

# Vector

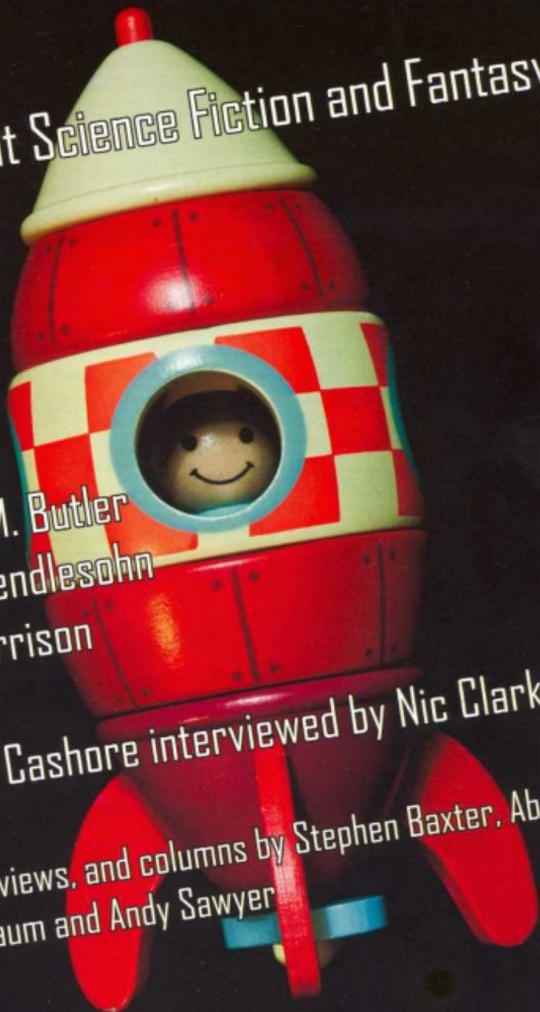
The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy

Essays by  
Andrew M. Butler  
Farah Mendlesohn  
Niall Harrison

Kristin Cashore interviewed by Nic Clarke

Plus reviews, and columns by Stephen Baxter, Abigail  
Nussbaum and Andy Sawyer



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The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

## Contents

- Torque Control**  
**No Easy Choices: Some Thoughts of an Adult Reading Children's and Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy**  
Andrew M. Butler
- Writing a Ruritania in a post-colonialist world 11**  
Farah Mendlesohn
- Taking Control of the World 16**  
Kristin Cashore interviewed by Nic Clarke
- Nicholas Fisk: Ten Short Novels 19**  
by Niall Harrison
- First Impressions 30**  
Edited by Martin Lewis
- Resonances #56 41**  
by Stephen Baxter
- Foundation's Favourites: Catseye by Andre Norton 43**  
By Andy Sawyer
- Progressive Scan: The Sarah Jane Adventures, Season 3 45**  
by Abigail Nussbaum

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# Torque Control

It's taken me a while to feel even vaguely up-to-speed with the contemporary boom in Young Adult science fiction and fantasy. I blame the fact that it wasn't a big part of my own reading experience as a young adult. A few years ago, when filling out the survey Farah Mendlesohn was conducting as part of her research for *The Inter-Galactic Playground*, I found it impossible to come up with five authors of sf for children, total, never mind five that I liked and five that I disliked. The two I managed to name were John Christopher and Nicholas Fisk, but even there I read only a scattering of their work; essentially the *Tripods* books for Christopher, and *Trillions*, *Grimy* and *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair* for Fisk. The most famous ones, in other words. When I set out to read Fisk for my essay later in this issue, much of it was new to me.

Elsewhere in this issue, Andy Sawyer picks Andre Norton's *Catseye* as his Foundation's Favourite, but I read no Norton, or Heinlein juveniles, either. Nor was it only children's and YA sf that I missed; the survey excluded fantasy, but I wouldn't have done much better there, not having read Diana Wynne Jones, or Susan Cooper, or many others save Enid Blyton's *Faraway Tree* books and plenty of Roald Dahl. Most of my childhood reading was decidedly non-fantastical – Willard Price, Johanna Spyri, Laura Ingalls Wilder – or at least of the kind where fantasies were clearly fantasies, as in the case of the author I look back on perhaps most fondly, Arthur Ransome.

Instead, I came to genre via Dragonlance, Games Workshop, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C Clarke and John Wyndham, and then later Final Fantasy, Stephen Baxter and Kim Stanley Robinson. Some of those authors I encountered via school – we had *The Chrysalids* as a set text, for instance – others via reviews in *SFX* and, later, *Interzone*. I was never one for reading my way through a library indiscriminately.

And then, the best part of a decade ago, I read Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, the first *Harry Potter* and the first of Philip Reeve's *Traction Cities* series (but no more of either series), and noticed a few more interesting-looking YA books like Malorie Blackman's *Noughts & Crosses* series popping up – but, like many people reading this, I imagine (although unlike many others, I'm sure) never really investigated that section of my bookshop in depth until suddenly everyone was talking about Scott Westerfeld and Justine Larbalestier and Holly Black, and Kelly Link was writing YA stories, and so were dozens of other genre writers, and there was clearly something Going On. And so I started paying more attention.

As Andrew M. Butler notes in this issue's opening article, it's a fool's game to attempt, as an adult, to

judge "what real children do read", especially when you don't have any children yourself. But of course, with the best of contemporary YA, you don't have to do that. It's become a cliché to observe that the books can be as good as anything you find on the grown-up genre shelves, but the sentiment is not untrue, albeit I'd finesse it by saying that on average there's more stylistic and narrative similarity between YA genre books than there is between adult genre books. At one point, I read four books in a row that all looked quite different, and certainly all had things to recommend them, but which all featured their first-person narrator fleeing their home village in the first 100 pages. The similarity was no predictor of quality, I should say; one of the books was Frances Hardinge's excellent *Gullstruck Island*, which Farah Mendlesohn considers in comparison to Terry Pratchett's *Nation* as a post-colonial fantasy.

Another of the four, Patrick Ness' *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, inaugurated what seems clearly to me one of the most significant science fiction series of the last five years – the third and final volume, *Monsters of Men*, is just out – telling the story of a boy coming of age on a colony planet where all the women are dead. (It went on to deservedly pick up the Tiptree Award, in a year when both the Nebula and Hugo also went to YA works, by Ursula K Le Guin and Neil Gaiman respectively.) What Ness and Hardinge have in common is what so many of the best YA writers offer: a commitment to a clear, distinctive, often stylistically ambitious voice. Kristin Cashore – interviewed by Nic Clarke in this issue – is another voice worth listening to, not least for the impressive way in which she renders relatively conventional fantasy tropes (the superpowered young heroine) as something fresh and distinctively exuberant.

We shouldn't forget that children's sf and fantasy comes – increasingly, perhaps, but has always come – in media other than books. As one of the protagonists of Bill Watterson's magnificent *Calvin and Hobbes* put it, there's treasure everywhere! Back in *Vector* 227 (the last issue to be devoted to children's sf; the one before that, issue 140, is perhaps most notable for illustrating that the battles fought for legitimacy don't change significantly even over 22 years), Gwyneth Jones explored an area we weren't able to cover in this issue, in her essay "The Games" – well worth re-reading, or seeking out in Jones' most recent essay collection, *Imagination/Space*, from Aqueduct Press. Here, though, Abigail Nussbaum takes a look at *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, and wonders what a children's spin-off of a family-oriented show has to offer, while Stephen Baxter – himself author of several fine YA books, most recently *The H-Bomb Girl* – revisits the golden age of *Eagle*. I wonder what the next YA issue of *Vector* will cover, ten or twenty years from now?

# Congratulations to the winners of the 2009 BSFA Award:

Novel:

China Mieville - *The City and the City* (Macmillan)

Shorts:

Ian Watson & Roberto Quaglia - *The Beloved Time of  
Their Lives*  
(*The Beloved of My Beloved*, Newcon Press)

Art:

Stephan Martiniere - Cover of *Desolation Road* by Ian  
McDonald:

[http://www.angel.org/will/site/files/ian-mcdonald-  
desolation-road.jpg](http://www.angel.org/will/site/files/ian-mcdonald-desolation-road.jpg)

Non-Fic

Nick Lowe - *Mutant Popcorn*, *Interzone*

# No Easy Choices: Some Thoughts of an Adult Reading Children's and Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy

Andrew M. Butler

There is a moment in every science fictional relationship when definitions are compared: it's the critical equivalent to dogs sniffing each others' genitalia to say hello, an index of what the other person's viewpoint on the genre is worth. Some may hold out for cognition and estrangement, others for hubris and nemesis and still others will look where someone or other (perhaps Damon Knight, perhaps John Clute) is pointing. But even after these differences are safely negotiated, there waits another layer of complication – is the genre the same genre across the different age groups? In other words, what is children's science fiction?

There are, arguably, enough problems in defining "children's literature" – literature being a relatively recent catch-all term for prose fiction, poetry, plays, writing with some kind of aesthetic dimension, and one which includes or excludes various genres largely according to taste (and it didn't even warrant an entry in my dictionary of literary terms). "Children", whilst at first sight a category that must have been with us since the first hominid speech, seems to have its origin as a concept we recognise in the definitions of the Enlightenment, and the growing need to distinguish between adults and non-adults in working practices. That apostrophe, though, in children's literature, assuming a stable notion of both terms, demands a level of ownership which reality will not grant it – there are simply too many editors, publishers, shopkeepers, teachings, librarians and parents standing between children and their reading to allow it to belong to them. A librarian may choose not to stock a title, or not to lend it – a parent may wish to object to the title, necessitating its removal, or, even more insidious, the adult may check the book out, refusing to return it, in the interests of protecting children with other, less "enlightened", parents.

Perhaps we should be pleased that books can still be considered so dangerous.

It seems that everyone wants to have a say about what our children read – although I hasten to disassociate myself from that "our", since I do not have, nor am I likely to have, children of my own. I read voraciously as a child, but I am amazed (and sometimes saddened) by the titles I had clearly

missed, especially as I read through the largely safe and innocuous categories of science fiction and fantasy. In this essay I want to outline some of the mechanics of the workings of children's fiction, especially at the young adult end of the spectrum (I will not speak to picture books, or anything aimed at a reader notionally less than twelve), even as I am probably not that interested in what real children do read. I am simply one more reader. At the same time – by focusing all too briefly on two young adult science fiction novels – I want to put the case for children's fiction which would push at the taboos set by adults supposedly on behalf on their children, which I suspect speaks more to adult's own anxieties than to the authentic protection of minors.

The boundaries of science fiction for children – dispensing with a term that might indicate ownership – are peculiarly porous, even as we largely forget about the science fantasy hybrids of C.L. Moore, Leigh Brackett and Michael Moorcock, among many others. Not only do authors of works aimed at a child audience move between genres as part of their publishing careers, but they frequently move between genres within the same work. (Are adults, who have learned the rules of a number of genres, more conservative when it comes to intergenerification? At the same time, no work ever belongs to just one genre – perhaps fiction aimed at an adult audience makes a better synthesis of the numerous elements.) In part it may be a response to the developing psychology of children – a greater part of their experiences are by definition with the unfamiliar, the estranging, so perhaps there is a sense of the fantastic in everyday life. Equally, children are learning all the time, although this might not be cognition in the same scientific, Baconian method as envisaged by Darko Suvin in his formulation of science fiction as cognitive estrangement. But there is certainly a series of learning encounters with the previously unknown – even if the child's perception of what the empirical environment ought to be is different from that of an adult.

There has long been a tension in fiction for children between escapism and education, although many writers have made attempts to link the two. To speak first of the obvious fantasy and *sf*, some of

it involves a moment of transition – up the chimney, down the rabbit hole, through the mirror, into the wardrobe, under water, into the air – which takes a character from the mundane world of the everyday into a fantastical realm. There is a clear demarcation between what is real and what is imagined, and often these narratives are framed by the revelation that it was all a dream, eliding the distinction between fantasy and fantasising. On the one hand, the opening gesture allows for a willing suspension of disbelief, as a familiar type of character and our substitute as readers undergoes an estranging experience; on the other hand I always feel that the dream explanation – with its preservation of scientific knowledge against the frequently irrational, I admit – is a betrayal of the art of fantasy. The escape is strictly time delimited; when I was a child I saw as a child, and now I have put away childish things. In Tzvetan Todorov's terms the "and it was all a dream" reveal would be allied with the uncanny, where unlikely events turn out to have natural explanations. What ought to be an opening out of horizons – what might be considered a conceptual breakthrough in science fictional terms – all too often ends up as a closing down of the frontiers.

Then there are the fantastic narratives that seem to take place on the edges of the real world – in which the Todorovian marvellous is possible. The Wombles, the Nomes, the Fraggles and the Borrowers go about their everyday lives, unseen by us, often picking up on humanity's detritus in order to make their own lives more comfortable. (It strikes me that Beresford's Wombles give out a rather mixed message about environmentalism – on the one hand these proto-ecowarriors are poster boys [occasionally poster girls] for recycling, on the other hand if we all stopped dropping litter, how could they survive?) On occasions the creatures under the carpet, or in the walls, or at the back of the wardrobe, or under the bed interact with humans, or become aware of a species living beyond their everyday ken – a neat parallelism (or rather reversal) of our continual discovery of there being worlds of germs and bacteria, atomic and subatomic particles and, more prosaically, the realisation that life goes on out of our sight – but largely the duration of the narratives is self-contained, with only occasional interactions with the human.

Some of these children's narratives beg rather than answer the question of their ontological or diegetical status – how "real" we are meant to assume these events are. The animals of *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) have qualities we can associate with moles, voles and badgers, but by the time there is a toad driving a car or flying an aeroplane a move seems to have been made to a more human scale. The narratives of *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) and *The*

*House at Pooh Corner* (1928) feel very self-consistent and the Hundred Acre wood feels a fully imagined and realist location – and we largely forget the framing narrative of these being tales about toy animals being told to a child, albeit toy animals that will interrupt the narration. The enchanted places of the narrative feel both more magical and more solid than the Edwardian nursery.

For the duration of each story a pocket universe is established – which allows an isolation of a limited group of characters who are operating within limited conditions. Anything not appropriate to the story can be forgotten about and airbrushed out of consciousness. This fantasising is not limited to narratives which are self-announcedly fantasy. Andy Sawyer has long ago pointed to the peculiar level of fantasy and fantasising in the books of the *Swallows and Amazons* sequence (1930–1947) written by Arthur Ransome. In some of them the messing around on boats becomes caught up in the children's own imaginings to become battles between pirates, in others a line is crossed which takes the children into a territory which is more akin to the novels of John Buchan, even down to the Scottish landscape. Are these real adventures, or unacknowledged campfire tales? (It would be a shame, once more, if these were but dreams.) Equally the school story – especially the boarding school story – locates its characters away from the real world with a ready made set of allegiances, alliances, rivalries and enmities to explore – in the house system, in the rules of the time table, in sports (initially outside of the official curriculum), in fagging and bullying, in the shades of the class system and in teachers whether sadist or easy touch. From the forerunners to Earthsea to the imitators of Harry Potter, magic has not been needed to create such fantastical retreats – for some British authors the school story was the nostalgic or horrified recreation of a childhood experience, although the post war generation were marked by the experience of the Eleven Plus and moved within the lower stratum of the grammar school as an escape from working class life which brought its own battles. The increasing dominance of the comprehensive school system in all areas of England (save for a few vestiges of feudalism such as Kent) meant that stories featuring schools largely lost the boarding element; it is surely the most conservative of nostalgias that has made Hogwarts possible. (The American school system, at least as refracted through the media, seems to have its set of fraternities and proms as sophisticated as any Tom Brown's activities.)

The boarding school and the passage to another pocket universe are two means of achieving the same goal – getting rid of the parents, and perhaps especially getting rid of the law of the father. Parents

are there to protect, feed, clothe and educate their offspring, and in a sense bring them up to be future representatives of themselves. It does not necessarily need a detour into Freudianism and the Oedipus complex to note that there is a tussling for power between the child and the parents – parents are there to permit and forbid – paradoxically to infantilise their charges even as they usher them to adulthood. Whether it is the father as representative of the law or mother as index of family morality (Coventry Patmore's the angel of the house), the parents mark a threshold of prohibition which needs to be crossed if the call to adventure is to be heeded. If child protagonists are not exiled, then it is often necessary to lose one of the parents – with a resulting tension from a new set of laws of morality which the substitute parent brings with them.

The morality which underlies much of the classic British children's fiction is frequently a Christian one – in the Pilgrim's Progress of *The Water-Babies* (1863), say, and the Christ allegories of the Narnia books (1950-1956). The shift in attitudes toward the characters in European fairy tales as collected by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, and the Grimms' rewriting of them over the decades in *Household Tales* mark the degree to which shared oral tales for all ages become moral lessons for the preteens – and the move to rewrite such tales by authors such as Josephine Saxton and Angela Carter represent a return to some closer to original intentions. The process of making these narrative anodyne did not begin with Disney, although the American conglomerate accelerated the process with its reach, impact and imposition of apparently universal norms to the stories. The shocked response to Margo Lanagan's "The Goosey" (2008) by a critic such as Dave Truesdale – "a retelling of the Hansel and Gretel story. Lanagan turns this traditionally gruesome fairy tale into one of child porn (depending on your point of view) and repeated homosexual rape of a child (Hansel)" [1] – makes problematic assumptions about the intended audience of that story, and about the nature of fiction not aimed at adults.

A common default assumption is that children's fiction will present its protagonists – usually children, or child analogues in the shape of talking animals – with a series of choices of a greater or lesser morality, sometimes openly, sometimes discretely. If the right choice is made, then there will be positive consequences, if wrong then the character or their friends are punished by the progression of the narrative. In the words of Oscar Wilde, "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means." The same morality is at work today in television aimed at non-adult audiences, including teen audiences: Buffy and her friends face

stark consequences for any sexualised behaviour, or indulgence in drugs or alcohol. A single hit leads to addiction, a single sip to alcoholism. Even in Philip Pullman's work – a body of work seemingly calculated to enrage the mores of the *Daily Mail* reader – sexualised characters under the age of eighteen are devastated by their experiences, and death or exile often results. One side effect of this is the tendency for the happy ending – perhaps even the eucatastrophe of Tolkien's theorising on fairy-stories, which is indicative of notions of grace and salvation. In extreme cases the character suffers selflessly like Job through the narrative, to be rewarded with a move to paradise in the form of a comfortable life and a cosy existence. Robert Cormier, at the height of his powers in the 1970s and best known for the (realist, albeit it's not that simple) *The Chocolate War* (1974) and *After the First Death* (1979), argues in an interview that "life doesn't present happy endings, and [teachers and parents are] preparing students for life. How can they hide unhappy endings from students? I sometimes look upon my books as maybe an antidote to all the phony happy endings we're presented with, which seduce people into thinking things are easier out there in the world than they actually are" [2]. Because, after all, if we lie to our children about the ways of the world, there will come a time when they discover that we are crying wolf.

The late 1960s saw the emergence of a number of writers of what was quickly labelled Young Adult Fiction – although it was also a category that was more visible in the United States than it was in the United Kingdom. Note that the term – problematic though it is – dispenses with any apostrophe of possession, and in some cases has been even harder to access than fiction aimed at a child market. This is probably aimed at a market roughly between the post-pubescent to the postgraduate, and probably finds its perfect audience in the 15-18 age group, although it may be appropriate for some younger or inappropriate for some older readers. People mature at differing rates. This fiction features characters on the edge of adulthood, facing real problems – families, parents, siblings, divorce, death, school, teachers, jobs, violence, health, drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, sexuality, homosexuality, race, gender, gender roles, sex roles, puberty, class, money, sport, warfare, law, peer pressure and so forth – ironically a whole set of areas which adult sf largely avoided dealing with prior to the taboo breaking of the 1960s New Waves. In fact, a case could almost be made – note my use of "almost" – that adult sf emerges as a result of some materials being assumed to be too strong for the juvenile market: I am thinking in particular of the positioning of *Starship Troopers* (1959), felt to be too violent or too militaristic for

children.

