

A surreal illustration featuring a large, realistic human face with closed eyes resting on a black and white checkered floor. In front of the face is a white, cracked mask with a jagged opening at the mouth. A dark, smoke-like vapor rises from the mask's opening. At the bottom, two hands are shown: one is a pale, mechanical-looking hand with a wristband, and the other is a realistic human hand. They are both reaching towards a small, ornate golden key lying on a cracked, stone-like surface. The background consists of a dark sky with a large, pale moon and several white clouds, framed by heavy, brown, draped curtains.

# Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

BEST OF  
2013  
ISSUE

No. 275

Spring 2014

£4.00

# Vector 275

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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Published by the BSFA Ltd © 2014 ..... ISSN 05050448

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The BSFA was founded in 1958 and is a non-profitmaking organisation entirely staffed by unpaid volunteers. Registered in England. Limited by guarantee.

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Outside UK	£40
Joint/Family Membership	Add £2 to the above prices

Cheques (Pounds Sterling only) should be made payable to 'BSFA Ltd' and sent to **Martin Potts** at the address above, or join via the BSFA website at [www.bsfa.co.uk](http://www.bsfa.co.uk)

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# Torque Control

So here I am, writing my first Torque Control, editing my first issue of *Vector*. It's one of those moments when you just have to pause and reflect on how you got here; luckily the Best of 2013 issue is the perfect place for a certain amount of retrospection.

First off I want to say a big thank you to my predecessor Shana Worthen for her time at the helm, and for the kind words and advice she's been offering me over the past few months. I really am honoured to be joining the great team at the BSFA and *Vector*, and am well aware of the long line of impressive names who have held this position before me. Hopefully I'll do you all proud. It's my aim to continue the great work done by Shana, but also to build upon it and enhance the journal to better reflect the ever-changing world of science fiction.

For now, however, let us dwell a little longer in the past. I have a particular affection for the "Best of..." issues, for the same reason that I hoard annual anthologies of the best short stories. It's great to have someone take you to one side and say "listen, I know you were busy this year but some great stuff came out that you might have missed." Having this kind of service appeals to me because I spend so much time sifting through older SF that I'm often sadly slow on the uptake with contemporary material, but also because it reassures me of one of the things that makes SF special: it's a living breathing genre, constantly on the move, constantly adapting, evolving, being added to and enriched.

And so we have the annual BSFA review, compiled by Martin Petto, presenting the highlights of 2013 as selected by various contributors to *Vector* over the last 12 months. This is followed by four specially commissioned articles, each reflecting on a facet of SF. The first, by David Hering, dissects and analyses the cinema of the year, whilst in the second article Molly Cobb turns her focus to the small screen. Laura Sneddon presents her highlights of the past year's comics and, last but not least, Tony Jones follows up on his article from last year's issue and gives us an overview of 2013 in audio. Each of the articles found room to praise a piece of SF which wasn't caught on my radar, and so editing them became an educational experience. I hope reading them will produce a similar reaction for you.

The regular columns continue in this issue with Stephen Baxter exploring unmanned probes in popular SF, Andy Sawyer presents a Foundation Favourite with a difference, and finally Paul Kincaid presents a short story by a neglected author who is worthy of far more significant attention.

Rounding off the issue, Martin Petto presents the results of this year's reviewer's poll, in which are selected the best thought off novels of the year, before presenting us with the

latest selection of reviews. Our back cover is turned over to an "In Memoriam" dedicated to some of the genre figures we've lost in 2013, we couldn't include everyone we might have wanted to, but the page stands as a symbol of remembrance to friends and colleagues.

It won't have gone unnoticed that the BSFA Awards Booklet is also bundled with this issue, please take the time to look through it and send in your votes for whichever categories you feel qualified to select between. This year has seen a lot of debate rage online about the merits of awards, but I believe there is still a place for fan-voted awards and the BSFA Awards rank in my mind as the most important of these to British SF. So please share your opinions with us and the wider community.

— • —

2014 promises to be a bumper year for SF in Britain, not least because Worldcon, the Olympic Games of Science Fiction, comes to London this Summer. Hopefully, *Vector* can go some way towards capturing something of the zeitgeist and continue to provide fascinating, enlightening articles that can be enjoyed by all of the BSFA membership. With this in mind I welcome your feedback on this and all future issues, as well as ideas and suggestions for the future. New contributors are also invited to get in touch and submit articles for consideration. The email address remains: [vector.editors@gmail.com](mailto:vector.editors@gmail.com).

— • —

How to end my first Torque Control? As a kid I read Marvel comics and loved Stan Lee's editorials, as such I feel I should sign off with some sort of catchphrase to echo his cry of "Excelsior", but since no such phrase is forthcoming I'll simply wish you all the best, see you next time.

**Glyn Morgan**  
Features Editor

**Cover art by Dimitra Papadimitriou**

**"Requiem for a Dream"**  
[www.mimikascraftroom.com](http://www.mimikascraftroom.com)

# *The BSFA Review: Best of 2013*

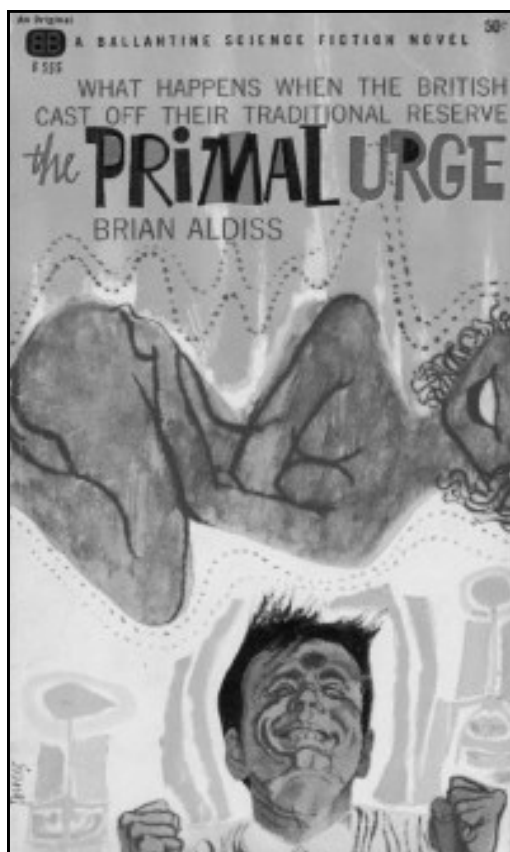
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compiled by Martin Lewis

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## Graham Andrews on *The Primal Urge* by Brian W Aldiss

**T**he *Primal Urge* takes place in a future Britain where forehead-implemented Emotion Registers react whenever a person is attracted to someone of the opposite sex. These so-called “Norman Lights” (named after the British firm which invented them) enable the id to contact the libido without being intercepted by that spoilsport ego. Hilarious consequences ensue.



James Solent is the viewpoint character, an ordinary Silly Ass-type bloke, except for the “shining circle, three and a half centimetres in diameter, permanently fixed in the centre of his forehead. Made of a metal resembling stainless steel, its surface was slightly convex, so that it gave a vague and distorted image of the world before it.” His ER, in other words, which soon lights up like a demented pinball machine.

*The Primal Urge* says more about neurotic late-Fifties/early-Sixties Britain than some better-known novels such as *Room At The Top* by John Braine and *Saturday Night And Sunday Morning* by Alan Sillitoe. Ballantine’s original front-cover blurb has deservedly attained semi-classic status: “WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE BRITISH CAST OFF THEIR TRADITIONAL RESERVE.” Richard Powers contributed an equally classic cover painting, which probably did quite a lot to stimulate the jolly old sales figures.

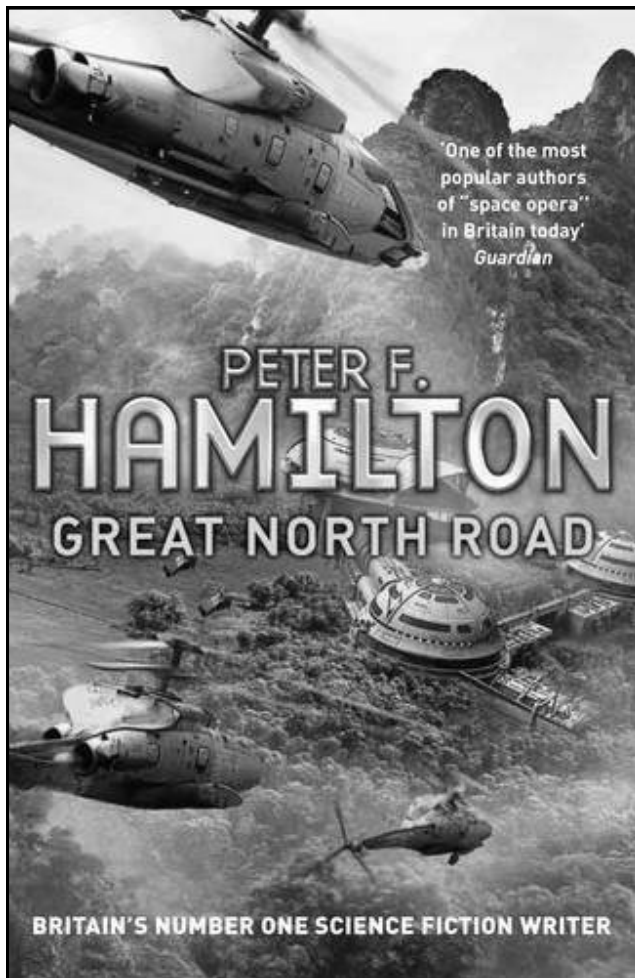
The Norman Lights apparently don’t register any emotions where same-sex attraction is concerned. Aldiss may have missed a prophetic bet there, but it isn’t too late for him to bring out a revised version. He might even collaborate with Stephen Fry, who is also a writer.

## Lynne Bispham on *Great North Road* by Peter F Hamilton

**F**or the last few years, I’ve tended to read more fantasy than science fiction but a trawl through the books that other people had left behind in a holiday villa this summer brought me to Peter Hamilton’s *Great North Road* (2012), a sprawling epic of a space opera that encompasses an alien threat to humanity, a search for immortality, spaceships and a futuristic murder mystery in the city of Newcastle.

In 2143, Newcastle is the site of a trans-space portal to another world, the tropical and largely unexplored St Libra. Earth’s oil reserves have long ago run out and St Libra is the





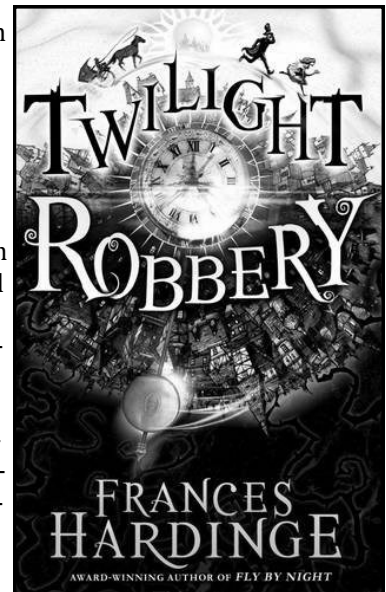
source of the bioil on which the world now depends. The portals to other worlds are patented and controlled by the Norths, a family of clones, whose monopoly over the flow of fuel to Earth has given them immense wealth and political power. Twenty years ago, a North clone was murdered on St Libra. The woman convicted for the killing, Angela Tramelio has always insisted on her innocence, and that the killer was an alien monster. Now, another North has been found murdered, this time in Newcastle, and, from the similarity of the crimes, it appears that Angela may have been telling the truth. With the St Libran bioil that is so essential to Earth's economy under possible threat from a hitherto unknown alien lifeform, the Human Defence League sends a military expedition through the Newcastle portal to the planet. When the expedition is stranded in the St Libran rain-forest, more murders follow.

With its massive cast of characters, its extrapolation of current day police procedures (such as the "smart dust" recording events throughout the city), its many different planetary locations and its multi-layered plot, *Great North Road* grabs the reader's attention for all of its 1,000 plus pages. I particularly liked the fact that it is only gradually, as Angela's backstory is revealed, that the overall arc of the plot comes into focus and its various strands draw together.

This page-turning, doorstep of a book has reminded why I first started reading science fiction and encouraged me to return to SF rather than fantasy. This is my book of the year and to the unknown holiday-maker who left it behind – many thanks.

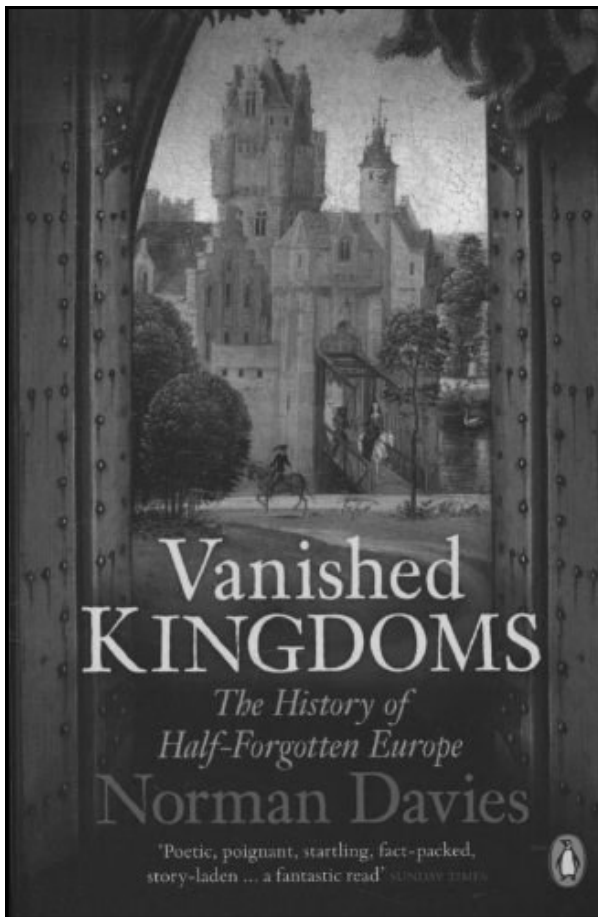
## Mark Connorton's SF of the Year

After reading numerous glowing reviews, I finally bought something by Frances Hardinge and went on to quickly devour the rest of her back catalogue. I particularly enjoyed the secondary world fantasies *A Face Like Glass*, *Gullstruck Island* and *Twilight Robbery*. Each book features a determined young girl involved with momentous events and duplicitous adults in a confined and vividly realised location but are otherwise wildly different. *A Face Like Glass* is set in an underground city ruled by a devious caste of magical artisans, whose leader is so paranoid that the separate lobes of his brain are plotting against each other. *Gullstruck Island* is set on a tropical volcanic island that is running out of land and rife with ethnic tensions. *Twilight Robbery* is about a divided city whose inhabitants are allocated to live by day or night by a sort of religiously inspired astrology. Each book is expertly plotted and characterised and bulging with wit, invention and memorable characters and scenes. Also, despite being children's books, they manage to cover surprisingly serious subjects (mob violence, ethnic cleansing, religious fundamentalism, revolution) in a thoughtful and considered way, without resorting to the gratuitous violence and gore of supposedly adult grimdark fantasy writers.



My favourite television show of the year was *Orphan Black*, a highly entertaining science fiction thriller about a young woman who finds she is one of several clones in the sights of various shadowy organisations. Despite having little new to say about clones, the series succeeded due to the sheer verve and energy of the plotting, with various twists, reversals and reveals, and the amazing central performance of Tatiana Maslany, expertly playing a handful of distinct characters who then go on to impersonate each other.

After years away I dipped my toes back into the world of comics this year and enjoyed a couple of newish Marvel series. *Hawkeye* takes the Avengers archer and brings him firmly down to earth, brawling with shell-suited thugs, tangling with unsuitable dames and bantering with his awesome teen girl sidekick (also called Hawkeye). The series is amusingly written and features excellent art, especially in an issue narrated by Hawkeye's dog, which manages to incorporate his superior sense of smell into the panels. *Young Avengers* featured more excellent artwork and design. The overall plot has an unfortunate tendency towards what I like to call 'Doctor Who-style handwaving bollocks' but that can be overlooked in favour of the gleeful execution and great characters, including teen Hawkeye again, a laconic and well-dressed Miss



America, an alien super soldier given to dancing to Motown records in his underpants and three queer male super-characters (who of course have a love triangle).

And finally, despite not being strictly genre-related, I'd like to give an honourable mention to Norman Davies's *Vanished Kingdoms*, a fascinating series of essays on the lost realms of Europe from Alt Clud in Strathclyde to Aragon, which should provide any fantasy or historically inclined writer with copious ideas and inspiration.

### Gary Dalkin on *Bellefleur* by Joyce Carol Oates

If I were to pick my Best New Book of 2013 it would be *The Adjacent*, Christopher Priest's most ambitious novel and one of his best. If I were to pick one film it would be *Mr Nobody*, made in 2009, never released here but sneaked into US cinemas last year. It's my new best film hardly anyone has seen — get the UK Blu-ray, which features the director's cut and an excellent making-of.

But my choice really has to be *Bellefleur* by Joyce Carol Oates, originally published in 1980. Not just because it is a great book but because it marks my discovery of a writer I will be reading for the rest of my life. I became interested in Oates via her association with Stephen King. As early as *Danse Macabre* (1981) King was writing admiringly of her work (she later returned the compliment introducing him at Princeton in 1997). And Oates is as prolific as King, so I have a lot of catching up. Last year I also read *The Mysteries of Winterthurn*, *Take Me*, *Take Me With You*

and *The Faith Of A Writer: Life, Craft, Art*. Why Oates was passed over for the Nobel Prize last year is unfathomable.

With so many novels I began with *Bellefleur* because it is acclaimed as one of Oates's finest and because it is the first book in a loosely connected series of American Gothics. It is a generational epic, the story of an American family from late 18th Century to mid-20th Century. All good Gothics require a haunted house and the slowly decaying Bellefleur Manor in the northern Appalachians is a masterpiece. There is the room where time flows differently, where one family member vanishes without trace. We meet a boy who perhaps turns into a dog; visit a frozen lake where people, possibly inhabitants of a parallel universe, can be glimpsed underside of the ice; see the baby-devouring "noir vulture", encounter a vampire lover, a psychic child, and a family curse.

*Bellefleur* is a great Gothic fantasy, enormous in scope and ambition, filled with richly imagined characters. Beauty and wonder co-exist with shocking brutality and stark physical horror. The result is an all-enveloping tapestry of life and death, sex and birth, and everything in-between which either makes life worth living or something to dread.

It can be read as a luxuriant fantasy or, as Oates notes, an allegorical "critique of America" written "in the service of a vision of America that stresses, for all its pessimism, the ultimate freedom of the individual." It is not genre in the usual genre sense but, just as much as Stephen King at his best, it is a psychologically driven novel of the dark *fantastique*. It is also a politically and socially engaged work which is perhaps more vital now, as the gap between rich and poor gets ever wider and as the entitled arrogance and avarice of the super-rich becomes ever more blatant and extreme, than it was when first published.



## David Hebblethwaite's Books of the Year

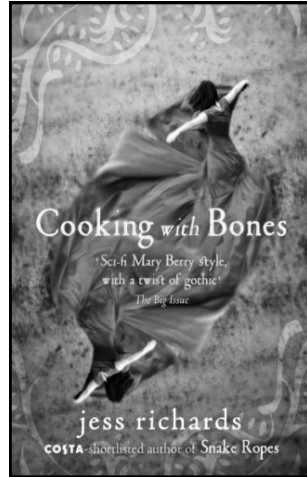
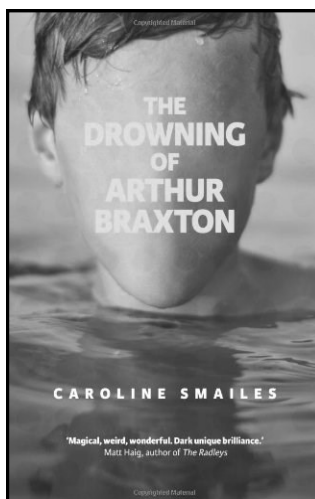
**M**y favourite piece of fantastic fiction from 2013 was *Cooking With Bones* by Jess Richards. On the one hand, this is a tale of two sisters who run away from home and take refuge in an abandoned cottage which has a book of magical recipes that affect the village beyond. On the other, it's a novel about growing up and working out who you want to be – which is particularly difficult for the sister who was genetically engineered to reflect back the desires of observers. Richards's prose is a joy to read, the book's vision compelling and its texture truly magical.

Sam Thompson's *Communism Town* is a book I heard much about in 2012; I was delighted to find that it was as good as I'd anticipated. Thompson tells ten stories about the same city, a city that becomes ten different places in the telling – it may be a place of dark corners, where strange transformations await the unwary; or a golden-age detective's web of riddles and outlandish crimes; or even just a boy's home-made model. The sense of something stories is jostling for attention is delightful.

The Japanese writer Project Itoh died in 2009 after a long struggle against cancer; his 2005 novel *Harmony* explores issues of health and medical treatment in a future where human life is seen as the most valuable resource. Itoh dramatises questions of personal responsibility versus the common good (and who gets to decide what those terms mean), authoritarian intervention versus individual choice. *Harmony* was one of the most thought-provoking books I read all year.

Back to 2013 and *Born Weird* by Andrew Kaufman, which balances the fantastic and the quotidian beautifully. The Weird siblings are tasked with gathering together at the dying aunt's bedside, where she will remove the (decidedly mixed) supernatural 'blessings' that she granted them at birth. *Born Weird* becomes a novel about being trapped in your family's shadow; the Weirids have all been constrained in some way as to what they could do or who they could be by mundane and supernatural phenomena alike; Kaufman moves back and forth across that line with great dexterity.

Finally, *The Drowning Of Arthur Braxton* by Caroline Smailes brings the fantastic to a northern English swimming baths. This is the home



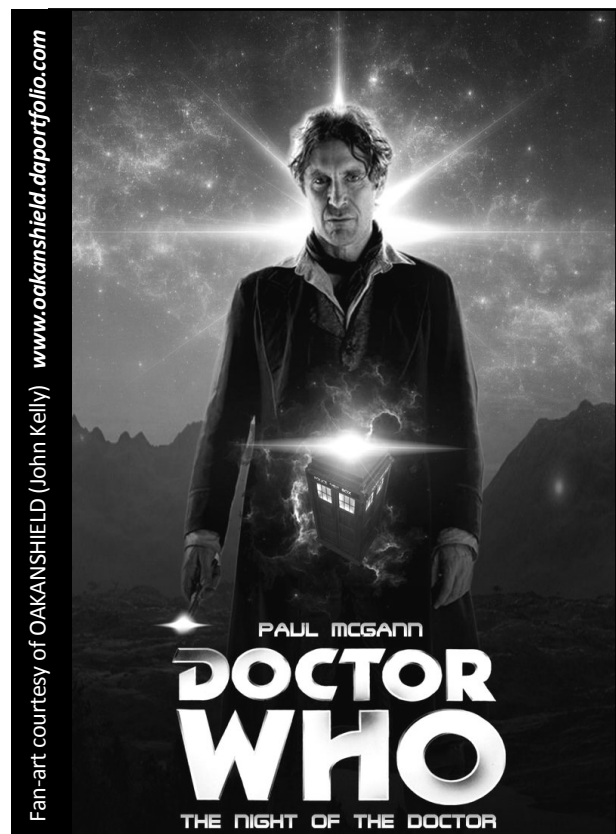
of a group of water nymphs, one of whom young Arthur Braxton unwittingly falls in love with. The clash between timeless magic and the modern, rather mundane, setting is amusing at times; but a deeper sense of something genuinely strange and dangerous also emerges. Smailes tells a coming-of-age story with an atmosphere all its own. Come to think of it, that description could also apply to *Cooking With Bones* – which, having brought my reading year full circle, seems a fitting place to end.

## Tony Jones on *The Night Of The Doctor*

**F**or me, considering the best of the year was simple. There is one particular moment when everything came into sharp relief and that is when Paul McGann appeared once more as the Eighth Doctor in the *Doctor Who* minisode *The Night Of The Doctor*.

I was at work when I noticed Twitter had gone berserk about a new *Doctor Who* prequel story being released by the BBC. There had been rumours that we might get some of the old Doctors appearing separate to the main anniversary programme but that was not the same as seeing Paul McGann appear in a BBC production as the Doctor once more. To make this personal – I am a huge *Doctor Who* fan and, through my interest in audio science fiction, have heard how Paul McGann might have developed the character given the chance. Instead, he had only one TV appearance and was consigned to being a footnote in the show's history for most viewers. He lived on only in comics, books and, more recently, audio drama.

In the world of SF audio, the British company Big Finish has produced hundreds of licensed *Doctor Who* adventures; many dozen of these have included the Eighth Doctor



and featured new companions. Although licensed by the BBC, there has always been an interest in how canon these stories actually are. Just before he regenerated, McGann's Doctor recalled five names: Charley, C'rizz, Lucie, Tamsin and Molly. These are all characters created by Big Finish and, in one simple line, huge amounts of material had become legitimised as part of the big story. I have collected these for several years and this was a moment of vindication. I was sat in the office at work but, thanks to BBC iPlayer, a big part of my *Doctor Who* obsession slotted into place and the disparate pieces of *Doctor Who* were made part of a glorious whole. I can only compare it to seeing *Star Wars* in the Seventies. Until then being a science fiction fan meant attracting a lot of stick from parents and school friends; after *Star Wars*, the idea of science fiction became a lot more acceptable.

This is not to say the year was only about *Doctor Who*, though the 50th anniversary itself was a big deal and the whole set of Doctors (including Peter Capaldi) in orbit around Gallifrey in *The Day of the Doctor* does come a close second. There was also the BBC radio production of *Neverwhere* which was very well made, though I ended up liking it less despite its not having the flaws of the original TV show.

### Tony Keen on *London Falling* by Paul Cornell

**T**he end of 2013 finds me, as usual, having read none of the novels acclaimed as the best of the year gone past. I look over the BSFA shortlist and nominations list, the submissions for the Arthur C Clarke award, the shortlists for the Kitschies, and there's nothing there that I've read, though there are several works that I own and some that I must get round to (Tony Balantyne's *Dream London*, Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice*, Christopher Priest's *The Adjacent*). The vagaries of international publishing, however, mean that the *Locus* Recommended Reading List for 2013 includes one work that I have read. That is Paul Cornell's 2012 novel *London Falling*, which I read for the second time last year.

*London Falling* sits in the fantasy section of the *Locus* list, for this tale of a magical London is certainly not science fiction. But it isn't necessarily what I first think of when I think of 'fantasy' either as it is so plainly rooted in reality. The addresses and locations it depicts are real (I've been to several) or not much removed from the real. This is a London of gangs, of football matches, of emotionally-reported child murder. Cornell is writing a magical London police procedural (a genre he is carving out with his friend Ben Aaronovitch) and the influence of British cop shows such as *The Sweeney* and *The Bill* lies heavy upon the work. Cornell's Detective Inspector Quill may not be *The Sweeney's* Jack Regan (and I mean John Thaw's Regan, not Ray Winstone's travesty), but he could easily be Jack Regan's son. (Detective Sergeant Costain, meanwhile, has more than a touch of Idris Elba's morally compromised Luther about him.) Yet for all the obvious influences, Cornell is never ironic, or tongue-in-cheek. Instead, he treats his material utterly seriously, and the novel is all the better for it.

The origins of this in a pitch for a TV series, admitted by Cornell in the acknowledgements at the back of the book, do come through, especially in the epilogue, which is setting up the following novels. We have, in effect, been reading a pilot episode. But there's nothing wrong with that. And because Cornell has been thinking about these characters for a long time, they are well-defined and realistic. Cornell even manages to elicit some sympathy for the (literally) baby-boiling villain.

