

VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association



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Torque Control

I don't have much to say about the death of Sir Arthur C. Clarke. I find myself somewhat lost. There was a sense in which Arthur C. Clarke, or the particular vision he represented, *was* science fiction, for me. Looking at my shelves, right now I don't actually own that many of his books; but I've read a lot of them (though by no means all), and they always seemed to capture the best – the grandest, most noble aspects – of the potential of science fiction. And of course, his influence on some of my favourite writers and novels, and (through the Clarke Award and the BSFA, of which he was President) on my recent trajectory as an sf fan is undeniable. His passing leaves a hole that I find difficult to fill with words.

Fortunately, this issue has contributions from many people whose words say it better than I could. In addition to recollections and tributes from Alastair Reynolds, Paul Kincaid, Gwyneth Jones, the BSFA's new President, Stephen Baxter, and many others, we have a transcript of a panel from this year's Eastercon discussing Clarke's legacy, and an extended "Foundation Favourites" column by Andy Sawyer that looks at *Prelude to Space*. American writer Vandana Singh mentions that when she heard the news of Clarke's death, she went outside to look at the stars; I did the same thing, but they seemed to me just a little further away.

The rest of the issue's articles organise themselves around two quite different poles. First, we have a couple of pieces about television series – past, in Sarah Monette's discussion of *Due South*'s first season; and present, in Saxon Bullock's examination of what makes *Torchwood* work (or not). (I don't want anyone to think we're treading on *Matrix*'s toes, by the way: you'll still find plenty of news and reviews at <http://www.matrix-online.net/>, updated regularly. But I think there's room for in-depth pieces in *Vector*.) And second, we have a number of contributions that, for want of a better description (and to borrow a phrase from Caroline Mullan), involve the conversation about sf. Graham Sleight has a proposal that he feels would make the Arthur C. Clarke Award a more effective contribution to the conversation. We have responses to Stephen Baxter's column about "how others see us" from last issue, from Clarke Award Administrator Tom Hunter, and *Vector* reviewer Martin Lewis; and, as you'll probably have seen by now, the second BSFA "Special Editions" booklet features extracts from two critical books, by Farah Mendlesohn and Paul Kincaid. (Note that Wesleyan Press will give you a discount on Farah's book, if you quote the reference in their advertisement.) And lastly, we have a fascinating conversation with Roz Kaveney, from a BSFA London Meeting last autumn, in which she discusses (among other things) her transition from a critic primarily interested in prose sf, to a critic of comics and filmed sf.

Meanwhile, I've been thinking about other ways

in which I can help promote conversations about sf, beyond simply putting *Vector* together. Now that I've finished my duties as a Clarke Award judge (obligatory plug for this year's winner, for anyone who hasn't already heard: *Black Man* by Richard Morgan), I'm able to focus more of my energies on the *Vector* blog, Torque Control, at <http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/>. I've been thinking about exactly what I want to do with it, and I've come up with two ideas. One is that I'll be organising discussions about recent sf novels and blogging the results: the first of these, a conversation with Paul Raven, James Bloomer and Jonathan McCalmont about Iain M. Banks' new Culture novel, *Matter*, has already been published. The second idea is an ongoing book group. I've decided to finally get around to tackling Neal Stephenson's Baroque Cycle, and will be posting about each novel in turn, every three weeks for the next few months.

I have to say that so far – having read "Quicksilver", the first novel in *Quicksilver* – I haven't fallen in love. And I speak as one who loved *Cryptonomicon*. It's not that I'm not enjoying it, per se, or even that I don't think it's interesting: it's that I've spent so much time engaging with the surface of the work that I haven't yet had a chance to delve into its depths.

When I was about a hundred pages into "Quicksilver", I mentioned in an email to Dan Hartland that I was having trouble, and speculated on why. I need (I said) historical fiction to have authority. If I read historical fiction, even quasi-historical fiction like the Baroque Cycle, I want to feel that it is giving life to a past time in a way that is, to the best of our knowledge, accurate – because otherwise what's the point? If it's not giving life, then I might as well read the non-fiction version; and if it's not accurate, then I might as well read a fantastical version. Dan argued, as Dan so often does, that my reasoning didn't stand up, that the very concept of being authoritative about history is flawed. Perhaps it is. But I think that historical fiction needs *something* like authority if it's going to stand up, and that the Baroque Cycle lacks anything of the kind; there are too many anachronisms, too many shifts between modern and period language.

On the other hand, I'm largely convinced that the lack of authority is part of Stephenson's point. Victoria Hoyle, commenting on my initial post, put it this way: "Forget accuracy. The Cycle flows from the idea that there is no such thing. History is just a story we tell ourselves along particular lines. [...] This is how it feels to have history pulled out from under you – what if there was no authority? What if fiction was all we had?" It's a challenging perspective, for me; but I'm going to try to learn to see it and use it. Come and join the discussion at <http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/tag/the-baroque-cycle/>.

Letters

To the editor –

There are many ridiculous things about Stephen Baxter's incompetent take on the stale subject of the way science fiction is viewed. Firstly, there is his lateness to the party. Surely no *Vector* reader needs the potted history of *As Others See Us* he so helpfully provides, and why is attacking year old reviews? Then there is his ludicrously overblown claim for the importance of science fiction itself. Does anyone honestly believe that SF will help us survive the 21st Century? Mostly though, there is the willful misreading of sympathetic reviews to suit his prejudices. It takes a special sort of myopic victimhood to be affronted by a review that says: "Sleek, smart and working in a genre where 'feminist' isn't yet a dirty word, [Tricia] Sullivan writes intelligent, zesty and free-wheeling novels that are so entertaining they're almost embarrassing. Seriously, when was the last time you read a really smart book that was also fun?" Baxter describes this as "persistent abuse of our genre by the smugly ignorant literati." I know who looks ignorant from where I am sitting.

Martin Lewis

To the editor –

I greatly enjoyed issue 255's round-ups and reviews of the year, but it was reading Stephen Baxter's latest appropriately resonant piece that's prompted me to write in.

As the new(ish) administrator of the Arthur C. Clarke Award I've recently been much preoccupied with that same question of how other people see us, not to mention the equally engaging questions of how we see other people back and how we choose to see and present ourselves.

I agree that Terry Pratchett's generation ship analogy is an excellent place to start and, taking it one step further, perhaps what we are seeing now are the implications of discovering that the target planet has its own native inhabitants, some hostile, many indifferent and others intensely curious to see what all this strange and beguiling architecture is that's suddenly sprung up all over the place.

To put it another way, perhaps the increase of *As Others See Us* moments are in fact signs that a great cultural exchange is underway, the old walls are breaking down and the volume of traffic is increasing from both sides. Perhaps the ubiquity, if not always quality, of sci-fi media has played a major role here, with new generations of authors now appropriating the contents of their writer's toolbox from an ever increasing number of different channels?

Other recent reasons to be carefully optimistic

are that for every throwaway piece of journalistic shorthand, we're also seeing equally serious broadsheet engagement. Witness John Sutherland in the *Guardian* dedicating an article to how online reciprocal reader feedback to William Gibson's *Spook Country* is 'threatening to completely overhaul the way literary criticism is coordinated.'

Joe Gordon on the Forbidden Planet blog (another person known for redefining perceptions of how literary criticism is conducted) went into some interesting territory when he said 'perhaps it is the increasing pace of technological development, perhaps it is the pervasiveness of science fiction in many forms – radio, tv, books, comics, movies – combined with the growth in popular science books, but for whatever reason more sf elements, or indeed outright sf, seem to be cropping up and not just among the fine SF publishers.'

The above quote is directly talking about this year's Clarke Award shortlist, but there's a broader point about how perhaps there are now as many authors actively trying to hack into the sf genre as there are ones existing in rigorous denial of its tropes.

It's a topic that crops up on occasion in relation to the Clarke Award, so to continue with that example as a case study of the current state of the genre I was particularly interested to note that from this year's shortlist selection three of the nominated authors can be said to be linked to the heart of the genre insofar as they have all been previously nominated, while the three authors new to the nominations, and in two cases first time novelists, are all notably younger authors (assuming you take younger to mean "in their thirties").

These are strictly observations, but let's take a tentative step beyond to suggest that we are now witnessing a generation of authors who've experienced, enjoyed and now honour their exposure to science fiction but who are originally native to another culture and now want to trade.

I'll be there fighting the good fight, writing stiff letters with Stephen as needed, but we should also be holding out a welcoming hand to anyone who wants to know more about the world we hail from and hoping they'll lift us up to the best their community has to offer in turn.

Tom Hunter
Award Administrator
The Arthur C. Clarke Award
April 2008

Memories of Sir Arthur C. Clarke

Stephen Baxter:

While working on my latest, and sadly last, collaboration with Sir Arthur C. Clarke (*Time Odyssey 3: Firstborn*, spring 2008) I went back to re-read the four books of the original *Odyssey* series. To recap, the books were 2001: *A Space Odyssey* (1968), 2010: *Odyssey Two* (1982), 2061: *Odyssey Three* (1987) and 3001: *The Final Odyssey* (1997).

And on this reading I was very struck by the development of Clarke's portraits of the future, and the persistence of his expansive vision.

Though the books were obviously written well within the span of a single lifetime, they date from different ages. Clarke himself notes in his foreword to 2010 that '2001 was written in an age that now lies beyond one of the Great Divides in human history; we are sundered from it forever by the moment when Neil Armstrong set foot upon the Moon [in 1969].'

So although the movie was first screened in the year *Apollo 8* circled the Moon, its vision was a sort of summary of dreams of spaceflight that spanned the interval between the Second World War and *Apollo*. The space clippers and great rotating space wheels were straight out of a blueprint. Werner von Braun had been developing for NASA since the 1950s, while the beautiful, elegant, roomy nuclear ship *Discovery* was an almost pulp-era vision of 'how the solar system should have been won' (to misquote a working title for the movie).

But the lunar dreams soured quickly. Real-life spaceflight wasn't an elegant Kubrick dream but cramped and dangerous and, worst of all, dull.

2010 was published in 1982, when *Apollo* was already a ten-years-gone memory, and the space shuttle had only just begun flying. In the novel a new spacecraft called *Leonov* goes to Jupiter to retrieve the lost *Discovery*, and to further mankind's relationship with the monolith-builders. There are new wonders; the book was inspired in part by the *Voyagers*' revelations about the Jupiter and Saturn systems. But the contrast between the spacecraft old and new is very striking, in the book as in the Peter Hyams movie. *Leonov* is an expression of the reality of spaceflight as it had been experienced: uncomfortable, squat, ugly and bristling. There is no gravity carousel here. When the two spacecraft are docked so the astronauts can escape the destruction of Jupiter, Clarke makes a male-female contrast (Chapter 46): 'It seems almost comically indecent ... And now that he came to think of it, the rugged, compact Russian ship *did* look positively male, when compared with the delicate, slender American one ...' This is an intrusion of post-*Apollo* reality into pre-*Apollo* dreams, as if two universes are overlapping.

In the later books, however, beyond the near-present of 2010, the old dreams revive. In 2061 there are great space liners called *Universe* and *Galaxy*, complete with swimming pools, powered by the late-eighties dream of cheap power – cold fusion. And by 3001, thanks to a fresh miracle called the 'Inertial Drive' old fantasies are evoked explicitly. Back-

from-the-dead 2001 astronaut Frank Poole says (Chapter 14): 'Do you know what *Goliath* reminds me of? ... When I was a boy, I came across a whole pile of old science-fiction magazines that my Uncle George had abandoned – "pulp", they were called ... They had wonderful garish covers, showing strange planets and monsters – and of course, spaceships! As I grew older, I realised how ridiculous those spaceships were ... Well, those old artists had the last laugh ... *Goliath* looks more like their dreams than the flying fuel-tanks we used to launch from the Cape.'

When I interviewed him in 1997 I asked Clarke if he had any regrets about the way the twentieth century had unfolded: 'I would like to have seen a lot of things but I have seen infinitely more than I ever imagined in my lifetime. I've seen space travel. In *Prelude to Space* [1951] I predicted the first flight to the Moon in 1978 and I thought that was ridiculously optimistic. Of course by then we'd abandoned the Moon! I'd like to see men on Mars but I'm very happy with what we've done ...'

Sir Arthur C. Clarke did vision, not disappointment, and this is summed up in the *Space Odyssey* series, which is like a bottleneck of dreams, not a termination of them. The later books represent a longing to return to the expansive future promised in Clarke's boyhood. Clarke's greatest legacy may be to have helped make that future possible.

Pat Cadigan

The first time I had an interview in *Locus* was when my first novel, *Mindplayers*, came out in the US, back in 1987. I said, erroneously, that Arthur C. Clarke had invented the communications satellite in the short story, 'I Remember Babylon.' Not long after the issue with my interview came out, I received a large manila envelope from Sri Lanka. In it was a letter from Sir Arthur correcting me in a wonderfully friendly way and a copy of his original magazine article. He had signed it and added something along the lines of, 'As you can see, this would never have passed muster at Milford!'

I was, as we say here in the UK, gobsmacked. I made up my mind that if there was anything I could ever do to honour the man, I would.

Five years later, I won the Clarke award for my second novel, *Synners*. Three years after that, I won it again for *Fools*. I couldn't be at either ceremony. A year later, I moved to the UK – that was actually an unrelated development.

And then the 2001 Clarke Award was looming and I decided that I would pull together an event to be held on the afternoon before the award ceremony that evening – readings and panel discussions with the nominees and other writers. As it turned out, all the nominees but one were British. The one exception was Octavia Estelle Butler. I strongarmed donations from publishers and other professionals and financed a flight over from the US with accommodations so she could be on hand. It was the first time all the nominees had been present.

The event was held at the Science Museum, in the Wellcome Wing, and it went over really well. Surprise

guest Jonathan Carroll showed up from Austria and joined in. I didn't do anything except stand around and grin all that afternoon, so that night I got to announce the winner and present the award to China Mieville.

I never got to meet Sir Arthur in person; I never even spoke with him on the phone. I wish I could have. But I'm glad that I found an opportunity to do something. I'll never forget how I felt when I opened that envelope from Sri Lanka. I was just another first-time sf novelist, but he bothered to read my interview. And then responded personally to me.

Salut, and bon voyage, Sir Arthur.

Gary Dalkin:

The first thing Sir Arthur C. Clarke said to me was, "You're late." Indeed I was. The phone number I'd been given, with strict instructions to call precisely on time, didn't have the right dialling codes. So I had to go on-line very quickly, or as quickly as dial-up permitted, and look up the codes for Sri Lanka. I was to interview Sir Arthur, something I'd managed to arrange through my British Science Fiction Association links and through being a judge of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, for Amazon.co.uk. The interview was the most nerve-wracking thing I've done in my career as a freelance writer, not least because without seeing *2001: A Space Odyssey* aged eight I might never have developed my love of serious science fiction, or of film, or at least not in the way that I did, to the point where I was a freelance writer interviewing Sir Arthur C. Clarke via the very system of telephones linked by satellites in geostationary orbit he had first written about in *Wireless World* back in 1945.

It wasn't the easiest interview I've ever done. He didn't elaborate or give much in the way of extra details, but he was friendly and polite in his famously gruff way. He warmed to me somewhat when he discovered that my dad had been stationed in Ceylon (as the country now known as Sri Lanka was then called), actually in Colombo, where Clarke lived, while serving in air-sea rescue in the RAF during the WWII. That seemed to be enough to initiate a small email friendship over the following couple of years, as we occasionally swapped stories about the RAF, Ceylon / Sri Lanka and The War. Eventually, as his health deteriorated he stopped all but more essential communications.

One unusual thing was that I became an electronic go-between between Sir Arthur and Ray Bradbury! The former could send email without problem but had difficulties with fax (I think if I remember correctly due to limitations with his local telephone exchange), while the latter had a fax machine but no access to email. So one of my small contributions to the international science fiction and fantasy scene was to receive a message from one technology and forward it via the other!

Angie Edwards:

Arthur C. Clarke wanted to be remembered as a writer. There is little doubt that his wish will be granted. But for those who did not personally know him, there is another side to his nature which should be shared, and that was his great simplicity and generosity.

He was generous with his time - any visitor who made the journey to Colombo, or chanced at his hotel if he was travelling, was welcomed and engaged in conversation. Writers were generously given forewords for books. Many people around the globe were quietly and unexpectedly given generous help and support.

He was a man of simple pleasures. He owned no property, never drove a car, and certainly did not have a wardrobe full of designer suits. Yes, he had a telescope, computers and gadgets, but his office was certainly not the state of the art hub of technology some might imagine. His Rolex watch was certainly the only possession he ever mentioned to me with any excitement. He never lost his love of animals, toys, dreadful jokes, and the pleasure of conversation and encouragement.

He was a writer, but he was a lovely, gentle man as well.

John Jarrold:

I first read Arthur C. Clarke's short fiction somewhere in the early 60s, when my dad gave me everything from Charles Dickens to Ian Fleming to read, after I got fed up with children's books. Dad was a reader of the pulps in the late 20s and 30s, so sf was amongst the loves he bequeathed to me.

Then I read *Childhood's End*, somewhere around 1967, and loved the invention and ideas. It's still my favourite of Arthur's novels.

Then, in 1988, after years of reading Arthur's work, I was lucky enough to acquire paperback rights for Orbit to several of his novels from Gollancz (these were the days of hardback publishers selling paperback rights outside the company), and met him on a number of occasions when he visited the UK for signings. His enthusiasm was undimmed - for both sf and science. I chatted to him, accompanied him to signings and watched him deal with his fans with humour and patience, although he was already over 70. I've had a number of high spots in the last twenty years of being involved in sf publishing (and expect to have many more), but dealing with someone who was a doyen of the field over fifty years has to stand out. Good man, fantastic fount of ideas and invention, and the author of seminal sf novels. Who could ask for anything more?

Gwyneth Jones:

I was at Aldermaston on Easter Monday, 'celebrating' fifty years of CND with a protest against the wicked irrelevance of replacing Trident. Not quite a peacenik, feeling a bit awkward, I devoted myself to walking around the AWE perimeter through flurries of sleet, admiring all the beautiful banners; myself shouldering a CND lollipop to prove I wasn't just an oblivious local, out for a freezing cold stroll. If I had a placard of my own, what would it say?

SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS

SAY:

THERE'S NO FUTURE
IN WMD!

Sadly, I'm well aware that most science fiction says exactly the opposite. Weapons Of Mass Destruction Are Way Cool, would be more like it. Then I remember that Arthur C. Clarke died last week. I can't imagine him here, but I think of his public record, his humane opinions. I recall an anecdote from Gregory Benford's sf Memoirs (published in Greg Bear's *New Legends* collection). The time must have been the early eighties, the venue a social gathering of sf giants in the California hills. Arthur C. Clarke was in town, something to do with the making of *2010*, and he turned up to say hi ... But Clarke had testified before Congress against the deployment of weapons in space, and the right wing libertarians (Niven, Pournelle, I think: can't remember who else), big fans of the Star Wars

initiative, were not about to set their colleague's bleeding-heart politics aside. It was an awkward meeting, they froze him out. The quiet Englishman didn't pick a fight. As Benford tells it, he just got back into the limo, and slipped away into the night ... I like that story. I like the idea of Clarke, dignified and unassuming, and I also like the fact that there was a limo, see. No matter what they say, there is an audience for humane sf. I don't have to work for the Military Industrial Complex, there is another way. Thank you, Mr Clarke. You give me hope.

Paul Kincaid:

One of the irritating things about most of the obituaries of Arthur C Clarke that I saw was the way they concentrated on his predictions. As if the fact that he came up with the idea of communications satellites in some way validated his science fiction.

This is nonsense, and he would have been the first to say so. He knew his science, and this allowed him to add verisimilitude to the technological futures he created. But the success or failure of his science fiction in no way depended on the accuracy of his scientific insight. In fact most of his best science fictions had little or nothing to do with scientific prediction. The impact of 'The Star' is in no way affected by the accuracy or otherwise of what he has to say about a star going nova, but it has everything to do with the effect it has on the humanity of the crew who discover the ruined civilization.

In other words he knew that science fiction is not about the technology or the predictions, though these may be eye-catching and intriguing. Science fiction is about the effect that these technologies have. And time and again he used that simple knowledge to write some of the best and most memorable science fiction there has ever been.

Which is not to laud Clarke as a great writer. He wasn't. At best his prose was workmanlike, his characterization was often rudimentary. But he knew how to tell a story, he knew how to get an idea across, and he knew how to make science fiction work so that anyone who read him was caught up in the breathless wonder of his vision. And at his best, he wrote science fiction that has not been bettered.

And his best is quite extraordinary, ranging from *Childhood's End* and *The City and the Stars* in the early 50s up to *Rendezvous with Rama* and perhaps as late as *The Fountains of Paradise* in the 1970s. His earlier fiction tended to be clunky, often repetitious, though it included some fairly solid if slightly stolid science fiction such as *The Sands of Mars*; his later fiction, mostly collaborations, and often needless continuations of stories that did not need any further elaboration, was frankly embarrassing (although again there are exceptions, the collaborations with Stephen Baxter, who is himself the most Clarkean of contemporary writers, are far better than most of what surrounds them in his bibliography). But that quarter century when he was in his prime produced novel after novel, story after story, that deserve to be read and read again. Not because of any great predictive element (watch closely the scenes aboard the spaceship in 2001, *A Space Odyssey* and you will notice astronaut Bowman reading something that looks suspiciously like today's internet. An invention by Clarke? Or a grace note by one of Stanley Kubrick's set designers? Who cares, it doesn't matter, anyone who watches the film, or indeed reads the novel, for its predictions is watching the wrong film) but because of how they expanded the language, the armoury of science fiction.

There is, for example, no finer account of the encounter with the alien than *Rendezvous with Rama* for the simple

reason that the aliens never actually appear. We were spared the deflating image of humans in funny suits, or strange beasts in a range of primary colours, that are so often the participants in first contact stories. Instead we had the alien as pure mystery. Frederik Pohl would repeat the trick later in *Gateway*, but no-one had done it before Clarke, and it was breathtaking. The later volumes which dutifully wheeled on strange beings were in many ways an act of cultural vandalism upon that first precise and elegant novel.

But let us forget the sad decline, and rather celebrate the writer who gave us *Childhood's End*, *The City and the Stars*, *A Fall of Moondust*, 2001, *A Space Odyssey*, *Rendezvous with Rama*, *The Fountains of Paradise*, and most of the contents of *The Collected Stories*, especially 'The Star', 'The Nine Billion Names of God', 'A Meeting with Medusa'. That's a canonical list if ever there was one. These are essential works of science fiction, works that must be read by anyone wanting to understand the history, the possibilities of science fiction. There aren't many writers who have made such a contribution to the genre, whose body of work could be set alongside that list (and I suspect none who might overshadow it).

And on top of that I have to add that when his own work was already in its twilight he gave us the award named after him. An award whose winners cannot always have coincided with his own tastes, but which he unflinchingly supported. We really do have a lot to be grateful for.

Ken MacLeod:

I can name the first Heinlein I read (Revolt in 2100) and the first Asimov (I, Robot), but I'm struggling to recall my first Clarke. The 2001 novelization? *Childhood's End*? No, wait - I have it now: *The City and the Stars*. I'd been reading SF for some time before then, but that book gave me my first jolt of pure, single-malt sense of wonder. The effect is easy to diagnose: the hairs on your arms and nape stand up.

Clarke's short stories and novels didn't always do that, but they did it more often than those of any other writer. The effect came with the ending. (When you talk about a Clarke story, it's always the last line that you quote.) The trick is simple: zoom out. The twist in the tale is that of the knob that's turned to show us the big picture. The glaciers are back. The stars are going out. I remember Babylon.

Clarke did the same with his non-fiction. His *Profiles of the Future* starts modestly enough - the perils of prophecy, swiftly exemplified by a chapter on the promise of the hovercraft. It ends with a vision of intelligences in a far future with trillions of years ahead of them - and turns back to ourselves, 'basking in the bright afterglow of Creation.' Is there a better way to know the Universe when you're young?

James Morrow:

My road to Arthur C. Clarke was convoluted but well worth the journey. Although the shingle on my door reads Science Fiction Writer, I did not grow up a genre aficionado. My youthful tastes were much cruder than that: comic books, *Mad* magazine, *Famous Monsters of Filmland*.

I was delivered from total geekdom by two remarkable mentors. The first was James Giordano, my tenth-grade English instructor, who taught me that great literature is primarily about ideas. The second was Glenn Doman, a Philadelphia physical therapist who treated brain-injured children via methods keyed to the evolution of the

mammalian nervous system. From Doman I learned that science had nothing to do with my dreary high-school textbooks and everything to do with humankind's capacity for disciplined transcendence.

Upon noticing that I shared her passion for idea-driven literature and science-grounded philosophy, a fellow University of Pennsylvania undergraduate placed two gifts in my hands. "You simply must read Teilhard de Chardin and Arthur C. Clarke," Carol Hogan said. *The Phenomenon of Man* failed to move me, but *Childhood's End* popped my skullcap and massaged my neurons.

