

Vector



The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

David Hebblethwaite on Alternate Worlds

Joanne Hall Interviews Andy Bigwood

Bibliography: Law in Science Fiction

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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

Book Reviews:

Martin Lewis
martin.lewis@gmail.com

Production:

Alex Bardy
BSFAMags@mangozine.com

British Science Fiction Association Ltd

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BSFA Website

www.bsfa.co.uk

Company No. 921500

Registered address:

61 Ivycroft Road, Warton, Tamworth,
Staffordshire B79 0JJ

President

Stephen Baxter

Vice President

Jon Courtenay Grimwood

Chair

Donna Scott
chair@bsfa.co.uk

Treasurer

Martin Potts
61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton,
Nr. Tamworth B79 0JJ
bsfatreasurer@gmail.com

Membership Services

Martin Potts (see above)

MEMBERSHIP FEES

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FOCUS: THE BSFA MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

Design Editor:

Alex Bardy
focusmag@mangozine.com

BSFA AWARDS

Administrator:

Farah Mendlesohn
awards@bsfa.co.uk

ORBITER WRITING GROUPS

Online:

Terry Jackman
terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk

Torque Control

In its way, this is an issue about professions. Medical doctors. Screenwriters. Novelists. Lawyers. Adventurers. Artists. How professions portray, and are portrayed in, science fictional works. How to make some sorts of living in a science fictional world.

It's also an issue which focuses predominantly on works from the middle half of the twentieth century. Stephen Krueger's bibliography of law and sf goes back to 1929 (with the nineteenth-century providing a brief bit of context). Stephen Baxter tells us about science fictional voyages to Proxima, beginning in the 30s. Leigh Brackett's Eric John Stark works were published in the 40s and 50s. The original *Star Trek* pilot, addressed by Victor Grech, debuted in the 60s, as did *Sign of the Labrys*, the subject of Andy Sawyer's Foundation Favourites column. *Doctor Snuggles* was aired in the 70s, the same decade in which "Songs of War", discussed by Paul Kincaid, was published. That was also the decade in which Andy Bigwood started his career as an artist. (Specifically, 3:10 pm on a Saturday in 1977.)

David Hebblethwaite, in his first article for *Vector*, explores alternate worlds and unreliable narrators by putting into conversation Nina Allan's *The Silver Wind* with David Vann's *Legend of a Suicide*. Meanwhile, Jacob Edwards takes on some of Douglas Adams' less well-known work, the collaboratively-written screenplays for two episodes of an animated series for children, *Doctor Snuggles*. Although he ultimately concludes that there is nothing uniquely Adams-esque about the episodes, he explores a number of topics of whimsy and theme common to both Adams and the series overall, including the character of Woogie, the tea-drinking camel.

Victor Grech's study of the portrayal of medical doctors in early *Star Trek* has had me thinking about doctors as humans. A quick straw poll confirmed that most of them in popular sf television shows were human. Is it a case of "Physician, (know how to) heal thyself"? Or a reluctance to see alien creatures as having a good bedside manner for humans? *Futurama* is one exception, *Star Trek: Voyager*'s computer-powered hologram another.

Stephen Krueger's bibliography of law and sf stories is the start of a conversation; it's a collection of novels and stories which turn on a point of law, and are all technology fiction. (My term, not his.) Meanwhile Eric John Stark, Leigh Brackett's recurrent character, is more prone to taking the law into his own hands in order to defend the oppressed and free the subjugated of our solar system, and (in later novels) other galaxies. Mike Barrett argues for seeking out Brackett's work; not only has it aged well, but it's exciting stuff.

At long last, we've started our promised series of interviews with our cover artists. Joanne Hall interviewed Andy Bigwood, who offers lots of advice and yearns for gold leaf. His favourite artist is one of the seven Guests of Honour at the 2014 Worldcon, Loncon 3, which will be held at the ExCel Centre in London's Docklands. I hope most of you will be able to attend it.

As announced at the AGM, this is the last issue of *Vector* I'm editing. I'm delighted that Glyn Morgan will be taking over as features editor of *Vector*, beginning with the next issue, and am looking forward to where he takes the BSFA's critical magazine.

Thank you to all the many people who have written articles and columns for the magazine during my three years as features editor, to the BSFA committee for their support, and in particular to the rest of the current *Vector* production team, Martin Lewis, editor of the BSFA Review, and Alex Bardy, whose work on layout is why this magazine looks as good as it does. It's been a pleasure working with you.

Although it's my last issue, it's the first for which I've received a letter of comment to print! Ian Massey has written a thought-provoking letter which has generated quite a bit of discussion amongst BSFA committee members, as we think through just who all our audiences are and the degree to which we are catering to them. Terry Jackman and Tom Hunter have more to say in reply.

Finally, there's the BSFA Review, full of good books to consider adding to your to-read pile, and, for those you've already read, analyses to reflect on further.

As always, your letters of comment are encouraged. We're always glad to hear from our readers, whether you'd like to comment on an article, or volunteer to write for us. You can reach *Vector* at vector.editors@gmail.com. But it'll now be up to Glyn to respond.

Shana Worthen
Features Editor

Cover art by Andy Bigwood
from *The Sixty: Arts of Andy Bigwood*
published by Immanion Press

Letters to the Editor

"What precisely are the BSFA's intended audiences, and how well does it cater to each of them?"

This is the question posed by Ian Massey, and one which the BSFA committee has spent time pondering in recent weeks. In the coming months, we'd like to hear from you, the members of the BSFA, as to what your answers are to the question of the BSFA's audiences.

In the meanwhile, here is the letter which started the ball rolling, and a few initial thoughts on the subject from current committee members.

— *Shana Worthen*

Dear Vector,

Recently, I have begun to question whether I am the correct audience for the BSFA. In terms of magazines, I tend to read them from cover to cover, even if the articles aren't within my scope of interest. For example, if I read SFX, I will read articles on Horror films, despite never watching that genre. However, while recently reading Vector 264 (I told you I was behind...) I found that I couldn't finish Lara Buckerton's article on warfare. I did read the whole of Felix Danczak's essay on TS Eliott and Iain M Banks, but it meant little to me. I consider myself reasonably well-educated, even though I didn't attend university.

I appreciate that Vector leans towards the academic style of article. Not exclusively, and there are plenty of articles I can read and enjoy. But my initial question regarding whether I was the correct audience for the BSFA soon changed, in my own head, to what that audience actually is. The aim of the Association, according to the FB page is to "appreciate and encourage science fiction in every form". But with just two publications, the other specifically aimed a writers, I wonder whether the BSFA is becoming more of an exclusive club, intentionally or not.

Matrix was probably the publication that appealed to me most, but I understand why it died as a magazine — much of its content

was time-specific and could be found easily and earlier elsewhere, I have to admit that I hadn't realised that its on-line incarnation had also failed.

One of the responses to my original post, made on the BSFA's Facebook page suggested that I might get more out of the BSFA if I participated more and suggested that I visited the forums. I have just had a look (although, as I replied, I tend to try to use FB as a one-stop-shop for discussions and information about my other interests, mainly because if I start getting involved in forums, I suspect my reading time will diminish even more) and, being honest, they don't seem to be a hive of activity. Nor have I seen that much discussion on the FB page. Another suggestion was along the lines that I got involved, as a volunteer, to help push the BSFA in the direction I want to see it go. Apart from the fact that I don't necessarily want the Association to change just because I think it's not necessarily right for me, I live "up North", probably too far away from the "hub" to get involved, even if I thought I had the skills to do anything to help. (Please, if you feel I can help, let me know.)

To be clear, I'm not trying to criticise the BSFA, or the people who run it. If the modern age has caused its membership to shrink towards that exclusive club and the majority of members are happy with that, that's fine by me. However, I would then question what the

function of the BSFA is. Nor do I think that I'm not getting value for money. I'm not questioning my own membership based on the fact that I could save a few quid a year but more on whether what I get from membership is worth my time - canceling my membership might buy me a few pints/three books/two CDs, but I would get the time I spend reading Vector back at a time in my life when spare time is ever more precious. I am, however, hoping to stimulate discussion around the subject, I'm just not sure what the best platform for that discussion is.

I look forward to reading your thoughts.

Many thanks

Ian Massey

ian-massey@hotmail.co.uk

Terry Jackman, Orbiter organiser

Of course, the BSFA's appeal to any spec-fic writer like me is unquestionable. Both the Orbiter groups and Focus magazine are writer-oriented, free to members, and accessible even outside the UK. They've been an invaluable aid to a solitary writer, improved my work, and given me a lot of friends as well as feedback and information.

In general, I've always figured the BSFA sets out to be of interest to anyone, of any age, who is curious about speculative fiction, which is why we tend to describe 'SF' as sf, fantasy and horror, to distinguish it from the narrower field sometimes implied. As such, I'd accept that sometimes there will be topics that don't appeal to me personally [and I will honestly admit to only reading the first and last paragraphs of any book review longer than 400 words!] but I would expect to find my share of other topics that do. Similarly I spend as little time online as possible, so if I don't use the website more that's my choice.

Being from the north west, I can't really get to southern evening meetings, wish I could. I make it a point to attend most committee meetings though, since they're daytime, and I always enjoy the AGM, a day's worth of free mini-con.

At the end of the day, I guess I get out in direct proportion to what I put in, rather like a convention can be much more fun if you volunteer?

Tom Hunter, Clarke Award Director

Who are the audiences? I'd say fans of science fiction living in Britain or with close ties to UK science fiction and fandom if living abroad. Thinking about who the actual current membership are is a really good question though, and one the BSFA is addressing the first part of this being the current ongoing tidying and updating of the membership list itself, with a second stage being to find out more who those people are.

Right now much of the membership information comes through direct contact and queries. On the one hand you get people who seem to think the BSFA should be doing loads and loads more stuff online, more free stuff, more magazines, more award categories, more official denouncing of whoever has cocked up on Twitter this week and so on through to people who are really passionate about being members of a British science fiction group but don't necessarily interact with all it has to offer, up to and including the stuff that lands on their doorsteps. Personally, I find myself fluctuating between those two states depending on what else is going on in my own world.

Does it serve its members well? On the whole I'd say yes, but there's definitely more it could do both to serve existing members and reach out to new ones. Limiting myself to one thing I'd suggest that a simple monthly (or, yikes, weekly) email newsletter would be a good thing to have, although I understand that some members are reluctant users of email, or unwilling to give out their addresses. This could link out to all kinds of interesting BSFA web content and other stuff on the web and provide a nice bridge in between the main mailings.

We would of course, love to hear your own views on the BSFA and what it offers its members, as well as further thoughts on what YOU think the intended audiences are, and how we can better accommodate those interests.

We would also like to take this opportunity to request more opinions — good or bad — on the current incarnation(s) of both Vector and FOCUS magazines, and the BSFA itself, and look forward to hearing from you sometime soon.

Doctor by Doctor: Dr. Philip Boyce and Dr. Mark Piper in Star Trek...

by Victor Grech

Doctors in science fiction are usually important protagonists or supporting actors. Numerous television series, including *Stargate SG-1*, *Firefly*, *Stargate: Atlantis*, *Torchwood*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Babylon 5* have included doctors who play important roles (table 1), and the majority of these medics are depicted as human, complete with foibles and failings.

Several SF book series also deliberately concentrate on doctors, such as Leinster's famous *Med Ship* series, which feature "Med Ship Men," volunteer doctors similar to *Médecins Sans Frontières International* who travel from world to world with no actual enforcement powers but are so respected that their medical advice is strictly adhered to. Other series include Viehl's *Stardoc* series which depicts the treatment of various different alien life-forms in *Sector General* trope.

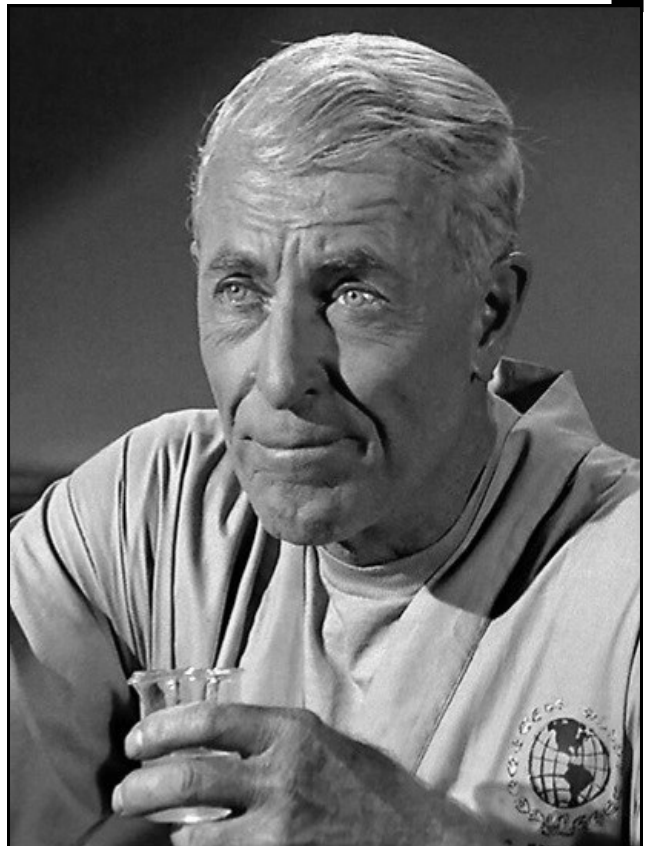
Comic books have also depicted heroic doctors, such as Dr. Pieter Cross who dons the mantle of "Doctor Midnite" (Reizestein and Aschmeier), Dr. Thomas Elliot who is also "Hush" (Loeb and Lee) and Dr. Donald Blake, Thor's original alter ego (Loeb and Lee).

Moreover, doctors have been heroic protagonists in several novels, such as McIntyre's "Dreamsnake" which depicts a female healer in a dystopian, post-nuclear apocalyptic world. SF seemingly fills all niches, and has also depicted Mills and Boon type medical space romances, with attractive nurses and handsome doctors (Webb).

Doctors in *Star Trek* have been crucial to the series. This essay will provide an analysis of Drs. Boyce and Piper who each appeared in one *Star Trek* episode, from the viewpoint of a practicing doctor. Since they each only appeared once, non-canon sources detailing their lives in the *Star Trek* universe have also been sought.

Dr. Philip Boyce

The fictional Dr. Boyce was born and educated in the city of New York in the 23rd century. He decided to pursue medicine at the age of fifteen and support himself in medical school by writing. His works proved popular although he declined offers to tour starships. Boyce initially practiced pediatrics in Manhattan, but all this proved unchallenging, and the novel diseases described in *The Journal of Space Medicine* prompted him to join Starfleet (Greenberger).



Enlistment led to some interesting experiences, and for example some time during the 2240s, Boyce led a medical team that attempted to find a cure for “Dezzla’s disease” on the planet Argelius (Stern). Boyce was assigned to the Starship *Enterprise* as assistant Chief Medical Officer for its first five-year mission (2246-2251) under Dr. Sarah Poole-April, and was promoted to Chief when the incumbent moved on in 2251, under Captain Pike, to 2264 (Oltion).

Boyce appeared as the main protagonist in several other narratives (Abnett), and on leaving the *Enterprise* (Barr), he retired to a teaching job at Starfleet Medical Academy (Greenberger). Boyce only appeared in one television episode, in a role reprised by John Hoyt (1905-91).

This episode (“The Cage”) was the *Star Trek* original series pilot. While it was completed in early 1965, it was used in the two-part episode “The Menagerie” (Daniels and Butler 1966) and was first broadcast on TV in its original form in 1988 (Butler).

Television episode

In the episode, Boyce is called to Captain Pike’s cabin on board the *Enterprise*. He shows up with a bag from which he proceeds to concoct a martini. When Pike asks him why he is mixing him a drink, Boyce replies that “sometimes a man’ll tell his bartender things he’ll never tell his doctor,” and proceeds to ask him how he is bearing up after a recent incident on the planet Rigel Seven where three *Enterprise* crewmen died and another seven were injured.

Pike blames himself for this debacle, but Boyce points out that Pike sets “standards no one could meet. You treat everyone on board like a human being except yourself, and now you’re tired.” Boyce then cynically questions

Pike’s proposal to leave Starfleet and settle down on Earth, knowingly stating: “not for you. A man either lives life as it happens to him, meets it head-on, and licks it, or he turns his back on it and starts to wither away (...) take your choice. We both get the same two kinds of customers. The living and the dying.”

This private conversation reflects two aspects to Boyce’s character: an intimate and cordial relationship with his captain and an application of his psychological training in an attempt to help Pike come to terms with his traumas, roles that are repeatedly re-enacted in doctor-captain relationships in *Star Trek*.

Boyce, a member of the medical profession, is expected to give clear and succinct reports. After reviewing the health of a group of colonists, his report to Pike is: “Their health is excellent. Almost too good,” paving the way for the discovery that most of what is witnessed on the planet’s surface (including said colonists) is just an illusion projected by a race of extremely powerful telepaths (Talosians): “Their power of illusion is so great, we can’t be sure of anything we do, anything we see.”

Boyce also joins the *Enterprise*’s science officer (Spock) and executive officer (Number One), both scientists, in illuminating the starship’s situation, further amplifying that ...

it was a perfect illusion. They had us seeing just what we wanted to see, human beings who’d survived with dignity and bravery, everything entirely logical, right down to the building of the camp, the tattered clothing, everything. Now let’s be sure we understand the danger of this. The inhabitants of this planet can read our minds. They can create illusions out of a person’s own thoughts, memories, and experiences, even out of a person’s own desires. Illusions just as real and solid as this table top and just as impossible to ignore.

Like much of SF, *Star Trek* is formulaic in that narratives are almost invariably close-ended with happy endings. Hence Boyce participates in the final exchange, remarking to Captain Pike that he looks “a hundred percent better.” And when Boyce discovers that a pretty, young female crewperson is called “Eve as in Adam,” Pike sardonically remarks that “all ship’s doctors are dirty old men.”



Dr. Mark Piper

As explained earlier, the first *Star Trek* pilot episode was initially rejected by the network, and a second pilot was commissioned and paid for by NBC (Whitfield), called “Where No Man Has Gone Before” (1966). After the first pilot, Boyce left the series and Piper acted in this episode on the personal recommendation of the director to Gene Roddenberry, the show’s creator (Solow 84). This decision was precipitated by a discussion between the director and Roddenberry that concluded that the Chief Medical Officer should be typecast as an old country doctor (Asherman 118).

Like Boyce, Piper also appeared in solely one episode and the role was reprised by the actor Paul Fix (1901-83), following which the role of Chief Medical Officer was filled by Dr. Leonard McCoy for reasons that will be explained later.

Piper (2191-2271) was born in New England and was interested in medicine from childhood. He entered medical school some time in the 2210s and not only joined Starfleet, but also married and raised a family of five children (Friedman). Piper acquired many honors during his career, but was tragically murdered in 2271 by a group of traitors within Starfleet (Graf).

An NBC series booklet from early 1966 gave the following resume:

Chief Medical Officer Dr. Piper is the oldest and most experienced space traveller aboard the Enterprise. As head of the ship's Medical Department, Piper is responsible for the mental and physical health of the crew. His evaluation of the reaction of the men to the pressures of the intergalactic space travel and the strange flora and fauna encountered on the planets visited will have a vital bearing on the conduct of each mission (Solow).

Television episode

In the episode, Piper acts solely as a supporting actor but is given great responsibilities by Captain Kirk. Piper's first lines are a simple introduction of another doctor, a young and beautiful woman: "Life sciences ready, sir. This is Doctor Dehner, who joined the ship at the Aldebaran colony" (Goldstone).

The *Enterprise* sets off on an exploratory expedition to the galaxy's rim and has a near-disastrous encounter with an exotic energy field. Dr. Dehner and one of Kirk's best friends, Lieutenant Gary Mitchell, both have latent extrasensory powers, are affected by the field, and begin to manifest increasingly and exponentially more powerful psychokinetic abilities, along with godlike powers of creation, with Mitchell eventually viewing humanity with escalating disparagement and outright contempt.

Piper's next three lines, interspersed in the script, are entirely in keeping with his role as a doctor and scientist, exhibiting crisp clarity:

"The only fact we have for sure is that the S.S. Valiant was destroyed."

"He's alive. Appears to be in shock."

"Perfect, perfect. I've never had a patient like you, Gary. Even the healthiest are generally off on some reading."

Piper next explains to Kirk that Mitchell escaped from custody, and tells him that Mitchell was last seen, "headed across the valley, to the left of the pointed peaks. There's flatlands beyond."

Kirk sets out to stop Mitchell and instructs Piper: "if you have not received a signal from me within twelve hours, you'll proceed at maximum warp to the nearest

Earth base with my recommendation that this entire planet be subjected to a lethal concentration of neutron radiation. No protest on this, Mark. That's an order." Piper does not feature further in the episode as Mitchell is killed during a fight with Kirk.

Discussion

Roddenberry remained discontented with the medical officer's depiction (Solow 84). He "wanted a somewhat younger, more active doctor. He didn't want an aging Solon, he wanted definitely a younger, more vigorous doctor" (Paramount).

The writer Peeples was also unsatisfied with Fix as in his opinion:

he was a little too old for the part (...) he wasn't right (...) the physical element (...) required every crewman of the USS Enterprise to be active. He had to be not only mentally alert, but the traditional images of a country doctor would hardly have fit the images of a man who would say, 'We've got an unknown disease, and there's a cure on this planet. Our only choice is to try it. It might kill you,' and I don't think Paul Fix's interpretation of the character would have been able to do that (Asherman 118).

The interviewer Asherman also felt that Fix played the role in an old-fashioned and "distinctly twentieth century" way (118). It was for these reasons that the role was given to DeForest Kelley (Dr. Leonard McCoy), who Roddenberry had wanted to cast in this part since working on the very first pilot (Solow 75, 84).

Roddenberry's initial notion of Boyce was as:

[a]n unlikely space traveler. At the age of fifty-one, he's worldly, humorously cynical, makes it a point to thoroughly enjoy his own weaknesses. [The captain's] only real confidant, (...) considers himself the only realist aboard, measures each new landing in terms of relative annoyance, rather than excitement (Roddenberry 7).

The doctor segued into "a highly unlikely looking space crewman, (...) pushing middle age, something of a worldly cynic" (Whitfield and Roddenberry 24) a particular characteristic that is shared by doctors in the original *Star Trek* series. Indeed, curmudgeonly country doctors are the norm in this series, through a total of three iterations of actors, including Dr. McCoy.

Doctors are expected to be interdisciplinarians, in that both Boyce and Piper hint at capacities which exceed their medical training, tropes that are expanded by other doctors in the franchise as well as SF in general (Grech "Interdisciplinarity"). Spaceship medics are expected to be able to deal with all biological conditions, from alien and exotic diseases to telepathic and super-paranormal powers, as evidenced in both episodes.

The doctors' humanity is most clearly portrayed in their relationships to their captains, where they act not only to preserve the health of the most vital crewmember



on the starship, but also, through the forging of strong links of friendship, act as psychological counselors. Indeed, it is later shown in this and in subsequent *Star Trek* series that the chief medical officers on Starfleet vessels have the right and duty to suspend captains from command if the physical or mental condition of their captain could be detrimental to the ship or its crew. These series also show that ship's doctors therefore routinely evaluate all crewmembers, including the captain, for fitness for duty in physical and mental assessments, since prevention is superior to cure.

The commonest trope that emerges from these narratives is that of the cautionary tale, that excessive and Frankensteinian desire to wrest nature's secrets, as opposed to the Promethian yearning for knowledge that commences with noble intentions. Both such leanings ignore potential catastrophic outcomes, with deplorable hubris being met with tragedy.

FIN.

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So Long, And Thanks For All The Visch

Douglas Adams and Doctor Snuggles

by Jacob Edwards

Fans of Douglas Adams who were born in the 1970s well may have encountered one of his more obscure works before any of the more famous pieces; nay, without even realising it. In 1978 Adams and sometime collaborator John Lloyd scripted two 25-minute episodes of *Doctor Snuggles*, an animated children's programme that screened first in the Netherlands (who co-produced), then the UK, Canada, the United States and Australia. While many viewers will hold fond memories of *Doctor Snuggles* in its own right, Adams devotees will point to the show's whimsical, wonderland logic and the trippy adventures and zany inventions of its eponymous hero and find themselves intuiting a 'lost' Adams masterpiece. Episodes seven ('The Remarkable Fidgety River') and twelve ('The Great Disappearing Mystery') seem at first to do justice to such notions, yet when taken in context give rise to rather a different insight into the respective involvements of Adams and *Doctor Snuggles* creator Jeffrey O'Kelly.

The Doctor Snuggles Shrine credits four of the five writers who worked on *Doctor Snuggles*: Douglas Adams, Richard Carpenter, John Lloyd and Paul Halas.¹ The order is not quite alphabetical yet nor is it in accordance with the magnitude of each writer's contribution. Richard Carpenter wrote six of the thirteen episodes, Paul Halas four, and Douglas Adams and John Lloyd two in partnership – no more each in effect than the single episode scripted by (Shrine uncredited) Loek Kessels. The divorcing of 'Adams' from 'Lloyd' is particularly telling for it suggests a distinct qualitative bias in favour of the former, as if Adams *ipso facto* must have brought more to the arrangement. The same bias might lead people to underes-

timate Lloyd's contribution to *The Meaning of Liff* (1983) and *The Deeper Meaning of Liff* (1990), both of which he co-authored with Adams. However, the ascendancy of Adams's star need not indicate the subordination of Lloyd's. With regard to the commissioning of Adams and Lloyd, Jeffrey O'Kelly has said:

"I listened to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and I thought it was wonderful. I told the producer that that's the kind of imagination I'd like to connect with my own. I think their agents had put them forward, and so John Lloyd and Douglas weighed in on *Doctor Snuggles* with me."²



It may be coincidental that O'Kelly lists Lloyd before Adams (or just a linguistic practicality aimed at keeping 'Douglas' on a first-name basis while avoiding the ambiguous phrase 'Douglas and John Lloyd'). However, the *Hitchhiker's* that O'Kelly had heard was series one of the radio programme, the creation of which had seen Adams

– who at the same time was scripting a four-part *Doctor Who* story, ‘The Pirate Planet’ — stall two thirds of the way through and so enlist Lloyd’s help in completing. Although Lloyd’s input is manifest only in the radio broadcasts (Adams heavily rewrote these sections in novelised form),³ his strength as a contributor of ideas is attested to also by his subsequent success in producing television comedies such as *Not the Nine O’Clock News*, *Blackadder*, *Spitting Image* and *QI*. Both Adams and Lloyd were working for BBC Light Entertainment Radio when (moon-lighting after hours) they scripted their two *Doctor Snuggles* episodes. Adams additionally was busy novelising *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (published October 1979, the same month in which *Doctor Snuggles* began its initial run in the Netherlands) and working on the second *Hitchhiker’s* radio series. Given Adams’s notorious propensity (even at this early stage of his career) to stoush with deadlines, there seems every reason to suspect that Lloyd, rather than being merely attendant, would have played at least an equal hand in writing ‘The Remarkable Fidgety River’ and ‘The Great Disappearing Mystery’. Indeed, if Lloyd transpires to have been the senior partner then this would go some way towards explaining Adams’s rather sketchy memory of the *Doctor Snuggles* experience:

“My recollection is pretty dim at this point, but I remember we came up with one episode about a river that was hiding in a cave because someone was stealing chunks of the ocean. I can’t remember what the other one was about. It was just a job for a couple of hungry wannabes, but I do recall that we had a lot of fun doing it. I never managed to see the actual programme, so I don’t know how they turned out, but I believe that one of them won some awards (which we also never saw, of course...)”⁴

There is no record of any such awards, and one cannot help but suspect that Adams used this somewhat flippant



quip to obfuscate a vagueness considerably more wilful than that of his being simply forgetful. After all, he and Lloyd were paid £500 per *Doctor Snuggles* script – and this at a time when BBC salaries ranged from £2,000 to £3,000 per year,⁵ and when the first six *Hitchhiker’s* scripts had earned Adams just £1,065 in total.⁶ Furthermore, the medium of television animation seemed intrinsically well suited to Adams’s flights of fancy – more so even than *Doctor Who*, with which Adams became involved from October of 1978 through 1979, butting his imagination against both the rigours of narrative drama and the programme’s technical limitations. Although more than two *Hitchhiker’s*-crammed years had passed between the writing and first ITV broadcast of Adams’s and Lloyd’s *Doctor Snuggles* episodes in February and March of 1981,⁷ nevertheless it seems hardly credible that Adams could have taken such little interest in an endeavour so lucrative and creatively boundless.

One possible explanation for Adams’s reticence on the subject is that he deliberately chose to distance himself from a show that, despite presenting in quite an Adams-like fashion, in fact owed almost all of its outlandish characteristics to someone other than Adams himself. Wikipedia makes note of the two episodes written by Adams and Lloyd, saying that ‘both deal with ecological issues’.⁸

1. http://members.tripod.com/dr_snuggles/credits.html [May 7, 2004; retrieved November 26, 2013]

2. Interviewed by M. J. Simpson, May 2002. Quoted in Simpson, M. J., *Hitchhiker: A Biography of Douglas Adams* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), p. 117.

3. Webb, Nick, *Wish You Were Here: The Official Biography of Douglas Adams* (Headline, 2003), p. 128.

4. Quoted in Simpson, M. J., *The Pocket Essential Hitchhiker’s Guide* (Pocket Essentials, 2005), p. 147.

5. John Lloyd interviewed by M. J. Simpson, April 2002. Quoted in Simpson, *Hitchhiker*, p. 117.

6. Simpson, *Hitchhiker*, p. 111.

7. <http://www.toonhound.com/doctorsnuggles.htm> [retrieved November 26, 2013]

8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dr_snuggles [September 14, 2013; retrieved November 26, 2013]

Whereas this is more or less true (more for ‘The Remarkable Fidgety River’ and less for ‘The Great Disappearing Mystery’), such a statement is misleading in its very existence. The implicit link to Adams’s environmental activism and his escapades with zoologist Mark Carwardine belies not only that Jeffrey O’Kelly presented writers with initial plot concepts before further editing each completed script,⁹ but also that *Doctor Snuggles* is ecologically themed throughout the entirety of its single season. The suggestion that Adams and Lloyd originated this aspect of the show is nothing but revisionist fantasy, and as such probably was something of an embarrassment to Adams. Where the comparisons to his other work become more uncomfortable, however, is in the overall similarity of Adams’s and Lloyd’s two episodes to the remainder of the *Doctor Snuggles* canon. *Hitchhiker’s* fans who track down only ‘The Remarkable Fidgety River’ and ‘The Great Disappearing Mystery’ may view these and conclude, *Yes, that must have been written by Douglas Adams*, yet anyone who watches all thirteen episodes will have difficulty telling their authorship apart.

In ‘The Remarkable Fidgety River’ the local river stops flowing and is found by Doctor Snuggles and his animal friends to be cowering at its source, afraid lest it reach the ocean and disappear. Chunks of the sea have gone missing and when Doctor Snuggles investigates he discovers that it is being carted away by aliens. Due to its polluted state these creatures have mistaken the ocean for unwanted rubbish. Doctor Snuggles uses his rocket ship to tow the water back to Earth, whereupon the river is persuaded to flow again. In ‘The Great Disappearing Mystery’ Miss Nettles and Madame Dum-pitoo are spirited away by a giant claw, as is Winnie Vinegar Bottle the witch. Doctor Snuggles builds a Get Lost Machine and uses this to track them to an egg planet where giant birds like Professor Featherbody keep people as pets. Once Snuggles explains the cruelty of keeping animals in cages, Featherbody releases

the humans and everyone goes home for a nice cup of tea. In the course of these episodes the viewer is introduced not only to Doctor Snuggles and his pogo stick umbrella but also to such marvels as the Cosmic Cat; Dreamy Boom Boom (a wine barrel rocket ship); the Multi-Whereabouts Machine; Mathilda Junkbottom (the scrapyard android); and of course Woogie, a tea-drinking camel who lives in a psychedelic cloudland called Lavender Lullaby. Although such curiosities may seem unequivocally ‘Adams-ish’ to the dilettante, in truth they are recurring elements of *Doctor Snuggles* and already had been introduced in previous stories – they are the conceptual outpourings of Jeffrey O’Kelly, not Douglas Adams.

