

# Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association



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# Vector 269

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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## Vector

<http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com>

Features, Editorial  
and Letters:

**Shana Worthen**  
127 Forest Road, Loughton,  
Essex IG10 1EF, UK  
[vector.editors@gmail.com](mailto:vector.editors@gmail.com)

Book Reviews:

**Martin Lewis**  
14 Antony House, Pembury  
Place, London, E5 8GZ

Production:

**Martin McGrath**  
[martin@martinmcgrath.net](mailto:martin@martinmcgrath.net)

### British Science Fiction Association Ltd

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Company No. 921500

Registered address: 61 Ilycroft Road, Warton, Tamworth,  
Staffordshire, B79 0JJ

President Stephen Baxter

Vice President Jon Courtenay Grimwood

Chair Ian Whates  
[chair@bsfa.co.uk](mailto:chair@bsfa.co.uk)

Treasurer Martin Potts  
61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton,  
Nr Tamworth, B79 0JJ  
[bsfatreasurer@gmail.com](mailto:bsfatreasurer@gmail.com)

Membership Services Peter Wilkinson  
Flat 4, Stratton Lodge, 79 Bulwer Road  
Barnet, Hertfordshire, EN5 5EU  
[bsfamembership@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bsfamembership@yahoo.co.uk)

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### FOCUS: THE BSFA MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

Editor: **Martin McGrath**  
[martin@martinmcgrath.net](mailto:martin@martinmcgrath.net)

### BSFA AWARDS

Administrator: Donna Scott  
[awards@bsfa.co.uk](mailto:awards@bsfa.co.uk)

### ORBITER WRITING GROUPS

Online: Terry Jackman  
[terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk](mailto:terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk)

# Torque Control



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John Martin's artwork  
at the Tate Modern

Just over a year ago, Niall Harrison concluded his survey of the best science fiction written by women and published in the previous decade, 2001-2010. The survey was the product of the realization of how few women had won the Arthur C Clarke Award recently – or the Hugo or the BSFA best novel award which, in turn, was part of a larger discussion of the degree to which women authors of science fiction were or were not being published in Britain in particular. Women were clearly writing science fiction, and just as clearly, it was being published. So why weren't more of them winning awards? The purpose of the poll wasn't to compile a definitive list of any sort, but to help raise awareness of the quality of some of the recent works of science fiction written by women.

So here we are, a year later. Many blogs, including *Vector's* own *Torque Control*, have hosted year-long discussions of science fiction written by women. The BSFA hosted a discussion of the subject at its 2010 AGM and mini-convention. Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* won the Clarke Award and Connie Willis the Hugo for best novel with her duology, *Blackout/All Clear*.

This issue of *Vector* is dedicated, in part, to revisiting the subject of women writers of science fiction. Few female UK-based science fiction authors currently have contracts, but worldwide, there's a great deal going on, a geographic, cultural, and linguistic diversity which Cheryl Morgan surveys in this issue. I came away from reading it with a massively expanded to-read list, and I hope it inspires you similarly. Tony Keen examines the roles of death and transformation in Justina Robson's books *Natural History* (one of the books on last year's list of the previous decades best science fiction by women) and *Living Next Door to the God of Love*. In contrast, Niall Harrison examines a very different author, Glasgow-based Julie Bertagna. Her post-apocalyptic trilogy, which begins with *Exodus*, provides an intriguing comparison with Stephen Baxter's current series of prehistoric climate change novels which began with *Stone Spring*.

The second in Victor Grech's three-part series on gender in

science fiction doesn't focus on women science fiction authors, but does deal with quite a few of them in the process of discussing the variety of single-gendered world in science fiction. In particular, he examines the in-story reasons, the biological explanations for their existence, and the degrees to which those mechanisms are found in the ecologies of our own world.

One of this autumn's major events was the launch of the third edition of *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*. This valuable reference book was overdue for an update, and the third edition has launched as an online-only one in order to enable to escape the constraints of print and be continually updated. The downside is that the third edition is, thus far, only partially revised. The full version of the encyclopedia should be updated by the end of 2012 if all goes to plan.

One of the many contributors to the *Encyclopedia's* expansion and revision was Adam Roberts, who covered science fictional music. In this issue, he considers the challenges of determining just what science fictional music even is, and how the edge cases in that argument can help with thinking about the larger, perennial version of just what science fiction is. In the process, he provides a thought-provoking discography of tracks, albums, and bands whose work might count.

Another of this year's major events was a series of exhibitions around the work of John Martin. The current version is at the Tate Britain, although it will almost certainly have closed by the time you read this. Andrew M. Butler reviews the show, in all three of its iterations. Even if you weren't able to catch it, he still argues for why Martin's work is worth seeking out, whether in the form of the exhibition catalogues or in his multitude of paintings and prints, which have inspired imagery in numerous science fiction films. Also consider looking up *Pandemonium: Stories of the Apocalypse*, the short-story collection of works based on John Martin's work, and published in conjunction with the Tate version of the show.

SHANA WORTHEN  
EDITOR

# Women SF Writers: An Endangered Species?

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Cheryl Morgan

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Recently on Twitter I got into a conversation with a friend of mine from Ireland. Having seen the online debate about men not reading women writers, he decided to buy a book by a woman science fiction writer. In Dublin's largest bookstore, he started at the beginning of the SF&F section, which is shelved alphabetically by author's last name. The first SF book he found by a woman was *Lightborn* by Tricia Sullivan.

Ouch!

I tried the same test in my local Waterstones. I found *Zoo City* fairly quickly, though I remember arguing fairly strongly in award discussions that it is fantasy. Other than that the only SF by women was from Justina Robson and Connie Willis. The store has a separate steampunk section where I found Cherie Priest and Ekaterina Sedya. There were lots and lots of fantasy books by women. Having been there, I'm sure the same can be said of the Dublin store.

So are women SF writers really that rare? Have they all given up, or been seduced by the Dark Side of Urban Paranormal Fantasy Romance (or whatever it is called these days)? Were there none to begin with? Armed with a pith helmet, a sturdy pair of boots, and a powerful pair of binoculars, I ventured out into the literary jungle in search of the sad remnants of this rare species. David Attenborough, eat your heart out.

I began my search in the UK because, well, this is a BSFA publication I'm writing for here. Also the online debates fingered the UK as particularly unfriendly to SF by women. We have a number of notable novelists still writing: Justina Robson, Tricia Sullivan, Gwyneth Jones, Pat Cadigan, Liz Williams, Karen Traviss and Jaine Fenn. Few of those, however, currently have a UK publishing contract. Fenn has a series in progress, and Janet Edwards is apparently due to join the group next year, but this isn't a promising start. Williams and Traviss, of course, have new books coming out in the US. Traviss appears to be only doing tie-ins these days (and doing very well at it), but Williams has a series starting with the indie publisher, Prime, in 2013. Robson has a short story collection available from Ticonderoga, an indie publisher in Australia. Our talent, it seems, is going abroad to get published.

There are a few other British-based authors that we

could claim for science fiction. After all, if *Zoo City* can win the Clarke Award and be a finalist for a World Fantasy Award, the genre fences are clearly rather porous these days. There are people on the fringes that we can bring in. Storm Constantine, Mary Gentle and Steph Swainston are all on the border with fantasy, though none of them have produced anything recently, and Swainston has famously left the business altogether. Kim Lakin-Smith treads the boundary between SF and horror. A check of the YA market turns up Moira Young whose *Blood Red Road* is a post-apocalyptic Western. A lot of Diana Wynne Jones novels had SF sensibilities too. Writing genre novels is something of a fashion with the literati these days, so we can perhaps claim Jeanette Winterson for *The Stone Gods*. And there are women producing short fiction. Juliet McKenna has written a Warhammer 40k story, so she counts (if you think orcs in space is science fiction), and *Dark Spires*, an anthology I published in 2009, included SF stories from Roz Clarke and Christina Lake. In the UK, it seems, science fiction by women is rare, but can be found if you look. I'm very much hoping that there are some I have missed, but I have the whole world to explore so I'm heading overseas.

The situation across the pond is rather more hopeful. Lois McMaster Bujold has recently returned to SF after a flirtation with fantasy, and Connie Willis is as popular as ever. Big name authors from earlier years are still writing: for example Nancy Kress, Sheri Tepper, Vonda McIntyre, C.J. Cherryh and even Ursula K Le Guin. Kress, in fact, is still a regular award nominee. She won a Hugo in 2008 with "The Erdmann Nexus" and her novel, *Steal Across the Sky*, was a Campbell Memorial finalist in 2009.

One of the big successes of women SF writers stateside is Elizabeth Bear. She continues to sell books and win awards, and while most of her work has some fantasy elements, her recent Jacob's Ladder trilogy is a straight up generation ship saga. The only fantasy elements are in the names some of the characters choose for themselves. Also still going strong is M.M. (Mary) Buckner. Her 2005 novel, *WarSurf*, won the Philip K. Dick Award, and her latest novel, *The Gravity Pilot*, came out in March 2011. Kathleen Ann Goonan has been fairly quiet in recent years, but she has just released *This Shared Dream*, a sequel to the 2007



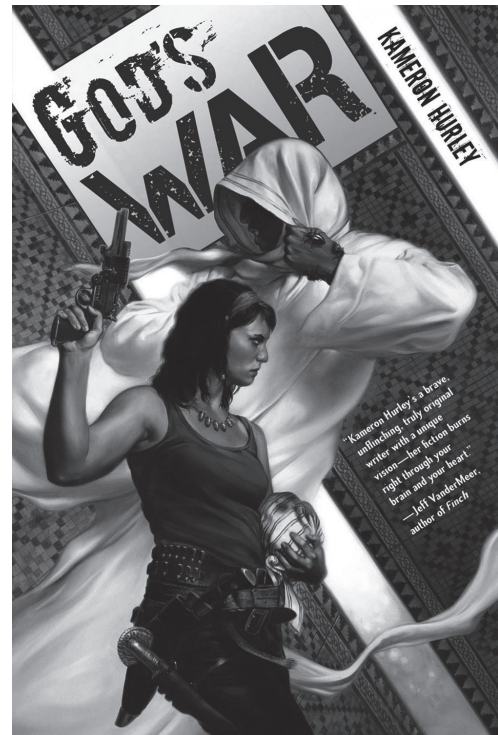
novel, *In War Times*. I happen to think that she's one of the most thoughtful people writing SF today. Don't take my word for it, though. Michael Dirda and Gary K. Wolfe love her work too. Maureen McHugh has been doing mainly video game work of late, but her second short story collection, *After the Apocalypse*, has been voted one of the 10 best books (of all types) of 2011 by *Publishers Weekly*. Kristine Kathryn Rusch is hugely prolific in multiple genres under various pen names, including at least three SF novels this year.

Special mention should also be made of Joan Slonczewski, whose biology-based hard SF is often accorded the same respect as the physics-based SF we know and love. She won the Campbell Memorial Award back in 1986 with *A Door Into Ocean* and, as her busy science career permits, is still writing. Her latest novel, *The Highest Frontier*, published in 2011, looks at the prospects of space habitats as a refuge from environmental catastrophe. Catherine Asaro is another American writer with impeccable scientific credentials and glowing academic career. Her habit of mixing hard SF with traditional romance plots has doubtless found a whole new audience for books about quantum physics, but does her no favors with people brought up on Asimov and Clarke.

Some of the new kids on the block are very impressive. Kameron Hurley has been drawing critical acclaim for her "bug punk" novels, *God's War* and *Infidel*, set on a planet settled by rival groups of religious extremists. Genevieve Valentine's *Mechanique* is also being widely praised. Both authors meld elements of science fiction and fantasy, which is something we have seen in the UK and will see again and again.

Other writers have been less lucky. One of my favorite authors of hard SF is Chris Moriarty. I loved *Spin State* (2006) and *Spin Control* (2007), and both books were heaped with awards. She's been quiet of late, and the rumour is that she's trying her hand at another supposed female ghetto, YA novels, but there's a new adult novel, *Ghost Spin*, due out next August. Linda Nagata also burst onto the scene with the critically acclaimed Nanotech Succession series, but dropped off the radar soon afterwards and is now republishing her novels herself as ebooks. Kay Kenyon's *The Entire* and the *Rose* series for Pyr has also got some good reviews, but I understand it sold poorly. 1994 Campbell New Writer winner, Amy Thomson, hasn't had a novel out since 2003. Jane Jensen was a runner-up for the Philip K. Dick Award with *Dante's Equation*, but as since gone back to video games. Wen Spencer burst onto the scene with a Campbell New Writer award in 2003 but has been very quiet of late. Kage Baker sadly died just as she was becoming enormously popular.

Some US-based writers have changed tack to keep their careers afloat. Nicola Griffith has written mostly crime for several years, and her latest novel is historical, though she was on the Hugo ballot with a science fiction story, "It Takes Two", in 2010. Louise Marley won the Endeavour Award with *The Child Goddess* in 2005 but has since mined her music background to write historical romances. Elizabeth Moon has taken to writing fantasy. Lyda Morehouse has written some great cyberpunk novels, but these days does most of her writing in paranormal romance under the name of Tate Hallaway. Sandra McDonald had a trilogy published by Tor, but has had no novels out since 2009.



Her website says she's moving into the YA market. Karen Joy Fowler's novels don't have any SF elements these days, though like Griffith she is still producing fabulous short stories.

The list goes on. Octavia Butler is sadly no longer with us, but Kate Wilhelm and Carol Emshwiller are still writing. Julian May came back after a long hiatus, but appears to have stopped writing again now. I've not yet mentioned Susan Palwick, Mary Rosenblum, L. Timmel Duchamp, Sarah Zettel, Anne Harris, Severna Park, Katherine V. Forrest or Ann Tonsor Zeddies.

As in the UK, many American women writers produce work that has SF sensibilities without looking much like SF. Fowler is a classic example. Elizabeth Hand and Catherynne M. Valente, two favorites of mine, are in this part of the spectrum. Hand's 1997 global warming novel, *The Glimmering*, which was short-listed for the Clarke and is now looking startlingly prophetic, is being re-issued in 2012. One of Valente's current projects is based around the legend of Prester John, but it takes the view that the bizarre mediaeval monsters that are described in Prester John's letter to the Pope are actually an alien civilization. Her SF novella, "Silently and Very Fast", is being serialized in *Clarkesworld* at the time I'm writing this. Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, which won the recent World Fantasy Award, reads very much like fantasy, except for the bits where the world is shown to be clearly post-apocalyptic, including a stash of derelict computers.

Another area on the fringes of SF is steampunk. Cherie Priest's novels, such as the Hugo-nominated *Boneshaker*, might contain things like zombies, but they are very much science fictional zombies, not the creations of Vodou priests. Ekaterina Sedya's most recent novel, *Heart of Iron*, is straight alternate history steampunk and centers around attempts by the Russians and British to acquire Chinese airship technology. Her *Alchemy of Stone* is a classic woman-as-robot story, albeit a clockwork robot. Back to zombies, there are horror crossovers too.

Seanán McGuire's evil twin, Mira Grant, has a very science-fictional take on zombies in the Hugo-nominated *Feed*, and Amelia Beamer's *The Loving Dead* also has a medical explanation for the zombie plague. In the area of mainstream crossovers, Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* is the most notable example.

Another area where there are American women writing SF is the YA market. Indeed, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* is one of the publishing sensations of recent times, and is a major factor in the current popularity of YA SF. Beth Revis is on the Carnegie Medal long list this year with *Across The Universe*. Much of Pat Murphy's output can be classed as YA. Ellen Klages' novels are, strictly speaking, historical, but they ooze science-fictional sensibility.

The US short fiction markets are full of women writing SF. In *Clarkesworld* over the past few years we have published SF by Yoon Ha Lee, Erin M. Hartshorn, E. Lily Yu, Gwendolyn Clare, N. K. Jemisin, Genevieve Valentine, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Brenda Cooper, Marissa Lingen, Lisa Hannett, Shannon Page, a few of the ladies I have already mentioned, and of course Kij Johnson's inimitable Nebula-winning story, "Spar". Other women who I know have written SF short fiction include Rachel Swirsky, Mary Robinette Kowal, Eileen Gunn, Eugie Foster, Vylar Kaftan, Ruth Nestvold, Mary Turzillo, Juliette Wade and Molly Gloss. I could go through other magazines and award lists and find a lot more, I'm sure, but that would turn the rest of this article into a list. Let's head north instead.

Does Canada have any women SF writers? Why yes, there's Margaret Atwood.

Of course she's not the only one. Julie Czerneda has also produced a lot of SF novels, and Phyllis Gotlieb, whose last novel was published in 2007 and who died in 2009, is so well regarded that Canada named their version of the Clarke Award after one of her books, *Sunburst*. Other Canada-based writers who have produced both SF and fantasy include Nalo Hopkinson, Jo Walton, Holly Phillips and Karin Lowachee.

The Australian speculative fiction scene is, if you believe those amusing podcasts, dominated by women fantasy writers, but it is not actually hard to find SF as well. Marianne De Pierres is well known internationally, and both Kaaron Warren and Jo Anderton are currently with Angry Robot. Michelle Marquardt, Maxine McArthur, Tess Williams and Sylvia Kelso have all produced SF novels in recent years but appear to have fallen off the radar (Kelso is still producing novels with a small press). Kim Westwood is only published in Australia, but the buzz I am hearing about her novels is very exciting indeed. Other Aussie ladies who have committed SF in some way or another include KJ Bishop, Margo Lanagan, Tansy Rayner Roberts, Deborah Biancotti, Lucy Sussex, Lezli Robyn, Sue Isle, Thoraiya Dyer and Kate Orman. Glenda Larke's recent *Watergivers* trilogy is sold as fantasy but is set in the future and reads very much like SF. Fijian writer, Nalini Singh, now resident in New Zealand, has had huge international success with SF&F-themed romance novels.

The rest of the world is harder to survey, as most of it writes in languages other than English and my universal translator is not working as well as I would like. Lauren Beukes, of course, flies the flag for South Africa, and we have Karen Lord in Barbados. Vandana Singh and Daina Chaviano both now live in the USA, but were born in

India and Cuba respectively. Singh, like Slonczewski and Asaro, has impressive academic credentials and can write SF as hard as anyone's.

Aliette de Bodard lives in Paris, but kindly writes for us in English. I asked her about women SF writers working in French, and she mentioned Jeanne A-Debats, Sylvie Denis and Sylvie Lainé as people who are making a name for themselves. Hopefully we'll see them in translation soon. Although the numbers are small, Aliette says that's as much to do with a lack of SF in general as any possible bias against women writing it.

The one foreign language market I know well is Finland. Johanna Sinisalo is familiar in the English-speaking world by now, having won the Tiptree with *Not Before Sundown*. Her latest novel, *Birdbrain*, is most definitely SF, and she's also the script writer on the forthcoming Moon Nazis movie, *Iron Sky*. Leena Krohn and Tiina Raevaara are both well known to literary audiences in Finland, but little of their work is translated. Marketta Niemelä was a finalist in the short fiction category of the SF&F Translation Awards last year with "Wagtail". Anne Leinonen, Eija Lappalainen, Jenny Kangasvuo and Saara Henriksson have all been making waves in Finland, and I'm hoping to be able to read some of their work soon. Anne and Eija, who write YA together, are shortlisted for their country's biggest children's literature award this year.

Phew! That was a lot of women. My apologies if it was a little overwhelming, but that was the point. There are very many women out there who write science fiction. A substantial proportion of them do it very well indeed. The idea that women don't write SF is clearly preposterous. Those who argue that women don't read SF will probably also argue that men don't read romance, but lots of people are buying books by Catherine Asaro and Nalini Singh, whose works have strong romance themes, so either lots of men are reading romance or the idea that women don't read SF is preposterous as well. Many of the women I have mentioned above address serious political and scientific themes in their writing. And some have achieved the highest honours in the field, winning major awards and critical acclaim.

Nevertheless, the commercial wisdom is that SF by women doesn't sell. That's clearly untrue as well. What probably is true is that SF by women, on average, sells less well than SF by men. It is probably also true that using gender-neutral initials, a gender-neutral first name, or even a male pen name, will make an SF book by a woman sell better. Working against that, if women aim their SF at the YA market, or include some element that will allow their work to be classed as fantasy, then they have a much better chance of selling their books. If Justina Robson can write a series called *Quantum Gravity* that is set in the future and stars a cyborg with a small nuclear reactor in her chest, and still have that work classed as fantasy (which I have seen happen, because the books do contain beings called elves, fairies and dragons) then maybe sales categories have as much to do with gender as with genre. Maybe science fiction by women hasn't gone extinct, it has just evolved into something we no longer classify as SF.



# Death and Transcendence in the “Forged” Novels of Justina Robson

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Tony Keen

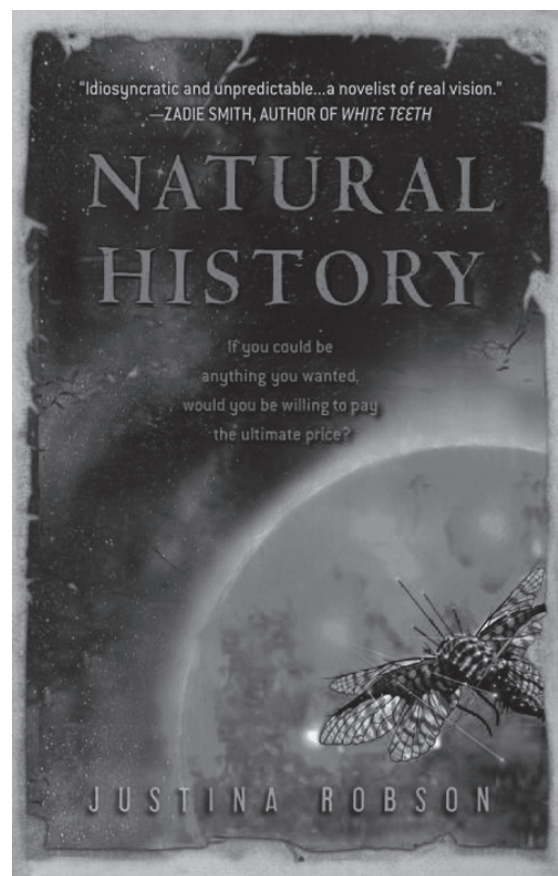
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In a 2006 review of Justina Robson’s 2003 novel *Natural History* on the *Strange Horizons* website, I wrote the following:

On one level, Robson is playing with notions of the Singularity, by having a society transformed by one sort of post-humans, the Forged, encounter another type of Singularity, a universal consciousness. But on another level, I think that Stuff may be a metaphor for death. Death takes our individuality, just as Stuff does, and most of us fear it, and the loss of that individuality, just as many of the humans in *Natural History* fear Stuff. Even where one does not believe that death is the end of existence, some belief systems see it as some sort of transition, “becoming one with the universe,” which can be a frightening prospect (and is exactly what Stuff causes). On this reading, it is a deliberate part of Robson’s design that Isol’s first encounter with Stuff comes at a moment that she believes to be (and would be without the intervention of Stuff) her own death.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I wish to further explore that idea with respect to *Natural History* and its loose 2005 sequel, *Living Next Door to the God of Love*. These two novels are amongst the best-respected of Robson’s works. *Natural History* was shortlisted for the BSFA, Campbell and Philip K. Dick Awards (though missing out on the Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlisting that had been bestowed on Robson’s previous two novels, *Sliver Screen*, 1999, and *Mappa Mundi*, 2001), and was voted by readers of the *Vector* editorial blog, *Torque Control*, one of the eleven best science fiction novels by women written in the period 2000-2010.<sup>2</sup> *Living Next Door to the God of Love* was shortlisted for the same three awards, and, though it did not receive as widespread acclaim as *Natural History*, is considered her best work by critics such as Niall Harrison and Adam Roberts.<sup>3</sup>

The two books also form a bridge between Robson’s earlier near-future hard SF, and the later *Quantum Gravity* series, the blend of SF and fantasy tropes in which is in particular foreshadowed by *Living Next Door to the God of Love*. The novels are set approximately five hundred



years in the future. Humanity has spread out into the solar system. In order to do this, new forms of human beings have been created, the Forged. Their bodies have been designed for new environments and needs, yet they still consider themselves as human as the Unevolved (or “Old Monkeys”, as the Forged call them).<sup>4</sup> In *Natural History*, humanity encounters the extra-terrestrial “Stuff”, a material that ultimately absorbs every intelligence that it comes into direct contact with, and integrates it into “Unity”, a transcendent entity that exists not only in the four-dimensional existence that we know, but in a full eleven dimensions. *Living Next Door to the God of Love* takes place thirty years after *Natural History*, and deals with the consequences of humanity’s continued interaction with Unity.

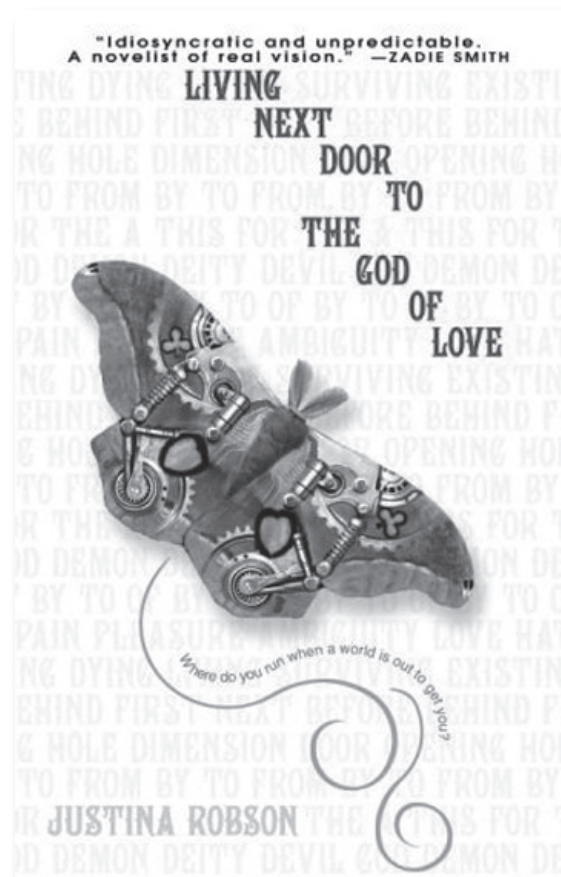
As noted above, *Natural History* begins with a near-death experience. The Voyager Lodestar Isol, a Forged deep-space probe, lets her attention drift, and flies into a debris shower that wrecks her (a moment vividly illustrated by Steve Stone's cover to the novel). In the middle of this debris, she encounters a lump of Stuff – by joining with that lump, Isol sets in course the events of the novel. Had Isol not done this, her life would have ended. Instead, however, she slowly is absorbed into Unity, much to her discomfort and eventual terror – bred, raised and/or programmed for a solitary existence in deep space, she has been given a natural affinity for solitude, and becoming part of such a community panics her, and makes her borderline psychotic. She only accepts her own merging with Unity (her "Translation", as it is described) when there seems to be no real alternative.

Of course, there is an alternative to Translation for those who come into contact with Unity – suicide. This is the route taken by the terraforming Forged Gaiaform Asevenday Kincaid, who blows himself up. It is also the course taken by the Tiktok Hive Cherisse, whose Queen poisons all five hundred of her subsidiary consciousnesses, save for Secta Tiktok Trini, who has already been touched enough by Stuff that she leaves the Hive before the autothanasia can take effect. This shows how frightening some of the Forged consider the notion of Unity. Even a being which is already a Hive Mind finds the concept of the all-encompassing Unity something too frightening to be accepted.

What stuff does is explained in Chapter 28 of *Natural History*, "Tom Speaks", a chapter fairly described by Shana Worthen as "a chapter of info-dumping".<sup>5</sup> Corvax, a Forged designed for working in the Asteroid Belt, has voluntarily taken a portion of Stuff into himself, and describes the process to fellow investigators. He makes the important point that the process is non-reversible:

"There is no possibility of return once living material accepts this translation. It – they – are in the process of evolving, and to assimilate stuff – that is, to assimilate them – is to become them. They will not destroy parts of themselves. But until the fusion is complete, then these is a chance for me – or whoever – to destroy myself, if I don't want to carry on and be consumed." (290)

Science fiction is often ambivalent about this sort of union with a universal consciousness, especially when all traces of the original sense of individuality is lost. In episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and subsequent iterations of the *Trek* franchise, the population of the Federation will fight to the death to avoid being assimilated into the Borg collective.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, in *2010: Odyssey Two* (1982), Arthur C. Clarke indicates that the human who was once David Bowman is happy to be joined in consciousness with the intelligences that are responsible for the monoliths (though Bowman admittedly does retain some degree of individuality). Usually, however, a work will take a view one way or the other. Through different characters having different views, Robson in *Natural History* manifests the general ambivalence of the SF field as a whole. Trini, Corvax, and the Unevolved historian Zephyr Duquesne embrace the opportunities provided by Translation, though in all of those cases after some initial hesitation. Others, as shown, reject it. Robson keeps her own views to herself, though it is notable that the choice of the contacted between



translation and self-destruction is at one point described as "Evolve or die" (*Natural History*, 295) – is that not the choice that is, ultimately, offered to all living creatures?

*Living Next Door to the God of Love* spins this slightly differently. In general, it gives a far less rosy picture of Translation. As with *Natural History*, the novel begins with an encounter with Stuff, now more generally referred to as "Unity". A pocket universe, or "Sidebar", has been created, into which some humans have moved. This Sidebar is then absorbed into Unity, humans and all. The "official" view is given by Theodore, a projection into 4D space of Unity, intended to act as a spokesman:

"Nothing has been lost ... Nobody has died. They are all *within*, every life perfectly recorded, every experience distributed. Fascinating people, all of them. I am glad to have come into the sphere of their influence."

...  
He wasn't apologizing. He was thanking them for a donation. (*Living Next Door to the God of Love*, 93)

But, as is realized by the Forged to whom Theodore tells this, for the people who knew the people who have been Translated, all their friends and family might as well be dead. This less rosy view is emphasised by the way in which some characters refer to the process of Translation – they talk of Unity "eating" individuals. Moreover, it appears that sometimes those individuals "eaten" can be brought back, if only for a time and never fully free of Unity – and the impression gained from those whom we do see is, when given their individuality back, they are not happy about being eaten. In addition to this, when Unity creates beings that are necessary to interact with the humans in the Sidebars, "Stuffies", these Stuffies have a degree of individuality, and want to preserve that as long as possible. They clearly do not relish the prospect of



returning to Unity. Even Theodore has more individuality than he thinks he has.

“Splinters” can be created from Unity, and at the core of *Living Next Door to the God of Love* is the story of one such Splinter, Jalaeka, who has managed to separate himself wholly from Unity, and wishes to maintain that situation, and save his friends from Unity. He is clearly the protagonist, and the reader is clearly meant to be on his side (not least because those opposed to him at various points indulge in horrific rape, torture and murder).

The end of the novel resists interpretation. I know that Niall Harrison reads it as everyone being absorbed into Unity, but retaining their individuality. In the *New York Review of Science Fiction* 213 (May 2006) the ending is read as Jalaeka recreating everyone in his own image. I myself think that possibly Jalaeka manages to separate Unity from the 4D universe. But I am unsure which, if any, of these readings is correct. However, for the purposes of this piece, it does not really matter. The point is that the individuality of the central characters is retained, and valued.

Through these two novels, Robson explores the ideas of loss of identity, in a way that only the science fiction novel can do. We as humans can never actually lose our individuality to this extent, unless we believe that it will come to us after death. Robson is able to use these novels to consider what might happen if we were confronted with the option of giving up our identity in this way. She addresses the issues of transcendence, and why individuals might fear it, as if it were a form of death. As Martin Lewis says of *Natural History*, on *SF Site*,<sup>7</sup> these are novels of ideas. They support the contention that Justina

Robson is not just one of the best British women writing SF, but one of the best British SF writers without further qualification.

