Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

Chinese Sf and Fandom

Eric Frank Russell and Race

Gareth L. Powell Interviewed

Plus Moonbases, Webcomics, and more...

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Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

ARTICLES

RECURRENT

THE BSFA REVIEW

In this issue, Dan Hartland visits *The Southern Reaches*, Martin McGrath looks for *Gemsign*, Shaun Green wants to *Get Katja*, and Liz Bourke remains in *This Just City*. Meanwhile, Gary Dalkin climbs the *City of Stairs*, L J Hurst considers it a *City of Endless Night*, Sandra Underman is struck with *Terror and Wonder*, and Lynne Bispham is just wondering why she only has *Half A King* while L J Hurst has *The Complete Uncle*....

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Vector

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Torque Control

It's been a year (on the calendar, if not in number of issues: more on that later) since I took over this editorship, I don't really know where that year has gone. 2014, despite being packed with all sorts of amazing and terrifying things, seems to have short-changed me on the number of days. It's the only explanation *I* can think of. I've really enjoyed the experience of editing the journal and collaborating with the rest of the BSFA and *Vector* team, but I can't deny it's been hard work.

You see, aside from editorial tasks, I'm writing my Ph.D thesis at the moment. To pay for that (and still make rent) I have a part-time job at a certain chain bookshop. Along with writing papers for conferences and organising my own annual Current Research in Speculative Fiction conference (and indeed a second conference this year on Alternate History – because I'm a glutton for punishment), fitting everything in has been a challenge. This is partly why this issue of *Vector* is with you now, in early 2015, rather than late 2014 as had originally been intended. I apologise for that.

As my thesis approaches its endgame, and its word count looks intimidatingly undernourished, I need to refocus my energies; but fear not, I'm not pulling a Ninth Doctor on you. I'm learning too much (and enjoying myself whilst doing it) to cede this post. Instead, I've recruited a co-editor to share the load and responsibilities.

So, from next issue, *Vector* will be edited in part by me and in part by Anna McFarlane, who recently completed her own Ph.D at St. Andrews University on the science fiction novels of William Gibson. Anna's also currently editing a volume of scholarly essays on the works of Adam Roberts, so I feel confident that she's going to be an invaluable asset to the journal, and I hope you'll offer her the same encouragement and support that I've received over the last year.

All this means that if you were expecting to be holding the traditional "year in review" issue of *Vector* in your hands right now then fear not: it's still coming and we're going to pull out all the stops to get it to you sooner rather than later. Plus there are already some cracking articles being worked on which will hopefully make it a bumper issue.

Talking of articles. I cannot emphasise enough how helpful it is to have a choice of material to place in forthcoming issues. Please do not read *Vector* under the assumption you cannot contribute to its pages. We welcome submissions from all BSFA members whether seasoned professor looking to air out a new idea (or dust off an old one), postgraduates looking to cut their teeth on an easy publication (and let's face it, we're an easy publication compared to the fancy peer-reviewed scholarly journals of the University Presses – that's fine, every publication has its place). From authors looking to expand on their ideas, or share something they found interesting during their research, even to be interviewed about their work (see my interview with Gareth L. Powell in these very pages, and hopefully a forthcoming one with his co-Best Novel winner Ann Leckie in a future issue), to fans wanting to share their passion for the genre, or draw attention to a forgotten favourite author or text. And everyone inbetween! I (soon to be *we*) would much rather have to work with an article writer to get the tone and language right for *Vector* than never see the article in the first place. If in doubt, send us something. We don't bite.

This particular *Vector* takes us around the world, from an interview with Regina Kanyu Wang about sf fandom in China, then south to Australia from where Jacob Edwards writes an article about race in the stories of English author Eric Frank Russell, via Sunny Bristol and the aforementioned interview with BSFA Award winner Gareth L. Powell.

All four of our regular columns return, with Andy Sawyer unearthing a forgotten novel which is terrifying in more ways than one. Paul Kincaid goes animatronic over a short story by C.L Moore, and Stephen Baxter takes us on a tour of moonbases through the ages. Finally, Laura Sneddon gives us the lowdown on some of the webcomics that have caught her eye (and having followed up on them, you really need to visit some of these web pages, the comics look even better in full colour and as Laura points out, some of them have moving elements which really add to the narratives).

On top of all that we've got the BSFA Review, edited by Martin Petto, bringing us a cross section of the current sf hitting the shelves of your local bookshop (chain or otherwise).

I hope you'll agree that's not half bad, and I'm optimistic that 2015 will go on to be *even* better. After all, two heads are better than one…

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Glyn Morgan
Features Editor

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An Interview with **Regina Kanyu Wang** Talking About Chinese Sf and Fandom

Regina Kanyu Wang interviewed by David Gullen

I met Regina at EuroCon in Dublin. She was also at LonCon3 as part of the Beijing WorldCon bid team. Regina was on a couple panels at EuroCon, and later on we were part of a group that collected at the bar and chatted into the evening. I asked Regina which mythic heroes existed in Chinese culture, equivalent to, say, King Arthur or Robin Hood. She reminded us of what we already knew – the Monkey King (Sun Wukong) – and also told us a story of a white serpent that fell in love and wished to be human. The differences and similarities to our own stories were fascinating and left me wanting to know more. I also asked Regina if she'd be willing to do this interview, and I'm happy to say she agreed immediately.

David Gullen: Thank you again for agreeing to answer a few questions about Chinese sf and fandom. First, please tell us a little about yourself, and how you became involved with clubs and conventions.

Regina Kanyu Wang: Well, my name is Wang Kanyu in Chinese and to make it easier for my foreign friends, I chose the western name Regina for myself. I live in Shanghai.

I have been reading science fiction, and later on fantasy, since primary school but I couldn't find many friends who share the same interest with me before I entered university. I joined the university science fiction club as soon as I found it. At that time, our club was small and we usually went to the neighbouring university to attend their events. Then we got the idea of founding an association of university sf clubs and holding a Shanghai Science Fiction and Fantasy Festival annually.

Later on, I met Finnish sf fans as well as scholars in my university and started to have contact with the Finnish fandom. That's how I managed to attend Finncon 2013 and visit the Nordic and Baltic fandoms last year. And this year, to meet more friends, I attended Loncon3 and Shamrokon.

DG: I understand there was an earlier sf movement towards the end of the Qing dynasty (Late 19th & early 20th century). Can you explain a little about the history of sf in China?

RKW: You are very knowledgeable! Yes, in the Late Qing dynasty, science fiction was introduced into China as a way to prosper the country. Literature has been regarded as something to carry social responsibilities in China for a long time. Learning advanced science as well as democracy from the west was the basic role that science fiction was supposed to play at that time. Most of the western sf translated into Chinese was kind of rewritten.

After the PRC (People's Republic of China) was established, the first wave of modern Chinese sf came in Late 1950s. During that period, the stories were mostly optimistic and limited.

Then came the Cultural Revolution, leaving little space for science fiction. After late 1970s was the second wave. Not only large amounts of works emerged, but also four magazines and one newspaper specialized in sf appeared, as well as fandoms started to grow. In 1983, the anti-spiritual pollution movement wiped sf from the map. Not until late 1980s and early 1990s did sf recover from the attack.

After 1991, when Science Fiction World held the annual conference of World sf, was the third wave: contemporary Chinese sf writers who are still active today started to emerge.

DG: When and where did the current Chinese sf fandom begin, and how big is it now?

RKW: The first Chinese sf fandom appeared in Shanghai in 1980 and immediately in other cities as well. But shortly after came the anti-spiritual pollution movement and all the fandoms were silent during these years.

The first fanzine in China was Nebular (Xingyun), edited by Yao Haijun, who is now editor-in-chief of Science Fiction World magazine. It was published from 1989-2007, 40 issues in all. It helped the forming of Chinese sf fandom.

Regional sf clubs and university sf clubs started to grow after 1990. Then a lot of online community emerged.

It is hard to tell how big the current Chinese sf fandom is now, because it is widely dispersed and diverse. The largest national (or global!) fandom, World Chinese Science Fiction Association, has around 180 members and most of them are "professionals" like writers, translators, editors, researchers, etc. There are regular sf events in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu, organized by different organizations and without registration system sometimes. The fandoms in different cities do have contacts, but mostly online.

DG: Please tell us more about AppleCore.

RKW: In 2009, sf clubs in four universities in Shanghai decided to organize a big event together. During the preparation of Shanghai Science Fiction and Fantasy Festival (SSFFF), we founded SF AppleCore as an association of university sf clubs in Shanghai.

SSFFF was held in 2009 and annually from 2011 till now. It is more based in universities. Most of the organizers and attendants are university students. During the weekends in a certain month, different events are held in member universities, organized by university sf clubs. A single event can attract 30-200 attendants, depending on the guests.

Since October 2013, AppleCore has started the monthly gathering AppleParty, targeting at graduated fans. Usually we have movie screening, topic lecture, panel or short talks in the afternoon and have dinner together in the evening. 30-60 audience show up in the afternoon and 5-20 stayed for the dinner usually.

DG: I thought a WorldCon 2016 in Beijing was a wonderful idea, a great way for fans to reach out and discover, in both directions. How was the whole experience for the bid team? Are there any plans for future bids?

RKW: Thanks! To be honest, I am more playing a supporting role in the bid team since I live in Shanghai and the core bid team is in Beijing. We lacked experience for the first time and were not very prepared, but we wish to learn! And I was amazed by the help and will to help offered by foreign fans as well as their interest in Chinese sf. It's so warm and inspiring!

I cannot speak for the Beijing team, but Shanghai might plan a bid after 2020. I also know an American fan who has been living in Haikou for years wants to start a bid in Haikou.

DG: Is there a regional sf convention in your part of the world, similar to EuroCon for Europe? Do you have much contact with sf fandom outside of China?

RKW: Unfortunately, we do not have regional sf convention yet. But I hear voices talking about starting one. It is kind of hard because China itself is so large, as you know.

Fandom in mainland China has much contact with Hong Kong and Taiwan fandoms. We also have much contact with the Japanese fandom and we are planning a Sino-Japanese sf research seminar in 2015 or 2016 in Shanghai. I have got some contacts from south-east Asia at Worldcon.

More work needs to be done!

And what Chinese sf conventions or other events could a foreign visitor attend in the next two or three years?

RKW: We don't really have regular conventions in China. Instead we have events like festivals, awarding ceremonies, and carnivals.

The most recent one is the awarding ceremony of Chinese Nebular in Beijing on Nov 1 and 2, 2014. International guests such as Ken Liu (the brilliant Hugo and Nebular winner), Pierre Gévart (editor of the French sf magazine, Galaxies), Toya Tachihara (Japanese researcher on Chinese sf) and all the names you can think of in Chinese sf will come. You may find other information here: www.guokr.com/xingyun2014/ (Well, in Chinese… if someone happens to be interested in coming, feel free to contact me.)

One major problem for Chinese sf events is that they do not settle the exact date until just months before. But you can expect the awarding ceremony for Chinese Nebular and Galaxy every year. Around the two awarding ceremonies, there will be different activities. The former is usually in October or November and the latter in August or September. Sometimes they are bound together. It really depends…

As for SSFFF, it's usually in May. It is also quite easy to organize a meal for foreign visitors in Shanghai, although we do not have a settled plan for cons yet.

DG: What different, new, or familiar things might we expect to see at Chinese conventions?

RKW: The Chinese conventions are very "Chinese"… Yes, almost all the events and info are in Chinese since we do not usually have foreign visitors.

Unfortunately, I missed the past three international conventions in China, annual conference of World sf in 1991, 97' Beijing International Conference on Science Fiction and 2007 International SF & F Convention just before Nippon 2007. They seemed to be very successful. So English service is definitely possible.

During the recent awarding ceremony of Chinese Nebular and Galaxy and their surrounding activities, there are red carpet, late night roadside BBQ and beer instead of masquerades and room parties. You may also expect signing session, seminars and lectures. The awarding ceremony of the Chinese Nebular this year will be a stage play, written by Liu Cixin (author of Three Body). That will be a brand new experience.

DG: Which Chinese sf authors would you like to see in translation for us to read? Apart from cost of translation and rights, are there any other big obstacles to translation?

RKW: Jiang Bo and Chen Qian. Jiang Bo works in the semiconductor area and writes excellent hard sf. Chen Qian is a librarian and is good at composing stories from a small and special angle, and she is a female writer!

The big obstacle I see is that Chinese sf authors are not so good at promoting themselves in the western world. So it is hard for them to be known by the English readers and editors. But now we have the Chinese sf project* on ClarkesWorld, which will help a lot!

(* The ClarkesWorld Chinese SF Translation Project, now fully-funded on KickStarter.)

DG: Please tell us about some Chinese authors whose work we can already read.

RKW: Liu Cixin, Han Song, Chen Qiufan, Xia Jia, Zhao Haihong, Hao Jingfang, Fei Dao, Bao Shu, Tang Fei…

Actually a lot of Chinese authors have already been translated. Most of the translated ones are short stories. Do not miss the first modern Chinese sf novel translated into English, Three Body by Liu Cixin.

DG: The online magazine and small press scene in thriving here. Is the same true in China? I'm also wondering if traditional literary culture feels superior to sf, as it can do in the UK, or if it embraces it?

RKW: Online magazine and online publishing is thriving here, too. It gives more writers the opportunity to publish their works. I do not see many small press emerging in China, maybe because of the strict publishing regulations here.

In general, traditional literary culture does feel superior to genre literary culture in China. Sf has long been put under the branch of children's literature in China. But in recent years, I see some trend of embracing sf in traditional literature. Sf has been included into traditional literature anthologies and magazines. More researchers choose sf as their academic interest or sf authors and fans start to do sf related research in universities.

DG: There have been various movements or styles in English language sf and fantasy, such as cyberpunk, grimdark, and steampunk. What are the current theme or style movements in Chinese sf?

RKW: We had silkpunk and carpentrypunk, but they failed to become a trend. Only a few related stories.

What can be regarded as movements are Science Fiction Realism proposed by Chen Qiufan in 2012 and Science Fiction Futurism proposed by Wu Yan in 2014. Science Fiction Futurism advocates that sf reflects reality in a way that realism fiction cannot do. Science Fiction Futurism advocates that sf should construct the future.

DG: Sf can be used to examine the world as it is today, and can be optimistic or pessimistic about the future. Do you see similar things in Chinese science fiction?

RKW: That's exactly what the two current movements in Chinese sf are about! Sometimes present and future are combined. Most of Chen Qiufan's works, setting in the near future, discusses the problems we can see or foresee today. And of course you can see a lot of Chinese sf writing optimistically or pessimistically about the future. Numerous examples!

DG: The Future! It feels the story of sf fandom in China is just beginning. What's coming next?

RKW: We are trying to show more presence on the international stage!

I have already persuaded my friend to volunteer at Windycon in Chicago; AppleCore is building a bilingual website; the official website of World Chinese Science Fiction Association (www.wcsfa.com) also plans to add English content. I am going to keep a blog about Chinese fandom on Amazing Stories.

We have a lot to learn from the international fandom and we want to be part of it!

DG: I have a dozen more questions, but also think I have taken up enough of your time. Thank you!

RKW: Thank you for asking all these insightful questions and giving me the chance to talk about Chinese sf!

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David Gullen's novel Shopocalypse, a near-future story of talking cars, shopping and nuclear war, is available from Clarion Publishing (2013). His short fiction has appeared in various magazines and anthologies, one of which was shortlisted for the James White Award, while another was an Aeon Award winner. His collection, Open Waters (theEXAGGERATEDpress), appeared in early 2014. He recently co-edited, designed and published the sf anthology Mind Seed, to raise money for the anti-child-trafficking charity Next Generation Nepal. He lives in Surrey with the fantasy writer Gaie Sebold, and too many tree ferns. He is represented by the John Jarrold Agency.
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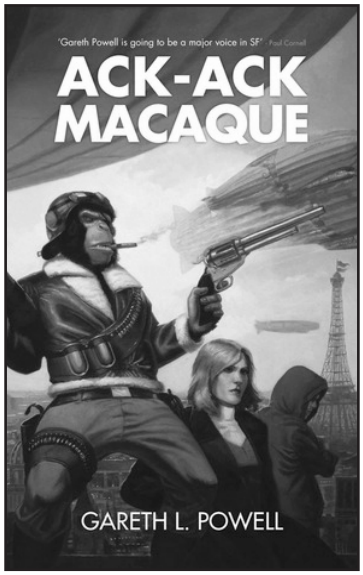
An Interview with **Gareth L. Powell** Talking About a Monkey...



Gareth L. Powell interviewed by Glyn Morgan

Gareth is a science fiction author from Bristol. His third novel, Ack-Ack Macaque, co-won the 2013 BSFA Award for Best Novel with Ann Leckie's Ancillary Justice. His books have been published in the UK, Germany, the USA, and Japan.

Glyn Morgan:* Ack Ack Macaque *started as a short story (In* Interzone *#212, Sept 2007. Winner of* Interzone *story of the year), talk us through the process of that story's development and how it became a novel.

Gareth L. Powell: The original Ack-Ack story was told from the point of view of a suicidal young man named Andy, who had just been dumped by Tori, his artist girlfriend, in favour of an executive at a media company. Not only had this executive, in Andy's eyes, taken his girlfriend, he had also adapted, softened and neutered her creation, a web animation about the adventures of a World War One monkey pilot named Ack-Ack Macaque – and to be honest, Andy's not sure which loss hurts him more, the loss of his girlfriend or the loss of his favourite cartoon. Warren Ellis memorably summed it up as: "The commercialisation of a web animation into some diseased Max Headroom as metaphor for the wreckage of a fucked-up relationship."

I wrote the story as a comment on what used to be called the 'Disneyfication' of popular culture. The Ack-Ack Macaque character starts out spiky but gets softened by the corporation that buys the rights to his series. I was originally going to call the story 'The Monkey That Ate The Internet' but once I'd introduced the character, he started to take over, and I decided his name made a catchier title.