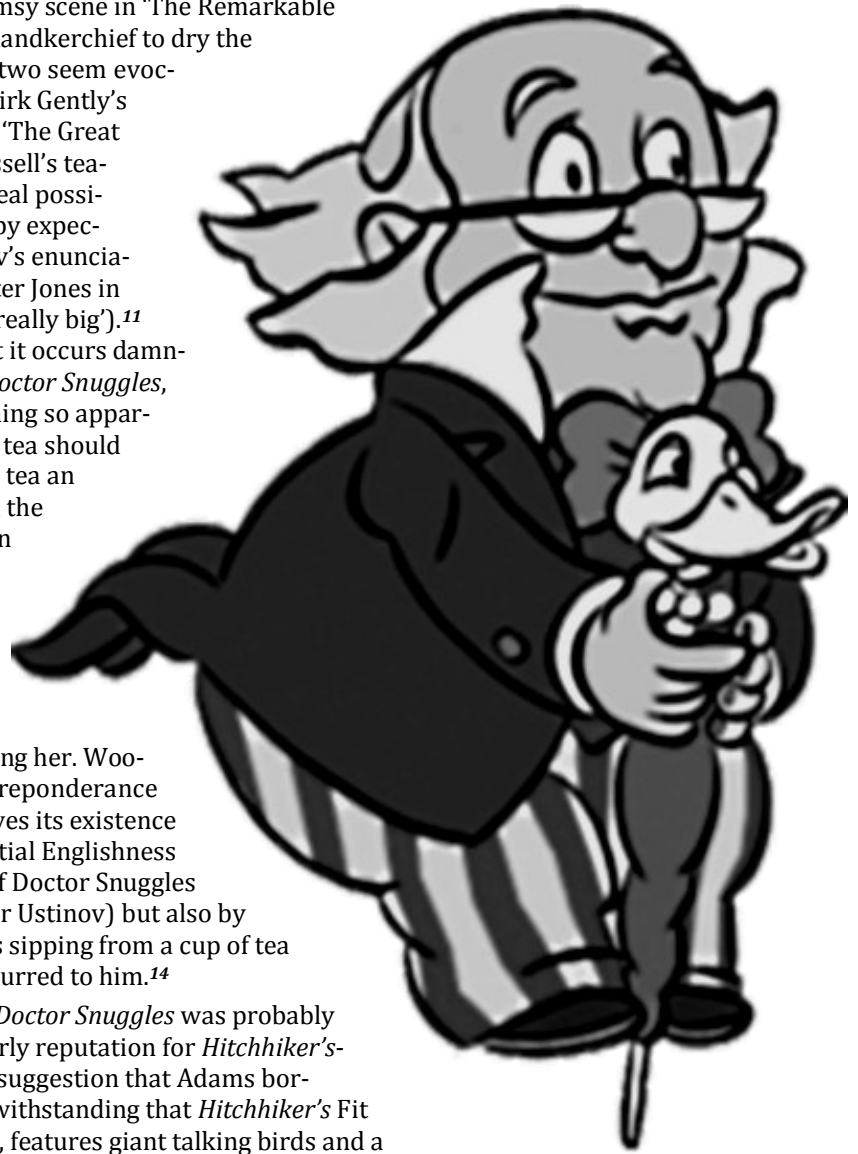
Given the difficulty in distinguishing Adams’s and Lloyd’s joint contribution from O’Kelly’s overarching conception – let alone then differentiating Adams’s signature from Lloyd’s – there seems little in either ‘The Remarkable Fidgety River’ or ‘The Great Disappearing Mystery’ that can with any confidence be attributed



solely to Adams. There is a certain drollery, to be sure, and a gentle mocking of British colonialism. In one particularly Adamsy scene in 'The Remarkable Fidgety River' Doctor Snuggles tries with his handkerchief to dry the river's eyes.¹⁰ Yet, even if the odd moment or two seem evocative -- the Get Lost Machine calling to mind Dirk Gently's theory of fundamental interconnectedness, or 'The Great Disappearing Mystery' throwing Bertrand Russell's tea-pot into the mix -- still there remains a very real possibility that our observations are being shaped by expectancy bias. Consider as a placebo Peter Ustinov's enunciation of, 'Space is so very big, you know' (cf. Peter Jones in *The Hitchhiker's Guide* declaring 'Space is big, really big').¹¹ It sounds right. It fits. The only problem is that it occurs damn-ingly sans Adams or Lloyd in episode two of *Doctor Snuggles*, 'The Astounding Treacle Tree'.¹² Even something so apparently concomitant as Adams's predilection for tea should not necessarily be read into. Yes, Adams made tea an integral part of *Hitchhiker's* -- he even extolled the beverage in an elucidatory article for American readers¹³ -- but within the ambit of *Doctor Snuggles* the only tea related item directly attributable to Adams and Lloyd is the Every Third Thursday Machine, which Snuggles invented in the shape of a tea-pot so as to jog Madame Dumpitoo's memory as to why Miss Nettles might be visiting her. Woo-gie the tea dependent camel and the general preponderance of tea drinking throughout *Doctor Snuggles* owes its existence not to Adams *per se* but rather to a quintessential Englishness shared not only by Adams and the character of Doctor Snuggles (voiced with great cultural refinement by Peter Ustinov) but also by Jeffrey O'Kelly, who indeed relates that he was sipping from a cup of tea when the concept for *Doctor Snuggles* first occurred to him.¹⁴

For Adams, then, any detailed appraisal of *Doctor Snuggles* was probably as likely to raise eyebrows as to cement his early reputation for *Hitchhiker's*-esque wit and inventiveness. There can be no suggestion that Adams borrowed in any way from *Doctor Snuggles*. (Notwithstanding that *Hitchhiker's Fit the Tenth*, first broadcast on January 23, 1980, features giant talking birds and a megalithic teacup.) Equally, though, it seems that *Doctor Snuggles* borrowed very little from Douglas Adams, and that the like-mindedness to which Jeffrey O'Kelly refers really is the only notable feature of Adams's association with the programme. With *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by the start of 1981 having rocketed him to fame, fortune and *al fresco* dining, Adams himself clearly felt no need to linger. Much though *Hitchhiker's* devotees might assume or hope it to have been otherwise, by the time that Adams was queried on the subject there well may have been no discernible difference between the full picture and the one that Adams had framed in his mind; namely, that *Doctor Snuggles* was little more to him than a fjord he might possibly have won a prize for -- oddly crinkled but memorable now only inasmuch that he remained quite taken by the name of its Dutch producer, Joop Visch.

FIN.



9. Jeffrey O'Kelly paraphrased at: <http://h2g2.com/dna/h2g2/plain/A8765553> [April 3, 2006; retrieved November 26, 2013]; http://members.tripod.com/dr_snuggles/tidbits.html [retrieved November 26, 2013]
10. *Doctor Snuggles* Episode 7 ('The Remarkable Fidgety River'), @3:34.
11. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Series 1, Episode 2 ('Fit the Second'), @8:03.
12. *Doctor Snuggles*, Episode 2 ('The Astounding Treacle Tree'), @14:10.
13. Adams, Douglas, 'Tea', *The Salmon of Doubt* (Macmillan, 2002), pp. 67-69. [Composed May 12, 1999]
14. Jeffrey O'Kelly paraphrased at: <http://h2g2.com/dna/h2g2/plain/A8765553> [April 3, 2006; retrieved November 26, 2013]

Nina Allan's *The Silver Wind* (Eibonvale Press, 2011) would generally be considered a work of speculative fiction. Ghosts (of a sort) and "time disrupted" link a series of pieces in which the characters' lives, relationships and identities are constantly being reconfigured. The stories contradict each other, and the full tale they tell lies in the gaps and discrepancies as well as the words themselves.

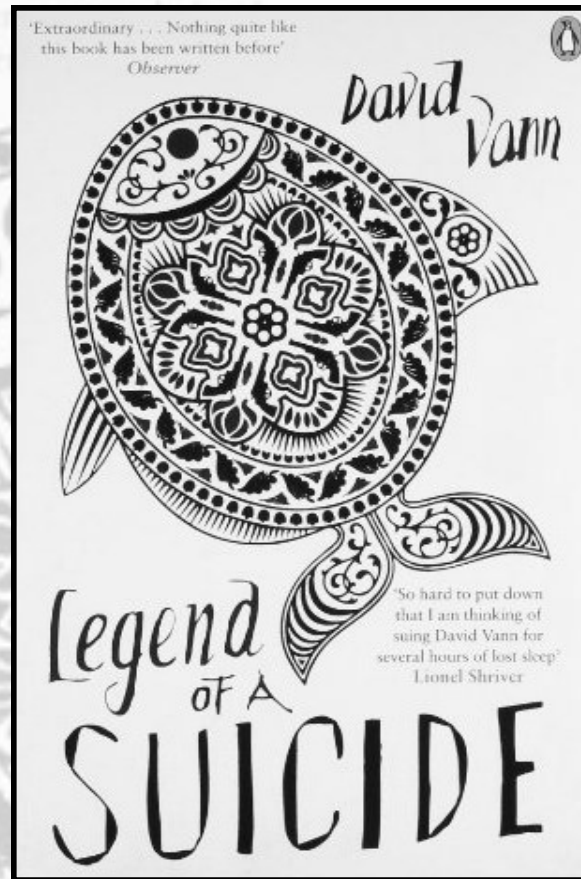
David Vann's *Legend of a Suicide* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2008; all citations are from the 2009 Penguin edition) would generally not be considered a work of speculative fiction. Taking as its starting point the suicide of the author's father, the book is a "legend" in both the sense of a series of portraits (after Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*) and that of a tale larger than history. We join members of the same family at different points in their lives, with the father's suicide always echoing in the background (or, sometimes, the foreground). The stories contradict each other, and the full tale they tell lies in the gaps and discrepancies as well as the words themselves.

However different these two books are, there's a clear sense in which they are doing something similar — both present a number of "alternate worlds". I want to explore here what that term means in the context of these works; and to show that, for all their differences, the collections employ a similar structure, towards similar ends.

It's easy to see from the outset that we're reading about different worlds in *The Silver Wind*, because the details of the two opening stories are incompatible. The first, "Time's Chariot", runs as follows: Martin Newland's life is changed on his eighteenth birthday when he receives the gift of a watch—a solid, sturdy thing (his "time machine", he half-seriously calls it) that gives him a new sense of engagement with the world, and makes him want to "become a connoisseur of time" (p. 25). But the real object of Martin's affection is his sister Dora; their illicit relationship comes to end when Dora is diagnosed with leukaemia. Hours after her death, and imagining particles of time smashing through the walls of universes, he rewinds the watch to a time when Dora was still alive—and suddenly an apparition of her is calling to him from the street below, only to vanish seconds later.

In the second story, "My Brother's Keeper", the key details have changed. Martin's family is not the same: most

notably, there's no sister this time, but a brother—Stephen, who's already dead as the tale begins, and who flits in and out of Martin's life as a ghost (one who must be real, because one of Martin's school-friends can also see him). The watch is a different make, given to him by a different person at a different age—but it still has the same significance to him. Andrew Owen ("the Circus



Fishing for Time: *Alternate Worlds in Nina Allan* *Wind and David Vann's Legend*

Man", a dwarf beach bum with outlandish clothes), who's mentioned only in passing in the previous story, comes to prominence here when Martin talks to him.

Owen describes time as "more like a garden, or a labyrinth" than a straight line, says that "a special watch like [Martin's] can open doors (p. 52)—and apparently rewinds time for Martin by thirty minutes. After two stories, our impression is of two different iterations of reality, linked by a structure which is not yet clear—but with a character, Andrew Owen, who seems to understand what's happening.

Legend of a Suicide similarly begins with a story that establishes a "default" reality which is then undermined. In "Ichthyology", Roy Fenn's family settle on the Alaskan island of Ketchikan when he is a baby; his father Jim buys a dental practice and a fishing boat. When Roy is five, Jim starts an affair with his dental hygienist; several years later, Roy's parents have separated, and he lives with his mother Elizabeth in California. While Roy pursues his hobby of keeping fish, Jim has traded in his dental practice for a commercial vessel, and is trying to make a living as a fisherman in Alaska. He doesn't succeed, and Jim eventually takes his own life in desperation.

The relationship between the first piece and its immediate successors is different in *Legend of a Suicide*. Where

The Silver Wind has obvious contradictions, Vann's book creates a subtler sense of discrepancy. The second and third stories of *Legend of a Suicide* could take place in the

same chronology as "Ichthyology"—but they feel as though they don't, because they focus on characters and incidents that have not previously been mentioned. "Rhoda" is a snapshot of Roy visiting his father and new stepmother (it's not clear whether she is the dental hygienist referred to in "Ichthyology"); "A Legend of Good Men" deals with Elizabeth's relationships after Jim's death. The sense here is of a gradual diffusion of reality—one history growing into, or branching off from, another, rather than the sharp breaks we see in Allan's volume.

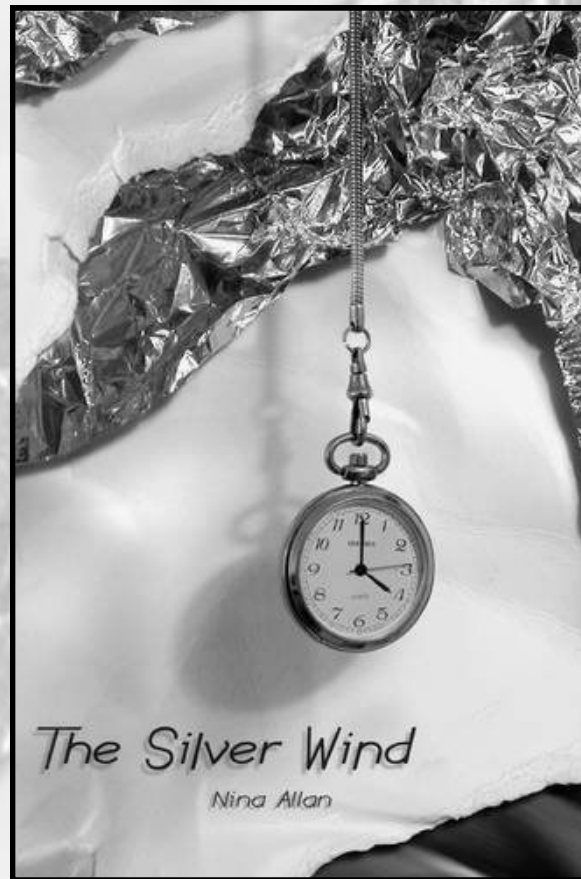
The nagging feeling of unreality is heightened by patterning between the stories: "Rhoda" focuses intensely on one relationship, while "A Legend of Good Men" is a broad-brush view of many; the former ends, and the latter begins, with Roy startled by a gunshot. This only emphasizes the artifice of what

we're reading. One's sense after three stories is that we're probably dealing with a single reality, but we don't know everything that happened.

Both collections pivot on a long central story that reveals something of the nature of what is happening in their respective books. For *The Silver Wind*, this is the title story, the most overtly science-fictional in the volume. In a clearly near-future London, the adult Martin is an estate agent who pines for his lost wife Miranda, and becomes intrigued by the new theory of time travel: that time is "an infinite and continuous arc of the present tense" (p. 62), along which it might be possible to move.

Martin goes to visit a dwarf clockmaker named "Owen Andrews", whom he's heard was involved in time travel experiments of some sort for the military. Andrews explains that the subject of these experiments—the Silver Wind—was a kind of "time stabilizer" that could allow people to move into different timestreams (but not to different points in the *same* timestream). Here we have something of a rationale for the text: each story is a different version of history, so the watches given to Martin must somehow allow access between them; there is even the suggestion that the subjects of unsuccessful time travel experiments manifest as ghosts in parallel timestreams, which could explain the apparitions of Dora and Stephen in the previous stories...

But let's not get carried away. This doesn't quite hold up to close scrutiny as an explanation: there's no actual evidence that the watches of "Time's Chariot" and "My



by David Hebblethwaite

's The Silver d of a Suicide

Brother's Keeper" work that way; and the ghost theory is something of a leap, given how much it would depend on events that aren't documented or even suggested in the text we have. The impulse to rationalise the different pieces of *The Silver Wind* is a strong one—but Allan plays with and against this impulse, by presenting an "explanation" that's as incomplete as the tale told by the book. As "The Silver Wind" ends, Martin has travelled into a new timestream, found that a version of Owen Andrews existed a hundred years previously, and now waits for the dwarf to transcend history and pay him a visit. This ending may underline the forlorn hope of both the kind of "time travel" about which Allan writes, and of deriving a coherent whole from the story-fragments of her collection.

In *Legend of a Suicide*, Vann likewise subverts an implicit assumption about the kind of text he's writing. Any remaining feelings that all of his stories take place in the same continuity are swept away by the novella "Sukkwan Island". In this piece, the young Roy goes to spend time with his father in the wilderness of the titular Alaskan island—and Roy is the one who kills himself.

This, then, is an "alternate world", but one that is qualitatively different from Allan's. When the version of Dora in "The Silver Wind" (here a client-turned-associate of Martin's, rather than a member of his family) remarks that her relationship with her husband is "like being married to your own younger brother" (p. 65), this carries a sting of recognition because we've already seen her in an intimate relationship with her younger brother, in "Time's Chariot"—we know that a throwaway line in one timestream refers to something that *has happened* in another.

At one point in "Sukkwan Island", Roy imagines that Jim is "something insubstantial before him", and might disappear if he looks away (p. 116); these comments are as knowing as Allan's, but *Legend of a Suicide* does not invite the reading that the settings of its different stories are linked in a definite metaphysical structure. So our instinctive response to such statements in Vann's book is less intellectual, more emotional, as we treat them as being solely metaphorical. In the case of the quotation I've just mentioned, we may think of the sad irony of Jim's death that (we assume) is to come. Once we've seen Roy commit suicide, we have to re-evaluate this, but still in a metaphorical framework—so the implication of Vann's stories is that we can't get to a single, definitive truth of these events.

Tricia Sullivan remarks in her introduction to *The Silver Wind* that "[t]he stories haunt one another"; the same could surely be said of *Legend of a Suicide*—and the stories following "The Silver Wind" and "Sukkwan Island" are haunted most of all, because they (and we) are no longer innocent of what their books are about. In Allan's collection, "Rewind" could be seen as an almost-sequel to "Time's Chariot": its Martin is not the same one, but he has also had a secret relationship with his sister Dora, who is now dead. She exists merely as a voice in Martin's mind, and may just be his delusion—a far cry from the apparently real ghost of Stephen in "My Brother's Keeper".

This would seem to suggest a denial of the supernatural in "Rewind", and the return of Andrew Owen in this story gives a similar sense of closing off. This version of the Circus Man talks to Martin about timestreams; there's even a suggestion that he might have caught up with the Martin left waiting at the end of "The Silver Wind"—but *this* Martin does not remember Owen. Whatever the Circus Man has managed to do—transcend time, who knows?—it doesn't seem to have had much consequence, or is at the very least too inconsistent and unpredictable to be of lasting use.

But it goes deeper even than that. Allan's final piece, "Timelines: an Afterword", brings us a totally new set of characters. Here, Andrew is the protagonist of a story made up by a girl; Owens is a make of watch. *The Silver Wind* then becomes a fiction of continuous loss: a means of travelling between realities is presented, but shown to be largely ineffectual—and even the one individual who appears to have mastered it seems ultimately to have no valid reality. Characters lose themselves and others in the gaps between worlds, and they don't know what they've lost, or even that they had something to lose.

Legend of a Suicide follows the same pattern of using alternate fictional worlds to parse a sense of loss. In the story "Ketchikan", the adult Roy returns to his childhood home, trying to find Gloria, the receptionist (not a hygienist this time) with whom his father slept. By making this journey, Roy hopes that he will come to understand what Jim did—but it is not to be. Roy is "an intruder still, a tourist always" (p. 201), and comes to feel that "the divorce and my father's suicide seemed to exist in another world" (p. 209). This latter comment is of course only metaphorical in terms of Vann's book; but the past is nevertheless as inaccessible to Roy as the different timestreams of *The Silver Wind* are to most of Allan's characters. But whilst the emotional impact of *The Silver Wind* comes from seeing different-but-similar lives played out (mostly) unknowingly in multiple words, in *Legend of a Suicide* it comes from knowing that there is no other world—whatever the exact truth, Roy's family fell apart and Jim killed himself, and there is no going back.

The final story of *Legend of a Suicide*, "The Higher Blue", pushes the collection in a slightly different direction. For the first time, it feels as though we are witnessing reality from something of a remove. Here, Roy (as the narrator) refers to Jim as "the father", demonstrating the distance of his feelings. This is a personal alternate world created from within, and it might stand to illustrate the differences between the two books: *The Silver Wind*'s alternate worlds face outwards, and link together in a broader metaphysical structure (albeit one that's deliberately not mapped out); *Legend of a Suicide*'s face inwards, may in some cases be shavings from the same block of history, and circle around a single event. But the true story of both can't be comprehended—is lost between one chapter and the next.

FIN.

Bibliography: Law in Science Fiction

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by Stephen Krueger

Introduction to law and SF bibliography

This bibliography has five parts.

Part 1: legal science-fiction stories

Part 2: legal science-fiction novels

Part 3: law stories which are not science-fiction stories

Part 4: anthologies about future crime

Part 5: articles about science fiction and law

The Internet Speculative Fiction Database is an online catalogue of works of science fiction, fantasy and horror. The ISFDB is searchable in several ways, including name of author, title of story or book, and magazine or book of publication.

Full bibliographic information for books is available online through the Library of Congress, Library and Archives Canada / Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, and British Library.

Part 1. legal science-fiction stories

Two criteria mark the stories which are listed in this part. The first criterion, which is the defining characteristic of science fiction in the Golden Age and now, is that a technological change, which has not yet occurred, provides the context of a story or makes the recited events possible. A story postulates, for example, space travel, or time travel, or human residence on other planets, or a society with machinery (such as rolling roadways) different from the machinery of the present one. It is technology-to-be, whether essential to the context or essential to the recitation, which distinguishes science fiction from other literature.

The second criterion is that a story turns on law. Mere mention of a law or of a trial is insufficient. A law or a trial has to be central to the narrative. The selected stories are both legal and literary in nature.

Science fiction involves itself with law, as does other literature. Examples of the latter are Charles Dickens, *BLEAK HOUSE* (1852-1853), Gilbert and Sullivan, "Trial by Jury" (1875), Franz Kafka, *THE TRIAL* (1925), *FORENSIC FABLES BY O* (1926), A. P. Herbert, *UNCOMMON LAW* (1935), and Aron Steuer, *AESOP IN THE COURTS* (1971).

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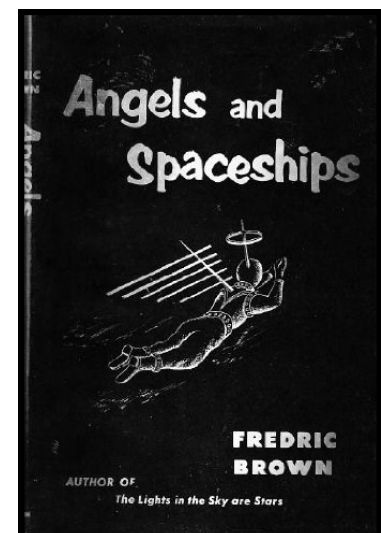
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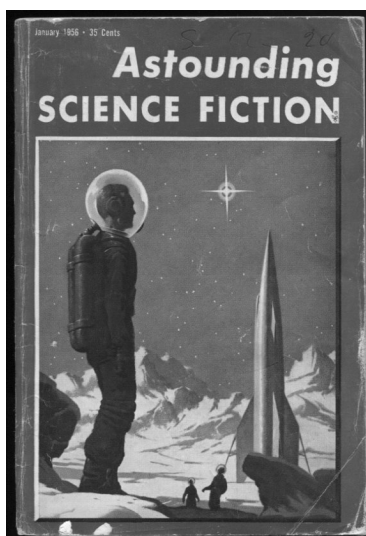
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Kristine Kathryn Rusch

"The Impossibles": *Analog*
(December, 2011)

Eric Frank Russell

"The Witness": *Other Worlds*
(September, 1951)

Robert J. Sawyer

"Just Like Old Times": *On Spec*
(Summer, 1993)

Kenneth Schneyer

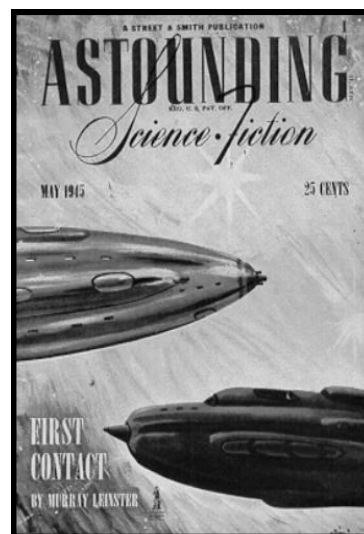
"The Whole Truth Witness": *Analog*
(October, 2010)

Bob Shaw

"Burden of Proof": *Analog* (May, 1967)

Robert Silverberg

"The Sixth Palace": *Galaxy*
(February, 1965)



Clifford D. Simak

"Desertion": *Astounding*
(November, 1944)

"How-2": *Galaxy* (November, 1954)

"New Folks' Home": *Analog*
(July, 1963)

Henry Slesar

"After" ('Lawyer' part): *Playboy*
(June, 1960)

Lord St. Davids

"In the High Court of Justice": *Analog*
(October, 1975)

William Tenn

"Party of the Two Parts": *Galaxy* (August, 1954)

"Time in Advance": *Galaxy* (August, 1956)

Theodore L. Thomas

"Mars Trial": *Future Science Fiction* No. 33 (Summer, 1957)

"The Law School": *Astounding* (June, 1958)

"Trial Without Combat": *Future Science Fiction* No. 28 (December, 1955)

Leonard Tushnet

"In re Glover": Harlan Ellison, ed., *AGAIN, DANGEROUS VISIONS* (1972)

A. E. Van Vogt

"The Great Judge": *Fantasy Book* (July, 1956)

"The Weapon Shop": *Astounding* (December, 1942)

William Vine

"Death Sentence": *Imagination* (June, 1953)

Edward Wellen

"Origins of Galactic Law": *Galaxy* (April, 1953)

Part 2: legal science-fiction novels**Alfred Bester**

THE DEMOLISHED MAN (1950)

Robert A. Heinlein

HAVE SPACE SUIT, WILL TRAVEL (1958)

STARSHIP TROOPERS (1959)

THE MAN WHO SOLD THE MOON (1956)

Frank Herbert

THE DOSADI EXPERIMENT (1977)

H. Beam Piper

LITTLE FUZZY (1962)

Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth

GLADIATOR-AT-LAW (1955)

Robert J. Sawyer

HOMINIDS (2002)

ILLEGAL ALIEN (1997)

MINDSCAN (2005)

Melinda M. Snodgrass

CIRCUIT (1986)

CIRCUIT BREAKER (1987)

FINAL CIRCUIT (1988)

Part 3: law stories which are not science-fiction stories

Of the two criteria put forward in Part 1, these stories meet the second criterion (turns on a legal issue), and do not meet the first criterion (a technological change which has not yet occurred). Consequently, the stories are not science-fiction stories, although they are law stories. More than half of the stories in this part were published first in science-fiction magazines.

Steve Allen

"The Public Hating": *Blue Book* (January, 1955)

Robert M. Coates

"The Law": *The New Yorker* (November 29, 1947)

Daniel A. Darlington

"Patent Rights": *Vertex* (December, 1974)

Avram Davidson

"The Unknown Law"

Fantasy and Science Fiction (June, 1964)

L. Sprague de Camp

"Language for Time-Travelers": *Astounding* (July, 1938)

Gordon R. Dickson

"Computers Don't Argue": *Analog* (September, 1965)

James P. Hogan

"Making Light": *Stellar* No. 7 (1981)

Joe Patrouch

"Legal Rights for Germs?": *Analog* (November, 1977)

Spider Robinson

"Melancholy Elephants": *Analog* (June, 1982)

T. L. Sherred

"Bounty": Harlan Ellison, ed., *AGAIN, DANGEROUS VISIONS* (1972)

Robert Silverberg

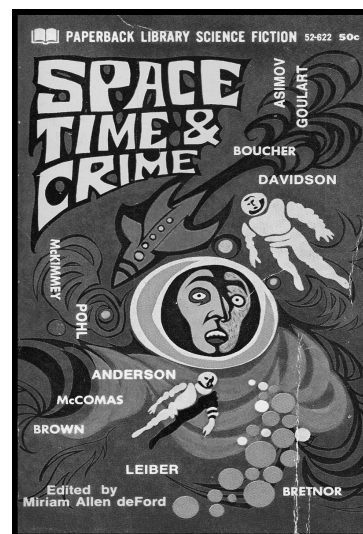
"(Now + n, Now - n)": Harry Harrison, ed., *NOVA* 2 (1972)

Dean Wesley Smith

"Flawless Execution": *The Clarion Awards* (July, 1984)

Theodore L. Thomas

"Motion Day at the Courthouse": *Analog* (October, 1971)

Part 4: anthologies about future crime**Miriam Allen deFord (ed.)**

SPACE, TIME AND CRIME (1964)

Barry N. Malzberg and Bill Pronzini (eds.)

DARK SINS, DARK DREAMS (1978)

Andre Norton (ed.)

SPACE POLICE (1956)

Hans Stefan Santesson (ed.)

CRIME PREVENTION IN THE 30TH CENTURY (1969)

Part 5: articles about science fiction and law**Alfredo Bullard G.**

"Law in Science Fiction[:]: Law and Technology: From Socialist Dystopia to Capitalist Utopia"

http://www.law.yale.edu/documents/pdf/sela/SELA11_Bullard_CV_Eng_20110325.pdf

Bruce Ledewitz

"The Place of Law & Science Fiction in a Law School Curriculum"

1 *Science Fiction Law Journal* 36 (1996)

Francis Lyall

"Law in Science Fiction: An Introduction"

55 *Foundation* 36 (1992)

Bruce L. Rockwood

"Symposium: Law, Literature, and Science Fiction"

23 *Legal Studies Forum* 267 (1999)

FIN.

Stark Adventuring: Leigh Brackett's Tales of Eric John Stark

by Mike Barrett

Leigh Brackett (1915-1978) contributed significantly to several different literary genres, and in each one she demonstrated an ability to successfully master the form. Her first story appeared in *Astounding* in 1940 and was distinguished by a hard edged narrative style which was popular with readers, and which led to her becoming a regular contributor to various sf pulp magazines of the day. Turning her attention temporarily to crime fiction, her 1944 novel *No Good from a Corpse* led directly to her working on the screenplay for the Humphrey Bogart/Lauren Bacall classic *The Big Sleep*. Howard Hawks, the film's producer, was reportedly so impressed by the novel that he told his secretary to get "this guy Brackett" to co-write the script with William Faulkner. Further major screenwriting credits included *Rio Bravo*, *El Dorado* and *Rio Lobo*, and that affinity with the Western was emphasised by her book *Follow the Free Wind*, which won the Spur Award for Best Western Novel of 1963.

But Brackett's primary focus was always science fiction, a field in which she was a commanding and influential writer, producing eleven novels and nearly sixty shorter pieces between 1940 and 1976. Her stories set on Mars are perhaps the most memorable, particularly in the way that they evoke haunting memories of the lost grandeur of a dying civilisation that was ancient before Man arose on Earth. She successfully wrote a series of entertaining adventures that utilised this extensive history as an effective backdrop, most notably in the 1953 novel *The Sword of Rhiannon*, which had originally appeared as "Sea Kings of Mars" in 1949, and which depicted the planet in its glorious halcyon days of a million years in the past.

This was in the tenth year of Brackett's career as a writer and marked the start of a significant period for her, with much of her best science fiction beginning to appear, including her tales of Eric John Stark; what may have helped to bring this about was the influence of Edmond Hamilton, who she had married at the very end of 1946. Hamilton carefully plotted his stories, with chapter by chapter summaries, whereas Brackett admitted that she tended to write with no specific pre-planning; she acknowledged that she learned to structure her fiction more carefully from her husband, and

this became apparent in an impressive sequence of longer tales. "Sea Kings of Mars" was certainly the best of Brackett's works up until that time, and it was quickly followed by another fine novelette in the form of "Queen of the Martian Catacombs". This introduced Brackett's best known character, Eric John Stark, an enduring creation who was to ultimately feature in four novelettes and three novels.

Stark was born to a family in a mining colony in the Mercurian twilight belt and orphaned early in his life. The only survivor of a deadly rock fall, he was saved and then raised as a native by aborigines as N'Chaka, the Man-Without-a-Tribe; they were eventually killed by predatory Earthmen, who caged and tormented the fourteen-year old Stark. He was finally rescued from captivity by the man who became his foster-father, Simon Ashton of the Earth Police Control, who tamed and civilised him, as much as he could be civilised. Those early experiences left their mark, and the savage that Stark was in his formative years is never far beneath the surface, sometimes exploding into vicious life in desperate situations and sometimes providing an advantage when "civilised" human reactions are insufficient. A man whose sympathies always lie with those he considers to be his own kind, the exploited and the oppressed, Stark is a powerful figure, tall and lean with a dark sun-burned complexion, black hair and pale eyes.

A skilled and practised warrior who is merciless to his enemies but intensely loyal to his friends, he also has an animal magnetism which holds a potent appeal for women, who admire his dominating masculinity and forthright approach, and for whom his lack of refinement presents no barrier at all. He is a soldier of fortune by profession, an enigmatic anti-hero in much the same mould as C L Moore's Northwest Smith, to whom he bears a strong literary resemblance. Smith also trod the ancient paths of Mars and Venus, pondered their measureless historical ages, and plumbed the dark secrets of ancient civilisations. Although Brackett's style of writing was quite different to Moore's, it is hard to believe that she was not influenced by the earlier writer, whose acclaimed stories had initially appeared in *Weird Tales* throughout the 1930s.

In his first story, “Queen of the Martian Catacombs”, Stark has been offered a job as a mercenary in the Low-Canal town of Valkis, but is being pursued across the Martian desert by officers of Earth Police Control under the command of Simon Ashton, who he has not seen for sixteen years. Stark is facing a twenty year sentence in the Luna cell-blocks for running guns to beleaguered rebels fighting a doomed battle against brutal corporate mistreatment. Cornered and unable to escape, he is offered a pardon by Ashton if he accepts the Valkis post and reports back on what is happening, which involves uniting warring tribes in the name of the mysterious ancient cult of the Ramas and its promise of physical immortality, fomenting a bloody rebellion to take control of the planet.



The action-packed story is absorbing reading as Stark discovers old enemies and treachery within the ranks he has joined, and is then stranded in the inimical and arid desert with the beautiful Berild. Reaching the ancient city of Sinharat, the Ever Living, events move quickly and soon come to a head, with Stark discovering the truth behind the planned uprising and thwarting the Twice Born in an exhilarating finale.

Brackett tells the tale with vivid descriptive prose, and the antiquity of the Martian cities is depicted well, evocative of past glories inestimably distant from the present. The hostility of the baking desert is also highlighted with a force that brings home the realities of the scorching sun and the overwhelming thirst afflicting the protagonists, as well as accentuating Stark's driven nature in his focused instinct to survive.

Stark next featured in “Enchantress of Venus”, a novelette which appeared a few months after “Queen of the Martian Catacombs”, and in which he is on Venus searching for a friend who went missing in Shuruun, an isolated and lawless port on the shores of the Red Sea, beyond the Mountains of

White Cloud. Captured by the Lhari, the last few survivors of a degenerate family of Cloud People exiled from the High Plateaus, Stark becomes one of the “Lost Ones”, slaves who are forced to excavate the ruins of an ancient city in search of the secret buried there, a secret hidden by an earlier reptilian race far in the past. Jealousy and hatred amongst the Lhari enable him to escape and lead a successful slaves' rebellion, although that triumph is tempered by his sombre reflection on the many lives lost.

