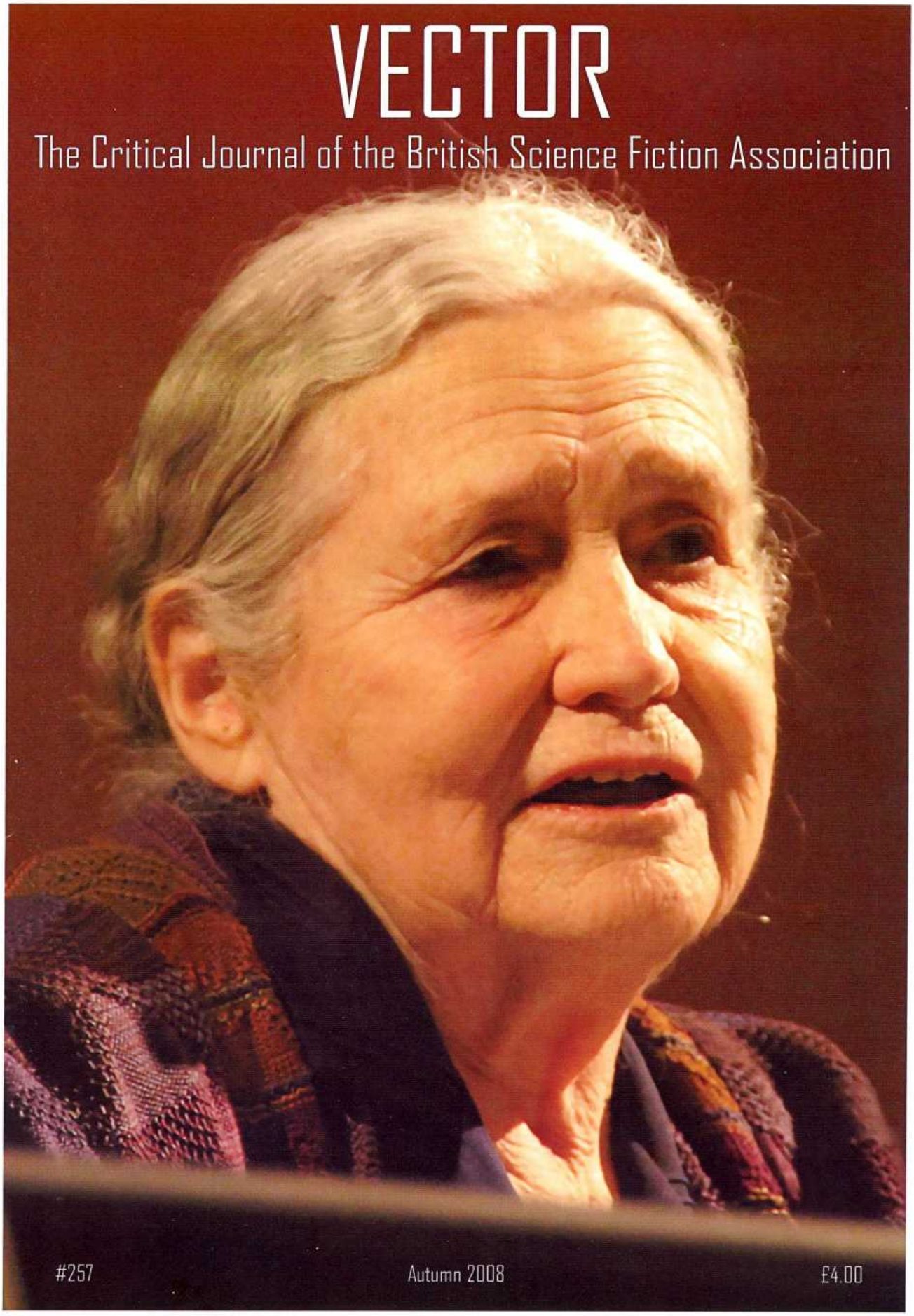
VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association



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Vector 257

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Contents

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Cover: Doris Lessing, British writer, at lit.cologne, Cologne literature festival 2006, Germany : 2006. Photographer Elke Wetzig (elya) Sourced from Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/ Published under GNU Free Documentation License Version 1.2, November 2002 For more details see http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:GNU_Free_Documentation_License

Torque Control

Ah, August! That magical time, when a young man's fancy turns to... awards?

We have a couple of bits of award-related content this time around. First and foremost, Adam Roberts takes a look at the SF of new Nobel Laureate Doris Lessing, asking why – despite her fondness for the genre – the SF community and canon seem not to have embraced her work. (I'm as guilty as anyone of this, so I'm going to read the two novels of hers that I have on the shelf – *Mara and Dann* and its long-windedly titled sequel – and report back.) We also have a letter from Nic Clarke, responding to Graham Sleight's suggestion, in his column last issue, that the Clarke Award judges release a statement or contribute to a panel discussing the choices they make. There was a bit more discussion of this issue on Torque Control, when I posted Graham's column on the *Vector* website [1] – but don't let that stop this new tradition of sending letters! Letters are good.

Nominating for the BSFA Awards is also good, which is why we have a short article by the new Awards Administrator, Donna Scott, reminding you that nominations are now open for best novel, best short fiction, best artwork, and best non-fiction.

But before we get too caught up in divining the best of this year, there's the final post-mortem on the best of *last* year to consider. The Hugo Awards, as I'm sure most people reading this have seen by now, threw up relatively few surprises, but a number of notable results nonetheless. Pre-eminent among them is probably Michael Chabon's win, for *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, in Best Novel. Despite predictions that the BSFA Awards (in which Chabon finished last) would be a good barometer for the Hugos, I don't think Chabon's win comes as a surprise, nor do I think it's undeserved. But it is surely notable: not so much for the fact that it completes a Nebula-Hugo double, or for the fact that Chabon picked up the Locus and Sidewise Awards besides, but for the fact that Chabon is now the only writer ever to win a Pulitzer and a Hugo, and arguably the first author not from a genre background to win. (Susanna Clarke had published a number of short stories in genre venues before *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* appeared, for instance.) Of course, Chabon is a special case, and has been heading towards genre for the last decade or more. (I've been dipping into his recent essay collection, *Maps and Legends*, and my strongest impression so far is that in this instance, he's not writing for me, because I don't need to be convinced that genre fiction can be good.) So I don't think Chabon's win indicates a paradigm shift in Hugo voters' reading tastes, or that Margaret Atwood's next SF novel is a shoe-in for the ballot; but when (say) Junot Diaz gets around to publishing his SF novel, I wouldn't bet against him becoming the second writer to do the Pulitzer-Hugo double.

There's interest in some other categories, too. As last year, when Tim Pratt beat Neil Gaiman, the short story category this year saw a relative newcomer, Elizabeth Bear, beat established Hugo veterans, Mike Resnick and Michael Swanwick – and quite convincingly, too. I'm not sure I'd have voted for Bear's "Tideline" over Ken MacLeod's "Who's Afraid of Wolf 359?", but it's not an unworthy winner, and it's very good to see new names breaking through. Indeed, as was pointed out by Nicholas Whyte, Bear is only the second Hugo winner, Pratt being the first, to have been born in the 1970s. Meanwhile, in the first true test of the Best Dramatic Presentation Long Form/Short Form split, *Heroes* didn't take home a Long Form win; Mary Robinette Kowal picked up the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, beating the odds that have recently favoured novelists; and John Scalzi ended David Langford's run as Best Fan Writer by getting twice as many first-place votes. On accepting his award he asked people to vote for someone else next year, a request he later repeated on his blog; a good suggestion, since it would be nice to see the category open up properly, and one I intend to follow, having just bought a membership for the Montreal Worldcon.

Another thing I'll be doing in Montreal is attending the WSFS business meeting to vote on the proposed abolition of the Semiprozine category (*Ansible, Locus, Interzone, NYRSF* et al.), and associated changes to the Hugos. I haven't fully decided how I feel about this yet: it will probably depend on how the associated changes are worded. As someone put it in an online discussion, we have forty years of experience to tell us that newszines (*Ansible, Locus*) screw over any category in which they are allowed to compete, but that there aren't enough of them to support a viable category on their own. The danger, I think, is that they end up slipping into another category: either Best Related Work (as it will be retitled), or Best Fanzine (Kathryn Cramer has pointed out that NYRSF could reclassify itself as a fanzine without too much difficulty) and dominate there instead. However, if this is avoided, I suspect I won't be too sorry to see Best Semiprozine go; there doesn't have to be a Hugo category for everything.

Anyway. In *non*-awards related content elsewhere in this issue, we have a bumper catch-up reviews section, heroically pulled together by Kari Sperring; Jonathan McCalmont on SF's changing attitude to scientific laws; Frank Ludlow on reviewing; plus regular columns from Stephen Baxter, Saxon Bullock, Graham Sleight, and Andy Sawyer (who this issue looks at *Vector* #1 as his "Foundation Favourite"). Next issue we're looking at war in SF, with among other things essays on *The Carhullan Army*, John Scalzi's "Green Soldier" trilogy, *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* and the continuing influence of *The War of the Worlds*. See you there.

Niall Harrison

[1] http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/2008/07/20/should-the-clarke-award-change/

Letters

To the editor:

I read with interest – and some incredulity – Graham Sleight's column about the Clarke Award in *Vector* 256. The short version of my response is that I just don't see the point.

Firstly, I find it hard to imagine that any public discussion of this nature will be positive rather than negative, focusing on celebrating the books that were shortlisted rather than condemning the ones that were not. Graham's column, indeed, is a case in point: while he says that the WFA panel has avoided the pitfalls, it is notable that his own argument keeps circling back to the fact that his favourite book of 2007 was absent from the shortlist, and he wants to know why.

Secondly, recent months have made it abundantly clear that people can and do have passionate conversations about the Clarke without needing to know the slightest bit about why the judges made the decisions they did – and, furthermore, that those responsible for the more histrionic elements of this discussion would neither listen nor care even if they *were* told. They have Ideas about the Clarke that transcend logic.

Nor do I think explaining what 'the rules of the game' were for any given judging panel would help, because then people would just argue about the boundaries instead of the books. While I admire the optimism in Graham's suggestion that a public statement of some type would satisfy dissenters, diffuse outrage and take us all to a blissful nirvana where everyone debated rationally and on the same terms, I've spent enough time on the internet to know that people don't argue because they lack enough facts to make a judgement; they argue because they like to argue, and because no two people's judgements are the same, even when they *do* have the same facts.

Any sort of public statement would surely only switch the conspiracy theories to a different, more gossipy focus: who on the jury got shouted down, who got outvoted, who's not telling the whole story, who's a snob for the literary stuff, etc. (Contrary to Graham's comments on the Booker, I think dissenting judges going public *does* undermine the value of the award, besides looking petty.) In other words, it would make it about the judges' individual preferences and prejudices, not about their joint decision on the books. Publicly airing and dissecting this would, potentially, be a big slap in the face to whoever won: actually, we only picked yours because we were split over the better books, say, is not something any award should be admitting at its own ceremony.

Thirdly, a moderated panel in which the judges face their public seems to me a particularly limited and problematic way of tackling this issue, since it will inevitably give more weight to those individuals who speak more confidently in public, and its message will reach at best a tiny minority of the Clarke's readers, except by hearsay internet reporting.

In essence, I can't imagine anything useful coming of this idea, nor – if I am entirely honest – do I much care why the judges chose the books they did in the first place. Awards are not reviews; they are a statement, not an argument. Arguing, I think, is for the rest of us to do. I can read and have an opinion on the selected – and rejected – books all by myself, without either imposing a narrative on the judges' choices or requiring them to impose one for me.

I'd probably only disagree with them, anyway.

Nic Clarke

To the editor:

"Producers take for ingratitude the writings of their viewers." (With apologies to Tagore.)

Saxon Bullock (*Vector* 256, "Torching the Wood", p. 39) makes some good criticisms of the TV series *Torchwood*. However, is it logical to criticise it for being *intended* as mainstream drama (with SF-style flavouring), rather than proper Science Fiction? Or, to use an old Jedi mind trick, "These are not the programmes that you are looking for" Mr Bullock!

Yours sincerely,

Lindsay Jackson

To the editor:

Nice to see letters in *Vector*. I was rather surprised, though, by the nature of Martin Lewis's missive (V256).

I thought that President Baxter's piece on the question of "as others see us" in *Vector* 255 was fine. I didn't find it stale. In fact, I thought it was great to see an established author voice a determination to challenge perceptions and unnecessary maligning of the genre. It's the first time I have seen an author of calibre do so publicly and commit to more than just warm air, and I think it's only proper that such bad journalism is addressed.

Nor did I feel that the piece was unbalanced by a potted history of "as others see us"; rather, I thought it was a good, rounded piece, and I found it patronising that Martin would assume what I need. I need Stephen Baxter in *Vector*, thanks very much.

I think the date of the reviews discussed is irrelevant. The article gathered references and used them. They are recent enough -- and five of the books reviewed in the same issue of Vector are as old. I have no idea of the Stephen's lead time, or how long the article was with Vector, or when he gets a chance to write things, but I for one don't mind a year-old review being referenced in such an article. It was a good article and, due to my professional occupation, the last line made me laugh, a lot.

The further extract from Patrick Ness' review of Tricia Sullivan's novel that Martin provides just emphasizes why it is important to question the need for a slur on the genre. Why should a review that includes such high praise feel the need to sneer, to have a sly dig at the genre? It shouldn't -- it is unnecessary. I think this is where Martin may have missed the point totally.

SF helps me to survive the twenty-first century. If Martin meant to ask whether solutions to the problems humanity currently faces may benefit from geniuses with open minds -- I don't know. I do know that much that was once SF is now reality, and that there is a difference between having an idea and making an idea work. These are two different jobs.

In all, I thought Martin's letter was unfair, not constructive, and couched in rather unfortunate terms. Words such as "ludicrous", "incompetent" and "myopic" all seem a bit severe. It doesn't achieve anything, and to be honest was rather unseemly, and disrespectful of our newly ascended Supreme Leader. As a BSFA member, I am incredibly grateful to Stephen Baxter for all the time and effort he puts into the BSFA. If he happens to write something I am not interested in I will skip it -- no big deal -- but that is rare. I wish i could say the same of all Vector's contributors.

(That said, I would love him to look at Alternate Second and then First World Wars!)

I didn't want to be writing a letter like this. I am sure controversy and discussion are healthy, but from a BSFA writer I respect, I expect much better, and I question Martin's aggressive and, in my mind, unfair stance.

Yours etc,

James Bacon

The BSFA Awards 2008

Donna Scott

I would like to start by expressing my thanks to Claire Brialey, from whom I took over the role of BSFA Awards Administrator earlier this year. She has put in sterling work over the years and I only hope that I can emulate her. I shall try to make the transition from her tenure to mine barely conspicuous, in fact, you shouldn't notice me at all, I would (quietly) argue. After all, it's not about the Administrator, it's about the books! The stories! The words! The art! Hey, it's about the Science Fiction. *Who is that person squeaking? What person?* Exactly.

For this issue of *Vector*, I have been invited to write a few words about the BSFA awards, and to announce that the nominations are now officially open. I say *officially*, because I have already been sent a few nominations, over the summer, from members impressed with what they have read in the first six months of the year. I have been able to accept them, because the format of the awards has not changed from last year, and the categories are the pretty much same: Best Novel, Best Short Fiction, Best Artwork and Best Non-Fiction.

TheRules

You may nominate a work if YOU:

1. Are a member of the BSFA

2. Give your nominations to the Awards Administrator, or send them to arrive by January 16th 2009.

Best Novel

The Best Novel award is open to any novel-length work of science fiction or fantasy that has been published in the UK for the first time in 2008. (Serialised novels are eligible, provided that the publication date of the concluding part is in 2008). If a novel has been previously published elsewhere, but it hasn't been published in the UK until 2008, it is eligible.

Best Short Fiction

The Best Short Fiction award is open to any shorter work of science fiction or fantasy, up to and including novellas, first published in 2008 (in a magazine, in a book, or online). This includes books and magazines published outside the UK.

Best Artwork

The Best Artwork award is open to any single science fictional or fantastic image that first appeared in 2008. Again, provided the artwork hasn't been published before 2008 it doesn't matter where it appears.

Best Non-Fiction

The Best Non-Fiction award is open to any written work about science fiction and/or fantasy which appeared in its current form in 2008, in print or online. Whole collections comprised of work that has been published elsewhere previous to 2008 are ineligible.

Subject to the following rules, you may nominate as many pieces as you like in any category, but you may only submit one nomination for any particular piece. Please be sure to include the following information with your nominations: the award category, the author or artist, the title, and the source (i.e. the publisher or magazine). All nominations must be received in writing, and must include your name to be accepted.

The shortlists for these four awards will be comprised from the five works in each category that receive the most individual nominations by the deadline. Works published by the BSFA, or in association with the BSFA, are ineligible for a BSFA award.

I can be reached at the following addresses:

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Why nominate?

The nuts and bolts side of the awards out of the way, I'd like to discuss what the BSFA awards mean to me. Yes, I know I said it's not about me – it still isn't – but permit me to share the thoughts of the many heads, as it were, from which I am speaking.

First of all, there's my newbie-member-head. When the opportunity to be Awards Administrator came along, I didn't just say yes, I said yes, *please*! I am a relative newcomer to the BSFA, and though I've probably just about got the hang of what goes on at a convention, I feel I am still as new and shiny to the scene as it is to me.

Perhaps that's how everyone feels, though. I certainly meet many people, in relation to the BSFA and in science fiction fandom in general, whose passion and enthusiasm for the subject is plainly evident. Even when I read some of the more lively online discussions on the BSFA forum, I can only be impressed by the immense knowledge of the subject so many members seem to carry around with them in their heads. It certainly makes me feel as though I should be keeping up. Following the discussions about the BSFA awards has made me even more aware of what's out there. I don't think anyone can help bringing an opinion to a discussion, but I am mostly still listening and learning, and I hope I can bring an open mind to the role. But as time goes on don't expect me to be anything other than more passionate about it.

What it is that we do when we vote for something? When we *bother* to hand in a vote, we are putting ourselves out – okay, not much, but we are. It is an act of dedication; a chance to repay those writers and artists with an accolade that we feel is *worth something*. And it doesn't matter if it's the deft prose, the literary cleverness, the inventive use of zombies or whatever it is that makes the work stand out to us – to us it is the Best. As a member, I want my vote to be valued, and so, as Administrator, I will treat your votes with the respect with which they are given.

Then there's my industry-head. As someone who works a little in the publishing industry, I am aware of the pride that is felt by the writers, artists and publishing houses when their work gets nominated for an award – it's a real cause for celebration. Sales are also very good, of course, but to be nominated for an award is a real affirmation of the reader's praise, transcending the producer/consumer relationship – especially as most writers and editors I know don't see their books as 'products'. It's very nice to be involved with something that proves just how far removed we are from stamping out 'made' goods.

Then there's my academic-head. Now, I'm a recent former student, rather than an academic, but I do feel as though I can appreciate the fervour with which the academics amongst our number love writing and reading about science fiction. Having read a lot of genre-related literary criticism over the past three years, I can testify that there are many fantastic and very readable books out there, as well as electronic journals, academic websites and bloggery. It's not stuff you'll find in the usual bookshops, but I'm struck that we are a well-read lot and often eager to share good links and sources. A few people have told me that they'd like to see the Non-Fiction Award presented next year, and pointed me towards a Livejournal Community – http://community.livejournal.com/nonficawards/ – but feel free to add your opinions on the BSFA forum.

I look forward to watching the debate as members discuss the intrinsic merits of that book or this artwork, and I'm certain that each of my heads will have an opinion (though they may disagree with each other occasionally). However, I will be biting my tongue. I will be keen to discuss any aspect of the Awards with members, except for what should or should not be nominated. Nonetheless, I am going to enjoy reading as much as I can through the year, and can't wait to see what you all rate. Roll on the BSFA Awards ceremony at Eastercon LX, in Bradford next year!

Doris Lessing and SF

Adam Roberts

Not everybody was glad to hear that Doris Lessing had won the 2007 Nobel Prize for Literature:

American literary critic Harold Bloom called the academy's decision "pure political correctness ... Although Ms. Lessing at the beginning of her writing career had a few admirable qualities, I find her work for the past 15 years quite unreadable ... fourth-rate science fiction," Bloom told the Associated Press. [1]

It would be *nice* to believe that the emphasis in Bloom's final three word dismissal is on the *fourth-rate* rather than on the *science fiction*. That, in other words, it is not by virtue of the fact that these books are science fiction that they are, in Bloom's mind, fourth-rate. Such would be the triumph of hope over experience. But if the Literary Establishment (a nebulous entity, I appreciate) sometimes looks down upon Lessing as a SF writer, what does the SF Establishment think of her work?

At first blush the answer to that question would seem to be that, despite writing many notable science fiction novels, Lessing is today pretty much ignored by the world of SF. It seems a long time ago that she was guest of honour at the 1987 Worldcon in Brighton. Her recent work has been barely reviewed in SF circles – almost nothing on the alt-historical *Alfred and Emily* (2008) or on the weird, half-fantasy creation myth of *The Cleft* (2007), nothing at all on *The Grandmothers* (2004) (four novellas, one of which was solid SF), and I don't remember seeing any SF responses to her post-apocalyptic *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot, and the Snow Dog* (2005). Mind you, this last novel has the single worst title of any novel published in the twenty-first century. If Lessing were alluding, comically (or, crikey, even *seriously*) to Rush's 'By-Tor and The Snow Dog' it would be perfectly fine. But she isn't. The title reflects that novel: which is to say the way the title is framed – a faux-naif foursquare untutored what-it-says-on-the-tin-ism – is the style in which the novel as a whole is written.

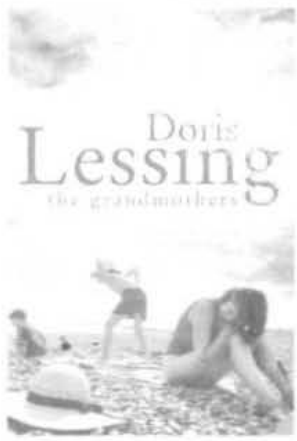
Nevertheless Lessing is a major world writer, a fact the award of the Nobel Prize recognises, and she has been what we might call a friend to SF for much of her career. Indeed, her late career has been dominated by SF. More specifically, she has used the genre primarily as a modular idiom, one in which the complexities of the actual world (which, in her classic novels, she captures so well) can be pruned away to leave a simplified, often deliberately 'primitive' or pre-Industrial-revolution, imagined world as her setting. The post-apocalyptic world of *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot, and the Snow Dog* is one of these; the imaginary kingdom of 'The Reason for It' (in *The Grandmothers*) and the very broad-brush, pre-historical fantasy location of *The Cleft* are two others. This is not so much world-building, as world-gesturing-vaguely-towardsing. There's a sense in which she has simply ploughed her own furrow, irrespective of what has been happening in the genre as a whole. A discussion of Lessing's SF at the literary group-blog *The Valve* prompted one commenter ('Walt') to observe, of encountering *Canopus in Argos* books: 'it was like reading science fiction from an alternate universe where H. G. Wells and Jules Verne never lived, and it took until the seventies for the genre to be invented' [2].

One consequence of this is that Lessing is regarded as marginal by most of genre fandom. SF fans rarely feel the urge to refer to her in their endless internet discussions of the genre; she doesn't grace award shortlists or the *Locus* recommended reading list; *Interzone* haven't profiled her. I had thought that academic critics of SF, and particularly those critics specifically interested in women writers of the genre, might be different; but no. Historians of the genre are unembarrassed at omitting mention of her (this is true of two of the best – Edward James's *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (1994) and Roger Luckhurst's *Science Fiction* (2005), and I'm sorry to say just as true of my own 2006 *Palgrave Critical History of SF*). There's a good essay by Moria Monteith 'Doris Lessing and the Politics of Violence', in Lucie Armitt's collection of essays *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction* (London: Routledge 1991); but other classics of feminist SF criticism mention Lessing only in passing – Marleen Barr's *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press 1993) for instance – or else don't discuss her at all: something true of Jenny Wolmark, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester 1994), Gwyneth Jones's *Deconstructing the Starships: Science, Fiction and Reality* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1999) and Debra Benita Shaw's *Women, Science and Fiction: the Frankenstein Inheritance* (London: Palgrave 2000). This strikes me as odd, given her eminence.

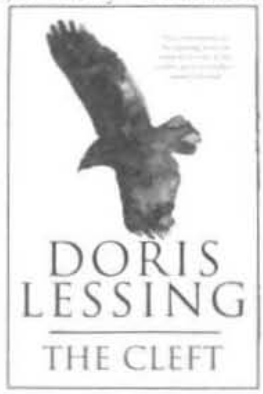
It is, at least in part, a reflection of the style or quality of SF that Lessing writes, and in casting around for a word to describe it I wondered whether it might not be called an *African* quality. Lessing grew up in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe, as it is now). When she moved to London in 1949 she was properly grown-up: thirty years old. If we choose, as we may since she acknowledges the continent's importance to her work [3], to regard her as primarily an African novelist, although one with strong connections to Britain, then she becomes one of only a very few major writers of SF to come from Africa (B. Kojo Laing would be another). Now, we can argue that SF is primarily a European and North American mode, but we'd have to concede that some very major writers have come from non-Western cultures – Japan, most

obviously, but also India and South America. Why not Africa? It's not a question that admits of a glib answer, but I once suggested a reason:

> African SF was non-existent for most of the period covered by this book; but this fact may be changing. One reason for the absence may be the broad cultural bias in favour of 'spirits' or 'magic' as an explanatory discourse, something in conflict with the materialist emphases of contemporary science. In the words of Kwame Anthony Appiah: "Most Africans cannot fully accept those scientific theories in the West that are inconsistent with [beliefs in invisible agents]. If modernisation is conceived of in part as the acceptance of science, we have to decide whether we think the evidence obliges us to give up the invisible world of the spirits. [4]



The point being argued here is that whilst 'the rich traditions of African "magic realist" and "fantastic" writing grow from this culture', it is less fertile ground for science fiction. Lessing's science fiction, more often than not, is 'African' in this sense. Her most famous series, the by-no-means-trivial *Canopus in Argos* novels, though possessing undeniable heft, is nonetheless grounded in a mode of spiritualist mumbo-jumbo that is basically immiscible with SF. Take *Shikasta* (1979), for instance. Shikasta is the Canopean name for Earth (Canopus being a sort of benign unified cosmic empire), a world on which something has gone very wrong. The planet's inhabitants live miserable and blighted lives. Unlike the rest of the cosmos they (that is to say, *we*) age ('the Shikastan disease'), torture, kill, oppress and enslave others (the first law of Canopus is 'we may not make slaves or servants of others'), and at the time the novel is set – the second half of the twentieth-century stretching into the first half of the twenty-first – the planet is approaching the end-times. It's in many ways well done, or as well done as any SFnal retelling of the Old Testament, that hoary old genre ruse, can be. But the reader's heart is bound to sink on discovering that the root of the problem for Shikasta is an insufficiency of SOWF, 'substance of we feeling', a mystic and essentially magical connection that binds the rest of the universe together. Critics sometimes explain this by respectfully invoking Lessing's interest in the traditions of Sufi mysticism, and her repeated fascination with the yearning of the soul for mystic communion with a higher unifying essence. But the problem, in SFnal-novelistic terms, is that when Lessing tries to explain the Shikastan fall she inhabits an idiom not so much Sufi as L Ron Hubbard: it's all to do, we're told, with the evil Puttioran Empire, and invading 'forces of disorder' from the dark planet Shammat, made worse by astrological stellar arrangements ('we are all characters of the stars,' says po-faced Canopean Ambien II, 'and their forces', p.40) and a rogue comet breaking what Lessing calls the 'intergalactic lock'. Creaky old gobbledegook like this is everywhere in the novel, like woodworm in a Shaker table. The novel can only conceive of both suffering and redemption in terms of *spiritual* oneness; a magical and immaterial irruption into a genre largely allergic to woo.

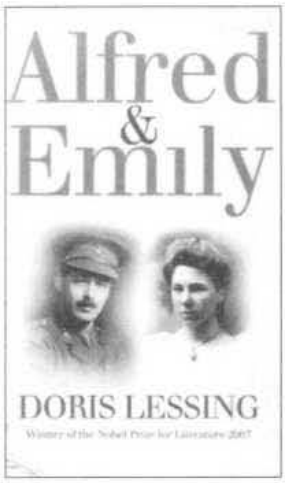


Lessing is sometimes called a 'feminist' writer; but that's not a very good description of her, unless we're take the phrase in the general sense of broadly 'on the side of' or 'interested in the doings of', women. That's too diffuse a definition, though. If we take feminism to be a set of specific *political* agendas, then we can say that one thing characterising Lessing's career has been a tendency to take up and then drop again a variety of political causes (communism, say; or Laingian anti-psychiatry; or African political engagement). Calling Lessing a 'feminist writer' is actually a kind of shorthand for recognising the very considerable importance of her novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962) to a particular generation of Western women; and it is the fact that that generation (coming into adulthood in the late 1950s and 1960s) also happened to form the vanguard of the first globally effective women's rights movement that lends the book its cachet. My mother had a well-thumbed copy of the old Penguin paperback, and I read it as a teenager. I look back on that now, and think 'oh dear'; I was at the wrong time of life, of the wrong generation, and (I say this as a reflection upon my teenage mind, not an assertion of gender-essentialist masculinism) the wrong gender to appreciate it. It seemed to me much too long, fixated on post-war concerns that seemed quite alien to the concerns of 1980, and the central narrative – which is, in effect, about the main character's mental breakdown and recovery – rather baffled me. But even through the veil of my inadequacy as a reader I felt the solidity of the book, the thickness of its affect, the way it generated its qualia of lived experience, real problems, actual struggles. At the same time, and as the woman's movement moved on and the nature of women's social and cultural experience changed, the novel, if it has not exactly fallen from favour, has in effect received the Order of the Granite Albatross. It has become seen as worthy, important, significant – three of the deadliest words in the literary-critical lexicon. What is more liable to put readers off that so dutiful a reputation? What is more likely (more to the point) to put off *science fiction* readers, who have consistently preferred the energetic, the disrespectful, the entertaining and the Pulpish to establishment notions of literary worth?

This has something, I think, to do with the relative disconnection from Lessing in most SF circles. As a writer – I mean, as a styler of prose – she is often drab. Her sentences are often unmemorably put-together, and occasionally clumsy and inexpressive. Her dialogue is usually dryly explanatory or expository, and rarely catches the rhythms or flavour of actual speech. She is more or less incapable of creating beauty through her prose alone, although she does have a knack for picking out eloquent intellectual or emotional detail, and she can be profound, moving, and often wise. She's also a prolific writer, which may not be a problem in itself, although some of her novels are certainly too long and slack. Martin Green sees her as a sort of D H Lawrence without the fluency. 'The roughness of her writing's texture sometimes suggests that a will to write is over-riding a resistance', he suggests; an 'inner conflict about the act of writing' [5]. That's an interesting idea, and, moreover, inner conflict as theme as well as actuality needn't be a bad thing. It

could, on the contrary, be a source of strength to a writer. Overcoming the inner obstacle is one of Lessing's great topics, after all; and some of the novels that chart just how strenuous and prolonged such overcoming usually is in life, and how such struggle is by no means sure to end in success (*The Golden Notebook*, or the *Martha Quest* novels) accumulate undeniable power. Nor does this have to do, really, with Bloom's curmudgeonly 'political correctness' jibe. Given her generation, and her gender, it is unsurprising that this Lessingian narrative frequently parses the experience of women, for whom inner obstacles reflected and were magnified by palpable external social obstacles.

