

# Vector

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



**No. 284**

**Summer 2016**

**£4.00**

# Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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Published by the BSFA Ltd © 2016 ..... ISSN 05050448

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# Torque Control

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**I**nadvertently, this issue of *Vector* seems to have become something of a meditation on history and how we represent it in fiction – on what we owe to reality when we write, and particularly when we write science fiction. In addition to regular columns from Andy Sawyer, Steven Baxter, and Paul Kincaid, we have a series of articles that question our relationship with history and the impact that we have when we rewrite old stories, whether factual or fictional. Firstly, Andrew Wallace has recorded and written up an interview that took place between Edward Cox and the BSFA- and Nebula-award winning Aliette de Bodard, an article that we hope will be one of many future accounts of such interviews at the British Science Fiction Association meetings for those of us who find it difficult to attend. Once more that theme of accuracy, both historical and linguistic, comes up again. Bodard draws on Ancient Aztec civilisation in her *Obsidian and Blood* novels, a historical distance that requires a large measure of poetic license, given that the Aztec civilisation on which her fiction is based has disappeared with very little detail about everyday life and customs. Not only does Bodard draw on distant historical periods, she also uses language unconventionally, writing in English despite the fact that she lives in Paris and set her novel *The House of Shattered Wings* there.

The longest piece in this issue is an interview with Adam Roberts by yours truly, and therefore one that deals with many of the issues that first brought Roberts to my attention as a writer. While he writes fiction, Roberts is also an academic who has produced one of the most significant works of science fiction criticism in the last decade, the Palgrave *History of Science Fiction* which came into its second edition in August. As you will probably see as you read the interview, I am interested in the ways in which writers process reality into the medium of fiction, it seems to me a skill that relies on dipping into the subconscious and losing some awareness of reality, transforming reality and the mind through the alchemy of prose. Yet a writer like Roberts can access this subconscious while still keeping in mind the historical debts he owes, both to the history of science fiction and to the history of ideas. Our interview focuses mainly on *The Thing Itself*, Roberts' most recent novel and one that portrays several time periods in different geographical locations, including one section that gives us a fictionalised perspective on the life of the philosopher Emmanuel Kant. As Roberts told me in the interview, the novel returns to the theme of homosexuality and to the limitations placed upon it historically when the homosexual act was illegal, as it still is in many countries today. In telling Kant's story and using science fiction to extrapolate from his philosophy, Roberts gives some recognition to homosexual desire and its suppression throughout history. It was a particular pleasure to interview Adam not long before the release of the first academic collection of essays on his work, *Adam Roberts: Critical Essays*, which will be published by Gylphi on the 4th of October and which I had the honour of co-editing with Dr Christos Callow.

We also have a paper by Graham Andrews, who takes us on a tour through the history of television and film literary adaptations. He puts the history of the form into context before giving an account of sixteen different tie-in novels from a form that is often dominated by science fiction and fantastika of every kind. This form, of course, relies on the adaptation of a visual work into the literary form but, as Andrews reminds us, since its inception film has always capitalised on existing literary works, so the exchange of stories and the complications of adaptation go in both directions. Andrews' article is an interesting account of some big names in science fiction writing little-known novelisations, and some little-known works that are worth remembering despite the normally ephemeral nature of their form.

Finally, we come to Polina Levontin's article on *Claire of the Sea* by Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian writer who draws not on history, but on the present and the future. While science fiction traditionally extrapolates from current technological or social situations to explore the effects of such trends - or finds its drama in extrapolating from alternate historical circumstances to guess at how different things might have been - Danticat's novel barely needs to extrapolate as her subject is the environment, and the extrapolation that she seeks to trace has already begun, if not raced out of human control. Haiti, where Danticat sets her story, is on the frontline of climate change, a global threat that is disproportionately affected the global south, a hemisphere already weighed down by the issues caused by colonialism, their mineral riches proving to be cursed. September might wear on, but we are still not at the end of the latest record-breaking summer and as time goes by and we still find ourselves reaching for the sun cream rather than the woollens, Levontin's account of Danticat's work and its relationship to the burgeoning theoretical school of ecocriticism becomes increasingly disturbing. While much of this issue focuses on the debt that we owe to the past as we write and rewrite it, Levontin's article and the work being done in the name of ecocriticism is a timely reminder that we owe a great deal to the future, and to those who are already suffering the profound effects of climate change in all its everyday forms. It is certainly worth thinking about what fiction might offer us at this historical moment where science struggles to adopt a tone that might go some way to changing the political agenda.

**Anna McFarlane  
and Glyn Morgan**  
Co-Editors, *Vector*

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# File Under ‘B’

by Andrew Wallace

***Aliette de Bodard is interviewed by Edward Cox  
(from the BSFA meeting, 23rd March 2016)***

***An account of Aliette de Bodard’s interview with Edward Cox  
at the BSFA meeting, 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2016***

**A**liette de Bodard is the Nebula Award-winning writer of numerous short stories, many set in the Xuya universe of her acclaimed novella *On A Red Station, Drifting*; the *Obsidian & Blood* trilogy of Aztec-themed mystery novels and, most recently, the fantasy epic *The House of Shattered Wings*.

Her father is French and her mother Vietnamese, a heritage that informs the tone and subject matter of her fiction. Although Aliette lives in Paris, she never writes in French, which terrifies her translators who know that for once the author will be able to check up on them. This question of accuracy recurred throughout the interview to the extent that it felt like a theme, if not in Aliette’s completed works then certainly in their creation.

History is a particularly fertile area; when asked how much of it went into the *Obsidian & Blood* novels, Aliette explained that because the Spanish had destroyed so much Aztec culture it was hard to include specifics. Her solution was to employ a combination of fantasy and improvisation; giving suitable nods to history instead of being a slave to it.

Aliette’s admitted passion for history doesn’t prevent her from reverse engineering past events to create the futures required for her science fiction. She starts with a clear idea of what she wants from a narrative and identifies the historical changes required to enable it. However, her reading of the past has revealed very few turning points in which entire civilisations alter direction. Even major battles involve a huge number of variables, no one of which may be important enough to bring about the desired future.

For example, science-fiction’s galactic empires tend to follow the Roman model, but Aliette’s Xuya civilisation is based on Imperial China and Vietnam. She needed to look at sixteenth century China, when extreme Confucianism caused the country to shut itself off. Aliette suggested that perhaps a faction who wanted trade would come to dominate; one of their ships became lost and smallpox arrived in the Americas ‘ahead of schedule’. China had vaccines against smallpox so the disease was less devastating in this alternative history than it was in the established one, especially as China was more interested in shared belief than shared race. As a result the ancient Americans survived and Asian countries like Vietnam did not decline and become colonised. Vietnam was thus able to enter the space race and establish a galactic civilisation with its culture by and large intact.

As well as being a writer, Aliette also somehow balances a dual career as a computer specialist responsible for hardware that manages the safe operation of underground trains. She brings an engineer’s practicality to depicting viable scientific progression in her fiction, but confesses she would rather have cool stuff in her stories than accuracy that may be less interesting. Besides, it’s the unpredictable niggles that lead to breakthroughs like relativity and string theory; no one, however smart, could foresee the discoveries that have actually changed the world. She subscribes to the Arthur C Clarke view that any technology, if sufficiently advanced, will seem like magic, especially if an idea is extrapolated beyond the realms of current knowledge.

Despite her striking use of tropes like spacecraft, planetary colonisation and interstellar war, Aliette defines

her science fiction as personal rather than anthropological. Content to blur the lines between science fiction and fantasy, she even acknowledges a soap opera element, describing the Xuya universe as a Vietnamese *Dallas* in space, with fish sauce instead of oil. This description is disingenuous though. A phrase she repeated throughout the interview was ‘this system is fucked up’. For instance, she observed that one of the many flaws of *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* was a civilisation which had achieved faster than light travel but was unable to prevent a woman dying in childbirth.

Anger at distorted priorities like these runs through Aliette’s work. She described how fictional worlds with just one magic system are based on the domination of Christian mythology and that the reason alternatives are rarely heard about is because they are repressed. Historical accounts of Vietnam, for example, were written by French colonisers.

Aliette’s ambition for her work is to show what it means for one person to have a belief system inconceivable to the other characters. Genre fiction is ideal for exploring the gulf this difference creates, whether through use of beings who experience time in a different way (immortals and fallen angels in *The House of Shattered Wings*; semi-organic artificial intelligences with life-spans of centuries in the Xuya stories) or through a more direct engagement with alternative history.

The ‘Obsidian & Blood’ trilogy is based on the premise that the Aztec belief system was real; for example, that blood sacrifices genuinely prevented the end of the world. Aliette was drawn to the Aztecs following a requirement in French education for students to study two living languages and two dead ones. Aliette’s work in Spanish led her to the Conquistadors, but her concern that they were not the best character witnesses for the ancient Aztecs led to closer study of the people and their time.

She became fascinated with the way different cultures reached different conclusions. To the Aztecs pain from torture was an offering to the gods, whereas in Middle Ages Europe it was merely punitive. Similarly, Aztec war was a ritual that came to a natural end when one group managed to demolish the other’s temple. They saw the Conquistadors’ wholly destructive warfare as not following the rules; while the Conquistadors wilfully ignored the Aztecs’ sophistication and regarded them as barbarians.

After spending five years on *Obsidian & Blood*, Aliette wanted to set her next book in France. The result was *The House of Shattered Wings*. The novel is about a group of people living in the ruins of nineteenth century *Belle Époque* Paris, following an apocalypse brought about by a pan-European war using magical weapons.

Aliette avoids depicting the wasteland, immediately setting the book apart from other post-apocalyptic novels. Her interest is in the sanctuaries, where an assortment of mortals and fallen angels live in favoured splendour.

Resources are short, however, and this microcosm dramatizes the price of survival when everything consumed is at the expense of someone else. The narrow geographical focus, which centres on an area around Notre Dame, both expresses and intensifies the drama as characters sheltering in the titular house are forced to leave while others are forced to remain.

Vietnam is represented by the immortal Phillipe, an outsider who is taken prisoner at the beginning of the story. He comes from an ancient, unfamiliar place and is in possession of an Eastern magic that the ruler of House Silver spires cannot fathom and is threatened by. Aliette’s interest in the clash of different cultures finds a subtle expression here, not least because Phillipe does end up bringing about violent and radical change.

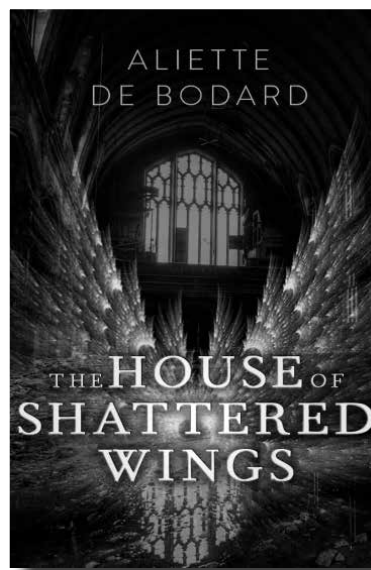
Elements of Phillipe’s native community and its related mythos feature in the sequel, *The House of Binding Thorns*.

The book will be based in House Hawthorn which, like House Silver spires, uses real-world geography and history. Hawthorn is formed of old country mansions with their spectacular gardens, which were slowly absorbed by Paris. Aliette explained that one of the narrative strands will be about resisting hostile overtures from a rival house, comparing the story to the nineteenth-century colonisation and subjugation of Asians by Europeans.

Next, Aliette plans to write linked novellas about generational mind ships and their families. She says she needs time she doesn’t have to carry out the required research; however, given that she holds a job of daunting responsibility and has managed to produce a substantial body of acclaimed work as well as raising a young family, it is safe to assume that she will work something out. She explained that she fits everything in by judicious use of commuting time (in both directions), by compartmentalising tasks, and with the support of her husband.

When asked about whether her books are listed under ‘D’ or ‘B’ she explained that the question was actually a fraught matter back home. ‘De’ means ‘from’ and this aristocratic prefix can be an uncomfortable fit in the republic of France. Aliette’s parents insist she be listed under ‘B’, but that allowances have to be made for foreign publishers. It’s a perfect summary of what was discussed this evening, including history, translation, politics and poetry (‘Aliette de Bodard’ is a name that really stays with you). Finally, there’s that ambiguity again; a need for accuracy forever subtly thwarted. Perhaps this is the essential tension in Aliette’s work: she has an engineer’s need for precision and an artist’s desire to mess it all up, beautifully.

Three days after this interview, *The House of Shattered Wings* won the Best Novel prize at the 2016 BSFA Awards and ‘*Three Cups of Grief*, by Starlight’ won the award for Best Short Story.



# Swallowing a Tragedy: Ecocide in Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*

by Polina Levontin

Edwidge Danticat is an American-Haitian writer who was born in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti in 1969 and immigrated to Brooklyn, NY in 1981. She is the author of several highly-acclaimed novels and collections of stories; her memoir *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007) won The National Book Critics Circle Award. Her work is mostly discussed in relation to Haitian history, immigration, identity, memory and trauma – but has not been marketed as science fiction. Yet in her latest novel *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), the apocalyptic tone present in so many of her narratives acquires a scientific form. The world of *Claire of the Sea Light* is built on the basis of a rigorous understanding of marine biology and ecology; science is manifestly essential to the plot. Furthermore, *Claire of the Sea Light* belongs to a growing body of literature concerned with future Climate Change scenarios – such works, sometimes referred to as 'Cli-Fi,' are of interest to the science fiction community and academics within the growing field of Ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is a relatively new field that expanded out of applying critical theory to the subject of nature.<sup>1</sup> Within literary theory several sciences, such as economics (Marxism), gender studies (feminism) and psychoanalysis are already established, and environmental science is yet another such addition that expands the range of methodological tools. A meta-analytic component of ecocriticism is critically evaluating environmental science itself as being shaped by several major discourses.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, ecocriticism is any study where any combination of these are present:

- Nature is the subject,
- Environmental science or ecology is part of the method,
- Environmental science, as a mode of inquiry, is itself criticized.

However, ecocriticism's relationship to environmental science is deferential. In the words of Greg Garrard:

Ecocritics must assess the scale and import of the scientific consensus, and in the final analysis defer to it, even as they analyze the ways such results are shaped by ideology and rhetoric.<sup>3</sup>

The scientific consensus on the environmental future of Haiti<sup>4</sup> falls within an apocalyptic discourse<sup>5</sup> within ecocriticism characterized by a belief that the current path leads to destruction which can scarcely be averted. Therefore, it is not surprising to find it reflected in contemporary Haitian fiction. This essay examines the representation of scientific viewpoints in Edwidge Danticat's recent fiction, and considers how climate change is used as a force that drives a tragic narrative. As such, it falls within the field of ecocriticism since it both focuses on representations of nature as its subject and uses environmental science as a methodology.

There is an episode in *Claire of the Sea Light* in which a woman, who is told by a doctor that she is carrying a deformed child unlikely to survive past birth, swallows a dead frog. She does so on a whim 'without thinking', in

1 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, (Blackwell, 2005), p. 2.

2 John S. Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth – Environmental Discourses*, (Oxford, 1997).

3 Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (Routledge, 2004), p. 107.

4 World Bank, *Vulnerability, Risk Reduction and Adaptation to Climate Change*, Country Profile: Haiti, (April 2011).

5 Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (Routledge, 2004), p. 93.

desperation, irrationally hoping that a lifeless frog, itself a victim of a disease, can restore her unborn baby to health. It does. Having swallowed the frog, Gaëlle thinks, 'let them fight it out and see who will win' (59). What is this battle that ensues inside Gaëlle's body? Is this a hauntingly disturbing parable for the battle between 'reason' and 'faith'? The frog, we learn, has already started decomposing although its internal organs, visible through the translucent skin, appear intact; having swallowed it as an impulsive and unpremeditated act, Gaëlle *decides* to keep it down, because suddenly she believes in the frog's power to challenge the certainty of the scientific prognosis. This moment epitomises the combination of science and fairy-tale narratives which saturate the novel. This is manifested in the very first sentence: 'The morning Claire *Limyè Lanmè* Faustin turned seven, a freak wave, measuring between ten and twelve feet high, was seen in the ocean outside of Ville Rose.' On one hand, this is a precise factual observation of a physical event – we learn about the exact time and location, and the scientific measurement of the phenomena (in feet), and yet, alongside the appearance of three numbers 'seven', 'ten', 'twelve', we read names like 'Claire *Limyè Lanmè* Faustin' and 'Ville Rose', and locate the novel within a genre of fairy-tales. The wave grabs, swallows and kills, Duvalier-style, a lone fisherman named Caleb in an act that, just like Gaëlle's, is impulsive, unfathomable and shocking. The nostalgically edenic relationship between man and nature, which is a setting for a return to Haiti in Danticat's story 'Night Talkers', is transformed into a violent confrontation in *Claire of the Sea Light*.<sup>6</sup> Nature becomes a character in itself and usurps the role of both murderous dictators and their victims found in earlier writings by Danticat. In *The Dew Breaker* (2014), the dictatorship of Duvalier has an independent *presence*, an agency of its own influencing the lives of the novel's characters beyond the borders of Haiti, beyond the time of the dictatorship itself. Sometimes it was personified as a real historical figure (Emmanuel Constant, Rosalie Bosquet), sometimes as a ghost as in 'The Bridal Seamstress' story.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere it would mutate and permeate a story in a wordless, disembodied form like a fog. In 'Water Child',<sup>8</sup> the dictatorship is sensed in a letter from Nadine's parents in Haiti devoid of 'sympathy, commiseration, condolence'; in her hallucinogenic visions of patients leaping out of barred psychiatric ward windows, recalling Duvalier's prison; in the agony of her patients whose voice is taken away not by *Tonton Macouts* but by surgeons performing laryngectomies. The regime does not disappear altogether from *Claire of the Sea Light*, but among the forces that shape the narrative it is no longer the most powerful. Ecocide has emerged as a source of terror even more destructive to life and the spirit of the people than former Haitian dictatorships.

The little koki frog, which Gaëlle swallows, stands in juxtaposition to the wantonly genocidal sea wave. The freak wave represents Nature as a source of power that threatens to annihilate the villagers completely by

drowning, flooding, or starving them. The koki frog represents Nature as a victim of global anthropocentric forcing – climate change. Climate change shares a lot with colonialism: it has identical actors, for those that are perpetrators and those that are decimated. Europe and the United States share the historic responsibility for the rise in greenhouse gas emissions, while the nations for whom climate change is most lethal are the former colonies. According to the latest risk assessment, climate change threatens Haiti more than any other nation.<sup>9</sup>

According to the author, the idea to use frogs as a 'bellwether species' for climate change came to her from an earlier novel by Mayra Montero *In the Palm of Darkness* (1997) where an American scientist and a devoutly voodooist Haitian guide set out to find a rare species of frogs, echoing Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).<sup>10</sup> In her essay 'He of the Trees', Lisabeth Paravisini-Gerbert writes: 'Montero portrays the frustrating search for the elusive *Eleutherodactylis sanguineus* as a voyage to the centre of a Caribbean darkness where corrupt neo-colonial forces threaten the very environmental context that makes possible the religiosity of Haitian people.'<sup>11</sup> So the mass extinction of the frogs signals a spiritual as well as an ecological threat. This is supported by the ritualistic behaviour of Gaëlle with respect to other dead frogs she finds, building up to the swallowing incident. We read that Gaëlle has been burying frogs each morning in secrecy. She digs little graves for them, 'performing a crucial service that no one else would or could do', which culminates in her becoming a burial chamber herself, a grave and a womb at once. It is hard not to think here about Danticat's own first pregnancy which coincided with her father's death, an overlap of grief, guilt, and hope that is more metaphysically potent than the simpler mystery of a pregnancy unclouded by death.<sup>12</sup>

This commingling of life and death is one of the ways in which disruption of nature's reproductive cycles has been depicted in the novel. With regard to the frogs this is stated explicitly in the text. Danticat writes from Gaëlle's point of view:

They'd been dying so quietly that for each one that had expired, another had taken its place along the gulch near her house, each one looking exactly the same and fooling her, among others, into thinking that a normal cycle was occurring, that young was

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9 Global Risk Consultancy, Maplecroft, (consulted at [https://www.maplecroft.com/about/news/climate\\_change\\_risk\\_list\\_highlights\\_vulnerable\\_nations\\_and\\_safe\\_havens\\_05.html](https://www.maplecroft.com/about/news/climate_change_risk_list_highlights_vulnerable_nations_and_safe_havens_05.html))

9 November 2014)

10 Interview with Edwidge Danticat (consulted at <http://repeatingislands.com/2013/08/24/edwidge-danticat-interviewed-by-the-coffin-factory/>) (9 November 2014)

11 In *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), p. 193.

12 Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying* (Knopf New York, 2007).

6 Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker* (Abacus, 2014), p. 79.

7 Ibid, pp. 103-117.

8 Ibid, pp. 44-57.

replacing old, and life replacing death, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly. Just as it was for everything else. (41)

But we come upon the evidence of other cycles, natural and social, being disrupted in the novel; the frogs are the prophets of the world coming undone. Gaëlle's child Rose, although born beautifully healthy, is killed aged seven in a traffic accident. Claire learns on her seventh birthday that her father is giving her away to Gaëlle to be a replacement for Rose. Claire's own mother dies in childbirth. Another child in the novel owes his existence to rape. And then for those readers who did not pick up on the hints, Danticat introduces a female character who suffers a rare genetic fertility disruption, which causes bleeding into her mouth during her periods, and leaves her childless. The implications of a disrupted parent/child cycle are scaled up to describe a major social problem in Haiti, that of gangs:

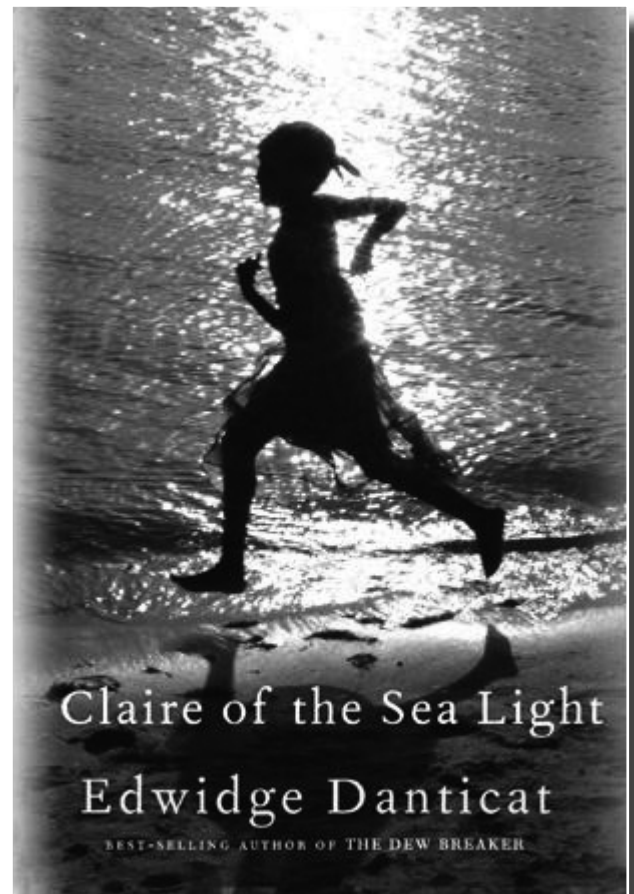
The gang members were also called chime, chimeras or ghosts, and were, for the most part, street children who couldn't remember ever having lived in a house, boys whose parents had been murdered or had fallen to some deadly disease, leaving them alone in the world. (65)

These tears in the social fabric, especially the disruption of relationships between parents and children, is a theme to which Danticat devotes much attention in previous works also. The examples are too numerous to list. It is finding a counter example which is difficult – a two parent family which stays together, where no one dies prematurely, where no one leaves or emigrates, where relationships retain their integrity. Neither *The Dew Breaker* nor *Claire of the Sea Light* contain a family narrative which is not somehow irrevocably damaged. In the quote above, Danticat names two of the forces that destroy families by eliminating parents before they could finish bringing up their kids: murder and disease. Death caused by man and death caused by nature.

Danticat simultaneously weaves a detailed portrait of Ville Rose out of many intertwined stories and makes the reader witness their untangling. We are not tourists in a postcard Haitian seaside village, but are implicated by our geolocation in a society on a brink of destruction, or perhaps even past it:

These were the real ghosts, he would say, the phantom limbs, phantom minds, phantom loves that haunted them because they were used, then abandoned, because they were out of choices, because they were poor. (82)

Poverty is identified as the main culprit behind both environmental and social disruption in the novel. Claire is given away because her father, a fisherman, is too poor to raise her. Poverty invalidates the efforts of Rose's father, Laurent, to alleviate environmental problems in the village. Laurent, before falling victim to chimeras, is a



voice on a grassroots environmental movement, a community organiser, an educator:

Laurent often held meetings in the shop with peasants who lived up- and down-river from them, warning them that the rivers were swelling in response to the lack of trees, the land erosion, the dying topsoil.

'What do you want us to do, Msye Lavaud?' they'd ask him in return. 'Help us find something to replace the wood we need for charcoal and we will stop.' (52)

When Laurent tells them that cutting a tree is like killing a child, the villagers respond that for them the choice is between their children and *tree*-children. The trees are cut for charcoal, to cook meals. Deforestation of Haiti, started by the colonist's clearing of land for plantations, is nearly total – less than 5% of original tree cover remains. People's dependence on trees for fuel and their inability to afford alternatives makes it unethical to combat deforestation without energy reform and subsidies – this is the policy recommendation implied in the above quote. A similar controversy arises when we try to protect the sea or land from overuse. Poverty makes enforcement of national park boundaries or marine reserves both unethical and difficult, in the face of desperation, without the use of force. If people have no alternatives but to continue to destroy the environment in order to survive, they will do so, even knowingly. Danticat illustrates this argument using Claire's father, a poor fisherman, as an ambassador:



It was no longer like in old days, when he and his friends would put a net in the water for an hour or so, then pull it out full of big, mature fish. Now they have to leave nets in for half a day or longer, and they would pull fish out of the sea that were so small that in the old days they would have been thrown back. But now you had to do with what you got; even if you knew deep in your gut that it was wrong, for example, to keep baby conch shells or lobster full of eggs, you had no choice but to do it. You could no longer afford to fish in season, to let the sea replenish itself. You had to go out nearly every day, even on Fridays, and even as the seabed was disappearing, and the sea grass that used to nourish the fish was buried under silt and trash. (9)

From a scientific perspective, the level of detail here is not only equivalent to, but also more readily comprehensible than that which is found in policy-related literature. Danticat describes in this passage a very complex problem and condenses it to a paragraph without collapsing its key dimensions: economics, ecology, biology and ethics. Translated into the language of scientific studies what we find out in this one paragraph is the following: fisher's income has declined as target species populations have collapsed due to both recruitment and growth overfishing (removing so much of spawning biomass that productivity is impaired and capturing individuals before they are fully grown), destruction of habitat providing shelter and feeding grounds to juveniles (such as sea grasses), pollution from domestic waste that government does not collect and treat, siltification related to floods and soil erosion, and ecosystem changes due to removal of top predators. We also learn that the fishermen's behaviour has changed. The community management principles that ensured sustainable harvesting have been abandoned, unleashing 'the tragedy of the commons' – a term coined by Garrett Hardin describing a situation where individual incentives to exploit a common resource lead to its overuse and degradation.<sup>13</sup> We learn the social norms used to limit fishing effort (the time the net is allowed to be at sea), and the common sense rules that safeguarded from growth overfishing by dictating that immature individuals are returned to the sea. We learn that the changes occurred within a generation, as the fisherman recalls a social mandate that in his youth safeguarded from overfishing by protecting spawning biomass – in the case of lobsters, not harvesting females full of eggs but returning them to sea to produce the next generation. These management rules are no longer followed by the locals, not because of a lack of knowledge or a lack of ethics but out of a need to survive. Further, keeping pace with the latest ecosystem-based approaches in environmental science, Danticat connects the devastation of the seas with the degradation of land – suggesting that deforestation and soil erosion are contributing to the destruction of the benthic habitats through the process of siltification which affects sea grass growth – 'sea grass ... was buried under silt'.

13 Garrett Hardin, 'The Tragedy of the Commons', Science, New Series, Vol. 162, No. 3859, (Dec. 13, 1968), pp. 1243-1248.

There is not much that can be glimpsed from environmental NGO reports<sup>14</sup> that is missing in this novel:

The trees in theirs and other provinces vanished into charcoal and the mountains crumbled and gave way, washing much-needed topsoil into the sea... (64)

Deforestation, the main environmental problem of Haiti, also increases risk of floods and mudslides that threaten both property and lives. Talking about Gaëlle, Danticat explains the danger:

Hers and Laurent's was now the only house so close to the rivers. The other houses, newer yet shabbier, had been dragged downstream year after year in flash floods, many with entire families inside. (52)

Environmental degradation is a result of economic activity. The dynamics of interaction between economy and environment goes beyond 'The Tragedy of the Commons' in Haiti, it is eschatological. Salinification and erosion of the soil cause a decline in agricultural productivity, contributing to rural poverty and leaving fishers with no viable land-based alternatives. Poverty ensures that

environmental destruction continues unabated. Both sea and land are increasingly over-exploited with diminishing returns making a collapse an almost inevitable outcome. The image of a family being trapped inside a house carried to destruction by a flash flood is an appropriate metaphor for entire villages in Haiti. Climate change is that flash flood.

The little koki frog is a prophecy, a final warning from nature. In an interview<sup>15</sup>, Danticat says:

When all these types of animals start disappearing, we can't be far behind. So the fact that the frogs are disappearing in Ville Rose is a sign that something big is going to happen, something even more environmentally drastic—and everyone knows it.

So now that we know about the impending, possibly irreversible, destruction, what can we do? Abandon reason and hope like Gaëlle for a miracle?

