

# Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association



No. 279

Spring 2015

£4.00

# Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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Published by the BSFA Ltd © 2015 ..... ISSN 05050448

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

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# Torque Control

It's been a year since Glyn joined *Vector* as the Features Editor on the 'Best of 2013' issue and so it seems serendipitous that I should become his co-editor in time to review the 'Best of 2014'. I'm grateful to Glyn for inviting me to help continue *Vector*'s proud tradition as a forum for all things science fictional. Glyn's work on the annual Contemporary Research in Speculative Fiction (CRSF) conferences has been something to admire since the debut event in 2011, especially as he manages to juggle this commitment with so many others, and it's a pleasure to be working with him.

Our 'Best of 2014' issue begins with the annual BSFA review compiled by Martin Petto, which gives us the highlights of 2014 according to *Vector* contributors and other aficionados. Our commissioned articles once again feature Molly Cobb, who gives us an overview of the year's science fiction on television. I am personally grateful to Molly for introducing me to *Orphan Black* through her 'Best of 2013' essay and once more she gives us a taste of current trends in science fiction programming and its overlap with fantasy and the mainstream. Also returning from last year's 'Best of...' is Tony Jones who makes sure that we never again have to face a dull commute with his roundup of science fiction audio releases. This issue also reviews an area that was neglected last year as Ashley Armstrong gives us 2014's best young adult science fiction. In addition to these overviews we're pleased to give you an interview with Ann Leckie, a fitting addition to this review issue as 2014 may come to be known as 'the year of Leckie' after she scooped the Hugo, BSFA, Arthur C. Clarke, and Nebula awards for her 2013 debut, *Ancillary Justice*. Our regular columns include a review of the year in graphic novels from Laura Sneddon and a science fictional version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) as Andy Sawyer introduces us to the first ever movie tie-in novel, this issue's 'Foundation Favourite'. Meanwhile, Paul Kincaid explores the male gaze and its construction of feminine robots in Lester del Rey's 'Helen O'Loy' (1938), an article that may be of particular interest to those who saw Alex Garland's recent film *Ex Machina* (2015) which also raises questions of gender through a feminine robot, albeit in a more self-aware manner. Steven Baxter begins to look forward to what 2015 may hold as he anticipates Ian McDonald's new Luna series, due for release with Gollancz in September, in order to consider the ethics of socio-politics in the precarious environments of outer space.

The appraisal of 2014 continued last month through the release of the BSFA and the Kitschies awards shortlists which give us an idea of where science fiction might be going in 2015 with both lists celebrating Nina Allan's debut novel *The Race* (2014) and Nnedi Okorafor's Nigeria-set novel *The Lagoon* (2014) alongside recognition for more established writers like William Gibson who delighted fans with the release of 2014's *The Peripheral*, a novel that combines his talent for mind-bending cyberpunk with his more recent

concern for contemporary settings. In future issues Glyn and I hope to celebrate the variety of voices keeping this field fresh as well as the concerns Gibson writes about in his novel: the boundary between the present and the future which seems to become blurrier with every new technological innovation. Contributors both new and old are invited to join us in these debates and can contact us through the email address: [vector.editors@gmail.com](mailto:vector.editors@gmail.com).

Finally, our back cover is given over to an 'In Memoriam' section to remember and celebrate all the great people we have lost since the beginning of 2014. Of particular note is Leonard Nimoy, whose sad loss will surely colour 2015 for many in our field. Nimoy performed the role of Spock in *Star Trek*'s original series with a charming touch of flamboyance and a twinkle in his eye that sparked devotion in many viewers: the emotion that many people feel on his death is a testament to his power as an actor and his deep connection with his audience. As well as acting, Nimoy took the director's seat for *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984) and *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), continuing the success of the series with two thoughtful additions that made the most of Nimoy's relationship with his cast. Nimoy also played an important role in science fiction culture through his many cameos, such as his appearances in Matt Groening's cartoons *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*. Also notable were his role in David Kibner's excellent remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) and his regular appearance as William Bell in *Fringe* (2008-13), one of the best science fiction television series of recent years. Of course, he continued to be a part of the *Star Trek* franchise through his appearances in J.J. Abrams' recent reboot movies where his charm gave gravitas and human warmth to films that were otherwise too often found wanting in those departments. As we go on to remember 2014 it might be worth finishing with a very modern goodbye, one made through the medium of Twitter. As they mourn, many fans will turn to Leonard Nimoy's final tweet: 'A life is like a garden. Perfect moments can be had, but not preserved, except in memory. Live Long and Prosper'. Here's to memories, and here's to making some more in 2015.

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use the hashtag  
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and Glyn Morgan  
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Cover art by Gav Herron,  
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# The BSFA Review: Best of 2014

compiled by Martin Petto

## Graham Andrews

John Wyndham published *The Midwich Cuckoos* with Michael Joseph, London, in 1957. The story is so well known by now that it should need only the most summary of summaries. A 'flying saucer' lands in a picture-postcard English village, the population is knocked out for a day and nine months later all the local women give birth to sinister and wild-talented alien 'cuckoos'.

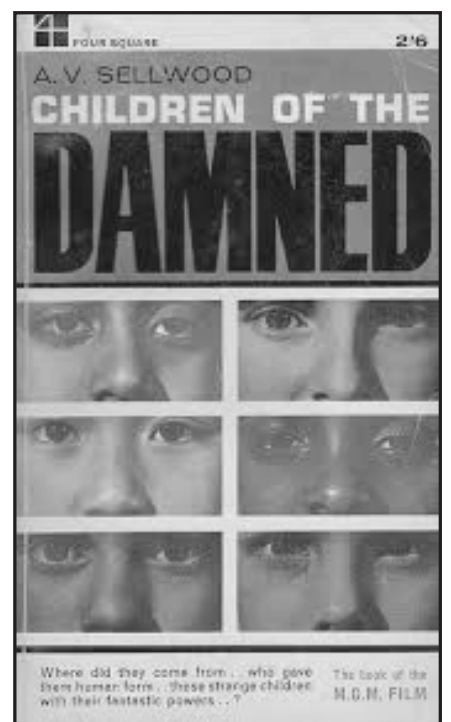
Ballantine published the first American edition two years later. Wyndham left an incomplete sequel, *Midwich Main*, which is now safely ensconced at the University of Liverpool. There have been two 'faithful' film versions, both as *Village Of The Damned* (1960 and 1995). Ballantine's 1960 tie-in edition took the film title. But these aren't the whole stories. See *Children of the Damned*, an oblique cinematic retelling directed by Anton M Leader.

Sidestepping the original storyline, scriptwriter John (*Cry Freedom*) Briley has six super-minded but apparently non-Cuckoid children relocated from six different countries (China, India, Nigeria, Russia, the USA and the UK) to London for investigation by two ill-matched UNESCO scientists, played by Ian Hendry (psychologist 'Tom Llewellyn') and geneticist Alan Badel ('David Neville'). It threatens to become a veritable global village of the damned. The scientific background is sketchily but ably handled.

As to what happens next: "BEWARE THE EYES THAT PARALYSE" and "IT'S THEM OR US!" (Courtesy of whoever wrote the trailer blurbs.)

The *Children* tie-in paperback was written by AV Sellwood and published by Four Square (dated 1964, but – like the film itself – released in 1963). You may or may not remember Sellwood from *The Dark World Of Witches* (Corgi, 1964) or perhaps even *Dynamite For Hire* (Panther, 1958). The Briley/Sellwood take on *The Midwich Cuckoos* is much more affective than Wyndham's, who kept his cuckoos in narrative limbo for much too long a time. I won't give away the just plain *right* ending, which goes one significant step beyond the familiar ticking-bomb – or brick-wall – routine. Where the film merely hints; the book rubber-hammers it home.

Sellwood betook himself to add several personal touches, such as this telling quotation from a member of Scott's ill-fated Antarctic expedition: "the silence was deep, with a breath like sleep." (spoken by Hughes in the film). The scene takes place in a dilapidated London church, evocatively replacing the schoolhouse of *Village*, where the now more-sinned-against-than-sinning children have sought sanctuary. This well-above-par novelization has never been published in the USA and that remains something of a dirty rotten shame.



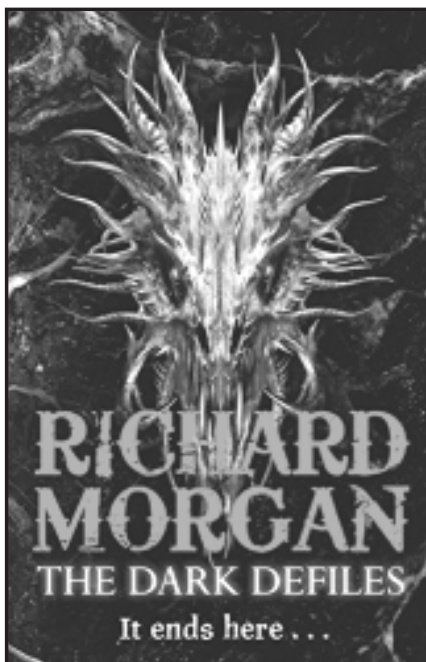


## Stuart Carter

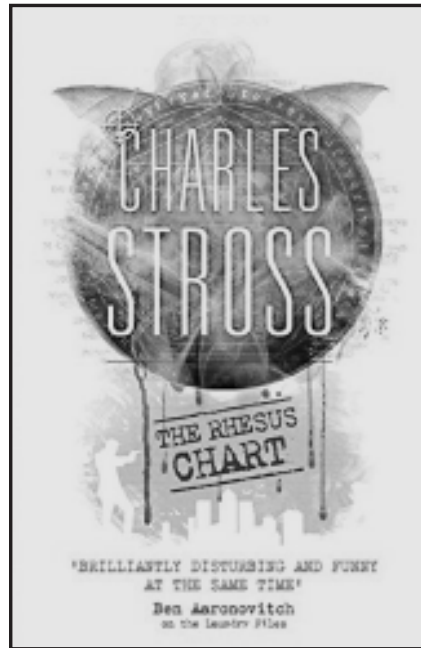
*The Dark Defiles* by Richard Morgan, the climax of his fantasy trilogy, is a grim and grisly tale of fighting with swords, fighting with magic, fighting hand-to-hand and just plain FIGHTING which kept me gripped. I'm not usually a fantasy fan but despite a shocking allergy to the massive trilogies that seem the default format for the genre, I nevertheless sliced through this final act like a razor-honed sword.

*The Wake* by Paul Kingsnorth is not science fiction either, in that it's set in the years after 1066 but written in a sort of cod-Old English. It is challenging and gripping throughout, just like good science fiction ought to be. As I read *The Wake*, my youngest daughter was beginning to read proper books so we both mutually struggled, learning to recognise words and their meanings almost from scratch. View Kingsnorth's language as a challenge, forcing you to slow down to understand a very alien viewpoint, and *The Wake* is science fictional after all, presenting the vicious Norman invasion of England in 1066 as a catastrophe for the natives - including the book's unreliable narrator.

*The Rhesus Chart*. Charles Stross. Vampires. Yay! Evil City banker vampires who you love to hate. Double yay! My love for the *Laundry*



novels had been suffering diminishing returns of late but an injection of unfettered satire on some of the bastards behind 2008's global crash returned his stock to blue chip status for me.

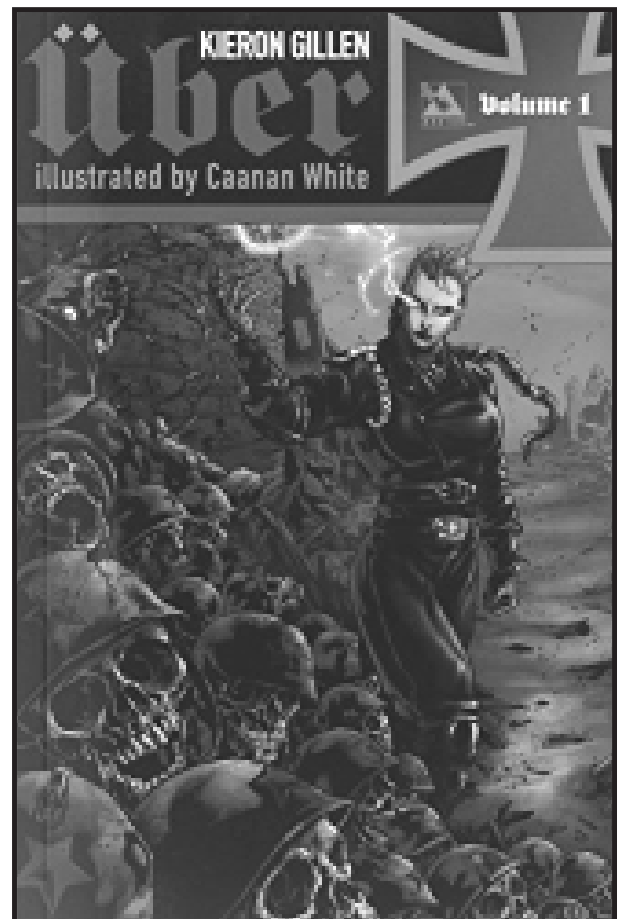


2015 was the year I rediscovered the joy of comics, all thanks to the Comixology app on my smartphone. Kieron Gillen's *Uber* is a complex and awful reworking of WWII, beginning in 1945 when the Nazis discover how to make actual superpowered supermen. Sure, it's been done before but seldom with this love of detail and prizing of historical verisimilitude. And gore. Lots and lots of gore. Every. Single. Issue.

But leave it to old hand Warren Ellis to yet again redefine superhero cool with *Moon Knight*. His thoughtful and mature understanding of the medium's strengths manage to produce pure Art from what is essentially a Batman rip-off. No more - every issue of *Moon Knight* was so beautifully thought out and designed, mixing Mad Science and Bad

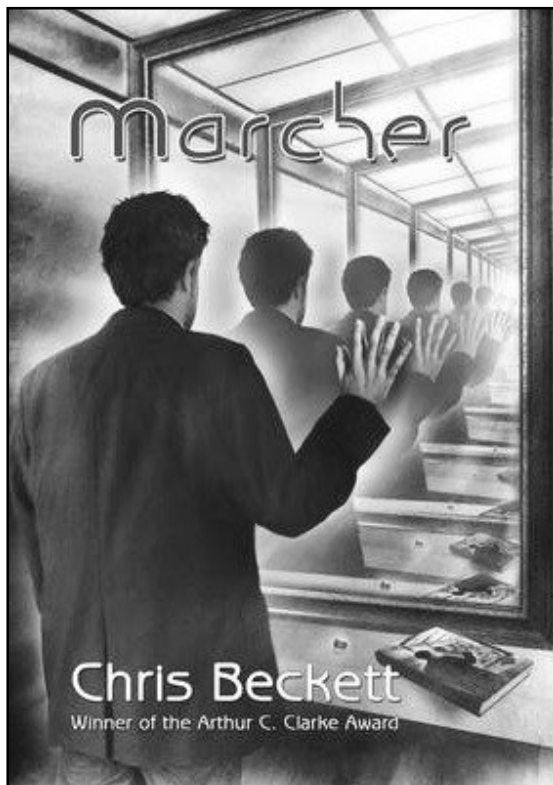
Violence to make bastards who deliver savage beatings to criminals cool. Again.

*Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie. It's her first novel? Really? She just sat down and wrote this, one day, having never done it before? Keeping readers on the back foot throughout with a subtle questioning of gender assignments and galactic empire? Bloody hell. I can't wait to read the next part...



## Gary Dalkin

Jeff VanderMeer made a spectacular ascension to the big leagues with the *Southern Reach* trilogy, a compelling post-modern variation on a pair of Tarkovsky films, *Solaris* and *Stalker*, or, if you prefer, on their source material, Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* and *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. Published as three separate novels, each with a distinct focus and approach, the whole succeeded as a single novel and one which, despite trading near exclusively in ambiguity, managed not to frustrate by knowing that ultimately the story must out and certain truths be told. A great achievement and one I would name, if absolutely pressed, as my publishing event of the year.



However, offering very strong competition were two exceptional British debut novels, both published by NewCon Press. These were *The Moon King* by Neil Williamson and *The Race* by Nina Allan. Also from NewCon Press was the first UK appearance, in a revised and much improved edition, of Chris Beckett's novel *Marcher*. This fixed everything that was wrong with the original US version. And NewCon Press

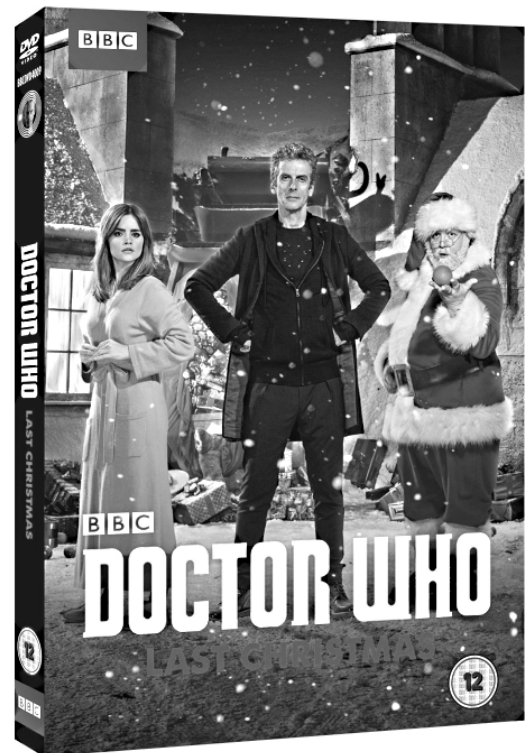
also delivered the excellent anthologies *Noir*, *La Femme* and *Paradox*.

Three mainstream novels with a foot in genre proved exceptional: *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt (half of which is accidental near future SF); *All The Light We Can Not See* by Anthony Doerr, which offered a beautiful mediation on the sustaining power of stories (with *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* as a specific example) as well as being, possibly, an elegant fantasy itself; and *Life After Life* by Kate Aitkinson, which was almost like watching someone else read the world's most sophisticated Choose Your Own Adventure novel but a tremendously powerful blend of family saga

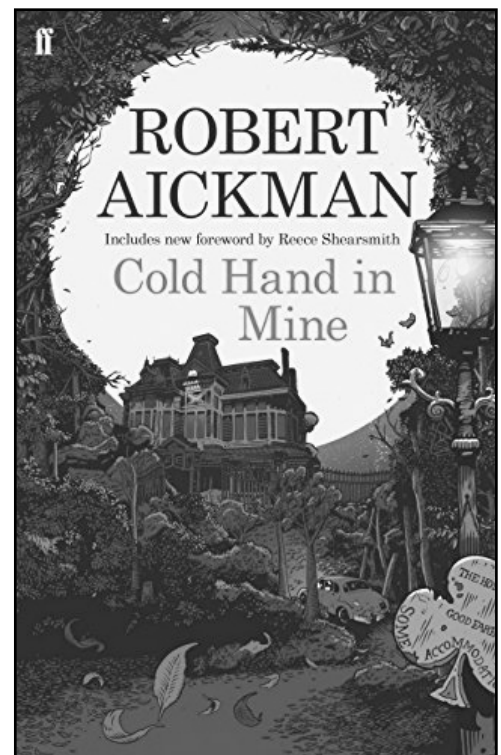
and WWII epic nonetheless.

There were two other notable occurrences for me, both reviving great British writers from the middle of the 20th Century. One was that a brief holiday in Cornwall led to my finally reading Daphne Du Maurier: *Rebecca*, *Jamaica Inn* (which can be seen as a variation on *Dracula*) and *Echoes Of The Macabre* (featuring 'Don't Look Now' and 'The Birds') are essential. The other was Faber & Faber launching a reissue programme devoted to Robert Aickman, issuing beautiful new paperback editions of *Dark Entries*, *Cold Hand In Mine*, *The Unsettled Dust* and *The Wine-Dark Sea*. Get them while you can.

Turning to the screen, I was delighted to see that the Seventies films *Solaris*, *Rollerball* and *The Medusa Touch*, none of which I had seen for a very long time, remain powerful works in their Blu-Ray incarnations. The little known *A Woman In Winter* rewarded a second viewing, though the DVD is desperately in need of an HD upgrade. Conversely, no new film failed to disappoint.



*Doctor Who* veered erratically between excellent ('Into The Dalek', 'Listen', 'Flatline') and dreadful ('Kill The Moon') as well as delivering the first really strong Christmas special, 'Last Christmas'. Peter Capaldi was outstanding as the latest incarnation of the Doctor and stronger writing enabled Jenna Coleman to transform the previously impossible girl Clara Oswald into one of the best companions.





## David Hebblethwaite

When I look over my favourite fantastic fiction in 2014, two main threads stand out. One is novels where the language really matters. Nina Allan's *The Race* may be one of the most finely calibrated science fiction novels I've ever read: it starts in the near future of an England which is not quite our own; shifts to the 'real world' (where the prose has a noticeably different texture); then returns to that other future, where we feel the weight of every strange word.



In *The Wake*, Paul Kingsnorth views the Norman Conquest and its immediate aftermath through the eyes of Buccmaster of Holland, a Lincolnshire freeman – and through his voice, as the whole novel is written in an adapted version of Old English. This “shadow tongue” is carefully balanced to make our immersion in the novel's past disorienting but not unreachably alien. Buccmaster's visions (if that's what they are) of the legendary figure Welland the Smith push *The Wake* into a fantasy of perception, and its direction remains uncertain to the end.

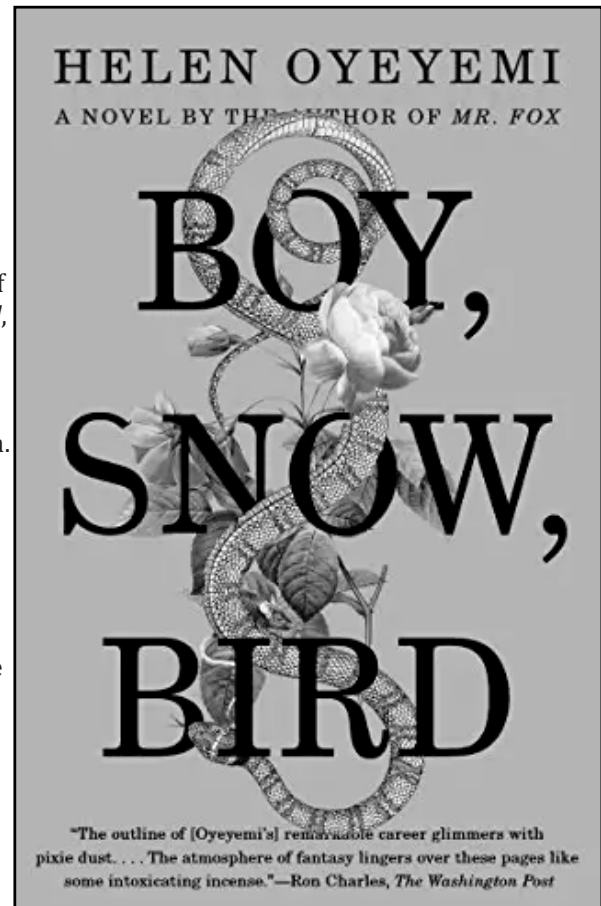
*What Lot's Wife Saw* by Ioanna Bourazopoulou (translated by Yannis Panas) is a theatrical novel set in a stagey near future, where the inventor of a crossword-like puzzle is tasked with working out the truth behind a death from the written accounts of those who found the body. The very substance of the novel shifts

as you read it, until its world is subverted by the text, and the power to shape reality is there for the reading.

The other key thread in my favourites this year is fairytales. Bridging my two sets of books is *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Helen Oyeyemi's tale of a girl named Boy and a black family passing as white in 1950s America. Oyeyemi draws on the iconography of the Snow White story in ways that shape our perceptions and expectations of her novel – and its rhythms change as a result.

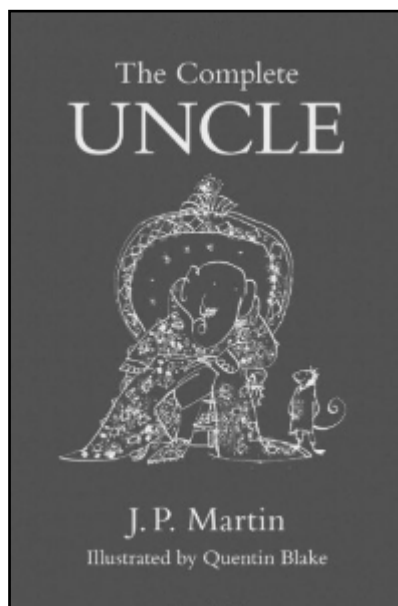
Kirsty Logan's *The Rental Heart and Other Fairytales* is a story collection which explores love in its various forms. Logan draws on fairytale and fantasy to greater and lesser degrees, and shifts her style fluidly between stories. The result is a kaleidoscopic carnival of tales that remains a strong aesthetic whole for all its diversity.

Finally, Janina Matthewson's *Of Things Gone Astray* is not strictly a fairytale but it has a powerful dreamlike quality that gives it an atmosphere similar to one. It's a novel whose characters lose things: the front wall of their house; their sense of direction (in more ways than one); their job (because the office has disappeared). The fantasy can be seen as reflecting the characters' emotional states, but is never reducible to simple metaphors, and so remains alive. Like each of these books, *Of Things Gone Astray* creates a world that is all its own.



## L J Hurst

2014 seems to have passed me in the way that deadlines whizzed past Douglas Adams's ear. I still have Christopher Priest's *The Adjacent* unread from 2013. I did discover 2013's *The Complete Uncle* in 2014 though. This makes all six of JP Martin's novels available with their Quentin Blake illustrations and is a superb example of what crowd-sourcing can do to raise capital for an exercise such as this re-publication.



Some years ago there was an internet appeal for funds to animate the stories but that came to nothing – probably because crowd-sourcing and publishers such as Matador/Troubador, who seem to raise their capital through it, did not exist so short a time ago.

I had to wait for the transatlantic arrival of *Deep Ends: The JG Ballard Anthology* from Terminal Press, as our native presses seemingly cannot print to the quality this folio volume requires. Editor Rick McGrath has followed his 2013 *JG Ballard Book* with an even more impressive work, which reprints one unknown art review by Ballard and a memoir by Ballard's daughter Beatrice among other contributions by David Pringle, Bernard Sigaud, Iain Sinclair and more. The colour production allows great illustrated essays on Ballard's geography and his time in Shanghai and detailed facsimiles of the school reports made

on student Ballard after he had been repatriated to Cambridge, post-war.

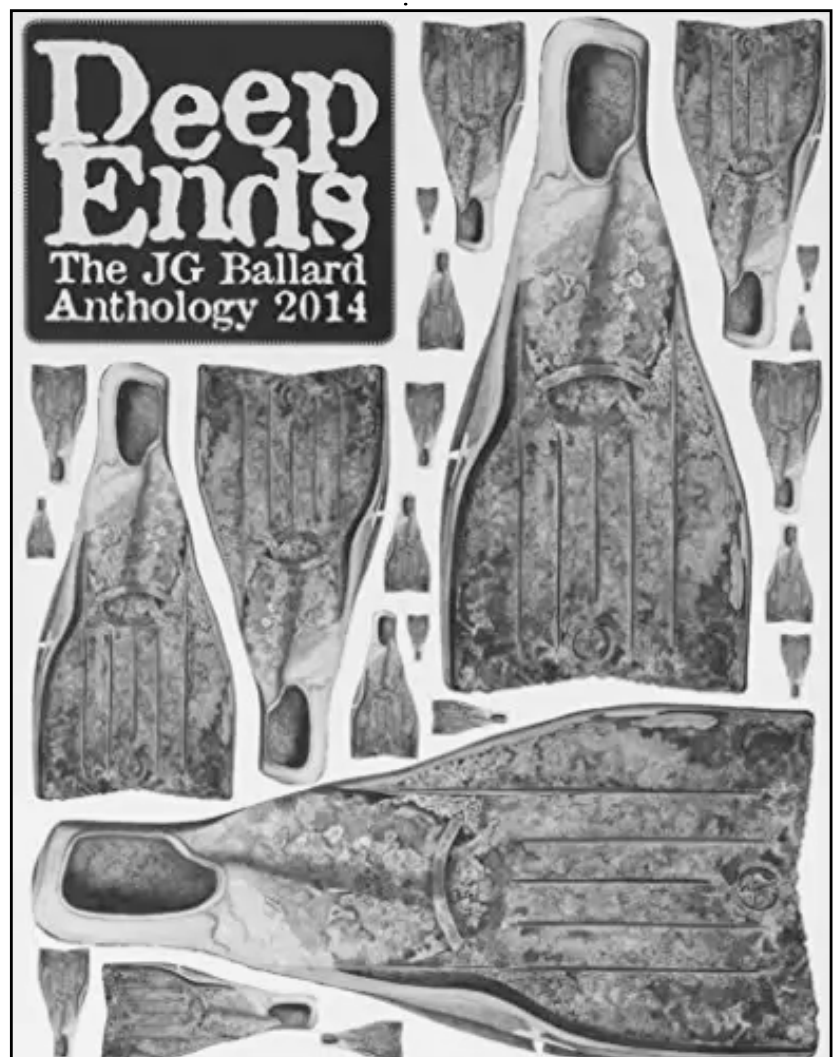
Initially, I had mixed feelings about *Seeing Things As They Are*, a new selection of George Orwell's journalism, made by Peter Davison from the twenty-volume *Complete Works*, interesting as Orwell's war-time observations might be, foreshadowing as they do much of the world in his fictional 1984. Orwell, however, always repays re-reading and some of the work here which did not appear in the four-volume *Collected Essays, Journalism And Letters*, for instance on the state of radio, is almost unknown. A short film review, in which Orwell condemns the quality of British documentary and public information films, reveals in a footnote that he had worked with the experimental film maker and animator Len Lye and that Lye was encouraging him to do so again. I think there is a lot more to be learned about Orwell and all forms of media – he should never be thought of as an anachronistic man of letters.

