

Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

Vector 261

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Contents

Torque Control	3
Letters	4
The BSFA Awards	5
by Donna Scott	
Landscapes From a Dream: How the Art of David Pelham Captured the Essence of J. G. Ballard's Early Fiction	6
By James Pardey	
A Benign Psychopathology: The Films of J. G. Ballard	12
By Jonathan McCalmont	
J. G. Ballard's CONCRETE: Thoughts on High Rise and Concrete Island	17
By Lara Buckerton	
An interview with José Carlos Somoza	26
By Ian Watson	
First Impressions	30
Edited by Kari Sperring	
Progressive Scan:	
Ashes to Ashes, Season 2	48
by Abigail Nussbaum	
Foundation's Favourites:	
The Voices of Time by J. G. Ballard	50
By Andy Sawyer	
Resonances #57	52
By Stephen Baxter	
The New X: Careening	54
by Graham Sleight	
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Torque Control

At Worldcon, in Montreal this summer, one of the panels I was on was an attempt to discuss “Non-fiction for sf fans”. It threw up a few interesting ideas, and a long list of interesting books. A partial record of the latter can be found on Karen Burnham’s blog [1]; one of the former was the difference in how the panellists interpreted the topic. Perhaps not surprisingly, as we went around the table, the professional fiction writers on the panel – James Cambias, Geoff Ryman, and Kari Sperring – often, though by no means always, recommended books on history or science: books that would help them to fill in the detail of worlds they write. Vince Docherty made a point of highlighting the non-fiction that fans reward in the Hugos – that is, fan writing, and the other kinds of non-fiction that get collected in the “Best Related Book” category. And since most of my non-fiction reading comprises writing *about* sf – criticism and discussion – that’s what I wanted to fly the flag for.

Even when I read outside that niche, I often find that I’m drawn to books about situations and subjects that can be read as important to sf. Such a book is Anna Minton’s *Ground Control* (Penguin, 2009), subtitled *fear and happiness in the twenty-first century*. It’s a summary and analysis of how the cities we live in have, over the last thirty years or so, been shaped by several complementary threads of government policy, building on the central argument that in the mid twentieth century cities in the UK were owned by local government on our behalf, and this was (in general) Good, whereas since the early 1980s they have increasingly been owned by investors and developers for profit, and this is (in general) Bad. The book is divided into three sections, based on three earlier reports by Minton, two for the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (which became, I assume, “The City” and “The Home”) and one for Demos (“Civil Society”), but is written in a much more lively, journalistic style than that heritage may suggest.

Minton shifts adroitly from interview and case study to theoretical context and policy detail; it’s a very readable book, and so far as I can tell thorough, if not always completely balanced. This is clearly by design – referring to the redeveloped Spitalfields site in London as “not a real market” is a more emotive way of making the point than describing it as, say, “not a traditional market” – but occasionally some interestingly rough edges are smoothed over. To write that local shops are “forced out of business by the new mall”, for instance, is a common enough

locution, but misplaces agency: the shops are actually forced out of business by people choosing to shop in the new mall instead. Why people make that choice is an interesting question, and one that should be related to Minton’s central arguments; because one of her frustrations is that the changes she documents have occurred without significant public protest – unlike, she argues, similar changes in US cities over the same period.

Those changes will be familiar to anyone who’s been living in a UK city over the last twenty years, but the synthesis is valuable. Run-down urban centres are sold to redevelopment corporations with results that are superficially attractive, but exclusionary by design, and largely without predicted “trickle-down” benefits. Similarly, private investment is increasingly relied on to provide new housing, where a parallel desire for security and prestige leads to a rise in gated communities (Minton is good at documenting the pathology of the desire for security), and a decline in the desire for public spaces, to run alongside the decline in their availability. In the most potent chapters of the book, Minton explores how policies on crime, health and urban planning – crucially, not always bad ideas, and often not worse than what preceded them, but failures nonetheless – concretize beliefs into the physical environment.

It’s hard, I’m discovering, to summarize this invigorating, fascinating, occasionally frustrating book without sounding just a touch sensationalist. To bring this back to sf, then, I was put in mind of Chris Beckett’s latest novel *Marcher* (Cosmos, 2009; although in the wake of his Edge Hill Short Story Prize win, Beckett’s just agreed a two-book deal with Grove Atlantic, so if we’re lucky a UK edition may be on its way). Beckett is of course deeply concerned with social policy, and never more so than this book, which revises and elaborates the world of “Welfare Man” and related stories published in *Interzone* and *Asimov’s* over the last fifteen years or so: a Britain where something like an inversion of the trends Minton describes has taken place. Rather than enclaves created by keeping middle-class people in, *Marcher’s* Britain features enclaves created by institutionalizing the welfare state such that undesirables are corralled into Social Inclusion Zones. Definitely not our world; but in its attentiveness to the lives of people within the Zones, it is more incisive than much contemporary British – or at least English – sf about its country of origin.

And, of course, Minton’s book reminded me of

Ballard, in particular the Ballard of *Running Wild* (1988) and later books [2]. Lara Buckerton's essay elsewhere in this issue tackles this side of Ballard's work with not a little flair. We also have two other essays on Ballard's influence – Jonathan McCalmont's rundown of Ballardian film, and David Pelham on the iconic Penguin covers of Ballard's early books – plus Andy Sawyer on *The Voices of Time*, and Abigail Nussbaum on the second season of *Ashes to Ashes* (which of course starts to deal with the displacements and disaffections caused by the redevelopment of London's Docklands, which Minton points to as the first example of the changes she documents). Plus

Graham Sleight and Stephen Baxter's columns, plus Ian Watson interviewing Jose Carlos Somoza, plus all the usual reviews, some letters, and a reminder that the time is nigh to start nominating for this year's BSFA Awards. Enjoy!

Endnotes

[1] <<http://spiralgalaxyreviews.blogspot.com/2009/08/non-fiction-for-sf-fans.html>>

[2] Steven Shaviro's notes on Ballard's final quartet are well worth a look: <<http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=749>>

Letters

Dear *Vector*,

Andy Sawyer's selection of *De Bracy's Drug* by Volsted Gridban as a "Foundation's Favourite" (*Vector* 260) took me back more than half a century. In the mid-1950s Scion's SF novelettes were sold in newsagents and on market stalls. I particularly recall one called "Decreation" by either Gridban or Vargo Statten (aka the incredibly prolific John Russell Fearn). Its cover picture was of a space-suited figure, though the story did not involve space-travel of any kind.

It was about a man named Esau Jones, living in rural England, and quite ordinary except that he was able to create solid objects out of nothing. He lived quietly and used his sensational powers to make a living creating vehicles such as lorries and trailers.

Trouble comes when the licensing authorities discover the vehicles are not being properly taxed. Being hassled causes his gift to go into reverse and it produces a dark patch of nothingness. (The "decreation" of the title, and anticipating concepts of black holes and anti-matter by a decade or more.) The patch is spreading and deepening, and a race is on to halt it before it engulfs the Earth.

The affected area is blown up and the world saved. The government decides discreetly to leave Jones alone to create as many lorries and trailers as he wishes.

I read this at school, and was rebuked for bringing "trash" into the class. At the time, we were studying Anthony Trollope: but I know whose stuff I'd still prefer.

Regards,

M. G. Sherlock

Andy Sawyer replies ...

How splendid! I haven't read this one, but it's certainly a must. I love the fact that if you have the gift of creating solid objects out of nothing you use it to create lorries and trailers. No need for bars of gold bullion, diamonds, or the first edition of Jane Webb's The Mummy!, apparently.

Dear *Vector*,

I found myself nodding my vigorous approval of the suggestion in *Vector* 260's editorial that there really should be a fantasy equivalent to the Arthur C. Clarke Award. For over twenty years now, the Clarke juries have done a wonderful job of looking beyond authorial reputation and number of units shipped to bring us a yearly selection of works that invariably proves that science fiction can (and must) be much more than the hollow shepherding of endlessly recycled tropes. The Clarke does not merely reflect public opinion, it challenges it and sets the critical agenda for fandom's annual awards round-robin.

To say that fantasy would benefit, as a genre, from this kind of institution is no great criticism of fantasy as all genres, all scenes and all movements benefit from a process of sifting. A process through which the new, the challenging and the unconventional can not only be brought into the light for a wider audience but also enshrined as a part of genre history. A genre history written not on the basis of commercial success, blog popularity or ability to pander to as many people as possible, but on the capacity to produce fantasy works that are genuinely and radically fantastical.

Yours,

Jonathan McCalmont

The BSFA Awards

by Donna Scott

In my first year as BSFA Awards Administrator, I've had my eyes opened to just how dedicated and passionate about science fiction members are and I think it's quite wonderful, really. Both the number of nominations received, and the quality of the works highlighted, were fantastic.

This year has rolled quickly by, though, and as we head into light jacket, or, if you will, cardigan weather, so we head into the time when I will start to see the trickle of nominations gather pace into my email inbox (she hinted).

I'm not entirely sure whether it isn't just because I am looking for it more, but it seems to me that this year the mainstream press has been taking a bit more notice of our science fiction authors and their output, particularly when it comes to their *pay*. Perhaps it is a sign of our times that now we are hoping to raise our heads out of the floods of recession, that we are once more beginning to think of the *future* – and pay more attention to those who write about it.

Bearing in mind that my evidence for this is garnered somewhat non-scientifically most of you will probably be a bit sceptical, but I have a feeling that in the coming year, the eyes of the literary establishment may be turned in our direction with a bit more than a cursory glance. So which works from 2009 would you choose to wave under the noses of the press to show them that current science fiction is engaging, fresh, intelligent, entertaining and so very *now*?

And why not nominate those works for the BSFA Awards?

Remember, to nominate, you must be a member of the BSFA, so I will need some evidence from you (membership number, full name, and postcode). I would worry if you didn't know your full name, but if you are unsure of any of your details, please write to me sooner rather than later so I can check your credentials. I don't work for the government, so we should definitely still have you on file.

The categories we are looking for are: Best Novel; Best Short Fiction; Best Non-Fiction and Best Artwork.

Works published by the BSFA itself (whether in book form, on the website, or in one of the magazines)

are not eligible for any of the awards. Otherwise, the eligibility criteria are as follows:

- The **Best Novel** award is open to any novel-length work of science fiction or fantasy that was published in the UK for the first time in 2009. Serialised novels are eligible, provided that the publication date of the concluding part was in 2009. If a novel has been previously published elsewhere, but not in the UK until 2009, it is eligible.
- The **Best Short Fiction** award is open to any shorter work of science fiction or fantasy, up to and including novellas, first published in 2009 (in a magazine, in a book, or online). This includes work that appeared in books and magazines published outside the UK.
- The **Best Artwork** award is open to any single science fictional or fantastic image that first appeared in 2009. Again, provided the artwork hasn't been published before 2009 it doesn't matter where it appears.
- The **Best Non-Fiction** award is open to any written work about science fiction and/or fantasy which appeared in its current form in 2009, in print or online.

To get your nominations to me, send them to:

Snail mail: Donna Scott, 11 Stanhope Road, Queen's Park, Northampton, NN2 6JU

Email: awards@bsfa.co.uk

Please note that all nominations must reach me by **Saturday 16 January, 2010**.

Landscapes From A Dream: How the Art of David Pelham Captured the Essence of J. G. Ballard's Early Fiction

By James Pardey

The idea that the world and everything in it is made from the four 'elements' of earth, air, fire and water endured among philosophers from antiquity to the Renaissance. All things, they said, were a combination of these four building blocks, and whether something was one thing or another – a rock, say, or a leaf – depended only on the relative amounts of each element in it. The idea was not so naïve as it seems, for when wood burned it was seen to release fire, air and water, as steam, until only earth remained as ashes, and in one sense the philosophers were not so very wide of the mark, since nowadays these 'elements' are known as solid, liquid, gas and energy.

It has often been said that J G Ballard's quartet of disaster novels published between 1962 and 1966 draws on these four classical elements for the natural catastrophes that destroy civilization in each of the books. In *The Wind From Nowhere* a global super-hurricane (air) reaches speeds of several hundred miles an hour, toppling trees, reducing cities to rubble, and darkening the skies with debris and topsoil. In *The Drowned World* rising sea levels (water) have flooded most of the Earth's populated areas, and London lies submerged beneath steaming lagoons and primeval swamps that are ringed by jungle and overrun with reptiles. *The Drought* presents a future where rain is a thing of the past and the Sun (fire) has dried up the lakes and river beds, creating a parched landscape of ghost towns and burning cities. And in *The Crystal World* a bizarre transmutation of matter (earth) is turning everything into a coruscating mineral realm where plants, animals and people are mutating into sculptures of glass and quartz.

This analogy is almost always noted without further comment, although in fact it may be taken

further. For just as Plato and Aristotle had posited the existence of a mysterious and immaterial fifth element, or quintessence, that suffuses all things, so something similar pervades much of Ballard's early fiction, which, in addition to the four novels, includes two collections of short stories, *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare* in 1963 and *The Terminal Beach* in 1964. So what in a Ballardian context is this quintessential element?

Ballard himself pre-empted the question in a guest editorial that he wrote for the British science fiction magazine *New Worlds* in 1962. In it he argued that it was time for sf to turn its back on outer space and its standard paraphernalia of rockets, ray guns and aliens, and strike out in a new direction that, by analogy with outer space, had become known as inner space. This was not a reference to the hollow earth stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs as Brian Aldiss later quipped [1]. The term

had previously been used in 1953 by the English novelist J B Priestley whose essay, *They Come From Inner Space* [2], presented a critique of sf as he saw it at the time. Priestley argued that the move into outer space was a move 'in the wrong direction' and maintained that sf should instead be 'moving inward' to explore 'the hidden life of the psyche'. He singled out the American writer Ray Bradbury as a pioneer of inner space [3] and added that although Bradbury used traditional sf motifs such as spaceships and Martians, he did so in order to 'show us what is really happening in men's minds'. Priestley held that men are not as rational as they like to think they are, but are also driven by the desires, urges and irrational instincts of the subconscious mind. For Priestley, the idea that people's actions are dictated solely by their conscious selves was akin to the equally fallacious assumption that 'what can be

seen of an iceberg is all there is of it'.

Priestley saw the flying saucer legend and sf's other trademark tropes as a product of society's collective unconscious. Rocket ships, he wrote, 'no longer represent man's triumphant progress' but instead have come to symbolize his attempts 'to escape from himself'. Likewise for aliens, which as metaphors for humanity's 'deep feelings of anxiety, fear, and guilt' can be traced back to the scientific romances of the nineteenth century [4]. So inner space is not a physical space at all but a psychological one. It is the dimensionless world of the subconscious mind or, as Priestley called it, the Unconscious. Ballard's editorial, *Which Way to Inner Space?* [5], did not mention Priestley's essay but may nonetheless be regarded as a sequel to it, for he took up where Priestley left off, describing Bradbury as 'a poet' and reiterating that 'it is *inner* space, not outer, that needs to be explored'. But Ballard did more than merely echo Priestley. He also argued that for sf to avoid falling by the wayside it must discover new routes to inner space that draw on more abstract, speculative and experimental techniques like those used in other media such as modern art. As such, he was not just offering a commentary on the state of sf, he was issuing a manifesto that would need to be adopted if the genre was to secure its place as 'the literature of tomorrow'.

Ballard ended his editorial with an anecdote about Salvador Dalí delivering a lecture in a diving suit. When asked how deep he proposed to descend, the artist had announced, 'To the Unconscious!' and Ballard's editorial was a unilateral declaration of his intent to follow Dalí there [6]. That he was true to his word may be seen in the novels and many of the short stories that followed, though by the time his editorial appeared he had already made a few forays into inner space with stories such as 'The Waiting Grounds', 'The Voices of Time' and 'The Overloaded Man'. A notable exception is his first novel, *The Wind From Nowhere*, which was also written before his *New Worlds* editorial but was structured as a conventional action adventure. Ballard later disowned it and referred instead to *The Drowned World* as his first novel, and it is here that inner space comes to the fore as a quintessential force in his fiction.

The Drowned World is a lushly atmospheric novel that takes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to the lagoons and jungles of post-diluvian London, where half-submerged hotels and office blocks rise out of the water, and cars sit rusting in the streets sixty feet below the water's surface. Reptiles now dominate the submerged city and the jungle teems with an even greater profusion of wildlife. Alligators patrol the lagoons and iguanas bask three deep in the upper windows of department stores. With humans gone, the flora and fauna are reverting to that of the

Triassic period some 250 million years earlier.

Amidst this febrile environment, Dr Robert Kerans and several other members of a survey team begin to experience strange dreams, like distant echoes of their surroundings, prompting one of them to ask, 'Is it only the external landscape which is altering? How often recently most of us have had the feeling of *déjà vu*, of having seen all this before, in fact of remembering these swamps and lagoons' (42). From this the realisation follows that the dreams are being triggered by primitive organic memories within their collective unconscious. These 'neuronic' memories were encoded in the nervous systems of man's earliest ancestors during the original Triassic period and have endured at a cellular level through the ensuing epochs of human evolution. But now, in response to the emergence of a new Triassic age, these dormant memories are finally resurfacing, leading the earlier questioner to conclude that 'we really *remember* these swamps and lagoons' (72).

As these dreams and memories take hold so those affected become increasingly introverted, and when the survey team departs these few individuals remain behind. Left alone, they avoid each other and withdraw into their own internal worlds, accepting that 'their only true meeting-ground would be in their dreams' (80). Thus they regress through 'archaeopsychic time' and 'a succession of ever stranger landscapes' (82) towards the prehistoric past of their cellular evolution, until 'the terrestrial and psychic landscapes were now indistinguishable' (72).

This exploration of inner space continues in *The Drought*, a novel that is thematically similar to *The Drowned World* and may even be seen as a reworking of it with a new catastrophe, a change of location and other nominal differences. For example, Dr Robert Kerans is now Dr Charles Ransom, and the deluge has become a drought that has scorched the earth and turned the landscape into a cracked desert of dead trees, long-gone lakes and empty rivers. Dust chokes the air, as do clouds of ash and smoke from the burning towns and cities whose populations have departed in a mass exodus to the coast. Here they eke out a hand-to-mouth existence in makeshift settlements around the water desalination plants that the government has set up.

But beneath this superficial similarity there is a deeper divergence, for while *The Drowned World* describes the internal landscapes of Kerans and his colleagues, *The Drought* takes a more oblique approach as Ballard turns his attention outwards to focus instead on the external landscape and the wreckage that is strewn across it. This change of perspective is echoed by the reader, who switches from an observer of *The Drowned World* to a participant in *The Drought*. As an observer, the

reader is psychologically detached from Kerans and reads his dispatches from inner space like those of a Reuters correspondent. Ransom, however, has less to say about his state of mind in *The Drought* and is more like a tour guide, taking the reader with him during his journey to the coast, his ten years of 'dune limbo' (103) and his eventual return inland to the ruins of the town in which he once lived. It is a desolate journey, fraught with danger, through an alien environment ravaged by destruction and decay. Abandoned vehicles clutter the highways, boats sit high and dry on the sun-baked river beds, and everything that was once familiar is now being destroyed. This in itself is bad enough but in fact it merely sets the scene, for the novel's core concern is existential and its theme is the uncertainty of physical and psychological survival. Death lurks everywhere, and prowls the landscape in the form of wild animals that were once caged in zoos, while psychosis threatens in the unpredictability of others – men whose minds are disintegrating like the world around them. As such, *The Drought* does not present a single, Ballardian version of inner space like the neuronc memories and archaeopsychic time of *The Drowned World*. Instead it sends its readers there, for it is their responses to this nightmarish world that the novel elicits, their feelings of alienation and vulnerability that it evokes, and their inner spaces that it explores. Like *Drowned World*, *The Drought* is a psychic odyssey, but one that must now be undertaken by the reader.

Having examined inner space in terms of both its internal and external landscapes, Ballard adopted an altogether different approach in his next novel. *The Crystal World* is an extended version of 'The Illuminated Man' which had appeared in his second collection of short stories, *The Terminal Beach*. In the story a man named James B— travels to the Florida Everglades to investigate reports of a bizarre phenomenon that is turning the region and everything in it to crystal. Similar outbreaks have been reported in the Pripet Marshes of Byelorussia and the Matarre region of Madagascar, and it is the Matarre to which Dr Edward Sanders travels in *The Crystal World*, although by then Ballard had relocated the Matarre into Cameroon in a move that recalls the story's famous predecessor, as Sanders journeys upriver through the steaming jungles of West Africa towards a new *Heart of Darkness*.

The crystallization process is similar to a cancer and seemingly unstoppable. As the ground underfoot and the slow-moving waters of the river begin to vitrify, so too do the flora and fauna. Like a game of animal, vegetable or mineral with only one outcome, everything succumbs and nothing is immune. This strange metamorphosis is in some way connected to reports by astronomers that

distant galaxies are 'doubling' – a phenomenon that is dubbed the Hubble Effect and attributed to the mutual annihilation of matter and anti-matter. These subatomic events are cancelling out the equivalent temporal components of time and anti-time, thereby 'subtracting from the universe another quantum from its total store of time' (85) and depleting 'the time-store available to the materials of our own solar system' (85). So time is quite literally running out, and as it does the plants, animals and people in each affected area change into scintillating new forms that freeze them in 'a landscape without time' (16).

This emphasis on time is a recurring theme in Ballard's fiction. He had given notice of it in his *New Worlds* editorial, where he cited time as 'one of the perspectives of the personality' and it is this subjective sense of time that shapes *The Drowned World*, as archaeopsychic time, neuronc time and a 'descent into deep time' (69). It is present in *The Drought* to a lesser extent, but in *The Crystal World* it again takes centre stage, transforming the external landscape as vividly as it does the dreamscapes of Kerans & Co. in post-apocalyptic London.

The Crystal World is also an intensely visual novel and the inspiration for it is easy to establish. For in 1966, the year that the novel was first published, Ballard wrote an article for *New Worlds* titled *The Coming of the Unconscious* [7], in which he equated 'the images of surrealism' with 'the iconography of inner space'. It was a view he reiterated in his 2008 autobiography, *Miracles of Life*, describing inner space as, among other things, 'the psychological space apparent in surrealist painting' [8]. But this belief that surrealism offers a window onto inner space was not confined to two statements made more than forty years apart. His writing repeatedly references artists such as Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, René Magritte, Paul Delvaux, Giorgio de Chirico and Yves Tanguy [9], and their paintings feature frequently in his fiction. Notable examples include a cameo for *The Persistence of Memory*, Dalí's famous painting of melting clocks, in 'Studio 5, The Stars' and an appearance by *The Echo*, Delvaux's time-lapse painting of a 'triplicated nymph walking naked among the classical pavilions of a midnight city' in 'The Day Of Forever' [10]. Likewise in 'The Overloaded Man', which extends the images of inner space to the neo-plastic compositions of Piet Mondrian. These provide a powerful metaphor for the mental breakdown suffered by the story's protagonist as 'object by object, he began to switch off the world around him. The houses opposite went first. The white masses of the roofs and balconies he resolved quickly into flat rectangles, the lines of windows into small squares of colour like the grids in a Mondrian abstract' [11].

As in his short stories, so in his novels. *The Drowned World* features a Delvaux painting 'in which ashen-faced women danced naked to the waist with dandified skeletons in tuxedos against a spectral bone-like landscape' (29) while on another wall 'one of Max Ernst's self-devouring phantasmagoric jungles screamed silently to itself, like the sump of some insane unconscious' (29). Later in the novel Kerans reflects on how the jungle around him increasingly resembles the one in Ernst's painting, while the dreams that he and his colleagues are experiencing are 'the common zone of twilight where they moved at night like the phantoms in the Delvaux painting' (79). With Ernst and Delvaux [12] featuring prominently in *The Drowned World*, the use of a Tanguy painting, *The Palace of Windowed Rocks*, on the cover of the paperback edition published by Penguin Books in 1965 might have seemed off-key were it not for *The Drought* which also appeared that year. Two of the novel's chapters, *Multiplication of the Arcs* and *Jours de Lenteur*, take their titles from paintings by Tanguy, and like *The Drowned World* there is a feeling that the external and painted landscapes are converging, as Ransom sees in his surroundings the 'drained beaches, eroded of all associations, of all sense of time' (113) in *Jours de Lenteur*.

Given these and other references to art and artists, their absence from *The Crystal World* may at first seem surprising. Readers who have come to expect such references may see in the novel's two main themes a tacit connection between 'the petrified forest' (169) and Ernst's painting of the same name, or an allusion to Magritte's *Time Transfixed* in the depiction of a world without time, but the novel makes no mention of these or any other paintings and the reason for this soon becomes apparent. Ballard excluded the art of others because its presence would have obscured the bigger picture that he was creating, for if a picture paints a thousand words then in *The Crystal World* it is the other way round and greatly magnified. The novel reads like a journey through a surrealist canvas, and its resemblance to one in particular seems more than coincidental. In *The Coming of the Unconscious* Ballard had singled out Max Ernst's painting, *The Eye of Silence*, as one of 'the key documents of surrealism' with 'a direct bearing on the speculative fiction of the immediate future'. For Ballard, the painting's 'frenzied rocks

towering into the air above the silent swamp' have 'the luminosity of organs freshly exposed to the light. The real landscapes of our world are seen for what they are – the palaces of flesh and bone that are the living façades enclosing our own subliminal consciousness'. With this in mind it is hard to ignore the resemblance of Ernst's jewelled ceramic structures and bright green biomorphic forms to Ballard's crystalline forest 'loaded with deliquescing jewels' (68) and living statues 'carved from jade and quartz' (83). The painting is suffused with a timeless, dream-like quality that is shared by Ballard's novel as the forest and everything in it slowly solidifies. This convergence of painted and written landscapes recalls those in *The Drowned World* and *The Drought*, though unlike these two novels it is not made explicit. As time is removed from *The Crystal World* it becomes increasingly surreal, until finally all movement ceases and like Ernst's painting there is

silence. If, as Ballard believed, the painting is a window onto inner space then Sanders in the novel climbs through it, pulling aside a curtain of tinkling lianas and shimmering glass foliage to penetrate deep into the heart of the petrified forest. He eventually re-emerges, but at the end of the novel he is seen heading back upriver, and it is tempting to imagine what he might discover on his return. For somewhere, glimpsed perhaps through a gap in the trees, there is surely a remote clearing surrounded by organic rocks and vitrified vegetation. It is the source of the outbreak, and it looks just

like *The Eye of Silence*.