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1. *Strange Horizons*: <http://bit.ly/x5x7V9>. I was partially led to this revelation by a misremembering of the end of *Natural History* by Niall Harrison in his review of *Living Next Door to the God of Love* in *Foundation* 96 (2006, 104), subsequently corrected in the version of the review that appeared in *Torque Control* (<http://bit.ly/yJGOyA>).
2. *Torque Control*: <http://bit.ly/zrarER>
3. Harrison, in the revised version of his review, calls it “the touchstone work for me”, whilst Roberts describes it as “a novel I suspect may be remembered as her masterpiece” in his introduction to *Heliotrope* (Greenwood, Ticonderaga, 2011), Robson’s collection of short fiction (14).
4. The issue of the Forged, and their relationship to humanity, is a fascinating topic to explore, but this cannot be done here. Robson explores the issue a little more in the short story “Cracklegrackle” (*Heliotrope*, 165-200).
5. *Torque Control*: <http://bit.ly/xTlye5>.
6. Beginning with “Q Who?” (wri.: Maurice Hurley, dir.: Rob Bowman, 1989), though they were foreshadowed in “The Neutral Zone” (wri.: Maurice Hurley, story: Deborah McIntyre and Mona Clee, dir.: James L. Conway).
7. *SFSite*: <http://bit.ly/wWsFOY>.

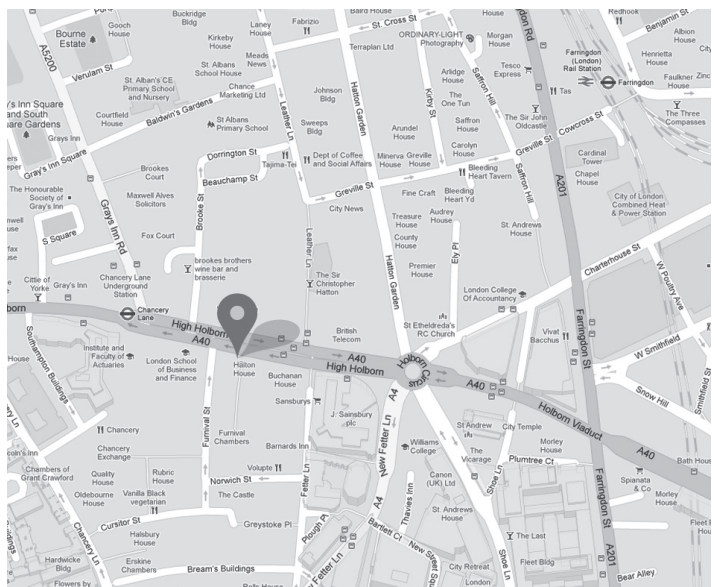
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# Telling the World: The Exodus Trilogy by Julie Bertagna

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Niall Harrison

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## I

There is a certain amount of resistance to the idea of science fiction telling stories about climate change. Not so much to science fiction that *includes* climate change; I think *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction's* claim that "consideration of climate change has become virtually inevitable in serious near future sf of the twenty-first century"<sup>1</sup> is a little optimistic, or perhaps disingenuous given the relative scarcity of "serious near future sf", but futures set in a changed landscape are readily accepted. Stories that are *about* changed or changing landscapes, about the processes of climate change, however, are a different matter. Consider reviews of Gordon van Gelder's recent climate change anthology *Welcome to the Greenhouse*. Paul Kincaid, in a review for SF Site, diagnosed a risk of polluting sf with futurism to no good effect: "if we expect science fiction writers to be better qualified than any other reasonably well-informed member of the public to comment on the scientific issues facing us today, we are deceiving ourselves"<sup>2</sup>. Anil Menon, meanwhile, in a review for The Portal, found the very concept of environmental sf oxymoronic: "The two words represent, and have always represented, orthogonal, if not antithetical, ways of looking at the world. One focuses on regulating needs, the other on deregulating desire"<sup>3</sup>. More generally many commentators see a risk of polemic that must be avoided. As Philip Pullman put it, at the Hay Festival in 2010, although "the degradation of the environment" is the next century's major challenge, "the difficulty is that we write with our imagination, not our conscience or our opinions"<sup>4</sup>; the muse comes first, the conscious mind second, and it is unproductive to try to assign your writing a topic. Perhaps too there is a sense that it is not meaningful to talk about a *story* of climate change, since it's a process that is radically divorced from the normal run of human experience, rapid only on long timescales. Weather is day-to-day, after all; climate is the background.

These objections, however, strike me as defensive if not defeatist. The latter most of all, given that science fiction routinely attempts to marry the cosmological and the human, and has developed quite a range of

strategies for doing so; it would be strange if these could not be adapted for the climatological. But I don't buy the polemic argument, either. Even if you believe fiction should always avoid overt argument (I do not), this is surely a reservation borne of internalising the incorrect notion that climate change is more inherently political than other novelistic topics. The cautions of Kincaid and Menon, meanwhile, must apply only to limited subsets of potential climate change sf (which may certainly have been found in the book under review). I can't see a compelling argument that this topic should carry a greater burden of scientific accuracy than others (that is, if you want to play with the net up you can, but it's far from compulsory), nor do I see a strong case that sf is inherently a wish-fulfilling mode (though it certainly is quite often).

The case in favour of deliberate climate change sf is put straightforwardly by Bill McKibben, in his introduction to another recent anthology, *I'm With the Bears*: "The scientists have done their job ... Now it's time for the rest of us -- for the economists, the psychologists, the theologians. And the artists, whose role is to help us understand what things *feel* like"<sup>5</sup>. More precisely, Thomas H. Ford writes of seeking fiction that can identify and convey a "new aesthetics" of climate: "one could speculate that climate could emerge as a new regulative idea, and that social life could soon come to be shaped by climate as if we could apprehend it directly"<sup>6</sup>. That *as if* is significant, I think, and in a callous sense, quite an imaginative opportunity. We're used to thinking of sf as portraying a rapidly evolving human world, with the new patterns of thought that demands; we're less used to thinking of it as portraying a rapidly evolving natural world with the same consequences. But the current atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide "is already too high to maintain the climate to which humanity, wildlife, and the rest of the biosphere are adapted"<sup>7</sup>: Earth is becoming an alien planet even as you read these words. New regulative ideas are already our destiny.

## II

Which brings me to Julie Bertagna's **Exodus** trilogy, comprising the title volume (2002), *Zenith* (2007), and



*Aurora* (2011), all published as Young Adult fiction. In defiance of Pullman, it is fiction of conscience; in an interview in the back of my copy of *Zenith*, Bertagna notes that the initial impetus for her story came from reading about the plight of Pacific islanders losing their homeland to sea. But it is not polemic. Written in energetic, direct, third-person present-tense prose, the trilogy is more than anything else an epic adventure, a story about seeking, and finding, and building the world you want to live in.

And the character who does more seeking and finding and building than any other is Mara Bell. As *Exodus* opens, at the very end of the twenty-first century, the waves are encroaching on Scottish islands. Our first glimpse of Mara comes as she tries to persuade her community, on the island of Wing, to listen to one of the elders warn that they must plan for the future: she stands on a stone platform “like an avenging angel, haloed by the flames of the sunfire behind her” (E3). She is from the start a force of nature, a “wild bird” (E25) driven by youth’s sense of destiny, an equal match (we feel) for the storms that wrack her island. Over the next few chapters, it’s 15-year-old Mara who will discover evidence of a new world -- great ark cities that have been built to tower above the floods -- and Mara who will persuade the community that their island must be abandoned to seek this refuge.

The journey doesn’t last long. Between the end of one chapter and the start of the next, long days and nights of sea-voyage have passed, and despite losses Mara and her community have arrived at a place of “Towers so thick and high it’s hard to believe they are real [...] the brilliance is heart-stopping.” Of course it’s also a fortress:

There is no land or harbour, only a blurred mass that heaves and bobs around the city. A huge, dull-coloured live thing. The vile, rotting stench of an open drain hits as the clustering thing sharpens into focus. Mara gasps as she sees it’s a heaving mass of humanity. A chaos of refugee boats crams the sea around the city and clings like a fungus to the huge wall that seems to bar all entry to refugees. (E66)

This is effectively put, but notice that the people excluded from the city are not, at this stage, of particular interest to Mara, and by extension to us: they are “a thing”, “a heaving mass”, “a fungus”, alive but alien. It’s not stretching things too far to say the refugees are significant only as scenery. Or, seen in a more functional light, they are significant as a final filter. The process of leaving Wing has been, as so often in YA, a process of stripping away the comforts of home from our protagonist: first the elders remained on the island, for lack of space in the boats; then Mara’s boat is separated from that of her parents by a storm; and now Mara will be separated from her remaining friends, driven to find a way through into the city, though it means leaving everyone she’s ever known.

So much gets us roughly a third of the way into *Exodus*. The remainder of that novel, and most of *Zenith*, is occupied by a tour of communities differently adapted to life on a drowning world. Now the mass of humanity starts to resolve into groups, and ultimately individuals. There are the treenesters, who live in the

shadowed steaming netherworld beneath the new sky city, among the ruins that once were Glasgow; there are the cosseted citizens of the sky city; then, in *Zenith*, we see the floating piratical city of Pomperoy, and the slavers of newly-thawed Greenland. Life has, in other words -- and contrary to Mara’s perceptions, growing up on Wing -- gone on, in a multitude of ways.

Take the treenesters, who are in some ways the most changed. They live in human-sized nests for fear of the rising water, and dress in scavenged plastic. They have a whole repertoire of superstitions and customs, rituals that have evolved around the glimpses of sunlight seen through the towers of the city at the beginning and end of the day. And all treenesters are named after a place, tying them to the land in a self-conscious fashion -- evidence of the environment becoming a regulative idea, and an idiosyncrasy that allows Bertagna to take full advantage of Glasgow’s local colour. To name just the most significant characters for the rest of the trilogy, there’s Gorbals, the youth who is the first treenester Mara encounters; Pollock the hunter; Candleriggs the elder, who explains to Mara the history of the world; Broomielaw the thwarted inventor, and Clayslaps her infant son. The world of treenesters is earthy and old, even for the young.

In contrast there are the sky citizens, whom Mara infiltrates when Gorbals is captured and taken as a slave. They are superficially the treenesters’ opposites: they live suffused in technology, in a place that “seems to be created out of light and air, glass and crystal and mirror -- and yet more light” (E222). They are heathy, and happy, “human angels” (E194) in stark contrast to the pale and malnourished treenesters. They are also oblivious to the world beyond their walls. Language is significant here as well, although to less effective ends. Bertagna’s attempts at neologism are clumsy -- “zapeedos” for a kind of high-powered skates, “cyberwizz” for a device to access “the weave” (and “ace wizzers” who are particularly proficient in their use, and even “wizzlogs” by the time we get to *Aurora*) -- and lend an air of falseness and superficiality to the arcology’s accomplishments.

In a different series that might be taken as deliberate, but here that seems less likely. Certainly there is a certain amount of commentary on the artificiality of life in the sky -- the netherworld is “far more real and alive to Mara than this bright, bland, beautiful palace” (E232) -- but the relationship between technology and nature in the *Exodus* books is not entirely antagonistic. The drowning world cannot be survived by humans without technology in some form, and communications technology is central to the coordination of a rebellion in *Aurora*. The sky cities may house numbed minds, but it’s clear we’re meant to see the cities themselves as remarkable constructions, drawing on renewable energy and the principles of what is called “Natural Engineering”, adapting the best of nature’s designs to human ends; at different times they are likened both to trees and to standing stones. Mara cannot help feeling a “grudging awe” (E249) for what the cities have accomplished; and even Candleriggs, so scarred by their creation that she now considers knowledge itself an inherently corrupting force and has driven the treenesters to their low-tech existence (which is an interesting twist for a character type usually associated with wisdom and honour), acknowledges that they are “wonders of the

earth" (Z50). The city itself, like the treenesters, takes its name from its Glaswegian roots: it is called New Mungo.

The societies Mara encounters in *Zenith* complicate what remains of the opposition established in *Exodus*. The ship-city of Pomperoy is both an example of a new regulative idea -- its culture is based on a distrust of land, which has a habit of sinking -- and obviously a technological enterprise, with its own adherents of natural engineering. (It's also significant that in the case of Pomperoy we get to see the culture first through the eyes of one of its own, Tuck Culp, rather than filtered through Mara; our perceptions of it are allowed to be cleaner than our perceptions of New Mungo. The range of perspectives continues to expand throughout the trilogy.) The Greenland-based settlers of Ilira are almost as technologically primitive as the treenesters, but they're as morally reprehensible (as deregulated in their desires, to borrow Menon's phrase) as the builders of the sky cities, luring travellers to their harbour to cannibalise their ships and take anyone aboard as slaves.

But arguably the most interesting exploration of the technological and the natural in the series is played out through the urchins -- Mara's term for the very young children she first sees living in the basement towers of New Mungo. With no parents, no names, and almost no language, the children are wild, the most native creatures of the drowning world that we encounter, pure new thinking. Indeed, the suggestion in *Exodus* is that they are somehow the product of natural selection, with webbed fingers and toes, and "thick, seaworthy skin like a water rat or a seal" (E100), covered in hair. When, at the end of *Exodus*, Mara escapes from New Mungo and travels north in search of new land, along with the treenesters and some survivors from her island, some of the urchins join her, and at least one becomes a valued companion. In *Aurora*, it is revealed that the urchins are the product of genetic manipulation, an attempt to breed humans suited to the changing conditions; and while it seems, at the end of the trilogy, that there is little space for them in human society, there is space in the new world itself. Aliens, made by humans, for an alien world.

### III

Although the climate is an active, inexorable presence throughout, the **Exodus** books are clearly not intended as literally predictive. Certainly the predominant idiom is realistic -- although the sea level rises seen outstrip anything predicted by the IPCC in the story's time-frame<sup>8</sup> -- but the complete work is framed as a fairy tale: the first words of *Exodus* and the last of *Aurora* are "once upon a time". There is a sense in which the core regulative idea in the trilogy has nothing to do with the environment, but is about story.

The treenesters, for example, can be seen as admirable not for refusing the temptations of New Mungo, but for making story central to their experience of the world: "You must have stories," Gorbals explains to Mara. "Stories are the world's heartbeat. That's what keeps us all alive" (E127). And so each night the treenesters tell stories, to mark the passage of time, to remember who they are. In New Mungo, by contrast, the concept has been erased from the dictionary, as Mara discovers when,

tired and missing the comfort of the treenesters' tales, she asks a search widget to find her one: "Defunct word," it tells her (E255). And so, by extension, the inhabitants of New Mungo have no sense of the passage of time, no sense of who they are and, most damningly, no interest in the world. They exist in an eternal, vague, comfortable present.

There are some exceptions, one of whom is the boy David Stone, known as Fox to Mara based on the electronic avatar she first meets, who becomes the trilogy's secondary protagonist. Fox is heir to the founding family of New Mungo (and indeed the rest of the sky cities; Bertagna, like many other recent British writers of sf, is not above being parochial and is quite unashamed about making the leaders of her new world order Scottish<sup>9</sup>) but restless in his world without entirely knowing why; Mara's arrival, and the brief intense relationship they enjoy in the last third of *Exodus*, sets him on a path to fomenting revolution. It's with Fox's help that Mara is able to rescue Gorbals, and steal a boat for the treenesters to leave New Mungo. Fox himself sets up shop in the netherworld, after realising that, "for good or bad, this is my world [...] I need to understand the past" [E276]. The pair's intense devotion to each other in their separation -- and, after years pass, their devotion to the story they tell themselves about each other -- becomes the emotional ground bass of the trilogy.

In the foreground, however, is the story the treenesters tell about Mara:

Candleriggs raises a bony hand and points to an engraving on another part of the building. "Look at this story in the stone. It shows a fish with a ring, a bell, a bird and a tree. This story is all over the city, in so many places. This is the story we live by. We believe in the day when these things will come together. When that happens the stone-telling shall be, and we will be free from this deathly underworld. We will be free to find our true home in the world. Now that you are here it must begin, because Thenew is the key to the whole story. And you are the image of Thenew." (E116)

A couple of pages later, Candleriggs is even more direct: Mara is "the one who will begin a new story for us" (E118). And, as I've already hinted, by the end of *Exodus* the prophecy comes true. The signs and portents appear and Mara leads the treenesters out of their underworld, onto the ocean.

For a trilogy set in what is otherwise ostensibly a rational universe, this is a bit surprising. But although Bertagna plays up the uncanny resonances that Mara encounters (to quite potent effect), in the end the power here is not the power of the supernatural, but the power of story to sustain and inspire. The former is perhaps obvious, and signposted by the fact that before Mara ever leaves home, one of her closest friends has cause to speculate that "maybe people make up something to believe in when they *need* something to believe in" (E24). The treenesters need to believe that their imprisonment will end, so they find a way to do so. More interesting is the way in which Mara comes to terms with the stone-



telling, from seeing it as “a pebble in her shoe” (E171) to a recognition that “I seem to be trying to live out their expectations because [...] I don’t have anything else to live for” (E271). It’s Mara’s resourcefulness and force of will that brings about the stone-telling: she chooses to solve the puzzle of her future, to become a leader, and make the story happen.

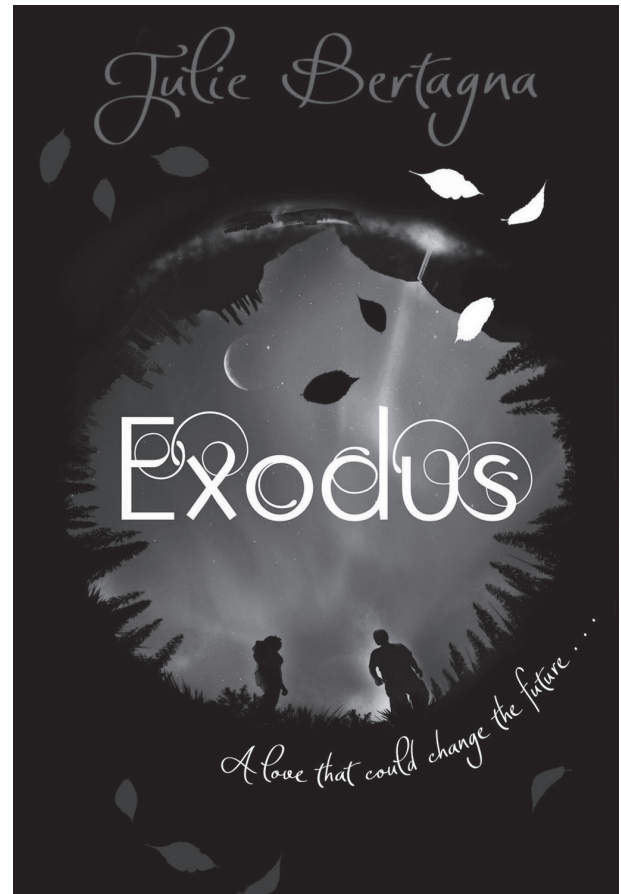
And then what? There are, after all, two volumes of the trilogy let to go. The end of one story is the start of another, as Gorbals tries to explain to the motley crew of the fleeing ship:

“We’re still living our story,” he finishes. “We don’t know how it’ll end. But the story set in the stones came true. Mara saved us and we’re not treenesters trapped in the netherworld any more. You,” he speaks to the refugees from the boat camp, “are not shut out of the world, dying outside the city wall. And you’re not ratkins any more.” He winks at the urchins. “We are all people now. People of the free world on the way to our home.” (Z96-7)

It’s a rather fine sentiment. Boldly, it comes true and is superseded in its turn. The last ten pages of *Zenith*, after Mara and comrades have battled through mountains and a Greenland winter to find a home, are a dramatic slingshot forward through time. “The Earth turns five thousand times and more” (Z331), and suddenly we’re thrust into the future. In brief glimpses we learn that a settlement has been established in the Greenland interior, where Mara and her companions live in burrows through the winter; that Mara’s daughter Lily (by Fox, conceived during their time in New Mungo) has grown old enough to become a young adult and a focus of story in her own right, as has the urchin Pandora that Fox has taken under his wing in the netherworld; and that the slaver’s community of Ilira has become a thriving hub for trade, and a place of great and beautiful bridges. And we learn that spring is coming.

All of which is enough setup to make *Aurora* a very interesting concluding volume, and a very interesting young adult novel. Just as we have learned to read this world through these characters, we are asked to learn it again, and this time as a panorama, darting across the globe to all the places Mara visited on her travels, as events unwinds towards revolution and war. Our protagonists initially are the new young adults: Lily, who almost immediately is set against the story she thought she knew, when she discovers that Mara has not told her the truth about her parentage, and consequently sets off back across the mountain in search of Fox; Pandora, who has become one of Fox’s lieutenants, a fierce “warrior queen of the netherworld” (A10), and who has fallen in love with Fox herself; and Candle, a girl living in the expanded Ilira chosen to be married to the city ruler as part of a business transaction. Before too long, however, and in spite of the fact that they are now adults, Bertagna allows Fox and Mara back into the story.

And as far as story goes, this time around it’s Fox’s role that’s the more thematically significant. In pursuit of his revolution, Fox has built a network of dissidents in the quiet corners of the electronic worlds of the sky cities,



and via the radio waves. Broadcasting as “the midnight storyteller”, Fox has seeded hearts and minds across the globe with a belief in story, and in particular in the idea of change. His final broadcast, half-way through *Aurora*, is as clear a culmination of the story of story in *Exodus* as you could ask for; and about as clear an address to the reader as Bertagna could get away with.

The story Fox will read now has never been told before. It is Mara’s story, the tragedy of the Earth’s sea-broken people. The most powerful part of this story, Fox will tell his army of listeners, is the ending. It has no ending, not yet. The end is still to be.

You, he will tell the people of the world, are the storytellers now. You must decide what happens to the sea-broken people. How the story ends all depends on you. (A144)

#### IV

One way of glossing everything above is to say that *Exodus* is about story as a necessary response to climate change. Another is to say that *Exodus* is political sf, a work that embodies that most characteristically young adult of narrative arcs, the discovery of agency in the world, in a way that is nuanced by the specifics of a world undergoing environmental change. Paolo Bacigalupi has argued that this sort of agency can only be convincingly articulated in a young adult venue:

As adults, we’re stuck in this matrix of decisions that we’ve already made. If you’ve got a mortgage to pay and you’ve got your commute

already set up, you keep getting in your car and driving even as you kill the planet. We're unwilling to make the more difficult decisions that would pull ourselves out of that matrix. But when you speak to young people, you're speaking to people who haven't cast all their choices in stone yet. They still have options; it's all in flux.<sup>9</sup>

It's not hard to imagine that something of the same thought process went into Bertagna's novels. In fact, compared to Bacigalupi's own *Ship Breaker* (2010), my feeling is that Bertagna's story is bolder and more successful. Both works convey the sense that the physical world itself is now a variable, uncertain and changing, but *Exodus*, thanks to successive slingshots past prophecy, past fifteen years, and towards an uncertain future at the end of *Aurora*, embodies this new regulative principle more fully. Similarly Bertagna's work is more engaged with the various new social orders that have arisen; *Ship Breaker*, relying more heavily on the melodrama of a single central villain, feels less specific to its context. And while *Ship Breaker* begins to show how people might adapt themselves to a changed world through the character of the engineered dog-man Tool, the variations in *Exodus* are more striking, and the equally engineered urchins are both more convincingly strange and more thoroughly explored.

In fact Bertagna's approach is less like that of Bacigalupi, and more like that of Stephen Baxter, whose *Flood* (2008) eschews anthropogenic sea-level rises for an accelerated, speculative version but which in doing so manages to convey more of the drama of change, and the necessity of response, than a more literal novel could do. There's also a hint of a more optimistic writer like Kim Stanley Robinson, whose *Science in the Capitol* trilogy (2004-2007) surely comes as close as any novel could to convincingly portraying optimism for adults in the face of climate change, and which shares with *Exodus* a recognition that any full response to the changing world must mean a radical and progressive re-ordering of society: both Mara and Fox, at different times, recognise and reject the historical biases and injustices from our world that have been continued into the existing societies of their world.

All of which said, there is also something a little too easy about Bertagna's portrayal of climate change denial -- by the citizens of Wing, and later of New Mungo -- as a matter of withdrawing from the world. It downplays the extent to which denial in our present world also involves the active creation of narrative. To read a statement by a denialist such as James Inhofe, the Republican senator for Oklahoma in 2003<sup>11</sup>, or a novel such as Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* (2004) is to be disoriented by the discovery of just how deep the rabbit-hole goes. There is no equivalent in *Exodus*; Candleriggs' scepticism of technology comes closest, but is rooted in the actual events of her life, and in any case has little effect on either Mara or Fox. But that aside, Bertagna's trilogy is an excellent example of the sort of climate change fiction -- the sort of fiction -- that makes us think about our world now, and about the processes of change in general. If Bertagna's fidelity to the power of story has a single advantage, it is that it underlines

that the world never stops becoming a new story. Each generation must learn it. Each generation must learn that they can tell it.

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# Single-gendered Worlds in Science Fiction: Better for Whom?

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Victor Grech  
with Clare Thake-Vasallo  
and Ivan Callus

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An excess of one gender is a regular and problematic trope in SF, instantly removing any potential tension between the two sexes while simultaneously generating new concerns. While female-only societies are common, male-only societies are rarer. This is partly a true biological obstacle because the female body is capable of bringing a baby forth into the world after fertilization, or even without fertilization, a prospective author's only stumbling block to accounting for the society's potential longevity. For example, gynogenesis is a particular type of parthenogenesis whereby animals that reproduce by this method can only reproduce that way. These species, such as the salamanders of genus *Ambystoma*, consist solely of females which does, occasionally, have sexual contact with males of a closely related species but the sperm from these males is not used to fertilise ova. Instead, it stimulates ovum development without any exchange of genetic material. It is believed that this species has survived due to the extremely rare (perhaps one in one million matings) fertilisation of ova by sperm, allowing genetic mixing and a modicum of biodiversity due to the introduction of new material in this salamander's gene pool.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the male body needs to be considerably re-engineered in order to carry a baby to term, necessitating a uterus, placenta and a delivery mode/orifice. However, conception may be dispensed with through an asexual method of reproduction, such as cloning or parthenogenesis, and the gestating process may be bypassed by a postulated ectogenetic process. The latter may also serve to gestate a baby that is produced by a sexual reproduction, through the conventional recombination of a spermatozoon with an ovum, and the resulting zygote implanted in an artificial uterus in the same way that a zygote is now implanted in a uterus by *in-vitro* fertilisation.

Yet another reason that explains why women-only worlds are commoner than men-only worlds is that a

number of writers have speculated whether a world constructed on strict feminist principles might be utopian rather than dystopian, and 'for many of these writers, such a world was imaginable only in terms of sexual separatism; for others, it involved reinventing female and male identities and interactions'.<sup>2</sup>

These issues have been ably reviewed in Brian Attebery's *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (2002), in which he observes that 'it's impossible in real life to isolate the sexes thoroughly enough to demonstrate [...] absolutes of feminine or masculine behavior',<sup>3</sup> whereas 'within science-fiction, separation by gender has been the basis of a fascinating series of thought experiments'.<sup>4</sup>

Intriguingly, Attebery poses the question that a single-gendered society is 'better for whom'?<sup>5</sup>

## MEN-ONLY WORLDS

A typical example of a men-only world is A. Bertram Chandler's *Spartan Planet* (1968), which features a men-only dystopia, 'Sparta', modelled on the militaristic values of the ancient Greek city-state. This version of Sparta is peopled by hypermasculine soldiers and effeminate nurses, with the same sex providing both of the conventional gender roles, and possibilities for sexual pairing. Spartan society is based on a deception as the planet's history is covert, the existence of a handful of women prostitutes is known only to the doctors who are the planet's elite, and the importation of ova to maintain the population is also concealed.<sup>6</sup>

In Cordwainer Smith's *The Crime and the Glory of Commander Suzdal* (1964),<sup>7</sup> based on his series dealing with *The Instrumentality of Mankind*,<sup>8</sup> humans settle on a planet where femininity is carcinogenic to all Earth species. Tumours develop widely on the lips, breasts, groin and edge of jaw, and frantic research shows that the alien sun's radiation has an unknown factor that turns body's own endogenous steroid hormones into a hitherto unknown form of steroid that infallibly causes

cancer in all females. One of the female doctors involved in the intensive research proposes turning all human females into males by injecting them with massive doses of testosterone, eliminating existing tumours and the tendency to develop tumours. Moreover, she learns how to implant tissue into the abdominal cavity such that an artificial womb, complex chemistry and artificial insemination, along with the judicious use of radiation and heat make it possible for men to bear boy children.<sup>9</sup> Further generations have very occasional female births that die unceremoniously and women were considered mythical, deformed and misshapen creatures in this society based on extreme violence and bloodshed.

The possibility of men carrying babies to term was explored in a more humorous vein in the film *Junior* (1994), where a medical researcher who develops a new drug that will allow expectant mothers to carry endangered babies to term is prohibited from testing the drug by Government regulation. He therefore implants a fertilised ovum in his own abdomen and carries it to term with the help of his own drug.<sup>10</sup> Virtually all pregnancies in the animal kingdom are carried by females of the species. In biology, male pregnancy is defined as the incubation of one or more embryos or foetuses by the male, and an example is provided by the *Syngnathidae*, a family that includes sea horses, leafy sea dragons and pipefish. In these species, females lay eggs in a brood pouch on a male's chest, and fertilisation by sperm and incubation continue by the male.<sup>11</sup>

A threatened men-only world is also portrayed in John Blackburn's *A Scent of New-Mown Hay* (1961), where a desperate, last-ditch German biological weapon from the mid-1940s features a mutated 'Madura' fungus that turns all women into monstrously inhuman, mobile fungal masses, completely sparing men.<sup>12</sup> The aetiological basis of this disease is inaccurate as this fungus does not exist. Madura is a region in India where the condition 'Madura foot' was first identified in the mid-1800s. Madura foot is a mycetoma, a chronic and localised subcutaneous granulomatous infection caused by more than twenty species of fungi and bacteria, and which may extend to involve underlying bone, joints, muscles and tendons. The infecting organism/s usually enters the body through a scratch or abrasion which is why the foot is most likely to be the site of infection. However, any part of the body may be involved.<sup>13</sup>

A dearth of women is also envisaged in the lunar penal colony in Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966). The original gender ratio of convicts was ten males to one female. Two generations later, the societal result is that women are venerated and revered, treated with exaggerated courtesy, and with dozens of suitors each. Women are completely safe anywhere on Luna, and sex crimes and domestic disputes are unheard of. Marriage customs also reflect these customs with group marriages and polyandry being the norm. In typically Heinleinian scenario, the convicts and transportees drift into a semi-anarchic society ruled mainly by common sense in a live and let live philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Such narratives reinforce how SF 'has a long history [...] of questioning systems of thought, particularly those we now label metanarratives [...], even as it appears to [...] valorize notions of scientific method, objectivity, and progress'.<sup>15</sup>

An enormous preponderance of male births accompanied by frequently sterile females is the plight depicted for future man in Clark Ashton Smith's *An Adventure in Futurity* (1931).<sup>16</sup> In Alan Nourse's *Raiders from the Rings* (1962), after a sojourn in space of any length with exposure to cosmic rays, men (who then become known as 'spacers') are unable to father female children, so they steal women from Earth as future mates. Interestingly, despite their radiation exposure, spacers are neither more prone to sterility nor more prone to father mutations. However, they are distinguished by white hair by the end of their teens and tend to live longer than the norm.<sup>17</sup> The author, a doctor, proposes that male sperm that carry an X chromosome have this chromosome put out of commission, so that the X behaves like a Y. Naturally, the protagonist, a young spacer, does not know what it means to have a sister. The story poses some unanswered questions in that we are never told whether cosmic radiation affects females in any way, or whether this radiation has any effects on other species. Interestingly, longevity in spacers occurs at the price of partial infertility in that spacers can only father males.