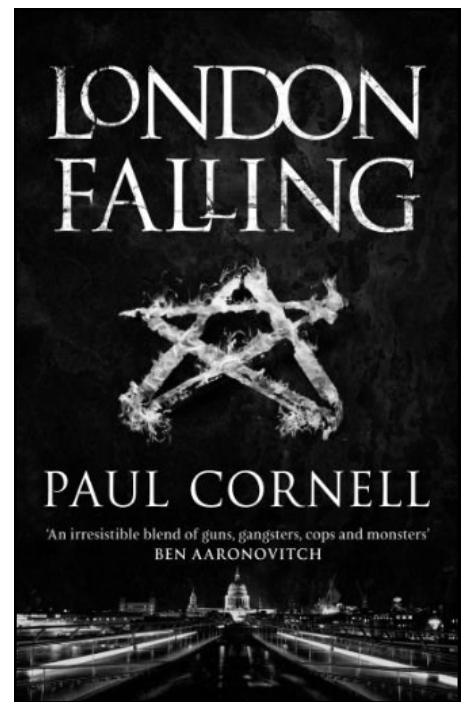
I read this novel again because I had decided to use it as a text in a course I teach on Fantastic London. It was definitely a success, proving the second most popular of the texts I had the students read (after the perennial favourite *Neverwhere*). As a result, I shall be teaching this text again in the summer and the appearance of the sequel, *The Severed Streets*, will be one of my highlights of 2014. That novel I shall be reading when it comes out.

### Paul Kincaid's Books Of 2013

**L**ooking back, it was a better year than I think I realised at the time, though the best things were all works that tested the edges of genre. Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*, for instance, is a subtle and beautifully written meditation on the ways we shape our lives, while Christopher Priest's *The Adjacent* takes all of its characters out of their familiar surroundings in order to explore how our lives shape us. And I was particularly pleased to see *The Story Until Now*, the retrospective collection of Kit Reed's short stories that defy genre categorisation, which may be why I don't think her work has received anything like the recognition it deserves.

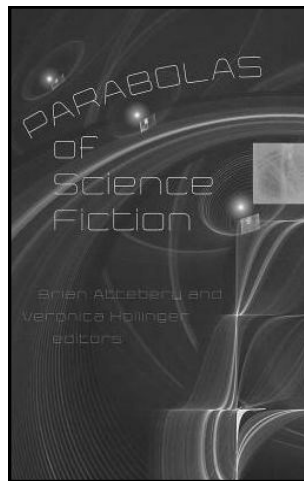
However, I want to use this space to note a few of the works that didn't quite make my top five. Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* was a remarkably assured debut let down by a very poor ending (she doesn't end this volume, she just sets up the next volume). As a representative of heartland SF, however, Paul McAuley's *Evening's Empires* wins my vote. That and the fact that it is a triumphal conclusion to a remarkable sequence.

It's been a good year for short fiction, with Reed's collection, Nina Allan's novella *Spin* and collection *Stardust* and M. John Harrison's haunting chapbook *Getting Out Of There*.



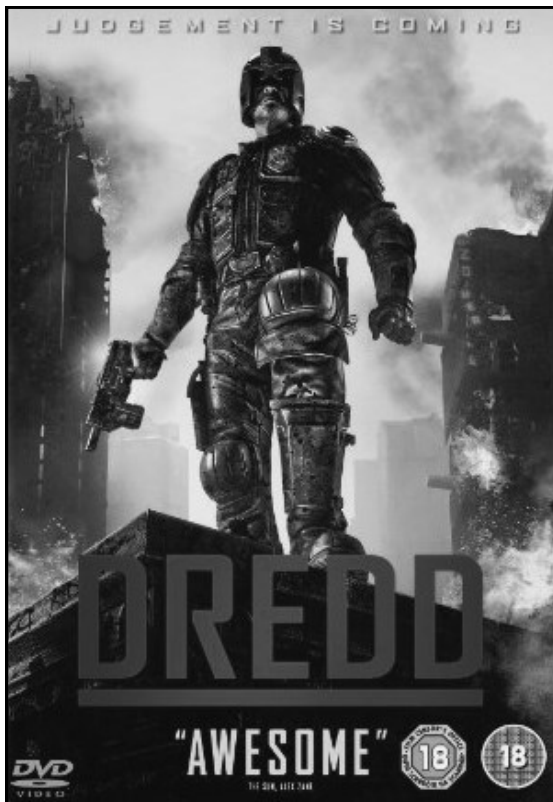
In fantasy, I finally got around to reading Graham Joyce's *Some Kind Of Fairy Tale*, which takes one of the staple tropes of faerie and turns it on its head to stunning effect. It was, I felt, a rather better integration of the contemporary and the fantastic than this year's *The Year Of The Ladybird*, which might have been a better book if it had not been fantasy.

Finally, in an excellent year for non-fiction, particular praise must go to *Parabolas Of Science Fiction*, edited by Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger, the sort of book which changes the way you approach the genre.



## Patrick Mahon's SF of 2013

After disappointing receipts at the box office in 2012, *Dredd* had a much better reception when it came out on DVD in January 2013. As someone who read *2000AD* from its 1977 beginnings, I had been dreading another Stallone-like disaster. I was therefore overjoyed to see what writer Alex Garland and director Pete Travis did with the character. I saw the film twice at the cinema, got the DVD as soon as it came out and have watched it many times since. Why? Because it isn't the usual Hollywood superhero movie. Karl Urban portrays the near-fascist lawman of the comic brilliantly, while Olivia Thirlby (as Psi Judge Anderson, here a rookie on probation) and Lena Headey (as gang boss Ma-Ma) portray female characters who have power, agency and their own storylines. The film also doesn't shy away from graphic depictions of violence, unlike most big-budget



genre films. The result is compelling and true to its British comic book roots.

Solaris is a publisher that has gained a reputation for producing high quality anthologies of original genre fiction. *Solaris Rising 2* is an excellent example. Editor Ian Whates collected together nineteen new short stories whose aim was "to demonstrate the diversity, vitality and sheer strength of modern science fiction". My favourite story was Adrian Tchaikovsky's 'Feast and Famine', a tale of astronauts on a rescue mission, where the hard SF setting worked in concert with strong characters and a high energy plot to create a really enjoyable story. 'The Lighthouse' by Liz Williams was another favourite. This tale about an alien mother and her

daughter, the last two survivors of a catastrophic war, quarantined on a lifeless asteroid for their species' crimes, provided an emotionally-charged storyline and a surprising climax. This anthology reminded me why I enjoy reading short form sf, presenting a broad array of diverse story ideas in fresh and exciting prose.

I love the idea of serialised fiction, whether it is the historical example of Dickens's novels, the modern parallel of Alexander McCall Smith's whimsical *Scotland Street* novels or the comic strips of *2000AD*. I was therefore immediately interested when I heard about Tony and Barbara Ballantyne's plans for a new monthly SF magazine called *Aethernet*. Over the last year this has serialised new genre fiction and non-fiction from a wide range of SF and fantasy authors including Tchaikovsky, Chris Beckett (who used the magazine to publish the sequel to his award-winning novel *Dark Eden*), Juliet E McKenna, Eric Brown, Philip Palmer, Libby McGugan and many others. *Aethernet* is an interesting innovation in genre publishing. Given the strength and diversity of the material it has published this year I very much hope it succeeds.

What do I conclude from all this? That the best sf stories I read or saw in 2013 arose where writers and publishers ignored the accepted wisdom and created genuinely new and original material. Long may it continue.



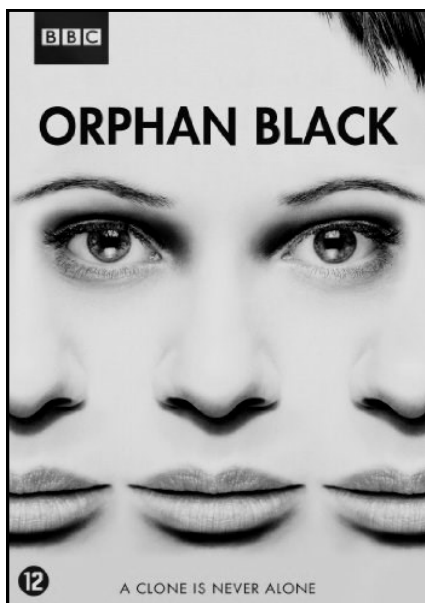
## Ian Sales's SF of the Year

My reading this year seems to have been all over the place – a lot of research for my writing, old SF to review on SF Mistressworks, crime and literary fiction read for pleasure – but not as much recent genre fiction as I'd like (although I seem to have bought plenty). This did have its compensations: because of SF Mistressworks, I discovered Joan Slonczewski's *The Wall Around*

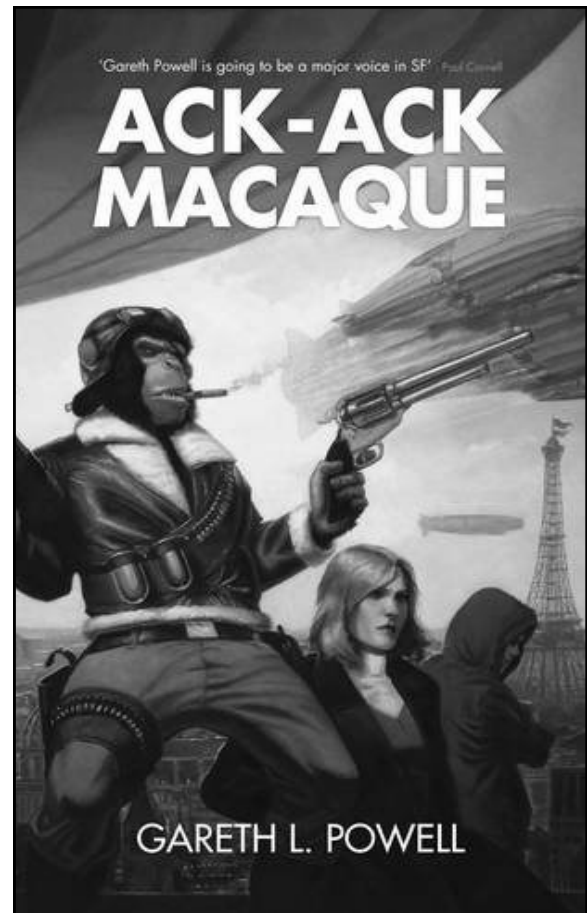


*Eden* (1989), which is a masterclass in writing accessible science fiction. The three women-only anthologies from the Seventies edited by Pamela Sargent were also very good reads: *Women of Wonder* (1974), *More Women of Wonder* (1976) and *The New Women of Wonder* (1978). Moving forward in time to more recent years, I thought MD Lachlan's *Wolfsangel* (2010) rang some fascinating changes on Vikings and werewolves. Ankaret Wells's self-published *The Maker's Mask* (2010) was a lot of fun, albeit a bit rough around the edges. Kameron Hurley's *Rapture* (2012) provided an appropriately bloody end to the *Bel Dame Apocrypha*, although the world-building did turn somewhat frantic as the story progressed. *Dark Eden* (2012) by Chris Beckett was a worthy Clarke Award winner, even if some of the cast played their parts with all the thudding predictability of characters from the Old Testament. And, of course, there was *Ancillary Justice* (2013) by Ann Leckie, which successfully invigorated SF taste buds that were starting to feel well jaded. However, the genre book of the year for me was M John Harrison's *Empty Space* (2012), which managed to do something strange and wonderful with its deployment of relatively common tropes.

On the big screen, it's been a dry year for me. I avoided all the tentpole SF blockbusters; not one of them looked like they were worth investing in the price of an IMAX 3D cinema ticket. I did go to see *Gravity* (2013) at the cinema, however, which I suppose could be called alternate history as it features a still-flying Space Shuttle. It was visually spectacular but the story was weak, the characters were shockingly incompetent and super-competent by turns and they fudged the science just a tad too much in places. *Ikarie XB-1* (1963), on the other hand, a black and white SF film from Czechoslovakia (as was) which I watched on a new DVD release, was a welcome reminder of when they used to make intelligent science fiction movies.



Finally, the only notable genre television for me in 2013 was *Orphan Black* (2013), a SF thriller series about a young woman who discovers she's one of ten clones. It was smart, well-made and its star, Tatiana Maslany, put in several excellent turns in her many lead roles. Happily, a second season is already in the works.



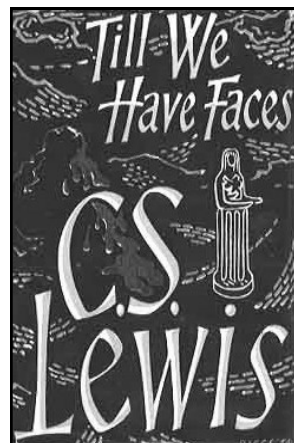
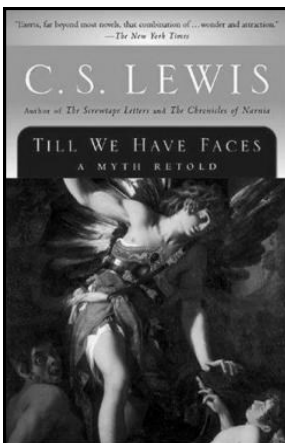
### Donna Scott on *Ack-Ack Macaque* by Gareth L Powell

I don't know about you but I'm fascinated by monkeys – and by the reactions of people to them; to see the fascination of a child recognising something like us but not *quite* like us. I'm intrigued by their similarities – and their differences – to humans. It would seem there is so much we can learn from them. But what I have often found troubling is the way humans sometimes treat our primate cousins. The dichotomy of the human-monkey relationship is at the core of this alternative history/near future steam-inspired adventure. The *Ack-Ack Macaque* of the title is an apt choice of primate for the exploration of real-world questions of vivisection, as macaques are commonly used in animal experiments today, especially for visual capability research. But this is no *Project X* tear-jerker. This is one kick-ass monkey, out for vengeance.

*Ack-Ack Macaque* is based on Powell's earlier short story of the same name, which won the *Interzone* reader's poll in 2007. The story takes place a few years from now and is set in the United Kingdom and France – the two countries having merged in the Fifties to form "Brittany". King William is on the throne and his wife, Celeste, is head of a giant technological corporation named after herself which, among other things, has created the exclusive multiplayer online game *Ack-Ack Macaque* – a virtual reality version of World War 2 in which Ack-Ack is a cigar-smoking, booze-guzzling fighter pilot who takes on the Nazis. But he's becoming too self-aware and is in imminent danger.

Someone who knows danger only too well is journalist Victoria Valois – a tough martial arts expert who literally has half a brain, after having had it rebuilt with gelware following a helicopter crash on an assignment accompanying Prince Merovech. She is investigating the murder of her estranged husband Paul – whose backup personality is now also living in her head. Fate reunites her with Prince Merovech, who has become accidentally embroiled in animal rights activism, and the plot twists and turns from there to treasonous intrigue.

If this sounds madder than a box of frogs, it certainly is. But *Ack-Ack Macaque* is a novel that ticks every box for me. It has great characterisation, especially with the adventurous Valois. She is a true survivor, whose experiences are not glibly washed over, but put in their place. The novel has plenty of pace and the story is complex and exciting. There is depth to the re-imagined political setting of Brittany and the ethical issues raised by the novel, belied by the cartoonish macaque and his gung-ho attitude. Given the pacing, it would have been easy for the other characters to tip into cartoon also, but Powell avoids this with crisp, efficient prose. My only critique would be that it's over all too quickly. Luckily, the adventures of Ack-Ack Macaque will continue with *Hive Monkey*. I wonder if I will discover then *exactly* which species of macaque he is...



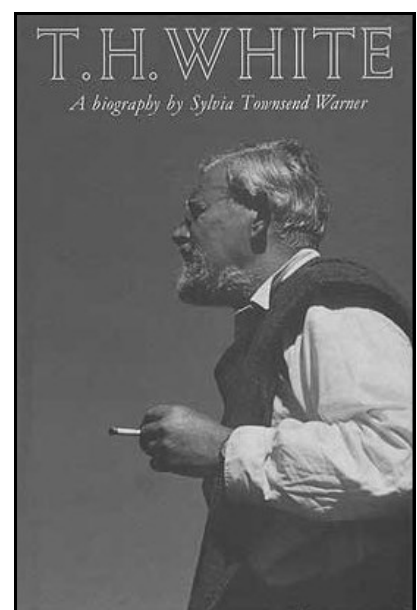
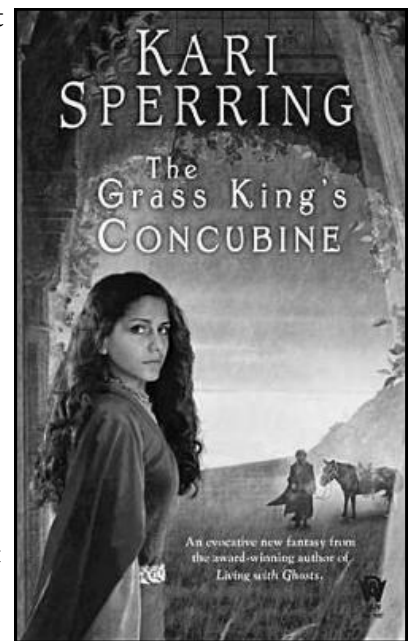
## Sandra Unnerman's Books of the Year

I have done a lot of rereading this year and reminded myself of several books worth telling other people about. *Till We Have Faces* (1956) may be the least known of CS Lewis's fantasies but it is an enjoyable reinterpretation of the myth of Cupid and Psyche. The first person narrator is the oldest of Psyche's sisters, Orual. The daughter of a barbarian king somewhere to the east of ancient Greece, she grows up to rule the kingdom successfully, against all local custom. Orual is sympathetically portrayed as an independent, capable woman so she provides an interesting contrast to the female characters in Lewis's other novels. The main focus of the novel is the development of religious feeling through her struggle with jealousy over her love for her sister. This struggle is dramatically told, from the beginning in which Orual says, "I will accuse the gods, especially the god who lives on the Grey Mountain... I will tell all he has done to me... as if I were

making my complaint of him before a judge." You do not have to share Lewis's Christianity to appreciate this story.

*The Grass King's Concubine* by Kari Sperring (2012) is also partly about the relationship between men and gods, or at least supernatural beings. It is a more complex novel than the Lewis, both in terms of the story it tells and the society it portrays. Aude is a wealthy heiress in a civilisation with developed industry and harsh inequalities. She has visions from her childhood of a Shining Place which she longs to find. She questions the basis of her role in society and joins forces with a young army officer. They marry, partly for practical reasons, but their love grows stronger the more it is tested. Aude's story is intercut with glimpses of a very different world of earth and witchcraft, dominated by shape-shifting ferrets. As the connections between the different strands of the story become clear, Aude and her husband are separated and must each fight to heal the supernatural realm into which they are drawn. The human characters in this novel are sympathetic and the mysteries they unravel are intriguing. But what stays in my mind are the evocation of the mythic landscapes through which they travel and the glimpses of the world through the point of view of the ferrets, with their heightened sensory perception and the immediacy of their thinking.

Sylvia Townsend Warner's biography of TH White, first published in 1967, provides a highly readable account of his life. His difficult relationship with his mother, his complicated feelings about his sexuality and his struggles with pacifism during the Second World War, provide insights into the background of the *Once And Future King*, without detracting from its power. It is also fascinating to discover his practical experience of such matters as falconry and diving and useful to have descriptions of his other books.



# 2013 in SF Cinema

by David Hering

If science fiction cinema in 2013 followed a broad trend it would, with a couple of notable exceptions, be one of continuation and refinement rather than revolution. Major franchises (*Hunger Games*, The Marvel Universe, *The Hobbit*) ambled along towards their Zeno's Paradox-style conclusions, with each final instalment subdivided into infinitesimal pieces. However, visually 2013 began to see something of a stylistic shift away from the kind of desaturated colour palette so strongly associated with the last decade of SF cinema, and which can be most persuasively traced back to Spielberg's work with Janusz Kaminski on *A.I.* and *Minority Report*. While those millennial glazed blues and greys have not altogether disappeared (gleaming chrome is still a component of JJ Abrams' futuristic aesthetic and there are sequences in Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* that appear to have been filmed in blue-and-white) there seems to have been something of a revival of the palette of strong primary colours more strongly associated with 1980s SF and fantasy cinema. That this was most notable in Guillermo Del Toro's *Pacific Rim*, Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy and Neil Blomkamp's *Elysium* might speak of the influence of that earlier era on a generation of directors who came of age at that time. While the use of 80s-style practical special effects has not been revived in the manner promised by Del Toro's *Hellboy II* – primarily for financial reasons, one would imagine – these latter films often seem to make overtures towards making their CGI look "practical" in



a 1980s fashion. In particular, *Pacific Rim*'s cutting-edge CGI achieves part of its impact through the knowing *invocation* of practical effects in the films and TV to which it pays homage.

### Summer Franchises

The two most significant SF/fantasy blockbusters of the summer, *Man of Steel* and *Star Trek into Darkness*, seemed to exemplify the no-win situation often associated with fan reception of large beloved properties. Both films, which aimed and often succeeded at broad, audience-friendly reimaginings of existing properties, were to a certain degree in thrall to earlier versions of themselves – *Star Trek Into Darkness* is an inverse rewriting of the original *Star Trek* sequel *The Wrath of Khan* (*Star Trek 2.2* might have been a more appropriate title for Abrams' film), while Snyder's take on Superman mimics to a fault the overbearing, brooding format associated with Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy. There is a longer discussion to be held about the use-value of the "fan-reference" being increasingly built into the construction of particular franchises, and whether this bur-nishes or detracts from the final product or is simply an inevitable result of the postmodern self-reflexive piling on of sequel upon prequel upon reboot (for example, the trailer for a bloodless 2014 reboot of *Robocop* displays an impeccably split reverence towards both the satirical 1987 original and Marvel's lucrative but largely characterless *Iron Man* film).



### "Marginal" Blockbusters

2013 also saw a couple of brave big-budget forays into more marginal SF territory, with the extraordinarily ambitious Wachowski/Tykwier collaboration *Cloud Atlas* and Joseph Kosinski's *Oblivion*. The latter, which in its successful and largely wordless opening half hour resembled a kind of Roger Dean album in motion (complete with a throwback synth soundtrack from M83 that recalled 1980s collaborations between Tangerine Dream, Ridley Scott and Michael Mann) displayed a remarkably downbeat, spartan aesthetic, and reinforced the 80s revival motifs seen elsewhere in 2013 with its CG-as-matte-painting landscapes and practical robot FX. While the film ultimately spirals into over-exposition, there is little to no "action" as Hollywood would recognise it, with a perfunctory chase sequence lasting about three minutes, and for all its faults there remains an abiding sense of a singular directorial vision to Kosinski's

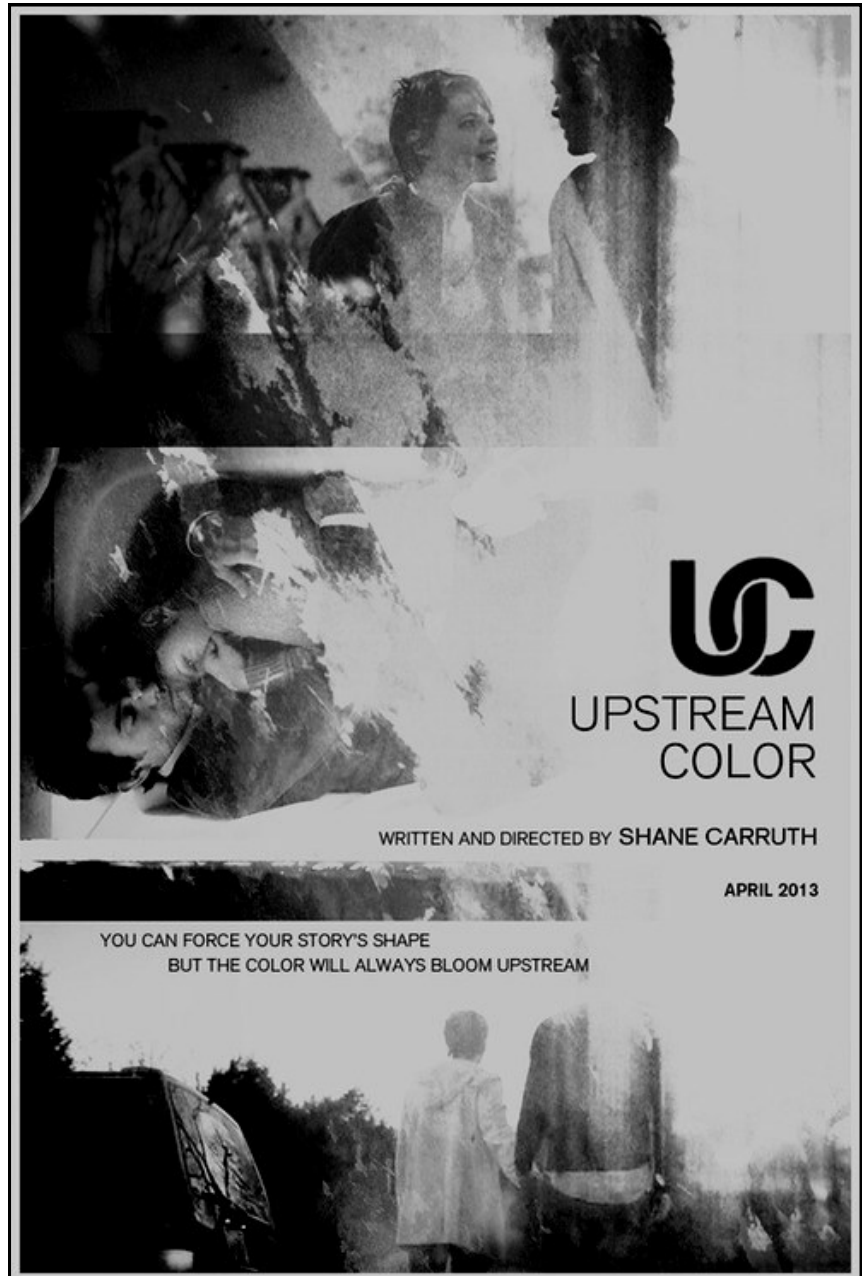
project. *Cloud Atlas*, which was released after a painfully stage-managed marketing campaign to confused and decidedly mixed reviews, managed to transcend the problems inherent in the structuring of the source material (David Mitchell's novel is made up of a series of self-enclosed episodes) and become one of the most remarkable cinematic achievements in years, avoiding many traditional pitfalls (multiple directors, episodic structure, juggling timelines) by placing the emphasis on its ensemble cast. The decision to cast the same actors in multiple roles across several timelines gives the film an oddly charming repertory quality, resulting in a remarkable, dizzying cumulative "performance". Projects like these tend to stand or fall on how they hang together, and by cutting between the timelines, rather than laboriously placing them end to end, the directing team construct a three-hour film that feels half that length. The film will divide viewers, but that's precisely what ambitious, innovative projects should do.

