

Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association



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The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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Focus is a magazine about writing, for writers. It is published twice a year and aims to present high quality articles about the art and craft of writing and, in particular, science fiction writing.

Torque Control

Spring brought with it awards season for British science fiction, the BSFA Awards followed, less than a week later, by the Clarke Award. Exciting times!

Twenty-five years ago, the BSFA and the SFF, along with Arthur C Clarke, co-founded the Clarke Award. A quarter of a century later, and the award is going strong. With increasing name recognition, it now has a noticeable affect on immediate post-award sales, according to award director Tom Hunter. This year's winner, Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City*, received healthy media coverage, helping to raise the profile of both book and award. These days, the Clarke Award ceremony is held at Sci-Fi London; read more about this year's film festival in the survey by Alys Sterling. The BSFA Review section (remember, our reviews section has a new name!) provides additional reviews of films from the festival.

In honour of the Clarke Award's birthday, Martin McGrath looks back at the work of Clarke himself, examining the natures of his utopian worlds through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias. The result is a wide-ranging survey whose structure lets McGrath parallel commonalities of a large number of Clarke's novels, grounded in the realities of mid-twentieth-century experiences.

Juliet McKenna looks back further still, to Homer's *Odyssey*, examining the degree to which it usefully functions as a model for epic fantasy, while unpacking the contemporaneous importance of critical aspects of the plot. Some of you may have attended the talk she gave at the eponymous Eastercon last year; this is a fleshed-out version of that talk, exploring everything from what makes a strong Greek woman to the ways in which elements of the *Odyssey* are precursors to those of modern fantasy novels.

Unlike McKenna with Homer, Roz Kaveney, when wanting to know more about one of Samuel R Delany's short stories, was able to ask the author himself. Their conversation explores the biographical events, frankly recounted, which helped to inspire the writing of his 1967 Nebula award-winning "Aye, and Gomorrah", as well as the story's resonances with other works, such as Cyril M Kornbluth's "The Altar at Midnight". The interview also deals with the nature of poetry, and thus, in an incidental way, contrasts modern poetic understanding with that of the ancient Greeks in McKenna's article.

As promised last issue, Ian Whates, *Matrix* editor, brings you all the details on the state of *Matrix* and what its future does (or, more accurately, does not) hold. *Vector* already now includes a regular column by Terry Martin, originally run in *Matrix*, and will provide more regular analysis of material released in non-book formats, starting with this issue. You already know about the Sci-Fi London coverage; this issue also includes an article by Roberto Quaglia, who looks into the crystal ball of the movie *Avatar*, and predicts our future. His approach to solving all our worldly problems is only partially tongue-in-cheek. His solutions, much like those of Clarke discussed by McGrath, recognises that utopia can only ever be partially attained.

As for the BSFA awards, most of you may already know from attending Eastercon or online coverage who the winners

are. This year, Best Artwork was won by Joey Hi-Fi for his cover for *Zoo City*. The non-fiction category was won by our own columnist and past *Vector* editor, Paul Kincaid, for his posts on "Blogging the Hugos" at *Big Other*. Best short-story was won by Aliette de Bodard for "The Shipmaker". Finally, the novel category was won by Ian McDonald for *The Dervish House*. Thank you to all of you who nominated and voted in the BSFA awards this year!

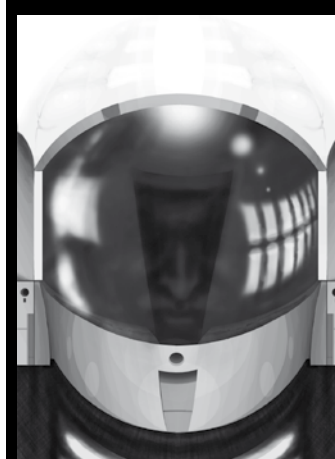
Many of you may not realize that the BSFA Administrator accepts award nominations year-round. If you see an inspiring work of art, read or hear an incisive commentary, or discover an astonishing new short story or novel published in 2011 which you think deserves a BSFA Award, you have the option of nominating it right away, rather than risk forgetting it in the coming months. Personally, I'm intending to write to organisers of science fiction art shows, to ask them to provide space on the labels for the year in which the piece was created, in the hopes that it will encourage more BSFA art nominations from convention shows.

Speaking of recognition for artists and authors in the field, I hope you all have the opportunity to catch the show at the British Library, "Out of this World: Science Fiction but not as you know it". Curated by Andy Sawyer, it showcases the field from Lucian to Lauren Beukes, including play scripts, a Bovril advert, and tie-in albums of science fictional music, in part from the library's sound archives. The exhibit is on display until September 25th and features a related programme of talks, roundtables, and concerts with all sorts of familiar people participating. See <http://www.bl.uk/sciencefiction> for more details.

Correction: I would like to apologise to Paul Kincaid, whose new column was omitted from last issue's table of contents. If you have your copy of Vector 266 handy, take a pen and, above "First Impressions", write "Kincaid in Short: The Infinity Box", p. 34.

Shana Worthen, Editor

<http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/>



The cover image for this issue of *Vector*, a tribute to Arthur C Clarke, was produced by Sam Mardon.

Sam is a graphic artist and illustrator, also studying Performance Design at Central Saint Martins. Creating art for a variety of mediums, across different media, he is currently working on his first graphic novel in collaboration with author Charles Christian.

If you're an artist and would like to see your work on a BSFA magazine cover, please contact Martin McGrath (martin@martinmcgrath.net)

MATRIX: A MAGAZINE OUT OF TIME

Ian Whates

When I was invited to join the BSFA committee in 2007, I felt honoured. I'm passionate about the BSFA and the role it plays at the heart of fandom and was thrilled at the prospect of contributing in some way. That September, I attended my first committee meeting, with the intention that I should take over editing duties at *Matrix*.

I arrived with a number of proposals, having no clue how they or I would be received. I didn't know many of the committee members and had no real concept of how the BSFA functioned. What I found was a group of people who were just as passionate about the organisation as I was but were weary; weary from trying to constantly do too much with too few resources. There was even a suggestion that the BSFA should be wound up. I opposed this vigorously, believing then as I do now that the BSFA still has a vital role to play.

Some of the proposals I presented involved revamping the website and launching BSFA forums, which we did. The forums initially flourished, though a move of servers and the subsequent loss of users' accounts has seen them wither in recent times.

Other proposals were a little more controversial. Any member could see that the organisation was struggling to fulfil its publication commitments, a fact which became all the more apparent at the meeting. At the time, the BSFA undertook to deliver six mailings a year. In 2006 they had delivered five, just. This was now late September 2007 and, as of that point, three mailings had been sent out. The shortfall wasn't due to any lack of desire or dedication but a lack of man hours and resources. I proposed that we recognise reality, accepting that six mailings a year was beyond us, and instead set a less ambitious schedule that we could actually keep to: four mailings a year. Niall Harrison, the then-editor of *Vector*, felt confident that he could boost the page count so that the four issues would contain more actual content than the five delivered in each of the previous couple of years.

Part of this additional content would be provided by moving items across from *Matrix* – notably Stephen Baxter's and Andy Sawyer's columns.

This brings me to the most controversial of the proposals I made that day. I knew Tom Hunter, my predecessor at *Matrix*, well, and had heard him talk of his frustrations with the magazine more than once. He found it galling that he would produce an issue full of current news, reviews of the most recent film releases etc, only to have it then languish for weeks or even months because other publications weren't ready. By the time the magazines finally reached members, the films had appeared, disappeared and been forgotten about, and the 'news' was several months out of date.

I therefore said that I'd accept the position provided I was allowed to move *Matrix* to an online format, where news could be

more promptly delivered.

I still believe this was the right call, despite the problems that plagued *Matrix* subsequently. Moving *Matrix* online freed up funds, enabling us to produce such things as the limited edition booklets which have been sent out to members regularly – from the 'Celebration Taster' that formed the first, with original fiction from Adam Roberts, Chaz Brenchley, and Ian Watson, to the most recent, the Robert Holdstock tribute. It enabled us to produce the Awards booklets that have been a feature for the past three years, giving members the opportunity to read all the short fiction and see the artwork shortlisted for the BSFA Awards. It enabled us to provide members with a *Postscripts* sampler from PS Publishing, packed with a host of classic authors, and the *Twenty Years and Two Surveys* book compiled by Niall Harrison. It also enabled us to keep membership fees unchanged for four years, while around us printing costs, production costs and postage prices were soaring.

As for *Matrix*, that looked to be a triumph as well, initially. The first online edition was visually stunning, drawing praise from all quarters. Unfortunately, problems set in almost at once. We lost our production editor after that first edition. Del, the webmaster, stepped into the breach, but that was only ever intended as temporary. Despite various pleas and calls, we've never found a reliable replacement. Twice we thought we had, but neither panned out. In addition, the supply of articles and reviews grew increasingly sporadic. I continued to produce issues as best I could, but the final straw came in late 2009. I wanted to put out a really strong issue. I contacted reviewers, article writers and columnists, confirmed they were all on board, and had everything lined-up... In the end, come deadline, I received one film review and an editorial. Despite chasing people, nothing more was forthcoming. I even spoke to one contributor in person a month later at Novacon. He said, "Didn't I send that to you? It's all written. I'll send it over next week."

That was November 2009. To date, I still haven't received the promised article. We don't pay for material. At the end of the day, we rely on the willingness of fans and members to contribute for the benefit of the wider membership. If the will to contribute simply isn't there anymore, there's no magazine. But *Matrix* has an even more fundamental problem. Times have changed. There are now innumerable dedicated sites that deliver genre news far more swiftly and effectively than we could ever hope to. Events have passed us by.

The BSFA has limited resources – our only income is the membership fees we all pay. It's vital we use those funds to benefit members in the very best way possible. Sadly, *Matrix* no longer provides this. It has served its purpose magnificently for many years, but we feel it's now time to move on, and trust you will join us in wishing *Matrix* a fond farewell.

INTRODUCING THE BSFA REVIEW

Martin Lewis

Meeet the new review section, pretty much the same as the old review section. So why the change of name? Well, because I want the section to get bigger, better and broader and this is a way of signalling that intent. Beyond that, I want to do three specific things.

Firstly, I want to scratch an itch. I have been editing the reviews section for a year and a half now and I want to stamp my mark on it. I've already made a few changes and, since I've had no complaints, I hope they've gone down well with the membership. (If you want to complain, please do so; *Vector* welcomes letters of comment.) One change I've wanted to make for a while is the name of the reviews section. To begin with, it is increasingly inaccurate. In the internet age it is unlikely that *Vector's* reviews will be your first impressions of a novel. Instead, we can offer considered reflection on a wide range of fiction and non-fiction, providing incisive criticism of both major titles and under the radar books.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge that the field is wider than just books. In fact, some people would suggest that science fiction is primarily a visual medium these days. I don't think this is true; personally, I still believe novels form the heart of the genre and I think that it is undeniable that the written word does a lot of heavy lifting for the field as a whole. That doesn't mean that on an individual basis films shouldn't be judged shoulder-to-shoulder with books though. The same is true of plays, music, comics and all manner of other non-textual art that currently doesn't get much of a look in.

Now, this might remind you a bit of *Matrix's* remit. As Ian says on the previous page, *Matrix* was not sustainable and the BSFA has instead developed new types of content for the membership. But I was never keen on the artificial split between literary and media reviews which sometimes gave the impression of a two-tier system. To me, a review is a review. So from this issue the BSFA Review will be covering all SF, starting with a pair of reviews of graphic novels and coverage of the Sci-Fi London film festival.

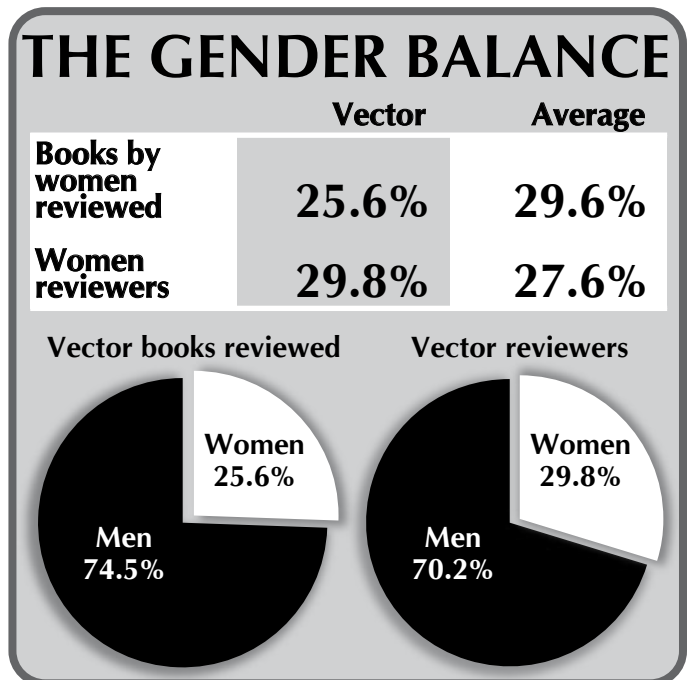
Thirdly, I want the BSFA Review to reflect the world we live in. You may have read about the VIDA survey of gender balance at book review venues¹. Niall Harrison, editor of *Strange Horizons* and ex of this parish, has undertaken a similar exercise for genre publications². This includes *Vector*, as you can in "The Gender Balance" (opposite).

This is clearly not representative of the population at large so I'd like to examine both issues – coverage and reviewer pool – in more detail. Turning to coverage first, figures from Harrison suggest that women wrote 37% of all SF published in the UK in 2010 (there are some caveats so I recommend reading the whole article). If you read *Vector*, on the other hand, you might think that only a quarter of books published were by women.

There is the question of what we mean when we talk about speculative fiction thought. It seems likely that this overall ratio varies between subgenres. Anecdotally, for example, we might think paranormal romance or modern urban fantasy are predominantly written by women. More scientifically, my own survey of every novel

submitted for the 2010 Arthur C Clarke Award (a fair proxy for British science fiction publishing as a whole) revealed that only 17% of the 54 novels were by women³.

This is not an excuse. I certainly don't want to sound like Peter Stothard, the editor of the *TLS* who infamously remarked of the VIDA survey that "while women are heavy readers, we know they are heavy readers of the kind of fiction that is not likely to be reviewed in the pages of the *TLS*". As editor, I will try and stop myself from lapsing into such thought patterns and bring you the broadest and most diverse selection of speculative fiction possible.



Finally, turning to *Vector's* pool of reviewers, I can't say how well our reviewers reflect the demographics of the membership as a whole (although I would be fascinated to find out). What I can say is that I am always looking for new reviewers and if you are interested in writing for the BSFA Review, please contact me.

(Endnotes)

- 1 You may have read about the VIDA survey of gender balance at book review venues: <http://vidaweb.org/the-count-2010>
- 2 Niall Harrison, editor of *Strange Horizons* and ex of this parish, has undertaken a similar exercise for genre publications. http://www.strangehorizons.com/blog/2011/03/the_sf_count.shtml
- 3 More scientifically, my own survey of every novel submitted for the 2010 Arthur C Clarke Award (a fair proxy for British science fiction publishing as a whole) revealed that only 17% of the 54 novels were by women. <http://everythingisnice.wordpress.com/2011/03/02/2011-arthur-c-clark-award-statistics/>

SCI-FI LONDON 2010: IN REVIEW

Alys Sterling

2011 marks the tenth anniversary of the London International Festival of Science Fiction and Fantastic Film, better known as the Sci Fi London Film Festival. This year's event was scheduled over a full 10 days, in several different venues, including the Apollo Cinema, the BFI, and Foyle's. It featured an Easter parade, an opening night party at Koko, and, as is now traditional, the Clarke Awards.

The true heart of the festival for me, though, remains the Apollo, with its sparkly blue floor and magical ability to make you forget that it's four in the morning and the audience in the anime all-nighter will be stumbling out for their coffee soon. This was my fifth year working as a volunteer, and definitely the most ambitious programme I've seen. Nearly every film was a premiere, some even world premieres. There were three nights of all-nighters, one at the BFI Imax. And the 48 hour Film Challenge received a record number of entries.

While it's not possible to see every film, I did see some very good ones, and also some which were not so good. (I was advised against seeing *Maximum Shame* by volunteers who had previewed it, on the grounds that the title expressed what the director ought to be feeling after perpetrating that film; you have been warned.) The line-up this year lived up to organiser Louis Savy's claim that while there's something for everyone, there's also going to be that one film everyone thinks he's crazy for including.

For me, the highlight of the festival was *Beyond the Black Rainbow*. Made in 2010, this film might have been stolen from the 1970s by time travellers. Its stylized cinematography and psychedelic drug visual sequences truly deserve to be seen on the big screen. My mind always runs to double-features – I'd show this with *Altered States*, though there are also nods to *The Man Who Fell To Earth* and *Solaris*. (I'm talking about the Tarkovsky film here.)

I also enjoyed *Lunopolis*, a low-budget conspiracy film with some truly priceless moments and a really cool idea for a conspiracy. This was followed (conspiracy double feature!) by the mediocre *Zenith*, which is only a conspiracy film if you don't believe the world is controlled by a small number of very rich people. This is not the glossy techno-thriller the promo picture might lead you to expect. In fact, it's so far from being techno that evidently in the future, when we have genetically engineered people to all be happy, they will still use VHS tape. Actually, they also won't be happy. But points given for depiction of seedy nightclubs as actually seedy.

Unfortunately, the version of *Gantz* screened at the festival was very dark – so dark that I can only assume

the final fight scenes, featuring a hundred-armed, sword-wielding Buddha statue come to life, were spectacular. This is a manga-based Japanese film, and it shows – the plot, while containing plenty of gore and action, is slow to get started, and the situation takes some figuring out. Those who didn't stay until the end of the credits missed the best bit – a teaser scene, and a trailer for the sequel, where it appears the plot gets much more interesting. (I'm guessing this may even be a three-parter. I would love to see it again with better visibility in the darker bits.)

Another slight disappointment was *Nydenion*. The effects are a low-budget CG which made the whole film feel like an extended computer game cut-scene, while the plot also seemed much like something from a game. I think this film would benefit from playable space battles.

Due to current events overtaking the festival, Louis scheduled an extra all-nighter for the night before the royal wedding – with the result that I stayed up all night volunteering, and only just managed to wake up the next day in time to see Kate's dress. (And some astonishing hats.) I did sneak in to see Ed Wood's *Bride of the Monster*; this is Wood at his best, complete with a giant rubber octopus that can drown its victims without any water.

I only managed to catch the first programme of shorts. This included *Brutal Relax*, winner of best short for the festival. I can see why – it has spectacular zombie make-up FX and an amusing plot. My favourite from that programme was *Capsule*, a film about two astronauts trapped in a space capsule, with an ending that's worth waiting for. Sci Fi London also shows short films before the features, which I'm glad of, because I also got to see *The Doctor's Wife* (no relation to the *Dr. Who* episode), an animation I'd recommend to fans of Tim Burton.

If you've visited the festival before, you'll know that besides the free books and magazines, the chocolates and badges, there is also pre-film entertainment in the form of some sort of videogame demonstration. This year, Nintendo provided several 3DS consoles to try out. Playing Super Street Fighter 3D, the 3D felt very gimmicky, much like watching films which have been shot in 2D and later processed into 3D. I found myself turning the 3D slider down in order to focus properly. Playing the AR demo they had was more fun, but not enough to convince me I need to replace the old DS. (Especially as I'm mostly playing on the iTouch these days, but that's a whole different review!)

As always, there were films I missed that I wish I'd seen, and films I saw that I wish I hadn't (the two gruesome mutant baby films in the Shorts 1 programme!), and I had to be reminded at the end that I don't actually live in the Apollo cinema. Roll on October, when we do it all again!

33RD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE FANTASTIC IN THE ARTS

The Monstrous Fantastic

March 21-25, 2012
Marriott Orlando Airport Hotel

In his seminal article on *Beowulf*, J.R.R. Tolkien describes the three monsters of the poem as “essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem.” The Fantastic has many similarly integral monsters and monstrosities. But what do these monsters mean? How does the monstrous signify? The Monstrous Fantastic will explore the many creative and cultural constructions of monstrosity in the arts from monsters of ancient times to monsters of the present and future. Conference participants may propose papers, propose and organize panel discussions, give readings, or participate in other ways. We encourage papers on our honored guests.

Guest of Honor China Miéville

China Miéville is the author of the novels *King Rat* (1998), *Perdido Street Station* (2000; winner of the Arthur C. Clarke and British Fantasy Awards), *The Scar* (2002; winner of the British Fantasy and *Locus* Best Fantasy Awards), *Iron Council* (2004; winner of the Arthur C. Clarke, British Fantasy and *Locus* Best Fantasy Awards), *Un Lun Dun* (2007; winner of the *Locus* Award for Best YA Book), *The City and the City* (2009; winner of the Arthur C. Clarke, Hugo, and World Fantasy Awards), *Kraken* (2010) and *Embassytown* (2011); of the short story collection *Looking for Jake* (2005); and of the Marxist academic book on international law *Between Equal Rights* (2006).

Guest Scholar Jeffrey J. Cohen

Jeffrey J. Cohen is Professor of English and Director of the Medieval and Early Modern Studies Institute at the George Washington University. His work examines the intersections of the posthuman, the queer, the monstrous, and other challenges to stable identities. His books and edited collections include *Monster Theory; Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages; Medieval Identity Machines; The Postcolonial Middle Ages; Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain; Becoming Male in the Middle Ages; and Thinking the Limits of the Body*.

As always, we welcome proposals for individual papers and for academic sessions and panels on any aspect of the fantastic in any media.

The deadline is October 31, 2011.

For questions about academic proposals or panels, contact **Sherryl Vint** at sherryl.vint@gmail.com.

For creative sessions of any kind, contact **Sydney Duncan** at sduncan@frostburg.edu.

We encourage work from institutionally-affiliated scholars, independent scholars, international scholars who work in languages other than English, graduate students, and undergraduate students.

Look for additional information and updates at www.iafa.org

AGAINST UTOPIA: ARTHUR C CLARKE & THE HETEROTOPIAN IMPULSE

Martin McGrath

In *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch charts “the steady and often imperceptible tending of human history towards utopia”¹ in a journey that encompasses daydreaming, culture, religion, philosophy and politics. Bloch’s work identifies both how the unrealized dreams of the past and the unfulfilled potentials of the here-and-now create a utopian impulse that drives the urge to build a better future. He sees in the “wishful images of the fulfilled moment” hope for consolation and fleeting glimpses of emancipation for those who are restrained by their existing social, economic and cultural conditions.

In relation to science fiction, Bloch’s work has been the source of a potent strain of literary analysis.² It is from Bloch that Darko Suvin refined the idea of the *Novum* as providing “the overriding narrative logic”³ in science fiction. Bloch’s utopian impulse is the origin of that “desire called utopia”⁴ in Frederic Jameson’s work and Bloch’s idea of “ideological surplus” – the potential that artefacts contain to transcend the ideology of the era in which they are constructed – provides a starting point for Jameson’s cultural studies. It is Bloch’s assertion that even “a cultural product whose social function is that of distracting us can only realize that aim by fastening and harnessing our attention and our imagination in some positive way”⁵ that Jameson adopts as the basis for a “Utopian analysis or method”⁶ that challenges the common Marxist assumption that popular culture is straightforwardly a means of infecting the masses with the ideology of the dominant class. Tom Moylan, introducing a collection of essays on Bloch’s legacy, recognises that his own study of utopianism and science fiction has consistently returned “to Bloch’s insistence on a utopian standpoint, a utopian epistemology”⁷.

Bloch’s philosophy of hope has, therefore, important resonances for the literature of the fantastic more broadly and for science fiction in particular. Taken as a whole, Bloch’s work might be seen to provide a coherent and

robust explanation of the continuing psychological and social appeal of fictions that look beyond the boundaries of the now and imagine better futures.

If we place this philosophical approach alongside the work of Arthur C Clarke, it is possible to see clear areas of common ground. Clarke could have enthusiastically endorsed Bloch’s conviction that it is only when humanity looks up from the present to imagine the future that we can begin the process of creating a better world. The two shared a similar faith in progress and the potential for the improvement in the human condition. There is, in the work of both writers, a recurring sense of the value of the mystical and an invocation of the sacred. Moylan, who has written widely on science fiction, utopias and dystopias, might as easily be talking about Clarke when he summarises Bloch’s view that:

“Present time is provincial and empty. If humanity becomes too much taken with the present, we lose the possibility of imagining a radically other future. We lose the ability to hope. We lose what Bloch identifies as the *Novum*: the unexpectedly new, that which pushes humanity out of the present toward the not yet realized future”⁸

And Bloch would have found little to argue with in Clarke’s sentiment:

“By mapping out possible futures, as well as a good many improbable ones, the science fiction writer does a great service to the community. He encourages in his readers flexibility of mind, readiness to accept and even welcome change”⁹

But Clarke and Bloch would have disagreed about the merits of utopia. For all the value of Bloch’s work it is his attachment to an achievable, desirable utopia that reveals



Image by Amy Marash

the great weakness in his analysis.¹⁰ Bloch seems unable to imagine a desire for things to be better that does not ultimately lead to *Heimat* (the home-land) in which all human potential is realised and Marx's dreams are made real. Bloch's work contains an ongoing struggle between his belief that history has a goal – a final moment of *homecoming* to a Marxist utopia – and his desire not to close off the future. Bloch, as Vincent Geoghegan concedes in his largely sympathetic study of the philosopher's life and work, is not always successful in escaping authoritarian utopianism, the desire to "discipline" the utopian impulse in order to serve a political agenda:

"...he cannot resist draping his own speculations in the purple of objectivity. Bloch seems to be quite clear as to what the broad outlines of his concrete utopia will be, and is quite prepared to use this vision as an 'objective' critique of mere 'subjective' visions. The openness of Bloch's sensitive portrayal of human dreaming thus narrows into a one-way street."¹¹

At the end of this "one-way street" what becomes of the dreams that Bloch identifies as the fundamental force behind the utopian impulse? Such dreaming wouldn't be treasonous (as it was under Stalin) or even superfluous – it would be impossible. In a utopia that meets all human needs and allows everyone to realise their potential, what is there to dream about? The fundamental force driving Bloch's vision of a better future evaporates and the sterile stability of a "concrete utopia" becomes inevitable. Humanity must abandon the future to live in the perfected present.

It is this sterility that Clarke found repellent. Clarke, in

his work, specifically sought to construct an idea of better societies and improvement of the human condition while, at the same time, specifically rejecting utopia.

CLARKE AND UTOPIA

Across the wide body of Clarke's fiction, his use of utopian (or dystopian) tropes is rare. However, where they do appear, Clarke's critique of utopianism is unwavering. In three key novels – *The City and The Stars* (TCATS), *The Songs of Distant Earth* (TSODE) and *3001: The Final Odyssey* – Clarke places his characters in societies that, by most definitions, would be classed as utopian. Though published some forty years apart these novels share a number of key features and display a remarkable thematic consistency¹².

In all three novels, humans have built stable, safe societies in which all their immediate physical, social and psychological needs have been met. Conflicts created by sexual jealousy, racial, tribal or national identity, religion and ideology have been left behind. These are humane and rational places in which each person is able to contribute (or not) based on their ability and interests. Their institutions are built around an idealised form of the American constitution – in TSODE Thalassans live under the "Jefferson Mark 3 Constitution – someone once called it utopia in two megabytes"¹³ which by 3001 has been refined so that the utopian society operates under a "Demosocracy, frequently defined as 'individual greed, moderated by an efficient but not too zealous government'."¹⁴

And yet for all the thought Clarke has obviously devoted to the design of these "perfect" societies – and for all that they are the logical extension of his own humane

rationalism – it is clear that they do not appeal to him.

In the city of Diaspar, on the spaceship *Magellan* and in Africa Tower the inhabitants have access machines that can control, more-or-less, every aspect of their environment, but understanding of how that technology works is fading away. Physical comfort, unlimited entertainment and reliance on technology are eroding humanity's curiosity and spirit of adventure. In each case Clarke has male characters who find this stagnation intolerable. This is most obvious in *TCATS*, where Alvin's discontent drives him out of the confines of Diaspar and overthrows an aeons-long status quo. In *TSODE* the discontented mutineers, led by Owen Fletcher, attempt a doomed revolt but even the loyal Lieutenant Commander Loren Lorensen finds himself tempted by Thalassan charms. In *3001* the resurrected Frank Poole seeks out the wilder frontiers of the solar system, relishing the "challenge – a sense of purpose, if you like – that I seldom found on Earth"¹⁵

In both *TCATS* and *TSODE* technological utopias interact with agrarian utopias in which humans live close to nature and within the limits of ecological systems (the villages of Lys or the island community of Thalassa). Lys is stable and relaxed and its people have developed impressive mental powers, but their caution and fear of the outside world makes them as sterile as Diaspar. That Thalassa has stagnated, producing little great art, standing outside history, is obvious and it is brought into even sharper relief in "The Songs of Distant Earth"¹⁶ (on which the later novel is based), which ends with a melancholic Lora watching the starship *Magellan* disappear from Thalassa's sky and pondering the contrast between the glorious destiny awaiting the ship's crew and settlers and her own people's pleasant but essentially empty future. The final chapters of *TSODE* reveal another potential weakness of agrarian utopias. Where resources are limited there remains an inherent potential for conflict. So, in *TSODE*, the Thalassan people destroy a fledgling alien civilisation to protect their own interests. Neither Lys nor Thalassa possess societies robust enough to cope with dramatic change nor capable of great deeds. They have both settled into a comfortable but pointless stasis.

Some of Clarke's short stories can also offer a revealing insight into his attitude towards utopia. In "Nemesis" Clarke creates a future where humanity is wise and has lived in peace and prosperity for aeons. Yet even here, Clarke can't imagine that dissatisfaction will entirely disappear or that the human urge for new knowledge and new frontiers won't reassert itself. In "The Lion of Commarre" humanity has advanced to a point where: "Everything had been discovered. One by one all the great dreams of the past had become reality"¹⁷ but the site of their great triumph has become a trap that humanity must escape.

Clarke's fiction is driven by his faith in human progress – both social and technical but Clarke repeatedly balks at the idea that such progress might create a perfect society. Where he follows his own ideas to their logical conclusion he comes to the realisation that such societies

would be fundamentally flawed. For Clarke, humanity needs to be constantly striving to go further – requiring the physical and mental demands of exploration and discovery – if it is to reach its full potential. Decadence is the ultimate threat to human progress. In analysing a number of Clarke's novels Robin Anne Reid concludes that Clarke is optimistic but:

"This optimism is reserved for continuing development, not some final end, some perfect state that can be achieved through technology or any other means... Apparently, Clarke is not interested in the idea of a static perfection for humanity, as opposed to continued exploration and development."¹⁸

If the Clarke's futures don't offer us the consolations of utopia, what is the source of its power?

A BRIEF HETEROTOPOLOGY

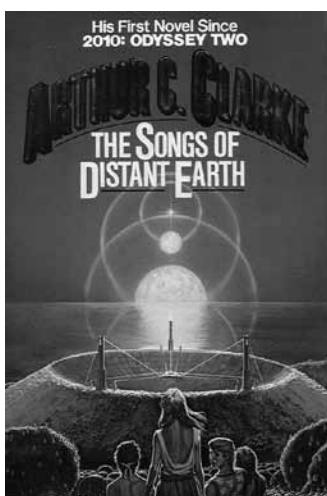
In *The Order of Things*, French post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault introduced the concept of heterotopias. He begins by considering a passage from Borges' essay "John Wilkins, Analytical Language" in which the author sets out a wild taxonomy supposedly derived from a Chinese encyclopaedia. Foucault is much taken with the power of this brief essay, noting the

"disconcerting effect of the proximity of extremes, or, quite simply with the vicinity of things that have no relation to each other; the mere act of enumeration that heaps them all together has a power of enchantment all its own."¹⁹

Foucault is amused by this taxonomy but also disturbed. He describes how the incongruous disorder of this classification acts to make the every item heteroclit, dislocating them from their everyday position and making it impossible to "define a *common locus* beneath them all." From this starting point Foucault goes on to define the idea of a *heterotopia*, which Merlin Coverley describes in his introduction to the idea of Utopia as his "place outside or between the categories of the physical or mental whose otherness challenges our everyday understanding of time and place."²⁰

Foucault returned to the idea of heterotopias in a short article, "Of Other Spaces", in which he contrasts heterotopias with utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place, they "present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces"²¹ whereas heterotopias are fundamentally real spaces that bring together elements of a society in a way that upsets our expectations or makes us question their interrelationship. Foucault then outlines the form of a number of different types of heterotopias; for the purposes of this article the most interesting are:

1. "Crisis heterotopias" are created by the earliest forms of society. They are sacred spaces created to house individuals in moments of "crisis" –



adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly – but in modern society they are gradually replaced by “heterotopias of deviation” (prisons, psychiatric hospitals, rest homes for the elderly) where we place people whose behaviour does not conform to the societal norm.