## Toby Jones

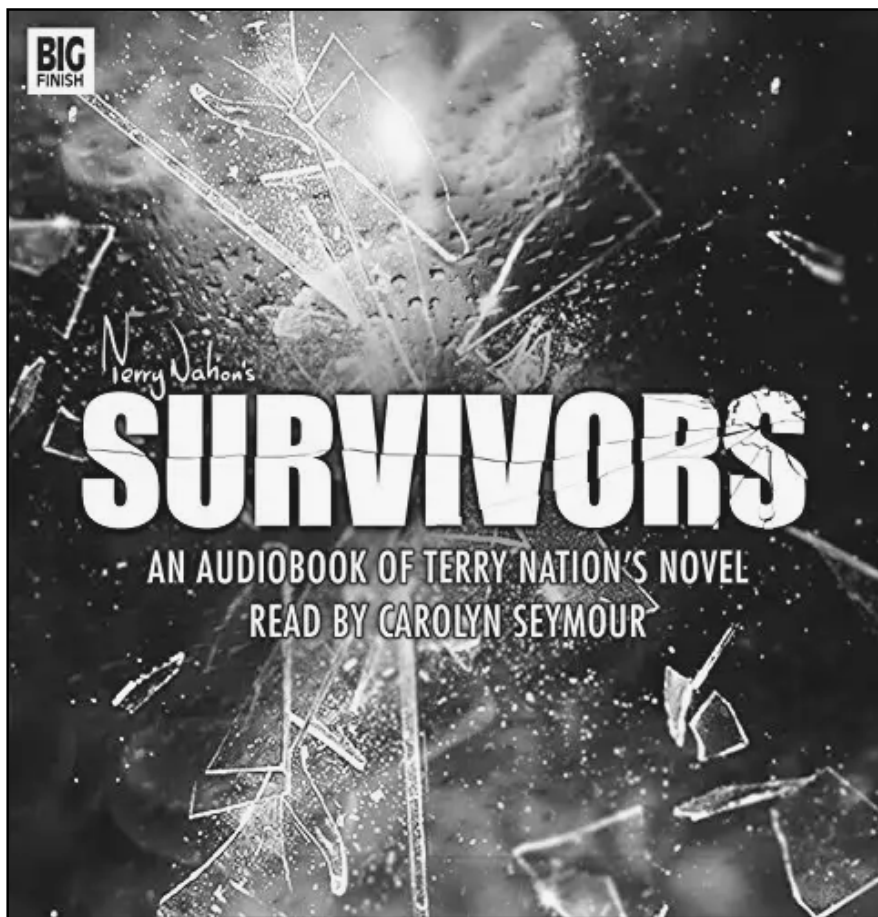
In a year that saw a triumphant World Science Fiction Convention held in London (and my first attendance in 25 years) it takes a moment to find another high. On reflection it is the release of the Big Finish box set of *Survivors*.

As a devotee of audio science fiction, the field is crowded with strong contenders for best of the year; why pick this one? Two reasons: first it is very good, second I was fortunate enough to be in studio when some of it was recorded.

*Survivors* was a much talked about post-apocalyptic show in the Seventies, brought to our screens by Terry Nation and running for three seasons. It had some flaws (the shaved faces and clean clothes of the cast being among them) but it also brought some of the best drama seen in the whole of the decade (eg. the episode *Law*







*And Order*). *Survivors* was a show that transcended boundaries, watched by science fiction fans and non-fans alike. Like many that remembered the original, I found the re-launch of the show for two series in 2008 disappointing so how would this new audio version compare?

Big Finish are known for creating audio drama with impact and working well with actors from any point in a show's history to recreate something with the feel of the original. With the announcement of Ian McCollough (Greg Preston) and Lucy Fleming (Jenny Richards) this new project gained a shape, further honed by the news that Carolyn Seymour would reprise the role of Abby and take a larger part in the second box set (due in 2015).

The premise behind the box set was to tell the stories of people whose lives overlap with the TV series without repeating it. This allowed for a new cast to be added (included Louise Jameson, Chase Masterson, Adrian Lukis, John Banks and Camilla Power) and for four stories with biblical themed names written by experience audio writers (Matt Fitton, Jonathan Morris, Andrew Smith and

John Dorney). The result was four CDs worth of some of the most compelling and dark science fiction drama I have heard for years.

As I mentioned, I was able to visit the studio for some of the recording and interview many of those involved. For everyone involved (including Jameson who auditioned for the show at the time) this isn't considered science fiction; instead it is a story of what could have happened and, indeed, what could still happen. For their version of the *Survivors* story, Big Finish stayed in the early Seventies and painted a world where ordinary people find themselves in the most extraordinary situations, death lurks around any and every corner and the line between hero/villain/madman is often hard to draw.

When I spoke to director Ken Bentley he told me the overriding imperative was to create on audio and experience for the listener that gave the same effect as they would have had watching the show in the Seventies.

They succeeded.

## Paul Kincaid

During the course of 2014 there were, whether officially sanctioned or not, independence votes in Scotland, parts of Spain and parts of Ukraine. Given, in addition, the rise throughout Europe of nationalist parties on both the right and the left, you have to admit that Dave Hutchinson's *Europe In Autumn* is probably the timeliest and most immediately relevant novel there has been for a good many years. Any science fiction novel that takes Europe as its canvas is a rarity and one that captures the zeitgeist like this is doubly so. In addition, it's a thrillingly written adventure story, full of tradecraft stolen from Le Carre and any number of twists and turns. So we don't just admire the percipience of the book, we can also sit back and enjoy the ride. Little wonder it has emerged as one of the very best novels of the year.

In my view, it is pipped only by Simon Ings's haunting reinvention of the British catastrophe novel, *Wolves*. This was the very first book I read in 2014, yet it has remained more vividly in my mind than many of those I read long afterwards. Throughout we keep glimpsing the sort of catastrophic remaking of the landscape that used



to be such a familiar part of British science fiction. But against this he sets constant variations on the idea of perception, from photography to virtual reality to new treatments for the blind, so we always have that underlying uncertainty about how our view of what is happening is being manipulated. The whole thing is deftly structured and beautifully written.

The rest of my books of the year are *Bête* by Adam Roberts, *We Are Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler, *The Bone Clock* by David Mitchell and *The Race* by Nina Allan. And a couple of books that don't make my list are still worth mentioning. *The Time Traveler's Almanac*, edited by Ann and Jeff Vandermeer is, to my mind, a pretty poor anthology but in among too much dross it still manages to contain some of the essential stories for anyone interested in time travel. And the big non-fiction book of the year, even if it is priced prohibitively far outside the range of practically everybody who might be interested in it, is *The Oxford Handbook Of Science Fiction*, edited by Rob Latham. It is a big fat collection of essays that, collectively, challenge are views of what science fiction might actually be.

## Anthony Nanson

You know that feeling of discovering an author you've never read before who really hits your buttons so you want to seek out everything they wrote? It doesn't happen to me as much as it used to, my taste having got fastidious with age, but it did in 2014. The author was Arthur Machen. It was HP Lovecraft's essay on 'Supernatural Horror In Literature' that put me on to him. I read the selection of stories in Penguin's *The White People* first, then the unforgettable *The Hill of Dreams*, then everything else I could find, culminating in asking my town library to seek the Holy Grail of Machen novels: the unexpurgated *The Secret Glory* including the legendary Chapters 5 and 6 which Machen suppressed. The library succeeded, bless them, and it was worth the wait.

Why does Machen strike such a deep nerve? Particularly in that genre of 'weird tales' in which Lovecraft is so gloriously over the top you read him partly for laughs and other leading practitioners –

Algernon Blackwood, MR James, Ambrose Beirce – are so leaden that I can't read them? I think it's the coupling of a conscious mastery of style with a tremendous daring in drawing upon his deepest, half-understood fears and desires. Lovecraft tries to do the same but cannot match Machen's craftsmanship in prose and has a less robust, less developed psyche that in the end can offer only madness, slime and unfulfilled longing.

Machen's style develops during his career, from a jaunty storytelling manner modelled on Stevenson to painstaking pursuit of literary perfection in *The Hill of Dreams* and then a plainer journalistic style in later work. *The Hill Of Dreams* perfectly clothes its theme of a man's desire for a forbidden

state of ecstasy with prose whose rhythm builds up and up throughout the novel till you're carried away in a literary equivalent of the ecstatic state of being more commonly associated with spiritual or sexual experience.

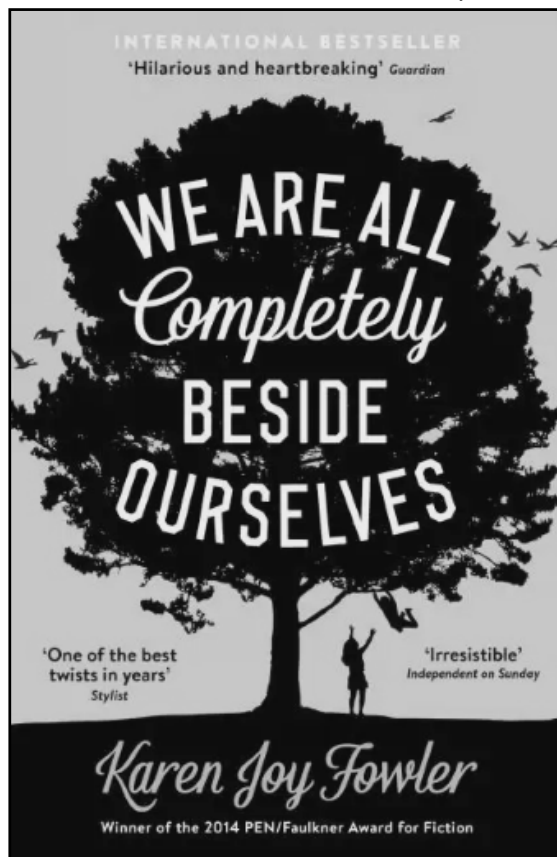
# The Hill of Dreams



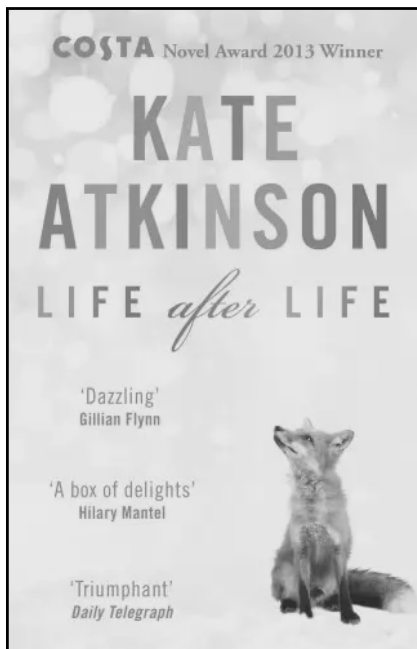
Arthur Machen

*Start Classics*

*The Hill Of Dreams* is so good that Machen could never match its brilliance again but pervasive throughout his oeuvre is this fascination with a kind of secret desire that is not explicitly explained and partakes of both the spiritual and the sexual. When he writes about the supernatural, Machen is in earnest, for he believes in it; so his writing has a force that can't be matched by fantasy that is merely contrived. Both the positive and the negative aspects of secret ecstasy he evokes have an exhilarating intensity. That he dwells so much on the dark side may perhaps be linked to the collective psychosis of European civilisation that led to the First World War, as becomes explicit in 'The Terror', in which the animals turn against humankind in judgement of the way people are behaving in the war. In 'A Fragment of Life' Machen quickens our hearts with the memory of an ecstasy sacred and good in the rustic intimacy of husband and wife; but in *The Secret Glory* he satisfies our deepest, most forbidden dreams, only to take it all away.







## Ian Sales

As I had originally planned to attend Loncon3, I made a serious effort to read some novels that were eligible for the Hugo Award. I stayed away from the obvious stuff... which no doubt explains why none of my choices made the shortlist. Among the best of those I read were *Life After Life* by Kate Atkinson and *The Machine* by James Smythe. Speaking of awards, next year I'd like to see both *All Those Vanished Engines* by Paul Park and *Europe in Autumn* by Dave Hutchinson appear on a few shortlists (and *The Grasshopper's Child* by Gwyneth Jones too but I'm more sanguine about its chances).

In other reading, *Daughters of Earth* (2006), edited by Justine Larbalestier, was a massively impressive anthology of historical SF - short stories, followed by critical articles on them - which introduced me to the fiction of Alice Eleanor Jones. She had half a dozen stories published in 1955. That's it. I tracked down a few of them and it's a shame she didn't write more. It was also a good year for

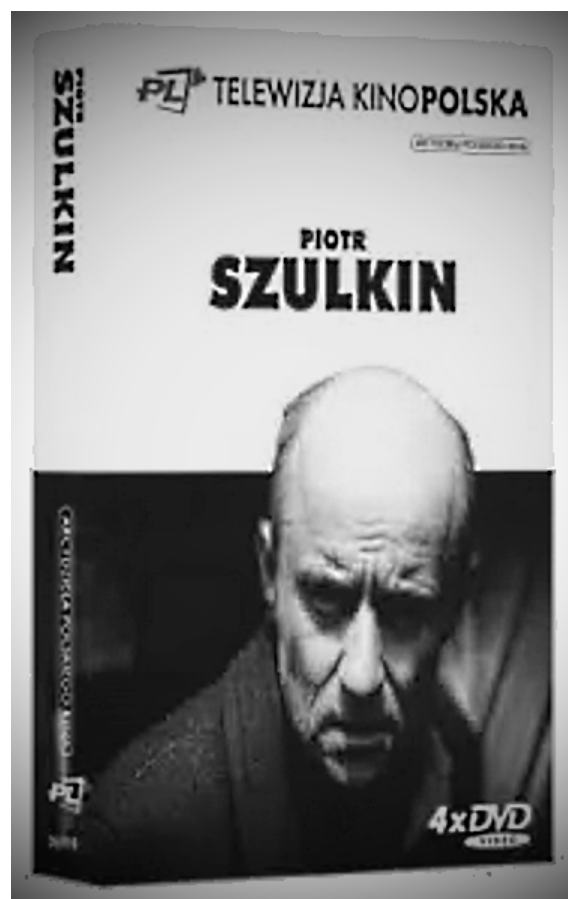
SF Mistressworks and I read and reviewed some excellent books by Pamela Zoline (*Busy About the Tree of Life*, 1988), Joanna Russ (*Extra(Ordinary) People*, 1984) and Josephine Saxton (*Queen of the States*, 1986). In fact, Russ's 'The Mystery Of The Young Gentleman' (1982) became a new favourite genre short story. Seriously, we need a complete collection of Russ's short fiction.

I also enjoyed Claire North's *The First Fifteen Lives Of Harry August*, although I thought the weak central maguffin badly distorted the plot; and Gillian Polack's *Langue[dot]doc 1305*, a polished time travel tale set in the eponymous time and place and with a nicely-handled sting in the tail. And I should



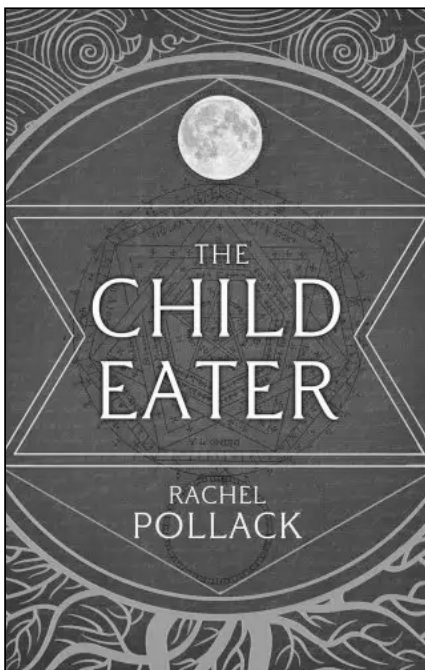
really mention Nina Allan's *The Race*, which I thought very good, although the four novellas didn't quite gel into a novel for me.

I visited the cinema only twice, to see *Under The Skin* and *Interstellar*. The former is greatly superior to the much-hyped latter; don't believe anyone who says otherwise. In 2014, I also discovered the films of Piotr Szulkin. There's a DVD box set available in Poland which contains *Wojna światów – następne stulecie* (*War of the Worlds - The Next Century*, 1983), *O-Bi, O-Ba. Koniec cywilizacji* (*O-Bi, O-Ba. The End of Civilisation*, 1985) and *Ga, Ga. Chwała bohaterom* (*Ga, Ga. Glory to Heroes*, 1986). All three are blackly comic sf films and definitely worth seeing. In 2014, I finally go to see Richard Viktorov's *Через тернии к звёздам* (*To The Star By Hard Ways/Per Aspera Ad Astra*, 1981) in its original form, not the badly-butchered MST3K version previously available and it really is quite strange. Finally, there's Shane Carruth's *Upstream Colour* (2013), an elliptical and quite moving film which does interesting things with film narrative.

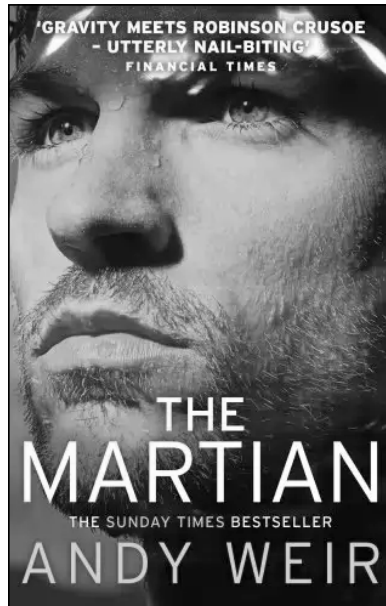


## Andy Sawyer

My best books of 2014 were *The Martian* by Andy Weir, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler, *My Real Children* by Jo Walton, *Questionable Practices* by Eileen Gunn and *The Child Eater* by Rachel Pollack. I don't know if it was a strong year but for the first time for a number of years I found myself struggling to make up a list not because I hadn't read enough but because there were many excellent books that I *had* read. Indeed, one was only read on the day before compiling this list.



Best SF “thing” of the year? Again, I'm struggling. I'm inclined to say the London Worldcon, which despite a number of potential and actual difficulties exceeded my expectations for the way I met old friends and learned new things. I was impressed by *HWJN* by Ibraheem Abbas (translated/co-authored by Yasser Bahjatt) (Yatakhayaloon, 2013), billed as the first science fiction novel to come out of Saudi Arabia, which I thought was a witty and self-confident moral tale embedded in an Islamic background and claiming the vocabulary of science fiction. Its successor, *SOMEWHERE* (2014) was as good, though a tad rushed in the translation. But in the end, I think that the British Library's “year of transrealism” – which had not one but *two* major exhibitions, on



Comics and the Gothic – nosed it. Each are only tangentially related to SF, of course, and each might have developed in different directions.

*Comics Unmasked* relied heavily on the anarchic, subversive undercurrent of comics (in whatever genre): “Art and Anarchy in the UK” was its sub-title. It unearthed some fascinating material, particularly historical material from the British Library's archives, including medieval books with comic-strip-like art, underground press (including the notorious “Schoolkid's Oz”), and of course the *Eagle* and Dan Dare. The strong political element included scripts for Alan Moore's *V For Vendetta* and more strongly partisan comic-strip such as Marvelman fighting the Ku Klux Klan.

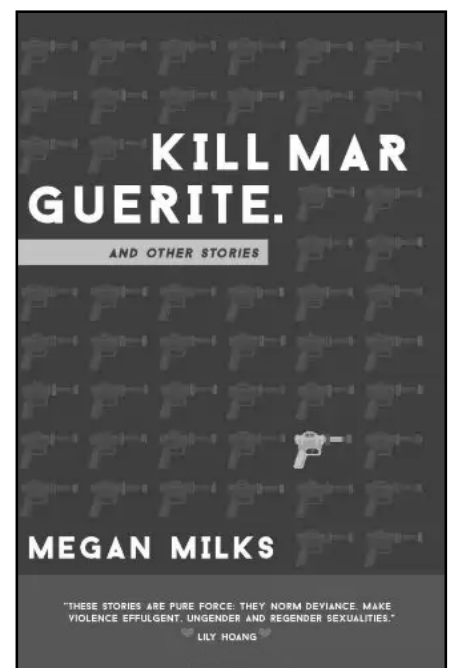
*Terror And Wonder* explored in great detail the literary roots of Gothic fiction and again I learned a lot from this. It was pretty effective at exploring the attraction of terror with much exploration of the concept of the ‘sublime’. Among the specific highlights for me were seeing the manuscripts of MR James's ‘Casting The Runes’ and the letter from Byron to John Murray confirming the truth of the events of the “ghost story competition” that resulted in *Frankenstein*. But pretty much at the top has to be the display of the seven “horrid” novels recommended in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (several of which are available for free on the internet and a Kindle omnibus edition of all novels mentioned in *Northanger Abbey* is available for 77p!)

## Aishwarya Subramanian

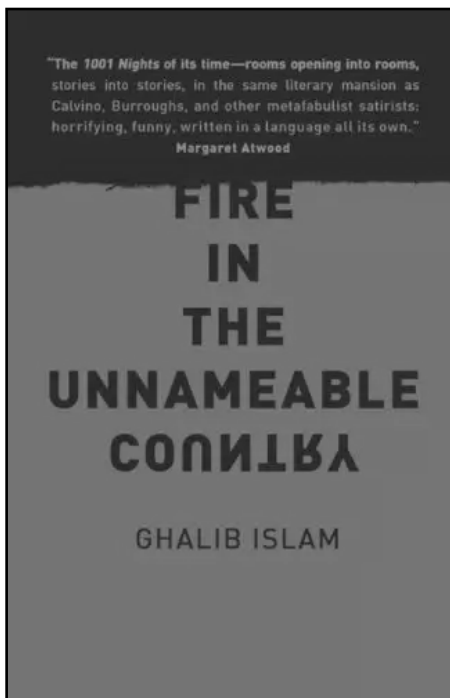
There are probably higher and better things to look for in fiction than recognition of oneself and yet much of what mattered to me in 2014 was finding SF that did just this. I found it in the multilingual wordplay of Ghalib Islam's *Fire In The Unnameable Country*, which takes English, Hindi, Bangla, Arabic, post-colonialism, drones, the surveillance state and attempts impossible things with them. I spent half of the year failing to read this book because a single line on the first page made me too gleeful to continue.

I found it in Megan Milks's *Kill Marguerite*, a collection of short stories that link myth and video games and bodily grossness and queerness and the experience of having been a teenage girl. And the dark humour of Kuzhali Manickavel's *Things We Found During The Autopsy*; the exhilarating cleverness of Adam Roberts's *Riddles Of The Hobbit*; and the school story-reading girl detective of Robin Stevens's *Murder Most Unladylike* (I'm sure, given time, I could make a case for this as science fiction).

Courtney Milan's historical romances (I stand by my belief that they are alternate history and therefore SF) continued to be great. As was Rebecca Stead's *Liar & Spy*; less obviously genre-related than the author's last (2009's *When You Reach*







Me, a time travel story) but fundamentally about narrative and escapism and roleplay. Sophia MacDougall's *Mars Evacuees* was moving and funny and warming as was Shalini Srinivasan's *Vanamala And The Cephalopod*. I loved Manuela Draeger's *In the Time Of The Blue Ball* (translated by Brian Evenson), a series of what feel like post-apocalyptic noir fables.

On the internet, the formation of the Strange Horizons book club was one of the best things about this year; providing a space for exactly the sort of conversations the field has felt lacking in recently. Lackington's had a strong first year, publishing new fiction by Sofia Samatar, Vajra Chandrasekera and Amal el-Mohtar, among others. The new St Vincent album was definitely science fiction and I loved it but my album of the year has to have been Lydia Ainsworth's *Right From Real*, which is my new soundtrack for the apocalypse and should be yours as well.

But really, the best thing about 2014 was the week I spent in bed reading Diana Wynne Jones, immediately after first helping to organise, then presenting at a conference on her work and being sure that I'd never want to read her again (or not for a very long time). Spoiler alert: she is still astonishingly good.

## Sandra Unerman

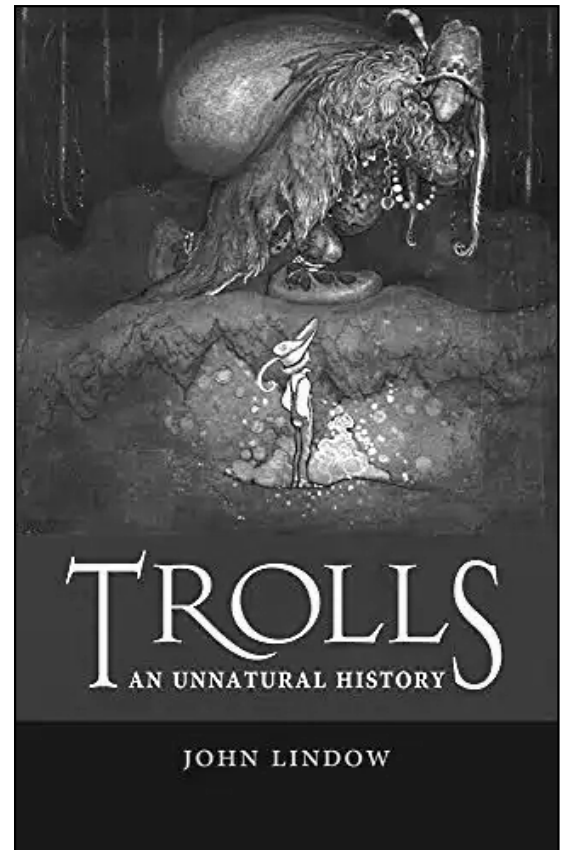
Frances Hardinge's novels are marketed as YA but, to my mind, they provide more intriguing and vivid fiction than much adult fantasy. *Cuckoo Song* is set in England, shortly after the First World War. Eleven year old Triss is slow to recover from an accident in which she has nearly drowned. Her symptoms and behaviour grow stranger until she is forced to question everything she has believed about herself and her family. And she only has seven days to discover what is wrong.

Triss lives in Ellcehster, a town full of secrets. The Besiders found in the cracks unnoticed by ordinary people are deeply uncanny and scissors are a truly frightening weapon. The failure of Triss's parents to deal with the loss of their son during the war is slowly destroying their family. Triss's loneliness and desperation are painful to read about but she does eventually find some helpers she can trust and learn how to develop her own strength and courage.

*Cuckoo Song* lacks some of the wild inventiveness of Hardinge's *Fly By Night* or *Face Like Glass* but it does have a compelling protagonist and some memorable minor characters, including Violet, the young motorcycle courier, and the Architect, who can build palaces in broom cupboards. The narrative is gripping and the novel convincingly evokes the life of a small town in the Twenties, where everyone is affected by the aftermath of the War.

*The Fourth Gwenevere*, a posthumous publication, continues the series of novels by John James set in the Dark Ages in Britain and Europe. Like his earlier books, it uses medieval folklore and literature to draw a picture of a fascinating and sometimes baffling world. This novel begins shortly before the death of Arthur and is narrated by a Welsh King, who describes the death and its aftermath, against a

background of struggles between the post-Roman British and the Heathen invaders. Some of the standard elements of Arthurian literature are subverted here: Mordred is known as the Soul of Honour and Camelot is not a castle. The narrative voice is direct and unromantic but still manages to conjure up a flavour of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century as people at the time might have dreamed about it, rather than as a historical reconstruction of events.



*Trolls, An Unnatural History* by John Lindow is a work of non-fiction. It discusses the earliest use of the word 'troll' and its relations to other words for monsters and uncanny beings. And it traces the history of trolls from the Norse poetic tradition to the internet by way of Tolkien and the Three Billy Goats Gruff. The earliest appearance is of a troll woman, who calls herself "giants' wealth-sucker" and "swallower of heaven wheel", and trolls are found in Scandinavian folklore with varying dimensions and natures, sometimes taking on the role occupied by giants or by fairies in British traditional tales. Lindow provides plenty of examples from literature not well known outside Scandinavia and a fine selection of illustrations.

# Best of 2014 in SF Television

by Molly Cobb

The past year has given viewers of SF television a new Doctor, a new superhero, a strengthened continuation of more established shows, and the cancellation of a number of shows that abandoned their speculative origins. The blurring of lines between SF and fantasy in some series means that it is more difficult to claim one as SF and another as fantasy. While this wedding of speculative fictions can make for interesting lines of inquiry, it can also destroy the original intention by making it too difficult to utilize science fictional elements properly, with the ever-present danger of turning them into a mere plot device or clichéd trope.

More generally, many speculative television shows have adopted an interest in the core mechanic of the 'Other' and the place of individuals within society. This element is common among nearly every show to be discussed here, whether straight SF, blurred SF/fantasy, or straight fantasy. Speculative TV programming thus encourages discussion regarding the social condition, philosophical considerations, scientific advancements, and the simple act of feeling like one belongs.