Young Adult Fiction appeared to edge away from out and out fantasy – although not from fantasising – although it would still include schools (*The Chocolate War*, for one) and still require the removal of the parents for the adventures to take place. Key writers of the early form include Judy Blume, S.E. Hinton and Robert Cormier on one side of the Atlantic and Aidan Chambers, Robert Swindells and Robert Westall on the other. Many of their books were labelled as political, because they dealt with contemporary issues, and refused to compromise their narratives in favour of a sentimentalised or soft endings – indeed British writer Robert Leeson openly admitted his allegiance to Marxism. Cormier, again, sees the tough ending as a duty to the reader and to the book – “I figure that as a writer I owe

the reader a book that is true to itself, which is realistic in the terms that I've presented it, and holds their attention. I don't think I owe my readers happy endings. I think I owe them endings that are the inevitable result of the events that occurred earlier” [3]. If we are shocked at a story apparently aimed at a non-adult audience which borders on the pornographic and features homosexual rape, it is largely because Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy has not dared to be so tough. Homosexuality has not been a taboo in Young Adult fiction – it is there in a number of Aidan Chambers's novels published over the last thirty-five years, as well as in a number of books by Brent Hartinger and Francesca Lia Block, David Levithan's frankly utopian *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) and Paul Magrs's frankly troubling *Strange Boy* (2002) – the latter's protagonist, whilst utterly convincing, seems uncalculated to appeal to a Young Adult audience as he is so young. But there are a few Young Adult titles that have the rigour and avoidance of any conventional charge of escapism, whilst being sf.

I would like to close by considering two of the YA sf titles that do meet such standards. It is perhaps no accident that both deal with nuclear war – a clear and present fear up to the end of the Cold War. Such an apocalypse, after all, gives a justification for getting rid of any adults that would be there, standing in the way of the protagonists' agency, and is random enough to spare a handful of adults to act as antagonists. The pockets of radiation free

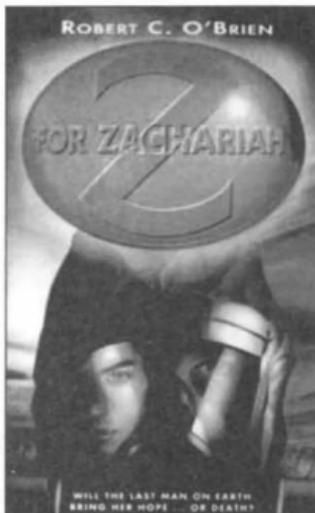
landscape are very much equivalent to the pocket universes in earlier fiction.

In Robert C. O'Brien's posthumously published (and finished) *Z for Zachariah* (1973), the war is already over, and Ann Burden ekes out a basic existence in an otherwise deserted valley in rural Pennsylvania, where two streams run through the landscape – one bringing life through clean water, the other bringing radioactive pollution. Her surname is no accident, although the weight on the shoulders it invokes is perhaps the least subtle aspect of the novel. She has been separated from her parents, indeed all of humanity, before the start of the narrative, and believes that she is likely the last human left alive. Into her rural, quasi-Robinsonian, but everyday, paradise comes a man – Loomis, although it is a while before she learns his name, and it seems more

likely that the name is meant to feel like a kind of overbearing threat. Loomis has survived in a bunker and, thanks to a radiation suit, has managed to make his way slowly across the landscape with a Geiger counter. But he makes one bad calculation: he fails to test both streams before he bathes, and plunges into the radioactive one.

Whilst Ann eventually emerges from hiding to talk to and then nurse him, we as readers realise what she does, that he has been given a life-threatening dosage. While the world had been stripped down to a young teenaged girl and her dog, the emergence of a last man does not mean salvation – this is not the emergence of some kindly Old Gentleman as seen in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899) or

*The Railway Children* (1906) who will right wrongs and restore the household fortunes. Instead he is another portent of doom, a closing down of hope. Adam, the first man, was expelled from paradise in Genesis for crimes involving curiosity (and, of course, sexuality), now the last man, Zachariah by default and a stitched abecedarian sampler, has returned to paradise, and will begin to rot. With this last couple comes sex, or at the very least sexual desire – and Loomis tries to force himself upon her. This breaks the rules of what we might think would be in a children's sf novel – sex being a taboo that Young Adult novels cross. Even today such a topic is controversial – compare the shocked reactions of some more sensitive readers to the scene between Lyra and Will in Philip Pullman's *The Amber Spyglass*



(2000) and the novels of Melvin Burgess, especially *Doing It* (2004), several generations later. Even worse is that this is potentially between two people of different generations – Loomis ought to be *in loco parentis*, even if he is not actually a father. He should be looking after her – but the bomb has reversed the order of things.

I was surprised, when rereading *Z*, that a rape did not in fact take place, for I was sure I remembered it, but the scene as written is shocking enough. The consequences are inevitable – Ann has to move from house to cave, from the safety that should be provided by a family to the safety she has forged for herself. Brian Moore, discussing the motif of the valley, especially the valley of plenty, in O'Brien's works, notes that "If we dwelt originally in a paradisaical garden from which our own curiosity expelled us, how fitting that we should yearn for a second garden in which we shall be respected as individuals and where the natural resources of the land [...] will be respected too" [4]. But Loomis is no respecter of Ann, she is at best his help mate, and she has lost ownership of what she had inherited through the death of her family. Loomis is both victim (of a nuclear war he has not started) and villain (his survival has been at the cost of others'). It is difficult not to assuming a gendering here of guilt and innocence. Long after reason would suggest she should abandon Loomis to his illness, she gives him half of what she eats. Whilst the ending does leave some scope for those who want to hope, O'Brien seems to have set the narrative up so that it cannot end well. There is no magic wand to waved or reset button to be hit.

Robert Swindells's *Brother in the Land* (1984, with an additional final chapter 1994) starts shortly before the outbreak of a nuclear war, and like *Z* is a teenager's journal of the aftermath of a war which no one has won, and it is not clear who started it. Danny Lodge lives in Shipton – somewhere between the real world Shipley and Skipton – with his parents and his brother Ben, and is out in the countryside when the bombs drop. His mother is killed outright, but his father survives at first, along with a limited amount of food. The comfortable everyday life is peeled away layer by layer: the removal of the angel

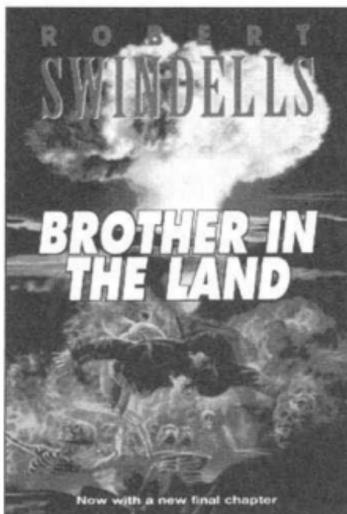
of the house perhaps instituting a holiday from responsibility and duty at first, so it can almost be played like a game, especially for the younger son. The law of the father is here complicated by the removal of one element of the father-mother-child triangle, and – if one believes in such things – the Oedipal battle is suspended. In any case, the potency of the father is undermined by such events being way beyond his control.

The survivors scratch a basic living, but then face various threats from the surviving authorities and then an occupying Swiss army. Soon it feels as if it would have been better for the Lodges to have died outright – the weaker members of the communities are culled in what had been presented as a hospital, and some of the survivors have turned cannibal.

Even the limited protection of their father is removed as that character is killed off. Danny has to face some harsh choices in how he behaves in order to keep himself and his younger brother alive – rather more than Ann, but only because there are more people to negotiate with. But, as Robert Leeson argued in a different context, "There are no simple choices. Ask any child who has the chance to stop some obnoxious bullying by telling teacher whether life's a straight knock-down fight between good and evil" [5]. It is a consoling act to say that playground bullying can be resolved by adult intervention, or that one can step in and unproblematically repair the social fabric. It is typical of the Young Adult novel that the sore is acknowledged, rather the application of some unrealistic

elixir. There is no simple answer.

And then Swindells turns the knife – we know the rain contained radiation, and the few plants which have come up, have come up stunted. It seems unlikely that the food they have been eating is safe, and it certainly won't get them through another season. Danny goes into exile, with Ben and his new sort of girlfriend, Kim, although they have been careful about getting themselves into the position of being a new Adam and Eve as their hope for the future is so slim, and they have already seen evidence to caution against becoming parents. This is no new book of Genesis. On their way to Holy Island, Ben becomes sick, from radiation poisoning. Again we can see no way out of this for the writer, and we in a sense should not hope for one – dying



should mean dying, and the author must play fair, for fear of being exposed as a phoney. (Whilst I understand the narrative thrust that meant Lyra got to be reunited with [the dead] Roger in a later volume of *His Dark Materials*, it does make a mockery of the republicanism of the rest of the trilogy to allow her the consolation of a second final conversation with him. Both *Buffy* [1997-2003] and *Heroes* [2006-] have shown reluctance to allow death to be permanent for their characters, and have been the poorer for it.) We are left with the manuscript that Danny has left behind, unclear of what awaited them at what is presumably Lindisfarne. It hardly seems that things could end well – although there is the optimism of the thought of the manuscript that forms the novel surviving.

Although both Ann and Danny escape from their initial pocket universes, their paradisaical valleys – which have come into conflict with (largely masculine) threats from outside – these novels are clearly not escapist. One set of problems will be replaced with another set. Whilst nuclear war could have occurred at many points since 1945, there is little choice but to use science fiction as the genre to explore these events. All YA fiction might be viewed as a kind of testing zone, where readers can face up to real or possible world anxieties – whether from outside (family, school, work etc) or inside (puberty, desire, self-image etc) – and different readers will thus learn different lessons from the same fiction. Sometimes the problem is presented via allegory or metaphor, sometimes it is faced head on. But the reader has to find their own answers, rather than be shown them, and the lesson of one book may not be the answer of another. To suggest that there is a universal panacea is to retreat into a childhood fiction where a parent – or kindly Old Gentleman – can kiss it all better and pay off all the debts.

Market forces and the inherent conservatism of some parents, school authorities, bookshops and editors – not to mention the wish to avoid provoking the easily shocked tabloid columnists on the lookout for a cheap headline – means that such challenging works are rarer in a fantastical than a quasi-realist generic context. Perhaps sf – even for sf readers – has been so infantilised over the decades that anything that smacks of the adult-themed in what has been thought of as intended for a child audience, causes a moral panic. Or perhaps the panic is for our own sense of lost innocence. After all, a fairy tale could not

possibly confront sexuality or be sexually explicit, despite the form having been there for a couple of centuries. Fortunately, there are a number of other YASF novels that do play fair with their readers and avoid offering easy choices to their characters. Most of the work of Ann Halam (although some of this is fantasy and some horror), the Gulf War shocker *Gulf* (1993) by Robert Westall, the numinous work of David Almond in *Skellig* (1998) and Melvin Burgess' tough body-swap narrative *Lady: My Life as a Bitch* (2001) spring to mind. Pullman, whilst not without his conservative moments with regard to sex, deserves his reputation, and Terry Pratchett's Johnny Maxwell Trilogy (1992-1996) is less compromising than some of his adult work. Whilst I have no particular vested interest in what children read – self-psychoanalysis aside, I suspect my interest is drawn to taking any sneered upon genre seriously – some of the most moving books that I have read have been in the YA section. We must not let our own adult conservative tendencies limit the genres that YA writers work in, nor limit the choices that they offer to their thoughtful readers.

#### Notes

1. David Truesdale, "Off on a Tangent: Short Fiction Reviews", *SF Site* 2008 (<http://www.sfsite.com/columns/tangent275.htm>).
2. Aidan Chambers, "An Interview with Robert Cormier" *Signal* (1979) 30, p. 129.
3. *ibid*, p. 130.
4. Brian Moore, "The Novels of Robert C. O'Brien" *Signal* (1983) 40, p. 33.
5. Robert Leeson, "What Were We Arguing About?" *Signal* (1976) 20,

p. 63.



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- Aidan Chambers, "An Interview with Robert Cormier" *Signal* (1979) 30, pp. 119-132.
- Robert Leeson, "What Were We Arguing About?" *Signal* (1976) 20, pp. 55-63
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- Andy Sawyer, "Twice Removed from Reality", *Vector* (1989) 149, pp. 10-15.
- David Truesdale, "Off on a Tangent: Short Fiction Reviews", *SF Site* (2008) (<http://www.sfsite.com/columns/tangent275.htm>).

# Writing a Ruritania in a post-colonialist world

Farah Mendlesohn

This short commentary arose out of a brief online discussion in which my correspondent argued that the use of an invented peoples for the Nation in Terry Pratchett's *Nation* (2008) was an act of cultural appropriation. In the process of the discussion I suggested *Gullstruck Island* (2009) by Frances Hardinge as another example. The conversation did not go very far because my correspondent had not read Hardinge's work, and because I was not sure why I saw Pratchett's choices as legitimate (or even if I did). This is an attempt to consider both books, both as acts of appropriation and as post-colonial comments on colonialism.

*Nation* is a rather unusual Terry Pratchett novel in that it is not a comic novel. I'd go so far as to suggest that the comic interruptions (the footnotes) and the comic characters (a hymn-singing ship's captain) are the weakest elements of the novel and disrupt rather than, as in his Discworld and Johnny books, reinforce the moral message of the book. This message is always and ever, 'think for yourself'. The supreme god that our hero, the islander boy Mau, finds himself wondering about, is IMO, which may or may not stand for 'In My Opinion', which is not a bad bit of humility for a god to embrace. Some commentators have seen this as the novel in which Pratchett finds god, but this is a misreading of the hyper-real belief structures of fantasy. A character cannot be an atheist in a world in which gods really are manifest, as some are in this book; the best one can be is a believer of the Republic of Heaven on Earth, as so many seventeenth century intellectuals were, or someone who argues with god, both of which paradigms describe Mau: 'I think that if IMO wants a perfect world, he wants it down here' (353).

*Nation* is set in an alternative British Empire, one which has been struck by plague (the Russian flu) and in which the king and one hundred and thirty seven heirs to the throne have died. A ship is sent to collect the next in line, who is serving as a governor in Africa; his daughter, unaware of this development, has been travelling, and is

presently aboard the schooner *Sweet Judy*, sailing the Southern Pelagic Ocean. Unfortunately, the ship is caught and wrecked by a tidal wave that also devastates many of the region's small islands and their inhabitants, leaving Mau, who had been away seeking manhood on Boys Island, alone as a sole survivor. Mau is shell shocked and traumatised, and as he buries the dead on his island he dismisses the white girl he sees as a ghost. In fact she is the governor's daughter, Ermintrude (who much prefers being called Daphne), who is unbeknownst to herself now the heir to the British throne and the Empire. From this set-up, *Nation* proceeds along two main threads. In the first, Mau questions the voices of the Grandfathers and the existence of the gods, and gathers the sea's refugees into the shape of a new nation. The second thread is the one of contact between Mau and Daphne, and contact between Mau's culture and that represented by, contained in, and plundered from the *Sweet Judy*. For our purposes it's this second thread that is important.

Mau can see from the contents of the *Sweet Judy* that his people are poor. Until then, he had known them as the richest island in the world. From the *Sweet Judy* they rifle wood, and metal, and tools in quantities never known of, but as Mau sees, they are merely scavengers, unable to make what they see. The *Sweet Judy*, he realises, is dangerous: it can encourage complacency, and although he does not use the term, can create a cargo cult. But what the *Sweet Judy* does teach Mau is that new learning is possible. Ironically, Daphne, when she discovers the treasures of the island's caves, goes the other way, pointing to all the things (astronomy, navigation, stone and metalwork) that Mau's people knew thirty thousand years before. Although it should be said that Daphne has already found worth in Mau's people, and the knowledge they carry, it is clear that she finds them most worthy for what they have done, while Mau finds them worthy for what they might do. This is unproblematised. Later Mau rejects the Grandfathers and Daphne and her father reject the conventions and mores

of his mother, but the first is a rejection of a genuine fantastical voice and an entire culture, while the second is simply choosing to ignore a powerful eccentric who is understood to be slightly mad by everyone. Mau unpeels the validated assumptions of his world; Daphne steps into them and takes Mau with her. In the end, Mau's choices and new understandings are validated not because they are true (although they are) but because they come to closely match the culture with power.

This reading seems to be reinforced by the arrival of Daphne's father, who is the new King (although he does not immediately know this). Daphne prevents him from planting a flag, shows him the wonders of the island and persuades him not to simply appropriate them. Once he does know he is the King, she encourages him to strike a deal with Mau, in which the islanders become not part of the Empire but part of the Royal Society. In return for access to their secrets, they will receive regular 'cargo', but cargo that will include teachers and lecturers. It is a good choice in political terms, but one whose consequences are elided.

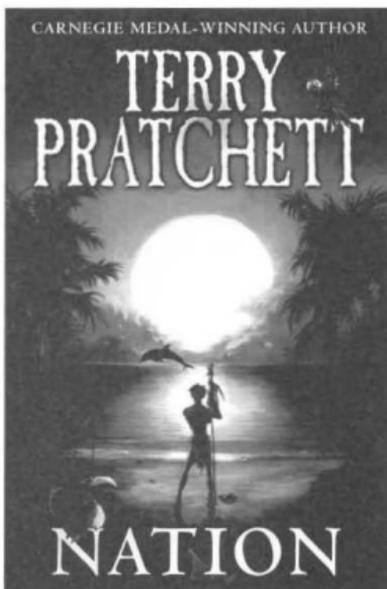
In the very last chapter, we learn that the Nation has become a people of the stars, who wrap their children's fists around telescopes, not spears, when they are born; who are both Western and non-Western. This apparently non-exploitative route has been generated by just three individuals: Mau, Daphne and the King. What the change lacks is any kind of contextual and institutional structure. Pratchett, usually far more aware of the limits of 'men of goodwill', here has chosen to see them as the solution to everything. A brief chapter at the end of the book closes off the possibilities of a history in which traders and merchants and antiquary thieves ignore the protests of the crown, or stir up trouble so that they can demand 'protection', or even one in which the 'science tourism' destabilises the culture and reduces the Nation to either servants or marginals. The evils of colonialism are depicted as individual evils. It

is a rare example of a Pratchett novel attempting to depoliticise an ethical issue (and it is a sharp contrast to the undercutting of Carrot's desire to Do Good in *Jingo* [1997]).

Frances Hardinge's *Gullstruck Island* also has comic moments, but they are always tragic-comic – the comedy of seeing someone make a choice that to them seems sensible but entangles them further in a mode of belief that will kill them – and the novel's understanding of colonialism is much more politically nuanced. *Gullstruck Island* is set on an island in a southern hemisphere somewhere. Unlike *Nation* it is probably not here. The island is home to a number of apparently indigenous tribes each with their ways and

their distinguishing features, and to a group of invaders, the Cavalcaste, who have come from Northern climes and insist on keeping to their old customs, which range from the eccentric (wearing spurs even though there are no horses) to the deadly (giving over the best land to the dead). The Cavalcaste are "white", and the indigenous peoples are dark, although this is a simplification of a complex situation in which very few of the peoples are 'pure'. A crisis is triggered by the death of the Lost, people who can separate their soul from their body and act as communication links across the island. It seems that only one Lost survives, Arilou; and she may not be a Lost at all, but only an imbecile. She

is cared for by her sister, Hathin. Both Arilou and Hathin are fascinating characters. To place the greatest power in the novel in the hands of Arilou, who has no interest in it and never will, is a stroke of genius that thoroughly naturalises the fantastic. Indeed in general it is perhaps clearer that magic does exist in the land of the Nation, where Mau seeks to look beneath it, than on *Gullstruck*, where as the book proceeds it becomes more and more unclear what is magic and what is a consensus belief system whose power is conducted through conviction. Equally, although Hathin is positioned for both



the reader and those she walks with to see her as the protagonist, for much of the time neither Hathin nor her enemies realise that she is. This is a metaphor for the whole book, in which the death of the Lost covers up a conspiracy against the Lace, a people who were once go betweens on the island and are now pariahs, which in turn covers up a conspiracy to expand farming into dangerous areas near the volcanoes (of which more in a moment), which in turn covers up mining which in turn covers up a food shortage, which finally covers up a conspiracy to expel the living in favour of the dead. *Most* of the people involved in this convoluted conspiracy know neither its protagonist or all its elements. They can be tied in to it not because they are evil or stupid, but because of the very structures of colonialism which Hardinge sets out to explore.

Gullstruck Island is volcanic. Everyone knows this. Everyone keeps one eye on the volcanoes. But because the knowledge about the volcanoes is held by a pariah community, one whose relationship to the volcanoes is at the heart of their pariah status – they sacrificed the newcomers to the volcanoes to appease them, when the newcomers started settling on the volcanic lands – it has become suspect. More than suspect, knowledge held by the Lace *must* be wrong, because to question its wrongness is to question the genocide meted out on the Lace in vengeance for their actions.