In the beginning of the novel one man is swallowed by the sea, at the end of the book the sea spits out another who has sought death in suicide. Both times, the villagers gather on the beach – a tragedy seems to be the only force that can still pull them together. The remnants of community, and the mystical power of nature to heal itself, are the only fragile elements of hope that Danticat offers. Science, it is hinted in the novel, might be part of a problem rather

14 Bhawan Singh and Marc J. Cohen, *Climate Change Resilience: The case of Haiti*, Oxfam research reports, March 2014.

15 Interview with Edwidge Danticat (consulted at <http://repeatingislands.com/2013/08/24/edwidge-danticat-interviewed-by-the-coffin-factory/> 9 November 2014)

than a solution. It is too slow, too cautious, too unsure of itself to result in timely action. Consider a herpetologist's response to the frog holocaust on the island:

According to Madam Boncy, the herpetologist had stated that, given his studies of the condition of the frog carcasses and the dirt and water samples he'd taken of their environment, and given the climate and blistering temperatures in Ville Rose that summer, the frogs had probably died from a fungal disease caused by the hotter-than-usual weather. (54)

The cautiousness of conclusions that the herpetologist derives from his observations contrasts sharply with a stark reality that it is already too late to act, the opportunity to prevent a tragedy is already missed! Averting climate change could have saved the frogs, but a fictional herpetologist does not even invoke the term 'climate change' but uses a non-committal 'hotter-than-usual weather' explanation. His conclusions are conditional, expressing a degree of belief rather than a firm opinion. It is probable that the frogs died of a fungal disease, but 'more research is needed' to establish the cause conclusively. Somehow, the scientific approach is a mismatch for the scale and the urgency of the threat facing Haiti and humanity at large. A threat which requires impassioned, decisive, and quick action like that of Gaëlle.

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# History, Metaphysics, and Meta-Science Fiction:

## An Interview with Adam Roberts

by Anna McFarlane

**Y**our most significant contribution to sf scholarship so far, the Palgrave *History of Science Fiction*, is going into its second edition. Could you tell us what readers can look forward to that didn't appear in the first edition?

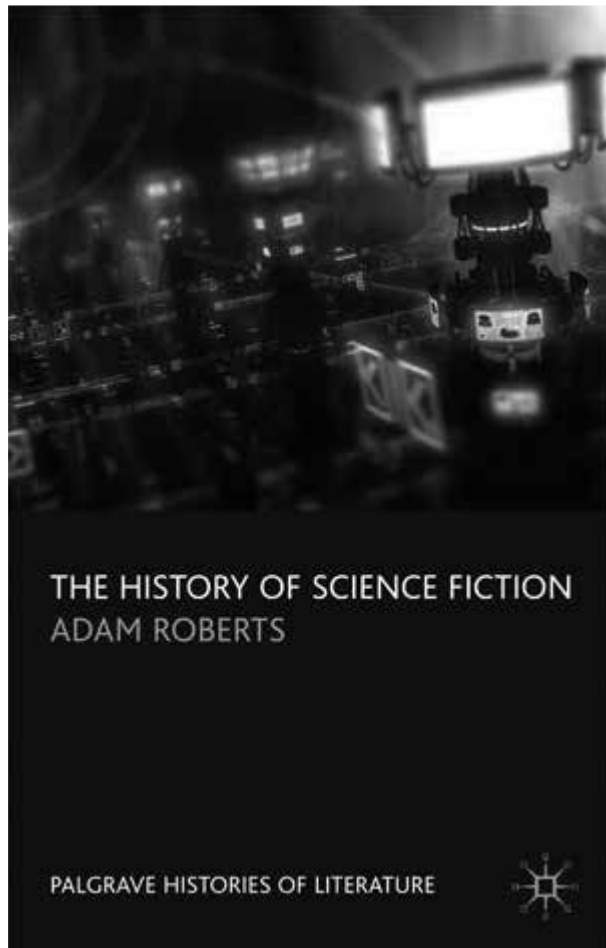
The first edition came out in 2006. In 2015 Palgrave came back to me asking to prepare a second edition. What they really wanted was a new chapter to add to the end of it, covering '21st-century sf', since the first edition more or less drew the line at 2000. At the same time they were happy for me to go through the whole thing revising and augmenting. I was glad of this latter, since there were various things about the first edition that were varying degrees of unsatisfactory for me. I'd originally applied for research funding to get it written, but had not been successful – indeed, my success rate in winning research money is genuinely lamentable. (I'm not sure why: I'm filling in the forms wrong, maybe, or I get unsupportive referees, my projects are shit or else I'm just unlucky.) Anyway: it meant the first edition was a project I had to fit around my day-job, other writing commitments, young family etc., so it the writing of it got squeezed in various ways. The second edition wasn't really any easier in terms of time, but I've more of a sense of what's needful, and I'm a more efficient researcher and writer nowadays than I used to be.

So, yes: there are two things new about the second edition. The first is a long final chapter that attempts a critical survey of sf in the 21st-century, and which morphs into a summary of the main thesis of the whole book, recapitulating its main thesis from a 2016 perspective. The second is that I've gone back through every chapter, corrected (mostly small) errors, adding more women writers throughout, and trying to integrate them more fully into the narrative rather than just tacking on a 'women' annex

to chapters (I think I manage this in the new final chapter rather better than in the main body of the text, I have to say). I've also added quite a few new texts. So one thing that the second edition deals with is the great number of neo-Latin fantasies and romances of the 16th- and 17th-centuries, stuff not only nobody reads but hardly anyone *can* read.

**With regards to the book's new structure, it's interesting that you give more of an account of earlier texts in the new edition while at the same time acknowledging that quite a few people disputed the 'long history' of science fiction that you propose in the book. Was it a conscious decision to acknowledge criticism while at the same time strengthening your thesis through more examples?**

The two main things the History argues are (a) that sf as such grows out of the Protestant Reformation, from more-or-less 1600 onwards, as a new sort of 'scientized' or material variety of older romance fantastika forms, and that even today SF still manifests some of the obsessions (especially to do with the status of the saviour/superhero, with atonement and transcendence) printed into it from that era and (b), coming down to the present, that over the last 40 years or so sf has metamorphosed from being a primarily literary into being a primarily visual mode. I think both those things are true, although (b) isn't a thesis original to me, and (a) seems not to have persuaded people in the sf critical community at all. So, to answer your question: I don't think adducing even more texts to the post-1600 list of texts is going to persuade those people. After all, there's a large box labelled 'ur-sf' if your narrative of the genre says that it starts with *Frankenstein*, with Verne/Wells or with Gernsback. It seems to me an evasion to separate sf into, ur, before and, *ah*, after in that manner (\*clears



throat\*), but that's probably just me. In the final part of my final chapter I try to connect my outlier main thesis to some of the more commonplace critical approaches to sf, by suggesting that a couple of other things associated with Protestantism (in particular, the rise of Capitalism out of Dutch and English traderfinance, speculation and banking, and hence of modern European imperialism and therefore the present post-colonial moment—all of which, of course, being things that many critics have explored as key contexts of sf) are relevant to science fiction *because* of these deeper roots. They are 'Protestant' in parallel ways to the way sf is 'Protestant'. But I'm perfectly content that people don't agree, provided only I've made the case as well as I can.

Quite a lot of the extra stuff I included was a function of the extraordinary search capacity of Google Books, which has proved a staggering boon and a blessing to scholarship, I'd say. So for example, I could type in the Latin for certain key sf phrases – let's say, king of the moon, rocket, future and so on – and come across all sorts of books, none of which appear in the regular histories. Or to pick one other example: critics like Paul Alkon and Darko Suvin agree that the 'future history' doesn't enter genre until right at the end of the 18th-century. For a long time I assumed they were right, because I didn't know any better. But it turns out that there's a *bunch* of earlier future-histories than this (I mean, that are more than, let's say, quasi-Biblical pseudo-prophecy) right back through the eighteenth and seventeenth-century. The earliest secular future-set history I found—again, thanks to Google

Books—was the anonymously-authored Lutheran *Neue Zeitung von einer tapfern Kriegsrüstung in Utopie im Jar 1544* ('New Journal of Valiant New Weaponry from Utopia, in the Year 1544') published in 1543. Another boon of Google Books is that I didn't serendipitously discover this in some reclusive library stacks in Obscurstadt Bavaria—nope, it's *right there*, on my laptop, and therefore on yours. It's as close to you now as entering that title into Google.

Of course there's a downside to all this too. A book like my *History* is trying to be as comprehensive as possible, though in a relatively small compass. Obviously I don't want to cherry-pick my examples in order to bolster my overall thesis, and working not to distort what the actual texts (hundreds and hundreds of them) actually say tends towards a looseness, formally, overall. Reading the whole *History* from beginning to end I think the latter predominates over the former, which means the book as a whole may be a little shapeless. Adding more exemplary texts is bound to exacerbate that. Still, it's preferable to tendentiousness I suppose.

**Actually, that secondary argument about science fiction's increasingly visual nature was something that interested me, but particularly because it was coming from you. So far your creative work has been in the literary field; would you ever consider writing for the screen? I can imagine you turning your hand to a series like *Black Mirror*.**

That's just what my wife says! 'Why not get a lucrative film deal, Adam?' she says. 'Why not write a bestseller? Then we could pay-down some of our mortgage.' Would that it *twuhre* so simple, as the cowboy says in *Hail Caesar*.

I might step back from this question a little, and put it this way: I teach creative writing, and in any given class the majority of people, kids mostly, who declare that they want to write a novel have had their sensibilities shaped by watching movies, TV and playing video games. It's there in what they write, often catastrophically so. I don't just mean in terms of writing that's full of TV cliché and so on (although often that's true); but in writing that's unconsciously saturated in the crudely refined visual.

The thing is: although they are both taken today to be narrative modes, Film/TV and Novels are actually very different things. Books, as Anthony Burgess once noted, are not made out of stories, or characters, or vision, or themes, or feelings. Books are made out of words. To be a writer, and especially to be a good writer, you absolutely have to love words. Film and TV texts are a combination of stagecraft and the splicing together of visual images and, despite being almost always nowadays put at the service of narrative (often very rudimentary three-act narrative), they are actually closer to poetry and painting.

**On that note then, let's turn to your most recent novel, *The Thing Itself*. It's a fantastic (in both senses of the word) time-hopping narrative that is, at the same time, a meditation on philosophy, particularly that of Emmanuel Kant. Forgive me if I get this wrong, but I believe you describe it as 'a novel by an atheist about**

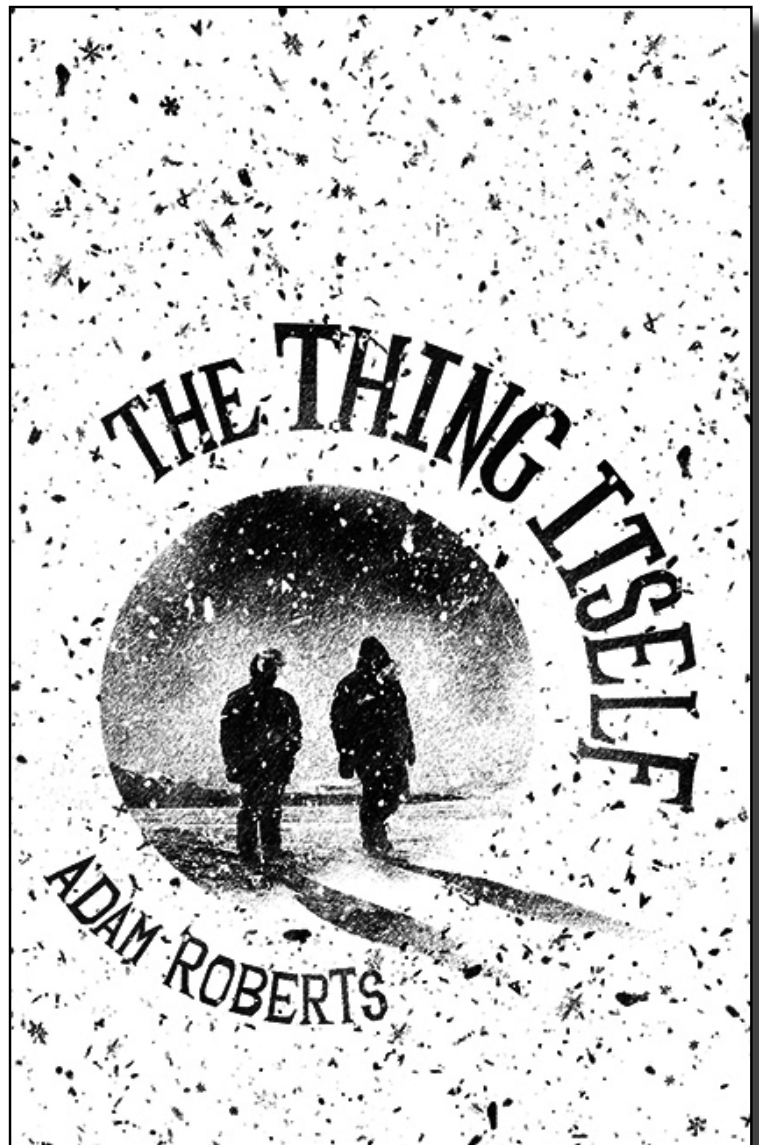


**why you should believe in God'. How do you see Kant's ideas contributing to this Protestant ethic that you identify in science fiction?**

I think the actual phrasing, in the acknowledgements, is: 'as an atheist writing a book about why you should believe in God, I have taken more than I can say from the devotional writing of my friends Alan Jacobs and Francis Spufford, Christians both.' There seems lately to have been an avalanche of books written by atheists trying to persuade readers to be an atheist, and of course there's a long tradition of religious apologetics, written by believers and intended to persuade people to believe. But I don't think there's ever been a book written by an atheist that tried to get its readers to believe in God. A gap in the market! And a puzzling one, really: because surely (I mean, isn't this common sense?) the way to explore your *own* views is to try and think properly, thoroughly and in good faith, through the *opposing* views? Does nobody else see this? Have dialectics really sunk so low in modern times? How can you position yourself in opposition to something you don't understand?

There was another impulse, if I'm honest. Remember Martel's *The Life of Pi*? That book was marketed as a novel that would 'make its reader believe in God'. It doesn't. I mean, though it's not a bad novel, its case for belief comes down to: if there are two stories that claim to explain the world, you should choose the more interesting and beautiful one. Which is bollocks. I mean, every person who is not a fantasist, liar or an ideologue surely has at least some investment in whether the way we make sense of the world is *true* or not. Surely. Shouldn't that be at least one of the criteria we apply? So the case I put forward for 'believing in God' in *The Thing Itself* is one that attends to the possibility that such faith is not pretty, or consoling, but actually true. Whether it persuades you or not is another matter, of course. It might do, though. You won't know until you read the book...

The other starting point for that novel was, of course, Kant. Now I'd read bits and pieces of Kant, and read *about* Kant, but I'd never sat down and actually read the whole of Kant. And then I did precisely that. The reason I did so was that I was making an edition of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* for Edinburgh University Press a few years back, and I couldn't do that without actually reading Kant's *Critiques* – Coleridge found in Kant the answers to the metaphysical dilemmas that plagued him as a youth; 'he took hold of me as with a giant's hand' is the way he phrases it, and the *Biographia* is suffused with Kant. So I read Kant. Turns out he's in equal measures stodgily tedious and deeply fascinating. And I made my edition, and Kant was still rattling round in my head. He's pretty much a household name, philosophically speaking, but who actually *reads* him, outside a coterie of neo-Kantians and academics? So, I thought to myself: people write sf that extrapolates from the ideas of, say, Einstein, or Albucierre or Darwin; why does nobody write sf that extrapolates



from the ideas of Kant, or Hegel, or Wittgenstein? I thought I'd give that a go. (Actually there are some exceptions worth mentioning: Stapledon's *Star Maker* extrapolates from Schoepenhauer, and does so pretty effectively; and Jo Walton's recent Plato novels are very good. But in general sf is more comfortable monkeying around with ideas from physics than metaphysics).

*The Thing Itself* is a science-fictional novelisation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Had it gone over, I could have written novelisations of the other two *Critiques* too, I suppose, but for now let's stick with *Pure Reason*. Kant says that the way we perceive real reality structurally determines both that reality and our consciousness of it (and vice versa, that 'real reality' structurally determines the ways we perceive it). By 'way we perceive' he means some very particular things: two grounds, time and space; and then twelve categories, things like causation, plurality, negation and so on. Actual reality is not temporal, or spatial, or causal or anything: those things are the way we *perceive* actual reality. You can test this idea yourself: Kant says we can imagine an object in space; and we can imagine the object being taken away so there is no object; but we can't imagine *no space*. That's beyond us, because 'space' is part of the structure of how we think. Then there was Kant himself: a man we would nowadays describe

as ‘on the Asperger’s spectrum’, introverted, neat, super-regular – people would set their watches by him as he crossed the town square and so on. Also it’s pretty clear he was a closeted gay man, who was for a time in love with his manservant, an ex-soldier prone to drunkenness whom Kant eventually had to dismiss. So all these things determine how the novel gets structured. It’s in twelve chapters, half of which move characters through space (from the south pole to the north pole, in fact) and half of which move about through time. And then the twelve themselves embody one each of Kant’s twelve categories. It’s a novel about gay love, or more specifically the obstacles to such love; and it’s about God because Kant was a devout if, for his day, slightly unconventional Christian. And the only way to write the believing-in-God stuff was to do it genuinely, atheist though I am. Other than that, it’s not a novel that illustrates Kant’s ideas so much as a fiction that extrapolates *from* them, because that’s what sf does.

But to return to the actual question you asked me: how do I see Kant’s ideas contributing to this Protestant ethic that I identify in science fiction? Not with any particular immediacy, since a lot of the dynamic of sf seems to me essentially theological rather than rational or metaphysical (there are exceptions, as I say above). But in another sense, Kant is the quintessential Protestant thinker: raising reason to his almost superhuman level, systematic and individualist at the same time, a hard worker (self-made man, indeed) with a quasi-imperialist inability to tolerate margins, blind-spots, othernesses that didn’t fit into his grid. An almost complete lack of what Keats calls ‘negative capability’. Sf is often like that, I think; and it’s often like that for deep and structural reasons to do with the history of the genre.

**Interesting, so if you approached Kant via Coleridge do you think that might have inflected the way you treated his life and ideas in the novel? I’m particularly thinking about the idea of the sublime and concepts like ‘transcendence’ which (although I’m no philosopher) seem to me forever coloured by their treatment during the Romantic period and, again, something that sf continues to feed from at its best.**

Absolutely, yes. ‘The Sublime’ is a key Romantic category, first theorised by Burke and (him again) Kant in the late eighteenth-century; it’s basically the same thing as the ‘sense of wonder’ that sf prizes so highly. As a young man I bought into the model that says sf begins with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which is to say: sf is an offshoot of Gothic Romanticism. I don’t think that’s true, actually (although *Frankenstein* is a hugely important text, of course). And 19th-century poetry, Romantic and Victorian, is where I started, I mean as a student: undergraduate and then postgraduate.

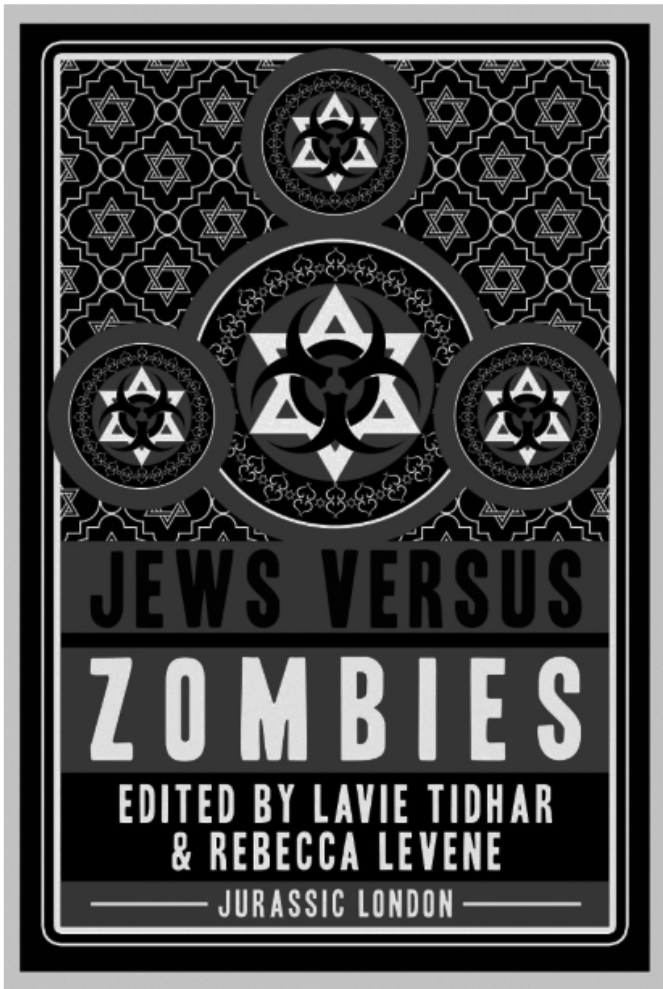
**The different sections of *The Thing Itself* are not just different in content or setting (different places in space/time) but they are very different stylistically. We had a Joycean monologue, a comedic/horrific Victorian section and (the one that I was particularly**

**impressed with) ‘A Solid Gold Penny’ which is written in 17<sup>th</sup>-century English. I was especially wondering if there was any specific preparation you went through for writing this section since it seems so spot on, and to my ear the language gives it a dark comedy, even when the subject matter is something that would make for harrowing reading in a modern setting.**

I don’t mean to sound blasé, but where the business of writing fiction is concerned, adopting different registers (doing, as it were, the police in different voices) is really just a business of technique. A good writer ought to be able to write in different registers and idioms, just as a good musician ought to be able to play in different styles, or a good actor ought to be able to deliver lines in lots of different accents. A lot of it is just practice, as with anything. How *do* you get to Carnegie Hall? It’s also about reading source material in a way that is attentive to the specific manner it generates its effects, and affects. Any writer worth her salt ought to be reading all sorts of different things, and paying attention after that fashion. Most of them are.

The thing that worried me about the 17th-century chapter wasn’t the stylistic register. It was other things. So, it needed to go on for a long time (it’s the longest of all the chapters, I think) and it needed to be sticky to read, resistant, which is one reason it’s written in that style. Most of all it needed to be *underworldly*, even if the darkness has, as you say, a grim comedy to it. In addition to the Kantian categories – as governing principles structuring the book, I mean – there are various other things underpinning the twelve sections out of which the novel is made: each chapter takes place in a different month of the year, for instance; in a different style, as you note, and so on. But there’s also a don’t-shout-about-it-or-everyone-will-want-one Vergilian, epic underpinning. I know, I know. But there you go. Now: of the *Aeneid*’s twelve books, Book 6 is where the hero descends into the underworld, visiting first a ghastly hell of the punished, of fire and iron; and then moving on to the pastoral delights of the fields of Elysium, reserved for dead heroes. ‘A Solid Gold Penny’ is this novel’s version of that, and my fear was – is – that it will just bounce readers out of the novel as a whole. It’s one of the things I admire about the novels of Hanya Yanagihara: the confidence she has when it comes to generating a dense, slow narrative momentum that pushes the reader through sometimes hundreds and hundreds of pages of just horrible and distressing material. The confidence that she has, in other words, that the reader won’t just bail. Or maybe she doesn’t care whether the reader bails or not.

**That leads me perfectly into my next question. We’ve spoken about how you’re influenced by the Romantics not just in the general way that all of us are, but as someone who has studied the period deeply. It’s my impression that the Romantics created an idealised image of the work of art as something created in solitude, a pure expression of the artist’s soul, that then the public can react to or not. You’re working in a very different time, and you use social media, blogging, and commentary on science fiction as a means of con-**



necting directly with your audience (or certainly an audience that has a great deal of crossover with those reading your fiction). Do you think this has an impact on how you approach writing fiction?

There's something in that, I think: there certainly were Romantics who made themselves the locus of their art, and stressed their solitude, indeed often (as in Byron) their *elevation* over the vulgar herd. The perfect visual rebus for this is the most famous canvas of that most Romantic of painters, Caspar David Friedrich 'Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer', 'The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog'.<sup>1</sup> This was a new model of what the artist ought to be: no longer part of a guild or community, much more the solitary genius, often misunderstood but inspired by a new kind of inward inspiration. Oddly, for the Romantics this sense of superiority was tangled-in with a sense of exile, of shame and guilt (when Nietzsche reworked this idea at the end of the century, he replaced shame with a kind of crazy glory). It's a potent myth of authorship, and although I don't think it's (\*coughs\*) *true*, plenty of people still believe it. Though maybe it used to be more of a thing, and is now less of a thing. Maybe that myth of creativity is starting to wane nowadays, in an age when so much creative art is intensely collaborative – a film, a TV series, an album, a video game, all of these things require dedicate teams of experts working together. Half a century ago we were still

enamoured of the idea of the auteur; maybe that's less true now. And it's hard to shake the sense that social media are seeping in to the age of creation: ideas for *Snakes on a Plane* crowdsourced on Twitter and so on.

For myself, and although I try to live by the maxim that the author is dead, I have to confess that elements of that Romantic myth insinuate their glamour into my own mind. I'm a pretty solitary individual, really, as I daresay most writers are, for the practical reason that writing is a solitary business. But I go further than many. I am, as you say, on social media a good deal; but, to give one example: I eschew and repudiate and dislike very much the '#amwriting' tag, all those boastful tweets about how many words X or Y wrote today, the wincing faux-naïveté of 'made progress on sekret project!' subtweets and the whole writing-as-public-display palaver. I sometimes wonder why it annoys me quite so much. I'm no Wanderer, gazing haughtily down on the Nebelmeer of ordinary folk; writing is a craft much more than it is an art. But, though I consider myself a fan of sf, and have been since I was a little kid, I have an increasingly awkward relationship with 'fandom' as a whole. I suppose there is something a little isolated, and even isolating, in what I write.

Actually, now that I come to think of it: I wonder if a sort-of pre-Romantic cultural logic is coming to prominence in genre at the moment, something being bedded-in by social media. Not the lone genius, but the cultural-worker who exists in a particular milieu, the community; the writer who writes for but is also policed by fans. So, take, for example, Jo Walton: a very interesting writer, I think, whose *Farthing* Trilogy has a brilliant grasp of the connections between Britishness and fascism (and a much truer sense of 1940s place and mood than, say, Connie Willis); and whose recent Plato books are really excellent. But the book for which Walton wins the Hugo is *Among Others*, more-or-less a love-letter to sf Fandom. I look around and see writers cultivating fan-bases – for good reasons, both of commerce and shared joy – and fandom as such becoming the horizon of what sf can do. Perhaps that's no bad thing. There are lots of shy and misfitted and awkward people who find a genuine sense of home in fandom, and cons can be fun, and cosplay is great. It feels good to belong. And fandom can even leverage (at least cultural) power in the world – for haven't sf and YA (which is mostly science fiction and fantasy) conquered the globe? But there are *also* gangs of arseholes in fandom, gamergaters and trolls, sneerers and people who respond with '\*headdesk\*' and 'blocked!' to any contrary opinion. The downside of belonging is a tacitly coercive set of shibboleths and conformisms. Alternatively, perhaps I'm just getting grumpier as I get older.

**You've also addressed Judaism in your sf - I'm thinking of 'Zayinim' your short story from the *Jews vs Zombies* short story collection (edited by Lavie Tidhar and Rebecca Levene). Do you think sf offers something specific to the Jewish tradition, or vice versa?**

Well, it can't be denied that Jewish sf writers have made immense contributions to the history of sf: at least from

1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wanderer\\_above\\_the\\_Sea\\_of\\_Fog](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wanderer_above_the_Sea_of_Fog)

the days of Isaac Asimov, Robert Silverberg and Shuster and Siegel's Superman, and from there in an unbroken line all the way through to high-profile sf writers of today like Neil Gaiman, Charlie Stross and Lavie himself. So there's something going on, isn't there. Some years ago a good deal of noise and debate was occasioned by Michael Weinograd's article 'Why There is No Jewish Narnia' in the *Jewish Review of Books* in 2010. It's not a very good article, actually, but there's something in its titular assertion – when it's so easy to list so many very influential Jewish writers of sf, why are there so few Jewish writers of Tolkienesque fantasy, and why do those few we might be able to name have profiles so much lower than e.g. Asimov and Gaiman? I'm not sure if there are easy or straightforward explanations as to why Jews have made so much larger a contribution to sf than to Fantasy. It would be interesting to look in more detail into the ways European Jewry worked and lived in a (pre-Nazi) Europe divided between Protestants and Catholics; or maybe it would be more fruitful to look at the Shuster and Siegel angle – the case argued with such comic panache in Michael Chabon's *Kavalier and Clay* that American Jews created super-Aryan characters like Superman and Batman as discursive gestures towards assimilation, rather than expressions of a particularly Jewish identity. Maybe American Jewry gravitated to sf precisely because it had become, by the twentieth century, such a markedly US genre, and this was a way of performing American-ness... where retreating to the more medieval-European tropes of fantasy would have been a backward, Old World step. I don't know.