A decade later, having resolved to write SF, I energized myself by revisiting Clarke's masterpiece, and I also channeled *The City and the Stars* into my fount of inspiration. At one level, of course, my fondness for preposterous satire was discontinuous with Clarke's rigorous visions. But beyond our different sensibilities, I realized I'd found a third mentor, deft at making epic extrapolations from our deepest human longings. You can imagine my joy when, interviewed in 1984 by Film Comment about the future of mass entertainment, Clarke spontaneously endorsed my second novel: "Just started *The Continent of Lies* by James Morrow, which deals with this subject brilliantly."

Thank you, Sir Arthur. I couldn't have asked for a better teacher. When I get around to writing *Bigfoot and the Bodhisattva*, all about the secret tutorial relationship between the Abominable Snowman and a future Dalai Lama, there is no question to whom I shall dedicate the book.

Alastair Reynolds:

I owe my early exposure to written sf to a happy accident. Around the time that I was eight years old, my parents bought me a copy of *Speed and Power* magazine, a weekly periodical catering to an innocent and largely vanished boy's world of helicopters, racing cars and battleships – illustrated in exciting seventies colour and typography with meticulous cutaway diagrams and the like. I was enthralled enough by that (as my parents must have known I would be), but tucked away at the back of each issue was a piece of reprinted Clarke fiction – either a complete short story, or an installment of a longer work. The stories were generally accompanied by imaginative, full-page colour paintings in a style not unlike that of Chris Foss. I thought the stories were absolutely fantastic – wonderful and terrifying in equal measure. Although it took me a little while to engage with all of them, most are now indelibly stamped on my consciousness – classic Clarkean vignettes like "Into the Comet" (abacus skills save spaceship crew), "The Haunted Spacesuit" (a Clarkean ghost story with an effective and typically rational outcome), and – most memorably for me – "A Meeting with Medusa", serialised over several issues of the magazine – the enthralling tale of the cyborg Howard Falcon's descent into the clouds of Jupiter. That story, I think, was the one in which I first experienced genuine "sense of wonder", and it wasn't long before I discovered that Clarke could do that to you again and again, not just in short stories but also in novels and even his non-fiction. I read *2001: A Space Odyssey* not long after, and then worked my way through the other books, right through into my early teens. For a long time, Clarke defined the operating parameters of science fiction to me – he was all I ever wanted from the form. To a degree, that's still the case. As I got older I became steadily more aware of the flaws in Clarke's writing, but I always found them easy to forgive, much as

I find it easy to forgive the later books. As has been said elsewhere, Clarke wasn't particularly skilled at portraying individuals (although I don't believe he was anywhere near as inept as often characterised), but he had a solid grasp of how people behaved en masse. He was skeptical about most things, but likely open-minded about one or two, he didn't subscribe to any embarrassing belief systems, and he was generous in his support and encouragement of younger sf writers. Unlike Heinlein he didn't descend into spirals of solipsism, and unlike Asimov he didn't attempt to cross-knit his every written word into a nonsensical meta-text. Most of his novels remain gloriously untainted by sequels or spinoffs, and I think we should be grateful for that.

It was always reassuring to think of Clarke living on his island, his great curiosity probing the future like some searchlight, alert to obstacles on the horizon. It would have been good to have him for this century, as well as the one just gone.

Geoff Ryman:

You Ain't Nuthin but a Space-Dog. If Asimov was Sinatra, he was Elvis. Arthur C Clarke established in the early 1950s what space-age sf would be like – wondrous, technically capable and quietly unconventional. People my age, however, looked on Elvis and Clarke in a certain way. The writers we felt closest to in 1966 were Aldiss, Ballard, Moorcock, Ellison, Silverberg, and Delaney, not to mention PKD – that still-impressive list of New Wave adventurers. We wanted experiment and dazzle; for us, Clarke felt staid and old fashioned. From the 1950s, Bester's two classics seemed more convivial and relevant. And yet, there was something about Clarke that kept insisting.

2001: A Space Odyssey is possibly the most impactful thrusting forward of sf into the mainstream ever. He was nominated for an Oscar for co-writing the screenplay. At the time *2001* was regarded either as flashily psychedellic, or coolly contemporary in the same way that Hiroshima, *Mon Amour* or *Last Year at Marienbad* was: formally challenging and abstract.

Even as a kid, I couldn't have disagreed more. I remember vividly being taken by Dad to see it (in Cinerama) and what inspired this future Mundanista most was that *2001* made the future ordinary, inhabited by real people with livings to earn, boring hours of space flight to fill in, zero-g toilets to be negotiated and frosty little interactions with the Russians on a space deck with a Howard Johnsons and Bell telephone logos.

The 60s came and went, but Clarke seemed to become more and more relevant as the 70s wore on. I remember in 1972 being converted back to photorealistic wondrous sf by the Nebula-Award-winning *A Meeting with Medusa*. I couldn't imagine a more delightful conceit than exploring Jupiter in a hot air balloon. Jupiter with its giant atmospheric fauna was a Wonderland sprung back into possibility by thought-through science.

That same year, *Rendezvous with Rama* was also published, and would go on to win both the Hugo and the Nebula. It was the king of the Big Dumb Object novels, but what an object. In retrospect it's the refusal of Clarke to explain too much about who or what the Romans were or what the object is that gives the novel its elusive power. His characterization also seems to get better over time, subtle and unmelodramatic rather than just bland and serviceable.

Imperial Earth (1975) caught my generation on the hop again. The story focuses on a family of clones, as sexually

reproduced children, clones of clones of the family's (male) founder. So where was the founder's wife to father children by other means? Certainly the current generation of Mackenzies have bi-sexual affairs. For those of us who were gay, there was a slowly dawning realization that this re-imagining of family applied to us. Not to mention that we don't learn until halfway through the book that Duncan Mackenzie is black.

The Fountains of Paradise (1979) set the space programme in a country remarkably like Sri Lanka. Without appearing to be in the least radical, Clarke was stepping around the ethnocentrism of sf that was beginning to be more apparent. For all his formal conservatism, Clarke, it would appear, was on our side and always had been.

Like Presley, Clarke's long career looks better and more relevant the further away we stand from it in time. What strikes me now, re-reading *Childhood's End* with a writing teacher's very jaded eye, is how fresh the prose feels. I was expecting it to feel pulpy. Clarke has a clear, strong, and powerful voice. It can be very funny in purely human terms: 'This annoyed George, who was beginning to feel alcoholically amorous and he decided to have a quiet sulk beneath the stars.' (Pan PB, p.76) When necessary it can convey simply and effectively powerful emotion. The lead character of the first generation to encounter the Overloads contemplates that he will not live to see the moment when they reveal themselves. 'And Stormgren hoped that when Karellen was free to walk once more on Earth, he would one day come to these northern forests, and stand beside the grave of the first man to be his friend' (55). He's a cunning plotter as well. The hook for most of the first third is: 'Why do the Overlords have to disguise their appearance?' Stormgren, the lead character, finds out but then Clarke jumps to his old age... and he doesn't tell us or anyone what he saw. So the hook carries us on to the plot turnaround which arrives classically one-third of the way through.

Clarke delivered on the sf promise; he knew science, he used it to imagine wonders we could at least half-way believe in. The final thing that strikes me now is how honoured Clarke was by the mainstream. One of the first sf novels I ever got my hands on was *A Fall of Moondust*. It was condensed for Reader's Digest. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He was first a CBE, then a Sir. He comes from a time that accorded more respect to sf than now. It's up to us to ask how that has been allowed to happen after the Moon landing, the IT revolution, and his example.

Vandana Singh:

I am saddened by the death of Arthur C. Clarke. My brother and I read his books eagerly as children, and even now, reading their names in his obituary brings back childhood memories. 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, *The Fountains of Paradise*, *Childhood's End*. I haven't read Clarke for years (most recently I re-read *Rendezvous with Rama* some six years ago, and loved it all over again) but my brother and I can still remember lines from some of his stories. What I find most wonderful about his works is the grand scale of his ideas, the jaw-dropping sense of wonder that came through. He thought big – and that applies just as well to his technological innovations (like the space elevator) as to his fiction. One of the first trips I ever took to Mars was via *The Sands of Mars*. I still remember how 2001: *A Space Odyssey* and *Childhood's End* pulled the rug out from under me. I read and devoured Asimov, too, in those days, and

have some nostalgic fondness for those stories, but they did not move me like Clarke's works did. Clarke's vision was more humane, his writing more fluent and more passionate. Reading his works as a child transformed the way I looked at the universe: a place of unending wonder, rife with secrets to discover. Remembering his works now, I am inspired to read them all again this summer so I can revisit those half-forgotten, familiar worlds.

Somehow I must have unconsciously assumed that Arthur C. Clarke would live forever, there on the jewel-like island of Sri Lanka, writing away and being the grand old man of sf for all of us space-bug-bitten carbon-based bipeds. Which is perhaps why his death was such a shock to me, even though I knew he was ninety, and frail. The night I heard the news I went out and looked at the stars.

Science fiction was a major reason I went into science. In particular, Clarke's vision influenced my interest in the great, sweeping ideas, the big questions. For that and more, thank you, Sir Arthur.



Sir Arthur C. Clarke at his home in Sri Lanka, late March 2005. Photo by Amy Marsh.

Sir Arthur C. Clarke Remembered

The following is a transcript of a panel discussion held on Sunday 23 March at Orbital, the 2008 Eastercon, to mark Sir Arthur C. Clarke's death and pay tribute to his work. The participants were Ian McDonald, author of many novels, most recently the BSFA Award-winning *Brasyl* (2007); Edward James, Professor of Medieval History and past editor of *Foundation*; Martin McGrath, editor of *Focus*; and Paul Heskett, who worked as Clarke's private secretary in the 1980s. The panel was moderated by Graham Sleight, and transcribed by Niall Harrison.

Graham Sleight: When you think about it, apart from anything else, Arthur C. Clarke had an extraordinarily long career in sf. I think his first professionally-published story appeared sometime in the late forties?

Edward James: October 1946, in *Astounding*.

GS: Followed by many more, and we hear he has a final, collaborative novel coming out with Frederik Pohl later this year. Of course he also contributed to numerous other fields. He famously wrote the paper that established the concept for geostationary communication satellites, he popularised the idea of the space elevator, did various things in the movie world, 2001 being the most famous, and presented television shows. He acted as a populariser for the idea of space travel in general. But what we are here to talk about principally is his sf work, so I wanted to start by asking the panellists to name a favourite Clarke work and talk about it.

Ian McDonald: When I was a kid, we used to go shopping to the local county shopping mall in Bangor in County Down, and the Northern Publishing Office Bookshop had a small but well-stocked and quickly rotated sf section. I found the likes of Bob Shaw's early stuff there, all in Pan for 26", and I found *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke. The edition with the great green cover – like *Independence Day*, with the Overlord spaceship coming over. So I paid my 26", said thank you very much, and took it home. I'd read quite a lot of science fiction by then, so even as I read the start of it I knew it was a little bit out of date and a little bit hokey, but at the same time it had that sense of Clarkean grandeur about it, which I think is what I look for in his work particularly. Stuff like *A Fall of Moondust*, *Earthlight* – that's nice, but it's a wee bit homey, maybe a wee bit Heinlein. It's the big stuff that I liked, that only the Brits seem to do particularly well, that Stapledonian sense that the cosmos is very large and we are very small. And I got that first from the cover of the book, and then as I read it I thought, this is exactly what I'm looking for.

In some senses it felt like the first posthuman novel, in that it started as a fairly obvious, clichéd thing – aliens come to Earth, yeah they look like demons – but then it gets more interesting. By the end of it, where the human overmind rises and consumes the Earth and heads off into the universe, I thought, yes, this is it. And as I say for me that's always been Clarke's thing – at one level he seems cosy and British and in another way he's not at all, he's big and he's chilling. His best visions of the universe are big, chilly and unknowable because what he seems to be saying is that the universe is not humanity's playground, it's post-humanity's playground. It's for the thing that comes after us. *Childhood's End* still remains my favourite Clarke book, and possibly the one that's influenced me the most.



Martin McGrath: I would pick *Rendezvous with Rama*, not least because it's a novel that manages to start with the utter destruction of Italy without introducing a human character, and goes on for another thirty pages without introducing a human character, but which is utterly gripping from the first word. And – as you said – there's the vast scale of it, of Rama, this thing that comes through

the solar system that humans are so small against, it's incredible. And yet at the same time, I think Clarke walks a funny line between American writers and British writers. He's not as cold as Stapledon, but he doesn't have the manifest destiny stuff, so you don't have that sense that humans are always going to be special. It comes back to the sense of perspective and scale. And in Rama that's physicalised in the ship, with tiny humans poking about in this thing that is so big that you can't quite grasp it. They can't quite come to terms with it. The first moments of that book have stuck in my mind, along with some of his stories. Unlike Ian, I didn't have a decent science fiction bookshop to go to when I was growing up, or even a decent bookshop. But we did have a library that managed to put all the sf books in the children's section. Coming across "Nine Billion Names of God", when you're eight years old and a Northern Irish Catholic, is quite surprising. And it was the same with Rama – it's one of those books that I read once as a child and then sent it back to the library, forgot the name and title, but I always had the vision in my head. It shaped the way I grew into science fiction.

EJ: I look at my books frequently and think, what

was the first sf book I bought? And it must actually have been *The Sands of Mars*, in that nice green-backed Corgi edition from the late fifties. I like the homey ones! I like *The Sands of Mars*, *A Fall of Moondust*, *Earthlight*, all those. *A Fall of Moondust* is just about a rescue mission after a vehicle accident on the surface on the moon, and I think it's wonderful that Clarke can make space seem so normal. It's one of the things that attracted me to him very early on. But his grand visions do appeal as well, and particularly for me his utopian visions. *Childhood's End* is very good, but *The City and the Stars* is the one that sticks with me still. I was probably only 11 or 12 when I read it first, but for a very long time it remained my favourite science fiction novel of all. It's a utopia and about someone being dissatisfied in that utopia, and it's amazing. If you read it now you see that, my god, he's got games in virtual reality, he's got all sorts of things. He called them different things, but they're there. The vision of a far future that Clarke had in that book was just staggering to me then, and magical. It's not a very adult book; the characterisation is minimal, and in fact if it was published today maybe it would be published as a young adult novel rather than an adult novel. But I've read and re-read it over the years, and you can still enjoy it at a certain level. It's a wonderful book.

GS: We've been joined by Paul Heskett, who was Arthur C. Clarke's personal secretary from 1982 to 1983.

PH: The reason I'm here, the reason that I come to conventions, is Arthur Clarke. As a child with a passionate interest in astronomy and astronautics it was wonderful when I discovered these tales of a human future. In the school library there was a copy of *Tales of Ten Worlds*, a collection of short stories, and I was absolutely enthralled by it, it was my way into science fiction. I would go through the library looking for all the yellow Gollancz spines. When I first met Arthur it was through a man called Val Cleever, who Arthur dedicated a couple of books to – *Prelude to Space* was dedicated "to Val and Vernor, who are doing the things I merely write about" – he was chief engineer of Royle's Royce on the blue streak project. Later on, I decided to go out to Sri Lanka, and Arthur had told me to look him up if I ever visited. I called him and said I was thinking of coming out, and said I'd be happy to work to repay any hospitality. He called me back a few days later and said he'd like me to be his private secretary. So I suddenly found myself in August 1982 helping him write a speech which was then given to the United Nations committee on disarmament in Geneva. I'm very proud to say it contained a few of my ideas. Anyway, I lived in Sri Lanka for a year and it was an extraordinary experience. I have a singular regret, which is that during that time he didn't write any fiction, I'd have loved to observe that process. But he did write some other things, a number of essays which I helped in the editing process with, which was a fascinating experience and a privilege in its own right. As was meeting some of the people who came visiting, because of course Arthur was a world-famous authority and received some eminent visitors. Regarding his literary output, it seems to me that there is pre-2001 and post-2001 work. The

novelisation of the film script that Sir Arthur wrote with Stanley Kubrick did boost his sales, and it enabled him to move out of the ghetto into mainstream. He was one of the first – and I'm not the first to observe this – to write books that appeared on best-seller lists. He had quite a lucrative publishing deal for *Rendezvous with Rama*, *Imperial Earth* and *Fountains of Paradise*, but his writing output was perhaps diminished. For me his golden period, when he was at the height of his powers as a writer and storyteller, was the early to late fifties. Certainly I think three of his best novels come from that period. *Childhood's End* is one; *A Fall of Moondust* is another; but there's also *The Deep Range*, which I think was published in 1957, which was imbued with his love of the sea. He was fascinated with diving, and fell in love with Sri Lanka on the way to Australia to do some diving at the Great Barrier Reef, in fact.

GS: We tend to forget that he was, as you sort of suggest, a public figure, a public face for science fiction and for space exploration in general. I wasn't alive when he famously did the moon landing commentary with Walter Cronkite, but certainly talking to people who do remember, it seems to have been a seminal event, and remarkably for the way in which he was able to explain it.

EJ: I was just going to say, you have to ask whether Clarke was invited to do that because he was a science fiction writer, or whether it was because he'd become well known as a writer of books about space. It's difficult to know. In Britain, at least, I think he probably was the best-known populariser of space science.

GS: But of course at that time it would have been immediately after the film of 2001 – again, I wasn't



around then, but it seems to have had a huge cultural impact, particularly coming at the same time as US was trying to work out how it dealt with Vietnam and seemingly intractable internal issues. I've never quite had the 2001 epiphany that other people seem to have had –

MMcG: I'm with you on that one. 2010's a much better movie.

GS: This was something we discovered in the green room, that a number of us on this panel are actually closet fans of 2010, although it's incredibly

unfashionable to say so.

IM: My 2001 epiphany was when I was a kid, again. Our primary school used to give out free tickets to the local fleapit cinema, which was the Queen's Cinema, famous for its double-dirties. But on this one occasion they had 2001, and I got free tickets, and me and my dad went to see it. I was maybe nine. We both sort of reacted the same way: "wowowow, what the fuck was that?" But at the same time it was amazing, in especially in such an unprepossessing place. You were taken somewhere else, out into the big universe.

MMcG: For me the problems with 2001 compared to, for example, 2010, as an adaptation of Clarke's work, is that it has gone too far in the Stapledon direction, and taken the human characters out too much. Because for me one of Clarke's strengths is that he had the scale but managed to keep the human characters.

IM: I think that was very much Kubrick's decision.

MMcG: I suspect it was.

EJ: They say you can only experience the full impact of 2001 if you're high, but actually you can only have the full experience if you'd spent the previous twenty years watching all the very bad science fiction movies that were around, because 2001 was the first time that being in space felt real. OK, there are some great movies before 2001, but none of them made space a reality.

IM: Didn't some astronaut say he felt he'd been there twice?

PH: Alexei Leonov.

MMcG: Although I think that was about reading the book, rather than watching the film.

Audience: Two comments. One is you tend to forget – I think Edward would bear me out – that Clarke was the Stephen Hawking of his day, the figure of science. The second thing is, that 2001 was also a breakthrough movie in cinema and the development of widescreen technology.

MMcG: It was the first Cinerama movie.

Audience: And it made an enormous impression because of its technical expertise, and I think that was what really set it on its way.

IM: 2001 was something, but media can bite back. Reading through the blogs on the BBC website, the "have your say" on Arthur's death, a lot of people remember him purely for Arthur C. Clarke's *Mysterious World*, which if they did these days they'd have a psychic or a medium doing it, not Arthur C. Clarke. To his credit he turned it into a sceptic show rather than a mystery show, but even at the time, watching it as a kid, it felt like a bit of a diminution of his powers.

GS: But this is one of the contradictions, one of the paradoxes here. We have this man who in his writings and in his public face champions the values of rationalism, of working things out – but at the same time found himself at the end of the argument, as it were, going towards mysticism, suggesting that there are some things our powers are not sufficient for.

PH: Certainly he wasn't a religious person. He was very fond of quoting a statement by Nehru, "politics and religion are obsolete, the time has come for science and spirituality." That's probably even more valid today.

GS: I see your point, but I'm just remembering the bit in *Childhood's End* where, firstly, you have a world-state come into effect, and secondly he says, fairly soon after the Overlords got there, that "all the religions had melted away except for a very ascetic form of zen buddhism which wasn't really a religion anyway in the first place". Or something like that.

EJ: What you have to remember with *Childhood's End* is the author's note, on the title page, which says the opinions expressed in this book are not those of the author. But I don't think that refers to his picture of religion. In 3001 there is a character whose specialism is "the psychopathy that is called religion".

IM: It is an allegory of the book of Revelation, in a sense: the demons arrive, they set up a millennium after which there's a general ascension.

GS: Well, it's a little more than an allegory, surely, because it presents you with these demons, then trumps that by giving you a rational explanation for them.

IM: Exactly, that's true. But I always felt that although Clarke was very rational, he was open to the sense of mystery as well. Maybe that's why he went for the *Mysterious World* thing, to get that sense of wonder out of that wondering.

PH: He was flattered by the producers, and offered a fair bit of money, as well.

GS: Where do we think this – mysticism isn't a great word, but I can't think of a better one – but where do we think it comes from? Is it simply looking at the stars and saying, rationalism isn't sufficient? Or does it come from Wells?

MMcG: There is certainly that line through from Wells to Stapledon to Clarke, even now to Baxter, where you do look at the universe from a non-religious perspective and find yourself having this blossoming moment, being lifted up by the scale of it. That's in all



of those writers. They have this sense that although the universe is so big, we are elevated by being able to comprehend the size of it. By being able to look at it and try to understand it.

IM: In a sense I feel this is something that's been lost, that we've lost the Clarkean vision of things, cyberspace has turned us all into introverts. I punned on my blog – oh my god, it's full of shops. In a way, it's the New Wave vision of inner space being as big as outerspace. Cyberspace is now as big as, if not bigger than, outer space, and I do feel that outwards perspective has been lost, in society at large even. Technology is now all about how we can share shit more quickly, basically. We need to recapture that vision of a big universe, and the fact that so far we are the only intelligence in it, and we have to ask – why are we spending so much time on Facebook?

GS: I was going to say there's an interesting oppositional figure to Clarke but you can almost make some comparisons – Ballard. In Ballard, in a story like "The Voices of Time", the universe is vast, and doing weird stuff, and we probably can't understand it. But in a way it's very similar to Clarke, in that what characters individually do doesn't make so much of a difference because they're in the middle of these vast processes. All that you can do, maybe, is observe and record, which is the scientific romance stand that comes from Wells.

IM: In a sense that's particularly there in *Childhood's End*. The protagonist is basically an observer, and in fact is sent off to another world so that he can come back and observe the end game.

Audience: I really do like the grand vision that Clarke presented, but I don't think we should forget the short fiction, I found him really to be a master short story writer as well.

GS: I'm sure we all do, but do you have any stories in particular in mind?

Audience: I can't think of any particular one from *Tales of the White Hart*, but they all have beautiful turns of the storyline on the very last page.

GS: I guess the two canonical ones are "The Nine Billion Names of God" and "The Star", both of which again are putting rationality and religion up against each other.

IM: And, oddly enough, in both of them religion wins. But following up on that point about *Tales of the White Hart*, I enjoyed Clarke's sense of humour. You

could always get a sort of wry smile out of Clarke, where you never got anything out of Asimov. Even his funny stuff wasn't remotely funny. With Clarke there was always just a small smirk, some little line he'd slot in, and I always enjoyed that about his writing, a very English humour.

PH: One of his great influences and interests was poetry, particularly English romantic poetry. For example "The Cruel Sky", that title is from a James Elroy Flecker poem, "To a poet a thousand years hence". Many of his titles, and I suppose a lot of the mystical sensibilities, came from something that he shared with poets like Keats.

GS: It's the romantic wanting the sublime, isn't it? Aspiring after that epiphany that you get from extreme experience, whether it's Wordsworth crossing the Alps or whatever. And I suppose you can also find it in Romantic music, which of course takes us back to Strauss.

PH: And another of Arthur's favourite composers was Sibelius – who also died when he was ninety, as it happens. I don't want us to forget that Arthur had a pretty good innings. But Sibelius did all his great works by the time he was forty, really, so you can't take the comparison too far.

Audience: Whenever he mentions a composer it's Sibelius, whenever he mentions a poet it's nearly always Tennyson.

GS: I don't know much Tennyson, but what I do know suggests that there's an awful lot of going off on ultimate voyages, and things like that. So we're saying that this sensibility comes from places other than just science fiction. How much of the landscape of Sri Lanka was reflected in his later fiction? The only one that occurs to me is *The Fountains of Paradise*.

EJ: Where he shifts the geography of Sri Lanka a bit to make it work...

PH: From between six and ten degrees North of the equator to right on. It's many years since I read the book so it would be interesting to go back to it now. But also *The Songs of Distant Earth* was imbued with some of Sri Lanka. The tropical, oceanic world. He regarded that book as quite autobiographical, I think.

GS: Which was also relatively late – late eighties?

PH: Yes, although developed from an early novella, and in fact he'd done a movie outline at one point, but nothing came of it. But Mike Oldfield did a concept album.

IM: Which, to my shame, I have!