Hardinge gets us to the acceptance of Lace knowledge via a process that is and isn't straightforward. Like Pratchett in *Nation*, and like many white post-colonial writers, her main route is simply to validate their knowledge: by the end of the book Hathin knows that her people's stories of Lady Sorrow, King of Fans and Lord Spearhead are encoded information about the path that the volcanoes take when they blow. But this is a fantasy, and Hardinge uses that to complicate the issue and to move away from Pratchett's approach of both pointing to the "truth" of old knowledge, and validating new: it isn't *just* that Lace tales contain a grain of truth. Hardinge approaches the problem from both sides.

The Cavalcaste, who rule the island think *they* are logical and distinguish the "superstitious nonsense" of the indigenous peoples from the naturally legitimate complex webs of superstition of their own. The Cavalcaste, as I have already mentioned, abandon good land to the dead: their cities are doughnuts, dead on the inside, living on the outside. They allow their dead to push them out of their land. As a result, the Island can no longer feed itself. Although the Superior (a

governor) who we meet late in the novel, obsessed with his ancestors, is an extreme manifestation of the assumption that the dead are more important than the living, he is only the logical conclusion of this belief.

In the conclusion to the novel, Hardinge chooses not to actively destroy any of these faiths in the minds of the inhabitants of the novel: instead, people's beliefs become complex webs of *your* belief and *my* beliefs, all of which are true for all of us even if *we* aren't sheltered by them, and which, therefore, *we* can choose to be sheltered by. When the Lace discover that the Ancestor ashes have all been stolen, they concur in the belief that this matters. Those who stole the Ashes, the Sours (who use the ash to make dye) also concur in the belief that the ash of the dead is important. That is why they stole it. Three sets of beliefs about the ash of the dead merge. The culture of *Gullstruck Island* allows people to embrace and accept each other's superstitions without themselves accepting full belief: Jimboly the crowd witch *knows* that the small bird she has tied to her collar can run off with the thread of her soul. Others do not share the belief for themselves, but fully believe that it is true for Jimboly. Similarly, although the Lace do not use the ash of their ancestors to produce a protective dye, they are willing to subscribe to the beliefs of the Sours and shelter from Lord Spearhead under the cloth the Sours wove and dyed for that purpose.

The culture that has emerged on *Gullstruck Island* is not one that seeks to strip back 'superstition' in search of truth but one which sees and accepts multiple and polysemic truths that one can 'borrow' for a while. The Cavalcaste are ridiculous in one way, but the core of the ridiculousness, the superstition itself, is never reduced to ridicule. What is, however, is the way they hang on to tradition more generally: the Cavalcaste, like invaders everywhere, have brought with them their own legal codes. It is fascinating that in exploring colonialism, it is the invader's code that is held up to scrutiny here, and not, as so often, that of the invaded.

The Cavalcaste come from a land of ice, snow, pine trees and horses. Their laws are all about the ways one needs to live in these circumstances: the result is a law code that knows how to deal with a stolen horse, but has not been adapted to the poaching of pearl fishing rights. As the novel unravels so too does are sense of a land 'ruled' by the Cavalcaste. Certainly they control the economy of the land, but the degree to which they control the culture of the island is disputable. The culture is hybridising. The Cavalcaste influence

the social structure, the way in which respect is accorded, but they cannot influence the ways in which people interact nor the ways in which people understand the world around them and how they understand 'truth'.

This is where Hardinge and Pratchett's books part company: Hardinge constructs a spiral of converging truths, Pratchett remains in sift mode. Mau's contemporaries continue to believe in superstition about the gods, but the tales are linked very firmly to truth and preserved only (as Pratchett, Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart put it in another book) as lies to children. Whereas Hardinge renders the Cavalcaste exactly as superstition ridden as the other islanders, and demonstrates only that their tales are the wrong tales for this time and place, Pratchett, for all he makes fun of some of the Empire folk, endorses their truth as fundamentally more true (there are good reasons for this, I'm not about to argue with astronomy) and for him the balance of power is about the ownership of truth.

The difference is, I think, encoded in the ways in which each constructs the language of conversation. The history of the British Empire is mostly of other people learning English, and it is a

significant challenge to the expectations of the arriving Empire that Pratchett has Daphne learn the language of the Islanders instead; but because he himself is writing in English, the language of the fictional British Empire in the book, the power shift this should entail is lost. Hardinge takes a different route. She also writes in English, true, and English is still used both to represent the language of the Lace and the Cavalcaste, but within those givens, she creates a second language. As Cavalcaste has become the language of the inside, and hence "Doorsy", the language of the streets, a mixture of Cavalcaste and the languages of the island has developed, still recognisably a

creole is known as "Nundestruth" (Not under this roof). Nundestruth is rendered as a creole and creates a powerful locale in the novel where "we" the reader cannot easily regard either Lace or Cavalcaste as representative of "us". It reminds us that the use of Standard English to represent Lace and Doorsy is a representation. While the two languages are not equal in authority in the novel – an issue Hardinge draws our attention to – she avoids compounding the problem by lending the authority of English to the ruling language.

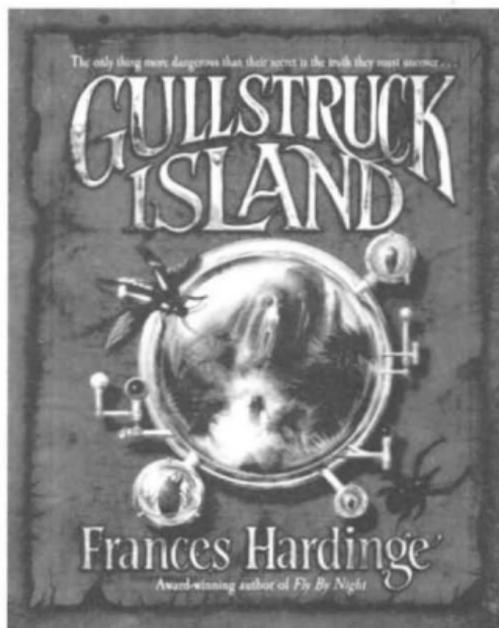
This brings us to my original consideration:

does the ruritanian nature of both these tales matter? Is there a disrespect in conjuring a culture from recognisable cloth but not tying it to the specific location, or does the Ruritanian context add something that remains of value?

*Nation* and *Gullstruck Island* are both immersive/otherworld fantasies, but *Nation* is a classic Ruritanian, set in a world that seems to be connected to ours (an alternate world from one of the Diana Wynne Jones multiverses perhaps, Chrestomanci would certainly not be out of place). *Gullstruck Island* is connected metaphorically –

the pattern of our world is northern invaders of equatorial lands – but there are no direct connections.

Ruritanias exist in the interstices of recognised lands; their role has traditionally been to provide a sentimentalised and romantic view not just of a distant mode of living, but of distant problems. That Ruritanias often contained secret heirs was undoubtedly connected to the British nineteenth century romanticisation of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the other Stuart exiles and the tendency to forget that hidden princes are more likely to trigger bloody civil wars than cheering crowds. Ruritanias are places in which to displace



concern. They are closely linked to the patterns of utopias as contexts in which to engage in political experiment, and they not unconnected to patterns of Orientalism. Both modes are rooted in the notion that the "other culture" is fundamentally unchanging. As a result both these forms are marked by the lack of interest in long term consequence. If you take a place seriously, then introducing a missing heir is a recipe for disaster, not for church bells and bliss (see Eva Ibbotson's *The Dragonfly Pool* [2009] or Peter Dickinson's *Shadow of A Hero* [1993] for a moderately sarcastic consideration of this trope). In effect, the willingness to create a Ruritania to try out an idea might inherently be a sign of disrespect: it is only possible because one expects the people of this land to behave differently to oneself.

That is not intended as a comment on either Pratchett or his intentions as a narrator, but rather to suggest that even when coupled with a determination to respect people of other cultures and colours, it is extremely hard to break the pattern of the Ruritanian/Orientalist mode if one replicates the structure. The existence of the British Empire in this novel, however exaggerated, however mocked, creates a 'normal' space in the neighbourhood against which everything else becomes quaint.

*Gullstruck Island* is every bit as appropriate as *Nation*. Where Pratchett has chosen the cultures of the South Pacific, Hardinge in an afterword talks about her experience with New Zealand although she insists that this is not based entirely on that knowledge. I am not in a position to judge either this or any notion of "authenticity", but I think the elements that break it out of the problems of Ruritania are twofold.

The first is the issue of change: neither *Gullstruck* nor any of its peoples, are ever depicted as unchanging. In particular, the Lace are a culture set up to embrace change in that they do not believe in the preservation of the memory of people. Souls are set to the winds and become dolphins. Change is part of life, adaptation is part of life. So that when everything does change for Hathin, she is psychologically oriented to just getting on with it. The role of unchanging tradition is given instead to the invader/coloniser Cavalacaste (a very nice touch which reminds the reader that those who impose unchangingness on others are frequently unaware of their own rigidities).

The second element is that issue of truth and knowledge. Everything that Mau uncovers, while speaking to the knowledge of his ancestors, reinforces the degree to which his nation has

"fallen"; for all that this is a story of 'uplift', in the end, the Nation is unable to rescue itself and must be rescued by others. It therefore becomes someone else's experiment, it becomes the yard in which the British Empire (in the form of the Royal Society) can play. In contrast the Lace on *Gullstruck* may be on the road to reintegration, but it is into a newly negotiated society. I think it is no surprise that there is no afterward to this book which looks forward to the future in the manner of the afterword in *Nation*, because the future we can see is so much less predictable. The Cavalacaste may regroup, but we already know they are no longer as "pure" as they once were. Many of their ancestor shrines are destroyed, and they themselves are set adrift on an empty religious sea. Unlike the British in *Nation* the Cavalacaste are not part of something apparently stable from which they can draw an insistence on Cavalacaste ways. The storytrope of *Gullstruck Island* has been the Gripping Bird, the bringer of change, and by the end the Gripping Bird (manifested perhaps as Hathin), has been all over the island. If Ruritania do not host change, then *Gullstruck Island* is not a Ruritania, and nor can it be orientalised.

This release from political stasis does not release the book from challenges of appropriation, but because the absence of stasis also means the absence of apparent solutions of the kind Pratchett uses to conclude his narrative, there is far less sense of a forced and politicised interpretation. Interpretation of the events of the book, and interpretation of the off the page consequences, are left off the page (as they were in Hardinge's picaresque *Fly by Night* [2005]). Hardinge has chosen not to control the future, but to leave it in the hands of the characters – which may be as close to a post-colonialist ideology as it is possible to get.

#### Works discussed

Hardinge, Frances, *Gullstruck Island* (Macmillan Children's Books, 2009)

Pratchett, Terry, *Nation* (Doubleday Children's Books, 2009)

#### Further reading:

Shawl, Nisi and Cynthia Ward, *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* (Aqueduct Press, 2005)

# Taking Control of the World

Kristin Cashore interviewed by Nic Clarke

**A**merican author Kristin Cashore has written, to date, two novels. *Graceling* and *Fire* were New York Times bestsellers in the US, and were both published in the UK by Gollancz during 2009. *Graceling* is set in a fantasy world where certain rare individuals are born with some exceptional talent or special power, known as a Grace. These Graces range from baking to mind-reading, to—in the case of the protagonist, troubled teenager Katsa—super-strength and combat reflexes. *Being Graced*, however, is rather less fun than it might appear, since the rulers of the Seven Kingdoms tend to prefer to have *Gracelings* under their control and in their service. The novel follows Katsa's efforts to escape being the pet thug of a repressive king, and come to terms with her abilities.

*Fire* is set some years earlier in the Dells, another part of the same world. The eponymous heroine has inherited a different sort of power from her charismatic and unscrupulous father: she is a 'monster', in the local parlance, able to read (and influence) others' minds and possessed of a glamour that is irresistible to the unwary. Just as for Katsa, though, this power is as problematic for *Fire* as it is liberating, something that she wields unwittingly and must learn to cope with and control: her allure arouses strong—at times violent—feelings in others, and makes her a target, forcing her to live in near isolation and constantly guard her actions and appearance in public. The feminist message is thoughtful, pointed and unapologetic, not least in the engaging love story that the book develops into.

Cashore, who has a master's degree in children's literature, is currently working on a sequel to *Graceling* called *Bitterblue*, which takes up the story of a secondary character, and is scheduled to appear in the UK in 2011. She blogs at <http://kristincashore.blogspot.com/>.

This interview was conducted by email, during February and March 2010.

Nic Clarke: Did you always conceive of *Graceling* as a story primarily for and about teenagers? Does the same apply to *Fire* and *Bitterblue*?

KC: I don't write for any particular audience, and as an adult with a degree in children's literature, I have to admit that I don't entirely believe in the audience-age distinction. I read books published for adults, young adults, and children probably about equally, and I know an awful lot of people who do; I also know an awful lot of people who *would*, if they realized the richness of art

available in the children's literature field. And I get mail from readers of all ages; I'd say that my readers seem to be evenly split between young people and adults. So, as far as whom I write the books for, the answer is definitely no—I'm not writing for people of any particular age. If anyone, I suppose I'm writing for myself.

(For context: in the US/Canada, the books are published for the YA market; in the UK/Australia/NZ, for the adult; in the majority of my 25 foreign rights territories to date, for young adults; in German, French, and Dutch, two separate editions [same translation] are or will be published, one for YA, one for adult.)

Now, the other half of your question—whom my books are *about*—I do find myself leaning toward young people as my characters, although I suppose in *Fire*, quite a few of the characters are more adults than young adults, and *Fire* herself is very mature for seventeen. *Bitterblue*, on the other hand, about whom I'm currently writing, is unquestionably young! (She's 16, and though her responsibilities are an adult's responsibilities, she's definitely more young-spirited than *Fire*.) Katsa was 18 in *Graceling*, I believe. I honestly didn't think much about Katsa's age at all. I think at one point my editor and I were having trouble figuring it out.

There's a certain freshness when you're writing about characters who are quite young. Young people have to cope with every single life issue that older people cope with (despite what some older people like to think), and they have problems that are just as enormous and troubling as older people (despite what some older people like to think!), but there's an extra element of tension, stress, and wonder, because they're dealing with a lot of these issues and problems for the first time ever in their lives. For the writer, that makes real potential for strong emotion and drama. And adults are still growing up, too—at least, that's how it seems to me!—adult life is a process of continued learning and heartbreak and joy and experience—so stories about young people growing up will often resonate with people of all ages.

NC: On the FAQ section of your website [1], you say that the characters were the genesis of *Graceling*. What, in that case, was the genesis of Katsa? Was she a response to the sorts of female characters you encountered in your reading as a teenager? (Or, indeed, in other media more recently—I notice you make reference to *Buffy* on

your blog from time to time.) Where would you place her in the pantheon of strong heroines?

KC: I'm not sure where Katsa came from, other than some rather unpleasant things – for example, my anger, growing up in a world where it was pretty obvious to me early on that I was considered a second-class citizen on account of being a girl – which was ridiculous, because I knew I was as good as anyone else! My frustration with my Catholic upbringing, I think Katsa may have been more a response to my life, and the lives of other girls around me, than to any media. I've only recently gotten into *Buffy*, actually, and was pretty tickled by the fights between Buffy and Riley, for example, where Buffy's holding back to protect him. It felt a bit Katsa and Po to me! The fights between Buffy and Spike, on the other hand, feel more like what I was trying to avoid with Katsa and Po (though I understand why it works with Buffy and Spike).

Will you just look at how I'll take any excuse to start talking about Buffy?

Getting back to your question. I am far too shy to try to place Katsa, my own creation, in the pantheon of strong heroines. But I'll name a couple of heroines who certainly did influence her: Alanna, from Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* books, and Aerin from Robin McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown*. I came to fantasy reading pretty late; I was in grad school when I started reading both these authors. It seemed to me that they wrote about women I'd been looking for, and imagining, all my life.

NC: What was it about Alanna and Aerin that particularly appealed to you?

KC: Their courage. Their determination. Their refusal to allow the world to limit them just because they're not men. The fact that they sleep (responsibly) with more than one partner and the narrative voice presents this as a normal thing, not as something dreadful. Their commitments to themselves, to their own hearts; their decency to other people.

NC: If you weren't reading fantasy when you were growing up, what did you read? Do you think fantasy offers greater freedom to create strong female characters?

KC: I read a lot of the classics, mostly American and British, written for children and adults. Books by women and men full of strong women who lived in times when women were blatantly treated as second-class people. (Think Jane Austen; E.M. Forster; *Anne of Green Gables*; Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books; Edith Wharton; Frances Hodgson Burnett; Louisa May Alcott.) I also read adventure stories, like *Treasure Island* and the like, and put myself into the male role. That's

something I've done a lot all my life, with books and movies: put myself into the male role. I mean, you have to, right? Maid Marian is cool and all, but wouldn't you rather be Robin Hood? And, I'm sorry, explain again why Princess Leia never became a Jedi and had to wear that metal bikini?

I don't think I'd say that fantasy offers greater freedom to create strong female characters, but it does allow the writer to tweak the *world* as she likes, maybe make the world of the book more accepting of female strength than the real world is.

NC: One of the things I enjoyed the most about both *Graceling* and *Fire* is the fact that the characters' relationships – both their friendships and especially their romances – read like real relationships. Too often in fiction, I find myself wondering what on earth the characters are going to talk about in their happily ever after, but your books show people getting to know each other, sharing interests and experiences, and learning to trust and value and be comfortable with each other; Katsa and Po, or Fire and Brigan, are partners, not suitor and damsel. How important was this to shape of these stories – was it the intended outcome all along, or did it come from the characters?

KC: Oh, what a compliment! Thank you. This is possibly the most important thing to me in my books, so it's so nice to hear that!

I'll often abandon a book I'm reading because I find myself not believing in the characters and their relationships. They'll feel stiff and emotionless to me. My favorite books are the books where the characters truly come to life, usually through their interactions with other people. So this is what I'm always striving for in my own books. I'll do run-throughs of each character and each relationship as I'm writing, and then especially once I've finished a draft, to check and double-check and triple-check whether a character is consistent within herself throughout, and whether her interactions with each person are consistent, and revealing in the way I want them to be. Every character will interact with every other character differently than the other characters do – if that makes sense – and I try to build that carefully, so that the relationships feel rich and real. It's fun to have characters who will open up with one person, but not with another, for example. And it's fun to have characters who don't like each other, or who like each other but disagree about a third person. The most fun is to have characters who love each other, and get them arguing! Arguments are the most fun to write, and writing them tends to help me get to know my own characters better.

To answer your question more directly, I'd guess I'd say "both" – it was my intention all along, but it was also the nature of the characters are they revealed themselves to me. Maybe they knew my intentions and

were trying to help.

NC: In some ways, Katsa and Po feel like a reversal of the stereotypes about men and women in relationships: she's the taciturn, closed-off one, while he's warm and grounded and nurturing. Were there any examples you looked to (or reacted against) in creating Po, or was his characterisation more driven by the needs of Katsa?

KC: I'm not sure where Po came from, though it probably did have something to do with Katsa's needs. It was really important to me that my leading man be a *decent* man, nonjudgmental of my wild protagonist, and happy to let her be exactly as she was. But as far as the details of his character go – I think he just came out that way! That's how he grew.

NC: On a personal note, I can't tell you how happy I was when, in *Graceling*, Katsa and Po decided that they liked the relationship the way it was, and that they didn't feel any need to get married. I gather from your website that this hasn't gone down quite so well with all your readers. Did you have any sense when you were writing it that you were being a tiny bit subversive?

KC: I suppose I knew that some people would consider it subversive, and readers do proselytize at me now and then. L... will never understand people who can't accept that love happens in all kinds of ways.

NC: I read your recent piece about what you can and can't do when writing fantasy [2], in which you noted:

"Writing fantasy happens to be all *about* limitations. It's about keeping to the rules; it's about building a world that's believable to the reader because it's both comprehensive and consistent; it's about assembling a body, a structure, that stands up on its own."

In the article you were talking primarily about worldbuilding and in particular about language use. But what opportunities and restrictions do you feel magic, that mainstay of fantasy, offers? Is it purely a plotting issue (the risk of magic becoming a get-out-of-jail-free card, say), or does it also affect the emotional notes you're reaching for?