Given this similarity between Ernst's painting and *The Crystal World* it was no surprise that when the novel was first published it was *The Eye of Silence* that filled the dust jacket, as it did the front, back and spine of the paperback edition published by Panther Books two years later in 1968. It was an improvement over the lurid sf imagery used on other covers [13] though it was not without precedent. The idea had first been introduced in 1963 when Penguin Books launched a new sf series. Penguin's then art director, Germano Facetti, had noticed a similar connection between *The Eye of Silence* and *A Case of Conscience* by the American writer James Blish and used a detail from the painting on the book's front cover. This use of twentieth-century art became a defining feature of the Penguin sf series and, in addition to the pairing of Ballard and Tanguy mentioned earlier,

Facetti studiously matched Ray Bradbury's *The Day it Rained Forever* with Ernst's *Garden Aeroplane Trap*, Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* with Tanguy's *The Doubter*, Fred and Geoffrey Hoyle's *Fifth Planet* with Magritte's *The Flavour of Tears* and so on, extending the idea to other artists such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Miró and Picasso [14].

For Ballard the images of surrealism served a more specific purpose as one of many possible routes to inner space. Such images informed one aspect of his fiction but they were not its *raison d'être*. That was inner space in its wider, quintessentially Ballardian form and to capture this required something other than reproductions of surrealist paintings on the covers of his books. This was the challenge facing David Pelham, the art director at Penguin Books from 1968 to 1979, when, in 1974, four of the five Ballard titles in Penguin's back catalogue came up for reprint. Pelham was responsible for numerous covers at any one time and would often commission other designers and illustrators to produce the artwork, but the Ballard covers he designed himself. The books were sold individually or as a boxed set in a slip-case that Pelham also designed, and it is these iconic images that have become most strongly associated with Ballard's fiction.

So why is this? The answer is three parts English to one part French. First, Pelham was already familiar with Ballard's work and a great admirer of it, being drawn to what he later described as its 'apocalyptic imagery' and 'depiction of technological and human breakdown and decay' [15].

Second, it no doubt helped that Ballard and Pelham were friends, having been introduced some years earlier by the artist Eduardo Paolozzi. The three men met regularly at Ballard's home in Shepperton, a suburban town south-west of London near to Heathrow Airport and the M25 motorway so, third, Pelham was able to discuss his ideas for these new covers with the author himself. Add to this Pelham's fourth ingredient – a generous amount of *je ne sais quoi* – and the results were more than merely eye-catching.

Pelham's covers featured a crepuscular sky above a barren expanse of water, sand or sunbaked earth as the backdrop for an artefact of twentieth-century industrial or military technology. According to the September 1974 issue of *Science Fiction Monthly* [16], these machines depict 'the debris of our society'. Pelham, the article explained, 'finds romance in

seeing the future as if it were *already* the past – in visualizing ruins created from the artifacts we are manufacturing now'. But the paradox of Pelham's artifacts is that they are not in ruins. His are pristine machines at odds with their apocalyptic settings. Half buried or submerged, they stand as tombstones to ostentation and brutality. They are icons, but only of man's arrogance.

An American WWII bomber lies abandoned and half-buried by the shifting sands on Pelham's slip-case [17] while its payload – a sister to the atom bomb that destroyed Nagasaki and the mother of all UXBs – rests nose down in the sand flats of *The Terminal Beach*. The bomb's tail-box tilts skywards like the flower of a strange fruit whose hard shell hides an exotic interior. In the belly of the bomb are the seeds of mass destruction, two stones of a ripening plutonium core waiting for the conditions that

will trigger them to germinate. But unapproachable and unknowable the bomb is quantum uncertainty writ large; it is Schrödinger's cat inside Pandora's box. This atom bomb sitting in the sand is as surreal as Dalí's melting clocks or Einstein's theory of relativity, for all are part of the same chain reaction. As mankind cowers with his fingers in his ears and his eyes squeezed shut, so both bomb and slip-cased bomber have their heads buried in the sand, as if in denial of this nightmarish world and the roles they have played in its creation. In contrast to this *The Drowned World* presents a peaceful scene. The surface of the water is flat as a millpond, a sea of tranquillity broken only by the art deco spire of the Chrysler Building which, like

the crown of a colossal King Canute, bears silent witness to the deluge that has turned Manhattan into a man-made reef and New York into a new Atlantis. Elsewhere *The Wind From Nowhere* makes a mockery of a spotless Centurion tank, while *The Drought* has turned a Cadillac Coupe de Ville into a memorial of chrome and streamlined angularity, its rocketship rear styling and flared tail fins an epitaph to the flamboyance of the American automobile.

The use of such icons to signify apocalyptic ruination is nothing new of course. The Statue of Liberty, in particular, has borne the brunt of numerous cataclysms that have left it in various stages of burial, collapse or decapitation. Ballard himself could not resist the temptation in *The Wind From Nowhere*, while the Statue's cameo in the final scene of the 1968 movie, *Planet of the Apes*, is one of the most memorable denouements in cinematic

history, a classic twist in the tail that still cools the blood today. Such images may thrill and perhaps even shock, but the explanation is invariably straightforward because the machine, the artifact, the icon is in ruins. Where Pelham's images differ is that they defy such explanation. The scene is apocalyptic but the machine is immaculate, and the two are not easily reconciled. Aesthetically these images mesmerise, and on closer inspection they tantalise, but as in Ballard's fictional worlds, answers are avoided and ambiguity abounds. And this is perhaps the key to Pelham's images, for they occupy a twilight zone between the landscapes of the outer world and those of inner space. Like the contemplation of a surrealist painting it may take several attempts to 'get' Ballard, but Pelham got him to perfection, creating a union of text and image that has never been bettered. With these classic covers the art of J G Ballard reached its apotheosis.

The Art of Penguin Science Fiction is at www.penguinsciencefiction.org

Works discussed

- J G Ballard. *The Wind From Nowhere*. London: Penguin, 1974.
 J G Ballard. *The Drowned World*. London: Penguin, 1974.
 J G Ballard. *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare*. London: Penguin, 1977.
 J G Ballard. *The Terminal Beach*. London: Penguin, 1974.
 J G Ballard. *The Drought*. London: Penguin, 1974.
 J G Ballard. *The Crystal World*. London: Panther, 1968.

Endnotes

- [1] Brian Aldiss. *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973, p.162.
 [2] J B Priestley. 'They Come From Inner Space.' In: *Thoughts in the Wilderness*. London: William Heinemann, 1957, pp.20-6.
 [3] Ray Bradbury may have been the first science fiction writer to visit inner space but an earlier pioneer outside the genre was Joseph Conrad in his 1902 novel, *Heart of Darkness*.
 [4] Perhaps the best example is the invasion of Earth by murderous Martians in H G Wells' 1898 novel, *The War of the Worlds*, which reputedly caused widespread panic in the USA when a radio adaption narrated by Orson Welles was broadcast in 1938.
 [5] J G Ballard. 'Which Way to Inner Space?' *New Worlds*, May 1962. Reprinted in: J G Ballard. *A User's Guide to the Millennium*. London: HarperCollins,

1996, pp.195-8.

- [6] Ballard playfully alludes to Dalí's lecture in his novel, *The Drowned World*. As the central character is putting on a diving suit he is told that he looks 'like the man from inner space' and is warned not to 'try to reach the Unconscious' as the suit 'isn't equipped to go down that far!' (102).
 [7] J G Ballard. 'The Coming of the Unconscious.' *New Worlds*, July 1966. Reprinted in: J G Ballard. *A User's Guide to the Millennium*. London: HarperCollins, 1996, pp.84-8.
 [8] J G Ballard. *Miracles of Life: An Autobiography*. London: HarperCollins, 2008, p.215.
 [9] Mike Bonsall's concordance of Ballard's oeuvre lists 110 references to Dalí, 40 to Ernst, 22 to Magritte, 14 to Delvaux, 11 to Chirico and 9 to Tanguy (<http://bonsall.homeserver.com/concordance>).
 [10] J G Ballard. 'The Day Of Forever'. In: *The Complete Short Stories*, Volume 2. London: HarperCollins, 2006, p.151.
 [11] J G Ballard. 'The Overloaded Man'. In: *The Complete Short Stories*, Volume 1. London: HarperCollins, 2006, p.336.
 [12] Paul Delvaux was a particular favourite of Ballard's and in 1986-87 he commissioned the artist Brigid Marlin to reproduce two Delvaux paintings, *The Rape* and *The Mirror*. Both were painted in 1936 but were thought to have been destroyed during the Blitz in 1941. In fact *The Mirror* had survived the war and was auctioned by Christies of London in 1999 for a hammer price of almost £3.2 million. Marlin's portrait of Ballard, also painted in 1987, is at the National Portrait Gallery in London.
 [13] Many of Ballard's book covers are displayed in Rick McGrath's Terminal Timeline at www.jgballard.ca/terminal_collection/terminal_timeline.html.
 [14] The relationship between text and cover art in Penguin's sf series is explored in a series of three articles in *The Penguin Collector*; see 'Not Quite NowhereBackwards' at www.penguinsciencefiction.org.
 [15] David Pelham, speaking at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in June 2005. A transcript of this talk appears in *Penguin by Designers*. London: The Penguin Collectors' Society, 2007, pp.127-53.
 [16] Aune R Butt. 'The Artist in Science Fiction.' *Science Fiction Monthly*, September 1974, pp.6-7.
 [17] In 1974, the year that Penguin published this boxed set, a short story by Ballard appeared in *Ambit* magazine. 'My Dream of Flying to Wake Island' tells of the first astronaut to suffer a mental breakdown in space and his convalescence at an abandoned resort where he becomes obsessed with excavating an American B-17 Flying Fortress that lies buried beneath the sand dunes.

A Benign Psychopathology

The Films of J. G. Ballard

By Jonathan McCalmont

J. G. Ballard's career spans a number of different phases. To science fiction fans he will be most fondly remembered for his early works of dystopian SF or his later works dealing with a twisted version of the present, but it is Ballard's more experimental phase that has provided the richest pickings for film directors. Indeed, the ideas contained within Ballard's experimental work *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969) have inspired not only that novel but also three genuinely remarkable films.

The Atrocity Exhibition (2000)

Adapting *The Atrocity Exhibition* was always going to be a challenge. Part novel and part collection, the book is an accumulation of vaguely inter-related short stories and novel fragments that were written and published entirely separately. The book is experimental insofar as it steadfastly refuses to adopt anything resembling a traditional plot or characters while its thematic content is abstract, obscure and half-formed. Even critical explorations of the book tend to swiftly devolve into jargon and elliptical analogies (such as Roger Luckhurst's suggestion that the book's protagonist is a T-cell), which do surprisingly little to elucidate the book's dense and confusing tapestry of ideas and images. However, despite its elusive nature, the book still has power. A power that flows through all of the films based upon it.

Jonathan Weiss' adaptation is framed as a clinical document. Its opening voiceover contains the solemn statement that the film is the product of a diseased mind, a project undertaken by a man (Victor Slezak) referred to alternately as Travis, Talbert and Traben in the hope of charting his open rebellion against the known psychological world. His conceptual World War III is an attempt to engage with the disintegration of the system of symbols and signs that govern human interaction and society. Having introduced us to this idea in the first of five literal chapters, in the remaining four Weiss explores it through the lenses of cosmetic surgery, car crashes, space exploration and death as a media phenomenon. Each chapter includes a series of staged psychodramas in which Travis forces lovers, colleagues and students to engage with a set of symbols in a completely new

way. The film plays around with identity not only by blurring the boundaries of Travis but also by having his foils die, come to life and skip back and forth in time.

Weiss cinematizes these various psychodramas by staging them in a series of architecturally astonishing settings that pulsate with modernist menace and just a hint of twisted futurity. Abandoned roads, junk yards, conference centres and old hospitals all conspire to create an atmosphere that is almost perfectly Ballardian. These short scenes (frequently quoting the intentionally portentous dialogue of the book) are then augmented via the use of footage of famous events such as the death of President Kennedy and the 1986 Challenger shuttle crash. Events which we have experienced and reacted to but only as media objects. A collection of media objects that suggest that our emotions are not linked to the real world but rather to a system of signs and symbols that we can theoretically move beyond.

As a work of non-narrative cinema, *Atrocity Exhibition* undeniably delivers the goods on a stylistic level. Weiss carefully deploys his famous footage, prompting us to consider again our emotional reactions to it. This process is only aided by the film's superbly weird soundtrack, which juxtaposes moments of tenderness with helicopters and atonal music.

The experience of watching *The Atrocity Exhibition* is unlike any other cinematic experience. Even compared to such famously non-narrative films such as Godard's *Week End* (1967) and Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), the film comes across as ferociously inaccessible and intimidatingly intense. However, the weirdness is undeniably part of the film's charm. It is only fitting that a film all about the construction of media images should demand of us a different critical stance than do other films and TV series. Should you track down the DVD you will also find an 80 minute commentary track by Ballard himself, framing and reframing the ideas in the book and film.

If it has a weakness, it is simply that it has been a long time coming. When Ballard wrote *The Atrocity Exhibition* in the mid to late 60s, his vision of a new kind of society demanding a new form of perception

was prophetic. However, many of his ideas about the de-coupling of symbols from the real world would later be articulated more fully by postmodernist and social constructionist theorists. Similarly, Weiss' decision to follow Ballard into obsessions with nuclear tests, Marilyn Monroe, Ronald Reagan, the Kennedy assassination and the war in Vietnam make the emotional baggage evoked by the film's visuals slightly more dusty than it needed to be. However, these minor quibbles notwithstanding, Weiss' adaptation remains an interesting and important contribution to the understanding of Ballard's work.

Crash! (1971)

One of the most fascinating things about Ballard as a writer was his lack of ideas. In the world of SF writing this is generally seen as a weakness but for Ballard it was undeniably a real strength. Ballard came up with new ideas less frequently than he did new ideas for books. Throughout his career we can see him returning to the same well repeatedly, using the same ideas in different ways and to different ends. Exploring them thoroughly before moving on. Sometimes we can even see the process of Ballard moving between great ideas, as the obsession with celebrity mutates into an interest in the car and an interest in the car mutates into an interest in the effects that our architecture have on our psyches. In between the publication of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and the novel *Crash* (1973), Ballard made a film with Harley Cokliss, a director with a deep interest in science fiction who wound up directing episodes of *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules*. Cokliss' *Crash!* featured not only Ballard himself as an actor but also a fresh voice over by Ballard written especially for the film.

In matters of tone as well as form, *Crash!* seems to be balanced between different works. A blend

of evocative visuals and the kind of voice-over you might find in a worthy BBC-produced monograph such as Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man* (1973) or Clark's *Civilisation* (1973), the film lacks the blood and semen-splattered human frailty of *Crash's* narrative but it also comes across as more accessible and polished than the disjointed experimentalism of *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

Conceptually, the film is somewhat hit and miss. Neither a work of narrative cinema nor a traditional documentary, Ballard's voice-over is accompanied by images featuring Ballard and a nameless woman played by Gabrielle Drake (best known for her appearance in Gerry Anderson's 60s TV show *UFO*). Unlike Cronenberg's adaptation of the novel, *Crash!* makes great use of London's modernist infrastructure, which is what inspired Ballard in the first place. With a haunted expression, Ballard edges his huge American car along motorways and through car parks. The outlandish stylings of the car are somehow in synch with the grey brutalism of its surroundings whilst Cokliss deploys futuristic synthesiser noises and snatches of atonal music to emphasise a tangible sense of dread and alienation. Indeed, atonal music's disfigured beauty and haunting futurism seems to be a surprisingly good fit for Ballard's ideas. As Ballard suggests in the voice-over, as much as the car is suited to the landscape of the 20th Century, we are unsuited to the car. If we really understood the dangers of driving and the number of deaths caused by car accidents we would not be driving at all. We would flee in terror. And yet we do not. We work and save in order to buy cars of our own. Cokliss captures that ambivalence perfectly.

However, as with Weiss' adaptation, once Ballard's initial ideas are laid out and enhanced by intriguing imagery, the film starts to wallow. Ballard's voice-

over refuses to focus on any particular area and he moves too quickly for Cokliss to simply accompany the words with images, with the result that much of the voice-over is accompanied by a disjointed mute psychodrama involving Ballard and his nameless companion. The two actors glare at each other through car windows. Sometimes the glares are inviting, at other times they are alienating, but in truth their interaction are just a collection of images. A visual holding pattern that Cokliss can access should he desire to illustrate anything in Ballard's voice over. So we move from the woman glaring at Ballard in the car to the woman slowly getting out of the car as Ballard speaks of the interaction between the female body and the design of a car. Then we move from glaring in car parks to images of the woman caked in blood as the voice-over switches to one of Ballard's descriptions of a car crash victim.

In-between literary projects, Ballard's ideas were, with hindsight, perhaps not yet focussed enough to allow a proper cinematic treatment, leading to the film's rather uneven character. However, when Cokliss does manage to sink his teeth into a proper idea, he brings far more to the table visually and sonically than Cronenberg ever did.

***Crash* (1996)**

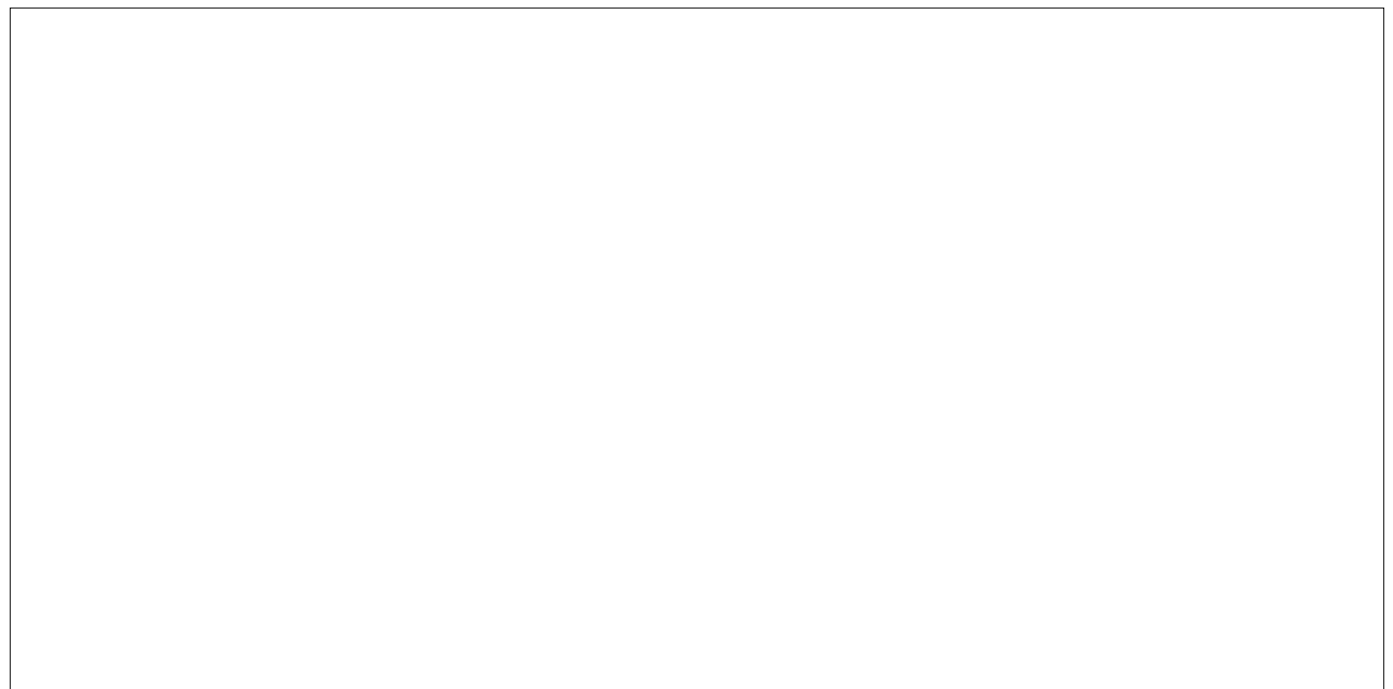
One of the central themes of Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* is the representation of celebrity. This is not the same thing as being interested in the celebrities themselves or being interested in the fact that our culture is obsessed with celebrity. In one vignette, Ballard has his protagonist plaster images of Elizabeth Taylor over a disused air field before mentioning in passing the fact that she died in a car crash. The real Elizabeth Taylor is not the object of desire and fascination, instead it is the image of

Elizabeth Taylor. Taylor as a cultural artefact with no grounding in the real world. An artefact that we can twist and deform to suit our own emotional and sexual purposes. Given Ballard's peculiar relationship with celebrity, it is perhaps only fitting that the film adaptation of his novel *Crash* should be partly overshadowed by the reputations of some of the people involved in the project.

For example, it is difficult to engage with the film now without being mindful of the fact that James Spader (the actor who plays Ballard) is an actor with a history of appearing in films with fetishistic themes whether it be *Mannequin* (1987), *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989) or the more recent *Secretary* (2002). Similarly, our reaction to *Crash* is also likely to be coloured by the fact that it is by David Cronenberg, who made his name with films such as *The Brood* (1979), *Videodrome* (1983), *Scanners* (1981) and *The Fly* (1986), all films about the refashioning of the human mind and form by advanced knowledge and technology.

Given these kinds of cultural associations, *Crash* should be an immensely over-powering piece of cinema but instead it is quite a low-key film that slips all too easily into the recognisable mould of sexualised psychological thrillers such as *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Color of Night* (1994), granting the film's characters a degree of self-involved seriousness which, one might argue, is at odds with the mocking sub-text of the novel.

The film follows the novel in being presented as a kind of sexual Portal-Quest fantasy. James (Spader) and his wife Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger) are a young attractive middle-class couple who are caught in the teeth of a form of sexual malaise that pushes them both to have extra-marital dalliances. However, instead of talking about why this might be or what



they want from each other, their shared language is degraded to questions of who came and who did not. These early adventures foreshadow what is to come. Catherine rubs her Heinleinian nipples against the engine of a light aircraft as a suspender cuts into the curve of her thigh. Meanwhile James and a camera operator contort themselves as they try to have sex in a cupboard. A tangle of limbs and a headless torso flail in frustration as the camera and the lovers struggle to fit everything into shot.

When the car crash finally comes, Cronenberg draws on the pornographic elements of the Horror experience by leering over a procession of scars, bruises, limps and elaborate orthopaedic braces. This is Cronenberg deconstructing the aesthetics of his own Body Horror sub-genre and presenting them not as horrifying but as sexually stimulating. James' first encounter with arch-fetishist Vaughan (Elias Koteas) sees his damaged body being ogled and prodded even though James is not yet ready to realise this. Later, a frustrated and bed-ridden James receives a hand-job from his wife while she describes the damage to the car in detail. James squirms before finally pulling away... the juxtaposition of pleasure, automotive damage assessments and injuries is too much for him. The sexual language of the couple has suddenly become more complex and he is not ready for it. He needs to be initiated.

This initiation comes at the hands of Helen Remington (Holly Hunter), a brittle woman whose severe hair-style, leather gloves and layered clothing speak of someone who protects herself from the world. Or the world from her. After she and James survive a second car crash, the pair become lovers and she introduces him to Vaughan. Vaughan is a man who is consumed and defined by his fetish. He lives in a huge limousine, the same model as the one JFK was assassinated in, and he supports himself by illegally staging recreations of famous Hollywood car accidents. He is also the head of a tribe of people who share his fetishisation of car accidents including burned out stuntmen and Gabriella (Rosanna Arquette), whose leg and back braces seem to have been styled so as to accentuate her body. Medical equipment not fetishised but sexualised.

This group introduce James to a whole new sexualised world. A world they wander around in a constant state of sexual arousal. They endlessly paw at each others groins. They fuck in cars. They fuck while in car parks and car washes. They fuck each other. They fuck other people. They flirt with car salesmen, reducing them to jelly through the medium of orthopaedic braces and fishnet tights. In a society where the needs of the car dictate so much of our architecture, the streets of the city themselves become fetish objects and so the group exist in a kind of heightened sexual reality where the neural signals

attached to mundane items have been switched from "functional" to "sexy". The sexual characteristics of humans are also changed by this heightened reality. The group do not prize large breasts and healthy physiques... they swoon for the scarred, the maimed and the disfigured.

Vaughan's gift to his followers is a new psychopathology. A form of mental illness that is beneficial to the people suffering from it because it is better adapted to the aesthetic realities of the modern world. Vaughan's fetish frees human sexuality from the constraints of the bedroom or the swingers' club and brings it out onto the streets and motor ways. Films such as *Basic Instinct* pretend to show their audiences a new world, a more sexualised world. But in truth it is the same world we live in now. James and Catherine struggled as a couple because this world had exhausted its sexual meaning. Catherine's stockings and James' sixpack had lost their potential to stimulate and thrill. However, by following Vaughan they discovered a whole new sexual language and a whole new world. The film ends with the couple intentionally crashing their car. James takes his wife from behind as she rubs herself against the top of the car's door frame. They inhabit a different semiotic world. *Crash* presents itself as an erotic bildungsroman but its message is ultimately quite different. The correct way to achieve sexual happiness is not to realise what one really wants and to go out and find it, instead the solution is to change what one wants so that one is happy with what one has and what one has in the West in the 21st Century, is the car.