But writing about obstacles can too easily produce writing that is itself an obstacle. The strenuous efforts her characters undertake can transfer themselves to the reader. Looking again at some of the Lessing I've read, I've been trying to work out, despite her manifest greatness, what's missing in her writing for me. Although everything Lessing writes comes across as evidently heartfelt, and thoughtful, it is not always heart-stirring or thought-provoking. Above all there is, I think, a debilitating *lack of weirdness* at the core of Lessing's writing. I say this despite her enduring interest in magic, because for her magic tends to have this spiritual and unifying quality that removes it from the realm of weird.



Take for example her last novel but one. *The Cleft* is, notionally, the narrative of a Roman senator, who parcels out episodes from a bizarre, unwieldy sort-of-creation-myth. Once long ago, we're told, pre-gender-divide humans lived in seaside caves, swam in the sea, ate fish, and spontaneously gave birth to young. They worshipped a 'cleft' in the land (it seems to be some sort of volcanic formation), a symbolic landscape-vagina. But then some of them start having babies with male genitalia; called variously 'monsters' or 'squirts'. A number of these were killed at birth as deformed creatures; others are carried away by gigantic eagles to start a community of males. These rescued babies somehow grow into adult and form a community of men who thereafter receive the unwanted boys from the Clefts (ported to them by the eagles ... I know, I know), suckle them on wild animals. Two communities grow up as 'female' and 'male'. All this ought to be very weird, estranging and stimulating; and it certainly strives to be that. But somehow it is not. Partly this is because it is all too clumsily done: its symbolism thuddingly straightforward, its gender-politics leadenly essentialist. But mostly it's because the central situation reads as thought-experiment literalisation of gender into the world, rather than as anything that brushes tendrils of dread across the tender membrane of the unconscious. The book *tries* to be weird, and in falling short it conjures the thought into the reader's mind that Lessing really doesn't understand what weirdness is. Its weirdness is all on the surface, in the gesture as it were; a weirdness predicated upon a familiarity rather than the other way around.

The danger here is that this account will lean too heavily on Lessing's flaws; and it is worth reiterating that she is a writer of major significance, one whose writing very often carries the weight and penetration of actual lived experience. The desire for weirdness can be, in a perverse way, a mode of disengagement with the world – the escapism to which our genre, and the fans of our genre, are prone. Lessing is always about engaging with the way the world actually is, rather than essaying escape from it.

One of Lessing's most successful science fictions – or fictions-full-stop – *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), turns this aversion for weirdness into a strength. The novel is a strange, understated post-apocalypse novel, all seen from the perspective of the unnamed female narrator, who observes the world disintegrating about her mostly from the window of her house. She is given a small child called Emily to look after, and the simple narrative of Emily's growing up refracts a portrait of a world at once recognisably modern and profoundly broken. Lessing writes the collapse as entropic rather than catastrophic, although it has reached, in the novel, a sort of critical mass: 'all over the city were these pockets of life reverting to the primitive, the hand-to-mouth. Part of a house... then the whole house... a group of houses... a street... an area of streets. People looking down from a high building saw how these nuclei of barbarism took hold and spread' (p.94; those are Lessing's own ellipses, there). We're never told what has precipitated the collapse (the narrator refers to this as 'it'), but the familiarity of the post-collapse world, its un-weirdness, acts as an affective foil to the second strand of the novel, in which the narrator recounts a variety of visions, or transcendental insights, into myriad 'rooms', some dirty and cold, some splendid and inviting. This visionary other-world is not weird either; it is, as a Sufi might say, actually home; and the novel ends with the narrator breaking free of the constraints of her domestic perspective on collapsing world, and simply walking away into the land of visions.

I am not arguing that Lessing is a stolid writer, because in fact the very *groundedness* of her writing can be its strength. If *The Cleft* largely fails, Lessing's most recent novel – the alt-historical *Alfred and Emily* (2008) retells the story of her parents' life, first as it actually was, and then as it might have been had the first world war not devoured her father's leg, leaving him the embittered amputee he was in life. It is a very powerful novel that is precisely about the relationship between fiction and reality, and just as its fiction (its *science*-fiction) takes force from its grounding in the actuality of its characters' lives, so their reality is enhanced by the fiction. It is a commentary about the potency of the interrelation between the real and the fictional – between, in a sense, the two terms that are abbreviated in the acronym SF.

Endnotes

[1] http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/europe/10/11/nobel.lessing.ap/index.html?iref=topnews

[2] http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/doris_lessfing/ (sic)

[3] STEPHEN GRAY: 'The *Canopus* series derives very strongly from your African past." LESSING: 'I certainly couldn't have written *Shikasta* without it because there are whole sections in *Shikasta* that are straight from Africa' ['An Interview with Doris Lessing', *Research in African Literatures* 17:3 (1986) 335]

[4] Roberts, *The Palgrave History of Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2006), 344

[5] *The English Novel in the Twentieth Century: the Doom of Empire* (Routledge 1984), p.188

...and the Law Won

Some Thoughts on SF and the Laws of Physics

by Jonathan McCalmont

If you were the type of person who enjoyed fools' errands, you might be tempted to try and formulate a definition of science fiction. Some fools might even be tempted to define science fiction in terms of an engagement with and speculation about the laws of nature as laid out in physics, biology and, increasingly, neuropsychology. If you are that kind of fool then I wish you the best of luck for a speedy recovery. However, even if you are not this particular kind of fool, you might be interested in the laws of nature and how they relate to SF; and in that case, this is the essay for you. The first nettle to grasp is that while our knowledge of physical law has undoubtedly changed over time, so has the concept of natural law that has underpinned the work of philosophers and scientists. This essay will consider two broad philosophical attitudes towards the laws of nature and how these attitudes have influenced different forms of SF. It will even suggest that these two ideas, though incompatible, actually coexist in a lot of science fiction.

The first approach sees natural law as a kind of metaphysical operating system that governs interactions between objects and determines what is and is not possible in our universe. The roots of this theoretical approach lie in antiquity.

The concept of natural law emerged in the time of Aristotle, who argues that objects possess elemental (e.g. earth, air, fire, water) qualities that dictate how they interact with each other; the consequences of these interactions are in turn based upon a more abstract set of rules governing causation and spontaneous chance. Somewhat depressingly, this approach to natural law would dominate proceedings for about two millennia, but even if we look at modern thought about the origins of natural law, we will see echoes of this ancient theory.

One of the driving forces behind scientific research for the last century has been what creationists dismissively call 'reductionism' but which could equally be called 'consolidation'. By this I mean the process through which the theories governing different physical phenomena are brought together under one larger over-arching theory such as Maxwell's theory of electromagnetism (combined electricity and magnetism), Einstein's theory of general relativity (united electromagnetism and gravity) or Richard Feynman's quantum electrodynamics (mathematically describes all phenomena involving electrically charged particles interacting with each other via the exchange of photons). The next big step towards what has become known as a theory of everything is a theory that unites large-scale relativistic phenomena with small scale quantum phenomena. The current frontrunner in this race, and controversial monopoliser of funds, is string theory, which postulates the existence of one dimensional objects known as strings. These strings are not only postulated as being the basic building-blocks of matter, they also seem to provide the basis for a quantum theory of gravity. The only problem (according to the Stanford physicist, Leonard Susskind), is that the various string theories that have been drawn together into what is referred to as M-theory all predict perfectly symmetrical universes in which expansion from the Big Bang is steady and uniform. However, as physicists and astronomers have noted, the rate at which our universe is expanding has increased. One explanation for this is the suggestion that there is an imbalance between the normal matter we can see and the 'dark matter' that we cannot see.

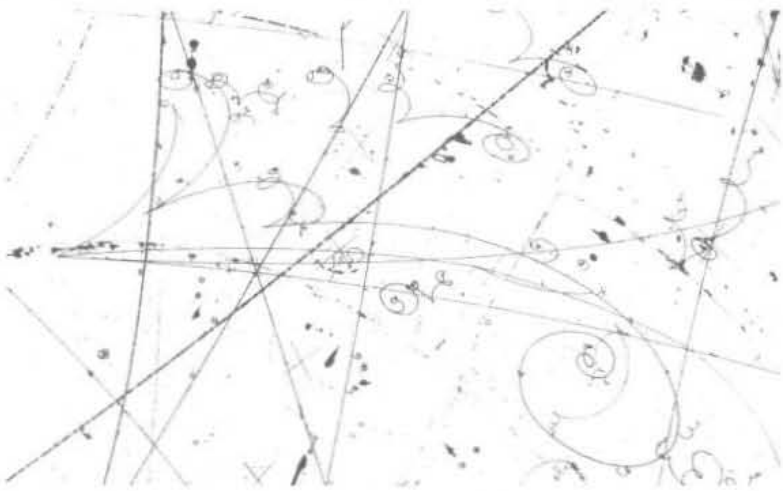
What is interesting is that this imbalance seems finely tuned to allow the emergence of life; a different imbalance would mean that life could not emerge or that the Big Bang would not have worked the way it did. In other words, physics needs to take into account the fact that we, as thinking things, exist and that this means that we live in the kind of universe that is compatible with the emergence of life.

The theoretical physicist Lee Smolin attempts to account for our life-friendly laws of physics by arguing that natural selection applies to the creation of universes. The physical constants that make our universe so friendly to the existence of life also make it likely to produce black holes and expand eternally until heat death. Both of these possibilities make the creation of other universes likely because the longer our universe persists, the more black holes it will form, and each black hole that collapses (according to the theory) results in the birth of another universe with our physical parameters being pinched off on 'the other side'. This means that compared to all of the other possible universes, our type of universe is more likely to have kids thereby making it more likely that universes such as ours exist. Meanwhile, the theorist Louis Crane has proposed the Meduso-anthropic principle according to which highly evolved civilisations would create black holes either for research purposes or in order to survive the heat death of their own universes (an idea also picked up on by Ray Kurzweil in *The Singularity is Near* (1987), as well as by Ian McDonald in his BSFA Award-winning *Brasyl* (2007)), thereby creating even more universes.

As readers of SF, some of these names and concepts may very well be familiar to you already. After all, the jargon of modern science and the philosophical assumptions underpinning it comprise the set dressing of much of modern SF. However, it would be trite of me to suggest that science

tends to pop up quite a bit in science fiction so I shall instead suggest that you note how both Aristotle and modern physicists used the same conception of natural law as a metaphysical operating system, and then move on to the ways in which modern SF has attempted to engage with this approach to natural law.

Stephen Baxter's *Manifold: Time* (2000) directly addresses the anthropic principle by featuring different universes that all seem to fail to satisfy the stringent criteria for the emergence of life. The suggestion is that the book's universe might be going through the process of evolution so as to make the emergence of life more likely. Baxter has also visited this theme in his *Xeelee Sequence*, whose first book, *Raft* (1991), features humans living in a universe where gravitational forces are much stronger than in our own; the fourth book in the sequence, *Ring* (1994), closed the loop by describing humans discovering a vast object that serves as an escape hatch from our dying universe. Australian author Greg Egan is even more direct than Baxter in his novel *Schild's Ladder* (2003). This book not only delves into the details of the real and fictional scientific theories it uses, it also features an artificially created universe with laws of physics that are significantly more friendly to life than our own depressingly barren corner of the metaverse. By focussing on the ways in which the laws of nature could vary from universe to universe, Egan and Baxter not only underline quite how tenuous our continued existence is, they also touch upon some of science fiction's most abiding themes



To borrow a phrase from David Hartwell about Hard SF, "if you know, you may survive". The idea of there being different laws of physics gives authors a new set of challenges to explore, as in the ending of Baxter's *Ring* where the survivors of humanity have to work out what their new universe's laws of physics are before they can hope to start finding a way to survive. As such, engaging with scientific theories about the origins of natural law has provided writers with more subject material on an even larger scale, allowing sensawunda-inspiring feats of engineering that are not only huge on the scale of human events, but so vast as to make entire universes merely parts of a larger construction and all of this without invoking the mystical or purely metaphysical.

The idea of a universe that is not only ordered but predictable and comprehensible is one that has been present in science fiction since the early days of Gernsback's scientifiction where knowledge and a can-do attitude meant that space was only ever another frontier that man seemed destined to tame. As we have learned more about the realities of space-flight, this vision of the high frontier has started to lose its shine but the old patterns of problem solving and sensawunda, which draw from the Aristotelean tradition of physical law, are still present in works of modern SF. However, this vision of a rule-like universe is not universally shared.

The Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, David Hume, pointed out that while we can sit and watch a game of billiards we never actually see the process of cause and effect that determines how the balls will act. All we really see is one ball moving along and touching another and that second ball taking off in a different direction. We never actually see the rules that govern the interactions of these balls and so we infer their existence. Some thinkers have interpreted this as Hume suggesting grounds for doubting the very existence of any laws of physics whatsoever. Indeed, philosophers have coined the term 'Hume World' to describe a universe where there are no laws to speak of.

Possibly the first SF story to describe a universe with different physical laws to our own actually describes a Hume World. Clark Ashton Smith's *The Dimension of Chance* (1932) features two aviators who follow a Japanese rocket-plane into another world whose landscape is marked by radically different geological forces and where water flows down one side of a valley only to flow just as freely up the other, while the fuel in the aviator's engine may or may not ignite from one moment to the next. This is a world without physical constants and rules, even if it is quite a friendly one.

Hume worlds are generally deployed in line with Darko Suvin's contention that science fiction is the fiction of cognitive estrangement. How could a world be more different from ours than by lacking even the most basic of physical constants, thereby rendering any prediction impossible? A Hume world turns one of the axioms of hard SF on its head by stating that knowledge of the world is impossible as there is nothing to know beyond correlation and chance – and even if you did know, you could never predict how the world would change from minute to minute or from second to second as all predictions are reliant upon the assumption that the world tomorrow will be like the world today.

However, as Ashton Smith's story demonstrates, it is hard to fully convey what is conjured up by the concept of a Hume world; a "true" Hume world would most likely be a howling void where even the most basic of molecules instantly breaks apart, lacking any kind of physical constancy to bind it together. Such a universe would not make a good setting for a story as it is difficult to have even the most avant-garde form

of narrative logic apply to a world without cause and effect. As a result, fictional representations of Hume worlds tend to be limited, with the laws of physics going partly mad or falling apart only in certain key places. A different take on this issue is the idea of worlds governed by different sets of laws superimposed upon each other like the skins of an onion.

The most famous instance of this particular trope remains the Strugatsky Brothers' *Roadside Picnic* (1971). The novel, which was later made into the film *Stalker* (1979) by Andrei Tarkovsky, features an area that has been touched by an alien visitation. This area contains advanced alien technology, but its laws of physics are so distorted and deadly that an entire new class of adventurer emerges, carefully piecing together an idea of how the world of The Zone works. The Zone was also clearly an influence on M. John Harrison's Kefahuchi Tract, part of which falls to earth creating the Site in *Nova Swing* (2006). Even the later *Star Trek* series were fond of the idea of some kind of anomaly turning up and taking a hammer to the laws of physics; a particularly note-worthy example is *Enterprise*'s Delphic Expanse, which was an area of space whose laws of physics were distorted in order to be more friendly to the Xindi race. The question then becomes whether these anomalies and the 'alien stuff' in *Roadside Picnic* or *Nova Swing* actually break the laws of physics or whether they are understandable disruptions in what is ultimately a completely ordered and predictable universe.

This distinction can have huge ramifications upon how we interpret a text. For example, Tarkovsky's film adaptation of *Roadside Picnic* suggests that The Zone will definitely grant wishes, whereas the original novel only reflects the fact that the protagonist only believes that it grants wishes. If The Zone's laws of physics are broken then a wish-machine seems an almost religious object of faith and hope in an utterly random universe. However, if The Zone's physics have been disrupted in an understandable way then a wish-machine seems like a more reasonable thing to believe in, after all distorting the laws of physics so as to create a wish-machine seems as good a reason as any.

If one takes the second interpretation of The Zone as a space with higher-order laws then the book ceases to be about such existential topics as hope and belief in a random, absurd and hostile environment. Instead, the book starts to take on themes of challenge, risk and reward, placing it much closer to the traditional SF attitude towards natural law and the traditional pulpish SF themes of the universe being a new frontier that can be tamed by the right kind of quick-thinking adventurer. However, while metaphysically ordered universes provide playgrounds for speculation and adventure and Hume Worlds seem perfect venues for tails of alienation and despair, these two attitudes are in no way mutually exclusive.

Instead, it is more useful to think of Hume Worlds and Hard SF worlds as taking up opposite poles along a spectrum of themes and topics as different books allow more or less degrees of lawlessness into their fictional worlds. Indeed, creations such as Enterprise's Delphic Expanse and Algis Budry's *Rogue Moon* (a 1960 tale of copied adventurers learning the rules to a structure with different physical laws) seem to exist part of the way between the existential readings of *Roadside Picnic* and the onion skins of order explored by Egan's *Schild's Ladder*.

The onion skin of reality is also a construct that has proved popular in texts that blend SF with horror. The philosopher Bas van Fraassen suggests that the concept of a *law* of nature with its suggestions of courts and commandments is partly the result of etymological chance as what was once theological jargon for discussing God's Design was then used as a turn of phrase by natural philosophers who realised the theoretical baggage that comes with the term "law". Indeed, many of the philosophical attacks upon science from the likes of Feyerabend and Rorty have focussed upon scientists using language to make their claims seem stronger than they in fact are. SF and horror have mined similar territory by deploying the onion skin as a means of stressing how easily all of our beliefs about the universe could be proved wrong.

My favourite example of this approach can be found in the works of Nigel Kneale, writer of TV serials such as *The Stone Tape* (1972) and *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958). Kneale, in a similar manner to H.P. Lovecraft, creates the idea that underneath the work-a-day world there is a deeply disturbing reality which may not be understandable, let alone predictable.

Peter Nicholls argues in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* that this trope is so all-pervasive in SF that any serious definition of SF needs to take it into account. This kind of conceptual breakthrough can involve a realisation about the artificial nature of reality, the fact that our universe is only one part of a much larger whole, that another character is not what they appear to be or that it was all a dream or the deluded ramblings of an insane person. This trope can also include the revelation that the laws of physics are not what they appear to be, thereby enabling the construction of some handy gizmo. A salient example is Orson Scott Card's *Xenocide* (1991), in which a new kind of physics is discovered allowing people to step outside of the universe and essentially edit it by the power of thought alone, thereby handily resolving all outstanding plot-lines.

The traditional Aristotelian conception of a law of nature is one of the building blocks not only of traditional golden age SF, but also modern Hard SF. However, it is not the only theoretical approach to physical law that has graced the pages of works of science fiction. Because the idea of a predictable, understandable universe is so basic to most SF, many authors have wisely chosen to subvert that assumption and explore the possibility of a world without law-like physical constants. However, rather than completely defenestrate the infant with the bath-water, most SF authors have tended to use pockets of lawlessness to emphasise the possibility that our understanding of the universe might be incomplete rather than utterly false. The next logical step is for SF to follow the postmodernists in seeing the laws of physics as things to be broken. Indeed, Nick Harkaway's debut novel *The Gone Away World* (2008) suggests a world in which the metaphysical laws determining what is and is not possible are utterly done away with leaving a world without safety but rich in possibility. Might this be the beginning of a trend?

On the "Art" of Reviewing

by Frank Ludlow

I'm sure that the discerning reader will have noticed the inverted commas in the title of this article. And a logical question to ask would be: *Why are they there?*

My answer is that one could easily take and pretty reasonably defend the position that reviews are mostly unimportant and insignificant things that aren't worth paying much attention to. Given the sheer quantity available these days, it's a fair bet that any given review will only, at best, be some random guy's ill-informed and ill-considered opinion. On top of that, there's a good chance that the person probably won't even have the faintest bit of familiarity (or God forbid, *expertise*) on the topic or item which is the subject of review. And it can get worse than that. The reviewer could be completely ignorant (in the general sense), completely biased, have an axe to grind, or simply out to make a name for herself through outrageous, insulting or controversial reviews.

Like it or not, reviewers with some or all of the characteristics I've mentioned above are very common. I've seen them operating everywhere, even in apparently reputable venues. And with the internet facilitating the posting and spreading of reviews of just about anything, from just about anyone, the problem is only going to get worse. In the past there certainly were bad reviews and reviewers, but not nearly to the extent there are now. Reviews used to actually require paper and print to disseminate, and possibly even had some editorial input, meaning more effort and expense was required than just throwing up an opinion on a blog. And as we all know, everyone has an opinion. That's just human nature. If you disagree with me, then certainly you've demonstrated you have an opinion on this at least!

This discussion is relevant to reviews, reviewers and critics of any art, from sculpture to dance, but we'll be concerned here with reviews of fiction, be it novels or shorter works. Indeed, the whole notion and practise of reviewing fiction is something that I've been wrestling with of late. This has been kicked off by certain events in the world of SF reviewing. I'm not going to refer explicitly to personal details here, which would be very unfair, but these events include the closing of *The Alien Online* [1] and its important reviews section, and the closing of the popular *Emerald City* webzine [2]. Although these events happened some time ago now (both in the latter half of 2006), they remain for me important examples of what this article is all about, and I could add several newer examples to the list if I wished.

The above events and others like them all share something in common. Some sort of pressure was brought to bear, by the readers of the reviews, or by the authors of the reviewed works, on the authors of the reviews themselves, and also on their host sites. This may have been due to disagreements over the tone of the reviews. Over the alleged accuracy of the content of reviews. Over a perceived bias against the item being reviewed (or against its genre or perceived politics). Or even over the motive underlying the reviewing in the first place. That this pressure can have the effect of stopping certain venues from running reviews, or from running at all, is what many people would consider bad news. Some others I have heard voicing comments alluding to "survival of the fittest". Before I say anything more about that, let's get back to basics.

Consider the position I took at the start of this piece. It could reasonably be argued that a hell of a lot of "reviews" are pretty useless, unreliable, hopelessly biased, and that the writing of such is no closer to being an "art" than someone spouting off their "well-considered" opinions to friends in the pub. Criticising what others have produced is (on the surface) much easier than getting up and actually producing something yourself. My friends have long learnt to stop commenting on certain sportsmen to the effect that "he's useless" or "I could have done a million times better", since it's always followed up by the challenge to "get off your arse and go do better then!" I also alluded earlier to why some people are motivated to write such poor or unfair reviews, be it to get attention, for pure publicity, to make a name for themselves, to grind an axe (political or otherwise), or even to deliberately hurt or insult.

Considering all that then, why do some people (fans, readers, authors, even bystanders who haven't actually read the original work in question) get so upset about certain reviews if they're just a collection of some guy's opinions? Shouldn't they just be expecting to read a load of nonsense? If the answer to that is "yes", then why do people bother reading reviews in the first place?

Well, even the controversial, outrageous or insulting reviews can be entertaining! People love a good argument, in fiction, and in real life. Conflict is always present in the world, and some would say it's even the driving force. So could we say that reviews that are ridiculously biased or controversial, for example, are entertaining, and in that sense have some semblance of value?

Perhaps there is an element of truth there.

But reviews have the potential to reach higher than that, to do more than just entertain, especially when in some cases "entertaining" means "insulting". People know this, and it's one reason why they can get so annoyed when they read a poorly written, unfair or ill-conceived review. All the more so when the reviewer in question has no concept of the possible weakness in their review, or of

their own personal biases. In my opinion, which I have at least tried to develop and argue logically, a review with a strong presence of any of the negative characteristics I've mentioned is more than likely written by someone who ultimately, when pressed, has to hide behind the old "it's my opinion and I'm entitled to it". Someone who isn't concerned by logic or constructing a reasonable argument, or even, dare I say it, admitting to being wrong, biased, or misguided occasionally.

There is a responsibility in taking on to review someone's work, and in putting that review out for all to see. Even more so now that people have the easy capability to create and host very professional-looking sites. If a reviewer has to fall back on the old mantra of "that's my opinion, so there..." then he or she has already failed in their responsibility to the author of the work and to the readers of the review. Indeed, I would say that it isn't even a real review, which must in my book be more than mere unsupported opinion with no logical and firm argument to back it up.

Despite the inverted commas in the title of this article, I actually do believe there is an art to reviewing. To good reviewing. That it is, in fact, an art all of its own. At the minimum, a good review can aim to inform the reader, even if only to express an opinion on whether something is worth someone's time and money (and in terms of economics, keep quality work on the shelves, and put poor work off them).

But they can still go further than that.

A good review can directly help develop the skills of the author of the work being reviewed, and give something to other authors that they can apply in their own work. We've all heard of the phrase "constructive criticism". No one really enjoys taking criticism, but it's the constructive part that counts. If the criticism isn't taken on board, at least the reviewer has tried honourably. And let's not forget there is such a thing as "constructive praise" too. Not every review has to be negative. In fact, the word "negative" is often confused with the word "critical". Being critical does not automatically mean being negative. Look up the word in the dictionary. A highly critical review can often be very positive towards the subject under consideration, though being positive for the sake of it (or for more questionable motives, e.g. supporting friends or associates purely because they're friends or associates) is almost as bad as being negative for the sake of it. In both cases, this is being unfair to the author of the work, and misleading the readers of the review.

I'd like here to quote a passage from an interview [3] with Alan Dean Foster on his response to a question regarding reviews of his own work. "Many, many years ago Spider Robinson did a review of my fourth book, *Midworld*, that shows what happens when a fellow writer decides to apply thought and knowledge to a review. It was, by the way, by no means entirely complimentary. But it was well-written and well-thought out, and there's no way you can get upset about a review done like that." Now, I'm not here advocating that all reviews should be written by writers only, and nor I think was Foster, but the general message should be pretty clear. I won't spell it out for you any more than that.

But I could go a little further in a different direction, and point out that good reviews can often make a wider contribution to the development of not just a particular artist, but to the SF genre as a whole. The reviews of Damon Knight serve as a good example of that. A good review can also use the work in question as a springboard from which to get into wider issues of interest to society, and thus enter wider debates. Certainly, there is great merit in all this, and I could talk much longer there, but I would be getting too far off-point.

Because here's the rub. *If reviewing is indeed an art, then a reviewer can damn well expect her artistry to be reviewed too!* A review can and should be subject to review itself! Just like the author of any work of fiction, the author of a review has to be able to take criticism (even if only to improve their art). Sometimes this criticism will be nasty, sometimes it will be unfair or misguided, just as the original reviews can be. Write a badly constructed story, get a negative review, write a badly constructed review, get a negative response. But even if a review is good, solid, and fair, it can still generate a negative response. Both reviewers and writers need to grow thicker skins, and at least aim (even if they never get there) for constructive exchange.

Reviews serve an important function, and will always be around. The function and importance of fiction should be self-evident to anyone who reads this. I don't know the exact details behind the *Emerald City* and *The Alien Online* decisions, but I can't help wondering if, other considerations such as time and personal life aside, some thicker skins on the part of the reviewers and their hosts wouldn't have hurt. Reviews, no matter the original intention or quality, will always get occasional angry responses. Get over it. Deal with it. And unless an author has been personally insulted in a review, as opposed his work being insulted, then a successful lawsuit is *highly, highly* unlikely. At the moment, I think that the reviewers are the ones being more over-sensitive.

Let's put it this way. If you really write (or host) a review you believe in, that you truly think is fair, that you would think fair even if it had been on a work of your own, where you have tried to state any personal bias at the outset, then any unfair or nasty response you get should have no bearing whatsoever. The phrase "water [or words] off a duck's back" springs instantly to mind.

Endnotes

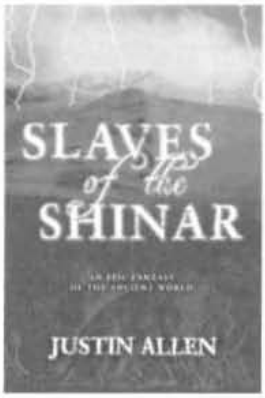
[1] <http://www.thealienonline.net>. The news section has since been replaced by the excellent UKSFBookNews, for which see <http://www.uksfbooknews.net/>.

[2] <http://www.emcit.com/>. The contents of past issues remain online for reference.

[3] "Around the World in 80 light years – an Interview with Alan Dean Foster" *Albedo One*, 29, 2004.

First Impressions

Book reviews edited by Kari Sperring



Justin Allen – *Slaves of the Shinar*

Overlook Press, 2008, 430pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 978158567916
Reviewed by A.P.Canavan

For a genre that has been called tired and clichéd, Justin Allen's *Slaves of the Shinar* is something of a breath of fresh air. To save some time; those looking for a story that has dragons, wizards lobbing fireballs and a group of under-funded vagabonds out to right all the evils of the world, this is not the book for you. For those looking for a story that shows how fantasy can be a compelling read, which illustrates the human condition and that shows how history can become myth, this is the book for you. Allen has created a world that blends seamlessly into our own past. It is utterly convincing in its sincerity and plausibility as well as its mythic tones.

The plot centres around two men as they become instrumental in changing the face of the world around them. They are not typical fantasy heroes, but characters caught up in extraordinary times and their actions carve them a niche in history and legend. The book itself seems to be in the trend of the 'historical fantasies' dealing with Genghis, Attila and Caesar, in that these deal with how men became legends, rather than genre fantasy which deals with legendary men performing legendary deeds. The matter-of-fact depictions of slavery and the brutality of war are at odds with the golden sheen or glorified images common to fantasy writing, and the complex morality of the novel certainly ignores fantasy's black and white approach to good and evil.

The character of Uruk, one of the central protagonists, seems to owe a great debt to Conan the Cimmerian, both in terms of physical characteristics and personality. In two of the set pieces of the novel, the theft of the Maidenhead of Kallah and the assassination of Kilimon, the resemblance to *The Tower of the Elephant* is startling. Allen's entire ancient world bears a remarkable similarity to Howard's Hyborian Age, although Allen has tempered this with a subtle touch eschewing Howard's more flagrant prose. That being said, Allen's world breathes and resounds with life. The very dust and grit of the heat blasted landscapes flavour and texture the prose giving a sense of veracity that Howard's creation never quite seemed to achieve.

The publisher calls this "An Epic Fantasy of the Ancient World" when this reviewer believes it should have been an Epic History of the Ancient World. This world lives and breathes and its cities became the very foundations of our world. Allen has returned to the idea that fantasy is myth making. This story reads as truth, as history, and yet contains within it the seeds of our own legendary past. It weaves a myth into the fabric of our history and reads as if it was an ancient tale that has been unearthed and translated for us, giving us a glimpse into our past.

Kelley Armstrong – *The Summoning*

Orbit, 2008, 390pp, £6.99, mm/pb ISBN 9781841497105
Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

Chloe Saunders can see ghosts, and not nice ones either. As a toddler she is tormented by them in the basement of the family home. They call her by name and then put on displays of stomach wrenching gore that would in a film be firmly labelled 18+. But she grows up and thinks it's all a nightmare until, in round two, puberty hits and she starts to see them again. Poor kid, it's no wonder she's scared.

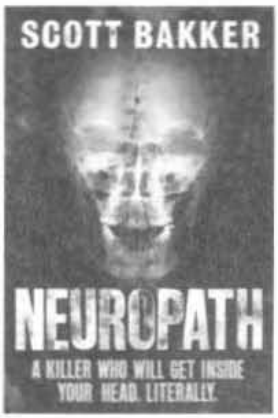
Unfortunately Chloe's abilities lead her to be labelled schizophrenic and sent off to a group home with other troubled teenagers. Needless to say, it transpires that these teenagers are not just troubled by their hormones, BO or difficult family lives, but their own sets of occult powers. And things get worse for Chloe as she progresses from unwillingly seeing ghosts to inadvertently raising the dead. And, oh, did I mention not nice dead either? Very bony and grabby, tend to attack in dark, confined spaces. Definitely in the 18+ category.