Audience: You've talked a lot about the influences on Clarke, but he was fantastically influential, and I was wondering if the panel would like to expand on that a



bit.

GS: Well, Ian mentioned Baxter, which is an obvious name.

MMcG: And Alastair Reynolds. There's a thread that runs through British science fiction of the extreme size and coldness of the universe, and Clarke is clearly part of that stream and has made it stronger. And you have to look at the impact that 2001 had on science fiction cinema, that can't be underestimated either. I think Clarke shaped the way we expected the future to look.

IM: That's a very good point. Clarke and 2001 shaped our expectations – until *Blade Runner* came along. That was the next complete paradigm shift, that was the next reinvention.

GS: And to pick up on what you were saying about that loss of vision, *Blade Runner* is a far more limited kind of future.

IM: It's also a much more Hollywood plotted film, it doesn't have that three-act-structure-busting thing that 2001 had.

EJ: I think it's perfectly true that people like Baxter and Reynolds were influenced by Clarke, but what I would suggest is that actually Clarke had relatively little influence on British science fiction writers for a long time. You can't see people in the fifties, sixties or seventies who you could say categorically were influenced by Clarke. The thing that I picked up on, the thing that still attracts me as I said, is his utopian vision, which is repeated again and again, *Songs of Distant Earth* and many of the earlier ones and some of the short stories – and indeed in 2001, one of his very last single-author works. But that utopian strand is not a very British thing. All right, that's unfair because Clarke got it from Wells, but it's not a thing that many British writers have really delved into.

IM: Why do you think it is? Is that it that Clarke was so huge and prominent that other writers felt they had to move away from what he was doing?

EJ: If one goes back to the very simplistic, old-fashioned view of American science fiction being optimistic and British science fiction being pessimistic, you could see Clarke as actually rather an isolated figure in the history of British science fiction, in some ways.

GS: But you could also argue that the New Wave of the sixties was quite specifically a reaction against the positive view of outer space as somewhere to go. And you could also argue that Clarke has had just as much influence on the other side of the Atlantic – Greg Bear's *Eon* and *Blood Music*, for instance, owe a lot to Clarke.

EJ: That's what I was going to say! Exactly. It's the corollary to Clarke's limited influence in Britain, that his influence in America has been very considerable. And I



suppose he is by far the best-known British science fiction writer in the States, and has been for a long time.

MMcG: It is interesting to note that 2001 came out at the height of the New Wave, and he probably became most famous with the general public exactly at the point when British science fiction was moving furthest away from that kind of vision. But I also

wonder whether there isn't a sense in which some of those writers, and some of those who would distance themselves from him, aren't still influenced by him. They still have that thread of the place of humanity in the world, but it's the pessimistic side of Clarke's vision, the pointlessness of all this when faced with that scale – people reacting and saying, well if it's so big we can't grasp it, what's the point? And retreating from it.

PH: I suppose to answer your question, I would say that I think we could all reel off a handful of names as obvious examples of his literary influence. I knew the late Charles Sheffield, who was a considerable admirer, and there are some fantastic novels that he wrote that bear comparison to Clarke's work.

IM: Wasn't *The Web Between the Worlds* around the same time as *The Fountains of Paradise*?

PH: That's right, and Arthur actually wrote the foreword to *The Web Between the Worlds*, saying this is an idea in public domain whose time has come. But what I was going to say is, look at the convention here, over a thousand people, and ask – how many people are here because they read books by Arthur C. Clarke? That influence, at a personal level, is huge. There are an awful lot of people, and I'm one, who got into science fiction and then into fandom through reading his books.

EJ: And that is in part, I think, because his books are incredibly approachable. They're very easy for a twelve-year-old to get into, whereas there's an awful lot of writers writing today, possibly even Ian sitting at the end, who wouldn't make much sense to a twelve-year-old –

IM: Damn right.

EJ: – he's a more mature writer. On Clarke's tombstone it says, "He never grew up, but didn't stop growing", and in a sense it's the childlike qualities of Clarke that make him very approachable as a writer, that make him such a superb introduction to science fiction. To some extent we've lost that, because he wasn't the only one in the fifties who had that quality. You could see it in Heinlein's juveniles. Someone like Ray Bradbury, even, had it. But nowadays there are not so many writers who've got that quality.

GS: This actually comes back to something that Edward and I were saying on the Not the Clarke Panel earlier, that one of the virtues of the Baxter book on the list, *The H-Bomb Girl*, is its approachability and its relative straightforwardness. That does have a lot to do with Clarke, I think.

MMcG: But at the same time Clarke's writing stands up. I've just read the shortlist for the 1958 BSFA Award, and just a little while ago I read *Childhood's End* for the first time, and I was quite surprised at the comparison. When you read the Heinlein on the BSFA list, *Have Space-Suit Will Travel*, or even the Budrys, *Who?*, they both seem terribly parochial books compared to what Clarke was writing earlier. His writing stands up remarkably well compared to a lot of that shortlist.

IM: He always seemed to be writing for the ages, and he had an amazing ability to take the stuff that he knew was out there and get at it first. *Rendezvous with Rama* – everyone had been talking about O'Neill colonies and so on, but he got there first, before it hit the popular imagination. I read about space elevators in *Omni*, then two weeks later *The Fountains of Paradise* comes out. It's that kind of sensitivity to the scientific zeitgeist that was amazing. He got there first with the big stuff.

GS: We're getting towards the end of our time; can we take a couple more questions?

Audience: I just wanted to say that he was also very approachable to young girls as an author. When you compare the other works of the time, Heinlein, Silverberg, they had very macho men, and were possibly somewhat misogynistic. It was very hard to find that person you could relate to as a girl, but I found it in Arthur Clarke's books.

MMcG: And not just women. I think it's in *2010*, there's a throwaway line where two astronauts are having a conversation, and one of them starts talking about the other's husband and how they've been together longer than his relationship. And nothing's made of it, it's just there, and it's taken perfectly for granted. So yes, socially he was often much more advanced.

GS: There's a sense in Clarke, in that respect, that there are certain shackles that we're stuck with in the here and now, nations and religions and so on, and that when we all get our acts together of course we'll be free of them, that any sane person can see that.

Audience: You talked about his influence on science fiction in Britain and America, but what about his influence in the wider world? A few years ago I looked up the secretary of the Arthur C Clarke fan club and found that he lived in Brazil.

PH: I know he has a big readership in Eastern Europe, in Poland, in Russia. The idea for a sequel to *2010* was suggested by a Brazilian fan who has subsequently become an author – he is acknowledged,

but his name escapes me at the moment. But there's a big international readership.

Audience: What did the panel think of *3001*?

GS: I have to confess I haven't read it.

IM: Me neither.

EJ: I've read it! It's more preachy than the earlier books in the series, and there isn't much of a plot, there's a lot of discussion. But as someone particularly interested in utopian fiction, in a way I found it one of the most interesting of his works. He does develop the ideas that he had in the early fifties towards utopia – I say the early fifties, although he actually wrote the basic outline of "Against the Fall of Night", which became *The City and the Stars*, in 1935. And there are still some of those ideas in *3001*, but you can see the way they've developed. So I found it really rather interesting, but I have to admit it wasn't a great novel.

MMcG: One more thing, just something that made me laugh. I heard this on a Radio 4 documentary. They had a clip of Arthur C Clarke introducing Isaac Asimov to a Mensa meeting, and he talks about his dedication of *Report on Planet Three* to Asimov: "In accordance with the terms of the Clarke-Asimov treaty, the second-best science writer dedicates this book to the second-best science-fiction writer." To which Asimov came back and said, "of course, I'm not going to mention Sir Arthur any more, except to say that we both write science fiction; I write science fiction because I'm a great writer, Arthur writes it because he's a stubborn writer." I thought that was very nice.

GS: I sort of feel we should finish with a big projection: All these worlds are yours except Europa ... but instead, I'll just say thank you very much. A round of applause for Sir Arthur.



Influence and Intersection:

Roz Kaveney interviewed by Graham Sleight

Roz Kaveney is probably best known to readers of *Vector* as a critic and the author of the books *From Alien to the Matrix* (2005), *Teen Dreams* (2006) and *Superheroes* (2008), as well as the editor of the *Vampire Slayer* (2001), the first collection of academic criticism about *Buffy* and *Angel*. She reviews regularly for *Time Out* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, and occasionally for other venues. She has also edited two anthologies of *sf*, *Tales from the Forbidden Planet* (1987) and *More tales from the Forbidden Planet* (1990), and published a number of well-regarded stories of her own. Outside *sf*, she has been active in civil liberties and mentorship politics. She lives in London; her website can be found at <<http://glamorousrags.dymphna.net/>>. The following interview with Graham Sleight was conducted at the Star Tavern in Belgravia on October 24th 2007, and transcribed by Niall Harrison.

Graham Sleight: I'm hoping to talk about the whole swathe of your career, but as a starter question what's the first thing you remember reading and being really entranced by?

Roz Kaveney: *Pebble in the Sky* by Isaac Asimov, when I was 8. My mother bought it in a jumble sale. I'd already been reading the *Narnia* books, and quite liking those, but even as an obnoxious 8 year-old I was squicked by the Christian allegory. And I'd looked at *WE* Johns, and all those other things that were around if you were a child in the fifties – Dan Dare, of course. But the point at which the real thing happened and it was the real true thing that stayed with me forever, that was *Pebble in the Sky*. Shoot me now.

GS: I'm sure there are worse taproots to have ...

RK: A second taproot text for me is *The Silver Locusts* by Ray Bradbury. Simply because *Pebble* was a Corgi book, I had gone looking for other Corgi books, and I got an odd selection. I was reading a bizarre selection of *sf* classics even before I was a teenager just because they were around.

GS: And did you stick in *sf* and fantasy for your teenage reading?

RK: Well, I never stuck in *sf*. I always read a lot, partly because I read ridiculously fast, and I had the extreme good fortune to follow my nose. So for example going to the *Ps* to look for Frederik Pohl meant that I read some John Cowper

Powys, which was very good for me in some respects, and read Pynchon's *V* within a few months of it coming out. I must have been about 13. You have to remember that by that point my best friend at school – this is Peter Ackroyd – had developed extremely pretentious reading tastes that I never tried to keep up with. He was already reading Burroughs, and I don't mean Edgar Rice. So keep it in perspective. On the other hand, we were both reading Lovecraft.

GS: But everyone does that at 13.

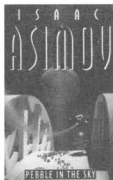
RK: There was this wonderful moment once, I was at a London literary dinner party, as one sometimes is, and someone said, "well of course the great thing about *Hawksmoor* is that it joins in the great tradition of MR James and the classic British ghost story." And I said, "Yes ... but there's also a debt to stuff like Lovecraft, you know, the curse across time that forces him to form black magic". And they sniffed, "I know you go whoring after strange literary gods, Kaveney, but I hardly think Peter Ackroyd has ever even heard of HP Lovecraft." And I said, "As the person who gave him several collections for his twelfth birthday, I beg to differ."

GS: Next you go up to University, to Oxford – do you have any intention at that point of being a writer, or being a critic, or just reading lots of books?

RK: I read English, and I sort of thought I'd probably be an academic, because it sounded like a good racket. And I tried writing ... I thought of myself as probably a poet rather than a writer of fiction, though. Most of the time I was at Oxford I was writing poetry, and going to poetry readings, and reading along with various people who became vastly more eminent than I ever did, despite in some cases not being very good. On the other hand, I wasn't very good either, and there was a point just after I'd abandoned my PhD – which is another story – when I just thought, "you know, this isn't getting any better. I need to stop doing this because it isn't going to work."

GS: Although you do still occasionally write things. I remember you wrote a poem when John M Ford died.

RK: I write occasional verses, and the best of my occasional verse is fine ... but if you're not making significant advances, if you're writing the sort of thing that's never going to get better, well, there are an awful lot of poets in the world, and an awful lot of them aren't very good, and why should I be another one? I've written one or two things down the years that satisfy



me, the Ford poem being one, but mostly I stopped. And I sort of thought I'd write some fiction one day, but I was too busy with other bits of my life, so I didn't actually write any fiction until my thirties, by which time I was already writing a lot of criticism.

GS: And when did you start writing criticism that you were publishing? How does it fit into the chronology?

RK: Well, one of the key facts was that in my late twenties I realised that I was definitely going to transition, there was no way I was not going to transition, and I had to find a way of making a living. Which essentially meant I decided that writing for



a living sounded like a good wheeze. So I started writing criticism, and one of the places I did that was *Vector*. Because at that point Mike Dickinson, who was an old chum – Mike and I knew each other when we were not quite babes in arms, but toddlers – said, well, why don't you do some reviewing for me? And so I did, and it meant I had a bunch of reviews from *Vector* to pimp round places like

the *Sunday Times* and *Books and Bookmen*. It was one of those schemes that worked. Plus, because I was a self-righteous 28-year-old, I really enjoyed some of this, writing for *Foundation* and so on. It's odd looking back across thirty years and realising how much grumpier I was then than I am now.

GS: So you drift off into your thirties and forties writing criticism. You also have various jobs in the real world throughout this time.

RK: Yes, one of the things I managed to wangle is working as a publisher's reader, which again doesn't pay very well but it beats working for a living. A mixture of publisher's reading and reviewing for places like the *Statesmen*, the *TLS*, and the *Independent* meant that I could always keep the wolf just about from the door. One of the nice things about that was, although the first time the *TLS* ever used me was actually to review science fiction, because they got sent a Frank Herbert novel and thought they should review it and someone mentioned my name, in the mainstream I've not been best known as a science fiction critic. I've never *not* been a science fiction critic in the mainstream, if you see what I mean, but it's always been "one of the things Roz knows about". I've been at the *TLS* now for a quarter of a century, and it's a case of – "Book on the history of air hostesses ... Roz would know about that." "Book on Second Life ... probably Roz would know about that." Hey, there are worse reputations to have.

GS: Sure. This is one of those questions that I find very hard to answer, but – why criticism? Why that particular impulse? I'm aware it's not the only thing you've done, but what satisfies you about it?

RK: It's partly because several of the writers I most admired in my twenties were critics. My becoming a writer on television and film is slightly less surprising if you know that I was a colossal admirer of the late Pauline Kael, and in fact I wrote the entry on Pauline Kael in *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing*. And I was buying Pauline Kael's collections from the beginning. I admire Edmund Wilson tremendously ... and what I learned from those writers in particular was just this: that without having to be flippant in the Clive James way, you can make the act of writing criticism an artistic enterprise in its own right – I mean, apart from the usefulness of your criticism, it's simply a discipline in writing good prose. And I've always felt very strongly that part of the point of being a reviewer is to write the best prose you possibly can. And part of the discipline, because I've never been a big-name reviewer, is concision. If people tell me, 300 words, I write 300 words, and they'll be the best and most informative 300 words I can write. As far as I'm concerned criticism is one of the arts.

GS: There's a question which you've touched on there, which is that at a certain point you take what looks like, although may not be, a left turn into becoming known also as a critic of stuff in the popular media as well as prose fiction. Whenabouts did that happen and for what reasons?

RK: It happened mostly in the eighties, and the reason was that I was already writing quite a lot for the *New Statesman*, and I saw the first few issues of *Watchmen*, and *Dark Knight*, and *Cerebus*, and *Maus*, and one or two other things that were about then, and went along to my editor and said, "Comics, graphic novels – the time has come to start treating this stuff seriously." And so it was very much a matter of being in the right place at the right time to have an influence, because I was one of the first people to write about *Watchmen* as serious and important work, and I'm very happy about that.

GS: And movies and TV came along at about the same time?

RK: I was always a vast consumer of movies and TV. I've always been someone who would quite often go to two or three movies every week. I never particularly thought about writing about it purely and simply because so much movie criticism in this period was being dominated by cultural theory, for which I have no bent. Specifically because some of the leading cultural theorists in the film field were old chums who were ineffectually patronising about my tastes.

GS: OK, but just looking at *Teen Dreams*, for instance, one of the central films there is *Heathers*, which was around at about the same time. And what I think of as the kind of sensibility that you talk about starts being explicit at this time.

RK: Well, I mean, it was there, I was always interested in writing about it, it just didn't get done until

things moved on and changed. The climate changed, it became possible to write the sort of clear but incredibly allusive close reading in media criticism that is what I do. Because I don't actually believe that no-one except a blockhead ever wrote for money but you have to have an audience. And I didn't find an audience until more recently. There's also the fact that I've always done a lot of political activism of various kinds. In the nineties, one of the reasons I wasn't doing quite as much of anything except work was that I was busy being involved with feminists against censorship and then being deputy chair of Liberty, which pretty much took up a decade of my time. And at the end of the nineties I got very sick, and while I was recovering I watched a lot of television again, and decided that I wanted to write a book on *Buffy*.



GS: How conscious are you of crossover between the bit of you that has been and continues to be a political activist and the bit of you that writes?

RK: I don't compartmentalise myself, I've never done that. I've always been as up front as is relevant about anything in my life in my writing or my politics. One of the reasons I got so committed to anti-censorship work was the experience of having my comics collection destroyed. I was living in Leeds and very much involved with the Leeds Left, gay liberation and feminism in the early seventies, and I left the refrigerator box with my comics collection in it with my landlady when I moved my record collection and most of my books down to London. She said she'd store it until I could come and collect it. Eventually I had enough money for the return fare, went to collect it and on the doorstep she announced that she and her CR group – consciousness raising group – had had a discussion about this and decided that the presence of my comics collection in a refrigerator box in the attic was so offensive that they'd burnt it all. The point is, it's not even as if I don't see their point of view, because 1960s and 1970s comics have their dark side, to put it mildly. But bits of my life inform other bits of my life, and I think that's how it should be. Significantly, the people I admire are absolutely as political and moral as they are literary and artistic. I suppose it's partly the way I was brought up, because though I stopped being a committed Christian at the age of 19, I was a very devout Catholic throughout my teens, and I was

very much brought up to believe that everything had to inform everything else, and it's not a bad principle as far as writing goes.

GS: I suppose the other thing to talk about here is you as a fiction writer, which you have done for a while. Is it fair to say that what's out there on the public record is the one-tenth that's above water?

RK: Say a quarter.

GS: You published a bit of stuff as part of the *Midnight Rose* collective in the early nineties, and apart from the fanfic you're working on a long-meditated novel, as I believe publishers say.

RK: Yes. That's again a synchronicity. During my critical career, particularly in science fiction, I did get very very browned off with certain people (no names, no pack drill) who would say, "yes, well, it's all very clever, and I know you think criticism is an art form, but it's not like real writing, is it? It's not like actually making things up, is it?" And then it came to be that in the late eighties I wrote what was going to be a fragment of memoir about my experiences in Chicago in the late seventies, which was a rackety time in my life, and I ended up turning it into fiction because it worked better that way structurally – because in fiction you can lie, so what was a couple of trips separated by eighteen months could become a single trip and a single long story arc. So that was around, it nearly sold several times, it didn't actually sell (although lots of people have read it). I also wrote some non-genre fiction at that time. What then happened was that I'd done the first of the *Forbidden Planet* anthologies and Geraldine Cook, an editor at Penguin that I did some work for asked, would I do some original story anthologies for her? And I decided that what would be most fun would be to sit around with my mates in a pub and invent some shared worlds, and co-edit them. One of the things about co-editing as opposed to editing is that if you co-edit you can write, because your co-editors will tell you if it's crap. Particularly if they're Mary Gentle. And thus it came to be that I wrote about 120,000 words of fiction, all of it genre, and published it, which are the five stories I wrote for *Midnight Rose*. In fairness to the unnamed people who'd sneered at me for being just a critic, one or two of them did come up to me and say, "well, er, I read that, you know, story of yours, and actually, it's quite good". So that was nice. But then I hit a couple of snags, one of which was the aforementioned political involvement, the other of which was that an editor, now dead, suggested that I write a novel for him. He was having career problems at the time and was in less of a position to commission than he hoped he was. So when I delivered the twenty thousand words and outline, of big widescreen space opera, a fragment of which is now on my website, he said "great, fabulous, I really need to see the final draft work you'd do, because I'm really having a tough time convincing people to let me take on new writers." So I made the huge mistake of going back and tightening every joint ... the final version is better, but it killed it for

me, especially when he then said, "terribly sorry, I'm not being allowed to commission new work by unknown writers at all." And because I have an infinite capacity for wandering off and doing other things when things get difficult, because I've always got a million things to do, I didn't think about writing again until I got too sick to do politics. At that point I started writing critical books, but I also started writing fiction again – which is where fanfic largely came in. Fanfic was a way of easing myself back into it, and also a way of understanding the person on whom I was doing critical work. Almost all of my fanfic was *Buffy* related. Joss Whedon has lots of faults, but he does write some of the best dialogue out there – and trying to write plausible pseudo-Whedon dialogue was terribly good for my writing and helped me understand how good he was, because it was such a bitch to imitate.

GS: When did you first run into Whedon? Was it when *Buffy* was first shown over here?

RK: Because of my interest in high school movies I'd actually seen the original *Buffy* movie, and thought, this is a mess but there's some good stuff in it. So when I read an article in the *Guardian* saying they've turned it into a television show I thought, oh yes, I'll watch that, and did, and was bowled over even by the first season, let alone by the second. As I say, this coincided with my having lost the internal struggle at Liberty to the New Labour hacks, and not being able to drink any more, and other things, and it just came along at the right time. Plus it was the point at which I started to pay serious attention to the net.

GS: At what point did you get online, then? Because people getting online coincided quite a lot with the period *Buffy* was emerging.

RK: I had an internet connection during the period that I was working with John Clute, Paul Barnett, Dave Langford and other people on the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, the idea being that we'd fire off emails to each other all the time. I didn't use it for much except email for ages, until I was working on *The Cambridge Guide to Women Writers* and was doing a lot of work on American novelists on whom there aren't many reference books. That was the time at which the British Library moved from the old building to the new building, and the number of books you could order up went down from infinity to eight per day. Now, if you're mostly summoning books in order to get dates, this is a bit of a nuisance. At which point I thought, hang on, there are these things called search engines, I bet I could use those, and light dawned.

GS: Had you been aware of things like fan fiction and slash fiction before this point?

RK: I'd been aware of them intellectually because I was around at the point when people started writing Kirk/Spock stuff, and Geoff Ryman wrote one of the first bits of slash parody, "Spock in Manacles" – I found a copy of the novella of that play when I was tidying up

the other week. So in that sense I was aware of it, but I never particularly came across it partly because I wasn't ever very interested in *Star Trek*. I didn't get involved in reading fan fiction until there were things around that I wanted to watch and therefore read fan fiction about. That was really *Buffy* and *Farscape* rather than *Trek* or even *Babylon 5*, though I did start to like *B5* at lot at one point.

GS: I suppose the other difference between, say, original series *Star Trek* and *Buffy* is that what queerness there is a lot closer to the surface.

RK: Yes, exactly. Plus of course almost all – not quite all – of what's written is femslash rather than boyslash, and with the exception of *Voyager*, who cares about anything in *Trek* from that point of view? But yes, *Buffy* was an important cultural moment. It was also a show that was rich and strange enough that you could do serious critical work on it and not have to patronise it.

GS: Where were you able to get serious critical stuff published on that in the early days?

RK: Ah, you see, I was vaguely talking about writing something for *Foundation*, as Farah will doubtless remember, and then in *Private Eye*, Pseud's Corner had a copy of the Call for Papers for Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery collection *Fighting the Forces*. I read this in Pseud's Corner and I thought, well, this seems perfectly sensible to me. So I fired off an enquiry and was told by a research assistant that it was too late, terribly sorry, and we've never heard of you, no exceptions. So I thought, ok, I'm not going to be in that book ... but then I thought, well, I know two or three really good other people, I bet I could put together quite a good critical book on *Buffy*. I talked to various friends and found some more people, and friends of friends, and talked to a couple of editors, and found IB Tauris, and talked to them about it. Ironically, Rhonda in particular has become a very close and much-loved colleague, but there was an element of competition, and the fact that I got my book out significantly before theirs did not displease me. As I always say, I'm not as nice as people think I am.





GS: Since then you have generated the other books that we have fliers for in front of us, and *Superheroes* is out in a couple of months?

RK: Yes, we don't have an official launch date yet, I'll be launching it in the States in April but it'll be out slightly before that here.

GS: And what iterations of Superhero-ness is it about?