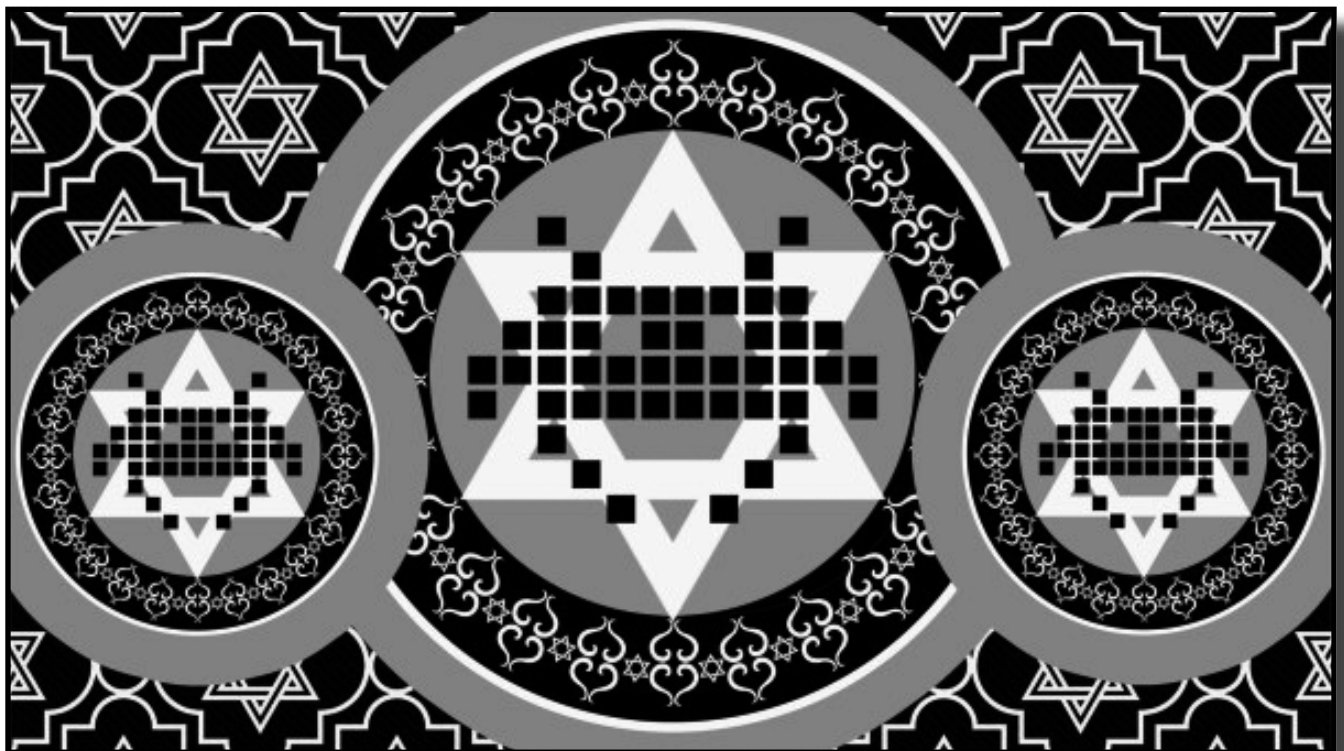
'Zayinim', yes: I wrote that because Lavie's a friend of mine, and asked me for a story. Indeed, I believe I'm the only gentile contributor to the *Jews vs Zombies* volume. But I am married to a Jew, which means our kids are Jewish, go to synagogue Saturdays and so on. Which in turn means I can proudly claim to be not *wholly* un-Jewish. Just almost entirely un-Jewish.

### And finally, can you tell us anything about your upcoming projects?

In terms of sf criticism, things are quieter for me right now than they've been for a long time. I'm reviewing much less than I used to, and now that the revision to the Palgrave book is done there's only one project I really want to see through to completion, which is a modest monograph on Ian Watson that I've started but which has gotten a little side-lined by other things. I'd like to get back to that. Another thing is that I may (it's not definite yet) be writing a critical biography of H. G. Wells. A publisher has approached me and mooted the idea. I've never written a biography before, so that might be fun to try.

Where creative writing is concerned, my next novel is a puzzle whodunit set in a near-future version of Reading, Berkshire. I wanted to call this *The RI-Town Murders*, since my future-Reading has rebranded itself thuswise, to make itself sound snazzier in the hope of stemming the hugely depopulating flow of people out of the real world into my future's many burgeoning virtualities. But my publisher has told me that books with exclamation marks in the middle of words confuse Bookscan and other online registers, so I ain't allowed that title. They are if anything even less keen on my proposed alternative, *The Man Who Sneezed In Shakespeare's Nose*, so I'll have to come up with a third title.

**The second edition of Adam Roberts' *History of Science Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan) is out on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2016. *Adam Roberts: Critical Essays* (edited by Anna McFarlane and Christos Callow) is out with Gylphi on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 2016.**





# Fit To Be Tied Through Time and Space

by Graham Andrews

Film and TV tie-in volumes have long been an integral part of paperback publishing. 'You've seen the film/TV series – now read the book!' Or, as some enterprising *restaurateur* supposedly urged (with regard to *Watership Down*): 'You've seen the film – now eat the cast!'

Most such 'novelizations' are no better than they could be, given the threadbare source material and the kind of writer usually associated with such unabashed hackwork. However, sometimes these written-to-order ephemera prove to be accidental time capsules that vividly evoke the pop-cultural eras from which they came. It's interesting to see how cinema and television genres wax and wane with the changing times: from romances to Westerns, from mysteries to horror, from historical melodramas to science fiction/fantasy (which I'll mostly be dealing with here).

To begin at the beginning: 'On 28 December 1895, Louis and Auguste Lumière showed a paying audience in Paris their *Cinématographie*, which projected moving film onto a large screen. The twentieth century's own art form, the motion picture, was born.' That quotation comes from *The Hamlyn History of the Movies* (1975) by Mary Davies, Janice Anderson, and Peter Arnold, which has become a collector's item in its own right.

Thomas Alva Edison's first film studio, used from 1894, was a ramshackle shed called 'The Black Maria'. By the time *How Bella Was Won* (adapted from *Our Mutual Friend*, by Charles Dickens) appeared in 1911, the Edison outfit was just one of several big companies in operation, Vitagraph and Biograph having both started up in 1897. But that's as far back into the swirling mists of cinematic time as I mean to go.

The important thing for us to bear in mind is that, almost from the word go, film-makers based their work upon established literary properties, e.g. *East Lynne*, *Ivanhoe*, *Frankenstein*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and just about everything by the aforementioned Charles Dickens. It wasn't long before publishers and movie producers cashed in on the large profits that could be made from cheap editions of novels that had been adapted for the silver silent screen. And when demand started to outstrip supply, they turned popular periodical serials into books that could be exploited as 'tie-in' publicity items.

David Pringle wrote, in an article entitled 'SF, Fantasy & Horror Movie Novelizations' (*Interzone & Million*, February 1994):

The first movie novelizations arose partly as a result of American newspaper and magazine circulation wars. They arrived in tandem with a new type of film – the movie serial... The earliest celluloid serial was the Edison Company's *What Happened to Mary* (1912), an episodic melodrama which also ran in prose form in the *Ladies' World* magazine. A book version, by Robert Carlton Brown, was published in 1913.

*The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), starring Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., inspired the first notable novelization by an author working from somebody else's script. A. L. Burt of New York City hired Achmed Abdullah (1881-1945) to concoct a novel from the screenplay by Elton Thomas (actually a pseudonym of Douglas Fairbanks: his two middle names) and Lotta Woods. Abdullah's birth name was Alexander Nicholayevitch Romanoff – his full adopted Muslim pseudonym being Achmed Abdullah Nadir Khan el-Iddrisseh. He was born in Yalta, the son of a grand duke and a second cousin of Czar Nicholas II of Russia and the Princess Nurmahal. Although the Abdullah book now has the scarcity value of a Roc's egg, you might pick up Richard Wormser's novelization of the 1961 'Steve Reeves' version for a few quid: *Thief of Baghdad* (Dell First Edition B216, 1961).

As the tides of time rolled on, so did the number of movie tie-in books, in both reprint and novelization form. The mass-market paperback book in the late 1930s and commercial television ten years later provoked a surge in production that led to a glut of such books in the fifties and sixties.

The basic definition of a film/TV tie-in book is that it must always mention the film or programme made from it, or that it was made from. A blurb heralding the imminent movie, or saying that the book is based upon the 'hit TV series', is enough to do the job. Most tie-ins, of course, go much further than a mere mention, with photo covers of stars and/or scenes from the film or show. Tie-ins are usually paperback originals, but if the film/TV series has

been adapted from a famous novel, the book will be a reprint. However, since the tie-in reprint may be the first (and often only) edition of its source material to accompany that film/TV series, it can be collectable in its own right.

The first comic-book novelization was George Lowther's *Superman* (Armed Services Editions 656, New York, 1942), which now fetches up to \$300 in almost any condition. A more recent example is *Blackhawk* (Warner Books, New York, 1982), by William Rotsler (1926-1997). Tie-in novelizations have also been produced from many other entertainment media over the years, from primitive 'steam' radio to high-tech computer games.

But this preamble is becoming more like a stroll around the Seven Hills of Rome, so I'd better get cracking on the list of sixteen examples (in chronological order). I've excluded from detailed consideration some too-familiar 'franchises' such as *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*. By way of being inconsistent, I've made a partial exception with *The Avengers*. The 'sci-fi' and weird-fantasy genres have dominated the tie-in field for over three decades now.

***The Black Box*** (Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1915; Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1917 + reprints), by E. Phillips Oppenheim.

Oppenheim (1866-1946) was justifiably blurbed as the Prince of Storytellers.<sup>1</sup> *The Black Box* was written in collaboration with Otis Turner, who produced and directed this fifteen-part silent serial for the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. It is now presumed lost, which might or might not be just as well.

From *The Universal Weekly* (No. 24, 12 June 1915): 'The last episode . . . contains the startling disclosure that Prof. Ashleigh (Herbert Rawlinson), the apparently harmless old scientist, has been a veritable Jekyll and Hyde, and that all the crimes supposedly committed by Craig (Frank MacQuarrie) were, in reality, the Professor's handiwork.'

***The King Who Was a King: The Book of a Film*** (Ernest Benn, London, 1929), by H.G. Wells.

The introductory chapter is entitled 'The Film, the Art Form of the Future'. Although *The King Who Was a King* never actually became a film – making it an early example of the 'phantom' tie-in book – Wells did subsequently associate himself with two cinematic classics: *Things to Come* (The Cresset Press, London, 1935) and *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (ditto, 1936).<sup>2</sup> The distinctive 'film sprocket' cover was designed by Paul Rotha (1907-84), the famous documentary film-maker and non-fiction writer. Another collectable Wells film tie-in edition is *The Time Machine* (Berkley Medallion G445, New York, 1960).

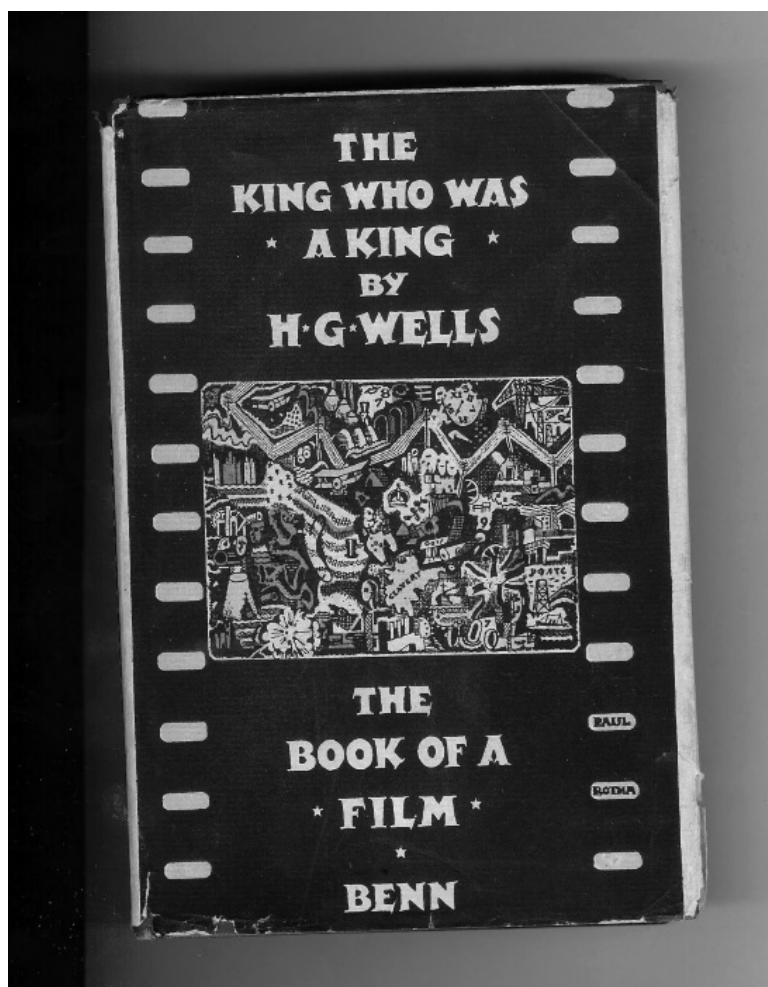
***Don Juan in Hell*** (Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1951), by George Bernard Shaw.

Illustrated with photographs from the Paul Gregory stage production starring Charles Boyer, Charles Laughton, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, and Agnes Moorehead. Directed by Charles Laughton, 'Don Juan in Hell' is the popular self-contained third act of *Man and Superman*, Bernard Shaw's seemingly endless four-act play (first performed in 1905). The first complete performance didn't take place until 1915, in Edinburgh.

***Spaceways*** (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1953), by Charles Eric Maine.

*Spaceways* was originally a radio play, which was broadcast by the BBC in 1952. The *Sunday Times* called it 'a superb piece of craftsmanship.' Charles Eric Maine (1921-81: real name David McIlwain) then turned it into a novel. The American edition (Avalon, New York, 1958) was retitled *Spaceways Satellite*.

Hammer Films produced the 1953 film version, which starred Howard Duff and Eva Bartok. The one and only paperback edition (Pan 297, London, 1954) is an 'inferred' tie-in edition: the film gets only a bare mention on the back cover. According to the blurb-writer, *Spaceways* represented 'a new kind of science fiction, with the accent on human relationships instead of machines.'





Maine's novel *The Mind of Mr. Soames* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1961) was filmed in 1969, starring Terence Stamp. The tie-in paperback was published by Panther.

***Darby O'Gill and the Little People*** (Dell First Edition A181, New York, 1959), by Lawrence Edward Watkin. Introduced by Walt Disney.

*Darby O'Gill* is the ultimate Oirish movie – to be sure, to be sure! In 1947, Walt Disney hired novelist Lawrence Edward Watkin (1901-81) to write a screenplay based upon two short-story collections by Herminie Templeton Kavanagh (1861-1933): *Darby O'Gill and the Good People* (McClure Phillips, New York, 1903) and *Ashes of Old Wishes and Other Darby O'Gill Tales* (Ayer, New York, 1926). The film was finally made twelve years later, starring Belfast-born actor Albert Sharpe (1885-1970) in the title role, with co-stars Janet Munro and Sean Connery. Jimmy O'Dea played Brian, the King of the Leprechauns.

Although the film looks Irish enough, it was filmed either at Disney's Burbank Studio or the Albertson and Rowland Lee ranches in Southern California. Second Unit footage taken in Ireland was then combined with matte paintings by Peter Ellenshaw. The song 'My Pretty Irish Girl', sung by the Connery and Munro characters, was – according to some 'usually reliable' sources – dubbed by Irish singers Brendan O'Dowda and Ruby Murray.

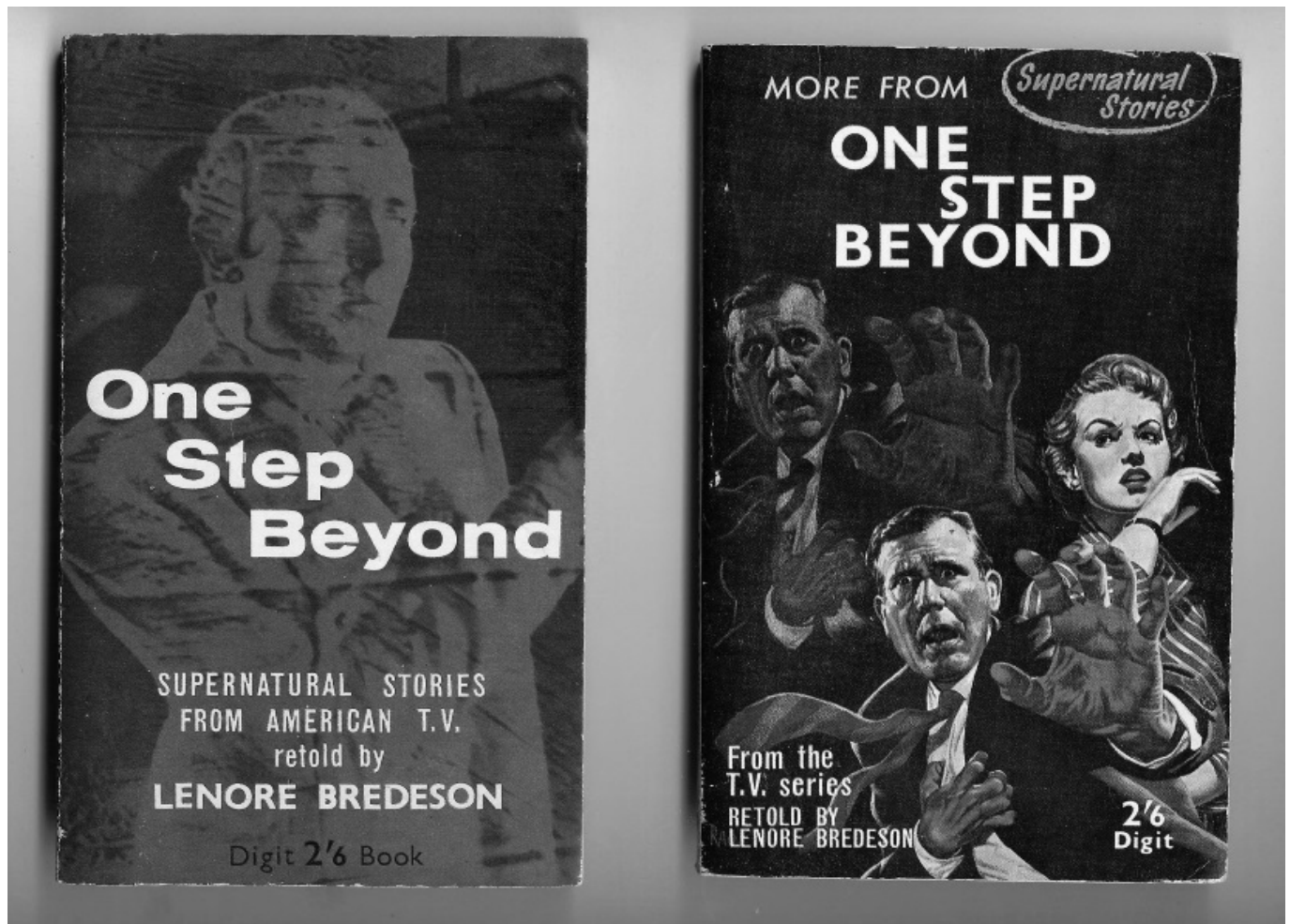
***The Brides of Dracula*** (Monarch MM602, New York, 1960), by Dean Owen.

Novelization of the Jimmy Sangster script for Hammer's first sequel to *Dracula* (1958: known as *Horror of Dracula* in the USA). Dean Owen was a pseudonym of Dudley Dean McGaughey (1909-86), a prolific author of paperback original novels. He wrote two other 'Monarch Movie Books': *Konga* (MM604, 1960) and *Reptilicus* (MM605, 1961). Monarch also published *Gorgo* (MM603, 1960), by Carson Bingham (pseudonym of Bruce Cassidy).

***One Step Beyond*** (Citadel Press, New York, 1961: Digit R468, London, 1961) and ***More from One Step Beyond*** (Citadel, 1961: Digit R552, 1961), both by Lenore Bredeson (1925-2006).

The extra-sensory-perceptive anthology series, *One Step Beyond* (1959-61), had the bad ratings-luck to be pitted against *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64), Rod Serling's more tongue-in-cheek presentation. John Newland, the show's host and resident director, had such an air of authority that viewers often claimed to have shared experiences with even the most fantastic episode. For example: 'If You See Sally' (*More Than One Step Beyond*) led to forty-five people writing in to say that they'd also met and talked with a young girl who had been dead all along!

Paul W. Fairman later produced a 'delayed' tie-in novel, *The World Grabbers* (Monarch 471, New York, 1964). It



might just as well – or better – have been linked with *The Twilight Zone*. For the Rod Serling record: *Stories from the Twilight Zone* (Bantam A2046, New York, 1960); *More Stories from the Twilight Zone* (Bantam A2227, New York, 1961); *New Stories from the Twilight Zone* (Bantam A2412, New York, 1962). The 1960s were the heyday of the film/TV tie-in novelization, when no self-respecting feature film or TV series went without its paperback-original ‘memorial’ edition. There was something of an over-production glut, however, which only began to level off in the mid-1970s. And then came 1977 and *Star Wars*...

***Tales of the Frightened*** (Belmont 90-297, New York, 1963, and Mayflower-Dell 8474, London, 1964).

In 1963, Boris Karloff lent his vocal talents to a brace of LPs: *Tales of the Frightened Volume 1* (Mercury MG 20815) and *Tales of the Frightened Volume 2* (Mercury MG 20816). They were part of a package deal arranged by an ingenious ‘book packager’ called Lyle Kenyon Engel (1915-86), which included a radio programme that didn’t happen and a book deal that did. There had been a two-issue digest magazine of the same title (dated Spring and August, 1957), supposedly edited by Engel but Michael Avallone (who later wrote the LP stories) did the real donkey work.

Michael (Angelo, Jr.) Avallone (1924-99) “ground out countless short stories and over 150 paperback novels – private eye tales, Gothics under female bylines, juveniles, erotics, espionage thrillers, movie and TV tie-in books. But unlike most purveyors of drugstore fiction, Avallone

is a true *auteur*, with a unique personality discernable throughout his work” (Francis M. Nevins, Jr., in *Twentieth-Century Crime & Mystery Writers*).

Avallone wrote more film and TV tie-in novelizations than anybody else you care to mention. But far and away the most commercially successful – for the publishers, not for Avallone! – was *The Man from U.N.C.L.E #1: The Thousand Coffins Affair* (Ace G-553, New York, and Souvenir Press/Four Square 1426, London, 1965). *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (Bantam N8033, New York, 1970) was also a mini-blockbuster. He perpetrated eight tie-in books of *The Partridge Family* for Curtis Books (1970-72).

***Fantastic Voyage*** (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, and Dennis Dobson, London, 1966), by Isaac Asimov.

Isaac Asimov (1920-92) returned to science-fiction writing after a ten-year gap to write this best-selling novelization of a box-office-smash film. He made at least some pseudo-scientific sense out of a screenplay by Harry Kleiner, adapted by David Duncan, from a story by Otto Klement and Jay Lewis Bixby. “Four men and one woman {Raquel Welch in a ‘special-effect’ role} reduced to a microscopic fraction of their original size, boarding a miniaturized atomic sub and being injected into a dying man’s carotid artery” (blurb).

It was serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post*, two parts (abridged), during February 1966. The tie-in paperbacks were published by Bantam (H3177), New York, and Corgi (GS7366) London, both 1966). A 17-episode animated TV



series by Filmmation ran in 1968-69. Asimov also turned some unproduced scripts into *Fantastic Voyage II: Destination Brain* (Doubleday, New York, and Grafton, London, 1987).

***Tarzan and the Valley of Gold*** (Ballantine U6125, New York, 1966), by Fritz Leiber.

"Ex-football star {Mike} Henry takes over the loincloth (after doffing his suit and tie!) in a hunt for kidnappers and jewel thieves. This Tarzan-for-the-60s is pretty good, if you can accept the Ape Man as a jungle James Bond. Excellent location film in Mexico. Panavision" (*Leonard Maltin's Movie Guide*).

*Tarzan and the Valley of Gold* is the 32<sup>nd</sup> 'official' film and the 25<sup>th</sup> 'official' novel in the Tarzan saga, both of which were authorized by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc. More facts about ERB (as he is affectionately called) may be found ... just about anywhere, really.

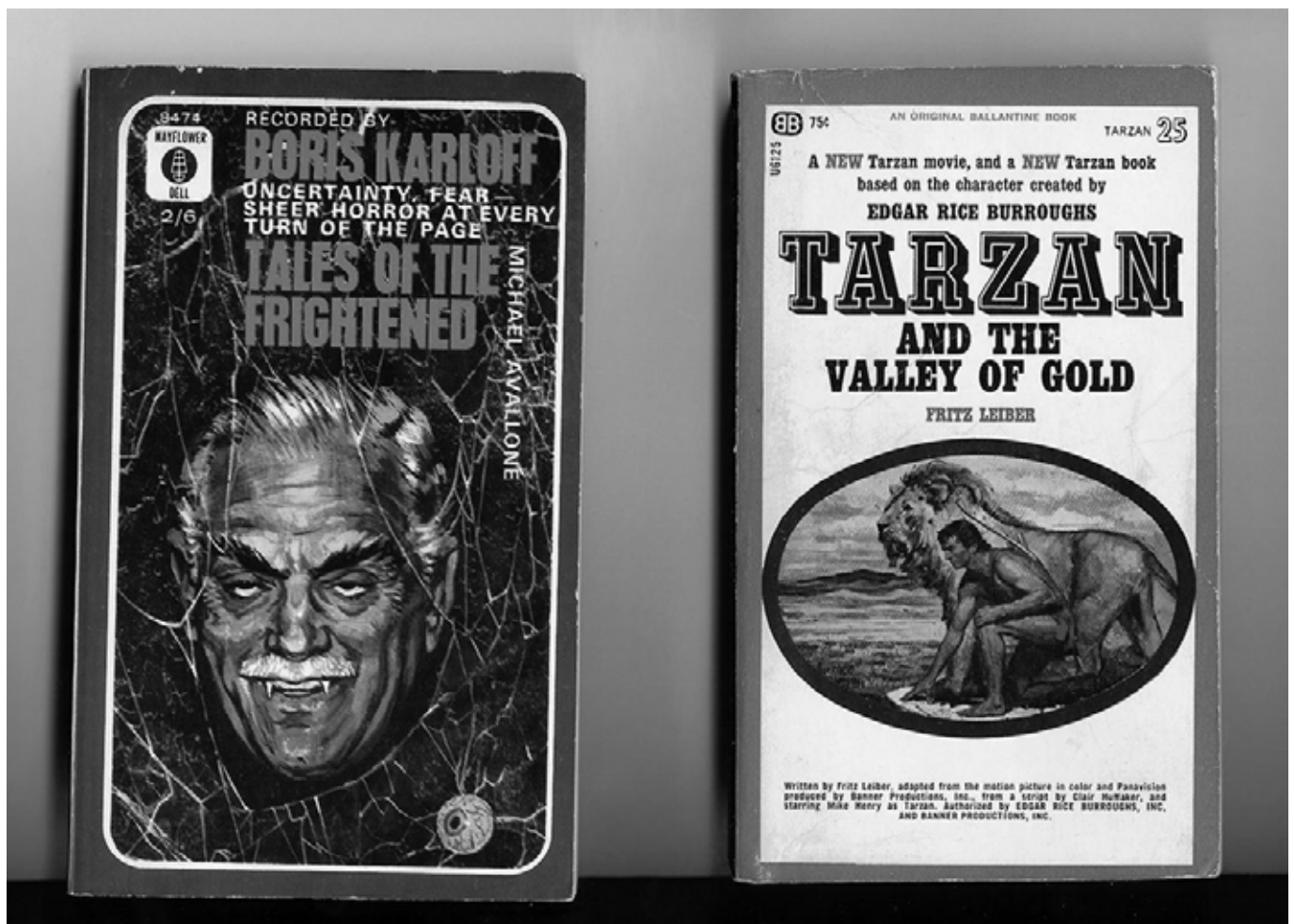
Fritz Leiber (1910-1992) was the very man to write this novelization, being one of the best science-fantasy authors working at that – or any other – time. His most famous novel, *Conjure Wife* (Twayne, New York, 1953, and Penguin, London, 1969) was filmed three times, most effectively in 1962. The British title was *Night of the Eagle*, which the US distributors changed to *Burn, Witch, Burn!* –harking back to a 1933 novel by A. Merritt (BMC No. 95). Berkley (F621) published the now scarce tie-in edition.

***The Time Tunnel*** (Pyramid R-1522, New York, 1966) and ***Timeslip!*** (Pyramid R-1680, New York, 1967), by Murray Leinster.

Irwin Allen (see above) moved into television with *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1964-68), based on his 1961 hit movie of the same title. Theodore Sturgeon (1918-85) wrote the film tie-in (Pyramid G-622), which doubled for the TV series (R-1068, 1964). All I can bring myself to say about *Lost in Space* (1965-68) is that the tie-in book was written by Dave Van Arnam and Ron Archer (Pyramid X-1679, 1967).

*The Time Tunnel* (1966-67) featured two scientists, Dr. Tony Newman (James Darren) and Dr. Doug Phillips (Robert Colbert), who jump into a – well – tunnel through time, trying to impress penny-pinching government VIPs. But they haven't figured out how to get back – one of those annoying little design flaws. Tony and Doug keep swinging back and forth in time, usually finding themselves locked into some old Twentieth-Century Fox movie footage, e.g. *Titanic* (1953 version, of course). Murray Leinster's two tie-in novels make much more intelligent use of 'real' historical events.

The first book has two separately published front-cover variations, one with a still from the TV series and the other using the illustration from *Time Tunnel* (Pyramid R-1043, 1964) – a completely unrelated novel, also written by Murray Leinster. But the serial numbers and publication dates are identical. The artist Jack Gaughan is credited with painting both covers, even though one edition uses a photograph. Leinster also wrote a juvenile – sorry, Young



Adult – novel entitled *Tunnel Through Time* (Westminster, Philadelphia, 1966). Let confusion reign!

