

VECTOR

THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION

REIMAGINING HISTORY

Edward James on The Limits of Alternate History

Juliet McKenna on History Around the Margins

Chris Roberson on History Repurposed

Jo Walton and Guy Gavriel Kay on Reimagining History

#254

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2007

£2.50

To al-Uqlidsi's *Compendium of reflections on the use of the records of beginnings and events and on the contemplation of shadow history in the construction of plausible-fables:*

In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate, with His blessing and with His help, upon who we depend and whose aid we invoke, I, the servant of God, in need of His mercy who is so rich in kindness, Daud al-Musafir al-Khilafahi bin 'Ammar ibn al-Afrangi, write:

It is hard to say just where and when the rebellion began. The first clear sign of it was, perhaps, the nomination three years ago of Gabriel Goodman's "A Discourse on the Nature of Causality, with Air-Planes" for the Victor Hugo award, plausible-fabulism's highest honor; and if that nomination failed, in the same year the Man Leinster prize was given to Sri Nathan Zuckerman's *Patrimony* – in defiance of the critics who asserted that *Patrimony* was not even a plausible-fable, but like Zuckerman's other works a subliterate mimetic potboiler, albeit with a surface veneer of fabulation. The critics were divided; but what could not be argued was that while Goodman's controversial tale had been published by a respectable literary press, Zuckerman's book was a refugee from that most lurid of genre ghettos, mimetic fiction.

History, as ibn Khaldun wrote in the *Book of Advice*, "is a discipline widely cultivated among nations and races. It is eagerly sought after... both the learned and the ignorant are able to understand it". Goodman and Zuckerman share little, apart from their apostasy from the Karaite faith, but in their works there is an undeniable similarity of technique. This technique – a rigorous extrapolation, according to Democritan logic, from (in Goodman's words) "a single point of departure", as if the world were a mere mechanism in which events were connected only by the lowest form of materialist causality – would be anathema to traditional students of shadow history, with their dedication to the rhythm of fable, the laws of poetry, the virtuoso revelation of hitherto unnoticed oneiric correspondances.

And yet in that jarring simplicity there is nonetheless a note that, in these times, is strangely resonant.

To the ordinary reader, it may appear that little has changed since the days of Hodge Backmaker and Jesse Strange. Etienne Esterlin's puppet theater of liberation plays to packed houses from Al Hamra to Great Zimbabwe; Howi Qomr Paukota has, with *A Day in the Life*, at last completed the great work he began a decade ago in *Old Familiar Things*, a work which one could justifiably expect to confirm his position as the preeminent shadow historian of our time.

Paukota's work, indeed, is an instructive example, for the story of his "Columbian Moiety", that peaceful and unified republic stretching from Algonquian Acadia across a continent to my native Caliphate of al-Aztlán, could be considered the apotheosis of the classical shadow history. The tragic career of Jagirdar Robert Lee Khan, in all its twists and turns, is a conventional theme that has given rise to many fine works, from Backmaker's *Bowdoin College* to M.F. Zhang's "Indian Country"; the romance of Adeline Stephen and Orlando Nicholson in the twilight days of Albion is a vein no less rich, and no less exhaustively mined (not least by Zuckerman); but never, perhaps, has the dream logic of any

shadow history before Faulkner's woven these two strands together with such delicacy.


Nonetheless – though I am aware that I court ridicule (if not, I hope, actual danger) by saying so in a publication devoted to the highest and most sublime art of plausible fabulation – future scholars of the art will remember this year not for *A Day in the Life*, but rather for an entirely different treatment of the Matter of Albion, displaced like Zuckerman's from the mimetic ghetto – namely Malachai Cohen's *Guidebook to a Land of Ghosts*.

There is nothing more distasteful to a plausible-fabulist than a fact, but the fact we must face is this: our ancestors created a complex literature for complex times. Our times are simple. The world of war-cities and Wisdom Servants is not the world of dream continents and familiar spirits. Faulkner's great work may be beautiful, but it is no more appropriate for our times than Cohen's obscure memoir of *Empire City*, *The Escapist*, would have been appropriate for the times of Clemens and Korzenowski.

At a time when the art of the plausible-fable, as a whole, is more and more seen as retreating from the borders of memory and dream, so that many prominent writers have been accused of producing not fabulism but mere futurism, we should not be surprised to find, as we descend from the heights of imagination, a feeding-frenzy of realists rising from the depth of mimesis to meet us.

And yet the solution that many have proposed – a return to the ancient principles of plausible fabulation, a recommitment to the rules of poetic composition, and, most of all, a rigorous insistence on the unblemished lineage of the plausible-fabulist from teacher to student, is surely counterproductive. Ibn Khaldun also wrote of the inner meaning of history, that which "involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things, and deep knowledge of the how and why of events".

Our readers may be turning to the realists for work that would once have been done by the shadow historians, but it is hardly just for craftsmen who have grown complacent in their craft to blame their customers for demanding more tempting wares. It rather behooves us to turn our tools upon ourselves, to plumb the waters of causality, to map the currents of history that have carried Zuckerman and Cohen and their ilk so far downstream while Faulkner and Esterlin spin in backwater eddies, and to learn to navigate those currents ourselves – if we can.

he author of this work – God forgive him! – says: I completed the composition and draft of this work on Shahr-el-Thamen 19, AM 5768. Knowledge comes only from God, the Mighty One, the Wise One.

TORQUE CONTROL

EDITORIAL
BY
NIALL
HARRISON

In one of those helpful synchronicities that make planning issues of *Vector* so much easier, suddenly everyone's playing with history. The trend is not brand new: witness, for example, Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle* within the genre, the fuss about Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* outside it. Nor is it necessarily attracting writers who haven't plumbed these waters before: Stephen Baxter has always written alternate histories alongside his near- and far-future stories, even if his current *Time's Tapestry* sequence is his most sustained and intriguing engagement with the matter of history to date. But it does seem to have reached something of a peak in 2007. Of the submissions received for the Arthur C. Clarke Award so far this year, for instance, one in six involves some fiddling with history, either to create pure alternate histories (such as *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon), or as part of some larger snail conceit (such as Paul McAuley's multiverse-hopping *Cowboy Angels*). That's not to mention the major alternate histories published in the US this year, such as Kathleen Ann Goonan's *In War Times*, Jo Walton's *Ha'Penny* or the latest instalment in Charles Stross's *Merchant Princes* series – the first book of which is due out in the UK this month, but hasn't been submitted for the Clarke. (Yet, anyway.)

Part of the reason for this last factoid may be that the *Merchant Princes* were sold and published as fantasy, despite the fact that, as many reviewers have observed, they can be equally well read as science fiction. It's a quirk of the genre taxonomy we've ended up with that when an author tweaks our history we shelve the result in science fiction, but when they borrow from our history to create a secondary world, even when that world has no overt magic, we call it fantasy. (There is of course also a half-way tradition of fantastic alternate histories, a tradition that – with Ian R Macleod's *The Light Ages*, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, and Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* books – seems at the moment to be in vigorous health.) The use of history in fantasy is at least as interesting as the use of history in science fiction, though, and so this issue sets out to explore both.

In a review for *Strange Horizons* earlier this autumn, Paul Kincaid mused on the subject of why writers and readers return to alternate histories. "Perhaps," he speculated, "we are fascinated by the fragility of our world: look how nearly we became other? Or it may be that where most science fictions display the continuity of human character – no matter how far away in space or time, we still behave in more or less the same way, driven by the same stimuli – there is a case to be made also for the contingency of our character: look, this world is but a heartbeat away yet see how differently we behave in the different circumstances. Or maybe the impulse is altogether simpler, the way we can never stop responding to that age-old impulse to wonder: if only?" (*Strange Horizons*,

17th September 2007) This seems to me a fair summation of how science fiction readers and writers approach this sort of book – science fiction being explicitly where Kincaid positions alternate history, although not everyone would agree with that characterisation. (I recently went on a reading holiday – wonderful idea, more people should do them: some friends, a picturesque location, good food and a large pile of books – and one recurring argument was that an alternate history was not, in itself, enough to make a novel science fiction. So while *Cowboy Angels* is *sf*, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* isn't. Elsewhere in this issue, in "The Limits of Alternate History", Edward James makes a version of this case, while in this issue's *The New X*, Graham Sleight argues the other side.) But Kincaid is speaking primarily as a reader, so to get a perspective from the other side of the typewriter I went to ask some writers.

Specifically, I went to ask Jo Walton and Guy Gavriel Kay, both writers who have published numerous works that clearly draw on specific historical contexts – sometimes to alter them, as in Walton's *Farthing* books, and sometimes to parallel or reflect a context in a world that is not actually our own, as in Kay's *The Lions of Al-Rassan*, *Tigana* and others. I asked them first what appealed to them about such a historically grounded approach to creating a setting, as opposed to trying to invent something from whole cloth, and they said:

Jo Walton: Real history is fractal in a way that it's very hard for imagined history to be, real history has the kind of details nobody could make up, and real history brings with it the resonance of being real – which is actually a double-edged sword. Real history resonates with the reader because it is real, but equally because of that it can have more weight than the story can support. The question then is why not write a straight historical story and the answer to that is, for me, because this way I can change the end. I get the resonance and the fractal weirdness of real history without its crushing inevitability.

Guy Gavriel Kay: While I agree with Jo that the freedom to change things is liberating, what appeals to me most, in an overarching way, is how using invented settings to explore motifs of history can – paradoxically – bring the story closer to the reader. Fantasy is 'supposed' to be about escape, but it is much more than that, or can be. History seen through the prism of the fantastic stops being 'just' about a given time and place. The paradigms of the fairy tale ('Once upon a time the third son of a woodcutter...') are all about universalizing, and identification. I find this a powerful tool as a novelist.

Kay's comment reminded me of something Kazuo Ishiguro said about *Never Let Me Go* – which, of course, is set in an alternate 1990s where biotechnology had advanced sufficiently

to make human cloning viable – when I saw him interviewed at the Oxford Literary Festival a couple of years ago. Ishiguro felt, he said, that using an alternate history setting allowed the story to become ‘universal’ in a way that a story set in a particular time and place wouldn’t be. He also mentioned that he was planning to take a similar approach to his next book (if I recall correctly, it was going to be about a war in an alternate Scotland; I have no idea if this is still the case) for similar reasons, but that he still felt a tension between needing to describe the setting in enough detail for the reader to engage with it, and needing to leave enough vagueness in the setting for the reader to bring their own imprint to it. When I mentioned this to Kay, he offered this response:

“That Ishiguro quote amuses me. I would never suggest he’s quoting me – far too likely that ideas pop into the zeitgeist all over at the same time – but I’ve been saying and writing almost word-for-word the same thing for over a decade now, as part of a ‘defence of fantasy’. I most often use the example of my own novel, *Tigana*, where a fantasy setting and the compressing or accelerating effect of magic are used as a metaphor for obliterating identity, to explore the ‘standard’ technique of tyrannies to try to erase the culture and history of an occupied people (or their own people). In a nutshell, the fantasy setting does make possible (doesn’t ensure, craft has a lot to do with that) the universalizing idea. The story is disconnected from a single time and place, and the theme can be seen as about all times and places: in this case, all tyrannies or occupying powers utilizing the tactic.

“This notion emerged for me from readings in history, from Mao’s beginning Chinese history with the Long March, Japan forbidding all writing in Korea during their early 20th century occupation, the English renaming places in Ireland from Gaelic to English. (Brian Friel’s wonderful play about this, ‘Translations’, was a specific inspiration for *Tigana*.) But on the broadest level I’ve been arguing and writing for a long time that fantasy is capable of being a subtle and sophisticated tool in this way for important observations about culture, society, history. Done as fantasy a tale stops being about ‘just one time and place’ and *can* become a universal (or at least a wider) observation.

“I actually think this is close to being obvious, but I’m ruefully aware that it isn’t so, not for genre-focused readers who aren’t inclined to see the genre in this way, and certainly not for those who disdain the genre. The *Tigana* example is offered as the most obvious one from my own work: the ‘device’ of magic, the fantastical setting ‘used’ – both of them – to achieve a larger purpose ... within the framework of an author’s desire, first and foremost, to shape a compelling story.

“I’m less occupied (so to speak) with the tension Ishiguro mentioned between offering detail and leaving things vague. I think that’s simply a function of the scale and thrust of a given novel. Some work better in a fuzzy, amorphous landscape, some gain texture and weight from precision of detail. One tension that does interest me is that between the invented setting – which signals the author’s (and the reader’s) freedom from ‘real history’ – and the use of very exact moments or motifs from history. This can be complex, in a variety of ways. I still recall a novelist/reviewer of my *The Lions of Al-Rassan* (who really ought to have known better) suggesting a violent early scene in the book represented overkill (as it were) on my part, an indulgence of Grand Guignol invention ... and the basics of the scene happened to be just about straight from the history of Al-Andalus. What interests me today (long after) is that there are these issues that can arise when you go in-and-out of real

events: a measure of recognition and responsibility comes with the technique we’re discussing here”.

Walton was less convinced by the universalising argument:

“I agree that there’s a way that changing things is freeing. You don’t have to write about the facts of the event, you can write about the truth of them – as in *Al-Rassan*, focusing it all within one lifetime so you can have that story. I think this is something Guy tends to do perfectly. But I’m not sure I agree it makes it universal – or at least, it depends how far away you take it. If you’re staying close to the original history then there is an obligation to that, you can’t make it too universal or change it too much without losing the essentials – the context and reasons why people did things. I think it’s paradoxical, it needs a focus on what’s particular and essential to reach what’s universal.

“I’ve done this myself – in my first three novels the world is specifically linked to our world and to lots of other worlds by the mythologically significant things happening the same. (If someone doesn’t do what they’re supposed to, someone else will do it, or if nobody does, you get the legend as if they did anyway, which is why in our world we have the Arthur legend and no historical Arthur.) Having that as an almost science-fictional rationale let me play with the history and the mythology in a fantasy context. And I think Guy has something like that in linking all his worlds to the Ur-world of Fionavar. With *Farthing* and its sequels I was doing straight alternate history, one change spreading out. But in both cases I felt an obligation to the original history, while also getting away from the weight of it. So there’s the question of how much you can change and how”.

So it comes back to that borderland between fantasy and sf again. Writers more clearly on either side of that divide discuss their uses of history elsewhere in this issue. Chris Roberson outlines the genesis of his ‘Celestial Empire’ timeline, in which China is first into space (by some way), and the various strategies he uses to incorporate the facts of history into his fiction; and Juliet McKenna shares some of the insights she’s gleaned into “History Around the Margins”, and describes how they’ve shaped her own work.

The question of responsibility to history, though, raised by both Kay and Walton, is one that particularly interests me. On the one hand, part of me instinctively agrees that there is some sort of responsibility required; when reading Owen Sheers’ debut novel *Resistance*, which features a Nazi invasion of mainland Britain in World War II, I found myself wondering whether it was possible to write an alternate history of that conflict that doesn’t mention the holocaust, or whether that fact must impinge at some point for the story to remain (for want of a better word) honest. (In *Resistance*, it is mentioned, although in such a way that you might think Sheers feels he’s doing it out of obligation, rather than because it’s needed for his tale.) For a more flippant example, there’s Paul Di Filippo’s collection *Lost Pages*, in which we find out where various sf writers would have ended up had history turned out otherwise – Heinlein, for example, becomes president. Good clean fun, except when it isn’t, as in the case where Alice Sheldon (head of the CIA), Alfred Bester (journalist) and Theodore Sturgeon (cult leader) end up ... well, the story leaves you with the feeling you get when you inadvertently imagine your parents in situations you’d rather not imagine parents in.

On the other hand, there's the argument put forward by David Moles, with which I suspect both Di Filippo and Daud al-Musafir al-Khilafahi bin 'Ammar ibn al-Afrangi, the author of the letter that opened this issue, would agree:

"I had this feeling, when I was writing 'Five Irrational Histories' [...] that I was violating the conventions of the genre. 'You've got too many Points of Departure! And they're impossible! And even if they were possible, they wouldn't do what you say they do! And you don't even mention the Civil War!'

"See, when I think of the term *alternate history* (as opposed to when I, say, just write it, without thinking about it), I think of a certain sort of story that you might call 'hard alternate history': well-defined turning points, the appearance (if not the reality) of relentless logical extrapolation [...] [But] if there's one sub-genre of SF that shouldn't ought to be pinned down and conventionalized, by its very nature, it's alternate history. There's an infinite number of ways to write alternate history. Let's more of us do more of them'.

(From
<http://www.discontent.com/log/archives/000367.html>.)

Now, in some ways I'm not being fair to Moles here, because what he means by conventions is not quite what Walton and Kay mean by *responsibility*, although I think there's some overlap. He's also talking specifically about alternate histories, and not reimagined histories. But as much as I nod along with Kay when he says:

"I see a larger, more ethically worrisome set of issues arising from the more usual techniques of fiction that employ real lives (living or dead, famous or obscure) and claim a freedom to do with them what they will. I do not subscribe to the, 'it is a novel, anything goes' school. Having said that, I'd also disagree with the idea that doing a work as a fantasy allows a freer approach to source history. It offers a heads-up to the reader that the author is not feeling constrained by actual events. I have, for example, no problem myself with a fantasy inspired by Elizabeth's England in which an invented, glamorous courtier figure is an amalgam of several real ones.

"Fantasy also allows the sharpening of focus (and time) to make a point ... in my *Sarantine Mosaic*, I've telescoped the emergence of the Iconoclast movement by more than two centuries to intensify the play of events and character. I've changed history in other obvious ways - my point is that I am much happier doing so in the acknowledged, declared context of fantasy'.

... it doesn't erase my sympathy with Moles' position. (Not least because his irrational histories are ridiculous amounts of fun; check them out at <http://irrationalhistories.blogspot.com/>.) Walton, meanwhile, is perhaps more pragmatic:

"When it comes to alternate history, I think history, like evolution, has what Jack Cohen calls universals and parochials. Universals are things that are always going to happen no matter what. Parochials are weird unpredictable things that only happen once. Once you've changed one parochial, which easily could have gone differently, you can count on universals to happen the way they tend to happen, but you can't count on other parochials turning up at all. With the *King's Peace* books I was changing the end so that while the 'Arthur' figure dies, the

kingdom can survive. With *Farthing* I was changing something before the beginning and extrapolating on.

"Auden says: 'History, to the defeated, may say alas, but never help, or pardon'. I think alternate history says to the reader: These things you think are inevitabilities? Alas. Help! Pardon?"

Perhaps the reason we don't see more truly alternate alternate histories is the same as the reason my friends didn't think of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* as science fiction, which might be stated as something like this: that many of the specific pleasures readers associate with books that play with history depend on a frisson between recognition and estrangement (or if you prefer, between the extrapolative satisfaction of science fiction and the expansive possibility of fantasy). Too much of one or the other - too many parochials preserved or altered - and you head towards a story that offers the specific pleasures of science fiction or fantasy, instead. Or maybe not: for Edward James, the best alternate histories are the most rigorous, the least wild.

And for me? What is my answer to Paul Kincaid's question? What are the specific pleasures I get from alternate histories or historically-inspired narratives? I've been thinking about this as a result of blasting through Stephen Baxter's *Emperor, Conqueror and Navigator* in quick succession. The books are interesting because they are about a timeline in which various agents are trying to change things, to manufacture an alternate world, and (so far) either fail, or succeed in preserving the timeline we have from someone else's attempted change. The sense of contingency, of historical mutability, that I associate with alternate history is achieved in this series through glimpses, worlds that are never realised; and it's emphasised by the architectural skill Baxter shows in bringing so many of his potential Jonbar points down to a single action by a single character. In other words, I think Andy Duncan pretty much nails it, in his chapter on alternate history in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*: "At its best, the alternate history reminds us that we all change the world".

Thanks once again to Liz Batty for production on this issue; thanks also to Nic Clarke for a helpful brainstorm about the content. Next issue is exciting for a couple of reasons: it's going to be our review of 2007, and we're going to have some extra pages. See you then. In the meantime, don't forget to nominate in the BSFA Awards and Retro Awards - full details on the BSFA website.

The Limits of Alternate History

Edward James

I time-travel into the Cretaceous era, step on a butterfly, and when I get back home I find that the wrong person has won the election and that the English language is subtly altered. Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" (1952) is a memorable story, and serves as a splendid metaphor for the whole genre of alternate history. It's the Butterfly Effect. And even if it has nothing to do with the "real" Butterfly Effect – which did not come along until the chaos-theorist Edward Lorenz invented the phrase in 1979 – it illustrates much the same principle: that changing a small variable may have grossly disproportionate effects further down the line.