2. Heterotopias capable of “juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible.”²² Cinemas and theatres bring together unrelated spaces in a single room but the oldest form of this heterotopia is the garden. “The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with... The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world.”²³
3. There are heterotopias of “indefinitely accumulating time” such as museums and libraries, which express the “will to enclose in one space all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time, and inaccessible to its ravages...”²⁴
4. Finally, there are heterotopias that create “another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.” These heterotopias of order are illustrated by the attempts to create communities in the religiously-inspired colonies of the New World.

In “Of Other Spaces” Foucault’s heterotopology describes physical sites but, just as Foucault’s idea of heterotopia has its genesis in the reading of Borges’ strange taxonomy, so heterotopian elements can be found in other texts. And just as Borges’ menagerie shocked, excited and disturbed Foucault, so these heterotopian elements can have a forceful impact on other readers. Clarke was no post-structuralist but, it is Foucault’s idea of heterotopias (not Bloch’s utopian impulse) that better describes the power of Clarke’s work.

CLARKE’S HETEROTOPIAS

Clarke’s work is often associated with a “sense of wonder” – moments when, through his writing, Clarke appears to open up grand vistas and rearrange our sense of our place in the universe. This section explores how Clarke’s *heterotopian impulse* contributes to our sense of wonder.

Heterotopias of deviation

Samuel Delany’s novel *Triton* carries the subtitle “An Ambiguous Heterotopia”. Delany deliberately engages with Foucault’s theories to deconstruct what he has called the “terribly limiting argument”²⁵ of utopian and dystopian fiction. Delany creates a complex world but his heterotopia is primarily a space that gives freedom to alternative lifestyles. *Triton* is an anarchic space that allows individuals to express themselves and, in particular, their sexuality in a wide variety of forms without judgement. Clarke’s fiction does not engage with the notion of heterotopia in the same conscious way. Nor is Clarke as aggressive in addressing the idea of sexual

freedom as Delany. Yet Clarke’s novels, especially his later novels, do expect that future societies will be more accepting of the full range of human sexuality. As Reid notes:

“Such relationships as group marriages and multiple marriages for people working in space occur regularly. Bisexuality is offered as a healthy norm, with any individual who is exclusively homo- or heterosexual being perceived as being a bit strange and in the minority.”

Women tend to play minor roles in Clarke’s novels²⁶ and male/male relationships dominate. These relationships are not usually overtly sexual²⁷ but his male characters frequently have a history of having difficulty forming relationships with women.²⁸ Close male bonding is common²⁹ but the relationships are usually asexual. A number of minor characters in Clarke’s novels are involved in same sex relationships that are accepted with equanimity³⁰ and Clarke presupposes the general acceptance of bisexuality as the orientation of “normal” humans in future societies.

Clarke becomes more explicit in his expression of sexual freedom in his later novels, stating explicitly what was only hinted at in his earlier works. So *TCATS*, first published in 1956, coyly contains references to discovering “all the possibilities” of love³¹ and the chaste relationship between Alvin and Hilvar while the plot of *Imperial Earth*, published twenty years later, is driven by a relationship between two male characters that was, at least for a period, unambiguously sexual³². A decade later, in *TSODE*, Clarke has two male characters casually discussing what proportion of their character was “hetero” and concluding that those who limited themselves to one gender of sexual partner were “so rare that they were classed as pathological”³³.

Clarke does not explore in detail the causes or consequences of sexual liberation in the way that Delany sets out to do in *Triton*. Clarke assumes that prejudices around sexual orientation (and others such as racism and sexism) will fade away in the face of humanity’s growing maturity. In a much quieter way than Delany, many of the worlds Clarke creates are also heterotopias of deviation.

Heterotopias of space

The Persian gardens that symbolise Foucault’s heterotopias of space enclose the entire world in miniature, placing the exotic next to the ordinary and combining physical reality with a mystical element. Clarke’s writing encompasses the entire universe, juxtaposing humanity and the alien, and seeking to stir our sense of the sublime in a similar way. Artefacts like Rama³⁴ and the monolith place human protagonists next to objects that confuse our sense of perspective, remove us from the centre of our universe and stimulate those parts of the mind that respond to the arcane.

Clarke’s aliens are often intrinsically unknowable, their motives, psychology and ambitions beyond the ability of the human mind to grasp, though that doesn’t prevent Clarke’s protagonists from trying. But even without the intervention of the alien or the understated shattering of the universe in a story like “The Nine Billion

Names of God", Clarke is able to bring together the exotic and the human to confound our expectations. Sometimes the exotic is a fruit of humanity's labour – technology sufficiently advanced to appear magical – such as the space elevator or the city of Diaspar. Often, however, it is simply Clarke's inextinguishable pleasure in gathering together the marvels of the universe and presenting them to the reader. In *2010 Jupiter* and its moons are every bit as mysterious and awe-inspiring as the great monolith that orbits with them. *2061* devotes as much time to the wonders of an excursion on Halley's Comet as it does to the mysterious events on Europa. In novels like *The Deep Range* and *The Ghost from The Grand Banks* the wonders are revealed beneath Earth's oceans. In *The Ghost from The Grand Banks*, Ada, a ten-year-old girl, quotes Einstein:

"The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapt in awe is as good as dead."³⁵

Clarke's heterotopias of space are gardens sown with the mysterious and the mystical. His books provide a space where the mundane and the inexplicable are brought together to force the reader to consider their relationships with that which they have taken for granted. In a universe that is vast, cold and forensically indifferent to creatures as insignificant as humanity, Clarke is still able to fill his works with beauty, wonder and even hope.

Heterotopias of time

The Scottish Enlightenment mathematician John Playfair, contemplating the implications of the then-new science of geology, said: "the mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time."³⁶ Arthur C Clarke frequently uses the technique of referencing *deep time* to create the same sense of giddiness in his readers. Clarke's heterotopias of time gather together far more than the mere epochs of human history imagined in Foucault's museums, his works can encompass the whole lifespan of the universe.

The most famous example of Clarke's use of deep time does not appear in any of his books but in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, co-written with Stanley Kubrick. When the proto-human warrior's bone club is tossed into the air and we switch, jarringly, to the gently rotating space station, all human history is swept up in an instant. This image may owe more to Kubrick than to Clarke, but it encapsulates a theme that runs through Clarke's work. In "The Sentinel", the short story that provided some of the inspiration for *2001*, the geologist narrator contemplates the vast age of the moon's "lost oceans" as his party travel towards the site of an alien artefact. In "Nemesis" the passage of vast aeons of time are described as mankind fades from the planet Earth and in "Transcience" and "The Possessed" the evolution of all life on Earth is compressed into a few thousand words. In *The Fountains of Paradise* Clarke plays with the distant past and the near future before placing them both in context

in a far-future set epilogue that conflates them into a single moment. Other cities may have lasted millennia before time "swept away even their names" but Diaspar in *TCATS* "challenged Eternity itself":

"Since the city was built, the oceans of Earth had passed away and the desert had encompassed all the globe. The last mountains had been ground to dust by the winds and the rain, and the world was too weary to bring forth more... they had lived in the same city, had walked the same miraculously unchanging streets, while more than a thousand million years had worn away."³⁷

Clarke's writing brings together the human and the near eternal but he is not just contrasting our own brief moments of consciousness against a background so deep that it can barely be conceived. Clarke's heterotopias of time may leave us teetering on the brink of that bleak abyss but his faith in the ingenuity of the human species and in the eventual triumph of our better natures can transform giddy fear into a sense of elation.

Heterotopias of order

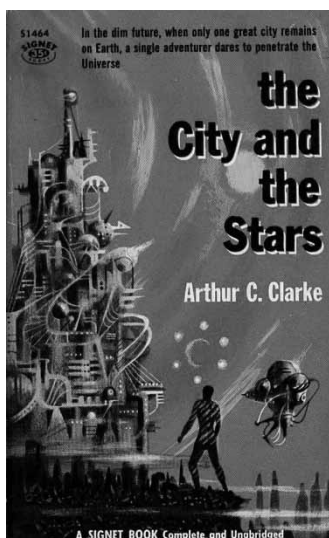
Most of Clarke's writing was done during the period between the Second World War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. While many of his contemporaries – not just science fiction writers – were imagining futures that demonised the "other" and entrenched contemporary divisions, Clarke was imagining worlds where humanity had cast off the burdens of past prejudices. In Clarke's writing, the full blossoming of Enlightenment reason brings societies that are wealthy, wise and free from the frustrations and jealousies that have prevented us from achieving our full potential. As mentioned, Clarke imagines worlds where ancient tensions caused by sex, race, nation and ideology have been dissipated but he devotes particular attention to the passing of religion.

In a number of Clarke's works religions play an active role in blocking progress or threatening the future of humanity.³⁸ More common, however, is the general assumption that the messy and illogical demands of religion have prevented humanity from reaching its full potential.

In *TSODE* Moses Kaldor muses on the humane and rational society the Thalassans have built "free from the threat of supernatural restraints" and notes:

"The Thalassans were never poisoned by the decay products of dead religions, and in seven hundred years no prophet has arisen here to preach a new faith. The very word 'God' has almost vanished from their language, and they're quite surprised - or amused - when we happen to use it."³⁹

In *3001* all religions have been discredited, "God" is literally a dirty word and Clarke embarks on a number of withering attacks on the barbarities conducted under the rubric of religion. One of his most famous short stories,



"The Star", deals with the moment of crisis for a Jesuit scientist who discovers that the bright star that heralded the birth of Jesus was the death-knell for a complex and advanced civilisation.

Clarke's heterotopias of order force us to confront the mess and jumble of our existing beliefs but offer the compensation that redemption is possible. Like the Jesuit "Indian reductions" in Brazil and Paraguay, the Quaker communities in Pennsylvania and the Puritan commonwealths of New England, Clarke's books seek to show that a better world awaits if we follow the right path to a state of grace. The fundamental difference, of course, is that Clarke rejects faith in god and inserts a faith in human reason.

CONCLUSION

Foucault, like Clarke, dismisses the notion that grand programmes of change can deliver perfected societies. But this rejection of concrete utopia does not imply that either author has given up on the possibility of change – or even that they believe that society cannot be made better. Both would share Foucault's belief that specific change can be achieved to improve society while still rejecting the idea of concrete utopias that might spring from wholesale, programmatic, revolutions.

"I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas that concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformations that have been made... to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century."⁴⁰

Clarke remains an optimist – far more confident than Foucault that humanity will reach "mature adulthood" and certainly more convinced of the ability of science and reason to lead us to that maturity. While Foucault recoils from the notion of progress, Clarke's faith remained unshaken. His fiction, in setting out a vision of scientific and social advance, creates within its pages a series of walled gardens in which we can experience recognisable elements of our own society made unfamiliar by being set against the exotic and the strange.

Clarke's construction of heterotopias of deviation, of space, of time and of order, disturbs our sense of certainty, it destroys syntax "and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to hold together."⁴¹ When those things that we took for granted always held together suddenly fly apart we are exposed to the previously unknown or the fundamentally unknowable. Language, the tool we use to interpret and make sense of our universe, fails us, the categories we construct to understand our environment become obsolete and intimate structures of belief are shattered. Thus we are left with that most characteristic reaction to Clarke's work – a "sense of wonder" in which we find ourselves momentarily adrift, made giddy and inarticulate, forced to reconceptualise relationships that we previously considered fixed, reliable and permanent.

It is the moment when we hover above an abyss of space and time and see the universe, rearranged, below.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Moylan, 1986, p. 20
- 2 Though science fiction is one of the few elements of popular culture that Bloch never engaged with, he was dismissive of all “purely technological utopias”.
- 3 Suvin, 1979, p. 70
- 4 Jameson, 2005
- 5 Jameson, 2004, p.366
- 6 Jameson, 2004, p. 364.
- 7 Daniel & Moylan, 1997, p. viii
- 8 Moylan, 1986, p. 22
- 9 Clarke, 2000, p. x
- 10 Bloch’s belief in the notion of an actual, realisable, utopia did more than lead his philosophical theories astray – it made him an enthusiastic advocate for Stalin and Stalinism from the 1930s to the 1950s. While his philosophical writing never wholly abandoned the libertarian, utopian, Hegelian-Marx-inspired socialist thread that runs through his whole work, his support for the Soviet regime through the worst of the purges does him little credit. The politest thing one can say about this period in Bloch’s life is that his politics and philosophy fell out of sync – he was hardly alone in embracing Stalin when faced with the reality of the rise of fascism but his allegiance continued for longer than others in the face of evidence of the system’s cruelty. One reason for this must be his attachment to the idea of utopia as an actual, realisable goal for which horrific acts could be justified as a price worth paying. When he did, finally, recant his Stalinist beliefs, he paid a high price. He was forced into retirement in 1957 by the East German regime and felt the full force of the state’s disapproval before finding himself on the Western side of Berlin when the wall went up in 1961 and deciding to stay there. He would go on to become a fierce left-wing critic of the failures of the Eastern European dictatorships.
- 11 Geoghegan, 1996, p. 152
- 12 Since *The City and The Stars* is based on the novella *Against The Fall of Night*, first published in the November 1948 issue of *Startling Stories*, the thematic consistency might be said to stretch across practically the whole of Clarke’s career as a professional writer.
- 13 Clarke, 1987, p. 71
- 14 Clarke, 1997, p. 228. In the same passage Clarke dismisses Communism for its utopianism: “It was generally agreed that Communism was the most perfect form of government; unfortunately it had been demonstrated – at the cost of some hundreds of millions of lives – that it was only applicable to social insects, Robots Class II, and similar restricted families.” “Demosocracy” is to be preferred for “imperfect human beings”.
- 15 Clarke 1997, p. 138
- 16 Clarke, 2000, p. 664-686
- 17 Clarke, 2000, p. 119
- 18 Reid, 1997, p. 124
- 19 Foucault, 2002, p. xix
- 20 Coverley, 2010, p. 10
- 21 Foucault, 1986, p. 24
- 22 Foucault, 1986, p. 25
- 23 Foucault, 1986, p. 25-26
- 24 Foucault, 1986, p. 26
- 25 Moylan, 1985, p. 158
- 26 There are major female viewpoint characters in the later novels in the *Rama* series and *Cradle*, which Clarke co-wrote with Gentry Lee and The Time Odyssey series co-written with Stephen Baxter. While women tend to be background characters, Clarke does often place them in positions of authority – such as Captain Orlova in *2010* and the sexually liberated Mayor Waldon in *TSODE*.
- 27 Duncan’s homosexual relationship with Karl in *Imperial Earth* is a notable exception. Duncan is also black, a fact the novel doesn’t mention until more than half way through.
- 28 Martin Gibson in *The Sands of Mars*, Alvin in *TCATS* and Heywood Floyd in *2010/2061*, for example.
- 29 Loren and Kumar in *TSODE*, Alvin and Hilvar in *TCATS*.
- 30 For example, George and Jerry, two minor characters in *2061*, are an open and happily married gay couple. In *The Ghost From The Grand Banks* Evelyn, Donald’s partner, leaves him for her nurse, Dolores. Clarke goes out of his way to have the doctor who breaks this news express his surprise that anyone would be shocked at such a relationship and dismiss objections to the free expression of the diversity of sexual drives as a “Puritan aberration”.
- 31 Clarke, 2001, p. 48
- 32 Clarke, 1975, p. 49
- 33 Clarke, 1986, p. 148
- 34 The great space-born oasis of Rama can itself be envisaged as a garden bringing together exotic flora and fauna from across the universe – the only Raman artefact that the crew return to Earth is a flower. Carefully tended green spaces are a minor but recurring theme in Clarke’s works. The vast park at the heart of *TCATS*’s Diaspar, a vast garden in the Africa Tower in *3001*, Earth Park on *Thalassa* in *TSODE* are just some examples. The exotic blooming of life in the depths of Europa’s oceans in *2010* might also be placed in this category.
- 35 Clarke, 1990, p. 129
- 36 Biographical Account of the Late Dr James Hutton, F.R.S. Edin.’ (read 1803), *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* (1805), 5, pp. 71-3.
- 37 Clarke, 2001, p.1
- 38 Buddhist monks in *The Fountains of Paradise* or “Chrislam” fundamentalists in *The Hammer of the Gods*, for example.
- 39 Clarke, 1987, p. 55
- 40 Foucault, 1984, pp. 46-47
- 41 Foucault, 2002, p. xix

HOMER'S ODYSSEY: THE WORLD'S FIRST FANTASY NOVEL?

Juliet E McKenna

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered the
hallowed heights of Troy.
Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open seas
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.¹

These opening lines of Homer's *Odyssey* epitomise so much that's characteristic of modern fantasy fiction. We have a hero on a journey, supported by loyal companions, encountering set-backs and suffering and all facing mortal danger.

You'll find these same themes time and again in the development of heroic, epic literature. Indeed, they predate Homer in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and doubtless feature in other works of ancient literature lost in the mists of time or only surviving in myths and fragments. It would be rash indeed to claim the *Odyssey* as the world's first fantasy novel, imagining that it sprang forth fully formed from Homer's imagination, like Athena from the brow of Zeus. Let's settle for considering it as the earliest extant and complete narrative suitable for comparison with the epic fantasy tradition that followed. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is far from complete and while the *Iliad* is a heroic tale, its focus is on conflict between individuals and armies and the consequences rather than following one man on a journey, literal or metaphorical.

After Homer, the same archetypes of the hero with his companions, facing successive challenges, can be traced through the Roman period and Virgil's *Aeneid*, into Anglo-Saxon with works such as *Beowulf* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, then onwards into the Medieval era and the *Song of Roland*. These same concepts persist through the evolution of the modern novel in the 18th and 19th centuries and on into the popular fiction written by H Rider Haggard, Edgar Rice Burroughs and others. Fantasy fiction most assuredly did not begin with Tolkien and *The Hobbit*. I believe it's important for writers to look back to the roots of the genre, not least to avoid merely perpetuating every more pallid copies of Tolkien. Epic, heroic fiction must continue to evolve if it is to endure.

These opening lines highlight something else significant which is common to the *Odyssey* and to *The Lord of the Rings*. The *Odyssey* is a journey, indeed, the words are now synonymous. But it's not a classic quest with our hero setting to discover something or to reclaim something. This isn't Jason in search of the Golden Fleece or the Knights of the Round Table off in search of the Holy Grail. Odysseus has done his great deed. He's trying to get home to his wife and family. Frodo is trying to destroy the almighty artefact, the One Ring. So we see that epic fantasy fiction, from this early instance to arguably its most famous incarnation, has always turned its own core narratives inside out, to find new ways of exploring the human condition while entertaining us with a thrilling story.

The *Odyssey* is very much about what it means to be a man. Even in this age of gods walking the earth, Olympian Zeus makes it clear that individuals ultimately determine their own fate, inside the first 50 lines of the *Odyssey*.

Ah how shameless – the way these mortals
blame the gods.
From us alone, they say, come all their miseries,
yes,
but they themselves with their own reckless
ways,
compound their pains beyond their proper
share.

The *Odyssey* returns to this idea time and again. Here Zeus is referring to Aegisthus, who seduced Agamemnon's wife while he was away at the Trojan War and ended up dead as a consequence, even though Hermes himself warned him off Clytemnestra. Later on, the noble suitors

who are courting Penelope have successive chances to do the right thing and save themselves but they opt not to. Reading the *Odyssey* soon puts paid to any idea that Greek literature is all about the gods playing games with the fates of men, like Blind Io and The Lady up on Dunmanifestin in the Discworld.

The notion that epic fiction is only about virtue rewarded and vice confounded is equally inaccurate. More than once, Odysseus is directly responsible for his own troubles and for the death of his men. On the other side of the scales, Helen is now back in Sparta, perfectly comfortable as queen with no one blaming her for the countless deaths at Troy. There are shades of grey here. In many instances, the *Odyssey* can seem more modern than literature from the intervening millennia more overtly dominated by Judeo-Christian societal values.

The *Odyssey* can also seem very modern in its disjointed narrative. Students of literature are often told that the *Odyssey* is so important because it begins '*in media res*'. Literally, 'in the middle of things', so a lot of the story is told in flashback. The structure is often described as cinematic. True but that's not nearly the most interesting thing about the *Odyssey's* narrative.

The story starts with Odysseus in the middle of his journey, stuck on Calypso's island, longing to get home. But Poseidon is dead set against that and a god with grudge is never a good thing for a hero. However Poseidon goes off to visit the Ethiopians and Athena persuades Zeus that Odysseus deserves to finally get home. Zeus agrees and Hermes tells Calypso to let him go and Athena goes off to send Odysseus's son Telemachus on a voyage of his own, to find out what he can about his father's fate. So the first four books of the *Odyssey* are actually all about Telemachus.

He was only a baby when Odysseus left. Now he's a young man with his father's house full of men who want to marry his mother Penelope, lounging around, eating his meat, drinking his wine and bedding the maidservants. Telemachus wishes his father would come home but meantime, he doesn't think he can do anything about this abuse of his home and his property, even though it's breaking all the conventions of guest-friendship, a key custom that helped keep people safe in an age of extremely slow long distance communication and dangerous travel, especially by sea.

While everyone acknowledges Telemachus's right to inherit his father's house, there's no 'the king is lost presumed dead, long live the king' feudal loyalty to him. Indeed, Laertes, Odysseus' father, is still alive. He's retired to a farm and has pretty much given up hope. So what I find particularly interesting about this start to the story is how it sets up two questions. Firstly, will Odysseus get home? Secondly, if he does, will he actually get home to anything worth having? Success in the first instance is no guarantee of success in the end, which makes the whole story much more complex.

So off Telemachus goes and thus the *Odyssey* begins with an archetypal instance of that great fantasy fiction favourite: Youthful Rites of Passage. Telemachus learns more about the world, about the Trojan War and about his father. This is all a significant part of the *Odyssey's* overall exploration of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a hero. Telemachus meets Nestor who

tells him about the aftermath of the Trojan War and it's far from heroic.

But then, once we'd sacked King Priam's craggy
city
Zeus contrived in his heart a fatal homeward
run
for all the Achaeans who were fools, at least,
dishonest too, so many met a disastrous end.

Agamemnon and Menelaus harangue their drunken troops and have a row about whether or not to offer sacrifices to the gods before sailing home. Nestor was one of those who does get back safe but as we've already been told, Agamemnon returns home to be murdered by Aegisthus and Menelaus is stuck in Egypt for so long he only gets home after Aegisthus has been murdered by Orestes. But since Menelaus might know what's happened to Odysseus, that's where Telemachus goes next. Where he finds a wedding, with Helen of Sparta the honoured queen, the gracious hostess, the perfect housewife with her golden spindle and a wheelie silver basket to hold her wool. This is quite an achievement for an adulteress who caused a ten year war.

This episode shows us the complexity of the portrayal of women in the *Odyssey*, something else worthy of study. When Telemachus meets her, Helen is the perfect hostess right up to the point where she drugs the wine she gives the men to drink. Ostensibly this is to ease their grief but the text immediately makes the point that Helen learned about potent herbs from another woman in Egypt, skilled with both medicine and poison and poison has traditionally been an archetypal woman's weapon. It's apparent that power need not necessarily come at the point of a sword.

This is reinforced as Helen tells her version of the end of the Trojan War, keen to excuse herself, now that her husband's a receptive mood thanks to those herbs. She insists she was lured to Troy by a madness sent by Aphrodite. When that passed, she helped the Trojan Horse stratagem succeed, because she alone recognised Odysseus when he crept into the city. Helen didn't betray him, so she asserts. Only that claim is immediately undercut by Menelaus remembering that hearing her voice when they were waiting inside the wooden horse almost caused disaster. A warrior called Anticlus was so desperate to answer that Odysseus had to physically hold his mouth shut. Helen's reputation is far from rehabilitated by the *Odyssey*.

It's significant that Helen is a daughter of Zeus. This is specifically mentioned. The most powerful women in the *Odyssey* are all goddesses, nymphs or witches. Circe uses drugs and magic to enslave Odysseus's men and knows the secrets of the Underworld. Calypso could grant him eternal life if he agreed to stay with her. Even helpful females like Leucothea who saves Odysseus from drowning and Eidothea who helps Menelaus escape the Old Man of the Sea are supernatural.

Does this mean that the *Odyssey* is misogynistic? Can a woman only be powerful through magic? Is it significant that Athena, female goddess or not, spends most of the time disguised as different men? While much of the work's exploration of what it means to be a man applies in the non-gendered sense of 'mankind', it's true that the



point of view is overwhelmingly masculine.

Judging a work this old by contemporary standards isn't particularly helpful here. From an ancient Greek point of view, there are positive images of women, whether that's from the perspective of the 7th Century BC when the works of Homer were first written down, through the glories of 5th Century Athenian democracy or the Alexandrian period. The most consistently positive portrayal is that of Penelope, Odysseus's wife. Her strength of character is revealed while Telemachus is on this voyage as she acts to save him from the murderous suitors, a mere five hundred lines or so after Helen's self-serving tale. She is repeatedly called 'wise', notably by Odysseus as he tries to explain to the divine Calypso how he pines for her, while readily acknowledging how far a mortal woman must fall short of the goddess in stature and beauty. Agamemnon's ghost praises wise Penelope in explicit contrast to the treacherous women whose twisted wiles have been Zeus's weapons against the House of Atreus; Helen and Agamemnon's own murderous wife, Clytemnestra.

Penelope's importance in the overall narrative is clear as the action cuts back to Ithaca several times while Telemachus is in Sparta, where he learns that the old Man of the Sea told Menelaus that Odysseus was stuck on Calypso's island. The suitors decide to ambush Telemachus on his return. A loyal servant tells Penelope about it. Initially Penelope weeps and laments but once she's recovered, she sends a messenger to Laertes in hopes that he'll come to help. She prays for help from the gods with all the proper rites. It might not seem much from a modern viewpoint but she is doing what she can, and it's worth noting that she does so without magic or drugs or supernatural assistance.

She's also controlling the situation in Ithaca through deliberate inaction. She could resolve things either by choosing a suitor or returning to her own father's house

for him to find her a new husband. Penelope chooses to do neither of these things. She's not above deception either; she kept the suitors at bay for years by insisting she needed to weave Laertes a shroud, and unravelling the day's weaving each night.

Another effective mortal woman is Nausicaa, daughter of the Phaeacian's King. When Calypso tells Odysseus that he can go and once she's sworn an oath this is no trick, he builds a ship and sets off, only to be wrecked by a storm sent by Poseidon, in case any one's forgotten the god's still got it in for him. He washes up on the beach and wakes up to find the local princess and her maids doing the laundry. Using an olive branch not so much as a token of peace as to cover his nakedness, Odysseus asks for help. Nausicaa is the one with the power in this situation. She's the one who decides how he and when he comes to the city, so her own reputation isn't compromised. By the standards by which they could expect to be judged, these are positive depictions of women.

This isn't to say that contemporary fantasy writers should use the *Odyssey* as a template without thinking through all the implications very carefully. Those implications may surprise some people. Penelope and Nausicaa are high status women and women's historical studies show us is that the higher a woman's status, the more constrained her choices were. Once there was property involved, first portable, tangible wealth such as we see given as gifts in the *Odyssey*, and later land and buildings, women became a means of transferring such wealth safely from one generation of men to the next. Relatedly, the value of virginity became enshrined in religious doctrine. The less a woman had to offer, the less society cared what she did and in historical terms that applied until very recently.

We live in a different world. While fiction that endures, like the *Odyssey*, does so because it can be seen as reflecting universal, eternal ideas, particularly by those

societies tracing their cultural descent back to the ancient and classical Greeks, the best modern fiction also reflects its own times and standards. Twenty-first century fantasy writers need to reflect our own times and advancements and should not perpetuate outdated stereotypes and prejudices by writing about default heterosexual white male heroes owing so much to Victorian historical notions of The Great Man. The depth and breadth of historical research into all levels of society in recent decades shows us that lives in past centuries were as complex and nuanced as our own.

To return to Odysseus, salty and naked hero on the Phaeacian beach, it's thanks to Nausicaa that he's welcomed with fitting hospitality. This is all related at great length and as an undergraduate reading Classics at Oxford, I was bored rigid by translating these seemingly endless and repetitive passages about guest gifts and feasting and sacrificing to the gods.

I have different perspective now. While a modern editor would cut most of this from a contemporary fantasy novel, such detail serves other purposes in this particular work. For modern readers it conveys is how very different this world is, both from our own times and also from that other default setting of fantasy novels; quasi-medieval, northern European feudalism with kings and nobles as society's elite and enjoying all the privileges that result. Queens and princesses are weaving and doing laundry. Kings like Odysseus can build a ship from scratch. Lords like Penelope's suitors have farms that they manage themselves in a hands-on fashion. These are not wealthy monarchs divorced from the realities of life.

For the original audience, the precise and extensive detail of the hospitality offered is important for different reasons, on several levels. Firstly, the flourishing Phaeacian orchards reflect directly on King Alcinous. He's a good king in that he keeps his people fed. To be able to offer a guest tangible wealth, precious metal objects or fine horses in what is clearly a pre-cash economy is still more to his credit. Similarly, having the surplus to provide a sumptuous feast reflects well on the kings whom Telemachus visits. It also reflects their honourable natures, unlike the suitors who, we are reminded more than once, are still gorging themselves, plundering Ithaca as they abuse these rules of hospitality and guest-friendship. We should not underestimate the moral dimension here.

Secondly, all these details add richness and complexity to a world that was already half lost in the mists of history, half-imagined by the *Odyssey's* author. It evokes that sense of wonder, of venturing somewhere strange which is at the heart of fantasy fiction's appeal.

At this point in the narrative, the *Odyssey* goes even further into the mythical and the magic with the dramatic tales which Odysseus relates while he's accepting the hospitality of the Phaeacians. But the mantra for the modern novelist is 'show don't tell'. This brings us to the key reason why the *Odyssey* isn't the world's first fantasy novel. Because it's not a novel. It's a poem.

This work of fiction was never intended to be silently read as a solo activity. The *Odyssey* is drama, written to be performed. In all of the flashbacks related by many different characters, Homer offers us intense first person narrative in order to bring the story to life. Consider

Odysseus's escape from the cannibal Laestrygonians.

Down from the cliffs they flung great rocks a
man could hardly hoist
and a ghastly shattering din rose up from all the
ships-
men in their death cries, hulls smashed to
splinters-
They speared the crews like fish
and whisked them home to make their grisly
meal.
But while they killed them off in the harbour
depths,
I pulled the sword from beside my hip and
hacked away
at the ropes that moored my blue-prowed ship
of war
and shouted rapid orders at my shipmates:
'Put your backs in the oars – now row or die!'

It's in such passages, performed by a skilled actor, in English or ideally in the original Greek with all the inherent musicality of the rhythms and language, that Homer's true genius becomes apparent.

Who was Homer? Was there one poet or two, one writing the *Iliad* and one writing the *Odyssey*? Or was material originally written by any number of poets brought together to make up these epics? These are questions that classical scholars have debated for centuries and which go far beyond the scope of this article.