KC: The get-out-of-jail-free card is always a big risk, and one I'm always trying to be careful with. Katsa and Po, in particular, are a little larger than life and run the risk of seeming a bit unbelievable, in my opinion. But it also definitely contributes to the emotional notes. Fire, for example – her powers played an enormous role in her own emotional life. And in *Bitterblue*, which I'm still writing, Bitterblue struggles a bit with the larger-than-lifeness of Katsa and Po, even resenting it at times. Bitterblue is my first heroine who doesn't have any sort

of magical powers. I'm finding that I love writing about an "ordinary" girl who's surrounded by extraordinary people.

NC: Does Bitterblue being "ordinary" change the type of story you're telling? This leads on from something I was saying above: I very much appreciated the fact that both Katsa and Fire, once they can use their power as they choose, start helping other people to take control of *their* lives, and in particular other women and girls (I'm thinking especially here of Katsa and Bitterblue bonding as they travelled through the snowy passes). Does an ordinary girl in a fantasy world have to change that world before she can take control of her life in it?

KC: Bitterblue being "ordinary" makes a few things easier for me as a storyteller. Maybe because I can relate to her a bit more, and maybe just because there's less strange stuff for me to manage, and more vulnerability in the character. When you're writing, you want to be able to throw your characters into danger now and then, and this is more difficult when your character can read everyone's minds and anticipate danger, as Fire can – or, in Katsa's case, when your character is virtually unbeatable. It's a whole lot easier to make Bitterblue vulnerable to danger than it was with Katsa and Fire. It's *way* easier for someone to sneak up on her! On the other hand, Bitterblue is smart as a whip, and as it turns out, that's a hard character to write, too. I'm limited by my own smarts, and the smarts I can borrow from the people who help me with my research.

I think the thing about Bitterblue that really differentiates the writing of this book from the writing of the others, however, is that she's a queen, and as such, is limited in where she goes. *Graceling* and *Fire* both involved a certain amount of travel and adventure. In *Bitterblue*, characters besides Bitterblue do lots of travel, but Bitterblue herself is too much needed at court – she simply has too much work – to allow her to leave the castle much, let alone the city. There's a *ton* going on in *Bitterblue*, but as far as Bitterblue herself is concerned, it's mostly taking place in a small area, and it's more about secrets and intrigue than high adventure.

I do think Bitterblue will be doing a little world-changing, once she gets her feet on the ground as queen!

## Notes

[1] "FAQs about Writing, Getting Published and Being Published", 28 February 2008: <<http://kristincashore.blogspot.com/2008/02/faqs-about-writing-getting-published.html>>

[2] "Hot dog, Katsa!", published in *The Horn Book Magazine*, January/February 2010. Available online: <[http://www.hbook.com/magazine/articles/2010/jan10\\_cashore.asp](http://www.hbook.com/magazine/articles/2010/jan10_cashore.asp)>

# Nicholas Fisk: Ten Short Novels

by Niall Harrison

*FISK, NICHOLAS [says the Clute/Nicholls Encyclopedia of Science Fiction] Pseudonym of UK author David Higginbottom (1923– ), who writes exclusively or children. His first sf tale was Space Hostages (1967), in which his tastes for HARD-SF backgrounds and realistically flawed protagonists were competently expressed. The former reaches full expression in tales like Trillions (1971) and Antigrav (1978). A Rag, a Bone, and a Hank of Hair (1980), on the other hand, gravely and movingly concentrates on the emotionally torn protagonist ... Fisk is a smooth writer, but the world he envisages ... is fraught.*

How well, I wonder, does that writing and that world hold up in 2010?

## 1. Space Hostages (1967)

Perhaps the first thing that will strike a modern reader about *Space Hostages* – not, as the *Encyclopedia* notes, Nicholas Fisk's first novel for children, but his first sf novel for children, published when he was 44 – is the names. The gang described in the first chapter hail from the land of Richmal Crompton, or perhaps *The Beans*: Billy Bason, Spadger Garrett, Tiddler, Sandra Rumsey, and the book's two main characters, "powerful young yobbo" Tony Hoskings, and Brylo Deniz who "has the brains but not the personality". Both those descriptions come from the back cover, not the text, but they're faithful to the novel's uncomplicated tone. And where else, after all, would a top-secret military spacecraft piloted by a dying runaway officer land, but on the cricket pitch of an English village?

The tale develops in neat, broad strokes. Flight Lieutenant Barclay (not obviously dying when we first see him) hustles the village children aboard his craft on the pretext of a ride; his actual motive is to save them from the (presumably nuclear) war he appears to believe is imminent, or perhaps to blackmail the governments of the world into peace by holding the children, per the title, hostage. The difference is somewhat immaterial, since once they're underway, out in space, he reveals that he has radiation sickness, and shortly thereafter dies, leaving the children to fend for themselves. The rest of the book works out the dominance dynamics

among the children, culminating in a thrilling return home in which bully Tony and brainy Brylo have to learn to work together.

A comparison to *Lord of the Flies* is perhaps unavoidable, although Fisk's group is even smaller and more constrained, and his book is a fundamentally nicer text; but it does reach for more than simple adventure. After Barclay's death, Tony assumes command, and his aggressively self-aggrandizing yet insecure demeanor can undercut the generally light tone quite viciously:

"Well, for flip's sake!–" he shouted, furiously, "I did all the real work – getting the Flight Lieutenant to talk and all that – and all you do is talk about frequencies! Who cares about flippin' frequencies, the radio's working, isn't it?"

He came towards Brylo – and tripped on the edge of the carpet. Once again, he raised a laugh. But this time, the laugh was against him. And Beauty, quite innocently, laughed too.

"Funny Tony!" she said, delightedly.

Tony turned and hit her across the face, hard.

There was complete silence. Beauty fell on her side, then propped herself up again on one plump little hand. The other explored her face. There was a vivid red print of Tony's fingers on it. Big tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks. At last, she gave a wail and began to cry. (72)

Without question, there are ways in which this passage, and the novel as a whole, shows its age. For a reader of contemporary YA and children's fiction, point of view may be the most obvious. It's not an immersive style, in that we're not tied to the point of view of either of the main characters and we don't share Tony's frustration or Brylo's fear – in fact, the only head we're allowed access to in this scene is that of Sandra Rumsey, who rushes to young Beauty's aid – but it is very observant, perhaps written with the consideration that it may be read out loud. The tone is an old fashioned kind of boy's own – indeed, the book is labelled as being "for boys of ten and over";

girls need not apply, apparently – which is one aspect of Fisk's style that develops interestingly over the course of career. Although it's perhaps worth noting that even here, Beauty does get to rescue Brylo later on, and that she becomes the first to stand up to Tony's command.

Brylo, meanwhile, will become familiar as an emblematic Fisk type, not just observant and smart, but already *knowledgeable*. Although he has to be taught how to operate the spacecraft – his studious nature saves them all – there's an awful lot about the solar system and about, say, the workings of radios that he already knows. Less typical is the fact that he's so explicitly an outsider. His father is a South American immigrant, and Tony's attacks on him can be explicitly racist: "you chocolate coloured git!" (135). Like much of *Space Hostages*, it's a cartoonish portrayal, but not a weightless one.

## 2. Trillions (1971)

What stayed with me from *Trillions*, from my original reading many years ago, was, more or less, this:

The name [given to them by children] fitted perfectly. It had the right hard, bright sound to it – and Trillions were hard and bright. It suggests millions upon millions – and the Trillions were everywhere, sprinkling roads and gardens and roofs and even the firesides of people's homes with a glittery dusting of tiny jewels (but Trillions were not jewels.)

And the name Trillions had a foreign sound to it – a suggestion of other worlds, star-studded skies, the cold emptiness of space. That was right, too. For wherever Trillions came from, it was not this world. (1-2)

This passage, right at the start of the book, must have been one of my first encounters with conventionally science-fictional sense-of-wonder, and in my memory the sense of abundant, lonely otherness overwhelmed just about everything else about the book: characters, setting, plot, whatever.

Re-reading it now, it turns out to be a book about figuring stuff out – even more than *Space Hostages*, and at times to the point of Heinleinian obnoxiousness. There's another brainy character, James Harding, known as Prof or Bem, aged 10 – Fisk is almost always scrupulous about giving us his characters' ages – who is always seeking "hard facts, not soft opinions" (2); there's Bem's "burning-eyed, round-faced yet spiky" eight-year-old sister, Panda; there's their rather problematic next-door neighbour Mina (nine and a half), heir to Beauty in her precociously self-conscious femininity – "You

could call her a female girl ... You can imagine for yourself how Mina responded to the Trillions" (3); and there's Scott Houghton, an average thirteen-year-old with an extraordinary "ability to observe, study, think, compare, invent" (4). As in *Space Hostages*, the perspective is a brisk sort of omniscient.

The major action of the first few chapters – it's striking now that this is assumed to be enough to hold a young reader's interest, although my experience is that it certainly was – is Scott and Bem experimenting on the Trillions. They sort them by straining, look at them under a microscope to discover there are donut- and spike-shaped ones, build things from them, and confirm that the larger ones can be broken down into smaller ones. The girls, meanwhile, play, treating the Trillions as baubles, making bracelets from them, and so forth. This is almost as irritating as the ease with which the children insinuate themselves into the operations of the adults who descend on their town (which is the site of the first Trillion-fall, although soon they're appearing all over the place), or the insistence that these kids "probably know as much about Trillions as anyone else in the world" (26).

Even so, however, the book's elaboration of that opening image, and its argument for the need for and potential empathetic power of science fiction, retains considerable force. Published four years after the first moon landings, *Trillions* is an early example of sf frustrated with how the world made real its dreams. One of the visitors, spaceman Icarus Blythe (!), tells Scott:

"It's the reporters I can't stand. Do you know what 'human interest' means, Scott? I'm 'human interest'. So are you, but not so much as that little girl, Mina. I am 'human interest' because I was once a spaceman, a pioneer, a hero. I went up there and the whole world watched with one eye and ate TV snacks. And then things went wrong up there and they forgot all about snacks. They watched with both eyes – watched like hawks – when things went wrong. I suppose all sorts of dear old people said all sorts of dear old prayers and all the children said 'Wow!' and 'Gee!' and 'Gosh!' And I suppose not one person in a million saw what it was all about ..." (48-49)

*Trillions* makes every effort to make you see what it's all about. In a visionary sequence late on, when Scott establishes contact with the Trillions' consciousness, it's almost as though a brat from a Heinlein juvenile had wandered into a brutally impersonal Arthur C Clarke novel by mistake. The supreme, tragic selflessness of the Trillions could be trite: they turn out to be the remnant technology of a dead alien race, determined to make themselves

useful; and they've concluded that the most useful they can be to humanity is to give them something to hate, in place of hating each other. In fact, as presented it is revelatory, its impact dulled only a little by the book's obliviousness to the othering within its own pages.

### 3. Grinny (1973)

One of the more widely available and widely taught of Fisk's forty-plus novels – and the only one outside of his Starstormers series, so far as I know, to spawn a sequel, which we'll come to in due course – *Grinny* is a significantly more sophisticated work than the two I've discussed so far, in literary terms if not in science fictional terms. It begins with an introduction by one Timothy Carpenter, who informs us that the book we're about to read is "based on my diary and writings of the Aunt Emma period", and that it is published as a warning, at the recommendation of one Nicholas Fisk. We are told that Mr Fisk considers that the danger (whatever it is) represented by Aunt Emma is over, that "the experiment failed" – but that Timothy is not so sure.

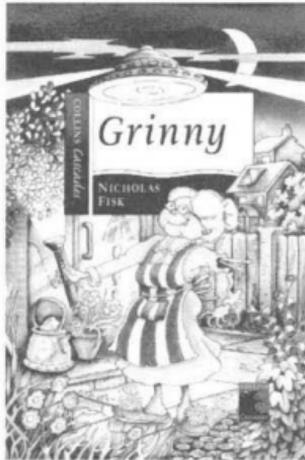
Instantly, then, the tone is new: more sombre, more ominous, less adventuresome. The voice is new, too, energetically first person, more textured, and all in all a rather fine creation, with just a hint of Molesworth, and perhaps the faintest premonition of Georgia Nicholson. It's used to describe the intrusion of an outsider into a family unit. Great Aunt Emma – or, as Tim takes to calling her, GAE – simply turns up one January afternoon and announces that she's come to stay. Neither Tim (aged eleven), nor his younger sister Beth (seven), have ever seen GAE before. She is short, neat, clean, and old, and all the adults treat her as entirely normal; but she asks odd, innocent questions – how do trees sleep? – and she just doesn't seem quite right.

GAE a bit boring, this questions thing of her goes on too much. She is always asking questions and some of the questions are so stupid or mock-stupid or whatever. I think she puts on a Dear Little Old Lady performance (1) to gain attention (although she is not a limelight hogger like, say, Aunt Lilian), (2) to prove she is still young and sprightly, (3) because her mind is getting a little perforated, like a gruyere cheese. (22)

The first half of the book is very effectively claustrophobic, as evidence mounts that GAE is not what she claims to be, while preserving ambiguity as to what she *is*, and the increasingly tense atmosphere starts to wear down the whole family, leading to at least one blazing row. (*Grinny* is perhaps at least as interesting for its domestic observation as for its sfnal content.) After this, Beth, who is by far the most suspicious of GAE – and who names her "Grinny", after her habit of smiling ambiguously – recruits Tim and their neighbour, Mac, to form the Grinny Credibility Gap Council. They plan to put their questions about Grinny to the test, and find out what she really is and why she's come to visit them.

It's worth pausing here a moment to consider Beth. On one level, she's clearly a continuation of the type represented by Beauty and Mina: precociously capable of using her youth and femininity to get others to do what she wants – in this case Mac, who we're told, slightly uncomfortably, has an almighty crush on Beth. Yet on another level, she's this book's hero by virtue of her youth, if not her femininity, and is almost unnaturally self-possessed. She's aware of Mac's crush, for instance, and has diagnosed it as transference because he doesn't have a sister of his own, or a particularly happy home. More importantly, it turns out that Grinny's alien mind-control abilities (oh yes) get less effective the younger you are: so Tim is less affected than his parents, and Beth is not affected at all. So it falls to Beth to drive the revolt against Grinny, and to come up with a way of killing her, which in the end she does with a minimum of fuss. Meanwhile, Tim finds Beth annoying, not just as a younger sibling, but specifically as a girl – "as Father is always reminding me," he notes near the start of his diary, "WAW, Women Always Win" (11) – and it's clear that this is a misjudgement that only makes it harder for him to believe Beth's conclusions about Grinny, even as he *knows* something is not right. There is, I think, an extent to which all this adds up to at least a partial critique of the young girls in Fisk's earlier novels; it may also be significant that the guide in the front of my copy of *Grinny* states that it's "for readers of ten and over" (my emphasis). It will, however, be quite a while before Fisk gives us a girl-hero front and centre.

The investigation of Grinny, who turns out to



be the vanguard intent on enslaving humanity, is as well done as the rest of the book; there's a captivating sense of *wrongness* to Grinny's behaviour that prefigures the atmosphere of Gillian Cross' *The Demon Headmaster* (1982). *Grinny* is as creepy as *Trillions* is mind-expanding; indeed *Grinny* is, in a sense, the dark mirror of *Trillions*. The aliens in both are arriving on Earth because their home worlds have been devastated, but they come with very different intentions. If there's more to this than simply an attempt to draw emotional power from children's bafflement when confronted with old people, it's surely the point that horror is the dark twin of wonder. "The strangeness of it all", Grinny tells Tim, "you must accustom yourself to it" (68): and you must know that it's not always a good thing. It could be seen as an atypical message for Fisk, but in truth his sf indulges in the potential of scientific advances to darken and distort almost as often as it argues for the potential of the scientific method to illuminate and reveal; and this particular horror is very effectively delivered.

#### 4. *Wheelie in the Stars* (1976)

Speaking of Fisk's conception of his fiction, there's a biographical note in the back of my edition of *Wheelie in the Stars* (for readers of *eleven* and over) that appears to set out his thinking:

Nicholas Fisk wrote his first complete book when he was nine. It was about a baby fox and was very sentimental. He first earned money from writing when he was sixteen. When he finished his RAF service he became an actor, jazz musician, illustrator and writer for all kinds of publications.

His interests include snorkelling, cars, old microscopes, building a swimming pool, photography (he has published a book on the subject), and a dozen other things. He finds that writing is hard and lonely work, but enjoys writing 'science fiction' (meaning stories about extraordinary things that *could* happen) for young people. They seem to understand how fast the world is changing, whereas most older people do not.

There are a few things that can be said about this. One is the trivial point that some of the material here can be seen coming through in his stories – the

father in *Grinny* is very proud of the swimming pool he's built, for instance, and we've already seen the military feature in a couple of books. Another is the marginally less trivial point that it's sobering to see the "how fast the world is changing" meme, so prevalent in current discourse about sf, in the back of a children's book published over thirty years ago. But the most interesting, as ever, is to see an author's personal definition of what they're writing – rarely do you see it set out so clearly, I think, and while you might quibble with whether the arrival of alien intelligences "could happen", it's certainly true that they're dealt with in a frame of rational enquiry, down to the chemistry of the batteries that power *Grinny*.

But it's a bit of a surprise to see it first in the back of *Wheelie in the Stars*, which is rather minor Fisk, even

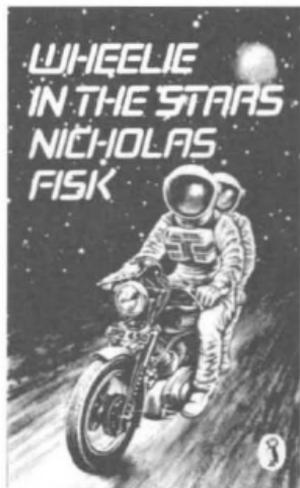
allowing for the fact that it's clearly considered to be primarily a lark. Its slightness is in some ways a shame. For one thing, it's the first time we've seen Fisk venture away from our present on Earth, even if where he's gone – the poisonous world of Terramer 3, which is "flatter than a pancake, colder than a deep-freeze, featureless as a billiards ball" (6) – isn't terribly exciting. And for another, although the story revolves around the friendship of two caucasian boys – cargostrippers at the station, who begin a project to reconstruct a vintage motorcycle – there's a welcome, if somewhat hamfisted, effort in the direction of a realistically multicultural future, which ends up feeling a bit wasted. One of their allies is Su, who may be described as "small, slant-eyed, black and gold", but

who's treated as being one of the team, and whose Hong Kong heritage is (at least to my mind) neither under- nor over-played. And the boys' boss is Banna, an eighty-year-old Indian who proves instrumental in helping them to get their bike running (the use of petrol having been banned in the oil wars).

Still, it's a rather techno-fetishistic offering, heavy on the nostalgia, unless you like motorbikes as much as Niven and Noll:

She looked dead and cold. Just metal.

"But you're not, are you?" Niven said, running his hands over the gold emblem on her tank. "You're a wonderful old girl, aren't you?" He looked at her, wondering why they had ever called Wheelie "her". The Wheelie



wasn't her, it was a him. (52)

It's nice that they can have a moment alone together, I guess. The plot unfolds with great predictability and no real suspense – Niven and Noll use *Wheelie* to save the day when all the modern sources of power in the trading station fail – but you're left thinking that although this may be a story that *could* happen, that isn't enough to make it interesting.

### 5. *Time Trap* (1976)

Published in the same year as *Wheelie in the Stars* – Fisk was much more prolific than I ever knew as a young reader, although that's surely in part due to the compactness of his books; even the longest of the titles discussed here barely breaks 150 pages, and most are well under 100 – *Time Trap* seems to have received more of its author's attention. Like *Wheelie*, it's set in the future, in a constrained environment (but on an environmentally devastated Earth, c. 2079), and focuses on male relationships (but without the machine to get in the way); and, as the title suggests, it's a time-travel tale. It's also the first time we've seen Fisk build a setting of any particular imaginative interest – *Wheelie's* backdrop being deliberately a void – complete with neologisms and a novel social structure:

... nobody in Unit 362 knows anything very much. They just amble about doing their thing. A pretty dull thing it is. The old ones drink True T and Coffymost and all the other synthys in the Bevvie Lounge. Some of them drink gallons a day, I swear they do. Sometimes, when they get their Senior Citizen Credits and it's a Saturday night – they can drink alcohol then – they lash out and buy each other Wizzky or Brand-E or =Gin. some of them even pretend to get drunk on the stuff though it isn't strong enough to wiffle a mouse. None of them has even tasted the real thing, of course (but I have. In the 1940s).