As you mentioned, 'Ack-Ack Macaque' went on to win the 2007 *Interzone* readers' poll. The character – who was only supposed to be incidental to the main story – seemed to strike a chord with readers, but I had no plans to write anything more about him.

Over the next couple of years, I moved my focus from short stories to novels. Pendragon published my first, *Silversands*, in 2010, and Solaris published *The Recollection* in 2011.

After *The Recollection* appeared, Jonathan Oliver at Solaris asked if I had another book I wanted to write, and I immediately said yes. I'd been kicking around an idea for a murder mystery set on a gigantic Zeppelin in an alternate future where Britain and France had merged in the 1950s. So I wrote up a synopsis and sent it to him. Only, while I was writing the synopsis, something unexpected happened.

The idea for the novel revolved around several not-quite-human characters. I wanted to talk about the nature of humanity and of what it means to be human by coming at the question from the perspective of characters that weren't sure they qualified. I had Victoria Valois, who'd had half her brain replace by synthetic neurons following an accident; her dead husband, the murder victim, who now existed only as an electronic simulation; and the Prince of Wales, who discovers his origins aren't as straightforward as he might have supposed. In order to complete the set, I needed a character that had never been human but was able to think

and communicate with humans… and there was Ack-Ack Macaque. He had been smoking his cigar in the shadowy depths of my imagination, just waiting for a chance to leap back into the daylight.

GM:* The Recollection *was also based on a short story (in this case one published in your collection* The Last Reef and Other Stories*) is the short story a formative part of how you think about novels?

GLP: Sometimes a short story's simply too short, and the central idea needs more space in which to be explored. Short fiction is a great tool for taking a look at one aspect of an idea, character or situation, but you really need to move out to novella- or novel-length in order to gain a three hundred and sixty degree perspective.

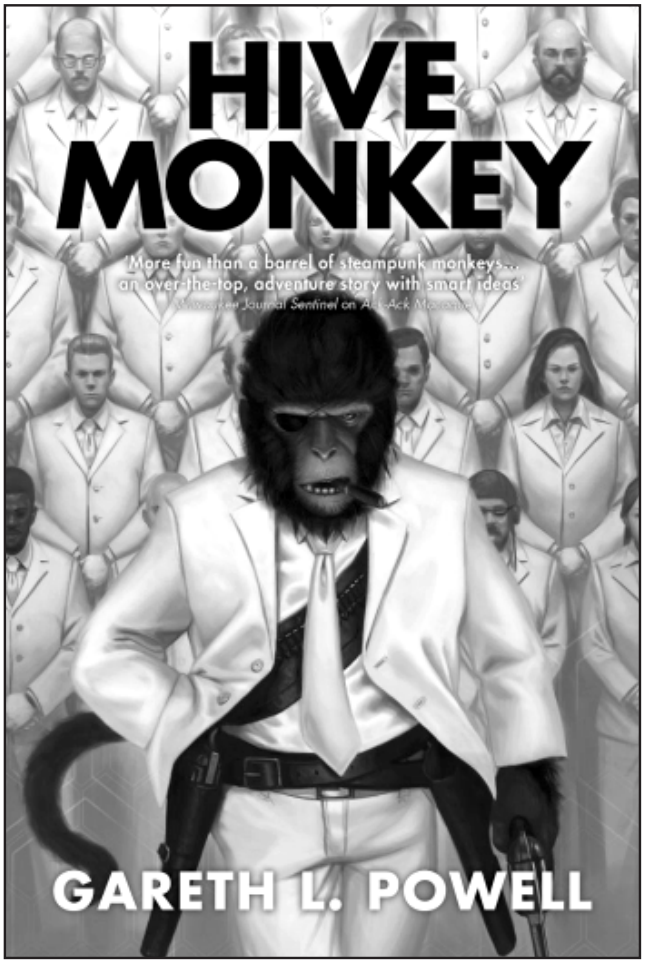
GM: At first impression* Ack Ack Macaque *and Ann Leckie's* Ancillary Justice *seem like very different books but actually they contain a number of overlapping themes or concerns: most notably the human-AI-machine relationship. Of course you mix this up still further by introducing 'animal' into that group as well. Some of your other work also brushes these issues and* Hive Monkey*, sequel to* Ack Ack Macaque*, builds on it in a big way. Is this a personal concern or, given Ann's book, do you think there's something in the air?

GLP: In some ways, I think science fiction has always been about our relationship with technology, exploring the myriad ways it shapes both our society and ourselves as physical individuals – and, right now, we're living in an age of profound change.

As science fiction writers, it isn't our job to accurately predict the future – history has shown that accurate soothsayers tend to get burned at the stake – but to explore instead a range of possible futures as a means of commenting on the world of today.

When I was at school in the mid-Eighties, hardly anyone had a mobile phone and home computers were something of a novelty. Since then we've moved so many of our work and leisure activities online, and encoded so much of our public identities into social media profiles, that legitimate questions can start to be asked about the extent to which the Internet has become a neural and cultural prosthesis for communication and memory storage.

As science fiction writers, we have to look at all this and ask ourselves what the implications are. In the macaque books, I'm asking what it will mean to be human when personalities can be recorded and 'run' on computers; when whole chunks of your brain can be replaced by faster and better components; and when we have the capability to 'upgrade' animals to human levels of thought. And I'm trying to entertain you while I'm doing it. I've taken a Philip K. Dick sort of approach. I've given you a quartet of fast-paced adventure stories that you can enjoy as such, but I've built them around some fairly weighty philosophical questions about the nature of family, grief, loyalty and what it means to be a human being in this crazy, accelerating world.



GM: As you've mentioned, the books are also alternate histories, set in a world where France and the United Kingdom merged in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis following a proposal from the French Prime Minister to Anthony Eden [a genuine historical event, in our timeline the offer was turned down]. What was it that attracted you to an alternate history rather than a straight near-future story, and why this particular turning, or jonbar, point?

GLP: I wanted to tell a story with Zeppelins and very powerful computer processors, and to do that, I felt I needed an alternative setting. The Anglo-French Union appealed to me as soon as I read about the French Prime Minister's offer in a *Guardian* article. It would have been a Europe dominated by a combined France and Britain. Think how the culture would have been different, how the politics would have played out... In the books, I throw in a few details - just enough to give the reader a flavour of these differences without swamping them in historical detail. For instance, I make reference to the Beatles playing their formative residency in Paris instead of Hamburg; of the Citroen HY filling the niche occupied in our world by the Ford Transit; and I postulate a kind of bilingual slang called 'Franglais'. Perhaps, most importantly, I relocate the silicon revolution from California to Cambridge, where computer technology flourishes under the leadership of British scientists and inventors such as Turing and Sinclair.

And as for the Zeppelins? Well, I had to come up with a historical and political/economic rationale for them, too...

GM: In* Hive Monkey*, you make a reference to the 8 Nations Rugby Tournament. As a Rugby fan, I have to ask: who are the additional two nations?

GLP: I will leave that as game for the rugby aficionados among my readership.

GM: You smuggle a lot of in-jokes into your writing. From the surely obligatory reference to* Planet of the Apes*, to* Star Wars*, to music reference like Sparks and Jeff Beck. Is this type of easter egging a personal joke/game, or are you trying to add some extra fun for the reader, and if so, are there any references you've put into one of your books but been disappointed to find no one seemed to get, or that you had to take out because an editor thought it was too obscure?

GLP: The references I drop into the books are mostly for my own amusement. My novel, *The Recollection*, had loads of them - such as the William Pilgrim Home For Displaced Time Travellers - but I try not to let them interfere with the story. I don't crowbar them in, just sprinkle them in lightly as they occur to me. Sometimes, they're hat-tips to classic stories, such as *War Of The Worlds*; other times they're just random scraps of pop culture ephemera that jump into my head while I'm typing. I hope readers who notice them take them in the spirit in which they're meant: as a bit of extra fun.

GM: The third book in the Ack Ack series comes out in January. Was it always going to be a trilogy, is this a definite final book or do you see yourself returning to the monkey at some point?

GLP: I initially wrote *Ack-Ack Macaque* as a standalone novel, but was overjoyed when Solaris commissioned a sequel. *Hive Monkey* came out in January 2014 and expanded the canvas, allowing me to explore the nature of the alternate world in which the first novel was set, while still elaborating on themes of humanity and family. However, as both books were quite different, and there were still a few loose ends, I knew I'd need a third instalment to tie it all together and bring the story full-circle.

In *Macaque Attack*, we meet an older, wiser macaque. He's beginning to realise that he can't be a loner forever, and he's starting to admit to himself that he cares about the people around him – the dysfunctional ersatz family of characters he's accumulated over the previous two volumes.

Having spent so much time in the company of Ack-Ack, Victoria, K8 and the rest of the main characters, I too had become very fond of them. They had all grown and developed over the course of the trilogy, and I wanted to make sure I did them justice. I think I did.

As it transpires, not only has *Macaque Attack* turned out to be their biggest and wildest adventure yet, it also features characters from my earlier space opera, *The Recollection* – which means that all four of the books I've written for Solaris form part of a larger tale, and the trilogy has become a quartet!

I have no immediate plans to return to Ack-Ack in the near future, but don't count him out of the game just yet. I may have other projects on which I want to work, but that doesn't mean I won't return to his world at some point, if inspiration provides the right story.

GM: What are you working on next, post-macaque?

GLP: Since completing the third monkey book, I've gone back to writing space opera. I have one finished novel, and I'm currently writing another that could potentially form the first instalment of a new series.

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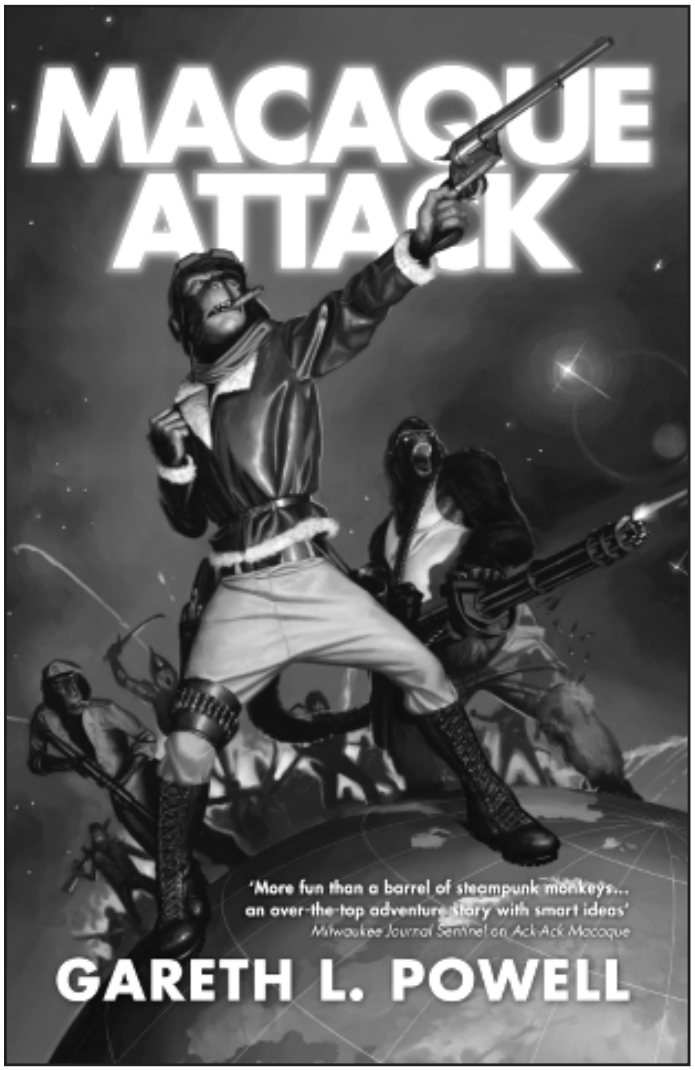
Thanks to Gareth for taking the time for this interview. You can find out more about him and his books at ***www.garethlpowell.com****.* ***Macaque Attack****, the third instalment in the Ack-Ack Macaque trilogy is due to be published on 15th January 2015. Follow the monkey on Twitter:* ***@AckAckMacaque***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Milestone or Millstone:
Searching for Black and White in the Founding Accomplishment of Sam Hignett and Eric Frank Russell...

by Jacob Edwards

A version of this article originally appeared in* **Aoife's Kiss *(June 2011)*

May 1941 saw the publication in* Astounding Science-Fiction *of Eric Frank Russell's short story "Jay Score". Pre-empting* Star Trek *by some twenty-five years, Russell imagined a spaceship of mixed crew — the* Men, Martians and Machines *under which appellation Dobson Books subsequently collected "Jay Score" and its three sequels.

This holism was enterprising, and not merely within the realms of science fiction. Russell also looked beyond the racial prejudices of the time, introducing to his white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant market the character of Sam Hignett — a black surgeon depicted sans the derogatory stereotyping so often prevalent when white authors deigned to sketch non-white characters.[1] But just how fair is Russell's characterisation? "Jay Score" opens with the following appraisal:

> This stunt of using mixed crews, for instance, is pretty sensible when you look into it. On the outward runs towards Mars, the Asteroids or beyond, they have white Terrestrials to run the engines and do the navigating because they're the ones who perfected rocketships, know most about them, and can handle them like nobody else. All ships' surgeons are black Terrestrials because, for some reason nobody's ever been able to explain, no Negro gets gravity bends or space nausea. Every outside repair gang is composed of Martians because they use very little air, are tiptop metal workers, and fairly immune from cosmic-ray burn. (88)

This at first appears a little condescending. White men have solved and now tend to the mystery of space travel while black men hold their place only due to some physical peculiarity, albeit a positive one.[2] As the story progresses, however, Sam Hignett is shown to be a highly competent surgeon:

> Sam had dragged back the engineer from the very rim of the grave. Only his long, dexterous fingers could have done it. It was a feat that had been brought off before — but not often. (92-3)

The engineers, in contrast, do little in "Jay Score" to display their supposed expertise; indeed, throughout the story's three sequels they engage in nothing more high-brow than heavy-handed (if memorable) gruntwork:

> The second engineer charged after the first. This was the guy with the four-foot spanner. The silliest thoughts occur to you at the most inappropriate times, and I remember that as I followed the computator and McNulty close upon this fellow's heels, I was thinking that I couldn't remember seeing him ever put down his spanner or let go of it for one moment. ('Mechanistria", 45)

Sam Hignett is by no means the main focus of "Jay Score" or subsequent adventures but he emerges nevertheless in a very positive light, evincing modesty,[3] compassion,[4] selflessness,[5] and above all, intelligence, in both conversation and action.[6] Why then do black characters not appear in any of Russell's eight novels or elsewhere in his 100+ short stories, novelettes and novellas? Whereas the subject of mixed crews goes on to receive a second, even more resounding treatment in "The Undecided", Sam Hignett merely fades into the background and disappears. He is not mentioned at all during the second half of "Symbiotica" and remains absent thirteen years later for the fourth and final instalment, "Mesmerica".

It could be argued, of course, that the 'whiteness' of Russell's writing is itself an assumption, based not on the texts *per se* but rather the preconceptions and expectations brought to these by the reader. Illustrations would have

strengthened these default perceptions — particularly in the early science fiction magazines — but artwork cannot be said to reflect an author's intentions. If a character is not described explicitly as being of one colour or another then does the issue not remain open to interpretation? (A prominent example of this comes by way of Ford Prefect from Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The original scripts make no mention of colour; and whereas Ford was portrayed initially by white Englishmen Geoffrey McGivern (1978) and David Dixon (1981), the role then passed to black American Mos Def for the 2005 film.[7]) Strictly speaking, most of Russell's white characters could be categorised as racially ambiguous, their physical features being rendered only insofar as to establish universally applicable traits such as size, agility, attractiveness or temperament; but to hedge around Russell's role in the whitewash of early science fiction is to be pedantically revisionist in one's approach to ethnicity. In the early 1940s there *was* clearly an assumption of whiteness — had it been otherwise then readers would not have needed constant reminding of Sam Hignett's race; Russell could have been less blatant in his colouring.[8]

Dissembling aside, the paucity of non-white characters in Russell's writing is beyond dispute; but does this give grounds for censure? Russell is notable also for the near-absence of women in his stories,[9] and it is here perhaps that insight might be gained into his mindset.

> For the whole of his existence upon this planet Man has lived in close juxtaposition with another and different creature known as Woman. Even today communication between the two is far from perfect and, as many a married man can testify, occasionally it gets shot to hell. ("Who's That Knocking", 80)

Implicitly, Russell is acknowledging the perils that lie in representing or pretending to understand somebody of the opposite gender — a danger that equally can apply if portraying people of different race or religion. Although it is natural for minority groups — the so-called 'other' — to be critical of the way they are treated within literature's dominant discourse, their stance sometimes leaves authors of that literature with no 'correct' course of action: to omit minority groups is to insult and offend but to misrepresent them — as one implicitly must do if not of the 'other' — is to cause outrage. Russell, then, may have felt the first, faint touch of this 'Damned-if-I-do, damned-if-I-don't' paralysis. "Jay Score" and its sequels stand almost unique among his fictional works as being written in the first- rather than the third person. The individualism and immediacy of a first-person narrative can serve (somewhat counter-intuitively) to establish a degree of separation between author and story. Whereas elsewhere an authorially indistinct third-person narrative might link Russell to the underlying thrust of his work, here there is a narrator of independence and character sufficient to filter Russell's observations and bear the brunt of any damnation they may incur.