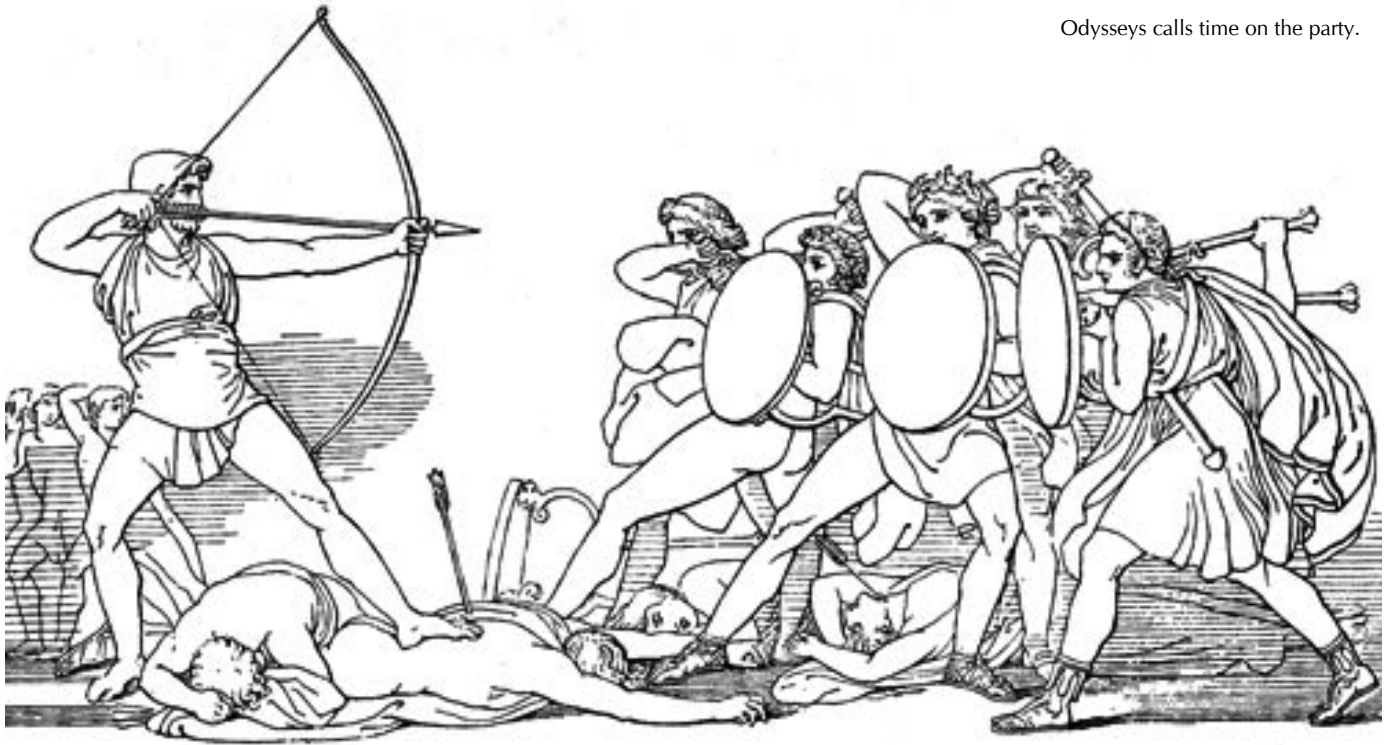
There's just one aspect of that debate that's relevant here. The fact that this is performance poetry is significant when considering the many repeated phrases and descriptions throughout the work; rosy-fingered dawn, the wine-dark sea, and so on. Because arguably the most significant discovery in Homeric scholarship was made by an American scholar called Milman Parry in the 1920s. He used metrical analysis of all the repeated descriptions to show how they serve a very real purpose in balancing the metre of the poetry. Specific adjectives are used in specific places in a line; the beginning, the middle or the end.

Then Parry really revolutionised Homeric scholarship by showing how the illiterate bards still performing in the Balkans in the early 20th Century used exactly the same techniques when they told a familiar story. Each version would be their own but they'd be improvising using a common store of phrases and expressions. The individual poet's skill would be demonstrated by doing that particularly impressively and fluently. That's what would draw an audience and build a poet's reputation.

The Homeric poet was so good that his are the works that were copied down, repeated and spread. Nearly half of the papyrus fragments from Alexandrian Egypt are from the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. They are also remarkably coherent and consistent. In a world before printing, that's quite some achievement and testament to the agreed worth of a work of literature. Consider how much of ancient literature didn't survive beyond tantalising references in other works. Homer was and is something special and while debate continues, the consensus nowadays is that both poems were the work of one man.

The central section where Odysseus tells the story of his disastrous voyage after leaving Troy is drama of the

Odysseys calls time on the party.



finest kind. Though there's one calamity after another and Odysseus and his men are responsible for an awful lot of their own troubles. They succumb to the temptations of the Lotus Eaters. Odysseus is the one who insists on going to find out about Cyclopes. He's the one who insists on waiting to meet Polyphemus, in hopes of getting something good out of him. Instead Polyphemus offends against every custom of guest-friendship by imprisoning and eating Odysseus's crewmen. But once they've escaped, Odysseus makes a fatal error by declaring his own name to Polyphemus which is how Poseidon learns who is responsible for blinding his son.

After that, the voyagers encounter Aeolus on the Isle of the Winds. At that point, they could have got straight home, because Aeolus gives them a bag holding all the winds except the one they need. Only the crewmen think Odysseus has some treasure he's not sharing, open the bag and all the winds escape and that's how they're washed up on the Laestrygonians' island. When Odysseus and his men flee, the giant cannibals hurl rocks to sink their ships and only a single vessel escapes. As all these dramas unfold, Odysseus is progressively stripped of the allies and resources that he will surely need if he's ever to reclaim his kingdom. The tension mounts.

After they've escaped the cannibals, they meet Circe, who turns Odysseus's men into pigs. Once that's been dealt with, he has to visit the Underworld. This is a fascinating episode that really emphasizes Homer's theme of men and women being responsible for their own misery through their own folly. The heroic ideal is emphatically undercut when the ghost of Achilles has no time for Odysseus telling him how famous he is back on earth.

By god I'd rather slave on earth for another man-
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to
keep alive-

than rule down here over all the breathless
dead.

But come, tell me the news about my gallant
son.

There's no sense of a blessed afterlife here. Life is for living. A man or woman's immortality is only through their children and the ghost of Odysseus's own mother tells him yet again how his family are suffering because he's still away.

So off he goes, trying to get home. He narrowly escapes the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis and then his last ship reaches the Island of the Sun. Catastrophes continue, brought on by disobedience and folly. Trapped by adverse winds for so long, his starving crewmen do what's been expressly forbidden, namely eating the Sun God's cattle, and that brings down the final catastrophic storm that wrecks Odysseus, to leave him all alone, on Calypso's island. Thus we return to the point where the story started.

So by the time we're half way through this story, not only do we have serious concerns about what Odysseus might come home to find, we have serious doubts about his ability to deal with challenging situations. He admits to pride, greed, stupidity and then there's plain bad luck, which kills Elpenor, the youngest crewman who manages to fall off a roof and break his neck.

But he does get home and the second half of the *Odyssey* tells of his triumph over the suitors as he reclaims his house, his throne and his wife. Once again though, this is no story of a triumphant hero returning to sweep all opposition away through a series of mighty deeds.

After his arrival on Ithaca, Athena disguises Odysseus so that he can find an ally in the loyal swineherd Eumaeus while she goes and gets Telemachus from Sparta. Eumaeus welcomes Odysseus with proper hospitality even though he doesn't recognise him and tells him how bad things are hereabouts and they swap more tales of the aftermath

of the Trojan War. Athena warn Telemachus about the suitors' ambush and he gets home safely to rejoin his father. There's an emotional reunion and they plan how to sneak Odysseus into the palace disguised as a beggar while Telemachus hides all the suitor's weapons and then they'll see justice done, to the suitors and to the servants who've betrayed their loyalties.

Summarising the story really doesn't do it justice. There's all the dramatic tension expected of an epic adventure. Odysseus is nearly recognised, more than once, by his old dog and by his old nursemaid. The suitors get wind of Telemachus returning and they're alert for trouble. Odysseus has a run in with a real beggar who's profiting very nicely out of the suitors' presence and that could be disastrous. Odysseus is delighted to see how Penelope has held off the suitors but when she insists on talking to him, he can't let her know who he is. He has to bide his time and that's good because he gains another ally, the loyal cowherd Philoetius. His involvement, like that of Eumaeus, makes it clear that nobility of character is not tied to nobility of birth.

Finally there's the trial of the great bow that only Odysseus can string. A dream of strange portents has convinced Penelope to test her suitors and marry the man who can shoot an arrow through a row of axes, which was a trick Odysseus used to do. Here the dramatic device is foreshadowing but there's still tension. We can trust that Odysseus will string the bow but how can four men really defeat all these suitors? Then these noble lords refuse to allow a beggar to join in the contest. Odysseus may not even get a chance to compete until Penelope intervenes.

At which point Telemachus tells her to retreat to her bedroom, an assertion of his authority which shows just how much he had learned, and grown up, on his own recent voyage. The next surprise for the suitors is Odysseus shooting an arrow through the neck of Antinous, their leader. As the suitors retaliate, the fight is violent, blood, and the result is by no means a foregone conclusion.

Amphimomus rushed the king in all his glory,
charging him face to face, a slashing sword
drawn-
if only he could force him clear of the doorway,
now,
but Telemachus – too quick – stabbed the man
from behind,
plunging his bronze spear between the suitor's
shoulders
and straight through his chest the point came
jutting out-
down he went with a thud, his forehead
slammed the ground.
Telemachus swerved aside, leaving his long
spearshaft
lodged in Amphimomus – fearing some suitor
just might
lunge in from behind as he tugged the shaft
impale him with a sword or hack him down
crouching over the corpse.

The suitors get hold of weapons thanks to a treacherous goatherd and innocents like the household's herald and

the bard nearly end up as collateral damage. Once the battle is won, the brutality doesn't stop. The household maids who have whored themselves are called in to clean up the blood before they're hanged themselves. Right to the end, human realities remain in the forefront of this supposedly heroic narrative.

That's not the end of the story either. Odysseus can't relax and sweep Penelope off her feet. In a final twist, the man of tricks and turns is tricked. She tells the servants to move their marriage bed and Odysseus loses his composure completely because that shouldn't be possible. He built that bed using a wooden pillar that's actually a tree trunk still rooted in the ground. Only Penelope is testing him because she's afraid of being deceived – something which she notes never occurred to Helen of Argos. Now she knows Odysseus really is home, they go to bed, first and foremost to talk, which is a very human touch.

But the story's still not over. While Odysseus goes to be reunited with his father Laertes, out on his farm, word is spreading about the slaughter of the suitors. Their kinsmen rally to avenge them, even though old warriors like Halitherses tell them to let things rest. The drama and danger of that proposal shouldn't be underestimated. The *Odyssey* unfolds in a part of the Mediterranean where blood feud and vengeance is still very much part of the culture today.

Odysseus and his allies all put on their armour, this time including Laertes, and they prepare to fight, until Athena intervenes, lending Laertes the strength to send his spear through the leader's head. When Odysseus attacks regardless, Zeus sends a thunderbolt to stop everyone in their tracks while Athena, still disguised as Mentor, a mortal man, rounds on Odysseus telling he must stop the killing or risk Zeus's wrath. Only when he does that, is the story really over. Men have decided their own destiny, from first to last.

In conclusion then, if the *Odyssey* isn't the world first fantasy novel, this story is undeniably one of the key foundations of ancient and modern literature. The way in which the narrative unfolds, the roles of all the different characters can teach anyone interested in the fantasy genre a tremendous amount about creating fiction to enthrall and entertain. Though modern fantasy writers would perhaps be ill-advised to risk the wrath of the gods of narrative by being so arrogant as to imagine that their own work will stand the test of time as Homer's has done.

- This article is derived from a talk given at *Odyssey, the 2010 Eastercon*.

NOTE

1. All quotations taken from the Robert Fagles translation for Penguin Classics

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING:

M I Finley – *The World of Odysseus*

Bettany Hughes – *Helen of Troy*

Charlotte Higgins – *It's All Greek To Me*

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAMUEL R DELANY

Roz Kaveney

In the following, sexually-frank interview, Roz Kaveney talks to Samuel R Delany about the biographical and literary context for his Nebula award-winning story, “Aye, and Gomorrah”, as well as “Citre et Trans”, and Cyril M Kornbluth’s “An Altar at Midnight”.

ROZ KAVENEY: Clearly there’s a link between “Aye, and Gomorrah” and some of the memoir writing you’ve done about that period of your life in the early 60s, when you were touring Greece and Turkey. Not just because of the locations, but because of the free-flowing sexuality of the time and some of the experiences you had—“Citre et Trans” is a good example of what I mean.

SAMUEL R DELANY: Yes, there is. But probably it’s more complex than it seems—that is, from skimming the surface of texts such as “Aye, and Gomorrah,” “Citre et Trans,” *Nova*, “Beatitudes,” even *The Motion of Light in Water* or “A Fictional Architecture that Only Manages, with Great Difficulty, Not Once to Mention Harlan Ellison.”

On October 18, 1965, with a straight friend of mine, Ron Helstrom, whom I’d run into the previous spring when we were working on shrimp boats out of Aransas Pass, Texas, down near Corpus Christi and Brownsville, I took off from New York City on an Icelandic Airlines prop-jet to Luxemburg, for a six month stay in Europe that lasted to mid-April of ‘66. Ron and I were simply friends, although many gay men that I met on the trip, in Paris, in Venice, and in Athens, and with whom I did have sexual relations, were very generous to us. Ron and Bill Balousiac—another straight young man who joined up with us on the plane over, and traveled with us for a few months—had a much better time than they would have, had they been traveling with a straight friend.

Here’s an incident that happened on the second or third day of our two-week stay in Paris, when the three of us were living in a small hotel on the Ile St.-Louis, next to the Hotel Olinda (at the time, its reputation was that of the cheapest hotel in Paris). I’d gone out cruising in the evening, and a little after midnight, in the Tuileries—the park grounds just in front of the Louvre—I ran into a very tall, very black, very handsome and full featured African in a dark suit, white shirt, and tie.

In the shadows, he was sitting on one of the side benches, one leg crossed over the other, masturbating.

I sat down with him, just as if I’d met him on Central Park West in the same way. We fooled around with

each other. He turned out to be a medical student, from Senegal, studying in Paris, whose mother was a tribal queen:

His name was Bernard—about twenty-seven years old, that is to say, four years older than I was. Bernard was actually an African prince!

We walked back to his small, ground-floor Latin Quarter room—where, in other apartments in his building, various other of his gay, African friends also lived. Prince or no, Bernard’s room was about eight feet by eight feet, with a table on one wall and a double-decker bunk-bed against another. Bernard slept on the lower level of the bunk and used the upper for storage.

A photograph of his impressive mother, the Queen, hung on the wall, as well as others of his family—his father and uncles and multiple mothers and aunts and many half brothers and sisters.

Bernard and I spent a very pleasant night together. The next morning, one of his friends in the building—a shy, stocky little fellow with bushy, slightly brownish hair, also from Senegal—came by and we all had coffee and pastry at Bernard’s. I explained that I was traveling with two other North Americans—and that they were straight. Then Bernard invited us all over that night for dinner. His friend had a working stove in his room, Bernard explained to me, and they often prepared dinners together.

His friend seemed shyly eager and enthusiastic.

Back at our hotel, I conveyed the invitation to Bill and Ron. They were surprised, but accepted. I didn’t mention how I’d met Bernard—but only explained that we had started talking, and that I had ended up staying over at his apartment.

We were expected at seven o’clock!

I suggested we bring a couple of bottles of wine—which we did. We spent about five dollars each on two bottles of wine—today about the equivalent of fifty a piece.

I’m very glad we did!

Dinner began with paté-stuffed mushrooms and olives and went on to a spectacular roast, with lots of wonderful vegetable dishes and a glorious salad. The Africans

recognized the wine as extremely good, and we got points for it! We were six for dinner: Bill, Ron, and myself, and Bernard and two of his African friends from the building. (The one I hadn't met yet was tall, soft-spoken, smiling, and—I finally realized—very smart and level-headed . . . enough for me to recall it, forty-five years on.) We all sat in Bernard's, some on the bed, some in chairs around the wall, balancing a five-foot by five-foot square of plywood on our knees, while Bernard flung up a white table cloth that momentarily filled the room, a spotless billowing sail, before it settled to cover the board and, laughing, we all pulled and slid and pushed and adjusted it under the edge and over our knees, and Bernard went on to lay cloth napkins and gold-edged china on silver chargers (at that time, they were the first chargers any of us North Americans had seen!) and cut crystal glassware for wine and water, and a wicker basket of French bread and a silver ewer of pink and peach roses. Then Bernard and his stocky friend from the morning—I remember he wore a French sailor-style shirt with a traditional boat-neck, three quarter sleeves, only with horizontal olive and mustard stripes (rather than red and white or blue and white)—carried the food in from the apartment next door.

Somehow not a glass of wine was spilled, and when we were in the midst of things, I couldn't help thinking with all that silver and bright china, and flowers on the table, we could have been at the Four Seasons!

It was a wonderful classic French meal, ending up with fruit and fine cheeses, and I remember thinking, only gay men could have brought this off! These guys truly enjoyed food and cooking. Today the whole evening stays with me as a prime example of serious international camp—a combination of real elegance and student poverty.

As dinner went on, with conversation in three languages (French, Senegalese, and English), Bernard's short friend (all three were gay) became quite taken with Bill—to which Bill was oblivious. Though Canadian, Bill spoke no French and we had to translate for him; therefore most of the evening's sexual overtones escaped him. Bernard's friend contrived to sit next to Bill and, with a big smile, kept putting his arm around Bill's shoulder, who would—with a smile back—shrug it off.

When we left and were walking in the street back to the Ile, the first thing Ron said to me, was: "They were gay, weren't they?"

And I said, "Yes."

Ron said, "Yeah, about halfway through, it dawned on me that something wasn't . . . well, quite what I thought."

And Bill said, "Gay . . . ? What do you mean? My God, that was a good dinner. That was so nice of them, too, just having us over like that, and not even knowing us . . . !"

But, as I said, this was four years before Stonewall . . . and in another world.

The next day, I went back and Prince Bernard and I spent another pleasant afternoon in bed. But, though he shows up—by name—as a tertiary character in *Nova* (at the Von Rays' dinner party at Sao Orinini), you'll note none of these are incidents on which, a year later, I chose to model either of my stories about matters gay, "Aye, and Gomorrah" or "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones," however coded—though I'm sure it would have yielded a more interesting, certainly a more

characteristic, and probably a richer story than the more traditional (in literary/thematic terms) ones I actually wrote. Yes, a fair amount of picking took place from actual incidents for these as well. But I can think of half a dozen such incidents that I could have turned into short stories far more easily, that I never tried.

But the fact is, *none* of the writing I did about that time—or during that time—gives a direct portrait of my sexual life back then. To repeat, this was three, four years before Stonewall. Back then you didn't write about things like that, except in code. You left clues that people could—sometimes—read, between the lines. But it was actually dangerous to write about them. You could get in real trouble. You could get your friends in trouble. So you didn't do it—not in journals, not in letters, not in fiction. A few brave souls, like Ned Rorum or Paul Goodman, were exceptions—and later on, I tried to fill in a few incidents myself. But basically, that wasn't me.

I tell you this, because it's important to remember, when considering fiction—like "Aye, and Gomorrah"—just how wide a gap can fall between life and literature—and how social pressures control that gap, so that, in looking at, say, the two award-winning stories of mine that deal with matters gay from the second half of the 'sixties, you have to realize they are finally fairy tales in the way my anecdote about the African medical student cruising the park and his friends is not—even though the Science Fiction Writers of America, who handed out the awards, doubtless felt that they were congratulating me for bringing a new level of "mature realism" to the genre, simply because I was dealing directly with something they thought of as sordid and probably wouldn't have recognized it at all if I had presented it in any other way.

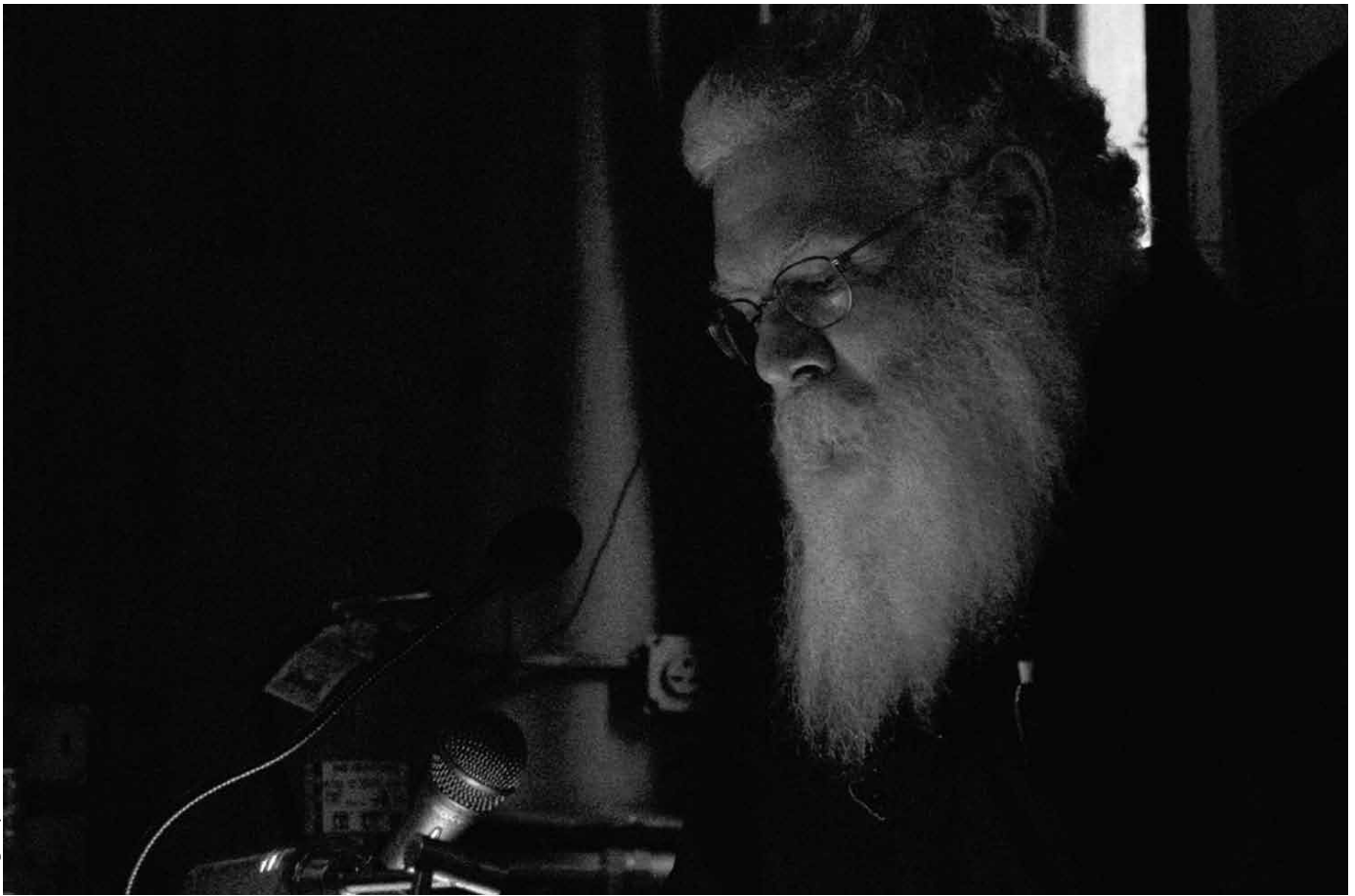
Possibly, at that time, I wouldn't have recognized it either.

For much the same reasons Nabokov says that *Madame Bovary*—famed at its time of publication for *its* realism, it even helped found the *school* of realism—is finally as much a dark fairy tale as "Jack and the Beanstock" and "Sleeping Beauty."

Now, something like "Citre et Trans" at least tries for a sketch of what was going on during some of my time in 'sixty-six in Athens. But you have to remember, even that piece was *written* two-dozen years after the fact, in September of 1990, which, as far as gay politics is concerned, was a different era entirely, twenty years on the other side of Stonewall.

And it benefits from a gay context that straight readers—even today—usually can't bring to it. Certainly not all of my gay encounters led to dinner parties with Senegalese tribal princes. But many of them—now with a Dutch journalist a couple of days later in Paris, now with a young Greek student who wanted to learn English in Athens, now with a young Oxford student on summer vacation in Greece—led to friendly social interchanges that I profited from or, in some cases, not only helped me out but helped out both my straight traveling companions as well. The vast majority of my sexual encounters—often two or three in a day—were pleasant and friendly; so that, when, eventually, back at that little white stone house above the Plaka in Athens, the two Greek sailors my older British room-mate brought home that night raped me, all that other was the context which gave that unpleasant

Image by Hourii B.



incident the meaning for me it had. But the context was not a bland, unmarked, progression of heterosexual encounters with their usual betrayals and break-ups and cheatings. It was a context in which the vast majority of the thousands of sexual partners I already had picked for myself had ranged from friendly and helpful to, at least, sexually satisfactory to me—at their worst!

What I thought I was doing when I wrote “Aye, and Gomorrah,” two years later in ‘66 (still three years before Stonewall), was to write a tale that, with one eye, the reader had to read more or less as a story of an unsuccessful pickup between a woman and a man, but which—with the other eye, as it were—the reader had to read as a story of a gay encounter (also unsuccessful) on the streets of Istanbul. I wanted to “borrow” the pathos from one and dramatize it in the other.

The real irony of the story, by the bye, which no one has ever commented on (at least in my hearing), is that—in the middle sixties, at any rate—while an immense amount of gay street-life went on in Athens and in Paris and in London and in Venice, practically none went on in Istanbul. (I gather some “underground” clubs functioned, but I never found them during my brief two-week stay.) But I found almost no public gay sex in the Turkish capital at all—whereas in Athens, as I have several times put it, in the same months, I had to beat it off with a stick! (But that’s the context against which you have to read the bad choice the gay Englishman, in “Citre et Trans,” makes in Athens, which results in *his* getting robbed and *my* getting raped. He simply hadn’t had any practice for several years, living in Istanbul—whereas in those other cities I’d spotted likely places for gay activity within hours—sometimes minutes—of my arrival!) I don’t know whether or not that’s changed in the years since.

ROZ: You’ve said that the politics of the story are dodgy. Is that because it expresses a deep unease about masculinity, and specifically about bisexuality and what one might anachronistically (in this context) call gender-queer?

SRD: The introduction of the story is, if anything, a way of bracketing the story’s gender expectations. The gender of the narrator and Bo and Muse and Kelly and Lou and the other spacers—with their carefully chosen gender-neutral names—was my way of suggesting that gender is not the point. But the fact that the writing *was* in code is the first thing that tends to distort the politics.

About the only mark of gender that remains in the story is that the narrator, while born male, is feminine enough in his behavior and carriage that a woman who has lesbian or bisexual leanings briefly recognizes that femininity in him when he’s rolling around drunk on the bus station steps of Brownsville. His own response to her recognition is to brush her aside completely. And that’s the last we hear of them.

I don’t know if recounting the somewhat glib inspiration for the story will shed any light on these aspects. But the tale was conceived just at the beginning of the era when commercial pornography was first socially available, as film and books. That is to say, full-length pornographic films were being shown in public theaters and whole lines of pornographic novels were being published by specialty publishers, many in Los Angeles and—a few of them—in New York City.

The age of the five and ten minute home-made reel of eight millimeter porn, sold surreptitiously “under the counter” of the less savory magazine stores and the like around the city’s red-light areas, was coming to an end. At that time I became articulately aware that practically every profession in the country had some sort of sexual

aura connected with it, that was often exploited in this commercial porn: soldiers, sailors, truck drivers, farm workers, policemen; waitresses, secretaries, school teachers, nurses, business women, librarians, house wives . . .

These were the years where we were first hearing about “astronauts.” What was the nature, I asked myself, of *their* sexual aura? I began to pay attention to the pictures of these always white and insistently Midwestern men, bundled up in antiseptically blank high-pressure suits that made anything specific about their bodies undetectable. Then, one day, it occurred to me that what constituted their “sexual aura” was specifically the complete smothering of anything overtly recognizable *as* sexual!

And the idea of the sexually neutered “spacers” came to me. It took the simplest kind of science fiction extrapolation/distortion to bring that off. After sitting in the back of my mind for a month or so, the first draft of the story was written over a rainy day and a night, while I was at the Milford Science Fiction Writer’s Conference, at the home of Damon Knight and his wife Kate Wilhelm—a sprawling, falling-apart mansion called “the Anchorage” in September of 1966, a weekend after Labor Day.

My friend, the English SF writer John Brunner, who read the first draft (in which the “spacer chasers” were called “froiks”), actually suggested “frelk” as an improvement on the slang term for people exhibiting a “free fall sexual displacement complex,” i.e., an intense sexual attraction for the neutered “spacers.”

When I started it, initially I viewed the tale as a piece of social/sexual satire—but clearly something else (basically, a literary cliché from the times) broke into the text, and—for the readers at Milford that year—gave the story an extra power that it otherwise might not have had. Yes, I very consciously decided I would use homosexuality as the model for the “new” perversion the “frelks” represented. But I was actually a little surprised—there in autumn of 1966—that so many people recognized it, or were able to follow along with, what is finally, a sympathetic presentation of the problems my characters have making a connection.

In ‘66, homosexuality was (a) illegal and (b) considered a serious psychological illness. You had to be secretive about it—extremely secretive—even with people you were otherwise relatively open with.

The secrecy and silence that society imposed on the homosexual—along with the concomitant loneliness that went with it—was about the only legitimate literary gay topic you could write about. That is to say, it had become both a political and an aesthetic cliché. And my story is positioned right at the center of that ghastly commonplace.

Unless you were willing to do some serious historical analysis, it was all too easy—especially for young gay men, like myself (I wasn’t yet twenty-five)—to assume that this loneliness was inherent in homosexuality itself, rather than something that necessarily grew out my protective response to the social situation around it:

Since it was a crime, there was nothing wrong with putting people caught practicing it in jail . . .

Since it was a serious mental disease, there was nothing wrong with incarcerating people who practiced

it in mental hospitals . . .

The key to breaking all this up was the realization, eventually, that you weren’t all that lonely after all. A pretty lively society and social structure existed in fact all around it.

But the story reflects almost none of that. Rather, the “isolation-and-loneliness” cliché is very much the one that “Aye, and Gomorrah” is drenched in.

Now women who practiced *heterosexual* sex outside of marriage were often incarcerated in the same way, if their families chose to persecute them—and often they did. (“Lewd and promiscuous behavior”—which was simply another term for sex with someone you weren’t married to, no matter *what* you happened to feel for each other—was the same kind of crime/disease for women.) *All* sex teetered on this dangerous line—although it was much worse for gay people than for straight. With straight sex, people were more willing to look the other way.

Still, when people say that the U.S.A.—not to mention Great Britain—is a profoundly and historically anti-pleasure society, this is the historical situation they are talking about. Yes, things have gotten better, in some senses, but the older forms and all the values that support them are still rampant.

While it’s nothing for me to be proud of, I don’t think in ‘sixty-six I was very aware of gender-queer problems and their social elements. If you’d asked me at the time, probably I would have said I was too busy trying to figure out how to play the hand I’d been dealt.

Because I was gay, I just assumed I’d been dealt an awful one. That’s what society tried to tell us all. And I was only just beginning to intuit that, no, maybe I’d been dealt a pretty spectacular one. Though, yes, I had to go and spend six months hitchhiking around Europe with Ron and Bill—and later I’d come back and live, with my wife, for two years in England, where we had our wonderful daughter together.

ROZ: To what extent is “Aye, and Gomorrah” a story where you were naturalizing sexual issues into SF? and to what extent a story in which you were using SF to explore sexuality issues?

SRD: Well, what I was inadvertently naturalizing—and by “naturalizing” I mean I was *not* subjecting it to any direct dramatic analysis at all—was the attitude that a deep, mysterious and inescapable unhappiness, probably ordained by God, lay at the center of homosexuality, or, indeed, of any paraphilia. I wasn’t yet able to show that unhappiness should be laid, rather, at society’s door, as a response internalized *from* the social situation.

ROZ: What about your “frelks”? In the period when you wrote this, chasers of various kinds were a bit rarer. Or were they? Any trans person reading this now automatically is reminded of our own chasers? Had you had people fetishize you? or felt that you fetishized people?

SRD: Well, the fact is, *all* sexuality is about chasers of one sort or another. Basically in this matter I’m a Freudian: *All* sexuality is fundamentally active. (Freud said “male,” though he went on to clarify in a footnote he later added to the third of the *Three Essays on Sex* that by “male” he was simply using a way—traditional at the time—of saying “active” rather than “passive,” which had nothing to do with gender *per se*, other than as a conventional way of speaking: there’s desire that you act on and desire

that you repress, but both those desires are active. There is no such thing as “passive” desire.) That’s true even if what you’re chasing (or standing around waiting for) is somebody who you want to do something to *you*. And, let’s face it, most of *that*—waiting for tops of one sort or another—grows out of an internalization of the fear of doing something to them that you want to shirk the overt responsibility for: it’ll be more comfortable (read pleasurable) for you if they (say) stick their thumb in your mouth rather than if you have to hunt up a person who will let you suck their thumb—if, indeed, thumbs-in-the-mouth are what you’re after.