Then we've got the Primers, the middle-aged ones. Primers because they're supposed to be in the Prime of life. I can only just bring myself to write about them. Even the ones with jobs or the ones with filled Kiddie Quotas (the full quota is two children, precisely two; when I was an evacuee in the 1940s, one of the kids I was with came from a family of *nine* children) – even the Primers with something to do, something real in their lives, are just Permitted Proudies. The Official Authority permits them to be proud of their zoomdrive cars, proud of their horrible homes (I'd call them hutches), proud of their ten-foot-square back gardens (look! A real shrub!) – yes, and proud of their

Partners, their wives. Proud, even of them! They *like* being Proudies. (7-8)

Strange to say, when presented as an except like this, but this odd mix – part Golden Age brio, part *Nineteen Eighty-Four* dystopia, just a hint of *Clockwork Orange* slangy – does its job well. As our narrator, Dave, hints, in the course of the novel he travels back to the 1940s, which despite the war seems to him a time of plenty and luxury. But crucially, the mechanism of travel is a drug provided by an older man, Lipton, who he gets to know in his Unit. You activate the drug by concentrating until you feel sleepy: "Then his legs begin to itch and twitch about ... you must keep still. Then he gets a dream or a vision – just a flash – of the time he wants to travel to" (24). And then you wake up there. For all that Dave comes to consider the past "My real life" (46), and for all that there *seems* to be real time travel involved, we can never quite dismiss the possibility that the whole narrative is a solipsistic dream. It's a clever move, treating the past as something to get high on – when Dave returns to the future, he feels "a huge despair, a hopeless longing" (52); in other words, he comes down – or perhaps as a virtual reality. And as I've already suggested, it mitigates – even takes advantage of – any false notes in the future worldbuilding: they just make Dave's sojourn in the past more convincing, after all.

The drug parallels are elaborated, as time-travel becomes a literal addiction for Dave, and Lipton starts demanding more in exchange for the next hit. One trip takes the pair to what Lipton claims is five years in Dave's future, where the Authority seems to have fallen, and they're attacked by a gang led by the violent but babyish Pink Fairy, and Dave is (it seems) destined to die: only Lipton, of course, can prevent this train of events. From here, the narrative spirals down and around itself, progressively darkening and offering little possibility of escape. A chink of light comes with a new way of conceptualising the time travel: that the trip is not involuntary, but that "It all depends where you start from, which is another way of saying *who you are*" (72). It's a testament to Fisk's growth as a writer by this point in his career, I think, that he can so carefully manage the different levels of reality at work in *Time Trap*. The last third of the book works out the consequences of his novum in some detail, and the result is a work more complex and thoughtful than it at first appears, and one which even manages to find a kind of grace for its ending.

### 6. *Antigrav* (1978)

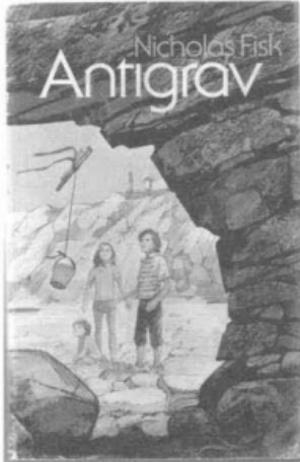
It's a curiosity that what is in some ways one of Fisk's least science-fictional books – essentially, *Antigrav* is driven by a contest for possession of some magic rocks – contains some of his most direct

writing about science. It begins when group of children, with the unlikely names of Train (Traynor), Mee (Amelia) and young Pog (Timothy), meet on a remote Scottish island, where their parents have been gathering for some kind of scientific retreat. Playing on the beach, Pog discovers a red pebble which, to his great joy, when placed in a Smarties tube with a bunch of other unremarkable pebbles, causes said Smarties tube to float. Their immediate impulse is, charmingly, to experiment. They determine that it seems to be lifting towards the moon, they try different combinations of stones in the tube, they determine the lifting power of the antigrav by tying it to a bucket, and most impressively they play with the balance of forces – antigrav vs gravity – and rig the tube/bucket contraption so that it can't point at the moon and has to spin, which causes Train to enthuse that they've invented a new kind of engine: a free source of power that could revolutionise the world. All of this recalls nothing so much as the opening of *Trillions*, except here the experiments feel even more direct and practical. This is *sf* as advocacy of an attitude to the world.

It's an attitude carried through to the adult parts of the story (that there are adult parts at all continues to mark Fisk out from much contemporary YA). While the children continue their experiments, not wanting to reveal what they've discovered, their parents debate the importance of science with some of the others on the retreat. One, for instance, insists that "Science is Power and Power is Science", and that he can't see "how anyone with even a notion of history can disagree with a basic argument like that!", to which Train's father provides the counter-argument: "Science ... isn't just power. Science is *science*. I do my work not to gain power, or give power to someone or something, but simply to find things out" (39). Ah, but his interlocutor responds, what if you discovered – say – a new source of power? Wouldn't you have to consider who used it, and what they used it for? Wouldn't that be your responsibility? At which point a third party, the somewhat mysterious Czeslaw, shuts them both up by firmly stating that "it is better to *do* about these things, than to *talk*" (40). It turns out, not hugely to the reader's surprise, that Czeslaw is a representative of an unspecified but fairly obvious foreign power, and soon we're into a full-on maguffin-led Cold War adventure, with the children kidnapped, imprisoned

on the spies' boat and latterly their submarine, and even subjected to a strip-search in pursuit of the red stone.

The childrens' imprisonment is certainly the most interesting section of the novel, for a few reasons. First, at times it's nearly as intense as the best passages of *Granny*; for all the silliness of the *sf*nal conceit itself, Fisk makes the situation the children find themselves in matter and there's a lingering sense that something seriously unpleasant could be about to happen. As is typical in his third-person narratives, Fisk eschews introspection, preferring to create atmosphere through action. In this case, just as the stone is about to be discovered, Train attacks Mee for revealing its location, and uses the distraction to hide the stone – thus ensuring, he thinks, that their kidnappers will see no need to pressure her further. As in *Space Hostages*, Fisk is able to make violence properly shocking, in this case by contrasting Train's actions with the detached running commentary inside his head:



"You stupid little cow!" Train yelled and flung himself straight at Mee, flailing at her with his hands ('No need to hit her head,' said his cold, clear mind). She looked up at him, horrified, but he continued to beat at her ("That was a good loud smack, when you hit her shoulder!" said his mind) until she stood up and backed away from him. (72)

This leads to the next noteworthy aspect of the captivity section of the book, which is that in response to Train's assault, Fisk gives us access to Mee's thoughts. "We swore an oath and he broke it. How could he? [...] He hit me again and again as if he'd gone mad. Mad with cowardice! He's such a coward that he'd do anything at all" (76-77). The shift doesn't last, and nor does the rift between Train and Mee – in fact it takes up less than ten pages – but it's still significant as almost the first time in any of these books that a female character takes the viewpoint, and the very first time one does so, I think, that Fisk treats the thoughts of his female lead as important in their own right, and not just as a way of providing an audience for the main drama.

Finally, there is the character of Czeslaw himself, who turns out to be more conflicted than we might at first have assumed; conflicted, indeed, to the point of having been driven a little mad by the situation he

finds himself in, which allows Fisk to use him as a vehicle to continue *Antigrav's* central argument:

Again, Czeslaw laughed. He said, "Oh, I see! You are children after all, silly children! You believe that on your side it is all good, all the men are good men; and on my side it is all bad things, bad men! You think the power of this little thing –" he shook the pebble in his cupped hands – "is safe with your mummy and daddy, but not so safe with the mummy and daddy of another country! Is that what you think?"

"But you said yourself," said Train, "that my father and her mother are good people –"

"I did not say they were *strong* people," said Czeslaw. "You are good children, nice children – but you are not *strong*. And I shall tell you this: the world is run by the *strong!*" (90)

The red pebble – science fiction in a Smarties tube, standing for science itself – is simply potential. It is neither good nor bad. It could enable (we are told) unlimited power or devastating new weapons. What matters are the choices people make about it and because of it. In the end, Czeslaw's choice is to abstain: he releases the children, with the pebble but in the middle of the ocean, in a dinghy, with no clear way of getting back to land. Mee mocks his "trust the little children" approach, and before you know it she and Train have rigged up an impromptu outboard motor for their dinghy, which enables their escape and, eventually, flight. (Never put *antigrav* on the mantelpiece in the first act unless ...) But in the end, Fisk pulls his punches, as the "good guys" too decide to abdicate responsibility: they skim the stone back out into the ocean, leaving it for others to rediscover. What they retain of their adventure are only images in a scrapbook: Pog's proud face, taken in the aftermath of the escape, "filled with a pleasure too deep for smiles" (121).

### 7. *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair* (1980)

Along with *Trillions* and *Grimy*, this is probably the most widely-read of Fisk's novels. Indicative of the esteem in which it is held is the fact that my edition is an "Oxford Children's Modern Classic" – the only one of Fisk's books to be so reprinted, I think

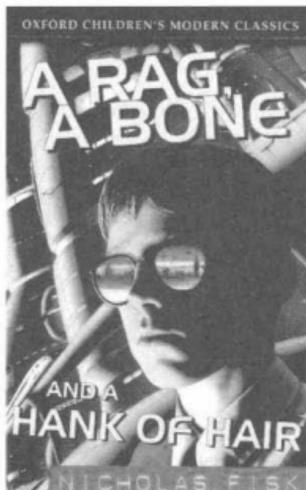
– and the fact that it comes with a note that Fisk "has been described as 'the Huxley-Wyndham-Golding' of children's literature". That's high praise, and not entirely exaggerated, particularly when it comes to the Wyndham comparison: Fisk at his best shares with Wyndham the same sort of clarity of focus, and at his worst the same sort of mildly patronising egalitarianism.

There's no doubt, though, that *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair* is Fisk at his best. Like *Trillions*, it's one of the books that has lurked in the recesses of my subconscious since I first read it; unlike *Trillions*, it holds up on re-reading for more than its basic conceit, as a rounded, serious novel showcasing an increased grasp of character and detail. Its protagonist, Brin, is one of Fisk's Important Smart Boys. We're even

told on the very first page that "Brin was young enough to matter", in a world where nuclear disaster has dramatically reduced the birth rate. Where he differs from Brylo, Scott, Train and the others, however, is his arrogance: he is quite happy to declare, to no lesser a board than the Western Elect, that he is "cleverer than most people", and that this is no doubt why he has been summoned before them. It's worth saying that Fisk's unpacking of his society here is noticeably more sophisticated than in, say, *Time Trap*. The details, such as the Rules of Politeness followed in what is ostensibly a pacifistic world, fall naturally out of an opening scene with its own significant narrative momentum. That momentum has to do with the use of the sorts of materials

listed in the novel's title which, when run through a Genetic Recoder (with the addition, in a wonderfully Frankensteinian touch, of "some electricity of course"), produce a living, breathing replica of the dead person they came from, in theory complete (in a scientifically implausible but narratively brilliant move) with their original personalities and memories, and crucially for the novel, original fertility. Brin is to be inserted into a Scenario in which some Reborns are reliving the Blitz to prevent future shock – echoes of *Time Trap*, here, in the conception of the past as a stage onto which Fisk's characters can step, taking readers with them – to help determine whether the project has been a success.

You might think that this setup has an obvious punchline – Brin is a Reborn! – and to the extent that Brin is indeed a Reborn, and that the experiment is



an attempt to evaluate him, as the first such raised outside the comforting familiarity of a Scenario, you'd be right. But what marks *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair* out is what Fisk builds around this narrative. For one thing, the novel is by far the most accomplished character study we've yet seen from him, with Brin's initial obnoxiousness skillfully tempered by his and our growing awareness of what he is and how he's been used, but never erased. For another it's as creepily atmospheric as *Grinny*, without that novel's rather straightforward good-versus-bad story. The future into which Brin has been born comes to seem increasingly dystopic – crucially, in some ways more restrictive than the Scenario – but this is framed as, essentially, an inevitable failure of utopia. (Perhaps this is, in part, where the Huxley comparison comes from, although the scenery in Fisk's futures – moving pavements, vid screens, and so forth – continues to owe most to Golden Age conceptions.) “For hundreds of years,” one of the Western Seniors tells Brin, “our civilization has been based on achieving peace – peace between nations and peoples, peace between person and person” (49). And they have been successful: but they find that peace is “too slow” for their needs now, without really understanding what the alternatives entail.

Most impressive, however, is the climax to which the story builds. After a brief jailbreak, as a result of Brin's increasing sympathy for the Reborns – he lambasts the Seniors as “savage, stupid and brutal” (60) and as a result is told to speak when he's spoken to, which unsurprisingly he takes badly – the group are manipulated back into the Scenario. Brin knows, at this point, “that some sort of curtain was to descend over the Scenario, and the play, and the players. There had to be an ending” (89), an intimation that no character in a Fisk story has achieved before, and one which proves to be a harbinger of an extraordinary final section. All the Reborns are killed by what they're told is a German bomb, but which Brin knows is the Seniors intervening in the Scenario, and the perspective shifts to various of the Seniors, dealing with the aftermath of the bomb. Each in turn is startled to hear a “a voice from nowhere” shouting “LIVE!” It's impossible to know whether these are the voices of the Reborn, who have somehow escaped death – earlier in the novel, they started to psychically influence the world, even creating a

new person wholly out of their own desires – or the guilt of the Seniors, who committed a violence that goes against all they stand for. And the novel ends, impressively, and unlike any of Fisk's other books, without clear resolution: simply with one Senior falling into “an uneasy sleep, filled with wild and impossible dreams, and voices calling” (110).

In a sense, *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair* is striking as the antithesis of the neutrality-of-science argument advanced in *Antigrav*, almost as *Grinny* mirrored *Trillions*. The Reborn are presented as “the scientific answer to the problem caused by a scientific disaster” (91), and certainly there's no quibbling (though perhaps there should be) over the idea that a low fertility rate is something that must be rectified, yet the Reborn themselves can be seen as notably

beyond the bounds of science: an area in which man was not meant to meddle. In that sense, it's a little depressing that it's the novel of Fisk's that has come closest to receiving the canonical seal of approval. But its ending, I think, undercuts this slightly: it says that if fear is your response to the unknown, if you abandon the attempt to *understand*, then it's no surprise if you're damned.

### 8. Robot Revolt (1981)

I've mentioned a couple of times that Fisk seems to be drawing on the well of the Golden Age when designing his sf. It tells you something, I think, that in 1981 he was writing about this sort of robot:

The robot entered. Hez admired its smooth natural walk, observed the bronze-metal tapered ankles. (‘Humantype limbs! Humantype head! Humantype speech!’ just as the Robomart advertisements said.) He envied the clean new slacks, so much more stylish than the old denims Hez himself wore. No shirt, though. No other clothing. The bronze torso, with its humantype cleft for the non-existent spine and the humantype arms so neatly jointed to the not-too-powerful shoulders, the curved column of the neck – Hez saw all of these and marvelled. The robot seemed to light up the darkness of the hall. (7)

The first chapter of *Robot Revolt* is almost entirely given over to describing the family's new purchase. The impression given is of a fine machine, very



artistically put together, a "good – but not too good – moving sculpture" (12). Hezekiah, aged 11, is excited by it, particularly by the ways in which this Mark III machine is superior to the Mark IIs he's familiar with; Abigail, aged 13, is more sceptical; and their father, Reuben Moulton, for all that he purchased the robot to help with the running of the household while his wife is sick, seems at times barely to tolerate it – in a nice touch, it does remain an "it" until renamed "Max" a little later on.

The robot, we realise, is out of place in what is a very traditional family, in the conservative-religious sense. Reuben is the founder and Pastor of a community known as the Shiners, which has distinct Amish/Puritan leanings. It's no surprise that one of the themes of the novel is the congruencies and dissonances between the sort of code followed by the Shiners and the sort of code followed by the robot. There are no strict Three Laws here, as this exchange underlines:

"I was given a moral programme. A code of ethics." The robot's voice was not toneless, but neither was it sympathetic.

Hez said, "You mean, you must never do anything to harm a human being – that sort of thing?"

"No, not only that sort of thing. My ethical code is far more complicated than that. It is as complicated as your own code, most probably. After all, the programme I follow was prepared by humans like yourself."

Hez said, "I'd never thought of that. There you are, stuffed full of contradictions and shoulds and shouldn'ts and musts and mustn'ts, just like us. You must be a mess inside!"

"A mess inside," agreed the robot. But it looked clean, tidy and efficient. (22)

This is good, rich seam for a robot to mine, and Fisk orchestrates his material into the most mature of the novels considered here, one that ranges, as did *Antigrav* and *Hank of Hair* over the role of science and reason, but also considers the impulse towards religion and order in human affairs, and even how humans integrate an understanding of death into their lives. Particularly interesting is the relationship that develops between Abi, the most fully-realised female character Fisk has given us to this point, and Max. When she discovers that her father has been perpetuating her mother's illness, Abi confides in the robot how easy she finds it to hate her father, and yet, despite what she now knows, how hard she finds it to love her mother. Max's analysis of her responses in dry cost-benefit terms ("Wouldn't it be more profitable to concentrate on loving your mother?") (45)

unsurprisingly enrages Abi, and ironically sets in train her plan to use Max to kill the her father. But Max, too, is learning from such conversations, and after being persuaded – or at least claiming to be persuaded – by Abi that the Pastor has a death wish, he instigates the titular revolt by essentially turning into a robot preacher, exhorting humans to listen to the voice of Reason they've created in their midst, and warning of dire consequences if they do not.

Of Fisk's various non-human intelligences, Max is certainly, and presumably by design, the most comprehensible. His revolt is not without its alien moments – one robot meeting paralleled with the Pastor's raucous church services is "silent and motionless", as the robots communicate on a level inaccessible to the human observers – but it is one with a fundamentally human goal, that of a recognition of rights. Having raised that parallel, and illustrated it with several stirring scenes of Max challenging the Pastor's authority, the ending Fisk offers is one of his darkest and most cruel, hinging on the intervention of – and this is one of the book's weaker points – the ex-boss of Robomart, who has been living incognito, complete with anagrammatic name ("Mr Toroba") among the Shiners, because he felt robotics (and science) had been getting in the way of "the inconvenient things, the truly interesting things" (126) about life. As a result of Mr Toroba's actions, the Pastor is allowed to walk away, freed in turn, it is implied, of the burden that enforcing the Shiners' standards imposed on him, while his wife is allowed to recover and takes custody of Hez and Abi. There is little justice for anyone: but in particular, no freedom awaits for Max.

Max bent over her and poured lemonade into glasses without spilling a drop. He was himself again now: the perfect servant and nothing else. He had 'wiped' his memory spools, cleared out everything he had learned, emptied his minds. He had realized the truth – that he was not more than human, but less. Infinitely less. He had been created to serve humans. He was just another appliance, to be switched on and off. (125)

### 9. You Remember Me! (1984)

One near-constant in Fisk's stories is that they are almost always restricted in scope. Their endings almost always refuse lasting change, and they tend to take place within some limited environment that is separate from the world at large: the community in *Robot Revolt*, the island in *Antigrav*, the trading station in *Wheelie in the Sky*, and so forth; even if the whole world is affected in *Trillions*, the important bits of the story take place in one village. *Grinny* is perhaps the most complete example of this approach, being an

alien invasion story that takes place entirely within the sphere of a single family; but *Grinny's* sequel is its antithesis, being a tale that, unusually, spreads out to give a sense of events affecting the whole of the UK.

Gone (at least to start with) are Timothy Carpenter's diaries. Instead, the novel opens in a tremendously middle-class third person narration: "The Roller Rally came down the street. The jobs were ready." Timothy – now fourteen – is observing the fracas that results, in his role as cub reporter for his local paper. The Rollers, supporters of "the rule of law", have been marching across the UK all summer. At most of the marches there has been trouble. At all of them, hundreds or thousands of people have joined the Rollers. The focal point of the movement is Lisa Treadgold. "That woman," Timothy hears a police officer say admiringly, "You've got to hand it to her. She's got power" (10).

Even going on this much, you'll probably be able to guess that Lisa Treadgold is Grinny mark two, with the same hypnotising catchphrase – hence the book's title – but a rather more effective plan, involving advocating the "three Ds", decency, discipline and dedication, and building up a more resistant power base. The story's metafictional underpinnings have been evolved as well: "Mr Fisk" is now officially "a friend of the family" who has "encouraged Timothy's ambition to become some sort of writer" (11); in one of *You Remember Me!*'s more effectively chilling moments, when Timothy starts to realise that something very wrong is going on and consults Mr Fisk, the letter he receives in return only reveals that the author has fallen fully under Lisa's sway. "I now consider her to be a wholly admirable phenomenon", he writes, before echoing the original Grinny: "You [...] must prepare your mind for some considerable changes" (51-2).

