

# Vector



**The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association**

**The Sublime in Iain M. Banks's Culture novels**

**An Interview with David Mitchell**

**Ieva Melgale on Latvian SF**

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The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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# Vector

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# Torque Control

The field of science fiction, especially in Britain, is currently engaged with a struggle that has infected the political and cultural fields at large, one that I want to characterise here as the struggle to define populism. Claiming populism for one's own group can be a strategic coup, while accusing someone else of pandering to populism can undermine their power and cast doubt on their principles. In politics we have seen populism used in the latter sense, whether in order to characterise Scottish National Party policies as opportunistic vote-winning strategies, or to dismiss the enthusiasm for the new Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, as a populism for the left-wing bubble, one that can never be translated into an elected government. Of importance to both of these issues has been the way that the debates have played out in *The Guardian* newspaper and its sister paper, *The Observer*. These papers have a loyal left-leaning readership but have recently been disappointed in the newspapers' reportage which failed to represent either the Corbynistas or the left argument for an independent Scotland. The contempt with which Corbyn supporters were treated even prompted *The Observer* to publish an opinion piece by Ed Vulliamy, one of their stalwart political journalists, bemoaning the missed opportunity to engage with readers and to listen to opinions from across the spectrum of British life, rather than echoing the views of the London-centric political and media establishment. In science fiction these arguments over populism have expressed themselves in the last few months in two incidents: the Sad Puppies debacle at the Hugo Awards and the rubbishing of Terry Pratchett's contribution to literature by *The Guardian*'s Jonathan Jones who blithely admitted to never having read a single Pratchett novel while dismissing his style on the basis of his popularity.

The presence of *The Guardian*'s name in the science fiction debate shows, once again, how the newspaper is failing to connect with readers. Jones's article was patronising and reinforced an elitist assumption that literature for the masses must, by definition, be cheap and nasty. Pratchett's substantial contribution to modern British (and world) literature was discussed in the last *Vector* editorial so there is no need to tread that ground again at length, but suffice to say that his popularity, combined with his wit and his social commentary should serve to show that populism can go arm in arm with a culture that speaks up to the masses rather than down, and that journalists dismiss 'the great British public' as X Factor-obsessed apathetics at their peril.

The Sad Puppies debacle was another example of the struggle for populism. The Puppies claimed to speak for a silent majority of science fiction fans who longed for a return to the Golden Age of science fiction, a time considered by the Puppies to feature military storylines and traditional gender roles with some books on the slate published by an outfit called Patriarchy Press. The Puppies failed to consider, however, that science fiction has always been popular because of its ability to interrogate the status quo from a critical (sometimes extra-terrestrial) distance. Even in Heinleinian fantasies of patriarchal domination that seemed to be the Puppies' model for the ideal science fiction, sexual relationships were disturbed through communal living in *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) or *The Moon*

is a *Harsh Mistress* (1966). These novels may have appealed to some because of their masculinist fantasy-fulfilment, giving male characters access to groups of young women; but they also appealed because they disrupted the monogamous, bourgeois relationship models readers found in the world around them. The Puppies underestimated this desire for difference as the success of 'No Award' in various categories signified. Once again, populism in the science fiction world proved to be on the side of diversity, intelligence and quality writing.

In this edition of *Vector* we hope to capture some of the diversity, variety, and engagement with issues of popular concern that make sf the rich field that it is today. Dave Gullen interviews fantasy and sf writer Ieva Melgalve on the state of Latvian sf and genre literature while Jim Clarke writes on 'The Sublime in Iain M. Banks's Culture Novels', taking us on a journey through religion, aesthetics and utopia. Laura Sneddon gives us an overview of science fiction in non-Anglophone European comic books with a particular emphasis on French titles like *Métal Hurlant* (1974, translated as *Heavy Metal*) which was a huge influence on William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and the cyberpunk movement as a whole. Andy Sawyer gives us a taste of Dave Wallis's *Only Lovers Left Alive* (1964), a Foundation Favourite that reminds us of the role sf, and particularly YA sf, has played in social commentary while Steven Baxter takes an intergalactic approach to diversity in his musings on the Fermi Paradox and the depiction of extra-terrestrial intelligence in Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1937) and Paul Kincaid writes about Max Beerbohm and his story, 'Enoch Soames' (1916), a (perhaps) fictional, and certainly fantastic, biography of a poet with striking similarities to Beerbohm himself. We also have Glyn Morgan's interview with writer David Mitchell, who tells us about his work, particularly his most recent novel *The Bone Clocks* (2014) and our collective future in the time of climate change and oil dependency.

In sf it is becoming more necessary for fans to be self-aware about the genre and to speak up when others attempt to claim populism for their own narrow politics. In order to be valuable, truly popular movements need to be based on curiosity and on the ability to challenge assumptions and to look to alternative experiences for inspiration in order to see problems and their solutions in a new light. In that spirit, we hope that this issue of *Vector* will be popular with you.

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# Latvian SF

## Ieva Melgalve in Conversation with Dave Gullen

**I** met Ieva at Archipelacon, the Nordic sf convention in Mariehamn, on the Åland Islands. We were reading from our own work later in the convention and so I introduced myself. We had a beer, and then we had another beer. During the convention Ieva gave a presentation on 'The Birth of New Latvian SF' to a packed room. This was really interesting, it seems to me the growth and reception of genre fiction is different in every country, and also has its similarities. I asked her if she would be willing to do a Q&A based on her talk for people in the UK unable to attend the convention, and she kindly agreed.

~

**Dave Gullen:** Hi Ieva, thank you for agreeing to answer a few questions about Latvian science fiction and fantasy. To start with, please tell us a bit about yourself, and your writing.

**Ieva Melgalve:** I started out as a literary/experimental writer with a dash of the fanstastic, and am now writing fantasy and science fiction with a dash of litfic. Recently, I have two fantasy books published - a novel "Dead Don't Forgive" and a middle grade fantasy book "Arrow, Star and Laee". My science fiction book "The Moon Theater" is in the works.

**DG:** You describe Latvian sf as being 'born' just a few years ago in 2010. Was there really nothing being written before then?

**IM:** Our only true sf writer was Anatols Imermanis, and there were kids' books and short story writers who had fantastic elements in their stories, but none of them really identified as "fantasy" or "science fiction".

**DG:** When Latvia was part of the USSR, sf was restricted, and fantasy was a 'forbidden' genre. Can you explain a bit more about why fantasy in particular was so suspect a form of fiction in the minds of the authorities?

**IM:** My understanding is that fantasy is a genre that tends to look in the past, in the stories and mythologies of the past, and this was suspect because we were supposed to see the past as obsolete. The future, too, was pretty much settled - that communism will prevail, and so most of the stories had to work around that fact. Some foreign

sf was published, mostly as "the warning about the evils of capitalism".

**DG:** How hard was it to get hold of foreign fiction in those times?

**IM:** It's a twofold question. Foreign fiction that was approved was easy to get by and could be bought cheaply, and the translations were excellent (even though many stories were edited/amended, for example, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales had no hint of Christianity in them). But I got to read Asimov, Bradbury, Sheekley, Cuttner, Harrison and others, so it was not all bad.

The forbidden fiction had to be smuggled and copied illegally, and that was a very risky business - there were people who were sent to Siberia for distributing forbidden literature. And, of course, if you have to distribute a book by physically re-writing it in a notebook or



typing it up on a mechanical typewriter, which gives you maybe 8 copies, you start with poetry and essays instead of "The Lord of the Rings".

**DG:** *Pūka Dziesma (The Song of the Dragon)* by Laura Dreīze was published in 2010. Why is this book so important for Latvian sf?

**IM:** It was the first epic fantasy book, and proud to be one. It proved to the publisher and other aspiring authors that Latvians could write fantasy, and opened the floodgates to many other books. Even though the critics regarded it mostly as an accident - it is not like they knew what to do with a fantasy book - it was a huge encouragement for everybody who dreamed of writing sf, including me. Laura Dreīze is also one of the linchpins in aspiring Latvian writers' circles, being our Municipal Liaison for NaNoWriMo.

**DG:** So why did it take so long for sf to begin to be published after independence?

**IM:** My guess is that most writers were busy writing realistic and historical fiction, as well as non-fiction, and the established writers didn't even consider science fiction and fantasy. The authors who started writing sf are mostly a younger generation - so they had to take their time to learn the craft and hone their skills.

Of course, there is the problem of money - due to the extremely small market, it is very hard for a Latvian writer's book to be commercially viable, but the government grant money mostly went to established authors and supported other genres (historical and literary fiction, as well as poetry and translations).

**DG:** In some countries genre fiction may be dismissed by mainstream literary culture which can lead to a lack of support. What is the situation for you today in Latvia?

**IM:** It is very hard for a fantasy or science fiction author to be taken seriously in Latvia, so fantasy writers are mostly not in "the literary circles", or should we call it "the literary pond". Other genres are even more stunted (for example, horror literature), some have gained more support from the readers (for example, crime and romance).

However, now the situation is slowly changing for the better and genre literature is not the pariah any more. For example, my books have been reviewed in literary magazines and portals. And, even though half of the reviews start with a shy "normally I don't read fantasy, but...", I think that our people are warming up to the genre.

**DG:** Bārbala Simsone – the Fairy Godmother of Latvian sf? Would modern Latvian sf exist without her?

**IM:** It is very hard to imagine Latvian sf without Bārbala. She is an editor in a major publishing house Zvaigzne ABC, and she has been working with fantasy and sf authors for years, as well as supporting the publishing of foreign sf. It is incredibly important for a genre author to have an editor who understands the genre deeply, knowing the rules and whether or not they should be followed in this particular book. And it helps a lot to have wide distribution network, instead of being published by a dedicated, but obscure indie publisher.

Oh, and she is a wonderful, enthusiastic person as well - which also is incredibly important for an author. Let's

Bārbala Simsone



face it, we all have our dark hours, and the editor is often the first to hear us whine and grumble, and sometimes the only one with whom we can talk about how "terribly unfair" the latest review is.

**DG:** In the UK genre world we have several big and mid-sized publishers, and a thriving small and independent press. What is the situation in Latvia?

**IM:** Regarding the genre literature, there are just a couple of publishers who would dare to publish Latvian sf. Actually, there are just a couple of publishers who would publish sf at all, and some of them are specialized in foreign sf. Honestly though, all of Latvian publishing is in a state of constant struggle, so my guess is that the publishers are not intentionally shunning genre literature, they just have to be very careful about who they publish. It is a Catch 22 situation of sorts - if they don't know the potential audience, they cannot afford the risk of publishing genre literature, but they cannot figure out the audience if they don't try publishing.

Since Latvia is such a small country, having a literary agent for local publishing feels like an excess - everybody knows everybody, or at least everybody knows somebody who knows somebody who knows just the right person. There are some literary agents who are helping with foreign translations.

**DG:** You mention 'Original directions' as one of the five contemporary directions on sf in Latvia. Where are these writers going with their stories – and who are they?

**IM:** Well, there's Tom Crosshill who is well-known to English reading sf audience, with his "Seeing Double and

Other Stories" published in Latvian. He is very versatile, humorous and able to latch on to the idea and tell a touching story - straight to the heart. Then there's Didzis Sedlenieks, who is writing mostly satiric sf with strong atheistic vibe - but his new middle grade sf book is being published now. I haven't read it yet, but I'm hoping he'll surprise me. And then there are miscellaneous emerging writers published in anthologies - they are all over the place, from surreal, rich and symbolic fantasy to humorous horror stories. And then there's me, who is all over the place as well - from "is this fantasy or is this drug-induced literary flash fiction" to the upcoming "post-apocalyptic literary horror sf".

**DG:** And Latvia has a history as long and vivid as any country. Who is exploring your folklore and mythology through fiction?

**IM:** The short and sad answer is: mostly, not our sf writers. There are some attempts to touch upon the subject (for example, "Seven" by Linda Nemiera, and "The Brotherhood of Pink Quartz" by Maritana Dimsone), but except for poor Bearslayer who has been dragged through all the genres imaginable, I feel that our folklore, mythology and history are subjects that sf writers leave to historical or literary fiction authors.

Perhaps it is linked to the deep respect that we have for these subjects - while I would have no objections to seeing

Kali in a spaceship, it would take a lot of work to place our Laima in one. The idea of putting historical persons in a sf setting feels even more uncomfortable. But perhaps this is a sign that really interesting work can be done here.

**DG:** What's the state of Latvian fandom today? Can we look forwards to a Eurocon in Latvia one day?

**IM:** We have a small, but very fun bunch of people who love sf and meet from time to time, both in two annual gatherings (LatCon and summer picnic), as well as an informal book club. Don't hold your breath for Eurocon though - I would say that our primary goal right now would be to mix and mingle with other European fans more, and bring our own people together.

**DG:** Please recommend some Latvian authors we can read in translation.

**IM:** Tom Crosshill has several short stories available online. I have a short story "Siren's Song" and also "The Happiness Monster", an ongoing series on Wattpad. To get a better feel for Latvian culture and attitude towards life, you should watch "Rocks in My Pockets" by Signe Baumanė (not sf, but pretty awesome anyway), and to read the best in Latvian poetry, try "Come To Me" by Kārlis Vērdiņš and "Then Touch Me Here" by Edvīns Raups.

**DG:** Thank you!

**IM:** My pleasure!





# The Sublime in Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' novels

Jim Clarke, Coventry University

The Culture novels posit an ontological zone of existence beyond the physical universe, or the "Real", a zone which Iain Banks calls the "Sublime". This state of being is attained by artificial intelligences and entire civilisations once they reach a certain undefined level of maturity. The Sublime could be considered as an expression of the heaven principle in Banks's atheistic utopian universe, yet it both draws upon and differs from iterations of the aesthetic sublime, which has a lengthy history in Western thought. In this paper I hope to parse the Sublime in the Culture novels, specifically in *Look to Windward* (2000) and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), which both feature acts of Subliming by civilisations in the Culture universe.

The sublime has a lengthy history, commencing with Longinus's study *Περὶ ὕψους* (*Peri hýpsous*). Longinus's sublime was an artistic quality, an elevation of literary style beyond the mundane. In the eighteenth century, inspired by encountering the Alps during Grand Tours of the continent, British philosophers extended the sublime beyond artistic aesthetics to apply to the aesthetics of the natural world. For John Dennis and the Earl of Shaftesbury, the sublime expressed not only beauty but also a sense of awe or fear. Edmund Burke argued that this horror or fear engendered by the sublime itself rendered a sense of pleasure, since the horror was not founded in rationality and this is known even as it is experienced.<sup>1</sup>

Critics have sought to adapt the sublime to sf. Cornell Robu considered the sublime to be a 'key to Science Fiction', proposing that science generates a Burkean derivation of pleasure from pain in sf.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, D.J. Jorgensen identified a 'sublime cognition' functioning at the heart of sf narratives.<sup>3</sup> According to Edward James, the sense of wonder engendered by sf texts arises from their liberation from notions of God: 'In the mind of most Romantics (as in

the mind of most sf writers), there is no divinity to protect mankind from the universe; the Great Watchmaker, if he is there at all, is not concerned with individual human beings. The Sublime is a consequence of the liberation of humanity, by the Enlightenment, from the protection of revealed truth.'<sup>4</sup>

For Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, the process of 'recoil and recuperation' in response to sf's Suvinian nova is triggered by this transfer of traditionally divine attributes to technological or even (post-)human entities. 'In sf,' he states, 'the powers and ideas of gods are made available to contingent physical beings, even if only for a little while'.<sup>5</sup> Iain Banks concurred with this narrative that technotopia could render such divine capacities attainable to humanity. He told Patrick Freyne that: 'Some of the ideas we've come up with that we've ascribed to god and religion – immortal souls and life after death – we will eventually be able to make come true in the same way we've made some of the lesser promises of religion come true, like travelling rapidly or talking to other people on the other side of the world.'<sup>6</sup>

Yet, if the object of this sf sense of wonder is the manifestation of previously divine attributes into a non-theistic context, then the sublime in Banks's sf is expressed by the AI Minds which dominate and control the Culture. Both wondrous and awe-ful, the Minds fulfil the Burkean characteristics of the sublime. Additionally, the overwhelming magnitude of their capabilities approaches the infinite and achieves the conditions of the Kantian mathematical sublime, which expresses the concept that nature can trigger a failure of reason and defy our attempts to comprehend it. This failure of comprehension in turn provokes the feelings of awe, delight or fear which mark the sublime. The Culture's Minds fulfil both Burkean and Kantian criteria for the sublime, as evidenced by the conversation between the hub Mind in charge of the Masaq' orbital and the composer Mahrai Ziller in *Look to*

1 In his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756).

2 Cornell Robu, "A Key to Science Fiction: the Sublime", *Foundation: The international Review of Science Fiction*, 42, Spring 1988, pp. 21-37.

3 D.J. Jorgensen, "The Sublime Cognition of Science Fiction Narratives", *Foundation: The international Review of Science Fiction*, 98, Autumn 2006, pp. 116-130.

4 Edward James, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 104-105.

5 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 148.

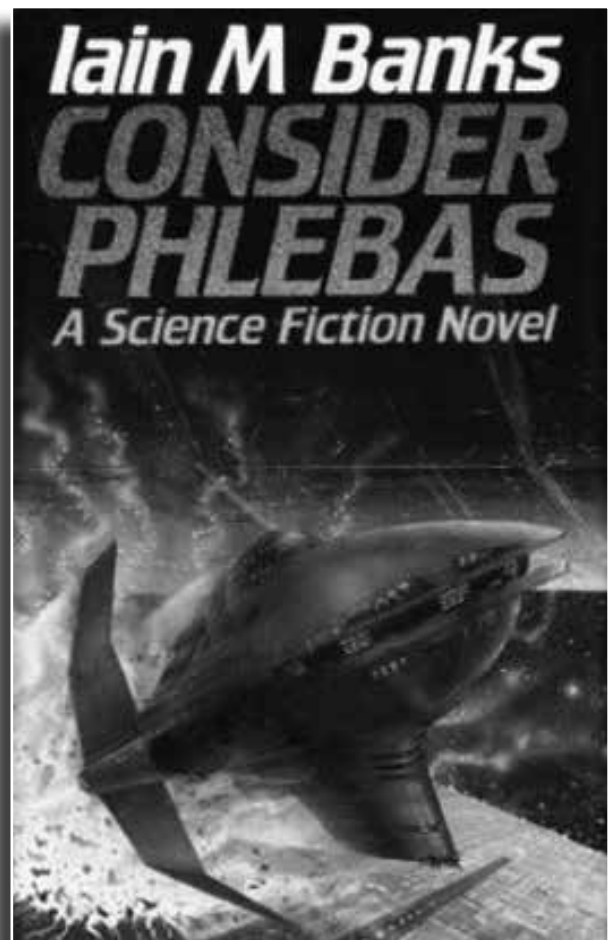
6 Patrick Freyne, "In the outer space of science and fiction", *The Irish Times*, Monday, October 15, 2012.

*Windward*. The Mind explains how it can simultaneously look after 50 billion orbital residents, co-exist in multiple galaxies, observe both the death of a planet and its aftermath a thousand years later, conduct hundreds of conversations with other Minds, cohabit with eleven other Minds in different parts of the galaxy, and inhabit millions of avatars of itself.<sup>7</sup> Though Ziller is neither overawed nor overwhelmed by the “almost infinite” resources of the Mind, the reader certainly is.

The Culture’s Minds are the logical conclusion of a process delineated in David Nye’s *American Technological Sublime* (1995), which detailed the transitions between the sublime expressed via natural entities like the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls, through the sublime expressed by manmade structures such as the Hoover Dam or the Empire State Building, to the sublime expressed by technological capacity such as the Manhattan Project or the Apollo missions. Nye projected forward towards a consumerist sublime expressed via the fantasies of Las Vegas, which itself intersects with postmodernist depictions of the sublime as a critique of the dynamics of capitalism by Zizek and Lyotard. However, such post-Marxist obsessions with capitalist economics are rendered irrelevant in the Culture’s post-scarcity utopia. An excess of information cannot function as the catalyst for sublimity in a universe where the processing capacity of the Culture’s AI Minds is incapable of being exceeded by the available data.

Yet what Banks refers to as the Sublime is an ontological status and not a response to the technological capability of the Minds. It is one of a range of supra-life states that exist in the Culture universe. There are a series of forms of existence beyond standard life, some of which are attainable by individuals, others by entire civilisations. From *Consider Phlebas* (1987) onwards, Banks depicted various post-human and post-life states. As Joe Norman has noted, ‘Soulkeeper technology in the Culture novels enables individuals to transcend the physical world and have their “essence” encoded as pure information, which crosses over into the virtual, digital environment.’<sup>8</sup> The possibility of digitising entire human beings was recently studied by researchers at the University of Leicester, who estimated that the data in the average human brain would amount to around 2.6 times 10 to the power of 42 bits. The team ‘employed several approximations to determine the amount of data required in bits to fully store a human genetic code and neural information and the signal to noise ratio of typical signalling equipment.’<sup>9</sup>

Though they estimated that to transfer one digitised human consciousness from Earth into orbit would take 350,000 times longer than the universe has existed, the Culture is able to achieve this almost instantaneously. Yet digital states, including virtual afterlives in heavens and



hells, still require an element of physicality. Even stored digital consciousnesses exist within physical enclosures or substrates. This has a curious parallel in the Sublime, due to a ‘seemingly non-get-aroundable requirement that you could not go disembodied into the Sublime. You had to make the transition substrate and all: brains and whole bodies, computational matrices and whole ships – or the equivalent – seemed to be required, as well as the personalities and memories such physical ware encoded.’<sup>10</sup> This condition of total transfer extends further, to include all copies and avatars that people or AI Minds may have generated in the Real. Banks tells us that ‘the versions left in the Real always, but always, were persuaded to follow their precursor versions into the Sublime.’<sup>11</sup>

Yet though the Sublime is an irreversible state, Subliming is not an irreversible process. We are told that ‘It was an open secret that the Sublime – or at least entities within the Sublime – could access almost anything within the Real’, and this is confirmed by the communications between the remnants of two civilisations in the Real – the Chelgrians in *Look to Windward* and the Zihgren in *The Hydrogen Sonata* – and their Sublimed relations.<sup>12</sup> Also, the anomalous Culture Mind called *The Zoologist* returns from the Sublime to reside within a virtual reality housed by its former colleague the *Caconym*. Each of these inter-

7 Iain M. Banks, *Look to Windward* (London: Orbit Books, 2000), p. 224.

8 Joseph Norman, “Digital Souls and Virtual Afterlives in the Culture Series”, in Martyn Colebrook and Katharine Cox (eds.) *The Transgressive Iain Banks: Essays on a Writer Beyond Borders* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), p. 151.

9 Sarah Griffiths, “Beaming up Scotty would take 350,000 times the age of the universe”, *Daily Mail*, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2013. [www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2382435/](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2382435/).

10 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (London: Orbit Books, 2012), p. 137.