RK: It's ended up being mostly about DC and Marvel comics. There's a chapter on the movies, but I ended up deciding that frankly, the movies are secondary work. The best movies, with very few exceptions like *Batman Returns*, are the ones that adhere most slavishly to classic continuity. As I say, *Batman Returns* is a colossal exception to that because it makes up in an incredibly fertile way backstory for both Catwoman and the Penguin that has nothing to do with anything that ever happened in the comics, but that's because it was written by Daniel Waters, that seriously unsung great screenwriter, who also wrote *Heathers* – and *Demolition Man*, which is why *Demolition Man* is an awful lot better than one thinks it is. Except for little problems like Sylvester Stallone and Wesley Snipes, at least. But it's a great script. Anyway, at the point where I was just finishing the book which unfortunately has the title *From Alien to The Matrix* – which is not my title because although it talks quite a bit about the *Alien* movies it talks hardly at all about *The Matrix*, but there you go – I was talking to Nick Lowe on a train. I always credit this to Nick, because he is probably our best science fiction film critic. We were both going to an academic *Buffy* conference in Milton Keynes, and he came up with a number of brilliant ideas in the way that Nick Lowe always does. I'd been talking about the way fandom teaches you skillsets. There's this thing I call competence cascades, whereby if a fandom encourages skillsets people acquire those skills and then the whole thing escalates – one of the examples is monster makeups. And he said, "of course, one of those skills is the ability to navigate corpses of work." Back in the early eighties I'd invented the concept of the Big Dumb Object, the setting that's also a plot macguffin and also creates the mood of the story, things like Rama or the Ringworld, so on this train journey he said, "oh, you might as well call them Big Dumb Narrative Objects, like the DC and Marvel Universes." And then he said, "of course, I suppose by now the DC and Marvel Universes are the largest narrative constructs of human culture." "By George," I said. "I think you're on to something there. I might write a book about that sometime, unless you regard that idea as totally yours." He said he'd never be interested in doing that, so he was fine. And *Superheroes* is the book. You see, what Sturgeon's Law that 90% of

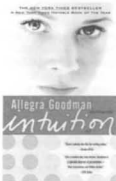
everything is crud fails to pick up on is the fact that the crud, that 90% is what the 10% grows out of, like manure. Good stories are often arguments with bad stories.

GS: One of the things that's striking to me, just thinking about this topic and not having read the final version of *Superheroes* is how much superheroes have leached into the culture at large over the past couple of years – *Kavalier and Clay*, *Fortress of Solitude*, now of course *Heroes*.

RK: It was time. Generally it's part of the increasing geekification of the culture. It's not that there are that many more people who do all this stuff, there are just more people who are out and proud about it. When I started mentioning that I was working on *Buffy*, I was amazed by the number of people who said, "well, of course we watch it, but gosh, I'm a serious scholar of arabic culture..." People used to feel that they had something to lose by acknowledging low tastes and now they don't. This is especially because people are starting to catch on to what I've called the geek aesthetic, which is that passionate love and the pursuit of knowledge that comes from that love about anything is worthwhile, because it is not just the thing you're in love with that matters, it is the amount of energy and serious thinking you put into it.

GS: So when you say the increasing geekification of culture, you don't mean that more people watch these things, it's that more people talk about them.

RK: Exactly. I suspect more people will admit to watching things, but people will talk about them in a much more intelligent way. It's just very noticeable that the one or two bad reviews that *Reading the Vampire Slayer* got were from cultural elitists who really really hated the idea that popular culture might be worth that much of people's time, or that popular culture could address serious topics in a way that the main culture wasn't. Side-issue here but not really: I just read for my publishers a terribly good literary novel called *Intuition* by a woman called Allegra Goodman, a novel of character, contemporary set, but in an Austenian tradition, about people working in a laboratory that's developing treatments for cancer. It's a book about scientific fraud. And one of the things that made it stand out was – how many good literary novels about people doing science are there that are not crossovers with genre fiction, in a way that this one actually isn't? It's the same issues as I was just talking about. There are certain topics that are not "worthy," if you like, and that is less of a problem than it used to be with the "literary novel", but it's certainly an issue. One of the consequences of that is the genre fiction of various kinds has developed a vocabulary for writing



about certain issues that the mainstream has not had the chance to develop. I think it's very interesting that one of the few good and subtle things that's been written about the political world of the war on terror is Marvel's Civil War event last year. Partly because Marvel made the quite interesting decision that they were going to write about the Patriot act and allied things, and in the bullpen at Marvel, the writer's conferences were hopelessly divided on all the issues, with the result that the ensuing event, which took place across almost all their titles, has a lot of different viewpoints. It's not just that it's a study of a moment in politics, it's a polyphonic study of a moment in politics. It would be nice that people found other ways to do it, but it's nonetheless interesting that comics were able to do it in the American mainstream, and climax with the assassination of the beloved Captain America.

GS: So what is next on your list of things to write about?

RK: I and a colleague are editing collections, one about *Nip/Tuck*, which if you don't know it is a melodramatic television show about plastic surgery, and one about *Battlestar Galactica* – the new version. I'm also going to do a second volume of readings in science fiction, a sort of sequel to *From Alien to the Matrix*. That will probably be in the second half of next year, so I probably won't finish it until 2009. And that's going to be called *Hobbits, Androids and Dinosaurs*, and will largely be big essays on Peter Jackson, Terry Gilliam, Guillermo del Toro and why Steven Spielberg should not be let near science fiction. And that's probably where I'll stick it for the moment – I'll write essays hopefully for other people's collections, but I don't plan to do any more critical books for a while, because I want to concentrate on the novel which is 100,000 words and counting. And just endlessly expanding. I'd like to finish that before I die, you know?

GS: I think, if it's ok, I'll throw it open to questions from the floor.

Doug Spencer: Do you find intrinsic merit in stuff that you write for yourself, if it doesn't get published?

RK: "Doesn't get published" is now a bit of a movable feast, isn't it? The point is I write for myself, I write for my friends. I like the gift relationship of periodically sending friends material at least as much as I like the commercial relationship of publishing. Because after all, for large parts of human history the gift relationship, distributing copies to your chums, was what there was and what people did. One of the purest pleasures I've ever had was sitting with a couple of friends, swapping the day's thousand words with a couple of my friends who were writing novels and there's a purity to that which I really rather like. There is a particular pleasure in the text when it's part of a gift relationship. I've been fortunate, in that *Tiny Pieces of Skull*, my unpublished Chicago novel, has actually had its influences because people who've read it have found it useful to them in terms of how to write certain

characters in works considerably more major than anything I've written.

Audience: I think some of the most important things you've written, in the critical analysis of the sf field, are those essays you wrote in *Foundation* on sf of the seventies, the eighties and the nineties. I know you consider those a complete sequence, but nonetheless, if someone was willing to pay you, and you had the time, to revisit the field, what avenues do you think you would now want to explore?

RK: Well, partly the ... not death, but fading of science fiction as opposed to fantasy. It's alive and well but it's not as well as it was. Partly the rise of good material that is much harder to pin down – you used to be able to say, well, that's this writer's sf, that's their fantasy. Now you can say, that's science fiction, that's fantasy, and there's stuff in the middle that's weird shit and good and not in either category but we read it and no-one else does. So the rise of sf and fantasy as a home for weird shit.

Farah Mendlesohn: I've read a fair bit of your work, and one of the things I'm interested in with critics – as a species – is the way a critic can develop an argument about both criticism and the literary world they inhabit over the course of their writing. I wonder if you're able to talk about the way you see the literary world and the way you see your criticism as a body of work. Is there an overarching argument you want to make?

RK: I think I'm not there yet. I'm always quite sceptical about that kind of grand narrative, if there is one in my work I think it's probably liable to fall apart as soon as I think about it. But certain things have always interested me. I'm fascinated by the extent to which all writing, but most especially genre writing, is an intertwining of a polemical discourse, in which people are arguing back and forwards either about ways of doing things or about actual issues, and a purely ludic echoing of other work, where we just echo other people's work because it's fun. The overlapping of those two things is fascinating. I'm also fascinated by process, by the way writers arrive at their mature artistic personalities, by the ways writers influence each other, by the ways that writers in the broader culture intersect. I couldn't really say more than that.

The Destruction of Benton Fraser: Season one of *Due South* by Sarah Monette

When I first heard about *Due South*, back when it was on the air in the mid-nineties, I dismissed it as a sitcom. *A Mountie with a wolf in Chicago*. It sounded like the sort of cheap implausibility that American sitcoms generate by the kilohertz, complete with cardboard cut-out characters and meretriciously happy endings. I was unmoved by the prospect of a sitcom about a Mountie and dismissed it entirely from my world-view.

Fast forward ten years.

I was introduced to Paul Gross via *Slings & Arrows*, which is a marvelous, goofy, surreal dramatic comedy about Shakespeare and theater and ghosts and madness. Gross is utterly mesmerizing, and because I will follow a compelling actor to the ends of the earth, I began to rethink my antipathy to *Due South*. If Gross played the lead character, it couldn't be all bad. And then I discovered that my grasp of the premise was crucially flawed. It's not a *Mountie with a wolf in Chicago*. It's a *Mountie, who is haunted by his father's ghost, with a deaf half-wolf in Chicago*. I sought out the DVDs post-haste.

Due South aired, despite what seem to have been near-constant threats of cancellation, for four seasons, not quite consecutively. The run of the show is held together by Paul Gross, who as Constable Benton Fraser, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, stands quite literally at its heart; in the first two seasons, his sidekick, foil, and best friend is Detective Ray Vecchio, played by David Marciano. Other important characters in Season One include Diefenbaker, Fraser's deaf half-wolf companion; the ghost of Fraser's father, Robert Fraser (played by Gordon Pinsent), whose murder is the starting point for the entire series; the long-suffering Lieutenant Harding Welsh (Beau Starr); Ray's sister Francesca (Ramona Milano) with her unrequited crush on Fraser; and, of course, Fraser's nemesis, Victoria Metcalf (Melina Kanakaredes), whom we meet only at the end of the season.

But, as I said, the heart of the show is Fraser; he's our focus, both in the sense that we love him and root for him week after week, and also in the equally important sense that the show's thematic underpinnings are largely concerned with the workings of Fraser's psyche. The first season, in particular, might as well be subtitled *The Destruction of Benton Fraser*, and that's the arc I want to discuss.

In talking about Fraser's psyche, I'm going to use a very loose and simplified adaptation of Freud, dividing the self into three parts: Ego, Super-Ego, and Id. The Ego is the core of the self, the conscious identity

that thinks about itself as "I." The Super-Ego is the conscience, the knowledge of right and wrong, the part capable of devotion to abstract concepts like "duty" and "justice." The Id is the animal-self, the child-self; the Id wants. It is selfish and greedy and completely amoral.

Now, one might think that Diefenbaker would represent Fraser's Id, but Dief is the guardian and sometimes external representation of Fraser's Ego. The Fraser we meet in the pilot for *Due South* is in fact radically separated from his Id; he needs Dief because otherwise he wouldn't be able to catch sight of his Ego at all most days. As we see in "Diefenbaker's Day Off" (*Due South* 1.2), "Chinatown" (1.6), and "Chicago Holiday" (1.7) – to name just three episodes – Fraser lets go of his perfect facade when he's alone with Dief, and the opinions that Fraser ascribes to Dief (trying to decide if Dief actually talks to Fraser is like trying to decide if Hobbes of *Calvin and Hobbes* is "real" – or how many angels can stand on the head of a pin) are the realistic, down-to-earth, slightly cynical opinions of the person Fraser might be if he didn't have to be the Mountie all the time.

But he does. Because Fraser is ruled, and bases his self-performances almost entirely upon, his Super-Ego. In "Diefenbaker's Day Off" (1.2), the journalist Mackenzie King calls Fraser's self-performance into question:

MACKENZIE KING: You're just this straight-arrow do-gooding Mountie out to help the little guy? Tell me why I find that hard to believe.

FRASER: Well, I understand your skepticism. Appearances can be deceiving.

Fraser goes on to explode King's own imposture as a nurse, ending pointedly, "A less trusting person might assume you work, say, for a newspaper," which is, of course, the truth. Fraser is simultaneously proving that he is, and isn't, exactly what he appears to be. His Mountie-self is both who he really is and a deceit he practices, and this is, in fact, the heart of Fraser's problem. If the Mountie is a role, it is also a role Fraser believes in whole-heartedly, and the only image of himself he seems to be comfortable with.

But that image isn't complete. For if Fraser himself is performing his Super-Ego, and Diefenbaker both guards and represents his Ego, then Victoria Metcalf, whom Fraser describes as the only woman he's ever loved, is his Id. The bank robber with whom Fraser survived

a blizzard in Fortitude Pass and then sent to prison, Victoria is carefully set up as Fraser's opposite. She is fire; Fraser is snow. Fraser, we might even say, is frozen (frozen in the Mountie form of his own Super-Ego). Victoria is passion and anger and ravening hunger:

FRASER: Can I see you again?

VICTORIA: When?

FRASER: Now.

VICTORIA: You hungry?

FRASER: Starving.

("Victoria's Secret Part I," 1.20)

Like a fire, Victoria is consuming. Food, sex ... money. Victoria wants. And like the Id, she sees no reason why she cannot have. On this level, it is intensely important that Fraser put her in prison; it explains everything about Benton Fraser as we see him in Season One. His Id is frozen and chained and shut away in the dark. And Victoria's fury at him – and the way that fury turns to passion – makes sense if you understand her as his Id. Of course she hates him. Benton Fraser's Id has every right and reason to hate his Super-Ego. But of course she loves him, too. Because he's her, just as much as she's him. (One way to read her elaborate scheme is as an attempt to rid herself of Benton Fraser once and for all. And even Victoria can't quite go through with it.)

Fraser's psyche is a very complicated place, but it's important to emphasize that the psychomachia of Fraser and Victoria (and Diefenbaker) isn't all that's going on in *Due South*, or even most of it. The thing that hooked me immediately when I started watching was the way in which the pilot sets up Benton Fraser, not merely as a character, but as a narrative device. We're introduced to Fraser through the opinions of his fellow Mounties, and they think he's certifiable. They also think that what he's doing is impossible, and this is only the first of countless times that Fraser will do the impossible and make it look easy. We discover over the course of the first season that Fraser has an inhumanly good sense of smell (he tracks Diefenbaker by scent in "Pizza and Promises," 1.5) and hearing ("Chinatown," 1.6), and he has perfectly unnatural – and narratively convenient – control over his autonomic functions:

RAY: How long has that been in there?

FRASER: Two and a half hours.

RAY: Don't those things dissolve?

FRASER: The key is to control your saliva ducts.

("A Hawk and a Handsaw," 1.12)

This is the way the show operates; it takes the sitcom-Mountie traits and makes them real, both by exaggerating them even further and by treating them as utterly prosaic, subject to fallibility and real-world problems and Ray's incredulity.

Fraser is intensely aware of his own performance as a superhero, complete with slightly thick-headed naiveté, and he uses it shamelessly, playing to the

preconceptions of everyone he comes in contact with. But it is also the role on which his sense of self is based, and that is precisely why the show won't let him keep it.

From the beginning, *Due South* is working to take its superhero apart. Partly this destruction is a matter of urban America vs. Canadian wilderness culture clash, but it's also a matter of taking a heroic figure and inflicting reality on him. And the first blow has nothing to do with America at all, except for the hired killer. It's a Canadian crime committed on and against Canadian soil, and the criminal isn't merely a Canadian, he's a Mountie. One of Robert Fraser's friends.

The first two seasons of the show are powered by the tension between Fraser's Capra-esque world view and Ray's cynicism. And for all that Fraser spreads sweetness and light, "romping through the streets of Chicago, rescuing widows and orphans where you may," as Ray says in "Free Willie" (1.1), the show doesn't wear rose-colored glasses. "You are innocent," Fraser tells Willie the street thief. "The police have no reason to incarcerate you." And the public defender (a black woman defending a black kid from a bad neighborhood) says tiredly, "Not from around here, are you?" The show is a fairytale – "an urban fable," Paul Gross calls it in interviews – and thus Fraser triumphs, but it's a fairytale with its feet on the ground, a fairytale that constantly challenges and undercuts its own fairytale nature.

The relentless grind of Chicago reality does wear Fraser down. "The Gift of the Wheelman" (1.10)



emphasizes just how isolated Fraser is: the price he pays for being a superhero. "This is the first real Christmas dinner we've had together in twenty years," the ghost of Robert Fraser says, "and I'm not even really here." More than that, Fraser is eating Christmas dinner alone. In a diner. The proprietor of which is only waiting for him to hurry up and leave already so he can close. Moreover, Robert Fraser's ghost destroys the illusion of Fraser's perfect control; he's bitchy and sarcastic and angry with his father in a way that he never is with anyone else but Diefenbaker, and the pressure of his father's beloved but deeply exasperating presence causes him to let that side of himself show in front of Ray. The facade of the Mountie is starting to crack.

An important station along the way to Fraser's destruction is "The Wild Bunch" (1.15). This is a deeply flawed episode, both logically inconsistent and shamelessly manipulative, but its heart, the scene in which Fraser is trying to steel himself to shoot Dief (wrongfully accused of being a dangerous animal) is painful regardless, and painful because the truth in Fraser is perfectly there. His heart and his duty are at odds; unlike Ray and Willie, he is determined to follow duty, even though we can see it killing him. And compare that scene – Fraser aiming for Dief, who's running for freedom and turns back for Maggie – with the end of "Victoria's Secret" – Ray aiming for Victoria, who's running for freedom and has turned back for Fraser. Only Victoria really is a dangerous wild animal, and instead of shooting his best friend, Fraser is shot ... by his best friend.

Due South is deeply concerned with the idea of friendship and how it differs from romantic love. In "The Man Who Knew Too Little" (1.14), Ray's friendship for Fraser is symbolized by his sacrifice of his beloved Buick Riviera. "The Blue Line" (1.16) is explicitly and specifically about what being a friend means; Mark Smithbauer, Fraser's "best friend" from childhood, is contrasted with Ray and Ray's loyalty:

RAY: Nothing like old friends, huh, Fraser?
It's good to know, no matter how many years apart, you can still get an 8 by 10 glossy out of 'em.

FRASER: It's been a long time, Ray. There's no reason to assume he'd remember me.

RAY: Eh. More excuses.

FRASER: He was my friend, Ray.

Fraser's adherence to his friendship with Mark is a little inhuman. In this, as in so many other things, Fraser seems to have been equipped with a toggle switch where most people have a dimmer. Once he's given his loyalty, it is apparently literally impossible to make him take it back. Because if it were possible, Mark Smithbauer would have done it. Mark no longer believes in friendship, a symptom of the cynical malaise that is destroying him. But Ray's friendship for Fraser, complete with teasing and bitching and arguments, is the real deal.

And throughout the series, Robert Fraser's relationship with Buck Frobisher is offered up as a model: this is what friendship – what love – looks like.

"There's a very easy way to define friendship," Fraser reads in his father's journal in "Manhunt" (1.3). "A friend is someone who won't stop until he finds you – and brings you home." In other words, a friend is someone who loves you, and this definition of love – even if the word is never used – is contrasted with the more traditional definition: "romance."

The romance of Ray and Suzanne Chapin in "You Must Remember This" (1.11) is clearly foreshadowing the return of Victoria Metcalf into Fraser's life, not only because this is the episode where Fraser starts to talk about her. Ray is put in the same situation with regard to Suzanne that Fraser was put in with regard to Victoria:

RAY: I find her, I gotta arrest her, too. End of story.

FRASER: Well, yes.

But that's not the end of the story. Not for either of them. Ray Vecchio is a foil for Fraser, and this episode is the moment at which this aspect of his character can be seen most clearly. When faced with the same decision, Ray makes the opposite choice; he chooses to let Suzanne go. And, significantly, that choice does *not* rewrite the story of Fraser and Victoria into a happy ending. Suzanne is an undercover federal agent, and Ray's romantic gesture is as incomprehensible to her as Fraser's devotion to duty is to Victoria.

This episode also starts asking questions that the series is going to continue to circle and sniff and gnaw on – much like Diefenbaker with a packet of chips – about love. What is it, how do you recognize it, what do you do with it? Romance is a constant problem for Fraser. He is certainly attracted to women (Victoria, QED – and the lovely moment in "The Deal" (1.17) when both Fraser and Ray are so distracted by the lingerie shop owner's leather bustier that they get several feet down the sidewalk in the wrong direction), but all his physical encounters are notable for the fact that the woman is the aggressor. Every single time, it's the woman who takes the first step, the woman who grabs him, the woman who initiates the kiss. The woman who reaches out to take what she wants.

And Fraser can't say no. He's consistently baffled and defeated by people like Katherine Burns in "An Invitation to Romance" (1.18) – and like Ray's sister Frannie – who act on their desires. And the question of Fraser's own desires ...

Well, oddly enough, "An Invitation to Romance" has rather a lot to say about that, in an oblique and Fraserish fashion. Fraser tells Katherine a story about love:

FRASER: I thought I was in love once, and then later I thought maybe it was just an inner ear imbalance. We spent an evening snowed in on the side of a mountain watching the Northern Lights. It was probably the most romantic moment of my life. But in the end I realized I'd learned two things. The first is that it's easier to think you're in love than it is to accept that you're alone, and the second is that it's very easy

to confuse love with subatomic particles bursting in the air. Well, I also learned I should have my ears checked more regularly.

For a show that is generally as funny and clear (i.e., the opposite of *noir*) as *Due South*, its underpinnings are bleak. It's easier to think you're in love than it is to accept that you're alone. Not one romantic relationship in the entire series is successful. Katherine Burns wants to believe in romance, and Fraser and the episode humors her. But we know all along it isn't true, just as we know from the very beginning, from the pilot, that Frannie's pursuit of Fraser is doomed. Ray's summation is on the nose: "Guys like him don't marry girls like you. That's fairytale. And girls like you get hurt and guys like him don't even know it. And that's life" ("Heaven and Earth," 1.19). What makes it worse is that Fraser *does* know. He's witnessing this conversation. He knows, but he doesn't have the first idea what to do about it. He doesn't know how to deal with Frannie, and he tells Ray about her seduction attempt quite deliberately, knowing Ray will hit the roof and knowing that this will block Frannie from ever trying anything of the sort again. He uses the code of chivalry as (to use an ironically appropriate metaphor) a shield, as a protection.

"Victoria's Secret" (1.20-21) is the episode in which Victoria returns, to seduce Fraser and then frame him for murder; love and revenge, in Victoria's world, are indistinguishable. This episode shows us what it is that Fraser has to protect and why. It's true that Fraser does not know how to deal with women, or with passion. It is not true that his inability stems from the sweetly helpless naivete he presents in "Heaven and Earth." And while Fraser wants to extricate himself from the situation with Frannie (which he pulls off very adroitly), it's at least as important to him to keep anyone from knowing that the real problem isn't that he doesn't know what to do with a woman. It's that he knows all too well.

None of the maladroitness or ignorance he manifests when confronted with Frannie or Katherine Burns or any of his other female admirers is in evidence in Fraser's interactions with Victoria, and in Part One of "Victoria's Secret" (1.20), Fraser and Victoria enact a conventional romance, complete with banter and frenzied passion and promises, establishing the conventions of romance so that Part Two can tear them apart. And grounds of the deconstruction are love and knowledge and need and how they don't match. It starts back in Part One, with Jolly telling Fraser, "You think you know her? You don't." But the meat of it is in a conversation between Fraser and his dead father:

ROBERT FRASER: She's not coming back.
BENTON FRASER: You don't know her.
R. FRASER: Neither do you.
B. FRASER: I'm in love with her.
R. FRASER: Doesn't mean you know her.
B. FRASER: Did you know Mom? I mean, did you know who she really was, or did you know what you wanted her to be?
R. FRASER: I knew who she was in her

soul. That's what I loved.

B. FRASER: Come on, Dad. You weren't around long enough to call her by name.

Fraser is projecting his father's mistake onto his own situation, not merely conflating love with knowledge, but conflating both of them with loyalty. (Which tells us also that Fraser as a child saw his father's absence as a betrayal.) Fraser is very invested in not making his father's mistake, just as he's invested in not repeating his own mistake. So invested, in fact, that he can't see Victoria at all, just as he accuses his father of not being able to see his mother.

There are a lot of things wrong with Fraser and Victoria's relationship. One of them is that Fraser is trying to force Victoria to be trustworthy by trusting her. All this gets him is betrayal. But more than that, what this episode proves, painfully and inarguably, is that Fraser does not know Victoria. No matter how hard Fraser tries to make Victoria be who he wants her to be, he doesn't know her. What's worse is that Victoria makes him not know himself. The most telling moment, I think, isn't the moment on the platform; it's the moment when the mugging victim accosts him:

MUGGING VICTIM: A man just stole my purse. Can you help me, please?

FRASER: No, ma'am, I'm afraid I can't.

This is the moment that hammers home just how much of Fraser, as we have come to know him, is a deliberate, conscious choice. He can turn the Mountie on and off like a tap. And therefore he chooses every day to get up and turn the Mountie on; the important thing, the true thing, about Fraser isn't the Mountie. It's the choice to be the Mountie. Because when he doesn't make that choice, he's somebody else.

This is what romantic love does, the show says. It is a destructive force. It tears your life apart – worse than that, it makes you tear your own life apart, as Fraser tears apart the Vecchio house looking for the locker key. Romantic love is a destroyer. The show puts this in opposition to love based on partnership, which Robert Fraser will tell Fraser is like a marriage – and in fact I think the thing I like best about the glimpses we get of Fraser's parents' marriage is that sense of partnership, that they were partners as Fraser is partners with Ray. But Victoria is not Fraser's partner.