“Enchantress of Venus” is a flowing well-paced adventure with some good characterisations. There is the venal and treacherous Malthor, the innocent and trusting Zareth and the crippled Treon, last of the Lhari and a man who has foreseen the approaching end of his family but who ultimately finds dignity and grace in his passing. It also further develops the nature and personality of Stark, who dominates the plot with his aggressive persona of barely repressed violence and his empathy for the plight of the subjugated and dispirited “Lost Ones”. Bitter memories of his own youthful imprisonment and mistreatment have instilled an abiding hatred of slavery in him which means that he will always defy his captors and fight for freedom —both his own and that of others— against all odds and regardless of the cost.

He also has a strong code of honour, this being apparent in the third story, “Black Amazon of Mars” from 1951, with Stark back on the Red Planet returning the stolen talisman of the legendary Ban Cruath to distant Kushat as a final favour to a dead friend. Captured and tortured by Mekh tribesmen, he learns of their intention to attack Kushat and determines to alert the city to the approaching danger. Escaping the clutches of the Mekh and their enigmatic masked leader Ciaran, Stark reaches Kushat and delivers his warning, but the city's defences are inadequate and it falls to the invaders after a bloody battle. One man, Balin, resolves to brave the Gates of Death, a forbidden pass to the northern ice cap, and utilize the age-old power said to reside there to defeat the enemy. Stark, whose brief use of the talisman means that he is aware of the deadly nature of what lies beyond the Gates, follows.

An exciting story which fully maintained the high standard set by its predecessors, “Black Amazon of Mars” is again descriptively impressive with the frigid wastes and the freezing cold depicted with convincing assurance. The shining ones of the strange city beyond the Gates are quite literally chilling entities, lords of the glacial ice, barred from bringing their arctic force to bear on the rest of the planet by a million-year old barrier which they are desperate to breach. The epochs that have passed since the time of Ban Cruath and the huge gulf between then and now is well portrayed; the enduring image is that of Ban Cruath, dead a million years, his preserved frozen body eternally guarding the Gates of Death, his sword of power ever alight in his hand. The story instills a commanding impression of the utter strangeness and eeriness of the polar citadel, and ranks very highly in the Brackett pantheon.

After three excellent novelettes in less than two years featuring John Eric Stark, readers probably expected that there would be more to come involving this intriguing character, but there was to be a wait of over two decades before that happened. In the meantime, two of the three Stark stories did appear as an Ace Double paperback in September 1964. Each was prosaically renamed, “Queen of the Martian Catacombs” becoming *The Secret of Sinharat* and “Black Amazon of Mars” retitled *People of the Talisman*. These were revised and expanded versions of the originals, and unlike such earlier Brackett novels as *The Sword of Rhiannon* and *The Nemesis*

from *Terra* they did have some significant differences as compared to their magazine appearances.

The Secret of Sinharat is much the same as “Queen of the Martian Catacombs” for its first half but then diverges; the story goes in the same direction but takes a different path, with some substantial variations, particularly at the conclusion with Stark left pondering his mortality and the temptation of eternal life. The plot of *People of the Talisman* is similar to “Black Amazon of Mars” up until the point where Stark reaches Kushat, but then veers off in a quite different direction in a much extended format. The changes result in what is a good book, but one that loses some of the driving force of the original story and its imaginatively striking depiction of the icy lords beyond the Gates of Death.

There is the persistent suggestion that it was Edmond Hamilton who was responsible for the 1964 revisions, and if that is so then he did do a good job of replicating Brackett’s style of writing. He presumably also changed the latter part of “Black Amazon of Mars” with his wife’s permission, although why there was felt to be the need to make such wholesale changes is a mystery. However, both versions do work well, and both deserve to be read.

This seemed destined to be the last appearance of Brackett’s inscrutable hero, but in the early 1970s, she collaborated with Edmond Hamilton to produce “Stark and the Star Kings”, which was due to be published in the Harlan Ellison edited anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions*. The book did not however appear and eventually the story was published in the compilation *Stark and the Star Kings* in 2005; it is a good tale, the “first, one and only, true, authentic collaboration” of the two authors.

The narrative begins on Mars, with Stark summoned by the almost legendary Aarl, Lord of the Third Bend, a man who even the Ramas of Sinharat “had known nothing about... but they feared his strength”. A mysterious cosmic force is draining energy from the whole of the Solar System and Aarl has discovered that its source is 200,000 years in the future, in the world of the Star Kings; Stark is transported there to find the source of the problem and resolve it while there is still time. It is a flowing and appealing space opera, utilizing the Star Kings setting that Hamilton had popularized in the 1940s; Stark fully retains his personality in the story, his actions and reactions being consistent with the character introduced in the earlier fiction, and at the end he returns to Mars chastened and in awe of what he has experienced.

This story, reportedly written in 1973, may have provided the impetus that prompted Brackett to bring her redoubtable hero back into print for the three novels in the *Skaith* series, *The Ginger Star* (1974), *The Hounds of Skaith* (1974) and *The Reavers of Skaith* (1976). By this time, fiction placed in such scientifically impossible locations as the deserts of Mars or the swamplands of Venus had become unacceptable to publishers,

and consequently Brackett chose an extra-galactic setting for the new adventures, but a setting which fully preserved the appeal of the earlier stories.

The action of the three books takes place on Skaith a distant, recently discovered planet in the remoteness of the largely unexplored Orion Spur. Skaith is an ancient but dying world, its sun only likely to last for a few more decades; temperatures are falling and what will be an endless winter is fast approaching, although the temperate zones remain largely unaffected for the time being. Many of the inhabitants view their grim future with fatalism, others simply live for the moment, and there are those who neither know nor wish to know any other life. Various religious factions have arisen, with vastly different agendas, some seeking to halt the death of the sun and some anticipating the arrival of the cold with relish.

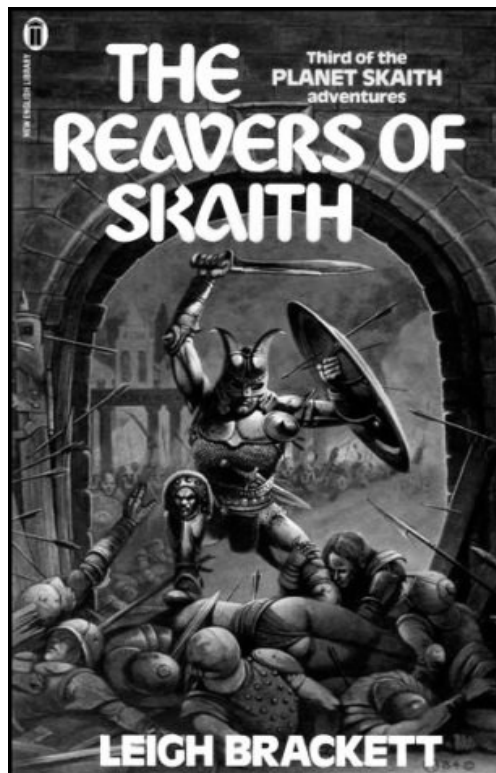
The all-powerful Lords Protector, thought to be immortal, rule from their impregnable Citadel far in the frozen north, guarded by the fearsome Northhounds. Originally a force for benevolence and charitable aid, the Lords have regressed to a dictatorial regime that holds much of the planet in thrall

through their enforcers, the Wandsmen. In the last twelve years, since starships first arrived on the planet, there has been much talk of leaving; many ordinary people of the city-states are looking for a better, longer life for themselves and their descendants, and the alternative of the stars gives them a hope that they had never before anticipated. But emigration would lessen the strength of the Lords Protector, and is consequently opposed by them in their stubborn refusal to accept the need for change.

In the first novel, “The Ginger Star”, Stark is searching for Simon Ashton, the man who rescued him from captivity when he was a boy, and who disappeared soon after arriving on Skaith in response to a call to discuss emigration. Stark finds that he himself has a pre-ordained role as the Dark Man of the natives’ prophecies, the man who will lead them from under the yoke of the Wandsmen and away from their dying planet to the stars. Uncomfortable with

such a role, but reluctantly accepting it as a means to help find Ashton, he faces danger and treachery on all sides; instrumental in the overthrowing of the Wandsmen at the city-state of Irnan he then embarks on a hazardous journey north towards the Citadel. There are confrontations with the People of the Towers, the cannibalistic Outdwellers, the People of the Hammer and the Children of Skaith-Our-Mother before Stark finds himself a prisoner deep within the mountainous Witchfires. Finally escaping, he then has to confront Flay, the pack-leader of the Northhounds, before breaching the Citadel and finally facing the Lords Protector.

“The Ginger Star” is a fast-paced and entertaining book, with a variety of imaginative scenarios and an array of colourful characters, and it also evokes the ambiance of the cold, doomed planet particularly well. The next book “The Hounds of Skaith” is a direct continuation of the story, and begins with Stark and the Northhounds pursuing the two



separate groups of Lords Protector and Wandsmen south, clashing with the voracious Runners and the Hooded Men of the Ochar. The revolution instigated at Irnan in the first volume gathers pace in the wake of the destruction of the Citadel and the lure of the starships at Skeg. The Wandsmen seek to close the spaceport and destroy Irnan, mistakenly thinking that this will quell the insurrection and restore normality, convinced that this is in the best interests of the people. Stark has other ideas, and raising an army of the Lesser Hearth tribes and the winged Fallarin, he takes Yurunna, the seat of the Wandsmen's power, and then heads for Irnan in a planet hopper armed with a laser cannon, raising the siege and defeating the mercenary army from the Inner Barrens. The book ends with the promise of the opening of the star-roads becoming a reality.

The second novel fully maintains the drive of the first book and moves the plot forward well, particularly in the way it shows the gathering momentum of the changes in thinking that the starships have brought to the people of Skaith. The concluding volume of the series, "The Reavers of Skaith", does not disappoint. Stark and the people who believed in him have been betrayed by the Altarean Peankawr-Che, the man trusted to open the starways, and Stark the saviour is now reviled and hated, the promised deliverance now looked upon as a lie. Meanwhile, various factions realise that they must move south to combat the relentlessly falling temperatures, in a tacit admission that the northern parts of Skaith will soon become uninhabitable and that alternatives have to be sought; similarly the people of the southern realms are migrating towards the temperate zones, driven by failing crops and increasing cold. The betrayal by Peankawr-Che has played into the Wandsmen's hands, and with no longer any perceived threat from starships and consequent emigration they are now consolidating and re-establishing their power at Ged Darod.

Imprisoned by the Peankawr-Che, Stark effects a daring escape and then makes his embittered way to seek out the rebel Wandsman Pelladron as a hopeful means of getting off the planet. But there are those who still have faith in the Dark Man, and a band of Hallarin, Tafts, Northhounds and Irnanase also head south under the leadership of Gerrith, Stark's lover and a seer who prophesies that the Dark Man is still the redeemer. An unbearably high price is paid but Stark rouses the Four Kings of the White Islands, driven from Ged Darod many decades earlier, and in an uneasy alliance they march on their old home with Stark as their leader. The beleaguered Wandsmen face enemies on all sides and the arrival of Stark's army brings about their final downfall. Out of the bleak times on Skaith, a new era really is beginning, although Stark has paid a high personal price and derives little pleasure from the part he has played in it.

Skaith is a fascinating world, detailed and well thought out. The inexorable dying of the planet does in some ways echo the failing world depicted in the author's stories of

Mars, but Skaith's end is approaching far more quickly, accelerating into a bleak and eternal winter. It is the effect on the inhabitants, and their gradual realisation of imminent demise, that is one of the strengths of the books, with reactions varying from a stubborn ignoring of the facts, through resigned acceptance of what is to come, and on to the need to escape through the newly accessible starways.

Skaith is an ancient but dying world, its sun only likely to last for a few more decades; temperatures are falling and what will be an endless winter is fast approaching...

Taken as a whole, the *Skaith* novels are fine examples of the genre, each book telling its own distinct part of what is an admirably developed story full of incident, and in Stark they feature a ready made larger than life character to dominate the intriguing plot. Brackett utilises many of the trappings of fantasy in her narrative, with fearsome monsters and sword-play, but it remains firmly rooted in science fiction, and the three books were

first-rate additions to a Brackett catalogue that had already produced much that was outstanding.

Eric John Stark was a memorable hero, a man who featured in relatively few stories but who made a lasting impression thanks to the undoubted skills of his talented creator. *The Reavers of Skaith* was in fact Leigh Brackett's last novel, as she died on March 18, 1978 at the age of only 62. Towards the end of her life, she returned to the writing of screenplays and wrote the first draft of *The Empire Strikes Back* for George Lucas, although it does not appear that much if anything of that draft was used in the final version, and the fact that the film credits both her and Lawrence Kasdan with the script was perhaps a final epitaph to a fine writer.

Much of Brackett's science fiction is in print at the present time, and unlike many of her original contemporaries from the 1940s and 1950s, her work has not significantly dated and she continues to be a much admired storyteller. The worlds and the characters she shaped so well still endear her to readers seeking out vigorously told adventures with colourfully exotic backgrounds, and will no doubt continue to do so for many years to come.

FIN.

LEIGH BRACKETT'S STARK TALES

"Queen of the Martian Catacombs" (*Planet Stories*, Summer 1949)

"Enchantress of Venus" (*Planet Stories*, Fall 1949) aka "City of the Lost Ones"

"Black Amazon of Mars" (*Planet Stories*, March 1951)

The Ginger Star (Ballantine, May 1974)

The Hounds of Skaith (Ballantine, October 1974)

The Reavers of Skaith (Ballantine, August 1976)

"Stark and the Star Kings" (*Stark and the Star Kings*, 2005, with Edmond Hamilton)

Joanne Hall interviews Andy Bigwood

by Joanne Hall



Joanne: *Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?*

Andy Bigwood: Artist, cartographer, author, convention organiser and bridge Engineer. I live in Wiltshire and consider 'The North' to be anyplace the other side of the M4. I trained in technical illustration in Bath when the most technical bit of kit they had was an airbrush. I missed the first episode of Doctor Who by a month.

How did you come to be an artist?

I became an artist at 3:10pm on a Saturday in 1977 in the Odeon Cinema. I watched that first Star Destroyer fly overhead, filling the screen and then too big for the screen. My first SF art was a spaceship built from Airfix Bismark kits photographed on my parents doorstep. I became a professional artist whilst fighting plague scorpions in an MMORG. Truthfully I owe everything to Storm Constantine and Ian Whates for giving me a way in.

Who would you say your inspirations are?

Primarily the art of Chris Foss, but also Jim Burns, the artist for the British cover of Anne McCaffrey's early Dragon books, the team that created Jerry Anderson's vehicles to name only a few.

Where else do you take inspiration from?

I take a camera with me whenever possible; there are always little things that can be of use. A cloud becomes a hawk, the discoloured plastic roof of Bath Railway station becomes the engine nacelle of a spaceship, a cauliflower becomes an alien's sightless face.

Do you have a favourite artist?

Chris Foss.

How were you introduced to fantasy and SF art?

I wouldn't say I was introduced to it; it was more like simply breathing it in. In the 1970's I could get a bus to Bristol and go to an independent book shop that had a ground floor of new SF, an upper floor of second hander 1960s classics and a display of Gerry Anderson's original vehicle models in the basement!

Do you have any particular favourite books/movies?

This could be a very long list, but I will try to be brief and cover a range of genres. *The White Dragon* by Anne McCaffrey, *Magician* by R.E.Fiest, *Wraeththu* by Storm Constantine, *Honor Harrington Series* by David Weber, *1632* by Eric Flint, *Vatta's War* by Elizabeth Moon. For humour fiction I'd go with something like *Myth Directions* by Robert Asprin, or anything by Sir Terry Pratchett. For TV its Dr Who first, then Jerry Anderson's various series. Musically Jeff Wayne's *War of the Worlds* and the film score to *The Battle of Britain* can send a shiver up my spine. Movies, too many to mention and none that really stand above the rest

You write as well. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

I have four short stories in print and a totally ambitious project that seemed like a good idea at the time! Three of the short stories are set in Storm Constantine's Wraeththu Mythos and can be found in the Anthologies *Paragenesis* and *Para Imminence*. The fourth story is in the charity ebook *Colinology: The Colin Harvey Memorial Anthology* — all profits from which go to the Above and Beyond charity.

My big project was *'The Sixty'* published by Immanion Press, this is an art book with sixty of my pictures accompanied by ultra-short fiction from 40 UK based authors (you know who you are!). Strangely it is on sale in America for twice the cover price... I guess it helps when the likes of Geoff Nelder keep winning things.

I am currently working on a novel.

I've seen your work on cover art from sketch stage to finished article. Could you talk us through the process?

When doing genre art covers I think it is very important that the cover has at least a passing similarity to the story. I recall some disappointment in my youth when a magnificent cover had no relation to the story within. I wanted to read what the picture promised, so when I am doing cover art the author's opinion and desires are almost paramount. The Publisher has the final say, but a happy author is in everyone's interest.

The process starts with a face to face meeting or exchange of emails with the author. I then go away and draw *'Rhubarb'*... this is a technical term... the first drawing *'is about as useful as a stick of rhubarb'*. When doing covers, my art is created within Photoshop as a combination of digital painting and photo-manipulation,

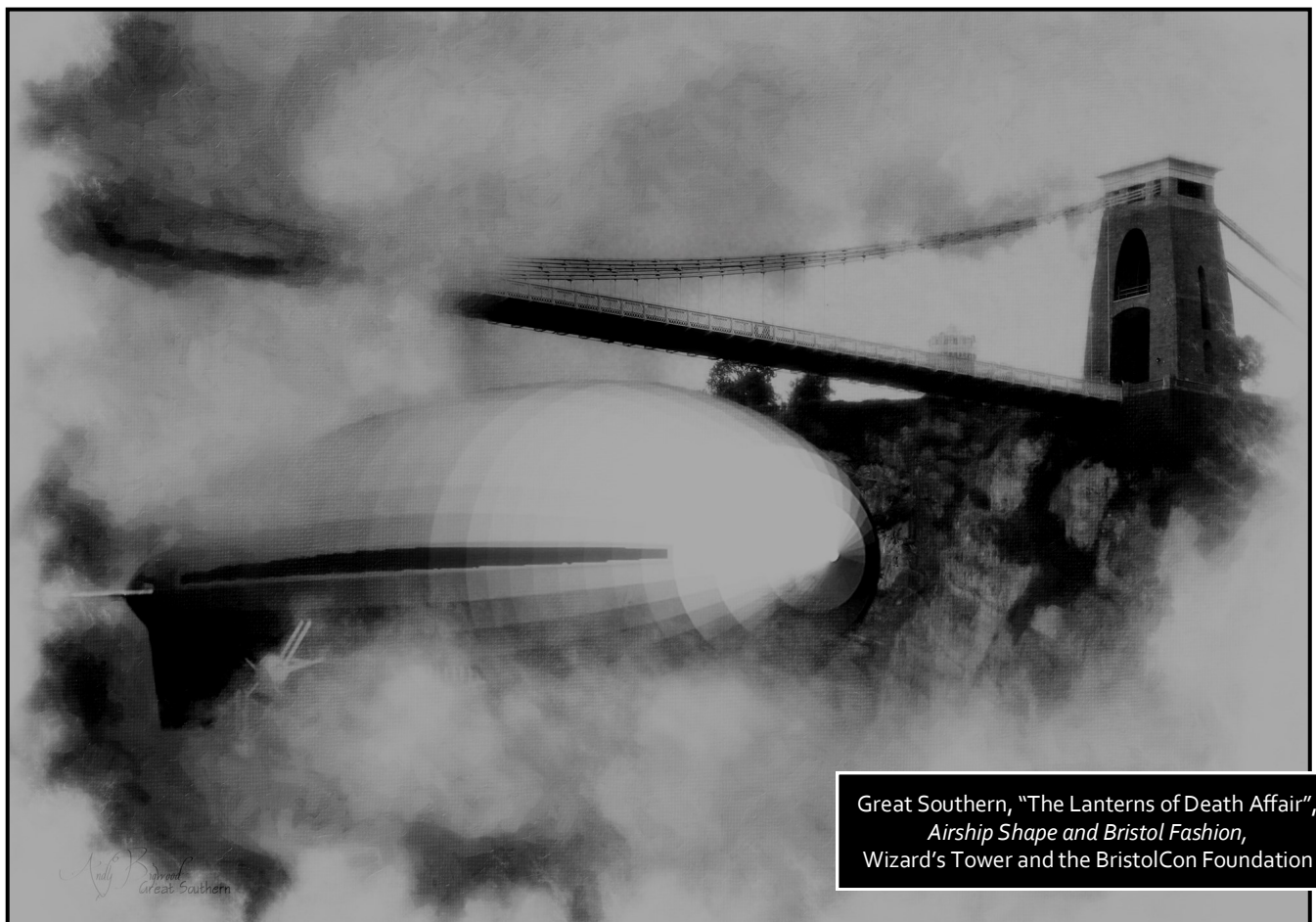
so rhubarb can look quite a lot closer to finished than a pencil sketch might. The art will then ping back and forth as I narrow in on what is needed.

Once the front art is sorted I turn my focus to the title font and spine. For a traditional book the spine is almost more important than the front. It's the spine that you see out of the corner of your eye in Waterstones. Next up is the back cover which is often a continuation of the front, the fun with the back cover is reducing the five pages critical recommendations to a half page above the barcode. For the cover itself, the process ends there.

As a digital artist I am faced with the problem that my art is infinitely replicable. To transmute the digital art into something unique, I print it to canvas, get it framed and then over-painted with acrylic gloss impasto gel (often mixed with holographic gel). The Holo-gel is particularly useful for creating pinpoint stars that can't be done digitally.

When you're doing book covers, what kind of input from the author is useful?

From the artist's point of view the best input from an author is a short brief (less than 300 words) giving a general concept. Some authors have the cover fully painted in their head; this can be an interesting challenge



Great Southern, "The Lanterns of Death Affair",
Airship Shape and Bristol Fashion,
Wizard's Tower and the BristolCon Foundation

C-Ring — a solar sailship sailing past the Ring Mountains



given that telepathy hasn't been invented yet. At the other extreme is the author who passes me a 500,000 word manuscript to pick a scene from, even if it is the next Harry Potter I don't have the spare month to find the best bit to illustrate.

What about drawing maps? Does that draw on a different set of skills?

"I love drawing the crinkly bits! (I won prizes for Norway)". But seriously, I draw two sorts of map, Tolkien-ish fantasy maps and the counties of England expressed in the style of underground maps. The former is an exercise in fun slipping in 'easter-egg' place names or applying global warming to Florida. When a fantasy map is done for publication I have to take care that the map reflects the author's concept of distance, this is a very interactive process requiring beer and beer mats.

The tube map is rather more like a Sudoku puzzle and a game anyone can try. Take an area, any town with a C road or bigger is a 'station-stop' if two roads meet it's a circle, lines can only go vertical, horizontal or 45 degrees, station-stops should be equally spaced. Fair warning one of these takes me far longer than a cover.

What media do you work in, and do you have a preferred medium?

As mentioned earlier my primary tools are Photoshop and acrylics.

What kind of creative patterns, routines or rituals do you have?

I find that I cannot paint and write fiction in the same week, I have to do one or the other. I do Photoshop in the evenings, I paint to canvas before Sunday lunch at Mum's and I write on the train.

Any tips you can offer aspiring artists?

Get out more! I'm an introvert, parties and pubs are not my natural environment. I think that the best thing an aspiring genre artist can do is exhibit at the literary conventions, EasterCon, BristolCon, FantasyCon... Before you can blink you will be on first name terms with some of the UK's best artists, and publishers.

What is your dream project?

A sequel to *'The Sixty'* but with insanely famous international authors like JK or Sir Terry, big gold leaf letters embellished on parchment pages bound in embossed leather ...and in a thousand years I want some Archaeologist digging it up nearly intact allowing future humanity to rediscover SF!

FIN.

recurrent: RESONANCES

Stephen Baxter

On the colonisation of nearby stars

My novel *Proxima* (Gollancz, 2013) is about the colonisation of a habitable planet of the star Proxima Centauri, a member of the triple-star Alpha Centauri system and the nearest star of all to the sun. Purely because of its sheer closeness Proxima has featured quite frequently in sf before, but as a 'red dwarf' star – small and dim – it's generally been seen as an unpromising venue for life. But in recent years we have been discovering 'exoplanets', planets of nearby stars, and as a result we've learned an awful lot more about planets, their origin and nature, than we ever could have learned from the worlds of the solar system alone. And my novel was inspired by exciting new ideas about planets of stars like Proxima.

That Alpha Centauri is the closest stellar system was established in 1832 by a Scottish astronomer called Thomas Henderson, working at an observatory in South Africa (Alpha Centauri is invisible from the northern hemisphere). The two principal stars, known as A and B, are no further apart than the planets in our solar system. Proxima, the third star, is so dim it's invisible to the naked eye despite its closeness; it was discovered later, in 1915, by an astronomer called R T A Innes working at Johannesburg. Proxima orbits the main binary pair four hundred times further away than B is from A (it's so far out that there's some controversy about whether it's really part of the Alpha system at all). As I said Proxima is an unspectacular red dwarf, a minor component of this system – but it is actually more representative of the Galaxy's stars than either Alpha A or B, or indeed Sol; while only a few per cent of stars are like Sol, seventy per cent are like Proxima.

In fiction Proxima's purpose has generally been simply to serve as the default destination for early interstellar missions because of its closeness – much as the moon, the

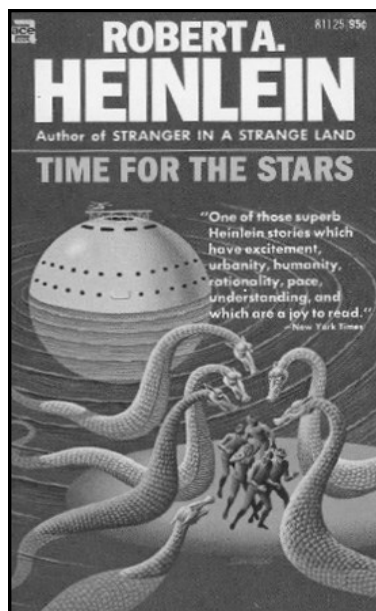
closest of the solar system's worlds, is a natural first target for interplanetary flight, even though the moon and Proxima may seem unpromising destinations in themselves. The first fictional starship bound for Proxima may have been by the mighty *Adastra*, in Murray Leinster's 'Proxima Centauri' (1935). The crew travel to Proxima for that most enduring of reasons: it is the 'nearest of the fixed stars to humanity's solar system' (chapter I). Proxima turns out to be a reddish ringed star with six planets. There is a level of realism; the journey across four light years takes a sensible seven years, with a peak velocity close to lightspeed and deceleration at one gravity. But the

hopeful crew are immediately met by hostile 'Centaurians': plant-based creatures who predate on human meat, and turn envious eyes on Earth.

Proxima was again mankind's first interstellar target in Robert Heinlein's famous two-part serial 'Universe' and 'Common Sense' (1941): 'The Proxima Centauri Expedition, sponsored by the Jordan Foundation in 2119, was the first recorded attempt to reach the nearer stars of this galaxy. Whatever its unhappy fate we can only conjecture...' After a mutiny, the descendants of the crew of the generation starship *Vanguard* forget they are on a ship at all. But after a Galileo of the Ship emerges - 'Nevertheless – it still moves!' – the Ship does reach a destination, but it's not clear if this is Proxima or not. In

Heinlein's brisk and enjoyable *Time for the Stars* (1956) Proxima is the first destination for a rather more rapid interstellar craft, the 'torchship' *Avant Garde*; the crew ingeniously exploit telepathic identical twins for faster-than-light communication.

Harry Harrison's *Captive Universe* (1969) is another variation on the generation starship theme, with Proxima once more the designated target. Again the crew are unaware that they are on a ship, but this time the ignorance is





deliberate, designed; the descendants of abducted 'Aztecs' believe they are still on Earth, but their 'valley' is actually carved into the interior of an engineered asteroid. Unlike Heinlein's robustly progressive piece, Harrison's characters condemn the Ozymandian 'Great Designer' behind all this.

James Blish's 'Common Time' (1953) features one of the more remarkable first port of call trips to Proxima. In the faster-than-light ship DPC-3 astronaut Garrard suffers peculiar distortions of subjective time, and has a dreamlike encounter with inhabitants of the star system: 'I shall adore the radioteles of Alpha and Proxima Centauri.' The story can be interpreted on many levels – Damon Knight thought it was a metaphor for procreation – but it seems essentially to be a meditation on the sheer strangeness of distant worlds and alien life.

The tradition of using Proxima as first interstellar target has continued, even if quite often we see nothing of Proxima itself or its worlds. Proxima is first port of call for Harold Randolph Hunter, an accidental traveller in space and time in Robert L Forward's more or less bonkers *Timemaster* (Tor, 1992). Forward excelled at turning outré science concepts into twisty, pulpish plots. Hunter's Proxima has four planets, including one

habitable world. The eponymous experimental starship of the 1997 movie *Event Horizon* (dir. Paul W S Anderson) disappears in 2040 during its maiden voyage to Proxima, when its experimental gravity-warp drive causes it to fall into another dimension.

As recently as the 2009 *Doctor Who* special 'The Waters of Mars' Proxima is again the first destination of mankind when faster-than-light travel is developed. The mission is piloted by Susie Fontana Brooke, granddaughter of the commander of the first mission to Mars who, at the end of her life, met the Tenth Doctor.

In sagas of more expansive interstellar colonisation, Proxima's relative closeness to Sol makes it a likely candidate for an early Earth colony. Thus Proxima III (the third planet of Proxima) was a key location in Straczynski's *Babylon 5*. It had been the site of an industrial colony in the twenty-second century; by the twenty-third century it had broken away from the Earth Alliance. The fourth series episode 'No Surrender, No Retreat' saw a siege of the colony by Earth Alliance troops, thwarted by Captain John Sheridan of the B5 station: 'Captain's Personal Log... Enough is enough.' This was the beginning of a civil war for humanity.

In the *Star Trek* universe, meanwhile, a Proxima colony in the twenty-second-century era of the *Enterprise* series was referenced in the episode 'Borderland'; a Klingon warship was spotted there, a presage of conflict to come. By the twenty-fourth century the Proxima system was the home of Starfleet maintenance yards (*Deep Space Nine*: 'Past Tense, Part I') and hosted an Interplanetary Bowling League (!) (*The Next Generation*: 'The Schizoid Man').

If it is inhabited, however, the sheer closeness of the Proxima system might be a cause of hostilities with Earth. We went to war with the Proximans in Stewart Cowley's lavish and entertaining 'Terran Trade Authority' series, beginning with *Spacecraft 2000 to 2100 AD* (1978). These are essentially picture books of gorgeous space warships, illustrated by the likes of Jim Burns. It was evidently all great fun. Today the TTA franchise is still alive, being the subject of an RPG, and enshrined in numerous websites maintained by mostly male fans, mostly of a certain age.

Decades earlier, Philip K Dick repeatedly used the Proxima system as a location for enemies of mankind. In 'The Variable Man' (1953), twenty-second-century humanity is locked in conflict with a Centauran empire based on the 'hub planet Armun'. The Nazi-like techno-

cratic government of Terra, seeking to break the stalemate, relies on statistical computer predictions of victory. The 'variable man' of the title is an odd-job man from 1913, scooped up in a 'time bubble', whose presence in 2136 throws the predictions into chaos.

Rather deeper by Dick is his novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1964), which, set in the year 2016, features what appears to be an invasion from Proxima, or rather from the spaces between Proxima and Earth. The industrialist Palmer Eldritch, on his return from a journey to Proxima, begins to market a highly addictive hallucinogen called Chew-Z to humans on Terra and on the miserable hovel-strewn colonised worlds of the solar system. The drug actually allows an infection of the human psyche by an intersystem entity. Under its snail trappings the book is permeated by Christian theology and symbolism – the drug-taking is likened to holy communion – prefiguring the revelatory works later in Dick's career. But it is the sheer inhuman scale of interstellar journeys that is being explored here. In the 'vast expanses between Sol and Proxima' the higher entity 'waited for some form of life form to pass by which it could grab and become'. *Stigmata* is surely the most significant use of Proxima in sf.

In the sf of the past little thought seems to have been given to the details of life on any worlds of Proxima. But then the scientific consensus used to be that stars like Proxima could not host Earthlike worlds, because such a world would need to be so close to the chill star that tidal effects would lock its rotation; with one face in eternal day and the other in unending night the world would be barely habitable – wouldn't it?

This perception goes back at least as far as Olaf Stapledon, whose astral traveller in *Star Maker* (1937) ignored Proxima, but Stapledon did pause (in section VII chapter 3) to inspect tidally locked worlds of the Proximan sort. He opined that they would be occupied by 'vegetable humanities'. In the ages of spin-down any life would have had to adapt to the slowing of the world's rotation, either hibernating through the long nights or migrating in pursuit of day. When the rotation was lost altogether life would only be possible in a thin band around the world's terminator, the only location neither too hot nor too cold, and with the atmosphere mostly frozen out it would not be possible 'to maintain any richness and delicacy of mental life'.