## A Semi-Social Conscience

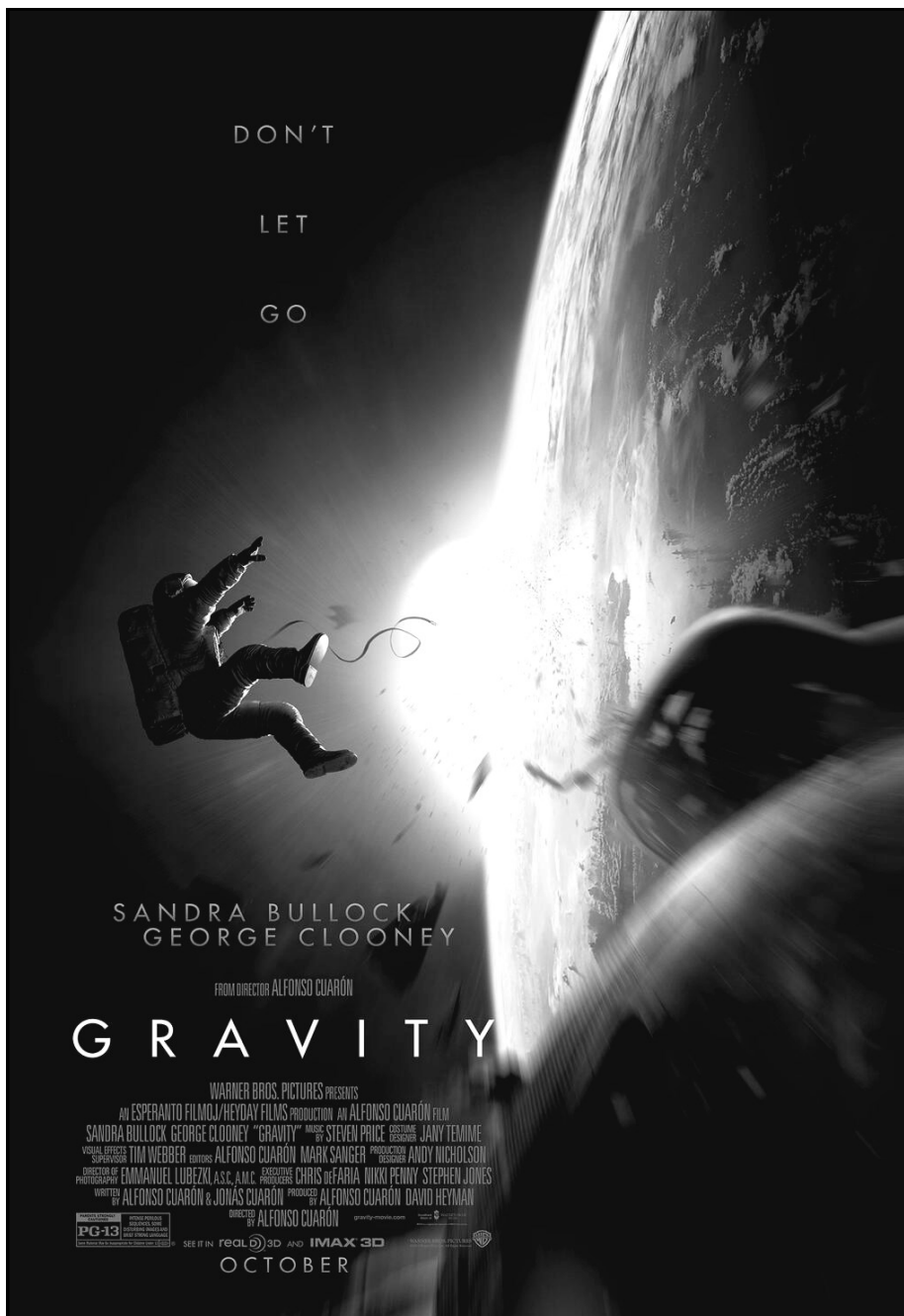
A glance at the plot synopses of Neil Blomkamp's *Elysium* and Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer* might suggest that science fiction with a social conscience was back in a big way in 2013. However, these two big-budget blockbusters, which spatialised economic disparity in different ways (in *Snowpiercer*, a train with the rich at the front and the poor at the back rattles endlessly through a post-apocalyptic frozen wasteland, while in *Elysium* healthcare is available only to those who live on an off-world space station) revel in an exquisite digital world building process that frequently outstrips any sense of social commentary. Blomkamp's stunning production design, which contrasts dusty rubbish heaps and gleaming chrome hardware, is significantly more interesting than his rather perfunctory plot. In fact, while *Elysium*'s action sequences are well constructed and occasionally thrilling (the film is far superior to its tonally askew and poorly constructed predecessor *District 9*) one gets the sense that for all its social overtures, Blomkamp is principally interested in one thing: watching people explode. In *Elysium* (as in *District 9*), he does this with such alarming regularity that one begins to wonder why Blomkamp doesn't just remake *Scanners*. The endless parade of mangled flesh and dismemberment ultimately provides a bewildering contrast to the suggested humanism of the film's central message, though Blomkamp's employment of future tech, particularly robotics, is handsomely rendered.

*Snowpiercer* is more successful, principally because it keeps its metaphor front and centre by virtue of its unity of location. The segmentation of the train provides a ready-made sandpit for the director to imagine distinctly designed worlds (a Wes Anderson-like classroom, a nightclub) that create a horizontal economic hierarchy. Like *Elysium*, the film is strong in its production design and set-pieces, and frequently extremely violent, though Bong Joon-Ho's tendency to vary the tone of his action sequences avoids the occasionally deadening effect of *Elysium*'s bloodbaths. Like *Elysium*, it's basically pulp, but unlike that film it does effectively carry its metaphor through to its conclusion. While it may be sacrilegious to say so (with the film's US release currently threatened with editing), the film could stand to lose a little of its 130-minute running time, particularly once the pace slows considerably in the third act.

Of the socially conscious SF released in 2013, Shane Carruth's *Upstream Colour* is by far the most interesting and innovative example. Indeed, *Upstream Colour*, which places itself firmly in the tradition of the kind of cerebral conceptual SF exemplified by the likes of Saul Bass' largely forgotten *Phase IV* or even Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, is the most downright engaging and original SF cinema of 2013. The film elaborates on the oblique, refracted storytelling aesthetic of Carruth's excellent debut *Primer* to present a set of related stories revolving around an opiate-style drug which allows the user to be controlled by a worm-like parasite, and a pig farming sound designer who may or may not be some form of deity. If it sounds strange, it's even odder when filtered through Carruth's unique visual sensibility, which de-emphasises the mechanics of plot in favour of a fragmenting series of conversations and vignettes which nevertheless serve a central metaphor about control and self-reliance. It's only on a second viewing that *Upstream Colour*'s meditation on contemporary post-crash America becomes truly clear.







Rather than focusing on the mechanics of a specifically SF conceit, Carruth uses the fantastical parasite, and the frequent appearance in the film of Thoreau's Transcendentalist text *Walden*, to create a beguiling picture of a contemporary society where motivations are hidden by a "giving away" of the self or a misunderstanding of the tenets of self-reliance. This is powerful, original cinema – directed, produced, scored and distributed by Carruth himself – that demands attention.

### And Finally...

2013 closed with the global phenomenon of *Gravity*, Alfonso Cuarón's first feature in nearly a decade. Breaking from the remarkable British dystopia of his previous film *Children of Men* (arguably the most distinguished SF film of the previous decade), Cuarón's decision to set his drama almost entirely in space necessitated an enormous

breakthrough in special effects and body mapping technology to bring to life the tale of two stranded astronauts and their attempt to return to Earth after the destruction of their space station. The intense pre-release focus on the technical aspects of the production perhaps skewed understanding of *Gravity*'s subject matter somewhat; the development of new technology to immerse the viewer in a realistic outer-space scenario led to a misconception that the film was a kind of "hard" SF, and upon release some inevitable brickbats followed regarding the verisimilitude of the situation. In reality, *Gravity* is no more a "hard" SF film than *2001: A Space Odyssey* (another film that pays lip service to the reality of space travel while concerning itself more with allegorical matters), a fact borne out by Cuarón's development of the story from a generic "extreme survival" scenario that did not actually originate in space. Instead, Cuarón's film functions as a potent allegory for emotional and spiritual resilience, with the ever-returning waves of destructive space debris an enactment of the ruinous psychological damage that follows a traumatic event (in this case, a bereavement) and the off-world location a space that both incorporates and obliterates all spiritual understanding and belief. Suggestions that Cuarón's film changed the "language of cinema" are perhaps inaccurate;

it would be more appropriate to talk of a change in the language of cinematic storytelling effected by the masterful use of technology and the economy of plot, with the film running only a little over ninety minutes.

2013 was a remarkable year for SF cinema considering the degree of innovation established across the budgetary scale (Carruth at one end, Cuarón at the other) and 2014 promises a lively year for SF cinema large and small in scale. Particularly notable projects include Gareth Edwards's promising-looking atonement for the 1998 US *Godzilla* disaster, the inevitable juggernaut of Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* and, perhaps most intriguingly, new work from Jonathan Glazer (a director out of the game since 2004's very underrated *Birth*), whose adaptation of Michael Faber's otherworldly *Under The Skin* promises to be something very interesting indeed.

# 2013 in SF Television

by Molly Cobb

With all the science fiction television these days, new and continuing, it can become difficult to separate the truly original from the generic stock. Continuing shows such as *The Listener* (2009-) and *Revolution* (2012-) seem to have lost their original steam while shows such as *Person of Interest* (2011-) and *Lost Girl* (2010-) have finally come into their own. The influx of vampires, zombies, etc. seems to have curved the focus towards more fantasy-oriented programming, which *Lost Girl* assuredly is, but strong SF can still be found. In particular, 2013 would seem to have been the year for Canada to showcase its SF talent as it premiered new shows, such as *Orphan Black* (2013-) and continued previous highly promising programming, such as *Continuum* (2012-), both massively award-winning and shown across all of North America, they quickly arrived in the UK shortly after premiering.

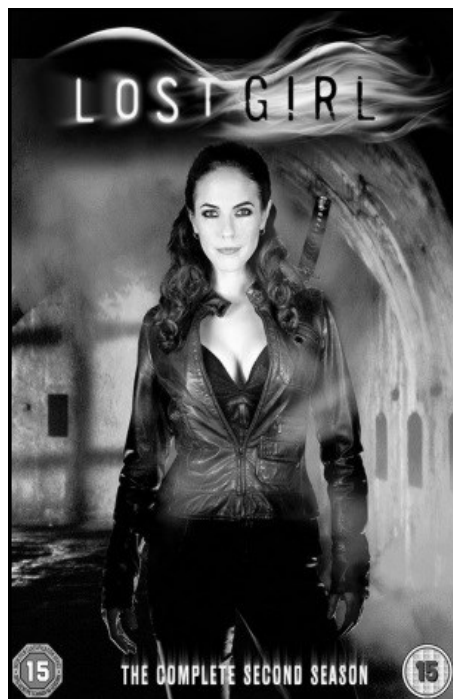
*Orphan Black* follows con woman Sarah Manning as she comes to the realization that she is only one of many clones of herself. The first instance we get of one clone meeting another is when Manning witnesses a different version of herself commit suicide. From this moment on, we are plunged straight into a world rife with the implications of cloning, the problems of personal identity, and the burden of living with the knowledge that you are not only not original but essentially carbon copies. While carefully avoiding the nurture vs. nature debate, *Orphan Black* does a fine job of utilizing the differing backgrounds of the clones to show off differing personalities and if nothing else, the show needs to be praised for Tatiana Maslany's acting abilities, as her portrayal of each different clone-self is nothing less than convincing and thoroughly compelling.

With *Orphan Black* handling the cloning issue, *Continuum* tackles the issue of time-travel. Kiera Cameron is a member of law enforcement circa 2077, living in a relatively dystopian police state. During a routine execution of multiple terrorists, they, and accidentally she, are sent back to 2012, the original air date of the programme. The show focuses mildly on Cameron's difficulties living in a time so different from hers, having to hide her futuristic technology while working with the local Vancouver police department, often to humorous effect, but is often more

interested in the implications of disrupting the timeline between 2012 and 2077. The show plays with differing time-travelling tropes, wavering between whether characters are stuck in a 'time-loop' or whether the act of time-travel created a new time-line, essentially erasing the original 2077 that they departed from. The eventual revelation that Alec Sadler, the man responsible for the dystopian future, is also responsible for sending them back in time to prevent that future from happening, only adds to the mystery and makes one wonder if perhaps stopping the terrorists from changing the future would be worse than letting them succeed.

Both the above shows are strong not only for their acting and writing but for their attention to detail, making their SF aspects believable, work-

able, and completely convincing. Aspects which are not there to serve as *deus ex machina* and often avoid falling into the more generic tropes often found in lower end SF. In 2013, *Continuum* managed an all-time record of 16 Leo Award nominations, cited by the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror for Best Television Presentation



and was positively compared to the critically praised *Life on Mars* (2008-2009). *Orphan Black* is still new in its run but was considered the Best New Show, Best Drama Series, and Most Underrated TV Show. It should be noted that none of these awards, nor any pending, have anything to do with the show being SF overall. Whether this is a bad thing, that SF awards are overlooking it, or a good thing, that mainstream awards are being taken over by an SF show, is yet to be seen.

*The Listener*, another Canadian show, has all but abandoned its original premise in favour of a more mainstream approach. The show centres on Toby Logan, a telepathic EMT. While some may argue that psionics are not strictly SF, the show certainly is not bothered about exploring the origins of the power nor concerned with many of its implications, SF related or otherwise. While season one showed Logan attempting to understand his powers and search for his mother, who presumably also had powers, season two drops these storylines completely and turns into a more standard police procedural. Even tiny details such as the headaches and nosebleeds Logan would get from overusing his power have disappeared. There is no longer the sense of mysterious conspiracy and in this case, Logan's telepathy has definitely devolved in a stock *deus ex machina*.

The last Canadian show I believe warrants mention is *Lost Girl* which, granted, is more appropriately categorised as fantasy. It may utilise the occasional SF element but its focus on the world of Fae and its protagonist, Bo, a succubus, make it firmly fantastical. The reason it bears mentioning is because in a world of fantasy TV programming often dominated by multiple shows revolving around similar premises, *Lost Girl* is nothing if not original. Its exploration of Fae and the plethora of powers found in that world are steeped in mythology and religion and cleverly give origin stories for most of the ancient history and myths that it references. Fae powers are not just for fun however; as the show utilizes them to explore relationships both between Fae and interspecies between Fae and humans, as well as how one can belong and at the same time be ostracized from their society. Bo's sexuality is immediately revealed as bisexual and while some of the more erotic scenes are certainly fan pandering, the underlying concerns regarding sexuality, when heaped on top of the fantasy setting, are often equally thought-provoking and heart-wrenching. The current season is by far the best, still playing at dramatic fight scenes, but expanding the history of the Fae to previously unseen lengths and showcasing far better imagination than was seen in many episodes of earlier seasons.

As for US programming, *Almost Human* premiered in 2013 and, while outwardly a mash-up of *Blade Runner*

and *I, Robot*, the concerns raised by a robotic police force and the growing relationship between John Kennox, who has unwillingly had his own leg replaced with a cybernetic prosthetic, and 'Dorian' are occasionally funny and/or interesting. One would, however, expect more originality from a show created by one of the showrunners of *Fringe* and executively produced by J.J. Abrams. *Revolution*, which entered its second season in 2013, similarly falls short in its exploration of the implications of its premise: a world without technology, slowly falling into a complete totalitarian state. While the new shape of the United States and the wider human condition, once government,



conveniences, and basic necessities are destroyed, is fascinating, I believe they missed a gold mine with the exploration of the technology they do currently have. Trains are once again seen running, as are helicopters, which is a start, but why no wind-powered boats? Or hot air balloons? Technology is of course reserved for those in positions of authority, reserved without subtlety, tact, or overall implications on the plot, but other options are certainly available to the average person. The show often seems to think its premise is enough to carry it without actually fully exploring what would really happen after the initial destruction has been carried out, preferring to meander through flashbacks that often take too long to have their meaning be realized in the present.

*Person of Interest* on the other hand, as it works through its third season, is finally starting to embrace its SF elements. The SF aspect of the show is not strictly necessary for its overall plot and most would probably not even class the show as SF. The exploration of government surveillance, however, and the uses it could be put to when in the hands of a few good Samaritans is interesting enough in itself. The implication that Finch's machine may have reached sentience, to the point of being able to make decisions regarding morality, is far more interesting, and while the show doesn't currently directly address this, it is in the background. Its subtlety may speak to the show's avoidance of the SF label or to some other hesitancy to reveal such details. Either way, the idea that mass surveillance would eventually be run by the machines themselves rather than humans is neither

comforting nor any more threatening, but certainly lends an excited anticipatory air to the actions of the main antagonist Root and the almost romantic attachment she and the machine have developed.

All those aside, there is of course *Doctor Who*, which saw not only its 50th anniversary in 2013, but the change over from Matt Smith to Peter Capaldi. The 50th anniversary episode, 'The Day of the Doctor', was certainly a fun affair, getting to see Tennant, Smith, and Hurt all alongside each other. It was also a good exploration of the history of Gallifrey and the adventures of the War Doctor as it artfully explored the sadness, shame, and amnesia suffered by the other Doctors. It was also a very clever mini introduction for the 12th Doctor: John Hurt's interactions with Rose found a similar chemistry to those between her and both Eccleston and Tennant lending a quality not only to their acting abilities but to the idea that once a companion, always a companion, regardless of the Doctor's current form. Tennant and Smith seemed to click on screen, from the moment Tennant put on Smith's fez through to Hurt's and Tennant's respective departures, leaving Matt Smith as once again the sole Doctor. Their interactions were pleasant reminders to the differing personalities of the Doctors when really they're all the same at heart. And of course, Tom Baker's cameo added just a tiny bit of welcome nostalgia.

The 2013 Christmas Special, entitled 'The Time of the Doctor', would then seem to have been designed specifically for the departure of Matt Smith and the arrival of Peter Capaldi, as the special appeared to have nothing to do with Christmas excepting the name of the town and the snow, as the subplot concerning Clara's Christmas dinner is quickly forgotten. The focus of the episode was definitely the regeneration, which is understandable, and in the light of that, perhaps the lack of attention to Christmas is forgivable. However, I feel that the potential for something brilliant, as seen in past Christmas Specials, especially, for example, 'A Christmas Carol' (2010), was lost, overshadowed by what is almost too much fan pandering regarding the end of Matt Smith's run. While a decent goodbye is to be expected, better episodes could be produced if only regenerations were kept secret prior to their occurrence. With everyone knowing Smith was leaving, the episode was fully concentrated on that, which is nothing new, but seems to especially stand out in this particular instance. The lack of dramatic tension regarding the Doctor's fate, as the audience can always be assured that somehow he will pull through, only further adds to the relative lack of plot as the Doctor's regeneration is itself a momentous occasion and should never be the underwhelming build-up of a lacklustre episode. However, finally getting to properly introduce the 12th Doctor beyond his brief appearance in 'The Day of the

Doctor' is thrilling in its own right. Peter Capaldi, being noticeably older than his recent counterparts, and in fact one of the oldest actors ever to be cast in the role, raises some potential questions regarding the direction the new

Doctor will take. It could be nothing more than a side effect of a hopefully brilliant casting choice or an intentional attempt to make the Doctor 'grow up', the interest in his kidneys either preserving his childishness or simply accentuating the Doctor's eccentricities.

The most recent season, overall, seemed to waver between exciting adventures and episodes that lacked the usual originality, though all equally interesting at heart. The ending of 'The Name of the Doctor' certainly raised some questions to be played with before the 50th while the Neil Gaiman penned episode 'Nightmare in Silver' didn't offer much that was new; his previous episode 'The Doctor's Wife' (2011) was original, heartwarming, and entertaining, perhaps putting too much pressure on the anticipation of his newest contribution. 'The Rings

of Akhaten' boasted yet another of Matt Smith's brilliantly heart-wrenching speeches, lending credence to the season's writers, which was brought down momentarily by 'Cold War' before being reignited in 'Hide'. Peter Capaldi's 'second' appearance as the 12th Doctor brings its own questions, such as why he doesn't know how to fly the TARDIS: typical momentary amnesia? Or something more? We'll have to wait until Autumn of 2014 to find out.

Yet another Whovian event for 2013 was *An Adventure in Time and Space* which was an original look at the creation of the series. The drama was quite well-received, even by non-*Who* fans, or *Who* fans unfamiliar with the older series. The echoing of Tennant's now famous final line by Hartnell is just one example of the attempt to keep it all in the family, as many of the cast used in the special also appeared in various episodes of *Doctor Who* at some point during the series' run. Following the airing of the 50th special was 'The Five(ish) Doctors Reboot' which followed the fictionalised antics of Colin Baker, Sylvester McCoy, and Peter Davison, who also wrote and directed the special, as they attempt to insert themselves onto the set of the anniversary special. Both wonderfully funny and heartwarming, it is a treat to see the men not only poke fun at themselves but to also be reminded of the 'classic' Doctors.

While the 'year of *Who*' certainly overshadowed the rest of the SF television world, this is still no excuse to ignore the other excellent SF programming that is available. The SF on television in 2013 was fairly unique for covering all its bases. For better or worse, you have your pick of cloning, time travel, dystopias, AI, psionics; the list goes on. Most are cleverly written and most utilize their SF elements to positive results, avoiding the trap that many an SF show falls into which is that of being SF while avoiding exploring what it really means to have those very same SF elements.



# 2013 in Comics

by Laura Sneddon

The murmurings of a science fiction revival in the world of comics grew ever louder in 2013 following the announcement from Vertigo that the publisher intended to restore their credentials within the genre. Sure enough, *Trillium*, *The Wake*, and *FDP: Federal Bureau of Physics* caused waves of interest throughout the year, as did the return of *Astro City* and *Tom Strong*.

It's true that it was a particularly strong year for science fiction comics, but the genre and medium have long been on good terms – from the first bounding leaps of Superman to *Attack on Titan*. Still, in the wake of Brian K Vaughan and Fiona Staples' *Saga*, the space opera that knocked zombies and superheroes from their pop culture thrones, publishers have certainly got their eyes on the stars of the future.

Even graphic novels leapt upon the extraterrestrial zeitgeist, with Paul Pope's *Battling Boy* and Frederik Peeters' *Aama* in particular garnering critical acclaim, and even the great Jason turning to the skies for *Lost Cat*. But in truth, it was futuristic, post-apocalyptic and even nihilistic fiction that captured the imagination of creators and readers throughout the year. While *Saga* and Grant Morrison's *Action Comics* tapped into the idealistic best hope within us all to great acclaim, others looked to the future with a wearier eye.

Four comics, from very different backgrounds, completely stole the show in 2013. All are science fiction, and none star superheroes. In fact each show us our very darkest fears about the fate of humanity – perhaps unsurprising given the current political climate.

*Ballistic*, by Adam Egypt Mortimer and Darick Robertson and from new creator-owned publisher Black Mask Studios, perhaps captured this outlook best; invoking the world of cyberpunk but with an organic twist – technology is grown rather than built, and capable of bio-mimicry and

bio-utilizations. Robertson is pushed to his limits here, creating incredibly detailed landscapes and intricate creations. The colours from Diego Rodriguez are suitable garish and bombastic, throwing light on the darkest shades of society.

Comparisons to *Transmetropolitan* (Robertson and Warren Ellis) are perhaps inevitable, but this is both a bleaker and more colourful tale. Each issue comes complete with a stack of notes further expanding upon this gangster-run hellhole; the sheer creativity bowling over readers and fellow creators even as it flies beneath the mainstream radar. Black Mask Studios is committed to publishing more political and risky ventures, and this is Mortimer's first comic. It's also essentially a buddy comic, following one man and his foul mouthed gun. The future is sick, crime-ridden, and hedonistic.







Hot on *Ballistic's* heels is *The Wake*, from *Batman* scribe Scott Snyder and *Punk Rock Jesus* star Sean Murphy, and published by Vertigo. The artistry here is breathtaking, switching between the surface of a future flooded world and the underwater horrors of a present day expedition. The claustrophobic setting of the seabed, so similar to that of a spaceship, as a place of terror and fantastical death is nothing new to sci-fi fans, but this combination is rarely seen in comics.

The future is depicted in a clean and highly detailed style, almost reminiscent of ukiyo-e prints in some of those waves, while the murky depths of the ocean floor and horrific monsters owe much to the supreme talents of colourist Matt Hollingsworth. In fact three highly talented creators have come together here to produce some of their best ever work. The future is drowned, architecture crumbling, and vastly depopulated.

*The Private Eye*, by Brian K Vaughan and Marcos Martin, caused great excitement when it was announced with teaser images that invoked the power of social media – “Follow”, “Like”, and “Share” temptingly asked of interested readers. Available in digital format only, the ten issue series is DRM free, available in multiple formats on a pay-what-you-want model, and is instantly available in English, Spanish and Catalan with more translations en route.

Five issues were released in 2013, with all profits going directly to the creators and allowing for each new issue to be published on their website, Panel Syndicate. It was a bold financial and publishing move, and one that seems to be paying off – in a year where digital comics made a real push for readership, *The Private Eye* has won many fans, not least due to the fantastic day-glo colouring of Muntsa Vicente.

Turning the post-apocalyptic trope on its head, here we have the future post-Internet. The Internet exploded, showering the world with information both public and formerly private – today there is no private, and everyone hides behind hi-tech masks. And to whom goes the power? Perhaps not who you would expect... this is indeed a highly original look at a world where knowledge is nothing, and privacy a distant dream. The future is utterly corrupt, individuality extinct, and everything is public.

And in true underground style there was *Raygun Roads*, by Owen Michael Johnson and Indio, a comic that is pure sensory overload for dispirited hearts everywhere, complete with integrated soundtrack that soothes your soul while your brain fights to race through the 48 page indie flip-album.

Raygun Roads and her Kittlebach Pirates are a band of punk-ass anarchists who hurtle into the grime of our world to boot it in the crotch and save Vincent Paradise from his mundane gloom at the hands of a Mr Shankley type job centre worker and/or the D-Void infected and Ullyses Pomp, shaman of shame and ruler of the Porpoise Purpose. With Vincent's artistic soul being corroded by the capitalist desolation of our society, it's up to him to save the world, and fictional characters break into our dimension, becoming more real and with their own story to tell.

It's utter chaotic madness, dripping with Indio's fluorescent colours and gorgeously grotesque characters embodying the spirit of punk, yet his beautifully fine artwork betrays his roots as a tattoo and underground music poster artistic genius. The artwork is overflowing with a crazed energy that leaves the reader breathless and crumpled, buzzed and angry all at once, as Vince fights to crush the influence of the man on his life and embrace his artistic potential in a world of suits and money.



It's social commentary and satire by way of complete insanity and a genuinely clever infinity loop in both fiction and reality that will have you reading and re-reading it over and over again. The future is infected by zombie drones in business suits, the establishment has crushed our artistry and creative desires, but our imaginations can set us free.

Four futures, four very different outcomes and yet all share two very important themes: threats to our way of life grown large from contemporary worries, and colour. Worries about technology, rising sea levels, privacy invasion, and the crushing boot of authority are all present in any current news broadcast and indeed are no stranger to science fiction readers. But in the world of comics, dominated as they are by militaristic superheroes and wealthy playboy vigilantes, it's interesting to see these fears being faced by characters that represent ordinary people.

In *Ballistic* our hero is Butch, an air conditioning repairman with big dreams and a thirst for crime in a cut-throat world. In *The Wake*, Dr Lee Archer is our protagonist, her skills as a cetologist and a promise of helping her get custody of her son back landing her on the research team that is taken to see a mysterious creature at the bottom of the ocean. In *The Private Eye*, we follow an unlicensed journalist who ends up uncovering far more trouble than he anticipated when taking up a case. And in *Raygun Roads*, our hero is an unemployed waster out of touch with his true potential, being ground down by the man.

