

# Vector



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

**Best of  
2016 Issue**

**No. 285**

**Spring 2017**

**£4.00**



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The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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Published by the BSFA Ltd © 2017 ..... ISSN 05050448

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

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# Torque Control

## Anna McFarlane

Tweeting about Vector?  
Use the hashtag  
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Welcome one and all to our Best of 2016 issue. In this annual issue we like to take a journey through the science fiction of the year gone by, to think about how the genre has been developed over the last year and to look forward to the future, hopefully with optimism and enthusiasm. 2016 has been a famously difficult year, beginning with David Bowie's death in the January and going to hell in a handcart from there. Myself and many others of my acquaintance have experienced this as something of a pathetic fallacy as unusually difficult times have affected our personal lives as well, echoing the grief and fear that we see on the news and on social media. While it is difficult to make it through such a troubling time, the thing that has kept me going, and I suspect many others, is the sense of association between the terrible events and the year itself; the arbitrary numbers '2016' have come to represent that grief. So, as we move into 2017, maybe we can let some of that go and look forward to how things might be rebuilt, or built anew, in this new year.

In science fiction this spirit of grief and optimism is perhaps best captured in one of the only original (and successful) science fiction blockbusters of the year. While *Star Trek: Beyond*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Star Wars: Rogue One* took the most at the box office, it was *Arrival* that brought something fresh and different to the cinema, drawing on Ted Chiang's 'Story of Your Life' from his excellent collection *Stories of Your Life and Others* (2002).<sup>1</sup> Its advertising was enigmatic, showing a desire to avoid spoilers and to keep the film's surprises for the cinema, and it's themes turned out to be almost heart-breaking when watched from the vantage point of Donald Trump's America. The desire for international (and indeed, interplanetary) cooperation was beautifully written into the emotional heart of the film which conveyed the deep need to communicate, shared by humans and extra-terrestrial life forms alike, and the tragedy of living with, and in, time. As the threat of global military warfare rises throughout the film it is hard not to contemplate the tensions between Trump and China when the president received an early phone call in his presidency from Taiwan, or the mistrust being sewn as tensions between Russia and the European Union rise once again. The film even acts as a reminder of the importance of studying and supporting the humanities, rather than following the money to create complex and weaponizable STEM projects with no thought of the consequences. While avoiding spoilers, I think it's fair to say that *Arrival* reads as optimistic in these dark, post-2016 days, but hopefully it isn't unbelievable. The success of the film, both critically and at the box

office, shows that there is an appetite for stories about those who fight for the truth, through all the fear and the misinformation. The film's other major theme evoked the tragedy of living in time – being tethered to time, whether that time be linear or not, means dealing with loss and grieving, coping with the inevitable changes that mortal beings must face. In a year that has become famous for multiple deaths and grieving, both public and private, we were given this film that reached out to remind us that the grief is analogous to the joy given to us by those to whom we feel the strongest connections, whether we knew them personally or not.

On that note, I won't list all of the famous deaths that infamously marked the year, but there were a few who particularly had meaning to science fiction fans, most recently John Hurt. Although technically a 2017 death, his is one that sees the end of a prestigious science fiction career with significant roles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), *V For Vendetta* (2005), and *Doctor Who* (2013). David Bowie was also particularly significant in bringing a science fiction sensibility to a wider audience, but we might linger on his significance in our next issue, since that will be our long-awaited music special.

In this Best Of issue you'll find the science fiction audio, television, videogames, and films that have shaped our cultural landscape over the preceding months, as well as Andrew Wallace's dispatch from the recent BSFA meeting where Jason Arnopp, author of *Doctor Who* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* novels among others, was interviewed by Scott K Andrews.

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

### BSFA Award Winners (2016):

**Best Novel:** Dave Hutchinson – *Europe in Winter* (Solaris)

**Best Short Fiction:** Jaine Fenn – *Liberty Bird* ("Now We Are Ten", NewCon Press)

**Best Non-Fiction:** Geoff Ryman – *100 African Writers of SFF* (Tor.com)

**Best Artwork:** Sarah Anne Langton – Cover for *Central Station* by Lavie Tidhar (Tachyon Publications)

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<sup>1</sup> See also Morag Hannah's review in our *Best Films of 2016* in this issue..

# Death Mettle: Jason Arnopp interviewed by Scott K Andrews

Andrew Wallace

*In October Jason Arnopp was interviewed by Scott K Andrews at a British Science Fiction Association meeting. Here, Andrew Wallace gives a flavour of Jason's work on Doctor Who, Kerrang! magazine, Doctor Who novelisations and his own original fiction.*

Although Jason Arnopp is best known for his horror fiction, particularly his hugely successful debut novel *The Last Days of Jack Sparks*, there is a meta-fictional element to his work that eases it into science fiction. This interview was a perfect case in point. Interviewer Scott K Andrews had previously been interviewed by Jason in 2015; now, here was Scott interviewing Jason using a series of questions from Jason's ebook *How to Interview Doctor Who, Ozzy Osbourne and Everyone Else*. This approach made proceedings somewhat unpredictable, like one of those adventure books from the 1980s where you have to choose which page to go to in order to find out what happens next. If that wasn't meta enough for the discerning SF ironist yearning for the narrative/reality flip-flopping of Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, Jason's response to some of these questions was to consider editing the ebook, therefore altering choice and thus fate altogether. Phew!

But where did these tendencies all begin? *The Last Days of Jack Sparks*, which is a fictional memoir boasting both an unreliable narrator and an unreliable editor, begins with a boy being locked in a strange room. This event had a precedent in Jason's own life; growing up in Lowestoft, Suffolk, he was locked in a room that served no functional or even architectural purpose and which Jason supposed was some sort of black hole, if only to give it a comforting scientific rationale. The outcome for him was less horrific than for Jack Sparks, but was suitably affecting that he remains grateful for the formative experience to this day.

It was a similarly dark imaginative appetite that got him into *Doctor Who*, who was then played by Tom Baker. 'The Hand of Fear' was particularly memorable, not so

much for the Hand itself as for the scene where someone is crushed to death by a rock. Jason describes this experience as scarring his brain, although in a way that seemed to inspire instead of paralyse.

Even his career in journalism brought him to the darker end of the spectrum. Rather than beginning with accounts of the village fete in the local paper, 16-year-old Jason responded to an ad in *Kerrang!* music magazine for a writer to handle extreme forms of heavy metal. His letter included sample reviews and also made the Jack Sparkish observation that *Kerrang!* knew absolutely nothing about thrash or death metal in a tone that seemed to work, despite missing the point that this deficiency was perhaps the reason for the ad in the first place.

Jason interviewed bands around the world for *Kerrang!*, and a key story from this period involved a photo shoot in 1998 for satanic extreme metal band Cradle of Filth at, of all places, the Vatican. It had not occurred to anyone to ask permission, so within moments of arrival they were surrounded by heavily armed, very angry guards who had the legal power to impose indefinite detention. Fortunately, one of the younger guards was amenable to the intruders' situation and all would have been well had he not then asked what kind of music Cradle of Filth played. 'Evil music,' Cradle of Filth replied, meaning that band, journalist and photographer only just managed to get away.

Throughout these escapades, Jason wrote fiction in his spare time while simultaneously rising through the ranks at his beloved 'Kerrang!' to become a senior editor. He reached a point, when the permanent editorial position became available, and he had to decide whether to continue with a secure job or take the riskier path of doing what he really wanted to do, which was write fiction.

His first commissions were not prose, however, but comedy for the BBC Radio 4 show *Recorded for Training Purposes*. Jason advises that a self-employed writer should follow the path of least resistance, even though he doesn't view sketch-writing his forte and considers his sense of humour too ridiculous for the mainstream.



Like any writer, Jason has a collection of books that he has written and abandoned. Asked to describe one, he talked about an unfinished novel from the 1990s about a man who sets out to kill as many film censors as possible. This recollection prompted a discussion about today's post on Jason's blog, which stated that horror can never go too far.<sup>1</sup> He maintains that the outcry over the Season Seven premiere of *The Walking Dead* reveals that people fail to understand that the horror genre is a psychological dry run for the awful things that happen in life. We should not be shocked when horror horrifies us, and the only limits should be matters of taste. Jason has never seen anything he feels went too far, despite having seen some extremely horrible films. There are provisos; he agrees with labelling and classification but does not feel that those categories have any place in the content itself.

Jason's love of all things horror gave him the opportunity to write his first novel tie-in. In 2005, he got a tip-off about a company which had been awarded the franchise for a series of genre movie novelisations and proceeded to scorch a path to the editor and ask to write *Friday the 13th*. He kept writing ideas; these became paragraphs, then an outline, and finally he got to write the novel.

Having gained this experience, Jason admits he then abused his position as an interviewer at a *Doctor Who* convention to collar one of the commissioning editors and ask if it was all right to send proposals for a *Doctor Who* novel. Jason's ideas were of suitable quality to be approved by the *Doctor Who* management team and he was given the go-ahead to write *The Gemini Contagion* featuring Matt Smith's Doctor.

Jason's unique career blend of journalism, fiction and drama then moved into a new phase with his script work for film director, Dan Turner. The partnership worked for two reasons: one, by then Jason had been writing for at least the 10,000 hours required to be proficient at it; two, Jason and Dan thought along the same lines. For example, when Dan came up with the idea of the military capturing a ghost, Jason's love of the concept enabled its development to the point where he scripted the movie eventually released as *Stormhouse*.

Although Jason enjoys scriptwriting, prose is his true love because with stories he is able to be writer, director, costume and lighting designer as well as the whole cast (I can only assume the soundtrack would err more towards Pantera than Abba). The downside of this creative supremacy is that no one else is to blame if anything goes wrong. Perhaps that is the source of his interest in meta-narratives like the self-published 'A Sincere Warning About the Entity in Your Home', which is a short story set in the home of whoever reads it. The story takes the form of a warning letter from the previous tenant, an

ingenious idea that is limited by the amount of information available about a home the author has never visited. The initial solution was to include details common to all homes (bed, sink, toilet, etc.), while a later version invited readers to submit details of their homes to improve verisimilitude and make every version of the story unique. A stage beyond *that* was for people to provide the details of friends' houses and arrange to have the story sent to them without their prior knowledge. Of course, like many cool ideas this one is open to abuse, hence the safeguard line at the end, which states that the story is fiction and includes the name of the person who bought it. Although someone dying of a heart attack while clutching one of these missives would be awesome advertising, Jason acknowledges that there are ethical considerations.

*The Last Days of Jack Sparks* feels like the best expression of Jason's writing. While not a tie-in, it is made up of a variety of different points of view explored in different documents, from Jack's last book, his journal that tells the truth behind that book, editorial notes by his brother, and various witness accounts. It is not non-fiction either although it is presented as such, with a cutting-edge understanding of current social media mores. Real people like Roger Corman and the directors of *The Blair Witch Project* feature in it, with permission from the individuals themselves. The overall effect is suitably disorienting and the climax uses an sf idea expressed with a wholly original and genuinely frightening supernatural device.

Jason's initial idea for the book was of a man who discovers a scary YouTube video and becomes obsessed with finding the people who made it. Feeding into that narrative was Jason's experience as a journalist, the way people on social media express a kind of certainty they don't have in face-to-face encounters, and the trend at all levels of the political spectrum towards instant opinion. Jason's theory about this phenomenon is that as the world becomes more chaotic, people cling to opinions more than they used to. It is certainly the case with Jack Sparks himself, a near-parody of a 'lad' whose obnoxious personality is a combination of over-confidence and ego. Such is his arrogance that he brings disaster on himself and those few who are close to him by laughing during an exorcism. Given the present real world political climate, it seems Jason Arnopp has once again flipped fiction and reality with uncanny accuracy.

1 <http://www.jasonarnopp.com/blog>



# Best of Science Fiction Television 2016

Molly Cobb

Last year saw no shortage of science fiction television series. Besides the number of shows with continuing seasons, a large number of new sf shows also premiered. Whereas 2015 was seemingly focused on superheroes, this past year appeared to be mainly concerned with time travel, as numerous shows utilised the theme. As well, sf TV of the last year also demonstrated an interest in commentary on refugees. The focus on the 'other' at a time when particularly relevant indicates television's capacity for, and interest in, examining contemporary society. As always, the high volume of sf shows available means not every one of them can be discussed here. Rather, a sampling of shows will be considered instead, allowing for an overview of available sf TV across multiple countries, themes, and broadcasting outlets.

With a mere three years of involvement in television production as of 2016, Netflix has shown that it is no stranger to the sf genre. On top of producing its own original series, Netflix has also allowed television which would almost surely never have reached an international audience to be viewed worldwide. For example, *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (2015-present) is currently unavailable in English speaking countries but is available in Spanish on the RTVE (Spanish Radio and Television Corporation) website. However, RTVE recently sold the rights to the third season to Netflix, thus not only ensuring an international broadcast, but an increased production budget.

*El Ministerio* follows the adventures of a team of individuals who work for the Ministry of Time, a secret government institution whose job it is to make sure history unfolds as it was meant to. Utilising a series of time portals in the form of doors, the team travel through time to protect Spanish history and culture. Much of the show revolves around attempts by the Ministry to prevent the alteration of history by individuals who have devised alternate means of time travel or who have discovered previously unknown portals. Those viewers familiar with shows such as *Quantum Leap* (1989-1993) will recognise the basic concept.

What *El Ministerio* does very well throughout its run so far is to utilise temporal social and cultural differences as political commentary, e.g. attitudes towards women, homosexuality, or religion. Due to the protagonist team being made up three individuals from varying time periods (16<sup>th</sup> century, late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and 21<sup>st</sup> century), this commentary is often in the form of one or another of the protagonists explaining cultural attitudes to another, meaning it never feels out of place due to its relevance to the situation. Along with this, the portrayal of modern technology as anachronistic is done well and often to humorous effect. Not only clever and often laugh-out-loud funny, these reactions, even from the 21<sup>st</sup> century protagonist, demonstrate just how much technology has changed, even in a short time, and emphasises the impact such modern devices as mobile phones or automatic weapons could have on history.

The potential impact of modern technology is used to examine a main concern throughout the show. Preserving history by ensuring events occur as they are meant to and that cultural icons, such as authors or painters, contribute to society as intended is placed in conflict with the desire to use time travel and modern technology to save friends and family or individuals whose deaths could be prevented, such as with modern medical knowledge. Attempts to save partners or family members, for example, produces much of the strain between the team and the ministry they work for, and subsequently causes the viewer to question what they would do if given the chance to travel in time.

Overall, *El Ministerio* offers good fun alongside examinations of the ethics of preserving history. The ability of the show to poke fun at itself via comments regarding TV shows about time travel or at the Spanish civil service via comments such as employees ending their work day at 2pm add to the humour of the show and its self-awareness regarding its subject matter. The characters are varied, interesting and well-written to the point that the absence of one of the main protagonists for the majority of Season Two does nothing to stunt or negatively affect the show. The replacement is woven in so fluidly it appears less a response to an actor's scheduling conflict and more as if





it had always been planned. The introduction of less episodic plots in Season Two also helps to expand the world of the show, as does the introduction of time travel that does not require portals or the hinted existence of clairvoyance or superpowers.

Despite the Ministry's time doors being constrained to Spanish territory throughout history, the show never feels stale or as if it is grasping for ideas, and with the second season even better than the first, high hopes can be had for the third season. With the continued representation of the differences between the reality of history and what is understood via history books, *El Ministerio del Tiempo* is likely to continue questioning the nature of history itself and whether altering history is always as bad an idea as it seems.

A show already broadcast by Netflix that utilises the theme of time travel would be *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (2016-present). The novel upon which the show was based was originally conceived as *Doctor Who* serials, which may explain why Dirk Gently's character in the show is very Whovian in his mannerisms, speech, and actions, as well as the companion-like relationship between Gently and Todd Brotzman. The interactions between characters are believable and well-acted, in that characters play really well off one another. This is probably due to the characters being both interesting and varied, allowing for the presentation of authentic relationships. The contrast and similarities between Dirk Gently and Bart Curlish (the holistic assassin) make their sequences particularly interesting. Instances

in which both characters have the exact same dialogue, for example, demonstrates not only their relationship but just how well each actor manages their character — for, though the viewer has heard it before, it remains fresh and relevant. The dichotomy of these two characters helps create a good balance/counterbalance and enables a visual demonstration of the holistic nature of the characters and the overall world of the show.

The quality of the acting in *Dirk Gently* helps promote another great aspect of the show, which is the perfectly placed and utilised humour. Presenting the right mix of drama and comedy, *Dirk Gently* never feels like it is taking itself too seriously nor trying too hard to elicit laughs. As a result, the show is both fun and entertaining and full of tense intrigue. Viewers are given enough of a mystery to keep them guessing without delving into incomprehensibility, for though the timeline is revealed piecemeal, it is ultimately revealed. Coupled with all this is the show's excellent pacing and cinematography.

*Dirk Gently's* Season One finale is a good lead in to Season Two as it wraps up any loose ends or character relations while introducing the start of a new plotline. By initiating this fresh plotline, the show reassures viewers that Season Two will contain the same characters audiences have become attached to but will not re-tread old ground narrative-wise. Thus, season two of *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* is likely to offer the same interesting characters while delving into new territory by expanding the world of the show and further exploring individual characters' personal storylines.





Moving away from the theme of time travel is the 1980s-inspired *Stranger Things* (2016-present). With the aesthetic of 1980s films such as *Stand by Me* (1986) or *The Goonies* (1985), *Stranger Things* plays on modern audience's fondness for the '80s. As such, the show's impact or effect on the viewer slightly relies on how taken with this decade the individual viewer may be. The show's soundtrack is very decade-appropriate and suits the mood and setting extremely well. In addition, *Stranger Things* has excellent production design which further evokes this 1980s feel.

By splicing the show between both sides of the mystery, those in the know and those not, as well as through the use of flashbacks, *Stranger Things* aptly depicts the thrill of a small town mystery throughout the season. However, when each episode is considered individually, the show moves perhaps less fluidly than it could as the pacing is a bit slow in places regarding plot progression. As such, action does not truly get started until about half-way through the season. This is likely because the show is much more character-driven than plot-driven, which is not inherently a negative, but it does make the plot merely functional in places.

The characters of *Stranger Things* are well-written and developed individually but unfortunately, when considered overall, are nearly completely comprised of archetypes. This reliance on archetypes, with the coupling of the plot as occasionally functional, sometimes makes the show predictable. The cinematography every so often aids in this predictability by visually giving away potential plot twists before they are actually revealed.

Any of the negatives mentioned here, even taken collectively, are not enough to make the show anything less than intriguing, interesting, fittingly tense, and well-acted. The addition of well-placed humour when appropriate also lends a light-hearted aspect to the show. The relationships between the characters are well-done and even with the use of archetypes, the show does a good job of portraying friendship, love, familial ties, and all the strains of growing up. Overall, *Stranger Things* is more

than worth watching and Season Two will likely build on what has been created in season one with the potential to be even better.

Moving away from shows available on Netflix, a joint Australian/New Zealand/American production called *Cleverman* (2016-present) gives audiences a look at how Australian aboriginal religio-cultural beliefs would co-exist with society in a near-future dystopia. The emergence into society of a humanoid species from aboriginal mythology called the 'hairypeople' sparks conflict between them and humans and the show utilises this to comment on contemporary concerns regarding racial tensions and the status of refugees. The containment of the hairypeople to an area called 'the zone' evokes images of refugee camps while the existence of numerical IDs for citizens, ubiquitous CCTV monitoring, and high-tech surveillance drones capable of instantly pulling up civilian information indicates it is not just the hairypeople under constant watch by the government. The existence of advanced technology that still resembles contemporary society further comments on the current social state by making the situations presented in the show recognisable and relevant while depicting how these current states may continue into the future.

The hairypeople and their culture are said to have existed for 80,000 years making them original inhabitants of the land. The constant reference to them as 'sub-human' or 'creatures' references not only their superhuman capabilities such as superhuman strength or speed but connotes the imperialistic attitude towards natives or the 'other'. The show expertly utilises this as a form of social commentary not only in 'the zone' but in relation to the experimentation the government performs on the hairypeople in secret, military prisons evocative of places like Guantanamo Bay. The treatment of the hairypeople as slaves or animals is used to depict the corruption and hypocrisy present in the government officials in the show and the destruction of the hairypeople for the supposed benefit of the rest of society. Attempts by the hairypeople to integrate into society are met with violence and the methods used to attempt this integration are designed to make the hairypeople more 'human', thus erasing their own culture.

Though the show does extremely well with social commentary, characterisation, and imagining a near-future surveillance state, it does fall short in other areas. The co-existence of modern society with the supernatural aspect of the aboriginal 'dreamtime' and the titular cleverman promises to be an interesting aspect of the show which is just not utilised enough throughout the majority of the first season. It does not get fully involved (or even really explained or demonstrated) until right near the end of the season making the pacing an issue. As such, Season Two is likely to deliver on what season one promised. Season One thus perhaps takes a little too long in setting everything up for, while it all needs to be introduced, it is done rather piecemeal instead of in a fully interconnected way.

Similarly, there is minimal character development over the course of the show (another aspect that does not really progress until near the season's end), but the show is well-acted. Due to the focus on social commentary, the interaction between hairypeople and the humans and the treatment of each is well-written, unfortunately believable, and often emotional. The responses and attitudes between humans and hairypeople is used to further examine treatment between races, tribes, family members, and friends,



thus creating a very well-done overview of relationships and how individuals function in societies, groups, or sub-sects. Though the show has its short-comings, it is worth a watch for its coupling of the supernatural and the scientific, its social commentary, and its promise of a second season which should bring all these aspects together.

One show which continued its run in 2016 was *Humans* (2015-present). Though full of interesting, well-written characters, it offers little that is new and, in fact, often treads very old ground in its discussions of androids and consciousness. Conversely, for 2016, HBO offered viewers *Westworld* (2016-present), based on the 1973 film of the same name. Though still discussing androids and the question of consciousness, *Westworld* goes above and beyond in nearly every aspect. It is, first and most immediately noticeably, gorgeous to look at. Its production design is extremely good, which is well represented by the similarly excellent cinematography. Visual transitions between the modern world and the park of Westworld are well-done with the park and androids believable as both real people in a real location and as advanced technology.

This believability factor is further aided by the quality of acting within the show regarding every variation of character: the human, the android, the progression from android towards human, and the changes detectable in characters at the point when the audience is allowed to see which characters are either android or human when previously unknown or thought to be one or the other. Changes in the androids are prompted by features such as memories, dreams or improvisation, which brings into question what makes humans 'human'. Some of the human characters within the show are also shown to progress through stages of consciousness, not in the same way as the androids, but in terms of self-discovery, thus giving a good counterbalance to the androids' own path to self-realisation. The more self-aware or the more memory some of the androids gain, the more violent they also become. This commentary on the state of human nature is coupled with discussions of the park itself and the type of people who visit it and take advantage of the ability to commit 'guilt-free' violence and destruction.

The first episode does a good job of setting up the rules of the park and the androids, the location, and the basis of how things are meant to work without being too expository and while still introducing and advancing the plotline. The repetition of the hosts' narratives, both visually and action-wise, offers a useful and well-done visual and narrative benchmark for changes when something goes wrong or is different, and demonstrates the difference between an uninterrupted narrative and one which involves the interaction of a park guest. Despite the repetition of the hosts' narratives, and despite the fact that they are known to be scripted, the viewer is still drawn into them, especially as minor variations promise bigger changes later on.



This visual repetition is also seen throughout the symbolic imagery present in the show, such as the moulds for designing the androids, which are not only used as a universal base design in the lab but evoke Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. The use of black or white cowboy hats throughout the show to denote heroes and villains is appropriately reminiscent of the Western genre and the movement of characters between hats is a good cue for moments of change or self-understanding. Additionally, the use of a player piano throughout the show is used to connote the programmable machine which only simulates the presence of the human and the changing reaction to it by androids as they become more self-aware helps demonstrate advancements in consciousness and autonomy. As well, the player piano produces much of the musical score in *Westworld* making it integral to the sound and mood of the show. Though this imagery is well-done, well-used, and perfectly evocative, it is constant and occasionally lacks a certain subtlety.

