sea adventure stories, which may explain why they are popular with sf readers.)

Now, I need to make some caveats here. There's a danger of that attitude slipping into a sort of glib optimism about personal and social problems, a danger that has been quite rightly highlighted by Mike

Harrison. Come to think of it, there's a danger of that attitude slipping into glibness in general, in a way that is damaging to serious thinking about serious problems, a danger highlighted by the Mundane sf school, and memorably by Geoff Ryman tearing a strip off an inoffensive and bewildered American rocket entrepreneur and would-be space colonist at the Glasgow Worldcon.

But having said that word of caution I will now throw caution to the winds and emphasise how radical and new the sf attitude is. For thousands of years literature has shown us man as a fallen creature, man as a rational animal, man as a political animal – all those definitions handed down to us from the philosophies and scriptures of antiquity. It's just over two hundred years since Benjamin Franklin said that man is a tool-making animal, a definition that Marx quoted approvingly in *Capital*. It took the Industrial Revolution to make Franklin's claim not just credible but obvious. And it's less than a hundred years since Hugo Gernsback smashed together some already existing genres – scientific romances and air adventure stories and future war stories and so on – and created a literature that takes seriously Franklin's definition of the human.

And by doing that, it actually changes human beings' conception of themselves. One of the first things we learn, back at the bash the rocks together stage, is that the changes we make in the world change us. This applies to our literary and imaginative productions too. Patrick Nielsen Hayden is quoted in the current *Analog* [232, November 2006] as explaining reading to the *Wired* generation by saying: "The book is the source code, the brain is the compiler, and the experience produced in the reader is the executable."

What, then, is the effect of science fiction on the reader? By focusing on humanity as *homo faber*, man the maker, it implicitly downgrades all distinctions between human beings that are irrelevant to that capacity: those of nation, race, sex, religion and class origin. Class as a position within the production process can be relevant, as can the relationship of that process to the rest of society and to the rest of nature, and these all figure in sf – hence all those engineers and entrepreneurs harried by bureaucrats or mobs.

At a party recently, a former sf fan told me about how sf had affected her life. She was, she said, a happy child until the age of nine, when her family moved to a town where the first question she was asked by the first kids she met was: "Are you a Protestant or a Catholic?"

She didn't know, so she went home to ask her mother. Back she came to the park with the answer: "We're Christians." This was the wrong answer. Around about this time she discovered 1950s sf, and she soon figured out that although much of it was ostensibly about aliens, it was really about black people and white people and women and men. And it gave her the hope, she said, that somewhere in the world we could be free of all this bigotry.

I found her story quite moving, and quite salutary, in that it shows how sf with all its failings and blind spots can still be a force for good. In my experience, both personally and in years of talking to other sf readers and fans, I think the reading of sf instils a certain ideology. It's not at all difficult to identify what that ideology is. It's humanism, Jim, but not as we know it. It's often favourable to various opposed kinds of universalist politics – liberal or libertarian, socialist, even conservative – but seldom to identity politics or nationalist politics. (In fact, where it is nationalist it pretends to be universalist.) It sees humanity as potentially united in the face of an indifferent or hostile universe. It's not friendly to religious fundamentalism of any kind, though it's open to religious belief and indeed to piety, as witness the novels of Orson Scott Card and Gene Wolfe. I suppose it would be possible to write scientific creationist science fiction – sci-cre sci-fi! – but it's hard to imagine, let alone to imagine its being any good. Likewise it's hard to imagine explicitly racist sf: the notorious exception, *The Turner Diaries*, is utterly marginal.

Finally, and I want to make this point particularly to this audience, I've found that sf fandom by and large really does reflect the attitudes I've described here. It's what makes fans such good people and such interesting company! There is much more to be done, of course, in terms of broadening sf fandom and making it more open. There is even more to be done in terms of developing the potential of a great literature that, I have argued, we see the beginnings of in sf. But if these things are done, they will be better done if they, too, are done consciously – and that means with an understanding of what sf already does right.

*Ken Macleod was Guest of Honour at Novacon 36 (Walsall, November 2006), where the above talk was delivered. His most recent novel, Learning the World, was shortlisted for the BSFA, Arthur C. Clarke, and Hugo Awards. His next novel is The Execution Channel (Orbit, April 2007).*

**Advertisement:** As you're probably aware, late last year Pat McMurray stepped down from the post of Committee Chair of the BSFA, and I took his place, pending formal ratification at the AGM. More formal thanks will follow at some point, I'm sure, but we're all grateful to him for the work he (and his fiancée, Julie) did.

In order to carry out my duties as Chair effectively, I will be stepping down as Production Editor of Vector as soon as a suitable replacement can be found. So, this is an advertisement.

Vector's Production Editor is required to collect copy from the features and reviews editors (an ability to enforce deadlines is useful, although actual physical violence tends to be discouraged), lay it out to the magazine template, and deliver it in electronic (Postscript) format to the printers. The production cycle is bimonthly, and the time available for layout is usually two weeks.

If you're interested, please contact me for further details at [vector.production@gmail.com](mailto:vector.production@gmail.com). – **Tony Cullen**

## Stephen Baxter's *Resplendent: Destiny's Children Book Four* as case study.

by  
Adam Roberts

Stephen Baxter's *Resplendent* (London: Orion 2006) adds a fourth volume to his *Destiny's Children* trilogy (*Coalescent*, 2003, *Exultant*, 2004 and *Transcendent*, 2005). What is added is not a novel, but a fix-up of eighteen previously-published short stories (plus one new one) arranged along a timeline from AD 5301 to AD 1,000,000 and illuminating various moments along Baxter's Xeelee future-history. And very good it is too: my review in *Strange Horizons* concluded with this judgment:

Baxter's Xeelee sequence is now so rich a megatext, so compelling a recapitulation of his own fascinations and of Hard sf itself, that each new addition to its canon resonates splendidly. If you've a taste for the strong black coffee of sense-of-wonder, inventive, hard-ish space-operaic and sweeping writing, then this is the very best Italian aromatic blend that money can buy. Very strongly recommended.

But for the moment I'm interested not so much in a value-judgment of Baxter's latest as in the larger question of the place of the 'fix-up' in science fiction as a whole. There's something important here, I think; and I want to argue the case using *Resplendent* as a case-study.

Of course for some any use of the term 'fix-up' sounds like dispraise: a hangover from the cheap publishing tactics of the Pulp days, an attempt to sell a bunch of stories to various magazines and then sell them again by slapping them between hard covers. It could be argued that fix-ups straddle a shift in the publishing history of the genre, from an age when the short story was the dominant form of written sf to the present age when full-length novels are the Boss. This is what The Indispensable (as I like to call Clute and Nicholls' *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*) has to say on the subject:

A term first used by A.E. van Vogt to describe a book made up of previously published stories fitted together – usually with the addition of newly written or published cementing material – so that they read as a novel. ... an example is van Vogt's own *The Weapon Shops of Isher* (fixup 1951). ... We do recognize that when we call such a text a fixup we are making a critical judgment as to the internal nature – the feel – of that text. We should perhaps emphasize, therefore, that the term is not, for us, derogatory. In fact, the fixup form may arguably be ideal for tales of epic sweep through time and space. It is perhaps no accident that Robert A Heinlein's seminal Generation-Ship tale, 'Universe' (1941), ultimately became part of *Orphans of the Sky* (fixup 1963 UK).

It is in part Clute and Nicholls' embracing of the term that has kept it fresh in the critical vocabulary of sf studies. But where some people like them, others find

them hateful; and it's hard to deny that sf fix-ups, from Asimov's *Foundation* to Charles Stross's *Accelerando*, tend to be idea-dense, narratively wide-ranging but rather fragmented and juddery reading experiences. There are readers who prefer the smoother finish of a properly planned-and-executed novel. But I, for one, think that Clute and Nicholls are right to praise the pulp possibilities of the fix-up. Indeed, I'd go further; a fix-up like Baxter's *Resplendent* articulates some of the key dynamics of science fiction itself.

*Destiny's Children* has, as a sequence, revisited and fleshed out Baxter's 'Xeelee' future history, which in the quickest of quick summaries goes as follows: humankind is conquered by the alien Qax, from whom they obtain an immortality treatment that allows certain individuals to live for millions of years (they're called 'Pharaohs', and one of them is the one character who oversees all the stories in *Resplendent*). After throwing off the Qax yoke humans spread through the galaxy, fighting a drawn-out war with another alien race, the 'Ghosts'. Eventually humanity becomes the galaxy's dominant species, with a single exception: the godlike and mysterious Xeelee. War is inevitable and lasts many hundreds of thousands of years. We chase them out of their fortress at the heart of the galaxy, but our victory, over time, turns to inevitable defeat. Many of Baxter's novels fill in details of this timeline. The first *Destiny's Children* novel introduced a new twist, the 'Coalescents' of the book's title: an evolutionary development of humanity into hive-like forms. The second, *Exultant*, dramatised the means by which individual humans became so efficiently subordinated into the needs of the Army as to become nothing more than cells in a leviathan. And *Transcendent* dramatised the choice between humanity and group-godhood. All three books are about individuality versus unity, through family, society, and religion, respectively.

In *Resplendent*, the stories all riff on the tension between alienated individuality and collaborative or symbiotic coalescence. On the one hand are many individual human characters, and the fragmented overarching form of *Resplendent*-as-fix-up; on the other hand are the various collaborative or unified creatures, and the whole-sight vision of Baxter's future history, something that can be apprehended as a single unity (as one character puts it: "in configuration space all the moments that comprise our history exist simultaneously", p.62). The ghosts are collective creatures, "a community of symbiotic creatures, an autarky" (p.105); humans are fiercely individualistic. But at the same time, to defeat the ghosts, humans must subordinate their individual urges to the collective good; for instance to sacrifice themselves in battle. Baxter's coalescent hive-humans, and his immortal Pharaoh humans, stand as the twin emblems of this principle of aggregation. The hives aggregate spatially, and the pharaohs aggregate across time. In both instances Baxter is trying to find a way of connecting the particular and the general, the atom and the whole-vision. The very 'bitty-ness' of the fix-up form becomes



Liebniz's Fix-Ups

part of its point, as a formal articulation of the underlying separation out of which the wholeness is construed.

In other words, the many stories in this book precisely dramatise the formal logic of the fix-up: the tension between an atomised and a unified vision of things. This is, at root, a philosophic question; something of which Baxter is perfectly well aware. His characters Reth Cana and Gemo debate it in one of the best of the stories in *Resplendent*, 'Reality Dust':

"There is no time," he whispered. "There is no space. This is the resolution of an ancient debate – do we live in a universe of perpetual change, or a universe where neither time nor motion exist? Now we understand. We know we live in a universe of static shapes. Nothing exists but the particles that make up the universe – that make up us. Do you see? And we can measure nothing but the separation between those particles. Imagine a universe of a single elementary particle, an electron for perhaps. Then there could be no space. For space is only the separation between particles. Time is only the measurement of changes in that separation. So there could be no time. Imagine now a universe consisting of two particles..." (60)

This notion, "space is only the separation between particles", Baxter credits to "an ancient philosopher. Mach, or Mar-que" (which is to say, Ernst Mach, 1838–1916). But Mach elaborated what was a basically Leibnizian understanding of spacetime: that it is purely relational.

