

VECTOR

THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION



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252

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TORQUE CONTROL

EDITORIAL
BY
NIAL HARRISON

For me at least, what stands out about 2006 are the films. It didn't seem to be a bad year for cinema in general (no year the includes Paul Greengrass' extraordinary *United 93* can really be counted a bad year), but for genre films it was a very good year, by one simple metric: I don't know what my favourite genre film of the year is. Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc have watched vastly more than me (and, I'm pretty sure, more than anyone I know), and provide their usual overview of the past year later in this issue, but for me the choice comes down to four films. Joint second, I think, are Richard Linklater's adaptation of *A Scanner Darkly* (rotoscoping an inspired choice; show stolen by Robert Downey Jr, who gives an inspired, twitchy performance while looking unerringly like *Cory Doctorow*) and Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (impressive contrasting of human horror and fantastic horror; great central performance from Ivana Baquero; slight reservations about the ending). Joint first honours, meanwhile, have to go to two more adaptations: Christopher Nolan's version of *The Prestige*, and Alfonso Cuarón's take on *Children of Men*. The latter is just devastating, particularly in (as everyone who has seen it has said) the final Bexhill sequence; you have to handwave the premise a bit, but that was always going to be the case, and the direction, cinematography and performances are more than enough to carry it along. *The Prestige*, meanwhile, sacrifices just a little of the critique of storytelling that is to be found in Christopher Priest's novel, but is beautifully put together, and arguably Nolan even improves on the original in his handling of the inevitability of the prestige, the fact that as you watching you know you're going to be tricked. If I was handing out a bronze medal, it would go either to yet another adaptation, this time of Patrick Suskind's *Perfume*, or to *Stranger Than Fiction*, an ultimately fairly lightweight but still charming metafiction in which a man starts hearing an author narrating his life before it happens. Any way you slice it: a good year.

Sadly the same wasn't true on the small screen. As Abigail Nussbaum outlines in her essay, 2006 was the year that *Battlestar Galactica* started to fall to pieces (a trend that hasn't been turned around by recent episodes), and the year that gave us the ridiculousness of *Torchwood*. On the other hand, it also gave us *Life on Mars*, whose second season is, as I write, continuing the story in a thoroughly satisfying manner, as well as the glorious *Heroes*. Admittedly, I approached *Heroes* with as much goodwill as I can remember approaching any new tv show of the last five years, even *Firefly*, simply because I've wanted to see a proper superhero show done as a television serial ever since I read X-Cutioner's Song as a teenager. But though *Heroes* does take a few episodes to find its feet, it's gone a long way towards repaying my goodwill; if it manages, as all indications suggest it will, a satisfying season finale, I'll consider the debt paid in full. The

core strength of Tim Kring's show is its plotting, both the intricacy with which individual episodes are put together and the extent to which they seem to have mapped out certain connections in advance. (Either that, or the *Heroes* production team is even better than Mutant Enemy at improvising their stories to take account of circumstance, which would still be some feat.) It also chases down implications, logical consequences and outright answers with admirable enthusiasm: not for *Heroes* the deferral of issues for as long as possible. If you haven't already seen it, keep an eye on BBC2 later this year.

I didn't read as much short fiction in 2006 as usual, but you can find some brief thoughts in this issue's Archipelago section, along with reflections by Claude Lalumière, Paul Raven, Claire Brialety, David Soyka, and Martin McGrath. Short version: buy M. Rickert's debut collection, *Map of Dreams*, right now. And beyond commending the Arthur C. Clarke Award and BSFA shortlists to your attention, there are only a few novels I can talk about. Two are major non-sf novels by writers better known for their sf. Simon Ings' dazzling *The Weight of Numbers* is a story woven into the mesh of the second half of the twentieth century as well as an exploration of the limits of reason (and arguably a thundering broadside against the assumptions of genre sf), and features a cast whose struggles against a world turning inevitably into the present are absorbing even when they're infuriating. And Geoff Ryman's *The King's Last Song* is not much less ambitious, and perhaps more heartfelt in its portrait of past and present-day Cambodia which – miraculously – doesn't descend into cliché or easy sentiment. It would also be inexcusable to not mention a novel by an American sf writer who has (shamefully) yet to see publication in the UK: *Blindsight*, by Peter Watts, a first-contact novel notable for the utter remorselessness of its commitment to its central premise. Of these three, only Ryman's novel made it into this year's Vector reviewers' poll, the results of which are presented by Paul Billinger overleaf: more surprising, perhaps, is the absence of most of this year's Clarke shortlist, and in fact the poor showing of 2006 books in general. For the first time in quite a while, the poll winner wasn't published in the immediately preceding calendar year. Time to worry? Well, as Paul points out, looking at the horizon, not really; but a useful time to take stock, perhaps.

A couple of apologies: one to Vaughan Stanger for misspelling his name in my article in Vector 251, and another to all of you, for the delay with this mailing. Liz Batty has helped out on this issue, but Vector still needs a new production editor – see the advert last issue, or on Torque Control, or email for details.

Vector Reviewers' Poll: The Best Books of 2006

Compiled by Paul N. Billinger

I'm getting a very strange sense of déjà vu here, and not just because this is the fourth Vector Book Review of the Year I've put together. In my introduction last year I wrote that I did not feel that 2005 was a great year for sf, wondering if we had reached a crux and whether something bright, shiny and new (or maybe dark, gloomy and new) was about to happen. But this year's reviewers' poll has concluded that, well, we're in much the same position as last year: the change, the new, has not arrived.

As ever, the criteria for the poll were, deliberately, wide and inclusive. The brief given was that Vector wanted to know the best fiction books its reviewers read during 2006, and the reasons. Preference was given to sf/fantasy/horror/slipstream etc books published during the last two years. Non-genre and older books could be included, as long as they were of interest to BSFA members. Unsurprisingly, many people (including me) made good use of this last sentence to include a fascinating range of titles. Yet, although the poll for 2006 has had just about the same number of books nominated (by about the same number of people) as was the case last year, there has been an increase in the number of books receiving two or more votes. This could mean that there are more books worthy of comment in 2006, but looking at the patterns it soon becomes clear that the real reason is that there is less consensus, with only three titles getting more than two votes. This year is also the first time for many years that the poll winner was not published in the year in question; and the rest of list also contains fewer works than usual from the last calendar year.

Which all sounds rather depressing, as if the end is approaching and science fiction is finished. Well, the mantra of "sf is dead" has been heard before; it was wrong then and it's wrong now. My suspicion is that all this is simply down to the vagaries of the publishing industry. It just happened that many of the genre publishers had a number of key books out late in 2005, and a hiatus in 2006. In contrast, 2007 is already looking to be very different, with a multitude of highly anticipated books from authors such as Ken MacLeod (*The Execution Channel*), Tricia Sullivan (*Sound Mind*) Steph Swainston (*The Modern World*), Alastair Reynolds (*The Prefect*), Richard Morgan (*Black Man*), Justina Robson (*Selling Out*), Adam Roberts (*Land of the Headless*), Hal Duncan (*Ink*), Liz Williams (*Bloodmind*), and Neal Asher (*Hillclimbers*). And that's just early highlights from Gollancz, Orbit and Tor UK. Gollancz, especially, are also continuing to support new authors with books by Jonathon Barnes (*The Somnambulist*) and Joe Hill (*Heart Shaped Box*) looking particularly interesting, a view supported by Paul Bateman, who reviews Heart Shaped Box in this issue's review column, describing it as "without doubt the best thing I've ever reviewed for Vector".

To further support my hypothesis about 2007, I would like to bring forward one Charles Stross. Mr Stross had no new UK publication at all during 2006 – his last being the critically acclaimed *Accelerando* in 2005 (which came second in last year's reviewers' poll) – but is likely to have at least four books during 2007: from Orbit, *Glasshouse*, *The Atrocity Archives*, and the latter's sequel, *The Jennifer Morgue* (the US edition of which was reviewed in Vector 250), and from Pan

Macmillan the UK edition of the first of the Merchant Prince series, *A Family Trade* (which we have also already reviewed back in Vector 240). Now, Mr Stross is hardworking but he didn't write all these last year, it's just the way the publishing schedule has worked out – which could make the Awards lists for 2007 look very interesting.

After that slight digression, let's return to 2006 but still not talk about the reviewers' poll. Before I can get to that, I must mention a book that is not included in the poll: *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon* (St Martin's Press, 2006), the biography of James Tiptree, Jr by Julie Phillips. To try and give the poll a stronger basis this year I changed the criteria from past years to make only fiction eligible. As a result, the Tiptree biography was excluded – which did not go down well with some reviewers, who clearly considered this the book of the year. This was a view shared by many others in the BSFA, whose nominations made it as one of five non-fiction titles to make the BSFA recommended reading list. The book was reviewed in detail in Vector 249, with Lesley A. Hall describing it as about as good as any biography can get and observing that "there is a very powerful sense that this biography does what all biographies should do: justice to its subject".

So, finally, to the poll, which sees Geoff Ryman's *Air* being the reviewers' choice for the best book they read during 2006 – a selection which is supported by the wider sf community as *Air* was one of those rare books which won both the BSFA Award for Best Novel and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Three others have done this: *The Separation* by Christopher Priest, *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell, and *Take Back Plenty* by Colin Greenland. *Air*, which was also awarded the 2005 James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award, was reviewed back in Vector 242 by Claire Briaire – another illustration of the vagaries of the publishing industry, as it was published a year earlier in the US – who simply concluded that "this is a novel that you really have to read". Which is getting us dangerously close to a consensus, or at least as close as the sf community ever will. Our reviewers' comments ranged from "exciting, challenging, thought-provoking, fascinating and deeply enjoyable" (Penny Hill) to "enthralled me" (Peter Wilkinson), which just shows that Claire was right: this is one book you must read, particularly since it's now available in a very stylish paperback edition from Gollancz. Geoff Ryman has done particularly well in the poll as his 2006 book, *The King's Last Song* – a historical novel-cum-travelogue set in Cambodia – also features in the list with two votes.

Only two other books got more than two votes, and they are books which could not possibly be more dissimilar and still be discussed here. The first is Alastair Reynolds' Clarke-like big-dumb-object homage *Pushing Ice* (which was, appropriately, shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award last year), which according to Chris Hill is Reynolds' most assured book yet with "relationships between the people that are as important as the Big Science". The second is *The Last Witchfinder* by James Morrow – shortlisted for this year's BSFA Award – which was described by Dave M. Roberts as a "picaresque story of one woman's lifelong struggle to bring about the end of The Witchcraft Act with the use of rational argument, narrated by the Principia Mathematica", which "brilliantly succeeds in combining page-turning adventure with intellectual debate".

So the top three in the poll show the diversity of sf today, from pure sf through the near-future effect of new technologies to an alternative viewpoint on a history which never quite existed. The other books in the poll expand this

spectrum even further, from vampires in an alternative Moscow in *The Night Watch*, through *Nova Swing* and its playful noir approach to a meta-physical event and back to more core sf with *Icarus*. In total, seventeen books received two votes apiece, which does go some way to showing what was good during 2006: only five of them were not published last year. And the poll shows clear overlap with both the BSFA Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award, with Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *End of the World Blues* and M. John Harrison's *Nova Swing* appearing in both shortlists as well as the poll (and both books are reviewed in full in this issue's main reviews column). *Icarus* by Roger Levy features in the BSFA Award shortlist and the poll as does Liz Williams' *Darkland*. Of the four remaining titles on the Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlist one, *Hav* by Jan Morris, is included in the reviewers' poll, but *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart* by Lydia Millet gained only a single vote – which is unsurprising for a book published as a mainstream novel and only now getting real exposure in the genre. Of the remaining two titles, neither gets even a single vote. In the case of Brian Stableford's *Streaking* this is perhaps because it is only available as a limited, expensive, hardback. The absence of the final title, *Gradisil* by Adam Roberts, is more surprising, since it is a core sf title from a well known author. Maybe the inclusion on the Clarke shortlist and the availability of a mass-market paperback will change this for next year.

In the pieces below the poll contributors have explained just what they think were the best books they read during last year. As always, this is a fascinating collection of titles, showing the sheer variety of books that interest them, and for me this is what makes the poll most interesting: discovering, or being reminded of, what is worth reading. So, read the comments, examine the lists and decide who you agree with, who you don't... and then go and add all those titles that have captured your imagination to your wish-list.

... and let's hope I can start next year's piece with "what an amazing year 2007 was for science fiction".

Vector Reviewer's Poll for 2006

5 votes

Air by Geoff Ryman (Gollancz)

3 votes

The Last Witchfinder by James Morrow (Weidenfeld & Nicholson)

Pushing Ice by Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz)

2 votes

Kingdom Come by JG Ballard (4th Estate)

Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist by Rachel Cohn & David Levithan (Alfred A. Knopf)

The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters by GW Dahlquist (Viking)

Vellum by Hal Duncan (Macmillan)

The Carpet Makers by Andreas Eschbach (Tor US)

End of the World Blues by Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz)

Nova Swing by M John Harrison (Gollancz)

Icarus by Roger Levy (Gollancz)

The Night Watch by Sergei Lukyanenko (William Heinemann)

Hav by Jan Morris (Faber & Faber)

Temeraire by Naomi Novik (Voyager)

The Prestige by Christopher Priest (Gollancz)

Living Next-Door to the God of Love by Justina Robson (Macmillan)

Set This House in Order by Matt Ruff (HarperCollins)
The King's Last Song by Geoff Ryman (HarperCollins)
Darkland by Liz Williams (Tor)
Spin by Robert Charles Wilson (Tor US)

Recent Winners

2006: *Air* by Geoff Ryman (Gollancz)

2005: *9tail Fox* by Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz)

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

2003: *The System of the World* by Neal Stephenson (William Heinemann)

2002: *Light* by M John Harrison (Gollancz)

2001: *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman (Headline)

BSFA Best Novel Award shortlist

End of the World Blues by Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz)

Nova Swing by M John Harrison (Gollancz)

Icarus by Roger Levy (Gollancz)

The Last Witchfinder by James Morrow (Weidenfeld & Nicholson)

Darkland by Liz Williams (Tor)

BSFA non-fiction recommended reading list

The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Anthology, edited by Paul Kincaid with Andrew M Butler (Serendip Foundation)
Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century, edited by Justine Larbalestier (Wesleyan University Press)

Great British Comics, by Paul Gravett (Aurum Press)

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

Polder: A Festschrift for John Clute and Judith Clute, edited by Farah Mendlesohn (Old Earth Books)

Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlist

End of the World Blues by Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz)

Nova Swing by M John Harrison (Gollancz)

Hav by Jan Morris (Faber & Faber)

Oh Pure and Radiant Heart by Lydia Millet (William Heinemann)

Gradisil by Adam Roberts (Gollancz)

Streaking by Brian Stableford (PS Publishing)

[Due to the delay in publication of this issue, these awards have now been and gone. The winner of the BSFA Award for Best Novel was *End of the World Blues* (in, by all accounts, an extremely close vote), while *Nova Swing* took home the Clarke. — Ed.]

James Bacon:

Temeraire (Voyager, 2006) by Naomi Novik is alternative history at its most fantastic. The research and accuracy, to the lay military fiction reader like myself, is more than adequate to make this an excellent read. What it lacked in depth it made up for with research and good ideas. *The Man in the High Castle* (Penguin, 2001) by Philip K. Dick is, to me, his best work and what always impresses is how well this tremendously hard-hitting story is set within a very realistic and well-realised alternative history. John Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down* (Penguin, 2000) is an example of how willpower can fight cold hard steel militarism, as portrayed in the neutral townsfolk's reaction to invasion. Written in 1941 as a piece of propaganda, Steinbeck had met refugees from neutral countries, and perceived their situation with much clarity. *The Call of Cthulhu and other Weird Stories* (Penguin, 1999) by H. P. Lovecraft is edited and annotated by S. T. Joshi and gently educated me about Lovecraft without the fear of being bored academically to death. The book is a classic, the new insight refreshing. *Strange Itineraries* (Tachyon Publications, 2005) by Tim Powers is a superb selection of very neat short stories and one yearns for more.

Paul Bateman:

This Thing of Darkness (Headline, 2005) by Harry Thompson made the Man Booker Prize long list, but didn't make the shortlist. This is a travesty, as was the author's death. Thompson had written one of the best books I have read in years – David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* included. With Stephen King's *Song of Susannah* (Hodder, 2004) I have almost reached the Dark Tower. *Elemental: The Tsunami Relief Anthology* (Tor, 2006) edited by Steven Savile and Alethea Kontis was surprisingly satisfying. Best of all it's a book I reviewed for Vector 247 last year, so read that to find out why I thought it was brilliant. Next is Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* (reprinted Gollancz, 2006) and yes, I know I'm behind the rest of you, but at least you understand why it finally made it onto my list. Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys* (Headline, 2005) is a book alive with a carnival of exotic, congaing, cross-cultural characters. It's potty, brilliant, sophisticated and just plain fun to be with. Bring the rum and let's party on the beach to the wee morning hours!

Elizabeth A. Billinger:

Steve Cockayne's *The Good People* (Orbit, 2006) and Nick & Norah's *Infinite Playlist* (Knopf, 2006) by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan – two books about growing up and how hard that can be. *The Good People*, narrated by the protagonist as a old man, is quintessentially British. It's a quiet novel with a rural setting, isolated and unsupervised children, ancient and natural magic, and a horror that tiptoes onto the scene and leaps out at the reader when least expected. Nick & Norah is brash, 21st century Manhattan, full of music, teenage angst, confusion, first love and music. This isn't the slow-paced, lyrical language of 1940s rural England, this is all sharp sentences, fractured thoughts, and words your mother wouldn't want to hear. It's about the highs of learning the world, of loud music, of not giving a

fuck and it's about the lows of not understanding your own feelings and the vertigo of not giving a fuck. And it's about first love.

The quiet novel of children's games and lands of make believe is a novel of repressed feelings, terrible secrets and a story that can only close in on itself. The heart-on-its-sleeve, live fast and die young tale of Nick and Norah is ultimately optimistic in its choice to have faith and to jump breathlessly into life.

Claire Briaire:

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *End of the World Blues* (Gollancz, 2006) is a dark and complex blend of continent-spanning crime thriller and dimension-spanning science fiction. This novel follows a man and a girl with several identities each on a fast-paced journey to reassess painful memories, atone for past hurts, and live through the ends of their worlds. *Icarus* (Gollancz, 2006) by Roger Levy has a fractured narrative on three worlds in several times; a novel of personal and interplanetary colonisation; an exploration of trust and betrayal, politics and religion, truth and memory. I've been meaning to read Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (Gollancz, 2004) for over ten years but have been waiting to forget as many of the spoilers that I heard when everyone else read it as possible. With the film imminent, I had to seize the moment before a new generation of spoilers came along. Great book, and I thought the cinema version was a good story for a film too. After reading *The Separation*, though, it seems so straightforward... Kaaron Warren's *The Grinding House* (Canberra Speculative Fiction Group, 2005) is the best collection of Australian short fiction I read last year, and that's picking from a category that almost made it into double figures. Elegant, poignant, surprising and original. A deserving winner of its Ditmar award. Zoran Zivkovic's *Hidden Camera* (Dalkey Archive, 2005) is a story puzzle that teases the reader nearly as much as the protagonist and leaves just enough unexplained.

Gary Dalkin:

The Separation (Gollancz, 2004) by Chris Priest was a re-reading. Originally I had approached the book as another of Priest's brilliant stories of unreliable narrators, doubles, paradoxes and shifting realities, seeing the WWII setting as a different background against which to explore familiar obsessions. This time, along with a reading of *Double Standards: The Rudolf Hess Cover-up* by Lynn Picknett, Clive Prince, and Stephen Prior (recommended by Priest on his website as 'amazing' and 'a marvel of investigation, gripping, plausible...') the political context came into focus. That history is written by the victors is such a cliché we rarely give it thought. But perhaps it is so much more true than we like to consider that we need fiction to begin to see the truth. What if, far from being *The Greatest Briton* (TM), Winston Churchill unnecessarily prolonged WWII? What if, not in sf, but in reality, Britain could have been spared the worst ravages of WWII, spared untold death, destruction and economic privation, and The Holocaust completely negated? And if something as astonishing as this might in all seriousness be true, what else does it imply about our other

unquestioned assumptions? The Separation is a masterpiece of uncertainty, the perfect novel for the age of spin.