Sure, I was a pretty good looking kid. The result was that women and men found me attractive from my early teen-age years on—and from time to time pursued me sexually. Quite possibly when you speak of the “chasers” of transgendered men and women, this isn’t what you’re talking about. Or it isn’t the *level* at which you’re talking about it.

Where *does* the line fall between polite pursuit, chasing, and stalking—though most of us can tell the difference, especially when we’re its focus.

Still, if you want to say that they fetishized me, I don’t mind. When it wasn’t mutual, though, sometimes it could be a nuisance. But by and large, I think of it as a valuable learning experience. That may mean, however, I was very lucky.

ROZ: Part of what the story does is echo and respond to other stories about spacers on leave and spacer bars. Which are normally seen in terms of hyper-masculinity (a good non-SF example is some of the stuff about sailor bars in *V* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*). Any particular sense of responding to the way that version of masculinity excludes the preparedness of a lot of sailors to be gay for pay?

SRD: Yes, that it does. But I’m not sure I follow what you mean—that is to say, I’m not sure I follow how that relates to “hypermasculinization” per se. Sometime in the late sixties, perhaps the early seventies, I wrote Joanna Russ in a letter, that I had decided there were two sides to sexuality. I call them one and two, but I don’t think that has anything to do with which is stronger or more important. I think it can be very different for different people.

What I arbitrarily call the first is what we sexualize in terms of what we are looking for: whatever particular gender with whatever particular traits we’re seeking. Some of those traits don’t even need an obvious relation to sex as it is usually thought of to be the focus of desire. In my case, as I have written about, here and there, at length, it involves men with big hands who bite their nails—the worse they bite them, the stronger my sexual response to them is. I have no idea how that came about, though there are of course a number of intriguing—at least to me—stations in its actual development, the mental wiring for which was clearly in place by the time I was eight- or nine-years old. And, yes, it was a little confusing. But I’ve also known men who were only turned on by the shoes of other men, most strongly by cloth shoes and sneakers. I had a friend once with a wrist-watch fetish: men who wore their watches low on the wrist, partially over the hand, were sexy. Men who wore the watch high on the wrist were a turn off to him—and I remember once telling

a writer friend of mine about this—Bruce Nugent—who said that, while he did not share the syndrome, he completely understood it. And the fact is, I do too. I’ve known men who were only turned on by men who wore colorful fabrics, in shirts and scarves and pants.

And there is the whole range of people who look to receive or give one or another order of pain or restraint.

What I arbitrarily call the second is how we need to perceive ourselves in order to feel sexy—what we assume we must look like or be like in order to be desirable to others. Now, me—I desire masculine men, with, as I said, a focus on hands. To *be* desirable, I need to see myself as masculine—only I don’t need to have the kind of nails that turn me on in other men.

I don’t bite my own nails. I never have or ever wanted to—save as an intellectual *Gedanken*-experiment. Bitten nails in girls or women I find faintly distasteful, though because I’m so attracted to them in men, intellectually I can make allowances for them in women.

Because of that, I’ve had a couple of very close women friends who were nail biters, though there was nothing sexual about the relationship—at least on my side.

Now there’s nothing feminine—clothing, make-up, body type—that strikes me as desirable. I can respond to much of it as beautiful on an intellectual level. Beautiful women can be fun; watching other people’s response to them can be fun. But the idea that someone else, a male say, can respond to any of that—long, polished-nails, long or coiffed hair, high heels—as actually sexual strikes me personally as ludicrous. The best it ever gets from me is a quiet giggle, which I try to repress so as not to bother those who see that as necessary to locate themselves in the circular sexual current we usually think of as full heterosexuality.

Now clearly many gay men desire straight-acting men and at the same time want to be feminine themselves. They feel, in their internalization of a feminine image, that being feminine is way of being sexy. I’ve known the straightest acting men, both heterosexual and homosexual, who, when they drop their jeans, were wearing lace-trimmed sheer blue, without flies—one of whom was a twenty-two-year old American Indian motorcyclist, who stayed with me for a few weeks in the mid-seventies. Though that was never me, I certainly came to recognize it in many other gay men. But at no time in my life, however, would you find me sneaking my mother’s or my sister’s underwear. But because I was wired the way I was, probably that held off my realization—and certainly interest—in matter trans-genderal (gender queer, if you will) for a while.

Because I *was* interested in masculine-acting men, however, I soon learned a number of things about them.

I noticed, for example, that it seems to be the super butch guys—and there are a fair number of them in the gay community—who are the ones who are most interested in their “female side.” Today, these are the ones who least surprise me when they announce that they have decided on a sex change—as I’ve seen happen on several occasions. It’s precisely the ones who have learned how to “perform” masculinity the best who often would *rather* perform femininity.

When I was in the Comparative Literature Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, I had a very masculine acting 28-year-old graduate student who,

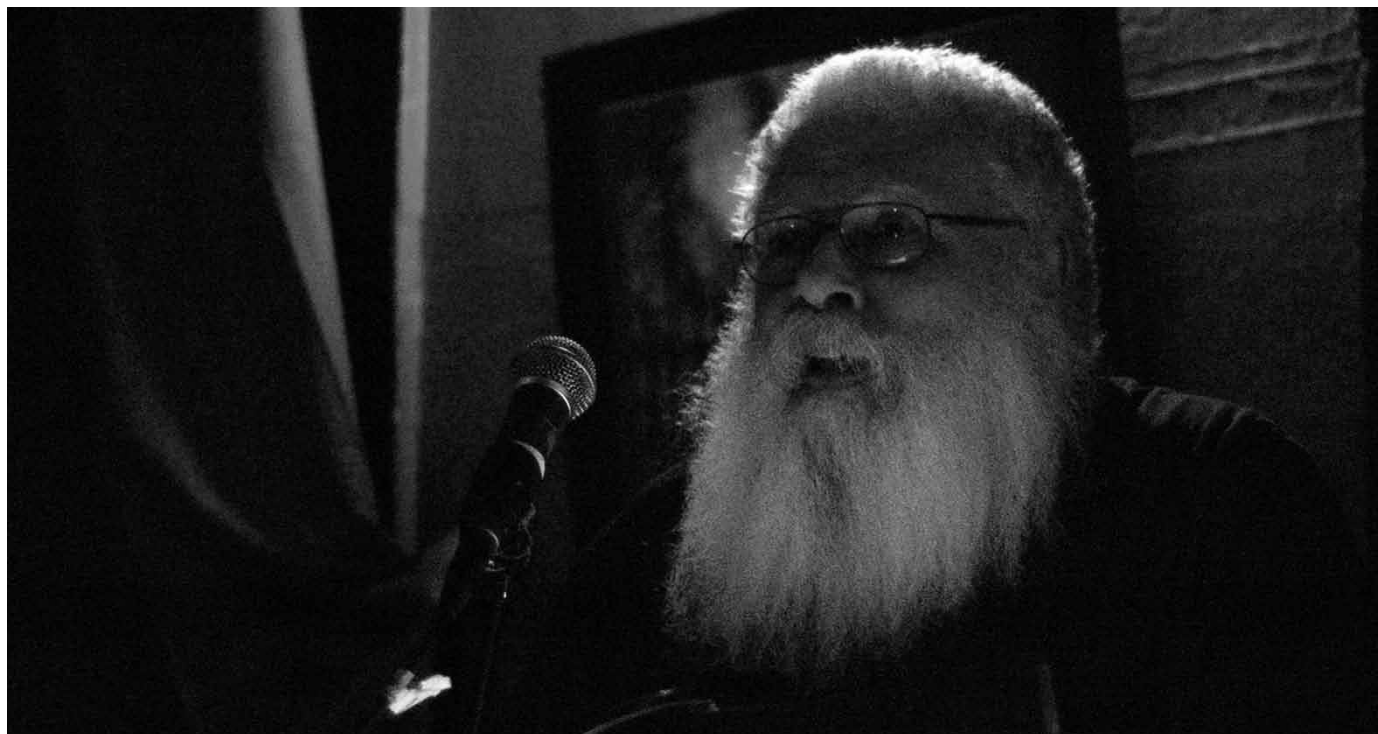


Image by Hourii B.

for the first two years I knew him, never talked about anything gay with me at all. Rather wistfully, at times, he would explain he wanted a girlfriend. But that was it. Then, after two years, one evening, when his mother was coming to visit him the next day, he told me that, between the ages of twelve and seventeen, in the Boston housing project in which he'd grown up, he had lived as a girl, dressing and acting like a girl and going to school as one—and that he'd only gone back to being a man after high school, when he gotten into college.

Yes, I was surprised—and that's not to mention the several students who came to my office to discuss the possibility of surgical gender reassignment, since I was one of the few teachers who discussed gay sexuality, AIDS, and the like in my classes as a matter of course. Thus these things tended to fall into my lap.

I have another friend, often in jail since I first met him at age twenty-one, who is an extremely masculine acting and good-looking German-American. He has sex with men, almost exclusively—though since the day I met him hustling on the corner of 42nd Street and 8th Avenue, he says that's just a convenience, and that he really desires sex with women—specifically Asian woman, the only sort he truly finds sexually attractive. He always thinks about such women when he climaxes. He can't have an orgasm, however, he has regularly explained to me, if he sees his own genitals while he's coming, and his orgasm is all but completely ruined if he sees or touches any of his own ejaculate—so that his own masturbation technique involves doing it inside a clean balled-up t-shirt, which he can only use once, because the idea of former ejaculate in the fabric is so distasteful. (This is why the majority of his sex is getting fellated by other men so that he can visually ignore the fact that he *has* a penis—and a rather large one, at that.) Now in his fifties, he's rarely gone three or four years without talking seriously to me about the possibility of a sex change: since he was a child, he explains, he has had to imagine himself a woman when he climaxes, though when he is not actually having sex, he rarely gives it a second thought.

Probably because the mechanics of my own desire are what they are, these situations rarely make it into my fiction. They are pretty much reserved for my nonfiction writing. Even there, however, the elements that fuel these interests go back to my childhood, but in the form of friends and acquaintances, who now and again have sat down and talked to me about these things. But they enter the precincts of interest along different trajectories.

ROZ: I've always read Cyril M Kornbluth's "The Altar at Midnight" as a coded story about cruising. I've never heard anything to indicate that this is the case, but my instinct drops heavy hints nonetheless. Did you know that story? And is there an element of response to it?

SRD: I only read Kornbluth's 1952 tale this morning—I'm *pretty* sure for the first time—after you mentioned it to me yesterday. It's possible I read it in *Galaxy* when it was first published: that was the year, at summer camp—I was ten—I began reading the magazine. The story has a definite gay subcurrent, which—if I *did* read it as a ten-year-old—went over my head. Probably the whole story did. Certainly it left no impression. Believe it or not, it's the first SF story I remember reading that uses the term "spacer" for the people who worked on space ships. Up until now, I would have told you *I* was the first person to use the term—which is preposterous.

Clearly I'm not: Kornbluth's tale predates mine by fourteen years.

The tale is a short-story version of *Ulysses*—specifically the "Nighttown" section. It follows an older narrator who meets a young man in a bar and follows their alcohol soaked evening of bar-crawling through the Gandytown Skid Row, where the kid is trying to get laid.

The young man, in Kornbluth's tale, is a spacer, under twenty-five, and as such he's scarred from his time on the ships—the veins in his face are ruptured from his encounter with hard radiation and unshielded sunlight, and so his visage is webbed with "redlines," which presumably make his skin look like "marbleized rubber" so that it's harder for him to pick up women. One

woman, Mrs. Maggie Rorty (now doesn't *that* sound like a character from Joyce . . .?), in one of the bars they visit, says she finds them "cute."

At one point homosexuality surfaces directly in the tale—rare for SF stories in the nineteen-fifties. For a few minutes, between establishments, they stop in a park where soapbox orators are haranguing the late-night passers-by: "After a while a pot-bellied old auntie who didn't give a damn about the face sat down and tried to talk the kid into going to see some etchings. The kid didn't get it and I led him over to hear the soap-boxers before there was trouble" (p. 271).

Basically the incident serves to clear the elderly narrator's own interest in the young man of any hint of homosexuality: since the narrator presents himself as protecting the young spacer from a homosexual pick up, he can't be guilty of wanting to do the same thing himself, now, can he?

Unless, of course, you think he's protesting too much ...

But then the question becomes what *is* his interest in this young fellow?

The resolution comes in the story's last paragraph. The kid wants to know, drunkenly, did he offend Miz Rorty, the one woman with whom he had a chance, by giving her his cigarette lighter . . . The narrator assures him that he was a perfect gentleman, then puts the young man in a cab and sends him with the driver to the YMCA. (If the narrator is read as repressing a sexual interest in the young man, he too is acting the perfect gay gentleman; presumably we are to sympathize . . . Indeed, it appears to be the emotional point of the story.) The kid is driven away in his Taxi.

Now, in the closing paragraphs, the narrator reveals that he is the physicist who invented the space drive that allows people to go into space and their faces to become scarred. His concern is guilt for this young man's—and presumably all such young men's—womanless state. We learn that he does not visit his own wife and children because they will see the redlines on "his own body" (though, for some reason that I don't quite follow, not on his face), unless we are supposed to assume that, at the very end, his face has been scarred all along—though conversation between the younger and the older man throughout the tale does not sound as if the young man recognizes any signs on the elder of his life as a "spacer."

Looking at the story for the first time—and as I said, I have no memory of reading it before today—easily you could read my '66 story as a rewrite of Kornbluth's '52 tale, with the young woman art student taking the place of the elderly physicist.

That kind of coding, if indeed Kornbluth was using it consciously in his tale, produces stories that tend to map onto one another.

But, no, the correspondences are, I'm afraid, accidental. That's the society—and the social cliché—doing the writing for us.

Another aspect of Kornbluth's story interests me, however. Starting with the title, "The Altar at Midnight," the tale is posed as a poetic one. Now it's not the "poetry" of Ray Bradbury or Cordwainer Smith. Not an articulate lover of poetry in science fiction, Pohl uses terms such as "special," and "brightly written" in his general

introduction to Kornbluth. But he's still aware of it as poetry. ("He was a poet before he was a science fiction writer.") Kornbluth wrote well in much the same way that his sometime collaborators, Pohl and Judith Merrill, wrote well. He wrote clearly, in the way his predecessor, Stanley G. Weinbaum, wrote well. He observed his near-future characters—the majority of them ordinary working men, with familiar jobs—carefully.

The poetry was the poetry of recognition.

As Theodore Sturgeon had already taught the SF writing community, half of "poetic" prose was careful observation of the world-that-is-the-case. The other half was "economy"—another word used frequently about Kornbluth's writing. Only then does that all-important *third* half emerge: euphony and grace.

Indeed, if there is something lacking in Kornbluth's writing, euphony and grace are what it is. But as it wasn't in great supply in the writers of the fifties, he still came off pretty well compared with his contemporaries.

These young writers began their professional lives in their teens. They were smart and learned quickly. They fueled themselves with Scotch (or "Hiram Walker's Imperial—or vanilla extract, or elixir of turpin hydrate or whatever we were drinking that night"), though, within sight of the high school often they'd dropped out of, they were not above a free chocolate malted milk provided by Isaac Asimov's mother of a winter Sunday morning at the Asimovs' family candy store on the corner across from Brooklyn's snowy Prospect Park.

For better or for worse, Kornbluth aspired to be a poet—as well as a freelance writer. It's hard to tell from Pohl's appreciation at the head of *The Best Science Fiction Stories of C. M. Kornbluth* what his friends thought of his poetic output. (Pohl, Cyril's friend from childhood, suggests that the "M." stood for no name at all and was added by Kornbluth purely for effect; a few articles on Google, however, give his middle name as "Michael," while others repeat that it was a dummy placeholder.) The general silence they maintain on the topic suggests not that the poetry was bad or good, but rather that the whole idea of being a poet at all was a little silly in their eyes, even as its discipline might have given him a writerly edge.

Certain topics ask for poetic treatment—love is one of them, and unrequited love in particular. Poetic writing is, through its intensity, writing that says more than it appears to say. Thus the love that dare not speak its name, in Lord Alfred Douglas's words, lends itself to poetic treatment, in times when it focuses on an expressly forbidden topic.

What we have here is, of course, essentially a literary structure: At its center is a *guilty secret*—and the guilt and the secrecy are both pivotal. The guilt and the secrecy creates a relationship between two persons, one who knows, and one who does not know. I suspect all writers, from time to time, can be drawn to that structure more or less strongly, whether the secret involves gay sex or not. But I suspect it's hard to write a story using such a structure, possibly for its poetic potential, that is not going seem, to some readers, a coded gay tale—even to the surprise of the author; which I think may have been what happened here.

June 6th, 2010

AVATAR: THE NEW FANTASTIC HORIZONS OF ONEIRIC JUSTICE

Roberto Quaglia
trans. Teo Popescu

That *Avatar* represents a milestone in the history of cinematography is an almost unanimous opinion. I believe that its real novelty resides in what it achieves beyond the history of cinematography.

In reality, our relationship to the outside world is to be found in our brains, or, in other words, in our mental models. From this perspective, *Avatar* represents a more important juncture than the moment it marked in the history of cinema.

In short, it is mostly a cartoon (how important was it that real actors provided the movements and expressions for the characters?) but we are all talking about it as if it were a “real” feature film. Are we sure we are in our right minds?

This is where the real novelty resides – our minds are ever less capable of distinguishing between reality and fiction. And that is only the beginning.

We must realize that the technical miracle *Avatar* brought about represents a miracle nowadays, in 2011. It is a matter of time until the next technical progresses will turn these techniques into a sort of common standard any film director will be able to use. And, sooner or later, we will also each be able to manipulate virtual reality by using our own personal computer or by accessing the immense power of network computing. So a somewhat hallucinatory future seems to be in store for us and, especially, for the future generations.

The human mind is much more flexible than one might believe, and the vision it has of the outside world may differ incredibly depending on the time and place the human species is in. It is enough to think about the famous story about the beginning of cinematography, when the Lumière brothers screened the first film, over a hundred years ago. It showed the image of a steam engine advancing towards the camera (thus towards the viewers, those who were in front of the screen). It is said that the audience fled in panic, believing that the steam engine was real.

Is the human mind the same today as it was in those days?

It seems not.

Facing the visual sign of a steam engine coming towards them, the only interpretation the minds of those people could generate was that it was a real steam engine which could run them over. And that was despite knowing quite well they were inside a confined space and that behind the screen there was a wall and not a platform. It is quite likely that the story was exaggerated and then turned into legend but, even so, it is a sign that that imaginary train which was just arriving stirred fear and emotions.

Later on, the human mind learned to enjoy films with the help of the so-called process of “suspension of disbelief”. In other words, we know the things we see are fictitious, therefore, we are essentially incredulous, but we skilfully suspend our disbelief during the film and pretend the things we are seeing are real. This is the only way we can watch and enjoy a film, suffer and be happy alongside the characters in it. If a film is bad, the small miracle of this suspension of disbelief doesn’t come true. The story doesn’t captivate us and we find the film a waste of time.

Suspension of disbelief is actually responsible for the fact that we let the music on the soundtrack of a film influence our moods, music without which many of the emotions we feel when we watch a film wouldn’t exist. The first time a film was brought for certain African tribes (quite untouched by modernity) to watch, the question those people asked at the end was if in our world there was always music in the background. If you think about this, it is completely absurd for a film which pretends to be realistic to have music in the background. But you don’t think about it. We don’t think about it. No one thinks about it. We share a common insanity in which the presence of a musical soundtrack in a representation we are watching makes it, paradoxically, more realistic instead of more unrealistic. That is because, in fact, the real world doesn’t have background music. You need the candid innocence of a man from the Bronze Age to realize that, if only for a moment.

For almost a hundred years, suspension of disbelief came in when films showed realistic things – real people,



real places. There were also cartoons which could, undoubtedly, be appreciated for artistic reasons but the only members of the audience who could suspend their disbelief when watching were children. An adult never forgot that he was seeing a cartoon.

Everything started changing with the appearance of special effects.

Things that didn't exist started appearing before our eyes at the cinema and our mind extended the limits within which it could suspend its disbelief. However, we must look at this situation with a critical eye; special effects can often be recognized as such. We playfully pretend to believe that a film filled with special effects is real but, when we want to, we know how to distinguish the truly fictitious parts from those which are truly realistic.

With *Avatar*, the problem gets more complicated.

Logically, we know almost nothing we see is real (as in the case of cartoons), but other, deeper and more important areas of our brain (those that, coincidentally, keep us alive when they make us react quickly to the circumstances of our surrounding environment) aren't so subtle and *believe* what they see. That is why when we watch *Avatar* (and especially in 3D) we have the powerful sensation that everything is real. Cinematic art has reached such a high technical level that it can fool deep and important areas of our brains.

The question is: how is this magical power going to be used by the architects of our future daydreams?

The plot of *Avatar* gives us a few clues about this issue.

The plot line is trite and predictable from every perspective. Some people were visibly bothered by this aspect but, in my opinion, if you want a good story it is better you read a good book rather than go to see the film with the best special effects ever accomplished. In fact, exaggerating a little, we could say that a good story might distract your attention from the special effects. In *Avatar*, the story is "transparent" – in the sense that it is almost non-existent – and all the attention can go to the film's atmosphere. Even the story some pedantic guy may have defined as "one of the best" is, in fact, another stereotype. Then, what good is it?

The leitmotif of the story is this one: to get their hands on the resources of a planet, some earthlings (whom we will call "the bad guys" from now) exterminate without major problems the natives (whom we will henceforward call "the good guys") of that planet. Of course in the end "the good guys" win with the help of an enlightened individual and the friendly biosphere, and the "bad guys" receive their punishment and a boo-boo (those

who haven't seen the film please forgive me for ruining the surprise of finding out the ending for yourselves).

This is, of course, an undisguised metaphor which stands for everything our society, the one we are also a part of, has done (with the Indians in America) and is still doing (with the Iraqis, the Afghanis and, soon, I suspect, with the Iranians).

Obviously, almost 100% of the audience identifies itself with the poor victims.

Is it so obvious?

Wait a minute, why should it be so obvious?

Western society is made of democracies – at least that is what they say – and it is a well known fact that in a real democracy the members of the government (mostly) do the things their voters gave them their votes for. But, outside of *Avatar*, in our real world, we (westerners) have recently invaded a few nations, bombing them and causing millions of collateral victims (according to certain estimations – 1,300,000 in Iraq alone).

These dead bodies have the defect (or the merit, according to the way you look at it) of not having been watched, the moment they spectacularly died, on a screen, in 3D, like the natives in *Avatar*. But the fact that they weren't visible doesn't make them less dead! (The famous Italian saying *Chi non muore si rivede*¹ suggests that, before television and the cinema, death really made someone less visible).

The politicians who have ordered this massacre (or only approved it, in some European countries) are the ones we voted for. "We" means us – the citizens of western countries; in other words, the majority of the audience of *Avatar*. And, strangely enough, those who watch the film don't identify themselves with those who in real life commit – through the politicians that have been delegated democratically – the killing of people in far-off countries. No. They identify themselves with the victims.

Something doesn't quite fit here.

This is an obvious case of cognitive dissonance.

We identify ourselves with the "good guys" when we watch the film, while in real life we are "the bad guys" even though we play this part without realizing it. On the other hand, some of the bad guys in *Avatar* committed genocide without seeing it as such. They really didn't seem completely aware of the consequences of what they were doing.

While reading these lines, many will say they *are not* a part of the group of "the bad guys" because they are *against* the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are *against* the exploitation of children in the factories of

multinational companies located in third world countries (which is a sort of slavery). They are against all of these ugly things.

But... they are against them *in what way*?

Perhaps in the sense that they *no longer vote* for the politicians that commit or approve of these vile things, or maybe they hunt the politicians who break their political promises with pitchforks, barrels of tar and feathers (these being older, more rustic, lynching techniques).

Are they against it in the sense that they *actually* give up *all* the benefits that derive from being "the bad guys"? Western wellbeing exists only because we take away from the rest of the world huge quantities of raw materials and we benefit from the cheap labour of a few hundreds of millions of people. This theft of resources, alongside the modern "displaced slavery" is what brings us our welfare.

I look around me and I don't see too many people willingly giving up these advantages.

In fact, I don't see any.

Some people would choose one or two minor advantages to give up so that they could lie more easily to themselves and pretend they are more virtuous than others.

Some give up the food at McDonald's. Others give up drinking Coca Cola. Bravo! Now, they *are truly* "the good guys"!

Nonsense!

No one, absolutely no one, is willing to give up the benefits that come from their being "the bad guys" and yet they all want to believe deep down that they are "the good guys".

It is very easy to give up eating cheeseburgers, which some may not even like. It is complete nonsense! No one gives up what they really want. The important thing is to be able to convince yourself you are one of the "good guys", preferably with the least effort possible.

Being one of the "good guys" is, in fact, an extremely refined comfort pleasure.

It may even become a gadget soon!

You must have a hard stomach (or a pair of really big balls, however you wish) to be able to enjoy your own welfare knowing you are one of the "bad guys". Normally, knowing you are one of the "bad guys" would ruin most of the pleasure which derives from being born in the richer minority of this world. Those who believe in the existence of life after death also have the following problem: most of the time, being one of the "bad guys" attracts eternal damnation to the torments of hell, rather than a very pleasant eternal stay in Paradise.

That would explain why wealthy western society needs special pagan liturgies to fend off from the conscience of its members the suspicion that they aren't really as "good" as they like to believe.

There is a wide variety of such liturgies and there is something for everyone.

Some are moved by the fate of furry animals and, to feel better, they go in front of opera houses to insult old ladies with mink coats. The common leather jackets are also made of skins taken from sacrificed breeding farm animals (let me remind you that the mink is also a breeding farm animal just like the oxen that, by dying, pay us a homage made of jackets, wallets, purses and shoes). But who knows why these very virtuous persons always

have something against old ladies and never something against biker gangs that, apart from the leather jackets, also wear leather pants – so, according to the same logic, they should be insulted twice.

And I can give dozens of other such examples, but that would distract us from the theme of our discussion.

The core of the liturgy is a ritual in which the person who wants to convince himself that he is one of the "good guys" suffers for one or more of the evils of this world. He may choose from amongst suffering for the victims of a war, for children who die of hunger, for those suffering from an illness (your choice which one), for an animal on the brink of extinction or for a population that was the victim of genocide.

But the indiscreet question is: *to what degree* are these truly virtuous people suffering?

I think Fruttero & Lucentini² tried to quantify the pain of those suffering for the evils of this world.

Firstly, you don't suffer too much for the evils of the world while you sleep. The subconscious doesn't even think of suffering, it prefers to dream. Secondly, when you are at work you don't really have the time to suffer for the evils of the world. If you are really working, it is only normal to have other preoccupations. Then, you eat three times a day. It is hard to suffer during lunch or dinner. If you think about those who are dying of hunger while you are eating you might lose your appetite. So, here we have another few hours in which you don't suffer. Then, there is the television. You watch TV at least a few hours a day, even if only to disapprove of everything they say on it. In this case, we might suffer for the bad quality of the programmes, and then we might be affected by the quality of our own suffering. Also, in life, we speak to other people, right? We speak to relatives, friends etc. It is hard to concentrate on the evils of the world when you are talking about other things. In the end, even when we direct our attention to a tragedy which is worthy of all our suffering we don't quite manage to truly suffer. You can't rule your heart. Sometimes you end up contemplating your own arid lack of sensitivity with sadness. Some other times you manage to feel a little pain, but then your mind adapts and replaces the suffering with a feeling of endurance – so, good-bye pain! When you stop the chronometer, you discover you have suffered for three minutes.

At the end of the day, it means a virtuous person, who is ready to suffer for one or more of the horrendous things that happen in this world, doesn't actually suffer more than the sum of a few whole days a year. That is fairly little for a person who pretends to have higher moral stature as opposed to the rest of the "insensitive", "selfish", "heartless" people.

Therefore, the pain felt for the evils of the world is entirely a virtual experience that exists more like a representation than as a reality... which brings us back to the issue that interests us.

Modern cinematography, whose consummate example is *Avatar*, perfectly and scientifically answers that liturgical need.

When we watch *Avatar* we are "free" to identify ourselves with the victims of the massacres which, in the real world, are committed to our own advantage. We (virtually) suffer when the cute blue aliens are being

massacred. Also in a virtual way we fight alongside these aliens against the “bad guys” (which, in fact, are us) and, finally, we triumphantly enjoy the victory of the “good guys”, with which we have identified ourselves (and who, in the real world, are our victims).

This cathartic liturgy gives us a strong illusory feeling that justice was done. It is an oneiric experience. But our mind functions in an oneiric, or dreamlike, state almost a third of our lives! Sleeping and dreaming are indispensable activities for our mind to produce its own representations of reality. When we watch *Avatar*, we subject ourselves to an oneiric experience designed by the director and shared by all the other viewers. It is a day dream. It is an oneiric experience we need to go through in order to compensate for the fact that we live in an unjust world. In this pre-programmed daydream we are our own victims and, as such, we fight and in the end we make our well-deserved requital. It is, of course, a requital made by our victims which only exists in our minds. But which is enough to make us feel better.

It is the new trend in Hollywood film-making. Think about it! There are increasingly more films in which the horrors of the society we live in are presented, evils that are immediately resolved with a wondrous solution which, in real life, doesn't exist.

Matrix, *V for Vendetta*, *The Bourne Trilogy*, *The Shooter*, *Children of Men*, Michael Moore's films, and many others provide the oneiric experience of a rebellion or a revolution against an unjust system which we recognize as such and which we, at most, like to verbally condemn in order to feel more virtuous.

The more naïve will say that these films are noble because they “denounce the terrible aspects of the system”, they “wake consciousnesses” and other such pretty phrases.

It could be. But I don't really see too many consciousnesses that have been awakened. And, most of all, I don't see any *actual* change in the behaviour of all these people who have experienced an “awakening” of their consciousness.

How is it that the millions of viewers of *Avatar*, after exiting the cinema, don't rush furiously to fill the squares in front of the buildings where the governments they have elected reside, governments that, in real life, are directly responsible for or are indirect supporters of similar exterminations in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere?

The answer is simple. These modern, “politically correct” and “denouncing” films may awaken consciousnesses but their main effect is that of offering an oneiric experience of an act of justice which is lacking in real life. It is a very satisfying cathartic experience. Compared to the past, it is undoubtedly progress. A long time ago, the only way in which you could settle the unrest of the population was through the notorious scapegoat. In the end, the human being is satisfied with very little – the *illusion* that justice has been done is enough. Occasionally, some still need to resort to these old practices. But, most of the times, the cinematic catharsis is more than enough. The scapegoat is entirely a virtual scapegoat. It is represented by the “bad guy” in the film. To make sure that no one was to identify with the bad guy, the main villain in *Avatar* is an almost grotesque human being, who looks like a grossly outlined comic book character to say

the least. That is not the result of the work of a bad writer. It is a deliberate and intelligent choice.

Indeed, these denouncing, “politically correct” films awaken consciousnesses but they do so by sedating their viewers at the same time, through a pleasant catharsis which they reach with the help of an imaginary happy ending. And to awaken the consciousness in that way – progressively and sedating it, at the same time – is very useful; the effect is that the explosive potential a group of not-yet-awakened consciousnesses has is defused. Revolutions usually take place when a critical mass of naïve consciousnesses is suddenly awakened. If you slowly burn the explosive of a bomb, the bomb will no longer explode. It fizzles until the entire explosive powder is burnt. At the end of the day, you end up with millions of awakened yet peaceful people. This is as good as it gets. Once awakened, the risk to reawaken no longer exists.

It may be that the people who create these films don't even think about such effects. The system may have self-organized itself like that. The audience *needs* dreamlike experiences in which the feeling that justice was served (which is quite uneasy in our imperfect real world) is satisfied without turning their everyday lives upside-down. What is more, they are ready to pay for such dreams. And Hollywood doesn't need to be told about that twice.