'Reality Dust' is a story that connects Earth in AD 5408 and a strange delocalised island set in a black sea of entropy and made out of a weird dust. By the end of the story we understand that this island is to be found not so much in another dimension as in a superdimension that sums all the others; that its dust is the 'reality dust' of the tale's title. To return to Reth and Gemo's conversation: with two particles it is possible to have separation, and time.

Reth bent and, with one finger, scattered a line of dark dust grains across the floor. "Let each dust grain represent a distance – a configuration in my miniature two-particle cosmos. Each grain is labelled with a single number: the separation between the two particles" He stabbed his finger into the line, picking out grains. "Here the particles are a metre apart; here a micron; here a light year ... this diagram of dust shows all that is important about the underlying universe." (61)

Of course, this is a simplified two-dimensional model. In our space "of stupendously many dimensions" the reality dust is prodigiously multiple, filling 'configuration space'.

What 'reality dust' represents, in fact, is the Leibnizian monad. Indeed, this should ring a bell. *Exultant* concerns, in part, ancient consciousnesses, 'minds from the dawn of time' that play a key part in humankind's capture of the Galactic core: Baxter names these beings 'monads'.

So what are monads? Gottfried Leibniz wrote at a time when the fundamental nature of the spacetime was the subject of intense philosophical scrutiny. What is the core stuff out of which everything around us is made? What can we break down the universe into? Some Ancient Greeks had suggested that everything is 'really' one thing, material atoms, aggregated into very many various arrangements. Descartes, on the other hand, argued that everything is 'really' two things, one he called matter and the other he called spirit or soul: hence 'Cartesian dualism' (strictly speaking, he argued that reality is three things: matter, soul and God; but then again, strictly, he didn't think the last of these was part of our 'reality' in the way the other two are). But many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers were unhappy with this. If matter and soul are radically different things, as Descartes believed them to be, how could they possibly interact? Spinoza suggested that the cosmos was 'really' one thing, which he fence-sittingly called "God, or Nature". Everything we can see, all the chairs and tables, people and animals, are actually just inflections or aspects of this underlying reality.

But Leibniz was not persuaded by this explanation. For if everything is actually just modalities of one underlying substance, then how could anything be different to anything else? How could there be motion or change, or (if we are just nodules of God poking through) how could we have free will? Now, Leibniz did believe in God as the ground for the very possibility of existence, but he also wanted to find a way of theorising mutability in the cosmos. His solution was monads: an infinite number of simple, immaterial and indestructible units out of which reality is constructed (in fact it would be more accurate to say that the 'reality' we all inhabit is a function of the interaction of these fundamental spiritual atoms).

Leibniz's system is often dismissed as too baroquely complex to be meaningful (Bertrand Russell called it a fairy tale, an internally-consistent but impossible piece of fantasy world-building). But there are times when Leibniz comes across as remarkably modern. So, for instance, he conducted a lengthy debate with his contemporary Newton over whether there was such a thing as "absolute space and time". Newton thought there was. Leibniz, like Einstein after him, thought not. According to Leibniz, and also to Mach, there are only relative relationships between things. Everything depended on the position from which you observe it:

Motion indeed does not depend upon being observed; but it does depend on its being possible to be observed. There is no motion where there is no change that can be observed. And when there is no change that can be observed, there is no change at all. (quoted in Nicholas Jolley's *Leibniz* [Routledge 2005], p.86)

Leibniz's monads not only constitute but also (each, individually) recapitulate the entire cosmos. This is the 59th paragraph of Leibniz's *Monadology* (1714):

This connection of adaptation of all created things with each, and of each with all the rest, means that each simple substance has relations which express all the others; and that consequently it is a perpetual living mirror of the universe... it is as if there were as many different universes, which are however but different perspectives of a single universe in accordance with the different points of view of each monad.

It's in these senses, I'd argue, that we can start to think of science fiction as a properly Leibnizian genre, and the fix-up in particular a deeply 'monadic' mode of literature.

So: to step from the analysis of the material substratum of the actual universe to the definition of science fiction, and to distinguish between 'realist' fiction and sf. The former tells stories and describes a world. Realist novels depend upon our connecting their stories to this one cosmos, the one we inhabit. sf, on the other hand, delights in the promiscuous creation of a boundless number of *alternate* worlds and inflections of our world: future realities, alternate presents and pasts. Of course, if these sfal different-realities had no point of connection to our world they would struggle to interest us; whilst if they simply replicated our world then they would be Realist works. In a textual sense this is the 'substance' dilemma over which the antique philosophers struggled; and the answer, in textual terms, lies in a Leibnizian monadology. Each sfal reality has its own discrete existence; but at the same time each acts as a "perpetual living mirror of the [textual] universe", reflecting and embodying the megatext we call 'science fiction'. So Baxter's Xeelee cosmos is its own thing, and simultaneously a thing filled with echoes and intertextual references to the whole backlist of science fiction.

There are several senses in which a book like *Resplendent* makes this plain. Each story, for instance, contains enough information about Baxter's overarching story (who the Silver Ghosts are, what a spline ship is, how humanity managed to defeat so imposing an enemy as the Xeelee) that a first-time reader coming across the tale as a standalone would be able to understand it. To read the tales in sequence is to clatter across these repeated explanations over and over, like driving across a cattle grid; but that's a necessary part of the fact that each story must *both* stand alone and reflect the whole narrative. And there's another sense in which each story functions as a monadic mirror. Take for example the story 'Ghost Wars' (2006). The set-up is this: humanity has suffered a setback in its war against the Silver Ghosts; a 'Black Ghost' has come to power and is organising the millions of silver globes. A team of humans must assassinate the leader. This tale works excellently as space-opera in its own right, but also resonates with memories of other sf: the Ghosts like less-malign, more emotionless Daleks, the Black Ghost a sort of Emperor-Dalek, the adventure high and thrilling. It is a story simultaneously distinctively Baxterian, and reminiscent of Heinlein or Niven, Doc Smith or Doctor

Who. In sf all individual texts have this relationship: some are more and some less original, but all relate intertextually, to and recapitulate, the rich backlist of the genre as a whole.

I sometimes wonder whether, as with Isaiah Berlin's celebrated distinction between hedgehogs and foxes, sf writers as a group tend to divide into two types. On the one hand there is the writer whose individual novels are all different to one another, and who seems to pride him/herself on his ability to fashion a wholly different artefact every time they go back to their word processor. And on the other, there's the author whose novels mostly or even exclusively all relate to some great singular vision – all prickles on the back of the same mighty hedgehog. The list of greats of Hard sf is populated to a disproportionate degree with such hedgehogs: Asimov; Heinlein; Niven; Cherryh; Bova; Clarke (all those sequels to 2001). Reynolds. Baxter himself clearly belongs to this group. It's not clear to me why it should be the case, but the fact is that sf fans patently love this sort of story. Each additional book gives you a new story *and* the satisfactions of filling in details in the overarching old Story-with-a-capital-S. But it's also a way of asserting an aesthetic unity to the diversity of individual stories; to rely upon a substrate or essence in order to link the various goings-on.

Berlin went on to talk about Tolstoy as a fox who wanted to be a hedgehog; and that's a remark that applies to Baxter too. He is so profligate with good ideas that many of them simply do not fit the bigger picture. If there were an infinite number of stars in the universe then the night sky would be white (for even the interstellar dust would have heated up and would glow). Baxter wants to set a story there. But that's not the universe of his future narrative. But he writes the story anyway ('The Cold Sink'), parcelling it off into a budded-off parallel universe. So many of Baxter's thought-experiments and images, howsoever striking, exist in this separate, monadic way: planets linked by a connecting bridge built from mud bricks ('The Ghost Pit'); or a sentient moss that can stop time ('The Dreaming Mould'); or posthumans living on the event horizon of a black hole ('Between Worlds'). But at the same time each of these monads is made, through the catch-all abilities of the Qax and the Xeelee, to reflect the whole fictional universe.

Baxter's coalescents, his army-aggregations of humanity, the various stories all teeming with originality that are nonetheless subordinated to a larger Narrative – all these things enact the monadology of science fiction itself. So many separate and hermetic realities, one great genre. What better formal embodiment of this than the fix-up?

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# Skin Deep Fiction

Anton  
Marks  
interviewed  
by  
James  
Bacon

Limitations are always self imposed. Even as readers of speculative fiction, although we like to think of ourselves as naturally questioning, we stay in our comfort zones too often. This is what I thought when I picked up and started to read Anton Marks' novel *In the Days of Dread* (2004, X-press). It was not what I would usually consider science fiction, though Marks readily describes it as such, and I fear few readers in the BSFA or abroad will have read it or heard of it.

What was it that grabbed me? Perhaps it was that it was just a bloody good read, a terrific tale set in a dystopian London forty years hence, L-Town, with interesting protagonists – a black man returned from a military tour in South Africa, to be a partner in a high-tech security services business; a beautiful and educated religious woman – whose fates are intertwined. Perhaps it was the political intrigue, or the action. Or perhaps it was the realisation that as a white pseudo-middle-class science fiction reader, I was reading something that I didn't think existed, and recognised how special it was, perhaps in an attempt to open my mind further. Religion and political control are central issues throughout the book, and we come to see them in their wider context.

This is the new quandary, perhaps: how do we find sf that may not be published by the imprints we know, as part of the sf genre, yet has much to add to our understanding of what the form is capable of? Sf has always had black writers, from Samuel R. Delany to Octavia E. Butler, as recently discussed by Nisi Shawl in her article in *Vector* 248. But most of them have come from a North American, Afro-Caribbean culture; to discover an equivalent work of black British science fiction was a shock – albeit a good one. And it is perhaps what the genre needs, fresh and different, unrestrained by the legacy and history of the sf we know.

So I tracked down Anton Marks to ask him to talk about his book, and sf in general, in his own words.

**JB: Could you talk a bit about *In the Days of Dread* – what the book is about, and why you wrote it?**

AM: *In the Days of Dread* is based roughly forty years into the future and is my attempt at extrapolating from a black perspective our importance in world history past, present and future. This alternative future has Africa struggling to maintain a Commonwealth of Democratic African States (CDAS); the way of life which is Ras Tafari has bonded with its Christian roots and has become a mainstream religion; racism has become more extreme; technology more advanced; and British society is coming to grips with the economic and cultural power of a united Africa as reflected in its indigenous people of African descent.

Asim Marshal, the main protagonist, has headed a covert military unit set up by the British government to help maintain the CDAS and therefore protecting EEC interests in the continent. He comes home – L-Town is a future slang term for London – after his tour of duty

wanting to be a normal family man again, but his past will not let him rest. He falls in love, is reunited with his daughter and finds passion in something other than violence and chaos. Still he is dogged by his history, and when his loved ones are threatened he has to revert to type and stop the threat at all costs. The idea of an ordinary man, his military training notwithstanding – who has to raise a family, who is looking for love, who is being a son to his parents, a big brother to his sister and a working man – being thrown into an extraordinary situation was a fantastic way to explore Asim and his future.

**JB: Did you set out to write it as science fiction?**

AM: Definitely, but for the science fiction purists out there maybe it wouldn't be classed as such because it doesn't expound on some far-reaching scientific theory. Although I personally feel science fiction has redefined itself so many times a huge variety of stories count. Paraphrasing Wikipedia: if the narrative world differs from our own present or historical reality in at least one significant way it can be considered as science fiction. I wholeheartedly agree. The difference may be technological, cultural, physical, historical, sociological, philosophical or metaphysical – so depending on what definition you subscribe to my novel could be considered futuristic thriller or science fiction. My idea was to simply approach a future world through the eyes of characters that normally have never been given a point of view but are an integral part of the world we live in and will be as long as humankind exists.