Premiering last August, *Outlander* (2014-present) is based on the first book of a series by Diana Gabaldon (published in the UK as *Cross Stitch*) and is arguably little more than romantic drama, genre-wise. The SF trope of time travel is used in a fantastical manner involving druids to transport our heroine, Claire Beauchamp Randall, from 1945 to 1743. With filming actually taking place in Scotland the show is lent a touch of realism and the flashbacks/flash-forwards between the two time periods emphasize not only the difference between the years but Claire's disconnect from the familiar. Though occasionally heavy in narrative voice-over, the show is generally well-acted and well-written ('The Wedding' specifically evidencing this as, rather than being superficial fan pandering, the sex scenes were genuine and authentic with the awkward development of intimacy between Claire and Jamie believably written). The relationship between Claire and Jamie Fraser in 1743 threatens Claire's marriage in 1945 and the parallel continuation of time between events taking place in both timelines inadvertently opens up discussions based around time itself, specifically the concept of linear time versus simultaneous time. Though so far only briefly touched upon, the show is slowly venturing

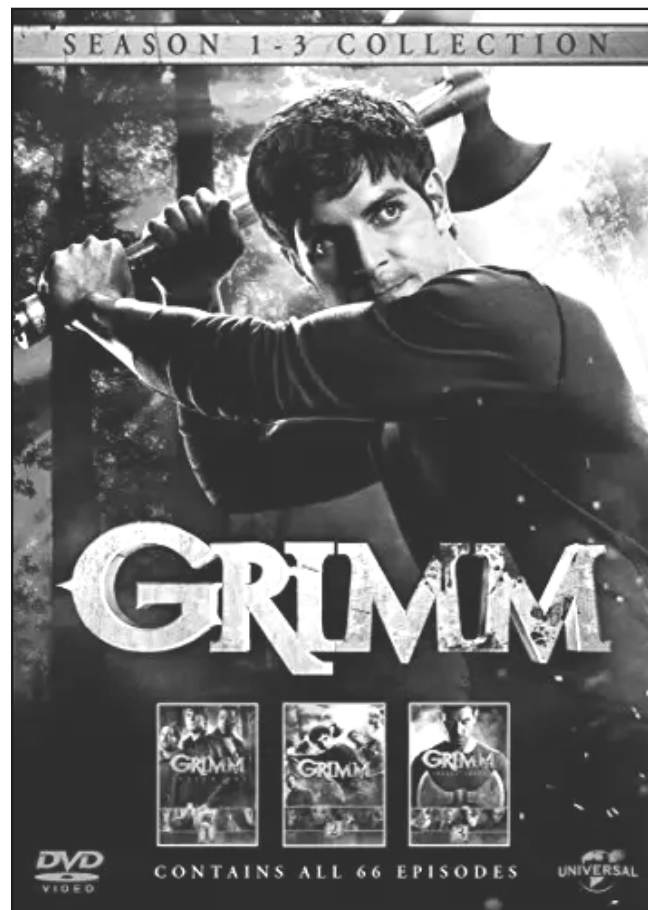
into questions of alternate history with the Scots' funding of the Jacobite army. Claire's attempts to warn them with her knowledge of future events of the war fall on deaf ears due to her inability to explain the source of her information. The impact her future knowledge may have on the course of history and her own timeline are demonstrated in the character of Jonathan Randall, her husband's ancestor whom she encounters multiple times and whom the Scots aim to kill, thus threatening the erasure of both her husband and a large piece of Claire's future. Tobias Menzies does a wonderful job of performing the dual role of both Claire's husband Frank Randall and of Jonathan, making the characters so radically different the viewer is capable of forgetting they are the same actor. The show has won both the Critic's Choice Television Award for Most Exciting New Series as well as the 2015 People's Choice Award for Favourite Cable Sci-Fi/Fantasy Show. While it can be argued that *Outlander* is not sufficiently couched in speculative fiction to be winning an award most likely meant for more genre-heavy programming, it does demonstrate the nature of current speculative television as encouraged by the viewing public.

With Menzies' excellent work on *Outlander*, one must be reminded of Tatiana Maslany's work on *Orphan Black* (2013-present). She continues to expertly navigate her multiple characters giving them each their own representation so distinct from one another that she easily occupies each role. Though this is the second year that the show has failed to garner an Emmy nomination it can hardly be considered a result of a lack of quality. Both critics and fans see this continued oversight as a direct snub but this lack of attention seems confined to the Emmys as, in 2014 alone, the show was nominated for 16 awards and won 23 others. Season two deals heavily with ideas of family and hereditary DNA, specifically Sarah Manning's ability to have a child. The implications of cloning, such as sickness, are explored with multiple clones being shown to have died from or contracted the same respiratory illness, marking a defect in the DNA. This season also delves more heavily into implications of ownership as it is revealed the patent for the cloning procedure is written into the clones' very DNA, bringing up questions of slavery and property. The patent for intellectual property includes all genetic derivatives from the

clones, which is legally shown to include offspring, thus bringing Sarah's ability to have children back to the fore. The show continues just as strongly as its first season, building on its questioning of the implications of cloning as a whole, as well as social considerations of individuals and philosophical implications of the self, specifically in relation to corporate patenting of the human genome.

Season three of *Orphan Black* promises to be just as good as its current season, with Ksenia Solo, formerly of *Lost Girl* (2010-present), joining the cast. Solo's exit from *Lost Girl* emphasizes the show's understanding of the human inability to completely fit within the Fae world, and the loss of the main human character takes with it most of the humanity and much of the humour of the show. Though still utilizing witty one-liners and comedic situations between humans and Fae, it lacks the bridge formerly made between the audience and the characters through Kenzi. As the current season is to be the last it is perhaps understandable, though still brave, for the show to choose to kill off multiple characters and have Kenzi leave. The deaths are believable and drive the emotion and tension throughout the current season so far. The advancement in characters' backgrounds and relationships helps pull the show together and inject true emotion into it, such as Tamsin's desire for family and Kenzi's self-sacrifice, first offered to save the life of her fiancé and then offered again to aid the protagonist, Bo. The connection between Fae powers and emotion mirrors human psychology, giving humanity back to the characters. The exploration of the afterlife offers up interesting concepts but is fairly minimal beyond the needs of the plot. Bo's family is further introduced and the flashback connections to season one help align the first and last seasons, bringing the events and characters nearly full circle. The show claimed the 2014 Fan Choice Award for Favourite Canadian Show, an award that is not genre specific, thus putting speculative programming ahead of mainstream in this particular instance.

*Grimm* (2011-present) blends elements of SF and fantasy, though still remaining firmly in the fantastic category. The clear association with Grimm's fairy tales explains the fantastic element, but discerning viewers can see the SF implications within the show: as with *Orphan Black*, genetics and DNA could easily be given their appropriate weight. Questions regarding these concerns as well as the consideration of their effects on ideas of the 'other', similar to the separation of human and Fae in *Lost Girl*, can be applied to the show and the Wesen portrayed within. Unfortunately, explorations such as these suffer from fairy



tale creatures often being portrayed too literally rather than exploring their cultural significance or abilities to adapt and hide in modern society. Specifically with regards to modern technology, one must wonder how they have managed to avoid being discovered after all this time. As the seasons have progressed they have become more intriguing and more intelligent, revealing the protagonist's powers as a Grimm as well as their hereditary nature and how to live with or without them. The show has skirted larger social or philosophical considerations but has done a decent job of exploring the psychological implications of discovering fairy tales do exist, both for non-Grimms struggling to

understand and believe in a world they cannot see as well as others who accidentally glimpse that world without knowing what it is. The effect on mental health and sanity is then brought to light, developing the concept of the 'other'.

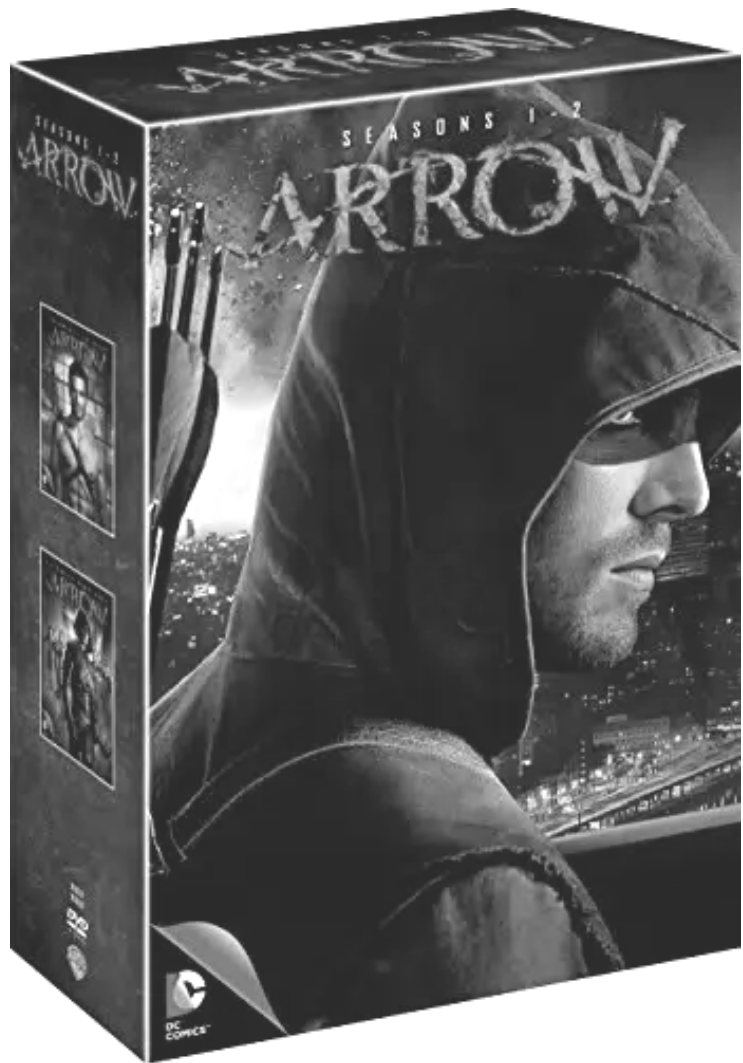
Unlike the aforementioned shows which utilize their speculative elements accurately, whether directly or indirectly, *The Listener* (2009-2014) is an example of a show cancelled at the end of last season due to its increased removal from its speculative origins. *The Listener* abandoned its SF premise in favour of an increasingly repetitive procedural drama, with Toby Logan's telepathy becoming nothing more than a gimmick or plot device. Though the acting was still of a decent quality, the series quickly became episodic and the writing reflected this lack of overarching elements. Some details regarding Toby's mother, which had initially driven the SF plotline in earlier seasons, are revealed and wrapped up in the last episode though with many questions left unanswered. The whole scenario was thus ultimately unbelievable and clearly hashed together in a hurry due to the pending cancellation. The show had previously been taken off the air by multiple television channels around the world due to low ratings, making it no surprise it was ultimately cancelled. In this case, it can be surmised that the abandonment of its SF origins led to a show that was quickly forgettable, relatively uninteresting, and lacking the mystery and intrigue that drove its earlier, more speculative, episodes.

An example of a fantasy show cancelled due to its ignorance of its speculative origins would be *Witches of East End* (2013-2014). Though not SF, it is worthy of mention to demonstrate that, regardless of genre, abandoning



expected speculative elements in TV programming is an easy route to cancellation. Reminiscent of *Charmed* (1998-2006), the show was entertaining and interesting, but did not nearly live up to the nostalgic idea of a family of witches. Low ratings in the second season ultimately led to its cancellation but there is currently a petition to have it renewed, which is backed by some of the original actresses from *Charmed*. Despite this fan approval, the show suffers from a presentation far too similar to that of the soap opera, due to the many contrived plotlines and over-the-top relationship dramas. Though the utilization of their powers and immersion in the fantastic means the show is still more speculative than *The Listener*, its focus on melodrama outweighs this usage and leaves it feeling almost as episodic.

A new show introduced during the 2014 fall season, *Forever* (2014-present) is arguably rushing towards a similar position as the previous two shows by utilizing its SF premise as a plot device and gimmick rather than a point of meaningful discussion and investigation into the implications of its speculative elements. Though the characters are charming and the episodes interesting, it would be no surprise if the show were subsequently cancelled in the course of its next season or soon thereafter. Despite its better qualities, the premise is rather superficial. The show follows Henry Morgan, a man made immortal after an accident at sea, and who is now working as a medical examiner in New York. His exhibition of characteristics similar to Sherlock Holmes is presumably an excuse to explain his usefulness to the police beyond that of duties performed in the morgue. Though there is inherently nothing wrong with the slow reveal, the exploration of immortality has been extremely limited and only really considered just prior to the mid-season break, though executed in such a manner as to give no explanations, only more questions. The discovery of a fellow immortal answers nothing except to imply that Morgan is not alone in his dilemma, giving no discussion as to how immortality is gained. Well-placed flashbacks do help reveal Morgan's past and thoroughly explore the impact of his immortality on his relationships and sanity. The danger of revealing his secret is what drives much of his interactions and the main tension within the series. Death itself is not a consideration, as Morgan will simply find himself regenerated. Due to this, Morgan's immortality is often little discussed except to the effect of how best to keep it a secret and is often only utilized to find some dramatic way to kill the protagonist, often in a situation where his immortality could be revealed, bordering on a gimmicky nature similar to that of Logan's telepathy in *The Listener*. The other characters in the show are poorly fleshed out, with little to no explanation as to why Morgan is now spending more time investigating crimes with Detective Martinez than her own partner, who only appears at choice times to deliver information needed to advance their investigation before disappearing again. As with many other low rating SF television shows, the problem remains a weakly developed premise that has little to no bearing on the episode to episode dealings of the characters or the overarching plot in any meaningful way.



To return to more quality programming, the DC universe has given viewers *Arrow* (2012-present) as well as its newest TV endeavour, *The Flash* (2014-present). *Arrow* is arguably not SF in the same sense as the other science fiction programming discussed here but the technology used, as well as its inclusion in the DC universe which does harbour many SF elements, relates it to SF through atmosphere and wider setting rather than through direct, obvious aspects. The crossover episodes between *Arrow* and *The Flash* help to remind viewers of this fact while demonstrating that despite their differences in abilities, age, status, etc., they are equally capable as superheroes. The show even pits them against one another, once seriously and once more playfully, though viewers are not shown who wins this friendly competition, thus not concretely defining one as more powerful than the other. A driving plot point in the most current season is the death of Sara which, though emotionally tragic for many of the characters, is quickly pushed to the background and, when solved, serves as a device to develop the drama between the Arrow and Malcolm Merlyn, with the death itself rendered secondary. The mid-season break was an engrossing and suspenseful cliff hanger thanks to the writing, despite the knowledge that they were unlikely to kill the titular character. The increased use of the League of Assassins has helped expand the world within the show and helped tie in more DC characters, just as the use of the Suicide Squad did in earlier episodes. Though nominated



for 15 awards, *Arrow* won none of them, despite the cast and writing remaining in good form and secondary characters coming to the fore with their own lives beyond that of the secret they share with the Arrow, giving the viewer insight into more than just a very localized individual and particular situation.

As a spin-off from *Arrow*, *The Flash* won the People's Choice Award for Favourite New TV Drama in 2014. Again, this award is not genre specific. The show is fun, funny, and well-acted and the mystery surrounding Dr Wells is being revealed at just the right pace to keep the viewer interested without feeling frustrated, as in the case of *Forever*. Barry Allen and his friends nearly replicate the team of the Arrow, though a younger version with less experience, which is explored through Barry's interactions with Oliver Queen. The show is flashier and brighter than *Arrow*, perhaps emphasizing the differences between the two protagonists or as a move away from the darker origins of the Arrow. The villains were in danger of episodic treatment but the show seems to be moving away from this with multiple episode story arcs and a larger plotline involving Barry's relationships with the people in his life. Precedent is thus given to Barry's experience of having powers while those around him do not, with his life as a superhero nearly secondary, but the two are balanced fairly well and the writing helps give both aspects equal weight. The technology and metahumans introduced throughout the show are interesting in their own right and often given their own flashbacks in order to explain their origins. Though the crossovers help keep the Flash and the Arrow in the same universe, the shows are completely different and without knowledge of their co-existence in the DC universe, one would be hard-pressed to acknowledge that Barry Allen and Oliver Queen live in the same world. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it does thoroughly separate the gritty Starling City from the flashy Central City.

A discussion of SF television would not be complete without a consideration of the most current season of *Doctor Who* (1963-1989, 2005-present). Peter Capaldi as the newest incarnation of the Doctor is a joy to watch; he's smart, funny, brusque, depressing, thought-provoking, and heart-warming. Unfortunately, he is let down by some surprisingly poor writing and less than excellent episodes. 'The Caretaker' was arguably the first good episode of the series (despite Danny Pink's rather sexist take on companions near the end of the episode), though 'Kill the Moon' quickly kills the mood with its over the top anti-abortion rhetoric and ignorance of similar decisions made in past series. 'Mummy on the Orient Express' was a return to form with 'Flatline' finally having the Doctor come into his own. 'Flatline' actually makes the Doctor feel like the Doctor, though not before Clara plays his role for him, in

a rather endearing manner. 'In the Forest of the Night' added little to the series overall except to heighten the tension of Clara's choice between Danny and the Doctor, though Danny's dialogue does not exactly endear him to the audience. His claim that what he has is enough and his desire to understand Clara before anything else is perhaps understandable but his complete lack of enthusiasm for the wonders of all time and space seems, if nothing else, a bit unbelievable. Though the final two episodes of the series were certainly dramatic and perhaps even heart-wrenching in places, they too suffered. Missy seemed too much like *Doctor Who*'s version of Moriarty and the idea that cybermen can still feel seems to contradict nearly everything the audience has been told about cybermen in previous episodes. The 2014 Christmas Special, 'Last Christmas', however, was fun and entertaining with creepy horror thrown in and was a good way to round off a series that needed a bit of a boost. Though the homage to *Alien* and *Inception* was clever, its borrowing was perhaps too heavy-handed. Combined with monsters reminis-

cent of the Weeping Angels and the Silence, the episode was perhaps less original than it first appeared. Despite all of this, the episode was thoroughly enjoyable and Nick Frost as Santa Claus was good fun, even if not on screen for very long. Clara and the Doctor admitting their lies to each other demonstrated their concerns for one another while also exposing some underlying worries about the effect of lying on Clara's character. The episode was highly praised by critics and it should be, for despite any faults it did show a return to the spirit of *Doctor Who* and the mixture of melancholy and joy expected from its Doctors. Clara's comment that 'Every Christmas is last Christmas' helps capture the sentiment of the special as well as her relationships with both the Doctor and Danny Pink, finally allowing some closure for all three characters.



The 2014 television season had its ups and downs but the cancellation of both fairly new shows and older ones is evened out by the awards won by other programmes in both SF and mainstream categories. *Doctor Who* remains as fun-filled as always and promises a return to form with its next series. *Orphan Black* and *The Flash* promise immersive SF exploration while shows like *Outlander* and *Grimm* allow a blurred take on SF and fantasy elements with *Arrow* and *Forever* as potentially good introductions for those new to SF. The overarching consideration of the 'other' shows a growing consideration of SF's place in the world and its human impact, across all classes of SF. Though of course other SF programming exists beyond the shows mentioned here, this overview demonstrates what is good about current SF programming and how the lack of thorough exploration of one's speculative origins nearly always spells disaster.

# Best of 2014 in SF Audio

by Tony Jones

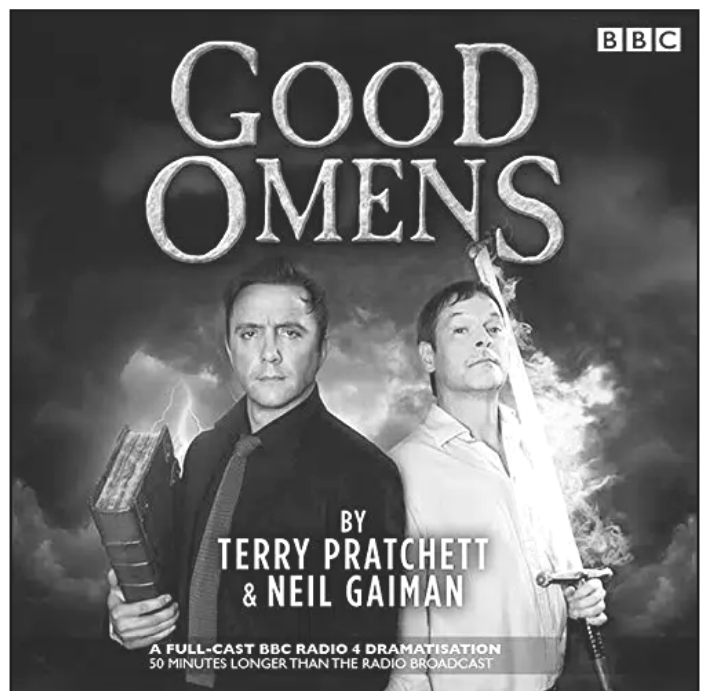
**F**irst, what is audio science fiction? In the simplest terms it is science fiction consumed by the ears, be that from the radio, audiobooks or podcast. There is a whole range of audio available – specially written dramas, adaptations, and simple readings. For me, audio rivals the eBook as the most effective way to consume science fiction as I commute. Anyone with a combination of train, bus, or walk to work has plenty of time in a week to listen to several hours of material. You can even listen while you cook; a friend of mine does much of his listening when mowing the lawn. Enough preamble; what were the highlights of 2014 in the world of audio science fiction? The short answer is change and diversity. The long answer? Read on...

## Free On the Radio

In the UK, we are lucky to have the BBC and for audio science fiction we have BBC Radio 4 Extra; at least that used to be the case. At the start of 2014, 4 Extra pulled back from their daily one-hour science-fiction slot and have now left us with only the weekends. I suspect much of the reason was the lack of new material, in turn driven by economics. Whereas a few years ago there were many new series such as *Undone*, *Planet B* and several bought-in *Doctor Who* titles, output had more recently focused on repeats.

This dearth of drama continued until Radio 4 announced a set of stories under the banner of *Dangerous Visions*. The title is, of course, a tribute to the classic collection of short stories gathered together by Harlan Ellison in 1967. The Radio 4 series ran for two weeks and consisted of ten titles, a mix of new stories and adaptations of well-known classics. Amongst the most well known were an adaptation of Ray Bradbury's wonderful *The Illustrated Man* with Iain Glen in the title role, Derek Jacobi and Hayley Atwell in Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* and James Purefoy with Jessica Raine in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*.

The adaptations were all drawn from the originals; *Martian Chronicles* picked four of Bradbury's stories and Dirk Maggs was Executive Producer (among many others Maggs worked on the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and the well-received 2013 adaptation of *Neverwhere*). The surreal nature of the original is captured in the adaption and once the listener adapts to the introduction of British



accents into what is clearly an American story they are drawn deep into another world.

*Do Androids of Electric Sheep?* closely followed the novel rather than the path taken in Ridley Scott's film adaptation, *Bladerunner*. The context is stripped back but the story of Deckard and his hunt for replicants is preserved and the result is a gripping tale of police action in a future America. Split over two episodes, the pivot is the most surreal (and quintessentially Dickian) sequence where Deckard is himself arrested as a replicant and doubts his own memories. James Purefoy shines in the lead role, whereas Jessica Raine has the harder challenge of playing the unemotional replicants: however, Rachael comes to the fore at the end of the story when Deckard begins to question his role as replicant hunter. I had read the novel only a year earlier and this is a good complement and an introduction for anyone who has only ever seen Ridley Scott's film.

The end of 2014 also gave us another Dirk Maggs production, this time his adaptation of Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's 1990 novel, *Good Omens*. This was broadcast over the Christmas holidays at an 11pm slot – how successful this has yet to be established. The BBC's website for



the production has a distinctive comic book look and it is interesting to note that some of the most evocative audio is that which has the same production values as a comic book: in a good comic strip each frame needs to set out the scene without getting in the way of the sparse narrative that tends to focus on dialogue. The same can be true of audio - if the narrative is mostly dialogue the scene setting has to be non-intrusive and support the story telling.

### Free Elsewhere

Ignoring podcasts, this was a quiet year for free drama. Even the highly regarded *Minister of Chance* focussed on film production though a remixed and re-mastered version of the Prologue and Episode 1 of the series were released. Although these were free (and still are), the CD is a fund-raising exercise as the makers seek investment for the film.

### The BBC

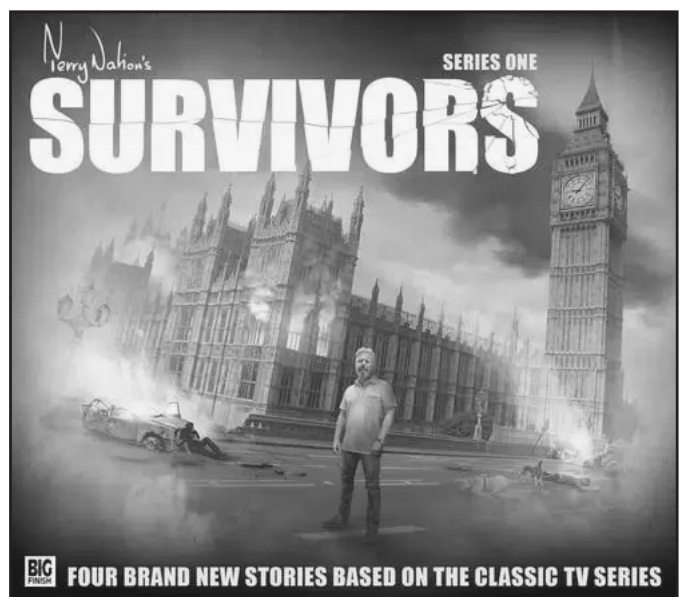
The market for quality audio (at least in the UK) has held up and the choice available has increased. It is not all good news, but in the main the consumer is still well served. A single organisation dominates but not at the expense of quality and nor does it act to stifle competition. At the tail end of 2013, the BBC's commercial channel, *AudioGo*, went into administration and things looked bleak at the start of 2014. Amazon snapped up the most profitable parts of the back-catalogue under their Audible range. This brought an effective halt to new products and any further investment. Towards the end of 2014, things started to pick up and the BBC are now back with their own audio offering, BBC Audio. They released some titles in time for Christmas, focussing on the *Doctor Who* brand.

### Big Finish

No review of audio science fiction can overlook the massive contribution Big Finish makes to the market. Deservedly respected for its *Doctor Who* audios, in recent years the range has extended to cover such titles as *Blake's 7*, *Stargate*, *The Avengers*, and *Dark Shadows*.

Big Finish has grown and diversified over the last twelve months, receiving recognition for excellence as shown by the BBC Audio Drama award for Best Online or Non-Broadcast Drama. Fittingly this was for a *Doctor Who* title, *Dark Eyes: The Great War*. In terms of diversification, Big Finish introduced two new ranges in January: *The Avengers – The Lost Stories* and full-cast *Blake's 7* stories. Big Finish had released several reduced cast *Blake's 7* audios previously and one full cast story, *Warship*, in January 2013. The new *Blake's 7* stories were released as six monthly episodes, each a single CD and telling stories set in the early days of the TV show (i.e. Blake was still in the programme!). A very different proposition was *The Avengers – The Lost Stories*. Much like better known titles, the very first series of *The Avengers* has almost no surviving recordings. Big Finish has been licensed to recreate these from the original scripts in audio form. To date, two sets of four discs have been released and provide a fascinating insight into the early days of a cult TV series. The atmosphere has been tightly recreated, and there are even musical moments to mark the advert breaks from the original broadcasts.

The year continued with more *Dark Eyes* boxsets, telling the continuing story of Paul McGann's Eighth Doctor and introducing a new regeneration of The Master. There was also a wholly home-grown series, *Vienna*, starring Chase Masterson (*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*) as Vienna Salvatori a glamorous assassin. Very much influenced by Philip K. Dick, these have been successful enough to ensure two further releases. Big Finish also created a boxset of stories for their own character, Charlotte Pollard. Played by India Fisher, Charlie (as she was known) spent years as the first companion to the Eighth Doctor in Big Finish audios and this narrative will continue in further boxsets. The headline Big Finish release of 2014 was a four-disc boxset of *The Survivors*. These stories were set during the early part of the first seasons of the original television series. Big Finish gathered together a new cast of regulars, newcomers and two of the original actors from the show – Lucy Fleming (Jenny Richards) and Ian McCulloch (Greg Preston). Carolyn Seymour who played the lead character of Abby Grant came on board late in the production and only had a cameo scene but will feature in the later runs. I was in the





studio for the recording of the third of these and even then could tell this would be a major success. The stories don't repeat the original episodes, but weave a tale alongside. The opening episode, Matt Fitton's *Revelation*, has been nominated for a BBC Audio award in this year's ceremony.

A surprise release was a dramatization of Simon Clark's 2001 novel *Night of the Triffids*, adapted by Simon himself. If nothing else this provided evidence (were it needed) that Big Finish would do a splendid job of bringing John Wyndham's original novels to a new audio market. The casting and musical treatment of this story captures an atmosphere unique to the setting. While Wyndham's original Triffids novel was a product of the 1950s, this is set in a 1970s world that never was and the overall effect is curious yet compelling.