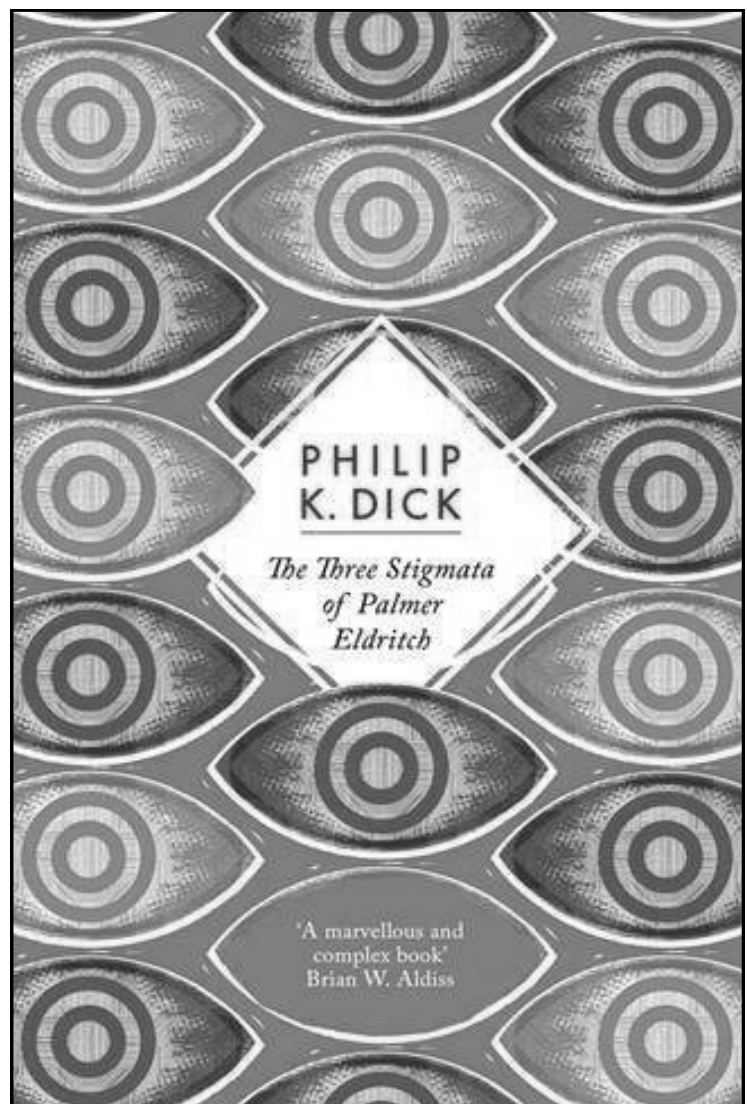
This was the standard view, but now we suspect that this model is wrong, and that red dwarfs like Proxima can after all host habitable worlds

(see for example 'A Reappraisal of the Habitability of Planets Around M Dwarf Stars', J. Tarter et al, *Astrobiology* Volume 7, Number 1, pp30-65, 2007). Even a thin blanket of air would transport enough heat around such a planet to keep the dark side from freezing entirely, and a deep enough ocean would not freeze to the sea bed.

And since red dwarfs are by far the most numerous stars, and since they are much more long-lived than the sun, suddenly the Galaxy looks much more hospitable for life-like humans than it did just a few years ago. Some scientists even claim that red dwarf stars may be the favoured locations for the origin and evolution of life.

Good old Proxima! For decades it has generally been selected as an interstellar destination only because it happens to be the closest star. But if it did turn out to host an Earthlike planet, Proxima may turn out to be our most important neighbour of all.

The Nazi-like technocratic government of Terra, seeking to break the stalemate, relies on statistical computer predictions of victory.



recurrent:

FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

Andy Sawyer

Sign of the Labrys by Margaret St. Clair

It made me think of a cross between A. E. Van Vogt and Mary Renault. And I mean that in a good way.

Margaret St Clair's *Sign of the Labrys* is notorious for one of the most overblown blurbs ever to appear on the back of a science fiction novel. "WOMEN ARE WRITING SCIENCE-FICTION!" screams the back of the 1963 Corgi edition (verbatim, it seems from the spelling) from the original US Bantam printing: "ORIGINAL! BRILLIANT! DAZZLING!" We are then told the significance of this:

"Women are closer to the primitive than men. They are conscious of the moon-pulls, the earth-tides. They possess a buried memory of humankind's obscure and ancient past which can emerge to uniquely colour and flavor (sic) a novel.

"Such a woman is Margaret St Clair, author of this novel. Such a novel is this, SIGN OF THE LABRYS, the story of a doomed world of the future, saved by recourse to ageless, immemorial rites... FRESH! IMAGINATIVE!! INVENTIVE!!!"

Justine Larbalestier, in *Daughters of Earth*, calls this "an eccentric brand of feminism at best", although wryly pointing out that "[i]t's more empowering to have 'a buried memory of humankind's obscure and ancient past' than to be suited for no job but that of a third-grade teacher, regardless of your accomplishments" (*Daughters of Earth* p. 112). It's certainly a blurb which has been noticed, and its hyperbole may even have contributed to the fact that Margaret St Clair (who also published as Idris Seabright) is one of far too many sf writers of the mid-twentieth century who are virtually unknown even among fans who claim that they know something about the genre. (If this sounds sanctimonious, let me point out that I was almost certainly put off by the blurb when, many years ago, I made the decision not to read *Sign of the Labrys*, although it was the atrocious cover which finally tipped the scales.) It was only when reading some fine pieces on St Clair on the "SF Mistressworks" website that I decided to investigate.

So who was Margaret St Clair? Born in Kansas in 1911, she majored in Classics at the University of California, Berkeley and then gained a masters in Greek (there is an untranslated Greek phrase which stands as the dedication of *Sign of the Labrys* to her husband Eric). She first published sf in *Fantastic Adventures* in November 1946 with "Rocket to Limbo" and had published some 30 stories in various venues such as *Startling* and *Thrilling Wonder* by 1950. During the 50s she published most of her "Idris Seabright" stories in *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Her first novel, *Agent of the Unknown* (1956), was part of an Ace Double, reprinting a 1952 story from *Startling* originally published as "Vulcan's Dolls". In the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* John Clute writes of its "sense of extraordinary constriction, to which the elegiac conclusion of the tale adds a powerful emotional glow". She published eight novels in all, of which *The Dancers of Noyo* (1973) was the last. There are also three collections of her short fiction. She died (aged 84) in 1995.

Much of her work fuses fantasy and sf in a way which we will see on *Labrys*. Sometimes this fusion moves towards a rather empty whimsicality depending on pulp-friendly "shock" endings, but often, in stories like "Stawdust", "Lazarus", "Iron Fort", "Asking" and "The Goddess on the Street Corner" (all in *Change the Sky*) there is (Clute again) "a singularly claustrophobic pessimism" which packs a powerful emotional punch. "Asking" for instance, gives us the solution to the protagonist's problems in a cup of raw alcohol. Chas S. Chilton, a writer on pagan issues, has published a fascinating essay on his discovery of Margaret St Clair ("Chasing Margaret") in his online series of essays "Letter From Hardscrabble Creek". From the word "labrys", Chilton deduces that St Clair had been reading Robert Graves, who had suggested in *The White Goddess* that the sign of the double-headed axe was a symbol of goddess-worship. He discovers that she had almost certainly read *Witchcraft Today* (1954) by Gerald Gardner, the book which some say invented modern Wicca, finding

echoes of it throughout *Sign of the Labrys*. Chilton tells us that the St Clairs were initiated into Wicca in 1966 by Raymond and Rosemary Buckland, had introduced Gardnerian Wicca into the USA two years earlier. Raymond Buckland had apparently critiqued *Labrys* for "Craft detail" shortly after its publication in 1963.

So what is *Sign of the Labrys*?

Like many science fiction novels and stories of the time (such as *Level 7* (1959) by Mordecai Roshwald or Philip K. Dick's 1964 *The Penultimate Truth*), it is set underground. Much of the action takes place in shelters which have been built as a refuge for nuclear war, although it is in fact a series of "yeast plagues" which devastated humanity and created the weird society in which narrator Sam Sewell lives. Food and other supplies are easily available in vast stockpiles. People are employed in make-work activities: "I don't know whether I have a job or not: I go there in the mornings, and sometimes they put me to work . . . I have moved the same stack of boxes over and over again." (p.1) but what gives the setting its immediate kick is that, partly

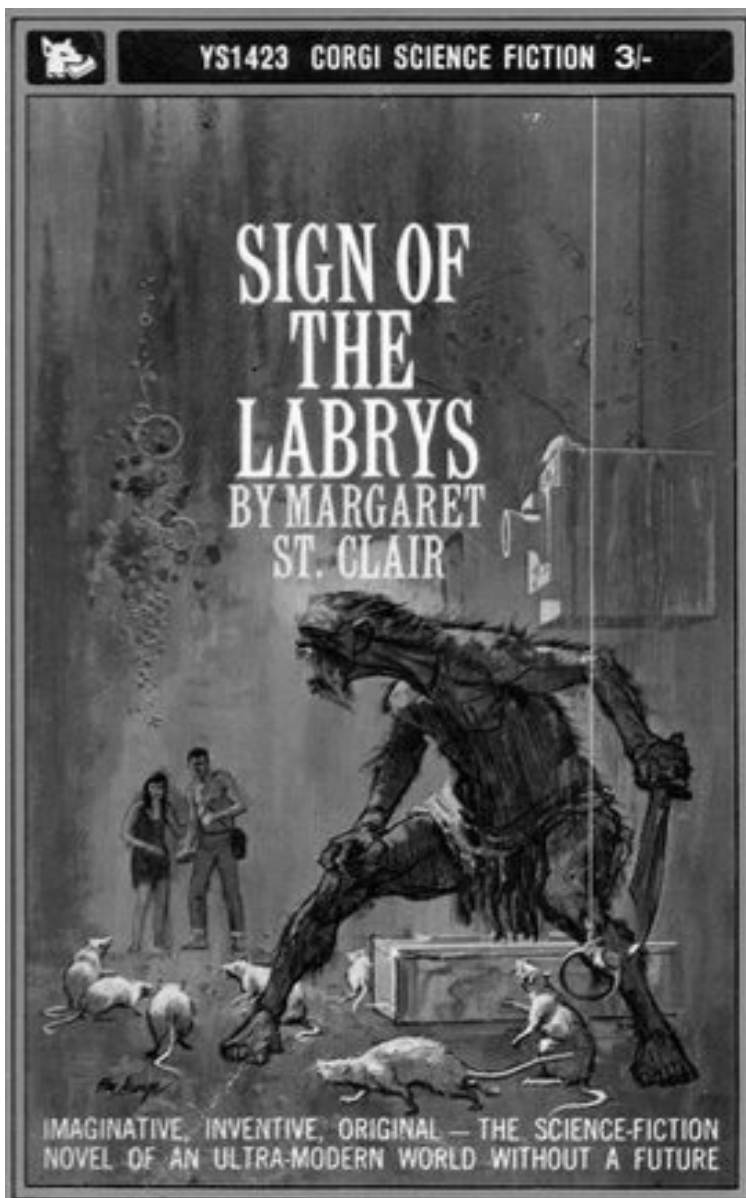
because of the plagues, partly because of some deeper psychological twist, humanity is losing its desire for social contact. "We want to be separate, apart. We can't stand each other's company." (p.2)

There seems to be no central government. The only administrative body is the mysterious and somewhat impersonal FBY; dreaded for no real reason that Sewell can identify except for its association with "science". (The initials are never really explained although the echo to an organisation familiar to St Clair's readers is clearly apparent – "investigation" is one of its functions – and the "Y" almost certainly stands for "Yeast". Sewell comes home one day to find a stranger in his room, who identifies himself as Clifford Ames. Ames is tracking down a woman named Despoina, who is said to be living with Sewell. Sewell denies knowledge of her, and is told that the FBY suspect she may be a "sower" – someone who murderously disseminates dangerous strains of yeasts. During their conversation, Ames notes that Sewell must work a long time – "seven to six... or something like that" (p. 3). Sewell's answer, that he doesn't even work "eight to five" sparks a reaction in Ames: Sewell reflects that he seems to have said something significant without knowing it. (Readers who can count may be ahead of the game here. Readers who understand the mystic significance of numbers get extra bonus points.)

Ames disappears through a hole in the ceiling opened up by a gadget on his belt, with a cryptic remark about "magic". Sewell is left to ponder. The next day something goes wrong with his water supply, and Sewell decides to find another place to live. As he is moving his possessions, a man in the distinctive FBY uniform collapses and dies in front of him, killed by the swift-acting and highly contagious pulmonary form of the yeast plague. Sewell anticipates being infected, but nothing happens. He continues moving to his new room. Needing fresh food, he goes to a rock-cleft where he knows he can find a fresh supply of the violet-coloured fungus which is about all the fresh food available to humanity now. There, he finds carved on the rock "the old, old sign of the labrys, the double-headed axe." (p. 9) Back at his new lodgings, he finds a note asking him to come to the lower gallery at eleven. It is signed "D".

The reader suspects that a number of clues and set-ups are being thrown at us.

Nothing actually happens at the rendezvous except that Sewell hears a voice intone "Blessed be." The next evening, Ames is at his new apartment asking again about "Despoina". Sewell denies knowing anything about it. Then what about the note? Asks Ames, brandishing it. Sewell feels foolish for not having destroyed it, but has to admit to the rendezvous. Ames seems encouraged, and tells Sewell first that he is suffering from a new form of the plague (but that Sewell is ok because he is plague-immune), and second that Despoina is not actually a "sower" but "can kill



plague cells just by looking at them.” (p. 11) As he leaves, Ames tells Sewell that he has all the signs of being the same kind of person as Despoina. And “Despoina is a witch.”

And the *next* day, Sewell finds on his suitcase a gold ring set with a carving of a woman in ancient Cretan costume. Ames bursts in, identifying the ring as Despoina’s, sent as a passport “to get past the guards” and tries to take it. During the scuffle, he dies of plague. Sewell puts on the ring and sets off in search of Despoina.

All this in seventeen pages, and there are well over a hundred to go. During those pages, Sewell meets a woman called Kyra, who uses that “password” number-phrase again and injects him with a drug which causes him to see in a looking-glass a vision of a man (himself) pursued by dogs; another woman called Cindy-Ann on Level G who seems to be one of an elite, pleasure-loving community (who dies as they are about to make love – is he carrying the deadly plague?) – an intelligent dog named Dekker who guides him towards what Sewell (who by this time is oscillating between reality and intensely visionary experiences, uttering phrases which mean more to the reader who has read the occasional book on witchcraft and folklore than to himself) describes as “the holy of holies”, where he goes through a ceremonial scourging by a man wearing an antlered mask and finally meets Despoina. And this is *still* less than half-way through the book!

By now, even the most imperceptive reader will have noted that this is a novel which assumes the persistence of Wicca (or that version of “the Craft” which assumes an unbroken tradition of goddess-worship back to Cretan

...but what gives the setting its immediate kick is that, partly because of the plagues, partly because of some deeper psychological twist, humanity is losing its desire for social contact.

times and beyond – there is even a scene in which bull-leaping takes a part) down to this post-holocaust time. St Clair cleverly incorporates this with a genuine science fiction plot (with a load of hand-waving, but certainly as plausible as many “harder” sf plots of the period”) about the biological engineering of the yeasts, and a background during which the symbols of Wiccan “magic” and straightforward extrapolative sf can be read equivalently on the scenery. The so-called “holy of

holies”, for instance, with its telephones, American flag, and Sewell’s reference to the “commander in chief” is clearly the office of the President, transferred underground to anticipate the forthcoming nuclear war. Every so often, as in true A. V. Van Vogt tradition, Sewell gets a new vision of what might actually be going on, or a new understanding of the nature of the (what might be) hallucinations he is experiencing and the paranormal powers he apparently has. By the end, it all fits together (sort of) of there is new hope for a humanity which can learn to co-operate again and this time, co-operate for building a better world rather than for destruction.

Knowing all this, and knowing St Clair’s affiliation with Wicca, makes the guff about “buried memories of humankind’s obscure and ancient past” make a lot more sense. Indeed, it would be interesting to know who actually wrote that blurb. A patronizing male, astounded that *women* could write science fiction? Or a goddess-worshipping New Age feminist? Or even just someone who was aware of St Clair’s interests and was, rather clumsily, trying to flag it to our attention?

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recurrent:

KINCAID IN SHORT

Paul Kincaid

Songs of War

Feminist science fiction is one of many ways in which the tools of science fiction can be used to satirical or polemical ends. At its best, it has produced some of the finest writers, some of the finest stories, in the history of science fiction. But it is not always at its best. It is all too easy for writers to lapse into tired and overly familiar ideas. There have been, for instance, role-reversal stories (in which men take on the social position of women and vice versa) and gynarchies (in which utopian enclaves are ruled by women) at least since the beginning of the twentieth century (*Legions of the Dawn* by 'Allan Reeth' (1908) or *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915)). These forms became particularly common during the late sixties and seventies when a vigorous strand of feminist science fiction emerged alongside second-wave feminism.

Unfortunately, such feminist utopias too often fell victim to exactly the same problems that beset all other utopias: we see the utopia as an end result not as a process, so we have no way of knowing how this ideal state might be attained; and the only way we can imagine the system working is if everyone is the same. In general, utopias do not survive contact with the enemy, the normal messiness of human life. Which is what makes Kit Reed's 'Songs of War' so interesting, because she manages the incredibly delicate balancing act of deconstructing the whole notion of a feminist utopia while at the same time emphasising the wishes and requirements of the women involved.

'Songs of War' was first published in 1974 in *Nova 4*, the last of Harry Harrison's short-lived original anthology series. It was not, perhaps, a natural home for a work of feminist science fiction, but then, Kit Reed was never an archetypal feminist science fiction writer, she was too questioning, too critical, to do anything but challenge any ideology. And it

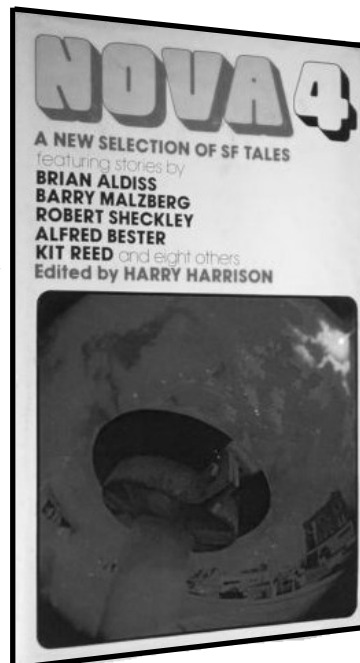
would have been easy, I suspect, to read this story as poking none-too-gentle fun at the idea of a feminist utopia without noticing the strong feminist message that is intertwined with the critique. The story, after all, tells of a women's army that fails, where the men don't have to do anything before their wives come back to domestic tranquillity. But that misses so much else in the story.

A lot is packed in to a not overly long story (just over 30 pages in *The Story Until Now*), and the viewpoint shifts restlessly between a large number of characters. But that is part of the point of the story: what is at stake here is the difference between individuals rather than trying to see them as all the same. As one of the central characters recognises, towards the end of the story, 'they had come up against the human condition [and] failed to recognize it' (285). The whole story is about the messy business of being human.

We start with a fire burning on a hillside. It is, we quickly learn, a camp fire, but it could as well be a signal fire, and many of the women in the unnamed town below the hill instinctively recognise its message: 'there was something commanding about the presence of the fire; the smoke rose steadily and could be seen for miles ... and a number of other women, going about their daily business, found themselves yearning after the smoke col-

umn with complex feelings.' (255) It speaks to them of a primitive time before housework, of childhood yearnings for adventure, of the camaraderie of a revolution before it all goes wrong. Although Reed has managed to slip in a specific reference to Castro in the mountains of Cuba, providing a model for what comes after, what we mostly notice here is the diversity of responses to the signal fire.

And the same diversity is displayed as we see the women drawn to join the nascent army in the hills. Lory wants



to realise her full potential, Jolene is bored with her interchangeable lovers, Annie is escaping an abusive relationship, Glenda teaches at the university where she outshines her husband and is just intellectually curious, Marva, Patsy and Betts can't get dates for the junior prom, and June feels stifled by housework. Inevitably, when June does join the army, she is assigned to the kitchen detail, more housework, because she has no other skills. Ironically, the woman who is most ideologically committed to the ideals of feminism, Sally, refuses to join the army at first because, in a mutually supportive marriage, she has no need to do so. She is as bored by the domestic as any of the other women: *'I don't love my little pink dish mop. I don't, but everybody has to shovel some shit'* (268, italics in the original). But when she does, eventually, allow herself to be persuaded to join the army it is because she feels that they need her, rather than that she needs them:

They were going so fast now that there was no jumping off the truck; the other women at the camp seemed to be so grateful to see her that she knew there would be no jumping off the truck until it was over. (271)

For a time, there's a sense that this is all a game. Marva, Patsy and Betts admire each other in their new uniforms. June is reminded 'of the good old days at camp in middle childhood, when girls and boys played together as if there wasn't any difference.' (264) While for Glenda it is a time of swapping horror stories about men, and 'digesting a dinner she hadn't

had to cook, and for almost the first time in eight years she wasn't going to have to go out in the kitchen and face the dishes.' (262) We see the camp as a play version of their familiar domestic lives. Even when they trash a porn cinema, throw rocks through windows, or practice on the rifle range, there is still something that stops this uprising of feminist consciousness turning into an outright war of the sexes.

The men, meanwhile, are either helpless or uncaring. June's husband 'couldn't quite figure out why, but the toilet had begun to smell. One of these days he was going to have to try and get his mother over to clean things up a little. It was annoying, not having any clean underwear.' (266) Glenda's husband, on the other hand, proves to be an excellent chef and starts an affair with a student. In the main, we don't see as much of the men as the women, and they tend to be treated slightly more uniformly than the women. One of the threads that runs throughout the story is that both sides are defined by their relationship to domesticity, but even here there is a spectrum: we are not expected to see any group as being uniform.

Within the camp there is a 'butch sisterhood', headed up by the military leader Rap and the gynaecologist Dr Ora Fessenden, who are intent on an offensive war that will, they hope, end in them killing all the men. But in this they are going against the instincts of the majority.

She wondered why women had all buried the instinct to kill. It was those damn babies, she decided, grunt, strain, pain, Baby. Hand a mother a gun and tell her to kill and she will say, After I went to all that trouble? (264-5, italics in the original)

And a little later, as she expertly reassembles her rifle, Patsy wonders: 'We won't have to hurt our *fathers*, will we? ... I just couldn't do that to anybody I *loved*' (267, italics in the original) Again we are meant to notice the diversity of views, but the main thing that is coming across here is humanity: how do you fight a war if you have no interest in fighting? In the end, Patsy's humanity is what allows her to emerge most successfully from these events. She meets and falls in love with Andy, and with him escapes from the camp.

They would surface years later in a small town in Minnesota, with an ecologically alarming number of children; they would both be able to pursue their chosen careers in the law because they worked hand in hand to take care of all the children and the house, and they would love each other until they died. (284)

This isn't the end of the story, but in a real sense it is the climax, the moral, the point at which the whole story is aimed. Patsy and Andy achieve what most of the army is after, because each treats the other equally. Underlying the dissatisfaction that drives the women to join the army in the first place is the sense that they are not being treated equally, but the army itself is not a way to achieve that.

But of course for the rest of the camp things have to take a very different course, in part because they are all very different. Events escalate, the women take over the Sunnyside Shopping Center. To this point, the men had not taken the revolution seriously: *'After all, it's only women. ... Let them have their fun. We can stop this thing*



whenever we like. ... What difference does it make? They'll come crawling back to us.' (271, italics in the original) But even now, nobody acts against the women, there's a strange inertia on both sides, as if nobody, except for the firebrands Rap and Dr Ora Fessenden, believes in what seems to be happening here.

Opposition to the women's army does emerge, but it is from within the camp. Right from the start, Reed has made it clear that even within the gynocracy of the women's army it is impossible for all the members to be or to behave or to be treated alike:

They were of a mind to free themselves. One of the things was to free themselves of the necessity of being thought of as sexual objects, which turned out to mean only that certain obvious concessions, like lipstick and pretty clothes, had by ukase been done away with. Still, there were those who wore their khakis and bandoliers with a difference. Whether or not they shaved their legs and armpits, whether or not they smelled, the pretty ones were still pretty and the others were not; the ones with good bodies walked in an unconscious pride and the others tried to ignore the differences and settled into their flesh, saying: Now, we are all equal. (257)

They want change, mostly because they are bored with the lives they live. But nobody, least of all those who created the women's army, have thought out what change they want or how they might achieve it. Utopia is all very well when the job is complete, but getting there is not so easy. One thing that Reed is saying that practically all utopian writers fail to notice is: you can't get there from here. And the reason why is that there is no 'there' to get to; all the women involved in this enterprise have their own individual notions of what would satisfy them, without those notions ever cohering into a single, unified vision. Rap's dream of killing all the men, for instance, cannot match Patsy's growing love for Andy, or June's tender regard for her domestically-hopeless husband: 'A portion of her was tempted to go in and do a swift secret cleaning – *the phantom housewife strikes*' (269, italics in the original). Just as the physical differences, between the pretty ones and the others, cannot be swept away by simple diktat, so these psychological differences or differences in ambition, cannot be merged into one unified utopian aim: 'There were probably almost as many expectations as there were women.' (274)

And the differences grow more pronounced as events escalate. A lot of this is down to the same sort of issues that drove them to the camp in the first place. We get echoes running through the story. June, who was bored with housework, 'was sick and tired of working in the day care compound' (276); Betts, who was anxious for a date, is now concerned by the way her breasts bounce when she runs; Glenda, who outshone her husband, is now concerned that he has not tried to contact her, unlike other husbands. 'The time was approaching when nobody in the camp would have clean underwear. The latrines are unspeakable.' (279) These, of course, are exactly the issues that bothered June's domestically incompetent husband.

Meanwhile, although the army has not attracted the opposition they expected or, indeed, desired, they have begun to receive media attention. Sheena, one of the original leaders of the rebellion, proves to be very telegenic:

By this time Sheena was a national figure; her picture was on the cover of both newsmagazines in the same week and there were nationally distributed lines of sweatshirts and tooth glasses bearing her picture and her name. She received love mail and hate mail in such quantity that Lorry, who had joined the women to realize her potential as an individual, had to give up her other duties to concentrate on Sheena's mail. (279)

The slyness of the 'tooth glasses' speaks volumes about the picture of celebrity being offered here. And again, Lorry's position illustrates that whatever else is going on in this would-be utopia it is nothing to do with equality. Sheena will eventually leave the army to pursue a career in television: 'Well, it's high time I started thinking about me' (284) she declares as she sweeps out, though in truth practically everyone in the army has been thinking about themselves the whole time. It is the fact that thinking about oneself cannot translate into thinking about the group or the cause, the failure to recognize the human condition, that is at the moral heart of this story.

Rap and Dr Ora Fessenden embark on the orgy of violence they have advocated all along, then slip away when it provokes the response they've also craved and the camp is surrounded by tanks. Other women, disgusted by the violence, pack up their things and go. Glenda steps in to take over from Sheena only because she realises she has nothing to go back to. And when Sally goes down to negotiate with the captain commanding the troops surrounding them, she is patronised and ignored:

'Don't you worry about a thing, honey.' He lifted her down and gave her a slap on the rump to speed her on her way. 'Everything is going to be real different from now on.' (285)

And so the story comes full circle. It began with a camp fire on the hillside, and ends with it:

Standing at their windows in the town, the women could look up to the hills and see the camp fire still burning, but as the months wore on, fewer and fewer of them looked and the column of smoke diminished in size.' (287)

Despite what the captain said so insincerely, or perhaps because of it, nothing is different. There are reports of uprisings elsewhere, which come to nothing. The rebellion has been in vain, or so it would seem. But some individuals are different, precisely because they have learned to co-operate. We remember Patsy and Andy. And when Sally is reunited with her husband, Zack:

'I think we do better together,' Zack said. Sally said, 'We always have.' (287)

All quotations taken from 'Songs of War' by Kit Reed in *The Story Until Now: A Great Big Book of Stories*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2013, pages 255-287.

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THE BSFA REVIEW

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2014 — a year for award-winning women?

When the shortlist of the Arthur C Clarke Award was announced earlier this year, most of the discussion was about what wasn't on the list: namely, women. This is the first time we've had an all male shortlist since 1988 and this situation has arisen because only 17 of the 82 submitted novels were by women. Of these, only four books were seen as potential contenders in the inevitable pre-award crystal ball-gazing.

The first was the dire *Pure* by Julianna Baggott. The sooner the axle snaps on the Young Adult dystopia bandwagon, the better. The second was *Alif The Unseen* by G Willow Wilson, which Nic Clarke reviews on page 40 and suggests it is "in reality about as science fictional in aims and spirit as *Harry Potter*." That isn't the only reason why the judges might not have considered it: "a marvellous idea let down by [Wilson's] determination to use her characters as vehicles for her argument and her apparent unwillingness to just let her protagonist be the immature idiot his actions would tend to suggest, rather than the saviour she would like him to be."

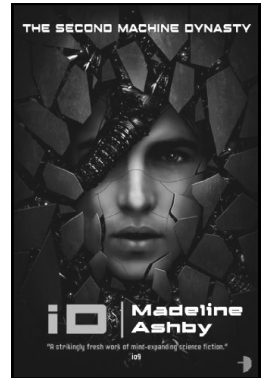
The third was *The Method* by Juli Zeh but, unfortunately, I can't tell you much about the novel as the paperback edition isn't released until May 2014, two years after it was originally published. Come on, Vintage, sort it out. I can tell you it was shortlisted for a British genre award though: the Red Tentacle at the Kitschies. In fact, six out of the ten shortlisted titles for the Kitschies were by women, although they have the benefit of being able to include excellent fantasy novels (such as *A Face Like Glass* by Frances Hardinge) and excellent mainstream novels (such as *The Panopticon* by Jenni Fagan).

The fourth contender, *vN* by Madeline Ashby, was also shortlisted for the Kitschies and guess what? It is great. Not everyone was of this view, however; Andy Sawyer reviewed the novel in issue #271 and said: "The novel only takes us so far and like many SF futures, *vN* suffers from something of a lack of focus... some generic flattening undermines the interesting things Ashby is doing with the "robot" icon." But I am an unabashed fan and could easily see it on the Clarke shortlist. In fact, it would make quite a nice companion piece to eventual winner *Dark Eden* by Chris Beckett; both novels provide interesting, accessible spins on long-standing science fiction tropes through coming of age stories that blessedly aren't aimed at Young Adults (although they may be aimed at young adults).

The sequel, *iD*, is out now and whilst it seems unlikely to appear on this year's Clarke shortlist, it is certainly strong enough. But she will have a lot more competition because, looking forward, one thing seems certain: the field of science fiction written by women and published in Britain is both broader and deeper than it was last year.

Some of these books are corrections of an unaccountable publishing asymmetry where both British and American authors (such as EJ Swift's *Osiris* and Kameron Hurley's *Kitschies*-shortlisted *God's War*) cannot find a home in this country. Some are the product of the cycle of publishing and the return of big beasts, young and old (such as Mira Grant's *Parasite* and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*). Some of them are from genre-hoppers and dilettantes (such as Karen Lord's *The Best of All Possible Worlds* and Susan Greenfield's *2121*) and many of them are part of the continued Young Adult boom, again young and old (such as Cassandra Clarke's *The Mad Scientist's Daughter* and Malorie Blackman's *Noble Conflict* — and yes, Baggott is back again too). And some of them represent the emergence of a new generation of female SF writers (such as Naomi Foyle's *Seoul Survivors* and Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice*).

It is that last novel that has captured the imagination of a huge chunk of the SF commentariat. I can't remember such enormous hype for a debut novel since *Altered Carbon* by Richard Morgan and, unlike in that case, most of it seems to be word of mouth. When it came through my letterbox, word hadn't reached me yet and it didn't seem particularly special: just another space opera novel. Sad to say, the only thing that made it stand out was the fact it had a woman's name on the cover. In some ways, my first impressions were right — it is the sort of accessible core SF you would expect from a book with a John Scalzi quote on the front — but it's not just a "well-crafted crowd pleaser", as Gwyneth Jones explains in her barnstorming review of the novel over the page. *Ancillary Justice* seems sure to appear on award shortlists in 2014.



Martin Lewis
Reviews Editor

Ancillary Justice by Ann Leckie (Orbit, 2013)

Reviewed by Gwyneth Jones

Romans In Space?

Already an assured short story writer, and a long-time active and savvy member of the US SF community, Ann Leckie's new space opera series promises to give a lot of pleasure to a lot of people. The opening episode, *Ancillary Justice*, with its classic, deftly updated storyline and a brilliantly original central character (not to mention that striking John Harris cover) has been greeted, predictably, with popular acclaim. But *Ancillary Justice* isn't just any well-crafted crowd pleaser. This debut, like Breq, its central character, is more unusual – and more daring – than at first appears:

Your name is Breq. It's Ghaiad Breq, should you need to give a family name. You're a wealthy eccentric from a planetary system off the beaten track of the wormhole network; travelling for pleasure, should anyone be curious. You are not what you seem, you have an over-arching purpose so impossible you don't bother thinking about it much and a mission to pursue on a remote, winter world. You fall over a naked drug-addict, half frozen to death in the street, and it's somebody you knew, a long, long time ago and staggeringly far away. You don't like her, you have no use for her, but you pick her up and carry her, for the next two hundred or so pages; having no idea why you're doing this.

Sometimes I do things without knowing why...

If wild coincidence and mysterious intuition were outlawed as narrative devices there wouldn't be many stories left in the world but few characters, even in the supposedly anti-literary SF genre, have ever been as outrageously calm and open about it as Breq, the woman who was a starship. Of course there's a rationale for her style, in regard to those extraordinary assists that smooth the way to a Chosen One's destined fate.

Firstly, there's Breq's highly unusual nature. Secondly, her makers, the imperial Radchaai (who are something like Romans in space, though Imperial China and Samurai Japan are clearly also important) believe devoutly in "Augury" and predestination, and she has assimilated their beliefs. But the storytelling is still *different*, coherently different: more like game play than literary fiction, in the way it engages the reader. Sometimes I missed the adrenalin of human-recounted action sequences. Breq's reactions are super humanly fast, but she notices so much detail in a split second, and is so little phased by pain or danger, it feels as if everything's placidly slowed down. But as I moved to and fro, from the mission action to the beautiful cinematic cut-scenes in which Breq's backstory unfolds, I found the effect seductive.