Change the past and you change the present: that's an easy enough concept (and for some demonstrates the impossibility of time travel); but I want to argue in this piece that to play the game properly and *elegantly* one does need to stick to some rules. The first, obviously, is that there should be some historical logic involved. There is none in the Bradbury story. Leaving aside the question of whether there were any butterflies in the Cretaceous period (if one is to believe Wikipedia, the matter is in dispute), for the death of a butterfly to have an effect on the future of humanity it would have had somehow to change the evolutionary history of primitive mammals. And Bradbury is suggesting that such a change would result in, not the evolution of, say, intelligent life equivalent to *homo sapiens* but from a different mammal ancestor, which I could just about believe in, but a different election result in a political contest fought by the same two politicians. I would reckon that to be totally impossible. As metaphor, Bradbury's story is unsurpassed; as alternate history, it is a non-starter.

Staying with the Cretaceous for a little longer, let us move to a somewhat more plausible scenario. In Harry Harrison's *West of Eden* (1984) the asteroid which destroyed a large proportion of the species on the planet never arrived. A saurian race evolved into the ecological niche held by *homo sapiens* in our time-line. So far so good. But these intelligent saurians live alongside humans. Given what I presume to be the devastating effect of the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction event in our own time-line upon mammals as well as upon dinosaurs, it is plausible that without the asteroid *homo sapiens* would have evolved in just the same way as in our world, although alongside a dominant saurian species? Everyone, of course, sets their own personal boundaries between the plausible and the implausible; and this is as true in "proper" history as it is in alternate history.

For me a good alternate history is one that genuinely explores historical plausibilities. And this means recognizing that the term "alternate history" – or, if you prefer, "allohistory" or "uchronia" – is generally used in such a way as to include various sub-genres that do not really belong to the label at all.

This was already noted by Robert Schunk in his incredibly useful bibliography of alternate history books, at <<http://www.uchronia.net>> (which builds on the important bibliographic work of Barton C. Hacker and Gordon B. Chamberlain, which is now over twenty years old). He says that the genre "somehow involves one or more past events which 'happened otherwise' and includes some amount of description of the subsequent effects on history", and he puts

the word "past" into italics to emphasise that alternate history does not include those works which were originally written to be set in the future but have become "alternate" by being superseded. Unless you draw this limit, he says (rightly) that "this bibliography would have the impossible goal of including a significant fraction of the books and stories that have ever been published, and potentially the majority of all science fiction". He makes other useful distinctions. "Secret history" or "hidden history", in which something we had known about the past is demonstrated to be untrue, as in Michael Flynn's *In the Country of the Blind* (1990) (which involves conspiracy theories), is not alternate history. He suggests that this category is close to the type of historical novel in which events are shifted around, or historical personalities invented, for literary reasons: *The Three Musketeers* is his example. Also to be excluded are those "alternate world" stories in which our own past is mirrored but radically recast: Guy Gavriel Kay's "Sarantium" stories are an example. Schunk would also exclude what he calls "personal alternate histories" or "micro alternate histories", where an individual goes back into the past in order to change their own personal history, but in which little or no change to society at large takes place. He instances the movies *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Sliding Doors* here, but argues that Ken Grimwood's *Replay* fits the alternate history category because the characters activities do change history.

I would not seriously argue that there is anything wrong with these distinctions. What I would like to do is to make some more. In terms of authorial approach and in terms of the pleasure that the reader gets out of the tale – or perhaps I should just specify *this* reader, who happens to be an historian as well as a science fiction reader – I think that the pure form of alternate history is too often sullied by importations from other genres.

What is the pleasure I am referring to? It is quite a refined pleasure, but one which I think many alternate history fans share, if only because they tend to be interested in history as well. It is akin to the pleasure felt when an author dumps you on an alien planet or in a complicated future society: the sense of anxiety as one struggles to read the clues in order to understand the novel, and the sense of achievement when the puzzle is solved, are the two major parts of the reading pleasure. One finds it too in what Farah Mendlesohn in her forthcoming book *Rhetorics of Fantasy* has called the "immersive fantasy"; she says that "at its best, it presents the fantastic without comment as the norm both for the protagonists and for the reader: we sit on the protagonist's shoulder and while we have access to their eyes and ears we are not provided with an explanatory narrative". This is quite different from the experience of the reader in what she calls "portal-quest fantasies", since there the reader is learning the world alongside the equally perplexed and anxious protagonist, who has entered this fictional world through a portal of some kind: that protagonist normally has a guide to explain the world to him (and to us). The experienced reader is likely to find the immersive fantasy more fascinating and compelling: this hypothetical reader might find even find the guide in the portal-quest fantasy an irritant who is ruining the pleasure of the reader, who would rather discover the world for him- or herself, rather than have the guide's vision of it presented on a plate.

A similar distinction can be made within the alternate history genre. There are "immersive" alternate histories, in which the reader has to solve the puzzle, not only of how the alternate present is different, but at what

point in the past a different decision has been or a different outcome arrived at, to create this alternative history. Schunk calls this event the Point of Departure (or POD); I still prefer the more fannish terminology of "Jonbar point", named after the John Barr who was the protagonist of Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Time* (1938). The big problem in getting this across in fiction is that the author either has to assume that the reader knows a good deal of history, or else has to drop in a conversation at some point which serves as an infodump. One reason why so many alternate histories have their Jonbar point in either the American Civil War or the Second World War, perhaps, is that these two periods are by far the most familiar for the average reader in the USA. The Thirty Years War would require a lot more explanation.

No writer of alternate history can simply assume that readers will pick things up. In a discussion with students recently of Alfred Bester's "Disappearing Act", which they had all read, I asked "At which point did you realize that the people in Ward T were not actually time-travelling into a real past?". One of them said that it was when Julius Caesar and Savonarola appeared in the same scene. "But at the beginning of that scene", I said, "the Roman aristocratic woman is shown as smoking a cigarette". The response: "But I assumed that people in ancient Rome would have smoked something..." None of them had seen, in the previous sentence, how incongruous it was that the wine in Julius Caesar's Rome was a Lachrymae Christi, although at least some noticed the anachronism in the previous scene when the protagonist placed a bet on the election between Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson (1952), and then offered financial support to the young and ambitious Henry Ford. The one whose revelation came with Caesar and Savonarola had missed all that, in the previous few pages. And these were history students (although admittedly in most cases students who have never before studied American history). It well illustrates the problems which a writer of alternate history faces when trying to be too cute. Infodump of some kind is in most cases a necessity, so that the average reader is not totally lost. Jo Walton does it beautifully, and almost imperceptibly, in her *Farting* (2006), which I would regard as the very model of an "immersive" alternate history.

If the "immersive" form is the pure essence of alternate history, what are the impure forms, the ones that have been born through cross-breeding with other sub-genres of science fiction?

The most obvious is the alternate history/time travel cross. If one wanted to be a purist and to eliminate this hybrid from the category of "alternate history" altogether, one would of course eliminate a lot of what has been characterised as alternative history, including classics like Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* (1953), which is probably the best of all those stories in which a time-traveller goes back, usually to Gettysburg, to change the result of the Civil War. (Given the popularity of Gettysburg as a destination for time-travellers, it is actually possible that most of those who fought, on both sides, were in fact from the future: this is a scenario investigated in a very different historical context by Garry Kilworth's wonderful "Let's Go to Golgotha", 1974.) The time-travel story frequently investigates an alternate history possibility, focussing on a potential turning-point, but does not normally look in detail at the consequences of the historical change that the time-traveller has introduced. More crucially, however, for the purist in me, this change has been introduced into history in an implausible manner, i.e. as a result of the action of a time traveller. Sometimes the change is very implausible indeed, as when white South

Africans time-travel to the Confederacy in the 1860s with a whole load of heavy weaponry in an attempt to boost white supremacy (this is in Harry Turtledove's *The Guns of the South*, 1992). And if one is not careful the story becomes a time-paradox story as much as an alternate history one, and may need the injection of what has now become science fiction cliché to sort it out. After all, if one time-traveller can change the future to suit him- or herself, what is to stop another time-traveller coming along to do the same, and so on ad infinitum? Time to call in the time police to try to keep History on the "right" path. (It is, incidentally, interesting how often authors assume that ours is the right path. I would have thought that five minutes' thought could suggest all sorts of improvement to our world that could be made with judicious use of a time-machine; as David Gerrold developed in *The Man Who Folded Himself*, 1973). By the time we have time police, we have moved a long way from alternate history.

Time-slips are, if anything, worse. I know that many people find it fascinating to follow, with Eric Flint (1632, published in 2000), the alternate history created when the author dumps the population of a West Virginian coal-mining town into Germany right in the middle of the Thirty Years War – and it does have lovely incidents, like Charles I, king of England and Scotland, getting hold of a twentieth-century history book and immediately slapping an obscure and perfectly loyal Huntingdonshire gentleman called Oliver Cromwell in prison – but, as alternate history goes, it is as impure and implausible as it can get. Still, for Robert Schunk the publication in 1939 of a time-slip story – L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* – was "the event which effectively made alternate history fiction a sub-genre of science fiction". Perhaps so: but I think it was rather the introduction of a scientifically implausible manner of time travel which made that story science fiction.

Another impure form of alternate history is the multiverse story. If we were to eliminate this from our category of "true" alternate history, we would, of course, discard Murray Leinster's story "Sidewise in Time" (*Astounding*, June 1934), which gave its name to the Sidewise Awards for Alternate History, presented each year since 1996 to the best short and long forms of the genre. (The first year was a double first for both British writers and for angels: the winners were Stephen Baxter's "Brigantia's Angels" and Paul McAuley's *Pasquale's Angel*.) Leinster's story imagined the possibility of shifting into any of the many (possibly infinite) number of worlds that have been created as a result of earlier historical divergences. The multiverse might exist, and an exploration of any one of its time-lines might be a perfectly legitimate alternate history, but the ability to move between one and another creates so many historical possibilities that it requires the intervention of H. Beam Piper's paratime police, not so much to keep order as to preserve the historian's sanity.

It is not, of course, that the historian's sanity is particularly threatened by ordinary thoughts of alternate history. Such speculation has a venerable ancestry, going back to Livy's speculation in the first century BC about what might have happened if Alexander the Great had not died young, through to Edward Gibbon's musings (in Chapter 52 of *The Decline and Fall*) about the possible fate of western Europe if Charles Martel had not defeated the Arabs at the Battle of Poitiers in 732. "The Arabian fleet might have sailed without a naval combat into the mouth of the Thames. Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might

demonstrate to a circumscribed people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet". The growth of "scientific history" in the nineteenth century successfully eradicated such unprofessional musings for a time; but, thank goodness, they began to re-emerge again in the twentieth century. G.M. Trevelyan's 1907 piece "If Napoleon had Won the Battle of Waterloo" was one of the first signs of this revival. Two books called *The "ifs" of History* came out, one in 1907 and the other in 1929. But the best-known product of the revival was the collection of essays edited by J.C. Squire, called, in the UK, *If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History* (Longman, 1931) and, in the USA, *If, Or, History Rewritten* (Viking, 1931). The UK title, at least, announced very clearly that this was just a game: it was a lapse from legitimate history. The Jonbar points in this volume ranged from the sixteenth century (Chesterton's piece "If Don John of Austria had married Mary Queen of Scots") to the very recent (Ronald Knox's "If the General Strike had Succeeded", and Squire's own bizarre squib "If It had Been Discovered in 1930 that Bacon Really Did Write Shakespeare", which concludes with the "joke" that Shakespeare wrote the works of Bacon...). The most imaginative contribution was undoubtedly Winston S. Churchill's "If Lee Had Not Won the Battle of Gettysburg", which, as the title suggests, is written as if by an historian in a world in which the Confederate army had won Gettysburg: the precursor of many a subsequent fictional narrative.

There are good reasons why "real" historians should not waste their time on alternate history scenarios: "parlour games", as E.H. Carr, author of *What is History?*, put it, although E.P. Thompson's "Geschichtswissenschaft" (loosely translated as "unhistorical shit") sounds better. It is the job of historians to analyse the sources and to make sense of them; by definition there cannot be sources for things that never happened. The counter-argument for that is that historians are forever making statements such as "Charles Martel's victory over the Arabs in 732 was crucial for the history of western Europe", which – as Gibbon would have seen – implies a possible alternate history ("it is crucial, because without it Europe might have become Muslim"). The very act of labelling some events or some individuals as "crucial" or "significant" implies that, without them, the outcome would have been different. But, even so, is it the job of historians to investigate hypothetical outcomes?

The other main objection to alternate history among professional historians comes from those who say that historical change is not a matter of individual decisions but the result of impersonal social and economic developments which cannot be changed or set in a different direction by individuals. The idea of an individual going back in a time machine to change history is nonsense; an individual could not change history. Now, it seems to me that this is not an objection to alternate history; merely an objection to shallow and ill-conceived alternate history. The pitfalls of actually going back into the past in order to change it are very cleverly worked out in Stephen Fry's alternate history novel *Making History* (1996), in which the world created by the elimination of Hitler before birth is very much worse than the world in which the protagonist had been born. Eliminating an individual cannot have predictable results; an individual, even one like Hitler, is as much the product of his society as his creator. Hitler has become even more of a touchstone for alternate history than Gettysburg (searching on "Hitler" in Schmunk's alternate history catalogue gives me 146 hits, and "Gettysburg" 42); unlike Gettysburg, however, the phenomenon has attracted a serious study,

Gavriel Rosenfeld's *The World Hitler Never Made* (2005).

It is perhaps ironic that the first professional historians to study alternate histories seriously were precisely those who believed in impersonal social and economic forces. The classic work is Robert Fogel's 1964 book *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History*, in which he imagined (or, rather, calculated) what the growth of the American economy would have been in the mid- to late-nineteenth century without railways, if transport had to be solely by road, river and canal. He concluded that the railway contributed only three per cent to growth: far below what had been proposed (largely by guestimates) by early economic historians. Fogel, more controversially, then turned to look at American slave-owning in cost-benefit terms, and argued (against the grain again) that it could be a profitable activity. Fogel received the economists' equivalent of a Nobel Prize in 1993 for his contribution to the "New Economic History", which he also called "cliometrics". It did not always use alternate history as a methodological tool, but in a sense economics and economic history was better primed for that kind of exercise than "straight" history. After all, if you put together a computer model to predict future trends, why should you not use a computer model to look at past trends, and to tweak the variables in order to reconstruct different pasts?

More recently, it has become fashionable for historians interested in more than just economic history to take an interest in alternate history – although they prefer to call it "counterfactual history", or "virtual history" (by analogy with virtual reality). Speculating about counterfactuals openly is more honest than doing it by implication, as, they argue, most historians do. It allows the historian to focus clearly on what the important causes and consequences of a particular event are: how can we really know what the significant causes are if we do not imagine the effects of them being removed?

Niall Ferguson, the Glasgow-born Oxford-then-Harvard historian, has been the main promoter of this revival, thanks to his 1997 book *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*. Before him, virtual history was for the most part "after-dinner history": amusing, or facetious, prone to exaggerating the way trivial changes could affect the future, and frequently taking the "easy" option of changing the outcome of a battle or imagining the carrying out or foiling of an assassination. Virtual History is yet another collection of "what if?" essays, although this time with a 90-page methodological prologue by Ferguson, and a firm instruction – or constraint – laid upon his contributors. "Counterfactuals should be those which contemporaries contemplated" (p. 87). This reminds us, he says, that it is the counterfactual which was often seen by contemporaries as the most likely outcome; and counterfactuals also remind us that people who died in wars "were the victims of genuinely chaotic and unpredictable events which could have turned out differently" (p. 88). In short – and here Ferguson nails his colours to the mast: "Virtual history is a necessary antidote to determinism" (p. 89). It is not only the ideologically determinist historians that Ferguson objects to: that is, those historians who believe that history moves in a particular direction, towards progress, or a Marxist utopia. More insidious is the way in which determinism can creep into an historical narrative: if one knows the end of the story before starting to write it, then it is easy for a writer to imply that it was all inevitable. Consciousness of counterfactuals could help the writer avoid this. By saying that we should only look at the counterfactuals which contemporaries

contemplated, of course, Ferguson is effectively saying that only the modern historian, buttressed by all the available letters, diaries, cabinet papers and newspapers, should get involved; for early periods of history we often have no real idea of what was on contemporaries' minds. But in a sense this fits in with the predilections of writers of alternate histories, for whom dealing with the changes produced by a Jonbar point only a few decades in the past is very much more manageable (and perhaps interesting) than one which is millennia away.

Recently, as was widely reported in the press, Niall Ferguson has discovered computer gaming; or, rather, he has realised that World War II games are not all shoot-'em-ups. He was approached by Muzzy Lane, the game company which had produced "Making History: The Calm and the Storm", which tried to take an in-depth view of the world on the eve of the war, taking in diplomatic and economic matters as well as purely military ones. He found that some of his own theories just didn't work, at least in this game. Beforehand, he had argued that if Britain and France had gone to war with Germany in 1938, over Czechoslovakia, they could have won. But it didn't work in the game, because France defected and the British Expeditionary Force was crushed: he had not allowed sufficient time for building up the diplomatic connections with France. But his thirteen-year-old son could see the mistakes that Ferguson had made; spending time setting up solid trade agreements with France worked, and a declaration of war in 1938 resulted in defeat for Germany. Ferguson is now working with Muzzy Lane to develop a game that looks at the circumstances of the Iraq war, and taking America and its allies ahead into conflict with Iran. He is setting up a course at Harvard that will use computer gaming as a way of investigating historical possibilities.

It looks as if historians are collectively taking a much more positive attitude towards alternate history. Readers are clearly interested, hence the spate of What If? anthologies in the last decade, as briefly illustrated in the bibliography (even though some of it barely gets beyond after-dinner history). Alternate history novels are going off in all directions, including that of the fantastic (Brian Stableford's *The Empire of Fear*, 1988, Orson Scott Card's *Alvin Maker* series, or Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, 2004). An enquiring historian might wonder why alternate history is becoming so popular. Is it because we no longer have any clear idea of the future, but are more aware than ever before that decisions are being made right now that are going to bring the future into existence? Or is it just that publishers have recognised a new marketing category?

It may well be that alternate history should be regarded as science fiction; it is, after all, extrapolation, which is what science fiction writers do. But, as I hope will have emerged from the above, I would argue that alternate history is at its best – and intellectually rigorous – when it limits itself, and keeps itself as far as possible from the trappings of more conventional science fiction, in other words, when it extrapolates hypothetical futures from the potentials of the past without the help of science-fictional gimmicks like time-travellers or aliens. And, a purely personal preference from a full-time pedant, I think that the most interesting alternate history scenarios are the most plausible, which in practice probably means ones where the Jonbar points are relatively close to the present. I could never believe in a Roman Empire that survived into the twenty-first century (Silverberg's *Roma Eterna*, 2003) (how many political systems ever last that long?), but I might be made to believe in, say, Thirteen

Colonies that remain such until well into the nineteenth century. Of course, if belief isn't important to you, why, then there are no limits at all!

Works Cited

- Cowley, Robert, ed. *What If? The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (London, 2000)
- Cowley, Robert, ed. *What If? America. Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (London, 2004)
- Ferguson, Niall, ed. *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London, 1997)
- Ferriiter, Diarmuid. *What If? Alternative Views of Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2006)
- Macintyre, Stuart and Scalmer, Sean, eds., *What If? Australian History As It Might Have Been* (Melbourne, 2006)
- Rosenfeld, Gavriel D. *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (Cambridge, 2005).

Edward James joined the BSFA in around 1963 and went to his first convention (RePetercon) in 1964. He was editor of Foundation between 1986 and 2001. He has won an Eaton Award and a Pilgrim Award for his contributions to the study of science fiction, and in 2005, with Farah Mendlesohn, won a Hugo for The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction. In his day job he is the Professor of Medieval History at University College Dublin.

History Around the Margins

Juliet E. McKenna

The template for fantasy fiction established in the 1970s harked back to authors such as Lord Dunsany, JRR Tolkien, Fritz Leiber and Poul Anderson who were largely inspired by northern European myth and history. That their books incline towards quasi-medieval, male-dominated tales is hardly surprising given these influences and the times they lived in. However fantasy fiction written today increasingly looks beyond the affairs of wizards and kings to the lives of humbler people and to tales set in exotic climates, times and cultures. Could these developments in fiction have happened without the parallel rise in historical research looking beyond the lives of great men? Without the re-evaluation of the age of empires from the perspective of the conquered as well as the conquerors? Or do both trends stem from a similar impulse to explore and discover more about the human condition?

That's a debate for another time. For the moment, let's simply consider the wealth of resources currently available for fantasy writers as historians push the boundaries of what we know and what we think we know about the past. A trawl along my own bookshelves turns up dozens of books to illustrate the expanding scope of what's now published. Unsurprisingly, a significant number would be shelved under Women's Studies if my study were that well organised. Even so, once those have been gathered together, I have a great many more books about other groups of traditionally marginalised people whose role in the historical narrative is now being reassessed. There's also been a rise in thematic histories and other media offer increasing amounts of interesting material.