In other Hollywood productions the manipulation is clearly deliberate and planned. But this is another issue, one that I have written extensively about in my book *Il Mito dell'11 settembre* (The Myth of September 11), where I have also analysed the subtle techniques with which the myth of the September 11 terrorist attack was built.³

Avatar marks a new stage in the development of an exemplary system of oneiric justice. In order for the oneiric justice to fully accomplish its cathartic function, it is essential for suspension of disbelief to function perfectly while we watch the film. The technical and artistic perfection of *Avatar* *wonderfully* accomplishes this.

Of course – as always happens – this is only the beginning.

In the future, not only justice is to be done in an oneiric space but even some important issues such as human rights will be dealt with in that same sphere.

This is especially the case for the right of every one of us to be a hero.

If we watch Hollywood films, it is clear that this important human right wasn't respected enough. The problem is that, in order to feel the least bit like heroes, we must identify ourselves with the characters played by Sylvester Stallone, Schwarzenegger or, if you will, Bruce Willis or Johnny Depp. Somehow this is humiliating. Why do we need to pretend to be in their shoes? Are we such deep shits that we cannot be heroes ourselves?

Since the satisfaction of seeing these films is entirely oneiric, at least they should be done properly. And the future, with the technical progress it will bring, will undoubtedly make that happen.

Once again, *Avatar* shows us the way.

It is important to stress that, in making *Avatar*, they used a technology capable of “avatarizing” the actors in real time, with the help of a computer, so that the director

could control the achievement of a scene without waiting for another person to create the special effects.

It is obvious that this is going to be the predominant technology in the future.

...With a few necessary improvements, of course.

And, since I am a science-fiction writer, I cannot avoid outlining a few speculations.

The most important improvement will be that the viewers themselves will be able to “avatarize” the characters in a film, giving them the appearance of whomever they want. And that, of course, will happen in real time, while they are watching the film. This is going to be quite easy for the films we watch at home, but much more complicated for those seen at the cinema (where our own desires will collide with those of the other viewers). Anyway, it will only be a matter of time until the technical feat is to be achieved in cinemas too. In the future, in order to distinguish ourselves from terrorists, we will all have a chip implanted, which is meant to certify our identity and which could also be used to determine what flow of images should be generated exclusively for us.

“To avatarize” the characters in a film means, for instance, that we will be able to give the hero of a film (or the victim – according to our preferences) our own appearance. Also, other characters could be replaced with the people we wish – thus, we will be able to insert relatives, friends and enemies in the film we want to watch. Why do you need to see Bruce Willis kill a “bad guy” who hasn’t done anything to you when, at the same time, you could be the one who gives your enemy what he deserves?

Some people might wonder, how is your television (or computer, or LCD wall, or whatever will be used in the future to watch films) going to know what you and your friends look like so that it could insert your images in the film?

This will be very simple. The current tendency of different nations to gather biometric data from their citizens, for so-called security reasons, will certainly come to a point where the authorities will start to 3D scan the bodies and faces of all the citizens (and that can easily be done whenever new documents are released or older ones are renewed). After all, if anyone falls ill with terrorism (in the future, they may discover that there is a virus which can transform a model citizen into a terrorist), the authorities might find it useful to have a three-dimensional model of the subject in their archives. The model may also be used to enhance the quality of the video recordings in which the poor fellow appears committing the acts of terrorism caused by the virus. The TV newscasts are always in need of such things.

With the help of privacy laws, the citizens will obviously have the right to choose to give their consent for their own digital avatars to be used in entertainment. But almost everyone will accept. That is because, in order to use the digital avatar of another person in the film we are watching, a small fee will, of course, be paid and a part of it will go to the person to whom that avatar belongs. Therefore, being disliked by many people will become a potential source of income because many people will want to pay a small fee in order to be able to kill you in the worst possible ways in the films that will entertain their evenings. But being loved by many will also bring

in cash.

Likewise, “avatarizing” masses of people will mark the beginning of a new era of great cinematic democracy, in the sense that anyone will be able to become a star. They won’t need to know how to act because their movements and expressions will be borrowed from professional actors who will have lent their bodies for the making of the original film.

Cinema 2.0 will represent an era in which everyone will really be able to be the heroes of their own dreams, and learn to live joyfully with the small imperfections of the real world with the help of the daily purging performed by the grand futuristic cinema of oneiric justice. In the end, actors and spectators will inextricably mix. The human mind will see all these things as being normal. And the moment will come when people will have a hard time believing that there were times when a film wasn’t dynamic, interactive and malleable – responding to their innermost needs.

In a world of collective psychology, a world transformed by these new ways of interpreting reality, even the horizons of politics will expand in directions that today may seem grotesque. Politicians will quickly discover that their voters will be much more tempted to vote for their ideal avatars than for their real selves, so every politician will “avatarize” him or herself with the help of the best stylists. That will be until they realize that, in fact, there is no need for a real, flesh-and-blood, politician to exist behind the avatar that everyone votes for... and that a real person rather tends to bring all sorts of collateral problems better done without. That will be the beginning of a new way of understanding politics.

But the climax of this evolution of politics will have been reached when every citizen will have his own sensory device that will allow him to project his own Avatar either on the candidate for which they vote, or on the winner of the elections. This will be the New World of the Final Democracy, in which everyone will be deeply and schizophrenically convinced they rule the world, and each and everyone will be able to blame themselves for their own possible persecution or oppression. This will be a perfect world in which the only possible revolution will be... the suicide of the revolutionary (or, in other words, self-assassination).

Avatar proves that nowadays more than in the old days – and in the days to come, even more than now – what Marshall McLuhan (the creator of the Global Village theory) argued a few decades ago is slowly coming to life.

The medium *is* the message.

And will continue to be so ever more.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Word for word this means *Those who don't die are to be seen again*; but the Italian expression would be equivalent to the English *Look who is here! / Look who we have here!* (T.N.)
- 2 Franco Lucentini and Carlo Fruttero, two Italian writers; they used to sign their joint work like that – Fruttero & Lucentini – , mainly humorous novels, articles, short stories.
- 3 This book was also translated and published in Romanian and, for those interested, it can be found online. On the site www.september11myth.com you can also find a few chapters you can read for free.

KINCAID IN SHORT: A YOUNG MAN'S JOURNEY

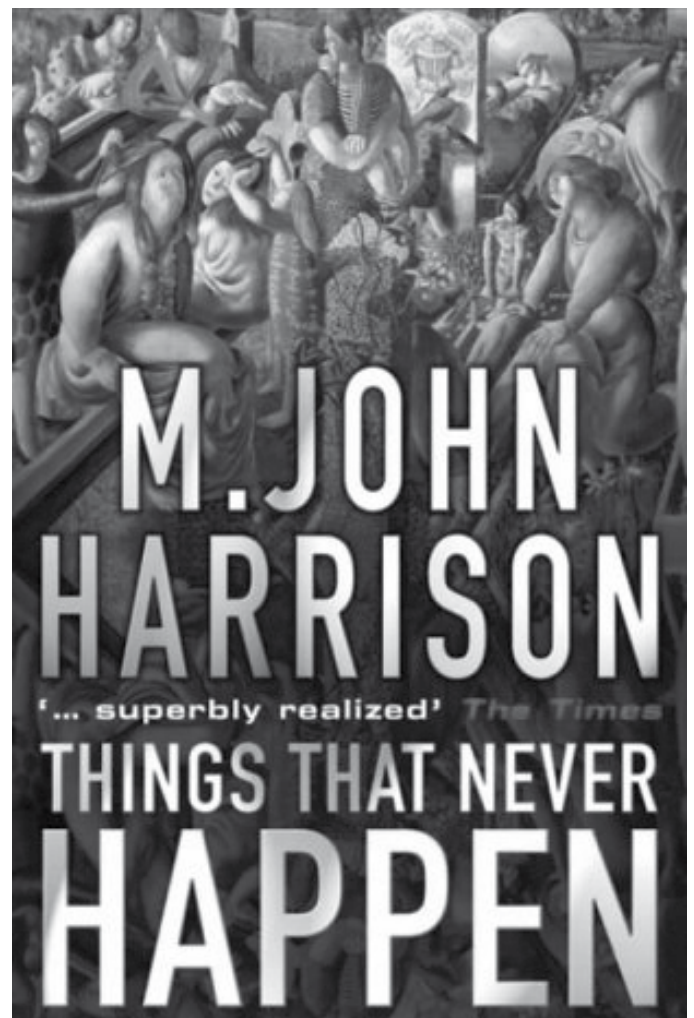
Paul Kincaid

When I first read this story (which, by the way, I consider to be among the four or five best things M. John Harrison has ever written) it was called 'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium' (*Viriconium Nights*, VN, 1985). When I reread it most recently, it was called 'A Young Man's Journey to London' (*Things That Never Happen*, TNH, 2003). In this column I want to look at the impact of that change.

To begin with, let me point out the extent of the change. Every occurrence of the word 'Viriconium' has been changed to 'London'. Nothing else has changed. Thus, the first mention of the city, on the first page of the story, originally read: "We all want Viriconium," Mr Ambrayeses was fond of saying. "But it is the old who want it most!" (VN, 139). In the later version we read: "We all want London," Mr Ambrayeses was fond of saying. "But it is the old who want it most!" (TNH, 159). It seems a simple substitution, as though there is an equivalence between Viriconium and London. We are talking about people wanting to get away, in one instance it is to a place we know to be imaginary though it is assumed to be real within the context of the story; in the other it is to a place we know to be real and assume to be real within the context of the story. The transformation of Viriconium into London, therefore, would appear to effect no substantial change in the character of the story; as I shall point out, it is not really as simple as all that.

Viriconium is a city that has gone through many transformations in its history (reflected in a number of variations on the name, such as Vriko or Uroconium). It first appeared in Harrison's *The Pastel City* (1971), and subsequently in *A Storm of Wings* (1980), *In Viriconium* (1982) and the stories that make up *Viriconium Nights*. And it is not consistently the same in any of those works; anyone attempting to find a coherent geography or history in them is doomed to disappointment. It is, in short, a convenient name for whatever Harrison's gloomy, sour or playful imagination might conjure.

London, by contrast, is real, a city many of us will have visited. It has a long history and its geography has changed over time, but it remains London, a city that has a magnetic pull upon our imaginations (from Charles Dickens to Peter Ackroyd, there are novelists who have written repeatedly about the place, though their inventions have not undermined its solidity). The city



seems to exhibit a similar magnetic pull upon the young, certainly runaways tend to gravitate there, though, despite what Mr Ambrayeses says, the old do not appear to desire it quite so much.

It is tempting, therefore, to say that the difference between the two versions of the story is the difference between wanting to run away into a fantasy and wanting to run away to somewhere real. But that is not how the story plays out, for two reasons: first, in the earlier version of the story, Viriconium does not play the role of a fantasy; second, in the later version of the story, London does not play the role of a reality.

Let me deal, briefly, with the place that Viriconium occupies in the story. We need to start by forgetting that we know Viriconium from other fictions by the same author. In 'A Young Man's Journey', Viriconium is a destination not a setting, and that is a very different function within the story. Indeed, other than in a brief and possibly apocryphal account (for Harrison does not write stories that invite us to trust either his narrators or, even more, those who tell tales to his narrators), we do not see Viriconium in this story. This is a tale about the north of England, the action revolving around Buxton, Manchester, Leeds and Huddersfield, real towns, yes, and within the story they feel particularly so because it is Harrison's familiar landscape of decay and defeat. Places that are described in a gritty and downbeat way tend to come across in fiction as more real than those that are described in a romantic language, though of course there is no reason that this should be the case, and Harrison's Huddersfield is no more real than his London.

What we have here is a story that purports to be about the here and now, about characters who, as so often in Harrison's fiction, survive on hopes that are only half understood, hopes that have long since faded. That's the mood that is presented right from the start, when Mr Ambrayse tells us that it is the old who want Viriconium most. The old tend not to be dreamers after impossible places, people who wish for fantasies; it is the young who want to get away to a better place. What Mr Ambrayse tells us, therefore, is that Viriconium is the name for his fading dreams and for those of another old man who is central to this story, Dr Petromax. These two shuffle about these northern town centres following an arcane pattern that is entirely within their heads, and in a very Harrisonian variant on the pathetic fallacy their cityscapes are tired and run down because they are tired and run down. In a statement that seems to encapsulate the very spirit of Harrison's fiction, he tells us: 'People are always pupating their own disillusion, decay, age' (TNH 169); the three go together, we can no more escape the approach of disillusion and decay than we can escape the approach of age. For old men, particularly old men as out of touch with their own environments as these two seem to be, what comes next is death. Viriconium, therefore, becomes a representation of death that they are always striving towards yet never really wish to reach. And in the brief glimpse we have of Viriconium, it proves to be unwelcoming, rejecting them as thoroughly as they have rejected the world, so wanting and being unwanted merge into a delicious uncertainty that informs the entire story.

But that is if we accept the stories of two strange old men who clearly have their own agendas, even if those agendas are never made clear. However, 'A Young Man's Journey' (and what an ironic title that is when you think about it) is the story of our unnamed narrator, who may or may not be young ('"I'm not old," I said' (TNH 160), though how much should we trust such a protestation?), but who is clearly as disaffected, as detached from his environment as Ambrayse and Petromax. That is why they latch on to him, infect him with their dreams, for they see a kindred soul in the making. And for our narrator, Viriconium can only ever be a whisper in the air, like Egnaro in another of Harrison's stories which has very



much the same affect. Yet the narrator is as disaffected from Ambrayse as he is from his environment; we know all the way through the story that if he were presented with the opportunity to reach Viriconium he would not take it, for that would entail a decisiveness of which he is incapable. For him, therefore, Viriconium may be real or unreal, but it always belongs to someone else, and from Dr Petromax's story it would seem that it is no better and no worse than the world he already knows; it is not the object of his desire. 'A Young Man's Journey' is not about his fascination with the fantasy that is Viriconium; rather, it is about his fascination with the desire for Viriconium that is displayed by Ambrayse and Petromax.

If I claim, therefore, that Viriconium does not play the role of a fantasy, how can I claim that London does not play the role of a reality in exactly the same story, when all that has happened is that one name has been substituted for the other? The point is that Viriconium has the affect of fantasy but within this story plays firmly against it; London has the affect of reality but equally plays against that. Here, 'London grinds past us, dragging its enormous bulk against the bulk of the world' (TNH 161), which already says that this is not part of our world. And when he quotes 'a famous novel' about someone going to London, our narrator comments ironically: 'You can't just fly there, of course' (TNH 162). You can, of course, fly to the London we know outside this story; I have done so, many thousands of other people have

done so; specifically, hundreds of people do so every day from Manchester, from Leeds-Bradford, from other airports within the realm of Harrison's story. But the world our narrator sees in York and Matlock, a world shaped by his own defeats and by the tales of Ambrayeses, cannot exist in the same continuum as London, whether real or imagined; there has to be a perceptual as well as a geographical shift. From where our narrator sees things, you really cannot fly to London; and so the city is removed from the reality of the story, which means that it is equally removed from our reality.

In another sense, it was never in reality. Of an apple tree, Mr Ambrayeses says: 'It bears no flowers in London ... There, it stands in a courtyard off the Plaza of Realized Time, like the perfect replica of a tree.' (TNH 166) In Viriconium, such specific place names as 'The Plaza of Realized Time', though clearly romantic, do add to the verisimilitude of the place. In London, not only do we know that there is no such reference in the A-Z, but we also know that a name like that would be out of place among London addresses. So what adds to the overall sense of place when talking about Viriconium detracts from any sense of place we have when talking about London. And that is just one of a host of geographical references that litter the story. Ambrayeses points out a woman who 'dreams at night of the wharfs of the Yser Canal' (TNH 166); which she might do if she were dreaming of Viriconium, but not if she were dreaming of London. (Ambrayeses is often ascribing such perceptions to people who never speak within the story. To the narrator it is a 'grammatical device which allowed him to penetrate appearances' (TNH 166); to us, it could as easily allow him to ascribe his own fancies to someone else.) And when Petromax finally tells of his visit to London, he reveals: 'We lived there for three months, in some rooms on Salt Lip Road behind the rue Serpolet' (TNH 171). Viriconium, as a literary construct, was made up of influences from many nationalities and times, part of its particular character was derived from the fact that it merged Mediterranean and Northern, Victorian and modern characteristics, so a rue Serpolet would not be out of place there. But roads in London are not called 'rue', so to find a rue Serpolet in London would be to identify London as a city in which these varied cross-cultural influences are at work. In other words, it would identify London as a city that has been made up on the same imaginative model as Viriconium.

London, therefore, raises expectations of reality but plays the role of fantasy. At one point in the story the narrator recalls being taken to a Manchester café by his grandmother.

Along the whole length of the room we were in ran a tinted window, through which you could see the gardens in the gathering twilight, paths glazed with drizzle giving back the last bit of light in the sky, the benches and empty flower beds gray and equivocal looking, the sodium lamps coming on by the railings. Superimposed, on the inside of the glass, was the distant reflection of the café: it was as if someone had dragged all the chairs and tables out into the gardens, where the serving women

waited behind a stainless steel counter, wiping their faces with a characteristic gesture in the steam from the *bain marie*, unaware of the wet grass, the puddles, the blackened but energetic pigeons bobbing around their feet.

As soon as I had made this discovery a kind of tranquility came over me. (TNH 168)

This recollection, of something similar to the stage magic effect known as Pepper's Ghost, comes at roughly the mid-point of the story, and it is the image about which the whole work turns. It renders real Manchester, a city whose particular urban affect might be said to place it slightly outside the small town North of Harrison's imagination, as a place where the real and the magical co-exist, a place thus half way to London or Viriconium. More significantly, this double image of inside and outside superimposed upon one another, this mirroring, provides our most explicit metaphor for how we should see London or Viriconium. We have already been told that the way into London that Dr Petromax found was through a mirror in the lavatory of a restaurant in Huddersfield. 'The mirror itself was so clean it seemed to show the way into another, more accurate version of the world. He knew by its cleanliness he was looking into one of the lavatories of London. He stared at himself staring out' (TNH 165).

London is not a reality, Viriconium is not a fantasy: they are 'a more accurate version of the world'. More accurate than what? Than what we see around us? What does that mean? All that Ambrayeses can mean by 'more accurate' is a world that more closely conforms to his dreams. And all that may be is an image superimposed upon the world. Yet even that reflection seems to take some courage to face. Petromax says one member of his expedition tried to turn back part way through the mirror. 'On the right day you can still catch sight of him in the mirror, spewing up endlessly. He doesn't seem to know where he is' (TNH 171). Yet when the narrator finds the right mirror in the right lavatory in the right restaurant in Huddersfield: 'Except perhaps myself, I saw no one trapped and despairing in it' (TNH 177). Except perhaps myself: anyone looking for a way out, into the reality of Viriconium or the fantasy of London, will see only their own despair, the disillusion, decay and age we have already been told is pupating within all of us.

London, like Viriconium, is a destination not a setting. The story is not about what might be found at that destination, but rather it is about the desire to get there, wherever there may be. And it is a desire that can never be fulfilled, because even if you did manage to reach London, it would not be the London of your imagination. When I first encountered the retitled version of this story I was unhappy with it, I felt that London could not match what was implied by Viriconium. But in the course of this examination I have come to recognize that Viriconium may be more explicit, but London, because of that very disconnect between reality and fantasy, tells us more about the true subject of the story.

Quotations taken from 'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium' in M. John Harrison, *Viriconium Nights*, London, Gollancz, 1985, pp137-158; and 'A Young Man's Journey to London' in M. John Harrison, *Things That Never Happen*, London, Gollancz, 2004, pp159-177.

NOW AND THEN

Terry Martin talks comics

We're going to take a little trip back in time before we look at a graphic novel that's a little more recent. The title to this piece I stole from a Mike Carey story that first appeared in Issue #10 of *Murky Depths*; one of his prose tales, I hasten to add, that we used for a writing competition that Mike judged for us. I'll be dipping into his comics in a future *Vector* column.

While recently searching for resources for a lesson I had planned with my Year 6 pupils, I happened to visit The Works. I don't expect to find any comic gems in a place like that, but it happened. Are you old enough to remember IPC's *Lion* (a competitor of the *Eagle*) and *Valiant*? They were amongst a wealth of UK comics that abounded in the 60s and 70s. Unlike DC Thomson's *Hotspur*, *Victor*, *Wizard*, *Hornet*, etc, IPC's offerings had a larger format and were on better paper. But what had I found in The Works? Two hardback reprints of tales from IPC's offerings I'd read as a kid: *Albion*, itself a reprint of reprints; and *King of Crooks*, the adventures of master crook The Spider drawn by Reg Bunn. But could comics like that, if they appeared now, still draw our younger readers away from some excellently storied console games? Whereas games can be a constant draw, a drug that some can't handle, comics, in my youth, came just once a week, and I think helped (me at least) to resist compulsions later in life. I can still remember that feeling of anticipation when the latest comic weekly arrived in the paper shop (we call them newsagents now) where I worked as a 363-days-a-week paper boy. How many kids would want to do that these days? But I digress again. The Spider was probably the first antihero I'd come across, and probably the first time I realised that 'dark'

was something that moved me more than other kinds of stories. I have to admit that artwork is important to me, I guess that's obvious from what I do, and, at the time, The Spider certainly drew me in. Apparently Titan also publish a collection which includes *The Steel Claw*. I'll be on the lookout for that too.

If you're an *SFX* reader and you like comics then you'll not go far wrong with their spin-off *Comic Heroes* which is slated to be moving from quarterly to bi-monthly. Another indication that comics are on the resurgence and that print isn't yet dead. *Comic Heroes* features a free taster comic called *Sidekick* - offering snippets from various comics - and will sometimes also offer another free comic. In Issue #5 they featured a French comic called *The Day of The Black Sun*, translated and published



Mark Millar's Nemesis goes to work.

in the UK for the first time last year but initially published in 1984. It's the first comic in a series of ten with a *XIII* masthead, the overall title for the series. It starts with a man being found washed up on the shore with a bullet wound to the head by an old fisherman. The man has *XIII* tattooed on his neck. His recovery is helped by a drunk, struck-off doctor. However, the wound to the head has given him amnesia and he sets out to discover who he is, finding in the process that he has amazing skills in fighting and survival. Ring any bells yet? Later he finds he's been left a fortune in a safety deposit box. The artwork is pretty good and does the job, though unsurprisingly it looks a little dated. I'm tempted to buy the next comic in the series, the whole idea of the promotion, only to see if this is a rip-off of the Bourne trilogy. Robert Ludlum's *Bourne Identity* was published in 1980. There are differences, but then you expect differences when a story is told in



Reg Bunn's
The Spider



The cover of *Murky Depths* no. 9, featuring Richard Calder's *Dead Girls*

a different medium. If you liked the Bourne story, and comics, then maybe this is worth a look.

Something else that's worth a look is *Nemesis*, published last year in hardback by Forbidden Planet's imprint Titan. If you're a *Murky Depths* fan you'll know that we don't deal with superheroes, although some may argue that some of the characters we have published could be given that comparison, so you might be surprised at my *Nemesis* choice. Yet *Nemesis*, one of two main protagonists in this story, isn't a true super hero – well, villain actually – just a regular dude with money to make him special. The story revolves around him and detective Chief Morrow who is out to stop *Nemesis* creating havoc and completing his promise of killing Morrow. As you'd expect from Millar, he pulls no punches with the graphics. If you're not keen on blood and guts, although there's probably less here than in *Kick Ass*, then this isn't for you. There's not quite a twist at the end but it's an intriguing revelation that satisfies.

While we're talking of Mark Millar I'll mention *Kapow!* This two-day event at the London Business Centre was his attempt to bring the San Diego Comic Con to the UK. This country is never going to reach the States' dizzy heights and *Kapow!* isn't the first ambitious attempt at a decent comic convention – we currently have a disjointed Bristol Comic Con, spread across two hotels, and, this year, a downsized Birmingham event – but being in London and at a reasonably-sized venue this was a brave effort. It was busy and bustling and loud and sometimes unorganised,

and several people hoping to visit the *Murky Depths* table completely missed us – easily remedied by a plan in the programme – but it was about comics, so let's hope it's something Mr Millar can build on.

Kapow! was also the second big event this year (the fourth overall) that we'd been showing off our latest graphic novel offering, *Dead Girls, Act I – The Last of England*. Everyone mentions the gorgeous production and as a limited edition – there will never be more than a hundred printed and they are all numbered and signed by the author and artist – it's a hugely collectable hardback. SFX reckons it's 'a fiendish futuristic fairytale full of style and invention' and highly recommends it. Is this self promotion? Maybe, but while we're the publishers, and we put Richard Calder and Leonardo M Giron together in the first place, it is their work and I feel, as any publisher should I suppose, that this is truly something special. There are no plans to adapt Calder's other *Dead* books, and in fact *Dead Girls* is based on the film (that was never made) script rather than the 1992 novel. Act II began in *Murky Depths* #16 and, for the non comic fans who may have decided to read this article, it is one of only two comics in that issue. All the other stories are prose. But I'll end on one more quote from the SFX review. This 'graphic adaptation of Calder's acclaimed novel about a plague of sexy cyber-vampire girls in a dystopian future is an absolute cracker' and it's 'one graphic novel that'll leave you with a serious doll addiction'. As you've guessed, I'm addicted.

RESONANCES

Stephen Baxter

During a trip to New York City in December 2010, I found the town full of billboards of a giant Jack Black looming over Manhattan rooftops: an ad for the new movie adaptation of *Gulliver's Travels*.

Jonathan Swift was a satirist. In his most famous work he was out to lampoon then-popular travellers' tales, and to mock our pretensions: The King of Brobdingnag '[took] me up in his right Hand, and ... after a hearty Fit of laughing, asked me whether I were a Whig or a Tory ...' In his later travels Gulliver goes on to much darker adventures of the soul, but Swift was a great story-teller who in his stories of Lilliput and Brobdingnag worked out his scale-change details as scrupulously as any hard-sf writer, and, as demonstrated by the Black movie, the sheer invention and delight of the little-big sections of Swift's book have ensured they have lasted as its most treasured elements.

Of course any biologist will tell you that Swift's Brobdingnagians and the rest are physically impossible. The basic science was figured out by Galileo in 1638, nearly a century before *Gulliver* was published: 'It would be impossible to fashion skeletons for men, horses or other animals which could exist and carry out their functions [proportionally] when such animals were increased to immense weight ...'

This is a pretty good summary of the famous 'square-cube law'. If you grew Jack Black to a Brobdingnagian seventy-two feet he wouldn't even be able to stand, let alone attack you. If his size is multiplied by twelve, say, as in *Gulliver*, his cross-section goes up as the square of the size – a hundred and forty-four times – but his volume, and therefore his mass, goes up as the cube – more than seventeen hundred times. His hundred-plus-times-thicker muscles wouldn't be able to raise his thousand-plus-times-greater weight. Conversely, a Lilliputian Jack Black would be grossly overmuscled, and would leap about like the original *Action Comics* Superman.

Because of such factors, in humans gigantism is essentially a disability. There have been outliers in history, such as the Roman emperor Maximus Thrax, said to have been eight feet five in his toga, and the Child of Hale, nine feet three, whose grave in Cheshire is a local landmark I used to cycle to as a child. According to the Guinness Book of Records the tallest man known to modern medicine was Robert Pershing Wadlow, who died at age twenty-two, nine feet five inches tall. The human body is not designed to be stretched to such a scale, and the lives of 'giants' are blighted by skeletal and circulatory problems.

Nevertheless 'giants' have been exploited in history. The 'Potsdam Giants' was an infantry regiment founded by a king of Prussia - you had to be six feet two to qualify.

The idea was that the soldiers' great height would intimidate their opponents. Its members were always plagued by health issues, and it was disbanded after a defeat by Napoleon.

There are giant animals in the fossil record, of course: the great dinosaurs, and some tremendous mammals of the past. In terms of evolutionary strategies, a species may grow to become too big to be taken down by predators, like the sauropods of the dinosaur age. On an island small species may grow larger in the absence of predation, like the moas of New Zealand – but already large species may grow smaller because of the lack of resources. Thus on islands you may find shrunken elephants, but mice the size of rats or larger.

The largest land animal ever is believed to have been a sauropod called an *Argentinosaurus*, thirty-five metres long and weighing in at eighty tonnes – compared to six tonnes for an African elephant, the heaviest living land animal. The sauropods survived at such sizes by sharing some evolutionary tricks with the birds. They had lungs supplemented by air sacs, so that they could extract twice as much oxygen per intake of breath as a mammal. And the sacs were clustered in their vertebrae, making these bones much lighter. Another advantage was that despite their size they were egg-layers, like all dinosaurs, and with large broods that didn't require much parental attention they were able to bounce back quickly from any drop in population. Conversely, big mammals reproduce slowly, and so tend to be prone to extinctions. However it's thought that the maximum theoretical size for a land animal is higher yet, at about twice the weight even of an *Argentinosaurus* – which would, as it happens, be around the weight of one of Swift's twelve-times-as-high Brobdingnagians.

Maybe because of occasional discoveries of tremendous bones from vanished dinosaurs and mammoths, giants have featured heavily in human mythology. There were the Titans who fought the Greek Gods, and Egia, the Norse giantess whose son guarded the rainbow bridge, and Ravana, the ten-faced Hindu giant. They're there in the Bible too, which featured Goliath, and King Og with his tremendously long bed: 'There were giants in the earth in those days ...' (Genesis chapter six).

And giants and little folk have featured prominently in sf all the way back to ur-works such as *Gulliver* and Voltaire's *Micromegas*. Little (or shrinking) people are generally, but not always, treated sympathetically, such as in the terrific 1957 movie *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952), Terry Pratchett's *Truckers* (1989), and Blish's classic 'Surface Tension' (1952), a favourite of my own. But with giants it's more complex. Some are seen as menaces, such as in the movie



Don't tell the mighty King Kong he's impossible.

Attack of the 50-foot Woman (1958), but King Kong (in the 1933 movie) was regarded with sympathy, as were the giants of HG Wells's *The Food of the Gods* (1904), in which children were force-grown to gigantism with a miracle food called Herakleophobia. Wells' idea was reworked in an episode of *Thunderbirds* called 'Attack of the Alligators!' (1965), whose vividly filmed monsters were anything but sympathetic. Adam Roberts' *Swiftly* (2008), an excellent sequel to *Gulliver*, depicts Lilliputians as clever, scary, elf-like creatures, while the Brobdingnagians, used by the Europeans in war-fighting, are calm and placid. There is a logic to this, perhaps; we associate little squirming creatures with pests like rats and mice, while perhaps our visions of giants derive from a deep memory of a child's view of adults.

The favoured giants of my own childhood were the clumsy villains of the Irwin Allen TV series *Land of the Giants* (1968-70), in which the plucky crew and passengers of the Earth ship 'Spindrift', thrust through a space warp into a world full of giants, were hunted down, picked up, caged, prodded and experimented on, in a show fondly remembered for its cheesy plots and some rather good little-big SFX. As it happens this show's giants were about the same relative proportions as Gulliver's Brobdingnagians.

The show was interestingly reinvented in three tie-in novels by Murray Leinster (*Land of the Giants*, *The Hot Spot*, *Unknown Danger*, Pyramid Books, 1968-9). The veteran writer seems to have had the freedom to reimagine the

show from the ground up. As a result the books are a good deal less cosy than the show, with the characters constantly humiliated by being reduced to the status of vermin, as well as being afflicted with existential angst over the sheer absurdity of their situation. At one point the 'Spindrift's' co-pilot gives an anguished summary of the square-cube law: 'A man that big couldn't exist! If he existed he couldn't move! Double the size of an animal, and you make it twice as strong, but four times as heavy!' (book 1 chapter 3). And yet the giants existed.

New York is a city that often feels to me as if it has been built for giants, for rampaging King Kongs and Jack Blacks, not for petty humans like me. Perhaps this is one reason why we spin our modern tales of giants - it's akin to the relish with which we smash up cities like New York and London in disaster movies; a part of us likes to see our modern Towers of Babel cut down to size.

Perhaps it is just as well the square-cube law prevents humans from splitting into miniature and gigantic variants. The lesson of myth and fiction seems to be that it is difficult to establish sympathy between creatures of such divergent sizes, whether you're looking up or down. How could we coexist? One Brobdingnagian giant would eat as much as two *thousand* ordinary folk consume, so our world, which hosts our billions, could hold a mere few million of *them* - but conversely it could support ten *trillion* of those pesky Lilliputians. The fight for lebensraum between small, medium and large could be horrific on every scale.