Empire of the Sun (1987)

One of the enduring puzzles about the work of J. G. Ballard has been its presence in the public eye. As an author who dabbled in genre while the ghetto walls were still firmly in place before moving on to aggressively inaccessible and sexually explicit works of literary fiction, Ballard's output seemed perfectly suited to the kind of niche occupied by a cult author. However, despite Ballard's refusal to peddle palliative or populist fiction, he acquired a certain level of fame. Certainly enough fame to merit a mention on the news when he died and certainly enough fame to earn him a (reportedly) unwanted position as one of the first people the media call in the advent of an unexpected celebrity death. One reason for Ballard's continued visibility was Steven Spielberg's adaptation of Ballard's partly fictional and partly autobiographical novel *Empire of the Sun* (1984).

Beginning with the invasion of Shanghai by the Japanese, the film follows young Jim Graham (Christian Bale) as he transitions from being the spoiled only child of a British taipan to being an

energetic and adventurous scrounger struggling to survive in a Japanese internment camp.

The opening sequences are among the most evocative to ever appear in a Spielberg film. We open with a BBC-voiced narrator informing us of the existence of a Japanese army huddled outside the gates of the town while inside, British ex-pats enjoy the kind of existence you might expect from Surrey rather than Shanghai. Indeed, were it not for the junks in the harbour, it would be easy to mistake Shanghai's skyline for that of Liverpool, while Jim's home is a quintessentially English country house on a quintessentially English street, the only indication of the house's true location being the faces of its staff and the beggar at the gate. Indeed, when Jim first notices the beggar he is shocked. The poverty and ethnicity of the elderly man are completely outside of the manufactured Englishness of his existence. In one spectacular scene, a procession of British people in fancy dress make their way through the city. Inside their limousines all is clean and peaceful while, outside, the city and its poverty-stricken Chinese population is gripped by panic and fear of war. When beggars dare to approach the cars they are brutally beaten to the floor by the local police. Blood splatters on the windows but the fancy dress-clad British remain clean.

Once the Japanese invade, the barriers protecting the British come tumbling down. Attempting to flee, hundreds of British people stand by the curb hailing taxis that will never come. The system has never failed them before, why would it now? When caught in a crush and forced to run for it, Jim's father limply protests "Good heavens, this is ridiculous!". Not ridiculous, merely the end of an age. Separated from his parents, Jim has to survive on his own in his abandoned house. Eventually forced to make his way into the city, he finds that his beliefs about how the world works are laughably out of synch with reality. "I surrender!" he pleads to the Japanese soldiers, prompting gales of laughter. "I'm English!" he screams as he runs from a mugger, while the Chinese look on unimpressed.

Upon being taken to an internment camp, Jim finds himself torn between two potential father figures, both with very different visions of the world.

Basie (John Malkovich) is an American and a born survivor who knows all of the angles and all of the flaws but who seems unwilling to see beyond those flaws. Sometimes, Basie is affectionate towards Jim. He will teach him what he needs to get by and give him things. But at other times, Basie is almost psychopathic in his lack of regard for the boy; taking bets on whether he will be killed by the guards and abandoning him not once but twice.

While Basie is an arch pragmatist who represents the baseness of the material world and the capitalist

refusal to lift humanity out of that base state, Jim's second father-figure Dr. Rawlins (Nigel Havers) represents a romantic belief in a better world. He tries to teach Jim the rudiments of a classical education but he also teaches him the basic elements of morality that seem to elude Basie.

Spielberg's beautifully directed but ultimately quite simple coming-of-age story has augmented Ballard's visibility by popularising a process of humanisation that began with the publishing of *Empire of the Sun* and which has continued with Ballard's other pieces of life-writing such as *The Kindness of Women* (1991) and his autobiography *Miracles of Life* (2008). For many authors, Ballard's aloof, experimental and technocratic characteristics would not be problematic but, unlike most authors, Ballard tends to cast himself in his own books. The eternally shifting identity of *The Atrocity Exhibition's* protagonist can be seen as an echo of the shifting identity Ballard shares with us through his own fiction. Just as *The Atrocity Exhibition's* protagonist is always a doctor, a teacher or a patient with a name beginning with the letter T, so too are Ballard's creations doctors and writers with names based upon Ballard's own. Ballard's equation of himself with his characters poses a challenge to his readers. How should one feel about an author we have 'seen' crash cars for sexual reasons? How should we feel about an author who seems to argue that better living can be achieved through psychopathology? Regardless of what the answer might be, I suspect that one would feel a lot better about an author we have also seen as a lost but likeable child.

Of course, while there have only been a handful of Ballard adaptations this does not mean that there are no other Ballardian films. Paolo Sorrentino's *The Consequences of Love* (2004) shows Ballard's eye not only for jaggedly angular modernist architecture and gleaming chrome but also an awareness of the relationship between human emotion and the environment around it. Also impressively Ballardian is Patrick Stettner's debut film *The Business of Strangers* (2002). Set in an airport hotel, this film explores the suggestion made by Ballard in *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000): A little psychopathology does a body good.

J. G. Ballard's CONCRETE: Thoughts on High Rise and Concrete Island

By Lara Buckerton

(1) Paradise

J. G. Ballard died on the 19th of April 2009. *You* are the promising young angelic architect commissioned to design his eternal paradise; time to step/flap up.

The seraphic refulgence favoured by so many of your colleagues feels inappropriate. A scrunched-up, half-hearted sketch of a cumulo-nimbus caryatid bounces from the rim of the bin. Far too much like some nexus of crystallized flora and fauna from Ballard's 1966 apocalyptic novel, *The Crystal World*.

Unsettled, you tear a new sheet and begin to explore an Edenic concept, but your garden reveries are infiltrated by great, sail-backed lizards. Boiling malarial lagoons breach the levees. You remember Ballard's 1962 apocalyptic novel, *The Drowned World*.

What about amenities? Every intimation of luxury or convenience evokes *High Rise* (1975), *Cocaine Nights* (1996) and *Super-Cannes* (2000), novels in which ultra-comfortable, designer living arrangements become a catalyst to ambiguous savagery, fetishism and sociopathy. "Over the swimming pools and manicured lawns seemed to hover a dream of violence" (*Super-Cannes*, p. 75).

Maybe he could learn to love great slabs baked to a malevolent glitter? Their service pipes and water towers exposed, as though every solicitous euphemism, and comforting illusion, were fallen victim to weird evisceration?

Oh boy. Did Ballard *like* Brutalism? You're not sure. "I have always admired modernism and wish the whole of London could be rebuilt in the style of Michael Manser's brilliant Heathrow Hilton," Ballard once wrote [1]. Was he kidding?

Brutalism thrived from the 1950s to the mid-1970s. Its signature material was *concrete*. It took its name from concrete, specifically *béton brut*, *raw concrete*. It took its cue, or its cube, from the heroism of early High Modernism, except now all heros were tragic heros.

Concrete, jutting, rough-hewn stone, brick, glass and steel: Brutalism has always baffled me a bit. It feels like anti-architecture posing as architecture. Serving the only nine crisps you own at your dinner party, trying to pass it off as the principled minimalism of an austere populist. I'm pretty sure

that's ignorance and prejudice on my part. But it's widespread ignorance and prejudice. Brutalist tower blocks soon came to both embody and symbolise the failures of the welfare state. You know the deal. Heroin tinfoil twirling, leaflike, in puddles of piss. In *High Rise* Ballard wrote, "In principle, the mutiny of these well-to-do professional people against the buildings they had collectively purchased was no different from the dozens of well-documented revolts by working-class tenants against municipal tower-blocks that had taken place at frequent intervals during the post-war years" (69).

I guess Brutalism should be seen against the background – literally – of its prehistory. Brutalist structures seem less antagonistic where they rise against architecture of a finnickier and more coy sort. Where Brutalism is a sparse elaboration upon a crinkle-crankle, tumbledown backdrop, its ahistoricism seems good-humoured – at least, a tantrum we can indulge.

Furthermore, in the post-war period, impatience with frilly bits had a stronger rationale than mere Enlightenment iconoclasm. Cunning, indirection, camouflage, nobility, glory, ambition, cultural and traditional particularity and partiality – all these were tainted by association with their equivalent martial "virtues." The prevailing spirit melted exhaustion with determination. The two world wars had been *bullshit*. Openness, accountability, stability, clarity, functionality, universality, neutrality, democracy were "in."

That meant honesty in materials. That meant that, in post-war France, Le Corbusier's multi-functional super-structures came more and more to resemble Medusa-stricken Decepticons. In Britain, the gentle, humanist, compromise Modernism of the welfare state compromise was increasingly confronted by the principled austerity of Alison and Peter Smithson. At the same time, the Smithsons resisted certain trajectories of continental Brutalism. Their chief beef was (ironically, in light of – well, in the shadow of – *High Rise*) that urban planning should foster community spirit. "'Belonging' is a basic emotional need," they wrote. "From 'belonging' – identity – comes the enriching sense of neighbourliness. The short narrow street of the slum succeeds where

spacious redevelopment frequently fails." [2]

Reyner Banham, the architectural theorist and critic, dubbed the British Brutalism of the Smithsons and their crew the "New Brutalism." Banham characterised the style by its formal legibility of plan, or memorability as an image; its clear exhibition of structure (including exposed service features – "Water and electricity do not come out of unexplained holes in the wall, but are delivered to the point of use by visible pipes and conduits"); and its valuation of materials for their inherent qualities as 'found'. And he added, "In the last resort what characterises the New Brutalism in architecture as in painting is precisely its brutality, its *je-en-foutisme*, its bloody-mindedness, and that the Smithsons' work is characterized by an abstemious under-designing of the details, and much of the impact of the building comes from ineloquence, but absolute consistency, of such components as the stairs and handrails" [3].

So we have an architectural philosophy which prioritizes function and in some degree aestheticises it. Though it is often received as anti-humanist, it has a commitment to the human which is revealed negatively, like someone painstakingly avoiding mentioning his or her big crush. Space and material are enslaved to an implicit ensemble of human needs. Every autonomous flourish is treated with the utmost suspicion.

To entirely rationalise an environment according to the real needs of its inhabitants requires you *know* those real needs, intimately. But that implies the risk that unquantifiables will be shoehorned into categories, and imperfection and idiosyncrasy will be met with intolerance. Moreover, a utopia designed for the desires of one kind of person could transform that kind of person into a *new* kind of person, for whom the utopia is – well, something else, un-utopian, perhaps *dystopian*.

Dystopia could already be here. Current levels of global inequality are vom-provoking, if you have anything in your belly. One response to dystopia is to distinguish "real needs" from luxuries. (The term "real needs" appears at least twice in *High Rise*. "Real illusion," another Marxist term, also pops up. I doubt whether these were conscious allusions). Selecting some real needs is the first step of the commonsense approach – more-or-less the Human Rights approach. Next you struggle, righteously, to fulfil everyone's real needs. Above all, you fight to revoke any luxuries which are based on *denying someone her or his real needs*.

But commonsense runs into problems. As Karl Marx pointed out, an axiomatic anthropological division between "real needs" and luxuries could set us on the path to . . . well, the Marxian version of utopianism. That's utopianism in a pejorative sense, implicated with false consciousness, especially with

"ideology." An updated term for what Marx usually meant by "ideology" is "idealism" – a kind of sublimation of class struggle, a transfer of its forms to the infinitely hospitable media of language and thought.

In essence, if we declare in advance what are "real needs" and what are luxuries, we're likely to superimpose abstractly-reconciled antagonisms on a material world still riven with conflict, then look cross-eyed, constipated, *yet smug*. Our utopian project, founded in dogmatic anthropology, would have no resources against an equally dogmatic counter-anthropology, one positing domination as an ineradicable feature of human nature. ("Domination" can use various proxies – self-interest, will to life, or the propensity for people to form efficient markets at the drop of a hat).

In fact, the first move of such conservative opponents will be to point out how falsely conceiving of material antagonisms as errors of thought – idealism – can exacerbate those antagonisms and raise their stakes. Battlomechs do not respect peace treaties, only other battlomechs. This is political Realism through and through.

So "commonsense" and "ideology" are joined at the hip, as are "utopia" and "idealism." Marx's response to this quandry was complex and, let me be square, a bit over my head. It had centrally to do, I think, with why Marx had to claim his approach was both dialectic and scientific. But more urgently – for our purposes – where does all this leave Ballard and Brutalism?

Imagine you're strapped into a hair-cutting machine, which insists you're an inch shorter than you actually are.

Brutalism inclines towards anthropological dogmatism. It never lets you forget which bits of the shebang are the humans. In Brutalism's dogged insistence on serving those humans, it crops anything jutting outside of its idea of what is human.

Nobody, on the other hand, could call *Ballard* anthropologically dogmatic – and in the next bit I'll say why.

(2) Soul

So anyway, *which* Ballard wings his way hither? In Christian tradition, resurrection is of the *flesh*, since the soul, which can't die, can't be said to live again. Saints get special bod mods: impassibility, glory, agility, subtlety. But which Ballard – or *what* of Ballard is on its way? Could it be Jim, the little squirt tearing around a Japanese prison camp in WWII? Or the dashing young RAF pilot in Canada? The *enfant terrible*, centre of a controversial obscenity trial? The middle-aged father, sitting in Shepperton, watching too much TV and writing out *High Rise* and *Concrete Island* long-hand? The dying Ballard?

Some strange council or admixture or Matryoshka?

In his 2008 memoir *Miracles of Life* Ballard wrote:

“To return to Shanghai, for the first time since I was a boy, was a strange experience for me. Memories were waiting for me everywhere, like old friends at an arrivals gate, each carrying a piece of cardboard bearing my name. I looked down from my room on the 17th floor of the Hilton and could see at a glance that there were two Shanghais – the skyscraper city newer than yesterday and at street level the old Shanghai that I had cycled around as a boy [...] I was on an errand, though I had yet to grasp the true nature of my assignment. I was looking for my younger self, the boy in a Cathedral school cap and blazer who had played hide-and-seek with his friends half a century earlier. I soon found him, hurrying with me along the Bubbling Well Road, smiling at the puzzled typists and trying to hide the sweat that drenched my shirt.” [4]

Was Ballard suggesting that he had a deep authentic core, a private continuity underlying his life’s vicissitudes and forgetfulnesses, which could be haphazardly accessed via an evocative taste, or fragrance, or snatch of song?

If Ballard’s books don’t exactly advertise a clear concept of paradise, then they’re even cagier when it comes to “deep authentic cores.” Ballard was far too sensitive to how authenticity today – like any moral concept – is mediated by representation, how it turns and twists to suit the courses of swift flows of capital and glamour. Only a lie for cash could be so convincing, so seductive, as *authenticity*.

Ballard fed his characters to his themes. You can watch his characters writhe and transmogrify in the guts of those themes. What survives from one phase of a character to the next is often what the earlier phase would categorize as trivial, peripheral. In *High Rise*, for example, when the well-educated residents start to vandalise their luxury tower block with quasi-tribal graffiti, their territorial sigils are witticisms, wordplays, acrostics and palindromes.

In a way, Ballard probably *couldn’t* write “good” characters – that is, “well-developed” or “believable” ones. At least, he was never too interested in those networks of corroborative detail from whose densities could spring George Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke, or Henry James’s Isabel Archer.

“Today naturalism has completely faltered,” Ballard said in a 1990 interview. “You only find it in middle-brow fiction.” [5]

Rather, Ballard’s characters are nailed to agendas as though to racks. The roboticist Masahiro Mori coined the term “Uncanny Valley” to describe how people respond more and more warmly to robots (and cute anthropomorphic animals and things) the more humanlike you make them – until they’re near-perfect facsimiles, when suddenly our responses swerve into disquiet or revulsion. (The Valley itself is the steep plunge when you plot these responses as a line graph). The inner lives of Ballard’s characters resemble the outer rictuses of those overly-lifelike droids. These characters seem to experience in extended similes. “Now and then, the slight lateral movement of the building in the surrounding airstream sent a warning ripple across the flat surface of the water, as if in its pelagic deeps an immense creature was stirring in its sleep” (*High Rise*, p. 22). The bits of the similes that “aren’t there” in the story – what linguists call the “vehicles” or

"figures" or "sources" – are so self-sufficient and suggestive, it feels like they *are there*; and sometimes, in *Super-Cannes*, say, they accumulate so thickly as to compose the novel's Unconscious. The characters' casual drifts of chat swirl into brutal prophecies, or miniaturised anthropological lectures, as though some impatient Aspect of the authorial deity commandeered their mouths.

Obsession with psychoanalysis part-substitutes for the carefully-evolved realist practices of psyche-counterfeiting. Subjectivity isn't patted into great homunculi like Dorothea and Isabel; rather it gusts at the reader in huge flakes of human life, which mix fragments of action and perception specified at psychoanalytic, anthropological, architectural, biological, discursive and socio-cultural levels, as well as at the level of the personality system, all arranged in unpredictable proportions and configurations, and all constantly and kaleidoscopically disseminating and auto-dissecting. Characters are made into media workers, doctors, psychiatrists and architects, and into versions of Ballard (like "James Ballard," the protagonist of *Crash*) to further mystify and enrich this reflexive, chaoplectic onslaught of psyche. Discourse has never been so free and indirect.

The counterintuitive fault-lines along which characters can shed characteristics are

pretty interesting. They comprise a poetics of startlement and discontinuity, a kind of *memento mori* that isn't concentrated upon one terminal limit of a lifespan, but strewn throughout it. But Ballard, as usual, was up to something more equivocal. The regressions which his characters undergo also create *new continuities*. They re-establish continuity with infantile drives, for example – drives which have been repressed, or otherwise desultorily socialised. Sometimes, a psychic flyover springs up which exceeds the individual lifespan. Racism, violence and perversity rescue characters from modern *anomie* and isolation, and weave them into quasi-feudal patterns of ingroup harmony. "For the first time it occurred to Wilder that the residents enjoyed this breakdown of services, and the growing confrontation between themselves. All this brought

them together, and ended the frigid isolation of the previous months." (*High Rise*, p. 60). Sometimes – in *The Drowned World*, for instance – these eruptive continuities stretch even further back, foaming freak solidarity with prehistoric *homo sapiens*, or with their hominid or even reptilian forebears.

The homologies between Ballard's childhood internment and his perennial themes – atavism, regression-sublimation, hallucinogenic stupor, normalised violence, the State of Nature, Eden, Empire and entropy – are so absolutely in-your-face that they're bound to attain exaggerated significance in Ballardian criticism. My hunch is that most quasi-autobiographical writing, especially writing as speculatively-spirited as Ballard's, works *precisely* by minutely muddying its connection with experience. (When I brood on a fact of my existence, it starts to suggest mutually incompatible modes by which it could be processed. The fact is incorporated into me in *one way*, and sublimated into art or shouting in an

incompatible way. Experience also has a *uniquely misleading* relationship with the writing it generates.)

That caveat aside . . . Ballard once described Lunghua internment camp as "where I spent some of my happiest years" (in *Miracles of Life* – though in an 1982 interview he said, "I have – I won't say *happy* – not unpleasant memories of the camp," [6]

remarking on the casual brutality, and on the many games the children enjoyed).

In *Drowned World* Ballard wrote, "For some reason, however, this inverted Crusoeism – the deliberate marooning of himself without the assistance of a gear-laden carrack wrecked on a convenient reef – raised few anxieties in Kerans' mind" (48). In the 1994 novel *Rushing to Paradise*, as in *The Drowned World*, characters withdraw from the wider world, pursuing a conscious – or quasi-conscious – agenda of enislement. Ballard's characters are often seen to endorse or solicit transformations which are – in a knee-jerk kinda way – *hideous*.

Yet even alienation, isolation and injury have a certain appeal. In *Concrete Island*, Maitland constantly wonders whether he somehow, on some level, arranged to maroon himself, whether in the

shape of a primeval concrete succubus he seduced himself. A quiet but clear echo of this aspect of *Concrete Island* can be heard in *High Rise*: "It was here that Anthony Royal had been injured when his car had been crushed by a reversing grader – it often struck Laing as ironic, and in a way typical of Royal's ambiguous personality, that he should not only have become the project's first road casualty, but have helped to design the site of the accident" (36-7). The affluent, culturally-elite cave-dwellers of *High Rise* use their last vestiges of civilisation to assure prying outsiders that everything's all right, lest their "dystopia" be confiscated. And of course in *Crash*, well, these aren't exactly car accidents.

In the short story, "The Intensive Care Unit" (1977) (one of the prophetic ones – this time it's webcams, Skype and stuff), Ballard got his narrator to muse:

"True closeness, I now knew, was television closeness – the intimacy of the zoom lens, the throat microphone, the close-up itself. On the television screen there were no body odour or strained breathing, no pupil contractions and facial reflexes, no mutual sizing up of emotions and disadvantage, no distrust and insecurity. Affection and compassion demanded distance. Only at distance could one find that true closeness to another human being which, with grace, might transform itself into love" (9).

In *High Rise*, the building begins to generate a sinister new social type:

"a cool, unemotional personality impervious to the psychological pressures of high-rise life, with minimal needs for privacy, who thrived like an advanced species of machine in the neutral atmosphere. This was the sort of resident who was content to do nothing but sit in his over-priced apartment, watch television with the sound turned down, and wait for his neighbours to make a mistake [...] people who were content with their lives in the high-rise, who felt no particular objection to an impersonal steel and concrete landscape, no qualms about the invasion of their privacy by government agencies and data-processing organizations, and if anything welcomed these invisible intrusions, using them for their own purposes. These people were the first to master a new kind of late twentieth-century life. They thrived on the rapid turnover of acquaintances, the lack of involvement with others, and the total self-sufficiency of lives which, needing nothing, were never

disappointed. // Alternatively, their real needs might emerge later" (36).

One could draw the lesson that any mode of human existence can develop the faculty to joyfully authenticate itself. That would be good news for *you*, angelic architect – suggesting that every soul lugs around its utopia like its snailshell.

But I don't think it's the right lesson. Ballard was interested in what made abhorrent subject positions appealing from the inside – what equilibrated them, harmonised them – but we don't have to take these systems' self-understandings uncritically. For one thing, often Ballard was exploring a quite recent commodification of ontology. Cost-benefit analysis (with a dash of Yippee-ish, gap year-vintage permissiveness) is how "*homo capitalist*" might articulate encroaching violent rebirth to her- or himself . . . but it doesn't prevail universally over *all* such violent rebirths. It's only because we're so accustomed to varying forms and levels of alienation that we can coolly appraise extreme forms of alienation and reconciliation like articles rummaged from a bargain bin.

Besides, even when the multitude are content with their (parking) lot, there are outliers who are *not*. "The Disaster Area" (1957, originally "Build-Up") is set in a probably-infinite urban space, the kind of platform shooter Möbius would have designed if he hadn't been into strips. Most of its residents are down with that, but not the protagonist, and he grows unhappily obsessed with the exotic concept of "free space."

The utopia-enabling scapegoat is a perennial theme of moral SF, of course. Check out the New Testament (65-150), or Ursula LeGuin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," (1974). Sometimes not one or two, but whole swathes are brought under regimes of torment. There are plenty of signs in *High Rise* that, for some residents, adaptation to a new way of life is psychically harrowing:

"Helen moved silently around the apartment, barely aware of her husband. After the fit of compulsive laughter the previous evening, her face was waxy and expressionless. Now and then a tic flickered in the right apex of her mouth, as if reflecting a tremor deep within her mind. She sat at the dining-table, mechanically straightening the boys' hair. Watching her, and unable to think of what he could do to help her, Wilder almost believed that it was she who was leaving him, rather than the contrary" (60).

When the uneven misery begins to follow contours of gender, class or race, questions of

justice creep into the picture. *Before* the high society disintegrates into a freakshow of lonesome copings, it goes through a period of explicit *class* struggle. The top five floors wear fancy pants and balkanize the middle twenty-five floors, guarding their own privilege by playing off class fractions one against the other. The bottom ten floors are muddled scum, abused, sullen and sickly.

There are hints that the sexual violence against the high-rise's neo-cavewomen is only a minor insult, that the cultural form of *rape* is wrenched out of recognition . . . but Ballard didn't come out and *say* that, and he was an author who could unflinchingly come out and say things. I think that *High Rise* strongly implies mass war rape, experienced as such. I think Ballard avoided first-person testimony (the book has three main characters, all male) because the sexual victim, as a matter of cultural form, invites pity, indignation, craving of custody and thirst for reprisal. These responses are all part of the same system of gendered and sexualised violence which *High Rise* is wrestling with on the dissection table. There is a subtext to the high-rise's pervasive all-women groupings. In the world of *High Rise*, those women who can live without men.

Justice, then, emerges as an important makeshift division between utopia and dystopia. The idea of justice lets that division go beyond determination by individual subjects. But justice is part of bourgeois morality, and implicated in that morality's indifference to injustice. As such, Ballard seldom if ever introduces justice as clear-cut concept. It is always peripheral, always vanishing, the lines to invoke it coinciding with those to banish it.

(3) Islands

Could there be such a thing as *just architecture*?

As the security situation in *High Rise* begins to deteriorate, the hard-drinking film critic Eleanor Powell exults, "For the first time since we were three years old what we do makes absolutely no difference" (40).

Architecture in a broad sense denotes more than buildings, more than physical *stuff*.

Architecture is about the structures which confront us and channel our lives down their various courses. Those structures limit our free will, but they also play a part in making free will something *worth wanting*. They delimit the ways in which what we do can make a difference – or determine that it makes "absolutely no difference."

Imagine there was a *just architecture*, an architecture which could ensure the virtue of its residents. What effect would it have on their free will?

Of course, the networks of pathways which confront us all *are*, in part, free will – the free will of

others. They are "built" out of the choices everyone *else* has made, in millennia or milliseconds gone by, or can be expected to make. (For this reason, it's often been thought that the terminal unit of virtue is the polity, not the individual. Sometimes the architecture enveloping particular person affords no opportunities for the good life).

When I heard the premise of *Concrete Island* – I was a kid, my dad described it to me – I had a quite different image of the island. It was a tiny little thing, maybe enough to sustain one concrete coconut tree. The marooned man stood in tatters waving his briefcase at an endless torrent of traffic. Every driver saw him, every one sped grimly by. Eventually, he sat down. His sitting down, I dimly reasoned, might be one of the best bits of the book.