*Westworld* does not lack for intrigue from the start but it gets even more interesting as it goes on. Backstories and storylines are revealed at a good pace throughout and keep the audience guessing without keeping too much hidden at a time. The writing for the show maintains a good balance between questions and answers thus progressing the plotline without feeling like there is nothing left to look forward to. What *Westworld* does extremely well is to keep track of all the moving parts of their narrative as the show could have left the viewer with a fragmented and confused plot due to the splicing of memory and present day. However, the show does a good job of pulling everything together without leaving loose ends, as other shows have often done as a result of trying too hard to operate multiple plotlines or timelines. Anyone still frustrated with *Lost* (2004-2010) will appreciate the skill involved in accomplishing such a feat with the writing of *Westworld*.

Because *Westworld* does such a good job of tying up its narrative, it brings into question whether a second season is really needed and whether it will actually degrade what would have been a perfectly good stand-alone miniseries. Season One is very well-contained and the ending does not appear to leave much left open in terms of narrative. There is always more to explore when it comes to consciousness, humanity, and the nature of androids but with that basis, seasons of *Westworld* would have to exist practically ad infinitum. In terms of the specific narrative explored in Season One, the viewer is left with enough information to imagine what could happen next themselves and is probably best left that way. Though there is still the potential for questions at the end of Season One, such as 'did the androids truly gain consciousness, or is it just a higher form of simulation?', they are questions that are left just open-ended enough to stimulate discussion among viewers without feeling like the show simply did

not bother to address it. Thus, Season Two of *Westworld* has the potential to either advance what it began in Season One or degrade it by forcing explanations on things which are best left to the viewer to examine for themselves.

These shows discussed above are a mere fraction of the sf TV available in 2016 but they are a good overview of the varied commentary available on aspects such as racial tensions, refugees, questions of humanity and consciousness, familial ties, friendship, or relationships in general. As well, shows such as *El Ministerio del Tiempo* further prove that English-language sf is not the only source of quality sf which examines our world and questions the nature of concepts such as time. The acquisition of the show's rights by Netflix demonstrates the increased ability of modern viewership to gain access to foreign television and expand the availability of world sf. In addition, *Cleverman* opens up access to aboriginal culture that would otherwise likely remain unknown outside of Australia and performs an interesting dual utilisation of dystopian sf with aspects of spiritualism that brings concepts such as the 'Dreamtime' to modern audiences.

Other sf shows such as *Luke Cage* (2016-present) premiered last year, as did *Incorporated* (2016-TBC) and *Colony* (2016-present). As well, *Dirk Gently* and *Westworld* are not the only sf shows to be based on pre-existing source material; there are shows such as *11.22.63* (2016-TBC) based on Stephen King's novel of the same name, *Frequency* (2016-TBC) or *12 Monkeys* (2015-present). Other shows focused on issues of refugees and social integration include *The Aliens* (2016), while shows such as *Travelers* (2016-TBC) or *Timeless* (2016-present) continue the theme of time travel to protect history or avert changes to the modern day. As well, live-action is not the only source of sf television; animated shows include *Kong: King of the Apes* (2016-present) or the Chinese-Japanese anime *Bloodivores* (2016-present) based on the Chinese web-comic *Time Prisoners*.

With too many to list, let alone discuss, the abundance of sf television shows indicates the continued and increased interest in the genre and its varied relevance to contemporary society. As well, outlets such as Netflix mean the quality of such television continues to rise, as does its availability worldwide. With this increase in well-written, well-acted, thought-provoking television in the sf genre, there comes as well the potential of increased viewership outside audiences that are already predisposed to the genre. Thus, not only are established sf viewers given the growing opportunity to explore non-English sf, non-sf viewers are given the growing opportunity to explore the sf genre.

# Best Films of 2016

various

## ***Arrival* (Villeneuve US 2016)**

Morag Hannah

Neuroscientists and linguists alike have long been fascinated by the bilingual brain. When a person has spoken two languages from early life or has become fluent in a second language, it has positive impacts on their ability to concentrate, to process and sort auditory data, and to improve the memory. Tentatively, research suggests that bilingual adults may have denser grey matter than monolinguals, particularly in the left hemisphere, and even that bilingualism may delay the onset of age-related dementia. With language processing, as with pretty much all areas of neuroscience, there are more questions than answers. Just how fundamentally could learning another language rewire and restructure your brain? Could it change how you process and understand your own past experiences? Could it change your entire perception of reality? *Arrival* sees a series of massive alien objects appear hovering a few hundred feet above the earth at various points around the globe. At regular intervals, they lower and open to admit their nervous human hosts – and to try to communicate with them. All over the world the race is underway: who will be the first to make a connection, to find out why they're here? Amy Adams puts in a nuanced, subdued performance as Louise, the talented linguist at the American site. Louise is a complex and compassionate picture of lonely genius, self-contained and layered, absorbed by the puzzle before her and tormented by dreams about her dying child. She is the centre of the film in every respect – intellectually, emotionally and structurally – executing with precision and heart what might be corny plot beats in the hands of a lesser actor. Stunning art production plays a big part in making the linguistics engaging. The complex ideographic language used by the aliens is as beautiful as it is obscure; the ragged rings of ink suspended in soft white mist are immediately iconic, lingering in the mind's eye long after the credits have rolled. We see just enough of the analysis to make it plausible, Louise's considered, systematic thought processes a world away from the mockery of real linguistics seen from the Henry Higginses of popular storytelling. Louise's epiphany at

the film's climax is mirrored for the viewers: everything we thought we knew, we suddenly understand; our perception of Louise's world shifts, and the entire film up to that point make a new kind of sense, bringing with it a fresh poignancy. *Arrival* is not merely about the personal; the journey Louise takes has a profound global – perhaps even universal – impact. The choices we make about how, when – and when *not* – to communicate with one another, as individuals and as a species, are at the heart of the film's message. Perhaps it poses a question too: what will it take for humanity to break down our communication barriers, move past our misunderstandings and work together for the good of all? We can't really afford to wait around for the arrival of aliens to show us how.

## ***Evolution* (Hadzihalilovic France/Belgium/Spain 2015)**

Mark Bould

It begins beneath the waves, and even when it is above water it all seems strangely aquatic. Submerged. Inter-tidal and hermaphroditic, like some kinds of echinoderm. Amphibian, like a selkie.

An oddly piscine-looking woman raises a ten-year-old boy, Nicolas, in a white-walled island village whose steep narrow streets are covered in cinders. They are alone there, apart from a dozen other oddly piscine-looking women, each of whom is raising a ten-year-old boy. They live on a diet of khaki mush filled with worms, and every day, Nicolas – and presumably each of the other boys – must take four drops of a medicine that looks suspiciously like cephalopod ink. He claims to have seen a dead boy on the sea floor with a red starfish on his belly. His mother dives to retrieve the starfish, thus 'proving' there was no dead boy.

But Nicolas knows something is not right. Where do the women go by lantern-light once their boys are asleep? What is going on at the medical facility along the cliffs? Why do all the boys eventually end up there? What happens to them?



The rooms are rather barren. No one says very much. The camera is generally static. Sometimes the action congeals into an ominous tableau. Occasionally one shot succeeds another without any sense of progression, merely of replacement and erasure; at other times, a shot lingers on the natural world as if willing meaning to burst forth.

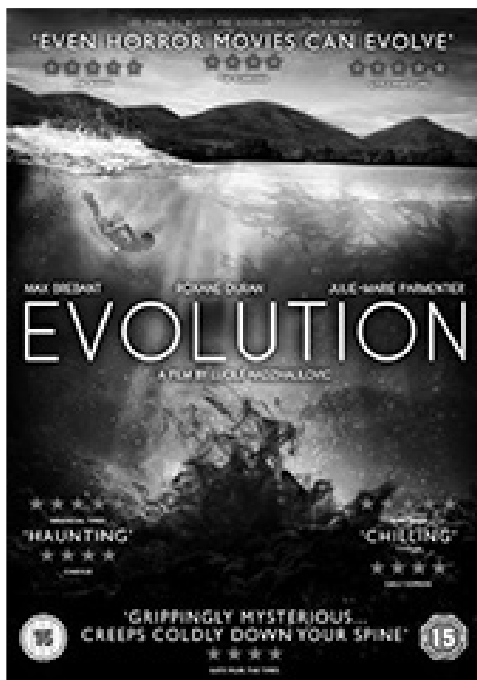
But meaning is deferred in favour of occult resonances, of connections between shapes and colours. The red starfish Nicholas's mother holds out to him is both a navel and a bleeding wound, its mouth a dentata; when he tears off one of its arms there is no blood apart from his spontaneous nosebleed, the product of some sympathetic magic; when he lies on an operating table, a five-armed star of lights reflects in his eyes, and a starfish extends sensors from the tip of one arm to touch his belly button. There is a semiotic liveliness in the film's obscurities, its half-glimpses and elliptical cutaways, its silences and incompleteness. There are traces of Lovecraft's *Innsmouth*, of Cronenberg's surgical and gynaecological horror, of del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), of Yuzna's *Society* (1989) even, and of Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973). Hadzihalilovic has also mentioned in interview the influence of Theodore Sturgeon's *The Dreaming Jewels* (1950).

Advertising for *Evolution* claimed that it featured 'some of the most mesmerising underwater cinematography this side of Jacques Cousteau', and that is no lie. But twinned and entwined with this beauty is a genuine Weirdness. This is a film for people compelled by strangeness. And who want to know where babies *really* come from.

### **Ghostbusters (Feig US 2016)**

Amy C. Chambers

We need women of science on screen – in major summer blockbusters working together to discover, empower, and save the world. As *Ghostbusters*' male 'evil scientist' exclaims 'do it in the right place, with enough power, and there goes the barrier!' – he's talking about releasing supernatural creatures on New York but it works for *Ghostbusters* too as it pushes at the gender barrier. It puts at least a small crack in the glass ceiling by showing that these 'sisters in science' are what scientists can and do look like. By normalising women of science on screen and by having them as lead characters rather than sci-candy sidekicks the film industry can show that being a scientist is an entirely achievable goal for the young woman looking to her future career.



Ivy League university physicist Erin Gilbert (Kristen Wiig), fringe scientist Abby Yates (Melissa McCarthy), and nuclear engineer Jillian Holtzmann (Kate McKinnon) use their collective intelligence to develop weapons and theories, and lead the charge in the fight to save their city. As Erin remarks, after being publicly denounced on the nightly news as frauds: 'We are scientists. Plus Patty'. The only non-scientist Ghostbuster is Patty Tolin (Leslie Jones) and despite Jones' protestations that the film is not racist, the reboot cast the civilian street-smart character as an African-American just as the original cast Ernie Hudson as the token black Ghostbuster Winston Zeddemore

back in 1984. It perpetuates the myth that black people are less intelligent than their white counterparts, suggests that people of colour are often incorporated as late attempts at diversity, and undermines the positive (even, feminist) contribution the film makes to the Hollywood blockbuster canon. Although *Ghostbusters* makes strides in representing women in STEM it does not manage to do so intersectionally.



Alongside the funny, brilliant white women of science, *Ghostbusters* could have included a scientist who was a woman of colour. Negative stereotypes may help to explain why fewer women and people of colour work at the higher levels of the STEM fields. Showing that science is for everyone is important. We need films like *Ghostbusters* to show diverse female characters with notably different personalities in the types of stories that have so frequently been dominated by men. Upcoming films like the biopic *Hidden Figures* (2016), which tells the story of black women scientists who worked at NASA in its formative years, will begin to open up the stories told about women of science but it needs to happen across a range of genres including science fiction comedy.

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### ***The Girl With All the Gifts* (UK 2016)**

Erin Hardee

The world is dying. Rotund cartoon planets with humanoid features urge us to ‘save the Earth’, telling us if we only turned off the light switches when we left the room and recycled more we might somehow put a halt to the catastrophic changes fossils fuels and capitalistic practices have wrought on our home. What these campaigns don’t tell us is that the Earth isn’t dying. Changing, yes, but the only thing disappearing is its capacity to support certain types of life – cuddly pandas, beautiful tropical fish, and us. The Earth will still be around long after humans have gone the way of the dodo, so really we ought to change our slogans. ‘Save the humans’. ‘Preserve the status quo’.

*The Girl With All the Gifts* is not an environmental paean, on the surface. The threat is not global climate change but instead ‘Hungries’, fungal spore-infected people who crave human flesh and whose animalistic behaviour causes the uninfected to hole up inside heavily-fortified military bunkers for safety. Inside one of these bunkers lives an even more exceptional cohort – around two dozen second-generation Hungries who are capable of maintaining their intellect and reason unless explicitly triggered by the smell of food – i.e. living flesh. They are kept in cells and shackles like tiny Hannibal Lecters and taught daily by the kindly Miss Justineau, who doesn’t seem to be able to see them as ‘other’ quite as easily as the rest of the base’s inhabitants.

This might be down to one particular girl: Melanie, who maintains control over her hunger even in exceptional circumstances. Clever, thoughtful, and yearning for love, Melanie is the linchpin of the whole film, the carrier of the potential ‘cure’ for the infection, who is spirited

across the countryside by a small band of soldiers after the base falls to a Hungry horde. It is revealed early on that for this cure to exist Melanie must die, a fate which suddenly seems all the more brutal with the discovery of more feral Hungry children living – and thriving – in a *Lord of the Flies*-esque urban gang. Melanie is torn between her love for Miss Justineau – the only person who has shown her kindness – and the idea that perhaps there is nothing wrong with her after all. The soldiers and scientists are trying to save humanity, but what if humanity’s time has reached an end? What if it’s time for a new world order?

We are so used to centring our stories on humanity and its survival that it is unusual and somewhat shocking to see one that turns this idea on its head. Every species wants to survive – it’s an evolutionary imperative, after all – but maybe the time has come to admit that for humanity to continue on it means that others cannot. *The Girl With All the Gifts* poses this question but does not let us away with any easy answers – and perhaps that’s as it should be.

### ***He Never Died* (Krawczyk Canada/US 2015)**

Mark Bould

*He Never Died* is an almost perfect little B-movie. It walks a very narrow tightrope: not exactly horror, not quite a crime movie, it constantly verges on brilliance and narrowly avoids camp, and it would probably not work at all were it not for two things. A carefully crafted soundscape that counterpoints the film’s visual style, upsetting any nostalgic comfort one might take in a film shot to look like Edward Hopper painted it. And Henry Rollins, who appears in every scene, and is astonishing in all of them.



He plays Jack, a grey-haired, middle-aged man, who lives alone in a small apartment. He is disconnected from the world. He does not have a job. He keeps odd hours. He eats at the same diner every day. Three or four times a week he plays bingo at the local church to be near, but not with, the old folks (they do not, he explains, distract him).



He has a pair of foot-long vertical scars by his shoulder blades (where Rollins's Captain-America-shield-sized 'Search and Destroy' tattoo should be, or perhaps a fallen angel's wings).

He keeps himself to himself. His interactions with people are stilted. He just doesn't get them. He states the obvious. He offers nothing. He is as deadpan as Buster Keaton. (His one loquacious moment is a seemingly interminable list, flatly delivered, of the many jobs he has had over the centuries.)

In his ears there is a constant roar – of screams and cries and growls, of weapons and machines – but as long as he can keep it tamped down, everything is fine. As long as it is tamped down, he doesn't kill people.

He has a long history of killing people. Very long. In fact, he started it.

He's an immortal cannibal straightedge, just about holding it together by not drinking or smoking or doing drugs or eating meat (nothing, he explains, that has had blood flowing through it). Although he does store mysterious limb-sized packages, bought from a hospital intern, in his fridge.

He is the vampire. Not just a vampire, *the* vampire. The only one ever. All those stories you've heard, every single one, are ultimately about him.

And now someone is coming looking for revenge. Someone with a grudge against Jack, but not nearly enough information about who or what he really is. But they will learn. Quickly, and rather bloodily.

There is also a friendly waitress, and a teenage daughter Jack never knew he had.

But all this is beside the point. The film is about something else entirely. It is about watching the ageing Rollins. It is about the creep of mortality. And about carrying on.

Mckenzie Wark argues that one of the problems in trying to represent the Anthropocene is that 'nobody lives long enough to really experience geological time', except perhaps vampires<sup>1</sup> – and Henry Rollins.

There is something geological about his body. It is always present, and has always been present. It is weathered by time. His knees no longer work properly when he walks. His weary face crumbles like granite. This is what it is like for the world to end.

Twenty years ago, Chixdiggitt (and possibly your mom) sang that 'Henry Rollins is No Fun'. They were wrong. This is what fun looks like.

1 <http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/12/anthropomise-en-scene/#.WJCYtkLxBS0>. Wark writes briefly about Jim Jarmusch's vampire movie *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013).

## High-Rise (Wheatley UK 2016)

Paul March-Russell

Ben Wheatley and Amy Jump's adaptation of *High-Rise* is the best film version of a J.G. Ballard novel precisely because it does not attempt to adapt Ballard's novel. It's easy to see why Ballard appeals to filmmakers – his work abounds in artistic and cinematic reference-points whilst his narrative approach is often strikingly visual and imagistic. But these qualities are bound together by a psychological sensibility that does not translate so easily to the screen where actions and motivations have to have some kind of rational credibility. So, in David Cronenberg's version of *Crash* (1996), the entire link to the psychopathology of the media landscape is lost and, rather than being a glamorous medical TV pundit, Elias Koteas's distinctly unglamorous Vaughan is simply a fraud and a sexual predator.

By contrast, the changes that Jump and Wheatley make to Ballard's novel create a film that is internally consistent and which help to develop their re-visioning of the work. So, instead of Wilder's death-scene in the novel, where he embraces his new (phallic) mothers, in the film Wilder is murdered by the women as revenge for his raping of



Charlotte. But, in a wonderful *tour de force*, the murder is seen through the kaleidoscope belonging to Charlotte's son, Toby, an instrument that he has previously said 'can see the future'. Is the future female, and if so, is it specifically that of Margaret Thatcher, whose voice closes the film, and who Ballard once (jokingly?) said he would like to have as a mistress?

Toby, played with delightful insouciance by Louis Suc, is a superb addition to the story and embodies Jump and Wheatley's intentions. The film is less of an adaptation and more of an intervention into Ballard's novel. Sensibly not updating the work to our own times, but setting it in 1975, Jump and Wheatley seek to use the novel as a kaleidoscope, a distorted prism upon that cryptic decade from whose snare all manner of neo-liberal horrors have now been released. Are we living in the future that Toby spies, or is that future still to come?

It is not simply the case though that Toby, like Jim in *Empire of the Sun*, is Ballard's juvenile alter-ego, spying upon what the adults get up to, although that certainly is part of his function. Unlike more reverential treatments of Ballard's work, the film also draws upon aspects of Ballard's own life-story – the dissection of cadavers as a medical student, the loss of his wife Mary (in this version, Laing has been traumatised by the death of his sister), and the father-son relationship that develops between Laing and Toby, just as Ballard was a single-parent to his children. These aspects implicate Ballard in his own fiction so that, in intervening in the novel, the film also intervenes in Ballard's cultural legacy. To that end, *High-Rise* is as much a critical achievement as it is an artistic one.

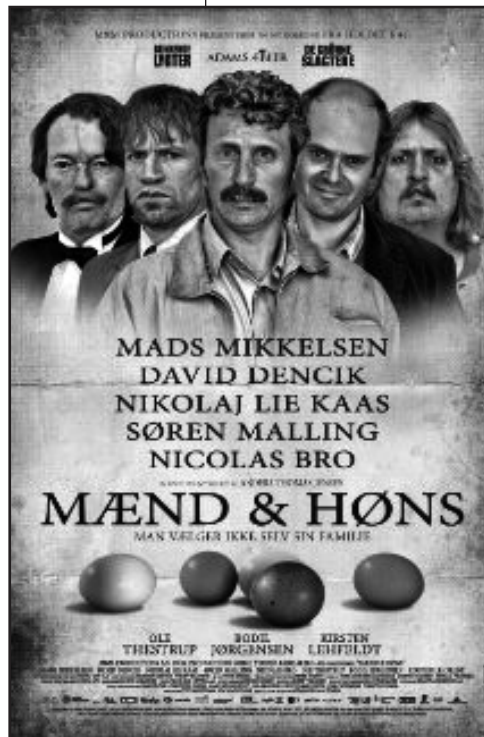
**Mænd & høns/Men & Chicken (Anders Thomas Jensen Denmark/Germany 2015)**  
Mark Bould

Once upon a time, in contemporary Denmark, there were two middle-aged, infertile half-brothers, each of whom lost his mother in childbirth.

Gabriel is younger, more responsible, more conventional. Multiple surgical reconstructions have failed to eradicate his cleft lip, and when nervous or upset he suffers from uncontrollable gagging.

Elias, a disastrous lothario, hides his cleft lip behind a scruffy moustache. He cannot resist picking arguments, however foolish or futile, and must masturbate at regular intervals to relieve the priapism from which he suffers. He scours dating websites in search of female psycho-

therapists so that instead of paying consultation fees he can ask them over dinner to explain his recurring nightmare. (The meaning of the gothic dream's imagery – full of sibling rivalry, separation anxiety, sex and violence – is obvious, yet utterly beyond him.)



When their father dies, they discover that he had adopted them. Gabriel, keen to break free of Elias, decides to go in search of their biological father, the long-disgraced doctor and geneticist Evelio Thanatos. Elias, desperate not to lose the closest thing he has to a friend, insists on accompanying his reluctant not-exactly-brother.

And, on the distant island of Ork, in Thanatos's now derelict and otherwise abandoned sanatorium, they discover three more (infertile) half-brothers, each of whom has his own deformities and peculiarities, and each of whom lost his mother in childbirth.

Writer-director Anders Thomas Jensen – who is currently scripting, of all things, the *Dark Tower* adaptation – is probably best known for his deadpan, heart-breakingly sad and yet really quite beautiful cannibalism comedy *De grønne slagtere/The Green Butchers* (2003). He returns with many of the same cast (including Mads Mikkelsen and Nordic noir regulars Nikolaj Lie Kaas, Nicolas Bro, Ole Thestrup and Bodil Jørgensen) to once more scale the heights of absurdist gothic Jutland grotesque – a genre I just made up while writing this sentence. It consists, as far as I know, of Jensen's two films and maybe Henrik Ruben Genz's *Frygtelig lykkelig/Terribly Happy* (2008).

In *Men & Chicken*, Jensen introduces another gallery of adorable yet pathetic misfits, all of them broken and disconnected and abandoned by the world, full of pettiness and desperation, and driven by violent impulses and mundane yet still unattainable desires. And this time he replaces butchery with bestiality. And abasiophilia. And chronophilia or anililagnia or gerontophilia, depending on how you interpret events. And arguably morphophilia or, if you even more mean-spirited, teratophilia. And turpophilia. And even a science-fictional twist or two.

Suffice it to say, Evelios Thanatos is a Baltic Moreau.

And are his children not men? Are they not capable of building a utopia in the ruins of their father's legacy?

'I may not be normal', Elias ultimately confesses, to which Gabriel replies, 'None of us really are'.



The film ends moments later with a golden-lit vision of community, of extended family as a metaphor for the triumph of affiliation and conviviality over a normalcy of marginalisation and exclusion. It is genuinely moving.

And so absurdly golden that Jensen clearly doesn't mean a word of it, while simultaneously wanting it to be true.