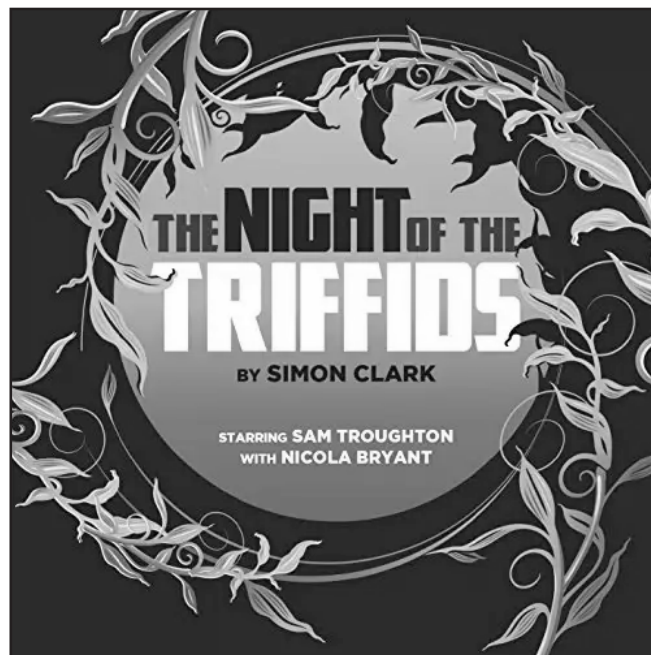
September also gave us an adaptation of a classic piece of literature – Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This boasted a strong cast (including Arthur Darvill, Nicholas Briggs, Georgia Moffet, Terry Molloy and Lizzie Hopley) and sticks closer to the original text than many other adaptations making it a credit to everyone involved. JR Southall, writing for *Starburst Magazine*, gave it 9/10 and called it 'a fascinating, absorbing reading... Highly recommended'. Unsurprisingly this is also up for a BBC Audio Award.

Of course, core to Big Finish is *Doctor Who* and 2014 marked the fifteenth year of their license. To mark this was yet another boxset, *Worlds of Doctor Who*, a story uniting several of the Big Finish spin-off ranges into one story. The year also saw the first releases of a new range of *Doctor Who* stories: *The Early Adventures*. These are full-cast stories for the earliest of Doctors with surviving cast members narrating and providing a voice for the Doctor. This year's titles were all First Doctor stories, each a double-disc story and designed to sound as though they were re-issued original off-air recordings with little sequences of voice-over to cover for missing visuals. This is not easy to imagine and takes some time to adapt to. It is well worth the small effort; some of the strongest stories of the year appeared in this short run of four stories and all were very much in the style of the original first Doctor television stories.

## Elsewhere

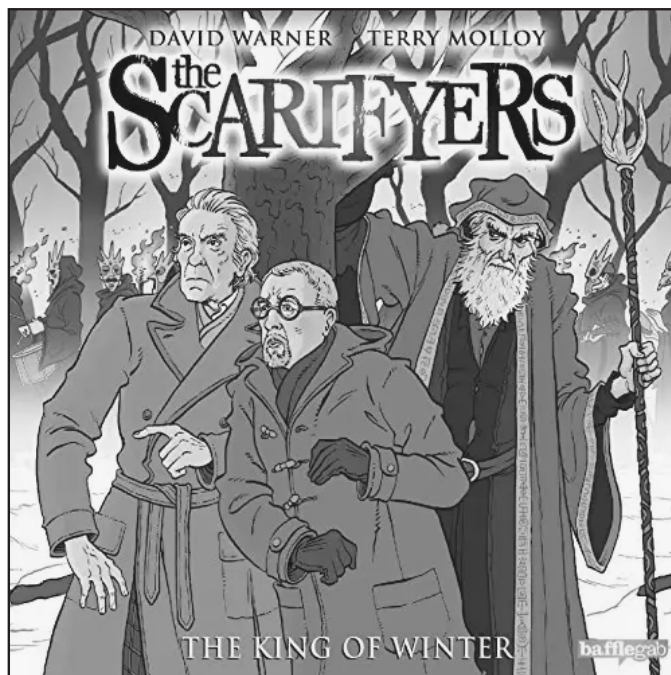
The creators of *The Scarifyers*, Bafflegab Productions, had a quiet year in terms of new releases until late in the year. October saw the ninth release in their lead range: *The Scarifyers: The King of Winter*. This is set in 1938 and features MI-13's Harry Crow (David Warner) and Professor Dunning (Terry Molloy) in a very tongue-in-cheek tale that takes in the exclusive Tarturus Club and the 300-year ghost that threatens the village of Thornton Gibbet. You can glean the style of the story from the many reviews. *Starburst Magazine* called the programme's puns 'almost too bad to document' while the *Sci-Fi Bulletin* praised its 'inspired lunacy' and *SFF Audio* enjoyed its 'rousing comedic fun'. If you haven't heard it, repeats still crop up on Radio 4 Extra.

In terms of new output, Bafflegab have been working with Paul Magrs for the second time (the first was the 2013 one-off, *Vince Cosmos*) on *The Brenda and Effie Mysteries*. Paul Magrs has written several stories in this range,



many of which have been dramatised for Radio 4 Extra. In this new range, released from December 2014, the story goes back to when Brenda arrives in Whitby to take up a quiet life as a landlady. She meets with Effie and together they investigate a mysterious cat and a haunted painting. The voice work is by Anne Reid and the story has a gentle, dry humour.

The Wireless Theatre Company released the final instalment of their second series of adventures based on the Victorian urban myths of *Springheel'd Jack*, the cast including the company's patron Nicholas Parsons. This toyed with the listener, sounding as though the hero had been killed off (other major characters have been eliminated in this series) but all was well. The finale opened as many doors as it closed, even if it borrowed from *Indiana Jones*. The creators (Jack Bowman and Robert Valentine) spoke at Loncon3, giving an insight into their production values and how they are pushing the possibilities of audio for the twenty first century.





Diversity continued with the appearance of a new publisher, Everybodyelse Productions, whose founder Martin Johnson worked with a range of studios before forming this independent company based in Nottingham. He has launched a new audio drama series, *Osiris*, based around the discovery of an advanced spaceship under a Nottingham forest. The cast is impressive for a new title from a new company and includes Christian Edwards, Liz White and Robert Whitelock. In style the story is action based and has the tone of something like the TV series *Agents of Shield* – it is designed to entertain.

### Looking Forward

The BBC has made no announcements about any more broadcast science fiction but they tend to announce near the time. I would fully expect another special along the lines of *Dangerous Visions*. Meanwhile, a second series of *The Minister of Chance* has been announced; there are no dates given yet, but every possibility it would begin in 2015. As BBC Audio finds its feet, it will also be interesting to see if they begin to move away from readings of classic and new *Doctor Who* titles and into fully fledged drama again. A glaring gap would be the *Destiny of the Doctor* range produced in 2013 in tandem with Big Finish. This



is crying out for the addition of a twelfth title on the back of Peter Capaldi's arrival in the series. This is precisely what Penguin did with their series of fiftieth anniversary eBooks and Holly Black's *Lights Out*, so there is precedent. The *Brenda and Effie Stories* will continue as Bafflegab gives us more chances to enjoy Paul Magrs' work. The Wireless Theatre Company's third series of *The Springheel Saga* also promises to be a highlight of the year. They produce other science fiction so are a publisher worth noting.



Big Finish is concluding its *Dark Eyes* range so what will the Eighth Doctor do next? We can only wait and see. There will also be plenty more *Vienna*, *Avengers - The Lost Stories*, *Survivors* and much else besides copious episodes of *Doctor Who*. There is also a new series (set in the present day) based on the original 1979 series *The Omega Factor*. I was lucky enough to be in the studio for the recording of part of this and it promises to be gripping and demanding of further stories. Their *Early Adventures* range will move into the territory of re-casting key characters starting with the companion Ben Jackson and will later extend to Barbara Wright. Big Finish has also re-cast the Third Doctor – exciting times, I can't wait! No doubt there will be plenty more to keep the science fiction listener entertained. I look forward to describing them all to you in 2016!

# Best of 2014 in Young Adult SF

by Ashley Armstrong

Young Adult (YA) fiction has been growing from strength to strength during recent years but it seemed 2014 was a breakout year with blockbuster movies such as *Divergent*, *The Maze Runner* and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay: Part One* breaking box office records. With lots of contemplative pieces about adults reading YA, it seems to have finally broken into the mainstream conversation.

Without a doubt, 2014 has been an astounding year for science fiction YA in particular with a slew of big releases from major hitters. We've had new books released by the likes of Cassandra Clare, Veronica Roth, Rick Yancey, Jennifer Armentrout, Maggie Stiefvater, James Dashner and Tahereh Mafi. There have also been a few awesome debut YA titles showcasing some amazing new talent, such as Amie Kaufman and Megan Spooner's *These Broken Stars*, Lydia Kang's *Control* and Pierce Brown's *Red Rising*.

It's also been a year of finales with both Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* series coming to a worthy conclusion (even though she hints at more to come from her *Shadowhunter* universe) and Veronica Roth concluding the *Divergent* series with not one but two releases.

Despite being spoiled for choice, there are some stand out sf books from 2014. They vary in subject from futuristic fairy-tale retellings, to grand space operas, to an alien invasion. Here are four of the best books I think the year had to offer:

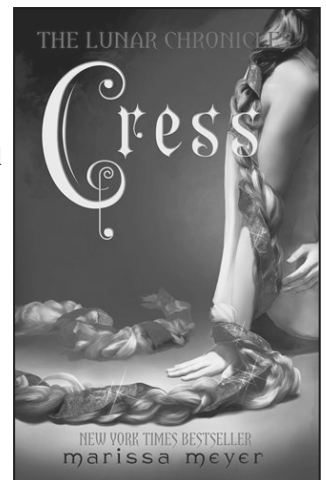
## *Cress* by Marissa Meyer

Looking back to the beginning of 2014 I initially had a very small list of books I was anticipating being released. *Cress* by Marissa Meyer however topped that list and didn't disappoint. It's hard not to fall in love with Meyer's writing and the worlds she creates from *Cinder* to *Scarlet* and now *Cress* (with both *Fairest* and *Winter* expected this year). Each book has been better than the last. All of these books are really well written with exciting and original story lines and delightful characters. *Cress* offers a feeling of freshness by adding new, quirky characters while seamlessly picking up exciting story lines from previous books.

Meyer has taken our favourite fairy tales and added a futuristic twist, somehow making them even more remarkable. She has created a complex sf world using traditional

fairy-tales; anyone who thinks a cyborg Cinderella doesn't work (you'd be wrong) look no further than *Cinder*. *Cress* is Meyer's version of the Rapunzel story, but she's no castle-bound damsel in distress; now she's a hacker on a satellite who risks her life to protect Cinder and push this series to what will surely be its thrilling conclusion.

If *Cinder* was entertaining and *Scarlet* (about a pilot Red Riding Hood and a street fighter called Wolf) was a thrilling sequel then *Cress* was astonishing, telling the stories of three badass female heroes and the men that follow them. With more action, political troubles, plot twists and of course romance, characters who are diverse, complex and interesting, *Cress* surpassed my already high expectations.



## *These Broken Stars* by Amie Kaufman and Megan Spooner

A debut novel for both authors, *These Broken Stars* by Amie Kaufman and Megan Spooner was a book I could not put down and one I would recommend to those seeking a gateway into YA. It has been described by many as an 'Intergalactic Titanic' yet while initially there are definitely similarities to the doomed cruise liner they soon stop being comparable and the focus very much becomes a story about survival and the relationship between the two main characters. This story is incredibly original, and unlike any other sf I've read before, with a compelling tone that you don't often find in YA sf.

We are immediately thrown into the world of our main characters aboard a luxury space liner: Tarver, a solider, and Lilac, the daughter of the richest and most powerful man in the universe. After a rather spectacular crash, Tarver and Lilac are stranded on a deserted planet left to forage and survive on their own without help. Slowly, something tender and fragile grows between them and in

the end, Tarver and Lilac have to make the difficult decision of giving up the wonderful peace they've found with each other in order to find their way back to civilization.

The writing is beautiful and complex, the world building immense and the dual points of view is one of the best uses of this kind of split narrative that I've seen in a long time, with both characters having distinct and believable voices. It's not a fast-paced read but rather a slow boiler, with the tension increasing as the characters explore their mysterious planet but that's what is so compelling about this book, what has you staying up until the early hours just to get some answers.

## ***The Infinite Sea*** by Rick Yancey

In Rick Yancey's *The 5th Wave* we met Cassie or 'Cassiopeia' who was trying to survive in a world decimated by the waves of alien invasions that had destroyed most of humanity and has sent the world back into the stone ages. Cassie, being one of the last human survivors, is left in a world where the number one rule is 'trust no-one'.

*The 5th Wave* was a breakout hit in 2013, and *The Infinite Sea* was greeted with high expectations that it surpass the magic of the first novel. While many think *The Infinite Sea* failed to meet those expectations, it was still full of heart-pounding action and after the slow pace of the first 50 or so pages moves along at lightning speed, hooking the reader in and not letting go.

The characters' world is even bleaker than before: the aliens love tormenting the few surviving humans, playing on what's remaining of their humanity and making them distrustful. They can't even take a poor defenceless child in without doubting them.

The book has a fairly confusing start as the motives and methods of the invaders still remain shrouded in mystery, but enough clues are dropped as to their nature to keep you turning the pages. Compared to the first book, this sequel was slower, more about the build-up, creating intense, crazy moments sandwiched between slow scenes that had me impatient for something to happen. This variation in pacing, however annoying at times, does work: the ebb and flow of the action scenes and the quieter, more pensive, sections of the book create time for Yancey to really develop his characters, to craft people you can connect to and care about.

## ***Grasshopper Jungle*** by Andrew Smith

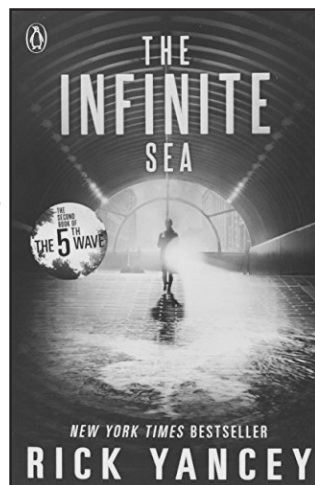
Though it was Andrew Smith's *100 Sideways Miles* that earned him a National Book Award nomination, it's Smith's eccentric *Grasshopper Jungle* that is truly mind-blowing. It has recently won the Red Tentacle at the Kitschies Awards and that seems fitting as I can honestly say *Grasshopper*

*Jungle* is one of the strangest books I have ever read. At first glance it's about a boy whose town gets invaded by giant insects, but it is so much more than just that. It is a hilarious coming of age story about self-discovery and one of the most honest portrayals of the strange and often alien feelings that come with being a teenager.

Reading *Grasshopper Jungle* is a wild ride: 16 year old Austin Szerba tries to save his small town (and humanity) from extinction by giant praying mantises whilst trying to deal with the attraction he feels to both his girlfriend Shann and his best friend Robby. This is more than just your typical alien invasion narrative, it's about the struggle Austin feels about who he is, it's about discovering your identity at a time in your life when your hormones are running wild. Smith manages to capture what life is like inside the mind of a teenager with accuracy and honesty. Some readers may find Austin's constant mention of sex and

erections vulgar but even though I've never been a teenage boy it feels like Smith knows what he is writing about.

*Grasshopper Jungle* is so delightfully weird, in turns dark and comical, terrifying and gloomy yet realistic and completely bizarre. Though it's a very LGBT-friendly novel in a genre that has been calling for more diversity, to simply label it as that would be a mistake. Always surprising, Andrew Smith weaves a compelling coming-of age story, about the teenage struggle with sexuality, sexual identity, family history, friendship and love into a story about giant praying mantis-like creatures taking over Earth.



It's not surprising that some of the best YA books published last year were sf based. Publishers have noted the success of YA fiction in recent years and its correlation to the rise of sf and fantasy in popular culture, with big blockbuster movies helping to increase book sales. Whether you are a teenager or an adult the core themes of a YA book resonate with us all. YA novels externalise evil as an enemy that can be seen and understood, whether that's as a monster that can be defeated or, as is more popular now, an evil in the world the character lives in, from political and economic repression to a world that has escalated to such technological advances that they are lost within it.

Whether you want a futuristic fairy-tale retelling, a Titanic-like space crash, an alien invasion or giant praying mantis, the four books I've chosen have something for everyone. 2014 was an amazing year for publishing as we said goodbye to some of our favourite series, said hello to some outstanding new ones and got major releases from headline names, but the excitement for this genre doesn't stop there, with lots to look forward to in 2015. Some titles are already creating a lot of buzz. For example, Victoria Aveyard's *Red Queen* has a lot of people talking and is set to be the breakout book of 2015 and let's not forget the award-winning Andrew Smith with his new novel *The Alex Crow*. I know YA isn't for everyone but there is one thing that's certain - its popularity with all ages certainly isn't showing signs of slowing down.



# Made of Win: Ann Leckie

Interviewed by Tom Hunter

**Director of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, Tom Hunter, talks to Ann Leckie about her epic year of SF awards triumph.**

**Tom Hunter:** *2014 was clearly the year everything happened at once. Have things settled down a bit now or indeed do things really settle ever after an epic round of award wins like yours? For instance are people just like us still getting in touch for interviews?*

**Ann Leckie:** Things have (mostly) settled down. There's still a steady trickle of interview requests, though, yeah.

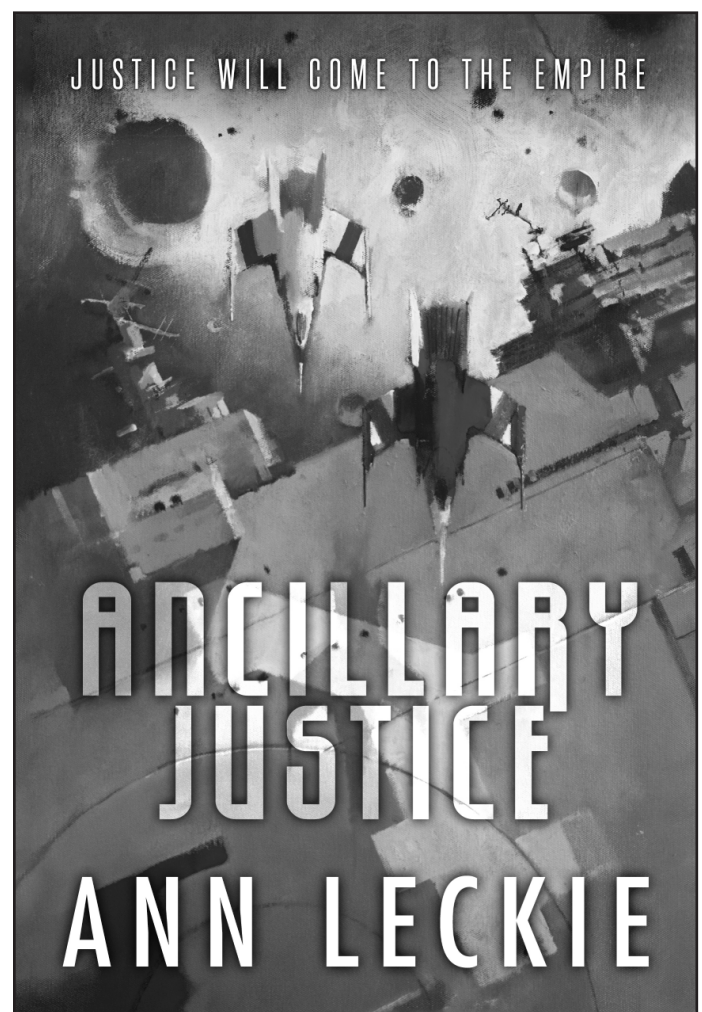
**TH:** *Sticking with your award wins, Ancillary Justice was winning in 2014 but actually published in 2013 when you were already well into books 2 and 3. Presumably not much could change on that trajectory given the speed of publishing, but has this affected the kind of projects you might look towards once the trilogy is out?*

**AL:** So, to some extent, I suspect that the critical reception of AJ, and the award wins, and the accompanying sales, means I have some amount of freedom in choosing my next project. Though not complete freedom--in a weird reversal of my short fiction career, I suspect most readers see me as primarily a science fiction writer, rather than fantasy, and likely that's what both publisher and public would prefer to see from me. Still, the universe of the Ancillary books is pretty big- big enough that I can stay within its confines and produce nearly any sort of thing that takes my fancy. The next thing I do is almost certain to be set in that universe, for those reasons. But I do feel that the past year or so has given me a certain freedom to work more or less however I'd like, and those constraints aren't terribly constraining.

**TH:** *Hopefully readers of Vector will have all heard the buzz about the way the novel explores perceptions of gender by now (short version: it's really cool, read it now), but what is less often discussed is how you first came to this approach and I'd be especially curious if anyone advised against it, even from a position of being helpful, for instance because they might have seen it as 'non-commercial'?*

**AL:** Actually, yeah, I was repeatedly advised against it. I came to it largely naively, wanting to write a culture that didn't care about gender at all, and eventually settled on using "she" as a default pronoun to try to convey this. Whether or how it works is of course a matter of who's reading, and various people have given very interesting takes on the question.

Once I'd settled on that particular approach, I had several people tell me, while I was writing and shortly after I'd finished, that it was cool but probably it would make the book unsalable. I don't think the phrase "non-commercial" was ever used, really, it was, at that stage



more a question of appealing to editors. Which, of course, the big houses need to make a certain amount of money off the books they publish, and so those editors are going to want to buy things that will sell lots of books. But most of my writing friends weren't really focused on making things commercial as such.

Still, they thought the pronouns would make the book difficult to sell to editors, and I suspected they were mostly right, in general terms. But none of them actually tried to argue me out of it. I'm not sure I'd have considered them terribly good friends if they had, really.

Because of those conversations, I had made up my mind, before sending the book out on submission, that the pronouns were a dealbreaker for me, that I wasn't going to change them just to make the book sell more easily. My agent, before he was my agent, when I had only subbed to him, suggested I reconsider the pronoun thing, and I spent a few hours distraught--it felt like this might be my only chance at representation! What if refusing lost me that chance? But this was why I'd decided in advance, and so I wrote him this long, impassioned email about why I had to keep the pronouns. And he wrote back basically, "Okay." Which is a big part of the reason he's my agent now.

I tell this story not to give the impression that my agent is horribly conservative or that I had to convince him about the pronouns--he's not and I didn't, really--but rather that sometimes things that we think are insurmountable barriers actually aren't. (And also that it's a good idea to know in advance what your priorities are, and be willing to stick to them, instead of trying to make that decision at what seems like a crisis point.)

The same with editors--my editors at Orbit didn't ask me to change the pronouns at all. It was, rather, one of the things they'd really liked about the novel.

My takeaway from the whole experience is that laundry lists of what's "commercial" or not aren't actually terribly helpful, not in and of themselves. I am not a fan of aspiring writers worrying too much about whether their work is commercial or not, not because I have any sort of disdain for the commercial (I like to sell books as much as the next person!) but because what sells or doesn't isn't really that easily predictable.

**TH:** *And speaking of commercial, it strikes me as well that we ought to talk about Space Opera itself. In many ways it seems that Space Opera is the constant 'new black' of the science fiction world, loved by people season after season but occasionally being rediscovered by reviewers. Is there a sense that in some ways space opera is perpetually making a come back do you think?*



**AL:** Oh, Space Opera! I love it so. But of course, much of what I love about it is looked down on by some SF readers. The bright colors, the high adventure--the (often) contempt for actual scientific reality in favor of capital R Romance! And of course, the term began as an insult for a kind of SF that some folks felt was a standard adventure with science fictional trappings pasted onto it.

I think that, historically, SF is actually several different genres that have been tossed in together. But the dominant narrative of what Science Fiction is mostly applies to a single one of these. Hard SF (as commonly defined) fits quite easily, it's the "central" form, but I think that centrality is kind of an illusion.

I also think that lots of younger readers are drawn in by the glitter and gleam of Space Opera, and come to the other kinds of science fiction later. That's even more true when you look at movies. So even when we go through a decade when people are calling for a more pure, "serious" SF, the Space Opera is still part of the field, still part of many writers' and readers' idea of what Science Fiction \*is\*, and there are writers coming up who'll want to write it, and readers who will have felt its lack and will be eager to see it come back into vogue. I suspect that, yes, it's going to keep going out of style and keep coming back in, always modified to fit the times.



**TH:** *More personally, what attracted you to start writing in this part of the SF field?*

**AL:** Mostly because it's the sort of SF I loved best, when I was growing up. I read nearly everything the local library had, and enjoyed a lot of it--one of the things I love about SF is its variety--but it's books like, say, Andre Norton's *The Zero Stone* that have remained closest to my heart.

**TH:** *And what is exciting you most about Science Fiction right now?*

**AL:** So, like I said, one of the things I've always loved about SF has been its variety. Large scale Space Opera to small scale, intimate explorations of particular scientific ideas, and everything in between, not to mention a few things alongside that didn't quite fit in there to begin with! And in the past few years this seems to be expanding--more awareness of translated work, for instance, and a greater variety of kinds of writers, of voices adding to the field. In some ways it's almost an unmanageable deluge--I can't possibly keep up with all the cool new stuff. But there it is, all that cool new stuff!

**TH:** *I wanted to pick up on a conversation we began last year on the issues surrounding diversity in SF. When we first started emailing last year, I remember you said you had originally been disappointed with the Clarke Award results the year before (the one with the all male shortlist) but that you'd then understood more about this (how the judging panel was made up of four female & one male judges for instance) and that the situation with many awards was more nuanced than straight shortlists often revealed or people on Twitter took time to dig into. Given your victorious run last year I don't think anyone can be better placed to know more about lots of different awards right now, and I wondered what kind of perspective this had given you on the broader conversation of diversity in SF?*

**AL:** So, yeah, when things like all male (or all white, or all straight/cis/what have you) shortlists or tables of contents happen, the factors behind that are very complex, and aren't always a question of the folks choosing the shortlists or the ToCs. In a lot of ways, that's just the most visible link in the chain, and so that's the point where people might notice, and complain.

That said, I think the complaints are a good thing, because that does lead to asking that question--how did this happen? Why does it keep happening? I know it's not comfortable to be on the direct receiving end of that. In fact, watching the various reactions to the awards this last year, and to my book in particular, has given me a lot of food for thought on what such reactions might mean, for me in particular when it's my work being complained about, and for the field in general.

Twitter of course doesn't really help nuanced discussion, but just making the problem visible is an important first step. Until that's happened you can't go on to discussing the way certain kinds of exclusion are systemic, that people's individual decisions are often constrained by circumstances that are out of their control--or circumstances that they're unaware of (because such systems are set up in such a way



as to make alternative choices invisible or near impossible). So, uncomfortable as it is, that barrage of "Oh no, why an all male shortlist???!?" can help lead to better visibility of a problem, and more digging into it can come after that.

It's no fun to be getting that, though! That's where I think it's important to take a step back and try not to take it personally. "The Clarke only picked white male authors this year!" isn't the same thing as "The jurors are sexist pigs!" Though of course it can feel that way. Just like "White people often do and say racist things" isn't the same thing as "You, Ann, a white person, are a terrible racist!" Responding with "But I'm not racist!" isn't really addressing what's been said. It's just reacting defensively.

Somewhat similarly, I've occasionally been asked how I react or respond to people who have various criticisms or complaints about my work. And, after much reflection, I've decided that really I don't always need to respond. I certainly don't need to argue. People have the right to have their reaction (to my work, to a shortlist) and of course the right to tweet or blog about it. I don't need to argue anyone out of it. If there's something in that response I think is worth pondering, then that's good. But to argue or protest my good intentions or whatever? Not useful.

So much of the way awards shortlists and ToCs end up packed with white straight cis guys is systemic, and often individual editors or awards administrators or whatever react with genuine hurt, and protest sincerely that they didn't try to exclude anyone. I'm sure they didn't. As I said, the roots of the problem are usually systemic. But IMO by

refusing to consider their own role in it, however small, that reaction is the opposite of helpful. Change has to start somewhere, and the more people are aware of a problem, the more chances there might be to begin that change. So ultimately, as unfun as it is to be the target of such complaints, I think they can be the beginning of a change.

**TH:** *I was also very pleased to see Ancillary Sword picking up award nominations. If anything this is more exciting for me as an Award Director as the common wisdom is later books in sequences don't get nominated and perhaps this is one of the less discussed areas affecting diversity and visibility of writers in SF e.g. we often see lots of excitement over first books but then that fades away and people go off in search of something new again. When you're looking at a Clarke submissions list of 1 in 4 women writers for instance and then deduct for books that are part of a sequence the number can plummet very fast. Thoughts?*

**AL:** So, actually I can think of a number of very good reasons why subsequent books in series don't get as much attention or generate as much excitement. But now you mention it, I wonder if particular writers feel compelled to write the sorts of things that might be series or trilogies. Hmm. I do know that I often see complaints that everything is "Book One in the Infinity Series" or something, and gosh why is nothing a standalone anymore? And I haven't thought very much about that, except to consider that, as a reader, if I love a world, or a set of characters, I'm more than happy to spend more time with them, and so I totally understand a publisher wanting to indulge that, if there are enough fans like me! As a writer, I have to admit I like the idea of making fans happy, but at the same time I would get terribly bored and burned out staying in the same track all the time. That's part of why I've said repeatedly that this is a trilogy, and I don't plan to just keep going with those characters on and on.

