

Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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MOON



The Year in Review

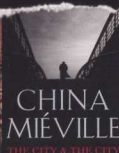
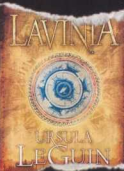
2009 in film by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

2009 Genre TV in 2009 by Abigail Nussbaum



BATTLESTAR
GALACTICA

2009 Vector Reviewers' Poll



Plus regular reviews, guest editorial by Ian Whates, columns by Andy Sawyer, Stephen Baxter, Graham Sleight

Vector 262

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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That Was the Year That Was

Guest Editorial by Ian Whates

Well, the last year of the first decade of the 2000s or the 'noughties', or whatever history chooses to label the period, has been and gone. Please note that I avoided referring to this as the 'new century', which technically didn't start until 2001 and so makes 2009 the penultimate year of the first decade of the new century... Good Lord, since when did defining a period of time become so complicated?

However you may wish to tag 2009, it proved an interesting year for the BSFA, particularly as regards our publications. We saw some real highs, notably the bumper package that landed on people's doormats last March in advance of Eastercon, with its beautifully produced special edition of PS Publishing's *PostScripts* (thanks again to Pete Crowther for all the work he invested in putting the booklet together and for sharing the production costs with us) and the 'Awards Booklet', featuring all the stories and artwork shortlisted for the BSFA Awards. While we can't promise anything as lavish as the *PostScripts* Special every year, we will do our best to emulate the Awards Booklet, subject to circumstances; after all, we need permission to reproduce stories and artwork, and there's no guarantee such permission will always be forthcoming.

More frustrating, certainly for those of us involved in producing the magazines, has been the delays which the more recent mailings have been subject to. In all honesty, looking back, I marvel that we managed to get the last two mailings of 2009 out at all under the circumstances. I've touched upon some of this in the BSFA forums, but would like to take this opportunity to fully update members on the frantic scrambling that has gone on behind the scenes to bring you the

magazines.

We had a fairly straightforward system in place. The printers, PDC, would print the requisite number of magazines from files provided, and send them to the distributors, JBS, who would then collate the magazines and any additional booklets

and inserts and post them out to the membership. Simple. Until last July, that is. We received news that, having taken delivery on July 13th of *Vector* 260, *Focus* 54 and Special Edition Booklet 5 (Martin Lewis's excellent SF Writers on Films special), JBS had closed their doors and ceased trading on July 17th. After many phone calls and emails and much negotiation, it was agreed that JBS would release the publications back to the printers, but only once we had paid the outstanding invoice for the mailing; in other words, we could only regain the publications if we were willing to pay them for a mailing they were never going to do. They had us over the proverbial barrel, and in the end, realising this would otherwise drag on for months if not years, we agreed. The printers, PDC, kindly undertook to take on the responsibility of distribution to members, naturally charging us for doing so.

PDC further agreed to do this on an ongoing basis, so we merrily arranged for a pallet of paperback

books to be delivered to them in preparation of the next mailing. This was Colin Harvey's recently released *Winter Song*, kindly provided free by HarperCollins' exciting new genre imprint Angry Robot, as part of a package of reciprocal advertising and promotion we've been negotiating with them, so thanks to Marc Gascoigne and Lee Harris for that.

Unfortunately, on the 4th November, some two



weeks after the books were delivered and with files for the printing of *Vector* imminent, we received an email informing us that PDC had ceased trading that morning, oh, and could we please arrange for the pallet of books to be collected from their depot in Guildford, Surrey between 11.00am and midday on the 7th November (giving us three days to organise collection and storage).

Somehow, we did, which then just left the minor matter of having to source a new printer and distributor with Christmas imminent. By December 17th, we managed to find a new company capable of doing both, Remous, had sent them sample publications, received and accepted quotes, had the paperbacks couriered from Surrey to Dorset (where the new printers were based), delivered files for *Vector*, agreed proofs, seen the magazine printed and the mailing collated and sent out. Phew!

Of course, this wasn't achieved without the odd hiccup or in the absence of a downside. We had always paid PDC and JBS partly in advance (to cover printing costs) and partly in arrears (to cover postage and packaging); so PDC had already been paid for the printing they didn't do, and of course we had to pay the new printers for the same job. Somehow, the *Quantum* newsletter, which Martin McGrath had worked hard to recreate following a hard drive crash, was overlooked and not included. Then there's the packaging... Remous told us that the paperback book was too bulky for the plastic envelopes they might otherwise have used (a point which had also been raised by the previous printers, PDC), so they opted for the paper alternative. Unfortunately, this

did not prove an unqualified success, with several members reporting ripped envelopes, and even the odd missing book. This is an issue we hope to have resolved prior to *this* mailing.

Apologies, therefore, to anyone who suffered from packaging problems, and for the erratic schedule recent mailings have been subject to, but I hope the above goes some way to explaining the difficulties involved.

As far as the BSFA as a whole is concerned, 2009 has been a healthy year. Throughout all the above trauma, *Vector* and *Focus* have maintained unfailingly high standards, and, judging by feedback, the Special Edition booklets continue to be well received. As members will know, we've kept membership fees unchanged for several years now, despite escalating costs, and that does mean that, with the need to pay twice for elements of the last two mailings and the cost of couriers etc, we're likely to show a small financial loss for the current year; but, on the positive side, membership is expanding and numbers are higher than they've been for a long while. During 2010, our ambition is to maintain this growth and to provide members with further quality mailings (and trust me, we've got some real treats planned, including a Special Edition booklet in tribute to Robert Holdstock)... Though forgive me for hoping that the latter prove a little less fraught than the last couple. So, Happy New Year to all BSFA members; let's make 2010 a good one!

Ian Whates
17th January 2010

Torque Control

A short editorial from me this time, mostly housekeeping. First, a couple of farewells. This is Kari Sperring's last issue as Reviews Editor, to whom many thanks are owed for keeping the section going from strength to strength, so: thank you. And it also sees the final installment of Graham Sleight's column, The New X, which has been such a staple of *Vector* over the last few years.

Second: per Ian's editorial, you should have received a copy of Colin Harvey's *Winter Song* with the last mailing. We thought we'd take this opportunity to run a Saturday *Guardian*-style book club, so at Torque Control in the week of the 19th April (which should be a couple of weeks after you

receive this) there will be a series of posts discussing various aspects of the novel. Do come to the site – <http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/> – and join in. The club is being organised by Martin Lewis, who takes over as Reviews Editor from next issue.

Third: this issue is *Vector*'s review of the year. We have the Reviewers' Poll, edited by Kari; Colin Odell and Mitch LeBlanc on the films of 2009; and Abigail Nussbaum on the year's TV. And we have, fourth and finally, this year's BSFA Award shortlists. "You should have already received your ballot. If not, check www.bsfa.co.uk for voting instructions; the results will be announced at Eastercon at the start of April. Congratulations to all the nominees!

The BSFA Award Shortlists

2009

Best Novel

Ark by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz)

Lavinia by Ursula K Le Guin (Gollancz)

The City & The City by China Mieville (Macmillan)

Yellow Blue Tibia by Adam Roberts (Gollancz)

Best Short Fiction

"Sinner, Baker, Fabulist, Priest; Red Mask, Black Mask, Gentleman, Beast" by Eugie Foster (*Interzone* 220/

Apex Online)

The Push by Dave Hutchinson (Newcon Press)

"Johnnie and Emmie-Lou Get Married" by Kim Lakin-Smith (*Interzone* 222)

"Vishnu at the Cat Circus" by Ian McDonald (in *Cyberabad Days*, Gollancz)

"The Beloved Time of Their Lives" by Ian Watson and Roberto Quaglia (in *The Beloved of My Beloved*,

Newcon Press)

"The Assistant" by Ian Whates (in *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction* 3, ed. George Mann)

Best Artwork

Alternate cover art for *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (art project), Nitzan Klammer

"Emerald" by Stephanie Pui-Mun Law

Cover of *Desolation Road* by Ian McDonald, by Stephan Martiniere, jacket design by Jacqueline Nasso

Cooke

Cover of *Interzone* 220, Adam Tredowski

Cover of *Interzone* 224, Adam Tredowski

Cover of *Interzone* 225, Adam Tredowski

Best Non-Fiction

Canary Fever by John Clute (Becon Press)

"I Didn't Dream of Dragons" by Deepa D (LiveJournal, 13 January 2009)

"Ethics and Enthusiasm" by Hal Duncan (Notes from the Geekshow, 8 June 2009) [Note: withdrawn from consideration]

"Mutant Popcorn" by Nick Lowe (*Interzone*)

A Short History of Fantasy by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James (Middlesex University Press)

Notes

Links to those nominees available online (the artwork, some of the non-fiction, and several of the short stories) can be found on Torque Control: <<http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/2010/01/25/2010-bsfa-awards-shortlists/>>. There are only four nominees in the Best Novel category, and six nominees in the Best Short Fiction and Best Artwork categories, due to ties for fifth place.

Hal Duncan withdrew his essay "Ethics and Enthusiasm" from consideration from the award. He posted the following notice on his blog on 25 January 2010:

Hal Duncan writes:

It's great company to be in. I haven't read the Clute or the Mendlesohn/James, but I can't imagine they're not more than deserving. And am I right in thinking Nick Lowe still hasn't had any official plaudits for his Interzone film reviewing? Cause if so, it's about fricking time. And as for Deepa D's piece? For my money it's probably the best thing anyone had to say during that racism-in-the-genre shitstorm, period. It's an intelligent, illuminating and *important* perspective on the commercial strange fiction genres, so it's awesome to see it nominated. I'd encourage you to read it, and I'd encourage you to *encourage others* to read it.

In fact, it occurs to me that maybe I have an opportunity to put my money where my mouth is here. Frankly, that Deepa D post is *off* more relevance to *sf* than my... critique of critique. Had we been talking about, say, the "To the Water-Fountains" BSC Review column, I might have felt differently. Hell, there's plenty of other theoretical critique on this blog that is written as actual commentary on the medium from a literary perspective. But this piece? It has, at best, a circumstantial relationship to the field, in that it happened to be written as a response to a particular discourse / specific events that happened to be going down within the field; as a commentary on critique in general its scope is neither limited to nor even *focused upon* strange fiction. When I saw that it was on the longlist, I was well chuffed to see it get a nod, but I really wasn't expecting it to make the final cut, so I hadn't actually thought about this much until now. Now that it's shortlisted... I have to say I don't really see how it fits the eligibility criteria of being "about science fiction and/or fantasy".

With that in mind, now, admittedly I don't think it has a hope in hell of winning, but then I didn't think it had a hope in hell of making the shortlist, so on the off-chance that it does... I think it would be criminal for my exploration of modes of critique to be accorded more status and attention than the exploration of issues of representation and diversity carried out by Deepa D, especially when those issues are precisely born of a *disparity of status and attention*. It would, I feel, be validating the very situation that requires redress if the BSFA Awards were to valorise abstractions that bear only a passing relevance to the field over a commentary that bears directly on its practical, political realities, not least because of the disparities of privilege at play here. It's awesome to have people take note of what I say from my platform, but in this case I'm going to use that platform to say, there are other voices you should be listening to first.

In short, as much as I'm loathe to reject this honour, and grateful as I am to those who voted me onto the shortlist, I'm going to decline the nomination on the grounds that this work is not of sufficient relevance to the field. It may have been sparked off by a debate *within* the field, but that same debate could just as easily have occurred elsewhere. Its inclusion on the ballot therefore seems to me... inappropriate. A mark of my inclusion in the discourse itself. I profoundly appreciate this as a token of respect for the specific work and as an indication that such broad concerns might be considered valid subjects within the science fiction and fantasy community – it's great to see the net being cast so wide – but ultimately the tangential relevance of this post is simply not comparable to the direct relevance of the other nominated works, and I would not have it stand as a contender where it can only receive status and attention at the expense of a more worthy candidate.

So, with the utmost gratitude to those who put it there, and more than a little reticence because of course I'd fucking *love* a BSFA Award for non-fiction, I'd like to respectfully withdraw "Ethics and Enthusiasm" from the running, and leave the contest to those works which bear directly on the field.

-- from <<http://notesfromthegEEKshow.blogspot.com/2010/01/bsfa-nomination.html>>.



2010 Vector Reviewers' Poll

Edited by Kari Sperring

As is traditional, for this issue Vector reviewers (and some others) were asked to recommend their favourite books of 2009. Each reviewer could select up to five titles. Preference was given to sf or fantasy works first published in 2009, but anything was fair game. The most popular title was China Mieville's *The City & The City*, which received four mentions; Neal Stephenson's *Hugo- and Arthur C Clarke Award-nominated Anathem* received three mentions, while Lauren Beukes' *Moxyland*, Ursula K Le Guin's *Lavinia*, Ian McDonald's *Cyberabad Days*, and Dan Simmons' *Drood* received two apiece. Eighty-one other titles received one mention each.

Graham Andrews

The Box: Uncanny Stories (Tor US, 2008) is a movie tie-in collection of Richard Matheson's work that includes "Button, Button" (1970), which was recently filmed as *The Box* – a film which got madder as it went along. That may be why I enjoyed it so much. The book features other classic Matheson stories such as 'Dying Room Only' and 'No Such Thing as a Vampire'.

For prodigiously obvious reasons, Michael Moorcock is much better known as a novelist than as a short-story writer. *The Best of Michael Moorcock* (Tachyon 2009, ed. John Dave with Ann and Jeff VanderMeer) is a hefty retro tome, and does a lot to redress the balance. It contains the classic novella version of "Behold the Man", "The Opium General", and – my personal favourite – "The Cairene Purse" (very Sax Rohmeresque, and that's meant in a nice way).

Dan Simmons' *Drood* (Quercus, 2009) is an ahistorical Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins take on a seemingly all-too-real Edwin Drood, rampaging through the 'Undertown' beneath London. Tim Powers or Arturo Pérez-Reverte could not have written it better – high praise indeed, I shouldn't have to assure you.

This is Me, Jack Vance! Or, More Properly, This is "I" by Jack Vance (Subterranean, 2009) deals more with the Life and it does with the Works. Also this year, Subterranean published the welcome – if spotty – *Songs of the Dying Earth: Stories in Honor [sic] of Jack Vance*, edited by George R. R. Martin and Gardner

Dozois (UK edition from HarperVoyager).

Finally, in *The Very Best of Fantasy & Science Fiction: Sixtieth Anniversary Edition* (Tachyon, 2009), Gordon van Gelder collects twenty-three stories celebrating sixty years of the sf magazine "that has consistently achieved the highest literary standards" (Booklist). The timeline runs from 1951 (Ray Bradbury's 'All Summer in a Day') to 2007 (Ted Chiang's 'The Merchant at the Alchemist's Gate').

A number of honourable mentions: *The Beloved of My Beloved* by Ian Watson & Roberto Quaglia/Roberto Quaglia & Ian Watson (Newcon Press, 2009); *We'll Always Have Paris* by Ray Bradbury (HarperVoyager, 2009); *Poe* ed. Ellen Datlow (Solaris 2009); *Sexton Blake, Detective* ed. George Mann (IPC Media); *Other Spaces, Other Times: A Life Spent in the Future* by Robert Silverberg, and the companion volume *The Collected Stories of Robert Silverberg Volume Four: Trips: 1972-3* (both Subterranean Press, 2009).

Paul Bateman

Matthew Reilly's *Temple* (Macmillan, 1999) is possibly one of the silliest books I've ever read – in one part our hero defuses a bomb inside a tank falling from 30,000 feet – but still very, very enjoyable. It's obvious the author knows his conspiracy involving Nazis, US Special Forces and an ancient South American artefact is pure hokum, but at the same time is having great fun writing it.

Ever wondered why you're not one of the beautiful people, one not rich or famous? In *Outliers: the Story of Success* (Allen Lane, 2008), Malcolm Gladwell discusses this in as way which, while not rubbing in his success too much, could have been particularly annoying, if like me, you went through a period of redundancy. Perhaps the underlying thesis, isn't such a shock (hard work and opportunity) but some of the snippets of information are interesting, such as how the hierarchical Korean language had serious implications for their airline industry, and why being born in the mid-1950s may have been an advantage in computing.

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov is many things, though mainly a satire on communist

Russia. First serialised in 1966-7, it's also one of those few classics that's never dull. How many other books involve Pilate, Satan, witches, a giant cat and the Russian literati? It's a lot easier to read the book than me try to explain it. I read the 2004 Vintage Classics edition, translated by Michael Glenny.

Science fiction is full of stories set on spacecraft, carrying out various operations and missions, allegories of real events. One wonders how many were inspired and informed by *The Cruel Sea* (Penguin 1953), Nicholas Monsarrat's classic account of the Second World War convoys, a story told with authenticity lacking from so many others.

We're endlessly bombarded by books, films and programmes about the Allies' War on Nazi Germany, but we hear very little about the war against Japan other than the dropping of the atomic bombs. In *Nemesis* (Harper Press, 2007), Sir Max Hastings covers the last eighteen months of that campaign, taking you to the heart of the conflict and the sheer overwhelming force required to win, not only from the perspective of US forces but also those of China, the USSR, Australia and Britain. He also discusses the reasons for various actions and the political struggles involved in bringing them fruition. Hastings even quotes Brian Aldiss for his experience of the Burmese campaign.

Lynne Bispham

If I had to choose just one book to recommend out of the many excellent sf and fantasy novels I read in 2009, it would be *Twelve* by Jasper Kent (Bantam, 2009). The year is 1812, and Napoleon has begun his invasion of Russia. Captain Aleksey Ivanovich Danilov is a member of a small group of Russian soldiers operating behind the lines of the French army as spies and saboteurs. With the French march on Moscow seemingly unstoppable, the group enlist the help of twelve mercenaries who prove to be extraordinarily effective at killing the enemy. It is not really giving away the plot to reveal that Aleksei discovers these mercenaries to be voordalak, the vampire of Russian folktale and legend. What really impresses about this novel is the seamless blend of historical fact and fantasy. The descriptions of the French occupation of Moscow effortlessly evoke the time and place, while the vampires are very much deserving of a stake through the heart rather than the seductive, good-looking vamps of most recent horror fiction. Aleksei also is a man of his times, particularly in his attitude towards his fellow spies, his wife, his mistress and his country, and his transformation from an "enlightened" nineteenth century man to a believer in the terrifying tales his grandmother told him when he was a child is entirely convincing. It is the wonderfully atmospheric prose and the accurate historical detail as much as the plot

that make *Twelve* a compelling read.

Rachel Vincent's *Stray* (MIRA, 2009) was my second great discovery of 2009. Taking as its starting point the South American legends of men who can turn into jaguars, this novel, and the others in the series, imagine a complex society of were-cats living alongside our own. These are not just people who have the ability to turn into big cats when it suits them. They have their own social and political structure, and their character and behaviour owes a great deal to the feline side of their nature. *Stray* is a great read, with a likeable, if sometimes misguided, heroine.

My third book of the year is Freda Warrington's *Elfand* (Tor US, 2009). The Aetherials are a semi-mortal race responsible for the legends of fairies, elves and other supernatural beings that live alongside humans, and yet are aware of the Otherworld that lies just beneath the surface of our own Earth. The intricate plot of the novel is propelled by the conflict caused when the war between the two worlds, essential for the Aetherials' survival is closed. A wonderfully original novel, this book takes many of the themes found in fairy tales and makes them its own.

Kelley Armstrong's *Living with the Dead* (Orbit, 2009) is another great read: werewolves, demons and ghosts in present day America. And finally, Celia Friedman's *Wings of Wrath* (Orbit, 2009), the long-awaited sequel to *Feast of Souls*, sees a sorceress seeking. Highly recommended, but read the previous book in the series first.

Tanya Brown

Karen Joy Fowler's *Wit's End* (Putnam, 2008) is a novel set in, and exploring, the interstices between fact and fiction. It's about writing, fan-fiction, online life, family secrets; it's about brothers and sisters, cults, fandom. It's funny, sad, thought-provoking. Fowler's voice comes through warm and strong, chatting to the reader, almost gossipy.

I loved *Flora Segunda: Being the Magickal Mishaps of a Girl of Spirit, Her Glass-Gazing Sidekick, Two Ominous Butlers (One Blue), a House with Eleven Thousand Rooms, and a Red Dog* (Magic Carpey, 2008) for its sheer ebullience and invention (even beyond the title). Flora, second of that name, lives in a large house in an alternate California (Califa) which is ruled by Aztec overlords. Her mother is a famous general (who thinks doing things by magic is cheating): her father mopes around drinking too much and suffering PTSD. Flora is more concerned with school, and her upcoming birthday celebrations. And doing things by magic ...

The entwined plots of Iain M Banks' *Matter* (Orbit, 2008) – a quest for revenge, a Big Mysterious Object, a lost city full of alien tech, feudal warfare

– create a multi-layered narrative (like the multi-layered ‘shellworld’ that’s the setting for much of the action) that showcases Banks’ gift for epic fantasy as well as some impressive world-building. Matter’s on a par with Greek tragedy in scope and resolution, and it brings together themes from fantasy and from science fiction with innovation and wit.

I love Ian R MacLeod’s Arthur C Clarke Award-winning *Song of Time* (PS Publishing, 2008): I love the prose (which is uneven, but at its best utterly ravishing), and the music, and a future that’s drawn in broad strokes because Roushana is frankly not interested in the details, and doesn’t expend energy or narrative on the devastating eruption of Yellowstone, or the bombing of Indian cities, or various other epic disasters (Venice sunk, Kilimanjaro snowless). I don’t want this to be the future I live through, but I can find it utterly credible and somewhat survivable – and yes, there’s a kind of happy ending, a sense that eventually things will be better than they are.

Elizabeth Knox’s *The Vintner’s Luck* remains one of my favourite novels: the publication of a sequel gave me a good excuse to reread the original! *The Angel’s Cut* (Vintage, 2009) is a term relating to winemaking; it refers to the portion of a barrel of wine that evaporates during ageing. The novel, though, is firmly grounded in the world of film, with discussions of the difference between conversation and dialogue, the inadequacy of flashbacks as a method of character development, the shape of a story. Flora’s a film editor, and she’s constantly looking for the flow, the shape of her own story: perhaps she also helps to give shape to ex-angel Xas’s history.