Lisa's achilles heel remains, however, the same as Grinny's before her: youth. Since Timothy is now older, he spends much of the novel struggling to resist Lisa's sway without quite realising what he's doing; not quite remembering Grinny, but not quite feeling comfortable, either. Fisk probably strings this thread of the novel out for too long, but it does give him an excuse to pay more attention to Beth, who moves fully into the limelight in *You Remember Me!*'s second half and is undoubtedly the best thing about the book: sharp, proactive and creative. About half-

way through, we start getting excerpts not just of Timothy's typed notes, but of Beth's own lively diary, which makes clear that she knows exactly what's going on and is desperate to stop it. Eventually she saves the world (again), despite having to carry a hated handbag to do it.

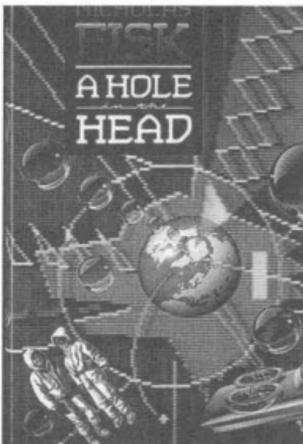
Sadly, the novel as a whole is not worthy of Beth. In broadening his focus, Fisk loses much of the intensity that marked out *Grinny*, and the satire of Margaret Thatcher's popularity is an insufficient, heavy-handed replacement. (There's also the slightly patronising suggestion that women may be easier to free from Lisa's mind-control than men because they're inclined to mistrust – perhaps read: see as rivals – an attractive woman who's popular with men.) Lisa's takeover is oddly victimless, with the horror of the scenario deferred to a future that never comes to pass, and while the plan to take Lisa down does depend on some typically Fiskian working-things-out, it's an even less scientifically-grounded novel than was *Grinny*. In all, as is so often the case with long-delayed sequels, it's a disappointment.

#### 10. *A Hole in the Head* (1992)

*A Hole in the Head* is not the last of Fisk's novels, any more than *Space Hostages* was the first, but it seems an appropriate place to call a halt; it may be his last major science fiction work, with more recent volumes tending to the whimsical or educational, and it seems to confirm the sense that Fisk's best work appeared between the early Seventies and the early Eighties. Although a more characteristic novel than

*You Remember Me!*, and certainly a more satisfyingly peculiar one, *A Hole in the Head* has enough of its own weaknesses to position it more as a curiosity than an essential work.

It's notable, at least, for putting front-and-centre the issues of ecotastrophe that lurk in the background of works such as *Grinny*, *Wheelie in the Stars*, and *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair*. We open in blankness: outside a research station at the North Pole, where as in *Antigrav* an assemblage of top scientific researchers provides an opportunity for some children, Jonjo (twelve) and Madi (ten) to do some exploring. What they find is a talking dog, Bob – not likely to trouble Patrick Ness' Manchee or Pixar's Dug in the hall of fame of such creatures, but entertaining enough in his own right – who has been traumatized by something he's seen, or something that's been done to him. Their



subsequent investigations lead them to a Max, not a robot this time, but one of the researchers, and together they walk us through Fisk's future history:

"Look, you know about the two major panics we've been through all these years since the 1980s—"

"The Greenhouse Effect and the hole in the Ozone Layer," Madi said. "How could anyone not know about them? New illnesses, new fuels to replace oil and petrol, new wars between the Haves and Have-nots, new maps to show where the rising seas have eaten away the old coastlines—"

"You're mixing two things into one," Max said. "Well, why not? They're interconnected. But stick to our Hole in the Head, the one above us right now: and its effects on *our* animals and life forms."

Jonjo said, "Skin cancers and eye diseases from too much ultraviolet radiation. That sort of thing?"

"Yes. Those are some of the obvious ones. But there are also genetic changes. The *nature* of some animals seems to be changing. (34-5)

The main literary problem with this passage is that Madi's recitation sounds like it comes from a sourcebook, not a textbook. But it also contains a disappointing narrative move by Fisk, in that it elides the predicted real consequences of real environmental catastrophe in favour of an entirely fictitious one. Not, I should say, that Fisk is the only sf writer to have indulged such a move in an attempt to make climate change storyable – far from it, sadly – but as *A Hole in the Head* progresses it becomes clear that Fisk's motive here is to present his protagonists with a deliberately fictional problem they can *solve* via direct individual action, and that feels disingenuous.

It feels churlish, in a way, to complain about this. Far more problematic, you might argue, is the character of Inge Lindstrom, Max's antagonist: a woman whose fearfully commanding presence comes down to using her good looks to get men to do what she wants, and a character who demonstrates Fisk's continued ambivalence about women. Meanwhile the main plot is not without its virtues: sexism aside, in some of the adult interactions that Madi and Jonjo get caught up in there's a convincing sense of political tensions just beyond their comprehension, and when Jonjo returns from a trip home to the UK – an unexpected removal from the main narrative that seems to send Madi and Bob into a holding pattern while he's away – he offers some evocative impressions of a warmed and half-drowned country where bananas and mangos are now staple crops, and glass-bottomed boats offer tours over drowned

villages. In many ways, *A Hole in the Head* is of a piece with Fisk's other later works in attempting to offer something a little more wide-ranging, and a little less neat, than a straightforward novum-intrusion tale.

But still, the book's ultimate resolution, which trumpets a "natural cure" for the ozone hole, "a cure from the planet itself" (117), feels like a betrayal. Fisk's description of the release of the ozone reservoir to which Bob leads Madi and Jonjo is convincingly freeing – "Through the glass you could see the sky; and in the sky, bubbles. Endless flights of them, whirling, swirling, colliding with each other, bossily bumping each other, and always rising, rising, rising, till they reached the Ozone Layer" (125) – but it's surely an inappropriate consolation to suggest that the planet will always provide, made worse by a zoomed-out epilogue that assures us that the ice-caps refreeze, the waters recede, and animals go back to their usual ways. Fisk's fondness for neatness is always most apparent in his endings – of all the books discussed here he only really resists the impulse in *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair* – and it undoes him here, I think, more than anywhere else.

So, not wanting to risk emulating him, I'll stop here, and risk leaving this assessment seeming as contradictory as the rewarding and sometimes frustrating body of work it represents.

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# First Impressions

Edited by Martin Lewis

First things first: hello! This is my first issue as reviews editor, having taken over from Kari at the beginning of the year. You probably won't see much difference; the reviews will continue to cover the entire range of speculative and fantastic fiction and attendant non-fiction. One change you will notice is this column. I'm going to allow myself some space each issue to chat about recent releases and to review a book that has recently caught me eye, ideally one that has managed to slip through the cracks. In this instance, I thought I would take my cue from the theme of the issue.

I had a good year for children's novels in 2009. *The Ask And The Answer*, Patrick Ness's follow up to *The Knife Of Never Letting Go*, was everything I hoped it would be. I also belatedly read Conor Kostick's excellent debut novel, *Epic*, following a mention on Farah Mendlesohn's *The Inter-Galactic Playground*. (If only the sequel, *Saga*, had lived up to its promise.) I dipped into the back catalogue of MT Anderson – best known for his superb *Octavian Nothing* duology – and found that he'd pulled off that rarest thing in *Thirsty*: an original vampire novel.

And it has continued. The first novel I read this year was *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. The plot will be familiar from *Battle Royale*, albeit with the (now inevitable) twist that here the children's fight for survival is televised. I wolfed it down in one sitting and, although its manipulation of the reader leaves a slight aftertaste, the literary equivalent of fast food is what you need in January.

I've just finished reading *Fever Crumb* by Philip Reeve, a prequel to his wonderful *Mortal Engines* quartet (2001-6). I was actually in two minds about reading this novel. Yes, I was hungry for more but, at the same time, *A Darkling Plain* was the perfect end to the series. Would re-visiting his world only tarnish it? Certainly there are two things that make *Fever Crumb* a pretty hard to stomach in the early stages: the rush and the jokes.

Fever is a foundingling in a ruined future London which is still the distant past for the protagonists of *Mortal Engines*. Raised by the Order of Engineers, who believe that emotionless is the same as logical and shave their heads every day, on the grounds that hair is a "vestige of our animal past", she has had a sheltered upbringing. Reeve turns her out into the mess of the city, straight into danger, and from that point she doesn't stop. Pace is often a virtue of children's fiction but here the breathless accumulation of increasingly unlikely plot leaves the reader desperate for a bit less action and a bit more reflection.

Characterisation is brusquer than we are used to

from Reeve. Our young heroine is so named because:

"During the Scriven era there was a fashion for women to name their children after whatever ailments they suffered from while they were pregnant. I have heard of people names 'Backache', 'Diarrhoea'..."

"I knew a man once called Craving-For-Pickled-Onions McNee," agreed Kit Solent. Ruan giggled and Fever looked disapprovingly at his father. Was he joking? She didn't see the purpose of jokes.

The reader might similarly squint disapprovingly at Reeve. This is sub-Pratchett but there is plenty worse. For example, the chief baddie is, of all things, a publican and we are told that:

"As well as the Mott and Hoople he had two other pubs, the Blogger's Arms on 'Bankmentside and the Polished Turd in B@ersea."

True, there were puns like this – generally of a similarly ahistorical nature – in his previous novels but I don't remember them being so common. Or, indeed, so rotten. In this London manufactured scents take the place of records and these puns reach their nadir with a truly weird aside about gangsta smell artists called Prince Nez and Sniffa Dogg.

At around the halfway mark it does ease up a bit, or rather, the ride becomes smoother, even if the pace of revelation continues unabated (after the globetrotting of Reeve's earlier novels, I naively thought things might be simpler in a static city). At this point there is a long flashback which provides some of the emotional power which is a trademark of his work. In general though, this weight is missing, and instead of deepening his world, he is only trading off it. The ending is abrupt and open-ended and apparently a sequel to this prequel, *A Web of Air*, is due out later this year. I'm afraid I won't be following Fever any further though.

Right, see you next issue when I will be discussing how to suppress women's writing. Prior to that I will need to spend some time on eBay because I can already tell that being reviews editor is going to necessitate a radical increase in my shelf space. Particularly since the editor of *Vector* was recently making me feel inadequate by boasting about having 3557cm.

*And God Created Zombies* by Andrew Hook (Newcon Press, 2009)

*The Push* by Dave Hutchinson (Newcon Press, 2009)  
Reviewed by Mark Harding

It is traditional, when someone starts their first day at work, for them to be given nonsense tasks – fetching the bucket of steam or getting the glass hammer out of stores. But this, I thought, was the reverse situation, with our new editor playing the tricks on me. Review Andrew Hook's new novella, came the command from *Vector Central*. On zombies. Andrew Hook – the Andrew Hook? Zombies? Wot? What? Shome mishtake shurely? But no, it is true. The real curse of zombies – surely the most boring monsters ever – is that talented people will insist on using them to produce interesting work. And now Hook has decided to join in. And it is, of course, a very interesting piece of work indeed.

*And God Created Zombies* is a slipstream horror story. (I must mention in passing the elegant jacket cover by Dean Harkness, which amplifies the already arch book title to a level of super-archness that can probably be seen from space.) The story is told in flashback by John, an apparently the lovelorn narrator typical of slipstream, as zombies gradually seep into his life and he has to puzzle out what is going on and what he is supposed to do about it. His only sources of information are George A Romero films, Roberto, his shady friend, and Rowena, the romantic interest.

Hook uses the solipsistic vibe of slipstream brilliantly to make unlikely behaviour smell of the truth. There is a startling episode near the beginning, when Roberto accidentally runs over the legs of a dead tramp and, with the complicity of John, decides to 'hit and run'. It is simultaneously weirdly unbelievable and disturbingly authentic and this mixture of (sometimes petty) self-obsession against a background of horror and apocalypse is characteristic throughout, not to mention uncannily plausible.

The story is completely coherent. It clicks together like a beautifully designed machine and gives a fully rational explanation for the appearance of a plague of mindless animated corpses obsessed with eating human flesh. The coincidences of fiction become, in this book, part of the story itself. Hook is so perceptive about the slipstream form – its self-awareness, self-obsession, its honest projection of inadequacies and desires – that the book is almost a critique of its own genre. Whether, by the denouement, the reader will throw the book across the room or simply lie down for a while (with the lights on) is up to individual taste. What is undeniable is the skill, scope, and ambition displayed in just a few pages. It is also food for thought; wouldn't I love to hear this one discussed at the book club of my local church! No longer can I simply categorise a whole sub-genre as an undifferentiated mass of thrills and spills. Damn it, I'm going to have read the reviews of zombie novels now, to find more books like this one to add to the 'must read' list.

The other novella from Newcon Press that I

received, *The Push*, has recently been shortlisted for the BSFA Short Fiction Award. As a platinum card holder in the Ignoramus Club I must confess I wasn't previously familiar with Dave Hutchinson. Eric Brown, in his generous introduction, hopes Hutchinson's work will find a wider audience. Well, if this sophisticated, funny, engaging work is typical, it certainly deserves one.

After heavy filleting to remove spoilers, the bones of the story are pleasingly sparse. Hanson – one of the founders of the colony planet Reith – has been slacking around the stars for a hundred years or so. He receives a message from the colony calling him back. Reith has a problem; an unexpected, absurd, unsolvable problem. The resulting story is a space opera about interplanetary politics as well as a very personal story about luck and love, responsibility and guilt.

The universe of *The Push* has a rich vein of comic cynicism and an inescapably British feel. The foundation of the Reith colony wasn't a civic project for the greater good or the product of maverick free-enterprise and it certainly wasn't the result of farsighted leadership. It was just four spoiled rich kids who did it for the ego-trip and because they could. The future arises from muddle, not design. The founders simply got lucky – their crazy scheme happened to work out.

We see the results through Hanson's grudgingly appreciative eyes. While he has been away, the independent colony has grown into what British moderation would concede is the nearest thing to paradise that we are likely to get: a sort of Chiantishire in space. Nobody's perfect but they rub along together as well as you could expect; the landscape is lovely, although the mountain climbing is limited; the butter and cheese is fantastic but the seafood is dubious (despite which Hanson is seriously thinking of starting a fish and chip franchise). These things count. Reith is more temperate than Earth and its daughter colonies (socially as well as geographically) making it an infinitely more desirable place to live. It has flaws but it is precious. And it is under threat.

The threat isn't from an alien warlord or Imperial stormtroopers: it's the bloody UN. The threat to the colony is undeniably chilling but we aren't promised the usual cataclysms of space opera. It's not bullets but writs. The implications are big but based on the characters and their understanding of each other. It's a bit like a Stephen Poliakoff play but with time-dilation and humour.

An unusual feature of the story – and one that displays Hutchinson's storytelling skill – is that the reader is amused and gripped throughout Hanson's progress, despite the fact that Hanson is, frankly, a complete and undisguised shit. Somehow, there is something refreshingly human about this. Inescapable too: what's an Eden without a snake? The intricate nature of *The Push* is such that you actually get double the value of its 95 pages because when you read it for a second time (which you will) everything is subtly different.

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves* by Stephen Hunt (Tor, 2009)  
Reviewed by Donna Scott

Stephen Hunt's *Jackalian* series would seem to be bang on trend at the moment: chunky books promising rollicking yarns in a steampunk setting, they are easily readable crossover books that we are informed will appeal to fans of Phillip Pullman and Susanna Clarke. Whilst some context is occasionally over-explained for younger readers through dialogue, this is nonetheless an interesting and engaging action adventure.

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves* is the second book in the series but is a self-contained story and most characters appear here for the first time. The novel builds on the established socio-political landscape of *The Court of the Air*, conveying a Dickensian-type society with intrigues and prejudices transferred to the different kinds of creatures that inhabit this world with varying degrees of enmity and affinity. The protagonist, Professor Amelia Harsh, is an adventurous archaeologist from the technologically adept nation of the Jackals, who has been ousted by the intellectual establishment for her unorthodox methods. The plot fixes on her journey to discover the lost city of Camlantia and restore her credibility, aided by Commodore Black and a crew of selected ne'er-do-wells, and funded by the man she blames for causing her father's suicide, the aptly-named Abraham Quest. To find the city, Harsh must lead her gang into "the heart of darkness", Liongeli. Parallels with Conrad would not be incorrectly assumed, the jungle setting offering a similar grotesque otherness.

Humans are often referred to as 'softbodies', emphasising their vulnerability compared with the shell-covered craynarbians, the flying lizard-like lashlites, and the spiritual steammen, who are not so much robots as self-aware mechanical men. In order to handle the adventure, our softbody heroes and heroines often require a few enhancements: Harsh is described as having "large sculpted biceps muscles that could rip a door apart or cave in the skull of a camel". There is more than an echo of Lara Croft and Indiana Jones here and another character, Cornelius – more infamously known as Furnace-Breath Nick – is a shape-shifter akin to the T-1000 from *Terminator 2*. The novel does not rely wholly on modern pop-culture for its references though: Hunt is evidently interested in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-century language and history and this research is conveyed subtly on the page.

Women are literally empowered in this book with physical strength, which enables them to be involved at the heart of the action. By contrast, the Jackals' queen is both physically and metaphorically disempowered by the removal of her arms: in other words, a figurehead. It is not simply a case of girls being beefed up to be boys, though the physicality of all the characters is emphasised and none are drawn particularly deeply. This may be because there is quite a crowd for us to be swept along by. The world that Hunt offers, however, is sufficiently rich to hold the reader's interest; a world that seemingly favours tradition and honour in its culture over technology (crystal books are now largely defunct artefacts and knowledge contained on them risks being lost forever). For Harsh, this is not a treasure hunt, but a quest for enlightenment.

*Fathom* by Cherie Priest (Tor, 2008)  
Reviewed by Tanya Brown

*Fathom*, something of a departure from Cherie Priest's earlier works (though not from her Southern Gothic roots), has something of the flavour of Tim Powers' *On Stranger Tides*. It melds furious tropical storms, the earth-quaking dreams of ancient gods, the stifling lushness of the forest and the sense of something ominous lurking beneath the calm surface of the sea. There are ghosts, witches, pirates and a shark-mouthed ingenue; there are elements of Greek myth, alchemy, urban legend and Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

Nia (short for Apollonia) is visiting her cousin Beatrice when she witnesses a brutal murder. Fleeing the scene, she plunges into the sea – only to be dragged beneath the waves, along with Beatrice, by something ancient and evil. But Nia is spared, in a sense: washed up like driftwood, she finds herself with plenty of time to reflect. Meanwhile, life on the little island of Anna Maria goes on without her, until the arrival of Sam, a harmless and likeable insurance adjuster, sparks transformation, change and a desperate race against the water-witch whose ambition is to waken a slumbering god.

While not a feminist novel in any meaningful sense, *Fathom* is full of strong, dangerous female characters. The men are less effectual, though somewhat more sympathetic. José Gaspar – generally believed to be mere legend, puffed up by local tourist boards – is portrayed as a former pirate who failed to discharge an errand and was punished for it: "I removed from the face of the earth every trace that he'd ever lived. There remains neither note nor relic to confirm he ever breathed before I claimed him." (p. 56) That's the vengeance of an angry goddess bound by her promise not to harm him; instead, she hits Gaspar where it hurts, in his reputation.

*Fathom* is a curiously timeless novel: it's set some time in the Twentieth Century but it's hard to be more precise. There are Coke cans and cars but most people on Anna Maria still get around on horseback; Nia wonders whether it's acceptable for a woman to wear trousers and bob her hair; Beatrice smokes "to look smooth". The novel is also rather unevenly paced with long slow passages followed by frantic chases and abrupt reversals. The final few chapters, in particular, feel rushed and somehow unfinished, though perhaps that's more a product of Nia's detached point of view. On the other hand, that very detachment lulls the reader into a sense of complacency that's shattered by casual violence and character death.

There's something hollow at the heart of *Fathom*. Perhaps it's the sense that we share with Nia, of moving – or being guided – through a world with rules and relationships that are never made clear. Perhaps it's the weight of reference and allusion that makes the novel top-heavy, so freighted with images and characters and ideas that it founders in confusion. Perhaps it's just the way the novel seems to simply stop, rather than finish: there's a lack of closure. Still, I'd recommend this: Priest's prose is robust, poetic and precise, she's adept at evoking atmosphere and her flavour of horror is unique.