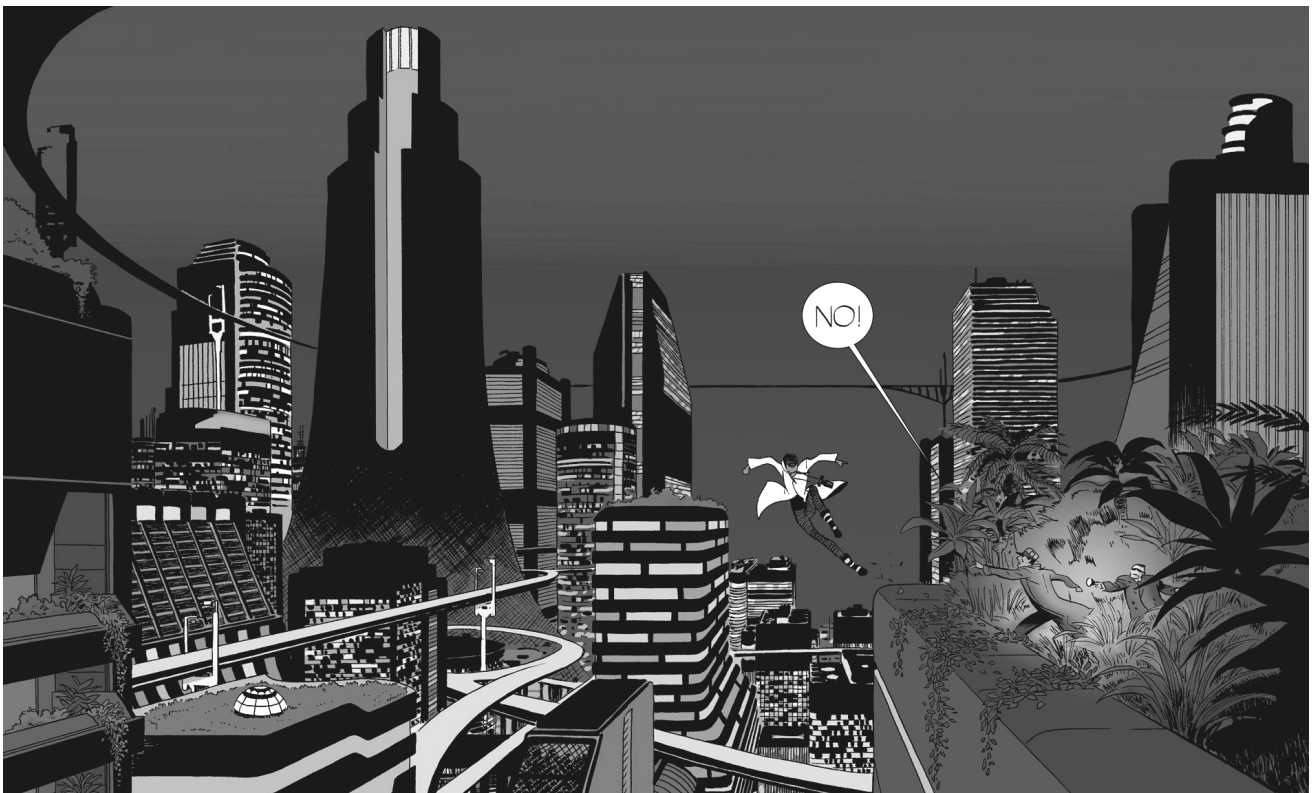
All have something more to say than simply beating up the bad guy, or falling out with their super-best-friends again. Not that superhero titles are incapable of larger messages, not by a long shot, but in the past year it does seem as if it is the science fiction comics that are taking current day issues and worries and projecting them into

the future as a warning call to all. Our environment is crumbling – half of England suffering from dire flooding in early 2014; our fear of technology and loss of privacy is matched only by our apathy to the inevitable; and the scapegoating of the poor and elevation of the rich continues apace under a conservative government – the latter long known as a creative fount of rebellious inspiration.

And what of colour? Lest it be forgotten, comics is that odd medium that blends both narrative and visual storytelling, at times both a hybrid of literature and film, and a predecessor of all communication in presenting all information at a symbolic level. In 2012 I was captivated by the black and white starkness of *Punk Rock Jesus*, the punk underdog to the undisputed vibrant champion of *Saga*, effortlessly blending the rampant capitalism of our society, the ever encroaching celebrity obsessed lack of privacy and the terrifying march of religious fundamentalism. The lack of colour sharpened the blade, and drove its point home.

But last year, the horrifying futures were covered in gorgeous palettes, soothing the eyes or jarring the brain in turn. *The Wake* was softly sweet, a de-saturated surface and a gloomy undersea leaving the mind ill-prepared for the horrors that awaited. *Ballistic*, *The Private Eye* and *Raygun Roads* all reveled in shockingly bright hues, both setting the tone and exciting the eyes. The future is bright and gorgeous, yet cruel and terrible all in one.

In a present where we flock to flashy and expensive movies while our countries grow poorer, spend money we don't have on disposable clothing made in sweatshops, fly the flags of our nations while our governments stamp on the poorest and most vulnerable, and close our eyes to the horrors in plain view, these are perhaps the most realistic futures of all.





# 2013 in SF Audio

by Tony Jones

For those who aren't familiar with audio science fiction, a quick summary: I use audio to mean anything available either on the radio, commercially or free. There are several types of audio available – specially written dramas, adaptations (which could include books, TV or film) which are also dramas and then readings of books.

For me audio is a great way to experience science fiction while I commute and with headphones on I make my way on public transport and on foot listening to the escapades of my favourite characters as I sit on the early morning train.

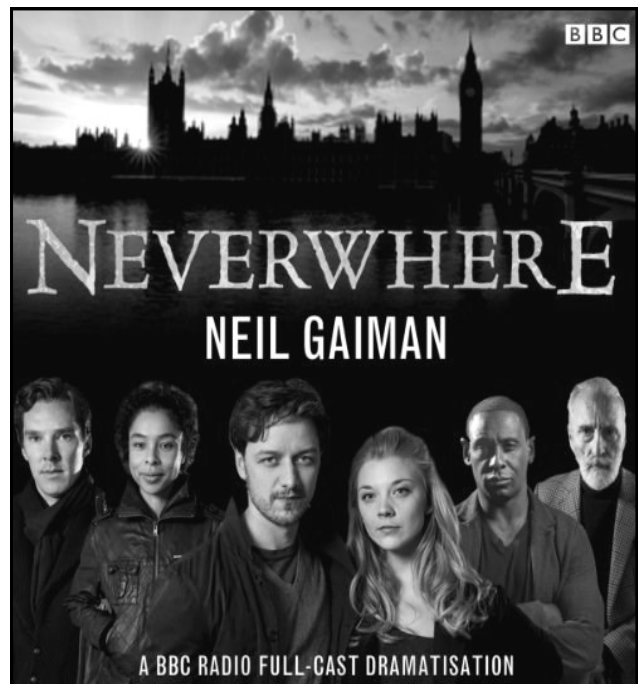
Enough background: what did 2013 give the audio science fiction fan to enjoy?

## Free on the radio

In the UK we are lucky to have the BBC and for audio science fiction specifically we have BBC Radio 4 Extra. Every weekday there is an hour of science fiction on between 6 and 7pm (repeated late at night) and a similar arrangement at the weekend. As we might expect, the 2013 schedule had a lot of *Doctor Who* adventures, both readings of books of BBC shows and original drama, and I return to the latter topic later in this feature.

The most noted new production in 2013 was an adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*.<sup>1</sup> This was first broadcast in March and repeated at Christmas. A six part series split between the first episode on Radio 4 and the final five on Radio 4 Extra, the adaption was by Dirk Maggs who also adapted the later *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* books for Radio 4. In the past, he has also brought Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and Judge Dredd to audio.

For those unfamiliar with the original novel or the 1996 TV series, *Neverwhere* is set in the magical realm of London Below and charts the journey of Richard Mayhew as he explores this subterranean world and helps a girl named Door in her quest to find out why her life is in danger. Think an urban fantasy version of *Alice in Wonderland* for the modern world.



Unlike the TV adaptation, this version gave the listener a cast very much at the top of its game. The cast included James McAvoy, Natalie Dormer, Benedict Cumberbatch, Christopher Lee, Anthony Head, Bernard Cribbens, Johnny Vegas and many more, including a cameo from Neil Gaiman himself. The adaptation to audio was seamless and nothing was lost in translation; the story seems made for the medium and has received rave reviews. The *Radio Times* website notes that *Neverwhere* was the most requested radio programme on iPlayer in March 2013 with over half a million online listeners.<sup>2</sup> The *Radio Times* editor Jane Anderson named it the “essential radio drama of the year”.<sup>3</sup> However, despite all its undoubted quality I still find myself preferring the original and very flawed TV production which, for all its deficiencies, still captured the imagination in a way that the highly polished radio epic didn't quite manage.



The year continued with the usual set of repeats of popular shows – many of which are exclusive to Radio 4 Extra – but one particular newcomer to the station was July's production of *I Have no Mouth, and I Must Scream* which was originally broadcast on Radio 2 in 2002. It stars both David Soul and author Harlan Ellison and is adapted from Ellison's 1967 short story of the same name. Written in the midst of the Cold War this is a chilling story of computer domination over humanity and won a 1968 Hugo and is one of my all time favourite short stories. Thankfully, the production does it justice with Soul being particularly strong in the lead role.

### Free elsewhere

Of course there is plenty of free drama available on the internet. Amongst the uncounted hordes I want to single out Dan Freeman's work *The Minister of Chance*.<sup>4</sup>

*The Minister of Chance* spun out of a BBC radio *Doctor Who* story of dubious canonicity called *Death Comes to Time*. Discarding the majority of its roots, Freeman assembled a strong cast and raised money for the project through crowd-funding. People can download the stories for free and donate money if they wish. The cast included Paul McGann, Sylvester McCoy, Paul Darrow, Jenny Agutter, Luran Crace, Tamsin Greig and Philip Glenister. Such has been the success that the team are now converting the story to film, again entirely funded by donation. The quality of the scripts and the concepts has undoubtedly made it easy to attract such a high calibre team.

The story itself is science fiction set on a world where one nation refutes the existence of science and believes in magic – other more peaceful nations follow science. Against this is the titular Minister, a figure capable of travelling between worlds, who is on a quest to stop one

of his own kind from wielding a power more akin to magic than anything else. Much of the tale is triggered by the experiences of a young girl named Kitty.

2013 saw the release of the final two episodes of the series: *The Tiger* (March) and *In a Bark on the River Hex* (May). In *The Tiger* the warmongering elements of previous episodes come to a head and we start to learn of the Minister's real mission and something of his true nature. The final part leads to a reveal of the hidden villain and we have a final struggle between science and ignorance.

I interviewed Dan Freeman at the time of the release of *The Tiger* and it was clear that the *Minister of Chance* project is an all-consuming passion.<sup>5</sup> The idea of going from audio to film entirely crowd-funded is very twenty-first century and I can't recommend this enough to anyone with even a passing interest in audio drama.

### Commercial titles

If we turn our attention to commercially available titles then *Bafflegab* had a mixed year.<sup>6</sup> Formed in 2006 as *Cosmic Hobo* they have been known for their *Scarifyers* series which has starred Nicholas Courtney, David Warner, Brian Blessed and Nigel Havers. Nothing was heard from the *Scarifyers* this year, although in February *Bafflegab* did release *Vince Cosmos: Glam Rock Detective*. Set in 1972, the hero of the story, Vince Cosmos, is a star at the height of the glam rock craze. He is also an alien. Played by Julian Rhind-Tutt (*Green Wing*) and written by Paul Magrs, this story was told from the point of view of Vince's new assistant Poppy Munday who moves down from Sunderland to London to take the job with Vince.

Poppy is soon drawn into a world of alien science and glam rock spectacles. First in a series it is not clear whether or not there will be more. The story is original and the period setting well realised. Poppy was played by Laruen Kellegher and was highly praised in several reviews such as:

"Absolutely loved Vince Cosmos. A lovely, funny, heart-warming adventure with a gorgeous central performance by Lauren Kellegher."

— Joe Lidster, writer of *Torchwood*, *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, *Wizards and Aliens*.

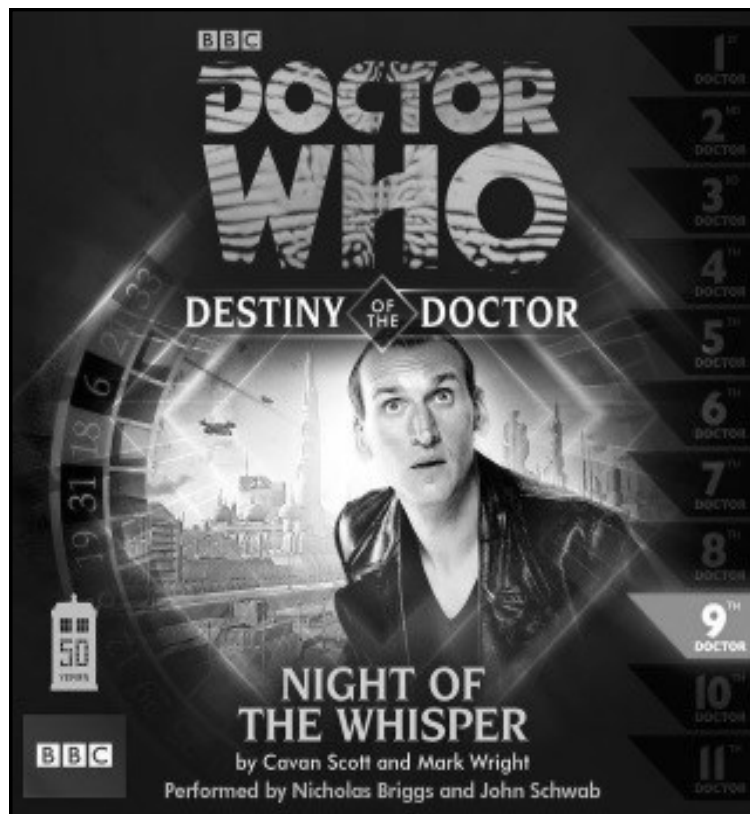
Later in the year *Bafflegab* entered into collaboration with Hammer Films to release the *Hammer Chillers* series of six stories somewhat in the style of the TV show *Tales of the Unexpected*.<sup>7</sup> The stories were from a variety of authors and covered a range of themes. Particular favourites included *Spanish Ladies* (another Paul Magrs story) and *The Devil in Darkness*, written by Christopher Fowler, in which Mia gets trapped in a lift on a Friday evening in an all-but-deserted St Petersburg museum with Andrei the Russian electrician. As the weekend passes, and they get weak from hunger, Mia begins to feel the presence of those who were once tortured in the basements of this grand old building. Overall this was a strong series with a good mix of writers, authors and productions that I hope are followed up with another series soon.



## Big Finish

Any review of audio science fiction in the UK has to mention Big Finish.<sup>8</sup> For the uninitiated, Big Finish produces a wide range of audio drama covering both licensed titles (including *Blake's 7*, *Doctor Who*, *Dark Shadows* and *Stargate*) along with home grown titles and various other stories (such as *Sherlock Holmes*, *Counter Measures*, *Graceless* and *Dorian Grey*). In 2013 they released dozens of titles and also provide some material for Radio 4 Extra.

The year started with the *Blake's 7* story *Warship* by Peter Angelhides. This was the first full cast adventure produced by Big Finish and not only did it mark the first appearance of Sally Knyvette back in the role of Jenna but it also told the story of the battle of Star One. For those less familiar with *Blake's 7* this is the battle that marked the divide between the second and third TV series. When the show returned in series 3 it would be without both Blake and Jenna. Much anticipated, this new adventure managed to find something for every character to do and wove a convincing story out of the various threads that the original TV series left hanging.



There was plenty of action and even a brief appearance by arch enemy Servalan near the end. *Warship* worked well because it didn't spend time rejoicing in the unification of the original cast; instead it told a decent story, wasn't afraid to add to the mythology and justified the disappearance of two of the main characters.

Big Finish is most known for its *Doctor Who* ranges which comprise the bulk of their releases. Big Finish is very tied in with the TV show, having been mentioned frequently across the 50th anniversary, and Nick Briggs,

the Executive Producer, voices the Daleks, Cybermen and many more for both TV and audio. With 2013 being the biggest year in *Doctor Who*'s history so far it was no surprise that a lot of special audio would be released. It is amusing in retrospect to contrast this with 2003 when the programme was so overlooked by the BBC that the only product marking the 40th anniversary was the audio release *Zagreus* written by Nick Briggs and released by Big Finish.

They started 2013 with a joint production with the now defunct AudioGO. This was the *Destiny of the Doctor* range: each month a new story for each Doctor in turn (first to eleventh) in a part narrated part dramatized story led by an actor who had played a companion. Each month the relevant Doctor would get a message from the Eleventh Doctor asking for the outcome of the current adventure to be tweaked. The final instalment *The Time Machine* by Matt Fitton brought all the pieces together in a tale set in Oxford and narrated by Jenna Coleman (Clara Oswald from the TV show). The demise of AudioGO delayed release but eventually it made its way into the light of day. This series as a whole marked many firsts including the first time Big Finish crossed into the territory of the post-Eighth Doctor and the first audio adventure for the Ninth Doctor in the dramatic *Night of the Whisper* by Cavan Scott and Mark Wright.

*Night of the Whisper* featured not just the Christopher Eccleston Doctor but also Rose and Captain Jack Harkness and was read by the almost ubiquitous Nick Briggs whose impression of Eccleston is very convincing. If there's any justice in the world this story will spin off into an entire series on its own.

Big Finish also included anniversary stories in its normal release schedule. The so-called "main range" gave three stories set in and around November 1963 and the first of these 1963: *Fanfare for the Common Men* is worth a special mention. It was written by Eddie Robson. In the very first episode of *Doctor Who*, Susan listens to a group on the radio – these were the Common Men. In Eddie Robson's story the Common Men live the life the Beatles would have had except that history has been changed. It is up to the Fifth Doctor and Nyssa to work out what has happened and defeat the inevitable alien threat. This story works very well because it captures a lot of the essence of 60s Beatlemania without losing the need to tell a dramatic story. It raises several smiles but there are also moments of tension and loss. The Doctor has to fight off the wrath of the Common Men's fan base as he insists that it is the Fab Four not the Fab Three who should be centre stage.

Big Finish also released a set of stories centring on a character named Quadrigger Stoyne – an engineer who was aboard the TARDIS when it was stolen by the very first Doctor. This overlaps slightly with events portrayed in the TV episode *The Name of the Doctor*, and so a lot of care has clearly been taken to keep this lined up with canon. The cover of the CD was even changed to show



the original shape of the TARDIS as a grey cylinder as depicted in the TV episode.

It fell to Nick Briggs to bring the fans what they most needed – a multi-Doctor story featuring all five living classic Doctors from Tom Baker to Paul McGann. Entitled *The Light at the End* it is a story of how the Master gained access to a super-weapon capable of wiping the Doctor from history. There are many moments where odd pairs of Doctors and companions end up mixed together and the plot relies on a clever twist resolve its crisis. The first three Doctors are also included in several scenes and the story felt like a complete a fitting testimony to the show's history.

### Elsewhere

The year came to a close with a release by The Wireless Theatre Company, a group who have won many awards for the quality of their work and have a simple mission as summarised on their website:

*"... to keep audio theatre alive and well, by creating original, exciting radio productions – both for existing radio lovers and for the download generation"*<sup>9</sup>

The Wireless Theatre Company are very active in promoting new talent both writing and performing and have had so many submissions that they have currently suspended asking for more (although interested writers should check regularly). Over the years they have featured Prunella Scales, Brian Blessed and Stephen Fry amongst others.

December saw them release *The Terror of London*: the first episode in season two of *The Springheel Saga* which includes amongst its cast Nicholas Parsons, who is also the patron of the company.<sup>10</sup> The saga centres on Springheel Jack himself, a historical figure, broadly assumed to

be an urban myth. He was seen at various times in the 1800s in and around London. Around this legend the Wireless Theatre Company has woven a fascinating tale which focuses on the attempts by DI Jonah Smith to bring Jack to justice. In tone the series is reminiscent of the BBC's *Ripper Street* due to the harsh style of the writing and production – this is not the sanitised Victorian England of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes but an altogether more brutal and compelling world populated by people who are recognisably real.

### Looking forward

Whilst the adventures in time and space will surely continue into 2014, with the Doctor Who anniversary now behind us, companies such as Big Finish are able to focus on diversifying their line-up. Already released is the first in a full cast series for *Blake's 7* no doubt as a result of the success of *Warship*, a boxset recreating the 1961 first series of Sydney Newman's TV spy show *The Avengers* (with more boxsets to follow) and, later in 2014, all new stories for the original 1970s series of *The Survivors*. I also hope that *Bafflegab* will produce a second series of Hammer Chillers and eagerly await further episodes of *The Springheel Saga*.

The BBC back catalogue that was sold via AudioGO will now be made available via the new BBC Audiobooks; it is not entirely clear what other changes will happen this year as a result of these changes.

No doubt there will be plenty more to keep the science fiction listener entertained. I look forward to describing them all to you in 2015!

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01rcwkv>
2. <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2013-11-26/neverwhere-starring-benedict-cumberbatch-and-james-mcavoy-comes-to-radio-4-for-christmas>
3. <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2013-03-16/neverwhere---if-you-listen-to-one-radio-drama-this-year-make-it-this>
4. <http://www.ministerofchance.com/>
5. <http://www.starburstmagazine.com/features/interviews/4796-interview-dan-freeman-the-minister-of-chance>
6. <http://www.bafflegab.co.uk/index.asp>
7. <http://www.hammerchillers.com/index.asp>
8. <http://www.bigfinish.com/>
9. <http://wirelesstheatre.co.uk/about-us/>
10. <http://wirelesstheatre.co.uk/>

# recurrent: RESONANCES

## Stephen Baxter

### Project Icarus

In my column in *Vector* 274 I wrote of how Proxima Centauri, the nearest star to the sun, is suddenly looking a much more promising destination for future interstellar probes and starships than it did just a few years ago. But what are the prospects for such missions?

For the last few years I've been contributing to a volunteer project called Project Icarus, whose purpose is to come up with a feasible near-future way to send an uncrewed probe to a nearby star (we're thinking of using a fusion rocket). The project was initiated by the venerable British Interplanetary Society, which has a very respectable history. Our own former president Arthur C. Clarke was involved with the BIS from its earliest days in the 1930s. Back then it was all pubs and playfulness — but out of it, astonishingly, came the first credible design for a moon ship. Ever since then, the BIS has influenced space developments in a very British way, as a think tank working on little or no budget. I first joined the BIS when I was about 14. Later I plundered the unique library

planets and are now en route to the stars. There have in fact been some interesting stories dwelling on possible consequences of those missions — especially concerning the messages from Earth the craft carried, in the forms of the Pioneers' engraved plaques and the Voyagers' 'golden records'. We hope for positive responses to our invitation to contact, but fear the worst.

'The Message' was a season 1 episode of *The Outer Limits* (1995) in which a profoundly deaf woman begins to 'hear', through a faulty cochlear implant, voices asking for help and a string of symbols. The symbols are recognised as binary code, and when properly assembled give a reproduction of the Pioneer plaque, along with instructions for building a powerful laser. The originators of the message turn out to be aboard a solar-sail spacecraft which intercepted a Pioneer on the edge of the solar system. They need the laser to be fired to avert the craft from a collision course with the sun, before safely passing on to their next destination.

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Although my own contributions are very minor; there are some heavyweight characters in there, from ferociously bright nuclear engineers to a veteran of Apollo.

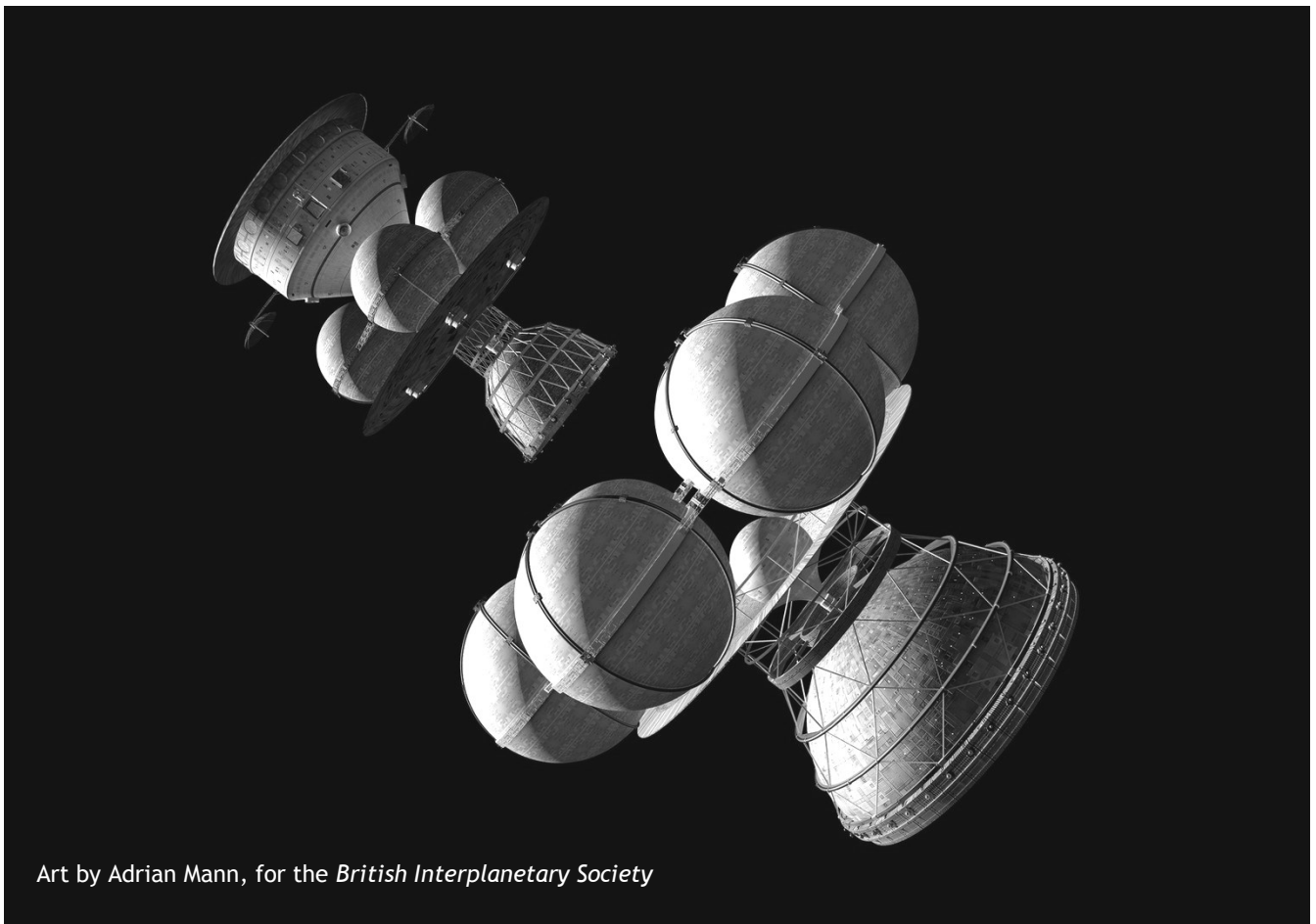
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when researching my own novels. And now I'm part of a team that's designing a star probe! Although my own contributions are very minor; there are some heavyweight characters in there, from ferociously bright young nuclear engineers to a veteran of Apollo.

Of course interstellar probes have featured in sf — though you'll find fewer tales featuring uncrewed probes than crewed starships like *Star Trek's* USS Enterprise, purely because of the wider dramatic possibilities of the latter. And in reality we've already sent out four interstellar probes, in the Pioneers and Voyagers launched in the 1970s, which skimmed past the outer

In John Carpenter's *Starman* (1984) an alien culture responds to the Voyager record by sending a visitor to Earth, who crashes near the home of a young widow in Madison, Wisconsin, and takes the form of a clone of the woman's dead husband. The visitor is pursued by sinister governmental forces. At one point a scientist from SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) protests at the treatment of the visitor: 'We invited him!'