For my thoughts on Robert Charles Wilson's *Spin* (Tor US, 2005), David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer's *The Space Opera Renaissance* (Tor US, 2006) and Stephen Baxter's *Resplendent* (Gollancz, 2006) see my reviews (in Vector 248, 250 and 250 respectively). And my final selection is Jon Meade's *Paradox* (Bantam, 2000) a dazzling political planetary romance.

Chris Hill:

The first three choices for this year were very easy; I knew pretty much as soon as I read them that it was going to take something fairly spectacular to overtake them. Mary Doria Russell's *A Thread of Grace* (Doubleday, 2005) is a moving story of the plight of the Jewish population of Italy during WWII and the people who helped them. Matt Ruff's *Set This House in Order* (HarperCollins, 2003) is a stunning novel about the experiences of two people with Multiple Personality Disorder and was the winner of the 2003 Tiptree Award. My third selection is *Air* (Gollancz, 2005) by Geoff Ryman but what can I say about this that hasn't been said already? Winner of more awards than I have room to list and deservedly so.

The last two places could be entirely different on another day, but on this particular day they are: *Pushing Ice* (Gollancz, 2005) by Alastair Reynolds which is the best 'pure sf' novel I read this year. A mining ship gets captured in a bubble of accelerated time/space, but it is the relationships between the people that are as important as the Big Science. Reynolds's most assured book yet. And finally I have selected *Fragile Things* (Headline, 2006) by Neil Gaiman, a varied and entertaining collection. As always, not every story works for me, but there are some real gems in here.

Penny Hill:

Green Glass Sea (Viking Books, 2006), Ellen Klages' first novel, is a love letter to the joys of knowledge, especially scientific curiosity. While not sf, it should appeal to most readers within the genre. It has just garnered its first award, the 2007 Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. I'm sure more will follow. *Darkland* (Tor, 2006) by Liz Williams is a welcome return to the world created in *Ghost Sister* (her first published novel). As a consequence, the experienced reader can enjoy the fore-shadowing without new readers being totally in the dark. *Set This House in Order* (HarperCollins, 2003) by Matt Ruff won the Tiptree award for 2003 and *Air* (Gollancz, 2005) by Geoff Ryman won one or two awards in 2006 (the Tiptree, the Clarke etc). These very different books – one borderline psychological sf, the other closer to the sf heartland – are both exciting, challenging, thought-provoking, fascinating and deeply enjoyable. *Ghostwritten* (Sceptre, 1999) by David Mitchell is another borderline sf/fantasy work which I found more involving and satisfyingly structured than the same author's Clarke Award shortlisted *Cloud Atlas*.

Steve Jeffery:

I've noticed that apart from critical works – of which Adam Roberts' *The History of Science Fiction* and *The Arthur C. Clarke Award* critical anthology, edited by Paul Kincaid stand out –

no sf books have ended up on my best-of-the-year list. And as I'm not allowed non-fiction here, my five books are all poised between fantasy and mainstream.

I've rediscovered how good short fiction can be. Yann Martel won the Mann Booker with *Life of Pi*, but to my mind he's even better at short story and novella length. *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* (Harcourt, 1993) collects four stories, variously sad, moving, and touched with moments of grace – and also satisfying my penchant for splendidly oddball titles: both the title story and 'The Time I Heard the Private Donald J. Ramkin String Concerto with One Discordant Violin, by the American Composer John Morton', while 'Manners of Dying', consisting of nine (of a possible thousand) variations on a letter from a prison governor to the mother of an executed prisoner, is a performance worthy of the late, great John M. Ford. I'm not sure Hal Duncan's *Vellum* is really a novel, or that it makes a whole lot of sense (I shall have to wait for *Ink*) but it's exhilarating and bewildering in equal measure, and there's not a lot else like it.

L. J. Hurst:

Unless his health improves markedly, Kingdom Come (4th Estate, 2006) may be J. G. Ballard's last work. It came as a surprise – still markedly contemporary like his last two novels, but still remarkably different from them too. The problem of crowds has existed in sf from the days of Edgar Allan Poe but Ballard's political slant on them and their social construction in the new super-malls is a unique slant on the subject.

Ian R. MacLeod's *The Summer Isles* (Aio Publishing, 2005) has not (yet) found a British publisher despite its setting in an alternate 1940s Oxford. It has a melancholy but not pessimistic tone. Interestingly, I heard about it in a non-sf blog (the frequently interesting *Grumpy Old Bookman*). Trent Editions are based at Nottingham Trent University, and among their reprints, to compare and contrast with MacLeod is Storm Jameson's 1936 dystopia, *In the Second Year* (Trent Editions, 2004). Although she saw the threat of totalitarianism approaching I am not sure that modern-day MacLeod does not feel as if he portrays the spirit of the age more clearly. A paradox there, perhaps?

Tony Keen:

I didn't read many books that had their first publication last year, and most of those didn't impress me. Ryman's historical novel-cum-travelogue *The King's Last Song* (HarperCollins, 2006) did, but I can't describe it as science fiction. I did, however, read several good 2005 novels; the best were Charles Stross' extrapolation of future humanity in *Accelerando* (Orbit, 2005), and Justina Robson's *Living Next-Door to the God of Love* (Macmillan, 2005) the sequel to, and deconstruction of, *Natural History*. I also had cause to visit a couple of classic texts from the 1990s, Ken MacLeod's *The Stone Canal* (Legend, 1996) is an extrapolation of socialism and machine copies of human intelligence, and Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (Gollancz, 2006) is an investigation of identity and the secrecy of the Victorian world of magic, neither of which disappointed.

Paul Kincaid:

It's been a fairly poor year for fiction (no novel matches my real book of the year, *James Tiptree, Jr.: the Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon* by Julie Phillips) but a couple of titles have stood out. *The Brief History of the Dead* (John Murray, 2006) by Kevin Brockmeier was a stunning short story in *The New Yorker*, so the expansion into a novel was always likely to be a disappointment. But in the end the chapters in the city of the dead maintained the elegiac tone of the original perfectly, and the alternating chapters set in Antarctica were at least no disgrace.

Nova Swing (Gollancz, 2006) by M. John Harrison looks like the best science fiction novel of the year, except that I don't think Harrison writes science fiction and I don't believe that this novel is actually set in the future. But it's an exquisite way of writing about the past. Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *End of the World Blues* (Gollancz, 2006) shows us most clearly and comes closest to achieving what he has so signally failed to do in his previous two novels. *Farthing* (Tor US, 2006) by Jo Walton is a chilling account of the fascism in our own hearts and the best alternate history of the year. And for short stories nothing came close to *Polyphony 5* (Wheatland Press, 2005) edited by Deborah Layne and Jay Lake.

Martin McGrath:

This year a number of books by authors I've enjoyed in the past left me feeling disappointed.

For quite some time I thought M. John Harrison's *Nova Swing* (Gollancz, 2006) was going to find itself in that category. I have no idea exactly what I was expecting from a follow up to the excellent *Light*, except that, when I got to the end of *Nova Swing* the first time, I knew this wasn't it. There were aspects of the novel I really disliked – the fake-noir setting, the fact that one of the leading characters is always described as looking like Einstein – if felt lazy and boring and I confess it left me feeling quite angry. So I was a little bit surprised – and the several piles of books that sit by my desk waiting to be read were outraged – when I found myself picking the book up a couple of weeks later and started reading it again. I still don't think I can claim a firm grasp on what the book is about and, in parts, it remains frustrating but images and ideas from it frequently resurface in my mind's eye. I'm beginning to feel haunted.

Simon Morden:

This year, I have been mostly writing. And judging. So three books are re-reads from the Clarke Award shortlist, and I make no apologies for that whatsoever, these being: Ken Macleod, *Learning the World* (Orbit, 2005), Alastair Reynolds, *Pushing Ice* (Gollancz, 2005) and Geoff Ryman, *Air* (Gollancz, 2005).

Max Brooks continues to keep me awake at night (you utter git) with his brain-munching undead in *World War Z* (Duckworth, 2006). But I want to take the opportunity to highlight a fantasy gem: *Bridge of Dreams* (Ace, 2006) by Chaz Brenchley who is a proper wordsmith: he knows his craft, he knows how to tell a story, he knows how to entertain. He also drenches the reader with atmosphere, imagination and emotion: his prose is sensuous and lovely, even while

describing horrors beyond comprehension. It's still astonishing and depressing in equal measure that Brenchley can't get a UK publishing deal when his writing is as good as this. The second book – *River of the World* – is out in April, but only in the USA, with a faux romance cover that does no justice to the work inside. Aust Gate will have imports, though, and if you're a fantasy reader looking for something which is magnificently different, get these two books.

Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc:

Sergei Lukyanenko's *The Night Watch* (William Heinemann, 2006) has no post-modern irony and wink-at-the-reader knowingness, just low-key noir fiction with intrigue and political complexity in contemporary Moscow. With vampires, wizards, impending apocalypse and century long battles between light and darkness, of course. The End (Egmont, 2006), however, does have plenty of post-modern irony and wink-at-the-reader knowingness in a book whose title here means the possible conclusion of a series of children's adventures by Lemony Snicket featuring post-modern irony and wink-at-the-reader knowingness. Best read in instalments, just like... The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters (Penguin, 2006) by G. W. Dahlquist, which is a welcome return to Victorian values as the novel returns to the part-work format. A two-month ten-chapter adventure following the plucky Miss Temple and her disparate companions getting to the bottom of sinister goings on involving mysterious cults and larger-than-life baddies. Why has her fiancé dumped her without explanation? What is the secret of the glass books? And how many people are going to live to tell the tale? Naughtiness and stiff-upper-lipness complement the double crossings, diabolical contraptions and cliff-hanger endings. Margo Lanagan's *Black Juice* (Gollancz, 2006) has strange and unusual short stories that just glimpse into others' lives. And Kit Whitfield's *Bareback* (Jonathan Cape, 2006) is a twist on the traditional werewolf story where most of the population are lycanthrope and our non-lyco heroine is refreshingly down to earth.

Martin Potts:

Temeraire (Voyager, 2006) by Naomi Novik was a surprise delight and a perfect easy holiday read. This historic dragon scenario was certainly novel to me and the thought of air combat in the Napoleonic War was intriguing. No doubt the sequels will allow expansion to the characterisations. *Olympus* (Gollancz, 2006) by Dan Simmons is the sequel to *Ilium* and is a perplexing melange of far future, Shakespeare, the Trojan War and an alien threat. I found it compelling. One has to admire how Hamilton uses *The Naked God* (Pan, 1999) to tie up all the plot threads in a satisfying conclusion to a 3000+ page epic. Alastair Reynolds' *Pushing Ice* (Gollancz, 2005) was especially enjoyable for me as I heard the author read an excerpt at Worldcon in Glasgow.

Hero in the Shadows (Corgi, 2000) features one of David Gemmell's best loved characters: Waylander. It was with great sadness that I discovered, upon returning from the holiday after reading it, that Gemmell had passed away. His tragic early passing is tempered only by the tremendous tales he has left behind. He will be greatly missed.

Paul Raven:

In parallel with our ever-increasing engagement with the internet, it's been a busy year for the restless ghost of cyberpunk, which made its presence felt in a number of novels. Vernor Vinge's *Rainbow's End* (Tor US, 2006) took a short step into a frighteningly plausible future, where 'homeland security' and 'trusted computing platforms' have taken on a whole new meaning. Peering further up the temporal stream, David Marusek's *Counting Heads* (Tor US, 2005) also examined the ever-shrinking gap between mankind and his technologies, in one of the most impressive debut novels I have ever encountered. 2006 also saw a resurgence of pulp-style adventure as primary plot-engine. Two examples that struck all the right swashbuckling notes while simultaneously providing lushly detailed settings were Tobias Buckell's Caribbean-flavoured *Crystal Rain* (Tor US, 2006), and the stupendous feat of world-building that is *Sun of Suns* (Tor US, 2006), the first instalment of Karl Schroeder's new Virga trilogy. Both books demonstrate that hard, serious science fiction doesn't have to stint on action, tension and complex characterisation. Into an unnamed category all of its own came Roger Levy's *Icarus* (Gollancz, 2006), a dark parable, somewhat reminiscent of Heliconia-era Aldiss, which should be held up as an astonishingly skilful portrait of a psychopathic character, as well as a striking piece of literary science fiction in its own right.

Dave M. Roberts:

Two books stood out above all others in 2006. The best novel was *The Last Witchfinder* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006) by James Morrow. This picaresque story of one woman's lifelong struggle to bring about the end of The Witchcraft Act with the use of rational argument, narrated by the Principia Mathematica, brilliantly succeeds in combining page-turning adventure with intellectual debate, with the argument being played out both in the human world and in the world of books. The best story collection, for several years, was *Impossible Stories* (PS Publishing, 2006) by Zoran Zivkovic. This is a remarkable collection, not only for the quality of the stories themselves but also for the way that seemingly unrelated tales are formed into a cohesive whole in the mind of the reader, both within individual story cycles and the collection as a whole.

A Pleasing Terror (Ash Tree Press 2001), is a massive collection of all of M. R. James supernatural writings. A very attractive and well annotated volume, this is the definitive edition of his work in the genre. Then we have the revised text of *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman (Headline, 2005). Finally, Stephen Gallagher's short novel, *The Painted Bride* (Subterranean Press, 2006), is an object lesson in thriller writing. The story is mercifully free of any unnecessary padding and the result is tightly written, well paced, disturbing and relentlessly gripping.

Peter Wilkinson:

Air (Gollancz, 2005) by Geoff Ryman came to me with such firm recommendations that, I thought, it couldn't live up to them. But it did. The (mostly) resolutely realistic account of the impact of near-future technology on of an isolated central Asian peasant village enthralled me. In *The Carpet Makers*

(Tor, 2005) by Andreas Eschbach loosely-connected short stories without continuing characters successively open out from cliché desert planet to cliché galactic empire – but in a gradually emerging story that is deftly handled and totally original. *Darkland* (Tor, 2006) is standard science fantasy, weak on technology but, in Liz Williams's treatment, strongly evocative of character and locations across several planets make it succeed. Paul Park's *A Princess of Roumania* (Tor US, 2006) is a fantasy of a detailed, vivid and dangerous alternate world, with characters to match – especially the pantomimic but fully three-dimensional villains. And the American teenager who is really a princess – romantic cliché? Not in Paul Park's world. *Ilario* (Gollancz, 2006) is Mary Gentle's story of art, diplomacy and intrigue in another vivid alternate world – the 15th century of *Ash* but decades earlier and with a very different leading character and plot. Perhaps it aspires to less than *Ash* but what it aspires to, it achieves.

The SF Films of 2006

by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

It is fairly pointless lamenting the lack of hard SF on the big screen since, frankly, in these less artistically inclined times it is unlikely to yield the box office returns necessary to sustain more than the occasional oddity (exceptions like *Primer*, good as that film is, slip well below the big studio radar). But in 2006 there was some intelligent SF out there that showed the genre could escape from the gee-whiz techno-fetishism of the blockbuster showcase spectacle that (come on, admit it) we all love. Amidst the mediocrity that has defined this year's big names there have been some surprisingly intelligent entries that also, shock, provide entertainment. That this year provided as many examples of good sf as it did can only be applauded, even as we lament the more vacuous or self-worthy offerings plied by the major studios.



Donning the costumes and looking serious for the third time come those mutinous mutants mired in a miasma of moral ambiguity – *The X-Men*. Will it be curtains for mutant kind as a “cure” for their afflictions is about to be issued? Will two top thespians out-camp each other with portentous prognostications of victory and Armageddon? Will the disenfranchised angel-winged son of the anti-mutant executive turn to good(ish) mutantdom or bad(ish) mutantdom? Will Wolverine ever stop being such a pathetic macho bore? Surprisingly Brett Ratner’s “if it doesn’t move, make it move” ethic resulted in a perfectly serviceable piece of film-making. The battles are big, the stakes are high and any deficiencies with the rushed effects are glossed over by the sheer scale and exuberance of the spectacle. There’s even time for introspection and a bit of political ambiguity – just not as much as there would have been had Bryan Singer been at the helm. But Mr Singer had a superhero project of his own – the stupendously expensive *Superman Returns*. Having dumped Earth to “find himself in the stars”, dippy hippy Superman returns just in time for megalomaniac Lex

Luthor to cackle his way through another insane plan involving world domination. Lois Lane has given up the thought of having Superman’s kids (insert *Mallrats* quotes here as necessary) and shacked up with Mr Sort-Of-Alright-But-A-Bit-Boring and had a kid. Singer clearly reveres both the character (bizarrely – Superman is the most rubbish superhero ever) and the original Christopher Reeves outings. This proves to be both the film’s success and its undoing. Amidst all the seriousness, the mythmaking, the post-modern adding of angst, you are eternally grateful for Kevin Spacey’s barnstorming performance as Luthor. The film is a truly spectacular event picture of the old (i.e. Superman 1978) variety which doesn’t just bombard its audience with eye-candy but makes them wait a bit between the glorious set-pieces. The downside is that after an hour and a half it seems as though the ideas have dried up.

Inevitably as a genre gains mainstream attention the spoofs start rolling in. With effects technology becoming more affordable the opportunity to parody is becoming easier, especially when anyone in spandex automatically opens themselves to a certain degree of ridicule. Previous attempts include the sublimely idiotic *Mystery Men* and last year’s limp *Sky High*. With Jack Black donning the stretchy pants in *Nacho Libre*, trying to work his way through the lower ranks of the Mexican wrestling circuit to fund an orphanage, the superhero has been brought down to earth with a shuddering bump. Less low-key is Ivan Reitman’s hit-and-miss *My Super Ex-girlfriend*. Luke Wilson is the hapless fellow who makes the error of dumping Uma Thurman – hell hath no fury like a superwoman scorned. Her vengeance is relentless, but only sporadically amusing.

The last decade has seen a remarkable resurgence in the popularity of the horror film, but history repeats itself and we are seeing the fruits of success in the inevitable line-up of sequels and remakes (we won’t trouble you with the tedium of *The Fog* or demean ourselves wittering on about the PG-13 rated travesty *The Wicker Man*). So we had *Grudge 2*, a sequel to a re-make and a re-make of a sequel wherein Sarah Michelle Gellar (soon to be seen in *The Return* whose poster isn’t exactly the same as *The Grudge* at all, honest) passes the spooky reigns to another group of creeped-out strangers in a strange land. Hey, at least it’s not dubbed. More haunted houses in *An American Haunting* which is, well, like *The Haunting* (1963) but set in America. And not as good. Amiable enough, with a good turn from Donald Sutherland, the film-makers were clearly unsure how to market their film so added in a needless bookending device. We also had *Final Destination 3*, another entry in the guilty pleasure fairground ride of a franchise (this time they even set it in a fairground) where teenagers who escape their pre-destined death face gruesome and elaborately over-the-top demises. Although exceptionally graphic, the sheer loopiness of the set-pieces and the sense of ghost train joie de vivre makes this a great popcorn-muncher. And we saw Kate Beckinsale return, wearing her Kate Beckinsale Impractical Tight Black Number (TM), in *Underworld: Evolution*, an improvement on the first part but still a complete mess. It’s vampires vs werewolves again with our foxy vamp in the thick of the trouble. And of course, there was that sick bunny of a film *Saw III*, so successful that you can guess what we’ll be writing in twelve months time – and so revolting that they had to call ambulances to cinemas to aid distraught patrons. Well, it is exceptionally sadistic, relentlessly nihilistic and misogynistic (let’s see, she’s naked and tortured, he’s clothed and tortured...), but ultimately you never get to know any of the characters

except by their means of death. The twisty revelations are fun but by the time you get to them you're hoping everyone's put out of their misery quickly so that you can rush home and make a cup of tea. Eli Roth doesn't make this mistake in the similarly brutal, borderline xenophobic *Hostel*. Roth's ghastly frat boys stomp around Europe in search of cheap sex and drugs, their Animal House antics resulting in some very messy business in the heart of ex-Soviet Europe. The film engages precisely because Roth has invested time (arguably too much) establishing the characters.