A friend of mine had exactly the same experience: heard about *Concrete Island*, envisioned the pared-down set-up q.v., years later was both disappointed and dazzled when she read the book. Maybe Dad just went around giving little girls misleading summaries of *Concrete Island*, I dunno. But I think that the distorted premonition does tell us something about the emotional and thematic mush that inevitably bursts, like restaurant waste from a black bag behind a mesh wire fence, when you change Crusoe's lagoon for a line of lorries. Hundreds of thousands of people queue up, although only by chance, to confirm that *they don't care about you at all*. If they have nothing to gain in helping you, then there is no natural sympathy, no moral law, which will compel them to.

Why *didn't* someone stop for him? Could there *really* be no break in the flow, 24/7? Too weird. It manifested the precision of science, as humane affect was subjected to rigorous physical demonstration and encoded as statistics. Percentage love in universe: 0.000%. Simultaneously, mists of allegory enveloped the fabled isle. Clearly, this could not be a realist work.

Structural flaws pervade this allegorical monument to modern nihilism and ambivalence. It's cemented together with its own counterfactuality. Its genre is not satire, but nightmare. It relies for its force on the reader's conviction that this is all wrong, that one *should* stop, that she or he *would* stop. Our moral universe *cannot* be so badly damaged. Even as it denounces the isolation and heartlessness of modernity, it whispers, "Things aren't so bad."

The actual island of *Concrete Island* is quite different, a sunken wasteland some two hundred yards long, cut off by steep embankments and three massive motorways. Maitland's injuries make it difficult and dangerous to climb up onto the motorways. Most drivers don't see him at all, or see him for only a moment, like some subliminal image in a movie roll. Like the figure glimpsed from a train

in a Ford Maddox Ford memoir, he'll take delivery of a multitude of interpretations. He is perhaps the object of a small, faint calculation – the possibility that “something is wrong,” weighed against the danger of pulling over.

“He stood up and turned to face the oncoming traffic. Three lines of vehicles sped towards him. They emerged from the tunnel below the overpass and accelerated along the fast bend [...] His jacket and trousers were stained with sweat, mud and engine grease – few drivers, even if they did notice him, would be eager to give him a lift. Besides, it would be almost impossible to slow down here and stop. The pressure of the following traffic, free at last from the long tail-backs that always blocked the Westway interchange during the rush-hour, forced them on relentlessly” (17).

The Kitty Genovese effect is also in play. Every individual driver judges it absurd that *no* driver would stop – there are thousands! – so no driver does. The physical architecture, in short, integrates with the psychic architecture in such a way that Maitland's neglect does not entail an unrealistic world of ethical egoist sociopaths.

If it is rational, is the architecture around the island then *just*? The walls of concrete and conventions of traffic safely channel the potentially lethal machines and their occupants. The architecture rationalises the behaviour of the motorway, in the sense that it forcibly aligns private and public virtue. Whoever endangers another in this hum of high-speed metal also endangers her- or himself. Yet clearly this architecture is unjust for those who fall outside its remit.

One boingy spring-board for utopian (and counter-utopian) thought is the premiss that when architectures of action prove themselves unjust, all their contingencies could be imaginatively cleared away, and they could be rebuilt from scratch. Somewhere on the continuum between cobweb and support strut, you draw a line. You chuck away what is contingent, mere convention, the product of evolutionary eccentricity. You keep what is essential to the human condition. In the society of bare bones, in this State of Nature, is there such a thing as justice? Is there “natural law”? Are there trade-offs between potential moralities? Can we create, and not just evince, virtue?

Whatever the State of Nature is, whatever laws it sports or lacks, it can be used to benchmark *real* societies, to detect where they are malformed and could be healed, or to recognise the limits of reform. But the priority which Ballard gave to the mediatization of experience led him to contest the reality of reality and the naturalness of nature. It's odd, therefore, that his books should invest so heavily (if seldom explicitly) in the concept of the

State of Nature. But power relations in Ballard's (quasi?) State(s) of Nature are complex, certainly irreducible to “hard” power (direct control of resources), and probably irreducible to hard and “soft” power (charisma, tricks). Power is intricately bound up with identity-formation and maintenance. “Real needs” are dubious, since even the will to life needn't underwrite all possible subjectivities. *Concrete Island* thematizes the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, probably. Maitland's successes in subduing the other inhabitants are somewhat incongruous. He is injured, crazed; he relies on them for food and mobility. He uses sex and money, and piss and booze, but it always feels as though he achieves more than he ought to, that there is a discrepancy between his resources and his status.

I was deftly summarizing *High Rise* for someone – it's like, this TV executive, he's covered in lipstick warpaint, his camera is practically a mace, catching sight of his own heavy, brown penis in the mirror calms him down, he can only grunt, it's been like a *month* or something, – and this person asked me, quite reasonably, what happens to seal the high-rise off.

I drew breath.

Because that's the template for these stories, right? Seal off a dinner party of anesthetists, social workers, *et al.*, give it ten minutes and *voilà* abattoir with yetis. Sealing off the nice people, or stranding them somewhere, does two things. It separates them from abundance (Capitalist abundance, typically), and it separates them from state institutions of law and order.

“Everyman is a gory savage, and his latent violence is closer to the surface than we think” – that's the moral, or the cliché, which this genre trusts us to anticipate and rewards us with in the end. We are Them. We are Them.

It is the convergence of science and pornography. Although it is, by itself, not *exactly* an authoritarian sentiment, it sports flanges serrated to dovetail perfectly with the ass-dags any charismatic demagogue who happens to goose-amble by. Because if Man (and it usually is “Man” by this point) is inherently a juggernaut of atrocity, his civil manner, but a dissembling gauze, then we *need* strong leadership to keep us in check.

Only the Hobbesian formula of protection-obedience will do. We are Them. But for the Grace of omnipotent authority, there go I. Never mind, like, separation of powers, checks and balances, constitutionalism; that never happened. Justice (or, second-best, security) must be built into a governmental architecture, since the “sealing off” experiment has shown it is not a natural feature of Man.

In *High Rise*, *nothing* seals them off! Nothing

triggers the regression; initially there are some tensions about dog-owners, and a bit of a question mark over when kids should use the pools. This is our clue that Ballard was up to something quite different.

Are We, according to Ballard, Them? Almost. Leap to the lead in the *hic et nunc* cocobananas carousel, and you're one of them.

Almost, but I think, *not quite*. Ballard was abstemious in laying the causal foundations of the high-rise tribalism. In Brian Aldiss's *Non-Stop* (1958) it takes several generations aboard a dodgy starship to regress. But *High Rise* is gently, and deliberately underdetermined. It requires of its readers a suspension of disbelief something in excess of what *The Portrait of a Lady* wants, though not quite the level demanded by, "In the Mirror Universe, the shapeshifter Odo is the supervisor of the mining complex at Terok Nor. He is a brutal taskmaster over Terran slaves there [...]" etc.

Some folks – the feminist Carol Pateman is a good'un – have criticised the State of Nature as a myth which legitimates existing power relations. But Ballard combined the State of Nature with cutting criticism of existing power relations. Rather than showing us the dystopia which underlies and legitimates the *status quo* (like Hobbes – or like John Locke, showing us the minimal model which clarifies the *status quo's* rationality), Ballard's States of Nature showed us the weird dystopian-utopian spaces which *already exist* within the *status quo*.

Ballard wasn't just interested in what the contrived spaces of a lab experiment, or the aftermath of a disaster, can tell us about human nature and big social trends. For Ballard, they just weren't allegories, thought experiments, or models. He was also interested – I really think there is a difference here – in *the spaces themselves*, which he suspected appear more frequently and pervasively than we care to admit.

Though Ballard's work is cautionary, it has a lot of good things to say about utopia, particularly if you think how relatively unpopular the concept has been recently. The concepts of utopia and dystopia are *fused*. It is quite impossible to speak of a radically better world without alluding to the utopianisms of Hitler and Stalin.

You can argue, again in a Marxist vein, that it is Late Capitalism itself that has grotesquely glued gulags, artificial famine and Aushwitz all over the pure and sweet concept of universal justice. You can argue that It does so to protect itself from criticism. You might be right, but this stuff is nonetheless *still objectively glued together*. Utopia-dystopia is a "real illusion," like the commodity form – it is an illusion we can't dispel by piercing it through thought and exposure with language, since the "illusion" is

invincibly reiterated every moment by our lived social relations; it is reborn from everywhere, it is more logical than logic.

And yet. Utopia has been a dirty word for so long ... it's sort of cleaned itself, a bit. Like dirty hair which they say secretes its own shampoo, or an abandoned piece of laundry that's ambiguously wearable again. Ballard never treated this utopia-dystopia hybrid as a weird limit condition, or latent dynamic, or bogeyman. With a science fiction novelist's prerogative, he showed it as something that was already here. He submitted its events to standards of justice, however problematic, and he traced possible trajectories of subjectivity through it.

Every time utopian thought is criticised for ignoring some latent real need, we slightly enlarge our idea of what it is to be human. Have our ideas of real needs simply needed more paranoia and more imagination? Nothing could be more dogmatic than ruling out utopia forever.

Post-script: Manaugh

So I've made three small suggestions about Ballard. First, his work is supremely conscious of the dynamic connection between environments and their inhabitants, and thus critical of efforts to "perfect" environments on the basis of a particular idea of the human. Second, despite his disdain for received notions of intrinsically superior modes of life, Ballard resisted moral relativism, and submitted the flux of subjectivity he depicted to standards of justice. Third, Ballard was drawn to segregated, normatively autonomous spaces, but not *only* as experiments, or models, their usefulness in extrapolation or generalisation or allegory. He was also fascinated by the possibility that much of society already takes place in such spaces.

It would be nice to get some closure on the J. G. Ballard's celestial resting place question q.v., even if it *was* just a thought experiment gradually revealing its own patent absurdity.

Did Ballard *like* Brutalism? Bollards, ballustrades, pallisades, flyovers, cloverleaf junctions, on-ramps, traffic islands, artificial lakes, storm tunnels, multi-storey car parks, business parks, military camps, edge-of-town mega-malls, abandoned cinemas, opulent, derelict hotels, ruined swimming pools quarter-filled with yellow water, an Alsatian bobbing, or bone dry and piled with human bones. Stairwells barricaded with chic utilitarian furniture, shadows moving behind them; did Ballard *like* this stuff?

My friend Posie Rider told me a joke; she told it wrong (Posie could fluff the punchline of an e-mail forward), but using Habermasian reconstructive science, I think this East German guy is applying to emigrate to West Germany. This state bureaucrat

says, "Listen, why do you want to emigrate? Here, you have a large, well-serviced apartment overlooking the park. Will you get such a nice apartment in the West?" It may be an old joke. The would-be emigrant says, "Oh, can't complain." "And you finally got that car you've been applying for?" "Oh, can't complain." "And you have a good, safe job at the shoe factory!" "Oh, can't complain." "So why do you want to move to the West?" "There I can complain!"

OK, so it's about freedom of expression and of political dissent. But I imagined hyper-democratic authorities in Western Germany taking those complaints seriously. I imagined them reconstructing the mortified immigrant's old situation around him.

Some subjects are deeply invested in resisting their own conditions of possibility. It is a deep problem for progressive politics of all kinds. It is the kernel of truth in the conservative slur that grassroots activists and other political volunteers are troublemakers and attention-seekers. By the end of *Concrete Island*, Maitland seems to be this kind of subject. Crudely, he doesn't want to escape from the island, he wants to be someone trying to escape from the island. (This explains the apparent hypocrisy of hiding from a police car and then, a paragraph later, thinking with delight of imminent escape).

The social critic, the cautionary visionary, implicated with his subject matter, is similarly constitutively conflicted. Did Ballard like this stuff, well, yes, in a terribly complicated iterative way, it was what he loved to hate to love to hate to love to hate . . . etc., with new cognitive angles materializing with each iteration.

So I guess if I were the angel architect (I'm not – it's *you*) I might build Ballard a limitless flux of only-ever-provisionally-distinguished subjectivity and environment, in intricate and glorious iteration, more or less *laissez-faire* but with safeguards against the evolution of infinite loops and other cul-de-sacs of dei-diversity. Plus bunting because that would kind of be my signature thingy. A cop-out based on free market indifference and fetishization of choice, you say; I say, the bunting's not; also Plan B is consult with another mortal. Nic Clear and Simon Kennedy have started a course on Ballardian architecture at the Bartlett School of Architecture in London.

Maybe Geoff Manaugh is the mortal for the job. He has recently published a book, *The BLDGBLOG Book*, based in part on his speculative architecture blog, BLDGBLOG (bldgblog.blogspot.com). The project is probably way too big for any one of us. But if we collectively came up with a utopia good enough for Ballard, I bet it would be good enough for any one of us.

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 [2] Alison and Peter Smithson, CIAM Congress 1953 (over-cited sound-byte)
 [3] Reyner Banham (1966): "The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?" in *As found: the discovery of the ordinary* (2001): ed. Claude Lichtenstein and Thomas Schregenberger, Springer, p. 130
 [4] Excerpted in *The Times Online*, 20 January 2008, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/book_extracts/article3215270.ece>
 [5] Jeremy Lewis interviews J. G. Ballard, *Mississippi Review*, Volume 20, Numbers 1 & 2, published 1991 by the Centre for Writers, The University of Southern Mississippi, online at <http://www.jgballard.ca/interviews/jeremy_lewis_1990_interview.html>
 [6] Quoted in BBC obituary, online at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/8007331.stm>>

An interview with José Carlos Somoza

By Ian Watson

In *Vector* 257 (autumn 2008) I reviewed Spanish author José Carlos Somoza's novel *Zig Zag*, and previously in *Vector* I chose *The Art of Murder* as a 'Best of 2005'; so I thought I'd like to interview him too, since I was going to a convention where he'd be. In the event he wasn't able to make it, so we did the interview by email. (I asked him to answer my English questions in Spanish.) His beautiful website is well worth a look, and a listen [1].

His most recent novel, *The Key of the Abyss*, is about a railway employee who encounters a terrorist with a bomb (a theme of much significance in Spain, due to the train bombing in Madrid), leading ultimately to a revelation of a powerful entity hidden behind those who kill in the name of religious faith. It's a thriller with a futuristic setting, using narrative techniques ranging from role playing games to classic adventure novels.

Ian Watson: Unfortunately I've only read the three novels by you which are translated into English, but I hope to read others when my Spanish improves.

You won the Gold Dagger Award of the Crime Writers' Association, and *Clara y la Penumbra* appeared in English as *The Art of Murder*. But I see the book as a wonderful weird speculative fiction (something very close to science fiction), rather than as specifically a crime novel. In the very near future, posed painted bodies (mostly of beautiful young women and men) have eclipsed all other forms of visual art and dominate not just the art world but the entire world economy. This may seem like a "conceit" which could only sustain a short story, but you sustain a complete long novel which becomes stranger and crazier and more surrealistic, yet at the same time more plausible, page by page.

(I'm using the word "conceit" in the way the word applies to English 17th century Metaphysical Poets such as John Donne: a concept borrowed from the new scientific discoveries and theories of the 17th century about astronomy, optics, etc. The poet plays with the concept as much as possible, sometimes in an erotic context, sometimes religious.)

Did you envisage the complete progress of the book before writing it, or did you discover this in the

process of writing? I ask because I imagine, perhaps wrongly, that crime writers produce a map of their book beforehand, then follow the map. (An exception is Agatha Christie, who wrote her novels all the way up to the final chapter, then stopped and thought: who is the *least* likely person to be the murderer? Then she rewrote the book to adjust the story to conform to her choice of murderer.) Personally, by and large, I usually don't know what will happen in a book until I write it. I do research, and make notes, and I think about the story, but the development of events is spontaneous. How about you?

José Carlos Somoza: For all my books I usually write what I call a "journey guide" or "tour guide" beforehand. I call it that because I try to set out all the possibilities that occur to me regarding the world I intend to describe in my novel. Just as in an actual guidebook, such a text also mentions "places" which my narrative may pass by way of, yet those aren't obligatory stops when the novel gets written. So when I get down to writing, the result is often partly improvised with no pre-planning, no matter how much my guidebook tells me possible outcomes and even alternative paths to each outcome. Thanks to this guide, I always enjoy genuine freedom at the time of writing, just as a traveller is free to choose his own route despite having bought a guidebook.

In the case of *The Art of Murder* I produced a lot of texts about "auctions" of painted human bodies, "works" by different artists, "biographies" of each of the characters, and so on, so that when I got down to the actual writing I could rely on abundant data about what I needed to say.

IW: Yours sons are named José & Lázaro. Psychologically Lázaro seems an interesting choice of name for a child. The person who rose from the dead. José is an obvious choice in your case, but why Lázaro?

JCS: I suppose, having complied with the family procedure of naming my first-born after a stack of uncles, not to mention my own parent, we had the opportunity to improvise with the second. We chose Lázaro because that was the name of various

characters in my first books; there are several Lázaros in those. What's more, the name echoes the z in Somoza.

IW: So why did you choose the name for *several* characters in your previous works? Usually writers try not to repeat the same names in different works, unless the books are a series.

JCS: I liked the name because of the biblical implications of resurrection and renewal. Oddly, as I recall, the Lázaros in my novels are very disturbed persons, but I liked that too.

IW: You refer in *Zig Zag* to "the maddening maze of modern physics." You studied some physics in medical school, and you did a lot of research for *Zig Zag* and consulted many scientists. Out of curiosity, does all the research still remain clearly with you in your brain? I know that it wouldn't remain in mine with the same clarity after a few years.

JCS: Of course I've forgotten most of the information. That happened to me just the same with the Greek world of *The Athenian Murders*. Nowadays I still get invitations to speak about Classical Greece and Plato, since that novel is one of my most translated books, but it's quite a while since I forgot the details about the culture of the world I was writing about. With quantum physics and string theory something similar is happening, except, unlike with the Greek world, I still go on reading articles about aspects of physics because those continue to interest me.

IW: A book you recommend enthusiastically is *The God Particle* by Prof Leon Lederman [about the Higgs Boson]. You wrote the acknowledgements page of *ZigZag* in 2005, and the book appeared in Spanish in 2006. This is a question about topicality. Were you influenced in your choice of theme by knowing that the Large Hadron Collider was scheduled to start working in 2008? Influenced, not merely by the inherent scientific interest of this, but by possible mass media interest? And even public panic? The British media made a bit of a sensation about the possibility of a micro black hole, produced in Geneva, eating the Earth. This is nonsense because micro black holes evaporate very quickly due to Hawking radiation, but this did at least give the public *something* to understand about the LHC. Of course, the media paid no attention to the fact that particles wouldn't start colliding massively for several months after the first switch-on. (And in fact this won't now happen till some time during 2009.) But I wonder if the theme of *Zig Zag* occurred to you spontaneously, out of inner necessity, or because

you foresaw this theme as becoming very topical not long after publication?

JCS: With *Zigzag*, something strange happened. While I was writing the novel I was doing so because I felt the need to write about that topic, as happens to me with all my books. I yearned to tell some story connected with the world of science, and particle physics – upon its amazing stage, the circus of reality! – seemed a good starting point. Later, while I was busy writing, I discovered that 2005 would be the 100th anniversary of the five "miracle" articles by Einstein in *Annalen* which revolutionised our vision of objective and subjective reality. This struck me as a good augury.

However, I didn't even think that the media could be interested in the LHC until long after the novel was published... And in fact the first I heard of this was when I was getting ready to write my subsequent novel (*The Key of the Abyss*, which isn't yet translated into English). It was then that I read a strange book about the end of the world written by a scientist who was speculating with genuine dread that they might produce micro black holes in the big particle accelerators. I thought to myself: "What a pity! That would have been a good theme to put in *Zig Zag*!"

IW: Out of curiosity, did you ever read the vulgar, lurid Dan Brown novel, *Angels and Demons* (published in 2000), which uses CERN in the near future in a ridiculous way? (A genius and his daughter produce antimatter at CERN, without anyone else knowing what they're doing, and store it in a private laboratory there. Stolen, the antimatter is hidden under the Vatican, and will destroy the Vatican within a few hours, unless the art historian hero can find the antimatter.)

JCS: No, I never read it. Instead I read *The Da Vinci Code* and it seemed to me a normal suspense novel whose success continues to mystify me even more than that of Leonardo's own works.

IW: You say that writing is "the only form of magic left to us." That's because writers create worlds and lives. Does this also include painting, music, film? Or only writing?

JCS: This would really only include writing. Despite the digital era in which we're living, the rest of the arts seem to me pretty limited in their range. However, in literature we have at our disposal the vast world of the human imagination.

IW: Are you interested in Alejandro Jodorowsky and his *Psicomagia*?

JCS: I come from a science background. I'm a doctor and psychiatrist by training, although I quit the profession almost as soon as I graduated. I specialised in bio-psychiatry, so I never felt the least interest in areas such as psychoanalysis, nor did I view them as scientific. That's why I'm very sceptical regarding anything connected with "self-help" without a verifiable scientific basis. The author you mention is of particular disinterest to me.

IW: Have you ever experienced something important which is rationally inexplicable? Don't say love!

JCS: This is a peculiar question because it leans in two directions. On the one hand, every day we experience important things which are rationally inexplicable (and not just love). For instance, I can't rationally explain the fact of my having *needed* to write *The Art of Murder* or *The Athenian Murders*, or the fact that I much prefer the colour red to green.

On the other hand, if the question refers to a "paranormal" happening, whether seeing or hearing or sensing strange things, well, frankly: no. As a child I saw a UFO in the sky over Madrid which people later said was a weather balloon. As I've said, I come from a strict scientific background and I place great importance in rationality... But that doesn't mean that what's "rational" can't be a bit surprising, or even inexplicable! That's why I'm attracted to quantum physics: a world of madnesses, yet perfectly real.

IW: You say that the common elements in your work are "mystery, play." I agree that writing should be both playful and should address mysteries. "Play" also means to me creating a kind of labyrinth of puzzles for the characters to solve or fail to solve. Did you ever read a novel by John Fowles, *The Magus*? Interestingly, the first novel by Fowles was a literary crime novel, *The Collector*. (Actually, about 25 years ago I wrote a novel inspired by a visit to Ljubljana, called *Queenmagic*, *Kingmagic*, about a world dominated by the rules of chess, played using magic. This sort of unites the two themes of play and magic.)

JCS: For me, the definitive author (and perhaps even founder) of works of this sort is Jorge Luis Borges, who, as you'll know, was certainly fascinated by chess as a game and as an intellectual experience. I think that every novel is, in a certain sense, *Borgesian* because it invites the readers to "play" with the mystery which it sets forth. Every novel contains mystery (we don't know what'll happen on the next page) and every novel is likewise a game. What happens is that some authors think they can

transpose on to their pages the reality that surrounds them. Bad mistake! That's why I don't understand what "realist literature" signifies. I've read Fowles, and liked both of those novels.

IW: Computer games now dominate the world of entertainment, earning much more than films, never mind books. And we have virtual worlds such as *Second Life*. "Virtual" *not yet* in the sense that we can enter those as a subjective experience; although that'll probably happen before very long. Participants can become involved almost obsessively, so that the game world pushes the real world aside. And to be sure many game worlds involve simulated magic. Are these game worlds a psychological area where play and magic can genuinely combine, or a web of illusions & delusions, or just innocent pastimes? I don't know if you've written anything about players of games, whether physical games or electronic games.

JCS: I'm *very* interested in those topics. I've been an RPG player for a long time (although there's less and less free time these days to play), and a player of videogames. Those other realities interest me in the same way as I'm interested in theatre or cinema. I think they reflect something that has always interested human beings: to live in other realities, other worlds.

IW: Has psychodrama been any part of your own life, or is your life calm and reasonable? And *precisely because of normality*, do you need to create fictional psychodramas? Was your choice of studying psychiatry a conscious preparation for writing?

JCS: I have a writer friend who, when faced with a question like this, always replies, "I'm perfectly well; nothing has happened to me, neither good nor ill." He believes that the perfect life for a writer is that nothing out of the ordinary should happen to him. I say he's right; I consider that routine is fundamental for creativity, and I try to avoid drama in my, as it were, "real" life. Obviously psychiatry was an important experience for me, but I don't believe it was so decisive when I come to write.

IW: Music is very important to you. *The Art of Murder* and Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (*Transfigured Night*) correspond to one another. Rather than ask, as journalists have asked, whether you are inspired by music, I'd rather ask: is this relationship similar to a magical "correspondence" in the medieval sense? For instance: Blood = Spring = Air = Liver. Is this something which you sense intuitively, magically?

JCS: Sometimes I believe that's so, because this

business of being “inspired” by music is wrong. Neither music nor anything else inspires me; things happen to me, and sometimes ideas emerge, but I don’t find any causal relationships between one thing and another. Music serves as atmosphere for the ritual of writing, yes indeed, now that you mention it, like the magical chant that accompanies, in some way, any important rite.

IW: In England crime novels are regarded as *almost* having the status of literary novels. Not quite, but almost. Science fiction has little literary status in England, partly because the cultural establishment in general have little understanding of science. And the market for crime is five times larger than the market for SF. Crime novels are equivalent to the “entertainments” which Graham Greene wrote, by contrast with his “serious novels.” Interestingly, Ruth Rendell divides her writing between crime novels under her own name, featuring a detective, and much more psychological thrillers under the name Barbara Vine. What is the literary status of crime fiction in Spain? Or is this question meaningless?

JCS: It could be said that in Spain the situation of the crime novel is the same as in England, with the proviso that in Spain people read much less. But effectively the crime novel has a much wider market than SF, and the genre is regarded as more “noble” than other genres. I think that’s been due partly to the ghetto in which the recognized authors of SF have been pleased to include themselves. Traditional SF has treated itself as a sort of religion, and we all know that every religion has initiates and heretics, believers and disbelievers. However, my vision of SF is much freer than all that. I think if *The Art of Murder* can be classed as SF, then many so-called “literary” novels which have a big following

could be classed likewise.