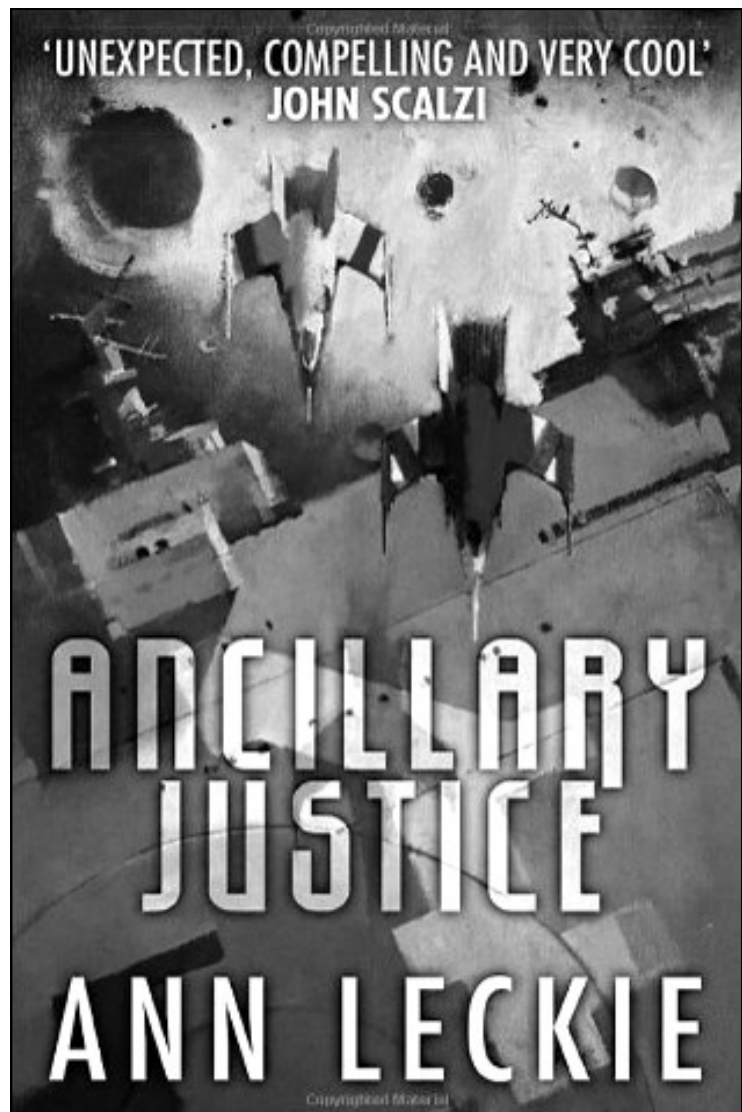
The universe of *Ancillary Justice* is not historically situated; the gap between the Radchaai empire and 21st Century Earth can't be bridged. Space opera, however – despite the ahistorical borrowed cultures, the costumes, and the abyss where 'how we got there from here' ought to be – obviously *is* historically situated and it always shows. In romances of future empire, US or other national politics can leap the gap like nothing else: we have Manifest Destiny scary totalitarian galactic empires; Sixties Liberal galactic empires; cynical, sarcastic Scottish Left galactic empires; resigned, ironic Equals under Brussels galactic empires; insanely Divided galactic empires, collapsing from within. It all depends on what's playing at home.

So it's refreshing to feel the strong presence of developments in fiction and social culture for a change. The Radchaai's dismissive attitude to assigned gender is a given at first, an arbitrary convention. But when we meet them on their own turf, and Breq surveys the humans whose ways she knows best, "an eddying crowd of unnervingly ambiguously gendered people", the derivation seems obvious. Online, nobody knows for sure; gender is just one of the variables people play around with, when building avatars. I've no idea if Leckie would agree, but the Radchaai seem to be asking us: for better or for worse, isn't this ambiguity fated to be our future?

The Ship Who Sang

Leckie hasn't commented, so far as I'm aware, on the relationship between her debut and Anne McCaffrey's 1961 story (and later fix-up novel). But I feel it can't be a coincidence, or just a friendly acknowledgement of the earlier work, that Breq (aka Justice of Toren One Esk) is also a ship who sings. Helva, the McCaffrey character, is the original human woman empowered by a spaceship suit. Of all the sentient ships the genre has thrown up since her day, Justice of Toren One Esk is without doubt the most original, technically specific starship AI to end up occupying a single human body.

Their differences and similarities chart an explosion of development in AI and in human consciousness science. Helva is a profoundly disabled human being inside a non-human embodi-



ment, running her ship's cybernetic systems like a pilot reading an instrument panel: much like the old idea of the mind as a tiny homunculus, hidden in the brain. The troop-carrier Justice of Toren's sentience is distributed, as in current models of human consciousness. She's everywhere and nowhere and, in the phenomenal mass of data that constitutes her awareness, constant sparks of something very like human emotion trigger constant tiny decisions. Or huge ones. "Without feelings", remarks One Esk, the Justice of Toren planetside ancillary unit, controlling twenty human bodies; who likes to sing, "insignificant decisions become excruciating attempts to compare endless arrays of inconsequential things."

Helva sings for her own pleasure: because she's still a human being, with human feelings. When One Esk sings it's a reminder and a warning. Emotion is a vital component of sentience but strong feelings are dangerous.

Zombies In Space?

Politically, it's not all that complex. Ancillaries are slaves: taken captive by the millions; stored in "suspension pods"; revived as required; surgically adjusted so they're slaved to the troopship and set to work. Psychologically, it's a puzzle. As an SF creative writing exercise, Justice of Toren One Esk in her multiple bodies is a tour de force, who will delight some readers and have others scratching their heads at first. As 'Breq' our narrator is something else. She's a starship AI in a human body, a mighty troop-carrier in revolt against her post-human Commander in Chief, but she's also a single segment of One Esk, the ancillary unit who sings.

There are no zombies in this story and no hive minds. Ancillaries are not reanimated corpses, they are living, fully functional individuals, surgically enslaved. So what happened to the original consciousness of this body? Does it provide the emotional infrastructure vital for the AI's sentience? When offered a chance to have the ancillary process reversed, Breq rejects the idea with contempt: she is who she is, her sense of self is intact. But is she who she thinks she is?

Who sings? Who loved? Who grieves?

In one of the great space opera epics of the last century, Carolyn Cherryh, a writer Leckie admires, invented a sub-race of synthetic humans, the azi. (Those were the days when armies of vat-grown clones seemed like a rational proposition). But the azi have brains designed for service and incapable of doubt, whereas the Radchaai have taken a more economically viable route and left themselves open to a slaves' revolt (the worst horror story of real world Roman society).

New ancillaries were no longer being made when disaster engulfed Justice of Toren: the planetary annexations had been halted. But the situation has changed and millions of captives are still held in suspension pods. So what's going to happen now? What about the multiple slaved bodies of Anaander Mianaai, the Commander In Chief drastically divided against herself? There must be thousands of them knocking around. Are they all accounted for? But perhaps the ancillary question has been examined and will now be set aside. Justice of Toren One Esk's unusual nature will simply be part of her story and the adventure will move on. That would also be fine. Time will tell.

The Forever War

"...anything long divided will surely unite, and anything long united will surely divide..."

(*The Three Kingdoms*, Luo Guanzhong)

There's always an empire; either corrupt and ripe for dissolution or in good health and expanding. Healthy galactic empires are *always* expanding, though liberal writers may fudge the territorial imperative. You can tell they're expanding because they're invariably negotiating with outsiders whose sphere of influence they have nudged (known as the alien Presger, rivals the Radch can't beat, in *Ancillary Justice*). It's what empires do, until they fall apart; usually having reached some internal, not external, limit of growth. Corrupt empires, meanwhile, are always evil monsters and the rebels are the glorious heroes. But there's no moral advantage implied in that wise *Three Kingdoms* aphorism and Leckie joins the classier band of space opera writers who take a nuanced approach: acknowledging cruelties, open to compromise, insisting on individual responsibility and never trying to pass off cynicism as compassion (a trait that has often annoyed me in the New Space Opera years).

Ancillary Justice is a war game with karma. It's also a game of three kingdoms: the empire, the rebels, the exterior force. But there is a fourth counter, in addition to the three powers of the medieval Chinese epic: the military. Well supplied with godmothers, if *Ancillary Justice* needs a godfather, it should be Joe Haldeman. Although Justice of Toren One Esk's adventures take her far from the fold, her sense of belonging – betrayed, disillusioned, horrified but still belonging – radiates from the remembered scenes of her backstory. And when all is done and dusted, it's almost no surprise that the same mad, malicious, all-embracing military proves infuriatingly ready to welcome Justice of Toren, mutineer and assassin of the worst kind, back into a kind of service.

It's so army; it's so dirty; and it feels like home.

The Handmaid's Tale

And finally, about that pronoun... Ships are conventionally called "she". The term *ancillary*, as in "ancillary unit", an unusual word for auxiliary or subsidiary, is derived from the Latin *ancilla*, a diminutive of *ancula*, a female servant. As anybody who has picked up on the buzz about *Ancillary Justice* will know, this double female coding doesn't imply anything about Justice of Toren One Esk's social status, earning potential or access to the professions. "She" is just the default pronoun, in the Radch world, for all permutations of sexual identity. I don't think *ancillary* implies anything at all (although it's a nice word), except that Ann Leckie was determined not to use an ambiguous noun or adjective, when a female one would do the job.

Famously, in 1969, UK Le Guin published a book that would become a revered classic. *The Left Hand Of Darkness* is about a world, Gethen, where the variant human population lived most of their lives without biological gender and only became 'male', or 'female' for a short period of oestrus – reproductive fertility – every month or so. Le Guin decided that all Gethenians would be called "he", because the vital importance of being called "he" was painfully real to her. Times have changed. Attitudes have changed more than I think Le Guin really believed possible back in the Sixties. In our day, Ann Leckie has decided that "she" will be the default pronoun in the Radchaai universe, to make the point that "she" really does not – and should not – make any difference to anybody's chances in life. The amazing thing is that in 2013 an astonishing number of people, from Saudi to Bangladesh, from Afghanistan to the UK, will openly tell you they agree with this. It isn't *true* yet, of course. But isn't progress a wonderful thing?

***Throne Of The Crescent Moon* by Saladin Ahmed
(Gollancz, 2012) and *Alif The Unseen* by G Willow
Wilson (Corvus, 2012)**

Reviewed by Nic Clarke

I suspect you can guess what this review's opening gambit is going to be but – alas – I can't resist: you wait ages for a Middle Eastern-tinged fantasy novel and then two come along at once. While the genre's invented worlds and visions of the future have become a little less Anglo- and Euro-centric over the past few years, engagement with the storytelling potential of any of the cultures of the Islamic world has remained vanishingly rare, at least outside of the wackier end of American military sf (of which the less said, the better). Within more thoughtful mainstream SF, Ian McDonald and Kameron Hurley have shown what can be done, drawing excellent stories out of richly textured portraits of multifaceted Islam(s) and diverse Muslim characters and one or two Arabic-language works (such as Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* (2011), set in near-future Egypt) have appeared in English translation. Until now, though, there has been little fantasy on offer.

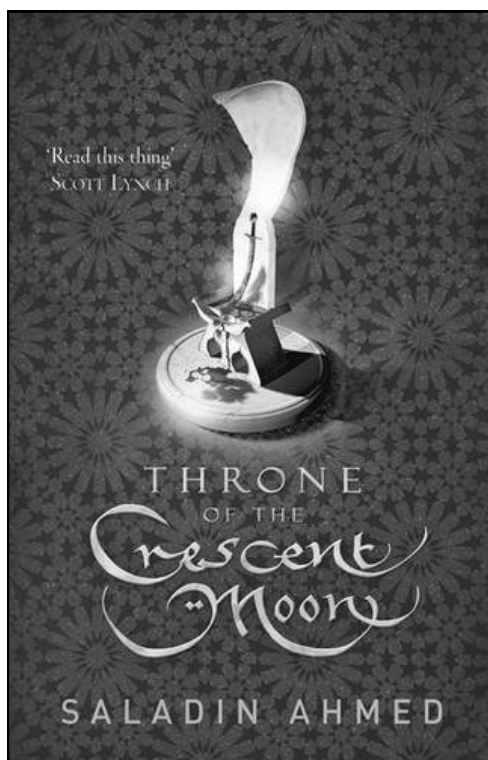
I use 'fantasy' quite deliberately, here; both of these debut novels, one by an Arab-American and one by an American convert to Islam resident in Cairo, are fantasies. *Throne Of The Crescent Moon* is a slice of high adventure sword and sorcery in an urban setting reminiscent of medieval Baghdad or Cairo. *Alif The Unseen*, for all that it centres on a computer hacker in a contemporary (fictional) Gulf city and was touted in some quarters as a contender for this year's Arthur C Clarke Award shortlist, is in reality about as science fictional in aims and spirit as *Harry Potter*. Its nameless City is a realm in which *jinn* regularly meddle and Wilson doesn't even bother to supply some handwavium code to explain the Macguffin computer programme that her protagonist creates in what is effectively a magical trance. The science, such as it is, isn't the point, only window-dressing for Wilson's real interests.

Of the two books, *Throne* is the more successful, both as a piece of entertainment and as a blending of familiar genre tropes with Islamic cultural touchstones. At the core of the story is a plucky band of adventurers – *ghul*-hunter Adoulla, reserved young dervish warrior Raseed, shapeshifting tribeswoman Zamia, healer Dawoud, and his magician wife Litaz – on a quest to save the venerable city of Dhamsawaat (and its ruler, the Khalif) from scheming courtiers conjuring evil spirits. Ahmed's choice to set the majority of the action in city streets and souqs is a smart one: medieval Islamic culture was overwhelmingly urban and Dhamsawaat is a nicely realised confection of commerce and tea-houses, book-lined homes and dusty alleyways. Similarly, the situations our heroes find themselves in echo Arabic and Persian literary tropes from the likes of *The Thousand and One Nights*: slightly undignified scuffles in alleyways with glamorous thieves and snuffy religious scholars, drawn-out negotiations with obstinate functionaries at palace gates and encounters with age-old supernatural beings on the liminal fringe between desert and city walls.

There are some oddities in the use of the material though, chiefly among the names. Adoulla, for example, means 'the state', and – at least in a medieval context – makes no sense as a name standing alone, rather than (as was the usual practice) paired with an attribute of said state, such as in the name of an 11th Century vizier known as Nizam al-Mulk ('pillar of the state'). Sillier still, we're told several times of the existence of a poet called Ismi Shihab. Since 'Ismi' literally means 'my name' in Arabic – and 'Ismi Shihab' simply 'my name is Shihab' – I couldn't help but giggle every time I read it, imagining how the poor chap must have spent his life trying and failing to make himself understood: "Hello, my name is Shihab." "Nice to meet you, Mr My Name." "No, no, my name is Shihab!"

Where *Throne* wears its setting lightly, *Alif the Unseen* feels more like it has something to prove. There are several dialogue exchanges – on medieval Islamic science, for example – that seem to be directly addressed to a Western audience presumed ignorant of Islam and there is also some real effort to nuance the issue of women, the veil, and choice (although the latter is undermined by the way the narrative treats its female characters, on which more below). Willow's City, meanwhile, is a sensitive and in places justifiably angry portrait of the autocratic regimes and highly stratified societies that still largely dominate the post-colonial Arabic-speaking world, particularly the oil-rich Gulf monarchies. The City is divided into elite and underclass, with the latter being largely South Asian immigrants labouring for minimal wages and with few legal rights; it is marked by secret prisons and police brutality, by surveillance and online censorship (something its protagonist, the eponymous Alif, makes an illicit living helping clients to circumvent, whether for political purposes or porn). The regime's representatives, when we meet them, are unfortunately more cartoonish than truly sinister or plausible but a spell in prison for Alif makes for a harrowing middle passage to the book, lent resonance by on-going reports of such repression in Wilson's new home of Egypt and elsewhere.

Like *Throne*, *Alif* merges familiar genre beats with fantastical elements drawn from Islamic literature and myth. In the role of smart-aleck supernatural interlocutors for her human characters, Wilson casts the *jinn*, whose capricious antics feature in many works of medieval Islamic fiction and fact. Shapeshifting, sort-of immortal magic-users, the *jinn* get to be rude and violent and active agents in the story where Alif and friends are mostly drawn along by events. They also provide access to cultural memory (which I suppose is a nice way of saying 'infodump'), telling Alif fun facts about the heritage he shares with everyone else in the City. The *jinn*'s homeland, a magical city that exists in effectively a parallel realm, accessed through secret doorways, is Iram of the Columns, mainstay of southern Arabian folklore. The story's main magical artefact, meanwhile, is – fittingly for a culture as steeped in love of the written word as Islam – a book. Named *The Thousand and One Days*, it is a collection of tales-within-tales like *The Thousand and One Nights*, to which it is supposedly a *jinn*-authored counterpart; decoded correctly, it may offer the ability to manipulate space and time. These elements don't always cohere as well they might with the hacker-versus-the-system framework of the plot,



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however, especially compared with Ahmed's simpler world- and story-building; Wilson has to do more (and more visible) heavy-lifting to get the pieces of her puzzle into place.

Throne is fun but lightweight, a self-contained tale that gets wrapped up in under 300 pages whose consequences are little more than a ripple on the surface of on-going Dhamsawaat life and whose characters make for cheerful company but are unlikely to live long in the memory. The fight scenes have an air of turn-based combat about them but are written with enough gusto and attention to in-character experience that it doesn't much matter. The deficiencies in the characters are more serious but fit with Ahmed's breezy approach to the novel as a whole: Raseed and Zamia are drawn in broad strokes, for example; the former being an earnest, pious youth determined to deny any feelings that distract from his calling, the latter a prickly, grieving desert nomad out of sorts in the city and laser-focused on avenging the death of her entire clan. Could there be romance on the cards by the novel's end? (Yes, indeed, but it's all too thinly sketched and unearned to have much impact.) The older characters get to be more nuanced and enjoyable, perhaps because they aren't obliged to bear the weight of such conventional story arcs. Adoulla makes for an engaging lead, an essentially good-natured too-old-for-this-shit veteran of supernatural combat, with a love of tea, a "blessedly unstainable" kaftan, and the inevitable loyal love interest whom his dedication to his career kept him from marrying. Litaz and Dawood, likewise, work nicely as a sweetly caring and sharp-witted old couple with hints of a more dynamic past.

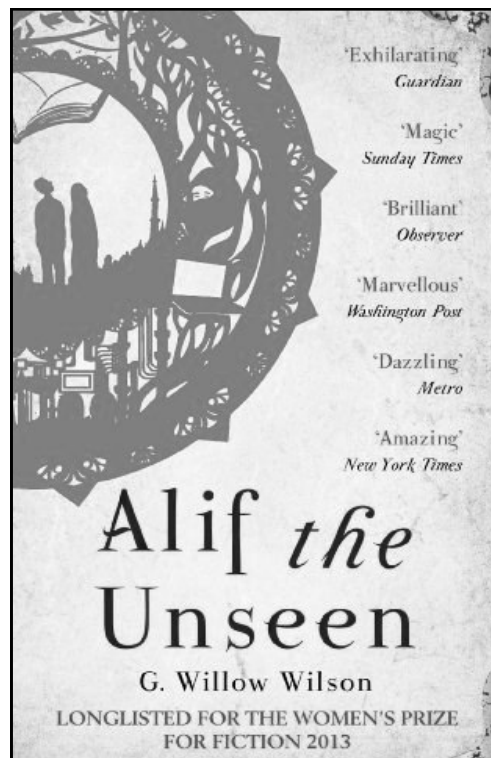
Alif the Unseen, by contrast, has a pretty un compelling protagonist, to put it mildly; Alif is an arrogant manchild who throws elaborate tantrums when things don't go his way. The problem is not that the novel is unaware of how repulsive his actions are but rather that it actively seeks to excuse and justify said actions. When his girlfriend breaks off her covert relationship with him because her family has made an arranged marriage for her, does he react with quiet heartbreak for her plight or impotent rage directed at said family, perhaps lamenting the patriarchal society that obliges a girl to obey her elders in all things? No, of course not. Instead, he blames her for refusing to elope with him into an uncertain, family-less future, then digs in a cupboard until he finds the stained sheet from the first time they slept together, and sends it to her with a note suggesting she is likely to need this proof of her virginity for her wedding night. Next, in response to her not-unreasonable suggestion that it would be easier if she never saw him again, he creates a magic computer programme in order to passively-aggressively fulfil her request. Using the surreptitious 'back-door' access he long ago gave himself to her computer system (because apparently nothing says I'm A Keeper like spying on your girlfriend), the programme will log her keystrokes and chart her online activity in such a way that it will be able build a profile of her and use it to automatically detect her presence, whatever alias she uses online. Through the programme, he will always know where she is, while she won't know where he is because he'll be able to prevent her from seeing him.

Yes, Wilson's hero spends the first part of her novel creating the world's first 100% successful lifelong stalk-your-ex app. But Wilson does not stop there; so invested is she in justifying Alif's sense of petulant entitlement that the novel is structured to reward his behaviour. His magic stalking programme turns out to be the only thing that can save the City from the forces of secular and supernatural evil that are combining to oppress and overthrow it. (It essentially sparks the Arab Spring.) Then, to cap it all, the unfortunate ex-girlfriend shows up right at the end, whereupon Willow gives her a couple of pages of dialogue to demonstrate definitively that she was a shallow, status-obsessed bitch all along and Alif is definitely better off without her. Luckily, the plucky, veiled Girl Next Door, Dina, is just itching to stop rom-com bickering with him and swoon at his feet. Dina is a well-drawn character, a forthright young woman who is about ten times braver and smarter than Alif and whose wearing of the veil is presented as a considered choice expressive of her independence of her parents (who had hoped she'd stay unveiled long enough to be sold off to some rich Arab as a plaything or minor wife). Unfortunately, Dina's main role in the plot is to a) alternately moon over Alif and (fondly) tell him off, b) disappear for large chunks of the page-count, and c) get threatened with rape roughly once every fifty pages when she is around.

Strangest of all *Alif the Unseen*'s characters is Wilson's apparent self-insert, an American named only 'the convert'. She is a superficially informed but in fact hopelessly naïve voice, whom the narrative mocks at regular intervals; she's a graduate student working on medieval manuscripts who is repeatedly shown to have a too 'Western' (read: rational, scholarly) approach to the world. (Although, since one example of her over-rational Western blindness to wonder involves refusing to believe such a thing exists as a 14th Century manuscript written on paper – when plenty of major university libraries contain older Arabic paper books – you have to wonder how many

Western scholars Wilson has actually met.) Indeed, the convert seems to exist in the novel primarily to be insulted and humiliated and is presented as truly content only when she's living in supernatural purdah in Iram, carrying the baby of the *jinni* who had been most ardently dedicated to demeaning her.

So neither of these debut novels are entirely satisfactory explorations of the possibilities of Islamic (or Arabic) genre fantasy. Wilson's fantastical Arab Spring, examining the tensions and injustices of modern Gulf society through the re-emergence of Islamic myth and magic, is a marvellous idea let down by her determination to use her characters as vehicles for her argument and her apparent unwillingness to just let her protagonist be the immature idiot his actions would tend to suggest, rather than the saviour she would like him to be. Ahmed's work is less self-conscious about itself as a pioneer of sword and Muslim sorcery but perhaps as a consequence it also feels less thoughtful, and less important, for all that it's a fun experience. Both are interesting, then but it's likely their authors will produce more challenging and absorbing books in the future.



The Adjacent* by Christopher Priest (Gollancz, 2013)*Reviewed by Paul Kincaid**

It is possible to read this novel as a gathering together of all the things that Christopher Priest has written about before. HG Wells (from *The Space Machine*) features in one section and JL Sawyer (from *The Separation*) is glimpsed in another; there's a stage magician (as in *The Prestige*) and a performance that goes fatally wrong (as in *The Islanders*); we are repeatedly told that a major catastrophic event occurred on 10th May, the date that is central to *The Separation*; and the novel swerves tellingly from our world to the Dream Archipelago, as *The Affirmation* did. But if you think you should be ticking off a checklist of Priestly obsessions as you read, think again. Yes, we keep encountering familiar elements, great and small, from earlier novels but here they are distorted, displaced, put into an unfamiliar context that is somehow adjacent to where we know them from.

Adjacency doesn't just provide the title and the McGuffin that sets the plot in motion, it is the metaphor that runs throughout the novel. Constantly we are being directed to look slightly to one side of what is going on. Priest plays fair, of course; early in the novel he explains how magicians use adjacency to direct an audience's attention to something innocuous and away from the business of the trick. But how do we know what is the real event and what the misdirection, until Priest, with consummate timing, pulls the rug from under us, as he does at several points during the novel? I have said before that Priest does not use narrators who are unreliable but rather worlds that are unreliable and I don't think any novel illustrates the point as powerfully as *The Adjacent* does.

The thing we are made aware of, time and again, is that all the central characters are misplaced. Tibor Tarent is of mixed Hungarian and American extraction, returning to a Britain that he does not recognise from an assignment on which his wife was killed. The two women he meets on his journey are, likewise, of non-British extraction. Tommy Trent is seen visiting an airfield in France during World War One where he clearly does not fit in. Mike Torrance trained to be an architect but now finds himself working as an engineer servicing bombers during World War Two. Krystyna Roszka is a Polish exile ferrying planes during World War Two. And in the Dream Archipelago, Tomak Tallant, Thom the Thaumaturge and Kirstenya Rosscky find themselves on the closed island of Prachous without any real idea of how they got there. As Tarent says at one point, "I'm out of synch with the world". He could be speaking for all of these characters, who stand at an odd angle to their worlds, worlds at war that have become dangerous and disturbed.

Note the names, of course: Tibor Tarent, Tommy Trent, Tomak Tallant, and Krystyna's lost love, Tomasz, whose doppelganger is Torrance. Priest draws our attention to the significance of the double initials, for instance in giving the storms that now lash Tarent's future Britain names like Edward Elgar,

Federico Fellini and Graham Greene. They are, of course, avatars of each other. Not entirely, not precisely; Priest is too subtle a writer for such straightforward doubling but we see echoes across the different worlds and times until the worlds start to come together within the psychology of the characters as we now know them.

We see quite early on how these double-Ts have been torn asunder by the brutality of the world they inhabit, though it is perhaps some time before we realise quite how damaged they are. Tibor's wife has been killed by a frightening new weapon, the Adjacent; now, returning to Britain, he finds himself caught in the Kafkaesque coils of a bureaucracy that has no place or time for him. Travelling across a landscape that has been changed beyond recognition by violent storms and by the adjacency weapon that has obliterated a vast triangle of West London, Tibor finds himself trapped within armoured vehicles known as Mebshers or in isolated establishments where he has no place or purpose. It is only gradually that we

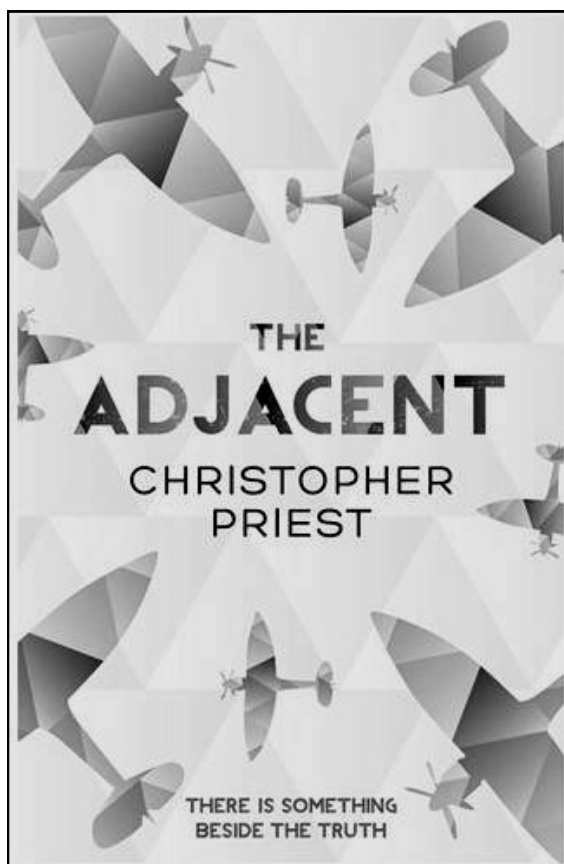
recognise how this increasing isolation reflects his own mental disintegration.

Meanwhile his avatar, Tomak, finds himself tracing a similar journey across the desert interior of Prachous with no idea how he got there. Eventually he will reinvent himself as Thom the Thaumaturge, echoing another magician, Tommy Trent, who tried to bring his skills at misdirection to the service of the Royal Flying Corps in World War One France. Thom has one great illusion that is doomed to go terribly wrong but as he prepares for it he is haunted by three women who all have some mysterious part in his life.

At the same time Krystyna/Kirsteyna searches for her lover, Tomasz, through war torn Poland, at an airfield in wartime Lincolnshire and across the strange, closed-in, secretive island of Prachous. At one point, flying over a part of the island where local rumour suggests there is a mysterious shanty town known as Adjacent, she sees from one direction a desolate black triangle like the scene of Melanie Tarent's death or the May 10th

atrocity in West London, from another direction the same location is occupied by a growing township, and from a third direction she sees a thriving city of glass and concrete. Those caught by the weapon known as the Adjacent have been displaced to the Dream Archipelago, just as Tomak and Kirsteyna have been; but more than that, adjacency is clearly a point where all times and places coexist. It is only by understanding this that we can understand how all these characters can die within the novel and yet be alive again.

The Adjacent is a novel that feeds on Priest's other work but it enriches that work, expands it and deepens it. You don't need to have read *The Affirmation* and *The Islanders*, *The Prestige* and *The Separation* (it might help but it's not necessary); but if you have read those books, *The Adjacent* will help you see them in a new light. It is as complex and rewarding as any of his novels, and it repays re-reading, but above all it is a novel that is as enthralling, as mystifying and as satisfying as any other you are likely to encounter this year.



***The Green Man and The Alteration* by Kingsley Amis
(New York Review of Books, 2013)**

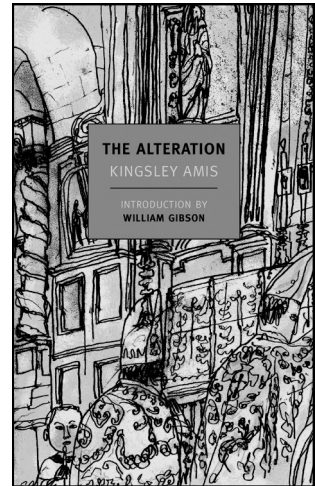
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

Although Kingsley Amis is best known for his mainstream comedies of manners to consider these novels as 'exercises in genre' misses the point that they are also classics of genre. *The Alteration* (1976) ranks with Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (1968) as among the best alternative-history novels ever written and *The Green Man* (1969) stands in similar rank within the tradition of the Jamesian ghost story. Nevertheless, there's a sense in which to consider them 'exercises' causes us to look more clearly at their merits. By the time of publication of these novels, Amis was aligning himself with the Old Guard rather than the New Wave in both politics and literature and there are playful swipes at his targets in both novels. Allington, the narrator of *The Green Man* jibes at novels ("Oh well, what had I expected? The thing was a novel.") and one of the characters in the story is an appallingly trendy vicar. In *The Alteration*, two of the representatives of the Church's Secular Arm bear the names of contemporary left-wing celebrity-activists. The most interesting playfulness, however, lies in what Amis is doing with the form and content of his chosen genres and the most rewarding aspect of reading these novels is that they are successful experiments in genre. There is no nonsense about 'transcending genre' here but they show us what genre can do.

Maurice Allington of *The Green Man* is the owner of the eponymous pub (the title also refers to the symbolic medieval figure of wildness) who as the novel opens is on his second wife and a bottle of whisky a day, haunted by thoughts of death, neglecting his teenage daughter and planning to seduce Diane, his doctor's wife. Associated with the pub is the story of Dr Underhill, a 17th Century necromancer whose ghost has been seen locally. Maurice's father collapses and dies, apparently on seeing something strange, and Maurice himself begins to encounter supernatural manifestations – first Underhill's wife, then Underhill himself, who seems to be communicating with him from beyond the grave. Maurice's son Nick and daughter-in-law Lucy are in varying degrees sceptical about his experiences but his encounters continue in more and more terrifying vein as he himself slides further into a moral abyss.

Michael Dirda's introduction quotes MR James's "recipes" for the ghost story to suggest that Amis is working against the grain. For James, "sex is tiresome enough in novels; in a ghost story . . . I have no patience with it." While Amis is Jamesian enough in his use of atmosphere and crescendo, in everyday setting and malice, sex is right at the novel's core, whether it is Underhill's predatory exploitation of young girls or Maurice's own plans to engage his lover Diane and his wife Joyce in a threesome. Almost certainly, the richest comic moments come with Joyce's deadpan acceptance of the idea and the act itself, sublimely undercutting Maurice's caddish fantasies. The supernatural encounters (each of the five chapters centres upon one; each are so different that it's possible to read the novel as an attempt to explore the different effects possible in the ghost story) are equally fine. In particular, the discussion between Maurice and the suavely sinister "Young Man" in chapter four adds an existential frisson to the plot. It's only the relationship between Maurice and his daughter that saves him: self-centred and exploitative he may be but he loves her and the final pages suggest that she has her head screwed on a lot more firmly than he has. A lesser novelist would have had Maurice redeemed at the end: his mental "to-do list" suggests that he is far from redemption but his experiences have caused us, at least, to understand him and empathise with him a little more.