Sean Bean fans will surely have rejoiced at the thought of not one but two horror films starring their man. *The Dark*, set in Wales, shot on the Isle of Man for tax reasons, has the actor living in a remote cliff-top house. His ex-wife and daughter arrive, and the daughter begins to see a ghostly girl who wishes to return to the land of the living. Unfortunately her return means that someone else must take her place in the world beyond. *The Dark* comes into its own because of its menacing monsters – a bunch of surly killer sheep. It almost manages to pull off this most unlikely of threats. Mr Bean also has wife and daughter issues in *Silent Hill*, a stylish adaptation of everyone's second favourite Konami video game franchise (the chances of a Dance Dance Revolution film seem surprisingly slim...). Ultimately it is too reverent to its source material (at one point the wife searches a desk, finds a key and later has to open a door with it – they may as well stick an energy bar in the corner of the screen) and as such comes across as a series of surreal zombie set pieces intercut with Mr Bean looking anguished and helpless. It does, however, look fabulous and is, surprisingly, centred almost entirely on the female characters. But it is very stony-faced in its dedication to being "serious" horror.

This is not an accusation that could be aimed at *Snakes on a Plane*. The title is the film, and as prime a concept as they come, with tough guy Samuel L. Jackson getting irate about those "oedipal" snakes on this "oedipal" plane. His job is to protect a valuable witness from assassination by a powerful crime syndicate. The syndicate's way around the problem is breathtakingly stupid and impractical – get the passengers impregnated with pheromones and let loose hundreds of poisonous, randy snakes on a jumbo jet mid-flight. *Snakes On A Plane* mostly lives up to its B-Movie premise with dumb jumps, scares and crass humour. There's more fun in the British horror comedy *Severance*, a sort of *Carry On Hostel*, as a group of itinerant office workers on a team-building exercise in Eastern Europe find themselves lost and under the watchful eye of some very nasty psychopathic killers. Featuring a cringeworthy motivational boss and the usual range of office caricatures (the toady, the stoner, the geek) the twist lies in the bloody demise of these fishes out of water. Meanwhile, *Slither* tried desperately to take the gross horror comedy back to the heights of Peter Jackson's most famous film, *Braindead*. Unfortunately it missed its mark, but it tried hard. Written and directed by James Gunn (Tromeo and Juliet, Dawn of the Dead remake and, er, Scooby Doo) it stars Firefly's Nathan Fillion as a hapless police officer in a small town investigating some very strange and sticky goings on. It's fun while it lasts, with an amiable cast, but the gags are only for chuckles and the gore's too gross for a non-horror crowd, but not gross enough to put it on par with *Braindead*. Still, it hit the spot better than *Scary Movie 4*, or the big screen debut of Ant and Dec in the overlong *Alien Autopsy*.

The immediacy of the horror film, its very disreputability

and links with grunge culture, has given it a distinct advantage when it comes to putting the finger on the pulse of audience expectations, at least at a basic level. Horror has consistently proved to be a highly profitable niche genre and the returns on often modest budgets are solid. The small budgets and high turnaround give horror much of its relevance – note how quickly the trend for creepy 12A horror gave way to the sadistic excesses of *Saw III* and *Hostel* post Iraq as horror films mirror society's fears (an almost identical reaction followed the Vietnam War in the 1960's). Cinematically SF has, by nature of its development time and general reliance on special effects technology, always had to catch up. Last year's responses started trickling in with Lucas's declared anti-Bush *Episode Three* and Spielberg's twin responses of *War of the Worlds* and the non-genre but extremely good *Munich*. Fortunately this year's offerings are less bombastic, more considered and offer some hope of revitalising the science fiction genre, which has recently been consisting of guys in spandex and big spaceships. These are dystopian science fiction films where the future isn't all good guys and bad guys, there's little in the way of extra-terrestrial interference and the metaphors relating to the current political climate are as clear as a freshly Mr Sheened window.



Three very different films all offered a bleak vision of our near future, but what is surprising given their diversity in tone and style – one is slick, one grimy, one animated – is how good they all were. *V for Vendetta* naturally attracted the ire of many – any Alan Moore adaptation gets a grilling regardless of quality (LXG was fair bait, *From Hell* was seriously underrated). But *V for Vendetta* told its story well, intelligently and packed in some action too, even if Matrix fans wanted more kung-fu and literary sorts couldn't take the noise. Add the politically radical message, favouring a sort of anarcho-communist future for Britain with terrorist acts aimed at the government, and the net result is one of the more thought-provoking pieces of popcorn fodder in years. There was more strife for Blighty in Alfonso Cuarón's adaptation of P. D. James's *Children of Men*, which offered a world of anarchy and violence as the population descends into nihilist self-interest following the failure of anyone to

conceive for nearly twenty years. If there is no future generation why bother protecting anything? Clive Owen stumbles unwittingly on a potential saviour of the future, putting his life in jeopardy and forcing him on the run in a police state on the brink of collapse. Cuarón films his dystopian future with a grimy realistic look that is at times astonishing – the immediacy of events reinforced by some of recent cinema's most memorable long takes. A bleak future also awaits an animated Keanu Reeves (no sniggering at the back there) in *A Scanner Darkly*, surely cinema's finest attempt at adapting Philip K. Dick. Undercover cop Bob Arctor must break a drug ring, a ring in which he finds himself the main suspect. A user of the highly addictive Substance D, his hold on reality becomes increasingly weak as the investigation progresses. Richard Linklater uses a rotoscoping technique to disorientate the viewer and place them in a world of hopelessness and paranoia – the drug talk moving from slacker stoner humour (a Linklater speciality) to outright hostility in a few hazy sentences. Any hopes that the ending would be less bleak than that of the novel are shattered.

More contemporary forays into the speculative or fantastical fiction have been attempted this year, with varying success. Unfortunately this year's *The Lake House*, featuring Keanu again, managed to (re-)make a perfectly acceptable modern Asian film in American for no readily apparent purpose and) throw any plausibility out of the window. The principle is loopyly charming – two people in the same house, separated by two years, form a slow romance by writing each other, a feat achieved by an apparent time rift in their postbox. Sadly the Euro-art-film pretensions and the way that the characters can interrupt each other mid-letter – how does that work then? – drain any suspension of disbelief. Tony Scott, the film-maker for whom the term intelligidumb was invented, returned with another Jerry Bruckheimer produced piece of slickness. *Deja Vu* gave us a reasonably intelligent (if you didn't think too hard), yet pacey story as Denzel Washington finds himself travelling back in time via some vaguely defined wormhole gubbins to prevent a terrorist attack, whilst managing to fall in love. Bridging the gap between the dystopian science fiction film and the superhero film was much derided *Aeon Flux*. Moving along at a pace that shows its roots as MTV's successful anime homage, the film's inventive visual style and parade of futurist surrealism never flags. Although ostensibly a live action interpretation of Japanese science fiction staples it nonetheless has the feel and design of a European science fiction comic, one where the ideas and vision supersede cohesion. Ultimately it fails because it tries too hard to make everything coherent, but this is a minor point for what is, for the most part, originally executed genre entertainment.

With the big three franchises off the radar for this year (the Narnia crew return in 2007, as does Mr Potter for what

we hope is a better outing than the pompous *Goblet of Fire*, while hopes of Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* fade into "what if...") territory) there seemed to be little for fantasy film fans to sink their teeth into. Even Tim Burton took time out after the mighty one-two of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and the sublime *Corpse Bride*. There was Gore Verbinski's cash cow (more on that later) and some smaller contenders. *Eragon* told the tale of a farm boy who found a dragon's egg and fulfilled his destiny defending his homeland from an evil king, played with lashings of ham by John Malkovich. The small British film *MirrorMask* looked gorgeous, but somehow didn't live up to its promising beginning. A ravishing triumph of film-making, but one where the heart was superseded by the design, this Gilliam-esque fairy tale is still well worth a watch. Speaking of Gilliam, he managed to return to something approximating his old form, not to mention some familiar themes, with *Tideland*, in which a young orphaned girl is left alone in her house on the prairie. Described by Gilliam as "Alice in Wonderland



meets Psycho', *Tideland* is funny, moving and strange. Pulling a stunning rabbit out of the hat following last year's insane superhero film *Zerbramen*, Osaka's most notorious and prolific filmmaker, Miike Takashi, came up with an epic fantasy unlike any other – *The Great Yokai War*. Filmed for a ridiculously low budget this is free-form imaginative fantasy at its finest. Bullied schoolboy Tadashi becomes the Kirin Rider at a local festival and is set the task of recovering the Great Goblin Sword. This is a required item because there is evil stirring. Tadashi is accompanied by a variety of yokai, spirits that inhabit all things, on a dangerous journey to confront the evil lord and save Japan from destruction. What sets *The Great Yokai War* apart is the sheer range and diversity of the creatures in its bulging bestiary; rubber necked women that snake around, umbrellas with tongues, walking walls, cuddly rodents, scaly fishermen, bubbling pollutant monsters, there's probably even a kitchen sink there. Over a

hundred unique creatures populate the frames of the film, all of them with distinct personalities. Less suitable for the kiddies is Tsui Hark's glorious return to form *Seven Swords* – a fantasy epic re-working of (surprise, surprise) – *Seven Samurai* in which a disparate band of heroes armed each with one of the titular swords do their damndest to stop the dastardly overlord from pillaging the land. This is exhilarating film-making, visceral and energetic, packed with scenes of superhuman endeavour, deep tragedy, betrayal and loyalty. More big blades abound in the (tragically straight to video here) CGI feature *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, a chaotic mismatch of alternate realities, fantasy and science fiction. It's a bit of a mess but who cares when it looks this good? There are motorbike chases, demons, giant robots, packs of savage dogs and hardly a moment goes by without some universe-threatening punch-up. Obviously those seeking realistic physics need to steer clear, but for sheer entertainment this is in a class of its own.

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest proved to be the year's most profitable film, indeed one of the most profitable films ever. The original was the sleeper hit of its year but the sequel went, inexplicably, through the roof. You'd have to be pretty po-faced not to have enjoyed every goofy minute of *Curse of the Black Pearl* and *Dead Man's Chest* offers more of the same, only bigger, louder and with larger coffers of doubloons to splash out on the production. But somehow the end results seem a little less enthralling – like coming off the best rollercoaster ride ever and going on again. It's still enjoyable but a little of the magic is gone. Keira Knightley goes all bodicey-feisty, Johnny Depp is superbly outrageous and Orlando Bloom still can't act for toffee. The basic premise seems to be to split everyone up in a convoluted way so that they can get back together in an even more convoluted way. There are some great set pieces, cannibals, kraken and all manner of cod proclamations. A similar principle was applied to *Mission Impossible III*, the feature debut for J. J. Abrams, who was the man behind *Alias* and *Lost*. There are more rounds fired than in a John Woo film, more big explosions than Bond and lots of gadgetry and techno stuff. *MI:III* is worth mentioning for the trailer alone – a brilliant piece of work that totally wrongfoots the audience. Sadly, though, the towering performance from Phillip Seymour Hoffman is all that there is to recommend the full feature; it's overblown, overlong and frankly just plain dull. The immediacy of hand-held camerawork that made *Children of Men* so immersive appears lazy here. If you've got a budget, buy a dolly. Far better in the gadgets and hi-jinks genre (Bond's back to basics approach excludes it from this round up) was the affable *Stormbreaker*, based on the popular books by Anthony Horowitz. This really is teenage wish fulfilment, as schoolboy Alex Rider finds himself capable of avenging the death of his adopted parent because he has inadvertently learnt the skills necessary to be a top British super-agent. Yes it's preposterous, but find a film listed here that isn't – *Stormbreaker* is fun, exciting and, more to the point (Pirates – that's you) coherent. Meanwhile *Déjà vu* gave us a reasonably intelligent (if you didn't think too hard), yet pacey story as Denzel Washington finds himself travelling back in time via some vaguely defined wormhole gubbins to prevent a terrorist attack, whilst managing to fall in love. Far more low-key was *The Thief Lord*, a nicely understated children's fantasy shot though an apparently muddy lens around the streets of Venice. It's an escape fantasy that takes two brothers into an underground world of homeless children under the protection of the self-styled Thief Lord. The way that the existence of magic is kept in doubt places the film ostensibly in the real world, but the melting plot of literary homage (Peter Pan, *Oliver Twist*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*) indicates a more fantastical outcome. An ideal Sunday afternoon watch with the kids.

Two lady in the water films vied for our attention. One, the teen-chick-flick *Aquamarine*, offered *Splash* (1984) with hunks, the other, *Lady in the Water*, purported to be a fairy tale. M. Night Shyamalan's latest was not greeted well by either the critics or the public. Caretaker Cleveland Heep finds a naked Narf in an apartment complex's swimming pool. She needs to return to the Blue World in the claws of an eagle but is being hunted down by vicious creatures that dwell in the grass. Shyamalan always manages to make the extraordinary appear ordinary – it is one of the things that makes his work so appealing – and *The Lady in the Water* continues the themes that are present in his other works. It has the potential to be a great little film, but unfortunately

that potential is never realised – the plot regularly grinds to a halt only to be kick-started by another revelation squeezed out of the knowledgeable but irritatingly tight-lipped Mrs Choi and some of the self-reverence is a touch tiresome.

Probably the most difficult films to categorise last year were *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Prestige*. The former, by director Guillermo del Toro, was moving and imaginative in a way quite unlike anything else released in 2006. Set in 1944 during the Fascist overtaking of Spain a young girl, Ofelia, is forced to live with her new step-father, an evil captain who treats human life as nothing more than an inconvenience. However, her new home has an old labyrinth, where she meets a domineering faun who tells her she must complete three tasks to claim her rightful place as princess of a grand kingdom. The contrasts between the magical realm and the hell of war make *Pan's Labyrinth* a fairy tale for adults – at times brutal, at times beautiful. Throughout the film you doubt everyone's motives bar Ofelia's, so the tension is high. This is magical film-making at its very best – Gilliam, Burton and Svankmajer rolled into one. And there was more magic in *The Prestige*, adapted from Christopher Priest's novel, as two stage magicians form a deadly rivalry. Assured and perfectly crafted, *The Prestige* benefits from tight scripting and a superb cast to make another (really, this is too much in one year) intelligent film for adults. Unfortunately the teaser trailers promised Batman vs. Wolverine, causing cinemas around the country to be invaded by fidgeting brats. Add some swearing please, Mr Nolan, and make the next one a 15 rating.

Perhaps the dearth of franchise excess helped things along but, almost in spite of itself, 2006 turned out to be a solid year for genre cinema.

The Winners (and there were many, many contenders):

Best SF: *A Scanner Darkly*

Best Fantasy: *Pan's Labyrinth*

Best Gruesome Horror: *Hostel*

Colin and Mitch are frequent contributors to Vector, and have been writing our annual film round-up since 1997. They are the authors of *Pocket Essentials* on David Lynch, Jackie Chan, Vampire Films, Horror Films, John Carpenter, and Tim Burton.

What Kind of Year Has It Been? SF on Television in 2006

by Abigail Nussbaum

Was 2006 a good year for science fiction on TV? On a trivial level, no, for the simple reason that with the exception of 1963, 1966, and perhaps also 1993, no year is a good year for sf on TV, not if one's definition of the genre extends beyond its outer trappings. It's been a long time, after all – at least since the by-now not-so-final demise of *Star Trek*, and probably for some time before that – since a television show dealt seriously with issues of science and scientific exploration, or with the effect that emerging technologies will have on individuals and communities. What passes for sf on our television screens more often than not uses the accoutrements of the genre to look backwards or at the present, but when was the last time you watched a television series that had something meaningful to say about, or even seemed to have given any thought to, the future?

If we were to step away from this rigid, and perhaps overly restrictive, definition of what constitutes science fiction, however, 2006 would still be a bad year for sf on TV. Established, respected shows failed to live up to the promise of their debut seasons. New series burst onto the scene amidst much hype and high expectations, and promptly fell flat on their faces. With one or two exceptions, the best that genre fans had to look forward to in 2006 was pulpy silliness and carefully maintained mediocrity.

In 2006, the writers of the new *Battlestar Galactica* moved away from what was arguably their most distinctive storytelling choice: the ultra-slow pace at which their story advanced. Between the 2003 miniseries which serves as the show's pilot and the middle of the second season, which aired in the summer of 2005, less than six months had elapsed in the show's internal chronology. 2006 saw screenings of the second half of the show's second season and the first half of its third, in which the gap between episodes widened to span weeks, months, and, on one memorable occasion, years, and bounced the last human survivors from one end of the galaxy to the other, with stops for psychotic admirals, life under Cylon occupation, and yet another signpost on the path to Earth. The slow pace at which *Galactica's* earlier episodes advanced allowed the show's writers to treat the various issues which arose out of their fractally-fascinating premise as interlocking cogs in a single, gigantic machine – the question of the morality of torturing a machine is raised in the first season episode "Flesh and Bone", in which Starbuck tortures the Cylon Leoben, and later recurs in the second season episode "Pegasus", in which the characters discover that Admiral Cain has been tormenting a Cylon prisoner for months.

In *Galactica's* current, more disjointed format, issues, no matter how weighty and complex, are raised for the first time, dealt with, and dismissed forever in the space of a single hour. Meanwhile, the show chugs onward and onward, burning up plot points and character nuances by the boatload. A single episode deals with civilian groups who seek a rapprochement with the Cylons. Another discusses the emerging black market economy within the fleet, the question of reproductive rights and responsibilities post-apocalypse, the resentment that survivors of the Cylon

occupation feel towards those who collaborated with their oppressors – sealed boxes all, from which almost nothing escapes, with no ramifications for the show's big picture. Is it any wonder, therefore, that the big picture has begun to fade away? It's very difficult, these days, to describe in any but the vaguest and most general terms what *Galactica*, beyond being a story about the survivors of a genocidal attack, is actually about, or what the thrust or direction of its current storyline is. This is not to say that all of *Galactica's* problems over the last year can be ascribed to a pacing malfunction – the shift from slower-than-real-time plot progression to massive leaps and bounds is only a symptom of a deeply-rooted problem. *Galactica's* writers seem to have set themselves no more lofty a goal than to shock their audience, sometimes through neat visual moments or plot twists – *Galactica* breaking atm0 in "Exodus II", a downloaded Six opening her eyes in a Cylon basestar and being confronted with the sight of Baltar in "Downloaded" (by far the most accomplished and enjoyable episode the show produced in 2006, although its impact is sadly diminished by the writers' haphazard treatment of the ramifications of its events), the 'One Year Later' title card in "Lay Down Your Burdens II" – but more often, in recent episodes, through facile political allegory. It is this emphasis on sensationalism, on the big moment as opposed to the string of little moments, the painstaking continuity and careful groundwork that characterized its earlier seasons, that is at the heart of *Galactica's* implosion over the course of the last year – for the sake of a few excited squeals from viewers and political pundits, Ronald D. Moore and his writers have sacrificed the integrity of their invented universe, their characters, and their story.

Battlestar Galactica's grim attempts at realism notwithstanding, the overwhelming majority of televised sf is pulp, falling somewhere on the spectrum between space opera and fantasy with ray guns. 2007 will see the series finale of a long-running exemplar of this approach, the Sci Fi Channel's *Stargate: SG-1*. In honor of having reached its 200th episode, *SG-1* broke with its peril-on-distant-planets formula this fall and aired an episode which was, at the same time, a lampoon of and an homage to sf TV. The result was both endearing – "Never underestimate your audience," *Farscape* alumnus Ben Browder, in character as newcomer Colonel Mitchell, earnestly exhorts the television producer who visits the characters in the hopes of picking their brains for ideas for a movie (which later becomes a television show) based on their exploits, "they're generally sensitive, intelligent people who respond positively to quality entertainment" – and frustrating – the show's writers play for a laugh a scene in which the female lead of the show-within-a-show mirrors her real-world counterpart's complaints that she is rarely given good material to work with. The meta-episode concluded with an Asimov quote which characterizes sf as pulpy and childish in its form, but significant and philosophical in its message. Which is quite a self-justifying, not to say self-aggrandizing, attitude for the *SG-1* writers to take – it doesn't matter that our product is, at best, mediocre, they seem to be saying, because even though we have nothing of substance to contribute to it, we're part of a grand literary tradition – but might actually be an accurate description of the more ambitious kind of pulpy sf on the airwaves.