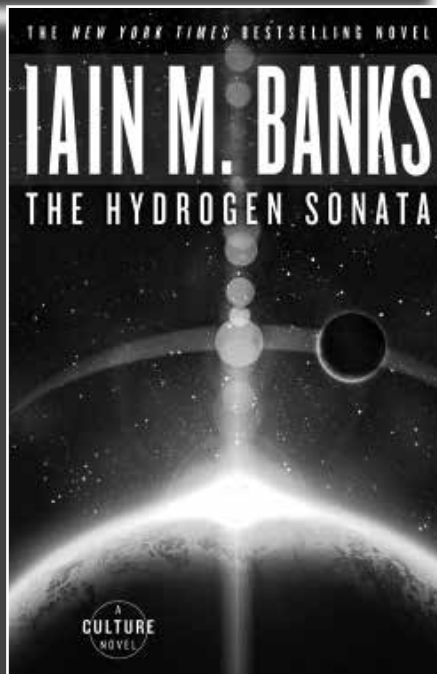
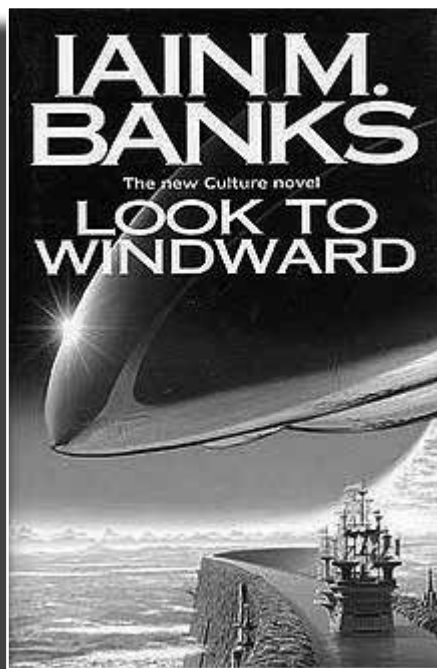
11 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (London: Orbit Books, 2012), p. 142.

12 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (London: Orbit Books, 2012), p. 142.



actions between the Sublime and the Real demonstrate differing levels of engagement. The Sublimed Chels, the Chelgrian-Puen, interact with the Real to the extent of seeking to trigger a massacre there. Their rationale is to seek revenge for Chelgrian lives lost in a civil war which they blame on the Culture. This act of vengeance will, they believe, salvage the honour of the dead Chelgrians, who can then be admitted to the Chelgrian heaven constructed by the Chelgrian-Puen within the Sublime. Such prolonged engagement with the politics and sociology of the Real may relate to the fact that, uniquely, only 6% of Chelgrian society had Sublimed in the first place. The Zihgren are a more typical example of Subliming, having left behind only a tiny remnant of their population to function as an embassy back in the Real. Their actions within the Real are limited to providing an explanation and apology to the Gzilt race for a wrong they had committed during their existence in the Real. By contrast, the AI Mind *The Zoologist* explains its temporary return to the Real as a quest '[t]o experience a kind of extreme asceticism ... and to provide a greater contrast when I return.'<sup>13</sup> *The Zoologist* attempts to define returning to the Real from the Sublime as reverting in maturity and losing most of one's senses, which number in the hundreds within the Sublime. It spends its time in virtual reality, exploring what it terms the 'Mathematical Irreal as opposed to the Ultimate Irreal of the Sublime' in a manner described as fundamentally abstracted and 'beyond vague' by its host, the *Caconym*.<sup>14</sup>

Notably, the Sublime exists within the Culture universe, not notably it as with the Excession or the "higher beings" which use the Excession as a bridge between universes. The sf problem of faster-than-light travel is, in the Culture universe, resolved by Banks through the depiction of hyperspace, an additional dimension accessible by the AI Minds which permits them to traverse unfathomable distances without breaching Einsteinian physics. This hyperspace remains part of what Banks terms the "Real", though it is a state beyond attainment for biological entities. However, its construction as an additional dimension beyond those which are experienced by humanity or similar biological species is a state it shares with the



Sublime, which Banks tells us in *The Hydrogen Sonata* exists in 'dimensions seven to eleven'.<sup>15</sup> Though Banks suggests that there may be states of being superior even to Sublimation, due to the events described in the novel *Excession* they are no longer accessible by beings from within the Culture universe.

The Sublime functions as a form of endgame to the process of evolution within the galactic context. Sublimation is an alternative to what we might term retirement. Akin to AI Minds which can go into "retreat", withdrawing entirely from galactic society, or the entire civilisations which "Elder", a process Banks describes as an 'honourable and venerable tradition for just quietly keeping on going, minding your own business (mostly) and generally sitting about feeling pleasantly invulnerable and just saturated with knowledge', Subliming offers somewhere to go when being galactically "Involved" has become tedious or exhausted.<sup>16</sup> In the Culture universe, societies progress through a set pattern of evolution, from sentience to early technology, then developing artificial intelligence and resolving scarcity before becoming galactically Involved as a precursor to Eldering or Subliming. Banks describes this arc in *Look to Windward*: 'To flourish, make contact, develop, expand, reach a steady state and then eventually Sublime was more or less the equivalent of the stellar Main Sequence for civilisations'.<sup>17</sup> This standardised trajectory may well have been influenced by the series of *Civilization* video games invented by Sid Meier, in which players develop societies along funnelled trajectories of achievement. In

2006, Banks admitted to the *Independent* newspaper that he had missed a submission deadline for his novel *Matter* after becoming 'a serial addict' of the game, playing it solidly for three months. Six years later he explained to gaming publication *Edge* that the appeal of the game to him 'was the abstract sense of a godlike view of something underneath'.<sup>18</sup> Yet if Subliming is analogous to attaining one of the winning states within *Civilization*, this places the Sublime beyond the remit of the narratives Banks tells. Winning any video game is an act of completion and conclusion. The player of

13 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata*, Orbit Books, London, 2012, p. 150.

14 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (London: Orbit Books, 2012), p. 148.

15 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (London: Orbit Books, 2012), p. 17.

16 Iain M. Banks, *Look to Windward* (London: Orbit Books, 2000), p. 145.

17 Iain M. Banks, *Look to Windward* (London: Orbit Books, 2000), p. 145.

18 "Iain Banks: My Favourite Game", *Edge Magazine* online, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012. [www.edge-online.com/features/ian-banks-my-favourite-game/](http://www.edge-online.com/features/ian-banks-my-favourite-game/)



games cannot follow the narrative beyond the impermeable barrier of the closing screen. Similarly, Banks's narratives do not and cannot follow societies or individuals into the topos of the Sublime.

Thus Banks's Sublime is essentially indescribable, existing beyond the confines of the Culture narratives. This fundamental ineffability is a characteristic that it shares with some iterations of the historical aesthetic sublime, such as that described in Thomas Addison's *Pleasures of the Imagination*, a text which is littered with so many superlatives that it becomes evident that the sublime is not supposed to be comprehended. As Thomas Weiskel explained in his seminal study *The Romantic Sublime*, 'the sublime is apocalyptic in the strict sense that it reveals final things, and the defeat of the sensible imagination accomplishes subjectively the end of the natural order.'<sup>19</sup> Banks's Sublime marks the apocalyptic endpoint of the Real, and the impossibility of expressing it within the confines of the Real - as evidenced by *The Zoologist's* interactions with its host the *Caconym* - marks the defeat of the sensible imagination. Banks's attempts to describe the physiology of the Sublime in *The Hydrogen Sonata* evoke the streams of superlatives found in Addison's text: 'unut-

terably microscopic, unassailably far away but at the same time everywhere, shot through the fabric of space-time not so much like the individual fibres of this metaphorical weave, or their tiniest filaments or their molecules or their atoms or their sub-atomic particles but - pointedly - like the infinitesimal strings that made up those, that made up everything.'<sup>20</sup>

This very incoherence is itself a longstanding attribute of the sublime according to Joseph Tabbi, for whom '[t]he sublime has always located itself between discrete orders of meaning. It is not a category in itself so much as a term that describes what cannot be categorized...'<sup>21</sup> Yet if we cannot (and are not intended to) comprehend Banks's state of Sublimity, with its hundreds of senses and eighteen types of weather, we can perhaps seek to position it relative to reality. The Sublime is described as an 'almost intangible, entirely believable, mathematically verifiable nirvana just a few right-angle turns away from dear boring old reality: a vast, infinite, better-than-virtual ultra-existence with no Off switch'.<sup>22</sup>

19 Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, repr. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 42.

20 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (London: Orbit Books, 2012), p. 17.

21 Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. ix.

22 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (London: Orbit Books, 2012), p. 63.



One need not die to access the Sublime, therefore it is not an after-life so much as a supra-life state. It is 'a higher state of existence based on pure energy', but one which requires that entities cross complete with their physical bodies which then are presumably transformed into an energy-based state, evoking the glorified bodies of the blessed in the evangelical Christian Rapture tradition.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Banks told Michael Flett that *The Hydrogen Sonata* was partly inspired by 'The Great Disappointment', a failed rapture predicted by the Millerite sect to take place on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1844.<sup>24</sup> Subliming also requires a degree of ritual: 'in the presence of Presences, all you did was say "I Sublime, I Sublime, I Sublime", and that was that.'<sup>25</sup> The "Presences" themselves recall the monoliths from Arthur C. Clarke's *Space Odyssey* series, as they are the product of a superior dimension, emerging from nowhere to stimulate an evolutionary turn in those who encounter them. Despite these hints of religious and spiritual influence, Banks's Sublime remains as firmly atheistic as the rest of his Culture mythos. Unlike the virtual heavens and hells of

*Surface Matter*, no inherent moral standard is required to access the Sublime: 'Every individual got their own chance, apparently, with no way – aside from summary execution – for society to pick and choose who went.'<sup>26</sup>

This may inform the Culture's antipathy towards the Sublime since they 'more or less alone, seemed to find the phenomenon almost a personal insult'.<sup>27</sup> In *Excession*, Banks explains that '[t]he implication [of Subliming] was that the very ideas, the actual concepts of good, of fairness and of justice just ceased to matter once one had gone for sublimation, no matter how creditable, progressive and unselfish one's behaviour had been as a species pre-sublimation.'<sup>28</sup> The only exception is the virtual heaven

created within the Sublime by the Chelgrian-Puen. It is not an inherent part of the Sublime, and the moral rules governing its access are overseen by the Sublimed Chels, rather than the physics or ethics of the Sublime itself.

Joe Norman argues that 'the utopian Culture is already a kind of heaven', but this is not the case.<sup>29</sup> The Culture is no afterlife, though it facilitates and encompasses movement between life, virtual life and post-life states. In *Surface Detail*, Banks depicts the "heavens" or afterlives of The Culture as virtual holiday resorts located on electronic substrates.<sup>30</sup> While the utopian nature of the Culture has been extensively explored by critics and has been confirmed by Banks himself repeatedly, their 'curiously puritanical' desire to impose standards of ethics and morality upon other societies requires them to interfere regularly, 'discovering, judging and encouraging - or discouraging - the behaviour of those to whom its own powers were scarcely less than those of a deity.'<sup>31</sup> Such interferences vary from the successful subversion of the cruel Azadian Empire in *The Player of Games* to the war with the Idirans or the Culture's tragic responsibility for causing the Chelgrian civil war. The Culture are not perfect, and nor are their intercessions. As Simon Guerrier points out, the Culture is so dedicated to what Tom Moylan describes as the 'emancipatory ways of being' typical of critical utopias that they 'have the freedom even to make what they themselves might later acknowledge as mistakes.'<sup>32</sup> This tallies with Moylan's understanding of utopia as encompassing 'faults, inconsistencies, problems, and even denials of the utopian impulse'.<sup>33</sup>

By insisting on remaining 'Involved' in galactic politics, the Culture consciously and deliberately evades the civilisational fate of Subliming, and this is due to their own utopian nature. Banks's Sublime is not a heaven as we understand it, since entry is predicated neither on moral behaviour nor on death. It preserves some of the characteristics of historical aesthetic sublimity, including its inability to be defined from without, and the combination of wonder and awe-ful fear it provokes among those attempting to perceive it. Though it can preserve the petty focus on honour and vengeance of unsublimed Chelgrian politics, the Sublime also functions as a utopian state in which the faults and problems of unsublimed civilisation are processed within a greatly expanded state of consciousness. Utopia does not require a further utopia beyond, since it encompasses its own utopian impulse in a kinetic and self-critical fashion. There can be no utopia squared, which is why the Culture, uniquely in Banks's universe, has no need to Sublime.

23 Iain M. Banks, *Look to Windward* (London: Orbit Books, 2000), p. 145.

24 Michael Flett, "Iain M. Banks – the Cultured interview", *Geek Chocolate*, 27<sup>th</sup> December, 2012. [www.geekchocolate.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=296](http://www.geekchocolate.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=296).

25 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (London: Orbit Books, 2012), p. 510.

26 Iain M. Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (London: Orbit Books, 2012), p. 110.

27 Iain M. Banks, *Look to Windward* (London: Orbit Books, 2000), p. 110.

28 Iain M. Banks, *Excession* (London: Orbit Books, 1996), p. 183.

29 Joseph Norman, "Digital Souls and Virtual Afterlives in the Culture Series", in Martyn Colebrook and Katharine Cox (eds.) *The Transgressive Iain Banks: Essays on a Writer Beyond Borders* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), p. 157.

30 Iain M. Banks, *Surface Detail* (London: Orbit Books, 2010), pp. 127-8.

31 Iain M. Banks, *Excession* (London: Orbit Books, 1996), pp. 183-184.

32 Simon Guerrier, "Culture Theory: Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' as Utopia", *Foundation: The international Review of Science Fiction*, 76, Summer 1999, pp. 28-38; p. 30.

33 Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 44.



# The Ticking of Bone Clocks:

## David Mitchell in Conversation with Glyn Morgan

**I**n August, David Mitchell came to Liverpool. I interviewed him for an event with Waterstones, held at the Oh Me Oh My restaurant. What follows is a transcript of our discussion. It has been edited for readability, and had some of the more tangential moments excised. Before the interview we were chatting, David sipping a Darjeeling tea having just minutes before landed in Liverpool after flying from his home in County Cork, and he told me that his first publications had actually been reviews published in Vector and that he'd even done a piece of cover art for an issue of either Vector or Matrix back in the day. We then took to the stage, in front of a large audience and had the following conversation:

**Glyn Morgan:** It's sort of a homecoming for you, in a sense, because you were born just up the road.

**David Mitchell:** Yeah, I was born in 1969 in Ainsdale, which I guess, back then was a newish, probably aspiring-lower-middle-class-ish branching off of Southport, which I understand was considered quite posh. Two of my earliest memories: one was playing in sand dunes at Ainsdale and a horse running past a high speed, along the surf... this is sounding a bit like *Chariots of Fire* isn't it... and my mum saying "that's Red Rum". The second memory is being brought to Liverpool for a birthday treat, and the treat was going to Littlewoods and having a ham sandwich! I can still taste it, this was about 1974 I guess (we moved down South in the mid-70s, hence my accent), but it was white bread, margarine, and a single layer of ham, but you know how – even when there's not much ham in it, because it's the mid-70s – the ham sort of impregnates the crust around it. I'd nibble off the crust first, but it was a slightly more hammy crust than a non-ham sandwich crust would have been, and I just remember how fantastic it tasted. Sorry, that's my North West story, exclusive to Oh Me Oh My, I've never told that story before.

**GM:** I was thinking about the connections between yourself and Liverpool. Not just the near-Southport connection but your second novel *number9dream* (2001) is a song by one of Liverpool's favourite sons, and I only realised the

other day that *Cloud Atlas* (2004) is named after a song by one of Yoko Ono's other husbands.

**DM:** That's deep research! Yes, it was a Japanese Composer called Toshio Ichihara. So yes, there are these hidden connections going on. There's football as well, which is like your soul in the Philip Pullman books: once it's set, it's set for life. Whoever you're supporting when you're five, for better or worse (and for the last few years my God it's been the worse, but maybe this year will be different) they'll be your team for life. So, I think of Liverpool every time I click onto *The Guardian* Sport website and see how they've done and it's like a web of connectivity with this fine city.

**GM:** How would you describe *The Bone Clocks* (2014) if you were summarising it to someone without giving too much away, but just enough?

**DM:** In the States they have something called an elevator pitch which is where you pitch a film to a wolfish film executive when you're trapped in an elevator before he gets out, or she gets out, at the top. So the elevator pitch for *Bone Clocks*...? It is the story of its protagonist, Holly Sykes, who we first meet as a fifteen year old, kind of teenage punkette, then we encounter her as a young woman, a girlfriend in the 90s, then as a mother and a partner, then as a widow, and then as an accidental writer of sorts, and finally in the 2040s in the West of Ireland as a grandmother. Throughout this arc of a life, her life is erupted into by a battle between two groups of pseudo-immortals: one of which is more or less benign, the other which is decidedly predatory. Holly is, in the beginning, a fairly unwitting pawn (in chess terms) in this battle but by the end she just might be its decisive weapon. Ping. The elevator doors open.

[At this point David reads from *The Bone Clocks*. He reads from section 3 of the novel: "The Wedding Bash". Pages 268-274 of the 2015 paperback published by Sceptre. It's a section narrated from the point of view of Ed Brubeck, a war reporter, attending a family wedding in 2004. The specific part which David read from details a frantic run through the hotel and out onto the pier outside after Ed wakes from a nap to realise that his six year old

daughter has disappeared whilst he slept. Whilst not relevant to what follows in this interview, it's interesting to note that in the course of his mad dash through the hotel Ed stumbles upon a science fiction convention, a moment which leads to some humour amidst the adrenaline.]

**GM:** There's a lot of horror in *The Bone Clocks*...

**DM:** And not just the quality of the writing!

**GM:** ...I'm not even going to touch that, because it's just so patently untrue. There are lots of different types of horror in *The Bone Clocks* and that section in particular is definitely the horror of someone who is a parent.

**DM:** It's based on two real life events. One *being* with a dad who lost his kid at a busy Japanese festival in quite a large town, some years ago. And of course part of me was "of course I'll help" and feeling terrible, but there was the evil part that is inside every single writer that was "mmm, must take notes". We did find the boy, he was fine! Then, as if in cosmic revenge, some years ago I lost my daughter in a drapers shop in the small town in West Cork where I live and I was afraid she had left and was wandering on the streets outside when she was happily sitting in a corner playing with curtain rings. It took me about twelve minutes to find her and those were the worst twelve minutes of my life.

**GM:** But at least you used them to good effect...

**DM:** Ah it's a writer's consolation that, no matter how awful it is, at least one day you can use it. Something happened a few months back and you know when you're

blubbing so badly that snot is coming out of your eyes and tears are coming out of your nose, and I happened to catch a glimpse of my reflection and I thought "ah so that's what I look like, that's what crying looks like". That's a nice consolation. I interrupted you with a massive interruption, I'm sorry.

**GM:** No it's fine, I'm here to facilitate interruptions! So, I suppose given the power of that memory, there's a lot of you coming through in that character's voice at that moment: of you looking for your daughter?

**DM:** Yes, through the prism of Ed.

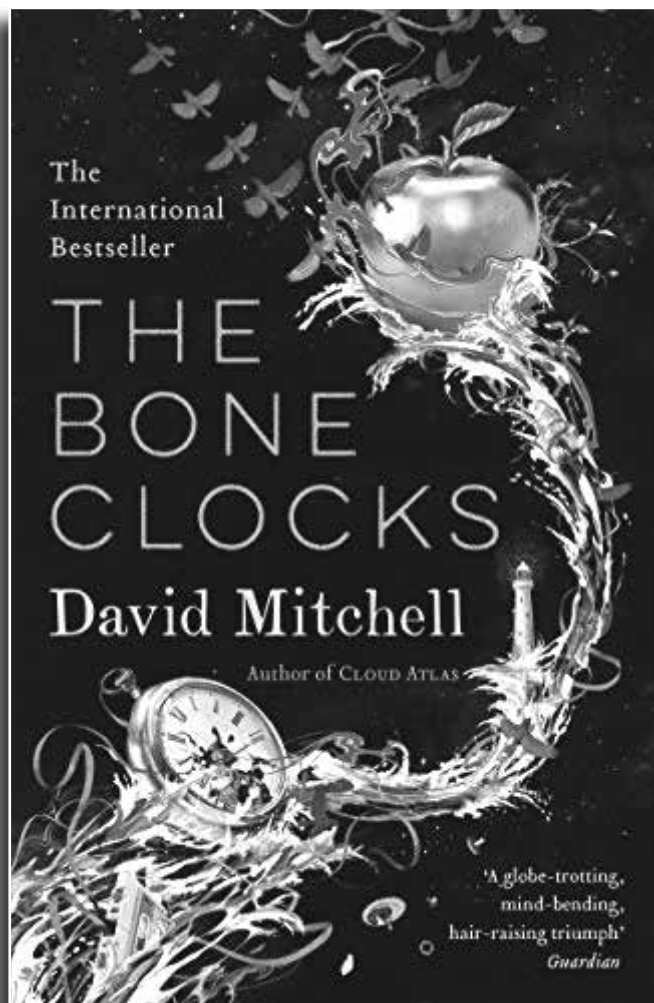
**GM:** People have referred to you as a ventriloquist or sorts, because of the uncanny way you are able to do voices and I think in particular your style of novel, where we jump between different first-person narrators, shows that off to particularly good effect.

**DM:** This might sound like a weird combination of false modesty and colleague bashing but I feel like complimenting a writer on his ability to do voices is a bit like saying to an actor: "Wow! When you played that role I thought you were someone else, I didn't think you were you!" Isn't that part of the job? I know different writers have different specialities, and some have skills that maybe writers who can't do voice as perhaps less dextrously have that I don't have, so I get that, but I think it should come with the job: it's part of the craft and you develop it if you want to develop your craft. The second thing is, it's maybe necessitated more in my case: I like the first person, it's my home style, it's my square one. I become someone else and then I know what they're going to say and what they're going to do and that's the plot and the dialogue taken care of for starters. I also like the Virginia Woolf *To the Lighthouse* multiplicity of points of view and once you have those two things: a fondness for the first person and a fondness for multiplicity then you better be a half-way decent "ventriloquist" otherwise your novel will blow up on the runway.

**GM:** I'd like to ask you about the other voices in *Bone Clocks* though, and how challenging they were for you to write. First, the most important character in the book, Holly, who narrates the first and last sections of the book. She's also your first female point of view. How hard was it for you to put yourself in a frame of mind to write a female protagonist? Was it a different challenge to writing, for example, Jason from *Black Swan Green* (2006) who is another teenager in the 1980s?

**DM:** Obviously it's more daunting because male is my home gender. A lot of fantastic female writers have written a lot of fantastic female characters, and male characters, but femininity is their gender. In the same way I'm kind of nervous about writing Americans because there are all the great American writers who have written American characters. It's daunting because it's easy to publically and humiliatingly fail. So, with some trepidation is probably the answer. My wife happens to be female, which due to some recent extremely enlightened legislation in the Irish Republic is no longer anything that we take for granted, but she was helpful with that section.