In *Raiders from the Rings*, effective infertility is portrayed as the basis for interplanetary war, a theme that shall be encountered later. Similar issues are raised in *Mars Needs Women* (1966), where Martians with a genetic deficiency that results only in male babies launch a mission to Earth to recruit female volunteers for Mars, meeting strong resistance from Earth governments.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of 'spacers', it is biologically impossible for the X chromosome to behave like a Y chromosome but it would be possible for the Y to behave like an X if the SRY (Sex-determining region) gene on the Y chromosome were knocked out of action, producing only females.

The XY arrangement is not universal and many situations found in nature appear almost science-fictional in their peculiarity. For example, some mammalian species have lost the Y chromosome entirely and only have an unpaired X chromosome, while others use a different Y chromosome or have both genders with paired XX chromosomes, as already discussed.<sup>19</sup> In birds, the system is similar but reversed with a heterogametic ZW chromosome combination comprising a female, while a homogametic ZZ comprises a male.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Non-mammalian and non-avian species have even more unusual gender determining arrangements. For example, some reptiles, including all crocodilians, many turtle and tortoise species, and some lizards, use temperature-dependent sex determination, and sex is therefore determined after conception, during embryogenesis, according to ambient environmental temperature.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, temperature-dependent sex determination has been recently advanced as a possibly reason for the extinction of the dinosauria in that global temperature changes may have skewed the sex ratio at birth of these species leading to a preponderance of males. Naturally, current global warming may also pose a risk for extant temperature-dependent sex determination species.<sup>23</sup>

It is not dinosaurs but other kinds of humans who are the menace to humans, in Edmund Cooper's *The Slaves of Heaven* (1974), in which earthbound primitive humans, descendants of survivors of an atomic war, are preyed



upon by high-tech humans who weathered the war in orbit and remained there so as to avoid radioactivity. The human females in orbit do not gestate infants as gestation in a microgravity environment accelerates ageing, therefore their ova are extracted, fertilised by sperm from their male counterparts, and after this *in-vitro* fertilisation, implanted in females who have been abducted from Earth who therefore serve as surrogate mothers. Once again, infertility is depicted as the cause for aggression between two groups of humans.<sup>24</sup>

Another men-only world is found in Lois McMaster Bujold's *Ethan of Athos* (1991). The planet Athos is all-male. Women are completely forbidden, and because of generations of such upbringing, women are mistrusted. The protagonist is an obstetrician who cares for the unborn, with gestation carried out via artificial external wombs which feature in many of Bujold's novels. Exowombs are depicted as convenient ways for women to have babies without the discomfort of gestation and labour.<sup>25</sup> The device can also be used as a sort of antenatal intensive care unit for foetuses that may have sustained damage, for example, by toxic gas.<sup>26</sup>

Aliens are responsible for forcing mankind to exist in a men-only world in Theodore Sturgeon's *The Incubi of Parallel X* (1955), when an alien invasion force slaughters women on a massive scale in order to extract a specific female hormone that rejuvenates the invaders. A scientist hides the surviving women in a parallel dimension out of sight of the ravaging aliens.<sup>27</sup> A special case of a male-only world applied to aliens is depicted in Fred Pohl's *I Plingot, Who You?* (1959) wherein a cowardly, spacefaring alien species devotes itself to destroying species who are on the brink of spaceflight so as to eliminate all possible threats to their species. However, a final male stowaway of a destroyed species is found on a spaceship.<sup>28</sup>

### WOMEN-ONLY WORLDS

Women-only worlds may be considered the extreme in ultra-feminist utopias. The concept of an all female society dates back at least to the Amazons of ancient Greek mythology, who, however, still required males to conceive.<sup>29</sup> SF allows us to perform thought experiments that create different Utopias, as conventional Utopias are often similar to More's Utopia, 'where equality is emphasized above all else, even to the point of suppression of individual liberty and imposition of a potentially oppressive conformity, [...], More's Utopia is still a strongly patriarchal society'.<sup>30</sup>

One of the earliest novels in this vein is *Mizora* (1880) where men are more forgotten than actually hated.<sup>31</sup> However, the most famous story in this trope is John Wyndham's *Consider Her Ways* (1979).<sup>32</sup> The female protagonist, a contemporary woman, awakens in a female-only world, and finds herself being called 'mother' by her attendants. Her initial amnesia slowly wears off but in the interim, she discovers that she has somehow travelled to the future and had very recently and successfully delivered quadruplets, and that she has had three other such deliveries. Other classes of women include strong and large framed manual workers and small framed servants. The ruling class most closely approximate today's women and decides the appropriate ratios of all classes. Babies are then manipulated by specialised feeding, hormone

manipulation and training.<sup>33</sup> The concept for these classes was initially derived from the Bible: 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise'.<sup>34</sup> The lack of males is explained as an accident by a male scientist who attempted to develop a virus that would exterminate the common male rat, a virus originally derived from one that specifically attacked rabbits, but which mutated and killed human males.

This situation is similar to the fungus-growing ant species *Mycocepurus smithii* that is located in the Amazon, whose queen produces eggs asexually, without any need for male fertilization. Hives are therefore composed entirely of females, albeit with the remainder of the hive composed of sterile female workers as is typical in ant colonies.<sup>35</sup>

The infection parallel in *Consider her Ways* is with rabbits, which are prolific breeders, originally only native to southern Europe, but which were also widely introduced elsewhere in northern Europe and Australia. When introduced into environments that have not evolved natural defenses against them, rabbits cause enormous damage. Myxomatosis is a disease that infects only rabbits and was first observed in Uruguay in the early 1900s, and which was deliberately introduced into Australia in an attempt to control rabbit infestation.<sup>36</sup>

In *Consider her Ways*, doctors used this opportunity to grasp power along with other graduates. These privileged women are allowed to have babies should they so desire. Women who wanted to attempt to bring back the male of the species were banned since this society views our current western society as having enslaved females with consumerism, making females unwitting slaves to romance.

A number of other (mostly) feminist novels have used this premise to redefine the conventional patriarchal status-quo, and experimenting with the results of an all-female society. Another famous and early novel is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), which depicts a country discovered by three male explorers, a lost civilisation inhabited only by women who reproduce parthenogenetically and where men are unknown. The explorers refuse to believe that such a culture could exist without men. Their conventional assumptions with regard to the innate inferiority of women are quickly put to the test when they are captured by a group of Herlander women, who subdue them with chloroform and educate them about their society.<sup>37</sup> Gilman was a prominent social critic and feminist writer in the United States from the 1890s through the 1930s, and humorously used this satire to question conventional and unquestioned gender roles, sexism and inequalities in a male-oriented society by comparison with a homosocial female utopia with a complete culture, political and financial system. This system is depicted as having developed from an all-female society, based on the principles of love, sharing and continuous striving towards improvement in the absence of men, implying that only without men and sex can utopia be achieved. The novel also anticipates modern problems such as pollution and overpopulation. The cyberfeminist Sadie Plant has wished for just such an extreme scenario, with women living separately from men and reproducing parthenogenetically.<sup>38</sup>

It must, however, be pointed out that SF authors have

also explored utopias that do not isolate genders, and for example, in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976),<sup>39</sup> a 'utopian community manages successfully to integrate advanced technology, social planning, individual liberty, and a close connection to nature [...] all citizens [...] are treated equally regardless of race, gender, or other differences'.<sup>40</sup> The population is controlled by having children to only replace deaths, and children are raised by groups of three co-mothers who may be male or female. Any of the trio may lactate, even males, as milk production is stimulated artificially, and all infants and toddlers are housed communally in large nurseries. Monogamy, the nuclear family and sexual exclusivity are obsolete. Language is therefore not gendered, the word father is lost, mother may denote a member of any sex and the third person pronouns 'he' and 'she' are replaced by 'per', a contraction for 'person'. Piercy also depicts an alternative dystopia wherein 'women function only as the property of men and the men themselves are little more than machines',<sup>41</sup> and a privileged clique of capitalists enjoy long life and affluence on space platforms, while the majority live on a decayed Earth, living on a diet of drugs and sex with ultimately death to look forward to in middle age after selling their organs to the rich for transplantation. Once again, SF clearly cautions us; 'the message seems clear: we can continue the way we are going until we reach this dystopian state, or we can change our ways and work toward utopia'.<sup>42</sup>

Futuristic visions are also employed in Tiptree's *Your Faces, O My Sisters, Your Faces Filled of Light* (1976), where the protagonist, a young woman, journeys simultaneously through the contemporary cynical and capitalist United States while also glimpsing a pastoral, women-only utopia.<sup>43</sup>

A dearth of fertile males in the far future is also depicted in Elisabeth Vonarburg's *In the Mothers' Land* (1992).<sup>44</sup> Total male destruction by an unexplained plague has also been depicted in the comic series *Y: The Last Man* (2003-2008) where every mammal possessing a Y chromosome, including embryos, fertilised eggs and sperm are destroyed, with the exception of a young man and his pet Capuchin monkey.<sup>45</sup> Wallace West's *The Last Man* (1929) portrays an all-female society where women have become masculinised, flat breasted and narrow hiped,<sup>46</sup> while Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines* (1989) describes a female society of clone sisters.<sup>47</sup>

In Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite* (1992), a virus is also responsible for killing all men and also irreversibly alters all women, allowing them to breed without men, but the setting is on an extra-solar planet. The planet is rediscovered by explorers centuries later, who find that women are able to commune with the planet, and realise that this colony poses a deadly threat to all men in the universe if the virus is allowed to escape the planet.<sup>48</sup> The fictional concept of a living and intelligent planet has also been famously expounded by Asimov in *Nemesis* (1989).<sup>49</sup> Even black holes have been imbued with intelligence,<sup>50</sup> and on an even grander scale, Olaf Stapledon envisaged the entire universe becoming intelligent and aware of its maker.<sup>51</sup>

In Edmund Cooper's *Who Needs Men?* (1974) a war that kills far more men than women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the final straw that triggers a popular, communist-type

female uprising against men in the United Kingdom, and later worldwide. New females are born either through cloning and artificial uteri or in a more conventional way from a woman in a parthenogenetic process. In the aftermath of this war, men are viewed with disgust and contempt having enslaved women for millennia. 'Wife' becomes one of the most obscene words in the language, reeking of possession, slavery and submission. Males are hunted down and exterminated in the countryside where they hide, and their illicit female companions are viewed with disgust.<sup>52</sup>

The eviction of the male is not uncommon in SF. In Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988), warrior garrisons keep men out of utopian women's towns,<sup>53</sup> the new-wave novel *Meanwhile* (1985) has men banished to the ocean, where they live in a giant bubble, and reproduction is by cloning,<sup>54</sup> and Le Guin's *The Matter of Seggri* (1994) segregates men in an enclosure on the extrasolar planet Seggri, and a series of observers variously describe these men as honoured lords served by women or as sex slaves for free women.<sup>55</sup>

Conversely, men are truly needed, albeit briefly, in the two *Star Trek* episodes, *The Lorelei Signal* (1973)<sup>56</sup> and *Favorite Son* (1997),<sup>57</sup> where beautiful females feed off the 'life energies' of males, thus killing men to retain their immortality at the expense of infertility.

In Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975),<sup>58</sup> 'characters refuse the reader's search for innocent wholeness while granting the wish for heroic quests, exuberant eroticism, and serious politics'.<sup>59</sup> The book deals with four women who hail from different worlds: Jeannine whose world revolves around marriage, Joanna who is experiencing a feminist revolution but is still expected to orient herself around men, Janet who lives in a women-only world as men have been killed off centuries before by a plague, and Jael, an assassin who lives in a world where the two sexes wage a cold war. These individuals are 'four versions of one genotype, all of whom meet, but even taken together do not make a whole, resolve the dilemmas of violent moral action, or remove the growing scandal of gender'.<sup>60</sup>

An alien occupation force conquers Earth, and proposes the imposition of a matriarchal society similar to their own in John W Campbell's *Out of Night* (1976). Males would be culled as few are needed to breed the race. Incidentally, the alien ruler is immortal, and we are told in passing that this process – which is unexplained – has also rendered her sterile.<sup>61</sup>

Nutrition may influence gender and in the insect order *Hymenoptera* (which includes honeybees) the queen is a fully functional female and determines whether to lay fertilised or unfertilised eggs. Fertilised eggs develop into female workers if given standard nutrition in their larval stages or queens if fed with royal jelly. Unfertilised eggs only have only half the number of chromosomes of fertilised eggs and develop into male drone bees, whose only function, like that of men in *Out of Night*, is that of fertilisation of the queen.<sup>62</sup>

The concept of males as drone-like breeders is also seen on the planet Lyrane in EE Smith's *Second Stage Lensman* (1965), where males are deliberately culled, and are stunted and rabidly aggressive breeding machines, kept out of sight and sound;<sup>63</sup> and a similar scenario is also depicted in MF Rupert's *Via the Hewitt Ray* (1930),



wherein males are also brainwashed and sterilised or disintegrated for exhibiting rebellious tendencies.<sup>64</sup> An analogous concept, this time in Martian animals, with violent males who are literally drones, used only to fertilise a female queen who produces all of the necessary worker castes, is seen in Philip José Farmer's *Open to Me, My Sister* (1960).<sup>65</sup> The opposite, female equivalent is the alien female Kzin in Larry Niven's *Known Space*, whose intelligence has been bred down so as to be more docile and more easily manageable by male Kzin, an intelligent and carnivorous species evolved from plains hunting cats.<sup>66</sup>

Other, less well known women-only (or almost so) worlds include *Virgin Planet* (1959),<sup>67</sup> *Leviathan's Deep* (1979),<sup>68</sup> *The Radclyffe Effect* (1969),<sup>69</sup> *London Fields* (1985),<sup>70</sup> *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* (1984),<sup>71</sup> *The World Celaeno Chose* (1999),<sup>72</sup> *The Y Chromosome* (1990),<sup>73</sup> *Wingwomen of Hera* (1987),<sup>74</sup> *Daughters of Khaton*,<sup>75</sup> *A Door Into Ocean*,<sup>76</sup> *Houston, Houston, Do You Read* (1976),<sup>77</sup> *Retreat: As It Was!* (1979).<sup>78</sup>

Interestingly, the mad scientist in Michael Blumlein's *The Brains of Rats* (1986), develops an airborne virus that is capable of transforming humanity into all male or all female within a single generation by affecting foetal development.<sup>79</sup> Farmer's *Mother* (1953) posits an unusual twist, in that human explorers discover a sessile alien species that consists of females, and anything motile is considered male, ingested, and during its pre-death struggles, triggers a chromosomal rearrangement, a unique form of sexual reproduction.<sup>80</sup>

Mankind has also hubristically inflicted a female-only world on the cloned dinosaurs that populate Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990) with the purpose of preventing breeding, an automatic control of the dinosaur population. This abstention contraceptive measure fails with catastrophic consequences when some dinosaurs spontaneously convert to the male gender, an amphibian property that they inadvertently acquire since the scientists who created them used frog DNA to fill in gaps in the original dinosaur genetic code.<sup>81</sup>

In women-only utopian societies, the return of men is not a source of joy since '[m]any of these feminist Utopias, in fact, are portrayed within the texts as having emerged from struggles against male-dominated dystopias'.<sup>82</sup> One of the more recent, women-only worlds has been described by Doris Lessing in *The Cleft* (2007), in which an ancient community of women have no knowledge of men and childbirth is regulated by the cycles of the moon. This feminist utopia is disrupted by the birth of boys.<sup>83</sup> Finally, Russ's *When It Changed* (1972) depicts the return of males to the women-only world of Whileaway. This society is stable and peaceful and women see the return of the men as a return to tyranny and oppression of the past, and yet, men assume that they will be eventually made welcome, even if their return is forcefully imposed.<sup>84</sup>

### SIMULTANEOUS GENDER ISOLATION

Simultaneous Gender Isolation has been least depicted in SF. Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance* (1958) questions what makes us male or female by a sudden and inexplicable division of our universe into two parallel universes: male-only and females only, for two entire years. Since this is set in the 1950s, the physical effects in the male universe

were minimal with utilities continuing to function despite an explosion of violence that sweeps a world that still operates technologically, whereas in the female world, social stability and peace are offset by famine and a widespread breakdown in technology. Homosexuality becomes the order of the day and both universes extensively and fruitlessly research the possibility of procreation in order for the species to survive; but this problem solves itself when the two universes suddenly merge again.<sup>85</sup>

Robert Sawyer's *Hominids* (2002) depicts an alternate universe in which Neanderthals became the dominant, sentient hominid, rather than *Homo sapiens*. Neanderthals voluntarily separate genders into two communities. Neanderthal females have synchronised menstrual cycles, and the communities come together only four days out of every 29 days, when the females are their infertile phase. Group procreation occurs once every ten years.<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, a few species are known to spontaneously segregate sexually, and these include the Malagasy sucker-footed bat.<sup>87</sup>

One possible and unintended consequence of such isolation is an unexpected pregnancy when the two genders meet again, as outlined in John Varley's *Wizard* (1980),<sup>88</sup> wherein one of the members of a lesbian society who live without males in an orbital colony has sex with a man for the first time, ignorant of the real possibility of pregnancy.<sup>89</sup>

In narrative forms, as in the real world, '[g]ender is a way of assigning social and psychological meaning to sexual difference, insofar as that difference is perceived in form, appearance, sexual function, and expressive behavior'.<sup>90</sup> SF is a versatile tool for 'investigating habits of thought, including conceptions of gender. Gender, in turn, offers an interesting glimpse into some of the unacknowledged messages that permeate science fiction'.<sup>91</sup> SF is thus capable of adding one or more novums (such as a single-gendered world) and delves into options and consequences that cannot be ethically experimented in quotidian life.

As we have shown, the single-gendered trope is often used to explore utopias or dystopias. Interestingly, gender roles in these narratives are cast such that 'all-male worlds should be dystopias and all-female ones at least evolving toward Utopia'.<sup>92</sup> Power is enmeshed in all of these discourses, whether feminist or otherwise, as argued by Foucault: '(i) that power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network; (ii) that relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality)'. This is particularly so in sexual relations wherein interpersonal relationships achieve greatest intricacy and intensity, and are hence particularly susceptible to the mechanisms of power.<sup>93</sup>

These stories also repeatedly interrogate gender roles, a concept 'which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis',<sup>94</sup> since 'there is no "natural gender" any more than there is a natural language'.<sup>95</sup> This is because the

gender code is [...] like language, [...] something we start learning the day we are born. Its rules and processes become part of the structure of consciousness, so that we find it difficult to

think consciously about it. It is rooted in biology but shaped by culture to such a degree that it is impossible to untwist the thread and say which strands are inborn—and which are acquired and arbitrary.<sup>96</sup>

One point that is clearly raised by these narratives is that the single-gendered utopia 'paradoxically, ends up asserting a peculiar sort of continuity between genders [...] differences are not flattened out but redistributed [...] Men alone may turn out to be more like women than we thought, and women more like men. Such redistribution alters the meanings [...] of possible overlap',<sup>97</sup> as famously depicted in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969),<sup>98</sup> wherein genetically engineered human androgynes that are biologically neuter for three weeks of each month go into 'kemmer' for the remaining week, a drastic biological change which transforms individuals into highly sexually receptive male or female genders at random. (In some existing Earth species, gender does change during the individual's lifetime, and recent studies have shown that a wide variety of species change gender when the individual reaches 72% of its maximum size.<sup>99</sup>)

Through single-gendered worlds, SF submits 'one way to find out just how men and women really differ might be to catch them by themselves'<sup>100</sup> However, these narratives inevitably raise new questions, such as how do the two genders actually behave alone? 'Do masculist texts represent natural, hard-wired, instinctual masculinity? Which of the feminist Utopias most truly expresses women's needs and desires? The dialectical nature of utopia indicates that no answer to these questions can be complete or final',<sup>101</sup> but SF authors cannot resist attempting to resolve these issues.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 H. C. Macgregor and T. M. Uzzell Jr, 'Gynogenesis in Salamanders Related to *Ambystoma jeffersonianum*', *Science*, 43 (1964), 1043-5.
- 2 Brian Attebery, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (London, Routledge, 2002), p. 107.
- 3 Ibid., p. 106.
- 4 Ibid., p. 107.
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# On Science Fiction Music

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Adam Roberts

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I

The second edition of that cornerstone of genre scholarship, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (ed. John Clute and Peter Nicholls 1994), is currently in the process of being updated as part of its third edition (2011; eds Clute, Nicholls, Langford and Sleight). The first two editions have a general entry on ‘music’ but no specific entries on individuals or groups who have released significant science-fiction music. As part of the process of generating the third edition, and augmenting its coverage of science fiction, I agreed to update the general entry and to write the various specific entries. This turned into a fair-sized job: I ended up writing 140-or-so separate entries, most fairly brief but some lengthy, on every SF musician and composer I could think of, from ‘Abarax’, ‘Acid Mothers Temple’ and ‘The Alan Parsons Project’ to ‘Zager and Evans’ and ‘Frank Zappa.’

One preliminary aspect of such a project is deciding which songs, albums and musical suites merit discussion in an *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* and which do not. This was a practical and necessary consideration, but it tangled me in one of the least edifying problematics of science fiction criticism, how SF is ‘defined’—something that generally speaking I, as a critic of the genre, strive to avoid. Indeed, it is not my intention to rehearse all the various ins-and-outs of that particular debate in this place, except in one particular sense.

It’s enough for present purposes to say that critics and theorists of science fiction who are interested in questions of defining the genre tend to identify features from within the internal logic of the built-worlds of the text as the salient.<sup>1</sup> One of the most influential of such strategies is Darko Suvin’s ‘novum’, the ‘new’ thing, not present in the world we actually inhabit, that differentiates SF texts from other sorts of literature. Now, the novum is always part of the *content* of the text, never of the form: either one or more artefacts (spaceships, robots, time machines) or one or more aspects of the imagined world of the text not present in the world the readers actually inhabit: a society without familiar gender differentials, for instance, as in Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness*; or without the concept of ‘I’ as in Silverberg’s *Time of Changes*. This

definition depends upon a number of assumptions that are not so much buried as taken so solidly for granted by the critics as not even to be recognised *as* assumptions; amongst them the idea that SF texts have ‘content’ as distinct from form, and that SF is specifically a description of a mode of representational art—that, to put it another way, if a work of art does not *represent* anything (does not, for instance, represent something sciencefictional) then it is not possible to determine whether it is SF or not.

Writing about SF music has encouraged me to question these underlying assumptions about genre; although rather than let that statement stand on its own I must immediately qualify it. In fact my starting position was rather more conventional. I began by selecting for inclusion musical texts that included some deictic reference to the sorts of things Suvin is talking about with his ‘novum’ rubric: songs including extra-musical reference to space ships, futuristic robots, time travel and so on. For example: David Bowie’s breakthrough single ‘Space Oddity’ (recorded quickly and released in July 1969 to cash-in on the moon landing) identifies itself as SF by title, and by lyrics that describe the voyage of an astronaut through the elation of his launch to his elegant despair at being marooned in space. Similarly the British band Hawkwind have released a great many individual songs and concept albums that, in their titles and lyrics, deploy unmistakable sciencefictional tropes and props, from *In Search of Space* (1971) and *Warrior on the Edge of Time* (1975) through dozens of albums to *Space Bandits* (1990) and *Alien 4* (1995). Indeed, for a time SF novelist Michael Moorcock was not only a lyricist but a fully-fledged member of the band. Then again, a great many musicians have adapted pre-existing SF novels into songs, or entire albums. For example: ‘Watcher of the Skies’ the first track on Genesis’s 1972 album *Foxtrot*, is a version of Arthur C. Clarke’s *Childhood’s End* (Clarke’s novel has proved popular amongst pop musicians looking to adapt novels into songs: I found half a dozen versions by bands as diverse as Iron Maiden, Pink Floyd and Van der Graaf Generator). Or again, Jacques Offenbach’s 1875 *opéra bouffe*, *Le Voyage dans la lune*, adapts Jules Verne’s *De la Terre à la Lune* (1865). In both these sorts of cases, it seems uncontentious to discuss them under the umbrella of



science fiction.

These two kinds of text accounted for the bulk of the music with which I had to deal. But sometimes the case was not so clear-cut; and here, I think, the question of genre identification becomes more interesting. So, for example, there are cases in which a sciencefictional reputation attaches itself to a particular performer, such that music they produce is taken as SF even if it contains no deictic titular or lyric genre content. Bowie is one example. There is, it might be thought, something nebulously 'sf' about his work whether his music makes explicit reference to sf conventions.<sup>2</sup> This has to do partly with the global success of his stage persona, 'Ziggy Stardust' from his 1972 album *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (Ziggy is a Martian who foresees Earth's destruction and travels here to save the planet with the power of his left-handed guitar playing). Attractive though the music is, arguably the most significant feature of Ziggy lay rather in the thoroughness of Bowie's embodiment, in performance and life, of his sciencefictional persona. It added a sense of rightness to his subsequent casting as the titular alien in Nicholas Roeg's 1973 film *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. Bowie's character ends the film by releasing albums of literally alienated music; and Bowie himself spun a new performance persona from the role: 'The Thin White Duke.' This character first appeared in *Station to Station* (1976), the cover of which album featured a still of Bowie in character from Roeg's film. And the question is: to what extent does this album, which has a distinctive SF 'feel' despite the fact that the songs themselves do not make specific reference to SF, deserve mention in an Encyclopedia of SF?

The American jazz-musician Sun Ra is another, and in a sense more interesting, case.<sup>3</sup> Born Herman Poole Blount. Sun Ra spent the 1950s mostly recording in Chicago. In 1961 he moved to New York, and his music grew experimental, more challenging, and sometimes less coherent. A second move followed in the early 1970s, this time to Philadelphia. Ra's early albums, from *Sun Song* (1956) onwards, sound like much of the swing or bebop jazz of that period, but Ra's music rapidly evolved into a spacey free-jazz that was much more avant-garde, and is now what people tend to think of as the 'Sun Ra' style. His band The Arkestra (the group released records under many variants of this name, including 'The Sun Ra Arkestra', 'The Solar Myth Arkestra', 'The Blue Universe Arkestra', 'The Astro Infinity Arkestra', 'The Jet Set Omniverse Arkestra', and many others) was a large ensemble with a high turnover of members; a fluidity that provided Ra with a practical correlative to his musical aesthetic of flow, liberation and compositional improvisation. All Sun Ra's many releases—his discography is complex, but there may be more than a hundred titles—have the same theme: a message for the human race articulating, in musical form, the escape-route from earthly discord towards a cosmic spiritual oneness of freedom and joy. Sun Ra claimed to have acquired his wisdom during a sojourn on Saturn, whence he had been transported by alien intelligences in the 1930s (or, according to some sources, the early 1950s). His account of this time is detailed, and shares many features with other benign alien abduction narratives, although preceding the cultural vogue for such things

by a decade or more. Ra certainly believed literally in this story, and both lived and worked according to the principles of the sciencefictional philosophy he derived from the experience.

Ra's music is almost all instrumental; which is to say, it gives the listener no lyric clues as to SF content; and yet it is very difficult to read his music as anything other than SF. A typical Sun Ra composition juxtaposes lightly shuffling bass and cymbals with rangy, freeform keyboard playing (by Ra himself), or tart and often atonal melodic lines from brass or woodwind. Often the titles of tracks and albums provide some extratextual nudges: we can, for instance, presumably take 'Tapestry from an Asteroid' (on *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra*, 1961) and *We Travel the Spaceways* (1959, as by 'Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra') as sciencefictional. But musically speaking there is little to differentiate the piquantly atmospheric improvisation of that music from (say) 'El is a Sound of Joy' (on *Sound of Joy*, 1968). Does a process of association render the latter text sciencefictional also?

There is a more testing category still: instrumental electronica. I decided to cover a good deal of this sort of music in my entries for the encyclopedia, despite—often—there being little or in some cases nothing specifically SF-contextual about the texts themselves to locate them securely within the genre. In this case I found myself wondering whether there is simply something intrinsic to certain musical forms, or to certain electronically synthesised sounds, that creates generic expectations. Some examples: In the case of 'Biosphere' (the name under which Norwegian musician Geir Jenssen, records) I found that SF-ness inhered less in the oblique album titles and more by the music itself. Biosphere's atmospheric and spacious ambient music is wholly lyric-free; and although titles such as *Microgravity* (1993), *Patashnik* (1994; the title is Russian Cosmonaut slang for a person lost in space) and *Shenzhou* (2002, named for the Chinese orbital craft) suggest SF they are hardly explicit. 2004's *Autour de la Lune* is a lengthy, minimalist version of Jules Verne's moon-flight novel. In this case I found SF not just in the title but *in the music itself*—mostly characterized by a number of harmonic bass drones and long-held horn notes, remarkably effective at conveying the sense of travel through deep space. Is this anything more than a subjective interpretive importation? It certainly cannot be argued on the basis of any kind of musical onomatopoeia, for actual travel through space is perfectly soundless, and certainly doesn't produce the sonic equivalents of harmonic bass drones and long-held horn notes. What, then?

A few more examples. Of the work of French composer and performer of electronic synthesiser pieces Jean-Michel Jarre, I wrote: 'There is no explicit sf content to the instrumental suites *Oxygène* (1976), *Equinoxe* (1978) and *Les Chants Magnétiques* (1981) but it is hard to escape the sense that these bleepy, throbbing, soaring soundscapes are aural SF.' I also discussed the German group Tangerine Dream at some length.<sup>4</sup> This group's first release, *Electronic Meditation* (1970), owes much to *musique concrète*, using cut-and-pasted audio tape to create its effects, and although wholly instrumental I argue that it partakes of a fabulist musical idiom in some sense reminiscent of the New Wave that dominated SF in

the late 60s and early 70s—the longest track on the album is the Philip K Dick-like ‘Journey Through a Burning Brain’. The group’s second release *Alpha Centauri* (1971) was described by the musicians themselves ‘Komische musik’; and manifests a slightly different style: more fluid and buoyant, sonically correlative, I argue, to an outward urge. In this case we might note that the track titles (‘Sunrise in the Third System’, ‘Fly and Collision of Comas Sola’, ‘Alpha Centauri’) instruct us to read the music as a narrative of a journey through space; but the same musical idiom is present, without such titular cues, on *Zeit* (1972), *Phaedra* (1974), *Rubycon* (1975), *Stratosfear* (1976) and *Force Majeure* (1979). At what point does it become unsafe to identify the music as sciencefictional? This is what I wrote:

Each of these albums construes a distinctive, organically repetitive instrumental sound, extremely though nonspecifically evocative. This was Tangerine Dream at its most musically effective: an onward-rolling series of spacious tonal atmospheres. In contrast to Kraftwerk’s precise and robotic sound, Tangerine Dream were aiming at a warmer, more expansive and *topographic* idiom, soundtracking mysterious other worlds, throbbing and spooling-out with a stylish implacability.

Now, it is not immediately obvious to what extent the ‘mysterious other worlds’ I identify can be described as being ‘in’ the music in any sense, and to what extent they are a product of my own sf-saturated brain.