Any capsule bio-bibliography of Murray Leinster (1896-1975) would be a quart-into-pint-pot affair, so I'll just mention that his birth name was William Fitzgerald Jenkins and that he became known as the Dean of Science Fiction Writers. Apart from the *Time Tunnel* books, he tied-in another Irwin Allen TV science-fiction series for Pyramid: *Land of the Giants* (X-1846, 1968), *The Hot Spot* (X-1921, 1969), and *Unknown Danger* (X-2105, 1969).

***The Afrit Affair*** (Berkley Medallion X1537, New York, 1968), by Keith Laumer.

Get thee to *The Complete Avengers: Everything you ever wanted to know about The Avengers and The New Avengers* (Boxtree, London, 1989), by Dave Rogers. I'd like to focus upon the last five tie-in novels published by Berkley, especially those written by collectable American science-fiction author Keith Laumer (1925-93). These books, which had no British editions, have now become very hard to find – even in the USA.

In *The Afrit Affair* (No. 5 in the Berkley canon), Laumer sends up science-fiction and spy-fiction something rotten – just like the TV series, then. "THE AFRIT STRIKES. TRY AND STOP HIM! Stranger and stranger things began to appear: giant footprints of a monster, murderous flying anvils, one-eared corpses, ticking bombs in the basement. Steed and Emma Peel hastened to discover the Afrit's identity – before he made his final strike..." (from the

back-cover blurb).

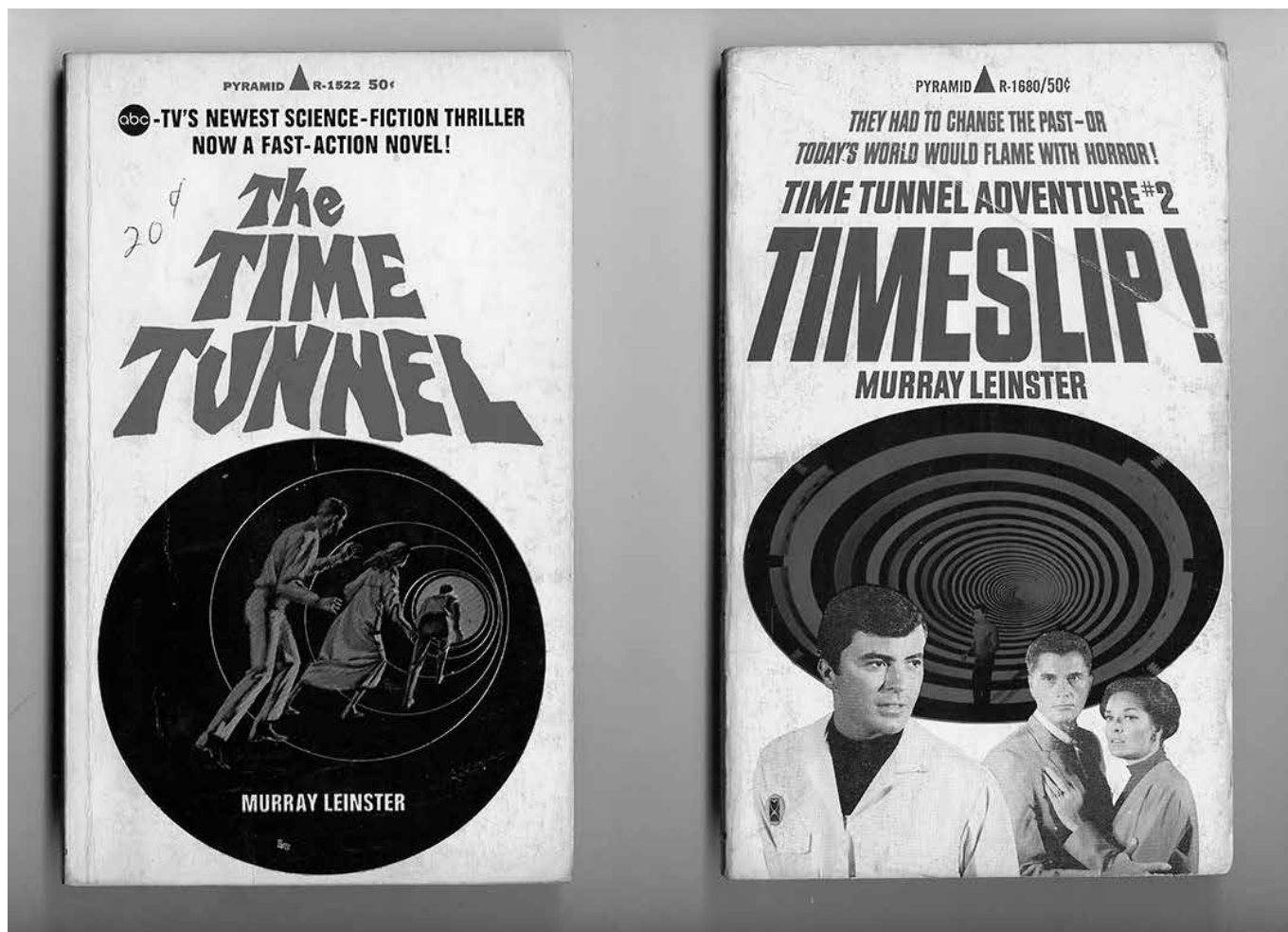
Laumer followed *The Afrit Affair* with *The Drowned Queen* (X1565) and *The Gold Bomb* (X1592), both in 1968. Berkley rounded off their 'Avengers' list with two novels by veteran pulpster Norman Daniels (1905-95): *The Magnetic Man* (X1637, 1968) and *Moon Express* (X1658, 1969).

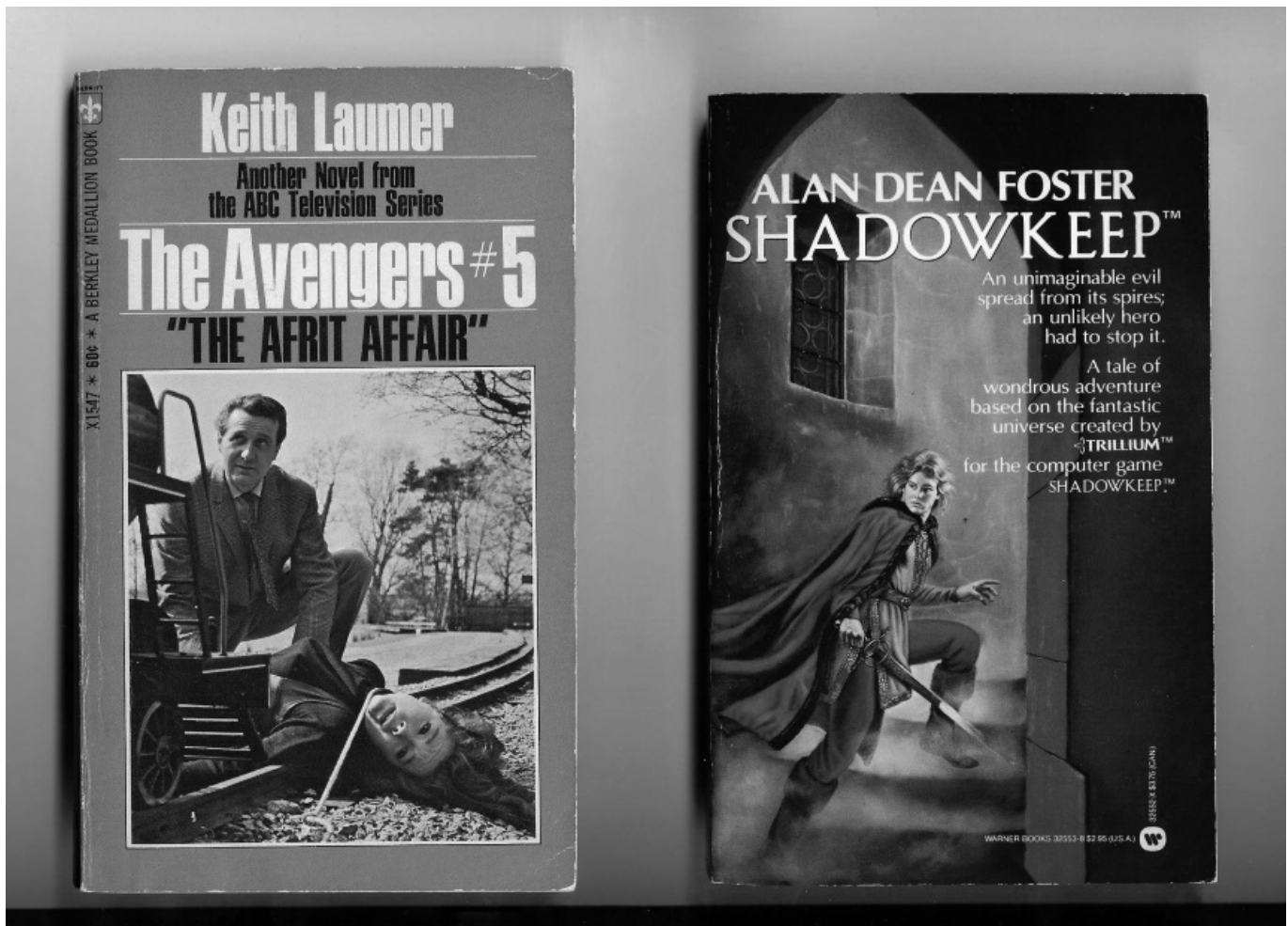
N.B. Laumer also wrote two tie-in novels for *The Invaders* (1967-68): *The Invaders* (Pyramid R1664, New York, 1967, and Souvenir Press/Corgi GS7836, London, 1968: as *The Meteor Men*, by 'Anthony LeBaron') and *Enemies from Beyond* (Pyramid X1689, 1967).

***Sapphire and Steel*** (Star, London, 1979), by Peter J. Hammond.

"All irregularities will be handled by the forces controlling each dimension. Transuranic heavy elements may not be used where there is a life. Medium atomic weights are available. Gold, Lead, Copper, Jet, Diamond, Radium, Sapphire, Silver and Steel! Sapphire and Steel have been assigned!"

These enigmatic words, spoken by some unknown person or *thing*, served to introduce the 34 twice-weekly episodes of the British TV series *Sapphire and Steel* (1979-82). The sensitive and psychic-powered Sapphire was played, mostly in blue, by Joanna Lumley. Steel was suitably grim and grey, with David McCallum well-cast against type. Two other specialist 'elements' turned up from time singular to times plural: Silver (David Collings) and Lead (Val Pringle). It seemed reminiscent of the old DC comics





'Metal Men' team of six robots – Iron, Gold, Mercury, Tin, Platinum, and Lead.

Peter J. Hammond, the show's creator – who was then best-known for his work on *Z Cars* (the British equivalent of *Adam-12*) wanted to take TV science fiction off on a tangent: "There have been plenty of stories of characters who travel in time but none before where time itself does the traveling" (publicity material). The series proved popular, but it was summarily killed off when ATV lost its franchise to Central. Sapphire and Steel were left in Limbo, literally ...

**Conan the Barbarian** (Bantam, New York, and Sphere, London, 1982), by L. Sprague de Camp & Lin Carter.

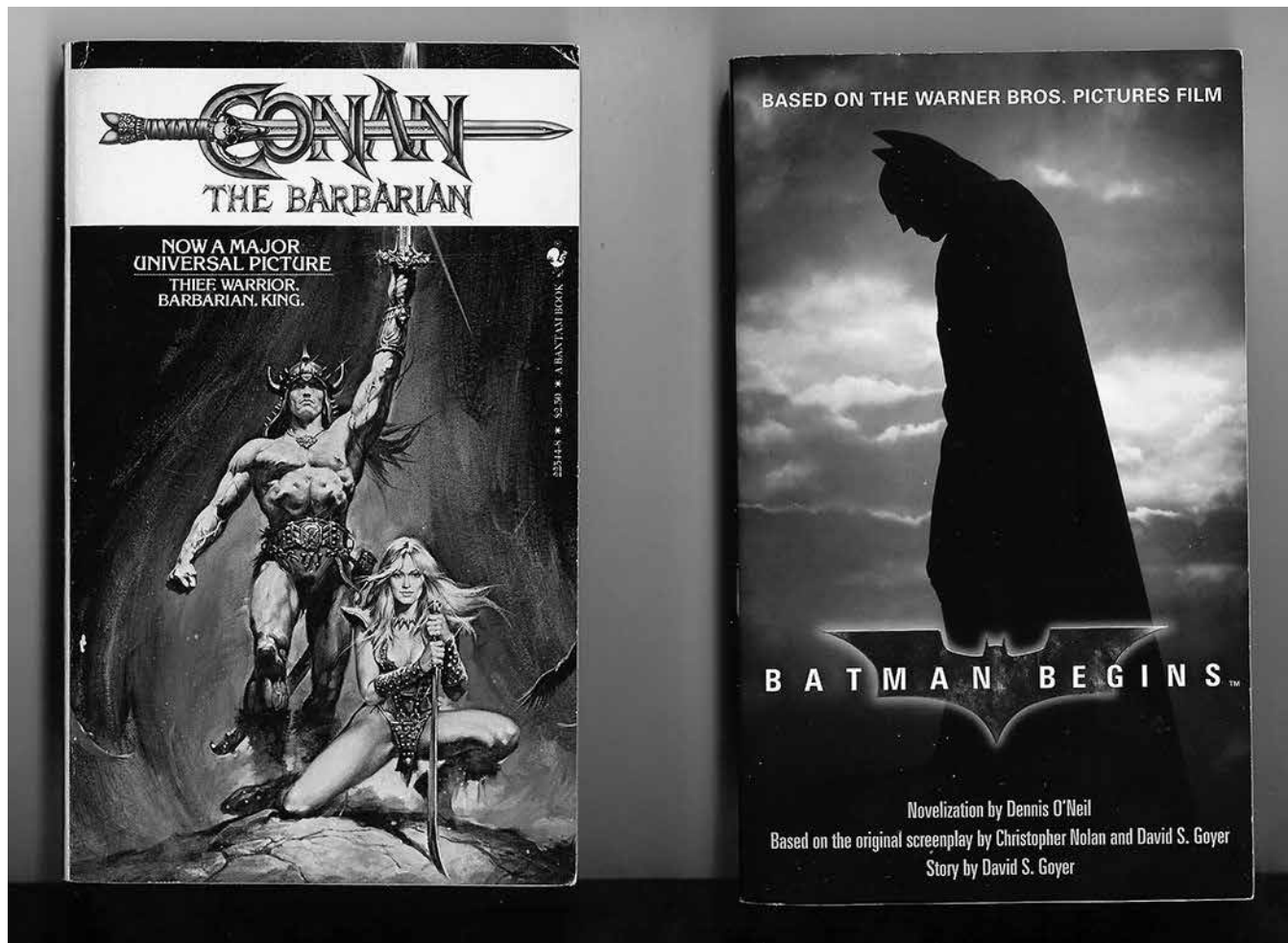
Lyon Sprague de Camp (1907-2000), spent more than thirty years promoting the Conan stories of Robert E. Howard (1906-36). He wrote several 'new' Conan novels in collaboration with Lin Carter (1930-88). It was only natural, then, that they should get together on adapting the script by director John Milius and the pre-*Platoon* Oliver Stone. But the sequel, *Conan the Destroyer*, was novelized by Robert Jordan (Tor, New York, 1984, and Sphere, London, 1985). Jordan, whose birth name was James Oliver Rigney, Jr. (1948-2010), had already penned several Conan novels for Tor. "Nobody alive writes Conan better than Robert Jordan" said the ever-generous de Camp.

**Shadowkeep™** (Warner Books, New York, 1984), by Alan Dean Foster.

*Shadowkeep™* was the first computer role-playing game to inspire a novelization by a major science-fiction writer. The game was designed by Ultrasoft. "Everyone seems to look upon the computer as a tool, but it's actually not a tool, it's a gate," claimed Foster. "It's a gate into other worlds, the fringes of which we've only begun to explore" (from the *Trillium Newsletter*, Fall/Winter 1984). The book is © 1984 by Spinnaker Software Corporation.

Other board game and/or computer game-related film tie-in novelizations are *Dungeons & Dragons: The Movie* (Wizards of the Coast, Renton, Washington, 2000), by Neal Barrett, Jr., *Doom* (Pocket Star Books, New York, 2005), by John Shirley, and Foster's *Transformers* (Ballantine Del Rey, New York, and Titan, London, 2007). The 'Transformers' started off as a line of action toys from Hasbro. *Mars Attacks!* (Signet, New York and London, 1996), by Jonathan Gems, was based on the old Topps Company bubble-gum cards.

Alan Dean Foster (1946 -) is the very model of a film/TV novelizer, starting with *Luana* (Ballantine, New York, 1974), based on a jungle-girl movie that nobody seems to have seen. He went on to adapt the animated *Star Trek* series (Log One to Log Ten, 1974-78), the first three *Alien* films, the original *Star Wars* novel (ghost-written for George Lucas) plus two non-canonical follow-ups, the revamped *Star Trek* movies (2009, 2013, with more to follow). The list goes on, and on, and ...



***Batman Begins*** (Ballantine Del Rey, New York, and Titan, London, 2005), by Dennis O'Neil.

Long-time comic book writer Dennis O'Neil (1939 - ) based his novelization upon the screenplay by Christopher Nolan and David S. Goyer (with a contractual nod to 'Batman created by Bob Kane'). O'Neil also novelized the no doubt first-of-many sequels: *The Dark Knight* (Berkley Boulevard, New York, and Titan, London, 2008).

Craig Shaw Gardner (1949 - ) wrote the novelizations based upon the two Batman films directed by Tim Burton: *Batman* (Warner Books, New York, and Futura, London, 1989) and *Batman Returns* (ditto, 1992). Both books graced *The New York Times* Bestseller List. I can hardly bring myself to think about *Batman Forever* (Warner Books and Bantam, London, 1995) and *Batman & Robin* (Warner Aspect, New York and London, 1997), by Michael Jan Friedman.

Joel Eisner's *The Official Batman Batbook* (Contemporary Books, Chicago, and Titan, London, 1987) will tell you everything you probably don't need to know about the *Batman* TV series (1966-68). *Batman vs. Three Villains of Doom* (Signet D2940, New York, and Four Square 1689, London, 1966) was written by Winston Lyon (real name: William Woolfolk). Lorenzo Semple, Jr. scripted the *Batman* movie spin-off, which was then novelized by Lyon as *Batman vs. the Fearsome Foursome* (Signet D2995 and Four Square 1859, 1967).

At present, the general trend seems to be away from the now tired old science-fantasy genre, although the *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and comic-book dinosaurs still go lumbering on. The main growth area is in mystery tie-in novelizations, especially *CSI: Crime Investigation* and its numerous big-city clones. Max Allan Collins alone has written *CSI* books set in Las Vegas, Miami, and New York. Ditto for the similar *Criminal Minds* franchise, e.g. the aptly-titled *Killer Profile* (Obsidian, New York, 2008). BBC Books, Ltd. has enjoyed great success in recent years with books based upon the regenerated *Doctor Who* series, e.g. *The Stone Rose* (2006), by Jacqueline Rayner, and its *Torchwood* derivative, e.g. *Border Princes* (2007), by Dan Abnett.

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1 You can read all – well, most – about him in my article for *Book and Magazine Collector* No. 279 (March 2007).

2 See *H. G. Wells in the Cinema* (Jupiter, London, 1977), by Alan Wykes.

# recurrent:

## KINCAID IN SHORT

### Paul Kincaid

## Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

by Jorge Luis Borges

*Mirrors and copulation are abominable, for they multiply the number of mankind. (68)*

**T**he map is the territory. That was the theme of my last column, about Dave Hutchinson's 'On the Windsor Branch', but it is a theme that runs through practically everything that Jorge Luis Borges wrote. The memory of 'Funes the Memorious' maps everything he has ever experienced in such detail that there is no practical distinction between memory and reality. The map of *Don Quixote* devised by Pierre Menard is indistinguishable from the territory of the original novel by Cervantes. The map of the crimes in 'Death and the Compass' is also the solution to the crimes, just as, in 'The Garden of Forking Paths', the scene of the story provides the map that will determine the outcome of a World War I battle. But nowhere is this interplay between map and territory more thoroughly and inventively worked out than in what is perhaps the greatest of Borges's *ficciones*: 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'.

### I

For a start, the map to the story that is the title is misleading, for we first encounter not Tlön but Uqbar.

Or to be more precise, what we first encounter is a mirror that 'troubled the far end of a hallway' (68). An interesting word: 'troubled'; mirrors and mirrorings crop up repeatedly in Borges's fiction, serving in their reflections and duplications much the same function as his most characteristic image, the labyrinth. And labyrinths are troubling, standing for the disturbed and disordered nature of the human mind. What this troubling mirror tells us is that what we are about to see is a reflection of reality rather than reality itself, a map rather than the territory; and, being troubled, most likely a distorted reflection at that.

But in fact Borges goes out of his way to convince us that this is reality. The country house in which this opening scene takes place is very carefully located in Ramos Mejía, once a rich, largely English, suburb of Buenos Aires, exactly where one would expect to find such a house, such

a mirror, and of course a copy of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* (a fictitious work, though there was an *American Cyclopaedia*). And Borges's companion on this evening is Adolfo Bioy Casares, who was his life-long friend and frequent collaborator. Indeed, the characters who are referenced throughout the story – Carlos Mastronardi, Néstor Ibarra, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Drieu La Rochelle, Alfonso Reyes, Xul Solar and Enrique Amorim – are all real people who were friends of Borges. The relationships drawn between them in the story maps the actual territory of their genuine relationships. This, Borges seems to be telling us, is territory not map.

Thus, when the troubling mirror prompts Bioy to quote an aphorism from Uqbar, that mirrors are abominable 'for they multiply the number of mankind' (68), we are naturally inclined to believe him (in the original Spanish, Bioy's statement is given in English, with a Spanish translation, to give it greater verisimilitude). It does, after all, sound like exactly the sort of saying that would appeal to both men, and indeed Borges had already made the same point in an earlier story, 'Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv', in which he suggested that Earth is an error and 'Mirrors and paternity are abominable because they multiply and affirm it' (43). (Though in this instance we might think that what is truly abominable about this mirror is that it multiplies realities.) Unfortunately, there seems to be no provenance for the quote; Bioy says he found it in Volume XLVI of the *Cyclopaedia*, but when they check the copy of the *Cyclopaedia* in the house there is no entry on Uqbar, nor does it appear in any of the atlases that Borges consults. This difficulty in finding any reference to Uqbar, of course, makes it all the more convincing when Bioy turns up a day or so later with his own copy of the volume. It turns out that this copy has four extra pages, which contain an article on Uqbar, and the article 'seemed quite plausible, very much in keeping with the general tone of the work, even (naturally) somewhat boring' (69). Of course it's boring, it's an encyclopedia entry, so it would seem unconvincing if it was anything other than boring.

Except that the entry is vague and ambiguous, but again there are odd convincing details. There's reference



to a history of Uqbar by Silas Haslam who, so a footnote informs us, wrote *A General History of Labyrinths*, a real book published in 1888 and originally illustrated by Haslam's wife, Anna. And the earliest book about Uqbar is ascribed to Johannes Valentinus Andreä, who wrote one of the early utopias, *Description of the Republic of Christianopolis*, and, perhaps more tellingly, wrote *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz* which eventually gave rise to rosicrucianism. Uqbar may be uncertainly located in space (there seems to be a map but no territory), but it is fairly firmly located in time.

## II

We can infer that the first part of the story takes place around 1935. As the second part opens it is two years later; an English railway engineer and old if not particularly close friend of the Borges family has died, and among his effects, Jorge Luis Borges comes across '*A First Encyclopædia of Tlön. Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr*' (71).

Tlön had made a tangential appearance earlier when we learned that all the literature of Uqbar was fantasy set in 'the two imaginary realms of Mle'khnas and Tlön' (70), but now that imaginary land would appear to be the subject of a multi-volume encyclopaedia. The unreal is reaching out into the real. And it is worth noting, briefly, how much of this story is dependent upon encyclopaedias, those authorities of cultural and material reality. By approaching Uqbar and Tlön by way of encyclopaedias, they are immediately granted substance: I have never heard of Uqbar, but it is in an encyclopaedia so it must be my ignorance that is at fault. Because an encyclopaedia embodies a systematic account of everything, 'its architectures and its playing cards, the horror of its mythologies and the murmur of its tongues, its emperors and its seas, its minerals and its birds and fishes, its algebra and its fire, its theological and metaphysical controversies' (71-2). The very all-encompassing character of an encyclopaedia betokens reality.

And against the all-encompassing nature of an encyclopaedia is set the all-encompassing nature of the inventors of Tlön (for it is never doubted by anyone, other than perhaps the reader, that Tlön is an invention), which it is determined must be 'a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebrists (sic), moralists, painters, geometers ...' (72). Such a vast conspiracy, we might assume, could not possibly be secret, but it seems easier to assume the secret society than to accept the reality of Tlön.

Yet it is the reality, or perhaps unreality, of Tlön that is at issue in this part of the story. Idealism is the only philosophy possibly because of the way the languages are constructed. In the southern hemisphere, for instance, the language is composed of verbs but not nouns; thus a phrase such as 'The moon rose above the river' would translate as 'Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned' (73). As we've already seen, the encyclopaedic uncertainty of Uqbar meant that that country seemed to have time but not space, and that is even more true of Tlön whose language of verbs means that the world is 'successive, temporal, but not spatial' (73). Meanwhile, in the northern hemisphere the primary unit of the language is the



adjective, so that instead of objects there are concatenations of attributes. This is again a language that denies space since there can be no continuity of extent, only a succession of sense impressions that may change from one moment to the next. Since anything can be named by this means, 'no one believes in the reality expressed' (73) by any string of adjectives, it is a world of continuity but not of solidity, the universe is no more than 'a series of mental processes that occur not in space but rather successively, in time' (73). Although some of the more eccentric philosophers have formulated a doctrine of materialism, 'generally with less clarity than zeal' (75), the very language of Tlön resists formulating the notion of continuity in time, so that materialism cannot even be fully or comprehensibly expressed.

This denial of substance, in which all that is material melts away, means that there can be no science in Tlön, but there are countless competing philosophies because 'metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy' (74). (Uqbar is not mentioned here, in fact it is almost entirely absent from the discussion of Tlön, but in this aside we are reminded that all of Uqbar's literature was also fantasy. Fantasy is therefore being established as the key element in the thought and the creativity of both Uqbar and Tlön, which encourages us to read the fantasy that is 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' as a map of real territory.) But if there is no science, there is psychology – 'the classical culture of Tlön is composed of a single discipline – psychology – to which all others are subordinate' (73) – and the school of thought that is most widely held maintains that 'there is but a single subject; that indivisible subject is every being in the universe, and the beings of the universe are the organs and masks of the deity' (76). In other words,

everyone and every thing is an aspect of, or a portion of, God. Typically, Borges quotes both Bertrand Russell and Schopenhauer (perhaps slightly misleadingly) to support this notion.

Such thoroughgoing idealism, we are told, ‘could hardly have failed to influence reality’ (77), for instance allowing objects to be conjured into existence simply by the belief that they should exist. This ‘has been of invaluable aid to archaeologists, making it possible not only to interrogate but even to modify the past, which is now no less plastic, no less malleable than the future’ (77-8). Thus not only is space insubstantial, but so is time: the map, the encyclopaedias in which this information is laid out, is thus more real than the territory.

### III

‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ was first published in the May 1940 issue of the literary magazine *Sur*, where so many of Borges’s early *ficciones* appeared. But the story concludes with a postscript that deliberately undermines everything we have read so far, and in fact changes the story from being a fantasy to being science fiction. As Emir Rodríguez Monegal puts it: ‘The postscript gives the game away because it is dated 1947 and reads: “I reproduce the preceding article just as it appeared in number 68 of *Sur* – jade green covers, May 1940” ... [but] ... the reader

George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne and the philosopher who introduced the doctrine known first as ‘immaterialism’, later as idealism, which denied the existence of material objects, claiming that everything is made up of sense perceptions in the mind of the observer. (Borges notes that, for Hume, Berkeley’s arguments ‘admit not the slightest refutation ... [but] ... inspire not the slightest conviction’ (72), but inexplicably omits the famous anecdote in which Dr Johnson kicked a stone and declared: ‘Thus I refute Berkeley!’) Thus we have a secret society, one of whose founding members was responsible for the very philosophy that Tlön apparently makes concrete, and the society takes as its mission ‘to invent a country’ (78). By the early part of the 19th century that mission had grown into the creation of the 40-volume *First Encyclopædia of Tlön*, ‘the grandest work of letters ever undertaken by humankind’ (79).

The *Encyclopædia* is the map, but the map starts to turn into the territory. In among a crate of crockery sent from Europe a princess finds a compass marked with letters from one of the languages of Tlön: ‘the first intrusion of the fantastic world of Tlön into the real world’ (80). Some months later, Borges found among the coins dropped by a dead gaucho a small, incredibly heavy cone ‘made of a metal not of this world ... [which is] ... an image of the deity in certain Tlönian religions’ (80). Finally, when a complete

## The unreal is reaching out into the real. And it is worth noting, briefly, how much of this story is dependent upon encyclopaedias, those authorities of cultural and material reality...

of *Sur* had in his hands that jade green issue and ... he was unmistakably reading it in May 1940 and not in 1947’ (Monegal, 332).

(Parenthetically, that first sentence of the postscript seems to have varied. Andrew Hurley’s translation, in *Collected Fictions*, reads: ‘I reproduce the article above exactly as it appeared in the *Anthology of Fantastic Literature* (1940) ...’ (78), as does the Anthony Kerrigan translation in *Ficciones* and the James E. Irby translation in *Labyrinths*. Presumably the reprint in *Antología de la Literatura Fantástica (The Book of Fantasy)* edited by Borges, Silvina Ocampo and Bioy Casares, was the approved text.)