Secondly, or thirdly, or fourthly, I can't remember where we're up to now - that's the problem when you use those number adverbs you can really get into hot water quickly



can't you? – I've got a theory that if you went to a comprehensive school then the future writer is at an advantage, if you had a more privileged background, then you're at a disadvantage once you leave your home stratum. If you went to a comprehensive school... I was at school with girls like Holly is what I'm trying to say: they were skinheads, or skinheads' girlfriends, they wore Doc Martins with red laces, not knowing that was a National Front thing, but they did it anyway. Maybe they did know... They would have been quite willing and able to have kicked the crap out of a bookish, stammering, middle class kid like me. Once or twice they probably did. But I now thank the memory of their Doc Martin steel tips landing in my face because it meant that I could study them and store them away and use them years later and so I drew on my comprehensive school for Holly. It was hard to get her voice, how you portrayed the demotic: more vernacular? Earthier accent? How East End should I make her? Should I lose the "h" with an apostrophe? Do it too much you sound like Dickens' urchins, if you don't do it at all then you're missing a trick, you're losing a chance to develop a character and resonate with what's in a reader's mind. So it took me quite a while to settle on a balance to represent her.

**GM:** You had a similar struggle with your pervious book *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010)...

**DM:** That was a nightmare!

**GM:** Because you were toying with writing in a historically accurate dialogue but that it ended up reading like *Blackadder*, I think that's a version of the book we'd quite like to see!

**DM:** I did, yeah. It'd be funny for five pages and then it's just urghh. I wrote it first person and then hit the problem "what language are they thinking in?" Are they thinking in 18<sup>th</sup> century English? (Or Dutch or Japanese, represented in English). In the beginning I combed through 18<sup>th</sup> century novels, which is a good excuse to read them. Have you ever read Smollett? He's not read much these days, it's really good fun. He's really smutty! It's the kind of book you see in libraries in National Trust houses that are never looked at and left, but he's really good if you get the chance.

I constructed this core of vocabulary and did about fifteen pages of *Jacob de Zoet* in that voice, but yes it was ridiculous. That taught me that if you get it right you get it wrong: what you have to do is collude with the reader in the creation of, in this case, bygone-ese, or in the case of Holly a kind of "East-End-ese". It's not accurate but (the closer you get to the present day the less true this is) sometimes accuracy can be an inhibition, it can be a disruptor. When you're writing a historical novel you need to create bygone-ese, I think there's a geographical present day version of this too. It's more important to chime with how the reader believes people in this demographic did and do speak than it is get it bang on accurate. The "lest" vs. "in case" argument is an example of this: "bring your umbrella in case it rains" that's quite twentieth century, we used to say "lest", and so on the border you need to work out is it "lest" or "in case" we're dealing with and go with instinct.

**GM:** The next character in *Bone Clocks* is Hugo Lamb, who is a completely different proposition to Holly...

**DM:** Oh he was fun!

**GM:** People who've read the book know how loaded a sentence like "he was fun" is in relation to Hugo. Hugo Lamb is a character people might remember as the cousin of Jason from *Black Swan Green*, he's a pretty nasty piece of work, let's put it that way.

**DM:** He's amoral. I read the *Ripley* books by Patricia Highsmith, the first one [*The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)] is sickeningly gripping: he's not even immoral, he's amoral. He's an artist of ethical dubiety! So there's Ripley in there: I want him to seduce the reader with his charm and then royally shaft them. There's also some Sydney Carton from *A Tale of Two Cities*: he's a great character, you think he's this monster, this coward, but he's got a spark of lightness in him that when it *really* counts it flares up, and I wanted to give Hugo an ending like that. I wrote the book, handed it in and thought "hang on, he's still alive! He's still out there somewhere!" He's about thirty-five years younger than he should be but he's out there.

**GM:** I want to ask you about Crispin Hershey, whose section was my favourite within the book, but before I ask you a real question about him I want to ask about something specific. At one point when we encounter him he's teaching creative writing, he advises his students to write letters to themselves as their characters. Is that an actual technique from your playbook?

**DM:** He's a slowly self-redeeming, uninviting soul, whose arc is facilitated by his friendship with Holly, the first real friendship with a woman he's ever had. He doesn't even realise he loves her. He's clawing up Mount Enlightenment. He is who he is, but when he talks about writing, that's him talking about something he cares about: and he *does* care about words, and he *is* a sentence geek, this stuff matters to him; that's when he's not a fool and he's not superficial, it's pretty much the only time when he cares very deeply, and so when he speaks about writing he means it.

**GM:** So these tips from Crispin Hersey we, as aspiring writers, can take as being reasonably good tips?

**DM:** If you want to. I say that not to seem clever, but in a way writing is something you spend your life learning how to do and you never quite get there, you never finish learning about writing, that's why it's such a great job. It's a combination of learning other people's tips and seeing what works for them and also forming your own core... we've been calling them tips but perhaps understandings... of what writing is and what it's about, what works for you. It will differ depending on who you are and what your experiences are, so what Hershey says is how I feel it works for me at the moment but I wouldn't say they are prescriptive, I wouldn't say I AM THE WAY!

**GM:** Whether good tips or not, I love even the way that you/Hershey talk about writing: saying that 'adverbs are the cholesterol in the veins of prose' and 'half your adverbs and the prose pump twice as well', that's wisdom you feel you should have on a T-shirt. But if it was fun to write the sociopathic Hugo Lamb, how much more fun was it to write the cantankerous author Crispin Hershey?





**DM:** It's always fun when you get to say the things you don't get to say. Give him the lines you have too much respect for hard working people to actually ever offend them by saying. Hershey is a sort of legitimate outlet for passive aggressive pent-up fury... But don't worry!

**GM:** I think that everyone who has read both *The Bone Clocks* and *Cloud Atlas* really wants to see him in the same room as Timothy Cavendish [one of the narrators from *Cloud Atlas*: a small press publisher who hits the big time].

**DM:** I thought about it. Maybe I will again in the future. Hershey is my first ever writer-character, I've always avoided it, I was afraid it would seem or feel somehow incestuous. It's said somewhere that when a writer starts writing about writers it's a sure sign that the creative aquifers have run dry. So when I wanted to write about writers, or talk about Art (with a capital "A"), then I used musicians; I translated it into songwriters and composers but then, for whatever reason, it felt right - like it was time. I wouldn't do it in a half-hearted way, I really wanted to write about the world and time spent by an author on the road, as opposed to in a small hut somewhere. This is where he lives: he's more of an author than a writer these days, which given the number of festivals around the world can happen to people. I've known people who you meet at the beginning when a hardback comes out, at the Hong Kong festival or something, then my book moves into my past and I write something else, then the new book

comes out and I'm invited to wherever and I meet the same author, and *they're still there*, and they're *still* promoting the same book! It's the curse of winning the Booker by the way... It's a curse that many of us don't have to suffer, including me! But it can be better for the book than it is for the author. Crispin Hershey is an example of an author whom the mercurial Gods of Prizes have smiled on once (for his book *Desiccated Embryos*) but it has become larger than he is or has been and he is now its employer. So in a way it's a cautionary tale. His cardinal vice is vanity, he believes his own reviews, believes what has been said about him, and he hasn't got people around him to remind him to take out the wheelie-bin, to ground him. So he's sort of a little reminder to myself to not believe the good reviews, and to not look at the bad ones either.

**GM:** Of course a bad review plays a key role in Crispin's section of the book...

**DM:** Which is also a sort of "wet dream" of a revenge plot which writers have had about revenge on negative reviewers. I don't do that but what happens to Crispin might well be what would happen to me were I to exact revenge on certain people in the media who will remain nameless... Well I say nameless, except in the next book I might change the name very slightly, have something awful happen to them and the name will be close enough that they won't be *sure* if it's them, and they'll go to their graves not knowing if I've hexed their lives through fiction, and the lives of their children and pets... It's very petty, but it makes me feel better.

**GM:** Well, on the topic of bad reviews... Whilst I loved the book, there were elements of *The Bone Clocks* that some people wrote very harshly about, specifically the fantastic element, which really seemed to stick in certain reviewers' craw.

**DM:** It did didn't it. The same quarters who opened fire on Kazuo Ishiguro for his book *The Buried Giant*, which I loved. There seemed to be a call that semi-respectable writers shouldn't be dabbling in genre, it can sometimes come from the other side as well...

**GM:** "Don't play in our playground"

**DM:** Yes. I wanted each stage of Holly's life, each section of the book, from the 80s to the 2040s to a degree to have its own genre. So we have Thatcherite social realism in the 80s. At the other end of the social scale we have a sort of rich kids, Tom Wolfe *Bonfire of the Vanities*-ish thing going on with the 90s. We've got a war reportage section in the Ed Brubeck section, a pastiche in Hershey's section. A fantasy in the fifth section, and dystopia in the sixth. For some people that's kind of against some sort of unwritten constitution and if you mess around with genre like that within the covers of a single novel then you **DESERVE TO BE TAKEN DOWN!** But you write what you write. You can't be a slave like that, you just have the book you want to write and the first loyalty is to that. You have to finish that book, you try to bring it into being as truly as you can.

**GM:** A key part of the fantasy section are two themes which you've used repeatedly throughout your work: the spirit and reincarnation, and human predation. This seems to be the section within the book where they meet.

**DM:** I'd add a third, if I may, and that's mortality. The book, in that section, offers a Faustian pact which is me having my midlife crisis really. If you could not grow old, if you could keep the looks you have when you're young, if you could have an endless, squanderable bank account of days, what would you be prepared to pay for that? Would you, for example, be willing to amputate your conscience? Would you be willing to have all that if someone else had

Not if someone has written with particular tropes from a particular genre. Find something more intelligent to not like the book for. It's all quite new, Dickens used fantasy and no one ever called him a fantastic writer, it was all just writing back then. Why do we need borders in the middle of a book shop? Why bother with all of this?

**GM:** I mentioned the horror of parenthood earlier, and

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## The moment you're on the centre stage of the world, the world begins nudging you towards the wings.

---

to pay? I mention this now because fantasy is in service of *that*. It's sort of a real theme, not the Faustian pact they're offered, but a need to come to a working accommodation with aging, with the fact kids are being born the whole time: people are moving into their twenties and thirties as we're moving into our forties and fifties. The moment you're on the centre stage of the world, the world begins nudging you towards the wings. It's *Make Room! Make Room!* or the old kids song "and the little one said: roll over, roll over". As we become members of an older generation to be superseded by a younger one. This is a social realist topic, it isn't fantasy. This is something we need to do! We need a healthier relationship with aging than fear! And so the jiggery-pokery with genre is in service of all this.

**GM:** It did seem to me that the reviews that were snottiest about fantastic elements in (to use a lazy term) "literary fiction", have the appearance of those that don't read much fantasy. They seem to think it's a genre that's always play and that's incapable of serious topics, themes, tropes and examinations of the human condition.

**DM:** And they seem to never care to look backwards, I mean what about Dickens? You've got *Bleak House* and someone dying of spontaneous combustion. Some of the greatest novels ever written are fantasy. What about *Master and Margherita*: as Neil Gaiman pointed out that you've got a talking cat who uses a machine gun and it's a brilliant novel and it's about Stalin and totalitarianism and art.

**GM:** And all the books we call magic realism, which is a label I've heard you don't particularly care for...

**DM:** Have I said that somewhere?

**GM:** At some point, yes.

**DM:** This is the curse of the internet, it never forgets.

**GM:** I suppose to be fair, I think you were at the time being critical of the term being applied to British writing.

**DM:** I feel it was invented by South American writers in a South American context when they were doing something very specific that related to the politics of the 70s and 80s in their region. I felt it was somewhat lazy to transpose it to anyone anywhere who writes a book where someone suddenly sprouts wings, turns into an angel, and flies off. But maybe it is okay, I don't feel that strongly about it really. But sure, *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is a great book, why is that allowed and *A Buried Giant* isn't? And who says so? And why does it matter? Surely the only thing that matters is if the book is any good or not?!

the fantasy sections are supernatural horror in a sense, the last sections of the book are something else. It's stuck with me. Someone else described it as Post-Anthropocene Horror, post-human age, or post-oil.<sup>1</sup> I feel it's an issue very close to your heart.

**DM:** I fear it will be close to everyone's heart, or it should be. I'm forty-eight and I might have had the best of it, I don't know, we'll see. We are members of, and beneficiaries of, a civilisation that is pretty much dependent on oil. I flew here because of oil; lights, heating. The food that's in our stomachs right now that is keeping hunger at bay was produced thanks to an agricultural system that converts oil into food. The clothes we're wearing were made in oil powered factories, by slaves, in other parts of the world and then brought to us by containerships: international trade, essentially it's just oil. Solar power is great for light-bulbs but we can't shift stuff, the distribution networks aren't there. The food arrives in our supermarkets thanks to a complex distribution network and it's just oil, oil, oil. They're not making any more of the stuff and what's left is getting harder and harder to extract and more expensive, in terms of oil, to extract. The hungriest industry of all is oil extraction, it sort of eats itself and then gives us the leftovers. But yeah! Our civilisation is in trouble. Let alone climate change, let alone what that's doing to our planet's life support system and its ability to keep safe our civilisation, to preserve it, our civilisation is itself an addict of a drug which there is an ever dwindling supply of. Is that a bit concerning?

**GM:** It's very concerning, which is why that last section of the book is so affecting.

**DM:** Thank you. It would have been tempting in a way to finish the book at part five, but then I realised I mustn't. It would have followed quite an identifiable Hollywood template where you have the apocalyptic battle and then stop, but actually there's been this other thing going on the whole time that Holly's life has been following its course, as our lives are following their courses now, our civilisation is on borrowed time and unless it changes its ways and, depending on which scientist you speak to perhaps we're already ten years too late, perhaps not. We'll see.

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1. I actually took this term, and its application to *Bone Clocks*, from Dr. Sarah Dillon who made a passing reference to the novel during her keynote lecture at the Current Research in Speculative Fiction (CRSF) conference 2015.

David Mitchell



David ended the discussion with a reading from his forthcoming short novel *Slade House*. He then took questions from the audience but my dictaphone was unable to capture them or the replies but I offer here a few brief summaries:

The first question was from a nuclear physicist in the audience asking about David's thoughts on that particular form of energy. He said that he recognised the arguments for its necessity to "plug the gap" but didn't really know enough about it. What he did know was very worrying to him and that was that the legacy of nuclear power has its own horrors and dangers. He references the Runit Dome in the Marshall Islands, a legacy of nuclear tests by the USA during the Cold War; the structure holds 111,000 cubic yards of nuclear waste and is threatened by poor maintenance and rising sea levels. Similarly, he pointed out that the clean-up and containment costs of the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan are roughly equal to the Irish economy, which clearly means nuclear power isn't a viable safe option for everyone.

Another question asked him which genres he would most like to play in next. He replied that he's been recently very interested in Iceland and so something with Vikings,

or Greenland, or the Sagas, is probably in the queue. Particularly, he's interested in writing something set 30 years after the end of *The Bone Clocks* and set in Iceland. He also admitted to being fascinated by the 18<sup>th</sup> century harpsichordist Domenico Scarlatti who was decidedly average until the final years of his life when he wrote 550 sonatas of brilliance. The inversion of the more familiar child-prodigy figure appeals to him and he wondered what might have triggered that sudden awakening of genius.

Finally when asked for further advice for aspiring writers, David replied: write something every day, feel encouraged when you read what you wrote last week (even if you think "God this is awful" work out *why* it is awful), reward yourself by enjoying the good bits, and cultivate and nurture your instinct – it is your friend and you will need to trust it.

\*

**My thanks to David Mitchell, to Sceptre, and to Waterstones. *The Bone Clocks* is available in paperback now (and reviewed in *Vector* #280 by Anthony Nanson). *Slade House* is out on the 27<sup>th</sup> October, just in time for Halloween, and the exact same date the book ends.**



# recurrent: SEQUENTIALS

## Laura Sneddon

### European SF Comics

**A**h Europe. If you are one of the fortunate science-fiction fans who can read in French, Italian, Danish and more, then the world of European sf comics are your veritable oyster. From countries like France and Belgium with their historical respect of comics giving rise to an output that dwarfs the US, to places like Hungary and Serbia that have more recently embraced the medium, Europe is bursting at the scenes with vibrant and unique sf comics.

You will remember Hergé's *Tintin* stories of their youth that verged into sf territory with *Explorers on the Moon* in 1954 when the journalist and his faithful dog found themselves on a lunar expedition with Captain Haddock, Professor Calculus and Thomson and Thompson, but many a comic character had reached for the stars first. Many of the early examples of science fiction in European comics indeed focus on the larger universe, or to a dystopian future that has ethical issues that ring close to home.



Of a galactic nature are Italy's *SK1* by Guido Moroni Celsi in 1935 (some eight years after the first sf strip in America, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century A.D.*), and countryman Federico Pedrocchi's *Saturno contro la Terra* (Saturn Against Earth) which ran from 1936-46. The latter began publication in the US in 1940 in *Future Comics* magazine, an amazingly fast turnaround, and introduced readers to the character Rebo, dictator of Saturn, who went on to appear in many other Italian comics throughout the decades – even appearing in a popular *Donald Duck* title.

France looked to the future with *Futuropolis*, a forward-thinking strip created by René Pellarin for the magazine *Junior* in 1937, starring the last city of men who discover a tribe of cavemen and wrestled with their ethical response.

In 1941, the British magazine *Puck* folded, ending Walter Booth's *Rob the Rover* strip that had been running since 1920. Beginning as an adventure strip – often referred to as the world's first adventure comic in English – Rob's adventures had soon taken an sf turn with his futuristic vehicles and underwater adventures. In the Denmark translations, the title had been changed to *Willy på Eventyr* (Willy in Wonderland), and Harry Nielson continued the strip onwards for Danish audiences. The comic was so successful that it ran under multiple writers until 1977.

In 1945, the French *Les pionniers of l'Esperance* (The Pioneers of Hope) by Roger Lecureux and Raymond Poivet saw the mysterious planet Radias approaching Earth, causing natural destruction. The crew of the spaceship Hope is sent to investigate. A year later Edgar P Jacobs, former collaborator of fellow Belgian Hergé, began his famous *Blake and Mortimer* series which had far more frequent sf leanings than *Tintin*. The same year saw the debut of the *Os 2 Amigos* strip in Portugal's *O Mosquito* magazine, with creator Jayme Cortez exploring a city of sea monsters with his characters, a distinctly Lovecraftian trope.

A decade later, in 1955, saw the launch of *El Mundo Future* (The Future World) by Boix in Spain, a series that would run for some 102 issues. This universe-spanning sf featured no main protagonist and mostly seemed to serve as a vehicle for Boix's Christian beliefs, with harsh criticism of communism and atheism casting a distinctly racist, or at least ignorant, shadow upon the comic for modern readers.

There are doubtless many more early examples that the English market rarely gives attention.

Italy, France, Britain, Belgium, Denmark, Portugal and Spain – all pioneers of science fiction in the early comics, but it should be stressed that by far the biggest role was played by France, a country that still very much leads the way in sf comics today. An entire shelf could, and should, be dedicated to the great Jean Giraud, better known as Moebius, the inspiration behind countless artistic geniuses that looked to him as their god.



El Mundo Future

## WILLY på eventyr



Fra Willy-centeret i Australien søgte onkel Hans stadig at komme i kontakt med Willy. I de måneder, der var forløbet, havde han rutinemæssigt søgt at kalde SM 5 på alle kanaler, men uden held. Men nu hastede det...



Samtidig var SM 5 ved at lægge an til landing i Nyreass by. Anti-stoffet havde smeltet det ispanser, der havde tvunget byens indbyggere under jorden. En oversvømmelse var resultatet... byen var forberedt.



Willy og Jonna «parkerede» SM 5 og vadede gennem vandmasserne. Deres mission var forbi. Nyreass var reddet - hendes fremtid sikret. Nu var det Jorden, der ventede dem. Hvis ikke noget uforudset meldte sig...



Vandet var ved at synke, og så vidt Willy kunne se, ville det ikke vare længe, før alt atter var normalt i byen. En soldat hilste dem ved hovedkvarterets indgang...



Afskeden med Nyreass var kort og hjertelig. - Hvad med Mutor? spurgte Willy. - Han er vendt hjem til sig selv. Vi går en lykkelig fremtid i møde.



Mens det skete, lød kaldesignalet fra Jorden i SM 5s kontrolrum. Onkel Hans havde ramt en rigtig kanal, men ingen svarede.



- Stadig ingen kontakt, meddelte radio-tekniker onkel Hans. - Hvad skal vi gøre? Skifte kanal? - Ikke endnu, svarede onkel Hans. - Vi giver os selv en time til. Det gælder liv eller død.



Arzach

From his early work in the 60s, including the non-sf but iconic western *Blueberry*, to the appearance of silent but legendary **Arzach** and the gorgeous *Airtight Garage* in the late 70s, Moebius presided over a golden age of French science-fiction comics. One of four men who came together in 1974 to launch the comics anthology *Métal Hurlant* under their new publishing house, Les Humanoides Associés, Moebius had free reign to exercise his love of sf – and fans in the US and UK had unprecedented access to this European movement with the reprinting of the magazine in America as *Heavy Metal*. *Arzach* remains a staple of any science-fiction collection, featuring a man aboard a pterodactyl-type creature, flying above strange and beautiful alien landscapes, and its wordless nature allowed it to be easily found in print even in the years where English editions are in short supply.

The availability and indeed existence of English translations are of course what dictates the European sf titles that the majority of British fans can read. The US publisher Humanoids, along with UK based Titan Books and Cinebook are responsible for the majority of titles translated from French, but many classics remain unavailable for the English market, not to mention a wealth of wider titles: the spate of superhero works in Serbia; Hungarian cyberpunk; the earlier, intriguing, duelling propaganda sf comics of Croatia and Bosnia during the Yugoslavian war; and, I'm sorry to say, the bulk of the ever popular and boobtastic softcore science fiction of countless decades.

With French comics dominating the translations, what then are the must-read titles that are readily available for those of us who, tragically, can only read English?

*The Incal* by writer and film director Alexandro Jodorowsky and Moebius, introduces the Jodoverse in which several sf comics take place, including the later *Incal* volumes, and spinoffs *The Metabarons*, and *The Technopriests*. This universe contains many of the ideas and concepts that were originally lined up for Jodorowsky's planned *Dune* adaptation, and *The Incal* inspired – with some legal issues – the film, *The Fifth Element*.

*The Incal* follows the disrupted life of John Difool, a lowly detective in a dystopian city upon a degenerate world who comes across an ancient, mystical artefact – the Incal. Conflict is inevitable with the galaxy's greatest warrior, the Metabaron, and the powerful Technopope. This cosmic battle will certainly seem familiar to fans of Bruce Willis and Milla Jovovich's 1997 film!