IW: The American blurb of *Zig Zag* says that you’ve been published in over 30 countries worldwide. Does this include separate editions in different Spanish-speaking countries as well as translations? Were you surprised to be published in any particular country?

And are you published in Cuba, from which you and your parents were exiled long ago?

JCS: I’ve been translated into more than 30 languages, including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Hebrew, and Icelandic. Naturally, the luck my novels have had (12 have been published) isn’t the same for all of them, but on the whole I’ve been well received in almost all the countries where I’ve appeared. I was indeed surprised to be translated in some “exotic” lands, such as in the Far East. I’ve been published in Cuba by special permission to produce a non-earning edition (non-earning for the author, that’s to say, although the Cuban authorities collected), a permission which I granted since I’ve always believed that the population have nothing to do with the dictatorships which oppress them. I don’t believe that stopping Cubans from reading my books would accomplish anything to improve their catastrophic political situation.

Endnote

[1] Somoza’s website can be found at <http://www.clubcultura.com/clubliteratura/clubescritores/somoza/home.htm>

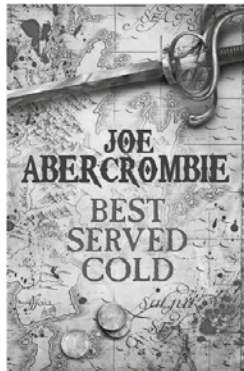
First Impressions

Edited by Kari Sperring

Joe Abercrombie – *Best Served Cold*
Gollancz 2009, £12.99, 534pp, tpb, ISBN
9780575082458

Reviewed by Lalith Vipulanathan

Joe Abercrombie's latest book, *Best Served Cold*, returns us to the world of his First Law trilogy with a standalone revenge tale set in the distant land of Styria. As Captain-General of the Thousand Swords mercenaries, Monza Murcatto has earned herself a bloody reputation and her employer, Duke Orso, the key to the throne of Styria.



Jealous of her popularity with the people and wary of a potential coup, Orso strikes first and has Monza thrown off a mountain. Miraculously she survives, and sets about gathering a group of suitably crooked individuals to aid her in a suicidal mission to take down the most powerful man in Styria and his cohorts.

Whilst not a particularly original story, a *Kill Bill*-esque roaring rampage of revenge should have been a good match for Abercrombie's brand of amorality and ultraviolence. Unfortunately the plot doesn't offer many surprises either and like the aforementioned film is a little on the bloated side too. Apart from the obvious and less than profound statement that revenge can be bittersweet, the implosion of Monza's unmerry band of men seems inevitable from the start and is indeed hammered home by Abercrombie's indulgent profusion of quotes about friends making the best enemies. What makes this all the worse is that *Best Served Cold* takes its sweet time getting there, so much so that a sense of boredom began to creep in around the halfway point which seems a rather fatal flaw for an edge of your seat thriller.

On the plus side the dialogue is as excellent as ever and Abercrombie's ability to form distinct narrative voices remains strong, with the duo of Shivers and Monza, as ignorant optimist and learned cynic respectively, making up the core

of the novel. Shivers continues the established Northman trend of self-deprecating black humour and Monza's singular focus is a notable improvement on previous female characterisation, if a little Glokta-lite; one gets drawn in as they both undergo a switch in attitudes over the course of the story. However, for all that it is Monza's fellow mercenary and former boss Costa who steals the show. The deliberately shallow drunkard is by far the most vivid member of Monza's band – mildly damning considering he's been borrowed from the earlier trilogy – but Abercrombie takes the opportunity to add some depth to his character. This goes some way to balancing the (once again) underused former torturer Vitari, as well as the intriguing yet underdeveloped foils such as the poisoner's apprentice Day, and Friendly the number-obsessed sociopath.

The complaints are perhaps a little harsh, but compared to Abercrombie's earlier books, *Best Served Cold* comes as a disappointment. *The First Law* trilogy was a breath of fresh air with a convoluted plot, sharp dialogue and excellent characters that leapt off the page. *Best Served Cold* has the same witty dialogue, but the plot is predictable and flabby and the characters simply don't match up. Here's hoping the next standalone can retain the creative flare of the original series a little better.



Caroline Barnard-Smith –
Dunraven Road
Immanion Press 2009,
£11.99, 248pp, pb, ISBN
9781904853657

Reviewed by Myfanwy Rodman

Trapped in the dead end suburbia of Dunraven Road, Zach knows he is meant for greater things. To his friends, he is a charismatic leader, to the desperate, a drug dealer extraordinaire. He is also the secret worshiper of ancient evil and now he is forming his own cult.

Enticing the disaffected youth of the neighborhood through sales of the highly addictive

drug 'red', Zach draws his host of disciples into a heady world of blood, pain and intoxication. But Zach not only worships vampires, he wants to become one. And all of it, the cult, the drugs, even his adoring girlfriend Kirsty, are only a means to that end.

Sapphire has loved Zach for years, even though she is going out with his best friend Justin, and she wants nothing more than to be his forever. But can even she stand back and watch as his plans lead to kidnap, torture and murder? She believes that she loves Zach but does she even know who he is? And how will she feel when she realises just what he is planning and how far he means to go?

Barnard-Smith's debut novel is tightly written and nicely paced. Tension grows slowly and eerily towards a thrilling finale, with just the right amount of mystery and horror. There is plenty of solidly described gore and even a few good 'squirmy' scenes. However the characterisation is sparse rather than satisfying and the focus broadly cinematic, never allowing the reader to become too immersed in the characters. For me this was ultimately unsatisfying.

The problems I had connecting with the characters meant that I had a hard time caring whether they lived or died and the rising tension of the plot was less effective. From the beginning the viewpoint characters were all unattractive in some way – even the heroes – so it was hard to root for them.

Dunraven Road often felt restrained and abrupt. Once they were introduced I wanted to know more about the vampires, their culture, society, back-stories, but this was largely ignored. They were set up as the bad guys, and nothing more. The shoot 'em up computer game style climax did nothing to address this. Though Barnard-Smith did try to inject some originality with Ray and his friends, a very different kind of vampire, this again was not developed fully enough.

Still, I'd imagine that for most this would be a thoroughly satisfying horror novel with its superb tension, its creepy atmosphere and nice gross-out scenes. Barnard-Smith is certainly a competent writer who knows how to get under a reader's skin, in the horror sense; some of the gorier scenes are still with me as I write this. I think with a few thousand more words to expand on the interesting bits, such as the vamps, this could really have been something.

All in all, a chilling, if slightly disappointing, offering from Immanion Press.

Eric Brown – *Starship Fall*

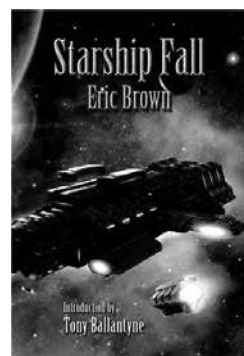
Newcon press, 2009, £9.99, 103pp, pb, ISBN 9781900679031

Review by Mark Connorton

Starship Fall is a sequel to *Starship Summer*, but is a self-contained story. The novella is about a group of friends who have retired to a beach resort on an alien planet, in a universe where a mass teleportation system has rendered starships obsolete. One of the friends leaves town urgently to search for his girlfriend, an indigenous alien woman who has disappeared to take part in a dangerous coming-of-age ritual, just as another meets a glamorous but washed-up actress recently arrived at the resort. These two events gradually become connected and intertwine over the course of the novella.

The alien ritual gives those who survive it the ability to catch glimpses of possible futures, and the effect of time on the characters is a major theme. There is a striking scene showing the actress holding a party full of holograms of figures from her earlier life, and several characters are haunted by events in their past and the thought of facing uncertain, and possibly lonely and empty, futures. This bleakness is offset by the warm depiction of the relationships of the group of friends, and the mutual support they provide each other.

Tony Ballantyne's introduction praises the novella for, among other things, being "hauntingly familiar" and for avoiding the "overwritten prose which excuses itself as cutting edge literature". This strikes me as a polite way of saying the book is old-fashioned and there's nothing wrong with that, if it's what you're after, but I was surprised at just how old-fashioned it is. Many of the characters are strictly from Central Casting: a retired starship captain is "piratical", an alien woman is "fey and elusive", and the has-been actress is pretty much exactly how you would imagine her to be. The aliens (who actually wave spears around and live in grass huts) could be natives from an old Tarzan serial and the whole story could be transplanted with very little effort to 1930s Earth, with a retired silent movie actress arriving in Kenya or Tangiers or any colonial city where there are exotic locals on hand to provide colourful rituals and ancient wisdom.



Although there is a certain nostalgic enjoyment to be had from such a well-worn story, I think it needs the dazzle of Bester or early Delany to make it work as science fiction and, although there's nothing wrong with it, the prose doesn't go the extra step to make the story shine. Everything hums along in an

undemanding way: the characters are likeable without being especially interesting, the plot twists are scrupulously foreshadowed but not that surprising, and there are brief moments of tension to keep you turning the pages. I wouldn't say it's the best introduction to Brown's work but fans and completists will doubtless want to read it, and as there is a limited print run of 350 copies, they will need to get a move on.

Kristin Cashore – *Graceling*
Gollancz 2008, £9.99, 340pp, tpb, ISBN
9780575084506

Reviewed by Myfanwy Rodman



In the Seven Kingdoms, men and women called Gracelings are marked by their odd coloured eyes as a race apart. Each is the bearer of a special talent; one might be an expert marksman, another a reader of minds. These abilities make Gracelings both envied and feared. Graced children are fostered by Royalty so that

their unique talents may be used for the good of the kingdom.

Katsa is niece to the King of Middluns and a Graced killer. From the moment of her first kill, at the age of eight, the nobles of the royal court have feared her talent and the fact that she has never been bested in battle. Katsa has few friends and bitterly hates her own Grace.

On a mission of mercy to rescue the kidnapped father of a foreign monarch, Katsa meets a mysterious Graced fighter whose skill almost matches her own and finds herself facing truths about the Graced that change her view of the world.

As the politics of the Seven Kingdoms begin to unravel the balance of Katsa's life also shifts. And she realises that the depths of her own power are all she may have to rely on to survive. Allies become enemies and Katsa is forced to turn from all she knows and embrace her Grace. She has been somebody else's killer for far too long, it's time to fight for herself.

Kristin Cashore's debut novel impressed me at first glance with its solid weight, quality cover art and detailed presentation. Once inside however, I found several disappointments. The writing was too often clunky and descriptions were sparse. I felt that the world, which was detailed, demanded more richness and depth in the writing. The pace was good and the level of tension kept

me reading, especially in the second half of the novel, where the action picked up and the plot points expanded. Despite this the novel remained simple and uncomplicated which sat awkwardly when the plot relied on political manoeuvrings to progress.

There were more than a few annoying niggles. The character of Tealiff, Grandfather of the King of Liend, whose kidnapping kick-starts the book, was in every way a MacGuffin, and never fleshed out as a character, which was very unsatisfying. And I really wanted to meet more Graced characters, especially those at the King of Middluns court, who were mentioned but never appeared.

But my pet hate by the end of this book were the names, Oll, Randa and Katsa sound very 'fantasy D&D' to me and not in a good way, while Po, the nickname of the equally bad Prince Greening Grandemalion, was truly horrendous: even explaining it away as the name of a tree didn't save it for me.

Despite all these problems I did enjoy this book and I suspect that a higher degree of editing would have improved it greatly. Definitely a first rate book in there trying to get out.

Sarwat Chadda – *Devil's Kiss*
Puffin 2009, £5.99, 279pp, pb ISBN 978-0-141-
32587-3

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

While most teenage girls – or so we're led to believe – worry about dating, zits and their GCSEs, Billi Sangreal's problems include the possibility of dying horribly and ending up in Hell. As the daughter of Arthur Sangreal, Master of the Knights Templar, her life consists of training in all kinds of combat and the best way of coping with demons. She's a protagonist likely to have tremendous appeal for the young adult audience of this book.

The story is set in present-day London, where the once-powerful order of the Knights Templar has shrunk to a small group of men and Billi. Their purpose is to preserve the world from evil, even though the odds are stacked against them. Billi rebels against her father's tough regime, feeling that he doesn't love her, and wants to make her own choices instead of having her life mapped out for her. This is where her readers will be able to identify with her; even though their own problems are more ordinary, the themes of rebellion and



relationships with parents will be familiar.

The action of the book is fast and compelling, with a touch of horror. Billi and the Templars have a suitably evil antagonist, who threatens to release the last Egyptian plague on London, though I'm not sure I entirely believe the author's identification of this character. (I'm being careful not to introduce a spoiler here). There's a marvellous 'all is lost' moment, and the way in which Billi and Kay together snatch victory out of defeat is wonderfully appropriate.

One aspect that I found intriguing is that all the Knights have Arthurian names, although they're not connected with their counterparts in Arthurian legend. In this novel, Gwaine (*sic*), not Kay, is Seneschal, and a potential traitor; Percy is West African; Balin is a priest. Kay in this novel is a fragile psychic, the Templars' channel into the occult, and, along with Billi, the most important character. So I'm not sure why the author chose to use the Arthurian names: it gives the book an added resonance in the idea of knighthood surviving through the ages, but I think it might have been more interesting to have developed correspondences with the Arthurian characters.

Necessarily, given the plot, the book is based on Biblical events and Christian belief. I liked the way the writer handled this; the characters are firmly Christian without trashing other forms of religion, and not unpleasantly pious. It makes a refreshing change from the neo-paganism which seems to be the default setting for religion in present-day fantasy novels.

I'm not the target audience for this book, which is probably why I was never totally immersed in it, but I still liked it a lot. It's Chadda's first novel, and a sequel is on the way. I'd be interested to see how he will develop his world.

John Clute – *Canary Fever*

**Becon Publications 2009,
£16.00, 440pp, pb, ISBN
9781870824576**

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer



It's sometimes hard to get a handle on the centre of what John Clute is bringing to the reviews in this new collection from Becon Publications. This is not due to his language – yes, Clute dives into the joy

of playful obscurity and neologism and *talking to the reader* rather than turning out summaries of the publisher's press release or product destined only for the Academic Industry (to which he gives

a couple of well-deserved, if slightly overdone, kickings in the interest of scholarship). But dictionaries are useful tools. Rather it's because Clute is an encyclopaedist who reviews, rather than a producer of academia-default monographs. There's the huge all-encompassing picture, and the sharp application of scheme to individual cases, but it's almost as if a middle-ground is absent. The basic structures of his critical approach are often scattered, summarised, or echoed in telegraphese (the term "body English" appears at least three times here) throughout these reviews and short essays. The collection is prefaced with a brief "Note on Fantastyka" which establish a few ground-rules about the nature of the literatures of the fantastic which are the central spine of fiction (Clute says) since the late eighteenth century, and which "infiltrate" these reviews. Some of these assumptions are referred to later – "Ever since the invention of the Future between 1750 and 1800" (165); "no story of the fantastic is in fact a genuine story of the fantastic unless it is meant literally" (309) – but it is frustrating not to have them examined and expanded.

In fact, only in a few essays such as the talk on "Fantastika" published in *Foundation* 103 (not presented here) does Theory thrash its way to the surface, to leave us wanting more and. Yet Clute is certainly the most incisive essayist in our field. He is not selling, describing, or force-feed-litcriting the books he writes about here: he is *reading* them. In reviewing Greg Feeley's *Arabian Wine* Clute writes of "the deep obduracy of the book, the adamancy of its pinioning of the world in the amber of Unawake, its deep refusal to sound the song"; but the last sentence of the paragraph, "More precisely, *Arabian Wine* is our world not happening", is the killer. When he says that *Slan* "is a security blanket of lost boys" we know what he means and in many ways there's more in that simple summary than in any book that anyone is likely (or, possibly, needs) to write about Van Vogt.

The best parts of this book, all of which is essential for anyone wanting to keep track of what the literatures of the fantastic are doing *right now* and what they mean, are where Clute gives himself space. Which is a lot of it. It begins with what ends up as (it's constructed from individual reviews in different places) an extended piece on John Crowley covering *Little, Big*, *Lord Byron's Novel*, and the "Aegypt" quarter, and continues with a similar survey of Michael Moorcock's "Pyatt" trilogy. It ends with a moving tribute to Thomas M. Disch, again taken from several places. Many of the best of the reviews are examinations of single books in which Clute's knowledge of

and feel for the literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (and of much more can be given time to *work*. When writing about Ian R. MacLeod's *Breathmoss*, for instance, he digresses – and in his revision for this publication later revises and elucidates this digression – to take issue with a remark made in one of the stories about the composer Richard Strauss. In the best of these pieces, which are closer to the tradition of the literary essay than the review, the pleasure of the text flirts tensely with the anxiety of influence and we, voyeuristically absorbed, anticipate the outcome.

Part of the reason I've described Clute's work as "essential" is simply because here we have critical coverage of important books – or at least books which speak to the age – which is either absent elsewhere or not engaged with nearly so well. I probably like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* a little more than he does, but he has put his finger on significant problems with the novel which none of the "mainstream" reviews I have read seem to have even considered as existing. To take another example, here is the only review I have read of the Taiwanese author Chang Hsi-Kuo's *The City Trilogy* – and again Clute notes *why* more science-fiction readers need to read books like this. (If a note of readerly smugness is discerned in my fixing upon that particular book, may I confess that I have actually read far too few of the books discussed here, The point is that I want, now, to read all of them.)

The range, in truth, here is astonishing. There are reviews of "standard" sf authors, but also Philip Roth (*The Plot Against America*), Andreas Eschbach (*The Carpet Makers*), David Mitchell (*Cloud Atlas*), Michael Chabon (*The Yiddish Policemen's Union*), Will Self (*The Book of Dave*), Sarah Hall (*The Carhullan Army*), and Thomas Pynchon (*Against the Day*) – all books which for reason of cherry-picking in the literary orchard or nationality (or both) will not be seen on the sf shelves in the bookshops. There are writers from within the field who push outward at boundaries or lurk in interstitiality: Kelly Link, Theodora Goss, and Nalo Hopkinson. And space opera. There is lots of space opera: books by Peter F. Hamilton, Iain M. Banks, Scott Westerfeld. There is an unpublished review/essay concerning John D. Watson's *Behaviourism* (1925) from where Clute quotes a passage which suggests that the organised, tidy, collectively-agreed future of the Behaviourist psychologists is linked to a kind of future-anxiety which underpins "the Secret Future of Scientifiction" – it is here where we find the reference to Van Vogt. Even where you know the book in question well – and the joy of such a collection, as I've implied, is that it will

introduce you to books you would never have come across – a new insight will send you back to it. There's a rather sour joke that reviewers read the books so you don't have to. But Clute's way of reviewing is to read the books so you *have* to: the way all the best reviewers and critics have done. Engrossed in the joy of reading and responding, in the engagement with *story* and what it does to the world instead of – as so many critics do – chiselling out a piece of the world and arguing for its justification by calling story to witness, Clute's *Canary Fever* reminds us why we read. It ought, it turn, to be read.

Thomas A Day – *A Grey Moon Over China*

Tor 2009 \$24.95, 411pp, hb, ISBN 9780765321424

Reviewed by Chaz Brenchley

Violence is futile, and endemic; we have met the enemy, and he is us.

It would be impossibly snide to say "There, now you don't need to read the book" – also self-defeating, because then you wouldn't need to read this review either. There's a temptation, though: if only to deflate the pomposity that constantly threatens to envelop and overwhelm this book. It believes, I think, that it's Important, beyond the generic importance of books; it has something to say, and it means to be certain that we hear it; it teeters constantly, sometimes desperately close to self-importance.

Which is a pity, because it's not a bad book by any measure. Any other measure. In many ways, indeed, it's excellent. Just ... well, not quite secure. It undermines itself.

A band of army engineers on a Pacific island stumble across a techno-treasure, the secret of unbridled power; which secret they use to blackmail the various governments of Earth into reviving a long-abandoned space colonisation project, so that they can get the hell off this sick planet. An orbiting torus will propel them through a wormhole, to a new planetary system. AI drones must go first, to prepare the way and build another torus at the other end; in the meantime, all the significant nations and alliances of Earth want to come too, and there's a deal of politicking and nastiness while we wait.

A drone does finally return to say it's safe, and actually they've found an even better planet somewhere else, that the new torus can send them to. Except that that turns out to be a dream beyond the reach of humankind, because violence erupts between the various national armadas as soon as they make the trip through the first torus, and that's before they encounter the fleet of alien

vessels...

It is a wonderfully ambitious work, swallowing time and space in its determination; its prose is masculine and robust, well suited to its material; and it does achieve many of its objectives. Just, it misfires early and often on the way, in both its characterisations and its structures.

Like Heinlein, Day fetishises engineering and is handwavy about the underlying science: which is fine, this is fiction, but he is equally handwavy about how this interesting tech is negotiated into use, how the whole desperate colonisation project is born and held together. All we see are the moments when it's nearly blown apart. Heinlein wouldn't do that.

The people here are engineered as much as the tech. They do what they're required to do, for the purposes of the plot. Which means that the initial catastrophe that drives the enterprise is actually just a farce: a crucial landing becomes a disastrous crash because the officer in charge is an incompetent who spews racist abuse at a multiracial squad, and I just never believed it. The core group of characters is so blatantly balanced – we have one African-American, one Chinese-American, one Japanese-American, so on and so forth, and our narrator is Latino – it makes no sense; there is no core ethnicity from which prejudice could derive.

Race is likewise a problem elsewhere in the book. All the Americans may be different Americans, but all the Chinese are the same Chinese, loyal 1950s Maoists chanting the party line in direct contravention of observable facts. And the Europeans are treacherous and stupid, almost meaningless, swiftly dismissed to a far lost fate after they have wreaked pointless and dreadful damage on their fellow-colonists.

The meaninglessness of violence is absolutely a theme, as is its constancy; wherever we go, we take it with us. Meaningfulness comes in dreams; this book mixes mysticism with its macho. And assigns roles to its soloists: the old Irish priest is the Voice of the Higher Purpose, as Sergeant Polaski is the Voice of the Military Machine, as President Allerton is the Voice of Politics and our narrator perhaps is the Voice of Reason. Individuals are no more sane than nationalities, and they are allowed absurd licence for the sake of advancing the plot, or possibly the message. The genius who programs the drones? Is the only one who knows how they are programmed, and is never pressured to give up her secrets. This is a massive planet-wide, galaxy-spanning project, and there is no redundancy.

Also, nobody changes. This isn't really a book about the apocalypse, despite its eco-dread and

the constant references to the Revelation of St John. It's about original sin, and determinacy. Which may be what renders it so relentlessly grim; I only remember reading one other book in my life that seemed to me so entirely without hope. "A Grey Moon Over China" has good ingredients, conspicuous craftsmanship and a certain absolute style; Day has much of the novelist's skillset, and he wields it well. But too much of his effort goes to the service of the message, at the expense of the book.

Greg Egan – *Oceanic*

Gollancz 2009, £5.99, 490pp, tpb, ISBN 9780575086524



Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

If you are reading this you are most likely a member of the BSFA, so it's axiomatic that this new collection from Greg Egan is essential reading. Egan writes both the hardest and some of the best SF around, and his largely idea-based SF is well suited to story length fiction – I won't append short to story because most of the works here, including the Hugo Award-winning title piece, fill at least 50 large format pages. There are only 12 tales in 490 pages, all of which originally appeared over the last 11 years, with seven first published between 2007 and 2009. Four stories were previously collected just last year, together with an additional story, 'Luminous', as *Dark Integers and Other Stories* (Subterranean Press).

Oceanic opens with the collection's weakest and most atypical story. 'Lost Continent' is a somewhat conventional narrative about a time-travelling Iraqi refugee in a US internment camp. It is atypical both in that the protagonist is an ordinary teenager rather than a brilliant scientist and that the science fictional element could be removed without undermining the story. This second point could not be made about any of the following 11 pieces, all of which fundamentally revolve around hard science, usually physics, maths or computer science with side orders of biology, cosmology, archaeology and other disciplines.

The stories are repeatedly concerned with pushing a particular scientific endeavour to the limits possible in a given situation, or solving an old scientific puzzle. In some stories the hard science element overwhelms the human dimension, though in the best Egan is as concerned with the human implications of the science as with the science itself. In some stories characterisation

is barely present, in others it is offered only to the extent it motivates the protagonists on their scientific quest.

In the title story ten-year-old Martin has a mystical experience when he is 'baptised' into the Deep Church. 'Oceanic' takes place on a colony world which lost contact with wider human civilisation 20,000 years ago. Martin is largely characterised by the development of his faith – there is a subplot involving sexual coming of age which has scant relevance to the main story and appears included to demonstrate a bold biological idea – and eventual crisis of belief arising from his later studies as a biologist into the ancient mysteries of the planet. Here Egan envisions a straw-man parody of Christianity, purely for the purpose of demolishing it, a feat he achieves by building his narrative around the discovery of a scientific explanation for the core miracle of the Deep Church. It is a flawed polemic in that Christianity itself is nowhere near as easy to undermine.

Far better is 'Oracle'. In a parallel world, mathematician Robert Stoney, a barely disguised analogue for Alan Turing, is rescued from incarceration by a visitor from the future. Turing's resultant spate of scientific invention leads John Hamilton, an equally plain *faux* C.S. Lewis, to conclude Stoney is in league with the devil. The lynchpin of the story is a TV debate between Hamilton and Stoney concerning the possibility of artificial intelligence, and therefore the nature of human consciousness. Egan plays fair by both men and the result should satisfy those on either side of the religious/scientific debate.