Foundation Favourites: THREE HUNDRED YEARS HENCE

Andy Sawyer

So what is it with early science fiction and horticulture? Just as Jane Webb Loudon, author of the 1827 novel *The Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty Second Century* (a previous Foundation Favourite) became better known for her handbooks and encyclopedias about gardening, so we are told that the author of *Three Hundred Years Hence*, originally published in 1836 as part of a collection called *Camperdown: or, News From Our Neighbourhood*, was an honorary member of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. It was the sequel to another collection called, in full, *Our Neighbourhood: or, Letters on Horticulture and Natural Phenomena Interspersed with Opinions on Domestic and Moral Economy* (1831), which begins “This work is written with the hope of exciting a love of horticulture and of rural pursuits, which comprehend in their range a taste for natural science.”

Three Hundred Years Hence has also been called the first known utopian novel by an American woman, and, as Nelson F. Adkins notes in his introduction to the 1950 Prime Press reprint, is structured remarkably like Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), which also begins with a young man in suspended animation waking in a technologically advanced future. Whether Bellamy read it is unknown.

Little seems to be known about Mary Griffith other than that she was widowed in 1815 (or 1830: sources vary). She spent most of her life on her farm “Charlie’s Hope” near Franklin Township, New Jersey, and died in 1877. One of the few reviewers of *Camperdown*, drawing attention to the changes described in the future of *Three Hundred Years Hence*, may have been (the review in the *Southern Literary Messenger* is unsigned) Edgar Allan Poe. According to the *Encyclopedia of New Jersey*, she published, in the same year as *Camperdown*, a book entitled *Discoveries in Light and Vision*.

If *Three Hundred Years Hence* is her best-known work, that is not saying much. The 1950 Prime Press edition, which positions it as an important document in the history of science fiction, ran to 500 copies. The entire text (including introduction) was re-issued, with a short preface by David G. Hartwell, in 1975 as part of the Gregg Press series of reprints. This is the version held by the Science Fiction Foundation. Fortunately, however, there are several internet sites where the novel is posted, and both *Camperdown* and *Our Neighbourhood* are available via

Googlebooks. And a close look at the novel suggests that the claims for its interest and importance are justified.

The frame story – and indeed the story itself – is quickly told. A young man, Edgar Hastings, is about to go on a journey when the steamboat he was supposed to have set out on explodes. The explosion loosens a snowbank above his house, which covers it, and the snow is in turn covered by the peak of a hill which collapses into the valley. The snow becomes ice, hermetically sealing Hastings into his house; and, as he was thought to have been on board the steamboat (and therefore perished in the explosion) nobody bothers to investigate. Until, that is, when three hundred years later a group of workmen, one of whom is Edgar Hastings, the first Edgar’s descendant, start clearing the land for a new street and discover the ice and the building beneath it.

Plausibility may not have been Mary Griffith’s strong point.

However, when we get to Edgar’s tour of the future New Jersey, we get a sense that she was a writer who thought hard about her subject. Although technologically-advanced futures were not exactly rare by 1836, they were uncommon enough to be notable, and Griffiths’ predictions are firm extrapolations from her own era. This is still a world that relies on horticulture, but Griffith has projected not the steam engines of her time but “a self-moving plough, having the same machinery to propel it as that of the travelling cars”. This source of power was, apparently, invented in 1850 by a woman: a woman whose name is not given us but who – when we look at the remarkably skilful passage in which the narrator avoids identifying the inventor – it may not be too fanciful – just could have been the scientifically-curious Mary Griffith herself.

This world also has extensive railway networks and balloons:

“Oh, I recollect, you had balloons and air cars in your time.”

“We had balloons, but they were not used as carriages; now and then some adventurous man went up in one, but it was merely to amuse the people. Have you discovered the mode of navigating balloons?”

“Oh yes; we guide them as easily through



Image from *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*
by Hugh Ferriss (1929)

the air, as you used to do horses on land."

New York has been extensively rebuilt and cities generally are cleaner and more sanitary. War, capital punishment, and the "honour code" which resulted in duelling have long been abolished, thanks to the greater moral influence of women. Griffith says little or nothing about the political system in her future, and while women clearly have equal family and economic rights there is no hint about whether they have the vote. This is, Griffith seems at pains to stress, a morally and physically healthier society than her own, one in which civilisation has made great strides.

Only – as often in many early utopias—race remains as a problem; not so much in this world itself as in the author's way of dealing with it as an issue. Strong and friendly trade-links have been established with China. Slavery has been abolished, by the simple means of buying out the slave-holders and encouraging the slaves to return "home".

"All that chose to settle in this country were at liberty to do so, and their rights and privileges were respected; but in the course of twenty or thirty years, their descendants gradually went over to their own people"

The former slaves are now free and prosperous equals, and while it is easy for modern liberals to look back and sneer, this seems a rather easy optimism. A deeper anxiety arises when Hastings asks after the fate of the

native Americans. His informant's reply is both evasive and guilty. Clearly, there *are* now, in this state and maybe throughout the whole realm, no native Americans. In this sequence, Griffith is clearly referring to what is known as the "trail of tears" of the 1830s, when many tribes were forcibly removed from their homelands in an act of what many (and Griffith seems to be agreeing) would call genocide.

It is not surprising that here, where a rather cosy dream of the future connects with the painful reality of the author's present, is the point where we reach that obligatory concluding point of many utopias. It *was* all a dream. Hastings awakes back home in the bosom of his family. We hope that he gets them out of the house before the snow falls.

Both the horticulture and the foreshadowing of *Looking Backward* may be optical illusions. It is no coincidence that much of the technological innovation forecast in a novel of the early 19th century should be concerned with farming, and the literary devices available for writers to set characters in a fictional future remained largely undeveloped. But the claim that *Three Hundred Years Hence* is an important work of early sf is one that is justifiable. It shows how writers in the first half of the 19th century were already considering the nature of the future; not only the *technological* future, but the actual shape of that future's society. Interestingly, that title, *Three Hundred Years Hence* was to be used again by an English writer in 1881 . . . but that is, perhaps, another story.

THE BSFA REVIEW

The *Routledge Concise History Of Science Fiction* by Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint marks the conclusion of a sustain period of genre activity from the academic publisher. First in 2009 came the *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, a vast work edited by Bould, Vint, Andrew M Butler and Adam Roberts. The prohibitive price put it out of the reach of pretty much everyone but academic libraries until a paperback edition was published at the beginning of the year. It is this edition which Glyn Morgan reviews over the page.

In the course of doing so he notes “the companion to the *Companion*”: *Fifty Key Figures* (edited by the same foursome). I reviewed *Fifty Key Figures* for the online magazine *Strange Horizons* where I suggested the point of the book “is to broadly map a large and fragmented territory in a way that engages the interested general reader and stimulates further investigation.... Of course, by its nature, it is somewhat jagged itself, fifty spikes jutting up from the vast plains of the genre.”

Now we have the *Concise History* – the companion to the companion to the *Companion*, perhaps – which smoothes out that landscape somewhat. At the same time, it brings new risks; *Fifty Key Figures* does at least avoid the “potentially unattainable comprehensiveness that a more conventional history of the genre demands of both author and reader.” This sentiment is echoed by Bould and Vint themselves in their introduction: “Writing the history of science fiction is an impossible task, and even writing a history is daunting.” Their solution is to acknowledge their limitations, set out their boundaries and provide signposting.

So the use of the word ‘concise’ is important. Compare this book, for example, to the recent *Palgrave History of Science Fiction*, edited by Adam Roberts (him again). After dealing with the problems of definition, Bould and Vint devote a single chapter to “science fictions before Gernsback.” Roberts spends six chapters and 150 pages getting to the Twentieth Century. This is not a criticism of Roberts’s book, simply a suggestion that the *Concise*

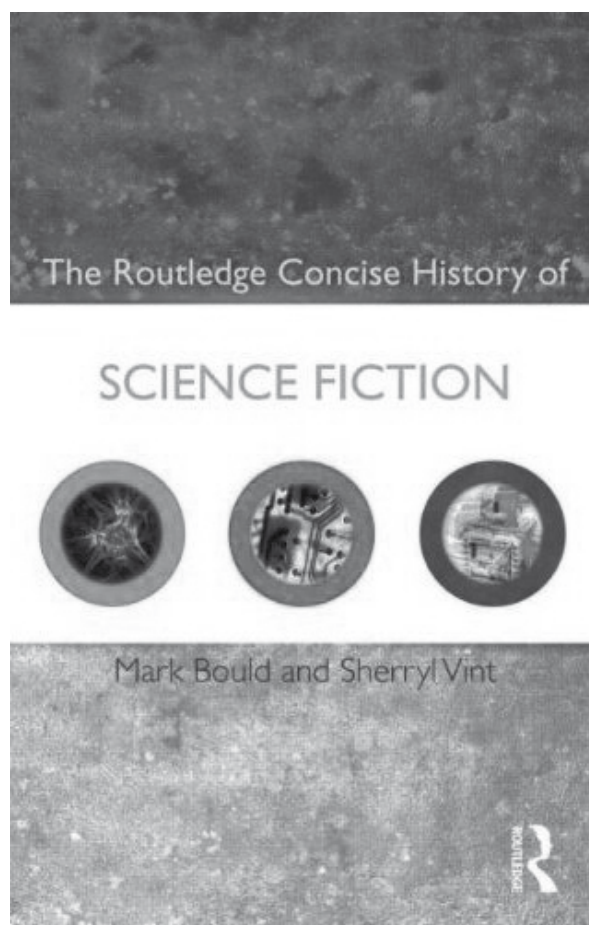
History is more likely to find favour with the general reader, the reader who is perhaps less interested in the genre emerging in the 17th Century as a dialogue between Protestant and Catholic worldviews and more in the themes and concerns of the last eighty years of modern SF.

Each chapter is short - about 20 pages including interpolated text boxes pointing in other directions - starts with a paragraph overview and ends with a bulletpoint summary. We are briskly taken from the Thirties to pretty much Now (the last word goes to China Miéville’s *The City & The City*). From the outset there is an emphasis on a plurality of approaches. For example, in the chapter on the Thirties (“Proliferations”) care is taken not just to address the rise of the pulp magazines but also comics and radio and TV serials. The editors remark that “histories of the genre usually marginalise or exclude such SF” but they are surely right that our collective understanding of what SF has been as much informed by the latter as the former. This careful look at “enrolment”, the way some works are brought into the canon of science fiction and others moved into other boxes (such as fantasy or horror),

lends a gentle but persistent (and entirely welcome) air of revisionism to the book.

Whilst the *Routledge Companion* and *Fifty Key Figures* are clearly primarily orientated towards students, they are also of considerable interest to the general reader. The same is even truer of the *Concise History*, an ideal book for a new SF reader who wants to know where we’ve come from. It is a book I’ve always wanted, a book I wish I had as a child.

Martin Lewis
Reviews Editor



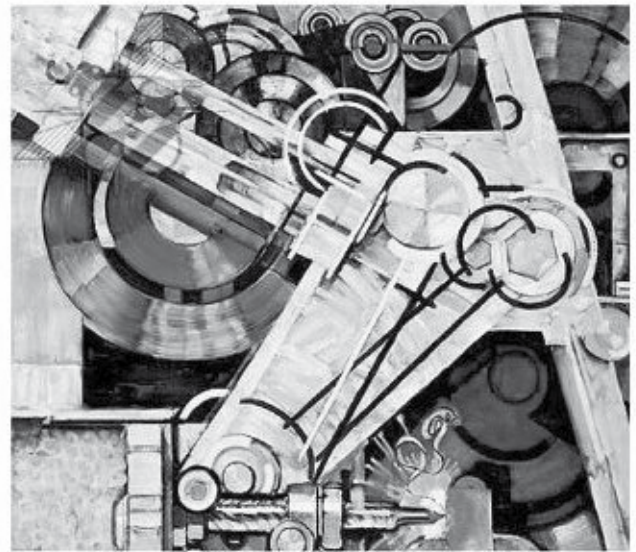
***The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*,
edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sheryl Vint (2009)
Reviewed by Glyn Morgan**

The most impressive aspect of *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* is the breadth of topics it covers. The book divides its chapters into four parts: 'History', 'Theory', 'Issues and Challenges' and 'Subgenres', each part containing essays by many and varied talented scholars on the staples of sf criticism as well as less regularly written on themes and topics. For example, we get the kind of subject-matter we'd expect in such a volume with chapters on 'Nineteenth-Century sf' (Arthur B. Evans), 'Postmodernism' (Darren Jorgensen), 'Space' (James Kneale) and 'Dystopia' (Graham J. Murphy) but then we also get chapters on topics much further from the core study set of most sf academics: 'Golden Age comics' (Marek Wasielewski), 'Fan Studies' (Robin Anne Reid), 'Music' (Ken McLeod) and 'Weird Fiction' (China Miéville), for instance.

This renewed focus on topics traditionally excluded, or at least forgotten, from such volumes was a conscious effort on the part of the editors who recognise that in the struggle to have the genre considered seriously, there has often been too great a focus on sf as prose fiction and subsequently "other media – film, television, comics – and material practices – toys, games, environments – were omitted or marginalized as less serious, less valuable, less significant". With this in mind they have aimed "to bring into dialogue some of the many perspectives on the genre, without striving to resolve this multiplicity into a single image of sf or a single story of its history and meaning." Noble aims indeed! Inevitably, this review must now turn to the question of whether or not the companion achieves these aims.

As I've already indicated, there are indeed a multiplicity of essays on diverse topics. For example, in addition to the aforementioned chapter on 'Golden Age comics', there are also chapters dealing with the 'Silver Age comics' (Jim Casey) and 'Comics since the Silver Age' (Abraham Kawa) as well as another on 'Manga and Anime' (Sharalyn Orbaugh); there are also no less than six chapters dedicated to different periods and forms of film and television, and another on 'Digital Games' (Tanya Krzywinska and Esther Maccallum-Stewart). Whilst this diversification of media is to be applauded and the editors lament that lack of space does not allow them to include chapters on "the longer history of sf, automata, radio, military planning, fashion, toys and games, UFOs and abduction narratives, futurology, the history of science, or sf art", it seems strange that given the attention paid to moving emphasis away from prose fiction, no mention is made – either as a chapter or in the list of omissions – to sf poetry. True, sf poetry is not a large field (certainly not by the standards of sf film or comics) but it exists with its own publications, awards and a small but significant cross-over into the sf mainstream. However, given the otherwise comprehensive nature of *The Routledge Companion* a single omission is hardly a critical failure, indeed the fact I can only think of a single omission beyond those already laid out is testament to the thoroughness of the editors.

In the introduction to *The Routledge Companion*, the



Edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sheryl Vint

editors also acknowledge that they are "conscious of [a] bias toward Anglophone sf from the US, the UK, and to a lesser extent Canada and Australia". This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of a volume being published for 'general consumption' amongst academics in the UK and it would be unfair of me to form a point of criticism on a matter acknowledged as a flaw at the beginning of the book. It is a shame, there's no denying that, but we can only hope it proves true that "perhaps this [book], in recognizing its own contingency, can open up a space for those voices still to be recovered and for those yet to come."

The Routledge Companion contains fifty-six chapters within its 554 pages. All but two of these chapters ('Fiction Since 1992' by Paul Kincaid and 'Alternate History' by Karen Hellekson) have bibliographies after their conclusions which provide details of any secondary sources referred to. It is a shame that these bibliographies are limited to just the references of the essays and include no further reading suggestions, particularly on the aforementioned less commonly analysed topics, and this absence marginally devalues the book's use as a definitive companion to the genre. I can only imagine that such an omission is owed to restrictions of time and space. Similarly, whilst the breadth of topics covered is appreciated, the sheer quantity of chapters runs the risk indicated by Adam Roberts in the opening chapter, 'The Copernican Revolution', that "[t]here is always the

danger that an essay such as this will degenerate into a dry list of titles and dates.” Thankfully, whilst several of the essays have had to sacrifice depth of analysis to accommodate the scope of their subject, the skill of the contributors and editors means that they never reach that point of degeneration and that, crucially, the book maintains its readability.

The question of readability is an important one because it forces us to ask who this book is for. As noted above, the occasional lack of depth to the chapters means they are of little more than a cursory interest to the hardened academic, steeped in the critical reading of a given subject; however, at the same time, the sheer scope of the subject matter on show here means that it is a rare, possibly non-existent, scholar who is an expert in every field presented. On the opposite end of the scale, there is a certain amount of assumed knowledge in many of these essays (with the primary sources, if not the theoretical and critical background). As such, I can readily imagine that a non-academic fan of sf could find the book an interesting but at times baffling glimpse into the world of sf criticism and academia. The *Routledge Companion* is most likely to find its home, then, with students and junior academics, acting as the first in a series of signposts and guided tours that will familiarise them with the wider world of sf and the history, issues and key debates that surround the genre. I can readily imagine that the book will soon be considered a key text on many undergraduate sf modules, especially since the paperback publication being reviewed has lost the prohibitive price-tag of its hardback predecessor.

The Routledge Companion takes a different approach to science fiction compared with other commonly available companions. Primarily, this is because it is separated into four distinct but broad sections which are “designed to provide a survey not only of sf but also of the scholarship surrounding it”. The expressed concentration on scholarship as an integral part of the study of sf leads us to notice a methodological split with other scholarly staples such as *A Companion to Science Fiction* (2005), published by Blackwell and edited by David Seed, or *The Science Fiction Handbook* (2009) by M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas. These texts devote considerable energy (and indeed pages) to analysing key writers and specific texts. *The Routledge Companion* is closer to *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, writ large. They follow a similar line and have chapters on many of the same topics; however, by virtue of its considerably greater size *The Routledge Companion* is able to expand further into the fringe topics which make this companion so notable.

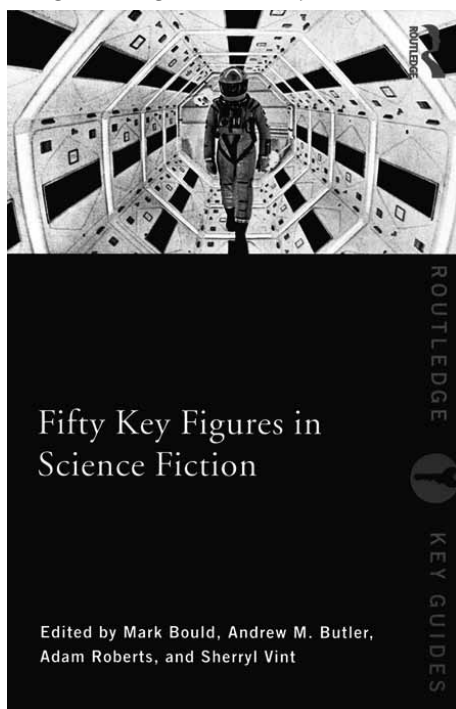
One symptom of these differing foci is that *The Routledge Companion* whilst definitely fulfilling its aim to provide a survey of sf scholarship is consequently sometimes light on the importance of the texts as individual phenomena.

H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, for example, is frequently referred to in the essays on ‘History’ and its importance in the eyes of the chapter writers is clear. However, due to constraints of space or the need to focus on broader issues than a particular text, we are never given an analysis of the kind of depth and critical acuteness that we feel either Wells or *The Time Machine* deserves. It’s worth noting that one rebuttal to this particular criticism has already been produced in the form of *Fifty Key Figures in Science Fiction* (2010), also published by Routledge and edited by the same four esteemed academics as *The Routledge Companion*. In a manner of speaking *Fifty Key Figures* can be seen as a companion to the companion.

For all its diversity of subject matter, *The Routledge Companion* lacks the comprehensive feel of the definitive sf reference guide, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993; 1999), edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls; after all the editors themselves point out topics which are omitted. However, it was never meant to. This is a companion to the genre, not an encyclopaedia. It is a guiding hand that can set you on the path to further and deeper study of one of its many subject areas and whilst it doesn’t necessarily have to be read all at once (or even in sequence), it is designed to be readable, even enjoyable, and it succeeds in these aims admirably. It seems greedy but having read this companion I am eagerly anticipating any future editions which include some of the

omitted material acknowledged in the introduction (or perhaps a second volume of entirely new chapters). This truly speaks to the success of the book as it has achieved what must have been an unwritten aspiration of the editors: it whets the appetite for study and further reading, it leaves you satisfied that you are further informed on its numerous chapter topics but curious as to further developments as well as to issues which are alluded to within its pages.

Overall then, *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* is a strong and significant addition to the corpus of material available to students of sf. It is self-contained enough to be readable on its own merits but only shines brighter when combined with other studies and resources. The editors aim “to bring into dialogue some of the many perspectives on the genre” and whilst there is little interaction between essays (except where they necessarily crossover), simply by placing chapters on the likes of comics or animal studies alongside essays which focus on feminism or Jules Verne within such a knowledgeable and professional volume, they cannot help but inspire the next generation of researchers to broaden their horizons and to compare and contrast these once distant fields. For this reason above all others *The Routledge Companion* deserves a place on the bookcases of not just libraries in universities but of all those who seek to further their understanding of this genre we call science fiction.



The Mervyn Stone Mysteries: Geek Tragedy

DVD Extras Include: Murder and Cursed Among Sequels by Nev Fountain (Big Finish, 2010)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

These three novels are the first in what, if successful, will presumably be a continuing series. In an author's note to *DVD Extras Include: Murder*, Nev Fountain says, "I love murder mysteries, and I love ploughing through entire ranges of mystery books". So why am I reviewing murder mysteries for *Vector*? There is no science-fictional or fantastical content *per se*. The *Mervyn Stone Mysteries* are associational, and at every level that association, which is specifically with BBC television science fiction, even more so with *Blake's Seven* and *Doctor Who*, is emphasised both by the stories and by publisher Big Finish.

Big Finish are well known in British SF circles for producing audio spin-offs from *Doctor Who*. More recently the company has been making some ventures into publishing. The *Mervyn Stone Mysteries* follow our eponymous hero, a former BBC script editor and writer who, like any good amateur TV detective, regularly stumbles into baffling murder mysteries. This happens every time Stone becomes involved again with the world of *Vixens of the Void*, an old TV show which ran on BBC1 between 1986 and 1993. VOTV was Stone's creation and greatest hit, a cheap space-opera not unlike *Blake's Seven*, but set in a future with more Servalans and no Blakes or Avons. Women rule in *Vixens of the Void*.

Today Mervyn Stone - unattached, unsuccessful, with no personal life worth mentioning - partly makes his living appearing at conventions, recording DVD commentaries and getting involved in a US mini-series remake. *Geek Tragedy* opens as Stone arrives at a Happy Traveller hotel hosting *Vixens of the Void* convention Convix 15. We are introduced to fellow star guest, former lead Vixen and aging sex-goddess Vanity Mycroft, mad old actor Roddy Burgess and avaricious promoter Simon Josh. Fountain offers a disparaging portrait of the whole event, fans included, which should do little to endear the novels to a large part of their potential readership.

A full third of the way into *Geek Tragedy* the first murder finally comes as a relief from the stultifying routine of the convention and with help from über-fan Nicholas, a tech-geek who digitally 'improves' the effects work in old episodes of VOTV and Minnie, who provides most of the 'sex!' alluded to by David Tennant on the cover, Stone turns sleuth. The story is pleasingly convoluted, in classic mystery fashion suspicion falling first one way, then another. Eventually there is another murder. And another. The main plotting is mostly careful, even when the events are otherwise farcical. Fatally the narrative, which takes place entirely over the three days of the convention weekend, has a void at its heart, suddenly and unaccountably jumping from late Saturday afternoon to 10am Sunday morning immediately after the second murder. Presumably readers are expected not to notice this or wonder what happened during the missing 17 hours.

DVD Extras Include: Murder is a marked improvement. The plot is more ingeniously twisted, involving an 'impossible' murder in a variation on the classic locked

room theme - the victim drops dead after drinking from a sealed bottle of water, one of 15 or so randomly placed at a DVD commentary track recording session. There is ultimately a huge hole in the murderer's plan, apart from which the reader is left to ponder if independent DVD companies really hire BBC studio space to record audio commentaries and if Christian groups actually picket the recording of DVD commentaries. But the tale does muster some suspense. The third adventure, *Cursed Among Sequels*, is even more labyrinthine but also extremely dull. It is hard to be concerned what happens because Fountain fails to make us care about either the mystery or any of the characters.

Big Finish have put a lot of effort into these books. There are even more nicely produced leather-bound editions but the review copies were well produced hardbacks with lavishly designed covers involving all sorts of memorabilia and artefacts relating to *Vixens of the Void*. Nicola Bryant - once *Doctor Who*'s Peri, now Nev Fountain's copiously thanked other half - even appears on the jacket of *Geek Tragedy* as Vanity Mycroft. Given Vanity's character, that's love. The conceit throughout is that *Vixens of the Void* was a real TV series. To which end the books come with forwards reminiscing about the programme by the likes of David Quantick, Jon Culshaw and Ally Ross. Also reproduced are extracts from fake fanzines and the timetable for Convix 15.

Fountain captures the milieu of British TV SF well. He knows TV production and is good on the details. He also knows fandom and these books feel like a labour of love. It is absolutely apparent that a lot of effort has gone into this project. Certainly Fountain must have had fun working out the history of *Vixens of the Void*. The show is even chronicled in some detail (see link below). It's just a shame the resulting books fail to repay the effort. Where all three fall down is that as comedy, they are almost entirely lacking in wit. It is surprising that the mystery element is stronger than the humour because, as the cover blurb tells us, Nev Fountain is an award winning writer best known for his work on *Dead Ringers*. He has also contributed to *Have I Got News For You*, *The News Quiz*, *Loose Ends* and is a gag writer for *Private Eye*. Even so, all three books are frequently embarrassingly unfunny.

Mervyn Stone himself, a late-40-something working far from the epicentre of the entertainment business and regularly stumbling into mysteries, is a character akin to Jonathan Creek. One might imagine Stone's natural home being a series of 90 minute BBC TV films. Unfortunately on the page Mervyn Stone has none of the likability Alan Davies brings to Jonathan Creek. Rather, he's an aimless, dirty old man just getting by while going nowhere. Given a suitably charismatic actor adaptations of these stories might work on TV but as books there is nothing beyond fannish enthusiasm to recommend.

Sci-Fi London Film Festival

Dinoshark (2010), *Sharktopus* (2010), *One Hundred Mornings* (2009), *Zenith* (2010) and *Super* (2010)

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

I love B-movies. That's why, while most of the rest of the country was sitting down to ogle the frocks and sigh at kisses on a balcony on royal wedding day, I was in a dark cinema in the West End with a bunch of other weirdoes watching a Roger Corman double bill. Anything had to be better than listening to Huw Edwards whisper on and on about hand-made lace and the wonder of monarchy, didn't it?

Well, maybe, but only just.

In his essay 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture' Frederic Jameson describes how Stephen Spielberg's adaptation of *Jaws* (1975) systematically removes a layer of "undisguised expression of class conflict between the island cop and the high-society oceanographer" that is present in Peter Benchley's original novel. I'm not sure if I accept the idea of Hollywood stripping away an author's implicitly political subtext – Benchley, after all, co-wrote the screenplay for the movie. Nevertheless, if Jameson thought that *Jaws* dumbed-down the monster-in-the-ocean genre, I'm pretty sure that sitting through either *Dinoshark* or *Sharktopus* would make his head implode.

Roger Corman (with his wife Julie) produced both these films for the American Sy-Fy channel. They are cheap and they are trashy, as one expects from a film with Corman's name attached, but they are also empty and dull and stupid and that's a disappointment. Roger Corman used to be better than this. Corman is, contrary to his hucksterish public persona, a smart guy. Under his ownership New World Pictures provided the conduit into America for films by Bergman, Kurosawa, Fellini and more. And, later, when a generation of important American filmmakers was emerging inspired (at least in part) by the filmmakers he'd championed he gave the likes of Coppola, Scorsese, Bogdanovich, Cameron, Demme, Howard, Dante, Sayles, Hanson and Towne their first breaks in Hollywood. As a director he made over 60 movies, many are instantly forgettable exploitation flicks but amongst them were strong features like *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961) and *The Intruder* (1962) and films like *A Bucket of Blood* (1959) and *X* (1963) that make up for what they lack in quality with boundless energy and flashes of humour.

Corman hasn't made a film since the pretty awful adaptation of the Brian Aldiss novel *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990) but as a producer he's still delivering up to four movies each year. Sadly his ability or interest in unearthing new talent seems to have deserted him. Timur Bekmambetov, who made the execrable *The Arena* (2001) and *Escape from Afghanistan* (2002) for Corman, is probably the last director of a Corman production to go on to bigger (if not necessarily better) things with the *Night Watch* films (2004-6) and the forthcoming *Abe Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*.

These days Corman is working with the likes of Declan O'Brien (*Sharktopus*) and Kevin O'Neill (*Dinoshark*). I'm sure both men are kind to their mothers and loved by their children but they are shockingly bad filmmakers. These days Corman's collaborators aren't young Turks on the

rise, they're established TV and straight-to-video hacks who've made a career out of tripe. It may be that the film industry has changed. The days of the B-movie getting released to cinema are long gone but even the notion of "straight-to-video" releases are fading from memory. Increasingly the only outlet for low-budget filmmakers who want to make commercial cinema are cable television channels like Sy-Fy. The budgets are miniscule, even by Corman's standards, but more crucially it's a market where there's little creative freedom and no appetite for risk-taking.

So *Sharktopus* and *Dinoshark*. Two intensely stupid movies with interchangeable plots shot in the same Mexican locations, often using the same stock footage, low-rent digital special effects, hackneyed scripts and casts so stiff that to call them wooden would insult trees. If one were looking, *pace* Jameson, for some layer of subtext, some secret pleasure that the masses might eke from the sequence of banal and increasingly depressing images that flash before you while watching this nonsense, then it might be that there is a joy to be found in seeing irritating people die spectacularly, but frankly this has been done better and more amusingly elsewhere.

Not that low-budget movies have to be intrinsically stupid, as Sci-Fi London demonstrated to considerable effect elsewhere in its long and eclectic programme. I enjoyed *One Hundred Mornings* immensely. It is subtle, smart and disturbing and as far removed from the failed kinetics of the Corman double bill as it is possible to imagine. Set in a rural Irish community in the aftermath of some distant apocalypse this is a deliberate piece of cinema, purposefully slow-paced (almost to the point of distraction) and eschewing (mostly) familiar end-of-the-world imagery. *One Hundred Mornings* is at its strongest when it makes the breakdown of community intensely personal. Two young couples, sharing a small cabin, gradually tear themselves apart as it becomes clear that the world around them has also fallen to pieces. This isn't an easy movie. It is bleak and harsh and it doesn't offer much in the way of exposition or explanation and those seeking happy endings should look elsewhere, but there's something powerful here that kept me gripped. Writer and director Conor Horgan clearly has talent and he gets some strong performances from his cast and the cinematography makes great use of the cruel Irish countryside.

Zenith is an altogether flashier proposition than *One Hundred Mornings*. Shot in a mish-mash of styles, *Zenith* is a bit of a mess in places and certainly over-earnest (there's a great deal of impassioned talking to camera and the portentous conspiracy-based plot and contains some glaring improbabilities) but it is, for all that, entertaining. It is set in 2044 in a world where "words are lost" and the numbed population, gene-engineered to be content, pay the protagonist, Jack, for drugs that make them feel pain. Jack also "knows words" and that makes him special. He can express himself and not just follow the paths laid out for him by the (oddly distant) authoritarian forces



One Hundred Mornings: “bleak and harsh”

controlling this future. Jack follows a trail of videos left by his father, Ed, that catalogue his descent from respectable Catholic priest to conspiracy-driven paranoiac. Jack becomes involved with a prostitute, Lisa, who turns out to be as linguistically adept as he is and slumming it from a wealthy background. All this eventually comes together in a mostly satisfying conclusion but *Zenith* is flawed.

Parts of the film are supposed to follow Ed from a video camera carried by his sidekick but the director (Vladan Nikolic, credited as Anonymous) either loses his nerve or can't sustain the artifice because soon we're shown shots that can't possibly have been recorded on the tape. Similarly, in Jack's section of the story, the camera's point of view twitches interminably in a frenetic display of directorial incontinence and, perhaps, a desire to distract us from the film's low budget. It's a shame because it isn't necessary, the use of location and the grimy cinematography work well when they're allowed to take centre stage.