### ***Midnight Special* (Nichols US 2015)**

David Hollands

*Midnight Special* is both an homage to, and an example of, a subgenre of the science fiction film that arguably saw its greatest successes in the 1980s with such works as *E.T.* (1982) and *Starman* (1984): the chase movie. This kind of sci-fi film follows the structure of government-chase movies of the 1970s like *Capricorn One* (1977), though with a specific genre slant; the one being chased is usually a being of otherworldly origins. Jeff Nichols, the writer and director of *Midnight Special*, acknowledged this fact in an interview for *ConsequenceOfSound.com* on March 28th, 2016:

I grew up on films like this, and I was always struck by this kind of Spielberg template from these early films, which is this mystery that unfolds into some sense of awe. I wanted to try my hand at that.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of *Midnight Special*, the otherworldly being is the young boy, Alton. He is pursued by both United States government agents and members of a religious cult. Alton is helped to his destination by his father, Roy, his mother, Sarah, and Roy's close friend, Lucas. Along the way, more of Alton's true nature is revealed, as is to be expected. Though unlike even *E.T.* or *Starman*, and certainly unlike the more mainstream Blockbuster science fictions films of 2016,<sup>3</sup> *Midnight Special* presents the standard tropes and iconography of its subgenre in subdued and unexpectedly lyrical ways.

In *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, Vivian Sobchack observes that,

The major visual impulse of all [science fiction] films is to pictorialize the unfamiliar, the nonexistent, the strange and the totally alien--and to do so with a verisimilitude which is, at times, documentary in flavor and style.<sup>4</sup>

2 'Decoding *Midnight Special*: An Interview with Jeff Nichols', *ConsequenceOfSound.net*, accessed February 22, 2017, <http://consequenceofsound.net/2016/03/decoding-midnight-special-an-interview-with-jeff-nichols/>

3 For example: *Star Trek: Beyond*, *Independence Day: Resurgence*, *Passengers*, *The 5th Wave*.

4 Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 88.

*Midnight Special* is an example of a work that does what Sobchack describes above, only to an even greater extent. The film begins with a black screen, over which we only hear a radio newscaster delivering a few mundane stories before casually mentioning that Roy and Alton are on the run. Immediately, the film makes clear Jeff Nichols' hyper-grounded approach to the material. *Midnight Special* also demonstrates an element of the genre that Sobchack observed as well:

[...] in every SF film there is a visual tension [...] between those images which strive to totally remove us from a comprehensible and known world into romantic poetry and those images which strive to bring us back into a familiar and prosaic context.<sup>5</sup>



While *Midnight Special* begins in as grounded a way as possible, the film also makes the familiar into the unfamiliar at key moments. The majority of night scenes of hotel rooms, car interiors, and highways are bathed in golden hues, which makes the landscape seem strikingly alien, even as the light sources – street lamps, headlights, moonlight – are easily identifiable. And, early in the film, an overexposed, grainy shot of school buses driving over a hill give the buses the appearance of spacecrafts. David Wingo's throbbing, synthesized score underlines the unfamiliarity of the familiar in these moments and overall images. By contrast, the more overt moments of spectacle, such as when Alton reveals a portion of his true

5 Ibid., 88-89.

nature to an awestruck Sarah and Roy, are treated with a more subdued sense of stylistic artifice.

Jeff Nichols highlights a potential reason for the tension of the film's style in an interview with *SlashFilm.com* on March 25th, 2016: 'The main idea here is parenthood. What's it mean? What are we doing as parents? That's what the movie is about.'<sup>6</sup> In the interview, Nichols attaches a secondary idea to the main thematic concern of the film: the necessity of 'blind faith' in the 'progression' of one's children. This sense of 'blind faith' is embedded in every aspect of the film, an evocative reflection of the weight of the choices Alton's parents must make in the face of the unknown, and by extension, the choices most parents must make in reality.

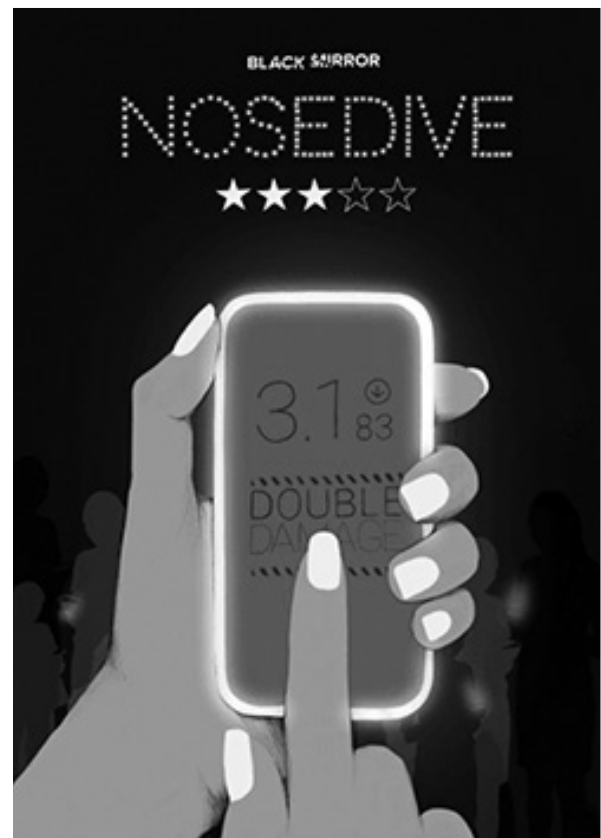
*Midnight Special's* plot is straightforward and unsurprising, especially for those knowledgeable of this sub-genre. Yet through the style of the film, a sense of profound mystery and awe pervades even the most familiar of moments in *Midnight Special*. The film shows that even the most fantastical tales we tell always reflect our most intimate concerns, even if the concern is as deceptively simple as the simultaneous joy and anguish of parents' hopes for their children's futures.

### **Nosedive (Black Mirror Season 3 Ep 1, Wright Netflix 2016)**

Alan Graham

Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* returned to Netflix this year with six episodes. The earlier seasons had been shown on Channel 4, so the online streaming service revived the much-loved show. With each episode looking at the potential negative consequences of the use or abuse of technology, it was seen as a modern version of *The Twilight Zone* or *Tales of the Unexpected*. The first of the new run, *Nosedive*, builds a world where a Peep-like app is used in everyday life. When Peep, a sort of Yelp for individuals, was first publicised it caused a huge online backlash. The episode then has an immediate appeal to those who remember the issues of privacy and consent which arose due to discussion of the app when it was announced for release in the autumn of 2015.

In the world of this episode, for the upper echelons of society, rating individuals you interact with on a daily basis is the norm. Users are seen with their noses glued to their mobiles almost constantly. With your rating out of 5 determining everything from which clearly-stated privileges you get – minimum scores to live in certain areas, get discounts on items, express queues and access to particular stores – there is a constant pressure to game



the system and increase your score. Lacie (Bryce Dallas Howard) is the focus of the story. You see her taking photos of her breakfast and sharing with the world how amazing it is before disliking the actual taste, but still rating the food great to avoid any retaliatory down-votes. The falsely-presented happy life of every friend on social media should be popping into your head at about this point in the story. An invitation to be maid of honour at the wedding of a best friend from school tempts Lacie with the opportunity to increase her social score. A visit to a data mining social strategist shows the potential to get 5/5 votes from people with a higher score for a good speech and the work begins. However, a series of unfortunate events leads to a slight drop in score below a threshold to board her flight to the wedding and the negative feedback spiral continues. Her brother Ryan seems merely apathetic to the social network gaming, but Lacie soon encounters the first person hostile to it, a truck driver. Discussing her life when giving a lift to the now-hitchhiking social climber, it's revealed that the truck driver once scores high in the 4s but now scores less than 1.5. Cursing, speaking her mind, and being the first genuinely happy person we have met. Eventually, Lacie arrives at the wedding and can't access the compound due to her now-low score. Sneaking in over a wall and drunkenly delivering her planned speech alongside threats of violence only results in a still lower score and subsequent arrest. Locked in a jail cell she spots the other arrestee for the day, in a sharp business suit. Free from the threat of down-votes by the public they scream obscenities at each

<sup>6</sup> 'Interview: *Midnight Special* Director Jeff Nichols on Trusting the Audience,' *SlashFilm.com*, accessed February 22, 2017, <http://www.slashfilm.com/midnight-special-jeff-nichols-interview/>



other and seem happy to be free of society's constraints.

Previous *Black Mirror* episodes have looked into the terror and abuse technology can heap on an individual, but episodes like this, which appear closest to the current time and are more conceivably within reach, give the sharpest shudder.

### **Prevenge (Lowe UK 2016)**

Anna McFarlane

While it is only now receiving a wider cinematic release, Alice Lowe's *Prevenge* is technically a 2016 movie, and what a movie it is. Lowe writes, directs, and stars in a darkly-hilarious horror film that follows 'Ruthless' Ruth (played by Lowe, who also scripted and directed), a heavily pregnant woman on a roaring rampage to avenge the death of her partner who died after being cut loose from a safety rope in a climbing accident. Ruth believes that her unborn child is speaking to her, forcing her to kill, and in the process the film tackles the dark side of pregnancy so much at odds with the pastel, yogic, infantilizing version of pregnancy that occupies the realms of baby showers and 'gender reveals'. In the opening sequence, Ruth is in a pet store being shown the mini-beasts by a lewd store-owner (Dan Renton Skinner) who takes every opportunity to make an innuendo, despite

how uncomfortable Ruth seems to be. As he shows her a tarantula in the back of his shop he tells Ruth that the spider is pregnant. 'Just like me?', asks Ruth. The film connects the pregnant body of human women and those of animals and insects, narrating the horrors of pregnancy in a way reminiscent of *Alien* (Scott, 1979) and its sequels, but unusually broaching the subject directly. Meanwhile its mise en scène and its soundtrack (by former UNKLE members, Toydrum) lift a wonderful comedy-horror into something close to a masterpiece. Ruth wanders through city streets on a busy Halloween night, dressed in a floating red dress and shocking skeleton makeup, pregnant belly prominent under the sheer material, to a soundtrack that sucks the air out of the room as it evokes claustrophobic 70s horror. Here the viewer is witness to an instantly-iconic scene, one that deserves to be more widely-known than this film's cult status may allow. One can only hope that the film's critical success will give Lowe a chance to stretch her creative wings again, and in the meantime fans can return to 2012's *Sightseers*, also written by and starring Alice Lowe, although Ben Wheatley took the directorial chair on this occasion, perhaps because Lowe was seen as an unknown quantity at that stage. She has certainly proven herself now, and hopefully opened the door for further adventurous films showing the darkly-funny side of pregnancy, horror, and monstrosity.



# 2016 in SF Audio

Tony Jones

Audio drama is a great way to enjoy science fiction stories, and there's a huge range of titles available and multiple ways to access them. In the UK we are fortunate to have the BBC as a source of stories, but there are also various on-line offerings and commercial publishers.

For a reviewer there's more than enough quality drama produced on audio to fill any number of commutes to work or relaxing hours with some decent hi-fi. On many levels the quality keeps rising, and this includes the writing, acting, directing, post-production and even CD artwork.

Time to get specific and explore the very best of the titles aired or released in 2016. Any review can only focus on some highlights, and there is plenty more out there to suit everybody.

## BBC Radio

I've already mentioned the BBC and there are several outlets to consider. BBC Radio 4 Extra has a daily 6pm slot where serials old and new are broadcast. Radio 4 doesn't miss out and there are even occasional titles on Radio 3.

One of the repeats was a version of EM Forster's *The Machine Stops*, and there's more on this story later in this review.<sup>1</sup> Classic repeats included all 14 parts of the BD Chapman adventure *Orbiter X* a story from 1959 about the construction of an orbiting space station, all very Tim Peake!<sup>2</sup>

There was also plenty for fans of John Wyndham to enjoy. The highlight was a brand-new version of *The Kraken Wakes*, broadcast in May.<sup>3</sup> It was adapted by Val McDermid, and starred Tamsin Greig, Paul Higgins and Richard Harrington. It was faithful to the original, while bringing some elements of the story up to date with newer

details regarding floods that could follow global warming. The performance was recorded with the BBC Philharmonic orchestra and even had a cameo appearance from Nicola Sturgeon! Later in the year we had a repeat of a 17-part reading of *Day of the Triffids*<sup>4</sup> and a 2010 documentary by Dan Rebellato exploring John Wyndham's impact on science fiction.<sup>5</sup> Titled *John Wyndham: No Place Like Earth*, it is worth hearing if you get the chance. Later in the year we also had the three-part *Midwich Cuckoos* first transmitted on the World Service in 1982 with William Gaunt taking the lead.<sup>6</sup> We also had the first broadcast of the Big Finish 2014 adaptation of Simon Clark's *Night of the Triffids*.<sup>7</sup>



If you're not a fan of John Wyndham, there were more light-hearted items on offer, including a repeat of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in August/ September, a mere 38 years since we first heard it on Radio 4.<sup>8</sup> Comedy was very much to the fore with *Welcome to Our Village*,

1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Machine\\_Stops](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Machine_Stops)  
 2 <http://www.turnipnet.com/whirligig/radio/orbiterx.htm>  
 3 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07bzhrd>

4 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0072sxm>  
 5 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00wqb56>  
 6 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007jmfj>  
 7 <https://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/the-night-of-the-triffids-1091>  
 8 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03v379k>



*Please Invade Carefully*, written by Eddie Robson and starring Peter Davison, Katherine Parkinson and Julian Rhind-Tutt.<sup>9</sup> This has now run for two series and is much lighter in tone than Davison's work as *Doctor Who* (1981-4).

We also had a first appearance on Radio 4 Extra of the Bafflegab story *The Scarifyers: The Thirteen Hallows* with Terry Molloy and David Warner playing Professor Dunning and Harry Crow as they pursue some chess related shenanigans and a 1,400-year-old knight played by Gareth David-Lloyd.<sup>10</sup> A couple of months later we also had the first broadcast of another Scarifyers story, *The King of Winter* and now Dunning and Crow have dark mysteries from the past to unravel.<sup>11</sup>

In amidst all the fun Radio 4 also found time to sneak in a new Neil Gaiman story in the world of *Neverwhere* called *How the Marquis Got His Coat Back*, which saw a return to the title role for Paterson Joseph after 20 years in this Dirk Maggs adaptation along with Bernard Cribbins back as Old Bailey, the part he played in Dirk Maggs's radio version of *Neverwhere*.<sup>12</sup> There was a further portion of Neil Gaiman with *Stardust*, a love story in two-parts part-set in the world of Faerie.<sup>13</sup>

### Free elsewhere (Internet)

There are plenty of other places on the internet to access and enjoy free content. These cover all tastes and there are far too many to even begin to list. Instead I'll concentrate on a couple of titles that illustrate the point.

From the creative genius of Dan Freeman who gave us the multi-award winning *Minister of Chance*<sup>14</sup> came *The Light of September*.<sup>15</sup> This is a big, bold story mixing the test run of a faster than light ship with the crew of the oceanographic research ship Venus. It's a tale of alternate history, alternate realities and history in flux. There are dinosaurs, the US is a right-wing theocracy and everything else is wrong with the world as the crew of the Venus (including Kevin Baldwin, Heida Reed and Richard Oliver) try to mend the world.

In contrast, *Strangeness in Space* is a very tongue-in-cheek comedy series written by and starring Trevor and Simon (Saturday morning BBC TV *Live and Kicking* in the

early 1990s).<sup>16</sup> It also stars Sophie Aldred (Ace in *Doctor Who*) and a range of guest stars each episode. Like many other titles it was crowd-funded and found lots of fans. The plot (if there is one) centres on the antics of NASA gift shop assistant Sophie (Aldred) and 1980s synth pop duo Pink Custard (Trevor and Simon) stranded in space with no obvious way home. It's mad and great fun.



### Big Finish

Audio drama is dominated by Big Finish, who at one point were mostly known for their new dramas starring classic actors from *Doctor Who*.<sup>17</sup> After hundreds of releases, their portfolio is now substantial and they are known for much more besides. They produce everything from short story reading, through audiobooks to full-cast stories. And now a confession; in October my short story *Rulebook* was released by Big Finish as a thirty minute reading by Nicola Bryant as Peri, the companion of both the fifth and sixth Doctor.

The biggest news for fans of Big Finish in the past two years have been the extension of their *Doctor Who* license and new ranges, most particularly *Torchwood*. Outside of *Doctor Who* and spin-offs they have also extended into some other new areas.

Big Finish have been busy, and here and there some peripheral projects have been parked while they play with their shiny new toys. This hasn't mean neglect, and the

9 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04m9qm2>

10 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b008jdzz>

11 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b084wd59>

12 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b080xppt>

13 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07xs1fd>

14 <http://www.danfreeman.co.uk/the-minister-of-chance>

15 <http://www.danfreeman.co.uk/>

16 <http://strangenessinspace.com/about/>

17 <http://bigfinish.com>

classic years of *Doctor Who* have been well served. The monthly main range (thirteen titles per year) included a Marie Celeste-style spaceship story of note (*Aquitaine*), a trilogy of stories with various incarnations of the Doctor meeting various incarnations of the Master. This allowed the Big Finish Master, Alex Macqueen, plenty of room to showcase his interpretation of the character. The highlight of the range was a pure historical story by Paul Magrs, called *The Peterloo Massacre*. It's a well-directed, tautly scripted and emotional outing for the fifth Doctor, with Peter Davison delivering a performance of great intensity and subtlety. As the title suggests it tells the tale of one of the darker moments in recent British history when 15 people were killed after cavalry charged a gathering of 60,000 – 80,000 people in St Peter's Field, Manchester.

Away from the main range, Paul McGann's eight Doctor has his own range of boxsets with Nicola Walker and Hattie Morahan. The third set includes *River Song* and starts with the John Dorney story *Absent Friends*, which won the BBC Audio Drama award for 2016 for its category. The Master also made an appearance in the ever-popular Big Finish spin-off range *Jago & Litefoot*.

The new license gave Big Finish plenty of new toys, including a boxset from David Tennant with Catherine Tate reprising the part of Donna Noble. Three fun stories and a special treat for long-time Big Finish fans. Back before he was the star he is today, Tennant appeared in several Big Finish audios, including a Nazi soldier facing the seventh Doctor in a story called *Colditz*. His return to studio was a nostalgic moment for all those involved. The new license also gave us a collection of stories for Ian McNeice to return to the part of Churchill, and Alex Kingston has come on board for a series of *River Song Diaries*.

If that wasn't enough, Kate Redgrave and Ingrid Oliver are appearing as Kate Stewart and Osgood in a range

of UNIT boxsets. It makes it interesting for the writers as they can't develop the backstories too far in case it clashes with the continuing appearances in the TV series. All this and we haven't considered the John Hurt *War Doctor* boxsets exploring the Time War.

It's the *Torchwood* range that has really shone, with a set of stories painting new scenery for the Cardiff team, but also exploring a whole range of angles on the show. The range has brought in several new (to Big Finish) writers and also brought back most of the original cast (with more announced for 2017).

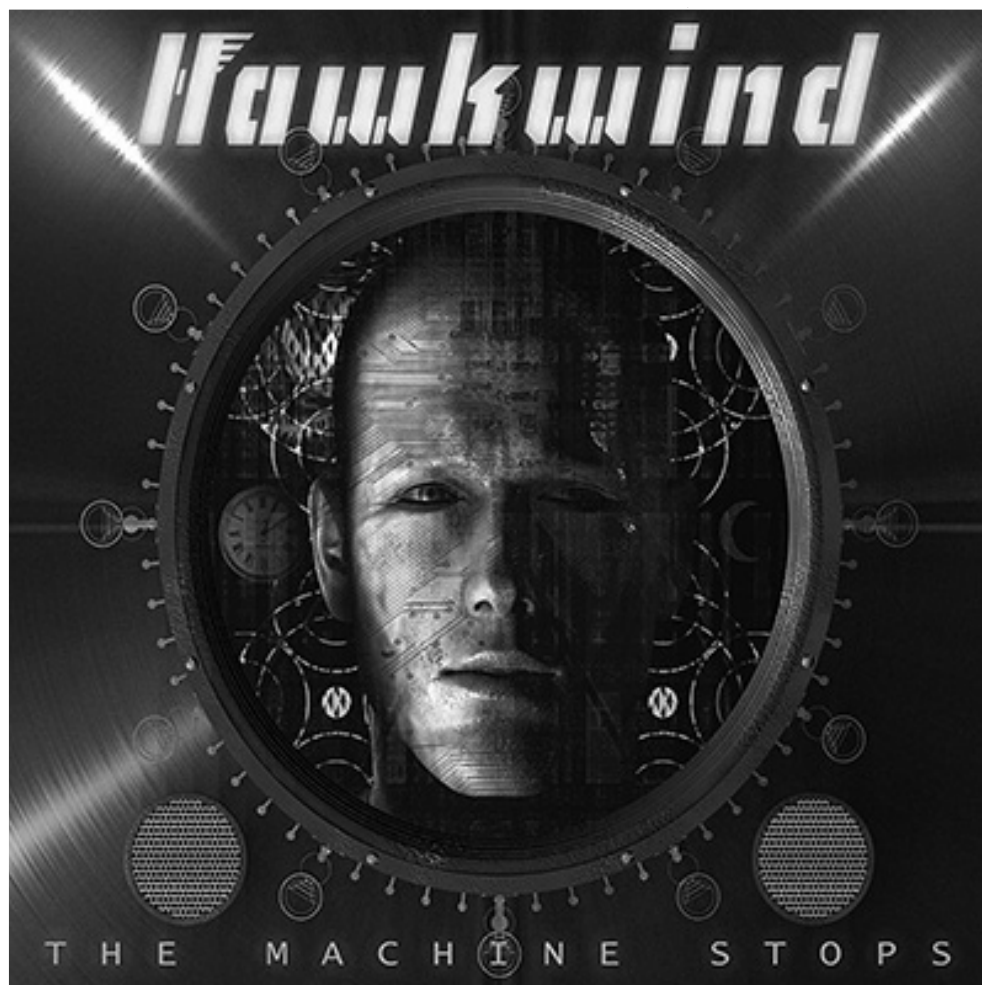
The show's tenth anniversary was celebrated with the boxset *The Torchwood Archive*, combining the talents of almost everyone so far to appear in a Big Finish recording.<sup>18</sup> The main *Torchwood* range consists of monthly stories, each with a main character from the TV series and one or two others. The reaction to these was so strong the first series of six was instantly followed by another. They've all been good, including AK Benedict's *The Victorian Age* putting Queen Victoria and Captain Jack Harkness into the same adventure, *More Than This*, an emotional and moving tale for Eve Myles as Gwen Cooper applying for planning permission to rebuild the Torchwood base, and May's *Ghost Mission*.<sup>19</sup> In this James Goss story, Sergeant Andy Davidson (Tom Price) is assessed for suitability to join the Torchwood team by a ghost named Norton Folgate. Norton is from Torchwood London in the 1950s, and played with great style by Samuel Barnett (Dirk Gently in the recent Netflix series). The character of Norton Folgate has become a fixture for Big Finish and made appearances in several other titles.

18 <https://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/the-torchwood-archive-1470>

19 <https://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/ghost-mission-1391>







Back in January Big Finish took their first steps with another cult classic, this time a new version of *The Prisoner*. Written by Nick Briggs and starring Mark Elstob as the title character, these capture the feel of the original 1960s show and work very, very well on audio. Another set is due in 2017. Other series continued, and the Terry Nation 1970s show, *The Survivors*, went from strength to strength as did the adaptations of the first series of the 1960s show *The Avengers*. Other series came to their natural end, including the Jonathan Barnes *Sherlock Holmes* series, and the *Dorian Gray* stories, starring Alexander Vlahos as the ambiguous immortal at the heart of this clever set of stories ranging across Dorian's long life.