This Christmas also sees the English publication of *Showman Killer*'s first volume from Jodorowsky and Nicolas Fructus, the tale of a genetically engineered assassin who is devoid of all emotion. Until... well. Spoilers!

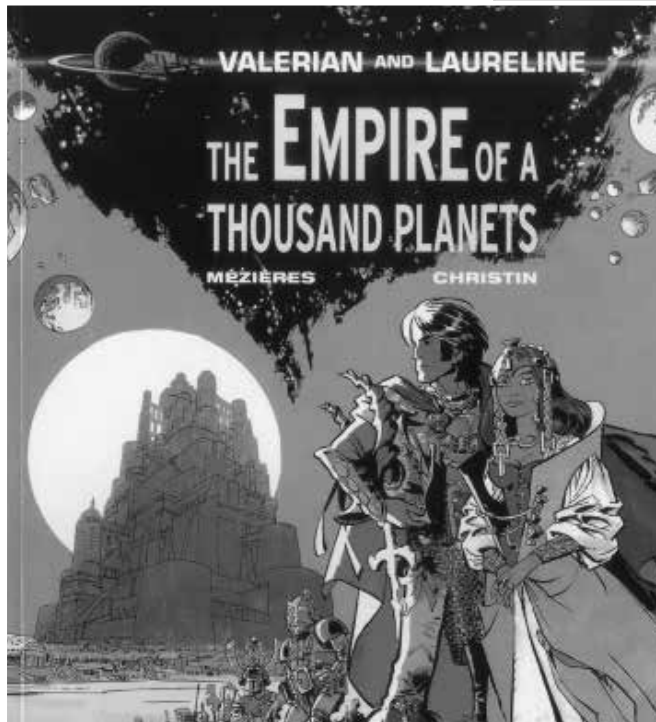
**Aldebaran** is the first cycle in the epic *Les Mondes d'Aldébaran* (Worlds of Aldebaran) saga by Léo, followed by *Betelgeuse* and *Antares*. Each cycle is five volumes and reference a different planet, along with a new cycle, *The Survivors*, running parallel to events in *Antares*. Set in a future where the Earth was consumed by the effects of global warming, cycle number one opens on Aldebaran-4, the first planet colonised by the human race and home to a brand new society. A giant sea monster wipes out a fishing village save for three teenagers, two of whom become our protagonists as they head for the capital and discover fascinating and unpleasant truths. Each cycle introduces new



cast members with every story weaving into a greater whole. Léo's work, with its clean lines, unique beasts and alien landscapes are utterly enchanting – his style may be very different from Moebius but they share a great love for bringing incredible worlds to life.

Léo, a prolific creator originally from Brazil, also has his successful *Kenya* series recently completed in English with follow-up series *Namibia* hopefully set to follow. *Kenya*, set in 1947, follows the investigations of British Secret Intelligence agent Katherine Austin into strange sightings of UFOs and prehistoric creatures, and the disappearance of an expedition in the African country.

*Valérian and Laureline* are two spatio-temporal agents of Earth's future, who patrol history in order to maintain the stability of the timeline. First published in 1967, this incredibly influential series by Pierre Christin, Jean-



Claude Mézières and Évelyne Tranlé was concluded in 2010 some 22 albums later. Of those, nine volumes are currently available in English, hopefully with more to come of this series commonly and widely referred to as a sf masterpiece. In fact elements of *Valérian and Laureline* have been spotted in films as diverse as *Star Wars* – both old and new – *Conan the Barbarian*, *Independence Day*, and again, *The Fifth Element*. Of the latter both Mézières and Moebius contributed to the production design of the film. Forbidden from meddling with events of the past, the two agents explore planets and attempt more subtle manipulations of the timeline. Spatio-temporal themes may be a tad cliché now, but in the late '60s, *Valérian and Laureline* was breaking incredible ground with a story that effortlessly holds up today.

*The Nikopol Trilogy* is a stunning series of sf comics from French-Yugoslavian Enki Bilal that were originally published between 1980-92: *La Foire aux Immortels* (The Carnival of Immortals), *La Femme piège* (The Woman Trap), and *Froid Équateur* (Equator Cold). Available as one collected volume, Titan will be putting this back in print for the English-language market in early 2016.

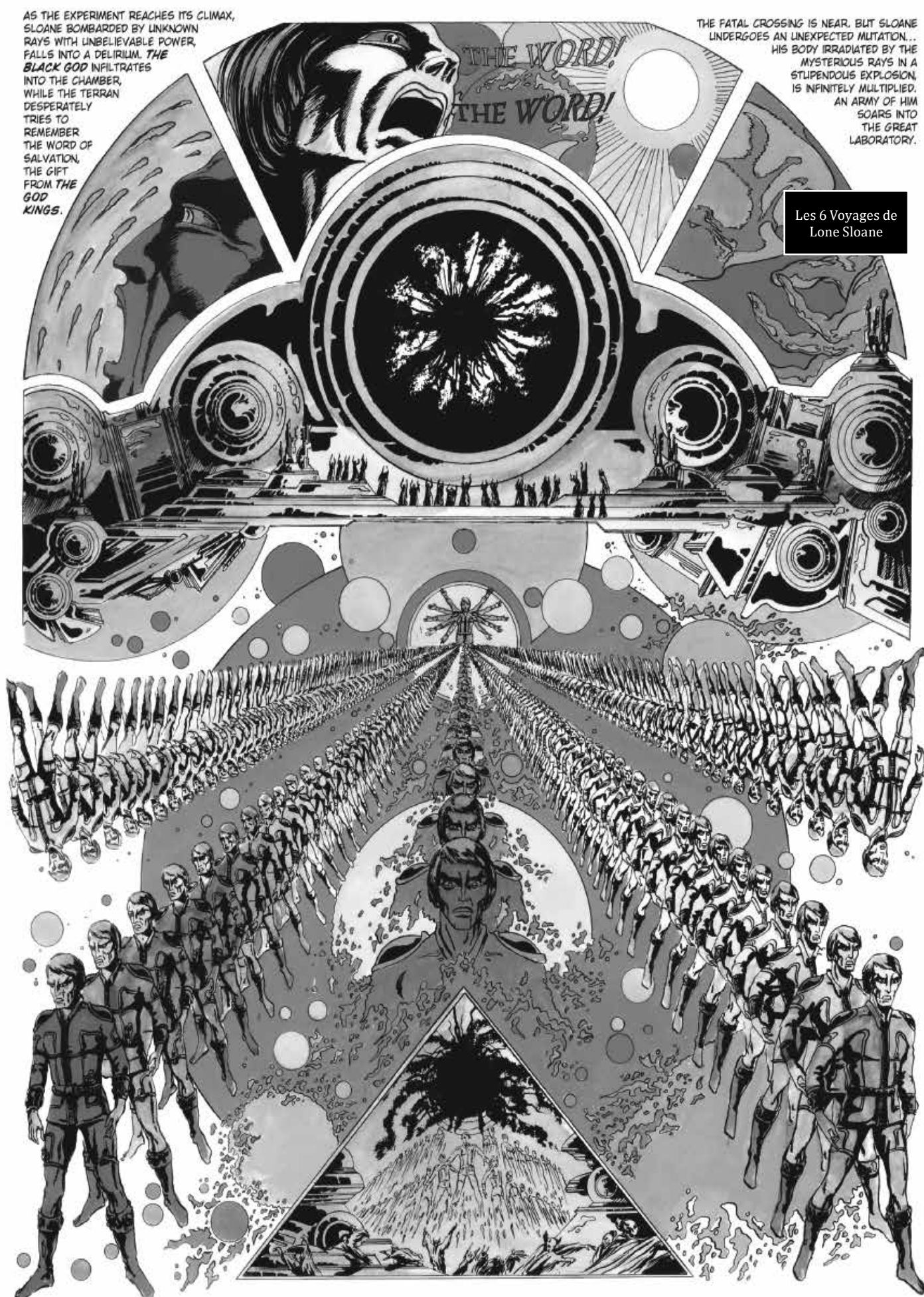
Opening in 2023, Alcide Nikopol is released from his 30 years frozen in space and returns to his home city of Paris, now ruled by a fascist dictator, a sizeable alien population, and a strange spacecraft that seems to be the vehicle of ancient Egyptian gods. Nikopol teams up with the rebellious god Horus to put an end to the corruption of the city. The second volume follows journalist Jill Bioskop, the blue haired woman from the iconic cover. Bilal, a former collaborator of Pierre Christin, also

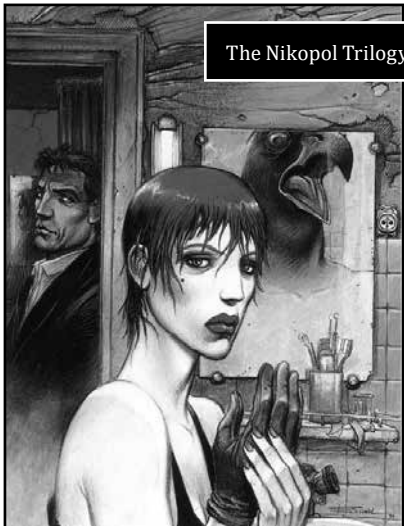


The Nikopol Trilogy









The Nikopol Trilogy

directed the animated film adaptation, *Immortel (Ad Vitam)* in 2004.

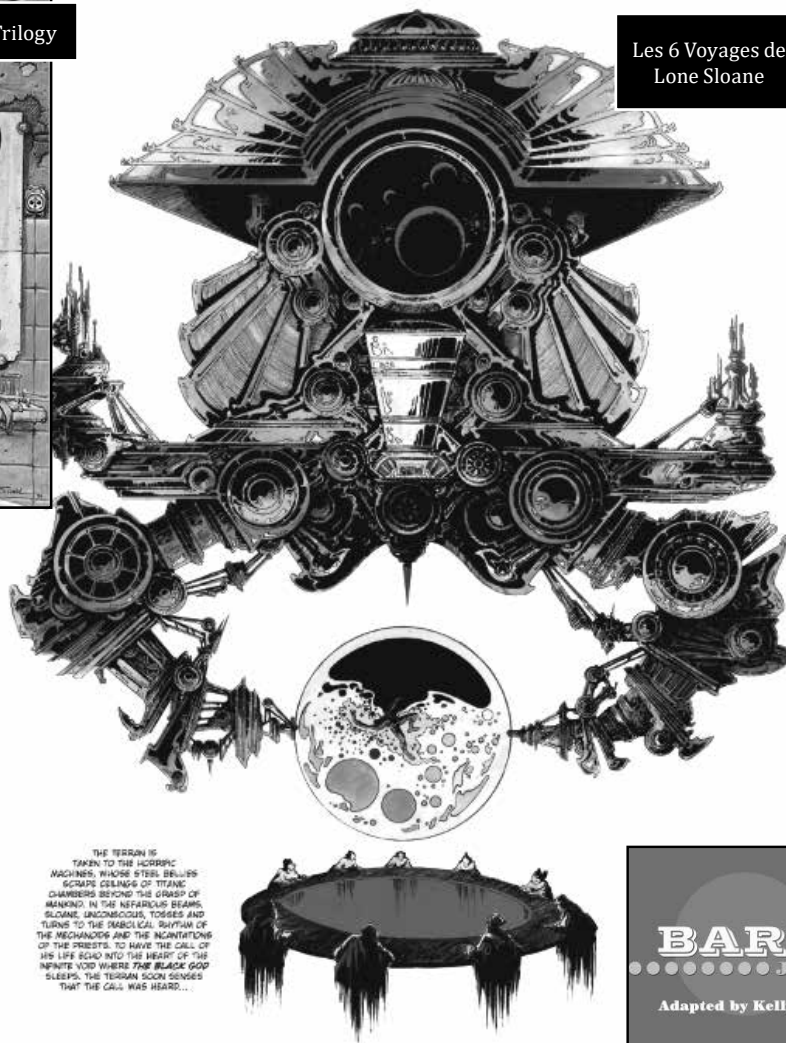
The dark and grimy feel of the artwork perfectly matches the dismal city that Nikopol is confronted with, and Bilal's slightly bizarre and exaggerated rendering of human faces adds to the alien feel. Oh and watch out for that flying yellow taxi cab, yet another influence on *The Fifth Element*!

Jean-Claude Forest launched the iconic *Barbarella* in 1962, and the long-running *Les Naufragés du temps* (Shipwrecked Time) just six years later. There are few sf fans that aren't familiar with the Jane Fonda cult film of 1968 but the original comics have been very hard to come by in the UK until recently. Humanoids has recently published gorgeous hardcover and handy digital editions of the original *Barbarella* and follow-up, *Barbarella: Les Colères du Mange-Minutes* (The Wrath Of The Minute Eater). Both are modern translations courtesy of Marvel star Kelly Sue DeConnick.

Modelled on Brigitte Bardot, Barbarella travels from planet to planet, facing down seductive aliens and the notorious *orgasmatron*. Despite the scandalous reputation of both film and comic, Barbarella was a progressively empowered character for her time during the swinging sixties. It's an adult erotic comic for sure, and there is a great deal of sex and skimpy clothing, but separated from the more cliché film adaptation, Barbarella is a well-rounded character with great agency. In a way, she is more Bond than Bond himself, and a smart and cunning protagonist.

The plot is a little stilted at times, but Forest's artistry is breathtaking and *Barbarella* remains a stunning example of a great female-led sf comic. And of course the Paco Rabanne designed wardrobe of the film directly influenced Jean-Paul Gaultier's designs in *The Fifth Element*.

Philippe Druillet's Lone Sloane character first appeared in 1966, appearing in issues of comics magazine *Pilote* until 1971. When Druillet co-founded *Métal Hurlant* and Les Humanoïdes Associés with Moebius in 1974, he also



Les 6 Voyages de Lone Sloane

revamped his popular character. Eight stories have been available in English over the years, via *Heavy Metal* and NBM publishing, but it is Titan that have now taken over the reins, republishing *Les 6 Voyages de Lone Sloane* (The 6 Voyages of Lone Sloane) in deluxe full-size hardback earlier this year, and with *Lone Sloane: Delirius* set for a Christmas release.

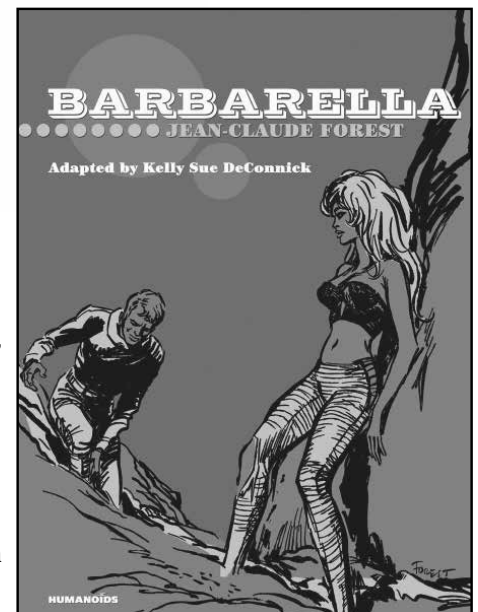
An excellent and influential example of psychedelic sf that won the rare praise of Hergé,

*The 6 Voyages of Lone Sloane* is set some 800 years after the Great Fear, a cataclysmic event that changed the universe forever. Vagabond, space pirate, mercenary, adventurer, Lone Sloane bounds from one adventure to the next while with effortless cool Druillet breaks all rules and conventions to create something wholly unique on an epic scale. It's difficult not just to stare in awe at the spectacular art, but the story more than keeps up with the experimental graphics.

As far as I know *The Fifth Element* didn't take anything from Sloane, but I wouldn't be surprised!

There are many other fantastic sf comics translated from our European cousins, and far more that remain undiscovered for those cursed with one tongue alone, but Druillet, Forest, Bilal, Christin, Léo and Moebius are the names that turn up time and time again, masters of their craft.

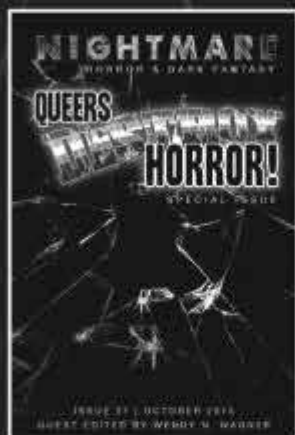
Perhaps one day we will be able to appreciate the masters of Danish, Croatian, Serbian, Icelandic, Swedish, Hungarian and Spanish sf comics, but until then there is plenty to enjoy.



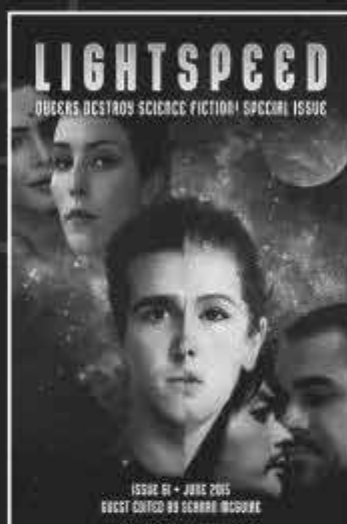
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# recurrent:

## KINCAID IN SHORT

### Paul Kincaid

## Enoch Soames

by Max Beerbohm

In the early afternoon of 3rd June 1997, a small crowd of people gathered in the Reading Room of the British Museum. The Reading Room had been due to close for some time, but owing to a series of delays it was still open on this date. According to the American magician Teller, of Penn and Teller, at around 2:10 in the afternoon a nondescript man appeared and began searching through the various catalogues before disappearing into the stacks. Most accounts of that afternoon, however, report no sightings, and when the crowd dispersed, Enoch Soames returned to fiction.

The central events in the story “Enoch Soames” include a pact with the devil and a visit to the distant future, so it is remarkable that over 80 years after it was first published there were still people willing, indeed eager, to believe in the truth of the story. But then, “Enoch Soames” is a quite remarkable story.

There is a portrait of the author, Max Beerbohm, painted by William Nicholson in 1905, just over ten years before he wrote “Enoch Soames”. It shows an elegantly dressed

Beerbohm himself appears in the story, which is presented as a memoir, but a lot of Beerbohm’s own character is so effectively transferred onto the failed poet, Enoch Soames, that I think it helps to explain why the fiction has been so readily and consistently believed as truth.

The story first appeared in the May 1916 edition of *The Century Magazine*, and there was nothing in its publication to suggest it was not fiction, except the tone of voice and the verisimilitude with which Beerbohm told it.

It begins as a memoir prompted by the publication of ‘a book about the literature of the eighteen-nineties’ (425). This is a genuine book: *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* by Holbrook Jackson, one of the leading literary journalists of the day, was published in 1913. In the index of this book, Beerbohm fails to find an entry for Enoch Soames, and it is this absence, which he feels sure no one else would have noticed, that prompts him to write the memoir. However, there is a caveat whose import will become clear only later in the story: ‘Not my compassion, however, impels

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**Beerbohm himself appears in the story, which is presented as a memoir, but a lot of Beerbohm’s own character is so effectively transferred onto the failed poet, Enoch Soames...**

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man with thinning, slicked-down hair wearing a stylish black coat with a cane in one hand and a glossy top hat in the other. Just the image, one might imagine, of a confident member of upper-class Edwardian society. Except that he stands sideways to the artist, an awkward, slightly hunched posture. His face is not quite turned towards the artist, there is something in the attitude that suggests he would be happiest to turn his back completely. His eyes are downcast, the mouth thin and pursed. There is something stiff and uncomfortable about him, a retreat from attention, and it is no surprise to learn that in 1910 he and his new wife withdrew to Rapallo, Italy, where he would live in semi-retirement for the better part of 44 years. It was here that he was most productive as a writer, and it was in this period, in 1916, that he wrote “Enoch Soames”.

me to write of him. For his sake, poor fellow, I should be inclined to keep my pen out of the ink’ (425). Beerbohm is not writing this for Soames’s sake, in that respect it would be better if he did not write, but because he is in some way compelled to do so: ‘sooner or later, write about him I must’ (425). The inevitability with which he writes is the point of the story, but Beerbohm passes this over so lightly that we barely notice, but rather concentrate on the seeming reality of a poet omitted from the standard reference work on the period. And a man, moreover, that Beerbohm admits ‘WAS ridiculous’ (425).

One of the things that is particularly interesting about this story is how closely Beerbohm sticks to fact; wherever possible, every name or location within the story is verifiable. So much so, indeed, that his original readers



might well have assumed it was down to their ignorance that they had not encountered poor Enoch Soames. Thus he begins with the arrival of the artist Will Rothenstein in Oxford in 1893, who was there to produce a series of portraits of university figures to be published by the Bodley Head. Rothenstein really did know Whistler and Daudet and the Goncourts, and he really did produce a portrait of the young Enoch Soames (though this was produced later, to coincide with the publication of the story). The story goes on to record the young Beerbohm's arrival in London (and so far this is a genuine memoir), and it really was Rothenstein who introduced Beerbohm to Walter Sickert and the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley and 'another haunt of intellect and daring, the domino-room of the Café Royal' (426).

It was here, in the Café Royal, that Beerbohm introduces Soames into this portrait of sophisticated *fin-de-siècle* London artistic society. Beerbohm immediately identifies Soames as odd, then steps back from that oddity:

He was a stooping, shambling person, rather tall, very pale, with longish and brownish hair. He had a thin, vague beard, or, rather, he had a chin on which a large number of hairs weakly curled and clustered to cover its retreat. He was an odd-looking person; but in the nineties odd apparitions were more frequent, I think, than they are now. (426)

'Longish', 'brownish', 'vague', Soames isn't just odd, he is ill-formed, he has not come into focus. The fictional Beerbohm is here confident and comfortable in this high social circle; upon Soames is loaded all of the awkwardness and unease that presumably led the real Beerbohm to later withdraw from that society. Soames's undefined character is highlighted in his first exchange with Rothenstein: Rothenstein vaguely recalls meeting him in Paris, and when Soames says he visited the studio, Rothenstein apologises for being out. 'But you were in,' (427) Soames replies, and we see immediately that he is someone impossible to pin in the memory. As Rothenstein says later: 'How can one draw a man who does not exist?' (428) and when

him. He talks slightly of Shelley and Keats, he insists his work owes nothing to contemporary French decadents such as Baudelaire and Verlaine despite the fact that Beerbohm recognises their influence, and he publishes a slim volume of poetry called *Fungoids* which sinks without trace, deservedly so given the two examples that Beerbohm quotes.

Aside from his being a mediocre poet, the other thing we learn about Soames, ominously given what is to follow, is that he calls himself a 'Catholic diabolist' (430), and indeed 'Diabolism seemed to be a cheerful, even a wholesome influence in his life' (431).