**JB: Do you read much science fiction?**

AM: I adore the Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror genres. I remember sitting on my dad's lap as a kid watching films my mom would totally disagree with if she found out. I grew up on this stuff and although I was mainly educated in Jamaica that passion for all things fantastic never diminished. Instead it was coloured by my African and Caribbean influences. My influences are wide and varied but if I was to point to science fiction authors then I would point to Isaac Asimov, Octavia Butler, Frank Herbert, Samuel R. Delany, Arthur C. Clarke, Nalo Hopkinson, Philip K. Dick, Michael Marshall Smith, Tananarive Due and Dean Ing. If we were to go to films then: *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Day of the Triffids*. And the list goes on...

**JB: The novel is published as Black writing. Do you consider Black writing to be a genre in its own right?**

AM: In an ideal world it wouldn't be, but it seems – from the bookstores and publishers' point of view at least – that our experiences are so far removed from those of the white middle class reader that it almost seems to be another genre. That can be a good thing, because I believe the need to find out about who black

people really are is on the increase, where a few years ago it was not considered essential to your existence. You would see all you needed about Africans – in Africa or the Diaspora – through the television and that was good enough then. Times have changed, thankfully, through our efforts in the media, sports, fashion and entertainment. The wider public are realizing we are multi-faceted, multi-dimensional as any other people are and we cannot be slotted into convenient generalizations because we make some people uncomfortable. If readers want to know more and if it makes life easier for them having Black Writing as a genre then I'm all for it.

I feel it is important that readers are aware that the book they have purchased to entertain and challenge them will hopefully do so, but from a black perspective. In some cases that will not be different from the perspective they are familiar with – but then again seeing through the eyes of a science fiction author who grew up in the Sudan, for example, would prepare you for a fresh viewpoint. Science fiction can only be as open-minded as the authors that create these fantastic worlds or characters. Our times reflect our compositions. In the '50s we had no place in the future; Civil Rights and Apartheid were the political realities. Today we are being recognized as part of the great human family and the political realities are quite different, and so our films and books reflect that.

**JB:** *In the Days of Dread* takes quite a bit from black culture, such as Rasta, and uses Africa as an interesting sidebar futuristic setting. To what extent do you feel you are offering something new to readers?

AM: I think any author would feel privileged to be able to bring a new flavour to their readership. What I did with *In the Days of Dread*, bringing all of these elements together to make it the exciting read I hope it is, may never been done before in this way. But it wasn't meant to be contrived, I was simply providing a snapshot of the society forty years hence but from the viewpoints of characters who cared about what was happening in *their* world. And it just so happened that in 'their world' they were concerned about the issues outlined in the novel.

**JB:** The two main settings in the novel, Africa and London, are very vividly realized. Were you conscious of trying to provide an alternative to the standard futures for those settings?

AM: Well, yes. With so many portrayals of the future being realized by some of the great sci-fi visionaries out there, I had to make sure the feel I wanted to portray was not a carbon copy of what had already been done. I was blessed because Africa and the Caribbean had been ignored across most of the popular media so the milieu I constructed was fresh and unique. And, as for London, how many times have you seen our great capitol explored from the viewpoint of black man, especially one in the future?

**JB:** Your portrayal of Africa was rather disconcerting –

where did that future come from?

The state of Africa in the novel was constructed from research and some extrapolation on my part. The Commonwealth of Democratic African States came about because of the Pan African movement. The hope was to unite the continent under one common language, a president, common currency and economics, centralized government etc. If you know anything of Africa's history you know that prospect is a daunting one to say the least, but a dream some of the more forward-thinking leaders cherish dearly. So in *Days of Dread* I made it a reality, where certain African nations grasped the concept and became part of the new state, while a few others fought for isolation. So small civil wars were being fought to bring the dissidents to heel. Africa's present situation had to be reflected on and realistic ways found in my view to turn thing around for such a great and important continent. There was no alien intervention – that could be another tale – no quick fix solutions. For Africa to unite it would be sheer human sacrifice and struggle.

**JB:** You used a number of recognizable places in London such as Shepherds Bush, was there any specific reason for this?

AM: I wanted to carry my readers along with me for the ride and show them parts of London not normally featured in novels: Harlesden, Shepherds Bush etc. When you can blur the lines of reality with a reader, for no matter how short a time, you have their full involvement. You have transported them between the pages. Whether you live in the UK or not, I wanted booklovers to identify with the real London of today and the possible London of the future. Certain landmarks cement that certainty in your psyche that although it is futuristic fiction this can be reality. It adds to the illusion.

**JB:** Did you have any difficulty getting the novel published? And what are you working on now?

AM: It was very difficult, because my publisher had to consider the commercial viability of my work for a market that is very science fiction shy. I'm trying to open up or possibly redefine what my market is, and so with that in mind X-press Publishers are slowly coming around to the idea, particularly due to the great response. So I've promised two books a year, where one will be futuristic based, sci-fi or horror, and the other will be crime fiction. I've already completed another futuristic erotic/thriller called 69 set in the same timeline as *In the Days of Dread* – forty years hence, in L-Town. It will be published in April 2007.

*Note: Anton's website, where you will be able to purchase his books, will be live by March 2007. In the Days of Dread is currently available through X-press <http://www.xpress.co.uk/>, but Anton has said readers should feel free to order from him directly if they would prefer, at [anton.marks@btinternet.com](mailto:anton.marks@btinternet.com). Shipping will be free to BSFA members.*

Last year, as part of the BSFA Awards, members of the society were asked to nominate any written non-fiction work about science fiction and/or fantasy which appeared in its current form in 2006. Based on these nominations, a recommended reading list of five items was compiled and published, consisting of:

The Arthur C. Clarke Award: *A Critical Anthology*, ed. Paul Kincaid with Andrew M. Butler (Scribner Foundation)

Daughters of Earth: *Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Justine Larbalestier (Wesleyan University Press)

Great British Comics, Paul Gravett (Aurum Press Ltd.)

James Tiptree, Jr.: *The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*, Julie Phillips (St. Martin's Press)

Polder: *A Festschrift for John Clute and Judith Clute*, ed. Farah Mendlesohn (Old Earth Books)

For the benefit of new members, this is different to the procedure in previous years. The non-fiction category was first introduced in 2001 as an award voted on by the membership, in the same way as all the other categories. It was suspended for 2004; for 2005, a different approach was piloted, in which nominations were invited as normal, and then a judging panel (of which I was a member) selected a winner and a companion recommended reading list. Criticisms made of the system used for the 2005 award include that it (or at least the way it was implemented) implied that BSFA members at large were not competent to judge a non-fiction award, by implication diminishing the value of the earlier awards; and, from the other end of the spectrum, that recruiting sufficiently knowledgeable judges on an ongoing basis would be difficult if not impossible.

However, the publication of this year's recommended reading list without a single winner generated an equal amount of discussion, about whether the BSFA should continue to have a non-fiction award, and if so what form it could take. Most of the discussion from which this article is drawn took place on the Vector blog, at <http://www.vectoreditors.wordpress.com/>. I largely stayed out of it; you can read my views in this issue's editorial. What follow are the views of a selection of reviewers, critics, and other BSFA members, but further discussion would be more than welcome. This is, I hope, of more than just academic interest -- the BSFA Awards are your awards, so speak up! As ever, letters to Vector should go to [vector.editors@gmail.com](mailto:vector.editors@gmail.com), or the address on the inside cover.

**Paul Kincaid:** I am delighted to discover that *The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Anthology* is on the BSFA Non-Fiction Award recommended reading list. And I'm pleased to see Polder, edited by Farah Mendlesohn, on the list, not least because I'm also in that book. I'm disappointed, however, that no actual award is to be presented in this category. I thoroughly approved of last year's arrangement, in which the award was open to nominations from members but a final winner was chosen by jury. I'm not sure what the reasoning is that has led to no award being presented this year, but I think it is a poor decision.

**Edward James:** I feel guilty about not going to BSFA meetings, or, if I go, not making my voice heard. But as someone who produces, occasionally, sf non-fiction and does not produce science fiction itself, I feel excluded from the organization which I first joined 43 years ago.

Two questions: can we find out why the BSFA abandoned the non-fiction award, and can we restore it? The BSFA, after all, is only the totality of its members, and probably more of its members write about sf than actually write sf, so one would think that a majority of the membership did favour a non-fiction award.

**Adam Roberts:** It certainly seems a bit silly offering a 'recommended reading list' of SF criticism, rather than deciding (via a BSFA vote, or if it's thought that too few members are interested enough in criticism to have read the stuff, by a panel of experts as was done last year) on a title. I assume the intention is to spread the honour around, but I don't think it works that way: a 'recommended reading list' sounds like something your college professor hands to you and insists that you read whether you want it or not; it seems, paradoxically, dispraising rather than praising the works themselves. An award makes sense in that it picks one title that deserves closer attention, or merits celebration. Otherwise the award becomes like a primary school sports day where everybody is given kojak-lollies just for turning up.

My ha'pennoth would be: if the BSFA (I mean members, or committee-on-behalf-of-members) isn't interested enough in sf criticism to decide an award it should stop offering one. Put out an award for TV, cinema, graphic novel instead perhaps. Don't get me wrong: I think this would be a great shame, and that sf criticism is very poorly represented in the awards culture. But that would seem to me more honest.

**Tony Keen:** I think my problem with the Non-Fiction Non-Award is the message that it sends out about criticism: that in the BSFA's opinion writing about sf really isn't that important, and doesn't warrant a proper award. Of course, actual original sf creation is always going to be more important than the secondary activity of writing about that creation. But nevertheless, good criticism is important, and I feel that part of the mission of the BSFA is promoting good criticism -- that is, after all, why Vector exists in its current form. Now, one can say that the recommended reading list does promote non-fiction, and I suppose it does for someone who has time to read all five. But what of someone who doesn't? One of the functions of the best novel award is the BSFA as a group saying, "if you're only going to read one novel this year, we think it should be this". Now the Association is not going to do this for non-fiction. Given, as Adam rightly observes, criticism is not overly supplied with awards, for the BSFA to pull back in this fashion seems to me to be a retrograde step.

**Graham Sleight:** Tony, a few disagreements. I think there are a number of problems built into the non-fiction



award as it has stood for the last couple of years, and can't easily see how they could be resolved. First, it tends to privilege book-length over essay-length (and essay-length over review-length) stuff. This is, historically, a field where a disproportionate amount of critical work gets done in reviews; how are you going to reward that? (Example: I think David Langford is terribly undervalued as a reviewer – as opposed to a fan writer – and I can't see anything in the current set-up that would unpick that.) Second, I think comparing stuff written within the protocols of academic writing and the world at large is not exactly apples and oranges but certainly very difficult. And third, as I understand it, the non-fiction award currently (and has always?) excluded stuff published in *Vector* and *Matrix*, which is a pretty big gap – Gary Wolfe's piece in *Vector* 249, for instance, is one of the best I've read anywhere in the last year. (Full disclosure, of course – I'm a reviewer/essayist, but not yet a book author; I have essays in two of the recommended books; and I'm editor-in-waiting of *Foundation*.)