Victoria has to be read on two levels. She is the embodiment of the destructive force of romantic love, but she is also the dark side of Fraser's soul. "Victoria's Secret" is very explicit about structuring Fraser and Victoria as yin and yang. He is snow, and she is fire. They are opposed to each other, and also connected. She is his double in the same way that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that Bertha Rochester is Jane Eyre's double: the dark double who can act out desires Jane can't even admit to, desires that are violent, destructive, that don't belong to the rational adult Jane, but to her wretched inner two-year-old self, neglected, unloved, and powerless. And thus Victoria expresses the primal, selfish desires that Fraser denies he has with every waking breath. I mentioned

the ravenous consumption of food earlier; Fraser goes from letting his dead father steal his french fries to sharing two enormous meals in a row with Victoria. Then, of course, there's sex, which the episode tactfully suggests Fraser and Victoria are having a great deal of. And for the first time in recorded history, Fraser skips work – and is completely comfortable and unapologetic about playing hookey. The overflowing abundance of flowers and balloons and get well wishes cramming his office in the next scene is also testimony to how aberrant this is. Fraser never skips work.



But maybe Benton Fraser wanted to. Just as maybe Benton Fraser wasn't looking forward to Ray's pool night, but would never have skipped it. That's the Id. Self-centered, self-focused, self-indulgent. And when Ray comes to tell Fraser off, he finds Dief exiled to the hall. Fraser is surrendering to Victoria, and he's doing it on purpose. "I made a mistake once," he tells Ray, "and I can't make it again." He followed the Super-Ego and ended up frozen; the Id promises to keep him warm.

But there's a problem with fire, and it shows up almost immediately on Fraser's words. Victoria shoots Diefenbaker. And, if we read Dief as the guardian of Fraser's soul, of the shy and fragile Ego whom we almost never see, it only makes sense that things get worse and worse in Part Two. Victoria abandons Fraser, and for the first time, with the candles that are emblematic of her burning all around his apartment, Fraser actually expresses the loneliness and need that the show has hinted at since the pilot:

R. FRASER: She's not coming back to you. And why in God's name would you want her to?

B. FRASER: Because ... Because I ... Because I need – oh god ...

R. FRASER: You're not going to get it. Sometimes in life all you need is that second chance. It's the one thing you're not going to have.

Robert Fraser's completion of the sentence Fraser can't get out may or may not be correct, but he's right about one thing. Whatever it is Fraser needs, he's not going to get it from Victoria.

She forces him to meet her in a strip joint, and it's because of her that he trashes Ray's house; she coerces him into being her accomplice in an exchange that isn't only illegal in and of itself but is also dishonest even on that basis; and finally she persuades him to run away with her, which would leave Ray holding the bag on a plethora of ghastly problems, starting with the mortgage on his house and working its way up from there.

This is the unchecked Id at work, and it demonstrates a lot of hostility, particularly towards Ray and towards the house that is the symbol of everything Ray has and Fraser doesn't. It isn't that Fraser wants to betray Ray, but the dark foundations of the psyche, represented here by Victoria, has its own emotional calculus. It wants to destroy what it can't have. "You never should have introduced me to your friends," Victoria says to Fraser. She is trying to destroy Fraser's life both because she hates him and wants him to suffer and because she loves him and wants to own him, because her love can only be selfish. The Id doesn't have any other way to love.

But even if it's selfish, even if it's self-serving, her love is real. She can't shoot Fraser any more than Fraser can shoot her; their relationship culminates in a stalemate, only broken when Ray shoots Fraser as Fraser is running to join her. Victoria escapes. And while it is wrong that Victoria escapes, at the same time, it's the only possible resolution. For Fraser to bring her to justice a second time would be to sacrifice his entire self to his Mountie Super-Ego. She has to escape. She has to carry Benton Fraser's freedom.

This is the nadir of the destruction of Benton Fraser, the larger-than-life Fraser we met in the pilot. He's gone toe to toe with reality, and reality has kicked his ass. He's been betrayed by the only woman he's ever loved and the only thing we've ever heard him admit to needing, and that betrayal has caused him to betray himself, to destroy himself; he's been shot in the back by his best friend.

The last episode of Season One, "Letting Go," is about the aftermath of catastrophe. The episode is about Fraser's recovery in hospital from being shot in the back, with an homage to *Rear Window* thrown in to provide the plot. The "Letting Go" of the title is about Fraser letting go of Victoria, but also of his letting go of his own hurt, his own sense of devastation. After your world ends, what do you do? And what Fraser comes to realize is that you have to pick yourself up and go on, that this stasis of suffering is, as his father's ghost says, worse than death. "Letting Go" is about what happens after the story is over, about what happens after you survive your own tragic ending.

And thus it is about Fraser making the choice to be the Mountie. And although I don't think the outcome of that choice is ever seriously in doubt, no matter what Fraser says, I think it's also important that the episode shows it as a choice, that it separates out the qualities that make Fraser a natural and inveterate puzzle-solver from the devotion to duty and justice that characterizes him throughout the series. And that it lets us see the tired, bitter man whom Fraser normally keep

carefully hidden. As I noted earlier, the underpinnings of *Due South* are bleak, and this episode shows us the effort it takes Fraser to rise above that, like a ballerina pirouetting on bleeding feet.

That's the ultimate purpose of the story of Dr. Carter and the lover who betrays her: to parallel Fraser's story and in so doing to make him face it:

INTERN: She's trying to kill me.

FRASER: Yeah, I can see that. You hurt her. I understand that.

CARTER: You don't understand anything.

FRASER: Oh, I understand that sometimes you can love someone so much you're willing to do almost anything for them.

The power of that kind of love can be very frightening.

CARTER: I don't care.

FRASER: Oh, I think you do care. I think you care so much that when he betrayed you, you tried to do the only thing that made sense. You tried to destroy yourself. Don't let him do this to you.

He's talking to her, but of course he's also talking to himself, and this is the raw bleeding root of Fraser's actions on the train platform. Victoria betrayed him; the only thing that made sense was to destroy himself, and the best way to do that, and the way most immediately to hand, was to go with her. It's a romance cliché, and it is the opposite of love. This is why it's important – and emphasized both in "Victoria's Secret: Part Two" and in the fragmented flashbacks at the start of "Letting Go" – that Fraser is aware of Ray and the other cops as he starts his run. He knows there are witnesses, and this will make his self-destruction, the immolation of Constable Benton Fraser, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, complete.

He just doesn't count on Ray and Ray's loyalty, which is dogged to the point of being blind, and blind to the point of literally mis-seeing, of seeing a gun in Victoria's hand when there wasn't one. And Ray's loyalty continues to refuse to allow Fraser to destroy himself, even in the bitter, ashy aftermath. Ray persists, in the face of Fraser's sarcasm and his apathy. Ray clowns, he makes elaborate plans, he forces Fraser to humor him, he says in every way he can think of that he's not giving up. Ultimately, Ray's loyalty leads to him throwing himself between Fraser and a bullet (just as Fraser's devotion to abstract justice is leading him to put himself between the faithless intern and the bullet), and whether it's that that act of self-sacrifice is sufficient for Fraser to forgive Ray or whether it's that that act of self-sacrifice is sufficient for Fraser to believe Ray forgives Fraser, it is definitely the case that it is only in the aftermath, the last scene of the episode, that the Mountie actually comes back, and Ray and Fraser's friendship can be reinscribed on their relationship:

FRASER: Thanks.

RAY: For what? Getting shot?

FRASER: Yeah.

RAY: Yeah, I figured you'd like that.

FRASER: Well, I'm not proud about that, but I'll admit I did get a certain perverse pleasure out of it.

RAY: Aha! Y'see, you were mad at me.

FRASER: Well, you shot me in the back.

RAY: Well, that was an accident!

FRASER: Well, I know. So was yours. I mean, it was an accident, wasn't it?

RAY: Yeah, of course it was.

FRASER: Well, there you go. Enough said. Even steven.

RAY: *Even steven?* ... Just give me those binoculars, will you? 'Even steven.' Nobody says 'even steven' anymore.

FRASER: Really?

RAY: Yes.

FRASER: Why?

RAY: It's juvenile.

FRASER: Oh dear.

The Mountie is Fraser's Super-Ego, but it's more than that; it's the only way Fraser seems to have to reach out to other people. And it's not until he gives that again that we realize what it is that Ray has been working so hard for all episode and just how much of Fraser has been missing.

It's good to have the Mountie back.

Sarah Monette is currently applying her Ph.D. in English Literature to the study of the adventures of a Mountie, a Chicago cop, and a deaf half-wolf, and enjoying every minute of it. She is a novelist and short story writer; her most recent book is a short story collection, The Bone Key. Visit her online at www.sarahmonette.com.

First Impressions

edited by Kari Sperring

Joe Abercrombie – *Last Argument of Kings: The First Law Book Three*

Gollancz, London, 2008,
536pp, t/p, £6.99, ISBN
978-057077904

Reviewed by Lalith Vipulanathan

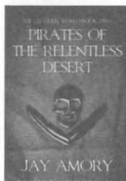
Returning to Adua after their failed quest in the Old Empire, Bayaz and company promptly go their separate ways. Logen heads back to the North to settle his score with Bethod, Jezal receives rather more glory than expected, Ferro rages against the lack of dead Gurmish and Bayaz's machinations continue unabated. Meanwhile, the Dogman and Colonel West are laying siege to Bethod's forces in Angland and come up with a cunning plan to lure him out of hiding that will probably get them all killed. Back in Adua, Superior Glokta is busy cajoling, blackmailing and physically threatening members of the Open Council in order to secure votes for the election of the Union's new King, but juggling the demands of his two masters is proving more difficult than he imagined. And if that wasn't enough, the Gurmish and Khalul's Eaters are outside the gates of Adua, seeking their own vengeance against Bayaz for his thousand-year-old crime. If the Union manages to survive all of that, there may not be much left for the new King to rule.

After the glacial pacing of the preceding books, *Last Argument Of Kings* could have ended with everyone shaking hands and agreeing to live in harmony and that would have been more plot than that of the first two books combined. A few reviews have made an entreaty to consider the trilogy as a whole before passing judgement, and whilst it's true that by re-reading *The Blade Itself* and *Before They Are Hanged* one can better appreciate the instances of foreshadowing, it also drives home the fact *The First Law* suffers from the Exponential Plot Accelerator typically deployed in the last third of an Alastair Reynolds novel. POV characters start switching mid-chapter as the narrative's pace goes into overdrive, flying back and forth between Adua and the North, from the political battles of the Closed Council to ultraviolent skirmishes rendered in wide-screen Gore-O-Vision. This high-speed rush of characters and events is almost too much to absorb and plot density implosion is only just avoided. During the course of the two sieges, a duel to the death, an apocalyptic breaking of the First Law and a whole slew of revelations, Abercrombie manages to maintain the distinctive voices of his POV characters as they go through the proverbial wringer.



Glokta, Logen and Jezal continue to dominate, but the supporting cast get a chance to develop as well. Well, most of them. Ardee's return from second instalment obscurity is constrained to that of love interest/damsel-in-distress, the intriguing Practical Vitari is relegated to a bit part at the end of the book, the hollow shell that is Ferro remains just that... stop me if you're seeing a trend here. In Ferro's case, Abercrombie may have been making a point about the self-destructive nature of vengeance but he shoots himself in the foot by introducing another revenge-driven female and dumping her all too quickly, missing an opportunity to redress the gender imbalance.

All in all, *Last Argument Of Kings* is strangely unsatisfactory. It's a fitting end to the trilogy and better than other recent fantasy sequels (*Red Seas Under Red Skies*, I'm looking at you), but doesn't reach the high standard set by *The Blade Itself*. Having said that, I'll still be looking forward to Abercrombie's next Union novel, *Best Served Cold*, and you should too, but in the meantime I'll carry on waiting for a fantasy trilogy where the middle volume is less, well, middling.



Jay Amory – *Pirates of the Relentless Desert: The Clouded World, Book Two*

Gollancz, London, 2007,
396pp, h/b £12.99, ISBN
978-0575080324

Reviewed by Penny Hill

This second volume feels very different in tone than the first. It is more violent,

with actions having more explicit consequences and there are more on-page deaths. Overall it is closer in tone and content to the works of Philip Reeve.

Jay Amory uses a sophisticated multi-threaded thread plot, moving between four principal groups of characters – Az on the airship, the miners struggling to survive in the desert, Den Grubbdollar looking for a chance to make his son's death meaningful and Cassie and her siblings trying to find Den.

The main theme of the novel is an exploration of the after-effects of slavery & emancipation. This world is in the process of becoming post-imperial. The existing rules have gone and new rules are required. One side has resentment at years of exploitation whereas the other side resents the loss of their former privilege and seeks a return to "how things should be". This exploration is pretty sophisticated for a Young Adult work. Overall in tone and confidence this is close to the adult end of the YA market.

While the class politics are handled well, I'm not sure Jay Amory knows quite what to do with his female characters. He presents an elderly matriarch Lady Aanfielsdaughter suffering from a crisis of confidence, Cassie a working-class girl who sulks at her "aristocratic" boyfriend, a female pirate who is straight out of "villains'R'Us" and Aurora, a competent feminist who is swiftly put back into a traditional role by becoming pregnant on her honeymoon. I did feel that Aurora's pregnancy was clumsily handled and inserted as a way of motivating Michael her husband. The world-building suggests to me that this is not a world where pre-marital sex is acceptable but the timing is wrong otherwise. Morning sickness doesn't usually start quite that early - it has become a fiction cliché for throwing-up to equal pregnancy. That being the case, the reader usually decodes this signifier very quickly - I'm sure most other readers will also be 100 pages ahead of the narrative reveal.

In terms of the perspective on the awkwardness of human relationships, I did like the two different retrospective accounts of Az and Cassie's last meeting. What Az sees as an insignificant sunbow, distracting Cassie from him, she registers as a symbol of the difference between their worlds that Az isn't even acknowledging.

I was uncomfortable with the use of disability as characterisation. Whilst it is good to depict a world where people's bodies are important and not everyone can take fitness for granted, I felt it was very poor characterisation to define one of the main villains by his disability. It feels insulting to have Wallimson using his disability (stunted wing) as justification for his underachievement and being unable to accept Az achieving more with an even greater "disability" (i.e. no wings at all). It is defining who someone is and restricting them by their disability, giving Wallimson only a one-dimensional basic motivation for what he does.

Some of the other characters are also a little one-dimensional. Mr Mordadson is purely an embodiment of the principle that "the ends justify the means" and while the mummersetshire burr of the Grubdollars was quite characterful, it was generic enough to be verging on patronising. I found the enigmatic Deacon a bit of a straw man, set up to show us again the untrustworthiness of organised religion. I have come to expect more depth than this in a book at this level. His almost superhuman abilities tipped the genre closer to horror.

Az, whose struggle to accept his lack of wings was such a key part of the first volume, is here almost sidelined in his own narration a lot of the time. His actions on the airship Cerulean do not really form part of the final climax. Personally I felt a little impatient with his immaturity in succumbing to Wallimson's challenge of "chicken" thus damaging the airship while mooring. This felt like a "Back to the Future" reference. Why don't adolescent boys just walk away from these challenges? Is this emotional drive to prove themselves true or merely another literary cliché?

I felt that the nihilism of the pirates was partly a heavy-handed moral lesson to the readers. Implicitly the hedonism of Redspire is seen as wrong and that out of

the epicurean lifestyle comes existential angst. Naoutha Nisrocsdaughter the chief pirate is the embodiment of this principle and the inevitable revealing of her ravaged face is designed to ram this lesson home (and reinforce the importance of good looks for women).

It was great that Jay Amory used this sequel to explore directly the impact of the climax of the first novel. I wanted to see this happen and was glad that he didn't shy away from the implications or invoke any kind of easy solution. The threatened escalating spiral of violence felt very real and only just averted by the destruction of the pirates.

Overall this was a satisfying read with a pacey plot. Even its flaws could provoke interesting discussions on the ways we view and judge others.



Kelley Armstrong – *Personal Demon*

Orbit, London, 2008, 384 pages, h/b, £12.99, ISBN 978-1841496955

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Personal Demon is the 8th book in Kelley Armstrong's continually expanding "Women of the Otherworld" series of Fantastical Ferocious Faux-Feminist Female Fighting Fictions. The first book, *Bitten*,

concerned the exploits of a female werewolf coming to terms with her identity but Armstrong soon broadened the remit to include other supernatural creatures, creating a parallel world of the fantastical who walk among the ordinary. You don't have to have read all of the previous books, but it probably helps to have encountered some, as recurring characters do tend to pop up at some point in the narrative. This allows familiarity for the regular reader, but the standalone nature of proceedings makes it fine for the casual "dipper in". In Armstrong's world the supernaturals generally stick together and try not to let humans know anything about their existence. There are werewolves, who live in packs, witches who lead a supernatural council and sorcerer cabals which are run like corporations, except most corporations don't kill their employees for minor misdemeanours. Allegedly.

Our first protagonist is Hope Adams, an Expisico half-demon, which basically means she thrives on the chaotic thoughts of others. Our second protagonist, Lucas Cortez, is the lawyer son of cabal leader Benicio Cortez but, wouldn't you know it, he's a nice lawyer and doesn't like cabals at all. Ironical then, that his father has named Lucas as his heir - he'll inherit the whole caboodle when Benicio shuffles off his mortal coil. Now, Hope owes Benicio a favour and this involves partying with a bunch of young supernaturals who rob rich non-supernaturals of some of their wealth. The gang are just having kicks and are signposted to become prime corporate material when they eventually grow up and Benicio wants Hope to keep tabs on them. When some of these kids get kidnapped Hope suspects cabal foul

play, but when a serious attack is launched on Benicio and two of his sons, the lines of loyalty become very blurred indeed.

Armstrong's formula has been clearly established in the way that she sets up both character and situation, leaving plenty of room for flirtation and foreshadowing of her readers' expectations. This time the story is necessarily told from both Hope's and Lucas's perspectives and always first person, allowing the tale to ping-pong between the pair. Armstrong is content to get on with the adventure at hand, removing the unnecessary detail to fashion that instantly dates many examples of this increasingly popular sub-sub-genre. There are, naturally, a number of sex scenes that range from the teasing to the ridiculous – as in the flashback where she and a lover have sex as she cooks a morning fry-up!

Personal Demon is pretty much what you'd expect it to be – an adventure mystery which ain't great literature, but is an undemanding and entertaining read.



Jonathan Barnes – *The Domino Men*

Gollancz, London, 2008,
281pp, t/p, £10.99, ISBN
978-0575082304

Reviewed by Penny Hill

After reading this novel, I had the horrid feeling it may have been supposed to be funny, in the same way as a couple of the later Tim Powers novels are supposed

to be. Unfortunately, it ended up being about as funny as cold porridge and much less appetising.

The main structure of the novel is a badly executed dual narrative. The first section is too long for second section to contradict effectively. Given the impact of each narrative, it would have worked better had the streams been inverted. As it is, the subversion of the normal world really doesn't work. Quite frankly, the "big bad" feels like a City of Heroes giant monster.

Although the plot finally managed a certain amount of interest, the characters remained at a most basic level. Our main narrator, Henry Lamb does not have much character. Apart from his lust for his landlady he doesn't appear to have any inner life, there's not even any real evidence to support the secondary narrative's subversive view of him as a pathetic liar.

Abbey the landlady is a construct not a character. We are told how lovely she is, but she functions merely as a cardboard cut-out lust object. She's only seen from the outside, we get no sense of warmth from her or anything other than the physical effect she has on Henry. Her only activity seems to be spending all her spare time watching mindless telly. It's been a long time since I've read a female character as badly drawn as this one.

The villains were equally drab. While they were repulsive and horrific, we were given no real sense of what they were or what drove their behaviour, not even a sociopathic "because it's fun".

There was persistent narrative coyness, with

reported dialogue rather than speech and an awful lot of "I can't describe how awful it was" used in place of description. This gets extremely irritating, especially in tandem with the excessive foreshadowing. It jars when an "I" narrator tells you he is witnessing events and then he refuses to describe them.

When the violence finally does occur, it has an unrealistic comic book feeling – people's noses explode as does the occasional whole person. This is not in itself funny, but it does provide a certain cathartic relief after all the foreshadowing.

One element that had me failing to suspend my disbelief was the depiction of a British royal family with the same characters and relationships as the real life versions but with different names. I found myself wondering whether the point was to avoid being sued. Had the characters been meant to have any depth, it would have been more effective to have created an entirely new family. As it is, we are therefore clearly in a slightly alternate England but for no very clear purpose.

The main narrative drive, with Henry's dull life and boring job transforming into something fantastical, felt like a cheap imitation of some of Tom Holt's weaker works. I'm sorry but nothing can make filing seem interesting.

This was one of those dull, irritating books where you just can't quite see the point. I had a persistent feeling that somewhere around the corner there was a much better version of this book. One which succeeded in being funny or scary or exciting or interesting or maybe even all four.

Overall, this was a deeply frustrating and ultimately disappointing book.

David Bilsborough – *A Fire in the North*

Tor, 2008, 601pp, h/b, £16.99,
ISBN 978-0230014510

Reviewed by Lynne Bispam

A Fire in the North, the second volume in the Annals of Lindorne, continues the story begun in *The Wanderer's Tale*. The first volume told how a band of adventurers set out on a Quest to the far north to destroy the evil rawg-lord Drauglir, who has arisen from the dead, having been killed centuries earlier by the noble Peladane knights. At the start of this second volume, various members of the party have become separated from one another. The main group, including the enigmatic Bollidhe, apparently the key to the success of the Quest, and the Paladane knight Nibulus, having escaped from enchanted Eotunlandt, continue northwards towards the Vaagenfjord Maw, the lair of Drauglir. Meanwhile, Gapp the squire, the only sympathetic character in the novel, finds himself alone with Methuselech, his master's mercenary friend. Increasingly Gapp comes to realise that Methuselech is nothing like the man he was, and that he, Gapp, has felt increasingly drained and has suffered from nightmares ever since he has



been travelling with the desert warrior. It is not a great shock for the reader to learn that Methuseleah has been possessed by an erstwhile servant of Drauglir. By the time Gapp has been reunited with the others of the Quest in the Maw itself, it has become apparent that more than one of the questors is not what he seems, that most of them have ulterior motives for making the journey, and not even Peladane knights are as noble as they would like to appear.

Although the writing in this volume has managed to avoid some of the more obvious stylistic faults found in its predecessor, the tone of the novel veers uneasily between horrific descriptions of entrails and gore and vain attempts at humour. There is little sense of place – even if most of the places through which the questors pass would be better avoided – and the main characters are no more than fantasy stereotypes, despite their lying and duplicity. Secondary characters, drawn from the various races that inhabit the world of Lindormyn, several groups of whom are also making for the Maw for one reason or another, can be broadly divided into good or evil, and it really is not giving away the plot to say that towards the end of the book there is a battle and Drauglir is defeated. There is a brief glimmer of originality when a character points out that the manner of Drauglir's destruction actually means that the whole Quest has been pointless and that Drauglir could have been destroyed far earlier – it is not that often that an author highlights the glaring faults in a plot – and the downbeat ending is reinforced by the decidedly unheroic welcome Gapp receives when he returns to his home town. Unfortunately a last minute attempt to subvert the epic fantasy genre does not prevent *A Fire in the North* from being yet another Quest fantasy in which a Dark Lord is finally destroyed, and it is far from the best example of its kind.

Kate Elliott – *Spirit Gate: Crossroads Book One*

Orbit, London, 2007,
630pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN
987-1841495996

Kate Elliott – *Shadow Gate: Crossroads Book Two*

Orbit, London, 2008,
657pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 978-1841496252

Reviewed by Kari Sperring



Kate Elliott is underrated: it is entirely possible that the sheer size and format of her books have proved a barrier to potential readers. There is, it must be admitted, something daunting about a book the size and heft of these – and the knowledge that they are the first of a projected seven book sequence could prove a further hurdle. But those who turn away as a result of the trappings might want to take another look, because they will be missing something. Elliott has been writing and publishing books now for nearly two decades, her

first four under the name Alis A. Rasmussen and, from 1992 under her current name. Her *Jaran* books, dealing with culture shock, cultural clashes, alien colonialism and human alienation, have achieved cult status and are highly recommended to those who like their sf with a strong socio-political tang. Her *Highroad* trilogy (*A Passage of Stars*, *Revolution's Shore* and *The Price of Ransom*, all 1990 as Alis Rasmussen) confront the issues of terrorism, labour exploitation and inherited wealth with a bleak honesty rarely found in American sf. And she is one of those rare authors who can cross the sf – fantasy boundary with confidence: indeed, she has done so since the very start of her writing career (her first novel was the steam-punk prefiguring *The Labyrinth* [1988], which mixed Victorian industrialisation with magic and faery).

Crossroads is her second major fantasy sequence (the first was the seven-volume *Crown of Stars*). In the Hundred, justice and peace were once maintained by nine strange cloaked figures known as the Guardians, but as *Spirit Gate* opens, they are long lost and their altars deserted, leaving the land to the rule of warlords and powerful trading interests, and upholding of the old universal law to the reeves, mortal men and women who are dwindling in numbers and in respect. Beginning with the violent murder of the reeve Marit, Elliott tumbles us into a world of war, greed, chaos and upheaval, where trust is a rare quality and security out of the reach of most ordinary people. Under the pressures of economic rivalry, political jealousy and military expansionism, the society of the Hundred is crumbling. Poorer people sell themselves and their children into bond-service, once an accepted and well-regulated way of clearing debt but now no more than slavery. Towns and villages are laid waste by the passage of armies and their inhabitants killed, forced into the new armies or driven into refugee status. Against this background a wide cast of characters drawn from right across the social spectrum struggle to survive.