Despite comprising half of humanity, women have long been solely defined by their relationships to important men, much as the traditional fantasy heroine is defined by her relationship with the hero. The movement to redress the balance began in the 1960s and 1970s, with books such as Sarah B Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (1975), which I first encountered as an Oxford classics undergraduate in the early 1980s. Since then countless studies have focused on those traditionally excluded by sex or class from full participation in the political or intellectual life of their societies. Some books are militantly feminist, occasionally to the detriment of their scholarship, but these shouldn't detract from this important development.

Individual stories increasingly come to light, of atypical women like Bess of Hardwick [1] or Lady Jane Digby [2] who eloped with an Austrian prince and finally married a Bedouin sheik. Looking to the margins of Europe, we find queens of medieval Byzantium, Irene, Euphrosyne and Theodora exerting enormous influence [3]. Heading to the far west Grace (or Graine) O'Malley, was feted somewhat inaccurately as the Pirate Queen of the Western Approaches [4]. In fact she was one of the last in the long tradition of independent ruling women in Celtic lands. Finding stories like these, published in short runs by specialist and small

presses, is one reason I always look at the bookstalls in castles and stately homes. Any fantasy author looking for inspiration for a female hero is well advised to do the same.

Such atypical women are not the whole story. A richer understanding of ordinary women's lives emerges from scholars researching into day-to-day records rather than meekly accepting official histories. Anglo-Saxon law codes show us a very different role for women before the Norman Conquest in Henrietta Leyser's *Medieval Women*. For example, Anglo-Saxon women could hold land and make wills bequeathing goods and property as they saw fit. Anglo-Norman women could do none of these things. The Anglo-Normans instituted laws of primogeniture, where the eldest legitimate son inherited all, where Saxon custom had seen land and property divided among all children. With virginity and chastity now playing a crucial role in the transmission of wealth, women's personal liberty was increasingly limited. Drawing on a range of evidence – including popular culture such as books, plays and paintings – Olwen Hufton carries the story through to the early modern period in *The Prospect Before Her*, where the paradoxical freedoms of the working class woman become increasingly apparent. When a woman wasn't an heiress, she could expect far more choice in her marriage. When her earnings through piece-work or domestic service were essential to the family purse, she had more influence within marriage than might be expected. Despite that, not every ordinary woman was content with the life mapped out for her by gender and custom. *Female Tars* by Suzanne J Stark reveals the remarkable tales of the women sailors, fighters and shipwrights of Nelson's navy. *Pandora's Breaches* by Patricia Fara explores the contribution of women to scientific and philosophical developments in the Age of Enlightenment.

We're not merely seeing respectable women's lives. A range of books on courtesans and mistresses [5] explore the ways in which women could wield considerable if unofficial power – though not all who made a living by selling sex could determine their own fates. *The Flouting Brothel* by Sian Rees tells the tale of prostitutes sentenced to transportation in the 18th century. Transportation was at least favourable to execution. Here too, modern scholarship has uncovered intriguing cultural differences and biases towards women, notably in Camille Naish's *Death Comes to the Maiden*.

Death itself is a taboo increasingly left behind by historians. D M Hadley's *Death in Medieval England* is a general study while Philip Zeigler's *The Black Death* examines that major crisis. These books go hand in hand with general medical histories [6] and books like *Plague, Pox and Pestilence* (ed. Kenneth Kiple) examining the particular role of disease in history. All of which offer potential plots that need not rely on the deeds of great men and indeed, show how great men can be laid low just as easily as the common folk by injury and illness.

This trend towards less prudish and squeamish history has also given us books such as *History Laid Bare* by Richard Zacks and Reay Tannahill's *Sex in History*, illuminating the full gamut of human sexuality. New work continues to uncover the reality of homosexual life throughout history. One can now read about sexes now largely left to history,

notably the eunuchs in the Byzantine and Chinese Imperial courts [7]. All of which is hugely useful for the fantasy writer wanting to challenge the increasingly outdated conventional, heterosexual and male-dominated template for the genre. Though I should warn, from personal experience, that reading such books on the train does prompt startled looks from fellow passengers.

Reay Tannahill has also written the invaluable *Food in History*. Food is another area where historical research now finds individuals, such as Elinor Fettiplace [8], whose experiences illuminate and personalise the past and so help the writer to create a fully realised environment for the reader. Food-themed histories such as Jack Turner's *Spice, The History of a Temptation*, together with *Salt and Cod* by Mark Kurlansky show how factors such as tastes, commerce and ecology can have just as much impact on events as the decisions of kings and princes. All of which is increasingly valuable for the fantasy writer as discerning readers demand ever more rounded, three-dimensional worlds. A light use with such detail is essential, given it is fatally easy to overburden a fantasy novel with world-building. However the more real the imagined world seems, the more readily the reader can follow the writer into the truly fantastic.

All of which takes us well beyond allegedly female concerns of hearth and home to show us just as much about men and their lives in different ages. Men, women and children rarely exist isolated from each other and plenty of books now show the reality of life in societies far removed from princely courts. *Power & Profit: The Merchant in Medieval Europe* by Peter Spufford, and *Making a Living in the Middle Ages* by Christopher Dyer show the middle classes have always been with us. *Europe at Home* by Raffaella Sarti, and *Medieval Children* by Nicholas Orme, reveal the domestic world while *The English Fair* by David Kerr Cameron uncovers merely one facet of the history of entertainments. Maureen Waller's *1700 Scenes from London Life* offers a fascinating snapshot of a capital city on the cusp of modernity. Showing all that ordinary people have in common, then and now, means the fantasy writer can draw the reader ever deeper into their imagined world, engaging their emotions.

On the other hand, Norbert Ohler's *The Medieval Traveller* uncovers the considerable trials and tribulations of making a journey by land or water when horsepower meant just that. Such detail enables the writer to remind the reader that they're certainly not in Kansas or anywhere else familiar any more. Other books focus on still more marginalized members of society. Roy Porter's *Madness, A Brief History* travels from possession by gods and demons to the chemical revolution in psychiatry. Armand Leroy's *Mutants* examines the historical fates of those condemned as freaks of nature alongside the biological explanations for their conditions. Such material can offer the writer dramatic means of highlighting how far removed their imagined world is from the reader's reality. A sense of uncertainty can then engage the reader still more fully.

The most marginalized members of society have historically been slaves. As before, my awareness of research in this area goes back to my undergraduate days and M I Finley's *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*. Ronald Segal's

Islam's Black Slaves uncovers the history of Africans taken to the east rather than to the west. Giles Milton's *White Gold* details the fates of those Europeans enslaved by the Barbary corsairs in the 18th century while archaeologists Mike Parker Pearson and Karen Godden uncovered the remarkable tale of Robert Drury, who published his own memoirs of being a slave in Madagascar in 1729 [9]. These books were of particular interest to me as I developed the slave-owning culture underpinning my second series *The Aldabreshin Compass*. I knew slavery could be a problematic issue, given I'd already had a few outraged emails when this culture featured briefly in *The Swordsman's Oath*. Furthermore, some facsimile of the 19th century plantation-based chattel-slavery of the Americas wouldn't serve my dramatic purposes and would risk distracting the reader as they saw the book through the prism of their own knowledge and opinion. Exploring the different historical realities of slavery in other places and cultures meant I could create something that fitted seamlessly into the world I was creating instead of knocking the reader out of it.

Another key difference between the average reader's reality and most fantasy worlds is the level of violence. After all, a genre called swords'n'sorcery does imply a fair amount of swordplay. Here the trend in research into those living on the margins of society has uncovered a rich seam of useful material, from William Urban's *Medieval Mercenaries* to Gillan Spraggs' *Outlaws and Highwaymen* and Lucy Moore's *Commen and Culpurses*. One can now read genuine medieval manuals on sword fighting reproduced in facsimile, such as Hans Talhoffer's fight-book [10]. Then there are the hugely useful photographs and experiences of those uncovering the history of European martial arts [11]. Getting out of the library to go and see historical re-enactments is a good way for the fantasy author to not only pick up references to such books but also to see the often chaotic reality of close-quarters warfare. Picking up a sword oneself is an excellent way of improving one's understanding of the realities of combat.

This is all closely tied to the rise of experimental archaeology. Some historians turn up their noses at such what they consider marginal activities. Regardless, these projects are an invaluable resource for the fantasy writer. *Ancient Inventions* by Peter James and Nick Thorpe is a fascinating record of the ingenious ways that universal problems have been solved since ancient times. Again, one can go beyond the boundaries of the library to watch television documentaries on building trebuchets or roman bridges or Leonardo Da Vinci's war bows. Academic interest in the classical Greek trireme reached its zenith with the building of the vessel *Olympias*, her commissioning into the Hellenic Navy and full sea trials in 1987 with rowers from British and American universities [12].

Valuable historical material can be gleaned from those reality series where modern families are put into a historical setting, be it an Iron Age village, a North American pioneer settlement or a Victorian house. Some authors also find the reactions and interactions of the victims, sorry, volunteers, fascinating as psychological research. Personally I prefer series like *Tales from the Green Valley*, a Lion TV production first shown on BBC2 and now available on DVD. Here two historical experts and three archaeologists spent a year living

and working in a remote farm on the Welsh borders, adopting the clothing, tools, diet and working practises of the early 1600s. It's a fascinating study, all the more enjoyable and informative because those involved are practical, capable people, who're willing to work hard and don't waste their time or mine with endless moaning.

One thing such programmes show time and again is how much practical knowledge has been lost historically. Happily another useful trend in modern scholarship is the re-examination of ancient and medieval scientific knowledge [13]. Adrienne Mayor's *Greek Fire, Poison Arrows and Scorpion Bombs* is an intriguing study of biological and chemical warfare in the ancient world, while Allan Chapman's *Gods in the Sky* traces the development of astronomy from superstition to science. In *The Calendar* David Ewing Duncan follows the struggle to align the clock and the heavens. Rebecca Rupp's *The Four Elements* takes the traditional quartet of air, earth, fire and water as a starting point for a wide-ranging exploration of science and natural philosophy. These books and more besides give the lie to Victorian notions that people living in less technologically advanced societies were somehow less intelligent. All of which helps the writer develop credible characters to whom their readers can relate.

In *Medieval Views of the Cosmos* Evelyn Edson and Emilie Savage-Smith reveal the common heritage of Islamic and Christian concepts of the world in that period, in particular with regard to mapping. Geography is a discipline where one can find many examples both of this trend for scientific history and stories of remarkable individuals. Simon Winchester, in *The Map That Changed the World*, focuses on one man, William Smith, and in doing so, reveals the origins of the science of geology. Nicholas Crane's *Mercator* tells the tale of the man who solved some of cartography's most intractable problems and paints a vivid picture of the 16th century, an age of discovery when all the old certainties about geography, science, philosophy and religion were being challenged. Giles Milton is a deservedly popular historian who has long been finding men who travelled to the edges of the maps. In *Samurai William*, he tells the true story of the Jacobean sailor who survived and thrived in the alien culture of Japan. In *Nathaniels' Nutmeg* he shows how one man, Nathaniel Courthope, unexpectedly played a decisive role in the imperial and economic rivalries of the 17th century spice trade. For a fantasy writer looking for heroes outside the usual run of kings and wizards, for periods of change and upheaval, such books can be invaluable inspiration.

Assessments of early scientific method have naturally led on to re-assessment of what was once considered magic and the intervention of the supernatural. Robert Temple explores the physical locations of ancient oracles in *Netherworld* as well as the practical means by which mystical experiences could have been created. In *The Magical Universe*, Stephen Wilson uncovers the everyday magic and ritual that permeated daily life in pre-modern Europe, still surviving in superstitions today. The beliefs and practises of those who were condemned as wizards [14] and witches [15] are examined in the light of modern knowledge, and viewed without the distorting prism of religious assumptions. Better yet, scholars

now explore the effect of contemporaneous beliefs on the way such marginal and eccentric people were treated.

As well as a wealth of inspiration for developing plausible systems of magic and realms of the paranormal, the fantasy author has much to draw on when working out how to integrate that magic into their imagined society, depending on whether or not that magic is overt or covert, sanctioned or illicit. The writer opting for repression and persecution can find themes emerging in their work that echo contemporary issues such as Islamophobia. A book such as *God's Secret Agents* by Alice Hogge makes for illuminating reading in this context, exploring the repression of Catholicism under Elizabeth I. Such material enables the fantasy writer to endow an imagined world with a universality that reflects on the real world we live in. The best fantasy fiction is thus very often far from blithely escapist.

As real world events in the past few decades have increasingly drawn our attention to the margins of Europe and what was historically the Ottoman Empire, we've seen increasing numbers of books re-evaluating history without a necessarily Anglo-centric bias. Hugh Kennedy's *The Court of the Caliphs* resurrects the history of a mighty empire, offering insights that modern diplomats would do well to note. Halil Inalcik's *The Ottoman Empire* is an invaluable introduction to that world, while Albert Hourani's *A History of the Arab Peoples* illuminates the complex relationship between Islam and the West. Similarly the histories of India and Africa and countless countries further afield are now being explored by home-grown historians whose impeccable academic credentials are enhanced by their innate understanding of culture, myth and oral traditions [16]. Accordingly, the fantasy writer looking for inspiration now has a wide choice of paths to follow besides those northern European routes already trampled to bare earth by the multitudes blindly following in Tolkien's footsteps.

I don't claim the books that I've cited here are necessarily authoritative. They're just some of the ones that have caught my eye and which I've found useful in the two fantasy series I have written thus far. In *The Tales of Einarinn*, my heroine Livak is a thief and gambler and her friends live similarly on the edges of legality and security. All the books I've mentioned looking beyond the respectable, political classes contributed to that series. In *The Aldabreshin Compass* I was creating a tropical island civilisation where autocratic warlords enjoy absolute power. I wanted this world to be strikingly unfamiliar, but key characters still had to be sympathetic without sharing any underlying cultural assumptions with the reader. Reading about the medieval Islamic cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, Moghul India and Persian history was crucial to squaring that particular circle.

Where I developed an academic, organised wizardly framework for magic within *The Tales*, taking inspiration from medieval medical schools, alchemy and proto-science, I needed to find a similarly coherent and logical basis for the Aldabreshin abhorrence of magic in *The Compass*. Having already hinted at conflict between magic and Aldabreshin fortune telling, I built an absolute belief in prophecy out of elements of Babylonian and Egyptian steady-state cosmology, Greek Pre-Socratic philosophy and aspects of Middle Ages scholarship where astrology and astronomy

converged. Since magic disrupts the natural order upon which all omens and thus prophecy is based, it obviously becomes anathema.

There's another whole pile of books I'm drawing on for the trilogy I'm currently writing, *The Chronicles of the Lescari Revolution*. I have many more besides on my shelves. Granted, I probably read rather more than many other fantasy authors, being a historian by inclination and education but when there's so much fascinating reading material, can you blame me? Besides, you'd be surprised how often I see the footprints of other writers as I go, notably Terry Pratchett and Philip Pullman.

Thankfully one of the benefits of writing fantasy fiction is that I don't need to apply myself to any given topic or period with the same intellectual rigour that I would need for, say, an Oxford tutorial essay. Fantasy authors are not looking for definitive historical truth, however one might set about defining that intangible goal. We're looking for inspiration for plot and character, for telling detail and unique aspects of invented cultures. There is so much material available now, particularly at the margins of what used to be the traditional focus of history, that there really is no excuse for any writer lazily appropriating characters, cultures or events wholesale. Changing the hats and hemlines or filing off the serial numbers is no longer enough. Contemporary fantasy readers expect more and they deserve more.

Additional references

- 1 *Bess of Hardwick*, David N Durant
- 2 *A Scandalous Life*, Mary S Lovell
- 3 *Women in Purple*, Judith Herrin
- 4 *Pirate Queen*, Judith Cook
- 5 *The Mistress*, Victoria Griffin; *Courtesans*, Katie Hickman; *The Book of the Courtesans*, Susan Griffin
- 6 *Western Medicine An Illustrated History*, ed. Irvine Loudon
- 7 *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James
- 8 *Elinor Fettiplace's Receipt Book*, Hilary Spurling
- 9 *In Search of the Red Slave*, Mike Parker Pearson & Karen Godden
- 10 *Medieval Combat*, Hans Talhoffer tr. Mark Rector
- 11 *English Martial Arts*, Terry Brown
- 12 *The Athenian Trireme (2nd Edition)*, JS Morrison, JF Coates, NB Rankov
- 13 *Landmarks in Western Science*, Peter Whitfield
- 14 *Wizards a History*, P G Maxwell-Stuart
- 15 *The Witch in History*, Diane Purkiss
- 16 *The Africans*, Ali A Mazrui

Juliet E. McKenna has published nine novels, most recently *Eastern Tide* (Orbit 2006), the conclusion of the *Aldabreshin Compass* series. She can be found on the web at <<http://www.julietemckenna.com/>>, and as a member of the Write Fantastic at <<http://www.thewritefantastic.com/>>.

History Repurposed – The Celestial Empire stories

Chris Roberson

The Celestial Empire began, as all good things must, in a hotel bar.

At the 2001 World Fantasy Convention in Montreal, editor Lou Anders invited me to submit a story to his anthology *Live Without a Net*. On the flight home, I outlined a story entitled "O One", which featured a conflation of an incident from Richard Feynman's autobiography *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!* with the story of John Henry and the steam engine, set in an alternate history heavily inspired by Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*. In the story, the emperor of a China which rules the entire world and which now wishes to conquer the heavens is visited by an inventor from Britain who has come to demonstrate his steam-powered difference engine. The story ultimately appeared in the anthology, and went on to be nominated for a World Fantasy Award and to win a Sidewise Award.

The following year, in another hotel bar at another convention, Lou asked me if I'd consider writing another story in the same world, and asked if I knew what happened next. I had no idea whatsoever, but of course wasn't about to admit to that, so I simply told him that the Chinese went to Mars and found the Aztecs there waiting for them.

Committed to writing the new story, though, I had my work cut out for me. In the story of the British inventor and the emperor, China had really been little more than a cultural idiom, a backdrop against which the story could play out. I hadn't devoted any time to considering how China might rise to world dominance, what sort of divergence might allow for such a thing to happen, nor what the rest of the world beyond the walls of the Forbidden City might be like. Faced with the prospect of writing more stories in that world, though, I had to start making definite what had simply been suggested before.

I have some background in the study of history. Though my major at the University of Texas was in English literature, my minor was in history, and for a time after graduating I taught history to the middle school-aged children of migrant laborers in the Rio Grande Valley, a stone's throw from the Mexican border. History has been an avocation of mine ever since, along with the study of science, and consequently I have a fairly wide selection of sources in my personal library. Raiding these, I gradually pieced together an eleven century-long history of this Chinese dominated world, diverging from our own in the early days of the fifteen century, which I had come to call the Celestial Empire.

In the years since I've slowly filled in the gaps in that history, writing a dozen or so short stories, a novella, and three novels in the sequence. As the world has developed, I find that the stories of the Celestial Empire fall into one of three basic types; follow one of three different strategies I employ to repurpose history for my own ends. That first

story, "O One", in essence encapsulates all three in the way it translates a historical event from one context and idiom to another, suggests a divergence from "real" history, and transposes an individual or their story from one context to another.

Translations

The first strategy used in the Celestial Empire stories is what I usually call "translation". These are stories in which a historical event from our timeline is translated into a different historical context and cultural idiom. Aside from the particulars about setting, language, and culture, these are fairly faithful accounts, with characters and events closely mirroring their historical counterparts.

For example, the story "Gold Mountain" details the story of immigrant workers from North America (here called "Vinlanders") who are brought to China to help construct an orbital elevator called the Bridge of Heaven, which rises from an immense artificial structure called Gold Mountain. Despite the somewhat exotic nature of their work, everything else about the immigrants' journey – the hardships they endure, the economically depressed circumstances they left behind, and the kind of prejudice and stigmatizing they experience in their new home – were drawn whole-cloth from historical accounts of Chinese immigrants in the American west in the 19th century, taking part in the Gold Rush or helping to construct the transcontinental railroad.

Similarly, in the novella "The Voyage of Night Shining White", I retell the real-life events that befell the crew of the Soviet submarine K-19 in the summer of 1961 in the North Atlantic, but instead using the Chinese crew of an atomic powered spacecraft that's part of an interplanetary Treasure Fleet bound for Mars.

Part of the interest for me in these types of "translations" is the way in which a historical event, shorn of its context, can be reexamined from a novel perspective without prejudice or preconception. Readers can approach the story of the crew struggling against the odds in "The Voyage of Night Shining White" without being reminded that these are members of the Soviet military, at the time inimical to the majority of the English-speaking world. Or a reader of European descent can approach the privations endured by the immigrants in "Gold Mountain" without the potentially distancing effect of the different cultural imperatives and standards Qing-era Imperial China.