The story also suffers from serious failures of logic. This is an oppressed society where access to knowledge is strictly controlled but Jack (son of a prostitute mother who abandoned him at the age of four and a missing, supposedly deranged, father) is, conveniently, a drop-out medical student. Language is on the decline but there are extensively stocked bookshops. The most fundamental flaw, however, is the sense that even at just 90 minutes, Nikolic is padding out his story with a surplus of sex scenes and fights.

Despite this the film is held together by a strong central performance by Peter Scanavino as Jack and the sheer number of ideas that Nikolic throws at the camera. Many of these ideas are familiar to the point of being clichéd but the energy and conviction of the filmmaking mostly papers over the cracks.

This year's Sci-Fi London festival closed with *Super*, the new feature from *Slither* writer and director James Gunn. It's the story of Frank (Rainn Wilson), an idiot, who first loses his wife (Liv Tyler) to a drug dealer

(Kevin Bacon) and then loses his mind. He has visions featuring an evangelical television superhero The Holy Avenger (Nathan Fillion) and is prompted to dress up as costumed vigilante The Crimson Bolt to fight crime with an adjustable wrench and his sidekick Boltie (Ellen Page). I wanted to love this film but couldn't, despite its fine cast and strong direction. My problem with *Super* was that I've already seen *Defendor* (2009), which covers almost exactly the same ground but has a fantastic performance by Woody Harrelson in the lead role. Wilson's performance here is respectable but he never draws out the deep empathy for his character that Harrelson elicits and, as a result, the film never quite delivers *Defendor's* emotional pay-off. *Super* isn't bad, it was just beaten to the punch.

Sci-Fi London has always given space to short films. There were three separate programmes of shorts this year and the annual 48 Hour Film Challenge delivered a bumper crop of interesting five-minute movies. The judges picked *The Intention of Miles* as the winner. It is a disturbing little film but for my money the first-contact story *The White Box*, with a slightly *Spooks* feel and a strong sense of tension, was the best of the lot. I also thought *Sit In Silence* was a clever and effective piece of filmmaking, enjoyed the ironic slacker apocalypse in *Red Rain* and the well-developed atmosphere of *No Escape*. But you can judge for yourself, the films are all still available to view online via the Sci-Fi London website.

In its early days Sci-Fi London billed itself as the science fiction festival for people who weren't science fiction fans. The tenth iteration of the festival now encompasses the presentation of the Clarke Awards and a growing number of literary events. It is growing every year, gradually encompassing all types of science fiction from the trashy to the profound, but the energy and enthusiasm of festival director Louis Savy is still the obvious driving force behind the scenes. 2011 was another entertaining year that provided much needed respite from the royal shenanigans down the road and delivered a number of treats.

Ignition City, written by Warren Ellis and illustrated by Gianluca Pagliarani (Avatar, 2010)
Reviewed by James Bacon



Warren Ellis is one of Britain's most prolific comic authors and with *Ignition City* he has created a wonderful alternative history science fictional world. Set in 1956, World War II came to a very different end, interrupted by a Martian invasion which has in turn lead to a 'Diesel Punk' world where space transport is the norm. Yet there is a tarnish on the sheen, as interstellar flight has brought its own

problems, optimism diminished by conflict with other life forms. This is the world that Ellis brilliantly captures.

It is also quite the homage to *Flash Gordon* and other pulp Rocket Heroes. For instance, Kharg the Killer, dictator of the planet Khargu, is an ally of Adolf Hitler and is defeated by the first people into space: Lightning Bowman, Gayle Ransom and Doc Vukovic. These are obvious takes on Ming the Merciless, Flash Gordon, Dale Arden and Hans Zarkov. Of further interest to SF readers will be other characters who are nods at the likes of Buck Rogers, Doc EE Smith's Lensmen and Commando Cody. This is a seam of nostalgia that Ellis digs into adds real delight to the story.

Into this world, we follow the adventures (such as they are) of former astronaut Mary Raven, who is coming to terms with the death of her father, Rock, a Cosmonaut. Rock Raven was a British war hero, who fought against the Martians and ended up living ignominiously in Ignition City, a man-made island spaceport where those who can no longer venture into space, yet still yearn for it, find as good a life as possible in the bars and ruins of rockets amongst other outcasts, criminals and space happy heroes. Rock has been murdered and Mary intends to find out what happened to her father, discovering much about him and the grotty world into which he had fallen. Interestingly the story is not so much about Rock Raven as it about Lightning Bowman, sickened with the need to get back into space and perhaps beyond redemption. It is in part this angle that we follow as we see how far he has fallen from his glory days for which he is so desperate.

The artwork by Gianluca Pagliarani is quite good. He is skilful at portraying unrealised technologies and aircraft, quite adequate with the close in character action and inventive with weapons. The characterisation, on the other hand, is lacking a little in depth and could do with a more detail. Similarly, occasionally the dialog seems to stutter and interfere in the glorious visual story that is occurring. Despite these minor quibbles, overall it's a splendid piece of science fiction, Warren Ellis has carefully and cleverly created a world which excites and captures the imagination.

Twin Spica: Volume 1 by Kou Yaginuma (Vertical, 2010)
Reviewed by Nick Honeywell

Ever since she was a young girl, Asumi Kawagama has wanted to become an astronaut.

In 2010, Japan launched its first manned spacecraft, "The Lion". Shortly after take-off, it caught fire and crashed in the middle of a city, killing and injuring many innocent civilians. One of these victims was Asumi's mother, who was badly burned and in a coma for five years before she died. Asumi's friend, Mr Lion - a human figure with a giant lion-mask on his head, like a mascot - was one of the astronauts on the spacecraft.

Twin Spica was originally serialised in 2001 in *Comic Flapper*, a Japanese manga magazine aimed at young men, before being collected in 16 book volumes. Over the last two years, Vertical have been publishing English translations and, at the time of writing, have reached the seventh volume. The first volume opens with Asumi having taken the first test to enter Toyko Space School and trying to figure out how to tell her father. The following chapters then deal with Asumi undergoing a practical test - along with two others who also passed the first test.

Yaginuma's strength in the telling of Asumi's story is his skilful balancing of the human drama with the science fiction conceit. Rather than tell a tale of derring-do, Yaginuma first introduces us to Asumi's life - both in the present and through flashbacks - before taking us on to the first of several tests. Although initially seeming bizarre and arbitrary, they are revealed to be testing the various attributes needed to be an astronaut - such as the ability to cope locked up in an enclosed environment, to get on with and work well with others and to cope with unexpected events.

Among this also, characters tell of their dreams of space: Asumi at five wants to be a "driver on a rocket"; during the practical test, her classmate Kei Oumi talks of how the photographs of Armstrong on the moon inspired her; and Mr Lion tells Asumi about his favourite star, the Twin Spica of the title. Space, Yaginuma seems to be saying, is what dreams are made of.

As well as being a story of science-fiction, *Twin Spica* does shade towards the fantastical in the ghost of Mr Lion, visible only to Asumi. Her oldest and closest friend, Mr Lion encourages and nurtures Asumi's interest in space. In other hands, such a character could be absurd but Yaginuma manages to stay on the right line of things by using him sparingly and to great effect.

The artwork in *Twin Spica* fits well with the story. While to some manga artwork can be full of stylised details and hard to follow, Yaginuma keeps his panels clean, uncluttered and easy to follow, keeping the art detailed enough to ground it in the world of the story but avoiding any excessive stylisations so the reader is always clear as to what is happening.

Rounding off the volume are two short stories, '2015: Fireworks' and 'Asumi', which Yaginuma wrote before *Twin Spica* and reveal more of what has happened in Asumi's past ('2015: Fireworks' in particular tells us more about Mr Lion's story). For those seeking an introduction to Yaginuma's work, 'Asumi' can be found on Vertical's website.

***Mardock Scramble* by Tow Ubukata**
translated by Edwin Hawkes (Haikasoru, 2011)
Reviewed by Alan Fraser

In Mardock City, part of a future nation called the Commonwealth, 15 year old prostitute Balot is bought by a gambler, Shell, who works for OctoberCorp, which controls all the gambling, prostitution and organised crime in the “pleasure quarter”. The outwardly benevolent Shell kills women once he tires of them and has their bodies turned into diamonds, seven of which he wears on his fingers on rings. To gain his eighth diamond, Shell locks Balot inside his car and then sets it on fire. Fortunately Shell is being watched by a private investigator called Dr. Easter and his sidekick Oeufcoque, a self-aware All Purpose Tool who can transform himself into any shape including weaponry. (The principal character names are all egg-related - “Balot” is a fertilised egg with a nearly-developed embryo inside that is boiled alive and eaten in the shell.)

Easter and Oeufcoque rescue Balot at the point of death - her body is almost incinerated, but she survives by being encased in synthetic skin which not only gives her super strength, but also gives her the ability to react with and disrupt electrical fields in her vicinity. Easter explains that the technology that saved her life has been authorised by Mardock Scramble, a set of eggstraordinary emergency laws passed by the city. Balot is asked by her private investigator saviours to use her new skills to help them to bring Shell to justice and also bring down OctoberCorp. Shell meanwhile hires a formidable PI called Boiled (he’s definitely hard!) who used to be Oeufcoque’s partner during wartime, not just to kill Balot but erase her very existence.

People’s memories can be accessed electronically and used in court so Shell has protected himself by erasing the memories of the crimes he has committed. Easter discovers that Shell has hidden his downloaded memories inside four million dollar gambling chips held at one of the casinos he manages for OctoberCorp. Nearly 300 of the novel’s 784 pages (the entire second book and part of the third) are taken up with a casino battle of wits, in which Balot and the Doctor try to turn two thousand dollars into the four million they need to get hold of Shell’s chips, playing poker, roulette and finally blackjack. Even if they manage to get hold of the information in Shell’s chips, they still have Boiled to deal with before they can get to Shell. Although the extended casino sequence slows the action down, it is far from boring, with engaging descriptions of the strategy and philosophy of gambling and gamblers.

Mardock Scramble was originally published in Japan in 2003 in three volumes, winning the 24th Nihon SF Taisho Award. Hawke’s translation of Ubukata’s prose is powerfully visualised, bringing the seedy world of Mardock City vividly to life, with pumping action sequences, such as when Balot discovers the powers of her new body and how to use it and Oeufcoque to defend herself. I could tell while reading that *Mardock Scramble* would be adapted to visual media: it was published as a manga in 2009 (scheduled for English release by Kodansha Comics this August) while the first part was made into an anime in 2010.

***Gantz* (2011)**
Reviewed by Lalith Vipulananthan

Getting run over by an express train probably counts as a rubbish way to start your day but for Kei Kurono (Kazunari Ninomiya) his day is about to get even worse. He finds himself being recruited by a mysterious black sphere called Gantz into a covert war against aliens hiding on Earth. Teamed up with other equally clueless people, including his childhood friend Masaru Kato (Kenichi Matsuyama), Gantz provides the group with powered suits, weapons and a mission briefing before sending them out onto the streets of Tokyo. Like a surreal real-life video game, successful completion of each mission is rewarded by points based on their performance. Night after night they have to kill or be killed, only this time death will be permanent.

This isn’t the first time that a long-running manga has been adapted for the big-screen in Japan. *Death Note* (2006), the *20th Century Boys* trilogy (2008-09) and many others have preceded it and the successful ones often made necessary changes that reflect the difference in pace between a two hour film and a serialised comic. *Gantz*, on the other hand, fails because it makes both too many changes and too few.

At its heart, Hiroya Oku’s ultraviolent manga is a wet dream of guns, tits and gore with bonus satirical commentary on modern Japanese society. The film adaptation strips out all of that and comes across like a Hollywood friendly version that bears only a passing resemblance to the source material. At the same time, the episodic nature of the story is left untouched at the expense of character development. This was always going to take a kicking due to running time but, with a second film right around the corner, a better foundation should have been laid down.

To account for the ages of the two main actors, Kurono is shifted from high-school to university student. In the manga, he is believable because he is a selfish and sex-obsessed brat whose forced draft into Gantz’s bug-hunts empowers him such that he can a) get laid b) become a (better) man and c) get a girlfriend. Skipping a) and b) is missing the point somewhat and, though Kurono appears to get a girlfriend, the relationship is completely platonic. Kato doesn’t come off much better, reduced to worrying about his younger brother and looking pained the whole time. The childhood relationship of Kurono and Kato is central to the manga and could have been used as an anchor for the film yet here is virtually non-existent.

What *Gantz* does get absolutely spot-on is the visual design. The black sphere, suits, weapons and sets are all true to the manga without going down the route of reproducing individual panels a la *300* and *Watchmen*. This is helped by well integrated CGI and quality cinematography, neither of which is often a hallmark of Japanese films. As a final blow, *Gantz* is hamstrung by an atrocious dubbing effort. The dialogue has been badly translated and the voice actors are wooden and lacking emotion, with the result that key scenes induce wincing and laughs galore at wholly inappropriate times. It also makes it impossible to judge the acting. Watch a sub-titled version, if possible, or just go and watch the superior *Death Note* instead.

***Under Heaven* by Guy Gavriel Kay
(Harper Voyager, 2010)
Reviewed by Dan Hartland**

The Nineteenth Century German historian Leopold von Ranke famously asserted that the aim of history was to show events “how they actually were”. For all von Ranke’s continuing influence amongst historians within the academy, there has been endless debate as to what he actually meant by this phrase: should facts, not theory, be the primary information imparted by historians; should they burrow deep beneath facts to discover the ineffable characters of historical phenomena? No one really knows – the reconstruction of von Ranke’s philosophy, as it actually was, has proved impossible.

This, of course, is an historiographical parable. For almost as long as there has been history, historians have questioned their own ability fully to record the past. Into this uncertainty have routinely stepped historical novelists. Some, such as Bernard Cornwell, have sought to support their unlikely fictions with research and explanatory author’s notes; others, including Mary Gentle or Jon Courtenay Grimwood, have chosen to prise further open the gaps between the facts historians uncover. The alternative history is a sort rhapsody of historical uncertainty: the jonbar hinge is the slave whispering into Caesar’s ear.

Within this second tradition, Guy Gavriel Kay has carved an unusual niche for himself. In an author’s letter accompanying the first ARCs of *Under Heaven*, Kay’s latest novel and his first set in the alternative Ninth Century China of Kitai, he writes: “Using the fantastic as a prism for the past, done properly, means a tale is *universalized* in powerful ways.” That is, *Under Heaven*, in common with Kay’s other works, isn’t quite alternative history, certainly isn’t straight history and doesn’t really care. Kay expresses distaste for the “hijacking” of real historical lives for the purposes of fiction; he aims to avoid the inevitable slackening of tension a straight historical novel risks when relating well-worn schoolroom stories; he intends to emphasise the fictionality of his work, the act of creation central to any novel. He seeks to eschew history for fantasy.

This rationalisation doesn’t quite hold. The opening pages of *Under Heaven* include a map, fairly obviously of China and its neighbouring territories; poets who write philosophical *haiku* are key characters; a vast civil service, selected from legions of aspirant scholars by testing and intensive exams, serve an emperor and an imperial house presiding over a Ninth Dynasty. This ‘worldbuilding’ reconstructs almost to the last pebble Tang China, a sophisticated civilisation relying on military force and extensive trade links via the Silk Road, neighbouring Turkic peoples to the west and Mongol tribes to the north. The plot of *Under Heaven*, in which the mourning son of a successful general returns to the imperial court with a priceless gift of 250 ‘Sardian’ horses, is made in large part possible by the same sorts of political, cultural and military conflicts which were ongoing in the years between 800 and 900 AD in China. “You could mask a dangerous comment by setting a poem in the First or Third dynasty,” our hero, Shen Tai, reflects early on. “Sometimes that convention worked, not always. The

senior mandarins of the civil service were not fools.” Well, quite.

Over and above the alternative history, the instances of the fantastic are few and ambiguous: the connection of a Mongol hero to the wolves of the steppes or the recurring images of feared fox-women are never fully resolved one way or the other and remain largely as articles of faith. Kay’s approach to historical fantasy simply changes the names of the real people and places involved for their own protection but the disguise is as transparent as *Dragnet*’s. I’m not sure Kay’s approach is as bold, honest or creative as he often makes out at his website.

This slight oddity of methodology aside, however, *Under Heaven* can be a compelling novel: the story of Shen Tai’s return to Kitai is ornamented with beautiful assassins, greedy Prime Ministers and playful courtesans. We are, then, in the realm of myth, where cliché and stereotypes can be waved away as universal values: the mysterious poet, the treacherous brother, the noble barbarian. All of these character types play a major part in the narrative, which in its effort to embrace the epic often risks the episodic: Shen Tai reaches the court and what the reader has assumed might be the climactic confrontation with Wen Zou, the devious Prime Minister, a little over half-way through the novel; along the way, his own story has been interrupted by that of his sister, married off to a brutal Mongol overlord and rescued by the aforementioned honourable savage. Mid-way through, *Under Heaven* pivots into a story in which a powerful north-eastern military governor rebels against the Emperor and declares a Tenth Dynasty, in the way of Chinese – or Kitan – history. This second spurt of plot, so much broader than a *bildungsroman* focused squarely on just two individuals, requires a shift of tone, with Kay increasingly imposing an historicised voice on a novel otherwise narrated in an immediate, urgent one.

This is in part merely the native patchiness of myth but it also speaks of a book in some need of an extra edit or two. In parts, *Under Heaven* is gripping and visceral: Kay does travel and war well and his politicking is complex enough to satisfy whilst clear enough to follow. His treatment of gender – a clear and deliberate focus, with Kay’s emphasis on Shen Tai’s sister, his courtesan ex-girlfriend, and the Emperor’s favoured concubine – at times retreats from a deftly established, though rather broad, undermined patriarchy (one describes those female characters by their male relationships advisedly); his dialogue snaps more with fortune cookie *bon mots* than it does with distinctive voices. Regardless, there is something dashing about *Under Heaven* which can make it an unevenly engaging diversion.

The changes of tenor and direction, and the stretched similarity of much of its character, test but never quite break the tendons which hold this novel together. *Under Heaven* can be hard work, but it an exercise with a certain vigour.

The Windup Girl by Paolo Bacigalupi**(Orbit, 2010)****Reviewed by Andy Sawyer**

Every so often a novel comes along which is greeted with almost universal enthusiasm. *The Windup Girl* seems to be one of those books which is not only good but, somehow, significant.

It presents one of those near-futures that we fear; recognisably extrapolated from our world but significantly changed. Oil seems to have gone. Energy is generated by the stored potential energy of “kink-springs”, the occasional coal-diesel motor and bioengineered elephants, or “megadonts”. (There are also the “cheshires”, bioengineered cats designed to chameleon-like blend into their surroundings, which have replaced their domestic cousins and gone feral. Every good sf novel has an apparently throwaway creation which sums up its world. For *The Windup Girl*, this is it.)

In Japan, engineered New People (“wind-ups”: “heechee-keechies”) have been created as combined companions, geishas and personal assistants. In Thailand, the novel’s setting, Western calorie companies and bioengineers circle around each other, competing for influence with the government and fighting a losing battle against new blights and diseases. The result is a complex network of conspiracies.

Anderson Lake, one of these “caloriemen”, is attempting to track down the Thai genetic seedbank. The discovery of new bioengineered fruit called the ngaw becomes the maguffin for Lake, who gains information about the possible origin of this fruit from Emiko, the windup girl of the title. Abandoned by her Japanese owner, she is working in a brothel where Lake drops the hint that becomes her own maguffin: a free village of New People somewhere in the north of the country. Obsessed by this, she plans to flee the brothel and find her salvation.

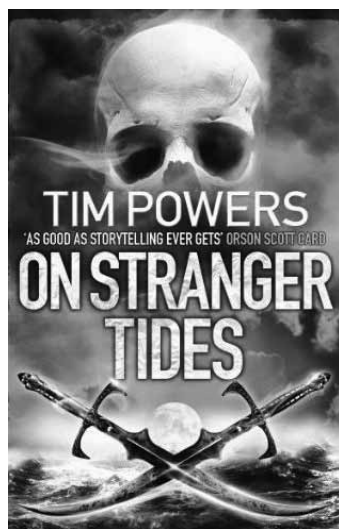
Other characters are similarly in bondage to their dreams and desires. Lake’s assistant is Hock Seng, formerly a shipping tycoon in Malaysia, now a “yellow card” refugee following the genocide of Malaysia’s Chinese population. His maguffin is his dream of regaining his status. Kanya is haunted by the memory by the memory of her commander Jaidee, the “Tiger of Bangkok”. Jaidee’s death is part of the Machiavellian dance between contending factions of the Thai government, lead by the rival ministers Pracha (Environment) and Akkarat (Trade), and the Regent for the Child-Queen, the Somdet Chaopraya. Kanya herself is both tool and actor in this drama. Somewhere upcountry is the renegade genehacker Gibbons, a cross between Conrad’s Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* and H. G. Wells’s Doctor Moreau.

The Windup Girl is what many of its readers have said it is: a novel which does something differently and does it well. Its plot is complex, beautifully counterpointed, and best not summarised too far. It does, perhaps, have one jarring note which prevents it from achieving greatness. Emiko is brilliantly extrapolated from the currently-fashionable notion that Japanese research into robotics is devoted to producing carers for an aging nation. These bioengineered New People have been specifically programmed to obey; usually for domestic purposes but there are hints of military use. Emiko is basically a super-toy; cared for by

her previously owner, but not cared for *enough* that he was prepared to meet the cost of shipping her back to Japan when he was transferred back home. She has little option but to join a brothel and be subject to gruelling and degrading tests of her obedience. To the customers, she is a sex-toy who will do anything she is told to and subject herself to any humiliation she is ordered to undergo. Unfortunately, she plays this role for the reader as well as her clients. The scenes in the brothel are overplayed and sort of what you’d expect. They are certainly a necessary counterpoint to other plot elements (after them, we feel the interplay between the contemptuous Kanya and another New Person who is simply a businessman’s PA more keenly) but also less powerful in depicting Emiko’s bondage to her genetic code than other scenes where her fear, programming and need to hide her tell-tale “ticktock” movements are more subtly shown. Once we are *within* Emiko’s mind, experiencing her as an individual in day-to-day interactions, the idea of what it might be like to be such a “new person” is stronger and more unsettling. Just as unsettling, though, are Hock Seng’s recollections of his previous life and the picture we get through him of the new refugee class.

The novel’s setting is significantly the only South Asian country which has remained independent from Western colonisation and this history is an important (but largely unspoken) element in its characters’ motives and actions. What has happened to the world which (for most of the novel’s readers) we would call “ours” is sometimes unclear: *this* history is clearly one of economic collapse (or a series of collapses) that have wiped away the structures and superstructures of our world. Technology and economics based upon technology have been replaced by bioengineering and it is not clear which of the competing pro-and anti- forces are winning. What we see of Gibbons, after something of an apocalypse at the end, is unnerving. Is the offer he makes to Emiko something to be welcomed or is this a gesture from a mad toymaker?

In the end, I’m not sure that that ambiguity is significant. The novel which *The Windup Girl* most reminds me of is neither *Heart of Darkness* nor *The Island of Dr Moreau*, but Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* which staked out for mainstream readers the science fiction of bioengineering and the arising problems. Despite its popularity, I’m not sure that *The Windup Girl* will reach quite that audience. Its thriller plot-structures and closer focus upon the actuality of what it pictures are both things which would alienate those readers, as would, I suspect, its deliberate distancing of *then* from *now*. In the novel, we are, after all, in the ravaged future it is warning us about. But in an odd way, it is a novel which counterpoints Atwood very well. She has people in (more-or-less) our world entering the future and being disturbed by it. Bacigalupi’s characters, whether *farang* exploiters or ruthless politicians, *live* in that future. They are just not versions of us living in a world we are anxious about but people born in that world who have to make moral choices based upon that world as it is, not as we would like it to be. Awful things happen in *The Windup Girl* but it is not necessarily inhabited by awful people. Which may be the most unsettling thing about it.

On Stranger Tides by Paul Kincaid**(Corvus, 2011)****Reviewed by Paul Kincaid**

When *On Stranger Tides* was first published in 1988 we had not heard of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Of course, now we know that this novel was an inspiration for the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films; now we know that this novel has leant its title and some scintilla of its plot to the fourth episode in the series. Now we know that the commingling of pirates and zombies is wide-screen epic adventure full of spectacular effects

and Johnny Depp pretending to be Keith Richard. Which means that when we re-read the novel now, in this new edition timed to coincide with the latest film release, we are reading a different book.

It means that now, when we read some piece of derring-do by reluctant pirate Jack Shandy, we almost inevitably substitute the name Jack Sparrow, though there is a fair bit of the part Orlando Bloom played in the first film in the character of our hero. Now, when we read of Blackbeard being rowed ashore by a dead man, we visualise Geoffrey Rush and one of his crew, the flesh dropping from their ghostly bones.

The novel is the poorer for the inescapable comparison.

In the Eighties, Tim Powers was on a roll, writing a series of novels that differed in tone and subject: the time travel fantasy *The Anubis Gates* (which featured the fictional poet William Ashbless who provides one of the epigrams in this novel); the futuristic *Dinner at Deviant's Palace*; and the subtle blend of realism and the fantastic in *The Stress of Her Regard*. Within this context, the garish adventure that is *On Stranger Tides* can be seen as part of an on-going experiment with style. But in fact the reference to Ashbless here indicates a more interesting link between these novels. They are all concerned with the Romantic and the Decadent, with a civilisation whose self-regard masks uncertainty and decline. The three novels set in the past all make extensive use of historical figures, Byron in *The Anubis Gates* and *The Stress of Her Regard*, in this novel Blackbeard and Woodes Rogers (the man who rescued Alexander Selkirk, the model for Robinson Crusoe). Byron and Blackbeard are cavalier figures who have set themselves outside the norms of their societies and in circling around these characters the novels provide an edge-on view of the way things are falling apart. And in each of the novels some intrusion of the supernatural (Egyptian gods in *The Anubis Gates*, vampirism in *Dinner at Deviant's Palace* and *The Stress of Her Regard*, voodoo and zombies here) acts as an archetype for the breakdown of the formal, the rigid, the dressy aspect of a rotting society. In *On Stranger Tides*, for instance, it is notable how often Powers describes formal costume, dress uniforms, the ball gowns at a Christmas

party, just at the point that the pirates or the supernatural are going to throw things into disarray.

Given such a reading of the book, it is no surprise that Jack Chandagnac is a young puppeteer (artistry betokens a Romantic spirit) on his way to the Caribbean to confront his uncle who has cheated Jack's father out of a rightful inheritance and thus brought about the father's death (the rightful order of society has been disrupted). But before any of this can come about the supernatural intrudes: pirates, aided by the magic of one of Jack's fellow passengers, capture the ship. Due to a wild and romantic act, Jack finds himself co-opted into the pirate crew (and rechristened Jack Shandy), where he discovers an unexpected affinity for the pirate life.

The plot now effectively resolves itself into a series of quests. Jack still wants to recover his lost inheritance but he is also out to win the love of Beth Hurwood. Beth is the daughter of Benjamin Hurwood, once a professor of philosophy at Oxford University but now eager to use voodoo to bring his dead wife back to life (an academic driven mad by magic is another example of the supernatural representing the overthrow of the establishment). Unfortunately, Hurwood's magic will entail the death of Beth. Meanwhile, Hurwood's creepy associate, Dr Leo Friend, another magician, has his own plans for Beth. On top of all this, Jack's captain, Philip Davies, is an associate of the notorious Blackbeard, with his crew of zombies. And the separate plans of Blackbeard, Hurwood and Friend all entail discovering the Fountain of Youth (Ponce de Leon puts in a delightful cameo), the novel's central quest upon which Jack and Davies find themselves unwilling company.

The succession of opponents – Hurwood, Friend, his uncle and Blackbeard – that Jack must separately face and overcome if he is to rescue Beth and win her love, is perhaps too many. Each climax turns out to be nothing more than the prelude to the next breathless climax. But behind the colour and the swashbuckling, which Powers handles with great aplomb, you sense a more thoughtful work running alongside the adventure. There is enough here – monsters and magic, battles and betrayals – to delight those who just want the thrills and spills of the film recapitulated on the page. But there is more going on in the novel than in any, or indeed all, of the films. Pirate society is presented as wild and free yet at the same time limited and limiting: excessive amounts of alcohol are consumed, society is a ratty camp on a small island, Blackbeard puts everyone in fear and most are simply waiting for the free pardon that Woodes Rogers is supposedly bringing. Yet the society they long for is little better, typified by extreme poverty, lawlessness and corruption. The romance of the pirate adventure and the decadence of actual pirate life places this novel squarely among the best work that Tim Powers has done.

***The Broken Kingdoms* by N.K. Jemisin
(Orbit 2010)**

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

I have not read Jemisin's debut novel, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, but I followed the action of this, the second book in the Inheritance trilogy, easily enough and felt it worked as a standalone.

Oree, a blind artist, is the first person narrator. She lives on the margin of society in the magical city of Shadow but has dealings with many godlings and has been the lover of one of them. One of the godlings is murdered and she finds the body. Then the actions of Shiny, a homeless man to whom she has given shelter, puts her in danger. Oree and those who come to her aid attract the attention of feuding powers, both human and supernatural. Oree's friends are attacked: she and Shiny are kidnapped. She makes alarming discoveries about herself as well as Shiny as she tries to escape and rescue the others.

Oree's voice is a likeable one, persuasive as the point of view of someone who cannot see the ordinary world (though she can see magic) and who has grown up more aware of the other senses accordingly. However, I felt her character was too close to that of a 21st Century young woman, wanting to lead her own life and be in control of her relationships, to be wholly convincing in the hierarchical and traditional society of the novel. But her kindness and determination held my sympathy and her adventures are well paced. I also enjoyed her more reflective flashbacks into her childhood.

The novel provides glimpses of the strange city of Shadow, some gruesome scenes and some idyllic ones, all told from Oree's limited but intense perspective. The impact on her of different kinds of light and the descriptions of her strange eyes provide some of the strongest images in the novel. There are some striking monsters but the most interesting character, apart from Oree herself, is that of Shiny. His physical presence comes across strongly, his indifference to physical harm and lack of feeling towards others are intriguing as well as exasperating. He is the character who changes most and through whom Oree explores the nature of life and love.

I thought early on that this was going to be a murder mystery in a fantasy setting. But the mystery element takes second place to the portrayal of feuds between various deities and cults, in which Oree becomes caught up and which lead to bloodshed and destruction. Oree's world is one of corrupt government, discrimination and tyranny but the novel is not about politics. It deals with personal relationships, played out on an epic scale through the involvement of divine beings. The relationship between gods and humans reminded me of Greek mythology, in that the gods have unmatched power but little moral authority. Oree is able to learn from them but also to push them into learning from her. The novel lacks the depths of an ancient epic and Oree's emotions sometimes come across as a touch naïve but even so Jemisin provides an engaging modern approach to traditional themes.

***The Dragon's Path* by Daniel Abraham
(Orbit, 2011)**

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This is the first in a new fantasy series, *The Dagger and the Coin*. The setting appears to be a classic pre-industrial Vestigial Empire (see Diana Wynne Jones, *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*) created by long-extinct dragons, in which some men with swords and a girl without a sword take a tour of the Map (helpfully provided). In the wrong hands, this could be boringly generic, but Abraham does some interesting things with familiar material. For a start, although we are definitely in Fantasyland (swords, dragons, traces of working magic), it's a Fantasyland close to the cusp of sf. The chief relics of the dragon empire are an Ancient Engineering Project road system made of "dragon's jade" and a species radiation of humanity into thirteen distinct 'races' that could be deliberate genetic modification. Similarly, the magic – blood-borne and possibly infective – could almost be nanotech.

Abraham also discards the moral compass of the classic epic fantasy in favour of a worldview tending towards gritty realism. There are no black-and-white choices, only shades of grey, and more or less enlightened self-interest motivates every character. One of them explains "... there are two ways to meet the world. You go out with a blade in your hand or else a purse... War or trade. Dagger and coin. Those [are] the two kinds of people." This is a long way from the heroic values of, say, *The Lord of the Rings*. There are no heroes here; the man with the best claim on heroic valour, the mercenary Captain Marcus Wester, seems embarrassed by his status and does his best to play down his 'heroic' past. The other main characters are Master Kit, an apostate priest turned actor, Cithrin Bel Sarcour, a banker and incipient alcoholic, Sir Geder Palliako, a bookish young minor noble, and Baron Dawson Kalliam, an old-guard Aristocratic Feudalist. The narrative structure is multiple-viewpoint with chapter-length sections describing the change and growth of each individual in one of those two value systems: Coins, the system of material wealth and prosperity, or Swords, the system of power, politics and violence. Hints of a Tarot-related symbolic underpinning are reinforced by an execution scene which realises the imagery of the Waite pack Ten of Swords.