This is not the standard epic fantasy of lost heirs and mystic powers: it is a bleak and realistic world driven by economic pressures, ambition and the struggle for survival. There are no prophesied leaders or comforting heroes: the characters are often out of their depth in situations they can neither understand or control, regardless of their social status. And these are well-drawn, realistic characters with few certainties and often little hope.

The scale of the cast is sometimes a little confusing. Although Elliott is good at reminding us who people are and what they seek, nevertheless the sheer number can become overwhelming and – to me, at least – not all of the characters are of equal interest. Their narratives are braided, so that several stories are updated in the course of each chapter: this can be frustrating. Occasionally, I found myself having to back-track to remind myself what had been happening to particular characters when we last saw them. The sheer size of the books, too, is not ideal: these are awkward volumes to handle, heavy and bulky. But all of these are perhaps general problems of the epic fantasy genre. *Spirit Gate* and *Shadow Gate* present us with a rich, believable, textured worlds and

a series of compelling tales which examine themes of immigration, economic necessity, slavery, poverty and the effects of war on civilian populations. Highly recommended; I look forward to the next instalment.



Greg Egan - *Incandescence*

Gollancz, London, 2008,
272pp, p/b, £12.99, ISBN
978-0575081635

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

2008 is fast becoming quite a singular year for science fiction: first a new Culture novel, then a sighting of the lesser-spotted Egan – all we need now

is a new Neal Stephenson and I'll be in sf heaven. Let's be honest, though, Greg Egan's novels are never going to be made into blockbusters by Hollywood. He's the quantum mechanics of science fiction – to paraphrase Richard Feynmann, if you've read an Egan novel and think you understand it then you probably haven't understood it.

I enjoy Egan's novels. I've been a fan since I was first blown away by *Permutation City* many years ago, but my understanding of them is akin to a little mouse nibbling at the edges to get a decent piece of the Egan intellectual cheese – a mere fraction of the whole.

Incandescence gave me less of that lovely cheese than I've come to expect.

There are two arcs to the story: in the first we follow Rakesh, who lives in a fairly run-of-the-mill million-years-hence utopian galactic community. With no preamble whatsoever he's approached by a being claiming to have evidence of a possible lost ancestral lifeform: some DNA found on a meteor near the galactic centre. This is a part of the galaxy largely closed to Rakesh's civilisation – the Amalgam. It's inhabited by the aptly named Aloof, of which next to nothing is known. Lahl, the being with the evidence, claims she was given it by the Aloof and is offering it to Rakesh since he is also descended from DNA-based lifeforms. Rakesh, for his part, is bored with his existence in a galaxy that has been excruciatingly mapped, catalogued, studied and civilised; he yearns for adventure.

The second arc is set inside a closed world called the Splitter inhabited by an intelligent but undemanding race of transparent centipedes. Roi, a farm worker, is content with her lot in life until she meets a strange person called Zak. Zak is strange because of the questions he asks – and some of the answers he suggests – about the basics of life in the Splitter. As she gets to know Zak she becomes infused and enthused with his questions and joins him on a quest to understand where the Splitter came from, what it is, how it works and, vitally, where it is going.

Incandescence feels like YA novel initially because the characters are portrayed in broad brush strokes, and both situations are quickly set up to allow Egan to get on with what he really wants to do, which is write the tale of an astronomical-mathematical Renaissance

amongst intelligent, but non-human, aliens. I didn't resent the quickness of the setup because it's the ideas we want to get to in an Egan novel and not the emotional anxieties of its characters, and it quickly becomes apparent that this is not a YA book.

It's questionable how interesting a renaissance such as this can ever be to an Arts-educated person like myself, particularly since it replaces the usual gosh-wow-how-far-can-he-go-with-this? extreme speculation that Egan is justifiably famous for. I could appreciate, I think, what was being done here: we're being shown how a society can use the scientific method to bootstrap itself from ignorance to knowledge, but without the background to properly follow this bootstrapping *Incandescence* seemed liable to descend into pedantry, losing me completely for whole pages at a time as characters discussed geometry and nothing else (theoretical geometry at that!).

Describing geometry solely via text is a difficult task, one that here would have been helped along significantly by the inclusion of quite a few diagrams.

Incandescence is never actually boring; rather, the worst I can say is that it feels a bit, well, tame. For all the talk of million-year time-spans, neutron stars and galactic travel, this is Egan's most limited and claustrophobic novel to date.

Magazine Review: Escape Velocity; Issue 1, Vol. 1.

Print format; £4.65, e-
book format; 55p
Adventure Books:

Reviewed by Terry Jack- man

Escape Velocity was an unusual debut. Though published by Adventure Books in the USA it has editors both sides of the Atlantic; Ron Blevins in Seattle and Geoff Nelder in Chester. An unlikely arrangement, but it seems to work.

When I received it the cover described EV as 'The Magazine of Science Fact and Fiction.' Frankly that should have been enough to put me off; I'm not a big fan of hard SF on its own. But the first impression – a glossy cover and the sheer thickness of the print version (164 pages?) – was at least intriguing. Happily it delivered on its initial promise. Forgive a few typos, and some eccentric pagination I assume were teething problems, and there was little else for me to carp at.

More importantly, the contents deserved a review. The actual contents page was one of the clearest I've seen. (Why do some mags make them so unreadable?) Of the 29 entries, excluding the editors' note at the end, there were 5 articles, 2 photo galleries, 1 – excellent – film page, 1 poem and a great 20 short stories!

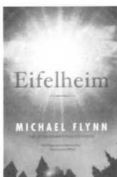
The articles varied from wholly factual to tongue-in-cheek, and included an interview with John Courtney Grimwood. My personal favourite there was probably 'Eight Unlikely Ways Life on Earth Could End'. The



photos – Mars shots from NASA – were a treat, even for a science refuse-nik like me.

Of the fiction, I rated eight as very good and another eight as good. Being an Orbiter I'm not into flattery and have to be bludgeoned into saying anything is excellent, but I did consider it: for flash fiction 'Suicide Mission' (T. J. McIntyre), and 'Sentient' (Michael Anderson), and in the shorts for 'Scream Quietly!' (Sheila Crosby) and 'First Class' (Barbara Krasnoff). What didn't get at least 'good' generally had something too, which was promising since most of these writers are relatively unknown. Good to see editors so determined to find new voices.

Overall, a very good read, much more so than I honestly expected, or have had from more established magazines in the past. The only thing I came away dissatisfied about was I couldn't see the date for the next one, so I'd suggest others take a look for themselves. Which, craftily, is why I haven't given any of the plots away here?



Michael Flynn – *Eifelheim*

Tor UK, 2006, 320pp,
\$14.95 (US), ISBN 13: 978-0765319104

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Eifelheim is largely set in the late middle ages in and around an unremarkable village in the German forests south of Strasbourg in the vicinity of Freiburg. The book

follows the aftermath of the emergency 'landing' of a Krenkish vessel in the Great Woods near the village of Oberhochwald. The giant grasshopper-like aliens, some of whom are injured, are discovered by the local priest, Dietrich, and Max, the right hand man of the benevolent local lord, Manfred. Dietrich, whose theology is informed by his rational, intellectually rigorous education in Paris, soon realises that the visitors are not demons, as some villagers would have, but travellers from afar. With Hilde, a village woman, he tends the injured and they gradually, with a standard SF computer translation device, come to communicate. The book is at its most fascinating in addressing the fraught and complex process of understanding (and misunderstanding) between mediaeval and alien minds.

There are fractions within the Krenkish and human camps alike, though the reader sees everything through Dietrich, who in perhaps the book's one major contrivance, is a rather more intellectually gifted man than might be expected for a remote village priest. His reasons for living in self-imposed exile form a counterpoint to the alien story and Dietrich's gradual redemption and forgiveness for past sins intertwines aptly with the Krenken accommodations to medieval life. Eventually some of the Krenken move from the woods into the village, travellers bring tales of the wider world, tensions rise between villagers and aliens and rumours of demons begin to spread abroad. Meanwhile the Krenken struggle with primitive resources to repair

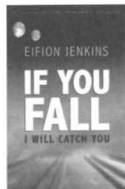
their ship before their essential food supplies run out.

Over the course of the book we see a year in the life of the village, and Flynn paints a rich portrait of a civilisation almost as alien and impenetrable to us as the Krenkish culture is to Dietrich. It does not make for an easy read, especially as Flynn uses many unfamiliar words and terms, and regularly includes short passages in Latin and German. The result is challenging, an initially rather dry and forbidding but ultimately a very rewarding book. A novel which requires slow and careful reading, and often re-reading, to fully absorb the breathtaking array of details and ideas which comprise its weave.

The events take place over the year between August 1348 and July 1349. Anyone with a passing knowledge of European history will realise the significance of these dates, as indeed will anyone who has read Connie Willis' 1993 Hugo Award winning novel *Doomsday Book*. Perhaps because it is the second Hugo nominated novel to arrive at this particular juncture, *Eifelheim*, despite being vastly better thought through than *Doomsday Book*, failed to take home its own Hugo. On the same note, while I haven't read all of last year's Hugo nominated novels, that *Eifelheim* lost to Vernor Vinge's *Rainbows End* is, to me, ludicrous.

Eifelheim is based on Michael Flynn's novella of the same novel, originally published in the December 1986 *Analog*, and subsequently nominated for a Hugo Award in 1987. The novella was set entirely in the then present, and the novel contains present day sections derive from the earlier work. These chapters, written in a rather arch, almost exaggeratedly formal and slightly condescending way, follow the relationship and researches of an historian, Tom, and a physicist, Sharon. Tom has become fascinated with the mystery of a German village, Eifelheim, which was abandoned in the 14th century and which despite all the geographical advantages of its location was never resettled. Sharon meanwhile is absorbed with the implications of the speed of light becoming measurably slower, and what this might mean for our understanding of the universe. These chapters only comprise 57 pages of a novel which, deducting contents list, map, list of characters and three sets of notes, runs a comparatively brief 292 pages. Inevitably Tom and Sharon's individual enquiries inform our understanding of the main, medieval, part of the novel.

Eifelheim is a rather detached and intellectual first contact adventure – the cover suggests "Carl Sagan meets Umberto Eco" – which rigorously fashions a meeting-place between two alien worldviews, medieval Christian theology and cutting edge physics, without doing disservice to either. Flynn's large cast of characters are fully realised, though perhaps ironically the mediaeval ones feel more alive and human than his rather dry and over-cerebral moderns. Meticulously researched and staying very close to known history – Flynn notes the few points where he has made minor changes to make the tale flow better – The result is a book which must inevitably be compared to Willis' *Doomsday Book*, and one that is far more intellectually and imaginatively satisfying if not so emotionally engaging or compelling. Highly recommended.



Eifion Jenkins – *If You Fall I Will Catch You*

Seren, Cardiff, 2008, 338pp, £7.99, ISBN 978-1854114563

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This first novel is a dystopian future fantasy. It has no interest in science or technology: familiar sf concepts are presented

sketchily and inconsistently. One major section, for example, takes place on a generation ship modelled on a shopping mall. Characters neither know nor care how the ship actually functions, it cruises at 1/5 of light speed without any reason for this limit, its initial target is the star "Eridani", and its motive force is briefly described as "solar sail" and "photon drive" without any sense that these might be two different things.

The story has four sections, each set in a different claustrophobic community. The linking character is Gwydion, whom we meet as a boy in the domed village of Mimosa (population 65), all that survives of Wales. Gwydion has a tormentor, Cai, whom he believes to be his twin, and whom only he can perceive. Cai disappears from the plot before his significance becomes clear. A plague has killed most of Mankind and rendered most survivors sterile; however Gwydion's first sexual encounter results in a pregnancy, and the Soma Academy offers to restore fertility to all boys who attend it. Gwydion has repeated "psychic shock" visions of falling from the Twin Towers after the attack of 9/11. (Shock effects from the much more devastating plague are unmentioned).

Gwydion leaves Mimosa for the Soma Academy in Madrid, a boys' school where the window shutters are always closed. The fate of Mimosa after he leaves is unmentioned. At the Academy Gwydion demonstrates his unique talent for astral travel and disappears, while the last remaining powerful politicians prepare to abandon their failing world. Alara, Gwydion's official Academy mother-substitute, is kidnapped and bundled aboard the generation ship. The fate of the Academy – and the rest of the world – after the ship leaves is unmentioned.

On the generation ship, the main pastimes of the population are shopping, drug-taking, and ineffective political protest. They have set out without a clear destination, and expect to find a new home in either fifty years or hundreds of generations. On the ship, Alara discovers astral travel and disappears. The fate of the ship after she leaves is unmentioned.

Finally, on a bleak and inaccessible beach on a strange planet, Gwydion discovers a group of simple peaceful semi-aquatic humanoids, interbreeds with them, and invents Civilization for them in easy stages. Alara sacrifices herself to save him. He grows old and dies. The eventual fate of the remaining beach residents is unclear.

Each community shown has lost its history. Gwydion personifies this problem; he abandons each successive community without a backward glance. The book's title is perhaps misleading, as despite the repeated motif of falling from a high place, several fallers are not caught, and those are kill their would-be catchers by landing on them. As a story of "the fall" this book is bleak and depressing, full of repeated motifs whose significance I fail to appreciate, and also full of major plot inconsistencies. Sigh.

Simon Logan – *Pretty Little Things To Fill Up The Void*

Prime Books, Edinburgh, 2008, 312pp, t/p, £7.95, ISBN 978-0809572298

Reviewed by Martin Lewis

Fade in across the Hackney skyline, sirens and the smell of Vietnamese food filling the air. Cut to a man in an overpriced flat reading a novel. Zoom in as his lip curls up in distaste on discovering it is written as a pseudo-shooting script.

Cut.

Films aren't books and a author who is a frustrated director usually makes for a frustrating reading experience. The directions are an infuriating affection which is a shame because Logan is a good – albeit uneven – writer. One notional reason for his stylistic choice is the fact that one of the characters is a documentary maker but it is a pretty thin justification. The artifice extends as far as calling the chapters "scenes". This grates as well but perhaps, given their slender length, it is right name for them.

Logan has previously published three short story collections and it initially shows in the rather fragmentary nature of his debut novel. (Or, as he irritatingly styles it, "n'vel"). It chops rapidly back and forth between his cast of characters: Elisabeth, the aforementioned filmmaker; Catalina, a teenage thrill seeker; Auguste and Camille, artists and lovers; and Shiva, a freelance terrorist. Of course, their lives are all intertwined and over the course of the novel they are pulled together for a transformative conclusion. It is much to his credit that this spiralling inwards seems natural and unforced, a grasp of structure that is unusual for a first time novelist. In fact Logan is good on all the fundamentals. For someone who clearly fancies himself as a prose stylist, most of his misfires, such as describing pylons as "fascist metal weeds", come when he is striving to attain a level of industrial poetry. Instead it is his characters, and more specifically their interaction with each other, where his strength lies. It is the sixth character – the city itself – that makes the novel so confounding though.

These scenes are all set in a nameless, placeless and, most puzzlingly, timeless city. The novel is deliberately anachronistic and obsolete: characters use payphones, pagers, VCRs and joysticks. One character is referred to as having a "Soviet jaw line" and then later "jagged Soviet features". Whatever this description means (and I am not sure) it seems likely that some of Logan's prospective readership weren't born until after the collapse of the Evil Empire. *Pretty Little Things To Fill*

Up The Void clearly harks back to the early days of cyberpunk but it is too redundant even to be the future as envisaged in the Eighties. In fact, this is almost pre-cyberpunk and shares more in common with Hubert Selby Jr than with any current SF writers. It is clearly a conscious choice but I'm not sure exactly why or to what end. One thing is for certain; this isn't science fiction but nor is it purely mimetic because it is so strongly abstracted from the real world. The city is a sort of fantasy sinkhole, a playground for malcontents, and this robs it of its power.

Ian McDonald – *Brasyl*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 405 pp, £12.99, t/p,
ISBN 978-0575080508

Reviewed by Tony Keen

Such are the vagaries of publication that many readers will already be aware of *Brasyl's* status as one of the sf novels of 2007. Favourable reviews have abounded, the novel is already on the shortlist for the BSFA Award, and by the time you read this you will know whether the Clarke Award jury has also chosen to shortlist it.

Let's be clear about one thing from the start. I'm not about to deviate from that consensus.

When *River of Gods* appeared in 2004, it was clearly a significant sf work. It won the BSFA Award, and was on the shortlist for the Clarke (why didn't it win?) and the Hugo. Naturally, the appearance of the next novel from the same author creates hopes and expectations. Will it be as good as *River of Gods*? Could it even be better?

River of Gods used the interlocking accounts of ten characters to tell the story of an eleventh, India itself. My initial guess was that *Brasyl*, likewise set in a developing nation likely to become economically important as the twenty-first century progresses, would do something similar. But, while *Brasyl* retains the vivid sense of place that characterized *River of Gods*, McDonald is too canny a customer to do the same trick twice. Rather than the account of a country, *Brasyl* is an exploration of the nature of existence.

Three strands tell the story. In 2006 a television producer seeks a disgraced football hero in Rio de Janeiro. In 2032, a São Paulo wide boy tries to find why a woman he saw dead is alive again. And in 1732, a Jesuit priest travels up the Amazon, in a section that looks remarkably like *Heart of Darkness* as written by Neal Stephenson.

For all the local colour, McDonald remains a science fiction writer, and sf ideas drive his plots. He is actually quite good at catching the mood of the sf zeitgeist. The big idea in *River of Gods* was artificial intelligence, and McDonald's version of the singularity. In *Brasyl*, it is alternate quantum realities, drawing in equal parts on the ideas of Hugh Everett III and Michael Moorcock. As the strands develop, and various doppelgangers appear, it becomes clear that the three narratives represent three different versions of human history. The strands are tied together with a neat trick that is quite bleak in its eschatology, but nevertheless includes a glint of optimism about the human condition.

The deployment of this idea is more skillfully done than in *River of Gods*. There the Big Dumb Object that

acts as the plot-driving MacGuffin seems imposed on the story rather than growing out of it. In *Brasyl*, the idea is better integrated with the story-telling, and this could make it a better science fiction novel.

But is it a better novel full stop? The prose is certainly delightful, and a number of passages saw me with a big grin on my face (particularly those involving the Jesuit Father Luis Quinn). On the other hand, McDonald lets himself down a bit with the end, which just stops rather than providing a resolution.

But this shouldn't detract from the fact that *Brasyl* is an excellent novel. As good as *River of Gods*? Definitely. Better? Well, there were many times when I thought it was, but in the final conclusion I don't think it quite makes the necessary mark. But even if I no longer think *Brasyl* is the best 2007 novel I've read (I've read something I enjoyed more since), it's one of the top two, and probably the cleverest. Recommended to the few of you who haven't read it yet.



Robert V S Redick – *The Red Wolf Conspiracy*

Orbit, London, 2008,
539pp, £18.99/£12.99
ISBN 978-0575 081765
(h/b)/ 978- 0575081772
(p/b)

Reviewed by Lynne
Bispham

This novel begins with a tantalising extract from a news-sheet telling how the Great Ship, The Imperial Merchant Vessel Chathrand, six hundred years old and the last of her kind, is lost at sea and all eight hundred souls aboard feared drowned. The action then switches to the start of the Chathrand's voyage, and immediately the reader is plunged into a page-turning narrative that describes the events leading up to the disappearance of the ship.

The empires of Arqual and Mzithrin have battled for centuries. Their last war ended forty years ago, but the two powers still fear and hate each other. The Chathrand's mission is ostensibly to ensure a lasting peace, but, as the passengers and crew assemble, it gradually becomes clear that certain folk aboard the Arquali Great Ship, including the vicious Captain and a disguised spy-master and assassin, have very different and sinister plans. If these plans are realised, the Mzithrins will be manipulated into civil war, whilst Arqual acquires power over the Crownless lands that lie between the two empires, and eventually moves against Mzithrin itself.

Pivotal to the conspirators' plans is the marriage of Thasha Isiq, the Arquali ambassador's daughter to a Mzithrin prince. Neither Thasha nor her father have any idea that this marriage, designed to cement the peace, is actually likely to be the catalyst that precipitates the outbreak of war, but Thasha, only recently released from the hated Lorge Academy for girls, has no desire to become the "Treaty Bride". Fortunately, as she begins

to realise that all is not as it appears aboard the Great Ship that is carrying her to her wedding, Thasha finds an ally in Pazel Pathkendle, a tarboy. Pazel's birthplace, the town of Ormael, has been attacked and invaded by Arquali forces, his mother and sister are missing, feared dead, and he harbours no small resentment against Arqual. However, is eager to join with Thasha and a small group of like-minded folk, a mage from another world, Thasha's sometime tutor, and a "woken" rat, an animal who has acquired the ability to think. As the voyage continues, there are hints of plots within plots and conspiracies within conspiracies. What are the motives of the mysterious Dr Chadfallow who has watched over Pazel since the fall of Ormael? Why did a stranger accost Thasha in her garden and whisper to her the Mzithrin words for "red wolf" before a guard put an arrow through his heart? What is the true identity of the soap-merchant Mr Ket? Will Pazel be re-united with his father who has treacherously joined forces with the Mzithrin? Meanwhile, hidden between the decks, the small Ixchel, who have their own reasons for boarding the Chathrand, try to keep out of sight of the "giants" who sail the ship and avoid the threat of the rats that share their hiding place. This is an extremely well-written, many faceted tale, and the remaining two volumes of *The Chathrand Voyage* trilogy will be eagerly awaited.



Adam Roberts
 – *Swiftly*
 Gollancz, London,
 2008 - 368pp/359pp,
 £18.99/£12.99 ISBN: 978-
 0575075894 (h/b)/ISBN
 978-0575082328 (t/p)

Reviewed by Paul Raven

Swiftly sees Adam Roberts in pastiche mode, wherein he riffs on a proto-sf classic to

produce something sharply satirical and piquantly post-modern, all the while shining a light on the elephants in our collective room.

At least, that's how it's supposed to work. Sadly, by comparison to his recent works, Roberts seems to have fallen a little flat with *Swiftly*.

This time, the source text is Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Set well over a century after Gulliver's voyage, *Swiftly* takes place in a mid-nineteenth century England which will seem familiar in some ways and strange in others.

The English have taken to capturing Lilliputians and using them to do microscopic engineering work that revolutionises mechanical technology. This has caused friction with France, who wish to see the little folk liberated from slavery. The English do not consider the Lilliputians to be enslaved, as they do not consider them to be human.

And so we meet our first viewpoint character, Abraham Bates - a gentleman of sensitive disposition who has colluded with the French in the cause of Lilliputian liberty. Once the French have conquered

England with the aid of the giant Brobdingnagians, he finds himself caught between two masters thanks to his treachery.

He also finds himself in love with our second lead, Eleanor Burton, a young lady of intellect and science. Recently married (and even more recently widowed), both she and Bates end up travelling the war-torn English countryside en route to York with the French army's Calculating Engine.

At which point, things start to go even more badly wrong for everyone concerned.

There is no shortage of ideas in *Swiftly*; Roberts' characters are bundles of contradictory drives and emotions. Bates seems to be a well-executed attempt at portraying a manic depressive character in an era unfamiliar with modern psychology. Poor Bates swings from profound melancholia to frantic happiness like a wonky pendulum, and his mood swings play no little part in his story arc. His quixotic choices are rarely the wisest course of action, but the reader's sympathy is always with him - even though he's a terrible buffoon.

Eleanor's richness of character comes from her place at the intersection of a number of social strata: the only daughter of a lower-middle-class family fallen on hard times, married off to a *nouveau-riche* industrialist; a bookish woman fascinated by mathematics and science in an era when science was strictly the province of men. Her viewpoint lets Roberts take passing pot-shots at current topics such as creationism, as well as the sexual repression and prudishness of the time.

Roberts has adopted the idiom of the era, writing in the Victorian mode of overwrought and clumsy prose. The principle benefit is the authentic voices that the language gives the characters, whose laughably stiff-backed metaphors raise more than the occasional smile.

But it's a double-edged sword - the verbose style is tough going for a reader acclimatised to the concision of modern fiction. It's also strangely jarring when something more current slips in - I figure only Roberts knows whether he deliberately included a punk rock album title in a chapter about the rebellious Eleanor, or whether that phrase simply leapt unbidden to the page ... Roberts being Roberts, however, I suspect the former.

The core theme of *Swiftly* is prejudice, along with the hypocrisy that often accompanies it - but the prejudice of the English toward their miniature engineers is just the start. The long-established English loathing of the French gets a vigorous lampooning, along with sexism, class hatred, religious intolerance and common-or-garden racism ... and the little interpersonal prejudices we all can't help but harbour. Prejudice, sad to say, is still a rich seam for an author to mine.