Such as the new *Doctor Who*, Russell T. Davies's reboot of the iconic series returned in 2006 for a second season, as well as spawning two spin-off shows. In the show's extremely successful 2005 debut season, Davies quite obviously made the choice to prioritize his story's emotional component, with plot acting as a backdrop or a catalyst to the exploration of the characters' personalities. This decision was borne out by the success of *Doctor Who*'s first season, due mainly to masterful performances from Christopher Eccleston and Billie Piper as, respectively, a man tormented by the choices he's made and a woman desperate to escape the tedium of a life too small for her. Davies extended this approach to the show's second season, in which David Tennant took over the role of the Doctor, but with less successful results, for the simple reason that the characters which were supposed to be the show's foundation were as ill-defined and hastily thrown together as its plots. Tennant is an extremely capable actor, but he's given nothing to work with in his attempt to make the Doctor his own. What he comes up with is a patchwork – half warmed-over and ill-fitting leftovers of Eccleston's performance, half the mannerisms and attitudes of the character he played in Davies's 2005 miniseries, *Casanova* (which might explain why the most successful episodes in the second season were "School Reunion" and "The Girl in the Fireplace", which both reposition the Doctor as an interstellar lothario, his companions taking on the roles of the lovers with whom he has a string of intense but fleeting affairs). Without the sustained weight of the ninth Doctor's character arc to lend it gravitas, *Doctor Who* devolves into the sum of its parts – a silly little show with very little to say.

A similar lack of substance seems to afflict the two spin-off shows set in the *Doctor Who* universe. *The Sarah-Jane Adventures*, starring Elisabeth Sladen as the Doctor's former companion, bills itself as *Doctor Who* for kids (what was the parent show's target audience, one wonders), and delivers precisely that. In an almost note-perfect repetition of the New *Who* premiere "Rose", Sarah-Jane's life is invaded by a curious, slightly bored, slightly unhappy young girl (this time, in deference to the show's mandate, an actual child) who is at first terrified, and then quickly entranced, by the discovery that the universe is so much larger and stranger and more dangerous than she had ever imagined. By insisting on such slavish fidelity to their source template, the *Sarah-Jane Adventures* writers squander the potential inherent to their main character, who, although touched by the Doctor, should not actually be the Doctor. In her appearance in "School Reunion", Sarah-Jane struck a cord with old and new fans alike because she was someone they could see themselves in, and someone they could hope to emulate – a human who, armed only with the knowledge that there is more to the universe than most of us suspect, would still go out of her way to investigate suspicious happenings. In her own show, Sarah-Jane's ordinariness is done away with – she wears a scientific analysis device on her wrist, has a talking super-computer, and even a sonic lipstick – and the result is nothing but a *Doctor Who* clone with very little personality of its own.

If *The Sarah-Jane Adventures* is *Doctor Who* for kiddies, then *Torchwood* is *Doctor Who* after dark – from its inception, the show was described as the antithesis of the candy-colored, family-friendly *Who*. Dark, sexy, and edgy were the adjectives used to describe it – the *Angel* to *Doctor Who*'s *Buffy*. Or perhaps the *Spooks*, or the *Ultraviolet*, or the *X-Files* – at one point or another over the course of the show's first season, *Torchwood* has imitated, cribbed, or outright stolen from each of these shows, as well as appropriating the plot

of, and vast stretches of dialogue from, the movie *Fight Club*, and cannibalizing its own parent show by presenting a poor man's version of the second season *Who* episode "Love & Monsters". *Torchwood* has certainly been trying on a lot of hats, but absent from this ever-changing wardrobe is the one marked *Torchwood*. After 13 hours spent in the show's universe, there is still no indication of what *Torchwood* is trying to be – beyond, that is, a ratings success – or of what makes it unique and not simply an imitation of better and more interesting shows.

It certainly doesn't help that from a technical standpoint, *Torchwood* is very nearly an unmitigated disaster. The not-untalented cast have been burdened with characters who have barely a single redeeming trait between them – a bunch of liars, thieves, rapists and murderers whose complete moral bankruptcy is matched only by their self-righteous obliviousness to it – as well as frequently painful dialogue, and the show's plotting runs the gamut between silly and so mind-bendingly awful that it goes right through absurdity and out the other end (the mid-season battle between a metal-bikini-clad Cyberwoman and a pterodactyl has surely earned its place in the annals of camp). Perhaps worst of all, *Torchwood* wastes the charisma of its lead character, and of the actor portraying him, transforming *Doctor Who*'s delightful Captain Jack into a humorless bore so tormented by the many and sundry horrors of his past that he barely even notices that his underlings have nervous breakdowns on a weekly basis. In spite of its liberal borrowing from a host of shows, *Angel* remains *Torchwood*'s primary influence and point of reference, and the show's writers work hard to equate the two protagonists – even going so far as to periodically punctuate their episodes with shots of Captain Jack looking down on the city from atop a high building, coat a-billowin'. Even *Angel*, however, wasn't entirely bereft of a sense of humor, and it was the fact that he was capable of putting aside his own pain in order to try to alleviate the pain of others that made him heroic – only two of the many points which seemed to have escaped the attention of the *Torchwood* writers when they set out to create their own version of Joss Whedon's show.

At the other end of the scale from pulp sf is crypto-sf: shows whose sfnal elements are counteracted by contemporary, largely realistic settings. The last few years have seen a proliferation of such shows – most of them short-lived – due to the breakout success of 2004 debut *Lost*. *Lost* started out incredibly strong, combining sfnal mysteries with character exploration – both through flashbacks which revealed the characters' pasts and closely-guarded secrets, and by charting the process by which relationships and communities emerged among the plane crash survivors as they made a life for themselves on the island. By the time 2006 rolled around, however, that show was gone, and *Lost* had written itself into irrelevance. Every level of the show – the plot, the characters, the relationships – is now dedicated to achieving a single goal – the perpetuation of a status quo which will allow the show to stay on the air almost indefinitely without ever amounting to a coherent narrative (or, as the show's co-creator Damon Lindelof put it in a 2006 interview: "How can you ever possibly think that 'Lost' will end in a satisfying way? [Executive producer Carlton Cuse] and I can almost guarantee you that it will not.") There may be a very great deal happening on screen – new characters are introduced and promptly killed off, stretches of tedium

are punctuated by shootings, kidnappings, and sex in the jungle – but at the end of the day the viewers are left right where they started – with more questions than answers (and, if these questions do occasionally change, this is more to do with the fact that older questions are forgotten and left by the wayside than with a tendency on the writers' part to resolve the issues they raise). The characters are by now so firmly entrenched in their one-sentence definitions – the doctor with a savior complex, the fugitive with a heart of gold, the self-loathing con-man, the fat guy – that they have long since ceased to be likable or even interesting. As, indeed, has the show.

A soothing balm for viewers frustrated by *Lost* can be found in the BBC's *Life on Mars*, one of the few bright spots in the outgoing year's sf TV landscape and the complete antithesis of the American juggernaut. Like *Lost*, *Life on Mars* is a high concept show that works hard to conceal its sfnal heart, to the extent that one sometimes wonders whether it even exists. In 2006, Manchester police detective Sam Tyler is investigating a series of murders when he is struck by a car. He comes to in 1973, still named Sam Tyler and still a policeman, but now working for Gene Hunt, a gruff, violent, bigoted drunkard who thinks nothing of beating up suspects or tampering with evidence. For the most part, *Life on Mars* is a fairly straightforward (and often simplistic) buddy cop show, with the added twist that the disagreements between Sam and Gene are rooted not only in their different personalities but in the gap that divides their generations. There still remains, however, the nature of Sam's displacement – is he insane, or a time traveller, or in a coma, or some combination of all three?

Interspersed with Sam's everyday life and police work are constant reminders of his predicament – he hears doctors and nurses discussing his condition, catches occasional glimpses of 2006 Manchester superimposed over the 1973 version, is addressed by the people on his television set, and can't stop dreaming about a mysterious woman in a red dress. Amazingly, these elements all tie together – by the end of the show's first season, a substantial number of the questions raised over its course have been answered. We know why Sam returned to 1973, and what some of his hallucinations mean, and the show's writers have promised that its second and final season (which began screening in February 2007) will put the remaining questions to rest. This willingness to tell a single, finite story is a rare artifact on both sides of the Atlantic, as is the seamless integration of sfnal and mimetic plot elements, but these qualities are dwarfed by the show's overall technical excellence – the uniformly superb acting, the clever plotting and dialogue, and most of all, the incredible work done by the show's set and costume designers, who lovingly recreate the early seventies right down to the paint schemes and the wallpaper.

On the cusp between pulp sf and crypto-sf lies *Heroes*, a new show about emerging superheroes which made a triumphant debut in the fall. With a main cast numbering in the double digits, each with their own supporting cast, as well as several villains and at least half a dozen separate yet slowly converging plotlines, *Heroes* is about as close as one can get to an on-screen comic book. From a technical standpoint, the show is nothing to get excited over: the acting is, at best, mediocre; the dialogue is stilted; the writing revels in cliché. What keeps the show afloat is first the sheer tonnage of its plot progression – no other show crams as much into 42 minutes, or does so as effortlessly – as well as the swift pace at which the writers raise questions, answer them, and use those answers to raise yet more

questions. With so much happening on screen at any given moment, the show's technical deficiencies become harder to spot, while another simple truth becomes glaringly apparent – that however problematic its parts, there's no denying that *Heroes*'s whole is just plain fun, popcorn storytelling at its very best. With only a dozen episodes under its belt, it's still quite dubious whether the show's writers can sustain this ephemeral sense of whimsy. *Heroes* could easily become another *Lost*, its writers so terrified of being asked to pay off the loans of their audience's patience and indulgence that they scuttle their own creation in order to make sure that it never arrives at the point where questions have to be answered. It remains to be seen whether *Heroes* has the resilience of its parent medium – whether, at the end of one extended storyline, its writers can simply come up with another. Newly minted fans will have to wait nervously, but at least there's every indication that the wait will be quite enjoyable.

I started this essay by pointing out how little of what passes for science fiction on our television screens is actually concerned with the central questions of the genre. As I come to its end, it occurs to me that what differentiates the good pseudo-sf from the bad is a willingness to address the central questions of any genre, and, more importantly, an awareness of the kind of story one is trying to tell. *Battlestar Galactica* has been lauded by mainstream critics for eschewing sfnal clichés, but these same critics ignore the fact that the show revels in the clichés of other genres – the war story, the spy story, the life-under-occupation story – while trusting that their juxtaposition with a space setting will help hide the show's general predictability and lack of originality. *Doctor Who* and its spin offs borrow their personalities from other shows, and *Lost* has done away with the need for a personality entirely, existing only as a puzzle that can never be solved. *Life on Mars* and *Heroes* succeed where these other shows fail because their writers have an idea of the kind of story they'd like to tell, and, at least thus far, the courage to tell, and finish telling, that story regardless of mercenary considerations. Irrespective of genre, these are rare qualities on the television landscape, and the fact that there exist as many as two shows which evince both indicates that 2006, while it may have been a bad year for science fiction on television, was a good year for television in general.

Abigail Nussbaum's reviews and essays have appeared in Strange Horizons, The Internet Review of Science Fiction, and the Israeli SF quarterly, The Tenth Dimension. She blogs on matters genre otherwise at Asking the Wrong Questions <<http://wrongquestions.blogspot.com/>>.

A Year in Short Stories

Claude Lalumière:

This article must start with a disclaimer: I've barely scratched the surface of the SF and fantasy stories published in 2006. So this is in no way a "best of"; rather, it's simply a brief discussion of the ten stories, among those I had the opportunity to read, that most impressed me.

One trend in SF and fantasy that I'm particularly enjoying at the moment is its growing global consciousness, an embracement of perspectives other than the traditional Western point of view of English-language genre fiction. Not that such an approach was absent in the past (Lucius Shepard, most obviously, repeatedly challenged the dominant status of that perspective), but it was too rare. I'd like to point out four such stories from this year that struck me as particularly noteworthy.

The first is by Paolo Bacigalupi, who is one of the most startling new voices to emerge in recent years. His "Yellow Card Man" (*Asimov's*, December) is a harrowing picture of an Asia devastated by global capitalism. In "Femaville 29" (*Salon Fantastique*, Thunder's Mouth Press) Paul Di Filippo's utopian streak once more emerges, in a story that oozes with yearning for a better world. Geoff Ryman's political fable "Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter" (*F&SF*, October/November) deftly navigates its tightrope balancing act between fantasy and reality. The most powerful 2006 story I've read, though, is Jay Lake's harsh and uncompromising "The American Dead" (*Interzone* 203), a haunting tale exposing the insidiousness of damage resulting from the cultural exportation of the American Dream.

Cyberpunk is still alive and well thanks to Cory Doctorow, whose brash, utopian, and subversive "Printcrime" (*Nature*, January 2006) is an iconic snapshot of what the subgenre stands for and can still accomplish.

One of my favourite tropes in fantastic fiction is the creation of a world slightly askew from our own, in which the oddness is taken for granted by the inhabitants of the fictional world. Two excellent such tales from 2006 are Tim Powers' *The Bible Repairman* (from Subterranean Press; the title almost says it all) and the singularly evocative "Salt Wine" (*Fantasy* 3), by Peter Beagle, which paints a world in which the existence of merfolk is accepted fact. For me voice is the most important ingredient in fiction, and in this wondrously strange tale the voice is pitch-perfect and mesmerizing.

Also eerily strange is Neil Gaiman's "How to Talk to Girls at Parties" (in *Fragile Things* [William Morrow], and surely one of the best short-story titles ever), in which two party crashers discover that the universe is vaster, scarier, and closer than they ever imagined.

Perhaps the most amusing story of the year is James Alan Gardner's journey across Canadian folklore, "All the Cool Monsters at Once" (*Mythspring*, Red Deer Press).

Finally, there's the thorny problem of *Lust for Life: Tales of Sex & Love*, a 2006 anthology I coedited with Elise Moser. Ten of its 21 stories can be counted as SF or fantasy, and of course I love them all. It seems unfair to exclude them, but also I wanted to include them too much. So I compromised with myself and decided pick my very favourite of the ten and

mention that one: Catherine Lundoff's dark, haunting story of love gone awry, "Emily Says".

Paul Raven:

I've not been following the SF short story scene for very long, but I definitely know when a piece of work pushes my buttons. And as far as SF stories set in near-contemporary situations are concerned, Chris Beckett's "Karel's Prayer" (*Interzone* 206) stands head and shoulders above the pack. Using the classic (but increasingly plausible) trope of cloning to explore terrorism, torture and ethical ambiguity, Beckett immerses the reader in the narrator's perspective, producing a rare situation wherein the reader actively sympathises with a repellent character. "Karel's Prayer" also shines a light into the murky corners of law and government, where secret police and shadowy political pressure groups play fast and loose with the statute books to guarantee the results they need. Beckett's ability to show us modern civilisational horrors without moralising or lecturing us is his greatest strength – the mark of a writer who really has something to say about the increasingly confusing world we live in, and who isn't afraid to say it.

I'm also a bit of a sucker for the high-tech branch of the genre, and there's been no sign of the Vingeian technological singularity becoming a *passée* theme, at least when well treated. Gareth L. Powell's "The Last Reef" (*Interzone* 202) manages to use the trope without falling prey to the uber-geek techno-worship that often comes as part and parcel of it. While there's more than a hint of gritty post-apocalyptic cyberpunk scenery, Powell's characters are drawn with the believable motives and real human flaws that stories of this ilk often lack; many readers are put off by the casual assumption that posthumanism is a desirable end-point. Transcendence is certainly not what Powell's protagonists are seeking, but it is thrust upon them by circumstance, allowing the narrative to cross the plausibility barrier and leap into the realm of *sensawunda* without leaving the reader behind. While I feel there's still plenty of room for the more playful material that Stross and Doctorow have made their trademark, stories like "The Last Reef" bring a welcome breeze of empathy to the proceedings by humanising the technological experience instead of technologising the human experience.

David Soyka:

"After Midnight," by Alison Campbell-Wise (*Fantasy Magazine* 4), is a brutal riff on Cinderella. Narrated by a cynical private investigator hired by the handsome prince to find the whereabouts of the mysterious girl at the ball, it inverts the cruel stepsister trope to strip bare the worst – and best – of people, who turn out not what they at first appear. Disturbing stuff. Speaking of disturbing, also of note in the same issue is Ben Peek's "Under the Red Sun", a creepy meditation on bioethics and religious faith. There is no Revelation, only a sense of impending doom.

To stay with this theme, Richard Calder's "After the Party", (serialized in *Interzone*) is another installment of his artful depravity. Prostitutes imported from a parallel reality called Babylon service clients in an alternate Victorian England. An aspiring whore seeking her first professional climax

encounters a member of the subversive Jack the Ripper society, which believes the revolution depends on ridding society of the prostitutes. The result is a very, very weird love story.

Feeling Very Strange



Jeffrey Ford's "Bright Morning," in which a writer who reviewers refer to as "Kafkaesque" meets his alter-ego in a series of Kafkaesque events, dates back to 2002, but since it was re-printed last year in the slipstream anthology, *Feeling Very Strange* (Tachyon), it gets in under an exception. It pokes fun at the whole notion of genre and book publishing categorization. Ford here isn't as much like Kafka as he is a funnier Philip K.

Dick. One of my all-time favorites of any year.

"Skunk" by Justin Courter (*Paraspheres*, Omnidawn), excerpted from a forthcoming novel, concerns a social misfit with a strange affection for bathing in skunk musk; his resulting personal isolation may be imperiled by meeting a woman who has a similar fetish for the smell of fish. I'm not sure what the point of this affliction is supposed to be (perhaps it will be evident in the novel), but the style reminds me of John Collier. It's just fun to read about this guy's obsession with stink and how he goes about satisfying it.

Also just for fun is "On the Air" by Edmund Morris (*Heliotrope* 1). A supposed transcript from a television show hosted by Hugo Gernsback in an alternate post-World War I America, this story is a whirlwind of literary and historical references. Think Howard Waldrop on amphetamines.

Claire Brialey:

By my standards, 2006 was a notable year of short fiction, in that I read considerably more short fiction during 2006 than I usually would. In particular, I was able to compare and contrast a considerable number of Australian collections and anthologies because we'd been on holiday and imported them. The 2004 and 2005 volumes of the *Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt (MirrorDance Books), both contained a readable range of the good, the very good, and the not-entirely-working-for-me. For me, though, the best Australian science fiction, fantasy, and horror of 2005 was to be found in Kaaron Warren's compelling collection *The Grinding House* (Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild).

Also from 2005, *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales* (Agog! Press), needed to be read in small doses since I discovered that there is such a thing as a surfeit of giant monsters; and I came a little late to Margo Lanagan's acclaimed second collection *Black Juice* (available from Gollancz in the UK, with an additional story) – which I found, somehow, insufficiently science fictional for my tastes. There were several particularly well-written stories but if I hadn't been told I

wouldn't have even tried to read them as sf. I was considerably more impressed by both the genre focus and the sense of completeness in Lanagan's first collection, *White Time* (originally published in Australia in 2000, and now available in a new edition from Eos).

Genuinely from 2006, though, were two more Australian small press anthologies: *c0ck: Adventures in Masculinity* (Coeur de Lion) and *Eidolon* 1 (Wildside Press). *c0ck* contains stories that aim to "question and problematise the male perspective from within" and I found it, on the whole, a better idea than it is a thing. Which sounds as though I'm trying to make a gender politics point, until you realise that at least a small part of the point of this book is the fun you're meant to be able to have with double entendre on the title. *Eidolon* (following the now defunct magazine) took a deliberate policy of featuring authors from outside Australia but had just as high a hit rate of good stories from writers who were new to me as from more familiar names.

To be fair, not all the short fiction I read in 2006 came from Australia. North America was represented, at least in editorial form, by David Moles and Jay Lake with their resplendent concept of *All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories* (Wheatland Press; 2004); mostly containing original stories, it closes with a reprint ("You Could Go Home Again") from national treasure Howard Waldrop. Heading back to Europe, I was prompted by reading Zoran Zivkovic's novel *Hidden Camera* to sample two of his linked collections, *Seven Touches of Music* and *The Library*. All translated by Alice Copple-Tosic, you can read about them in Vector 247 and I can't recommend them enough. At Eastercon I bought *The Highway Men* (Sandstone Press) from author Ken MacLeod, who was trying out his own take on the cosy catastrophe and now promises to turn the idea into a novel, and at Novacon I bought *Time Pieces* (Sword Publishing) from editor Ian Whates; it's British through and through and contains more original takes on time travel than I had thought still possible.

Martin McGrath:

I've read so many good novellas in the past year that the temptation is to declare some sort of renaissance for the form.