Now you mention it, though, I wonder how gendered the basis for those complaints might be. When I think "popular series I love" it's Cherryh and Bujold who come to mind first. Though, of course, it was Jordan on the Hugo ballot last year, right? Still, interesting thought.

**TH:** *Coming back to our own trilogy, I wouldn't want to guess ahead too much (and not asking for any spoilers of course) but the book titles themselves seem to imply you had a trajectory from the start, and part three 'Ancillary Mercy' suggests that maybe that ending will be a little different from the usual 'saved the universe' conclusions? Hints?*

**AL:** Oh, I don't want to spoil anything! I did have a trajectory in mind from the start, you're right about that. But I also am not an outliner, my process is...I guess organic is the best word. So I knew where I wanted to end up, but not, perhaps, the specifics of how that was going to happen or what that was going to ultimately mean until I got the third book down on paper. But in general, I don't think a "saved the universe" ending is possible. I mean, they can be fun, but it's kind of already part of the setup that, no, you can't really save the universe, much as you'd like to (even if you're going to try anyway)." But, you know, Breq is well aware of that and it's not going to stop her from trying, right?

**TH:** *Ann, many thanks indeed for taking the time to answer these questions and best wishes for the end of the trilogy and beyond!*

**AL:** You're very welcome! And thank you!





# recurrent:

## SEQUENTIALS

### Laura Sneddon

## 2014 in Science Fiction Comics

In recent times it seems that every year is hailed as being particularly strong for science fiction comics, and 2014 was no exception with *The Verge*, *Salon*, and *What Culture* amongst the popular websites extolling the virtues of SF comics over the (still successful) SF movies of the year.

In truth though, 2014 was indeed a landmark year for SF in the world of comics, with continuing splendour from *The Wake* by Scott Snyder and Sean Murphy, *Saga* by Brian K Vaughan and Fiona Staples, and *The Private Eye* by Vaughan again and Marcos Martin. *The Wake*, as mentioned in our 2013 'best of' list, published the second half of its story throughout the year, managing to not only completely subvert expectations by moving both into the future and the past of the previous storyline, but by evolving the plot beyond its original subaquatic horrors to a more extra-terrestrial yet shockingly close to home reveal.

Refreshingly, despite how engaging these SF staples were during the year, the newcomers rose to the challenge and, amazingly, obliterated the competition. Six comics, from six separate publishers, and six unique creative teams, demonstrated the sheer breadth of the science fiction genre, from space faring and superpowers to time travel and artificial intelligence, with a sprinkling of surreal mind-bending horror and identity subversion in between.

Oni Press had an incredibly successful year, not least due to the ongoing *Letter 44*, by Charles Soule and Alberto Jimenez Albuquerque. Soule is best known perhaps for his considerable work for DC and Marvel, but *Letter 44* is surely his masterpiece. When the president of the US leaves his office, they also leave a letter for their successor – and letter number 44, from a president who ran the economy into the ground and embarked on countless wars in the name of anti-terrorism (sound familiar?) leaves the new president speechless. Because all the repugnant actions of the US were the result of the need to fight a far larger problem: an alien construct in the asteroid belt that looks suspiciously weapon like.

The story bats between the political fallout of managing such a secret on Earth and the claustrophobic tale of the crew en route to investigate the alien object on a

seemingly one-way trip, with differing colour palettes to match. It's hard to say which is more devastating to read, the crew who have been pushed to the brink and beyond, or the all too believable political manoeuvres and deception on the ground.

At Legendary Comics, the infamous master of magic and mayhem Grant Morrison teamed up with gorgeously macabre Frazer Irving to birth *Annihilator* into our world, a tale of two places connected by a rather different problem. Screenwriter Ray Spass (pronounced Space, he





screams) is on a self-destructive and Black Mass filled path to obliteration when he is diagnosed with a deadly brain tumour. Desperate to produce his last script to save his career, he finds himself instead writing for his life.

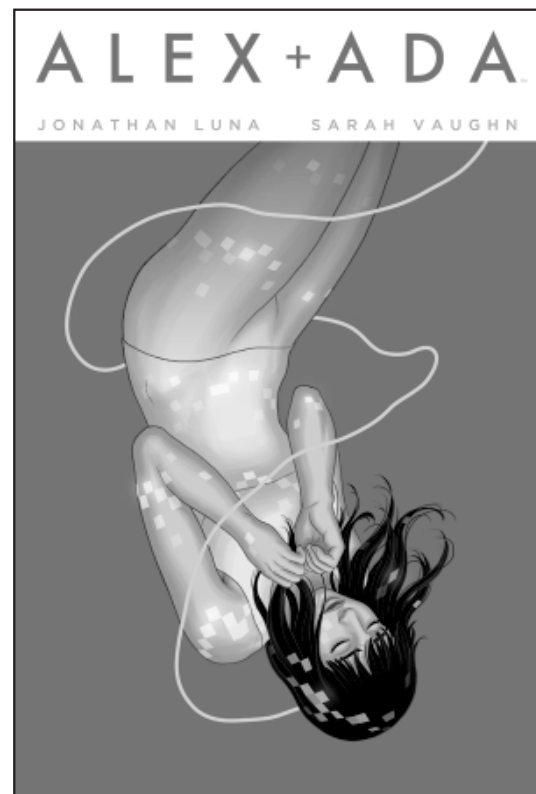
The protagonist of his story, Max Nomax is also fighting for his life – on the edge of the black hole, the Great Annihilator, at the centre of the Milky Way. Oh, and he's also standing in front of Spass in the flesh, demanding he finish Nomax's story which is in fact a ball of data masquerading in Spass' brain as a tumour he needs to download onto the page. It's the kind of madness that only Irving can do justice, as he paints the pages with sequential insanity.

With the FBI on Nomax's tail, and Spass sinking in and out of consciousness, the story of Max is slowly revealed. But is he the bad guy he makes out to be? Is Spass the harmless idiot we assumed? And who is that adorable sentient teddy bear holding a knife?

*Alex + Ada*, an ongoing series by Jonathan Luna and Sarah Vaughn from indie favourite Image Comics, is a little less mind-bending but no less brain-stretching. In a future where artificial intelligence is real, with sentience withheld, the lonely Alex is gifted an X5, the latest in realistic androids, by his grandmother who greatly enjoys her own robotic lover. Alex, while initially horrified, finds himself unable to return Ada and is consumed by the idea that she is more than she seems.

The slow pacing and gradual world building of *Alex + Ada* is a delicious delight, and while so far the comic has yet to bring much original to the artificial intelligence

genre, the lack of direct narration and the desire to know more, much more, about this world have rightfully won it a strong audience.



Jeff Lemire, the critically acclaimed creator of *Essex County Trilogy* and *Sweet Tooth* and celebrated writer of *Animal Man*, turned his hand to a tale of star-crossed lovers of another kind in Vertigo's *Trillium*. Two stories unfold in parallel: William Pike, torn apart by his World War I traumas, on an expedition in the jungles of Peru in 1921; and Nika Temsmith, a botanist seeking access to a rare flower on the outer-rim of colonized space in 3797. The flower blooms within a temple guarded by a peaceful and mysterious alien people, a similar temple to the one Pike stumbles across on his quest to find a lost Incan site.

The temples also serve as a gate between worlds, between time, and between two very broken people that gently fall in love. A love that threatens the very fabric of the universe, bending time and space, displacing people from their lives into others, tampering with memories, and all in a race to procure the only flower that can halt a disease decimating the human population.

What *Trillium* has, more so than perhaps any other comic this year, is genuine, breath-holding emotion. Nothing here is conventional, everything old is turned new by Lemire's imagination, and the coldest of alien worlds becomes a home you simply never want to leave.

Similarly, the often underrated Boom! Studios surprised many with *The Woods*, by James Tynion IV and Michael Diallynas, a spatial hopping tale of a more horrific nature, but with that emotional core intact. The 437 students of Bay Point Preparatory High School suddenly, and inexplicably, find themselves transported – school, teachers, staff, and all – to a mysterious and deadly alien planet. With blood and death near on the horizon, the reader is introduced to those who will perhaps last longer than

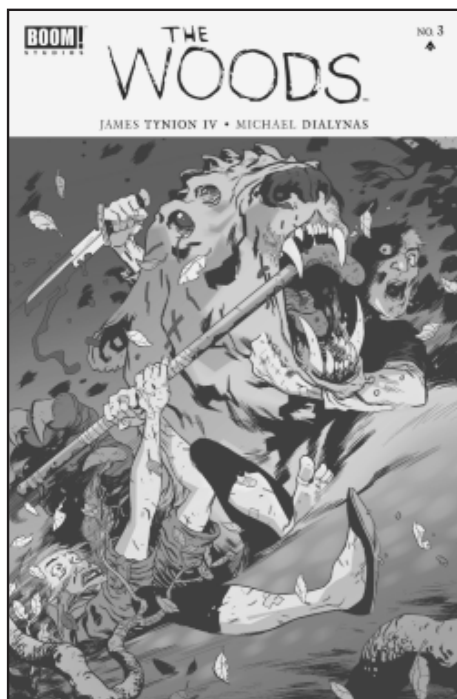


most – screw-up Karen and her control-freak best friend Sanami, the delinquent Calder, the quiet yet huge Benjamin, the geeky Isaac, and the self-proclaimed genius, Adrian.

While the familiar post-apocalyptic turmoil breaks out in the school between the useless principal and passionate student council leader – as well as the sadistic PE teacher – the motley crew of misfits enter the jungle at the behest of Adrian who has ‘spoken’ to the mysterious alien stone pointing the way into the wilderness. Unsurprisingly, shit gets real, but with a selection of well chosen and slowly delivered flashbacks, the reader is shown that none of the gang are who they are perceived to be, with friendship celebrated and heteronormative romances given a firm back seat.

It’s rare that a comic manages to balance horror, humour, mystery, science fiction, and relationship woes without tipping the story out of alignment, but *The Woods* is a rare beast that manages all this and more with aplomb.

And finally, king of the cinema Marvel surprised itself by hitting the big time with the new *Ms Marvel* by G Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona – a comic that embraces diversity, welcomes new readers, puts a realistic young girl in the title lead, and banishes notions of romance to the sidelines.



*Ms Marvel* is, perhaps, the most popular comic of 2014 when digital sales are taken into account (i.e. those readers who do not usually frequent comic shops, a wider audience!).

The announcement that Kamala Khan, a Pakistani American Muslim from New Jersey, an ordinary teenage girl, was to be the new *Ms Marvel* sent the mainstream press into an



absolute tizz. While the often resistant to change old-school comics fandom sputtered about political correctness gone mad, there was a roar of celebration from newer fans and the stellar sales and number of reprints have established *Ms Marvel* as a core Marvel title.

When mysterious mists bestow Kamala with Inhuman powers and the ability to shapeshift and heal, she takes inspiration from her hero Carol Danvers (the previous *Ms Marvel* and current *Captain Marvel*) to help the people of her city. The series follows her attempts at crime fighting alongside the difficulties she experiences at home, and her struggle to balance her religious duties alongside both her superhero and teenage lives.

While Wilson is herself Muslim, it’s important to note that this book is far from evangelising about any faith – Kamala’s life is utterly relatable to many, and with

the combination of clever writing, dreamy art and superb characterisation it’s really no surprise that the book has been so successful. And yet of course in the world of comics, it is a surprise to many further up the publisher chain that a female-led book can be both popular and critically acclaimed. Hopefully both Marvel and DC will continue to push in this direction in the coming years.

While the science fiction comics of 2013 had a focus on our very darkest fears about humanity, the comics of 2014 are threaded with optimism. *Letter 44* seeks to explain the war mongering of the past decade while *Alex + Ada* and *Trillium* posit love as an important and conquering force. *Annihilator* plays with the force of creativity itself as a life-saving endeavour; *The Woods* puts individuality above authority to find hope. And *Ms Marvel* shows us that anyone can be a hero, both in the world of superheroes and in the world of superhero comic book sales.

Darkness still surrounds us, whether that be a claustrophobic journey into space and a planet plagued by war, self-destructive behaviours in a money obsessed world and the terror of uncontrollable affliction, crushing loneliness that turns us to technology for some semblance of connection, horrors from our past that break us and the terror of jumping over the next hurdle, the reality that we hide who we are and can trust no one... all are conquerable. With hope. With optimism. Maybe even with love. But certainly with enthusiasm. And always, of course, with science fiction.



# recurrent:

## KINCAID IN SHORT

### Paul Kincaid

## Helen O'Loy by Lester del Rey

The Science Fiction Writers of America was formed in 1965, and immediately launched the Nebula Awards. The first awards were handed out in 1966 for the best science fiction published in that year of birth, 1965. But two years later, under the SFWA's second president, Robert Silverberg, it was decided to extend the idea backwards and identify the best stories that had been published before they could have been eligible for the Nebulas. All the then 300-or-so members of the SFWA were entitled to vote, just as they did for the Nebulas themselves.

The results were predictable. The top place went to Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall", and other's prominent on the list included Stanley Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey", Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon" and Theodore Sturgeon's "Microcosmic God". Let's face it, the voters were predominantly white male and American, who were raised during the 40s and 50s, and their choices reflected that background. 26 of the top 30 stories were gathered into an anthology, *Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, (the omissions were down to editorial decisions, such as no author appearing twice, so Arthur C. Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God" was included, but not "The Star"). Looking down the contents list it is striking if, for the time, unsurprising, that all of the authors are white; with the exception of Clarke, all are American; and with the exception of Judith Merrill and C.L. Moore (present as one half of the pseudonymous 'Lewis Padgett'), all are male.

In my last column I explained how the male gaze in Moore's story, fixated on the appearance and supposed frailty of the woman as object, is consistently undermined by the strength and individuality of the woman. Del Rey's story, on the other hand, is all male gaze.

"Helen O'Loy" was first published in *Astounding* in 1938, and like many stories of that period it offers a peculiarly uneven vision of the future. Technologically, things are far in advance of the present day. The two friends at the heart of the story 'rented a house near the rocket field' (62), and they travel by rocket even for what seem to be relatively short journeys, as when the narrator, Phil, 'hired a personal rocket and was back in Messina in half an hour' (66). Above all, there are humanoid robots with 'memory coils and veritoid eyes ... [and a] ... cuproberyl body' (63).

Yet against this background of whizzy, high-tech paraphernalia, the society we see seems Victorian in its attitudes and customs. Thus, at a key moment Phil is called away because old Mrs van Styler says 'her son has an infatuation for a servant girl, and she wants you to come out and give counter-hormones' (65). What this says about the future state of medicine is bad enough. Phil insists he is 'no society doctor, messing with glands' (65), which suggests that society doctors are still promoting monkey glands. This was a vogue that reached its height during the 1920s, during which the testicles of monkeys were ground up and used in patent medicines for their supposed

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**...we are presumably in a world where a reputable doctor will dispense medicine to people without their consent on the say-so of the rich and powerful.**

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C.L. Moore, along with her husband, Henry Kuttner, is included for the delightful "Mimsy Were the Borogoves", but her work under her own name, particularly "No Woman Born" which I wrote about in my last column, did not make the list. But one story that did make the list was Lester del Rey's "Helen O'Loy", another story of the feminised machine, a female robot in this case rather than a woman turned into a cyborg; and I strongly suspect that "Helen O'Loy" was what inspired "No Woman Born".

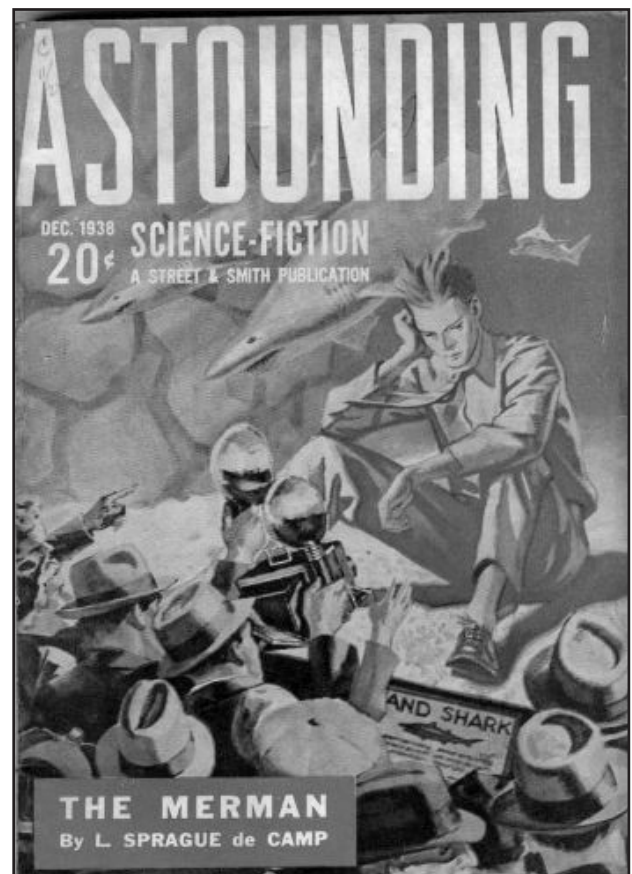
revitalising effect. The vogue didn't last all that long, and even at the time most people saw through it as a sham, but it presumably lingered far enough into the 1930s for del Rey to pick up on the idea as a shadowy underpinning for his futuristic medicine. It is also revealing, not to say disturbing, to find that young Archy van Styler and the poor servant girl can be 'cured' (del Rey is careful to put quotation marks around the word) of their mutual love by this counter-hormone treatment. This idea of a 'cure' for

love, by the way, has resonances with the main body of the story, but we'll come to that shortly.

If future medicine seems retrograde, what this brief interlude says about society is even worse. We are in a world effectively unchanged since the 1890s, where there are masters and servants who are each meant to know their place, and where a rich old woman can dictate who her son can and cannot fall in love with. Moreover, since we are told that young Archy and his unnamed servant girl are tricked into taking the futuristic monkey glands, we are presumably in a world where a reputable doctor will dispense medicine to people without their consent on the say-so of the rich and powerful. Nor should we fool ourselves into thinking that this hierarchical picture of society is meant to be in any way satirical. It is presented as a perfectly unexceptional portrait of how the world is likely to operate; this brief passage is here simply to show the dangers of love as a counterpoint to the central story of Dave and Helen.

Dave and Phil are a couple of buddies who share a house, and who miss out on marriage because they prefer guy pursuits ('Dave wanted to look over the latest Venus-rocket attempt' (62)) to girly pastimes like wanting 'to see a display stereo' (62). It is notable that Phil's highest praise for Helen comes when 'We went trout fishing for a day, where she proved to be as good a sport and as sensibly silent as a man' (72). In the main, a woman can only be a worthwhile companion when she behaves just like a man; being a love interest is something else entirely, and something that a man should approach only with trepidation.

The two settle, with every appearance of relief, into a comfortable bachelor existence. They have a robot servant who is clearly female, partly because she is called Lena, but mostly because she does all the cooking and cleaning. Domesticity is the sole purpose and entire measure of a woman. When Helen arrives, some time after the pair get rid of Lena, 'there was the odor of food in the air that he'd missed around the house for weeks' (68), which doesn't suggest that either Dave or Phil can lower themselves to actually cook should the need arise. As Phil says later of Helen: 'Helen was a good cook; in fact she was a genius, with all the good points of a woman and a mech combined' (71). The trouble with Lena is that she isn't very good, she puts 'vanilla on our steak instead of salt' (63). And even though she is a robot, with no emotions, no consciousness, such mistakes are still her fault. 'When those wires crossed, she could have corrected herself. But she didn't bother; she followed the mech impulse' (63). As if a creature of wires and programs is responsible for any errors in that wiring, that programing. But then, Lena isn't really a robot; she is meant to be an ideal woman, serving all a man's needs without making any demands upon him. Only she isn't quite ideal enough. So Dave combines his knowledge of robotics with Phil's understanding of 'the glands, secretions, hormones, and miscellanies that are the physical causes of emotions' (63) to put in some 'mechanical emotions' (63). But the next day 'she flew into a tantrum and swore vigorously at us when we told her she wasn't doing her work right' (63-4). What is wrong with a woman is clearly emotional, because then she gets annoyed when her rightful master criticises her work.



Lena obviously has to go: 'we've got to get a better robot. A housemaid mech isn't complex enough' (64). The new robot is Helen, about whom the very first thing we are told is that 'She was beautiful, a dream in spun plastics and metals' (62). In fact this is all we are told about her appearance, all that really matters. As I say, this story is all male gaze. Amplifying this objectification of the female, we are further told that the manufacturers:

*had performed a miracle and put all the works in a girl-modeled case. Even the plastic and rubberite face was designed for flexibility to express emotions, and she was complete with tear glands and taste buds, ready to simulate every human action, from breathing to pulling hair. (64)*

One can only wonder why a K2W88 utility model domestic machine might need tear glands and taste buds. And that coy reference to simulating 'every human action' is later discretely expanded when Helen says: 'you know how perfectly I'm made to imitate a real woman ... in all ways. I couldn't give him sons, but in every other way ...' (70, ellipses in the original). But this is not a robot story, nor was ever meant to be. It is a male wish fulfilment fantasy in which Helen O'Loy is an object made to serve man's pleasure, from great food to guiltless sex ('I couldn't give him sons'), but without the inconvenience of being a real woman.

And the chief inconvenience, as we soon learn, is that messy female thing: emotion.

Once they have unpacked Helen, Dave and Phil spend a sleepless night during which:

*we poured over the schematic diagrams of her structures, tracing the thoughts through mazes of her wiring, severing the leaders, implanting the heter-*

ones, as Dave called them. And while we worked, a mechanical tape fed carefully prepared thoughts of consciousness and awareness of life into an auxiliary memory coil. (64)

Before they can turn the newly enhanced Helen on, however, Phil is called away to cure that terrible disease of love between a rich woman's son and a servant girl. When he is able to return home weeks later, he discovers that the same disease has struck there. Or rather, after carefully working to make Helen as close to human as possible, they are horrified to discover that she is displaying all the worst faults of a real woman. That is, although she is a superb cook and keeps the house spotlessly clean, she also enjoys romantic stories on the 'stereovisor' which acted like 'a perfect outlet for her newly excited emotions' (68). So when Dave returns home (this is a future shaped by visions of mid-century domestic normality: the man goes out to work, the woman stays home) she tries to greet him with a kiss. 'Helen's technique may have lacked polish, but it had enthusiasm, as he found when he tried to stop her from kissing him. She had learned fast and furiously' (68).

Dave delivers a lecture about 'the folly of her ways' to which she replies, 'but I still love you' (69), whereupon Dave takes to drink and starts staying away from home. But when Phil, fresh from putting paid to one romance between a man and a servant, suggests that they change a few of Helen's memory coils, Dave won't have it: 'I'm not used to fussing with emotions' (69). In that case, he would appear to be the only character in this story who isn't.

Rather than change Helen, therefore, Dave's response is to run away. He sells up his business and moves out to a farm. Phil stays home with Helen, and clearly enjoys her companionship (that fishing trip). Noticeably, when he takes her shopping 'she giggled and purred over the wisps of silk and glassheen that were the fashion, tried on endless hats, and conducted herself as any normal girl might' (71-2). The romantic films and shopping trips suggest a very stereotypical view of how women behave, but Phil can afford to be dispassionate in his relationship because he's not distracted by any of that love nonsense.

Helen, however, cannot escape her emotions. At one point, Phil finds her 'doubled up on the couch, threshing her legs up and down and crying to the high heavens' (72). Women's emotions are such melodramatic and messy things. So Phil calls Dave: 'I've made up my mind. I'm yanking Helen's coils tonight. It won't be worse than

what she's going through now.' (72) They have already decided that this solution would be the same as murder, but clearly emotion is not worth living with. And Helen agrees: 'Maybe that's best, Phil. I don't blame you' (72). She is acting like a man again, bravely and rationally recognising that female emotions are worse than death.

Fortunately, Dave sees sense and realises he loves her, so the two live together as man and wife. 'No woman ever made a lovelier bride or a sweeter wife. Helen never lost her flair for cooking and making a home' (72-3). Again, the male gaze presents Helen in terms of her looks and her domestic skills. Of course they have a long and happy marriage, and when Dave dies, Phil heads out 'kill' Helen

because they 'both feel that we should cross this last bridge side by side' (73). Naturally the story ends with the suggestion that Phil himself never married because he was also in love with Helen. So the story closes with reassuring sentiment, and it is here in this rather hurried final section that the reputation of the story probably lies. The more we make robots resemble people, the more they will behave like people, the more, indeed, that they will become people. "Helen O'Loy" was, perhaps, the first story to suggest that a humanoid robot might be an object of love, which makes it something of a ground-

breaker. But it only breaks that ground by making the object of the story, Helen, less a humanised robot and more a dehumanised woman.

One can easily understand why this dispassionate take on passion might have prompted a writer like C.L. Moore to respond with her own passionate attack on dispassion in "No Woman Born". And re-reading Lester del Rey's hackneyed piece, I am more and more convinced that Moore's story must have been conceived as a response to "Helen O'Loy".

What is less clear is why, 30 years later, the SFWA still considered it one of the finest science fiction stories of the century.



Quotations taken from:

del Rey, Lester, "Helen O'Loy" in Robert Silverberg, ed., *Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume I* (London: Sphere, 1972) pp. 62-73.



# recurrent:

## FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

### Andy Sawyer

## A Message From Mars

### by Lester Lurgan and Richard Ganthony

As the previous 'Foundation's Favourite' was a book of this era (the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), I hadn't intended to follow up with something of the same vintage. But late last year the British Film Institute published on their website their restored version of what was being billed as the first British full-length science fiction film, *A Message from Mars*, directed by J. Walter Waller, issued in 1913 and based upon the play by Richard Ganthony. Intrigued by the film, I investigated further and discovered that there had been a 'tie-in' novel (one source claimed that this was the *first ever* movie 'tie-in' novel published), and so I had to read it...

It all turned out to be more complicated than I'd thought. The film (according to the BFI's notes), was based upon a play which 'saw many revivals over 30 years in Britain'. The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* gives 1899 as the date of the play, and John T. Soister's *American Silent Horror, Science Fiction and Fantasy Feature Films, 1913-1929* gives 22 November 1899 as the date of the first performance, with Charles Hawtry (who also starred in the film) as lead.

of the prolific Mabel Knowles (1885-1949: better known as 'May Wynne'). As 'Wynne', Knowles published over 200 romances, school stories, historical adventures and religious works. As far as I know (do correct me!), this lively adaptation of Ganthony's play is her only work that can (however loosely) be called science fiction, but it would be interesting to look at the other 'Lurgan' books to see if this is yet another female writer of the field we have 'lost'.

I know nothing about Richard Ganthony (1856-1924) other than the fact that he was born in Liverpool and died in Surrey, and seemed to have spent much of his life in the USA. Was he one of the earliest Liverpool SF writers? That all depends on whether you call *A Message From Mars* SF. It is certainly one of the earliest portrayals of a Martian civilization, though the way the plot echoes Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* in the way a miserly curmudgeon is morally reformed by the supernatural visitant, and the lack of technological speculation, makes it closer to the kind of whimsical fantasy of H. G. Wells's *The Wonderful Visit* (1895), rather than his *The War of the Worlds*

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**Wells's *The War of the Worlds* was itself influenced by the theories of Percival Lowell, whose 1895 *Mars* suggested that Martian 'canals' were evidence of intelligent life.**

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It was also performed at the Garrick Theatre New York between 7 October 1901 and March 1902. The book (the SFFC copy is unfortunately undated) says that the play 'has given delight to theatre audiences for eleven years'. The *Encyclopedia* and the British Library date Lurgan's tie-in as 1912. However, as the SFFC copy contains illustrations from the 'Cinematograph version which is being shown in every town in Great Britain, Australia, South Africa, America and Canada' (perhaps *something* of a stretch there...?), it is clearly a second edition.

To add to the complications, *A Message From Mars* was filmed in New Zealand in 1903, though this version remains lost; and a US version directed by Maxwell Karger was issued in 1921. 'Lester Lurgan', the author of the novel, is a pseudonym (used for at least five other novels)

(serialised 1897, published in book form 1898). However, Mars was very much in the news at that time. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* was itself influenced by the theories of the American astronomer Percival Lowell, whose 1895 *Mars* suggested that Martian 'canals' were evidence of intelligent life. The German author Kurd Lasswitz's *Auf Zwei Planeten* (Two Planets), also about an older Martian civilization contacting Earth, was also published in 1897. In 1901 Nikola Tesla claimed to have received radio signals from Mars; a claim which probably inspired a popular march by Raymond Taylor, 'A Signal From Mars'. In the film, we see our anti-hero Horace Parker refusing to take his fiancée Minnie to a dance because he would rather sit by the fire and read. The book makes it clearer that what he is trying to read is the latest article in an astronomical

magazine about the possibility of life on Mars, and much is made about his grumpy insistence that he is a proper scientist, unlike the frivolous womenfolk in his life who want him to do all sorts of un-serious things like let his hair down and have a bit of fun.