Of course, it is in the details and the setting that history is often at its most interesting, so I would never dream of shearing events of their proper context in every instance. In fact, in the second strategy it is the context which is itself the point of the stories, in large part.

Divergences

This second strategy is employed in stories in which I tell a story about a particular moment in history, presented as faithfully as possible in its original context and idiom, but with subtle changes resulting from an earlier divergence from our history.

Probably the best example of this tactic is the story "Fire in the Lake", a murder mystery which takes place in the fifteen century within the Forbidden City in the last days of the

Yongle Emperor. A reader who approaches this story without a fairly detailed knowledge of the lines of Chinese imperial succession would likely read this as nothing more than a straight historical detective story. In fact, this is the point at which the history of the Celestial Empire diverges from our own, as the outcome of the murder investigation here leads to a different successor taking the throne than happened in our own history, and the clear implication is that the course of Chinese history from this point onwards will differ from that followed in actual fact.

To a somewhat lesser extent "Thy Saffron Wings" employs this strategy, here used to offer a view on cultural influence. The story centers around the historical figure of Sir Robert Anstruther, a nobleman who came to London with King James after the death of Elizabeth I. Unlike the historical Sir Robert, though, the character in the story is dispatched to the docks to escort the first ambassador from the Chinese emperor to the British court, who has lately been in Italy reading the work of Galileo and looking over Leonardo da Vinci's designs. At the story's end, before the ambassador unveils the latest Chinese innovation, a rocket-propelled glider, the characters join the audience of William Shakespeare's new play, "Prestre Johan", about the legendary figure's visit to the court of the Great Chan, which serves to show the cultural influence the Chinese have already had by in Europe by this stage in the alternate history.

In a history that ultimately diverges so widely from our own, this strategy can be of somewhat limited use, since after a certain point the world of the Celestial Empire resembles our own so little that such stories aren't really possible. It is, of course, a matter of subjective opinion, but those alternate histories that resonate most with me as a reader, and the type that I try to create in my own fiction, are those which recognize that small changes can lead to considerable effects. Stories in which alternate histories that diverged from our own centuries or even millennia ago still had an Adolph Hitler ruling over 20th century Germany, or a John F. Kennedy presiding over a mid-century United States, may well be well-intentioned (and well-written) counterfactuals, presenting the world as different than it is, but as a student of history I find it difficult to accept them as rigorously conceived alternate histories. The more time passes after the point of divergence in a well-conceived alternate history, then, the greater the degree of difference with our own history. But in those first decades following the divergence the changes are of a more subtle character, and it's here that I can make the most of presenting our history in a more faithful manner. For stories set further along in the alternate history, though, taking place in a quite changed world, a different strategy is needed.

Transpositions

This third strategy is what I call "transpositions", and is almost a blending of the previous two. In these stories, characters based on historical figures from one context and idiom are transposed into another, and made the central player in a historical event transposed from yet another.

A good example is my story "Red Hands, Black Hands". The main character, Song Haugu, is a thinly-veiled portrait of the French novelist George Sands. She affects male dress, smokes tobacco, has a complicated relationship with the consumptive composer and musician Pan Xo (which, if written in the Western-style of "given name first, family

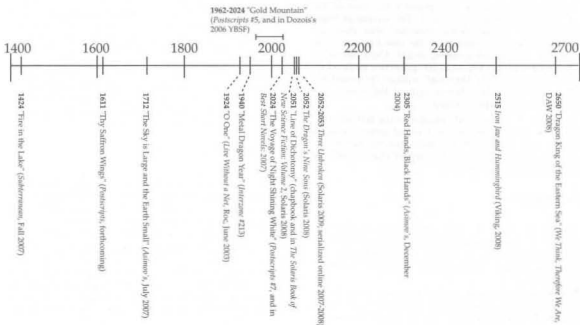
name second fashion would be *Xo Pan*, pronounced something like "show pan"), and is the writer of popular fictions but yearns to write something more meaningful. This character is deposited into a city which is the cultural hub of a terraformed Mars some centuries into the future of this alternate history, on which political tensions and adverse economic conditions in the rural areas have created widespread insurrection, inspired by the Red Turban and Boxer Rebellions of Imperial China.

A perhaps somewhat less exotic example is my story "Metal Dragon Year", in which the fourteenth century Muslim explorer Ibn Battuta is reimaged as a Muslim engineer who emigrates from North Africa to a technologically advanced China to work on the first manned space launch. The story takes place during a cold war between the Chinese and the Aztecs, who are also working on their own space program but who are not above employing espionage to gain an advantage. Against this backdrop a crew of taikonauts are killed in an analog of the Apollo One disaster, and the engineer learns that a friend is not all that he seems.

These "transposition" stories tend to approach history from an almost post-modernist perspective, to use the term in its architectural sense, treating the past as a reservoir of characters, concepts, and settings to mix and match as the story requires. Here the impulse is not to examine history itself, as such, but to use elements from history as props, furniture, and set dressing for another story entirely. The historical elements themselves, though, serve as models for different way of viewing the world, such as George Sands providing a model for a woman acting at odds with the traditional gender roles of her society. If the reader is unfamiliar with the relevant history upon which I'm drawing, their enjoyment of the story should not be impaired in the slightest, and in fact I often don't include overt "signposts" pointing the reader in those directions; but those who are familiar with the sources will hopefully appreciate additional layers of meaning.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should point out that there are Celestial Empire stories which fall outside of this taxonomy. Typically, those types of stories repurpose *fiction* in the same way that stories of these three types repurpose *history*, while employing a strategy of transposition to help flesh out the background and setting. For example my forthcoming young adult novel *Iron Jaw and Hummingbird* features a character who is equal parts George Bernard Shaw's Eliza Doolittle and Rudyard Kipling's Kim, making her way through a terraformed Mars and getting embroiled in an armed uprising that commingles aspects of the White Lotus Rebellion and the later Boxers. Or there's the story "The Dragon King of the Eastern Sea", which imagines what form something like Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics might take in a Confucian-based society. Or the novel *The Dragon's Nine Sons*, which might fairly be termed a kind of response to the film *The Dirty Dozen* transposed into a war in space, with the Aztecs playing the part of the Nazis.

As the Celestial Empire sequence grows, and the alternate history is gradually filled in, though, I'm confident that I will continue to employ these three strategies, and to experiment with different variations and approaches. At present I'm at work on a novel, *Three Unbroken*, which is the story of a war between the Chinese and the Aztecs for control of Mars. Employing my translation strategy from a somewhat different perspective, the novel is conceived as a history of a war that never was written in the style of historian Stephen Ambrose (of *Band of Brothers* and *Citizen Soldiers* fame), with incidents drawn heavily from the historical accounts of Allied soldiers, sailors, and aviators in World War II, but instead told through the eyes of characters from a Chinese-dominated history in sixty-four chapters, one for each of the hexagrams of the I Ching. *Three Unbroken* had its genesis over drinks at a convention when my editor at Solaris, George Mann, asked me for a Celestial Empire project that might be serialized in installments online. As all good things must, then, this latest project too began in a hotel bar.



Tony Ballantyne – *Divergence*
 Tor, London, 2007, 328pp, £10.99, t/p,
 ISBN 978-0330446501

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Divergence sees Tony Ballantyne continue to build upon the world and the characters first introduced in *Recursion* and *Capacity*, via another complex, braided, and multi-book plot resembling the 'n-string game' that first appears on page seventy eight.

Divergence begins in the year 2252, introducing the dysfunctional (a more unkind person might say 'incompetent') crew of the spaceship Eva Rye, a motley bunch feeling their way out into a universe they barely know, let alone understand. Meeting a mysterious stranded stranger who offers to trade with them via an equally mysterious 'Fair Exchange' computer program, the crew takes on board a peculiar woman, Judy. In exchange for her passage to an embattled Earth the stranger sorts out the problems aboard the Eva Rye – although not in the manner anticipated.

In the wider universe, the Watcher, humanity's beneficent AI overseer on Earth, is under siege from both another AI and an infestation of deadly Dark Seeds, a strange, yet apparently natural, quantum phenomenon. As if there weren't bad enough news for both the Watcher and a perfectly ordered and happy humanity, Judy has been told that upon reaching Earth she will kill the Watcher, even though she can't imagine carrying out such a terrible deed. Can this unwilling mission be related to her flashbacks of being the actual original Eva Rye on Earth in the year 2089, trying perversely to escape the attentions of a fledgling Watcher in the Russian Free States?

It's a question that pervades *Divergence*: why would anyone not want to be part of a world and a population shaped for perfection? Why not hand over control of your destiny to a brilliant and entirely benevolent super-intelligence?

I did begin to wonder if, at its core, *Divergence* isn't a book-length questioning of Banks' Culture, which has also handed over control to brilliant and entirely benevolent super-intelligences (albeit on a larger scale). If it is, then the conclusion eventually reached here is a repudiation of Banks' anarchist Mind-run utopia. Admittedly it's easier to reach such a conclusion if you're writing in a more Dick-ian, not to say anthropic mode, as Ballantyne seems to be. His strange universe initially seems to owe more to Cordwainer Smith than Dick, but don't be fooled: Ballantyne's novum is a more fluid affair than either Smith's or Banks', and far less restricted by any kind of need for Hard sf explanations and justifications. Here, just as in Dick's hallucinogenic worlds, spaceships, AIs and Von Neumann Machines are simply a given – which makes a perverse amount of sense given that most of future humanity in the

Ballantyne universe doesn't seem to understand how anything works either. However, Ballantyne has greater forces at play than mere Culture Minds, and while *Divergence* often seems to be adrift in a sea of random events, there is a perceivable method to his madness. This may be as godless a universe as Banks', but is not without its teleology.

Divergence is a strange little book; it begins simply enough, chock-full of all the traditional sf ingredients, a straightforward space adventure almost reminiscent of the pulps in its charming naivety. But Ballantyne does an excellent job of twisting this around, dribbling in a few extra unexpected spoonfuls of thoughtful philosophy and abstract concepts, until you're about as far away from ray-guns and bug-eyed monsters as it's possible to get and still be in a spaceship!

So this strange little book isn't for fans of old-style space opera. Reminiscent in style of M. John Harrison, and in some ways the plot of John Clute's *Applesed*, I can give little higher praise to a book's intellectual ambition. But is there the mortar of a good story surrounding the bricks of its philosophising? Well, yes, mostly there is; not to mention robots with disintegrator guns, Schrodinger's Kittens, AIs called 'Kevin' and 'Chris' and the brilliantly scary Dark Flowers. It's all somehow wonderfully English: drifting slightly off kilter and out-of-control – but not too much!

Stephen Baxter – *Conqueror*
 Gollancz, London, 2007, 375pp, £17.99,
 h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 978-0575076730

Reviewed by Tony Keen

This is the second novel in Baxter's four-part series. Time's Tapestry takes a sweep through British history, telling how a mysterious 'Weaver' from the future attempts to change history through a series of prophecies. I reviewed the first volume, *Emperor*, in Vector 250; I was not enthusiastic. I felt that the novel failed to work as plausible historical fiction, undermining the credibility of the sf. I can report that I found *Conqueror* rather more palatable.

It may simply be that I am less familiar with the era Baxter covers here, the early mediaeval period from AD 418 to AD 1066. But I think *Conqueror* is actually a better-written work. There are still some of the historical slips that marred *Emperor*. Possibly a corrected version will amend the location of the old Roman fort of London in the south-east corner of the city, where the Tower of London would later be, rather than in the north-west, where the Roman



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

EDITED
 BY
 PAUL N.
 BILLINGER

fort actually was. And near the beginning of each section there is a slow passage where a character muses, often in internal monologue, on the history that has brought the characters to the particular point where the reader meets them. As infodumps go, these bits are clunky.

Against this there is an absence of 'what about that Bayeux tapestry, eh?' moments, where characters discuss what is important to a modern readership, but would have generally meant nothing to people at the time. Too many of these are to be found Emperor, but the concerns of the individuals in *Conqueror* match those of the times and circumstances much better. It must further be added that the prophecy that drives the narrative does so in less unlikely ways than in the previous novel, except possibly in the final part, that deals with the events of AD 1066. In the section dealing with King Alfred, the prophecy is almost incidental to the decisions that the King takes, even if other characters don't think so. So, as a historical novel, *Conqueror* works better.

What Baxter does particularly well is landscape. In *Emperor*, I didn't feel that Baxter conjured up a living Roman world. In *Conqueror*, on the other hand, he does an excellent job of portraying a post-Roman England, one dominated by the monuments – the cities, walls, and roads – that the Romans left behind them. Since he lives in just such a landscape, Hadrian's Wall country, one can imagine that he has a head start.

The hard edge with which Baxter writes also won my sympathy. There is no room for sentimentality in how he handles his characters. Many people come to bad, brutal ends – one chapter finishes with the viewpoint character being beheaded. The reader is left in no doubt that the prophecy destroys lives.

What does the Weaver want? Is he good or bad? These questions are yet to be answered. There are some hints that the Weaver believes that history has turned out wrong, and wants to create what Baxter described in an article in *Matrix* as 'a better route' to the present day. But the full revelation will have to wait until the fourth volume. I'm now more interested in seeing how it will turn out than I was after *Emperor*.



Stephen Baxter –
The H-Bomb Girl
Faber & Faber, London,
2007, 288pp, £6.99, p/b
(reviewed in proof), ISBN
978-0571023279-6

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger

I don't remember the Cuban Missile Crisis; I was conceived during the Big Freeze of 1963 that followed. I have long assumed that it was a combination of extraordinarily low temperatures, heavy snow

falls and power failures that determined the timing (if not the fact) of my birth. After reading *The H-Bomb Girl* I find myself contemplating the ways my life might have turned out differently, and indeed the possibility that I may never have been born at all, had a peaceful resolution to the crisis not been found. Equally, I am too young to have been aware, at

the time, of a musical revolution that included The Beatles and promised change to a generation of teenagers forever separated from their parents because they had not experienced life during wartime.

I don't remember the big events of the sixties but I have vivid memories of the quotidian, of uncomfortable wooden school desks and Quink-stained fingers, of huge block-like radios and Formica tables, of mangles and miserable Monday washdays, and there is much that I recognise in this story of teenagers in the Liverpool of 1962.

Laura Mann is more than usually aware of the escalating political and military crisis. It's not that she has a great interest in these things, but her father is an RAF officer and refuses to indulge her desire for ignorance. Her new friend Joel is even more knowledgeable because he is a committed member of CND. Her other friend, Bernadette, acquired not so much by choice as by an accident of seating plan at Laura's new school, has no interest in these things at all. Bernadette's focus is on surviving poverty, a bomb-damaged house, a gin-damaged mother and a boyfriend who's really a bit of a prat.

The first part of the novel is devoted to world-building. Never mind that it's a world some will recognise, it still needs to be explained, fleshed out and made to feel authentic. And, perhaps surprisingly, I found this one of the weaknesses in the book: there is too much that calls attention to itself as there merely for verisimilitude, and a few moments that verge on info-dumping. The other thing I feel is less successful than I would like is the characterisation of the main protagonists; the writing style keeps me at a distance watching Laura and her friends rather than living alongside them.

Woven into the familiar story of disaffected, misfit teens are hints that everything is not quite as ordinary as it seems. At first they are subtle and easily overlooked, but slowly it becomes more certain that this is science fiction, not a historical novel. While Kennedy and Khrushchev deal with their global crisis, Laura's personal crisis is also escalating. She doesn't know who she can trust, but she recognises that her life is in danger. As tensions increase and Laura begins to understand just what is at stake and the difficult decisions she must make, *The H-Bomb Girl* springs a bravura chapter on the reader. Just one chapter, but it contains all the most powerful imagery in the novel, and here the understated style works to counterpoint and emphasise what one might wish had been glossed over. After that the book is on a roll with a satisfying all-action resolution, philosophical speculation, and ultimately a promise of hope for the future.

For that one chapter alone I shall be forcing this book on my friends when it comes out, and the novel as a whole is a satisfying and thought-provoking read. It would make a cracking film.

David Bilsborough – The Wanderer's Tale

Tor, London, 2007, 678pp, £14.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 978-0230014480

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

This novel takes the reader into the familiar territory of a Quest. Five centuries ago the dread rawg Draughr, a demon, was destroyed by the High Lord Arturus and his Peladane knights. Now the demon has arisen once again – as such demons tend to do – and must once again be

destroyed. To this end a band of assorted characters gather: a warlord's son, his comrade in arms, a knight and his squire, an old and a young priest, a shaman, and the wanderer who the shaman declares, in portentous tones, is to become the decider of all that will befall. After sixty five pages, with only the journal of a soldier present at Drauglir's previous defeat to guide them, the questers set off on what is not so much a quest as a travelogue – there is far too much irrelevant information about the land through which they pass, so there is less rather than more of a sense of place created. The author often addresses the reader directly, which has the effect of further distancing the reader from the events taking place on the page.

Various mishaps befall the travellers, they are threatened by ogres and other fell creatures, they become separated from one another, they are watched by supernatural beings who drop hints that some larger gameplan is being plotted by Fate, and the reader begins to despair that any character or being will be introduced without having to trawl through said character's entire life history, present psychological state and the geography of their homeland! The old advice of 'show, don't tell' seems to have been passed by, as has the fact that there is more to descriptive writing than listing different types of soldiers in an armoury or goods for sale in a market. The characters remain steadfastly two-dimensional throughout, despite the author being sure to tell the reader what they are thinking or feeling at any given moment in great detail.

At times the style of the book attempts to become humorous so that the high ideals of a Quest are contrasted with the more down to earth comments and thoughts of the characters, and yet the writing is just not amusing enough to make this a comic novel or a spoof of the high fantasy genre. The author's habit of continually putting words in inverted commas, as though the exact word was not available, becomes very irritating; for example, the symbols on the cover of a book are described as looking distinctly 'alchemical' – well either they look alchemical or they do not, so why not find an adjective that describes them accurately?

This real problem with this novel, however, is that it is just plain unoriginal. A book that has such a well-worn plot as a quest to destroy a demon needs something to make it stand out from the crowd, be it unforgettable characters or scintillating prose. Unfortunately *The Wanderer's Tale* lacks anything to make it exceptional, and left this reviewer distinctly underwhelmed.

publisher (Berkley) sporting a stereotypical cover featuring a bearded bloke in a bent pointy hat and spar spangled robe. It would appear on first sight that *Wizards* is aimed squarely at the Young Adult generic fantasy market. But first appearances can be deceptive.

For a start, the editors are well known and well-respected, and the list of contributors is both impressive and wide ranging, including Neil Gaiman, Garth Nix, Elizabeth Hand, Jane Yolen, Kage Baker, Gene Wolfe, Peter S. Beagle, Nancy Kress, Terry Bisson, Tanith Lee and Orson Scott Card. The clincher, which may make this a must-have for completeist collectors, is that these are all original, previously unpublished stories.

Neil Gaiman's 'The Witch's Headstone' starts with a story of a young boy, Bod (short for Nobody), who lives in a graveyard and who has been adopted by the dead who reside there. It's a typically offbeat and lyrical story, which may be part of a novel in progress, that sets the tone for much of the anthology, particularly that (unless you count a dead witch) it doesn't actually feature a wizard, let alone one with a pointy hat.

That said, Dann and Dozois, in their preface to the anthology, apply a fairly loose definition of wizard, extending back to the first Neolithic shamans who wowed the Neanderthal hunters of the tribe with animal paintings on cave walls and forward through shamans and seers, warlocks, witches and others who stand with one foot in the world of spirits and one in our own.

A number of contributors have taken the freedom of that loose definition to explore aspects of wizardry ranging from myth and legend to traditional sorcery, witchcraft and earth magic.

The latter is evidenced by Garth Nix's 'Holly and Iron', which pits the English wood magic of a pair of outlaw sisters against the foreign iron magic of Norman invaders. Stone magic is the theme of no less than three stories, including Nancy Kress's 'Stone Man' in which a teenage skateboard punk's unusual abilities are brought to light when he is hit by a car, and he finds himself unwillingly recruited into a group of misfit magicians who claim to be fighting for the future of the planet.

Similarly, the longest story in the anthology, Orson Scott Card's novella length 'Stonefather', features another adolescent protagonist whose magical affinity for stone and rock is unsuspected, even by himself, until he sets out from his marshland home to the city, and finds himself unwittingly precipitating a power struggle between water mages and stone mages.

The stone wizard of Elizabeth Hand's 'Winter's Wife' is a small and deceptively childlike Icelandic woman. ("She looks like that weird singer, Boink", observes Justin's friend Cody of this exotic addition to Shaker Harbour's small island population). Like several other stories by Hand, it's set in a small and tight-knit community, but one that is threatened to be torn apart by the attentions of a rich property developer, Thomas Tierney. When Tierney starts cutting down the island's old and cherish King Pines, Vala's rock-like resolve proves to be more than just a figure of speech.