Two I particularly liked were by Lavie Tidhar, and both were published by Pendragon Press. "An Occupation of Angels" surprised me by being a really taut, exciting thriller – something that the cover artwork and the title really don't hint at – while "Leaves of Glass" in *Triquorum* One was an extraordinarily intense piece of writing. I also enjoyed both "The Djinn's Wife" by Ian McDonald (*Asimov's*, June) and *The Highway Men* by Ken MacLeod (Sandstone Press) and I'm pleased to see them both on the BSFA Awards shortlist.

But the best novellas of the year, for me, both came from PS Publishing and both sneaked out right at the end of the year – Robert Charles Wilson's *Julian: A Christmas Story* and Robert Reed's *Flavors of my Genius*. Beyond sharing a publisher and both appearing in December, both novellas are similar in that they build upon instantly familiar sf tropes. Reed's novella has humanity seduced and transfixed by the power of imagined worlds. The story plays games with reality in a way familiar to anyone who has ever seen *The Matrix*, but *Flavors of my Genius* is a subtle and clever

exploration of love and loss and the things we need to make us human. *Julian*, meanwhile, is set in a post apocalyptic world where global warming has transformed the globe and mankind has reverted to a feudal state where objects from the past are treated with a mixture of fear and reverence. It's the sort of thing I usually pass over, but here I was gripped from the opening sentence. PS Publishing's hardback editions are immensely satisfying artefacts, but Wilson's writing is more than comfortable in these plush surroundings and *Julian* is a surprisingly layered story given its relative brevity.

Beyond the novellas mentioned above, I thought both *Interzone* and *Postscripts* got stronger with every issue last year. I thoroughly enjoyed *Long Play* (Elastic Press), a collection of music-themed stories, and small press magazines like *Jupiter*, *Hub*, *Albedo One* and *Forbidden Worlds* all played their part in demonstrating the continued vitality of the short story on this side of the Atlantic.

Niall Harrison:

The advantage of going last in a situation like this is that I can piggyback on the recommendations that have gone before. So I'll note that the extra story Claire mentions in *Black Juice* is "The Point of Roses", and that it's (in my opinion) deservedly on the BSFA short fiction ballot this year; but I'll also second Martin's recommendation of "The Djinn's Wife", which is the best of several stories Ian McDonald has now published set in the world of River of Gods, and which should probably win the short fiction award. And I'll back up David's assertion that Lavie Tidhar had a good year: the standout for me was "My Travels with Al-Qaeda" (*Salon Fantastique*, Thunder's Mouth Press), a fragmentary but intense meditation on the aftershocks of terrorism. And I'll emphatically second Claude's recommendation of Paolo Bacigalupi's "Yellow Card Man" (*Asimov's*, December, rounding out a strong year for that magazine); when Bacigalupi puts together a collection, it's going to be one of the must-have books of its year.

Speaking of collections, 2006 was a pretty good year, including Jeffrey Ford's *The Empire of Ice Cream* (Golden Gryphon), Theodora Goss's *In The Forest of Forgetting* (Prime), Alan DeNiro's *Skinny Dipping in the Lake of the Dead* (Small Beer), Ian R. Macleod's *Past Magic* (PS Publishing), Alastair Reynolds' *Zima Blue and Other Stories* (Night Shade Books) and Stephen Baxter's *Resplendent* (Gollancz). Almost all of these followed the almost-standard procedure of featuring major new original stories; particularly of note are the masterful novella "Botch Town" in Ford's collection, the elegiac 1,000,000 AD-set "The Siege of Earth" in Baxter's, and the affecting multiple-universe tale "Signal to Noise" in Reynolds'.

The stand-out short story writer of 2006, though, was M. Rickert. A number of typically dark, intense stories appeared over the course of the year – such as "A Very Little Madness" (*FS&F*, August) or "You Have Never Been Here" (the only original story in *Feeling Very Strange*) – but the capstone was the appearance of her debut collection, *Map of Dreams*, from Golden Gryphon. Rickert's stories range from mythic recreations to contemporary fantasies to tales that may or may not be fantasy at all (in situations where that choice really matters: a mother being presented with the chance to end war forever in "Anyway", for instance) to one near-future

science fiction tale (the extraordinarily acute "Bread and Bombs"). And of course there's the title story, a long and complex time travel novella, a compelling exploration of loss and grief, and a frame for the rest of the book all in one. Rickert's work is notable for her command of voice and detail: she knows what all readers know, that who tells the story matters. Which is, coincidentally, another reason you should read her.



Claude Lalumière <<http://lostpages.net>> is a writer, editor and critic; his story "This is the Ice Age" appears in *The Year's Best SF 12*, edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer.

Paul Raven reviews for *Interzone* and *Strange Horizons* as well as *Vector*, and blogs with an inexhaustible energy at the *Velcro City Tourist Board* <<http://www.velcro-city.co.uk/>>.

David Soyka reviews short fiction for *Black Gate* <<http://www.blackgate.com/>>, and other stuff for venues including *Strange Horizons* and *SF Site*.

Claire Brialety is one of the editors of the *Nova* Award-winning and Hugo-nominated fanzine *Banana Wings* and reviews for, among other places, *Foundation* and *Strange Horizons*.

Martin McGrath has written a daunting number of reviews for *Matrix*, and is the editor of *Focus*.

Jonathan Barnes – *The Somnambulist*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 320pp, £9.99, t/p, ISBN 978-0575079427

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Those crazy Victorians seem to be such a rich seam of material for so many modern authors, and we here in the science fiction corner seem no more immune to their whisky charms than anyone else. Cue the entrance of Mr Jonathan Barnes 'the renowned impresario' (it says here), with his new work of sensational fiction *The Somnambulist*. Who is the eponymous sleepwalker? Well, interestingly he isn't the central character of this pulp Victorian world – that particular honour belongs to illusionist and part-time detective Edward Moon.



Moon is an independent fellow, nightly performing a magic show in his very own theatre. Once a dazzling orb in the firmament of fashionable society, he has long since passed his zenith. Nowadays, as well as making a respectable living with his magic show he also serves as an agent of last resort for the London constabulary in particularly peculiar cases. Moon's long-time companion, not to mention a staple of his stage act, is a giant of a fellow known only as *The Somnambulist*, a downright queer fish who drinks nothing but milk and communicates only via a small blackboard and chalk.

Frankly, it's all a bit of a rum set-up.

Moon is called upon to assist in the investigation of the death of a Mr Cyril Honeyman, found dead in the street having apparently leapt from an upper window. Needless to say, Mr Honeyman's death proves to be anything but suicide, and is in fact linked, by a

skein of logic so torturous as to be almost physically painful, to an underground plot to bring the city of London to its knees. Aligned against the forces of anarchy are, in order of increasing effectiveness: the Metropolitan Police, shadowy government departments, even murkier secret societies and, finally, Edward Moon and *The Somnambulist*.

Can Moon, in one last blaze of perspicacious glory, decipher the slim clues before him and save old London town from a formidable, unknown terror?

The Somnambulist, as I've already said, is a rum old set-up and no mistake, and I'll be blown if I know quite what to make of the thing.

For instance, despite claiming to be set just after the turn of the century, clinging to very coattails of the Victorian era, *The Somnambulist* really owes allegiance to no particular period. Most of the 'Victoriana' herein is divertingly painted scenery rather than authentic background detail. All the boxes are ticked – there are grotesques, repressed and repugnant desires, Dickens-esque caricatures (indeed, Barnes recycles some of Dickens' character names), plus if you've read Alan Moore's *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen* or Mieville's New Crobuzon novels, then you'll feel at home, and probably appreciate the hints of a much deeper and darker history.

In the end though this is a less exacting or satisfactory read than either of those because *The Somnambulist* doesn't add anything to our collective folk memory of 'Old London Town'; preferring rather to simply exploit the pre-existing vision. So the milieu feels more born of 'dream logic' than experience: Barnes tells you you're in Old London Town rather than showing you, and since *The Somnambulist* is set in an era determinedly devoted to Realism (with a capital 'R'), it all feels just a little too arbitrary to work effectively. Moore's *League* and Mieville's New Crobuzon are both similar hyper-realities. Each is a twisted vision of our own world, but they are buoyed up by the overwhelming detail and description arrayed behind them – in Moore's case by the 'reality' of the other fictions contained within it, in Mieville's by the sheer descriptive force of his prose. But Barnes' story can't match either of those.

And I'd be interested to hear why the book is called *The Somnambulist* when the eponymous enigma plays so small a part in the proceedings. Despite his large size, this minor cipher could be excised entirely from the text with no significant change to the plot (only the title).

In the end, *The Somnambulist*, is a promising read, but tries to do too many things at once, leaving it unfocused and episodic, as though the writer had produced it while himself caught up in a London fog.

REVIEWS

EDITED
BY
PAUL N.
BILLINGER



Andrew Butcher – *The Time of the Reaper*

Atom, London, 2007,
378 pp, £5.99, p/b,
ISBN 978-1904233947

Reviewed by Ben
Jeapes

A good YA novel gets rid of the adults so that the kids can have their fun undisturbed. Andrew Butcher achieves

that in spades by wiping out the entire global population of over-18s. A good YA novel can also be enjoyed equally by the target audience and by adults, and here he is less successful. This is aimed squarely at teen readers who aren't that interested in ideas or good writing but who like a good adventure, and it won't find much of a readership outside that group.

A mysterious plague with a 100% mortality rate affects only adults: flu-like symptoms at first, death within about 48 hours. As their world collapses around them, the book follows a group of teen personality types carefully selected for maximum mutual incompatibility. We follow the kids from the birthday party where the ominously capitalised Sickness is first heard of (and the plot almost dies, stillborn, of inertia), through to the collapse of civilisation as we know it and the first tentative hurrah of the survivors as they fight back against the forces of anarchy. There are chilling images that show this really is it. The group clusters around a short wave radio set as a frightened kid in Brooklyn Heights describes Manhattan burning. A hospital is surrounded by a traffic jam full of corpses, some of whom have been shot by the police and army who were trying to defend the place before the plague got them all. And then our hero turns and runs because he hears the far-off wails of newborn infants in the maternity unit, and he knows there simply isn't anything he can do to help.

That's the strengths. But ...

If only the characters weren't so perfect. They talk clearly and fluently, conveying exactly the right amount of information needed to avoid ambiguity, down to the use of clauses and subclauses if necessary. Even the uneducated yobs are fully articulate tributes to the state system, while the hero can look at books being burnt and think that there go the building blocks of civilisation. Quote. Viewpoints shift all over each page as the author tells us what is going on inside different heads, then suddenly drops in a physical description in lieu of a pronoun – instead of 'him' or 'her', the speaker may suddenly be described as 'the brown haired boy' for no reason except that apparently we needed reminding. No nuance goes knowingly unexpressed, no opportunity to shoehorn in some infodumping unused.

But these just annoy. What *affronts* is the ending. The plague is of alien manufacture, designed to soak up the

opposition of planet Earth but leave a useful slave force. On the last page, the aliens come in to land. The kids have held it together through the deaths of their parents, the collapse of their world and a pretty good battle. It's *Lord of the Flies* on a global scale and, by the skin of their teeth, the Ralphs have triumphed. Wouldn't you want to read more? *Survivors* for the iPod generation? But no, all the preceding has been rendered moot because now we get a humdrum alien invasion, as if Butcher was a little ashamed of trying his hand at serious sf and wanted to win back the lowest common denominator readers. A great shame.

The target audience will go 'wow!' and buy the sequel. Meanwhile, if any teenager comes up to you and asks for a good book on global plagues, point them at *Earth Abides*.

John Clute – *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror*

Payseur & Schmidt, Seattle, 2006, 162pp, \$45.00,
ISBN 978-0978911407

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

There was a time when it seemed likely there might be a third monumental encyclopedia to join those on Science Fiction and Fantasy co-edited by John Clute. The *Encyclopedia of Horror* never came to pass. But the theme entries, or some of them at least, seem to have been prepared, because that is essentially what we have gathered in this slim, stylish volume. At least, the thirty short essays here are crowded with cross references not only to other entries in the lexicon but also to entries in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* and to entries in an encyclopedia that does not appear to exist.

The theme entries, particularly in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, were the critical heart of the work, setting out a framework by which fantasy might be discussed. Above all, they laid out a contentious structure for fantasy: Wrongness, Thinning, Recognition, Return. In this lexicon of horror, Clute very deliberately sets out a parallel structure: Sighting, Thickening, Revel, Aftermath. That this is a conscious echoing of the fantasy structure is made explicit in the entry on Horror in which he sets the two structures side by side: fantasy he likens to a progression from Autumn (Wrongness) to Summer (Return), while horror takes us from Spring (Sighting) to Winter (Aftermath). In other words, on this model horror is a drear cousin of fantasy.

To my mind, wrongness, thinning, recognition and return provide a recognisable model for only a limited sub-set of what I would consider fantasy (it describes *The Lord of the Rings* and its offshoots perfectly, but bears no relationship that I can perceive to *Little, Big* or *Mythago Wood* or most of the stories by Borges, or any of a host of key texts in contemporary fantasy). So I find the new structure, so artfully duplicating its predecessor, similarly unconvincing. At its best it fits a certain archetype of supernatural fantasy (there is, curiously, no entry for 'supernatural' here) in which



something vile enters the world (sighting), its first disturbing effects are explored (thickening), horror is let loose (revel), and finally it is either banished or rules (aftermath). But I am far from certain that all horror literature fits this model, and therefore I am far from certain what it is meant to tell us about horror literature as a whole.

Which is not to say that this book does not provide a valuable resource for any critical discussion of horror. The problem is that like the other literatures of the fantastic, fantasy and science fiction, horror is easy to recognise and difficult, if not impossible, to define. And because we know, or think we know, what it is we are pointing to when we say science fiction, or fantasy, or horror, it is easy to dismiss the genre as no more than a succession of tropes and traits. Horror, by this count, is simply a literature that instils in the reader a sensation of horror, but such a sensationalist definition ('affect horror' in this lexicon) allows no room to go beyond feeling into serious critical analysis. The inestimable value of this book is that it does provide a language for talking about horror that takes us beyond mere sensation. I may not agree with some of the terms and some of the analysis presented here, but I suspect that all critical discussion of horror from this point on will make use of this vocabulary. The downside of this, of course, is that we are therefore saddled with Clute's linguistic idiosyncrasy (as the discussion of fantasy now has to contend with terms like 'wainscotting'). Revel, for instance, here acquires a reference at odds with familiar usage of the term. A clearer explanation of how and why certain of these terms were arrived at would have expanded the book somewhat, but would have been welcome for all that. Clarity, however, is only rarely a by-product of Clute's lexicographical precision, even sentences that appear to be in plain English are loaded with so many allusions that it becomes difficult if not impossible to untangle the entire intended meaning of any statement. At one point, for example, he casually uses the word 'prestige' in the sense coined by Christopher Priest, so no dictionary will help explicate that particular sentence.

Having said at the beginning of this review that the lexicon appears to be the theme entries extracted from a putative Encyclopedia of Horror, I should point out that there are sufficient clues to suggest that this is a recent work, perhaps even a work in progress. I am not just referring to the frequent citing of books and stories from 2005 and 2006. It is notable, for instance, that throughout the book Clute repeatedly and casually calls science fiction a mode of fantastic literature. This is a radical new departure in the thinking of a critic who has, hitherto, stoutly maintained that science fiction is a form of realist fiction. I can only assume that this sea change is a recent phenomenon, and it does inform the whole book.

Finally, and briefly, I should note that each essay is accompanied by a full page black and white illustration by a different artist. Some are crude, some are complex, some seem to capture the unsettling tone of the subject matter, some seem comic, but taken together they mean that this is not only a valuable, perhaps an essential work of criticism, it is also an extraordinarily handsome volume.

Mat Coward – *So Far, So Near*

Elastic Press, Norwich, 2007, 212pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0955318108

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

In a genre as rooted in action, and novel action at that, as the fantastic can seem, the importance of voice can sometimes be overlooked. Yet the greats all have distinctive voices. It is one of the reasons why they are great. Imagine a laundry list written by Christopher Priest or, possibly more apposite in this case, M. John Harrison. You know the author within two sentences.

Which is not to say that, on the evidence of this collection, that Mat Coward is 'great', but he has a very distinctive voice. It is a voice I like very much – a vernacular I know, simple and yet subtle – and this choice of material suits the voice perfectly. I know the locations he writes about, and I've met the people who live in these stories – well some of them, anyway. If you're looking for wild flights of fantasy then you will be disappointed. If you want different ways at looking at us, now, then you should find something of interest here.

My personal favourite is 'We Have Fed You For a Thousand Years', a post-industrial, post-ironic meditation on what constitutes 'entertainment' in these jaded days, and screamingly funny in a quiet, relentless way that reminds me of a favourite Steve Bell cartoon. Headbanging as a sport? A spectator sport? A televised sport? Yet the story isn't just funny. There is anger and outrage here, commentary upon what we are prepared to accept today – and shouldn't – disguised as a parable about what we will accept tomorrow.

Equally angry, and a description of literal alienation that is so matter of fact that I defy any reader not to scratch their head and wonder how they hadn't seen it like that before, is 'Now I Know It's Name', about a refugee, a cat and a jaw aching well meaning social worker. This should possibly be the bookend of the volume, with its companion piece, 'Time Spent in Reconnaissance' – about an inscrutably alien trade mission. For a writer so seemingly rooted in the mundane, Mat Coward creates exceedingly good aliens – whether space aliens, aliens from another continent or aliens of another sex – seemingly knowable yet, ultimately, not, and sets them against 'our' efforts to comprehend them (and failing, mostly). Sondra in 'Remote Viewing' is not only American and a woman, she is an older American woman, and young Joe on his National Service is so far out of his depth he doesn't know he is drowning. Only he doesn't drown. He survives, changed but not really understanding how he is changed, like so many of the protagonists of these tales.

As I say, if you are looking for a primary coloured splash, this isn't the place to look. The colours of these stories are far more subtle, and mostly found in contemplation, when observations and insights creep up all unexpected. Like so much that is English, first glance at these stories may make them seem innocuous, but a deeper reading reveals surprising insights and passions. Not every story is a gem,



but Mat Coward covers a lot of ground, and there are enough bright, shiny jewels to make this collection well worth acquiring, and remarkable value for money.

Elastic Press is one of the small presses where the discerning reader can find distinctive voices, voices not always heard in the clangour of the mainstream. Be discerning. You will be rewarded, mostly with laughter at unexpected moments.

**David Devereux –
Hunter's Moon**
Gollancz, London, 2007,
192pp, £18.99, h/b
(reviewed in proof),
ISBN 978-0575079856
Reviewed by Dave M.
Roberts



Jack is a government agent. He is, as he describes himself, a musician by choice, a magician by profession and a bastard by disposition. With publicity selling it as 'perfect for fans of both Andy McNab and Buffy', *Hunter's Moon* is one of those novels involving a secret government organisation that not only acknowledges the existence of supernatural forces, but is actively fighting them. In this case, the organisation itself is largely off stage, with the story related in the first person by Jack. Breaking down the nice snappy description shows a distinct imbalance in his three aspects. Jack the musician consists of occasional references to his playing blues in an open-mike night as part of his cover. A cover which appears to involve making himself as conspicuous as possible. Jack the magician plays a surprisingly small role; at moments of the 'high-octane' action he sometimes has to rely on magical skills. The author's note assures us, in a patronising don't-try-this-at-home way, that the magic is not actually real. To be honest, as most of the magic seems to involve blood, murder and death, I'd be very worried about anyone who wanted to try it at home. Jack the Bastard is a definite understatement. Complete and utter misogynistic shit is somewhat nearer the mark. All the women in this book, without exception, are either of evil intent, weak or just plain incompetent. When most of the female characters are introduced we get a fairly detailed description of their physical attributes and how Jack feels about them sexually, which is notably lacking for the male characters. When we get to the scene which seems to involve an attempt to break his spirit by giving him a really great blowjob, you do start to wonder if the whole thing is intended as a parody.

David Devereux is clearly attempting to create a thoroughly unpleasant anti-hero, and in this he succeeds in spades. Having the first person narrative delivered by someone so repellent – and he really has no redeeming features whatsoever – ensures the tone of the whole book is set by his personality. As there is nothing that makes the

character interesting or engaging, this tone soon leaves a very nasty taste.