It is ironic, then, that Sam Hignett's appearance in three issues of *Astounding* ruffled no feathers and stirred up no WASPs, and that history would revere rather than revile Russell's bringing a black character into the twinkling white domain of early 1940s science fiction. But the question still remains: why did Sam Hignett (or at least his understudy, Wally Simcox) not make an appearance in "Mesmerica"? Thirteen years had passed since "Symbiotica" and the intervening period took in both the end of World War Two and its aftermath. Perhaps Russell's outlook had changed; perhaps his holism now encompassed aliens and animals but not humans; yet still he brought back the preceding stories' characters with a consistency that makes Sam Hignett's a glaring omission. The Negro surgeon should have been mentioned, even in passing, and the fact that he was not allows doubt to nudge insidiously at the back of the sceptic's mind — a shadowy possibility that, if true, would blot the stamp of approval heretofore given to Russell by those who chronicle racial representation. "Mesmerica", unlike "Jay Score", "Mechanistria" and "Symbiotica", was neither published by nor submitted to any science fiction magazine; rather, it was written especially to round out *Men, Martians and Machines* as a 'fix-up' novel.[10] Having no need to be mindful of potential editors' biases or market requirements, Russell's dismissal of Sam Hignett came entirely at his own initiative and must surely have resulted either from conscious oversight or from a palpable and incriminating nonchalance. Could it be, after all, that the anomaly was not so much Hignett's absence from the fourth story but rather his appearance in the first three? Perhaps, as with his infiltration of the 'Blieder' drive (read: 'bleeder', a profanity of British colloquialism) into *Astounding*,[11] Russell had no higher purpose in mind for his much-lauded portrayal than to sneak something taboo past the straight-laced John W. Campbell and his prudish sub-editor, Kay Tarrant.[12]

...the paucity of non-white characters in Russell's writing is beyond dispute: but does this give grounds for censure?

It would be a shame if Russell's promotion of Sam Hignett were to prove merely a jape and not the result of sincerely held beliefs, or if the subsequent demotion of Hignett's character indeed stemmed from racial dislike or disinterest on Russell's part. Curiously enough, one piece of evidence that may be brought against this interpretation is Russell's unconcealed aversion to all things Japanese. Writing at a time when British POWs were being tortured in Burma and Malaya, and for a largely American market even as US marines were battling Japan in the Pacific, Russell showed no hesitation in expressing his abhorrence; in the short story "Resonance" — again, one of only a handful written in the first person — he launches a scathing attack on the 'Japs', hurling racial epithets[13] without compunction and questioning the very humanity of the Japanese as an ethnic group.[14] Although it lies beyond the modern reader to judge anyone who lived (and in Russell's case, served) during The

War, one point is clear: Eric Frank Russell, when he was of a mind to, could douse the gentle good humour that otherwise pervades his fiction and instead add vitriol to commonly held prejudices, airing his beliefs beneath the flag of nationalism. If he did in actuality hold something against Negroes[15] then surely he would have been less subtle, less reticent in showing it.

Intriguing though it is to speculate, the issue is perhaps something of a moot point. Whatever Russell's personal beliefs or motivations, it remains a *fait accompli* that with "Jay Score" he broke new ground by giving a black character equal footing alongside the white majority of early science fiction. Was Russell an egalitarian pioneer or was he no less biased than the next Englishman, only with a wicked streak of perversity? Looking back from afar there can be no black and white answer; but as of May 1941, with Sam Hignett's appearance aboard the *Upskadaska City* (or, fittingly, the '*Upsydaisy*'), at least now there was choice.

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Additional Notes:

[1] Ingham, John L., *Into Your Tent: the Life, Work and Family Background of Eric Frank Russell* (Plantech, 2010), p. 161.

[2] 'Sam, of course, endured it most easily of all the Terrestrials and had persisted enough to drag his patient completely out of danger.' Russell, "Jay Score", p. 96.

[3] "I only wish I could!' His black face showed his feelings. 'You know how much I'd like to put him right, sergeant — but I can't.' He made a gesture of futility. 'He's completely beyond my modest skill. Maybe when we get back to Earth—' His voice petered out, and he went back inside.' Russell, "Jay Score", pp. 99-100.

[4] 'Sam Hignett's black fingers were closing and unclosing as if they itched to come to the aid of the sufferer. The guy with the spanner had rolled up his sleeves and revealed a tattooed nautch dancer on the muscle of his lower left arm. The dancer shimmied as he altered and tightened his grip on the spanner. His face still looked like hell, but his eyes were hard.' Russell, "Mechanistria", p. 47.

[5] 'His black features curiously alight, Sam Hignett yelled at Sug Farn, 'Me last!' Our Negro surgeon might have got his wish, but he counted without the tentacled individual dangling overhead.' Russell, "Mechanistria", p. 49.

[6] 'Sam came out with some iodine. It didn't work, but it did make a terrible stink.... Frowning, Sam went back to look for something else.... [He] came out with a big glass jar, dribbled its contents over my gooey hands. The ghastly green covering at once thinned into a weak slime and my hands came free. 'Ammonia,' remarked Sam.' Russell, Eric Frank, "Symbiotica", *Astounding Science-Fiction* 32.2 (October 1943), pp. 128-161; pp. 137-138.

[7] 'Douglas himself is on record as saying that as far as he was concerned the only character who had to be British, indeed English, was Arthur Dent....everything else was up for grabs.' Stamp, Robbie, "HHG2G Exec. Producer Robbie Stamp Answers", *Slashdot* (http://slashdot.org/articles/05/04/26/1952248.shtml), posted 26th April 2005, accessed 18th February, 2014.

[8] 'Next, Sam Hignett, the Negro, his teeth gleaming in startling contrast with his ebon features.' "Mechanistria", p. 39. 'Sam's very white teeth glistened in his black face as he smiled with satisfaction.' "Symbiotica", p. 129. 'He rubbed a weary hand over his crisp, curly hair.' "Symbiotica", p. 132.

[9] Ingham, *Into Your Tent*, pp. 207-208.

[10] Ingham, *Into Your Tent*, p. 241. Translations of "Mesmerica" subsequently appeared in Italian, Japanese, Dutch, German and Spanish publications. Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Wallace, Sean, *Eric Frank Russell — Our Sentinel in Space*, 3rd Revised Edition (Galactic Central, 1999), p. 22.

[11] Russell, Eric Frank, "...And Then There Were None", *Astounding Science-Fiction* 47.4 (June 1951), pp. 7-65; p. 8.

[12] Ingham, *Into Your Tent*, p. 206. Significantly, perhaps, the contents page summary of "Jay Score" takes rather a disingenuous slant: 'Earthmen for rocket engineers and pilots, Martians for repairmen, for they needed little air. But it took Jay Score's leather-skinned breed for emergency work!' *Astounding Science-Fiction* 27.3 (May 1941), p. 4. More in keeping with the story's opening would have been: 'Earthmen for rocket engineers and ships' surgeons, Martians for repairmen, but it took a big clunker like Jay Score to be emergency pilot!' It seems that the precis was bleached clean of Sam Hignett and his fellow surgeons.

[13] 'Yellow-bellies'; 'rice mashers'; 'monkeys'; 'little yellow buggers'. Russell, "Resonance", pp. 46-47 & 54.

[14] Ingham, *Into Your Tent*, pp. 179-180. The 'I' of Russell's story perceives Emperor Hirohito as the 'celestial simian in Tokyo' and captive Japanese soldiers as 'comporting themselves humbly as becomes a lower grade of creation', while suggesting caustically that: 'Our fireside propagandists have got those little yellow guys all wrong. Why, washed in an antiseptic, fitted with better bodies, supplied with brains, and given a decent education, they'd verge on the human.' Russell, "Resonance", pp. 47-48. Adding to the racial vilification, one of Paul Orban's illustrations (p. 58) depicts what presumably are meant to be Japanese troops — ghoulish, uniformed beasts that nowadays would not look out of place in a horror magazine or zombie anthology.

[15] The term Russell used, capitalised and considered polite at the time, having on the one hand superseded 'coloured' (which was sufficiently generic to encompass Asians) and on the other hand yet to be overhauled in favour of 'Black'. Smith, Tom W., "Changing Racial Labels: From 'Colored' to 'Negro' to 'Black' to 'African American'", *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 56.4 (Winter 1992), pp. 496-514; pp. 498-499.

BSFA e-newsletter Sampler

A regular newsletter by Donna Scott, usu. delivered via email

Please get in touch to update your details if you're not already receiving this (and to help us keep our database up to date).

Hello and welcome to the January newsletter!

Happy New Year to all our members. Have you made any resolutions yet? If not, here's an easy one to keep - nominate for the ***BSFA Awards***! The deadline is coming up on 31st January, but if you can get your nominations in sooner, that would warm the cockles of our hearts.

Then, we just need to sit tight and wait for the convention season to kick off. SciFi Weekender and Eastercon are just a fortnight apart and almost hugging, due to the Moons being particularly friendly this year.

And if you can't wait until the big thaw to get your science fiction fill, there are some cool events happening this month in London and Sheffield.

Hope to see you at one of these!

Donna x

Over on the BSFA website, author Juliet E. McKenna writes about the new EU VAT regulations, and is appealing for all members whose businesses are affected to complete the EU VAT Action survey (all one address):

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/10GWseoeGY46uW1bXsRVyKODCnwDq6o0Ubx-6uimgs7TE/viewform

Now that the legislation has arrived, she would also like to hear from authors and publishers who have stopped direct ebook sales from their own website rather than tackle the complexities of compliance, or anyone who has abandoned any business plans for 2015 such as launching ebooks to complement hard copy publishing or starting independent sales or ebook sales from your own site as well as using Amazon. GooglePlay, iBooks etc.

You can find out more on the BSFA website, and can reach Juliet on *juliet.mckenna@gmail.com*.

Sheffield SFSF Social with
Adrian Tchaikovsky* and *Jo Thomas
Sat 24th January 2015

In association with the British Fantasy Society, the BSFA, and the Sheffield Fantasy and Science Fiction Social Club:

On 24th January 2015, at 4pm, please join us upstairs at Eten on York Street in Sheffield for the very first SFSF Social. Our guests will be the following wonderfully talented authors and swordfighters:

Jo Thomas, author of *25 Ways to Kill a Werewolf*, available now from Fox Spirit Books.

Adrian Tchaikovsky, author of the *Shadows of the Apt* series, available from Tor UK.

There'll be chat, book talk, good company and the chance to win awesome prizes.

Free entry!

Keep informed, follow ***@SFSFSocial*** on Twitter.

Eten Café and Tearoom
2-4 York Street, Sheffield, S1 2ER

BSFA London Meeting
28th January 2015
Anne Charnock

On 28th January 2015, from around 7pm.

The Artillery Arms Public House (Upstairs)
102 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8ND (*map here*)

ANNE CHARNOCK, The Kitschies and Philip K. Dick Award Nominated author of *A Calculated Life* will be interviewed by BSFA Best Novel Award winner **Adam Roberts**.

Interview commences at 7.00 pm, room open from 6.00 pm (and fans in the MAIN bar from 5.00 pm).

There will be a raffle (£1 for five tickets), with a selection of SF novels as prizes.

FUTURE LONDON EVENTS:

Feb 25th	- Scott K. Andrews
March 25th	- Suniti Namjoshi interviewed by Farah Mendlesohn
April 22nd	- TBA

ALL WELCOME
(No entry fee or tickets. Non-members welcome.)
For further information about the London meetings, contact Audrey Taylor, London Meetings Organiser, *bsfa.london.meetings@gmail.com*

We Want You!

There are lots of ways you can get more involved with the BSFA. We are keen to hear from anyone who would like to help spread the joy of science fiction.

There are lots of opportunities for volunteers, from event organisation and guest booking to good old book reading!

Curious? Get in touch with Donna at *chair@bsfa.co.uk*

BSFA Awards - Deadline Coming Up!

As members of the BSFA you are all eligible to nominate for the BSFA Awards.

The BSFA committee met in December and discussed our objectives with the award. We want the BSFA Award (and the BSFA itself) to represent the full range of the genre and the diversity of talent and ability behind those working across the spectrum of short fiction, novels, art and nonfiction. Our starting point is to make sure that the suggestions list is as complete and representative of the best work as possible.

This year we've asked people to put forward four nominations per category for the Awards and they can also add to the recommendations section as well.

This is designed to promote as many authors and artists as possible. We'd really like to hear from you. Everyone is just as qualified as everyone else to make their nominations. Lastly, for your information, the rules are:

- Nominations are restricted to four per category.
- Nominations shall open in October each year and run to January 31st.
- A minimum of three nominations will be required for a work to be included on the ballot; if there are fewer than three works achieving this level of support, the category will not be awarded.
- You may not make multiple nominations for a single work.
- **Please do not nominate your own work.**

Find out more about how to nominate on the BSFA website.

The deadline for nominations is **31st January. 2015**.

recurrent:
FOUNDATION FAVOURITES
Andy Sawyer

The Storm of London by F. Dickberry

The Storm of London was completely unknown to me until I started researching for the 2014 London Worldcon's display on the many and ingenious ways in which writers have envisaged the destruction of Our Fair Capital. Noticing that the Science Fiction Foundation Collection had a copy of a book entitled *The Storm of London* by F. Dickberry (John Long, 1904), I investigated, and found a novel to chill the blood of every right-thinking fan. It is, indeed, the ultimate disaster.

The interestingly-named F. Dickberry published four novels, of which *The Storm of London*, subtitled "a social rhapsody", was the first and most successful: it went to at least seven editions. There are no entries in The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* or *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, and there is very little information as to who he or she might be. A tiny entry in the *Oxford Companion to Edwardian Fiction* says that it is "likely" that "Dickberry" was Fernande Blaze de Bury, who contributed to the *Scottish Review* in 1899 and 1900, possibly related to the Anglo-French writer Ange-Henri Blaze de Bury (1813–88) and his wife, Marie Pauline Rose Stuart. There is no reason suggested why this is "likely", unless the resonances between the names are what is meant.

The Storm of London is a comedy which starts when Lionel, Earl of Somerville, bored and disgusted with the dissipations of his life, and his relationship with his social-butterfly fiancée, decides to shoot himself. As he pulls the trigger, a violent clap of thunder shakes his house to its foundations. When he awakens, he tries to work out what happened – then suddenly realises that he is naked. All the bedding and covers in his room are gone. Outside in the street he sees an errand-boy and two street-cleaners on their rounds – *naked*. He calls his manservant, who informs him that his breakfast is ready, but that he cannot fetch any clothing because there is *none* to fetch. Somehow, the storm has stripped the entire population of Britain of their clothes.

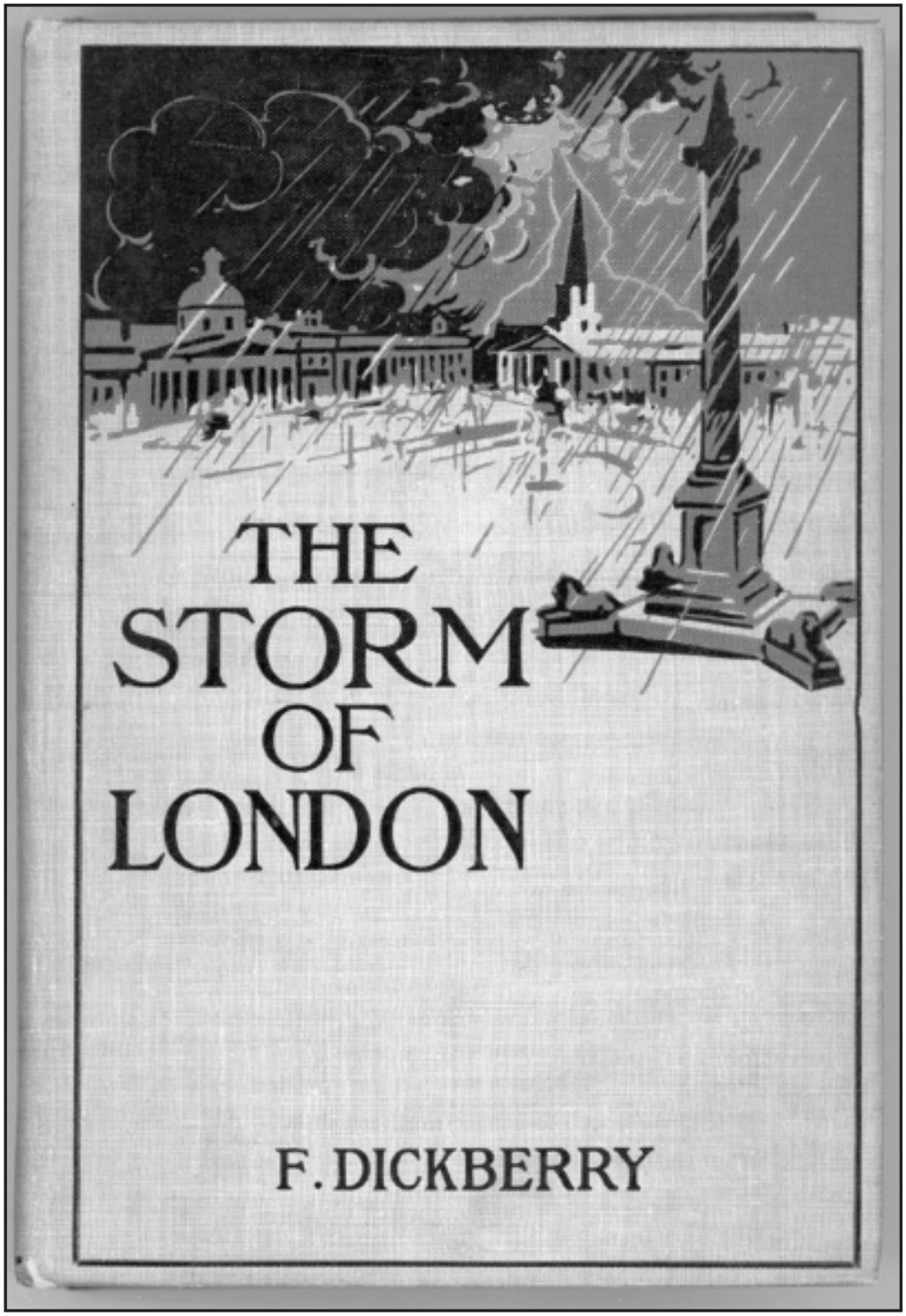
At this point, we modern readers begin to wonder exactly *what sort of fantasy* we are reading . . . .