'Oracle' follows 'Singleton', to which, though it is set a century earlier, it is a sequel. If, as the Many Worlds Interpretation implies, there is a universe for each different possible action, is free will an illusion? In 'Singleton' a momentary act of bravery leads a young Sydney-based mathematician to question the deterministic and therefore moral implications of a theoretical multiverse of parallel realities. His act of courage changes the protagonist's future, giving him the self-confidence to ask out fellow student Francine and thus setting the course of his personal life, but also leading to a ingeniously conceived investigation into artificial intelligence in a search for true freedom of choice. Together 'Singleton' and 'Oracle' form the best work in *Oceanic*, a stunning 115 pages of exceptionally imaginative writing with clear moral and philosophical purpose.

Also starting in near future Sydney is 'Dark Integers', about a mathematical conflict between incompatible realities fought partly by laptop from New South Wales' Blue Mountains. It is

actually a sequel to 'Luminous', the title story of Egan's 1998 collection. It is also the sort of mind-spinning tale at which Egan excels, as is 'Crystal Nights', a story nominated this year for a BSFA Award and reprinted in a booklet included with a recent *Vector*. It is another thought-provoking account of an artificial intelligence research quest, which Egan characteristically extrapolates to the logical extreme. 'Steve Fever' is the final near-future tale, a lighter story of a teenager who wants to run away from the family farm to find adventure in the city, though only because he is compelled by the Stevelets in his brain. A medical nanotechnology project has followed its programming to impossible ends with catastrophic and sometimes whimsical consequences.

'Border Guards' introduces the mind-boggling invention that is quantum soccer – 'The match was being played by the oldest, simplest rules: semi-classical, non-relativistic.' (There is an interactive illustration at <<http://www.gregegan.net/BORDER/Soccer/Soccer/html>>). The game is described in vivid terms, yet the core of the story is an examination of the future shock implicit in coming to terms with immortality and the transition from our society to a very different tomorrow. Extended human life-span and the move to post-humanity in software is central to 'Induction', which follows a space project from the moon at the turn of the next century to the depths of space, and lays some of the groundwork for a timeline which could result in Egan's Amalgam universe.

The three remaining stories in *Oceanic* are explicitly set in the far future Amalgam, also the setting for Egan's 2008 novel, *Incandescent*. 'Riding the Crocodile' explores attempts to make contact with another advanced civilisation, the Aloof, through the medium of a millennia-spanning existential quest to find a meaningful reason to die at the end of an already millennia-old marriage. Egan addresses the question of how to fill an immortal life satisfactorily, but unsurprisingly fails to find a convincing answer. 'Glory' and 'Hot Rock' are only able to find narrative interest by moving completely outside of the benign Amalgam into worlds which know nothing of its existence. 'Glory' is a relatively minor story set against a rapidly heating cold war, while 'Hot Rock' posits a series of intriguing ancient mysteries in a story with echoes of Clarke's *Rendezvous With Rama*.

At the risk of being lambasted as Adam Roberts was over his review of *Incandescent* on Strange Horizons (<http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2008/06/incandescence_b-comments.shtml>), in the Amalgam stories Egan's characterisation is so slight the tales blend together

in the memory and become a scientifically-intriguing continuum with little impact. In other stories in this collection, and in novels such as *Permutation City*, *Distress* and *Diaspora*, Egan demonstrates that he can brilliantly combine story, hard science and complex characterisation. With the Amalgam universe it appears he simply has other priorities. With this caveat in mind, *Oceanic* is an excellent collection. The best stories will stay with you for a long time.

Max Frei – *The Stranger*

Gollancz 2009, £18.99, 544pp, hb, ISBN 9780575089747



Reviewed by David McWilliam

The Stranger is the first volume of the hugely successful Russian fantasy series *The Labyrinths of Echo*. It is the first person narrative of Max Frei, a self confessed 'loser' who by the age of twenty-nine has been unable to build a life for himself due

to his inability to sleep at night. During the day, when he sleeps very soundly, Max's dreams are so vivid that they hold the same subjective reality value as his waking experiences. Travelling widely during his somnolent adventures, he repeatedly finds himself in a pleasant cafe, talking to an elderly gentleman. The venue is later revealed to be the Glutton Bunba in the city of Echo and his conversational partner is the influential Sir Juffin Hully, the Most Venerable Head of the Minor Secret Investigative Force of the Capital of the Unified Kingdom. The traits which prevent Max from finding a place in his society are deemed by Juffin to be the perfect qualities for the role of his Nocturnal Representative, and a job offer is made and accepted within his last 'real world' dream. Once in Echo, a city wherein magic is strictly regulated, but also readily available, Max must learn its customs and rules, allowing the reader to orient themselves at the same time. He quickly develops a formidable reputation for himself within the powerful, yet also somewhat dysfunctional, team that operate from the House by the Bridge, as they defeat spectral murderers, living dolls and repeatedly thwart the malevolent designs of dead Grand Magicians.

The blurb on the back of the book seems designed to entice as wide an audience (from the readership of the fantastic) as possible, claiming that *The Stranger* is a story for fans of

Steve Erickson, Susanna Clarke, Neil Gaiman and Salman Rushdie, a novel that is 'part fantasy, part horror, part philosophy, part dark comedy'. I found these assertions to be both intriguing and highly dubious; and, unfortunately, the latter premonition proved to be correct. Though it can be reductive to make comparisons between authors, I feel that I must refute the suggestion that this text is evocative of any of the (very different) authors mentioned above, save perhaps Neil Gaiman, whose *Neverwhere* (1996) deals with a similar portal fantasy scenario to much greater effect. Whereas Gaiman juxtaposes the real and imaginary, allowing each to bleed into the other, Frei's protagonist is plucked out of a world the reader is not made familiar with, meaning that it is necessary to try to construct him from his mannerisms and self reflections, which veer wildly from excessive self-love to the lowest ebb of self-disgust. Combined with Juffin's attempts to mould him into the role of his successor, this makes the character hard to relate to.

Max's ability to excel at almost every task he is assigned further undermines any empathy he might generate, as he seems to have an innate ability to save himself without even trying. Often the rules of a fantasy world are set up just so that extremely powerful mages can prove their omnipotence by breaking them, but in *The Stranger* I had no real sense of what was possible or impossible due to the ever-increasing range of Max's abilities, which were often activated without his conscious volition. The unfortunate effect of this is to make everything seem utterly whimsical, which precludes the promised sense of horror and undermines what would otherwise be an intriguing fantasy world.

Juffin's team are assigned the task of seeking out those who flout the law and use forbidden magic which, in a manner reminiscent of role playing games, is measured in levels. Those who uphold the law are exempt from its prohibitions, and use their superior knowledge of thaumaturgy to quickly destroy or incapacitate the opponents. The deadly outcome of most of their investigations is counterbalanced by the banter between the members of the Minor Secret Investigative Force, which is evidently supposed to provide comic relief. Whether the humour was lost in the translation or simply did not appeal to me, I found their exchanges, characterised by melodrama and an abundance of exclamation marks, really quite tiresome. Collectively, they came across as members of a privileged old boys' club, constantly reinforcing their sense of superiority through mutual backslapping and hyperbolic praise.

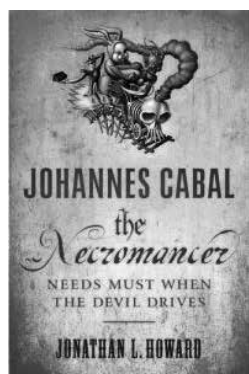
Whilst their opponents are often suitably

weird, such as a vampiric beast within a mirror, an entity that can consume its victims in their dreams, and the ghostly revenant of a Grand Magician of one of the forbidden orders who consumes the inmates of the cell in which he died, not once did I receive the impression that a major character was truly threatened. The novel is structured around these episodic encounters, which are for the most part completely self-contained, and the ease with which they are solved, combined with the lack of any overarching story beyond Max's professional development, meant that I found the novel hard work, in spite of the simple prose style.

It is only in relation to Max's unsuccessful romance with his colleague Lady Melamori that I saw him having to overcome any sustained hardship and, in doing so, become far more engaging. This gave a brief hint as to what the novel might have been if Max had faced any real adversity in his escapades and been exposed to any significant danger. If I had to guess, the text indicates that he will most likely find a way of overcoming the seemingly insurmountable barrier that forbids their relationship, as there are strong hints that he has a destiny as some form of 'chosen one' and is told that "everything works for you sooner or later" (527). The combination of a glorious destiny without any sense of a limit to Max's growing powers left me feeling deeply uninterested in finding out how this sequence will end and I will therefore not be reading any further instalments.

Jonathan L Howard – *Johannes Cabal – the Necromancer*

Headline 2009, £19.99, 335pp, hb, ISBN 9780755347834



Review by Simon Guerrier

Johannes Cabal has made a deal with the devil. He's already sold his soul; the deal is to win it back. Cabal has one year to claim 100 *other* souls, and Satan's even going to throw in the means with which to claim them. Soon Cabal is in charge of a travelling carnival, with something to tempt every

punter.

But Cabal has obstacles in his way: rival villains and wizards, concerned local residents and his own vampiric brother. And he can only use his dark powers sparingly; they're linked to a ball of black blood down in Hell that shrinks every time he performs a spell.

There's all the makings of a rich and lively adventure here, but sadly it never quite works. The ball of black blood, for example, is forgotten as soon as it's introduced. Rather than curbing Cabal's efforts, it seems he just does what he likes.

Nor does the year's deadline feel much of a ticking clock. Cabal sets up his carnival, claims his first victims and makes excuses for a few more. The middle chapters are unconnected episodes: Cabal getting caught in a hell dimension, or the carnival as seen by a small boy. Then, without much sense of time passing, or how the carnival and its staff have developed, we skip to the end and a race for the last two victims. There's no sense of time passing, of the seasons changing, of the strain Cabal is under. In fact, while he may get a bit cross when inconvenienced, there's little sense that events really affect him.

Cabal's brother, Horst, acts as his conscience. The vampire struggling to go without blood is not a hugely original idea. There's no new spin on the character here. Horst chides Cabal and helps save a few worthy souls, but is powerless to sway his brother. The later stages of the book would have worked better had Horst had more influence, or suggested Cabal is more conflicted than he lets on.

As it is, we don't feel any great pressure on Cabal. And to be honest, until the last couple of pages we're given little reason to root for him, either. He's pompous, arched and sarcastic without ever quite straying into wit. That in itself is a major problem for what's meant to be a darkly comic novel. It simply isn't all that funny, dramatic or original.

The denouement hangs on whether Cabal will claim the souls of two poor, innocent women to meet his deadline. But with almost no indication of his having any scruples, this hardly works as a crisis of character.

And yet the last two pages reveal *why* Cabal sold his soul in the first place, and why to reclaim it again he's gone to such effort and given up so much. There's the first hint of a much more complex, conflicted and interesting character there. One who may well support a continuing series.

Colin Harvey (Ed.) – *Future Bristol*



Swimming Kangaroo Books
2009, £9.99, 234 + x pp, pb,
ISBN 9781934041932

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Future Bristol is a collection of love stories for the city of Bristol – not just future but also

past, possible present and sideways. And why not? Bristol is, or should be, a science fiction city, as editor Colin Harvey points out in his Introduction. It probably has more Brunel monuments than any other city – Temple Meads station, the SS *Great Britain*, the Clifton suspension bridge. And who could forget Concorde, or the Bristol Brabazon, a double decker airliner long before that interloper the A380?

Actually the authors all have amnesia as regards the Brabazon, but Brunel does very nicely and his work appears in most of the stories. Most often it's the bridge, but the *Great Britain* turns up in a role that might have surprised her builder – a pirate flagship in Joanne Hall's enjoyable future noir "Pirates of the Cumberland Basin".

In Liz Williams's "Isambard's Kingdom", Brunel and his bridge itself are co-opted by mysterious forces to ensure that the future he builds is the right one. Several stories sidle up to the fact that Bristol was built on a dark past of slavery and oppression, as well as the nicer things we would rather remember, but Williams' faces up to it squarely, accepts the fact, and offers Bristol's redemption.

Nick Walters' "Trespassers" introduces us to the exciting world of Urbex – the very real world but extremely science fictional past time of exploring derelict manmade structures. An evocative venture into the ghostly, abandoned passages of the Clifton Rocks Railway – a Victorian funicular tunnelled into the cliffs of the gorge – leads to an encounter with similar-minded but far more advanced beings doing their own unique form of urban exploration.

I was expecting to like Jim Mortimore's "The Sun in the Bone House" the least, not because of the author (who has a fine body of spinoffery behind him) but because of an unpromising start that uses jumped-up present-tense narration and jumbled images. It may be artistic to some points of view but is usually a turn-off for me. But I ended up perhaps enjoying it the most for the ease with which he takes Bristol from a prehistoric collection of hovels to the jewel of a glorious post-Stapledon, post-human, post-material universe, all in the space of 5000 words. Bristol at the end of time – who'd have thunk?

There are no duds, though some work better than others. The whole collection is a good read by a good set of authors. It may help to know Bristol better than I do but it's no disaster if you don't. Above all, it does what Harvey says he wanted to do in the Introduction: the writers send up a flare to anyone of a similar mind in the Bristol area, and Bristol itself sends up a flare to the rest of the world. In both cases it says, *here we are!*

Jane Lindskold – *Thirteen Orphans*
Tor 2008, 367 pp, hb, ISBN 9780765317001

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The events of this fantasy take place in our town world, the difference being that in the novel magic, of various traditions, is real. Brenda Morris is a nineteen year old American college student who has no notion of the hidden magic that exists behind the surface of her ordinary, everyday existence, until she accompanies her father, Gaheris, on a trip to meet an old friend of his, Albert Yu. Finding Albert's office ransacked and the man himself apparently missing, Gaheris, along with another old friend, Pearl Bright,



informs his daughter of her inheritance as the descendant of one of the Thirteen Orphans, exiles from the Land of Smoke and Shadows: not just a distant land, but another world.

The original Thirteen Orphans were twelve scholars and magicians, formerly advisers to a deposed and deceased Emperor, and that Emperor's young son. In order to prevent the destruction of their land by the new Emperor and his supporters, and to guarantee the safety of their families, the twelve entered our world, living at first in China. They brought the deposed Emperor's son with them to keep him safe. Each of the Orphans is associated with a sign of the Chinese zodiac, and their magic has been encoded in the Chinese game of Mah-Jong. At their death, their power passes to their heir. Among the children and grandchildren of the Thirteen Orphans, Albert Yu is the Cat, the current Emperor, Pearl is the Tiger, while Gaheris is the Rat, and as she now discovers, Brenda is his heir presumptive.

After years without any contact or overtures from their enemies who remain in the Lands of Smoke and Sacrifice, the present-day Thirteen Orphans now find themselves under attack once more. The memories of nine of the Orphans have been stolen, including those of Albert Yu, and after an encounter with a magician and warrior from the other world, so are those of Gaheris. Brenda, finding that some of the Rat's powers have passed to her, must join with the remaining Orphans, the Tiger, Rooster, Dog and Rabbit to locate and defeat their enemies once more. Not an easy task, when they are not even sure who their enemies are, or exactly what they want. The capture of one of the enemy and Brenda's ill-advised attraction to

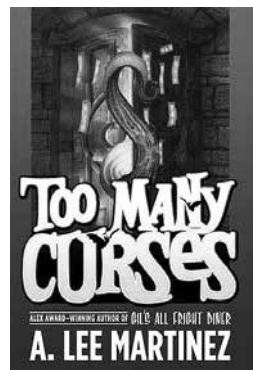
him are a further complication.

This novel, with its contemporary urban scenario, its characters who have bills to pay and exams to take, even while they must learn how to use their innate inherited posers, has a voice of its own in its depiction of the magical lying just beneath the mundane. The way the magic works, the importance of words and their and meaning, even the magical attacks of the enemy are all consistent with the novel's Chinese cultural, historical and mythological background, which is a relatively untapped area for fantasy fiction. The first in a series, the novel does reach a conclusion, but the next book in the series, which will hopefully take the story forwards, is eagerly awaited.

A Lee Martinez – *Too Many Curses*
Tor, 2008, 320pp, hb, ISBN 9780765318350

Reviewed by Simon Guerrier

Nessy the Kobold is the servant in an evil wizard's castle. She feeds the monsters and chats to the ghosts and avoids the advances of Decapitated Dan. When the evil wizard accidentally gets killed, the inhabitants of the castle think their curses will be lifted. But their troubles have only just begun.



This is a fun, fast-moving adventure packed full of daft characters and incident. The prose is straightforward and there are plenty of jokes. The chaotic plot, as more monsters and obstacles rain down on Nessy, is all nicely tied up in the end. It's a satisfying – and quick – read. Though there's plenty of icky things going on – belching and vomiting and being eaten alive – Martinez rarely lets us in on anyone's pain. For example, a character has the tip of their tail turned to ice and we don't get any sense of how that feels, how it chills the rest of the body. Nor is there much urgency about changing the tail back.

Perhaps this is part of Nessy's character – we're often told she's a practical soul, more worried about keeping the castle tidy than the various creatures that want to kill her. By the end she's changed her priorities and learnt to take charge of herself. But rather than her character developing all the book, this change comes rather suddenly in a final confrontation with... It would spoil it to say too much more.

I assume *Too Many Curses* is for the same sort of audience as devours *Harry Potter*. Which makes

the swearing a surprise. Sir Tedeus calls people "wanker" several times and there's one occasion of "bastard." (Ron Weasley can say "bloody hell" in the movies, but he can't swear in the books.)

There's the same recourse to books and the slow learning of magic as Potter, the same tests and dark wizards and dark humour. There's the same plucky, oppressed underling who must dare to challenge a legendary dark wizard to a duel. There's the same lessons of compassion overcoming evil, and of the hero's reliance on their friends.

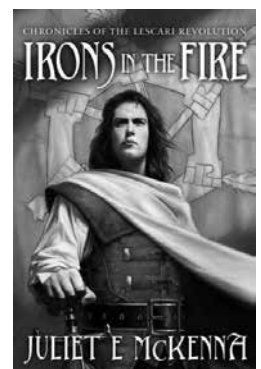
But *Too Many Curses* lacks the emotional depth of JK Rowling. We don't feel for Nessy or her friends. The books ends open enough for there to be further adventures for Nessy, but there's no urgency for them.

Juliet E McKenna – *Irons in the Fire* (*Chronicles of the Lescari Revolution*)

Solaris 2009, £12.99, 523pp, tpb, ISBN 9781844166206

Reviewed by Penny Hill.

From the outside, this fantasy appears conventional enough. We have the usual map to tell us where we are and which places are important. The setup is six dukedoms within the kingdom of Lescar. Each duke has ambitions to become High King but no individual is powerful enough. They work together in constantly shifting alliances and family obligations as they inter-marry their children; they work against each other through military campaigns initiated each season. War is the normal condition. It feels like the board game *Warrior Knights* – especially with the vulnerability of the dukes ensuring they have a strong heir.



Very soon, you realise the normal fantasy world tropes are subverted. Characters who would normally be background actors are here the protagonists and the powerful characters who typically dominate these narratives are reduced to mostly off-stage forces – changing people's lives as implacably as forces of nature.

Instead of a generic fantasy, we have a class struggle. Our main characters are economic migrants, sending wages back to whichever dukedom they come from, to enable their families to pay their duke's levies for militias for the campaigns. There are very few actual peasants,

since the characters typically need the skills and/or resources to have agency. So while their parents may have had an agricultural or service industry background (such as inn-keeping), our protagonists are skilled craftspeople – weavers, smiths, map-makers, tutors and scholars.

I enjoyed the character development, although with the size of the cast some protagonists remained unavoidably sketchy. Some fledgling relationships are depicted but the strongest concrete bond we see is one of friendship. The third-person narration shifts viewpoints, so we see several characters from both the inside and outside, challenging the perceptions we have built up.

The overall structure of the story is hard to tell from this first volume. I would strongly recommend reading the novella “Turns and Chances” beforehand. It acts as a prequel to this series and quickly establishes the world. Without the background from the novella, you may find the complex opening of this novel off-putting. While there are many incidents in this novel, the overall pace is slow-moving as complicated events are gradually set in motion. McKenna explicitly acknowledges this, having her characters discuss how fast time is passing while their preparations are underway. Even knowing that this is the start of a series, I was expecting more progress – by the end of this volume I was already looking forward to what will happen next. Given that these are the “chronicles of the Lescari revolution”, one potential weakness is that the struggle seems purely focussed on removing the existing feudalism. I am intrigued as to what might happen next – assuming of course that the revolution is successful. We have a couple of occasions when Evord deliberately avoids replacing one powerful figurehead with himself. Is that really what will happen? Will our planners become reluctant dictators or will they find a way to institute a more representative form of government? One character raises the question but no-one offers any answers.

I enjoyed the world-building information, from details such as the fact that the food supply chain was part of the planning (and nobody attempted to cook stew when on the march) to the stark depiction of pre-industrial warfare. Mercenaries are the closest equivalent to a professional army and a necessary part of the dukes’ strategies but their code and actions are despised by others. The militias recruited by the dukes to protect their various towns and castles are made up of whoever is available – with the inexperienced sent to the front in any conflict to act as arrow fodder. Only the survivors are promoted.

Medicine is at an early stage of development –

an apothecary is glad to examine some skeletons so he can see how hip and spine joints work. One key character has a motor dysfunction that leaves him reliant on a servant and the difficulties of that interdependency is nicely drawn. His choices are challenged and we see him becoming more active and enduring the resulting pain. There is a strong sense that most people’s choices will be curtailed by accident or disease as they get older and that only money can guarantee future security.

Magic does exist in this world but it is rare and mistrusted. While allegedly controlled by an Archmage, we see very little of it in this volume. In most fantasies, we would expect an Archmage to become a key character, however the treatment of the dukes suggests he may remain an off-stage influence.

I would recommend *Irons in the Fire*. It is entertainingly challenging to follow all the shifting priorities between the conspirators and across the different dukedoms. While quite a long book (500 plus pages in trade paperback) it is a fairly quick read and I finished it wanting to know what happens next.



Frederik Pohl – *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon*.

Tor 2009, 320pp, pb, ISBN 978765321777

Reviewed by Mark Harding

The obvious question, of course, is what would Brūno think? Is this re-issue, first published in 1980, a timeless Little Black Dress or a pair of bell-bottom trousers?

Published when the admirably energetic Pohl was aged about 60, *Beyond The Blue Event Horizon* (hereafter shortened to ‘Blue’) is the follow up to the enormously successful *Gateway*. Robin Broadhead – a multi-millionaire from recovering Heechee alien technology in the previous novel – has funded an Earth-technology expedition to a Heechee Food Factory in the Oort Cloud. But the travellers find much more than an empty factory...

Does a mere 3 decades show a difference in cultural trends? Well, yes. And there’s a great deal of fun in uncovering and comparing assumptions and attitudes. The ship’s computer, for example, is capable of engaging in conversation with the crew, yet they can beat it at chess. Attitudes also change – there is remarkable lack of paranoia about big business and government. The Corporate representatives in *Blue* are pussycats, behaving with a respect for individuals that is touchingly

unbelievable.

Alas, the problems come from areas other than fashion. Firstly, there is the issue of what a Channel 4 documentary might call 'When character driven plot... goes wrong.'

Much of the action comes from the characters making the strangest decisions – either from whimsy, or to provide Pohl with material to fill up the pages. For example, if you were funding a dangerous space mission lasting 8 years, would you send a family of four that includes a 10-year old girl and a granddad that fought in WW2?

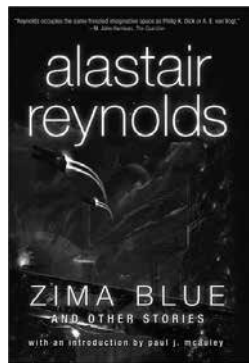
More seriously, there is a great deal of irrelevant characterisation. Pages are invested on detailing individuals, only for them to turn into mere bit players. Most of the characters aren't even likeable (or interestingly dislikeable). And much of the character exploration seems required mainly to justify unlikely plot twists – which frequently turn out to be incidental to the main story anyway.

Secondly, there is the Chekov's gun problem of the Heechee.

Right from act one, the expectations of a meeting are set: with an isolated spaceship travelling to the artefact, and characters fantasising about the Heechee. But the reader also learns from the start that this expectation will never be met. So we end up in the unfortunate position that the characters are in suspense but the reader isn't.

This hurts, because the background to *Blue* is the sort of daring, exciting speculation that makes Space Opera my drug of choice. The last two chapters are great – the piecing together of clues, and then the final reveal of the BIG picture. If only there weren't so much irrelevant noise before we get there.

So, the catwalk summary: The ideas appearing at the end of the show are classic – definite LBD – the sort of thing we can't do without, dahling. But the cut and stitching leave much to be desired. OK as a bargain from Oxfam, but I wouldn't pay full price for it.



Alastair Reynolds – *Zima Blue*
Gollancz 2009, £18.99, 403pp,
hb ISBN 9780575084056

Reviewed by Jaine Fenn

Alastair Reynolds has established himself as a major voice in British SF, and in this short story collection he expands his already broad horizons. Reynolds, who has a PhD in astronomy, usually imposes constraints on his novels, and steers clear of anything that breaks

the laws of physics as we currently understand them. This means no FTL, hyper-intelligent aliens, immortality or trans-dimensional travel. However, with these stories he's thrown away the rule-book.

None of the stories take place in his 'Revelation Space' universe, but some of them are linked, which gives the collection a structure it might otherwise lack, as the very range of the author's imagination can result in some mildly disorientating mental gear-shifting between one story and the next.

The settings vary from current day to far future, and the tone from dark and pessimistic to light and almost whimsical (there's certainly something whimsical about using an avatar of Elton John to explain the mysteries of spacetime!). The stories are often built around a slow reveal, as we find out, with the characters, that things are not what they seem. The problems presented aren't always resolved, but his style of storytelling means the reader may be too busy enjoying the ideas to worry about the lack of formal resolution.