### Elsewhere



Hawkwind might not be an obvious creator of audio drama, but (as their many fans know) they sit somewhere close to the centre of that Venn diagram linking rock music and science fiction. At the start of 2016 they released their thirtieth album, *The Machine Stops*. EM Forster fans will recognise this as the post-apocalyptic 1909 short story noted for predicting (to some extent) a world whose inhabitants are over-absorbed by social media. As concept albums go it stays true to the original in terms of tone and some of the major themes. Worth a listen if you've ever enjoyed tracks beyond the legendary 'Silver Machine'!

Fans of recorded music may have noticed headlines proclaiming 2016 as the year of the resurgence of vinyl (for example, the Guardian

reported a 53% increase in LP sales).<sup>20</sup> Audio drama hasn't been immune to the lure of the physical, and we've had a release for *Doctor Who: Genesis of the Daleks* in 180g TARDIS blue vinyl!<sup>21</sup> Big Finish also got in on the act with a vinyl issues of one of its most well-regarded titles, *Chimes of Midnight*.<sup>22</sup>

Back to more conventional media, and Bafflegab decided to kill off Tom Baker in the Paul Magrs story *King of Cats*. The story is far from conventional and takes a very affectionate poke at the fourth wall in a madcap story also featuring Katy Manning. This is the first in the *Baker's End*<sup>23</sup> series of eccentric titles, and continued with *Gobbleknoll Hall*.

B7 media also made an appearance late in the year with a new interpretation of *Dan Dare*, mixing the original comic strip with just enough modern touches to freshen up for a new audience. A magnificent cast included Ed Stoppard (*Upstairs Downstairs*, *The Pianist*), Heida Reed (*Poldark*) and Geoffrey McGivern (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*). It's the first in what looks to be a long-running series and even if you aren't old enough to remember the original, it's worth a listen to bring back

the joy of pure story-telling. A wide range of reviewers had plenty to say<sup>24</sup>, including Saxon Bullock, SFX Magazine:

Feeling very much in the same cliffhanging style as pulp SF sagas like Flash Gordon, these are pacy, action-packed adventures that aren't afraid to throw more modern concepts and references into Dare's world.

### Looking forward

The year 2017 marks 70 years since the death of a true colossus of science fiction, HG Wells. We've already had several audiobook readings of the more obvious titles, and are promised a new musical version of *War of the Worlds* from Sherwood Studios. Meanwhile, Big Finish intends to mark the occasion with a six, full-cast audio dramas, beginning with *The Invisible Man* starring the recently deceased John Hurt.<sup>25</sup>

Radio 4 has also struck early with a five-part series of fifteen-minute stories from the world of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* starring Hermione Norris.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever else 2017 holds, at least the world of audio drama is here to keep you entertained!

20 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jan/03/record-sales-vinyl-hits-25-year-high-and-outstrips-streaming>

21 <https://www.piccadillyrecords.com/counter/product.php?pid=108470>

22 <https://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/the-chimes-of-midnight-limited-vinyl-edition-1441>

23 <http://www.bafflegab.co.uk/detail-baker.asp>

24 <http://www.b7media.com/?p=3759>

25 <https://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/the-invisible-man-1598>

26 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08crt5z>



## Isaac Asimov's I, Robot

### 15 Minute Drama

The rise of robotics in the 21st century, told through the poignant and mysterious story of enigmatic lawyer Stevie Byerley. Dramatised by Richard Kurti.



# Best Videogames of 2016

Conor McKeown

2016, in regards to sf games at the very least, was comparable to complaining about the food in a restaurant only to be given five free meals in response; the quantity was never the issue. And yet, low and behold, quantity seems to be the only solution offered by the games industry.<sup>1</sup> A large portion of the games released this year had some sort of thematic hook that could charitably be defined as ‘science fiction’ with a wealth of games being set in space, an alternative future, or showcasing some imagined piece of technology or other. However, that is not to say that just having Mario hold a ray-gun makes an sf game; not to this reviewer at least. As such, in the interest of clarity it should be said here that the games listed ahead have, to my mind at least, attempted to use speculative technological or cultural advances as a device through which to stimulate an interesting narrative or ludic experience. Without meaning to sound like that pretentious guy at the office, there was only one big studio produced game I could truly recommend (revealed below). Amidst the number of big-budget science fiction games this year, it was difficult to see clearly exceptional contributions. Although I can recommend *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Mirror’s Edge: Catalyst* and *ReCore*, I do so as a way to pass the time, not expand the mind. If that still seems quite broad, allow me to expand upon that definition by listing the games that I won’t be mentioning this year (along with a brief explanation, in lieu of an apology for anyone who happens to disagree with me). Although *Overwatch*, *Doom*, *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* and *Gears of War 4* may all be great games (I can particularly recommend *Doom*), they bring very little new to the genre. It is my hope, therefore, that the games I do mention each utilise the tropes of science fiction to challenge our expectations of reality in an interesting and provocative manner.

On the subject of games being provocative, however, no account of the sf games of 2016 could be complete without mentioning the great disappointment that was *No Man’s Sky*. Hyped by a host of writers and gamers (including myself), the game was sold as a procedurally-generated

alternative universe with a potential 18 quintillion planets, each unique from another. These planets would contain life characteristic of algorithmically generated eco-systems naturally distinct from one another. Players could explore together or become engaged in interstellar combat, challenging each other for the rights to an entire intergalactic biome. While, in hindsight, having such high expectations was foolish – generative algorithms are impressive, but if we can create alternative universes already, NASA probably would have done it – it doesn’t excuse what was sold as the final product. While the company more-or-less delivered on the promise of pseudo-infinitely generated worlds, they dropped the ball in providing players with activities to do once they got there. Rather than the escapist’s dream of an alternative dimension in which they can explore an endlessly interesting space, *No Man’s Sky* instead presented players with a universe that was simply endless. It quickly became clear that the most anticipated title of the year was just another boring and repetitive videogame. That being said, the game can still be congratulated for trying hard to accomplish something new, without huge amounts of capital, and for continuing to try to provide players with something close to what was promised through ongoing updates. It’s also worth mentioning that if you aren’t looking for a lot to do or are happy to just *space out* (excuse the pun) and stare at the, admittedly, gorgeous visuals then the current bargain-bin prices of *No Man’s Sky* make it a very tempting way to waste a weekend. Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned from all this. Perhaps that lesson is that, while our species has fantastic ambitions for artificial intelligence, algorithmic generation, virtual exploration and space travel, we aren’t quite able to achieve them; at least, not yet.

With the year’s most noteworthy disappointments out of the way, it’s time to crack on with the sf games from 2016 that I can truthfully recommend for all the right reasons. To reveal that big studio title I referenced earlier, my personal choice of mainstream game of the year goes to *Titanfall 2*. To be frank, there were times when this game felt like it had been tailor-made to suit the preferences of my 12-year-old self. The comfortably linear plot

1 I should really say ‘industries’, as increasingly games design seems fractured into the AAA and indie sectors.



feels like it is lifted straight from the best boy-targeted 1990's Bandai anime that never was. You take control of Jack Cooper, the rookie with big ambitions in the war of the future where real men fight using mechanised armour. Becoming a successful pilot, however, is dependent upon the bond between a pilot and his 'Titan'. Inevitably, Jack becomes involved in a plot larger than himself, comes to forge a relationship with 'BT', his very own mech-suit, and a bittersweet, cliff-hanger ending ensues. The gameplay has an equally 'worn-in' feel as each of the buttons seemed to be assigned to exactly what I thought they would be and have just as much impact. Using the environment to my advantage, taking full advantage of Jack's hand-to-hand skills, and eliminating enemies felt intuitive but rewarding. While I wouldn't claim to be a particularly skilled first person shooter (FPS) player, particularly on a console, I played the game on default difficulty and only died when I wasn't paying attention. Adding to that, I completed the game's main campaign in less than ten hours, taking my time to explore, enjoying the ability to 'parkour' (is that a verb?) my way around levels. Nevertheless, I can only find myself recommending the game as its brevity left me wanting more, rather than feeling like I had to trudge through needless padding just to get to the end credits. To summarise my feelings towards *Titanfall 2*; sure, you could write the story on the back of a beer mat; sure, you can mouth along to the plot elements as they are revealed. Still, with all that in mind, I felt the

story was 'concise' rather than 'short' and befitting the enjoyable, straightforward action. What made the game stand out amidst this year's stream of similarly pitched action jaunts were the little extra additions; the characterisation of Jack and BT, for instance, gave gravity to the otherwise by-the-numbers proceedings. At first, I couldn't ignore the game's lack of thematic complexity and was taken up wishing I was playing 2001's *Zone of the Enders*. On reflection, the predictability of the game made it something to come back to and attempt on harder difficulties or get engrossed in in the extensive multiplayer mode. It shone as an ideal standard for games of its kind.

Moving away from the 'mainstream' successes this year, I was – once again – drawn to more independent titles this year. Pushing beyond being just 'games' I found myself profoundly challenged or deeply moved by the games I mention below. These titles left me with that unmistakable and most exceptional feeling that something about the way I see the world had just changed. First on this list is *Inside*, a new title from Playdead, the now legendary developers of *Limbo*, which presented a fascinating look into future dystopia. It is hard to provide a description of *Inside* that does the game justice without spoilers. If I was at a party and a friend said, 'it's a game about a boy in a red jumper trying to avoid being caught by scientists doing mind control experiments' I would squirm with the temptation to tell you what's 'really' happening. The best I can say is that the game has an excellent twist that doesn't deflate but rather reframes your play. What is more, it is very likely a twist you will not be able to guess. To be clear, you don't find out that you were the killer all along, that it was really you that left the front door open or that the thing you did caused all the bad things to take place. What you discover, if properly considered and not taken as simple provocation, should challenge your perception of what you considered your role in the game to be. If you are interested in questions of agency, determinism, collectivism or body horror, *Inside* is definitely a game to be placed on a Steam list.

Aside from the plot, gameplay is minimalist but never straightforward. If you played *Limbo* you will be familiar with the simple controls and limited number of actions that can be combined to produce challenging but rarely illogical puzzles. For example, early in the game, you may see a locked door, a box and a button. Combining these objects in the correct manner results in an open door. As the game continues, increasing numbers of modifiers are added to familiar formula. In this manner, you are asked to think, but unlike games like – say – *Monkey Island*, you are never victim to a specific, sometimes bizarre logic that makes sense only to the developers. This leads to some satisfying moments of relief when simple solutions discovered that were right in front of you all along. That being said, as the game comes to its conclusion, these puzzling moments were not left behind. Many of



the game's hardest puzzles are introduced during the final moments of the game and, while they are possible, I increasingly found myself trying everything rather than using logic. While I will begrudgingly admit that this makes a huge amount of sense given the specifics of the ending, I still felt frustration that the story was being held back by my inability to figure out where I was meant to place which box. *Inside* may well be my favourite game of the last decade though the consistently challenging gameplay did, on occasion, prevent me from feeling completely immersed in what could have been a viscerally cerebral plot.

Vastly different was *Stellaris* which, for good reason, has earned the playful moniker, 'No Man's Sky but fun...'. In truth, comparisons to *NMS* are actually rather superficial. There are plenty of *NMS* alternatives to choose from (2015's space-set survival game *Empyrion: Galactic Survival* springs to mind) and, to be frank, *Stellaris* much more closely resembles *Eve: Online*. That being said, *Stellaris* reminds us exactly what a vast space-age experience should be. Touted as a '4X' title (explore, expand, exploit, exterminate) wherein clever diplomacy and allocation of resources can triumph over straightforward military might, the game flaunts its depth and complexity from the off. Gameplay begins by asking you to choose from a number of premade species portraits, before assigning up to five traits and three ethos types that result in intriguing strengths and weaknesses. The potential for nuance here is staggering as the race you create will have specific outlooks on how to co-operate with the other civilisations that you will eventually encounter. Your race may take the form of hedonistic, totalitarian, colonists seeking to conquer the universe by force for their God. By compari-

son, you can play as a pacifist culture, focusing on trade and co-operation or even a hive mind, obsessed with collecting new species into their own. As the game develops through resource harvesting, well-paced and thoughtful conflicts, scientific developments and cultural evolution, your race may come to take on new traits or even change its ethical stance. Given this, the game feels like a fully immersive depiction of interstellar life.

Far from being 'Sim City but in space', it's important to point out that this resource building game is packed with engaging political and social commentary. For instance, I found it almost impossible to survive as a civilisation while maintaining my own, chosen, ethical codes. I would invariably begin play as a pacifist-materialist, refraining from using slaves and interested in joining with other races for the betterment of society. After several hours, however, I would inevitably devolve. More often than not I found myself ruthlessly staking claims on resources, declaring war on allies in order to (unsuccessfully) break trade agreements and taking what others called 'slaves' but who I thought of as my legion of 'volunteers'. In other words, *Stellaris*, while being an excellently conceived space-strategy game, also taught me a number of difficult truths about myself. If strategy games are your 'thing', I heartily recommend it but, truth be told, that wasn't why I kept playing. For me, this is the closest thing I have ever experienced to a residence within the *Star Trek* universe of thousands of planets stretching across light-years of space, each with complex cultures and beliefs. That so much of what I experienced was procedurally generated was dizzying but made me very hopeful for our technological future.



Though perhaps less intellectual than *Stellaris*, the ambitious *Superhot* also caught my attention this year. While the main hook of the game is that ‘time moves only when you move’, this is not just a gimmicky tech demo. *Superhot* takes place in an alternative present where unnamed hackers, of which you are one, attempt to steal and distribute stolen videogames over a text-based chat service (perhaps not such an ‘alternative present’ after all). After a fellow hacker provides you with the .exe of an experimental new title you play it and get a chance to engage with the interesting time vs. gameplay mechanic. To be clear, *Superhot* places you in the action of a conventional first-person shooter; however, your opponents are frozen in place and take action only when you do. This interesting take on the FPS formula lends itself to more thoughtful action than a standard run-and-gun affair. In preliminary looks and early reviews of the game, much was made of this mechanic and the ability to watch back your play through. In the finished product, however, this mechanic is used as the starting point for a surprisingly in-depth story to unfold. While nothing that a quick rewatching of *The Matrix* wouldn’t prepare you for, *Superhot* engages with questions of self, artificial intelligence and the extent of human agency in a world dominated by digital systems. What’s more, its dystopian ending, owing much to *Portal*, is a welcome posthuman flourish that allows the game to stand out from similar cyberpunk titles.

Adding to this cyberpunk sensibility, in a year with so much to offer, I found myself frequently drawn back to two games with intriguingly similar mechanics. Both *Quadrilateral Cowboy* and *Glitchspace* have embraced the legacy of Doublefine’s *Hack n’ Slash* as notable entries in what could tentatively be called the ‘hacking simulator’ genre. The two games present the player with a first-person experience where they must outwit a game on its own terms, by coding their way out of a series of increasingly complex situations. While *Glitchspace* is a puzzle game first and foremost, with the added intention of teaching players how to code, *Quadrilateral Cowboy* takes a more story-oriented approach. As if taken directly from the pages of a William Gibson novel, players must assist a number of cyber-thieves on daring heists with their state-of-the-art hacking-deck complete with a

‘staggering 256k RAM’. In practice, both games resort to providing the player with a command line and waiting patiently while the player figures out the best way to put together simple programs to fit the specific needs of the game. While there are moments where both games were undeniably reminiscent of *Math Blaster!*, they nevertheless provided an interesting glimpse into a more demanding gaming future. Perhaps it is only a matter of time before games demand a rudimentary understanding of JavaScript before you can play? Perhaps, on the contrary, coding is becoming so visually driven in these days of web and game-engines that from-scratch coding has become a novelty?



In all, the games of 2016 provided some new highs but some new lows for science fiction gaming. While there was a hint of ‘business as usual’ from triple-A developers who seem to use science fiction settings as a way to excuse their big guns, bigger explosions and fancy-looking blue lens flare, there is a strong indication that some developers are still willing to push the envelope. If there could be said to be any consistent trend throughout the games it would be that of self-destruction. In the case of *Titanfall 2*, that came in the form of crew members willing to sacrifice themselves; in *Stellaris*, the weight of an intergalactic empire often proved too much; in both *Inside* and *Superhot* players can choose whether or not to end their avatar’s life indefinitely; *No Man’s Sky* meanwhile, just blew up in the developers’ faces. Hopefully, this ominous portent is nothing to take to heart and 2017 will offer similar highs and lows. If not, with the inevitability of a coming storm, another classic game will be dragged from the memory banks of some old PC and remastered beyond all recognition. Surely, that’s almost as good?



# recurrent:

## KINCAID IN SHORT

### Paul Kincaid

## The Fall of Frenchy Steiner

by Hilary Bailey

The recent death of Hilary Bailey reminded me of what was perhaps her best science fiction short story, 'The Fall of Frenchy Steiner'. First published in the July-August 1964 issue of *New Worlds*, it is one of the finest examples of that strangely long-lived category of alternate history, in which the Nazis win the Second World War. It's a type of story that first began to appear in the late 1930s, when fear of Hitler's seemingly inexorable march to war began to spread. In the immediate aftermath of war such stories enjoyed a new vogue, largely because the true horrors of Nazi rule were becoming known and the war itself was recent enough for people to remember how close Germany came to victory. Later, these became the sort of alternate history story popular with non-science fiction writers (*SS-GB* by Len Deighton, *Fatherland* by Robert Harris, *Resistance* by Owen Sheers), often, I suspect, because it provided an inherently violent setting for a thriller plot. Such stories may be about to have a new lease of life, given the recent dramatisations of *The Man in the High Castle* on Amazon and *SS-GB* on the BBC.

It is, in other words, a type of story that never seems to die. Yet for me the real heyday of the Hitler Wins story was a brief period roughly bracketed on the one hand by 'The Fall of Frenchy Steiner' and on the other by 'Weinachtsabend' by Keith Roberts, two stories with noticeable similarities. They occupied a very particular period in British cultural history. The general election that brought Harold Wilson's Labour Party to power occurred just a few months after Bailey's story appeared, but already the ruling Conservative Party was mired in controversy and the deference in which politicians were held during the 1950s was long since gone. By the time Roberts's story appeared, the 1970 election had brought Edward Heath's Conservatives back into power, but had, if anything, damaged the reputation of politicians still further. What is noticeable about these two stories is that in conquered Britain, British people are working prominently with

the regime; villainy is not restricted to the Germans (in fact, the real hero of Bailey's story is German), nor are all Brits noble resisters. The new anti-establishment mood of the Sixties is reflected in an assumption that 'we' are no better than 'them', an assumption that would have been unthinkable amid the heroism of fifties war films. (It is worth pointing out that the archetypal American take on this theme, *The Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick, also falls squarely into this timeframe, and also concerns American collaboration with the new masters.)

On a less political note, it is also interesting that both 'The Fall of Frenchy Steiner' and 'Weinachtsabend' are set at Christmas. It is not altogether clear why this should be. There is certainly an irony in this, clearly spelled out in Roberts's story, but in Bailey's story Christmas is deliberately underplayed, there is a total absence of celebration, of decoration, of any sort of festivity, even when the story takes us into the heart of German government. I think that Christmas is intended to act as a counterpoint to the superstition, the engagement with the supernatural, with which the Nazi regime is associated in both stories. The fact that the beliefs and actions of many of the Nazi leaders were shaped by belief in magic and ritual had been known before the war, but it was only in the Sixties that this knowledge seemed to have been absorbed to such an extent as to come out in the fiction. Thus the cruelty of the rituals enacted in 'Weinachtsabend' is all we need to see of the cruelty of the entire regime, while 'The Fall of Frenchy Steiner' revolves around the belief that the title character can foresee the future.

And, of course, both stories reach their climax in a richly, if perhaps tastelessly decorated country house that implicitly identifies the new regime with an old aristocracy. But we'll come to the climax in due course.

\*

If 'The Fall of Frenchy Steiner' reaches its climax amid the ostentatious trappings of wealth, it begins in dire poverty.

It begins with our narrator, Sebastian Lowry, arriving at a dingy club in Leicester Square. It is lit only by candles, which hid 'the rundown look but not the rundown smell of home-brew and damp-rot' (83). This creates a sense of disconnect right from the start: even in 1954, when the story is set, and even more so in 1964 when it was written, Leicester Square was the glittering heart of London nightlife. But later, as Lowry returns to the once-posh hotel (on Piccadilly, near Park Lane, its staircase made of marble, all what we would normally consider indications of money and exclusivity) that is now the cheap boarding house where he lives, we see that such dinginess is now the common state of London. 'The water was off most of the time ... The gas came on three times a day for half an hour – if you were lucky. The electricity was supposed to run all day if people used the suggested ration, but nobody did ... I had an oil stove, but no oil' (87). In the immediate postwar years, Britain went through a period of austerity, but the last of rationing had already been lifted by the time this story is set, and even at its worst it was never as bad as this. This is privation on an unprecedented scale, and deliberately imposed. Later still, when Lowry heads out for lunch with his brother Godfrey, who has a senior position in the German government, he looks at the despoiled city and asks: 'Thinking of cleaning up, ever?' to which he receives the off-hand reply, 'No manpower, you see' (103). As Lowry reflects: 'Naturally they left it. One look was enough to break anyone's morale. If you were wondering how defeated and broken you were and looked at Park Lane, or Piccadilly, or Trafalgar Square, you'd soon know – completely' (103-4). The cost of defeat is spelled out in dirt and squalor, the ugliness is Bailey's way of showing how different this world is.

But let's turn back to that moment when Lowry walks into the ironically named Merrie Englande. There are two policemen sitting at the bar. They wear helmets (though police would not normally do so inside, and one of the two is, we learn, a detective inspector, who would wear neither a helmet nor a uniform), which identifies them as typical British bobbies, though we later learn that, 'the uniforms were all the same. You couldn't tell the noble Tommy from the fiendish Hun' (98); only the helmets remain the same. 'They wanted you to think they were the same blokes who used to tell you the time and find old Rover for you when he got lost,' (99-100) as Lowry remarks to the dodgy clothes dealer, Arthur; to which Arthur replies, sardonically, 'Aren't they?' (100). Coppers, like just about everyone else, are only too ready to adapt to the new order. Literally so: when one of the policemen in the bar leaves his card for Lowry his name is

given as 'Det. Insp. Braun' (86); he has even changed the spelling of his own name, Brown, to the German form. When Gwyneth Jones described an alien takeover in her Aleutian trilogy, what was startling was the way humans remodelled themselves to be like their conquerors; but here was something similar from 30 years before. There is still some resistance – at one point we hear explosions from 'the English Luftwaffe doing exercises over the still-inhabited suburbs' (85) – but it isn't made explicit. While we imagine someone still fighting there, on the whole collaboration is more common.

Lowry is a musician who earns a precarious and potentially illegal living playing at the club, so he is instantly on guard against the police. But though the police are happy to intimidate anyone, they are there to ask about someone else: Frenchy Steiner. Frenchy is 'a kraut' (84), we later learn that her real name is Franziska, who sometimes sings at the club with Lowry's accompaniment. He had written 'Frenchy's Blues' for her, 'one of those corny numbers that come easy to the fingers without you having to think about them' (84); although he doesn't say as much, it is pretty obvious that Lowry is in love with her. In the end, Frenchy doesn't show up that night, and the police leave without revealing why they are after her. The only comfort is that it is CID not the Special Branch, so it isn't political.

The next day, however, Frenchy shows up at Lowry's room. He tries to send her away: 'It was the code. If someone wanted by the cops asked for help you had the right to tell them to go... If you were a breadwinner it was expected' (90); but Frenchy doesn't go, and Lowry doesn't really try too hard. She insists that she has no idea why the police might be after her, and anyway they can't do anything because she has 'a full passport' (90). In this stratified society, only the elite have a full passport, there are 'about two hundred' (96) in Britain, and they can literally get away with murder. Lowry's brother Godfrey, Gottfried as he now calls himself in another example of taking on the colouration of the conquerors, has one because he is Deputy Minister of Public Security; it is Godfrey who pays Lowry's rent, to avoid the embarrassment of him being arrested as a vagrant, but the two haven't even seen each other for two years. But a full passport marks someone out as special to the regime, so why should Frenchy have one? And why should the police be interested in her? She says she has the passport because she is the daughter of the mayor of Berlin, but there is clearly something more.