Then there is the case of British prog-rock group Yes, whose music is sometimes instrumental and sometimes includes lyrics (written by Jon Anderson, and sung in his warbling falsetto).<sup>5</sup> In either case the music has strong SF-associations less by virtue of its actual content, for even when there are lyrics they are rarely rationally comprehensible. The SF-ness of Yes has more to do with their album cover art, which from the 1971 album *Fragile* and through many subsequent releases was by noted SF illustrator Roger Dean. This art tends to be images of fantastical and alien landscapes, precariously tapering escarpments, sinuous rivers, odd-looking foliage and the like, rendered with an almost fauvist colouration. A great deal of Yes’s music, particularly the instrumental pieces, seems to me precisely to *evoke* these sciencefictional worlds; music that presents itself in terms of landscapes to explore rather than traditionally constructed pop songs. The sheer length of many 1970s Yes tracks is (I argue) an important part of this spacious, open-ended aesthetic—the title track of *Close to the Edge* (1972), for example, lasts eighteen minutes; whilst ‘The Gates of Delirium’ on *Relayer* (1974), is over twenty minutes long. And longest of all is the double album *Tales from the Topographic Ocean* (1973)—in effect one continuous song, 83 minutes in duration, broken into four sections only by the exigencies of vinyl record technology. This work can be seen as the ne plus ultra of prog-rock excellence, or idiocy, depending upon one’s perspective. It is certainly a text unembarrassed about its own pretentiousness. The track titles tell their own story—or rather they *don’t*, for it is hard for the rational mind to assemble a coherent

narrative from: ‘The Revealing Science of God (Dance of the Dawn)’, ‘The Remembering (High the Memory)’, ‘The Ancient (Giants Under the Sun)’ and ‘Ritual (Nous Sommes Du Soleil)’. The trajectory here aims at a cosmic grandeur in which an SFnal ‘sense of wonder’ and galactic scale have their place; and if it sags often into ill-disciplined nonsense, bombast and a kind of aural doodling, it nevertheless sometimes touches on precisely this sublimity.

This, then, is the key issue: to what extent is it viable to talk of instrumental music like this as ‘science fiction’? More particularly, is it possible to take music that lacks identifiably paratextual material (album and song titles; lyrics; cover designs and so on) as science fictional in terms of the musical form itself?

## II

To ask this question is actually to intervene in one of the major debates in musicological theory: is *music itself*, shorn of paratextual cues, a representational art, or not? This is a question that continues to inform discussion of musical aesthetics. So, for instance, noted English philosopher and tosser Roger Scruton is certain that ‘music, as we know and understand it, is not a representational art form.’<sup>6</sup> Now, Scruton, here, has something particular in mind when he talks about representation. He does not deny that music *means* to us in some way (or we wouldn’t care so deeply about it); but ‘representation’ is too denotative a phrase for Scruton’s liking. He thinks that ‘music inspires and consoles us’ precisely because ‘it is unencumbered by the debris that drifts through the world of life’ [Scruton 122]. Of opera he writes:

if music has a role in the theatre, it is not because it represents things, but because it expresses them. Likewise when Schopenhauer, using a Kantian term (*Vorstellung*), describes music as a representation of the Will, or when Hanslick, using the same term, denies that music can represent our inner emotions, they are really writing about expression. [Scruton 119]

This is, of course, to make a large claim about the limitations of ‘representation’; and Scruton attempts to inoculate his account against counter-example:

The weakest claim on behalf of musical representation would be that music can represent things. Of course, it is easy to imagine music being given a representational use. For example, I could play a game in which I communicate with my partner through a musical code; we assign signature tunes to characters, events, properties, and states of affairs, and use them to communicate about an imaginary world. This would show musical representation to be possible, however, only if the nature of the tunes as music were essential to the game. And that is precisely what would be disputed by the sceptic. Someone who heard only sounds and never tones could play this game, and no musical understanding is



involved in recuperating the representational content from the ‘musical’ signs. [Scruton 124]

It seems to me that Scruton is too quick to dismiss this game; a version of Wittgenstein’s language game for music that, in fact, explains a great deal of music use in society. It obviates the need to identify the ‘something intrinsic’ in music that generates the perception (for instance) that minor keys connote sadness, Sousa’s ‘Liberty Bell’ connotes Monty Python, or—to return to the subject in hand—that electronic synthesisers connote science fiction. These things belong, we might want to argue, to the same cultural semantics that means red lights connote ‘stop’ or a smile connotes positive feeling. There are, famously, theories of representation predicated upon the assumption that all representation works this way. To translate into the more specific terms of the focus of *this* paper, the ‘SFness’ of Tangerine Dream or Jean-Michel Jarre becomes part of a larger cultural ‘language game’.

But I want to try and argue something more specifically formal, and in that regard I may have a use for the Scruton’s distinction between the representational and the expressive function of music. This is not to say that I am using these terms as Scruton does. Indeed, when he attempts specificity in those terms, his thesis comes unstuck.

While someone may look at an untitled picture and know immediately what it represents, it is most unlikely therefore that he should do the same with a symphonic poem. The relation between a work of music and its “subject” is determined only by the presence of ancillary text: the title, the lyrics, the action on stage. A quarrel between a husband and wife might be “represented” by music that could equally be used to “depict” a forest fire. [Scruton, 130]

‘Only’ is too restrictive, here; and Scruton’s counter-example in fact, and presumably inadvertently, rather supports the opposite case. For it suggests that there is indeed an intrinsic content to the piece, although an affective, rather than cognitive one. The notional music Scruton posits clearly connotes a degree of ferocity or energy; it is possible to intuit that not only without ancillary text but without any information about the music at all. This in turn pinpoints the crux: Scruton has too limitedly ‘cognitive’ comprehension of ‘meaning’. For him music, to be representational, must represent discrete, rational, expressible cognitive meanings. But as Peter Kivy—a rather more expert musicologist—points out, the meaning of music is other than cognitively or rationally denotative: ‘the notion of an intimate and special connection supposed to exist between music and the emotions is as widespread among the general public as it is the oldest and most persistent claim in the philosophy of music, accounting in many cases to the very basis of musical aesthetics.’<sup>7</sup>

Kivy thinks *some* music is strictly ‘depictive’ (he cites the case of a piece called ‘Pacific 231’ by Honegger, in which the sounds of an accelerating steam train are onomatopoeically, as it were, imitated), although he, to

quote Steven Davies, ‘objects to an approach treating all music as of this type. Someone who hears a “story” in a work of pure music treats the experience of listening merely as the occasion for indulging her imagination, allowing the music to prompt her thoughts where their own lack of vivacity or interest do not make them self-propelling, as it were.’ That ‘merely’ perhaps sounds a little too dismissive; and it does not seem to me that we necessarily need to reduce the representational content of music to ‘story’. Nevertheless, Davies makes some telling points:

A person who substitutes fantasy for attention to the work reacts (at best) to an idiosyncratic amalgamation of the music and an imaginatively generated program not connected to the work; the response is not to the work itself but to some private, personal object of fantasy. To the extent that her response is shaped by the detail of the imaginatively invented program, that response is not to something depicted in the work.<sup>8</sup>

Jenefer Robinson attempts a little more nuance, distinguishing a ‘semantic’ theory and a ‘hearing-in’ theory of depiction in relation to music. She thinks the former common, and the latter very rare, because we cannot hear-in representational content without first being given a necessary textual context.<sup>9</sup> So, we might say, Beethoven’s descriptive titles to his sixth-symphony provide us with a semantic context to read the symphony as being ‘about’ a storm in the countryside and its aftermath; but without those titles we’d have no way of coordinating a representational account of the music.

This persuasively argued distinction between ‘semantic’ and ‘heard-in’ theories of depiction is a better way of talking about what I grope towards in the first section of this paper: for calling Bowie’s ‘Space Oddity’ SF depends solidly upon its semantic content, where calling Tangerine Dream’s *Stratosfear* SF involves a much less grounded ‘heard-in’ assessment. This, in turn, might be unpacked into a drawing-together of a looser set of actually semantic connections: the other music released by the band, for instance; or the historical contingency of the invention of the electronic synthesiser happening to coincide with that time when the space race was at its most culturally penetrative. In neither case is there anything *intrinsic* to the music of *Stratosfear* to make it SF.

But talk of ‘intrinsic’ qualities makes me a little nervous. Meaning is not an intrinsic thing—by which I mean, ‘I have measured out my life in coffee spoons’ does indeed mean ‘my existence has been wasted upon social trivia’, despite the complete lack of intrinsic references to waste or triviality in the statement. The 1970s TV show M\*A\*S\*H was set during the Korean War, and no reference is made in the text itself to Vietnam; yet the show is in important ways ‘about’ Vietnam for all that. This, again, is to dip my beak into a large debate, one that has been vigorously pursued through the last several decades of academic exchange. My purpose here is narrower: it is to query the crisp separation of ‘form’ and ‘content’ assumed by many commentators. The case can certainly be made that these two elements are aspects of one another, that form signifies just as (arguably; more

potently than) content. That content is itself a mode of form, has been compellingly argued by a number of contemporary theorists of literature and culture. But it is, in musicology, a much older notion. Here is the eminent nineteenth-century theorist of music, Eduard Hanslick: 'the concepts of content and form mutually determine and complement each other ... But in music we see content and form, material and configuration, image and idea, fused in inseparable unity ... In music there is no content as opposed to form, because music has no form other than the content.'<sup>10</sup> This is the point at which, constellating the formal (specifically: the tonal and instrumental rather than the melodic) aspects of the music I have mentioned here with the affective quality of that music, a new mode of approaching the question of describing the 'genre' of SF begins to emerge.

### III

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there have been many differing definitions offered of SF as a genre, and they are not always mutually compatible.<sup>11</sup> Almost all presume a particular and content-based logic of representation: that an SF text is SF is it represents a particular SF thing or quality. Moreover, the understanding of representation takes it on a rational-cognitive level. This ought not to surprise us, I suppose, give the 'science' element in the phrase 'science fiction.' But my experience of writing about SF music leads me to ask: what would it mean to think of SF not as a cognitively representative mode, but as an affectively expressive one?

This does not, it seems to me, mean that we would be replacing precision with vagueness: 'this text evokes a sciencefictional feeling' is not the same thing as 'I *feel* this text to be sciencefictional', not least because the former is affective and the latter only intuitive.

I can be more precise. Fundamentally, what SF/Fantasy offers the readers is *transport*. This is a kind of enchantment that depends upon a removal, to one degree or another, from the associations of the reader's actual life. In a Fantasy text we might think of this as 'magic' or enchantment or glamour; in a sciencefictional text we tend to talk of 'sense of wonder'—a similar, and similarly affecting, rapture. The technical vocabulary of criticism, by talking about 'novums' and 'estrangement' and 'structural fabulation', although they are talking about this thing, don't sound as if they are, which may be a distraction. Closer to the point is the descriptor 'Fantasy' itself: a word which has a spread of meanings, not necessarily negative or merely escapist in connotation, for the world of psychoanalysis.

Fans of SF are in search of a newness that their actual world lacks—hence, of course, *novum*; except I would seek to modify the usage of this term sufficiently to move it away from the belief that this newness inheres in one or other prop or physical item (a time machine, a ray gun, a spaceship). To think so is to reduce SF to gadgets. Better to talk in terms of 'sense of wonder', and better again to understand that this sense is much more affective than cognitive.

At its heart this is a metaphoric quantity, for science fiction is a fundamentally metaphoric mode: one that seeks to represent the world without reproducing it. This

is to assert more than merely that science fiction deals with metaphors—to point out, for instance, that 'the matrix' in film of *The Matrix* (1999) is a metaphor for the wage-slave existence of contemporary urban capitalism. It is to argue that the form of the metaphor—a 'carrying over'—is the logic of SF itself.

It may well be true that people tend to use 'metaphor' and 'simile' in interchangeable ways; but actually the difference is a key one. Simile, as the word suggests, is a way of talking about something by comparing it to something that is similar: 'Achilles is courageous, like a lion' focuses our attention on the point of likeness—the courage. Metaphor, as rhetoricians remind us, means a more radical process of semantic transportation, a passage of meaning from one thing to another thing. This may sound like hairsplitting, but in fact the difference opens a chasm of signification that speaks directly to the desire at the heart of SF. 'Achilles is a lion' metaphorically carries across from one thing to a completely different thing. Achilles, after all, is *not* a lion—there are a wealth of ways in which Achilles and a lion are different. To say 'Achilles is metaphorically a lion' is in one part to bring out a point of simile (in this one respect—his courage—Achilles is a lion) but it is always, inevitably, to do much more: it is to generate an imaginative surplus, a spectral hybrid of beast-human. This imaginative surplus is what carries us away; and metaphor is its vehicle. That is partly what I mean when I talk about SF as being in crucial ways a metaphorical literature: one that seeks to represent the world without reproducing it.

Now these qualities—the enchantment, or 'sense of wonder', the intellectual thrills, the hairs on the back of the neck starting up—are so centrally a feature of how music moves us that I am almost tempted to suggest that music itself might work more effectively as a baseline mode for critics interested in discussing what science fiction, generically, *is*. In listening to an album of instrumental electronica, my response ('this is science fiction') is more than simply one of conditioned association; the music itself articulates a particular sort of metaphorical, materialist-transcendentalist sense of wonder, an affect entry into an alien and specifically non-cognitive realm. It might seem perverse, or at least counter-intuitive, to quote Adorno at this juncture: yet Adorno's faux-naïf insistence on the *linguistic* aspect of music is particularly relevant here. 'Music resembles a language,' Adorno insists. 'It is customary to distinguish between language and music by asserting that concepts are foreign to music. But music does contain things that come very close.'<sup>12</sup> For Adorno, the atheist, this language is actually *theological*.

The language of music is quite different from the language of intentionality. It contains a theological dimension. What it has to say is simultaneously revealed and concealed ... It is demythologised prayer, rid of efficacious magic. ... To be musical means to energize incipient intentions: to harness, not to indulge them. This is how music becomes structure. [Adorno, 2-3]

I end this essay by taking this, against the grain, as a way of approaching defining science fiction—SF



music, in other words, becomes the paradigm of the genre, rather than an outlier example of it. 'Musical structure' as Adorno notes, is 'more than a set of didactic systems' because 'it does not just embrace the content from outside; it is the thought-process by which content is defined.' That, precisely, is also what's distinctively science fictional about science fiction.

Adam Roberts  
Royal Holloway, University of London

## ENDNOTES

- 1 See for example, Bould et al (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (Routledge 2009); Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2008); Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (Palgrave 2006); Mendlesohn and Edwards (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (CUP 2003).
- 2 On Bowie, see Nick Stevenson, *David Bowie: Fame, Sound and Vision* (Polity 2006).
- 3 On Sun Ra, see John F Szwed, *Space is the Place: the Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (Perseus Books 1998) and James L Wolf, Hartmut Geerken (eds), *Sun Ra. The Immeasurable Equation: the Collected Poetry and Prose* (BoD 2005). One of the best discussion of Sun Ra's SF context is John Corbett, 'Brothers from Another Planet: the Space Madness of Lee "Scratch" Perry, Sun Ra and George Clinton' in *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr Funkenstein* (Duke Univ. Press 1994), 7-24
- 4 See also Paul Stump, *Digital Gothic; a Critical Discography of Tangerine Dream* (SAF Publishing 1997)
- 5 On Yes, see Bill Martin, *Music of Yes: Structure and Vision in Progressive Rock* (Open Court 1996)
- 6 Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (OUP 1999), 135
- 7 Peter Kivy, *Music, Language and Cognition* (OUP 2007), 140
- 8 Steven Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Cornell University Press 1994), 81
- 9 See Jenefer Robinson, 'Music as Representational Art', in Philip Alperson (ed), *What is Music? An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Haven Publications 1987)
- 10 quoted in Norton Dudeque, *Music Theory and Analysis in the Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (Ashgate 2005), 35
- 11 Brian Stableford, John Clute and Peter Nicholls, in their lengthy entry 'Definitions of SF' in Clute and Nicholls' *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1994) quote sixteen separate definitions, from Hugo Gernsback's in 1926 ('a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision') to Norman Spinrad's more recent 'science fiction is anything published as science fiction' [Clute and Nicholls, 311-14].
- 12 Theodor Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music* (Verso 1998), 1-2



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# John Martin: Apocalypse at Tate Britain

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Andrew M Butler

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There is a moment in a mid-1820s etching by John Martin when Biblical narrative collides with archaeology, and with market economics — in *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve From Paradise* the couple are running out of the Garden of Eden through a rocky landscape, a tongue of lightning in the background. Down to their right is some sort of prehistoric creature, almost certainly depicted with the latest theories of what dinosaurs would have looked like, at a time when such palaeontology was in its infancy — the word dinosaur being coined by Richard Owen in 1842. In Martin's earlier oil painting of the same title, dated about 1813, the image is broadly similar, but lacks the creature. The addition would help him sell the print. This was no one-off — he illustrated for Gideon Mantell's *The Wonders of Geology* (1838), in the form of *The Country of the Iguanodon*, and Thomas Hawkins's *The Book of the Great Sea-Dragons* (1840), as well producing other images of antediluvian fauna. Such depictions suggest that Martin is one of the first science-fiction artists, and his paintings of Biblical, historical and mythological scenes, often featuring disasters and tumultuous landscapes, reinforce this sense. His uneasy status as a provincial outsider having to earn a living from a metropolitan elite also anticipates the struggles for mainstream respect of genre writers. These images could be found in *John Martin: Apocalypse*, a major exhibition held at Tate Britain. The show was part of the Great British Art Debate, which poses the questions: "Is the idea of British Art a British Fantasy?"; "Is art too popular?"; "Does the art of the past say anything about the world of today?"; "Should the public have a say in what goes into museums?" and "Should art be good for you?", and I will offer some answers to these questions having first discussed Martin's work. The debate is centred on four touring exhibitions co-organised by the Tate, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums, Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service and Museums Sheffield, the others being *Family Matters: The Family in British Art*, *Restless Times: Art in Britain, 1914-1945* and *Watercolour*. I went to the John Martin exhibition at the Laing, Newcastle and the Millennium Gallery, Sheffield prior to London; there were minor differences of selection, as well as in ordering. All three versions of the show paired Martin

with a contemporary British artist, Gordon Cheung or the Turner Prize shortlisted Glenn Brown whose *The Tragic Conversion of Salvador Dali (After John Martin)* (1998) channels sf illustration alongside Martin and is the last image on show at Tate Britain.

Martin was born in 1789 in Haydon Bridge, Hexham, Northumbria, the youngest of four sons. HApprenticed to a coachmaker, he intended to learn heraldic painting, but after a dispute about terms his indenture was cancelled and instead he went to work with Italian artist Boniface Musso. Musso had already given him lessons in drawing and oil techniques in Newcastle; now Martin learnt to paint plates and glass as part of a commercial operation. In 1806, he moved to London, where he supplemented his income by producing watercolours and, in time, became a professional artist. The key place to be exhibited was the annual Royal Academy of Arts summer show, then held at Somerset House, although his first painting was rejected in 1810. The same painting, retitled, hung the following year; the breakthrough came after when a member of the board of governors of the Bank of England, William Manning MP, offered fifty guineas to buy *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion* (1812). This painting had been inspired by James Ridley's Oriental fantasy *Tales of the Genii* (1764), where the hero Sadak crawls across a mountainous landscape toward amnesia-causing waters. Further large canvases followed over the next forty years, with Martin in search of wealthy and influential patrons — one being Leopold, the Belgian Crown Prince. In 1816, Leopold married Princess Charlotte, daughter of the future George IV, and subsequently brokered a marriage between Victoria, his niece, to Albert, his nephew. Martin's painting of the 1838 coronation, a rare contemporary subject, was another success. But Martin had also found popular acclaim, with the Biblical painting *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still upon Gibeon* (1816), and was to both show his work in London exhibitions and to tour them around the world — it is thought that two million people saw his Day of Judgement triptych (1849-53) in the UK, the USA and Australia.

Martin's paintings typically invoked a sense of the sublime. Longinus, writing about rhetoric in the first century, argued that "the true sublime uplifts our souls;





Detail from *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion* by John Martin

we are filled with a proud exaltation and a sense of vaunting joy", whereas the eighteenth-century Edmund Burke argued that "delightful horror [...] is the truest test of the sublime". In Martin's case, the feeling is invoked by vast landscapes containing tiny figures in the fore- to midground to give a sense of scale — and his canvases tend to be portrait in orientation, allowing for the composition to tower above the viewer. The terrain is often bowl-shaped, with cliffs and trees taking up the left and right sides of the frame, and then, further back, rivers, lakes, seas and classical cities in the haze of the background. Sometimes the sky forms an answering semicircle, perhaps with clouds of fire, and in some canvases the patina of the painting is cracked in concentric circles. Frequently, the sky is scarred with lightning, scratches across the canvas. In *The Deluge* (1826), the sea curves around the bottom of the canvas, sweeping the boat

clockwise, with storm clouds completing a circuit around the top of the composition, an oval of fairer weather and a glimpse of cities in the distance between them.

*The Deluge* is one of several paintings Martin made of the Biblical flood, alongside *The Eve of the Deluge* (1840) and *The Assuaging of the Waters* (1840); the painting of *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve From Paradise*, alongside *The Garden of Eden* (1821), *The Fall of Babylon* (1819), *Belshazzar's Feast* (1820), *Adam and Eve Entertaining the Angel Raphael* (1823) and *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852), suggests an Old Testament theme running through his work, especially the sense of a powerful, destructive, vengeful God. The success of *Belshazzar's Feast*, which was reproduced in several versions, clearly suggested that there was a market for such apocalyptic thrills, in a Britain which in the process of being changed forever by the industrial revolution and a network of railways



threading its way between mines and factories and ports, and between London and the provinces. The aristocracy and the upper middle classes could go on Grand Tours across Europe, to the Matterhorn, the Alps, Venice, Sicily and beyond, but Martin had been on no such journey and locates such landscapes within England. It is tempting to see the valley of the Tyne with Newcastle perched above it as one inspiration for his topography.

It was apparently a journey through the industrialised Black Country which pointed him to the New Testament subject of *The Great Day of His Wrath*, a book of Revelation style destruction of Babylon in which volcanic powers rip open a landscape, and vast boulders — on which ruined cities can be glimpsed — are thrown through the air. A second painting, *The Last Judgement* (1849-53), has a landscape riven in two, beneath Christ and the Angels sitting in court at the top of the picture against a more heavenly sky. On the left of the canvas are the saved, including a range of politicians, poets and artists from antiquity to the present day, on the right, across a chasm filling with corpses, are the damned. Before the painting was damaged, there was a train being driven towards the abyss. The trilogy is completed by *The Plains of Heaven* (1851-3), a gentler pastoral of the era after the Second Coming, the green of grass and trees surrounding a rich azure of sky and sea. But Martin also looked to Pompeii and Herculaneum for his subjects, and its destruction by volcano (1822, 1822-6), and a classical story of Marcus Curtius being swallowed up by a chasm in a city street. The larger version of the canvas was damaged when the Tate was flooded — with some controversy it has been restored and partially repainted. Several of Martin's paintings have faced flood, fire and train crashes, as well as sabotage. These are the thrills of the end times — a painterly equivalent of the delicious fears we get from the prophecies of Nostradamus, the alleged 2012 claims of the Mayans, the Y2K bug and endless movies from Roland Emmerich or Michael Bay. Indeed, several films including *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis, 1981) and (of course) *2012* (Emmerich, 2009) were shown alongside the paintings when the exhibition was staged in Sheffield.

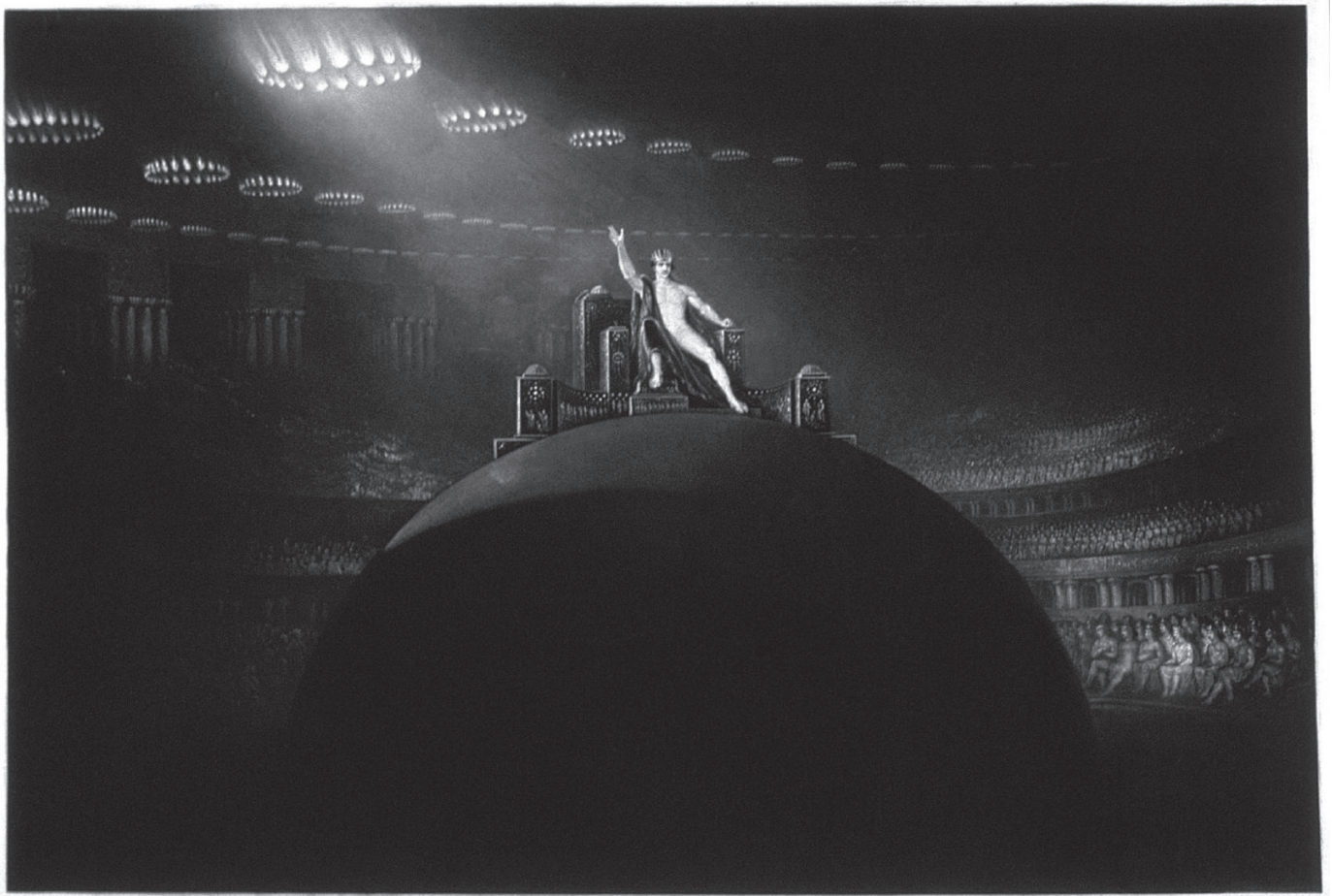
Martin knew how to exploit his work and, indeed, had to — his family needed the money and Martin was generous to family and friends. One brother, William, developed a miner's lamp which was safer than the Davey Lamp, but required funding to gain patents and patronage. Another brother, confusingly also named Jonathan, suffered from his own breed of apocalyptic mania and set fire to York Minster in 1829. The trial brought notoriety to Martin the painter, not least because of their shared name, and he partly paid for the lawyers. He could get good money for a large canvas, but sometimes it was wiser to paint a second, smaller one, which was more practical — some of his paintings are three or four metres tall and wide.

It was not just his family which distracted Martin from producing art — from the 1820s onwards he was developing plans for canals across London to provide a water supply for London and Westminster, for a sewage system to improve London's hygiene (and to provide fertiliser for farms) and for a network of railways circling central London and along the banks of the Thames. In this work he anticipated Joseph Bazalgette's improvements to the London drains and the Embankment and the piecemeal

engineering of the London Underground network and overground lines, then in its infancy. Funds were never quite available to translate Martin's plans into practice. He was also friends with Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Michael Faraday, Charles Babbage and other scientists such as Georges Cuvier, a French palaeontologist. In the painting *Arthur and Aegle in the Happy Valley* (1841), inspired by a Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton poem, Martin insists that the background constellations are accurate in astronomical terms, even if the topic was fictional. He drew on the latest science and engineering. Martin also knew Charles Barry, who won the competition to design the neo-gothic yet classical new Houses of Parliament, and it is likely this architecture also fed into his work. One could scale his painting of *Balshazzer's Feast* to discover how many miles long his palace interior was — or so Martin argued — and contemporary archaeology was another source of inspiration and publicity. Pamphlets and handbills listed details of the people painted in crowd scenes and drew attention to details. All of this contributes to the showmanship which Martin clearly possessed in spades — but also, perhaps, to the sense of insecurity from being an outsider, a working-class artist with little training. Conspicuous testimony to his sense of pride is a piece of furniture, shown in *Apocalypse*: a bureau with drawers labelled for Martin's various projects and honours. At the 1851 when Great Exhibition, he presented himself as an engineer rather than as an artist.

Sales pitches remained necessary, as the art market ebbed and flowed in the era of J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, the former artist stopping at nothing to gain advantage and positioning in the Royal Academy summer exhibitions. Whilst it was possible to sell similar paintings in several sizes, this undercut their exclusiveness, so, abandoning exclusivity, Martin made a virtue of copying through the comparatively mass medium of the mezzotint. One technique, developed in the 1640s, required the smooth surface of a metal plate to be partially roughened, to produce lots of dimples which could hold ink; the alternative was to roughen the whole surface of the plate, smoothing the areas which needed to be lighter. A couple of hundred copies could be printed from the plate until it began to deteriorate through pressure. Martin both produced his own prints and licensed his images to others. Some of these would be bound in books, others would be sold as pairs in portfolios; although, as the Tate exhibition shows, his presentation of these was sometimes untidy. Mass production jeopardised quality. But the mezzotints enabled Martin to revise his earlier compositions — hence the appearance of a prehistoric creature alongside Adam and Eve. Martin employed other engravers to make plates of his images, although he was not always happy with their work and would sometimes reject it. Other times he would do his own engraving, and for a period set up a state of the art press in his own home where he supervised the production of mezzotints by professional printers.

*Balshazzer's Feast* was a key image in this enterprise, with mezzotints surviving from various states of the proofing and printing process; later versions were designed by William Martin (his son), James G. S. Lucas and the Leighton Brothers. Martin's revisions allowed him to negotiate his ownership of the image — he had sold

**Satan in Council by John Martin**

the engraving rights along with the painting to William Collins. Martin argued that his mezzotint was based on a sketch, rather than the oil painting, so constituted a new work. On the other hand, Martin was himself at risk from piracy. Around 1836 he appeared before a parliamentary select committee, noting that he had delayed publishing some of his mezzotints in the hope of more favourable copyright legislation. One engraving by Lucas took the tower in the background from *Belshazzar's Feast* e— although as this architecture was remarkably like Pieter Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* (c. 1563) paintings there was little room for accusation. A century later, Martin's canvas was to provide inspiration for D. W. Griffith's set design for Babylon in *Intolerance* (1916).

One series of mezzotints were commissioned in 1824 by Septimus Prowett as illustrations to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), returning to Old Testament scenes, but also paving the way for scenes from Revelation and the New Testament in general. The most striking of these depict Satan, especially *Satan in Council*, whose composition seems to anticipate the council chamber in the Star Wars prequel trilogy (and Lucas apparently was inspired by Martin's work; the empty landscape of *Solitude* (1843) is echoed in the climax of *THX 1138* (1971) or the deserts of Tatooine). Martin went on to work on illustrations of the Bible, a less successful project than he had hoped, as was his attempt to sell direct to customers, bypassing the established English network of print emporia existing. Worse, he undercut himself by designing cheaper plates to be printed by Edward Churton. Nevertheless Martin

still made more money from his mezzotints than his paintings — Michael Campbell, a Martin collector and scholar, suggests up to £25,000 — although the market declined through the 1830s.