Fortunately, perhaps, the printed word allows for much more *delicacy* than the film or comic-book version: wisely un-illustrated, *The Storm of London* is no soft-porn story (the possibility of "licentious chaos" is dismissed at one point as "nonsense") but a comedy of manners, precisely a comedy of *class* manners. Mass nudity reveals that it is not so much modesty or salaciousness that is the problem, it is that, when we are all naked together, *how do we know who is socially superior?* Lionel reflects that "it was the idea of appearing before and mixing with an indiscriminate crowd. It would be really annoying to have your butler look you up and down, and to stand the flitting sneer on the lips of your groom." And later, "If we cannot know employers from employees the whole status of civilisation is done with." And how can law and order be maintained if we cannot recognise the police by their uniforms?

There are of course the obvious jokes about husbands who, when out of their homes in a state of nature, cannot recognise their wives (and vice versa): later in the novel Lionel meets a young woman and in their discussion about the changed world it becomes clear that they are soul-mates and they declare their love for each other. It is only when he asks for her address that he realises that she is his fiancée Gwendolen.

Mass nudity reveals that it is not so much modesty or salaciousness that is the problem, it is that, when we are all naked together, *how do we know who is socially superior?*

When Lionel first ventures out he meets Dick Danford, a music-hall artist, who tells Lionel that the danger of social solecism can be averted by taking on board the specific gifts of his own trade, for success in the music hall means a deep and observant attention to "all the particularities of Society leaders, the oddities of the clergy, of City magnates and gutter marionettes". Eventually, a way of living in the



new situation begins to be thrashed out, but in the humour of it all some quite fundamental issues are raised:

> "If you reform burials, you must also some day reform marriage; you will find a great deal of incongruity and of levity in that ceremony also; then will follow the reform of the relations between the sexes, between employers and employees, and goodness only knows what else."

Although there are some trenchant exchanges between viewpoints representing class privilege – reminded that he is a "gentleman", Lionel hotly responds that the word "means absolutely nothing but impunity to do every disgraceful action under the sun", and the more relaxed relationship between master and servant allows Temple to tell his employer some home truths about the strange behaviour of the upper classes. *The Storm of London* is hardly a revolutionary novel; true, some of the changes brought about in society after the storm are virtually communist, but it is social manners and snobbery rather than the relationship with the means of production which the novel targets. And, at the novel's climax, when a joyful procession in honour of the new era is chorusing "Happiness! Happiness!", Lionel awakens. It has all been a hallucination when recovering from the results of his injury. Happily, Gwendolen has been at his bedside throughout, listening to his ravings, and has become a reformed character. They decide to leave England, marry and to lead a better life.

So, all is restored at the end. *The Storm of London* is not even a revolutionary manifesto. Yet I have described it as "a novel to chill the blood". And so it is. We can, I assume imagine ourselves in such a situation. For most of us, it would, I venture to guess, be highly embarrassing. But there is a moment of such appalling horror, such Lovecraftian terror, opening up such unguessable abysses of blasphemy, that the fate of Lionel fades to nothing. Let's look again at the plot. LONDON is unharmed by the storm, but the *clothing* of all the inhabitants vanishes. However, it is even worse than that. When the Earl of Somerville, after his initial awakening sends his manservant to get him something to read:

> *"Temple came back saying that every book had disappeared".*

Has there ever been such a hint at our deepest fears?

recurrent:
KINCAID IN SHORT
Paul Kincaid

No Woman Born

Catherine Moore wrote under the gender-neutral name, C.L. Moore, not, as is widely thought, to disguise her sex, but so that her bosses at the bank where she worked would not discover that she was writing for the pulps. But in the heavily male-dominated world of the sf pulps, it helped her establish a reputation without standing out as a woman. Indeed, Henry Kuttner wrote a fan letter after the appearance of her first story, "Shambleau" (1933), under the impression that he was addressing a fellow male writer. He discovered his mistake soon enough, and the pair were collaborating by 1937 and married in 1940, thereafter often writing together under the pseudonyms 'Lewis Padgett' and 'Laurence O'Donnell'. But they still wrote alone on occasion, and one of her finest stories was "No Woman Born" which appeared in the December 1944 issue of *Astounding*.

In her groundbreaking essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985), Donna J. Haraway evokes the figure of the cyborg, a hybrid between human and machine, as a metaphor for the position of women and as a radical new way of approaching feminist arguments. The chimeric quality of the cyborg breaks away from the binary divisions that had commonly characterised discourses about men and women. Although she nowhere mentions Moore, "No Woman Born" might well have been the paradigm for Haraway's essay.

Written four years before the first regular television network was established in the USA, Moore's story nevertheless envisages a world of global television celebrity. And the first international star is Deirdre. No surname is given for her, which suggests the intimacy with which she is universally known, but perhaps also indicates the infantilising effect of celebrity which has reduced her to just the one familiar name. In the four or more pages before Deirdre herself puts in an appearance, all we are told about her is her beauty. The very first words of the story are: 'She had been the loveliest creature whose image ever moved along the airways' (21), and again, a few lines later: 'There had never been anyone so beautiful' (21). There is something inside that projects this beauty, as Harris, her former manager, reflects: 'It was the light within, shining through her charming, imperfect features, that had made this Deirdre's face so lovely' (22); but essentially she is being defined by her appearance.

At least, that is how she is being presented by the men in her life, by Harris, our viewpoint character, and by Maltzer, who has been working with Deirdre for the last year. Note that the men are identified by their surnames, Deirdre by her given name.

There is one other thing that we are told about her this early in the story; she is dead: 'the whole world had mourned her when she died in the theatre fire' (22). And Harris prefers to think of her as dead still, even though he is now, a year later, on his way to meet her in her apartment. In fact, her body had been destroyed, the physical manifestation of her beauty, but her brain had been preserved and had been put inside a cyborg body. That had been Maltzer's job, and Harris was now on his way to see her new being for the first time, and it is clear that the loss of her beauty bothers him more than the loss of her person. Or perhaps it is another loss he mourns, for when he thinks of the year of intimacy that Maltzer has just experienced he thinks: 'There had been between them a sort of unimaginable marriage stranger than anything that could ever have taken place before.' (24)

In fact, her body had been destroyed, the physical manifestation of her beauty, but her brain had been preserved and had been put inside a cyborg body.

Maltzer is disturbed, nervous, and again it relates to her beauty. 'It's not that she's – ugly – now … Metal isn't ugly … Maybe she's – grotesque, I don't know.' (24) The same refrain, even the same words, come again when Harris finally goes into her room to see Deirdre herself:

> He had envisioned many shapes. Great, lurching robot forms, cylindrical, with hinged arms and legs. A glass case with the brain floating in it and appendages to serve its needs. Grotesque visions, like nightmares come nearly true. And each more inadequate than the last, for what metal shape could possibly do more than house ungraciously the mind and brain that had once enchanted a whole world? (26)

It is, noticeably, a list informed by the garish covers of the pulp magazines that Moore wrote for. But they are masculine notions of mechanical men, and this is emphatically a feminine notion of a mechanical woman:

> The machinery moved, exquisitely, smoothly, with a grace as familiar as the swaying poise he remembered. The sweet, husky voice of Deirdre said, 'It's me, John darling. It really is, you know.' And it was. (26)

There is, of course, an ambiguity in these words that Moore does not make explicit. For John Harris, it is Deirdre because the metal body recalls the physical beauty of the old Deirdre; for Deirdre, the consciousness, the sense of identity, the mind is still exactly the same as she has always been, regardless of the casing that houses the brain.

The cyborg (the word is not used in the story, of course; it had not been coined yet) does not exactly duplicate Deirdre, for 'she had no face … only a smooth, delicately modelled ovoid.' (27) Significantly, we learn that for Harris, 'The mask was symbol enough for the woman within. It was enigmatic' (27) she is, in other words, objectified by being rendered featureless. She is further separated from the human Deirdre in her clothing, for she does not wear what she once might have done. Instead, 'the designer had [given] her a robe of very fine metal mesh.' (28) As a performer, she would have been used to being given costumes for different roles, but this is something more, this is an object that is given no choice about what it might wear.

To the male gaze, she is all that is needed to recall the flesh and blood Deirdre. But Deirdre herself subtly begins to undermine this perception of her. The first and practically only thing the male gaze told us about Deirdre was her beauty, but she says: 'I never was beautiful. It was – well, vivacity, I suppose.' (30) And she moves 'with a litheness that was not quite human. The motion disturbed him as the body itself had not.' (29) To the men, the cyborg Deirdre recapitulates the woman whose beauty they adored; for Deirdre herself, it allows her to become something Other. '"It's – odd," she said, "being here in this … this … instead of a body. But not as odd or as alien as you might think."' (32, ellipses in the original)

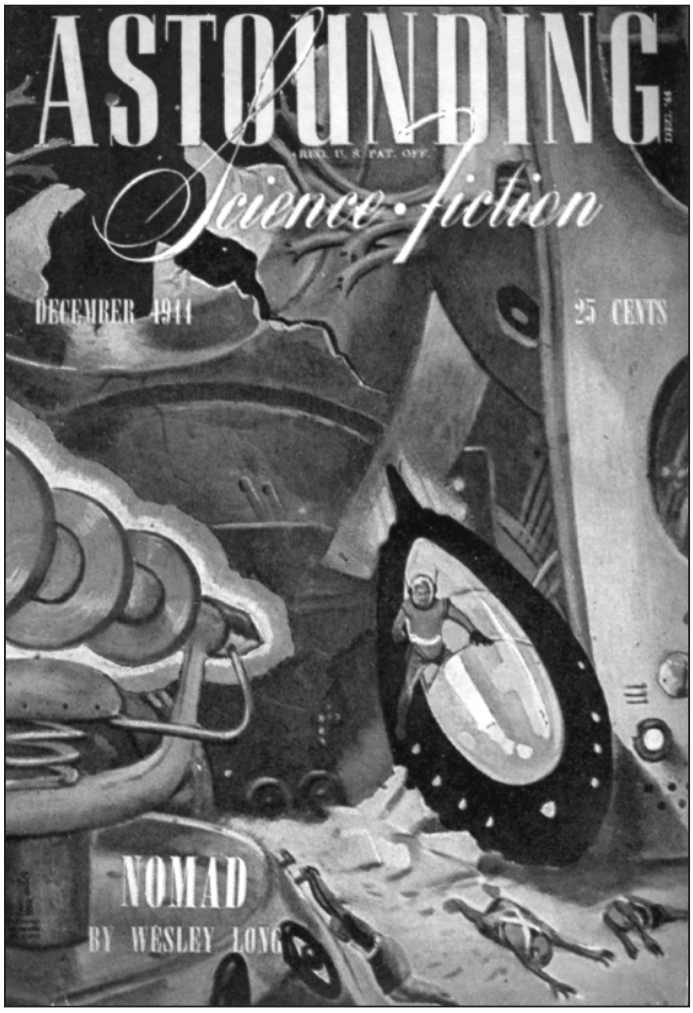
One of the ways this otherness manifests itself is that Deirdre is supremely confident. Was she like this before? We are not told, but given how nervous both Harris and Maltzer become in the face of this confidence, it seems unlikely. She is determined to go back on the stage, but the men are wary of the prospect. At first it seems that this is inspired by a sense that she is frail: 'She was so delicate a being now, really. Nothing but a glowing and radiant mind poised in metal.' (34) This is a view that Maltzer emphasises later: 'If she only weren't so … so frail […] she's so pitifully handicapped even with all we could do. She'll always be an abstraction and a … a freak.' (41) But we quickly realise that this takes us straight back to body image: 'if the world did not accept her as beautiful, what then?' (34)

What he does not realise, but Deirdre clearly has realised, is that her new body has changed the world. Planning the dance and the music that will constitute her act she says:

> Later, you know, really creative men like Massanchine or Fokhileff may want to do something entirely new for me – a whole new sequence of movements based on a new technique. And music – that could be quite different, too! Oh, there's no end to the possibilities! (35-6)

She is confident because her cyborg incarnation has given her a new power, new abilities, that the flesh and blood Deirdre did not possess. Being no longer quite a woman has liberated her. 'I don't want [the audience] to pity my handicaps – I haven't got any!' (38) she says, directly repudiating Maltzer's perception of her.

Harris perhaps gets an inkling of this when 'It came to him suddenly that she was much more than humanly graceful – quite as much as he had once feared she would be less than human.' (37) But the thought leaves him just as quickly when they start to plan her comeback performance: 'That strange little quiver of something – something un-Deirdre – which had so briefly trembled beneath the surface of familiarity stuck in Harris's mind as something he must recall and examine later.' (39)



There is a hint of the old patriarchal attitude when Harris suggests that Maltzer will have to 'give his permission' (38) for her performance, a notion that Deirdre quickly repudiates: 'I don't belong to him.' (38) And later, when Harris and Maltzer are watching the play that precedes Deirdre's performance, Maltzer declares that she cannot compete because 'She hasn't any sex. She isn't female anymore.' (39) Sex would seem to reside in her appearance and in her being possessed, or as Maltzer puts it: 'You know how she sparkled when a man came into the room? All that's gone, and it was an essential.' (40)

In a long speech, Maltzer compares himself to Frankenstein, creating a life that must become horrible to the mob because of its difference. 'You are not wholly human, my dear […] in spite of all I could do, you must always be less than human […] You're only a clear, glowing mind animating a metal body, like a candle flame in a glass. And as precariously vulnerable to the wind.' (55) Inevitably, perhaps, he sees her not as an independent being but as his own creation.

When Deirdre takes her turn to speak, she immediately repudiates this view of herself.

The recreation of herself as a cyborg has released Deirdre from the traditional weak and subservient female role, and this is her own declaration of independence.

This view, specifically about Deirdre but by implication about all women, goes unchallenged; Moore was writing for a predominantly male audience, and put into Maltzer's mouth perceptions that the audience would unquestioningly share. But what we are watching in the cyborgisation of Deirdre ('"She isn't human," Harris agreed slowly. "But she isn't pure robot either. She's something somewhere between the two,"' (41) a sympathetic perspective that still classifies her as a something) is an individuality that takes her away from such notions of sex and beauty.

The idea that Deirdre is something new in the world, that the world has been changed, is stressed again when she gives her performance. The stage set, a shimmering golden haze, is as 'The world might have looked […] on the first morning of creation, before heaven and earth took form in the mind of God.' (42) Her appearance suggests 'the chivalry and delicacy of some other world,' (44) and the music 'was utterly pure and true as perhaps no ear in all her audience had ever heard music before.' (45)

Her performance is, of course, a triumph, but in the moment of her triumph Maltzer decides that she must immediately retire from the stage. Because of her appearance (because everything that is female is tied up with appearance) he is convinced that the audience must inevitably turn against her, and, a now-familiar refrain, 'She's too fragile to stand that.' (48) And in this moment we are reminded of their 'long intimacy so like marriage' (49) so that the clash of wills to come must be read as a husband laying down the law to a compliant wife.

The confrontation comes two weeks later, after Deirdre returns from a trip to the country. The scene begins, as if reminding us of the perspective with which we first entered the story, with a reiteration of the male gaze: 'She was all metal now, the Deirdre they would know from today on. And she was not less lovely. She was not even less human – yet.' (52) That final 'yet' prefiguring what is to come. Maltzer's tone is patronising and possessive: 'You can't deceive me, Deirdre […] I created you, my dear. I know.' (52) But Deirdre 'had withdrawn far within, behind the mask of her voice and her facelessness […] Humanity might be draining out of her fast, and the brassy taint of metal permeating the brain it housed.' (53)

> I'm not – well, subhuman […] You didn't create my life, you only preserved it. I'm not a robot, with compulsions built into me that I have to obey. I'm free-willed and independent, and, Maltzer – I'm human. (56)

The recreation of herself as cyborg has released Deirdre from the traditional weak and subservient female role, and this is her own declaration of independence. It is only by becoming a cyborg that she can become fully human. '"Of course I'm myself," she told them.' (57) Her release from the perception of weakness is symbolised by the incredible speed and strength she displays in rescuing Maltzer from his suicide attempt. Far from being subhuman, she has in fact become superhuman.

There is distress, yes, but not because of frailty, rather she is lonely, the only one of her kind. But in the years remaining, before her brain wears out, 'I'll learn … I'll change … I'll know more than I can guess today. I'll change – That's frightening.' (64) The transformation out of the traditional female role has opened incredible prospects to her.

Some readings of the story find a hint of menace in the final line: '"I wonder," she repeated, the distant taint of metal already in her voice.' (64) She has gone beyond human, they argue, and therefore must be a menace. I don't agree. I think the emphasis should be on 'wonder' rather than 'metal'. Deirdre's liberation now allows her to wonder. As Donna Haraway says: 'The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century.' (149)

Quotations taken from "No Woman Born" by C.L. Moore in *Women of Wonder: The Classic Years* edited by Pamela Sargent, San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1995, pp21-64.