In the novel, we first see Horace bullying a waiter in his club for not bringing his brandy-and-soda quickly enough; and later, as Minnie sympathises with the plight of the poor who have no fire to sit by, Horace remarks that they are probably brought to it by 'drink and reckless improvidence'. We get the picture. We learn that Minnie, an orphan, has been brought up by Horace's late mother, and he draws the rather creepy (but very common at the time, at least according to fiction) conclusion that they might as well be married. He, of course, is conscious of the great favour he is doing her, and although she genuinely loves him, *he* would rather sit by the fire and nurse his spurious cough than go out dancing.

Eventually Minnie and Horace's aunt (as chaperone) leave, with Arthur, a mutual friend who is also angling after Minnie's hand. (Yes, indeed: that article about Mars really *had* to be worth reading!). A tramp knocks at the door, with a letter from one of Horace's friends asking him to find the man (a good workman who is down on his luck) some employment. Horace gives him a whisky and a biscuit, listens to his tale about how his wife has died and his daughter Minnie (Oh! ... could it be?) and tells him to push off. Then, meditating on how selfish and mean people are to him, he picks up his paper and settles down ...

... And then he hears a voice. A gigantic figure, 'a better and nobler manhood than the gazer by the fire-side had ever conceived to exist', is addressing him in portentous tones. It is a 'Messenger from Mars' (named Ramiel in the play) who it turns out has been exiled from his planet for committing the crime of selfishness. His sentence is to visit Earth and find one of the planet's most egregiously greedy and contemptible inhabitants, and reform him.

Horace is having nothing with being reformed. Ramiel takes him out and shows him how Minnie is having a grand time at the dance with Arthur, and they overhear what Horace's friends *really* think about him. Later, they witness a man knocked down by a speeding car. The embarrassed Horace is 'persuaded' to hand over money to support the man's family while he is in hospital. But this is against his will and doesn't count. So his pride is punished as he receives sudden news that his house has burned down and his bank has failed. He is now penniless! (It is explained, to reassure us, that Minnie and Aunt Martha have listened to sensible advice and put *their* funds in a different bank.) Horace, who earlier has patronisingly tipped a police constable to call him a taxi, is reduced to grovelling for pennies in company with the very tramp he had earlier spurned, opening the doors of the coaches

taking people from the very dance he should have been at with Minnie, and shooed away by indignant authority-figures. The tramp glimpses Minnie, and is struck by how much she resembles his wife ... are we really being led up to something here?

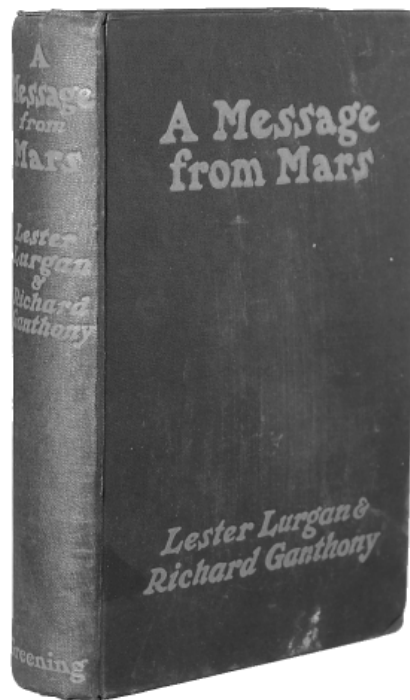
When his 'mate' collapses, Horace humbles himself by pleading for help. Finding a sovereign in his pocket (magicked there by Ramiel?), he shares it with his partner. His job done, Ramiel returns to Mars.

And then ... we are relieved to discover that it was all a dream. Horace wonders about how vivid it was, as a fire-engine rushes past. He begins to feel sympathy for whoever might be affected: then, as he is about to fall back into his old mindset, he is interrupted by the news that a lodging-house (in a neighbouring poorer district) is on fire. At first dismissing his servant, he sneaks out of the house to see if he can be of any help.

The result is that Minnie and Aunt Martha, with Arthur, returning from the dance, are indignant that Horace

has gone out after making such a fuss about *having* to stay in. Arthur asks Minnie to marry him, but she sees his true colours when *he* refuses to go out of the house and help the people whose house is being burned down: 'The firemen will attend to it. It's their business, you see'. Imagine their surprise when Horace returns with the dispossessed lodging-house tenants, along with our friend the tramp, who discovers among the refugees a little girl who is *his* Minnie. Phew! This means that Horace can be generous to the tramp and set him up in business without actually being *related* to him ...

Now that last sentence is something of a cheap shot. The book, and the play, are clearly meant to promote 'Christian charity' from the affluent middle-classes (this is all done to the sound of carol-singers and 'Good King Wenceslas'), but that's considerably better than the remote selfishness which was Horace's initial state. Moral whimsy rather than science-fiction adventure or speculation, *A Message from Mars* is hardly a socialist tract for the times, but its heart is in the right place. Much in the 1913 film is only semi-explained, but audiences would have been familiar with the plot from the play, and the novel may well have been designed specifically to help filmgoers with the plot. There are divergences between film and novel (it's not quite clear without having access to the play-script whether film or novel more accurately reflects the play, but the 'business' in the novel about the science and speculation about 'life on Mars' may cover for the costumes in film and book). It would be interesting to see a script of the play: a few play-bills advertising it can be found on the web. We may not be quite convinced by the Martians as Martians but *A Message From Mars* is a neat and entertaining piece of social commentary which shows the way science fiction-like images were rapidly entering popular entertainment in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.





# recurrent:

## RESONANCES

### Stephen Baxter

## Extraterrestrial Liberty

In the midst of our look back at 2014, I'm looking forward to what's likely to be a highlight of 2015: the first of Ian McDonald's new *Luna* series (Gollancz, September 2015) about life in a base on the Moon.

The Moon has been in my thoughts recently, as evidenced by my last column here on media depictions of Moon bases (See: *Vector* #278). And in June 2014 I took part in an exercise with a bunch of academics on drawing up a constitution for a free lunar colony.

We are of course working through hundredth anniversaries of World War I. The war was sparked by the assassination of the crown prince of the Austrian empire in Sarajevo, an act of rebellion against perceived tyranny. But what of the future? What of rebellion in space? Given the fragility of off-world environments, such as lunar bases, would such a rebellion even be possible? And if not, what guarantees of freedom could there be?

This issue has been debated at seminars held in 2013 and 2014 (another is planned for 2015) on the theme of 'Extraterrestrial Liberty', hosted in south London by the venerable British Interplanetary Society. The seminars are led by Edinburgh-based astrobiologist Charles Cockell, who told us how he had been drawn to the topic after a chance encounter with a volume of Rousseau in a second-hand book store. He soon discovered that no serious academic thinking (as opposed to speculation in the science fiction field) had been devoted to the question of freedom as applied to space colonisation.

This an issue for the mid-term future. In the near future, astronauts hopping back and forth to the International Space Station are citizens of nations on Earth. In the very far future inhabitants of a terraformed Mars, or the Earth-like world of another star, may have as much freedom of movement and thought as the most fortunate of us enjoy today, if not more. But consider the middle case, a domed colony on the Moon in a century or two, with some tyrant in control of the air supply (shades of *Total Recall*). How can you rebel? You can't smash the life support machinery without killing everybody in the colony. And you can't flee from the domes without killing yourself. Where then is a hedge against tyranny, a guarantee of freedom? There is a fundamental clash in such situations, said Cockell, between the freedom of the individual and the need for the collective to maintain shared systems.

We probed such issues from a variety of perspectives. I gave a brief summary of science fiction dreams of frontiers and utopias, from Heinlein to *Star Trek* and *Gundam*. We were cross-disciplinary. While a representative of a US libertarian think-tank hailed John Locke, a planetary scientist discussed the application of the US federal-government model to colonies in an inhabited solar system.

As for liberty on the Moon, in sf the theme has been explored in stories dating back to the origins of the modern genre. "The Birth of a New Republic" (*Amazing Stories Quarterly*, dated winter 1930; 1931) by Miles J. Breuer and Jack Williamson is a conscious re-run of the events of the American Revolution set on the Moon. The war is fought out with huge atomic spacecraft and gaudy weapons, and in gigantic caverns inhabited by hostile 'Selenites' – who, in the story, parallel the role of the native Americans. Perhaps the most interesting variation from the historical precedent, and with modern resonances, is that the Earth of the 24<sup>th</sup> century is dominated by a handful of huge corporations, not governments. The lunar colonists seek independence, not from an imperial power like Britain, but from economic control by the 'Metals Corporation' (13). The sweep of the piece is irresistible: 'I was soon within the glass walls of the city; as a young officer, I took part in the innumerable balls and banquets given in honour of the victors. But my heart was seldom with them. I thought only of the dark-eyed girl who was waiting for me in the little city far across the frozen lunar wastes' (78).

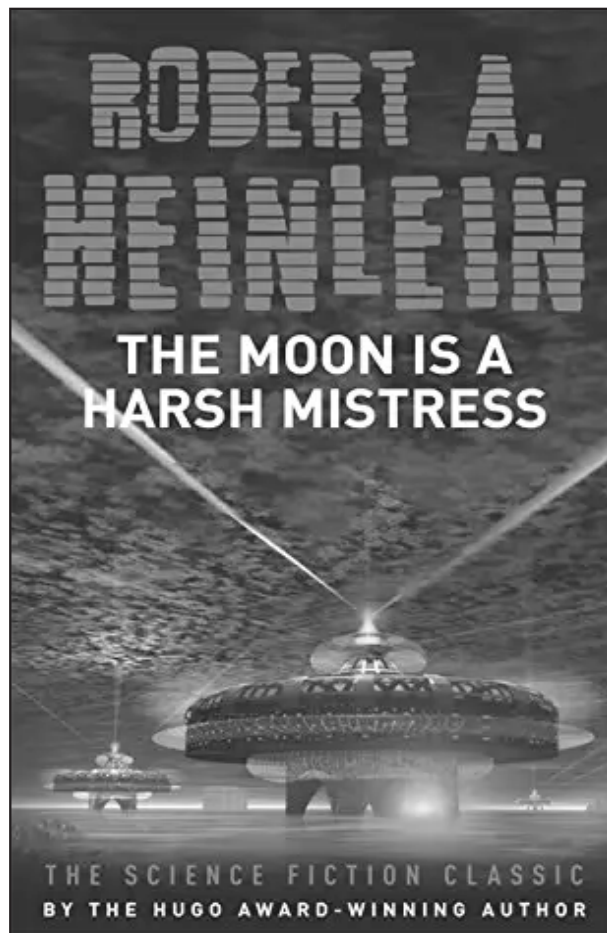
The most significant legacy of "Birth of a New Republic" is probably its influence on Robert Heinlein's much more substantial *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966) (according to an introduction to the 1981 edition of "New Republic" by Williamson). In 2076 Luna City is a penal colony. The convicts make a living by mining lunar water and exporting wheat to an overpopulated Earth. A Lunar Authority, under a Warden, controls the colonists' lives, including the provision of the air they breathe. The demands of the Earth-based authorities are excessive to the point that they will lead to famine on the Moon in a few years' time. The lunar colonists rebel, and ultimately the confrontation is resolved as the colonists use mass drivers to drop rocks on Earth cities.

The immediate challenge faced by Heinlein's rebels is their utter dependence on communal life support systems.

They understand that it is suicidal to strike against the infrastructure itself: 'The woman had been in The Rock almost all her life . . . yet could think of something as new-choomish as wrecking engineering controls' (44). Meanwhile the Warden controls these essential systems centrally, from his isolated and heavily guarded complex. In the end Heinlein resolves these problems rather easily by giving the colonists a crucial ally in 'Mike', the colony's sentient central computer. This does illustrate however the significance of the control of central life-supporting functions to the issue of extraterrestrial liberty.

What happens after the revolution? The subsequent development of Heinlein's independent Luna is glimpsed in *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls* (1985), published two decades after *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. This is a fantastical tale of multiple realities, linking together many of Heinlein's earlier fictions. There are long sequences set in a 'Luna Free State' (61) over a century after the revolution (180). Luna is presented as an arena of ferocious, unregulated and uncontrolled *laissez-faire* capitalism; common systems like a 'ballistic tube' transport system are 'privately owned and totally unregulated' (185) and you have to pay directly for the air that you breathe (190). Whatever you think of the values behind such a system, it doesn't seem to work too well. One very elderly survivor of the revolution complains, 'When this was a penal colony, there was more freedom under the Warden than there is now with self-government' (236).

A consciously different answer to the problem of freedom in an enclosed colony is dramatised in John Varley's *Steel Beach* (1992). This is a knowing revisiting of Heinlein's ideas – indeed there is a cult of hard-line 'Heinleiners' (50) on Varley's colonised Moon. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> century, mankind has been expelled from Earth by aliens known as the 'Invaders', but survives on the Moon and other worlds of the solar system. Varley depicts a civilisation suffused by reasonably high technology, rich enough to have moved on significantly from Heinlein's frontier-austerity toughness. Despite widespread automation, a 'job guarantee is a civil right' (146). On the other hand, 'if you don't want to work, that's fine, too. Nobody starves, and air has been free since before I was born. It didn't used to be that way. Right after the Invasion if you didn't pay your air tax, you could be shown to the airlock without your suit. I like the new way better' (147). Economically this system, of free access to essentials, is close to the



'post-scarcity' model of economics (and is similar to the constitutional model Kim Stanley Robinson described emerging on his free Mars (*Blue Mars*, 1996)).

As for our draft lunar constitution, we debated a balance between an individual's right to physical security versus responsibilities to contribute to that security. And the issue of the air we breathe came to be a central focus. Since humans will expire in seconds if deprived of oxygen, the supply of air in an enclosed environment has an importance qualitatively different from other resources on which we depend, and for which even in the modern world we are prepared to pay – power, food, even water. If you don't pay your water bills and your supply is cut off, at least you have time to put the situation right. If your air is cut off, for whatever reason, you have no options at all. So we decided it should be the right of all citizens, come what may, to an uninterrupted air supply.

We humans are still very Earthbound. In the BIS seminars, we wondered if our discussions are premature but our planetary scientist had shown us how the US Founding Fathers, then restricted to thirteen eastern states, had in their constitutional deliberations had the vision to devise a governmental system that could be expanded to incorporate states yet to be founded, across a continent yet to be explored – and that was precisely what was achieved. If they could think ahead, why not us? After all, Rousseau probably never imagined he would one day be read by an astrobiologist . . .

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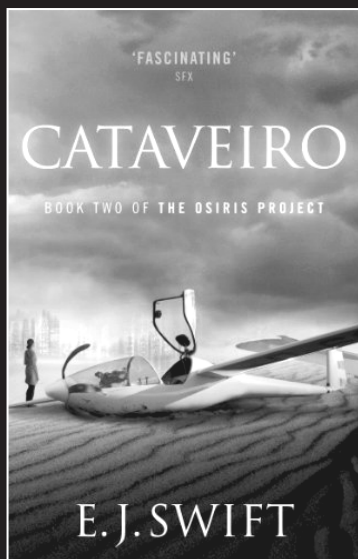
# recurrent:

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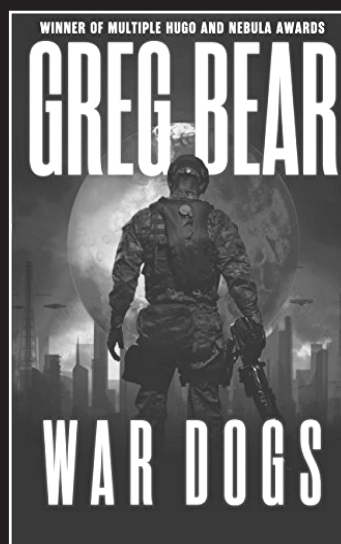
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## The BSFA Review Poll 2014

Well, it has been a bloody good year for British SF. But, as our BSFA Review Poll shows, it has also been a resurgent year for British SF: it features three debuts and two long overdue returns.

I'm delighted that one of those British debuts jointly tops our poll: *The Race* by Nina Allan. Over the last decade, Allan has been quietly building one of the most impressive reputations in the short fiction field, culminating in her BSFA Award for Short Fiction last year with *Spin*. Kerry Dodd reviews the novel overleaf and finds it a "thought provoking and gripping book which peels back the emotive struggles of the human condition, focussing upon the connections between people's lives, their emotions and, most powerfully, the nature of reality." Creatively, Allan's career seems unbounded but the publishing industry needs to catch-up and bring her to a wider audience.

So the community owe thanks to Newcon Press who have been having a pretty good year themselves. As well as *The Race*, they also published our bronze medallist, *The Moon King* by Neil Williamson, and the BSFA Award nominated story 'The Honey Trap' by Ruth E J Booth (which you can read for yourself in the BSFA Awards Booklet elsewhere in this mailing). Like Allan, Williamson has come up through the short fiction scene – a reminder of how vital *Interzone* remains as a testing ground for new talent. As Kate Oylett put it in *Vector* #277: "It's a real delight to find a debut full-length novel where the characters pop, the situations glisten with sheer wonder and you realise you were meant to have put the book down and gone to bed sensibly a good hour or more ago."

Nina Allan shares first place with another resurgent writer: Jeff Vandermeer. Who could have predicted that this cult weird fiction author would publish the critical and commercial international science fiction hit of 2014? Still less that it would be a thoroughly contemporary take on the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century estrangement of writers like Budrys, Ballard and the Sturgatskys. In our last issue, Dan

Hartland described it as "preternaturally fertile, the sort of layered and constructed fiction that readers pine for and so rarely receive" so perhaps it is slightly surprising it didn't appear on the BSFA Awards shortlist for Best Novel alongside *The Race* and *The Moon King*, particularly given this year's shortlist ran to eight books due to a tie for fourth place.

Dave Hutchinson published his first short story collection in 1978 but didn't publish a novel till 2001 and has only followed it up now. Likewise Simon Ings's last science fiction novel came out in 1999. *Europe In Autumn* (reviewed by Ian Sales on page 45) and *Wolves* both show that British science fiction has been missing out.

No such pause for Ann Leckie. *Ancillary Sword* (reviewed by Anne F Wilson on page 45) immediately followed up 2013's international sensation, *Ancillary Justice*. That debut won the BSFA Award for Best Novel – along with every other award going – and you wouldn't want to bet against it doing the same again. Or indeed for the Hugo.

Robert Jackson Bennett has probably also got a shout of getting on the Hugo ballot with *City Of Stairs*, another change of direction for this versatile writer. It was reviewed by Gary Dalkin last issue: "an ambitious and accomplished novel with interesting things to suggest about the relationships between peoples, their cultures and their gods."

Finally, the poll confirms Frances Hardinge's position as queen of British children's fiction, sneaks in a characteristically slippery work by Karen Joy Fowler and heralds the arrival of Renaissance Man, Paul Kingsnorth. Let's hope 2015 is half as good.



Jeff Vandermeer

Nina Allan



## BSFA Review Poll

- =1) *The Race* by Nina Allan
- =1) *The Southern Reach Trilogy* by Jeff VanderMeer
- 3) *The Moon King* by Neil Williamson
- 4) *Europe in Autumn* by Dave Hutchinson
- 5) *Ancillary Sword* by Ann Leckie
- 6) *Wolves* by Simon Ings
- 7) *City of Stairs* by Robert Jackson Bennett
- 8) *Cuckoo Song* by Frances Hardinge
- 9) *We Are All Completely Besides Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler
- 10) *The Wake* by Paul Kingsnorth



**The Race by Nina Allan (Newcon Press, 2014)****Reviewed by Kerry Dodd**

**“H**e was interested in how the lives of ordinary people can become unfastened from reality.”

Nina Allan, who won last year's BSFA Award for Short Fiction with her novella *Spin*, has now published her first novel, *The Race*; a thought provoking and gripping book which peels back the emotive struggles of the human condition, focussing upon the connections between people's lives, their emotions and, most powerfully, the nature of reality.

*The Race* is an intriguing read whose synopsis and cover hint at the narrative within without accurately conveying the intricacy of its structure. The novel is presented through four perspectives that initially appear to be unconnected but by the conclusion are undeniably linked. The build-up of anecdotes of 'mundane' life for each of the characters creates believable and convincing personas, whose engagement with topics of estrangement, broken families and prejudice demonstrates Allan's confident voice and sophisticated style of writing. Although, as the novel progresses, the science fiction or speculative elements of the novel seem to disappear, the conclusion delivers a satisfying end that reinstates their importance to the narrative. Allan's novel embodies how a science fiction text does not have to be solely concerned with the distant future but can be equally poignant through its reflection on the conceivably soon-to-be present.

The novel opens with Jenna, whose life is entwined with that of illegal smartdog racing in her coastal home town of Sapphire. From the outset of the novel, the concept of smartdogs – a “product of illegal experiments in stem cell research”, adding human DNA to greyhounds – demonstrates the science fiction twist to the narrative. The prospect of runners who, through the implementation of a brain implant, can telepathically link with their dog, presents a transhumanist concept that is believable, yet one which later offers a chilling ulterior motive. The detailed description of Sapphire – an island blemished by industrial fracking and ecological collapse – equally draws upon apocalyptic narrative techniques that offer an interesting comparison to contemporary issues of climate change. Although the novel is undeniably set outside of modern day, the lack of specific details draws upon science fiction's capacity to question current issues through futuristic concepts.

The novel progresses from Jenna to Christy, an author who presents her troubled childhood alongside the function of her writing as a form of psychological projection. This is most prominent through the unstable relationship with her brother, Derek, which embodies a fear of monstrosity that haunts the novel, echoing Jenna's chapter. Although the second section of the novel is a stark contrast to its opening, the novel retains its pace through the perceived honesty of the narrator and her later apprehension over the disappearance of Derek's fiancée, Linda. Christy's concern feeds into the next chapter as she is lead to Alex, Linda's ex-boyfriend, with whom the narrative

passes. Again the detailed depiction of childhood brutality is represented through the racist persecution that Alex suffers, highlighting a common theme of trauma that Allan focuses upon throughout the different narrators. At this point the novel moves forward in time to when Alex and Christy meet again to discuss the disappearance of Linda. The impact of Derek's supposed actions, as well as the frequent allusions to Christy's writing, reveals the connection between the two parallel strands in the narrative, which concludes with the introduction of Maree. The novel here returns to the parallel plot, as Maree is part of a secret government programme exploring the possibility of an innate human connection to smartdogs.

*The Race* is a thoughtful and sophisticated examination of four characters' interconnecting lives which, by the ending, leaves a mixture of answers and new questions that seek to interrogate the nature of reality. The build up of repeated images embodies an unfolding narrative that reveals the intricacies and detail of the setting, as well as the structure of the novel itself. Although the connections between the four chapters are initially unclear, the process of deduction and revelation demonstrates the complexity of the novel.

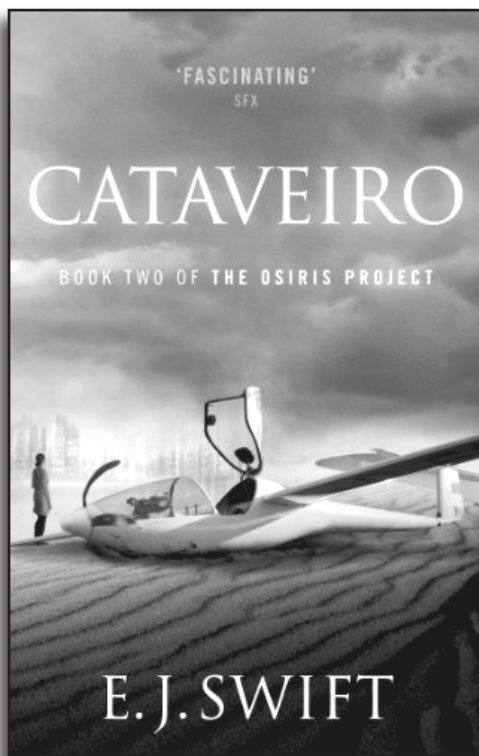
The concurrent themes throughout the book link the four sections as each character confesses to the reader their most intimate thoughts and secrets, whilst conveying the key debates that lie at the heart of the narrative. The contrast between natural and unnatural, possession and loss, belonging and alienation reinforce the poignant, emotive style that Allan utilises. The repetition of estranged or missing parents adds an emotional touch to the writing as the author refuses to shy away from representing both the best and worst of human lives.



In an interesting movement from the smartdog racing at the start of the novel, the transition to Christy and Alex provides a parallel plot that initially appears as a stark movement away from the titled 'race'. Yet, as the narration moves to Maree, the overlapping themes between the seemingly different sections of the novel begin to reveal the overall picture. This concluding section reveals the Gothic subtext to the novel that creates suspense around the mysteries of each of the protagonists, one that is influenced by the frequent allusions to old or decaying houses, ghosts that linger at the edges and the overlapping of the past upon the present. The reader is himself invited to return to past sections of the novel at the conclusion, as the questions of morality, ethics and personal choice that are left open at the end offer a pertinent parallel

to the opening focus on smartdogs and the legitimacy of such an experiment.

For me the fast paced nature of *The Race* offered a short, compelling read whilst leaving space for reflection on the themes presented throughout. The blending of transhumanist concepts alongside insightful depictions of the narrator's lives works well with the intense style of the novel. However, the conclusion is one that left me wanting more, especially concerning the idea of smartdogs. I feel that that these ideas could have been pushed further, rather than simply becoming the subtext to the alternate universe narrative.



***Cataveiro* by E J Swift (Del Rey, 2014)**

**Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller**

In *Osiris*, her first novel, E.J. Swift introduced us to the sea-city of Osiris, anchored off the eastern seaboard of the southern American continent, close to Antarctica. Most of its inhabitants believed themselves to be the last survivors of a series of natural disasters and technological interventions which had rendered the rest of the world uninhabitable. But Osiris was by no means a sanctuary for all. While the descendants of the founding families lived in a certain amount of luxury, the descendants of the refugees who had fled to Osiris were corralled in one small part of the city. Their lives were marked by poverty, overcrowding, disease and the certain knowledge that there was little chance of escaping these conditions. This siege mentality was reflected in Swift's descriptions of the city itself. While the inhabitants of west Osiris yearned for the space and luxury of the city's east side, glimpsed only when they worked there on a casual basis, the younger members of the founding families yearned for something they could not easily articulate but which we might call 'freedom'. Osiris was nothing more nor less than claustrophobia incarnate, run by people who had turned too far into themselves to acknowledge the truth; that the city itself was closing down and no longer self-sustaining.

It comes as a shock then to turn to the wide open spaces of *Cataveiro*. Everything suspected by a few Osirians turns out to be true. People have survived and there is still habitable land, close to the poles, even though much of the world is now desert. We first see this world through the eyes of Ramona Callejas, a young woman who is both pilot and cartographer. Her literal birds-eye view is in sharp contrast to the unavoidably restricted vision of the Osirians (remembering that for some of them mental disorder expressed itself in an obsession with escape through flight). Through Ramona we see how people have survived, in small settlements hidden away, or have gathered together in places like Cataveiro, the

city of travellers, a place as magical as lost Osiris; and more so because it is real, while most people believe that Osiris is nothing more than a fairytale, long since destroyed.

Ramona loves her work: while others talk about cartography being about power, about knowing what is out there, she sees it as an act of translation: "the rendering of something unknown into something intelligible". It has a "beauty all of its own". The point, though, is that while Ramona might be able to make topography intelligible, she is less well equipped to navigate the political situation unfolding around her. By contrast, Vikram, the activist who has achieved the impossible and escaped from Osiris, is acutely aware of the political situation but unsure of what he should do, while Tao, unhappy spy-in-exile from the Republic of Antarctica struggles to reconcile his love of his homeland with a conviction that it is doing something terribly wrong.

All three are constantly engaged in acts of translation as they try to understand how the personal and the political fit together. With communications so poor, almost everyone is reliant on gossip, rumour and chance meetings for information. The reader, the novel's own cartographer, watches the characters stumble from confusion to revelation, knowing that only she has anything approaching a complete map and, even then, information remains withheld. Meanwhile, Ramona, Tao and Vikram pursue their various routes towards understanding.

*Osiris* was a novel that was overtly politically aware. It was not difficult to draw parallels between West and East Osiris and, say, Israel and Palestine - or to think of Soweto and Johannesburg and a host of other examples - to the point where it did begin to seem a little heavy-handed. The political dimension persists in *Cataveiro* but here Swift has eschewed the easy dichotomies for something more subtle and complex. This is less 'them and us', more 'everyone for themselves'. There are no good guys or bad guys, just layer upon layer of personal interests, competing hopes and fears. Everything has its price, or is available only at a price, depending on where you find yourself.

And yet, whereas *Osiris* was a grim and unrelenting environment in which to exist, with even its beauty restricted to the entitled, the world portrayed in *Cataveiro* is filled with moments of beauty and wonder. And so much light; this novel blazes out. Ramona can marvel at the Nazca lines, which have survived and are now at the heart of a religion, even though only she can see them from above. The city of Cataveiro is filled with music, broadcast on the radio but also performed live and available to everyone. Only the profoundly lost, such as Tao, can find no joy. This is not to say that *Cataveiro* is any kind of utopia. The ebola-like redfleur is a constant threat, with harsh quarantine regulations enacted at a moment's notice, but the misery that pervaded Osiris is less immediately obvious. Survival is possible, in *Cataveiro* and beyond.