The daughter of a demonic Dark Lord and the Saint of the



**Jack Dann and
Gardner Dozois
(eds.) – *Wizards*
Berkley, New York, 2007,
416pp, \$25.00, h/b
(reviewed in proof),
ISBN 978-042515180
Reviewed by Steve
Jeffery**

I think my heart sank a little when I first opened the package, and I wondered what I might have done to upset the reviews editor this

time: A fantasy anthology called *Wizards*, from an unfamiliar



World, in Kage Baker's 'The Ruby Incomparable', is bound to be a little wayward, especially when she has an unusual and somewhat startling request for her birthday present. This is the first story I've read of Kage Baker, and if the others are as much as this, I suspect I've been missing something.

Tad Williams has a brace of wizards, one of them a damaged simpleton and seeming miracle worker, able to grant one's heart's desire by a touch of hands, and another his old arch-enemy who tracks him down. 'The Stranger's Hands' gives one possible and surprising answer to what your deadliest rival's deepest wish might be. Another damaged miracle worker features in Tanith Lee's surprisingly uplifting 'Zinder' where a despised village idiot has a powerful and important dream life.

One of the best stories (against some stiff competition) comes from Andy Duncan with the splendidly titled 'A Diorama of the Infernal Regions, or The Devil's Ninth Question'. Another orphan (magic often seems, in fantasy, to be a consolatory outcome for orphaned or dispossessed children) working in a carnival museum, escapes through the backdrop and takes on the Devil in a riddling game.

After Gandalf (or Harry Potter, if you're a certain age), Merlin is probably the foremost wizard who comes to mind. Gene Wolfe plays typically convoluted games in 'The Magic Animal' with the Matter of Britain in a complex story that features the relationship between Merlin (Myrddin) and Nimue/The Lady of the Lake, mixing in elements of Alice, faeries and Poe's raven.

All in all, *Wizards* is a surprisingly strong original anthology, and I wouldn't be surprised to see several of these stories turn up in one or more of the annual 'Year's Best' anthologies.



Kelley Eskridge –
Dangerous Space
 Aqueduct Press, Seattle,
 2007, 255pp, p/b, \$18.00,
 ISBN 978-1933500133
Reviewed by Sue
Thomason

This is a collection of seven stories, with an introduction by Geoff Ryman. They are all 'what-if' stories, views of our reality with the settings changed, and what they are mostly interested in is not technology but feelings. The

primary world is not the outer world but the inner one, and technology is interesting for its effects on individuals and their emotions. The tone is intense and intimate; characteristic of people living on the edge, as most of the main characters in these stories do. Their voices are the voices of the inheritors of Romanticism.

'Strings' features a world in which Western art music (classical music) is the only music. It's a world that believes in achievement, in only the best, in perfection. Musicians bear the names of their instruments; Piano is a major character. The best performer on a given instrument bears the name of the best instrument – Stradivarius – and the title is awarded at regular Competitions. Stradivarius is admired

for her control, her precision. All other forms of music, and especially improvisation, are forbidden. This story sees classicism as dead, cold, fixed – as the System. What is missing, of course, is freedom, change, individual self-expression. The story ends with an archetypal Romantic breakout.

'Dangerous Space', the longest story in the collection, is about the other sort of music; the music of feeling, created and performed by a small group of intimates without a conductor, living on the edge, pushing the boundaries of intimacy, experience, and self-revelation. Duncan, the singer-songwriter, seems bent on destroying himself to feed the music, and a new technology which allows the audience to experience the feelings of performers seems designed to hasten that destruction. This story completely wrong-footed me; I thought the evil new technology would kill Duncan, but in fact it, and him, are brilliant successes. This is a world of talented exhibitionists and paying voyeurs – which may not be so far away from our own.

'And Salome Danced' is about a performance of the play *Salome*, subtitled *Identity and Desire*. It's a story about identity and desire; a constructed/shifting identity, a destructive/consuming desire. And again, it's a story about emotional broadcast telepathy: "All the things that I have felt about this play, she will make them feel." And not in a good way, although it will be ravishing at the time.

'City Life' reverses a set of conventional values – the miraculous healing of individual humans is shown to be bad thing which drains 'life force' from a city, causing it to malfunction and decay. The City here is the world, the norm, the exciting place to live.

'Eye of the Storm' explores the fighting/fucking continuum, showing how extreme physical contact can become an act of love.

'Somewhere Down the Diamondback Road' is... this one lost me. There's a murder in it, and the love of fast driving, and a protagonist who I think is drugged against her will, and it's obviously a piece of very stylish writing, but I don't actually understand what's going on here.

'Alien Jane' is, I think, about perceptions of femininity and/or womanhood. And about the ability to feel, to be hurt; how that can and must ultimately be a good thing.

So: these are very well-written stories in a startlingly original and individual voice; they are deeply felt, coherent, and stylish. They praise speed, the city, intensity, risk, experimentation, sophistication, the cutting edge, sex, feeling, and rock music. Buy them if those are your touchstones – in fact, even if you are, like me, a cautious unsophisticated vanilla person, these stories are worth reading for an interesting and clear view into an alien world.

Celia Friedman – *Feast of Souls*
 Orbit, London, 2007, 499pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 978-1841495316

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Witches, in the world of this fantasy novel, will inevitably die an early death, each use of their magic taking a little from their own soul. Magisters have found a way to combat this destruction of their life force. Those that attain their rank are immortal and



close to omnipotent, the limits to what they can do defined only by the need to hide the secret of how they maintain their power from those they call the 'morati', the mortals amongst whom they live. The Magisters recognise that should this centuries-old secret be revealed, humankind would rise up against them and destroy them. It is this need to guard the secret of their power that binds the Magisters together; in all else they are rivals, and no longer human. They may get involved in mortal politics, attaching themselves to the court of a king for the material benefits such a position can bring – or simply to pass the centuries. Until now, no woman has succeeded in becoming a Magister, only men it seems have the ruthlessness to survive the process of Transition by which they attain their power. Then the witch Kamala persuades the reclusive Magister Eathanus to take her as his apprentice. Despite Eathanus' misgivings and apprehensions, Kamala succeeds where others have failed, learns the terrible truth, and becomes a Magister.

Meanwhile, at the court of the High King Danton, the king's son, Andovan, is dying. The Magister Royal, Ramirus, summons Magisters from across the known lands, ostensibly to seek a cure, but in fact to discover who it is among their number who is causing Andovan's illness. Incredibly it becomes apparent that a woman is involved, although only the Magister Colivar, one of the eldest and most powerful of his kind, will entertain the possibility that this woman is actually a Magister in her own right and is not simply a witch acting on behalf of some powerful man. Whilst attempting to solve this mystery, Colivar becomes further entangled in morati politics, and begins to realise that the fate of Danton's kingdom is related to the return of the ancient evil that once destroyed civilisation and now will threaten the Magisters as much as it threatens mankind.

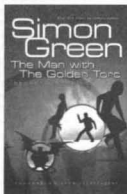
Although the Magisters' secret is revealed early on in the novel, there are enough twists and turns in the skillfully woven plot to make the book a real page-turner, in which well-drawn characters move through a totally believable world. The Magisters themselves are entirely convincing as a portrayal of what humans might become should they have access to immortality and virtually unlimited magic. Unlike so many altruistic wizards in other fantasy worlds, these all-powerful beings serve only their own self-interest, and to a greater or lesser degree in each individual, have little or no empathy for the mortals that they used to be. As such they make *Feast of Souls* an original and compelling read, and I eagerly anticipate the next volume in what could become a classic of the genre.

Simon R. Green – The Man With The Golden Torc

Gollancz, London,
2007, 377pp, £10.99, up
(reviewed in proof),
ISBN 978-0575079397
Reviewed by Estelle
Roberts

As the title of this novel heavily suggests, this is, to a large extent, a fantasy parody of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels.

In fact, the end page of the uncorrected proof informs us that



Shamen Bond, (yes, really), will return in *Demons Are Forever*. However, to see the book purely in these terms is actually to do it a disservice. It is an entertaining read, and appears to have few pretensions to be anything else, but it is also reasonably intelligent, well written, and, at times, both humorous and quite moving.

The action mainly centres around one Eddie Drood, username Shamen Bond, one of the younger black sheep of an extremely large family, whose *raison d'être* purports to be the protection of ordinary humanity from those who would threaten it, both of human and non-human origin. To this end, Shamen and his many fellow field agents are equipped with all sorts of superior high tech weaponry, including the titular torcs. These are given to all the Drood children shortly after birth, and, when activated, cover the wearer in an almost invincible golden armour and gift them with extraordinary strength. Drood, it seems, thoroughly enjoys his work, even though it is isolating, it being too risky for agents to form unapproved long term relationships. However, it is when his own Grandmother, the Matriarch of the family, attempts to have him assassinated for no reason that he can fathom, that Drood begins to doubt the truths that he was raised to believe, and to wonder if there is anybody left that he can trust. What follows is a genuine race against time to bring down the family from the inside, and to discover its ancient and horrific secrets. During the course of this, he encounters groups of people ranging from the strange to the demented, all with their own agendas, and is very ably, if surprisingly, assisted by Molly Metcalf, an extremely powerful witch, with whom he has had several interesting, and sometimes painful, encounters in the past. Drawn together almost in spite of themselves, their mutual attraction is undeniable, and although Molly is desperate, for her own reasons, to see the downfall of the Droods, this is, no doubt, a contributing factor to her joining Edwin's quest.

While this novel has much to recommend it, perhaps its main flaw is that the Bond references can be a little too knowing. We have the groan-worthy puns of the titles, the souped up Hironel sports car, the entire department run by the Armourer, (Q, by any other name), to develop neater and deadlier ways of killing things. There are also some rather Bondesque descriptions of women, although the female characters are, in the main, strong and well drawn. This is particularly the case with Molly Metcalf, although the idea of two enemies actually being attracted to each other is not exactly new. Drood himself is quite an endearing character, and you do care what happens to him. It is a page-turner of a book, the style is eminently readable, and the pace is well kept throughout, even during the less action-orientated scenes. It also has some interesting original ideas, particularly to do with the origins of the family's power. The denouement is well-written, being both fast paced and shocking, with characters showing a capacity to surprise and betray worthy of a Bond novel.

This is the beginning of what I am sure will be an enjoyable and successful series, *The Secret Histories*, which will be much appreciated by fans of fast paced, tongue in cheek fantasy.

Jim Grimsley – *The Last Green Tree*
Tor, New York, 2006, 397pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN
978-0765305305

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

The genre has never been afraid – or even ashamed – of gigantism. Ideas that could support a short story are expanded to trilogies in which worlds are built in minute, tedious detail. Yet the very best and brightest have always left the reader asking questions, wanting more – hence sequelitis (and its bloodied twin, prequelitis). *The Last Green Tree* does not suffer from gigantism and makes no attempt to present its conflict between humans and sentient, ambulant trees in detail except inasmuch as it impinges on the players – rich old man Figg, child savant Keeley, the traitor Nerva, the strange, wizardly Dekkar – and their flight from catastrophe and the destruction of their civilisation towards what might be seen to be salvation. Then there are the creatures who seem to be gods, but aren't, and those who are, new gods and old gods and very old indeed gods, all of whom make play with the humans for personal reasons that make Zeus and Co seem like paragons of sweet reason.

The plot itself is essentially a river trip into hell, into the heart of the woody enemy that has attacked a humankind living in a recognisable Stross/Banksian future with horrible, irresistible weapons that make it clear the intent is genocide. Echoes of Conrad and Simmons. On board is the possible saviour, the maths prodigy who is the intended vessel for the genuine antagonist, Rao, a truly ancient being lured to this other Earth by the failure of the higher beings whose task it is to guard and nurture us fragile, lesser things. All the humans and other beings – natural and artificial – on the trip can be and are sacrificed to the magician Dekkar's plan to use Keeley to subvert Rao's plan. In the end, of course... You'll have to read the book to discover the end because it isn't what you expect.

This seems like your typical 'story of ideas', not my preferred cup of tea. I dislike watching cardboard figures being moved around a gameboard that has 'predestination' written on it in bright, flashing lights so that the author's idée fixe can be illustrated (you have your own list, mine begins with Asimov...). This story is entirely free of character development or even revelation. These are archetypes, even stereotypes. The sentient trees are literally wooden humans. But it doesn't matter. Grimsley's mythical figures – the Fates disguised as the three sisters, the fisher king who deserts his post – are presented with such vigour that his essentially second hand ideas become alive and stimulating. We may know exactly what is going to happen to the humans, but Jessy's fate at the hands of one of the sisters is a genuine and satisfying shock. It is very rough justice, but still justice for his weak, selfish abandonment of the humans in his care.

Unlike your typical 'story of ideas', *The Last Green Tree* does not shout out Grimsley's 'truth'. The reader is presented with 'facts' and left to draw their own conclusions. Yes, it lacks characters. Yes, it would be better understood if you read the whole of the dispersed canon first. Yes, the prose is occasionally clunky. But the ideas and occasional concepts (are the sentient trees to be explored in the next volume?) are enough to leave a smile on at least this reader's face at the end of it. The slipcover describes it as 'A Sci Fi Essential Book'. Who knows, they may be right. Decide for yourself.

Kay Kenyon – *Bright of the Sky*
Pyr, New York, 2007,
451pp, \$25.99, h/b, ISBN
978-1591025412

Reviewed by Liz Batty

Bright of the Sky features Titus Quinn, a space pilot who claims to have travelled to a parallel world with his wife and daughter, and escaped to tell the tale, if only he could remember exactly what happened. No-one believes his story, least of all his former employers, until they stumble on a chance result showing that maybe he was right after all. He travels back to the parallel world of the Entire to find his wife and daughter, his lost memories and...

Bright of the Sky, the first of *The Entire* and the *Rose* series, is, at first glance, unpromising: there are no ideas here that haven't been seen before. Quantum physics and parallel worlds, mega-corporations and sapient computers are staples of the genre but, after introducing the universe we know, Kenyon drops us into the Entire, a feat of world-building which begs to be called rich and nuanced. The titular Bright refers to the never-dimming sky of this strange world, created and ruled by alien overlords, and populated by otherworldly creatures as well as the Chalin, a race created from humans by the ruling Tarig. The Entire is such a fascinating universe that it makes our own look dull by comparison and it is halfway through the book before we return to the plot strand on Earth for a cursory chapter, as though the author too could not wait to get back to the interesting parts of the story.

The characters are equally well depicted, especially the aliens of the Entire. Titus Quinn begins as the discredited space pilot, living as a recluse, who rushes to the rescue of his wife and daughter. By the end of the novel he is a fully fleshed out character, with strengths and flaws, which only lends weight to the difficult decisions he has to make. Quinn's daughter Sydney, now living as a slave rider among a race of telepathic horse-like creatures, manages to be sympathetic and human while leading a revolution among the slaves, when she could easily have been too strong and perfect to be believable. The layered intrigues and agendas of the different characters, both the aliens and the humans, help to create the three-dimensional characters which only makes it a bigger letdown on the rare occasions it slips. The secret plot of the Tarig rulers is sadly predictable but the revelation redeems itself in the character's reactions. The one clear-cut bad guy, a Tarig lord, sticks out as a one-dimensional character in a world populated by well-rounded figures. The human Helice Maki is a young, brilliant and ruthless engineer, reminiscent of Qiwi Lisolet from Vernor Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky*, but without the vulnerability which made Lisolet sympathetic.

Even though the book comes in at a hefty 450 pages, with all the time spent developing the character's motives there are still interesting aspects left uncovered. The intriguing future Earth, with sapient computers and a population largely on the dole and fed by cheap entertainments, is hardly visited after the opening section. The religion of the peoples of the Entire, where "May God bless your journey!"



is not a positive sentiment, is left a mystery while Titus Quinn's struggle to decide which of the two worlds he belongs to is discussed a little too often. Still, there are another three volumes to come and if they continue in the same vein as the first they will be worth a look for fans who like their space opera to come with a greater emphasis on rich characters and world-building than the nuts and bolts of science.

Jay Lake – *Trial of Flowers*

Night Shade Books, San Francisco, 2006, 263pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 978-1597800563

Reviewed by Chris Hill

In the ancient City Imperishable, the Gods have long since departed and no longer interfere in the affairs of its inhabitants. Once the centre of a great empire, the City has withdrawn into itself. But the City is restless: there are rumours of armies on the march to the city, in fear that the Gods are returning to restore the City's empire.

Three of the City's denizens start on personal quests: Jason the Factor is trying to find why his sponsor and friend, Ignatius Redtower, a city councillor, has disappeared and how to return him to the city. Imago of Lockwood has come up with a demented plan to re-enact the obscure Trial of Flowers to get himself elected to the long-empty position of Mayor in an effort to reverse his bad fortunes. Bijaz, leader of the Sewn faction of the Dwarfs, is trying to protect his people from the oppression he has foreseen. These quests appear to have little to do with each other, but ultimately will determine the fate of the city.

Trial of Flowers belongs firmly in that subgenre of fantasy dealing with great cities long past their glory, seemingly falling into entropic death. If I have one frustration with these sorts of books it is that they are often a triumph of style over substance. The cities and denizens are fascinatingly, and fantastically, described, but nothing of import seems to happen (K. J. Bishop's *The Etched City*, for example). *Trial of Flowers* is different; the actions of the characters directly drive the story. In this sense, of the other books in the subgenre it most resembles *Perdido Street Station*.

Not that these are, initially, terribly likeable characters. Imago does not want to become Mayor out of any sense of civic duty, but for his own selfish reasons. Bijaz may have the needs of the Sewn at heart, but he likes to entertain himself by watching normal humans being tortured to death. But one of the things that particularly appealed to me about the book is that for these characters it is a redemptive journey (a theme I always find fascinating), a redemption earned by suffering.

If I am honest, the City Imperishable itself feels much like any other great decaying city; it is its religious past and its social structure that is interesting. In particular there are the dwarfs. An actual naturally-born dwarf is unusual, most of them are created; mainly crippled by being forced to grow up in a confined space. How such a cruel tradition came into being is one of the key questions of the book. The answer that is ultimately given is quite unexpected.

There are some things that do not quite work. It is made clear early in the book, and further emphasised at a couple of later points, that Jason's tastes run to the violently sexual. But this has absolutely no bearing on the rest of the story, so one wonders why so much was made of it. Also, although the resolution makes perfect sense, the key event just kind of happens and then is done. I found myself thinking 'oh, is

that it?'

But these are small reservations. Overall this was a thoroughly enjoyable (although not always easy) read and on the basis of this I am very much looking forward to what Jay Lake comes up with next.

Paul McAuley – *Cowboy Angels*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 425pp, £18.99, h/b

(reviewed in proof), ISBN 978-057507934

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Adam Stone is an ex-Company man, living the good life on a farm in a 'wild sheaf' where homo sapiens never achieved technological civilisation.

Unfortunately for him the Company is the Central Intelligence Group, The Real's version of our CIA.

The Real is a parallel world in which the Second World War never happened, where Alan Turing emigrated to America in the 1950's and laid the foundations for the development of Turing Gates. By 1968 the CIG was beginning to use the Gates to secretly explore parallel worlds. Conveniently for the purposes of the current story, all the worlds found have either split away from current history sometime in the last century, and so offer variations on our modern world, or are uninhabited by humanity and thus undeveloped. The undeveloped worlds are exploited for resources and used as getaways for the rich, privileged and powerful. Some of the parallel Americas are infiltrated by the CIG's 'Cowboy Angels', who run black ops to destabilise American governments which don't meet with the approval of the US government in The Real. When governments fall the newly 'liberated' nations join the Pan-American Alliance. That is until Jimmy Carter is elected on the promise of ending this infinite war of American expansion, and keeps his word by closing down the Cowboy Angels.

Hence we find Stone in retirement. Meanwhile Stone's fellow ex-Cowboy Angel and once best friend Tom Waverly has vanished, presumed dead. That is until he reappears after three years, running amok across several 'sheaves' of the Pan-American alliance killing half-a-dozen parallel universe versions (dopels) of a top Government scientist. The sixth killing has gone wrong and the CIG have closed the two Gates out of the Johnson Sheave. Waverly is trapped somewhere in a single America. Flushing out such an experienced agent could take years, then Waverly lets it be known he will talk to Stone. So Adam is back in action, in what for the first half reads like a well-polished CIA type spy conspiracy adventure with the science fiction element being that the story is spread across several different parallel Americas. Then McAuley introduces a very big conspiracy and a second science fiction element, and things get more interesting. The science-fictional plot twists and turns become as integral to the increasingly labyrinthine plot as the espionage machinations. Meanwhile the parallel worlds are imaginatively conceived, particularly the American Bund Sheave where Stone becomes reacquainted with a



former gangster, now businessman and political power-player, whom he once helped ferment a revolution. Eventually, and this comes as no surprise, our protagonists find themselves in the Nixon Sheave, which should seem a very familiar place to most readers of this book.