The downside of such a rich conceptual imagination can be a corresponding lack of emphasis on plotting and characterisation. Ideas matters more than action, and rather than the depths of emotion and complexities of motivation, Reynolds concentrates on the height and breadth of the human intellect. In places some stories, particularly those written early in his career, read more almost like science articles; but they are such interesting articles that this isn't necessarily a problem. Having said this, some of the later stories display Reynolds' developing skill at using an evocative word or phrase to convey the necessary impression of a technological innovation or unfamiliar concept, whilst allowing the reader fill in the details for him or herself.

The collection's title story is one of the strongest, with a simple but haunting plotline, and its placing as the final story in the book makes more sense than it might first appear. Other memorable tales include the classic space opera 'Spirey and the Queen' and the quiet subversion of 'Cardiff Afterlife'. One contemporary story, 'Everlasting' arguably isn't even SF. A personal favourite was the novella 'Minla's Flowers', one of the most recently penned stories in the collection; in this story we are given snapshot views through the eyes of a seemingly powerful yet ultimately impotent observer as he watches the disintegration of a doomed culture. The flowers of the title are his initial gift of peace to an innocent child, but by the end have assumed a far more sinister significance.

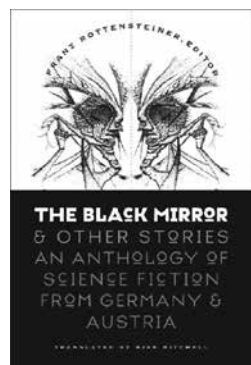
This is a book bursting with ideas, and if you don't mind occasionally having said ideas conveyed via slightly thin characterisation and

plotting, then it might just be essential reading.

Franz Rottensteiner (ed) – *The Black Mirror & Other Stories. An Anthology of Science Fiction from Germany & Austria* (translated by Mike Mitchell)
Wesleyan University Press 2008, \$85.00/\$27.95, 377pp, unjacketed cloth & trade pb, ISBN 9780819568304 (hb), 9780819568311 (pb)

Reviewed by Ian Watson

Wesleyan University Press continues its excellent Early Classics of Science Fiction Series (Verne, Stapledon, Robida, etc) with a volume that in fact ranges from 1871 unto 2008, right up to date. But before we get on to the redoubtable scholarship involved in this volume, it's worth stressing immediately that, as regards the fiction, this is for the most part a distinctly *fun* book to read – right from the 1870s onwards – to an extent that surprised me, not having known much beforehand about the early and middle days of German SF. I once put a copy of a Perry Rhodan novel in my freezer for 3 months to see what would happen (it remained unchanged), but



otherwise German SF passed me by a bit till now.

The very first tale, by Kurd Lasswitz, is a witty and lyrical delight; okay, a bit talky at times, but generally high-spirited as well as elegant. Ludwig Hevesi's "Jules Verne in Hell", from Austria in 1906, continues the witty, inventive route; another gem.

Personally I found the story by Otto Willi Gail rather nifty as a narrative, although the intro ticks him off as a techy who wasn't greatly talented so that his "story is an interesting period piece with surrealist overtones, although not very important as a criticism of modern society." Aha, Franz Rottensteiner has his Marxist hat on. Writers have social duties. Likewise, Hans Dominik "showed no understanding of scientific thought and hardly more of technological progress". Personally I'd say he's at least in the ballpark, and his exhilarating yarn is a decent attempt at conveying astronautics, despite its inaccuracies, as of 1934 – what does one expect?

A recurrent theme, in several more recent stories, is of a highly conformist society which prides itself on its liberalism, which is thus in reality a mirage; a reiterated comment on modern German society. Carl Amery's brilliant 1985 tale of enforced conformism plus sensationalism

really pushes the button foresightfully as regards contemporary Britain's, never mind Germany's, society of rapidly metastasizing surveillance cameras and reality TV; and it's neat that the city of Passau, which Amery destroyed fictionally, proceeded subsequently to give him a lifetime award. It's also neat to know that Karlheinz Steinmüller is now a TV futurology pundit; the last time I met him and Angela, after the collapse of East Germany, along with a very decent income for SF writers, he was feeling lucky to have a job trawling through the Stasi archives. Their story blathers a bit, then picks up poetically. Involving as it does a sheer fantasy of radioactivity, for a modern story it feels curiously like one of the golden oldies written with innocent enthusiasm; although Philip Dick was just as cavalier about radioactivity in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* so why shouldn't the Steinmüllers be likewise?

Stalwart author and former editor at massive publisher of SF, Heine Verlag, Wolfgang Jeschke weighs in vigorously and wittily with a piece about body organ purchases from "partners" in poorer countries; and there are jolly strong pieces from numerous other writers too, modern ones predominating. Interestingly, Helmut Mommers' "Habemus Papam" of 2005 about the election of a robot Pope causes the initial reaction, "Hey, Silverberg already did this brilliantly years ago!" followed presently by the realisation that this story is even more brilliant. So a book which I suspected initially might be a bit of hard work is actually a delight.

Credit for the buoyancy of *The Black Mirror* must of course go, not only to the authors bygone and still present, but to the translator of it all, award-winning Mike Mitchell who lives in the west of Scotland; and a jolly good idea it was to have the complete anthology translated by the same person, of such calibre, rather than by various, varying hands. A momentum of trust develops.

The book seemed to me slightly over-footnoted. Do we really need to be told who Albert Schweitzer was, or what "Jawohl, mein Führer" means? Well, the volume is targeted at an American, not a European, readership, although an audience that's presumably already up to speed on such matters. Still, better to be safe than sorry; and a lot of the footnotes at the back are invaluable. Well done, Franz Rottensteiner.

Olaf Stapledon – *Last And First Men*
Gollancz 2009, £7.99, 297pp, pb, ISBN 9780575082564

Reviewed by L J Hurst



At the end of the twentieth century Gollancz re-published *Last And First Men* as the eleventh SF Masterwork (then re-published their re-publication, so you can find it in two different covers). It is now part of their Space Opera Collection along with Greg Bear's *Eon*, Clarke's *Rendezvous With Rama* and Larry Niven's

Ringworld. It is, of course, the grand-daddy of them all; actually inspiring those later authors, as Arthur C Clarke once admitted, and as Gregory Benford implies in his Foreword, while C. S. Lewis wrote part of *Out Of The Silent Planet* as a repudiation of Stapledon's remorseless vision of millions of years of evolution, through eighteen different species of "men".

Clarke and the biologist John Maynard Smith read the same copy in the Porlock, Somerset, village library, while Doris Lessing, as she says in her Afterword, read it in a farmhouse in the Rhodesian bush. First published in 1930, by 1937 it was so widely known that Jorge Luis Borges reviewed it in Spanish. A work of fiction with no plot and almost no characters (a few individuals appear, though never named), *Last And First Men* may have only one precursor, Winwood Reade's Victorian world history, *The Martyrdom Of Man*. Stapledon uses Reade's sweeping approach, not being afraid to cover long periods in which human life becomes inhuman, when civilisations have collapsed, or as Stapledon has it at times, when the next human species has so far failed to evolve that its creatures are not sentient. They are both firmly secular in their approach. Although some of the later species engage in elaborate rites, for instance learning to fly in fantastic patterns and doing nothing else, the narrator denies that it is apotropaic. Similarly, while the narrator is one of the Last, eighteenth, men who has taken over the present day writer in order to record the history of the solar system, that narrator's powers of telepathy and time-travel are explained away scientifically.

Hidden at the back of the book are five pages of Time Scales, each one covering longer and longer periods than the last. Yet there is still not time for everything: *Last And First Men* remains a novel of this solar system – Stapledon expanded his vision in 1937's *Star Maker* – but here humanity grows on the Earth, is invaded by aetherial Martians who leave their telepathic powers, migrates to Venus, where the native race is exterminated, and then migrates finally to Neptune, from whence there is nowhere to run when the sun extinguishes. In

that finality, this also suggests that Stapledon is not interested in "space opera" despite the series name in which this volume has re-appeared. The invasion from space and, later, the vessels in which mankind migrates receive little technical attention, while later still Stapledon either cannot or will not envisage pan-galactic voyages to extend the range of humanity. That does not stop this book being a space epic, though, and that is what it is.

Charles Stross – *Wireless*

**Orbit 2009, £14.99, 352pp, hb, ISBN 9781841497716
Reviewed by Martin Lewis**

'Missile Gap', the novella that opens *Wireless*, is a pretty good encapsulation of Stross's concerns as a writer. It takes place in the middle of the Cold War but on an Earth that has been radically altered and flung into another galaxy. The reconstruction of the planet into one flat plate on a vast disc brings with it gravitational changes that render the Space Race dead and flight difficult. These changes allow Stross to play with his love of abandoned engineering projects by introducing, for example, a vast nuclear-powered ekranoplan the size of an aircraft carrier. Piloted by Yuri Gagarin. Carl Sagan also appears as a character and there are many similar winks. So: a big picture hard SF idea, a Twentieth Century alt history, a strong awareness of the history of science fiction, a couple of in-jokes and some cool toys that never were.

Like Ken MacLeod, Stross is looking towards the future with nostalgic eyes.

There is more of the same on display throughout *Wireless*. In fact, 'Missile Gap' is something of a retread of 'A Colder War', published five years previously. Gagarin and Sagan are replaced by Colonel Oliver North and Stephen Jay Gould, and the missile gap becomes a shoggoth gap, but otherwise they are the same, right down to the infodump chapters presented as classified briefing films with identical security warnings.

'A Colder War' is the only story which overlaps with Stross' previous collection, *Toast* (2002), and this repetition makes its inclusion a mistake. It also points towards a lack of purpose in a collection which is almost-but-not-quite comprehensive and where Stross unfortunately uses his introduction to pointlessly justify his existence as a short story writer. Obviously the stories collected as the mosaic novel *Accelerando* (2005) are not reprinted



here but only one of his three collaborations with Cory Doctorow appears ('Unwirer'). Why this one, which feels more Doctorow than Stross in composition? Why include 'MAXOS', a joke about extraterrestrial 419 scammers that at three pages is still too long? 'Down On The Farm', part of the ongoing Bob Howard series that mashes Lovecraft (him again) with spy versus spy, is great fun – if clunkily structured – but is cut adrift from the rest of its continuity here. The impression is of a writer casting around for any material to hand, that the overriding reason for this collection is that Stross gets jittery if he doesn't release at least two books a year.

The main selling point of *Wireless* is 'Palimpsest', an unpublished novella. A mix of time travel and deep time future history, it is a powerful piece but sabotaged by an afterword in which Stross makes clear that it should really be a novel, had industry requirements not dictated otherwise. I understand the travails of the jobbing writer – Stross has chronicled them well on his blog – but *Wireless* is so market-driven that any enjoyment of the stories was overwhelmed by a desire for less haste and graft and more reflection and quality control.

Judith Tarr – *Bringing Down the Sun*
Tor 2009, \$14.95, 224pp, pb, ISBN 9780765303981

Reviewed by A P Canavan

There has been a sea change in modern fantasy. Seemingly long gone are the door-stop novels with detailed descriptions, intricately interwoven plots and significant character development. The emphasis is now on fast, short chapters kindly described as having 'a swift pace', simplistic plots euphemistically labelled 'lean' and character development has been replaced with 'strong personalities'. Judith Tarr's new novel is no exception to this developing trend. *Bringing Down the Sun* professes to be a fascinating look at Olympias, the mysterious mother of Alexander the Great, tracing her rise from relative obscurity to become the mother of one of the most famous kings the world has ever known. A woman made infamous in myth, legend and recorded history, she was a priestess, a witch, a queen and a mother. Her life is a testament to the strength and courage of a woman who dominated the ancient world and whose actions led to a new world order. The reader is promised an 'intensely romantic fantasy' that will



explore the history and events that shaped the life of this amazing woman.

Regrettably it is satisfactory as neither romance nor fantasy, but rather a half measure that fails to live up to either standard. The treatment of Olympias's history is superficial and rushed, with neither the context nor the setting being fully explored. The cursory treatment of the significant events in her early life certainly make the story lean and fast paced, but it leaves the book feeling light, underdeveloped and more like an airy appetiser than a real literary meal.

Part of the problem is that anyone even passingly familiar with the history of Alexander will find this story lacks any dramatic tension. Yet readers unaware of this epic history may be left confused. Additionally, Tarr attempts to straddle the uneasy divide between the ancient perception of magic as a real force, and the modern knowing gaze which insists that such beliefs were naïve and ignorant. Unfortunately this tension leads to a confused composition that never quite achieves balance. While Tarr convincingly creates a sense of the ancient world in parts, in particular the religious rites, ultimately the novel fails to achieve the epic status that befits Olympias' place in history.

Where this book succeeds is in its articulation of the trials of the female hero. Being defined as a daughter, goddess worshipper, political bargaining chip, wife and mother, Olympias' struggle to survive and succeed in the ancient masculine world makes for an interesting read. Fans of Tarr's previous novels will no doubt enjoy this.

Despite this, the book remains a disappointment for those wanting to immerse themselves in the mythic tradition, but for those wishing only to dip a toe into epic history it is an easy holiday read. If you want a taste of the ancient world read this. If you want to more than just a taste then you should look elsewhere.

Karen Traviss – *Gears of War: Aspho Fields*
Orbit 2008, £7.99, 385pp, pb, ISBN 9781841497372

Reviewed by Jaine Fenn

This is not a book that should be judged by its cover.

The first thing you're likely to notice is the name of the video game it ties into, emblazoned in manly rugged letters, complete with red skull logo. After that, your eye will



probably be drawn to the brick-shithouse of a marine with his unfeasibly large weapon. The title and author's name are almost a footnote at the bottom.

Please don't let this put you off.

What could have been no more than a series of excruciatingly detailed combats executed by two-dimensional testosterone-monkeys becomes something altogether more interesting in Traviss's skilled hands. Every named character in this book is a 'Gear', a soldier fighting for the Coalition of Ordered Governments (or COG – geddit?). However, each character is also a complex individual with his or her own foibles, faults, opinions and story.

Despite appearances, this book is largely about relationships, and the strains war puts on them. The author's deft touch and highly readable style also allow her to slip in thought-provoking comments about conflict: for example, she gives us the chance to consider what it might feel like to personally engage and defeat a soldier whose selfless actions make him a hero to his own side, whilst making his death a necessity to ours.

There are actually two wars recounted here, and the action switches between them, moving backwards and forwards in time. The later one, set in the world of the game, is your classic destroy-the-alien-menace scenario. The earlier one is a long-running human vs human conflict on the book/game's remarkably Earth-like world.

Whilst splatting aliens makes for good gameplay, it doesn't leave much room for serious plotting or depth of writing, and Traviss concentrates her efforts on the earlier war. A lot of her comments rely on the contrast between the two conflicts: 'She dropped two grubs. She didn't feel bad about the *satisfaction* it gave her. Monsters were easy to kill. She knew she'd never wake up in the night worrying about their widows and orphans.'

There are minor niggles: it would have been good to see a little more of the non-battlefield aspects of the world by way of contrast, and there are some 'stock' elements, such as the Gurkhas-by-any-other-name and the gentle giant ex-sports star who happens to be the black. Also, the first and last of Traviss's trademark chapter header statements are from the alien perspective, and both raise tantalising questions about what's really going on – questions that might be answered if the reader would only go and buy the video game/other books... We're also reminded that we are in tie-in territory in the main narrative at the beginning and, more particularly, the end, with several unresolved references and a final teaser. But then a tie-in was what the author was being paid to write, so don't let this put you off either.

Overall, given the constraints imposed by the format, Traviss has done a remarkably good job of telling a compelling and complex story.

Kit Whitfield – *In Great Waters*

Jonathan Cape 2009, 340pp. £12.99, hb, ISBN 9780224079242.

Reviewed by Nik Ravenscroft.

A recurring folk tale in coastal counties is that of the children from the sea, strange green human-like creatures caught in a net and brought ashore... Variations of this legend – whether they can speak, whether or not they survived – occur all over the British Isles (and for all I know, all over the world) and it is this fascinating idea that Kit Whitfield has harnessed in her excellent novel, *In Deep Waters*.

The world is one that we recognise – the names of the monarchs are those of Renaissance and Tudor England: Anne and her sister Mary, Edward, Philip, Henry – and the geography is familiar. England is England still, and is Christian. However, since the ninth century 'landsmen' have had to contend with the existence of the pagan 'deepsmen', dwellers in the sea who can destroy shipping and disrupt trade or act as defenders for any country with a coastline. This England's history diverges from the one we know. Hybrid rulers alone can keep their powerful half-kin in check but as the in-breeding years go by, England's ruling family gets weaker, throwing up sports like the violent throwback Philip, and the blue-faced Anne.

While hybrid bastards are destroyed as treasonous and burned alive, one is secretly protected, Henry, and the book follows his story, as he tries to move into the English court and royal house. It also follows that of Anne, the quiet, observant younger princess of the royal family and her bid for the throne.

Whitfield's world is utterly convincing. The importance of water is reflected in the names of the nobility and other characters: rather than hills and towns, names derive from bodies of water – Claybrook, Westlake, Shingleton – and the royal house is Delamere. The first chapter details Henry's first five years of life under the sea and takes the reader into a world where the deepsman tribes use echo location and have to



defend themselves from sharks and dolphins, where fear is a constant, where there is no real shelter or any barriers and where communication is necessarily limited, using body postures as well as sounds. Even more fascinating is the reaction of Henry to life on land. Whitfield's evocation of the terrors of a ceiling (when an overhead surface would be perilous) and corners of a square room (underwater, too constricting and entrapping) are matched by her consistent and imaginative use of marine analogies and metaphors. She details the mental processes of trying to learn a new culture and we see through Henry's eyes as well as those of his carers. The language of the deepsmen derives, as it should, from their practical and directly physical relationships and the interaction between it and the philosophy of the landsmen is very thoughtfully depicted. Henry's insight that landsmen deal in 'words' rather than factual things, being preoccupied with 'word' terms like honour and faith and especially with a dead landsman, Christ, makes the reader look critically at their own language and its unconscious biases. Whitfield has not settled for the simple: Henry is a beautifully drawn monster; her politics involve the power of the developing church and she blends matters of statecraft, religion and relationships into a story that is difficult to put down.

There are some questions. A more critical and knowledgeable reader might question whether any ruling system would survive over hundreds of years – surely over that length of time, there would be many more nobles trying to usurp the royal prerogative by breeding with a deepsmen woman? Henry's final actions seem a little inconsistent – does Whitfield close down the story too quickly? And then, long after putting the book down, one wonders what will happen when man-powered flight is invented. That the thought even occurs is a tribute to the imaginative power of Whitfield's novel and its ability to convince.

Alexander Zelenyj – *Experiments at 3 Billion A.M.*
Eibonvale Press, 2009, £18.75, 658 pp, pb, ISBN
9780955526848

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

The size of this volume – forty stories – is more what you'd expect of an omnibus edition of the short stories of an established author. There's material enough here for three collections. Whether it's all fit for publication is another question.

The publisher explains how the book impressed him: 'Here was something lyrical yet very fresh and clear – melancholy yet oddly positive in that. So much so that it was a hard submission to read.

I kept putting it down, working on other things, then forcing myself to press on with it – almost reluctant to touch it, simply because it stirred something that, quite frankly, hurt.'

I too found it a hard book to read and indeed kept putting it down and had to force myself to press on. The publisher's words seem unconsciously to hint at the book's weaknesses as he tries to describe its strength. That strength is the audacity with which Zelenyj seeks to evoke intense nuances of mood and feeling. Sometimes he succeeds, as in the vision in 'The Mighty Ones Listen to the Wind' of a procession of animals moving inexplicably through the night, expressing a kind of totemic force that ignites the possibility of meaning in the narrator's empty relationship.



The stories are set mainly in the primary world, but there's always some quality of otherness, which sometimes resolves into the explicit presence of aliens or spirit beings. And there's a recurring interest in problematic sex.

'Just Right under Moonlight' captures a nostalgic memory of a long hot summer of youthful sex and at the same time conveys the emptiness of this – the boys are so distant they might as well be aliens, the girls so little understood they seem like ghosts – and the women's sexual objectification is pointed up by the interruption of this idyll by a spate of serial murders. The thematic link is clear, but the story is not structured to deliver a satisfying significance in the pattern of events. Such weakness of structure is a recurring flaw.

Another is that Zelenyj's voice tends to keep inside an envelope of stream of consciousness, which would be fine in one story but is tedious in forty. He needs to vary the narrative texture, take us out more into the here and now of dialogue and observation. He also needs to take a scalpel to his prose, which is weighed down with adverbs and subordinate clauses: 'Startled – and angered at his reflexive reaction as he jerked his face away from the sudden motion – he clamped his palms together mightily, catching the creature crushingly. He held his hands together a moment, tightly. Relishing the idea of the thing's demise in his fingers, but not quite feeling its slight form within his grasp. Slowly, he rubbed his hands up and down, imagining the smear of dusty ashes on his skin' (60).

In my view, this is a writer who has potential

Progressive Scan: Ashes to Ashes, Season 2

by Abigail Nussbaum

It is one of the quirks of the *Life on Mars* universe that one can never be entirely certain just what genre its stories belong to. Early *Life on Mars* seemed to be telling a time travel story, with Sam Tyler's actions in 1973 affecting his present in 2006, but in its second season the series veered off into naturalism, finally concluding that 1973 had been Sam's fantasy (and then giving that conclusion a rather nasty twist – much nastier, I suspect, than its writers intended it to be – when Sam decided to kill himself in order to go back into that fantasy). In its first season, *Mars* spin-off *Ashes to Ashes* seemed to be continuing in its predecessor's naturalistic footsteps. Police psychologist Alex Drake, who had treated Sam during his brief return to the present day in the *Life on Mars* finale, is shot and, like him, finds herself in the past – this time the early 80s – and working for Gene Hunt. *Ashes to Ashes*'s first season follows the groove dug by *Life on Mars*'s – Alex connects with her unwitting mother and tries to prevent the family tragedy that has shaped her life, only to discover that her father was a villain rather than a victim – but it lacks the earlier series's urgency because, like Alex, we believe that 1981 is her dying fantasy, and the quest to save her family nothing but a puzzle set by her churning mind. In its second, and far superior, season, however, *Ashes to Ashes* has begun to inch back towards genre. Though individual episodes continue to tell crime stories, and the season's overarching story is similarly focused on the same questions about the nature of police work with which *Life on Mars* was concerned, the second season introduces new elements to Alex's story which suggest that there exists a cosmology that ties her and Sam's experiences together, making them something more than a dying hallucination.

Picking up in the spring of 1982, several months after the first season's end, season two finds Alex more comfortable in the early 80s, her resistance to her new life worn away at by months of silence on the ghostly voices and apparitions front (or, to put it less charitably, by the writers finally clueing into the fact that it's difficult to manufacture tension when your main character thinks that everything and everyone she encounters is a figment of her imagination). Predictably, this silence is shattered in the season

premiere when Alex discovers that a period which to her had seemed like months spanned hours in the present day, at the end of which her headshot but still alive body has been found and is being rushed to hospital. More intriguing, however, are the messages Alex receives in 1982 which reference the funeral of Princess Diana, and suggest that Alex, and Sam before her and perhaps many others, are living in some sort of shared spiritual realm, from which they can affect the real world, and return to it if they have the strength and inclination to do so. It's a clever widening of the *Life on Mars* universe, which imbues Alex's experiences with meaning and substance without undermining the earlier series's ending.

All of which is not to say that I think the *Ashes to Ashes* writers have any interest in the neat construction of a persuasive secondary world. The fantastic premises of both series are quite clearly a means to an end – the painstaking historical recreation of a recent period for which we feel a mingling of nostalgia and bemused horror (the collective we, that is – I myself was an infant in the early 80s), characterised by tacky clothes and hairstyles, distinctive period music on the soundtrack, and, above all else, the larger than life figure of Gene Hunt. Savior and villain, hero and antihero, champion of law and morality and unreconstructed bigot all rolled into one nonsensical, self-contradictory package made all but irresistible through the force of Philip Glenister's weapons-grade charisma, by the end of *Ashes to Ashes*'s first season, Gene's shtick had worn a little thin. It is essential to the success of his character that he lack even the faintest shred of self-doubt or self-awareness, that he pursue what to his mind is the course of justice with a certainty that burns with the fire of a thousand suns, but by the time the first season finale showed us Gene giving a rousing St. Crispin's Day speech extolling the virtues of good old fashioned policing in response to the entirely justified accusations that his police department is violent and bigoted, the dissonance at the heart of his character – and of the show's treatment of him – had become too great to ignore.

The second season takes the wise measure of making Gene a more shadowy, more sinister

character in its early episodes, and of moving Alex to the show's forefront by having her investigate Gene himself. When Alex and Gene trace the murder of a police officer to his partner in the season premiere, they tug on a loose thread which reveals a vast police conspiracy involving Gene's boss, but Gene immediately shuts down the investigation and shuts Alex out of his inner circle. The next few episodes see Alex and Gene dancing around each other, demanding each other's trust but hesitant to grant it, while the rest of the squad struggle with their own issues of trust as the magnitude of the corruption within the force is revealed. By the end of the season, one of the main characters is revealed as a traitor, and a failure on Gene's part to trust Alex results in tragedy for both of them. The second season shows us a more human Gene, uncertain and fallible, who engages in subterfuge even with those closest to him, and who despite his bravado and sense of purpose is at the mercy of his superiors and often finds himself forced to turn a blind eye to injustice. It also shows us a more proactive Alex, whose energies are directed, for once, at actual police work rather than her own personal tragedies. The more prosaic nature of this story paints Alex in a more flattering light, as a competent, driven professional who achieves real results, rather than the frantic jumping at shadows that characterized her season-long arc last year.

Unfortunately, the second season does a better job building up the police corruption story than it does paying it off. Halfway into the season, what should have been a leveling up of the story – with Gene toppling his crooked boss and then discovering that he was being directed by even more powerful figures – ends up sapping it of tension. His antagonists now faceless, Gene must resort to batting at shadows, giving speech after stirring speech about his zero tolerance policy towards corruption and his determination to clean his house while the plot stalls. The story doesn't actually move until the season finale, and its resolution lacks the neatness of previous *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes* finales, and relies on Alex remembering a piece of information the viewers hadn't previously been aware of. Revealing that Alex has a fellow traveler similarly turns out to be a bit of a damp squib, more interesting for the light said traveler's existence casts on the nature of Alex's predicament than for his own personality, which turns out to be Stock Creepy Villain #12, and his motivations for stalking, manipulating, and occasionally assaulting Alex turn out to be disappointingly maudlin.