The focus on the personal and the immediate means that one's attention does at times wander from the underlying narrative, concerning the wider actions of political states, but never so much as to lose the story's thread entirely. But after two novels, one can only speculate as to the nature of the likely revelations in the third. For all the maps, for all the hints, this story's trajectory remains enticingly uncertain, which is one of the reasons I find it and its predecessor so enjoyable. Swift constantly but quietly upsets the reader's expectations for the novel and, as a result, it is a much richer read than it might at first glance seem to be.



***Sibilant Fricative* by Adam Roberts  
(Newcon Press, 2014)**

**Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont**

**I**t is hard to imagine a worse cultural climate in which to be a reviewer of genre literature.

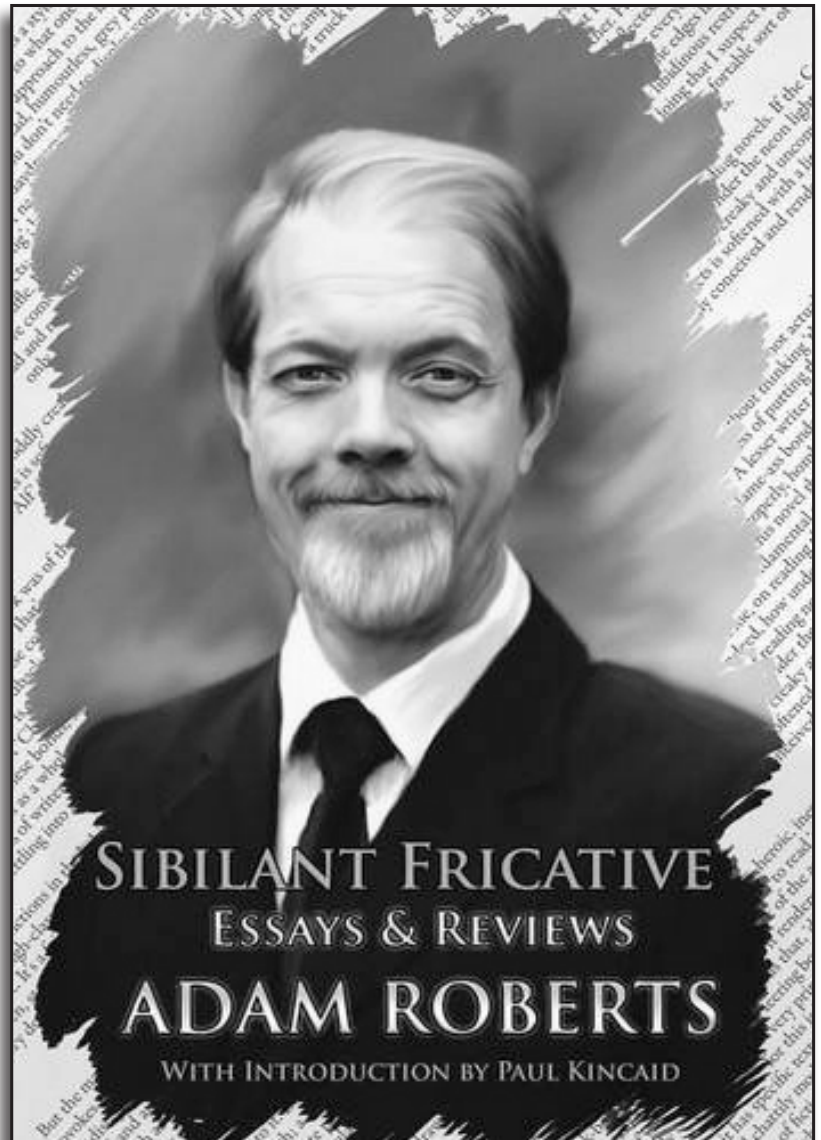
Fandom built its first cultural spaces as solutions to the problem of how to keep friendships and conversations alive once the convention ended and people had to go home. Given the nature of this problem, it is not surprising (in hindsight) that these cultural spaces came to be dominated by fans who wanted to read and write about things other than books. Cast your eyes over a few pre-Internet fan histories and the impression you get is that critics were seen as the genre equivalent of pub bores; tediously self-involved killjoys who only ever wanted to talk about their own pet subjects. Forced to the margins of their own cultural spaces, it is hardly surprising that fandom's small cadre of 'serious and constructive' writers wound up embracing the chance to publish stuff on the Internet.

Fandom built its second set of cultural spaces in an effort to find someone, anyone, with whom to have a conversation about the book they had just finished reading. Blogs were founded, websites built and audiences acquired but it wasn't long before these fragile digital networks came to resemble the answer to a question that had only ever been asked by people in the publishing industry: What is the cheapest and most effective way of marketing books and promoting authors?

Cultural spaces created in the hope of open and honest discussion of genre literature soon transformed into spaces devoted to self-promotion and getting people excited about future purchasing decisions. Write a serious review and it will be less widely read than a 400-word puff piece that looks suspiciously like it might have been based on a press release. Write a serious review that happens to be negative and you run the very real risk of being harassed by both the author and their fans. Today's genre landscape is like a psychotic Disneyworld; it's all smiles and hugs until someone threatens you with rape.

Faced with such hostility, genre's cultural spaces have begun to fragment at an extraordinary speed. Yesterday's friends are today's ideological opponents and by tomorrow their frame of reference will have become so remote as to be completely incomprehensible. Is serious criticism even possible in such a climate? How can reviewers hope to remain relevant when every contribution to genre culture seems to split it into smaller and smaller clades? People in search of answers to these types of questions could do a lot worse than seeking out a collection of essays by the author of *Jack Glass* and *New Model Army* as, to put it bluntly, Adam Roberts provides us with a model of what modern genre criticism should be.

Essay collections are often stuffy and inaccessible affairs as social conventions have it that 'criticism' (as opposed to mere reviewing) is something to be read only once you have familiarised yourself with a particular text. Less a formal distinction than an internalised defence mechanism, the division between critics and reviewers serves chiefly to silence the spoiler-phobic and provide critics with a handy excuse for failing to make their ideas accessibly to a wider audience. *Sibilant Fricative* challenges this defensive posture by ensuring that none of the essays require you to be familiar with the text in question. In fact, you don't even need to be interested in the books and films being reviewed in order to get something out of Roberts's writing.



But what is there to get out of Adam Roberts's essays and criticism? What is it that elevates him above the thousands of people turning out reviews for free? Why should you want to spend money on this book? The short answer is voice and the long answer is what will take up the rest of this piece.

The book opens with an introduction by Paul Kincaid and a preface by Roberts himself. Despite Kincaid opening his introduction with a sabre-rattling desire to disagree with Adam Roberts, the two men actually wind up agree-



ing with each other over what constitutes good criticism: Apparently, it's a combination of honesty, fearlessness and the ability to produce something that is entertaining in its own right. Much like Paul Kincaid, I find myself unable to disagree but then, I'm not entirely sure what any of these things mean in practice. Are there critics who don't care that they produce unreadable crap? Are there critics who sit down in front of their keyboards with the intension of writing cynical, cowardly pabulum? Quite possibly, but merely saying that we should avoid these things is no guarantee that we will; human minds are slippery things and principles even slipperier still. Better then to look at how Roberts works and see what honesty, fearlessness and entertainment look like in the wild.

The first thing you notice about Adam Roberts' criticism is that it is funny in a way that makes you laugh and smile at least once per page. This type of thing shouldn't be unusual but it definitely is. You see, as eager as reviewers may be to castigate the derivative and formulaic, most criticism tends to fall safely within the confines of two stylistic registers: either it is quasi-academic, which is to say that it is stone-cold serious and full of technical jargon, or it is consumer-focused, which is to say that it tries to condense the reviewer's emotional reaction to a work down to a few stock phrases and maybe a mark out of five. Given that most criticism is designed to convey either emotional urgency or authority, it is refreshing to read a collection of essays for which making the reader laugh and smile were evidently a very pressing concern. *Sibilant Fricative* ends with Roberts's justifiably celebrated reviews of every book in Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series but other comic gems include a sex scene written in the style of Greg Egan, a review of *District 9* presented as a string of disconnected context-free tweets and mocking Neal Stephenson's *Anathem* by inventing a load of unflattering critical neologisms that perfectly capture the essence of the book while also casting shade at many recent trends in genre publishing.

Roberts's willingness to engage in pastiche and to try different approaches to writing reviews makes for a satisfyingly varied reading experience. The first few essays about Philip K Dick are very conventional but from there on in, Roberts ceaselessly varies his methods and angle of attack. Every time you think he might have settled into a rut of short funny reviews, he hits you with an extended essay of such dazzling complexity and erudition that it almost takes your breath away. Then, after a few weighty pieces that delve into fascinating areas of critical thought, he'll provide a short review written in the style of an Anglo-Saxon poem or a comic dialogue.

Each of the essays included in *Sibilant Fricative* has something interesting to say (even if it is only a joke) but the piece that comes closest to explaining Roberts's methods is undoubtedly his magisterial double review of JRR Tolkien's *The Children of Hurin* and Patrick Rothfuss's *The Name of the Wind*. Roberts observes that, despite living in a medieval world, Rothfuss's characters all talk like modern people. He then compares this to Tolkien's novel, which is set in a similar kind of epically fantastical world to *Name of the Wind* but features characters who think and speak in a style imbued with the values of epic

poetry, values that seem to leak out of the characters and infect the world. Roberts's frustration with Rothfuss is palpable; why deploy fantastical tropes when your world and characters are so emphatically modern? Language shapes thought meaning that your choice of language necessarily impacts upon the style of story you wind up being able to tell. This recognition that style and content are one explains why it is that Roberts's refuses to settle for formulaic approaches; each new angle of attack results in a different kind of critical essay and each new essay yields an original thought or idea.

The most enjoyable essays in *Sibilant Fricative* are those in which Roberts approaches the text with a sense of bewilderment. His essays on JJ Abrams's *Lost* and *Star Trek* in particular find him casting about for something that will help him impose some sense of order on the riot of themes and images. One of the chief joys of good criticism lies in being able to crawl behind the eyes of an intelligent and worldly reader as they make their way through a text. Criticism is all about communicating what linkages a particular text formed in the critic's mind and Roberts is brilliant not only at capturing what it feels like when a film or TV series suddenly snaps into place but also at curating those linkages for public consumption. One of the things that renders criticism inaccessible is a desire to exhaust the meaning of a text, to pluck at every connective thread and tighten every conceptual knot until you have a sort of story of the story or text of the text. The problem with this is that most of the things we see in stories are the result of projection and so trying to make sense of both the text and our impressions of the text can lead to the sorts of conceptual pile-up that result in the invention of new sub-genres and gratuitous use of the suffix '-punk'. Roberts evades these types of quagmire by restraining himself, by choosing a single linkage and unpacking it to the point where it becomes accessible to everyone, even if they haven't read the text or encountered the idea before. Does this method result in unimpeachable readings of the text in question? Certainly not but it does result in essays that are entertaining and thought-provoking and that is exactly what good criticism should be.

*Sibilant Fricative* is undoubtedly one of the finest collections of essays that genre criticism has ever produced. Funny, intelligent, accessible and stylistically innovative it gives us the opportunity to relax into one of the strongest voices in genre culture. Indeed, while Roberts's style and subject matter may vary considerably throughout the book, everything he writes resonates with that same critical voice; goofy yet elegant, befuddled yet authoritative. *Sibilant Fricative* is a reminder that being a critic is all about finding your own voice and following that voice even as it pushes you to experiment with style or argue for unpopular views. It may be hard to imagine a worse cultural climate in which to review genre literature because the position of the critic has been devalued to the point where they are seen as nothing but purveyors of free PR. This is a book that allows you to glimpse a better cultural climate, a world in which critics pursue their voice and are respected as creators in their own right. *Sibilant Fricative* is everything that genre criticism should aspire to be.

**Bête by Adam Roberts (Gollancz, 2014)****Reviewed by Paul Kincaid**

Voltaire had a term for it: *contes philosophique*, philosophical stories, ideas fiction. Since science fiction has been called the literature of ideas, it is clear that there is an overlap between the two. But one does not map exactly upon the other, rather *contes philosophique* tend to fall somewhere between science fiction and what philosophers call 'thought experiments'. It is fiction used to explain and explore an idea; the usual fictional virtues of character, setting and plot may be present but they matter less than the presentation of the thought, the argument.

Adam Roberts is a modern exponent of the *contes philosophique*. *Bête* is a novel crowded with philosophical arguments about consciousness, identity and the nature of the soul, while the peripatetic plot winds about itself in a way deliberately designed to raise and raise again these issues. On the surface, of course, it is a novel about animal rights but you cannot write about the animal without questioning what it means to be human and that is what this novel is really about.

Our 'narrator' (I use scare quotes because, like so much in the book, this becomes questionable towards the end) is Graham Penhaligon, a no-nonsense farmer and butcher who once dreamed of becoming a poet. As the book opens, he is on the point of slaughtering one

of his cows ready for butchering and the cow is begging for its life. Animal rights activists have started seeding farm animals with minute chips that fuse with the animal brain and give it the power of speech. For many, perhaps most people in the country, animal speech raises uncomfortable questions about the intelligence of animals, whether or not they have a soul and whether or not they should be farmed. But Graham, who seems to live his life in a state of ever-accumulating rage, won't stand for any of that nonsense; as far as he is concerned, it is the chip speaking, not the animal. He shoots the cow (we meet the cow again later in the novel, sort of; although 'sort of' could be used to qualify any statement about the plot). Unfortunately, the whole incident is caught on film and becomes an internet sensation. Animal rights legislation is passed with dire consequences for Graham and the country as a whole.

For a while things move quickly. We are briskly told that Graham loses his farm and his wife, enjoys a brief fame among those opposed to animal rights, then, as the economy falls apart, he becomes a tramp, moving from town to town doing a little illicit butchering here and there for those who still like to enjoy a joint of meat. Then things slow to the pace of his walking as he sleeps rough (mostly in and around Bracknell Forest to the south and east of Reading). For a while he is accompanied by an itinerant

preacher, who sees the coming of the bêtes as a sign of the end times. Then he meets and, to his own surprise, falls in love with Anne but she has cancer and dies before we are a third of the way into the novel. After this he takes himself away into the depths of the forest, as far away from people as he can get, at which point the story becomes one of cold and rain, of scant food and scarce drinking water. In his very few encounters with the outside world, we see that humanity is retreating; towns are being abandoned, people are squeezing into a few walled and overcrowded cities, for good measure a new plague is ravaging the population. All of which is of little concern to Graham, who seems to regard people in much the same way he regarded his farm animals.

A word about bêtes: in so relentlessly English a novel, in which an outside world is scarcely even mentioned, it is never explained why a French word should be chosen to identify the talking animals. It makes them foreign, alien, but in a work that has more wordplay, puns and malapropisms even than is usual in an Adam Roberts novel, we have to take note of things like this. I suspect, therefore, that we are intended to hear an echo of 'bet' in the word, the novel details a huge gamble about the nature of consciousness and the future of humanity. The internet allows the chips to talk to one another which in some ways makes the bêtes smarter than humans but is it just the chips talking, as Graham believes, or is there a more native intelligence at work. Such issues are chewed

over again and again in long and discursive conversations with the people Graham encounters and, increasingly, with the bêtes, often when Graham is drunk so that ideas become slurred and lost. Notably, the bêtes insist on addressing him as Graham, which he resents; though later, when a supercilious army officer calls him 'Penny', we realise how much self-identity is tied up in the names and another philosophical strand is revealed.

There is a war going on, which he hasn't noticed, and the bêtes, through Anne's cat, Cincinnatus, want Graham to act as their ambassador in peace negotiations. They have a carrot to entice him, one that reveals where the sense of self in the bêtes resides, and that will entail a loss of humanity in Graham. In a sense, none of this holds up to scrutiny: the plotting is inconsistently paced and over-reliant on coincidence, too much happens off stage to allow a clear and coherent view of either the world or of the events within it.

And there is so much foreshadowing in the novel that at times it seems there is more foreshadowing than plot. And yet this is precisely the strength of the book: the foreshadowing is constantly making us question the nature and character of our narrator. Such questions underpin the broader issues of where our consciousness resides and what it is about our consciousness that makes us human that are raised, discarded and re-examined throughout the book. It is, in other words, exactly what the very best *conte philosophique* should be.





## *Ancillary Sword* by Ann Leckie (Orbit, 2014)

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

*Ancillary Sword* is the sequel to *Ancillary Justice*, Ann Leckie's multi-award-winning debut novel. The burning question for me was, can it possibly be as good?

The story follows on immediately from the first book. Our heroine Breq is the last surviving ancillary of the troop carrier *Justice of Toren*, used by the Radch Empire in its aggressive programme of expansion and conquest. The ancillaries are people taken from conquered planets, their identities destroyed and slaved to their ship's AI. Breq's identity split off when her ship was destroyed by the Lord of the Radch herself, Anaander Mianaai. The events in *Ancillary Justice* have precipitated a civil war which now threatens to break up the empire.

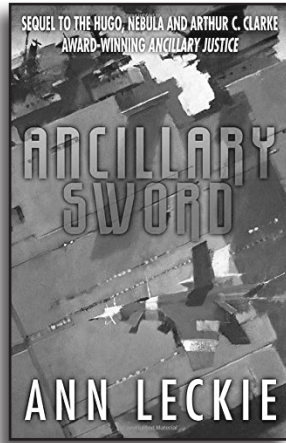
Breq is now legally human with the rank of Fleet Captain and her own human-crewed ship. She has been sent by Anaander Mianaai to Athoek station in order to prevent the other faction destroying the inter-system gates and seizing the station. But Breq has her own reasons for going which do not involve advancing Anaander Mianaai's agenda. She has, however, been obliged to take on a new lieutenant, the violet-eyed Tisarwat, who may simply be an engaging teenager but is more likely a spy for the Lord of the Radch.

*Ancillary Justice* stood out for its treatment of gender. The Radch do not ascribe differences in character to gender differences and their language doesn't differentiate; Breq uses the female pronoun indiscriminately and struggles to identify male and female when using a non-Radch language. The reader has to make her own accommodation with this. By *Ancillary Sword*, I found it a useful reminder of Radchaai culture and, in particular, the fact that sexual relations are governed more by status than by gender.

As well as exploring gender and identity, *Ancillary Sword* also examines the structures of imperialism and colonialism. Like the British Empire, the Radch has an overwhelming demand for tea. Athoek is a tea producing planet with an imported population of slave workers. After a certain number of years, conquered populations are supposed to be able to earn citizenship and qualify for 'the aptitudes', the universal testing system. In practice, however, plantation workers are kept in subjection by a company store system, routinely sexually abused and denied the aptitudes. Breq is drawn into the internal politics of the station and the planet, disrupting their existing social order but at the same time exposing the brutality and corruption that are endemic to colonialism.

Leckie is an economical writer. Each scene does at least one thing to advance the plot but most of them do two or three other things as well, whether that is character development, giving us additional information or setting up a future payoff. It's a joy to read for the sheer craftsmanship. It has narrative drive, plot and characters that for me stand comparison with Lois McMaster Bujold. Leckie also asks the hard questions: What can one person do? Can you be a good person in a bad system? What use is dying for your principles?

Is it as good as its predecessor? Definitely.



## *Europe In Autumn* by Dave Hutchinson (Solaris, 2014)

Reviewed by Ian Sales

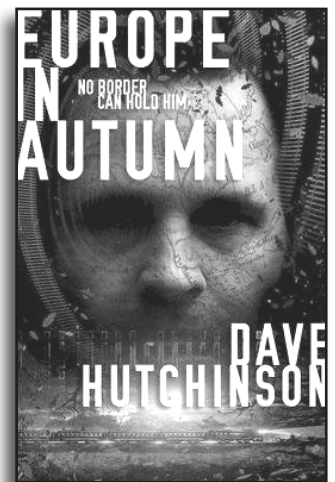
The map is not the territory, as Alfred Korzybski famously said, and in *Europe In Autumn*, this is certainly true. Rudi is a cook, originally from Estonia but now working at a restaurant in Poland. In the near-future of *Europe In Autumn*, the continent has splintered into a mess of small states with closed borders. Threaded through them is an extensive railway network, the Line, whose tracks and stations are considered a sovereign nation in their own right.

Rudi is a well-drawn character, with an entertainingly dry and witty voice. He suspects the owner of the restaurant where he works of having other, less than legal, interests and so he becomes involved with Les Coureurs des Bois, a pan-European network of undercover couriers and smugglers. As is the case with secret organisations of this type, they start him with small tasks and tell him almost nothing. Unfortunately one such mission, which entails retrieving an object from a Line station, for a person best described as 'untrustworthy', proves later to have important consequences for both Rudi and Europe as a whole.

Where *Europe In Autumn* stands out is its true European sensibility and Hutchinson's sense of place is impressively convincing. Perhaps the plot is somewhat episodic - which is, in part, dictated by the nature of the story, since it's structured around the tasks handed to Rudi by Les Coureurs des Bois - and the joins between some of them do seem a little forced. A section during which Rudi is held prisoner in London, feels like a springboard to something. At first it reads a little like a stumble but it's actually the step to "Part Two"...

This is where *Europe In Autumn* shows its true colours. Where previously the novel might have read like a near-future thriller, science fiction only by virtue of its setting and furniture, there is a very science-fictional idea threaded through it. Around three-quarters of the way into *Europe In Autumn*, Hutchinson takes an off-piste swerve and introduces an entirely new element. The introduction is not entirely elegant - it's a lump of exposition whose relevance seems at first mystifying - but Hutchinson has done his groundwork and the revelation slowly begins to make sense of many earlier incidents in the story.

*Europe In Autumn* is by no means the first science fiction novel to wear the guise of a spy thriller, only to reveal in its second half it possesses impeccable genre credentials. While that disguise does lead to certain narrative expectations, which in *Europe In Autumn* are not entirely met, the big reveal succeeds in making sense of everything that has gone before. It is epiphanies of this sort which draw us to science fiction. *Europe In Autumn* is a polished piece of work that definitely adds up to more than the sum of its parts. I expect to see it on at least one awards shortlist next year and a sequel, *A Song For Europe*, is out in 2015. I'll be picking up a copy.





***Irregularity*, edited by Jared Shurin  
(Jurassic London, 2014)**

**Reviewed by Aishwarya Subramanian**

*Irregularity* was published to coincide with the ‘Ships, Clocks and Stars: The Quest for Longitude’ exhibition at the National Maritime Museum. This connection sets the collection in a very specific context: the 17th to 19th centuries in the history of science, the age of enlightenment. Most of the stories sit comfortably within this framework; the earliest, Richard de Nooy’s ‘The Heart Of Aris Kindt’, is set in 1632; the latest, Simon Guerrier’s ‘An Experiment In The Formulae Of Thought’, in 1854.

The focus of the anthology – helped along by, to put it mildly, not the most diverse list of contributors – makes it inevitable that the majority of these stories are of Northern Europeans doing science in Northern Europe. But the age of enlightenment is also the age of empire (what did we think they needed all those ships for?) and occasionally this fact comes into play in these stories as well. The fatal game in Rose Biggin’s ‘A Game Proposition’ is played out in Port Royal and the role of empire is explicit in Roger Luckhurst’s ‘Circulation’ which is proper Victorian horror. It’s also the disturbing undercurrent to Henrietta Rose-Innes’s ‘Animalia Paradoxa’, one of the strongest stories in the anthology. Rose-Innes’s unnamed protagonist is in search of a spectacular new animal for the collection of a rich patron in France but he’s prone to thinking of the African men he’s hired to help him as collectibles as well.

As is often the case with a themed collection, a number of the stories here are variations on the same central idea—that ordering and knowing and mapping and exerting power upon and destroying are all inextricably bound up in one complex knot. (“He’s mapped us,” says a character in Biggin’s story, “in a tone that meant murdered us.”) The strongest of these is EJ Swift’s ‘The Spiders Of Stockholm’ in which a young girl befriends the spiders that live under her bed, only to unwittingly kill them one by one as a visiting scientist tells her their names. This is basic fairy tale logic—to know a thing’s true name is to have power over it—but it’s also at the heart of the enlightenment project. The child protagonist makes these two systems of understanding the world fit together surprisingly well. ‘Knowledge is power’ is hardly an original idea but the lonely, detached perspective of Swift’s Eva would make up for greater sins than this and ‘The Spiders Of Stockholm’ really is powerful and lovely. Though it’s unfortunate for both stories that Swift’s should be placed immediately after Biggin’s which treads similar ground.

In Kim Curran’s ‘A Woman Out Of Time’ humans aren’t the ones imposing order upon the world but the creatures upon whom order is imposed. Unknown forces (in my head a version of Terry Pratchett’s Auditors) watch Emilie du Chatelet in alarm as she threatens to discover

too much, too soon. Humans are not entirely powerless, though, and Curran’s nameless narrators have plenty of help from the patriarchy.

It sometimes feels as if all of *Irregularity* is at war with Linnaeus—he is indirectly responsible for the death of Eva’s spiders, is one of the driving forces that leads Henrietta Rose-Innes’s protagonist to hunt for the chimera in Africa, shows up (as a sympathetic figure) in Tiffani Angus’s ‘Fairchild’s Folly’ grappling with the question of whether or how one might classify love. It always comes back to the question of classification—to what extent it’s harmful, to what extent it’s natural and human, to what extent the universe is classifiable. None of these stories makes reference to William Blake’s ‘The Ancient Of Days’; I’m not sure if this is a pity or a relief.

This drive to impose order, whether innately human or not, extends in some ways to *Irregularity* itself. The afterword by Richard Dunn and Sophie Waring suggests a relatively ordered understanding of the history of scientific progress; dependent on success and failure (the collection is dedicated to “failure”), strewn with “false leads” and “dead ends” but largely teleological. But then there’s the best story in the collection, Adam Roberts’s ‘The Assassination Of Isaac Newton By The Coward Robert Boyle’. This story is gloriously silly, the whole thing is an extended pun; but it’s also chaotic, its framing of the history of human thought destabilising the collection completely.

Some of the most powerful (and the most powerfully weird) SF stems from this sort of chaos—the thing that doesn’t belong exploding into the world. Nick Harkaway’s framing narrative tries to place the book *Irregularity* itself in this position but it feels rather inconsequential. More successful is M Suddain’s ‘The Darkness’, a version of the great fire of London, as told by Samuel Pepys, but with

an inexplicable black hole and multiple instances of cruelty to bears. It’s very cleverly done, with Pepys’ account (convincing, at least to me, in its stylistic details) of life going on as normally as possible juxtaposed with the giant vortex slowly consuming the city. Guerrier’s ‘An Experiment In The Formulae Of Thought’ takes for its starting point another great moment of literary rupture, that megalosaurus “forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill” at the beginning of Dickens’s *Bleak House*. This alternate history brings together the history of this book, the Crystal Palace dinosaurs and Ada Lovelace but it doesn’t have anything like the same effect; the story is too concerned with signposting its sources.

This is a problem general to a number of the pieces that make up this collection. There are honourable exceptions—Swift, Suddain, Rose-Innes, whose quiet, clever story bursts into weirdness at the end, James Smythe’s brilliant, over the top prose – but too often these stories are a little too well-researched, a little too carefully signposted, a little too written to spec. And the whole is underwhelming as a result.



**Paradox, edited by Ian Whates  
(Newcon Press, 2014)**

**Reviewed by Duncan Lawie**

The Fermi paradox seems a hoary topic for science fiction but here are fifteen new stories which show that fresh engagement delivers new riches. As Marek Kukula and Rob Edwards tell us in the introduction to this collection, “[i]t’s a simple question but its implications are profound... alien civilisations should be numerous – and yet we see no credible signs of their existence”. The larger part of the introduction provides a historical survey of Western thought on the question since Copernicus – an interesting extension of the concept from the usual 20th Century exceptionalism. (The special edition hardback has an additional, fascinating, essay by Stephen Baxter on Fermi and Stapledon.) And then we are on to the stories.

The ordering of the fiction in this volume creates its own narrative so it is worthwhile reading in the order presented. We begin with a strong, though obvious, take on the paradox in ‘Catching Rays’ by David L Clements. This is classic hard SF with research scientists on the moon discovering an unexpected non-terrestrial object and employing problem solving skills. In a general anthology, the impact would be quite different but here both the characters and the reader know that the story is wrestling with Fermi. The answer is clever but in the context no more. By contrast, in the next story, Pat Cadigan’s ‘The Big Next’, Fermi isn’t mentioned. Instead, the story relies on the reader’s knowledge of where this is published to infer that it is providing an answer to the paradox. I found myself all the happier with the first story now that I could hope it was the exemplar of a particular kind of response to the question, rather than just the first example.

There is a temptation to associate each of the stories with one of the three classes of answer to the paradox the introduction describes but that is part of the pleasure of reading this collection that I would rather not spoil. Still, it is interesting to note that this volume abjures the multiverse. Given the vast bounds of this single galaxy, let alone the 14 billion years of our universe, it’s quite reasonable not to exponentially complicate the problem with the option of many universes. Further, the stories tend to be set quite close to our own time and only a few stories venture beyond our Solar system. There are a couple of common ideas that could be extracted from this – we are waiting for the aliens to come to us or we don’t expect to get far from home over the next few centuries. But within that broad scope, even where there is overlap, each story is distinctive.