Cowboy Angels feels like a book written to tap into the Tom Clancy/Jason Bourne market while still appealing to Paul McAuley's core sf readership. Notice the writer has dropped his middle initial, the use of which has become over the years has become a designator between mainstream and genre – think of those twin authors Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks.

There is a lot of plot in *Cowboy Angels*. There is also a lot of Bourne movie style action. McAuley builds the suspense well and the set-pieces are effectively conceived. It's a shame then that the plot essentially wraps up a 100 pages before the book does, leaving room for several Hollywood battles, shoot-outs and chases. What there isn't is much in the way of characterisation, emotional involvement, better than functional writing or political point. Politics goes no further than taking as a given that America likes to spread its version of freedom to other nations, whether they like it or not. In-fact by setting the story in the 1980's the book skirts the contemporary resonances it deliberately sets up. And one does have to wonder, if America had several unoccupied parallel worlds to exploit, would it bother spreading 'freedom' to other worlds, when such actions are always really just a front for a resource grab.

The blurb on my proof copy says "Fantastic concept: *Stargate* meets 24". Well there's nothing new in the concept of a parallel worlds political/espionage thriller. Michael P. Kube-McDowell did it with more political bite 20 years ago in *Alternities*. As for *Stargate*, the action, intrigue and driving trains through gateways call to mind Peter F. Hamilton's *Commonwealth* books, and regarding 24, Waverly's daughter is along as sidekick, someone to discuss the plot with and to get kidnapped and rescued. And to doubtless provide some female eye-candy should a film version be made. Ultimately *Cowboy Angels* is subservient to the very American values of global market dominance it implicitly seeks to critique. Given a choice between an Arthur C. Clarke Award (which the author has already won for *Fairyland*) or a potential mainstream blockbuster and the prospect of a Hollywood sale, which would you take? We are all citizens of Pan-American Alliance now.



John Meaney –
Bone Song
Gollancz, London, 2007,
346pp, t/p, £10.99, ISBN
978-0575079540

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

When is a horror novel not a horror novel? *Bone Song* has all the trappings of a gothic horror, but has the feel and structure of a police procedural thriller.

Tristopolis is a city powered by necroflux generators which use the bones of the dead by the million, and machinery is for the most part powered by enslaved wraiths. Using a lift

involves walking into an empty shaft and allowing the wraith to carry to your destination. There are living gargoyles, and zombies do not just walk the streets but are fully integrated into society, albeit with a certain degree of discrimination. Lieutenant Donal Riordon is assigned to protect a visiting opera singer following the audacious murders of other performers, and possibly more significantly, the theft of their bodies. All bones have a resonance following death and the bones of those who are particularly creative have resonance such that they can be utilised as a psychic drug. A drug for which some buyers are willing to pay very highly indeed.

As would be expected, where there is a valuable drug source there is a ruthless cabal, The Black Circle, ready to take advantage of this. As would also be expected, the powers behind such a cabal are very powerful indeed, and being assigned on a case that means taking this on is in actuality far more horrific than anything any of the city's trappings can provide. Following his failure to protect his charge, Riordon finds himself at the centre of events and assigned to a task force set to infiltrate and bring down the cabal. Having set up the situation, we are dropped four square into a traditional crime thriller. This comes complete with tight plotting, false trails and close calls as well as potentially explosive and inappropriate relationships and senior police and political figures seemingly too close to The Black Circle for comfort.

The traditional gothic elements of Tristopolis form a well realised construct in which the story is played out. The world that John Meaney has created is a fascinating one, and one that the reader can get a great deal of pleasure exploring independently of the plot. Similar to a number of other fantasy cities – such as China Miéville's New Crobuzon – Tristopolis is such an overwhelming presence that it extends beyond being the backdrop to a becoming a significant character in its own right. These gothic elements are so integral to the world that within the context of the story they cease to be horrific in of themselves. They are simply a part of life for the people that live there, and as all the characters are themselves of this world there is nothing out of the ordinary to it. It is not regarded as odd that autopsies are carried out by Bone Readers, who read the psychic emanations of the dead bones, and nor should it be, as that is the way the world works. This backdrop does not make *Bone Song* a horror novel; rather it makes it an sf novel with an alien society that operates on a different set of rules. This is highlighted by Riordon being a fan of a series of fantasy novels which are set in what appears to be a version of our world. The setting merely enhances the effect of the inherent horror of the actual events of the story. John Meaney integrates these two generic aspects very effectively, and the result is a compelling and fascinating thriller that at no time uses its location to cheat the reader.

Tristopolis is a fascinating place which I would be more than happy to visit again. Whether I'd actually want to live there is an entirely different matter.

Kai Meyer – *The Wave Runners*

Egmont, London, 2007,
374pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN
978-1405216357

Reviewed by Tanta
Brown

"Jolly ran across the ocean, striding freely. Her bare feet only just dipped into the water".

It's 1706, in the tropical waters and jungly islands of the Caribbean. This is a world not only of bloodthirsty (though also some well-mannered) pirates and freebooters, but of the supernatural: and from that very first line, where Jolly's introduced as something rich and strange, the magic is present in every dimension of the tale.

It would be remiss of me to blurb this book as *Pirates of the Caribbean* meets China Miéville's *The Scar*, so I won't (but it is).

The Wave Runners, first in a trilogy, contains the ingredients for a classic fantasy adventure – a dashing pirate captain, somewhat down on his luck; a Pirate Princess who looks just like a Mary-Sue but, cheerfully, picks her nose; a dreadlocked teenage stowaway blessed with good luck and a gift for fencing; a Mysterious Elder with one eye and two coal-black parrots, Hugh and Moe; a ship crewed by ghosts; a dog-headed man; an Oracle of questionable provenance; the imminent destruction of life as we know it; strong spirits; explosions; creepy-crawlies.

And that's without mention of the two protagonists, Jolly (named after the Jolly Roger, a namesake she's determined to live up to) and Munk. Jolly was brought in the Tortuga slave market and raised by pirates; Munk has lived his fourteen years quietly on a small island somewhere off the main seaways of the Caribbean. That quiet life, naturally, comes to an abrupt end when Jolly turns up, determined to wreak vengeance on those who've sunk the only home she's ever known.

Jolly's a polliwoggle – hence the walking, running, on water, and a decided aversion to spending very long on land – and her gift (magically bestowed only on children born just after the Port Royal earthquake of 1692) may yet be the salvation of all who dwell upon dry land. For the Ghost Trader (he of the single eye and Gothic parrots) tells of the Mare Tenebrosus, "a sea that knows no bounds, where there is no land": freak storms and shipwrecks are signs of this world breaking through into our own, and now the powers of the Mare Tenebrosus want to conquer land, and have conjured a Maelstrom through which to make their entrance...

Another admirable quality of this book is one that is, and should be, invisible. I didn't realise that I was reading a translation. The prose is idiomatic, fluent and assured, as I assume it was in the original German. All too often translated prose reads clumsily, or there are phrases and references that simply make no sense, but that's not the case here.

It would be easy to dismiss this as formulaic fantasy (take one setting, spice with supernatural, add Archetypal



Characters at regular intervals, separate out one set of protagonists at end of book one...) if it lacked the sheer enjoyment that carries the plot along, the pacy writing and confident characterisation, the eldritch nastiness of the Bad Things and the sordidness of the more human villains. The reader isn't kept entirely in the dark; secrets are revealed and discoveries made, and the complex plot is sturdy enough to admit small mysteries and at least one question that I'm amazed Jolly hasn't asked herself. There's a cliffhanger ending to keep us all waiting for the second book, *The Shell Magicians*, due this summer, and the conclusion in *The Water Weavers* (due in the autumn).

Stephenie Meyer – *Twilight*

Atom, London, 2007,
434pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN
978-1904233657

Stephenie Meyer – *New Moon*

Atom, London, 2007,
563pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN
978-1904233862

Reviewed by Penny Hill

What happens when a Mormon writes a teen high-school

romance vampire novel? If you've ever lain awake at night asking this question, then wonder no more. As with a hippo dancing Swan Lake, it's not how graceful or otherwise the hippo is that matters – it's the fact it is dancing at all. The same is true of *Twilight* and the sequel *New Moon*. I've read them so you don't have to (unless you're looking for unintentional humour).

With such a strict moral code to follow, the author has completely boxed herself into a corner with these books. If they were a film they'd be a U certificate. I have never seen such a family-friendly vampire story. Unfortunately, I cannot see how these novels will appeal to its target young adult audience. Fourteen year olds would hurl it across the room for being disappointing. The main appeal of a vampire novel is the sense of transgression, where sex and violence intermingle. In this set-up the vampires are practically vegetarian and are highly moral, restricting the opportunities for sex and blood.

In *Twilight* the plot moves too quickly from the romantic build-up of 'I like him, does he like me?' to a platonic 'going out' relationship and stays there. The mid-section of the book is mostly taken up with Bella and Edward talking endlessly about their 'relationship' and how it would be unwise to take it any further than the occasional hand-holding. There is a lot of tell and very little show. It is noticeable that on the few occasions when they do kiss, his hands are always clearly described as touching her face – to make it clear that we are not to imagine anything else happening simultaneously. This is what the author wants and expects out of teenage relationships and I can't believe she tried to do it in the context of vampires, potentially the sexiest and most dangerous fictional inventions of the last couple of hundred years.

Even bad examples in the genre are better than this – such



as Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake and her collection of nikes and beautifully dressed vampires, or even Holly Lisle and way too many torture scenes. There is certainly more sex and teenage realism in the average Judy Blume book than this. This is like a pale imitation of Buffy and Angel's relationship with the teeth drawn.

How much maturity is desirable in the perfect teenage hero? Because he is always the perfect gentleman, there is a tension-reducing sense that Bella is never in any danger from Edward. In fairy tales a prohibition often becomes a prediction 'Don't open the door' (Bluebeard) or 'Don't let anyone in the house' (Snow White). Breaking the prohibition moves the plot forwards – and in Meyer's novels, it doesn't happen. There is also a disturbingly anti-feminist thread that Bella has to be completely passive while Edward kisses her in case she over-excites him and he bites her. What kind of 'women are responsible for rape' theory does that sound like?

While writing my original notes for this review I found myself using the words 'tension' and 'frustration' over and over again – to describe the lack of plot or tension and how frustrating this was. In a teenage romance, I expect more misunderstandings, confusing signals and sexual tension as the story continues. I would even have been happier with more typical wish-fulfilment activities such as making new friends, shopping and avoiding homework.

One of the key requirements is to identify with or at least sympathise with the protagonist. Bella is self-absorbed to the extent that she makes no real friends and has no outside interests. Having moved to a new town suddenly every boy is attracted to her but while we keep being told how special she is, we do not see any reason for this. She keeps saying she doesn't believe Edward can love her and quite frankly, neither can I. Although I am not the target audience for these novels – although I do like much YA fiction – I found myself getting impatient with Bella's melodramatic physical responses, which is ironic as these at least fit in the gothic tradition of which this is such as travesty.

On the whole, the second novel *New Moon* is a decided improvement on the first. By removing Edward from the scene early in the novel and concentrating on Bella's complicated friendship with Jacob, this novel has some of the tension and focus that the first one lacks. The stagnant relationship is broken. The author builds a convincing and interesting picture of Bella's relationship with Jacob where the tension is between what they need from each other and what they can offer. (She needs his friendship, but can't offer the romance he wants). There is also more plot with strange disappearances, Jacob's mystery (spoiler: what goes well with vampires?) and the whole explicitly referenced Romeo and Juliet style misunderstanding, with a trip to Italy thrown in.

If *Twilight* is an 'international bestseller' then who is buying it? With the lack of romance or plot complications and the ostensible threat watered-down, this becomes a young adult novel that would only appeal to adults looking for something safe to buy for their children. But what happens when these sheltered Mormon children think that all vampire novels are as safe as these and start reading Buffy novelisations?

**Richard Morgan –
Black Man**
Gollancz, London, 2007,
560, £14.99, h/b, ISBN 978-
0575075139

Reviewed by Paul Raven

Richard Morgan's previous novels have cemented his reputation for writing slick ultraviolent cyberthrillers, loaded with cutting edge technological and cultural extrapolation. *Black Man*, retitled as *Thirteen* for the US market, represents no deviation from this accustomed format. But it also examines deeper themes of great relevance to modern times with insight and maturity, while providing the reader a white-knuckle ride of suspense and intrigue.

Carl Marsalis is a 'variant thirteen' – an example of the first wave of genetically hard-coded super-soldiers, engineered to be the ultimate alpha males in a feminised society where the alpha male is an increasingly atavistic and unnecessary niche. But still useful in certain scenarios, of course – like counter-insurgency and covert military operations, where instinctive violence, paranoia, pragmatism and animal magnetism are distinct advantages.

Or they were advantages... until word got out that governments had been tinkering with DNA to create human killing machines, and the inevitable backlash of public opinion rendered the thirteens *personas non grata*, largely confined to reservations on Earth, or on the sparsely terraformed surface of Mars. Marsalis, however, has a degree of freedom that the others do not, because he's a turncoat. He works for the UN, hunting down rogue thirteens and bringing them to justice... or death.

The irony of his position is not lost on Marsalis; he is hated and feared for what he is, but accepted to some degree because he works to destroy things like himself. He is an embodiment of compromise with prejudice, which is amplified by the colour of his skin: he is the black man of the title. So, when working in Jesusland – the seceded republican Bible Belt of the former US – he is exposed to old-fashioned race hate, which has largely died out elsewhere. But as is often the way with human prejudice, it has been replaced, replaced by prejudice based on genetic determinism.

This is Morgan's main theme; are we more than what our genes code us to be? Does DNA make the man? The nature/nurture debate is long standing, and likely to remain so for some time, but as good science fiction is supposed to do, Morgan's treatment of it shines a light on the world we live in today, a world where irrational hatreds based on sweeping generalisations of race, creed and genetic descent are sadly still strong political and social forces.

Black Man is not merely a thriller with a theme, it's also a sterling piece of writing. While the style may be descended from noir through cyberpunk, it is very knowingly so; full of overt nods to the canon as well as oblique references to Morgan's previous works. It also stands as testament to the



possibility of procedural thrillers having vivid characterisation. Morgan has sidestepped the problems of infodump – which is unavoidable in a fictional world with this level of detail, and where the world is crucial to the story – by couching almost all of the worldbuilding into dialogue which also delineates the characters with sharp detail. No sign of Harrison's 'clomping foot' here; everything the reader is told about the world is necessary to the plot, and all the eyeball kicks are delivered with the economy of a martial artist.

Large it may be, but *Black Man* is a fast-paced story, following a measured crescendo of violence and intrigue through to a Quixotic climax. Marsalis is a strong central character; a man of action, certainly, but a man stretched on the rack of compromises, compromises with himself, with what he was created to be, and with the society that suffers his existence at the price of his willingness to deny his nature. The thirteen are portrayed as men who have never reconciled the Oedipal Complex and made peace with themselves as part of mankind; Marsalis stands somewhere between them and the rest of society, holding his training and instinct in check, but conscious enough of that nature to hate himself for having to do so – and to hate the world for making him that way.

It is evident that Morgan has poured a great deal of passion and personal feeling into this novel; his contempt for religious bigotry and crass commercialism bubbles through the prose at a number of points. As such, I imagine it was a bitter pill to swallow when he was informed that the book would have to be retitled for the US market, an ironic emphasis of the attitudes and prejudices he has made such pains to dissect. Whatever title is slapped on it, however, *Black Man* is a vivid and exciting novel by a man who is reaching his full stride as an author – and a demonstration that visceral sf can still pack an intelligent punch.

Paul Park – *The White Tiger*

Tor, New York, 2007, 304pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 978-076531528

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

This is the third in Park's Roumanian quartet, following *A Princess of Roumania* (2005) and *The Tourmaline* (2006) (the final volume, *The Hidden World*, is due next year). Though penultimate volumes can sometimes seem slower and less eventful than other parts of a quartet marking time, building suspense – *The White Tiger* provides a new perspective on previous events, and considerably more information about the world in which it's set. A great deal happens in this volume of the story, though it's inconclusive. There are reversals, mistakes, the gradual subversion and destruction of several well-laid and long-term plans. All it takes is a little greed, the wrong person in the right place, the hidden world trickling into the real.

The White Tiger moves the focus away from Miranda Popescu, who's been transplanted from our own Massachusetts to become a fairytale princess, a symbol of freedom and hope, in a Roumania quite different from the one we know. Miranda – seen by her family's loyal followers as the embodiment of the White Tiger, a legendary symbol of Roumanian freedom – is a shadowy puppet in this novel, and when she does appear it's seldom in a sympathetic role. There's more warmth in the widowed Baroness Nicola Ceacescu, calm within her web of plots: the Baroness is as happy to use magic – simulacra, 'the old country magic of

whores', and a degree of foreknowledge that may be prescience or predetermination – as poison or intrigue. Sasha Prochenko (the bold and dashing lieutenant whom we encountered first as a girl, and then as a dog) is now a tripartite creature, capable of being male or female or something quite inhuman: and the ways in which Prochenko's three selves manifest, merge and interact with new protagonists, is fascinating.

Park fleshes out his world in this volume of the quartet. In *A Princess of Roumania* our own reality was written off as an elaborate deception to hide Miranda: now it's reinterpreted as a failed experiment. 'Models for evolution, heliocentric ... fairy stories. A world where dreams mean nothing. Where the dead are dead. Where stars are only balls of flaming gas and planets are dead rocks, and we are only responsible to our own selves.'

Miranda, the archetypal self-involved teenager, says lamely 'And I thought it was all for me'.

Roumania, even while occupied by the Germans, is the cultural, or magical, or actual centre of a world in which a god has been imprisoned in a tower for the last three centuries: where Cleopatra has taken her place amongst the deities on Olympus (and a world in which this deification is perceived as history rather than mythology): where Shakespeare's known as 'that English refugee' and Newton – who 'died of syphilis and mercury in Potsdam, a drunken broken man' – is more famous for his alchemy, and a few unpleasantly effective devices, than anything else. After all, in this world, Copernicus was wrong.

The story gathers pace like a runaway train – yet there's also a curious, calming distance between the reader and the characters, a sense that we are watching their stories unfold rather than inhabiting those stories. In a way that could be said for the characters, too: that they're not inhabiting their own stories. For a world constrained by fate and gods, there are a great many individuals creating and recreating themselves, choosing the myths by which they live and die. Nicola Ceacescu, whose unfinished opera *The White Tiger* – with herself in the leading role – shows a steely determination to revise her own history and that of all Roumania, strives to find the myth that fits what she has done, and what she's become. Will she be Cleopatra with her asp? Or will she assume the attributes of that other princess of Roumania, the infanticidal Medea?

It remains to be seen whether or not Park can pull all the threads of his narrative together, explain every allusion and reinterpretation, in the final volume of the quartet. But having come this far, my hopes are high.

Marianne de Pierres – *Dark Space*

Orbit, London, 2007, 416 pages, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1841494289

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Dark Space is space opera in the style of *Dune*, only scaled down to a fraction of the size and with characters.

Araldis is a barely terraformed Italianate world run roughly along the lines of the Renaissance states. Elsewhere in space a prospector has discovered a mysterious life-giving alien entity that is assumed to be God, rather than (for reasons I never got quite clear) just another mysterious life-giving alien entity. De Pierres tells the intertwining stories of four well-drawn people: two Araldisians, the god

prospector and an aspirant to godhood from the spin-off religion. They seem to run in parallel but, crucially, we eventually realise one of them is set a year before the other three and they converge cunningly.

'God' presumably plays a bigger role in later books because most of the action here concerns Araldis. The world boasts a small fleet of which the flagship is *Insignia*, a living vessel with a hereditary line of pilots based on genetics. You can't help wondering why anyone would willingly limit their options in this way if it didn't provide a nice set-up for a story. The next pilot in line is Mira, daughter of the lesser nobility, until the Principe decides that her gene will be transplanted into his own son and *he* will be pilot. Mira learns this in a public announcement at the ceremony-cum-press conference that was meant to confirm her in the position, showing that while Machiavellian scheming is one of the Principe's strong points, tact is not.

Mira goes on the run and the Principe's son, Trinder, who really doesn't want to be pilot, disgraces himself in a way even Prince Harry wouldn't consider and is banished. But then Araldis is invaded and their problems become suddenly less important. Survival is the prime objective; next on the list is getting to *Insignia* and flying off to get help.

De Pierres has a positively evil sense of humour that is a delight to read. Unfortunately this only shows in the story lines of the god prospector and the god aspirant, while it's Mira and Trinder who get the lion's share of the story in strictly po-face-mode. Neither are remotely likeable, not even redeemed by loveable roguishness like the other two, and it would be hard for them to shine anyway because they spend most of the story reacting to events beyond their control. They are at the receiving end of an invasion and are as helpless and out of the loop as most refugees. Mira shows the most proactivity, rescuing a child, gathering together a group of survivors and falling in with some helpful mercenaries who get her to *Insignia*, but it's more by luck than good judgement.