The solution may be, therefore, to have a UK sf-related non-fiction award run by a body other than the BSFA, and divided into short- and long-form. But I still don't see how you get round the academic/non-academic divide. I think a recommended reading list is probably the least-bad solution to that right now.

**Martin McGrath:** I think it's interesting that the change to the non-fiction award is attracting so much attention and argument when the fact, as I understand it, is that one reason for the change is that there was so little interest in the award as it was previously run. And while I agree with the current proscription against nominations for BSFA-published material in the ballot, if I am anything like the average BSFA member it does prevent me nominating a significant proportion of the sf criticism I read each year. Which, I guess, acts as a further restriction on the award for many BSFA members. Personally I quite liked the idea of a 'mixed economy' approach to this award – either a judged award based on nominations received from members, or a member-voted award based on a recommended shortlist from a panel.

**Tony Keen:** My problem with Graham's argument is that whilst all voting systems are imperfect, that isn't a reason for getting rid of them. Yes, the non-fiction award will always favour books over articles and reviews. The Recommended Reading list, 100% books, doesn't address that, and the problem can't be got round without either splitting the award, or removing any input from the membership. Yes, it's difficult to compare the academic and non-academic. And yes, it's a pain that BSFA-published material is excluded, but propriety rather demands such a clause.

None of these seem to me to be arguments for not having an award. Similar problems exist with the other categories. It's much easier for a 300-page Jon Courtenay Grimwood novel to get nominated than an 1100-page

Thomas Pynchon one, for reasons that have nothing to do with which is the better work. When the final voting comes round, those short stories available online have an advantage over the others that again has nothing to do with their actual quality. And how easy is it really to compare the work of, say, Iain Banks and Christopher Priest?

I may be misreading him, but Graham's argument seems to boil down to it being better that no non-fiction be recognised with an award than that the wrong piece of non-fiction be so recognized. I reject that argument, not least because few would dream of employing it in reference to the other categories.

**Andrew M. Butler:** The exclusion of the materials published by BSFA came about, as I recall, from the year that the cover of *Omegatropic* won best artwork and best non-fiction book. There was muttering, in some quarters, that nepotism or home team advantage came into play – which both risked bringing the award into disrepute and hurt the feelings of some of those involved in producing the material. I was only ever short-listed for one of the Pocket Essentials – the same year as *Omegatropic* – but my instinct since then would have been to decline the nomination whilst I was directly involved in the BSFA. In most competitions, employees of the company running it are forbidden from entering.

On a judged award, we're dealing with a small pond here – I'm in two of the shortlisted books, and am credited for one of those. My guess is that the two books have about half a dozen contributors in common. Adam and I are working on two books (along with two other editors) with overlapping contributors, some of whom are active reviewers, and/or the sort of person you'd think to ask to be a judge for a non-fiction award. A lot of us are mates or hang out or at least have a grudging respect for each other. I can't think of a mechanism that would allow the BSFA (or the Science Fiction Foundation, which my gut suggests would be a more natural home) to come up with informed judges who would not be open to idiotic charges of nepotism. It perhaps would also look odd to have two different means of judging the awards.

But a membership award is also difficult, because the cover prices of non-fiction can be prohibitive. Some academic journals are prohibitively expensive (although perhaps a password protected PDF might be made available), and much academic press is worse. Greenwood Press volumes start at £50, and many are probably more expensive. Even with a hardback sf novel at twenty quid, it's reasonable to assume a sufficient sized readership to get an informed popular decision over five novels. Enough people automatically buy the shortlisted novels of the major awards. *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* was reasonably priced; the Blackwells Companion is £85. I wouldn't have bought a copy of it new, despite some really good stuff in it.

It would be great to have a non-fiction award (and a proper one, not one which goes to books of cover art as the Hugo for Best Related Book tends to do), but I can't

see a respectable way of judging it. As with many things it needs to be seen to be above reproach as well as being above reproach.

**Paul Kincaid:** As a declaration of interest: I have now been 'recommended' in the BSFA Non-Fiction Award category twice in succession, once for an essay, once for a book I edited. I am flattered and honoured. And I also know that I would not win if an award were given this year, because the Tiptree biography is by a long chalk the best work on the list.

But I still think there should be an award. It is important, because other than the Science Fiction Research Association awards (which tend to be academic awards) and the Hugo Best Related Book (which is a catch-all for anything not actually fiction and rarely even shortlists anything remotely like criticism) there is *no* award for sf criticism. And that is a deeply regrettable situation.

I agree with Adam that simply issuing a reading list is more like setting an exam than honouring good work. And it also sidesteps the very thing that any award is theoretically supposed to do, which is name the best.

There is indeed a problem in comparing a review with a collection of essays with a biography with an encyclopedia and so on – though there are comparable problems with every award there is. How about making two awards – short form and long form? That way you wouldn't actually be comparing a book with an essay. But we do come down to the basic issue that the fact of the award is more important than anything, so if you don't want to split it, we still need the award itself.

**Graham Sleight:** Tony, I don't think you're misreading me *much*. My argument boils down to: 1) Particularly with something as emotive as awards often get to be, you need to ensure that how the rules are couched sets as level a playing field as possible; 2) It's almost impossible, for the reasons I stated in my comment, *which I think are specific to non-fiction and not the other categories*, to have a level playing field for a non-fiction award; and therefore, 3) Any notion of 'bestness' is going to be flawed from the start. And at the very least, any award which has a constraint on its level-playing-field-ness should declare that upfront.

I agree with Tony that deciding what's best out of, e.g., Priest and Harrison is difficult; but we do at least have some commonly agreed tools for doing that. And one is, contra Paul, at least comparing the same kind of entity. One last thought: another way to deal with all these issues may be to reward a body of work in non-fiction over a year, rather than an individual work.

**Colin Harris:** Like Tony, I feel quite strongly that we should have a non-fiction award and that we should not abandon it just because there are difficulties in trying to be fair to everyone. I say this as someone who's been involved in some related discussions on Hugo categories at WSFS Business Meetings in recent years. Broadly speaking, these discussions tend to go as follows:

1) There is some debate over a category definition – triggered either by interest in a new category or by an attempt to clean up an existing one.

2) Concerns begin to arise (often triggered by hypothetical cases) about every possible wording change – people can always think of an exception case that won't be favoured.

3) The language proposed for the award to clarify what is/is not eligible gets more and more tortuous.

4) Someone argues that if we can't be fair to everyone, then we shouldn't have the award.

5) Someone from the silent majority speaks up to the effect that a common sense definition which works 90% of the time and usually gets the right answer, and enables an area of the field to be honoured, is far better than solving the problem by recognising nothing in that area. This view carries the day.

I am very much in favour of 5), and have stood up and argued this case (successfully) in the past. There is a lot of good non-fiction out there. The BSFA members should be given a chance to recognise it. An appropriate definition would give a good answer most of the time.

**Jonathan McCalmont:** Andrew, I must admit that your comment has resulted in my experiencing a degree of psychic pain like a million Clutes screaming "Haeccceity!" and then being silenced for ever. So accept my apologies if I sound tetchy in this.

What you're essentially saying is that in order to be "the kind of person you'd want on a jury" you have to be a dead-tree biographer or critic. However, if you are a dead-tree biographer or critic then you're likely to feature in the kind of books the jury is likely to be evaluating and therefore you're *not* "the kind of person you'd want on a jury". The problem is that you're suggesting that credibility is dependent on levels of overlap which, if demanded in academia would make peer-review, let alone PhD vivas completely impossible. Or to put it another way, there are people who can intelligently comment upon and evaluate sf biographies and criticism other than published dead-tree critics. Setting aside the critics who only function online, as well as actual sf authors, there are critics and academics who either look at genre in other mediums or are fans of genre but don't engage with it as part of their day jobs.

Given that the Hugos are voted for by common-or-garden sf fans and command a good deal of respect, I think you're setting the bar for any notional BSFA non-fiction award absurdly high. What you're saying really is as absurd as "you can't judge a book of science fiction until you've written one yourself" and we all know how self-serving those kinds of remarks tend to be.

**Ian Snell:** To clarify eligibility – the current criteria clearly state that anything published by the BSFA is not eligible for an award, in any category. (This does not preclude items published by members of the BSFA, or even the committee, provided it isn't actually the BSFA publishing it.) The reason for this is simple; I do not want the BSFA Awards to be seen as the BSFA giving

awards to itself in public.

Jonathan – for a panel-judged BSFA non-fiction award, the judges would have to come from the BSFA. Being able to reliably gather a panel that is both willing to judge, feels confident to judge, and will be respected to judge the award is, I think, a harder task than you're making out, much as Andrew said.

The BSFA is a relatively small pond, and being asked to judge the entirety of sf non-fiction is a hard task that many people would not be willing to do – myself included. The proportion of the membership that would be willing to do the job are probably already fairly active and well-known, and are likely to fulfill the other two criteria – but they are also quite likely to either be eligible for the award themselves, or judging the Clarke! This isn't because only those who write the stuff are good enough to judge, but because those who are willing to judge are likely to already be involved in the critical scene.

Comparisons to the Hugos aren't useful because they're not a judged award. A voted non-fiction award would obviously be more comparable, but that has other problems, primarily the declining voting figures that led to its suspension in the first place. A judged award was not decided upon because anyone felt that the award generally ought not to be a popular vote, but because it was becoming harder to get people voting.

The solution to this problem is potentially to include judges from outside the BSFA. I think the Clarke model, for example, is a good one, although I do believe getting people to commit to reading all non-fiction in a year might be harder than getting them to commit to reading all fiction in a year – especially since getting the stuff free to the panel might be a harder sell than for the Clarke, at which point the panel is being expected to spend a lot of money.

**Jonathan McCalmont:** Ian, I think you're right that the way ahead is a non-BSFA special jury. You could even call it "The BSFA special jury prize for non-fiction". BSFA appoint judges, judges choose winner. Alternatively you could just pick the judges and then make them honorary members for a year thereby satisfying the judging criteria and reaching out to good people in the wider SF community that aren't members of the BSFA.

Beyond that, I'd be astonished if you really did know every member of the BSFA who was knowledgeable about criticism. Short of googling every new member or only granting membership upon successful completion of a written exam there's no way you can know all the members of the BSFA who could judge a series of works of criticism.

The group you know are the group of people that you know from cons and BSFA meetings and so on that you know to be knowledgeable about criticism and SF and such. It's hardly an equal opportunity layout is it? How about having an open call for judges? Put an ad in *Vector* asking for people who are knowledgeable about criticism and that are willing to judge.

My point about the Hugos is that authenticity and credibility can come from any number of sources. You don't need higher standards than a PhD viva board.

**Graham Sleight:** In response to Colin's comment: this sounds an entirely plausible narrative for what happens to the Hugo categories. But I'd argue that the case here is different. First, the Hugo categories are subject to a high-profile process of, let's say, testing and refinement both formally (through the Business Meeting) and informally (through chatter, blogospheric and otherwise.) The Hugo categories we have now are an emergent phenomenon of decades of scrutiny and debate: this is not the case with the BSFA non-fiction award. Second, we are in the position now where novel-length and short-short-story-length pieces of non-fiction get considered in the same category of the BSFA Awards. If that was the case with the fiction Hugos, there would be an outcry, and rightly so.