Mark Connorton

This wasn’t a great year for me for genre fiction, but the highlight had to be China Mieville’s clever facsimile of a European police procedural (complete with English that reads as though it has been translated from another language). *The City & The City* (Macmillan, 2009) is set in two (or maybe three) bizarrely separated but co-existing cities somewhere in Eastern Europe. The book is tightly and economically constructed, giving the reader a brisk tour of each city as the investigation proceeds. The central conceit didn’t quite work for me, but even one of Mieville’s near misses is better than anything that most other authors can come up with.

People who are disappointed that Mieville

hasn’t just spent the last few years churning out more Bas-Lag novels might enjoy Felix Gilman’s *Thunderer* (Bantam Spectra, 2007), a fantasy set in an infinitely large and unmappable city haunted by scores of competing deities and sects. There are nods to Peake, Borges and Mieville and some great set pieces and dazzling images. The book tells the story of a musician/priest searching the city for his lost god and becoming embroiled in a conflict that involves, among others, a gang of flying urchins, a levitating battleship, a malevolent river deity and more.

The Red Wolf Conspiracy by Robert V. S. Reddick (Gollancz, 2008) is another enjoyable fantasy with a similarly Victorian feel, set on a huge ship that is supposedly carrying a diplomatic mission to a distant land. The plot could have done with some editing, and the romance between two main characters is rather perfunctory, but the book is still highly entertaining, with impressive nautical detail and an engaging cast (which includes sentient rats, numerous spies and assassins, and a race of miniature people).

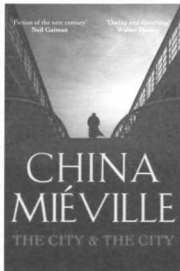
Paul McAuley’s *The Quiet War* (Gollancz, 2008) is an impressive hard sf novel about a war between an authoritarian Earth struggling with environmental collapse and the diverse, more liberal colonies on the moons of the outer planets of the solar system. Despite some heinous infodumping in the early chapters, the book soon evolves into a tense thriller with some interesting technology and strong

characters.

Finally, and though only tangentially related to science fiction, I can’t help recommending Roberto Bolano’s *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (WW Norton and Co, 2008) – a collection of slyly humorous capsule biographies of fictional right wing authors. Philip K Dick and Norman Spinrad are name-checked, and L Ron Hubbard evoked, in the section on a science fiction author whose hilariously awful sounding novels concern the adventures of ‘a mutant, stray German Shepherd with telepathic powers and Nazi tendencies’.

Jaine Fenn

In *Going Under* (Gollancz, 2008), Justina Robson’s writing is clear and vivid and she credits her readers with intelligence; plus I’m a sucker for stories that mix tech and magic then add a heavy dose of intrigue.



What stands out most in this book is her portrayal of the fae realm as somewhere utterly twisted and alien yet with its own internal consistency. Many writers have tried to capture this sense of mysterious other, but I've never come across such a disturbingly successful attempt.

This year I finally caught up with the rest of the world and read Charles Stross' *The Atrocity Archives* (published in the UK by Orbit, 2004). It didn't disappoint. The central story is an expanded novella, so there's a fair run-up to the action, but that just gives Mr Stross the chance to thoroughly relish his subject matter. The book exhibits a very British humour, subtle and geeky, which makes the horrific elements all the more starkly shocking. He's got me hooked now, damn his eyes.

I keep forgetting what a great writer Joe Haldeman is. It's hard to review *Marsbound* (Ace, 2008) without dropping spoilers, but I will say that it's a book of two halves, the first one rather slower than the second. This gives a somewhat uneven pacing, but that was my only real quibble. He does an excellent job of getting into the head of his young female protagonist, and has a fair stab at representing more unusual worldviews that crop up later (can't say more without spoilers). Anyway, it's a fine read.

I'll end on a guilty pleasure. I read all three of Toby Frost's Space Captain Smith books this year, but as well as having one of the best titles of all time, *God Emperor of Didcot* (Myrmidon, 2008) is the most coherently plotted of the series so far. None of them are great literature but they're all great fun. Mr Frost's writing is packed with stunning one-liners, and he displays and flagrantly abuses a comprehensive knowledge of the sf genre, leading no cliché un-mocked and no reference teased up without a sly wink. He also throws a good tea party.

Simon Guerrier

Neal Stephenson's *Anthem* (Atlantic Books, 2008) is a typically robust brick of a novel, 937 pages packed with action, maths and top facts. At first, I thought it was running along the same lines as *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *Riddley Walker*: the people of a post-apocalyptic Earth struggling to put the world back together, making sense and science from the fragments left of the past. For the first 200 pages that's exactly what it is, detailing young Erasmus' life in a Concent, caught up in chores and philosophical

discourse, and cut off from the world and his family outside. But there's quickly hints of something going on in that external world which will affect the young scholars – and might even lead to a fourth great Sack of the Concents. Erasmus is soon on a peregrination into the dangerous exterior, trying to make unravel what's happening. Without giving too much away, the quest and mystery are suitably thrilling, while allowing much discussion of Big Ideas. A lot of that discussion – on mathematical proofs, on etymology, on perception – is engrossing.

China Mieville's *The City & The City* (Macmillan, 2009) is a police procedural set in eastern Europe in two co-existing cities. They reminded me of the two spaceships blended together in the 1979 *Doctor Who* story, 'Nightmare of Eden', only without the Muppet aliens. Citizens in either city must not

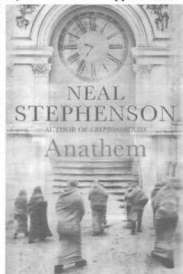
notice their counterparts on fear of invoking the dreaded Breach. Mieville's writing is punchy and vivid, making this mad idea chillingly real. It also reads like it's a translation, and all kinds of little details – the proximity of Budapest, mentions of films and books, the bafflement of visiting Canadians – helps give it a ring of truth. *The Wire* as written by Borges.

The Ancestor's Tale by Richard Dawkins (Weidenfield and Nicholson, 2004) follows the evolutionary 'tree' of all life on Earth, starting with us humans and working backwards through the apes and animals and plants to the micro-organisms. It's full of wit and detail, and constantly awe-inspiring. There are also

shrewd digressions on topics like race and culture. You could mine it for sci-fi aliens and monsters – I already have. There are the sea squirts that eat their own brains when they mature, the sponges that survive being sieved cell by cell, or the starfish even Dawkins calls 'Martian' because they're so unlike other life forms on Earth.

Mark Harding.

Adam Roberts' *Yellow Blue Tibia* (Gollancz, 2009) is a novel that everyone in the country should be made to read (for their own good). The hero, Konstantin Skvorecky, provides the most detailed account we have of the background to the 1986 UFO invasion of Russia. And the book is an original and profoundly frivolous meditation on Stalinism, Scientology, Russia in the 80's, Science Fiction, the Copenhagen interpretation, Fanaticism, Absurdism, Paranoia,



UFOlogy, Love, and the benefits of smoking. This is the sort of science fiction novel that my snooty friends will be busy with right now finding reasons for classifying as *not* science fiction. (Presumably this is the delay in having it serialised on Radio Four – a perfect fit surely.) Apart from an exceptionally high count of first class jokes (if that terminology isn't showing my Capitalist indoctrination too much), you also get a delightful language lesson in Russian. Thought provoking, witty, clever, humane, clear-eyed and cheering. What more do you want?

Niall Harrison

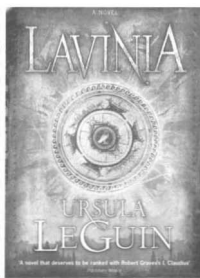
For me, 2009 was a year of promise fulfilled, and form returned. A year, broadly speaking, of fantasy over science fiction; and a year of American excellence.

The Brit in my pack is Kit Whitfield, whose unsentimental *In Great Waters* (Jonathan Cape, 2009) showcases as bold a conceit as her first novel, *Bareback* (2006) – in this case, merfolk interbreeding with royal families in medieval Europe – with much improved execution, if some historical hand-waving. It includes a staggeringly well-done human-but-alien perspective, and much in the way of nuanced courtly shenanigans, as its protagonists struggle to create and own their worlds, both public and personal.

Two other second sf books hail from America. The middle volume of David Anthony Durham's *Acacia* trilogy, *The Other Lands* (Doubleday, 2009), builds on a solid foundation to superb effect. Without neglecting the Big Story pleasures of epic fantasy – more than with any other book this year, I was spellbound by the irresistible rightness of the unfolding plot – Durham inserts both political argument and striking monsters that China Mieville could be proud of. The last chapter is tragic, terrifying, and bodes extremely well for book three. Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (Night Shade Books, 2009) returns to an existing world as well, in this case the ecologically ruined near-future Thailand familiar from a couple of the stories in last year's collection *Pump Six*. The novel is brutal, fiercely argumentative, and utterly immersing; and it seems extraordinary that no UK publisher has picked it up. It doesn't grasp everything it reaches for, but it reaches for more than any other science fiction novel I read this year.

In one sense I am ill-placed to praise my next pick.

But in another, my lack of direct familiarity with the *Aeneid* makes that praise all the more important. Ursula K Le Guin's *Lavinia* (Gollancz, 2009) is emphatically not for initiates only: this beautiful, generous, wise revisioning of the title character's life contains all the explanation it needs. And the marvellous sanity of its fictive universe is matched this year only by Kim Stanley Robinson's *Galileo's Dream* (HarperVoyager, 2009), which combines a moving portrait of the scientist's life with a vertigo-inducing cosmological space opera. It is a book with a lot to say about time, memory and history and, as ever with Robinson, about the physical, emotional and spiritual joys of living. And of the five dreams I've written about here, I think it may be the most nourishing.



Penny Hill

One of my slots for the five best books read in 2009 was filled very early in the year, by Neal Stephenson's *Anathem* (Atlantic Books, 2008). Yes, it's self-indulgently long in places, and I could have done with less of the "North pole adventures" section. But I loved the fascination with science and thinking. I persuaded myself that I could follow the various proofs as they were happening and I did enjoy the overall story.

Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (Hodder Children's Books, 2007) is a book I am glad I was persuaded to look at. This beautiful wordless book shows us what an immigrant

experience can be like, with all the wonder and terror that entails. If you get a chance to buy it – do.

For my next pick, I'm counting as one book all three parts of the *Magic or Madness* trilogy by Justine Larbalestier (Penguin, first volume 2005; *Magic Lessons*, 2006; and *Magic's Child*, 2007) because they form one continuous narrative. I particularly like the price of being magical and have found myself using this series as an example of how I believe magic should work in fiction – that there should always be a cost, that it should never be easy and that there should be consequences.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Stieg Larsson (MacLehose Press, 2008) is such an excellent and chilling thriller that we have not only bought the rest of the trilogy for ourselves, we bought all three for my 94 year old Granny for Christmas. I hope she can cope with the anal rape scene.

Finally, *Firebirds Soaring* (Firebird, 2009) is another triumph from fabulous editor Sharyn November. She has inspired and brought together stories by some of my favourite authors. If you haven't read her two earlier Firebirds collections then rush out and buy all three now.

Tony Keen

I have been even less successful in reading the sf of 2009 than I have been in previous years. The only novel that I managed to finish was *Lavinia* (Gollancz, 2009), and that was first published in the US in 2008. I didn't think this was as extraordinary as some reviewers did, but I might reconsider that verdict if I were to read it again. In any case, I certainly thought it was good.

The pick of the 2008 catch-up from the awards season, *Flood* (Gollancz, 2008) is



Stephen Baxter doing what he's always best at, showing the slow collapse of civilization, and people's attempts to muddle along as before in the face of catastrophe.

The flooding of London alone is worth reading the novel for, even if the rest wasn't any good – which, of course, it is. Baxter's return to form, previously

shown in *The H-Bomb Girl* and *Weaver*, continues. Next up, Ark.

Fiction book of the year, however, was Ian McDonald's collection *Cyberabad Days* (Gollancz, 2009). They are set in the world of *River of Gods* (2005), and fill out still further the picture of India shown in that novel, including explaining how India became so fragmented. It makes me want to go and read *River of Gods* again, which is what it should do. The final novella, "Vishnu and the Cat Circus", is an exceptional *tour de force*, addressing criticisms raised against the original novel in a way that doesn't seem like an infodump. I can't wait for *The Dervish House*.

This year's "classic I haven't read before" was *The Kraken Wakes* by John Wyndham (Michael Joseph, 1953). I read it as a companion to *Flood*. It's deservedly considered one of Wyndham's best.

Finally, I want to cheat a bit, and include a non-fiction book. *A Short History of Fantasy* by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James (Middlesex University Press, 2009) is an excellent introduction to the genre, especially valuable for the period up to about 1970, before the field exploded across our bookshelves. You should get it.

Paul Kincaid

2009 was a year when non-fiction easily outweighed most of the fiction I read, primarily because of Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr's *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan, 2008), which is simply one of the most important works of sf criticism to have appeared in many years, but also because of Nicholas Ruddick's superb survey of prehistoric fiction, *The Fire in the Stone* (Wesleyan, 2009), and also *On Joanna Russ* edited by Farah Mendlesohn (Wesleyan, 2009). The latter perhaps concentrates too much on the obvious aspects of Russ' work but still provides valuable insights into an important writer. While not obviously genre related, I would also mention *The Age of Wonder* by Richard Holmes (HarperPress, 2008), a superb account of the interaction of science and the romantic imagination from the late 18th century to the mid-19th.

The outstanding genre novel of the year was *Cloud & Ashes* by Greer Gilman (Small Beer Press, 2009); not an easy book to read and a work that will inspire admiration rather than love, but still an astonishing work. The year's other outstanding fantasy is *Avilion* (Gollancz, 2009), the last novel from Robert Holdstock and a fitting end to the seminal Mythago Wood sequence.

Science fiction hasn't produced anything to match the Gilman, but China Mieville's *The City & The City* (Macmillan, 2009) was the novel that gave me most intellectual pleasure, a fascinating examination of the role of the border in shaping how we see the world. I also enjoyed *Gardens of the Sun* by Paul McAuley (Gollancz, 2009) for old fashioned sense of wonder, even if the plot was not under such tight control as in the previous novel, *The Quiet War*. And *Journey into Space* by Toby Litt (Penguin, 2009) was altogether more satisfying than I had anticipated, by a non-sf writer who clearly knows how to use the devices of sf to serious effect.

I read quite a lot of short fiction this year but nothing that stands out dramatically other than *The Best of Gene Wolfe* (Tor 2009) – which is so obviously an essential book as to hardly need mentioning – and *Cyberabad Days* by Ian McDonald (Gollancz, 2009), which provides a mosaic view of his future India that is, if anything, even better than *River of Gods*.

Finally, John Crowley's *Four Freedoms* (William Morrow, 2009) is a mainstream novel about women

working for the war effort in America during the 1940s, but it's by John Crowley so it deserves your attention, it is also very good indeed.

Anthony Nanson

At a time of cynical commercial pressures to publish cutting-edge baby food, Lou Anders' anthology *Fast Forward 2* (Pyr, 2008) is a reassurance that science fiction can still be the locus of artful, intelligent, thought-provoking stories. Besides strong contributions from, among others, Chris Nakashima-Brown, Nancy Kress, Ian McDonald, and Jeff Carlson, I'm especially grateful to this book for introducing me to the superb work of Paolo Bacigalupi, in 'The Gambler'.

Rarely these days am I gripped as compellingly by a novel as I was by Christopher Priest's *The Separation* (Gollancz edition, 2007). It's not so much the human story that mesmerised me, fine though that is, as my need to know to how – metaphysically, historically – he was going to tie together the alternative timelines through the Second World War. Though the denouement proved disappointing, the book raises provocative questions about the ethics of the British bombing raids against German cities and the possibility Britain could have negotiated with Rudolf Hess a peace that would have saved many lives.

This year I finally managed to track down a copy of Ursula Le Guin's classic, *The World for World is Forest* (Gollancz, 1977). It was worth the effort. This short novel works on many levels: as comment on the ruthless treatment of aboriginal peoples in the course of extracting the resources of their lands; as comment on the Vietnam War (current at the time of writing); as myth of the Fall; as visionary extrapolation of the convergence between inner world and outer world in some kinds of metaphysical consciousness, as for example in the Australian Aboriginal songlines.

Patty O'Brien's *The Pacific Muse: Exotic Femininity and the Colonial Pacific* (University of Washington Press, 2006) is a study of another colonial (and postcolonial) dynamic: the disempowering depiction of the exotic feminine other as primitive and highly sexualised, a trend she charts from the island-hopping of Odysseus to its apogee in the European conquest of Polynesia. For the bracing relevance of this analysis to science fiction, space opera especially, one need only consider the seminal influence upon *Star Trek* of the Pacific voyages of Captain Cook and his contemporaries.

Finally, to anyone who enjoyed Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-Earth* and J. R. R. Tolkien: *Author of the Century* I would recommend his *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien* (Walking Tree, 2007), a collection of Shippey's erudite but delightfully witty articles on all aspects of Tolkien's work. They go

more deeply than the books into the philological roots of Tolkien's imagination, framing his fiction as an outcome of the efforts of Germanic philology to recover by careful reasoning not only lost elements of language but also lost culture, history, and myth – a reason perhaps why Tolkien's world-building feels ultimately more authentic than that of many of his imitators.

George Newberry

2009 was something of a mixed year for me. Several of the most popular authors of the current scene limited their output to short fiction collections, such as Greg Egan (*Oceanic*), Ian McDonald (*Cyberabad Days*), Alastair Reynolds (*Zima Blue*) and Charles Stross (*Wireless*). Whilst the reprinting of short stories is certainly no bad thing, for me none of these works had the same allure as an original novel would have.

Additionally, authors famed for their consistency were found to be well below par in the last twelve months. Joe Haldeman, for instance, had recently put out a chain of skilled and highly entertaining novels, until the weak link of 2008's *Marsbound* arrived.

Whilst this book was pleasing in a highly retro fashion, I was left with the overriding impression that this book could have in fact been published fifty years ago—zero-G sex aside—to very little comment. That feeling, coupled with mostly uninteresting characters and an unsatisfying, abrupt conclusion, resulted in my disappointment at this offering.

Of the collections listed above, Ian McDonald's *Cyberabad Days* (Gollancz, 2009) felt the most cohesive. The stories are all staged in the mid-twenty first-century 'India' of McDonald's *River of Gods*—a setting I now believe to be one of the most ambitious and poetic projects underway in British science fiction. These stories superbly recall the sensual and lyrical atmosphere of that original novel. Of particular note in this new collection are the increasingly confusing intercessions between the

A technicolor, jittery rollercoaster ride into a steaming hell.
Like a Clockwork Orange, it has the makings of a cult success.
André Brink



mythological and the real, much as in the work of one of his stylistic and thematic predecessors, Roger Zelazny—but in a more detailed and thoroughly 'modern' fashion.

A couple of stand-alone novels did seem worthy of mention here: Iain (M.) Banks combined many of the themes from his mainstream novels with a new (for him) form of science fiction in *Transition* (Little Brown, 2009). The result is an entertaining, often funny and complex novel about the attempts of a group called the Concern to police an infinite multiverse of realities. There is some very poignant commentary on the role centralized authorities play in our lives—about the methods they use in our name to ensure 'security' and 'freedom'—and in equal balance there is strong characterization and brisk plotting.

Lauren Beurk's *Moxyland* (Angry Robot, 2009) makes quite a good companion piece to Banks' book, coming at the issues of terrorism, authority and resistance from a more subversive, 'underground' standpoint. I admired the book for its relentless energy, and also for its highly creative construction of a near-future South Africa in which exponential technological growth has merely served to calcify divisions in society. The overarching conspiracy-theory will possibly seem like familiar fare to some readers by now, but this is more a novel about vivid moments and of characters at once connected and alienated by their culture.

Perhaps it says something about 2009 in general, however, that I will remember this year as much for its reprints as for its original contributions. Of particular note was Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*'s long-deserved addition to Gollancz's Science Fiction Masterworks series, and the 40th anniversary edition of Ursula K Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* from Orbit. Despite being a long-time fan of Dick's work I had never read *High Castle* until this 2009 edition. I will not say much about it since many of you are doubtless aware of the work, other than to comment that the characters were as painfully human as any I have come across in literature, and that Dick's handling of the 'Nazis win WW2' alternate-universe scenario displays a subtlety of imagination lacking in the modern sf scene. Le Guin's, meanwhile, is a novel both of wonderful world-building and of profound theoretical implications. It is a novel which asks questions of our most fundamental preconceptions and one that is still relevant today.

Martin Potts

The year started brilliantly with *Three Days to Never* (Harper Collins, 2007) by Tim Powers. Easily up to Powers' high standards of weaving a tale of the fantastic between unlikely events and

people – in this case, incorporating Albert Einstein, Charlie Chaplin and time travel. Wonderful prose, fascinating scenarios and extraordinary situations. The tragedy is that I believe this book is not yet available in the UK; but it's well worth it if you can locate a copy, especially the Subterranean Press edition with haunting illustrations by J K Potter. I was privileged to meet Tim Powers at Eastercon, and the man is as fascinating as his book. PS Publishing have done him proud with the release of *Powers* (ed. John Berlyne) this year.

The rest of the year saw me playing catch up. David Brin's *Kiln People* (Tor, 2002) is an excellent extrapolation of the development of cloning and a view on how this technology could manifest itself and its social impact. It was a surprising novel in that it developed in ways I did not expect, and its scope was far wider than the gumshoe thriller suggested on the cover.

Stephen Baxter's *Coalescent* (Gollancz, 2003) is a totally engaging tale: spanning thousands of years from Roman Britain to the far future. Baxter's historical facts are absorbing and the pages turn easily, with the culmination of the tale wholly satisfying, the exploration of biology and history conducted at a pace that is always engrossing. The sequels are on my list for 2010.

Some of you may know that I was a great fan of David Gemmell's heroic fantasy, in which he demonstrated such wonderful storytelling skills, and I have finally found a successor, ten years after everyone else. Steven Erikson's *Gardens of the Moon* (Bantam, 1999) had epic scale, engaging characters, intrigue, action, politics and a satisfying fast pace. My fantasy thirst was well and truly quenched and my appetite whetted by the sequels available. I enjoy excellent storytelling and this was it.