Perhaps such mentions of money are vulgar — but I see in Martin a kindred spirit of today's science-fiction writers. He might not have quite been competing for the reader's beer money, but he knew how to exploit a successful image in more than one format, and he knew how to bring showmanship to his exhibitions. In the lack of official recognition from membership of the Royal Academy nor was he knighted — although the Belgians honoured him — we might also think of the anxieties over the injustices of the Booker Prize or snootiness about the Granta Best of Young Novelists lists. But mostly it is in his fusion of science and art, his use of the sublime, and his creation of apocalyptic imagery that never quite feels reducible to allegory or political parable. (His painting *The Last Man* (1833) is inspired by an 1823 Thomas Campbell poem rather than Mary Shelley's 1826 novel, but his accommodation of Jane Loudon as a house guest might put him somewhere in the genesis of *The Mummy! Or A Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* (1827).)

I've long been struck by the scale and grandeur of Martin's images, both in canvases I'd seen at Tate Britain and the Laing in the past, and on book and LP covers, but *Apocalypse* is his first major exhibition in thirty years. The excuse of The Great British Art Debate is a good one, but I confess that I saw the Newcastle variant in ignorance of the questions, and the first time it is clear that *Apocalypse* is



part of the project is in the credits at the end of the gallery — indeed it was whilst reading the credits of *Restless Times* that I discovered the *Watercolour* exhibition was asking such questions. I don't think it struck me that all of the art in the latter was British. Thus, it didn't occur to me to wonder "Is the idea of British Art a British Fantasy?". Clearly those paintings — and I would argue Martin's work — are art *by* Britons, but is that the same as *British* art? I don't suppose there is a single identifiable British style — although there is a strand of neo-romanticism which can be sketched. I suspect asking if there is a British fantasy of British art expresses an anxiety about the division of spoils between Tate Britain (Pimlico) and Modern (Bankside). I'm happy for a porous definition of British art.

The second theme, "Is art too popular?" is perhaps raising a question about dumbing down and artist being populists or crowd-pleasers — although the crowdedness of some exhibitions such as the National Gallery's Leonardo show might suggest that too many people like to look at art, or like to be seen looking at art. L. S. Lowry, Beryl Cook and Jack Vettriano all suffer critical neglect from being too popular, and perhaps Martin has been neglected because he has been seen by millions; certainly many critics felt he offered the *wrong kind* of sublime. The vast canvases of the *Day of Wrath* triptych were shown theatrically in the Laing, not only being in a separate room from earlier paintings (although not on their own), but behind a wall to delay their impact. Sheffield was able to show them across a single wall, but this was a bit spoilt by the noise spilling from the cinema in the gallery. The Tate was most elaborate, building a temporary auditorium, and choreographing a ten-minute sound and light show, projecting images onto the painting to make them appear animated. It didn't quite recreate the Victorian experience, but it perhaps reminds us that a gallery is not a pure, antiseptic experience (although the use of mobile phones and flash photography would remind us of that anyway). It was arguably vulgar, but perhaps not vulgar enough.

That much of Martin's work is in the genre of history paintings does raise the question "Does the art of the past say anything about the world of today?", because we often look to historical precedent to try to understand the present. However, there is dispute about what Martin's paintings said about his present. His paintings of the fall of great cities might be thought to present London as some kind of Babylon, set to crash into the Thames. Martin does seem to meld his paintings of Kensington Gardens or Richmond into a piece with his wilder canvases, but I'm not convinced his apocalypses are that kind of allegory; in fact I'm sure he could have painted St Paul's Cathedral being struck by lightning or the fire of the which destroyed the Houses of Parliament if he'd wished to do that. But, as the ongoing genre of disaster movies proves, we share his fascination with catastrophe, although his are far from cosy ones. Martin's interests can help us trace our own.

The public appetite for *X Factor* and *Strictly Dancing* should perhaps make us wary of a positive response to "Should the public have a say in what goes into museums?". But I'm as unhappy with leaving selection just to an élite as I would be to the masses, without being clear as to what a compromise should be. Martin (and

Lowry, Cook and Vettriano) shows that public taste can be at odds with critical dogma, but we can take time to warm to a challenging piece of work. The fund raising by the Art Fund is one way for the public to aid accession, but it is still the Art Fund who decides what to campaign for. I'm not sure the exhibition really answered this question — pretty well all of the paintings were from gallery collections (and is that the same as a museum one?), most of the mezzotints were from the private collection of Michael J. Campbell, so the one-offs are in relatively public hands, and the prints mostly in private — although probably many of them are also in the Tate or British Library archives.

To the final question, "Should art be good for you?", I answer "No", although like most of these questions it depends by what you mean. I guess it is a British — or maybe Anglo-Saxon thing — to think that we should suffer in our art, as if it is some kind of foul medicine, and the art of instant gratification is somehow perceived to be less good for us. Matthew Arnold's doctrine of culture as the best that had been thought and said, of sweetness and light, defines culture as good for us, as improving, although he is short on details of concrete examples. I would counter that it is good to confront difficult work. Some of the work in *Watercolour* was challenging and moving, and ugly and disgusting, whereas much of the sweetness and light style in that exhibition it left me unmoved. The latter is still art, even if I didn't feel that it did me any good.

Fortunately the exhibition does not live or die by this debate — which you need to go online to find — and I'm not convinced that answering the questions brings you closer to the grandeur of Martin. His work is sublimely astounding. If you want to see the inspiration for a hundred ends of the world, or be inspired yourself, immerse yourself in Martin's art, which is, in the words of curator Martin Myrone, "suspended or caught between mass production and the unique, the popular and the rarefied, the industrialised and the artistic, the sensationalist and the scholastic." And that, after all, is the place where we often find sf.

## READING LIST

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# *recurrent:* KINCAID IN SHORT Paul Kincaid

## WEIHNACHTSABEND

Alternate history is, by its nature, a fiction of disease. It is designed to undermine everything that seems most solid and real around us, to show how febrile and unreliable is our very being. Because if history could so easily be changed, if there are so many moments when everything we understand about the nature of the world could have been radically rewritten, then we have to comprehend that, in the blink of an eye, everything that we are and believe might be excised from the world.

One of the things that makes Keith Roberts' novelette one of the very best alternate history stories ever written, is that he brings this dis-ease into the fabric of the story itself. He doesn't do this in the conventional sense of including within the story an alternative to the reality of the story (one of the things that I want to show is that there is very little that is conventional about this story), but every certainty is shown to be unsure, every moment of security is shown to be unsafe. In this story we do not occupy history, it is not a landscape where we might stand firmly, it is, rather, a flood in which we are swept up, helpless to control its twists and turns. And that is so uneasy a situation to be in that most of us tell ourselves the comforting fiction that we have some control over our destiny.

Perhaps the simplest way to consider the insecurities of this story is to just read it through. We open in a chauffeur-driven car taking Richard Mainwaring and Diane Hunter to Wilton Great House for Christmas. It is an almost archetypal English Christmas. A country estate awaits them, but right from the start Roberts undermines this upper-class English idyll – *Brideshead* revised for a new world order. The entrance to the estate is guarded by 'two new stone pill-boxes' (9); an officious armed guard, speaking entirely in German, checks their papers. Even the weather conspires in the air of menace: 'It was as if the car butted into a black tunnel, full of swirling pale flakes. He thought he saw her shiver.' (10)

This is easy, we recognise at once that the story conforms to a very familiar type of alternate history: Germany has won World War II. But no, we soon learn that it is more subtle than that. Britain and Germany agreed peace terms in early 1940 (as Lord Halifax, the Foreign

Secretary and Churchill's chief rival to succeed Neville Chamberlain, advocated), and now the Two Empires, as they are known, have formed a political union. But there is something even more subtle than that going on here. We are not told specifically when the story is set, but it is clearly some time after the abbreviated Second World War. Hitler has died and been succeeded by his deputy, Hess, now an old man who has himself been succeeded by someone called Ziegler. The Minister, Mainwaring's boss, wears a rollneck shirt, an item of clothing briefly fashionable in our 1960s. In other words, I would place the story roughly contemporaneous with when it was written in the late 60s. The regime has been in place for some time, there is nothing to suggest that this is a brutal occupation, the Two Empires are supposedly friendly equals. So why are there *new* pill-boxes? Why is the armed guard more officious than usual? Diane is clearly not the only one who is nervous; the whole situation is unstable right from the start.

This insecurity is made explicit in the character of Mainwaring. He is a relatively senior civil servant, the very epitome of cumbersome stolidity, secure in his own lack of ambition, 'the knowledge of failure' (13), comfortable in the compromises and accommodations he has made with the regime he serves. In this he is surely meant to stand for the country as a whole. But this comfort has already been compromised by an unauthorised contact from an American journalist; for him, the pill-boxes and guards represent much-needed safety: 'Here, of all places, nothing could reach him. For a few days he could forget the whole affair. He said aloud, "Anyway, I don't even matter. I'm not important." The thought cheered him, nearly.' (14) So much rests on that 'nearly', because even within the supposed safety of the Minister's mansion, a forbidden volume appears in his room – 'Ten minutes ago the book hadn't been there'. (14) Mainwaring and the regime serve as metaphors for each other, each finding doubt and vulnerability where they feel most secure.

Even the nature of Christmas itself is used in the undermining of our understanding and the increase in insecurity. In a ceremony that provides the central metaphor informing the whole story, even little children are required to pass through a gauntlet of terror.

'They lie in darkness, waiting,' said the Minister softly. 'Their nurses have left them. If they cry out, there is none to hear. So they do not cry out. And one by one she has called them. They see her light pass beneath the door; and they must rise and follow. Here, where we sit, is warmth. Here is safety. Their gifts are waiting; to reach them they must run the gauntlet of the dark.' (19)

We are reminded, of course, of the tunnel of darkness through which Mainwaring and Diane had to pass on their journey to the mansion. But who shall be their Lightbringer, the girl who leads the children through darkened halls where ghosts and goblins and the demon Hans Trapp lie in wait? As the Minister further explains:

'The Aryan child must know, from earliest years, the darkness that surrounds him. He must learn fear, and to overcome that fear. He must learn to be strong. The Two Empires were not built on weakness; weakness will not sustain them. There is no place for it. This in part your children already know. The house is big and dark; but they will win through to the light.' (19/20)

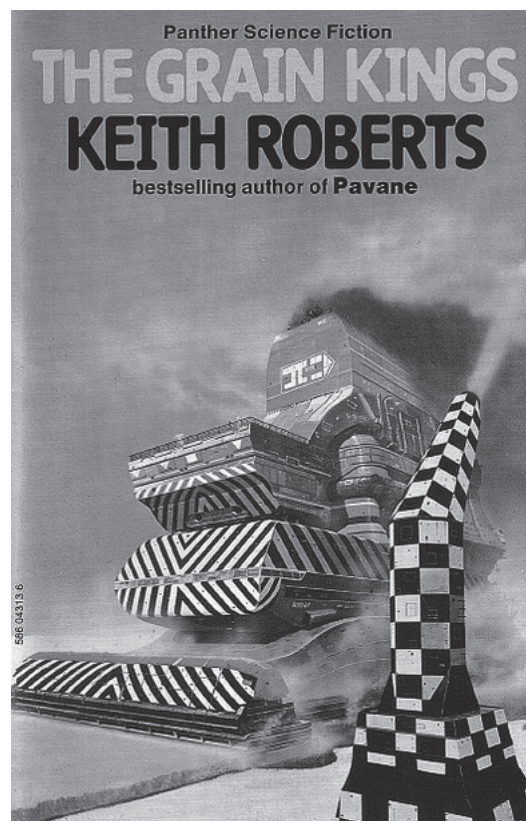
This seems like a representation of typical Nazi ideology but, as so often in this story, it also contains its opposite, for it suggests that there is something to fear. It becomes not a religion of strength but an admission of weakness. Thus, when the tree is lit, 'Mainwaring thought for the first time what a dark thing it was, although it blazed with light.' (20)

Having become used to the way that every statement contains its opposite, what, then, are we to make of the Minister's statement to Richard: 'You are my friend. I trust you, above all others, I trust you. Do you realise this?' (21) – especially since this heavy emphasis on trust comes when the issue of trustworthiness has not been raised before this point? Richard now follows the Minister on a journey into the bowels of the house that echoes the journey the children have just been forced to make – 'Come, man, come! You are more nervous than the children, frightened of poor old Hans!' (21). At the end of this journey Richard receives his own present, a Lamborghini and a promotion, which in itself negates Mainwaring's earlier insistence that 'I don't even matter', and we learn that the outside threat we have been sensing seems to come from divisions within the regime. 'The shadows, Richard. They were never closer. Well might we teach children to fear the dark.' (23) Since we've already heard of the mysterious Freedom Front, it would seem there are all sorts of ghouls and demons pressing in the darkness around this world.

The first part of the novelette ends with an extended sex scene involving Mainwaring and Diane, one of very few that Roberts ever included in his work. This concludes with a suggestion that Diane has been brought along for the Minister's own sexual amusement, and Mainwaring seems comfortable going along with that.

## 2

The second part of the story opens, as the first did, with a quiet scene redolent of other, romantic, country house stories. Looking on from a distance – 'Far things – corpses, hills, solitary trees – stand sharp-etched' (28) – we watch riders gathering for a hunt. We catch fragments of conversation – 'It seems the air itself has been rendered



crystalline by cold; through it the voices break and shatter, brittle as glass' (28) – in German. All is bucolic, peaceful, except that 'across the country for miles around doors slam, bolts are shot, shutters closed, children scurried indoors' (28/29). Again, the romantic is rendered threatening.

And again there is a twist in this sense of threat. Roberts notes, almost in passing, that a horse falls, a rider is crushed, 'The Hunt, destroying, destroys itself' (29). Like the darkness of the lit tree, we get the sense of things cutting both ways, those seeming most in control are those most at risk. But still, however disordered the Hunt may be, it rides wildly on and the quarry 'reddened, flops and twists; the thin high noise it makes is the noise of anything in pain' (29). But as the Hunt disperses, 'a closed black van starts up, drives away' (30) and we know that the quarry was no fox.

Mainwaring, of course, knows none of this. The story now returns to the tight focus upon him that it had briefly abandoned for the distanced observation of the Hunt. Mainwaring sleeps late after his lovemaking, then spends the day idly wandering about the house. But gradually he becomes concerned that Diane has not appeared. When he confronts the chauffeur who drove them from London, the driver insists: 'I'm sorry. I drove you ... on your own.' (34)

At this point, Mainwaring returns to his room and begins to search it systematically. It would seem that he is searching for evidence of Diane's existence when he pounces triumphantly upon one of her earrings lodged between the floorboards. But then he continues the search, until he finds a hidden recording device. There's something a little odd about this, as if he knew what he was looking for all along, and there is no real sense of surprise when he discovers the recording device. It is as if something latent within him has been awakened, as if he

always knew that he was under observation but had no real need to find proof of it before now.

Again, for a moment, the story withdraws from Mainwaring and that distanced voice resumes with an account of the Party, the climax to the festivities. Once more, a supposedly joyous event is tinged with anxiety, and the toasts are made to 'five thousand tanks, ten thousand fighting aeroplanes, a hundred thousand guns' (35). But as the whole thing breaks up into an orgy, we return to Mainwaring, who is elsewhere in the house playing detective. He beats up the 'wrinkled and pot-bellied' (37) *Hundenmeister*, the Master of the Hounds, to try and find out what was in the van that left after the Hunt. (This is a continuity error by Roberts; Mainwaring wasn't there, he didn't see the van, he should know nothing about it.) And having proved himself rather unpleasant by beating up a weaker man, he then defies an armed GFP captain.

But he finds nothing, and returns to his room waiting for them to come for him. And while he waits he drinks whisky and reads the forbidden book, Geissler's *Toward Humanity*. (It is significant that the author's name is German, and the GFP captain who confronted Mainwaring is English, though he speaks German. Roberts may have been one of the most English of writers, but there is no simple nationalist agenda being played out here.) As he reads the book he tears out the pages and consigns them to the fire, though there is one brief passage we are allowed to read over his shoulder.

[T]he forces of the Two Empires confront each other uneasily. Greed, jealousy, mutual distrust; these are the enemies, and they work from within. This, the Empires know full well. And, knowing, for the first time in their existence, fear ... (39)

This passage fulfils much the same function in 'Weihnachtsabend' that *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* does in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, a perspective on the world of the story that is effectively from outside the story. And it confirms the sense of unease, of fear, that we have found running under the surface of the story. That simple list of 'Greed, jealousy, mutual distrust' sets the terms for the final confrontation we are about to witness. Roberts has, as it were, stepped outside the story and told us how to read it.

Nobody does come for him. After a short sleep, he wakes hungover, then takes apart, cleans, reassembles and loads his Luger – the sort of lovingly detailed account of familiar technology that was such a feature of Roberts's work – and finally goes to a scheduled meeting with the Minister.

This morning everything seemed strange. He studied the Minister curiously, as if seeing him for the first time. He had that type of face once thought of as peculiarly English. (41)

And again, Roberts shifts our perspective. To this point it has been easy to assume that the Minister, as a representative of the ruling regime and as head of a household where German is habitually spoken, was himself German. In fact, other than the rather lowly chauffeur, who is called Hans, it may be that there is no-one in this story who is not English. This is emphatically not a story about a German take-over of Britain, but is rather about the readiness of the English to accept

Nazification.

There is a further implication of insecurity in this world when the Minister begins by talking matter-of-factly about 'more trouble in Glasgow. The fifty-first Panzer division is standing by' (41) (it must be insecure indeed if tanks are needed to quell the unrest). Mainwaring ignores him, twice asking what happened to Diane, and when the Minister won't answer, he draws the gun. The Minister refuses to take it seriously: 'That's an interesting gun [...] If the barrel is good, I'll buy it. For my private collection.' (42) When Mainwaring continues to press the point, he says the Hunt killed a deer, and as for Diane: 'she's gone. She never existed. She was a figment of your imagination.' (43) As an alternative, he offers: 'Buy yourself a girl friend [...] When you tire of her ... buy another' (43). There is an insouciant sense of power, of the rightness of buying and selling people, that, for a moment, convinces Mainwaring. He lowers his gun, saying, 'They picked the wrong man' (43), which suggests that his actions are inspired as much by a sense of having been picked by the Freedom Front as by any feelings for Diane.

There is a sense, indeed, that Diane is only incidentally involved in the greed, jealousy and mutual distrust that is coming out in this dialogue. For the Minister, now, praises Mainwaring's courage: 'I want men near me, serving me. Now more than ever. Real men, not afraid to die [...] But first ... I must rule them.' (44) This is macho posturing, chest-beating over who controls and who is controlled, and Mainwaring, as we saw right at the beginning of the story – 'I'm not important' – is normally quite comfortable being controlled. But the Minister overestimates his personal power, and by implication the power of the entire regime, when he reveals that there was more surveillance in Mainwaring's room, that they knew Diane was an agent of the Freedom Front tasked with activating Mainwaring.

Do you see the absurdity? They really thought you would be jealous enough to assassinate your Minister [...] Richard, I could have fifty blonde women if I chose. A hundred. Why should I want yours? (44/45)

There is a basic inhumanity in this, an assumption that Mainwaring could not have had any genuine feelings for Diane because genuine feelings are not part of their understanding of how people work. And it is at this point, when he comprehends the nature of controlling and being controlled, when he must see himself as one of the children being led through the fearsomeness of the dark purely for the satisfaction of those who occupy the dark, that Mainwaring shoots the Minister. 'He thought, "It wasn't an accident. None of it was an accident." He had underrated them. They understood despair.' (45) He was being controlled from the moment he arrived at the house, but it seems that the Freedom Front controlled him better, because they understood despair.

When he waits on the snow-swept roof for the helicopter that will certainly kill him, he thinks: 'We made a mistake. We all made a mistake' (46). And the mistake, surely, was what had set the country on the historical path it had taken, and that had unleashed the darkness in the English psyche.

● Quotations taken from 'Weihnachtsabend' in Keith Roberts, *The Grain Kings*, London, Hutchinson, 1976



# recurrent:

## RESONANCES

### Stephen Baxter

## (MORE) PULP FICTION

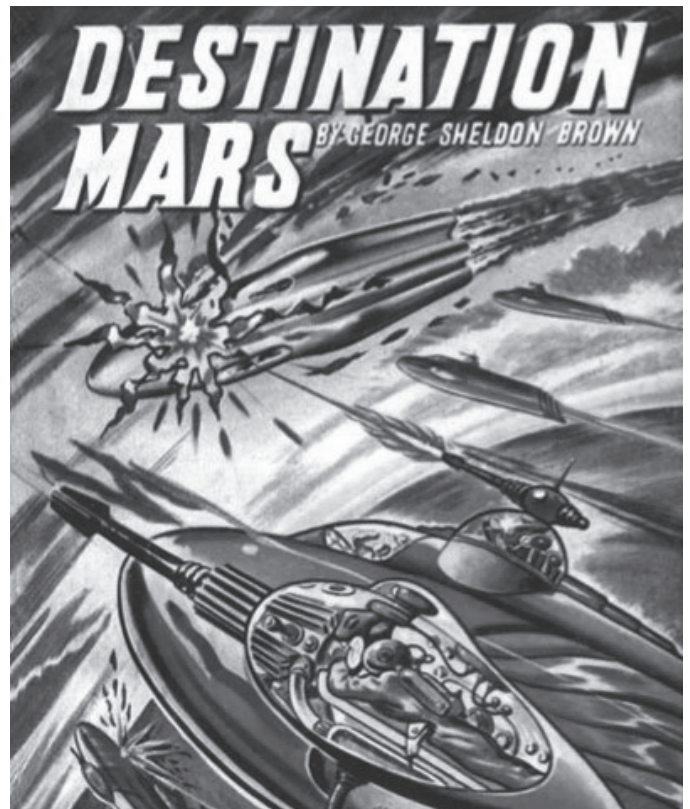
In my last column (*Vector* 268) I wrote of the work of John William Jennison, a very prolific British writer who, starting from around 1945, was a mass-producer of genre fiction for the UK paperback houses. Jennison touched my life through his Gerry Anderson tie-in novels of the 1960s, published under the pseudonym 'John Theydon'.

Jennison was just one of a generation of authors who worked on the tough treadmill of pulp publishing in the 1950s. Because they worked under pseudonyms which generally belonged to the publishing house and were 'shared' by several writers, it's often difficult for later generations even to work out who wrote what in this period. It turns out that Jennison's period sf accounts for only eight titles of his total of perhaps 150 books (according to careful research by Steve Holland and other scholars).

What were these books like? It was all very formulaic, even down to the length of the books. From 1950 to 1953 Curtis Warren books, for example, were expected to be exactly 112 or 128 pages long, some 36,000 to 40,000 words. The lengths were to do with the standard sizes of paper blocks. Sometimes endings were obviously rushed, as the author strove to tie up his storyline to fit the word-length. The books were cheaply produced. They had laminated covers folded around the paper blocks and the whole package was held together by two fat staples, which made the books impossible to lay flat – and which today are generally rusting away. The price was typically 1s. 6d (7½ p). They had vivid full colour covers, some of which have themselves become objects of collectable desire.

The pay rates were of the order of £1 per thousand words – so only £40 or so for an entire novel! A pound was worth a lot more in 1950 than it is now, but even so to make a decent living you had to write fast and fluently, knocking out drafts to the required length with the minimum of revision. At his peak in the early 1950s, Jennison for example seems to have been producing a book per week, predominantly westerns.

Appearing from 1952-4, Jennison's sf titles were produced by various publishing houses under six different house names: King Lang, Neil Charles, Gill Hunt, Edgar Rees Kennedy, Matthew C. Bradford and George Sheldon Browne. Submitting to the collecting bug, I set myself the task of tracking down *all* the sf novels written under these house names. I found a total of 34 novels, including



Jennison's, produced with six other writers: Dennis Hughes, David Griffiths, Brian Holloway, and three names still very familiar today in George Hay, John Brunner, and EC Tubbs. And I discovered that, even in the tough working conditions of the time, some decent genre product was generated.

Consider David Griffiths, a prolific author and like Jennison another man who kept his private life a secret. My favourite of the seven novels Griffiths contributed to the Jennison 'stable' is *Fission* (1952, Curtis Warren, as by Gill Hunt), an engaging time-travel jaunt. From 2035, an age of man's interstellar federal republic, there are hops to atomic war in 2500, occupation by mind-controlling aliens in 5500, another terrible war of liberation, a Romanesque interstellar kingdom in c.300,000 – and ultimately the traveller is saved by billion-year-hence post-humans and sent home. Griffiths' imagination falters at times, but the book has the primal appeal of all time travel stories right

back to Wells's *The Time Machine*; the attention is easily held by the vivid unfolding revelations of the rapid skips through time.

I've yet to lay my hands on two books by Brian Holloway, another British writer of whom nothing seems to be known. Dennis Hughes was one of the most prolific of the genre authors, churning out sixty (known) sf novels in a decade. Six a year! He contributed no less than thirteen of the Jennison-stable titles, all published between 1951 and 1953. The most fun is probably *Destination Mars* (1951, Edwin Self, as by George Sheldon Browne), in which the British spaceship *Aphid* races to Mars against a sinister competitor from the east, in pursuit of minerals that will open up the rest of the solar system. Mars is Lowellian, with canals, water shortages, humanoid aliens on a dying world. The easterners kidnap a princess and there's a lurid chase through a weird forest. This is of course very derivative, a mash-up of Wells and Burroughs. But again the basic tropes of the genre are here, and they engage as always: you witness the first footstep on a new world, you are absorbed by first contact with the alien, and you have to read on to find what is to be discovered.

George Hay, who contributed one title to this survey, was the working name of Oswyn Robert Tregonwell Hay. Born in 1922, he is less remembered for his early fictional forays than for his exploits as an editor from the 1960s, and the role he played in establishing the SF Foundation. He died in 1997. In his *Terra* (1953, Curtis Warren, as by King Lang), aliens from Vega invade a solar system ruled by a corrupt Federation of Planets. Morgan Lee, technical whizz and super-rich entrepreneur, captures a bunch of the aliens and broadcasts the reality of the invasion to Earth and the colony worlds. Eventually peace breaks out between the rebels on both sides. This is intelligent, fast-paced, confident and humorous, with echoes of Robert Sheckley.

John Brunner, born in 1934, is the highest-profile of this little stable of authors. And he began publishing at the age of just 17, with his one contribution to the set, *Galactic Storm* (1951, Curtis Warren, as by Gill Hunt). Here is John Brunner's first published sentence: 'They fetched Sharp out the other day, a doddering, maundering white-haired imbecile of thirty, who, supported by two white-coated doctors, waved fatuously and laughed at the milling crowds under his balcony' (p4).

Perhaps wisely Brunner chooses two students as young as himself as his main protagonists. One of them, Sharp, is a precocious computing whizz who hijacks a relays-and-valves computer to produce a terrifying projection of a coming global-warming catastrophe: 'It fits all the available facts – and we had to wait for a mere boy to evolve it.' (p21) The predictions catapult the boys to international prominence. Soon with their tutors they are despatched to Antarctica, to investigate volcanic phenomena – but here they encounter the flying saucers of Venusians, a decadent inbred race who have come to the Earth to 'terraform' it, to make it like their own world, and so impossible for human life. In the hurried accelerando that closes the book we see humans using Venusian technology to counter-invade Venus and spread through the solar system. But we take our flaws with us: 'I foresee the destruction of humanity, as swiftly and surely as ever the Venusians were destroyed, our air poisoned not by a plant and an enemy, but by ourselves' (p110).

The book is fast-paced, full of ideas, incident, precocious science, all expressed in hectic, charmingly immature

writing. It's clearly an action story meant to fit the genre demands, but maybe there are echoes of HG Wells in the loftier viewpoints exercised at the conclusion. And maybe the foresighted emphasis on environmental concerns – 'Do you know what would happen if the icepacks at the poles melted? London would be fifty feet under water!' (p18) – foreshadows works like Brunner's masterpiece on over-population, *Stand on Zanzibar*. In the end you have to marvel at the ability of such a young man to deliver a coherent novel at all, and let alone one so bursting with energy and originality.

For my money the best novels of this set are the two contributed by Ted Tubb. Edwin Charles Tubb was in his early thirties when his first novels were published in 1951, but by the following year he was already selling fiction under his own name. He was popular and enormously prolific, perhaps best remembered for his long-running Dumarest saga.

His *Saturn Patrol* (1951, Curtis Warren, as by King Lang) is a striking work: 'Listening to their talk, Gregg could imagine the wide-flung places of the Galaxy, the fabled Centre from which flowed wealth and power ...' (p46) In a colonised Galaxy war has become too devastating to be unleashed on the inhabited worlds. So wars are fought by proxy in space, by mercenary 'Warbird' spaceship crews. But this has become a racket, and the cultural and economic development of the Galaxy is stagnating.

Gregg Harmond, 'ex Saturn Patrol' (the only reference to the title! – which was evidently an unwelcome imposition by the publisher), is living on a tough colony world when a Warbird calls. Harmond earns his place in the crew with some toughly written fisticuffs, and soon rises to command his own Wargroup. When he realises how corrupt the whole system is he begins a campaign to conquer the rich and decadent empires of the Galaxy Centre. This is well-paced and compellingly written, with plenty of tough action scenes that recall *Starship Troopers*. And the premise, built on themes of power, corruption, economics and exploitation, is surprisingly sophisticated. Harmond is a complex character, racked by guilt, who loathes the Warbirds even as he comes to lead them.

In Tubb's *Planetfall* (1951, Curtis Warren, as by Gill Hunt), Earth, Mars and Venus depend for their military spacecraft fuel on Jovium, extracted from the punishing prison mines on Jupiter. An Outer Worlds Directorate administers a 'Power Dole' that satisfies nobody. Earth tries to gain an advantage by bribing a Directorate controller. The hugely incriminating evidence is stored on a patrol ship ... which is stolen by a lunar customs inspector called Rex Carson, framed for narcotics smuggling, who becomes the focus of an interplanetary power struggle: 'I'm going to play with the destinies of worlds' (p71). This has echoes of *Saturn Patrol*, with its story of an outsider rising to overthrow a system of military suppression and economic injustice, but it's less convincing.

It's very pleasing that some of these all-but-forgotten titles will soon be made available through Gollancz's 'Gateway' e-books initiative. We all owe a debt to the labour of scholars like Steve Holland who have done much to unravel the sheer confusion of the first post-war years of British sf publishing. But that period gave a first start to major authors like Brunner and Tubb, laid the foundation of the modern genre in Britain – and bequeathed us some delightful titles in their own right, full of the wonder that is central to good sf to this day.



# recurrent:

## FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

### Andy Sawyer

## ONCE IN A NEW MOON (AKA LUCKY STAR)

Sometimes you open a book and something hits you. With Owen Rutter's obscure and rather battered *Once in a New Moon* (part of the large collection given to the Science Fiction Foundation by Nik Pollard), it was the frontispiece. A young couple, whom you just *know* are speaking with that cut-glass accent so prevalent in 1930s films, are seen just entering into a kiss, eyes closed in ecstasy. Our eyes drift to the caption.

"Stella, darling, there's something I've been waiting for all day."

As *double-entendres* go, that has to have caused much mirth in cinemas throughout the land, and I for one would give much to see the film, which is so obscure that even among those dodgy sites which offer to stream to your hard-drive rare movies and almost certainly much more besides, there is hardly a mention of it. Yet *Once in A New Moon*, the film of *Lucky Star* by Owen Rutter, is one of the earliest British science fiction films, and although the novel owes much to Jules Verne's 1877 *Hector Servadac* (aka *Off on a Comet*) and the novels and stories of HG Wells, it is worth something more than a smutty giggle.

The coastal village of Upper Shrimpton is inhabited by the entire cast of comedies of manners of the 1930s. Mild-mannered Harold Drake, the village postmaster, is a wannabe explorer, who'd love to be his famous namesake, Sir Francis. His daughter Stella (she of the frontispiece) is in love with Bryan (he ditto), son of the local squire Lord Bravington (a genial and decent old buffer) and his fearsome and bigoted wife. There is the obligatory Colonel (Colonel Pepper) and the equally obligatory slightly dotty Vicar, the Reverend Rupert Buffet. "a master in the art of ignoring facts". What removes the novel from the realm of laboured comedy is the Dark Star which is heading towards the Earth and which, Harold Drake warns the village, is likely to destroy it.