**Paul Raven:** Before I put in my ha'penny worth, I'll openly confess to being a definite n00b here – not just to sf criticism and the judgement of its worth but to organised fandom in general, and the BSFA in particular.

That said, here's my pitch. I assume that the ideal is for the BSFA awards or recommendations to be decided by the interested portion of the general corpus of the BSFA, not necessarily just the critics and SMOFs and so on. So how about this: get some smart code to knock together a more advanced website for the BSFA, one with membership logins. Then, for situations like this non-fiction award/list malarkey, have some sort of Digg-like system where a member can submit an item (on-line or otherwise, doesn't really matter as long as it's plain what is being referred to) to the pool of nominations. Then other members can look through the list, chase up stuff they haven't read (or perhaps haven't even heard of) that looks interesting, and give them a thumbs-up or thumbs down vote. Multiple categories (or sub-categories) could be supported: book-length, essay-length, review, blog, opinion piece, humour and so on. Each member can nominate a theoretically unlimited number of books or articles, but can only vote on each article once. Hey presto – rhizomatic consensus engineering.

Okay, so the obvious flaw is that not all members are wired yet (indeed, I infer from previous conversations that a great percentage may not be), but I can't see that situation remaining the same for more than a few years. Maybe a long-term idea to mull over? Or maybe I just spend far too much time in front of a computer when I should be reading or writing... In all seriousness, though, as a real newcomer to the field, I think it would be a shame for the category to disappear entirely – I've been meaning to ask a few people for suggestions on good starter-volumes of sf criticism so that I can get a feel for it, and knowing that there has been some debate about this in previous years leads me to believe I'll get no shortage of valuable answers.

**Colin Harris:** Graham, your second point is well made, but in other respects the Hugo case is analogous. The Best Related Book category is defined as "Any work whose subject is related to the field of science fiction, fantasy, or fandom, appearing for the first time in book form during the previous calendar year, and which is either non-fiction or, if fictional, is noteworthy primarily for aspects other than the fictional text." So although the words 'book form' appear, the category spreads widely from critical works to collections of columns to autobiographies and in many cases art books – diversity in every form except length. And there is (almost) no outcry about the problems of comparing these very different items because the consensus is that the category we have is the best available compromise.

Nevertheless, I agree that there are differences, so rather than go down a rat-hole here I'd rather go back to a more fundamental point, which is that juried awards and member-voted awards both have their merits. Neither is inherently better than the other in any absolute sense – but you get something different depending on which option you pick. It seems to me that what we have here is a sense of schizophrenia, where there is an implication that the general membership can be trusted to honour fiction works but not non-fiction. And I don't subscribe to that presumption. It's inherent in any publicly voted award that you may not get the answer you 'want', but that's what vox populi is all about. What is more, the BSFA membership is in my experience better informed than the average group of fans. If we're saying that the group isn't worthy, then I agree fully with Jonathan and those who say that we're setting the bar absurdly high. And certainly I think that's the wrong message to send to a membership which is smaller than we'd like – unless we want it to become smaller still and even more inward looking.

**Ian Snell:** Jonathan, I'm not claiming to know all the people who are knowledgeable about criticism; personally, I don't even know all the people who go to cons and meetings. What I'm saying is that I suspect that the people that are willing to come forward to judge an award, with all the public scrutiny and time commitments that entails, are already the people that... come forward to do stuff, with all the scrutiny and time commitments that entails. Personally, I think that anyone that would be willing to come forward and do that would likely be perfectly able to do it, but I don't hear anyone actually volunteering, and the people who have done it have specifically said they don't want to do it again, because it isn't a fun or rewarding task.

Colin, it's not that the membership isn't worthy, it's that the membership isn't voting. As much as various interested parties here would like to think otherwise, the BSFA and Eastercon memberships are not as interested as many would hope.

**Jonathan McCalmont:** If the problem seriously is lack of jurors then I bet if Niall were to put something in an

edition of *Vector* he'd get a response. I joined the BSFA at the end of the summer and 1) I wouldn't know who to talk to in order to become a judge, and 2) I, like most British people, would probably struggle to write an email or a letter to the relevant person demanding to be made a judge. So throwing one's arms up in the air and saying that nobody's interested is clearly nothing more than lazy pessimism.

Besides which, the Hugos have had a very credible non-fiction award that doesn't just go to artbooks and it was selected on the basis of a popular mandate. So I'd argue that for this category to go from reading list to award would only require allowing people the right to vote.

**Andrew M. Butler:** Jonathan, I suspect you're violently agreeing with me. When I said that a lot of us know each other, all I meant was that *some* of these (let's call them the usual suspects) are the sort of people I could imagine on a jury for a non-fiction award within the sf field. I've not given you their names, their place in the universe, or even what the two books I alluded to are. Some of the contributors are fans, some of them are academics, some of them write online as well as on paper. Some of them are most or all of the above. And I could well imagine (big of me, I know!) people on the jury who weren't the usual suspects – but a lot of these people are likely to produce work online, on paper, in convention programme books, maybe even on toilet walls, which would be eligible for a non-fiction award. They would then, I assume, have to recuse themselves either from being judges or accepting a nomination.

(When it comes to the Clarke Award, authors either serve during a year they do not have a book out or do not let the book be shortlisted. Or at least, this is what has happened so far.)

I know that reviews editors from various journals had enough problems finding suitable reviewers for some of the BSFA, SFF, Cambridge, Blackwells volumes, because the obvious names were in the volumes in question (or potentially annoyed because they weren't). Maybe that's a failure of their imagination, or their address books.

Thinking about it, I do trust pretty well all of those usual suspects to be able to rise above any rivalries and conflicts of interest that might arise from these particular people being from a small pond. (There are people who are not part of this pond, obviously.) Actually, I also trust that those people who voted for *Omegatropic* and its cover art weren't an organised block vote so that the BSFA could give itself a prize. It didn't stop some numbskulls from muttering 'fix'.

For what it's worth, I've been on a jury judging nonfiction, which had the advantage of a pretty tight set of criteria for entry (and was based on submissions rather than trying to read the four specialist paper-based academic journals, all the BSFA magazines, all the online blogs, 'zines and websites, all the conference proceedings, all the monographs, all the fanzines, all the anthologies, not to mention all the non-specialist venues

which now cover the genre). It was still tougher than reading all the novels for the Clarke Award. It would be great to have a non-fiction award on this side of the Atlantic, but I'm smarter at seeing the problems with it than the solutions. I wish I could see the glass as half full.

**Adam Roberts:** A couple more things occur to me. One function of the BSFA awards is to reward the best in *sf* in a given year; but another function is to give BSFA members a focus for thinking, writing (in blogs, and elsewhere), chatting amongst themselves about last year's *sf*, not only what were the best things in the genre for that year, but what 'best' means in terms of *sf*. This last thing is extremely healthy and important. One of the greatest strengths of *sf* (over against other genres; crime, say; Westerns; Romances) is that most of the fans care very greatly about the genre, get involved in it, sacrifice enormous amounts of time and energy in it.

Now the fact of the matter is that, whilst most BSFA members I know read a great deal of *sf* fiction, long and short, most don't read a lot of book-length or academic criticism. This is not because they're uninterested in the critical debates of the genre; it's because academic books cost ridiculous sums of money (the hardback of my Palgrave history retailed at £55, for the love of bejimbing); and because most members have limited time and would rather spend that time on primary than secondary texts. But this really isn't the same thing as being uninterested in criticism. It does, however, mean that few BSFA members are in the position to make a properly informed voting judgment on a list like the 'recommended list' on the BSFA website.

This is by way of seconding Edward James' point from way back when. I'm a BSFA member, and a critic of *sf*, but I'm also an academic; so, as a critic, I tend to keep up with the published stuff (because if I can't afford it, or just don't fancy affording it, I can always order it for my university library). I'm a little atypical, in the organisation, for that reason. But a high proportion of BSFA members, though not academics, are critics, and most of them are interested in and engaged by critical discourse as it relates to the genre: they blog, they review, they publish in fanzines and e-zines and elsewhere. A non-fiction award would be worthwhile not only in rewarding the best work, but in making those members feel included.

To do this I think the award would need to be rejigged: for example, a published criticism award and an online criticism award. The former, despite all the problems (and there are real problems) associated with it might have to be, as last year, an announcement that a panel of experts has declared etc etc. (If the BSFA had simply announced that the Tiptree biography was to receive the non-fiction award this year I can't think of a single person who would demur, or who would complain that an injustice had occurred). The latter could be the opportunity for some of the really really excellent blog and website (and publicly-available-online journal articles etc) writing to have the spotlight

shone upon it; linkage, and the fact that such things are bound to be reasonably short, would give members the chance to read every nominee and give a properly informed voice to their feelings about the best of it.

**Graham Sleight:** That's all good sense, Adam. I don't have any problem with my work being judged by the 'proles'. But I think there's an unexamined notion doing the heavy lifting in your post – if an award were to be juried, what constitutes 'properly informed'? Do you simply mean people who've had access to the books in ways that ordinary readers haven't? Or people who have sufficient knowledge to peer-review/critique the work in question? That is, are you seeking jurors who are operating – in terms of their experience/scholarship etc – at the same level as those writing the submitted books? My own view is that for a juried award – with the connotation of authority it carries – you probably have to; but that limits your pool of potential jurors so radically that it creates other problems.

Your published vs. online award division would solve some things, I suggest, but still doesn't get round the fundamental problem of book-length vs. review-length non-fiction. The danger is that 'published' criticism will wind up being synonymous with a-bunch-of-work-between-covers. To take one other example that I forgot earlier, how is it possible that the British *sf* community has not garlanded Nick Lowe with the laurels he deserves for his 20+ year stint of film reviewing in *Interzone*? Easy – he hasn't published a book of *sf* criticism, and so gets ignored in this sort of conversation.

**Jonathan McCalmont:** The nebulous concept of being 'properly informed' is what makes me slightly uncomfortable in all of this. If you set the bar as highly as Andrew seemed to in his first post (though his second post clarifies that position to a more inclusive one) then there's a real whiff of snobbery to that requirement.

You're also right that the delineation between short vs. long form criticism as well as online vs. dead tree publication makes a huge difference. At the moment, as someone who is only starting to move from 'reviewer' to 'critic', there's a real sense that there are a series of increasingly refined tiers above me with the upper limits leading to publication in dead tree format.

Any award would have to choose where it drew the line and therefore what it said about the nature of criticism. Many of the more established critics seem to be quite pro-status quo in this, which is fairly understandable. But I think that being more inclusive would probably do some good in not only making criticism feel accessible rather than some obscure and rarefied quasi-academic pursuit and that might encourage some of us lower-tier critics and even encourage some consumers of *SF* to become critics as well.

So I would be in favour of an award that was democratic and didn't make any distinction between online or paper publication. Being more inclusive might

also mean that the address books of people looking to compile future critical anthologies might get a little bit thicker. What I'm saying is that aside from just rewarding the best criticism, depending upon how the award was constructed you could also use it to help energise the sf fanbase a bit. That is also a consideration.

**Graham Sleight:** It's a shame that we haven't had more people who are not non-fiction writers themselves contributing to the discussion. We've been doing a lot of presuming what people in general want with precious little data.