*Conjure Wife* by Fritz Leiber (Orb/Tom Doherty, 2009)

Reviewed by L J Hurst

Fritz Leiber's *Conjure Wife* first appeared as a serial in *Unknown* magazine in 1943. Since then it has been filmed thrice, been re-printed countless times and Tom Cruise now has a fourth film in pre-production. What makes it so interesting? It seems to be the story of a struggling academic who discovers that Tansy, his wife, has become reliant on magic and ju-ju, which he – as a rationalist – persuades her to abandon, only to discover that her secret has not only been the secret of his little success, but that she has also been the bulwark guarding him against the malign and destructive forces. After those revelations Norman Saylor is only slightly more surprised to discover that most of the female half of the human population is engaged in such a dark battle.

In the 1930s the occult had started to slip into American literature, mainly through the success of Thorne Smith's light-weight *Topper* novels, but in 1941 *Unknown* magazine became the portal for intelligent fantasy through L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt's 'Harold Shea' stories. Shea was a psychologist who visited the land of myth, while Norman Saylor is a sociologist who has magic invade this world but both characters use their learning, and especially both rely on symbolic logic to work out their problems. In fact, Saylor relies on a pages long algorithm in his struggle to recover Tansy's soul. For Tansy has given up her soul in order to save Norman as he has sunk deeper and closer into the invisible maw of the beast, and Norman in an Orpheus and Eurydice moment has to bring her back, though from the seaside rather than from Hades in one of Leiber's games with the reality of myth and magic.

Written by a young man, perhaps influenced by his recent theology degree, in part *Conjure Wife* is a reflection of life on a New England campus in what we think of as a time of repression, yet many of the activities seem still relevant today. As Norman Saylor's problems begin he has to deal with students who have failed but feel rejected (re-appearing in Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*), and females who allege sexual harassment (used again in David Mamet's play *Oleanna*), which are both on the human plane; higher is the dragon on the college roof who starts to move, echoed perhaps in the classic *Doctor Who* serial, 'The Daemons'. Meanwhile it would be easy to imagine that Tansy Saylor is turning to magic because of her boredom as a faculty wife – this is the world where women exist during the day and become most active in the evening when they are taken to bridge parties but the supporting arch of the plot is that both magic and logic can work in this world, while the continuing story arc is that of the battle to recover the Saylor marriage, or more generally what has been and can be good. I'd include Leiber's work in that.

*White Is For Witching* by Helen Oyeyemi (Picador, 2009)

Reviewed by Nic Clarke

This is a subtle little gem of a ghost story, written in a sparsely elegant style and paced as a page-turner whose mystery lies mostly in its characters' fears and flaws. It centres on a haunted bed and breakfast in Dover and the people – living and dead – whose lives are entwined with the house, and with each other.

The impressionistic prologue is reminiscent of Kelly Link. It begins with the story's end and features a trio of first-person narrators, none of whom can give a straight answer. Urged by her brother to talk about their missing mother, central character Miranda offers surreal details: "Lily's favourite films have a lot of tap-dancing and a little story. Lily slides towards the colour red like it's a magnet". The rest of the story is told in a more accessible way but, in its treatment of the characters and their histories, it continues to resist simple readings and neat endings. Oyeyemi's writing is all about nuance.

The house, of course, looms large in the story, both as a place of incident – a stalled lift, confusing corridors, extra rooms that appear from nowhere – and as a discomforting physical presence: "All the light in the house was subterranean, as if the place had been built out of mildew". It is not simply exaggeration to say that the house is a character; it is, in fact, one of the book's narrators, addressing the characters ("I'm the Braille on your wallpaper that only your fingers can read – I tell you where you are") and plotting how to trap or expel them, according to its preferences. And it does have preferences; although it is never directly stated, the house and its spirits have a marked hostility to people who aren't (white) British, chasing away tourists and migrant workers, tormenting Ore, Miranda's black friend from university, and intermittently toying with the idea of bumping off Miranda's French father. The focus of its attention, and the novel's, is Miranda herself, whose possible possession by the house's spirits manifests as an eating disorder and episodes of amnesiac fugue. And she is, it seems, not the first woman in her family to be thus worn down.

As the house wages its slow campaign to take over Miranda, the sense of dread grows; but this isn't a one-note book. Offsetting the darkness is a surprising amount of humour and even a little romance, particularly when Miranda becomes a student at Cambridge and some of the narrating duties are taken up by the dry-witted Ore. Ore's adoptive family are not exactly the most right-on bunch on the planet but they provide a stable, loving contrast to Miranda's home life and offer amusement besides (of Ore's cousin, grown into teenage attractiveness: "Nothing tawdry, she just sits there and quietly smoulders, as if she'd quite like to be undressed.") Recommended.

*Red Claw* by Philip Palmer (Orbit, 2009)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

If you've been reading sf for at least two or three decades then you'll find it hard to not to crack a smile upon seeing a cover so wonderfully retro as *Red Claw* – all cheap models and faux-distressed edges. It's an unpretentious device that tips a wink at the reader as if to say "Remember me?" and the tale between those covers attempts to do much the same thing.

The colony of Xabar is the only piece of livable real estate on the planet of New Amazon. Its twin tiers of mutually antagonistic inhabitants, Soldiers and Scientists, are there to do just two things: firstly, to analyse the hell out of New Amazon's astonishingly diverse and perplexing lifeforms, and secondly, to blow the hell out of New Amazon's astonishingly diverse and perplexing lifeforms so that the entire planet can be terraformed for the good of the evil Galactic Corporation.

Initially everything goes according to plan: the Scientists – led by enigmatic genius Professor Helms – run about like children in a sweetshop, while the Soldiers – represented by impatient nonsense jingoist Major Sorcha Molloy – roll their eyes and try to stop New Amazon's vigorous flora and fauna *stopping* and eating them. Things most assuredly *stop* going according to plan when Juno, Xabar's super-intelligent AI overseer, develops some kind of fault and most of the colonists are killed. Only a small group of survivors remain – Scientists and Soldiers both – and they must try to survive amidst some of the weirdest and harshest creatures humankind has ever encountered. But the planet may not be their only enemy...

*Red Claw* aims to be a piece of hardboiled sf that comes on seriously strong from the very first sentence – "It's raining acid piss again" – and continues in a vein that devotees of serious mainstream literature will probably find about as palatable. If you like your stories violent, straightforward and laced with both mordant humour and geeky Golden Age references then you'll probably quite like *Red Claw*. It's such a wild pastiche and parody of so many sf classics (A.E. Van Vogt's *The Voyage Of The Space Beagle*, for a start) that you're bound to find a few titbits here to enjoy. The problem is that sadly they are just titbits, and Palmer throws everything into his mix with such utterly wild abandon that I didn't enjoy *Red Claw* anywhere near as much as I'd initially hoped.

*Moxlyland* by Lauren Beukes (Angry Robot Books, 2009)

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

"Full of spiky originality," declares Charles Stross, on the cover of *Moxlyland*. "A new kind of sf, munching its way out of the intestines of the wasp-paralysed caterpillar of cyberpunk." We've heard this too often, haven't we? And it's not true of Lauren Beukes' first novel. To the contrary, it's a book that would be all too easy to reduce to a string of buzzwords. Individuality, conformity, conspiracy. Wired, urban, dense. Terrorism, gaming, marketing, Cadigan, Sterling, Stross.

The word missing from the list is *knowing*. The cast of *Moxlyland* know their world is artifice; they know that everything, every interaction and object, is probably designed to sell. That's the air they breathe. That's what one of them, artist Kendra Adams, feels impatient about; that's why she eschews a digital camera for an old-fashioned film one. "There's a possibility of flaw inherent in the material", she argues. Digital is too perfect, too controlled, and in its perfection lies unreality. What interests her is the "background noise" captured while you're focusing on something else.

Those details interest Beukes, too, I think. Other things too, of course: in an afterword, she emphasises the plausibility of some of her novel's more prominent conceits: proprietary, corporation-run universities; law enforcement robots; use of mobile phones to deliver a disciplinary electric shock; biotechnological art; corporate co-option of rebellion for its own ends. But what marks the novel out is its texture.

Set in Cape Town in 2018, *Moxlyland* is told in four voices. First-person in a near-future setting is always a high wire act; the narration must be different enough to evoke a changed world but not so different as to sound implausible or just silly. Differentiating four such voices is an even bigger ask but Beukes makes a reasonable fist of it and her characters' personalities and situations are distinct enough to make up for any tonal similarities. In addition to navel-gazing Kendra ("I feel like the tarps sop up emotional residue along with the dust drifting down to settle on the carpets"), we meet: Toby Ward, self-consciously slangy blogger, spoilt and obnoxious ("It's always fun to infringe on people's personal space"); Lerato Mazwai, AIDS orphan, now a programmer indentured to the corporation that raised her, gossipy and shallow ("this fat chick across the aisle keeps giving me these dirty looks"); and Tendeka Mataboge, middle-class activist working with street kids, profane but unfailingly empathetic, even when being threatened ("Compared to what he must have gone through getting here, who the fuck am I that he should be afraid of me?").

It's the glimpses of these lives in this setting – Lerato's upbringing, Tendeka's struggle with corporate sponsorship of his aid programmes – that snag the attention, more than the overarching manipulation they struggle against. The novel's conclusion is never really in doubt; *Moxlyland* wears its cynicism on its sleeve. But it's a sharp, sly ride, not new but proficiently done. You've heard this too often, as well, but indulge me: Beukes is one to watch.

*The Sad Tale of the Brothers Crossbart* by Jesse Bullington  
(Orbit, 2009)

Reviewed by Simon Guerrier

Hegel and Manfred Crossbart cross 14th Century Europe robbing and killing and generally pissing off anything that comes in their way. In the first few pages they butcher the wife and family of a yeoman turnip-grower called Heinrich in front of him. Heinrich and his friends are soon in pursuit so Hegel and Manfred think they'll head for Egypt which has tombs they can plunder. That's just the start of Hegel and Manfred's problems. There are monsters and witches around every corner and the plague is tearing through whole towns. Every few pages there seems to be someone to stab or maim or steal from.

I'm not really the audience for this book; I'm bored by gory horror movies and gangster memoirs about who they killed and how much they loved their mums. But there's really not a lot to like about this book. The two leads are vicious, mean and stupid with little interest in the things they encounter on their journey. This is a problem since it's chiefly through their eyes that we see the world. In a 100-page sequence set in Venice, there are a couple of mentions of bridges but little else to describe one of the most distinctive cities in the world. There are occasional glimpses of the 14th Century setting – the Pope is in Avignon, the Venetians have sacked Constantinople – but there's little interaction or insight. The bibliography cites more than four pages of books which helped in "realistically rendering the historical world" but the Crossbarts don't care to learn anything from their adventure and remain unchanged by all that befalls them. They're in this for the violence.

It's not just the two leads, there's not a sympathetic soul in the whole story. Everyone is greedy, vain and stupid. Perhaps it's an accurate portrait of a nasty, brutish age but it makes for a wearisome read. It's a very violent book, peppered with long descriptions of things being gouged and broken. There's a lot of vomit, too, and the one sex scene is a lesson in grotesque, over-written misogyny:

"Withered breasts swaying pendulously, her tongue flicked over her few teeth and severed their drool-bond. He shrivelled even as he came inside her cold clamminess, screaming in terror at the realization he had been bewitched and wrenching away from her headfirst into the tipped table. He blacked out and vomited simultaneously, her cruel laughter following him into nightmares that stood no chance of besting his first sexual encounter."

Witches – as well as manticores, mermaids and demons – allow for ever more disgusting abuses of people's bodies, though the constant bludgeoning has only a dulling effect on the reader. The prose style doesn't help, every clause crammed with adjectives. On page 283, a section jumps between different characters in different rooms without any hint to the reader what and who is where. There are some well-realised, exciting moments – such as when they burn house down round a demon – and some attempt at humour as the Crossbarts discuss religious doctrine but I struggled to care about the brothers or their story. The book ends with them hoist by their own petard, trapped inside the tomb they've come so far to rob. I spoil this for you now so you won't waste your time on the worst book I've read in years.

*Elfland* by Freda Warrington (Tor, 2009)

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The Aetherials are a race of semi-immortals who live secretly amongst the mortals of Earth and who are responsible for human legends of fairies and elves. Every seven years, on the Night of the Summer Stars, their Gatekeeper performs a ritual to throw open the Great Gates between Earth and the Otherworld so that the Aetherials may make the visit to their homeland that is essential for their well-being. When the current Gatekeeper, Laurence Wilder, refuses to unseal the Gates, claiming that a great peril lurks behind them and it is no longer safe for them to be opened, the Aetherials on Earth are thrown into turmoil. Many of them believe that if the Gates remain sealed, the Aetherials' powers will fade and die.

Rosie Fox, daughter of a prominent and respected Aetherial family, and her brothers, live in the English village of Cloudford, close to the Great Gates. As children, they are kept apart from adult mysteries and conflicts but as they grow older they become aware of the animosity between the Wilders and the other Aetherial families with whom they associate. Rosie first encounters Laurence's sons, Sam and Jon, when she is nine years old and Sam, just a little older, steals from her and then threatens her brother. Despite the Wilders' hostility, arrogance and bad reputation, as a teenager Rosie finds herself drawn to Jon, who has no interest in her whatsoever, and then, despite herself, to Sam, who is strongly attracted to her.

With the Great Gates sealed, not only are the Aetherials denied access to their homeland but the younger generation are unable to make their first visit and undertake their initiation into the Aetherial world. To some, as the initiation is not without danger, this is no bad thing, but to others it is a disaster. Jon and Rosie's younger brother, Lucas, go off the rails, experimenting with both human and Aetherial drugs to try to re-open the Gates. Rosie's older brother, Matthew, rejects the Otherworld completely, denying his Aetherial nature. He marries a human and encourages Rosie to do the same. Eventually, not without misgivings, she does marry his human friend Alastair. When Sam returns to Cloudford after a long absence, it can only lead to catastrophe for all concerned.

This beautifully written novel creates a scenario where Aetherial characters must deal with the concerns of the Otherworld alongside the more mundane family problems that might be experienced by their human contemporaries. Not only does Rosie discover that there is more than one reason for the hostility between her family and the Wilders but circumstances propel her to undertake a central role in the wider conflict that threatens to destroy the Aetherials. The imagined world of the novel is entirely convincing and the characters simply leap off the page. *Elfland* is an outstanding novel and a must for any reader of fantasy, once opened it is simply impossible to close.

*Soulless* by Gail Carriger (Orbit, 2009)

Reviewed by Penny Hill

*Soulless* is an entertaining steampunk vampire romance. Having recently read *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* by Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan it was fun to use it to assess the romance tropes I encountered within the novel. The "big misunderstanding" that keeps our hero and heroine apart is reasonable, you don't have that nagging "But why don't they just ask each other?" feeling that characterises so many romantic misunderstandings. Alexia, our heroine, falls into the still relatively unusual category of being an active and sensible heroine – whose actions are therefore more interesting to follow and we have a nicely bewildered macho hero as well. The supporting characters would not disgrace a Georgette Heyer novel: a frivolous mother and step-sisters who do not appreciate our heroine, a quietly competent butler and an understanding best friend. Beyond the romance elements there is also a reasonable mystery plot for our protagonists to uncover.

I enjoyed seeing how the social constraints of the time were additionally complicated by the rules of the supernatural so that Alexia has to manoeuvre between physically protecting herself and obeying social conventions. In general, the narrative voice follows the Victorian setting quite closely, although there were some places where the dialogue was rather grating because of the (probably accidental) use of out of place words such as 'ornery' and 'aluminum'. In addition, the frequent swearing of Alexia's main antagonist, Lord Maccon, in front of women was undoubtedly deliberately done to show his contempt for social niceties but there was a danger that this clash with our expectations would be enough to break our suspension of disbelief.

I was surprised to find that while I could accept the sexism within the context of the period, I was uncomfortable with the prevalent racism against the Scottish and Italian characters. Nor did the author do herself any favours by persistently exoticising her heroine because of her half-Italian heritage. We were told far too many times that most people did not find Alexia good-looking because she did not fit the aesthetic ideals of the day and that those who did, did so because of her unusual qualities.

This is light, fun, frothy escapism. It is not in the least important or award-worthy but it is a good example of its kind. The supernatural romance sub-genre is one that has expanded a lot recently and, for those of us who have seen it take over the genre shelves in the bookshop, it is reassuring to know that there are good examples out there. I certainly will look out for the next novels in this series.

*Indigo Springs* by AM Dellamonica (Tor, 2009)

Reviewed by Penny Hill

This novel starts with an interview in a post-apocalyptic world and then flashes back to the events that triggered this future. I expected the narrative to follow the usual pattern where the future is used to book-end the main narrative but, disconcertingly, it did not.

Altogether there are three timelines. The future section is actually the least interesting of the timelines and the framing structure of the interview is rather weak because we have no context for Astrid, the protagonist, or Will, her interviewer. However, the tight third person viewpoint did eventually help me to empathise with Will. I wanted him involved in the story and to succeed in his goals so I was pleasantly surprised with the resolution to this section. Using Astrid's viewpoint in the past sections again helps us empathise with her, mitigating slightly the effects of our hindsight on that narrative. During this compelling account of the events that initiated the apocalypse, we start to get intriguing hints of a previously repressed past.

I was left wondering whether the novel as a whole would have worked if it had been narrated in a different order though. We would have lost some of the tension of trying to work out how the situation got to the future point but we would have been able to make up our own minds about events rather than feeling everything was predestined. Several potentially dull narrative sections were subtly skipped over so that we only saw the interesting sections and this might have been harder to disguise in a strictly chronological telling. Another problem is that since we are told immediately that Astrid's friend, Sahara, becomes a villain this overshadows all her earlier actions. Her weaknesses become too obvious early on and it is hard to accept Astrid's continuing forgiveness of her. By the end of the book, there was a trade-off in the choice of structure between these flaws and the aspects of this structure that did work, such as working out the answers to the mysteries surrounding some of the minor characters.

*Indigo Springs* has a well-constructed magic system. One of my criteria for a good fantasy is that the magic should have a believable cost, it shouldn't be a 'get out of jail free' card. While the rules do not necessarily need to be explained or to make sense, we the readers should be aware that they exist. Here there are clear benefits and risks to using magic. Once you are linked into the magic world it is not something you can just ignore or only use when it is convenient to you. The dangers of greed and misuse are demonstrated throughout the narrative.

There was also a pleasant yet non-idealised small town setting and the minor characters were interesting and well-drawn. They clearly had agendas and hidden issues beyond those purely required to service the main plot. It was also refreshing to see more blurred boundaries of sexuality than we often get in mainstream works.

Overall, this novel was a strange mixture of frustrating and enjoyable. I recommend it with reservations. As it is a first novel, I will be intrigued to see how well the author manages the sequel, *Blue Magic*.

*Small Miracles* by Edward M. Lerner (Tor, 2009)

Reviewed by Mark Harding

Set just five years in the future, *Small Miracles* opens with Brent, an engineer with Garner Nanotechnology, on a ride-along in a police patrol car to demo their ground-breaking nanosuit. The suit is made of a nanobot-impregnated fabric that makes it the coolest thing since the iPhone used to be (Lerner's certainly sold it to me; I've already started saving up to buy one). But a horrendously stupid accident occurs. In the disaster that follows, Brent's life is just about saved by the nanosuit. It's a miracle. Or is it a curse...

*Small Miracles* is engineered like an expensive luxury car – a German or Japanese one – where everything works exactly as it should. The book is an object lesson in writing a near-future thriller, precision designed to skim over the genre's dangerous potholes by maintaining a firm grip on a single area of interest. The prose is completely transparent, only marred here and there by a publisher's typo. Lerner quickly and easily introduces a large cast of characters, who are distinctive and consistent throughout the book, while the main protagonists are detailed with light and shade and flaws. Refreshingly, this author is also very good on the modern business world and its operation and excitements.

A particularly impressive aspect is the painless way that quite detailed information on nanotechnology is communicated. Lerner is an apt name for this author, as he appears to possess a telepathic download device to effortlessly transfer information through the page and into your head. You are simultaneously entertained and – at least you feel at the time – educated. *Small Miracles* as a whole could be given out by college professors to their students as lesson 101 on the concept of emergent intelligence.

It's also a fast, smooth, uninterrupted ride; a definite thriller and you don't stop being thrilled until the last page. You arrive at your destination without even noticing the amount of time that has flown by.