Drake's warning is dismissed, especially by Lady Bravington and the Vicar, who even when Upper Shrimpton is sent spinning off into space to become a moonlet in its own right, refuse to believe the evidence of their own eyes. Even when Drake and his daughter sail round the "world" (achieving his lifetime's ambition!) showing that the village and the area around it is the only dry land, the upper classes remain closed to the changes



that have hit them. The picture of Lady Bravington declaring "I don't believe a word of it – it's a bad flood," as the servile vicar hovers over her, is another delight.

But things go from bad to worse. When all the village's supplies are gone – what then? And how is this community going to organise its affairs? Naturally (naturally!) the gentry and their hangers-on become the ruling body. Lady Bravington is in her element. "To her there had always been but one party: the Conservative Party, whose duty it was to protect the rights of landlords and keep everyone else in his Proper Place. But of recent years even the Conservative Party was not what what it had been. Pusillanimous was the word she applied to its conduct. It pandered. It gave concessions to Trade Unions and other iniquitous secret societies whose existence ought to have been made impossible by law. . . . She had



hoped she would live to see the day when a Dictator would control the affairs of Great Britain" And Lord Bravington becomes "His Excellency". Class barriers remain firm. Our romantic duo (remember them) are forbidden to marry and Lady B. browbeats the Vicar into refusing to carry out the ceremony. Although Harold Drake blackmails the Vicar into marrying (as village postmaster, he knows the Rev. Buffet's shameful secret . . . a weakness for football pools and newspaper competitions), it's something of a Pyrrhic victory. Class conflict breaks out when the Bravingtons refuse to share the food and fuel resources of the "Big House". Mr Parrot, the village butcher, leads an election campaign, which takes on a sharper edge when Wicklow Phelps, an American resident, suggests that the only way to conserve resources is to introduce birth control.

Things are saved by a somewhat fuzzily-described return to Earth, and the moonlet lands in the North Sea. Fortunately, Earth hasn't been destroyed by the Dark Star, and things return to normal. Upper Shrimpton becomes "Shrimpton Island" and all (except Harold) leave. "I shall be a kind of Robinson Crusoe", he sighs happily.

Rutter (1889 – 1944) himself served in World War One and became a prolific novelist and travel writer. His novel *Lucky Star* was published in 1929, and while it is something of a period-piece, it is fascinating to read it in these days of "we're all in it together". The film was written and directed by Anthony Kimmins, whose career lasted until 1962 and whose films included thrillers and

comedies, some featuring stars such as George Formby and Gracie Fields. The meagre references to it I have found suggest that it was handicapped by a low budget. As an early British science fiction film, it may also have suffered in comparison with Maurice Elvey's *The Tunnel* of the same year, whose transatlantic tunnel has a much higher gosh-wow factor than the sub-Wellsian political parable.

Certainly, even *Once in a Blue Moon's* best friend couldn't defend it from the charge of being dated. As an exercise in utopian fiction which borrows from Wells short story "The Star" (1897) and would have stirred up memories of the 1926 General Strike on its original publication, it hardly does justice to the ideas it raises. By 1935, indeed, bigoted aristocrats praising the dictatorships of Europe were not really all *that* funny. By the end of the novel, very little has changed. The conservative order remains in place. This catastrophe really is significantly cosy. Yet it's perhaps a reminder of the way science fictional scenarios were used naturally in fiction which was designed to speculate, however loosely, about potential changes in society. The "dark star" is a powerful image of destruction, still capable of rich layers of meaning. And while we look at the plates in this edition and smile condescendingly at the stereotypes and unwitting *double-entendres*, we end the book with something like admiration for Harold Drake, "explorer's soul in a postmaster's body", who manages to live his dream in a manner he never would have thought of.

[www.jameswhiteaward.com](http://www.jameswhiteaward.com)

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. For more information visit [www.jameswhiteaward.com](http://www.jameswhiteaward.com).

**interzone**



**BSFA**  
THE BRITISH  
SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION

# recurrent: PICTURE THIS Terry Martin

## FABLES OF MICE AND SAMURAI

If you were at the Custard Factory back in 2006 and at the Think Tank in subsequent years you'll know all about the Birmingham International Comic Show, known affectionately as BICS – no, nothing to do with ballpoint pens. If not, then you'll probably be unaware that Shane Chebsey is one of the main organisers of the show. That means you're also unlikely to know he's one of the main publishing editors at Scar Comics, one of several long-established small-press comic publishers in the UK. Why do you need that information? You don't, but it does lead me into the first graphic novel to be scrutinized this issue as it's from Scar. I picked it up at the Birmingham Comicon – this year's recession-hit slimmed-down version of BICS held at the Holiday Inn in Birmingham.

If aliens taking over the Earth is science fiction then this one fits our remit perfectly. Like many writers of alien fiction, Roger Mason's aliens are just larger than life humans with the same hang-ups and desires rather than something completely alien; likely what they will be if we're not the only intelligent life form in the universe – which I flippantly and controversially, though not scientifically, of course, often suggest we are. Mason's aliens are not just caricatures of humans they are physically a lot larger; a clue being in the title *The Mice - The Factory Menace* (quite possibly a word-play on the *Phantom Menace*). The humour in this tale, relying on familiar human faults, is offset by the violence. It's set in an alien canning factory somewhere near The Wash (my current home turf) from the darkly drawn-up map, where freedom-fighting humans are attempting to sabotage the alien's canning production plant. The aliens regard humans as little more than vermin – hence the title. There's no back story as to how humans lost their dominance over the Earth, but that they did means these aliens are pretty mean. While we intermittently travel with a group of humans, the main story is one of a food company trying to meet targets and how they cut corners to achieve it. The human involvement – while well depicted – is a mere annoyance (not to the reader, the aliens).

The illustrations, also by Mason, are in black and white and executed with natural flare and accrued experience. There are moments when the pictures tell one story and the narrative dialogue another – something I always find satisfying in comics, and something that is difficult to

achieve in any other storytelling medium – showing an intelligent respect for the reader; what Scott McCloud labels Parallel Combinations (I'll be talking about his graphic novel, *Understanding Comics – The Invisible Art*, in a future column. It's a book I have unashamedly used to help construct several graphic novel and comic workshops.). *The Mice* could have been a very slick and professional looking graphic novel, but what lets it down for me is the hand lettering. A touch of *Illustrator* and this would be high on my list of must haves. Regardless, *The Mice - The Factory Menace* is worth getting your hands on and quite easily lends itself to further tales.

And further tales sums up Bill Willingham's *Fables*. I've only just picked up on *Fables* with Volumes 13 & 14, *Witches* and *Red Rose* respectively; another recommendation from an Eastercon panel earlier this year. Having spoken to regular *Fables* readers and from comments online, it has lost many regular followers but picked up new ones; certain story lines having disillusioned some – inevitable, I think, with any long-running series. *Fables* is a kind of *Matrix* of fantasy worlds which are actually real(!); where magic is possible (mostly) and fairytale characters mix with demons and humans. It's these familiar fable and fairy story characters that are central to the stories – and it's the plural you get with the collections – there is an overall story arc that links them, sometimes less obviously than others. It's these different subplots that stop *Fables* from becoming boring and inevitable, although there is only so much you can do that is new – and not recoded – even within a limitless world of imagination. The artwork is well handled by various artists and helps to make *Fables* a consistently strong contender for one of Vertigo's best titles. It's certainly worth dipping into, but don't blame me if you get hooked.

While *Fables* just keeps going and going, it's satisfying, on occasion, to pick up a couple of volumes of something that tells a complete story and *Madam Samurai*, another from the Scar catalogue, does just that. Based on an original idea by Gael McLaughlin, artist David Hitchcock and writer Gary Young draw you in from the beginning with a Victorian London – 1888 to be exact, and the backstreets of Whitechapel . . . where a whore gets her stomach slashed open. Sounds familiar? In this instance it's not surgical knives used but the samurai's favourite weapon,





Madam Samurai does battle (top) and details from *Fables 13: Witches* (left) and *The Mice: The Factory Menace* (above)





*Green Lantern Secret  
Origin from DC Comics*

the katana (as opposed to the wakisashi that was used for self-disembowelment. A Jack The Ripper “expert” argued with me recently about the reality of using a katana at close quarters. I understood what he was getting at – the length of the two blades – but, heh, we’re talking comics fiction here and sometimes the illustrations need that extra bit of metal. In any case, surely samurai used the katana at close quarters; it’s unlikely that they threw it at their enemy. But then, it’s unfair of me to argue my side of the case without the other being represented.). The artwork, in black and grey tones, suits the story admirably. No, it’s not sci-fi but it’s an enjoyable tale of revenge and suggests an alternative to the Ripper theory, although it doesn’t stack up to the “facts”. If you’re lucky you’ll be able to pick up the two graphic novels at a convention for just £12 – they’re normally £7.99 each.

*Madam Samurai* isn’t a super hero story, and if you’ve been a *Murky Depths* reader you’ll know that super heroes aren’t on our agenda, so you might be a little surprised that I’m going to give you a glimpse into Geoff Johns’ *Green Lantern Secret Origin*. No, I haven’t seen the film, though I had the joy(sic) of watching a looping trailer for the whole weekend at Mark Millar’s Kapow comic convention earlier this year. It became almost hypnotic. John’s *Green Lantern* manages to stir my youthful memories of the feelings I had anticipating and enjoying comics, and why super heroes DO have a place in this medium. That they became the dominant force in comics is a shame but of all the super heroes Green Lantern is arguably one of the more science-fiction-specific characters among the ‘older’ heroes you’ll find, at least in the mainstream. This origins story shows the creation of the first Green Lantern on Earth, and his training at the Green Lantern boot camp – but like all good super heroes he has a flaw – and it’s not that green can’t beat yellow. Hal Jordan has a huge ego, a big heart, but no fear, the latter being a prerequisite of being a Green Lantern. I never really bought into there being more than one Green

Lantern as a kid, but maybe my vision has changed, I think I like emerald more now than I did back then. Incidentally Geoff Johns is also writing the DC’s 52 reboot version of Green Lantern. I’ve heard lots of good things about 52, mainly from retailers whose sales have increased – older buyers coming back to comics without the fear they’ve lost years of continuity and new buyers curious as to the fuss. Of course, some of the sales are to buyers switching from Marvel. While I’ve refrained from taking the 52 plunge it seems that DC have made a tactically astute move. So watch out for Marvel’s reboot . . .

With only two copies remaining of *Dead Girls, Act 1 – The Last Of England* (that’s the limited edition hardback, signed by Richard Calder and artist Leonardo M Giron and numbered 1 to 100) as I speak, I thought it an appropriate time to reveal the plans for *Dead Girls, Act 2 – The Big Weird* (a phrase originally penned by Calder if you think you’ve heard the term before), particularly as the last of that act would have appeared in (and in full colour) *Murky Depths* #19. But by now you’ll know that the quarterly version of *Murky Depths* has ceased publication so you might be wondering how that affects *Dead Girls* and further limited editions. *Act 2* in hardback was planned for Autumn 2012. The current plan is to reissue Episodes 1-4 in two full colour comics (with some additional pages) and follow up with the remaining subsequent (and so far unpublished) episodes in their own comics through 2012 and into 2013 with the intention of producing a full trade paperback version of the three acts with a launch in 2013. It actually means the final edition will be published about two years earlier than was intended. And that can’t be bad.

Also, if you’ve been following Lavie Tidhar’s *I Dream of Ants*, another comic series, with art by Neil Struthers, that would have ended in *Murky Depths* #19, you’ll be pleased to now that the collected story will be available early next year.

# THE BSFA REVIEW

In the last issue, I suggested that there was an increasing Transatlantic divide within science fiction. Since then I've read two debut SF novels which have further fuelled this belief. Both are published by Night Shade Books in the US but have no UK publisher and, although they are only a mouse click away from the British reader, this at least partially removes them from the discourse. For example, they won't turn up on the BSFA or Arthur C Clarke Award shortlists because they can't.

The first of these novels is *Soft Apocalypse* by Will McIntosh and there is a small irony here in that the novel is expanded from a short story of the same name which was originally published in this country in *Interzone* (and shortlisted for the BSFA Award). It is an interesting take on one of the two currently dominant modes of SF: the collapse.

"It's so hard to believe," Colin said as we crossed the steaming, empty parking lot toward the bowling alley.

"What?"

"That we're poor. That we're homeless."

"I know."

"I mean, we have college degrees," he said.

"I know," I said."

Is this now our default future? Not too long ago the singularity was the next big thing and humanity was potentially unbounded. Now, the idea that things are bad and are just going to keep on getting worse seems less pessimism than realism. This is reflected in the increased popularity of depictions of bleak futures by writers both within and without the science fiction community. I was a judge for last year's Clarke Award and therefore read pretty much every science fiction novel published in the UK and, along with space operas, such stories made up the biggest chunk of submissions. We used to call such narratives "post-apocalyptic" but these days the term seems both too cataclysmic and too abrupt for the type of fiction that is most commonly being produced. A book like *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy is anomalous, a throwback; rather than nuclear fire or *The Day After Tomorrow* ice, the world usually ends not with a bang but a whimper. There is no scourged Earth for our lone protagonists to wander through, no clear before and after, rather they must live through the slow degradation of everything they have known. Energy prices keep increasing, food prices keep increasing, unemployment goes up, homelessness goes up, the weather becomes more and more extreme, disease becomes more and more prevalent. Eventually the strain proves too much and the centre cannot hold: things fall apart. I've taken to calling this subgenre simply "collapse"; however, you might just as easily call it "soft apocalypse".

Jasper is a white American with a college degree who somehow finds himself destitute and living the life of a gypsy. That is McIntosh's term and deliberately adds a racial element; Jasper's whiteness has been rescinded and those who have

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managed to keep a precarious hold on their possessions treat him as they would once have treated immigrants. Indeed, the US apparently has no qualms about rescinding his very citizenship: “They’re deporting homeless US citizens to third world countries along with illegals... They’re trying to defend it as retaliation for poor countries encouraging their people to come here. And they’re getting lots of support from people on the right.”

Starting by deliberately echoing the Great Depression, the novel slips forward in time a couple of years with each chapter. This is a technique used to impressive effect in Steve Amsterdam’s brilliantly titled but wildly uneven collapse novel, *Things We Didn’t See Coming*, and allows for the fact that the future will undoubtedly be both weird and changeable. Post-apocalyptic literature was a fiction of finality: this is the end, all options are closed down, reduced to the basics. The collapse is more fluid, as the years pass society ebbs and flows as it tries to keep purchase on the concept of civilisation. So in *Soft Apocalypse*, whilst there is a focus on ensuring basic needs (water, food, shelter) are met, there is also a focus on things that would be ridiculous luxuries in the post-apocalyptic world (dating, music, education). The sort of things that pre-collapse young people are interested in, in other words.

McIntosh’s biography describes him as a “psychology professor at Georgia Southern University, where he studies Internet dating, and how people’s TV, music, and movie choices are affected by recession and terrorist threats.” Much of this fertile ground is clearly present in the novel and his great achievement is projecting his current milieu into a downwardly spiralling future. But that is also its limitation. Projecting the quarter life crisis of the post-campus novel is something that core SF couldn’t do but once you’ve made that leap there isn’t anywhere else to go. When Jasper speaks it is in a voice we know all too well:

“Sometimes I hated these people, who lived so comfortably while the rest of us barely got by. Maybe I hated them because I always figured I’d be one of them, I don’t know.”

The second of the two books was *God’s War* by Kameron Hurley which has benefited from liberal online promotion amongst the British science fiction community courtesy of ex-Vector editor Niall Harrison but it remains a novel that is resolutely under the radar. It is a planetary romance, the once popular subgenre that currently finds itself outshone by its well-travelled younger sibling, space opera. The great virtue of space opera is scale, the widescreen baroque as Brian Aldiss brilliantly put it; the planetary romance offers something similar in microcosm, the different cultures and colours packed side-by-side on a globe. In this focus on worldbuilding, the form frequently resembles epic secondary world fantasy (especially since the cultures involved are often at comparable levels of technological advancement). The interplay between fantasy and science fiction is particularly intriguingly in *God’s War* which critic Farah Mendlesohn has gone so far as to describe as being “sword and sorcery far future fantasy” rather than SF. For me, the novel is clearly and importantly science fiction but has been interestingly filtered through a New Weird sensibility that we would more usually expect to be applied to epic fantasy.

Nasheen and Chenja are the two major powers on the planet of Umayma, both subscribing to slightly different

branches of an Islam further filtered through thousands of years of thought and both at war because of this for what is functionally forever. As is traditional, it is young men who are forcibly recruited to feed this machine. In Chenja, this has resulted in a small upper class of old men with dozens of wives. In Nasheen, the prevalence of women on the home front has led to them taking control. This “genocide of gender”, as one character aptly puts it, leads to a matriarchy with no men and a patriarchy with none either.

Nyx is a bel dame, rounding up Nasheenian deserters for the endless war at the front. She is an alpha female, a badass action hero, but not a man with breasts as is so often the way in genre fiction. Earlier in the year an aphorism (or ‘Tweet’, as we call them these days) was floating round the internet wondering: “Why do people say grow some balls? Those things are weak and sensitive. If you want to get tough, grow a cunt. Those things take a pounding.” Nyx would be on board with that.

When we meet her, she is already ragged; she has just sold her womb and has taken black work in addition to her government contract. The first act ends with her being violently cast out of her murderous sorority and imprisoned. The book returns to her eight years later and, after the density and intensity of the first half, the world becomes a more familiar place. She has assembled a crew and is scratching out a living as a bounty hunter when she is inevitably drawn into a potentially epoch-shattering conspiracy.

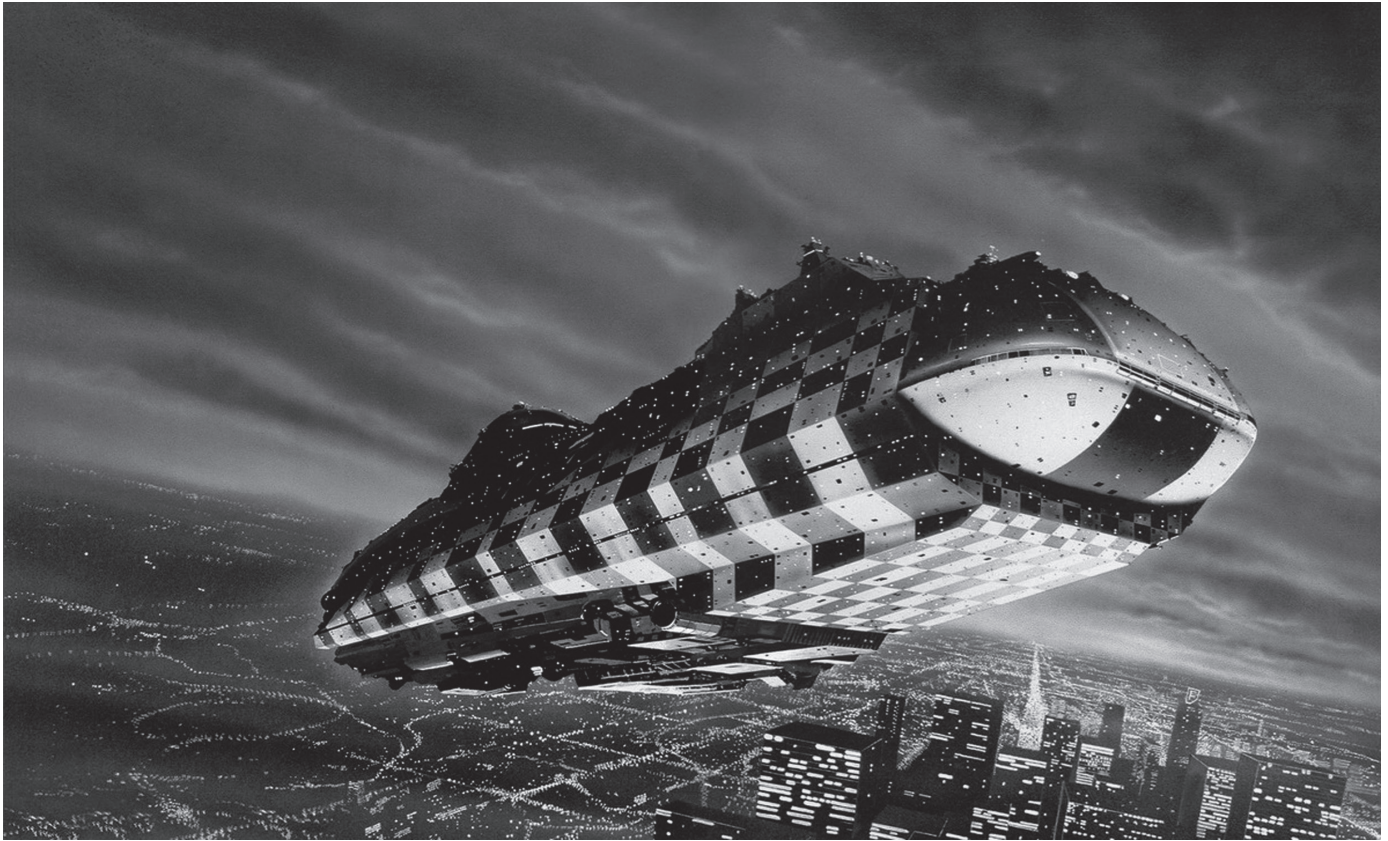
It is fair to say that the plot is the most underpowered aspect of *God’s War* but it is hard to care too much when it is so intellectually and imaginatively stimulating. The science fiction heart of the novel comes through in the intersectionality of Hurley’s work, the way she pushes together and pulls apart huge issues like religion, feminism and warfare. For example, the women of Nasheen claim to love their boys but they idealise them for a supposed virtue that allows them to dehumanise them and ultimately send them to the slaughter, echoing both the way young men are currently treated and reminds us of the way women have similarly been objectified throughout the history. This is melange of ideas is furthered further thickened by the intrusion of the weird; shapeshifters and magicians and insect technology, all with a SF underpinning but used for the same destabilising purpose. The result is a novel that is overwhelming and by the end there is a sense of exhaustion; for Nyx, for the world, for the reader. The sequel, *Infidel*, was also published this year and opens up the world but is this necessarily a good thing?

Tom Hunter, director of the Clarke Award and BSFA Committee Member Without Portfolio, is fond of saying that the future of SF is hybridity. I’m not entirely convinced by his evangelism but this blending - whether literary fiction with genre as in McIntosh or fantasy with SF as in Hurley - is clearly oxygenating speculative fiction. The US and UK genre publishing pools are big enough to be in no danger of stagnating but a bit more percolation between them would definitely be healthy.

**MARTIN LEWIS**  
EDITOR, THE BSFA REVIEW



**Hardware: The Definitive SF Works of Chris Foss** (Titan Books, 2011)  
Review by Alastair Reynolds



Chris Foss's cover for Harry Harrison's *In Our Hands The Stars*

"That'll never happen." These words were delivered by a geography teacher, examining a paperback of Asimov short stories that I'd foolishly allowed to remain visible on my desk. The focus of his scorn was not the contents of the book, of which he remained ignorant, but the cover, a painting of some daunting megastructure rising above an alien moon. Actually, I'd have readily agreed with him that not only would the depicted situation "never happen" but there was a vanishingly small chance of it having much to do with the stories in the book. This, after all, was a Chris Foss cover. Foss covers seldom related to anything.

It didn't matter. I loved Foss and I still do. The colour, the drama, the vast sense of scale and possibility – his pictures have always delighted me. Liberated from the texts themselves, as they are in this massive retrospective edition, it matters even less. Foss has been prolific, so clearly nothing less than a big book will suffice. I haven't counted but with more than 230 pages, a good number of which are divided into three or four panels, *Hardware* must contain well over 500 illustrations, all – to my eye – well reproduced on good quality paper. Given the proviso that it's almost all machinery and landscapes, the range is impressive. There are, for instance, fifteen paintings just of submarines. There's a two-page spread devoted solely to paintings of things being grabbed by giant robot claws coming out of the sea. Hundreds and

hundreds of spaceships, space stations, bases, asteroids, towering robots and explosions. People crop up here and there but they're not the reason we come to Foss. His most iconic images are largely devoid of the human element. Personal favourites: the marvellous double-spread picture for 'A Torrent of Faces' – Ballardian entropy made manifest, even though it isn't a Ballard book – and the gorgeous single image that was split into three for the Foundation trilogy.

It's such a generous assortment that it seems churlish to quibble but I'd have appreciated an index by book title and I'd be slightly wary of the date attributions: my edition of Harry Harrison's *In Our Hands The Stars*, for instance, with its gorgeous cover of a chequerboard spacecraft rising from a night-lit cityscape, dates from 1981, not the 1986 stated here. There's also little about Foss the man: other than a single small photograph from 1977, there's no image of him (and even in the photo, it's not obvious which one is Foss). I'd have appreciated a sense of the artist in his natural habitat. We're assured that Foss is still active but there's little evidence of that from the images, few of which date from later than the early 90s. Clearly, SF paperback illustration is a very different game than it was in the "golden age" of the Seventies but Foss's work still looks pretty timeless to me. It would be good to see new work but in the meantime this lavish book is a fitting retrospective.

***Everyone's Just So So Special* by Robert Shearman (Big Finish, 2011)**  
 Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite



Robert Shearman returns with his follow-up to his British Fantasy Award-winning collection *Love Songs For The Shy And Cynical* and, once again, he's put together a superb volume of stories. As before, he's adept at combining the outlandishly fantastical with the minutiae of everyday life and relationships but, whereas the main theme of his previous collection was love, here Shearman is broadly concerned

with the relationship between individuals and the grand sweep of history.

Separating the main stories is a chart of dates, a "history of mediocrity, and futility, and human error", to quote its unnamed compiler in one of his asides. The reasons behind this chronicle's existence are revealed only gradually as Shearman depicts a man who has been burnt by life, found that even the history he loved as a child now seems hollow and that he and his family have paid a heavy price. For this narrator, history has become nothing but "memories [and] interpretations"; a similar view is expressed by the protagonist of 'A History of Broken Things', who intersperses recollections of his past with reflections on his mother's decline from dementia, whether history is nothing but our memories and what that means if we forget or are forgotten.

One could take from this the view that individuals are insignificant in the face of history and loss but that's not the impression I gain from *Everyone's Just So So Special* – at least, not entirely. It seems to me that individuals are central to many of these stories, even in some cases warping reality around themselves. For example, 'Coming in to Land' is presented as a flight attendant's address to her passengers, insisting that they have to believe in Paris for it to be there when they land but it's clear by story's end that this is all about the attendant and her ex-lover. In 'This Far, and No Further', time literally stops from the strength of Polly's desire to find her missing daughter – but there are a number of perceptual shifts which poignantly reveal her true state of mind.

Several other pieces in the collection also use a strange situation to illuminate character traits. The story 'Dirt' is a particularly striking example: Duncan Brown is a university lecturer having an affair with a student from another faculty, who calls herself Natasha and is obsessed with Russia (or her mental image of the place), even keeping a bag of Russian soil under her pillow. Natasha's fascination comes across as the rather eccentric fad of a teenager still shaping her own identity; it only takes the

innocent action of Duncan sending her a postcard from Russia to undermine what the country represents to her. But a neat narrative move at the end gives cause to question whether it's Natasha or Duncan who has the more tenuous hold on reality.

One of the hallmarks of *Love Songs For The Shy And Cynical* for me was the way that Shearman often used the fantastic to facilitate equally satisfying literal and metaphorical readings of his stories. We can see a similar approach in some of the tales in the current volume. 'Inkblots', for example, quickly skates over the implausibility of there being such a thing as a "hospital tattooist" to produce a poignant reflection on declaring one's feelings when they might change. Sam's father and terminally-ill mother decide it's time to get tattoos of each other's names and would like Sam to have one with both of their names but he's not keen on the *permanence* of a tattoo. Then Sam's mother doesn't die after all and his parents drift apart; Shearman explores the ramifications of such a development in a situation where a tattoo effectively represents a declaration of undying love. In tandem with this, we see Sam's own unease with the idea of love and commitment, represented by his squeamishness around tattoos.

However, it seems to me that the richest stories in *Everyone's Just So So Special* go beyond straightforwardly metaphorical readings into the deeper heart of fantasy. The protagonist of 'Times Table' literally sheds her skin with each new birthday but the remains hang around as living puppets. The story portrays the protagonist at various stages in her life, from the fourteen-year-old girl taking her teenage insecurities out on the younger self who wasn't the girl she now wishes she could have been to the old, old woman surrounded by the ghosts of her past. To an extent, 'Times Table' is about who we are as people and the changing nature of self but the sheer range that it encompasses makes the story greater than the sum of its parts.

In 'Restoration', a figure known only as "the Curator" has conquered the universe and each year of history is now a mural in his vast gallery. Andy gets a job at the gallery and is particularly taken with both 1574 and his boss, Miriam (that's the name she takes, anyway; she's forgotten her own). And Miriam is not the only forgetful one, as Andy too sometimes finds her slipping from his memory, but a new directive from the Curator forces the two of them to take drastic action. 'Restoration' is a slice of beautiful strangeness that works by remaining focused on the characters at its heart; even when the world we know has been utterly swept away, we can recognise the people.

So who actually *is* special, in the face of all that was, is, or might be? Perhaps the story 'Acronyms' offers a clue in its portraits of interlocking (though separate) lives, beginning with a café-owner who makes the finest BLT sandwich and heading towards an outlandish tale of spying. Everyone is special in their own stories, but those stories may be only tangential to each other. Shearman's collection, however, certainly is special.



***The Habitation of the Blessed* by Catherynne M Valente (Night Shade Books, 2010)**  
 Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Anything by Catherynne Valente is deliciously fractal: all her stories are made of stories. *The Habitation of the Blessed*, which begins the extrapolation of the legend of Prester John into a full-blown fantasy trilogy, is no exception. In 1699, the monkish framing narrator, Hiob von Luzern, encounters in the Himalayas a tree that grows books as fruit. Salvaging three volumes, he sets about transcribing them before they decay, such that in alternating chapters we are presented with John's tale of his journey, several hundred years earlier, to the kingdom of Pentexore; with reflections on their life together by his later wife Hagia; and with nursery-tales told to royal Pentexore children by their handmaid Imtithal. (Stories within stories within stories.) This conceit doesn't work perfectly - at times we can tell there's only one book here; John and Hagia's narratives overlap less than independently told volumes would do - but the occasional returns to 1699, in which Hiob edges towards religious crisis and despair and pages moulder faster than their contents can be recorded, lend the proceedings a welcome urgency.

Pentexore itself is delightful and wondrous, home to a multitude of immortal intelligent races, some animal (cranes, lions), some animal-mythological (gryphons) and some humanoid-mythological. Hagia, for instance, is a blemmye, with no head and a face in her chest; Imtithal is a panoti, with ears so large they can wrap around her like a cocoon. There are also amyctryae, with huge jutting mouths, tensevetes, made of ice, cametanna with huge hands, and many more, some pre-existing, some invented by Valente. There is great joy to be found in this profusion of intelligences and the variety of cultures and practices and mythologies that goes with it but the seeds of great sorrow as well, in the contrast with John's dogmatic Christian belief in a single true story of the creation of the world.

Valente's manoeuvre here is quite clever. When Hiob muses on Hagia as an "alien storyteller", we might think that she is but while John's narrative is certainly one of first contact, more and more it comes to seem that it's John and Hiob who are most deeply alien to us, rendered so by time, and that we might feel more kinship with the pluralistic tolerance of the Pentexoreans. The extent to which Hagia and Imtithal are alien to us, in fact, is largely the extent to which they embody their principles more purely than any extant society; as Hagia insists, "an infinity of time crafts a much different soul than a few anxious years", one more given to charity, and love, and more averse to causing harm that will be remembered forever. And it's Hagia, who loves John, who sees the threat to this utopian psychology, which remains to be unpacked over the next two volumes. "I am happy for you, that you have found a way to fit us into your story," she tells John, late on. "But you do not fit into ours and I fear what you will do when you discover that."