"A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" by Donna J. Haraway in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London, Free Association Books, 1991, pp149-181

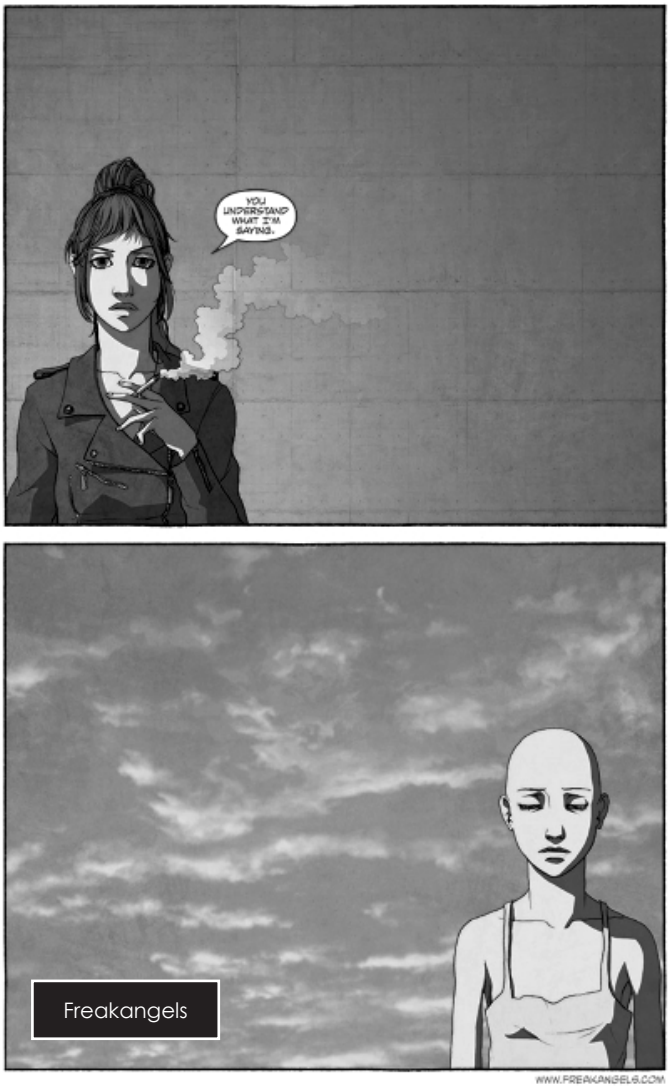
recurrent: SEQUENTIALS

Laura Sneddon

The Beauty of Webcomics

In recent years the media at large has happily reported that comics have "gone mainstream". Certainly the barrage of blockbusting superhero films would support this, alongside the always iconic superhero merchandise available for both fans of Christopher Nolan and Lynda Carter. But within the comics industry itself, there is increasing friction when it comes to determining what "mainstream" actually means.

From an outsider's point of view, comics have long been synonymous with superheroes, yet the days of *Batman* and *Spider-Man* being a major pocket-money spend are long behind us. In decades past, superhero comics could sell hundreds of thousands of copies each month. Now it is a rare occasion for one to reach that 6th digit, despite the greater presence of superheroes within our pop culture. long behind us it is a rare occasion for one to reach that 6th digit, despite the greater presence of superheroes within our pop culture.



Superhero comics are no longer a mainstream buy for our reading population, and those monthly comics that do sell well are often bolstered by trade collections and television tie-ins (e.g. *The Walking Dead*). Gone too is our proud history of truly innovative newspaper strips such as *Flash Gordon* or *Little Nemo in Slumberland*.

Real creativity however cannot be destroyed, only displaced. Underground and independent comics continue to thrive, as do graphic novels within a book market that has finally recognised their exceptional potential. But while the former benefit from lack of editorial restraint at the expense of reduced readership, and the latter are constrained for the price of a greater audience, there is one platform that gives the creator both control and the potential for the largest fanbase of all: the internet.

The first webcomic appeared almost three decades ago, when Eric Millikin began publishing *Witches and Stitches* in 1985 on Compuserve. An unauthorized parody of the *Wizard of Oz*, the online platform enabled Millikin to avoid censorship, and it wasn't long before other creators followed his success. By the late '90s the number of webcomics had exploded and when Scott McCloud, author of the famous *Understanding Comics*, published *Reinventing Comics* in 2000, he introduced the world to the idea of the "infinite canvas" – the idea that the size of a digital comics page is theoretically infinite.

The freedom that webcomics have to transcend traditional comics boundaries and traditions, alongside an escape from censorship and editorial constraints has resulted in a truly wonderful and unique area of the comics form. On the other hand, long before self-publishing was easily available for other authors, the near-universal access to the internet has resulted in next to no quality control. For every wonderful webcomic that hovers beneath the radar, there are several published primarily for the creator's own small circle of friends.

But why not? The internet is indeed infinite in scope, and with personal tastes varying so greatly there is at least something for everyone – guaranteed! As one might expect, the internet is also home to a great number of science fiction webcomics, with science fiction and fantasy truly outnumbering every other genre. This is perhaps due to the younger generations of creators making this platform their own, and the *Neuromancer* punk edge of the internet itself.

Freakangels (***freakangels.com***) has served as the gateway webcomic for many a reader, with author Warren Ellis bringing fans of DC and Marvel comics to the audience. Ellis, who has worked on titles from *X-Men* to *Stormwatch*, has a firm foothold in the world of science fiction. *Transmetropolitan*, his series with artist Darick Robertson, remains one of the best cyberpunk comics ever created, and Ellis brings that same energy to his webcomic. Along with artist Paul Duffield, he has conjured a post-apocalyptic world, centred in Whitechapel, and the titular characters, twelve 23 year old psychics. Set six years after the end of civilization, this is disaster fiction at its best with Ellis describing it as "retro-punk" or "near future steampunk".

Duffield is a highly underrated artist and colourist, composing gorgeous watercolour backgrounds and dynamic characters with equal skill. With a more traditional format, usually four panels per page, this is an easy entry into the world of internet comics. First published in 2008, *Freakangels* is 144 episodes long and has been collected completely in six chunky hardcovers.

An intriguing mix of both fantasy and science fiction can also be found in some of the most critically acclaimed and successful comics, most notably Tom Siddell's *Gunnerkrigg Court* (***gunnerkrigg.com***). The story of a strange young girl at a deeply strange school encompasses both the world of magic and the world of robotics, with a great deal of mythology interwoven with science and logic. Also published in several hardcovers, Siddell slowly unwinds the mysteries around both the school and the girl, Antimony

Carver, and her circle of friends. Each chapter is brilliantly self-contained but as the story has gone on, more and more connections have begun to appear, with the plot spilling in many completely unexpected but enchanting directions.

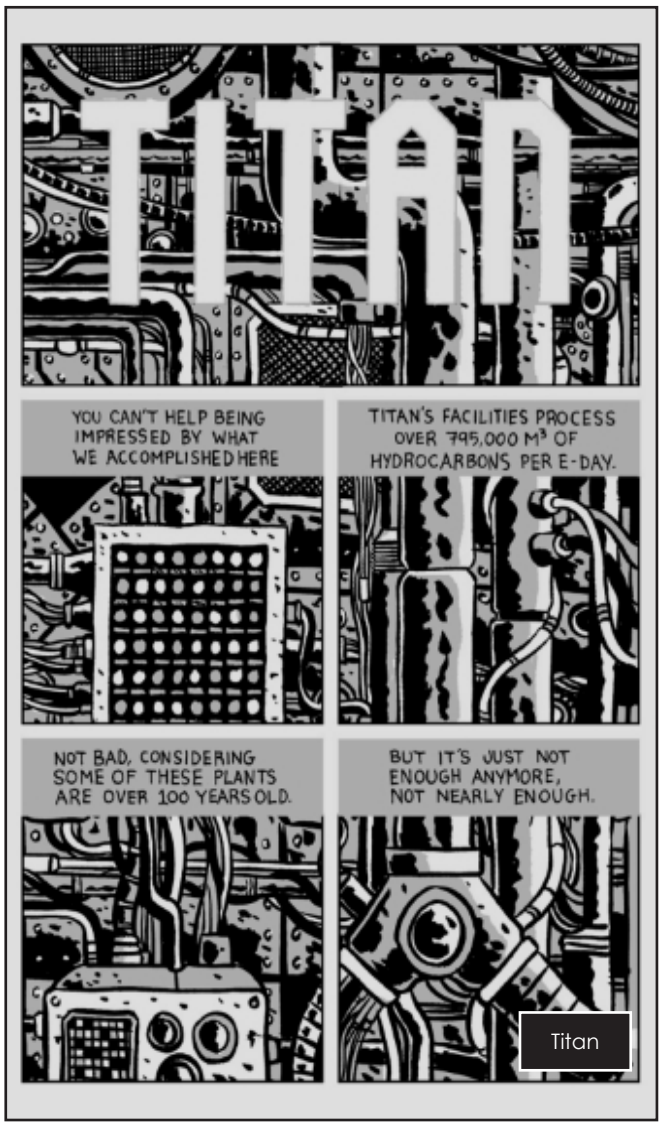
Almost of equal enthral is the evolution of Siddell's art: from fairly simple and childlike, to remarkably sophisticated and impressive. The transformation of colour is telling too, with the duller colours of the school gradually reflecting the magic and science of the story in turn. First published in 2005, the comic is updated three times a week, and is available in four glorious hardcovers thus far.

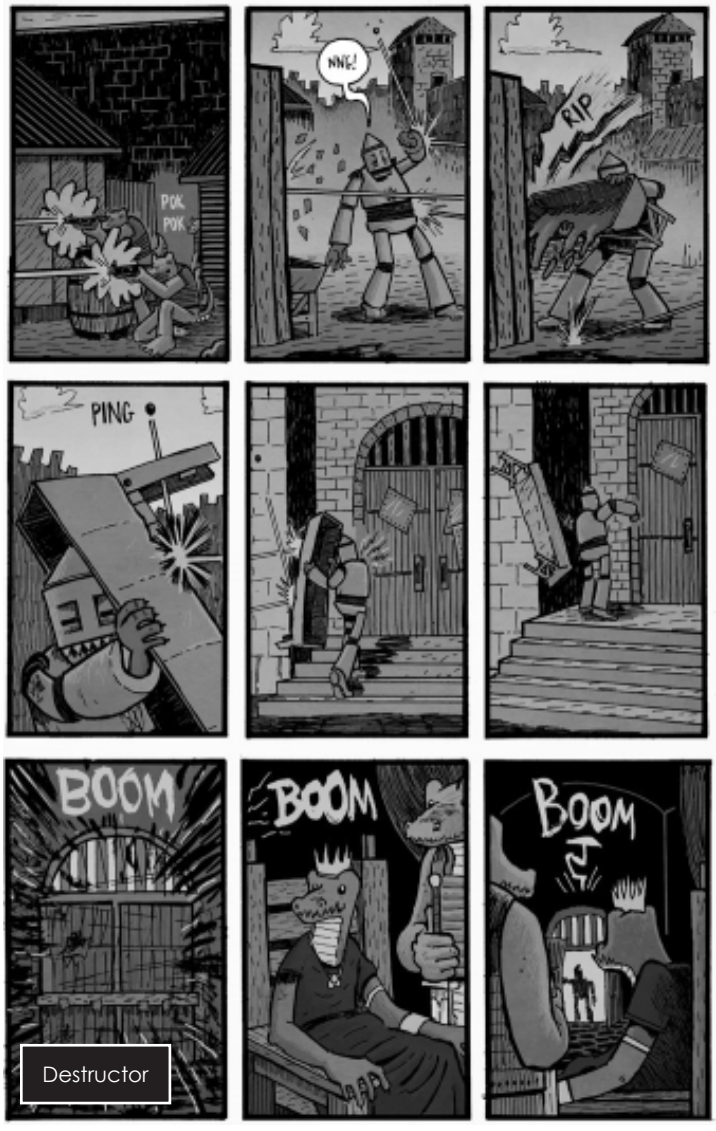
A similar blend of fantasy and science fiction can be found in the acclaimed *Ava's Demon* (***avasdemon.com***), set 1000 years in the future and starring a 15 year old girl named Ava Ire who is haunted by Wrathia Bellarmina, the demon ghost of an alien queen. Created by Michelle Czajkowski, a former intern at Pixar and Dreamworks animator, the comic has one panel per page occasionally interspersed by animated scenes. While so called "motion comics" do not always have the greatest of

reputations, Czajkowski's skill as an animator lifts these interludes above and beyond expectations to grab a huge readership- fans raised nearly $200,000 to bring the webcomic to print form.

Animation is just one ability afforded by the infinite canvas of a browser page, and one that is used wonderfully by Jen Lee's *Thunderpaw: In the Ashes of Fire Mountain* (***thunderpaw.co***), a tale of two anthropomorphic dogs, Bruno and Ollie, as they make their way in a suddenly post-apocalyptic world. The two buddies, waiting for their humans to return to their car, slowly realise that the world is not the same as it used to be, in a comic brought to life with a blend of twitchy animated gifs, static panels, and forays into art which spills endlessly down – or across - the page.

The art is both reminiscent of underground comix and





achingly cute, and the colour palette of blacks and orange paint a picture of doom as the two pals fight against the odds. *Thunderpaw* is relatively new, launched in 2012, and updates monthly.

The exploitation of both the horizontal and vertical scroll for the internet reader is used wonderfully by Margaret Trauth's *Decrypting Rita* (explored in *Vector* #276) and Sean T Collins and Matt Wiegle's *Destructor* (***destructorcomics.com***). The latter is the story of the titular tyrant as he crashes throughout the sprawling Alpha System, rising to unimaginable power with his brutal mob of allies. Originally published in black and white via the Top Shelf 2.0 webcomics portal, the strips are gorgeously coloured by Wiegle, and two new story arcs.

That use of colour is particularly striking throughout in a comic with very little dialogue but mountains of characterization and action. The endless page is used in the collection of each story arc, publishing multiple comics on a single page for a more immersive (and less fiddly) read.

Francois Vigneault uses a similar technique in his webcomic, *Titan* (***studygroupcomics.com***). Each of the (currently three) chapters has one page to themselves, with the newest chapter updated every Thursday with the latest panels. Vigneault is telling a very human story of immigration and diversity tensions, as lead character Mngr João da Silva arrives at Homestead Station on Titan. The moon is

populated by both humans and Titans, people who have been biologically engineered to cope with the low gravity, but are restricted to certain employment. Chafing against the human minority and with their jobs at risk as da Silva assesses whether the colony should be shut down, tensions run high.

Each chapter is in black and white with a unique third colour, this is a very underrated comic and *Titan* #1 and #2 are available to buy in physical format from the Study Group Comics website.

One of the most popular science fiction webcomics is *Terra* (***terra-comic.com***), from creators Holly Laing and Drew Dailey. Focusing on guerrillas, the Resistance, working to put an end to war between Earth and the Azatoth that has caused chaos throughout the galaxy, the comic follows the adventures of four characters in particular. With plenty of action and great character interaction, this is particularly popular with fans of cult science fiction television shows.

Terra is very prettily drawn, with shades of manga influence at work, and the cell-shaded colouring is very easy on the eye. First published in 2009, the comic updates once a week.

Similar, and yet completely different, is Jenn Manley Lee's *Dicebox* (***dicebox.net***); a sprawling science fiction epic following a married couple of space bums as they aimlessly travel from world to world. It may sound somewhat banal, an exact description bestowed by comics legend Carla Speed McNeil with all sincerity and love, but the worlds that Griffen and Molly traverse are utterly spectacular and amazing to the reader, yet completely ordinary and even boring to them.

First published in 2002, *Dicebox* is often cited as the longest running science fiction webcomic, and its niche-defying premise is exactly what made the internet such a promising platform. Besides the slow paced gradual unravelling of backstory and world-building, the comic also has a welcoming approach to gender: the gender neutral pronoun of "peh" is in familiar usage, with some characters using it exclusively while others blur the gender binary in different ways. Griffin for example identifies biologically as female, but her gender is more complex. It's a refreshing change from other future-set comics where the binary is frustratingly adhered to, and has won the comic an even greater readership. Lee is aiming for *Dicebox* to span four books by the end, with the first available to buy in physical format or pdf on the website.

One of the most interesting science fiction webcomics is also one of the most elusive: *I Was Kidnapped by Lesbian Pirates from Outer Space* by Megan Rose Gedris is, ironically, only available via piracy after the creator lost the rights to Platinum Studios, a company plagued by fraud and embezzlement accusations. The comic began in 2005, was bought in 2006, and was taken down by Gedris in 2013 after failing to reacquire the rights and wanting to distance herself from the beleaguered company.

The comic, rendered in glorious 1950's pulp style, was bursting with pop art panache and Kirby dots. Susan Bell, an ordinary secretary, is abducted by an alien raiding party of lesbian space pirates who believe she is the long-lost princess of their planet. Kitsch hijinks ensue, with beehive hairdos and bullet-shaped bras aplenty.

It's a damn shame that one of the best webcomics created is no longer with us, and a sobering reminder to all comic creators that the internet is no safer than the world of corporate comics when it comes to young creators signing the wrong contracts.

Still, with ever increasing online innovation and the booming popularity of tablet devices, who knows what excitement the future holds for the youngest of comics platforms?

recurrent:
RESONANCES
Stephen Baxter

Imaginative Moonbases

Because of my involvement with a lunar colonisation project that I'll describe in a future column, recently I've been looking back at sf-nal imaginings of Moon bases.

As it happens *Doctor Who* returned to the Moon in 2014 in an episode called "Kill the Moon", which featured, ironically for one of the series' more scientifically illiterate episodes, a pretty convincing near-future lunar base. In the year 2049 Mexico is running a 4-person mining survey base. Set on a well-rendered lunar surface, the base was a series of small shack-like pressure domes; inside you saw a workplace, like a small Antarctic base perhaps, grimy, metallic, undecorated, crammed with equipment, notes pinned to the walls, and all thoroughly grungy. About the only splash of colour was a big Mexican flag on one wall. The Moon is a lethal environment where living spaces have to be expensively enclosed, and every lungful of air mechanically recycled; in the near future at least, colonies there will be small and cramped, and that's what we saw – even if there were unfeasibly long corridors down which the Doctor was chased by lunar germ-spiders . . . or something.

Lunar bases in media sf haven't always been so authentically depicted, but they have reflected contemporary dreams and hopes. Back in the 1960s, before the Apollo astronauts encountered the reality of the Moon, bases could be a hell of a lot larger than that Mexican shack, majoring on airy engineered chambers and big windows giving onto the stark lunar landscape.