**Martin Lewis:** Do those people exist? Or rather, there are plenty of people who read fiction without wanting to produce it but are there people who read non-fiction (beyond reviews) who have no interest in producing it? How many people who buy – for example – *The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Anthology* do so from the position of general reader? I suspect not many.

**Liz Batty:** I don't write any non-fiction. I don't read a lot of non-fiction, but I do read *Vector* and *Foundation* and other odds and ends (I've read the Tiptree bio), and I'm quite happy with a recommended reading list. Since there seems to be interest from the members in nominating books this year, I don't see why we can't just stick with a member-nominated and member-voted award for what bits of non-fiction the members enjoyed most in the year, and include books, essays, online posts and everything else in with it. If there were a juried award created with potential jurors being those who are properly equipped to judge the scholarly merit of the non-fiction they review then I would have no problem with that, but I like the BSFA awards being something for the proles of the BSFA to vote on.

**Graham Sleight:** Despite appearances, I think I mind about awards a lot less than most people I know in the field. I'm involved in some, I want to see them done well, but everything I say sits in that larger context. I think it's one of the reasons I'm less concerned than most if the non-fiction award vanishes. I would rather see it done not at all than in a way which didn't command legitimacy, and which didn't provide a manifestly equal basis for all kinds of non-fiction to compete. I have certainly come to the conclusion over the last year that whatever validation I may get in my career as a non-fiction writer, I shouldn't expect it to come from awards; which is fine, and there are other kinds of validation. This is the reason – and god knows it's a controversial view round here – that I think this year's solution of a recommended list rather than an award is quite an elegant one. It recognises the diversity (and incomparability) of different works, it doesn't place the authors/editors under the pressure of expectation that an award generates, and it short-circuits the whole question of "Who is able to make a properly informed decision?" – while still showing that the BSFA recognises the importance of this area.

**Farah Mendlesohn:** Graham, the voted-on non-fiction award commanded a fair bit of legitimacy until the BSFA committee publicly declared otherwise and abandoned it. That we now have to work out how to 'restore' such legitimacy is precisely due to this action in the first place. If the same action had been taken for the Art award – which until effort was put in, had become 'Interzone cover of the year', there would have been a similar outcry. I am aware the BSFA 'consulted' but what they never actually did was to put the decision to a vote of the membership at the AGM.

**Paul Kincaid:** I think we are starting to get a consensus that we need an award. We may actually need several awards, but in general there seems to be agreement that an award for non-fiction is a good thing.

(Nobody has yet made the obvious statement that an award which does not actually present an award is either ludicrous or a dereliction of duty – so I will.)

The disagreement is all about detail: one category or many? Popular vote or jury or some sort of combination of the two? How to constitute the jury? etc etc. (And can someone please explain to me why we should consider there is a difference between online and print reviewing? I write both and it makes not one jot of difference to how I write, the arguments I construct, or the views I present.) There is clearly some need to work out how the award should be constituted. But just because we don't yet have a system which satisfies everyone (does any award?) is no reason to flounce around and say therefore we shouldn't have an award.

As has been pointed out, an award is not just a jolly for the winner. Awards work in many ways to reward the best, to encourage the good, to promote good work to those who might not encounter it, to serve as a standard bearer, to include (and there are a number of people, both here and those I have been in communication with privately, who have said that as people who primarily or exclusively write non-fiction they feel excluded by the BSFA). All of these things are part of the original and ongoing remit of the BSFA, so it seems like a natural organisation to run a non-fiction award. More than that, it seems to me that if the BSFA chose to abandon the non-fiction award it would be turning its back on a large part of what it is supposed to be doing.

And a final small but possibly not unimportant point: the major reference sources in the field, such as the SF Encyclopedia, only give award winners. So in most places people are likely to consult in future the 2007 BSFA Non-Fiction Award will either be given as 'No Award', or will have disappeared from the public record altogether.

The full text of the discussion above can be found at the following links:  
<http://peake.livejournal.com/88785.html>,  
<http://vectorseditors.wordpress.com/2007/01/14/and-the-nominees-are/>  
 and <http://vectorseditors.wordpress.com/2007/01/16/the-non-fiction-category/>. Jonathan McCalmont also expanded his thoughts on access to sf criticism at  
[http://www.sfdiplomat.net/sf\\_diplomat/2007/01/thoughts\\_on\\_sf.html](http://www.sfdiplomat.net/sf_diplomat/2007/01/thoughts_on_sf.html).

## Long Live The UK SF Scene by Niall Harrison

At about this time last year, *SFX* magazine did something quite unexpected: they launched a competition to find new writers. Sure, they did it in a typically cack-handed way – the first draft of the rules imposed ludicrous copyright restrictions, stating that all entrants “irrevocably assign to Future Publishing Limited all intellectual property rights that they have in any part of the world in their stories and waive all their moral right”; fortunately they were quickly revised – but their hearts did seem to be in the right place. The issues immediately following the announcement, for instance, included writing tips from Justina Robson, James Lovegrove and Steph Swainston, all of which were subsequently included (along with an introduction by Adam Roberts; no prizes for guessing which publisher sponsored the competition, then) in a small book featuring the winning and runner-up stories.

Reading through *Pulp Idol*, as it was inevitably titled, what’s surprising is how sucky most of the stories aren’t. To a certain extent, this can be attributed to adjusted expectations: you go into the book knowing that all the featured writers will be previously unpublished, and that (the success of *Nature’s Futures* series, and Bruce Holland Rogers’ World Fantasy Award win for *The Keyhole Opera*, notwithstanding) there’s only going to be so much they can do in 2,000 words. It’s unarguable that most of the stories deploy the most common of sf tropes – the end of the world, scientific experiments gone wrong, first contact – and that a lot of them end cheaply, with either death or a punchline. But the best of the book’s offerings – such as Emily Salter’s ‘Unfinished’, in which a girl’s drawings come to life with pretty much the consequences you’d expect – do actually work as stories, which is no mean feat. (Not to mention the fact that, whatever its other failings, a piece like Mark Dunn’s ‘Sense and Insensibility’ deserves a certain amount of credit for creating a story in which the phrase “I could literally feel Rose’s eyes rolling” isn’t a Thogghism.)

What’s also a little surprising is how unusual it feels to read through a selection of short stories that are all or almost all (one assumes, although *SFX* is sold beyond these isles) by British writers. It’s been a truism for a good few years that short fiction is no longer the heart of sf, but given that there are more and more British markets for short fiction, it’s noticeable that there are fewer and fewer British writers filling them. Those established British writers who are still producing notable short fiction – such as Stephen Baxter, Liz Williams, Alastair Reynolds, Ian McDonald, or Charles Stross – are publishing almost exclusively in US venues. Reynolds and McDonald, in fact, both have stories on the current BSFA Short Fiction Award ballot that were first published in the US. Neither is it the case, as far as I can tell, that there’s an impatient queue of talent behind them waiting to use up the home-turf slots. Or at least,

that’s the impression I’ve been forming, which is why I sat down to read a pile of British magazines.

It’s getting on for three years since the transfer of authority, so now also seems like a fair time to take stock of how the TTA Press incarnation of *Interzone* is doing. At first glance, at least, the picture is of rude health: the magazine is smarter, shinier, and more perfect-bound than it has ever been. In the non-fiction departments, old favourites – Scores, Mutant Popcorn (a collection of Nick Lowe’s criticism seems long overdue: someone fix this, please?), Ansible Link – are still in place, and if none of the new review features, such as Sarah Ash’s *Mangazone*, have quite reached the same must-read status, well, it’s still gratifying to see the magazine attempting to increase the diversity of its coverage, from computer games to radio shows and everything in between. Admittedly some of the longer features, such as IZ206’s interview with David Naughton and Camden Toy, do have an uneasily superficial *SFX* vibe about them, and you sometimes wonder how far *Interzone* is going to go in that direction. But if such features get new readers to pick up the magazine, that’s no bad thing, right? Because the fiction’s still there.

Well, yes it is – as, thankfully, is the tradition of publishing the winner of the James White Award; which makes a striking contrast with *Pulp Idol*, since Deirdre Ruane’s ‘Lost Things Saved In Boxes’ (IZ196) was one of the strongest stories published by the magazine in 2005 – but like the non-fiction and overall magazine format it’s changed quite dramatically since the Pringle era, and not always for the better. Clearly the new editorial staff have the right and the need to put their own stamp on the magazine. But with the exception of a few stalwarts (such as, er, Richard Calder; or more positively, Chris Beckett, who provides this issue’s best story, and who in many ways seems more at home in this version of *Interzone* anyway), every time I pick up an issue I’m still slightly surprised how few familiar names. British or otherwise, are on the cover (not to mention how few female names). As I say, this shift is not because the other members of the older stable are no longer producing short fiction: Alastair Reynolds, for instance, whose short fiction is arguably his best work, had three stories from 2005 reprinted in various Year’s Best anthologies. But none of them were first published by *Interzone*, and while that may well be because they weren’t ever submitted, it’s hard to escape a sense that the work of someone like Reynolds just doesn’t quite fit any more. (It is perhaps noteworthy that Reynolds’ 2006 collection *Galactic North* is dedicated to David Pringle.) Andy Cox and his team’s idea of what good sf short fiction is, or should be, in the 21st century clearly differs quite dramatically from that of their predecessor.

The contributions to IZ206 demonstrate this vision in much the same way that the contributions to every

# Archipelago

by Niall  
Harrison

other Cox issue have demonstrated it. It's something visible not so much in the stories' content – the issue is not particularly diverse on that front, but overall the magazine is no more rigorous now about what 'science fiction' is than it ever was – but in their approach. Jamie Barras' 'The Beekeeper', for instance, is a planetary scavenger hunt: the characters spend their time rummaging through the ruins of an obliquely described biological factory-stroke-habitat, hunting for the FTL drive that the surrounding alien civilisations won't sell them.



Some awkward reappropriation of terms from molecular biology aside ("we can express our reserve ship", one character says; well, okay, sort of), the story is written smoothly enough, but never delves deeply enough into its setting to earn either its title or its ending. At the other end of the spectrum, content-wise, is Tim Akers' 'Distro'. Akers has appeared a few times in *Interzone* now, not to mention in *The Third Alternative* before that, and 'Distro' is a reasonably sharp piece of horror-

inflected near-future sf about a distributed personality, with striking details (a tattoo is "a murderer's dream of a butterfly") enlivening an ultimately quite conventional plot. But here too the ending, while not coming out of the blue, exactly, seems to have been designed more to get the story over with than to provide any kind of resonance with what came before. Two other stories in the issue, Robert Davies' 'The Ship', and Jae Brim's 'The Nature of the Beast' are shorter and more heavy-handed – neither is as far above the level of *Pulp Idol* as it should be – but what all four have in common is a narrowness of focus. None of them are directly about different or potential worlds, in the classic way of sf short stories; rather, they're about characters who have distinctly limited viewpoints of different or potential worlds, which is great for the reader if you're Paolo Bacigalupi or Ian McDonald and can pull off the sort of background world-building that requires without short-changing your characters, but not so satisfying if you aren't and can't.