Nevertheless, Lowry lets her stay; if nothing else, the full passport casts a protective shield around him whilst he is in her company. And though she continues to insist that she has no idea why the police might be interested in her, she adds, mysteriously, 'but I'll know tomorrow when I wake up' (94), our first indication of Frenchy's



particular talent. Our second indication comes when Lowry wakes with a migraine. Frenchy rubs his temples, and the pain goes. She is some kind of healer. She then announces that she is getting out of London; she still doesn't know what the cops want from her, but 'I just know if I keep away from them for a month or two they won't want me any more' (95). We won't understand why this might be until the end of the story, for now we have little choice but to accept her oddness. As Lowry admits: 'I'd always known Frenchy was odd, by the old standards. But as things were now it was saner to be odd' (96). Frenchy's healing skills and prescience are the only way to deal with the world turned upside down that is Britain under Nazi rule.

But while Frenchy is out, using the immunity of her full passport to gather the things they will need to get out of London, brother Godfrey shows up. Making out that it is entirely casual, he takes Lowry out for lunch, but soon starts quizzing him about 'a sort of casual entertainer. A German girl I think' (105). Moments later he lets his guard down even more, saying 'We want to repatriate her' (105) and adding some vague story about an inheritance. Lowry stonewalls him, but knowing the Security Ministry is involved adds an extra urgency to their escape.

They don't get far before they are surrounded by police, along with Godfrey and someone who turns out to be Frenchy's father. As they are being driven back to London, it becomes obvious that neither the police nor Godfrey have any idea why there was a hue and cry for the girl. And despite appearances, Frenchy seems to remain in control of the situation. She insists that Lowry should accompany her, which is why he finds himself held first in a luxury hotel in London and then taken to a palace, 'half old German mansion, half modern Teutonic with vulgar marble statues all over the place' (117). It is now that Lowry learns what is so special about Frenchy.

When she was thirteen she began to have visions: 'I used to see tables surrounded by German officers. I used to overhear conferences. I saw the tanks going into battle, burning cities, concentration camps – things I couldn't possibly know about' (113). This is where the belief in

magic and ritual of the Nazi hierarchy comes into play. Frenchy becomes 'the virgin who prophesied for Attila ... officiating at sacrifices and Teutonic saturnalia, watching goats have their throats cut with gold knives, seeing torchlight on the walls' (114). In among all of this, she tells the Leader (as Hitler is referred to throughout the story) not to invade Russia. Frenchy is the turning point, the reason that Germany won the war. And afterwards: 'I'd spent four years in an atmosphere of blood and hysteria, calling on the psychic part of me and ignoring the rest. I was unfit for life' (115). She had tried to kill herself, tried to get away, but now 'There must be desperate problems to be solved. Or the Leader's madness is getting worse. Or both' (115). Which is why she is dragged back to the heart of the Nazi regime.

At first they see no way out. Frenchy doesn't want to help the regime, but she's 'not strong enough to resist' (115), and when she asks Lowry to kill her, he refuses because 'If I killed you, how could I go on hoping you'd have a better life?' (115). In the end it is the superstition of the Nazis that they use against them. In the Leader's palace, Frenchy gets away from her handlers long enough to get to Lowry's room, where she convinces him to have sex with her. 'Do you mean that if you're not a virgin you can't prophesy?' (119) Lowry asks, but it's a question that is never answered. Brought into the presence of a raving Leader, just her declaration that she has 'fallen' (122) is enough to convince Hitler's aides that she can no longer help them. And in that moment hope is gone, chaos breaks out.

This, we must assume, is what Frenchy foresaw when she said it would be enough to keep out of the way for a month or two. She knew the Leader was coming to an end; she just didn't realise that she was the one who would bring that end about. But she knows at the end. "'This is the end of the Thousand Year Reich.'" She grinned again. "I did it"' (123).

**Quotations taken from 'The Fall of Frenchy Steiner' by Hilary Bailey in *Hitler Victorious* edited by Gregory Benford & Martin H. Greenberg, London, Grafton, 1988.**

# recurrent:

## FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

### Andy Sawyer

## The Men in the Flying Saucer

by Arthur C. Clarke

In a previous ‘Foundation’s Favourites’ I mentioned Margot Bennett’s article ‘Space-Ships Also Leak’ (*Lilliput* 129, March 1948), in which she pokes fun at science fiction magazines with witty deconstructions of Norman Firth and John Russell Fearn. Since then, I discovered that *Lilliput* itself committed science fiction, when I was trying to track down the original publication of a story by Arthur C. Clarke.

*Lilliput* was an odd little magazine of a kind which no longer exists and for the lack of which the world is probably poorer. Founded in 1937, it featured photographs, art, short stories and features, with a bias towards ‘the arts’. Sometimes unfairly called a ‘men’s magazine’ (it did merge into *Men Only* in 1960, though that seems to have been before that magazine’s soft-porn days) it was more a general-interest magazine with an occasional racy air about it. My interest was revived when I discovered that the story I knew as ‘Trouble With the Natives’ in *Reach For Tomorrow* (1956) had originally been published in *Lilliput*. Remembering having seen a pile of the magazines in a local bookshop, I was lucky enough to find the relevant issue, which is now part of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection.

‘The Men in the Flying Saucer’ (also, confusingly, published the same year for a US audience in *Marvel Science Stories* as ‘Captain Wyxtphll’s Flying Saucer’), appeared in the February 1951 issue of *Lilliput*, in somewhat abridged form, with delightful illustrations by Gerard Hoffnung.

It’s one, of course, of numerous stories that appeared upon the theme of ‘flying saucers’, made popular since Kenneth Arnold, in June 1947, spotted mysterious objects flying through the air like saucers skipping across water when flying his private aeroplane near Mt Ranier, Washington. Science fiction editor Raymond A. Palmer (famous for publishing the ‘Shaver Mystery’ stories in

*Amazing*) published Arnold’s account in *Fate* magazine in 1948. Earlier that year Kentucky Air National Guard pilot Thomas Mantell’s attempt to close in on an object apparently flying at speed above him resulted in his death when his plane lost control and crashed. As far as much of the public was concerned, the title of Marine Corps pilot Donald Keyhoe’s article in *True* (January 1950) said it all: ‘Flying Saucers Are Real’.

Country duo The Buchanan Brothers, had, the previous year, responded to the Hiroshima A-bomb with ‘Atomic Power’, a song written by Fred Kirby the morning after the explosion, in which ‘Hiroshima, Nagasaki paid a big price for their sins’. They were equally apocalyptic with ‘(When You See Those) Flying Saucers’, recorded a matter of weeks after Arnold’s 1947 sighting, when they proclaimed that ‘you’d better pray to the Lord when you see those flying saucers. It may be the coming of the Judgment Day.’ (A lighter sense of judgement appears in the 1951 novelty song by Ella Fitzgerald when ‘Two Little Men in a Flying Saucer’ are dismissive about American culture and decide to leave for home).

The saucers were to become a staple visual icon in films and comic books, featuring in Al Capp’s hillbilly comic strip ‘L’l Abner’ and a range of B-movies such as *Flying Saucer* (Mikel Conrad, 1950) in which American intelligence agents discover that the ‘saucer’ seen in Alaskan skies has been invented by an American scientist whose assistant is trying to sell it to Soviet spies, *Flying Disc Man From Mars* (Fred C. Bannon, 1951) featuring, um, a Martian landing on Earth in a flying disc, *The Thing From Another World* (Christian Newby, 1951), based upon Jon Campbell’s story ‘Who Goes There?’ (1938) in which a team investigating ufo reports exults, ‘We finally got one . . . we’ve finally found a flying saucer!’ when they realise that the shape they have detected beneath the Arctic ice is almost a perfect circle. Perhaps the archetype



of all such films was released towards the end of 1951: Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* saw Klaatu and the robot Gort land in a shining saucer to warn the Great Powers of Earth of the dire consequences of testing atomic weapons.

During the rest of the decade, 'flying saucers' became a pop-culture icon like no other. Apart from maverick figures like Ray Palmer, who went on to turn *Other Worlds* into *Flying Saucers From Other Worlds* and eventually *Flying Saucers*, what we might call the 'core' science fiction network was somewhat semi-detached about ufos, especially when people like George Adamski and Truman Bethurum started writing about their contacts with aliens. And so the mockery in 'The Men in the Flying Saucer' is partly because of its publication for

an audience which would find the idea of flying saucers childish nonsense. Clarke remained firmly sceptical about ufos. Consequently, he pokes fun.

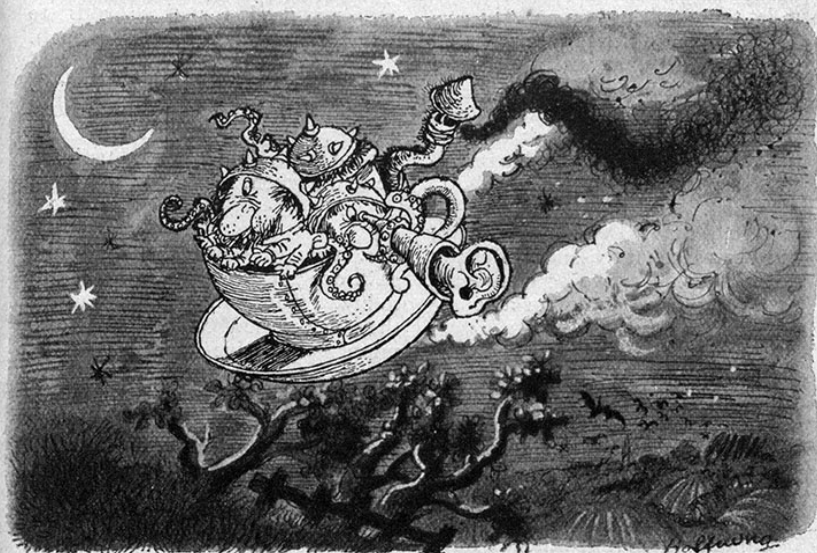
A saucer captained by the multi-tentacled (as you might expect) Wyxtpthll lands somewhere in Clarke's native West Country. It's a lousy landing, the automatics have packed up *again*, and the two most humanoid members of the crew, Crysteel and Danstor, are sent out to make contact with the natives, having carefully researched the local radio programmes. For safety, they are allowed to take with them 'disrupters' – 'But only Mark II's' – the full point of the joke here will only appear in the later publication of the story. Crysteel and Danstor encounter a range of stereotypically comic characters: a labourer with a broad, indecipherable accent, an absent-minded

professor, a profoundly deaf woman who asks them to write down their message, and a teenage boy whose favourite reading matter (*Staggering Stories of Pseudo-Science*) makes him sympathetic to their quest. 'Here at last, surely, was someone who could understand them.' However, his mother berates them and slams the door. The village constable simply thinks they are mad, and lures them into a cell at the police station which is occupied by Graham, a student who is sleeping off the celebrations of his unexpectedly good degree in the local pub – intriguingly the 'White Hart'. Using the 'disruptor' they break out and escape to the saucer in Graham's ramshackle Bentley: and that, my friends, is how Graham eventually became Earth's representative to the universe.

It's an amusing, if not particularly profound, tale which nudges the reader into thinking that flying saucers, and, for that matter, science fiction itself, are nonsense. The jokes in the fuller, *Reach For Tomorrow* version of the story, are better, including the saucer pilot's despair at the 'cheese-paring form-fillers back at Base Planet', and the Captain's reason for his refusal to allow Crysteel and Danstor to have the more dangerous 'Mark III'

FUTURE

BY ARTHUR C. CLARKE



## The Men in the Flying Saucer

Illustrations by Gerard Hoffnurg

**T**HE Flying Saucer came down vertically through the clouds, braked to a halt about fifty feet from the ground, and settled with a considerable bump on a patch of heather-strewn moorland.

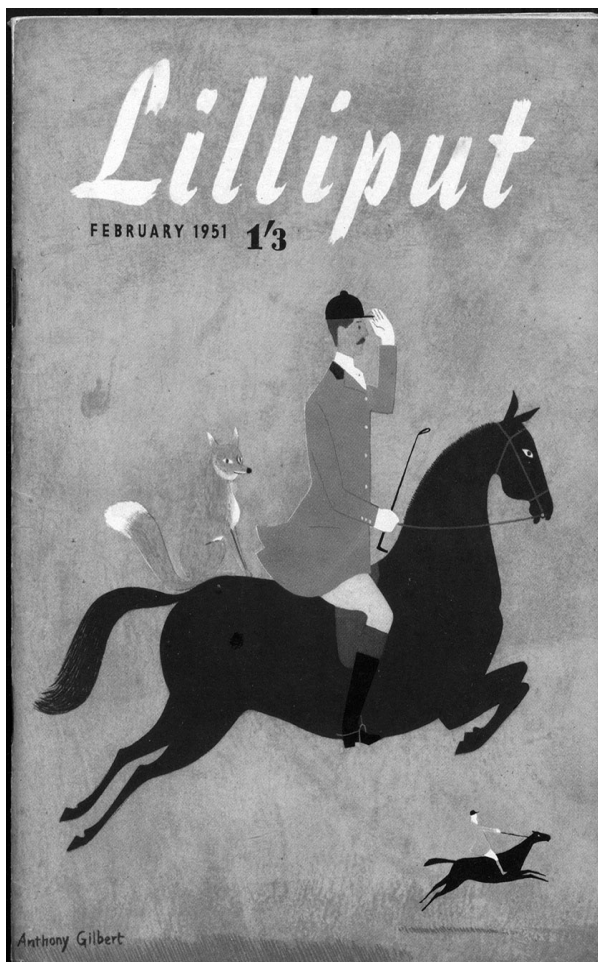
"That," said Captain Wyxtpthll, "was a lousy landing." Master Pilot Krtclugg unwound three of his tentacles from the control panel, stretched all four of his legs, and relaxed comfortably.

"Not my fault the automatics have

packed up again," he grumbled. "We're down in one piece, which is more than I expected. Tell Crysteel and Danstor to come in here. I want a word with them."

Crysteel and Danstor were, very obviously, of a different species from the rest of the crew. They had only one pair of legs and arms, no eyes at the back of the head, and other physical deficiencies which their colleagues did their best to overlook. These very defects, however, had





disruptors : 'I'd be court-martialled if they heard about it at the Base. Suppose you killed some of the natives – then I'd have the Bureau of Interstellar Politics, the Aborigines Conservancy Board, and half a dozen others after me.' (This strengthens the implication of the story's eventual title). In the longer version, it's also clearer that the aliens' understanding of Earth life is not only because of the radio programmes that they have been listening to, but because these programmes are lurid crime dramas: 'It's quite obvious from their broadcasts that the social system is very primitive, and that crime and lawlessness are widespread. Many of the wealthier citizens have to use what are called 'detectives' or 'special agents' to protect their lives and property.'

The *Lilliput* version is interesting because it is, after all, Clarke in his somewhat underrated playful mode, turning his attention to English customs and asking himself what would happen if the saucers actually landed in his native Somerset rather than in California. Hoffnung's caricatures add to this teasing. Here, it's science fiction for people who don't know much about science fiction but, probably, think they do. It's amusing, but something of a squib. The fuller version is more satirical, more focussed on the hapless alien pair's misunderstandings of things which we consider perfectly normal. The longer version also allows Clarke to turn his attention more closely to the



actual subject matter – science fiction itself. When Jimmy's mother berates the strange men who come along filling her son's head with rubbish about space travel, she's expressing what Clarke and his fellows must have heard all too often.

'It's bad enough having a good-for-nothing son in the house who wastes all his time reading this rubbish, without grown men coming along putting more ideas into his head. Men from Mars, indeed! I suppose you've come in one of those flying saucers!'

'But I never mentioned Mars,' protested Danstor feebly.

Slam! From behind the door came the sound of violent altercation, the unmistakable noise of tearing paper, and a wail of anguish.

Here, and in the sections where Crysteel and Danstor just can't get why their understanding of human culture is getting the wrong reaction, Clarke addresses his readers who know what science fiction is and how and why it works: he's addressing *us*. In *Lilliput*, poor Jimmy's chastisement would be a Philistine jibe: in *Reach For Tomorrow* a circle of friends is being teased.



# recurrent: RESONANCES

## Stephen Baxter

### Biosphere 2

2016 saw the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day that eight volunteers sealed themselves up inside Biosphere 2, a vast greenhouse deep in Arizona, for a two-year “closure” experiment, in which they would attempt to survive on their own agriculture in an enclosed ecology.

It is now forty years since Gerard K. O'Neill produced the first modern (that is, post-Apollo) designs for habitats in space. Thousands of workers in his “Bernal Sphere” or “O'Neill Cylinders” would have built solar-power satellites, and their habitats would be stepping-off points to the asteroids and beyond, in a conscious re-run of the American frontier experience. Such studies, hotly debated and often beautifully illustrated, continue to be made (I'm involved in one myself, called Project SPACE, run by the British Interplanetary Society). Biosphere 2, inspired by dreams of greenhouses in space, was a preliminary experiment in testing some of the systems such a habitat might need.

But from the beginning it was surrounded by controversy, doubt and even mockery: ‘Biosphere 2 was funded by a drugged-out millionaire, and run like a cult,’ Paul McAuley said to me (private correspondence, 27/8/16). ‘Gibson and Sterling once visited, and it gave them both the heebie-jeebies. The people inside were on starvation rations and had huge problems with CO<sub>2</sub>, oxygen and ants.’ And yet this dated last-century relic does have some lessons for us today.

Biosphere 2 had its roots in late 1960s counter-culture movements (Poynter), specifically experiments in communal living. The Institute of Ecotechnics, founded in 1969, advocated the merger of a growing understanding of ecology with advancing technological capabilities. The Biosphere 2 idea was born at the Institute's ‘Galactic Conference’ in 1982 when a presentation was made on a “greenhouse in space” habitat, echoing Tsiolkovsky's ideas of the 1890s. It was determined to try to build such a habitat on the ground. The involvement of Ed Bass, a Texan billionaire, was crucial; ultimately, he funded the project to the tune of a cool \$250m.

Biosphere 2 was to be part of an entrepreneurial venture based on the construction of enclosed systems for research

and education, and spin-off products and systems. The initial *scientific* purpose of the experiment was to study the behaviour of closed biospheres, including the presence of humanity. Unlike similar then-recent experiments by NASA and others, Biosphere 2 was not minimalist in mass or volume, or reductionist in ecological complexity. Biosphere 2 used complete ecosystems, “biomes”, as its building blocks. Under its glass roof – itself requiring pioneering technology to achieve sufficiently minimal air leakage – Biosphere 2 included several “Wilderness biomes” of different types: rain forest, marshland, savannah, desert, even ocean, with an inventory of 3800 species. These species included one primate, a bushbaby, and octopi in the ocean. It was expected that the biomes would adapt to their enclosure, through the tendency of biological systems to self-organise.

The human crew would be supported by the environmental systems, and fed solely by enclosed agricultural systems powered by sunlight. Mechanical support included systems to circulate and process air and water, to process waste, and to simulate tides, currents and waves.

The habitat was sealed overground by its glass superstructure, and underground by a steel liner. There was an extensive below-ground infrastructure called the “Technosphere”, a concrete basement containing pumps, air handlers, water storage tanks, heating and cooling exchangers, and much other equipment: ‘Biosphere 2 was the Garden of Eden atop an aircraft carrier’ (Poynter). Electrical power for pumps, fans and all other internal systems was supplied by an external Energy Centre running on natural gas.

The largest demand for energy was for cooling. It was estimated that on a sunny Summer's day in Arizona Biosphere 2's equilibrium internal temperature would be a fatal 65°C. In fact, there was a power loss in June 1992; evacuation would have been mandatory in 20 minutes if it had occurred during the day's peak heat.

Two “missions”, long-duration closures of the inhabited system, were run from 1991-3 and in 1994. Training and selection for the missions contrasted with astronaut pro-

grammes at the time by focussing on teamwork by small groups in isolation: on research ships, in the Australian outback.

Biosphere 2's agriculture was described as 'closed-loop, bio regenerative, non-polluting, self-sustaining, intensive' (Poynter). The crew worked in fields, in rice paddies and in a tropical orchard. They had chickens, goats and pigs, and their crops included beans, strawberries and bananas, rice and wheat, peanuts, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, peppers and beets. In practice absorption by the glass, shadowing by the superstructure, and in the first closure atypically bad weather, reduced the food supply below expectations, and closure was "broken" by the use of stored food. The farming was time-consuming, with unanticipated blights causing the extinction of some crop plants.

The biomes evolved in some unexpected ways. The biomass of the rainforest biome increased by some 50%, but the extinction rate overall was 20%. There was a decline in flying insects and a loss of two bird species; however there were explosions in the populations of some species of ant and cockroach, which required active intervention by the crew.

Technical flaws led to significant imbalances in the atmosphere. The oxygen levels declined from an initial 21% to 14% after 16 months of closure. The crew suffered symptoms like altitude sickness, which led to the emergency addition of CO<sub>2</sub> scrubbers and an oxygen injection system.

The crews suffered physically from the poor air and diet, and psychologically from the long enclosure. They split into factions, argued over food and other privileges, and were at times reduced to near assault – spitting for instance.

Scientifically, the Biosphere 2 experiment was controversial even before it opened. The counterculture background was always a cause of suspicion, and the "Biospherians" certainly took themselves seriously: 'Biosphere 2, scientific model, symbol, affirmation, helps us understand life, and, therefore, ourselves,' said founder John Allen in 1991 (Allen). This background led to suspicions of a lack of scientific rigour, as did the fact that the facility was so large scale and complex – 'holistic' – with a lack of controls. But the experiment had brought into contact (or collision) disciplines that had previously had little to do with each other: 'The engineers thought the ecologists flaky, while the ecologists presumed the engineers uptight' (Poynter). A science advisory committee praised the project's attempt to measure phenomena previously not examined analytically, in the large-scale workings of ecologies – until the advisory committee itself was fired in February 1992.

In the end, however, for all its flaws, Biosphere 2 did achieve its basic engineering goal, in demonstrating that a crew could survive in a (more or less) closed environment

for long periods supported only by non-industrial agriculture. To quote Jane Poynter, one of the Biospherians: 'Sure, we had our fair share of problems. But we had met a basic criterion of success – we had proven that a man-made biosphere can successfully sustain life, including human life, for an extended period of time, without crashing, or devolving rapidly into green slime'.

And thus Biosphere 2 does provide a reference point for space habitat studies. As Martyn Fogg asked (1995), 'Most basic life support on Earth comes for "free". In space it will represent an additional power requirement. How much more?' Biosphere 2, a habitat that was actually built and run, provides one benchmark, however imperfect. And the power levels used, it turned out, were much higher than those optimistically assumed in typical space habitat designs.

Its founders' entrepreneurial ambitions have long been abandoned, but Biosphere 2 itself survives. Today research continues under the auspices of the University of Arizona. It remains the largest closed-environment system ever created. And perhaps its wider legacy lives on.

One very recent space habitat study was called Starport 1 (2016), a project of the International Space University (ISU). Starport 1 would house 300 people in low Earth orbit. The aim was to build incrementally, while making a living through in-orbit manufacturing, research and tourism, towards a "space city" by 2060. the purpose of the project, as developed by the ISU students, was a striking rejection of the O'Neill thesis of forty years earlier, with 'its decades-old rationales ... [and] metaphors of the American Frontier and European colonialism ... What will likely resonate most with millennials and their successors are rationales concerning bringing societies closer together through international cooperation and the moral imperative to protect and rehabilitate planet Earth.'

Perhaps for modern generations, the motives for building space habitats will resemble less O'Neill's pioneer fantasies of the Frontier, and more the Biospherians' holistic dreams.