Meanwhile the relationship between the two is starting to change. By now (another accurate memoir) Beerbohm had sold an essay to Aubrey Beardsley's *The Yellow Book*; consequently he feels more firmly entrenched in the society within which he moves. Soames, 'that absurd creature' (432), remains outside the charmed circle. His poems are rejected by *The Yellow Book*, and thereafter 'for the poets and prosaists of *The Yellow Book* and later of *The Savoy* he had never a word but of scorn' (433). Though Beerbohm has a grudging admiration for the way Soames 'kept his dingy little flag flying' (433), by the time Soames brings out, at his own expense, his third and final book, Beerbohm forgets to buy it and cannot even remember what it was called. Though Soames is, I believe, Beerbohm's portrait of himself if he had not made it, a creature shunned and resentful, surviving on a minute inheritance and continuing to believe absolutely in his own literary genius, because Beerbohm had in fact made it – 'John Lane had published, by this time, two little books of mine, and they had had a pleasant little success of esteem' (433) – he could afford now to regard Soames with pity for the tragedy of the man. Rothenstein does indeed paint a portrait of Soames – 'it "existed" so much more than he; it was bound to' (433) – which gives Soames a brief, belated taste of fame, but its withdrawal breaks him.

It is now, in the summer of 1897, that what has seemed

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## This disdain between Beerbohm and the Devil is echoed at the very end of the story when, years later, Beerbohm passes the Devil in Paris...

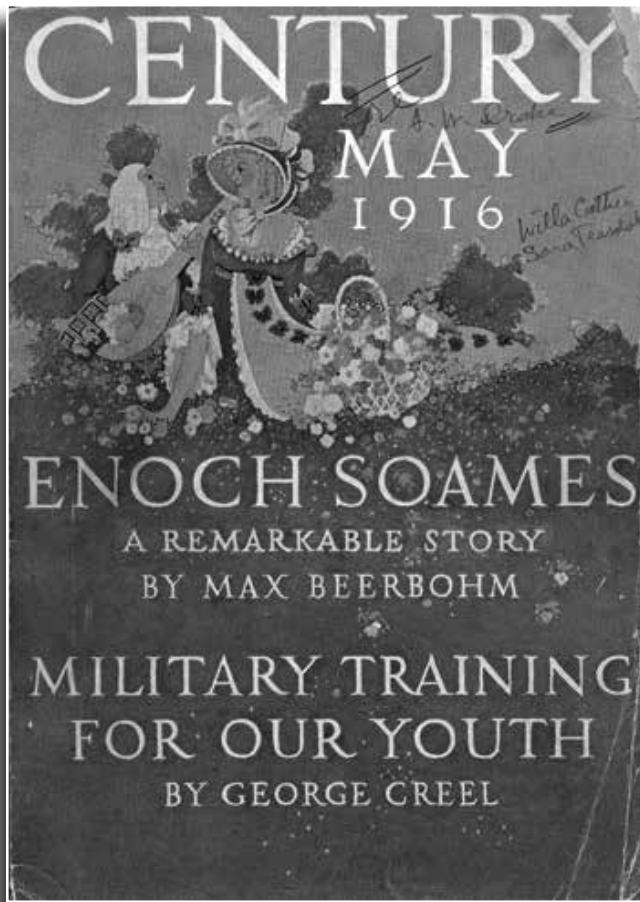
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Beerbohm next runs into Soames, he has 'a vague sense that I ought to have recognized him' (429).

When this imprecise being joins the group in the Café Royal, Soames makes a series of gestures, flinging his cape back, ordering absinthe, speaking awkwardly and pretentiously in French. But they are no more than gestures, the man is all pretence. Though Beerbohm notes that they did not identify him as a fool because 'he had written a book. It was wonderful to have written a book' (427). And all of Beerbohm's ambition is alive in that last sentence. When he acquires the book, however, he finds it impenetrable, all carefully wrought, but 'Was there, I wondered, any substance at all?' (429) and while the young Beerbohm continues to respect Soames as someone who has been published, we readers get a less positive perspective on

like a memoir, an account of a deservedly-forgotten writer, suddenly lurches into the fantastic. Beerbohm dines at a short-lived café in Greek Street called Restaurant du Vingtième Siècle, a name which signals that a tale about the past has become a journey into the future. He finds Soames at the café, who treats him to a long diatribe about being neglected, then, still convinced that fame will come his way eventually, he declares that he would sell his soul for the chance to go to the Reading Room of the British Museum one hundred years hence and see the 'endless editions, commentaries, prolegomena, biographies' (436) devoted to him and his work. Whereupon a 'Mephistophelian' (434) man at the next table joins them and introduces himself as the Devil. He is not as either man imagine the Devil to be, Beerbohm later describes him as 'the sort of man who

hangs about the corridors of trains going to the Riviera and steals ladies' jewel-cases' (439). Later still, he says that 'Dread was indeed rather blunted in me by his looking so absurdly like a villain in a melodrama' (442). Beerbohm's understandable response, therefore, is to burst into laughter: 'I tried not to, I knew there was nothing to laugh at, my rudeness shamed me; but – I laughed with increasing volume' (436). This disdain between Beerbohm and the Devil is echoed at the very end of the story when, years later, Beerbohm passes the Devil in Paris and 'he, if you please, stared straight at me with the utmost haughtiness' (444). Beerbohm is so assured of his own position that he expects even the Devil to treat him with proper civility; confirmation in its way that Beerbohm's own social standing is the central issue of the story.



Soames, already a diabolist and anxious to discover his own renown, is less dismissive. He quickly agrees to the deal which will transport him to the Museum exactly one hundred years hence. The Devil checks his watch, ten past two, with closing time at seven, at which point, as the Devil puts it: 'pouf! – you find yourself again here, sitting at this table' (437). For Soames, the scene switches to where Teller and his companions are waiting. Left behind, Beerbohm says dryly to the Devil: '*The Time Machine* is a delightful book, don't you think? So entirely original' to which the Devil replies: 'it is one thing to write about an impossible machine; it is quite another to be a supernatural power' (437). Even now, Beerbohm and the Devil are jockeying for position.

Beerbohm returns early to the café, and exactly on time Soames reappears. Beerbohm tries to persuade him to

renege on the deal, to flee from the Devil, but Soames is fatalistic: "It's like my luck," he said, "to spend my last hours on earth with an ass." But I was not offended. "And a treacherous ass" (438). This last is explained by a passage Soames copied from a book he found in 1997:

Fr egzarmpl, a riter ov th time, naimed Max Beerbohm, hoo woz stil alive in th twentieth senchri, rote a stauri in wich e pautraid an immajnari karrakter kauld 'Enoch Soames' – a thurd-rait poit hoo beleevz imself a grate jeneus an maix a bargin with th Devvl in auder ter no wot posterriti thinx ov im! It iz a sumwot labud sattire, but not without vullu az showing hou seriusli the yung men ov th aiteen-ninetiz took themselvz. (441)

The debased language, a distant ancestor, perhaps, of the language in Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, and used here to the same end to illustrate how far the future has fallen, is the most startling and inventive aspect of the story. Though H.G. Wells in *The Time Machine*, the novel to which Beerbohm has already made specific allusion, has his time traveller unable to communicate with the Eloi of the distant future, he had not attempted to present the language of that distant time. This is, I suspect, the first time that a fragmented language of the future is presented in fiction, and that such broken and distorted prose stands as a representation of the times.

There is also a deliciously inverted self reference in the passage. The story we are reading was written in 1916, is itself a reference point in a book read in 1997, yet all of this relates to events in 1897. In 1916 and 1997 the story is fiction, yet its very fictionality is a bone of contention in the "reality" of 1897 of which this is a memoir, and a time in which Beerbohm himself did not write any fiction. Soames spells it out when he attacks Beerbohm: 'you're so hopelessly not an artist that, so far from being able to imagine a thing and make it seem true, you're going to make even a true thing seem as if you'd made it up' (442). In other words, Beerbohm is so poor a writer that he'll make a true story seem as if it is fiction, which is how it will be recorded in the reference book of 1997; but this in turn means that the fiction we think we are reading is in fact a true story, and hence Teller and his companions waiting at the British Museum in 1997. And they are there in the story, the people in the Reading Room: 'They will have been awfully waiting to see whether he really would come. And when he does come the effect will of course be – awful' (444). Teller and co must be there, just as Beerbohm must write the story, and still we wonder if, perhaps, that nondescript man really was ...

It is an infinite regress: if we read "Enoch Soames" as fiction then it is a true story, but if we recognise it as a true story then it is fiction. Which is one of the cleverest and most satisfying aspects of this most intricate of works.

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Quotations taken from "Enoch Soames: A Memory of the Eighteen-Nineties" by Max Beerbohm in *The Time Traveller's Almanac* edited by Ann & Jeff VanderMeer, New York, Tor, 2014, pp425-444.

# recurrent: RESONANCES Stephen Baxter

## The Fermi Paradox

**M**y latest book is *Xeelee: Endurance*, a new collection of short fiction set in my 'Xeelee Sequence' universe. This is a cosmos crowded with life on all scales of space and time – to which scenario a scholar of the Fermi Paradox might object: if that's so, where is everybody? As it happens 2015 contains two (minor) relevant anniversaries: the 65<sup>th</sup> birthday of the formulation of the Paradox in 1950, and the anniversary of the death, that very same year, of that greatest of cosmic dreamers, Olaf Stapledon. Stapledon was surely unaware of the Paradox, sadly, let alone of the decades of analysis that have followed. But given his views of life in the universe, what might Stapledon have made of Fermi's tricky argument?

In 1948 Stapledon, invited by super-fan Arthur C Clarke, gave an address to the British Interplanetary Society. Stapledon, who had just two years to live, had become a 'peace pilgrim' after Hiroshima, and a subtext of his talk was the looming Cold War. He returned to themes that had dominated his life's work, concerning the promise and dangers of the future, and he set out this summarising vision of mankind's cosmic destiny:

*'If, by one means or another, man does succeed in communicating with intelligent races in remote worlds, then the right aim will be to enter into mutual understanding and appreciation with them, for mutual enrichment and the further expression of the spirit. One can imagine some sort of cosmical community of worlds.'*

This uplifting vision was explored in Stapledon's fiction, most memorably in *Star Maker* (1937). But you might ask, however, why it is that we are not *already* part of a 'cosmical community of worlds'? The universe is vastly older than mankind; why have races who went before us not already built such a community? Why are we still alone?

This kind of question has become known as a Fermi Paradox question. The Paradox was first framed in 1950 during a lunch at Los Alamos including physicists Enrico Fermi, Edward Teller and others. If life and intelligence have arisen on Earth, they should have risen elsewhere among the Galaxy's hundreds of billions of stellar systems. Why should we be special? And if we have developed

spaceflight, others should have too, and maybe gone further than we have. For example, even at 0.1% of light-speed, a colonising wave could have covered the Galaxy in 100 million years; the Galaxy is 100 times older than this, so that there has been plenty of opportunity for aliens to have achieved this many times over. And even one colonising wave could have left detectable traces.

In short, if they exist, they should be here, or at least should have been here. During that 1950 lunch, in a jokey conversation about UFO sightings, Fermi is said to have suddenly asked: 'Where is everybody?'

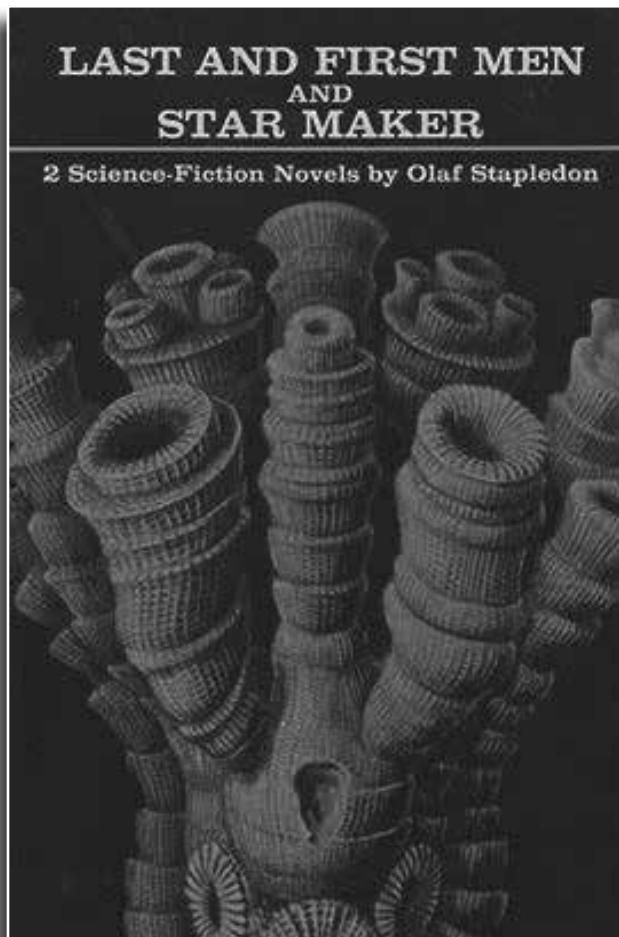
In the years since, the Fermi Paradox has been a stimulus to thought about our cosmic context. In 2002 Stephen Webb produced a useful survey of the Paradox and candidate solutions to that date, which he enumerated as fifty, gathered into three broad categories:

1. 'ETI (extraterrestrial intelligence) is here', despite the apparent silence, referring to such theories as: the UFO hypothesis - they are here but in hiding;
2. 'ETI exists but it has not yet communicated', referring to such theories as: we are looking for the wrong messages (signals rather than artefacts, for example); technological civilisations always destroy themselves before they communicate, etc.;
3. 'ETI does not exist', referring to such theories as: the emergence of life and/or mind is rare.

A seminal 1983 paper by David Brin noted that candidate solutions of Fermi need to respect scientific principles of consistency and mediocrity. Consistency: a solution must explain why *all* aliens have failed to colonise the Galaxy. Mediocrity: a solution should not assume that we live in a special place or epoch; we are 'mediocre', meaning we live in typical times, and not for example just before a transforming event such as the emergence of a galactic empire.

What might Stapledon have made of Fermi arguments in the context of his own thinking?

Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930) is a stupendous future history depicting the rise and fall of no less than eighteen human species across two billion years, beginning in the then present in 1930 and ending up with



the Last Men on Neptune. Throughout this titanic span humanity, along with life forms on Venus and Mars, is essentially isolated within the solar system. Indeed it is only the Last Men who begin to understand the lack of contact with any interstellar community, and the reasons reflect some of the Fermi solutions collected by Webb.

The Last Men are aware of minds on distant planets, but life and mind are rare in the Galaxy: there have been only twenty thousand life-bearing worlds, only a few score have achieved human-level intelligence, and 'today man alone survives' (p230). These predictions reflect Webb's Solutions 43 ('Life's Genesis Is Rare') and 47 ('Intelligence at the Human Level is Rare'). Furthermore interstellar distances are too large ever to be traversed, even by the Last Men's mighty ether-ships, powered by the annihilation of matter: their 'most daring voyages are confined within one drop of the boundless ocean of space' (p217), reflecting Webb's Solution 9: 'The Stars Are Too Far Away'.

*Star Maker*, meanwhile, is a supracosmical saga so vast in scale that the rise and fall of all the species of mankind, covered at length in *Last and First Men*, is dismissed in a couple of paragraphs (p379).

In Stapledon's cosmology planetary life is rare, if only because planets are rare. Planets were thought to be formed by the close approach of two stars, an unusual event, so that planets were as rare as 'gems among the grains of sand on the sea shore' (p266). (Modern theories of planetary formation indicate that habitable worlds might be much more common than once thought.) The

inhabited worlds remain essentially isolated for a long age – up to ten billion years *after* humanity's extinction (Chapter V). Stapledon depicts such worlds with staggeringly imaginative variety, but these worlds conform to common destinies; many races succumb to internal flaws or cosmic accidents, as illustrated by the fate of mankind in *Last and First Men*. But a few others 'wake to such lucidity that they pass beyond our ken' (p301).

It is these latter, rare at first, who shape the next age of the universe. Super-advanced 'minded worlds' can handle problems ultimately too challenging for more lowly intelligences – and these challenges include interstellar travel. There follow long ages of galactic integration, first as 'minded worlds' combine into empires, and then a coalescence of planetary life and living stars. The unified cosmos journeys in search of the ultimate cause: the Star Maker.

So humanity rose and fell in a universe saturated with life from the beginning, indeed our own sun was alive, but we failed to recognise it (just as in the Xeelee universe, in fact).

This sounds plausible – but David Brin might raise an objection. Recall that Brin forcefully argued that a candidate Fermi solution should obey principles of mediocrity in space and time. Stapledon gave a detailed timeline of his multicosmic creation (pp436-437). The age of planetary life from its beginning on isolated worlds to the 'supreme moment of the cosmos' spans some 68 billion years, itself a small interval in the total span of 500 billion years from the creation to 'complete physical quiescence'. And in that interval of 68 billion years we live a mere 10 billion years before the great transforming moment of the development of interstellar contact, and the cosmic integration that follows. So we actually live in an atypical time; we happen to live a mere 2% of the total cosmic duration (10 billion years out of 500 billion) before the great ages of integration begin.

I wonder if an awareness of such Fermi-inspired arguments might have persuaded Stapledon to tinker with his timescale.

To ponder the Fermi Paradox requires a capacity to contemplate the destiny of life and mind on a cosmic scale, and that capacity Stapledon demonstrated in abundance. And it certainly defies principles of mediocrity that Stapledon should die in the very year that the Paradox was first published.

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# recurrent:

## FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

### Andy Sawyer

## Only Lovers Left Alive

by Dave Wallis

**T**he adults kill themselves off in despair and the teenagers loot the wreckage of “square” society: I can’t help but smile cynically at the way I approved of this scenario a lot more when the book was first issued than I do now. One of the many abandoned projects of the Rolling Stones was a film of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, which came out of the unease about turbulent youth in the early 1960s. Memory tells me that the Stones, or their manager, or at least someone who thought this was worth printing in the newspapers, were going to ditch the motor-bikes Ernie’s gang ride about in for sports cars which were closer to the sophisticated image they were trying to reach for. The internet tells me that they really wanted Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, but the rights for that had

As many “social issue” books of the time do, it leaves behind a thought-provoking mixture of realistic extrapolation and naivety. We are not told, for instance, exactly how ‘adult’ is defined (though the then legal definition of “over twenty-one” is as good as anything): at one point the survival of someone as old as nineteen is presented as something unusual, though we first meet East London’s Seeley Street gang in the ‘upper sixth’ year. They are a mixture: described as ‘the very worst of the truanting, semi-criminal fourth-year leavers’ and the ‘GCE stream intellectuals ... a natural aristocracy of brains and daring [who] lived only to defeat tutelage.’ The leaders are Ernie, who has spent three weeks in a Remand Home, his girlfriend Kathy, and the elegant Charlie. Following close behind is Robert,

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**Once the oldies are gone, the teenagers loot shops and live off what they can get. It’s cosy catastrophe with enough squalor to make it real on the streets.**

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already gone and Wallis’s novel was the closest they could get. Whatever happened in development hell, the film never materialised, and all we are left with is the book, which the Science Fiction Foundation Collection holds in the shape of the 1966 Pan paperback bearing a cover showing a suspiciously neatly-groomed leather-jacketed yob clutching a machine-gun.

If anyone wants to give us the Anthony Blond first edition, you know where I’m to be found ...

A left-wing former serviceman and later teacher, Dave Wallis published *Only Lovers Left Alive* in 1964. Possibly drawing upon William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* of ten years earlier, and certainly upon the anxieties about youth culture which were exploding in the early 60s, the novel begins with a classroom discussion about the increasing suicide rate and takes us into a world where all the adults have gone and gangs of teenagers roam the streets of the country, at first scavenging and eventually learning how to pull a kind of society back together again.

hopelessly in love with Kathy, who is at first tolerated but whose brains, when the collapse finally happens, makes him an effective ‘intelligence officer’ for the gang.

At first, the release from the demands of parents, teachers and other authority figures is simply party time. Once the oldies are gone, the teenagers loot shops and live off what they can get. It’s cosy catastrophe with enough squalor to make it real on the streets. But the rumours of a powerful gang who have taken over Windsor Castle and who are prepared to use the ex-military armaments they have acquired (and who have instituted a system of slavery based upon torture) bring a shadow of darkness, and Ernie, still burning from a humiliating beating inflicted at the hands of the same gang in “normal” days, sends Robert on a scouting mission. This leads to the best and worst of the book. The best is a poignant scene where Robert comes across a household of younger children who have banded together and act out a terrifyingly painful scenario each night where the first one who falls asleep is ritually assaulted humiliated

but then has the power to send everyone to bed and is surrogate parent/leader for the next day. Each child's customary good-night ritual is repeated, 'desperate with desire' as Robert tries to rectify his mistake in interfering with the practice by taking over as 'father'. However, the next day, we have one of the most egregious examples in 'idiot plotting' for a long while as Robert meets hooker-with-heart-of-gold Julia and manages to tell her everything about his plan to find out what he can about the Windsor gang. The fact that she is against the gang and doesn't in fact betray Robert (and in fact really *does* quite fancy him) doesn't affect the point that this is peculiar writing indeed: poor old Robert opens his heart to Julia just at the point where he is in the greatest danger, and very little is made of the fact that he is a reasonably intelligent person and just *might*, in such a situation, have kept his mouth shut and wondered whether he is being seduced in order to elicit information from him?