I mention McDonald advisedly, because his shadow, or specifically that of his BSFA-nominated story 'The Djinn's Wife' (*Asimov's*, July 2006) looms long over one of IZ206's would-be major stories. Will McIntosh's 'Soft Apocalypse' (IZ200, nominated for a BSFA Award last year) was perhaps the quintessential New *Interzone* story, in that it centred on a character who wasn't just struggling to adapt to the future, but struggling to recognise what sort of future he was in, and 'The New Chinese Wives' takes something of a similar approach. The story is set in a China where the government has started to provide video wives – walking, talking, autonomous illusions – for the glut of Little Emperors produced by contemporary birth-control policies, and as with 'Soft Apocalypse', the focus on a very real social

issue lends the piece an admirably down-to-earth tone. The viewpoint character – an old man whose son is one of the first men in the neighbourhood to marry one of the New Wives – is also sensitively drawn. It's instructive to look at the ways in which McDonald's story, set in the India of *River of Gods* (2004), where men outnumber the women several times over, does something very similar and quite a lot better. For starters, McDonald's story assigns its video spouse a personality and some agency – a move that ratchets it a couple of notches up the implausibility ladder, but gives the whole scenario that much more depth and power. For another, McDonald is simply a better writer: his images are more vivid, his characters better developed. And there is a lot *else* going on in McDonald's future – and sure, that aspect of 'The Djinn's Wife' benefits from having a complete and thoroughly excellent novel standing behind it, but it still highlights the limitations of 'The New Chinese Wives'. McDonald's story fluidly integrates style and content; McIntosh's story nods towards a complex world, but in the end is more of a concept sketch, a shadow of a story proper.

Lastly, then, is Chris Beckett's 'Karel's Prayer'. I said earlier that Beckett seems in some ways more at home here than in Pringle's *Interzone*, for example with stories like 'Piccadilly Circus' (IZ198) – set half in a vibrant virtual London, and half in the ruined real London that lies beneath the illusion – so it's a little ironic that his contribution to this issue isn't in that vein. In fact, it stands out by abandoning the world almost entirely. 'Karel's Prayer' is the story of the interrogation of one Karel Slade, a "prominent Christian leader" and, it transpires, one of the brains behind the Soldiers of the Holy Ghost, a group devoted to the maintenance of "human integrity", and not above blowing up genetic engineering facilities, or AI research labs, to prove the point (think current pro-life groups on steroids). Most of the story takes place in an extremely short period of time – maybe an hour – and revolves around Karel's interactions with the government officials who have captured him and (it seems) are planning to torture him until he reveals the names, passwords and plans they want. The twist, half-way through – is Karel actually Karel, or is he some kind of copy? – is not unexpected, but Beckett handles both the transition and its implications well, to the point where, just for a minute, you find yourself thinking, well, if he is only a copy, then maybe extreme methods aren't as unjustified as they would be with the original. In other words, 'Karel's Prayer' is the sort of question-driven story that we still think of first when we think of short science fiction. It has some of the flaws of its form – notably Karel's character is a bit thin, relying a little too much on the reader's external knowledge – but, simply by paying attention to the situation it establishes and the consequences that flow from it, rather than moving dazedly through a partial world, it manages to evince more intellectual and emotional vigour than the rest of



the issue put together.

I don't want anyone to come away from this thinking that I think the new *Interzone* is worthless, or that Pringle's *Interzone* was an unalloyed golden age: neither is true. But I have some fairly serious reservations about the direction in which Cox and Co. are taking the magazine. If anything, they've asserted their editorial vision too clearly: IZ206 is typical in that, 'Karel's Prayer' aside, there is a lack of tonal diversity. Which means that though the stories can be relied on for certain virtues (primarily decent sentences, but also a certain intensity), they also tend to share the same flaws (structural unevenness, unsatisfying world-building, heavy-handed resolutions). Of the magazine's identifiable stable of new writers, perhaps only Karen D. Fishler succeeds at marrying this particular style to a satisfying tale on a regular basis. And while it's always welcome to see her stories, and those of some other newer American writers like McIntosh, Elizabeth Bear, and Jay Lake, it's clear that I'm going to have to look elsewhere for the Brits.

Of course, that's fair enough: while it would be nice to think *Interzone* is not unfriendly to British writers, there's no reason it should be the only place we look for their work, and even less reason that it should be expected to serve as a training ground for newbies. As I implied earlier, the UK 'zine scene is actually not in bad health at the moment, from *Jupiter* and *Albedo One* to more recent additions like Wendley Bradley's *Farthing*, which launched its first issue back at Interaction in 2005. In the year-and-a-bit since then there have been four issues of *Farthing*, all of which have featured an admirably clean layout and some of the most striking magazine covers I've seen in ages, in addition to stories by writers such as Cherith Baldry, Andrew J. Wilson and Ruth Nestvold. Perhaps those names are a bit misleading, though, because for the most part *Farthing* has an intimate, clubby feel, and you probably won't recognise most of the writers it publishes.

Like *Interzone*, though, it's staked out a clear patch of territory, and whatever reservations I'm about to express it should be said up-front that editorial vision is much preferable to wishy-washiness. The first issue's editorial promised "stories that are short, stories that are funny, stories that tell us something we haven't thought of before", and most of the material they've published has succeeded at least on the first two counts. Most *Farthing* stories, even the ones that don't quite come off, are quirky and deft; their defining characteristic, in fact, is charm. A good number of them – such as, in issue 4, Lucy A. Snyder's 'Sara and the Telecats', or Merrie Haskell's 'Dead Languages' – are downright perky. And while there are excursions into horror (William I. Lengemann III's 'Willy and Topsy', in which an elephant meets a grisly fate) and science fiction (Matthew S. Rotundo's 'Brains', in which people use plug-and-play electronic hardware to augment their intelligence), most of what you'll find in any given issue of *Farthing* is

offbeat fantasy. There is a tendency to publish the occasional story that mistakes thick, clumsy prose for elegance – in this issue, 'God's Madmen' by Robert Devereaux, an overlong piece of quasi-Victoriana that occasionally captures the poignancy of a utopian dream in a falling world, but more often bogs down – but most stories can be relied on to have an engaging lightness of touch that makes the magazine easy to pick up and read.

The inevitable downside is that a light touch can too easily become lightweight. To demonstrate what I mean, let me go back to Haskell's story, since it's arguably the most typical entry in this issue of the magazine's output as a whole. 'Dead Languages' is the story of Lillian, a large-boned (or, in her own words, fat) 28-year-old recruited by her feisty friend Annabel to star in an independent film that she insists will be a genuinely feminist reinterpretation of several recent Hollywood vampire flicks. From somewhere the props department has acquired a genuine ancient scroll, and when Lillian reads out the incantation it carries, wackiness ensues, as everyone takes on the role they were performing for real. If you're thinking this sounds like an episode of *Buffy*, that's because the aforementioned incantation might as well be a direct lift of the spell that transforms Sunnydale in the season two episode 'Halloween' – and while the debt is acknowledged, and Haskell has a nice line in witty dialogue, the story never really moves beyond that reference point. Moreover, while it's a nice touch that the spell isn't undone at the end of the episode 'H\*H\*Hstory', it's an ending that – if you stop and think about it – does feel a little bit unearned, a little bit too much like a wish-fulfillment for Lillian. But then, it's not clear to me that Haskell is trying for anything more than a piece of charming froth, and on that level the story succeeds completely.

*Farthing* also does better than *Interzone* on the male-to-female ratio in the table of contents; but it's no more help to me in trying to find those elusive new British writers. Unless I miss my guess, every contributor to issue 4 is American, which does seem a little incongruous when the editor is based in London, and the cover is of an artwork in a Sheffield gallery. (Issue 5 is more Brit-heavy; enough, at least, to stage a *Farthing* reading in London at the end of January.) Mind you, the best summation of the enterprise is probably the fact that the quote on the cover from Ursula K. Le Guin is "Cooler than *Asimov's*". Which it undeniably is (not that that's hard); just don't expect the fiction to be better, necessarily.

Which brings me, sort of, to *Postscripts*, a magazine that has never seemed to me to live up to its provenance. PS Publishing is, after all, far and away the UK's most reliable genre small press, and Pete Crowther has a solid



history of short fiction editing, not least in the series of anthologies he's edited for DAW – including *Moon Shots* (1999), *Mars Probes* (2002), *Constellations* (2005), and *Forbidden Planets* (2006) – almost all of which, as it happens, include a high proportion of British contributors. (Indeed, in the case of *Constellations*, exclusively British contributors.) So you'd think *Postscripts* might be what I'm after, and the more so when you consider that it has a wider remit than any of the other magazines considered here, in that it will

happily include crime and horror stories, and even mainstream pieces with no discernible genre elements, alongside science fiction and fantasy. The Summer 2006 issue (#7), in fact, includes two such pieces – Stephen Volk's 'A Paper Tissue', in which a middle-aged couple on holiday in Italy start to face up to the state of their relationship, and Jack Dann's 'The Method', which describes a fictional encounter between JFK and Marilyn Monroe – although sadly neither is anything special. If there was an *Analog* for mainstream fiction (I'm imagining a magazine of solidly

crafted, tidily plotted stories with no ambition whatsoever), both would fit right in.

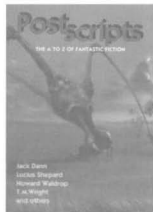
And perhaps that's *Postscripts'* problem. It's not just that it's not cool, but that it completely lacks what, for all my reservations about them, both *Interzone* and *Farthing* have in spades: personality. It consists almost entirely of middling work by midlist writers – almost always perfectly competent, almost never blessed with the spark of originality, or the urgent sense that they *needed* to be told. Take, for instance, Vaughn Stranger's 'Touching Distance', which relates the story of a blind man recruited as an experimental subject for a tactile bodysuit that might eventually allow him to 'see' using his skin. The central concept is nicely sketched-out, and we empathise enough with Joe Markheim for the ultimate revelation about the trauma that led to his blindness to be effective, but still, we've seen both before. Similarly, Ian Creasey's folktales riff 'The Fisherman of Northolt' has a striking opening line ("They say the sea eats love when it can't drink bones") but singularly fails to do anything we don't expect. Both are far more traditional and idea-driven than most *Interzone* or *Farthing* stories, and welcome on that level, and both are diverting enough ways to spend fifteen minutes; but neither does anything *new*. At the same time, the issue's more self-consciously stylistic pieces – 'False Dawn of Parrots' by Rhys Hughes and 'Tomato as Metaphor' by T.M. Wright – seem clumsy and somewhat pointless next to similar but more polished examples of such work from *Interzone*. And none of them stand out as "a *Postscripts* story".

What good work the magazine does feature tends to

come from the names you already recognise. If nothing else, *Postscripts* deserves some credit for giving a continuing British venue to Zoran Zivkovic. (Who knows whether Crowther poached him from *Interzone*, or whether Cox just doesn't want Zivkovic's work, or whether it's for some other reason entirely.) 'The Elevator' is the last in a quartet of related stories – 'The Cell', 'The Hospital Room', and 'The Hotel Room' having appeared in issues 4, 5 and 6 respectively – and follows the same basic structure as its forbears, focusing on a protagonist visited by four varyingly enigmatic guests, each of whom tells him a story. By itself, 'The Elevator' is solid Zivkovic, but as in earlier story-cycles, what makes the story sing is the way it draws together and interconnects the whole: this time around, the guests are the protagonists of the earlier pieces, and though the precise meaning of the various recurring motifs and symbols is (as ever) open to interpretation, *Four Stories to the End* may be Zivkovic's most satisfying work in this vein since *Seven Touches of Music*.