The year ended with a title I picked up without recommendation but purely out of curiosity. G. W Dahlquist's *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters* (Penguin, 2008) had an intriguing title and strap lines so I took a gamble and it paid off and thus special mention must be made of it. Set in an alternative Victorian era, we are presented with a mysterious alchemy which appears to absorb memories and experiences for repeated viewings later – only the viewings are all consuming experiences which entrap the viewer and alter the contributor and expose them to manipulation. A political plot unfolds with all the Machiavellian twists of a Sherlock Holmes mystery, via the narration of the brave action of three very different characters who individually then collectively set out to uncover the plot of the controlling cabal. At times erotic, and always fast paced, the narrative keeps the pages turning and an action filled fantasy adventure is superbly delivered. The book is also beautifully presented with front and

end papers which present letters, diagrams, location drawings and advertisements of the fictional period which enhance the whole experience. Absolutely fantastic – go on, treat yourself to something a little different.

Myfanwy Rodman.

Picking my top five books out of a whole year was always going to be tricky. I read a lot and a book has to be pretty atrocious for me not to enjoy something about it. Still, looking back I have found that these books stood out from the crowd.

Alex Bell's *Jasmyrn* (Gollancz, 2009) is half thriller, half romance, half horror, half fairy tale – damn, I have too many halves. It's slow at first but definitely picks up the pace. The love affair is predictable, but some of the plot twists aren't and there is lovely foreshadowing throughout.

Mythangelus by Storm Constantine (Immanion Press, 2009) is a thoroughly solid read. Mixing of sf and fantasy is a feature of much of Constantine's work. Here, some linked stories based in secondary worlds familiar from previous novels, and some standalone tales, explore the angelic myths. It's a must for Constantine fans and for others a great introduction to a polished and original writer.

Peter V Brett's *The Painted Man* (HarperVoyager, 2008) came as part of a job lot of five that I read in about a week. I found it very enjoyable, with a secondary world setting that felt more like backwoods America than the wilds of mediaeval Europe. The mythos is detailed and consistent, and the scattered viewpoints give the plot breadth and scope. One disappointment was the demons, who were presented merely as a force of nature, not a sentient race.

Maria V Snyder's *Poison Study* (MIRA, 2007) came in the same lot as *The Painted Man* but is a very different kettle of fish. It presents a different type of secondary world – a military dictatorship – and focuses more tightly on character development and political intrigue. It's a slim, compact volume, and the first in a trilogy that promises to expand the world as it goes.

Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind* (Gollancz, 2007) is beautifully crafted – it took nine years to write – and superbly written. This brilliant debut novel is beautifully crafted (it took nine years to write) and superbly written. It harks back to an era when fantasy novels were epic and sprawling in their construction as well as their plots. The secondary world is detailed and wholly believable, the protagonist an intriguing mystery, and as it is the first book of a trilogy the best may be yet to come.

And now for the very best of the year. Though not as technically proficient as *The Name of the Wind*, two novels by Sarah Monette that read as one story

– *Melusine* (Ace, 2005) and *The Virtu* (Ace, 2007) – are the best of the best. Set in a beautifully realised secondary world, complete with court politics, dark intrigue, assassinations and madhouses, they boast arger than life characters you can't help falling in love with, and a brother on brother team to match that of *Supernatural*. A fantastic read.

Andy Sawyer

Probably the best novel I read this year was China Mieville's *The City & The City* (Macmillan, 2009), which took his sense of urban unease to the police procedural and the terrain of middle Europe. His conjoined cities (I'll say no more for those who have yet to experience the actual relationship between them) are echoes of Berlin and Jerusalem, of course, but also (certainly for me) Victoria on Hong Kong island.

I still have a pile of 2009 books to read, but among those I did get through and wrote about were Lavie Tidhar's *The Apex Book of World Sf* (Apex Books, 2009), which contained some fascinating stories including one, Anil Menon's "Into the Night" (originally published in *Interzone*, 2008), which is the best encounter with the future I have come across in a long while, an uneasy anticipation which shows, simply, that this encounter is going to come to us all, however much we pretend we have embraced the winds of change. Gwyneth Jones's *Grazing the Long Acre* (PS Publishing, 2009) brought together some of her fine short stories in an immensely satisfying collection. Much was made of the confessed "surprise" of the judges when Chris Beckett's *The Turing Test* (Elastic Press, 2008) won the Edge Hill Prize for best short story collection of the year, but it was well deserved and I hope will bring Beckett more of the attention he deserves.

A conversation with a South African writer drew my attention to Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* (Angry Robot, 2009), which is now published in the UK. While some of it is familiar post-cyberpunk territory, and some of it (such as the future-slang the characters sometimes converse in) is almost certainly a lot more familiar to South African readers than those of us who have never spent more than a few days there, there's a skilful and sometimes chilling sense of futurity about the novel which makes it memorable. Beukes, I think, is a welcome new voice.

Sadly for my self-respect, much of my most memorable sf has been in front of the screen. I have yet to see *Avatar*, but was impressed by *Moon*, although it veered too close to *Solaris* in places for true greatness. Despite my ambivalence about *Torchwood* I enjoyed *Children of Earth*, the lengthy serial which showed earlier this year. Perhaps the length of a 5-parter helped it get right what I generally dislike about it – its apparent attempts to convince us that

mildly transgressive sexuality is a substitute for character. Here I thought the relationships between the characters were both sympathetic and believable. I'm still thinking about the two end-of-year BBC blockbusters, the new *The Day of the Triffids* and the farewell of David Tennant in *Doctor Who* (who we also saw killed in *Hamlet*). But Tennant's final farewell was almost as moving as his Shakespearian one, and while the new BBC versions of Bill Masen and Josella Playton were not quite as effective as Wyndham's original characters in reflecting the anxiety of their times, the revamping of the minor character Torrence into a fully-fledged demonic (almost literally) warlord by Eddie Izzard worked well for me in making this more than another attempt to replay the original novel. The triffids themselves were suitably mysterious, and Vanessa Redgrave turned up as the leader of a religious community to good effect. Although the best ever adaptation of

The Day of the Triffids that I've seen still has to be the 2004 Fools Gold Theatre version where the audience were pursued through a Wirral park by unseen clattering, this was a genuine attempt to think about what was relevant, in the story, to our times. If it wasn't quite

successful, it was because, unlike what Wyndham may have consciously or unconsciously been doing with the characters of Coker or Josella, it didn't always confront its sources of anxiety – although the sight of an aeroplane plummeting down from the sky in a drama aired on December 28th must surely have added an extra frisson after the news reports of a few days earlier.

Donna Scott

It has been a bit of a busy year for me: the bulk of my reading time has been taken up by my work as an editor. In addition, I've reserved my daily commute for scribbling bits of comedy or poetry, so I was quite surprised to look back over my year's 'free' reading to see I've managed to squeeze in some quality sf over the last twelve months.

This year has been a fantastic one for the novella. I can see myself reading a few more of these next year, too. My star pick of these would be *Starship Fall* by Eric Brown (Newcon Press, 2009), a bittersweet story of love, life and friendship on the distant colony of Chalcedony, and a sequel to *Starship Summer*. Brown

is a writer's writer, who selects his words with utter care. His prose is crisp and eminently readable. A lovely story.

I thought it was about time I caught up with Inspector Chen and read the second in Liz Williams's series: *The Demon and the City* (Night Shade Books, 2007). I've still got a few more to get through before I've caught up with the series, though. These books are delightful and excellently written. The story sweeps along and the characters are fabulous – I think I love Zhu Irzh! Though he'd have to do something about those nails...

I really enjoyed the winner of last year's BSFA Award for Best Novel, *The Night Sessions* by Ken Macleod (Orbit, 2008). It's set in a secular Scotland where religion, now considered a bit of a deviant hobby following the Second Enlightenment, is being discovered by robots. An interesting scenario to set a tale of murder and intolerance, spun out with



Macleod's dry humour.

The humour in Charles Stross's *Halting State* (Orbit, 2008) was more pun-like, but I like puns. This crime story set in a virtual world seemed only a step away from the present. I doubtless missed many in-jokes, but as a non-gamer I still found it an absorbing story.

eing pressed for time though, I have relied heavily on short story collections for a burst of satisfactory fiction. Both Ian Whates's *The Gift of Joy* (Newcon Press, 2009) and Jai Clare's *The Cusp of Something* (Elastic Press, 2007) have been great to dip into. Here are fresh voices, showcasing their skills with different styles of writing. I look forward to seeing what they do next.

Martyn Taylor

Without question, my choice for the book of 2009 is Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (Bloomsbury, 2008), the remarkable tale of Nobody Owens, a boy raised by the (mostly) noncorporeal inhabitants of a graveyard, the one place where he is safe from the assassin who slaughtered his family. This should be

black, but is as light a story as you will read. Yes, most of the characters are dead – at least – but they are more real and human than you will find elsewhere. There is no rationale for this other world, but there doesn't need to be. The transparent writing carries the reader away. This, my friends, is literature of the highest order masquerading as a genre novel.

Alan Garner's *Elidor* (HarperCollins Children's Books) is an old book, first published in 1965, but shares many of the strengths of the Gaiman. There are no explanations of the other world, largely because the bewildered determination of the four young lead characters is such a powerful element of the story. The writing is spare almost to the point of banality, and the kids are very much of their time, but Garner – like Gaiman – leaves the imagining of the other world mostly to us. Garner is one of those authors who mould reading habits. Gaiman does the same.

Dan Simmons is a different sort of author – there has never been anything spare about his prose and his worlds are thoroughly constructed, and often built on the literary legacies of earlier writers. *Drood* (Quercus, 2009) is, of course, Dickens' *Edwin Drood*, which is not one of the most cheerful stories in the English language. By contrast with Gaiman and Garner, Simmons leads the reader by the hand through his detailed immersive experience, proving that no method is exclusively 'right' or 'wrong'. I found the whole book a demanding process, but very worthwhile. Don't expect to read this in a single sitting!

Just as emotionally demanding is Pat Cadigan's *Tea from an Empty Cup* (Tor, 1998), another classic I re-read after years of disengagement. As old fashioned in its way as the Garner – the future in which we live is not scripted by William Gibson or choreographed by Ridley Scott (for which small mercies ...), and the Japanese millennium is quickly giving way to the Chinese hegemony. Even so, Cadigan's merciless dissection is much more concerned with the internals of her characters rather than the external decorations.

All four of these books are serious and nobody could be surprised if they are set texts tomorrow, or the day after. However, there is (a lot of) space for fun, fun, fun in our reading. Stephen Hunt's *Court of the Air* (HarperVoyager, 2007) and *Kingdom Under the Sea* (HarperVoyager, 2008) are the first two in his sequence of not quite clockpunk adventures, with the trappings of alternate technologies flung over broad brush, picaresque riots that owe as much to Alan Moore as they do to H Rider Haggard. Some of the references may skate past some readers ungrasped, but I confess to having enjoyed these books immensely.

Sue Thomason

From my shortlist of eleven books, I've picked the following five as being of most interest to *Vector* readers:

Don't Sleep, There are Snakes by Daniel Everett (Profile, 2009): a committed Christian missionary and his family went to live with a "primitive" Amazonian Indian tribe who speak a language isolate (a language with no obvious connection to any other known language). His intention was to learn their language, translate the Bible (or at least a gospel), and convert them. It didn't work out like that. Does language shape thought, or does thought shape language, or what? What concepts cannot be expressed in another language? How widely variant are human worldviews, as mediated by human languages? Was Chomsky right about universal/innate grammar? Lots of big ideas and questions to play with.

The Cottage Garden Diaries: My Year in the Eighteenth Century by Fiona J Houston (Saraband, 2009): time-travelling made simple – or fairly simple – as if the business of living was ever simple. Gives a strong sense of the immediate personal experience of living this life; a book about being and doing, rather than thinking. How to live on local food, without electric light, central heating, or man-made fibre clothing... we could all be doing this again, maybe sooner than we think. Is this a diary from the past or the future?

The Country You Have Never Seen by Joanna Russ (Liverpool University Press, 2007): a collection of Russ' essays and reviews; clear, insightful and committed writing about lots of books I know and love. Made me shriek "Yes, yes!" a lot. Also made me shriek "No, no!" a lot. The best kind of critical writing does that.

When it Changed: Science into Fiction, edited by Geoff Ryman (Comma Press, 2009): these short stories are "an attempt to put authors and scientists back in touch with each other ... Composed collaboratively – through a series of visits and conversations between leading authors and practicing scientists". Well, what an interesting idea; fiction about science! And I'm always interested in collaboration.

Anathem by Neal Stephenson, and its accompanying CD, *Jolet* (Atlantic Books, 2008): hugely stimulating and thought-provoking; the only book this year that I read and immediately started re-reading (I read it four or five times eventually, skipping the rocket stuff the last couple of times). Full of big ideas. Will take me years to finish digesting it. And the music is stunning. (Another collaboration, in effect; I'm coming to the conclusion that a lot of works of fiction with only one author's name on the front are much more collaborative than that convention makes it seem...)

2009 in film

Yet Another Year in Decline

by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

It's been a strange year for the film industry, one of contradictions that saw everyone being deeply depressed at significant increases in box office revenue. During a time of recession cinema attendance tends to increase because going to the movies is a relatively cheap form of entertainment – certainly when compared with a night out on the town with all the trimmings or a holiday to foreign climes – a theory supported by an upwards turn in takings of around 14%, despite a decrease in actual product. This year hasn't really seen many of the hyper-mega-super-blockbusters we have come to know and loathe love hit the screens – only a few of the standard sf/comic franchises have made an appearance, including a fashionably late Mr Potter. Despite the stellar box office takings, the studios don't have the vaults of Kugarrands to spend on either the movies or on marketing, because other branches of their multimedia businesses have suffered the effects of the recession. But perhaps this is a good thing, as some of the best products we've seen this year have been the lower budget productions – more thoughtful, more intelligent, or a little bit quirky.

3D is here to stay. Right? We've had a slew of 'em this year, culminating in James Cameron's over-hyped *Avatar*, allegedly the reason behind the industry spending billions upgrading cinemas, although matters such as piracy and the ability to charge more at the ticket stall certainly attracted many takers. So was *Avatar* worth it? Well, yes. A cross between *Titanic* (1997) and *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), the plot involved humans wanting to obtain the elusive element unobtainium (a timely homage to 'science fiction' 'classic' *The Core*) on a distant planet so that they can make squillions of dollars back home. However, the indigenous 12 foot blue humanoid aliens, the Na'vi, aren't really so keen on having their forest planet transformed into a giant mine for corporate profit and empire building. The humans come up with two possible solutions: try to connect with the aliens and convince them to co-operate, using Na'vi avatars controlled remotely by human scientists, or alternatively just have the military blast them out of existence. So not a social, economic,

militaristic and environmental deconstruction of the present at all then. It goes without saying that the effects are stunning, but they complement the story and characters rather than simply add a 'wow factor'. Yes the plot is thin, but Cameron knows where to place his camera, rather than just wave it about hoping the editing will sort it all out in post-prod (that's you, Mr Bay). And if you get a chance to see *Avatar* in IMAX – take it.

Avatar aside, 3D still tends to fall into the realm of the family film or horror movie, but this year's filmmakers have generally eschewed the format's gimmicky nature (see *Fly Me to the Moon*; or actually, don't...) in favour of a good story and character development, the 3D enhancing the film rather than becoming its *raison d'être*. It's a shrewd move that adds credibility to the format and, crucially, means the lucrative DVD/Blu-Ray/TV markets won't leave punters questioning why characters inexplicably wave things at them. Best of this year's bunch were Pixar's *Up!*, Disney's *Bolt* and *Coraline*, all of which were so splendid that they were even capable of wowing provincial audiences who could only see them in dimension-poverished 2D. In *Up!* 78-year-old Carl Fredrickson ties thousands of helium balloons to his house to defy the property developers who are trying to get him into an old people's home and flies off to Venezuela to search for a waterfall that captivated both him and his late wife throughout their youth. But he's not alone because wilderness explorer Russell has unintentionally joined the adventure. Utterly charming, beautifully realised, moving and funny *Up!* is yet another solid gold winner for Pixar and, while the very young may be restless at first (the opening is a mini-film in itself), the wacky comedy ensures that everyone comes out satisfied.

Bolt is a superdog. His mission, should he accept it (which he always does) is to protect his owner, Penny, from the forces of evil. What he doesn't realise is that he's actually an ordinary dog who's the star of a TV show and that Penny is an actress. When he accidentally ends up on the other side of America he has to team up with an alley cat and a hamster in a ball – who happens to be his biggest big fan – and get back to his beloved Penny. With a solid premise and

great animation, *Bolt* is a whole load of unassuming fun. Its influences are plain to see – *Toy Story* (indeed, Pixar luminary John Lasseter is now giving a guiding hand at Disney's animation branch) and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, among others – but its characters and story hold the piece together.

Coraline, based on Neil Gaiman's book, was another masterpiece of animation from Henry Selick, who really didn't get the recognition he deserved for *A Nightmare Before Christmas* (this year's 9 was similarly credited to Tim Burton who, along with Timur Bekmambetov, took a producing credit). It's a dark but magical fantasy in which lonely Coraline chances upon a door in the wallpaper of her new home that opens into a passage leading to another version of her house. She meets her other mother who, unlike her regular mum, is attentive and charming. She also cooks a better dinner but, strangely, has buttons where her eyes should be. Coraline is offered the chance to stay in this new and apparently happier world, provided she is willing to undergo a small operation. The perfect horror story for children, *Coraline*'s PG rating belies the way that the scares really get under your skin. The quirky sets, the exemplary model animation and the delightfully macabre humour mark it out as one of the year's most successful films.

Monsters vs Aliens was a slice of silly fun. When Susan Murphy is hit by a meteorite on her wedding day she becomes the towering Ginormica and is locked away with a bunch of other monsters in a secret government institution. However when aliens attack earth, the military set the monsters on the invaders with the promise of letting them go free... if they can save the world. With a pile of in-jokes that reference classic sf – *Dr Strangelove*, *Attack of the 50 foot woman*, *The Thing*, *Earth vs Flying Saucers*, *Mars Attacks*, *Spaceballs*, *Destroy All Monsters* – this is pacy fun all the way, all the more surprising when compared with Dreamworks' otherwise generally moribund fare.

Fantastic Mr Fox shunned whizzy CG and 3D by reverting to traditional, tactile, stop-motion techniques. Expectations were high for Wes Anderson's animation debut (American accents notwithstanding) as he retold Roald Dahl's story about the cunning Mr Fox, who feeds his family by stealing from three crooked farmers. Living in a hill underneath a tree along with Badger, Rabbit, Weasel, and their families, matters come to a head when the irate farmers pool resources and set out to irradiate the villainous vulpes once and for all. The distinctive and deliberately stylised

animation combined with Anderson's off-the-wall sense of quirky humour set out to make *Fantastic Mr Fox* a satisfying addition to the canon of children's film that, due to its almost Ladislav Starevich qualities and a typically oddball soundtrack, will stand the test of time. Like *Coraline*, there are scary bits, but it also features an animated Meryl Streep dancing far more assuredly than she did in *Mamma Mia!*

9 (not to be confused with *Nine*) was an oddity. Too scary for kids and probably too childish for adults, it was hard to see where this was pitched. 9 is a sackcloth ragdoll (think *Little Big Planet*'s Sackboy with a frown) who, along with 1 to 8, has awoken to find himself in a post-apocalyptic world where mechanised monsters roam the land, decimating anything in their wake. 9 persuades the others that they must try to learn about the machines and their intentions. The world's future could depend on them... if the filmmakers can think

of an ending. Though visually stunning and baroque in its vision, the scant plot (a series of set pieces that resemble someone playing a particularly good platform game) and po-faced grimness detract from the otherwise enjoyable thrill ride. Still, first time feature director Shane Acker is definitely a figure to watch.

The popularity of franchise films and comic book adaptations has not diminished, but once again their numbers appear to be on the decline, with a few studios trying to kick-start new examples or reboot old ones. The much delayed release of *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* charts Harry's 6th year at Hogwarts as he finds an old

textbook that used to belong to the Half-Blood Prince and becomes spectacularly good at making potions. And of course there are more clues to discovering more about Voldemort. David Yates, who directed the previous film and is completing the final two, manages to produce something cinematic and coherent from another sizeable tome, increasing the imminent threat to breaking point (the film is at times quite violent). The result is the young wizard's most successful outing yet (bar Year Three) with action set pieces tempered by scenes of character development and interaction. And this time Helena Bonham Carter gets to be truly evil.

What a waste of time *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* was. Well, that's not strictly fair, the titles featured a pretty spectacular montage of Wolverine battling through history, so we recommend watching that and then not bothering with the rest. In the mid-1800s,



Logan and Victor leave home after one of them kills their father. They serve together in a number of wars and eventually join a team of mutant commandos. Logan wants to quit but finds it impossible to leave as his commander has plans for his future. *X-men* fans might enjoy this but the minimal plot and poor characterisation just don't cut the mustard. Even the set pieces have reached a 'seen it all before' saturation point and the 'Logan's wife' plot is so underdeveloped the audience has little sympathy for him or anyone else for that matter. In a year that tried to push 3D it's surprising that anyone bothered with this 1D yawnfest.

And in the Hasbro toys franchise market *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* competed with *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*. Both are chock full of set pieces but the latter eschews Michael Bay's penchant for unfathomable scattershot shots for Stephen Sommers' typically gung ho Saturday Morning style action with modern tech. They sort of remember to put a plot in amidst all the action.

Oh dear, oh dear. Salvation is what we needed after *Terminator Salvation*, the fourth entry in the long-running series that really should have been terminated after *T2* (1991). The familiar plot (John Connor, Terminators, violence) is given a 'twist' by being set in the future world that the other films flashed forward to. Sadly, though, director McG has a hard time coaxing any enthusiasm from us, in a film full of sound and fury but signifying nothing. A big budget and big explosions couldn't save the film from the biggest crime of all – it was boring.

With that in mind, the prospects for anything good to come out of the latest attempt to update the aging *Star Trek* brand were looking slim to say the least – a bunch of TV hopefuls trying to 'reboot' the original series from the bottom up under the steady hand of JJ Abrams, the man behind the underwhelming *M13* (2006). But wait. What a revelation! Treading the fine line between updating the franchise and keeping the trekkies happy was not going to be easy, but somehow it all works – breakneck pacing, genuinely exciting set-pieces and great interaction between the characters as we see how young scallywag Kirk grows up and finally accepts responsibility as commander of the USS Enterprise.