This is Kelley Armstrong's first book for teens, and it's not badly written. The plot is tight and the characters are interesting. The teens reading it will need strong stomachs – it is much more gruesome than her adult fantasies, for some reason. The ghosts are really unpleasant. "The custodian (dead guy at her high school, burned to death) pushed his face into mine and it changed to that horrible melted mask, so close I was staring into his one bulging eye, almost out of its socket" (27). Eww. Some (if not all) of the staff at the home are fairly obviously lying and manipulating the residents. And there's a lack of the lightness of touch and humour that make, for instance, Diana Wynne Jones's *The Time of the Ghost* or *Witch Week* so enthralling even when they're scary. And the dialogue isn't exactly snappy either, so *Buffy* it ain't.

The book lacks plausibility in some areas. For instance, it appears that the ghosts actually want Chloe to help them. Well, you'd have thought it would occur to them that putting on their scariest faces and chasing her round the basement wouldn't really help. The adults also seem extremely ruthless and ready to dispose of their charges at one moment's insubordination. What they want isn't at all clear, or maybe they're just bad at getting it. And the moment where Chloe gets her first period, late, is almost sanitised out of existence. She gets a sanitary towel from a machine and that's it over, then. Sorted. Never mentioned again. So she's not going to be tormented by mood swings, cramps, water retention, worrying about leaks, smells or even the decision whether to use towels or tampons. No, in *The Summoning*, teenagers only have occult problems. But I'd have thought she would at least have wondered whether she could only see ghosts when it's, you know, That Time of the Month.

Anyway, we're told that this is the first book in Armstrong's

young adult trilogy, 'The Darkest Power'. I expect we'll get to find out what the adults want and then, hopefully, Chloe and her teenage friends will foil them. I'm just not sure that my stomach will be up to it.



Scott Bakker – *Neuropath*

Orion Books, 2008, 321pp £12.99/£9.99, ISBN: 9780752891507 (h/b) 9780752891514 (t/pb)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

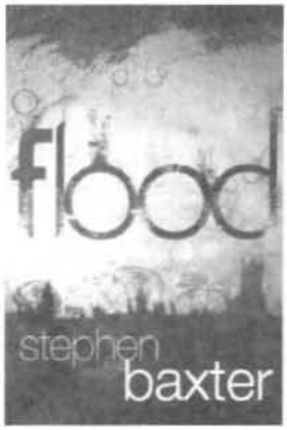
Neuropath is a horror novel. One morning in August not many years from now Columbia University Professor of Cognitive Psychology Thomas Bible is visited by the FBI. They want him to help them track down his best friend, Neil Cassidy, a neurologist who has been working in black ops for the NSA and has now gone rogue. Cassidy is kidnapping and surgically altering the brains of semi-famous people – a business magnate, a porn star – with whom Bible has in some way had some slight connection. The crimes connect philosophically to a long standing intellectual debate, The Argument, between the two friends regarding the nature of free will, perception and consciousness. Bible is reluctant to become involved, but the FBI show him a HDVD of Cassidy's work, the results of which are as psychologically horrifying as they are physically nauseating. Meanwhile a serial killer labelled by the media as The Chiropractor is terrifying New York with an sickening series of crimes. This is a book for the seriously strong of stomach.

Neuropath is a science fiction novel. Moscow has been nuked. The melting polar ice caps have ended the North Atlantic Drift, sending Europe into a slow freeze. There are August blizzards in Paris. Wal-mart has been accused of illegally installing low field MRI scanners to monitor Associates and customers alike, and Neil Cassidy has graduated from interrogating terrorist suspects with drugs and virtual reality to altering their perceptions with neurosurgery.

Neuropath is a science fiction thriller that wants to be a Hollywood movie. Thomas Bible is a young professor with a beautiful ex-wife, two delightful children and a gay No.1 Neighbour. He is soon partnered with the beautiful FBI agent Samantha Logan in a desperate psychological game which inevitably becomes very personal indeed. These Hollywood clichés aside, Scott Bakker has written what is, in-part, a ferociously intelligent novel in which concepts from the cutting edge of psychology and what they mean for our sense of humanity are as cognitively vertiginous and disturbing as the exceptionally gross physical horrors of the book are nauseating. What Cassidy does to his victim's minds, and why, is as disturbing as what happens to their bodies. *Neuropath* would probably like to grow up to be *Se7en* meets *Saw* with a PhD. The writing is frequently excellent, with startlingly original use of metaphor and dialogue bristling with electric intelligence. Even if the same points are made rather more often than necessary, Bakker still achieves very difficult goal of approaching how one might think differently, to think outside the brainbox.

For 256 pages the result is a powerfully challenging narrative. Then it all goes catastrophically wrong. If *Neuropath* were a film one would imagine David Fincher had suddenly been taken ill and replaced by Michael Winner. What was a thoughtful and gruelling psycho-thriller almost instantly collapses into risible action – a movie-friendly car chase through the New York subway station – absurd plot twists and laughable Grand Guignol of such excess Ken Russell would think twice. In lengthy dialogues characters tell each other what they already know, and one character – who being psychopathic has no empathy or care for any other human being – unbelievably bothers to explain the plot rather than just kill everyone. This of course gives our hero time to... And when finally we find out exactly what caused all the trouble in the first place, well, surely the NSA should have realized that by definition it just couldn't possibly, ever, work.

Neuropath is a hugely promising book, which most disappointingly degenerates into literal nonsense. Scott Bakker is clearly a vastly talented and intelligent writer. One can only wish his editor had told him to go away and completely rewrite the final 60 pages.



Stephen Baxter – *Flood*

Gollancz, 2008, 473pp, £18.99 / £12.99, ISBN 9780575080560 (h/b) and 8790575080584 (t/pb)

Reviewed by Edward James

The proof copy came in a zipped waterproof 'evidence bag': the cover shows signs of heavy water-staining, and it announces that the text was recovered from a depth of 4000 metres, from a collapsed tower block in Central London, fifteen days after planet-fall in AD 2115. (It is astonishing to think that they are still using Courier font in 2115.) We know, then, that this a disaster novel, a re-run of some kind of Sydney Fowler Wright's *Deluge* or J.G. Ballard's *Drowned World*. However, it is only a disaster novel in one rather narrow and anthropocentric sense. Yes, *homo sapiens* may be doomed, but Gaia itself may do quite well out of the Flood, expanding its biomass, stabilising itself, and getting rid of most or all of those pesky humans at the same time.

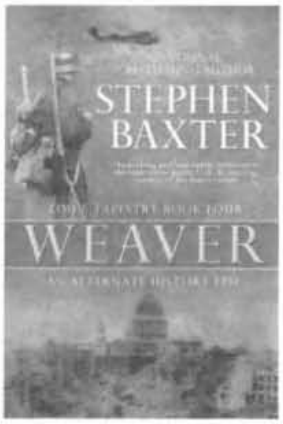
This is not a global-warming novel, as both protagonists and readers initially believe. This is a flood of Noah-style proportions: "And the waters prevailed so mightily upon the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered" (Genesis 7:19). The water comes not from above, as in the Noah story, but from below, seeping up from vast subterranean seas. In an afterword, Baxter refers those who might be dubious about that idea to articles in *Nature*, *New Scientist* and *Science*.

The action takes place between 2016, the beginnings of the flood, and 2052, its climax. We see events largely through the eyes of Lily Brooke and her family – her blood relations and those who were even closer than blood relations, the three who had shared life with Lily for five years as terrorist hostages in a politically chaotic Spain. Some of the best scenes are those set in London in 2016, as the Thames Barrier is breached. Baxter extrapolates from descriptions of the London flood of 1953, but adds some purely twenty-first century touches: the Londoners knocked off their feet by the rushing waters which they have failed to notice because they were too busy taking photos on their mobile phones, or the helicopter hired by provincial London-haters, who are ogling the events via http://www.watchthecocknesswim.com. But Baxter gets the tone just right: the panic, the excitement, the incomprehension, the resignation.

As the waters rise (and the impact on coast-lines of the rise of sea-level is illustrated by a number of maps) there is migration to higher ground, and the struggle to survive as higher ground becomes in shorter and shorter supply. A number of our protagonists have been taken under the wing of an enterprising (and thoroughly ruthless) entrepreneur, with access to all the means of survival, enabling the protagonists and hence the narration to proceed to what remains of

the USA, to the Andes and elsewhere, to see how humanity's end-game plays itself out on a global stage. For all that it is a disaster, the mourning is mostly for individuals, and not for humanity en masse, let alone for the loss of millennia of scientific and artistic achievement. Yet this is Baxter's point, emphasised at the end by focussing on the joy and optimism of one of the raft-dwelling children: most people live for the present and for the future. A child who has never lived on dry land cannot mourn its loss; humanity evolves.

There is a Clarkian moment at the very end, a question from Lily which reminds one of the last line of *Rendezous with Rama*, and not only raises speculations of a hyperdiegetic nature, but makes one think of possible sequels. I'd be happy to read them.



Stephen Baxter – *Weaver* (*Time's Tapestry*: Book Four)

Gollancz, London, 2008, 321pp, £18.99/£12.99, ISBN 9780575078642 (h/b)

Reviewed by Tony Keen

In reviews of previous volumes of *Time's Tapestry*, *Emperor* (*Vector* 250), *Conqueror* (*Vector* 254) and *Navigator* (*Vector* 255), I was lukewarm. I was wrong. *Weaver* is not only excellent in its own right, but draws the sequence to a close so as to revise my opinion of *Time's Tapestry* as a whole.

Navigator left European history at the end of the fifteenth century. In the previous three volumes, Baxter covers a wide chronological range. In *Weaver*, Baxter goes straight to 1940, and a common subject for alternative history (especially by non-genre writers), a German invasion of Britain. This is not a historically-set SF novel depicting attempts to interfere in the past, as the previous three novels were.

Most treatments of a German-occupied Britain shy away from a basic problem – the German military establishment was ill-equipped to launch such an operation, and the political establishment reluctant. Baxter takes this on successfully, producing an alternate history which lies outside what John Clute terms the 'Hitler Wins' genre. In this timeline, the Panzers do not stop short of Dunkirk, so the British Expeditionary Force does not escape. The Luftwaffe does not switch from airfields to cities, so the RAF loses the Battle of Britain. Even so, this is a close-run invasion, and only partially successful; the Germans can only occupy Kent, Sussex and part of Surrey. One can quibble with details – what finally stops the German advance in southern England is a bit rabbit-out-of-a-hat – but overall this is a plausible picture. Points of complaint are more than compensated for by skilful use of historical detail, such as the woman revealing that her daughter is to be evacuated on the *City of Benares* – heartbreaking to those who know that liner was torpedoed.

The single time period allows Baxter to put a lot more into characterization. There are memorable individuals – the vile English Nazi Julia Fiveash, decent German Ernst Trojan, and his SS brother Josef, Ben Kamen, the Austrian Jew who understands the implications of interfering in history better than anyone. People whom the reader has been drawn into liking suffer unsentimental fates. Baxter writes vividly; for example, this description of a man run over by a tank: "His guts were forced out of his mouth and his arse, like toothpaste from a tube."

I felt very angry as I read *Weaver*. Not at Baxter or his writing, but at the Nazis' treatment of the people of southern England, and also at how 'collaborators' are treated in liberated areas. That anger is justified, and surely the emotion Baxter wants to elicit. Though these are fictional English people, who in reality never had to go through the travails of occupation, behind Baxter's prose is what did happen to the people of France. Human beings really did things like this to other human beings.

Weaver satisfyingly concludes *Time's Tapestry*. All threads are tied together, and if a few are unresolved, this is for perfectly good reasons. Baxter has become much more sophisticated, both as historical novelist, and in his handling of alternate history. There is a recognition that history cannot be successfully changed in such a way that the person doing the changing will perceive it (though Baxter breaks this rule once), and a final bravura twist links the novel back to our history. *Weaver* shows one of Britain's best SF writers back on top form.

Marie Brennan – *Midnight Never Come*

Orbit, 2008, 379pp, £6.99, mm/pb ISBN 978184149717-1-84149-717-4

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

In part this is a historical novel, in which an impoverished young gentleman, Michael Deven, is trying to establish himself at the court of Queen Elizabeth I. His route to preferment takes him into the service of Francis Walsingham, spymaster to the queen. Here he investigates Walsingham's suspicions of a 'secret player' in the politics of the time, specifically influencing the execution of Mary Queen of Scots.

Parallel to this is the fantasy world of the fae. Below London lies the Onyx Court, ruled by the evil Invidiana. Lady Lune – to some extent Deven's equivalent in the faerie court – has fallen out of favour and is trying to re-establish herself. To do this, she must enter the human world. Deven and Lune must ally together to counter the threat to both their worlds.

This is a period I love, so I had high hopes as I started to read the novel, and I wasn't disappointed. The background is richly detailed, both in the fantasy world and the historical reality of Elizabethan London. It's obvious that a massive amount of research has gone into it, yet it sits lightly on the book, and there's none of this awful pseudo-historical, 'Got to go down to the Globe tonight to catch *Othello*.' Real historical characters come across as authentic, and I was particularly impressed by Elizabeth. My one criticism of the characters is that Deven never really had the presence that his role would suggest – for me, at least.

A similar amount of thought has gone into the portrayal of the inhabitants of the Onyx Court; as they're fictional, Brennan has a bit more scope which she uses to peel off layer upon layer of mystery. Invidiana isn't the two-dimensional wicked queen she appears to be at first, and the character of Francis (whose role I won't give away) is for me the most intriguing of the book.

The style is as rich as the background, and appropriate to the period, though there's the odd word – stymied? – which made me blink a bit. The dialogue works well: always the hardest thing to get right in a historical novel, in my view.

The overall 'feel' of the book is dark; the Onyx Court lives up to its name, and much of the real world action takes place at night. There's spiritual darkness too, in the sense of evil and loss. But the darkness isn't absolute, and the final sense is of hope and redemption.

If it isn't obvious already, I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and I recommend it. Having read it, I'll be looking for some of Brennan's other work.

At the end of the book, as an extra, there's an interview with Marie Brennan where she talks about the origins of the novel and how she wrote it. I found this very interesting; I wish other publishers/authors would do the same.

Terry Brooks – *The Dark Wraith of Shannara*

Orbit, 2008, £6.99, 184pp, p/b ISBN 97818418496382

Reviewed by Shaun C Green

This all-new story set in Brooks' world of Shannara is not only its first appearance in a graphic novel, but also my first experience of the setting. Fans may wish to take my opinions with a pinch of salt.

Set after the events of *The Wishsong of Shannara*, *The Dark Wraith of Shannara* resumes the story of Jair Ohmsford, a young man capable of using a form of magic known as the wishsong. As the story begins Jair's sister has him swear not to risk using the dangerous wishsong again, but Jair is troubled by portentous dreams. The following day he learns that several old friends have been kidnapped, and so Jair and those allies he can round up set out to rescue them. Along the way Jair learns more about the wishsong and about his own potential.

This story is generic, inoffensive quest fare, featuring appearances by various characters who I assume will be known to Shannara fans. The central plot works well enough; it is unoriginal but comprehensible to a newcomer. But it is as a graphic novel that *The Dark Wraith of Shannara* is flawed. This rests on the way that the tale has been written and structured, seemingly as a short story with pictures rather than something that embraces the strengths of the graphic medium. This problem is obvious in every caption of narration, in every transitionally disconnected panel, and in every bit of expositional text. As the story does not always flow visually, the author and reader are forced to rely on this omniscient crutch. The old writer's adage of 'show, don't tell' is rarely this obviously and damagingly violated.

The artwork itself is competent but lacks the personality that can breathe life into a setting. Perhaps this is partially down to Shannara itself, which seems to be drawn from a very generic high fantasy tradition. This could be part of the charm of Shannara to its fans — there is an almost pastoral feel to the setting — but personally I found the lack of ambition and imagination uninspiring.

The flaws of The Dark Wraith of Shannara are too significant to make this graphic novel worth anyone's time. Whether it's due to the poor adaptation to the comic book medium or the sense of having seen it all before, it's likely you'll come away disappointed.

Storm Constantine – *Student of Kyme*

Immanion Press 2008, 193pp, £9.99, t/p ISBN 978190453411

Reviewed by N. J. Ravenscroft

This is a book for the fans of the world created by Constantine in her *Wraeththu* series but is not a book for those who haven't yet met it.

The first trilogy dealt with the intriguing process of change from Mankind to *Wraeththu* and the evolution of new ways of living -

characters are charismatic and difficulties exist to be solved (or not). After a second trilogy, we now have two novels in the *Wraeththu* Mythos, dealing with life on a smaller scale. A sort of dark Wraeththu chicklit, concerned with the domestic, the local; the personal. Constantine has her character explain that the local reflects the global – but a new reader would not get the full sense of the range and intricacies of *Wraeththu* from this little tale, focusing as it does on one person's relationship difficulties.

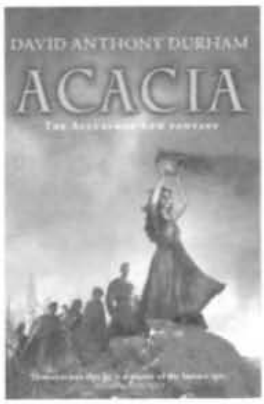
Storm Constantine's creations remain dark and fascinating, if sometimes rather inclined to speak like the Agony Aunt of a New Age magazine ('Go to Ysobi, and release him, as you desire release'). In Student of Kyme, most *hir* aim to live serene lives of dreams and beauty, elegantly dressed, hierarchically organised (essentially, we're back with servants in the Big House but no-one minds because... Er... Because.) and with work, such as it is, concerned with knowledge, with psychic development of self and others, and 'creative projects'. ?*Student of Kyme* is a direct sequel to *The Hienama* and puts the other side of the crisis developed in the latter, the first person narrator being the earlier book's 'villain'. There is a direct connection with the first trilogy – it is the Tigron Pellaz whose sage advice prompts Gesaril to finally confront his past by completing his earlier contemporaneous diary. It's not a long task – the final part is only the last 45 pages of the book. A destructive relationship continues, semi-divine aid is invoked, proves effective and our hero is free to take his feelings of victimisation ('I wondered why it happened to me, why so many bad things happened to me.') to a new continent. There is no reluctance to turn the pages but this is not Storm Constantine at her greatest: too little really happens. ?

The book opens with that favourite device of fantasy novels, the portentous quotation. This states the bland, oft-repeated trope that 'you can learn stuff from bad times so don't cry about it'. I am sure that it is ironic that the character cites the quotation, as he signally fails to learn this lesson. There is also a map, which I found disappointing. At the beginning of the *Wraeththu* chronicles, it was made clear that this was an Earth, but somehow separated from ours: we are free to indulge our personal prejudices about place and time. Not now: Sulh is inescapably Britain, slightly nibbled by rising sea levels, and having an intriguing (underwater?) blob – 'Ruin of the Lund' – where London is/was. York figures as Yorvick and while forests have overtaken the Midlands, places like East Anglia are apparently devoid of interest and settlement. The Kyme of the title appears to be in the Lincolnshire Wolds – and I didn't want to know. I'd rather not be thinking of Doncaster and its environs while I read about fey beings communing on etheric planes.

The problem of the book for me lies in its narrow scope – its focus on the feelings of the characters to the exclusion of other topics. There are interesting developments – the bringing into being of *delura*, and their use, and it's fun to see Constantine taking a swipe at the cultural colonising tendencies of the Gelaming. The difficulties of how to develop *hir* technologies and the intriguing attitude of once-male *hir* to the 'bedroom candy' of pretty little 'second generation' *hir*, are touched on and provide a certain amount of weight but remain frustratingly underdeveloped. Instead, the feelings of the main character are really all. Adolescents are self-centred, yes, and it seems that *hir* are no exception. While allowing a certain enjoyable consideration of the possibilities of hermaphrodite sex, it is less than Constantine can do and less than this reader wants.

This feels like a middle novel; loose ends are left dangling, new

tribes and characters are introduced and new horizons hinted at. I suspect that we haven't heard the last of Gesaril and I'm not too unhappy about the prospect. As long as he's feeling a bit better.



David Anthony Durham – *Acacia*

Doubleday, 2007, £12.99, 576pp, t/p
ISBN 9780385614474
Reviewed by Mark Connorton

David Anthony Durham is already known as a writer of historical fiction, and his first fantasy novel *Acacia* has been praised in the USA as the latest high quality epic to hit the shelves. Book one (of a series of three) is wrist strainingly hefty and comes with the obligatory map at the front. We have a kindly but flawed king, his four young children, and a seemingly tranquil empire (named after the ruling island of Acacia), threatened by political enemies, old regional rivals and sinister northern hordes.

So far, so George RR Martin, but *Acacia* soon takes off in unexpected directions. Within the first quarter of the book, the king has been killed, his children scattered, and his empire overtaken by studly northern viking-a-likes called the Mein. We also quickly discover that the supposedly benevolent Acacian Empire maintains its grip by sending thousands of slaves to a mysterious overseas power in exchange for powerful narcotics that keep the populace placid and docile. In Acacia, the opiate of the masses really is an opiate.

Epic fantasy has often being criticised for its inherent conservatism, with many plots concerned with protecting or restoring a feudal monarchy that has been somehow ordained to rule by fate. Acacia is more interested in exploring colonialism and the nature of political power. The Mein gain allies in the fight to overthrow Acacia by exploiting hostility to the injustice of the slave quota, but when they take power, they find themselves compelled by political and economic necessity to carry on slave trading exactly as before. The king's children are also determined to cease the trade if they regain the throne, but again, things are not looking promising at the end of the book. Refreshingly, it seems that the focus of the trilogy will be to explore how difficult it is to change a deeply entrenched and unjust political system.

It's a shame then, that the execution of the novel isn't quite up its imaginative themes. The plot starts out strongly, then meanders around in the middle before eventually regaining its impetus towards the end. Parts of the book are too explanatory and expository, and lots of key scenes disappointingly occur off camera or are briefly described in summary.

The characters are also not especially compelling or well defined. I found myself struggling to distinguish between the three middle aged men who get point-of-view chapters; and of the four siblings, the least sympathetic is the only one who stands out, just because she isn't as blandly perky, upright and brave as the others.

I'm not entirely sure about the treatment of women in the novel either. We are repeatedly told that Acacian women can serve in the army and have been powerful rulers in the past, but the two prominent female characters (and there are only two, in the whole book) take an awfully long time to remember that and to escape the decorative roles they find themselves in. Unsympathetic sibling seems to suffer a bit from Susan-in-Narnia syndrome (i.e. is punished for being sexually mature) and spends several chapters doing things that only make sense because they serve the plot.

Despite all this, there are times when the book really comes alive: there are some strong descriptions of grief and bereavement; fun battle scenes involving germ warfare, giant mutant warthogs and reality warping magic; and refreshing side trips away from Fantasyland Europe to Fantasyland Africa and Polynesia. Unsympathetic sibling comes into her own towards the end, and we are left on a note of uncertainty and ambivalence that bodes well for the sequels.

There's a lot of setting up in the novel, planting seeds for future plotlines, and despite its faults it's an interesting read. I look forward to the follow-up, where hopefully Durham will be able to fix the flaws apparent in *Acacia* and play more to his strengths.

Gabrielle S Faust – *Eternal Vigilance*

Immanion Press, 2008, 248 pp, t/p, ISBN 9781904853534
Reviewed by Mark Connorton

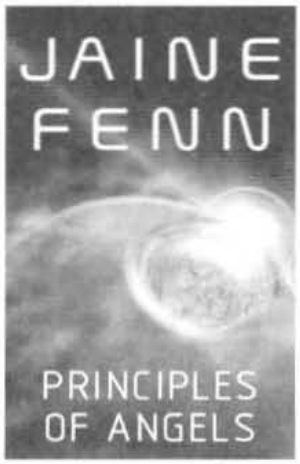
Reading *Eternal Vigilance* made me wonder if there is a critical shorthand term for "probably based on the author's role-playing campaign", as it reads a lot like a sourcebook for one of the White Wolf 'World of Darkness' games. Vampire Tynan awakes from a hundred years of sleep to find himself in a post-apocalyptic America, now ruled by a shadowy dictatorship of hacker/magicians called the Tyst. He soon meets some of his old vampire pals, who recruit him into the resistance alongside obligatory plucky rebels the Phuree (magical crusties, basically). Of course, Tynan is the only one who can stop the Tyst from summoning an ancient evil and destroying the world.

You may think I am just summarising the start of the novel, but the book comes to an abrupt halt as soon as Tynan accepts his mission, leaving one feeling as though the novel has ended about half way through. There is no clue from the jacket copy that this is the first part of a series, but I assume this must be the case, given the large number of loose ends and foreshadowed plot elements that are never resolved. If *Eternal Vigilance* is intended as a stand-alone book, then the pacing and structure leave a lot to be desired. The novel consists entirely of set up and exposition as we get Tynan up to speed on his new world, and then stops without any sense of resolution. There is an attempt at generating conflict, in that Tynan is not sure why he should save a world he despises, but I never felt any genuine doubt as to whether he would accept the mission.

For a novel about a battle to determine the future of the world, the book is surprisingly devoid of actual battles. The Tyst are virtually invisible and we only hear from various characters about how evil they are, without ever seeing them do anything. The only brief action sequences occur when Tynan's allies occasionally attack each other in fits of pique. Instead, we get an awful lot of Tynan's thoughts about the various events. Your enjoyment of this will depend on your tolerance for overwrought gothic prose. When the sight of an old refrigerator inspires Tynan to several paragraphs of existential angst and ennui, it is hard to detect any increase in emotional intensity when something really bad happens.

At times the book does reach the levels of pulpy inventiveness

that the set-up promises, such as when we hear the biography of a Tyst traitor, or learn about the demonic AI that the Tyst use to defend their networks. At these moments we get some glimmer of the potential the novel could have achieved had the action ever shifted to the battle against the Tyst. As the book currently stands, the decision to publish it in such a seemingly truncated form has not done the author many favours.



Jaine Fenn – *Principles of Angels*

Gollancz 2008, £18.99, 384pp, h/b
ISBN 9780575082915
Reviewed by Chaz Brenchley

It's a reviewer's right to be occasionally fanciful; and it is my fancy today that Khesh City, the venue for Jaine Fenn's first novel, has a certain topological equivalence to the book itself. Above, it is all extravagance and artifice, wild ideas smoothly realised; below is all the necessary structure laid bare, acknowledged but not incorporated. These two disparities are conjoined by a third element, a stalk that pins the city to its uninhabitable planet like a thumbtack, just as the novel is pinned by authorial and editorial choices – in my mind-map, at least – to what I think of as core SF territory.

Which makes it quite an old-fashioned book, but in (mostly) good ways. It's neat in size, and in conception; it doesn't sprawl either across the page or across the universe. The action springs from the ideas, and the ideas can all be contained within the one city. If the characters are sometimes moved a little like chess-pieces from section to section in pursuit of resolution, again that goes with the territory and the tradition. *Principles of Angels* reminds me of nothing so much as the SF I grew up with, my golden age (that would be the '50s, '60s, '70s, since you ask).

In another unsatisfactory metaphor, Khesh City must resemble a mushroom: dome above, gills below and a stem that raises it above the planet surface. As you know, Robert, we will now visit all these structures.

The internal structures, the sociopolitical shape of things may be inevitable, or may simply be well-established. Within the dome, within the grip of artificial gravity under an artificial sky, tourists and citizens interact in a complex social model that's exemplified by a form of democratic assassination at the top. Democratic and public, so that it serves as entertainment also for the tourists.

The Undertow, the substructure that supports the dome, is inhabited by an underclass with no citizenship and no rights. Life below is difficult, clannish and dangerous, with the fall always in the corner of your eye; but the Undertow is also home to the Angels, the elite band of assassins who carry out the will of the city above.

Taro is a rent-boy who had lived under the protection of his Angel aunt until he was a witness to her murder. Needing to buy his way into a gang in lieu of that better protection, he goes topside to the city to earn some money and is intercepted by the Minister who oversees the Angels' work. He's sent to witness an assassination, but disrupts it instead when he recognises the intended victim's bodyguard as the man who killed his aunt.

Elarn Reen is a singer, come to Khesh City ostensibly on tour. In fact she has come as unwilling agent of the Sidhe, an enemy humankind thinks long defeated. She is here to perform her own assassination; in defence of her own life, she must track down and kill her former lover, who is in fact a renegade Sidhe.

And is in fact the Angel who missed her mark today, failing to kill the politician Salik Vidoran, whom Elarn meets by seeming chance and tumbles into bed with...

And so the plot weaves these disparate lives together, Taro and Elarn both struggling to survive in the grip of far more powerful forces, hoping to find some personal resolution beyond mere survival.

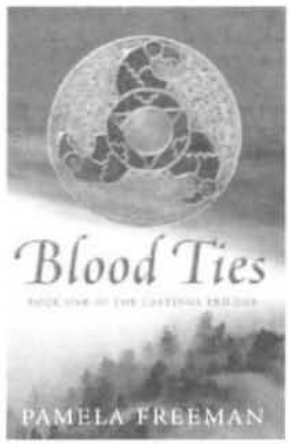
Superficially, this book is a gleeful romp: a tightly-plotted SF thriller in classic vein. Underneath it's largely asking questions about coercion in various forms, and where a lack of choice will drive us.

When a friend picked up *Principles of Angels* and read the blurb on the jacket, she snorted and said, "What are the Sidhe doing in the rest of this?"

Which had I confess been my own first reaction; in that way that Arthur has been cropping up unpredictably anywhere in SF and fantasy for the last forty years or so, I worry that the Sidhe may do it for the next forty. Here, however, they are comfortably SFnal and eventually appropriate.

Where the book has genuine problems, they can I think be put down to its being a first novel. The writing is generally smooth, but the structure shows through; sometimes there's a sense of ticky-box plotting, "been there, done that, what's next...?" Throughout the story, our heroes are ignorant and blundering in confusion, while the villains are omniscient and über-competent to that degree that has me wondering how they're ever to be defeated, and hence leaves me slightly unconvinced by the denouement.

Overall, though, this is happy reading, richly inventive and pleasantly realised. There are three cities, we know, on the uninhabitable planet of Vellern; it seems to me not impossible that we might yet visit the other two. I'm looking forward to the journey.



Pamela Freeman – *Blood Ties*

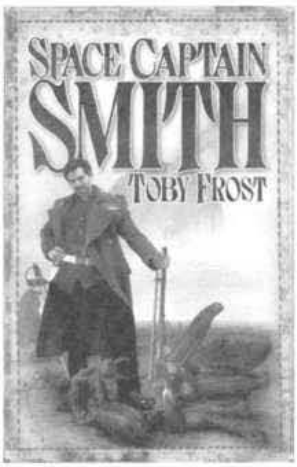
Orbit, 2008, £7.99, 372 pp, t/p ISBN 9871841497013
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

This is Pamela Freeman's first novel for adults and it is a triumph. A thousand years have passed since the Eleven Domains were conquered by Acton and his tall, blonde warriors from the north, and the original dark-haired inhabitants were either massacred or forced to take to the Road. Now known as Travellers, they are still despised and badly treated by the descendents of the invaders. Resentment towards the conquerors is also still rife amongst the Travellers. Saker, a Traveller who is also an enchanter, has determined to seek revenge, not only for the deaths of his own family at the hands of a Warlord's soldiers, but also for the deaths that occurred a thousand years ago at the time of the invasion – and he has discovered the spell that will enable him to do so.