Anyway, the story itself concerns his attempts to penetrate a powerful coven of witches who are out to assassinate the prime minister. No rational explanation of this is forthcoming, so we have to take it on trust that there is a good reason for it. Plot-wise, the book is a fairly ordinary thriller following a pretty standard story arc, with Jack going undercover, losing another undercover agent to the group (a woman, naturally), tracking down and killing members of the coven, before going in all guns and magic blazing in a bid to rescue the agent and save the day. There is plenty of action, excitement and close calls which can occasionally make for an exciting read, but this is so often interspersed with wading through turgid writing and info-dumps, not to mention the misogyny, that those elements get overwhelmed.

I can't comment on how it compares with Andy McNab, but any self respecting Buffy fan would probably hurl this at the wall in disgust after the first couple of chapters. I can only assume that Gollancz have published this on the back of the success of David Devereux' memoirs of his life as a professional exorcist. *Hunter's Moon* is a thoroughly loathsome book, which reads like a disturbed adolescent male's power fantasy.

Hal Duncan – Ink
Macmillan, London,
2007, 614pp, £17.99,
h/b, ISBN 978-
1405052092
Reviewed by Steve
Jeffery



As befits a work in which everything – characters, worlds, acts and betrayals – is endlessly replicated in a confusing kaleidoscope, *Ink*, the second half of *The Book of All Hours*, begins,

slightly confusingly, on Volume Three.

Ink is less a sequel to its predecessor, *Vellum* (reviewed by Martin Lewis in *Vector* 243), than the second half of a thousand-plus page story (or perhaps more accurately an overlapping collage of stories), albeit one with a twenty year break between the end of Volume Two, at the end of *Vellum*, and the opening of Volume Three. It is now twenty years after the Evenfall, the war precipitated by Metatron and his angels for the vacant throne of God, swept across the palimpsest multiverse of the *Vellum*. The *Vellum*: a book, a manuscript and a blueprint and mutable operating code for the universe, written in living ink on the skin of angels in a language of power known as the Cant. Or, in one present day incarnation, a box "crammed full of papers – loose scraps and notebooks – pages yellowed and leather bindings brittle as autumn leaves" in the possession of Guy Reynard, handed down from his grandfather, Jack Carter, in a note dated Palestine 1929.

The first jolt follows almost instantly, as we read the story of a Jack Carter, under observation in an asylum after filing off his horns and cutting off his own wings with a pair of shears. Obviously, we are no longer in Kansas, Toto. This Jack claims never to have had wings, to be a changeling. He almost convinces Guy, his doctor, although the more obvious explanation is that this horrific self harm is a dissociation from a world in which his friend, Thomas Messenger, Puck, has been beaten to death by a couple of a fay-bashing thugs. This scenario, with Thomas/Tom/Puck as the murdered innocent, Jack, scary and deranged with grief, and Guy, is one that recurs time and time again (literally) throughout *Ink* and *Vellum*. Meanwhile the dislocations pile thick and fast. In this world, America is America, Britain is Albion, and the bedside Gideon speaks of Our Saviour, Lord Adonis. And we're still only in the Prologue.

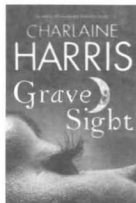
As the book itself opens, we are launched into a play within a play, staged by Guy, Jack, Tom and Joey as travelling players visiting the medieval fiefdom of a Duke's castle. This unfolds like an anarchic and Dionysian (and eventually gory) version of *Hamlet's* 'The Mousetrap' as played by Mike Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius ensemble in their Harlequin and Columbine drag. This is all great fun, but something of a disconcerting shift from *Vellum's* mixture of Sumerian mythology and the trenches of World War One. Still, if you are going to range over the whole of time and space, and start rewriting the world on the fly (as Guy sets out to do, in an attempt to break the cycle of loss and sacrifice endlessly played out by his friends), you have to expect a certain amount of confusion. I think, *Ink* sometimes pushes these abrupt shifts too far (and too long) for the reader's patience: I found myself skip reading many of the later episodes of gratuitous mayhem in which Jack Flash and Joey Pechorin stalk each other as avatars of anarchy and repressive order through the streets and malls of a bleak future Glasgow known as Kentigern, to a running commentary from a late night pirate radio DJ Don in an airship floating above the city. It all gets a bit much, plus for some reason I couldn't shake an unfortunate image of Jack as *Torchwood's* Captain Jack Harkness. To an extent, the book's solipsism is heavily underscored by these episodes, as if the 'Magnificent Seven' of the cast – Tom/Anna/Jack/Joey/Guy/Don/Seamus – a seven-souled being forever trying to break the cycle of myth and history and find a way to make itself whole, are the only people who matter (or even really exist) and anyone else is so much cannon fodder.

Ink, like *Vellum*, can be as maddening as it is fascinating, as its plot threads shift abruptly, often without warning, across the whole cycle of human history and mythology, taking in Sumerian and Mesopotamian pre-history, Orphic Mysteries, pre-war Palestine, the Tower of Babel, the Cathar and Templar heresies, near future dystopias, and even a 1940s sci-fi spoof (*The Suns of S'thum*, as by Lewis Spence) full of wayward apostrophes and a handy Buster Crabbe style plot summary. It's also scattered with a number of neat jokes ("The Book does not play James Joyce with the Cosmos") and you really can't fault anything that takes a good dig at the loony theorising of Baigent and Leigh et al along the way. "Peachy keen", as Jack would say.

Do our heroes (and heroine) win? Well, sort of. The pastoral Epilogue ends on a note of grace and explicitly

reveals The Book of All Hours for what we've known it all along: a love story, in search of its own 'happy ever after' ending.

Charlaine Harris
– *Grave Sight*
Gollancz, London,
2006, 263pp, £9.99, h/b,
ISBN 978-0575078833
Reviewed by Paul
Bateman



Harper Connolly is not your average twenty-four-year-old independent woman. She can tell dead people. She can tell what, but not who, caused their deaths.

Harper is used to hostility in her line of work, as many of her clients think she's in league with the Devil. With her stepbrother Tolliver, who doubles as her manager and bodyguard, she travels to the Ozarks in the Southern States of the US to find the body of a missing teenage girl, Teenie Hopkins. The locals believe Teenie's boyfriend, Dell, killed her and buried her body in the woods before shooting himself. When Harper finds Teenie's body she learns this is not the case, and there are those who do not want her to find out anything more, putting her and Tolliver in danger.

Sounds like a set up for a Dean Koontz, so why is *Grave Sight* published by Gollancz Romance? I'd never heard of this imprint before. The name and the picture of a dagger through a love heart like a biker tattoo, makes me think that they're aiming at adolescent female Goths waiting for *Buffy* to make a comeback. (Somehow I don't think I fit their target audience, as I'm not female, would prefer *Firefly* back and wear slippers.) I'm not sure if the publishers think this book's meant to be edgy romance or a thriller with a slushy streak; either way the romance/slush is minimal in *Grave Sight*. Harper has a bit of a fling with a police officer, but it's neither overly lovey-dovey nor sexually explicit. If anything *Grave Sight* is more of a murder mystery with a supernatural overtone. Perhaps Gollancz Suspense would be a better imprint (though I expect to be paid if this name is taken up).

But for those of you who aren't as shallow as me trying to pigeonhole books just to make them easier to categorise and review, you'll be wanting to know is *Grave Sight* a worth the time and money. Well the answer is yes and no. There are better books. There are worse ones. I'm not fussed either way.

The characters of Harper and Tolliver are reasonably well drawn, though less said about why Americans seem to insist on using surnames as first names the better. Harper is very self-aware and is conscious that her gift is limited and that her clients are often hostile towards her, as though she had killed the dead people she finds. I thought this an interesting insight that showed a good understanding of how people really behave. However, much of the book is hardly original. The idea that a lightning strike caused Harper's ability to

find the dead is clichéd, and the plot unfolds like many standard mysteries, and the final revelation is hardly unexpected. Ultimately, I'm not put off reading anymore from this series, in which I presume Harper looks for her missing sister, probably in the next book or the one after that or so on, but then again I can't claim that I'm itching for the next Harper Connolly mystery. With reviewing, I'm often looking for The Next Big Thing or something to tear apart, but with *Grave Sight* I've had to settle with likeable, but in the end, indifferent.

Brian Herbert and Kevin J.

Anderson –
Hunters of Dune
Tor, New York, 2006,
524pp, \$27.95, h/b,
ISBN 978-0765312921
Hodder & Stoughton,
London, 2007, 625pp,
£7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-
340837498

**Reviewed by Ben
Jeapes**



After many years and two prequel trilogies we reach *Dune 7*, the series finale and direct sequel to *Chapterhouse: Dune* based on detailed notes left by Frank. A group of refugees led by the latest Duncan Idaho are fleeing the Honored Matres (evil and generally not very bright counterparts to the Bene Gesserit) and the unnamed Enemy that approaches the former empire. A New Sisterhood is evolving from the fusion of more forward-thinking Honored Matres and Bene Gesserit which will be the only viable opposition to the Enemy when it arrives. Face Dancers in the knowing or unknowing service of the Enemy are infiltrating everywhere; and the Guild is splitting between its Administrators, who just want the Guild to do its job and get ships from A to B, never mind how, and the Navigators, who will do anything for spice, so the actual Navigating.

It's easily readable, which puts it well ahead of *Dunes 2-6*. One of the authors has quite a neat turn of phrase, making up for the other who writes like a sixth former (you can picture the ghosts of the !!!s he must have wanted to put at the end of sentences in the strangely unengaging action scenes). What it doesn't do, sadly, is really give you a reason to read it, unless you're a *Dune* completist.

There are (of course) multiple story lines, each told in snippets of three/four pages on average, which makes for bittiness. Many of these turn out to be dead ends as characters die or are otherwise neutralised with no discernible plot impact. Key events like the obliteration of an entire world are over almost before you notice – if you turned two pages by accident, you would miss it. Eventually the story picks up as all the threads come together, the entire original cast are reincarnated as gholas, and a trap is sprung

that almost ensnares our heroes. We learn who the Enemy is (thereby learning the reason for those prequel trilogies, though the Enemy's origins story has been done before) and we're all set up for *Dune 7b*. Finally. Yes, I should have mentioned that this is actually *Dune 7a*, as the authors decided two volumes were needed to do the story justice. The original *Dune* had no difficulty with being quite long, covering a similar time period and never letting up the action – you can't help wondering why they couldn't do likewise here and just give us one volume. Gee, I wonder?

And mentioning the original *Dune* highlights the book's key weakness, which is the lack of *Dune*. It's unavoidable as Arrakis was destroyed at the end of *Heretics of Dune* but the sheer *Duneness* of *Dune* was such a massive presence that you were prepared to forgive its weaknesses. Without *Dune* or an equivalent to distract us from the logical absurdities of galactic empire, ships the size of cities, the technological dead-end of spice, plot-device genes that block you from the visions of seers, psychotic sisterhoods in tight leotards etc, we have no reason to suspend our disbelief and the whole thing comes across as a bit ... well, silly.

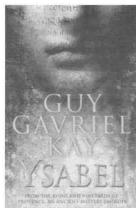
Nor is there anyone you can really like or care about. The adult characters are stuffed shirts. The gholas are still children. There are two versions of Paul (presumably the home-ghola and the away-ghola) but it's young Vladimir Harkonnen, with his sheer delight in making evil personal, who shows the most signs of being fun.

Fun – that's what's missing.

Guy Gavriel Kay – *Ysabel*

Simon & Schuster,
London, 2007, 421pp,
£18.99, h/b, ISBN 978-
0743252508

**Reviewed by Sue
Thomason**



Ned Marriner is a fifteen-year-old Canadian schoolboy spending six weeks in France with his father, a famous photographer who is

working on a book called *Images of Provence*. Ned is trying annoyingly hard to be really, really cool. He meets a girl in Aix-en-Provence cathedral and says really cool, witty things to her. Then they both meet a strange, scarred man with a knife, who tells them they have blundered by accident into an old, old story, and the wisest thing to do would be to run away now and not get involved. Of course they don't.

Ned and his father have a great gang of (adult) mates to hang out with, and the guys are served by Melanie, the perfect P.A., who is smart and sexy and loves her job, which is anticipating and fulfilling their every whim, need and desire. Melanie gets taken over by, or subsumed into, an archetypal Goddess or Muse figure straight out of Robert

Graves, whose purpose is to inspire male desire. She is desired by two equal and opposite heroes; the dark scarred man mentioned above, who represents Provence's Graeco-Roman history, the stranger, the traveller, 'civilisation' with its money, weights and measures, the cunning calculator, smooth talker and manipulator – and his blond Celtic tanist, who represents intuition, emotion, inspiration, poetry and magic. Ned meets and likes both men, but rather than joining either side of their eternal conflict, he sets out to rescue Melanie and return her to the real world. His mission is played out against a background of family conflict – a conflict fuelled by earlier encounters with the archetypal world. (I really hope that this is deep unexplained backstory, and not heavy referencing of another book by Kay.) Very strange things happen, and we learn a good deal – perhaps more than is comfortable – about the history of Provence.

The book is extremely well-written, beautifully paced, engaging, vivid and convincing. I started reading after supper one evening, and sat up until midnight to finish it.

And as soon as I'd finished it, I thought, "but it's rubbish!" It's clearly designed as a perfect fantasy for adolescent boys. There's the gang of supporters, there are all these talented adults deferring to Ned, there's his mother abandoning a job with Medecins Sans Frontieres and cadging an immediate flight back from a combat zone because Ned admits on the phone to her that he Needs His Mom (but she then stays tactfully in the background so that he can get on with being heroic). There's the fact that he's never lost for a witty response to a girl. They all fancy him, of course. Melanie pretty much promises to sleep with him as a sixteenth birthday present (thus tactfully avoiding the issue of underage sex). And Kate (the girl from the cathedral, who is there to deliver history lectures, crib essays from, and be threatened and rescued) is clearly of much the same mind.

There are major plot inconsistencies, in particular that the Goddess/Muse figure needs to take over a contemporary human woman's body every time she re-manifests, but the two male archetypes seem to serially reincarnate as themselves without needing to take over 'real' men.

And I am Really Annoyed that these three numinous, powerful archetypal figures have been hanging around in Provence for at least two and a half millennia, and the men haven't found anything more interesting to do than try to kill each other in order to get the girl, and the girl hasn't found anything more interesting to do than inspire lust and homicide. If this is the story we're locked into, we're doomed, without any possibility of learning, change, free will, empathy, compassion, or alternatives to a bipolar worldview in which Light and Dark are forever at war, and men do great deeds while women inspire them, and get rescued.

He's a very talented writer. But I wish he'd used his gift differently.

Sergei Lukyanenko – *The Day Watch*
William Heinemann, London, 2007, 320pp,
£11.99, t/p, ISBN 978-0434014439
Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

A summer romance by the beach whilst recuperating from a hard battle.

An amnesiac with apparently monumental powers wanders the streets of Moscow.

A court in Prague needs to decide the fate of many in a tale of tragedy and love.

Although billed as a trilogy, the first two books in Sergei Lukyanenko's remarkable Night Watch cycle are themselves mini-trilogies of interconnected novels, distinct tales that intertwine to create a wider picture. Like Zabolon and Gesar, the powerful wizards that front the Day and Night Watches respectively, we are forced to witness a bigger picture than the various characters that populate the novels like pieces on a universal chessboard. Indeed the characters, as rounded and individual as they are, become all too aware of the fragility of their existence, slowly realising they are just game pieces to be sacrificed, however reluctantly, for the two great religions of Light and Dark. Unlike Zabolon and Gesar, though, we do not have as much insight into the grander scheme of things from time immemorial, so the power struggles are as surprising to the reader as they are to the characters. All this might seem like a tale of big wizards and disposable foot-soldiers but that would do the book a great disservice – *The Day Watch* is a rich and rewarding read that, for all its lack of 'human' players, plays out the frailty of existence against an epic struggle between Light and Dark. This time the book focuses more on the Day Watch, the forces of the Dark whose job it is to ensure that the treaty between the two sides is not violated by the Light – any indiscretions result in balancing acts of darkness or inquisitorial arbitration. Again, this is not the simple choice of 'good' vs 'evil' – the Light Others have been responsible for some of the greatest crimes against humanity in their effort to impose order while the Dark Others allow for more creative and free thought. Neither side has anything but distrust for the other and this is where the book's apparently minor incidents have a habit of escalating into world threatening conflict, all played alongside a blissfully unaware general populace. The opening story of this book sucker punches anyone expecting another build up to impending apocalypse, concentrating instead on the aftermath of a particularly fraught battle where a brave and injured Dark Other is sent to a holiday resort for children in order to regain her strength, away from the hustle and danger of the big city. There, among the dunes and the campfires, to the singing of children and the strumming of a guitar, she finds solace in a simple, heartfelt romance. But this tale provides the catalyst for events far more catastrophic than anyone in the Watches, with the possible exception of Zabolon and Gesar, can possibly imagine.

The Day Watch is a book that is, at times, achingly human, tragic and moving but set against a wider backdrop of global instability and cataclysmic events. The very ordinary within the extraordinary creates an atmosphere that highlights a

delicate balance and even minor players have a part to play in the fate of the world. A remarkable, low-key, high-stakes, emotionally driven book that is essential reading for anybody who loved the first volume (which was reviewed in Vector 250). Just ignore the "J.K. Rowling –Russian style" soundbite on the jacket – it does nobody any favours.

Farah Mendlesohn (ed.) – *Glorifying Terrorism*

Rackstraw Press, London, 2007, 261pp, £15.00,

t/p, ISBN 978-0955468803

Reviewed by Paul Raven



The history of literature burgeons with stories containing political messages, and genre fiction is no exception to his rule. Science fiction, with the utopia as one of its accepted tropes, lends itself particularly well to his sort of writing.

Glorifying Terrorism was published as an act of protest and defiance against the UK's 2006

Terrorism Act, specifically the passage that criminalises the alarmingly nebulous action that gives the book its title. The remit was simple enough – each contributor was asked to write a story that could be considered a glorification of terrorism under the new law.

The results are diverse in their approach, and illustrate the power of well-written fiction to break down the black and white portrayals of the media into the myriad shades of grey that the real world is painted in. That old aphorism tells us that every terrorist believes themselves to be a freedom fighter, and here this ambiguity percolates through a range of settings, from plausible alternate histories to wildly remixed and re-imagined civilisations.

The more obviously fictional settings rely on allegory to encourage the reader to see through the eyes of others: perhaps those of a peasant class denied a regular supply of water, as in Kari Sperring's 'Strong Brown God'; or of a marginalised political group in a consumer-fascist orbital colony, as in Chaz Brenchley's lyrical yet chilling 'Freecell'.

The near-future and alternate-history pieces are yet more subversive in approach. Gwyneth Jones' '2020: I AM AN ANARCHIST' is a frighteningly believable look at a Britain-yet-to-be, its population largely pacified by grotesque reality television and a nakedly bread-and-circuses approach to sports events; Ian Whates' 'Laughter of Ghosts', for all its wry humour, reminds us that the talking heads may not be the ones making the decisions they announce; Una McCormack's 'Torch Song' is set in a hot dark dystopian London, bleached whiter than white by the rise of fascism.

Some more experimental works are scattered among the selection, too: Vylar Kaftan's 'Civilisation' reuses the pick-

your-own adventure format to take a non-partisan look at the cyclic nature of revolution and regime, offering a glimmer of hope at the end of the satirical rope; Charles Stross closes the volume with 'Minutes of the Labour Party Conference 2016', a blackly ironic fake document from a future where the worst has already happened.

Almost all of these stories have a tinge of catharsis to them – they feel like stories that their authors not just wanted but needed to write. I find it unlikely that the contributors submitted their work in the earnest belief that doing so would change the world overnight, but it seems plausible that they did so as a way expressing the personal liberty they hold dear, and which they fear draconian law-making could undermine or destroy.

Likewise, it is too much to hope that sales of *Glorifying Terrorism* will contribute significantly to the dismantling of authoritarian regimes, in the UK or anywhere else – the most fervent opponents of the views it espouses are the least likely to read it, after all. But for the open-minded it can serve as a reminder that our freedoms were fought for in the past by men and women who were labelled terrorists by those they sought to overthrow or undermine – and a reminder that genre fiction can tackle the big issues of the day with the same strength as mainstream literature, if not more.