'The Exchange' by Tony Ballantyne (a Brit! And another apparent *Interzone* exile, while we're making a list) is also fine stuff, although odd, and atypical for its author, being a very low-key story about some British children on an exchange to Nazi Germany during an alternate World War Two. It's a real shame that the story headnotes impose an interpretation on the events that follow, because to me it's actually subtle and allusive enough that it can be read in several different ways; the innocence of teenage love (or hormones, if you prefer) is evoked well by Ballantyne, and cleverly used to highlight the largely unmentioned-on lingering wrongness of the setting. And though it never gives way to moralising, 'The Exchange' is also arguably the only story that comes close to answering the call for more political fiction issued by Lucius Shepard in his guest editorial – "be incautious in your pronouncements and, at the same time, canny in your concealments [...] make the reader feel the dimension and nature of their own peril, even while addicting them to your product" – although that fact only serves to emphasise once more the hodge-podge nature of the magazine. *Postscripts* is a collection of parts in search of a whole.

It's hard to know what to make of a new magazine that – as Yorkshire-based *Hub* does – opens its first issue, for no readily apparent reason, with a reprint, particularly when it's a reprint as lightweight as Bud Webster's 'Bubba Pritchert and the Space Aliens'. The story was first published in *Analog* in 1994, and is a brisk, breezy, dialogue-driven piece about some aliens who rock into town one night with a spaceship in need of repairs. The title character, who turns out to be a member of the Saucer Nuts of America, happily helps them out, along with friends who say useful things like "Wait a minute, guys, we've read enough science fiction to know... [plot point is fairly improbable]". If you like that sort of thing you'll like this, but to me it comes over as aesthetically



in-bred – and it's not a very good guide to the rest of the magazine, which skews more to the fantasy/horror end of the spectrum. Mind you, there are several other, more pressing, reasons to worry about the editorial team's judgement, namely that most of the stories aren't very good: fiction editor Lee Harris may think that James Targett's "characterisations are among the best [he's] ever read", but when the relevant story opens with such a clunky paragraph as this –

If Ox owned a motorcycle jacket then it had been hung-up somewhere to gather dust and fond memories. Now he was just another bloke with a receding hairline and a paunch hanging over his thick leather belt. Andy the bartender didn't know the bloke's real name, but Ox seemed like the right kind of name for a retired Hell's Angel. There was nothing else to speculate on, it was another Wednesday afternoon, and, as usual, The Drover's Arms was dead.

—you do start to wonder. Simply on a sentence-by-sentence level that's not very good (ungainly repetition of "name" in the third sentence, for instance), and neither is it a good introduction to either Ox or Andy. We know what Ox looks like and that Andy likes to speculate about people; that's it. 'Old Gods' isn't actually all bad; once it gets going, it turns into a Gaimanesque encounter with some old Gods (yes, Ox is one) that satisfyingly resists explanation, although it's always possible that the answers were contained in the column that apparently went missing from page 23. But the hyperbole around it does the story, and the magazine in general, no favours at all.

Similar distractions crop up elsewhere. After Alasdair Stuart's 'Connected' (one of a number of really quite short stories in the issue, almost all of which fall at the better end of the *Pulp Idol* quality spectrum), for example, we are told that "Al Stuart is one of the nicest guys you'll ever meet, but if he ever invites you into his head for five minutes make your excuses and leave. Seriously." That may well be true, and the desire to talk up your authors is understandable, but *Hub*'s approach is a bit much – particularly when, as is the case with Stuart, the author works on the magazine as non-fiction editor. Even the relatively sedate bio for Eugie Foster – whose 'Wanting to Want', a grimy contemporary fantasy about a drug-addicted prostitute who is offered a complete identity transplant, is probably the issue's best offering – can't resist an exhausted "phew" at its end.

The nonfiction features are as uneven as the fiction, and the overall selection is downright weird. In no particular order, among other things there's a bluffer's guide to *Eragon*, an entire double spread of (breathlessly enthusiastic) reviews, a somewhat pointless-seeming article on 'Invisibility in the Real World' (by Stuart himself), a piece on 'Writers Who Blog' by Christopher Brosnahan (about "Gaiman, Hamilton, Adams and Co"

– that's Scott Adams and Laurell K. Hamilton, if you were wondering), and an interview with Keith Brooke by Molly Brown (actually a significantly truncated transcript of their discussion at a BSFA London Meeting last summer). Expanded versions of these last two pieces are available on the magazine's website, which is something of a mixed blessing. I'm well aware how tricky it can be to get the word-count-to-space-available calculation right, and you can see how this strategy makes sense for an interview, but the print version of Brosnahan's piece simply ends up feeling, like too much of the rest of *Hub*, choppy and incomplete.

Thus endeth the journey. There's not much point trying to say, on the basis of one issue apiece, which one of these magazines is the best (although I'm pretty sure *Hub* is the worst, and that it will need to get quite a bit more professional quite quickly if it's going to survive). Quality is always going to be variable, never mind the fact that different magazines serve different audiences. And while it is somewhat unsatisfying that a survey of British short fiction magazines doesn't give me the opportunity to talk about writers like Reynolds, Stross, Baxter and McDonald, in the end that's a bit of a red herring. All four (and others) are happily publishing in other venues that are easy enough for me to track down, and we don't have a drastic shortage of new British sf writers – they're just breaking in, like Hal Duncan and Justina Robson, at novel length. There is a larger concern, though, which is: I'm as avid a short story reader as anyone I know, and none of these magazines are satisfying me – certainly not in comparison to their US equivalents. It's not just that the stories are, almost without exception, better in US venues such as *F&SF*; it's that an anthology like *Twenty Epics* has a real sense of community about it, not in the clubby *Farthing* sense, but in a more energetic, restless sense. In comparison, the magazines above almost can't help being a disappointment, not least because I think there was a sense, in the late '90s, that in *Interzone* we had a magazine with a similar vibrancy, one that could compete with its transatlantic cousins on an even footing. No longer. These days, we may have the writers, but we don't have the scene.

#### Works discussed

- *Farthing* 4, ed. Wendy Bradley.  
<<http://www.farthingmagazine.com/>>
- *Hub* 1, ed. Lee Harris. <<http://www.hub-mag.co.uk/>>
- *Interzone* 206, eds. Andy Cox, David Matthew, Jetse de Vries, Liz Williams, Andrew Hedgecock.  
<<http://www.itapress.com/IZ.html>>
- *Postscripts* 7, ed. Peter Crowther.  
<<http://www.pspublishing.co.uk/>>
- *Pulp Idol*, published by Future Publishing Ltd as a supplement to *SFX*. <<http://www.sfx.co.uk/>>





## The Dark Side of the Boom

At the end of November, at about four hours' notice, I wound up conducting an interview with Jo Fletcher, Editorial Director of the Gollancz sf list. (What, you don't come to the BSFA London meetings? You're missing so much... check out <http://www.bsfa.co.uk/index.cfm/section.events>.) It was at about four hours' notice because Claire Weaver, the scheduled interviewer, came down with some hideous lurgy on the day and I was shuffled into her place. Claire had carefully prepared and cleared with Jo a set of questions, and I think I rather threw her by coming up with my own in a frantic Tube journey. One of them was very obvious but managed to elicit an extremely interesting answer: I asked Jo what she felt was distinctive about the Gollancz list compared to her competitors – Orbit, Voyager, MacMillan/Tor, and so on. She said – and I don't have the benefit of a transcript or recording so I'm paraphrasing from memory and notes – that the Britishness of the list was what marked it out.

In part, she was clear, this was an economic decision: Gollancz likes to buy all the rights to a book so that it can sell foreign-language rights in, for instance, other European countries. One can't do that when one is publishing the British edition of a book originated by, say, Tor or Eos in the US. But she also defended it as an aesthetic stance: that British sf is the equal of any being written at the moment, and the Gollancz list is a showcase for that. Whatever you think of that judgment, it's had good and bad consequences. The good is what gets called generically the British Boom: the vast majority of the writers associated with that movement (whatever the hell it is, and whether it's over, just beginning, or simply a figment of our collective imaginations) are published by Gollancz. The bad is that British readers who don't get the chance to go to specialist bookshops or attend US conventions will find it much more difficult to pick up on the bunch of very interesting things going on in sf across the Atlantic, which are almost totally invisible if you wander into a Waterstone's. Even the more important books don't get published over here: Robert Charles Wilson's *Spin*, last year's Hugo winner, Vernor Vinge's *Rainbows End*, and Peter Watts's *Blindsight*, many people's favorite sf novel of 2006 – not one of them has a British edition in prospect.

But behind this front rank of stuff we're not getting to see is another layer of work which marks, I think, where the field is going; and it's even harder to happen across by accident. This is the work I referred to last issue as genre-mixing, and there's no doubt in my mind that it's the predominant trend in speculative fiction over the last decade – if not in sales, then certainly in aesthetic interest and influence outside the genre. So I want to try to offer a few pointers to where some good work of this kind can be

found. Kelly Link is scarcely underground these days, her work having won Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards, and her last collection *Magic for Beginners* having been picked as one of Time's five books of 2005. But to my mind, her first book *Stranger Things Happen* is even more interesting: riskier, more varied in tone and content, though unlike the later book, not without its occasional failures. Once you've entered Link's imaginative terrain, you don't easily forget it: non-sequitur deadpan weirdness is delivered in tight declarative sentences with little cognitive gaps between them, like the jolts you feel as you fall asleep. Both books are available from Small Beer Press ([www.lcrw.net](http://www.lcrw.net)), the micro-publisher that Link runs with her husband Gavin Grant. They also publish *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, an elegantly designed zine for genre-mixing work, and a small range of books. I'm currently working my way through another of their collections, Alan De Niro's *Skinny-Dipping in the Lake of the Dead*, which is experimental in very different ways from Link. Byzantine soldiers invade an American college town in the first story, a premise played out to the point where everyone has to start learning Greek.

One charge that could be made against genre-mixing stories is that sometimes nothing much happens, that they tend to be mood pieces gently wafting striking images around in the hope that they'll have some effect. Theodora Goss is a writer who's got past this obstacle, as you'll know when you run into her image of the fairy-tale princess ordering her world from the seat of a bulldozer. Her first collection, *In the Forest of Forgetting* (<http://www.forestofforgetting.com/>) comes from Prime Books, a more prolific small press boasting Jeff VanderMeer as one of its editorial consultants. One of Goss's concerns is rewriting fairy-stories with revisionist glee: the same is true of M. (Mary) Rickert, who's been publishing acclaimed stories in *F&SF* for the last few years. Her first collection, *Map of Dreams*, is a handsome hardcover from Golden Gryphon (<http://www.goldengryphon.com/>).

It should be noted that, in what I've said before, I've avoided labeling these folks as part of any movement. My views on movements in sf is, as previous columns have probably made clear, pretty wary. If you want to ally these people to an affinity group, then googling, say, "Interstitial Arts Foundation" or "New Wave Fabulists" should give you all the team-spirit you need. But even more than most forms, it seems to me, genre-straddling work is about the individual artist ruthlessly refitting old materials to their personal ends. Even if you have to drum your fingers for a month for Amazon to deliver them, each of the books I've mentioned will give you a live, individual voice; and there are many more out there, waiting to be discovered.

# The New X

by  
Graham  
Sleight