Whilst Saker is travelling the Domains, seeking out battlefields and sites of ancient massacres, two other characters' stories unfold. Bramble has inherited her restlessness and dislike of being enclosed from her grandfather, who had started life as a Traveller, but married one of Acton's people and settled in one place. When she accidentally kills one of the local Warlord's men, Bramble is forced to flee her village home. Eventually, settling on a farm and training horses, she achieves fame for winning the Spring Chase, a horse race with symbolic significance. Unfortunately, her victory brings her to the

notice of another Warlord who is intent on furthering his own power within the Domains, and she is forced to flee once more. Ash is also of Traveller descent, although in his case his Traveller parents, who earn their living through their music, have apprenticed him to a Safeguarder, a trained bodyguard and assassin, as his utter lack of musical ability precludes his earning his living by performing. No-one else would accept a Traveller as an apprentice, and initially Ash is eager to please his employer, Doronit. After a time, however, he is revolted by the thought that he is becoming as cold-bloodied a killer as Doronit herself. When he realises that she is using him for her own nefarious schemes, he rebels, refusing to kill at her command, and he too is forced back onto the Road.

The world through which these characters move, their paths drawing ever closer together, is brought vividly to life. Certain people in this world have the ability to see and communicate with ghosts to a greater or lesser degree, and these spirits are a constant presence among the living. Others have the Sight or the ability to cast fortunes, although the meaning of their predictions is not always clear. As the novel progresses, the stories of people whom the main characters have met also unfold, illuminating the world of the book still further. By the end of the book, it seems that Ash and Bramble will be forming an alliance against Saker, and the reader is left eagerly awaiting the next volume in what has every indication of being a major new fantasy trilogy.



Toby Frost – *Space Captain Smith*

Myrmidon Books, 2008, £7.99, 306pp, p/b, ISBN 9781905802135
Reviewed by James Bacon

Although from the look of the cover *Flashman* in space may immediately come to mind, it would do both authors a major disservice to compare the George McDonald Fraser character of Flashman to Frost's protagonist, Space Captain Smith, who is altogether a different kettle of fish. Yes, both authors deal with humorous military fiction, but Isambard is far from the cowardly cad, salacious lecher that was Sir Harry Flashman.

Set in the 25th Century, we find a universe where a Victorian-styled Britain has expanded its empire out into space. Our dashing hero, stiff lipped Space Captain Isambard Smith is given a mission, to bring a young lady from the rather rum New Francisco back to Britain. Unknown to him he is initially used as a decoy, but through luck and guile he manages to become the focus of an intergalactic struggle to seize a potentially powerful weapon, in the form of this beautiful hippy lady.

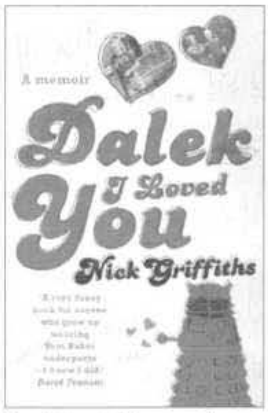
Smith has mannerisms and out-dated attitudes which would embarrass many a modern conservative. He has guts, back-bone, a real tally-ho approach, and this makes him interesting despite his overtly xenophobic and misogynistic attitudes. His best friend Suruk is a skull-collecting psychopathic alien. He finds himself attracted to the good looks and appealing behaviour of Rhianna the herbalist, whose relaxed attitude he knows should offend, and he has to deal with this and his prudish ways. His discriminatory manner, his distaste for the French for instance, and his miserliness become humour points as he asininely continues for the good of The Empire.

Added to the team we have Carveth, a simulant built specifically to be a sexual companion, who has escaped, pursued by an assassin, and assumed the role of space pilot, thanks to the assistance of a Haynes' manual for Smith's ship. She continually uses innuendo and euphemisms despite her best efforts and the most mundane things can suddenly become hilarious, thus; 'That torpedo hit us hard. We've got serious damage to the thrusters, heat warping in the secondary camshaft and the right-side emergency jet's completely knackered. We can't thrust, our shaft's bent and we'll probably never shoot off from the right hand again.'

Compared to Smith's attitude though, the zealous nature of the religious Eden Republic and the quite evil Ghast Empire (an ant-like race, determined to rid the universe of humans at any cost), make Smith's humorous failings seem a little piffling and this is perhaps a deeper reflection on society and attitudes. There is no science in this novel, but there is a definite nod to great science fiction, with quite a few references dotted about.

The approach is laugh-out-loud schoolboy humour and all this with a multi stroke Wankel-rotary engine. Yet when was the last time you laughed out loud reading a book? It definitely makes people stare. It's refreshing to have such a fun read without Rankin, Fforde, Holt or Pratchett on the spine.

What's most interesting is that there is a definite effort to get this novel to appeal to a broader readership in a way that most SF authors would secretly love, but fail to achieve. The novel has featured on W.H. Smiths' front-of-shop tables across the country and also in marketing offers for Borders and Waterstones. It's being compared continually to Flashman or to Hitch Hikers, both books that had broad market appeal, but which were very different, except in their quality of prose and humour. It's an easy, fun and damnably enjoyable read and already Isambard Smith and the God Emperor of Didcot is being touted to follow this debut.



Nick Griffiths – *Dalek I Loved You*

Orion Books 2008, 261pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN9780575079403
Reviewed by Simon Guerrier

Nick Griffiths writes about Doctor Who for the Radio Times. As well as covering the current series, he wrote features marking the show's 40th birthday back in 2003 and interviewed former Doctors to coincide with the TV movie in 1996. But he's been a fan of the show since early 1970. *Dalek I Loved You* is his memoir.

There's a lot of this about. Toby Hadoke's one-man show *Moths Ate My Doctor Who Scarf* got nominated for a Sony Award. In a regular column for Doctor Who Magazine, Neil Harris describes what it *used* to be like as a fan – back when it was something you apologised for rather than celebrated.

There's little in Griffiths' book a Doctor Who fan won't already know, yet part of nostalgia's appeal is that it's so familiar. And this book is less for Doctor Who fans as for those who lived through the 1970s. It's a fun, lively account of that decade and of then being a grown-up. But, like a Channel 4 clips show, it's often a sequence of "Do you remember X? They were rubbish!" followed by "And what about Y? Weren't they brilliant?!?"

It's told in broadly chronological order. Griffiths himself has not had the most exciting of lives. He quotes from diaries in which nothing much happens. He goes to a poshish school where some of the teachers have nicknames. We learn he was an unexceptional student who's then unexceptional with girls and work. There's a divorce, a job he both likes and despises, and then a girl who might just understand him...

But he's certainly a fan. He can describe the plots of old stories without having to look them up – well, most of them. The book is peppered with lists – things he remembers, likes or dislikes. He even times himself compiling his Doctor Who top ten. He's got an encyclopaedic knowledge of top facts, a hunger for obscure details and a paralysing sense of embarrassment. This all suggests he has what *Doctor Who Magazine* once described as the "fan gene".

Even his vocabulary is infused with fannishness. "Garb" and "arrant" are rarely used outside the Target Doctor Who books of the 1970s, and "see it in my mind's eye" is how Mary Whitehouse decried a particular Tom Baker cliffhanger. (The book also features a lot of the script of *Withnail & I*.)

So what *kind* of fan is he? For all his nervousness, Griffiths has fiercely held opinions. He either loves something – an episode, a Doctor, a moment in his life – or he *really* hates it. He heckles bands and celebrities with delicious glee, and says himself that this attitude serves him well as a TV critic. Of course it's okay for *him* to be less than excellent and have rubbish hair. He sees the world in black and white – either "brilliant!" or "rubbish!" – yet extremists are in his list of things that give him "the fear".

As well as not being very self aware, many of his jokes feel too easy – received wisdom rather than thoughts he's had himself. He swipes, for example, at Mary Whitehouse and Colin Baker. But now Griffiths is himself a father, does he not think Whitehouse could have had a point that the Doctor being drowned isn't ideal teatime viewing? And Baker had no say in his scripts or costume or the direction the series was taking. He was just the visible one and so the obvious scapegoat.

This is the problem with what is otherwise a fun book: there are few original insights. Griffiths admits he's not the most incisive reporter – Richard Dawkins even hung up on him in the midst of an interview. Rather this is about what Griffiths already remembers – and what he can google on the way. Even then, there are easily googlable errors: The author of Dalek is *Rob* Shearman, not Colin; it's Arnold T Blumberg not Blomberg; the Doctor's home constellation is Kasterborous, with a K not a C. As a result the book feels a little dashed off; just as Griffiths himself dashes off mid-paragraph to search a cupboard or rewatch a particular video.

It reminds me a lot of the kind of article in old fanzines about what the writer was doing when he (almost always a he) watched a particular episode. So a review of Terror of the Zygons will be as much about a family holiday in Cornwall that coincided with part three, where it rained too hard to go to the beach. Why do we need to know about the beach? Griffiths frets about his parents and son reading his shyly recounted sexual experiences – without ever explaining why he's telling us about them in the first place.

Perhaps this grown-up stuff helps explain why he distanced himself from the series – The Five Doctors special in 1983 was, he says, like saying goodbye. For a long period – more than a third of the book – Doctor Who doesn't even warrant a mention. Or perhaps the show hasn't been quite as important to him as he makes out.

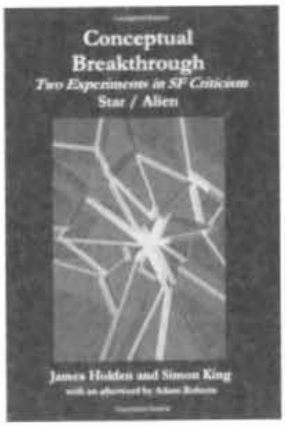
Until the very end, there's little on *why* the show appealed to him, or has won him over anew. As a child, he says, it was just so unlike anything else – he lists the other shows he'd seen. He likes, he says, Doctor Who's imagination, the Daleks, the escapism, the humour, the quarries. But his 12 year-old son Dylan describes something far more involved and emotional than this list suggests:

"I feel a bit embarrassed watching the New Doctor Who with my Dad because he's more childish than I am, shouting at the TV to not look around or don't look there and being scared when something jumps out at the Doctor. But it's always a good laugh watching him because he is the best Dad in the world" (p. 279).

A friend also reminds him of a trip to a Doctor Who exhibition in the early 1990s. Griffiths had to wait until there was no one else around before gleefully trying the Dalek voice-changer. It's telling that he doesn't remember this himself.

The book ends oddly, with Griffiths conducting an interview he's not very interested in and then knocking off early for a beer. You're left wondering what he's learnt from writing the book. Has Doctor Who shaped who he is? Has the book changed his view of himself or the show? Has it helped his parents finally understand their awkward, dorky son? Do his original props and David Tennant's email address give him a sense of ownership of a show now so popular with everyone?

Griffiths skimps on this awkward, embarrassing stuff. Sadly that means that for all this is fun, it feels like he spent his life doing his own thing, with Doctor Who on in the background.



James Holden and Simon King – *Conceptual Breakthrough: Two Experiments in SF Criticism (Star/Alien)*

InkerMen Press, 2007, 137pp, £9.95, ISBN 9780955625916

Reviewed by Nic Clarke

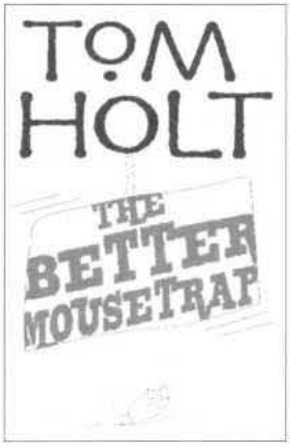
Bit of an oddity, this one. Or, at any rate, its authors would dearly *like* it to be. It always rings warning bells when someone describes themselves with such "I'm mad, me!" lines as "Dr Simon King was born in Cheltenham, and educated at Loughborough, Sussex and Worcester, and has since spent many happy years on the planet Tralfamadore." Oh dear. Nor do things improve with the rather self-aggrandising claims made on the back cover: that the authors of this slim tome are "breaking up the orthodoxies of SF criticism" with their work, which takes inspiration from what Peter Nicholls in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* called 'conceptual breakthrough', or a paradigm shift that prompts a new way of looking at the world. This they shall apply to criticism. "Could it be," we are asked, "that SF criticism usually addresses itself to only *two* questions: how to define SF, and how to police its boundaries?" I don't know; could it? In the history of the genre, have there really been so few examples of what *Conceptual Breakthrough* attempts: that is, theme-driven, close-reading lit crit? This assumption is presented unquestioned, the reader left to come up with the evidence to support or refute it.

At the same time, this is determinedly unconventional literary criticism, apparently inspired by Levi-Strauss' *bricolage* or 'whatever is to hand' approach to analysis. Thus the close reading is sprinkled with eccentricity, lashings of *NewWho* references, and autobiographical asides ranging from the slightly forced to the spectacularly pointless, such as, "The face is also a text: as my mother used to say, 'I can read your face like a book.'" Still, we are warned from the outset that these are "exasperating, partial and above all *subjective* accounts" (emphasis in original; at times, I would have placed it elsewhere). And what we get, in the nuts-and-bolts of the argumentation, if not in the conceptualisation of it, is more a playful thought experiment than an authoritative revolution in criticism.

The book is divided into four parts. The introduction sets out the stall well enough but is bogged down by some clumsy phrasing. (After a note that the titular breakthroughs may also be found in mainstream literature, for example, we are told, "As if to recognise this fact, the essays in this volume do not restrict themselves to science fiction". 'As if'? Surely the authors know what their work does or does not recognise?). In the second part, 'Star', James Holden pursues written SF's relationship with the stars, weaving together

detailed discussions of Bester's *The Stars My Destination*, Clarke's *The City and the Stars*, Delany's *Empire Star*, and Wells' story 'The Star'. Holden considers the stars as both destination and (in Derrida's formulation) *a*destination, the thing that is *not* reached, and in terms of both their physical reality and their metaphorical function; there is a very neat and perceptive progression from characters' journeys within space exploration tales to the idea of the reader as a story's destination and locus of meaning. More ambitious and also more hit-and-miss is Simon King's contribution, 'Alien', which takes in Iain M. Banks' *Algebraist* and Alastair Reynolds' *Diamond Dogs*, together the likes of *Alien*, *Close Encounters* and *Doctor Who* in its quest of what aliens signify in SF. A lot of the argument hinges on the disconnect between science-literate and science-illiterate experiences of SF, and – less interestingly – on anecdotes about the author's childhood toy preferences. It will surprise no-one that a major conclusion is that SFnal aliens have more to say about us than about anything truly alien. We close with an Afterword by Adam Roberts, whose sharp and pithy analysis manages to make the forgoing seem a great deal more lucid than it is, and who even provides a couple of fictional vignettes on the topic into the bargain.

Ultimately, the biggest problem is perhaps the book's tone, which never quite settles. The authors seem to be hedging their bets as regards their audience: one moment we are given extracts from *Doctor Who* scripts and assumed not to know who Borges was, the next there is an extended application of Cartesian philosophy to *The City and the Stars*, although the latter's credibility is shaken slightly by an unfortunate proof-reading error (viewed charitably) that switches Descartes' nationality from French to German. Parts read like unedited blog musings, others like something more universal and scholarly, and readers who prefer one style are likely to find the other jarring. Thought-provoking and, just as the authors say, occasionally exasperating.



Tom Holt – *The Better Mousetrap*

Orbit, 2008, 345pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781841495033

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Emily Spitzer works for Carringtons, one of Britain's premier pest control companies. Her job involves, for example, ridding a bank of the dragon that is currently occupying its vault (dragons are inherently attracted to gold you see). This ended up being a fairly easy job (though it is a mystery why the only thing the dragon seemed to be guarding was a small cardboard tube). But Emily's life is about to take a turn for the worse: someone keeps killing her, although she seems unable to stay dead.

The latter is due to Frank Carpenter, who inherited a Portable Door from his father and uses it to earn a (fairly) honest living changing the past so that an insurance company doesn't have to make payouts. Of course when he finds himself falling in love with Emily, his cheerful, responsibility-free existence is threatened.

It's a while since I have read anything by Tom Holt. I thoroughly enjoyed *Expecting Someone Taller* and *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?*, but found that the my enjoyment trailed off as the books continued, the author seemingly in a desperate struggle to form coherent plots out of funny set pieces. My bemusement reached its head in *Grailblazers* where, if memory serves, the whole plot was contrived by Merlin to get sleeping knights up and about for some exercise. So while I have dipped into one or two books since, Tom Holt has long been absent from my 'must buy' list.

On the strength of *The Better Mousetrap* this may change. There are certainly no problems with having a plot, even bordering on too much plot at times. I did get a little confused at a couple of points, although that may be due to this being related to other books that I have not read. In particular I was left wondering whether this is this an alternative world where everyone knows about goblins, dragons and magic, or is this all secret?

There are a couple of idiot plot moments, in particular Emily, after her mystification in the first chapter about the cardboard tube the dragon was guarding, forgets about it until the plot needs it. In the main, though, it hangs together pretty well.

Holt assembles a fairly likeable cast, the only exception for me being Emily; I could understand the pleasant, but rather limp, Frank falling in love with her, but not the other way around; I cannot help thinking that this is a relationship that would last until the first time Frank says 'no'! Still, this is at heart a romantic comedy and so it has to obey certain conventions.

But does *The Better Mousetrap* work as a comedy? On the whole I would say 'yes', not often in a 'laugh out loud' way (although there are some such moments) but more often events are greeted with a wry smile. Holt has always been good at getting humour from fantasy in mundane settings and this is no exception. In tune with this the villain, when eventually revealed, is not motivated by a desire to rule the world but by more ordinary desires.

In summary, then, *The Better Mousetrap* is a highly enjoyable, low-key comic novel.

Stephen Hunt – *The Kingdom Beyond The Waves*

HarperVoyager, 2008, 556pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 978000723220 8

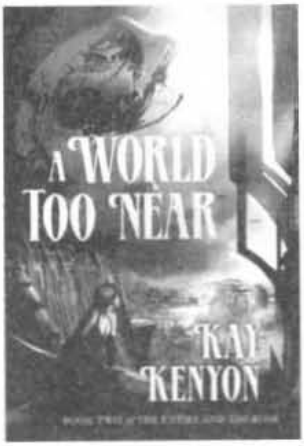
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

I think this fantasy novel must be a sequel to, or set in the same world as, Hunt's first book, *The Court of the Air* (although this isn't made clear either in the book blurb or the accompanying publicity material). It is the work of a fertile imagination, containing airborne chunks of earth detached from the surface in "floatquakes", ley lines, worldsinger mages, crustacean people, plant people, robot people ("Steammen"), bat people, people people, Amazons, near-immortal descendants of the vanished city of Camlantis, non-electronic computers ("transaction engines"), clockwork-driven carriages, submarines, flying machines ("aerostats"), a French Revolution-cum-Communist dystopian state, crystal-books infected with information sickness, an Evil Genius (complete with world-destroying killer nano-mist), a flying madman, a state secret agent, and an archaeologist. And more. Much more. In fact there is so much Neat Stuff crowding into the foreground on every page that there's no room for any background. For me, a deep and almost reverential sense of awe and wonder – which is something I treasure in amazing fiction – is not generated or maintained by introducing new gosh-wow stuff on every page.

And just as the stage is crowded with sets, props and characters, so the plot is crowded with Action. Amazing adventure jostles daring escape is overtaken by thrilling near-disaster in a storyline which ignores careful, detailed continuity in favour of slaughtering its way to the Plot Token. I suspect this is print fiction aimed at an audience

whose tastes and expectations have been shaped by TV serials and computer games. The final body count is high, very high, but the characters are cardboard so who cares? You will never be bored reading this book – stuff comes at you far too fast and too frequently for that – but you will never have time to develop any empathy for individuals or cultures, any depth of understanding. I don't like the (lack of) ethics, in other words.

But what I *really* don't like is that the book doesn't take itself seriously. It's infused with an air of mocking self-awareness that continually blocks the full suspension of disbelief. Oh yes, the sort-of-Communists are called Carlists, not Marxists; aren't we clever to have noticed that? Superficial acquaintance with a wide range of lightly disguised contemporary cultural motifs is assumed – is the tick-every-box mentality now invading fiction? Yes; the whirl of images is dazzling, but at the end of the book, what have I learned? How have I grown? I am saddened that a fiction so inventive should prove to be a bubble not a jewel; a thin coating of Desperate Fun over a void.



Kay Kenyon – *A World Too Near*

Pyr, New York 2008,425pp, h/b, ISBN 9781591026426
Reviewed by Mark Harding

The first thing that catches your attention is the mixture of signals in the jacket illustration. There's a rather vaguely drawn futuristic landscape, while in clear foreground focus is a pneumatic lady wearing what looks like a ball gown and evening gloves. Some mistake surely? But actually, it's a very good indication of the contents.

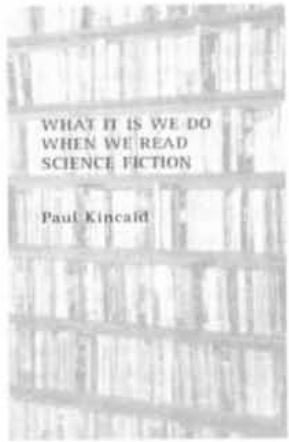
A World Too Near is the second book in *The Entire and The Rose* series. The heart of the story is dramatic enough for anybody: technologically advanced aliens have custom-built their own universe (called *The Entire*) and in a spectacular gesture of environmental callousness plan to burn up the whole of our universe (*The Rose*) as a power supply. In the previous book Titus Quinn had accidentally discovered this parallel universe, and his wife and daughter are trapped there still. As the only human who knows his way around The Entire he is the obvious choice to return carrying a nanotech weapon to turn the alien doom machine to goo.

Although the foundation of Kenyon's alien universe is the highest of high-tech, there is very little in the way of hard SF; the feel of the novel is much more of magic than maths. SF novels usually enlist the devices of other genres; interestingly, Kenyon makes noticeable use of the tropes of Romance – hence the velvet-gowned woman on the cover. She is Johanna, Titus' wife, slave-mistress to Lord Inweer, one of the five Tarig aliens who rule over The Entire. As in the way of these things, Johanna has charmed this powerful and mysterious Lord to the extent that she is granted gifts, slaves, influence, and the run of the fortress city in which she lives.

In fact, the Quinns must qualify as the most charming family across at least two universes. Apart from Johanna's amorous tribulations with Lord Inweer and Morhab the snake-demon engineer; the daughter, Sydney, is so lovely that she has been made chief of the Inyx – a sort of Mongol horde of telepathic horse-creatures – and Titus himself is the subject of more than his fair share of hero-worship and female interest. Kenyon works on the basis that you have to be truly evil not to be won over by the Quinns sooner or later.

But the novel also packs surprises: a brilliantly managed one, is that just at the point I was starting to think all the love action was destroying any inter-species frisson, is precisely the moment that Kenyon chooses to throw in a plot revelation which gives a real jolt of disorientating 'otherness' and puts a whole new perspective on the Tarig and their behaviour.

Kenyon's hybrid of SF and fantasy has many dramatic ideas, some vividly realised scenes and an intricate, wide-ranging plot. If you haven't read the preceding book, Kenyon effectively provides the plot links needed. Yet the drawing of the world behind the main characters is not so effective; it feels vague, just like the background in the illustration on the cover.



Paul Kincaid – *What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction*

Beccon Publications, 2008, £15.00, pp v + 365, t/p, ISBN 9781870824545
Reviewed by Adam Roberts

There's a 'we' in the title of Paul Kincaid's generously selected, nicely produced collection of critical essays (indeed, there are *two*). Who *is* that? It's a key question.

Presumably, for one thing, it's the 'we' the book is aimed at; which is to say, it's you, readers of *Vector*, and people like you. You, if you're thinking of parting with fifteen pounds and investing the time in reading it, will likely be interested in how we might define SF, and equally interested in critical appraisal of some of the genre's key players. Kincaid's volume offers both. The former, in two opening sections 'Theory' and 'Practice', takes the form of the title essay, and pieces called things like 'On the Origins of the Genre' and 'Anatomising Science Fiction'. The latter takes up most of the volume's bulk: essays (mostly reprinted reviews) covering works by a clutch of British writers (Aldiss, Clarke, Robert Holdstock, Christopher Evans, two strong essays on that neglected master Keith Roberts and a brave stab at Clute's *Appleseed*), as well as a variety of non-Brits: Steven Erickson, Steven Millhauser, Borges, Russell Hoban, Joe Haldeman, George Turner and Gene Wolfe. The jewel of the collection is a cluster of four essays on Christopher Priest that treats this important writer with insight and intelligence. Without exception these pieces on individual authors are well-handled, informed and informative, and written in a style that prizes clarity and plainness: no jargon, or pet theories, just an individual who cares about SF explaining what works and what doesn't in a set of novels. But then the chances are that 'we' have already read Kincaid's reviews, and are already aware of his talents.

The opening two sections, attempting a broader critical engagement with the genre, are much weaker. If I call Kincaid an amateur critic I don't mean to be insulting: some of the genre's best critics (as he himself knows very well: John Clute and David Langford are two examples) are also amateurs, in the sense that they begin with an *amo*, an 'I love', and that they are unencumbered by the professional requirements or intellectual blinkers of the academy. Kincaid's own reviews are in the best tradition of non-university-academic critical engagement. But when he decides to engage with the sorts of debates that university critics have worked over very thoroughly unfamiliarity with the terms of these debates limits what he's able to achieve.

For instance, in the title essay 'What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction' he announces 'I must say here and now that as far as

I am aware I am neither a structuralist nor a post-structuralist, though since I've never been entirely sure what those terms really mean I suppose it's possible I am' [3]. He's aiming, perhaps, for disarming with this; but sails close to crass. Given that the essay rehearses the issues that academic Critical Theory has been primarily concerned for the last four decades, this rather proudly announced ignorance sets-up a rather naïf discussion. Kincaid mentions Wittgenstein's later philosophy, without going into much detail, and quotes from Austin's *How To Do Things With Words* without touching on the Derridean challenges to that rather limited study, or the larger critical debate their exchange occasioned. This absence of critical context means that discussion shifts between the banal ('the word "cat" is not a cat') on the one hand, and a series of floundering and often contradictory assertions on the other. Kincaid apparent believes that 'language is a means of conveyance; the message is what is conveyed' [11]; that in use 'language models reality' whereas in fiction 'the language models nothing in reality' (he provides evidence for this latter statement with the observation that Ebeneezer Scrooge never actually existed). But the idea that language is a sort of carriage porting 'meaning' from place to place is so crude as to be frankly useless — medium and 'message' are radically interconnected — and the assertion that fictional language models nothing in reality is flatly wrongheaded: language precisely *models* reality (Scrooge is not a real person, but he is a *model* of a real person; much as a toy car — to take a specifically late-Wittgensteinian example — is not an automobile, but *is* a model of an automobile). Kincaid perhaps means that language does not directly *apprehend* reality; but this is not what he says, is as true of real-life usage as it is of fictional, and is a rather trivial point to boot.

'Conflicts over definition [of science fiction]' Kincaid says, 'are usually redundant and cause more harm than good' [77]. Nevertheless he spends the first 50 pages of his book engaging in this redundant, harmful activity, and no very clear sense of what 'science fiction' is emerges. Sometimes the definitional focus is on language; sometimes on content, sometimes on authorial intention ('hard sf is so fluid in intent...' 31) although I'm not sure how he intuits this latter quantity. He tells us that SF is 'a series of strands, none of which would stand as a genre or even a sub-genre in their own right' [20] but since he nowhere tells us what genre or sub-genre means, this isn't so helpful. At one point he offers certainty: 'certainly, science fiction is about novelty' [6]; but this struck me as *less* than certain (my experience of reading a lot of SF is rather the reverse—of the non-novelty and cosy familiarity of many of its tropes). Sometimes he is vague: talking of, for example, apparently 'a tone' and 'a quality' that are 'inextricably linked' with British SF without pinning down what they are [49]. He insists that there is no point of origin for the genre, 'because there is no ancestral text that could possibly contain even in nascent form all that we have come to identify as science fiction' [13], which is rather like asserting that present day Irish-Americans cannot identify 'Ireland' as their point of cultural origin, since Ireland in 1600 did not contain Jackie Charlton, the song 'Danny Boy', Coors beer, funding the IRA or people dyeing their hair green and bringing the city of New York to a halt on Saint Patrick's Day. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* don't 'pre-contain' the *Aeneid*, *Paradise Lost* and *The Dunciad* either, but there is nevertheless some point in tracing the traditions of epic poetry back to Homer.

'What we are actually doing when we read science fiction,' Kincaid says, 'is allowing ourselves to be mystified' [11], which goes some way towards a definition, although it rather suggests that if I wish to experience the most intense sciencefictional buzz I ought to pick up the *Écrits* of Lacan, a textbook on Advanced Vector Calculus, or perhaps I ought just contemplate the success of the *Sex and the City* movie. He adds that 'the language that mystifies us' also provides us with the wherewithal to construct a non-mystifying reality. In fact, we might think, the urge to *dissolve* mystery (the motor of science, after all) is at the heart of SF; and it's certainly the case that some of Kincaid's strongest essays here are precisely demystifying: providing (for example) the detailed historical context to a clutch of alt-historical takes on the American civil war, for instance; or constructing an intelligent and informative itinerary of islands in UK fantastic writing.

Most awkwardly of all Kincaid insists that 'we have no commonly agreed definition of the genre' because 'everyone is on a different mobius loop' [15]. This is awkward because, actually, his definition of SF depends precisely upon invoking a community of SF aficionados—his is, in other words, a *contextual* and Stanley Fishian approach to definition. SF is what 'we' recognize as SF. Time and again he tests putative definitions of SF against the benchmark not of actual definition but rather the beliefs of 'those of us who know the genre' [14]. 'Because we can see the resemblances between works of science fiction ... we can talk sensibly about the genre' [21]. One definition of Hard SF is dismissed because it contradicts what 'we might have felt comfortable with before', and isn't 'what I would describe as hard sf' [30]. A story by Greg Egan 'stretches my notions of hard sf to their breaking point' [44]. This appeal to authority seems to me critically limited: it's not just that it is circular (although it is); it's that it depends crucially upon who gets included in the 'we' and who doesn't. So, when all pre-Wells fantastic fiction is dismissed as not SF on the grounds that 'let's face it; such ur- or proto-science fiction wasn't that much different from other literature going on around it' [50], the 'us' being instructed to 'face it' bothers me: perhaps it includes me, but (since I happen to disagree with the statement) it comes over as slightly rhetorically coercive. This isn't to say that Kincaid lacks the range, or body of experience, or open-minded critical intelligence to talk interestingly about the genre; it is just to say that a 'we' implies a 'not-us', a group of people who are marginalized and excluded. And that there may be some merit in thinking SF — especially SF — through the margins rather than the centre. There's a lot in this collection that is excellent, although perhaps it needs to be clearer about who 'we' are.

Kim Lakin-Smith – *Tourniquet: Tales from the Renegade City*

Immanion Press, 2007, 244pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781904853350

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

Tourniquet, the debut novel from Kim Lakin-Smith, takes us to an alternative Nottingham; whether by 'alternative' you infer a variant history, or a dance to a different beat, the epithet rings true. Nottingham's transformation began some years before the action of *Tourniquet* when 'the most revered band in the history of rock', ?bergoths Origin, decided to turn their back on the mainstream and retire to the city, provoking an influx of adoring fans and followers, and an outflux of ordinary, decent *Daily Mail*-reading folk. Gradually Nottingham, its municipal bodies suborned by the wages of Gothic rock, has been transmuted into the darkly magical Renegade City, its familiar landmarks and thoroughfares – Sneinton Market, St Mary's Church, Maid Marion Way, the legendary venue Rock City – overseen by the Drathcar (the four neo-vampyric members of Origin) and overrun by the tribes that have evolved.