The very first lunar base featured in *Doctor Who* gave the title to the serial "The Moonbase" (1967). In the year 2070 multinational specialists at 'Moonport' control the world's weather using a 'Gravitron', a gravity manipulator – which unfortunately the Cybermen attempt to hijack. The exterior of the domed base was elegant, with delicate glass-walled chambers, although the interior was a utilitarian environment for a uniformed crew.

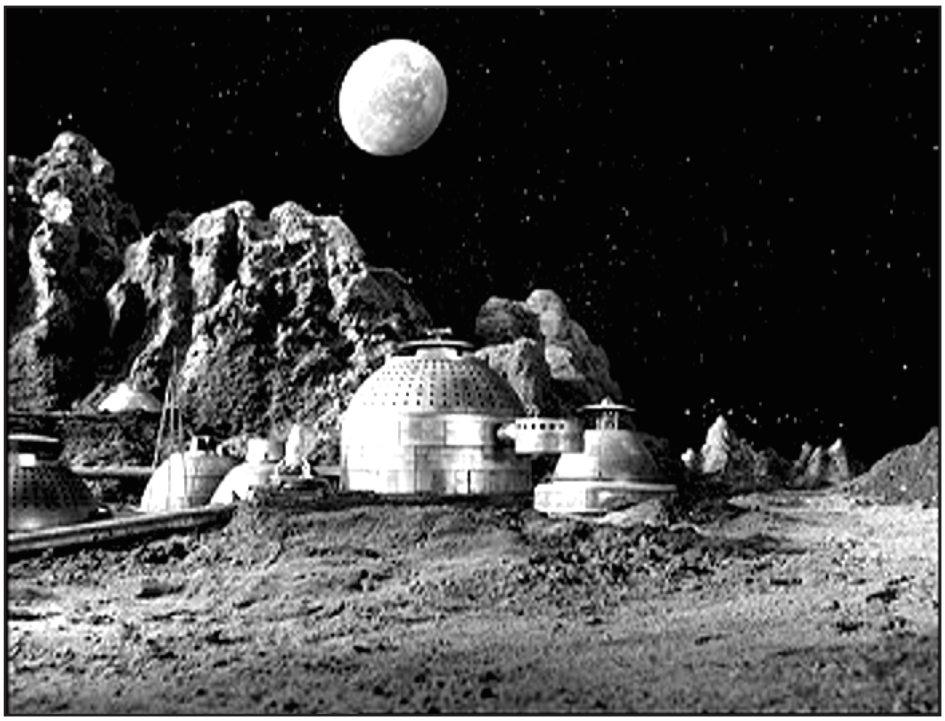
Similarly in "The Seeds of Death" (1969), the Moon is a hub of the 'T-Mat' system – global transport by teleportation, under UN control. The lunar base is functional but lifeless, full of metal surfaces and sharp edges, and the crew wear anonymous uniforms with name badges. In "Frontier in Space" (1973) the Moon is being used as a prison by a bureaucratic world government. The colony is plain, utilitarian, a monochrome blue, including the prisoners' uniforms; overall the effect is actually similar to the earlier science bases.

Imaginative Moon base designs showed up in many of Gerry Anderson's TV shows. In the episode "Lunarville 7" of *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (1967), the 'lunar controller' declares that the Moon is to be an 'independent world' and will step aside from the war with the Mysterons. Captain Scarlet discovers that, alas, the controller has been taken over by the Mysterons. From the exterior the base is a cluster of silvered domes (some of which look suspiciously like upturned colanders and other kitchen utensils). Within, we see a guest suite like a futuristic hotel room, and a main control room, expansive, clean, lacking any decoration save monochrome washes of pale colours of floor and walls, and with huge circular portholes. For budget reasons you never saw large crowds in the Anderson puppet shows, and despite the bright colours, the few characters in these wide gleaming spaces add to an impression of sterility and coldness.

In Anderson's *UFO* (1969) a Moonbase is the outer perimeter of a deep defensive network against attack by humanoid aliens. Seen from above the Moonbase has a stark geometric layout, four domes surrounding a central block connected by a cross of rectangular passageways. Inside the decor is metallic, the control centre and other work areas places of smooth curves, flashing lights and robust-looking windows. The living areas are more colourful, plastic and bright, with vibrant 60s-style abstract furniture – but few signs of personal adornment. Once again everyone's in uniform, the men in silvery coveralls, the women sparkly catsuits and vivid purple wigs. It is as if they are all parts of a giant machine.

A bigger-budget base with similar 60s chic came in Hammer's movie *Moon Zero Two* (1969): 'the first Moon "western"'. The story is about corporate scams on a colonised Moon in the year 2021. The design is a clash of old tech and new. The 'Moon Zero Two' of the title is an antiquated shuttle that looks like a stretched Apollo lunar module, but the lunar bases we see are more advanced. At the main settlement, Moon City, habitable chambers are cut into the faces of a rough-edged pinnacle. Inside, bright, roomy domes of metal ribs and panels are built into the dark lunar rock. In the bar there are very 60s Aarnio 'ball' chairs, and on a stage Pan's People-style dancers gyrate endlessly.

Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me (1999), Mike Myers' hilarious spoof, features a Moon base which captures this period perfectly: 'I've turned the Moon into what I call a "Death Star" . . .'. Dr Evil's base is an echoing geodesic dome, a typically machine-like place of geometric symmetry underlit in blue, the people in identical costumes, the starry sky visible through huge windows. Austin Powers, having hitched a ride on Apollo 11, thwarts Evil's plans once again.



A turning point for lunar base aesthetics was Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), influential in this as in so many other areas. Dr Heywood Floyd, en route to his encounter with the lunar Monolith, stops at Clavius, an American Moon base, a sprawl of buildings joined in a geometric logic of circular arcs and radii. The only interior we see is a conference facility, a rectangular box with eerily glowing pale white walls. But the enduring chic of *2001* shows up in other interiors, such as the grand wheel-shaped space station with its upward-curving corridors, white-walled with splashes of colour. Everything is orderly, calm, machine-like and clean.

Gerry Anderson's *Space:1999* (1975-77) clearly shows the influence of *2001* – which isn't surprising as special effects director Brian Johnson, while an Anderson veteran, had spent three years working on the movie. The show was derived in part from a proposal for a second series of *UFO*, which would have featured an expanded SHADO Moonbase – but, with a significantly larger budget, the principal settlement Moonbase Alpha was a handsome affair, with (according to a sales guide issued for the second series) 311 people inhabiting a settlement over two miles across and connected by subways. The layout of Alpha externally is reminiscent of Clavius from *2001*, with the concentric-circles-and-radii plan, and the habitable areas are lit by square light panels in walls and ceiling, just like Floyd's conference room. Some sets are spectacularly large, especially the main control centre within which overheads shots are possible. The colours, of decor, furniture and uniforms, are white, grey, pale beige – the place is almost colourless in fact, no coloured wigs now, no Spectrum chic. The whole looks like a clean, modern industrial facility.

This was a series created *after* we had glimpsed the reality of life on the Moon through the Apollo flights, the lunar modules cramped and cluttered and Moondust grimy. But media designers are often primarily influenced by earlier media products rather than influences from the real world.

Still, gradually, a new, more utilitarian aesthetic did show up. George Lucas famously said of his *Star Wars* saga (1977 onwards) that he wanted to show a 'used universe', but the very lived-in spacecraft in *Dark Star* (1974) was a predecessor, and later *Alien* (1979) cemented visions of industrial space habitats in the imagination.

The BBC's *Moonbase 3* (1973), created by *Doctor Who* veterans Barry Letts and Terrance Dicks, was a brave but ultimately unsuccessful early attempt at a grunge-on-the-Moon saga. Set in 2003, Moonbase 3, one of five national science research bases, is a cluster of domes and rectangular slabs, the interiors drab, windowless and cramped – there are very few long shots. The base has the feel of a nuclear submarine; the expansive fantasy of *UFO* seems very remote. The drama derives from psychological pressure coming from bureaucracy, budgets, personal conflict and the sheer lethality of the environment; the base psychologist is kept pretty busy. As a product of the austere early 70s the show reflects its times, and may have influenced later downbeat space productions such as *Star Cops* (1987).

More recently, the design of lunar mining base Sarang in Duncan Jones' movie *Moon* (2009) shows a mix of influences. As huge machines scrape the valuable fusion fuel helium-3 from the lunar regolith, the base has a sole human inhabitant – with a twist I won't reveal here. The movie was realised with Anderson-style model work for exterior shots, and for the interiors a 'full 360 [degree] set' was constructed on a Shepperton sound stage, a series of connected chambers some 90' long and 70' wide, surely one of the most complete Moonbase mock-ups ever created (***www.comingsoon.net***, 23 January 2009). The base has corridors with square cross-sections reminiscent of modules on the International Space Station, with a dash of *2001* in the florescent light panels, and post-Apollo grime in the airlocks.

The Moon is an arena of contradictions in sf. It is the nearest alien world of all, and an obvious settings for near-future adventures beyond the Earth. But on the other hand it is the only world we have yet actually visited, and the collision of the Apollo astronauts' gritty experience with the gaudy, more abstract dreams of just a few years before their landings makes for a jarring clash of aesthetics.

recurrent: THE BSFA REVIEW
Edited by Martin Petto

Southern Reach: Annihilation, Authority and *Acceptance* by Jeff Vandermeer (Fourth Estate, 2014)

Reviewed by Dan Hartland

There is a powerful spell of which many of those active in online criticism have for some time been aware. SUMMON VANDERMEER is best effected simply by referring to one of the eponymous scribbler's works in a published review, blog post or comment; upon conjuring, VanderMeer will manifest, most often offering a faintly under-written defence of even the smallest gripe or criticism, occasionally doing so in a way which leaves the readers of this digital ectoplasm less than confident that the summoned sprite meant to do that.

VanderMeer's occasionally less than happy history of engaging with his readers makes the rapturous response to his *Southern Reach* trilogy all the more remarkable. Coming as it does after something of a break from fiction - VanderMeer has in recent years made most (and significant) impact in editorial conjunction with his wife, Ann - the trilogy is as heavy and serious a statement as a returning writer could possibly wish to make. It is a distillation of the genre in which he is now widely regarded as an expert, the Weird; it is an act of astonishingly wide-ranging pop-culture criticism; and it is a furiously well-written, sometimes shockingly evocative story of ecological disaster, adaptation and accommodation.

Set in a world in which a tranche of land known only as Area X has been given over entirely to a weird physics with no identifiable origin or cause, the novel centres on the invisible but impermeable border with few known egresses which separates Area X from all but the ill-fated expeditions sent by the government agency set the task of investigating it, the Southern Reach. In this scenario, VanderMeer plays with issues of perception and penetration: how Area X can and can't be measured or understood; how it may or may not interact with the world beyond it; and what its creeping weirdness, its inhospitability and indifference to human beings might mean or portend.

The first volume of the trilogy, the quite unusually discomfiting *Annihilation*, follows the group of women who enter Area X as the Southern Reach's twelfth expedition (but who are in fact much further along a hidden sequence of secret visits that that). We never learn the names of any of the expedition's members but instead come to know them by their function: the viewpoint character, for instance, is identified as the biologist and her desire to observe and understand proves ill-suited to the impossibilities of Area X. Most obviously, this includes the subterranean structure on the walls of which is

written a recursive prayer-like koan in iridescent script. Counter-intuitively known by the biologist knows as the Tower, it houses the Crawler, a fractal, shifting being which appears to contain the essence of Area X and yet is utterly ineffable. "The longer I stared at it," bemoans the expedition's supposed expert on unusual organisms, "the less comprehensible it became."

VanderMeer is quite brilliant in this first volume at instilling in the reader the disorientation and terror which Area X inspires in the expedition. To read *Annihilation* is to interface with the inaccessible. VanderMeer's spare prose presents the illusion of transparency, the suggestion of clarity, but the subjects of his sentences are something other, crafted to be just beyond the extent of his diction: "I was no longer a biologist but somehow the crest of a wave building and building but never crashing to shore". This is crystalline writing, cut and polished to gleam, but what it quite means is unclear. Only by accretion and exposure does the reader begin to piece together a working understanding of events and it is a real achievement of VanderMeer's that unlike many lesser writers of the Weird he does not revel in incomprehension. He rewards his reader.

He also tests them. In the second volume, *Authority*, VanderMeer leaves Area X entirely for the confines of the Southern Reach's headquarters. Here, the protagonist is John Rodriguez, a disgraced former counter-terrorism field agent who prefers the nickname Control. This, of course, echoes Le Carré and, where *Annihilation* distilled the Weird, at times *Authority* seems to refract spy fiction and thrillers. This second book may test the patience of some. It feels in many ways less urgent and less alarming than the first, yet I think in its uncanny depiction of office politics it sounds a satirical note which adds a new voicing to the trilogy's overall euphony.

One of Control's most creative staff scientists, Whitby, develops a *terroir* theory of Area X: that, as with wine, "environmental varietals" have conspired to produce specific and unrepeatable effects within its weird boundaries. But the palimpsests of agendas and personalities at the failing Southern Reach lead Control to another conclusion, "finding now in Whitby's *terroir* theory something that might apply more to the Southern Reach than to Area X". That is, Control (again denied a real name) is out of control, both of a territory which systematically and entirely erases all trace of human activity (reshaping it as weird doubles or fatal cancers) and also of the agency designed to contain it. "Topological anomaly?" Control imagines his grandfather scoffing at the term used by his staff to describe the Tower. "Don't you mean some kind of spooky thing that we know nothing, absolutely fucking nothing about, to go with everything else we don't know?"

Control's family have more purchase on this bureaucratic farce than his mere imaginings. Control is Acting Director of the Southern Reach at the behest of his powerful spymaster mother, following the disappearance on an expedition of the previous incumbent. The drifting of the trilogy into the family saga genre can feel like a bridge too far. Control's mother proves to be an important character and his relationship with her is therefore rather more significant than the queasy attenuation VanderMeer sketches with notable facility for unease. At first they read as another iteration of the trilogy's over-arching theme that most people want "to be *close to* but not *part of*"; their rapidly apparent plot importance makes the story oddly local for a trilogy constantly skirting the cosmic.

Perhaps, though, we require an anchor: *Authority* ends with Control and the returned double of the biologist (now referred to as Ghost Bird) finding a fresh entrance into an expanding Area X, which seems if anything more rather than less strange on second encounter. Indeed, the third and final volume of the trilogy, *Acceptance*, proves both its most ineffable and its most up-front. Told from a range of perspectives - Control, Ghost Bird, the former Director and, most disturbingly of all, the lighthouse keeper in the region that becomes in the course of his story Area X - connections begin to be made. The trilogy rejects the idea that any single one of us can perceive completely and its multi-voice finale attempts to show why.

"There's nothing to this world but what our senses tell us about it," insists Control, "and all I can do is the best I can based on that information.". Control is repeatedly undone by this inflexibility and he passes through these novels rather lost and buffeted; his opposite number is the twin-face of the biologist and Ghost Bird, who seek to inhabit a space as natively as possible. "Area X was all around them; Area X was contained in no one place or figure. It was the dysfunction in the sky [...] the heavens and earth. It could interrogate you from any position or no position at all, and you might not even recognise its actions as a form of questioning."

In the online magazine *Strange Horizons*, Adam Roberts has written better than anyone about the ways in which the *Southern Reach* trilogy in this way reimagines nature writing for our troubled times. What does it mean that our environment is altering in ways we don't understand, into shapes for which we are not necessarily suited and in a manner that emphasises its indifference to our presence? The expeditions of the Southern Reach are forays fated to doom because they seek human-sized solutions to these questions; VanderMeer's inexplicable clarity is an idiom suited to disputing this.

But in its lovers and families, its terrorists and spies, its intimate villages and expansive governments, the world of the Southern Reach is also more widely about connection and motivation. In fact, I'd suggest that to read the richness of the trilogy through a purely ecological lens is to deny the potency of its effect. In the lighthouse keeper's tale there are moments of pure horror - "Sadi spun and twitched and twisted on the floor, slamming into chairs and table legs, beginning to come to pieces" - but it is impossible to challenge Ghost Bird's welcoming of the inevitable accommodation to come. The simultaneity of the horror and beauty of Area X - that the individual cannot prevail against the universal - is the terror and redemption at the heart of our every interaction.

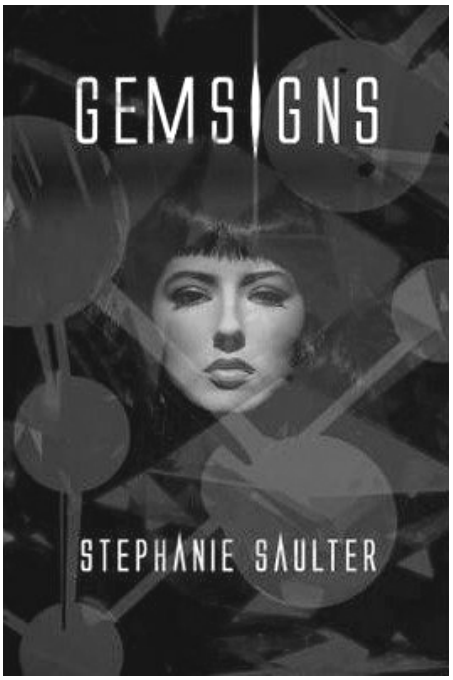
All of which is to say that the *Southern Reach* is preternaturally fertile, the sort of layered and constructed fiction that readers pine for and so rarely receive. We will all in future SUMMON VANDERMEER with markedly less trepidation.

Gemsigns and *Binary* by Stephanie Saulter (Jo Fletcher Books, 2013 & 2014)

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

I can cut a long story short in reviewing Stephanie Saulter's first two novels, *Gemsigns* and *Binary* (collectively part of the slightly clumsily named *(R)Evolution* series), by saying that I recommend them highly. Like most early-career authors, there are roughnesses around the edges of Saulter's work but there is more than enough evidence in these books to suggest that she has the ability to turn into a very accomplished novelist. However, these books do more than just suggest future potential, they do enough on their own to justify your reading time – they are both thoughtful and entertaining.