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# 2017 and Beyond...

Alex Bardy

As with any enterprise run entirely by volunteers, there comes a time when it feels like things are grinding to a halt – situations and attitudes change, people move whole continents, ‘real’ jobs become ever more important, and at the heart of it, like a trusted watch that keeps on ticking, there are always family matters to be dealt with be it directly or indirectly.

The BSFA is no different – since I took over all the layout and design duties back in 2012, there have been several editorial changes, various positions vacated and repopulated, and numerous efforts to ‘improve’ things. This is an ongoing state of affairs, and not something likely to change any time soon. And although we’ve had more than our fair share of ups and downs, I like to think that for the most part we’ve done a good job – this ‘family’ has been through some tough years, shall we say.

Last year was quite possibly the toughest, as I’m sure Dave Lally, Donna Scott, Terry Jackman and the rest of them will attest – at times it just felt like too many things needed ‘fixing’ and the political landscape outside our little corner of the world also experienced massive upheaval, something most readers won’t need reminding about.

Of course it’s not all bad news - personal highlights over the years include certain issues of *FOCUS* and *Vector*, some excellent *BSFA Awards* booklets, and the publication of *Best of Vector Volume 1* (edited by Paul Kincaid and Maureen Kincaid Speller) back in 2015 to name but a few.

Something else I’ve been involved with during my time here at the BSFA (and possibly an area not many people are even aware of) is an effort to maintain a digital archive of previous BSFA magazines and publications. At time of writing, this currently stands at approx. 150+ publications, some going back as far as 1977 (incl. issues of *Matrix*, *Paperback Parlour*, and *Tangent* among others), yet remains just a fraction of the vast library of previous BSFA publications over the years – so if you do happen to have some older back issues of anything BSFA-related hidden in your loft or basement, please do get in touch: [bsfamags@mangozine.com](mailto:bsfamags@mangozine.com)

Alas, one aspect of the BSFA we have struggled to keep up with –and it’s an area close to my own heart as anyone who has met me will already know– is in the production and distribution of our publications.

For me personally, every publication we produce is an achievement – it’s hard work, takes a lot of co-operative effort, and the lack of feedback invariably a bit hard to stomach at times: “We work really hard to bring these things to them, the least they could do is write to us and moan about it,” is a conversation I have had more than once with fellow BSFA members!

Something needs to change, as they say.

It’s with this in mind (and the rich history of previous BSFA publications), that we here at the BSFA have decided to try something a little different, an experiment of sorts, the like of which we hope will allow us to make the whole process a little more efficient and dare I say, reliable...

For some time now, Susan Oke has been at the helm of a strong army of BSFA readers and reviewers, and has continued to be way ahead of the rest of us when it comes to producing content on time and in readiness for each issue of *Vector* – indeed, she’s so far ahead that we’ve decided to give her lots of additional space in the form of an independent publication of her own!

The plan, as such, is to have Susan and her army of keen and hard-working writers produce content for a regular ‘review-only’ publication, giving them more room to wax lyrical and flex their writing muscles with feature reviews, more content, and of course, more opinions.

This *BSFA Review* publication will hopefully allow us to bring you a regular dose of all things review-related (at least 4 times a year) without the associated worry or headache as to when the rest of our *Vector* and/or *FOCUS* publications are ready for print.

The first one of these will be with you in a few months, hopefully accompanying the next issue of *Vector*, so please keep an eye on your letterbox! Do please bear with us in the mean time, as they say...



**Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of the *War of the Worlds*: Live on Stage (Dominion Theatre)**

**Reviewed by Duncan Lawrie**

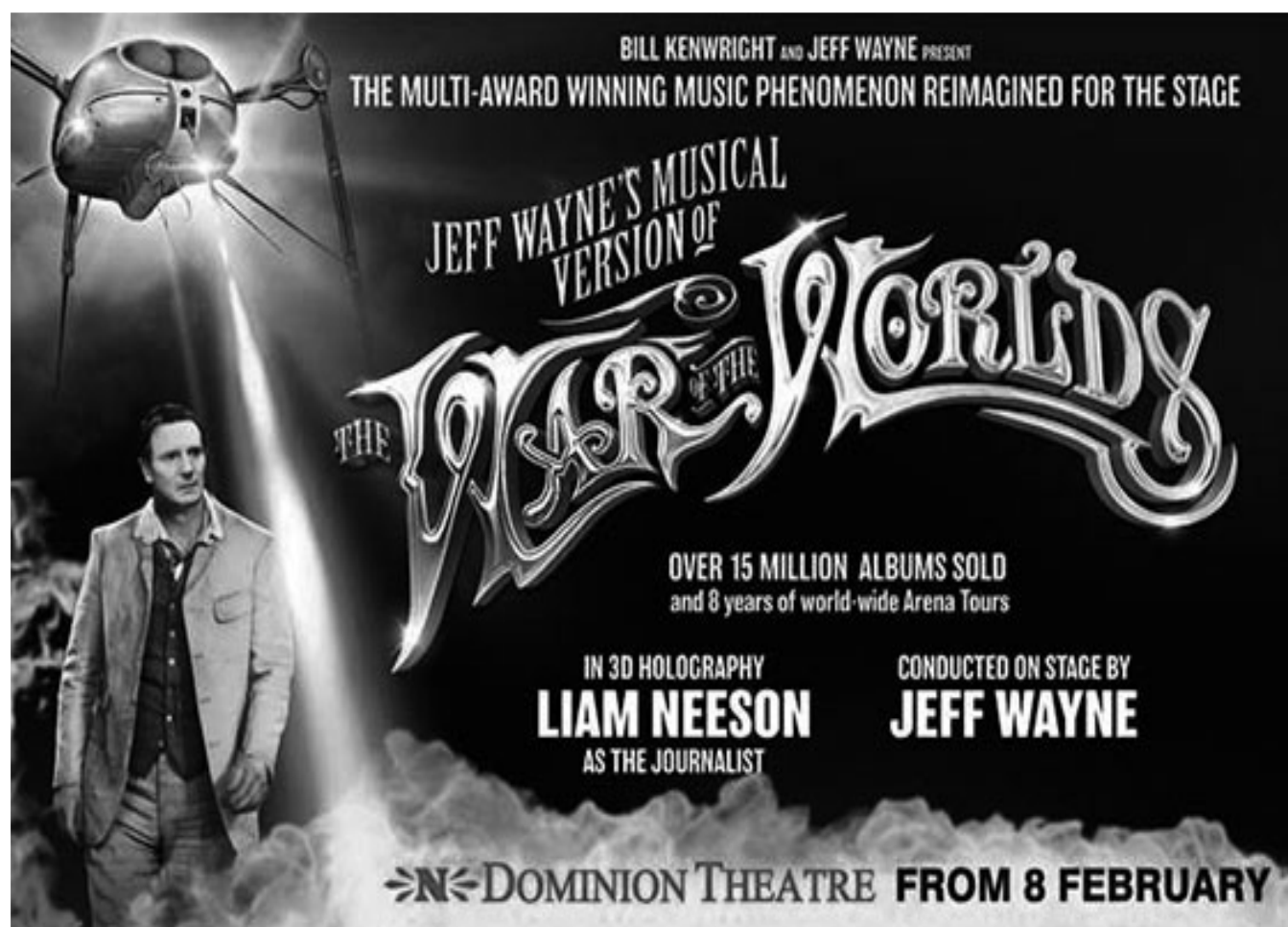
**T**hat magical overture rises with Jeff Wayne centre stage, conducting what looks like a large rock band on stage left and an equally large string section on stage right, with computer based animation projected behind them. As this piece ends the bandstand splits, moving the two sections backwards and clearing the stage for action.

And there is plenty of action. A dance troupe spends the first half of the musical transforming from peaceful Englishers into a terrified horde. Members of the cast respond to digital animations of Martian machines of death and destruction projected onto a variety of drop down screens across the width and depth of the stage. A swinging Martian heat ray zaps stage and audience with green light, whilst great bursts of fire leap from the front of the stage (the heat was palpable from my seat). There is a Martian fighting machine as tall as the stage will allow, but it looks clunky as there isn't enough depth for this monster to do more than creep crabwise across the stage. A Liam Neeson projection provides a portentous narratorial oversight of events. That this is recorded and that the special sounds come from a timely keystroke on a

synthesiser can make the band seem a little superfluous, but the event is as "live" as they can make it.

Being so familiar with the music, there is a moment of shock in each half as the soundtrack is split open to add a new song. These inevitably sound more modern but they also adjust the balance, being lead by the female cast (all the better as Madalena Alberto and Heidi Range sang rather better than the male cast, who were not in great shape in the first half). The presence of David Essex is clearly a source of delight for some of the audience, and perhaps Daniel Beddingfield provides a similar thrill for a later generation. Beddingfield's execution of what was once Essex's role of The Artilleryman is a highlight.

The dancers come into their own in the second half with two major set pieces. In the quiet moments of Earth's defeat, they appear as the red weed, writhing as it fills the earth's green spaces, ably extending the animated weed on screen. Later, as The Artilleryman describes his grand plan to start all over again, they provide a leathered up crew of diggers and builders, creating the new world underground. Mixed with the Edwardian outfits of the first act, the seventies synthetic sounds and the steampunk reading which Wells has accrued, this production is a glorious mash-up.



**Frankenstein, Royal Opera House****Choreography: Liam Scarlett****Music: Lowell Liebermann****Reviewed by Duncan Lawrie**

**F**rankenstein—a name that resonates in the Western canon, high and low. Two hundred years after its first crashing call upon our collective unconscious, Mary Shelley's best-known work mutates into yet another form: ballet. Whilst this version has to admit the many echoes in the public mind, it strips away all that it can of other creations. The programme comments, repeatedly, on creators and performers reading Shelley's book. It chooses nineteenth century costume, ignores the bolt-in-the-neck twentieth century and uses a modern, tonal orchestra to demonstrate love, pity and a desire for human advance that goes horribly and unintentionally wrong.

Ballet strips away the technical, the prolix, leaving the bones of plot, rebuilding with music and motion into a visual, emotional form. This story begins with an orphan coming out of the dark. Elizabeth grows up alongside Victor Frankenstein. The young dancers show that they are a matched pair through a pas de deux, which is repeated as they mature, declaring their love for one another. Victor goes off to University. All this is prelude—the tavern scene a placeholder for every student tavern scene—it is the anatomy lecture that brings the ballet awake. The scene in which Frankenstein's Creature is constructed and brought to life is a triumph of angular music and kinetic motion. The stage machinery steampunkifies the set with gears and crackling, arcing discharges. Steven McRae masters the art of the graceful lurch—moving as awkwardly as a made thing, as gracefully as a ballet dancer.

The second act brings the action back to the Frankenstein estate. There is no escape onto the ice, no wilderness but the wood at the back of the estate and a hint of the Alps at stage rear, where the Creature can lurk, watching as Victor attempts to live a normal life.

It is always “the Creature”. The programme does not want a monster and associates the most beautiful music with the Creature, suggesting its existence is, perhaps, an embodiment of psychological horror, rather than a literal creation. The third act reinforces this interpretation for much of its length. The setting is a ball. The Creature appears and disappears, dances as one of the crowd, as one of the invited guests, as the uninvited guest. In another tradition of horror, though, the Creature reifies; he kills all that Victor holds dear and so Victor kills himself. The Creature dies, holding his maker in his arms as the Frankenstein estate burns to the ground.

And so this ballet connects us to the key events and the emotional core of Shelley's masterpiece.





***Like A Boss* by Adam Rakunas  
(Angry Robot Books)**

**Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven**

So, cards on the table: I was the editor who bought Adam Rakunas's first published story. I mention this not to make claims upon his subsequent success, but to confess a bias on my part to the themes that animate his work. 2008's "The Right People" was concerned with social networks (presciently so, with hindsight), but there were already numerous writers sketching that oncoming iceberg; what really sold the piece was the way it situated the impact of change in the social dynamics of a community, rather than focussing on individuals.

I'm pleased to see that social focus sustained in his second novel. A continuation of the characters and world of *Windswept*, *Like A Boss* stars smart-mouthed rum distillery owner Padma Mehta, who's trying to hold together her business, her sanity and her whole hometown in the wake of a massive disruption of Santee City's fragile socioeconomic balance. Padma's backstory includes a stint as a reluctant yet righteous union organiser, and as the jeopardy starts piling up—frequent bombings, marches and riots make this a rather Zeitgeisty tale—the struggle between Padma's self-preservation and her social responsibility acts as a mirror for the fragmented and factional conflict that's tearing this city of stubborn refuseniks apart.

Or, more succinctly: *Like A Boss* is a science fiction novel which unashamedly foregrounds the social mechanics of labour movement organisation. There are those to whom such a theme will always seem "worthy" (say it with your lip curled in a sneer), and there is certainly an extent to which Santee City is a utopian creation—but that's only a problem if you choose to parse utopias as blueprints rather than thought experiments. The question at the heart of *Like A Boss* isn't "how could a unionised cane-cutting planet give the finger to corporate capitalism?", but "how do you get marginalised people to come together in the face of divisive rhetorics orchestrated by structural power?" Which isn't to say you'd want to use it as a manual for would-be union organisers, especially given how Rakunas doesn't flinch from highlighting corruption and ossified power on all sides, but it makes an accessible argument in favour of unions *in principle*, which is more than any union in this country has managed since Thatcher.

The necessities of utopian texts are manifest in the novel, and not always to the benefit of literary standards: the whole point of the secondary-world setting is that it's socioeconomically distinct from the reader's world, and so there has to be some socioeconomic exposition in order that the reader understands what's actually happening on-stage. But it's done with a deft hand, and it helps that Rakunas's prose style—dialogue-led, and replete with endearingly overblown banter—keeps things squarely in the vernacular, so it rarely feels that the characters are info-dumping for your benefit. That's in contrast to, say, Cory Doctorow's rebel-

raising YA novels of recent years, with which I feel *Like A Boss* bears some similarities: the breakneck pacing, sassy protagonists, and anti-authoritarian agenda, f'rex. But Doctorow tends more toward the didactic, zooming in on the individual's use of the technological tools of sedition and protest, while Rakunas keeps the community dynamics and rhetorical jousting of street politics front and centre.

So if you're looking to corrupt young minds and turn them against our neoliberal overlords—and why would you not?—you'll wanna give them Doctorow, so they know how to fight the system. But first you'll wanna give them Rakunas, so they know what they're fighting for.

***Rosewater* by Tade Thompson (Apex, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Polina Levontin**

*Rosewater* is Tade Thompson's second novel, set in Nigeria, which in 2066 is the epicenter of an alien invasion. Loss of sovereignty is the subject of the novel: the serious heart of a narrative that artfully masquerades as thriller, romance, and detective fiction, recalling Nollywood slapstick at some points and Dante's *Divine Comedy* at others. In *Rosewater*, we encounter aliens, homunculi, zombies, a phoenix, a griffin, and an even more mythical—a flawlessly beautiful, stiletto-wearing secret agent. Below this exuberant surface of a fast moving first person narrative, 'invasion' is examined, from both the perspective of the intruders and the colonized. The parallels of aliens landing in London, absorbing the consciousness of an Italian immigrant, and then making their way to Nigeria to establish a colonial base compresses the history of the Roman and British Empires. More presciently, *Rosewater* comments not just on the history of colonization on Earth, but insightfully portrays the scientific scenario of a possible future colonization of space by intelligent, human-designed nanotechnology—a scenario Yuval Harari finds likely in *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. In *Rosewater*, the aliens got to us first.

The ability to invade minds is the scientific innovation explored most in depth. The treatment of this subject clearly benefits from the author's scientific expertise as a psychiatrist. The aliens rely on a quantum network of nano-filaments that can transmit and store information—this *xenosphere* extends through space and time. The aliens in *Rosewater* are more like intelligent biotech mushrooms spreading through the universe, capable of mimicry and adaptation via symbiotic relationships to local forms and conditions. On Earth, they learn to take human form and develop individual, almost human-like selfhoods, which leads to human-like problems—for example, disagreements over policy towards 'natives' emerge.

Like anthropology in the age of European colonialism, a system of collecting knowledge about the colonized is invaluable to the aliens. The government



keeps the existence of this network and a few 'sensitives' who develop abilities to interact with the *xenosphere* a secret. Kaaro, the narrator, is the most skilled of these 'sensitives'. The two-way connection to the *xenosphere* means that while he can intrude into other people's minds, he is also vulnerable to being inundated with memories, experiences and feelings that belong to others, threatening his sense of identity. His psychic abilities are a burden, trapping him in jobs he hates and despises, such as interrogating prisoners for the government.

*Rosewater* is both insightful and entertaining. Thompson's understanding of both history and the human mind gives the story a solid core. The structure of the novel reflects its other theme of time-travel: several storylines starting at various points in the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century are interwoven, but in a way that enhances the understanding of Kaaro's personal journey. Kaaro lives in millenarian times—history, human history at least, is coming to an end. The apocalypse creeps with an ecological pace. Kaaro has his entire lifetime to develop understanding and perhaps acceptance of the change. Nothing forces one to reconsider how one should live than the approaching end of the world. Even though Kaaro's answers are predictable—love, kindness, and respect for liberty—it does not make them less profound or less valuable.

If *Rosewater's* vision is flawed, it is in predictions rather than analysis. Sometimes, the pessimism about the future is depressing: it is 2066 and homosexuality laws are still on the books in Nigeria and people still read Ayn Rand. The predictions can be hard to believe: would clubs in 2045 still sound like they did in the 1990s? Kaaro is not always a likable character, but his music taste is on point, if a little antiquated for his times. He listens to Miles Davis, Otis Redding and Marvin Gaye. But if I had to compile a mixtape for the apocalypse, I'd include them too.

### ***The Bookman* by Lavie Tidhar (Angry Robot, 2016)** Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

Originally published 2010 and here in a new edition with extra material, *The Bookman* is the first in a swashbuckling steampunk trilogy, continued with *Camera Obscura* and *The Great Game*. Its hero is Orphan, a young would-be poet and bookseller in a London drawn from every popular romance we've read (and a few—because Lavie Tidhar is a sharp and perceptive snapper-up of instances and characters from 19<sup>th</sup> century British and French adventure fiction—that we haven't). Britain is ruled by a coterie of alien space-lizards, Prime Minister Moriarty is about to launch a space probe aimed at Mars, and, in a scene unfortunately not followed through, Karl Marx is looking for a volume of de Sade's notorious *Histoires de Juliette*... "for a friend".



Following an assassination at a play by Shakespeare ("the first of the Poet-Prime Ministers") and an explosion that wrecks the spacecraft launch, an automaton in the shape of the late Lord Byron recruits Orphan to investigate the events, organised it seems by the sinister Bookman. Orphan, whose friend and mentor Gilgamesh has disappeared and whose lover Lucy has been killed during these events, agrees. He is launched upon a quest that will not only bring him to confront his own identity, but will bring him into contact with most of the great adventure-fiction writers of the time—and their characters.

In short, this is steampunk on the grand scale, in a universe not quite ours even by steampunk standards. What we know as America is in fact Vespuccia (from the explorer Amerigo Vespucci, whose forename gave the continent its name), and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* lurks in the

background. There are some great scenes, such as Orphan's encounter with the "Mechanical Turk" (an actual chess-playing automaton, though the historical instance involved a human player crouched inside the mechanism); and his time on the waves as a pirate. The plot is, as you might guess from the instances of automata and conspiracies, complicated by events as they unfold, and eventually the secret of Orphan's origin is revealed.

For me, the enjoyment of the book lies less in the plot than in the inventive detail which makes up the background. Steampunk itself is, by now, much more interesting as a kind of game, trying to work out who or what will appear next. Some of these games, such as the "Persons from Porlock", a group of anarchists who interrupt the cogitations of writers so that their masterpieces never appear, probably deserve a novel of their own. ("In his statement, a confused [Oscar] Wilde said that the title of his new play was to be called *The Importance of Being Something*, but for the life of him he could no longer recall what that something was.")

It's for this reason, perhaps, that I found the best part of the book the appended "Murder in the Cathedral", which appeared in *Asimov's SF Magazine* in 2014. This takes place, chronologically, early in the story when Orphan crosses over to France, though in the novel it does not appear. Here, Orphan meets Herb Wells, a young writer on his way to a convention in Paris of fans of the scientific romance. Orphan tags along with him to this "Convention du Monde", and meets, among others, Al Blackwood, Arthur Machen, M. R. James and Jules Verne, together with another automaton, E. T. A. Hoffman. He attends a Hugo award ceremony, and becomes involved in a murder mystery. It's a knowing spoof of the fannish world some of us live in, and enjoyably accessible to those for whom all of that fannish stuff is hearsay. Whether it's worth the price of admission for those who already have *The Bookman* is debatable, but for those who had been tempted but had been wavering I can confirm that a the 19<sup>th</sup> century Worldcon of our dreams definitely cements the deal.

***Ninefox Gambit* by Yoon Ha Lee**  
(Solaris Books, 2016)

Reviewed by Alex Bardy

**N***inefox Gambit* is not the easiest book to review. On the face of it, it's a science fiction military tale about a disgraced captain who has a chance at redemption by retaking a fortress full of heretics, and when looked at through this lens, it does a reasonable albeit somewhat stilted job of it. Great. Good book. Decent read. Worth a look.

Ahhh, but there's more, of course, much more...

The disgraced captain is one Kel Cheris, her crime is using unconventional tactics in a world in which the very fabric of reality is held together via calendrical mathematics, overseen by the amorphous Hexarchate—failure to believe or have faith in which could ultimately lead to that reality's destruction. Oh, and she convinces her commanders to allow her to partner with a brilliant former Shuos general and infamous tactician, Jedao: brilliant for having never lost a battle, former because he exists only as an undead digital representation of his original consciousness, and infamous for having slaughtered not only his enemies but his own army too. Of course, Jedao is also considered insane. Just saying...

I'll give you two minutes to read that again and absorb it before I carry on.

The originality of the setting, impressive world-building and general presentation of this universe/reality is done exceptionally well in places, but it's also really tough going. At times you feel like throwing in the towel because there's too much input at once, and at others your mouth is agape in awe and wonder. The attention to detail is incredible, and we get to learn some ridiculous trivia about the many and varied inhabitants of this reality, but that's also my main (and only) gripe. This book goes left, right, up and down, round and round, with seemingly no quarter or restraint, and frankly just flies all over the place.

Apart from the huge space battles and general world-building aspects, the highlights are made up almost entirely of the dialogue and interaction between the insane Shuos Jedao and Kel Cheris, although I did find myself rooting for some of the more roguish elements in the book, especially Cheris' subordinate, Nerevor.

Eventually, Cheris' unconventional thinking leads to a pleasant but not entirely unexpected twist, which is probably not so surprising if you've been following carefully.

Reading this was certainly an experience, deciding whether or not I liked it or loved it is considerably more difficult. In conclusion? It's well worth a look...



***The Destructives* by Matthew de Abaitua**  
(Angry Robot, 2016)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

**I**t's 30-odd years from now and humanity is still recovering from the Seizure. This was the day of the almost-Singularity when artificial intelligence first appeared and overwrote every piece of stored data on the planet with a single short loop of video. Things fell apart, millions died and the new-born artificial intelligences—who prefer the term “emergences”—fled to the sun. There, living in such a tight orbit that humans cannot touch them, the emergences have created their own University of the Sun and are trying to undo some of the damage wreaked by their birth—a large part of which is a ruthlessly enforced ban on the creation of further emergences.

Meanwhile, Theodore Drown lectures in “Intangibles” at the University of the Moon. Theodore has been accompanied since birth by the only emergence outside the University of the Sun, Dr Easy, a robot researching a single human life from beginning to end. He certainly

chose an interesting one: Theodore is an unfussy addict and spoilt rich kid recovering from many narcotic fixations, one of which, the drug *weird-core*, has left him with self-inflicted facial scars and permanently muted emotions.