As mentioned, a key spectrum of difference is how directly they engage with the paradox. The stories I enjoyed most were those which, like the Cadigan, use the context of the collection to determine that the story is a response to the question. Paul Cornell’s ‘Zeta Reticuli’ covers the impact of First Contact on the Visitors; Tricia Sullivan’s ‘The Ambulance Chaser’ chooses an even more unusual protagonist – an old lady (who is not secretly a witch); Stephanie Saulter’s ‘Audiovisionary’ and ‘Stella By Starlight’ by Mike Resnick and Robert T Jeschoenek present the response of an apparently unique individual.

For me, the standout story of this collection is Adam Roberts’s ‘Baedeker’s Fermi’. It manages to fit multiple commentaries on the social mores of Europe in 1900 and could be read quite effectively as a metaphor of the classes of people one chooses not to see except that, blindingly obviously, the impossible things our protagonist immediately forgets are literally the aliens.



Elsewhere, Paul di Filippo is his usual gonzo self in ‘The Trail Of The Creator, The Trial Of Creation’ which is about the consequences for many star systems of finding out they are not alone whilst ‘Fermi’s Doubts’ by George Zebrowski and ‘Aether’ by Robert Reed offer much quieter, more personal responses. ‘Lost To Their Own Devices’ by Adrian Tchaikovsky has an answer fresh for

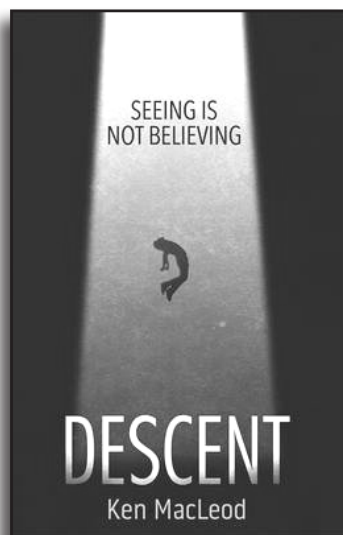
the Twitter generation and Keith Brooke and Eric Brown provide a fresh take on a story told in every SF generation – almost to the title – with ‘The End Of The World’. Less interesting was ‘In The Beginning’ by Gerry Webb, a story which appears to be aiming for Richard Morgan’s *Takashi Kovacs* territory but with the Fermi element dragged in to fit the theme.

There is one story I can’t reach a verdict on. Rachel Armstrong’s ‘The Worldmaker’ is most likely an interesting failure but one which is hugely ambitious. Like the Webb, it at first appears to be about something entirely different; in this case an abundant future solar system and an indulgent humanity. The viewpoint leaps about confusingly, leaving impressions of how much freedom and choice people have before telescoping outwards to the story of Commander Martyn Fogg and his recalcitrant composting system on Europa. There are a couple more diversions, including sample diagrams flagged as Conway’s Game of Life, which may be a red herring or a vital thread, before sliding back to the original setting and a completely new theme in the final paragraph. I think Armstrong has managed to provide Fermi answers in all three categories within 22 pages whilst also showing an optimistic human response to the news that the universe is full of life. I suspect it is the story which will stick with me the longest.

After this, Mercurio D. Rivera’s post-contact story on an alien planet Atonement, ‘Under The Blue-White Sun’ feels comfortably familiar even as it combines two Fermi answers. As the final item, this brings the book to a graceful close. There is some soft going through the middle of the volume and a steep ascent near the end but the reading is worth it. This is a strong collection where the gathered items combine to more than the sum of their parts.

**Descent by Ken MacLeod (Orbit, 2014)****Reviewed by Lynne Bispham**

The defining moment of Ryan Sinclair's life occurs when, as teenager, he and his friend Calum climb a Scottish hillside and are knocked unconscious by light from a silver sphere that could be anything from a weather balloon to a stereotypical UFO. Calum suffers no lasting effects from this episode but Ryan has nightmares and his family notice changes in his behaviour. He is then abducted from his bed at night by "bog-standard Grey" aliens and taken to their mothership – an episode which may or may not have been a dream. In the novel's near-future Scotland, high-tech surveillance is everywhere but curiously there is no evidence for either of these close encounters. In his more rational moments, Ryan reasons that there are perfectly normal physical and psychological explanations for the phenomena he has experienced but after a visit from a certain James Baxter, a bogus church minister who seems to be some sort of Man in Black, he becomes gradually more convinced that he is caught up in what may - or may not - be a political conspiracy or a cover-up of technological advances by the military or the obscuring of genetic information that may have important consequences for the future of the human race. This "speciation event" is



tied up with the secret history of Calum's family and explains why he was unaffected by the UFO. But again, there is uncertainty as to whether or not this secret is actually true.

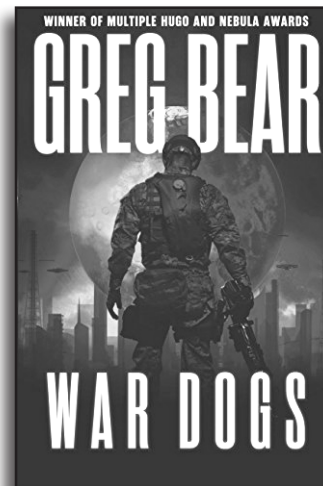
The plot of *Descent* is very low-key. The reader is shown episodes from Ryan's life as he grows older, attends university and becomes a science journalist. At several high-lighted moments, it becomes apparent that he is being watched – although by whom and for what purpose is not made clear.

We are firmly in *X-Files* territory with conspiracies within conspiracies. There are times when it seems that Ryan is simply paranoid but a further visit from James Baxter and the arrival of a pair of thugs at his home indicate that his suspicions are real. The reader is teased into believing that the various plot-strands are on the verge of being brought together and the mysteries solved but then the story veers away into new possibilities.

So this is not a novel of fast-paced SF action but rather one of growing tension as Ryan tries to understand what it is that has made him of interest to the conspirators – if they exist. On one level, it is a coming of age story and, on another, a mystery set in a very well-described near-future society with entirely convincing technological advances and politics. The book owes its success largely to the character of Ryan, who is flawed but sympathetic, and the first-person narrative draws the reader in to his story. By the final chapter, there is a resolution of sorts but there are still enough untied subplots to leave the reader wondering if the truth is actually still out there waiting to be discovered.

**War Dogs by Greg Bear (Gollancz, 2014)****Reviewed by Andy Sawyer**

*War Dogs* begins with 'Skyrine' (Sky Marine) Michael Venn returning to Earth after a mission on Mars. Through his reminiscences we discover just what went on in his encounter with an alien race, the Antagonists, with whom Earth forces are in combat as virtual mercenaries for the Gurus who have made contact with humanity and shared their advanced technology. Also involved in the encounter were various human Martian colonists – now side-



lined by the war between Skyrines and Antagonists – some of whom seem to have stumbled upon the secret which Venn is now carrying back to Earth.

Fundamentally a SF Shoot-'Em-Up, *War Dogs* has a lot to offer in its gritty picture of war on Mars. There is certainly a lot of action and what we see of the Martian colonists, the Muskies, is genuinely fascinating. Traditionally, SF has often painted space colonists as idealists, libertarians, even utopians –

groups with which a vaguely liberal readership can identify. Bear's Muskies are different: either groups who can afford to take the journey to Mars and cut themselves off from the rest of us or genuinely creepy separatists like the Voors – people holding to the apartheid race-theories of 20th Century South African Afrikaners. The interaction here, together with the cosmological background (much of the action takes place within a geological formation which seems to be a body that had crashed into Mars eons previously) and the descriptions of the Martian environment, is the best part of the book.

But much of it suffers from a kind of thinning-out process that can only be how Bear is setting us up for the development of the story in subsequent volumes. It's clear at the end that *stuff is happening* elsewhere in the Solar System. More irritatingly, the war between Gurus and Antagonists (which presumably is part of that 'stuff') often comes across like a lot of hand-waving designed to put Venn and his comrades on Mars. The result is that I put the book down with the feeling that I'd read the first part of Arthur C Clarke's *Childhood's End* mashed-up with a *Warhammer 40,000* novel, without the satisfaction I would have had from the separate parts.

There's a peculiar running thread about how no-one says "fuck" anymore because the Gurus *don't like it* (an explanation is eventually given) so we have a mildly amusing picture of what looks like a bunch of prissy-mouthed prudish space marines. (Though you can swear on Mars because the Gurus aren't listening. Maybe.) As far as I'm concerned, the Gurus can take over Facebook and science fiction fandom any time they like but it all sounds rather bafflingly implausible. Hints of something more interesting of which this may be a side-effect are dropped but, like the Big Reveal, this must be set aside for later.

So altogether a strange mixture which seems to be aimed at wings of the readership which don't normally interact. There's imagination a-plenty and the ability to present that imagination in words is not lost but I rather pine for the days of *Blood Music*.



## **Defenders by Will McIntosh (Orbit, 2014)**

### **Reviewed by Shaun Green**

**P**icture, if you will, the unstoppable war machine of this particular grim future: seventeen feet tall, mounted atop three legs, with a face like the Moai of Easter Island. Large and strange and thus terrifying but also fundamentally absurd: a terribly threatening creature that, through the lens of fiction, we struggle to take seriously.

This is not all there is to the eponymous 'defenders'. Their minds are also constructs: deprived by design of the neurotransmitter serotonin, the defenders do not understand emotion and are not aware of the world in the same way as the humans they are distantly based upon. Despite genius-level IQs, training from birth in all aspects of military strategy and tactics and a ferocity that matches their strength, they are in many respects child-like and hungry for approval.

Their lack of serotonin offers their greatest strength against the Luyten, the alien enemy they were designed to fight. These alien super-telepaths have all but conquered Earth, driving the human race to the brink. Ordinary human soldiers never stood a chance; their minds were open books to the Luyten, who were able to anticipate every action against them from troop movements to shots fired.

The defenders cannot be read and they are built for war. They are larger, faster and stronger than the Luyten. Their training, knowledge and intelligence allows them to operate autonomously, without human input. It was the only way they could possibly work, as their human parents might unknowingly reveal plans to the enemy. Yet even if they win and mankind can be saved, the question of what happens next remains to be answered.

This is a surprisingly emotionally engaging novel for what is essentially a cross-breed of two traditional SF tropes: the invasion of Earth and the unforeseen consequences of scientific progress. One of Will McIntosh's greatest successes with *Defenders* is how he evokes mood, skilfully matched to the challenges both humanity and his human characters face throughout the novel's course. Fear is prevalent, as are despair and a sense of impending doom. Periods of fragile hope run along a knife-edge balance before erupting into elation. Moments of violence are often all the more shocking for how they are introduced.

Such emotional richness should come as little surprise to prior readers of McIntosh and it is also central to the novel's themes. The defenders, deprived of serotonin, lack a sophisticated emotional core. Outside of conflict they struggle with how they should live, imitating their 'parent' species in manners that are variously laughable and terrifying. The Luyten, possessing individual yet shared consciousness, are a hyper-empathic species despite their callously violent actions. Mankind sit somewhere between the two: capable of great emotional majesty but divided and ruled by fear. The balance between such conflicts provides much of the book's drive on both a micro and macro level.

It is not without flaws, as is true of any novel. McIntosh fails or chooses not to address some difficult moral and ethical

issues thrown up by this war for species survival. Regardless, this is an engaging, thought-provoking and occasionally frightening read.

## **Parasite by Mira Grant (Orbit, 2013)**

### **Reviewed by Patrick Mahon**

**M**ira Grant is the pseudonym Seanan McGuire uses for her science fiction horror writing. *Parasite* is her fourth novel as Grant and the first in a new trilogy.

It's the summer of 2027 in San Francisco. Six years earlier, Sal Mitchell had a serious car crash. She should have died but instead she became the first human whose life was saved by her Intestinal Bodyguard™, a patented parasite produced by global pharmaceutical giant SymboGen. Once implanted in a user's gut, the parasite prevents most common illnesses. Before Sal, though, it had never brought someone back from the dead. SymboGen is still trying to work out how.

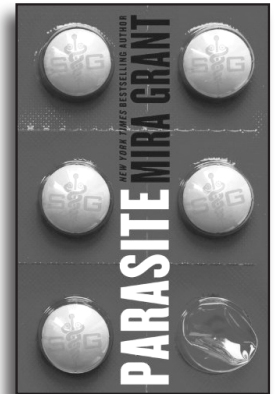
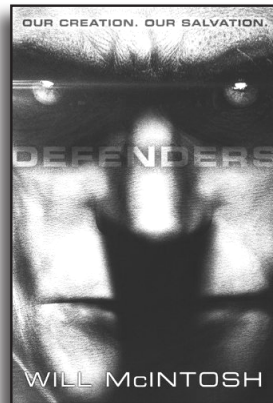
The city is hit by a strange affliction which turns people into sleepwalkers, some of whom start attacking others. As the pandemic spreads, Sal realises that SymboGen seem to know more about it than anyone else. Why? Then Sal is contacted by an ex-SymboGen employee who offers to show her how the new illness and her miraculous recovery are linked. Does she want to find out the truth about what happened to her?

What I admired most about this novel was the narrative style. Grant has a confident voice and the storyline unfolds at a natural, unhurried pace which retains your interest from page to page. If your focus is a tight and energetic plot, you'll probably enjoy this book. For me, though, a good thriller needs a tight plot and a strong protagonist. *Parasite* has the former but not the latter.

I've got two main issues with Sal Mitchell. The first is agency. She hasn't got any. Every time there's a crisis, someone else rescues her. Put bluntly, she's a useless hero. The second is her demand for personal autonomy, regardless of the costs to others. It's clear from the start that you need to cut Sal some slack, since she only has six years experience of the real world on which to base her decisions. However, she keeps insisting on her right to act independently, even though she repeatedly demonstrates poor judgement which harms other people.

Early on, for example, when a colleague called Chave turns into a sleepwalker right next to her in the SymboGen canteen queue, the security guards ask Sal to back away. She does the opposite and not through panic either: "Some imp of the perverse made me step closer to her". Chave then attacks her and she is only saved when Sherman, a close friend, rugby tackles Chave to the ground. As a direct consequence, Sherman gets infected and dies. Yet this incident is quickly brushed under the carpet and Sal appears to learn nothing from it.

This is not a woman whose judgement I would trust in a crisis. As she's the protagonist, though, that's exactly what Grant repeatedly asks the reader to do. As a result I lost confidence in Sal and stopped caring about what happened to her. *Parasite* has a great plot and stylish prose. I just wish the lead character had been up to the challenge.



## ***Broken Monsters* by Lauren Beukes (Harper Collins, 2014)**

**Reviewed by Shaun Green**

**D**etroit: Motor City. Once the seat of the American automotive industry, it has experienced sharp decline. Its population has fallen by 25% since 2000, largely thanks to suburbanisation and declining inner-city residence. Its economy has also suffered, culminating in the city declaring itself bankrupt in 2013. Suburban citizens have suffered as well as local businesses, with widespread foreclosures and bankruptcies declared thanks to the sub-prime mortgage crisis. This has only added to the derelict industrial landscape of the city, often described as 'ruin porn'. Today's Detroit is a troubled city. Small wonder, then, that it provides fertile ground for Beukes's latest novel, one which explores the fractured psyche of the city and its struggling residents.

The core cast is a diverse bunch. The story opens with Gabi, a detective in the Detroit PD, standing over the body of a young boy. The corpse has been mutilated in a most horrible manner: the torso bisected and the legs clumsily replaced with the rear of a fawn. Meanwhile Gabi's teenage daughter, Layla, has her own problems, though they are those more traditionally associated with the young: social acceptance, unrequited crushes and troubled relationships with her separated parents.

Jonno is a recent immigrant to Detroit, having fled the disastrous collapse of his previous relationship and working life. He is of the age where one begins to think of oneself as ageing and his career as a writer has met little success. He somehow boasts a modicum of natural charisma despite his introspective nature tending towards solipsistic self-pity and arrogance. Another key character, TK, could not be more different. An enterprising vagrant, TK dedicates himself to his few close friends and his fellow Detroit homeless. While he may pick at the remains left behind in repossessed homes and businesses, he attempts to do so with compassion and respect.

Finally there is Clayton, an unsuccessful experimental artist. He suffers severe mental issues, particularly delusions concerning his relationships with others and a tendency to fixate, but despite his numerous personal problems he is not without friends in Detroit's artistic community.

As *Broken Monsters* unfolds we follow these five as they work to solve a string of ghastly murders, to navigate the pitfalls of youth in modern America, to build a new life on the back of industrial decay and cultural vibrancy, to survive and support amidst economic ruin, and to execute great works. Their lives, and those of the supporting cast, intersect and build towards a crescendo that is borne of both the technologies and culture of the modern age and the timeless nature of violence and horror.

Given that I am writing this review for Vector it's essential to acknowledge upfront that based on this plot summary it would be easy to position *Broken Monsters* as a crime thriller rather than anything that fits within the diverse genres of SF. To an extent this would be accurate, yet there are two reasons that this novel is interest to the dedicated reader of speculative fiction.

The first is that like Beukes's previous work, this is fiction that is keen to explore the social, cultural and technological realities of the present: challenges that, when met and accurately represented in fiction, cannot fail but be SFnal. What once characterised Detroit is of the past; domestic industry is no longer a significant part of the American national character. In Detroit, as in other cities, the gaps have been colonised, in part by new industries that explore and exploit what remains. Social media and web start-ups play a role in this novel, and the ways they affect and are affected by the lives of their users prove major causal factors in *Broken Monsters*.

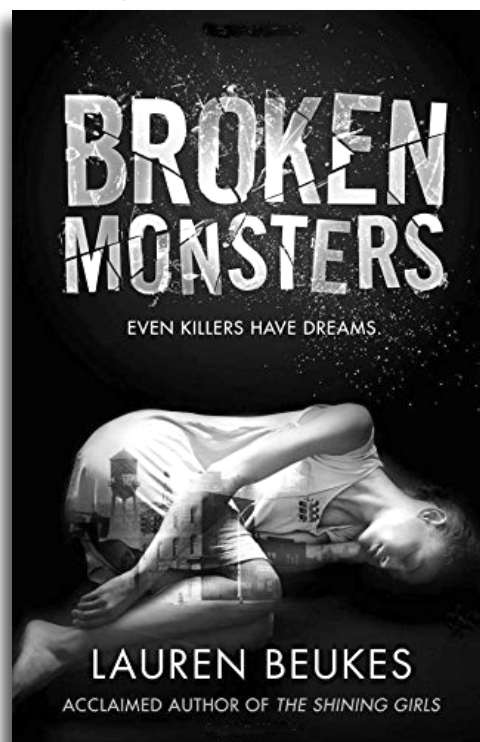
The second is that, without wishing to issue any spoilers, not everything turns out quite as it might in the works of a more traditional writer of crime fiction. These elements of the novel are, happily, integral to the tale that Beukes has set out to tell, and are not mere window dressing intended to appeal to her existing audience.

Beukes has an eye for the grime and decay of run-down urban environments as well as the impact such environments have on their residents. This much has been clear since her first novel, *Moxyland*. Authenticity is an important factor in her Detroit and her research has played dividends, with the city and the characters who live within it all proving convincing. Significant time has been invested into presenting a realistic picture of the Detroit PD, for example. I single this example out because said research has not overwhelmed the story through its clumsy integration.

This has been an issue with some of the few modern crime novels I've read, such as Simon Kernick's *Relentless*, which among its own crimes can be counted the intrusive peppering of acronyms, protocol and fact-flavoured tidbits.

*Broken Monsters* is an admirable work of fiction. It is dark and gritty without being gratuitous or juvenile and, despite its grim subject matter and often brooding atmosphere, it contains genuinely funny moments. As a crime thriller, it offers mystery and horror in a convincing modern setting, although any whodunnit elements rapidly fall by the wayside as they do not serve the story being told. As a fantastic work, it offers low-key moments reminiscent of urban fantasy's subtler beats as well as more significant intrusive fantasy. As SF, it successfully captures what it is to live at a time when technology drives social and cultural change faster than any individual can keep up and even-handedly portrays both the positive and negative human impact of such.

Its few flaws are rarely significant. Among those that stand out is the risk inherent in writing a novel with social web technologies and concepts so close to the forefront: these date quickly. There is also the associated risk that





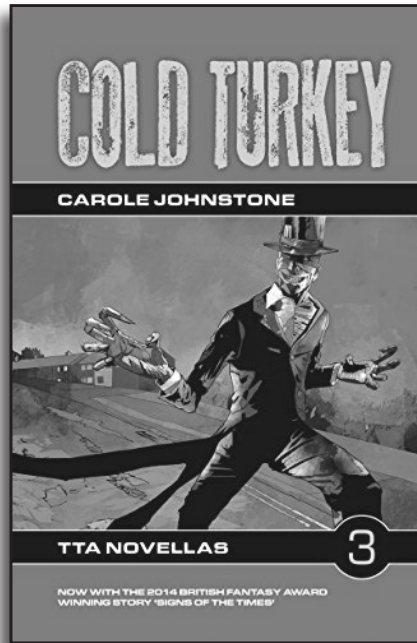
whatever names you come up with to describe your fictional analogues of real sites will have already been used for real online services, as is the case with the ChatRoulette analogue SpinChat. To Beukes's credit, she appears well aware of these risks and has worked to mitigate them without sacrificing that vital contemporaneity. This is partly done by largely eschewing the awkward name-dropping that often passes for integrating modern technologies into present-day fiction, focusing instead on the how and why of usage, the interaction with it and the feedback received.

A more immediate flaw is that the core cast, strong as they ultimately prove, initially feel archetypal. They can be quickly reduced to the cynical cop, the bratty daughter, the tortured artist and the homeless hero. They do ultimately transcend such pigeonholing, however, thanks to well-drawn contradictions within their personalities that become apparent through their deeds and words.

One character who leapt out at me early on is Jonno, whose cynicism is far less worldly than Gabi's. He's a specific type of young man: occasionally prone to self-destructive impulses; assured of his own superiority yet riddled with self-doubt and even self-loathing; prone to sorting everything he observes into easily categorised and marketed slots despite his disdain for the BuzzFeed-esque 'listicle' web journalism that sustains him.

Jonno proves to be one of the novel's more contemptible figures but he's also surprisingly sympathetic. On top of that, he proves a somewhat familiar figure. Readers of *Moxyland* will remember Toby, that novel's improbable saviour and survivor. Toby is reminiscent of Charlie Brooker's Nathan Barley, a character from both the eponymous Brooker/Chris Morris TV series and Brooker's earlier satirical TV guides, although the author has stated they were conceived of entirely independently. Toby, like Barley, was a self-absorbed fool obsessed with his own social media profile and ignorant, often wilfully so, of the wider world. *Broken Monsters*'s Jonno falls somewhere between Barley and his nemesis, Dan Ashcroft, a cynical critic of the Barleyesque idiots he despises and yet unable to escape the facts that they are his key readership and have inadvertently come to define his own cultural position.

Drawing a connection between a 2014 novel and a largely overlooked satirical comedy show from 2005 may seem a stretch for a book review but I do so for good reason. Brooker's later creative works such as *Black Mirror* are heavily focused on the nightmarish possibilities that current and future technologies and social trends invite; his earlier works explored similar themes in entertainment and 'new media'. Beukes, like Brooker, is evidently both intrigued by and ambivalent about the ramifications of these areas of intersection. I've encountered relatively few writers who deliver explorations of the way such ideas impact human lives as thoroughly as Beukes. Not bad for a murder mystery in a run-down old city.



## ***Cold Turkey* by Carole Johnstone (TTA Press, 2014)**

**Reviewed by Graham Andrews**

**T**he novella has always been the awkward cuss of short-form fiction. As anthologist Leo Margulies wrote in 1963: "Though preferred in magazines as a lead-off story, the short novel is uncommon in hard cover or paperback books." But the situation today is a lot more novella-friendly, thanks to amenable small-press publishers and *Cold Turkey* - TTA Press novella number three, after the award-winning *Spin* by Nina Allan - is a good case in point

*Cold Turkey* tells us more than most people would surely like to know about Raymond ('Raym') Munroe, who sort-of teaches at a sink-school in the fictional Lanarkshire town of Glengower – which aptly rhymes

with 'glower'. His relationship with his better-off partner, Wendy, is equally going nowhere. He has also been making doomed attempts to shake off his addiction to nicotine, as per the title, which exacerbates his already masochistic existence. "Buck up," I felt like yelling. "Snap out of it, man!" But it would only have been a waste of my metaphorical breath. Interesting as a psychiatric case study, though.

Raym has been haunted from childhood by what seems like his very own Monster from the Id, which manifests itself as the 'Tally Van Man', who stalks him wearing winklepicker shoes, top hat and a long-tailed black coat, grinning maniacally all the while. "You're almost out of time, Kiddie Winkle!" This isn't the calypso-famed Mister Tally Man – not unless he's a voodoo second cousin. Just when Raym thinks that things can't get any worse, they do: "'I saw him Mr. Munroe.' A sly look lit up Jimmy's blinking eyes." He's *always* chasing you." And that's only a third of the way through.

As luck would have it, I read the interview with Carole Johnstone in *Black Static* # 42 halfway through writing this review. "*Cold Turkey* was about my need for control, and how that might manifest in a life that is safe, a life hardly lived." Raym's life is safe and controlled only in so far that he never leaves his 'discomfort zone' and it is in fact a life *hard* lived. Character is fate. We become ourselves by what we create and the results are not always benign. The narrative arc here is a continuous paroxysm of disintegration, unfolding from one lean sick-as-a-dog sentence to the next. I enjoyed the ride immensely, despite my antipathy towards the central character – or perhaps even because of it.

Johnstone does a nice line in quirky characters. For just one example, Mrs McClelland, the school receptionist, whose bright eyes call up images of "old spinsters and cats – and unlucky salesmen handcuffed to pipes in the basement." There is also a sleazy sex scene, involving Raym and teaching assistant Cate MacDonald, that is worthy of Norman Spinrad himself.

I'd like to put in a good word for the scarifying wrap-around cover artwork by Warwick Fraser-Coombe, which is done in the style of Sol Amendola, Angelo Torres and maybe Joe Kubert. But also a pernickety afterthought: I wish that the title and author's name had been printed on the spine.



# In Memoriam

*Aaron Allston (1960-2014), author, game designer*

*Neal Barrett, Jr. (1929-2014), author*

*Thomas Berger (1924-2014), author*

*Jon Bing (1944-2014), author*

*Val Biro (1921-2014), illustrator, author*

*Ken Brown (1957-2014), fan*

*André Carneiro (1922-2014), author*

*Stepan Chapman (1951-2014), author*

*Brian Clemens (1931-2015), screenwriter, producer*

*James H Cobb (1953-2014), author*

*Robert Conroy (1938-2014), author*

*John Cooper (1942-2015), artist*

*Carl Djerassi (1923-2015), author, playwright*

*J T Edson (1928-2014), author*

*Helen Eling (1937-2014), fan*

*Suzette Haden Elgin (1936-2015), author, poet*

*Brett Ewins (1955-2015), artist*

*Gerry Fisher (1926-2015), cinematographer*

*Eugie Foster (1971-2014), author*

*Curt Gentry (1931-2014), author*

*H.R. Giger (1940-2014), artist*

*J.F. Gonzalez (1964-2014), author*

*Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), author, Nobel Prize winner*

*Sam Greenlee (1930-2014), author*

*Lesley Hatch (1954-2014), fan*

*Phil Hardy (1945-2014), journalist*

*Michael Hemmingson (1966-2014), author*

*Bob Hoskins (1942-2014), actor*

*Hayden Howard (1925-2014), author*

*Dan Jacobson (1929-2014), author*

*P.D. James (1920-2014), author*

*Kris Jensen (1953-2014), author*

*Michel Jeury (1934-2015), author*

*Graham Joyce (1954-2014), author*

*Hirai Kazumasa (1938-2015), author*

*Daniel Keyes (1927-2014), author*

*Richard Kiel (1939-2014), actor*

*Jay Lake (1964-2014), author*

*Glen A Larson (1937-2014), producer*

*Roberta Leigh (1926-2014), author, producer*

*Walt Lee (1931-2014), critic*

*Philippa Maddern (1952-2014), author*

*Alexander Malec (1929-2014), author*

*Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014), author*

*Colleen McCullough (1937-2015), author*

*Donald Moffitt (1931-2014), author*

*R A Montgomery (1936-2014), author*

*Steve Moore (1949-2014), author*

*Frederic Mullally (1918-2014), author*

*Walter Dean Myers (1937-2014), author*

*Leonard Nimoy (1931-2015), actor, director*

*Mick O'Connor (-2015), fan*

*Kate O'Mara (1939-2014), actress*

*Chapman Pincher (1914-2014), author*

*Andy Robertson (1955-2014), editor, author*

*Frank M Robinson (1926-2014), editor*

*Alan Rodgers (1959-2014), author*

*Mark E. Rogers (1952-2014), author, artist*

*David Ryall (1935-2014), actor*

*Michael Shea (1946-2014), author*

*Lucius Shepard (1943-2014), author*

*George Slusser (1939-2014), critic*

*Zilpha Keatley Snyder (1927-2014), author*

*Mary Stewart (1916-2014), author*

*Ryder Syvertsen [Ryder Stacy] (1941-2015), author*

*Rod Taylor (1930-2015), actor*

*Melanie Tem (1949-2015), author*

*John Rower Townsend (1922-2014), author*

*Alice K. Turner (1939-2015), editor, critic*

*Billie Whitelaw (1932-2014), actress*

*Robin Williams (1951-2014), actor*

*[Jan 2014 through Feb 2015]*