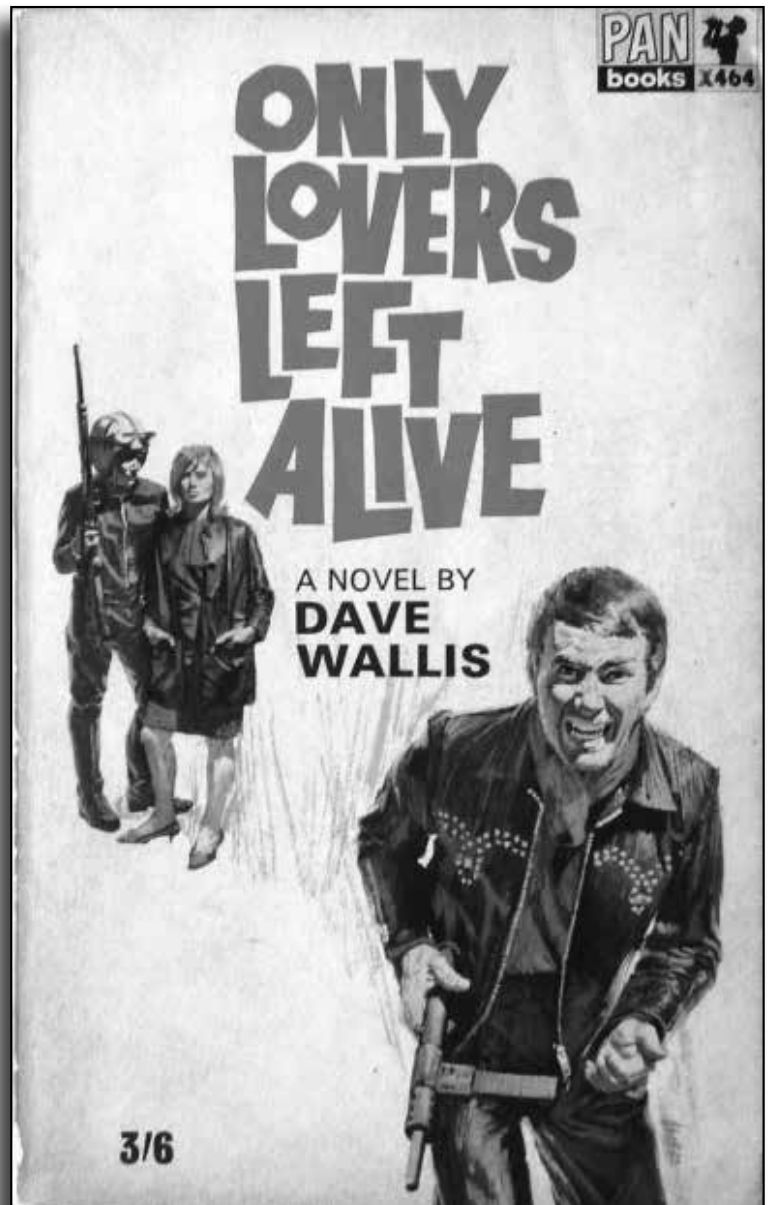
Still; that aside, the Seeley St. mob win the day, although the loot soon disappears and things get worse as typhoid and starvation reduce the population. Eventually, what remains of the gang leaves London and moves north. They begin to learn to live off the land. Kathy becomes pregnant and, with help from Julia, gives birth successfully. The few remaining gang members become a kind of family rather than a tribe. The country they move through is a mosaic of rival territories, but the gangs are developing systems of trading and skill-sharing (for example, there are references to former medical students giving advice on contraception and childbirth). Eventually Ernie, Kathy and co end up in Scotland, to join a gathering of the northern tribes, and 'a planned exploration of the cities to salvage what metal and tools were there and special groups were chosen to look out textbooks and manuals for medicine and building and metal work and stock breeding.' It looks as though some sort of society is going to be rebuilt from the wreckage.

*Only Lovers Left Alive* is, read over a half-century from publication, an odd mixture of teen-exploitation (it was apparently criticised in the press as slandering teens), vindication of youth and their view of the world (on the back of a 1979 reprint, Wallis writes of a 'thick file' of letters of praise from teenagers), and forerunner of the current wave of YA dystopias. Certainly, as a novel in the tradition of *Lord of the Flies* or *A Clockwork Orange* it doesn't, I think, really hold up. Even in my own mid-teens I remember rather distrusting it as a reader, not quite sure how far it really did hold up a mirror to my own interior and exterior world. But it has some interesting snapshots in it: the torch the stammering Robert has for the glamorous Kathy, and the only partial solution he finds in his relationship with Julia (who always remains a free spirit), the way Kathy and Charlie realise—but too late—that *they* are the real "couple" of the gang; and the way Ernie and Kathy grow up, changing from children to adults whether they know (or like) it or not. But perhaps the most genuinely poignant part of the novel is the early thread involving 'Alf Neighbour' cliché incarnate of the chummy journalist whose only real interest in people is how their stories can be

exploited to sell newspapers. Alf finds himself at the head of a body of Help Centres which attempt to look to the energy and liveliness of teenagers as a way of combating the drift to suicide. Set up as a typical newspaper cash-in scheme, Alf's scheme of togetherness and inquiring among young people 'what they're thinking and how they can help if at all', becomes, to his surprise, something that he is really committed to.

Alas, it is too late. To the Seeley Streeters, Alf comes across as yet another patronising adult, and by then his own self-disgust is his own undoing. His death is not suicide, but might as well be. His scheme might not have resulted in anything, but it could have.

*Only Lovers Left Alive* is not a great book, but it is possibly better than a vehicle for the Rolling Stones might have made it. The very ordinariness of the characters makes them difficult to be played by even the comparatively limited level of superstars that the Stones were in 1966. Far better, I think, that it remains as one of the muddled but genuine attempts to understand youth culture from someone who was at the chalk face at the time.



# recurrent:

## THE BSFA REVIEW

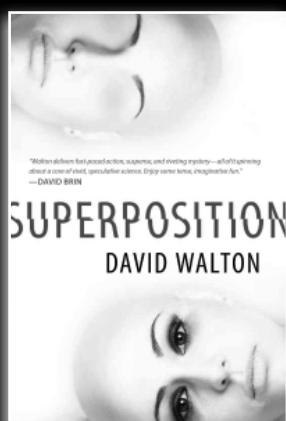
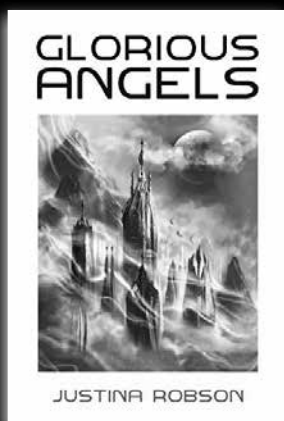
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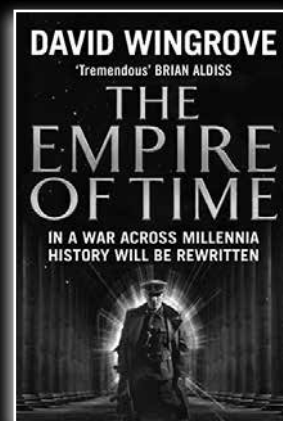
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# If Music Be The Food of Fiction...

I had been planning to review about *Y Dydd Olaf* by Gwenno for my editorial this time round but I've rapidly come to the conclusion I'm not qualified to write about it. If I wanted to put you off, I would describe it as a folktronica concept album sung in Welsh (and, occasionally, Cornish). But I don't because it is great. Perhaps more alluring is the fact *Y Dydd Olaf* (*The Last Day*) is also the title of a 1976 science fiction novel by Owain Owain, nuclear scientist, poet and Welsh language activist. Alas, as far as I can tell it has never been translated into English. If any members have read a copy, please let me know!

The language barrier for the album initially seemed less insurmountable; a track like 'Patriarchaeth' sounds like it should be pretty self-explanatory and Saunders has given some fascinating interviews about where her music is coming from and the seed Owain's novel has sown. So this gave me hope. And, after all, my favourite science fiction albums are all instrumental. This includes both actual SF soundtracks such as *Tron: Legacy* by Daft Punk, albums that merely sound like soundtracks such as *Tarot Sport* by Fuck Buttons.

The sequel to *Tron* gets a bad rep as just another example of Hollywood cannibalising itself and I can't in good conscience describe it as a good film but the audio and visual design is stunning and the partnership with Daft Punk is inspired. The opener, 'Overture', is pure blockbuster bombast. Hubris clobbered by nemesis, indeed. This then slides into 'The Grid' before the sublime 'Son Of Flynn', each sketching out SF worlds in less than two minutes each.

Meanwhile 'Surf Solar', the opening track of *Tarot Sport*, is ten and half minutes of escalating, unrestrained sense of wonder. For some reason, it always puts me in mind of space elevators; the optimism and drama of Arthur C Clarke's *The Fountains Of Paradise* and gothic destruction of *Chasm City* by Alastair Reynolds. 'Surf Solar' is truly epic and listening to it whilst driving on the motorway is likely to lead to your license being endorsed.

*Y Dydd Olaf* is a rather different kettle of fish, both for its tone and its use of words. In fact, its surface is remarkably sunny for a dystopia, perhaps not surprising from an artist whose previous outfit was The Pipettes. But I say 'surface' since the aforementioned 'Patriarchaeth' marries a bouncy electro beat and soaring vocals to the following refrain: "Patriarchy, and your soul is under siege". But I only know that because I looked it up.

As the album progress, the production becomes increasingly harried by robotic noises of the sort that make *The Middle Of Nowhere* my default 'bloody hell, the future's out to get me' album. There are even pwew-pwew laser noises as 'Sisial Y Môr' fades out. But what does it all mean? You can clearly pick up the rejection of purist folk revival and the embrace of a counter-narrative built around industrial

heritage; simplistically, a sonic melding of north and south Wales. Still, a lot of context and hence nuance is striped out by my inability to understand the lyrics which means that, unlike the other examples above, I feel like I am missing half the picture.

So I can tell you 'Fratolish Hiang Perpeshki' is the standout track on the album and I that a big part of why I love it is Saunders's phrasing but I can't tell you what she is saying. Interestingly, however, the album comes with an accompanying suite of remixes including a radical re-interpretation of this song by TOY. This howling, violent version is perhaps more accessible for being entirely abstract (though certainly not better).



Despite all this equivocation, I can wholeheartedly recommend the album to you. If you only want to own one Welsh language... well, make it *Mwng* by Super Furry Animals. If you want to own two, buy *Y Dydd Olaf*. And I'm sure random music recommendations is exactly why you are a member of the BSFA. Still, this column was certainly less outright ill-conceived that one of my scraped editorial ideas to review the 2013 Tom Cruise film *Oblivion* based solely on its soundtrack. My notes include such baffling scribbles as "same setting as *The Lion King*?" and "Morgan Freeman = giant spider" so I think you can probably count yourself lucky.

**Martin Petto**  
Editor, BSFA Review



**Twelve Tomorrows, edited by Bruce Sterling  
(MIT Technology Review, 2014)****Reviewed by Shaun Green**

**B**ruce Sterling needs little introduction and nor does the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *Twelve Tomorrows*, perhaps, does. It's a relatively new tradition for the university's *MIT Technology Review* magazine, first appearing in 2011 as *TRSF*, a science fiction anthology containing twelve stories, each ostensibly focusing on a distinct area of technology plus a gallery of one's artist's work.

Come 2013, the format had altered slightly; now titled *Twelve Tomorrows* and in the stewardship of the same editor, it still contained twelve stories and a gallery but also introduced a Q&A with an additional author and allowed its writers to range wherever in the near future they wished. This brings us to last year's edition with Sterling as guest editor: a Q&A, a gallery and... nine short stories. The twelfth tomorrow is a book review. Irrespective of your thoughts on the non-fiction inclusions, I was surprised that here we have only 75% of the stories one might reasonably expect based on the anthology's pedigree and title, particularly given the precedent set by the 2011 and 2013 collections.

Let's look at what we do have. The anthology opens with Lauren Beukes's 'Slipping', which imagines a relaxation of sporting regulations permitting athletes to enhance themselves technologically. This, of course, is driven by the neoliberal impulse to open everything up to markets. Where better to let potential contractors to Big Pharma and the defence industries test zombie mind control, brain-dead soldiers in augmented power armour, gene-spliced furies and pseudo-organic cyborgs than track and field? The concept sounds funny but Beukes plays it straight and lets the humanity of her characters shine through the implicit grimness of her concept.

The big-name draw for this anthology is undoubtedly William Gibson. His writing oozes studied post-corporate cool, very slick and smart; it's highly readable even as you want to simultaneously throw up and slap his characters (which is fine; I'm sure they're not intended to be likable). 'Death Cookie/Easy Ice' is nominally about a tribe of people who sort-of fixed the Great Pacific garbage patch – that vile maelstrom of plastic particulate and rubbish in the North Pacific Gyre that's spread at least as wide as Texas – and ended up living on it, and who may or may not be practicing cannibalism, seriously extensive body modification and weirder stuff besides. The next ambassador the outside world is sending down is a performance artist and if she has a plan beyond gliding down there and trying to get naked no one talks about it. This is confusing but no less so than the violence that constitutes a conclusion. It turns out that this story is stitched together from early chapters of *The Peripheral*, Gibson's latest novel. Context, I guess, comes later; here we just get opacity. Lovely prose, though.

More sensibly structured but sadly less engaging was Pat Cadigan's 'Business As Usual'. Some pleasant and mildly humorous characterisation aside, it's not got much to say. What it does offer largely concerns the "internet of things" and talking to fridges, which are literally the two public perceptions of this area of tech that a later story jokingly mocks. Unfortunate. 'Business As Usual' is supposed to be funny because it is funny for a fridge to ask penetrating questions about human nature because it doesn't understand the lying and self-destructive impulses of its owners and it *can be* funny that the default corporate

response to ethical problems is usually to sweep them under the rug but it would be nice if the story had either something more to add to these ideas or, indeed, a better joke. As it is, this story is merely cute.

Another story that falls a little short is Warren Ellis's 'The Shipping Forecast' but I liked it a lot more. He's written special ops espionage, sneaky violence and naturalistic humour many times before and here pulls it off again. He also does a fine line in incidental worldbuilding, economically pulling off a vivid snapshot of a world altered by economic shift and climate change as well as London's place within that. Overall the tale is a delivery vector for an idea about why corporate power might choose to do something off-grid, which is interesting to read and nod along to but which doesn't occupy the mind subsequently. Still: an interesting idea packaged in an engaging story is the modus operandi of the science fiction short and therefore why am I expecting more? Because I like Ellis's work, I suppose.

A number of stories in this anthology can be thematically drawn together, albeit loosely, because all concern the concept of 'disruption', a market theory term that's gained popularity in common parlance, both in that context and in reference to technological disruption. When you're talking futurism in the Western world, you're talking both, and so it is with the stories by Christopher Brown, Cory Doctorow and Paul Graham Raven. Happily, none of these authors plump for the tidy, predictable narrative of a new technology disrupting the world and making it better.

Brown's 'Countermeasures' opens with high-tech espionage and follows that with some public/private political collusion, all of which should be exciting but left me cold. I suspect the self-conscious bleeding edge futurist vibe is probably why and that's just personal preference. Happily, I found something for me once the story developed a little more and forayed into idea territory. 'Countermeasures' manages to blend an interesting cocktail from the role of crowdsourcing and social networking in post-internet revolution political consciousness, the labour value of user-generated content on web services built on same and entrepreneurial disruption as personal-political liberation.

I went into Doctorow's 'Petard: A Tale Of Just Deserts' with reservations: I like Doctorow because his bouncy writing tends to carry you along but I find his politics suspiciously neat (if, in essence, agreeable). Happily, while this tale opens up with a plucky young techhead who is working to #changetheworld with his open source #TechActivism that could be a business but doesn't need to be because #OldModelsAreStupidAndObsolete, it wrongfoots you and darts into less travelled territory. Rather than simply being about the smart young things beating the dinosaurs of big business and changing the world for the better, it looks instead at how existent power structures could seduce the smart young things with the appeal of clever modern business models and exciting problem-solving challenges. It draws a potentially uncomfortable link between the sociopathy of corporate structure and power, and techheads who are more obsessed with problems than people. It's one of my favourites from this collection.

Another favourite, Raven's 'Los Piratas Del Mar De Plastico' appears right after Gibson's contribution and, given the title, I worried that it would also concern the Pacific garbage patch. Happily the plastic ocean in question is a vast field of greenhouses in Southern Spain, an impoverished region which receives the bounteous gift of piratical

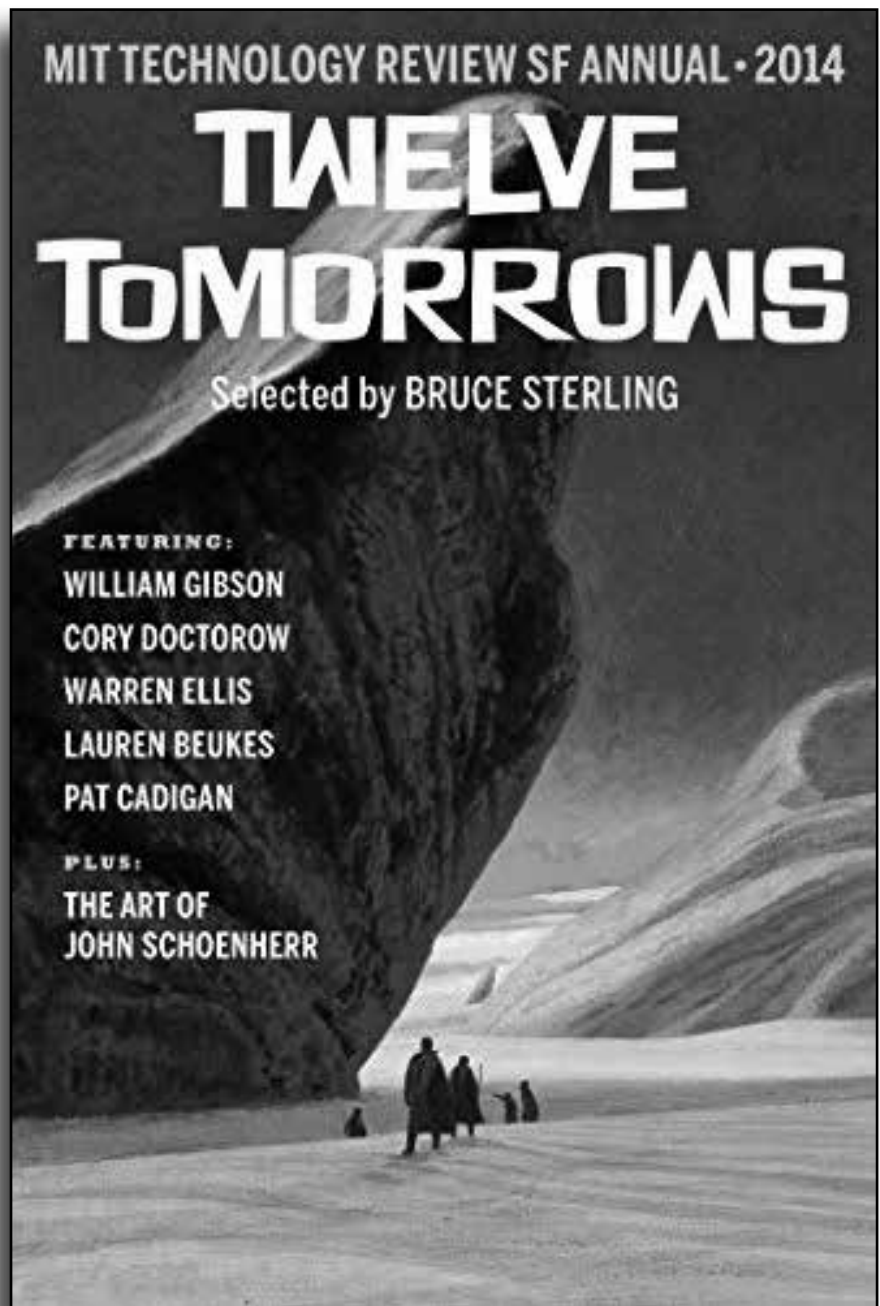
entrepreneurs swanning in to disrupt and profit. Raven's prose is dense and chewy - in stark contrast with Gibson's sharp, fragmented style - but his voice soon establishes itself. The story concerns the confluence of technology, business, grey/black markets and, more importantly, what's left behind after they move on as well as alternatives to the meta-narrative of 'wealth creation'. I enjoyed it for its earthiness, empathy and thoughtfulness, even if it does commit a minor sin with one character's slightly cringeworthy Glaswegian dialect.

Joel Garreau's 'Persona' is about the bifurcation of personalities into clone receptacles - to facilitate multi-tasking, basically - and their subsequent re-integration, all through the prism of academics and academia. The experiment is all going reasonably well until the media catch wind of it. 'Persona' could easily be a 'science gone wrong!' or 'conservatives hate science!' story but after leading you up that road it surprises you with an ambush. The concluding events failed to convince me - they don't at all follow from the characters as previously established - but I still liked the tale for its clever ideas and sleight of hand.

Finally we have Sterling himself. It is generally frowned upon to include yourself in an anthology you're editing but this is Sterling so I'm sure we'll all forgive him. 'The Various Mansions Of The Universe' follows an older married couple, one of whom has died and been brought back thanks to some advanced medical tech. The other underwent the same procedures in an act of solidarity. Now they're hunting for a place to live that fits them psychologically and grumbling about the world as it is and was along the way. It's largely an excuse for Sterling to explore and expound upon some of his ideas, on which your mileage may vary (I find it frustrating that he doesn't bother reiterating his conceptual frameworks; you just have to run with him, though it is a fascinating run) but either way the story is carried by the emotional warmth of its protagonist duo.

As for the non-fiction components, the Gene Wolfe Q&A is interesting and ranges widely for a short interview, offering lots of tidbits to chew on, though I'm not sure how it connects with the general thematic territories the collection otherwise explores. It leaves me wanting to read more Wolfe, though, which is inherently good.

I was similarly puzzled by the John Schoenherr gallery, much as I enjoyed the prints of his *Dune* work. There's no introduction to contextualise the art included and the obvious argument - that it represents 'futurist visions of antiquity' in an effort at juxtaposition - doesn't stand as that's not what any of the pieces present are about. Still, they're nice pictures and the 'Jaenshi Warrior' illustrations introduced me to a new source of George Lucas's rampant plagiarism, so I learned something too.



We end with Peter Swirski's review of Stanislaw Lem's *Summa Technologiae*, which - you may sense a pattern - also threw me a little. It left me wanting to read this fifty-year old book, which is wonderful, but why is it reviewed here? It's not a 2014 connection as it was translated into English for the first time in 2013; Swirski's other review of this book (available online at Skefia and io9) even describes its publication as "one of the main literary events of 2013". The closest I can come to a convincing theory is that it demonstrates how a thoughtful scientist and writer can imagine futures that need not date quickly.

*Twelve Tomorrows* is a strong collection of stories, perhaps largely because MIT and Bruce Sterling carry such substantial SF cultural cachet and their professional interests lend the solicited writers some thematic common ground. I'm slightly perturbed by the reduced number of stories as well as the selection process for the non-fiction inclusions but, those concerns aside, this book offers a good mix of entertaining reads and food for the grey matter, comprising a respectable variety of both cautionary and hopeful visions of tomorrow.

***Glorious Angels* by Justina Robson  
(Gollancz, 2015)**

***Reviewed by Dan Hartland***

In a year in which the Hugo Awards have been hijacked by sectional interests seeking to stamp a retrograde and backward-looking character upon the genre, Justina Robson's *Glorious Angels* sounds as a rallying call amidst the din of battle. Perhaps that tilt at topicality does the book a disservice, however: Robson's tenth novel – and her first since completing the *Quantum Gravity* series in 2011 – is wholly uninterested in point-scoring or easy proselytizing. It is a novel which, for all its gender politics and alternative sexualities, offers its riposte to the *atavistes* not in any particular analogue or allegory but in its complexity and nuance, its refusal to take a single form.

*Glorious Angels* follows a clutch of high-powered characters at the heart of a palimpsest of political conspiracies in the far-future city (or secondary world) of Glimshard, one of the Eight: a collection of cities which taken together form a sort of loosely federated Empire. Those elisions and almost-contradictions are typical of a novel which spends much of its time placing people, concepts and structures in a variety of combinations, forcing flux upon the reader and in so doing calling into effective question any underlying assumptions first about the text and then, of course, about the world beyond it.