Tourniquet opens with a Fae girl, Jezebel, fleeing an army of Skinwalkers, one of whom turns out to be her estranged brother Harish. Next, we encounter Druid, Origin's drummer, vowing to

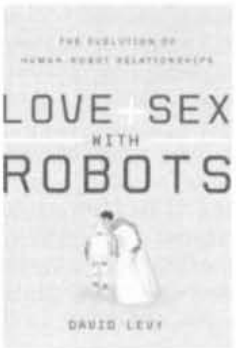
avenge the reluctant martyrdom of lead singer Roses, who burnt to death in a fire that may have been no accident. Roses, it turns out, was Druid's brother, which may explain why Druid's so keen to discover the truth behind his death when the other members of Origin, slinky bassist Sophia and lilac-eyed lead guitarist Adeudas, seem fashionably unconcerned.

Fame can be its own punishment, as many a rockstar has found to their cost: but in this case Druid's famous face is his salvation, for he can pass as no more than one of the Drathy, obsessive fans who emulate the clothes, the physiology and the lives of their idols. It's the mysterious "D", then, who mingles with the lowlives of the Renegade City; who encounters the sassy and streetwise IQ (Irvine Quirk), his battleaxe grandmother Queenie, and a host of other colourful characters who seem drawn as much from legend and ballad as from the counterculture.

Lakin-Smith's prose is extravagant almost to excess, glowing as a stained glass window and spiky as baroque barbed wire. The Nottingham she paints is not one of soft-focus spires limned with dark fire, but a convincingly gritty cybergoth city, dangerous and dirty. There are motorbike tourneys, Fae wings patched with duct-tape, wireless pirates plying the canals. It's visually arresting, and often rather frantic as D and Jez progress on what's either a quest or an extended pub-crawl through the underside of the city.

Like Gwyneth Jones' *Bold as Love* sequence, *Tourniquet* posits a world where rock'*n*'roll is really as important as it thinks it should be. Unlike Jones' amiable dystopia, the Renegade City is an isolated (and likely barricaded) polder in a land of normality. Very little is said of the rest of England, the rest of the world, save as something to be fled. Whatever the goths and hippies and punks hope to find in the Renegade City, it's not peace. The different tribes – Trawlers, Castclan, Skinwalkers, Fae – are engaged in constant internecine conflict, as exclusive and elitist as playground cliques: 'apartheid', Jez terms it, and Druid is increasingly aware that Roses' libertarian notions haven't translated well to reality.

Tourniquet is so tightly and intricately knotted a novel that it's sometimes hard to see through the gloss of poetic prose to the shape of the story. There's an unresolved feel to it, a haziness to the last few chapters, that makes me wonder if the stories herein are to be continued. I'll certainly look forward to more of Lakin-Smith's work.



David Levy – *Love & Sex With Robots*

Duckworth, 2008 352pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN: 9780715637401

Reviewed by Paul Raven

David Levy's *Love & Sex With Robots* had an unexpected effect on me; I discovered that I'm a romantic after all.

No, wait – it's not what you think! I haven't suddenly developed an abiding adoration of androids as a result of Levy's points. Quite the opposite – I've always believed that I have a very rational and cynical view of human love and affection, but Levy's deployment of the psychological and physiological foundations of those emotions in support of his thesis has made it clear that I have, to some extent, been fooling myself.

Levy's thesis is that not only will it be possible for humans to be doing the wild thing with fully artificial partners within around five decades or so (possibly less), but that the majority of us will inevitably be doing so, with little or no sense of shame. The first part of the conjecture is more than plausible, especially if you're plugged in to the RSS feeds coming out of the electronics, computing and physics establishments. The Japanese, especially, are making massive strides in robotic appearance and capability – aided, perhaps, by their very different cultural attitudes towards automata – but as Levy points out there's no shortage of effort in the US and elsewhere, albeit from different angles. The possibility of robots that could pass for human in a casual momentary encounter is far from being a wild speculation. Frankly, I'd say that fifty years is probably a conservative estimate of our ETA on the far side of The Uncanny Valley.

What is a little tougher to accept is the notion that, during said casual encounter, you'll decide that you want to have sex with this friendly and attractive android. I'm willing to bet you can think of three or four major objections without even having to make an effort; I know I did. Levy has heard them all, though, and plenty more, and he proceeds to refute them all. And this is where my hidden romanticism reared its atrophied yet leonine head; for the great majority of Levy's refutations are based on statistics and psychology, both of which are disciplines with a deserved record for, more frequently than not, discovering exactly the results their practitioners set out to find.

So, when Levy quotes studies wherein a significant number of responders used anthropomorphic language when talking about their computers or toy robot dogs, I find myself wondering what options they had to choose from on the questionnaire. When he quotes surveys wherein people self-report on the frequency of their liaisons with human sex-workers, I find myself remembering all the times I've gleefully lied through my teeth to the person who has cornered me with a clipboard while I try to buy some new shoes. Psychology has value, but it isn't predicated on measurable variables – I don't trust it like the 'hard' sciences, which it masquerades as here.

That aside, Levy's points aren't actually that incredible when taken in isolation: we *do* develop affections for non-human (even non-humanoid) things; we *are* prone to getting our sexual jollies by whatever means necessary (given our particular circumstances and cultural barriers). But these aren't the bits that really stuck in my throat. I found it harder to deal with the notion that artificial intelligences will develop well enough to not only simulate the aspects of a human personality that could make someone fall in love with it, but also to reciprocate that love.

Now, if you're even slightly more romantic than me (and there are pieces of Brutalist architecture which meet that criteria), you just had a huge emotional knee-jerk reaction. How could a robot love you back, even if you fell in love with it? And this is where I just can't bring myself to square with Levy's ideas: he claims that expert systems will be able to accurately mimic the reactions and behaviours of a sentient consciousness falling in love, and then uses the "quacks like a duck" argument – in other words, if it *appears* to be falling in love with us, might we not just as well accept it as being the same thing?

Logically, there's a lot to be said for Levy's arguments, but love and logic feel about as far removed from one another as Earth and the moon, and I can't help but feel there would be something strangely exploitative about creating beings whose only purpose is to make us feel happy and loved, and to satiate our every sexual whim. Perhaps he's right, though; indeed, perhaps learning to fall in love with artificial beings will encourage us to take a more rational view of love as a physiological and psychological phenomenon in years to come. Maybe I'm less a romantic than I am a cynic, though, because I don't intend to hold my breath. I'd also argue that economics is going to provide a stumbling block: how many people will be able to afford a robot companion? Where's the energy to power them going to come from, in a world where we're not entirely sure how we'll supply basic amenities to the entire global population fifty years hence?

My disagreements aside, Levy's book brings together an

interesting cross-section of research material about human-human and human-machine relationships, and as such provides plenty of food for thought for the SF-nal thinker, even though many of the throwaway cautions and "what ifs" in his conclusion have been well trodden long beforehand by genre writers. I'd very much like to give him Chris Beckett's *The Holy Machine* to read, providing as it does the dark flip-side to Levy's somewhat wide-eyed Church Of The Soft Machine best-case-scenario. And therein lies the fault, I think; an SF reader will find *Love & Sex With Robots* to be lacking the rigorous interrogation of ideas that the better fiction writers can provide. The happy corollary being, of course, that there are a hundred stories waiting to be written in response to it ...

Howard Phillips Lovecraft – *The Necronomicon: The Best Weird Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft*

Gollancz, London, 2008, 896pp, £20.00, h/b, ISBN: 9780575081567

Reviewed by Donna Scott

I can dimly recall first learning about *The Necronomicon* from the whisperings among my school friends. Back then, a friend told me about this ancient book, which he said had been banned for making men mad, and that some writer called H. P. Lovecraft had written clues in his fiction about the terrible things that happened to people who had only dared look within its pages. In fact, reading Lovecraft's stories, the friend said, was *almost as bad*. I thought I would take my chances, and am almost certain that 'At the Mountains of Madness' was the first horror story I ever read.

As a newcomer to Lovecraft, I found the stories deliciously terrifying, though part of the pleasure was almost certainly bound up with the idea that someone might disapprove of me reading them. However, this anecdote leads to my present-day suspicion that the power of the Mythos to terrify is perhaps greater than the sum of its fictions.

With this "definitive" single-volume collection, Gollancz presents readers old and new with a substantial body of Lovecraft's work, ordered for the most part in chronological order of first publication. Out of sequence are two poems, 'Night Gaunts' and 'To a Dreamer'. This is a brief acknowledgement of the fact that Lovecraft also wrote poems, but here they are used to frame what matters: the fiction. Beginning with 'Dagon', first published in 1919, and ending with the posthumously published 'The Dream Quest of Unknown Kaddath', the chronological presentation is useful in that it allows the reader to observe the development of the elements and themes around which the Mythos took shape. The writing becomes more crafted in the later published stories, though Lovecraft's instinct for Poe-esque homage remains strong.

As Stephen Jones explains in his very thorough 'Afterword' to the collection, Lovecraft was disappointed with the payment he received for 'The Colour Out of Space' from *Amazing Stories*, and vowed to only write for *Weird Tales*, although the editor of that magazine, Farnsworth Wright, had originally rejected the story. Wright had particular ideas about what his readers liked, which might go some way to explaining Lovecraft's formulaic approach to story beginnings. Although the stories are still enjoyable to read, there are many ways in which they would not do by modern day standards: they are largely 'told' instead of 'shown', using little dialogue or changes in pace. Suspense is often conveyed by something being too *horrid* to describe.

Furthermore, the supremacist tone in several of the stories does not make for comfortable reading. This is manifested as a horror of mixing with the lower classes in 'The Lurking Fear', where the protagonist describes strange goings on at the site of the Martense mansion. In the story, the English-hating inhabitants of the mansion, who are descended from the seventeenth-century New-Amsterdam merchant, Gerrit Martense, have degenerated through isolation from society into people who are "heavy of speech and comprehension" with the inherited defect of having one brown and one blue eye. Yet these descendents are only said to 'degenerate' after they take to "intermarrying with the numerous menial class about the estate", who are also described as "the mongrel population". In this subtle way, the progeny of incestuous relations are ranked a notch above mixed race children. Not so subtle is the depiction of the boxer, Buck Robinson, in 'Herbert West – Reanimator' as "a loathsome gorilla-like thing, with abnormally long arms... and a face that conjured up thoughts of unspeakable Congo secrets and tom-tom poundings under an eery moon". Lovecraft uses this aspect of 'otherness', that is to say, a race, culture or religion that he thinks of as different from his or the reader's own, in order to convey a distance from the safe and the known, intensifying a sense of the unheimlich. The gods and monsters can be thought of as an extension of this idea: a horror of all that is beyond *earthly* understanding. A reader can infer Lovecraft's fear of medical experimentation into stories like 'Herbert West – Reanimator', and evolution is horribly reversed, first in the animalisation of the lower classes, then with the white, male protagonists driven mad by corruption. The stories warn of those things that man is not meant to seek knowledge of, and yet it is the exoticism of far-flung places, hidden civilisations, mysterious cultures, and even the forbidden book, *The Necronomicon*, that renders the stories so alluring.

The prejudices conveyed in the text can certainly detract from the pleasure of reading, even if you take the view that Lovecraft wrote these stories in more naïve times, which is debatable, but the stories' power lies in the building up of legend, both inside and outside the text, and the development of unusual ideas in contemporary horror, like the waking of terrible, ancient gods.

It is interesting to spot the influence of other writers on Lovecraft's distinctive voice: Jones mentions Poe, Lord Dunsany and Arthur Machen. Huysmans's grotesque aesthetic style is also an evident influence (Lovecraft even mentions Huysmans and Baudelaire in 'The Hound'), or even Baron Friedrich de la Motte Fouquée. The 'Afterword' also lists successful writers who have been influenced by Lovecraft, and the back of the book bears a prominent endorsement from Stephen King.

Jones rightly praises August Derleth, who established the Arkham Press with the aim of bringing Lovecraft's work to a wider audience, and is responsible for coining the Cthulhu Mythos term that still resonates with horror fans. The section of the 'Afterword' that discusses modern Lovecraft spin-offs and homage in literature, films and games is perhaps more disjointed than the biographical section; nonetheless, Jones's writing is informative and communicates enthusiasm for the subject.

This edition could be useful for students, although it only lists the majority of Lovecraft's collaborative works and contains no editorial footnotes. However, with its black leather cover and creepy illustrations, it looks every inch the fabled *Necronomicon*, and my enjoyment in reacquainting myself with the stories was only enhanced by its attractiveness.

James Morrow and Kathryn Morrow, eds. – *The SFWA European Hall of Fame*

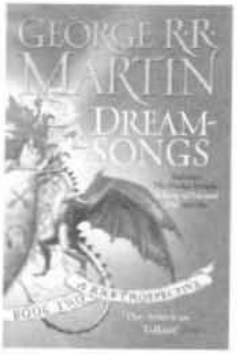
Tor, 2007, 222pp, £17.99, ISBN 9780765315366
Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

The SFWA European Hall of Fame gathers together 16 stories from continental Europe published over the last twenty years. Previous SFWA Hall of Fame anthologies have been efforts to collect together Nebula-worthy stories that were not eligible for the awards due to being published before they were inaugurated. I believe that the SFWA membership was polled on the stories for inclusion. This differs in that it is not a consensus of the SFWA and the introduction by James Morrow would suggest that the only direct SFWA involvement was some initial funding for the project. This introduction gives a brief history of European SF, and attempts to place the anthology into some sort of context. What we have is a collection intended to provide a representative sample of some of the best SF published in continental Europe over the last twenty years that a predominantly English speaking audience would not have access to.

Given that the stories are taken from such a broad range, with at most two stories representing any one country, how far can they be said to be representative of the SF of that country? Especially when that country has been through some of the political upheavals seen on the continent. Probably not very far at all, so for the lay reader attempting to place the story into their proper literary and socio-political context is something of a futile exercise. This is not necessarily a bad thing as it then leaves us with the stories themselves, and so the anthology has to stand or fall on the quality of the fiction within. And stand it most certainly does, by almost any standard this is a strong collection and picking out the best stories is no easy task. The conjoined prisoners in Valero Evangelisti's 'Sepultura' form an astonishingly potent image in one the most brutal prison systems ever envisaged, as do the paradoxical and beautiful dancers in Jean-Claud Dunyach's 'Separations'. The remarkable and touching "Yoo Retoont Sneogg, Ay Noo" paints a picture of a brutal post-apocalypse society where those with imperfections are farmed and harvested with all the respect afforded a battery hen. There is strong sense of isolation in a number of the stories. The idea that speech can be fatal is given a potent new reality in Elena Arsenieva's 'A Birch Tree, A White Fox'. A story from Russia published at the end of the cold war which, although set on a remote and empty planet, is probably the most resonant (from a simplistic western perspective) of its country's political history. There comes a point where the need for communication by any means overrides the consequences. 'Baby Doll' by Johanna Sinisalo is a shocking portrayal of the effect of the need to conform for adolescents, told from the point of view of one who does not fit into the media view of what they should be, and Andreas Eschbach's 'Wonders of The Universe' is an affecting account of an astronaut's final moments on one of Jupiter's moons, out of reach of rescue. Each story in this varied collection is notable in its own way but one is of particular note. This is the complex and beautiful time-travel story 'A Blue and Cloudless Sky' by Bernhard Ribbek. It is a play on the fulfilment of prophecy, as the actions of the time are largely known as they've already happened and form a part of the history and faith of the colony. What is cause and what is effect is never entirely obvious, and the resolution is simultaneously both moving and shocking.

One very positive aspect of this anthology is the emphasis put on the translations, and it is good to see the translators properly credited for their work and regarded as a part of the creative process. Even where an existing translation exists, a new one has been commissioned. According to the introduction this was done with communication between author, translator and editors to ensure all were happy with the result. The result of this effort is twofold. We can reasonably assume that what we end with is as close to the spirit of the original as can be reasonably expected. There is also, however, more consistency to the prose than I would have expected from such varied sources. Given the quality of the result, this cannot really be considered to be a bad thing, although one does start to wonder how much editorial input there was.

This is fine anthology and, with the introduction and extensive story notes, more than simply a collection of good stories. The Morrows' efforts to create an overview of the quality of the SF available from continental Europe have been largely successful. With such a large and largely untapped resource, it is to be hoped that there will be more of this type of effort being undertaken, to give those of us with limited language skills access to more of this fiction.



George R.R. Martin – *Dreamsongs: Book 2*

Gollancz, 2008, pb, £8.99, 717pp, ISBN 9780752890098
Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

We should clear this up first. This Gollancz paperback edition (*Dreamsongs Book 2: A Retrospective* on the cover, *Dreamsongs II* on the title page) is the second part – or more precisely, the second half – of a massive 1300 page and half a million word retrospective of George R.R. Martin's shorter fiction, spanning some forty years. It was originally published by Gollancz in the UK in 2006 as one massive hardback, *Dreamsongs*, and previously in the US by Subterranean Press (2003) under the title *GRRM: A Retrospective*, though the Gollancz editions omit the illustrations in the original US edition.

Unfortunately, I've not seen the first half of this book, which contains much of Martin's earlier fiction (including some fanzine writing) and particularly the Hugo and Nebula Award winning and nominated stories including, 'A Song for Lya', 'Sandkings', 'The Way of Cross and Dragon', 'With Morning Comes Mistfall', 'Bitterblooms', 'Meathouse Man' and 'Nightflyers'. I've read most of those of those previously in older collections and anthologies, and have fond memories of many of them, so I'd urge you – as I will be doing – to seek out parts of this retrospective (unless your wallet and your wrists can cope with the hardback edition).

Dreamsongs II, like the earlier volume, is divided into several sections, each prefaced with an autobiographical note and comments on the stories. The division between Books I and II is not entirely chronological (although judging by the bibliography at the end this volume contains much of the later work, from the 1980s onwards). But to start we skip back to the mid 1970s with the opening section 'A Tale of Tuf' which, as its name implies, contains two stories featuring Martin's disarmingly avaricious freelance ecological engineer, problem-solver and cat-lover, the splendidly named Haviland Tuf. Tuf, Martin freely admits, takes his inspiration from a number of well-known predecessors (all, he observes, larger than life and with memorable names) such as Northwest Smith, Dominic Flandry, Slippery Jim de Griz and Nicholas van Rijn. In 'A Beast for Norn' (1976), Tuf is prevailed on by an envoy of one of the lesser houses of Lyronica to supply a superior fighting beast for the gaming pits, boosting that house's prestige and fortune. Naturally, all the other houses soon want their own unbeatable beast and approach Tuf in turn. The stakes (and Tuf's fees) escalate in a classic arms race of

ferocious custom-bred monsters until the inevitable collapse of Lyronica's bloodthirsty gladiatorial power broking. In 'Guardians' a similar theme of self-defeating escalation arises when Tuf is called to deal with an ecological problem on a largely marine planet. In this case, though, problems arise from the client's impatient demands for quick results and inability to look beyond a 'quick fix' (which will be familiar to almost anybody working in a bureaucratic organization), while Tuf tries to look beyond to the root cause. (This turns out – as most readers will have guessed – to be down a lack of communication.)

The next section, 'The Siren Song of Hollywood', details the frustrations of Martin's work for *The Twilight Zone* ('The Road Less Traveled', directed by Wes Craven) and an original pilot, 'Doorways' (1991). Both are reproduced here as the original scripts, rather than the cut down and butchered versions in which they were finally aired.

At the same time, Martin was working on the successful shared world of *Wild Cards*, two stories from which are included in 'Doing the Wild Card Shuffle'. The premise behind Wild Cards is a world in which the outbreak of an alien virus has divided humanity into three groups: unaffected normals; the ghettoized jokers, afflicted with various, often grotesque, deformities and strange abilities; and aces, outwardly normal in appearance with superhuman powers.

'Shell Games' features Martin's character the Great and Powerful Turtle, while 'From the Journal of Xavier Desmond' was originally a frame story that ran through the fourth volume, *Aces Abroad*, tying the various stories together into a "mosaic novel" rather than just a collection. Writing this, Martin, says, was one of the tougher assignments of the Wild Cards universe, and, powerful as it is, it loses something when presented on its own without the stories it cemented together.

The final and longest section, 'The Heart in Conflict', brings together a number of later stories, prefaced by another neat introduction in which Martin argues against *Galaxy*'s back cover diatribe from the 50s against "Bat Durston" stories – where, stripped of SFnal trappings, the plot and characters might just as well have come from a western or a swashbuckling pirate adventure. Instead, GRRM argues that if you look hard and deep enough, either they're all Bat Durston stories, or none of them are: they're just stories about people in different situations. So in this section we have the World Fantasy Award novella 'The Skin Trade', about private investigator Randi Wade and Willie the Werewolf (yet another story in which the idea of turning it into an ongoing project foundered through circumstance, distraction or *'creatus interuptus'*), a story of revenge and time travel built around a chess game, 'Unsound Variations', and 'The Hedge Knight', a prequel to Martin's epic *A Song of Fire and Ice*. Fantasy readers will probably see this as the highlight of the volume, but for me it lacks the depth and moral ambiguity of the novels, while 'The Skin Trade', 'The Glass Flower' (a story about immortality, power and desire) and 'Portraits of His Children', in which a self-obsessed (and, to be honest, deeply unpleasant) writer is haunted by his own creations, are subtler, darker and more successful.

Taken as a whole, *Dreamsongs* is a fine retrospective of some of the best stories in the genre from a writer who thinks and cares deeply about his art.

Stephenie Meyer – *The Host*

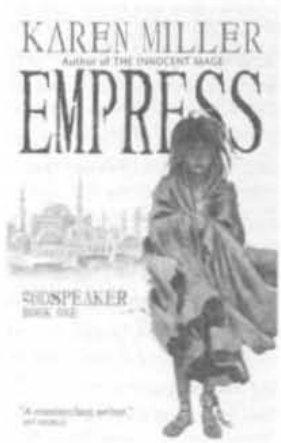
Sphere, London, 2008, 617pp, £14.99 ISBN 9781847441836
Reviewed by Paul Bateman

Stephenie Meyer has written three bestselling novels for "young people" about vampires and *The Host* is her first "adult" novel, though the *Harry Potter* books contain more sex, swearing and violence, and Philip Pullman deals with more grown-up themes.

Apparently she doesn't read much vampire literature. More telling is that she doesn't read much science fiction. A number of the Amazon reviews follow the same conclusion: "I don't like science fiction but I like this". Hmm...

So what is the book about? Well, the Earth has been invaded by stealth by parasitic silver worm-like creatures called Souls which take up residence in people's neck's and control their bodies and minds, bringing peace to the violent human world. Similar ideas have been explored in Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The X-Files*, but Meyer takes a more feminine approach to this premise as this is more character-based than plot-driven. A human, Melanie, tries to kill herself to stop being taken over by a Soul, but fails. The Soul in question, Wanderer, has lived on a variety of planets in different bodies over the millennia. When a Soul takes over a host body it has access to all the individual's memories. Melanie's memories are important as she was part of a resistance group and the Souls want to stamp them out. Or at least the few militant Souls, known as Seekers, want to. Wanderer soon discovers this isn't as easy at it seems. Melanie's mind is still active, keeping information from the Soul. With time Wanderer learns of Melanie's brother, Jamie, and her boyfriend, Jared. The memories and feelings for them are so powerful that Wanderer comes to fall in love with them and doesn't tell the Seekers. Soon Wanderer goes native, rejecting her own kind, and escapes to find out if Jamie and Jared are still alive, hiding out in Arizona. She finds the resistance group and is taken captive. The novel then follows how various members of the group behave towards her, from cautious enthusiasm to outright distrust, and how she integrates into their group.

It's from this point I found it became a bit dull and didn't really sustain my interest for the remaining four hundred pages. Essentially, *The Host* could have been better had it been half the length. Ironically, I was disappointed this world of Souls hasn't been explored in any depth to satisfy me, but this may be rectified as Meyer is already at work on a sequel. But I doubt I'll bother with any sequels as even with forty or fifty years to go of my life, there isn't enough time to waste on this sort of thing. In short, *The Host* had its entertaining moments but I wasn't as impressed as other readers. Undoubtedly this will end up near the top of the Vector Reads of the Year poll, making me feel stupid, but to paraphrase a Will Self TV review: "I read this so you don't have to. So don't."



Karen Miller – *Empress*

Orbit, London, 2008, £7.99, pb, 646pp, ISBN 9781841496771
Reviewed by A.P.Canavan

Empress is the first book in Karen Miller's new *Godspeaker* trilogy. Like her previous fantasy series *Kingmaker, Kingbreaker* this story is primarily a coming of age tale following the difficult life of a young character as they try to make their way in the world. In this case it is a young slave girl who names herself Hekat. The generic nature of this coming of age portal quest is offset somewhat by the harsh and merciless setting of the land of

Mijak. It has flavours of ancient Persia and the Arabian Nights, and is more reminiscent of Margaret Weis' *Rose of the Prophet* trilogy than Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, although there are similarities to both, if not in scope and scale.

As has become characteristic of her work, it is Miller's characters that dominate the story and which flesh out her skeletal plot. Despite this, few of the central characters are likeable in any way. The initial goodwill created through the plight of Hekat is soon squandered as the child becomes a hard, arrogant harridan whose dialogue and interior monologue become both repetitive and irritating. The reader feels little pleasure in her rise to power, despite coming to respect Hekat's drive, focus and ambition. Perhaps part of this is linked to what seems to be the true focus of the story, an exploration of a society dominated by a harsh and merciless religion that matches the rigours of the unforgiving land in which both reside.

Whilst Mijak is not truly a theocracy, the influence and prevalence of the powerful, hard-line, fundamentalist religion dominates the land. Each and every act is weighed in terms of the god's design and fear of the military is secondary to fear of the Godspeaker priesthood, to whom even the Warlords must defer lest they be deemed sinful or acting in a way contrary to the interpretation of the god's will. It is a land of fear, superstition and clerical magic, and the god is harsh and bloody, demanding obedience, sacrifice and regular costly offerings. Hekat derives much of her strength and drive from her sincere belief that she is an instrument of her god, and this allows her to succeed against impossible odds. Yet at the same time Miller explores the destructive nature of such a rigid adherence to an inflexible doctrine. It is both their strength and their curse.

An added bonus to this edition is an interview with Miller at the end. Whilst not especially pointed or thought provoking it is still an insight into the author and her work and should please fans.

By no means a sweeping epic, the religious setting of this story is almost intriguing enough to carry the reader through, and the slightly heavy handed plot hooks promise development into something grander in the next two books. Fans of her style will not be disappointed but new readers may find it a little repetitive and tedious.

Richard Morgan – *The Steel Remains*

Orion, 2008, £12.99, 41pp, h/b,ISBN 9780752891507

Reviewed by Penny Hill

I had heard that Richard Morgan's next book was going to be fantasy, however part way through I looked at the world he had created and thought "No – this is a science-fiction premise presented as a fantasy". Cynically, I believe he has chosen to do this because of the third strap-line on the proof review copy "The fantasy market is three times the size of the science-fiction market". As marketing ploys go, this one should succeed. While there are some aliens and advanced technology, they are introduced as demons and magic and it's not too much of a stretch to continue to read them as such if you so choose.

I liked the world history presented to us. All too often, a fantasy novel is about the big adventure, the ultimate war. By contrast, here we experience a world where the war has already happened, "civilisation" has been triumphant over the invaders and is now recovering from the aftermath in an exhausted "What happened to our Golden Age?" manner. Our three protagonists, who were all heroes in the struggle, are now trying to live normal lives and no, the war did not make them rich.

Although the opening is very strong, quickly establishing this world and our protagonists' place on the outskirts of it, I found the overall pacing of the novel rather weak. After the first 72 pages, we reach the middle section where everyone's activities and next steps have been established. They then spend just under 200 pages repetitively going through the motions while waiting for the next bit of plot to move them into the right place to meet up for the climax and resolution. Once that happens, it improves again.

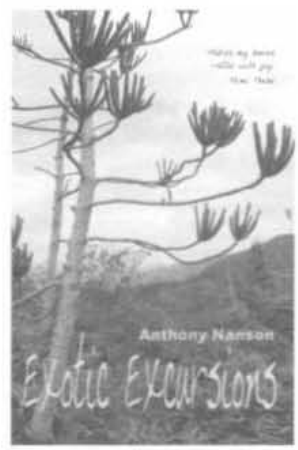
Ringil's experience with the dwenda successfully communicates a truly alien encounter of both place and people. The final section is exciting and breath-taking but I started to feel that there wasn't going to be room enough in this one volume for the story Morgan wanted to tell. I had that "Uh-oh, here comes a trilogy" feeling which means that the resolution for which you've invested your time is going to be delayed for another two volumes. In the end, we got the resolution in this volume but it was a little rushed considering the leisurely build-up.

There is a lot of faux diversity displayed in the characterisation. Two of the three protagonists are male and the third is a bloke with tits, who just happens to be half alien. Surely in the 21st century, where women unaccountably consider themselves to be fully half the human race, we should have moved past the "women as aliens" cliché? Most of the other female characters were background slaves/whores, with the exceptions being the mother who instigates the plot by forcing her son to go and rescue the helpless (female) victim. Way to diversify Mr Morgan. Yawn. He's really not going to be up for the Tiptree Award any time soon. Nor does it help that the only gay character in a homophobic world has enough privilege to avoid any consequences. And let's not start on Conan the barbarian horseman.

Where Morgan is on ground that he knows well, the description and narrative are very well done. These are the best fight scenes I've ever read. It's always clear what's going on – who's doing what, why and how they're doing it. The passages are fluid and kinetic, convincing you that one man with the right weapon can take down three nominally superior aliens.

This was my first Richard Morgan and while it doesn't make me want to read his back catalogue, I am cautiously interested in what he writes next. However I may well wait for my trusted friends to read and recommend them first.

I don't see this book as an award-winner. It was a moderately enjoyable read that takes one step forwards and two back in terms of ideas explored (plus points for history, minus points for gender and cultural ideas). There are worse books to take on holiday.



Anthony Nanson – *Exotic Excursions*

Awen Books, 2008, £7.99, 149pp, t/p, ISBN 9780954613778

Reviewed by Martin Lewis

This collection promises to map "the territory between travel writing and magical realism". Actually the territory it covers is rather broader than that. Regardless of genre or mode, though, there is a great deal of uniformity to these stories and the opening story, 'The Things We Love', provides something of a template for what follows.

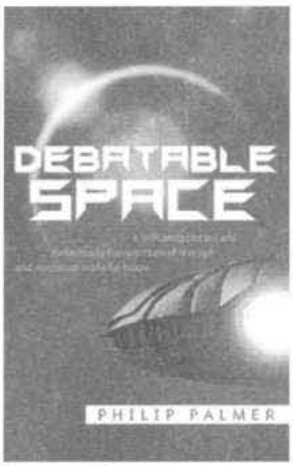
An engineer (and amateur palaeontologist) goes to Africa to supervise a water pipeline project he helped set up. Whilst there he finds indications that dinosaurs may still be living in this remote corner of the world. Accompanied by native guides he goes in search of one such creature and, with very little incident, finds it, only to discover that it is dying because of the changes to its habitat caused by the pipeline. It ends with his realisation – signposted by the title – that we always kill the things we love.

At thirteen pages this is one of the longest stories in the collection but it is still rather abrupt. These are more vignettes than stories, impressionistic rather than narrative, over as soon as they have begun. 'The Things We Love' is nowhere near as trite or as moralistic as my bald synopsis makes it sound but both these threats are lurking in the background of Nanson's work. The themes of pastoralism and colonialism are overwhelming and all the stories end on such a moment of minor internal revelation. Every final sentence is designed to impart Meaning but the effect, particularly cumulatively, is that the reader is beaten over the head with Nanson's philosophy.