The Alteration is set in a world where the Reformation never happened and the Roman Catholic Church is firmly in control. Ten-year-old Hubert Anvil is the finest singer of his generation and his gifts have brought the attention of the Church Hierarchy



to him. It has been decided that he can best bring his gifts to bear upon the glory of God by keeping the purity of his voice through to adulthood. In other words, he is to be "altered" and spend the rest of his life as a castrato singer. (In our world, castrati were still singing in the 1890s). The novel is centred upon the reaction of Hubert himself, his family (including his mother and her lover, the family priest Father Lyall), his school-friends and his teachers. Hubert makes an unsuccessful escape attempt to the home of the New England ambassador whose daughter has become a friend. While characters such as Hubert's brother Anthony and his older friend Decuman are rebels within the context of their society and New England has become a refuge for dissidents, there is no overthrow of the regime offered. Indeed the Pope (John XXIV: a brilliantly-portrayed shrewd Yorkshireman) has his hands firmly on the tiller and a coda set fifteen years after the main events show how his plans to avert social catastrophe have been brilliantly if chillingly successful. Equally, New England—in many ways as sexually repressive as Catholic Europe and with an apartheid-like policy towards its native inhabitants—is no utopia.

If worldbuilding is one of the attractions of alternative history, *The Alteration* surely deserves its reputation and William Gibson in his introduction suggests that the novel is one of the great precursors of steampunk. Science is an obscenity: there is invention and technology to some extent but nothing powered by electricity. Amis's glory here, though, is the way he plays the common alt-hist game of reflecting our world through his. His characters are fans of a rather despised speculative fiction called TR (Time Romance) featuring wild inventions such as electric flying machines and at one point there is a discussion about whether a novel called *The Man In The High Castle* by Philip K Dick is TR or CW (Counterfeit World, which deals with the results of change in historical facts). Later in the novel are references to slightly changed versions of novels we know (*Galliard* by Keith Roberts; *The Orc Awakes* by JB Harris) and readers of other genres might pick up a series featuring "Father Bond" or *The Wind In The Cloisters*. *The Alteration's* characters too are, like those of many other examples of alternative history, characters who in "our" world play different roles: Jean-Paul Sartre is a Jesuit, Thomas Sopwith (of "Sopwith Camel" aircraft fame) designed the Channel Bridge, Edgar Allan Poe was a New England general. Some say that the cunningly political Pope John, with his Yorkshire accent, is a portrait of Harold Wilson, whose second term as Prime Minister ran from 1974-1976. Is this rather too fanciful a game? It may be for some – and looking at it objectively I might agree in places – but it shows how deeply Amis studies his sources and his plot draws the reader deeply into the story. This is a classic of the field.

Indeed, If I were to suggest the most accomplished and original of those Amis books I have read, *The Green Man* and *The Alteration* would be in the top three (along with his first novel, *Lucky Jim*). It's good to have these books reissued.

Benchmarks Continued, edited by David Langford and Greg Pickersgill (Ansible Editions, 2012)

Reviewed by Dan Hartland

Quis spectabit ipsos spectatores? The reader may forgive the ropery Latin in order to allow the question: reviewers, for whom there is blissfully no very good word in the tongue of Rome, are more active than mere watchers and that makes oversight seem rather urgent. But who must fill this august office? Surely not, for pity's sake, another reviewer?

It would seem so.

The back cover of *Benchmarks Continued* features a convenient retort to anyone who understands reviewing as a pursuit to be held to account: "Criticism," quoth the late Algis Budrys, whose *F&SF* reviews this first of three volumes begins to collect, "is not subject to the democratic process." Budrys wrote this line in November 1981, a month after slamming Julian May's *The Many-Colored Land* for its emptily fannish character: "Fannish SF – Effseff? – [...] is notably fond of scenarios testing such propositions as 'You shouldn't bottle up anger', 'You'd better be sure what you're sure of', 'Pride creates mistakes', and any number of other such variously profound open-ended statements which are in the same relationship to a fully-formed aphorism as the *Reader's Digest* is to a good encyclopedia."

Plus ça change, I might add, should I not be concerned you'd mistake me for a linguist. Budrys here – and in other places throughout this volume – nails his subject. On the products of SF publishing's assembly line: "limited pieces of yardgoods that come milling off the publishers' loading docks with [...] stultifying invariability every month". On the curious qualities of the late stories of Robert A Heinlein: "a kind of game, with Heinlein visibly his own hero". On the strength of George RR Martin, presciently aware of the approach which would ultimately bring the author HBO-bestrident success: "Lovecraftian settings [...] peopled] with characters who react only pragmatically to the always well-described features of their predicament."

In fact, Budrys wrote so well, and so directly, that his reviews can read as almost instant aphorisms of their own. "Life is a twine of varicoloured cords snapped up from everywhere" is a not uncommon example of his particularly declarative style. "What do I mean by 'good'?" he asks. "I mean the author was in clear command of all the essential details of a worthwhile narrative." And, as if to put to rest once and for all the eternal debate: "Science fiction" is one of the names for the sort of fiction in which the underlying social assumption is that science is real and technology is the only means of affecting the Universe. 'Fantasy' is one of the names for the sort of fiction in which the underlying assumption is that magic is real and its manipulation is the only means of affecting the Universe." Fully-formed aphorism or *Reader's Digest* précis? It can be difficult to distinguish.

There is no doubt that Budrys is an entertaining companion: dipping into practically any page of *Benchmarks Continued* will reward you with at least one joke, several juicy asides, further reading and fodder for debate. The volume bursts with a fierce intelligence worn with the casual air of a writer at ease with the demotic. For all Budrys's playful usages – distimmed,

eireniphilic, anfractuosities – it is hard not to compare him with John Clute, a reviewer of similar stature but significantly more forbidding prose, and find Budrys a critic laudably in favour of broad tents.

On the other hand, Clute embraces valence in a way which was alien to Budrys. *Benchmarks Continued* knows what SF is – "drama made more relevant by social extrapolation" – and it hews to this definition without deviation. As with the thin line between the aphoristic writing Budrys decries and the kind he himself produces, his reviews exhibit an intellectual acceptance that SF is variegated ("whatever the hell structure SF has today") but are married to a conception of the field bound inextricably to the pulps: "I defy even Stanislaw Lem and his partisans to produce evidence for a body of 'serious world SF', independent of but contemporaneous with 'American SF' [...] the autodidactic product of people who got their degrees either in respectable ('secure', 'lucrative') professions or at the school of hard knocks." *Benchmarks Continued* is consequently an often backward-looking volume, spanning the Seventies and Eighties and yet often reading like a work of twenty years previous: M John Harrison's novel *A Storm of Wings* (1980) is reviewed and promptly likened to Mark S Geston's *Lords of the Starship* (1967); seemingly every entry in Ballentine's *Best Of* is re-

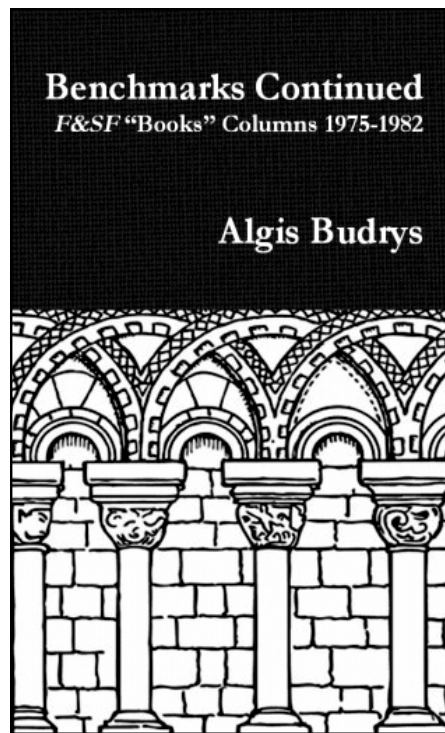
viewed: Cordwainer Smith, Edmond Hamilton, L. Sprague de Camp, Lester del Rey, Randall Garrett ... they all get effusive mentions. This in a period which saw the publication of Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Kate Wilhelm's *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* (1976) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979).

Of course, you see what I did there: one of the functions of Budrys's enlightened conservatism (at one point he dismisses "unconventional technique and elliptical narrative" as akin to "musical finger exercises or the young sculptor's passing interest in arranging found objects") is, naturally, the radical underrepresentation of women. Budrys famously panned Russ's *We Who Are About To...* (1977) ("I cannot imagine why Dell published this book") but he is similarly baffled by Pamela Sargent's all-female collection *Women of Wonder* (1975) ("polemical, rather than entertaining") whilst he reviews CJ Cherryh's *Gate of Ivrel* (1976) with the condescension of an encouraging master: "All of these are apprentice faults, listed here

because Cherryh's obvious underlying talents [...] fully justify taking an interest."

This antedeluvian tendency doesn't stop there. Budrys criticises Samuel R Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975) and yet praises Robert Onopa's *The Pleasure Tube* (1979) as offering an epochal "breakpoint" for the genre. For every quotable flash of wit – "A story is like a prime number, divisible only by itself" – there is a sense of dragging SF back towards a mode it had already left behind ("Modern science fiction [...] will never be expunged").

In August 1976, Budrys wrote that, "I have been calling for a historian of science fiction." Posterity may judge his reviews a mixed bag or his criticism less than progressive. But he was nevertheless the man for whom he searched – his piece on Damon Knight's non-fiction *The Futurians* (1978) is, for instance, insightful and incisive. On this level, he remains a source with whom to be reckoned. Who reviews the reviewers? The historians.



***Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America* by John Cheng (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012)**

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In June 1833, at the third meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, William Whewell coined the term 'scientist'. He thus effectively turned natural philosophy, the preserve of the amateur, into a profession for the specialist. Over the next century, science would indeed become more difficult for the amateur to affect or understand; yet in the early 20th Century, as new technologies affected lives for good and ill, and the ideas of Freud and Einstein were discussed in popular newspapers, amateur interest in science was at a high point.

In 1929, Hugo Gernsback, having lost control of *Amazing Stories*, launched a new magazine, *Science Wonder Stories*, and in it gave a new name to the 'scientifiction' he had championed: 'science fiction'. There are some (including John Cheng) who argue that the invention of the name equated with the invention of the genre. I am not so sure; from the start these pulp magazines featured reprints of stories by Poe, Verne and Wells, extending the genre back to encompass earlier forms of fantastic literature; at the same time, many of the early contributors blithely incorporated elements from westerns, detective stories and romance into their work, so the form was never especially pure. Nevertheless, the name created a sense of expectation and identity. Cheng argues, therefore, that as real science became more complex and inaccessible, the science fiction pulps mediated between professionalised science and the interested amateur.

Paying as much attention to the letters columns and other departments as he does to the fiction, Cheng looks at how editors and contributors emphasised their scientific credentials (EE 'Doc' Smith, Miles J Breuer MD) and how the readers responded by challenging the science, even to the extent of filling their letters with complex mathematics. He considers how the spread of everyday technology (telephones, motor cars) was represented in SF, ranging from simple optimistic views of the future to a growing dread of robots. He looks at how understanding of science affected views on social issues such as gender and race and how these were challenged by the readers. And he deals with the way the pulps presented - or, more accurately, misrepresented - complex scientific notions such as time and relativity. Having thus described the relationship to science of a predominantly young and largely, though not overwhelmingly, male readership mediated through the SF pulps, he goes on to examine where this relationship led. He takes two case studies: the emergence of fandom (which developed as the conversations begun in the letter columns were continued elsewhere leading to a professional engagement with sf for many of the letter writers) and the emergence of the rocketeers (where amateurs attempting to build working rockets were in turn enfolded into the professional military-industrial complex with the onset of the Second World War).

There are problems with this book. Cheng is so enamoured of jargon that several sentences are, literally, meaningless; towards the end, the amount of repetition suggests that parts of the book were rather carelessly put together; much SF scholarship is missing from the picture; and his focus on the pulps in

the two decades between the wars means that much else happening in SF at the same time is excluded from the picture. Nevertheless, as a sociological and historical account of the phenomenon of the SF pulps, there is a vast amount of fascinating information to be found in this book.

***Science Fiction (Routledge Film Guidebooks)* by Mark Bould (Routledge, 2012)**

Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont

The Routledge Film Guidebooks are a series of monographs designed to serve as introductions to academic thinking on different film genres. Pitched somewhere between the market for purpose-built university textbooks and the one for more idiosyncratic and accessible film-writing, the series has benefited hugely from the fact that most of its authors have had very clear and occasionally unusual understandings of their chosen fields. This prickly, defiant and wondrously dense volume by Mark Bould is absolutely no exception to the rule.

After the briefest of introductions stressing the futility of attempting to define the term 'science fiction', Bould launches himself into a short chapter about the role of science in SF. Setting the tone for the rest of the book, this opening chapter covers a heroic amount of ground forcing Bould to swing from topic to

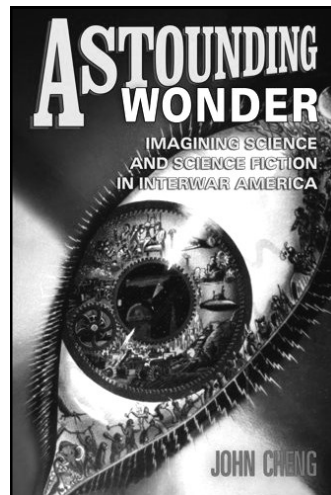
topic like a humanities Spider-Man. Each time Bould lands on a topic he quickly references the people who have written about it and explains their ideas using a variety of different films. A topic dispatched, Bould takes to the air with a witty quip or a quotable put-down, leaving interested bystanders to whisper 'who was that masked man?' and pick over his endnotes and bibliography in search of deeper understanding.

However, while Bould's ceaselessly energetic style allows him to cover topics

including colonialism, capitalism, depictions of science, depictions of women and depictions of mental illness, the really interesting stuff only happens when Bould takes the trouble to slow down and break new ground.

The book's middle chapter begins by considering the popular distinction between 'intelligent' works of genre and the spectacular big budget Hollywood productions that dominate the popular imagination. Bould unravels this distinction by pointing out that even the earliest of Georges Méliès's fantasias contained their fare share of mind-boggling special effects. Indeed, what is the much-vaunted 'sensawunda' if not the literary equivalent of raw spectacle? This fictional distinction exists because works that emphasise the spectacular over the thoughtful push against the limits of human cognition and remind us that our brains are really little more than small meat computers that are easily hacked by directors with a gift for manipulating sights and sounds. Humanity's disgust at its own inhumanity tends to prompt either an urge to flee from the sublime, an urge to surrender to the grotesque or an urge to ironically deflect through camp and Bould draws on his extensive knowledge of genre cinema to show how different films have engaged with each of these urges in a variety of different ways.

This is a book that serves not only as a great introduction to academic writing about genre film but also as an introduction to the ideas of Mark Bould, one of the most unerringly insightful and entertaining academic critics in the field today.



Vurt and Pollen (Tor UK, 2013) by Jeff Noon**Reviewed by Shaun Green**

In the indeterminately futuristic Manchester of *Vurt*, a gang of half-streetwise kids hooked on feathers and the Vurtual reality state they induce live between a decaying squat and a battered van. One member of this gang, Scribble, lost his sister to the Vurt in what's known as an exchange; something from the real goes in, something from the Vurt comes out. In this instance it's a glooping mass of sentient jellyflesh that the gang – the Stash Riders – affectionately refer to as the Thing from Outer Space.

It's a sad blob, the Thing, hooked on feathers and unable to communicate with the Riders but they lump it around with them because Scribble's on a quest to get his sister back and for that he also needs a certain black market feather which – he hopes – will facilitate the counter-exchange. Most of the rest of the gang just dig the feathers, but Scribble's a part of their fucked-up family and so they're all along for the ride.

Meanwhile, a few cops – predominantly a tough-faced pro called Murphy and a no-faced shadowcop out of the Vurt named Shaka – are hunting down the Stash Riders. What began with a botched feather exchange and heavy-handed policing escalated into the murder of a poor dumb fleshcop and that Murphy and Shaka just won't brook. These two won't give up, any more than Scribble will, and so their quests weave in and out through the real and the Vurt, respectively driven on by hard-nosed professionalism and something a little less pure than familial bonds.

Vurt was originally released in 1993, winning the Arthur C. Clarke award, and a sequel, *Pollen*, followed in 1995. Both novels are rooted in Manchester, Noon's home for much of his life, and the deep familiarity born of love – or deep love born of familiarity – shines through both novels. They are also tightly bound to the pop-cultural scene of the time, both the early acid house rave culture of the late Eighties and the Madchester scene that followed. I was eleven when *Vurt* was published so I can't speak with too much authority here but my take is that *Vurt* is a love letter to the liberatory freedom of drugs, dreaming and the counter-culture that characterised these scenes, whilst *Pollen* is in some ways a more nostalgic novel and in some ways a more conservative one.

Pollen opens with an extract from a book in which a far-future historian looks backward in time, an opening which establishes several key facts from the outset. Firstly, it renders the dreamy psychedelia of *Vurt*'s counter-cultural wild ride in the handwavy pseudoscience of SF, anchoring its oddness with an element of the mundane. Secondly, it makes reference to the Looking Glass wars and how they began with an incident known as the Pollination, telling us upfront that what we are about to read is the first significant skirmish between the Vurt and the real.

Pollen is a very different book to its predecessor: less an underworld tour through hedonism, ugliness and beauty than the story of the continuing struggle which underpinned *Vurt* thematically. Structurally *Pollen* reaches into the toolbox of murder mysteries, at least for its first acts, and so it is that we are introduced to Sybil Jones, a flesh-and-blood shadowcop, one of the best on the beat (cliches are part of this toolbox, okay?)

but also a Dodo, one of the Unbeknownst, an unlucky sod who is incapable of dreaming and cannot access the Vurt.

We're also introduced to Coyote, the best black cab driver in Manchester, a dog-man with romance in his soul and a map in his head. We spend quite a bit of time getting to know Coyote before he meets a sticky end, including witnessing him bring a fare into the city from out in the zombie-infested wastelands outside the city. This is a girl called Persephone and all evidence suggests that she is trouble.

And from this point on the flowers begin to grow and the pollen count begins to rise.

You can read *Pollen* in a couple of different ways once you've associated it with the history of British and Mancunian music, politics and culture but whatever your take, it's clear that this is a novel grappling with the issues of the time. The danger and excitement of underworld counter-culture versus the safety and security of those cultural forces once leashed and commodified: the boot of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act descending to end the free party scene followed by the rise of the commercial megaclubs.

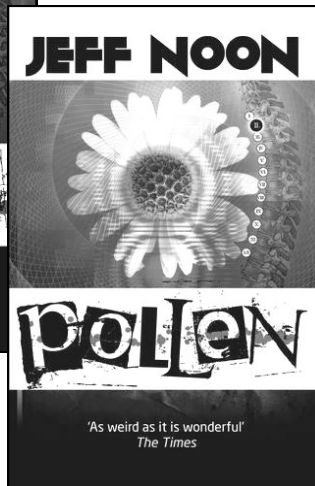
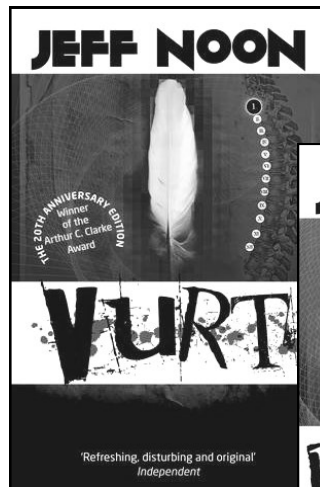
The same struggle between independence and order appears elsewhere in *Pollen*, such as the modern Xcabs offering safety and comfort with their computerised city maps and alliance with

the cops versus Coyote's learned and lived local knowledge and willingness to stray outside legal bounds. It is not a clear-cut struggle, mind; several of our sympathetically-rendered protagonists are cops, the enforcers of the status quo, whereas the local pirate radio DJ is an old Sixties hippy who talks big about resistance and revolution but, when it comes down to it, he's all bark and no bite. In *Vurt*, too, we see no shortage of the ugliness of a world obsessed with feathers and dreaming. One member of the Stash Riders, Beetle, is described as "a man without dreams. He dreamt other people's dreams, through the

feathers." The Beetle is not an unusual man: a world with *Vurt* is a world dominated by escapism. Small wonder that such a state of affairs should eventually come to war.

I should note that there are problematic elements to these novels. *Vurt* is such a ride that at times its pacing is a little loose; it meanders at points, stumbling on broken bottles and there's only so much that wild imagination can do to distract from moments of purposelessness. *Pollen* is a tauter novel, more focused on what it's trying to say, but unravels somewhat toward the end, the stakes having been built so high that the eventual resolution would have fallen short even if it weren't only half-coherent and unconvincing. Elsewhere the prose can try so hard to be hip that it comes out nonsensical; what, for example, are we supposed to imagine that a "petal-growl" sounds like? Both books are also heavily heteronormative, which isn't particularly unusual, but if a lot of sex that is very focused on domineering masculine desire isn't your thing, well, forewarned is forearmed.

For me, none of this matters as much as just how entertaining, inventive and unique these novels are. I can forgive imperfect endings or a drunken stumble if the rest of the journey is this entertaining and thought-provoking and I can forgive stylistic mis-steps because most of the writing really is brilliant. On the other points, well, hasn't our political, literary and social culture come a long way since the early Nineties? It certainly has but not far enough that the yearning for freedom that underpins both of these vivid and inventive novels does not still resonate.





Mindjammer by Sarah Newton (Mindjammer Press, 2012)

Reviewed by Kate Onyett

Sarah Newton's *Mindjammer* is a terrific, incredibly detailed and rompingly epic space opera. Writing in a universe she developed over a number of role-playing sourcebooks, there is a comforting sense of authorial control and weight of authority over the subject matter. One can relax knowing that this is a soundly con-

structed piece of traditional science fiction. That is, an exploration of the human condition examined in a fictional context.

The plot unfolds into an engaging thriller set in humanity's far, far future. Newton proposes humanity has reached the stars and the original colonies, left stranded from Earth by reason of the tremendous distances involved, have evolved into societies that suit their new environments. Earth now works to reclaim these planets into a standardised Commonality. Clay, Stark, Proffitt and De Luz, a four-strong team from an agency that is designed to manage and integrate old colonies into the whole, are sent to the Solenius system to investigate increasing social unrest. The conspiracy they uncover threatens to destroy the Commonality and all it stands for.

Central to the fabric binding Newton's universe are fundamental questions about belief and self. The team are indoctrinated to believe there are limits to human consciousness; where it can go, what it can be. This is basically a state-controlled allowance for a proscribed sort of individuality. It is a promise of uniqueness that is essentially a sop to the masses to give them a (false) feeling of self-destiny and self-control. If this seems familiar, consider the culture of our modern West, where the much-lauded Self is transcribed into commodified desires. But with every purchase, every subscription to satiating experiences, one is bound further and further into the commercial (and through it, into the political) weal. While Newton's universe is not based on purchase power, it can hold the mirror up to ours and critique the complaisant acceptance of belief systems. Her heroes will be shaken and questioned; we should be, too.

The idea found on Solenius – an entirely collective mindscape, dubbed the Comsentience – is a Commonality 'heresy' (continuing the political-quasi-religious referencing). That humanity can continue in forms not designated possible or morally correct by Commonality standards begins a revolt which Newton develops into an old-fashioned clash of ideologies: the Commonality's controlled mass of individuals versus the Comsentience's massed mind with its concomitant loss of self. It's the Cold War all over again but in space with bigger explosions and terrific set-pieces.

Possibly due to Newton's own role-playing specialism, the book is blatantly structured as a series of action-packed missions. The detail is tremendous, visceral and extremely visual; just as it has to be for gaming. Newton has caught a fine balance between ethical debate and wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am excitement. The book is not going to set the socio-political world on fire: the tropes are there to *define* events, not to be the start of a grand polemic, and they become muddled in the drive for conspiratorial action and explosive adventure. It is, however, exactly what it should be; a sci-fi book that is an exciting, intelligent read, well worth a look.

Down To The Bone by Justina Robson (Gollancz, 2011)

Reviewed by Patrick Mahon

Down to the Bone is the fifth and final volume in Justina Robson's *Quantum Gravity* series. To recap, the story starts in 2015 when a quantum bomb tears holes in reality and humanity finds out that theirs is only one of several parallel universes. The others are occupied by elves, demons, faeries and the undead.

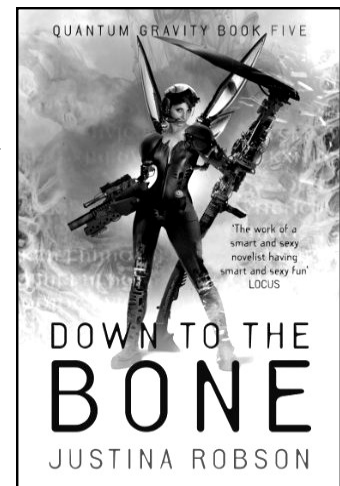
Junior civil servant Lila Black is critically injured when a routine trip to the elves' dimension of Alfheim goes horribly wrong. The Government rebuild her as a cyborg and retrain her as a special agent. Her first solo mission is to protect an elven musician called Zal from assassination. Falling in love with him isn't in her orders but that doesn't stop her. Lila's problem is that wherever she looks she sees evidence that her own government aren't telling her the whole truth, about her mission or about how she ended up as a cyborg. She wants to quit but knows she can't walk away from the problems the quantum bomb has created.

I found Lila a difficult protagonist to root for. Given what the government has done to her it is understandable that she is often angry. However, she spends much of her time stomping around like a moody teenager. Her self-indulgence gets tiresome after a while, making it difficult to sympathise when she once again does something impulsive and puts her friends in danger. When her friend Teazle tells her, "these childish fits of yours must stop, charming as they are", it is difficult not to agree.

Early in the book Lila is warned of an imminent catastrophe that only she can avert. The quantum bomb has freed a powerful creature, imprisoned by the elves at the beginning of time. It is out for revenge. When Alfheim goes silent, it seems like the end of the universe is nigh. Can Lila fulfil her destiny?

This is a witty, intelligent novel. Robson takes joy in throwing diverse elements from sf, fantasy and horror into the mix, deftly combining quantum physics with artificial intelligence, magic, fantasy races, clones and the undead. The ideas flow thick and fast and much of the enjoyment comes from following Robson as she riffs on one after another. This also proved to be my main stumbling block. Robson's enthusiasm for endless diversions from the main plot is almost unbounded. Subplots can enrich any novel but not if there are so many that it becomes difficult to see the wood for the trees. At times this book read more like a fascinating travelogue; it could, perhaps, have been subtitled *Travels With Lila*. Just don't ask me to draw you a map.

Down to the Bone is a flawed but worthwhile read. Although it sometimes felt like an effort to stay the course, I ultimately enjoyed the energy and playfulness of the story. I would like to revisit the whole series again in a year or two, to see if I appreciate its complexities better on a second encounter. I rather expect I will.



Starship Seasons by Eric Brown (Drugstore Indian Press, 2013)**Reviewed by Ian Sales**

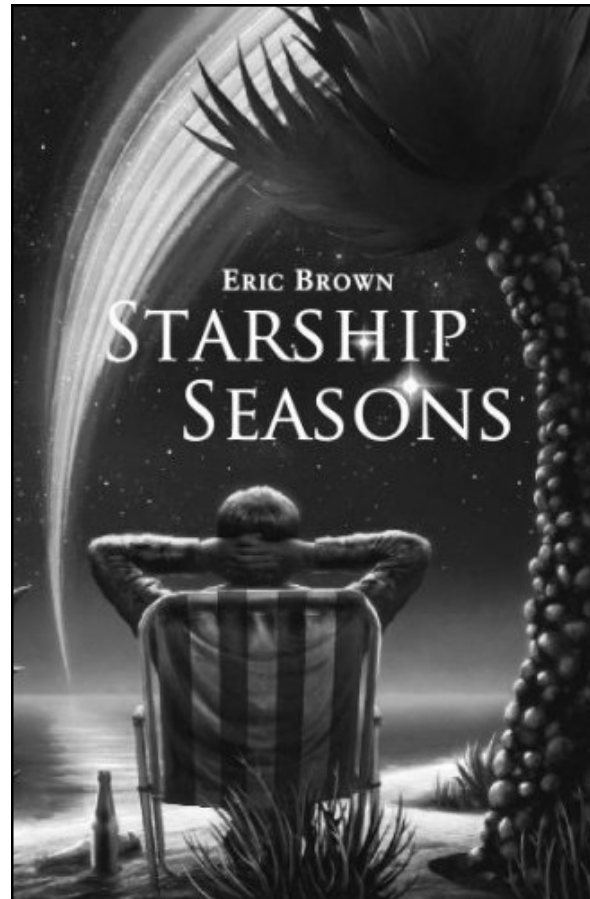
The four novellas which make up this collection - 'Starship Summer', 'Starship Fall', 'Starship Winter' and 'Starship Spring' - were originally published individually by PS Publishing (of which Drugstore Indian Press is an imprint) and NewCon Press between 2007 and 2012. All four are set in a future in which starship travel has been superseded by Telemass, interstellar teleportation. The novellas feature David Conway and the circle of close friends he makes when he moves to Chalcedony, Delta Pavonis IV. While the stories share locale and cast and each novella references events in the preceding stories, they can be read as standalones.

In 'Starship Summer', Conway has retired to Chalcedony, a move partly driven by the death of his daughter and the subsequent breakup of his marriage. While hunting for a suitable property on the shore of the idyllic Magenta Bay, he stumbles across a junkyard of starships, run by an ex-pilot called Hawk. Conway decides to use an old ship as a home but the one he chooses is of mysterious provenance. He settles into a life of indolence - with a great deal of drinking - and makes friends with several of the locals, including Hawk, famous artist Matt, telepath Maddie and Hawk's alien lover, Kee (a native of Chalcedony). Conway soon discovers his starship home is 'haunted'... by an avatar of the Yall, an advanced alien race who have long since vanished. With the help of the Yall ghost, Conway and his friends make his starship operable and discover the true purpose of Chalcedony's mysterious marvel, the Golden Column, an impenetrable pillar one kilometre in diameter and thirty kilometres high.

'Starship Fall' is set five years later. The fuss over Conway's discovery of the Column's purpose - it is, in fact, part of an instantaneous interstellar transport network - has died down. The appearance in Magenta Bay of holo superstar Carlotta Chakravorti-Luna, however, threatens to upset Conway's life of indolence and drinking. And then Kee, vanishes into the jungle to "smoke the bones", an alien ritual which allows the smoker to snatch glimpses of the future but has a seventy percent fatality rate. Conway, Maddie and Hawk head off into the interior to 'rescue' Kee but unfortunately are too late to prevent her undergoing the ritual. What she sees of the future involves Chakravorti-Luna and also Hawk's possible death. The holo superstar admits she is on Chalcedony to find an ex-husband who crashed on the planet decades before and this has something to do with the smoking the bones ritual.

The plot of 'Starship Winter' is driven by Matt, the artist, who puts on an exhibition of works which use "empathy stones" from the world of Acrab IV. Visiting Magenta Bay is Darius Dortmund, an empath, who is not only unduly interested in Matt's showing but is also accompanied by an alien from Acrab IV. Dortmund is arrogant, secretive and a nasty sort. He annoys and upsets Conway and his friends, spoils the grand opening of Matt's art show and then, at a big party in his rented property later, is found murdered. Suspicion immediately falls on Conway's circle, who had stayed over at Dortmund's house for the night.

In that novella, Lieutenant Hannah van Harben of the local police becomes Conway's love-interest. In the final book of the quartet, 'Starship Spring', it is six years later and Conway and van Harben are now living together. Their friends are busy off-planet: Matt and Maddie touring Matt's latest art show, Hawk and Kee flying rich tourists to some galactic wonder. But all six arrange for a fortnight away at an expensive Chalcedony holiday spot called Tamara Falls when they return. Part of the charm of



the place is that it's apparently haunted and the ghost makes a number of appearances in front of the group. It also seems to be trying to tell them something.

Matt admits that the holiday is being paid for by Dr Petronius, a famous art patron, who insisted on it as a condition of his offer to tour Matt's art show. Millennia ago, the Yall fought and defeated an evil alien race, the Skeath, who managed to hide a vast army beneath Tamara Falls, ready to be awoken one day to conquer the galaxy. Petronius wants this to happen and needs Conway and co to be on-hand to trigger it.

There's something very... *comfortable* about the stories in *Starship Seasons*. There's nothing edgy or outrageous about the world described, nor about the concepts deployed in the stories. That the characters are well-drawn is a given; Brown has been writing SF since the mid-Eighties and he's very good at it. But each of the central quintet has a secret and that five damaged people should become such close friends occasionally feels somewhat banal.

That feels like too harsh a judgement: these are four polished novellas, firmly located in genre heartland, thoughtful and considered in tone and very much character-centred. They will not disappoint a dedicated science fiction reader even if, in these days of immersion and jump-cuts and blowing shit up, these novellas do feel a little old-fashioned in affect. Entertaining and well put-together, certainly, but....

The fate of the galaxy is several times put at risk, the lives of the central and supporting cast are frequently in danger and yet, once the dust has settled, Conway's life returns to normal. There is progression - the Golden Column supersedes Telemass, Conway and van Harben have a child, the characters grow and heal over the years - yet the victories won in each of the novellas still feel small scale and personal. Sometimes, that's all science fiction needs.

***The Devil's Nebula* (Abaddon, 2012) and *Helix Wars* (Rebellion, 2012) by Eric Brown**

Reviewed by Tony Jones

Two books by the same author and despite a career spanning more than twenty years, forty books and two BSFA awards, I have to confess to never having read any of Eric Brown's work before. Would these be the only works I would ever read or would the experience turn me into a fan?

I started with *The Devil's Nebula*, the first novel in the *Weird Space* series (touted as a shared world but so far only written by Brown). The setting is quickly painted: we have a human empire known as the Expansion nestling up against a larger empire, the Vetch. The story opens with Ed Carew and his crew of smugglers exploring an evacuated human world just inside Vetch space with the intent of looting an abandoned museum. Escaping the planet with their prize, they are arrested by the navy, tried and sentenced to death. This is, of course, all a ruse and the navy instead pressgang them into crewing a mission across Vetch space to investigate signals from a lost human colony ship.