Frank Miller, armed with the arsenal of techniques he learned co-directing *Sin City* (2005), returned with his adaptation of Eisner's comic character *The Spirit*. Miller's version is a visually intense and constantly imaginative assault on the senses as the titular Spirit battles with his old enemy The Octopus (Samuel L. Jackson) and an assorted bevy of freakish thugs and femme fatales. The plot twists are fast and convoluted, the faux noir dialogue is occasionally annoying and much of the iconography jaw-droppingly tasteless, but the film's main problem lies in the fact that

however hyperactively imaginative it is, it remains a detached and cold experience. Far more satisfying was Zack Snyder's long awaited *Watchmen*, a two-and-a-half hour adaptation of one of the defining comics of the 1980's. *Watchmen* is held in such high esteem that whatever Snyder did someone was going to get annoyed about it ("they cut the psychic space squid!") but film is film – it isn't a comic. Obviously they had to leave some things out, but what is surprising is how faithfully the whole thing plays – it's as though Snyder sacked his storyboard artists and just grabbed another couple of copies of the collected edition at his local Waterstones. Superb effects and mercifully not toned down to appeal to a PG-13 audience, *Watchmen* was spectacular, thoughtful and brutal. The title sequence alone is worth the price of admission.

Hollywood also provided a number of non-franchise/comicbook sf films this year, some of them preposterous, some a little more thoughtful. *Surrogates* is set in a future in which humans interact with each other through surrogate robots (all, naturally, better looking than they are in real life), thus reducing crime to zero and making everybody happy, except for those who choose to reject this life of lethargic hedonism and live outside the sterile cities. Cop Tom Greer (Bruce Willis) has to leave his relatively blissful surrogate life to investigate the death of a real person – the surrogate shot by a shadowy figure wielding a new type of weapon. This is all eminently watchable sf puff with a few good ideas and a couple of well staged action set-pieces; this is after all a Bruce Willis film, not Tarkovsky. The problem is that once the high concept idea has drawn you in you're left with a big pool of 'so what' – especially when you realise that the trailer does, in fact, show you the entire movie, only quicker.

Knowing's mildly preposterous premise – Nicolas Cage becomes aware of impending future disasters via a time capsule message at the local primary school – turns into an interesting and engaging film thanks to Alex Proyas' direction. The denouement doesn't quite live up to the promising start, but it's worth a watch, particularly for the elaborate and spectacularly staged disaster scenes, which added an odd combination of thrill and sobriety to the often absurd proceedings.

Now, *District Nine* was a pleasant surprise. ET refugees have been placed in a camp in South Africa and are getting restless due to the appalling conditions. The Multi-National United organisation is given the task of closing the camp down and evicting the unpopular 'prawns'. Tension between human and alien is inevitable. Why can't the aliens just go home? Combining action with social commentary, *District Nine* was one of the more thoughtful action sf films of the year. Not so *Outlander*, although it did have aliens and action. In fact, it was ludicrous – 'Vikings meet aliens' probably best summarises the plot. A human-

looking alien crashes to earth several centuries ago and has to ingratiate himself with a bunch of violent Vikings before they make peace with each other and all set off to fight a big alien monster together. With lots of action, not much story and no introspection, it passed the time.

Where would we be without Roland Emmerich and his cinematic Götterdämmerung (not forgetting to include a new and innovative way of decimating the White House)? In 2012 the world is going to end. The Mayans predicted it, so it must be true. It's because of those wretched mutating neutrinos that are causing the earth's core to boil, and we're all doomed. Everyman and failed author (John Cusack) must save his family from a series of increasingly bombastic natural disasters and two-dimensional stereotypes. Cod-science hokum of *The Core* (2003) variety makes this an enjoyable, if overlong, spectacle – you'll laugh, but not when the film-makers want you to.

You know, you can wait years for a time-travel love story, then two come along at once. Both *The Time Traveller's Wife* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* depicted the difficulties of holding down a long-term relationship while one of the partners can't function properly in time. In *The Time Traveller's Wife*, Henry (Eric Bana) cannot stay still in time and flits in and out of his lover Clare's (Rachel McAdams) life. Benjamin Button (Brad Pitt) was born an old man who progressively grows younger. Both films have merits, but were overlong; you can't help wondering whether the time travel element just spices up an otherwise not particularly fascinating love story. Or is that too cynical and unromantic?

The glorious *Inglourious Basterds* is included because it all happened in an alternative universe – honest, it's Tarantino's re-imagining of WW2. Once upon a time in Nazi occupied France... an elite squad of American soldiers kill and scalp Nazis. Meanwhile cinema owner Shosanna is planning her own revenge on the Nazis who slaughtered her family earlier in the war. Overlong at 153mins, this is a Tarantino talky that's sporadically violent, but its tongue remains firmly in its cheek. And Brad Pitt's Texan-Italian accent is just hilarious.

Shorts was another sf/fantasy, you know, for kids, from everyone's favourite hyperactive big kid Robert Rodriguez. This is pure wish fulfilment fun that doesn't patronise but could alienate adults with its stream of consciousness 'cool' stuff, including crocodiles, bogey monsters and mini-aliens. The narrative is made of a series of shorts that are not in chronological order; it's easy to follow but you're left wondering why they bothered. Maybe it's a primer for watching *Pulp Fiction* (1992) in later life?

And away from the big hitters there were some smaller or quirkier offerings this year, although this

sector is finding funding increasingly difficult as studios hedge their bets on larger 'tentpole' flicks in proven genres. The problem is exacerbated by a lack of willingness on the part of many multiplexes to take a risk with smaller movies, so that the chances of seeing all but a few of the independents outside London is slight.

Terry Gilliam returned to form with *The Imaginarium of Dr Parnassus*, a wonderful, if slightly ramshackle (but therein lies much of its charm) flight of imagination. Tony finds himself involved with the magical but rickety travelling theatre of Dr Parnassus – a medieval throwback anachronistically creaking its way through modern London. But the *Imaginarium* is not what it seems – it contains a gateway to surreal and dangerous worlds of the subconscious – and Dr Parnassus has a terrible secret that he is keeping from his daughter Valentina. Interest in the film centred primarily on this being the last performance by Heath Ledger, who died before filming had been completed – the occasional substitution of his character with Johnny Depp/Jude Law/Colin Farrell actually feels right for the film and adds a further level of surrealism to proceedings. There's more imagination in this modestly priced carnival of the bizarre than in a score of Hollywood fantasies and even a Python-style 'dancing policemen in drag' segment. At times shocking, hilarious and just sheer bonkers, *The Imaginarium of Dr Parnassus*'s DIY ethic and gung-ho acting do much to ingratiate it with viewers.

In Gerald McMorrow's *Franklyn*, a number of apparently unconnected characters find their lives entwined in an unexpected way in contemporary London. Meanwhile, in the religion-rife metropolis of *Meanwhile City*, a vigilante called Preest escapes the authorities and seeks answers amongst the oppressive urban landscape. This is an ambitious film that takes in sf, religion, suicide, drug addiction and homelessness amongst its many themes. The mise-en-scene is impressive on a film with such a low budget; the Gilliam-meets-*Dark City* (1990) landscapes of *Meanwhile City* contrasting with the low-key normality of contemporary London. The downside is that the multiple plot strands require a lot of goodwill from the audience, as they take a while to unravel, and there is a nagging sense the film is too clever by half. But it is different, imaginative and ambitious in scope – something that not too many British films can claim.

Duncan Jones' *Moon* was one of the highlights of the year. Energy shortages on Earth are a thing of the past because, on the dark side of the moon family man Sam, aided with chirpy robot GERTY, are responsible for controlling the mining of resources that the earth needs. Sam is coming to the end of his three-year stint on the station and looking forward to seeing his wife and daughter again. But then strange things start happening... A heady mix of 2001: A Space

Odyssey (1969), *Dark Star* (1974), *Silent Running* (1972) and *Solaris* (1972), *Moon* may wear its influences on its sleeve, but it makes the final product its own. The effects (though partly CGI) have a tactile quality that recall pre-*Star Wars* intelligent sf and are better for it.

Similarly low-key in the effects department, *Cold Souls* shows Paul Giamatti having trouble getting into his role in a Chekov play. He finds an innovative solution for his acting angst: a high-tech company who can extract and store souls. Giamatti has his put into storage with the aim of restoring it post-performance, but he doesn't realise there's an international trade in souls and his ends up inside a Russian soap-opera actress who is unwilling to trade it back, even if it does look like a chickpea. *Cold Souls* sank without a trace on release – a real shame for this low key, quirky and underplayed but very, very funny film. Think Charlie Kaufmann (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Being John Malkovich*) – lite with a wonderfully self-deprecating performance from Giamatti, who basically plays a version of himself, and you're there.

Horror films traditionally perform well in a time of recession – if you're having a bad time horror movies show others having it far worse, with plentiful added gore – the perfect antidote to downturn blues. Vampires too are all the rage but, wouldn't you know it, the big hitters are aiming squarely at teens this time around. *Twilight: New Moon* made a killing at the box office. Bella's still with Edward, but after an accident at a party, it turns out the vampires can't restrain themselves and so they leave to resist future temptations. Bella becomes an adrenaline junkie and meets a new friend, Jacob. He's a werewolf. So that's alright then. *Cirque Du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant* was an attempt to bring vampires to a slightly different teen demographic than the anodyne 'Mills and Swoon' of *Twilight*. Darren Shan meets an enigmatic-ish vampire at a freak show and after a series of tedious encounters leaves his ordinary life, dies, and joins the Cirque Du Freak as a vampire. While the freak show itself is interesting and mysterious, the film doesn't have staying power and ends up being anaemic (not good for a vampire film) and annoying. Even the Brits chipped in with the pseudo-exploitation, pseudo-comedy *Lesbian Vampire Killers*, a cynical and frankly

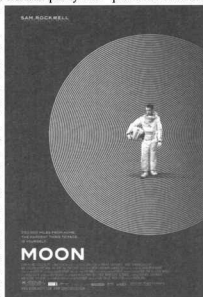
embarrassing effort all around.

Fortunately it wasn't all so-called comedy and teen moping, as Swedish vampire film *Let the Right One In* proved to be one of the year's highlights. Oskar is a bit of a loner. He's getting bullied at school and seems to find it hard to make friends. Then a strange girl called Eli moves in next door. She smells a bit odd and can't stand sunlight but the pair form an unlikely friendship. However it appears that Eli has a craving for human blood. *Let the Right One In* is understated, intriguing and atmospheric – a real slow burner with sporadic moments of violence and one of the best bully comeuppance sequences in the history of cinema. This is a horror film for the art-house audience, but one with enough humanity to broaden its appeal. Unlike, say *Twilight*, it doesn't feel the need to explain the vampire conventions, it just gets on with the plot.

Thirst was Park Chan-wook's latest, a deviation from his 'vengeance trilogy' and the candy-floss images of last year's *I'm A Cyborg*. A priest has become a vampire following a blood transfusion, comforting patients in hospital and then drinking their blood after hours. He does at least feel bad about it. But after starting an affair with the wife of a friend he embarks upon a new life of hedonism. With lashings of sex and violence, Park takes his time telling his story and laces the content with his usual brand of black humour.

Based on a Japanese anime of the same name, *Blood: The Last Vampire* was, bizarrely, a Hong Kong, France, Japanese, Argentinian co-production which followed the anime for the first half and then deviated wildly to produce something a bit more conventional in tone but no less ambitious. Saya works for a secret organisation dedicated to the eradication of demons. She looks 16 but is, in fact, several hundred years old and can easily dispatch vampires with her trusty samurai sword. When she is sent to an American military base she realises that this may be her opportunity to finally destroy the evil arch vampire Onigen. OK so the scripting is poor, the acting variable and the computer effects quite rosey, but the action is great, courtesy of Cory Yuen, some of the visuals striking and they never let ambition be dampened by a meagre budget.

There were a couple of horror-thrillers worth your attention. *Orphan* was a welcome revival of the creepy



kid film. Kate and John – married, two children – wish to add another to their brood. A local orphanage reveals Esther, a polite and talented child, and the family adopt her. But Esther is not what she seems, not just for her unfashionable clothing or ‘foreign’ accent, but for the events that happen around her. What is her dark secret? *Orphan* is tense, exciting and slow burning. It’s a modern horror, so has to have a nasty scene at the start just to make sure you don’t think you are watching *Kramer vs Kramer* (1979). The denouement is preposterous and, although the final act can’t top the build up, it’s still a cut above the norm.

Meanwhile, in *Jennifer* (daughter of David) Lynch’s *Surveillance* there’s a very nasty serial killer on the loose and the body count is rising. FBI weirdoes Anderson and Hallaway interrogate the witnesses and suspects at a local desert police station. But the stories from addicts, kids and police, all seem to tell the tale slightly differently. It’s nasty and deliberately weird but Lynch does use her limited budget well. It is an interesting thriller, if too clever for its own good. *Jennifer’s Body* was the latest offering written by Diobolo Juno Cody. Jennifer is the most popular girl in school. All of the girls want to be friends with her, and all of the boys want to have sex with her. Her best friend Needy is a nerd. Jennifer ends up as a sacrifice in a rock band’s Satanic ritual and becomes possessed by a demon, causing her to chow down on the local jocks. *Jennifer’s Body* wants to be *Heathers* with demons but it doesn’t quite work; there’s plenty of gore but no real tension, and the premise doesn’t really follow through to anything.

In *Zombieland*, pretty much the whole world has been taken over by zombies. The few survivors search for the last remaining Twinkies and head out to a theme park because it seems to be the best thing to do. There’s plentiful fun in this po-mo horror comedy, with an excellent cameo from Bill Murray adding the icing to a very bloody cake.

And let’s not forget the low budget ‘sensations’. Colin told the sorry tale of a zombie’s miserable existence, unusual in that it followed the plight of the zombie and not the survivors of whatever plague had afflicted the world. It allegedly had a budget of about £45, an inspiration to low-budget filmmakers the world over, and was innovative and engaging, if overlong by about 20 minutes. (Why don’t horror directors realise that 80-90 minutes is the perfect running time for a horror flick?) *Paranormal Activity*, on the other hand, currently has the record for the biggest budget-earnings ratio ever. A simple plot involving a couple who’ve just moved into a new pad, there’s definitely some sort of presence ensuring that they won’t get a wink of sleep. A *Blair Witch* for the end of the Noughties?

Triangle was another small film that managed to pack a decent number of scares into its running time.

A yachting trip ends in near disaster when the weather turns nasty and a group of friends have to be rescued by a passing liner. But why is the ship deserted and why does Jess feel as though she’s been here before? You think you know where *Triangle* is going to take you, but it manages to defy expectations. A relentless little number with a few shocks along the way, it turns into an Escher sci-fi horror rather than the standard supernatural/psycho mix we’ve come to expect.

Even Sam Raimi eschewed the megabudgets of *Spider-man* and returned to his *Evil Dead* days with *Drag Me to Hell*, a tale of a yuppie who is cursed by an old gypsy. Energetic and frenetic, with typically gross-out scares and shocks, it wasn’t Raimi at his best, but was enjoyable (and importantly funny) hokum nevertheless.

And then there were the sequels: *The Descent 2* was actually pretty decent – it started immediately after the original had finished and, while it’s hard to buy the premise that the sole survivor would immediately return to those dank caves with the monstrous creatures inside, it does deliver the scares and gore, just not the originality. *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* didn’t see Kate Beckinsale in her Kate Beckinsale Impractical Tight Black Number™ because this was a prequel, but that didn’t stop it from being another waste of a premise. Still, at least the franchise didn’t go the route of many horror vehicles as the latest (and weakest) *The Final Destination* felt obliged to become 3D as did the re-make of *My Bloody Valentine*. It wasn’t the only re-make (so help us...) as *Friday 13th*, *Last House on the Left* and *Halloween 2* wasted valuable screen estate that could have been showing *Let the Right One In*. Incredibly, *Halloween 2* was an even worse re-make of a film that was terrible in the first place. And just when you thought it could get no worse there was *Saw*, where are we now, *Saw 6*? Its relatively lacklustre box office should have killed the franchise stone dead but oh no, apparently the problem wasn’t the film, it was because it wasn’t in 3D...

Despite the general air of media and economic malaise there were a few reasons to feel upbeat about the year. But with increasing pressure on lower and middle budgeted films, escalating conservatism in multiplexes and a panacea to all ills that involves wearing uncomfortable plastic glasses, the future may well become more myopic, albeit with an extra dimension thrown in (at a surcharge).

So, the winners are:

Best sf: *Moon*

Best Fantasy: *Coraline* and *Up!*

Best Horror: *Let the Right One In*

Special Remarkable Comicbook Adaptation

Award: *Watchmen*

Progressive Scan: Genre TV in 2009

by Abigail Nussbaum

Looking back at 2009's genre TV output, the most obvious question that comes to mind is: did they plan it? In the last year of a decade in which genre TV can be said to have come of age, to have gained – for better and worse – an irrevocable mainstream acceptance, some of the most influential genre series and creators of the decade provided endings, stopping points, and final statements. *Battlestar Galactica* ended its four season run. Russell T. Davies and David Tennant left *Doctor Who*, the latter regenerating into the next Doctor in his final appearance. Joss Whedon, arguably the driving force behind the genre TV renaissance of the late 90s and early aughts, and certainly an inspiration for many of the television writers working in genre today, made an abortive attempt to return to the small screen with the one-season-not-so-much-of-a-wonder *Dollhouse*, perhaps proving that his day has ended. If only the producers of *Lost* had screened their final season in 2009 instead of 2010, we could be certain that a conspiracy was at work. Intentional or otherwise, this panoply of endings comes not a moment too soon. 2009 may have been landmark year in genre TV, but not a particularly good one, and many of the final seasons that aired this year were tired, overwrought, or simply too steeped in their shows' very worst qualities. They demonstrated that it's time for some new blood, and more than that, for some new ideas.

Kicking off the year's cavalcade of endings was *Battlestar Galactica*, which aired the second half of its fourth season in the winter of 2009. The ten episode run acted as a sort of coda to the desperate search for the perhaps mythical Earth which had driven the characters – humans and Cylons alike – for three and a half seasons. Having arrived at Earth and found it a lifeless, irradiated ruin, the remnants of the rag-tag fleet, and the renegade Cylon basestar they'd joined with, struggle with even more crippling despair, which infects even the leaders of the fleet as the *Galactica* begins to disintegrate and the Cylon faction still bent on human destruction (whose leader, Cavil, is repositioned as the architect of the original attack on the colonies, implicitly absolving the other, "good" Cylon characters of their part in

this atrocity) closes in on their position. The 2009 half-season follows in the footsteps of the 2008 run by making meaningful stabs at walking *Galactica* back from the soapy, overwrought mess it became in its third season, without quite managing to undo the damage that those episodes wrought to the show's premise and characters. The writers scrambled to tie up the loose ends and unanswered questions they'd dangled before the viewers – the identity of the final Cylon, the details of the Cylons' plan, the reasons for Starbuck's resurrection – but the answers they came up with were rushed, running the gamut from overwritten to nonsensical, and often required major retconning of previously established plot points. A genuine uptick in the show's quality occurred with the three part mutiny storyline, in which Tom Zarek and an embittered Lt. Gaeta wrested control of the fleet from Roslin and Adama after the latter tried to forge an alliance with the renegade Cylons. It's a story that plays to *Galactica's* strengths – positing the fascinating and thorny dilemmas that emerge from the show's premise, and depicting exciting and pulse-pounding battle scenes – though it is hobbled by a too-neat ending and by the writers' choice to delegitimize Gaeta and Zarek's initially quite defensible position by having them commit multiple, senseless murders to secure their hold on the fleet.

These slight improvements, however, were swept away by "Daybreak," the three-hour series finale, and one of the most self-indulgent, self-destructive pieces of writing the *Galactica* writing room has ever produced. The actual premise of the episode, which sees the entire main cast, including the half-dead former President Roslin and the current President, Lee Adama, signing up to attack one of the Cylons' most heavily fortified positions in order to rescue a single child, is nonsensical, but it slides into absurdity when the writers try to tie together the various surreal visions experienced by the characters over the course of four seasons (head Six, head Baltar, the opera house, "All Along the Watchtower") and come up with something so over-literal (Starbuck punches the notes to the Dylan song into the navigation computer and comes up with the jump coordinates for the real Earth) as to wring what little wonder and

numinousness has still remained out of the show. Having arrived on Earth, hundreds of thousands of years in our past, the characters inexplicably decide to abandon technology and live off the land (the fact that in so doing they will almost certainly be sealing their doom as thousands of technology users from an industrialized civilization fall prey to their ignorance of agriculture or a lack of antibiotics is conveniently ignored by the writers), thus ending both Colonial and Cylon civilization once and for all and essentially rendering the events of the series meaningless. "Daybreak" cements *Battlestar Galactica* as a series so committed to its allegorical component that it is willing to completely dismantle its worldbuilding in order to make a trite and silly statement (war is bad; robots are also, possibly, bad) about the present – the kind of science fiction that has absolutely no interest in imagining the future.

Even as *Galactica* was winding down, 2009 saw the premieres of several series that sought to imitate it, whether by telling allegorical, present-day-oriented sfnal stories or by imagining a future or alternate universe whose trappings are all but identical to our own (but for the actual spaceships and killer robots, *Galactica* might as well have taken place in 21st century America). NBC's lavish, no-expense-spared *Kings* was an alternate universe fantasy, very loosely based on the Biblical story of the struggle between the Israelite kings Saul and David, whose characters drove cars, wore suits and designer dresses, watched TV and called each other on their cell phones. The blatant and deliberate attempts to recall real-world politics – a mega-corporation attempts to influence national politics, the king limits the freedom of the press, the inhabitants of a disputed region violently protest a peace accord that will hand their homes over to their enemies – are hobbled by the simple fact, which seems to have escaped the writers' notice, that the politics of a monarchy are not the politics of republic, and by the rather obvious absence of any thought given to how an absolute monarchy would look like and behave in the modern era. These flaws were exacerbated by problems in the show's scripts and acting (though the older castmembers, led by Ian McShane giving a cut-rate version of his star turn in HBO's *Deadwood*, were all quite strong, their younger counterparts, and particularly Christopher Egan as a wooden and empty-headed David, were not up to imbuing their characters with the gravitas required of them) and *Kings* was quite rightly put to death after a mere thirteen episodes.