Nanson writes well, if not particularly excitingly. For a writer who makes clear in his introduction that his work is infused with spiritualism he is surprisingly rigorous. If anything it is so self-consciously precise as to be slightly stifling. It is not his writing that proves the problem though but rather his subject. The problem with trying to convey the ineffable is that it is, well, ineffable. Nanson is well aware of this and even explicitly addresses the problem in 'Touching Bedrock':

"I pointed down at the sea, hoping she might perceive what I had perceived, that our eyes would meet in an epiphany of understanding... To convey to her what the sight meant to me suddenly seemed a great labour that once set upon would obliterate the tenuous feeling it sought to express." (33)

It is a striving for the transcendent that he remains unable to realise. Several times whilst reading the collection I was struck by how much better Nanson's concerns could be served in verse rather than prose. Instead it really only amounts to a sketch book of autobiographical and anthropological observations, so that although it contains a fair percentage of material that could be considered fantastic, *Exotic Excursions* is unlikely to be of interest to Vector readers. In fact, it is so strongly personal that its audience is probably very limited indeed, perhaps limited solely to the author himself.



Philip Palmer – *Debatable Space*

Orbit, 2008, £10.00, 474pp, t/p ISBN 9781841496191

Reviewed by Simon Guerrier

Space pirate Flanagan declares war on the evil chief executive officer of the human universe by kidnapping his daughter. The "Cheo" has already allowed thousands of his offspring to die, so what makes young Lena so special? Well, for one thing she's not nearly so young as she seems...

Philip Palmer's *Debatable Space* is a sprawling space opera set over hundreds of years. It's lively, exciting and packed with ideas, yet the author's afterword might be about another book entirely.

Palmer says this is rigidly hard SF. He quotes books on quantum theory and emergence and mocks the teleportation booths in Niven's Ringworld. Yet while the physics might be extrapolated from the real thing the story is shambolic fantasy.

The huge incidents described don't seem to have much consequence – plans either work or fail, the characters just keep buggering on. At one point, for example, an army fills the years on its way to a battlefield by breeding thousands of reinforcements. We start to get to know some of these individual children, who are then abruptly sacrificed without a second thought – born and killed off in the space of a few pages. Only one parent is traumatised by the loss.

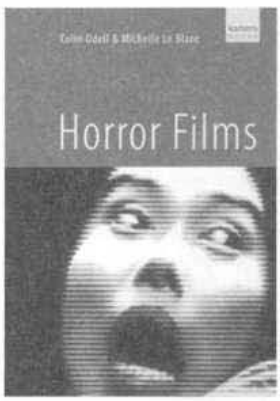
The textual cleverness doesn't help. Different typefaces convey different voices. There are gaps in the text to spell out when people are thinking or flying. Kidnapped Lena is editing her own story, even as we read it. At one point we're told to skip through an infodump to get back to the action. At its most annoying it takes three pages to spell out the word "Antimatter" in giant letters and seven pages to say, "You are prey".

This all gives the sense of brash effect with little substance behind it. Characters rarely seem changed by their experience. In fact, there's little differentiation of character other than their being pissed off or horny. The cast are crude SF archetypes – a space pirate rock star, a sexy cat woman, a socially inept geek, an alien made out of fire. They're clever but also shallow and cruel. There's no wit or kindness and any surprises come from Flanagan out-manipulating people or having to commit appalling acts of violence (with the noblest motives).

Lena is no better – spoilt, selfish and resentful of the long past. She's had an eventful life fighting international criminals, creating the links between the stars and becoming the first President of Humanity. I'm not sure we're meant to believe all of this – the book doesn't say she's lying as such, but she's been pivotal to the major developments in civilisation for 200 years, yet without ever getting the credit.

Lena first made her name through a radical interpretation of emergence theory. But her life's work (until that point), a mash up of hard physics, psychology, history and pop culture, was ridiculed by the academics. Palmer's book likewise mashes up all kinds of wild ideas into one brash and teeming narrative. But there's little subtlety or insight, and an excess of explosions and mad violence.

It's fun and exciting, with some great twists (and some which feel too much like cheating). But ultimately this is a brash, adolescent adventure. And that would be fine if Palmer didn't seem to think he's written something else.



Colin Odell & Michelle Le Blanc – *Horror Films*

Kamera Books; 2007; 204pp; £9.99 pb; ISBN: 10: 1842432184 / 13: 9781842432181 (includes dvd containing short films *Virus* (5 min), *Savage* (17 min) and *Chicken Soup* (7 min))

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Horror Films is exactly what the title says, a book about horror films, and a DVD containing 3 short horror films. I grew up avidly studying books like this, notably Carlos Clarens' *Horror Movies – An Illustrated Survey*, and a small British guidebook to the genre whose title I can no longer recall. The difference between those older books and this latest by Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc, is that *Horror Films* makes a democratic survey of the entire global output of horror cinema, and unlike most books gives due weight to the pre-talkie era.

Regular readers of *Vector* and *Matrix* will need no introduction to the authors, being familiar with their amusing and perceptive

reviews and articles which have enlivened BSFA publications this last decade. In their new book Odell and Le Blanc bring their enthusiasm, sometimes idiosyncratic writing style and vast viewing experience to a legion of films. This dynamic duo have seen everything, from 1940's Indian ghost stories, to Mexican masked wrestler vs monster flicks to more familiar fare such as Hammer horrors and 'video nasties'.

The book is divided into five parts, a lengthy and substantial introduction which analyses the nature of the genre, followed by separate sections covering Europe, the Americas, Asia and Australasia. Each of these sections, bar the last, which is very short, offer separate chapters focusing on countries or regions with particular traditions of horror film production. Hence there are chapters on British, Italian, French, German, Spanish, North American & Canadian, and Central and South American, Japanese, Hong Kong, Korean and Indian horror cinemas. Australia and New Zealand are covered together in the Australasia section. Apart from a general historical survey in each chapter, each section ends with a more detailed chronological review of several landmark films from the geographical region under consideration. These reviews are about a page long each, and span the genre from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) to *Gvozdi* (*Nails*) (2003), from *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) to *Hostel* (2005), from *Gojira* (*Godzilla*) (1954) to *The Host* (2006).

Of course the problem with a book like this, and it would apply just as much if the page count were two or three times greater, and one over which the authors must have agonised at length, is what to leave out, and just how much to say about the films they have included. The book is necessarily a whistle-stop tour. Everyone will be able to carp about something that is missing, and my token grumble would regard the omission of *Don't Look Now* (1973). But that is really beside the point, because what the authors do with both tremendous verve and considerable knowledge is provide an introduction to the genre on a global scale which even dedicated film fans will find at least in part enlightening, finding previously unheard of films to add to the must see list. Equally the authors provide what amount to warnings concerning certain titles which no one in their right mind would want to watch. But never fear, Odell & Le Blanc have watched them so we don't have to.

As for the three short films, which amazingly have bypassed the BBFC, all are interesting, *Savage* at 17 minutes being the most substantial and overtly 'horrific'.

Judith Park – *Y Square One*

Yen Press, 2008, £5.00, 180pp, ISBN 9780759523057

Reviewed by James Bacon

Judith Park is a German of Korean origin who produced her first manga *A Rotten Day* at eighteen. Living in Germany, her work is written in German and translated. *Y Ssquare One* is about a teenage boy and his quest for the things that teenage boys all desire, and especially a girlfriend. We follow the actions of Yoshitaka and his envy of an Adonis classmate Yagate. His hunger for girls leads him in desperation to seek advice from Yagate and it all mostly goes quite wrong. A fun title perhaps, with an underlying nastiness about the cruelty of teenagers, it is a light read and never gets deeply into the psyche of modern youth. The artwork is quite nice and Park has the eye for young men, with our protagonist a quite good looking boy despite his lack of apparent appeal, in a very androgynous way.

Peach-Pit – *Zombie-Loan 1 & 2*

Yen Press, 2008, both £5.99, ISBN 9780759523531 & 978075952869

Reviewed by James Bacon

A surreal concept and a lively story. Michiru Kita has Shinigami Eyes which allow her to see an invisible ring around people's necks which indicates their closeness to death. She meets two boys at her school, Chika Akatsuki and Shito Tachibana, whose rings indicate they should be dead, and promptly faints. They have signed a deal with ZOMBIE-LOAN and have evaded death in return for hunting zombies. They are not friends, but have joined together by necessity. Each of them have powers of their own. Shito and Chika decide Mirchiru may be more useful alive than dead and she joins them in their hunt of the undead. Fantastically Shito's hand can create a Ruger Super 'Big Red' Redhawk magnum revolver and Chika has a katana with special powers. Some violence, especially between these teens, is a bit odd, but there is much spirituality and even sympathy for vanquished zombies and the books are quick paced with all the sweet oddness and inappropriateness of a teen manga story. Peach-Pit is actually two ladies, Banri Sendo and Shibuko Ebara who take their title from the bar in the tv show *Beverly Hills 90210*. Their styles are so similar they are indistinguishable and they certainly merit their a good reputation for Bishojo –beautiful young female – artwork.

José Carlos Somoza – *Zig Zag*

HarperCollins, 2008, 504pp, $24.95, h/b, ISBN 9780061193712

Reviewed by Ian Watson

Exiled from Cuba at the age of one for political reasons, José Carlos Somoza is obviously unusual. (Well okay, his parents were expelled, in the direction of Spain. "Sent packing" would be the wrong term, since all they were allowed to take with them was their infant son.) After graduating in psychiatry, Somoza took up writing full-time 14 years ago, with complex crime novels, one of which won a major erotic award; while his fifth, *The Athenian Murders*, set in the Ancient Greece of Plato, netted the Golden Dagger Award of the UK Crime Writers Association. A couple of years ago, I chose Somoza's subsequent *The Art of Murder* as one of the 5 best SF novels of the year; and here he comes again in his third translated novel, *Zig Zag*, with a perversely erotic crime technothriller which is at the same time, yet again, one of the very best SF novels of the year, dealing as it does, ingeniously, with string theory as a means of viewing times past.

Maths genius David Blanes has developed a brilliant and controversial theory that time is made of strings, which can be opened with particle accelerators at modest, though very precise, levels of energy, allowing glimpses of the past, since every particle of light has time strings coiled up inside it. Maths wiz Elisa Roblado survives a very challenging master class along with jealous rival Ricardo (Ric) Valente Sharpe, resulting in both being recruited, along

with others (including a palaeontologist) into a secret project on a tiny island in the Indian Ocean. They duly glimpse dinosaurs and Jerusalem in 33 AD (the red shift of time past is a great idea), yet those who view the past also experience powerful and weird psychological traumas – and then the murders begin, so vicious and extreme and inexplicable that even the most hardened witnesses of the aftermaths can lose their sanity. (I struggle in vain not to use the term after-Maths.) It is as if a sadistic demon is punishing those involved in the project.

Ten years onward, we only gradually learn about what happened previously, and what is happening in the present, as the cunningly designed narrative skilfully propels us onward in fascination and terror. It would be a complete plot spoiler to say whether the solution to the awful mystery is scientific or demonological (or even worse). Yet from early on we have known the answer, without knowing it; and everything belongs, including all the voyeurism – nothing's gratuitous, however gratuitous it may seem. This is an utterly haunting book, with a cutting-edge (literally so!) scientific background, upon which Somoza plays remarkable cadenzas of a virtuoso. Some scenes out-Egan Greg Egan, and *Timescape* seems a bit simple by comparison.

The force of the narrative even overcomes the deficiencies of the translation. Somoza is a very eloquent and luminous writer, a stylist supreme, served excellently well by the translators of *The Art of Murder* and *The Athenian Murders*. *Zig Zag* too often seems flat and stilted and even misleading, more like a literal first draft.

"Do you think there exists some form of wickedness beyond what can be scientifically explained?" just isn't a natural spoken sentence in English. The original Spanish text is: "...¿crees que hay algo maligno que va más allá de lo que pueda conocer la ciencia?" which flows nicely. A much less stilted English version would be: "Do you think there's something evil beyond the ken of science?"

"...the airport where they landed (which they told her belonged to Yemen)" – so is it *in* Yemen, or somewhere else controlled by Yemen? To be sure "...pertenecía a Yemen" can mean that, but the English ought to be simply "was in Yemen."

"Her nails (fingers and toes) were painted bright red..." Why not: "fingernails and toenails"? There's too much similar awkwardness. "The kind of trench of a thing that takes water years to form a rock..." The Spanish is perfectly lucid: "Es como el efecto que causa el agua en la roca: requiere años." The English is ungrammatical nonsense, suggesting that the translation was never revised.

And a wee black mark to the writer of the blurb, who doesn't know the difference between masochistic and sadistic.

However, let's not labour the matter! The sheer power of the book overcomes the nuisancy irritants. *Zig Zag* highly deserves an SF award.

Brian Stableford – *The Curse of the Coral Bride*

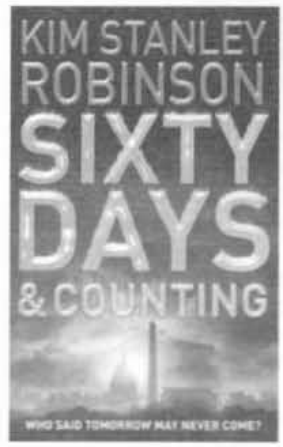
Immanion Press, new edition, 2008, £12.99, 312pp, t/p ISBN 9781904853510

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

In the far, far future the end of the world is nigh. Most humans left many centuries before. The plague is abroad and no-one is immune from its putrefied touch. Technology is gone; sorcery and divination are the only guides for hapless souls who remain, hungry but anxious to foretell their destiny. In this tumultuous landscape a young diver, Lysariel, becomes obsessed with a strange luminous red coral that he discovered in a cave beneath the sea. His plans to prove its existence to his sceptical uncle are somewhat scuppered when he is suddenly crowned king of Scleracina and his brother Manazzoryn becomes next in line to the throne. The pair are delighted to be introduced to two charming girls, daughters of pirate princes, who they hastily betroth. But such frivolity and joy are fleeting glimmers of happiness, for there are wider political and spiritual forces at work that threaten to destroy the kingdom. Infatuated by his young bride Calia, King Lysariel determines that a statue should be sculpted from the magical coral as a tribute to her beauty. From the moment the mystical material is dragged from the ocean's depths things start to go very, very wrong. Parts of this grim future have been predicted by Giraiazal, practitioner of astrology and cartomancy, a morpheomorphist (who can shape the dreams of others) and wily devil who has found himself in the position of Grand Vizier of Scleracina, more by luck than judgement. However, it's really not at all in Giraiazal's interests to foretell a future of doom and gloom.

Curse of the Coral Bride is a gothic novel of tragedy and betrayal with a smattering of horror set against the backdrop of a dying world. These are dark times and Stableford describes his characters in such a way as to keep their motivations slightly masked from view, save for his protagonist Giraiazal whose chief goal is survival, which is not easy to achieve in a world that is no longer enlightened, but threatened with anarchy and despair. But one thing that remains, despite the denizens knowing of their imminent doom, the will to power still binds those with the authority to see through their treacherous intent. This, then, is a tale about the lust for power set against a backdrop of fear and superstition.

The book's structure is linear, and each chapter preceded with an extract from The Revelations of Suomynona, the Last Prophet, which ranges from the informative to the whimsical, explaining the various divination practices or philosophising about the end of the world. This has the effect of bringing a more rounded vision of the world to the reader without impinging on the central narrative, but can break the flow of the story, in some cases jarringly so. But this is a minor quibble, *Curse of the Coral Bride* is an exciting and intriguing read, drawing the reader into its strange world through its deliberately archaic use of language and turn of phrase. A gothic fantasy that feels at home beside *The Castle of Otranto* in tone and brooding, doomed romance.



Kim Stanley Robinson – *Sixty Days and Counting*

HarperCollins, 2007, 504 pp, £6.99, pb, ISBN 9780007148943

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

At the beginning of this, the third part of Robinson's trilogy about climate change, the US has just elected Phil Chase as president. Suddenly the most powerful and most carbon-polluting nation on earth has a government committed to doing everything it can to tackle global warming. Frank Vanderwal, now a presidential adviser, remains the main protagonist, as in *Fifty Degrees Below*; his job to bombard the executive with ambitious ideas on how to stem the crisis. Charlie Quibler, his co-protagonist in the first book, *Forty Signs of Rain*, remains usurped from his larger role in the plot; he's there mainly to provide domestic comedy in tandem with his toddler son, Joe. The

latter's enigmatic relationship with the refugee monks of the drowned island nation of Khembalung also hints at a spiritual dimension that begs subtle questions about any purely political and technological mission to save the world as we know it.

The blurb's description of the novel as a 'taut science thriller' belies a leisurely, disorderly plot reflecting the disorderliness of real life. The only thriller element is the subplot of Frank's love affair with Caroline, a Homeland Security operative persecuted by a renegade covert team linked to that department. We're a long way here from noir dystopia. The bad guys have been marginalised by a benevolent regime prepared to act firmly against the purveyors of Götterdämmerung (Robinson's label for the selfish continuation of policies that you know will bring catastrophe). This is typical of Robinson's moral universe, in which most people are inherently decent. The world of *Sixty Days and Counting* is a world in the grip of profound environmental crisis – he alludes to the meltdown of China's ecosystems, he shows us the ecological degradation of California's Sierra Nevada – but we see almost nothing of the social breakdown and human suffering such a crisis will engender, and there's little unpacking of the fact that global warming is but one symptom of humankind's more general exhaustion of the earth's resources. Chase implements radical policies and preaches sustainability, but we see little sign of radical change in American society actually taking place. Though Frank ruminates about recovering a more primal relationship with the earth, it's technological fixes – high-efficiency solar power, the pumping of meltwater back on to the Antarctic ice cap – and the reallocation of funds that are expected to save the world.

What's refreshing is the way Robinson's sense of hope flies against the dystopian cyberpunk prognosis that has become so normative it seems inevitable. He doesn't describe a utopia to which we should aspire; he depicts the *process* by which we (to be precise, America) might vector from where we are now towards amelioration of the crisis. This is a vital contribution: the timescale of climatic change is such that, to the individual human being, the process will always be more important than any imagined end point. As in his Mars trilogy, Robinson is able to narrate a story about the technical application of science and political theory in a compelling, readable way that will reach a vaster audience than any textbook about climate change.

I read this book in the belief it was the penultimate work of a quartet. The publisher has since told me it's the conclusion of a trilogy. Unfortunately, though subplots are resolved, the story as a whole lacks climax or closure. I appreciate that Robinson should want to leave it an open question whether or not the effort to address the climate crisis will succeed; but the book ends anticlimactically at a point where I was still waiting for the crisis to bite. I feel disappointed, not just that a series I was enjoying is finished, but that this, one of the first major works of fiction to tackle the global environmental crisis, has not fully got to grips with the gravity of that crisis. For me, the story remains open for one more hefty volume.

Lilith Saintcrow – *To Hell and Back*

Orbit, 2008, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 9781841496696
Reviewed by Myfanwy Rodman.

Dante Valentine has been through Hell. Now she has returned to earth, dumped in an alley, beaten, broken and far from home. She can't remember everything that has happened to her, but she knows it was bad. Just as she knows that Lucifer, Prince of Hell, is trying to use her against her lover and her friends and that everyone she cares about it in danger. But Dante Valentine knows something else too – Lucifer isn't going to get away with it.

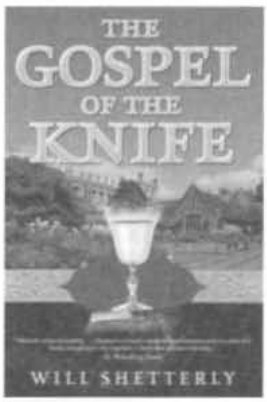
Reunited with her demon lover Japhrimel and his band of Hellesvront agents, Dante begins to plot her revenge. The Devil may have started this, but Dante Valentine is going to finish it. Once and forever...

Everything you might expect from a writer called Lilith Saintcrow, this novel has in spades: demons, explosions, arcane magic, fire fights and one hell of a finale. In fact you could say that you'd read it all before and you'd almost be right. But what *To Hell and Back* does have going for it is its original setting and strong characters. This is futuristic dark fantasy, something I'd never read before, complete with hovercraft, laser guns and flying skateboards. Some of the terminology jars a little: the use of words like plasgun seem old fashioned and clumsy. But overall the setting is cleverly and carefully constructed and the historical back-story interesting and comprehensive. I especially liked the demon language, with all its complex nuances and double meanings and the use of Ancient Egyptian language and religion.

There *are* some problems with the text, a lot of repetition and clumsy language grated for me, though it never detracted from pace or tone. And worse then that this, the fifth book in a series, gives little in the way of help to the first time reader. Conversations citing past events are confusing and infuriating and too many sentences imply but never make clear what the characters are discussing, leaving a reader not acquainted with the whole series in the dark as to some of the relationships between characters.

Also, despite her supposed dynamism, the character of Dante was a little disappointing. She spent most of the book being dragged from pillar to post, never really understanding what was happening and never really choosing her own course of action. As I have not read the other books, and because Dante is having rather a hard time of it at the beginning of this one, I can't tell whether this characterisation is the norm throughout the series or not.

All in all, *To Hell and Back* was a rip-roaring read, which I enjoyed very much despite some annoying flaws. I loved the world and the main characters and it really felt as though Saintcrow knew what she was talking about all the way through. A very competent piece of world-building. I may not be able to resist starting at the beginning of the series and reading the lot now. And surely that's the way it should be.



Will Shetterly – *The Gospel of the Knife*

Tor, 2007, 320pp, $25.95, ISBN 9780312866310
Reviewed by Nic Clarke

As he is cycling home from school one day, Christopher Nix's life takes an abrupt turn for the strange. A carload of rednecks take a dislike to him – for having hippy-ish long hair, and the temerity to answer back – chasing him through woodland and threatening him with a beating. Panicking, he barely notices when he crosses a pond with little more than damp feet for his trouble. He pays more attention when the first of his would-be assailants sinks, instantly. Bullies thus sent packing, even if he remains unsure of precisely how, Christopher returns home, to a fight with his Dad over mowing the lawn. Deciding that no-one will miss him anyway – in what surely ought to be a fit of petulance, or at the very least mope, but which reads more like indifference –

Christopher elects to run away.

America in the era of the Vietnam War: a land of cultural, political and social ferment. Christopher is a teenager in the middle of it, which of course brings a ferment all its own, although for the most part this is only obvious when we are told it directly in the (second-person) narration; for all his supposed intelligence and rebellious streak, in both speech and action Christopher comes across as largely ponderous, even inert, and his experience is ploddingly detailed for us more often than it is vividly evoked.

In any case, by the time night falls, Christopher has hitched a lift with a van of hippies – who turn out, disappointingly, to be "Jesus Freaks" rather than the sexually liberated nymphs he envisaged – and fallen in with a girl calling herself CC. Initially he is none too thrilled by the latter development either; CC is black, and "the only blacks [he] think[s] are sexy are famous adults", like Uhura from Star Trek. Happily, Christopher gets over his racism in the space of a few hours, partly because CC has spirit but mostly, it seems, because it becomes apparent that she is more willing to put out than the white girl he was crushing on that afternoon. One (interrupted) roll in CC's aunt's back garden later, Christopher gets driven home by a pair of police caricatures. The next morning, CC is gone, apparently forever, and Christopher is digging holes in his own garden, this being his father's suitably manly punishment for our hero's disobedience. (Christopher's relationship with his father is, well, bracing ("How did you learn to swim?" "Dad threw me off the end of a dock."); homespun wisdom from the days when men were Men, no doubt).

Months pass, and Christopher thinks about CC. Being a teenage boy, this mostly revolves around regret that he didn't get laid. Being a naïve teenage boy, he thinks this means he's in love. Being a naïve teenage boy in a book, he's right. The action moves, abruptly, to "the Academy", an elite school to which Christopher is whisked away by a mysterious benefactor, Jay Dumont. Christopher and his peers spend a vanishingly small amount of time attending classes, and rather more time playing dorm pranks, rowing on the river, and wandering the woods at night. The Academy – a setting chosen largely, it seems, so that Shetterly can take potshots at the inequity of private schooling and the privilege of the rich – is a fairly lifeless creation, functioning primarily as a plot vehicle. Here, Christopher meets various deliverers of exposition, has a tedious power struggle with more bullies, and uncovers the head of John the Baptist and the titular Gospel, the latter being a frankly unnecessary 60-page narrative tangent that retells the life of Christ, clumsily and with different names.

It comes as no surprise when we learn that Dumont is only interested in Christopher for the power that had him walking on water in the opening chapter – or rather, for the bloodline that gives him such power. For Christopher, like Dumont and his family, is one of the Elohim, godlike beings whose lineage goes back to Christ and beyond, and who have spent thousands of years using their powers to line their nests.

It only gets sillier from there. Christopher's nubile new half-sister repeatedly offers to have sex with him (she can't help it, it's the blood), but noble Christopher refuses her on the grounds that he is still half-heartedly moping about CC – although, when his Elohim super-voice summons dear CC from hiding (temporarily, and pissed off), he fails to notice she clearly hasn't had to run all that far. Then Christopher rebels. The class war – sorry, war in heaven – has never been so tedious and badly structured. Avoid.

Jeff Somers – *The Digital Plague*

Orbit, 2008, 342pp, £6.99, ISBN 9781841497044
Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Avery Cates is an assassin who has made it to the top. He is personally inconvenienced and professionally mortified when he is abducted by persons unknown, injected with a substance unknown and released into the wild again. Shortly after, people around him start getting ill and dying. The reader is a little (but only a little) ahead of him in working out that he might be the cause of this thanks to the injection of whatever-it-was. There were echoes, briefly, of the classic noir film *D.O.A.* – but the hero of that movie's response wasn't "I was going to have to kill a whole lot of people."

Thereafter the plot expands relentlessly, logically and with a high body count, expanding on the world created in Somers's *The Electric Church*. Reading that first book isn't necessary, but those who have (I hadn't) might get an extra layer of enjoyment. The injection is the digital plague of the title, an ingenious little nanotechnology device intended to bring down civilisation and further the aims of some convincingly and enjoyably barking mad bad guys.

I only had two hiccups with the logic of this future world. Psionic powers of telekinesis and compulsion are recognised and acknowledged, but the nanotech of the plague takes people by surprise; and rather than use aeroplanes, or helicopters, or even dirigibles, all of which are reasonably controllable if a malfunction occurs, they use anti-gravity-based hovers which fall like a brick out of the sky at least twice in the course of the narrative.

The plot is pure science fiction, in that if you removed the science fiction it would make no sense at all. The underlying technology doesn't exist in our world and the logic behind it would be groundless. Jeff Somers's story could only exist in the world that Somers has created. Ten out of ten for story telling and world building.

What I disliked was that it's a really, really, really grim world. The only concern of anyone with power or authority is to keep that power or authority. Cates has made a success of himself, in that he started as a street punk who would rub out anyone on a freelance basis, and is now fully professional. He still kills people, which is the bottom line. There is no way out. There is no beauty or elegance or creativity and no chance of anything ever being better.

Cates himself isn't entirely happy about this and does have a vague notion he should help keep civilisation going and defeat the plague. There is no real sense of why he should do so, apart from the general precept that it's better to be alive and human than a reanimated zombie. Normally I wouldn't argue, but having seen what it means to be alive and human here, I'm not so sure. This world has no redeeming features and nothing worth living for. There's a plague coming? Bring it on.

Charles Stross – *Halting State*

Orbit, 2007, £12.99, 338pp, t/p ISBN 9781841496948
Reviewed by Michael Abbott

If this book had a Hollywood pitch, it would be "Christopher Brookmyre meets William Gibson", but only because Hollywood hasn't heard of any science fiction writers since Gibson. Stross, in keeping with his position as a leading light of the New Eclectics, has turned in another novel unlike any of

his others. The (acknowledged) debt to Brookmyre comes in the Scottish urban setting, the dry sense of humour, the corpses with secrets, the fast-moving and twist-filled plot, and a certain sharp attitude. From William Gibson comes, er, science fiction with computers in. Except that Stross has his own approach to technological developments and the social changes that follow behind them, probably more rigorous than Gibson's. High-powered mobile phones, virtual reality tech, and online gaming all feature as integral parts of both his story and the near-future (2016) world in which it takes place. Alongside this he has an equally good grasp of the way modern corporations do both business and their employees, and (as far as I can tell) a similar grip on the workings of the police and other, more dubious organisations. It all adds up to a world that is a fascinating combination: half of it familiar and down to earth and the other half made up of unexpected developments that you realise are extremely plausible when you think about them, but which you would never have thought of on your own. Maybe this is actually Stross's Mundane SF book: you'd have to ask him.

(For what little it's worth, my guess is that he gets the pace of technological development about right, but slightly overestimates the speed of social adoption of new technology. But then I'm a notorious technophobe, and people reading this in 2016 are welcome to have a good laugh at my expense. Stross is understandably pleased that one of his predictions has already come true since he wrote the book.)

The plot escalates entertainingly, and if it's a little top-heavy to be completely believable, you don't really notice until it's all over. It starts with an organised theft of virtual treasure from a bank in an on-line game, and turns into something completely different more than once as the story progresses. Explaining it further would be unfair to everyone, but policewoman Sue Smith, high-powered accountant Elaine Barnaby and software guy Jack Reed all approach the plot from different angles, and are pleasant enough company for us as they find out the truth. They also take it in turn to narrate chapters in the second person, which works better than you might think. (It's also thematic to the online games in the story: Stross has said that it's a nod to the prose style of the early computer text adventures.)

If Hollywood had any sense, the pitch for this book would just be "the new Charles Stross", and that would do.

Charles Stross – *Saturn's Children*

Orbit, 2008, 372pp, £15.99, ISBN 9781841495675

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Saturn's Children is Charles Stross's tribute to Asimov and Heinlein – the novel that neither of them wrote but both might have if they had been writing 50 years later.

Freya – her name itself a nod to one of Heinlein's heroines – can infallibly reduce any man to a quivering heap of pleasure, which would be more of a useful skill if there were any men around to practice it on. Unfortunately she is a biomechanical concubine who came off the production line the year after the human race disappeared from the face of the solar system. Despite that hiccup, human civilisation is rattling along in the capable hands of its faithful servants – the robots that we created to take us to the stars. Some are doing exactly the job they were designed for; some, like Freya, have had to acquire new skills, even if old habits die hard. Freya falls foul of a robotic aristo, has to get off-world quickly, and thus begins a series of Fridayesque travels around the solar system.

These are the robots of twenty first century SF rather than the Golden Age – as much biological as they are mechanical, in some cases far from human and in some so close that you (and they) can scarcely tell the difference. They are grown rather than manufactured and their minds are trained and imprinted with actual human neural patterns, that being the only kind of self-aware intelligence humans ever mastered. (Rather drolly, in a society that knows full well it's created, Creationism is the scientifically proven worldview and Dawkins/Darwinism is the preserve of scientifically illiterate bigots.) Thus the Three Laws are as much as Asimov brings to the story; not as frequently rehashed as Elijah and Daneel liked to make them, but just as central to what happens. After that it's Heinlein all the way.

This is a system with outposts on every significant solar body and even starships being despatched to far-off worlds. The civilisation works so well precisely because it's run by robots, with their unlimited time and attention spans and adaptability to the most extreme environments. It's an intricately described milieu with a built-in inferiority complex: a system-wide society of individuals who want to be human, who feel human, who do their best to act human and yet know they aren't. They have inherited every virtue and vice of their late masters, and every one of them is programmed with Asimov's Three Laws. So imagine the power that would accrue to anyone who actually got hold of, and could control, a real human being. This becomes the McGuffin behind Freya's ongoing adventure.