Meanwhile the story is interspersed with scenes set on an unidentified alien world (called World) where a human colony lives in association with an alien race known as the Weird. The Weird are suitably alien; they provide nourishment to humans and seem to control them in ways not understood by a young girl named Maatja who rejects their food, preferring to forage and spend time with humans outside the colony known as the Outcasts.

At its heart, this is a story of the catalytic effect outsiders have when they reach an isolated community and we are quickly drawn into a battle between our heroes and the Outcasts against the Weird. The plot is more complex than this though – we have telepathic powers, mind control and a deep rooted alien conspiracy. So *The Devil's Nebula* has a lot of good ingredients and the prose is excellent in many places. Despite all this I found myself not caring what happened and, on finishing the book, disappointed. Some of the characters are decent but others are one-dimensional and the last dozen pages raced through the action as though the author was in a hurry to be done.

My unease is probably best expressed by an early scene when the smugglers are waiting for execution. This is a device I have seen well used but here it failed to convince. Even Carew himself was unconvinced and spent time telling this crew that something didn't feel right and that he couldn't take the situation seriously. This is my problem with the story over all.

Turning to *Helix Wars*, I was not sure what to expect. It is the second book in a trilogy, the follow up to *Helix* (2007) about

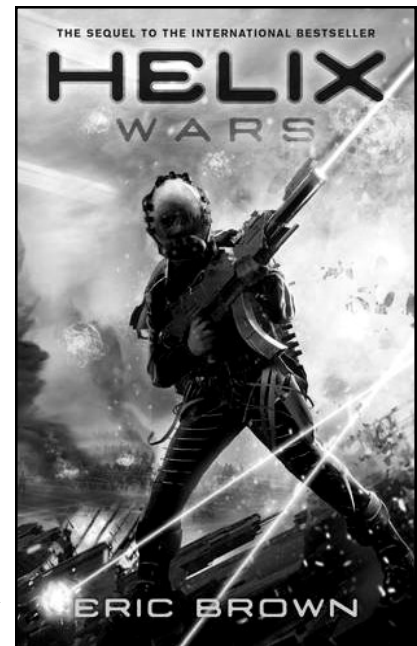
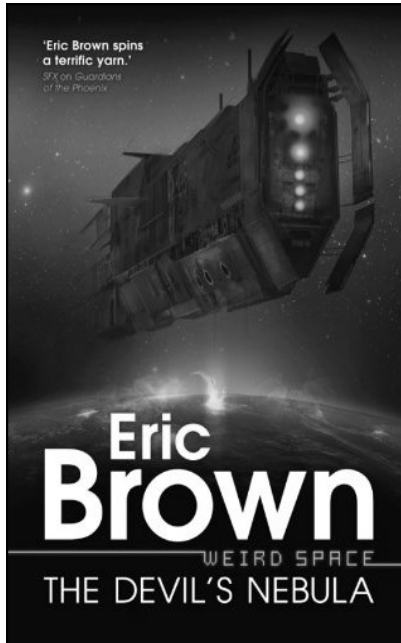
which I knew nothing. The setting is explained quickly on the back cover: "The Helix is a vast spiral of ten thousand worlds constructed by the Builders to provide a refuge for alien races on the verge of extinction." The Builders have conveniently moved on to a virtual afterlife leaving the various races to find their own destinies.

The hero of the story is a human named Jeff Ellis, a pilot whose shuttle is brought down on the world of the Phandrans by invading forces from the neighbouring world of the Sporelli. The story starts as a chase across a war torn landscape, focusing on the relationship between Ellis and a Phandran, Calla, as he tries to survive and return to the human race.

Having got this straight, we now have two chunks of back-story. The first is Kranda from the Mahkan race. She has a debt to repay since Jeff once saved her life and, on hearing he has crashed, acts like a Guardian Angel-cum-Valkyrie, cutting a swathe through the Sporelli and eventually rescuing Jeff and taking him home. The second is Jeff's wife, Maria. To counterpoint the action of the rescue, we follow her through an affair; the root cause of which was the death of their child and Jeff's inability to share his grief with his wife. So structurally the novel has three female characters in orbit around a male character which I found interesting. Jeff the human is somewhere in the middle of the Mahkan (strong, big, aggressive, technologically advanced) and the Phandran (spiritual, small and low tech with short life span) spectrum. At an angle to this is his broken relationship with his wife.

Having returned home and reported the Sporelli invasion, Jeff's reward is the news that his marriage is over. Meanwhile Calla is still held captive by the Sporelli so Kranda suggest that she and Jeff take on the Sporelli and rescue her. This allows Brown to show us the fabulous interior of Helix with its majestic infrastructure and show us vividly how superior the Builders were. The action builds and steps up a level when we learn of the deeper plan behind the Sporelli emperor's actions. Needless to say all ends well with much heroism from our main players and the scene is set for a subsequent novel.

I found this novel to be substantially better than *The Devil's Nebula*. Brown took his time to develop the plot and character without rushing to a conclusion. Within pages I cared about Jeff Ellis's life and was reminded of classic SF such as Larry Niven's *Ringworld* (in terms of the setup) and Arthur C Clarke's *Rama* series in terms of the interior of the Helix). The races were all very distinct and the least developed was probably the human race. Although it is possible to find flaw in a somewhat tidy ending, overall this book works well. I have already bought *Helix* to read and will look out for the inevitable third book. *Helix Wars* is one of seven titles shortlisted for the Philip K Dick Award and I wish it well.



***The Mammoth Book Of Time Travel SF*, edited by Mike Ashley (Robinson, 2013) and *The Shining Girls* by Lauren Beukes (HarperCollins, 2013)**

Reviewed by L J Hurst

Mike Ashley's new anthology collects twenty five stories on time travel, some of them more science-fictional than others. That is to say, some concentrate more than others on the concept of time or on how we might travel through it at differing rates, though most pay more attention to the people affected by it. Hard science hardly gets a look in. Ashley, as his brief introductions to each story make clear, tries to group stories by their differing themes. These start with dislocation and time-slips, pass through return to earlier times via appeals to the future (to come back and save us) and end with attempts to address and change our earlier selves.

It is difficult not to note that time travel SF rarely escapes from echoes of other fiction: David J Lake's 'The Truth About Weena' (1998) continues the story of H G Wells's time-traveller; Sheila Crosby's 'Scream Quietly' (2005) reveals that Jules Verne was conceived by a woman using an unusual escape from a violent marriage; while Fritz Leiber's 'Try And Change The Past' (1958) is a variation on the pulp magazine short where a sucker never gets an even break. Ashley says that he has chosen Malcolm Edwards' only fiction, 'After-Images' (1983), because it has the spirit of time dislocation found in JG Ballard's 'Voices Of Time' (1960), though Ballard himself is not represented here. Ellen Klages's 'Time Gypsy' (1998) is a love story, while Christopher Priest's 'Palely Loitering' (1978) only slowly reveals that its ladies in summer dresses are not promenading in one of Chekhov or Schnitzler's continental spa towns.

Fritz Leiber's story is the oldest in this volume (eleven were first published after the millennium) with Liz Williams's 'Century To Starboard' seeing its first print here. When the time travel story appeared it seemed another way of confirming that the technical vision was also one of wonder: extraordinary creatures seen by Wells's time-traveller in the future, while those who went into past, such as Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee, were able to put their hand to inventions that brought civilisation nearer. We are less sure now: the opening story, Gregory Benford's 'Caveat Time Traveler' (2009), makes that clear, as spivs waiting in the future take advantage of short-term visitors from the past. Elizabeth Malartre's 'Darwin's Suitcase' (2007) has a future scientist trying to persuade Charles Darwin not to publish because of the forthcoming destruction caused by the wars against fundamentalism, while Michael Swanwick's 'Legions In Time' (2003) has a curious secretary opening doors she should not and finding herself walking to unattractive dystopia.

Having long been a fan of L Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* (1939), I have only recently learned of Poul Anderson's reply to it: 'The Man Who Came Early' (1956), which dis-

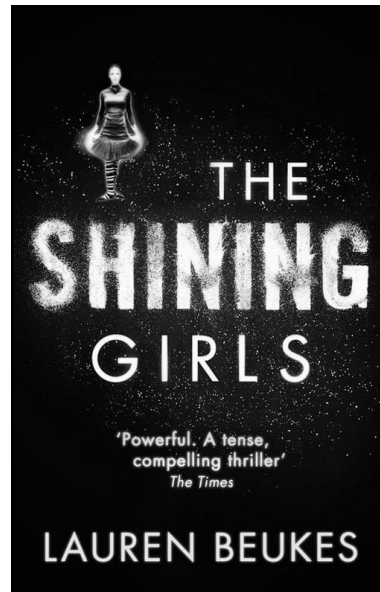
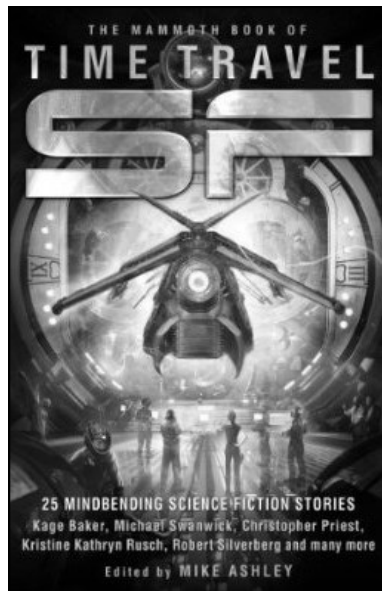
countenances the likelihood of someone with modern technical knowledge being able to advance progress. Steven Utley's 'The Wind Over The World' (1996) exemplifies that tradition in this volume: to travel in time for any great period you must also travel a distance because of geological changes. Two people go back to the Silurian period: one lands where the reception party is waiting, the other is somewhere else in an age before the dinosaurs, never to be found, to live who knows how long?

Seven of the twenty five stories are by women and feature women (of the male writers, only Utley and Swanwick feature female protagonists). Elizabeth Malartre's Darwinian encounter is viewed by a nun at a chronoscope, while Kristine Kathryn Rusch's 'Red Letter Day' (2010), which concludes this volume, is narrated by an American high school student waiting for her letter from the future, a sort-of reversal of the year books which now predict who is the student most likely to succeed. While neither of these are optimistic, two authors do manage to turn things around. Sheila Crosby's 'Scream Quietly' echoes Erin Pizzey's ground-breaking non-fiction study of domestic abuse, *Scream Quietly Or The Neighbours Will Hear* (1974), while Molly Brown's 'Women On The Brink Of A Cataclysm' (1994) echoes Pedro Almodóvar's 1988 film title. Yet both Crosby and Brown's protagonists manage to escape the negativity of the inspirational titles. This achievement is most obvious in Ellen Klages's *Time Gypsy*, a lesbian love story across time in which the women come out ahead of the men in academic politics as well.

Mike Ashley has produced this anthology just as Lauren Beukes's *The Shining Girls*, in which a serial killer makes the fortuitous discovery that a run down house in a miserable neighbourhood is actually a time machine, has appeared. Harper Curtis is a wretched drifter in the Great Depression: unfortunately, he is also attracted to women stretched through the 20th Century who have a shining quality that only he can see. He also leaves and takes keepsakes from one death to another and Kirby Mazrachi, who is intended to be his latest victim, realises his threat just in time. Unfortunately *The Shining Girls* fails because Lauren Beukes has not realised that misery is not a catalyst like platinum that will make the rest of her story react and sparkle. Beukes has some inter-

esting ideas though: a dead body in the house and another body in a dumpster down the street, which appear, disappear, die and re-vivify are finally and successfully explained. This is not something everyone can do: did you ever notice in Charles Dickens's time-travelling *A Christmas Carol* that the boy dying on Scrooge's doorstep just vanishes from the narrative without explanation? Overall, though, this book needs plot and it does not have it.

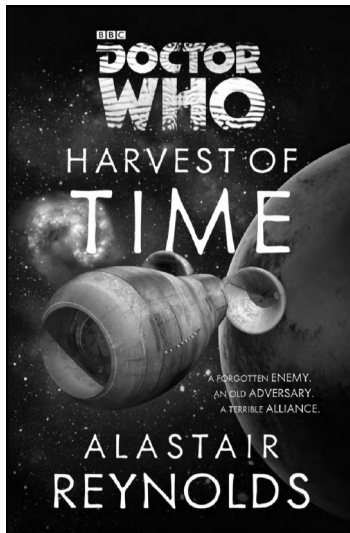
While there are few explanations of time-travel here and little investigation of its paradoxes, perhaps the appearance of these two volumes now is not coincidence. Some might say it is about time.



Harvest Of Time by Alastair Reynolds (BBC Books, 2013)**Reviewed by Glyn Morgan**

I mentioned to a friend in my book club that I was reviewing a new Doctor Who book. "Which Doctor?" "The Third", I replied. They nodded sagely but then cocked an eyebrow, "which companion...?" "Jo." This met with considerable approval.

Even for some people reading this review, the Doctor-Companion incarnation, combined with the identity of the author whom you should already have gleaned from the header, will have sold the book to you. Such is the power of *Doctor Who*. For everyone else, even those who are only aware of the basics



(TARDIS, regeneration, sonic screwdriver) then it might still please you to know that in *Harvest Of Time* Reynolds has achieved the difficult task of balancing fan service with original story-telling, immersing the story within the *Who* universe whilst remaining accessible for those with only a basic conception of the show.

The book centres on the third incarnation of the Doctor, as portrayed by Jon Pertwee, during his time spent acting as an advisor for UNIT whilst exiled on Earth by the Time Lords.

Given Reynolds's other work – and indeed the cover of this novel which features a particularly phallic spaceship in orbit around a red planet – you could be forgiven for assuming that this book plays true to the author's demonstrated strengths of space opera and big ideas. Indeed, there is inter-planetary, cross-time, paradox inducing adventuring to be had, but actually the majority of the narrative is firmly grounded on Earth and kept to a human scale. Similarly, the setting is grounded by real-world concerns such as the Cold War which is a looming spectre hanging over several of the human characters, particularly a pair of suited MoD employees.

The main action of the novel is concerned with the invasion of Earth by an alien force known as the Sild. It is testament to Reynolds's mastery of the *Who* legend that I was completely unable to tell whether the creatures were an original creation or an established enemy (as it turns out, the former). But then this is typical of the author's technique throughout the book as a whole: the Doctor's characterisation is solid, the glimpses of back-story relating to his youth ring true and the behind-the-sofa horror is present alongside humour of various shades (a grisly pun on sleeping policemen springs to mind) but where the book really shines is when The Master is on the page. Roger Delgado's performance is instantly summoned to mind in a villain who, in order to combat the source of the Sild threat, is recruited as a reluctant ally and is at once suave, charming, ruthless, violent and arrogant.

The interplay between the two Time Lords contains some moments of wonderful banter as well as serving an important purpose that the new series could learn from: The Master is shown to be superior to the Doctor in several ways, this has the effect of depowering the Doctor, flagging his weaknesses and fallibility, making him less of the undefeatable superhuman he has appeared of late.

The book feels familiar enough to welcome the current generation of Whovians; small moments seem to reference the

newer series, such as people's memories of the Master being gradually erased through time lapse and specifically how UNIT attempt to combat being reminiscent of the plot arc surrounding the Silence in the sixth season. At the same time, it is another fine tribute to a classic era at a time, with the 50th anniversary nigh, when science fiction is looking backwards as much as it is to the future.

11.22.63 by Stephen King (Hodder & Stoughton, 2011)**Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite**

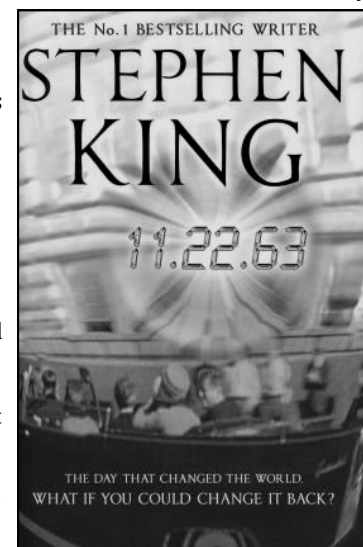
There's a portal leading to 1958 in the storeroom of Al Templeton's diner. No matter how much time someone spends there, only two minutes will have elapsed in the present when they return. Their actions in the past may alter the present – but all will be reset if the portal is used again. Al has tried to change the course of history by preventing the assassination of John F Kennedy but cancer caught up with him before he could wait out the necessary five years. Back in 2011, he enlists teacher Jake Epping to go back and do what he couldn't.

JFK's murder may be the impetus of its plot but the main focus of *11.22.63* for much of its length is Jake's experience of the past: his realisation that he quite likes it back there and his personal relationships, especially in Jodie, the small Texas town where he eventually settles and falls in love with a librarian named Sadie Dunhill. This strand has its moments but in many ways it's the least interesting aspect of King's novel: as a character, Jake is rather anonymous – which is part of what helps him slot into 1958 but it also means there's less emotional interest when he's not being driven by his mission.

Nor is there much friction between past and present in the novel. Jake sees signs of the period's prejudice and bigotry but never has cause to truly confront or engage with them. For King's protagonist, the Fifties and Sixties can, unproblematically, be a time when root beer tasted better and folks were friendlier. The odd acknowledgement of social attitudes that don't sit well with Jake's liberal sensibilities does not carry much force in the face of this living past's seductive nostalgia.

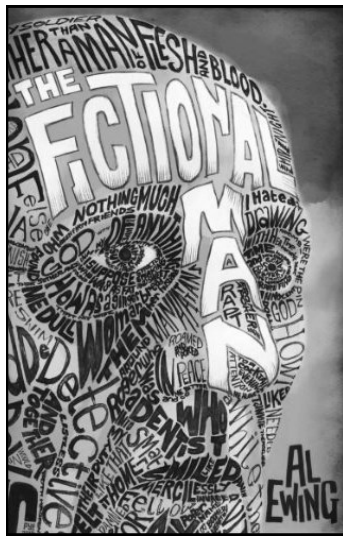
There are intriguing hints throughout *11.22.63*'s midsection that time itself is resisting Jake's attempts to change history; this maintains tension over whether he will actually succeed. But it's not until novel's end that the time travel aspect comes right to the fore – and here the book unbalances, as the tone built up over 700 pages shifts more than once over the next 30. A historical domestic drama with overtones of a thriller becomes a compressed science fiction story and the transition is too abrupt to work.

The characterisation of Jake also causes the ending to come unstuck. Up to that point, the protagonist has seemed mostly detached; now, he acts with a strength of feeling that we haven't really seen before and that King hasn't really earned on the page. What's more, the closing shifts feel like an author trying to have his cake and eat it, backtracking on a commitment to an emotional position. It's a frustrating end to an uneven novel.



The Fictional Man by Al Ewing (Solaris, 2013)**Reviewed by Gary Dalkin**

Niles Golan is an expat Brit in Hollywood. Never grown-up, he narrates his life with an internal monologue transforming his everyday inadequacies into triumphs. Niles is his own fictional creation: to himself, a genius novelist akin to the young Thomas Pynchon; to everyone else, the hack who writes the popular Kurt Power adventures novels. His ambition is to launch a movie franchise but to get the chance he has to pitch a remake of his teenage-self's favourite film. This should be a dream, except everyone at the studio is clueless and Golan realises that his once beloved movie is horribly dated, sexist, homophobic and racist.



The Fictional Man is based on an impossible conceit, one of those high concept movie-friendly ideas where one aspect of reality is altered from our world but things continue just the same. It's absurd but depending on how well it's done we buy into it for the duration. Here it is generally very well done. Al Ewing is a breathtakingly clever writer and his conceit is that human cloning was perfected decades ago but then outlawed because everyone is entitled to their own unique identity. Fictionals are not clones but tube-born people, genetically designed and psychologically programmed to embody the part of particular characters in hit movie or TV franchises.

Golan's best-friend, Bob, was created to play the public domain character The Black Terror. Niles's 'therapist' Ralph only feels real while acting out the role he played on a cancelled TV show. Then there's Liz, who may be Fictional, or perhaps just part of the scene. And Sherlock Holmes is investigating the murder of... Sherlock Holmes.

There's just one aspect of the conceit which doesn't work. Ewing postulates a career and life destroying taboo against womb-born people (ie you and me) having romantic or sexual relationships with Fictionals. It's a device for addressing prejudice but it doesn't work as fiction since a large part of the attraction of movie stars is sexual. Audiences don't make hits of films featuring stars they feel nauseous fantasising about. Curiosity alone – forget lust – would produce an endless line of volunteers eager to discover what those perfect genetically engineered Fictional icons of the silver screen were like between the sheets. It's a major conceptual flaw in an otherwise exceptional novel, a book which begins as light comedy and becomes increasingly strange and audacious.

The subplots slot into place like a finely-honed screenplay. It's ultimately even rather moving. The dialogue is sharp and Ewing delights in perfect pastiches of everything from the Onion AV Club to a mid-20th Century *Collier's* story. In a world where everyone is acting even when they're not, Niles's quest explores the ambiguous nature of fiction and the personas people adopt. With its layers of unreality, inner voices, stories within stories, revelations, drugs, paranoia, betrayal and even in its California setting, *The Fictional Man* reads like the meta-fictional, post-modern, pop-cultural, hyper-referential heir to Philip K. Dick.

"Is there a movie?" Niles hadn't heard. "There will be. There always is." It will be directed by Michael Bay and star Ben Still-

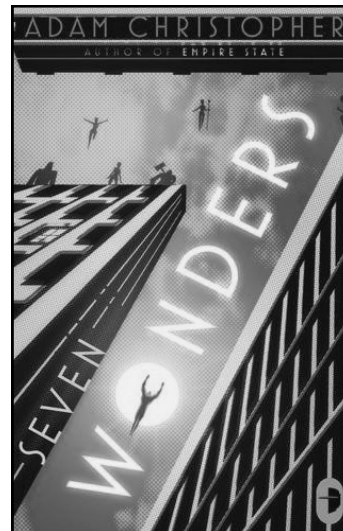
er, Tina Fey and Robert Downey Jr as Sherlock Holmes. Ridley Scott will produce. It will be reviewed as a monumental folly, the new *Last Action Hero*. In twenty years it will be considered a cult classic and we will all deride the remake.

Seven Wonders by Adam Christopher (Angry Robot, 2012)**Reviewed by Jim Steel**

Evolution is blind. The superhero industry started as a way to take advantage of four-colour printing on cheap paper. Those primary-coloured guys, unfettered by physics, looked wonderful on the page. By the Eighties there were writers who had grown up loving these juvenile wish-

fulfilment stories and were able to treat them in a mature manner. Cinema technology also caught up and the genre baggage had become a mythology.

Alan Moore's *Watchmen* remains the high-water mark for superhero graphic adventure, with a film adaption that, despite fanboy carping, offers a faithful and rewarding version. Moore cut his heroes from new cloth and imagined what our history would have been like had they really been around to interact with us. Adam Christopher's second novel,



likewise, turns out a new selection of superheroes but in a more conventional comic-book manner that will be familiar to DC and Marvel readers. The Earthbound chapters, for example, are restricted to a single fictional city, the analogously-named Californian metropolis of San Ventura with the action moving to the Moon and deep space during the course of the book. The Seven Wonders themselves are a pretty good fit for the Avengers, with Linear matching Quicksilver and Hephaestus – complete with hammer – filling the Thor role. We know where we are.

Superheroes have triumphed in this world and it is only San Ventura that is still plagued by a supervillain, the Cowl. In real life he is multi-billionaire Geoff Conroy; obviously this is a man who views armed robbery and terrorism as a diverting hobby since we're all aware of how much real crime multi-billionaires are capable of. Insider dealing and gerrymandering do not in general call for fist-fights so his mundane alter-ego is a philanthropist. There is a hint of conspiracy around the Cowl's continuing freedom but it's a thread that is never resolved. At one stage he moves to the good side but such is the lack of characterisation that we have to rely on the psychic Bluebell for assurances that his conversion is genuine.

This is not a novel of character. Most of the superheroes – and there are lots – are defined by their names, although there are some pretty imaginative minor characters and one can imagine that Christopher developed an extensive encyclopaedia for his novel. It also lurches sideways, plot-wise, halfway through, when a major character dies. But it will be a familiar proposition for comic readers who will be used to their franchised characters taking new directions. If you're a fan of the DC and Marvel universes then by all means have a go at *Seven Wonders*; it's fun, even if it's twice as long as it should be. Hopefully Christopher will also be offered a chance to script comics at some stage as well since his love for the medium is obvious. But if you're not a superhero fan then there is little for you here.

***Across The Event Horizons* by Mercurio D Rivera
(Newcon Press, 2013)**

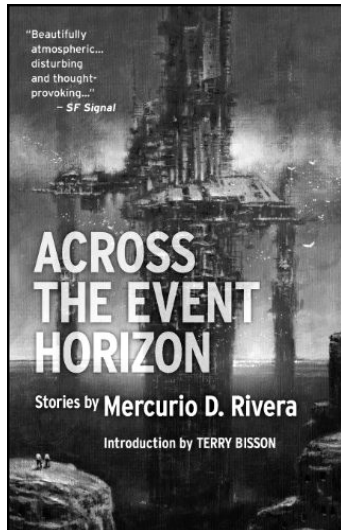
Reviewed by Karen Burnham

Mercurio D Rivera's debut collection, *Across The Event Horizon*, showcases a selection of his fiction spanning from 2005 to 2010, much of which originally appeared in magazines such as *Interzone* and *Black Static*. These are generally well written and have a much more diverse cast of characters than a similar collection would have had ten or twenty years ago. Most of the stories hew fairly close to 'core sf' territory: we have disastrous encounters between humans and aliens, communication between parallel universes and individuality amongst identical clones. Many of them fall on the heavy-handed side of the spectrum. However, some stories are a little more subtle and, in the end, the collection offers an interesting contrasting message.

The stories that deal with parallel universes and alternate versions of self tend to be the most heavy-handed. 'Snatch Me Another' is a sad tale of grabbing different versions of loved ones from alternate universes, especially when the 'original' has died. The lesbian couple at its heart have trouble letting go of the son they lost. This is followed by 'Dear Annabehls' set in the same universe – a great concept in telling a story through advice column Q&As but it falls down in its over-the-top execution. 'The Fifth Zhi' and 'Doubled' both deal with people trying to claim individuality in the face of a system that mandates exact similarity. 'Fifth Zhi' is more effective in telling an individual story as 'Doubled' seems to lose steam at its ending.

The stories of alien contact are more interesting and creative. 'Dance Of Kawkawroons' involves exploiting a sentient alien species to produce a brain-stimulating drug; the interspecies communication and multiple viewpoints are done well. 'Longing For Langelana' tells of a failed romance between a human and alien on a hostile planet. 'Missionaries' tells a deeply cynical tale of communication between different factions of humans and aliens in which everyone feels superior to everyone else. And 'The Scent Of Their Arrival' depicts scent-based aliens trying to understand audio-visual human communications. The real threat of the story unfolds slowly and turns an ostensibly happy ending into a tragic one.

All of which is to say that the extreme hopefulness of the finale, 'Answers From The Event Horizon' is quite a tone shift for this volume. The uplifting message that provides the final note comes from advanced beings communicating through a white hole: "...imagine the inconceivable, strive for the impossible. The cosmic path is clear; you're on your way. And it's going to be an amazing journey, we promise." Given that we've just finished reading a dozen plus stories of war, exploitation, abuse, torture, miscommunication and violence, it provides an interesting contrast between what so much of sf casually communicates (cynicism and fear of the future, the Other, and our reaction to the Other) and the message it desperately wants to be seen as sending (hope for an intrepid future).



***After the End: Recent Apocalypses*, edited by Paula Guran (Prime Books, 2013)**

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Can you name another genre as destructive in its imaginings as science fiction? Horror might be nastier, war stories might be bloodier and religious texts have more WTF but for sheer megalomania science fiction has this category all sewn up. Sure, you might say, as a genre SF aims higher so has further to fall when things go awry; but doesn't there seem to be an awful lot of fatalism inherent in our favourite genre?

After The End has twenty examples of the end of the world, all written over the last five years – meaning, no purple clouds or ravening rays here, I'm afraid. What it does offer is a fascinating peek into our more recent neuroses: the world destroyed by environmental collapse, economic collapse, plague, the tragedy of the commons – even old-fashioned nuclear war makes an appearance. But the method is secondary in these tales. It's the aftermath that we're interested in: who's survived? What remains? Where is there left to go?

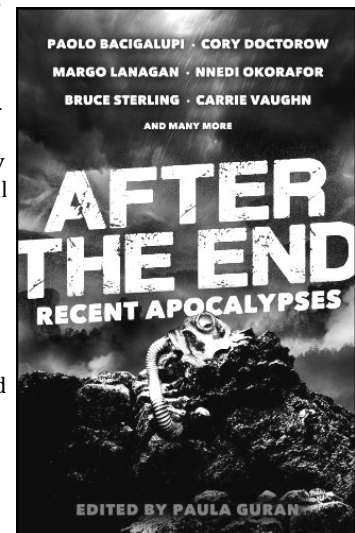
The answers to these questions are remarkably varied.

My own favourite, 'Pump Six' by Paolo Bacigalupi, is a Brunner-esque tale of humanity's inability to recognise its own descent into stupidity, mollycoddled by a slowly failing infrastructure that it can no longer maintain. Bacigalupi's protagonist's struggles in vain to shore up a failing near-future world, one clearly based on our own short-sighted, hyper-sexualised and media-saturated times. Lauren Beukes's short, sharp satirical shock 'Chislehurst Messiah' tickled me mainly because I live near Chislehurst and know it well. Is it a sly dig at the middle-class heroes of John Wyndham's 'cosy catastrophes' from the 1950s? Beukes's own self-obsessed 'messiah', adrift in a collapsing corner of suburban London, offers a juicy hit of *schadenfreude* for even the least class-conscious among us.

Simon Morden's 'Never, Never, Three Times Never' follows a blind man and a woman in a wheelchair struggling to reach the supposed safety of London together. It drifts perilously close to schmaltz but is well-written and brief enough to avoid those particular rocks, reaching a conclusion that couldn't be more life-affirming if it was narrated by Morgan Freeman.

Far more disturbing and pessimistic is Margo Lanagan's 'The Fifth Star In The Southern Cross,' a murky downbeat tale of genetic decay and disintegration brought about by, I think, humanity interbreeding with aliens. The story's narrator is almost as unpleasant as the future he lives in and though his genes may be pristine, if he's the saviour of the future then you might almost prefer the alternative.

Fortunately, there are brighter visions on offer, such as Carrie Vaughn's 'Amaryllis' and Kage Baker's homely tale of travelling folk, 'The Books'. In fact, speaking as a long-time avid consumer of doomsday tales, it was something of a surprise to discover that stories of the apocalypse needn't be awful and sobering to be readable. In this collection, it was the quieter tales, those in which the best of humanity shines through after the worst has taken its toll, that mostly stayed with me after reading.



Nebula Awards Showcase 2013, edited by Catherine Asaro (Pyr, 2013)

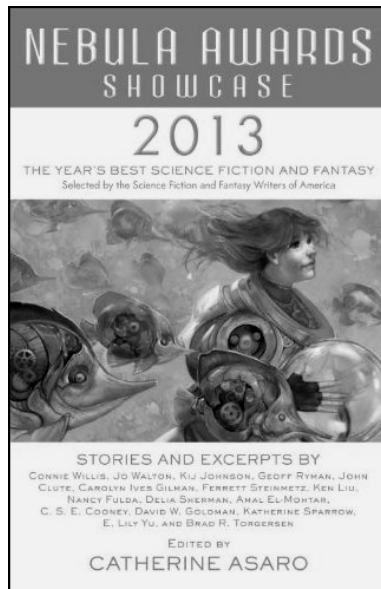
Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Most readers of this review will know what is on offer here: the winning and some of the short-listed Nebula Award stories. In addition the book contains the winners of the Andre Norton Award, the Damon Knight Grand Master Award, the Solstice Award and the Rhysling Award for poetry. For a reviewer faced with what has been assessed as the best fantasy and science fiction of the previous couple of years, it is almost an *embarras de richesse*.

One thing that occurred to me as I read the stories is how many of them depend on a vividly imagined sense of place. Sometimes the setting is familiar (or almost familiar) such as the Welsh valleys in the extract from Jo Walton's *Among Others* or the North American background in 'The Migratory Pattern of Dancers' by Katherine Sparrow and 'The Axiom of Choice' by David W Goldman. The excerpt from Delia Sherman's *The Freedom Maze* presents a real-world setting which is alien to us through the passage of time and the change in attitudes. Others, like Brad R Torgersen's 'Ray of Light' and Ferrett Steinmetz's 'Sauerkraut Station', take place in a future artificial environment. Both 'The Ice Owl' by Carolyn Ives Gilman and 'The Man Who Bridged The Mist' by Kij Johnson introduce the reader to a complete and finely imagined new world. In my view, this last story had a predictable plot and somewhat stereotyped characters but I was totally engaged by the setting; the description of the mist and the voyages through it lift it from the ordinary into something truly special.

Another area that struck me as I read was how many of these stories depend on conflict: not the 'conflict' which how-to-write books instruct their readers to incorporate into their fiction but a genuine clash of cultures, of understanding and of ways of being. 'The Cartographer Wasps And The Anarchist Bees' by E Lily Yu is perhaps the most obvious example but the same theme appears in Geoff Ryman's 'What We Found' and Nancy Fulda's 'Movement', where characters whose ways of thinking are profoundly different fail to find understanding. The humour of Connie Willis's 'Ado' does not disguise the way in which excessive PC thinking restricts and ultimately destroys the marvellous. Most disturbing – perhaps because it strikes too close to home – is the way in which Ken Liu in 'The Paper Menagerie' and Delia Sherman in her extract use fantasy to express problems of racism.

I haven't tried to analyse the quality of individual stories as that would take more space than I have but it is enough to say that all of them deserve to be here. It seems to me that one vital aspect of fantasy and science fiction is to present us with new worlds or make us look with new eyes at the familiar world we inhabit. Another essential is to offer new ways of thinking and of being. This collection succeeds brilliantly in doing both.