***Ventriloquism* by Catherynne M Valente (PS Publishing, 2010)**  
 Reviewed by Nic Clarke

A collection of short fiction from Catherynne M Valente is overdue, both for my impatient fangirl-collector heart and - to judge by the contents page of this beautifully put together PS Publishing volume - in terms of Valente's prolific output too. *Ventriloquism* packs in no fewer than 32 stories from the first six years of her career and, while none are particularly long, they are dense: tonally and stylistically.

Valente packs a lot into a sentence; Hansel and Gretel reimagining 'Bones Like Black Sugar' was my introduction to her baroque impressionist prose, with its lyrically incongruous phrasings ("my steps grin on the pine needles") and ornate descriptions, resonant with the narrator's emotions (the dead witch's body is "frozen in the grace of a ruined arch, the skeleton of an angel consumed, [...] ribs descending black as treble scales, femurs like cathedral columns dripping with honey-gold"). Such is the richness that reading too many of these tales in one sitting does threaten narrative indigestion and sometimes - 'City of Blind Delight' or 'Proverbs of Hell', for example - the piles of interesting adjectives cannot overcome a certain inertia in the telling.

But the collection does also show how much Valente has experimented with style and structure over the years. Her love of allusive language is more or less a constant, with the odd exception (like the stripped-down, Kelly Link-esque 'The Days of Flaming Motorcycles'). Tonally, though, the intense interiority of the early works - like the sensual, rhythmic *Gilgamesh*-between-the-lines 'The Psalm of the Second Body' or the hypnotic, cyclical rusalka tale 'Urchins, While Swimming' - has been increasingly replaced by a more arch, detached mode. Both 'A Buyer's Guide to Maps of Antarctica' and 'The Radiant Car Thy Sparrows Drew' use a found footage style, offering snapshots of story at a remove, sketching context through telling details rather than lengthy description and inviting the reader to imagine what fantastical elements lie in the narrative gaps. 'Buyer's Guide' tells the tale of a bitter feud between two explorers through an auction house catalogue's description of some deeply unusual maps, while the steampunk 'Radiant Car' does the same thing with intriguing fragments of documentary film. 'Golubash (Wine-War-Blood-Elegy)' is told in a similar way but the story - a brief history of human expansion to the stars as expressed in vineyard rivalry - is a much less comfortable fit for the structure. The decadence of tasting warfare through really expensive wine is a nice idea but the narration falls into the As You Know, Bob trap once or twice too often, lacking the dry wit and lightness of touch that makes both 'Buyer's Guide' and 'Radiant Car' such delightful reads.

Valente's willingness to vary the palette is welcome and gives the collection a level of interest that goes beyond the individual stories on offer: a sense of her increasing maturity, adventurousness and - something I didn't really expect when I first became an admirer - playfulness as a writer. Here's to the next six years.



***The Immersion Book of Steampunk*, edited by  
Gareth D. Jones and Carmelo Rafala  
(Immersion Press, 2011)  
Reviewed by Glyn Morgan**

I haven't seen Paul WS Anderson's version of *Three Musketeers* yet (and I doubt I shall be rushing out to remedy this situation) but his new film adaptation seems noteworthy for its use of a steampunk influenced aesthetic. There is something of a steampunk boom going on around us with the colouring of Alexander Dumas's classic being but one symptom; a significant quantity of dedicated blogs, costumes and accessories, novels, graphic novels, short stories and other re-imaginings have emerged in recent years. New to the fray is *The Immersion Book of Steampunk*, edited by Gareth D. Jones and Carmelo Rafala and with a great cover illustration from Charles Harbour. The thirteen stories vary greatly in length and the longest - Lavie Tidhar's reprinted transcendental novelette 'Leaves of Glass' – is the best. The story features American poet Walt Whitman being propelled into a dream-like otherworld where he encounters poets both contemporary, such as a sword carrying Lewis Carroll, and those not yet born, such as Dylan Thomas and Allen Ginsberg. With so many poetic voices in the story, the onus is on the author to provide a piece which is suitably lyrical and mysterious and thankfully Tidhar succeeds in this admirably. Equally enjoyable is the extremely slight 'Kulturkampf' by Anatoly Belilovsky which casts Wagner as a conquering general, duelling rival armies through the playing of orchestral symphonies and operas.

Other highlights include the opening story, 'Follow That Cathedral' by Gareth Owens, a classically steampunk tale which not only has an eyebrow raising title but begins with a spot of zeppelin diving. Gord Sellar spins a tale about whether intelligent machines have rights around a Sherlock Holmes and Watson-style pair of visitors to China in 'The Clockworks of Hanyang' whilst Aliette de Bodard's 'Memories In Bronze, Feathers, And Blood' forgoes the seemingly obligatory Victorian chic by being set amongst the Aztecs. Tanith Lee adds a turn-of-the-century twist to the tale of Cinderella in her greatly enjoyable but very short 'Empire of Glass.'

Unfortunately, my experience of the steampunk movement is that the quality of the fiction can be very uneven. This carries over to a certain extent in *The Immersion Book* where, although none of them are actually bad, some are less convincingly steampunk than others. The problem with aesthetically charged -punk movements is that their aesthetics can often be bolted on in an unconvincing manner. By simply adding mirrorshades or a zeppelin to an otherwise conventional story you create a cyber or steampunk story but the most convincing tales are those which *require* the presence of such accessories. If a steampunk story can survive as a story with all of the steam and punk stripped out of it then I question why it needed to be steampunk at all. There are no stories in *The Immersion Book* which fail on such a massive level; there are, however, examples of stories which left me slightly less than convinced by their punkish attire. As a whole though, the collection is a stylish and interesting assembly of tales from authors who may normally live in the shadows cast by the zeppelins of more instantly recognisable heralds of the subgenre but here are given a chance to showcase their talents and do so in fine fashion.

***Solaris Rising: The New Solaris Book of Science Fiction*, edited by Ian Whates  
(Solaris, 2011)  
Reviewed by David Towsey**

Before a reader even opens this anthology, they could be forgiven for feeling excited and perhaps a little in awe. After all, the authors listed on the front cover are household names - or will be to anyone reading this review. *Solaris* has a pedigree for SF anthologies and the revival of this series can only be a good thing for the genre as a whole. Such anticipation can only lead, in classic dramatic form, to disappointment.

It seems to me that science fiction short stories are in a perpetual balancing act between concept and empathy. In *Solaris Rising*, the stories that stuck with me, that kept coming back to me in the more mundane moments in life, were those that gave greater emphasis to the emotions. For example, Jack Skillingstead's 'Steel Lake' describes the horror of re-living your past mistakes in a kind of waking-dream state; this had me imagining old romances and dangerous scrapes I'd rather forget. Unfortunately, these vivid and effecting pieces were outnumbered by more concept-driven stories such as Lavie Tidhar's 'The Lives And Deaths Of Che Guevara' and Adam Roberts's 'Shall I Tell You The Problem With Time Travel?' which were initially interesting but soon forgotten.

Perhaps due to the high density of idea-led fiction in *Solaris Rising*, there is also a tendency towards exposition. 'Rock Day' by Stephen Baxter is the well-worn tale of an amnesiac protagonist in a post-apocalyptic, empty landscape and the final sections are so encumbered with awkward explanation, it is difficult to generate any enthusiasm for the situation or characters. Similarly, Stephen Palmer's 'Eluna' closes with an information-laden showdown that fails to satisfy.

In his brief introduction, Ian Whates outlines this as an anthology of diversity. As such, *Solaris Rising* can only be commended for showing the great variety of material that is still produced within the slippery generic term science fiction. Colony planets rub shoulders with evolutionary social networks; hallucinatory drugs are taken alongside self-consciously triffid-esque aliens. However, jumping from one story to the next, there is a growing sense of familiarity. Some pieces, such as 'The Incredible Exploding Man' by Dave Hutchinson, wilfully play with genre tropes. Others, like 'Mooncakes' by Mike Resnick and Laurie Tom, attempt new spins on old favourites. This tells the story of a captain whose anxieties range from the personal to the cultural in the last days before take-off. This is old news, although the de-centring of these cultural worries to a Chinese framework is an interesting twist. Still, as with many of the stories in *Solaris Rising*, this attempt to re-invent an old premise falls short of producing an original and successful piece.

There are readers who will enjoy the familiarity of these easily identifiable characters, situations and dilemmas but moments of surprise are few and far between. This, combined with the liberal use of exposition, left this reviewer deflated. Not even Peter F. Hamilton's self-reflexive, humorous 'Return of the Mutant Worms' could pick me up. *Solaris Rising* shows that variety is laudable but cannot sustain an entire anthology by itself.

***Escape Velocity: The Anthology*, edited by  
Geoff Nelder and Robert Blevins  
(Adventure Books, 2011)  
Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts**

*Escape Velocity* was a short-lived sf fact/fiction magazine, which ran to just four issues up to 2009. This anthology collects the best of the fiction from that magazine, along with a number of stories that the publishers had been unable to publish before the magazine folded. This is a substantial collection with 48 stories, a poem and a cartoon all packed into 350 pages so the stories are necessarily short with the longest only running to 15 pages. For the most part, they are tales with a slight twist or some sort of revelation at the end, although this is too often signalled long before that point, and tend to have something of a slightly old-fashioned feel. They are generally engaging, frequently entertaining, rarely challenging, and, far too often, almost instantly forgettable. This is by no means the case with all the stories. Ian Whates's 'Royal Flush' starts apparently narrated by a paranoid psychopath but proves to be something far more complex and absorbing. Duane Byers's 'The Zozoian' is a short but effective aliens-amongst-us story and Jaine Fenn's 'The Prettiest Star' has a certain poignancy as the last surviving member of an orbiting space crew prepares for her last moments. These are alongside decent contributions from Ben Cheetham, Rebecca Latyntseva and others.

A couple of the longer stories are written by the editors themselves. Geoff Nelder's 'Auditory Crescendo' is the story of a man whose hearing problems are operated on by the authorities, leaving him with hyper-sensitive hearing. The way the government then puts him to use turns this into an unexceptional cold war story. Robert Blevins contributes 'Hole Card', a short tale of a prisoner who is not quite what he seems, with a not unexpected twist. Blevins's longer story, 'Whisper in the Void', is by far the strongest of the three contributions from the editors. Two astronauts stranded on a desolate planet struggle with one another and the barren environment as they try to set up signalling equipment. While the relationship elements could have been stronger, it does build to a genuinely horrific resolution. These three stories do represent the anthology as a whole reasonably well and betray a taste for a particular type of story that crops up time and again.

The main problem with this anthology is that there are just too many stories that do not really come up to standard. Given the sheer volume of stories, the better ones are simply not as plentiful as they should be. A little judicious editing and dropping a number of the stories could have changed a fairly run-of-the-mill collection into something much more interesting. The Adventure Books website indicates that they are no longer publishing science fiction in order to focus on true-life adventures. This, along with the fact that the magazine is no longer a going concern, suggests that *Escape Velocity* was at least partially an exercise in clearing the decks of their publishable sf submissions.

***Crash Day* by Jack Mangan and *The Legend of False Dreaming* by Toiya Kristen Finley  
(Pendragon Press, 2011)  
Reviewed by Penny Hill**

When you hear that something is a chapbook from a small press, you expect to receive something that looks like a professional publication. Well, maybe Pendragon are a very small press indeed. The review proofs of these two chapbooks took the form of two small stapled booklets, with ragged edges, looking more like fanzines than professional works. I suspect that the copy-editing was also not yet complete. One example was the repeated courtroom scene in *Crash Day* where we are told two different numbers of critical injuries and deaths.

*The Legend of False Dreaming* is the shorter of the two with a drab and foggy tone throughout. It was slightly futuristic with a horror motif but no clear sense of story. It felt more like a mood piece; this might have been effective as part of a collection or anthology but felt too slight to stand alone. Its theme – the loss of the American Industrial Dream – was handled more effectively and concisely by Billy Joel in the Eighties hit 'Allen Town'.

*Crash Day* is crisper but the additional length and focus only shows the paucity of the core idea. It did contain one small good idea – that even if we automated traffic and cut delays down to seconds, people would still be impatient – but this single glimmer is not enough to sustain a 56 page story even in conjunction with a somewhat contrived car chase.

The setting is an archaic IT department, responsible for managing the automated traffic systems. Victor is the new recruit and we see the narrative from his tight third person viewpoint as he learns the setup and deduces the approaching plot events. As a female business analyst, I found the IT setup and characters to be creakingly old-fashioned. Maybe there are still pockets of the industry that are as male-dominated as this, where women are treated like aliens whose key value is whether or not the men find them attractive, but I haven't seen any like this recently. Quite frankly this setting casts some doubt on the idea that the author is quite as hip as he claims in his author bio. I'm not sure unquestioningly depicting early 20<sup>th</sup> Century views on gender stereotypes entitles you to claim you "shake up perception & promote independent thinking".

I found the narrative tic of presenting us with the end result and then flashing-back to be somewhat hackneyed. It removed tension by telling us on the first page that Victor will survive. This means that there is no real sense of jeopardy for him during the aforementioned car chase. Victor's key aim here is to save Heather, his beautiful but unapproachable Department Manager, from the rush hour traffic, before the traffic guidance software crashes and causes major accidents. I was thrown out of the story at this point because once Victor has reached her, there is no very good reason for the car chase to continue. They would have been safer if they had just stopped and parked.

Overall these chapbooks were both very disappointing. I wouldn't recommend buying them to find out if you like these authors. I would like to think that anyone who is serious about being a professional author would have produced better work than this.



**Rule 34 by Charles Stross****(Orbit, 2011)****Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven**

You've been reading *Rule 34* by Charles Stross, and as a result your internal monologue has shifted into the second person present tense. On balance, this is a good indicator of how well Stross has got to grips with this difficult narrative mode because - as disconcerting as the experience is once you stop reading and try to go about your normal routine - the time you spent subsumed by the book's pantheon of viewpoint characters flew by remarkably fast.

You remember Detective Inspector Liz Kavanaugh from *Rule 34*'s predecessor, *Halting State*; a decade after helping mop up a very messy breaching of the borders between meatspace and the synthetic worlds of the intertubes, she's found her career sidelined by the office politics of the (post)modern police force, which remind you of your own experiences in hierarchical organisations, as well as those of your friends. DI Kavanaugh's prime responsibility is the overseeing of the eponymous "Rule 34 Squad": a retrofitted outbuilding containing a clade of geekish deskmonkeys who keep an eye on the bizarre horrors that bubble up from the roiling fleshpots of the digital domain. It's not all LOLcats, Polish pr0n bootlegs and dubstep mashups of celebrity chef *non sequiturs* though; in a world where 3D printing has become a garage industry, the troll hordes of tomorrow have ways of making their imaginings take dangerously solid form. However, it isn't a rogue meme-made-concrete that initially shakes Liz out of her career-slump ennui, but the bizarrely-staged murder of a former spam-king.

Anwar Husseini, meanwhile, is a bundle of contradictions spilling messily over the edges of the boxes that society wants to file him in: a Muslim man with a taste for Deuchars IPA and a propensity for graft and grey-hat employment that saw him spend a stretch in prison, courtesy of a certain DI Kavanaugh; a happily married father-of-two who also seeks the forbidden consolations of Edinburgh's "pink triangle" gay scene; an earnest (if not too bright) guy trying to do the right thing in a world where the wrong things are far more lucrative, not to mention more easily accessed. He's trying to keep his nose clean while he works out his probation in a precarious job market, so the offer of a part-time gig as honorary consul to the embassy of a newly hived-off independent republic of Somethingistan is tempting enough for him to avoid asking too many questions. Your own sense of the too-good-to-be-true is apparently more finely tuned than Anwar's but, even so, you're impressed at just how deeply into the shit he manages to get without Stross once resorting to egregious moments of Idiot Plot.

The Toymaker is a dangerous character (both within the context of the story and without); a schizoid freelance CEO trained by a black-hat venture capitalism fund and deployed to downsize and reboot the Scotland branch of "The Operation", which consists of browbeating local small-time crims into illegally fabbing and distributing black-market nasties of every stripe, from bootleg household gimcracks to the sort of sexual lifestyle accessory that would make contemporary tabloid scares about internet smut look endearingly naive and puritanical by comparison. (You're reminded of the theories of Joel Bakan who, in his book *The Corporation*, suggested that the behaviour of large corporations would be considered psychopathic if exhibited by individual human beings; The Toymaker and

The Operation personify and concretise that metaphor, respectively.)

*Rule 34* spends a lot less time inhabiting virtual spaces than *Halting State*. Abandoning the immersive MMORPG as dominant technological paradigm, Stross goes to town instead with augmented reality, a sort of hybrid of virtual reality and the canonical everyday of meatspace: reality overlaid with data, delivered by way of eyewear loaded with locative technologies and wireless bandwidth up the wazoo. AR is not the only blogospheric buzzthing in *Rule 34*, however; along the way you've also encountered post-national financial entities, "choice architecture", morality prosthetics and the (seemingly oxymoronic) concept of libertarian paternalism, not to mention the more familiar and tangible next-big-things like drone sousveillance, 3D printing, ubicomp, everywhere and hell knows what else. These cutting-edge postulations sit alongside the sort of grab-bag WTF oddities that anyone who reads BoingBoing (or who drinks from any of the other online firehoses of geek culture) will recognise as readily as you did. You recall Stross's intent, publicly stated back in the mid-Noughties, to "pitch for the SlashDot generation" and - despite SlashDot's diminishing voice among the expanded geek bloc - you can't help but feel he's pretty much nailed it. *Rule 34* is fast, darkly funny and has the smell of Zeitgeist on its breath; you also suspect that if there's any writer in UK sf right now whose work could find a home in the bag (or ereader) of the hypothetically average mainstream thrillers'n'mysteries reader who "doesn't really like sci-fi", then Stross is probably it.

And that's taking the unusual style into account. You've read many jeremiads against the second person as a high-friction narrative mode and wonder whether Stross's success with the form is due only to his dogged persistence and characteristic desire to fly in the face of conventional wisdom or to some additional fundamental change in the modern sense of identity. (The answer, you assume, rests somewhere in the phase space between those two possibilities.) The second person mode reflects the dissociated sense of self provided by networked virtual worlds and there's an argument to be made that anyone who spends a considerable time in (or is it on?) the metamilieu of the internet - right in Stross's crosshairs, in other words - might be more attuned to the experience of projecting their identity into the immediate experience of another, while still retaining sufficient sense of self to understand and appreciate said experience as narrative and puzzle-quest at once.

You know that this is an untestable and navel-gazey kind of theory but that's never stopped you before. Indeed, as time goes by you feel that "unresolved fragments of your untidy life are sliding towards an uncertain resolution" which is as neat a description as you could write of the vibe toward the end of *Rule 34*, as numerous threads entangle their way to the denouement. Its wiry hybrid vigour belies the care lavished on its construction, while its deadpan gallows humour leavens the socioeconomic meathooks of its imagined future. You suspect it's the best novel Stross has written so far.

***Equations of Life* by Simon Morden  
(Orbit, 2011)  
Reviewed by CB Harvey**

As science fiction novelist probably couldn't ask for more than to be absolutely topical. Simon Morden's *Equations of Life* posits a world in which the entirety of Japan has been evaporated. The multiple, heart-rending horrors perpetrated by the real-life earthquake and tsunami on the island nation in March 2011 fell short of that apocalyptic outcome but consequently afford the novel a terrible piquancy which might otherwise have eluded it.

That the real world Japan narrowly avoided nuclear catastrophe also fits with the post-nuclear context of the book, although in the book this is the result of terrorist activity rather than the caprice of the natural world.

Our anti-hero Samuil Petrovitch is, much like the novel itself, a curious mixture. A Russian national who escaped the nuclear fallout in St Petersburg, Petrovitch is part criminal, part genius physicist and full-time cynic with a smart line in Slavic cursing. He also, crucially, possesses a weak heart that could give out at any point, making him a much more fallible protagonist than this kind of action-driven plot would ordinarily allow. Petrovitch now ekes a life in a darker but still familiar London in which portions of the capital have been turned into makeshift accommodation for sections of the city's bulging populace and where extremes of deprivation co-exist with – for the most part at least – plausible technological advances. When he spontaneously intervenes to save the life of a Japanese gangster's daughter, he finds himself drawn into a turf war between the Yakuza and Russian mafia. Despite Petrovitch's best efforts to extricate himself – even down to running away, a cowardly but refreshingly logical course of action for a protagonist to take – he quickly becomes implicated in an altogether grander plan involving the resurrection of the lost Japanese state.

Along the way Petrovitch encounters an abundance of characters whose traits come close to rivalling his own in their idiosyncrasy, giving the narrative a very distinctive flavour. There's fellow genius physicist Pif working on a formula for quantum gravity; gun-toting, smart-mouthed giantess nun Madeline, Petrovitch's unusual love interest; Inspector Chain, the irascible policeman investigating the case; Oshicora, cultured Yakuza supremo and his daughter Sonja, whose amorous intentions for Petrovitch are not reciprocated; and American computer whizz Sorenson, whose role in events might just prove pivotal.

*Equations of Life* features some deft description, beguiling characterisation and some leftfield science fiction ideas. In the initial stages of the book Morden works hard at giving us a believable context for his coterie of oddballs to inhabit, one that has an appealingly noirish quality to it. It's perhaps a shame that he eschews this carefully constructed reality in the latter stages of the novel for something which, while epic, feels like a poor fit for what's gone before. But then he wouldn't be the first writer to sell us a car that subsequently turns out to be two vehicles spliced together. If you don't mind a bumpy ride then *Equations of Life* is definitely a quirky journey worth taking.

***Germline* by TC McCarthy  
(Orbit, 2011)  
Reviewed by Stuart Carter**

Has there been a sudden glut of books featuring journalists as science fictional anti-heroes or is it just coincidence that my last two review assignments have featured them? Coincidence or not, the similarities snowball further in that both Dan Abnett's *Embedded* and my latest assignment, TC McCarthy's *Germline*, are well written, gritty and excellent reads. So I'm not complaining.

*Germline* follows the career of journalist Oscar Wendell after he inexplicably lands the gig of a lifetime reporting from the frontline for *Stars And Stripes* magazine. The frontline in this case is mostly deep underground in the caverns and mineshafts beneath Kazakhstan. Wendell joins the soldiers there who are fighting for possession of the country's deposits of rare earth elements that are so vital in the production of modern technology - technologies such as mobile phones and computers. However, it soon becomes apparent that Wendell is not the best man for this sought-after but dangerous and dirty job. Already struggling with a drug problem from back home, Wendell finds the tunnels of Kaz terrifying, senseless and claustrophobic enough to drive anyone to drugs, let alone a washed-up reporter already addicted to them...

The first half of *Germline* passes in a bizarre haze that alternates between absurdity and atrocity as Wendell discovers the realities of a future war that, despite being fought with some occasionally cool high-tech weaponry and gadgets, is far from "cool"; war, it seems, will always be hell.

The "germline" of the title refers to the genetically enhanced super-soldiers that both sides have begun using in the war and this is, unfortunately, the least successful part of the novel. It's a mystery why the novel is called *Germline* as the "genetics" play a relatively small part in it. A better title might have been *Apocalypse Underground* because *Germline* resembles nothing less than a future subterranean version of Francis Ford Coppola's classic movie, stuffed to the gills with drugs, horror and crazy military shit.

In fact, the drugs, horror and crazy shit make this a difficult book to wade through at times and it's a testament to the visceral quality of McCarthy's writing that at no point does this become a slog. Wendell begins the book all messed-up with no redeeming characteristics and mostly he stays that way. As the war drags on, you realise that you can't help sympathising with the plight the poor bastard finds himself trapped in. Sure, he's a bastard, but the war - fought solely for the resources needed to make our little technological luxuries (an iWar, you might call it) - is so crushingly awful it doesn't matter how much of a bastard Wendell is, you wouldn't wish his experiences upon your worst enemy. It's a neat trick to pull off – generating sympathy for someone like Wendell. You may not like him but you will find yourself rooting for him by the end of this harsh but rewarding experience.



***The Map of Time* by Félix J Palma  
(HarperCollins, 2011)  
Reviewed by Gary Dalkin**

In his first novel to be translated into English, Spanish novelist Félix J Palma explores the literary legacy of HG Wells and *The Time Machine*. Like many a Victorian novel, *The Map of Time* is in three parts and characters who take a central role in one part may feature in the background in the other two. Wells himself takes major supporting parts in the first two sections before stepping centre stage for the final act.

In the first part, wealthy Andrew Harrington still mourns the death of his prostitute lover at the hands of 'Jack The Ripper' eight years before. He is on the verge of suicide but his cousin, inspired by the recently established company Murray's Time Travel, has other ideas. In the second part, Claire Haggerty, a privileged young woman out of sorts with her time, plans to escape back to the future to become the companion of the brave Captain Shackleton, heroic leader of the future war against the robots. Can HG Wells facilitate a romance across time? Of the third part, the less said, the less spoilt. Suffice to say, that Wells becomes profoundly involved in some very strange business indeed.

Palma clearly knows his material and *The Map of Time* can be considered a loving homage not only to Wells but to British Victorian fantastical and Gothic fiction as well as time travel stories in general. Joseph Merrick (AKA The Elephant Man) makes a guest appearance as do Henry James (who Wells did know in real life) and Bram Stoker (who Wells did not). 50 Berkeley Square, by repute the most haunted house in London, even serves as a setting. Palma plays fair by what we know about Wells's life while deftly incorporating a veritable alternative history of time travel fiction (we get clear nods to *Time After Time*, *The Terminator* and *The Time Traveller's Wife* along the way).

It is an ingeniously plotted novel but Palma struggles to make us care about his characters. This lengthy book also takes a long time to get going, so much so it might have been better if the first two parts had been interwoven. The writing itself is uneven; a chapter spent with Joseph Merrick contains far better prose than the rest of the novel, while some passages are simply clunky. Whether this is an accurate reflection of the Spanish original or the result of an inadequate translation I cannot say. There are also infelicities which should have been picked up in the editing. For example, Palma makes several references to Wells writing "science fiction" in the 1890s even though (as the book itself eventually acknowledges) the genre did not gain this name until the Twenties.

Criticisms aside, for those who grew up with the great heritage of the British fantastic, *The Map of Time* is an unmissable treat, the minor failings of which are easy to forgive for the manifold pleasures offered. Others may not have the patience to make it through the 500 large pages but this is a book in love with the very heart of the genre.

***The Company Man* by Robert Jackson Bennett  
(Orbit, 2010)  
Reviewed by Anne F Wilson**

*The Company Man* is a science fiction novel. I thought I'd mention that up front, as the packaging is ambiguous: the front cover shows a man with his face in shadows, a smoking gun, a cigar and a fedora. So far, so noir. The blurb on the back, however, implies that it's a horror novel. Then I started to read and there were airships. Clearly this is some sort of new steampunk-noir-horror genre.

We are at the start of an alternate Twenties where science has been advanced by the surprising inventions of the McNaughton Corporation, the eponymous Company. The world of the airship-riding rich is immeasurably improved by these inventions; the world of the workers who toil in the factories, not so much. Cyril Hayes is an investigator for the Company, endowed with a limited and problematic form of telepathy which he copes with through drink and opium. He is called in by his contact in the police, Garvey, to help investigate the murders of a number of union men. For the task Hayes is assigned a new secretary, Samantha: part assistant, part nursemaid, part spy. Then eleven (unionised) workers on a trolley car are stabbed to death in an impossibly short time. The Company needs Hayes to clear its name but he keeps digging and starts to find out too much.

The novel isn't badly written but I do have problems with the imagery. The author makes a committed attempt to use language as a tool to describe what he sees in his imagination but unfortunately he uses images that don't really work. "The Nail rose in the distance, dwarfing the other buildings...Its ash grey shaft stabbed into the sky, windows lining its castellations." So it's a sort of skyscraper but with battlements? "At the top its jade steeple glittered with promise. They called it the Nail because to many it looked like one, with a fat head and a long sharp tooth." How can it have a steeple *and* a fat head? And the prose goes on like this. I continually felt as though I was reading through blurred glasses.

There's also something a bit unfocused about the three main characters. Both Hayes and Samantha are supposed to be British but don't use British phrasing. Garvey is introduced in the opening scene but we are told nothing about him except that he is big with thick, boxer's hands and keeps the makings of cigarettes on him. Later he turns out to have a boyish charm but it's not quite enough to bring the character to life.

So the author is trying to write noirish steampunk-flavoured SF but I think he just misses the target. On about page 25 (when the mysterious origins of the Company's inventions are discussed) I started wondering when the aliens were going to turn up. The novel is 454 pages long and for much of it the heroes run around investigating corporate skullduggery which is only tangentially relevant to the plot. Noir is short and snappy. You wouldn't catch Raymond Chandler noodling about for 400-odd pages before he got to the crunch.

**Heaven's Shadow** by David S. Goyer and Michael Cassutt (Tor UK, 2011)  
Reviewed by Graham Andrews

**H**eaven's Gate – sorry, *Heaven's Shadow* – can best be described as a 'scriptment' (a useful term I picked up from reading *The Greatest Sci-Fi Movies Never Made* by David Hughes). David S. Goyer wrote *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* and Michael Cassutt worked on *Stargate SG1* and the second version of *The Outer Limits*. They have now combined forces to make this hybrid script-treatment 'trailer' for an iffy skiffy film that might be in pre-production even as I write. With two more volumes the size of a navvy's sandwich to come, it could end up as the longest and most self-destructive spoiler in the history of cinema.

The main story takes place in 2016. Three years before, two amateur astronomers in Africa detected a huge Near Earth Object that unobservant professionals and defective space-based telescopes had missed. Co-discoverer Colin Edgely suggested naming NEO X2016 K1 'Jurdu' – from an Aboriginal word for 'Big Sister' – but that would have been just plain silly, Col! No, it made more sense to call it 'Keanu' after the greatest actor-scientist of all time (it'll be interesting to see if the Man Himself goes along with the gag). NASA sends two manned probes (*Destiny-7* and *Venture*), which are soon in a space race with the rival Russian/Indian/Brazilian probe *Brahma*. I could tell you the rest of the plot but then I'd have to kill myself.

If there's one thing I dislike more than trilogies in general, it is trilogies kitted out with a list of DRAMATIS PERSONAE. They smack too much for me of those old movie serials that proudly billed THE PLAYERS. Brian Aldiss trusted readers to pick up on who-was-who-and-did-what in his extensively re-complicated *Helliconia* saga. Does anyone with fully-functional brain cells really need to be told in advance that Zack Stewart is an "astronomer and astronaut, commander of *Destiny-7*"? I should hope not. Heaven may cast a shadow in this novel but the characters certainly don't. They make the Pod People look like Mexican Jumping Beans. The most memorable – if subsidiary – character is Wade Williams, author of "sci-fi novel" *Starship 'Kilroy Was Here'* (1999). I have this surely irrational urge to seek it out on eBay...

The Captain's Log-type notes that head each chapter provide some welcome light relief. For example: "*Big Dumb Object*: n, from science fiction, a term originated by Roz Kaveney, writing in *Foundation*, the British journal, to describe large, extraterrestrial planetoids, spacecraft or structures. See *Ringworld*, *Dyson Sphere*, etc. *The Scifipedia*, accessed Aug. 2019." In my admittedly biased Ulsterman opinion, I believe that James White's *All Judgment Fled* (1968) is the best and most cinematic Big Dumb Object novel yet written. It runs to only 140 pages in Corgi paperback against the whopping 416 pages of *Heaven's Shadow* (and that's just the first book of the trilogy). I wish that Goyer and Cassutt had farmed out a one-volume novelization contract to, say, Alan Dean Foster, for some much later release date. But let us all sincerely hope that we won't read about *Heaven's Shadow* in a future edition of *The Greatest Sci-Fi Movies Never Made*.