Stross doesn't do societies that have happened for plot convenience. His societies happened for a reason and that reason constrains the plot, making for a most satisfying read. How would a system-wide civilisation work? By being run by robots (see above). But how would a society of robots run? Robots are property – who would own them in the absence of humans? Stross has thought it through and we get the full blast of the economic and social imperatives as well as the physics that constrain slower than light travel around a solar system.

Thankfully, Stross isn't Heinlein, though the man would doubtless approve of the recurrent sex – Freya is a concubine, after all – and there are many 'door dilated' equivalents. Stross can match Heinlein's strengths and beat him on his weaknesses. His depiction of women shows signs of actually having met some from time to time, his use of *spung* is actually funny, and he can talk about the squishy bits without getting all coy. Sex is used – frequently – as an instrument of pleasure or of control, but is never as pointless or as automatic as Heinlein managed to make it. Love comes as a surprise to Freya, and once she recognises it she knows it is something to fight for.

But, you seriously need to pay attention. Almost everyone you meet here is a copy of one or another standard template, and given that 'souls' can also be swapped and imprinted between bodies, it's easy to lose track of who is exactly who. On the plus side, Freya is a much richer character than Friday, possessing a sense of humour and of irony; on the minus, so much happens to her that is beyond her control that she can come across as weak.

To the reader, Freya's biggest problem is built in to the structure of the story. She's not human. Pre- or post-singularity, present day or far future, Stross nonetheless peoples his novels with humans, with whom the target audience can identify. Freya is convincingly portrayed as a would-be human who knows she isn't; and thus the author's triumph works against the reader's interest.

A. E. Van Vogt – *The Voyage Of The Space Beagle*

Orb, 2008, $14.95, 215 pp, ISBN 9780765320773

John C. Wright – *Null-A Continuum*

Tor, 2008, $22.95, 317 pp, ISBN 9780765316295

Reviewed by L J Hurst

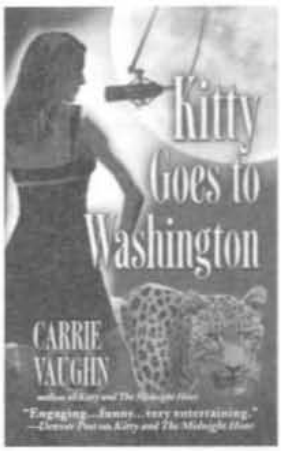
When he produced *Voyage of the Space Beagle*, A E Van Vogt also produced a new form of literature: the fix-up, a chimaera created from older discrete works (short stories) to which the author added linking material. Van Vogt also introduced some of the horrors that have filled books and TV and cinema screens ever since, because his interstellar monsters are so monstrous that script writers have found it easier to pillage his work than to invent new creatures themselves, and unlike Darwin's original HMS Beagle, which recorded finches and tortoises, this namesake seems to locate only horrors. Of the *Space Beagle*'s four parts, the first (Coeurl, an almost unthinking hunger with tentacles) and the third (Ixtl, which wants to lay its eggs in living humans) are the most ghastly: they were merged in the screenplay for *Alien*.

Van Vogt was not a horror writer, though, and he was ahead of his time in other ways. The struggle to gain recognition for "Nexialism", a holistic theory of science, among the ship's officers is an important plotline of the novel, as it leads to battles and mutinies. In science and in SF the time of systems thinking represented by Nexialism was yet to come, but Van Vogt identified what would be involved and made the practice more than just a frame for his fix-up. Soon after this book was first published he went off on a very different tangent involving Dianetics, but between 1939 when "Black Destroyer", the story of Coeurl, was published and the novel's first appearance in 1950 he was working on original lines.

In another analysis, in the second part of the novel, which tells of the Riim, a sort of telepathic chicken community who could yet destroy the ship, Elliott Grosvenor, the Nexialist protagonist, uses the terms "fellah" and "fellaheen" in his examination of Riim thinking and acceptance or non-thinking-about of their philosophies using terms that have now gained a new recognition in the light of Middle Eastern events and politico-theologies. The terms and the problems they represent remain significant. That Van Vogt could apply them so appropriately in the realms of space is a tribute to the continuing power of this book, again indicating that it is far more than a horror story set on an enclosed world, and more of a novel ahead of its time, well worth re-printing.

In the same decade in which he wrote *Space Beagle* Van Vogt wrote *The World of Null-A* and its sequel, *The Players of Null-A*, introducing Gilbert Gosseyn, who lives in a universe in which Non-Aristotelian logic is purported to exist, in which machines allocate those with remarkable powers to the super-world of Venus, in which Gosseyn is found to have two brains, in which he can die repeatedly, and in which super-villains and Space Emperors, have many varied intentions for the unfortunate amnesiac. After last year's *Slan Hunter* by Kevin J. Anderson continued another of Van Vogt's series (quite well, too), John C Wright has written *Null-A Continuum* for the Van Vogt estate. Readers of Wright's 2002 novel *The Golden Age* and its sequels will recognise his powers as a Van Vogt ventriloquist, particularly as to the inventions of the Null-A series; however, Wright adds some features of his own. Firstly, he gives the name of the philosophers who inspired Van Vogt's work, such as Samuel Hayakawa, to characters. Secondly, he starts to cross-refer these stories to other, non Null-A books, such as the fantasy *Book of Ptath* whose name becomes a significant part of the plot. Thirdly, though, his invention explodes. *Null-A Continuum* must be twice the length of any of Van Vogt's own works, as Gosseyn himself goes backwards and forwards, fights back against Shadow Worlds, and travels through time. Gosseyns multiply until in the last chapters there are enough of them to fill a court room, so that his generations and avatars sit on judgement on him. Despite Van Vogt's own protestations the Null-A books were never a good advertisement for Non-Aristotelian reasoning and John C Wright has probably extended that nullity.

Tor's Van Vogt editions have glorious red-gold cover illustrations by Bruce Jensen. Admire the covers, and then open *Space Beagle*, there is more to be found inside than I can account for.



Carrie Vaughn – *Kitty Goes to Washington*

Gollancz, London 2008 321pp £6.99
ISBN 9780575082670

Reviewed by Anne F. Wilson

Kitty Norville hosts a late night radio show. She's also a werewolf. Rejected by her pack, she is on the road, giving her show from a new venue every week.

So we're squarely within the 'Vampires, Witches and Werewolves' territory staked out by Laurell K Hamilton, Kelley Armstrong and Kim Harrison. Why read this one?

Well, the radio show is a clever idea on a number of levels. Kitty immediately engages our sympathy, showing us that she's warm, down-to-earth sort of girl, with a sense of humour. The format lets her interact with lots of people, humans and otherwise. The reader get a good picture of the way things are in America for creatures of the night, and the author can drop in bits of plot without making it too obvious.

This book is the second in the series (the first being *Kitty and the Midnight Hour*). As the story opens Kitty travels to Washington to testify before a Senate enquiry into Paranormal Biology. She's invited to stay by the local vampire Mistress of the City, Alette. So far, so good, but then Kitty starts to act recklessly. She meets a hot were-jaguar from Brazil at a cocktail party, hangs out with him at a club frequented by the local were community, and goes back to his flat with him. She seems untroubled by questions such as: 'Can a were-wolf and a were-jaguar even have sex together? Wouldn't their inner beasts find each other unattractive?' or the more mundane: 'Should I go off to the flat of a man I just met this evening to have sex with him when none of my friends or my vampire hostess know where I am?' Then we get more plot. Kitty launches into investigating a charismatic preacher who claims to be able to heal vampires and were-creatures. And this isn't even the book's main plotline, which kicks off about half-way through.

The book could be better written. I wish the author had spent a bit more time on character development and building up dramatic tension. I wish that she had dug a bit deeper into the givens of her world. 'Do vampires have souls?' asks Kitty. She's sure they have

because Alette has been kind to her. Frankly, this is lame. I wish that the 'English' vampires spoke a language that was recognisably old, instead of merely having 'cute British (sic) accents'. And I really, really wish that the author used 'lycanthropes' to refer to werewolves alone, instead of any and all were-creatures that happen to cross Kitty's path.

The book is amiable enough, but hardly groundbreaking. Where it does score ahead of the others, I think, is in its humanity. Kitty's an engaging character whom it's hard to dislike. Perhaps the book's greatest appeal for me, however, is that unlike all the other female werewolves in this genre, Kitty's not an alpha female. And God knows, if I were a werewolf, I wouldn't be one either.

Surendra Verma – *Why Aren't They Here? The Question of Life on Other Worlds*

Icon Books, 2008, 232pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 9781840468656

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Let's begin with a little context. A light year is something like 5,878,625,373,183 miles. In other words, if I were to drive at a steady 60 miles an hour, it would take me, non-stop, over 1,118 years to cover one light year. Our galaxy is approximately 100,000 light years across. Even if we were capable of travelling at the speed of light, that's 100,000 years just to make the one-way trip across one average-sized galaxy. By comparison, human civilisation is about 3,000 years old, and technological civilization younger still. If our very first manned space ship had set out for the nearest star at one-tenth of the speed of light, it would still only be about half way there. If you want an answer to Fermi's Paradox, it could simply be that no-one's had time to get here yet.

On the other hand, it's now uncontroversial to assume that some sign of life will be found on Mars, and there are a couple of moons around Jupiter and Saturn that are also looking promising. There is, almost certainly, life of some sort out there. Whether there is intelligent life, what it's like, whether Hollywood make-up artists have got it right, these are all questions that none of us can answer.

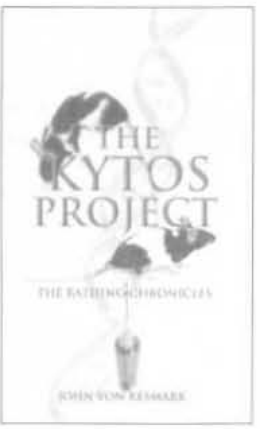
There are other issues surrounding life on other worlds. Although the ancients were confident that other worlds would have plants and animals just like earth, by the time of the Reformation, with Copernicus and Galileo transforming the way we saw our solar system, this was a theological minefield. If people on other worlds knew Christ, that destroyed any notion of the uniqueness of the Christian revelation; but if they did not, could they be without sin. The whole idea of life on other planets was such a threat to the very fabric of the Church that it saw Giordano Bruno burned at the stake in 1600. And it is still enough of an issue for the Vatican to make a pronouncement on this subject as recently as May 2008.

We have a universe so big we cannot comprehend it, made of matter so mysterious we can't understand it, in which there may or may not be an unknown number of planets, upon which there may or may not be life, though we have no idea what form it might take or if it would be intelligent or even if we would be able to recognise the intelligence, and it can still damn your immortal soul. No wonder we're fascinated by the subject.

To be fair, Australian science journalist Surendra Verma doesn't touch on the theological implications of life on other worlds in this entertaining little book, but he covers just about everything else. There's a brisk trot through the history of science, from Aristotle onwards (with a preference for the idiosyncratic: more space is devoted to Descartes' vortices than Newton's gravity); and of science fiction (equally idiosyncratic: Kepler, Voltaire, Orson Welles, Fred Hoyle, Stanislaw Lem, Carl Sagan).

Next up is a breakneck canter through the science of life and competing theories about how life might arise and whether the seeds of life might come from space. (Honestly, in this company Hoyle and Wickramasinghe seem quite sensible.) Then it's on to planets, whether Pluto counts, how we discover them, what makes them hospitable to life. All the competing theories about whether or not there is life out there are played off against each other, all at the same hectic pace (no hypothesis receives more than a couple of pages of attention). There are chapters on seeking messages from space, and sending messages to space, before Verma wraps up with a series of questions about what would happen if we ever did make contact with ET.

Verma is thorough, and draws in ideas from around the globe and from the very latest research, but this is popular journalism. If you know anything about any of the subjects covered here, you'll learn nothing new (and you may well be irked by his breezy approach). For those who don't know, however, this is a clear, accessible and wide-ranging introduction to an extraordinarily fascinating subject.



John Von Kesmark – *Kytos – The Dark Beyond – The Rathing Chronicles*

Matador, Leicester, 2008, 280pp, £9.95, t/p, ISBN 9781906221966

Reviewed by Jim Steel

It was fortunate for the two brothers, Parsus and Memnon, in their coming to realise that events existing in the parallel future dimension could be fashioned by whatever took place in the parallel present dimension, which is natural and as it should be.

If the chapter-opening sentence above doesn't make your eyes bleed, then this could be the book for you. Nobody deliberately sets out to write a bad novel, but occasionally one wonders if a pastiche is being committed. Unfortunately it doesn't take long to find out that there is neither a Spinrad nor a Farmer behind this novel.

The cover makes for interesting reading. The first few blurbs seem to be from pay-for-review sites, but by the end they are coming from totally unrelated articles in The Guardian and National Geographic. The publisher is the self-publishing wing of Troubadour Press. The previous volume, which was set eight years earlier, was distributed by Vine House who offered a similar service.

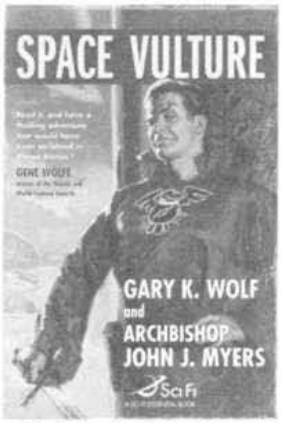
The world of 2078 has coalesced into five super-states with the sole exception of Britain, which has been overrun by giant intelligent rat-men. The Rathings (erroneously called clones by the author) were created covertly by a professor who abandoned their embryos on a beach, not expecting them to survive. Well, you wouldn't. The superpowers have placed Britain under a trade embargo, which hasn't affected such things as mobile phones or laptop computers, but has necessitated the development of food injections *that taste like the real thing*.

After multiple digressions, the plot slowly starts. Ash, now twenty years old, vows revenge on the Rathings when his father is killed. He decides to go to Rumrunner Cove and use a time gate to go back and stop the Rathings before they get started. Friends Bill and Ellie come along, despite Bill telling Ellie that "Girls aren't allowed on this trip." Enid Blyton would be proud of them.

Meanwhile, Rathings are being murdered in locked rooms. Two police officers (one human, the other a Rathing) try to solve the

mystery. At the same time, General Ströessor is planning a military coup with the advice of another Rathing from a parallel future dimension. Confusingly, the Parallel Future Dimension, Present Dimension and Parallel Fourth Dimension Future all are dated December 2078. There is also a reference to a parallel *past* dimension. Having some of the characters say that it is all too complicated for them to follow does not let the author off the hook. One suspects that Von Kesmark is trying to reinvent the wheel, but the smoke and chaos means that it is hard to keep track of what he is trying to say. It is doubtful if he has actually read any science fiction but, given that characters make use of time gates and phasers, it seems safe to say that he's watched some on television. It reads like a first draft that ran through a spell check programme and escaped into the wild.

A concluding volume will follow.



Gary K Wolf & Archbishop John J Myers – *Space Vulture*

Tor Books 2008, 333pp, h/b, ISBN 9780765318527

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Nostalgia is a peculiar affliction in SF where, by definition (well, almost) tomorrow is better than today. Back in the day there were *Tales of Wonder* and *Planet Stories*, and *Flash Gordon* could be seen every Saturday morning by geeks with thick glasses, bridgework and questions about acne.

You'll gather this is not a nostalgia I share. I don't regard Heinlein and Anderson as gods, just hack writers who had flashes of brilliant imagination. I normally want more from something that demands several hours of my time. *Space Vulture* is not a book calculated to tickle my taste buds. In fact, by all rational criteria, it should be nothing more than a cynical pastiche, existing for no more reason than the parting of the gullible from their money. That it is not is a testimony to the sincerity of Wolf and Myers. They don't seek to exploit those works, but to emulate them, to recreate them. That the Heisenbergian principle that the mere identification of a desirable past state makes it impossible to exactly recreate that state is hardly their responsibility.

The plot hardly matters. Uber-villain Space Vulture captures uber-cop Captain Victor Corsaire, together with the new love of Corsaire's life, widow, mother and progenitor of pioneers, the beautiful, resourceful and redoubtable Cali, whose two boys – Eliot and Regin – fall into the clutches of the just redeemable petty crook, Gil Terry. Space Vulture prepares to auction off the death of Corsaire to the highest bidder among his numerous enemies, all the while working his charms on Cali. In the meantime, Eliot and Regin set off in search of their mother. Everything rattles along at breakneck pace with the minimum of suspense – if you ever believe that everything will not fall out okay for everyone, with that expected unexpected twist at the end then you are probably twelve years old and think *Starship Troopers* is absolutely the best book ever written.

Wolf and Myers have written a book with their tongues nowhere near their cheeks, which is why it works. I imagine they mailed episodes to each other with wide grins on their faces, eager to read and write the next instalment. It is quite an achievement to create something that should cause nothing but groans in the reader that, despite everything, reads as both innocent and un-selfaware, a pastiche that tastes genuine.

As I read this I was forcibly reminded of a Flash Gordon movie, the Buster Crabbe one rather than the Sam J Jones. I read this book with the smile on my face that I expect Wolf and Myers wanted to see. I enjoyed it. What I didn't do was enjoy it enough to ever want to see it or anything like it ever again.

John Wagner and Colin McNeil – *Judge Dredd: America.*

Rebellion/2000AD, 2008, £11.99, 144pp, p/b graphic novel, ISBN 9781905437580

Reviewed by James Bacon

From the world of Judge Dredd set in the futuristic Mega City One we find a tale of love, hurt democracy and terrorism.

We are told the story of a beautiful girl, America, who has ideals and a moral conviction of what freedom really means to her. Judges, Judge-jury and executioner, instil fear in all citizens at a young age, the younger the better. From an early age America sees them to be evil and thuggish. Meanwhile her best friend Beeny is just scared of them and pursues his love of playing his *gitter* (Mega City slang for guitar).

In America's eyes, the Judges are a totalitarian regime existing to sustain themselves and suppress the people they claim to protect, continually watching, suspecting, degrading and suppressing the citizens of Mega City One. Her anger at the system manifests itself as she becomes a pro-democracy activist. Beeny who is not only her great friend, but is truly in love with her, is eventually spurned for a pro-democracy boyfriend when he finds the strength to ask her out. As these two friends' lives diverge, one gets involved in politics while one succeeds in fulfilling his musical dreams.

We rejoin our friends years later. Beeny is rich beyond his dreams but is lonely. By chance, he once again meets America. Heartbreak has left him inept with girls. He is used to propositioning prostitutes and suddenly he is propositioning America under a street light.

Things gets worse when it turns out that their meeting is a set-up to kill Judges. Suddenly Beeny finds himself a witness to terrible slaughter. Beeny is in shock, more so as he realises that terrorists leave no loose ends. One of America's terrorist comrades shoots Beeny despite her distraught protestations.

He isn't killed, though, and he covers for America by lying to the Judges to protect her.

America tracks him down to talk. She tells him of her life which has been one of travesty and horror, and she recounts the suffering of unquantifiable injustices at the hands of the Judges. The Judges had subverted a peaceful democratic march in order to beat it into submission; America's partner was killed during this. She was imprisoned and while incarcerated the Judges told her that her unborn child was genetically defective and forced an abortion upon her. The murders of her partner and child have driven her quite insane with vengeance and turned her from a subversive activist to terrorist and she has joined Total War, a terrorist organisation.

Her outpouring brings America and Beeny together, and they consummate their love. She subsequently asks for money for explosives to blow up the Statue of Liberty. Beeny is besotted, he will do whatever she wants but also wants to save America from her life, from herself, to take her away from the horrors she is perpetrating. How he tries to do this, brings the story to a close. He knows one way or another blood will be on his hands.

The ending to this story is one of the most poignant in the history of the Judge Dredd oeuvre. The story draws upon thirteen years of Mega City mythology and history. Readers of Dredd familiar with

the earlier types of story were suddenly presented with a very politicised and oblique view of the futuristic city and law-enforcement force that has created so many tongue in check, hilarious and exciting moments. Here Wagner throws a real googly as he upturns the world readers know so well and shows it in a very unsympathetic and acute blood drenched light. It is telling that eighteen years later the story can still be reflected upon in the light of what we call freedoms in today's world.

Included in this graphic novel are two successor stories, *America II: Fading of the Light*, and *Cadet*. *America II* is a good story, but nowhere as strong or as effective as the original. *Cadet* though is quite interesting in that it really allows a level of focus on Dredd's thinking and the mentality and psyche of the cadet in question. It's one of the better Dredd stories in its own right and the connection is quite inspired.

Colin MacNeil's artwork complements the story. The stories were created over sixteen years, so one gets an opportunity to see the artist's progression from full colour beautifully painted artwork to where he works on the inks and the colours are computer generated. His imagery in America is incredible and there are a number of images which are just iconic. This is a great graphic novel.

Gene Wolfe – *An Evil Guest*

Tor US, 2008, 301pp, h/b, ISBN 9780765321336

Reviewed by Martin Potts

It has been a long time since I have read any Gene Wolfe and with the sleeve notes advertising "Lovecraftian noir fiction" and subsequently "Lovecraft meets Blade Runner", my anticipation was acute, being a fan of all elements.

This novel is set in a near future not dissimilar to current times, apart from the fact that mankind has made contact with a single extra-terrestrial civilisation with which it is co-existing well, and generally technological advances have continued. The story has an intriguing start with one of our main characters-to-be, Dr Gideon Chase, in interview with the President of the United States who wishes to engage Dr Chase's services to find, and it is strongly suggested eliminate, one 'William Reis' who is considered to be a threat to national security. Chase is driven more by the thrill of the puzzle surrounding his quarry than materialistic gain, and decides to accept. His plan is simple; to set a honey trap using Carrie Casey, a co-operative unknown actress. We then discover more about Chase which, delightfully, increases the mystery surrounding him as he mystically develops Miss Case's charisma to new heights, making her a star overnight: attracting the attentions of Chase's quarry.

Thus the trap is set, the cast is ready to play their part, and then, it appears, Gene Wolfe decides to tell another story. A love triangle which never really satisfies, played out to a backdrop of a horror element barely hinted at, until the final fifth of the book when the malevolence has been inadequately built up over the length of the narrative to have any real impact. The character so brilliantly introduced and fleshed out, Dr Chase, is effectively lost from the story (although he is one side of the love triangle albeit a predominantly absent one) much to the detriment of the reader's involvement as the remaining characters do not have the gravitas to command our interest or sympathies. Miss Casey's reactions to some very bizarre events are so blasé that I had to reread some passages to make sure I hadn't misread. I could have forgiven the author had the two narratives had a clever tie up at the finale but they don't. Chase has walked off the canvas and it is left to the heroine to experience the final tragic events alone.

In the opening half of the book there were some excellent sequences – all featuring Chase – and the repartee between Chase and Casey was very reminiscent of Bogart and Bacall and worked wonderfully. Unfortunately, as stated above, it felt like Wolfe didn't want to finish that story and got distracted by another – sadly, far inferior and ineffective. The Lovecraftian elements are minimal or merely undeveloped asides and the Blade Runner reference is totally inappropriate. However, since reading this book I have found myself reflecting upon it and can't help puzzling over what I must have missed. So I suppose at some subconscious level I enjoyed it, but not nearly half as much as the novel it should have been.

Particles

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

Jay Amory – *The Wingless Boy*
Gollancz, London 2008, 601pp, £12.99, t/p ISBN 9780575083714
This volume brings together the first two volumes (*The Wingless Boy*, 2006 and *Pirates of the Relentless Desert*, 2007) of new writer Amory's Clouded World series.

Raymond Benson – *Metal Gear Solid*
Orbit, 2008, 321pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 9781841497358
Official tie-in novel from the Konami Digital Entertainment videogame, mixing spy thriller with shoot-'em-up action.

Mark Chadbourn – *The Burning Man*
Gollancz, London 2008, 339pp, £12.99, t/p ISBN 9780575079496
Fast-paced and entertaining, bringing together the best elements of horror, urban fantasy and thrillers.

Steven Donaldson – *Fatal Revenant*
Gollancz, London 2008, 789pp, £18.99, h/b ISBN 9780575082380
Volume two of the Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant. This new volume is sure to be welcomed by Donaldson's many fans.

Sara Douglas – *The Twisted Citadel*
Harper Voyager, London 2008, 576pp, £8.99, p/b ISBN 9780007270392
Volume two in the Darkglass Mountain trilogy, epic fantasy in the Brooks mould.

Greg Egan, *Incandescence*
Gollancz, 2008, 300pp, £12.99, t/p ISBN 9780575081635
Hard science and conflict from Egan, reviewed last issue by Stuart Carter and now in bookshops.

Steven Erickson – *Toll the Hounds*
Bantam Press, 2008, £18.99, h/b ISBN 9780593046371
Volume 8 in the Malazan Book of the Fallen: critically acclaimed epic fantasy in the George R R Martin style.

Jennifer Fallon – *Wolfblade*
Orbit, London 2004, 711pp, £7.99, p/b ISBN 9781841496528
Placed in power despite herself, Fallon's heroine resorts to diplomacy to as her one means of survival in this epic fantasy.

Wayne G Hammond and Christina Scull – *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*
Harper Collins, 2005, 894pp, £12.99, p/b ISBN 9780007270606
Paperback edition of this useful reader's guide to the classic fantasy: winner of the Mythopoeic Society Award in Inkling Studies.

Robert Heinlein – *Requiem: Collected Works and Tributes, ed. Koji Kondo*
Tor, 1992, 341pp, t/p ISBN 9780765320544
Welcome reprint of this book of works by and essay on Heinlein: highly recommended.

Joe Hill – *Heart-Shaped Box*
Gollancz, 2007, 403pp, £6.99, t/p, ISBN 9780575081864
Highly acclaimed debut novel from Hill, the son of Stephen King, this is a ghost rock opera. Reviewed in *Vector* 251 by Paul Bateman.

Robin Hobb – *Renegade's Magic*
Harper Voyager, London 2008, 760pp, £8.99, p/b ISBN 9780007196203
The final part of the latest trilogy of this very popular and entertaining writer.

Paul McAuley – *Cowboy Angels*
Gollancz, 2007, 408pp, £7.99, t/p ISBN 9780575082236
Paperback of McAuley's well-received alternate history, reviewed in *Vector* 254 by Gary Dalkin.

Fiona McIntosh – *Goddess*
Orbit, 2007, 556pp, £7.99, p/b ISBN 9781841494623
Third volume in the *Arabian Nights*' style Percheron series from this popular Australian author.

Vicki Petterssen – *The Scent of Shadows*
Voyager, 2007, 455pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 9780007270217
– *The Taste of Night*
Voyager, 2007, 440pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 9780007270224
– *The Touch of Twilight*
Voyager, 2008, 406pp, £6.99, p/b ISBN 9780007270231
First three books in a projected sequence of 12 from new US writer Petterssen. In the heat of Las Vegas, Joanna Archer is one of only twelve mortals gifted – or cursed – with the power to affect the eternal battle between light and shadow. A new twist on the supernatural formula.

Brian Ruckley – *Winterbirth*
Orbit, 2006, 544pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 9781841494241
Brian Ruckley – *Bloodheir*
Orbit, 2008, 528pp, £14.99, h/b ISBN 9781841494388
The first two volumes in The Godless World Trilogy by Scottish author Ruckley. This is full-bodied epic fantasy with a Gaelic twist – battles, magic and treachery in the fashion of Peter Morwood and George R R Martin.

Robert Scott and Jay Gordon – *The Larion Senators*
Gollancz, 2008, 578pp, £8.99, t/p, ISBN 9780575082823
Third and final volume in the Eldarn sequence: epic fantasy in the mould of Donaldson and Jordan.

J RR Tolkien and John D Rateliff – *The History of the Hobbit Part One: Mr Baggins*
Harper Collins, 2008, £9.99, p/b ISBN 9780007266463
The History of the Hobbit Part Two: Return to Bag End
Harper Collins, 2008, 906pp (both volumes), £9.99, p/b ISBN 9780007266470
Beautifully presented and edited, this is the full original manuscript of *The Hobbit*, complete with new editorial annotations, critical essays, index and illustrations. While this is sure to appeal to Tolkien's many fans, the two books will also fascinate writers, critics and anyone who wants to learn more about the processes through which a book grows, changes and develops. A wonderful addition to the Tolkien papers.

Sean Williams – *Astropolis Book 1: Saturn Returns*
Orbit, 2007, 367pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 9781841495194
First volume in a new space opera series, reviewed in *Vector* 254 by Ben Jeapes, now out in mass market paperback.

F. Paul Wilson – *By The Sword*
Forge, due November 2008, 347pp, h/b ISBN 9780765317070
Part thriller, part dark fantasy, this is a new entry in the Repairman Jack series by this best-selling author.

Orson Scott Card – *Keeper of Dreams*
Tor, New York 2008, 656pp, h/b ISBN 9780765304971
Twenty two of Card's short stories from across Card's career, representing not only his work in SF and fantasy, but his literary and Mormon writings, plus the two Hatrack River novellas.

Terry Brooks – *The Elves of Cintra*
Orbit, London 2007, 374pp, £7.99, p/b ISBN 9781841495767
Genesis of Shannara book 2. New entry in another of fantasy's longest-running epic series.

Ramsey Campbell – *The Grin of the Dark*
Virgin Books, London 2007, 341pp, £7.99, p/b ISBN 9780753513811
Terrific horror thriller based around music halls and madness.

A Lee Martinez – *The Automatic Detective*
Tor, New York 2008, 317pp, t/p ISBN 9780765318343
Had-boiled noir detective novel set in a world of robots and little green men: this series is SF's answer to Glen Cook and Jim Butcher.

Alan Campbell – *Iron Angel*
Tor UK, London 2008, 435pp, £17.99, h/b ISBN 9781405090360
The Deepgate Codex, volume 2. Mieville-esque fantasy set in a fog-bound Victorian style world from this acclaimed Scottish writer.

Misty Massey – *Mad Kestrel*
Tor, New York 2008, 320pp, t/p ISBN 9780765318022
Pirates, magic and swashbuckling: a pacey debut novel replete with feisty heroine and derring-do.

Ellen Datlow and Kelly Link & Gavin J Grant (sic) – *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror 2007*
St Martin's Press, New York 2007, 4272pp, t/p ISBN 9780312369422
The twentieth annual collection, covering 2006, and containing stories by Joyce Carol Oates, Gene Wolfe, Delia Sherman, Geoff Ryman, Jeff Vandermeer and many more.

Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough – *Deluge*
Bantam Press, London 2008, 223pp, £17.99, h/b ISBN 9780593056141
Book three of the Twins of Petaybee. Shape-shifters and song blend in this SF saga based on Inuit, Celtic and South Sea Island mythology.

Adam Stemple – *Steward of Song*
Tor US 2008, 288pp, h/b 9780765316301
This is the second solo novel from Stemple, the son of Jane Yolen, and takes up where his debut, *Singer of Souls*, left off. Blending music, Gaelic and Native American folklore and the detective genre, he charts the adventures of siblings Bridie and Scott as they hunt for their missing brother Douglas. The writing is strong and the characters – who are not always appealing – well-drawn. Likely to appeal to fans of Charles de Lint and Emma Bull.

Dominic Took – *The Storms of Acias*
Transient 2007, 175pp, £6.99, t/p ISBN 9780955612305
This self-published debut novel has several strengths, notably a lively plot and a some strong ideas. It is not, however, an easy read, mainly due to stylistic difficulties. Took is dyslexic and his writing can be difficult to follow. He makes no secret of this and it may be one reason why he has chosen this publication route. He is talented, however, and I hope he goes on writing; with a little help from a copy-editor, he has much to offer.