If the second season's plot fizzles, it at least serves the characters well. Gene and Alex, as I've said, are given meatier, more interesting roles, and the relationship between them is also complicated.

In the first season, Alex played the Sam role – the representative of 21st century mores standing in opposition to Gene's Old West cops and robbers mentality – but in the second season her opposition to Gene is less clearly defined. She challenges and investigates him when he appears willing to ignore the hints of corruption among the brass, but also moves into the role of his trusted lieutenant when he commits to the struggle against that corruption (and turns a blind eye to the violent and extra-legal methods Gene employs in pursuit of that goal). For his part, Gene shows a growing dependence on Alex, and though the writers' choice to paint that dependence in romantic terms is a predictable one, Gene's infatuation with Alex is so boyishly awkward that it completely sidesteps the common tropes of opposite-gender, opposite-temperaments, never-allowed-to-hook-up-because-it'll-ruin-the-show-but-still-clearly-into-each-other pairings, while still allowing us to see that the two have definite chemistry.

Among the secondary characters, the second season's standout is Ray. Matching his bigotry and violent tendencies but lacking his intelligence and charisma, Ray has always been Gene's ugly twin, the character we were encouraged to sneer at as a distraction from the heroic treatment Gene received. *Ashes to Ashes*'s first season tried to give Ray a few layers with an episode in which he learned a Very Important Lesson about the awfulness of rape, but such a transition was too much, too fast. In the second season, the writers move more slowly with Ray, first showing his growing disillusionment with Gene, who chooses Alex as a confidant over him, and then forging an unlikely but extremely successful partnership between him and Alex. By the end of the season, Ray seems like a savvier, more complicated person, and if the broad hints about his being 'repressed' are a rather obvious approach to take with someone as crudely chauvinistic and comically oversexed as Ray has always been, the character (and Dean Andrews's performance) is strong enough to support them.

Montserrat Lombard continues to do good work on the sidelines as token female Shaz, but the writers have yet to distinguish the character in any way from *Mars*'s Annie (except in the sense that Shaz's professional aspirations and the difficulty her gender poses her in achieving them are significantly less commented upon than Annie's were, despite being no less significant). As a result, even Shaz's finest moments mainly call attention to the fact that we've yet to find out what happened to Annie after Sam's death in the fantasy world, and that like her, Shaz's importance is apparently limited to being the object of one of the male character's attentions. This is particularly unfortunate as that character, Chris,

with whom she shares most of her scenes, fares the worst of the cast. From the beginning Chris has been the adorable bumbler, the character whom Sam and later Alex had to shepherd and mentor. What seemed charming in a young man, however, is less appealing when we rejoin him ten years on and find him still a man-child. In the second season we see the dark side of Chris's immaturity, both in his relationship with Shaz, which is nearly scuttled several times because of his insensitivity to her needs and desires, and in a huge professional failure that costs several people their lives. This is a reasonable character arc for Chris, but the writers' choice to rehabilitate him almost as soon as they've dragged him through the mud renders it toothless, and their insistence that all that matters is that Chris feels bad about what he's done is galling.

The second season ends with what should be a major upheaval in the show's universe, making real progress in Alex's struggle to get home while complicating our understanding of the relationship between the real and fantasy worlds. Even more important, however, is the fact that Alex finally tells Gene that she's a time traveler, and that Sam was too. After three seasons, Gene, who has consistently ignored, dismissed, or laughed off even the most

outlandish behavior from both Sam and Alex is finally confronted with the full extent of their weirdness. It's in Gene's nature to ignore intangibles and ambiguities and cling to a clear-cut, concrete worldview, but even he can't forget that Alex has told him something completely insane. Or at least in theory he can't. *Ashes to Ashes's* second season finale leaves the show poised to open up its universe and its stories in preparation for a conclusion that will cap both it and *Life on Mars's* story (Glenister has announced that he will only play Gene for another season, and clearly there's no show without him), but it remains to be seen whether its writers are willing to stray out of their comfort zone of period-specific crime stories. If the third season finds Alex back in her starting position in 1982 and Gene once again oblivious to everything she's told him, we'll have to be content with the quirky crime drama, which is enjoyable in itself (though as it was on *Life on Mars*, the series's crime writing is its weakest point). To be honest, this seems like the more likely outcome, but there is still a chance that, however fuzzily defined and however ill-conceived its secondary world, *Ashes to Ashes* will turn out to be a grand and extremely odd genre story. We probably won't know for sure until the very last episode.

Foundation's Favourites: The Voices of Time by J. G. Ballard By Andy Sawyer

On her website, Ursula K. Le Guin lays into J. G. Ballard's American editor for writing something fatuous: "His fabulistic style led people to review his work as science fiction. But that's like calling *Brave New World* science fiction, or 1984." Or, says Le Guin, like calling *Don Quixote* a novel. Or *The Lord of the Rings* a fantasy. Or Thomas More's *Utopia* a utopia.

"But this looks good. Well, then, it's not sf."

True, Ballard's work over the last decade or so has been far removed from neo-space opera, or celebrations of the coming Singularity. And it's true also to say that the kind of work Ballard was publishing in the early 1960s, in the Carnell-edited *New Worlds* magazine, was designed to combat the traditional view of science fiction. "One unfortunate by-product of the Russian-American space-race, and the immense publicity given to the rival astronauts, is likely to be an even closer identification, in the mind of the general public, of science fiction with

the rocket ships and ray guns of Buck Rogers," is the first sentence of his guest editorial in *New Worlds*, May 1962. He continues by calling for sf to turn its back entirely on juvenile space opera clichés and the simplicity of the Wellsian approach to character and narrative, and proclaims that "it is *inner* space, not outer, that needs to be explored". Unlike his fellow new-wavers, Brian Aldiss and Michael Moorcock, moreover, Ballard avoided all involvement with fandom.

Nevertheless, Ballard also proclaimed that "only science fiction is fully equipped to become the literature of tomorrow, and that it is the only medium with an adequate vocabulary of ideas and situations". Whether the sf of today lives up to Ballard's standards is debateable (and probably depends on the simple question "*which* of today's sf writers are we actually talking about?"). Whether Ballard's *own* writing lived up to the standard he wanted is also debatable—no first-rate author's work

ever quite lives up to their own ambitions—but if today's science fiction has any originality, power and passion at all the early stories of J. G. Ballard must take responsibility. Many current readers of Ballard, while hailing him as the significant writer that he is, seem to either overlook his early stories, or suggest that their appearance in sf magazines is some sort of aberration, or ignore the fact that it was *science fiction* rather than any other form of literature that Ballard wanted to reform and invigorate.

This is why it's worth taking a second look at Ballard's first collection, *The Voices of Time* (1962)—all, incidentally, dating from before Moorcock's takeover of *New Worlds* and official founding of the New Wave. *The Voices of Time*, a Berkley Medallion paperback, contains seven stories; the title story, "The Sound-Sweep", "The Overloaded Man", "Zone of Terror", "Manhole 69", "The Waiting Grounds" and "Deep End". (Confusingly, the 1984 *British* collection of the same name only contains the first two stories. The others are "Prima Belladonna", "Studio 5, the Stars", "The Garden of Time", "The Cage of Sand", "The Watch-Towers", and "Chronopolis". It is actually a reprint of the 1963 *The 4-Dimensional Nightmare*. This is not the only time this sort of thing happens.)

(Even more confusingly, the Berkley Medallion paperback contains a copyright statement for "Prima Belladonna", not "The Overloaded Man" ...)

All these stories are from *New Worlds* or *Science Fantasy*. The title story takes us into Ballardia, a world which is as recognisable as Graham Greene's "Greeneland", but instead of whisky-priests and seedy Caribbean dictatorships it's empty swimming-pools (the trademark Ballardian image appears in the first sentence) and entropy. We witness the count-down of the universe, gradually winding down, echoed by more localised events such as the transformational mutations of animal and plant life, and the overpowering narcolepsy of the protagonist. "Instead of treating time like a sort of glorified scenic railway," wrote Ballard in his *New Worlds* editorial, "I'd like to see it used for what it is, one of the perspectives of the personality." Here we have a plant which literally *sees* time and, another Ballardian trademark, also the sense of acceptance, almost ecstatic fulfilment and release which becomes familiar to readers of his early novels, from *The Drowned World* (1962) on. Time is also part of "The Overloaded Man" ("I may actually be stepping out of time," Faulkner speculated", and "Manhole 69", in which three experimental subjects find themselves with more time than the rest of us when an experimental surgical technique frees them from the necessity of sleep.

"The Waiting Grounds" is a Stapledonian vision of Deep Time, but given a twist: "Not that the world is about to 'end'. The implication is rather

that it has already ended and regenerated itself an infinite number of times, and that the only remaining question is what to do with ourselves in the meantime." "Deep End" is a terminal Earth in which the oceans have been sacrificed to terraform the planets and a dogfish holds the hope of a new Eden. "Zone of Terror" sees Larsen trying to "settle down with Kretschmer's *An Analysis of Psychotic Time*" only to experience visions of himself, a double "displaced not in space but in time". "The Sound-Sweep" offers another Ballardian motif, the "new art" such as those to be found in the *Vermillion Sands* collection, but here we also have the figure of the mute sound-sweep Mangon, whose job it is to clear up the residual traces of stray sound. If sound, and especially music, is pattern over time, then again we have yet another story which explores facets of one of Ballard's most pervasive obsessions.

Ballard's early stories, in this collection and elsewhere, are among the richest of his works. Several of these stories I have not read for thirty years, and I was surprised how resonant they were — if not a little depressed that they seemed to be as fresh and strange as when I first encountered them. Surely a little creakiness could be excused; a sense of having been naturally overtaken by the younger Turks of the present? — but no; these stories could be written today and we would be marvelling at their originality. I am not sure what this implies about the state of sf today.

But to go back to Ballard's rather imperceptive American editor. Perhaps one of the unfair traps which seduced unwary reviewers into thinking that these stories were science fiction was that they were published in sf magazines and issued in book form with a puff from Damon Knight, who called Ballard "the freshest new talent in science fiction since Brian Aldiss". True, there isn't a conventional spaceship on the cover of *The Voices of Time*. It has one of those semi-abstract designs (by Richard Powers) common in the 60s, which may resolve into spaceships if you want it to. And true, Ballard's refusal of stories about hard-bitten space engineers who solve problems by means of a close application to the laws of physics is apparent from the start. Despite Ballard's strictures, space opera has not gone away. But I suspect that, even though they may not have studied his work, the baroque inventiveness of neo-space opera writers like Banks, Hamilton or Reynolds depends a great deal on the initial explosion of impatience.

Resonances #57

By Stephen Baxter

2009 marks seventy years since the declaration of World War II. As you grow older, successive anniversaries make you consider such events with changing perspectives. At one of my own personal milestones, my fiftieth a couple of years ago, I looked back, as you do, at how some of my various heroes coped with that traumatic age – and I found that HG Wells was fifty in 1916, slap in the middle of the twentieth century's first global trauma of war.

And, wondering what Wells made of the Great War, I learned that though that nightmare made him long for an end to a war on this world, he seemed to have believed that wars *between* worlds were inevitable.

In 1914 Wells was an influential writer and thinker, internationally famous. At first he seemed excited by the sweeping transformation the war might bring, and in late 1914 he published a collection of journalism whose title came to sum up what many hoped would ultimately be the result of the conflict: *The War That Will End War*. (Actually the precise origins of that famous phrase are disputed; it may not be Wells's.)

But after 1914 Wells's views changed greatly. Aged fifty he recorded these adjustments with searing honesty in a novel called *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916; page numbers from the Odhams Press edition). I suspect this book isn't well known to Wells's sf readers, but in its time it was a commercial success, and, remarkably, sold to soldiers in the trenches on both sides of the wire.

Mr Britling is a middle-aged writer and commentator, with, to put it mildly, a rather complicated personal life. So Britling is clearly meant to represent both Wells and, given his name, a wider Britishness. But, crucially, unlike Wells Britling has a late-teenage son, Hugh, who is therefore in danger of call-up – Wells's own children were too young. Through Britling's reaction to the war we glimpse the painful changes in Wells's own thinking.

We meet Britling in the summer of 1914, a last season of house parties, village fetes and a complacent ruling class: 'We're at the end of a series of secure generations in which none of the great things of life have changed materially. None of us ... really believe that life can change very fundamentally any

more forever' (38-9). In fact British soldiers hadn't fought in western Europe, and nor had Britain faced a serious threat of invasion, for a century – since the age of Jane Austen.

But complacency is soon punctured. At a summer fete, 'the small Britling boys were displaying their skill and calm upon the roundabout ostriches, and less than four hundred miles away with a front that reached from Nancy to Liege more than a million and a quarter of grey-clad men ... were pouring westward to take Paris.' (124).

When war comes, Britling's first reaction is 'imaginative release ... Things that had seemed solid forever were visible in flux; things that had seemed stone were alive' (146). This reflects the Wells who wrote *The War That Will End War*, who seems to have hoped that the war might be a short sharp shock of a cleansing kind that would lead to a healthier new order – perhaps it would be like the cosmic close encounter of *In the Days of the Comet* (1906). But the incompetence, waste and growing savagery of the war soon dispel that dream.

The war becomes personal for Britling when son Hugh lies about his age, joins up and is sent to the front. Wells visited the front himself, and he includes a convincing series of letters from Hugh detailing the tommies' life. Britling by now is revolted: 'The spirit and honour and drama had gone out of this war. Our only hope now was exhaustion. Our only strategy was to barter blood for blood – trusting that our tank would prove the deeper ... while into this tank stepped Hugh, young and smiling' (230). Hugh, inevitably, is killed. 'All over England now ... women and children went about in October sunshine in new black clothes' (271).

Britling writes and writes, an authentic thing for a writer to do, trying to come to terms with the horror and grief. He experiments with ideas of social Darwinism – maybe cruelty is necessary for a healthy species – and dreams of world federations and courts, and even turns to religion. Wells himself went through all these evolutions of thought. The book ends with a facsimile handwritten page of fragments as even Britling's writing, his one solace, breaks down, and the name 'Hugh' is written over and over.

Wells was in a privileged position, having worked on propaganda for the government and having visited the battlefields. Even so it's remarkable how clearly he / Britling saw the consequences of the war while in the midst of it: 'This war ... is killing young men by the million, altering the proportions of the sexes for a generation ... destroying the accumulated wealth that had kept so many of them in refined idleness, flooding the world with strange doubts and novel ideas ...' (188). In the end he rejects war itself vehemently: 'Massacres of boys! That indeed is the essence of modern war. The killing off of the young. It is the destruction of human inheritance' (303). That's an authentic fifty-year-old's reaction, I would say. It is heartbreaking to visit war graves and see how young their occupants were, how much of their lives were left unfulfilled. 'No life is safe, no happiness is safe, there is no chance of bettering life until we have made an end to all that causes war' (285).

But if Wells came to long for an end to human war, in another strand of his writing he almost always showed contact between human and non-human intelligences degenerating into conflict.

Consider *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), in which you have two intelligent species who actually learn to communicate. Cavor and Bedford quickly convince the Selenites that they are 'strong dangerous animals', and Bedford, lusting after the 'gold knocking about like cast iron at home' considers 'coming back in a bigger sphere with guns' (Chapter 15). In the end Cavor foolishly convinces the Grand Lunar of humans' 'insatiable aggressions, their tireless futility of conflict' (Chapter 25). In Wells's ur-text of alien conflict, *The War of the Worlds* (1898), the Martians aren't here to talk at all but to take our world, and indeed our blood. To the Artilleryman, the War of the Worlds 'isn't a war ... any more than there's war between men and ants' (Book 2, Chapter 7). He's right; this is something more fundamental than human war.

Perhaps the clearest expression of Wells's thinking in this regard comes in his story 'The Grisly Folk' – published in 1921, so after World War I. The Neanderthal is our closest relative but seems monstrous: 'The grisly thing ... was hunchbacked and very big and low, a grey hairy wolf-like monster ... For the Neanderthals [contact with humans] was the beginning of an incessant war that could end only in extermination ... The two races were intolerable to each other.' Why intolerable? Because: 'They both wanted the caves and the banks by the rivers where the big flints were got. They fought over the dead mammoths that had been bogged in the marshes, and over the reindeer stags that had been killed in the rutting season.' This is not human war. This is a Darwinian conflict, between two species competing

for the same ecological niche. Compare this to Darwin's own writing, for example this extract from Chapter 3 of *On the Origin of Species* (1859): 'As species of the same genus have usually, though by no means invariably, some similarity in habits and constitution, and always in structure, the struggle will generally be more severe between species of the same genus, when they come into competition with each other, than between species of distinct genera.' Wells had studied evolution under Huxley, Darwin's follower, and understood this very well.

Fifty-year-old Wells, appalled by the Great War, longed for peace between humans. But he was still the tough Darwinian thinker who appeared to believe that contact between species must result in the extermination of one side or another – as many in the present day fear is a possible outcome of contact with extraterrestrial intelligence. A century later it is a measure of Wells's capacity of imagination that his works continue to illuminate both sides of this dismaying contradiction.

(Based on a talk to the HG Wells Society annual conference on 'HG Wells: Wells and War', Queen Mary University, London, 20th September 2008.)

The New X: Careening

by Graham Sleight

As I write, British sf is in an uproar over the news that Alastair Reynolds has signed an agreement with Gollancz worth £1million for his next ten books. Well, I say "In an uproar": it got talked about a lot, but no-one really seemed to think it was a crazy thing for either party to do. Reynolds's popularity is clear, and what Gollancz have done makes sense to me as locking in one of their most high-profile authors for the next decade or so. But the Reynolds news came in close to another event discussed throughout the sf community: the death of Charles N Brown, co-founder and longtime editor of *Locus*. I couldn't help but feel that the two needed to be thought of together.

I'm no-one's unbiased observer on Charles Brown, since I write for *Locus*, knew him reasonably well, and had talked with him a lot over the last few years. So I won't attempt to write any kind of obituary here, except to note that *Locus* has both strong supporters and strong detractors. Ages ago in this column (and before I wrote for *Locus*), I said that I found myself thinking of "the sf field" as three different though interdependent activities. The first was the world of writers sitting down and producing stories. The second was the world of readers getting hold of those stories, responding to them, and building things around them (reviews, theories, responses, conventions, doctoral theses, fanfic). The third was the commercial world of publishing and bookselling that mediates between the two, and in which success provides at least one way of keeping score. The unusual thing about *Locus* is that, to varying extents, it tries to provide coverage of all three of those worlds. The problem is that the third of those worlds is the one that's most difficult and uncomfortable to talk about in lots of respects.

It's difficult partly because a lot of the financial workings of the field are shrouded in (perfectly legitimate) commercial confidentiality. Publishers don't want to give away what they're paying. And it's uncomfortable because money is always an awkward subject, especially for us British. So public reporting of the financial dynamics underlying the sf field is always going to be partial. (And when something important, like the Reynolds deal, gets made public and talked about by the participants, you have to assume they're doing it for a reason – in this case, I guess, to boost Reynolds's profile.) But just because nine-tenths of this iceberg is under water doesn't mean that it's not there, or that it doesn't affect things on the surface.

I don't know if it's something in the water at the moment, but there seems to be an awful lot of talk about sf and fantasy writing as *career*. Jeff VanderMeer has an interesting-sounding book coming out shortly – I've not seen a copy – called *Booklife*, about how writers can and should balance their needs as writers and writers-who-have-to-exist-in-a-commercial-world. My Twitter feed is periodically taken up with discussions of the rights and wrongs of using that platform as a promotional one. At the last convention I attended, there was a very lively discussion about the rights and wrongs of using panels and the like to plug your own books by displaying them on the table in front of you. And so on. In a sense, this is the age-old art versus commerce argument in various modern guises – with the proviso that it doesn't have to be an either-or. But a couple of general statements may be worthwhile. The first is that, as a relatively regular visitor to North American conventions, it seems to me that there is a cultural divide here: US authors are more ready than British ones to be direct about the book they have out now. The second is that these discussions may be especially pointed in our subculture because of the perceived clash between sf as an idealistic, unshackled-from-the-mundane enterprise and the thisworldly realities of commerce. (And here it's relevant to remember Bruce Sterling's line about how disappointed he was the first time, as a member of SFWA, that he got to go to a con party run by that organisation. He was expecting universe-shattering visionaries, and instead got a bunch of old white guys "complaining about their advances and spilling beer on their shoes".)

The other point here is that the description I've just given is way too simple. In what I've written so far, I've been describing almost exclusively genre-fiction-published-as-genre-fiction. It's increasingly the case that if you want to read the most interesting speculative fiction, you can't just look at what's published or marketed. There's no better illustration of that, in fact, than the path J G Ballard's work took. His earlier, more fantastical work shaded, as his career went on, into books that were more and more about the here and now. And because his talent was so unarguable, books like *Empire of the Sun* or *The Day of Creation* got recognition from, as we in the sf field say, the mainstream. Ballard, to his credit, never committed any Kurt Vonnegut-style acts of apostasy, and continued publishing in magazines like *Interzone*

so unarguable, books like *Empire of the Sun* or *The Day of Creation* got recognition from, as we in the sf field say, the mainstream. Ballard, to his credit, never committed any Kurt Vonnegut-style acts of apostasy, and continued publishing in magazines like *Interzone* to the end of his career.

Ballard may not have been the first author to make this transition, from genre-published author to "mainstream" recognition, but he's surely one of the most prominent. Writers as various as John Crowley, Jeffrey Ford, Karen Joy Fowler, William Gibson, M John Harrison, and Jonathan Lethem have since made the same sort of transition. Some of them (Ford, say) have continued publishing work that's overtly fantastic; some, like Harrison or Lethem, occupy that ill-defined territory labelled slipstream; while a work like Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club* would provide no shocks in material or treatment to a reader used to the mimetic. Gibson, perhaps the most interesting case of all, has followed a very similar path to Ballard: gradually stripping back the amount of "future-ness" in his work until a book like *Pattern Recognition* shares the same unmistakable voice as *Neuromancer* but not its extrapolations.

You can see many motives for wanting to make this kind of move. For a start, the readership for mainstream fiction is bigger and, if I can put it like this, less restricted. People who might never think of wandering into the sf section of a bookshop might pick up the new Gibson or Ford without suspecting (in Greer Gilman's fine phrase) that they might catch genre cooties from it. As a consequence – though again it's a fuzzy area for the reasons given above – it seems reasonable to suggest that an author successful in the bigger field of the mainstream might also reap bigger financial rewards. (I return, as I have done in the past, to Barry Malzberg's comments about what an economically small field sf is.) Alastair Reynolds's £100,000 per book is, I'm sure, a lot for a British sf author; but it's pretty small compared to the publicly-touted figures for advances given to major mainstream authors. But there's also a final difference between publishing a novel outside the world of sf. It's a shared axiom of our field that sf doesn't get the degree of critical attention it should do from the wider world: that writers like, say, Geoff Ryman or Gene Wolfe are as good as any getting published outside the genre, yet aren't recognised as such. Without coming over all *Godfather* about this, it's an issue of respect. Or, to be more exact, where as a writer one wants to get one's respect from. The way I've phrased that makes it clear I think there are as many different answers as there are writers.

Indeed, I'd argue that one of the most fruitful ways to understand almost any sf author's work these days is how comfortable they are with the idea of "mainstream-ness". Alastair Reynolds, for instance,

seems entirely happy to make a commitment to be published as an sf author, by an sf publisher, for the next ten years. Iain Banks hops back and forth between the two, with only an M-shaped figleaf to differentiate his incarnations. One of the revelations of John Berlyne's recent Tim Powers bibliography was how openly Powers wanted to position his book *Last Call* as one that would break him out of genre publishing. And so on.

Take another step back from this kind of narrative (a Stapledonian zoom-out, if you like), and you're not at the level of authors and books but of movements and trends in writing. In the past, I've been a bit sceptical in this space of the sf community's desire to slap a movement label on everything that, uh, moves; but some generalisations do have useful explanatory power. First, I think it's clear that the border between "the mainstream" and "the fantastic" is becoming far more permeable, both in terms of what writers write and how it gets published. What I don't (yet) have a solid sense of is whether the same is true of the reader experience – are people moving back and forth between the two in what they buy and read? Second, this sort of perspective makes it more and more clear how limiting is a view of sf that looks only at what's badged as sf. There is this year, amplified by the recession, the perennial debate about whether the "big three" sf magazines can survive on declining subscriptions and ad revenues and, as a consequence, questions about – if they vanish – where beginning writers will get published. But that's only a limitation if your frame is the sf field. Leaving aside the ever-proliferating number of small press or online sf venues, there are plenty of places not badged as sf that are happy to publish it.

Talking with Charles Brown once, I accused him (half-seriously) of maintaining an apostolic succession model of sf: like popes to St Peter, every sf writer could trace back a lineage of influence to a foundational figure, usually Heinlein. He allowed that this might be the case, but said that one shouldn't criticise Heinlein (as I was doing, mainly for his politics) until one had read him and understood his full importance to sf. And I do, these days, sort-of-see Charles's point. But I suppose my argument now would be that the apostolic succession model makes less and less sense. What I've tried to describe above is what might be thought of as the sf-ness of sf getting more and more attenuated. (I would say that sf was marrying out, but that'd confuse the Catholic church metaphors even more.) As ever, the William Gibson quotation applies: "The future is already here – it's just unevenly distributed." Hence the continued success of some writers of "core sf", such as Alastair Reynolds. I just think that, in the future, we'll have more Ballards than Reynoldses.

but whose craft must improve before his work
will truly be ready to enter the marketplace.