Just as Tlön made a ghostly appearance in the midst of the description of Uqbar, so Orbis Tertius had received a passing but unexplained mention in the second section when we learn that the encyclopaedia of Tlön bears ‘on the first page and again on the onion-skin page that covered one of the color illustrations ... a blue oval with this inscription: *Orbis Tertius*’ (71). We hear nothing more of this ‘third world’ until the postscript, when we are introduced to a ‘secret benevolent society’ (78) that was formed sometime in the seventeenth century, in either Lucerne or London, and including among its members

set of the *Encyclopædia* is discovered, ‘reality “caved in” at more than one point. The truth is, it wanted to cave in’ (81). It is no accident that the story, written at the beginning of the 1940s, looking out upon a world with Stalinism and Nazism, with a massive war starting to roll across Europe, should present a world ready to fall for a new certainty, a different way of shaping reality. It is not necessarily a better way, as Borges warns: ‘Spellbound by Tlön’s rigor, humanity has forgotten, and continues to forget, that it is the rigor of chess masters, not of angels’ (81).

‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ is a thought experiment about a thought experiment, a map that becomes the territory. It is also a warning that confusion between map and territory is where the terror lies.

Quotations taken from ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ by Jorge Luis Borges (translated by Andrew Hurley) in *Collected Fictions*, London, Allen Lane, 1998, pp68-81.

‘Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv’ by Jorge Luis Borges (translated by Andrew Hurley) in *Collected Fictions*, London, Allen Lane, 1998, pp40-44.

*Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* by Emir Rodríguez Monegal, New York, Paragon House, 1988.

# recurrent:

## FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

### Andy Sawyer

## Terror Strikes by Norman Firth

So obscure is Norman [Wesley] Firth that the Science Fiction Foundation Collection has neither of the novels the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* has in its entry, and only one issue of *Futuristic Stories* (and none of *Strange Adventures*) for which he allegedly wrote the entire contents. Yet during his short but prolific career (five million words of all kinds of fiction in around five years, before his death of tuberculosis in 1949), Firth was known as the 'Prince of the Pulp Pedlars'. Although it is categorically denied in Philip Harbottle's invaluable *Vultures of the Void: the Legacy* – essential for anyone interested in the history of post-war British genre publishing – that Firth was the writer legend has it was chained to the wall of his publisher's basement, he churned out stories for the 'spicy' Utopian Publications and the 'mushroom' publishers such as Hamilton, John Spencer and Brown, Watson at an industrial rate. Much of this writing was under the obligatory multitude of pseudonyms: even the 'Wesley' of his frequent moniker N. Wesley Firth seems to have been a family name which he adopted. The use of pseudonyms, necessary if you are responsible for the entire contents of a magazine, seems to have deceived Margot Bennett in her article 'Space-Ships Also Leak' (*Lilliput* 129, March 1948), in which she entertainingly describes the rigidity of the contemporary space story, with its frame 'almost as rigid as the sonnet' and plots involving 'a hero who saves the galaxy after a stiff fight against man-eating mud, cosmic envelopes, or scheming icicles.'

Bennett, whose own *The Long Way Back* has been covered in this series, seems to have annoyed science fiction fans with her jokes about the contents of the sf magazines, and certainly shows no sense of realising that the reason that 'Mr [Rice] Ackman's Universe is not unique' is that he and N. Wesley Firth are the same person. To be fair, stories which seem to be by John Russell Fearn are given the same treatment, and Bennett seems to be enjoying her explorations of the Zogs and the Zengoes, as indeed, anyone who follows her example might (as long as a handy bottle of Martian *sitch* is kept within reach for when things get too baroque).

For there is a huge difference between writers of this sort of pulp/popular fiction who are simply illiterate hacks and those who have a gift for storytelling. After following Margot Bennett into the world of Rice Ackman, whose 'Dark Asteroid' makes up the entire contents of the

December 1946 second and final issue of *Futuristic*, I was hungry for more. Tosh, it might have been, but certainly not monochrome, boring tosh.

And here, coincidence strikes, because while I have never seen a copy of the original of Firth's novel *Terror Strikes*, behind the scenes Phil Harbottle had persuaded the Ulverscroft Foundation to issue, in their series of Large Print 'Lindford Mystery Library' books, several Norman Firth novels, and I was able to buy one for the SFF collection. And here Firth seems to be confirmed in his rank of well-above-competent entertaining writers. There's an adage attributed to T. S. Eliot: 'good writers borrow: great writers steal'. This seems to be taken as meaning that while all writers will borrow from others, the really *top* writers will not transform their borrowings so that they will have written something clearly their own. *Terror Strikes* doesn't actually do this – but it does something intriguingly different in the borrowing terms, and almost as interesting.

There is a series of murders in London. Quickly, it becomes apparent that all of them are directors of the same company, known for its dodgy dealings and willingness to do anything to 'prise some loose change off the suckers'. These murders are *witnessed* – and often described in graphic detail. However, it is certain that nobody noticed anyone near the victims. Could there be something supernatural happening? Chief Inspector Ebenezer Sebastian Sharkey of Scotland Yard is called in to investigate and, together with his friend Denby Collins, a writer of books debunking the occult, they solve the mystery.

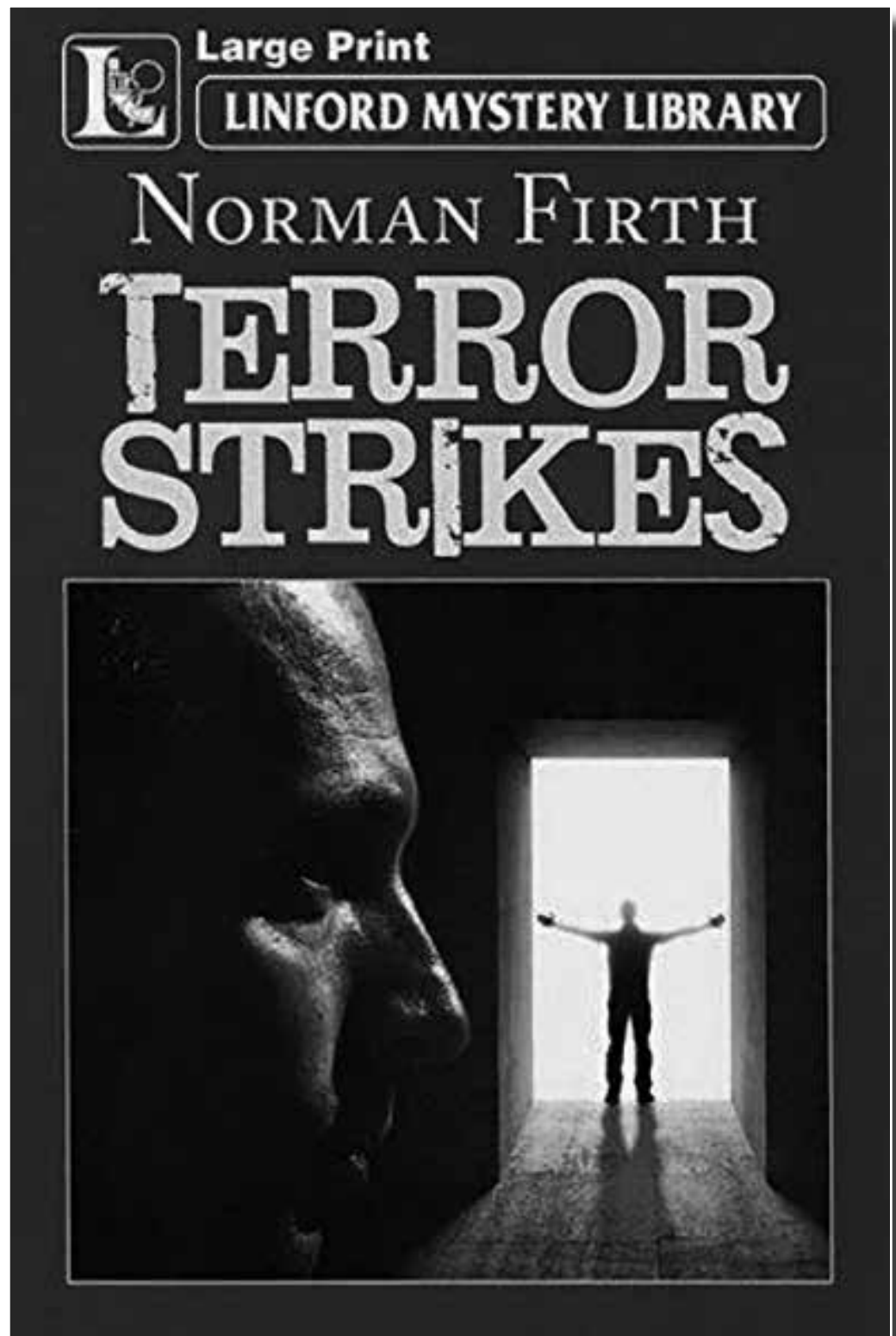
And essentially, it is as simple as that. It is hardly verging on spoilerdom – for this clue is given to us quite early on in the book – to note that the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* points out the novel's close resemblance to H. G. Wells's 1897 *The Invisible Man*. And it is true that the novel often reads like a something from a production factory where even the author will have hardly bothered to read over what has been written. At one point, we are pointed to the next victim, but when we meet him, his name has been changed. When we come across 'Colonel Harris Gore-Blatherington' we can immediately picture from the name that he is an ex-military buffoon. What we see on the page is what we get, and while the next few pages are amusingly

written, everything from the put-upon batman to the long-suffering wife to his bull-like roars of 'confounded impudence' is pretty much what we'd expect from that name.

And yet... and yet. While the science of the invisibility is hand-waving stuff, it's no more so than many more authentic 'hard science fiction' stories of the time and certainly no more so than Wells's own attempts to make his own version of invisibility plausible. It's neatly embedded in a background of commercial skulduggery and given life in a popular detective-fiction context. The obvious similarities to *The Invisible Man* also hide the way Firth uses them to mask the actual identity of the culprit, and there are some genuinely funny moments when Sharkey and co. are trapped in a room with the invisible villain, flailing about in the hope to connect. The police elements provide the sf story in a context in which it will be picked up by readers wanting a mystery to be solved. Sharkey is himself an interesting character – a corpulent cop not nearly as slow-witted as he appears to be, who seems to me to be heavily drawn upon Claud Eustace Teal, the Scotland Yard foil to Leslie Charteris's 'Saint' who first appears opposite Simon Templar in 1929. What we seem to be getting here is not dull-witted hackery but sharp-witted professionalism – take a plot here from one genre, add a character there from another, mix with storytellers' *panache* and – *voila!* something that readers will slip down gratefully and easily. I personally would love to see more about the team of Sharkey and Collins, but by the time *Terror Strikes* was off to the publisher Firth was no doubt working on his next commission.

Firth died in Birkenhead after a writing career of around five years. He was 29. Most of his output appeared as slim paperback novels with lurid covers and in equally-ephemeral magazines. Apart from specialist col-

lectors/historians, there probably aren't a dozen people who recognise his name. Although sf was only a very small part of his output, it would have been interesting to see what might have happened if he had lived until the next decade when *New Worlds*, *Science Fantasy*, *Authentic*, and *Nebula* were shaking off the reputations of *Futuristic* and *Strange Adventures* and readers were looking for more thoughtful material. On the basis of *Terror Strikes*, Firth would have had the ability to deliver.



# recurrent: RESONANCES Stephen Baxter

## Batman vs Superman...?

To say that this year's big DC superhero movie has received mixed reviews is understated. *Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice* (dir. Zack Snyder, 2016) 'is not only a turkey, it invents an entire new spectrum of turkey... It is the Turkey McTurkeyface of turkeys,' wrote Camilla Long, and not in some obscure blog but in the *Sunday Times* print edition (27 March 2016).

But the film has been undeniably commercially successful – and it does have some thought-provoking content. In what is probably the movie's take-home line, Batman says to Alfred, '[Superman] has the power to wipe out the entire human race. If we believe there's even a 1% chance that he's our enemy, we have to take it as an absolute certainty.' And this, an expression of the required response to an existential threat, has resonance with real-world debates about our (potential) relationship with the alien.

My own introduction to the comics was as a little kid back in the 60s, an era now called the comics' 'Silver Age'. The comics themselves weren't so easy to find in Liverpool; you'd get a random selection of titles and numbers on racks in the newsagent's – following serial stories was tricky – and at 10d each (about 4p) they weren't cheap. It was always Superman who appealed most to me. No doubt there's a chance element about the first title you encounter, and on which you imprint. But I think I responded to the super-science elements of Superman's background, along with his strength – there was one specky kid who never got bullied – and his rather wistful Solitude, as monumentalized in his great Arctic Fortress, and reflected in endless, introverted thought bubbles as Superman carried out various tasks of heroism nobody could ever know about.

I haven't been an avid comics follower in later years, but I have kept an eye on the headline events (so, statutory warning: this is a review by a dilettante rather than a scholar). I've tended to stick with DC, my first love (though I've enjoyed the Marvel movies, notably any involving Robert Downey Jr.). In 1978 I enjoyed the Christopher Reeve / Richard Donner Superman movie, which captured something of that Silver Age optimism, I think.

Then came the great narratives and retellings. I have done my best to follow DC's hugely complex reboots of its multiverse, such as *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1986), in which the many parallel worlds and versions of the heroes which had proliferated by that time were collapsed into

one 'saved' world. For DC this kind of elaboration of the backstory dates back, in fact, at least as far as September 1961 when, in the pages of *Flash* no. 123, the Superman of the Golden Age showed up in the Silver Age, as an emissary from 'Earth-Two': no longer a kind of discarded draft but an ongoing character, alongside the latest revision. This was in fact a kind of retconning, to justify how a character active in the 1930s – Superman had met Hitler for example – could still be young and active in the 1960s: parallel worlds.

Maybe the comics were already serving an audience of long-time fans as well as the ten-year-olds; the Superman saga, having debuted in 1938, was already a generation old. And this trend was thoroughly cemented by the 1980s, when the 'direct market', the regular subscribers and the specialist stores, began to generate a lot more revenue than the casual browsers of the 'spinner racks' in the drug stores, and the publishers began to focus much more on the needs of the dedicated fans.

As a result, with time the great comic franchises have become sagas of metafiction, worked and reworked by many hands, at times becoming something their original creators would surely not have recognised – and, at times, as in the hands of writers like Frank Miller, achieving a remarkable depth.

And of course the superheroes have not been immune to upheavals in our own universe. At 'Sideways in Time', a conference on alternate history hosted by the Universities of Lancaster and Liverpool which I attended in April 2015, Rachel Miszei Ward of the University of East Anglia gave a fascinating paper on the superheroes' response to 9/11. Both Marvel and DC are themselves based in New York, and many of their heroes operate there, or in cities which are close parallels such as Metropolis or Gotham. But the heroes could not deal with the city-threatening crisis when, after all those supervillain storylines, it showed up for real. So in the comic editions that appeared immediately after the event, the heroes wept over the ruins, or applauded the firemen and other real-world heroes. But they were impotent, irrelevant.

In the years since 9/11, of course, the superhero meta-brands have more than recovered, as evidenced by the huge commercial success of the Marvel and DC blockbuster films. Yet this too may represent negative aspects



of our own evolving society. In the *Guardian* of March 28 2016, Annika Hagley of Roger Williams University in Rhode Island argued that the modern superhero movies are emblems of a crisis of faith in democracy and western values; Batman is a kind of vigilante, operating outside the law, while Superman shows a blind faith in authority, even though the systems behind that authority are (arguably) corrupt and failing. So Batman vs. Superman is a contest between two narrow choices, vigilantism vs. authoritarianism, with nowhere room for the subtlety, and difficulty, of empathetic engagement and democratic action.

massive asteroid strikes, or self-induced calamities such as a takeover by advanced AIs, or the destabilisation of the vacuum through an unwise high-energy physics experiment. We appear to be getting better at thinking about such issues. At the minimum, it seems to me, a consensus is emerging that such threats should be made public and widely debated, before any action is taken that could even potentially bring down a terminal disaster on us.

And perhaps extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI) represents one such threat.



In the Superman universe(s) there are aliens flying around in the sky, but in the real world we're still searching for them. After more than fifty years of SETI, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, being conducted by passive means – listening for alien signals with radio telescopes – some advocate 'Active SETI', sending powerful messages to the cosmos in the hope of provoking a reply. But others counsel against this, including Rees and Hawking, and David Brin, perhaps the most outspoken critic working in our genre. The argument is that maybe contact with ETI will provoke an existential threat of the kind I've described. After all, if *they* think the same way, they may feel obliged to obliterate us, as a potential existential threat to *them*, while they have the chance, while we

are weak and unprepared. So by messaging we are like innocent baby birds 'shouting in the jungle', while the predators wheel in the sky above us, all unseen.

Which brings us back to our relationship with Superman, an alien living among us, in a less trusting age. In Superman's long history, in fact, he has often been seen as a potential threat, or at least as something terrifying. In his very first appearance, lifting a truck over his head on the cover of *Action Comics* no. 1 (June 1938), people are shown fleeing from him with grimaces of terror (granted they were bad guys who had it coming). Superman himself would often deposit bits of Kryptonite with friends and family, to be used to control him if it were ever needed; in *Smallville*, WBN's noughties adaptation of Superboy, it was Ma and Pa Kent who held the glowing rock.

And so, sadly, we come back to Superman. Just as Batman says, Superman appears benevolent, but he's an alien of world-ending powers, which *could*, in that one per cent possibility, be turned against us - through concealed malevolence, or even through some accident or illness. As such he represents an existential threat, and we have a responsibility to the species to think about him that way.

So, to return to the movie quote about the theoretical threat even of an apparently benevolent Superman, Batman is actually being supremely rational, if coldly so (but that's Batman for you). He is using language characteristic of modern analyses of existential threats, of which Martin Rees and Stephen Hawking, among others, are leaders (see Rees's *Our Final Century*, Arrow, 2004). An existential threat is one that poses a danger to the continued existence of the human race itself: a threat of extinction. Examples include natural disasters like

are weak and unprepared. So by messaging we are like innocent baby birds 'shouting in the jungle', while the predators wheel in the sky above us, all unseen.

But what a depressing conclusion that is. At the end of the 1978 movie, Christopher Reeve, flying over the Earth, smiled through the camera at the audience. And in 2016, in *Batman vs Superman*, a Depression-era escapist hero who was meant to be an embodiment of truth and justice and a 'champion of the oppressed' (*Superman* #1, 1939), gets hit over the head by Batman with a kitchen sink. How times have changed.

David Brin's blog on messaging to ETI is at <http://www.davidbrin.com/shouldsetitransmit.html>

# recurrent:

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**NEBULA AWARDS SHOWCASE 2016, edited by Mercedes Lackey, (Pyr, 2016)**

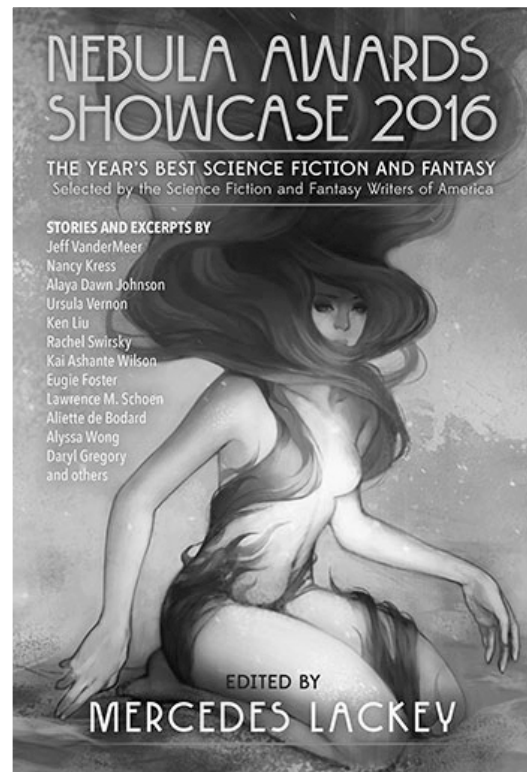
**Reviewed by Lynne Bispham**

**A**s Mercedes Lackey, editor of *Nebula Awards Showcase 2016* writes in her introduction, the Nebula Awards are chosen each year by the members of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. That is, they are chosen by writers, who may have a different outlook on the work that comes up for the Nebulas than readers. Mercedes Lackey goes on to say that ideally the short stories, novelettes, and excerpts from novellas and the winning novel in this collection will challenge the reader. Even if they “might leave you deciding that you are absolutely never going to re-read this story, you will never be sorry you read it in the first place.”

This anthology showcases the 2014 Nebula winners and nominees, and is evidence that 2014 was a good year for science fiction and fantasy. The excerpts from the winning novel, Jeff Vandermeer’s *Annihilation* tells of a party of four female scientists who are sent on an expedition to investigate an abandoned part of their country known as ‘Area X.’ The fact that we are not told the characters’ names – they are referred to as the psychologist or the biologist – makes for a sense of alienation, and yet the uncanny and ominous atmosphere simultaneously draws the reader into the story, making them want to know more about the mystery of Area X. Why is it quarantined? Is it contaminated? What is going on in this place that seems to have its own ecosystem? The expedition’s discovery of a previously unknown tunnel going straight down into the earth – a tunnel which the narrator somehow cannot help seeing as a tower – and their decision to enter it increases the sense of dread that permeates the writing, and makes for compulsive reading. This first chapter of *Annihilation* certainly made me want to buy the book and read the rest of the *Southern Reach* trilogy of which it is the first volume.

The anthology also contains all six of the excellent short stories nominated for a Nebula, including ‘The Breath of War’ by Aliette de Bodard, ‘When It Ends, He Catches Her’ by Eugie Foster, ‘The Meeker and the All-Seeing Eye’ by Matthew Kressel, ‘The Vaporisation Enthalpy of a Peculiar Pakistani Family’ by Usman T. Malik, and ‘The Fisher Queen’ by Alyssa Wong. These stories are all very different, but what they have in common is the way they take a typical SF or fantasy theme – the longing to be somewhere ‘other,’ alien conquest, immortal vampires who fail to retain the memories of their human selves, future war, captured mermaids, hard SF with spaceships, and alien beings travelling the universe ‘harvesting’ stars – and give them an entirely original slant. The other thing they have in common is that they are simply extremely well written, having both a central SF or fantasy ‘idea’ but also fully realised, three-dimensional characters – no mean feat when a writer is telling their story in 7,499 words or less. The haunting ‘Jackalope Wives’ by Ursula Vernon, with its lyrical prose, has a magic realism quality and a twist on shape-shifter legends that make it a worthy winner of the Short Story Nebula. ‘A Stretch of Highway Two Lanes Wide’ by Sarah Pinker also particularly impressed me. In this quirky tale, a farmer’s injured arm is replaced by a bionic prosthetic with a ‘Brain-computer Interface,’ with strange, unexpected results as the arm appears to have retained a memory of being part of a road.

Of the novelettes, all are very readable, but there are two that stand out from the rest for the creation of their own imagined ‘worlds’, and the sheer quality of the prose.



One is the Nebula winner, *A Guide to the Fruits of Hawaii* by Alaya Dawn Johnson, in which the remnants of the human population are kept in vampire-run concentration camps, a superbly realised and horrifying scenario, with a conflicted heroine who fears that her history with one of the vampires has made her a traitor to humankind. The other exceptionally impressive novelette is Sam J Miller’s *We Are the Cloud*. Set in a dystopian cyberpunk future where the poor sell their brainpower until they have no brain left, this story is bleak but memorable, with a main character who begins as a victim, but is given a way out.

There are only short extracts from the novella nominees, but the winner of the Nebula for a novella, Nancy Kress’s *Yesterday’s Kin* is printed in full, and the anthology is worth reading for this impressive story alone. Narrated by two characters, a geneticist and her drop-out son, it is a ‘first contact’ story in which an alien space ship arrives off the coast of New York, having come to warn humanity of a threat to both Earth and the aliens’ home planet, and to ask for Earth’s scientists’ help to avert it. In the race against time to find a solution, the overriding theme of the story is revealed as the importance of kinship, of knowing who you are, and having a place where you belong. One strand of the story concerns mitochondrial DNA, and while I have to admit that I have no idea as to the authenticity of the science as used to develop the plot, it does make for a convincing and thoughtful read.

The fiction in *Nebula Awards Showcase 2016* might have been nominated and voted for by writers, but these stories, novelettes and the winning novella are certainly recommended to readers, while the excerpts from the longer works can only encourage further reading of these authors writing at the top of their genre.

***The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction,*  
edited by Rob Latham  
(Oxford University Press, 2014)**

**Reviewed by Anthony Nanson**

These days a non-fiction book has to be a 'hand-book' in the way a tube of moisturiser has to be a 'system'. This book is not an SF equivalent of the *Boy Scouts Handbook* but rather a collection of 44 densely written essays in the field of SF criticism. It's not a centrally coordinated text; each author has done their own thing. Some chapters provide an overview of a topic plus a swing towards a thesis. Some analyse a few texts within a specific theoretical framework. Others present an ambitious argument with wide-ranging implications. The authors' ideological premises vary too; although there's only token cross-referencing between the chapters, you can get a sense of the dimensions of debate in SF criticism by reading the chapters against each other. If you consider the range of scholarship each chapter draws upon, the kaleidoscope of ideas packed into this volume's 600 pages is enormous. To review this material thoroughly, and evenly, would require many pages; all I can do here is point out some of the patterns of ideas that caught my interest.

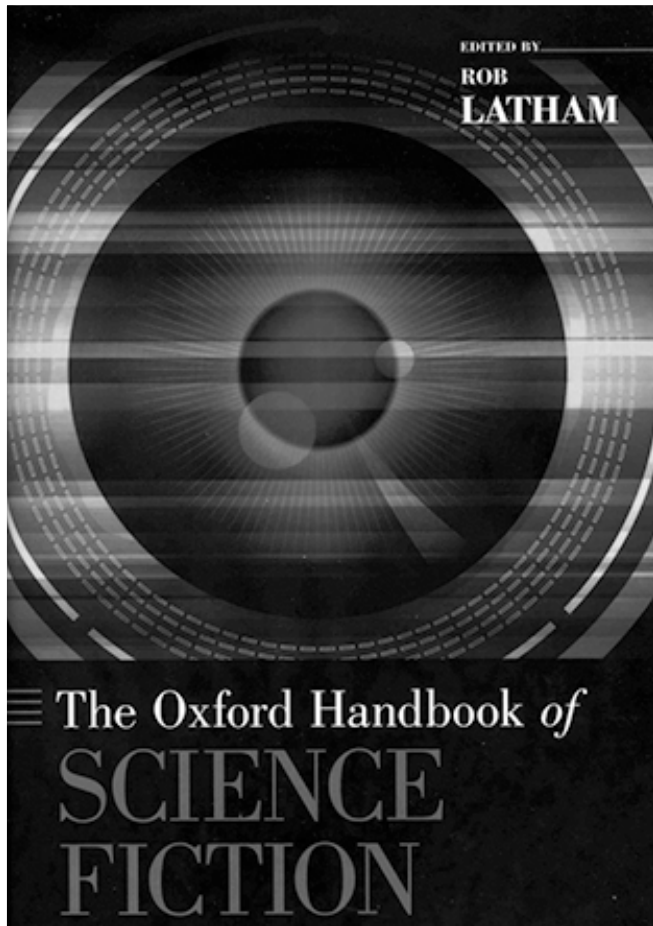
The editor declares an agenda 'to describe the historical and cultural contours of SF in the wake of technoculture studies'. The chapters are grouped into four parts: Part 1, 'Science Fiction as Genre', focuses on the literary genre; Part 4, 'Science Fiction as Worldview', addresses some of the critical perspectives applied to the reading and writing of SF; the other two parts, 'Science Fiction as Medium' and 'Science Fiction as Culture', are rooted in cultural studies and explore the science-fictionality of modern technoculture, including but by no means limited to SF entertainments like film and games. This steer towards technoculture perhaps explains the conspicuous absence of ecocritical perspectives. However, the weighting of so much attention towards the material world as well as towards fiction exposes how much effect SF really does have in the transformations of the world.

One positive impact is SF's contribution to the advancement of science by providing a space for speculative thinking less constrained by the rigours of science proper (see chapters by Sherryl Vint on 'The Culture of Science' and Anthony Enns on 'Pseudoscience'). But there are social impacts as well. One basic tension in the book is between a critical stance that expects SF to catalyse positive change by imagining possible futures – pertaining for example to the liberation and empowerment of the oppressed and silenced (see Lisa Yaszek, 'Feminism'; De Witt Douglas Kilgore, 'Afrofuturism') – and, on the other hand, a discourse that frames a future genuinely different from the present as unimaginable because the future is 'always already' here (see Veronica Hollinger, 'Genre vs. Mode'; Colin Milburn, 'Posthumanism'). This latter discourse allows scholars of techoculture to indulge in playful postmodernist profundity: 'Shifting back and forth between non-fiction and fiction – recreating our present as the preface to its "true story of the future" – all of the people in this film, real and imaginary, become fictions of themselves. Even while insisting that the Singularity will preserve and enhance the essential aspects of human nature ... the film de-natures its real-life characters and makes them into puppets of the post-Singularity future. We all become characters in this storyline ... all humans are destined to

become "much more machine than we are biological." In other words, our lived reality is made the avatar of science fiction' (Milburn). This may be the kind of criticism Phillip E. Wegner has in mind when, quoting Bertolt Brecht, he speaks of 'intervention that "ha[s] no particular material consequences, and foster[s] no particular change"'. There's a question here about to what extent the future can be predicted or seems predestined (see Andrew M. Butler, 'Futurology'). Moreover, to deny the possibility of a different future, a better world, is to be complicit with neoliberal dogma that insists there's no alternative to the way things are going.