The basic set up of the *Gemsigns* world is familiar – perhaps overly so – from much young adult and modern dystopian science fiction: a specially formulated minority must struggle to overcome entrenched oppression. In this instance a technological plague has dramatically reduced the human population. In response to the crisis, humanity has created a range of genetically modified (Gem) workers designed to do the menial and dangerous jobs necessary to shore up the foundations of civilisation. These Gems, marked out by brightly glowing hair of various shades depending on the corporation responsible for their creation, have for generations been considered sub-human. As with other novels of this type, the metaphorical oppression rather simplifies the world, crowding out real and existing inequalities (of race or gender, for example) and there's never any doubt where Saulter expects the sympathy of her readership to rest.



What grabs the attention in *Gemsigns* is not so much the basic setting but the point at which Saulter has chosen to begin her trilogy. Most of these stories deal with the initial struggle for freedom and lead up to the moment of the overthrow of the *ancien régime*, ending with revolution and a singular victory or betrayal. Saulter, however, starts the story with basic rights already won. The Gems have freed themselves, more-or-less, from the control of the corporations who created them and are recognised as having at least some rights to fair treatment and independence. But, as in the real world, the struggle for freedom and equality is not won in a moment.

Gemsigns takes place against the background of a constitutional convention designed to decide the precise meaning of the Gem's independence. As such, *Gemsigns* is a relatively rare book in science fiction in that it is not simply concerned with battering the reader with ideological formulations but devotes time to the political processes of negotiation, consensus-building and compromise that are fundamental to entrenching theoretical freedoms. In this way – if not in writing style or specific subject matter – Saulter's first novel is reminiscent of the work of authors like Kim Stanley Robinson or Eleanor Arnason.

This not to suggest that *Gemsigns* is in any sense a dry book. One of the many traps that await authors of specifically political stories are those moments of lost faith, either in their own ability or in the comprehension of their readers, that leads them to feel the need to stop their stories to explain *the point of all this*. It is a trap that Saulter elegantly avoids, her story unfolding neatly from the motivations of her characters and the logic of the machines she has set in motion in the creation of her world. *Gemsigns* is a book that is admirably lacking in lectures.

Binary begins shortly after the end of *Gemsigns* and extends the notion that victories are not won in a single moment. In some ways this second book is more conventional. It revolves around unravelling the mysteries in some of the characters' histories and resolves itself through an improbable break-in and showdown in a secret laboratory but the book showcases another of Saulter's strengths as a novelist. Taking the already large cast of the first novel then adding to it, the most impressive aspect of *Binary* is the way in which this diverse group remain individually distinctive and convincingly realised. Saulter has a deft touch with relationships too and the interplay between Aryel and Eli and Sharon and Mikal is nicely handled. If the intensity of the feelings shared by Callan and Rhys is a little *sudden* it is, at least, sweetly delivered.

Saulter has room to grow as a writer. At present she delivers her words efficiently and cleanly enough and the mechanics of her writing are solid but there remain one or two moments of clumsiness and, I think, opportunities for her to explore greater stylistic complexity in her writing. I also think her futurist London lacks a really convincing sense of depth and place. The setting for her action can sometimes feel a little vague and she can take the reader's familiarity with the settings for granted.

But if the *(R)Evolution* series has a real weakness it is in her representation of the chief villain. Zavcka Klist is Chief Executive of Bel'Natur (one of the corporations who created the Gems) and she sometimes drifts towards the cartoonish, prone to unnecessarily elaborate plots and with a tendency to recruit henchmen of dubious quality. It would have been nice, given the depth of the world that Saulter creates for her kaleidoscope of characters, if she had given the Gems and their allies a rather more nuanced and complete foil for their struggle.

This year science fiction fandom has lauded the work of Ann Leckie, with *Ancillary Justice* winning award after award. As two neophyte female SF novelists, the temptation (to which I'm about to succumb) is to compare Leckie and Saulter. Both have room to develop stylistically and both share a similar weakness in characterising their antagonists. Leckie's book attracted attention thanks to a single flashy idea at its core, playing games with pronouns and gender expectations but, for me, Saulter is the more promising prospect. Both *Gemsigns* and *Binary* deliver complex but satisfying plots whereas *Anciliary Justice* rather falls apart at the halfway mark. Saulter also creates a broader range of interesting and fully realised characters, none of whom feel that they exist purely to give the protagonist a sounding board. Stephanie Saulter may not have received the same attention as Ann Leckie this year, but there's no reason to assume that she cannot be every bit as important a writer going forward.

Get Katja by Simon Logan (ChiZine Publications, 2014)

Reviewed by Shaun Green

The eponymous Katja is a punk, a fact that won't have escaped readers of Simon Logan's previous novel, *Katja From The Punk Band*. About the only things that Katja values in her life are her guitar, her band, The Broken, and her wits. All three are about as battered as each other but, as Minnesota punk band Dillinger 4 wrote, channelling down-and-outer author Nelson Algren, "the beat-up side of what they call pride could be the measure of these days."

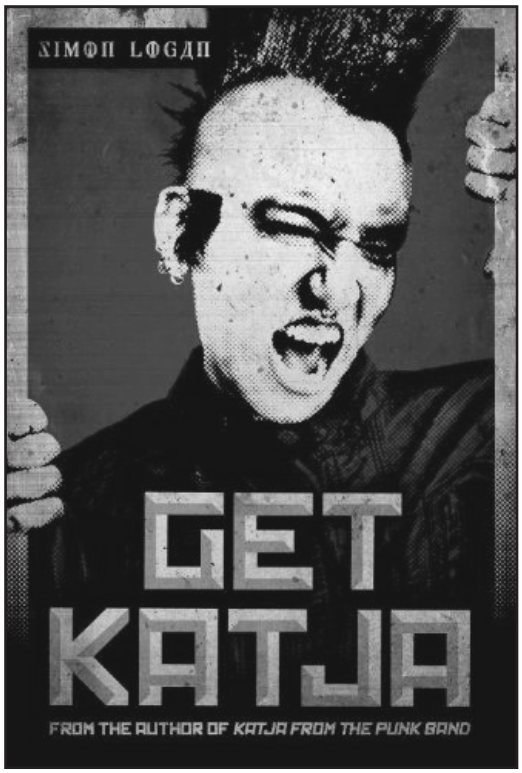
Alas, Katja's dream of a simple life thrashing her guitar and vocal chords on-stage is yet to be realised. She's only recently emerged from hiding to play a gig, having gone off-grid to escape blowback from the first novel's events. Following soundcheck she's jumped by debt-collector Lady Delicious and her gang of transvestite thugs. Katja's protestations that neither she nor her band have borrowed any money fall on deaf, bejewelled ears, and her guitar is taken to ensure she won't abscond without playing the show.

Delicious and her girls aren't the only parties with an interest in Katja. Crooked detective DeBoer, fresh on the heels of a poker loss against local loan shark Frank, spots her mohawked visage snarling forth from a gig poster and knows the value she represents to some of his affiliates. Then there's the voyeuristic nurse Bridget and her boss, Doctor Stasko, a deranged surgeon addicted to cosmetic body modification surgery. Stasko has found a copy of the same poster and is convinced that Katja is perfect for one of his projects. Nikolai, Katja's ex-bandmate and a recovering addict, might be the key Bridget needs to 'obtain' her. This cast and more are pulled into Katja's erratic orbit as the chase begins in earnest. Their efforts often clash with Katja finding herself passed constantly back and forth and various parties getting knocked out or robbed as they pursue their prize. The evening of The Broken's comeback gig is setting up to be one of the busiest, and nastiest, in their lives - assuming they make it through to morning.

It took me about halfway through *Get Katja* to clock that the novel's core literary mode is that of a farce: a comic and dramatic tale characterised by roughly-drawn characters and highly improbable situations. It is strange how an act of mental categorisation can shift a perception of a piece of fiction: prior to cottoning on I'd found myself increasingly put off by how absurd and contrived the events in this apparently cynical and streetwise story were. Once I was in on the joke and light was shone on the novel's comic intentions, it and I gelled a little more.

Logan himself bills *Get Katja* not as farce but as "industrial crime". I'm unsure what to make of that as, outside of his grimy world, corrupt characters and occasional reference to body-modification, there are few strong connections to either industrial music or the crime genre. Then again, I'm writing this for the British Science Fiction Association and am no expert on either form. I am at least qualified to point out that the book has very few science fictional elements at all (perhaps the most fantastical idea present is that a punk band playing a dive venue would be paid a sum of money actually worth stealing).

It does seems clear, however, that Logan has drawn inspiration from the seminal British film *Get Carter* - the novel's title is an obvious pun - particularly in his convoluted plotting, his focus on underworld lives and the casually brutal violence he describes. Unlike Carter, however, Katja is often an actor without agency; while she's tough, smart and independent she spends as much of the novel unconscious or imprisoned as not. There's some dissonance at the novel's heart as a result of its protagonist so often proving an object rather than an agent but Logan mitigates this issue through the use of multiple character perspectives and the increasingly sympathetic Nikolai. It also helps that following the twists and turns of the dense plot soon becomes the reader's focus, particularly in the latter half when an additional thread is revealed.



The prose favours clarity and directness over ostentatious literary flair with descriptive narration often limited to initial scene-setting. Few of the novel's locales have a particularly strong sense of place and there's little opportunity for introspection. Instead the focus is on action and movement, as it should be for a novel that is so heavily constituted by its plot. This does mean that the novel can sometimes feel a little superficial and detached but once you're caught up in the flow of events it's rarely a concern. Furthermore the heavily-plotted and farcical nature of the novel might clash with characters composed of finer strokes or where the urban environment possessed more of the unpredictable personality it occasionally exhibits.

I do wish that what characterisation we do get was less prone to cartoonish misanthropy; a personal bugbear which I feel is all too often a lazy shortcut in writing which wishes to appear 'mature' by way of blanket cynicism about human beings (and if there's one thing I've often seen at the heart of punk, even at its nihilistic worst, it is a contrarian optimism). But probably *Get Katja*'s biggest weakness is that it's not terribly funny: the improbable twists and turns of the plotting provide most of the effective humour, with the characters' attempts at wit almost uniformly falling flat. Of course, this could be a by-product of how utterly dreadful we are intended to find most of the cast but at least Katja could have gotten a few good jabs in.

For all that I have criticised many aspects of this novel, I'd give it a reserved recommendation. It's a solid novel that proves a lot of fun and although its weaknesses may be apparent to the discerning reader, they're easy to overlook in enjoying the ways in which the book sings - or, at least, snarls.

City Of Stairs by Robert Jackson Bennett (Jo Fletcher Books, 2014)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Robert Jackson Bennett's debut, *Mr. Shivers* won the Shirley Jackson Award and the Sydney J Bounds Newcomer Award at the British Fantasy Awards. His second novel, *The Company Man*, was honoured with the Philip K Dick Award. He followed these with *The Troupe* and *American Elsewhere* (which also won the Jackson). I have been aware of his career for some time, often thought his work looked interesting but never got round to him. One of the things which made the books look interesting was that each appeared to be very different, from alternative history noir thriller to an epic contemporary horror which had been compared to Stephen King by way of HP Lovecraft. When I was offered *City Of Stairs* for review I almost turned it down, ironically because it seemed so different again from the author's previous work.

It is a secondary world fantasy, a subgenre which generally has little appeal to me, in part because I have developed an intense dislike for franchises and novel series in general. So before going into detail, let me say that *City of Stairs* is a rare beast in being a self-contained secondary world fantasy novel which not only has a beginning, middle and end but a clear purpose in its design to which that end attains. For that alone, it should be celebrated. This is not to say that a sequel would not be possible, only that it would necessarily be such a different book that I can see no demand for it. More of the same would not be possible.

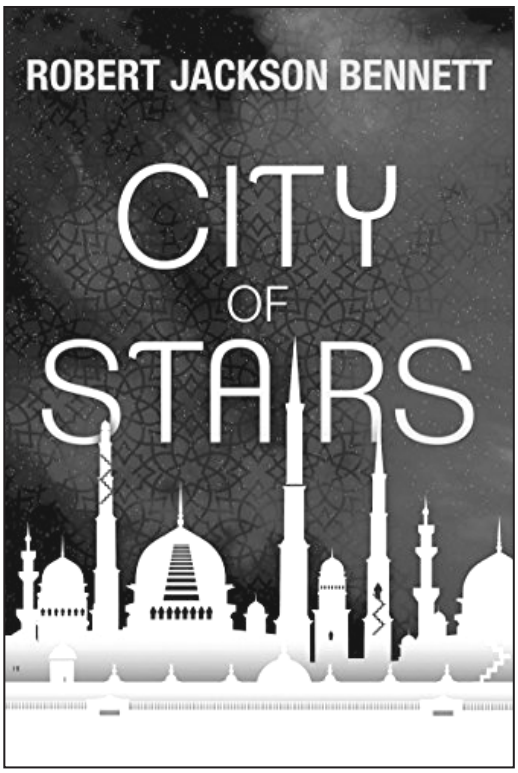
City Of Stairs is a metaphysical political thriller, for much of its length a story of methodical enquiry, though towards the end it develops more into an action adventure. It is also an exemplary example of world-building, in which the design is imaginative, intricate and purposively supportive of the author's overall scheme. It will be difficult to say more without spoiling the many pleasures of experiencing this book oneself, for it is a sort of mystery novel in which the investigation is not simply into the circumstances which resulted in the death of one particular individual but a parallel investigation into the nature of the world itself.

Bulikov, now in decline, is still one of the biggest cities on the Continent. Once a superpower, the Continent itself is under the rule of Saypur and when the Saypurian academic Dr Efrem Pangyui is murdered a Cultural Ambassador, Thivani arrives to begin her own, unauthorized investigation. The reader soon discovers that Thivani, accompanied by her 'secretary', a taciturn one man army, Sigrid, is not who she presents herself to be and has both a complex past and a family history which ties her to old conflicts which have not yet played their course. To say more would be to spoil things but Thivani turns out to be a very interesting character.

Bulikov is a complex city, once home to six major religions, before the gods were overthrown and killed in the war which reversed the fortunes of the Continent and Saypur. Now there are tensions between those who would lay the foundations of a progressive future and those who would return to religious fundamentalism. Meanwhile, the occupying powers are content to maintain a status quo in which the City and Continent alike remain in perpetual stagnation. Bennett develops a complex sense of Realpolitik out of this situation, while his depiction of the various characteristics of the six gods who were destroyed in the War and their attendant, very different religions, offers parallels, never exact, between various real world intersections between politics, history and faith. There are some readers, probably more in the author's home country of the United States, who may see things which offend them but, if so, that might be akin to thinking the Carly Simon song 'You're So Vain' is about you.

Other than the political thriller aspect of *City Of Stairs*, there is a more fantastical dimension in that the War which gave rise to the current situation fractured reality in mysterious ways. There are places in Bulikov which, if one knows how, function as portals to elsewhere. And in a now strictly materialistic reality, there is a vast warehouse filled with artefacts from the time when the gods still existed and the supernatural was real. And yes, this warehouse does inevitably remind the reader of the end of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* or the TV series *Warehouse 13*, though have no fear that the novel is overly derivative. This is a very small aspect of Bennett's highly involved and original world-building.

City Of Stairs also finds space to a weave a more personal subplot concerning lost love into a general theme of historical nostalgia and there are passages of awe, beauty and wonder as well as stark horror in Bennett's tale. Occasionally the novel falters when the somewhat over the top action seems at odds with an otherwise more intricate, cerebral tone. This is particularly so during an attack on a lavish society party, when Sigrud reveals talents akin to Liam Neeson in *Taken*. There are also places where the book could have benefited from more careful editing: on one page we are told there are "dozens and dozens of entry permission stubs". But then a couple of lines later "there is a total of nineteen permission stubs". A few pages later and there are dozens again. Elsewhere we read that the Governor's accommodation is less than two miles from Bulikov's walls. A couple of pages later and someone, referring to the Governor, says, "but when you've got those walls only a day's walk from you..." But these are minor quibbles. *City Of Stairs* is an ambitious and accomplished novel with interesting things to suggest about the relationships between peoples, their cultures and their gods. You may not agree with the author's implied conclusions but it makes for a fascinating argument and an engrossing read.



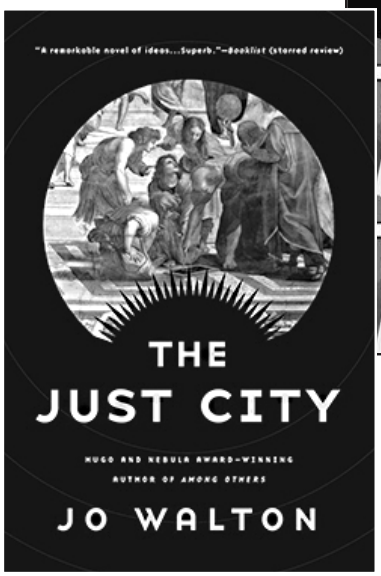
The Just City by Jo Walton (Tor, 2015)

Reviewed by Liz Bourke

The Just City is a peculiar and marvellous book. Its central conceit made me very dubious at first, for it revolves around an attempt to set up a version of Plato's *Republic* (*Politeia*, in Greek) under the aegis of the goddess Athena - by men and women from across more than two millennia. They bring to the city ten-year-old children and set about attempting to produce Philosopher Kings by teaching them art and music, philosophy and rhetoric, the goal of striving after excellence (*arete*) and justice. They are striving to produce perfect justice yet because they have taken Plato's *Republic* as their model, behind their every action lies the spectre of its "noble lie."