In contrast to these uplifting scenarios, in the movie *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989), we see a Pioneer probe used for target practice by a Klingon Bird-of-prey: 'Shooting space garbage is no test of a warrior's mettle!'



Art by Adrian Mann, for the *British Interplanetary Society*

In 'Little Green Men', an episode in the second season of *The X-Files* (1994), the contents of the Voyager golden record are apparently played back from an alien source and picked up by the Arecibo radio telescope. At the facility FBI agent Fox Mulder faces a close encounter with a hostile 'grey' — but he fears the whole episode was faked, and is left with no evidence either way. Worse still, in L. Ron Hubbard's novel *Battlefield Earth* (1982) the predatory Psychlos are led to our world by the map on the Pioneer plaque: 'Man apparently sent out some kind of probe that gave full directions to the place, had pictures of man on it and everything. It got picked up by a Psychlo recon... The probe and the pictures were on a metal that was rare everywhere and worth a clanking fortune... One gas barrage and we were in business' (Chapter 1).

Much more advanced probe designs than the Pioneers and Voyagers have been proposed in the technical literature. And in fiction, Greg Bear's novel *Queen of Angels* (1990) features AXIS (for Automated eXplorer of Interstellar Space), a probe to Alpha Centauri. An onboard Artificial Intelligence designs its own science programmes, and is equipped to communicate with any alien encountered. But as with another famous ship-bound AI, HAL of Clarke's *2001* (1968), conflicts in the AI's programming lead to a breakdown. In this case AXIS has been given a powerful motivation to communicate above all else; its failure to find anybody to speak to at Alpha Centauri drives it 'crazy'.

Perhaps Icarus should take good care with planetary protection. A lurid fictional example of what happens if you don't was given in 'Voyager's Return', an episode from the first season of the TV drama *Space: 1999* (1975). An exploratory interstellar probe called Voyager One accidentally sterilises two inhabited worlds with its deadly 'Queller Drive'. The craft is followed back to Earth by vengeful aliens: 'You came proclaiming peace and you brought destruction!'

A smart probe went wrong in the *Star Trek* (TOS) second series episode 'The Changeling' (1967). The crew of the *Enterprise* encounters a malevolent entity that turns out to be a much-modified life-seeking probe from Earth called Nomad. Launched in the early 2000s, Nomad suffered a meteor strike and then merged with an alien probe that it calls 'the Other'. Nomad's programming, to seek out all life, merged with the Other's, which was to sterilise soil samples, the result being a distorted imperative to sterilise *all* imperfect life. This story was one seed of the movie *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979).

Of course these storylines are fantastical. But they're all built on the idea that our robot probes are an embodiment of our curiosity, our wish to know and understand, and indeed to communicate — even though we're fearful of the risk of harmful contact. Godspeed, Icarus!

Project Icarus is at [www.icarusinterstellar.org](http://www.icarusinterstellar.org).



# recurrent: FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

**Andy Sawyer**

## Walter Gillings' Science Fiction League Membership Certificate

Most of the "Foundation Favourites" have been books, or magazines. Certainly print material, mostly fiction; the occasional non-fiction or fanzine, although a set of cigarette cards featured in the March 2004 *Matrix*. For this column, I want to look at archive material, and highlight something which few of us have ever seen: a membership certificate of the Science Fiction League.

What was the Science Fiction League? It was, the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* tells us, "the first and most successful of several professionally sponsored sf organizations," launched through Hugo Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* in April 1934. Its aim was "to co-ordinate all who are interested in science fiction into one comprehensive international group". As well as a membership certificate available for 15¢, League members could purchase their own headed notepaper and

aged to form local groups to discuss and promote sf and (of course) to purchase League "essentials" so that League members could recognise each other. If there were passwords, or secret handshakes, Gernsback did not reveal them in pages which could be scanned by mundanes like us. There were certainly rules, of which the most important were that members should obey all rules and regulations of the Science Fiction League (Rule one *and* Rule four!), and that "I will, at all times, use my best efforts for the dissemination of Science Fiction." Members were also instructed that they should promptly answer all correspondence addressed to them by other League members. There were occasional test papers published in *Wonder*, with questions like "Who coined the word 'scientifiction'?" and "Give your friends' reaction to science fiction in no less than 250 words." (a bit of a hostage to fortune among some of my friends, that one, but these were simpler times!)

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Some of the exchanges in the letter-columns of the magazines of the time were as vitriolic as any internet spatter today (and, arguably, as trivial).

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envelopes and gold lapel buttons. These, Gernsback suggested hopefully in the May 1934 issue, would ("in many cases") ensure discounts of science fiction material to the lucky members. The Directors of the League included Forrest J. Ackerman, Eando Binder, Edmond Hamilton, Clark Ashton Smith, P. Schuyler Miller, Hugo Gernsback and Charles D. Hornig. Fans were encour-

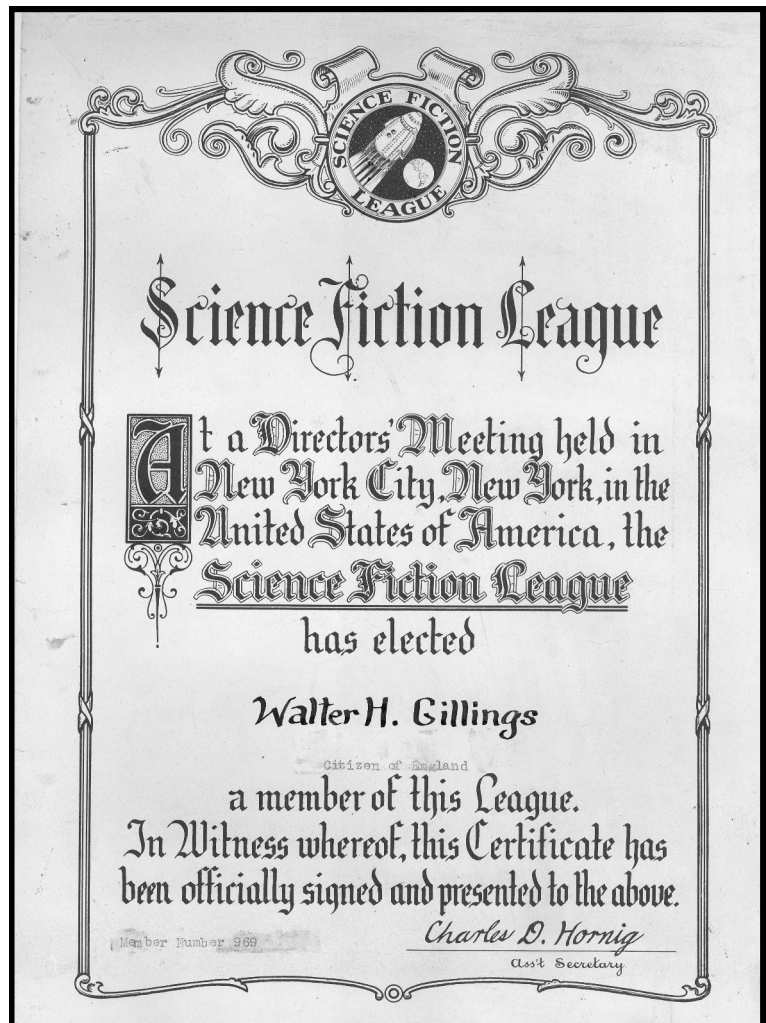
*Wonder* regularly promoted the League, devoting pages to the activities of League members, offering advice on forming local groups and suggesting ways of promoting science fiction (and the League... and probably most importantly, Gernsback's magazine) by writing to the local press stating how valuable and educational science fiction was. Readers were also advised to study SF carefully, so

that they could present reasoned and informed arguments about its value whenever called upon. *Actual* readers were perhaps a little less idealistic – extracts from a letter from Waldo M. Streman of Los Angeles in the September 1934 *Wonder* pleaded a little wistfully for fellow-readers (“And girls!”) in the LA area to get in touch. *Wonder* responded to Streman by mentioning the League and suggesting that he come forward as a potential Director of the LA Chapter – and continued by promoting the international flavour of the League which had already had enquiries from an A. V. Bleiden in Shanghai (“we have three Russians, four Chinese, one German, one American and one Englishman”) and a J. R. Ayco of the Philippines. Science fiction was taking over the world!

Walter Gillings would have immediately noticed all this activity. A trainee journalist, he had already, through *Wonder Stories*, made contact with a fellow British fan (Len Kippin) in 1930 and together they had formed the first British fan group, the Ilford Science Literary Circle. Later, he spent much of the 1930s agitating for a British science fiction magazine (his *Tales of Wonder* lasted 16 issues between 1937 and 1942) and producing two of the most important fanzines of the pre- and immediately post-war period (*Scientifiction* and *Fantasy Review*). He was a columnist in the glossy *Science Fiction Monthly* in the mid-70s.

Interestingly, Rob Hansen writes in *THEN*: “Having had his doubts about the SFL Gillings didn’t join up until the organisation had been going for a year. When he and Kippin did send for memberships, Gillings enclosed a letter urging all British readers to join the SFL – but only with a view to the eventual formation of a British Science Fiction League, one which he hoped would function apart from the parent body”. This didn’t happen (apparently the letter was never printed) but with thriving groups in Liverpool and elsewhere British sf fandom was well under way and eventually in May 1935 the first non-American “chapter” of the Science Fiction League held its first meeting in Leeds, organised by Doug Mayer.

According to Rob Hansen’s essay on Leeds fandom in Peter Weston’s essential fanhistorical journal *Relapse* 21 (accessible on [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com)), this group had about a dozen members by the end of 1975, of whom around a half were regulars. “Thriving” in the last paragraph was, of course, relative. If we believe the grandiose enthusiasm of



Walter Gillings spent much of his life working tirelessly, and with indifferent success, to promote sf. His Science Fiction League certificate presents him as a pioneer among those of us who think that sf does have something to offer. His story can be read (where else?) in *Relapse* 19, as told by Rob Hansen and his friend Phil Harbottle. He died, after a long career in journalism, in 1979. Much of his collection and archive material vanished in only semi-explained circumstances. *Relapse* 20 contains as full an explanation about what happens to this material as is probably possible this time after the event. The SF League certificate was given to the Science Fiction Foundation in 2008 by the book dealer who had obtained a number of books from Walter Gillings’s collection (some of which we bought). It is a memorial of a part of the history of sf, and sf fandom, which is still echoing today, and of one of the great founder-figures of British sf. Without the initial enthusiasm of people like Walter Gillings, we would all be the poorer.

the *Wonder* pages devoted to the League, a mass movement devoted to science fiction was about to sweep the world, but the Leeds experience seemed to be typical. Meyer, also director of the “Institute for Scientific Research” was 16 and living with his parents. Some aspects of fandom really did have big ideas – by this time the British Interplanetary Society was taking off in Liverpool and incorporating almost *en masse* the local sf group – but many of these groups were simply small groups of friends who enjoyed discussing sf and swapping magazines. The

time were as vitriolic as any internet spatter today (and, arguably, as trivial). Wollheim was accused of what in political circles is known as “entryism” (joining an organisation for the purpose of undermining it) and certainly by then the cosy world of fandom was already riven by factions. It’s easy to see Gernsback’s championing of a Science Fiction League marching onwards for the good of the greater cause of science fiction as silly at best, if not deeply cynical. But while the Gothic typography and formal language of Gillings’s certificate raises a smile

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The Directors of the League included Forrest J. Ackerman, Eando Binder, Edmond Hamilton, Clark Ashton Smith, P. Schuyler Miller, Hugo Gernsback and Charles D. Hornig.

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feeling of belonging to a club – or League – *with its own headed notepaper!* just added to the enjoyment.

The Science Fiction League *was*, of course a marketing ploy, but it did offer an opportunity for fans to meet each other and through it, fanzines and local fan groups began to spring up. All was not sweetness and light. By September 1935 *Wonder* readers were reading about the expulsion of three League members, including Donald A. Wollheim, for “spreading gross untruths and libellous slander to other science-fiction fans and authors”. Some of the exchanges in the letter-columns of the magazines of the

(imagine the cut-and-thrust of debate among the League’s directors as Gernsback, Hamilton, Smith, Hornig, *et al* earnestly decided whether Joe Phan was a fit and proper person to join their august company), no-one would have been fooled. And were they so wrong to want to meet like-minded people who believed that sf really was something special, and was Gernsback so wrong in encouraging them?

Reader: why did *you* join the BSFA?

**Have you registered for the BSFA e-newsletter, yet?**



[www.bsfa.co.uk](http://www.bsfa.co.uk)

# recurrent:

## KINCAID IN SHORT

### Paul Kincaid

## Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne by R. A. Lafferty

I am not now, nor have ever been, a Catholic. I accept, therefore, that there might be niceties of theology that may pass me by in some fictions by Catholic writers. Nevertheless, one thing I do not expect to come across in Catholic fiction is existential despair. The mercy of God, the hope of heaven, offer the chance of salvation no matter how bad things may get. There is always a way out. One of the two great Catholic science fiction writers of the late 20th century (by which I mean that their Catholicism was integral to their science fiction) was Gene Wolfe, and in his work there is always a new sun. But in many of the stories by the second great Catholic science fiction writer, R.A. Lafferty, there was no new sun. Time and again his stories trap us in endless repetition in which we can go back to the beginning and start all over again, but we cannot escape. There is no exit from stories like 'All Pieces of a River Shore' or 'The World as Will and Wallpaper' or, one of his finest stories, 'Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne.' And the fact that these stories are cast as comedies only makes the inability to get out of the world, to find heaven, that much more suffocating.

'Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne' was first published in *Galaxy* in 1967. Much of Lafferty's best work appeared in *Galaxy* and in Damon Knight's *Orbit*, because these were the edgier, less conventional markets for science fiction in America at the time, and writers don't come much edgier or less conventional than R.A. Lafferty. His usual technique was to present some extravagantly impossible situation – the actual banks of the Mississippi reproduced as a sideshow diorama, a narrow valley which warped space – and then have its consequences explored, often by members of a recurring cast who were more caricatures than characters. The grand idiocy of his invention and the silliness of his characters made the stories seem as if they were a joke on the genre. I suspect that is how many at the time would have read 'Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne', a comic exaggeration of a familiar time travel paradox. But I don't think that was ever how Lafferty saw them. There was always something darker and more serious under the comedy. Which may be why, as a writer, he is so hard to pigeonhole.

The familiar names are all here: Gregory Smirnov, Willy McGilly, Audifax O'Hanlon, Diogenes Pontifex, Aloysius Shiplap. I used to wonder whether there was some significance in the fact that Raphael Aloysius Lafferty used part of his own name for a member of this repertory company of caricatures. Did he, perhaps, stand as in some way representative of the author? But in fact Shiplap is no less roughly delineated, no less silly in action or pronouncement, than any of his fellows. Lafferty was simply using his own name for comic effect. They are joined by Epiktistes the Ktistec Machine, Lafferty's baroque and at times rather incoherent version of an AI, that would feature in a number of stories and the novel *Arrive at Easterwine* (1971). Indeed, as this story makes explicit, Epikt (as the name was often abbreviated) was as much a fetish object as it was a piece of technology; but then, technology in Lafferty's work was rarely separated from superstition. But even this hugely complex, hugely powerful device is made out to be comic: 'Epikt had also given himself human speech of a sort, a blend of Irish and Jewish and Dutch comedian patter from ancient vaudeville. Epikt was a comic to his last para-DNA relay' (171). Although Lafferty is, as always, at pains to point out that the assembly represented 'the finest minds and judgements in the world' (172), everything from their names to their petty behaviour undermines any confidence we may have in them. In Lafferty's world, intelligence or genius is not necessarily something to be applauded.

Their plan is to change history: 'We are going to tamper with one small detail in past history and note its effect' (172). Specifically, Epiktistes will send an avatar back in time to kill the man who betrayed Charlemagne at Roncevalles (sic) in 778, and who thus effectively caused Christian Europe to be cut off from Islamic and Jewish scholarship. It is interesting to note that Lafferty is careless about the technology of his story. He has no interest in telling us anything about how time travel might be possible, not even using the sort of gobbledegook that Willy McGilly and Audifax O'Hanlon and their fellows commonly employ. It is, rather, a form



of wish fulfilment. All it takes is for someone to say 'Push the button' and 'From his depths, Epiktistes the Ktistec machine sent out an Avatar, partly of mechanical and partly of ghostly construction' (175). And that is the extent of the scientific explanation that Lafferty offers. In contrast, he spends a good part of three pages detailing the delicate web of alliances that held across France and Spain prior to the battle of Roncevalles, and how the consequences of that battle changed the access to learning across medieval Europe.

As they are preparing for the experiment, Willy McGilly reveals that, when he was a boy, he went back in time and, with a dart made of slippery elm wood, killed: 'King Wu of the Manchu, Pope Adrian VII, President Hardy of our own country, King Marcel of Auvergne, the philosopher Gabriel Toeplitz. It's a good thing we got them. They were a bad lot' (174). When the others protest that they have never heard of any of these people, Epiktistes backs him up: 'Where do you think I got the idea?' (174). In this exchange, it seems that we have the whole plot of this story laid out in advance. Someone changes history, and no-one can remember how things were before the change. Except that it isn't quite like that: because obviously Willy McGilly remembers both histories or he wouldn't have been able to recall his exploits; and Epiktistes, who played no part in the events, remembers it also.

There follows a quick survey of the state of things before the change. There are eight humans plus Epiktistes; they are in a 'middle-sized town with half a dozen towers of pastel-colored brick' (174-5); there are two shows in town that Valery hasn't seen; and the arts have never been in meaner shape. This means that, as soon as the change has happened, we can see the difference. There are, immediately, ten humans and three machines; they are in 'a fine large town with two dozen imposing towers of varicolored limestone and midland marble' (176); there are now two dozen shows that Valery hasn't seen; and the arts have never been in finer shape. In other words, as we can see from outside the time of the story, the world has apparently been changed for the better. But our slightly revised cast of central characters are not aware of any change, even Epiktistes 'can't see any change in anything either' (175). As Willy McGilly, so often Lafferty's mouthpiece, sums it up: 'The very bulk of achievement is stupefying ... The experiment, of course, was a failure, and I'm glad. I like a full world' (178, my ellipsis).

And yet, despite their evident satisfaction with the world as it (now) is, they decide to continue with the experiment. Abruptly, the moral underpinning of the story is transformed. Willy McGilly's initial efforts to change history removed from the record characters who were 'a bad lot'. The group's first experiment was designed to improve the world by facilitating the spread of human knowledge and thus eliminating the Dark Ages. Even their target for assassination, a traitor whose actions brought about a massacre, was no innocent and so might be considered worthy of his fate. So far, what has been done can be presented as morally worthy. But the decision to continue with the experiment is not made for the betterment of humankind, but out of the sin of pride, and hang the consequences: 'And if there is a present left



Lafferty was probably the most anti-scientific science fiction writer of the latter part of the twentieth century, but then, his work is only classified as science fiction because it does not really fit anywhere else.

to us after that, we will make a third attempt the following day' (178). Even their new choice of target illustrates this moral compromise. John Lutterell is no traitor, no facilitator of mass slaughter, but rather the sickly former chancellor of Oxford University who, in this history, bested William of Ockham and changed the intellectual underpinning of European thought in the Middle Ages. It is clear that this choice is not only morally dubious, it is recklessly dangerous: 'we would have liked Ockham. He was charming, and he was wrong, and perhaps we will destroy the world yet' (179).

Interestingly, it is as they decide to reinstate William of Ockham's thought within the philosophy of medieval Europe that we get the first hint of a bleed-through from the different timelines. As Gregory Smirnov says: 'There is something amiss here, though. It is as though I remembered when things were not so stark with Ockham, as though, in some variant, Ockham's Terminalism did not mean what we know that it did mean' (178). Lafferty's convoluted syntax here representing the convoluted temporal structure of the story. Naturally, this sense of dis-ease doesn't stop anyone, and the presentiments of doom that have undercut this last section of course come to fruition.

Suddenly the group is reduced to four: 'the three humans and the ghost Epikt, who was a kachenko mask with a speaking tube' (181), and they are reduced to stone age conditions, 'nude in the crude' (181) as Lafferty puts it, such overt rhymes and rhythms being a characteristic feature of his prose. Again Lafferty both extols and undermines the intelligence of his characters, the three humans are the 'finest minds in the world ... (the *only* humans in the world unless you count those in the other valleys)' (181, my ellipsis). While Epiktistes the AI is here reframed as a cult object: 'We made his frame out of the best sticks, and we plaited his face out of the finest weeds and grasses. We chanted him full of magic and placed all our special treasures in his cheek pouches' (181). Even at its most technologically advanced, Epiktistes is as much magical as scientific, so this new version seems to belong with the two versions of Epiktistes we've already encountered. Science, in Lafferty's stories, is never differentiated from magic, and the work of the characters he apostrophises as 'the finest minds' is as much ritual observance as it is any sort of scientific endeavour. Lafferty was probably the most anti-scientific science fiction writer of the latter part of the twentieth century, but then, his work is only classed as science fiction because it does not really fit anywhere else.

The scene that follows in this third version of reality, therefore, is in many ways an encapsulation of all that has gone before. The humans are reduced to basics, eating hickory nuts and 'rump of skunk' (181), helpless despite, or perhaps because of, their intelligence. They are unable to see their world, unable fully to function within it, because of their desire to change it. And the endless regressive trap has been sprung by the fetish Epiktistes, the object of their own manufacture in which is invested all their scientific belief and endeavour (here recast as superstition), and which can address them only when they provide the voice. They are the architects of their own despair. It is, in John Clute's term, a godgame, but a game in which god is absent, replaced by the false god Epiktistes. And because god is absent, unlike, for instance, in the godgames of Gene Wolfe, there is no way out of the trap. It is a totally enclosed world, a world that can only represent existential despair.

In this Stone-Age reality, the three humans recall the legend of the folk hero Willy McGilly who used a dart of slippery elm wood, and with this model in mind send the ghost Epikt back in time to kill the original Avatar of the original Epiktistes. And suddenly everything is restored to what seems to be how things were when the story began. As before, there is an ill-formed sense of how things had been otherwise:

*"Is it done?" Charles Cogsworth asked in excitement.*

*"It must have. I'm here. I wasn't in the last one."* (183).

Yet this suggestion of slippage between realities is immediately contradicted by the fact that, as ever, they have no awareness that anything has changed. They do not even know if they tried to change history:

*"Push the button, Epikt!" Diogenes barked. "I think I missed part of it. Let's try again."*

*"Oh, no, no!" Valery forbade. "Not again. That way is rump of skunk and madness."* (184)

But is it? If no-one knows whether they have changed history, no-one can know that they shouldn't do it. The godgame can only be repeated.

Quotations taken from 'Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne' by R. A. Lafferty, in *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*, New York, Ace, 1970, pp 171-184.

# recurrent:

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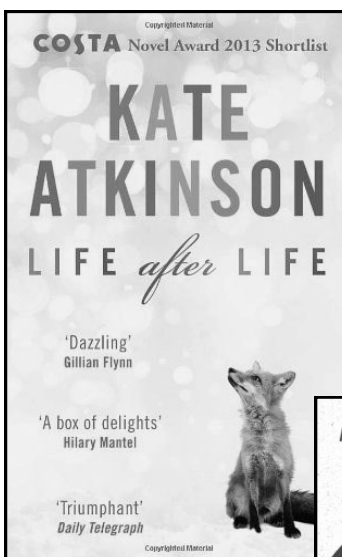
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# The BSFA Reviewers' Poll

In last issue's editorial, I wondered if 2014 would be a year for award-winning women. Since then, *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie – one of the books I singled out – won the Golden Tentacle for best debut at the Kitschies and has been shortlisted for both the BSFA and Philip K Dick awards. Meanwhile, *A Tale For the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki – a book that wasn't on my radar, despite having been shortlisted for the Booker – won the Red Tentacle for best novel. I should have been paying attention but obviously others were since Ozeki takes joint first place in our poll of reviews, alongside Kate Atkinson for *Life After Life*.

They are a thematically fitting pair, although I think their merits are less matched. If I was being cynical, I'd say Ozeki's novel appeals to SF readers because it consists of page after page of tedious exposition. It is the duller sort of literary meta-fiction aligned to a self-help primer on Buddhism with a bit of pop science thrown in for good measure. *Life After Life*, on the other hand, is sublime. Atkinson tells a very different tale of time which encompasses the best of historical fiction, family saga and romance but amplifies these through a palimpsest fantasy narrative. A worthy winner of the Costa Award.

As you might expect, there is a lot of cross-over between our poll and the BSFA awards and the next spot goes to Christopher Priest who won the award in 2011 with his previous novel, *The Islanders*. In Vector #274, Paul Kincaid said of *The Adjacent*: "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."

Just outside the medal positions is Nina Allan with *Spin*, shortlisted for the BSFA Award for short fiction but eligible here as this beguiling novella was published in book format by TTA Press. And, of course, there is Leckie herself. (I do wonder if, despite the hype, her middling position here is an indicator of her chances for the award itself).



## BSFA Reviewers' Poll

- =1) **Life After Life** by Kate Atkinson
- =1) **A Tale for the Time Being** by Ruth Ozeki
- 3) **The Adjacent** by Christopher Priest
- 4) **Spin** by Nina Allan
- 5) **Ancillary Justice** by Ann Leckie
- 6) **A Stranger in Olondria** by Sofia Samatar
- 7) **What Lot's Wife Saw** by Ioanna Bourazopoulou
- 8) **The Shining Girls** by Lauren Beukes
- 9) **The Machine** by James Smythe
- 10) **Evening's Empires** by Paul McAuley

*A Stranger In Olondria* by Sofia Samatar and *What Lot's Wife Saw* by Ioanna Bourazopoulou were books that I'd hoped to get to before nominations closed for awards season. Alas it was not to be but their appearance here makes me even more determined to read them in 2014. In a crowded reading schedule, I will always make time for Lauren Beukes though. *The Shining Girls* is substantially less interesting than her previous work but nonetheless evidence of a formidably talented writer.

Finally, we have two male British science fiction writers at opposite ends of their careers. *The Machine* is James Smythe's third novel since his debut in 2012 (it was also shortlisted for the Red Tentacle); *Evening's Empires* marks Paul McAuley's fourth appearance on the shortlist of the BSFA Award since 1991. (The two BSFA shortlist novels missing here are *Ack-Ack Macaque* by Gareth L Powell and *God's War* by Kameron Hurley but the latter came third in the poll back when it was originally came out in 2010. Such are the vagaries of Transatlantic publishing.)

So that was 2013. My own start to 2014 has involved moving house so if you are a publisher, please check the new address for review copies at the front of the magazine. The wealth of paperwork that has accompanied this move also means that I have finally updated various accounts and pieces of identification with my married name. Which means it is time for me to do the same for *Vector* too.

**Martin Petto**  
Reviews Editor

***The Silent Land* (Gollancz, 2010), *Some Kind Of Fairy Tale* (Gollancz, 2012) and *The Year Of The Ladybird* (Gollancz, 2013) by Graham Joyce**

**Reviewed by Paul Kincaid**

The thing about fantasy, at least that which takes myth, legend or fairy tale as its point of origin, which is most of it, is that we know the story. We know that the prince will claim his throne, that the evil witch will be defeated; that's the whole point. Fantasy isn't meant to surprise us with newness but to confirm the eternal, to show us that patterns of story that have stayed more or less the same throughout the ages still shape the ways we see the world. The worst fantasy takes this as an excuse to repeat exactly what has gone before and, in doing so, mistakes the story for the telling and so feels tired and derivative as a result. The best fantasy sees that novelty lies not in the story but in the telling and so constantly reshapes the ancient narratives. This is the way that eternal stories continue to resonate in a modern age. This is the way that Graham Joyce writes.