Meanwhile, SyFy (as the SciFi Channel now styles itself) filled the gap left by both *Galactica* and the two cancelled *Stargate* shows with a new entry in that franchise, *Stargate: Universe*, which makes deliberate attempts towards jettisoning the previous series's jokey tone in favor of a *Galactica*-inspired

grimness, and whose premise, of a dysfunctional crew of maladjusted military officers, resentful scientists, and few civilians who end up stranded on a barely-functional spaceship millions of light-years from Earth, is clearly intended to recall both *Galactica*'s premise and its lighting-deprived look. Thus far, the series is a hit, despite or perhaps because of the fact that it is essentially *Galactica* Lite – the characters are all mean and unpleasant to one another, but without the depth of characterization that would on occasion make *Galactica*'s characters understandable and even appealing despite their depravity, and without the humor that often made *Stargate* characters likable despite the thinness of the show's writing.

This fall, we saw the premiere of *V*, yet another remake of a cheesy and shabby-looking 80s science fiction show which makes no bones about drawing parallels to real world politics (the alien visitors win over humanity by promising universal healthcare – despite the fact that every industrialized nation in the world other than the US already has it) though whether the show will turn out to be as simplistic and overwrought in its allegorical component as *Battlestar Galactica* seems irrelevant. Despite a magnificently creepy turn by *Firefly*'s Morena Baccarin as the alien leader Anna, the *V* pilot was choppy and uninvolved, paying little attention to its characters as it struggled to make revelations we all knew about already surprising. Similarly uninspired was fellow fall pilot *FlashForward*, loosely based on the 1999 novel by Robert J. Sawyer and at least a bit of a departure among the year's genre debuts in that it is clearly trying to imitate *Lost* rather than *Battlestar Galactica*, with a large cast connected by ties of work, friendship and family, several strained relationships and precariously positioned romances, and episodes that pile on the puzzles and mysteries with a shovel. Unfortunately, as with *V*, the characters are dull and the writing renders even the most tantalizing mysteries inert.

Nearly drowned out by the torrent of *Galactica* imitators was the actual *Galactica* follow-up, or rather prequel, *Caprica*, whose pilot was released on DVD and iTunes in the spring and whose first season began airing in January 2010. Which is a shame, because unlike *Kings*, *Stargate: Universe*, and *V*, *Caprica* doesn't seem to be trying to become another *Battlestar Galactica*, and may even be an honest to god science fiction story rather than a political allegory. Though ostensibly telling the story of the creation of the Cylons and the first war between them and humanity, *Caprica* (which was originally pitched as an unrelated story and only later folded into the *Galactica* mythology), in its pilot, is telling a science fiction story familiar from dozens of other iterations – scientist creates sentient machines,

hilarity ensues. Alongside this story, the pilot also introduces a story about racial tensions between different human colonies, exacerbated by organized crime organizations, and a violent monotheistic sect based in one of the marginalized colonies. It's hard to become excited over plotlines which *Galactica* mined so inelegantly for some of its worst "issue" episodes, but going by the pilot, *Caprica* lacks the tendency towards histrionics and oversimplification which made *Galactica's* treatment of these subjects so unbearable, and may in general prove to be a more nuanced, more interesting, and most of all more snail take on *Galactica's* premise.

In the UK, 2009 was the year of Russell T. Davies's farewell tour of *Doctor Who*, with five specials (I am cheating slightly by including the 2008 Christmas special "The Next Doctor" and the second half of the two-parter "The End of Time," which aired on January 1st 2010) in which the Doctor, made even more emo by the loss of his latest companion, moped around the universe while trying to pretend that it all wasn't about to end for him. In interviews towards the end of his run on the series, Davies has said of his haphazard, throw-everything-at-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks style that "I can see more traditional ways of telling these stories, but I'm not interested. I think the stuff you gain from writing this way – the shock, the whirlwind, the freedom, the exhilaration – is worth the world." The 2009 specials are a clear demonstration of why this is not a useful philosophy of writing. They range from enjoyably daft ("The Next Doctor," "The Planet of the Dead") to lumpy messes ("The Waters of Mars," "The End of Time") and are at their best when Davies lets an impressive slate of guest actors elevate his rather turgid writing (David Morrissey and Dervla Kirwan as the companion and villain in "The Next Doctor"; Lindsay Duncan, who manages to imbue her character in "The Waters of Mars" with a commanding presence despite the fact that the script confuses leadership qualities with yelling 'that's an order!' a lot; Bernard Cribbins as the companion in "The End of Time"). But as pieces of story-telling, the specials are something of an assault. After four seasons, Davies has raised the bar for bombarding the viewer with nonsense in order to elicit a surprised, wondrous reaction so high that nothing short of a nonstop barrage could possibly top it. Forget the plots not making any sense; by the time "The End of Time" rolls around, not even the big emotional moments that those nonsensical plots are meant to be in service of truly work. For every fine exchange between Tennant and Cribbins we get the Doctor going into hysterics over the fact that he has to sacrifice himself for Cribbins's character – something he's been quietly willing to do for other

characters many times in the past. When the Doctor finally does regenerate – after a twenty minute long, simultaneously self-pitying and self-congratulatory tour of his former companions – I was more than happy to see the back of both him and Davies.

What makes Davies's work on *Doctor Who* in 2009 all the more aggravating is the fact that 2009 is also the year in which he produced what is not only the single best story in *Who* spin-off *Torchwood's* history, but the very first story to actually justify that show's existence and its conception of itself as *Doctor Who* grown up. After two seasons in which *Torchwood* was characterized mainly by a juvenile obsession with sex, by plots so poorly conceived that they made even *Doctor Who's* worst excesses seem coherent, and by the continued debasement of its entire cast, the spin-off returned with "Children of Earth," a five part miniseries that wowed fans, haters, and new viewers alike by actually being good – a good story, driven by well-drawn characters, and packing a considerable punch. The mini, in which Earth is visited by an alien species demanding a tribute of children, and whom *Torchwood* are helpless to combat, has its flaws – it is underpinned by a cynicism about government that is so deep as to be either laughable or disturbing, depending on how seriously the writers intend it, and there's no denying that a major reason for the story's success is that the *Torchwood* characters are shunted aside and spend most of the story playing catch-up while the actual movers and shakers, and the audience's identification characters, are one-off characters (most notably Peter Capaldi as civil servant John Frobisher and Cush Jumbo as office temp Lois Habiba). Most troublingly, the story, which can best be described as a *Doctor Who* story without the Doctor, in which the vulnerable human characters are faced with an enemy so terrible that they have no choice but to capitulate to it, is actually weakened by the existence of the previous two seasons of *Torchwood*, in which Captain Jack and his cohorts had proven themselves capable of stepping into the Doctor's shoes and performing the same impossible, world-saving feats as him. The fact that they can't do so this time around feels arbitrary – which of course it is. For all these problems, however, "Children of Earth" works. Its character moments – between the regular series cast and the new characters alike – are affecting, and its story is compelling, enough so that the problems I've noted above only register in hindsight. Contrived as its premise is, "Children of Earth" poses an excellent question – what to do when there are no good choices – and answers it in a way that is both horrible and affecting. The miniseries was a raging success (despite alienating some existing fans, particularly in its choice to kill fan favorite Ianto Jones) and thus a proper,

thirteen episode fourth season for *Torchwood* has been assured. It's left for us to hope that when it returns, *Torchwood* will have more in common with "Children of Earth" than with the show it was in its first two seasons.

Perhaps the most exciting, and thus the most disappointing, genre television event of 2009, however, was Joss Whedon's return to serialized television with *Dollhouse*, a series whose life spanned the calendar year almost exactly (the series premiered in February, and ended in January 2010). Starring former evil Slayer Eliza Dushku (and with guest turns from former Whedon actors Amy Acker, Alexis Denisof, Alan Tudyk, and Summer Glau), *Dollhouse* centered around a secretive and exclusive establishment catering to the tastes of the rich and powerful. For a very large consideration, the dollhouse imprints "actives," of whom Dushku's Echo is one, with any personality, skill, or proclivity the client desires. From its inception, *Dollhouse* struggled to strike a balance between the limitations of the network television model and Whedon's, by all accounts rather muddled, vision for the series. Interference from Fox and the need to capture viewers forced Whedon to write the first half of the show's first season as a series of standalone episodes, personality of the week stories in which Echo played different roles for different clients. These were indifferently written and showed up Dushku's limited range, but most importantly, they failed to establish the kind of show *Dollhouse* wanted to be. Why, after all, should viewers care about a series whose main character is a blank who is rewritten by a different personality each week? The story heated up in the second half of the first season when Whedon started revealing hints of the show's endpoint – a future in which the connection between mind and body is severed, and which ultimately results in the end of human civilization when mind-wiping technology is weaponized, as seen in the first season finale "Epitaph One," which flashes a decade into the show's future. Unfortunately, the clarification of the show's focus wasn't accompanied by better writing for its individual episodes. *Dollhouse* remained an interesting concept hobbled by indifferent execution, and became even more so in its second season, when after the news of its cancellation Whedon, in a desperate effort to craft a coherent story, sacrificed the complexity of his characters and his central concept as he rushed through the steps leading up to the "Epitaph One" future. The best that can be said of *Dollhouse* is that it represents Whedon challenging himself that testing his limits; the worst, that perhaps those limits exist for a reason.

So what's left? 2009 was also the year in which *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, after ending its second season with a string of episodes that did a lot to compensate for the indifferent, meandering plotting of its late 2008 episodes, and a season finale that set up a very promising and interesting direction for the show's third season by sending John Connor into a future in which he is not humanity's savior, was summarily cancelled. That the show was flawed is undeniable, and yet looking at series such as *Heroes*, which hasn't been anything near watchable since its first season and yet seems to have an endless lease on life (it is currently wrapping up its fourth season, and despite abysmal ratings there's a good chance that it'll return for a fifth), it is very frustrating that a series as interesting as *Sarah Connor*, which took such an idiosyncratic approach to the familiar story about the machine apocalypse, should not have been given those extra chances to prove itself. In non-*Doctor Who* news, British TV fielded the first season of *Being Human* and the second of *Ashes to Ashes*, both of which I've written about here before, both of which are flawed series elevated by strong characters and, in the latter case, the surprising sense that the writers might actually have an interesting endpoint in mind for their story. Ratings juggernaut *Lost* kept plugging away, mostly regaining its fans' affections, and trashy vampire soap *True Blood* returned for a second season even more beloved than its first.

As much as it was a year of momentous endings and turning points, 2009 also gave us more of the same – smart, interesting efforts sank like a stone; trashy crowdpleasers soared; the superheroes and vampires crazes that have swept the movies and blockbuster publishing continued to seep into television; everyone is trying to make the next *Lost*. It would be nice to think that in the wake of all these endings, 2010 will represent a turning point. Stephen Moffat will take over *Doctor Who*; *Lost* will come to an end and perhaps *Heroes* will too, leaving something like a clean slate for new creators and new visions; and NBC's failed experiment at fielding all-late-night talk shows, all the time will force the network to recommit to scripted television. Realistically, though, there's not much on the horizon that leaves me hopeful about the future of genre TV. The decade just ending was one of tremendous upheaval for television in general and genre TV in particular, but also one in which a certain image of genre – influenced heavily, in the latter half of it, by *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*, and geared towards an inclusiveness that weeds out much of what makes science fiction and fantasy interesting and fun – has dominated. Whether or not 2010 brings it, I hope that the future holds a broader, smarter field of genre TV in store.

First Impressions

Edited by Kari Sperring



Emma Bull – *Bone Dance*
Tom Doherty Associates,
 2009, 315 pp, p/b, ISBN
 978765321734

**Reviewed by Anthony
 Nanson**

This novel, first published in 1991, is a window into how cyberpunk visions of the future had by then moved on from the

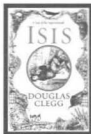
high-tech libertarian anarchy envisaged by Gibson and company the previous decade. In Bull's post-apocalyptic America the means to develop, or even maintain, high technology have been obliterated. It's a meltdown third-world situation where you have to know where to go just to use a functioning phone. Sparrow, our protagonist, makes a living by trading pre-war videos and CDs. In this ultimate postmodern dead end, culture is continually recycled from the past, gradually fading into oblivion as recordings wear out and lose quality in recopying. Every interaction between people is subject to the cold market ethics of 'the Deal' – or so Sparrow believes.

Sparrow has problems. Sparrow keeps waking up to discover that a whole chunk of whatever's just happened is simply a void of memory. People seem to be after Sparrow too. It's hard to know who to trust, especially if you have all these gaps in your memory, and if you can't believe anyone will help you unless you can pay them back. It transpires that Sparrow is caught up in a feud between the Horsemen – beings developed in the final stage of the Cold War whose consciousness is able to 'ride' the bodies of lesser mortals. One of them is to blame for the button being pressed to trigger the nuclear apocalypse. His enemy means to kill him to expiate her own guilt of complicity. There are reasons why Sparrow makes an appealing steed, reasons fundamental to the nature of who Sparrow really is.

Sparrow's journey of coming to terms with himself is a journey about becoming fully human, of accepting that people can do each other favours

without any deal, but just because they care. It confronts the notion of the Horsemen's possession of other people's bodies, as a cold military technology, with an alternative, spiritual understanding of what's going on, deriving from voodoo.

All of which is intellectually interesting, but I'm afraid I found the book rather tedious to read. Partly because of the mock-tough-guy wittiness and laboriously self-conscious framing of the dialogue: "I'm staying here." I managed not to drop my eyes from hers. / "No, you're not," she said agreeably' (134). But beneath this is the more fundamental problem of a lack of emotional tone. It's not that the characters lack feelings or that the story lacks drama. The problem is in the prose. Rarely does the way the words are put together carry any charge, any tension, any feeling that sets me on fire, that hooks me into this experience, that makes me care what will happen to these characters. Everything is pitched to the head, to our appreciation of the cleverness of plot and novum. It does not move me the way the cyberpunk of Gibson, Shirley, and Shiner can.



Douglass Clegg – *Isis*
Vanguard Press, 2009, 128pp,
 h/b, ISBN 9781593155407

**Reviewed by George T.
 Newberry**

Douglas Clegg's slim new novel *Isis* displays an admirable affection and respect for the subtleties of classical horror writing. It is the dark story of Iris Catherine Villiers' childhood: a time spent in an archaic Cornish ancestral home with few others but her older twin brothers, Harvey and Spencer, and their gardener Old Marsh as company. Iris is brought up on Old Marsh's tales of ancient pagan magic and Celtic lore, and when tragedy strikes the family – in particular her favourite brother Harvey – it is to these powerful legends that Iris turns for her solace.

It is a simple story given much narrative direction by the inevitable prophecies gleaned from Old Marsh's storytelling. It deals with issues right at the heart of Gothic literature: of a blind selfishness following the death of a loved-one, and of human frailty in the face of the incomprehensible. And it is ultimately the exposition of human nature, rather than the supernatural forces portrayed, which generates the horror of this piece. Clegg is largely successful in addressing these pervasive themes in such a short work, and a few scenes are especially powerful. Of particular note is an original and evocative description of the afterlife near the story's culmination. The sequence of actions taken by Iris at the book's finale are also skilfully unsettling. Iris is, indeed, a well-drawn and complex character.

There is a difference, however, between being successful and being truly haunting and beautiful, and sadly *Isis* often falls below this level. The subtle, carefully constructed story seems strongly familiar in tone and subject, as if the book is a little too classically constructed: something not helped by the frequently clichéd nature of Old Marsh's ominous warnings to Iris. Many of the supporting characters, in fact, suffer from Clegg's attempt to recreate the Victorian impression of 'rural village folk'. The old-fashioned, old-English subject of the book, furthermore, occasionally clashes badly with the prose style, which is by-and-large fairly standard late twentieth-century American horror writer. The book is incredibly readable, but in many ways would have benefitted greatly from the slower, more claustrophobic styles of the nineteenth-century authors Clegg tries to emulate in terms of subject. This clash is justified by the plot, it must be said, but perhaps not by the end result. It might possibly be the fact that I am a Cornishman myself, but I was left feeling that greater attention to setting and atmosphere over character might have yielded a far more satisfying, balanced work.

It is not that this book lacks original ideas, but they seem underdeveloped and secondary compared to the elements referencing Clegg's predecessors in this form of Gothic fiction. The consequence is a book that seems stranded between two horror traditions, and which would have profited from choosing one stylistic camp or the other from the outset.



Storm Constantine
Mythangelus
 Immanium Press 2009,
 £12.99, 345pp, t/p, ISBN
 9781904853572

Reviewed by Myfanwy Rodman

Ideas about divinity, gender, mysticism and otherworldliness abound in this collection by dark fantasy writer Storm Constantine. Inspired by her fascination with angelic mythology and told in Constantine's evocative and lush writing style, each story layers plot and theme with a very strong sense of atmosphere and place.

The pieces that work best in this collection are those connected to larger bodies of work, as early draughts of novels or stories written in the universe of a larger project. 'Paragenesis' and 'Heir to a Tendency' are two such stories: they feel fuller and more developed. There is a sense of there being more to the world and the characters than the immediate form of the story.

This is not true of the more stand-alone pieces, notably 'The Law of Being' and 'The Green Calling'. These stories felt as if they were explorations of ideas and themes rather than realisms of character, and were less emotionally satisfying.

My favourite stories were a series of three re-worked fairy tales, 'Spinning for Gold', 'The Nothing Child' and 'Living with the Angel'. These stories are again part of a larger body of work, Constantine's *Magravandias* trilogy, though they are set several hundred years before the series. As earlier mentioned, this sense of foreknowledge and a wider world gives the stories resonance and depth.

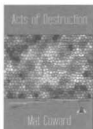
As a fan of fairy tales I recognised the stories' genus and enjoyed the ways in which they were twisted by Constantine into something new and fascinating. The transformation of the miller's daughter in to a son for Constantine's version of Rumpelstiltskin 'Spinning for Gold' changed the story subtly but beautifully, giving the whole piece a Byzantine, opulent air. And the serial nature of the stories allows the central character of 'Spinning for Gold', Jadrin, to grow and develop into the fey creature of 'The Nothing Child' whose strange, slightly gross and spooky recipe for conceiving a biological child with his male lover was wonderfully realised.

Another favourite 'The Feet, They Dance' stood out because of its ending. The slow, increasingly creepy plot led very nicely to a horrific conclusion, made all the stronger because the reader never

gets to actually see it. They are left to unpleasantly imagine the inevitable.

Constantine's longer works (she has published several series of novels) are affected by her slightly aloof and removed use of viewpoint and a certain coldness in her writing style that can prevent the reader from fully engaging their emotions. This is less of a problem in the short story form, and actually enhances some of these pieces, especially those derived from fairy tales.

Mythangelus is a collection of well written, thought provoking and enchanting stories, with a mixture of settings and styles that never feels stale. I have read a few of Constantine's books but am not a confirmed fan and I enjoyed it immensely. This is certainly one book I will be returning to again and again.



Mat Coward - *Acts Of Destruction*
Alia Mondo Press, 2009,
£10.00, 264pp, t/p ISBN:
9780955868610

Reviewed by L J Hurst

No matter how bad things may be, it seems easier to imagine them getting worse rather than better, which

means that Mat Coward's *Acts Of Destruction*, set in the near future, is a very rare work. Probably inspired by tales of how Cuba has sustained itself despite the US blockade, Coward's novel, written in the style of a police procedural, takes as its given the conversion of Britain into a new commonwealth, dedicated to equality and sustainability, where all large businesses have become co-operatives, petrol-driven vehicles are infrequent and homes have converted their driveways and car-ports into small allotments.

Times of change are never easy, and although there seems to have been no major destruction in the conversion of Britain (unlike, say, the destruction wrought in the English Civil War of the seventeenth century, or that of the Russian Revolution), there are still things to be aware of, including threats from the now fundamentalist USA, which sends kidnappers to save children for the Lord. Closer to home, where the police once sought car twockers they now seek bicycle thieves, and every factory needs a night-watchman to look after the small-holdings on the former car-parks and factory roofs, as the produce intended to be part of the workers pay is also a temptation to thieves. For thieves have not gone away.

An earlier group of idealists, those in Paris in 1968, used to cry "Under the cobbles, the beach!" In this time, some people are still loath to lift their tarmac paths, but they might have worse reason for their reluctance than mere stubbornness, they might know that they would reveal a hidden corpse. So it is no wonder that the police still have plenty to do.

Mat Coward had one template to work by, William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890/91), which was not the first Utopia, but was one of the most complete, set in west London, rather than Coward's north London. However, if there was one limitation in Morris's work, it was that it described a journey without a purpose. Actually Morris had better materials closer to hand, as reading Tony Pinkney's William Morris blog recently I have discovered that Morris was an early fan of the detective story, as was Burne-Jones. Choosing the form of a crime novel, with its skeleton of plot, provides Mat Coward with a stronger structure – readers discover the world without being given lectures, as the detectives go about their business. James Lovegrove's 2003 dystopia, *Untied Kingdom*, failed, lacking this structure, while Ian R. MacLeod's *The Summer Isles* (2006) had it and succeeded.

Set somewhere between John Creasey's Gideon stories and the Bryant and May tales currently being published by Christopher Fowler, *Acts Of Destruction* grew out of a one-off short story, "Back to the Land" (2002). Mat Coward has said that it is not meant to be a manifesto – I would hope so, too, given the goody-goody hypocrisy of some of the characters – but that is no reason why it should not be first of a series that explores such a brave new world.



Jean-Claude Dunyach - *The Thieves of Silence*
Black Coat Press, 2009,
£12.99, 261pp, p/b, ISBN
9781934543726

Reviewed by Ian Watson

This is the second story collection in English by Jean-Claude Dunyach (already known to UK readers, we hope, from various splendid tales in *Interzone*), brought to you by American Black Coat Press (www.blackcoatpress.com), which specialises in translating French popular genre classics – mysteries, thrillers, gothics, sf etc. 100 volumes so far in 5 years: a round of applause is deserved.