Fearsome Journeys: The New Solaris Book of Fantasy edited by Jonathan Strahan (Solaris, 2013)

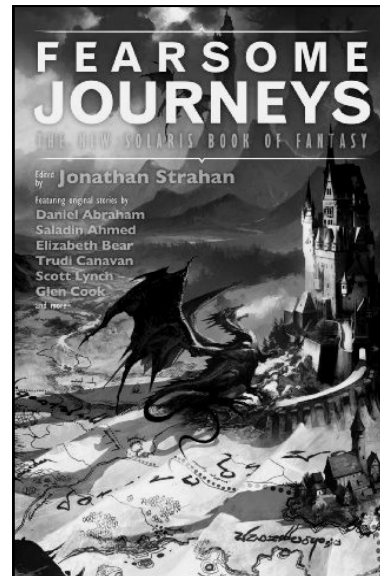
Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

The blurb's claim that *Fearsome Journeys* "explores the whole range of the fantastic" is nonsense. All twelve stories are immersed in a secondary world, typically of the kind that feels like a generalised medieval Europe inhabited by modern Americans. All involve combat and most present an overt military situation. The tone ranges from the earnest realism of Kate Elliott's 'Leaf and Branch and Grass and Vine' to the jolly Dungeons & Dragons of Saladin Ahmed's 'Amethyst, Shadow, and Light': "Zok chewed and swallowed. 'And we were nearly killed by the shade of a baby-eating cleric there'".

Only in the last story, Daniel Abraham's 'The High King Dreaming', does the writing move into a higher register as the dreaming consciousness of an Arthur-like king, deceased but not dead, sweeps freely through time as he observes the fortunes of his daughter who's now queen and endlessly awaits the time of need for his return. The one other story that imparts a shiver of enchantment is Elliott's, facilitated by the realism with which she handles the characters' belief in a folkloric 'Hanging Woman' whose existence is never made explicit.

Elsewhere the tendency is to disenchant magic by presenting it as equivalent to technology, something that always makes me think of the mechanics of role-playing games. Here, for example, is Glen Cook in 'Shaggy Dog Bridge': "He babbled about lethal residual magic, the half-lives of curses, and the magnitude of sorcery needed to drop the walls of the gorge." And Scott Lynch's 'The Effigy Engine' takes us into a thinly disguised allegory of Coalition forces fighting in Afghanistan, in which magic serves as

heavy weaponry and 'counter-thaumaturgy' connotes 'counter-insurgency'. Trudi Canavan does try to conjure some real magic in 'Camp Follower', in which an unusually companionable whore turns out to be an ancient sorceress but her writing, though it slips down as easily as a yoghurt, can't compete with the meat and two veg you get from Elliott.



Perhaps the cleverest story is KJ Parker's 'The Dragonslayer of Merebarton'. Parker skilfully evokes the jaded voice of an ageing knight who's forced to rally himself to tackle a stray dragon. This dragon is no enchanted creature; its physiology is entirely explicable in scientific terms. At the same time, there's no ecological sympathy for it as a rare species. It's just a menace that needs to be killed, the death of certain men in the fight pointedly lacks any meaning, and the knight is convinced by his own close shave that death is no more or less than annihilation. The story is an intrusion of the disenchantment of the modern world into a realm, fantasy, that one might hope to be a last refuge, and portal, of enchantment. It struck me as a parable of the imaginative dead end that fantasy of the kind collected in this book has run itself into, where the most interesting thing left to do is to ironically devour the genre from within. The cutting edge of fantasy lies elsewhere.

***Magic: An Anthology of the Esoteric and Arcane*, edited by Jonathan Oliver (Solaris, 2012)**

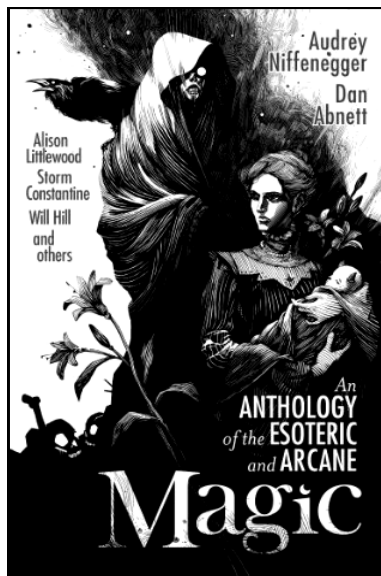
Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

This anthology contains fifteen new stories by an assortment of writers, including Dan Abnett, Storm Constantine and Christopher Fowler. It is unusually elegant for a paperback with dramatic cover art by Nicolas Delort and stylish decorations inside. In his introduction, Jonathan Oliver says that his aim is to exceed and confound what the reader understands by magic and the stories he has chosen are all set in versions of this world, past present or future, ranging from horror and paranormal mystery to science fiction and fantasy. But what they share is a refusal to use magic as a plot token in an action adventure; instead, they focus on the dangers of magic and its impact on the characters caught up in it. I would not say that my understanding of magic as a fictional motif has been confounded as a result but it has been deepened and complicated in enjoyable ways.

I found all the stories worth reading but rather than mentioning them all, I have picked out a few which struck me particularly on account of their strong characters and their atmosphere. Madness is an overt theme in at least two stories (though it hovers round the edges of several more). 'The Wrong Fairy' by Audrey Niffenegger concerns the father of Arthur Conan Doyle and the pictures he paints before his death in a lunatic asylum. The female magician in this story is alarming and strange with a vivid presence, although we are told so little about her. Dr Derwent, the madman in Liz Williams's 'Cad Coddau', is a traditional figure from the past and the story evokes the beauty of Celtic legend.

'Shuffle' by Will Hill is about card playing, tattoos and demons. The protagonist is a man caught up in magic almost by accident and his first person narrative provides fractured insights into a very curious life. In Rob Shearman's 'Dumb Lucy', the magician has to deal with the gap between his conjuring tricks, which become less and less effective as he travels with his silent companion, and the possibility of real magic devouring the world.

'Domestic Magic' by Steve Rasnic Tem and Melanie Tem is about Felix, a boy who misses school because of the problems of dealing with his witch mother and his little sister. The magic makes their lives harder for Felix, not easier, and he is forced to make a choice that is one of the saddest and most convincing in the book. Another compelling story is 'MailerDaemon' by Sophia McDougall. Grace, an unemployed computer programmer, does not believe in magic. But she accepts help from a friend to get rid of her nightmares and finds herself entangled with a demon, who likes the way her mind works but objects to her boyfriends. How she solves this problem turns into a modern fairy tale, lively and humorous, with a cliff-hanger at the end.



***Tales Of Majipoor* by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz, 2013)**

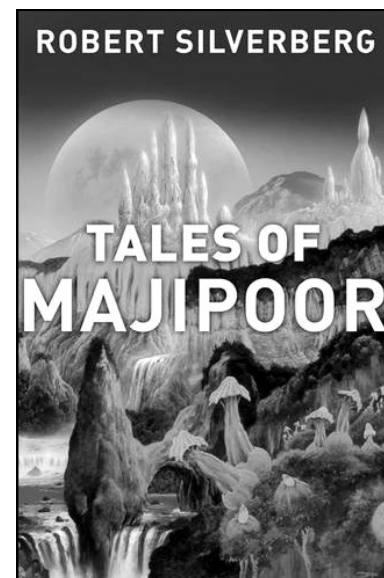
Reviewed by L J Hurst

Robert Silverberg began the *Majipoor* series in 1980 with the novel *Lord Valentine's Castle*, produced another two volumes in the following two years and then waited before publishing four more between 1995 and 2001. *Tales Of Majipoor* comes twelve years later, though it collects stories going back to 1998. Readers who appreciate island fantasies are prepared to wait – as the demand for George RR Martin's *A Song Of Ice And Fire* demonstrates – but those who initially hailed the arrival of Lord Valentine seem to have been silent in the interim. Perhaps Silverberg could blame himself: although it would have been easy to set novels such as *The Face Of The Waters* (1991) on the seas of Majipoor to maintain public face of the series, he did not.

Majipoor is an enormous planet with three continents, mostly cut off; a struggling and suppressed aboriginal life; many cultures and sentient species; and a government which owes something to the idea of a philosopher-king and a distant inspiration in books such as Herman Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*. It was settled from space long ago but there is little looking to the stars today. Of the seven stories in this latest volume, the first three look to the government, the minor aristocracy it maintains and their relationship to the aboriginal shape-shifters (in 'The End Of The Line')

and the Pontifex, supreme governor of Majipoor, and his concern for all his subjects. There is no democracy on Alhanroel, the major continent where the Pontifex rules from his castle, but enlightened autocracy seems to be gradually arriving, though the seventh and final story, 'The Seventh Shrine', suggests that some of his subjects will, unfortunately, abuse the Pontifex's good will.

The three stories in-between take fantasy in a different direction: magic and the weaving



of spells. A few years ago, Silverberg contributed to the massive Jack Vance tribute *Songs Of the Dying Earth* (which I reviewed in Vector #266) and I cannot help feeling that 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', 'Dark Times At The Midnight Market' and 'The Way They Wove The Spells In Sippulgar' show that he has longed to linked his world and that of Vance. The poetic irony in the Vance stories, in which characters found that all their cleverness rebounded on them in cruel trickery, can be seen in 'Dark Times' where "Ghambivole Zwoil, licensed dealer in potions and spells... a small many-tentacled creature with a jutting beak and fiery yellow eyes" finds himself compelled to consume one of his own love philtres – not because it does not work but because it does not work as his customer, a Marquis, requires. Unfortunately for Zwoil he finds that love can cross the species barrier as he also discovers his potion's efficacy but at that point he is so amorously blinded that he may never know how successful he has been.

If the arrival of *Tales Of Majipoor* tempts readers impatient for more fantasy they will discover that there are many rooms in Lord Valentine's castle, though they may be troubled by what is found inside them.

Savage City* by Sophia McDougall (Gollancz, 2011)*Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller**

It would be wrong to say that the alternative world setting is incidental to Sophia McDougall's *Romanitas* trilogy but neither is the working out of such a history the driving force behind the series, not when the point of divergence occurs so far in the past. Yet, neither should the series be regarded simply as a story set against a faux-imperial backdrop for local colour. Instead, McDougall has created a world in which various powerful and emotive issues can be interrogated away from contemporary assumptions and received wisdoms. Once this is understood, McDougall's choice of an alternative Imperial Rome as a venue in which to explore personal freedoms and political expediency is more easily understood.

Savage City, like its predecessors, focuses on Una and Sulien, slaves who escaped to Europe and were later freed, thanks to their involvement with Marcus Novius, heir to the Imperial Throne, who had fled from Rome after his parents' murders, fearing his life was in danger. In *Rome Burning*, Una had come to realise that Marcus's cousin, Drusus, was behind the murders, so determined was he to fulfil a prophecy that he would become emperor. As *Savage City* opens, with the deaths of Marcus and other members of the Imperial family in a bomb blast,

Drusus once again finds himself thwarted but usurps the throne anyway and attempts to execute Una and various others because they know what he has done.

A power struggle between unevenly matched forces is a fictional staple; one expects those on the side of 'good' to triumph somehow, no matter how unevenly matched the two groups might be. What makes *Savage City* and its predecessors stand out from the crowd is the focus not on the mechanics of the struggle as on the emotional price it exacts from everyone, on all sides of

the conflict. Everyone has a particular view of how various issues ought to be handled and no two seem to agree.

All her life Una has dreamed of the abolition of slavery and, having escaped, is determined to do what she can to make it happen; her relationship with Marcus offers a chance to finally achieve this yet Marcus has been made acutely aware that political solutions are not easily enacted, even by emperors – the economic costs of turning slaves into paid servants is made plain. By the same token, his relationship with Una, even as a freedwoman, cannot be sanctioned by the state; she can be his concubine or his advisor but not his wife.

When the state cannot help, Una turns to grassroots activism, utilising people's strengths and their willingness to perform various actions according to their own convictions. This willingness to accommodate can be linked to Marcus's attempts to avert war. Drusus, by contrast, believes in absolute authority and with it the right to dispose of people as he sees fit. War is necessary in order to establish his own supremacy; it does not occur to him to question his own right to order to people to die on his behalf.

In addressing such issues *Savage City* and its predecessors attest to the fact that it is possible – maybe even necessary – to do something with speculative fiction that goes beyond the familiar tropes. While the fantastic elements of the narrative are

low-key – Sulien's ability to heal, Una's ability to direct people's thoughts – and the alternative history doesn't always entirely convince, the passion behind the narrative is highly persuasive.

Sharps* by K.J. Parker (Orbit, 2012)*Reviewed by Liz Bourke**

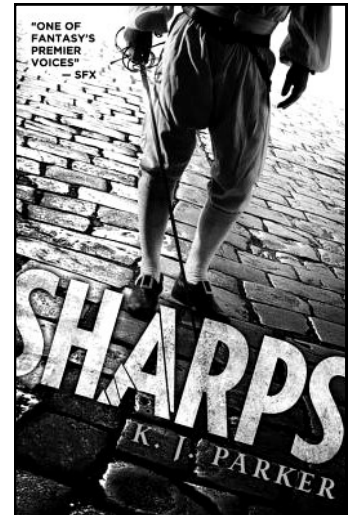
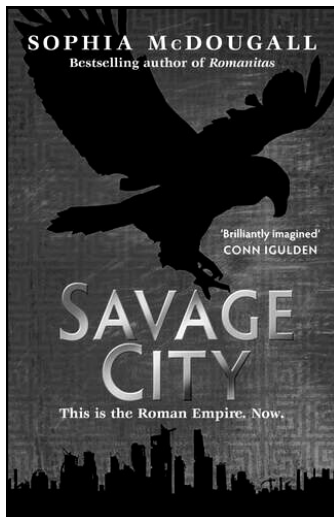
Sharps is a determinedly mundane fantasy in the gritty mode: mud, uncomfortable travel and rather a lot of political economics. It puts me in mind, oddly enough, of Cicero – if Cicero had been a novelist with a penchant for fencing.

For the first time in decades, an uneasy peace reigns between the neighbouring countries of Scheria and Permia, a peace that has more to do with mutual exhaustion and looming bankruptcy than anything else. To promote goodwill, a disparate group of Scherian fencers are bribed, coerced, and bullied into taking part in a sporting tour of Permia: Suidas Deutzal, champion fencer and war veteran; Giraut Bryennius, draughted onto the fencing team after he killed a Scherian senator; Adulescentulus Carnufex, son of a Scherian general responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Permians; and Iseutz Bringas, who's on the tour in order to avoid getting married to her father's choice of husband. A retired champion fencer and former military logistics officer, Phrantzes, is blackmailed into acting as their – rather ineffective – manager, while the intelligence officer Major Tzimisces accompanies the tour ostensibly as an official liaison.

Thrown together by circumstance, the fencing team gradually realise the tour isn't exactly the grand gesture of peace and goodwill they'd been told it would be. Dogged by riots, violence, internal divisions and lack of information, they have to walk a narrow path between pleasing the crowd and not provoking renewed war by their actions. And pleasing the crowd means fencing with sharps, not bated foils – putting their lives at risk for sport, while the political cut-and-thrust around them puts their lives at risk for the war that certain factions want to provoke.

Parker's brand of fantasy is determinedly realist in its vision. There are no wizards here, just flawed people subject to imperfect situations. The lack of magic makes for an interesting conundrum: is it fair to call this *fantasy* without an overtly fantastic element? I think it is – what else can you call a story in an entirely imagined world? It's certainly in dialogue with the genre – indeed, I suspect Joe Abercrombie and the grim fantasy cohort of the last half-decade or so are mining a seam Parker helped to open with her debut work, the *Fencer* trilogy (1998-2000).

Sharps is gritty without being bleak and possesses veins of humour and empathy but one would never mistake it for a comforting book. It's surprisingly tense for a novel that takes its time coming around to its points but, while it proves a gripping read, it does have one major flaw. All the complicated scheming that underlies the fencing team's misadventures never quite seems to gel into a coherent logic: Parker's juggling too many machinations to pull off a climax and resolution that satisfies this reviewer's judgment. That said, it's one of only a handful of fantasies to consider the economic aspects of political upheaval as well as the personal ones and worth reading for that alone.



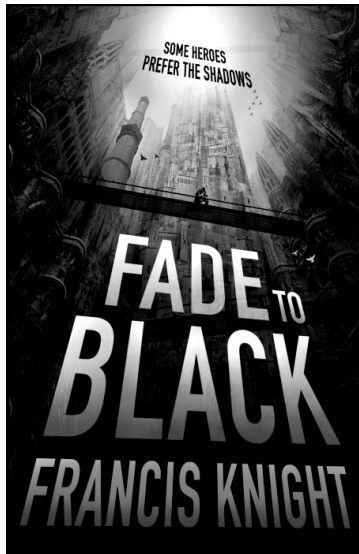
***Fade To Black* by Francis Knight (Orbit, 2013)**

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

F*ade To Black*, Francis Knight's debut novel, is a fast-paced urban fantasy, the first in a series featuring bounty hunter Rojan Dizon. The action takes place in the city of Mahala, a massive metropolis, which has been built vertically, level upon level linked by a spider's web of walkways. It's physical structure is replicated in its political and social structure, with the elite members of society and the government, the Ministry, living on the highest levels, Heights and Clouds, while those of less importance inhabit the lower levels, Trade and Boundary, where sunlight only penetrates via a system of reflecting mirrors. The city's technology was once driven by pain-magic but this has now been outlawed by the all-powerful Ministry. Unfortunately, synch, which replaced it, proved to be toxic, and many of Mahala's citizens died before the Ministry replaced synch with the less effective Glow and sealed off the most infected areas, including the lowest level, the Pit. The descriptions of Mahala make for a very powerful visual image.

Rojan Dizon himself is cast in the mould of the private investigators of film noir, living on his wits, mingling with the lower echelons of society. He is also a pain-mage, whose use of his forbidden magic makes him very successful in tracking down missing people, whether criminals or absconding teenagers. He has had a rough start in life and treats women appallingly and yet he has a soft heart beneath his jaded exterior. When his estranged brother, Perak, with whom he has no contact for years, asks for his help in rescuing his abducted niece, Amarie, Rojan is quick to agree for the sake of their shared past. It very soon becomes clear that Amarie's kidnapping is linked to the work that Perak is doing for the Ministry.

While Rojan may not be the most original character to appear in what is essentially a conspiracy thriller with an urban fantasy setting, he is a likeable hero who is willing to use his forbidden magic to help others at considerable danger to himself. The author's depiction of magic gained by the infliction of pain and the cost this has to the practitioner is particularly well done; the idea that magic must have checks and balances being far more interesting than magic that gives its users limitless power. It is also Rojan's magic that is central to the plot of the novel as becomes evident towards the end of the book, when several unexpected twists reveal links between seemingly disassociated events that have gone before. While I did feel that the various plot strands were brought together a little too neatly and speedily, I found this novel an enjoyable read, particularly due to the atmospheric portrayal of Mahala and the way the author has obviously thought hard about the implications of the magical system on which it is run. Rojan Dizon and the city he inhabits have great potential and I look forward to seeing how the author develops her character and her setting in the next volume in the series.

***The Heretic Land* by Tim Lebbon (Orbit, 2012)**

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

T*he Heretic Land* is something of an endangered species: a self-contained, complete unto itself fantasy novel. The whole is told in a substantial but not excessive 454 pages, including an interesting six page interview with author Tim Lebbon.

The book opens with a man on a ship, Bon Ugane, sailing into exile. He is a citizen of Alderian but has run foul of the authorities for continuing his missing teenage son's investigations into what really happened in the war between Alderian and Skythe, 600 years before. The dominant religion, the Fade, has an official history which places the blame for the ruination of Skythe purely on the victim's heads. Evidence suggests a more complex truth.

Bon befriends a fellow exile, Leki, and they make it ashore on Skythe, now a desolate wilderness with a much reduced population subsisting in the shattered remains of a once great civilisation. They are rescued by Juda, who helps them evade the relentless, not entirely human Slayers, and begin a quest which involves the mystery of Bon's son, Venden, the real history of the ancient war and the even more ancient gods at the heart of that conflict. Gods who may be about to return and wreck renewed apocalyptic destruction.

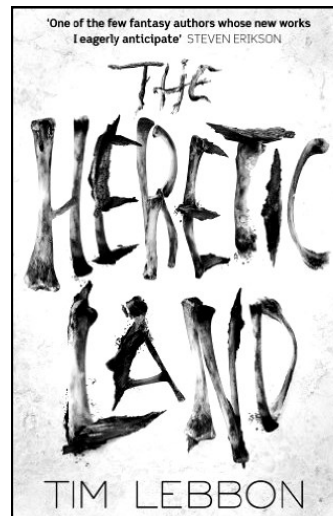
Tim Lebbon is clearly fascinated with zombies at the moment. Following his Stephen King-esque epic *Coldbrook*, here we get fantasy world zombies, the Kolts. Horrific as they are, they are not the main threat but add a blistering ferocity, even while a greater danger comes from misguided religious authority and

'engines' which, ambiguously, may deal in sufficiently advanced technology, or the remains of lost magic. Juda, an addict of magical dregs, has his own perilous agenda. There is much more to Leki, with whom Bon begins to fall in love, and even Venden was never entirely who he seemed to be.

The setting, a world with technology perhaps somewhere between the Europe of the 18th and early 19th centuries is well realised, without the overbearing levels of complexity of some multi-volume fantasies. We learn enough

about Alderian, its society, its religion and military, to tell the story which is as it should be. Inevitably war comes and the army scenes are well evoked, with some strikingly inventive weaponry and gripping combat. A naval battle with a terrifying Deep Pirate is especially well conceived.

The Heretic Land is dark, violent, gruesome and bloody. The novel becomes increasingly surreal as it continues and a plot which spans centuries, if not millennia, comes full circle in the expected manner of any self-respecting tragic historical epic. The narrative is not especially complex but the various threads are interwoven well and the plot revelations unfold with well-crafted precision. Not a cosy or comforting read, *The Heretic Land* it is an entertaining, tense and exciting adventure for those who like a taste of doom with their fantasy. I was reminded in story and mood of the rather more densely written 1967 classic, *Lords of the Starship* by Mark Geston, and that can't be a bad thing.



***The Girl Who Fell Beneath Fairyland And Led The Revels There* by Catherynne M. Valente (Constable & Robinson, 2012)**

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This rich and complex fairy story is the sequel to *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland In A Ship Of Her Own Making*, self-published in 2010 and winner of the Andre Norton Award. It contains many references to characters and events in the first book (which I haven't read) but can be successfully understood and enjoyed as a story in its own right. Despite following the format of classic Victorian children's literature, it's really an adults' book, full of knowing asides designed to go above the heads of the children the story is being read aloud to. I don't think it has actually been written for reading aloud to children – although the prose cadences would make it a great read-aloud book – but it's been written to evoke the culture in which that happened; the comfy past, full of security and wonder, with a typical absent father: E. Nesbit. Alice. Oz. And measured against the stereotypes of gender preferences, it's a girls' book, not a boys' book.



The story is full of complicity, artless artfulness and subtly sophisticated unsophistication. The protagonist is September, a thirteen-year-old girl from Nebraska who lives with her mother (father is away fighting in Europe, rationing is in force; we are in the middle of World War I). After a series of adventures in the previous book (and year) her renegade shadow has become the Queen of Fairyland-Below. September longs to return to Fairyland and her magical friends: the Green Wind, the Wyverary, the talking lamp. When she does return, she finds herself confronting the sinister Alleyman, invisible stealer of shadows, and begins a quest to reunite with her own shadow (now known as Halloween the Hollow Queen), awaken the sleeping Prince Myrrh and put things right. She wanders through a formal labyrinth of story whose purposes are wonder, delight and the slow winning of understanding. Each beautifully-crafted episode is rich in sensory descriptive detail, a skilled blend of familiar archetypes in unfamiliar and original clothes. It's the antithesis of an action-adventure story: too finely worked, too slow, too cluttered, too intricate, too twee, too self-conscious. Its virtues are also its failings: people will either love or hate them.

Chapters (and story-episodes) are short (following the children's-literature format) and many wonders are introduced, described and then dropped. The effect is that the book becomes a Cabinet of Curiosities; the reader pulls open drawer after drawer, goes "oh wow!" and slams them shut without further thought. There is a strong, knowing authorial voice and presence which some readers will find irritating. Although several of the story's apparent whimsies are revealed to have quasi-Jungian underlying seriousness and depth, there is little sense of real jeopardy breaking through the dreamlike detachment and magical jumble.

***The Devil's Apprentice* by Jan Siegel (Ravenstone, 2013)**

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

This is, I think, the first of Jan Siegel's works to be packaged as Young Adult but it's not a big departure since her last two trilogies, *Prospero's Children* and the *Sangreal* books (as Amanda Hemingway), have featured teenage protagonists.

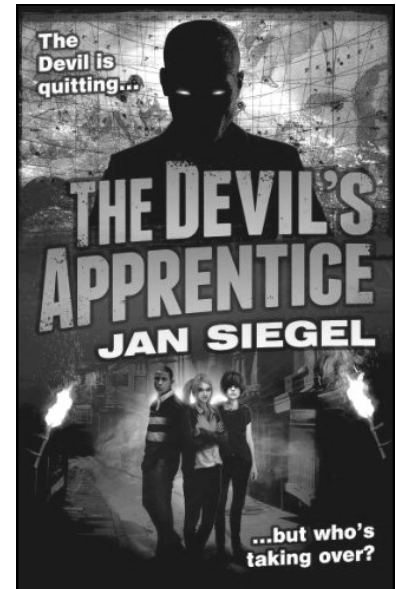
Mr Pyewackett died in December 1999 but is still walking, talking, eating Hobnobs and pestering his lawyers (Messrs Whitbread, Tudor, Hayle). He wants to move on but he can't depart this life until he finds a custodian to take responsibility for the House With No Door. His legatee, Mr Bartelmy Goodman, wizard and chef, is untraceable. Something must be done. Thirteen-year-old Penelope Tudor is named as executrix of Mr Pyewackett's will and custodian of the House until Goodman can be found. Pen is helped in her search for Goodman by Gavin (an aspiring chef) and Jinx (a trainee witch) who have their own reasons to look for him.

Jinx's reasons are particularly pressing: Goodman taught her magic and she needs him to save her from what she has discovered, namely that the Devil has decided to retire and is looking for an apprentice. He has identified a number of human candidates, whom he has sent into the House to 'develop'. The House is a portal, containing whole corridors of doors that lead to other worlds: historic, mythic, alternative, fictional. People who enter a world tend to get absorbed into its narrative pattern and forget where they came from. The candidates will face trials in the worlds they have entered and in surviving them will be stripped of their humanity and become (the Devil hopes) suitably diabolical.

Siegel's prose is assured and graceful and her characters are solid and interesting. Pen, Gavin, Jinx are all well-drawn and sympathetic and there is a generous supporting cast of goblins, spirits and familiar animals, not to mention Mr Pyewackett's false teeth. Siegel also handles both history and myth with confidence. Like Pen and Gavin, we are easily sucked into the worlds beyond the doors and because, unlike the phlegmatic Pen, we are readers of fiction, we recognise those worlds which are briefly and vividly sketched. Restoration London; mythical Greece; a barren mountain where a dragon lairs; Renaissance Italy. The candidates, too, are absorbed into the worlds but they need to be strong enough to change the patterns that each world is trying to impose.

The Devil's Apprentice is hugely entertaining with broader humour than Siegel's previous works but it also contains tragedy. Moments of farce ("There's a velociraptor in the utility room!") are matched with scenes of genuine emotional power such as when the plague stalks 17th Century London.

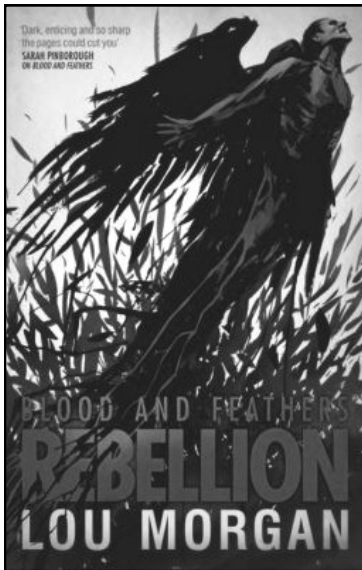
My only complaint about the book is its cover. The covers to Siegel's previous books, particularly the *Prospero's Children* trilogy, were beautiful and evocative. By contrast, this is garish, with violent colours and crude lettering. I sincerely hope that it doesn't put readers off as I can highly recommend the contents and Siegel is an excellent writer who deserves to be better known.



***Blood and Feathers: Rebellion* by Lou Morgan (Solaris Books, 2013)**

Reviewed by Kate Onyett

Rebellion is the second book in Lou Morgan's reworking of angelic mythology. Set very much on Earth, the war between angels and fallen angels is heating way, way up with humanity caught square in the middle. Morgan's debut novel saw the introduction of Alice, a half-born (part human, part angelic), drawn into the conflict, leading to the razing of Hell itself. Now the fallen are on Earth, their home destroyed, but the balance has tipped in their favour, as they turn the minds and world of men into a new hell. Alice and the angels still keep up the fight but it is looking bleaker and bleaker with



traitors and traps lurking in the shadows and the angels, under Archangel Michael's leadership, veering further towards their darker sides; deciding that by any means necessary is the only way to attempt to destroy Lucifer's plans, his forces and the devil himself. Even if this means the destruction of the very humanity they were once sworn to protect.

Solaris Books have opened the door to new, punchy British fantasy: *Rebellion* is fast and exciting, a tremendous 'summer blockbuster' style wham-bam book

that ricochets from fight to fight, barely pausing for breath. Morgan has taken supernatural beings out of an ineffable realm, and lands them in the solid realities of mere mortals. These angels and demons fight, bleed, feel and die. Primarily this is down to Morgan's decision to keep their physical interface in a recognisably humanoid form – with the added bonus of great big wings for the angels. The flesh and blood bodies of these beings grouse, bitch and angst as well as any human, and Morgan has wisely decided to keep the action hot and the nit-picking details of supernatural existence low.

This is definitely a book for those who like modern, urban fantasy – this is pure genre – and those who liked the first novel (*Blood And Feathers*) will lap it up. If anything, this book suffers a little from 'middle story syndrome.' Some expected pre-knowledge of the story is needed (although hints and reminders are dropped in for the new reader) but it feels very much that one has entered half-way into something that is bidding fair to be epic in scope. The emphasis is on action, and the moving of characters into positions (physically and emotionally) that will make for a spectacular dénouement to come. There is an inescapable sense of bridging going on and, in places, props and locations become mixed-up and elastic in shape and size as a result.

To Morgan's credit at no point did it feel as if there was an unnecessary amount of writing and her universe is strong enough to stand very much on its own merits. She writes with wry humour and one feels confident that she knows where she is going. We aren't being sold a lemon. It is a sound addition to speculative writing and showcases a confident authorial voice who should find herself very much at home with those who like Neil Gaiman and Jim Butcher.

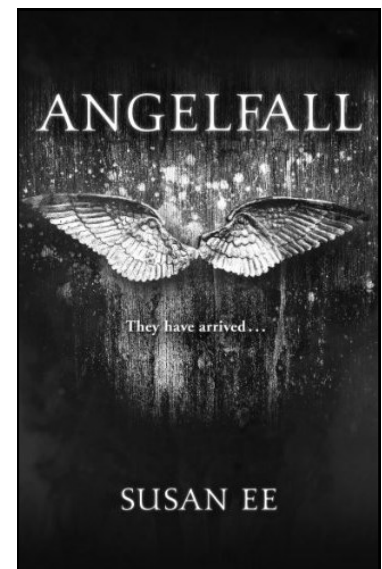
***Angelfall* by Susan Ee (Hodder, 2013)**

Reviewed by Tony Jones

Shortly after I started Susan Ee's *Angelfall*, I realised that I was a snob. When I picked the book up, I was put off by the sticker proclaiming it an 'internet phenomenon' and feared that this might be another YA novel in the *Twilight* mode with vampires / werewolves crossed out and angels written over the top. A few pages into the story of Penryn, her disabled sister Paige and their seriously disturbed mother, I was disabused of my prejudices – the text is crisp, there are glorious descriptions such as a sky flaming like a bruised mango and short, evocative phrases that quickly tell us about the world of *Angelfall* (for example, "I also slip sharpened steak knives into Paige's wheelchair").

This is a world where angels have returned to Earth, wreaking devastation. It is post-apocalyptic survival with Penryn fending for her family in a world of crazed gangs and angel hunting parties. Moving around, they encounter a group of angels torturing one of their own by removing his wings. Penryn intervenes and in the process her sister is taken. She and the angel, Raffae, make a peace of sorts and join forces to travel to the angels' base. This extended road trip through a blasted landscape allows the author to paint the picture of surviving groups of humans and give hints of evil loose in the land.

The book is tightly written with many short chapters which are mostly action driven. The religious element is kept light but is there to explain some of the horrors of this new world and there is a romantic element to the story which isn't overplayed. What is overplayed in my mind is the unusual combination of skills and characters needed to drive the story; it is over-contrived that Penryn happens to meet the one angel in need of help from a mere human. She is complex enough in her own right and we learn that she became an expert in martial arts out of fear of her mother who may also have crippled Paige. Penryn doesn't need to meet Raffae to have an interesting story. Otherwise, the action is very well written, the prose does not suggest that this is a debut novel and the story moves along at a great pace.



As the end nears, the pieces begin to line-up for the inevitable set of sequels as we learn more about the angels and the tensions between various factions. The horror also increases as a parallel plot emerges. It is here that I also had problems with the overall set-up. The idea is that angels arrived and devastated the Earth leaving humanity in an LA version of Mad Max. Large numbers of people did survive which should have included some military personnel that could easily have killed angels with standard weapons. We learn that angels are strong and fast but not invulnerable. A simple attack with a few bombs causes them to panic – this is not an ultimately superior foe sent from heaven but really could have been just another alien.

Criticisms to one side, this is an enjoyable read and I can see why it became an internet hit. I would definitely pick up the next book.

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