Natasha Mostert – *Season of the Witch*

Bantam Press,

London, 2007, 480pp,

£12.99, h/b, ISBN 978-

0593057896

Reviewed by Ian Watson



Natasha Mostert, a South African currently living in London, can perhaps be described as a realistic (and lyrical) dark fantasy thriller writer, whom sf readers should be paying attention to if they like the sort of thing that Christopher Priest, say, does with the 'science' of magic in *The Prestige*.

In fact, Mostert's previous *The Other Side of Silence* has an awesome science fictional concept. The musical scale as we know it is approximate and imperfect. This is true. Pythagoras believed that music represents the underlying nature of reality. True. Two Americans launch a very believable and compulsive computer game with the aim of co-opting millions of players' computers to create a perfect musical scale. However, this untunes minds and may untune reality itself, unless the ancient drum-stones of Africa can speak out once more. Personally I'd have been tempted to wreck the solar system as a climax; but that's me. *The Other Side of Silence* is probably a better book for not doing so.

Mostert's new *Season of the Witch* weaves together Remote

Viewing with the Theatre of Memory – for which I have a big soft spot, having based my own sf novel *The Flies of Memory* upon the notion about eighteen years ago. In the real world Remote Viewing kicked off in 1972 at the Stanford Research Institute at the behest of the CIA, presided over by parapsychologist Russell Targ and a colleague, as a response to reported actual Soviet investment in 'psychic warfare'. The aim: to spy at a distance by mind power. This was Project Scantate, which underwent name changes to Gondola Wish, then Grill Flame, and finally in 1991 Star Gate (no direction relation to the TV series), and upon which the US government spent \$20 million over the years, until cancellation. Perhaps that isn't so much cash objectively, compared with developing a widget for an ICBM, but basically all you need are some people. (Or alleged cancellation. For developments in the age of 9/11 and al-Qaeda, see Jon Ronson's jaunty journalistic *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2004). It's always possible that there's a real psychic team hidden behind the daft one, which gets exposed. Or is this a conspiracy theory?)

Mostert takes Star Gate a stage further, with a training project in Oxford involving the powerful talent of Gabriel who comes unstuck traumatically because he's too egotistical. Consequently his girlfriend at the time, Frankie, who isn't quite as powerful a talent, splits from him. Gabriel becomes a successful data-thief, using electronic methods instead, although he can still 'slam the ride', a wonderful phrase of Mostert's. Frankie marries a very rich old businessman chap, though out of genuine love. When the old chap's son goes missing inexplicably, Frankie turns to Gabriel. This leads to Gabriel's involvement with friends of the family, two wondrous sisters called Minnaloushe and Morrigan who were secretly initiating the son into a Memory Palace of their making, wherein the Renaissance Art of Memory and High Magic mix.

One of the Ms writes on her computer a fascinating diary, which Gabriel duly hacks into. The other M, evidently a powerful remote viewer herself, may well have murdered the son. Entranced by both of the Ms to the point of obsession, Gabriel cannot decide which. Or perhaps I should say Witch. And then he finds himself under attack...

The aim of the Art of Memory was to create in one's mind (and in this case also on computer, a fascinating twist on cyberspace) a complex environment to which complex items of knowledge are attached symbolically. Taken to its ultimate, this may lead to comprehensive understanding of the universe. Ramon Lull's memory system (in his *Ars Compensiosa de Inveniendi Veritatem*, if memory serves) probably is "the occult origin of modern computers".

Mostert's evocation of the Memory Palace is masterly, and indeed much of the prose is saturated in beauty, with wonderful observations, insights, eroticism, and a great build-up of tension. Three-quarters of the way through the novel, and we still don't know which M is the killer; this is skilful stuff. What's more, the ending satisfies perfectly. A bewitching book, in more than one sense; and an enlightening one.

Naomi Novik –
Temeraire: Throne of Jade
Voyager, London, 400pp,
£12.99, h/b, ISBN 978-0007219124

Reviewed by James Bacon

I loved Naomi Novik's first book *Temeraire* (reviewed by Sue Thomason in *Vector* 244), and was totally caught up by her imaginative use of dragons in an alternate history of the Napoleonic times. As a debut it spent time introducing the characters and the scene and showing the reader a history that never was.

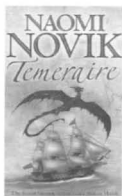
The second book in the series is a nice and easy read; there is excitement, a little adventure. Novik has again done considerable research to ensure there are parallels between 'her' world and 'our' world that are recognisable, yet distinct. This allows the reader's imagination to drift gently into the very different history and there are no jarring reality checks, which happens when some alternate history authors make a woeful error (but credit artistic licence). I had somewhat hoped, though, that there would be more development of the main characters, more twists and turns, a level of detail perhaps that would answer to my inquisitiveness about Novik's world. I admit I would have preferred a greater depth to the first book, but with the amount going on, such a neat idea and a lovely story I trusted that depth and detail would come at a later stage.

I have a great love of naval books, from Reeman and Kent to O'Brien and Forester, and the addition of dragons to the mix adds so many opportunities and possibilities. Novik adds in flight a hundred and twenty years before it occurred in War. And it's not just string bag airships, but the vessels of flight that are mighty beasts, on a Lancastrian scale, some over 100 feet long, and bearing many men aloft.

The heroes of *Throne of Jade* are an ex-naval Captain Will Laurence and his Dragon, Temeraire, and after their adventures together in His Majesties Aerial Corps in the first book they now have to journey to China, in part as an act of diplomacy and partly as an act of forced honour. The Chinese lay claim to Temeraire despite him being a prize from a French ship and they wish to use diplomacy and other pressures to gain his agreed return. The sea adventure and then action in China are quite good and there is a level of political deviancy therein that marks this book apart from the adventures of the previous one.

The problem, and I feel slightly harsh in saying so, is that I want more. Is this a bad thing about a book, that it leaves one yearning for more? Perhaps I have too high expectations as I see a world that is resplendent with opportunities.

The relationship between Dragoon and Rider is very strong, a key message of the first book, and much depends on it. So important are Dragons to the British war machine that ladies are allowed into the service as certain Dragons will not bear male riders – something unthinkable at the time



historically is bypassed and a subtle way for the author to introduce female characters directly into the action.

Dragons go berserk at the loss of their rider, yet in this book one of the devices used is the draw that China has for Temeraire, which creates a new dynamic between him and his rider, but it felt too simple a device, something that wouldn't and shouldn't actually be a concern, based on the understanding of the importance of the bond. Some cleverer subterfuge might have been more engaging, and I felt that with so much ingenuity in the book, that this was rather too lax a device.

In all though this is an enjoyable sequel and a fine read. It is no bad thing to want more and I hope that as the series progresses that Ms. Novik will bring further levels of depth to her imaginative and brilliant version of history.



Arkady and Boris Strugatsky – *Roadside Picnic*

Gollancz, London,
007, 145pp, £6.99, p/b
SBN-13 9780575079786

Translated by
Antonina W. Bouis:
detail omitted from
nowhere in this
edition)

Reviewed by L. J.
Hurst

The Strugatsky brothers' *Roadside Picnic* appeared in English translation in 1977 (the Russian original was published in 1972). Set in Canada in the near present the title only becomes clear in the second half of the book when a character explains that the strange, radiant, deadly regions scattered around the planet are the places where visiting aliens stopped for a moment and left their rubbish like the sandwich wrappers or oil-slick left by earthly picnickers. Just as our picnickers are careless of the environment perhaps the aliens have been similarly regardless of our planet; a lack of care carrying the corollary that they did not find us worth contacting during their halt.

Round the edge of the regions, which the authorities have closed off, live the survivors of what was initially a disaster. Now these towns house roughnecks such as Redrick Schuhart, a 'stalker': a man who knows how to find his way into and through 'The Zone'. He makes a living by bringing out gewgaws, familiar objects that have become bejewelled and selling them unlawfully (today's equivalent would be blood or Illicit Diamond Buying). In addition to the jewels there are strange foreign objects such as anti-gravity rings, for which there is a market, yet no official use. The Zone is not safe, though, and Schuhart returns carrying his companion, Buzzard Burbridge, whose legs have been deboned by the alien 'witches' jelly'.

Schuhart tries to drink to relieve the horror of his life, but he is too responsible to drink to excess since he has a wife and young daughter, Maria, to keep. Maria was born after

the visitation and is sightless, her eyes totally white. When the authorities finally send Schuhart to prison he has enough power and wealth to ensure that his family are kept in good health. When he emerges seven years later he finds that some of the items from The Zone, like the 'so-sos' which act as key and power unit in a car, have been put to use, but he discovers, too, that Maria, who has always been nicknamed Monkey, is now fur-covered. If she is an example of the post-Visitation generations then the future must be different from anything Schuhart or the authorities know, expect or plan for. Schuhart cannot leave The Zone alone and returns with Burbridge's son, during which journey it becomes clear that Burbridge junior has become a believer in the miraculous within The Zone, and who believes that a Golden Ball left by aliens can grant any wish, including the return of his father's legs. Schuhart sinks further into despair at this hopeless aspiration but not to the degree that he cannot himself make a wish, "Happiness for everybody, free", 'free' because, of course, what has come out of The Zone at that point has come with tremendous social and moral cost. Nor has anyone any idea whether they will make sense of The Zone or the Visitation, they are still "hammering nails with microscopes".

Within a few years of publication there were a number of ways of seeing *Roadside Picnic*: the brothers used it as the basis of their screenplay for Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, though they reduced the science fictional elements while keeping the alien artefacts and the mutating child. Not long after that, though, when the zone around Chernobyl became just as interdicted, yet just as much the result of so much promise of which nothing good could be made, *Roadside Picnic* proved itself another example of sf's horribly ironic prescience and therefore deserving its place in the ranks of SF Masterworks.

A reprint of the previous Macmillan US/Gollancz/Penguin edition, this time the editors have managed to miss saying it is a translation and completely omitted the translator's name. The previous edition also included an introduction by Theodore Sturgeon which has also been reduced to seven words on the cover.

Liz Williams –
Bloodmind
Tor, London, 2007,
293pp, £10.99, t/p,
ISBN 978-1405055499
Reviewed by Penny
Hill



Bloodmind is the follow-up to *Darkland* which was an excellent novel, complete in itself and which I reviewed in *Vector* 247. *Darkland*, set in the same universe as *Ghost Sister* (Liz Williams' first published novel which again I reviewed, way back in *Vector* 220) stood alone in terms of its own plot threads and characters.

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Bloodmind is a direct sequel, carrying the character of Vali straight through from the epilogue of *Darkland* into another set of events. It uses the same narrative style composed of disparate characters' views of events and includes travel across and between the same planets. Vali herself is the only viewpoint character we see in both novels. My overall feeling was that *Darkland* suffered from rather a lot of travelling and not much action or plot to justify this. There is also a lack of character development with people behaving consistently through-out, rather than any sense of growth or change.

One of the major themes of *Bloodmind* is the examination of the boundaries between human and animals, especially around the question of sentience. The selk who are genetically modified animals with intelligence for a season of the year are twice used as a get-out-jail free card to move the plot along. *Ghost Sister* had introduced us to the adapted inhabitants of the planet Mondhile who only attain sentience when they reach puberty. In *Bloodmind* they are principally off-stage and their abilities are seen as a potential weapon to be exploited. The feir warriors are a combination of berserkers and shamans who distort perceptions of reality in order to defeat their enemies. On the planet Nhem where men have bred women to be little more than animals, we share the experiences of the women as they become human due to the bird catalysts provided by the resistance.

This novel is more heavily female-dominated than either *Darkland* or *Ghost Sister* without being as extreme as *Banner of Souls*. The only male character we see is Thorn Eld, Vali's untrustworthy vitki companion and his isolation is made more clear by the fact that out of the principal characters, he is the only one who doesn't have a first-person narrative. Vali is the closest we have to a sympathetic character, partly because we are already familiar with her from the previous novel and we consistently see more of her viewpoint than that of the other characters.

Overall, I found this novel slightly disappointing. I have loved all of Liz Williams' different worlds and with *Darkland* I was particularly glad to see more of Mondhile. In *Bloodmind* however, I'm not sure she's adding anything to the world she has already built, nor did I find the main plot particularly engaging.

On the other hand, we do get an enjoyable expansion of the new world Nhem and the viewpoint character Hunan. In *Darkland* we had an outsider's introduction to Nhem as Vali went in and committed her shocking political assassination. This time, we see what the world has been like for a woman who has spent most of her life lacking sentience. I liked the way the women's awakening is handled and the idea of the community of survivors in the ruined city on the edge of the desert. It is fascinating to see their gradual build-up of skills and resources – making this section of the novel an interesting reflection on more traditional survival stories such as desert island or post-apocalyptic tales. I would have been happier to spend more time exploring this world than chasing Skadi across bleak landscapes.

Liz Williams - Snake Agent
Night Shade Books, San Francisco, 2006, 284pp, \$14.95, h/b, ISBN 978-1597800433
Reviewed by Penny Hill



Liz Williams is a talented and diverse author. *Snake Agent* shows that she has successfully created another different type of interstitial fiction for us to enjoy. Set in the near future, in a franchised version of Singapore we quickly discover this is an alternate future – one where Chinese mythology is real. This means that hell exists, it is possible to trade between the earthly world and both heaven and hell and that ghosts are real. Because not everyone is able to perceive or use these connections, we are strongly aware of the mundane world all around with Sergeant Ma and other police officers, pretending this isn't real. It is the rarity of his spiritual talents that makes the protagonist Di Chen such a useful detective.



I especially liked the way Williams kept Chen's character grounded in mundanity – he may have spiritual talents and be the protégé of a Goddess, but he still has to cope with paperwork, internal politics and colleagues who are suspicious just because he's different. He also has a fascinating and complex relationship with his patron goddess Kuan Yin. Her demands for perfection hinder him in carrying out his duties but also have a more long-term role. This is more than just throwing unnecessary obstacles at the hero to prevent him resolving the plot too quickly. In a recognisable spiritual stance, Kuan Yin hears all prayers but doesn't intervene.

Chen's wife Inari gradually develops her own plot thread. As a demon married to a human, she initially has even more restrictions than most wife characters and her choices contribute significantly to the second half of the novel. I particularly enjoyed her familiar spirit whose dual forms reminded me strongly of the magical powers of the raccoons in Isao Takahata's film *Pom Poko* (and could perhaps be traced to the same original source?).

I enjoyed the gradual revelation of the world-building – finding out that hell has levels and its own bureaucracy. The idea of the strife between the different infernal ministries felt realistic as well as being a key driver behind the plot. I also enjoyed the persistent theme of mirroring, from the franchise cities, replicating each other on earth, to the temples that have analogues in heaven and hell and the traditional idea that people are able to burn toy money and possessions to convert them from the earthly to the spiritual plane. On the character side, Zu Irzh, Chen's counterpart from hell, felt like

the untrustworthy flashy cop from a buddy movie – a demonic Ray Vecchio perhaps?

Within Williams' world-building she also explores potential new technology extrapolating from current possibilities. I particularly liked the change from our current hard-edged technology to new bio-technology where flatcreens have been replaced by nanofilm and humans are hired as interface nexi for processing power. These ideas are part of this world, part of the plot and part of everyday life so that Chen's discomfort with his nanofilm is the same as mine when trying to take a photo with my phone.

I really enjoyed this novel. It has a fast plot that keeps you hooked while using the split narrative to reveal to the reader slightly more than Chen can see – for example we can see what has happened to his wife Inari before he even knows she is missing. It was also good to feel that the plot was made up of multiple conspiracies on both the earthly and demonic levels. One message that came across clearly was that within hell there are different degrees of evil, complicity and repulsiveness and that the correlations between them are not obvious.

This is the first of at least three Detective Inspector Chen novels set in this world and I look forward to finding out what other supernatural police procedural plots Williams' invents in *The Demon* and *the City and Precious Dragon*.

Gene Wolfe –
Soldier of Sidon
Tor, New York, 2006,
319pp, \$24.95, h/b
(reviewed in proof),
ISBN 978-0765316646
Reviewed by Tony
Keen



In 1986, Gene Wolfe, already highly respected on account of *The Book of the New Sun*, took time off from the history of Severian to write *Soldier of the Mist*, the story of Latro, a Latin mercenary in the army of the Persian King Xerxes in 479BC, and his adventures through Greece in the aftermath of the defeat of the Persian invasion. Latro has suffered a grievous head wound in the climactic battle of Plataea, as a result of divine displeasure. He now cannot recall events of more than a day previously, but on the other hand, he can see the gods and demigods that populate the Greek landscape. John Clute observes in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* that this work picks up and reflects themes in *The Book of the New Sun*.

Now, seventeen years after the second volume, *Soldier of Arete*, appeared (the two are now collected as *Latro in the Mist*), Wolfe has returned once again to his amnesiac hero. In the intervening period, Latro returned to his Italian home and wife, but his memory is still not restored; so he goes to Egypt in search of a cure.

Wolfe maintains the central conceit of the previous novels,

that the text is based upon ancient scrolls written by Latro, as a means of maintaining some record of what he cannot recall. Wolfe is merely the translator – hence the occasional footnote, and in this volume a historical foreword that runs to seven pages, longer than those of the first two put together. At the end of *Soldier of Arete*, Latro entrusted his scrolls to the poet Pindar. New readers may therefore quite happily start here. The setting is different, there are new Egyptian gods, and the supporting cast is largely new (a slight disappointment for those fond of Pindar and the slave girl Io). There are some references to events of the previous novels, but since Latro himself has no knowledge of those events save what he is told, the reader need not feel that they are missing something that the novel's protagonist is not.

The device of the scrolls also means that Latro only narrates what he can recollect on the days when he is able, willing, or remembers to write. This allows Wolfe to make some spectacular jump cuts, throwing the reader into some violent action, the prelude of which may only become clear some chapters later when someone else relates it to Latro. Important plot developments occur off stage, and are only revealed some time after they have happened. It's a bit like reading a literary version of a Nicholas Roeg movie, and Wolfe can't be accused of not challenging his readers. But this works, and means the reader never quite knows what is going to come next. They are certainly never bored by overlong transitional scenes.

The main reason, however, that *Soldier of Sidon* works as historical fantasy is that Wolfe knows how to write historical fiction. All his characters, real (and there are fewer of those than in the previous novels) or imaginary, act in plausible ways, and their concerns are, for the most part, those of the time, not those that might interest a twenty-first century reader. (Wolfe slips once on this score, when Latro, watching a bullfight, muses that a purpose-built arena might be better. But he has been so successful elsewhere that we forgive him this.) Even the device of translating many place names (though fewer in this novel than before, and only very rarely personal names) into the English equivalent of what Latro thinks they mean (which is not always what they actually do mean), which I found irritating when I first started reading *Soldier of the Mist*, becomes something that one just accepts.

To this can be added that Latro remains a very likeable character. Stripped of his memory, he is also stripped of prejudice and preconception. He takes people as he finds them, and his instincts are usually sound. And his lack of recollection does not make him easily fooled, even if others assume it does.

Soldier of Sidon ends with Latro's story still unresolved. Wolfe gives no indication that there are any further scrolls, but this reviewer at least hopes that one will be discovered in the not-too-distant future.

One final word: illustrated books are rare these days, but *Soldier of Sidon* is blessed with delightful pencil sketches by David Grove.

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

Stephen Baxter – *Emperor*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 302pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079229

Stephen Baxter – *Transcendent*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 522pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575078147

Paperback editions of two of Stephen Baxter's recent novels, *Emperor* being the first in the Time's Tapestry series and *Transcendent* the third and final proper novel of the four-book *Destiny's Children* trilogy (which is to say a fourth volume, *Resplendent*, is a fix-up of related stories). Gary Dalkin has reviewed both *Transcendent* (Vector 246) and *Resplendent* (Vector 250) and found the whole series compelling and essential reading.

Tony Keen reviewed *Emperor* in Vector 250 and whilst finding much to admire had issues with Baxter's use of the British Roman Empire setting and the historical plausibility, but did concede that as a historian specialising in the period has a rather different perspective to most readers. We'll see what Tony's view of the next volume, *Conqueror*, is in a future *Vector*.

Dr Arnold T. Blumberg and Andrew Hershberger – *Zombieman: 80 Zombie Movies to Die For*

Telos, Tolworth, 2006, 497pp, £12.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1845830032

Well, as the title says this is an in-depth look at eighty films plus a zombie movie index with over 550 others. Contains detailed analysis on the usual suspects, such as *Dawn of the Dead* and *Night of the Living Dead* (in both cases the original and the re-make) plus others such as a selection of classic Italian zombie films, *Braindead*, *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and even *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*. Nicely put together, with good layout, plenty of information and done with a sense of humour: it's only the bloody awful cover that lets it down. Well worth it for any interested film fans.