Asked by a freelance executive to investigate a hidden data archive, Theodore finds himself inside a rare pre-Seizure virtual reality remnant that contains a strange secret connected to the onset of the Seizure itself.



The archive, and the facility researching it, are stored deep underground on the far side of the Moon, safe from prying (emergent) eyes. Theodore narrowly escapes certain death, cracks the archive's secret and marries the freelance executive. Then, when a more conventional story might have been congratulating itself on a job well done, the story *really* gets going: chasing emergences and dead scientists across the Solar System, stopping only to set up a marketing agency (the eponymous Destructives), get shot at, tortured and sucked into a biological emergence.

Despite their power and intelligence, the emergences are not omniscient gods, and their attempts to keep humanity safe following the disaster of the Seizure are flawed, resulting in a cultural stasis that isn't helping anyone—least of all the emergences. There's a sense of them as parents to humanity's children: muddling through and putting a good face on things, but not quite certain what's expected of them. For sure, anyone whose “best” includes setting up gigantic pseudo-shopping malls—“Asylum Malls”—to provide a safe and secure environment for traumatised survivors of the Seizure doesn't necessarily understand what's best for humanity.



*The Destructives* is stuffed to bursting with imagination and intelligence, served with a side order of wickedly cynical retrospection about life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. You'll never look at a shopping mall in the same way again!

***The Beauty* by Aliya Whiteley  
(London: Unsung Stories, 2014)**

Reviewed by Kerry Dodd

For years post-apocalyptic narratives have questioned how humanity strives and survives in the face of adversity and significant change. Fungal-based terrors have been creeping into recent media as a source of transmission anxiety, body horror and border crossing—such as the spores in Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach Trilogy* or Cordyceps in the video game *The Last of Us*. Aliya Whiteley's *The Beauty* asks, in the absence of women, how do men continue?

In the Valley of Rocks members of the Group seek this answer—if there is one at all. Bereft of any women due to a terminal fungal infection, which causes mushroom growth from tissue and orifices, *The Beauty* turns to the paradoxically sinister and beautiful aspects of nature in this chilling vision of the future. Nate, the storyteller of the Group, recalls memories and tales of the past, of better times and brighter days. Whiteley's novella is bursting full of lyrical, dark and exquisite phrases ranging from the fungal overgrowth in the graveyard to the tender nostalgic moments over firelight. Nate's inquisitiveness unsurprisingly goes too far, his interest in the graveyard's mushrooms leads to his apparent abduction into the earth and discovery of the Beauty.

Trapped within the ground, Nate debates whether he has died, beset by visitations of the nightmarish Beauty. Crawling out a central hole in the underground chamber, the Beauty's yellow fungoid skin, eyeless and earless visage are a creepy and looming presence that remains disturbing even by the novella's conclusion. For Nate, however, there lies an attraction in the femininity of the body, the soothing 'motherly' tone and the pursuit of pleasure. Enraptured with these fungal beings, Nate relates this discovery to the Group, until each man has matched and named their own Beauty, a development welcomed by some and perpetuating self-loathing in others.

Whiteley's novella deftly moves between gender and social critiquing, remaining poignantly sharp whilst maintaining an uneasy chill within the narrative tension. Hooked throughout, for me this was a quick yet absorbing read—a short novella that exudes sophisticated and subtle prose located most prominently in the Beauty's twisted nature of being both alluring and repulsive. Separated into four distinct, yet satisfying sections, the integration of the Beauty within the Group's community leads to revolution, strife and the prospect of a new beginning. Playing with and inverting sexual politics, the deeper the narratives goes, the more sinister the Beauty appears—for in the wake of this weird encounter, will

man really survive, or will something more developed, more hybrid and more advanced emerge from the fungal growths? Capitalising on the fear of that which sprouts and spreads its spores, *The Beauty's* delightfully eerie style is tense and sharp throughout.

***Sleeping Giants* by Sylvain Neuvel  
(Michael Joseph, 2016)**

Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite

On her eleventh birthday, Rose Franklin falls into a pit near her home in Deadwood, South Dakota. The walls of the pit are covered with strange, glowing carvings, and at the bottom is a huge metal hand. As an adult, Rose becomes the lead scientist on a secret government project studying the pit. She works out why the hand came to light when it did, and that knowledge leads to the discovery of other metal body parts buried around the world. It appears that these are the makings of a giant alien machine—but what does it do, and who can operate it?

Besides being Neuvel's debut, *Sleeping Giants* is the first novel in his 'Themis Files' series; in keeping with that name, the chapters are framed as 'files', most of which are interview transcripts. This has surprisingly far-reaching effects on the experience of reading the book. A description of the plot movements might sound familiar enough: a select team of military and scientific personnel is assembled in ambiguous circumstances (the interviewer in all these transcripts, who appears to be in charge, remains anonymous); there are upheavals and sacrifices on the road to building the 'sleeping giant'; we discover that even those in the know don't know everything.

But what's striking is the relationship that the reader comes to have with these events. There is a distance to everything, because we're reading about things happening at a remove, and often in the relatively dispassionate tone of a recollection. Even when an interviewee is in the midst of action ("We've been hit! We've been hit! ... An antitank missile. It came from a launching vehicle on the west side ... I felt that one"), there's an abstract quality to how we *feel* that action.

This also feeds into a broader sense that the events of *Sleeping Giants* are almost too large to grasp. Neuvel's protagonists do much that could be considered morally reprehensible, but it's easy enough to feel ambivalent about them when reading. Rose's discovery has such profound implications for humanity that it challenges conventional morality, and placing events at a distance from the reader underlines that.

The subdued tone of *Sleeping Giants* doesn't pay off completely. Sometimes one might wish for a more direct adventure story, and there isn't always sufficient depth of effect from the 'document collection' structure to offset that. There is also, perhaps, too much of a sense that this is only the beginning of the story—this book feels more like a prologue than a fully satisfying instalment in itself. But the quietness of it is intriguing, and I'm keen to see where Neuvel takes his series in the volumes to come.



**The 1000 Year Reich and Other Stories**  
by Ian Watson (NewCon Press, 2016)

Reviewed by L J Hurst

What has slowed down Ian Watson's once prodigious rate of output? After *Mockeymen*, a 2003 fix-up, *Orgasmachine* was a novel he had been struggling to publish in English since 1976, and then he had a co-writer for *The Waters of Destiny* in 2012. In part Watson answers the question in this new collection in the comment that follows 'The Tale of Trurl and the Great TanGent: as he has retired from Britain to Spain so he has followed a reverse rake's progress, from author to filthy conrunner'. It would be possible to imagine one of Watson's fictions describing this bi- or tri-furcation of his life. He became active in the Northampton Writer's Group that inspired new authors, some of whom collaborated with him and were published in *Butterflies of Memories* (2006); meanwhile, Watson continued with a smaller number of his idiosyncratic fictions; and thirdly, Ian Whates' NewCon Press, also emerged from this inchoate ferment. In his Spanish home Watson has become part of the local convention scene, even while he has been wrestling with others: his 'Tale of Trurl' is a pastiche of Stanislaw Lem's Trurl and Klapaucius stories, an addition to the Polish author's 'Cyberiad', written as an apology for supporting Barcelona over Wroclaw for EuroCon.

Of the eighteen stories here, the NewCon Press website emphasises just one, 'In Golden Armour'. Fans of Warhammer gaming know that Ian Watson wrote some of the first spin-off novels in the *Inquisition* trilogy and the stand alone *Space Marine*. 'In Golden Armour' is heir to *Space Marine*, though only in a parallel universe, not being allowed to use its 'background or names or weaponry' as Watson explains in an exasperated endnote. For a story that mostly describes spacesuits that can amputate your arms and legs when lacerated by alien weapons, as you continue to fight in the name of some creed that aeons should have erased, 'In Golden Armour' is a good one.

If Watson in one story has paid tribute to Lem, and in another revisited himself, then 'The Name of the Lavender' is a parody of a novelist. In his account of the investigations of the 'Conspiracy Investigation Agency' Watson may not be out-Browning Dan Brown but he is giving him a run for his money. It also reconnects Watson with his long-term interest in language, as his protagonists are in turn part of the 'Metaphor Program' who have backgrounds in 'semiotics, iconography, symbolism and allied tropes'. Of course, that does not stop them travelling to exotic parts of the Mediterranean or being swept down streams deep underground, but it does mean that his semiotics, fake as

they are, will appear more real as unseen gardeners seem to make flower clocks tell impossible times.

Many of these stories have appeared in small press chapbooks, but 'Breakfast In Bed' appeared in *Analogue Science Fiction*, and 'Me And My Flying Saucer' in *Nature*. The third story to have appeared in a major magazine is 'Blair's War', which was published in *Asimov's Science Fiction*. The Blair of the title is not the Blair of whom one thinks immediately when putting the words 'Blair' and 'War' together. This Blair is Eric Arthur Blair, but again we have a bifurcation: this Eric Blair has not become the George Orwell who wrote *Homage to Catalonia* about his time with an under-equipped militia unit; this Blair has not joined the Indian police as a young man but the British Army, and has risen to lead the interventionist forces in Spain which drive back Franco and his fascists. The hidden, almost vestigial skeleton underlying this vision must be books such as Forester's *The Gun* and Bernard Cornwell's 'Sharpe' series, describing an earlier intervention and opposition to totalitarian forces, even while Watson names another book, Adrian Bell's *Only for Three Months*, as the basis for his counter-

story of Basque evacuee children in Oxford. And even then this is the old Ian Watson, master of reverse and surprise, he hits us with a final counter-punching paragraph.

The title story can be read as a sequel to 'Blair's War', set a long time later. This describes the eponymous 'Reich', not the German Empire 'Reich' but the radical scientist, Wilhelm Reich; the man who helped developed the theory of 'sexpol' sexual politics, and later 'discovered' Orgone energy; who inspired Hawkwind's 'Orgone Accumulator' and Kate Bush's 'Cloudbusting'. After a disturbing introduction in which Watson manages to play off counterfactual against alternative history, the events he describes take place in a moon base where a few citizens of the United States of Free America have taken refuge

above an Earth where their fellow Americans are squeezed between Nazi and Nipponese empires. In Watson's history Reich died under the Nazis, instead of escaping but dying in a Federal penitentiary, as really happened, while his papers survived. The moon base kids build an Orgone gun more in hope than certain knowledge, and start to fire it, first back at Earth, then across the lunar surface at their neighbour, Festung Speer, only to incur a refugee problem they had not foreseen.

In many ways, to understand the successes and failures of *The 1000 Year Reich* you need only read the title story: it is clever, it is almost impossible to pin down, but it contains so many allusions that a majority of readers will never notice, let all understand most of them. That story and 'The Name of the Lavender' could become books in their own right. Perhaps, then, the answer to my initial question is: Ian Watson has been condensing himself.





***Dreamsnake* by Vonda N. McIntyre  
(Jo Fletcher Books, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Nick Hubble**

During the 1970s, four novels managed a clean sweep of the Hugo, Nebula and Locus Awards for Best Novel: Larry Niven's *Ringworld* (1970), Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Joe Haldeman's *The Forever World* (1974), and Vonda McIntyre's *Dreamsnake* (1978). On the basis of this company, *Dreamsnake* should be considered one of the unquestioned classics of the genre. However, while not unknown, it is clear that the novel does not have the same name recognition as these peers, nor has it been republished like the others as part of a series of classics, such as Gollancz's SF Masterworks. Indeed, this reissue from Jo Fletcher Books appears to be the first mass market paperback edition in the UK since Pan published it in 1979.

Similarly, despite being at the centre of American feminist SF in the 1970s, McIntyre does not have the same renown as Le Guin or Joanna Russ or James Tiptree Jr. She tends to feature in critical accounts of that period as a bit-player: one of the *other* participants in the 'Women and Science Fiction' symposium organised by Jeffrey Smith and published as *Khatru 3 & 4* (1975); one of the co-editors of the 1976 anthology *Aurora: Beyond Equality* in which Tiptree's story 'Houston, Houston, Do you Read?' and Le Guin's essay 'Is Gender Necessary?' were both first published. Sarah Lefanu denies trying to construct a hierarchy of feminism in her book, *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (1988), but that is nonetheless what she does by describing *Dreamsnake* as essentialist. On Lefanu's reading, McIntyre's fiction is feminised rather than feminist because, in attempting to rebalance the relationship between men and women, it implicitly accepts the naturalness of sexual difference rather than challenging the social construction of gender.

However, even if the stance of McIntyre's fiction was considered unfashionable in the 1980s and 1990s, values do eventually change. Constructivist approaches to gender are no longer automatically considered to be the most progressive or radical. While it is useful to know the reception history of a book there is no reason why that should be allowed to outweigh new readings in changed times. In this respect, the relative neglect of *Dreamsnake* is perhaps an advantage because it allows us to read it afresh as a contemporary text in a way that is simply no longer possible in the case of something as well known as, say, Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).

In fact, *Dreamsnake*, with its post-apocalyptic setting and young female protagonist, would have fitted comfortably beside Emily Mandel's *Station Eleven* and Emmi Itäranta's

*Memory of Water* on the 2015 Clarke Award shortlist. The novel begins with Snake, a healer, tending to a small sick boy as his parents hover anxiously in the background. The desert surroundings and other factors indicate a nomadic society, but crucial indicators of difference complicate our reading of this situation. For a start, in a pattern that will gain significance over the duration of the novel, there are three parents, but more immediately striking is the fact that Snake actually uses snakes to heal people. Specifically, she is able to use the rattlesnake and the cobra, which she carries around with her in a special case, to synthesise and inject—through their bites—complex drugs into her patients. She also has a third snake, the rare and mysterious dreamsnake of the title, which she uses as part of the healing process. However, when she leaves her dreamsnake with the small boy to comfort him while she prepares the drugs he needs, his parents become anxious and kill the snake. This action sets up the plot of the novel for Snake either has to return to the healers' settlement and risk being stripped of her status for losing such a valuable snake or she has to find another one somewhere.

Eventually, she decides she needs to go to Center, a sealed city that still has connections with the off-world colonies from where the dreamsnakes originate. Her arrival there, around about two-thirds of the way through the novel, sets up an interesting contrast in technology. By now we have seen that the nomadic societies and scattered townships through which Snake travelled are not as primitive as they first appeared. It turns out that Snake herself made her dreamsnake and four others by painstakingly transplanting DNA through a micropipette in the healers' laboratories; a process that she can no longer

repeat due to the arthritis that is a side product of the healers' own gene fixes. By linking such techniques to non-hierarchical ways of living, McIntyre is claiming science as the ally of progressive politics, a position that was presumably supported by her own background as a geneticist. Significantly, Center turns hostile towards her at exactly the moment she talks approvingly of cloning.

If this belief in science suggests 1970s optimism rather than twenty-first century pessimism, then it should also be considered that the science McIntyre privileges is definitely not instrumental. The world she depicts is one where all humans can learn to exercise control over their own bodily processes. Crucially to the generally egalitarian nature of the societies McIntyre depicts, it is considered to be men's responsibility to ensure contraception through 'biocontrol' of the temperature in their testes. This key social norm is supported by one that is even more fundamental: the necessity for consent in all human interactions. Snake wouldn't heal someone who didn't consent to it, let alone have sex with them. It is this relevant and timely principle, rather than its historical status, that makes *Dreamsnake* demand to be read today.





*Witches of Lychford* by Paul Cornell  
(Tor.com, 2015)

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

“Those she talked to who wanted the store to come here had hardly embraced evil. They talked about how hard things were, how they needed to shop more cheaply without spending a lot of money on petrol, how they and their relatives needed the jobs Sovo would provide. There was something of a class divide there. Those who weren’t well off tended to back the store on the basis of economic survival.”

“As Lizzie had seen so many times with victims, the harder your life had been, the harder it was to give yourself room for ethical choices.” (*Witches of Lychford*, p103)

I’m going to start with a couple of apologies. First, I apologise for starting a review with a lengthy quote, I’ve always considered this a bit of a cheat in reviews. But, it’s no exaggeration to say that these two paragraphs made me so angry—made me want to punch walls and slap innocent bystanders—that I thought it was worth pulling them out and considering them in detail. And secondly, I apologise in advance for writing a review that won’t talk much about the plot, writing or anything else within the covers of Paul Cornell’s *Witches of Lychford* except these two paragraphs and the attitudes they reveal. Actually, I’m not really apologising for that, consider it more a *warning* about what is to come.

Let me take a step back to explain how this passage fits within the story. In *Witches of Lychford* an idyllic English market town nestled in the Cotswolds faces an existential threat: the arrival of Sovo, a big-brand supermarket. But not just any big-brand supermarket. Sovo is, literally, the work of the devil and the only people that can stop the defiling of Lychford—this other Eden, this demi-paradise—are three women of various varieties of witchiness: old, new age and Church of England.

The threat represented by Sovo is not just the coming of an external evil. As the passage above makes clear, there is an enemy within. People are being seduced by evil (and its associated cash). The mayor has been corrupted, good citizens are being won over and, on the northern edge of the town, in the gloomy, hated housing estate (“the Backs”) the unethical poor are rumbling discontentedly. We don’t actually see many of these people in Cornell’s novella, his *Lychford* focuses on the middle class, but those that we do see are eminently corruptible: like Jade Lucas, who will do anything including, literally kissing the arse of the devil (or at least Sovo senior management), for a slightly better job.

Now, Cornell’s position is clear. The intrusion of this edifice of global capitalism into his England, (this precious stone set in a silver sea) is a bad thing, even without the

accompanying *diablerie*. His protagonists—especially the old witch Judith and the vicar Lizzie—are fighting to preserve the good and ancient order of Lychford. The poor, in falling for the devilment and the tainted silver offered by Sovo, are not evil, but weak, ignorant of what is really at stake, and incapable of resistance. Nonetheless, their lack of room for ethical choices has placed them in the enemy camp.

The casting of the poor as hapless victims in this novella made me very angry.

This liberal disdain for those who need saving from themselves, who need the upright to make their ethical choices for them, is the worst kind of paternalist claptrap. Yes, it’s true, that poverty can limit the opportunities for those of us who grew up on council estates, but it is also in these kind of communities where people work hardest, pull together most forcefully, to make the right choices—the right ethical choices—for themselves and their families. It is these communities that, overwhelmingly and despite the obstacles in their path, bring their kids up right, to respect each other and look out for each other and to achieve what they can. It is precisely these types of communities where people fight hardest to resist the temptations to sell their souls to the devil. And, of course, some fail. But failure is not unique to their class.

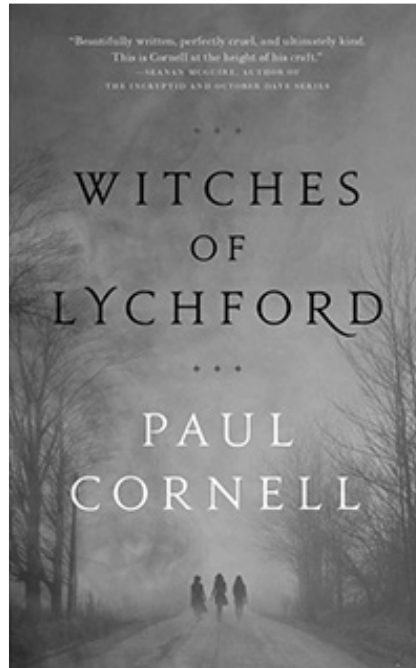
It was not the poor on council estates who brought the “austerity” that Cornell plainly loathes. Far from it. It was precisely those who had the **most** room for ethical choices—an infinite number of rooms, all *en suite* and with pretty bay windows looking over unspoilt rolling countryside—whose failures betrayed us.

The *Witches of Lychford* ends with order restored. The town has been saved from the awful evil of a supermarket and the rest of the world from the devil it would have unleashed. Lizzie, the vicar, has her faith back and the Judith, the old witch, has Autumn as an apprentice to whom she can pass her ancient wisdom. All is restored.

Except, what about those poor? Where will they work? How will they feed themselves? How will they live in this brave old world of boutiques, artisanal bakers and the expensive gentility of a Cotswolds’ dormitory?

Cornell never tells us. The people of “the Backs” are entirely absent from the denouement of *Witches of Lychford*. It’s almost as if they never really mattered—almost as if this book was really only about preserving a certain type of English house “against the envy of less happier lands” and the depredations of our unhappy present.

The *Witches of Lychford* has been well received. Its comfortable vision of middle Englishness has clearly struck a chord with readers and reviewers. I’m sure that Cornell and his novella’s heart are in the right place, but its condescension drove me mad.



**Who Wants To Be The Prince of Darkness?**  
by Michael Boatman (Angry Robot, 2016)

Reviewed by Kate Onyett

I've said it before, and I always will: comic fantasy is THE best platform for satire. When you get people laughing at the jokes, they are open and receptive to critique of the ideas being lampooned. While not a laugh-out-loud comic fantasy, Boatman's *Who Wants to be the Prince of Darkness?* is funny. It's funny because of the outrageous set-piece battles, the cinematic visuals and the sassy characterisations.

It's black-and-white, good guys vs. bad guys stuff. At heart, this is an old-fashioned Hero story: an unlikely individual is singled out to be a deciding force in a tremendous war amongst the forces of the supernatural that is threatening to tear the worlds apart. And the triggers for this apocalypse are missing fathers and failed responsibility. Satan and Yahweh have retired; their angels and demons left to run mad and run riot. Manray, the hero, is a single-minded, selfish soul because his own father failed to provide a kind and loving upbringing. Inferred as a direct result of this is the rise of the 'false' paternity: the dictator and the self-aggrandising self-help guru. Boatman covers a lot of ground with this one, and takes a large bite from the modern evils of shallow celebrity and over-saturation of television (truly, an opiate of the masses—human or supernatural) as dopes to prevent people from waking up and smelling the (literal and metaphorical) sulphur. Anyone who stands before a crowd and makes large, declamatory speeches about 'my people' and 'our way of life' should be an automatic warning.

Pretty heavy stuff, but wrapped up in a rumbustious wham-bam apocalypse of underworld questing, roller derby, demonic possessions, reality TV and southern white supremacy survivalists.

So what do we have?

A hero – check.

A heroine –check.

Sufficient angst in their backgrounds to make them 'edgy' – check.

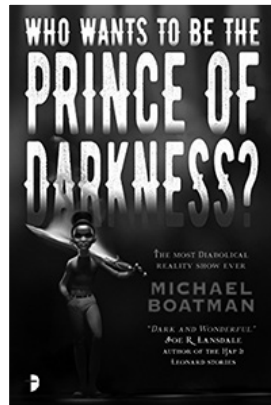
A soulful road warrior in an unlikely form – check.

Baddies – check.

Goodies, kind of – check.

BIG SFX – check, check and check.

With its slow reveal structure—battles, exposition, battle, exposition (etc.)—winding up the dramatic action in a teasing show of peek-a-revelation, this is basically a direct and bold descendent of the wonderfully cheesy 1980s action-flick. It's a bit bonkers, a bit brilliant and a devilishly good read!



**The Bronze Key, Book Three of the Magisterium Sequence** by Holly Black and Cassandra Clare  
(Corgi Books, Penguin Random House, 2016)

Reviewed by Christopher Owen

The *Magisterium Sequence* is a New York Times Best-selling middle-grade fantasy series by Holly Black and Cassandra Clare. The books are about a boy named Callum Hunt who goes to a secret school to train as a mage. While this premise sounds extraordinarily similar to many other works of the magical school genre, such as LeGuin's *The Wizard of Earthsea* books and Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series, this series starts with an interesting twist: Callum wants to fail his admittance test. Warned all his life about the dangers of magic, Callum avoids the magical community at all costs. But when he fails at failing his admittance test, he is forced to go to the school for mages, The Magisterium. Here his own preconceptions about magic and the world are challenged. With shocking twists throughout the series, Black and Clare also challenge the reader, shifting drastically away from traditional fantasy tropes while simultaneously critiquing important social issues.