**Wither** by Lauren DeStefano  
(HarperCollins, 2011)  
Reviewed by Mark Connorton

**W**ither is the first volume of a YA trilogy set in a world where the unforeseen consequences of genetic engineering have led to the current generation dying prematurely – men at the age of 25 and women at 20. This imbalance of the sexes has caused a dystopian society to evolve in which teenage girls are forced into polygamous marriages to ensure they procreate before they die. One such girl is a 16 year old New Yorker, Rhine, who is abducted and, along with two other girls, forced to marry Linden, a wealthy young architect in Florida. Rhine attempts to escape Linden's luxurious mansion, all while avoiding the wrath of Linden's father, who is glimpsed carrying out sinister medical research in the basement. There are echoes of *A Handmaid's Tale*, *Bluebeard* and the HBO polygamy drama *Big Love* in the novel but as this is a YA novel aimed at teenage girls, the main focus is on an insipid love triangle between Rhine, her sensitive but rapey husband and a handsome but personality-free servant.

Whilst admittedly not the target audience for such a book, I found the story fairly laughable and frequently infuriating. As well as being asked to accept the hand-wavey 'genetic manipulation' plot device, we also learn that everywhere apart from North America has been destroyed in a war which not only killed everyone but caused all the other continents to sink beneath the sea (though this had no effect on the climate or sea level in Florida). Rhine thinks this is sad because it means she will never see touristy exotica such as geishas standing under cherry blossom trees, rather than because billions of people have died. This solipsism and misjudgement of tone is carried through the rest of the novel which always fails to live up to its grim premise: Rhine is sold into sexual slavery but never has to have to sex with anyone; she is abducted and imprisoned but the first thing that happens to her is she gets a make-over and the book spends as much time describing her wardrobe, pampering sessions and delicious meals as her feelings of being trapped; she resents the injustice that has befallen her but has no objection to asking her own servant girl (who is also a slave) to run her a bath and rub her feet whenever she feels like it. The book is supposed to be a dystopia but is so toothless that the worse it can imagine is the long, boring summer holiday of a spoiled wealthy teenage girl.

If the book was in any way exciting or compelling then I could possibly forgive this but it limps along with a few plot events (mostly relating to girls other than Rhine having babies or dying) linked by endless padding and descriptions of nice dresses. Even the climax is a let-down, weakly plotted and devoid of tension. The success of indie guitar bands in the last decade led to a glut of generic "landfill indie" and I wonder if the YA boom is now entering its "landfill" phase? In any case, there are plenty of much better YA books out there to read instead of this.



***The End Specialist* by Drew Magary  
(Harper Voyager, 2011)  
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer**

Immortality in science fiction is often a *device* – that is, a way of allowing the reader to follow a long passage of time from a single viewpoint. For instance, in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy the convenient discovery of a life-extending technique allows the same characters to observe the results of the terraforming process and develop the ethical arguments. Here, the discovery of the cure for ageing suggests some of the possible problems of the next century but it is also central to the story as told by one of its early adopters, John Farrell, whose online diaries have been discovered after an event called The Great Correction. Farrell's life covers the sixty years from 2019 when, at the age of 29, he takes the "cure" to 2079 when the problems of having an increasing population of ageless citizens are solved in a dramatic and terrifying way.

The cure stops the ageing process but it is not, technically, immortality. Accident, murder or even heart disease can still carry people off. Nevertheless, once taken, ageing stops at the "cure age" and, even though for many years the cure is only available through black market medical practitioners and is vehemently opposed by the establishment, a population of young achievers who are determined to keep hold of what they have got rockets throughout the developed world. We all know that 'you can't take it with you' but what if you are determined not to go? Farrell's record shows some of the results of such a decision. Although his cure is immediately followed by a dramatic and sinister event – his best friend is killed in a terrorist explosion at the apartment of the doctor who is giving her the cure – what he first sees of life post-cure is generally benign or, at worst, darkly ironic. When time is available to do things, interesting and amusing (if pointless) things can be done. For instance, Farrell meets someone who has decided to spend a year in every country in the world.

But immortality starts to become a burden. The idea of marriage as a contract for life (already crumbling throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) completely dissolves. Children begin to resent their parents' immortality; this is the baby-boomer generation writ large. The forced tattooing of children with their birth date by the Chinese government is only a start. A new industry arises – the "end specialists" who help out people who decide that they have had enough of life. Farrell becomes an end specialist and lives through the appropriation of that (dubious enough) industry by a government increasingly anxious about the implications of more and more people chasing the world's resources. The novel ends with world governments taking what is perhaps the only possible solution to the problem.

Magary ingeniously balances grimness with mordant wit. There are cameos of the blackest humour – such as the mothers who give their babies the cure so that they will, forever, have unconditional love – which suggest that Magary's science-fictional forebear is Jonathan Swift rather than Hugo Gernsback. At its heart is a rather conservative distrust of technological progress and a future convincing in its instability, though we surely must suspect that population pressures would have hit this world with mass starvation long before the end of the century. But *The End Specialist* is hardly meant to be realistic. At least, I hope not.

***The Enterprise of Death* by Jesse Bullington  
(Orbit, 2011)  
Reviewed by Sandra Unerman**

The enterprise of the title is necromancy in its original meaning, magic by communication with the dead as practised in Europe early in the 16th Century. This is portrayed as gruesome and disgusting but highly effective, though its practitioners are outcasts, persecuted by the Inquisition.

The principal character is a young African slave, captured by bandits in Spain with two companions and handed over to an ancient sorcerer. The one who survives his challenges is forced to learn the practice of necromancy, which involves cannibalism and necrophilia. When she is set free, she has ten years to find out how to defeat the necromancer before he takes her over body and soul. She is taken prisoner as a witch by the Inquisition and rescued by Manuel, a soldier and artist from Switzerland. With his help, she finds friendship and love of a sort. More adventures follow until the final confrontation with the sorcerer in the middle of a battle.

At one level, this is a work of historical imagination, portraying post medieval Europe as if some of its folklore were true. It is a world of mercenary soldiers and rampant superstition as well as tyrannical rulers and a corrupt church. Bullington is more interested in what that society would have in common with life today than the differences. The opening tells the story of Boabdil, the last Moorish King of Granada and the sense of a wide sweep of history is maintained through the involvement of historical figures, including Paracelsus, the alchemist and physician, as well as references to the troubles of the Church on the verge of the Reformation and the fighting of mercenary armies in Italy. The story moves around Europe but the settings that are evoked in detail are timeless ones, such a cave in the mountains and the graveyards where a lot of the action takes place.

The novel is full of horrors but it is not a traditional horror story in that it does not involve the reader in the intensity of the characters' fear and loneliness. The tone is detached and humorous and invites us rather to a rattling ride through all sorts of emotions and experiences. The values of the sympathetic characters are 21<sup>st</sup> Century ones, as they struggle to work out their own morality and learn from their experiences. They also argue and explain things to one another in rational terms. The dialogue mixes 16<sup>th</sup> Century terminology and dialect with modern idiom, including a lot of obscenities. This highlights what the characters have in common with their counterparts today but I found it heavy going to read.

The most distinctive aspect of the novel is the narrator's voice; lively, knowing, humorous, perhaps even ruthless towards its characters. It will be enjoyed by fans of Bullington's first novel, *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart*, and by anyone with a taste for medieval horrors not taken seriously.

**Redlaw** by James Lovegrove  
(Solaris, 2011)  
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

“Policing the Damned” it says on the back cover, along with some other stuff that tells you immediately that this book has vampires. And if you haven’t read the back then the disembodied voice that introduces the book kind of gives the game away: “The vehicles of the night – what music they make.” Takes you back to good old Hammer films, doesn’t it?

Except that this isn’t a Hammer film and these vampires aren’t from the aristocratic stock of the old Count. And they definitely aren’t Hollywood sparkly: “Redlaw was the focus of countless crimson, blood-gorged gazes.” These are refugees (bestly, carnivorous refugees, mind you), flooding into Britain from all over Europe because our laws are a bit more lax about that sort of thing than other countries. Even in liberal little Britain steps have been taken to contain the growing problem by penning the undead into ghettos – sorry, Sunless Residential Areas – and creating a special police force to enforce the containment – the Sunless Housing and Disclosure Executive.

To his colleagues, Captain John Redlaw is a living legend; to his foes, he is London’s most feared SHADE officer. He is also rough, tough, and smarting because he recently lost a partner to a rogue nest of Sunless but he’s not bitter (hah). It becomes apparent very quickly that Redlaw is solely interested in justice and will kick anybaddy’s ass that gets in his way, Sunless and human alike. “‘If there’s one thing lower than vampires,’ he said, ‘it’s people who prey on vampires...’” He doesn’t like anybody, really. In fact while the text says “Redlaw”, you’ll find yourself thinking Dirty Harry or Judge Dredd and, like Inspector Callahan and Joe Dredd, when he thinks that Something Bad is going on then even setting him up, taking away his badge and gun and throwing him in lockup won’t stop him.

Once you get over the basic premise that vampires exist and can be regulated if you have the will (and firepower), there are no real surprises in the book. The pages are populated by hard-nosed cops (including a prime specimen of the latest fashion accessory fashion – a female boss!), a boozy priest with a heart of gold, smarmy, corrupt politicians and evil businessmen, all supporting (or more usually locking horns with) our two-fisted, Cindermaker-armed flawed hero.

Stock characters aside, Lovegrove has written a roller-coaster of a book and there’s no complaint from me about the action. It’s a real page-turner, although it seems a little unbalanced at times. The touches of humour in the prologue and the early pages aren’t quite carried forward into the later parts and, as the plot gets increasingly dark, any lightening of the mood actually becomes obtrusive. But in the end, with the aid of an inventive armoury, our hero prevails (not really giving the game away, it’s that kind of book) and some quite broad hints of deeper background scattered through the text point the way to a sequel.

**Can You Survive the Zombie Apocalypse?** by  
Max Brallier (Gallery Books, 2011)  
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

If you are looking for a novel featuring zombies, this book is not for you. It is in fact an interactive ‘choose your own adventure’ book, although its gory and violent content mean that it is most definitely for adult readers only, rather than the younger age groups that such books are usually aimed at. The main character in the book is ‘you,’ the reader. You take on the persona of a twenty-five year old male New Yorker who is sitting in a dreary business meeting when the news comes on TV that Manhattan has been overrun by zombies. From that moment it is up to you to move the storyline forward in whatever direction you choose. Initially you must decide if you are going to try to get out of the city (in which case you must turn to page 205) or barricade yourself into your apartment (by turning to page 22). Then you are faced with decisions about weapons and escape vehicles, whether you will be a hero who tries to help your fellow survivors or whether you will selfishly save yourself at any cost. Your choices will determine whether you do actually survive the zombie apocalypse, are torn limb from limb or become a zombie yourself. Of course, if you do find yourself devouring human flesh, you can simply turn back a few pages and re-think the choice that led to your destruction. According to the blurb, there are one hundred paths you can take through the book, and fifty different endings, and after many readings, I have yet to come across the same ending more than once. Some of the scenarios do seem to be very short, although that may just be the result of my making the wrong choices!

This book certainly succeeds on its own terms and is great fun, never taking itself too seriously. Literature it is not but stylistically it manages to capture brilliantly the fast-paced, gruesome yet inherently humorous tone that fans of classic zombie texts like *Dawn of the Dead* or *Resident Evil* have come to know and love. There are also any number of colourful characters; I particularly liked the samurai-sword-wielding stripper. Some of the characters become your allies, even if it is only to the extent that you get stoned together while the zombie apocalypse rages around you. Others are as much a threat to you as the zombies themselves, for as in all the best apocalypses, guns are freely available to the ordinary citizen. Originality is not one of the book’s strong points but the recognisable situations that you find yourself in are all part of the book’s appeal.

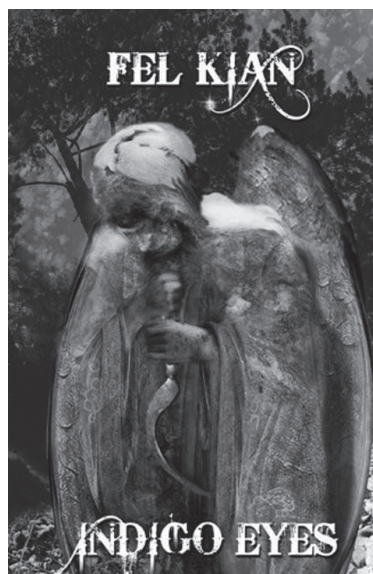
I do have reservations as to who exactly the book is aimed at though. Obviously, the prerequisite for enjoying the book is that you are familiar with the zombie genre! Whether computer-games players, used to slaughtering monsters in 3D, would find its ‘Turn to page...’ formula too mundane or whether readers of horror would want a DIY plot, is questionable. However, if you are not averse to pitting yourself against the undead and are looking for some entertaining escapism, this book will suit.



**Indigo Eyes by Fel Kian and Greyglass by Tanith Lee**

(Immanion Press 2011)

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry



*Indigo Eyes* follows the fortunes of three separate sets of characters. In the main thread, on which the others eventually depend, Lylithe, a powerful faerie, is tracking down seven fallen angels to kill them and extract their life essence, known as *sapphire*. Her purpose isn't revealed until the end of the book, and I didn't find it totally satisfactory. The effect of the *sapphire* – which I won't reveal – is

extraordinary, but there doesn't seem a logical reason why it should have this effect, or any reason why Lylithe should have believed it would, since the process doesn't seem to have been used before. I suspect it might have been developed as an excuse for the vividly described evisceration of several demons.

In another plot thread, Saraquinn, who has faerie blood but has left her own world to marry a mortal man, vanishes without trace on the eve of her son's tenth birthday. Years later, her son Peter is led into the faerie world by Saraquinn's sister Melianne, in an attempt to discover what happened to his mother.

The third thread concerns Adriana, a young girl who is mourning the death of her parents, with whom she had a troubled relationship. She is dragged unwillingly into the faerie world, where she takes on the name of Severina. I confess that at first I found Adriana to be an annoying brat, but her experiences cause her to mature and she becomes, in my view, the book's most successful character, retaining her street-wise flair and humour while becoming resourceful and courageous.

I may not be the target audience for this book, because I prefer darkness in fiction to be subtle and suggestive rather than a full-on gorefest. Still, I found much to enjoy. The structure, the interweaving of the different plot threads, is effective, and the various settings and characters are imaginatively described. However, the prose is less successful.

*Indigo Eyes* is Fel Kian's first novel, and it appears from the information given about him that English is not his first language. He's aiming for a rich and complex style, loaded with simile and metaphor, but his language skills just aren't up to it. The book is riddled with errors: misspellings, use of the wrong word (as if he had run mad with a thesaurus) and grammatical errors such as the use of "cacti" and "brethren" as if these words were singular. The list could go on. Call me a boring, pedantic nitpicker, but I was continually jerked out of the story by

yet another mistake. I can't imagine what the editor at Immanion Press was doing to let the book go out in this state. Kian obviously needs guidance in this area – and he's not to be blamed for that – and the services of a good editor would have made his novel so much better.

It's hardly fair to compare a first-time novelist with an experienced and successful writer like Tanith Lee, but to change from *Indigo Eyes* to *Greyglass* is like coming up for air. Lee's prose is spare and deceptively simple, much of the story rooted in the everyday, yet for me her novel induced shivers where *Indigo Eyes* did not.

Susan, the central character of *Greyglass*, is twelve when we first meet her, reluctantly going with her mother Anne to visit her grandmother in her large, rambling and sinister house. Grandmother is an autocratic old lady, apparently stranded in the past, and intent on exercising control over her daughter and grandchild. Following her death, Susan is freed from the necessity of visiting, and yet, as she grows up, she is again and again drawn back to the house.

Throughout the novel it's unclear – and deliberately so – how much of the uncanny nature of the house is real, and how much is due to Susan's perceptions of it. Does it really change, or does it only appear to do so as Susan matures and sees it differently? How much can be ascribed to the different purposes of the house as it changes ownership over the years?

As Susan grows to adulthood the sinister occurrences intensify, and yet so much is suggestion, speculation, or taking place off-stage. Lee is fully in control of the subtlety of the narrative. As I said above, much of the novel is taken up with Susan's career and her relationships in the real world, particularly with her mother, her mother's appalling man friend, and the two men in Susan's own life. However, the house remains looming in the background, an ever-present threat, and the reader knows very well that sooner or later Susan will have to confront what is there.

I was inveigled into expecting the ghost of Grandmother to manifest herself, but the eventual 'explanation' is much more interesting than that. I won't reveal it for obvious reasons, yet it left me intrigued and wanting more, because although the novel comes to an end, there's a sense that the story will continue. Lee deliberately leaves questions unanswered. If you like open and ambiguous endings – as I do – you will appreciate this; if you prefer loose ends to be tied up neatly, then you might not find the culmination of the novel satisfactory.

*Greyglass* could be considered a young adult novel, particularly as Susan is a child and young adult herself for a good proportion of the book, but it would be wrong to consider it as purely for young adults. A young or inexperienced reader might miss some of the nuances, while there's enough depth for an adult reader to return to the novel for a second reading at least. I enjoyed it tremendously and fully recommend it.

***The Goblin Corps* by Ari Marmell  
(Pyr, 2011)  
Reviewed by Lalith Vipulananthan**

**A**fter spending centuries on a cunning plan for world domination, the Charnel Lord Morthûl is foiled by sorcerer Ananais duMark and his group of meddling heroes. Out of spite Morthûl murders the only daughter of duMark's liege, King Dororam, who in turn assembles all the armies of the Allied Kingdoms in an effort to end the threat of Morthûl once and for all.

Morthûl has no intention of being destroyed by mere mortals and plots a counterstrike that involves forming an elite Demon Squad for a top secret mission. Thus Cræosh the orc, Katim the troll, Belrotha the ogre, Fezeill the doppelganger, Gimmol the gremlin, Gork the kobold and Jhupess the bugbear are thrown together and expected to get along on pain of an extremely torturous death (or merely the prospect of joining the Charnel Lord's legion of undead servants). At any rate, they have other things to worry about, like the historic survival rate for Demon Squads being on the low side and not having a clue about the finer details of the mission. Or, indeed, any of them. If the group can survive for long enough and avoid killing each other then perhaps they'll be the ones who will save the day, albeit for the forces of evil.

Telling a fantasy story from the point of view of the villains is nothing new. Mary Gentle was one of the first almost twenty years ago (*Grunts!*) and more recently Stan Nicholls (the *Orcs* series) and Jim C. Hines (Jig the Goblin) have had a crack. So what does Marmell bring to the table with his effort? Subverted tropes, complex characters and plotting? You wish. What you get is coarse-grained characterisation and relationships predicated on gross racial behaviours, layered with bad slapstick comedy married to a plot ripped out wholesale from a roleplaying quest. That is to say that the Demon Squad go looking for various magical items, during which the big guys (the orc and troll) pick on the small guys (the gremlin and the kobold) whilst the ogre and the bugbear provide comic relief by being really fucking stupid. Some of it is even occasionally amusing:

A keening war cry rose to the uncaring heavens, and it took the startled Cræosh a moment to realize that it had come from the gremlin!

"For King Morthûl! For the Demon Squad!" Gimmol shouted, eyes gleaming with fervor and anticipation – and then, glistening blade a shining beacon above his head, he charged madly in the wrong direction.

"Gremlins," Fezeill observed as the stunned party watched him go, "do not have particularly good night vision"

There is a fair amount of shit-wading to be done to get to those rare moments and there are many more instances of dwarf-kobold/gremlin tossing, insults on a par with 'your Mum' jokes, 'funny' bullying and narrative missteps, deliberate or otherwise. Cræosh uses nicknames such as Nature-boy for Jhupess (because he's simian and lives in

a forest), Dog-breath for Katim (trolls in this world have hyena heads) and Shorty for Gork (because he's...you get the idea). Oh do stop, Mr Marmell, my sides are splitting.

The repetitive nature of the comedy makes reading the book a complete slog, assuming you are able to survive prose that describes a serpent-like creature as moving "with the speed (unsurprisingly) of a striking snake" or a character losing his balance and staggering "sideways in a clumsy dance as his entire center of balance became, well, uncentered". There is a later example of poor narration that is lampshaded as being the fault of the character's exhausted state; fair enough but this would have worked better if Marmell had done it much earlier and, more importantly, knew the difference between a simile and a metaphor. With wordplay chapter titles such as "Elf Care" and "Ogre and Under", the book elicited a binary response of Picard-style facepalms and wanting to punch the author in the face.

If that wasn't bad enough, the pacing is completely broken. It takes 200 pages to find out about the Demon Squad's mission, the aforementioned magical item hunt, carried out on behalf of Morthûl wife, Queen Anne (one would never have guessed that Marmell got his start writing material for *Dungeons & Dragons*). There are some sub-plots added for variety, such as Gimmol's secret talent and the introduction of dark elf Nurien Ebonwind who wants information on troop movements, but they also take so long to play out that they all collapse under the weight of expectation. Once those all wind up, we're onto another secret mission that finishes all too quickly before the epilogue and the shocking, shocking I tell you, twist. In his back cover blurb, James Barclay thinks that having fantasy stereotypes thrown in your face is entertaining and fun. I think he's talking rubbish.

Few and far between they may be, there are occasional glimmers of worth buried in the dross. Genuinely amusing scenes occur from time to time and Marmell's decision to start proceedings after Morthûl's grand defeat is an interesting take on the trope (although, again, this was done first by Gentle). Also in its favour is the fact that the book is a standalone and the cover is gorgeous, even if it won't appeal to fans outside of the genre.

In many ways, I'm surprised that there is still so much shit fantasy published when the genre has been elevated to higher standards. Back in the Nineties, I read far too many *Dragonlance* novels as a teenager and I would probably have lapped up *The Goblin Corps*. In the meantime Joe Abercrombie and Scott Lynch (amongst a good many others) have had fantasy works published that do witty dialogue and black humour a damn sight better and have got fantasy trope subversion down to a fine art. In short, go and read Abercrombie et al instead.



***Echo City* by Tim Lebbon  
(Orbit, 2011)  
Reviewed by Jim Steel**

The city is, of course, one of the big genre themes. Like war, it brings out the best and worst in us. Unlike war, at least for most of us in the West, it is something that we have direct experience of.

*Echo City* starts in spectacular fashion with a monstrous beast shambling out from the city and setting forth across a toxic desert. The poisons slowly kill it and it splits open to birth another creature, this one winged which, when it falls, births another, smaller, creature. It's a remarkably arresting prologue and it takes the novel several chapters to recover this momentum. But it does recover. An amnesiac stranger, Rufus, wanders in from the desert and into a canton that is a prison slum. One of the prisoners, Peer, decides that he is something important and breaks out with him to locate her old underground movement. Her ex-lover has taken up with the Baker, the present representative of a multigenerational series of women who have gene-spliced and chopped people (including themselves) to make the vast variety of creatures that populate Echo City. The Baker claims that it is science but this is a society that arms itself with blade and crossbow and where religion has a strong grip on the masses. It seems like magic to most of them.

Echo City is an unpleasant, vicious place but Lebbon is someone who places great faith in human nature. Most of his characters – certainly all the ones who are on stage for any significant length of time – are graced with humanity. For example, three drug-addicted gang members, hunting victims for subterranean cannibals, are revealed as real, worthwhile people during their few pages of life. Or take Nophel, the rejected bastard of one of the Bakers, who spies on the city with creatures that are little more than giant eyes and at first appears to be the closest to a conventional villain here. Even he is comprehensible and ultimately sympathetic. It is Lebbon's characterisation which, even more than his invention, drives this book.

It turns out that most of the major characters are related to or have had relationships with each other and what we are reading about, on one level, are the events affecting an extended dysfunctional family. Echo City itself is about to face a massive threat from beneath the many dead layers and bubbles that exist under the present-day streets and the characters have to set about exploring their environment in the search for a solution.

There are flaws; it's a large novel and, although everything is used and it all makes for an eventful journey, it does feel as if it could somehow have been compressed without losing anything. On a much smaller scale, the word 'crap' is overused as a swear word - surely the urbanites could be a bit more imaginative. It's as if the novel had YA aspirations at one stage. But the flaws are minor; this is a first-rate novel.

***Sea of Ghosts* by Alan Campbell  
(Tor, 2011)  
Reviewed by Mark Harding**

It's not every day I'd recommend the latest rip-roaring fantasy yarn by pointing to the felicities of the prose. But cop this: "The shopkeeper stood seven feet tall and wore a fantastic turban, a twist of ice-cream silk laced with pearls." Or, at the very height of the action: "A man stood in the doorway, clad from head to foot in metal. Brine burns covered his naked scalp and face. His eyes were as red and wild as those of a berserker dragon."

*Sea Of Ghosts* is rich in texture and depth, romance and horror. It's a world where humans live among the magical artefacts of a greater civilization. There's the glamour of a lost paradise but with the rub that it was a paradise where the humans were slaves. The Unmer civilisation was destroyed in a vicious and treachery-filled war. But the Unmer, some of whom survive as prisoners of the telepathic Haurstaf, have left curses amongst the ruins. Chief of these is the brine: an acidic mutation-forming poison that is gradually drowning the world, a threat ignored by the human rulers because they are too busy playing power politics.

The heroes are Colonel Granger, a battle hardened soldier, on the run from his own emperor and Ianthe, who is struggling to understand the mysterious but awesome psychic powers she possesses. In the hands of a lesser writer these could be stock characters but Campbell brings them to life. Ianthe is every mother's nightmare of a recalcitrant teenager. Granger is admirable for his moral sense, yet he's not above defrauding widows when he has to. He's pig-ugly but gosh he's *smart*. Granger is the worthy hero because he solves the problems he faces faster than the reader can. Yay the nerd!

Characterisation is one of Campbell's great strengths. What a delight to have an evil genius who is demonstrably a genius (and simultaneously vile and admirable). At the end of the novel you want to read more: not because the narrative has failed to reach a proper conclusion (it does) but because you want to know what is going to happen next *to the characters*. What's going to happen in the complex relationship between the evil genius Maskelyne and his wife, Lucille? And you hope the ruthless psychic Briana survives the devastation of the ending, simply because you want to see her reaction.

Much of the book is a rescue story – but with plenty scope for score-settling. The denouement involves destruction on a massive scale. I don't know if it is a bad mark against my morals but I was revelling in it. The storytelling is admirably crafted, with adventure, excitement, clarity and thoughtfulness. The world building is intricate, grand-scale and gripping, and frequently transcends the Gothic-noir of squalor and blood to become sad and tragic. Bloodthirsty, insightful, homicidal and humane; an adventure story for sure but there's no need to be guilty about this pleasure. In summary: I can't wait for the next episode.

***Blackdog* by KV Johansen  
(Pyr, 2011)  
Reviewed by AP Canavan**

Whilst an established Canadian author of children's sf and fantasy novels, *Blackdog* marks Johansen's first foray into epic fantasy. The novel focuses on Attalissa, a goddess re-incarnated as a young girl, and her protector, the titular Blackdog, a spirit that possesses human hosts, as they attempt to deal with the threat of a powerful evil wizard who is attempting to consume the goddess's power.

On the surface, it appears to have all the elements of a great epic fantasy: cosmic conflicts between good and evil, multiple character perspectives interweaving into a grander narrative tapestry, fascinating hints of legendary backstory and a diverse world setting. Unfortunately *Blackdog* does not quite live up to its promise since these elements never quite cohere. The story does not seem to know which it would rather be; a gentle, intimate tale following the coming-of-age of the young goddess incarnate or an epic battle between vast supernatural forces. In trying to be both, it has succeeded at neither. An illustration of this concerns the Blackdog himself. While he is the eponymous character, the narrative vacillates unevenly between his role as guide and protector, reducing him to the position of supporting companion, and the exploration of his 'curse' and his repetitive struggles to overcome it.

Disappointingly, the world and story are told to the reader, rather than shown, resulting in a feeling of thinness and lack of texture. For a book of some 540 pages there is a surprising lack of detail, as plot, action, world building and character development are sketched rather than explored. The plot itself is simplistic, banal and so heavily foreshadowed that there are few, if any, surprises. The shifting of narrative focus between the personal narratives and the larger plot leads to both feeling lamentably underdeveloped. The climax of the plot is overly neat and split between the straightforward coming-of-age narrative and the obvious, underwhelming grand battle. When the disparate elements finally collide, it creates a sense of forced artifice rather than natural convergence.

In terms of action, there are few battles or fights and those included are hastily passed over and never approach 'epic' in nature. There is little tension in the short sequences and almost no sense of the viciousness of battle or the emotional repercussions of loss and death. This blandness affects the world itself as there is no real distinction drawn between the various locales, regardless of the radically different terrains.

The characters are rarely distinctive and very few are developed beyond stereotypical or function-driven roles. Those few interesting characters are inevitably underused and underdeveloped. However, a major point in Johansen's favour is her treatment of sexuality as she seamlessly integrates non-heterosexual characters into her world in a subtle display of acceptance without the use of gratuitous sex scenes or heavy-handed narrative underlining.

While *Blackdog* is not good as it falls short of both YA and Epic fantasy, it is inoffensively mediocre and tediously predictable rather than truly abysmal.

***A Dance With Dragons* by George R R Martin  
(Harper/Voyager, 2011)  
Reviewed by Alan Fraser**

There have been six years between *A Dance With Dragons* and its predecessor in the *Song of Ice and Fire* series, *A Feast For Crows*. This new book was actually expected to follow 2000's *A Storm Of Swords* around 2002 but Martin split it into two, geographically: *A Feast For Crows* was set mainly in the South of Westeros; the over 1,000 pages of *A Dance With Dragons* start with the Northern sequel to *A Storm Of Swords* and then continue the story beyond that book, told from many old and new viewpoints.

Daenerys Targaryen has become stuck in the Eastern city of Meereen with her dragons, beset by enemies, while people are slowly crossing this vast world to reach her. Tyrion Lannister has escaped Westeros after being wrongly sentenced to death for the murder of his nephew, King Joffrey, freed by Varys the Spider in order to find Daenerys and convince her to come quickly to Westeros. Meanwhile Quentyn Martell, prince of Dorne, is trying to reach Daenerys in order to convince her to marry him and then use Dorne as a springboard to capture the continent. Victarion Greyjoy has set sail from the Iron Islands with a hundred ships to bear Daenerys and her army to Westeros, while a Westeros lord disguised as a mercenary is bringing a mysterious young man to meet Daenerys.

In the North of Westeros Jon Snow, illegitimate son of Eddard Stark, is now Lord Commander of the Night Watch, persuading the wildlings who live north of the Wall to cross over and fight with them against the Others who are coming as winter approaches, while crippled Brandon Stark is far north of the Wall looking for the "three-eyed crow" with a guide called Coldhands.

After describing the fourth book as "a bitch", Martin describes this one as "three bitches and a bastard"! Others have suggested this is because he has made the story too complex and the scope far too wide with too many viewpoint characters and events occurring to keep the reader focussed on the critical parts of the narrative. When you consider it's taken him eleven years finally to complete the sequel to *A Storm Of Swords*, that's an understandable view!

However, although some of the viewpoint characters, their lives and aspirations, and the events in which they take part seem not to further the story, Martin is undertaking a mammoth and vivid world-building exercise here and every detail is important to it, showing that living through mediaeval times was a dangerous, dirty, disease-ridden and very often short-lived experience, both for nobles and for "small folk". Martin's success is creating such a world and peopling it with believable characters, many of whom we've come to care about very much.

This is a hard book to put down, even when it's finally finished. The series will continue with *The Winds Of Winter* and hopefully conclude with *A Dream Of Spring*. I'm hooked on it yet again and hope that it won't take Martin another eleven years to complete!





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