She is also the least interesting character. Trinder at least has some demons to exorcise. Mira is apparently a good pilot, but she only gets to fly on the last page and it's hard to admire her for something we never see and which is anyway an inherent, unearned skill. What Mira can do is feel sorry herself, and if she's half as good at piloting then *Insignia* is in safe hands.

Hopefully later books in the series will broaden the picture. It's a rich, biotech-heavy milieu of mostly human and human-derived forms, and de Pierres does a good job of portraying this universe and its subtle, complex racial politics. We need to know what happens to Araldis, sure, but the events off-world are much more intriguing and enjoyable to read.

Jeff Prucher (ed.) – *Brave New Words*

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, 342pp,

\$29.95, h/b, ISBN 978-0195305678

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Where do you start with a dictionary of science fiction – the *Oxford* dictionary of science fiction, no less? Ah yes: with the obvious.

science fiction n. 1. a genre (of literature, film, etc.) in which the setting differs from our own world (e.g. by the invention of new technology, through contact with aliens, by having a different history, etc.), and in which the

difference is based on extrapolations made from one or more changes or suppositions; hence, such a genre in which the difference is explained (explicitly or implicitly) in scientific or rational, as opposed to supernatural, terms. Compare FANTASCIENCE, PESUDOSCIENCE, SCIENCE FANTASY 2, SCIENTIFIC FANTASY, SCIENTIFICFICTION, SCIENTIFICATION, SPECULATIVE FICTION 1. 2. A work of science fiction. 3. IMAGINATIVE FICTION. Compare FANTASY 1, SCIENTIFANTASY, SPECULATIVE FICTION 2, STFANTASY.

That last is an abbreviation of 'Scientifantasy', if you're wondering. Is this a passable definition of science fiction? Well, it's no worse than most of the others I can think of. Interestingly enough, the work I immediately turned to for comparison, the 1993 *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, doesn't actually have a comparable entry; which arguably may be very sensible of Clute and Nicholls, given the nature of their project, but wouldn't suit Jeff Prucher at all. Not unambitiously, his project, as outlined in the preface to *Brave New Words*, is to catalogue the linguistic influence of science fiction on language at large.

Which is to say that most of the definitions in this book are appropriately conservative – cyberpunk is, in its first definition, "a subgenre of science fiction that focuses on the effects on society and individuals of advanced computer technology, artificial intelligence, and bionic implants in an increasingly global culture, especially as seen in the struggles of streetwise, disaffected characters", which is the sort of thing you can poke all sorts of holes in if you want to (is it really a present-tense term, or did you have to be writing before, say, 1992 to be a cyberpunk?) but serves its purpose. All the entries come with citations, from the first usage to (where appropriate) a contemporary example. The most recent citation for science fiction is from Susan Sontag, of all people, writing in the *New York Times Book Review* in 2005 "both science fictions and philosophical novels need principal characters who are skeptical, recalcitrant, astonished, ready to marvel" while the first is from W. Wilson's 1851 *Little Earnest Book upon Great Old Subject* [sic], which describes "Science-Fiction, in which the revealed truths of Science may be given, interwoven with a pleasing story which may itself be poetical and true – thus circulating a knowledge of the Poetry of Science, clothed in a garb of the Poetry of Life". That is, if you ask me, a rather fine way of putting it. Whether or not it's the first ever usage of 'science fiction' to describe a literary form is, of course, something I don't have the scholarly resources to check. I suspect it's not, since that's the way of these things; but I'd be surprised if there were citations from *much* earlier.

In some other cases, it's hard to be so confident. The first citation for 'beam' (v. to travel or to transport (something) by means of a matter transmitter), for instance, is not *Star Trek*, but:

1951 S.A. Peeples, D.A. Kyle & M. Greenberg *Dictionary of SF* in M. Greenberg *Travelers of Space 24*: The transported matter is usually broken into its component atoms, keyed, 'beamed' and reconstructed by a specially keyed receiver.

This is a case where a reader could wish for a bit more context. On the one hand, the fact that the citation comes from an earlier *Dictionary of SF* suggests it's not the first usage of the term; on the other hand, 'beamed' isn't the word being defined, it's a word being used to clarify another definition, and it's at least plausible that this is the first

science fictional usage. Once the element of doubt is there, though, it's hard not to start applying it to every citation: anyone want to take bets that 1940 was *really* the first occurrence of 'fanzine'? Or, even more questionably, that 'infodump' was first used by Howard Waldrop as late as 1990? But you could say the same about any dictionary of citations, and there are as many examples that (like 'science fiction') find a mention earlier than I would have expected. Moreover, Prucher tacitly acknowledges the criticism, noting that "due to the scarcity of many early science fiction publications and the ephemeral nature of most fan publications, many terms in this dictionary were likely in use prior to the earliest evidence herein" (xxviii). So in this respect, perhaps it's best to take *Brave New Words* as a work-in-progress; an approximation, not (ironically) the definitive statement.

There is another question to be asked of the book, though, which pertains to the selection criteria. There have to be some: it would be impossible to include every neologism ever coined in an sf story, and even if it weren't, in the absence of an electronic edition it would make the dictionary almost unusable. So Prucher includes five major categories of words: fangpeak, critical terms, sf terms used in a non sf sense ('space cadet'), words that were not coined in sf but are closely associated with it ('cyborg'), and – this may be the controversial one – words coined in sf if they are used either in multiple fictional universes, or in mainstream conversation. Which means 'newspeak' (and, entertainingly, 'frell', although not 'dren' or – my personal favourite *Farscape*-ism – 'mivonks'), but no 'dillithium'. Moreover, there's nothing since 1999 – an arbitrary line had to be drawn somewhere, and the end of the twentieth century is as good a place to draw one as any, but it does mean there's no entry for 'new weird' (or 'mundane sf', or 'interstitial', as in the Interstitial Arts Foundation and the anthology they published this year, *Interfictions*; 'slipstream', being older, does get an entry). Within these parameters, so far as I can tell from a random sampling over several weeks, the book does its job: I haven't yet gone looking for something that falls within Prucher's criteria but isn't there.

And I have gone looking for things, and not just because I knew I'd be reviewing the book. One of the things *Brave New Words* is good at, as the quoted entry on science fiction may suggest, is tracking variant terminology; particularly when consulting one of the critical terms, you're apt to find yourself following a chain of references back in time, then getting distracted by "becroggle v. see CROGGLE" and haring off in another direction entirely. Such is the joy of cross-referencing, and when it comes down to it, the joy of *Brave New Words*. It is, perhaps, fairly damning to say of a dictionary to say that it occasionally niggles at the pedantic reader, but ultimately the book does what Prucher set out to do: it's impossible not to come away with an expanded sense of the linguistic richness of sf. (Easier, in fact, to take that sense away from this book than from some sf novels. But I digress.) And there's something satisfying, not to mention welcoming, about the straight face with which the note on definitions, having explained that (for obvious reasons) 'they' and 'their' are used as singular and plural third-person pronouns, avers that "Definitions of words relating to science fiction fans and writers, however, can be assumed to have human referents" (xxiv). I can't wait until I find the Mountweazel.

Adam Roberts – *Land of the Headless*
Gollancz, London, 2007, 288pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN
978-0575077997

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

Do you want to know how smart Adam Roberts is? His latest novel, *Land of the Headless* takes its name from a story you don't know by a writer you've never heard of, whose lasting claim to a footnote in history is mostly that he went to school with Pushkin, someone you've probably never read. Not that your ignorance, or mine, matters. Because even if you knew that *The Land of the Headless* was an early dystopia written by Wilhelm Kuchelbecker, romantic, Decembrist-revolutionary, failed assassin and buddy of Pushkin, I'm not sure it helps cast any light on this story.

Roberts, genre historian and professor of literature with an interest in the nineteenth century, plainly intends some of his study of two-hundred-year-old books to show beneath the sf veneer of his latest novel, *Land of the Headless*. There is the stiff formality of his narrator, who addresses the reader directly as though writing a letter. There is the heavy reliance on misunderstanding and sudden revelation. Other reviewers, more learned than I, have suggested Proust as an influence but I thought I got a sniff of Hardy in the semi-tragic self-flagellation of the protagonist who allows an early lapse of judgement to haunt him until hard won happiness is torn apart by a nexus of chance meetings and unlikely revelations. There's even a section that begins with a close paraphrase of Charlotte Brontë's most famous punchline, "Reader, I married him".

Adam Roberts is amongst the cleverest of current British sf novelists. He is perhaps the most technically ambitious and certainly the most aware of the context in which he writes. But there is something missing. His words lack penetrating power. He peppers his targets with sharp phrases but none have sufficient force to bring down the great beasts that he has in his sights.

The blurb on the back of *Land of the Headless* calls it a "searing and supremely timely satire of religious fundamentalism" but it is no such thing. The reviewer in *The Times* presumably saw the word "satire" and, like Pavlov's puppy, invoked Swift and Orwell. *Land of the Headless* can't bear such weight.

Roberts has none of the bitter, venomous precision of Swift and none of the righteous fury of Orwell. Both these writers possess an almost fearsome clarity in their writing which is entirely absent from this novel. Facing the massed forces of religiously-inspired intolerance, I would as happily be armed with a wet lettuce leaf as a copy of *Land of the Headless*.

And it's not because Roberts lacks the capability as a writer. In other novels he has demonstrated that he can write passages of real power. Here he creates a pompous, self-delusional protagonist that every reader would happily throttle, if he hadn't had his neck chopped off in chapter one. True, the narrator's constant whining won't ingratiate *Land of the Headless* to the casual reader, but Jon Cavala's universe, dominated by a theocracy that reserves the same punishment for sex outside marriage as it does for murder, quickly becomes engrossing. As a simple tale of war, love, loss and a kind of redemption, *Land of the Headless* works well enough.

But, any novel that persistently claims to be a 'simple tale' clearly wants to be much more than that. Roberts isn't

spooling out all these words just to distract us with a bit of bounce-free Mills & Booning.

Land of the Headless has a memorably absurd discussion about 'God particles' making a spaceship travel faster than light and an intriguing but unsatisfactorily explored moment when Cavala mistakes a computer virus for heaven. The novel's Panglossian characters' passive acceptance of dreadful events and cruelty is also meant to prick the reader. But Roberts's critique of religion is too shallow to support the edifice of his novel. The splooged together hodge-podge of Islam and Christianity is too vague to convince and, worse, there's no indication of how this planet-wide (indeed galaxy-wide) tyranny might be enforced. People wander around from place to place without surveillance or apparent hindrance. There are police, but they are easily avoided. The clergy make no appearance at all. Military authority is arbitrary and stupid to the point of farce but there's no sense of it extending beyond the barracks. There's no indication of fear or oppression in people's everyday lives and no sign of how a rigid order is enforced.

And because no real time is given to constructing a realistic, plausible, fierce orthodoxy and a mechanism of government capable of reaching into lives across planets, nothing here has real bite. If we exclude, for a moment, the apparently random acts of beheading (which are never satisfactorily explored), Cavala and his companions might as well be trapped in the cloying bosom of an over-keen Vicar of Dibley as beneath the boot of the ravening hordes of modern fundamentalism.

Effective satire requires not just intellect but focus and fury, *Land of the Headless* lacks either. It wastes its energy on an unsatisfactorily rambling narrative and, if Roberts really is angry about religion, he keeps his emotions too tightly reined beneath stylistic tricks and his protagonist's missing stiff-neck.

Justina Robson – *Selling Out*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 284pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 978-0575078659

Reviewed by Chris Hill

In 2015 an experiment went wrong leading to the walls between Earth and other dimensions being broken down. Except from the other worlds' viewpoints it has always been this way. After being almost killed on a diplomatic visit to Alfheim, Lila Black was rebuilt as a cyborg. She has returned from her first mission for the Otopian Security Agency, detailed in *Keeping It Real* (reviewed in *Vector* 249), having fallen in love with the person she was supposed to be protecting and also ended up carrying the essence of a dead elven necromancer within her. Oh yes, and she accidentally helped catalyse an elven civil war. Naturally her bosses consider the mission a great success.

Now they have a new mission for her. Lila is sent to Demonica, ostensibly for research but really to find out how her elven lover, Zal, managed to end up also being a demon. Naturally, shortly after arriving she finds herself in a vendetta with a powerful demon family and faces an assassination attempt.

Before reading the *Quantum Gravity* series I would have classified Justina Robson as a fairly serious-minded writer, whose complex and rewarding novels can, at times, be hard work. *Selling Out* is very definitely Robson kicking back and

having some fun.

Selling Out, the second book in the series, deepens the background of the new worlds as the narrative splits into three threads: while Lila gets into trouble in Demonica, Zal manages to get himself stuck in the Elemental world of Zoomenon, which is quickly dead to human (or elven) life, and Lila's working partner Malachi gets involved in the Ghost Research Centre, investigating the nature of I-Space. The structure of each of these worlds is clearly delineated, and Demonica is especially fun, engaging in the intrigues of a mediaeval city state, but with the denizens treating it like an extreme sport!

But while these adventures are intriguing and help to round out the worlds, none of them are really resolved; overall the book feels somewhat plot-less. I felt that the characters (and the several important new ones that are introduced) are being moved into position for a much more interesting story to come. On the other hand, there are hints dropped that maybe the situation regarding the Quantum Bomb is not quite as straightforward as it might appear.

Lila remains a contradiction. While making use of the now better-integrated abilities of her replacement body parts, she is still not able to reconcile herself to what has happened. To an extent, damaged people can be interesting to read about but just occasionally I found myself wanting her to pull herself together. However, the glimpses we get of the family life she came from helps gives her a nice grounding in reality.

Overall *Selling Out* was an enjoyable read, competently written with many intriguing ideas and I am looking forward to the next volume, but with the hope of a stronger story next time.

Andrzej Sapkowski – *The Last Wish*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 280pp, £9.99, t/p, ISBN 978-0575077782

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The Last Wish is part of a cycle of stories which have enjoyed considerable success in the author's native Poland, an odd-ball fantasy rooted in traditional fairy tales, but with a subversive slant. The Witcher Geralt has been trained since his childhood in Kaer Morhen, the Witchers' settlement, to fight the various monstrous and supernatural creatures – vampires, rusalkas, ghouls and werewolves – that plague the forests and fields through which he rides. His fighting prowess has been enhanced by potions and spells, but the trials through which he has passed, and the experiments to which he was subjected, have left their mark and his white hair makes him easily identifiable. Geralt is not simply an heroic righter-of-wrongs and rescuer-of-princesses, but a professional who, for the right price, can be hired to kill. Like all Witchers, he is a mercenary but he will only kill monsters; he is not an assassin who can be used by kings and princes to rid themselves of their political rivals. Despite his friendship with a priestess of the cult of the mother-goddess, he does not believe in any of the numerous gods whose temples abound in his land. He does have his own code and principles, but he also has a cynical attitude towards most people in authority, as more than one overbearing knight has cause to discover, and as is made evident by his refusal of a prince's request that he discover the whereabouts of a beautiful woman who, sick of the prince's vulgar advances, had fled a royal ball, losing a slipper in the process.

The novel consists of various episodes from Geralt's past, interwoven with an on-going narrative. Most of the incidents described have a ring of familiarity about them, a resemblance to well-known European folk and fairy stories, but they are much darker in tone than most versions of such tales. In one episode, a man has been transformed into a Beast; however he is quite happy to remain as such, since word has spread among the wealthy merchants of his neighbourhood that he is willing to pay a great deal if said merchants will hand over to him their daughters. In another episode, a queen orders a huntsman to take her step-daughter into the forest and kill her. The princess tells Geralt that the hunter let her go but in this version of 'Snow White', the hunter rapes the princess, and she takes to selling herself to survive. The blurb describes *The Last Wish* as being for "those who are young, their age not withstanding," but some of the subject matter, even when it is mentioned in passing, would indicate that the book is not aimed at juveniles, despite the fact that there is a Witcher computer game available for those so inclined.

Geralt makes for a curiously likeable protagonist, a fairy-tale hero fit for our jaded times, while the subversion of the plots of traditional fairy-tales also has much to recommend to the twenty first century reader. Just don't expect this fairy story to end happily ever after.

Robert J. Sawyer – *Rollback*

Tor, New York, 2007, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 978-0765311085

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Robert J. Sawyer is a Canadian author, and *Rollback* is set mainly in Toronto in 2047. There are also substantial sections set in 2009, when the first extra-terrestrial message is received on earth, and during the years leading-up to the arrival of that message. Key to both periods is Dr Sarah Halifax, radio astronomer and tenured professor at the University of Toronto. In 2009 Sarah decodes the alien message and is instrumental in compiling earth's reply – the heart of message from Sigma Draconis is an eighty four question multiple choice ethics test.

Thirty eight years later, just as Sarah and Don are celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary, a second alien message arrives. Cody McGavin, a Bill Gates type entrepreneur, is a major philanthropic donor towards SETI research. He believes that any alien civilisation humanity encounters is statistically likely to have had advanced technology much longer than our species and therefore have attained immortality through scientific means. Such a civilisation is also believed to be peaceful, or else it would have already destroyed itself. Humanity therefore has much to learn about how to solve its own problems from contact with such an alien race, and such aliens being immortal, McGavin believes interstellar conversations, over however long a period of time, would be between individuals rather than species. McGavin considers Sarah is personally vital to the conversation begun with whatever being on Sigma Draconis sent to the first message, and so offers to fund a multi-billion dollar rollback for her. Essentially a resetting of her genetic clock to age twenty five, with complimentary restorative surgery. Sarah agrees on condition the billionaire pays for Don to also receive a rollback.

Only around two hundred people have previously received a rollback. The procedure is relatively untested, and something goes wrong. A cancer treatment Sarah received

decades previously means that the rollback does not work for her, while Don is soon an eighty seven year old man in a healthy, attractive twenty five year old body.

Rollback proves to be significantly more about the consequences of being given a second life, and of Sarah and Don's unique new circumstances after sixty years of devoted marriage, than it is about the ramifications of the second alien message. For much of the novel the alien message is little more than McGavin's MacGuffin. Indeed, that part of the plot is pushed into the background until the final quarter of the book, with the eventual outcome outlined in a nine page epilogue. This is regrettable as the resolution feels very rushed, massively condensing potentially enough material for a whole second section as long as the current novel. Perhaps the best solution would have been for *Rollback* to end without the epilogue, with a sequel of equal length to follow. As it is the book takes a quick trip through *A for Andromeda* territory, the conclusion coming across as startlingly optimistic, domestic and naive.

For much of *Rollback* we follow Sarah and Don in 2047. Or rather, we mostly follow Don. The couple's plight is well imagined and illustrated with telling incidents. The unfolding narrative is often poignant, yet one can not avoid feeling there is a large element of male wish-fulfilment fantasy. Virtually the first woman Don meets after his rollback is Lenore, another astronomer, who proves to be the love of his second life. Unfolding events are bittersweet and in places moving, but it is all far too easy. Sarah is still eighty seven in every respect and Don and Lenore aren't. Lenore looks like the young Nicole Kidman and enthusiastically shares many of Don's interests, from Scrabble to vigorous sex. It's about as likely as receiving a message from the stars.

There are other problems. Along the way there are some interesting speculations, but apart from the development of rollbacks for the select very rich and some advances in robotics the world of 2047 is too much like today to convince.

Sawyer also loads his arguments. Just one example being that Sarah deduces from the interstellar ethics quiz that the aliens will conclude that those who fall on the 'pro-choice' side of the abortion debate will be more likely to value alien life, because they have risen above the simple biological imperative to reproduce their own genetic material. This patently simplistic argument suggests everyone on the 'pro-life' side of the debate only makes choices through genetically determined instinct rather than by rational consideration and moral principle. It is woolly thinking in a book which is ultimately so comfortably cosy as to feel like a very old fashioned slice of sf. *Rollback* entertains in an unchallenging way, but fails to convince and it is ultimately forgettable.

Allen Steele – *Spindrift*

Orbit, London, 2007, 390pp, £6.99, p/b ISBN 978-1841496009

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Spindrift is the fourth in Allen Steele's *Coyote* series. The eponymous trilogy (*Coyote*, *Coyote Rising* and *Coyote Frontier*) saw star ships set off to colonise a distant planet during a period of political upheaval; establish the colony and quickly rebel, in echoes of the American War of Independence; and then come to an uncertain understanding with Earth. Given the levels of insecurity, double-crossing, paranoia and incompetence shown at every stage of the

colonisation it was not surprising that another of the star ships, the EASS Galileo, should have disappeared. Now, fifty-six years after that disappearance, the Galileo has returned, though with only three of its original eight crew aboard. The debriefing is going to be interesting, especially as the ship's xeno-biologist had been reprieved from a life-sentence imposed for genocide in order to serve.