A central theme of these texts is the desire to belong. In the first book in the series, *The Iron Trial*, Callum struggles with two issues: first, that he does not want to belong to the magical community, and second, when this first opinion changes, he worries that he will be unable to make friends due to his physical disability and social awkwardness. The book presents the magical community as diverse and equal in many respects, with positions of authority held by people of colour and women. At the same time, the book uses several techniques to highlight the issues of institutional ableism, meaning the systemic oppression of disabled people. The book ends with a surprising and fascinating twist, which is then followed by Callum choosing to join the community in a moment of bold, self-assurance. However, in the second book, *The Copper Gauntlet*, issues of good and evil are interrogated deeply, and Callum starts to keep track of his positive and negative traits in an obsessive desire to prove to himself and others that he is worth keeping within the magical community. In the end of this book, Callum's fears are put at ease and he begins to finally feel that he belongs.

And this is what makes the newest book, the third book of the series, so interesting. In *The Bronze Key*, Callum deals with having social responsibility and respect for the first time. While attending a formal function where he is given an important award, someone tries to assassinate him. Throughout the book, Callum struggles to live up to the social expectations that come with his newfound belonging, while also trying to identify the mysterious person(s) who are trying to kill him. This leads Callum to many new experiences, including heightened supervision, greater social emphasis placed on his dating interests, and a deeper interrogation into the institutional structures that shape his magical community. He learns about the power structures of his society, including the unfair justice system that is in place, which blurs the lines between good and evil and makes Callum question all those he trusts. Ultimately, this is a children's story in which the main character learns that he absolutely does *not* belong.

*The Bronze Key* continues the series' tradition of pushing



the confining boundaries of genre tropes and reader expectations while simultaneously contributing a social critique of real-world issues. Not only does this book interrogate different issues regarding incarceration, but also, with the mention of a character's same-sex parents, this book joins the shockingly short list (less than ten texts) of twenty-first century middle-grade fantasy novels with LGBTQ+ characters. With this in mind, it will be very exciting to see what else this series will do in its final two books; *The Silver Mask* will be released September, 2017, and *The Enemy of Death* in September, 2018.

***The Mysteries* by Lisa Tuttle  
(Jo Fletcher Books, 2015)**

**Reviewed by Gary Dalkin**

A detective novel requires a mystery. The title of Lisa Tuttle's novel (of which this is a new edition, the book originally being published in 2005) is as up front about that as can be. However, two things soon become apparent, that in this novel people are themselves 'mysteries', and that this is no conventional detective story, in that so far as anyone can tell, no crime has been committed.

Ian Kennedy is an American expat in London, barely making a living as a private detective specialising in finding missing people. On the verge of middle age and thinking about a career change, another American, Laura Lensky, asks him to find her daughter, Peri, who disappeared two years ago in Scotland.

While Peri has abandoned her old life of her own free will, naturally Laura wants to know that nothing bad has happened to her daughter, that she is alive and well. So too does Peri's one time fiancé, Hugo, a young filmmaker. Though while his is concerned, his life has moved on; he has a new girlfriend who would not appreciate Peri's return.

Kennedy, meanwhile, is driven to find those who have gone missing because of mysteries in his own past. Mysteries that have taught him how perceptions can be affected by memory, hope and fantasy. For years Kennedy remembered his father stopping the family car in the middle of nowhere, getting out, walking into a field, and then vanishing before his eyes. Later he realised this did not in fact happen. His father simply went to work one day and didn't come home, absconding to start a new life. An incomprehensible trauma came to be explained through an inexplicable fantasy. Then later still, Kennedy found that not even the fantasy was his own invention, but something he had read and later forgotten in a book. A supposedly true story which itself turned out to be fabricated. An urban legend. The layers of unreality accumulate.

History repeated itself when one day the love of Kennedy's life, Jenny, simply walked out and disappeared. That was ten years before the novel's present, and with nothing left in America, Ian relocated and made a new life in England. The

story unfolds through his investigation into what has happened to Peri, a narrative which mixes past and present, paralleled with the gradual revelation of his own mysteries: his youthful discovery of what really happened when his father left, and his later enquiry into Jenny's disappearance.

Set against this is Peri's story. The tale Laura and Hugh have to tell is one that raises more questions than can comfortably be answered, pointing to a supernatural explanation which Laura refuses to consider. And yet Kennedy is ideally placed to investigate, having been recommended to Laura by the one person who would know that this case would resonate with him because of a further mystery in his past. Once before, Kennedy investigated a missing person, the circumstances of which bore uncanny parallels to Peri's disappearance, circumstances that would seem impossible to anyone else, and for him, impossible to ignore.

And so Kennedy finds himself in Scotland, confronting a sometimes painful personal history, exploring the edges of a deeper, more universal mythological past, the ancient mysteries, clues to which might be found in various tellings and retellings of Celtic legends.

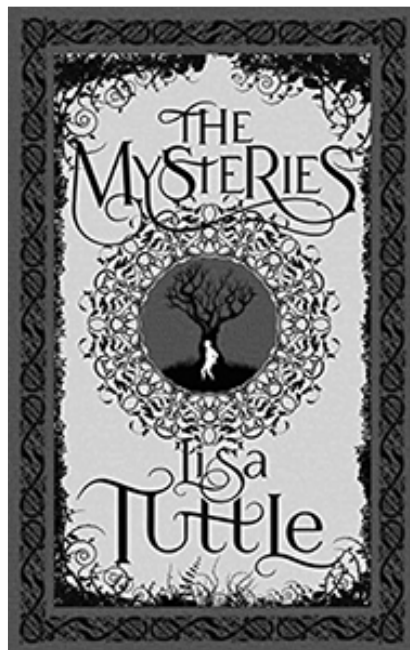
Sometimes people disappear.

Between the main chapters Tuttle inserts short accounts of various vanishings, and sometimes of people who came back. Meanwhile Kennedy, Laura and Hugh come closer to finding what has happened to Peri. The novel asks, do they each want to face the truth, and when they do, how will it affect them? *The Mysteries* is a slow burn of a book. It pulls the reader in gradually, skirting the edge of the supernatural, the numinous, and the unknown. When once it gathers pace the final third has a ferocious grip.

There are moments of great tension, of a building sense of dread and malevolence, though this is not horror or even dark fantasy. The supernatural here is simply different, 'other'. There is even a hint of some form of scientific explanation. The otherworldly characters have their own purpose, which only tangentially intersects with the everyday realm of human life. There are no true monsters

or villains. The 'other' is not some dread Lovecraftian domain, though it can be hazardous, fraught with peril. Rather *The Mysteries* is a story of choice, about engagement with the world as it is. It contains several love stories, exploring different sorts of love, selfish, sacrificial, romantic, familial, doing so while telling a story which, while not especially complex in terms of detective fiction—there are no great plots, crimes or conspiracies—takes fine advantage of the detective novel format. For what is a detective story if not a metaphor for the quest to understand the nature of the world, for addressing that which we instinctively recognise is out of kilter, seen only through a glass darkly?

And if that sounds too vague, fear not that it will all end too ambiguously for satisfaction. In this review I have deliberately avoided more than a hint of the central mysteries of the novel. But everything is lovingly resolved in a book that, alongside *The Silver Bough*, may well be Lisa Tuttle's finest achievement to date.





**ORCS: Tales of Mara-Dantia by Stan Nicholls**  
(NewCon Press, 2015)

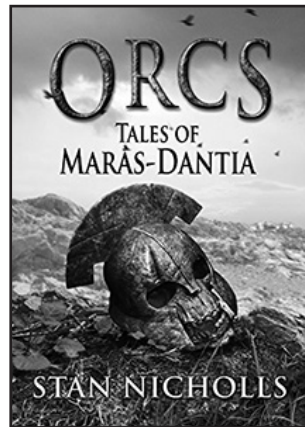
Reviewed by Graham Andrews

I must confess to a general disinterest in sub-Tolkien 'heroic fantasy' or 'swords & sorcery' or whatever. It took me a long time to get into *The Lord of the Rings* itself and I've never felt the urge to get back into it. I don't believe in Ultimate Battles between Good and Evil, Epic-Quest Trudges bore me to tears, and all those so-called Rightful Kings can fight for their own lost thrones, thank you very much. Having said that, I must also express my undying admiration for the 'Lankhmar' sagas of Fritz Leiber and the 'Lyonesse' trilogy by Jack Vance.

All of which put me off reading the 'Orcs' books, by Stan Nicholls—a very big mistake on my part. Diana Wynne Jones defined orcs as being "a newer and better mutation of GOBLINS, even nastier and always in the service of the DARK LORD" (in *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*). Very LOTR stuff-and-nonsense, to me. But Nicholls immediately points out that his Orcs series "is in no way connected to or inspired by *The Lord of the Rings*... I cannot imagine any writer would be foolish enough to try adding to those classics, or attempt to incorporate Tolkien's world into their own fiction. It's something I wouldn't dream of doing" (Introduction). Who mentioned Terry Brooks? Own up!

*Orcs: Tales of Maras-Dantia* (cue demented mental picture of orcs prancing about a village green to accordion music) is a short-story collection coda to the trilogies entitled *Orcs: First Blood* and *Orcs: Bad Blood* (1999 to 2010). Nicholls had the conceptual-breakthrough wheeze of turning orcs from cardboard cut-out villains into three-dimensional heroes—well, rough-and-ready but not-entirely-ruthless mercenary soldiers—with a history and culture and ambitions all their own. Captain Stryke leads an outfit called the Wolverines, who are effectively indentured servants of Jennesta, a despotic half-human, half-nyadd (don't ask, just find out) Queen who makes the White Witch of Narnia look like Little Bo-Peep. Maras-Dantia is populated by Orcs, Elves, Trolls, etc.—and Humans, who are making the magic go away. Bloody humans! There is an ongoing conflict between the Manis (who worship many gods) and the Unis (who worship just the one).

'The Taking' first appeared in *Swords Against the Millennium* (The Alchemy Press/Saladoth Productions, 2000), edited by Mike Chinn. 'Fit for Purpose', 'Paid in Blood' (particularly enjoyable, with its genial genie), and 'A Night on the Tiles' are originals. Nicholls has thrown in two 'bonuses': an Alternate Opening to *Weapons of Magical Destruction* (from *Bad Blood*) and 'David Gemmell Interviews Stan Nicholls about the Orcs Series'. It's all good stuff, as Alexander Armstrong is wont to say on *Pointless*, and my appetite has been well-and-truly whetted for catching up with the other Orc-ish chronicles.



**City of Blades by Robert Jackson Bennett**  
(Broadway Books, 2016)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

I don't normally read sequels, they being by definition largely antithetical to the very thing that attracts me to speculative fiction, the discovery of the new and unknown. I was originally drawn to the novels of Robert Jackson Bennett for the very reason that each one looked uniquely imaginative. I reviewed *City of Blades*' predecessor for *Vector* in 2014, writing:

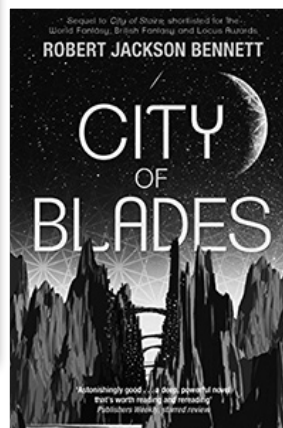
"*City of Stairs* is a rare beast in being a self-contained secondary world fantasy novel, which not only has a beginning, middle and end but a clear purpose in its design to which that end attains. ... This is not to say that a sequel would not be possible, only that it would necessarily be such a different book ... More of the same would not be possible."

Well I brought it on myself, agreeing to review the sequel, because it turns out I was wrong. Robert Jackson Bennett has solved the problem of writing a sequel where none seemed possible, by reworking *City of Stairs* with a different protagonist in a different city.

Five years have passed and General Turyin Mulaghesh, a supporting character from *City of Stairs*, comes out of retirement to investigate the disappearance of a Sapuri agent in Voortyashtan. The city's ruined harbour is being dredged under the supervision of Signe, daughter of Sigrid, former one-man army and now reluctant diplomat and pirate fighter. Again there are mysteries and artefacts pointing back to the days when six Divinities ruled the Continent, again there is political intrigue and rivalry, and again there are ominous portents that something of the elder gods remains. Something dark and terrible, for Voortyashtan was once the domain of the goddess of death.

Those who have read *City of Stairs* will see where this is going, and therein lies the problem. *City of Blades* is just as well crafted as its predecessor, but while I was able to write about that book—it is a sort of mystery novel in which the investigation is not simply into the circumstances that resulted in the death of one particular individual, but a parallel investigation into the nature of the world itself—it is simply not the case this time.

With less of the fantastical to reveal, the novel instead focuses on Mulaghesh's character, and fortunately she is an interesting, rich and complex person: a compassionate career soldier, utterly dedicated, and bedeviled by her involvement in a long-ago war crime. *City of Blades* is a well-plotted, complex, thoughtful, gripping, and even moving adventure. Many readers will enjoy it just as much as *City of Stairs*. Just don't expect the freshness of the original.



***Splinters of Truth* by Storm Constantine  
(NewCon Press, 2016)**

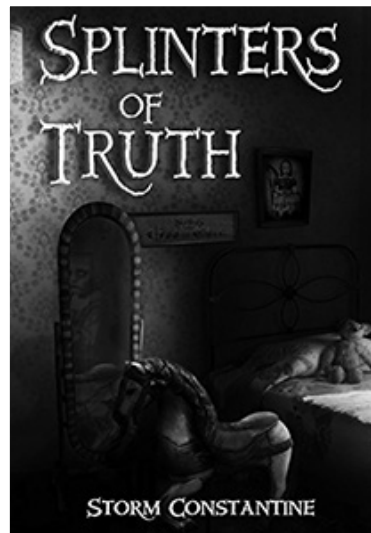
**Reviewed by Anthony Nanson**

Teaching a degree module on writing fantasy and science fiction, I once had a student who asked whether it was okay to work on a story about contemporary witchcraft, given that the supernatural content of the story was to her not fantasy but part of the reality of her own experience. It was an instance of the usual student fear of getting marked down if you don't satisfy the tutor's expectations; but her sense of dilemma raises interesting metaphysical questions. Definitions of 'fantasy' as involving things that break the rules of what's possible in the real world are premised on a consensus of materialism. Although that consensus is normative in academia, it's less comprehensive among the population as a whole, and indeed among writers. The critic Tzvetan Todorov used the term 'fantastic' to refer to stories in which the reader is left hesitating between supernatural and mundane interpretations. 'Fantastic' is an unfortunate choice of word, since you'd expect it to refer to fantasy in general, but the concept Todorov elucidated is important, since it captures also the lived experience of perceiving things that don't fit a materialist understanding of the world. In the real world the supernatural doesn't present itself in the tangibly manifest way it does in most genre fantasy; encounters with it are always open to some other interpretation.

The reason for this preamble is that many of the fourteen stories in *Splinters of Truth* are variations of the Todorovian 'fantastic'. In 'Violet's House, or Songs the Martyrs Sang', a pubescent girl perceives a ruined folly as haunted, yet her imagination seems overwrought by the kaleidoscope of emotions as she and her friends grow into women at different speeds. In 'Do as Thou Wilt', a tarot reading escalates into a magical ceremony, a vision, the possibility of lasting consequences. In 'Spirit of Place', a young girl is sensitive to the bad vibes of her grandma's house, which take figurative form in her dreams. In 'The Fool's Path', brinkmanship over a Ouija board between believers and sceptics in the charged setting of a theatre bar leads to a reckless bargain with the Fool—and a denouement that the characters debate whether to interpret as accident or magic. In 'Just His Type', the escalation of erotic attraction between a paranormal expert and a glamorous groupie appears to cross the line into full-blown gothic supernaturalism, but even here ambiguity returns in the cold light of day.

A sense of taking the supernatural seriously, as well as inside knowledge of occult subculture, comes through in these present-day stories. The fantastic is made plausible by the realism engendered by a plain prose style: 'At each site they visited, Noah had the group sit down and meditate to see if they could pick up any information from the

past, such as what the site might have been used for in ancient times.' The prose moves into a higher register in 'The Farmer's Bride', a story about a gentleman magician and a witchy woman, set in a historical period in which normative belief in the supernatural together with the mortal necessity to keep one's 'difference' secret catalyses a powerful intensity of supernatural perception: 'He could see the life force pulsing through the earth, sucked up by trees and ferns and forest grass ... A web of shining strands pushed out from his body and made union with other strands coming towards him.'



In 'Fire Born' and 'Haven'—respectively, secondary-world fantasy and fairy tale—Constantine's writing approaches the lyricism of Tanith Lee. She refers in a note to the landscape of 'Fire Born' as 'surreal', but it's not surreal in the way of Angela Carter; it's convincingly realistic yet has the subtle quality of strangeness that a well-imagined fantasy world should. 'Haven' reworks the trope of enchantment by the Queen of the Otherworld into a mini-masterpiece in which the mythopoetic logic of fairy tale permeates the entire fabric of story, setting and style: 'Where she walked, moss grew deeper into the ancient stones, ivy tumbled down from high balconies like a woman's unbound hair, and the mortar between stones grew damp and friable.' 'The Order of the Scales'

is immersive fantasy too, inspired by *World of Warcraft* gaming, but the prose here is static and unengaging.

Darkest and nastiest of the stories is 'Kiss Booties Night Night', which depicts a future society rather locked in the 1990s—much emphasis of bulletin boards and retro dressing up in late-twentieth-century gothic—yet takes the technologisation of life to a horrific extreme with its imagining of an S&M machine. The cringingly pathetic stalker in this story is one example of a tendency towards the othering of men—alongside the time-waster who shags a teenage girl in 'Violet's House'; the unfaithful video-game-addict husband in 'Do as Thou Wilt'; the viscerally creepy Colin of 'Colin's Cough'; the minor celebrity who sexually exploits his groupies in 'Just His Type'. Thankfully, there are also sympathetic male characters in 'The Farmer's Bride' and 'The Fool's Path'.

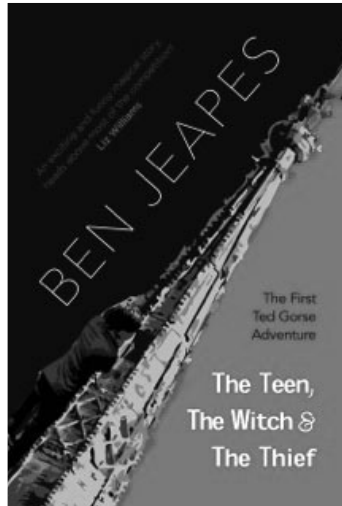
If many of the stories engage with the supernatural not merely as fantasy but as an aspect of some people's experience of the real world, the effects of that encounter tend to be unpleasant. This is partly to do with genre expectations of conflict and 'darkness', but I'm reminded of anecdotes I've heard about dabblers in magic ending up in psychiatric wards. Though I'm sympathetic to the re-enchantment of the world that a Todorovian uncertainty about the supernatural makes possible, Constantine's stories could be read as warning against playing with magic unless you know what you're doing and your heart is pure.



***The Teen, The Witch & The Thief and  
The Comeback of the King* by Ben Jeapes  
(CreateSpace, 2016)**

**Reviewed by Sandra Unerman**

**T**ed Gorse is a sixteen-year-old boy with a police caution for shoplifting, who does not get on with his stepfather. *The Teen, the Witch & the Thief* begins as he starts work in a second hand bookshop in Salisbury. The rest of the family go away on holiday, except for Ted's younger brother, who is in a hospice, in a catatonic state. Ted enjoys his job and visits his brother whom he loves. But he cannot suppress the kleptomaniac impulses he does not understand. He soon encounters the Witch and the Thief, who are engaged in a struggle to control supernatural forces capable of taking over the world. These forces have affected Ted, his family and his best friend, Stephen, in ways Ted discovers slowly and painfully. He has to choose the right side in the struggle and work out how to use his IT skills in an entirely unexpected context.



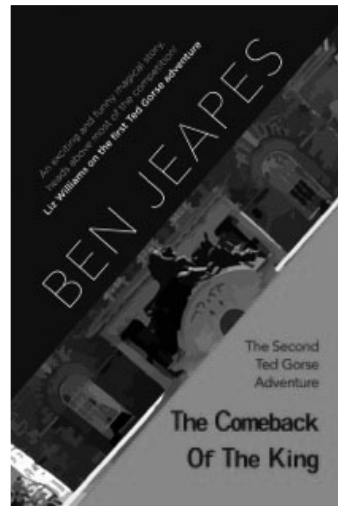
*The Comeback of the King* is a new adventure for Ted, which continues the themes of the first book but deals with different challenges. This time, he operates more independently, against an antagonist who is less actively malicious but has a more widespread impact on the local community. The King who wakes from the earth was worshipped many thousands of years ago and has plans to take back his kingdom. Unless Ted can work out how to stop him, he will cause destruction and devastate people's lives. The book does not mention King Arthur, although the characters talk about plenty of other kings. Instead, we are given a vision of the possible consequences, both comic and tragic, if aspects of the Arthurian legend really did come to life.

The books have a strong sense of place. Salisbury's streets are pictured in detail and the cathedral is the setting of some of the most important scenes in *The Teen*, while the landscape matters more in *The Comeback*. Both books evoke a strong sense of the past. In *The Teen*, this comes across early in Ted's vision of meta-Salisbury, where the different layers of the city's history are all present in the same place at the same time, 'the shops he ran past were modern *and* seventies grey concrete *and* Victorian redbrick *and* more grimy black and white timber...Every structure was distinct in its own style and they were all there at once.' In *The Comeback*, we are in the King's point of view as he wakes on the grassy mound that was once Old Sarum, and throughout the book as he notices the changes to the land and the people. We are made aware both of the

astonishing prosperity of modern Salisbury by comparison and of its ecological impact. The river floods when the King calls his Queen out of the water and she breaks down the weir.

The magic in these books is closely interwoven with computer technology, a theme declared early with the slogan on Ted's T shirt 'Geek and Proud'. Ted and his friend Stephen design their own computer programmes, which are critical to the methods they eventually use to engage with the supernatural. The battle in *The Teen* is for control of the Knowledge, a pool of magical expertise. This is visible to Ted in Salisbury Cathedral as 'a vortexy, worm-holy, twisty kind of thing that people would step into in all the right kind of movies.' In *The Comeback*, the King's magic has nothing to do with computers but Ted has to think in IT terms in order to find a way to fight him.

The books provide plenty of action. Some of the most powerful scenes do not involve magic, as when Ted and his friend Zoe have to evacuate children from a fire at the hospice, and when he has to climb down the spire of the cathedral. The magical battle in *The Teen* feels too much like a computer game, but there is a more interesting use of magic when Ted tries to restore his brother's mind through gathering memories of him from the Knowledge.



Ted is an appealing hero, despite an irritating tendency to get into unnecessary trouble. Of the other characters in both books, Malcom, the bookshop owner, and Barry, Ted's stepfather, come across the most strongly, both interesting in their different ways.

The female personalities made less impression, although they do have important roles to play, not just as subordinate to the men.

From the outset of *The Teen*, it is clear that a supernatural struggle is going on. It is not so clear, however, who is on the right side. Ted engages the reader's sympathies but he makes mistakes and our doubts about who to trust and how far continue at different levels through most of the book. In *The Comeback*, the complexity is of different kind, because the King himself is charismatic figure to the reader as well as to his subjects. In both books, the excitement is increased by these uncertainties.

The fantasy in these books appeals partly by the way it draws attention to the realities of ordinary life, to Salisbury as it is now compared to the land of forests and rivers the King once knew, for example. But the fantasy is also powerful in the way it makes Ted face up to crucial moral and emotional choices.

These books would be a good introduction to modern fantasy for young computer enthusiasts and are a fun read for anybody.





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