Transmission, Interrupted 3: Midnight at the Lost and Found

by Saxon Bullock

If there's one thing that Season 4 of *Lost* has proven, it's that timing is everything. Barely had the producers behind the long-running Island-set mystery saga announced a definite date for the series finale – 2010, at the end of the sixth season – when the 2007 Writer's Strike came along and threw everything up in the air. Suddenly, fans who'd already waited patiently for 9 months were looking at yet more waiting, while a massive question mark was hanging over whether Lost's 16-episode 2008 run would make it beyond its eighth instalment.

Thankfully, this uncertainty didn't last too long. Once the strike was settled, the production hiatus ended, and the show was able to continue. However, the after-effects were hard to avoid – not only did S4 lose two episodes (and show obvious signs of last-minute compression and rewriting), but it also couldn't hide that some of the show's bad storytelling habits were still alive and well. At its worst, *Lost*'s fourth season is as befuddling and frustrating as ever – and yet, out of this potentially tangled mess has also emerged some of the show's most consistent and entertaining material yet, taking its novelistic, multi-layered, time-hopping narrative and pushing it further than ever before.

Following in the wake of S3's mind-blowing finale, in which *Lost*'s storytelling structure was up-ended thanks to an unexpected switch to a post-Island flash-forward, S4 essentially charts two stories. In the present, it's the tale of the remaining plane crash survivors struggling with divisions in their ranks (with separate groups forming under the leadership of Jack and Locke), while also discovering that the newly arrived and mysterious crew members from the offshore Freighter aren't the benign rescue party they claim to be. In the future, it's the story of the 'Oceanic Six', the only survivors to make it off the Island – who they are, what they're doing, and how their pasts are refusing to let them live in peace.

Most of the 14 episodes that make up S4 see *Lost* at its most rewarding – mysteries are set up, but a large number of them are solved by the end of the season, and the show refuses to drag out the flash-forward structure for too long. By the end of season finale 'There's No Place Like Home', the 'present day' Island-based section of the plot (which has remained in 2004 since the show's beginning) has been wrapped up, and most of the 'flash-forward' gaps have been filled in. Narratively, *Lost*'s future has never been quite so ambiguous.

But then, some of the show's best material has been born out of the moments where the story takes a sudden left turn – and it's to the credit of Exec Producers Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindendof that so far, they've mostly managed to get away with it. *Lost* has been able to carry off long-form storytelling and make the majority of it feel organic, as if there is a genuine plan at work somewhere in the background (as opposed to *Battlestar Galactica*'s habit of throwing kooky ideas at the wall and seeing what sticks).

S4 has also seen the show heading in a much darker, bleaker direction, matching the mood of the S3 finale and pushing the level of violence even further. Juxtaposing the castaway's hope for rescue with the knowledge that only six make it off the Island (and the largely tragic and downbeat trajectory of their resulting lives) gives the whole season a bittersweet air – but most of all, it has meant that uncertainty is back in the mix in a big way. The flash-forwards recall the sense of intrigue and interconnectedness that defined S1 but wasn't always sustained, except now, instead of simply being about "Will they ever escape the Island?", the show is suddenly bigger and broader.

Episodes like 'The Constant' (S4 E05), 'The Shape of Things to Come' (S4 E09) and 'Cabin Fever' (S4 E11) were *Lost* firing on all cylinders, balancing characterisation, intrigue and drama (as well as taking the show closer than ever before towards genuine SF). The regular stream of plot revelations and foreboding menace built up throughout the season, and peaked with the three-part finale, which perhaps wasn't quite as gripping as S3's climax, but still packed an emotional wallop. And with the previously inescapable Others missing in action for most of the season, we had a new group of mystery characters and antagonists in the crew of the Freighter. Canny casting made sure that performers like Ken Leung, Jeremy Davies (once again refining his slightly spaced-schtick) and the fantastically grizzled Jeff Fahey were able to make a good impression. Combined with the presence of season 'big bad' Daniel Keamy, and the continued manipulations of Benjamin Linus (played with effortless style by Michael Emerson, who's evolved into one of the show's best performers), there was enough to keep the show consistently gripping.

And yet it'd be impossible to describe S4 as a hands-down smash, or to say it fully maintained the improbable return-to-form of S3. For a start, despite the high-octane impact and pace of S3's finale, 'Through the Looking Glass', sections of S4's first half saw a return to a dawdling pace, and a sense that characters were being left to sit around waiting for something to happen (literally, in the case of Locke's bizarrely directionless leadership). A couple of episodes felt almost disposable (especially the dull and uninformative Juliet flashback 'The Other Woman (S4 E06)), while even the new-found narrative tricks couldn't make the manipulative structure of 'Ji Yeon' (S4 E07), with its 'intercut flash-forward and flashback' twist, feel like anything other than a shameless con.

A bigger problem manifests itself in the season's overarching plot. One of S4's primary drives of intrigue is the real reason for the Freighter's presence on the Island – the mission to recover Ben Linus – but in places, the lack of explanation seems murky

for the sake of it, especially when it comes to the motivation of uber-industrialist Charles Widmore (a character who'll never escape the strange ignomy of being played by Alan "Jim from Neighbours" Dale). Widmore's reasons are hazy in the extreme, and the mystery behind the faked wreckage of Oceanic flight 815 (complete with dead bodies) is more perplexing than intriguing, with both Ben Linus and Widmore pointing accusing fingers at each other and nothing resembling resolution.

The scene between Ben and Widmore in 'The Shape of Things To Come' is admittedly powerful, especially in the wake of the brutal murder of Ben's adoptive daughter, but it's also a couple of steps away from the kind of overwritten and incomprehensible babble that *The X-Files* used to deal in with its mythos episodes, and *Lost* pursues that direction at its own risk. Too much, and it starts getting in the way of the show's frequently entertaining nuts-and-bolts action adventure.

If there's a single element that points out the flaws both of S4 in particular and *Lost* in general, however, it's the return of Harold Perrineau Jr. as Michael. One of the original season's core characters, Michael was badly served by S2, spending most of it howling for the return of his son or absent altogether, and his departure off the Island along with Walt was one of the show's biggest flapping plot threads. S4 was obviously meant to tie that thread up, but while the reconceiving of Michael's character as guilt-ridden, estranged from his son and desperate to atone was effective, very little was actually done with it.

'Meet Kevin Johnson' (S4 E08), an episode almost entirely dedicated to a Michael-centric flashback, was undoubtedly the season's weakest instalment, and seemed to consist of nothing but Perrineau Jr. looking awkward and tense. Even in the season climax, where Michael is finally told "You can go now" by the Island and meets his end, there's a sense of being massively short-changed. The plotting kept Michael separate from most of the ensemble (he only interacts with four of the regulars), and even his eventual sacrifice is far from heroic, acting more as a plot device and leaving a general feeling of dissatisfaction (a feeling shared by Perrineau Jr., who's been vocal about his unhappiness at the way Michael's return was handled).

Probably the greatest credit to the writers and producers behind *Lost* is to say that even with these kinds of mistakes, S4 still shows a sharpness and sense of forward momentum that makes you wish they'd restricted the seasons to shorter lengths from the start. By the end of S4, we may not have any answers to the 'big' questions – Jacob still remains a mystery, the Smoke Monster may be summonable yet we don't know what it is, and there's obviously echoes of an ancient civilisation on the Island but we've no idea who they were – but ultimately, of course, *Lost* isn't really about the answers.

In some similar ways to *Galactica* (which arrived only a year before *Lost*), it's a very post-9/11 show, with a mixed group of characters having to find a way of surviving in the wake of an apocalyptic event, and finding themselves locked in a battle between rationality and faith. There's even echoes of *The X-Files* in this battle, but *Lost* deals with the idea in a much more off-beat and multi-layered way, and doesn't make it a smooth fight. While often painted in a positive light, the journey towards faith also often seems to be littered with corpses, with irrationality often leading to a violent death (Boone in S1, Shannon in S2, Mr Eko in S3). Even Locke's inner perception of himself as a warrior/shaman (something that's previously been seen as a largely positive aspect) is called into question in S4, thanks to the flashbacks in "Cabin Fever" (S4 E11), and Locke's eventual destination as a corpse in the Hoffs and Drawler Funeral Parlour at the end of S4's final episode.

On the other hand, there's the path of science and reason, which Jack follows all the way through S4 (even to the extent of losing his rationality in search of it, ending the Island storyline in S4 as an argumentative and unreasoning mirror image of Locke at the end of S3), and what does clear-cut, heroic rationality get him? A future destiny as a pill-popping, alcoholic shell of a man ready to embark on a semi-lunatic quest, unable to continue with his life until he exorcises the ghosts he left back on the Island.

Underneath the mystery, the layers of obfuscation, and the "Who's Kate going to end up with?" questions, the battle between Reason and Faith – how we perceive this fight, and this balance, and how it affects us as people – is the central theme of the show. You can argue that the frequent longeurs and blind alleys don't help in putting this across, or that the show might have been stronger working with fewer episodes, or with a firm end-date fixed from the start (although even having that didn't make J. Michael Straczynski's run on *Babylon 5* any easier...). There's truth in all of this, and it's certainly easy to understand why many viewers may have lost patience – but *Lost* is the exception that proves the rule, a wild and crazed loner in the herd of US network television that illustrates as much by what it gets right as what it gets wrong.

It frustrates, it confuses, it perplexes, but it's also capable of a synthesis of acting, writing, directing and storytelling that a show like *Heroes* can only dream of. *Lost* is bedded in for the long game, and while the eventual series finale waiting at the end of S6 is almost guaranteed to not give any of the 'real answers' many viewers seem to demand, for the moment – despite its slips and mistakes – it's continuing to show that sometimes, the journey itself can be more interesting, illuminating and important than the destination.

Foundation's Favourites: *Vector* no 1

Andy Sawyer

What is the longest-lived critical journal of science fiction? Technically, it seems to be *Extrapolation*, which was founded by Thomas D. Clareson in 1959 and is still running today. If being "academic" and associated with universities doesn't count, then perhaps we should consider A Langley Searles's *Fantasy Commentator*, which began in 1943 (although there was a long hiatus between 1953 and the second series beginning in 1979, and the last issue to reach the SF Foundation library was no. 57/58 date Summer 2004). But there's certainly a case for the BSFA's *Vector*, which is widely regarded as one of the best of the "non-academics" and whose first issue is dated Summer 1958. For the past fifty years, *Vector* has been an invaluable source of articles, interviews and reviews for the serious researcher into science fiction.

So what is *Vector* no 1 *like*?

The first issue was edited by author E. C. Tubb, and longtime fan Terry Jeeves handled the production. (The stylish jet-plane climbing into the stratosphere on the cover is uncredited, but interior cartoons are signed by Jeeves. The cover of the second issue was credited to Jack Wilson: Jeeves produced the cover for no. 4.) Although *Vector* is described as "the official journal of the British Science Fiction Association" rather than what it eventually became (a journal of amateur and semi-professional criticism and reviews), it reads more like one of the serious fanzines of the 1930s, such as Walter Gillings's *Scientifiction* than a club or society 'zine. Only a page of "classified advertisements" plugging the BSFA's library service, and a writing competition suggests that this is published by an organisation, although the general tone of the magazine is well within the parameters of what many of the individuals who set up the BSFA wanted: a society which would somehow act as a bridge between the science fiction readership and the convention-going/fanzine reading fan groups. (For more on the history of the BSFA, see the BSFA's web pages, especially the link to Rob Hansen's history of the BSFA at <http://www.mjckeh.demon.co.uk/cambridge.html> [or *Vector* 250 – Ed.])

Tubb's editorial sets this tone. SF, says Tubb, with its roots in Hugo Gernsback's magazines, is "a new baby and is considered by many to be an illegitimate one". True, there is rubbish published, but the standard is improving. Science fiction is growing up. This is, of course, an argument which has become wearisomely familiar through its repetition every couple of years, but this period – the late 1950s – was certainly a good time for SF. Among the material mentioned, either reviewed or in passing, are Alfred Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!*, Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, Eric Frank Russell's *Wasp*, and fiction by John Wyndham, John Brunner, Robert Silverberg, and J. G. Ballard. There are no women writers mentioned apart from Katherine MacLean (a writer I've recently rediscovered, to my great delight) and the stirrings of the New Wave are some years in the future, but there are certainly authors mentioned who any reader of SF would find rewarding.

Tubb followed up his editorial with his "Handbook for Beginners" – a basic how-to-write essay for those who want to write their own SF. Tubb describes some narrative techniques, considers ways of storytelling (discussing the use of tense, for example), and warns against common errors like adjectivitis, repetition, and the sort of clichéd dialogue in which people lecture each other about things which they know perfectly well simply in order to pass basic information along to the reader. He also drops some handy hints about presentation. Again, this essay has essentially been repeated with variations throughout the history of the BSFA for each new generation of would-be writers, but it's clear, sensible advice from an intelligent professional. Following this is the competition – members are invited to produce a 500-word short story about a knife. In the grand tradition of BSFA competitions this attracted two entries, by K. T. McIntyre and Arthur ("Doc") Weir . Weir won, but Tubb, clearly dissatisfied with the standard of the entries, showed how it could be done with a sharp (sorry!) little story of his own.

Next, Jim Rattigan discusses two films, a Russian film about space travel called *Blazing a Trail to the Stars* and the Hammer horror *Dracula* starring Christopher Lee. Daphne Buckmaster argues that there is still room for SF speculation post-Sputnik and "Sandy" Sandfield discusses the question of characterisation in SF, suggesting that we do not necessarily read SF for complex psychological character-study. Much of what he says is, in my own opinion, quite right, but when he illustrates it the problem with the central argument breaks through. "SF does not need characterisation to any greater extent than a swimmer really needs trunks in order to swim." Well *yees* . . . I can see what he means, but most of us would look a lot better in the swimming-baths without displaying bits of our anatomy all over the place, not to mention that, well, in order to be *permitted* to swim in most swimming-baths you do, actually, need your costume. Writers who go for the "big ideas" without this poncy characterisation and literary construction stuff do need to know what they'd doing. Otherwise it really is the literary equivalent of diving in the swimming-pool *sans* costume in the merry delusion that people are admiring your bravery and unconventionality rather than wishing you'd taken the trouble to put something on. But this is a discussion which has bedevilled SF since its inception and unfortunately will not go away.

An unsigned "News and Views" column talks about the state of SF publishing and mentions the low ebb of fannish activity other than from the Liverpool and Cheltenham groups. Terry Jeeves and Roberta Wilde provide usefully informative round-ups of the American and British magazines respectively – and that is it.

Vector makes an interesting start for the BSFA. It was to go through a series of troubles in the next few years. Tubb unfortunately relinquished the editorial post and after several Jeeves-edited issues the resulting musical-chairs meant that the first ten issues of *Vector* shared eight editors between them (one of whom, incidentally, was Michael Moorcock). From the second issue onwards, the great problem of club publishing – receiving enough good-quality material in time to meet deadlines – can be seen to have descended upon the emergent BSFA. With more consistency at the start, *Vector* could have developed more quickly into what it eventually became, and now is. Issue 6, for instance, has a fascinating piece about SF and fantasy in Portugal, and early issues contain artwork by Jim Cawthorn and an article by Kingsley Amis. But even so, this first issue is of great interest. Surely it's one of the classic documents of British science fiction!

Resonances

by Stephen Baxter

If you are a young adult in 2008, you have grown up with dire warnings of the global climate-change disaster that will unfold during the coming century – a century much of which with luck (good or otherwise) you might expect to live through. For instance in his book *The Revenge of Gaia* (2006), environmentalist James Lovelock, the key proponent of the 'Gaia' hypothesis, says he believes climate change will claim billions of lives.

Of course the green apocalypse isn't the only threat looming over us. We fear we will be terminated by a dinosaur-killer asteroid strike, or a global pandemic, or the burning of the last of the oil, or the conversion of the Earth into mush by nanotechnology gone mad – or we will burn ourselves up in a clash of civilisations. It must be difficult to see through this miasma of dire warnings to a hopeful future.

But the modern young aren't the first generation to have grown up with a threat of doom soon. My generation, born in the fifties, was educated into an awareness of the Cold War, a mind-numbing stalemate that could have triggered a mass nuclear war. It was hard to imagine growing old. It seemed pointless planting a tree, for it would have no chance to grow before the future was terminated in a wall of blinding light.

This was the seed for my young-adult novel *The H-Bomb Girl* (Faber, 2007). I wanted the modern young to have a glimpse of the horrors of futures past. So I set the book in October 1962, when the Cuban Missile Crisis brought us probably as close as we ever got to all-out global nuclear war.

At that time the Soviet Union was losing the nuclear arms race. Premier Khrushchev saw that if he could plant bases for short-range missiles on the island of Cuba, with its friendly Communist government, he could even up the playing field at a stroke, and cheaply. In October 1962 American spy planes spotted the launch pads, still under construction. President Kennedy, fearing a wider war, ruled out air strikes and invasions and ordered a 'quarantine'; US Navy ships were ordered to turn back any more Russian ships. Kennedy was trying to show firmness without provoking a fight. Behind the scenes there were frantic negotiations, but world war was an accidental gunshot away.

And if that fateful trigger had been pulled, the bombs would have probably fallen on Sunday 28th October 1962, at 8am in Britain – 3am in Washington, the most difficult time to respond. A total of some two hundred megatons would have been delivered to the UK, more than ten *thousand* times the firepower unleashed on Hiroshima. In our timeline, 1967 saw the 'summer of love'. If the bombs had fallen Britain's population would have reached a minimum that year, with between four and eight million people scraping for survival.

But missiles on Cuba just weren't worth risking war over. Both sides backed off. The Russians dismantled their bases on Cuba, and in return the Americans got rid of their own missile bases in Turkey. Annihilation was postponed, and everybody started worrying about something else.

The fact is, we're always fearing the worst; it's just that the worst we can imagine keeps changing. The generations before Cuba had their own horrors of the future. Pre-Second World War Britons feared the coming of the Nazis with poison gas, paratroopers and fifth columnists. HG Wells, one of the most eminent modern prophets of all, in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) foresaw a world war that would last decades, ending in global ruin. None of these threats came to pass, at least not as the most extreme fears depicted them.

Western culture has a deep-rooted expectation of apocalypse just around the corner that seems to date back as far as the Book of Revelations, which itself derived from Jewish and older eschatological traditions (see Simon Pearson's *A Brief History of the End of the World*, 2006). Jesus Himself seems to have expected the end of the world in His own generation. Arguably the most influential book ever written, Revelations' picture of the coming last days, when all will be swept aside in a time of disaster and battles before the coming of a new order, remains a template for our many views of the future. The climate-change scenarios fretted over by the MoD and the Pentagon follow just such a pattern, of an age of conflict over diminished resources like water preceding global breakdown.

Today there are plenty of adherents to the literal vision of Revelations, including many in positions of power. In 1981 James Watt, President Reagan's secretary of state, stood before Congress and claimed that protecting natural resources was unimportant because Christ was soon to return. But even beyond the ranks of the core religionists, the current debate about climate change has taken on an evangelical tone that transcends the science results, with 'climate change deniers' being challenged by the true believers.

Perhaps apocalyptic thinking is in some circumstances

a valuable meme. Humanity has indeed been faced with immense convulsions and disasters in the past, from the climatic shudders of the Ice Ages through to the grim mortality of the Black Death. Maybe our habitual pessimism about the future is an expression of a kind of folk memory, a grandmother instinct warning us not to be complacent, to make us expectant of drastic future change, as we have experienced change in the past.

But on the other hand we may be more resilient in the face of even savage change than we sometimes imagine. We recovered from the Black Death, and the Second World War. And some horrors don't come to pass at all; the Third World War never happened.

Not only that, the threat of a mega-catastrophe may actually be diminishing. In July 2008 (see *New Scientist* 26th July 2008) a conference at Oxford University's Future of Humanity Institute discussed the risk of global disasters capable of killing hundreds of millions. Leaving aside the entirely unknown, and slow-burners like climate change, the assembled experts concluded that many such threats are lessening. Security safeguards ensure that acts of bioterrorism and nuclear terrorism are getting harder to perpetrate, while the threat of nuclear war has been diminished by a reduction in stockpiles and a shutdown of weapons material production. Asteroid strikes remain a danger, but our mapping of space is good enough for us to be sure there is no second dinosaur killer waiting out there. A nasty flu virus could strike, but governments are well prepared for the worst case. And so on. We may be safer in many ways than we have been for decades.

And maybe we're actually getting better at handling mega-disasters, or the threat of them. Some thinkers now believe that Kennedy's successful judgement during the Crisis might serve as a model for the resolution of future conflicts (see for example the essay by Jeffrey D Sachs of Columbia University in *Scientific American*, March 2007). Kennedy treated his Soviet adversaries as rational, and he tried to avoid vilifying them or backing them into a corner. He noted later, as Sachs quotes: "Nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war."

Game theorists today describe Kennedy's strategy as 'generous tit-for-tat' (GTFT). You cooperate with your opponent as long as he plays along. If he begins to cheat you stop cooperating too, to show your opponent there are advantages in cooperating, but you always leave the door open for future cooperation. Sachs notes, "GTFT is so successful and robust that many evolutionary biologists suppose that the basic strategy is somewhat hardwired in human attributes". It seems to me that Kennedy, along with similar spirits on the other side of the Iron Curtain, avoided the catastrophe fundamentally by understanding that the basis for cooperation lies in our shared humanity. Anyhow we have to be grateful that the strategy worked in this instance, or else there might have been no more evolutionary biologists - or indeed evolutionary biology.

None of this minimises the real threat posed by such problems as climate change. But a recognition of our propensity for apocalyptic thinking casts a clearer perspective on our hopes and fears.

As Kennedy said after Cuba, "In the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet ... We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal." Perhaps that fundamental sympathy might help us muddle through to 2100, as we have been muddling through one threat after another since the Ice Ages. We will survive the green apocalypse, chastened and changed perhaps, and by the time those now young grow old, their children will have found something entirely new to worry about.

The New X
Photocopying the Navel of August Caesar

Graham Sleight

Some writers – the best – sign in unmistakably within a few words. Here's one of them, from 1991:

> To say that in a bare two years John Goodman has emerged from less than nowhere to become the most employable character actor since Donald Pleasance, is about as adequate as saying his entrance in this movie is the most astutely calculated since Omar Sharif's in *Lawrence of Arabia*. It's not that he actually does much in the film. He doesn't even rescue [Jeff] Daniels at the end as you're second-to-second expecting. He just does his character (here, the village exterminator, for what little it matters) any time there's a suitable-sized hole in the script. I don't think this is an accident. Actors are wising up: you do not share scenes with this man if you can possibly avoid it. You do not appear in the same shot, even if you'd fit. When watching the dailies, you block off your view of his side of the screen with your palm. You insist on segregating his credit at the end of the list with an "and". Should you find yourself unavoidably trapped in a dialogue scene, ask for more money, and be sure to leave a four-second pause for the audience cheer before responding to any of his lines. You have no more chance of stealing a scene from John Goodman than from a topless Jessica Rabbit.

Anyone who reads *Interzone* will know who that is: Nick Lowe, who's been contributing film reviews to the magazine under the banner "Mutant Popcorn" since issue 13 in Autumn 1985. Here in the UK, we've been exceptionally well-off for smart and knowledgeable people writing about SF film: Roz Kaveney, Kim Newman, and the late John Brosnan, for starters. But those three are also known for other activities in the SF field. Lowe, so far as I'm aware, has written no books on SF: there's the *Interzone* column and not much else. Nor, unless anyone else can contradict me, has his work received any formal recognition: no nominations for the BSFA or other awards, no GoH spots at conventions. About Lowe himself I know very little. I've never met the man. He's apparently a Reader in Classics at Royal Holloway, just outside London; his website avers that he is no relation to the pub-rock singer of the same name or the couple of other Nick Lowes out there in popular culture. What I do know is that his run of film-reviewing at *Interzone* has been the longest continuous stint of work of this calibre in any venue since I've started reading SF. Indeed, there have been times, in the magazine's gloomier days, when I've bought the magazine just for Mutant Popcorn, and I know I'm not the only one.

The first thing to pick out about his writing is its density, the speed with which he makes his points. In a review of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* in IZ 202 (2006), he says that "the Potter films are increasingly becoming the tough-love editor the books should have had." True, and you could write a doctoral thesis on that if you wanted. Or, at slightly more length, Lowe on George Lucas in a generally sympathetic review of *The Phantom Menace* in IZ 148 (1999):

> For the nagging truth about George Lucas, filmmaker and master of the galaxy, is that he is a man honed by nature to shoot second unit. He still can't plot, can't write dialogue, can't direct humans; can edit a little; when on form is a wizard with storyboards; but is clearly more comfortable in his mature career as a Medici of the digital arts than as a maker of films in his own name.

Lucas as Medici of the digital arts is something that's shaped my own understanding of all three of the prequel films. It's what you might think of as an explanatory idea, one that provides a framework for understanding far more than it says directly. It gives reasons, for instance, why Lucas in his DVD commentaries hardly ever talks about acting or performance, but a great deal about the mechanics of putting shots together. Hence also, for instance, his tendency to share those commentaries not with actors but with the fellow technical-types from the workshop he's created. And, indeed, his increasing role as a curator/patron for such projects as *Clone Wars*, rather than a creator in his own right.

A similarly fruitful conciseness is found in Lowe's review of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* in IZ 68 (1993):

> The *real* problem with Lynch's treatment of women is the way they so often seem segregated and polarized into good girls and bad, virgins and tramps, madonnas and whores, Laura Derns and Isabella Rossellinis, goody-goody Donna Haywards and double-damned Laura Palmers. It's not just the women, of course, and it's not their problem alone.
>
> One of the things that eventually dismantled the viability of *Twin Peaks* was its progressive sorting of *all* its initially-ambivalent characters into white souls and black in a war between absolute good and evil, part of the series' long descent from complexity and ambiguity into something more recognisably like television.

It's not just that this is an analysis that makes clarifying sense of what Lynch had done up to that point. It's also useful – and, indeed, uncannily predictive – in understanding later films like *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Inland Empire*. It makes clear, without belabouring the point, that Lynch's moral vision merely seems to be painted in grey, and that there's a particular cost on the women characters.

One favorite subject for Lowe is the idiocies of modern screenwriting theory and the reductive simplicities of divisions into "acts", "arcs" or "beats". However, he doesn't see this in isolation, as witness this paragraph from the start of a column, introducing a review of Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King* in IZ 56 (1992)

> I'd like to see Joseph Campbell on the bonfire, frankly. Apart from the brain-softening effect on decades of (mainly American) students of all that sub-sub-Jungian new age twaddle proclaiming itself as scholarship, there's something rather offensive in the suggestion that a phenomenon as globally complex and diverse as the anthropology of narrative can be reduced to a cheap narcissistic metaphor of personal growth. The fact that this stuff is gaining rather than losing ground on our side of the Atlantic isn't

> a pretty development. But the really alarming trend is the way it seems to be seeping into screenwriting courses. George Lucas, a man with a badly Californian brain, is clearly the chief villain here, flannelling on about how if it wasn't for his old guru Joe Star Wars would never have changed the history of film. And in Hollywood, at least, where there's a huge sucker market for simple-minded classical reductionist explanations of triumphantly nonlinear processes like movie success, this soft cheesy camembert of an analysis sells like diet plans. (See e.g. Linda Seger, *Making a Good Script Great*, Samuel French 1987 – a central text for understanding what happened to the Hollywood script in the 1980s.) No matter that if you do set out systematically to apply the magic formula you end up with a pile of goat's poo like *Willow*. Faith is indestructible.

This interest in the structure of films – how it comes about, and how it's shaped by the studio context it emerges from – is reflected in a couple of Lowe's more distinctive angles on the field. The first is an awareness – usually amused rather than impatient – of the ways in which narratives show the shaping imprint of their creator. Especially in the fantastic, a device like a ring, a prophecy, or an oracle can most fruitfully be understood as a partial revelation of how the story's supposed to be shaped. (Hence, most famously, Lowe's suggestion that the *Star Wars* movies make far more sense if you substitute the term "the Force" with "the Plot". There's actually a long exposition of this in Lowe's 1986 talk "The Well-Tempered Plot Device", online at <http://news.ansible.co.uk/plotdev.html> which I won't try to summarise. "The Well-Tempered Plot Device" is, I believe, Lowe's first use in print of the term "plot coupons", now immortalised in writers' workshop lexicons: you trek round the fantasyland map, collect them all, and then mail off for the ending.)

Related to this is a second distinctive approach he uses, which is harder to paraphrase. I think the best way I can summarise it is that it's the movie version of ontogeny-recapitulates-phylogeny. As Lowe uses it, it's an approach that suggests that the deep structure of a movie will, when properly examined, reveal the decisions that made it become that shape. This is often done from an SF frame, as with this, from IZ 174 (2001):

> Sir, you'd better see this. We fished it out of the ice near Luton Villa a couple of months back, and our technicians have had it on the slab trying to figure out how it functioned. We're now sure it's a late-model human memetic product of the kind known as motion pictures, and our archeo droids got pretty excited when they identified it as the long-lost **AI: Artificial Intelligence** – the movie that many have suspected to hold the key to the mystery of whether humans were truly capable of emotion. We've long known that the humans used to build these vastly expensive artificial creations endowed with simulated emotions as consolations in their inadequacy, immortal unchanging expressions of their own failure to love which have long outlived their creators. But *AI* is the only one that tells its story as it actually happened: the epic story of a juvenile meme's quest to become real enough to fulfill its need for love.

The metaphor is extended in various ways. The strata of the archaeological investigation mirror the strata of the film's tortuous screenwriting process. The meme's quest for love not only reflects that of the android Haley Joel Osment in *AI* but also the attempt of Kubrick-Spielberg to graft emotional resonance onto the Aldiss vignette the project begun with. The metaphor is a conceit, of course, a game – but a game that's instructive. This kind of approach is particularly useful in looking at those films – an increasing number, it seems – which have had a protracted development history, and where the finished product reflects the work and sensibility of a number of hands. In other words, it's particularly suited to films.

There are plenty of other things to celebrate in Lowe's writing. There's a joy in the idiocy of the field, as evidenced by his occasional offhand suggestions for unmakable sequels: *Citizen Kane* II ('Hi! My name's Rosebud. Any calls for me?'), *Watership Down* with gut flora, or *Faxing the Runes*, a zany update of the MR James story featuring a heartless yuppie paid back for unkindness to a gypsy. There's a deep – though rarely shown-off – knowledge of written SF. There's a genuinely surreal imagination at work in some of the offhand remarks. There is, when the occasion calls for it, a moral seriousness, as with the extract on Lynch quoted above. And there's an aesthetic outlook, as voiced in IZ 21 (1987) which again seems predictive of what's happened in the two decades since:

> So what can we prognose for the next decade [of SF cinema]? I know what I'd like to see, though I can't imagine it bears much likeness to anyone else's shopping list or what we'll eventually be made to consume. I'd like to see *Empire of the Sun* sweep the 1988 Oscars (likely) and deserve it (optimistic). I'd like to see Jeff Goldblum play Richard Feynman, Martin Scorsese win the 1992 Democratic nomination, and lots more films about depressive architects photocopying the navel of Augustus Caesar. But most of all I want faster films for shrinking attention spans, more snazzy whiplash editing, stuff that reeducates our popular semiology by forcing us to process images at hitherto undreamed-of speeds. I suppose I could offer a pious wish for scripts with imagination, intelligence, and political and emotional maturity, but who would I be kidding? If you can't live without that stuff, you'll have a pretty wretched time at the movies. Film is at heart a manipulative medium, a throat-grabber; great films should crush your resistance and nail you to your seat, then turn on your emotions like playing on a bank of switches. If, some time in the next ten years, they evolve the first primitive glintings of intelligence as well, I'll be well pleased.

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