We know, within a page or two of the start of these novels, the story we are being told and how it must therefore end. We know, when Zoe and Jake survive an avalanche and return to a town emptied and silent from which they cannot leave, that this is a limbo after death. We know, when Tara returns home after twenty years looking no older than when she disappeared, that she has been away with the fairies and what that must betoken for her future. We know, when David returns to the town where his father died, that the ghostly figures he glimpses on the beach will somehow reopen and repair that ancient wound. All of that is known and none of it is relevant. The operative word is 'return' because these are stories of eternal return whose very familiarity is what is important about them.

If *The Silent Land* is the least satisfactory of the three novels under review, it is because Joyce sticks most closely to the story we recognise. Zoe and Jake are a married couple who have been together long enough to know each other quite well but maybe not long enough for Zoe to be sure how Jake will react when she tells him she is pregnant. Then, on a skiing holiday in the Pyrenees, Jake accidentally sets off an avalanche. When they manage to dig themselves out and get back to their hotel they find it deserted, though the power is still on, fires are still lit and fresh food is laid out in the kitchen ready for cooking. The same is true of the rest of the village but when they try to phone out they get no signal and when they try to leave they are unable to do so. Then eerie things start to happen, candles stay lit without burning down, food stays fresh when left out for days, they can drink as much wine as they like without getting drunk but it seems to have no flavour and the dog that Jake had as a child reappears. To be fair, within this cessation of time, Zoe

and Jake are only a beat or two behind the reader in recognising that this must be some sort of afterlife.

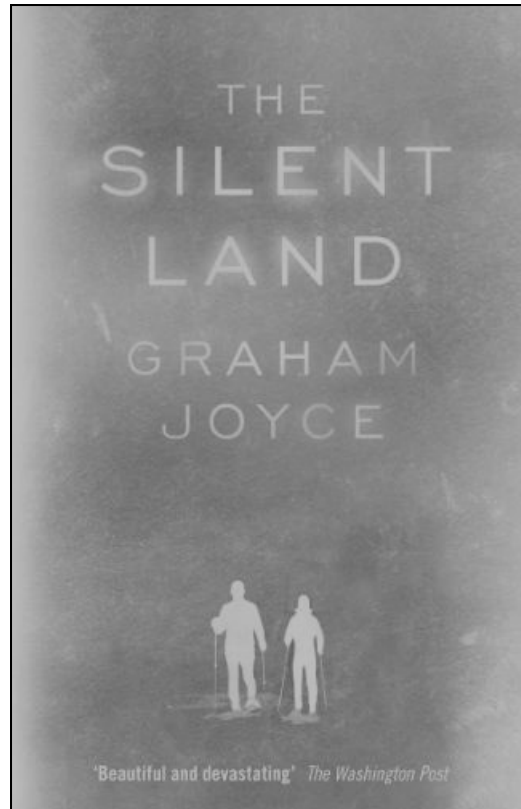
Then time reasserts itself; indeed, starts to move more quickly than ever. Food rots, candles dwindle, fires burn out in minutes and suddenly everything acquires a strange urgency. At first the pair had treated this limbo as an extension of their holiday, spending the days skiing and the evenings enjoying the best food and wine but now as they sense an approaching climax and strange, threatening figures start to appear in the snow, they struggle to find purpose in all of this. The purpose turns out, movingly if somewhat prosaically, to be love. Joyce beautifully and powerfully portrays the relationship between the two, not as some saccharine romance but as a jagged thing of irritation and defensiveness and need and delight.

Joyce's prose is glorious, his characterisation utterly convincing but we have, of course, seen these afterlives before and there isn't quite enough here to make this telling of the story unfamiliar and fresh. That is certainly not the case with the best of these novels, *Some Kind Of Fairy Tale*, which wrings surprise after surprise out of this most familiar story. One spring morning, after breaking up with her boyfriend, Tara walks away into the bluebell woods where she meets a man on a white horse who takes her away into a realm of sexual licence and sudden violence. Because of the arcane rules that govern the inter-relationship of the land of fairy and our own world, she must wait six months before she can return, and when she does so she finds it is Christmas Day twenty years later.

So far, so conventional, but what makes this novel so effective is that Joyce concentrates on those she left behind, those who have grown old in her absence. Her parents are at first just delighted to have her back, they don't want to ask questions, they don't want to know where she was, but gradually they begin to doubt, to regard her with unease, to become distant. Her brother Peter, once academically promising but now making a career for himself as a farrier and with a chaotic family of his own, cannot bring himself to believe her story. Tara's former boyfriend, Richie, was suspected by the police of killing Tara and he has since spent time in prison, his close friendship with Peter has ended and a once-promising musical career has been frittered away on booze and drugs. These are damaged people and though Tara's return does help to rekindle the friendship between Peter and Richie, there isn't really the healing that any of them might have hoped for from her return. It doesn't help that one of the fairies seems to have returned with Tara and is intent on causing mayhem, while Richie has

suddenly developed a life-threatening brain tumour that may or may not be connected with her return. In short, we realise quite early in the novel that Tara's reappearance is not in itself a happy ending.

One of the things that makes this novel so powerful is that Joyce tells his fragmented story through the eyes and sometimes in the voices of several different characters. Tara, of course, tells of her experiences in the other world, a mixture of conventional fairy tale tropes and a sort of hippyish anarchy that is, in truth, the least interesting part of the novel. But this is contrasted with the dry reports of the old and rather eccentric psychiatrist that Peter insists she should visit, who points out the conventional nature of the tropes she uses and



offers psychologically insightful interpretations of her story. This counterpoint is fascinating because, as readers, we believe Tara's story at least in so far as we know we are reading a fantasy novel but our doubts and questions are incorporated into the story through the rationalisations of the appropriately named Dr Underwood.

Alongside these two voices we get several others, though perhaps the most interesting is when we see through the eyes of Peter's son, Jack, who accidentally kills a neighbour's cat with his new air rifle. This accident forces him, tentatively and unwillingly, to make contact with the old lady, who in turn has what proves to be important information for Tara. Lives interlock and Tara's absence from these lives for twenty years has meant that precious linkages have not been forged. The old romantic image of going to live with the fairies has here been deftly transformed into an acute and startling story of social and psychological damage.

The most recent of these novels, *The Year of the Ladybird*, does not quite have the impact of *Some Kind Of Fairy Tale* for the simple reason that it is, perhaps, not a fantasy novel at all. Or to put it another way, apart from one brief, powerful but ambiguous scene, the fantastic plays no necessary part in the novel.

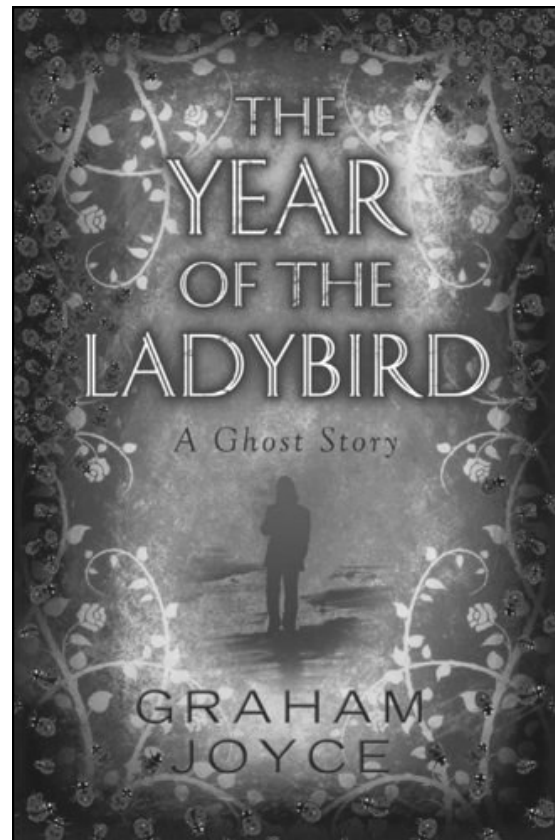
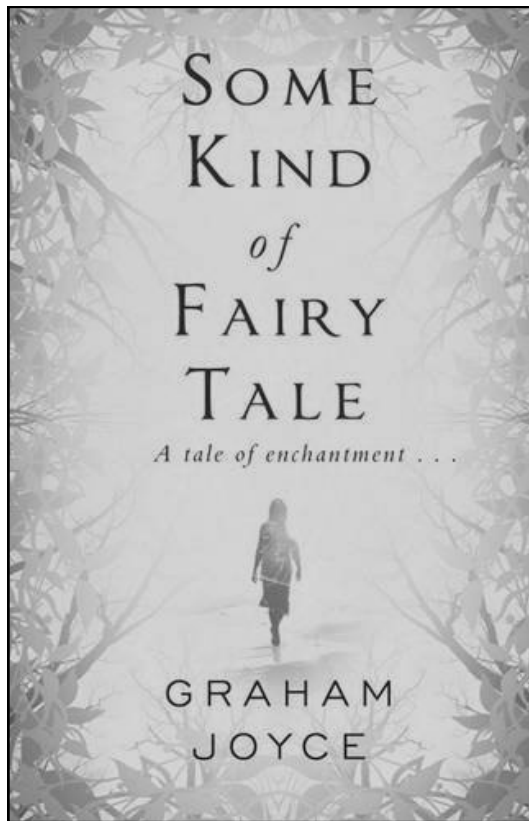
What we have is a coming-of-age story set in the long hot summer of 1976. It was a year of drought, a year of searing summer heat that did not break until September, a year in which, in Joyce's memory, there was a plague of ladybirds. It was also a year in which the Labour Government of James Callaghan (who had just replaced Harold Wilson) was losing control of the economy to all-powerful unions, prompting an upsurge in right wing protest movements which saw unexpected electoral success by the racist British National Party. It is in this fevered atmosphere that Joyce's student hero, David Barwise, gets a summer job as a 'Greencoat' at a holiday camp in Skegness. The Greencoats (clearly analogous to the famous Redcoats of the Butlins Holiday Camps) run every aspect of the entertainments provided for the holidaymakers so David spends his days organising sandcastle building competitions, pretending to be a pirate, judging Glamorous Granny contests, setting up the nightly variety shows and so forth. As the country becomes more affluent and starts taking its summer holidays in Spain, the holiday camp is a dying institution but nevertheless the work is both exhausting and satisfying, particularly as David discovers he has a real talent for working with children.

Behind the scenes, things are less happy. Several members of staff are in the BNP and mistake David for a sympathiser so he finds himself inadvertently caught up in their

thuggish politics. This does not go down well with the mixed-race dancer, Nikki, with whom he starts an affair. At the same time one of the most brutal of the BNP members, Colin, is driven by a mad jealousy of his wife, Terri, who works as a cleaner at the camp, and he browbeats David into spying on her unaware that David is actually having a sexual relationship with Terri. When Terri disappears, David fears the worst and also imagines that he may be in danger himself.

With all of this going on – and Joyce tells a vivid and thrilling story – it seems unnecessary to add in the extra complication of a ghost story. David's parents split up when he was very young and one day his father took him away from home to Skegness then died in mysterious circumstances. David has only the sketchiest memory of these events but, now he is in Skegness, he begins to see the faceless figures of a man and a boy. This haunting has only the barest interaction with the plethora of other events going on and the resolution, though chillingly done, seems almost anticlimactic when compared to the dangers, political complications and complex love stories that are also going on.

The thing to note in all of this is how good a writer Graham Joyce is. He has absolute control of his prose, which can be lush or staccato, soothing or jagged to suit the requirements of the story from moment to moment. All three novels are firmly anchored in the real so that the fantastic, which seems to grow out of the mundane rather than being imposed upon it, is that much more convincing. In fact, *The Year Of The Ladybird* could well have been a straightforward mainstream novel without losing any of its impact. But when he gets the balance just right between the real and the fantastic, as he does in *Some Kind Of Fairy Tale*, the result is a work of stunning accomplishment that will live with me for some time to come.





*Love Minus Eighty* by Will McIntosh (Orbit, 2013)

Reviewed by Shaun Green

If prostitution is the world's oldest profession, would it be fair to suggest that pimping might be the second?

Will McIntosh is an author I've had tabs on for some time, having first been impressed by 2005's 'Soft Apocalypse' (*Interzone* #200), a short story published relatively early in his career. Although the ensuing eight years have left my memory of the story's details weatherworn and occluded, what I do remember is its powerful sense of inevitability: the smallness and powerlessness of individuals in the face of greater things; forces of nature and forces of governance, both bearing the potential for great violence. I recall a story of individuals doing what they could to get by in the face of rapid, unpredictable and often terrifying change.

*Love Minus Eighty* exhibits some of those same thematic beats: small people rendered powerless yet making connections with one another, all the while finding ways to if not thrive then at least survive or subvert the realities forced upon them. The setting is Earth, many years from now. Technologically, humanity has taken strides forwards: death itself has been partially defeated thanks to rejuvenation treatments and advanced communications technology is cheap and ubiquitous - at least among the rich of New York's High Town. The urban poor of Low Town are not so well off, although they may at least count themselves above those outside the city who - from what little we see of them - are almost wholly dispossessed, cut off from even the common urbanite currency.

Although this stark division between the haves and the have-nots is no focus of *Love Minus Eighty*, for the reader its observation is inescapable. For the people of New York, sense-filtering technology allows them to overlay a cleaner, more palatable presentation over the grungy environs that surround them. McIntosh presents his setting neutrally, without authorial comment or judgement, which makes each revelatory moment all the more appalling. Chief among such revelations can be counted the Cryomed dating centre where the 'bridesicles' are kept.

The women locked into the bridesicle program are perhaps the best example of the way in which individuals or vulnerable groups are rendered powerless by cold, cruel economics: unable to afford their own rejuvenation, these women are literally frozen in time. They escape only for brief moments when a 'suitor' inspects them, judging their suitability for what is, in essence, marital indentured servitude. It is a chilling representation of the way in which late capitalism will commodify anything and everything, all to serve a perceived market need. Little matter that these are people stocking the shelves and placed under consumer scrutiny. Their deaths have been translated into debt and that debt has forced them into a submissive role (a tale as old as money itself, as old as slavery).

My initial minutes with *Love Minus Eighty* were not favourable. The Cryomed dating centre and those who frequent it are inherently repugnant and I confess I was uncertain where McIntosh planned to take his novel. Surely most readers of *Vector* will have a vague recollection of the early response to Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse*, slammed as "the prettiest little whorehouse in Los Angeles"? I chewed my lip as I was introduced to Mira, the oldest resident of the facility, and a sour-hearted old bastard who switches her off after a three-minute conversation.

Things don't get much better as we're introduced to Rob, a somewhat directionless musician living beyond his means, and Lorelei, Rob's wealthy girlfriend who unceremoniously parts ways with him early on in a manner that seems to shriek irrationality, envy and cruelty. Her career involves constant surveillance by a small platoon of fans who drop in and out of her televised life and Lorelei opts to first root

through Rob's possessions, dump him and then dump his possessions out of a high window - all on-screen. The portrayal, and Rob's bewildered and infuriated perspective, screamed straw-woman: a stereotypical harpy, capricious and unpredictable; a character set up for the reader to loathe.

Happily for me - although unhappily for Rob - events take an unexpected turn as he and other characters are brought crashing together. By this time we've also been introduced to Veronika, a professional relationship coach who struggles to take her own advice, instead pouring her energies into fictional romance and an unrequited crush on her colleague Nathan, a friendly, charismatic and ambitious man who dreams of success, wealth and a beautiful woman on his arm. Lorelei, Nathan and Veronika - alongside a few other latecomers - find their lives and loves inextricably drawn into orbit around Rob and his brutally doomed relationship with one of the hundreds of bridesicles frozen

alongside Mira. It's said that love will always find a way but when the line of separation spans life and death, poverty and debt, what can possibly result?

*Love Minus Eighty* ultimately succeeds. It deftly constructs a world of great complexity whilst maintaining careful focus on presenting only those elements relevant to the novel's story. Its world is much, much larger than the bridesicle program, which is for most people only a tiny component, something they only rarely pay heed to.

This novel tells a story of individuals who come together and, through that, grow and learn and, ultimately, discover their own routes toward happiness (if they will but commit to following them). It is a powerful love story told through the lenses of SF and the human condition, simultaneously serving as a reminder of how humanity's best often comes about in spite of, not because of, our technological prowess and complex socio-cultural constructs. Despite a hard sell and a tough beginning, McIntosh has won me over again.



**The Eye With Which The Universe Beholds Itself by Ian Sales (Whippleshield Press, 2013)**

**Reviewed by Dan Hartland**

At times, science fiction can look very much like a fetish. Susan Sontag once famously argued that science fiction and pornography resemble each other: “Such fantastic enlargements of human energy [...] are rather the ingredients of another kind of literature, founded on another mode of consciousness.” That is, the exaggerations and absurdities of science fiction (and of pornography) are signifiers of purposes opposed to the standardised shibboleths of ‘respectable’ literature. Science fiction, in other words, is a radical artform.

If this were once true of the sort of SF to which Sontag referred (“spaceships and teeming planets”), it is true no longer. For many years (and as has been most notably argued in recent times by Paul Kincaid) the tropes which once made science fiction so exciting and radical a mode have long since passed into the realms of mass-cultural cliché. Increasingly, genre writers interested in the shock of the new have either migrated to fantasy – most notably, that curious beast the New Weird – or dejectedly advocated for that strangest of all literary forms, ‘mundane’ science fiction. Likewise, M John Harrison’s trope-killing *Kefauchi Tract* trilogy took place in a universe in which every science fictional means of interstellar travel works just fine.

In this context, it is little surprise that an author like Ian Sales has resorted to self-publishing. Sales is a writer interested neither in the anything-goes excitement of fantasy, nor in handing over hard SF to the ‘mundane’ refuseniks. For him, the approaches of science fiction – the rigour of its once revolutionary topos – are far from fetishes; rather than being objects venerated by the faithful but empty of all magical and spiritual properties, they are challenges to be met. In his writing, he struggles both with difficult physics but also the strange demands that a fidelity to scientific principles places on one’s prose; for his readers, Sales’s work demands new ways of reading and – with a nod again to Sontag – new ways of thinking.

*The Eye With Which The Universe Beholds Itself* is the second volume in his *Apollo Quartet*. In the first, *Adrift On The Sea Of Rains*, we were introduced to a group of astronauts stranded on a Lunar base when Earth descends into cataclysmic nuclear war. That their only hope of rescue lies in a salvaged piece of occult Nazi technology, the mysterious Bell, might cue the reader into the fact that Sales’s history is here alternate. That this short novella (just 52 pages) is expanded by an appendix, in which a glossary of terms becomes a quite astounding work of fiction all its own and in which the run of NASA’s Apollo missions ends not with the seventeenth but with the twenty-fifth, should make Sales’s purpose even clearer.

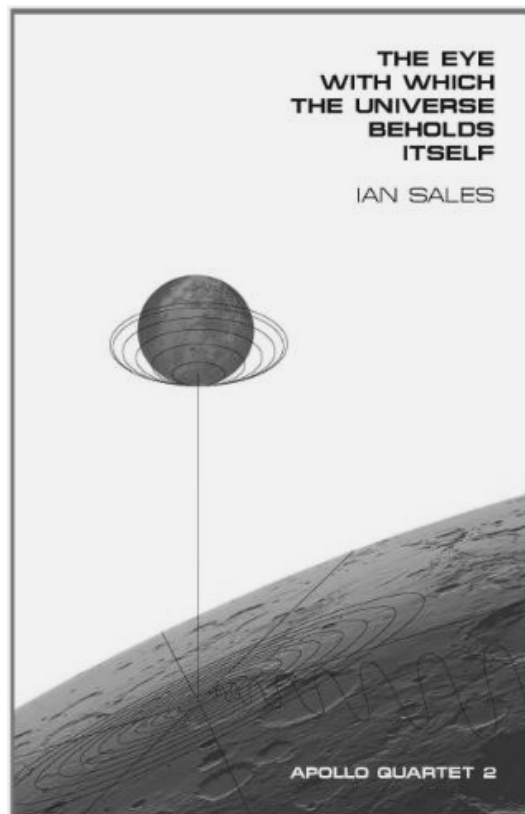
The *Apollo Quartet* ironises our own space-faring history in order to bring to bear the techniques of the ‘old’ science fiction in new

ways. In many respects, *Adrift On The Sea Of Rains* reads like a classic piece of ‘scientifiction’: all sprockets and physics (“two beryllium peroxide cylinders [...] in a bath of a violet mercury-like substance known as ‘Xerum-525,’” is how Sales describes the Bell). But, in a tense and indelible scene of dialogue in which the astronauts discuss how best to launch one of their number back into orbit, there is such a focus on how the intense psychological pressure of the *Apollo Quartet*’s ruthless interstellar space – including uncomfortable space-suits and unforgiving environments – can exhibit itself in terse acronyms and growled equations.

That novella’s sequel is, if anything, even defter in its use of science fictional conceits. It is certainly more confident: set in yet another alternative reality, its lead character is Bradley Elliot, a US Air Force pilot who becomes the first man on Mars in 1979. Twenty years later, he is sent further into space to investigate a base that has disappeared. The ghosts of Philip Francis Nowlan, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ray Bradbury haunt Sales’s solitary man exploring interplanetary expanses but the certainties of that earlier stripe of SF are rejected. By the year 2000, “Elliot’s mission to Mars is all but forgotten, mentioned only on PBS science programmes, public access shows about UFOs and the Face on Mars, or in nostalgic sci-fi novels.”

*The Eye With Which The Universe Beholds Itself* is precisely anti-nostalgic. It takes place in the future those novels promised us, in which, thanks to what Eliot found on Mars, interstellar travel is possible and the space programme never ended; and yet it is clear-sighted about what that might all mean for the men and women who fly those spacecraft – which are closer to Apollo 11 than the USS Enterprise – and for humankind as a whole. What Eliot experiences on Mars changes not just him but the world he inhabits: in a bold coda to the novella, which is placed only after another of Sales’s bravura appendices (thus making explicit how essential they are to his narrative), interstellar travel has become a new means of outsourcing, moving “from exoplanet to exoplanet, exploiting each one for an Earth now entering a post-scarcity age.”

In this context, as Eliot reflects towards the end of the novel, when he stares across the vast desert of an alien planet, “any direction is as good as another.” The worlds of the ‘old’ science fiction – whose jetpacks we continue to do without – are no better or worse than our own but then ours is not so shining an achievement, either. All this is encoded in Elliot’s decaying relationship with his wife, alienated and attenuated by an at times irrational insistence on a mantra he shares with science fiction itself: “We have to know what happened.” This ironic ingress into the personal is what makes Sales’s science fiction so exciting: unlike the weaker, ostensibly similarly hard SF stories he recently collected in *Rocket Science* (Mutation Press, 2012), the *Apollo Quartet* doesn’t genuflect at the altar of the fetish; rather, it sees past the tropes and perceives once more the topos.



*The Fractal Prince* by Hannu Rajaniemi (Gollancz, 2012)  
Reviewed by Jim Steel

Back in the ur-days of cyberpunk, virtual reality was viewed as a portal world. You jacked in and off you went to a *Tron*-like fantasy world, leaving your drooling body slumped in the physical world. As the decades have moved on and we have advanced into the future, we have discovered that the worlds are not as differentiated as we once thought they'd be. Head-up displays (hello, Google Glass), headphones and screens are everywhere and will only increase. The world is, and will continue to become, stranger than we ever imagined. Move a couple of centuries ahead and there will be... well, this.

This is the second of Hannu Rajaniemi's trilogy of novels concerning the thief Jean le Flambeur. It is perfectly possible to read this on its own but anyone attempting to do so will probably dispute that. Rajaniemi's short, present-tense sentences come across as choppy and dense and they occasionally risk losing the reader. He also jumps between first-person and third without varying the style to any great degree. Add to this the fact that appearance, memories and identities are fluid and you might initially feel that you are looking at chaos. However, he has packed enough into the start of this volume to ensure that it can be done and you are instead recommended to read the first book, *The Quantum Thief*, merely because he is one of the most important SF writers of the century.

In this volume, le Flambeur leaves Mars and travels to Earth, along with Mieli and her sentient space ship, Perhonen. The woman with the talking space ship may be a cliché but Rajaniemi manages to find fresh uses for them and they help to anchor the narrative. It was Mieli, after all, who sprung le Flambeur from jail for a heist at the start of the first volume, and it is clear that the three characters are going to remain linked throughout the trilogy. Earth itself is an old world, riddled with dangerous wild code, and Rajaniemi constructs an arabesque for it, both directly, with flying carpets and jinn, and obliquely, with nested, recursive stories. Le Flambeur is searching for an early version of a villain, a child-like one that had been safely buried by parents when Earth started to get chaotic, but it is Mieli and Perhonen who face the biggest challenges.

Rajaniemi sprinkles his prose with adjectives like precious jewels (literally, in many cases) in order to make it sparkle but these almost-non-sequiturs add little to the telling. The characters themselves rarely get any description which, given their willingness to jump bodies or to exist virtually, makes for a useful economy of prose and keeps the narrative moving. The confusion caused is frequently deliberate. Much is made of

Rajaniemi's grasp of maths and theoretical physics but everything is contextualised enough for any reasonably-read science fiction fan to follow (he's not an author to use in any attempts to convert the straights, though). However, he is also not averse to layering on other flavours. For example, Gogols are a delight, punning off Google and Russian literature alike. You also know exactly what they are from the name – upload-

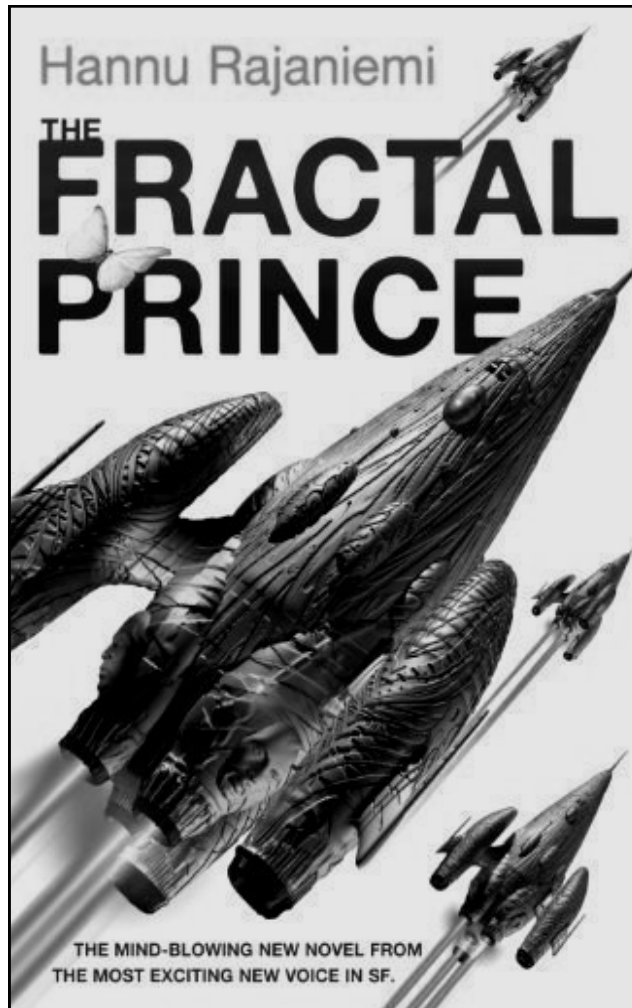
ed personalities – and their place and value in the economy follow on from this. Who needs description when you can pun? The reader also instantly knows what sort of personal software a Watson is merely from its name. Lesser writers would spill a page of words on that that device. The Teddy Bears Roadside Picnic Company, by contrast, is almost overly verbose by Rajaniemi's usual standards, even if typically playful.