Glimshard is a matriarchy but this is almost the least interesting thing about it. In publicity for the novel Robson has been at pains to stress that *Glorious Angels* "isn't meant as a manifesto or a conclusion"; it seems a shame she even has to point that out but it's nevertheless important to any reading of the novel that the reader accepts it as, again in Robson's words, "its own odd thing". Indeed, gynocracy is not taken as the sole defining characteristic of Glimshard's society, nor a wholly positive one. Rather, it merely is, as are the spa-cum-brothels in which men are encouraged to rut away their desires with women who have volunteered for the experience ("she was open to anything, so long as she felt that she was in the controlling position of the bestower"); and as are the Karoo, the alien creatures from the far north and deep south who have been stirred into action after years of isolationism by a mysterious archaeological dig which is occasioning war.

The Karoo are weird in both the banal and the literary sense: they are unknowable, ineffable and terrifying. No single Karoo, we learn, is the same as another – making flesh the novel's abiding interest in infinite diversity – and their drives and agendas remain to us a mystery. They are represented in Glimshard by Tzaban, a 'defective' Karoo who cannot properly link telepathically with his kind as all other Karoo can; in his appeals first to the Empress and then, more importantly for the narrative, to the novel's protagonist, the professor of Engineering, anti-war activist

and regime spy Tralane Huntingore, Tzaban seeks to bridge unplumbable depths. It is part of the novel's bravery that he does not – cannot – wholly succeed. "He must explain things and bridge it," we read as Tzaban scolds himself at one point, "but he stalled, unable even to start."

Indeed, the partiality of all knowledge – and therefore of all communication – is a *leit motif* of *Glorious Angels*. Though Tralane is respected across Glimshard for her unrivalled ability to reverse-engineer the many technologies left to the Empire by mages long passed, she does not truly understand how they *work*. This includes even her home, a magical remnant of that past civilization: "Nobody that the head of the house deemed unfitting would be able to enter any opening in Huntingore ... and [she] longed to know the methods and the powers they used then, but the door and window seals were only a fragment of the things she didn't know." This absence of totality

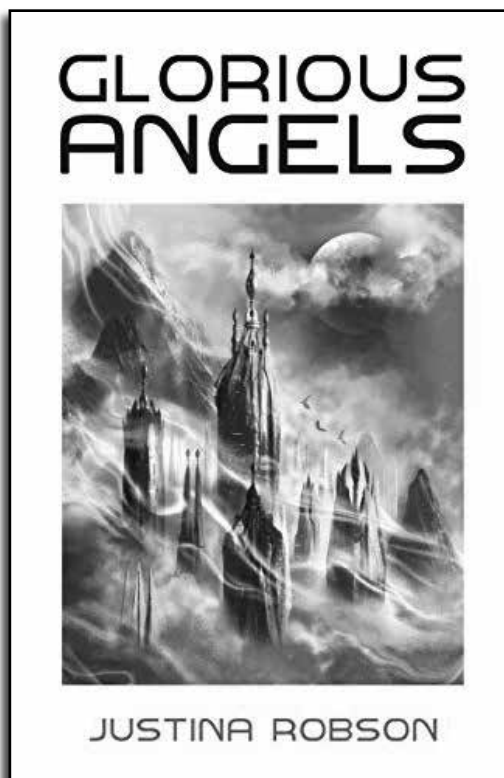
defines the novel and its world, and represents its beating heart: *Glorious Angels* has no final word to say on any subject. That is its conclusion.

We see this in the ambiguous sexualities of all the characters but most clearly in the compromised playboy and spy, Zarazin Mazhd. When we first meet him, we learn he has loved Tralane from afar for years, respecting her whilst gladly serving many powerful women; but he also resents the patriarchy: "men are free to refuse the advances of women, although they would be sorry and stupid to refuse women of any power," he complains in one of the novel's characteristic moments of Janus-faced nuance. When the Empress herself muses that Glimshard should be declared "the city of Alchemy", the novel shows its hand: it is about how *any* combination may be made to work in one way or another.

There is an extent to which all these iterations – all this iterising? – works to make a strength of

Robson's dilatory tendencies. The last of her novels to be shortlisted for a major genre prize, *Living Next Door To The God Of Love*, was an often wildly inventive affair set in the same world as her *Natural History*; it was also somewhat marred, for this reviewer at least, by a decided lack of focus, even a nonchalance, when it came to questions of pace. *Glorious Angels*, too, boasts a cavalier structure – in this sizeable novel, fully its first half, and arguably its opening two thirds, essentially act as set-up – but such is the alliance here between theme and voice that Robson's double-edged talents as an author – her fondness for detail and extraneity – are threaded adroitly into the whole. If the plot-driven final furlong of the novel is not as compelling as the almost soapy atmospherics that go before it, that is a small price to pay for a novel thus aligned.

Capacious and open, intelligent and wry, *Glorious Angels* offers multiple pleasures of character, setting and theme and is never less than entirely itself: for every nod to the Emerald City or to Ursula LeGuin, it feels uniquely its own thing – memorably, troublingly so. It may, then, be the quintessential Justina Robson novel, at just the time we need it.



**The Bees by Laline Paull (Fourth Estate, 2014)****Reviewed by Martin McGrath**

**W**hy would an author write a story in which the main characters are bees? One reason might be simply that bees are interesting little creatures – fascinatingly social, successful, widespread and apocryphally busy – and we are intimately familiar with them. Their hives and lives offer the writer useful opportunities for allegory and metaphor. Or, perhaps, though we are familiar with bees their experiences are so entirely outside our own that they can also play the role of exotic aliens – seeing the same world as we do but in a radically different way. A third reason might be that as the bee struggles with environmental disruption – climate change, disease, pesticides – these little bugs offer the writer an opportunity to comment on humanity’s dysfunctional relationship with nature.

Laline Paull’s debut novel, *The Bees*, uses bits of all three of these elements and part of its weakness is trying to do too much without being convincing about any one point. Still, it’s worth starting by discussing what the book does rather well. In imagining the bee society – dominated by females and with a central character driven by a powerful maternal instinct – this book’s most interesting aspect is the prominence it gives to the female view. The peculiar institutions of the hive are driven by sisterhoods and a central character’s concerns are distinctively womanly. Some reviews compare the book to Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (a comparison which doesn’t do this slighter novel any favours) and some resonances are clear.

But *The Bees* is only a partially successful novel. The plot is over familiar. A girl, born to low circumstances and living in a corrupt state that imposes rigid conformity upon its citizens, discovers that she has extraordinary powers. She travels through her society, magically excelling at everything she does, becoming embroiled in the machinations of the ruling elite and becoming the tool that smashes the existing equilibrium. Had Flora 717, the protagonist, been given a bow and arrows instead of wings and a stinger then she could very easily have dropped into this story from *The Hunger Games*. Flora’s hive often feels more like a Hollywood high school movie with the pretty girls in charge and competing for the attention of pomaded (the male bees actually wear pomade...) jocks who act like jerks. While Flora is well realised, the supporting characters are overly familiar; shallow, unmistakably human and frequently buzz too close to caricature.

It is, however, the perverseness of taking a creature that is almost defined by their intensely social nature and using them to write a story of the triumph of the individual will that is most bewildering. For much of the novel I kept expecting the other shoe to drop and for Paull to make some sort of point about the value of individual freedom versus the collective will but if that’s her intention she does it in a rather odd way. Flora may overthrow the corrupt regime but

she struggles simply to replace one sickly, but well-meaning, queen with another, more ruthless one, who wrests control by violence. Paull turns out not to be very interested in whether this is a good thing. Perhaps her point is that this is nature, the strong will prosper, but if that is what she wants us to think then it is a peculiar moment of ruthless realism in a book that plays fast and loose with other laws of nature.

Paull’s story is not one of revolution so much as it is one of individual exceptionalism which is both a bit dull and a bit worrying. Dull because of the grinding inevitability of Flora’s triumph, she is magically brilliant at everything. Worrying because Flora’s superiority is revealed to be due to genetics,

she is the product of the queen’s mating with “one of those fierce black wanderers from the far south”. The magical ‘half-breed’ is an unpleasant cliché that I’d be happy never to read again and the genes-make-the-ruler idea made me deeply uncomfortable.

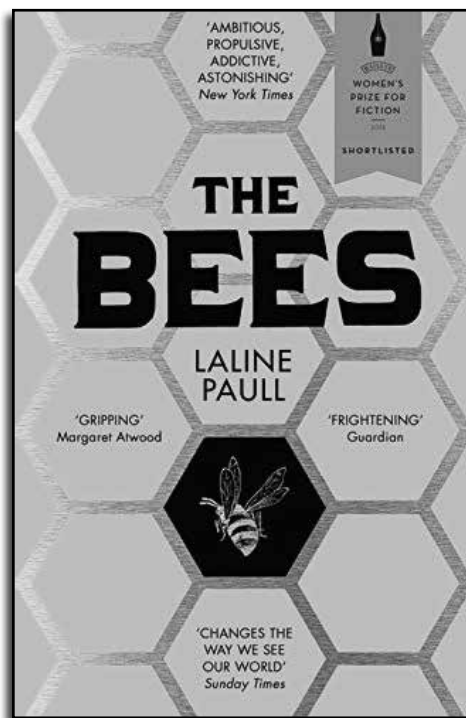
Paull’s well-meaning but simplistic environmental message doesn’t help much. She relies on an almost childishly crude ‘man bad, nature good’ dichotomy that is undermined by her simply getting things wrong. Crops sprayed with pesticide become a charnel field: “The earth was littered with bodies... a bloated mouse stared up with white eyes. Dead sparrows lay between the plant stalks, their beaks open and their tiny tongues dried grey. Between them were dead bees, countless numbers of them, and wasps, and flies, their bodies speckled with the pale grey film...”. It’s a striking passage. Pesticides do damage animals of all kinds but not like this. Nor, despite the Internet myth, are bees

being confused, trapped and killed by mobile phone masts so that the ground is littered with hapless once-buzzing corpses.

The passage that (perhaps illogically) enraged me most is the moment when crows – those clever but lumbering carrion-eaters – are portrayed hunting bees on the wing, even snapping butterflies from the air as they pass. It seems preposterous that anyone that’s ever seen a crow (or a bee fly) could write down something like this but there it is. The moment doesn’t matter in terms of the story being told but it adds to the sense that this book, which puts so much emphasis on nature, has been written by someone who doesn’t have any deep connection to that world.

There are nice passages in *The Bees* and some interesting ideas – Paull’s writing is not irredeemable – but, fundamentally, I didn’t like the book. I don’t like the *Watership Down* of these bugs, the flat supporting characters or the lazy representation of nature. Our environment is important. Humanity needs to change a lot of the ways in which we interact with our planet. But I don’t see how it helps us to replace one set of wrongheaded ideas (man as the master) with another set of wrongheaded notions (animals are cute versions of us).

And so I come back to my initial question: why would an author write a story in which the main characters are bees? Having finished this book I’m still not entirely sure that I understand what Paull hoped to deliver but, whatever it was, I don’t believe it has been achieved.





**Rook Song by Naomi Foyle**  
(Jo Fletcher Books, 2015)

*Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller*

Every time I read a novel by Naomi Foyle, I ask myself the same question: why does she write science fiction when she has so little affinity for it? I use the word 'affinity' with great care here, for I believe it is possible to write a successful SF novel without having read that much SF. But I also believe it is possible to read a great deal of SF and still fail to write it if, at some fundamental level, you just don't get it. And I don't think Naomi Foyle really gets SF. Or, rather, I think she understands its surfaces but its deeper levels are lost to her.

Her first novel, *Seoul Survivors* (2013), described on her website as a 'cyber-chiller', was a near-future pre-apocalypse novel written as though she'd heard about cyberpunk from someone who had read William Gibson's *Neuromancer* a long time ago. All the markers of cyberpunk were in evidence yet, as a whole, the story made very little sense, while the characters were so thinly drawn as to be negligible.

*Astra* (2014), the first of the *Gaia Chronicles*, went to the opposite extreme. Foyle built her world in elaborate detail in full view of the reader but the end result was equally implausible. Here, the premise was that an ecotastrophe of some sort had prompted a large group of Gaia-worshippers to move eastward across Europe to find a place where they might live in an appropriately ecological fashion. The country was called Is-Land, while the world beyond the boundaries they created became Non-Land. The indigenous people were simply expelled from this new Garden of Eden.

Is-Land became a totalitarian state, its creation myth carefully reinforced by a youth fertility cult. Compulsory service in IMBOD, the organisation that maintained Is-Land's borders, was accompanied by treatment to ensure compliancy among the younger generations of the population. Astra's Shelter-mother was one of few who believed the treatment eliminated creativity. As a result, she faked Astra's receipt of the treatment. This in turn placed Astra in danger as her lack of conformity became evident.

The novel ended with Astra being exiled from Is-Land, having realised that the Is-Land elders were withholding information about the outside world. She also intended to find her Non-Lander father. Astra was clearly also the subject of a prophecy about the star girl who would sort out everything. This was fairly predictable narrative fare. All that was truly notable about *Astra* was how just long it took Foyle to get to the point. Little was shown, much was told.

In *Rook Song*, Astra has crossed the border, into the care of the humanitarian Council of New Continents (CONC), and is witness to the reality of life in Non-Land in her new role as naïf abroad. The short version is that it's crowded, noisy, there's not enough to go round and many of the people are

living on top of toxic waste dumps which cause cancers and birth defects. It is a very familiar life. Various political groups are struggling for control, while a group of young activists, many of whom are 'alt-bodied' as a result of the effects of the toxins, are trying to make their voices heard through artistic interventions that everyone else tries to ignore. Unsurprisingly, they immediately recognise Astra as the fulfilment of the prophecy.

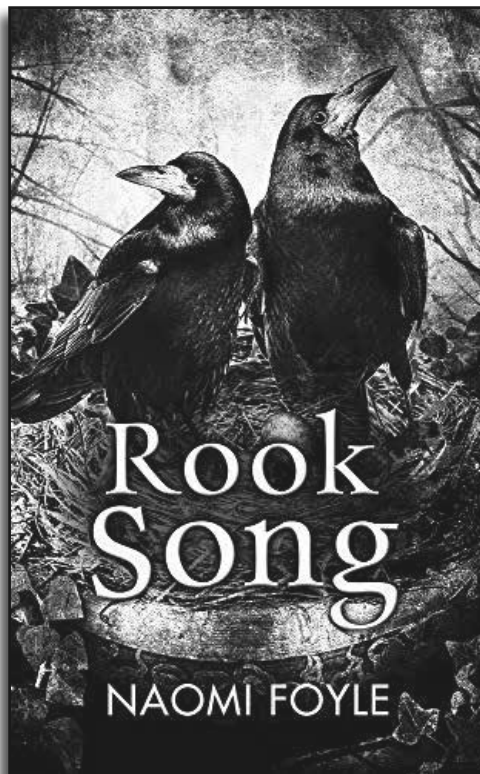
Foyle has undoubtedly thoroughly researched all of the many issues she engages with in *Rook Song*. The novel's acknowledgements abundantly testify to this. And yet, despite all this research, too many things ring a little hollow. Foyle's portrayals of humanitarian disaster feel superficially realistic in that I too have seen all this online and in the papers but there is no sense of her going deeper into people's

stories. Her displaced people too often seem to perform their condition in an unsettlingly stereotypical 'Near East' fashion as the reader's focus lingers on them and this is not merely because we see them through Astra's ill-informed eyes.

Likewise, I feel very uneasy at times about Foyle's portrayals of the alt-bodied, who seem a little too often to function as Magic Cripples within the story. The acknowledgements suggest that Foyle has received approval and support for what she's doing but I remain concerned that prophecy is the purview of the physically and ethnically othered within the story, rather as Una Dayyani, leader of the Non-Landers of the region, is represented more by what she wears and by the state of her manicure than by what she does. While we understand that Dayyani is deliberately careful of her image, what we are given fits within a certain casual perception of so-called third-world leaders.

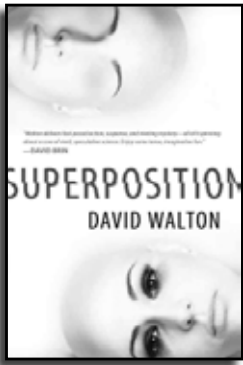
Admirable as Foyle's research might be, just because it is thorough does not mean she shows a nuanced understanding of the issues involved. For that matter, thorough research doesn't necessarily produce a story. It is giving nothing away to say that by the end of the novel Astra is no further forward in her quest than she was at the beginning, although along the way her previous understanding of the world has been unsurprisingly dismantled. Of course, given Astra is the star girl of the prophecy, all we need to do is wait for the inevitable ending, unless Foyle has a coup de théâtre up her sleeve for the concluding volume, which I very much doubt.

My impression is that for Foyle, science fiction is little more than a sand box for experiments in literary long form, providing off-the-peg stories for her to work with. This would be tolerable if Foyle produced well-crafted narratives. Instead, *Rook Song* is a series of tropes awkwardly slotted together, the gaping holes stuffed with research to provide structural integrity. There is no attempt to either extrapolate or innovate. As a result, while Foyle may be testing herself in trying to write science fiction she is also testing the patience of the reader by expecting them to read such hackneyed, ill-wrought fiction.



***Superposition* by David Walton (Pyr, 2015)*****Reviewed by Gary Dalkin***

**S***uperposition* is a science fiction novel based on an interesting pair of superimposed ideas. The first is that there are intelligent beings at the quantum level of reality; beings as strange and unknown to us as we are to them. The second idea builds upon the notion of sub-atomic particles being in two places at once - and speculates as to some of the consequences of quantum effects acting at a macro level.



One winter's night two years after Jacob Kelley resigns from the New Jersey Super Collider, Brian Vanderhall, an old colleague, turns up on his doorstep, fearful and panicked. He demonstrates to Jacob how he has made a breakthrough which enables him to produce quantum effects on everyday objects. But then Brian fires a bullet through - or possibly around - Jacob's wife and flees into the night. The next day Jacob and his brother-in-law Marek go to Brian's

lab, and in short order encounters Vanderhall's bullet-holed corpse, the manifestation of a quantum eyeless 'man' who steps out of a mirror, and a very much alive Brian, who is quickly absorbed in the quantum entity Marek dubs a 'varcolac', after a creature from Romanian legend.

Jacob has reason to suspect the varcolac may harm his family and races home to discover them simultaneously dead and disappeared. He finds himself living two possible lives, one in which he is arrested for Brian's murder and put on trial, the other in which he evades custody and sets out, with his surviving daughter, to trace the real killer and save the rest of his family before the probability wave resolves, leaving them permanently dead and the two Jacobs merged back into one. Chapters alternate between the court case - ridiculously, an entire murder trial is enacted in a week - and the 'man on the run trying to prove his innocence save his family and find the real killer' formula beloved of bad American mini-series and movies.

While acknowledging the varcolac might not be malicious, Walton uses them as nothing more than a threat to the wholesome integrity of his hero's all American family. Which may be why there is not even a mention of CERN, thus avoiding the question as to why the America of the 2030s has its own phenomenally expensive super collider. Whereas Greg Bear's *Blood Music* used a comparable concept to transform the world, *Superposition* resolves as a deeply conservative ode to American values, its prime directive the restoration of an apple pie status quo.

Towards the denouement, events become utterly ludicrous in the manner of too many Hollywood thrillers, ending in a welter of action clichés. Even then *Superposition* is so clumsy Walton feels the need, after assorted entry-level lectures on quantum physics throughout the book, to deliver an account of the Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment nine pages from the end. Just in-case someone still hasn't got it. You don't need to open this book though, to know whether it resolves into a living work of fiction, or an entanglement of terminal formula. I've run the experiment for you and was disappointed to observe that *Superposition* is DOA.

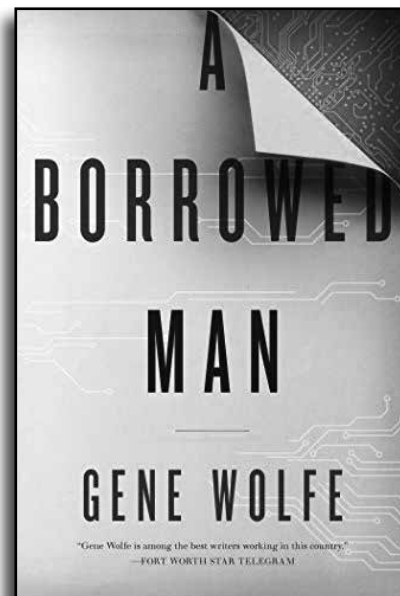
***A Borrowed Man* by Gene Wolfe (Tor, 2015)*****Reviewed by Gary Dalkin***

**T**he narrator of *A Borrowed Man* is a reclone of a dead mystery novel writer, which is to say Ern A Smithe is human but is legally classified as property, a man with the implants of memories scanned from a deceased middle-aged writer residing somewhere in his much younger brain. He is owned by a local library, where he lives on a shelf and is occasionally consulted or checked out. He is not permitted to write new books, for fear they would diminish the reputation of those by his original self. Beyond the library, the earth's population is down to one billion, with political pressure for further reductions. Which explains why if Smithe and his fellow reclones are not borrowed enough they will be burnt. Alive.

Meanwhile those classified as human, at least most of those the novel focuses on, live a life of luxury. There's an obvious political subtext, but not one Wolfe chooses to seriously explore. Ern is a slave, a resource, who like the characters in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* accepts his fundamental place in the scheme of things but, being intelligent, imaginative and optimistic, decides to make the best of it. Perhaps

that's the point - certainly Wolfe never attempts to make plausible the bizarre conceit upon which the novel is based. It's simply a given upon which a routine retro mystery plot is built.

Said plot gets going when Smithe is borrowed by Colette C Coldbrook to assist in solving the mystery of her brother's murder. Her financial genius father recently died and when Conrad Coldbrook Jr opened Conrad Coldbrook Sr's safe, he found



a mystery novel, *Murder On Mars*, by the original Smithe. Colette believes the novel contains a secret to die for and that Ern might help her unlock that secret and find her father's killer. Unfortunately Ern barely remembers his original self writing of the book.

*A Borrowed Man* is, like Al Ewing's far superior *A Fictional Man* (which I reviewed in Vector #274), a literary game. It is rather clever, somewhat arch and, given the threat hanging over the protagonist, inappropriately cosy in a *Columbo* meets *Murder She Wrote* sort of way. Every character is a stereotype, which means the book only has a chance of working if the reader feels able to suspend disbelief. Unfortunately the whole notion of Smithe's character is so unconvincing it is impossible to care what happens. Consequently the novel is entirely tedious, all plot mechanisms discussed at inordinate length, amounting to nothing but one more trip through time worn genre tropes. I didn't buy a single word of *A Borrowed Man* and I recommend you leave Ern A Smithe on the shelf.