Dunyach's first collection, published in 2004,

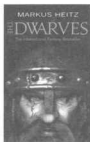
was *The Night Orchid*. It contained astonishing stories which, for instance, topped the *Interzone* readers' poll and were picked up by Year's Bests. It was a must-read, not only for people interested in French sf, but on account of sheer imaginative brilliance and top-class writing, and is equalled in *The Thieves of Silence*, Black Coat's 100th volume. Themes here include an aquarium of AIs being bred within a high-security asteroid; a vivid Midsummer Day's Nightmare (as it were) of a fairy ensorcelling a farm boy, by which he learns much; mannered duels in a threatened human habitat on a world of hostile vegetation; a hilarious black comedy of dinosaur bureaucracy as the fatal asteroid nears Earth; a screamer-artist (you have to read it to understand, since it's unlike anything you've probably read before); a timepearl hunter contending with bizarre aliens and obsessive pigs (you have to read it...); a Mage With No Name visiting a depopulated village where birds were transformed into men (you can almost hear the twanging Ennio Morricone soundtrack).

A character comments, at one point in the satanically good habitat-duelling story, "Clever—although a little too poetic for my liking." And I wonder if, to generalise, this might be a key to the difference in tone and emphasis between French sf (or at least that of Dunyach) and the sf of the Anglo-Saxon hegemony. Dunyach (with a PhD in applied maths and supercomputing, who works in aerospace engineering in Toulouse) deploys wonderfully telling metaphorical imagery amidst almost gratuitous poetic beauty; *drenched with beauty* is perhaps the appropriate phrase, and as in a poem there's often such economy of phrasing amidst the richness of notions, as well as amazing precision of observation and delineation. If a lyric poem aims to be perfect, the story "Separations" is a perfect story in the sense that it's detached inside its own magical bubble with its own exact internal logic. This isn't exactly the norm in the Anglo-Saxon sf hegemony, although Dunyach does do High sf, in the sense of cosmic and exalted scope, and he easily out-punches Malzberg when it comes to dead astronauts and Budrys when it comes to a lethal habitat. He also does cosmic stuff with all the poetic-scientific panache and sly humour of Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics*. Dunyach has some hilarious one-liners; I loved one's salary varying according to the changing distance of an orbit from Earth. However, a pervasive mischievous strangeness (with its own commanding internal logic) is mainly what powers these tales, not exactly of sf as we know it, but perhaps of Science Surrealism which is extremely refreshing and

visionary, opening up new ways of writing.

The translations, by 5 virtuoso hands, are extremely eloquent 99% of the time, with very few peculiarities, such as, say, "The boy lied down", or "My camera-eye fled out of its recess" – which might even be ingenious inventions, come to think of it.

After this banquet, from now on I shall immediately read any new story by Dunyach that I see; and so should you.



Markus Heitz – *The Dwarves*
(transl. Sally-Ann Spencer)
Orbit, 2009. £7.99, 736pp, p/n
ISBN 9781841495729

Reviewed by A.P.Canavan

This is the first book in a projected four book series by German author Markus Heitz. The blurb proclaims "no one has ever questioned the courage of the Dwarves": unfortunately this doesn't cover originality.

This is perhaps a little harsh, as although the influence of Tolkien on his writing is both pervasive and obvious, it does not mean that this is a bad book. In fact Heitz has created a quest adventure that rattles along nicely, if a little predictably, with flashes and glimmers of real potential for the rest of the series.

The central character, Tungdil, is a dwarf who has been raised away from his kin by a human wizard. He then is sent off on an errand that turns into a series of adventures that see him meeting up with other dwarves, battling undead elves, forging a great magical weapon and ultimately battling an evil sorcerer. This of course allows for a long tour of fantasyland by the naïve hero with the reader at his shoulder. As stereotypical as this linear plot sounds it moves the story along and engages interest.

It is the little things that make this work stand out. Dwarves are no longer the sidekicks, but are the instigators and participants in a world-shaping quest. There are interesting backstories and hints of a detailed world history that are slowly developed and explored, adding depth to what could appear stereotypical. In particular the history of the warrior brothers Boindall and Boëndal is both poignant and tragic. The political intrigue and racial tensions within the world aren't overly convoluted but raise the plot above the pedestrian. Perhaps most importantly, Heitz finally answers the question about female Dwarves and beards.

The setting of the book, the realm of Girdlegard, complete with the ubiquitous map, is an isolated

vale divided into human and Elven kingdoms, surrounded by mountains inhabited by the titular Dwarves. So there is a promise of a wider fantasy world yet to be explored which may have an impact on the future books, while also creating an accessible and understandable locale for the first book. The setting is not overly detailed, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps with their own imagination, yet manages to create a strong impression of a 'realistic' fantasyland.

The book's main weaknesses are the linear nature of the plot, which relies a little too heavily on million-to-one-shots that work nine times out of ten, and the sometimes heavy-handed telegraphing of information. This is offset by the interesting, if not necessarily likeable, characters and the tantalising glimpses of a much deeper and more interesting story to come.

Heitz has modernised the Tolkien-esque tradition with the grit of Gemmell, the action of Erikson and the threat of character death, without detracting from the charm and comfort of the familiar quest narrative. Simply put *The Dwarves* is *The Hobbit* for grown ups.



Gerard Houarner – *The Oz Suite*
Eibonvale Press, 2009,
£6.75, 145pp, p/b ISBN
9780955526831

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

“Themed around *The Wizard of Oz* in a very dark way,” the Reviews Editor said. “Fanfic,” I translated with a mental sigh. Sometimes I love

to be wrong.

Gerard Houarner's inspiration for this slim collection of three shortish stories is unashamedly the film, not any of the books. Love it or loathe it, *The Wizard of Oz* is crammed full of images that will be instantly recognised by most sentient beings in the western hemisphere. Some of those images, though it takes the subconscious mind to realise it, are very dark, just with a thin veil of brightly coloured paint over the top. It's these that are the psychological reference points in the lives of three middle American protagonists, all damaged in different ways.

“No We Love No One” comes closest to standing on its own, sans Oz. One night the population of the earth essentially doubles as spiral, snail-like shells drift down from the sky on parachutes, each one containing a human baby. This is the only previously published story, and while it's both eerie and a rebuke of our instinctive dislike of the unlike,

that's not a novel message and you get a feeling Houarner was twiddling his thumbs a little, trying to think of something to tie in that would really give it that little extra kick. Then he hit on the Wizard.

And it seemed to work, so he wrote the next two, this time with the Wizard link foremost in his mind. “Bring Me the Head of That Little Girl Dorothy” actually seems to make Oz a real setting at first, as the opening narrator seems to be the King of the Flying Monkeys. I say seems to. It's possible ‘he’ is also the Witch herself, or a middle-aged woman in our own world on the edge after a lifetime of self-loathing and dysfunctional relationships, or maybe all of the above are simply self-aware fragments of a twisted personality that is somewhere.

Finally, “The Wizard Will See You Now” is about a badly abused child coming to terms with his demons. The Oz images here are the building blocks of an entire life, constructed with care and well depicted by the author: they have to be, because if he saw his world in real-world terms it would be too horrible to stay sane. The danger of wanting to see the Wizard is not knowing exactly what the Wizard might give you: but, see the Wizard you must. Eventually.

My favourite Oz story: to recruit the Munchkins, a nationwide casting call went out to differently sized aspiring actors. The 100-odd that answered congregated in Hollywood and for the first time in their lives met other people like them. After a lifetime of being solitary freaks back home, suddenly they were united, unionised and empowered.

Oz touches lives in many ways and some of them are even good.



L. Jagi Lamplighter – *Prospero Lost*
Tor, 2009, 347pp, h/b, ISBN
9780765319296

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

At the end of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Prospero, the sorcerer, is restored as the rightful ruler of Milan, and his daughter Miranda is married to Ferdinand, the son of Antonio, the man who usurped her father's ducal throne. Except, as is revealed in this very readable first novel, that is not what happened. Miranda and Ferdinand never wed. While her family believe that Miranda herself chose a chaste but eternal life of service as a Handmaiden to the goddess Eurynome over marriage, the truth is that Ferdinand jilted her. And Prospero did not remain Duke of Milan for long. With the help of a trio of French sorcerers, Antonio once again attacked

Milan, and the Prospero family were forced to flee.

Four hundred years later, the family business of Prospero Inc. ensures that the supernatural entities that cause earthquakes, hurricanes and other so-called natural disasters are bound by contracts and covenants that prevent the worst of their efforts from befalling mankind. With Prospero himself retired, and her brothers and sister gone their separate ways, the day to day running of the company falls to Miranda, who as a Handmaiden of Eurynome, has access to the Water of Life which grants her and her family immortality. Then Miranda receives a message from her father warning her that he has unwittingly unleashed powers best left bound and she must warn her siblings. Being a dutiful daughter she sets out to do just that, and to discover what has happened to Prospero, since he has disappeared.

Unfortunately, her siblings are a dysfunctional lot, Mephisto being off his head and possibly a demon, Theophrastus having renounced magic and Logistilla become a latter-day Circe, turning men into animals, so Miranda does not find them much help. The more she discovers about her family, the more she questions the truth of her memories of the past four hundred years. Particularly when Ferdinand turns up and claims that he did not jilt her but was sent to Hell by Prospero himself, and has now escaped. Miranda begins to wonder if one of her family, maybe even her father, is a traitor who has trafficked with the Devil. And she begins to have doubts about the ethics of Prospero's binding of the Aerie Ones, the spirits who once served him and now work for Prospero Inc., essentially against their will.

Whether or not Shakespeare would recognise his characters as they are portrayed in this book really does not matter – an Aerie One incorporated in the form of a detective may not be very Shakespearean but he is totally in keeping with the ambience of *Prospero Lost*. Lamplighter has drawn together elements of *The Tempest*, both traditional and urban mythologies, added some alternate history, and made a fast-paced and intelligent fantasy. The novel ends with many questions left unanswered – are Prospero's magical books truly lost? Will Miranda marry Ferdinand? Hopefully readers will not have to wait too long for the next volume and the answers.



Ursula Le Guin – *Lavinia*
Gollancz, 2009, 432pp. £14.99,
h/b ISBN 9780575084582;
£12.99, u/p ISBN
9780575084599.

Reviewed by Tony Keen

Ursula Le Guin's novel *Lavinia*, positively reviewed when it appeared in 2008 in the United States, takes as its starting point the Latin poet Virgil's epic, the *Aeneid*. Most summaries of the voyage of the Roman hero Aeneas, as described in the *Aeneid*, pay more attention to the journey than to the arrival. The escape from Troy, the encounter with Dido in Carthage, the visit to the Underworld: these are what people remember. Aeneas' war in Latium against Turnus and the Latins is usually given a swift mention at the end, obscuring the fact that this war occupies six of the poem's twelve books. So, by taking this second half of the *Aeneid* as her core text, Le Guin is already doing something out of the ordinary.

Not that retellings of the Aeneas legend are particularly uncommon of late. Combined with another Trojan warrior, Helikaon, he is a major protagonist of David Gemmell's *Troy* trilogy, and Jo Graham's *Black Ships* is a retelling of the voyage from Troy to Italy. However, Graham and Gemmell are both writing historical novels, postulating events that might eventually have inspired the mythological accounts. As a result, each feels free to depart from Roman accounts where they wish (more so in Gemmell's case than in Graham's). At the same time, they are in other respects bound by historical plausibility (so, for instance, the four centuries' difference between the traditional dates of the Trojan War and of the foundation of Carthage means that Dido cannot, for Graham, be a Carthaginian queen, and so becomes an Egyptian princess instead).

Lavinia is doing something very different; it is a novel in direct dialogue with Virgil's *Aeneid*. There may be differences in detail – in the novel *Lavinia*'s hair is dark, not fair, as Virgil states. The cities of Latium may be rather more humble than Virgil implies. But each time there is a change, it is a reaction to the Latin text, and is often highlighted as such. Le Guin even engages with one of the major scholarly debates on the poem; why does Virgil end the poem so abruptly with Aeneas killing the defenceless Turnus, as the latter begs for mercy, and is the reader meant to admire or despise that act?

In this relation to an ancient text, *Lavinia* resembles Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad*,

a novel that takes a different look at the material of Homer's *Odyssey*. Like Atwood, Le Guin chooses to concentrate on the woman who is the hero's prize for the completion of his adventures. Lavinia is the daughter of King Latinus, and the woman who will become Aeneas' wife. She is also, as Le Guin notes, the *casus belli*, the reason war breaks out when her father breaks her engagement with Turnus to give her to Aeneas. But where Homer's Penelope at least has some agency, and a personality that comes through, Virgil's Lavinia is almost a complete cipher, wholly deprived of agency, and with barely a line to utter. Her role is to be the hero's prize, and nothing more.

Le Guin takes a feminist approach to this material. Lavinia narrates the novel, and it is her decision to reject Turnus for Aeneas. She is her own woman, as much as anyone can be in the Late Bronze Age. But her actions are not truly free.

It is, however, not patriarchy that dictates Lavinia's actions, but *story*. In its best moments, *Lavinia* is an interrogation of the nature of fiction. Lavinia encounters the dying Virgil, in one of the novel's most fantastical moments (Le Guin follows the modern trend for excluding direct participation by the gods). Virgil lays out her future to her, as he has written it (and also apologises for the small role he has allotted her). This leaves Lavinia unclear as to whether she is a real person, or the poet's creation. The novel raises (but of course does not answer) questions about the relationship between 'real' historical figures, and the person they become the moment someone writes down their story.

Had the entire book been like this, then *Lavinia* would be an extraordinary novel. Some critics clearly believe that it is anyway. If I cannot go along fully with that judgement, it is because Le Guin is unable to keep up the brilliance of the earlier sections. In the early portions of the novel, the narrative is not arranged according to linear chronology – instead it skips from time to time, much as human memory does. But as the novel goes on, linear chronology reasserts itself. Moreover, something is lost once the story no longer has the *Aeneid* to react against. Le Guin does a fair job trying to pick a route through the mixed legends of Aeneas' later life and that of his son Ascanius (choosing a narrative that would deny literal truth to Julius Caesar's claims to be descended from Ascanius). But it lacks the shine of the earlier parts of the novel.

Nevertheless, this is a good book, which can certainly be recommended. It demonstrates that Le Guin remains a significant literary force.



Charles de Lint – *The Mystery of Grace*

Tor 2009, 269pp, h/b, ISBN 9780765317568

Reviewed by Anne F. Wilson

Charles de Lint's new book is set in the Southwest United States. The book opens on Halloween, one of the days of the dead, *Los días de los muertos* (which is curiously misspelt as *muerter* throughout the book) when the dead walk amongst us, or, more particularly, amongst the inhabitants of the small town of Solona. Some of the dead are in fact more corporeal than one might expect, amongst them our heroine, Grace.

I liked Grace. She's a Latina, she has a lot of trashy tattoos, she fixes old cars for a living, she eats Mexican food. She has grease on her hands that never quite washes out. When the story opens Grace is mourning her grandfather, her *abuelo*, who just died, and there's a lot of really good detail about how this affects her. She is tattooing herself with her dead. She has a picture of her dead mother under her collarbone, and she's looking for a picture of her grandfather so that she can get a tattoo of him to match. She starts smoking again after he dies. All this feels very real and poignant.

But then Grace meets a white guy at a Halloween party, and they fall in love, and there's no racial tension because in the Southwest, apparently, lots of white people and hispanics get together and it's no big deal. I wasn't very clear on exactly where the Southwest was, so I looked it up on Wikipedia, to find that the definition varies, but it always includes New Mexico and Arizona. "The Southwest is ethnically varied, with significant European American and Hispanic American populations in addition to more regional African American, Asian American, and American Indian populations." Ah well, there you go then. That explains why our heroine is a Latina, her corner shop is Mexican, she falls in love with an Anglo and becomes best friends with a black street kid. Or I think she's black. She may just be brown. Anyway, all this mish mash of races doesn't really matter, because everyone gets on so well with each other.

It's probably unfair to be so picky, but I feel that the thumbsmudging over the real cross-cultural differences shows an irritating blandness. It's a tourist vision of the Southwest, with tamales and pinon and cactuses and hot-rod-ding. And yet where de Lint does get into details, there are some great touches. For instance the first thing a ghost needs to do when they come back on Halloween is to pee.

The feeling of inauthenticity, of something missing continued when looked up *Los días de los muertos* on Wikipedia, and discovered that there's only actually one, and it's November 2nd, not Halloween. So we get a lot about Mexican Catholic beliefs and rituals, but they're on the wrong day, and more importantly, the reason for them isn't really addressed, why people feel the need to believe in something in the face of awful, inescapable death.

So I did enjoy the book, but I just kept thinking that it could have been so much better. There are some great, gritty details but a lot more airbrushing over problem areas. There a lot of difficult questions to ask about death and grief and loss and moving on, but having set them up, this rather slick little ghost story doesn't really address them. And frankly, I think Grace deserves better.



Farah Mendlesohn – *The Inter-Galactic Playground: A Critical Study of Children's and Teens' Science Fiction*

McFarland, 2009, 273pp, p/b
ISBN 9780786435036

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

I was barely into my teens when I persuaded my local public library to allow me to escape the tiny room set aside for children and explore the vastly more exciting territory of the adult collection. It would be another couple of years before I actually discovered science fiction (and another couple of years beyond that before I became enamoured of the form), so I never actually read children's sf as a child. I am not, therefore, an ideal reader of this book; not that it is aimed at children, but part of its dynamic is the progression from children's sf to adult sf, and that's a journey that I never made.

Writing about children's literature has some peculiarities all its own. Alone among the various branches of literary criticism, the intended audience for the critique does not include the intended audience for the literature. The person teasing out meanings and associations from the work under study is not the person at whom the work was aimed (I note that the primary focus of this book is on fiction published when the author was no longer a child). In other words, both the critic and the reader are making approximations and assumptions when deciding how close the study comes to the actual reception of the work by the children who are supposedly its readers.

This is one of the main thrusts in the first, and in many ways the most interesting, part of Mendlesohn's book. This is a polemical account

of the expectations made of the child reader, the assumptions about what a child actually wants to read, how the child interprets and understands what is read, and what is 'good' for the child. Mendlesohn gets gloriously irate at librarians, teachers and critics who argue that children need to be protected, cannot understand anything complex, need a simple language. For Mendlesohn what is read is part of the process of understanding the world, of preparing for adulthood, and children are capable of being far more sophisticated readers than many adults allow.

To that extent, this is a very liberal, free-spirited book and it is easy to find oneself cheering her along as she goes after those old-fashioned, restrictive voices in often far from scholarly language. Yet at the same time there is a narrowness in Mendlesohn's own understanding of what she is doing. Her reading of what constitutes 'science fiction', for instance, is far more restricted than I suspect she would employ in another context, something she goes some way towards admitting when she says: 'This set of criteria [the tropes by which she identifies science fiction] was enforced far more rigidly than I would prefer in other contexts' (9). The core of science fiction, at least as presented within the structuralist apparatus of this book, is limited to hard sf and a few related works that make use of technology. This is because, throughout the book, science fiction for young people is presented very much as a didactic literature. This is part and parcel of her quarrel with those librarians and academics whose primary urge seems to be to swaddle young people in a protective cocoon of childhood; if science fiction is meant to direct young people along the route to adulthood, then its purpose is to teach about that adult world, to open up the way, not close it off.

This is why much of the early science fiction for children from the 1950s and '60s (Mendlesohn is particularly admiring of the work of Robert Heinlein and Andre Norton) is described as 'career books'; that is, novels which effectively describe an apprenticeship for a role in later life. One of the things that has happened, socially and culturally in America and Europe over the last fifty years, has been a growing separation between childhood and work. The extension of education, the introduction of things like gap years, the concern to defend children from the dilemmas of adulthood, have all made the transformation from teen to worker a more gradual process. As a result, 'career books' have tended to lose their purpose, and few if any of the children's science fiction written over the last thirty years or so have had that underlying purpose.

Right at the start, Mendlesohn says that her book arose out of a 'dissatisfaction with the children's and "young adult" science fiction I was reading

in the 1980s and 1990s' (1), and I would guess that this dissatisfaction in turn arose from the eclipse of the 'career book' model during that same period. Just as science fiction for adults has gone through all sorts of phases over the last thirty years, so has science fiction for children; and just as hard sf has recently re-emerged in adult science fiction, so it has in children's science fiction, though shorn of the 'career book' gloss it might once have worn. This certainly seems to coincide with the trajectory of Mendlesohn's interest in children's science fiction. She argues that there was a dearth of children's science fiction in the twenty years up to the late '90s, and certainly there was a decline in the didactic hard sf that coincides with her interest; and as hard sf has reappeared in children's sf over the last decade (along with the sort of didacticism represented, for instance, by Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008)), a book that receives a lot of attention here), so she argues that children's science fiction has undergone a revival over the same period.

The final four chapters of the book move on from arguing with the academic establishment, and turn to considering the fiction itself. Although she deals to some extent with children's science fiction from the 1950s onwards (and with occasional references to earlier works), most of the book is concerned with novels that have been published in the last decade or so. Chapter Four looks at the broad character of children's science fiction decade by decade since the '50s; Chapter Five turns to the way things like society and gender are portrayed; Chapter Six moves on to issues, themes and plot devices; while Chapter Seven, misleadingly titled 'Best Practice Now', is more concerned with tying in the works she has examined with the more general remarks about children's fiction she made in the early part of the book. A lot of books are covered here (many of them arising from a survey she conducted on her blog, analysis of which is included in one of the numerous appendices), though most seem to have inspired the same sort of dissatisfaction that sparked the book in the first place, which means that serious analysis is restricted to a relative handful of novels and the structure of these chapters means that there is an awful lot of repetition.

There is also a lot of (probably unconscious) prejudice on display. For instance, Mendlesohn firmly believes that in any post-catastrophe scenario community and co-operation are essential to survival, and since children's science fiction should be didactic, that is what it should teach. In turn, however, any fiction that focuses on children surviving alone is consequently dismissed as bad science fiction. Or again, discussing M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), she declares: 'According to Anderson, having easy access to information undermines

memory and makes one more vulnerable to the ideas of others. There is no understanding at all that easy access to information makes it easier to go further in one's own analysis, or that the more ideas one encounters the more resistant or acute one might become' (155). That belated 'might' is the only recognition that her own certainty may not be shared by all. This determination that there is a right thing to be taught in children's sf is inevitable if the literature is seen as primarily didactic. But if we see didacticism as only one among many aspects of literature, whether for adults or for children, then it becomes more problematic to dismiss books for failing to match one's own certainties.