Allen Steele has changed his story telling in this account of the Coyote universe. The earlier volumes are more linked and overlapping short stories, focusing on different characters, while *Spindrift* is definitely a novel, told in flashback after the re-arrival of the Galileo. So we read how the crew was put together, the voyage through the star-gate to the distant stars, the descent of the module with its reduced crew to the surface of a strange asteroid, and what happened to the mother ship in the meantime. And, of course, how the reduced crew manage to return.

Writing on a slightly shorter scale, Steele takes us through the political foundations of colonies, in shades of Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, through to the discovery of the big strange object in echoes of, say, Greg Bear's *Eon*. In the background is an earth still dividing up between two or three shape-shifting super-states, which seem to have been true from George Orwell's last days through to Bruce Sterling's in more modern terms. And once we are on the star ship we are in the realms of paranoid captains and distrustful lieutenants; fortunately, said captain never achieves the opportunity to put his secret plans into practise or something nastier might have returned to earth through the star-gate, nevertheless the failures of that style of management have been infamous from the days of HMS Bounty through those of the USS Caine.

In echoes of the back-cover blurb what I am doing, though, is avoiding describing the asteroid on which our three heroes land, what they find there, and the much bigger implications of what then happens to them. Even if a lot of *Spindrift* seems unoriginal it would not be sporting to give it away. On the other hand the last serious plot element has a significance on Earth, and it is one that long ago John W. Campbell raised: what do you create when you need a warning sign that anyone or anything can understand means 'Keep Away'? In the case of *Spindrift* that question is not answered well and becomes the catastrophe of the story. Exploring it would have added a lot more to Allen Steele's invention.

Steph Swainston – *The Modern World*

Gollancz, April 2007, 325pp, £14.99, h/b
(reviewed in proof), ISBN 978-0575070073

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This is the third of the Castle novels, following *The Year of Our War* and *No Present Like Time*. I haven't read either of these (although they have been reviewed in Vector 236 and 242 respectively), and would say *The Modern World* works reasonably well as an introduction to the pre-industrial world of the Fourlands, which is in the process of being overrun by giant Insects, apparently unintelligent but terrifyingly efficient at killing people. The centre of resistance to Insect domination is the Emperor San, god's replacement or stand-in (god is referred to in lower case throughout the book), who is immortal himself and able to extend his immortality to a Circle of fifty helpers, each the world's best at their profession. Members of the Circle have no special defence against illness, injury or death, but they do not age.

As they retain their Circle positions only as long as they are the world's best Cook, Archer, Messenger, etc., and as they are open to Challenge at any time, they are mostly a bunch of compulsive over-achievers.

The main viewpoint character is Jant, winged Messenger, reformed (well, fairly reformed) junkie and unreliable narrator (this is made quite clear right from the start of the book, when he apparently dies very nastily before Chapter One, in which this experience is revealed as a flashback revisiting a nearly, but not quite fatal, encounter with the Insects). Jant's main foils are Lightning, the Circle's Archer and in many ways the most interesting character in the book, and Cyan, Lightning's seventeen-year-old daughter, privileged, inexperienced, arrogant, irresponsible, and in rebellion against her father and the orthodoxies of the adult world. Cyan disappears from her Grand Tour of the Fourlands, and on the eve of a major offensive against the Insects Jant is despatched to the city of Hailith to find her, if possible. He manages (with help) to save her from death by overdose of scolopendrium, his own drug of addiction, but is forced to re-enter the Shift, an alternate set of realities accessible only via the drug. After that, things get complicated. And they don't end happily ever after, although a satisfying conclusion is reached.

The Modern World is hard, gritty-realist fantasy. Progress brings appalling problems, it is far from clear that the Insects will ever be defeated, peoples' lives and relationships are bitter, complex, and seldom go according to plan, even where there is a plan, which there often isn't. For most people, life is hard, and then you die horribly. The Emperor San may not be a Good Guy after all. The Circle may be doing bad things both to its members, and to the world it supposedly exists to protect. People fail, give up, and do stupid things. By the end of the book, a major disaster may have been averted, but things in general are not improved, and some aspects of the Fourlands' precarious stability are definitely shakier than they were at the beginning.

It's beautifully written, with a lot of original use of language, and a skilful blend of action, character development, and precise, vividly descriptive worldbuilding. I found it hard to overcome my distaste for the nastiness of so much of this world, but by the end of the book I was rooting for one character who becomes aware of some of the flaws in this world, and as a result makes a difficult, and deeply ethical, choice, and acts on it.

Recommended for people with strong stomachs, tough minds, and emotional resilience. Not recommended for people who don't like giant insects or worms.

A. E. Van Vogt and Kevin J. Anderson – *Slan Hunter*

Tor, New York, 2007 269pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 13-9780765316752

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Van Vogt published *Slan* in 1940: a melding of Bambi with Superman, it often appears in lists of Golden Age classics. Forty years later, Van Vogt's step-son realised that the conclusion of the novel, where telepathic, superhero, Slan Jommy Cross is ready to form a triumvirate with his girl-friend and her father to run the world, might not be as conclusive as it seems. For a year Van Vogt worked on until his dementia was realised and his papers went into storage. After he died in 1990 his widow, Lynda, persuaded

Kevin J. Anderson to review Van Vogt's script and consider completing it; she knew Anderson's reputation from his work on the Herbert family's *Dune* franchise. Some internal analysis suggests that this is now more Anderson than Van Vogt but that is not necessarily a bad thing – the man who gave us the word 'fix-up' to describe how so much sf has been put together might not have written a story as tightly plotted as *Slan Hunter*.

In Van Vogt's future, normal humans with unthinking hatred have persecuted the telepathic Slans (humans with tendrils growing through their hair with which they communicate) almost to extinction. *Slan* itself starts with Jommy Cross being orphaned in a city street where everyone's hand is against him. He escapes by riding on the back of John Petty's car, who, in an incredible coincidence, is head of the secret police. Now, in the sequel, John Petty is the eponymous *Slan Hunter* and Anderson starts his story with an amazing reversal of traditional story telling: this one begins 'and with one bound they were captured'. What had seemed to be Jommy Cross's victory has actually put the Slans in the hands of their worst enemy.

Anderson continues with Van Vogt's braiding of stories, adding one new character and story line, so this one opens with a mother arriving at a maternity clinic full-term, only to discover the horror engendered in the doctors when she is delivered of a *Slan* baby. In keeping with that earlier Bambi-style, her husband is killed while she escapes with the child. Anderson also expands on the earlier book's competing *Slan* cultures – the contention between the 'true Slans' and the 'tendrillless Slans'. It does not help their strategic planning, though, that various leaders are chasing the same girlfriend, whom they will threaten with pistols and fleets of rocketships at different times.

Van Vogt had one guiding rule in writing: at every turn of the story, no matter what the protagonist manages to do, things only get worse. Although the *Slan Hunter* introduction takes that to its logical limit, Anderson is not true to that principle as the book continues and introduces what seems to be his own trope in writing, especially in the last third of the book: no matter what happens, events start to tie up. Events which just seemed to have happened are revealed to have been done on purpose – usually by one of the villains – and characters who seemed to have no relation to one another are revealed to be closely related, sometimes even after death!

Reading *Slan* and then *Slan Hunter* (do read both*) I found them closer in synch than some on-line critics (start at ICSHI: The A. E. Van Vogt Information Site). In fact, I have only one question: Van Vogt in his last days talked of a *Slan* trilogy, so given the closures that Anderson has manipulated for *Slan Hunter*, how will he make everything even worse that one last time?

(*to coincide with the release of the sequel Tor America have reissued a paperback edition of *Slan* (270pp, \$13.95, ISBN 978-0312852368) with a new introduction by Kevin J. Anderson.)

Sean Williams – *Saturn Returns*

Orbit, London, 2007, 292pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 978-1841495187

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Ex-galactic mercenary Imre Bergamasc was stored in machine-readable form, encoded in a groove running

around the inside of a giant iron cylinder that was subsequently destroyed by a nuclear explosion. He was resurrected when some aliens kindly reconstructed the cylinder, having tracked down its composite atoms in the depths of space. It's understandable that there are gaps in his memory and various other quirks, such as the fact that he is now a woman. He sets off into the blue yonder, occasionally stumbling across old friends or enemies to help or impede his progress. Bit by bit he tracks down clues, finds out what happened to the vast galactic empire he remembers so fondly, and begins to suspect sneaking that maybe he – or at least the original Imre who created the backup – is the one who brought it down.

We're encouraged to think Big. Big, big, big. The empire – the Continuum – was strung together like a giant Internet where the servers are quasars, artificially manipulated to encode information in their pulses. Imre's ship tells him that a journey will take 1200 years and he doesn't bat an eyelid. The story is set 800,000 years from now, Imre's career spans half of that and some characters go back to the twentieth century, Big.

Pointlessly big, perhaps; the story often feels smaller. The Continuum fell centuries ago, but thanks to science where your personal time rate can be juggled and death is only a relative term, it only seems like a few years. Everyone remembers it like it was only a few years, acts as if it was only a few years ... So why not make it a few years? Nor are these the frightened people of Clarke's Diaspar, still haunted after thousands of years by the echoes of Mankind's lost empire. The folk here seem to have got over the Continuum like we've got over the Romans. And as the standard of living is still pretty high, armies of galactigoths singularly fail to swarm over the borders, even a small surviving fragment of the Continuum consists of several suns and planets shunted together into one big supersystem... you can't help wondering exactly what difference the Continuum made while it was still around, or what loss it is to anyone now living, or whether a similar story couldn't have been told within a much smaller setting.

Imre's sex change seems like the good idea that sparked off the story – but then the story grew legs of its own and the idea could have been discarded. On a couple of occasions, Imre's old acquaintances refuse to believe it's him, as he's suddenly a she. This in a universe of full body backups, routine dividing of consciousness between different bodies in different time periods, duplicates of the same person trying to kill each other so as to be the only one again ... changing one teeny chromosome shouldn't be much of a challenge.

Quibbles. We have a vast galactic backdrop, against which individuals are scuttling whose life stories tell the story of the galaxy. Questions are raised of identity and guilt. Imre is a corrupted backup. Is he the same man as the original? He's pretty certain he wouldn't do what the original did. There again, he doesn't know all the circumstances that the original faced. And the original is still out there. Keep reading because it's worth it. And if you're a Gary Numan fan – I'm not, so needed the explanatory appendix – there's extra value added.

Reviews Index

Tony Ballantyne – *Divergence* [Stuart Carter]
Stephen Baxter – *Conqueror* [Tony Keen]
Stephen Baxter – *The H-Bomb Girl* [Elizabeth Billinger]
David Bilsborough – *The Wanderer's Tale* [Lynne Bispham]
Jack Dann & Gardner Dozois (eds.) – *Wizards* [Steve Jeffery]
Kelley Eskridge – *Dangerous Space* [Sue Thomason]
Celia Friedman – *Feast of Souls* [Lynne Bispham]
Simon R. Green – *The Man With The Golden Torc* [Estelle Roberts]
Jim Grimsley – *The Last Green Tree* [Martyn Taylor]
Kay Kenyon – *Bright of the Sky* [Liz Batty]
Jay Lake – *Trial of Flowers* [Chris Hill]
Paul McAuley – *Cowboy Angels* [Gary Dalkin]
John Meaney – *Bone Song* [Dave M. Roberts]
Kai Meyer – *The Wave Runner* [Tanta Brown]
Stephenie Meyer – *Twilight* [Penny Hill]
Stephenie Meyer – *New Moon* [Penny Hill]

Richard Morgan – *Black Man* [Paul Raven]
Paul Park – *The White Tiger* [Tanya Brown]
Marianne de Pierres – *Dark Space* [Ben Jeapes]
Jeff Prucher (ed.) – *Brave New Words* [Niall Harrison]
Adam Roberts – *Land of the Headless* [Martin McGrath]
Justina Robson – *Selling Out* [Chris Hill]
Andrzej Sapkowski – *The Last Wish* [Lynne Bispham]
Robert J. Sawyer – *Rollback* [Gary Dalkin]
Allen Steele – *Spindrift* [L. J. Hurst]
Steph Swainston – *The Modern World* [Sue Thomason]
A. E. Van Vogt and Kevin J. Anderson – *Slan Hunter* [L. J. Hurst]
Sean Williams – *Saturn Returns* [Ben Jeapes]

Obituary: Douglas Hill (1935-2007)

Jessica Yates

The news that Douglas Hill had met his end, in the proverbial phrase, by being run over by a bus, affected me three times over: he was a writer of SF, of children's books, and died in Palmer's Green quite near to where I live. I wrote the essay about his work for the St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers (1999) and interviewed him several times while working on it.

Hill, a Canadian who came to London as a journalist, was literary editor of *Tribune* from 1971 to 1984. He started writing SF for the young in the mid-1970s after a publisher challenged him to remedy the deficit, and began with the Last Legionary quartet (1979-81) about a space mercenary searching for the evil Warlord who destroyed all life on his home planet. This series revelled in the moral use of violence, James Bond style, effectively bringing space opera back to juvenile SF with a bang.

Next came the Huntsman trilogy (1982-4) set on a primitive, post-nuclear Earth where alien Slavers oppressed humanity. Our hero Finn, a genetically-altered human, leads the resistance to drive the Slavers off planet Earth.

This was followed by the ColSec trilogy (1984-5), about teenagers exiled from Earth to colonise a new planet. Both these trilogies showed Hill's development of strong female characters. Then a two-part series *Blade of the Poisoner* (1987) and *Master of Fiends* (1988) brought American sword-

and-sorcery conventions into British juvenile fantasy: a complete contrast to the literary Celtic and Norse flavour of Tolkien, Garner and Cooper.

In later years Hill wrote a space opera trilogy about a Han Solo-type rogue, Cade, and a two-parter for adults about Del Curb, an Intergalactic Courier in Harry Harrison style. He also wrote a lot of shorter fantasy and SF for beginning readers, and edited and contributed to many anthologies for adults and children, including *The Young Green Consumer Guide* in 1990. He served on the committee of the children's writers and illustrators group of the Society of Authors from 1995 to 1997. His fellow-writer and friend Mary Hoffman wrote that "It is ironic that everyone who knew Douglas mentions his charm, kindness and old-world courtesy, when his writing was extremely powerful, dramatic and often violent". He was also willing to write articles defending his choice of writing, and the SF genre in general, and gave an interview to Andy Sawyer in *Vector* 140 (Oct./Nov. 1987).

He had just started to writing for teenagers with his *Demon Stalkers* trilogy when he met his sudden end. How horribly ironic that a man who had travelled to the farthest reaches of the galaxy should be slain by a common London bust. Think of Hill whenever you tackle a zebra crossing, and take care.

VECTOR

254

THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION

Contents

**A Letter from Daud al-Musafir
al-Khilafahi bin 'Ammar ibn al-Afrangi** 2

Torque Control 4
Editorial by Niall Harrison, Jo Walton, and
Guy Gavriel Kay

The Limits of Alternate History 7
Edward James

History Around the Margins 11
Juliet E. McKenna

**History Repurposed - The Celestial
Empire stories** 15
Chris Roberson

Reviews 17
Edited by Paul N. Billinger

Obituary: Douglas Hill 34
Jessica Yates

The New X 36
Graham Sleight

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

Editor's blog: <http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/>

Vector

**Editors
Features, Editorial
and Letters**

Niall Harrison
73 Sunderland Avenue
Oxford, OX2 8DT
vector.editors@gmail.com
Paul N. Billinger
1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry
NN11 3BE
paul.billinger@gmail.com

Production

Liz Batty
liz@urchin.earth.li

Published by the BSFA ©2007 ISSN 0505 0448

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

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

Front cover image from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/alpoma/>, used under Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial license. Illuminated capitals from <http://tonts.lordky1.net/>

The British Science Fiction Association

President Sir Arthur C. Clarke, CBE
Vice President Stephen Baxter
Chair (acting) Tony Cullen
bsfchair@gmail.com
Treasurer Martin Potts
61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton,
Near Tamworth
B79 0JJ
mtpotts@zoom.co.uk
Peter Wilkinson
39 Glyn Avenue, New Barnet,
Herts, EN4 9PJ
bsfamembership@yahoo.co.uk
US Agent Cy Chauvin
14248 Willfred Street, Detroit,
MI 48213, USA

Membership fees
UK £26 p.a., or £18 p.a. (unwaged), or £28 p.a. (joint/family membership), Life membership £260
Europe £31 p.a.
USA \$35 p.a. (surface mail)
\$45 p.a. (airmail)
Rest of the World £31 p.a. (surface mail)
£37 p.a. (airmail)

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

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

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

Website www.bsfa.co.uk
Orbiter Writing Groups Gillian Rooke
Southview, Pilgrims Lane, Chilham,
Kent, CT4 8AB

Other BSFA Publications

Matrix: The news magazine of the BSFA

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

Features & News Editor Claire Weaver
matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk

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

Focus: The writer's magazine of the BSFA

Editor Martin McGrath
48 Spooners Drive, Park Street,
St Albans, AL2 2HL
focus.editor@blueyonder.co.uk



THE NEW X

BY
GRAHAM
SLEIGHT

I'm sure it's only a mildly obsessive-compulsive goal, but I recently set about filling in the gaps in my run of Gardner Dozois's *Year's Best Science Fiction* anthology. The last volume to arrive with me was the *Second Annual Collection*, covering 1984, and I couldn't avoid being struck by the cover. It depicts a near-future New York: to be specific, Liberty Island, and the south tip of Manhattan. It's a gloriously sunny day, and the light glints off the dome that's being built over the island. Vast construction cranes are putting it in place, pane by pane, but the dome hasn't yet reached the twin towers of the World Trade Center. And there's something odd happening there: at the top-right corner of one of the towers are two bursts of yellow and orange flame, together with a plume of smoke.

In a sense, this is just a closer-to-the-bone version of what I wrote about in *Vector* 249: an sf-nal vision of New York that happens to be falsified because it depicts the WTC towers. But it also nagged at me for reasons that were harder to articulate, and I said so (or tried to) on my Livejournal. I got a couple of particularly instructive comments back. Tony Cullen pointed out that the illustration wasn't original to the Dozois book, but was recycled from the July 1984 *F&SF*, where it illustrated Frederik Pohl's story "The Greening of Bed-Stuy" (subsequently incorporated into *The Years of the City*). I've not been able to lay my hands on a copy of the story since then to work out how the apparent WTC fire figures in the plot. And John Crowley made the deliberately flip suggestion that this was an alternate world: the decision was made in 1985 to build a dome over the city to protect against terrorist attacks, but it wasn't quite complete when the planes struck.

That begs the question that's come up a couple of times elsewhere in this issue: why do we think alternate history is sf? (More crudely, why is it mostly shelved and marketed with sf?) After all, most people would say that sf is "about the future", and alternate history isn't. Back in *Vector* 249, I said that I didn't have much time for definitional debates, but I'm going to contradict myself now with the assertion that alternate history is sf in two respects: in method and in effect. I said then that one of the problems with defining sf is that you wind up spending too much time thinking about boundary cases, chasing after the illusion of an algorithm that'll give you a binary yes/no answer to "is this sf?". But you can at least, I suggest, think of characteristics that are more or less typical of sf. Top of my list of such characteristics is extrapolation.

An sf-nal future differs from a fantasy world because you can always draw a line (sometimes

lenuous, sometimes not) between it and the time when the work was written. Indeed, much sf gives a lot of space to this in infodumps and the like. The same is true of alternate history, except that the line can be drawn between the work and some point in the past. Again, alternate history will tend to explore what happened along this line, and how Hitler winning World War II, or whatever, generated the world now being explored. Or, to turn it around, in both future-based sf and alternate history, the writer has to work forward from a known point to the world of the text. The tool, extrapolation, is the same.

And so, I'd suggest, is a large part of the effect. Sf is often criticised for failing to meet the criteria of mimetic literature, for failing to foreground character with sufficient skill or nuance. Instead, it has to present character along with a picture of the world in which the characters find themselves. So too does alternate history. In fact, since alternate history is (among other things) an argument about history, it has to make its reasoning far clearer than future-based sf does.

It's for this reason, I'd suggest, that alternate histories almost always make explicit where they diverge from our own history – the "jonbar point", as people are increasingly saying. Some works, like Christopher Priest's *The Separation*, take their jonbar point as almost the heart of the work: not the end of the story, but what it most often circles around. Even those that don't – Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* is a canonical example – often contain both general meditations on history and specific accounts of what's happened since the jonbar point. Because, if not, why write alternate history? To use another definition of sf, Adam Roberts's, alternate history, like the rest of sf, is about difference. By describing how a different society evolved and what its values are, we may be able to see our own more clearly. If that makes alternate history, and sf in general, sound a far more political form than most literature, that's not an accident. But that's a whole other subject; in another world, this column would have been about it.