One of the strangest of places in the novel, even if an apparently obvious one, is the ongoing virtual attempt to recreate all of the past. You can drop in anywhere and anytime, as our characters do when they turn up in Nineties Vienna (which also one of the few occasions when reference is made to a time earlier than our present day – the novel takes place several centuries in our future). Rajaniemi takes this and runs with it, only to abandon it and move on before we get a good look. The only inhabitants of this artificial shadow world who are secure are those whose existences are guaranteed by history. The others, those artificial intelligences who are mere

spear carriers, are at risk of being wiped out every time some new discovery comes along and the project is updated. It is as if its timeline runs at right angles to our own, although there are some entities powerful enough to make themselves fixed points. There are great questions of identity and free will in a quantum universe which could be addressed but aren't as the characters aren't the most introspective of people.

But it is with his main character that Rajaniemi makes his sole concession to the reader. Le Flambeur's occupation ensures that not only does he drive the plot, he also stands outside of mainstream society (indeed, he started the first volume in jail). What is new to the reader is frequently new to him as well. But le Flambeur is not a tourist, and he only pauses to observe when he feels he is in danger – which does happen fairly frequently, it must be said. This is not a novel of character.

However, there is always the next volume. If Rajaniemi goes deeper instead of wider then he will truly have crafted something that will last. There are hints that the next volume might head out to Mieli's home in the Oort cloud because there are some things in need of repair at the end of *The Fractal Prince*. And the mysterious Great Common Task still continues to tantalise. Will it be actualised or will it march into religion?

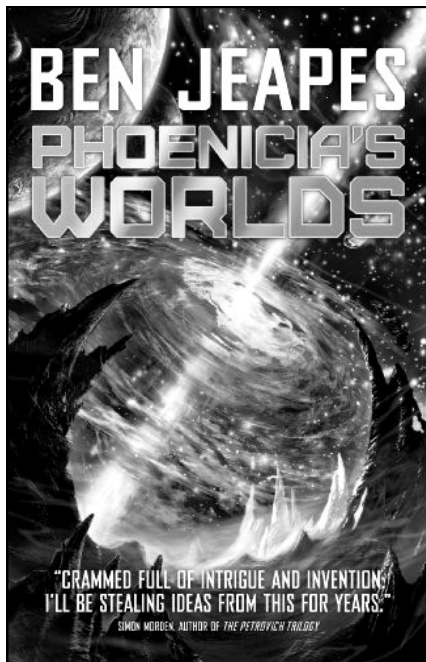


*Phoenicia's Worlds* by Ben Jeapes (Solaris, 2013)

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

*Phoenicia's Worlds* is the first adult novel from Ben Jeapes, whose reputation as a novelist rests on his young adult science fiction. I feel that young fans of his previous work will also find this book accessible, though there is enough depth here to interest the adult audience it is aimed at.

*Phoenicia* is the starship which brought the first colonists to the world of La Nueva Temporada, an ice-bound planet which is in the process of being terraformed. At the end of the voyage, a wormhole was opened to Earth and the starship, of no further use, was mothballed. Felipe Mateo and his brother Alex take over the ship with the intention of exploring further but the destruction of the wormhole means that the starship must be used to return to Earth and secure help for the now cut-off colony. As Felipe died in the disaster, Alex is the only person whom the ship – itself a character in the book – trusts



to head this mission. At the same time that Alex departs, his half-brother, Quin, is born and, while time stops for Alex in the cryogenic sleep of the voyage, Quin grows to manhood in a world where resources dwindle and political troubles mount.

The thing that struck me most while reading this book is the contrasts it offers: the contrast between Nueva and Earth; between high technology and the

bleak landscape of Nueva; most tellingly, between Alex and his half-brother Quin. While Alex remains young and retains a youthful idealism, Quin matures in a hostile environment and becomes corrupted. Jeapes traces in credible detail the way in which Quin's good intentions are twisted by flaws in his character or balked by outside forces he cannot control.

The structure of the book also provides contrast in that Alex's chapters are exciting space opera with fast action and conflict, while Quin's chapters centre around political scheming. Jeapes is adept in switching from one to the other while leaving the reader in suspense.

The style is lively and readable with effective understated humour. (The sneaky chapter headings are fun, too!) The future technology is incorporated seamlessly into the story without any clunky infodumping. But the fact that it's an easy read doesn't mean that there's no depth to it. I found myself thinking particularly about family and political relationships and about the morality of the choices which the characters make.

The one problem I have is with the ending of the book. There are two unexpected revelations in the final pages and I wish that Jeapes had prepared for them more carefully, in the manner of a whodunit writer seeding clues. As it stands, the ending seems rather rushed. However, this is a minor matter considering the book as a whole, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

*Crash* by Guy Haley (Solaris, 2013)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

After a couple of well-conceived extracts from fictional texts we are plunged into the aftermath of as big a crash as any reader could desire. Confusion reigns, but then who wouldn't be discombobulated, finding oneself expelled from suspended animation amid the remains of a starship scattered across an alien world?

Haley flashbacks to explain how Dariusz Szczeciński and his fellow other passengers ended up in this mess. Dariusz is desperate to escape an Earth where everything is owned and controlled by an unassailable super rich elite. One of these entrepreneurs launches a programme to seed humanity across the galaxy via a multi-ship star fleet on a mission to colonise nearby star systems but the ESS Adam Mickiewicz is separated from its companion ship and is forced to make desperate crash landing.

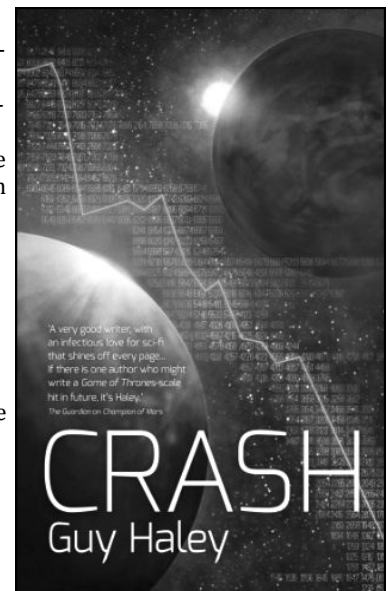
It is here that *Crash* takes a misstep. Combined with the title and the cover art, the first chapter suggests the novel is going to be as much about plunging financial markets as the aftermath of a starship disaster. However, this topical exploration of the market is never returned to again. Instead, the majority of the novel follows the survivors regrouping and taking the first tentative steps towards building a new society on a harsh but not uninhabitable (or uninhabited) world.

Real politick creeps in, factions form. There is militarism, exploration, exploitation, romance, violent conflict, hope and – this being a very English novel – weather. Bad weather. The new planet's rotation is locked to that of its star, meaning that one side is always in sun, the other dark, with interesting and well extrapolated implications for climate and colonists. There is also the mystery of just what caused the titular catastrophe. And why.

Making the majority of the characters central European is one of the most interesting touches of the novel, though there is one Englishman crying out to be played by Jason Statham if ever a film were to be made. Indeed, the space hardware is excellent and Haley can plan and execute big hardware action set-pieces to shame modern Hollywood. I was reminded variously of *The Andromeda Strain*, *Alien*, *Starship Troopers* and even *Prometheus*. *Crash* is how the BBC's *Outcasts* might have played had it been written by people who actually understood hard science fiction.

As *Crash* went on, I did begin to wonder if it was the first book in a series as there seemed too much to resolve in the number of pages remaining. Happily it doesn't turn out to be the launch pad for an endless saga and there is a definitive and satisfying ending. Sequels are possible but

not required. *Crash* is good, imaginative, heartland British hard SF with its politics realistically to the left. It is a book written by a writer who has grown up knowing, understanding and loving the genre. A constantly absorbing adventure, it is not a potential award winner or a book to change this or any other world, but it is thoroughly enjoyable and entertaining.



***Close Encounters of the Invasive Kind: Imperial History in Selected British Novels of Alien-Encounter Science Fiction After World War II* by Sarah Seymore (LIT Verlag, 2012)**

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

As its sub-title might suggest, *Close Encounters of the Invasive Kind* is a PhD dissertation (University of Paderborn, Germany) and has the merits (as well as some of the faults) of the form. Seymore writes clearly and there is little specialist jargon, apart from some terms like “homodiegetic narrator” (i.e. the narrator who plays a part in the story). However, it is well-researched and looks beyond the usual specialist-scholarly publications and, without being especially groundbreaking, covers a lot of territory in the discussion of how Empire is a constant theme in post-war British SF. Inevitably, one could ask for other authors but with thirteen novels covered this is quibble rather than criticism. There are some minor uncertainties of expression (almost certainly due to the fact it was presumably originally composed in German) but, altogether, the general SF reader would find this rewarding and accessible. It is only the doctoral student’s need to explain authors and concepts which an examiner might not be familiar with which leads to some summary which a reader well-versed in British SF would not necessarily need.

The introduction is a whistle-stop tour through British SF and modern colonialism theory; essential context for the PhD but perhaps less so for the general reader. The rise and fall of the British Empire is necessarily truncated but in places opens up critical argument – the implications we read behind, for instance, the statement that Britain gave independence to India as “compensation for cooperation in the war against Germany and Japan” is an (unintended) overlooking of the decades of argument against and resistance to colonial rule from within India! It is, though, usefully suggested that the result of decolonisation is complex; both a sense of guilt and a nostalgia for days of influence as well as a series of new problems for newly-independent countries.

The actual discussion falls into three parts. The first section, ‘Exploitative Alien Invasions’, covers those novels in which humanity is the colonised and aliens are the colonisers. Readers are encouraged, as they were in HG Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898), to invert their own relationships with ‘real’ colonised nations. The key works here are Brian Aldiss’s *The Interpreter* (serialised 1960; published as a novel 1963), John Christopher’s *Tripods* trilogy (1967–68) and Stephen Baxter’s *Timelike Infinity* (1992). Aldiss’s novel explicitly puts the human race in the position of, say, late-Victorian India: colonised by the super-empire of the invading nuls who have brought huge material benefits, organised (for their own profit) industry and agriculture on efficient and rational lines, and who see themselves as vastly superior to the ‘natives’. To the nuls, humanity is “brutal, barbaric and morally inferior”: part of the excuse for colonialism. In Christopher’s trilogy (indebted, of course, to Wells), the invaders’ condition humans to be servants or pets. The teenage protagonists become part of a resistance movement in a straightforward replay of colonial history (another important reading of the novel, of course, is that of teenage resistance to the enforced conventions of the adult world). Seymore has interesting things to say about the difference between Christopher’s original and the BBC adaptation,

especially about the fact that post-victory, human nationalist rivalries start to reappear. The inclusion of Baxter’s novel (part of his *Xeelee* sequence) is described as something which “might surprise” as it is not specifically about imperial history. Nevertheless, Baxter’s epic sweep and technological focus allows various aspects of invader/subject relationship to be dramatised: not specifically the reasons for invasion or even *what they do* but *how* the Qax gain and lose dominance on Earth. In the *Xeelee* universe, suggests Seymore, imperialism is a process that naturally accompanies the rise and fall of technological civilization – today’s subjects may be tomorrow’s dominators.

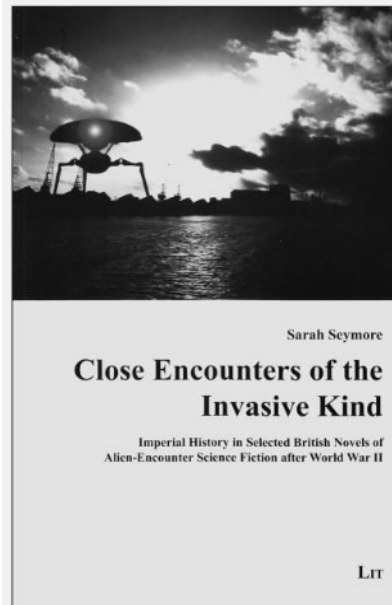
The second section describes “benevolent alien invasions”. Here are Arthur C Clarke’s *Childhood’s End* (1953) and Fred Hoyle and John Eliot’s *A For Andromeda* (1962) and *Andromeda Breakthrough* (1964). In Clarke’s novel, the narrative is one of uplift by a superior race: a paternalistic, civilising process leading to first a material utopia and then a transcendental sublimation. While the utopia’s sterility is discussed, it’s not clear here how far Seymore is recognising the deep vein of imperial anxiety (conscious or otherwise) which runs through the novel, rendering the term “benevolent” thoroughly ambiguous. The *Andromeda* novels (linked to the BBC TV series)

make an interesting point in which the invasion is “stirred up but never happens”. Otherness manifests through indirect influence and the creation of the artificial being *Andromeda/André* with a final twist which suggests that the human resistance to the alien plan is all part of the ineffable master-plan to ensure human maturity (which, if I read rightly, is an interesting have-cake-and-eat-it justification of the white man’s burden!) Both discussions here work fine in the context of a dissertation but for book publication cry out for expansion.

Thirdly and finally, the rather evasively-titled ‘Different Invasions’ section covers John Wyndham’s *The Kraken Wakes* (1953), Brian Aldiss’s *Non-Stop* (1958) and Gwyneth Jones’ *Aleutian* trilogy (1991–1997). These are novels whose SF formats (unexplained invaders, the pocket-universe and traders who kind of stumble into dominating the world) open up really interesting ways of talking about colonialism and Seymore begins to take advantage of this. Wyndham’s novel exploits

anxieties about the Cold War and the way invasion and colonialism can be denied by the subjects of such processes. Aldiss does not have actual *aliens* at all but “discusses central aspects of imperialism such as paternalism and responsibility for a subject people”. It was also written right in the middle of British decolonisation, just as Jones’s *White Queen*, *North Wind*, and *Phoenix Cafe* were written at a time when the more complex issues of ‘discovery’, ‘exploitation’ and ‘post-colonialism’ had developed a considerable theoretical literature. The essential ambiguity of the *Aleutians* and how “we humans” attempt to understand this ambiguity is central here. (We, of course, understand the *Aleutians* through science fiction, which tells us everything we know about aliens, and so we get most of what we know about them completely wrong: an ironic meta-reading which is rather missed here but Seymore rightly stresses that Jones’s novels are important and original works). Here, modern concepts like post-colonial guilt and cultural nostalgia given much more resonant and nuanced interpretations.

Some readers will, of course, distrust political interpretations of science fiction novels. I find it convincing and, while Seymore’s book is only a partial coverage of a wider topic, it makes up for it by bringing into the discussion a number of books only occasionally, if at all, looked in academic treatments of SF.







**The Eidolon by Libby McGugan (Solaris, 2013)****Reviewed by Liz Bourke**

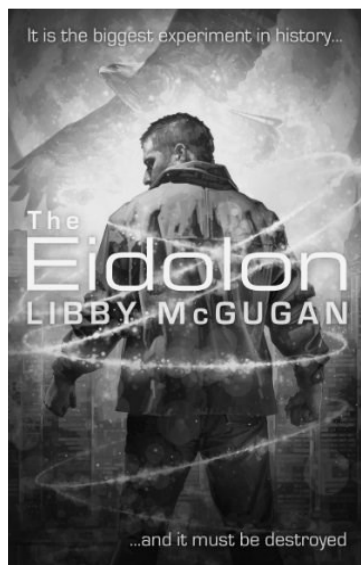
**T**he *Eidolon* is the debut novel of Libby McGugan, a Scottish physician who claims Joseph Campbell, Lao Tzu, Brian Greene, JK Rowling, Alasdair Fraser and Yoda for her inspirations. *The Eidolon* also happens to be one of the least engrossing books I have read in some time. And in many ways, the *oddest*. A confused mélange of espionage, science, and fantasy, it never quite succeeds in bringing its disparate elements together into a coherent, entertaining whole.

Robert Strong is a recently unemployed physicist. We first meet him in the opening pages, mountain-climbing with a friend in Tibet. His relationship with his long-term girlfriend, Cora, is on the rocks: she has been having visions of her dead sister, while Strong is a decided rationalist. After an accident during a mountain ascent, however, he gradually begins to see things at odds with his rationalism. "The energies are changing," a Tibetan monk tells him. "They are shifting between the worlds."

Returning to the UK, Strong mopes about, lamenting his unemployed state and his failed relationship, and seeing the occasional dead person. (Not, of course, that Strong believes he is actually seeing dead people.) After an interminable thirty pages of this - it seems much longer - he receives a job offer from a mysterious benefactor: a hundred thousand pounds for a week's work. There is, of course, a catch: the job is to sabotage the latest set of tests at the Large Hadron Collider at CERN. Strong's mysterious benefactor, Victor Amos, provides him with compelling evidence that these tests pose a significant risk to human life on Earth. Once he reaches CERN, however, Strong is plagued by second thoughts. And visions of Cora's dead sister. And drama involving the father whom he had long *believed* dead.

When a group of mystical death-transcending dead people who call themselves Eidolons reveal themselves to him, and reveal that Victor Amos is nothing like as benevolent as he presented himself, Strong is forced to work with *metaphysics* as well as physics, and oppose an ancient evil that wants to create hell on earth.

Written in the first-person present-tense, *The Eidolon* involves a lot of talking-head exposition of physics, to say nothing of the similar way in which the metaphysics of death in *The Eidolon* is communicated to the reader. Robert Strong comes across as a boring, unpleasant, self-involved little man, inclined to critique the appearance of airport staff - "Do you need a chisel to take off your make-up at night?" he thinks, at one point - and judge the people around him poorly, whose ultimate acquisition of superpowers and a spine seems remarkably unearned. He is assisted in this transition by the Eidolon Sattva, who initiates Strong into the ways of the Eidolons and dispenses platitudes like this: "The coin of grief has two sides," says Sattva. "On one is the pain that will lessen but never quite leave you. On the other, the knowing that the one you love is home."



The final-page twist is a reveal worthy of *The Sixth Sense*. Provided, that is, that *The Sixth Sense*'s twist had been telegraphed well in advance. McGugan's novel opens and closes with a series of dull, grinding clunks rather than anything like a bang. In all honesty, I can't recommend it.

**The Ballad of Halo Jones by Alan Moore and Ian Gibson (2000 AD Graphic Novels, 2013)****Reviewed by Tony Jones**

**T**he *Ballad of Halo Jones* is a black and white graphic novel collecting together comic strips originally published in 2000AD in the mid-Eighties. Even if comics are not your particular field of interest, you probably know that the writer, Alan Moore, as creator of *V For Vendetta* and *The Watchman*. Ian Gibson is one of 2000AD's most respected artists.

Halo Jones is the most unlikely of comic strip protagonists: she is everywoman, unhappy with her lot and forever seeking more against a backdrop of the far future. At this point, 2000AD was known for *Judge Dredd*, Genetic Infantryman *Rogue Trooper* and barbarian fantasy *Slaine*. The magazine was becoming more experimental but how would a character like Jones fit with the readership?

She first appeared in July 1984 and ran for 10 weeks in the story that would become Book 1 of this volume before reappearing in February 1985 for Book 2. My own consumption of 2000AD started around then and I remember that *The Ballad of Halo Jones* was initially seen as controversial for reasons that are at the heart of who she is. She was ordinary: no super powers, no agenda, no alien origin. Ordinary that is by the standards of a suburb of 50<sup>th</sup> Century Manhattan full of the unemployed. By this time 2000AD fans had well-defined female heroes such as Judge Anderson in *Judge Dredd*, so who would want to read about a woman with no job, who hangs around with her friends

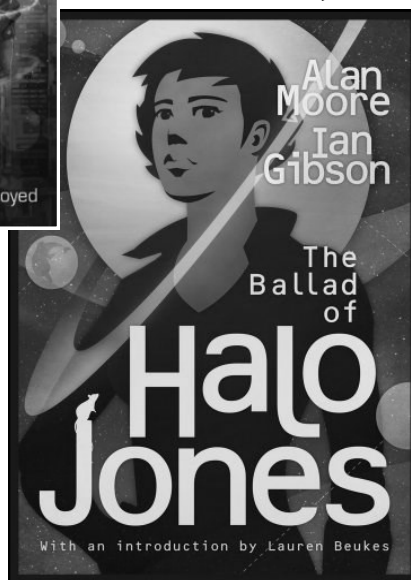
and for whom a trip to the shops is a major event? The answer was almost everybody.

Jones acts as our eyes and ears in the deep future; every page is full of clever dialogue, subtle back-story and wonderfully realised drawings. She does eventually get away from Earth and spends Book 2 as a hostess on the starship Clara Pandey. Here she brushes almost incidentally with major galactic events though ends up alone in a bar on a distant planet, unemployed again. Upping the action, Book 3 finds *Jones* serving as a soldier in a war

that Earth eventually loses. She survives and, at the end, sends her lover, the evil General Cannibal, to his death. She flies off to live the rest of her life and we can't help but wonder what happened next.

There were meant to be six more books but what we have are these 200 odd pages of Halo Jones's life, told with Dickensian skill and full of characters that seem wonderful and brutal to us but are just part of everyday life to her.

*The Ballad of Halo Jones* has been re-published in advance of its thirtieth anniversary. I'm certainly pleased - I lost my own copy some years ago. Halo Jones, welcome back!



**Terra by Mitch Benn (Gollancz, 2013)**

Reviewed by Alison Page

*"It is a very different planet from this one. We have no death. No gravity. And a different-shaped gear stick on the Mini Metro."*

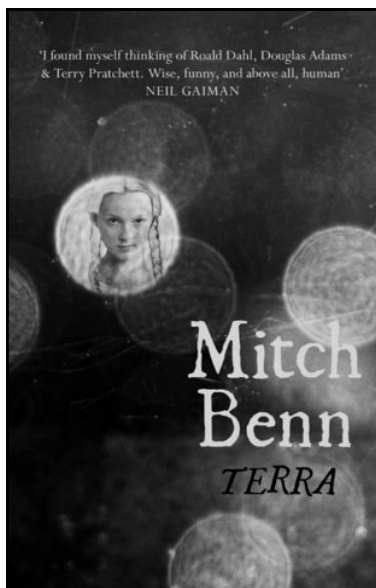
(Rowan Atkinson 'Zak the Alien', *Not the Nine O'Clock News*)

**T**erra is a gentle parody-SF novel by Mitch Benn, singer and songwriter on Radio 4's *The Now Show*. It is a quick read. It is suitable for children. It is a kind-hearted book. It is not particularly funny or satirical. It's not really science fiction either.

At the start of the book, an earth baby is accidentally abducted by a UFO. Given the name Terra by her adoptive father, she is brought up on Fnrr, the home-world of the familiar big-eyed grey aliens. Life on Fnrr is stolidly predictable and run by passive-aggressive middlebrow intellectuals. In other words, Fnrr is Radio 4 in Space. Terra, with her unique abilities to sing and to tell funny little stories, helps to improve their afternoon schedule, er, civilisation.

This is comedy SF in the least demanding sense of both those terms. Life on Fnrr is about as alien as the Jetsons. All objects are familiar from everyday life, but with slightly unusual colours. The iPads are called slates on this planet. Secondary school is called a Lyceum. No doubt the gear sticks are of unusual shape. The action takes place on an island with a fading scientific tradition, just off a continent threatened by fascists.

The writing is amusing rather than hilarious: "Lbbp consulted the clock; it was mauve. Time to get moving." The wash of unfunny jokes is soothing. The hour is mauve. We know where we are. We are tuning in to a program we like. We are reading a familiar genre. Terra goes to Lyceum at age 11. She



stands out because of her notorious origins. Perhaps she will change the world. Some of the other pupils resent her. Her best friends might as well be called Hermione and Ron.

Mitch Benn is an humane and competent writer. The values he expresses are civilised. Female characters have equal standing to male. There is redemption, sacrifice and reconciliation. Emotions are developed and released, bringing tears to the eyes. Plot points are seeded and bear fruit in time. Only at the pivotal

moment of the story does Benn's narrative competence fail. The plausibility of the silly storyline is stretched too thin and it snaps. It snaps when we are asked to believe in the lightning-fast redemption of a genocidal fundamentalist. Perhaps that's just a stretch too far.

Benn is not Douglas Adams or Terry Pratchett. There is nothing here that will come back to you in another context because at last you have the words to name something that you were never able to see before, until some genius made a joke about it. But fairground rides like this have their place: when you get home from work and you just want something nice to read, written by someone like you.

**The Testimony by James Smythe (Blue Door, 2012)**

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

**T**he event dubbed The Broadcast is the moment when almost everyone in the world hears a sound akin to static but internally, mentally. Then a voice, always in English, saying 'My children' and, later, 'Do not be afraid'. No recording equipment captures The Broadcast. Opinion cites God, aliens, terrorists, foreign governments.

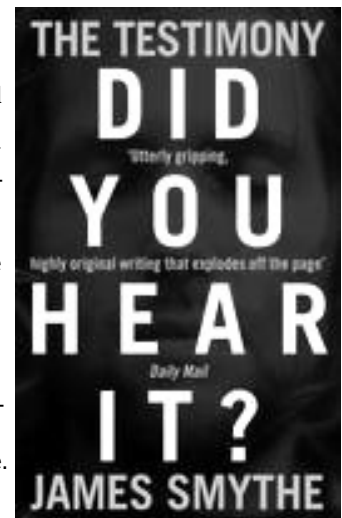
*The Testimony* follows the same oral history format as Max Brooks's *World War Z* to tell the story of a global crisis from multiple viewpoints: a London sales executive and a member of Parliament, a private military contractor, an imam in Leeds, in nun in Vatican City, a South African drug dealer, a Mormon farmer, an unemployed man in Moscow, a doctor in Bankipore, a professional gamer in Shanghai, the White House Chief of Staff, a political speech writer in Tel Aviv, a lawyer in Edinburgh, a postgraduate student in Marseilles and as many again.

Where Brooks painted himself into a corner by letting readers know from the onset that humanity survived the zombie holocaust, James Smythe far more successfully maintains suspense by beginning with a more original catalyst. Frightened people are dangerous and as Smythe cuts from character to character he builds a powerful sense of unease. There is violence, suicide, religious crisis and upheaval. The world edges towards war and there is still a final Broadcast to come.

Smythe establishes an interesting range of characters who are not just mouthpieces for the bigger picture but who have concerns of their own and tells a thoughtfully engaging story. This is because, unlike Brooks, he is not afraid to face the theological issues raised by the premise without painting those of various faiths as fools or straw men. He depicts people from Catholics to Muslims to Mormons to atheists and others as diverse human beings, not merely as avatars of metaphysical viewpoints. He is also, again unlike Brooks, not afraid to explore the grief of those characters bereft by escalating events, particularly in following the harrowing path of family man Phil Gossard. Equally, one of the most intriguing threads of the story chronicles a handful of that tiny minority of humanity who do not hear The Broadcast and their attempts to reach each other as the global travel infrastructure deteriorates.

Ultimately Smythe is faced with either explaining his premise and almost certainly disappointing the reader (the solution to a mystery is rarely as rewarding as the enigma itself) or maintaining an unresolved pseudo-history to the end and risking the novel being no more than a thought experiment bereft of any solid foundation. I won't tell you which course he takes but *The Testimony*, for all its thoughtfulness and narrative grip, left me wanting a more satisfying book than Smythe was able to provide.

I would still recommend you read his work though. From the claustrophobic 'two character, one apartment' pressure cooker of *The Machine* to the global scope of *The Testimony*, Smythe is an unpredictable and ambitious novelist with a refreshing commitment not to repeat himself.



*The Lowest Heaven*, edited by Jared Shurin (Jurassic London, 2013)

Reviewed by Dan Hartland

Two messages emerge from *The Lowest Heaven*, an anthology of seventeen short stories about our solar system published in collaboration with the National Maritime Museum's *Visions of the Universe* exhibition: the first is that contemporary literary science fiction is a pessimistic beast; the second is that the volume's publisher, Jurassic London, has in a relatively short amount of time managed to become one of the UK's most dynamic and best-connected small presses.