In the early chapters, Mendlesohn argues wonderfully, passionately, vividly that children's science fiction should be liberating, that the imagination is vital to growth. As we move on to discussion of individual novels, however, this liberation seems to close down somewhat; partly, I am sure, the fault of authors, but partly also, I suspect, the fault of the perception of children's sf being presented here. This is an essential book that opens up for critical discussion the whole arena of children's science fiction, but I hope it will generate other ways of looking at the books in question.



Keith Miller – *The Book on Fire*
Immanion Press, 2009, 246pp,
£11.99, ISBN 9781904853688

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This is one of the most beautifully written books I've ever read; a triumph of style, a hymn to the senses. Those who believe that every page of a novel should contain Plot, and that the first duty of a writer is to go through their first draft and take out all the adjectives, should read this book to find out what they're missing. Though it's presented as a story for lovers of books, it's actually writing for lovers of words, for those who love being seduced by descriptive prose. It's wonderful, it's delicious, and reading more than a page or two at a time is like trying to eat a whole box of chocolates at one sitting. This is prose to be taken in poetry-sized bites.

The story is set in Alexandria, a multicultural city obviously very familiar to the author, but presented as exotic, mysterious and vivid. For this is not our Alexandria but the essence, the myth, the City of the Library – that's THE library, the one containing every desirable and potent book. The viewpoint character is Balthazar, a book thief, who comes to Alexandria to attempt the greatest challenge of

his career, and who, during his sojourn in the city, takes two veiled lovers; Shireen, a librarian, and Zeinab, a burner of books, devotees of preservation and destruction. Balanced between these mighty opposing forces, and also between the forces of reality and myth, most of the writing celebrates a succession of moments of experience: tastes, smells, textures; breakfast in a café, a walk on the seafloor, the sound of Arabic snoring. In these moments the great forces intersect; archetype becomes reality.

The story? It drifts along, shading into a dozen different great story cycles along the way: Narnia (Balthazar's stolen books, as befits significant portals, are kept in a wardrobe), Middle-Earth (the statement "I cannot read the letters of fire" occurs three times, and the character referenced is certainly as desirable and dangerous as the One Ring), Scheherazade, the Classical Underworld... I have probably missed dozens of references. In many ways it's actually more of a travel book than a story-narrative; the country being explored is simultaneously the mythical city of Alexandria (definitely reminiscent of Hav in places) and the country of modern classic fantasy fiction.

Faults? I find the ending weak; most of the last two chapters feel like a desperate and slightly random hunt for an elegant way out of this sub-creation. I am also disconcerted by the underlying ethics, which celebrate the transfiguration of ordinary moments through paying full attention to the glorious onslaught of sense-data (Good!), but apart from that lean towards detachment and decadence. For all its apparent passion, it's a rather cool book. Experience is not there simply to be enjoyed, but to be observed, distilled, recorded, in a recursive self-awareness that approaches self-centredness. It's a book in which books are more important than other people, and should that be so?



Neonymous Nine – Cern Zoo
Megazanthus Press 2009,
264pp, t/p ISSN 14742020

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Neonymous.com is a group which publishes stories without the baggage of the author's name attached. Thus the reader approaches the story *qua* story and judges it on merits unclouded by expectation. In these high days of the cult of celebrity this is, at the least, an intriguing concept.

The title, *Cern Zoo*, suggests the stories will be linked with the Large Hadron Collider, or perhaps a nearby zoo. While both concepts appear here

and there, the connections are mostly tenuous, especially regarding the collider, which I find a disappointment, but that may just be me.

The stories range from a couple of pages – 'Sloth and Forgiveness' (which, along with 'The Lion's Den', are the only stories here even approaching humour, and neither raise the eyebrow of surprise) – to the almost novella length 'Salmon Widow', which is either the best short story I have read in a long time or the worst, an arch cut up that leaves the reader to come to their own conclusion, if they can reach one. I can't. The 'invented at the same time' trope is revisited, particularly by the excellently atmospheric 'Artis Eterne' and the vaguely euro-centric 'City of Fashion', one of which worked because the author convincingly portrayed the setting while the other... didn't. The notional zoo recurs as well ('Mellie's Zoo in particular'), but it is very clear that the authors have no time for zoos or those who frequent them.

This feels like a very British collection, low key, observational, morose and burdened both by the facts of the past and the possibilities of the future, the theme of is 'why can't the world just leave me alone?' Nothing wrong with that, only an entire volume of such stories can make for a certain lack of enthusiasm when it comes to turning the page. Not that there is anything amiss with any of these stories. Discovered alone they might not raise many cheers, but none would be torn from the magazine and flung into the waste bin. All in one place, however, they come pretty close to critical mass both in terms of worthiness and wearisome.

One or two stand out. 'Salmon Widow' had me grinding my teeth but turning the pages. 'The Last Mermaid' had me scurrying to the history books just in case it was true. 'The Rude Man's Menagerie', while the only clearly American set story in the collection, has its roots in Cern Abbas rather than Cern, and illustrates the tragedy of the little (wo) man struggling against the anonymous forces of business collapse. 'The Ozymandias Site' suffers a little in its title – the ending is telegraphed way too soon – but has a genuine touch of the different that is absent elsewhere.

Cern Zoo is something of an odd fish. I am unsure what the editors were trying to achieve and so cannot comment on their success. I shall, however, wait for Neonymous Ten. Which should be comment enough.



Roberto Quaglia – *Paradoxine*
Immanion Press 2009,
£12.99, 330pp, t/p, ISBN
9781904853671

Reviewed by Michael Abbott

This is a bit of a Tin Man of a book. It's keen on technology, in a not-all-that-technically-accurate way, and most parts of the book get replaced by something else at some point, including the plot, the universe and even the protagonist (though he gets over it). In fact, it even replaces the novel half way through, when the original 1985 book finishes and the 1999 sequel takes over. This edition is their first translation into English (from the Italian). There's a clue there, and another in the Calvino pastiche of the first paragraph ("You read the first line...", and another, subtler one, in the introduction written by Robert Sheckley. About half way through the first novel it dawned on me that this book was the Italian equivalent of Sheckley's brilliant *Options*, a book in which the plot repeatedly fails to happen, and reality is not to be trusted. The plot does actually happen in *Paradoxine*, but the book spends a lot of time on diversions and digressions that don't have much connection to anything that happens before or afterwards. It is just about a science fiction book, but it owes more to the European surrealism tradition. (And there is a very clear nod to *Options*, so I Am Not Making This Up.) It is a book that is vividly aware of its own book-nature, and interested in what that implies.

The plot, when it's happening, centres on James Vagabond, who works for the Very-Secret Service in the saving the world line. Generally, he does this by hanging around, and waiting for something to come up – since he's a protagonist by trade, it generally does, but in these two books it's not that easy. I won't reveal who or what he's actually up against, but I will admit that my reaction was "Oh no – not that". On the way, Vagabond has problems, often entertaining, with immersive television, Microsoft computer houses, Paradox Realms, heaven, the Vatican (and a fake pope), alternate versions of himself, and a pub that only serves fictional archetypes. He even, at one point, becomes a stuttering ant eater. I think. The tone is light, and often amusing, but there are a lot of scenes where one or two characters start to Expound on Reality, and everything stops for a few pages till they finish. (It's possible that the book is a lighter read in the original Italian. I have no way of telling.) But most of the details don't actually matter to anything else in the book, and none of them have much emotional

weight. The world might end; Vagabond is vaguely put out.

Some of the notions in the book are very inventive. It's often funny, and in places, it's very, very funny. But it's a bit of a Tin Man of a book, and it doesn't really have a heart.



Adam Roberts – *Yellow Blue Tibia*
Gollancz 2009, £12.99, 336pp,
t/p, ISBN 9780575083578

Reviewed by Stephen Deas

World War II is over. The Soviet Union has defeated Hitler and Stalin is convinced that Europe and America will soon fall. Global Soviet peace will follow; and to prepare for that peace, Stalin calls Konstantin Skvorecky and a handful of other Soviet science fiction authors to a secret dacha in the countryside. The new communist world will need some new menace to hold it together, something to give it a unity of cause and purpose. In short, it will need the threat of an alien invasion, and the job of this group of writers is to create one, a fiction but a plausible one. No expense will be spared in staging this invasion. It will begin with the destruction of an American spaceship and a huge explosion in the Ukraine...

When their job is done, the writers are unceremoniously ejected and told to forget what they have done. Mostly they consider themselves lucky not to have been shot.

Fast-forward some forty years.

Skvorecky, now ex-SF writer, ex-alcoholic, part-time translator and dedicated cynic, finds himself asked to act as a translator for a rather odd pair of Americans. As he leaves, he is approached by the last other survivor of Stalin's sf cabal, now working in the KGB, who tries to convince him that the alien invasion they created is becoming reality: It's 1986. The Space Shuttle *Challenger* has exploded, something is afoot in the Ukraine at Chernobyl, and aliens appear to be secretly invading the world.

So there's the set-up. Skvorecky quickly acquires a taxi-driving nuclear physicist sidekick and proceeds to be bounced from one slightly bizarre and surreal episode to the next in what is, in the end, an exquisitely crafted and cerebral mystery.

Now, I have this idea that stories engage with readers in two fundamentally different ways. They engage with us on an emotional level, with adrenaline-pumping action, tooth-grinding tension, white-knuckle drama; with love and joy and hate and revenge and possibly too many adjectives.

And they engage with us on an intellectual level, with ideas and philosophies that educate and amuse and stimulate and enrich. *Yellow Blue Tibia* is firmly entrenched at the latter end of the spectrum. Skvorecky and his taxi-driver never emotionally engage with the story in which they find themselves; rather, Skvorecky observes his own trajectory with a detached amusement, while his taxi-driver is a realistic depiction of Asperger's Syndrome. These are both deliberate choices by the author and, as with everything else here, expertly crafted; in fact, this sort of detachment is probably necessary, as some of the strangeness they encounter would likely drive anyone else (reader included) to distraction trying to work out what could possibly be going on. Right up to the end, it's not clear whether this is a mundane KGB conspiracy, a comedy of errors, a narrator who's lost his marbles or whether there are, indeed, some aliens somewhere. Roberts seems fascinated with the phenomena of UFOs, the are they-or-aren't-they of them, the weight of the anecdotal set against the utter lack of hard physical answer. *Yellow Blue Tibia* even offers a rather tidy answer.

The real strengths of this book are in the easy flowing prose (I occasionally had to stop and read a scene again simply to admire how well it was put together), in Skvorecky's sardonic wit and in the marvellous central idea, revealed at the end, which gives almost perfect coherence and sense to all the seemingly random events that preceded.

In summary, the writing is elegant and yet straightforward, the mystery is engrossing and the idea at the core is inspired. Readers after an emotional connection may find it difficult to engage with the story, but for those who are after a piece of old-school science-fiction brain food that makes you think, *Yellow Blue Tibia* delivers in spades.

one part cosmic wonderland. Its narrator is Pedino. Pedino is a Pawn. This may sound like bad news for him, but it isn't; out of the entire population of Bellogard, only sixteen (at most) are actual pieces, possessed of full souls, able to do magic, and able to fight in the centuries-long war against Chorny. Why are they at war? That's a good question, one that the Bishops and other pieces ponder long and hard. There's a general consensus that when the war ends, with the death of either King, so does the world. But nobody thinks this is a good reason to stop fighting, because the war seems like the reason for the world. And maybe those who have full souls can survive the end of the world.

It is, very obviously, a chess world, and Watson has a lot of fun with it, inventing cities, people, philosophies and politics, all built around the ancient game. And then he does it all over again a few more times later in the book, with a twist I won't reveal – but I still remembered what it was from reading the book back in 1986, and I remember being exhilarated and boggled by it at the time. (It's possible, and I should be careful here, that I'm going to be more taken with the twists than many people. But you should err on the side of reading the book anyway.)

The book is inventive, fast-paced, tongue-in-cheek, silly, and deep. The adventure doesn't flag, but it leaves room for some unnerving questions about what reality is, the purpose of life, and which people matter to us, and why. Read, and enjoy.



Fay Weldon – *Chalcot Crescent*
Corvus 2009, £16.99, 278pp,
h/b, . ISBN 9781848872684

Reviewed by Penny Hill

The near future setting of this novel edges it into the category of sf and therefore makes it of interest to us. It is an exaggerated extrapolation from our current economic plight.

Weldon is using this as an excuse for creating an artificial backdrop to her main story rather than putting much effort into world-building or showing us how we would get there from here. It is a very retro-style future reminiscent of the Home Front of the second World War, using motifs of rationing, morale-boosting posters and the dark side of everyone minding your own business. Mixed in with this nostalgia are some added CCTV monitoring and some elements of the state capitalist side of Soviet Russia (roads having central lanes for the party faithful are particularly emphasised).

I was surprised that Weldon was genre-savvy

SF
IAN WATSON



Ian Watson – *Queenmagic*
Kingmagic
Immanion Press 2009, 198pp,
£9.99, t/p. ISBN 9781904853664

Reviewed by Michael Abbott

Why look, this is very handy. This is the second edition of a book first published in 1986, and here on the back of the new edition is a quote from a previous *Vector* review, by Martyn Taylor. It says: "Read, and enjoy... This is a bloodily funny book... Go on, allow yourself to be subverted. It's good for you." All very fair comments, but perhaps I should write a few words of my own as well.

The book is one part coming-of-age story and

enough to make soylent green references regarding her "National meat loaf", because apart from a few genre trappings this is principally mimetic fiction and as such the emotional family entanglements seem overdone. For everyone to be plausibly this interconnected, we would either need a more isolated community or be operating within a heightened sense of reality such as a melodrama or a fairy-tale.

Fay Weldon has always written the kind of feminism that sets my teeth on edge. It points out all the flaws in both men and women and offers no hope for a solution. Women tend to come off worse in her writing – they are either strong and cold and selfish like the narrator or they are weak like her daughters, constantly blaming their mother for their fathers' faults. Her men are usually merely guilty of being selfish. Because there is nothing particularly interesting or new in the way she uses gender, this now feels like a very old-fashioned type of feminism.

One aspect Weldon handles well is the depiction of the sexual mores of the liberal elite of the 1970s. All the ostensible sexual freedom mostly translates as freedom for men to do what they like and blame women for making themselves unhappy. The key question of who decides what a relationship is and when it is over and who gets the blame are all at the heart of this novel. It now feels as alien in its way as the pre-contraception morality that came before it. In this way at least, Fay Weldon is continuing the great tradition of modern literary novels – that of unhappy people making each other miserable.

A key question posed by the text is how unreliable is Frances the narrator? There are sections she imagines and presents to us as possible truths. Unfortunately, we're not invested enough in this world and its reality to care whether these fictionalised sections are true or false. I found Fay's use of her actual still-born sister as the narrator to be exploitative. If I did want to spend any more time around these people, it might prompt a little research into Fay Weldon's own life to see which other real life characters she has exploited to tell a story in which she has written herself as a victim.

I did find Frances irritating. Realising that the repetition of each statement with an enhancement was a deliberately chosen style did not make it any less annoying. I was tempted to find a red pen and cross out every fact we'd already been told. Because Weldon gives us nothing to warm to in Frances, we do not care about the central theme – her obsession with her first husband's abandonment and his subsequent child.

There is a real hostage to fortune section where Frances tells us we don't have to carry on reading her book. If you reach this stage and are not engaged

in the story then feel free to stop.



John Wyndham – *Plan For Chaos* (ed. David Ketterer and Andy Sawyer)
 Liverpool University Press,
 2009, £65.00, 268 pp, h/b, ISBN
 9780846311796

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

One cannot help feeling a certain frisson of anxiety on learning that, forty years after his death, John Wyndham has published a new novel. *Plan for Chaos* came to light after Wyndham's papers were acquired by the Sydney Jones Library at Liverpool University in 1998, and given the ongoing controversy over the publication of authors' lost and suppressed manuscripts, it is a relief to learn that Wyndham would probably have been delighted to see it finally appear. When first completed, it was unsuccessfully circulated to a number of publishers, and revised at least once as a result of editorial comments, but generated little interest despite the best efforts of Frederik Pohl, Wyndham's US agent – 'I seem to be almost alone in my enthusiasm for it' (13). Although Wyndham recognised that it had problems, he struggled to find the best way to revise it, and eventually returned the manuscript to his files.

Looking at the novel now, it is not difficult to see why a publisher in 1950 would demur. When Pohl proposed revising the novel himself, he diagnosed one of the main problems. 'I suppose the entire Nazi element needs to come out'. Doubtless, people didn't want to consider the idea of a resurgent Nazi movement formed of cloned humans as a future possibility so soon after the end of World War Two. Whether Pohl addressed what seems to me to be the other major weakness of this novel, David Ketterer's introduction does not say, but at least one publisher noted that Part 1 would benefit from drastic cutting. There is no getting past the fact that this is a novel of two remarkably disparate halves, to the extent that when I began Part 2 I initially thought the first-person viewpoint had shifted to a different character entirely, and was startled to discover that Johnny Farthing was still telling the story. While I don't doubt Ketterer's belief that the two bound volumes of the manuscript do indeed form one novel, and were submitted as such, I am less convinced that they started out as a single entity.

Ketterer's research suggests that immediately after the war, Wyndham began to rework earlier unsuccessful projects, but as his records covering the immediate post-war period are fragmentary,

and the few references in Grace Wilson's diary and Vivian Harris's biographical notes about his brother are tantalisingly vague, it is not clear whether Wyndham created this novel from scratch, or incorporated material from another abandoned project. Either way, this is a peculiar piece of work. Wyndham, a man acutely sensitive to the demands of the market, apparently intended *Plan for Chaos* to be not 'what the enthusiast classifies as science-fiction, but, I hope, more what the general public thinks s-f to be' (11). Ketterer interprets this as meaning that Wyndham wanted to write something with a broader appeal, which seems reasonable, but the comment remains enigmatic given that I suspect the general public had a very clear idea of what science fiction was, and think Wyndham wished to conceal that he was writing science fiction. Certainly, he had already commented to Pohl that if a novel's beginning 'were to be presented in the more familiar style of a detective-story a number of people who customarily scorn s-f might be brought to start it and trapped into going through with it' (10).

This is what seems to be happening in part 1 of *Plan for Chaos*, which might charitably be described as a sub-Chandleresque thriller. Johnny Farthing, an Englishman of Swedish descent, is working in the US as a photographer for the magazine *Choice*. Covering a story about a young woman's unexplained death, he notices that she looks remarkably like his fiancée, Freda. A second, similar young woman dies inexplicably and when Freda disappears, having apparently left her flat with Johnny, he discovers that, despite his exceedingly striking appearance, he also seems to have a double.

Inevitably, Johnny's enquiries attract attention and he is picked up by the group behind the kidnap. He is not particularly surprised to find that all the women in the organisation look superficially like Freda, while all the men look rather like him. Moreover, they are all identified by numbers, and find it impossible to account for Johnny's unnerving similarity to them. Johnny manages to assume the identity of one of the multiples, and is thus able to make his way to their headquarters before the substitution is discovered. The one surprising element of this first section of narrative is that the group he is travelling with is transported by flying saucer, although they remain within Earth's atmosphere.

As a detective story, Part 1 of *Plan for Chaos* seems rather half-hearted. Although the story's initial premise is deeply intriguing, Johnny is an observer, not an investigator. Once the organisation is in control of the action, he functions more comfortably as an observer and commentator than as a man of action, in common with many of Wyndham's male

protagonists. Detached from the action, Johnny has time to reflect on what's happening, but lacks the ability to analyse his experience, and thus the immediate revelation of Part 2 is far more of a shock to him than seems reasonable given the evidence he already has.

Had I blind-read Part 1, I would have been hard-pressed to identify it as by John Wyndham. There are, with hindsight, certain embryonic themes that one might regard as quintessential Wyndham concerns. The identical men and women will surface again, in slightly different form, in *The Midwich Cuckoos*, while Freda reminds me strongly of Phyllis in *The Kraken Wakes*. The classic Wyndham uncertainty about the nature of women is also in place. Johnny is at times conservative in his attitudes towards women, though he is equally admiring of their independence. One is slightly surprised to find that he and Freda are engaged (though not yet married because Freda's father is opposed because they are first cousins). Their relationship seems to be more one of companionship than one of passion.

In Part 2 the novel's tone shifts markedly to something that is more recognisably the Wyndham of *Day of the Triffids*. The prose seems more measured and the emphasis is on exploration of issues than on explosive action. Johnny's first encounter with The Mother reveals how she intends to bring countries to war through feigned attacks by other powers, after which her 'children' will take over and create a new Germany. She lays out her philosophy in great detail, though Johnny is somewhat sceptical of many of her claims, and revolted by others. In particular, he is clearly uncomfortable with the idea of cloning, seeing it as unnatural (and indeed he later expresses fears at the thought of a monosexual race), and he is equally uncomfortable with Freda's calm acceptance.

Here, we meet those familiar Wyndham themes: the terrifying unknowability of women, and the struggle between Science and Nature. On the one hand, it has to be Freda who identifies The Mother's failure to fully comprehend her children's emotional needs. While they may believe in her cause, 'that hasn't stopped them at the same time wanting babies, husbands, homes of some kind.' (175). The Mother, as Freda notes, has devised a machine with no safety valve. (At the same time, Wyndham portrays at least one man who has secretly married 'out' and fathered a child, so he apparently is sensitive to the idea that men might seek the same security, even if Johnny hasn't quite figured it out.) On the other hand, while Johnny is revolted at The Mother's manipulation of what he sees as natural processes, it is Freda who points out that his attitude would have deprived humanity of such things as safe anaesthesia.

The Mother's solution to the lack of a safety valve – to use Johnny's and Freda's children as 'new blood' – is greeted with dismay because it will obviously take at least another generation to come to fruition. This provides the spark to ignite a rebellion; different factions wrangle over whether they should initiate The Mother's plan, and in the confusion Johnny and Freda, along with a group of others, escape in one of the flying saucers, taking with them a vast amount of data about The Mother's scientific work.

What finally happens to that information remains unclear, but Ketterer invites us to read *Plan for Chaos* as a covert prequel to *Day of the Triffids*, particularly as the two seem to have been written concurrently, and suggests that Wyndham's work on *Plan* helped resolve difficulties he was experiencing with *Triffids*, in terms of establishing the technology that produces the triffids and causes the satellite malfunctions in the latter novel. Ketterer's arguments are persuasive, ingenious even, suggesting that Wyndham perhaps planned a future history trilogy, though there seems to be little if any substantive evidence for this last thought.