Perhaps too rich in this case, however. I reached the end of *Swiftly* and found myself wondering what Roberts had been trying to tell me. He has stood accused of being overly subtle before, but this is the first novel of his that I have read which seemed genuinely opaque in purpose, perhaps because so many targets are aimed for.

I'm guessing he intends *Swiftly* to attack our thinking in many small ways, like the pin-prick swords of a Lilliputian army, rather than bludgeoning us with one single Brobdingnagian IDEA. But while I can't find

fault with Roberts' insight and intelligence, I feel *Swiftly* demonstrates a momentary failure to communicate that vision effectively.

Sarah Singleton – *The Amethyst Child*

Simon and Schuster, London, 2008, 230pp,

£6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1416925910

Reviewed by Ian Watson

After three gorgeously written Gothic tales pitched at the Young Adult market, with *The Amethyst Child* Sarah Singleton returns to the contemporary terrain which was the setting of her first publication, *The Crow Maiden*. That first novel, beautifully produced by print-on-demand Prime Books – before Singleton hit the bigger time of actually having her books in Ottakar's (weep, weep) and Waterstone's, thanks to Simon and Schuster – concerns New Age road protesters living in trees to save those from felling, and fairies, although not your *key* sort but the perilous pagan kind. As in her subsequent books, the prose is often sheer poetry of nature, a delight to read. In fact everyone should read *Century*, *Heretic*, and *Sacrifice*, since YA is but a marketing strategy for these mature and complex novels (which soon picked up awards and short-listings).

So what is an 'Amethyst Child'? The Indigo Children's Website (www.indigochildren.co.uk) explains that Amethyst kids are one of the names for Star Children being born these days, kids with seeds of meta-human consciousness. Apparently comet Kahoutek in 1973, apart from being a comet, was a symbol used by the Oneself for the opening of an Energy Gate (a bit like the Star of Bethlehem), and comet Hale-Bopp in 1995, apart from being a comet, completed the process. With several allusions (or illusions?) to Spielberg's *Taken* mini-series, and *X-Files*-like comments about ET intervention in human consciousness, Star Kids are different, and feel different, either royally so or alienatedly so. Indigos are the most visible of these Star Kids. (The colour has nothing to do with an aura, but is apparently the result of "scientific observations by a woman who has the brain disorder called synaesthesia" – although I wouldn't personally refer to synaesthesia as a 'disorder'.) Star Kids, "a great percentage of all kids being born today", are often imaginative loners frustrated by consensus systems such as school. Maybe they won't wait in line, get bored in class, seem antisocial unless with their own kind. They may be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder. Actually, they are heralds of higher consciousness to come, and are now awakening. This may be why the Labour government spent in vain £70bn of tax money over 10 years educating 4 million young people who failed their GCSEs (well, so says the Bow Group, although they don't mention Star Kids).

In *The Amethyst Child*, Singleton wonderfully explores the anguishes and exaltations of feeling different, and the deep ambiguities of that way of interpreting – and exploiting – adolescent growing pains.

Dreamy and somewhat passive Amber, whose nice parents seem banal, falls in with Dowdie (who isn't at all dowdy, but fiery) who lives outside the system in

the seemingly paradisaical Community presided over by charismatic James Renault, whom the voice of Throne guides to identify and nurture Amethyst children. But James certainly doesn't talk any tosh about comets.

Alas, there's a big worm in the apple, though none of the ones you might surmise. But I don't want to give plot spoilers, because the book is so beautifully paced, and tension mounts such that you feel like screaming, "So what does happen next?"

Amber is duly enchanted. Not so, the talented though embittered Jonny, whom she also falls in with. And events ensue... which, from the ongoing interspersed interview with a dandy of a Detective Inspector, we can surmise will not turn out benignly.

Some of the prose is necessarily a bit sparser than in Singleton's other books (though never prosaic) due to the need to address (successfully!) the banality of contemporary life, yet consider this description of Jonny: "He was a coffin full of iron chains, broken rods, smashed gears, snagged wire, needles, poison and grit." And much is luminously lovely: "The moon, a silver egg, perched on a high turret"; "Carefully, we turned over memories, like stones, to see what thoughts and feelings might lie beneath." Interactions between characters are perfect. One learns a great deal about manipulation, weakness, strength. The book is a dream of ease to read, as well as compulsive. The ending is perfect; and even the banal is redeemed. Bravo.



Jo Walton – *Farthing*

Tor, New York, 2007, 336pp, \$6.00, p/b, ISBN 978-0765352804.

Reviewed by James Bacon

Farthing is a very gentle read. Jo Walton's slight change in history which provides the background to *Farthing* is very believable and her extrapolations from it very entertaining. Her story is

about the evil that people are capable of, set in England in 1949. She uses a very plausible twist in history to create circumstances for a smaller tidier story about those who would be affected by such historic ripples, rather than the mechanics of the initial change. These subsequent ripples turn into a tidal wave.

The story is told by two narrators, of whom the first is Mrs. Elizabeth Kahn, daughter of Lord and Lady Eversley, who are known along with their coterie of friends and relations as the Farthing set. Walton's tone and style carry this along in a fashion reminiscent of some of the best classical period works of literature. The aristocratic heroine, who expresses considerably modern thinking about treatment of employees and concerns about her weight, relates the story well, in a very lady-like way.

A murder takes place in the Eversley household and Mrs. Kahn's husband is implicated. As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that not all is perfect with this political set and a sacrifice has to be made in order

to enable a decisive political movement. The capability for evil and the person who perpetrates it are all the more nasty when it is considered who will suffer: this reflected both in the heroine's life and in the wider social context.

Mrs. Kahn is rather naive a narrator and I was pleasantly entertained by the juxtaposition of the second narrative, that of Inspector Carmichael of Scotland Yard. Carmichael is in part the traditional fictional detective, but he is also rather unusual in this out of kilter world. These two very different viewpoints alternate, presenting a effective parallel between the characters' situations. While this technique can be confusing, there are so such problems here and I enjoyed the opposing viewpoints telling the same story and watching the tales intertwine. Both narrators suffer in their own particular ways from their involvement with something they would never bring upon themselves willingly.

The nasty nature of some of the political goings-on is very skillfully crafted and the story grows deeper and darker as it proceeds, showing how much can be sacrificed in the name of power and how unpleasant people can be in order to keep control and to manipulate the public into agreeing with what should be unthinkable.

The anti-Semitic attitudes that play a part in the story are well thought through. Britain in the 1930s had more anti-Semitic feelings than people would like to admit and Walton brings this home. While reading this book, I attended a Holocaust memorial at a Synagogue. We heard about a lady whose mother defied and spoke up against Moseley in the thirties during his marches to south London. This made me realise exactly how open the bigotry and discriminatory behaviour was, which today would be totally unacceptable.

With that in mind Walton extrapolates the attitudes that were prevalent before the war, in an alternate Britain which first appeased and then became friendly with Nazi Germany. This brings out the insidious and subtle ways in which prejudices become commonplace in an effective and ultimately chilling way.

The initial change in history that allows the Farthing set to accumulate power is the flight of the Deputy Leader of the Nazi party Rudolf Hess. One of the set, Sir James Thirkie, seeks a form of agreement and appeasement with Hitler in 1941. It's after the battle of Britain, there has been no invasion and the war in Europe has come to an end. Travel and trade continue. The war in the east is alluded to, although in a rather simple way, and a little more ingenuity and elucidation would have sated the military reader in me, but this is not a military book.

In our world, Chamberlain appeased Hitler, and Hess's flight has been the basis for intrigue, novels and conspiracy theories: Robert Harris's *Fatherland* and Christopher Priest's *The Separation* spring to mind. The idea of a divergence here is not new, but it would be unhelpful to draw comparisons. Jo Walton has found a very neat and clever twist to entertain the reader which is not a clone of these very popular and strong works. *Farthing* carves out its own place in the alternative history genre on its own merits and a worthy companion to these other good works.

Where the story goes to next is very important. Despite the clear ending to this book, it is part of a trilogy and the direction of the second book will be an important factor for further success. It will not be easy to create another such enjoyable journey and there is a lot of expectation, but I for one hope that the standard remains as high and enjoyable.

Clive Warner – *Rebody*

Citiria, Monterrey, 2007, 271pp, \$18.95, t/p, ISBN 978-0979038617

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Hugh is an English professor who makes the mistake of dating one of his students and is subsequently murdered by her father when his indiscretion is discovered. Luckily for Hugh he has recently won insurance to have his head frozen. But when he awakes in 2373 he finds that his head is attached to the body of a household robot, and has to work until he has paid off the cost of his resurrection. Soon he escapes to a part of the city controlled by animals with enhanced intelligence and soon finds that the future is not what he was expecting.

When I received this book to review I must admit that my heart fell: a writer I had not heard of published by a small press I have not heard of (looking at the web site listed on the back of the book indicates that it pretty much exists solely for the purposes of publishing Clive Warner, listing as it does two fiction books, one non-fiction book and two poems by Mr Warner, and *nothing else*) with a dreadfully gaudy cover. Also the story is one of those 'person frozen wakes up in future to give modern perspective on future world' which is an sf tradition with a long and distinguished history that, alas, I find holds very little interest for me.

Well, I was pleasantly surprised. *Rebody* may not be a classic of the genre but it is, on the whole, fairly engaging and takes some unexpected directions.

It is the enhanced animals that actually form the centre of the narrative, and Hugh's brain does not long remain encased in metal, but gets moved into the body of an orang-utan (leaving Hugh having to deal with an orang-utan's, um, *drives*). That he quickly gets put in the position of leading this community against the oppressive robot city-dwellers is a little dubious – there is an uncomfortable 'white man's burden' feel to it – but at least he has the grace to be reluctant.

Each chapter is headed by a quotation and one can easily see who Warner's major influence is by the number of them that are taken from the books of Philip K. Dick. *Rebody* sits on a similar borderline between 'straight' and 'satiric' narratives, not always completely successfully.

In conclusion while *Rebody* never entirely escapes its rather well-worn scenario it does have its unexpected moments and proves worth a read.

Transmission, Interrupted 2: Torching the Wood

By Saxon Bullock

When a television show ends its first season with a pig-faced Uber-demon doing a *Godzilla* impersonation on the streets of Cardiff, it's safe to say something may have gone wrong – but then, this was hardly the first sign that all was not well in *Torchwood*. Following the adventures of bisexual space adventurer Captain Jack Harkness (John Barrowman) as he leads a team to investigate aliens in modern-day Cardiff, the much-vaunted 'adult' spin-off from *Doctor Who* had already brought us the serial smoke-shagger, the disco Cyberwoman (complete with little high-heeled cyber-boots), and more shots of Barrowman glowering and looking constipated than the mind can comfortably encompass.

It should have been the adult Brit SF show that we'd all been waiting for, but instead turned out to be the televisual equivalent of a multiple motorway pile-up. Displaying a creative vision so disjointed it more often resembled a massively uneven anthology show that just happened to star the same actors each week, it was an unsightly mess – and between the plot-holes, excessive gore, lesbian chic and the ridiculous pimped-up *Torchwood*mobile, things seemed like they could only get worse.

And then, amazingly – they didn't. Season 2 of *Torchwood* can be described in many ways, but one of its defining features is that it's an improvement on Season 1. Russell T. Davies and the New *Who* team can often seem unwilling to admit their show is anything less than perfect, but in *Torchwood*'s case they did seem prepared to accept some of the criticism of Season 1, and also act upon it. Result? A significant drop in the overdone swearing, relatively little outright splatter, and even a moratorium on the everybody-shagging-everybody-else strategy of Season 1.

While it still exuded an almost adolescent glee every time its lead actor kissed another man (especially in the opening episode 'Kiss Kiss Bang Bang') the second season was an altogether more chaste proposition, preferring to concentrate on melodrama and doomed romance. It even allowed the *Torchwood* gang to (Shock! Horror!) behave like a team rather than spending most of their time arguing and causing more problems than they solved.

And yet, and yet. Even with all these noticeable improvements, a flashy *Who* crossover with a three-episode appearance from Freema Agyeman's Martha Jones, and the fact that technically speaking it's a brilliantly slick and fast-paced piece of television... *Torchwood* is still a broken show. It's gotten better at pretending not to be, and is good at putting up a front the general public might be drawn in by, but the problems are still there, and no level of 'daring'

sauciness or pithy knowing humour is going to solve a show that's been misconceived from the start.

One of the biggest problems is that, underneath its slick techno-thriller exterior, *Torchwood* isn't remotely interested in being a science fiction show, and far prefers to be a horror story. Originally pitched as *This Life* meets *The X-Files*, only a handful of the show's 26 episodes have been genuine SF. Most could easily be restructured into dark fantasy or horror with the minimum of script editing, while others have either fallen into the science-as-magic category, or gone for a mix of action thriller and full-bore horror without even bothering with explanations (most noticeably in Season 1's 'Countrycide'). Even the quieter episodes have the wistful ambience of the ghost story about them (S1's 'Captain Jack Harkness', S2's 'From Out of the Rain'), and the show is often effective at generating moments of ethereal spookiness – although it's rarely good at making the resulting atmosphere last.

In fact, despite its obvious debts to *The X-Files* and procedural shows like *CSI*, *Torchwood* possesses a truly bizarre tone that veers from being a pacy adventure romp to the kind of tragic, maudlin melodrama that makes Season 6 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* seem like a barrel of laughs. The latter years of Joss Whedon's TV universe have often been an all-too-obvious influence on the show, and by the casting of James Marsters in the Spike-facsimile role of Captain John (even down to repeating the twist of him 'unexpectedly' turning out to be a good guy in the finale), it seems the production team isn't even bothering to hide their pillaging anymore.

The comparisons do them very little good, however. Next to the often virtuoso dance between playful comedy and dark tragedy that *Buffy* pulled off at its prime, *Torchwood* is more of an ungainly, clumsy wreck – like a bad cover band, they might be getting the tune right, but they're missing the soul behind it. The handful of truly effective *Torchwood* episodes have been the least *Buffy*-esque ones – melancholy and moving episodes like 'Out of Time' (1.10), 'Captain Jack Harkness' (1.11), and 'A Day in the Death' (2.08) where, for a brief period, you can see the show stumbling towards finding its own identity rather than simply aping what's gone before.

There's also the sense that even in its second season, *Torchwood* still mistakes po-faced bleakness and tangled relationship melodrama for being genuinely adult. Indeed, for a grown-up 'intelligent' show, it's at pains to make certain its characters are rarely smarter than its audience, and also still relies on fairly sizable lapses of logic – the most notable Season 2 example being episode 11 – 'Adrift' – where the entire plot is based around Jack keeping a secret from Gwen for absolutely no

understandable reason. These storytelling errors often seem to be overlooked by the general, non-genre audience as part of *Torchwood's* 'ridiculous' nature, but for anyone who require that (at the least) plot-point A actually connects with plot-point B, it's a significant problem.

In today's environment, of course, it's not really necessary for an SF show to be genuinely SF – especially as British TV has had a long and awkward relationship with both onscreen science fiction and fantasy. While we produce some amazing stuff, we're also a country whose main dramatic tradition is rooted in realism, and the low budgets (at least until recently) of even our most well-known examples of SF TV has meant asking the audience a lot in terms of suspending their belief. With ever-evolving movie special effects, and TV production values significantly rising in the late Eighties, it became easy to perceive SF TV as a creaky joke enacted on shaky sets, and only suitable for cult audiences.

As a result, for a while the genre almost completely died out on British TV – and it's this fear of being obsolete that's generated *New Who's* deliberately knowing attitude to humour. Davies has gone on the record saying that most of the gags aren't there for the children – they're there for the adults, and whether you love it or hate it, it's an astute strategy for a show that simply has to attract a large Saturday night audience. However, when you bolt this attitude onto a drama whose primary target is supposed to be adults, you end up with a show that has an exceptionally odd attitude to its own genre, and has to regularly wink at its own audience as if to say, "Honestly – it really is rather ridiculous, isn't it?" in order to prevent the audience themselves from reaching that conclusion first.

Torchwood is possibly the first time this 'release valve' for the audience's disbelief has also been used as a get-out clause for weak storytelling – and the end product is an exceptionally strange show that simply doesn't possess a middle ground. Displaying a love of purple dialogue and big emotion that often puts its parent show in the shade, *Torchwood* only has two modes. Either it's asking you to laugh at the idea that somewhere as ordinary as Cardiff could be crawling with aliens – ('Kiss Kiss Bang Bang' (2.01), 'Something Borrowed' (2.09)), or it's grabbing you by the throat and insisting you listen to everything it has to say about being human in the twenty first century (Everything from 'To the Last Man' (2.03) to 'Adam' (2.05) and 'Adrift' (2.11)).

There's never any sense of balance, and only rarely does the show earn the big emotions or justify the weighty topics it's aiming for – more often than not, it comes across like the random ramblings of an adolescent poet who needs to get out and start meeting

girls. What really causes it problems, however, and has ensured that even the noticeably improved second season is still undeniably broken, is the flaw that lies at the heart of *Torchwood's* central concept.

In its barest essentials, what the show is trying to do is take the dramatic principles of *New Who* and push them further. It's almost like a televisual equivalent of *The New Adventures*, Virgin's range of 1990s *Doctor Who* spin-off novels, where the authors were allowed to go in directions the parent show wouldn't normally explore – areas that sometimes included sex, swearing and gory violence. *Torchwood* should, in theory, be doing the same

thing for *New Who* – but where this approach hits a gigantic problem is that the show is trying to do so by using aspects of traditional horror storytelling, while still staying firmly rooted in the *Doctor Who* universe, and tapping into *Who's* essential ethos.

For all its self-indulgence and nihilistic darkness, *Torchwood's* instinct is still to reassure its audience that everything's going to turn out alright in the end, and to suggest Captain Jack and his team will eventually succeed in their quest to help humanity. The show frequently aims for the same sense of wonder and limitless possibility that *Doctor Who* presents (most notably, and successfully, at the climax of 'A Day in the Death' (2.08)) – and yet doesn't seem to

understand that *Who's* universe is, at heart, reassuring and innocent. It's a creation of the optimistic Sixties, and a world of terrors that (when most successful) play on childhood fears, only a few steps away from fairy tales – a concept that doesn't sit comfortably with Horror's central idea that the world is an unfriendly place filled with threat and danger. Even the episodes written by Peter J. Hammond, creator of the creepy cult classic *Sapphire and Steel*, go to prove this – 'Small Worlds' (1.05) and 'From Out of the Rain' (2.10) manage some nicely atmospheric moments, but can't truly scare because, despite all of *Torchwood's* efforts (and the attempt at a downbeat ending in 'Small Worlds'), the show is still taking place in a world where monsters are defeated.

A related problem is that, despite appearances, *Torchwood's* moral universe lacks any real complexity, and doesn't even manage to always make sense. 'Sleeper' (2.02) shows the Torchwood team have no problem with indefinite detention and torture if it means catching terrorists, but Tosh's flashback in 'Fragments' (2.12), featuring her brutal imprisonment by UNIT, casts the idea in a completely different and negative light – suggesting it's perfectly okay as long as Torchwood are the ones doing it, and the person involved actually is an alien.

What's almost always missing is any attempt to engage in a dialogue, not just with earlier episodes, but with the audience. The central ideas for episodes are almost always arch, 'high-concept' hooks that have been



done before; 'Reset' (2.06) was the old medical scientist doing the "Doesn't the ends justify the means?" talk. 'Sleeper' (2.02) tackled the well-worn question of what it means to be human, 'From Out of the Rain' (2.10) was largely pillaged from one of Hammond's *Sapphire and Steel* scripts, and even comedy wedding episode 'Something Borrowed' (2.09) was essentially ripped off wholesale from a *Buffy* episode.

Even the handling of its lead character isn't as transgressive or adventurous as it thinks it is. One of New *Who*'s most attention-grabbing aspects, Captain Jack seemed like a natural fit for a spin-off show, and giving free reign to his devil-may-care attitude and omni-sexual nature sounded an intriguing idea. And yet, even after the first year's epic mistakes with the character, where Jack was transformed into a brooding, glowering duplicate of *Angel* (all the way down to the immortality), there's the sense that Jack still doesn't work in *Torchwood* as well as he does in *Who* (John Barrowman's three episode turn in *Who* S3 was far more entertaining than any of his *Torchwood* work).

It also doesn't help that Barrowman doesn't quite have the dramatic range to carry off all the material he's being given. Season 2 did, at least, hand him a few more opportunities to flirt and play comedy, but his 'impassioned' face looks more ridiculous than empathetic, and his take on the line "What have they done to you my poor friend?" in 'Meat' (2.04) was one of the season's howlers. Along with this, there were plenty of occasions where Jack was once again the gruff, glowering leader of Season 1, and while plenty of fuss is made over his sexuality, there's never the sense that the show is doing anything with the idea other than using it to push a few transgressive buttons, and bolster up a slow-paced script. The best example of this is the completely irrelevant scene in 'To the Last Man' (S2, E03) that seemed to only be there to add a little boykissing to the episode; but more generally, Jack's stable relationship with Ianto is never really explored in any depth, and doesn't go through any significant changes. It's also notable that the show seems far more interested in the more traditional (and boringly predictable) unrequited longing between Jack and Gwen, and that Ianto is the only regular who doesn't get a dedicated episode this season (although considering the last Ianto-centric episode was the calamitous 'Cyberwoman' (1.04), maybe that's a good thing...).

There's also no end in sight for Jack's status as the latest suffering Christ-figure to hit the *Doctor Who* universe – apparently, it wasn't enough for him to be a roguish, bisexual Han Solo, he's now got to be a tortured, lonely immortal separated from his home, and sentenced to walk throughout eternity. He even gets the ultimate cliché of the Tragic Childhood™, leading to yet another badly executed story arc, and the utterly flat climactic episode 'Exit Wounds' (2.13) – which somehow made the shenanigans with Mr Pig-Faced Demon seem far more entertaining in retrospect.

While the seeds for the climax were clumsily sown in 'Adam' (2.05) with the revelation of Jack's long-lost younger brother Gray, if the writers were going to give Jack a sibling who unsurprisingly turned out to be evil, the least they could have done was (a) cast a decent

actor, and (b) make the character in any way interesting. Instead, we got a whining brat who was appallingly easy to defeat, and seemed to think that not even Jack being buried alive beneath Cardiff for 1900 years (with no apparent psychological after effects) was enough to make up for his treatment at the hands of Evil Torturing Aliens of No Fixed Identity. To add insult to injury, the final episode's action turned out to be merely a prologue for the main event – possibly the most over-extended and melodramatic death scene in recent memory. Both Owen and Tosh took nearly fifteen minutes to expire in a sequence that's the heart of what *Torchwood* is really about – shameless tearjerking cranked all the way to eleven, and a seriousness that verges on laughable.

Going from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the engaging drama of Rhys finally discovering Gwen's secret in 'Meat' (2.04) to the sight of Owen attempting to wrestle a CGI skeleton in 'Dead Man Walking' (2.07), *Torchwood* is the working definition of a contradiction in terms. It wants to be the dark, cool spin-off – the *Angel* to New *Who*'s *Buffy*, but hasn't yet realised that thanks to its multitude of flaws, the spin-off show it has more in common with is – unfortunately – *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Indeed, while the slightly *Xena*-esque comedy romp 'Something Borrowed' (2.09) was a terminal calamity, it was also the biggest sign that pitching the show as a purely camp romp might be a much better fit than any of its wearying self-conscious seriousness.

Torchwood may have stood more of a chance of working had it been stripped of its *Who* connections and designed as a purely standalone work (it's strongly rumoured this was how it was first conceived by Davies, as a late nineties post-*X-Files* thriller) – or even if it had sought to distance itself from the reassuring worldview of its parent show, telling distinct stories that just happen to take place in the same universe. Instead, it's hugely dependant on its *Who* connections – the three-part Martha arc was a shameless method of bolstering the ratings mid-season, the continuity references have become ever more overt, while the decision to air a pre-watershed repeat with edited content – yet another echo of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – shows the production team have realised that chasing the crossover audience is the best way of keeping the show alive.

However, it's doubtful any major changes are on the way, despite the oddball decision to cull two-fifths of the group. If and when the show returns, it may have shifted even further towards a less deliberately edgy approach – there are rumours it may be retooled with an even more family friendly tone, and it's worryingly possibly *Torchwood* could become a convenient dumping ground for *Who*'s ex-companions. There's certainly little chance *Torchwood* is going to go anywhere that other shows haven't been many times before, and while it'll remain a high profile series, it's unlikely to do British onscreen SF any favours. If each generation truly gets the television it deserves, then going by *Torchwood*, we could all be in serious trouble.