Now for the downsides. Firstly, there's a notable absence of sensawunda. Normally sf sensawunda is evoked by landscape and tech, fantasy sensawunda by landscape and magic but despite the presence of all three elements in this book, everybody treats everything as routinely mundane. There's no fresh perception, no shiver of unearthly delight, no C. S. Lewis-style Joy. Secondly, although lots of stuff happens, the narrative feels slow-paced. The events all feel like set-up, rather than being meaningful in themselves. Thirdly, and perhaps most fatally, I couldn't really like any of the main characters except Master Kit, who is the least-foregrounded. In particular, it may have been an error to make the character the target audience is most likely to identify with, the character Most Likely To End Up As Dark Lord (the black leather cloak could be a bit of a give-away here). I won't, on balance, make any particular effort to read further instalments because although this narrative is well-crafted, it hasn't made me care.

The Heroes by Joe Abercrombie

(Gollancz, 2011)

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

Earlier this year, in a blog post entitled 'The Bankrupt Nihilism of our Fallen Fantasists', Leo Grin rounded on Joe Abercrombie, accusing him of belonging to a group of writers who were "clearly bored with the classic mythic undertones of the genre, and who try to shake things up with what can best be described as postmodern blasphemies against our mythic heritage". For Grin, "our mythic heritage" comprises the work of J.R.R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard, both of whom he considers to be vastly superior to Abercrombie. Grin claimed not to be interested in fantasy per se but in "something far more rare: the elevated prose poetry, mythopoeic subcreation, and thematic richness that only the best fantasy achieves, and that echoes in important particulars the myths and fables of old". Clearly, Grin has a very particular view of what fantasy should consist of and, equally clearly, Abercrombie's writing doesn't fit that template (although Abercrombie himself acknowledges Tolkien and Howard as influences, to which I would add Fritz Leiber's 'Fafhrd and Grey Mouser' stories). However, it is surely going too far to suggest that Abercrombie is contributing "another small, pathetic chapter in the decades-long slide of Western civilization into suicidal self-loathing", employing 'cynicism, profanity, scatology, dark humor, and nihilism'.

In fact, Abercrombie is doing nothing of the sort. Instead, I would argue, he is doing something that Tolkien simply couldn't, given the social mores when he was writing and his own literary background as a medievalist, and that is to provide the authentic voices of the 'poor bloody infantry' and the villains, voices that are crucially missing from *Lord of the Rings* except in the crudest of examples. Tolkien does not glorify war but he does ennoble it; after all, it provides the refining fire for many of his characters. They are also positioned within a clear moral framework which shapes their behaviour throughout. There is little room for moral ambiguity, which mostly manifests itself in unwise decisions made for what appear to be the best of reasons. However, with the exception of Sam Gamgee, moral angst is the province of the burghers and the nobility.

One of the most striking things about Abercrombie's *First Law* trilogy was his ability to persuade the reader to take a sympathetic interest in the most unlikely people, a prime example being Sand dan Glotka, the swordsman turned torturer. Most memorable of all were Logen Nine-Fingers and his group of mercenary fighters, Named Men such as the Dogman, Harding Grim and Rudd Threetrees, hardened by years of fighting for whoever would pay most. They are skilled fighters who approach battle simply as a job to be done but they have a well developed (if idiosyncratic) moral code.

In *The Heroes*, Abercrombie tightens the focus, concentrating on the three days of battle that ensue when the King of the Union goes to war against the Northmen, now led by Black Dow, another former member of Logen's dozen. The Dogman, meanwhile, is fighting on the side of the Union. And if reference to the Union prompts

thoughts of the American Civil War, the model for this engagement would seem to be, in part, Gettysburg, with the Union forces, confusingly, taking on the Confederate role in this fictional encounter.

Abercrombie's war is anything but glorious spectacle. Instead he gives the reader a polyphonic account of battle, with voices and thoughts from all levels of the two opposing armies, woven into an extended meditation on the nature of warfare itself and the different ways in which it is fought. The Union forces are run according to a strict hierarchy and fights in a highly structured way that cannot react easily to sudden changes in the battle plan. The army's leaders have been appointed not according to their abilities as soldiers but through patronage. As a result the men are ill-led and the army makes many avoidable mistakes. The Northmen's army has a loose-knit structure, with small groups of men who can respond quickly to a situation but who are less easily controlled as a large group. They are, however, led by men who have earned respect, and indeed fear, for their fighting skills. There is a clear sense that Black Dow and his cohorts have some idea of what they're supposed to be doing.

Yet, Abercrombie shows that the warriors of both sides are beset by similar doubts and worries. Corporal Tunny has learned to survive by getting the raw recruits to do his work and would never dream of admitting that he cares about them, yet poignantly we see him writing secretly to the families of those who died to assure them their sons died good and noble deaths. Beck, son of a Named Man, goes to war filled with high hopes of earning glory, only to realise that he simply is not cut out for the fighting life. Craw, Black Dow's Second wonders if he is growing too old to fight; Prince Calder, who seeks peace, discovers he has a talent for strategy and treachery; and Bremer dan Gorst is heedless of danger as he expiates his sins through battle. The inept are often rewarded for their stupidity while the competent remain unnoticed and fighters like Craw and the other Named Men know that the next battle will look pretty much like the last one.

Once again, Abercrombie challenges the received notion of what a fantasy epic ought to look like in what is his darkest novel so far. There is little glory to be found in this epic battle, only profound gratitude at having survived. Abercrombie's characters continue to find a cynical humour in their situation, not to mention looking out for those closest to them. Abercrombie's war may be less ennobling than Tolkien's but his portrayal of it possesses an honesty that Tolkien himself would, I think, have recognised, even if Grin continues to dismiss it as unacceptably nihilistic and inappropriate material for a fantasy novel. I for one am happy to skip the 'mythopoeic subcreation' in favour of this stark portrayal of the consequences of war.

***The Scarab Path* by Adrian Tchaikovsky
(Tor, 2010)
Reviewed by Nic Clarke**

Anyone curious about Adrian Tchaikovsky's popular *Shadows of the Apt* series but daunted by the prospect of starting a story 2,800 pages long - and counting - might want to consider a) handing in their fantasy fan badge (what's 3,000 pages in this genre?) or b) giving the *The Scarab Path* a try because, unusually, the fifth instalment is a good place to begin.

Set in a remote, previously unseen corner of Tchaikovsky's industrialising fantasy world, it's the closest thing to a standalone story this series is likely to see. It isn't completely independent but it tells an entertaining, (largely) self-contained tale and gives a flavour of Tchaikovsky's style and imagination. Pacing and prose have improved somewhat, too, since book one, although plot and world-building remain the major draws. The peoples, or "kinden", of Tchaikovsky's world each share characteristics – inherited and cultural – with a particular insect. Ant-kinde, for example, communicate telepathically and live in mono-kinde city-states, the inhabitants of which share hive minds; Spiders are tall, beautiful, and inveterate schemers; Mantids spend a lot of time tearing each other's throats out with retractable forearm spines; and Flies, well, fly. Kinden fall into two categories: the rational, industrious Apt – Beetles, Ants, Bees – who can design, build and use mechanical devices ranging from locks to trains, and the charismatic, instinctual Inapt – Spiders, Mantids, Moths – who cannot. The latter made up for this lack, historically, by using wiles and magic to manipulate or even enslave the Apt until a revolution curtailed Inapt dominion and ushered in a new, faintly steampunk age. In recent volumes, Tchaikovsky has blurred – thankfully, given the potentially troubling analogy to race in our own world – the line between Apt and Inapt, showing us Ant cultures more different from each other than they are from other kinden; 'halfbreeds' who combine the qualities of both parents (not without meeting considerable prejudice) and free spirits who choose their own life. *The Scarab Path* continues this trend, introducing Scorpions – a tribal people containing both Apt and Inapt – and centring on a Beetle settlement, Khanaphes, whose inscrutable inhabitants have long denied their Aptitude. Khanaphes is an ancient Egyptian city in all but name and Tchaikovsky has fun with the eerie mystery of the city's hidden "masters" and the exploration of the giant pyramid – booby-trapped, obviously – at its centre.

Along the way, the novel investigates how characters' assumptions – from their kinden heritage, the environment they grew up in and a host of personal joys and animosities – colour the way they see the world. Beetle protagonist Cheerwell must come to terms with the steady loss of her Aptitude and new, unwelcome insight into Inapt magic after the events of the previous book; Wasp Thalric, isolated again from the Empire, fears that he has become "some kind of halfbreed of the mind" as he finds himself developing decidedly un-Wasp feelings like compassion. It isn't a masterpiece, by any means, but it's developing into one of the more inventive fantasy sagas out there.

***The Wolf Age* by James Enge
(Pyr, 2010)
Reviewed by A.P. Canavan**

Fans of the adventures of Morlock Ambrosius will no doubt enjoy this third instalment which returns to a traditional continuous action-packed narrative. While the focus remains centred on Morlock, Enge's invention and exploration of the society of the werewolf city of Wuruyaaria engage most.

The inhabitants of Wuruyaaria, divided by 'pack' politics and dominated by a 'survival of the fittest' mentality, are a refreshing change from the werewolves found in Paranormal Romance. Enge combines brutality and unforgiving savagery with rough honour, humour and touching emotion. Through Morlock, the novel explores the intricacies of werewolf politics and the nature of their civilisation.

This exposes both strengths and weaknesses in Enge's writing. The language of the werewolves, divided into day and night speech as befits their dual natures, is unpronounceable. Each name is a cascade of guttural consonants intended to represent the yelps, barks and whines of the lupine throat. The werewolves 'sing' their political speeches just as a wolf howls at the moon. Their concept of honour is called 'bite' and is represented by wearing the fangs of bested opponents as jewellery. In short, it is a deeply imaginative and wonderfully coherent fantasy. However, realistic as it may be, the werewolf language grates on the eyes and is never shortened, either for reader convenience or out of casual familiarity between characters. For example, the supporting characters of Hrutnefdhu, Liudhleoo and Rokhlenu are integral to the story and so their names occur in full with irritating frequency, not to mention the names of every tangential character, area, object and custom. The book resounds with lupine snarls unreadable to the human eye. The language, while entirely fitting, becomes a niggling irritant.

A second lexical problem is Enge's use of science fiction language such as "fourth- and fifth-dimensional polytopes in three-dimensional space" and "juncture of space-time". While this fits with the metaphysical framing narrative of the Strange Gods which Enge uses to propel the story, it also suggests that the setting is a potential far-future, post-apocalyptic world. However, these phrases are jarring in their irregularity and sit uneasily in the midst of more traditional fantasy language and the apparent fantasy setting. While other authors and even genres have integrated the concepts of fantasy magic and sf language, in Enge's case they fall leaden and disrupt narrative immersion.

The last quibble is with the ending which sets up further books in the series and is dutifully climactic but undercuts much of the narrative importance of the preceding two thirds of the novel. As a result, the ending suggests that the entirety of the story has merely been a way-station for a larger story yet to be told.

Despite these problems Enge has written a great fantasy that is imaginative and thoughtful as well as catering for the desires of sword and sorcery fans. The depths of his imagination and his werewolf society need to be read and explored; his howls need to be heard.

Blood and Iron by Tony Ballantyne

(Tor, 2010)

Reviewed by David Towsey

Blood and Iron is the second instalment of Tony Ballantyne's *Penrose* saga, although it is not necessary to have read the first book, *Twisted Metal*, to enjoy this story. In fact, *Blood and Iron* opens with a helpful - if tongue-in-cheek - historical summary of the previous novel.

Penrose is a robot world with different robot nations vying for survival and dominance. Ideologies clash along with metal limbs. The most sought after commodity, unsurprisingly, is metal - not only the source of more wealth but the source of more robots. On Penrose, population growth is directly linked to conquest; landscapes are swept clean of iron ore and foundries pop up like motorway petrol stations.

The story follows five main characters: Kavan, Karel, Susan, Wa-Ka-Mo-Do and Spool. At times their narratives collide, whilst at other points they remain continents apart. Yet there is always a resonance between them that adds to the richness of this world. To begin, the all-conquering state of Artemis is buckling under its own success and is on the brink of civil war. Kavan leads a growing rebellion against the established hierarchy, which includes General Spool, whereas Susan finds herself trapped in Artemis as an adopted citizen. Into this destructive conflict comes humanity.

Humans, travelling from a distant world, provide an interesting tension on Penrose. They are technologically superior to Artemis and Yukawa (Wa-Ka-Mo-Do's home nation), their weapons wreak greater havoc than anything a robot mind has imagined. And yet, as one soldier comments: "There is an emptiness about them. You can see them with your eyes, and hear them with your ears, but cannot sense their metal. They seem so insubstantial...". I greatly enjoyed this reversal of sympathies, viewing humans through the eyes of the robot. The portrayal is complex and subtle, avoiding the obvious binaries of good versus evil and man versus machine. Whilst Yukawa seeks to play politics with the humans, trying to use trade to curry favour with their powerful guests, Artemis can only respond with force. These two very different reactions to the same crisis give real depth to the novel.

From the outset, Ballantyne's concise and subtle description of his world captured my attention. His language and dialogue treads a fine line between the alien and the familiar, largely to great success. Construction such as "craftsrobotship" felt a little awkward and pulled me out of the story but such moments were rare. There is, perhaps most importantly, a great deal of genuine emotion displayed in *Blood and Iron*. Characters suffer and succeed, are raped and make love, are tortured and inflict pain, and not once did I find myself questioning them as feeling and situations appropriate for robots.

Many things are left unresolved by the end of the novel; Penrose's future looks uncertain and so does its past. The arrival of humanity raised many questions regarding the origins of the robots who call Penrose home. There is so much left to discover about this world. I eagerly await the next entry in this saga and some of the answers it might bring.

The Evolutionary Void by Peter F Hamilton

(Pan MacMillan, 2010)

Reviewed by Martin Potts

This novel, following on from *The Dreaming Void* and *The Temporal Void*, is once again adorned by Steve Stone's stunning thematically consistent cover artwork. It is the final part of the *Void* trilogy, a second sequence set in the same universe as the *Commonwealth Saga*, composed of *Pandora's Star* and *Judas Unchained*. This trilogy is set 1500 years after those events and the human race has continued its advancements, expanding into the Galaxy and increasing contact with non-human species. The galactic civilisation is mostly recovered from the ravages of the Starflyer War but is now fractured by ideologies differing on the concept of where humanity's evolutionary journey should go next: a post-physical merged consciousness, bionomic technological enhancements or genetic manipulation.

To add to this politically charged situation, a galactic citizen called Inigo experiences and controversially shares communication from the Void, an enigmatic volume of space. These communications are in the form of "dreams" which tell the story of Edeard, a psychically gifted resident of a planet believed to lie within the Void. Edeard's battles against injustice and inequality eventually result in a state of fulfilment for his community, promising a utopia where psychic power and happiness can be shared and experienced by all. Millions are inspired by Inigo's dreams and he forms a movement called Living Dream which intends to enter the Void. The plan is resisted as many believe this pilgrimage will trigger a cataclysmic physical expansion of the Void, resulting in the destruction of the galaxy outside of it.

This third and final instalment picks up exactly where its predecessor left off. The ever resourceful and resilient Araminta, another who has been "dreaming" and sharing Edeard's life via a communal field of consciousness, has escaped the clutches of the Living Dream movement who see her as the key to enter the Void. Thus Araminta becomes the focus of galaxy wide attention and Hamilton takes her on a voyage of self discovery. This coincides with one of the more extreme factions seeking to use the Void to further their own ends. They spectacularly outmanoeuvre Earth's protectors to such an extent that the expansion of the Void and the obliteration of all life external to it appears certain. Cue a frantic search for solutions which occupies the bulk of the novel.

During Araminta's journey she encounters a race called the Silfen which read like the elves of folklore and along with Edeard's tale these two narrative streams allow Hamilton to explore elements of fantasy within an SF universe and his treatment is sympathetic, never contradictory and, ultimately, essential for the saga's conclusion.

The Evolutionary Void is satisfying in all respects. Indeed, some of Edeard's dilemmas are still resonating in my mind as his solutions, though practical, were not always ethical. Sadly Paula Myo, a wonderfully drawn character in the *Commonwealth Saga*, has only a supporting role in this sequence - but, in typical Paula style, it is still pivotal. Overall, Hamilton fans should not be disappointed in his resolution of the myriad plot strands; the canvas remains huge and there is plenty of scope for a return in future novels.

Point by Thomas Blackthorne
(Angry Robot, 2011)
Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Thomas Blackthorne is actually the pseudonym of John Meaney: as Meaney, he writes hard SF novels such as *To Hold Infinity* for Gollancz; as Blackthorne, he writes near-future thrillers for Angry Robot. This is his second novel as Blackthorne following 2010's *Edge* and his publishers say on the back cover: "File under SCIENCE FICTION/THRILLER: Suicide Cults. Razor Teens. Corporate Atrocity. Stop the Slaughter." That gives you a short but accurate plot outline!

Point is set in a near future Britain on the edge of collapse, shivering in a nuclear winter brought about by the self-immolation of the United States. A general election is underway between the ruling LabCons (Meaney has a sense of humour!) and the opposition TechDems. Tyndall Industries, the most powerful company in Britain, sponsors a knife fighting team in the gladiatorial sport that has replaced football as the nation's obsession. When the nation's failing, give the masses more spectacular entertainment - bread and circuses, after all...

Ex-Special Forces soldier Josh Cumberland, the main character from *Edge*, learns that his beloved daughter Sophie has died after a year on life support. His grief initially causes him to lose control and since this is a man whose whole existence has been one of warfare, you wouldn't want to get in his way. Fortunately he escapes this destructive path by throwing himself back into his work when he is commissioned to find a missing nuclear scientist who worked for one of Tyndall's competitors. Josh tracks the man to a remote part of Wales, only to see him throw himself off a cliff rather than return. Following this setback, he rejoins his Special Forces unit and loses himself in intensive training with only the punishing psychical exercise preventing him from going over the edge.

At the same time, Josh's now estranged partner, neuropsychologist Dr. Suzanne Duchesne, is contacted by a government department about a disturbing new group suicide phenomenon – Cutter Circles. Thirteen teenagers, each armed with a knife, sit in a circle and, on a signal, cut. The government has kept this away from the public thinking that it might end after thirteen circles have died but soon the count is fifteen and they realise it isn't going to stop. What's puzzling is that unlike suicide web-sites, there is no sign of this on the internet, so they have no idea how it is spreading. There is one clue: all the dead teenagers had recently become members of the Young TechDems, which would imply that there could be a political motive behind this apparent compulsion. When Suzanne reaches a Cutter Circle in time to save one girl, she makes a breakthrough that puts her at serious risk. At this point Josh finally gets involved in helping her to find out who is behind both the Cutter Circles and the scientist's suicide.

Even though this is a new field for Meaney, he's an accomplished writer and this book features a credible near-future Britain, believable extrapolated technology, and a heady mix of politics and excitingly-realised action. It's pretty obvious who's behind all this but *Point* still makes a satisfying read (and the unexpected epilogue leads me to believe more books in this series are planned).

Embedded by Dan Abnett
(Angry Robot, 2011)
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

The life of an interstellar journalist is not as glamorous as you might think. Take Lex Falk, an award-winning media veteran; he's at the top of the heap and still being sent to tedious new colony worlds like Eighty-Six to cover minor brush wars. However, despite being carpet-bombed by corporate PR upon arrival, Lex is a good enough journalist to spot that something is amiss on Eighty-Six. Having exhausted all conventional channels, Lex turns to some one-time colleagues to discover what is making Eighty-Six's corporate investors so nervous. What can possibly be threatening the rate of return on such a dull but predictably blue-chip world? And, worse still, can it really be true that the secret is dangerous enough to attract Bloc agents and turn the galactic Cold War hot?

In order to discover the secret - but also to lift his jaded spirits - Lex is persuaded to take a gamble on a new piece of technology, one that can literally put him inside the head of another human being. Lex suddenly finds himself a soldier in the Settlement Office Military Directorate representing the interests of the United States on Eighty-Six and prepping for a patrol in a restricted area. There he discovers that no-one knows what the secret of Eighty-Six is but everyone is prepared to fight for it, even if that triggers an Interstellar World War One...

Embedded really surprised me. I'd never heard the name Dan Abnett before and had been disappointed by a number of not-dissimilar sounding mil-sf novels by unfamiliar authors recently. So my expectations were fairly low. Fortunately it turns out that Abnett can write – *really* write. His prose is tight, fast-moving and evocative. My first thought was what a pleasure it was to read someone so obviously familiar with the *craft* of writing. Hard on the heels of that was the realization that Abnett can world-build pretty well, too. With just a few choice phrases, throwaway brand names and observations I was not only seeing this universe but I believing in it too. Understanding the politics driving events on Eighty-Six and the game of playing join-the-dots with our present-day world, it all felt grounded in a cynical, messy but not too dystopian milieu.

Later combat scenes continue to dazzle, bringing comparisons with Richard Morgan in their logic and the unravelling chaos they unleash. There is very little glory in Abnett's combat zones, only terrified human beings working at the limits of their training and capacities, living on adrenalin and borrowed time. If Abnett has never been in a warzone himself then he must surely have spoken to some who have - that's how real *Embedded*'s combat scenes feel.

Things do falter at the end. The story concludes both suddenly and rather inconclusively with no obvious sign that *Embedded* is the first part of a series (which I hope it is). Ending aside, however, this is a simultaneously thoughtful and hardboiled read. The smart backstory teases a real world out of very little actual detail whilst the combat sections had me trembling with tension. Achieving such an effect using only printed words on a page marks Abnett out as an author to watch. To use a couple of his own repurposed adjectives: the man is wealthy; he's golden!

The Bookman by Lavie Tidhar
(Angry Robot, 2010)
Reviewed by Niall Harrison



Perhaps the appeal of literary steampunk is simply that it offers a relatively fresh venue for adventure fiction. You could certainly shanghai Lavie Tidhar's first novel as support for this thesis if you felt like it. *The Bookman* aspires to being a rattling good read: it is fast paced, to a large extent has clear good guys and bad guys and is filled with revelations, reversals and chapter-ending punchlines ("He had half an hour to

save her"). It's also an enthusiastically post-*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* concoction that nods frequently to its intertextuality and fictionality.

Put another way, everyone is famous. Historical figures (Karl Marx, Isabella Beeton, Jules Verne, a robotic Lord Byron) mingle with conspiracy theories (David Icke's lizard royalty) and adapted literary creations (Inspector Irene Adler being the most notable; admirably, Tidhar keeps Holmes almost entirely offstage.) All strut across a quasi-Victorian London and, after an inevitable tangle with pirates, Verne's Mysterious Island. Winding his way through the melange is Tidhar's multiracial protagonist, Orphan, who at first is simply out to save the love of his life but who gets pulled into a mystery involving the titular terrorist, those ruling lizards, a Mars probe and - the clue is in the name - his own heritage. Throw in a subplot about rights for robots, possibly enabled by an event called "the Translation" that's described in suspiciously singularitarian terms, and you have an unfailingly energetic story.

The Bookman is nothing if not self-aware - Orphan, we are told, loved his love "the way people do in romantic novels, from the first page, beyond even the End" - and occasionally quite strikingly written. Tidhar is a slick writer and his command of his novel's pulpy idiom is pretty firm, segueing from textured descriptive passages to muscular action sequences as the moment demands. But that slickness is also his weakness. Orphan experiences London as "a cacophony of the senses, a bazaar through which he could amble, picking and discarding sensations like curios or books," and I at least knew how he felt. It's not an uncommon experience reading Tidhar - recent short stories have with equal proficiency adopted the clothes of cyberpunk so fully that the surface comes to seem the point of the exercise - and there are worse problems for a writer to have. But it's disappointing all the same and I hope for more distinctively owned work in Tidhar's future.

Rivers of London by Ben Aaronovitch
(Gollancz, 2011)
Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite

Peter Grant is an ordinary police officer until he finds himself interviewing a ghost about a mysterious death. Pretty soon he's working for DI Thomas Nightingale, the Metropolitan Police's one-man bastion against supernatural crime, which seems to be on the rise again after several decades. So, in between learning magical secrets that haven't been taught for fifty years or more, Peter has to contend with an entity apparently causing normally placid individuals to commit violent murders and a feud between rival spirits of the Thames.

Its author already a television and tie-in writer, *Rivers of London* is Ben Aaronovitch's first non-franchise novel and the first of a projected series (with two sequels to follow later in 2011). It's a promising start but one not without flaws: there are times when the narrative momentum loses out rather too much to the establishment of the world and characters. Aside from the occasional dry quip, Peter Grant comes across as largely anonymous, both as a narrator and character; and the secondary human characters, even the eccentric Nightingale, don't fare much better. The descriptions of London tend to focus on bald geographical details - the names of streets and landmarks - a technique I didn't find particularly evocative.

Beneath and between all this, however, is some interesting fantasy. When Grant encounters the river spirits, there are tantalising hints of magic lurking behind the everyday, the deep archetypes these beings represent: "I felt the force of [Father Thames's] personality drag at me: beer and skittles it promised, the smell of horse manure and walking home from the pub by moonlight, a warm fireside and uncomplicated women".

The way that Aaronovitch reaches back into history for the book's mystery and its solution is very satisfying (one gains a strong sense that this novel could only have been set in London) and I like the practical approach to magic - for example, if you change shape in this fictional world, it damages the tissues of your body - which gives it a real sense of consequence.

That last point links to a subtext which may prove a key dynamic as the series unfolds: the clash of old and new. This is represented in the characters of Nightingale (the fusty old wizard-figure who has no truck with technology) and Grant (the young mixed-race copper determined to reconcile magic with his knowledge of science). In the present volume, it's also there in the contrasting portrayals of the river spirits; Father Thames is an Olde Worlde fairground showman whereas Mother Thames is a Nigerian matriarch. Indeed, in Aaronovitch's fictional reality, magic itself is an old phenomenon brought into the modern world; the theme of old versus new is suggested in *Rivers of London* more than it's explored but it will be interesting to see it and how it develops over time.

Aaronovitch's series may not quite have hit the ground running with *Rivers of London* but there are clear signs here that a real treat may be in store in a book or two's time.

***Secrets of the Fire Sea* by Stephen Hunt
(Harper Voyager, 2011)
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham**

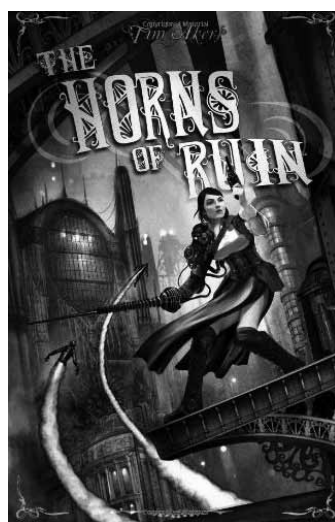
In this action-packed steam-punk fantasy, the fourth novel in Stephen Hunt's Jackelian series, Jethro Daunt, defrocked parson turned consulting detective, is a Sherlock Holmes-type figure, with formidable powers of deduction. His Dr Watson is Boxiron, a steam-powered man of metal. Jethro has no love for the atheist Circlist Church of mathematicians who expelled him and wrecked his engagement to fellow priest Alice Gray, but when the Church's inquisition, the League of the Rationalist Court, ask him to investigate her murder, he feels compelled to accept the commission. Together, Jethro and Boxiron travel by steam-powered submarine from the Kingdom of Jackals to the island of Jago where Alice was Archbishop, and where most of the action of the novel takes place.

Orphan Hannah Conquest, a mathematical prodigy, was the Archbishop's ward, and always expected to follow her guardian into the Circlist Church. With Alice dead, Hannah is not only conscripted into the Guild of Valvemen and subjected to deadly doses of radiation in their turbine halls, but she also becomes the target of Alice's murderer. Joining forces with Jethro, Hannah comes to realise that the Archbishop was harbouring an ancient secret connected to research begun by Hannah's archaeologist parents, and that it was this secret that got her killed.

Despite being the fourth volume in a series, *Secrets of the Fire Sea* is a stand-alone novel, although there is an unfortunate amount of info-dumping in the early chapters to bring those who have not read the previous volumes up to speed. After that, however, the book rollicks along at a cracking pace, masterfully blending the genres of detective murder mystery, high adventure and science fiction/fantasy and deftly adding a detour into cyberspace and *Da Vinci Code* territory along the way. As the main plot, the investigation of Alice's murder, advances, there are many twists and turns, and the characters make discoveries that neither they nor the reader expected.

There are few writers who would attempt to combine so many genres in such a complex many-stranded novel, but Stephen Hunt manages to pull it off. The success of the book owes much to its steam-powered Victorian-esque world, which may be a far future Earth. The island of Jago, surrounded by the magma flows and boiling waters of the Fire Sea, its people cowering in an underground city, terrified that the vicious creatures that inhabit the barren interior will breach their defences, is very well-depicted, and the in-fighting of its various political factions helps to drive the main plot along. Another strength of the novel is its cast of interesting characters, such as the coke-fuelled Boxiron, whose Steamman Knight's head has been grafted onto an inferior mechanical body, and who has great difficulty in controlling his violent instincts when he is in "top gear." That said, the narrative does slow up in the last chapters of the book with some of the main characters embarking on a Quest into the interior of the island, but it picks up again in time for a battle, and for Jethro to denounce Alice's murderer in classic detective mystery style.

***The Horns of Ruin* by Tim Akers
(Pyr, 2010)
Review by Simon Guerrier**



Eva Forge is a young paladin in the cult dedicated to Morgan, a murdered but self-evident god. She's assigned as a bodyguard to the Fratriach Barnabas on a mission. They venture into the dark, dangerous city and collect a girl called Cassandra who is more than she appears. But then they're ambushed by bug-eyed men. Eva fights back with both sword and magic but loses sight of her charges. The rest

of the book sees her scouring the city for Barnabas and Cassandra, exploring all parts of the city and unravelling a secret that will turn her world upside down.

The Horns of Ruin is a violent, action-packed adventure. But for all the turns of the plot, there's little here that's surprising. The back cover boasts of "a perfect merger of steampunk and sword and sorcery" and that's true but both genres are treated a little generically. It's full of swordfights against the odds and magic-tinged explosion but there's little wit or innovation.

The cover suggests that Eva is a beautiful, willowy goth girl squeezed into a corset and showing lots of leg. But the Eva in the book is not quite so attractive – we're told on several occasions that other characters don't want to have sex with her and instead try to keep out of her way. There's good reason for this. We learn early on that she's a surly, argumentative thug, quick to take offence. Throughout the book, she's rude to the very people she needs to help her and at one point destroys a gatehouse because they hesitate in letting her through. Instead of asking questions, she bludgeons her way through the mystery.

The victim of most of this is Owen, a sort of police officer who helps Eva for most of the story and is constantly berated and, at one point, punched by her for his trouble. Despite their sparky relationship, there's little to make us warm to them – or anyone on the story. The dialogue is all people telling each other, bluntly, things that drive the plot.

The magic all seems a bit easy. Whenever she faces a challenge, there's always a spell to give Eva extra strength or dexterity or to smash things up. It doesn't cost her anything to use her spells. And, she also rather does as she pleases, with little guilt or self-doubt about all the deaths and damage that follow her. At the close of the story, despite everything she's learned about the world she's in which she's grown up, there's no sense that she'll act any differently.

As a result, its chief appeal is that it feels so familiar and undemanding. A perfectly serviceable adventure story, but sadly not much more.

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The James White Award is an annual science fiction short story competition open to non-professional writers. Stories entered into the competition must be original and previously unpublished. The award is sponsored by Interzone and administered by the British Science Fiction Association.

This year's judges are novelists Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Juliet E McKenna and Interzone editor Andy Cox.

The winning story will receive £200 plus publication in Interzone, the UK's leading science fiction magazine. Entry is free.

Entries are now being accepted. The closing date for this year's competition is 31 January 2012. The winner will be announced at Eastercon.

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