Instead, we are left with *Plan for Chaos*, Wyndham's orphan novel. We have no way of knowing now what kind of reaction it might have drawn had it been published in 1950. It would have been groundbreaking, but I wonder if it would have been successful. Now it is more of an historical curiosity but for anyone with a serious interest in Wyndham's writing, it is a must-read. While Part 1 stumbles badly, Part 2 shows, quite startlingly, the moment when Wyndham became Wyndham. To that end, one can only hope that Liverpool University Press will publish this in paperback, as the hardback price puts it way out of reach of most pockets.



Michelle Zink – *Prophecy of the Sisters*

**Atom 2009, £12.99, 343pp,
h/b, ISBN 978190564482**

**Reviewed by Mark
Connorton**

This YA supernatural thriller is set in mid-nineteenth century New York State, where teenage

twins Lia and Alice are orphaned by the death of their father. They soon find themselves subject to supernatural forces – a brand-like mark appears on Lia's wrist and both sisters experience strange dreams. It transpires that they are playing roles

described in an ancient prophecy, in which a set of twin sisters are chosen each generation to take part in a supernatural battle. One sister is tasked with releasing a powerful demon and his army into the world and the other has to prevent her. Lia and Alice start a covert battle, whilst still living together and trying to maintain their Victorian veneer of propriety, attempting to work out which sister has which task and what they have to do to fulfil their respective roles.

The mythology behind the prophecy is vaguely reminiscent of *Buffy*, with unwilling Chosen Ones given great responsibility at a young age and a mish-mash of Biblical lore, Celtic mythology and spiritualism. Lia has a considerate and adoring boyfriend who helps her investigate her father's library, but he is soon pushed into the background when Lia finds some female friends to help her, who are connected to the prophecy themselves. Relationships between women, whether friendly or not, are at the centre of the novel. It is written in the first person, in a studied, reserved style that successfully evokes the period, but has slightly deadening effect on the narrative, as everything is filtered through Lia's perceptions.

This appears to be the first book in a series and infuriatingly there is no satisfactory plot resolution by its end. What we do get is also paced a bit too slowly for my liking. The first three quarters are taken up with Lia dutifully gathering all the necessary clues to work out what she is supposed to do, or agonising about a mystery that many readers will quickly guess the solution to. The slow rationing of information interspersed with repetitive scenes of introspection feels like padding after a while. It's the kind of book where a character with lots of useful information thinks it best not to share it with Lia until the final chapters because she doesn't want to worry her, even though the entire planet is supposedly at stake.

The conflict between the sisters is also downplayed in exchange for clue gathering and exposition. We are repeatedly told how dangerous Alice is, but for much of the book she is barely present, reduced to lurking in corners and making spiteful faces. When she finally does play a more actively antagonistic role, the plot picks up a gear, the book comes to life, and we get a genuinely shocking and unforeseen moment towards the end. I would say the series has potential, but this isn't a great introduction as a stand-alone novel. Now that the stage setting is all in place, hopefully the sequel will show some improvement.

Foundation's Favourites

Lt. Gullivar Jones: His Vacation on Mars, by Edwin Lester Arnold

by Andy Sawyer

This "favourite" comes with a touch of sadness. In 2008, one of the unsung heroes of British science fiction, the fan and book dealer Ken Slater, died. Without Ken, whose "Operation Fantast" in the 1940s served more than anything else to bring together a science fiction fandom which had been scattered by World War Two and kindle a new enthusiasm for science fiction, many of us would not be here, doing what we do. Ken was a friend and supplier of books and magazines and knowledge about sf and British fandom to many of us, and possibly never quite realised just in what affection he was held.

In his will, he left a financial bequest to the Science Fiction Foundation, and it was agreed that it would be spent upon the purchase of books that for reasons of cost and/or scarcity had not been acquired by the sff library. Almost immediately, a copy of the scarce first edition (1905) of Edwin Lester Arnold's *Lt. Gullivar Jones: His Vacation on Mars* came in sight. While *Gullivar Jones* has been several times reprinted, it sold poorly on first release and it was not until the influence of the novel on Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Under The Moons of Mars* (first serialised in *All-Story* magazine in 1912 and later reprinted as *A Princess of Mars*) was noted that it received serious attention. Although Arnold had seen acclaim for *The Wonderful Adventures of Phra the Phoenician* (1890), he may have been discouraged by the poor reception of *Gullivar Jones*. Certainly, it was his last novel. As an important text by a British author, it was agreed that this would be the central part of the purchases made in memory of Ken.

Jones, a discontented young officer in the American navy, attempts unsuccessfully to aid a stranger who seems to have fallen out of the sky entangled in a carpet. Standing upon this carpet, Jones wishes he was on the planet Mars – and to his astonishment, he is! Taught the language telepathically by the androgynous yellow-

cloaked An (whose garment signifies, it turns out, membership of a slave caste of women who wanted equality with men), Jones is shown around this apparently rich pleasant, and co-operative society ("What else is the good of a coherent society and a Government if it cannot provide you with so rudimentary a thing as a meal?") in the manner of William Morris in *News From Nowhere*. In the process he rescues the beautiful Princess Heru from drowning, and the sight of her damp robe clinging to her figure is enough to make him fall in love with her. All seems set up for an erotic idyll, especially as Heru has taken a shine to Gullivar. However, the yellow-cloaked worker caste is not only the only flaw in Martian civilization. It's revealed that these indolent utopians have a savage enemy who take the fairest girl they can find for tribute to their overlord. And – guess what – the lovely Heru is this year's tribute.

Jones's rescue mission takes him through a Mars not entirely unlike the Barsoom in which a chivalrous Southern gentleman named John Carter was to find adventure once Edgar Rice Burroughs had sharpened his quill. Introducing the 1964 Ace reprint, Richard A. Lupoff notes a number of parallels between the works, including that between the River of the Dead down which Arnold's Martians launch their deceased, and the sinister Iss in *The Gods of Mars*. There seems no proof that Burroughs possessed or read a copy of *Gullivar*, and Arnold was certainly not the only writer of the time who found Mars a convenient locale for romance, but this decadent, colourful Mars is certainly worthy to be considered a forebear of Barsoom. Gullivar's exasperation with the *very* lightly-clad young folk who would rather play than join him on his quest is amusing, as are his encounters with some of the flora and fauna of Mars – including the plants which grow into boats and the tree which, when shaken, explodes in a burst of white dust like a bag of flower.

There are, to be sure, some exasperating holes in the plot, such as what happens to An (who vanishes from the story as soon as she is not required) and Gullivar's rescue of the Princess takes not one but two coincidences. Forced to prove his identity as a powerful supernatural being by the kidnapper Ar-hap, Gullivar has to go on a quest to fetch things he has *just happened* to pick up on his travels. "By what incredible chance had he hit upon the very errand I could answer to best, the very trophy I had brought away from the grim valley of ice and death, and had still in my shoulder-bag?"

Well, that was a bit of luck, then!

And, once Gullivar has sent Heru off to safety and is left to the attentions of a barbarian horde in a burning palace, he comes across – guess what! – the very magic carpet which had transported him to Mars, swept up with the spoils from Heru's kidnap. As Ar-Hap's men breaks down his barricade, he takes the final chance and wishes he was in New York.

And then he was saved!

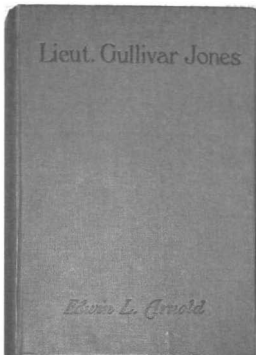
H. G. Wells may have been the source for the setting (Arnold's pleasure-loving Martians are very like the Eloi of *The Time Machine*, and the narrator's first encounter with Heru is reminiscent of the Time Traveller's rescue of Weena) and Edgar Rice Burroughs may have improved the format of the adventure-sequence. But Arnold does have a wry touch of humour to leaven the melodrama: On waking after Heru's kidnap, he leaps into action and his trousers – "oh! I must find her at all costs; and leaping from bed I snatched up those trousers without which the best of heroes is nothing". On his return to New York, he discovers that his girlfriend Polly has come to investigate his absence, alarmed by not having heard from him and fearing the worst. Oh, no, says his landlady, who has more experience with young gentlemen – he's probably out on the razzle. And on cue, "dirty, dishevelled, with unsteady steps", Gullivar makes his

entrance, to be greeted with "a passion of happy tears" from the relieved Polly and a "Humph!" from the landlady. The happy couple are wed, Gullivar writes his book (which we are reading) and promises not to go gallivanting off to Mars again.

He also promises to say as little as possible about Heru. Which raises the question, just *what* in his account of sporting among these semi-nude Martian lovelies has he left out? Perhaps we had better wait for the sequel.

Other books purchased by the Science Fiction Foundation with the assistance of the Ken Slater Bequest include first editions of H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899)

and John Wyndham's, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) plus early "future-war" novels not held by the Foundation Collection such as *The Gas War of 1940* by "Miles" [Neil Bell] (1931) and *Hindenburg's March into London* by Paul Georg Munch (1916). Ken's daughter Susie Haynes is now carrying on the family tradition, as Fantast Three, and can be seen selling books at any good convention (contact fantastthree@yahoo.com).



Resonance 58

by Stephen Baxter

2010 sees the fiftieth anniversary of Project Ozma, the first modern SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) experiment. Back in 1960, American radio astronomer Frank Drake listened for alien signals from two stars at one frequency for a week. In the last few years I've become involved with SETI myself. I've joined one of the SETI academic task forces, have attended conferences, have written up a few academic papers – and have, naturally, mined the experience for story ideas, always my basic motivation.

And after fifty years, surely the most striking thing about modern SETI is that there have been no positive detections. What's going on?

The modern SETI concept was born in 1959 in a seminal paper by two physicists, Giuseppe Cocconi and Philip Morrison, who realised that the then relatively new radio telescopes could be used to send signals between the stars (see *Nature* v183, pp844ff.) We've become used to the idea since, but back then it was a tremendously exciting notion that there was an apparently technologically feasible way for civilisations no more advanced than ours to speak to each other. Cocconi and Morrison had no doubts about the possible implications: 'Few will deny the profound importance, practical and philosophical, which the detection of interstellar communications would have.'

But now we've had fifty years without such detection: silence from the sky.

Advocates of radio-astronomy SETI point out how limited the searches have been so far; only a small number of stars in a small range of frequency domains for limited times have actually been studied. There have also been unsuccessful searches for other sorts of evidence, such as artefacts at stable points in the solar system, and the infrared 'blisters' created by Dyson spheres as in Bob Shaw's *Orbitsville*. Even distant galaxies have been examined, fruitlessly, for signs of cultivation by super-intelligences, as in Sagan's *Contact*.

Of course absence of evidence is not evidence of absence; we can't yet conclude we are alone. Nevertheless it can't be denied that the sky is *not* full of radio-noisy, close-by civilisations, as might have been hoped back in 1960. What is this telling us about the universe?

Over SETI's first few years, workers like Frank Drake speculated on who might be sending radio messages – for it's only worthwhile listening, you see, if you believe somebody could plausibly be transmitting. Out of this developed a model of lonely island civilisations based on Earthlike planets orbiting sunlike stars in safe galactic

environments. Faster-than-light travel or signalling was deemed to break physical law, and slower-than-light interstellar travel was ruled out because of the energy cost and huge distances and times involved. So cultures were restricted to communication by lightspeed electromagnetic waves. And they would signal each other at universally 'obvious' frequencies, such as hydrogen-molecule resonances, and would send each other mathematically coded scientific textbooks – so argued the mathematicians and scientists behind the model.

Does this sort of paradigm still stand up? Fifty years later we've learned a lot more about the Galaxy and the possibilities for life in it, and we can make a broader analysis – which might suggest new directions for SETI. (In the following discussion I'm following a methodology devised by workers like Bracewell ['Communications from Superior Galactic Communities', *Nature* v186, pp670-71, 1960].)

SETI analysts, following Drake, often describe life in the Galaxy in terms of two parameters: N, the number of civilisations in the Galaxy at a given time, and L, the average lifespan of such civilisations. Note that by 'civilisations' here I actually mean cultures doing something we might detect; the sky may be full of dolphin philosophers, but they are excluded from this analysis. And 'life span' here means how long they persist in their detectable activities. L for us at this point in time is only a century or so (unless we were detectable before radio, for example from atmospheric trace gases, which seems actually quite likely to me). Obviously the higher these numbers, the greater the density of detectable civilisations, and the more likely SETI is to achieve a positive result.

So how high could N be? Earth and sun aren't necessarily the model for habitability any more. Since 1960 we've found extrasolar planets, some vaguely Earthlike, orbiting all kinds of stars, and there could be habitats away from a star's 'habitable zone' such as frozen-over ocean planets like Jupiter's moon Europa – or even habitats away from the stars altogether, such as the planets of brown dwarfs. And of course it's not necessary for every civilisation to have had an independent origin. It's been shown that even with sublight travel there's been time for a single ancient civilisation to have infested every habitat in the Galaxy. There seems no reason why N couldn't in principle be of the same order as the number of stars, or even higher.

L, meanwhile, may be very large indeed – again, in

principle. The Galaxy has after all been producing long-lived, metal-rich, stable stars for billions of years. In fact, it's past its star-producing peak.

However, if we are restricted to the speed of light for travel and signalling (and I'll return to that 'if'), there are, in a Galaxy the size of ours (100,000 light years across), critical values of N and L: both at one million.

The 'N' limit is to do with short-lived cultures. If there are less than a million cultures they would be spaced at an average distance of greater than 100 light years or so – and a culture as short-lived as ours (so far) could not expect two-way contact with a nearest neighbour. On the other hand the 'L' limit concerns communication among the long-lived. Cultures lasting more than a million years would have time for several exchanges, even with cultures on the far side of the Galaxy.

Now consider the table – which, in a manner any office worker will recognise, reduces the whole question of galactic civilisation to a two-by-two matrix based on these numbers.

Box I, with small L and N, describes a Galaxy of a relatively small number of sparsely scattered cultures lasting a relatively short time (on average). If we are typical, we may well live in this lonely ghetto, where radio signalling is probably futile because everybody else is just too far away, and we'll probably die out before receiving a reply. The best bet is one-way communication with long-lived artefacts – just as we have in fact sent off records with the Pioneer and Voyager probes.

If the sky is full of short-lived cultures like our own, but there's so many of them that they're relatively close together, we may be in Box II, which I've labelled 'space opera': each culture has many neighbours, some of them close enough for repeated contacts and so some degree of interaction, peaceful or otherwise.

Box III, on the other hand, describes a Galaxy crowded with long-lived civilisations. One would expect deep cooperation and perhaps a high degree of integration among these mature cultures. This might resemble the 'Galactic Club' of Sagan's *Contact*, of close-knit super-intelligences bent on large-scale cosmic projects.

Boxes II and III, however, are the Fermi Paradox boxes: where are they all? If we were in either of these boxes we would surely see our neighbours, either their noisy wars or their solemn rebuilding. This is where the negative results (so far) from SETI are meaningful; perhaps we can (tentatively) exclude these possibilities.

Finally Box IV is a Galaxy of 'long-lived isolates'. (Remember that L is an average; if we are the solitary youngsters in an old people's home, we'd still be in Box IV.) These ancient but lonely cultures, scattered sparsely, may detect each other but only from afar.

It is these cultures, however, that seem most likely to initiate radio signalling programmes. You might have to wait a hundred thousand years to get a reply, but the wait would be a small fraction of your own million-year longevity. Box IV is the nearest of my partitions to

the universe of the standard SETI paradigm of scattered island cultures.

This sort of analysis, continually refined as fresh observational data is assembled, could guide investment in an array of alternative SETI searches. Traditional radio-telescope SETI is not without plausibility – but we're looking for signals from cultures quite unlike ourselves, for if short-lived cultures like us are typical (and so we're in Box I) radio SETI is unlikely to succeed. And if we are in either Boxes I or IV, as seems most likely, we might be better off investing in searches for artefacts rather than signals: either monoliths left by our short-lived neighbours (Box I), or smart probes sent out by the super-civilisations at the edge of the Galaxy (Box IV) (it's been argued that such probes might be at least as cost-effective as endlessly signalling with powerful Galaxy-spanning transmitters).

But what if we continue to get null results? We might have to decide whether to continue searching at all. In 1975 the Soviet Union all but gave up SETI searches when new Fermi-paradox arguments made Shklovskii, the 'father of SETI in the Soviet Union', change his mind about the likelihood of success.

And, with time, as the evidence of absence piles up, we may have to consider the possibility that we are effectively alone. As the Galaxy has already passed its star-forming peak, it may be that we will prove to be the only emergence of consciousness in the Galaxy's long history. If so, small, fragile, vulnerable, mortal and flawed as we are, what a dreadful responsibility we would bear!

But there's another possibility. Remember that 'if': all the analysis above depends on the speed of light being a true limit. Maybe the Great Silence is just evidence that nobody has yet discovered an operational FTL – for if they had, the Galaxy would be elevated either from Box I to Box II (space opera), or Box IV to Box III (Galactic Club). Perhaps a first discovery of FTL would be a transforming event in galactic history, comparable to the human mastery of fire on Earth.

And how cool it would be if humanity turned out to be the Galactic Prometheus.

	Short-lived: L < 1 million years	Long-lived: L > 1 million years
Densely populated: N > 1 million	II: 'Space Opera'	III: 'Galactic Club'
Sparsely populated: N < 1 million	I: Short-lived isolates	IV: Long-lived isolates

Table: Possibilities for life in the Galaxy: N, the number of detectable cultures in the Galaxy, vs. L, the average lifetime of cultures.

The New X: 2010

by Graham Sleight

Talk about a Proustian rush: last time I went into my local charity shop, they were selling VHS copies of movies, at a forlorn £1 a go. Years ago, Bruce Sterling was talking about doing a book called the Dead Media Project – see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Media_Project – which would have chronicled all the technologies created and discarded over the last century or so for carrying information. It was a little alarming to realise that a medium I could remember coming into the world was now passing out of it. Sticking out of the charity shop shelf of cassettes, because it was packaged in one of those “library cases” about a centimeter bigger than the cassette on all sides, was *2010*.

So far as I can remember, *2010* was the first proper film my brother and I were allowed to rent from the local video rental store. Neither of us had seen *2001*, but that didn't seem so important since *2010* was loaded with exposition of the backstory. And it painted a near-future that could be believed in: continued US-Soviet tensions, a clunky but functional space programme (this was, I think, before the *Challenger* disaster), and the inevitable prospect of humanity making contact with alien species.

I'm writing this, as it happens, in the first couple of days of 2010. I don't need to point out that *2010* has not come true either in detail or in broad outline, and that we're nowhere near being able to send a human-crewed spaceship to Jupiter. (A couple of years ago, I wrote a piece for NYRSF arguing that the increasing “date-obsolence” of much sf is a problem – that books like *The Forever War*, *Martian Time-Slip*, and *Virtual Light* purport to take place in years that have already passed. *Vector*-readers will, of course, say that science fiction isn't supposed to be predictive, and I'd agree; but setting a fiction in a given year certainly looks as if it's offering a prediction...) I think the structural issue here is that sf has always seen advances in space travel happening more quickly and more easily than has really been the case. Conversely, up until a decade or two ago, sf was always too conservative about the societal changes that would come from the digitisation of information: getting a better grip on this was one of the legacies of cyberpunk. Apart from its optimism about, and advocacy for, space travel, *2010* is an emblematic sf work in another way: it makes sense. Its events take place for rational reasons, and it also explains much that seemed puzzling about *2001*. This was not lost on Stanley Kubrick, who directed the first film. In *Eyes Wide Open*, his memoir of writing the screenplay for *Eyes Wide Shut* with Kubrick, Frederic Raphael records the following conversation between the two. Kubrick is complaining that Arthur C. Clarke keeps sending him information he doesn't want about his activities:

KUBRICK: He keeps sending me all these faxes. Pretty well every day I get a shit-load of

stuff from him. Did you ever see the movie they made called *2010*?

RAPHAEL: I did as a matter of fact.

KUBRICK: What did you think?

RAPHAEL: I didn't stay till the end. It ... it wasn't directed by Stanley Kubrick, was it?

KUBRICK: Know what they did? They explained everything. They told you what everything meant. You tell people what things mean, they don't mean anything any more. (pp. 71-2)

Several things have to be factored in here. It's not at all clear how Raphael had such perfect recall of the conversations that make up the book – the Kubrick family has claimed that Raphael's book was a breach of trust and that “Mr. Raphael's analysis of Stanley's personality bears no relation to the man we knew and loved so well” <<http://eyeswideshut.warnerbros.com/ck/ckenglish.htm>>. And it's not difficult to pick up from this extract a degree of self-serving-ness that pervades the rest of the book. But suppose for a moment that Raphael isn't a totally unreliable narrator and that Kubrick did say something like this about *2010*. It's hard to deny that he had a point. The uncanny power of the film *2001* derives from so much being left unexplained, and so much that is explained not being put into words.

It has to be said that science fiction as a whole does have a problem with explaining. If there's one structural flaw I'd argue has been inherent in the genre (for all sorts of good historical reasons going back at least to Campbell and Gernsback), it's that sf stories explain too much. They tell you everything you need to know about the world, they don't stop explaining, they paper over every gap in the world with words. There are exceptions, of course – van Vogt's famous slingshot endings, say. But I think science fiction would be a good deal more interesting as a genre if it knew when to stop explaining, if it knew better the value of silence. There are all sorts of corollaries to this, such as the extent to which Gene Wolfe – the field's most thoroughgoing exponent of silence – has always been a *succes d'estime* rather than a genuine popular success. (Is there any other writer of even remotely comparable stature who, like Wolfe, has never won a Hugo?) A science fiction that knew when not to tell you everything would, I think, be richer and more interesting.

If I'm preaching the virtues of silence, I'd better practice them too. This is my last column for *Vector*, at least for the moment. I'm very grateful to editors Harrison and Melzack for giving me the opportunity in the first place, and to the readers who've responded to these pieces. Me, I'm off to rule the Sevagram.

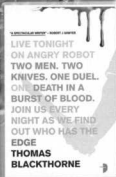
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