Terry Brooks – *Armageddon's Children*

Orbit, London, 2006, 369pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 978-1841494784

Terry Brooks – *The Elfstones of Shannara*

Atom, London, 2006, 614pp, £7.99, h/b, ISBN 978-1904233985

Terry Brooks – *The Sword of Shannara*

Atom, London, 2006, 664pp, £7.99, h/b, ISBN

978-1-904233-978

Terry Brooks – *The Wishsong of Shannara*

Atom, London, 2006, 566pp, £7.99, h/b, ISBN 978-1904233992

And a further re-print of this very derivative Shannara fantasy series from the late seventies/early eighties, notable for being rather attractive editions – for fantasy novels anyway – and now being published by Atom, the YA imprint of Little Brown (and sister to Orbit apparently), which I suspect is the right market for them. As for *Armageddon's Children* well, Terry Brooks has clearly been reading too much Asimov as with this book he is attempting to bring all his previous books into one epic narrative. *Armageddon's Children* 'explains' how our world, as portrayed in his *The Word and Void* series, becomes the world of the Shannara books. Baffling and bizarre.

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

Orbit, London, 2006, 307pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1841494562

Chris Bunch – *Star Risk: The Doublecross Program*

Orbit, London, 2006, 346pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1841494555

These are volumes three (*Doublecross*) and four (*The Dog*) in this military sf series... and if you want to know more go and read Colin Bird's review of the first two volumes in Vector 249's review column (not very impressed but could have been much worse).

Jeffrey A. Carver – *Battlestar Galactica*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 337pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079656

Craig Shaw Gardner – *The Cylons' Secret*

Tor, New York, 2006, 320pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 978-0765315793

Peter David – *Sagittarius is Bleeding*

Tor, New York, 2006, 320pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 978-0765316073

Three novels from the "Sci Fi Channel's Hit Series *Battlestar Galactica*", two from the US and one from this side of the Atlantic. The Gollancz published one appears to be a direct novelisation of the miniseries whereas the others may, or may not, be original as they are "all-new adventure" but are based on teleplays which implies they aren't. Whatever, I'm not spending any more time on this as I hated the new series – just when will the Cylons get on and do something? – so I'll leave it to you to work it out. Only fair to say that most other people seem to like the series, but novelisations are always a bad idea.

PARTICLES

EDITED
BY
PAUL N.
BILLINGER

Gardner Dozois (ed) – *The Best of the Best: 20****Years of the Year's Best sf vol 2***

St Martin's Press, New York, 2007, 642pp, \$40.00, h/b, ISBN 978-0312393413

Not the most snappy of titles but a great collection nevertheless. As you can gather this is volume two, taking titles from 1985, Robert Silverberg's 'Sailing to Byzantium' up to 2002 with Alastair Reynolds' fantastic 'Turquoise Days'. Chris Hill reviewed the first volume in Vector 241 finding much to admire but expressing surprise about some of the selections. Volume two looks to have a pretty strong selection, including, amongst others, Joe Haldeman's 'The Hemingway Hoax', Nancy Kress' 'Beggars in Spain', Michael Swanwick's 'Griffin's Egg', Greg Egan's 'Oceanic' and Ian McDonald's wonderful 'Tendeleo's Story'. Many – most? – of these have been anthologised before but it's still a good collection.

Joe Haldeman – *Peace and War*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 697pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079199

Omnibus edition of *The Forever War* (1974), *Forever Free* (1999) and *Forever Peace* (1997) with the version of *The Forever War* included here being the author's definitive one. Well presented, and for such a thick book surprisingly easy to physically read, making this an essential volume.

Kim Harrison – *Dead Witch Walking*

Voyager, London, 2006, 416pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0007236093

Kim Harrison – *The Good, the Bad and the Undead*

Voyager, London, 2006, 453pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0007236115

Kim Harrison – *Every Which Way But Dead*

Voyager, London, 2006, 501pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0007236123

Kim Harrison – *A Fistful of Charms*

Voyager, London, 2006, 510pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0007236131

Kim Harrison – *For a Few Demons More*

Voyager, London, 2007, 520pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0007247790

OK, here we go again: another series mixing vampires and other monsters with the police procedural/thriller and starring a kick-ass female hero, in this case Rachel Morgan. Witch (not going to even try to avoid mentioning Buffy here). Slight change with this series is that we're in the near future after a virus killed off half the human population and brought the creatures into the open (er, sorry, that's not very different then?). Rachel works for the Inderland Runner Services apprehending criminals in Cincinnati... she wants to quit "but no one quits the I.S.". The only way she can gain her freedom is by exposing the city's most prominent citizen as a drug lord. Various things ensue including Rachel gaining a (female) vampire as a room-mate and falling in love with a rat (well, human in rat form though she was a rat at the time) all of which just serve to annoy as little of consequence happens, just lots of whining, and you really don't care about anyone or anything. I like this type of book but could barely finish the first. Just go and read Tanya Huff's Blood books (now turned into a disappointing TV series). If you're still interested the books are listed above in

series order.

Barb and J. C. Hendee – *Traitor to the Blood*

Orbit, London, 2006, 485pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1841495712

Ah, now this is different. No mix of vampires/monsters with police procedural/thriller for the Hendee's. Oh no, here we mix the vampires/monsters with fantasy. According to Kevin J. Anderson it's a "mix of Lord of the Rings and Buffy the Vampire Slayer". This is the fourth in the series and Alan Fraser described the first, *Dhampir*, as "slam-bang good-versus-evil actioner with some genuinely poignant moments" when he reviewed it in Vector 241. So has some potential, although when I read *Dhampir* I found it tedious and poorly done (why do I keep trying books like this?).

Tom Holt – *Barking*

Orbit, London, 2007, 404pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 978-1841492858

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

Orbit, London, 2006, 346pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1841492841

More comic fantasy.

In Barking "monsters are roaming the streets of London. Of course, some monsters are scarier than others". Apparently this is a reference to and slur on lawyers. Look, just see my comments throughout this column about Roberts (that's the A. R. R. version), Langford and Moore and draw your own conclusions. (Interesting that the colour, layout and graphics of *Barking* matches perfectly with *Doctor Whom*. Could this be a plan to make all humorous books look the same so that I can avoid them with ease?)

Vadim Jean – *Terry Pratchett's Hogfather The Illustrated Screenplay*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 252pp, £20.00, h/b, ISBN 978-0575079298

Pretty much what the title says: the script from the TV film shown Christmas 2006 and now out on DVD. The script here, written by Vadim Jean and 'mucked around' by Terry Pratchett, is very nicely illustrated but that's all you get: script and pictures, with no extras.

Rudyard Kipling – *The Mark of the Beast and Other Fantastical Tales*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 785pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575077911

The fiftieth Fantasy Masterwork is a massive volume of Kipling's fantastical stories, from traditional ghost stories to psychological horror, to (almost) science fiction. The collection here includes 'The Phantom Rickshaw', 'The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes', 'The Man Who Would Be King' and many others. This edition includes an Afterword by Stephen Jones and an Introduction by Neil Gaiman who describes the best of the tales included here as "simply, in the first rank of stories written in the English language".

Margo Lanagan – *Black Juice*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 230pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079243

At last we get to a book I can be unequivocal about: go and buy it, even if you already have a copy of the 2005 Eos edition as the UK version includes an extra story, 'The Point

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of Roses'. If you need more convincing then go and read the review from Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc in Vector 247 which describes it as "a marvellous collection of tales and a remarkable read" and that all the stories are "exemplary but perhaps the most outstanding is the first, 'Sing My Sister Down', telling the tale of an execution of a young woman". Strongly recommended (but that will hardly be a surprise).

David Langford – *The End of Harry Potter?*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 196pp, £9.99, h/b, ISBN 978-0575078758

Well, it's nearly over as Harry Potter and the Truly Awful Title is finally published on July 21st. In the meantime for all you Potter fans we have here the true words of a wise-one as he tries to cash-in offers his thoughtful examination of what Potter Volume 7 may contain, based on, well, probably a discussion down the local public house (or more likely some Convention or other). So Lord Langford gives us the "unauthorised guide to the mysteries that remain". Of course when the final volume is published there will need to be a revised edition of *The End of Harry Potter* to point out what the original got right and why Rowling got the rest wrong. The book cover contains the interesting fact that Langford has twenty seven Hugos against Rowling's single one for Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (a clear example of the Hugos making a one catastrophically wrong choice). Truly genius idea for a book and respect to Lord Langford for this.

Scott Lynch – *The Lies of Locke Lamora*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 537pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0-575-07975-5

Reviewed in Vector 247 by Estelle Roberts where she found this to be "an enjoyable and entertaining read, with a humorous edge, as well as being, at points, quite moving" but there is a but as "it ranks with most other examples of the fantasy genre, but is not particularly outstanding". The novel has, however, been getting a lot of support on the interwebs with the second volume (of a projected seven plus novellas) *Red Seas Under Red Skies* due in the summer of 2007 and the film rights to *The Lies of Locke Lamora* already having been sold.

J. Shaun Lyon – *Second Flight: Back to the Vortex*

Telos Publishing, Tolworth, 2006, 424pp, £40.00, h/b, ISBN 978-1845830090

A very hefty hardback volume covering everything possible about the second series of 'New Who' when David Tennant takes over as the Doctor. The book is in two parts: the first covers the background and the creation of the series and the second a detailed (oh so very detailed) episode by episode guide. Each episode guide includes information on the Torchwood arc, the use of the sonic screwdriver and, bizarrely, the body count. Nicely produced edition which even includes a few (not very good) colour photographs but at £40.00 it's going to be for the very committed fan only.

Christopher Moore – *The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove*

Orbit, London, 2007, 326pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1841494517

Readers will be well aware that I don't 'humorous' books no matter what genre so a book with the quote "If there's a funnier writer out there, step forward", from *Playboy*, on the cover is not going to be popular with me (I'm prejudiced: so sue me).

The worrying thing here, however, is not that Moore gives great Title but I actually like the books – as I confessed in *Vector* 249 (and since then I have read another. And enjoyed it). The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove is the fifth book set in Pine Cove, California, where the town psychiatrist has decide to switch everybody from their normal antidepressants to placebos, which – eventually – attracts a colossal sea beast named Steve. Yes I know, this does not sound promising but trust me, give it a try. And I promise I won't be recommending Roberts (again the A. R. R. R. R. etc version), Holt, Rankin or any of their ilk.

A. R. R. R. Roberts – *Doctor Whom*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 165pp, £8.99, h/b, ISBN 978-0575079281

So just a parody of Dr Who then? Ah, no, it's cleverer than that as the subtitle is E.T. shoots and leaves: the zero tolerance approach to parodyation. So it's the bastard offspring of Dr Who and Lynne Truss! Hilarious, I'm sure? Funniest joke here is the price of this slim hardback.

Adam Roberts – *Gradisil*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 457pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575078178

Paperback edition of this Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlisted novel (and by the time you read this we'll know if it's the winner or not) which was reviewed by Paul Bateman in *Vector* 248 where he was impressed... but perhaps not as much as some. He found the structure of the three parts didn't quite mesh but that it was a "good book, with a number of interesting concepts and fully fleshed characters" and cryptically concluded "but then again would a better book have given me the delights of 'poodle-hoops'?" You will need to read the book for an explanation.

Justina Robson – *Keeping It Real*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 279pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079076

Justina Robson – *Mappa Mundi*

Pyr Books, New York, 2006, 523pp, \$15.00, t/p, ISBN 978-1591024910

Finally an American edition of Robson's 2001 Arthur C. Clarke shortlisted novel *Mappa Mundi* and a paperback edition of the rather less successful *Keeping It Real*. *Mappa Mundi* initially appears to be a techno-thriller but becomes more of a key sf work as Natalie Armstrong investigates how her work is becoming used by the military as a form of mind control. *Keeping It Real* is very different, mixing sf, fantasy and music, a mix which really didn't work for Paul Bateman in *Vector* 249 when the kindest thing he had to say was "lighthearted romp". Just stick to *Mappa Mundi* (which was reviewed in *Vector* 221).

Geoff Ryman – *Air*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 390pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575078116

I'm in agreement with Chris Hill from the *Vector* Book Review of the Year 2006 "what can I say about this that hasn't been said already?". One of the rare books to win both the BSFA Best Novel Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award plus winning the James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award and topping the *Vector* Reviewers Poll. Which basically means this is one book you must read. And if you haven't it is now

available in a rather nice paperback edition. If you still need further convincing then Claire Brialey reviewed the book in full back in Vector 242.

Lilith Saintcrow – *Dead Man Rising*

Orbit, London, 2006, 387pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1841494678
Second Dante Valentine book, a series that Martin McGrath described as falling into the "spunky women battling/shagging demons targeted precisely at a post-Buffy market". Yes another one of those. Martin reviewed the first in the series, *Working for the Devil*, in Vector 249 and summarising that "this is not a good book". He did give reasons, all of which I agree with. Here the psions are dying – it's set slightly in the future with humans and monsters living an uneasy co-existence – and the cops can't find the killer, so they call in Dante (as you do in novels). Surprisingly, the series continues in *The Devil's Right Hand* (November 2007) and *Saint City Sinners* (January 2008). (And that name, Lilith Saintcrow, can't be real can it?)

Dan Simmons – *Endymion*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 617pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575076396

Dan Simmons – *The Rise of Endymion*

Gollancz, London, 2006, 804pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575076402

New paperback editions to match the first two parts, *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, of what is now known as *The Hyperion Cantos* (with both pairs also available as unnecessary trade paperback omnibus editions). The *Endymion* books pick-up two hundred and seventy-four years after the fall of the Worldweb in the *Hyperion* ones. Strange that I've never actually read the *Endymion* books. Strange because I read the *Hyperion* books in my formative years and they will always be in my selection of favourite sf novels but still I didn't read these. This may have been because there was six year gap between the publication of the two pairs, but I suspect it was that I didn't think the *Endymion* books could possibly live up to my memory of the *Hyperion* books – most unfair and I really should read these.

Martin Sketchley – *The Liberty Gun*

Simon & Schuster, London, 2007, 310pp, £12.99, u/p, ISBN 978-0743256810

Third instalment of the *Structure* series (always rather worrying to see something becoming a 'series') following *The Affinity Trap* and *The Destiny Mask*, both of which were reviewed by Chris Hill in Vector 235 and 243 respectively. In *The Liberty Gun* Delgado and Ashala are catapulted into a future Seriat occupied by the Sinz. As Chris has commented in his reviews of the other books this is unlikely to mean anything unless you have read the earlier ones as Sketchley makes no concessions to new readers. Despite some issues with the second book Chris was looking forward to this volume. (Good to see that this series has been successful enough for Pyr to publish it in the States.)

Kojo Suzuki – *Ring*

HarperCollins, London, 2007, 392pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0007240135

Kojo Suzuki – *Spiral*

HarperCollins, London, 2007, 460pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-

0007240142

Kojo Suzuki – *Loop*

HarperCollins, London, 2007, 473pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0007179091

Wonderful new paperback editions of this trio of horror/sf novels loosely centred around a fateful videotape, which were turned into the films (although the books that followed *Ring* are nothing like the sequels to *Ring* the movie). Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc reviewed *Spiral* in Vector 244 and were impressed, describing it as a "ghost story with a modern twist that delivers" and that for followers of the many incarnations of the *Ring* this is "another parallel universe from the original, mutated as the author intended for maximum reproduction and survival". All are strongly recommended.

Liz Williams – *Darkland*

Tor UK, London, 2007, 424pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0330426916

Shortlisted for the BSFA Best Novel Award this is Liz Williams' seventh UK published novel and a sequel to her first, *The Ghost Sister*, reviewed by Penny Hill back in Vector 220, so it's appropriate that she also reviewed *Darkland* in Vector 247. Although built upon *The Ghost Sister* the narrative in *Darkland* is separate and the book can be read independently (but of course you'll want to read *The Ghost Sister* anyway). Penny concluded that *Darkland* is an "excellent, well-constructed novel with plenty to offer new readers and existing Williams fans alike. It has warmth, depth and complexity while remaining fast-paced and enjoyable". Strongly recommended.



Remaking History

It's no secret that I'm a big *Doctor Who* geek – much to your editor's dismay. In this capacity (being a *Doctor Who* geek that is, not dismaying your editor), I've recently been enjoying Tat Wood and Lawrence Miles's *About Time*, a history of 'classic' *Who* projected to fill six volumes, of which five have been published so far. In addition to the usual work of covering *Who* stories in chronological order, Wood and Miles have a number of boxed-out essays on overarching questions across the series's life. One, in the volume on William Hartnell's time in the role from 1963-66, asks, "Can you rewrite history, even one line?"

The context was the Hartnell era's frequent journeys into historical settings without any science-fictional story elements. To take an early example, in "The Aztecs" (1964), the Doctor and his companions have to accept that the primitive civilisation in which they find themselves is locked into conducting human sacrifices, and they cannot alter either its large-scale cultural direction or the specific events which were in train before they arrived. Of course, over its decades-long history, *Who* took a number of different approaches to this question, using whichever perspective seemed handiest for the story at hand. "Inferno" (1970), for instance, is a full-blooded alternate-world story in which a parallel-Earth Britain under fascist rule is contrasted with the "real" world. The parallel world is doomed by the choices made by its inhabitants, but they enable the Doctor to save his own Earth: as he muses, "Free will is not an illusion after all." The immediate issue, of whether there's a consistent approach to time-paradoxes in *Who* is, as Wood and Miles recognise, pretty clear: of course there isn't, and anyone attempting to find one will break their brain. More interesting, I'd suggest, is the question of the writer's choice here. If, as I suggested, writers decide whether or not to have a mutable history based on what will serve the story – based on aesthetic reasons – it might be interesting to look at some of those reasons.

Some examples may help. Stephen Fry's alternate history novel *Making History* (1998) gives us a world in which Hitler died but the Nazi party rose in Germany under a leader without his flaws – and so extended its grip on the world even further. So Fry is not merely giving us a world where past time is mutable, but also diving into the age-old historians' argument of what causes historical change – individuals or 'social forces'. Alternate history provides a venue for this to be examined in ways that no other fictional form does. Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (1968) comes down firmly on the side of individual action: a single act, the assassination of Elizabeth I, is enough to skew English history radically from the course we know. The same

is true of Christopher Priest's *The Separation* (2002), if you trust its unreliable forking narratives: a different response to Rudolf Hess's 1941 mission to the UK gives an earlier armistice in World War II. John Crowley's "Great Work of Time" (1989) is a few steps away from that. He posits a time-travel technology which allows an "Otherhood" to work on the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to preserve the British Empire. Their individual actions skew history somewhat, and produce more benign versions of the Empire. But World War I happens, albeit in a more limited form, in other timelines we see. At the heart of Crowley's story is a debate about the morality of altering history; the story argues that any attempt to do so is Faustian overreaching, and will be punished accordingly. Roberts, by contrast, is interested in describing cultural change within his alternate world. The novellas that make up *Pavane* show individual actions slowly skewing events. Priest, I'd suggest, is wanting to argue for the worth of not having fought World War II after 1941; the means of that taking place are less interesting to him than the reasons. Different purposes entail different aesthetic choices.

Many alternate histories – particularly those which zap back and forth between more than one timeline – use quantum theory as their pretext. Or, more particularly, they use the many-worlds interpretation of quantum theory. (Gregory Benford's *Timescape* (1977) is an exemplar here.) I am willing to be corrected by those who know their science better than I do, but the many-worlds interpretation is only one way to look at the available data. It strikes me that it's particularly attractive to sf writers not because it's right or wrong but because of non-scientific reasons. If, from every moment, a range of possible outcomes branches, and if some of those outcomes might be accessible via some science-fictional gizmo, then you are in a position to make choice storyable, to examine the outcomes of different decisions. It may well be that time-travel is not possible – as Stephen Hawking has said, if it was, the best evidence would be that they'd have turned up already. (And, with the wisdom of hindsight, snapped up all the tickets for the events we now know are important like the 1966 World Cup Final.) But time-travel and alternate-world sf are too tempting as devices of story, as means to examine character. You may not be able to alter history, even one line, but sf has never let science stand in the way of story.

THE NEW X

BY
GRAHAM
SLEIGHT