Enter Gary Westfahl and 'The Market'. From his questionable premise that SF was born of Hugo Gernsback in the pulp magazines, Westfahl argues that the genre was distorted from its 'natural' path by the intervention of John W. Campbell, Jr and his 'herculean' promotion of SF blessed with literary merit and innovative thinking. In recent years, market forces have brought SF back to its true calling 'to entertain undemanding readers'; Campbellian SF is doomed to 'become something like poetry, ignored by most readers but still a vibrant tradition to the minority that values it' and denied the right any longer to be called 'science fiction'. So much for the literary accomplishments examined in Peter Stockwell's chapter on 'Aesthetics' and Joan Gordon's on 'Literary Science Fiction'! Westfahl writes, 'the marketplace discovered what sorts of stories people want to read, and it devised mechanisms to provide them with products they desire' – notice how he gives authoritative agency to 'the marketplace', as if it is God. This is neoliberal (aka 'libertarian') dogma in action. In a chapter on 'Libertarianism and Anarchism' Neil Easterbrook explains how libertarian discourse transforms faults such as greed into virtues and does so with 'smug certainty' about 'the totalizing final truth of its worldview'. People do not 'naturally' desire the products Westfahl valorises; their desire is manipulated by big business that has taken control of SF production and single-mindedly seeks to maximise return on investment.

Moreover, the impact of SF's products can be problematic. Libertarian economists such as David Friedman acknowledge the influence of reading the likes of Robert Heinlein on the forming of their beliefs. In Steffen Hantke's devastating analysis of 'Military Culture', 'the military theme stands out as a crucial marker of commercial viability', SF film endorses war through the thrill of spectacles of combat, and SF has been instrumental in military training, technical innovation, and propaganda, including the personal involvement of writers such as Ben Bova and Jerry Pournelle (see also David Seed, 'Atomic Culture and the Space Race'). Chapters by Adam Roberts, Patrick B. Sharp, and John Rieder on, respectively, 'The Enlightenment', 'Darwinism', and 'Colonialism and Postcolonialism' argue that inherent to the genre is the metanarrative of a superior culture expanding and conquering in the tradition of European imperialism. Rieder argues that colonialism remains intertwined with capitalism in today's conditions of technoscientific imperialism; hence a need for postcolonial SF that opens up future possibilities that may seem foreclosed by the logic of history as narrated by the powerful. There's a gender dimension to this too, thanks to Darwin's theory of sexual selection. Darwinian thinking is so engrained in SF, Sharp explains, that even feminist SF has accepted it at the same time as it has reacted against it. A key figure in both Sharp's and Rieder's analysis is Octavia Butler, whose



fiction conveys both a need for human beings to rise above the impulses of human nature, and the high price that must be paid to speak authentically against power.

Charles Elkins (quoted by Andrew M. Butler) argues that SF, like other art, 'must destroy old beliefs, furnish us with new forms of passage from the old to the new, and finally inculcate new value in place of old beliefs'. In his chapter on 'Utopianism' Wegner takes a determinedly hopeful view. Key to his claim that SF is inherently utopian is its materialist orientation, along with Fredric Jameson's notion that 'all contemporary works of art ... have as their underlying impulse ... our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived'. In SF, says Wegner, the otherness of utopia resides not in the novum, which though it marks a difference from our world is part of the fictional world's status quo. Rather the story must turn in such a way as to point towards a possibility that is not yet resolved into being. In my understanding of this the incomplete closure passes to the reader the burden of possibility of in some way becoming the change. Easterbrook holds up Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* as presenting an example of anarchist utopia, with its 'incomplete, ambiguous, or complex conditions that the narrative or characters still doubt, probe, and question', in contrast to the 'arrogant certitude' of libertarian fiction. Wegner concludes by affirming, with reference to Ken MacLeod, the idea of open-ended (rather than prescribed) utopia: the 'future as permanent revolution where we are once again endowed with the power – and the responsibility – to act as free subjects'.

However, as Jameson's book *Archaeologies of the Future* conveys, the spaces of utopian possibility seem ever tinier in the globalised world of late capitalism. Rob Latham

describes SF's association with the utopian aspirations of 'Countercultures' in the 1950s and 1960s, but reports nothing about the story since then. Nic Clear introduces the utopian intentions of 'Architecture', but acknowledges that what actually gets built is firmly determined by commercial priorities, to the extent that cyberspace seems the most promising avenue for imaginative work in this field. Leonie Cooper's discussion of 'Theme Parks' reveals Disney's theme parks to be microcosms of the totalitarian impulse of technocapitalism, in which the consumer's behaviour is controlled as stringently as a worker's on a production line, and the possibility of utopia in an alternative world is eliminated because (quoting Baudrillard) 'one is always already in the other world'. Industrial automation reduces human beings to components of machinery in a manner as functional for libertarian capitalism as for fascism or communism (Roger Luckhurst, 'Automation'). And cybernetic theory challenges even the existence of our inner self, flattening the human being to a mere surface of algorithmic responses – a condition that online culture is expediting through the privileging of metonymy over metaphor and the fragmentation of self as the private becomes indistinguishable from the public (Thomas Foster, 'Cyberculture').

It seems to me that one thing at stake here, besides sanity, is the metaphysical. A chapter that complicates the materialist orientation of SF is Brian Attebery's on 'The Fantastic'. Attebery anatomises four types of intersection between SF and the fantastic: the Natural Fantastic, in which a natural process seems extraordinary; the Rationalised Fantastic, in which something that seems beyond reason turns out to be rationally explicable; the Situated Fantastic, which juxtaposes alternative interpretations of what's going on; and the Dissensus Fantastic, in which the scientifically comprehensible is embedded in a greater reality that transcends the scope of science. The third and the fourth of these sometimes fit with Tzvetan Todorov's conception of 'the fantastic' as involving an unresolved hesitation between mundane and supernatural interpretations. I wonder if this kind of hesitation, or openness to what seems inexplicable, in life as in fiction, may have relevance to the quest for utopia that Wegner so persuasively invokes.

Wegner's chapter is demanding to read. So are many others in this book. In some cases the prose is impenetrable or dull. Others, like Corey K. Creekmur's survey of 'Comics' or Gary K. Wolfe's of 'Literary Movements', are perfectly readable. Roberts demonstrates that sophisticated theoretical arguments can be expressed in clear, elegant prose; for example: 'It can be argued that, conceptually and formally, science fiction possesses an "encyclopedic logic" – or, more precisely, that its synchronic encyclopedic impulses exist in dynamic tension with its diachronic narrative impulses'. Rob Latham's *Handbook* is an advanced text, addressed primarily to scholars at postgraduate level and beyond. The price tag of £97 is clearly pitched to university libraries. The book is well edited, indexed, and referenced, as one expects of Oxford University Press. If you want a more accessible (and cheaper) collection of critical essays about SF, I'd recommend Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn's *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. But if you want to cogitate deeply about SF and its web of relationships with the larger culture, there is much meaty substance in these chapters. Just don't do what I did and read it all in one go!



**Invaders edited by Jacob Weisman  
(Tachyon, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven**

When will we ever tire of angsting over the elusive and ever-more-fuzzy border between science fiction and literary fiction? No time soon, I'd wager: genres are, after all, not unlike nation-states, and it takes a lot of what sociologists call "boundary work" to keep a conceptual territory coherent over time. For some, the answer is to build walls and fences – a vogueish strategy, certainly, though one lacking in precedent for its success over the long term. But for others, the answer lies in understanding why those who cross borders choose to do so.

Tachyon have a lengthy and commendable history of putting that latter strategy to work, having produced a handful of anthologies prior to this one (such as the slipstream anthology *Feeling Very Strange*, or the excellent-if-contentious *Secret History of Science Fiction*) which probe at the crosshatched interstices of the genre, focusing on its rogue's gallery of émigrés, ex-pats, surly hermits and pioneering forebears. In this most recent volume, Tachyon honcho Jacob Weisman turns his attention to the genre's immigrants as a way of getting at the more vexed matter of its lingering exceptionalism: if we're not willing to concede that it's science fiction, Weisman asks, then what is it that these non-genre writers are writing?

"All sorts of stuff" would appear to be the simplest answer to that question, with the greatest strength of *Invaders* being its tonal variety. Deji Bryce Olukotun's "We Are The Olfanauts" takes the oh-so-contemporary dystopian tech-start-up template and transposes it from California to Kenya; Steven Millhauser's "A Precursor of the Cinema" goes all Borges on the co-evolutionary history of art and technology; Max Apple rehumanises the mad professor trope in "The Yogurt of Vasirin Kefirovsky"; Molly Gloss's "Lambing Season" plays a light-touch first contact riff in the deep-country key of Annie Proulx; Junot Dias drops disaster onto the Caribbean while his disaffected protagonist looks on in "Monstro". Human experimental subjects escape their laboratories; dementia patients recall their pasts, even the bits they'd rather not remember; baffled protagonists wake to find themselves barricaded into a Ballardian nightmare with no exit or entrance; dissatisfied housewives answer misdelivered letters from forgotten inventors. It's a mixed batch, certainly, but gloriously so.

That these stories should be so varied is no great surprise, but the implicit question remains: what is it that marks them as not-sf, or as not-quite- or not-entirely-sf? It's clearly not a question of style or vibe, or even of publication venue.

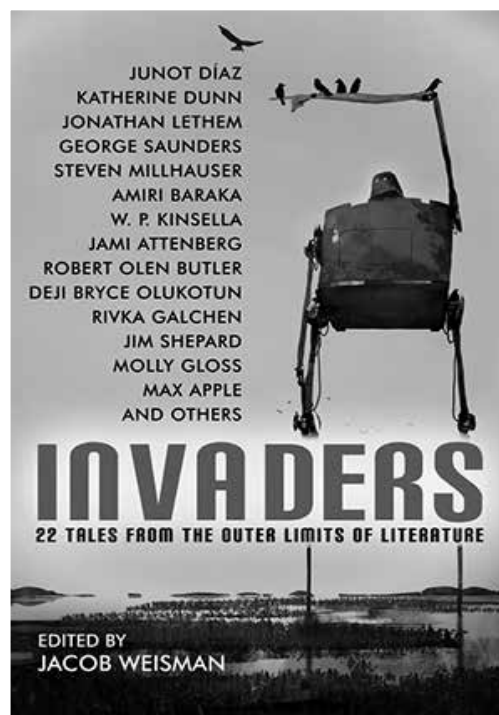
I think maybe Weisman hits the nail on the head in his introduction, where he remarks *en passant* that the anthology contains "a lot more stories about sex and relationships because that's what you'd find in the mainstream magazines." I'm not sure how true that claim may be, but it does offer a new way to look at this old dichotomy: if we can claim that, broadly speaking, the science fiction genre is distinguished by its focus on relationships between people and technology, then it follows that other, less marginal literatures are more focused on relationships between people and other people. The liminal set which Weisman has here assembled would seem to represent what happens when those two approaches to narrative are reconciled to some degree: stories about relationships between people and other people as mediated by technology.

Of course, one could argue that the distinction I'm making is subjective, or tautologous, or both – but such are the perils of discussing literature. A more constructive argument might be that an increasing amount of sf *qua* sf is moving its narrative focus in the same direction; if that's so, why is *that* stuff sf, but *this* stuff somehow not sf?

The answer is perhaps implicit in the title of the book: the not-sf-ness of this stuff is inherent not in its tropes, themes, styles or even its values, but in its origins. Its otherness is a function of the outsider status within which it has been framed; it is not-quite-sf because it is collected in a book which takes the existence of not-quite-sf as an ontological given. Of course, this is a clear advance and improvement over that older ontology, wherein the universe comprises only sf and

not-sf... but it nonetheless produces a liminality, a state of statelessness: these stories remain not-quite-sf in the same way that, to a certain sort of British person, the English spoken by a citizen of the former colonies (or, indeed, of the post-industrial hinterland) can never be more than not-quite-English. It's not the language that matters so much as who is speaking.

It says something important (and more than a little sad) about the legacy culture of science fiction that even an anthology aimed sincerely at broadening the generic territory and making the borders more porous couldn't avoid a title that frames immigrants as invaders – ironic, too, given the genre's ineluctable relationship with colonialism and empire. To be very clear, that's no slight on Weisman, nor on Tachyon: this is a fine book from a reliably interesting and adventurous publisher, and I commend it unto you. But through it we are reminded that genres, like nations, are really just identities – one more way of sorting Them from Us, no matter how generous and inclusive the taxonomy. The not-quite-sf-ness of these immigrant stories lies not in the stories themselves, but in the way we see their writers: the gap lies not in their writing, but in our reading thereof.



**Meeting Infinity edited by Jonathan Strahan  
(Solaris, 2015)**

**Reviewed by Duncan Lawrie**

Jonathan Strahan's introduction claims this anthology is about "the ways in which profound change might impact on us in the future, how humanity might have to change physically and psychologically" (15). The collection succeeds at this, alongside demonstrating that such ideas often link to eternal themes of our fears and hopes for our descendants. Whilst not all the stories here work as stories, each presents an interesting conception of humanity.

James S. A. Corey's *Rates of Change*, placed first, reinforces the introduction with commentary on accelerating change whilst centring on how different the next generation might seem, but there is no subtlety in it. *Desert Lexicon* by contrast, might just be too subtle in its connection to the theme. Benjanun Sriduangkaew's story is of modified convict soldiers who aren't supposed to survive their mission. It might be asking whether we must become monsters to destroy the monsters we create. The desert setting parches, leaving the characters nothing but their need for revenge. I didn't enjoy reading it. I doubt I was supposed to.

I did enjoy *Drones* by Simon Ings, perhaps because the familiar setting of southern England makes a kind of cosy catastrophe. Yet humanity is profoundly changed, most males never create a next generation and women are out of sight. That the first person narrator gets what he wants almost feels soft after the earlier stories. There is no such consolation in Kameron Hurley's *Body Politic* whose protagonists may be experiments like those in *Desert Lexicon*, or just the masses fighting amongst themselves rather than seeing the system which keeps them down.

*Cocoons* by Nancy Kress adds alien life to the mix. Such contact affects how different our children may be, but this time a whole human society struggles with ideas of what our species limits should be. In *Emergence*, Gwynneth Jones' protagonist struggles instead with personal endurance through time, alongside the question of whether our true successors are those we create, who can be at home beyond the cradle of Earth.

Yoon Ha Lee signals an intent to grapple with the history of the field with the title *The Cold Inequalities*. The certainty of engineering logic in Godwin's *The Cold Equations* (1954) is replaced by the impossibility of organising all of culture into a ranked order, wrapped in a discussion of what a sentient entity might value, whether the parts can be separated from the whole and what makes a human different from an algorithm.

Bruce Sterling's *Pictures from the Resurrection* brings us back to Earth with the crunch of medically mediated zombies, people rebuilt to remove the distracting layer of morals and consciousness, which stops us being perfect

survival machines. This is not a desirable future, but Sterling's writing almost makes it sexy. The people in Gregory Benford's *Aspects* retain more of their humanity but, pursued by relentless machines, the future of their kind is uncertain. This story is both glorious and confusing with multiple changes of mood, of voice. It captured the pace of the characters' lives and the cultural melange of their heritage but still left me feeling that Benford was doing too much in the pages available.

*Memento Mori* by Madeline Ashby manages tone and intent beautifully. The ending may seem rushed but this is an effect of the acceleration of pace through the story, which presents a possibility of long continued life without continuity – and what can happen when you want to forget but one of those in your past lives does not. Sean Williams' *All the Wrong Places* has a similar theme, but copying yourself across the universe, are you all still you? Which one?

Alliette de Bodard's *In Blue Lily's Wake* is set in her Xuya universe so those familiar with the concept that the minds of ships are born from human mothers may find this story easier to parse. Grief and guilt are the themes here, ably handled through the fully rounded protagonists.

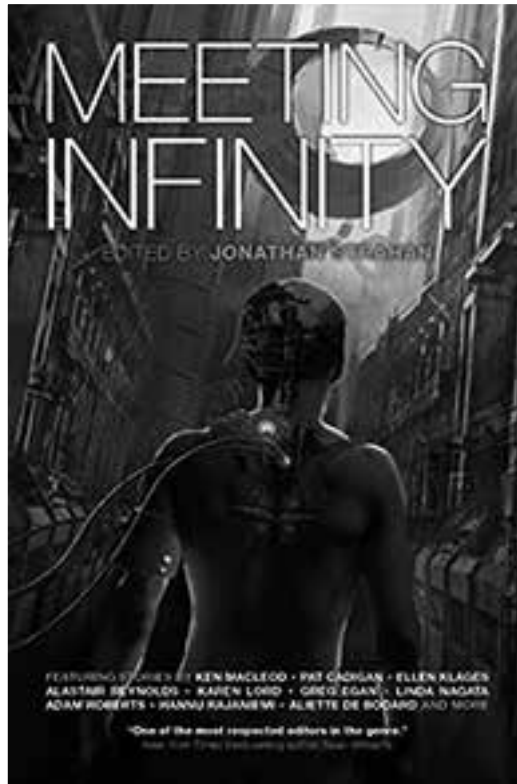
Ramez Naam's *Exile from Extinction* has another conflict between humanity and artificial intelligence. This one is extreme and a final survivor is fleeing the home planet. The story remains interesting for as long as it maintains the uncertainty of the narrator's identity.

*My Last Bringback* by John Barnes is another first person narration. The protagonist is brilliant, but jealous of her successors, the nubrids who have several times our lifespans. In the last generation of natural humans, she has become something of a charity case, but none

of this necessarily makes her a nice person. *Outsider* by An Owomoyela finds a similar conflict in its background, but the foreground is a colonised planet, and a version of humanity that has genetically adapted itself to succeed. What is a hive mind that is not a hive mind? If these colonists still see themselves as human, does that make them human?

The volume concludes with an Ian McDonald story in the setting of his current sequence. *The Falls: A Luna Story* is, again, about our children and our successors. The protagonist is a psychologist for AIs in this case, integrating the personality of a space probe before it heads off to Saturn – but most of the story is of her daughter, of how the moon has changed since she first arrived and how that world has made her daughter so different from her.

From this survey, our successors will be different from us, in philosophy and body plan – possibly not even our genetic descendants. Still, with writing this good, we will care about them, be filled with hope for them, or fear of them, as has happened in every generation.



***Disturbed Universes* by David L. Clements  
(NewCon Press, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Patrick Mahon**

**D***isturbed Universes* is the debut short story collection by David L. Clements, a working astrophysicist based at Imperial College, London. It contains sixteen pieces: fourteen stories and two non-fiction articles. As might be expected, most of the fiction falls under the category of hard science fiction, although there are some examples of softer SF, horror and fantasy too.

Before you even open the book you get some idea of the likely content from the beautiful cover picture by renowned SF artist David A. Hardy. It shows a glowing accretion disc around a black hole, with multiple galaxies in the background and illustrates the setting used at the end of the final story in the book.

I haven't got the space here to talk about every piece, so I'll highlight a cross-section. The collection opens with 'Re-Creation', a fascinating tale mixing the hard SF of the astrophysics of colliding galaxies with the fantasy of creation myths. We meet a group of students journeying to a city who camp for the night and admire the extraordinary constellations above them. Their tutor tells a story about the origins of their species which features gods and intelligent AIs and ends with a surprising revelation. This is a great start to the collection, demonstrating Clements' strengths in both science-based plotting and character-driven conflict.

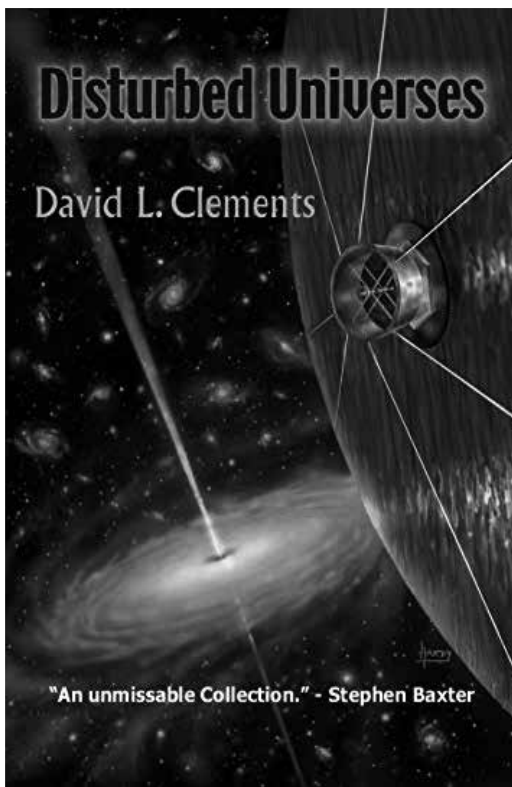
The following two stories explore the same idea at different lengths. 'Last of the Guerrilla Gardeners' is a flash fiction story that explores what might happen if big agro-businesses genetically modified, patented and privatised the whole of nature, resisted only by a small band of plucky gardeners who surreptitiously plant natural flowers on bits of rough ground when no-one's looking. 'Seed Dealer' addresses the same concept at greater length. Both stories have interesting things to say about capitalism and the increasing power of big business, suggesting that there is a strain of radical eco-politics at the heart of Clements' worldview. While the shorter piece is inevitably very plot-focused, the longer story includes strong characters with an intriguing backstory and provides a more rounded take on the story scenario.

'His Final Experiment' has echoes of *Morse* in its investigation of the violent death of an Oxford don. A professor of quantum physics has committed suicide and the motive appears to be his unhappiness with the outcome of his most recent experiments, much to the confusion of the investigating police officers. This is an intriguing piece, not least because it is written entirely in the future tense, a novel approach that is linked to the story's subject matter and works remarkably well. It plumbs some interesting areas in the philosophy of quantum mechanics, leaving much food for thought.

The two non-fiction items are found in the middle of the collection. 'The Mauna Kea Experience' recounts one of the author's trips to use the telescopes mounted high above the clouds on the island of Hawai'i, while 'Launch Day' tells of his feelings as he waits for two telescopes to be launched into space, knowing full well that if the rocket

explodes, as happened on the previous launch, his career may well go up in smoke with it. Both articles provide interesting insights into the highs and lows of life as a working astronomer and I found them a valuable complement to the fiction.

The final six stories in the collection are set in a common story universe, albeit spanning an extremely extended time period and having no characters in common. They tell of mankind's expansion into the universe, starting a couple of decades in the future with permanent outposts on the Moon and ending 100 million years hence as the last remnants of humanity try to avoid extinction. The sequence is Clements' attempt to answer the Fermi Paradox, which asks why we've seen no signs of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, given that there's been ample time for it to evolve since the



Big Bang. Clements' answer seems rather pessimistic to me but it provides the substrate upon which he grows several intelligent and enjoyable stories that freely mix the topics of lunar mining and astronomy, nanotechnology, the evolution of post-humans, galactic colonisation, interstellar warfare and the ultimate fate of humanity. A diverse cast of characters with realistic human motivations and frailties inhabit these stories and, ultimately, they are successful because you care whether the characters make it to the end of the story or not. A particular highlight in this regard is the fourth story, 'Long Way Gone', which starts from a hard SF premise of colonising distant planets by beaming the colonists' DNA and brain patterns there and then using nanomachines to recreate them *in situ*. This scenario is used to explore questions of love, abandonment, mental illness and redemption in a way that I found truly insightful.

Looking at the collection as a whole, two themes seem to me to unite the stories. The first is a belief in the ability of rational thought and action to improve the lot of humankind. The second warns of the dangers posed by those whose primary interest is power, whether that's the power of big business to privatise nature, the power of bureaucrats within academia to make or break scientific careers on non-scientific grounds, or the power of ancient aliens to destroy younger species who start to compete with them for a significant share of the universe's resources. While I'm not sure I completely subscribe to Clements' worldview on all of these issues, I think he has produced a set of stories that provide a valuable contribution to those debates while being thoroughly entertaining at the same time. Highly recommended.

***Azanian Bridges* by Nick Wood  
(NewCon Press, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Paul Kincaid**

**A**uthoritarian regimes tend to be very fragile. They are sustained mostly by fear and oppression, but such states are inherently unstable, since they naturally generate resistance from within and opposition from without, requiring ever more extreme efforts to keep the lid on. When such regimes do fall, therefore, a mass of fault lines often going back many years are usually revealed, so that the immediate cause of the collapse may actually be quite small. In apartheid South Africa, for instance, the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 was not the first step towards dismantling the regime, but very nearly the last. Appalling economic conditions, largely dependent upon an oppressed and unwilling labour force; increasing internal resistance to the heavy-handed enforcement of the country's repressive laws; tentative moves to appease critics (the reform of pass laws, the creation of homelands); the ending of sympathetic white regimes in neighbouring states; growing international pressure; all had weakened the regime to such a degree that the release of Mandela, no doubt intended to shore up the status quo, was all it took to trigger the final collapse.

The various pressures on the South African government, economic, political and diplomatic, had sapped the will to redouble the repression, the only way the genie might conceivably have been kept in the bottle. But what if someone with that will, Eugene Terreblanche, leader of the extremist AWB, had staged a coup (something he came very close to doing during the negotiations to end minority rule)? That is the scenario explored in Nick Wood's first novel, *Azanian Bridges*.

The time is the present. Mandela has died in prison, and Terreblanche remains president at the cost of more extreme repression than ever before. Constantly, in the background of the novel we glimpse a succession of images that suggest a country on the point of falling apart. The country's economic failure is shown in the way everyday technology, such as mobile phones, lags a long way behind the rest of the world. This is partly due to the fact that access to the internet is rigidly censored, though adept hackers are able to break through the national firewall. Meanwhile heavily armed and brutal militarised police man so many roadblocks that any movement within the country is severely limited. Even though the white population has little or no awareness of the world their black and coloured compatriots inhabit, they are inconvenienced to the extent that mutterings against the government are growing in intensity. The situation is clearly reaching the point where the gentlest of touches will demolish the entire house of cards, and that touch is about to come from the unlikely of characters: a young black activist suffering post-traumatic

stress disorder and the overweight white psychiatrist who is treating him.

Sibusiso is clever enough to have left his rural home for an all-black school, where he is introduced to the politics of protest. At one protest, that quickly turns violent, he sees his best friend shot and killed by the security forces. It's an experience that unhinges him for a time, and he is committed to a mental hospital where he comes under the care of a white neuropsychologist, Dr Martin Van Deventer. An Afrikaaner estranged from his conservative parents, Martin thinks of himself as a liberal though he has no actual experience of the daily lives of the country's black population; late in the novel, when he finds himself drawn into black neighbourhoods, it is a strange and subtly terrifying experience. Together with an old friend, he has invented a device, an "Empathy Enhancer", that allows people to share the thoughts and feelings of others. They have had a prototype built, which has been smuggled into the country – one of the petty illegalities that helps to put a white Afrikaaner at odds with his own government – and Martin decides to try it on Sibusiso.

For Martin this is a therapeutic device, but others see it differently. For the security services, it is an ideal tool for use in interrogations; for the ANC, it is a weapon in their war against white power. It is unclear how news of this device has spread so rapidly; but the point is that in a police state such as this, a place of spies and rumours and gossip, there is no such thing as secrecy. As a consequence, Martin becomes an object of the security service's attention. He destroys his prototype to stop it falling into their hands, then secretly has a new model made, but this is stolen by Sibusiso at the urging of ANC radicals. Martin's efforts to recover his device lead him ever deeper into radical black activism and greater danger from the security services. Meanwhile, Sibusiso has to undertake a journey unlike any he has experienced in his life before, smuggling the Empathy Enhancer out of the country where Chinese technicians (the Chinese are the major international allies of black Africa) turn Martin's clunky device into a slick mobile app, a neat illustration of South Africa's technical backwardness. But though a new weapon likely to undermine any sense of white superiority is now in the hands of the ANC, this does not lessen the immediate danger that Sibusiso faces upon his return to South Africa.

There are moments of awkwardness in the novel when the evil of the apartheid regime is laid on with perhaps too broad a brush, but there are equally moments of great subtlety when a tiny detail instantly illuminates the reality of this crude regime. On the whole, however, this is a powerful work of political science fiction that well lives up to the advance praise it has already received.



**Down Station by Simon Morden (Gollancz, 2016)**

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

**D**own Station is a real place, an abandoned stop on the London Underground. *Down Station* the novel is a portal fantasy adventure, in which the defunct rail stop serves as a gateway to a different world, also called Down.

Mary has been in care and, as a result of her explosively violent temper, in trouble for most of her eighteen years. When the novel begins the Underground is about to close and she is due to start her shift on a cleaning team; her main concern is not getting referred to her probation officer by her 'weasel-faced' supervisor. Nineteen-year-old Dalip is a Sikh engineering student on a placement with a team replacing damaged track in the tunnels. He is gentle, scrupulously polite, respectful, and completely obedient to his parents' wishes. He lives in awe of the memory of his warrior grandfather and places duty and his faith above any interests of his own. The resourceful, pragmatic Stanislav supervises Dalip.

A storm is building over London. Distant sounds on the Underground grow in intensity until an evacuation is in process and disaster strikes. The opening chapters rapidly establish a sense of dread and terror as an apocalyptic fire sweeps through the city. The beginning of the novel is breathlessly gripping as a handful of trapped workers, Mary, Dalip and Stanislav amongst them, find a door that leads not to the inferno London has become, but to the cold shoreline of another planet.

Here *Down Station* slows a little as the survivors regroup. The lead trio joins forces with an older black woman, Noreen, who prefers to be called simply Mama, Rumanian cousins Elena and Luiza, and another woman, Grace. They begin to explore their surroundings, try to understand what has happened to them, and work out how to survive and what to do next.