Foundation Favourites

Prelude to Space, by Arthur C. Clarke

By Andy Sawyer

Arthur C. Clarke's first novel was written in 1947 and published in the USA in 1951. It was not until 1953 that a British edition was published, although *The Sands of Mars* had been published two years earlier, and in many ways it seems odd to focus upon *Prelude* rather than (say) *Sands* (which was almost certainly the first Clarke I read and a novel for which I still have a great affection). Other works, such as *Against the Fall of Night* (first published in 1948 in magazine form and in book form 1953; revised as *The City and the Stars*, 1956) and (especially) *Childhood's End* (also 1953) show Clarke's nostalgic utopianism and Stapledonian vision more clearly, while his great work (I think) is more consistently in his short stories. *Prelude to Space* is in many ways less a novel than a manifesto, a propagandist work which can even be said to fictionalise the issues of his first book, *Interplanetary Flight* (1950) which argued the case for space he, and the British Interplanetary Society, had been presenting since before the war.

Yet this is precisely why I think it matters, and why I think it supports my case that Clarke is one of the most interesting and illuminating British writers of the 1950s – in any form – and few people, even among sf readers, have really noticed this.

The critic John Sutherland, on BBC Radio Four's "Front Row" programme the day after Clarke's death said that Clarke had been overtaken by subsequent science fiction, and had neglected "personal" issues like sexuality and relationships. All of this is true, but Sutherland – usually a sharp and intelligent commentator – seemed not to understand *why*. (Doris Lessing, on the same programme, had approached this question more closely.) *Prelude*, I think, offers a few clues.

Dirk Alexson is a promising American historian who has been chosen to investigate, as it happens, the biggest event in human history: the first moon landing. Much of the novel is his direct observation – conversations, films, lectures, filling in background for us. As a historian, he's curiously uninterested in motive and wider background. He *says* he is, but few of the book's characters have any depth to them, and the space programme's roots in the actual times Clarke was living in during the writing and publication of the novel are really quite sketchily treated.

This does not matter.

"Interplanetary", the international body which has long argued for space travel and is now putting its arguments into practice, is derived from the pre-War "Interplanetary Societies", notably the BIS, of which Clarke was a prominent member. As Alexson speaks to the participants of this project, he becomes more and more convinced by their arguments and examples. There is a camaraderie between the technicians and scientists, a poetic vision of the future which unites humanity. The Interplanetary team are, in Alexson's words, "visionaries who also happen to be scientists". In Clarke's own vision, this is a single step of a long voyage of understanding the universe.

Clarke's vision is Wellsian, in the senses that he sees

the only hope for humanity in the employment of science and grand visions. But while Wells believed in taking a scientific "long view" of the social world ("the honest application of the obvious") and saw his technocratic elite as a serious body which sometimes would have to make hard decisions, Clarke's is gentler, more playful. "Someone once said that all human activity was a form of play," says Sir Robert Derwent, the Director of Interplanetary; "We're not ashamed of wanting to play with spaceships." But we also see Sir Robert in more contemplative mood, in a later chapter, as he recalls the poetry of Swinburne that enthralled him as a boy, particularly the lines from "The Garden of Proserpine":

Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light
...
Only the sleep eternal
in an eternal night.

The "eternal night" is inevitable. But can humanity, before it overtakes us, understand its place in the universe? Clarke's stoic utopianism isn't geared to give a cosy answer to that question, but it recognises it as a question worth answering.

The details of Clarke's 1978, are, in themselves, cosy. "Interplanetary" is mostly administered by the British, with the mission HQ in Woomera, Australia, developed as a missile testing ground in the late 1940s. Although "international" in scope, there are no Western Europeans (save the French member of the crew of the "Prometheus"), let alone Russians, Indians or Chinese. Even Clarke's Americans, Alexson and the project's Deputy Director, Maxton, *sound* British, and one suspects that Alexson at least is only American so that a novel aimed initially at an American market can have an American main character. There is much nostalgia about London. This is a *future* London, of course. Alexson arrives at "New Waterloo Station" to see "the spacious sweep of the fine new Embankment, still only twenty years old", but the iconic St Paul's Cathedral and the Houses of Parliament are still there although Clarke, through a secondary character, reminds us that this Palace of Westminster is *not* the original building, which suffered extensive bomb damage during the war. Much is made of comsat technology – envisioned, of course, by Clarke himself in his famous *Wireless World* paper of 1945 – but the nature of this 1978 belies any thought that Clarke is engaged in any "prophetic" vision other than that of his main theme. Writing this using the word-processing facilities of a desktop computer I think of "three thousand tubes in the computer and control circuits alone" differently, even though that was a legitimate speculation in the 1950s. Those of us old enough to recall the Sex Pistols and the Clash in their pomp will smile at the reference to "dancing to the gentle, nostalgic rhythms so popular in

the late 1970s." Above all, apart from a recollection of the "unsettled 1950s" Clarke does not foresee any significant post-war conflict. The Third World has not risen, the Cold War somehow mellowed. (Later novels, admittedly, are darker.)

In John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, published the same year, there is an altogether different sense of unease. The satellites in orbit around Earth bear a more sinister payload. All is well with technological marvel as long as complacency and accident are factored out of the possibilities. Once breakdown happens, there is no guarantee that society can be mended.

Is this suggesting that *Prelude to Space* is simply an outdated exercise in nostalgia? I would say no, for two reasons.

First, we should not make the mistake of thinking that Clarke is trying to conceive of the world of 1978. This is his contemporary world, at a crucial point in its history, trying to decide whether the future lies in space, and whether that future should involve replicating the old system of nations and frontiers. To that second question, Clarke is giving as resounding a "no" as he is affirming the first. The future of the species itself depends upon space. We know now that the first moon landing – a decade earlier than Clarke gives it here – was fuelled by military and super-power rivalry, and the "poetic visionaries" were exploited. But that is not necessarily proof that Clarke and the "cranks" of the British Interplanetary Society were wrong. The novel's epilogue shows the result of a first moon-landing that didn't happen in our time-stream, with Alexson as one of the thousands of people with heart conditions whose lives have been saved by the moon's low gravity. This is a bright dawn for humanity. "[T]he Renaissance had come again." Clarke is not arguing that humanity will move into space at some time in the future. He is trying to persuade his readers that it *should*.

Second, and following on from this, there is a more existential argument here even that a (comparatively small) number of people might have their lives extended by new medical possibilities. Clarke's a-political stance is perhaps a more fundamental claim that the future of the species itself depends upon space. Underneath this account of the preparations for a moon landing is the implication that it will transform humanity. In Chapter 27, Alexson reflects upon the isolation of the moon. In one of those visionary chapter-endings which are so characteristic of Clarke's literary style, his interior monologue segues into the narrator's "And now at last, after all these ages, its loneliness was coming to an end". This image of "loneliness" is one, which as a number of commentators on Clarke have noted, is important. In Chapter 32, the final chapter of the novel proper, Dirk again recalls "that image of the lonely island lost on a boundless and untravelled sea". The chapter's final words, "the first frail ship was sailing into the unknown perils and wonders of the open sea", suggests a resolution to that loneliness. Whether it is the human race, Dirk Alexson, or Clarke himself whose sense of loneliness is assuaged by this exploration beyond the cradle, it is a powerful image rendered no less effective by the fact that it has been so often used.

Here, perhaps (almost certainly) more than Clarke intended, we have a picture of post-War Britain as important as anything by Kingsley Amis or Philip Larkin. This is the Britain that looked to the future, that saw rebuilding the country, and the world, after the horrors of the Second World War, as a challenge willingly to be met. Hiroshima and Nagasaki, showed the alternative,

but the dreams of the rocket scientists and science fiction readers pointed a way out. If other sf writers like John Wyndham, and John Christopher in novels like *The Death of Grass* (1956), show the anxiety of the 1950s, *Prelude to Space* shows the dream: the possibility that history does not have to be the way it is, and that humanity can take control of its destiny. It is a dream itself, of course, built upon its own anxieties. There is a clear tension between its small-c conservatism and its dramatic vision. "Prometheus" (and Clarke would have been aware, even if had not meant the implication, that *Frankenstein* is sub-titled "The Modern Prometheus") lifts off in the final chapter to the synchronised chimes of Big Ben. The fantasy that Britain would play a major role in the forthcoming age of space remained just that – a simple fantasy. Yet this was not quite so clear-cut at the time: the "British role in space" fantasy was one which offered a new, post-Empire Britain. The multinationalism in *Prelude to Space* is limited, but like the multinationalism of its contemporary, the "Dan Dare" strip, it is important. Political nationalism is over, although cultural nationalism remained.

Later novels, such as *Childhood's End*, would develop this sense in which Clarke's early novels are so particularly English, and in which icons of Englishness are so important to the nature of the futures depicted in them. Much of English fiction after 1945 seems to be a confrontation with the future, in the sense of understanding that after the War, and the social upheaval in its wake, things cannot be the same. We think, say, of the so-called "Angry Young Men" and writers of working-class life like John Braine and Alan Sillitoe, but science fiction seems to be waving similar flags. There is a sense – and I wouldn't argue too strongly with anyone who put this forward – that the "Brits in Space" fictions are trying to have their cake and eat it: relinquish one empire and make sure there is a place at the table in the feeding-frenzy for another. But while the history of humanity in space has not gone down the trail suggested in *Prelude to Space*, it and novels like it are affirmations that, like it or not, we are all on one planet together. *Prelude* is a document of the space age – whenever that may be said to begin – by someone who was trying to make it happen – and as much as any one man can be said to, did. Clarke's visions sit very uneasily with the much more pragmatic visions of the next couple of decades, but that is exactly why the book matters.



Resonances

By Stephen Baxter

I was born and raised two hundred miles from London, and yet, as for many Britons, much of my life has been dominated by the capital. I commuted to work there for four years, and London is the centre of the UK publishing industry, as of so much else.

Perhaps that's why, like other great cities, London has come in for its share of genre battering, from alien invasion in HG Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897) to desiccation in *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (dir. Val Guest, 1961). With Sir Arthur C Clarke, I saved London in *Sunstorm* (Gollancz, 2005) – but in *Flood* (Gollancz, June 2008) I'm drowning it.

And in fact, I've discovered, London seems more frequently subjected to ordeals by water rather than by fire.

§

This watery anxiety may reflect the very real threat of flooding. The Thames Barrier was built in response to a catastrophic flooding episode in 1953. But

climate-change predictions of sea level rises are invalidating some of the Barrier's design assumptions – and after a half-century of development some one and a quarter million people now live on the capital's flood plain. These fears are reflected in Richard Doyle's

fat disaster thriller *Flood* (2002) (an update of a pre-Barrier novel called *Deluge* (1977)), in which a North Sea storm surge overwhelms the Barrier and floods modern London. The research is meticulous, but setting the river on fire (from downstream oil refineries) overeggs the pudding. (A poorly received movie of the book was released in 2007, and SAS action man Chris Ryan delivered a juvenile version of a similar scenario in *Flash Flood* (2006).)

In more literary works a flooded London is often a stage for dramas of judgement and cleansing. Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004) is set in an alternate London centred not on Trafalgar but Victory Square, governed not by Blair but 'Bliss'. As the waters gather relentlessly, only a couple of innocent kids are saved by being swept

across from Gee's city into our London, emerging in the sunshine of Kew Gardens. Ben Elton's *Blind Faith* (2007), a dystopian future about the abandonment of reason, is brave and forceful but lacks grace; it feels like 1984 rewritten by a grumpy old man. And the setting is a flooded London: '[Finchley] was not an easy place for Trafford to get to, as it involved crossing Lake London with his bicycle and disembarking at the Paddington jetty ...' (Chapter 21). London itself is a kind of punishment, horribly crowded and overrun with the plagues that take our children.

In Will Self's *The Book of Dave: A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future* (2006) Dave is a forty-something London cabbie, maddened by dodgy antidepressants and his separation from his son. In the distant future, after an unexplained flood has reduced England to an archipelago called Ing, a hateful new culture arises based entirely on Dave's dug-up rantings. Much of the dialogue is in 'Mokni', a descendant of Cockney spiced with Dave's cabbie lingo: 'Ware 2, guv?' Genre fans will surely be reminded of Walter M Miller's

A Canticle for Liebowitz (1960). As sf Dave isn't terribly convincing; it's hard to imagine our descendants being quite so dumb as this. But though Self shows only our worst qualities being projected into the future, Dave contains at its heart a dense, earthy, affectionate



portrait of London itself, a city seen 'spreading to the far hills of the south in brick peak after tarmac trough, blood-orange under the dying sun' (Chapter 14).

§

Sometimes London's flooding is an incident in a wider deluge. Memorable global floods include Garrett P Serviss's *The Second Deluge* (1912) and Karel Capek's *War with the Newts* (1936). In Kim Stanley Robinson's *Blue Mars* (1996), after volcanism melts the Antarctic ice sheets, the flooded Thames estuary is host to a strange Brueghel-like intertidal culture which lives off the submerged pickings of the past. 'Boxes, furniture, roofs, entire houses' come floating down the river: 'London,

washing out to sea' (p219 of the 1996 Voyager paperback edition).

In *Deluge* (1928), by UK writer S. Fowler Wright, 'the slightest tremor' (Prelude) on a global scale has inundated much of the planet, and the protagonists struggle to survive on the archipelago that is all that remains of the Cotswolds. *Deluge* is quite remarkable for a book written by a 46-year-old English accountant in 1920, as the characters shed their 'civilised' restraints, and a strong man imposes a crude new 'law'. Wright rails against then-modern industrial civilisation and the sheep-like people he argues it bred, and in some ways this book foreshadows not so much polite Wyndhamesque British catastrophes but American social-Darwinian dramas like Niven and Pournelle's *Lucifer's Hammer* (1977).



Of course John Wyndham himself drowned the world. His enjoyable *The Kraken Wakes* (1953; pages numbers from the 1955 Penguin edition) is a watery reprise of Wells's *War of the Worlds*. A 'meteor' shower delivers invaders to the ocean's abyssal depths; these may be visitors from a 'high-pressure' world, such as Jupiter. There is a bleak Darwinian perspective: 'Any intelligent form is its own absolute; and there cannot be two absolutes' (p180). In the war's terminal phase the polar ices are melted, and London's relentless drowning is told in pitiless detail: 'One day we walked down to Trafalgar Square ... On the far side, and down as much as we could see of Whitehall, the surface was as smooth as a canal' (p221).

JG Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) is something of a riposte to Wyndham. After anomalous solar flares cause intense heating, London sinks into a gummy lagoon: 'The dense groves of giant gymnosperms [crowded] over the roofs of the abandoned department stores' (Chapter One). As nature reverts to archaic forms in an 'avalanche backwards into the past' (Chapter Three), humans also begin to regress; our reptilian sub-brains remember the swamps. *The Drowned World* is a kind of inversion of Wyndham, a convulsion of the psyche as much as of the physical world, a narrative in which only the insane would even bother trying to save civilisation. But for all the heat there is an emotional coldness. There is only one female character, and no children at all, no families; in this self-consciously

psychological study, the normal, instinctive, indeed genetic motivations to survive are set aside in favour of solipsistic isolation.

§

The ur-text of all London latherings is surely Richard Jefferies' astonishing *After London, or, Wild England* (1885). The Earth is convulsed by the passage of an 'Unknown Orb': 'It became green everywhere in the first spring, after London ended' (Chapter I). Abandoned London dams the Thames, and southern England is drowned by an immense inland sea called the Lake, around which a brutal medieval society huddles behind stockades. The most compelling passages describe a heart-of-darkness journey into the carcass of London itself, a lethal landscape where the beach is black, the air yellow and the sun blood red; 'all the rottenness of a thousand years and of many hundred millions of human beings is there festering under the stagnant water' (Chapter V). It is a relief to retreat to the Lake, which represents beauty, harmony and freedom. The book has to be seen against the background of late-Victorian distrust of industrial civilisation, as expressed in works like Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), and foreshadows judgemental works like S Fowler Wright's. But Jefferies expresses a particularly intense dislike of London itself. He may have blamed the city for the consumption that was killing him while he worked on *After London*, not yet forty.

A profound yet hopeful response to Jefferies is Brian Aldiss's *Greybeard* (1964). Spaceborne nuclear tests have sterilised mankind, and as the last childless generations age, civilisation steadily breaks down. Again the Thames is naturally dammed, and an inland 'Sea of Barks' (Berkshire) is formed. But, amid an earthy story of cantankerous old people, the book is studded with vivid pastoral descriptions which recall Jefferies, and the fecundity of nature is itself a source of hope: 'The ascendancy of man had only momentarily affected the copiousness of this stream [of life]' (Chapter 7).

Londoners are wary of their rivers, which have been constrained and overbuilt since Roman times. The climate-change predictions are worrying, but must London become a swampy Ballardian nightmare? Maybe Londoners will find ways to live with their rivers in something like their natural state, as Egyptians welcome the Nile's annual floods for the fertility they bring.

The New X: More Light

By Graham Sleight

I'm writing this on the night before the Arthur C Clarke Award ceremony. (It's also the night before my deadline but that, I assure you, is pure coincidence.) The Clarke Award this year has already caused its share of controversy. When the shortlist was announced this year, more than a few eyebrows were raised. That list – comprising Stephen Baxter's *The H-Bomb Girl*, Matthew de Abaitua's *The Red Men*, Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army*, Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts*, Ken MacLeod's *The Execution Channel*, and Richard Morgan's *Black Man* – seemed, to many, more than usually detached from the field's own sense of what was worthwhile in 2007. (Three days after the shortlist was announced, I called a friend in the US who's worked in the field for several decades. Almost his first words to me were "We think you've all gone crazy.") It was suggested that the presence of three books on the list by authors not associated with sf (Hall, Hall, and de Abaitua) was an attempt by the award to ignore the genre heartland in favour of the "literary", whatever that means. Indeed, some felt that these three novels weren't sf at all. And, most prominently, people were surprised by omissions from the list: in particular Ian McDonald's coruscating *Brasyl* (which won the BSFA Award and is now up for the Hugo and Locus Awards), and Michael Chabon's intricate alternate history *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (which has just won the Nebula and is also up for the Hugo and Locus.)

There's an issue here, and a meta-issue. The issue is whether this year's jury got the shortlist "wrong". The meta-issue is my sense that the debate around the composition of this year's Clarke Award shortlist has been less fruitful than before, and that this is rooted in fixable things about the way the Clarke operates. But let's deal with the "wrongness" first. Personally, I'm happy to say that I think *Brasyl* was the best sf novel published in the UK last year; that it's a welcome corrective to the first-world-focus of much sf (and, one has to say, much of this year's Clarke list); and that its omission from the list is, to me, just not comprehensible. The omission of Chabon's book is something I can live with, as its attempts to make isomorphic the condition of Jewishness, the game of chess, and the protocols of the detective novel wound up seeming forced to me. On the other hand, I think that the Sarah Hall book thoroughly deserved to be on the list, and that the inclusion of the Baxter – the first YA book to be shortlisted for the Clarke – was also a bold and worthwhile choice. But that begs the question: by what right do I assert that my opinion about *Brasyl* is "right" and that of the jury is "wrong"? The five people on the jury this year are smart and able people, and I don't doubt for a second that they've worked hard and in good faith to do their job.

Let me come back to that word *comprehensible*, which I used in the last paragraph, and to the meta-issue.

I was on the Clarke jury in the preceding two years, and one of the things that amused and puzzled me was the degree to which people who weren't on the jury attempted to impose narratives on our choices, on the basis of no evidence. In 2006, it was said, we had included Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* because the Clarke "always has a literary novel". Some of the same puzzlement as was directed at this year's jury was also applied to our 2007 choices of Jan Morris's *Hav* and Lydia Millet's *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*. To me, inside the jury bubble, those choices were entirely comprehensible; to those outside, even when they'd read the books, they often weren't.

So, I will find myself sitting in the Apollo Cinema tomorrow evening, and I will hear one of those six books announced as the winner. For about half the shortlist, I'll be somewhere between happy and very happy; for about half, I'll be somewhere between grumpy and furious. But my problem is that either way, *I won't know why the decision has been made*. Let me, as Alan Partridge would say, paint you a hypothesis. Say, for instance, that the Chabon book wasn't excluded because the jury didn't think it was good, but because they thought that pure alternate histories shouldn't count as sf. That's not an unarguable position, according to certain ways of looking at sf. I think it's wrong (as I argued in a previous column), but it's not out of court. But if that was why the Chabon was excluded (along with other fine books like Owen Sheers's *Nazis-in-Wales Resistance*), then the reading public is not being given all the tools it needs to make sense of the shortlist. Or, more precisely, it's asking the Clarke-interested public to play a game whose rules and boundaries only the jury knows in full; and I think the Clarke should serve the interests of the readers above all.

The proposal I'm heading towards, as you may guess, is that in future Clarke Award juries should present some kind of detailed justification for their decisions in a public forum. (Obligatory disclaimer: although this proposal appears in the magazine of the BSFA, one of the Clarke's juror-providers, and although I edit the journal of the Science Fiction Foundation, another juror-provider organisation, this is a personal view and doesn't represent the official policy of either.) This justification could take the form of a statement signed up to by all the jurors to be read out at the ceremony; but this runs the risk of dodging issues. The Tiptree Award solution, whereby the jury makes a rather more extensive statement about their year's reading, goes a few steps further, but not quite as far as I'd like.

I'm thinking, in fact, that the Clarke should adapt the model of the World Fantasy Award: once the award is announced, the jurors should appear on a panel and talk about why they've done what they've done. Within pre-agreed bounds (civility, moderation by the chair of

jurors), they should answer questions from the public. If they, as smart, good-faith people, have reasons why they didn't think *Brasyl* was shortlistable, I think it enhances rather than detracts from the conversation to hear them. All I'm suggesting is that we need a forum where an issue like that can be debated transparently rather than guessed at.

There are a couple of objections to this that need dealing with. The first is the silly one that we don't, in this country, get to ask the jurors in a criminal trial why they decided on a verdict, so why should we do the same with the Clarke jury? But the two kinds of jury just aren't comparable – in the stakes of what they're deciding, in the kinds of judgment they make (about proved facts in one case, about subjective judgments in the other). Indeed, I think the language of "juries" is actively misleading in the context of literary awards, and I prefer to think of them as "judging panels". The first-and-a-halfth is a bit deeper. Sometimes – whisper who dares – judging panels don't always agree unanimously about their decisions. If, say, three jurors said that they wanted X to win, while two said they'd really have preferred Y, then a public airing of those disagreements might undermine the legitimacy of the award given to X. But that – and the Clarke doctrine that jurors sign up to "cabinet responsibility" – rests, I think, on an unhelpful premise. The cabinet has to agree not to air private grievances in public about, say, the 10% tax rate because it'd impede their ability to function as a group in future. But as soon as the Clarke jury has chosen a winner, it dissolves. The institution continues to the next year, of course, but with a cast at least partly different. The Clarke is, I'm sure, more influenced by the (Man) Booker Prize in its organisation and presentation than by any extant awards in the sf field; and the Booker, in theory, operates by the same sort of principle of collective responsibility. But in practice (because of the higher stakes and the greater media interest), the Booker's jury splits and issues tend to get leaked to the media. So we often know, even if it's not officially announced, what the "runner-up" for the Booker was, and who argued what way. Given that the Booker is pretty clearly the pre-eminent prize for fiction in the UK, you can't claim that knowing this undermines its legitimacy or profile; and how much better it would be to have this conversation, as I'm suggesting, in public and on the record.

The second major objection is that a panel discussion of shortlisted (or non-shortlisted) works would inevitably lead the jurors into negative comments about

why they didn't view certain works as highly as others, whereas the Clarke process at the moment consists only of positive statements. First, there's "We think these are the best six sf novels of the year", then "We think this is the best sf novel of the year". Getting into public debate about the demerits of certain works would undermine that spirit. Well, one's first comment is that the World Fantasy Award has managed to walk this

line for a couple of decades without collapsing. The second is that the Clarke is about aesthetic judgments, some aesthetic judgments are negative, and there's no point kidding ourselves about that. I'm sure that the judging panel can think of ways to be diplomatic but clear about how they reached their conclusions.

The last objection is that future Clarke choices, of shortlists and winners, should stand or fall on their own merits without additional gloss. But, frankly, they often don't. I'm sure that everyone in the sf community who follows the award has past results that they're baffled by: fill in your own example here, or guess mine from the title of this column. But reading the books concerned often doesn't help the bafflement. To be told that X is better than Y *without substantiation* is as unhelpful in an award as it would be in a review. To put it another way, I don't like the idea of Clarke judges having power without accountability.

And think of the advantages, too. The Clarke would get a great deal more publicity, especially if the panel was done in collaboration with the Award's new partner, Sci-fi London. The guessing-games, which have generated so much entropy

this year, would be torpedoed. They might be replaced by criticism of the judges' actual statements, but we would at least then have criticism based on evidence. Above all, we'd have transparency. In the nineteenth century, Walter Bagehot said, of the monarchy, "We must not let daylight in on the magic". Which is an eloquent way of saying that non-transparency is often in the interests of the thing concealed, not those it's supposed to serve. The constituents of the Clarke aren't primarily the authors, the publishers, or the critics; they're the readers. By "readers", I mean the broadest possible set of people who read sf. I don't want the Clarke simply to consist of tablets of stone handed down from the impossibly lofty mountain where the jury sits; I want it to be part of the conversation. We're all here, surely, we're all paying attention to the Clarke, because we hope it'll generate good talk. All I'm asking is for the award itself to lead in that.

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