The story is told in the first person from three perspectives. Maia, once Ethel, is a young woman of the 19th Century who found in the *Republic* a model of women's intellectual equality and prayed to Athena to take her to such a city. She finds herself one of the masters and teachers of the city, involved - along with such figures as Cicero and Ficino, Porphyry and Pico della Mirandola - in seeing it come into being. Simmea, once Lucia, is one of the ten-year-old children bought from slavers and taken to the city, who finds in philosophy and learning both joy and personal fulfilment.

The third perspective is that of Apollo, who has laid down his godhood for the length of a mortal life and come to the city in the form of the boy Pytheas in order to learn and grow in understanding. He and Simmea become close friends, closer than lovers, united in the quest for knowledge and excellence.



But not all who have come to the city involuntarily want to remain or believe that the city's founders have their best interests at heart. And when Sokrates arrives in the city, in the fifth year since its establishment, his habit of asking persistently inconvenient questions, of going where he wills, befriending whom he wills, and discussing what he wills openly becomes a thorn in the side of the city's assumptions and pretences: a thorn that may well puncture the "noble lie" and see the project of the city brought to ruin.

The Just City makes its major thematic argument clear from the first page, though in a sneaky fashion. It is only as the book progresses that one realises how upfront it was about its concerns. For *The Just City* is a novel concerned, in many respects, with justice and consent, and the distortion of both: informed consent, consent in retrospect, lack of consent, the power to compel; and whether justice is possible without honesty. Cunningly disguised under explicit arguments about excellence and truth. Appropriately enough, at times it reads like one of the more entertaining Socratic dialogues.

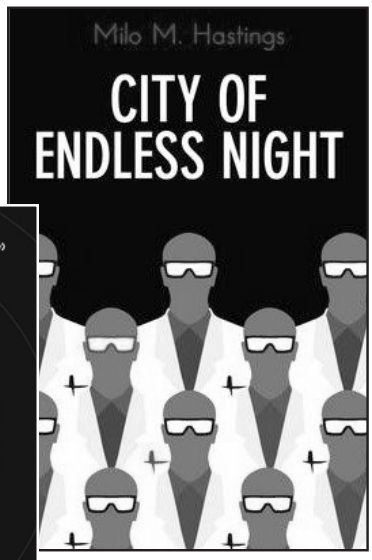
The conclusion leaves us hanging but there is to be a sequel, *The Philosopher Kings*. Meanwhile *The Just City*? Well worth your time.

City Of Endless Night by Milo M. Hastings (Hesperus Press, 2014)

Reviewed by L J Hurst

City Of Endless Night is an almost unknown marvel, a dystopia first published in book form in 1920, preceding many others by decades, yet exploring many of the ideas and worries that fill speculative fiction still. Today he would be called a food scientist who made his living breeding poultry but his interests were much broader: he was a relative of the Wright Brothers and also became a proponent of the 'Roadtown' style of continuous urban building. He received his break as an SF writer with a story serialised in Physical Culture magazine, published in 1911.

In 1919, he serialised *City Of Endless Night* between May and November and the original title, 'Children Of Kultur', revealed a little of the background to his work that was hidden in its final name. Hastings must have been reading the international press with great closeness as he wrote of the consequences of attitudes to war, exemplified by what was happening in Germany and elsewhere. In one sense a review could consist of simply listing all the subjects he found coming true: eugenics, sexual separation and subjection of women, social order being divided between deified leaders and a downtrodden proletariat, synthesising of food, reward by class, concentrated building. Nearly all of them unidentified in the way that Hastings was to use them – he was not writing in the style of HG Wells and I doubt if he knew of EM Forster's 'The Machine Stops' (1909) which shares something of the subterranean setting.



The story is relatively simple: in 2151 the world has been unified and is at peace apart from a German rump who have built Berlin downwards as an enormous fortified bunker. A world engineer falls into a border tunnel and discovers a stratified society run on ruthless lines - scientifically bred, nearly self-sufficient - in which there is almost no chance of rebellion within. The final insufficiency gives him his chance to escape and make his report.

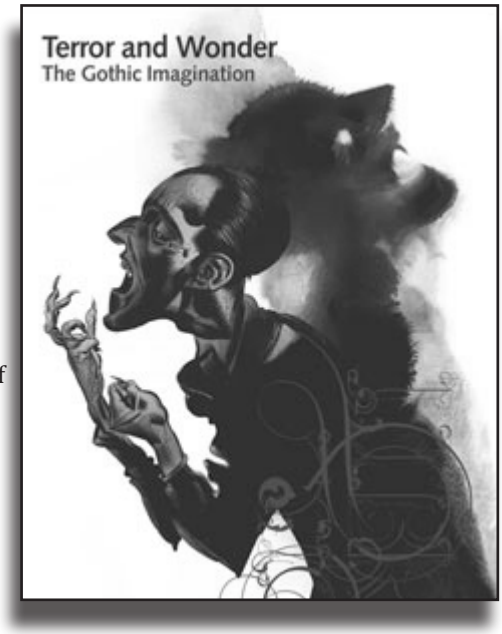
Hesperus have been re-publishing SF classics (such as Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* which I reviewed in *Vector* #268) and this is another that makes it worth searching out their catalogue, particularly as it never seems to have received a British edition before. Despite its condemnation of the future Germans it may have influenced Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*, though it would be wrong to believe that it leads directly to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (the sexual politics are wrong) or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (wrong sexual politics and urbanisation, though interesting precedent on the apotheosis of the leadership). It would, however, make an interesting comparison with Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* – where her godhead was Hitler, rather than Hastings's Hehenzollern king - or with (developing the sexual politics) Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Terror And Wonder: The Gothic Imagination, exhibition (British Library, 5 October 2014 to 20 January 2015) and book, edited by Dale Townshend (British Library, 2014)

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

The Castle Of Otranto by Horace Walpole was published 250 years ago. Ann Radcliffe, author of *Mysteries Of Udolpho* and other Gothic romances, was born in the same year. These anniversaries provide the jumping off point for the British Library's current exhibition and the accompanying book, a set of essays on related themes rather than simply a catalogue. Both explore the changing themes of the Gothic since the 18th Century, not just in books but in culture more widely.

You hear screams as you walk round the exhibition but they are not loud enough to be off-putting. They come from the screens playing film clips from *The Bride of Frankenstein* and *The Innocents*, among others. There is also a video of authors such as Neil Gaiman and Sarah Waters talking about their work. But books and illustrations predominate, although there is a scatter of intriguing artefacts, such as a vampire slaying kit in a wooden box and a costume designed by Alexander McQueen.



The early sections of the exhibition focus on the beginnings of Gothic as a genre. As well as Walpole and Radcliffe, here are the 'horrid' novels recommended to Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. One is entitled 'Horrid Mysteries', which conveys the flavour of these 18th Century novels, with exotic locations, villainous monks and nuns and supernatural apparitions which may or may not be unearthly. A replica mirror from Strawberry Hill, Walpole's famous house, and a splendid model of Fonthill Abbey demonstrate the visual elements of this period of Gothic. Near a print of Fuseli's *The Nightmare* is an audio reading of an encounter laid on for the painter's benefit in which friends acted out a supernatural adventure. These examples emphasise the playful elements in 18th Century Gothic which were overtaken, after the French Revolution, by darker, more disturbing work such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

The Victorian section of the exhibition shows the move in literature away from Italian castles and ruined abbeys to city slums, criminal gangs and mental asylums. Alongside Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, there are examples from penny dreadful serials where Quintilia the Quadrigamist flourished alongside Sweeney Todd and Varney the Vampire. The material from the last two decades of the 19th Century has had an even stronger influence on modern Gothic. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case Of Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde* was published in 1886 and the Jack the Ripper murders took place in 1888. The themes of degeneration and decay were given literary form in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*, both published in 1890. And, even more significantly, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* came out in 1897.

The 20th and 21st Century displays provide an eclectic sampling rather than a comprehensive survey. Mervyn Peake, Edward Gorey and MR James are represented alongside Wallace and Gromit (for *The Curse Of The Were Rabbit*) and *Pride And Prejudice And Zombies*. But I did not notice much about American Gothic literature or the proliferation of TV series about vampires and werewolves.

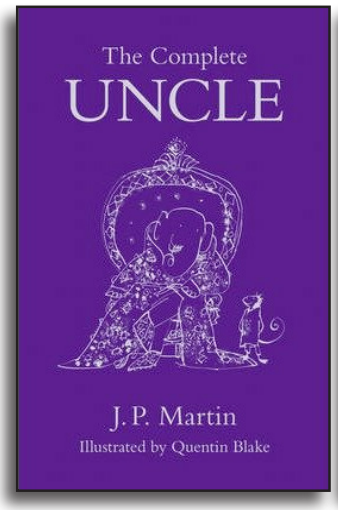
The book covers some of the same ground as the exhibition but develops additional themes. The early chapters consider how the original, early medieval Gothic tribes came to be seen both as the representatives of anti-classical barbarism and as the precursors of English Protestantism and Parliamentary democracy. So, by the middle of the 18th Century, the Gothic could represent superstition and tyranny on the one hand but also freedom and vigour on the other. And it could be used for a cluster of impulses, in architecture and poetry as well as the novel, which moved away from the perceived rigidity of classical styles towards a new pleasure in ruins, wild landscape and in the medieval past. These chapters provide plenty of interesting context for the early Gothic novels, although not much said is about comparable developments in Europe. It might have been worthwhile to relate the developments in English Gothic to the rise in national consciousness and a renewed sympathy for the supernatural in Germany, in particular.

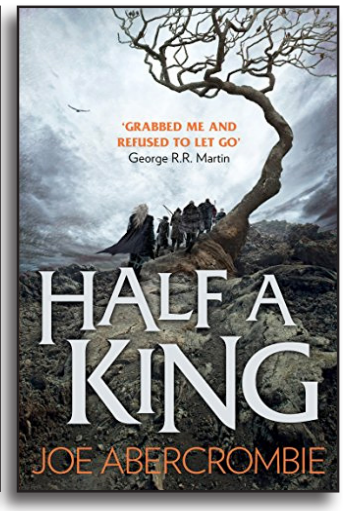
As well as new settings, 19th Century Gothic introduced new themes. In Chapter 3, Alexandra Warwick traces the impact of the Industrial Revolution and of recent discoveries in prehistory and geology through Dickens's treatment of the poor and his complex vision of London, in particular in *Bleak House*. She draws attention to the wider context, such as real problems of urban burial in the mid-Victorian period and to the use of Gothic imagery in political discourse. She quotes Karl Marx's description of capital as 'vampire-like' and blood-sucking. She also discusses the emergence of the woman who challenges her place in society in another strand of Gothic fiction, from Jane Eyre onwards.

Themes considered in the remaining chapters include the influence of Freud and his theory of the uncanny and a renewed engagement with history in more recent Gothic fiction. An interest in metafiction and in books as artefacts goes right back to *Otranto* which was first published anonymously with a claim that it was translated from a medieval text, discovered in an ancient library. In Chapter 6, Catherine Spooner discusses the new possibilities of this theme in the digital age as well as recent explorations of the theme of the cursed or forbidden book.

The exhibition and the book both end with a series of photographs from the Whitby Goth weekend of April 2014. These resonate well with the playful mood of 18th century Gothic and show the continuity as well as the changes in what Gothic has meant down the years. The exhibition also some striking etchings by the Chapman Brothers and I particularly enjoyed the selection of book illustrations. These include a view of Gormenghast by Ian Miller which shows the continuing importance of the castle in the Gothic vision.

Altogether, there is plenty of thought provoking material here, as well as useful suggestions for future reading.





The Complete Uncle by J P Martin, illustrated by Quentin Blake (Matador, 2013)

Reviewed by L J Hurst

This magnificent volume makes all six of JP Martin's *Uncle* novels available again; the text reset and Quentin Blake's illustrations freshly scanned. Marcus Gipps, who conceived of this venture and crowd-funded it through Kickstarter, has even had it set in Bembo, the same type as the original editions published in the Sixties. Placed between each work are recollections of Martin from his heirs, memories of their own discovery of his works from figures such as Will Self and Garth Dix and accounts from Neil Gaiman, Dave Langford and Richard Ingrams who, over the last forty years, have each tried to promote the books and keep them in the public eye.

My own introduction to Martin was borrowing *Uncle Cleans Up* from our public library in the mid-Sixties. Reading them out of sequence as I found them, I was unaware of both the rave reviews which are reprinted here and the tortured publishing history of the books.

The first book in the series, *Uncle*, was published in 1964; Martin published two more before he died in 1966 aged 86; his daughter and son-in-law published the last three between 1967 and 1971. It took me years to discover that there were the final two, though rarity and price made those unavailable. Reading them now makes it clear that Martin wrote (or was finally edited) in a story arc as the heroes of *Uncle* and his friends within their skyscraping castle, Homeward, move towards a final confrontation with the villains of Badfort.

Homeward is an extraordinary invention, a castle of towers and open spaces, where entrances may be high in walls, underground or even via spring lifts from neighbouring roofs; a majority of the working population are dwarves who pay Uncle a farthing a week rent each but human families occupy their own niches, while bears and wolves may work as ticket-collectors on the subterranean railways. Uncle himself normally travels on a traction engine, discovering new lands within his realm, such as Lost Clinkers, an already post-industrial chemical works.

When the publisher Jonathan Cape accepted the first book in 1964 he asked if there were more. There were. Martin had invented *Uncle* before the First World War, telling stories to his children then changing them as his experience of the world widened. He had completed several of the series before the Second World War, only to be rejected for many years in his submissions.

The books were illustrated by Quentin Blake – ten years before he started to illustrate Roald Dahl with whom he has become far better associated – and a contemporary *Times Educational Supplement* review of *Uncle* makes another interesting point when it says that the Blake illustrations modernize the story: what would a reader in, for example, 1934 have thought of the book without its rampant wild images? Not much perhaps. It took three decades of waiting, and the vision of Louise Orr, the children's editor at Jonathan Cape, putting Martin and Blake together, to produce this gesamtkunstwerk, a complete work of art. It took another four decades of waiting and the vision of Gipps to make it available in one volume.

Half A King by Joe Abercrombie (Orbit, 2014)

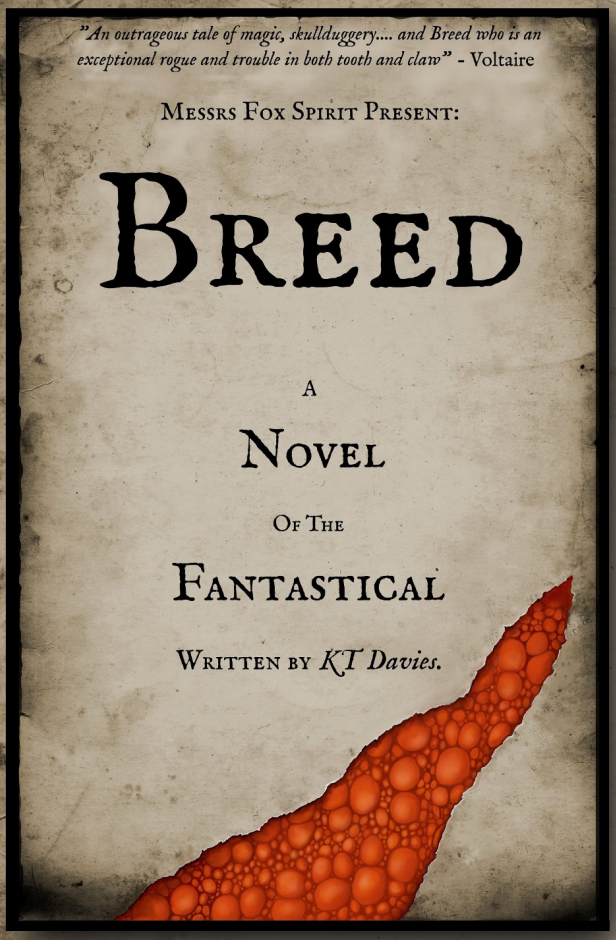
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Half A King, the first book in the *Shattered Sea* trilogy, is a Young Adult fantasy. Yarvi, Prince of Gettland, was born with a crippled hand. Unable to wield a sword, he is despised as a weakling by his father, King Uthrik, and scorned by his father's warriors. More suited to using his mind and having no wish to humiliate himself by attempting to gain fighting skills, Yarvi trains to become a Minister, an advisor to kings and rulers. Just before he is due to take the Minister's test that will result in his losing his royal status, the murder of his father and older brother forces him to assume the Black Chair, the throne of Gettland. Swearing revenge on his father's killer and encouraged by his bellicose uncle and mother, Yarvi leads an army against the rival king but is himself betrayed and sold into slavery. Concealing his identity, he determines that he will regain the throne he never wanted and have his vengeance against both his father's murderer and his own betrayers.

There is much to like about this book. Yarvi is an engaging hero and it is easy to sympathise with his plight as a boy lacking any martial ability in a world that values strength above mental agility. The reader warms to him as he uses brains rather than brawn to achieve his revenge, gathering about him a band of fellow outcasts and becoming a leader. It is not giving too much of the plot away to say that by the end of the book Yarvi has, despite himself, become a man of action, capable of killing in cold blood when circumstances demand it. Other characters are also well-drawn, particularly the larger-than-life captain of the slave galley where Yarvi is chained to an oar, who provides a certain amount of comic relief amongst all the literal and metaphorical back-stabbing. The fights are well described, without being gratuitously graphic.

The plot of the book has many twists and turns and whilst Yarvi's betrayal is sign-posted, later incidents are completely unexpected. Yarvi is not the only character who grows and changes over the course of the story. There is one twist in the plot that I did find too much of a co-incidence to be believable but generally the book is a real page-turner.

What the book is not, is startlingly original. With its teenage hero and fast-paced plot it is in many ways a typical fantasy coming-of-age tale. Our young, dispossessed king and his companions journey through a mock-medieval world that has little to distinguish it from any other found in the genre, including a pantheon of gods and a vanished race of elves. That said, the novel remains very readable, succeeds on its own terms and will no doubt be enjoyed by its target audience. It will be interesting to see where the author takes the story in the next volume.



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