The planet reveals itself to be very different from earth, when the first major sign of life the characters see is a giant sea serpent. This part of Down is mountainous and heavily forested and there are signs of abandoned human habitation, but people are scarce. The companions encounter a man who is accompanied by a pair of wolves, and later another man, Crows, so called because he commands his own personal flock, who explains that he came to Down while fleeing a racist beating in 1938 London. London and Down have been connected for decades, if not centuries, the portals opening at times of great danger. Unfortunately, so far as anyone knows, no one has ever managed to go back the other way.

In the absence of any nations or laws, Down is a place where people can become whatever they truly are. As the cover strapline says: Another World, Another You. One of the most interesting aspects is the way Morden develops ideas about the choices people make when there is no longer an imposed and agreed moral framework. The world itself reacts to the personalities of those who

inhabit it, becoming a mirror to their innermost selves – appropriately configured buildings grow out of the ground wherever people settle, and people themselves change. Already having lived through one major period in his life when all the normal rules of civilised conduct ceased to be in force, Stanislav is particularly intriguing in this respect.

Eventually all but Mary become prisoners of the local 'queen', who for purposes of her own decides to set Dalip to fight wild animals to the death in an arena. Escapes and rescues are plotted, and much action and adventure ensues.

*Down Station* is a ripping yarn that takes time to balance genuine questions of morality – the treatment of prisoners, the ethics of conflict and betrayal – with real character growth. Mary and Dalip couldn't be more mismatched, but develop well together as a pair of protagonists and it is rewarding to follow them as they grow into their potential.

Other than some graphic violence and the fact Mary swears a lot, the book has the central characters, coming of age themes, fast moving easy-to-read style and high adventure content typical of a YA series. And that includes characters struggling to control superhuman abilities and a battle with a dragon. It therefore seems a little odd that *Down Station* is being marketed as a novel for adults – such a strategy seems likely to disappoint some older readers while bypassing the readership which would appreciate it the most.

Equally odd is that, on the advance copy I was sent for review at least, there is no acknowledgement that this is the first of a series. It was only when I was halfway through that it started to become clear this was not going to be a standalone work – far too much was being set up to be resolved within the 150 pages remaining. There's nothing wrong with this, but a standalone novel raises different expectations from the opening of a series, and as series are so popular it seems counterproductive, not to say misleading, to withhold the fact. *The White City*, a second, and possibly final volume – though the world of Down is so vast, and so far almost completely unexplored that this feels like a saga which could run indefinitely – is to be published in the autumn.

Ultimately though, however it is marketed *Down Station* reads like a good, engaging first installment in a new YA epic fantasy series. It will be very interesting to see how it all turns out.

**The Cold Between by Elizabeth Bonesteel (HarperVoyager, 2016)**

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

**T**he *Cold Between* is a space opera, a genre of which I have high expectations. Novels by Lois McMaster Bujold, C J Cherryh and more recently Ann Leckie and Becky Chambers deliver strong characters, interesting settings, convoluted politics and a certain amount of grittiness. Although I found the book an enjoyable read, my expectations were largely disappointed.

To recover from a bad break up, Elena Shaw, Chief Engineer of the Corps starship Galileo, has a one night stand on the colony planet of Volhynia. Her partner is a





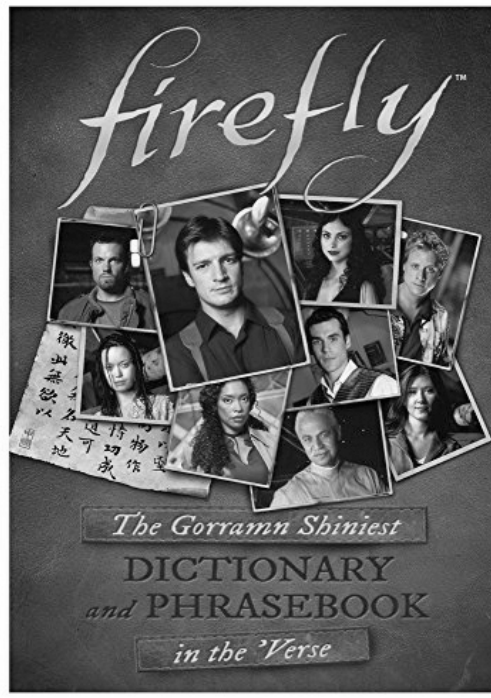
mysterious man, Trey, who wears a black uniform and belongs to a spacefaring group called PSI (nothing to do with telepathy). Then Elena's ex-lover is found brutally murdered. Trey is framed by the local police. Elena and Trey go on the run.

The Corps is a Central Government interstellar police force cum emergency service, rescuing colonies in trouble and enforcing law and order. PSI swan around the galaxy independently rescuing colonists and fighting syndicate pirates. Who exactly the Central Government and PSI are, their history and funding is never explained. This vagueness extends to the historical and cultural context. We are told that Standard and most of the languages spoken in the Fourth and Fifth sectors are derived from ancient Russian. There is no hint as to how this came about, and no evidence in the dialogue such as Russian slang or phrasing except that Trey calls Elena *m'laya*.

Perhaps the most glaring omission, in a setting that is clearly influenced by Star Trek, is any racial or cultural variety. Everyone whose skin colour is mentioned is white. Ted Shimada, one of Galileo's engineers, may have some Japanese ancestry but we are only told that he's "a good-looking man, lean-muscled and hearty." Well, that's the important areas covered. Socially we are stuck in the middle of the twentieth century, apart from full equality for women. How this particular aspect changed without any corresponding social effects is baffling. Sexuality is resolutely polarised into gender binaries. The only way of de-stressing is to drink alcohol. Male characters easily resort to violence. It's all very conventional.

The writing style is not awful, but it's thin. Characters are described in terms of their physical beauty. There is a graphic sex scene within the first few pages, somewhat airbrushed to fit within the tropes of romantic convention. While I'm perfectly happy to have romance in my space opera, I'd prefer a bit more realism with it.

As I said earlier, I did find the book an enjoyable read. There was an interesting mystery, and I liked the characters and wanted to find out what happened to them. Unfortunately, when compared with the authors named above (admittedly the best in the genre) it falls a long way short.



## ***Firefly: The Gorramn Shiniest Dictionary and Phrasebook in the Verse***

**by Monica Valentinelli  
(Titan Books, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Nick Hubble**

**I**t is now nearly fourteen years since the one and only series of Joss Whedon's *Firefly* first aired with its distinctive blend of retro-future shock, but the desire for more has not waned as testified to by the constant internet discussion and rumours. The latest manifestation of this ongoing interest is this rather odd book that is neither a companion to the series nor quite – despite high production values and a copious selection of stills – a glossy celebration. Aside from the character write-ups mentioned below, only a few of the

alphabetically-organised entries included provide useful background on elements of the series, such as the 'Blue Sun Corporation' and 'The Rim', while a handful of others explain its particular inflection of more general science-fictional concepts such as 'terraforming' and 'colony'. The majority of entries, however, are just standard dictionary definitions of words and terms such as 'airlock', 'cockpit', 'engine-room' etc. The selection criteria is not entirely confined to spaceship-related terminology but also encompasses other themes such as conflict ('battle', 'firefight') and, in surprising detail, plumbing ('latrine', 'pisspot', 'septic system', 'septic tank' and 'septic vac'). Every now and again a more intriguing word such as 'nubile' or 'sanguine' crops up just to add a hint of depth and colour.

If this sounds largely underwhelming, that is because it is largely underwhelming, although not all entries are quite as banal as the following: 'hair, n. Integral part of culture throughout the known Verse. May be grown long, kept in a certain style, shaved off, etc.' (p.69). Some interest is generated by an account of Whedon's attempts to evade network censorship by using antiquated British sexual terms; hence the J's are enlivened by 'John Thomas' and the Q's by 'quim'. By this point in the text, however, the reader or browser has long since given up hope of there being any wider purpose to the book other than these occasional minor diversions. Even the section containing translations of the Mandarin Chinese phrases from the series is mostly repeating information already in the public domain. Therefore, it is mildly disconcerting rather than climactic to discover in the final pages that Monica Valentinelli's intention, especially with her descriptions of Mal Reynolds and company, is to 'highlight how characters reveal their personality through language' (p.158). This makes sense given Valentinelli's involvement with the *Firefly* role-playing game but as the analysis more-or-less boils down to pointing out that characters from the Central Planets speak properly while those from the Rim are prone to drop endings and use contractions, it is hardly 'rocket science' (thankfully not defined).

**Occupy Me by Tricia Sullivan (Gollancz, 2016)****Reviewed by Martin McGrath**

**T**he overwhelming sensation left at the end of Tricia Sullivan's strange, awkward new novel is of things straining and stretching and struggling to be free. This is true of the characters, all of whom seem to be constantly pushing against something literal and/or metaphorical, but also true of the book itself. There's so much packed in here, and at such conflicting, awkward angles, that it's as though the paperback covers might, at any moment, tear themselves asunder and the whole lot flop, exhausted and spoilt, on to the floor. That Sullivan juggles it all so deftly, so that disaster is avoided and a sort of triumph is delivered, is to her credit, but for the reader the journey is not always comfortable.

At one level this is a straightforward book: a nowish/near-futurish thriller in which money and oil and intrigue lead its characters around the world from exotic locales to, well, Edinburgh. Pace Industries, a rapacious oil company, is trying to recover stolen money and a mysterious briefcase. The briefcase is in the possession Dr Sorle, the physician who cared for the former oil executive, financier and embezzler, Austen Stevens. But Sorle is also, it quickly emerges, something much stranger than that. And, behind all those thriller elements, driving itself to the surface through this thin skin, is a story about time travel, a giant flying dinosaur, alien birds whose habits include collecting the "waveforms" of the lost, entropy, the end of the universe and Pearl, the lost angel.

Normally, at this point in a review, it is customary to provide a brief summary of the plot of the novel under consideration. That is very difficult with *Occupy Me*. At its heart is Pearl, a black, lesbian, "angel" with wings that fold into higher dimensions and an urge to mend people. Pearl works for the "Resistance": a group of time-travellers pushing against mankind's destiny, straining through small acts of kindness, we believe, to nudge humanity into a better future. But neither they nor Pearl know exactly who or what she is.

Structurally, I found *Occupy Me* hard going for the first third. The opening sections are choppy, quite hard to follow and the story takes some time to begin to cohere – the struggle is clear but the purpose of all that grunting and shoving isn't and I became frustrated with the book.

If I hadn't been sent this book to review, I might never have finished it. But, if I had walked away, I would have denied myself what becomes an intriguing, mind-expanding, often very funny and really quite effective science fiction thriller. The threads, at least most of them, pulled loose in the book's opening do eventually weave themselves back together into a tapestry (or, maybe, cross-stitch) that isn't just a recognisable representation

of some world, but a multi-dimensional universe that tips and wobbles the reader across many plains of existence and yet still dumps us, at the end, with a sense that we have been through something complete and understandable. It's a very clever trick.

The fact that the novel does not shatter into incoherence is largely down to Sullivan's success in creating a protagonist, in Pearl, who remains both perplexing and a rounded and convincing person – someone who the reader wants to succeed and whose story we want to watch develop. Pearl, whose physical characteristics play with the iconography of angels, has parts missing and those parts have left a hole in her memory. Amnesia is an overused trope and I groaned slightly as it became clear that here was another hero with crucial blanks that can't be filled until the plot demands it. But, actually, Sullivan does a rather good job in mixing things up so that the plot device doesn't feel too familiar and the "reveal" – when we

discover what Pearl is, where she came from and how she fits into the broader scheme of things – is so far out of leftfield that any accusation that this was just another re-tread of a Bourne-style thriller plot would be left flopping helplessly like a hapless dinosaur in puddle of oil (possible spoiler there).

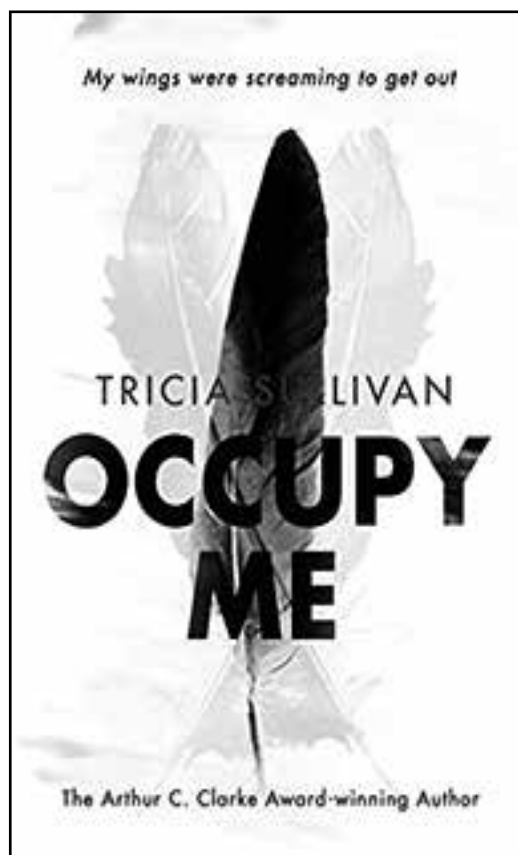
As the novel progresses it also gathers a memorable and intriguing cast of supporting characters. Sorle was, and was not, scooped up half dead in Africa by Pace Industries and used as a poster boy for their "philanthropic" works. His detachment from his own culture – he was given a Western education and became a respected doctor – and his anger at the men and system that have pillaged his homeland, bringing war and disease, gives *Occupy Me* another layer of struggle and another layer of depth.

And then there is Alison, who I might have fallen slightly in

love with. She's a vet who, just when she believes life's ability to surprise had passed, grows into someone more confident and more capable and altogether more badass than she ever expected. She's a really nicely handled character and if her blossoming strains credulity just a touch, it's one of the more pleasant stretches required by this book.

*Occupy Me* is not a book that grabbed me from the off. Reading it took work, it required me to give it the benefit of the doubt. In the end, though, it was a book that repaid my work. Once things start to click into place it accelerates quickly, the jumble of the opening coming together into a well-oiled and fast moving whole that offers both humour and excitement. It's a memorable thriller, a mind-expanding lump of science fiction and throughout, the writing is flecked with gemlike turns of phrase.

A book worth the struggle.



***A Prospect of War* by Ian Sales (North Blyth: Tickety Boo Press, 2015)**

**Reviewed by Shaun Green**

**A** *Prospect of War* is the first novel in Sales' *Age of Discord* trilogy and is of course a space operatic affair. This enduring genre often lives or dies on its depth and breadth, its epic adventure and galactic stakes, its melodrama and high-tech thrills. What we're offered here seems to fit the bill: an interstellar civilization defined by divisive class systems; political subterfuge and looming civil war; secret masters and spies duelling in the dark; a pre-gunpowder spin on personal combat; space warfare that feels both technically precise and exciting. Unfortunately, the melange that is delivered is simply not as exciting as its component ingredients promise.

The Empire has stood firm for over a millennium, its strict feudal structure sprawling across vast swathes of interstellar space. Yet despite the strength that has allowed it to endure, it is under threat: not from without but from within. A sinister figure, known only as the Serpent to those few who recognise his machinations, is working to dethrone the Emperor and break the imperial line. To this end they have suborned nobles, political factions, military regiments, even units of the supposedly apolitical Imperial Navy. The existence of the Serpent is so difficult to prove, his plots so well concealed, that those who combat him must do so in secret or as renegades. Amidst this ambiguous struggle we find three women who will play pivotal roles.

Lieutenant-Commander Rinharte serves aboard *Vengeful*, a battlecruiser under the leadership of the woman known only as the Admiral, which now operates outside the Imperial Navy. Rinharte is forced outside her comfort zone as she is appointed to ground operations, working to identify allies and enemies in the Admiral's secret war. Sliva Finesz is a minor noble appointed by a political sponsor to the civilian-investigatory Office of the Procurator Imperial. The mysteries which she begins to unpick could lead to something far larger. Finally there is Murily Plessant, who captains the data-freighter *Divine Providence*. She and her crew work for secret masters, and have recently taken aboard the inexperienced crewman Casimir Ormuz. Though they do not know one another, and may meet as enemies, they could prove natural allies – but first each must work to understand the extent of the threat to the Empire.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of *A Prospect of War* is the Empire itself. Its feudal nature is common enough in space opera: nobles rule planetary systems on behalf of an Empire with the majority population of 'proles' largely lacking the freedoms and luxuries of their social superiors. The extent to which these strata define entire lives is uncompromisingly presented, and without overt authorial judgement. Few characters question the Empire's inequi-

ties or monstrosities, as you might expect of those born and raised in a polity that has stood unbroken for 1300 years.

The scenes in which warships manoeuvre and battle are also enjoyably tense. I like their idiosyncrasy: they recall dramatizations of historic submarine warfare in which the exact location and vector of an opponent is not directly perceivable, but must instead be interpreted based on experience, calculation and estimation.

Much like the Empire itself, the hand-to-hand nature of both one-on-one fights and melee combat recalls the *Dune* novels. These went to great lengths to explain why projectile weapons were practically obsolete; the gist was personal shields which permitted slow attacks but repelled fast-moving objects. There's no such explanation in *A Prospect of War*, which does unfortunately leave the reader thinking 'this is all very well, but why not bring a gun to a knife fight?'

Clearly, this is a stylistic conceit – it fits perfectly well with many other aspects of the tale's setting – but this criticism, one which almost immediately occurs to the reader and is never addressed, also dovetails with another question that begs to be asked: why do the trillions of Imperial proles never rise up against their numerically inferior masters? They fill all manner of industrial, technical and academic roles

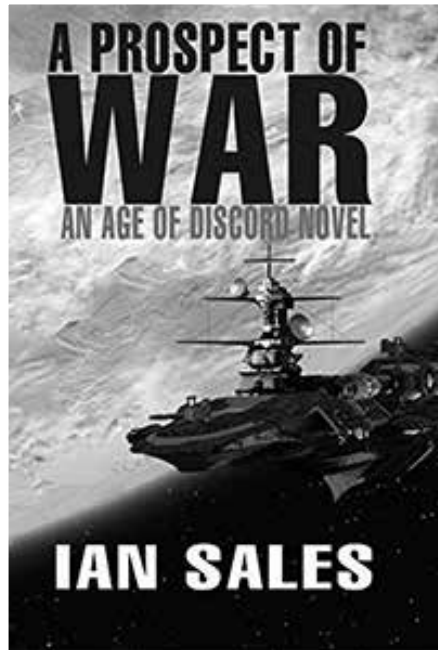
in Imperial society, surely somewhere along the line someone with some degree of class consciousness encountered gunpowder?

I spent much of the novel waiting for these particular pennies to drop. They never did, though some soft critiques of the Imperial social strata do emerge in the final chapters, suggesting that the next novel might move in such a direction.

A consistent stylistic issue is the unremarkable conveyance of sense of place. One fine exception is a market whose generations of traders have gradually absorbed and obscured the symbols of noble power and authority, which is a wonderful image. For the most part, though, it's bland Imperial grandeur and faceless, monolithic buildings.

Similarly bland are the characters we root for; the core cast are likable but rarely exhibit great cleverness, depth or inner turmoil, whilst minor characters like "hulking brutes" and "corpulent nobles" are straight out of central casting. Perhaps the most objectionable is the chap raised a prole but secretly born of nobility; other characters are caught up in his orbit due to his growing charisma, so we're told, despite him not reading as terribly charismatic at all.

The 'noble farmboy' is so much the cliché that, like the characters socialised to not question the Empire's divisions, and that *Triumph of the Will* architecture, it seems inevitable that something hugely dramatic and paradigm-shifting must be around the corner. Sales has even stated that his trilogy is intended to subvert certain genre traditions. But here in this 550-page novel there's scarce evidence of that, and who reads a second book because it might do what the first did not?



## ***All The Birds in The Sky* by Charlie Jane Anders (Titan, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts**

**T**he debut novel from Charlie Jane Anders is a captivating story of the tensions between the spiritual and physical worlds, while keeping the narrative firmly at the human level. The spiritual aspect is represented by the inherent magic of nature, and the physical by advanced physics. Although it could be said that Clarke's third law does come into play here, as the boundaries between the magic of nature and that of science start to blur.

Patricia and Laurence are two misfits. They don't fit in at school and, although totally different, find themselves forming a friendship based on mutual support. Patricia is a witch who may be able to communicate with animals, and Laurence a physics and engineering genius. He has invented a time machine that enables him to jump two seconds forward in time, thus avoiding to a limited extent the bullying to which he is subjected at school. This is symbolic of the impressive but largely impractical developments that he is undertaking, and even this only protects him to any degree if he is fully alert to the dangers around him.

Lawrence has access to his abilities, but circumstances mean that the use to which he can put them is severely limited. Much remarkable work, not least an apparent artificial intelligence, lies unacknowledged in his room. Patricia, on the other hand, appears to have significant powers, but is unable to access them. When they do manifest it is not at all clear how she achieved it, least of all to Patricia herself. These two characters are isolated by their own personalities, both within the school and from their parents, who have no comprehension of their children, and how they might need something beyond being prepared for a life where they keep their heads down and fit into society as best they can. The children's abilities are either hidden from view or perceived to be of no consequence.

Patricia and Lawrence are so very different from each other that under normal circumstances a friendship between them would be almost unthinkable. When that friendship is also under the hostile gaze of the rest of the school, it's remarkable that they ever even speak. Their days in an ordinary school are forcibly brought to a close as they are both transferred, somewhat dramatically, to schools focussed on growing their respective abilities. While this pulls them apart geographically, psychologically and emotionally it cements the connections between them and further isolates them from the ordinary world.

Some years later, the two are leading very separate lives. Patricia uses her abilities, which by this time have become much more developed, to quietly help people. Laurence is working on the development of anti-gravity

within a secretive project that aims to save humanity from the clearly impending collapse. When they encounter one another – despite having consigned their friendship to the realm of massively simplified school day memories – that same relationship develops and their co-dependence starts to make its presence felt.

Their relationship is one that seems to be based on a mutual understanding of their respective isolation, complicated by a deep-seated incomprehension of what it is that actually makes the other person what they are, and why that makes them special. The two of them, in representing opposing but co-dependant aspects of their world in science and magic, need something else to make their friendship cohere. It could almost be said that the development of the relationship is structured quite closely on that of the traditional rom-com couple. Two completely mismatched people coming to a realisation that the reader/viewer has had for some time. They are incapable of properly comprehending one another, yet neither is complete without the other.

That is something of an oversimplification. This pair are not merely unsuited to one another, each inhabits a different world, and those worlds hold the other with a deep-seated suspicion. This suspicion, and the concomitant misunderstanding could prove disastrous not just for Patricia and Laurence, but the entire world. The world is diving headlong towards collapse, and these two are very significant players in separate efforts to save humanity through very different means. Not understanding one another could go far beyond the couple not getting together, but potentially exacerbate the end of humanity.

The necessary glue comes in a somewhat unusual form. The world in which they are living has taken social media up a level, with the introduction of the caddy.

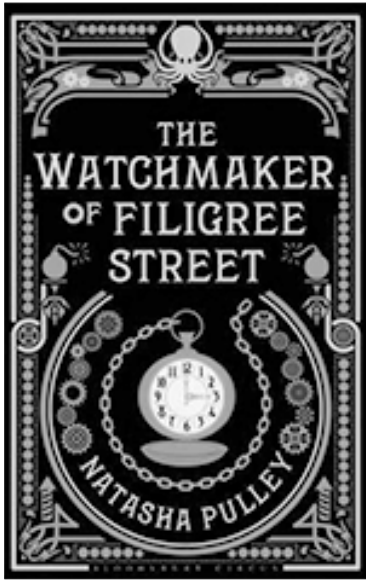
This mobile device embeds itself firmly into people's lives, with time-based suggestions that go far beyond recommending a nice restaurant, and keys itself fully into the lives and needs of the users. The caddy does appear to be having a genuinely positive impact on people's lives, albeit with the obvious side-effect that people are further abdicating responsibility for their own lives and destinies. Laurence spends much of his spare time trying to reverse engineer the caddy to get to the algorithms that they are using. His lack of success, and his failure to realise exactly what is behind this technology demonstrates his lack of understanding of what he is actually capable of achieving. It is this third personality in the relationship, which while not obviously playing a significant role for much of the story, is actually what holds everything together. Not least Patricia and Laurence's relationship.

While this is a book about the relationship between science and magic and the impending apocalypse, even at its most pyrotechnic it remains about the people involved and their own search for identity. This is a very fine debut indeed.



***The Watchmaker Of Filigree Street***  
 by Natasha Pulley (Bloomsbury, 2015)  
 Reviewed by Nick Hubble

An elaborate tea-making routine marks Home Office telegraphist Thaniel Steepleton, the main protagonist of Natasha Pulley's assured debut novel *The Watchmaker Of Filigree Street*, as sensitive and different. In fact, he is also a gifted composer, who perceives sound as colour. Returning one night to his boarding house, Thaniel finds that someone has broken into his room and left him an ornate golden pocket watch that shines with the colour of a human voice.



Although the watch does not work initially, it eventually starts to keep time of its own accord and some months later produces an ear-splitting alarm that causes Thaniel to leave the pub he is in and thus avoid the blast from a bomb set off moments later across the street in Scotland Yard. This bombing is an actual historical event that took place on 30 May 1884; part of the Fenian campaign that forms a backdrop to the novel. Pulley's deft

interweaving of history and fiction allows her to set up several different levels of tension ranging from the initial plot-driving suspicion that the maker of the watch is also the maker of the timing devices for the bombs, through a wider scientific discourse of cause, effect and probability, and on to more philosophical questions concerning the nature of agency within a deterministic universe.

The eponymous watchmaker is revealed to be a Japanese man, Keita Mori, who likes to surround himself with intricate mechanical devices. When Thaniel moves into Mori's spare bedroom in order to spy on him for the police, he soon finds himself drawn towards the other man. What gives the novel's gentle mixture of mystery and romance real bite, however, is the involvement of the theoretical physicist, Grace Cooper, who Thaniel meets as the consequence of a spin of a roulette wheel. Grace is the only person capable of working out the full implications of Mori's ability to manipulate probability and she urgently warns Thaniel that the older man is capable of reducing his life to the level of a clockwork automaton.

A key part of the pleasure of Pulley's narrative is the way that it applies its queer steampunk sensibility to the real mechanical marvels of the late Victorian period such as the telegraph system and the London Underground. Reading *The Watchmaker Of Filigree Street* makes it difficult to associate the whirl of clockwork with anything other than the steady uncoiling of the springs of desire and the collapse of convention. By the end of the novel, even the hiss of steam has taken on a golden hue and Thaniel has finally found someone special to share his tea with.

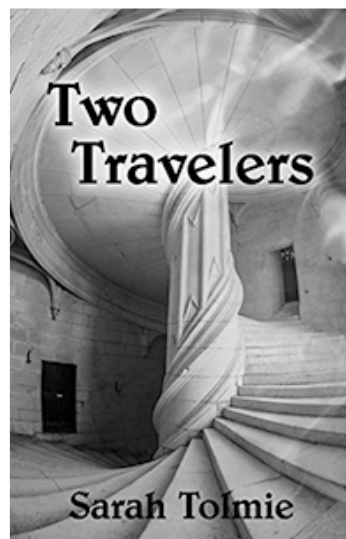
***Two Travelers* by Sarah Tolmie**  
 (Aqueduct Press, 2016)  
 Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

In genre fantasy novels, moving between worlds is seen at best as an adventure, at worst as some sort of problem-solving exercise. The characters who do so are inevitably given special status within the narrative, and everything revolves around their sudden presence within that story. That is, the story cannot exist without them. They never suffer psychologically as a result of their sudden relocation, and show few if any regrets for the world they've left behind; their present situation is always rather more interesting, apparently.

In *Two Travelers*, Sarah Tolmie strays from the orthodox line to examine the perplexities of being an outsider in a strange new world. The protagonist of 'The Dancer on the Stairs', who awakens one day on the marble staircase of a mysterious palace, cannot speak the language of the place in which she finds herself, but more critically is all but invisible to the people who live there because she lacks the chemical signatures on which they rely to distinguish among themselves within a complex social hierarchy, not to mention the knowledge of how the social system works. It takes months of patience, and a good deal of physical discomfort and mental anguish before she is able to even begin to establish herself within this world. By contrast, in 'The Burning Furrow', Dragan, also called Eyo't, regularly slips between this world and a country called Dinesen, though how he does this, he doesn't know. Over time, he has found he can take his family with him between worlds. In this world, he and his wife run a successful diner in the USA; in Dinesen he is a freedom fighter, a member of a persecuted minority, and wanted by the authorities. In the USA, Dragan's outward identity seems immutable if a little obscure; in Dinesen his identity is contingent on a host of constantly shifting circumstances, many of them not entirely under his control. Who then is responsible for shaping who he is?

Tolmie challenges us as readers to think more deeply about those issues we might otherwise take for granted in fiction, such as living in a world whose hierarchy is so rigid its inhabitants literally cannot see one, or else of living a double life between two worlds. These stories are less about events themselves, although there is

plenty of drama in 'The Burning Furrow', and far more about the personal cost to characters – disrupted marriages, lost families, starvation, the knowledge that one will be perpetually an outsider, issues rarely explored by genre writers. However, in these fiercely intelligent and provocative stories, Tolmie insists that we look at the familiar from an entirely different and strikingly original angle.





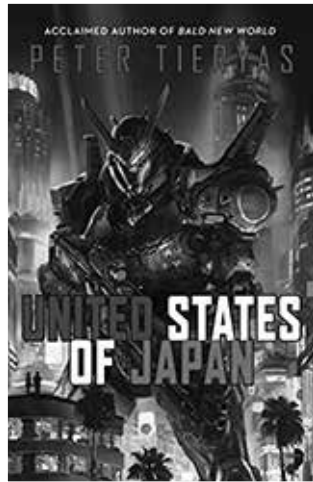
***United States of Japan* by Peter Tieryas  
(Angry Robot, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Kerry Dodd**

The Second World War represents a historical landmark of the last century, a conflict frequently addressed through recent speculative fiction. Blending alternate reality and futuristic sci-fi, *United States of Japan* suggests a glimpse of what might have occurred if Germany and Japan, rather than the Allies, had been victorious. Undoubtedly indebted to Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, Peter Tieryas' novel is a chilling representation of cruelty and terror back-dropped with 1984-styled paranoia and Japanese mecha. Opening with American citizens of Asian ancestry being detained in prison camps, the brutality and horrific initial scenes set the tone for a novel that encompasses questions of ethics, morality, loyalty and servitude. Ranging from thriller to an action-filled conclusion, *United States of Japan* is a gripping and poignant novel that casts neither side in a beneficial light.