**The Madagascar Plan by Guy Saville  
(Hodder and Stoughton, 2015)**

*Reviewed by L J Hurst*

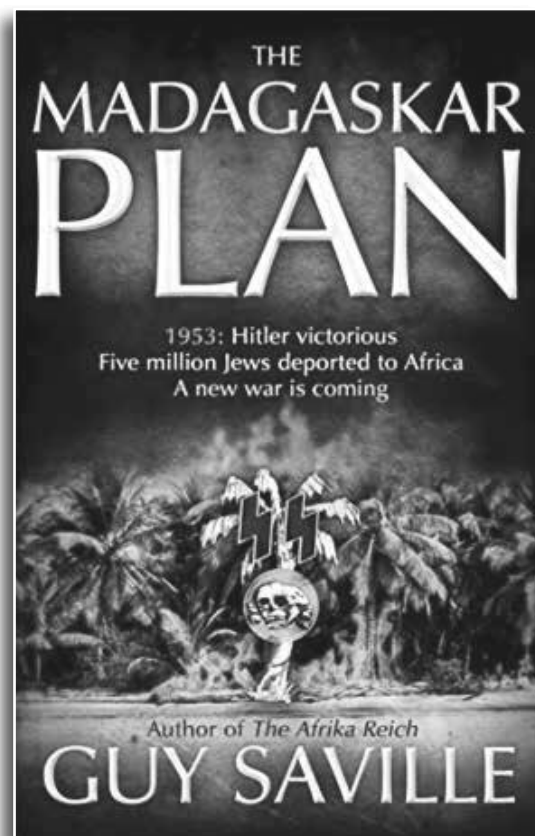
**T**he *Madagascar Plan* is the sequel to *The Afrika Reich* and the prequel to an as yet unannounced third volume. Big books are back in fashion and Guy Saville is definitely writing one: unless I've missed a plot element then this series will not be a trilogy but even larger. On the other hand, given its subject matter, one would hope that it has an end and sooner rather than later.

*The Madagascar Plan* is an alternate history, set in 1952, in which the Nazis have conquered Europe, cowed the United States into near-absolute isolationism, and forced the British Empire to collaborate in their malign plans. Given the early date at which the Nazi forces have won, 1940, there has been no Wannsee Conference to plan the extermination camps, instead the Jews of Europe are being shipped to former French-controlled Madagascar (Saville uses the German spelling), where the SS are simultaneously exploiting their labour and killing them through exhaustion. What is worse, the British have been forced to submit their own Jewish citizens. Meanwhile, the Nazis' racist ideology means that they have occupied the other African colonies and are attempting to exterminate their populations, while the exile governments attempt some resistance along with the native forces.

Against this background, Burton Cole is on a world-wide hunt for the woman he loves who has been sent with a cadre of British prisoners to the penal island. Already, Cole has acquired enemies in the British and Nazi forces, fought so painfully that he has lost an arm, found he has had to collaborate with Europeans who might hate the Nazis but cannot be trusted to love a Briton and, given the general level of double-crossing (even one Nazi does not trust another; their leadership preferring to play divide-and-rule), cannot count on even the assistance of the Maccabees on the island let alone risk the chance of finding a good German.

Historians have been discovering alternate history - or, as they prefer to call it, counterfactualism - for a while. I reviewed 1997's *Virtual History*, edited by Niall Ferguson, and 2005's *The World Hitler Never Made* by Gavriel Rosenfeld for Vector. Rosenfeld has now published *Hi Hitler!* which received a very 'who breaks a butterfly on a wheel?' review from Richard Evans in Guardian. I was surprised until I discovered that Professor Evans himself had tackled the subject in his lecture series, now published as *Altered Pasts*. Usefully, Rosenfeld has a blog, 'The Counterfactual History Review', in which one can find links and reposts and ripostes on the specialised area of Nazism but also accounts of other uses of counterfactualism in academic research. For a long time the go-to place for fans of alternate history has been Robert Schmunk's Uchronia website. The drawback to such a site, though, is that its inherently list-based nature (year by year identify a juncture point of divergence and works based on it) risks hiding the seriousness of counterfactual analysis in a chronological bibliography.

In his earlier volume Rosenfeld introduced the concept of 'normalization': that is, he found that the closer to the War was the work he was studying, the stronger was the condemnation of Nazism. An earlier example of time normalizing the Nazis would be Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, where The Beatles have managed to achieve success in Hamburg, even though we know the Nazis condemned



jive music and sent Swing Kids to concentration camps. Harris was, of course, relying on contrasts, that popular music would develop even while exterminations go on unannounced, for his horrified effect.

Richard Evans rejects the idea of normalization but, supposing it is true, is Saville normalizing? In large and small ways, yes, whether he intends it or not. The size of this volume and of the series as a whole is one example; by contrast, Philip K Dick managed to portray the devastation of Africa in a paragraph in *The Man In The High Castle*. The continuing violence and its scale is another feature of contemporary fictional worlds, written or visual (though Saville has not learned how to kill off his characters unexpectedly so he is behind there). Though the majority of *The Madagascar Plan* is a thriller on steroids, Saville emulates popular history writing, especially that style which now borrows from Mass Observation and other diaries. Chapter 10 ends with a paragraph which seems entirely factual: two thousand British Jews were transported each week, then this sentence: "'Few in Britain are truly anti-Semitic,' observed George Orwell as the first ships departed. 'The majority, however, are indifferent.'" Alternate History always has to take on some foreign form as it does not have one of its own (See my essay 'What If - Or Worse: Alternate History in Context' in *Vector* #202), so here it takes on the shape of a history book. Steroids and history, though? Consistency in that way is not Saville's strong point but it does not have to be.

The British experience at Dunkirk provides the point of divergence in both the real world and the world of *The Madagascar Plan*. Either path, though, gave the Nazis control of Europe. Anything after 1933 was going to be tainted. With Saville's invention one can experience the horrified thrill of another way the Second World War could have gone to the worse but the greatest alternate history has yet to be written: 'Neville Chamberlain Victorious'. The author of that would need to burn the midnight lamp.

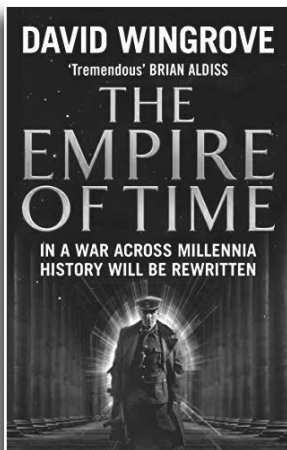
**The Empire Of Time by David Wingrove  
(Del Rey UK, 2014)**

*Reviewed by Graham Andrews*

**“W**ho controls the past,” George Orwell was good enough to tell us in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, “controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.” David Wingrove might have used that quotation as an epigraph for *The Empire Of Time*, the first volume of his *Roads To Moscow* three-book singular novel.

I found it hard to read my way into *The Empire of Time*. The six-page CHARACTER LIST runs to 105 names, both imaginary and real. Otto Behr is the viewpoint character, a *Reisende* (German for time traveller) who takes his own sweet, well, time in telling us just what the Hell – or Asgard – is going on here. His side – the Germans, which I’m not at all sure, yet, is the ‘good’ side – is fighting up and down a three-millennial timeline to prevent the other side – the Russians, which I’m not at all sure, yet, is the ‘bad’ side – from winning the *Rassenkampf* (racial war). They certainly seem bent on giving Adolf Hitler a helping hand. At one point, Behr poses as an envoy from the Confederation of North American States, which is an irrelevant barbarian backwater. The British Empire, United Kingdom, whatever, has no significant part to play in this quantum-jump drama – so far, at any rate.

The extensively re-complicated plot is matched by equally complex background detail: technology indistinguishable from magic, counterfactual history, counter-fictional facts, intricate personal relationships and unexplained – or unexplainable – terminology. What is all this hectic talk about the Chain of Time, the goddess Urd, *Adels*, Q-balls that “zip through anything, even the burning heart of stars,” and Four-Oh, where the strangely few



Germanic tempunauts hang out when they’re not time-jumping (and which reminds me of the ‘Place’ in Fritz Leiber’s classic novel, *The Big Time*)? The reader is given little or no chance to take anything in before being flung into the story – no, stories – proper. I have no firm answers to give you, just a whole lot more indefinite questions.

I can say, however, that Wingrove issues us with a fair warning. From his introduction: “It might be noted at the outset that this work is told, not in a

direct chronological fashion, but by great leaps forwards and back through time. That is, I’d argue, how it should be. It is, after all, a time travel novel.” {We experience} “all that happens through Otto’s eyes, through Otto’s thoughts; sharing each moment as he experiences it, and, by that means, giving the reader the very feel of travelling in time.” Point well taken, David.

By its very nature, the first volume of a trilogy is difficult – if not impossible – for anyone to review with precision or confidence. Having said that, *The Empire of Time* does move, hold the interest and there is a satisfactory ‘teaser’ ending. And now the past-to-present and-back-again peregrinations of Otto Behr will control a significant part of my own book-reading future, on the Sat Nav-free road to Moscow.

**The Seventh Miss Hatfield by Anna Caltabiano  
(Gollancz, 2014)**

*Reviewed by Sandra Unerman*

**I**n 1954, eleven year old Cynthia is invited in for lemonade and cookies by a neighbour, Miss Hatfield. As a result of the visit, she becomes immortal and her age is advanced so that she becomes a young woman, the seventh Miss Hatfield. She is then sent time travelling, to New York in 1904, in order to steal a painting from a wealthy industrialist, Charles Beauford. The task proves more difficult than expected and she has to find excuses for staying with the Beauford family. Cynthia cannot remain in any one time period for long so the love she begins to feel for Henley Beauford, Charles’s heir, adds to her troubles as she struggles to complete her mission.

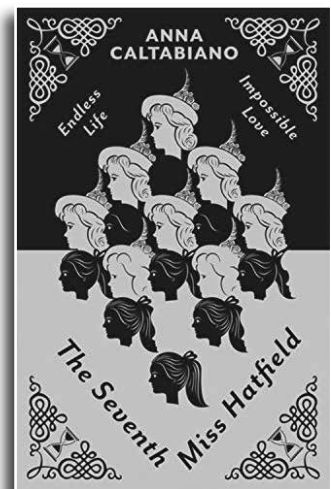
The magic worked on Cynthia separates her mentally and emotionally from her family and her previous life. This is neatly shown as her vocabulary and her reactions change during her initial encounters.

But as a result, it is difficult for her to engage the reader’s sympathy because she is cut off from the feelings that would have been natural to her. Once she embarks on her adventures, she hardly seems to care about her family and she accepts the instructions she is given pretty much without question. The theme of a time traveller who cannot stay anywhere long has plenty of potential and it should combine effectively with the story of a young woman dealing with her first love affair. But Cynthia seems to go through her experiences too lightly, while too many of her actions are guided by other people’s suggestions.

Of the other characters, the most developed is Henley Beauford. He is an engaging young man but he accepts Cynthia’s mysterious intrusion into his family too easily. Their growing relationship is very light hearted, considering the troubles that afflict them both.

Most of the novel is set in 1904 and the physical presence of the period is well evoked: the clothes, the carriages in the streets in New York, the ice cream parlour. There are a few details that do not ring true. Long playing records were not introduced until the Thirties so I doubt that Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony could have been played on a Victrola in 1904. More significantly, people adapt too often to Cynthia’s notions of how things should be, even though there is some attempt to show a different way of life from any she has known. In particular, her attempts to make friends with the servants go more smoothly than is convincing.

Anna Caltabiano wrote this novel when she was seventeen. It works as a light-hearted, well-paced narrative that kept me wanting to turn the pages. But it could have been much stronger, if the time travel theme had been explored in more depth and the characters had had to fight harder for what they care about.





**Dark Star by Oliver Langmead  
(Unsung Stories, 2015)**

*Reviewed by Martin McGrath*

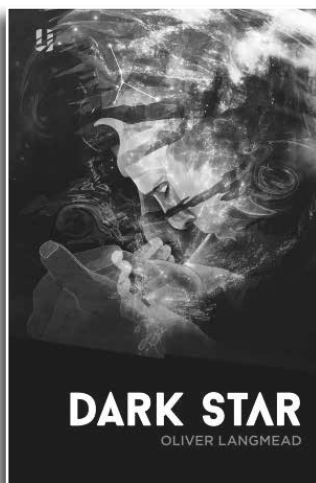
**U**ntold riches and global celebrity: whatever it was that possessed Oliver Langmead to write *Dark Star*, we must hope that it was neither of the above. Because who, in their right mind, writes an science fiction noir (almost literally) detective story in the form of an epic poem? And who, in their right mind, buys such a book?

Reader, I have no answers to those questions. Indeed *Dark Star* is a riddle I have totally failed to solve. In many respects it is a very conventional novel. Its SF part – a human pioneer society gradually devolving on a strange planet – is every bit as familiar as its detective elements – a burnt out cop caught in a web of corruption that's far above his pay grade. The setting is interesting – Vox, a city on a world that circles a star that emits no light. Darkness presses in on all sides and this has created a society where light has become a conspicuous sign of wealth and privilege. This weirdness, however, is undercut by familiarity. The streets our protagonists (Virgil and Dante – I know, right?) walk are not alien, they have been worn smooth by the shoe leather of ten thousand hard-boiled shamuses who passed this way before.

Then you have the form. I'll confess my heart sank at the idea of 200 pages of SF poetry. It seemed as ill-judged a decision as taking a perfectly respectable dog and dressing it as Chewbacca. The first time you see a picture it's mildly amusing. Then you look into the eyes of the dog – the smallest pug or some monstrous wolfhound – and you see the pain and humiliation and you remember that this damned thing had lupine ancestors roaming the steppes and terrorising every creature they met. It doesn't matter how good the Chewbacca costume is (or, in this metaphor-stretching case, the epic poetry), once you've looked into that puppy's eyes it's always going to be the kind of weird that won't go away.

*Dark Star* never quite overcomes this weirdness but the book isn't quite squashed by it either. The form doesn't get in the way – indeed one of the problems is that Langmead doesn't make quite enough of his bold choice. Too often the words can zip by without making the impact that I hoped they would. It's not that *Dark Star* is thoughtlessly written but it's too smoothed off, the words don't poke the reader in the eye as often as they should. Nor did the language have the repetition or formulaic structures that my (limited) experience of epic poems led me to expect.

All that said, it's hard to be unkind to a book written with such preposterous ambition. Just having the idea wins Langmead a great deal of leeway. As a detective story it's an engaging, unlikely tale and as a work of SF it's got a fascinating setting. As a work of epic poetry it was neither quite epic nor quite poetic enough for me but if *Dark Star* is no *Iliad* or *Beowulf* then Langmead is hardly the first author to fall short of that mark.



**Edge Of Dark by Brenda Cooper (Pyr, 2015)  
Reviewed by Stuart Carter**

**S**weeping the dust under the rug is only a temporary solution when tidying your home; doing the same with any cybernetic super-intelligences in your solar system is *at least* as bad an idea. But that's what Brenda Cooper's biological humans have done in her latest novel, *Edge Of Dark*, and now the cybernetic super-intelligences are coming home to roost.

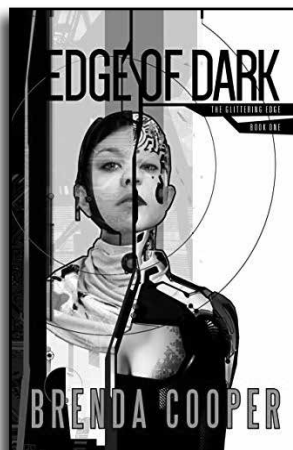
Having been banished to the very edge of the planetary system many years ago, the post-human Next have spent their time growing stronger, faster, smarter and just *better*. The humans at the centre of the system seem mostly to have spent their time shopping and bickering – although some noble souls, such as Charlie, a central character and Ranger on the system's remaining habitable world, Lym, have been working on restoring the wrecked ecosystem. He is thrown together with poor-little-rich-girl Nona, who is visiting Lym for the first time to scatter her father's ashes.

Set in a mature, colonised system where interplanetary travel is a commonplace but interstellar travel is very rare, *Edge Of Dark* deals with a divided humanity struggling to come to terms with itself. Split between a relatively small number of humans living traditional planet-bound lives, many millions more living determinedly non-traditional lives on thousands of independent space colonies and the once-human Next who are not alive at all by some measures, all of these different groups must somehow come to an understanding if they are to inhabit the same system.

Cooper does a marvellous job presenting the pros and cons of becoming a cybernetic super-organism. She also presents the systems humans rather well and that's where *Edge Of Dark* excels: in presenting *all* the system's humans in a sympathetic light. None of them are perfect, no one has a perfect solution to the problems they all face but none are obvious *villains* either. They're just people, making the same mistakes people have always made and attempting to muddle through as best they can. There are no action heroes here – the tense and frightening capture of a space station is viewed from both inside and out with watchers from both viewpoints equally helpless. But there is intrigue and tension aplenty, well managed from an array of unique and likeable characters.

This isn't gung-ho fightin' SF – military solutions barely come into the equation – instead *Edge Of Dark* is about subdued *realpolitik* and characters' attempts to avoid conflict. There's a dark, cold edge to this tale however that's far scarier – and at times just as exhilarating – as going in all guns blazing, especially when written and managed as subtly as here.

There is one confusing aspect: all the unstated backstory. I assumed it was meant to be semi-legendary, like *Battlestar Galactica*, the lost history of a solar system settled in the distant past (and attacked by gleaming cyborgs...) but later discovered previous books set in this universe. Perhaps a timeline could be included in the next book for all us late arrivals?



***In Dark Service* by Stephen Hunt  
(Gollancz, 2014)**

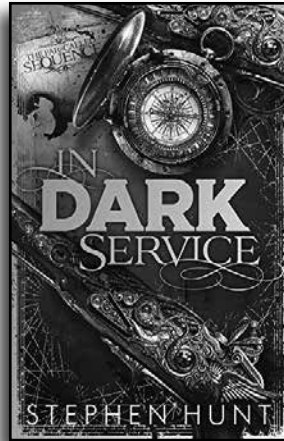
*Reviewed by Kerry Dodd*

Carter Carnehan and Duncan Landor are frustrated with country life; shadowed by parental imposition and expectation, they lust after the excitement of the city and freedom from responsibility. When a bandit airship thunders into this pastoral idyll, ransacking the peaceful town of Northhaven and in the process enslaving its people, the boys realise that their dreams have taken a dark turn. Sold into slavery, their chances of escape look bleak, leaving any apparent chance of salvation on the shoulders of the enigmatic Jacob Carnehan – a clergyman who sets out to rescue his son and buy back the town's captured slaves

As an avid fan of the *Jackelian* series, the start of Stephen Hunt's new series was a mandatory read. *In Dark Service's* twist of fantasy and science fiction with a concoction of epic adventuring, political hierarchy and the extraordinary will be instantly recognisable to those who know his previous work, whilst being fresh, well-paced and accessible to new readers. This adventure spills over with immense and vibrant sceneries, from the volcanic sky-mines to the city of Arcadia, the seemingly endless expanse of the landscape demonstrates Hunt's impressive imagination. The world is splendidly detailed but demands persistence from the reader in order to experience the full effect. Standing at 556 pages long, *In Dark Service* is a novel for which you will want to set aside enough time to engage with its magnitude.

Although slow to start, the book is quick to expand on what becomes its apparent central setting: the Vandian Imperium, a vastly developed country that uses slave labour to extract precious metals from the sky-mines. Capitalising on this monopoly, the Imperium are an awe-inspiring force driven by their lust for financial gain. The inter-warring Vandian family, who clash over social hierarchy, lends a sophisticated and intriguing dimension to the vividly gritty and miserable lives of their slaves. The soul-crushing and relentless atmosphere of the mines adds an emotive edge to the novel, contrasted with Jacob's gripping adventure that leads him on a journey through countries of varying technological advancement and cultures. I was drawn in by the tremendous visual imagery but it is the compelling characters who animated the story.

Yet, personally, I found the later section the most engaging as the narrative expands to an epic scale, leaving hints at a complex world and a mythos that will likely form the rest of the trilogy. Starting with the humble origins of Northhaven, the explosive conflict, imposing monolithic standing stones and haunting supernatural provides a satisfying conclusion that left me wanting to know more about the vibrant backdrop to the compulsive tale of family, duty and human nature. Whilst not for everyone, *In Dark Service* is a testament to Hunt's writing, a rich landscape that offers much to explore in the rest of *The Far-Called Sequence*. I have already started on the second book, *Foul Tide's Turning*.



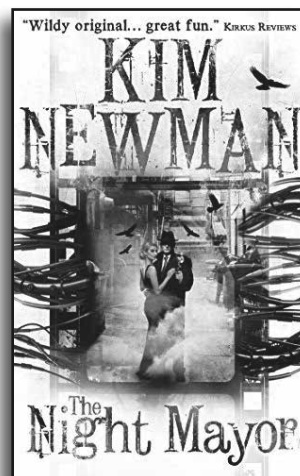
***The Night Mayor* by Kim Newman  
(Titan Books, 2015)**

*Reviewed by Sandra Unerman*

In Kim Newman's first novel, originally published in 1989, Truro Daine, master criminal, is in prison on Dartmoor. He escapes into a virtual reality, the dream of a film noir city, where he is the all-powerful Night Mayor. From here, he plans to return and take control of the outside world. Two professionals, makers of dreams into which others can enter, are sent to find him, despite his power to transform himself into different characters. Their wild adventures, as they struggle to destroy Daine's world before they are absorbed into it, are great fun to read.

Tom Tunney enters the City in the character of his own invented private eye, Richie Quick. His fascination with the movies on which Daine's dream is based is evident from the outset and he soon begins to lose himself in his role. Susan Bishopric, the other dreamer, has a less romantic view of the films, stronger creative powers and a wider repertoire of images. Even so, she struggles against the manipulations of Daine within his own world.

In a novel, words must do the work of the camera in a film. Here, the noir mood is set in the opening sentences: "It was two thirty in the morning, and raining. In the City, it was always two thirty in the morning, and raining." Tom's first person narrative continues to evoke the atmosphere of films like *The Big Sleep* or *Casablanca* and he has the Chanderlesque wisecracks to match.



Susan's episodes have a more upbeat feel, as befits her less sentimental character. She reads *Headlong Hall*, Thomas Love Peacock's early 19<sup>th</sup> Century satire and thinks about her interest in the past as aesthetic archaeology. But she surrenders to the power of music, whether it is Ella Fitzgerald or the Merry Widow Waltz. Her adventures in the city are full of action and energy, as when she dreams up a water monster from Japanese films.

Most of the novel is set in the City, so the reader has the fun of spotting many film characters and actors, often seen in not quite their usual roles. But we are also given glimpses of the near future from which Susan and Tom have come. These contrast both with the film world of the City and with our own reality. Susan is critical of the movies on which the City is based and particularly the limited scope for female characters. For a woman, "It was dangerous to be dangerous back then," she says. The reader can enjoy the film noir setting, see the possibility of different relationships between men and woman in Susan's world (which has its own drawbacks) and reflect on what has or hasn't changed since 1989. So the time lag since the story was written, rather than making it out of date, has added another layer of interest.

The book also contains four short stories. These concern murder, films and game playing, so they provide variations in miniature on the themes of the novel.