*The Lowest Heaven* boasts an unusually starry list of contributors: Alastair Reynolds, Adam Roberts, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Mark Charan Newton, Lavie Tidhar, Kameron Hurley and James Smythe are all present and correct (and, sadly, representative in gender distribution of the hobbled state of current British SF publishing). Had Jurassic contented themselves merely with this roster of big guns, they would have done well. But alongside these significant space has been given to writers whose names might not sell so many copies, but whose work stands easily in august company: for instance, EJ Swift, Sophia McDougall and Esther Saxey all contribute stand-out tales.

Indeed, the volume's consistency is its chief characteristic. McDougall kicks things off with 'Golden Apple', a moving story inspired by the sun, in which two parents go to extreme lengths to save their daughter, Daisy, who is wasting away with an illness no doctor can diagnose. In an isolated laboratory, scientists have succeeded in solidifying sunlight and placing it within a container; the desperate parents hold up the lab with a fake gun and attempt to cure their daughter with an infusion of pure sunlight. The tenderness with which McDougall paints the couple's devotion to their offspring and the economy with which she draws their own attenuated relationship is matched by the evocative weirdness of the story's conclusion: "I sat in the living room and stared at Daisy's silhouette, imprinted on the glad she'd walked through in solid light."

This gently subversive tone – or, if you like, this preference for knowingly unlikely science – is shared by several of *The Lowest Heaven's* stories. In Adam Roberts's 'An Account of a Voyage ...', an 18th Century Europe touched by the technologies of a mysterious race of moon-dwellers gropes towards a partial understanding of its uses and we witness a moonwalk undertaken whilst the astronaut is clad in Indian rubber ("to stand still was to freeze, so I be-stirr'd myself to motion, tho' it hurt ever bone in me to do so"); in Grimwood's 'The Jupiter Files', a dog-headed debt-collector from the future requires a Chandleresque gumshoe to make good on a loan given to his distant ancestors ("the borrowers have just chosen an inverse interest model"); and in Archie Black's 'Ashen Light', a settlement on 24<sup>th</sup> Century Venus resembles almost to the letter the Holcomb of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* ("A true-crime book, *For Love Alone*, [was] written by a notorious Venusian novelist seven years after the murders"). There are a number of rather successful *jeux d'esprit* underway in these pages and *The Lowest Heaven* gathers an energy and charisma from them.

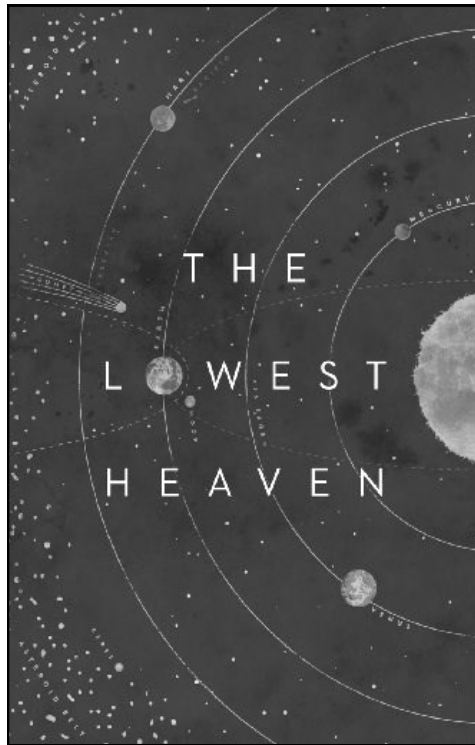
These stories' recurrent interest in Earth's past and in alternative science is, however, partly a function of the collection's realistic assessment of our solar system's essential inhospitability. The stories' authors are struggling to find ways of writing about nearby spatial bodies which do not involve characters flying them. Admittedly, David Bryher's 'From This Day Forward' features two lovers preparing to leave the solar system in a long-haul spacecraft (though both men agree to be cloned as a means of not removing the value of their labour from human space); meanwhile, Kameron Hurley's 'Enyo-Enyo' – which shares, in a not entirely favourable comparison, a hard-bitten, morally ambiguous female protagonist with her *Bel Dame Apocrypha* series – takes place after an interstellar war and on a vessel resembling something we might find in a Joe Haldeman story. But, by and large, this sort of future – the one long imagined by writers such as Ray Bradbury, who inevitably appears in Simon Morde's Mars story (though as a sort of imaginary friend to an explorer who never sets foot on the red planet) – is not the characteristic milieu of *The Lowest Heaven*.

Rather, there is an interest in how the solar system would *change* any humans bold or desperate enough to venture into it. In 'A Map of Mercury', Alastair Reynolds posits a cyborg art enclave split in two between those half-humans happy with their adaptations and those insistent that the only consistent approach is to become entirely other: "What use are lungs and a heart, on Mercury? What use is a digestive system? What use is meat?" In Kaaron Warren's 'Air, Water and the Grove', a spacecraft returning from Saturn brings a substance

which "felt like rain but [...] solid" and which ensures a change not just in human psychology and physiology but in culture: "I used to talk about Saturn, bound with woollen strips beneath Rome to stop him leaving, unbound only during Saturnalia. I think he is with us now, unbound because we worship him with our dullness, our melancholy." In 'Only Human', Lavie Tidhar lists "humans, robots, Others, Martian Reborn, tentacle junkies, followers of Ogko" as some of the denizens of his own future solar system.

It goes on. When, in Esther Saxey's 'Uranus', a Victorian homosexual sees the solar system via astral projection, he professes to perceive "things too far from my own experience for me to understand them". Most pointedly, at the close of James Smythe's post-apocalyptic 'The Grand Tour', the Voyager probe returns with a transformative message from an alien species ("Is it still a body if there is no form?"). The solar system does not admit us.

All of which is in stark contrast to the illustrations provided by Royal Museums Greenwich, which hark from a Victorian age of optimism, in which astronomical wall hangings were produced for working men's clubs, the heavens mapped for the edification of the human race that might inherit them. Of course, this is deliberate and adds to the lively intelligence that characterises what emerges as an entertainingly ambivalent volume. As a snapshot of a literary slice of the science fiction fraternity, then, *The Lowest Heaven* is heartening, enjoyable and substantial; the National Maritime Museum, however, might worry it will put people off stargazing for life.



***A History Of The Future In 100 Objects* by Adrian Hon (Skyhook, 2013)**

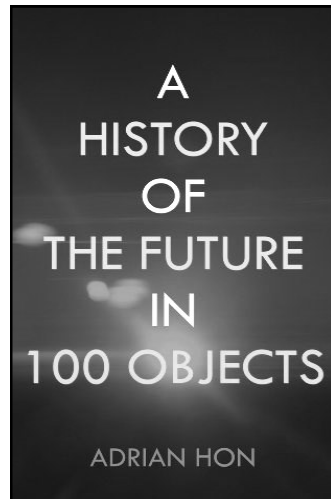
Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Despite its idiosyncratic form - the physical edition claims to be a collection of “speculative essays” but the ebook asserts it’s a novel - there’s something reassuringly nostalgic about Adrian Hon’s first book. Its stately march through the next seventy years of our history recalls a more confident era of SF, when it was taken as read that writers could and should offer a roadmap. And Hon has been diligently polymathic. Some of his essays/stories are elegant and moving, others sketchy or formulaic, but each of the 100 objects feels not just extrapolated but impressively *integrated*: contributing to one or more strands of an argument that the next century won’t be nearly as bad as we’re currently inclined to think. Or will it?

Certainly the dominant tone is a combination of Establishment Patrician - much like the BBC Radio 4 series that inspired the book - and confident technophilia, thankful to be living in more enlightened times. The framing of the first object is typical: “What fascinates us today about ankle monitors is how they represent the dilemmas and compromises that were typical of the early 21st century.” A raft of objects indicate social advancements - introduction of basic minimum income, inclusion of poly-amorous relationships in marriage, radical democratic accountability - while others seem to promise that increased digital connectivity can enable humbling humanitarian projects and astonishing creativity (games seem to be the century’s defining artform). By the end of the *History* humanity is moving out into the solar system, terraforming Mars and Venus (with a nod to Kim Stanley Robinson: “Professor Russell from the Echus Overlook Institute” makes an appearance as a talking head), cooking up asteroid biomes.

There are dark moments. In 2052, with 50,000 people living in orbit, a runaway debris cascade kills 700, cripples infrastructure and causes a global recession. The next year, there is a financial crash (regulations devised during the late teens having been “whittled away”). And there are a few objects that are directly unpleasant - stigmatisation and isolation of “the downvoted” being perhaps the most striking. Yet often, negative consequences feel minimised or absent. What the closing chapters of the *History* hint, however, is that we are meant to notice this lack.

What might make this a novel is that is an *authored* book and its selections only claim to be a version of history. I think we are given space to disagree with the curator. Perhaps the most striking example of his biases is the treatment of climate change. Barely mentioned for most of the *History*, it moves centre stage sharply in 2058, when “The Melt Event” raises sea levels 45cm in a year. We are two-thirds of the way through the book’s timeline, yet this is object 93, and so suddenly, instead of three or four objects per year, we have a couple per decade, mostly involving the adventures of posthumans off-Earth; and the societal-historical “us” is eroded by increased first-person editorialising. It’s clear that our home is in crisis. It’s also clear that to our guide, that’s not the interesting story. But it’s the one I wonder about.



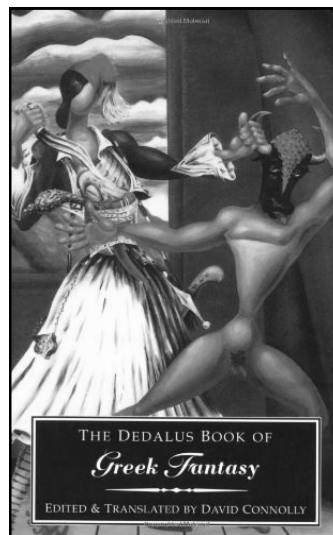
***The Dedalus Book of Modern Greek Fantasy*, edited and translated by David Connolly (Dedalus, 2004)**

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

Fantasy as a dedicated genre didn’t really exist in Greece till very recently. Many of the stories gathered here, dating from the 19th Century to the turn of the 21st, are by mainstream literary authors, including the major poet Constantine Cavafy and the arch-surrealist Andreas Embirikos. Recent years have seen the publication of several Greek anthologies of fantasy and science fiction, thanks mainly to the efforts of editor Makis Panorios. David Connolly’s selections draw heavily but not exclusively from Panorios’s anthologies. It’s to Connolly’s credit as a translator that all thirty stories come through in engaging and well-crafted English prose.

Free of the constraints of genre expectation - except perhaps Dedalus’s taste for ‘distorted reality’ - the stories are extremely diverse. They range from the straightforward retelling of folktale in Emmanouil Roïdis’s ‘Blossom’, through the absurdist surrealism of Nano Valaoritis’s ‘The Daily Myth or The Headless Man’, the exotic traveller’s yarn of Fotis Kontoglou in ‘Pedro Cazas’ and the occultism of Tassos Rousos’s ‘The Last Alchemist’, to dystopian science fiction in Alexandros Schinas’s ‘The Rulers’. Heroic fantasy is conspicuous by its absence. The sequencing of the stories by date exposes an increasing interest in science fiction in later work.

One of the delights of imaginative fiction written in other languages is the displacement of default Anglocentric perspective. In Theodoros Grigoriadis’s ‘Theocles’ the research project to make contact with intelligent beings elsewhere in the galaxy is conducted not by American but by Greek scientists and the person chosen to leave earth to meet them is, too, a Greek. Andreas Lascaratos’s traveller in ‘Journey to the Planet Jupiter’ is relieved to discover the Jovians speak Greek. And in ‘Westminster’ Yorgos Theotokas exoticises the London Underground as a locus of gothic nightmare where the trains never stop and are operated by people who are completely mad.



Given the diversity of stories, it’s hard to make generalisations. Surrealism caught on strongly in Greek literature and there’s plenty of evidence of that in this book. Here’s a snippet from Aris Sfakianakis in ‘It Was Already Past Midnight’:

“Floating in the white sauce in place of mussels were human lips ... Moreover, the lips were painted and appeared to be alive as they slowly opened and closed, emitting tiny indeterminate sounds, rather like sighs.”

Quite often the tone is urbane jaunty. This, for example, is the opening of

‘A Day Like Any Other’ by Tassos Leivaditis: “Waking up fully dressed in bed, in a room you’ve never seen before, is, of course, a bad omen for the day about to begin. But not being able to remember how you came to be in this unknown house is something of a nightmare.” That there’s a tendency for women to be presented in strongly sexualised ways may not be the sin of sins but the fact that all thirty authors in the book are men strongly suggests some scope - I suspect in Greek fantasy as a whole - for redressing the balance on that score.

***Gods & Monsters: Unclean Spirits* (Abaddon Books, 2013) and *The Blue Blazes* (Angry Robot, 2013) by Chuck Wendig**

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

**“B**eware, there is an evil presence in the world.” This quotation, attributed to St. John the Devine, would make a suitable blurb for both *Unclean Spirits* and *The Blue Blazes*. I’d only known Chuck Wendig from seeing his name cited in *SFX* and *Locus* before these books came to me for review. Abaddon’s publicity bumf tells us that Wendig is a novelist, screenwriter and self-described penmonkey and he has been pretty prolific since he started writing genre fiction. Abaddon have already published his *Double Dead* (2011) as part of their *Tomes Of The Dead* series and *Angry Robot* have published his *Miriam Black* novels, *Blackbirds* (2012), *Mockingbird* (2012) and *The Cormorant* (forthcoming 2013). He has also written non-fiction including *500 Ways To Be A Better Writer* (Nook Books, 2011).

It took me more than fifty pages to get into *Unclean Spirits*, part of Abaddon’s new *Gods & Monsters* shared world series, in which “the gods are all real, and *all here*” (Pat Kelleher is due to write the next installment, *Drag Hunt*). Even the bits that did make sense made no sense to me – if you know what I mean because I sure don’t. (I have this possibly paranoid thought that Wendig has actually planned it this way.) This is the opening paragraph: “Life, sliced into tiny moments. Cason Cole beneath a shattered door. Smells: eggy gunpowder smoke, rose petals, sweat, sex. Sounds: someone screaming. Another someone gurgling. A high-pitched *eeeeeeeeee* in the deep of Cason’s ear.” Then, just as I was about to give up the reviewing ghost, a synaptic relay went ‘click!’ in my van Vogtian double-brain (or whatever) and I quickly read all the way through to the very end.

Mystery-man Cason Cole must fight to save his wife and child from indentured and infernal slavery having incurred the wrath of Nergal, the Mesopotamian God of Death, whose emblem was a cock – and I don’t mean the kind that goes cockadoodledoo! Other Google-able gods include Coyote, Dagba, Cernunnos and Erinyes, the Fury, while Cannibal Corpse and Shorn Scalp live down to their monstrous monikers. Frank the Freak, formerly known as Frankie ‘Pretty Boy’ Polcyn, is also one of the monsters – or is he? As a writing workman for Abaddon, Wendig has done a whole lot more than just being worthy of his hire.

Turning to *The Blue Blazes*, the title is a reference to the mineral Cerulean which runs through the prehistoric schist of the Great Below. In its narcotic form it is a sort of woad-wage drug where users “smudge some of the blue powder on the temples to bring on effects that include: preternatural strength, preternatural toughness, as well as a wiping away of the illusions that keep mortal man from seeing the truth of the denizens of the Underworld.” But the hangovers are horrendous!

“It’s quite rare and fetches a high price among those who know of its existence. The Organization controls Cerulean. Or, at least, they think they do.” So say the Journals of John Atticus Oakes, Cartographer of the Great Below.

That’s enough deep-background stuff for this reviewer but as luck would have it, Wendig has given his 140-character story pitch:

“Mookie Pearl and his rebellious daughter stand at the crux between the criminal underworld.”

Or, even shorter:

“MAN AND GIRL DO CRAZY OCCULT DRUGS AND PUNCH MONSTERS BELOW THE STREETS OF MANHATTAN.”

Or, even shorter:

“MAN EATS MEAT, FIGHTS HELL.”

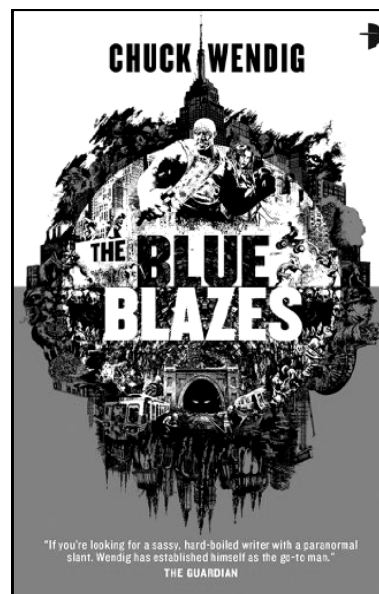
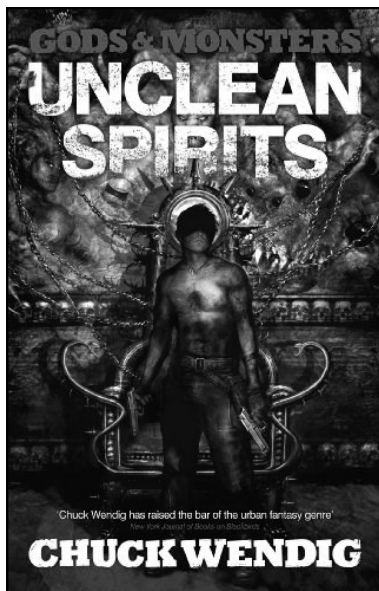
Cason Cole is a mere stripling when set beside Mookie Pearl. He’s “built like a brick shithouse made of a hundred brick shithouses”. In the (uncredited) cover illustration, Mookie Pearl resembles a Bizarro version of Doc Savage, wielding his mighty blood-stained chopper (compare and contrast with Clint Langley’s relatively sedate artwork for *Unclean Spirits*). Mookie’s beautiful brunette-y daughter, Nora, also features – sketchily – on the front cover but she’s more like Catwoman gone feral than Patricia Savage, the Man of Bronze’s loyal and helpful cousin. It makes for a fraught, hard-to-explain family

relationship: Orpheus and Eurydice in the Underworld they sure as Hellboy ain’t. I’d like to see Wendig collaborate with Samuel R Delany on a novel entitled *The Einstein Evisceration* but that’s probably just me being silly.

If there’s one thing that Mookie can’t stand it is goblins: “He hates gobbos. *Hates them*. Sees what they’ve done. What they can do. They have nothing to believe in . . . They’re awful creatures with no place in this world. Above or below.” The combined monster-to-

human ratio in *Spirits* and *Blazes* is inordinately high which makes for some of the best Good outnumbered against Evil action scenes I’ve read in who knows how long. Cason Cole is a good man forced to do bad things for the sake of other good people. For an ex-prizefighter, he’s a bit on the vincible side but then the odds are seldom in his favour. Mookie Pearl, however, seems like a Big Thicky Thug to me – I couldn’t care less about him or his diabolical daughter. I’d have rather learned more about John Atticus Oakes, an intrepid explorer who deserves a novel of his own.

Truth to tell, I could have done with less ultra-violence and much more stylistic light and shade. Wendig might well acquaint Cole and the Pearls with these wise words: “Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.” But they’d probably say “Oh no, not Nietzsche!” before getting right back into the fight.

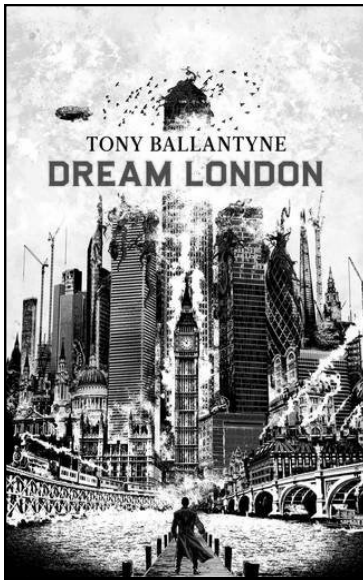




*Dream London* by Tony Ballantyne (Solaris Books, 2013)  
Reviewed by Donna Scott

**D**ream London used to be London until the changes started happening. The tube lines have receded, the parks have disappeared and TS Eliot's *The Wasteland* has cheered up. Very few people willingly enter into Dream London and no one can leave.

Captain Jim Wedderburn – the protagonist of Tony Ballantyne's first fantasy novel – is the type of man to describe himself in the third person. He's "a rogue" who "drinks and whores [...] fights and steals" and is "afraid of nothing". He is a respected man about town; a flamboyant dresser, admired by men and adored by the ladies who whore for him in exchange for "candy", who is keen to expand his pimping business and grow in importance. Rival bosses, the Daddio and the Cartel, are trying to get Wedderburn to work for them and the outside world needs



a hero on the inside to help destroy the city before the changes spread. But James Wedderburn is not so confident beneath his bluster and, like everyone else, would just like to be able to escape the city before he forgets himself entirely.

James Wedderburn was an ex-soldier turned bouncer for a gentleman's club; now the seedy underworld consumes his environment as London takes retrograde steps to becoming a city where women have no career choice but prostitution, dress is a mix of *Carry On* and

Victoriana and technology and education are in reverse. The past is not romanticised here. In the wharf, the Angel Tower grows taller each day but could this be the source of the corruption and what does it all mean?

Readers of Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation Of Dreams* will spot the intentional obviousness of Dream London's psychosexual landscape: the tube archways reduce to "sphincters"; Wedderburn inhabits a purple domed tower called "Belltower End"; the growing Angel Tower is the biggest phallic symbol of all. Initially revelling in a city that suits him down to the ground, Wedderburn is eventually overwhelmed by the "obscene" over-sexualisation that robs his friends of their will to fight. However, his is not a sympathetic character and despite a city-full of women who would willingly whore for or sleep with him, he can't help but speculate on sensible school-girl Anna's potential to earn for him. Corrupt innocence is, however, most distinctly embodied in Honey Peppers – a foul-mouthed little girl who works as Quantifier for the Daddio and repeatedly threatens Wedderburn with acts of sexual violence.

*Dream London* is a Bretonesque landscape for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and, like the *Surrealist Manifesto*, is full of absurdism, humour and wit. But whereas André Breton's manifesto proposed psychic automatism (where reason and morality do not influence thought) as a good thing, Ballantyne's novel offers a complex yet entertaining counter-argument. It's compelling, if not entirely comfortable reading, which paints the dream landscape vividly whilst keeping one sure foot on the ground.

*The Rook* by Daniel O'Malley (Head of Zeus, 2013)  
Reviewed by Martin McGrath

**D**aniel O'Malley's first novel, *The Rook*, won the 2012 Aurealis Award for best SF Novel published by an Australian and comes laden with praise from writers like Charlaine Harris, Charles Yu and Lev Grossman. I found it hard to understand why.

*The Rook* is the story of Myfanwy Thomas, holder of the eponymous title in the secret Checquy – an ancient agency of the British government that rolls up the roles of GCHQ, the SAS, MI5, MI6 and more and clobbers anything supernatural that threatens the interests of the British state. The story begins as Myfanwy comes to in an unnamed London park. She has no memories. Her only clue about who she is and what has happened is a letter in her pocket – written by herself. The story that unfolds is of treachery in the heart of the Checquy and the return of a long-feared (Belgian) threat determined to have revenge for a centuries-old humiliation.

O'Malley is not aspiring to high art. *The Rook* seeks to be an action-driven, lightly comic adventure. This is a noble enough aim. It is too easy to dismiss the craft required to construct a tightly told story that propels the reader through the text. The art of comedy is even more frequently overlooked but even more difficult to write. What each of us finds funny is an intensely personal sensibility but good comedy also touches some universal nerve.

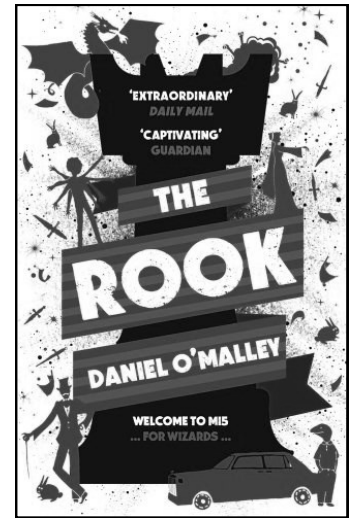
Even judging it on its own terms, however, *The Rook* fails.

Amnesia is a dull, well-worn trick for an author to play on his protagonist but that doesn't mean the results couldn't have added something to this story. What is inexplicable is that O'Malley, having introduced this tired trope, throws it away by giving Myfanwy a giant folder full of information on her history. He thus instantly dissipates most of the dramatic possibilities in his protagonist's awkward position and, more egregiously, he also destroys any chance that his story will develop the velocity essential in this type of book. The folder becomes the pretext for long, long passages of infodumping – much of which should have been excised to leave a leaner, more exciting novel.

Another problem is the fact that the novel lacks any sense of physical place. Locations are sketched in – London, Bath, Reading, a Welsh valley, a Scottish castle – but they are only names and there is no indication that the author knows or cares what these places are really like. One major piece of action takes place around Reading police station, which we learn is a large building with wooden doors that have windows and steps to the front door. In the age of Google Maps, there is no excuse for such vagueness.

As for the comedy, I laughed out loud once on page 140 at a line about men in hats. Others may have better luck, though it will depend on whether you find the name Myfanwy funny.

In his acknowledgments, O'Malley thanks his "editrix" for the entertaining debates "such as what color of fungus was funnier" (they went with purple) but I think both author and reader would have been better served by a more ruthless approach with the red pen.



# In Memoriam

*Patricia Anthony (1947-2013), author.*

*Iain Banks (1954-2013), author.*

*Bob Booth (1947-2013), author, convention organiser.*

*Gary Brandner (1933-2013), author.*

*Michael Burgess (1948-2013), author, critic.*

*Charles Chilton (1917-2013), author.*

*Tom Clancy (1947-2013), author.*

*Ann Crispin (1950-2013), author, Writer Beware co-founder.*

*Mick Farren (1943-2013), author, musician.*

*Bobbie DuFault (1958-2013), fan.*

*Jan Howart Finder (1939-2013), editor, fan.*

*Richard E. Geis (1927-2013), fanzine publisher.*

*Parke Godwin (1929-2013), author.*

*Richard Griffiths (1947-2013), actor.*

*Ray Harryhausen (1920-2013), visual effects pioneer.*

*Rick Hautala (1949-2013), author.*

*James Herbert (1948-2013), author.*

*Bernard Horsfall (1930-2013), actor.*

*Anne Jordan (1943-2013), author.*

*Joel Lane (1963-2013), author.*

*Ed Lauter (1938-2013), actor.*

*Elmore Leonard (1925-2013), author.*

*Dan McCarthy (1934-2013), fan.*

*Doris Lessing (1919-2013), author, Nobel Prize winner.*

*Douglas R. Mason (1918-2013), author.*

*Barbara Mertz (1927-2013), author.*

*Richard Matheson (1926-2013), author.*

*Robert Morales (1958-2013), author.*

*Deborah J. Miller (1963-2013), author, David Gemmell Legend Award founder.*

*Philip Nutman (1963-2013), author.*

*Andrew J. Offutt (1934-2013), author, editor.*

*Daniel Pearlman (1935-2013), author.*

*Frederick Pohl (1919-2013), author.*

*Robin Sachs (1951-2007), actor.*

*Elliot K. Shorter (1939-2013), editor, fan.*

*David B. Silva (1950-2013), editor.*

*Jack Vance (1916-2013), author.*

*Michael Waite (1936-2013), fanzine publisher.*

*Paul Williams (1948-2013), journalist.*

*Colin Wilson (1931-2013), author.*