For Beniko Ishimura forty years after the American's defeat, the war is a haunting memory through the daily reminders of the totalitarian system constantly watching its citizens. Working in a government department focusing on censoring video games, ensuring subversive or insurgent material is removed, Ben's life epitomises the constant anxiety of being branded a traitor to the Japanese Emperor. Living in constant fear of the Tokko (Tokubetsu Koto Keisatsu) or secret police, loyalty and unwavering subservience are mandatory qualities of this new Empire, where dissent is treated with graphic torture, interrogation and often death. Called away from a government dinner, Ben receives an untraceable call from an old military superior through a flesh phone directly planted within the messenger's body – the first of many small but effective pieces of imagery reminiscent of *Ghost in the Shell*. Charged with overseeing the funeral of the General's daughter, Ben's life spirals out of control as his subservient personality is physically forced to face both his unresolved past and shape the Empire's future. The arrival of *USA*, a game simulation based on the Allies winning the war, threatens to disrupt the uneasy power balance. Visited by Akiko Tsukino, an agent of the Tokko, the brutal, direct and unflagging devotion of the perceived 'ideal' citizen is questioned as the novel expands until no person is above scrutiny. For these two very opposite protagonists, their different illusionary perceptions must be torn down to face the stark reality; a rough journey but one that exemplifies Tieryas' persuasive writing and attuned character focus.

*United States of Japan* at times represents a tissue of dystopian and Japanese media, yet Tieryas' writing is persuasive and engaging, pulling these influences together with vibrant language matching the striking front-cover mecha. Echoing Dick's penchant for unreliable characters and layers of illusions, the extent of questionable motives keeps the novel fresh and interesting. Personally, I was disappointed that the *USA* game did not feature as heavily



as I expected, leaving space for questioning the authenticity of 'reality' and simulation. However, Tieryas' unrelenting graphic depictions and approachable style retains the novel's drive to an explosive conclusion, which aptly draws together the previous threads and offers a moment of poignancy and reflection as the final hidden truth is revealed.

***Winter* by Dan Grace (Unsung Stories, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Duncan Lawrie**

*Winter* is a fine example of how to make good use of the novella form. Almost every scene progresses both our understanding of the plot and of the people in it, while the disordered narrative maintains intrigue as to the balance of the truth.

The story opens with a powerful and attractive scene, drawing the reader into the book. It is a hunting scene: spears and a stag in the winter snow. One of the characters is called Adam and another sings the dying creature a shaman song of apology. The genre reader is already untangling clues which become all the more interesting when the others in this scene, Mikhail and Ingold, go back to a farm that appears to have at least twentieth century trappings.

There are some rough edges, which leave me intrigued. That first scene, on rereading, is one of the two that fits least well into the final narrative, as Adam shows no other aptitude for the Wild. The other is a one-word chapter, context free, which adds drama at the moment of its passing but which never re-joins the plot in any meaningful way. Perhaps such an expectation of tidy threads is my mistake as a reader, as it does emphasise the contingent state of all our protagonists.

Indeed, whilst the story runs through two threads, telling the stories of the same characters but displaced in time from each other, it isn't quite so simple to fix all the elements into those threads. That slight fracturing creates stresses in the story, asks the reader to do more work and thereby gives more interest than a time-ordered narrative could. The plot, somewhat untangled, has Adam, Leila and May reach a farm in Scotland, fleeing their past in the South. There is third party commentary on the terrorist movement "The Green Man"; their association with it means they have good reason to fear for their lives. The refuge they reach is already occupied by Mikhail and Ingold, who have a more traditional twenty-first century immigrant story. With the stirring of plot lines, it is less obvious who is in the right or where the reader's trust should lie. So the novella maintains equipoise.

This equipoise, the gradual realisation by the characters of how completely their lives have changed, forever, is balanced against the reader learning what kind of world this is set in, what kind of people these are. Ideally, the penny drops for both reader and protagonists at the same time, in the novella's final chapter. Dan Grace comes very close to achieving this perfect denouement.



***Windswept* by Adam Rakunas**  
**(Angry Robot, 2015)**  
 Reviewed by Stuart Carter

**R**um, solidarity and the economic crash might not be *quite* the old staples of the British Navy but they are the main ingredients of Rakunas's nightmare tale of evil corporations gone interstellar.

Padma Mehta lives on Santee Anchorage and works for The Union, pushing back against The Man and the Big Three – between them the Big Three have Occupied Space all sewn up, running a galactic racket that only The Union have escaped. Except not quite.

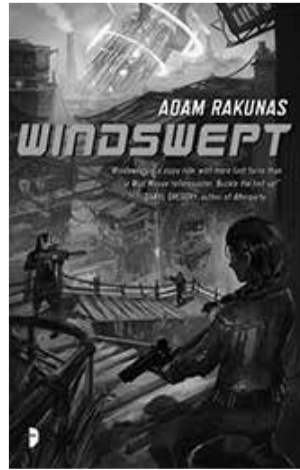
Santee Anchorage keeps its independence by exporting molasses off-world. Molasses is the lifeblood of Occupied Space, being turned into everything from fuel to textiles to, of course, rum. Despite the best efforts of The Union, this isn't some socialist paradise: it's a tough, grimy, industrial world utterly dependent on trading a single commodity. On Santee Anchorage, everything comes down to molasses one way or another – even freedom.

Padma's been working and saving for a long time, now she's within spitting distance of affording her own rum distillery and retiring. All she needs is to find another thirty-three Big Three employees ready to breach their contracts and join The Union. That's why when Bloombeck, one of her rather less salubrious contacts, hears tell of an incredible forty 'Breaches' about to arrive in-system, Padma ignores her better judgment and goes all out to rescue them. But can she get there before competing Union recruiter – and all-round pain-in-the-ass – Saarien? Or will the Big Three throw a spanner in all their plans? And, while we're asking questions, what the hell is going wrong with Padma's beloved rum all of a sudden?

*Windswept* is Rakunas's first novel and it showcases a great ear for wisecracking dialogue: there are one-liners and witticisms all the way through, delivered by a great cast of characters and grotesques. If *Windswept* didn't quite work as a novel for me (life in The Union seems entirely too nasty, brutish and short for most people), then the story whisks along smartly enough, those same characters and all their eccentricities mostly compensating for any cracks in the story.

There are action sequences aplenty (usually involving a descent into the sewers) counterbalanced by some smart world-building in the background. The whole book takes place on Santee Anchorage; there's a real sense of an entire universe out there, a nightmarish vision of our own world gone awry. It's one you imagine Richard Morgan might have written after overdosing on *Friends* or some other US sitcom.

There's nothing dazzlingly original in *Windswept* but the politics are heartfelt, the characters likable and the adventures of kick-ass Union rep Padma Mehta make for a thoroughly fun read. I just hope she's done with exploring the sewage systems of Santee Anchorage in future adventures!



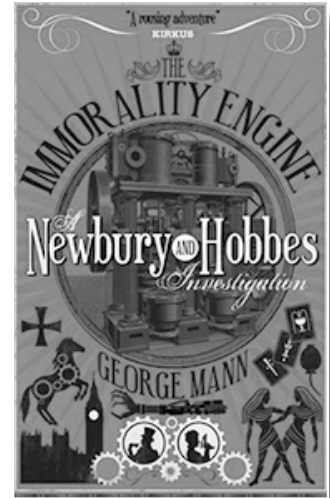
***The Immorality Engine* by George Mann**  
**(Titan Books, 2016)**  
 Reviewed by Kerry Dodd

**W**hen the body of a well-known, yet never proven guilty, criminal turns up in the gutters of London, Scotland Yard calls upon Gentleman Investigator for the Crown, Sir Maurice Newbury, and his keen assistant, Miss Veronica Hobbes, to investigate. Shortly after the discovery, a new robbery bearing all the hallmarks of the deceased's methods is uncovered. It is up to Newbury and Hobbes to solve this peculiar enigma, under the beady eye of Queen Victoria – herself a hybrid horror of machine and flesh sitting at the heart of her Empire, hatching sinister plans to the tune of her clockwork heart.

But our adventurous heroes also have their own demons to exorcise. Slave to opium dens, Newbury's darker pursuits of occultism and laudanum enslave his genius mind, offering inspirational glimpses whilst he teeters on the edge of the abyss. Meanwhile, Miss Hobbes struggles with her own private secrets, as well as the plight of her incarcerated sister who is plagued by harrowing clairvoyant visions of the future. In this automata-filled alternate Victorian London, the supernatural and technological clash as progress faces spiritualism to decide not only the fate of a city, but also an Empire.

Lured from his opium dens with the prospect of this new and puzzling case, Newbury with the help of Miss Hobbes, sets about to discover the mystery of the apparent copycat crime. Driven by the hunt for the seeming doppelganger, the investigation pursues a number of paths, each convincing and leading up to the wider impacting conclusion. Yet the true delight of the novel lies in its sensitive development of its key duo. More than just an episodic instalment, the driving force of the narrative is clearly the well-written and engaging interaction between Newbury and Hobbes. Bursting with explosive action, each potential culprit is well crafted and neatly draws together its various strands to a satisfying conclusion.

Following in the footsteps of the recent Steampunk craze, *The Immorality Engine* is a thrilling hunt through the grimy, grotesque and geared streets of London. Fast-paced and eloquently written, the tale of Newbury and Hobbes is delightfully told, each page running as meticulously as clockwork. Standing as the third book in the series, the narrative is fresh and compelling, even for those who have not read the previous instalments. Laying the subtle foundations of the fourth book, *The Executioner's Heart*, the novel is thoroughly enjoyable up to its conclusion, whilst offering small hints at the lingering greater threat to come. Re-printed in 2016 with vibrant new covers, George Mann's 'Newbury and Hobbes' investigations represent a must-read for Steampunk enthusiasts and a great introduction to the genre for new comers.



**POWERS: The Secret History of Deena Pilgrim**

by Neil Kleid and Brian Michael Bendis  
(Titan Books, 2016)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

**S**o, Powers, right?  
Powers, yeah.

Brian Michael Bendis' breakout comic hit with Mike Oeming?

Yeah, Powers.

The one with all the dialogue? The police procedural with superheroes?

That one. Quick-fire. Smart alec. Fresh. Fresh and all swear-y as hell.

But this one has no pictures? And it's written with this Kleid guy. How does that work?

Guy's got a story to tell.

Good story?

A story.

And?

Deena Pilgrim, main character in the comics. First time in the comics was her first day in the new job.

And?

This book looks at her past.

Nice.

It's all interwoven, past and present. You know how these novelists love that. But it's all ret-conned, too. You know how comics guys love *that*. Captain America guy is murdered. Everyone's sad. Until they find out he was a closet fascist.

Harsh.

Harsh is right. Everyone else is a no-good lying sonofabitch, too. Except the good guys. But they get blown up.

Blown up?

Blown up.

Blown up like, *exploded* blown up?

Yeah, not the good kind of exploded. Don't worry, they're all fine. You get exploded-blown up here, two hours in hospital and you're fine again.

How does that work?

Hmm.

Can we recap? Captain America's a fascist?

He's the Citizen Solider here, but yeah.

And he's murdered?

He's old. He's tired. He's done.

And the cops are after his killer?

They are, but there's a lot of water under the bridge. Everyone's got their ambiguities, right?

"Ambiguities"?

Ambiguities. No one's who or what you think.

Tricky case.

Yeah. Trickier than it needs to be.

Eh?

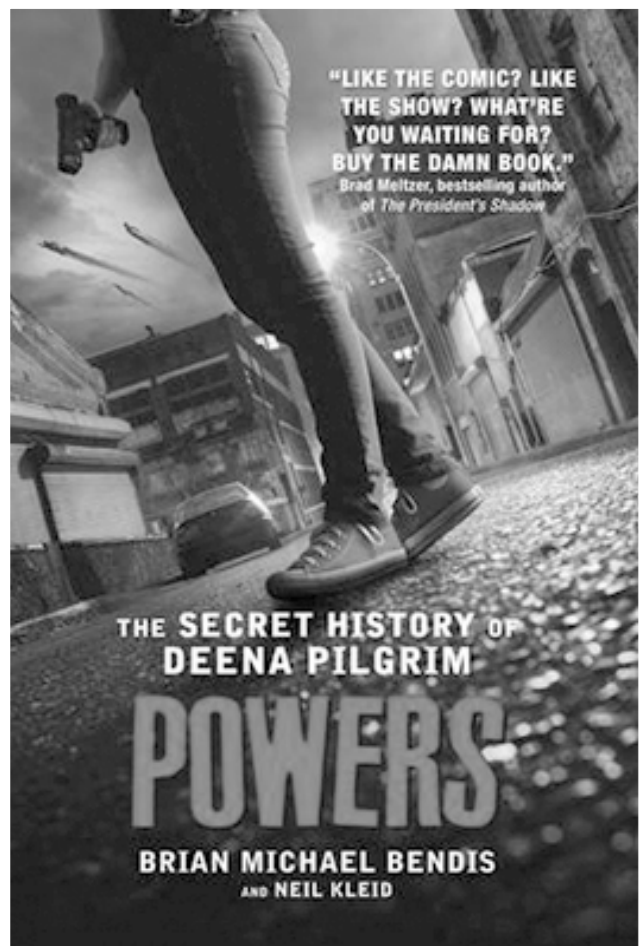
Let's just say the writer's been let off the comic leash.

There's a leash?

You gotta paint the story with words, it's different to a comic. Ask Warren Ellis, that guy knows. Novel needs words, lots of words; words you wouldn't need in a comic. They...clog things.

Clogs? Like little wooden shoes?

Clogs like cholesterol, like *blockage*. The story doesn't flow like the comics do, it chokes. In the comics you see the quick-fire banter between Deena and Walker, her partner – you can literally *see* it on the page. It's a beautiful thing. Bendis is famous for it.



So, this Kleid guy...?

It ain't his fault. Banter gets smeared across the page, lost in the verbiage.

Poor guy. So why make it a novel? Why ditch the "graphic" part?

That's the question.

And the answer?

You got me.

No?

Yeah.

You gonna read the next one?

I ain't gonna read the next one. Stick to the comics.

**The Fire Children by Lauren Roy**  
(Ravenstone, 2015)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

**I** have it on good website authority that Lauren Roy's by-line also appears with the 'mystery' middle initial M. She might or might not have used it to avoid confusion with the Canadian jazz and blues, R & B and rock singer of the same name. Her first novel, *Night Owls* (2014), featured an urban-fantastic bookshop owner called Valerie McTeague.

All right, so I'm just stalling for time. It took an initial fast skim and two more concentrated readings for me to really 'get into' *The Fire Children*, which made me feel more than usually like a Big Thicket (no comments, please). The opening sentence is a good cryptic scene-setter: "Yulla was born during the Darktimes, in the

middle of the Scorching Days.” But the next fifty-odd pages are filled with walk-on characters like Kell (Yulla’s elder sister), Amma, Aunt Mouse, Abba, Old Moll, Ishem and Anur. There are places named Worship Hall and The Sunglass, situated in the city of Kaladim (represented by the usual useless front-paper map). We also have Brother Sun and Sister Moon: self-explanatory celestial objects – or are they? Time – and Lauren Roy – does tell.

When all has been read and done, *The Fire Children* is a ‘Nightfall’ kind of story, with a dash of Daniel F. Galouye’s equally seminal *Dark Universe*. But Roy veers more towards fantasy than science fiction where ‘rational’ explanations are concerned. Irrational explanations are something else again.

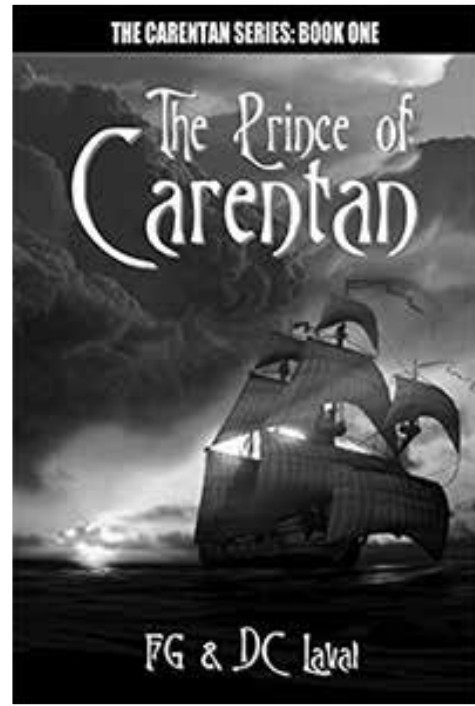
Every twenty years or so, the star Mother Sun is eclipsed by Brother Moon, which orbits an unnamed planet with Kaladim as its only-mentioned city. This brings on the Darktimes and Scorching Days. The people of Kaladim skulk in dark caverns while the titular – and all-too-literally lethal – Fire Children walk the surface of their world. The hot-headed (sorry about that, folks) fifteen-year-old Yulla makes her way up and out of the protective tunnels. She watches as the Witch Women, who secretly worship the moribund Brother Sun rather than the life-affirming Sister Moon, capture one of the Fire Children, for their own malevolent and maniacal purposes. Yulla almost

immediately falls in love with Ember, for that is the Fire Child’s name, and – after a long-drawn-out fright of passage – Things Will Never Be Quite the Same Again in or anywhere near Kaladim.

I agree with the first part of Liz de Jager’s front-cover blurb: “The world-building is rich and evocative.” But I must

disagree with the second part: “The mythology Roy spins is fundamentally believable.” My suspension of disbelief hung by the neck until it was dead, dead, dead. Having said that, nobody ever wrote anything that pleased everyone, and *The Fire Children* is such a generally well-wrought novel that I’m reservedly recommending it to those among you who can accept all the overheated mythological machinations.

BTW: Larry Rostant’s cover painting is so effectively affective that it seems a shame to have it overprinted with mere reading matter.



***The Prince of Carentan* by F.G. & D.C. Laval  
(Double Dragon Press, 2015)**

**Reviewed by Sandra Unerman**

**T**he King of Carentan is dead and his son, Prince Gereinte, is attacked and left to die in the forest. After Gereinte is rescued, he is determined to escape from his over-protective court, so that he can have adventures of his own. Meanwhile, his three sisters struggle to reconcile themselves to their lives as royal princesses, and his younger brother is under a threat nobody suspects. When Gereinte manages to run away, he has to undergo hardship and danger as he works incognito on a ship and later travels through strange lands.

The setting is a traditional medieval style fantasy, with only a few hints of magic. There are rival kingdoms and religions, with treachery and threats of civil war within Carentan itself. The novel includes plenty of fights, plausibly described, pirates, disguises and unexpected friendships, as well as more attempted murders and kidnappings.

Gereinte’s mother, the Queen Regent, plays an unusual role. In stories aimed at younger readers, the adults who should be responsible for the teenage protagonists are often missing or ineffective, if not malevolent. Queen Caitlin, by contrast, is both competent and good hearted, if somewhat Machiavellian. However, she and Gereinte are seldom together for long, so the relationship between them does not come across as a strong one. His sisters have the potential to develop into interesting characters, perhaps in later books in the series, as do the girls he encounters on his travels. But this is very much Gereinte’s book. He remains resilient and cheerful through all his troubles and learns to use his wits as well as to fight.

*The Prince of Carentan* is a light-hearted adventure story. The characters and setting are not developed in much depth but the pace and good humour may well appeal to the young readers at whom the novel is aimed.



**BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 4, edited by S. T. Joshi**  
(Titan Books, 2016)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

In some eldritch parallel universe, there exists a periodical entitled *H. P. Lovecraft's Weird Fiction Magazine*. Here and now, however, we have the *Black Wings of Cthulhu* anthology series, edited by S. T. Joshi, which does more or less the same job. Joshi is the go-to guy for HPL scholarship. As luck would have it, I have recently read – and enjoyed – his *A Subtler Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of...* and *A Weird Writer in Our Midst: Early Criticism of...*

The overall title has been taken from HPL's seminal monograph, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1945: 1973): "The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim." Joshi points out that the Lovecraftian gods are actually non-supernatural aliens who are mostly indifferent to pure suffering humanity. The authors in this collection have thankfully shied away from recreating Lovecraft's *faux*-Poe style, with its clunky dialogue and scalp-deep psychology. There isn't a single dud story in the book, although some are better than others. Your judgments will, of course, differ from mine.

One story, John Pelan and Stephen Mark Rainey's 'Contact', would not look out of place in *Analog*. But it also dramatizes what Joshi terms HPL's trope of cosmic insignificance, where merely human history is concerned. Captain Samuel "Red" Pepper commands a cold-sleep expedition to Pluto. It transpires that a race of intelligent bug-like creatures, hell-bent upon invading Earth, have got there long before them. They – and/or their gigantic spacecraft – go by the cod-Lovecraftian name of *Yagh-Zaddagh*. By the way, I've often had recourse to *The Encyclopedia Cthulhiana* (1998) while writing this review. Thank you, Daniel Harms.

The remaining stories take place on Terra Firma – no, Terra **un**-Firma. These *Cthulhu around the World* travelogues include 'Artifact', by Fred Chappell (Queen City, North Carolina, to a Lilith-inspired cult in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Poland – with other elder gods and occult forces thrown in) and 'The Rasping Absence', by Richard Gavin (Bell Island, Newfoundland, where research into Dark Matter leads investigative science reporter Trent Fenner into a Lovecraftian Dark Universe). 'The Wall of Asshur-Sin', by Donald Tyson, is set in the Yemeni Land of Lost Souls, but roams further afield, to a sea-god in the South Pacific known as *Kthulhu*. Lois H. Gresh's 'Cult of the Dead' deals with the Peruvian *garua* – otherwise the Others or the Old Ones ("older than the Incas, and older than time").

Will Murray's 'Dark Redeemer' makes great play with Nyarlathotep (a spellchecker is of no great help here), who acts as a messenger between the Great Old Ones and those beings deluded enough to worship them. "Suppose Nyarlathotep was the product of the powerful unconscious mind of a long-dead writer of cosmic

horror stories, Howard Philips Lovecraft," wonders Carl Muirhead. "What if Lovecraft was powerful enough to create these dark forces he wrote about, and one of them has come to sweep the Earth – if not the galaxy – of all life?" Talk about lucid dreaming! Darrell Schweitzer invokes Lovecraft's Black Book itself – the *Necronomicon* – in 'A Prism of Darkness'.

Not surprisingly, the most essentially Lovecraftian of all the stories are those taking place in New England and HPL's home city of Providence, Rhode Island. 'Half Lost in Shadow', by W. H. Pugmire, is a brooding mood piece, located in HPL's fictional Kingsport, south of Arkham, based on Marblehead, Massachusetts, near witch-haunted Salem. The Terrible Old Man, from 'The Strange High House in the Mist' (1926), receives an honourable mention. Jonathan Thomas has set 'We Are Made of Stars' in Providence, his own place of birth. Ira (no surname) is a

minor civil servant, nicknamed the Graffiti Czar, who has been called in to remove the enigmatic words, 'We Are the Stars', from the condemned St. John's Cathedral. To start with, at any rate. I hope that the equally dilapidated 'Superman Building' is real, and that we've not been made the victims of a cruel hoax.

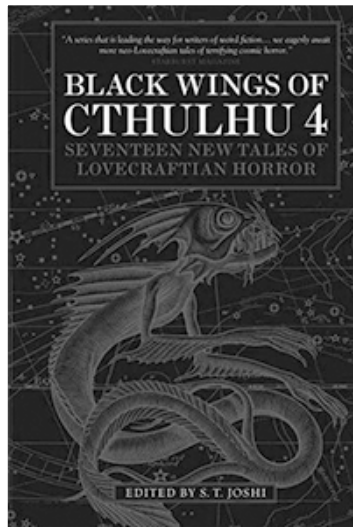
I was particularly taken – or maybe even possessed – with 'Fear Lurks Atop Temple Mount' (after H. P. Lovecraft's "The Lurking Fear"), by Charles Lovecraft, an Australian poet who legally changed his name to become a 'spiritual descendant' of HPL. For example: "It was a thing beyond all sanity – /A slithering, rat-like scurrying, a hazy/Genetic wrongness, a nameless crazy/Tearing thing, scratching out the mind's lost eye./I merely shuddered then, as wave on wave/Of horror pounded on me to the grave." Lovecraft's antipodean avatar gives us such a close retelling that we could almost get away with never re-reading the original story. Well, there's many a true word spoken in jest...

Lovecraft was a writer for whom melancholia was a semi-permanent condition and who could probably not have produced a story, novel, or poem had it been otherwise – although his letters and articles do have the occasional spark of good humour. It's never a good idea to psychoanalyse any writer through his or her writings, but I do feel safe in saying that Lovecraft was a suitable case for therapeutic treatment. Following the lead of those old Alfred Hitchcock anthologies, HPL's Collected Works could be entitled *Stories to Commit Suicide By*. However, I consider him to be a fabulous – if flawed – fantasist, and the stories in this volume have done his memory proud.

**HEX by Thomas Olde Heuvelt**  
(Hodder & Stoughton, 2016)

Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite

**H**EX is Dutch author Thomas Olde Heuvelt's first novel to appear in English (the translation is by Nancy Forest-Flier). For this version, he has changed the setting from the Netherlands to the USA; but his story of a small town haunted by the manifestation of a witch feels right at home in America.





Katherine van Wyler, known as the Black Rock Witch, has stalked the town of Black Spring for three centuries, her eyes and mouth sewn shut. The threat of what might happen if she is disturbed keeps the townsfolk in their place; even leaving Black Spring for too long drives people to suicide. The town has become particularly sophisticated at keeping the witch a secret: it has its own surveillance programme called HEX, with a private computer network, an app to report sightings, and draconian laws against revealing anything to the outside world. But Black Spring's teenagers are tired of living like this, and have plans to push back. Their first trick is to dig up a lamp-post, place it in Katherine's path, and video the results. One way or another, life in Black Spring is about to change...



So, the beginning of *HEX* promises a contemporary, rather knowing take on a horror staple: what happens when an age-old, unknowable curse meets modern technology and the youthful desire to have the same opportunities as others? The end result, though, is not as far away from the traditional horror experience as you might anticipate. Olde Heuvelt gradually builds up a sense of menace, as nobody is quite sure what Katherine can or will do, or how far the town's teenagers are willing to push her. For that very reason, however, the middle of *HEX* tends to meander: the book could go anywhere, but you don't really get a sense of narrative drive that would pull it all together.

Stick with it, however, and the novel turns in the end. Particularly intriguing is the sense that Black Spring is haunted not so much by the witch as by *fear* of her: a scene in which one character is put on trial for breaking the town's rules by attacking Katherine bears a strong resemblance to a witch trial of old. In the final chapters of *HEX*, the tension rises to its highest pitch, as the townsfolk grow increasingly desperate, and some even turn to Katherine in the hope of a resolution. If this change of pace seems to come a little out of nowhere, it's nonetheless exhilarating – the ending of the novel is as grimly dramatic as you might wish. More of that and I'd be recommending *HEX* more strongly, but there's still enough here to make the book worth your time.

### ***The Sand Men* by Christopher Fowler (Solaris, 2015)**

**Reviewed by Graham Andrews**

**T**he *Vermilion Sands Men* – sorry, *The Sand Men* – is a very Ballardian novel. I could just pinch – I mean, reference – this blurb from the 1971 Berkley edition of *Vermilion Sands*, and exit smiling: “(Dream World) embodies the languid decay of a tawdry dream. A desert resort designed to fulfil the most exotic whims of the jaded rich.” However, the fundamental differences between Dream World and *Vermilion Sands* are more striking than the superficial similarities. The same thing could be said

about the connections with the ‘gated communities’ in *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes*. At least the artists and middle-class professionals in these enclaves have some imperatives – no matter how obsessional – to get them out of bed in the mornings.

Dream World is in the process of being built by some shady conglomerate, upon reclaimed land in that modern-day Arabian Nightmare on the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf – Dubai. (I haven't been there since my Army service back in the Olden Days, when it was little more than a sand pit, and – from what I've read, the place hasn't changed for the better.) A ghost town, almost before it has been alive. There seems to be no good reason for it to exist in the first place, although a great many bad reasons present themselves along the way, and that could also apply to most of its thrown-together population.

Unlike Ballard's dystopian novels, the story is told from a female point of view: Lea Brooks, whose husband Roy has been employed to sort out the architectural faults that have been plaguing the multi-billion dirham Persiana hotel. Lea soon rebels against being treated like another Stepford Wife, which leads her to investigate the supposedly accidental deaths of other people who have been rocking the Dream World boat. Her 15-year-old daughter, Cara, gets involved with a gang of wayward youths who would fit right into *Running Wild*. The whole thing might – or might not – be the work of a long-secret tribe called the Ka'al ('Men of the Sand'), who have existed since the first human settlement in Dubai (circa 3000 B.C.). But that isn't what the novel is 'about': in Ballardian terms, it's like living in a future that has already taken place.

I really must apologize to Christopher Fowler for banging on so much about Ballard. *The Sand Men* is far more than just a piece of fan-fiction. To over-simplify like mad, Fowler has adapted the tropes of inner-space fiction for his own authorial purposes, just as Ballard did with the tropes of outer-space fiction. It is, even more importantly, a story that will drag you down into Lea Brooks's private hell – and make you enjoy the experience.



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