If I have a quibble, it's that for me, the product lacks heart. This seems to be a common problem with top-quality marques; not just for sf and thrillers but for well-lauded mainstream writers too. You can't mistake the intelligence but somehow you don't feel the author's emotional stake in the book. Or maybe it's that once the characters have reached the end of the narrative, somehow their place in your imagination also comes to a full stop. But don't let this put you off: the book deserves to be read. As an education, and as an entertainment, it's a top class piece of kit.

*Flashforward* by Robert J Sawyer (Gollancz, 2009)

Reviewed by Terry Jackman

*Flashforward*, originally published in 1999, has been reissued in the wake of the recent TV series of the same name. As might be expected from this author it is a hard sf novel; both the acknowledgements and the content of the novel demonstrate serious research and Sawyer has given a scientific underpinning to a novel that could easily have resembled a fantasy story. So, for those who like lots of science in their sf, there's definitely a treat in store. On the other hand, for those like me, who are wary of hard sf and admit to skipping any large chunks of educational content, it was a touch off-putting to find that the opening pages were largely devoted to factual description with no dialogue for four pages. Thankfully, although the first dialogue we get is only in the form of a countdown, it does lead us straight into the story proper.

It's 2009. At the CERN laboratories in Geneva, Lloyd Simcoe, his fiancée, Michito Komura, and younger colleague, Theo Procopides, attempt to recreate the Big Bang and find the Higgs boson. The experiment fails but at the same instant the entire world experiences a brief leap twenty years into the future. Were these visions real or hallucinations? Either way, can the experiment really be responsible?

The short universal loss of consciousness causes panic and chaos. The death of Mikito's daughter, killed by a runaway car, is one result that hits close to home. Lloyd and Michito, spurred by grief and guilt, set up a web-based study of the event, to receive and collate reports of thousands of individual visions. Some of the people involved embrace these signs as proven fact, good or bad, personal or political. Others treat them as warnings. Theo, investigating his failure to recall any vision at all, discovers a news report of his own murder.

Can such foreknowledge help him or others alter their fate or is the future fixed? Did they in fact cross time or enter an alternate reality? And what will happen when they repeat their experiment? Will the results prove CERN innocent or not?

With its strong personal relationships and action scenes – plus the recent unrest regarding the actual Large Hadron Collider experiments – this book could now, only ten years after its first publication, be as easily classed a contemporary thriller as science fiction. For me, it was more riveting than many hard sf novels I've tried. Frankly, *Flashforward* was better than I expected: a good read, rooted in science but focussed on the characters' stories. Whereas I watched a few episodes of the TV version and quickly got bored, I finished the novel with no difficulty. Being a 'What If' junkie, I'll always wonder, though, what would have happened if Sawyer had chosen to give the second attempt a different outcome.

*Retribution Falls* by Chris Wooding (Gollancz, 2009)  
Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont

*Retribution Falls* is grounded in the observation that we are our own worst enemy. This observation drives the plot. The book charts the misadventures of a gaggle of low-lives, drop-outs and losers who are all on the run from some terrible mistake in their pasts. A failure to confront those problems has resulted in them ruining their lives to the point where they are now eking out a living as a gang of criminals working out of an old ship. The biggest fuck up of them all is, of course, the ship's captain Darian Frey, who has fucked up so many times that he no longer has anywhere to hide from his past. In fact, his past has not only found him, it has tricked him into murdering a member of the royal family resulting in him and his gang being chased from town to town by murderous government agents and Frey's vindictive and embittered former girlfriend.

*Retribution Falls* begins well. Its opening chapters combine tropes from across the genre spectrum with a picaresque cast of amiably low-life characters. A plot grounded in genuine human psychology ties together high-octane set pieces in a setting littered with tropes taken from across the genre spectrum and formed into a story filled with tension, romance, betrayal, alienation, magic swords, airships and beautiful pirate captains. Unfortunately, while this Clarke Award nominee presents itself as a confident and muscular thriller, the reality is a novel that is at times both bizarrely neurotic and anaemically thin.

The central problem here is a jarring disconnect between the various registers in which the novel is written. One minute the characters are swapping wisecracks whilst skilfully evading explosions and gunfire, the next they are falling over and being comedically incompetent before collapsing into soggy piles of angst as they try to confront feelings of alienation and self-loathing. These abrupt gear changes only serve to emphasise the feeling that Wooding's characters are painfully under-written. Indeed, despite serving to both anchor and drive the plot, *Retribution Falls*'s characters are frequently nothing more substantial than a cool name attached to a few items of clothing and the occasional speech pattern. By returning to the characters' issues over and over again, Wooding is not so much exploring the human condition as crudely parodying it.

What is most vexing about *Retribution Falls* is the fact that it is not systematically bad. There are times when it all snaps into focus. Action sequences are crystalline in clarity and breathless in pacing while a scene in which a young aristocrat is forced to confront his own mortality crackles with a surprising authenticity. These moments of grace and subtlety are fleeting but powerful and result in a novel, which though poorly written and an undeniable failure, nonetheless remains quite surprisingly likeable.

*A Matter Of Blood* by Sarah Pinborough (Gollancz, 2010)

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

There's been a series of killings, committed by someone with a remarkable control over flies. The corpses have all been laden with fly eggs in such a way that they could not have got there naturally. Nor, it would appear, by human hand. Enter DI Cass Jones, a man with a past, to investigate the case. With a failing marriage and a second high profile case involving the execution-like killing of two schoolboys, this is a man under pressure. The situation is not helped when he gets the news his brother, Christian, has murdered his own family before shooting himself. Not surprisingly, *A Matter Of Blood* is as much about Cass Jones as it is about the cases he is trying to solve. He is shaped by events to the extent of burying much of his personality; it feels like there is someone in there but all we get to see is the protective shell he's built around himself.

Jones's story is set against the backdrop of a world where the economic crisis almost reached tipping point but was rescued by the intervention of a mysterious financial institute so dominant it is known only as The Bank. Indeed, it appears to be the single properly functioning economic entity and exerts a sinister influence on more or less everything that takes place. While it is clear that there is something supernatural going on from early on in the novel, it is handled in such a way that it is always gently implied and slightly ambiguous. The way the fly eggs are left on the corpses suggest there is something not quite human about the killer and the overwhelming influence of The Bank casts a shadow over events much as a swarm of flies does over a corpse.

The success of a crime thriller really rests on the strength of its plot and unfortunately there is a plot device in this book I have great difficulty with. I have never encountered a scene where a computer password is guessed in order to move the plot along that convinces me. Jones does this not once but twice. This undermined the integrity of the plot for me which is a great shame, as otherwise the story plays out nicely. The various investigations, alongside the numerous revelations, come together satisfyingly and the fact that the supernatural elements are, for the most part, ambiguous in nature works in the book's favour. The effect is to heighten the tension rather than undermine it.

Although *A Matter Of Blood* is the first book in the *Dog-Faced Gods* trilogy, it still feels satisfyingly complete on its own and, while weakened by the odd unconvincing plot device, this is still a very effective thriller. Some of the revelations towards the end would suggest that it is unlikely the story can continue in this vaguely supernatural crime vein though. The series could go in a number of directions, possibly more overtly horror, but too much has been revealed for it to be just more of the same.

*Into Your Tent: The Life, Work and Family Background of Eric Frank Russell* by John L. Ingham (Plantech, 2010)  
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Do we need a biography of Eric Frank Russell? And if so, is this the biography we need? Russell himself wouldn't have thought so. He was notoriously antagonistic even when asked for relatively anodyne bio-squibs to accompany his novels or stories, while more personal probing would prompt an almighty rage. He would have been incandescent at the idea of this biography.

Russell's reluctance to reveal himself goes some way to explain why there is so little personal information in this book. The other reason is that there is little personal information to reveal: Russell worked for the same company all his life writing in the evening and at weekends, he remained married to the same woman all his life, he had an undramatic war in the lower echelons of the RAF, apart from one pre-war visit to New York his foreign travel was limited to regular holidays in Ireland and the Isle of Man. It was a blamelessly uninteresting life.

Eric Frank Russell was the author of a handful of short novels and around 100 stories, which he invariably referred to as yarns. He was the first British author to win a Hugo Award (for his story 'Allamagoosa' [1955], an otherwise amusing but undistinguished piece) but this hardly makes him one of Britain's science fiction "greats" as the cover proclaims. He was popular for a while, mostly because he combined easy-reading pulp sensibilities with an irreverence and a gift for light comedy that were rare in the science fiction of the day. Once or twice he produced work that truly soared but mostly his stories were minor and (as the convoluted publishing history of each one so lovingly detailed in this book makes clear) were often shunted from magazine to magazine before finding a home in low-paying markets. He gave up writing at the end of the Fifties and by the Sixties his star and his reputation had waned. In stature, and in lasting quality, he was certainly no match for such contemporaries as Arthur C. Clarke or John Wyndham.

And yet, he was an early and active member of the British Interplanetary Society, he was an early and active member of the Forzean Society, he was a speaker at the very first science fiction convention in Leeds in 1937 and contributed to any number of fanzines. These were interesting times, even if Russell's own involvement often proved to be peripheral. There is something here that would repay our attention.

Unfortunately, I don't think this book is the way to do it. Ingham begins by getting carried away with the modern possibilities of researching a family tree. He traces Russell's family back over

several generations, then spends 75 pages exploring its various branches in great detail, recounting the lives of so many uncles and great aunts and what have you that, as he admits more than once, Russell himself probably hadn't even heard of most of them. So confusingly presented is all this that in the last sentence of one paragraph we are told of the death of one uncle and his wife and in the first sentence of the very next paragraph we are told of their marriage. This confusion of chronology extends throughout the book so that, for instance, in the midst of describing the stories Russell was writing in the early Fifties, Ingham has a long digression about rather ham-fisted efforts to put together collections of Russell's stories in the Sixties, most of the contents of which hadn't yet been written at this point in the narrative.

This constant and irritating dodging backwards and forwards in time means that he will often mention something with the unhelpful remark that he has already discussed this. In the absence of any index, there is no easy way of turning back to that reference and putting things together in their proper sequence. (The absence of an index also makes it impossible for me to check my distinct impression that every single time Ingham mentions the name Hugo Gernsback, he also tells us that Sam Moskowitz called him the "father of science fiction". But there are certainly repetitions of this nature throughout the text.) An index is not the only surprising and unfortunate omission from the book. There is also no list of sources so we have no way of knowing whether the numerous quotations from Walter Gillings, John W. Campbell, Ted Carnell and the like come from private communications, interviews, published articles or the like. And that means they are, of course, untraceable.

Back to the narrative: Ingham traces Russell's early life in a military family with a disciplinarian father who perhaps inspired his lifelong anti-authoritarianism (there are two or three attempts to identify resonances between Russell's life and work but there is honestly little autobiographical in most of the yarns). A peripatetic childhood ended up in Liverpool where, or whereabouts, Russell stayed for the rest of his life. He got a job, he joined the BIS, he got involved in fandom, wrote bits and pieces for various magazines, and around 30 started to write fiction. After the war, in which he served in a ground-based capacity in the RAF, he resumed his fiction writing and, according to this biography, his life stopped. We get virtually nothing about his life after 1945, even the twenty years of his life remaining after he stopped writing are passed over in silence (the date of death is given but not the cause of death or whether his wife predeceased him). Instead we get brief, generally enthusiastic summations, along

with submission and publication histories, of every piece of fiction he wrote in not quite chronological order. There is not enough analysis to count as criticism, too much to count as biography and the variant titles are tossed around with such disregard that it is often hard to keep track of what we're talking about anyway.

In general, Russell seems to have been well liked by some and distinctly unpleasant towards others; he wrote stories that were groundbreaking in their attitude towards race yet remained violently racist towards the 'yellow races' all his life; he wrote some of the funniest anti-war stories of the era yet included extreme violence in other stories; he undermined authority in his fictions but was authoritarian in his own attitudes. He was a mass of contradictions and Ingham does nothing to unravel them. Better, I think, to turn back to *Wasp* or *Next of Kin* or a handful of his better stories. Russell was right, we don't really need a biography.

*GM Fiction*, edited by Pippa Goldschmidt (ESRC Genomics Network / University of Edinburgh, 2009)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

**GM***Fiction* documents the winning and shortlisted entries to a story competition run by Pippa Goldschmidt, writer in residence at the ESRC Genomics Policy and Research Forum, and inspired by her 'interest in how science is represented in fiction, and how fiction writers respond to the challenge of including scientific knowledge or fantasy in their narratives.' In other words, a science fiction story competition. The Forum invited authors to let their imaginations loose...and write a story inspired by genetics. Entrants were also encouraged to consider how, and if, we understand the impact of genetic information on our everyday lives... Judges were Lin Anderson (crime writer), Dr Joan Haran (social scientist), Dr Elizabeth Patton (medical researcher) and Professor Simon van Heyningen (vice principal for teaching and learning and biochemist, University of Edinburgh).

There are nine stories in *GM Fiction* and very few of them do anything interesting with the competition brief. In 'Killer Genes' by Sarah Shaw, Bobby, a young prisoner, has a heart attack and reassesses his life. His guard, whose unborn child has tested positive for sickle cell anaemia, causes Bobby to wonder if a test which could reveal future character might result in people like himself being aborted. It is an effective character piece which says nothing notable about genetics or genetic testing. Likewise 'Living With Cally' by Penny Feeny shows how a young boy comes to love his autistic younger sister. That his mother (and his best friend's father) happen to work in a genetics research lab has little bearing on the heart of the story. The winning entry,

'The Test' by Ben Smart, is a vignette about an artist who may have inherited the illness which killed his father. Again it is a character piece which tells us nothing about science in general or genetics in particular. The test in question could as easily be any medical investigation for a fatal disease. In similar vein, 'Most Likely To...' by Anna Faherty recounts the results of using genetic testing to make the predictions for a school yearbook. Again it does nothing of interest with the idea.

More successfully, 'The Problem Child' by Neil James Hudson offers a wry science fiction comedy about the future possibilities of physical and personality modification. It plays the whole for broad satire and isn't sufficiently sophisticated or polished to fulfil the potential of its ideas, but at least it has some. George Anderson's 'The Big Boys of Lumphanan' is an arch fable concerning selective breeding in a Scottish fishing community and 'Unnatural Selection' by Kate Tough is a very short story with a good twist.

By far the best two stories are the pair which were chosen for joint third place. 'Phrenology, or the Causes of Crime' by Jonathan Gibbs employs a now discredited medical science to suggest we may be as misguided again now or in the future in other areas of medical knowledge. Within a chilling portrait of a self-deluding sociopath, Gibbs illustrates that science in the wrong (even if well-meaning) hands can be a dangerous power. 'Original Mike's Coffee Shop' by Patrick Hudson takes identikit fast food franchises to the logical conclusion, suggesting in the future even the managers of such outlets will be identical clones grown by the companies which own them. The theme of replicant rebellion is the same one explored in *Blade Runner*, though the very British telling would not have been out of place in early Nineties *Interzone*.

*GM Fiction* is not a book. Eight of the stories are presented as individual card covered and stapled booklets. 'Unnatural Selection' is so short it is simply printed on the back of a card. Most of the stories are illustrated but the art is so perfunctory in execution as to be worthless, adding nothing to any of the stories. Minus the art and blank spaces the whole amounts to around 51 pages of fiction (about 18,000 – 20,000 words). The individual booklets are contained in a foldout card case no more substantial than the covers on the stories. The presentation is a gimmick, inconvenient to handle and read, easy to damage, designed with style over content in mind, making a very small amount of fiction appear a more substantial package than it really is. I read it all in less than 90 minutes and I am not a particularly fast reader. At £9.99 with only two stories really worth reading and nothing absolutely exceptional this is terrible value for money. The content may impress the mainstream but as sf readers we've seen it all before, done far better, decades ago.

# Resonances #56

by Stephen Baxter

One endearing detail I spotted recently, while watching a DVD of the second series of *Life on Mars* (2007), was a newspaper kiosk plastered with children's comics. Cheap and cheerful, cheeky and colourful, with everything from *Beano* to *Victor* and *Bunty* to *Mandy*, there used to be a whole ecology of the things, with hardy perennials and ever-changing newcomers all chasing an elusive clientele. By LOM's 1973 British comics had a history decades deep, and had provided honest employment for generations of artists and writers.

My own comic of choice was always the mighty *TV Century 21*, aka *TV21* (from 1965), a vehicle for strips based on Gerry Anderson's TV shows (see 'Adventures in the 21st Century: The Future History of *TV21*', *Vector* 224). *TV21*'s sales peaked at 630,000 a week – astounding numbers by today's standards. As a comparison the initial monthly print run of *BeanoMAX*, launched in 2007, was 120,000.

But even by the mid 1960s, the British comic industry had begun a long decline. And, over forty years on, this tradition has all but vanished.

Though there had been a prehistory of picture and story papers reaching back to Victorian times, the modern British comics industry was effectively born in 1937-8, with the publication of the *Dandy* and *Beano* by Dundee-based DC Thomson. The first British comics to feature extensive colour and speech balloons, and full of imaginative, irreverent humour, *Beano* and *Dandy* were an instant hit, and proved big morale boosters during the Second World War. After the war sales soared, thanks to the baby boom – and a lack of choice of children's entertainment. By the early 1950s *Beano* and *Dandy* were together selling four million copies a week. In 1950 the *Eagle* was launched. Beautifully produced and starring Dan Dare, *Eagle* achieved enormous sales, as did sister comic *Girl*, published from 1951 to the same high standards. These comics proved market leaders for a new wave of adventure and comedy comics for boys and girls.

By the 1960s, with the increased availability of television and the penetration of American comic franchises into the market, children had more choice on how to spend their money. In the short term this made the market still more competitive, and *TV21* was born in an era when such giants as DC Thomson (*Beano*, *Dandy*, *Hornet*) and Fleetway (*Buster*, *Valiant*) would launch competing comics like prize-fighters trading punches. At the market's peak there were

around fifty weekly titles for the under 18s, with a combined circulation of up to ten million a week.

Few titles endured in such a market. So, in contrast to the US where titles like *Superman* and *Spider-Man* could last for decades, the wisdom in Britain was that the sales trend of (almost) any comic title was always downwards from issue 1. Of course there were exceptions such as the sturdy *Beano* and *Dandy*, but this law of decline even applied to the mighty *Eagle*, which showed a steady drop from its first issue print run of nearly a million – but that was a starting point high enough to enable the title to last two decades.

And, given such a market, the only choices for the editors in managing their comics were either to revamp their titles periodically – or, when they failed, to merge them with healthier competitors. Mergers in fact made commercial sense. In the first week after the merger, the new title could sell around ninety per cent of the combined sales figure of the two pre-merge titles. Of course the circulation numbers would soon decline back, but while it lasted the surviving title could get a healthy sales boost for little or no additional outlay.

And the resulting chains of consumption gave rise to an extraordinary series of comic family trees (see Graham Kibble-White's marvellous *The Ultimate Book of British Comics* [2005], and the website Comics UK).

Suppose you had started buying comics with the daddy of British sf comics, the *Eagle* in 1950 – and never gave up, no matter what your favourite merged with. What would you have been buying in 1973, and indeed 1993?

You could in fact have kept buying *Eagle* for nineteen years. In the comic's less glorious second decade it gobbled up such lesser experiments as an action comic called *Boy's World* (1963-64) and Hulton's own *Swift* (1954-63), a junior *Eagle* spin-off (which had itself gorged on a Disney comic called *Zip* (1959-63)). But in 1969 the *Eagle* became lunch for the *Lion* – a venerable survivor, launched in 1952 by Amalgamated Press, that was originally meant as a low-brow rival to the *Eagle* itself. While a million boys had bought the *Eagle* weekly in 1950, only six readers complained when it was rationalised to oblivion.

*Lion* itself had previously absorbed a short-lived boy's comic *Champion* (1966), and a title even older than *Eagle*, *Sun* (1947-59). *Lion* would make one more meal, of another IPC boy's action title called *Thunder* (1970-71), before itself being consumed by sister IPC title *Valiant* in 1974. And with the *Valiant* I would have

joined the growing confluence of comic-buyers, for it was the *Valiant* that had consumed *TV21*.

*TV21* had in its day had been no slouch, eating up a disastrous spin-off sibling comic in *Joe 90: Top Secret* (1969) and before that *TV Tornado* (1967-68), a cheapo TV tie-in. *Tornado* had in turn eaten another short-lived production called *Solo* (1967), principally famous for a strip based on Captain Scarlet's deadly foe the Mysterons. There wasn't much left of the spirit or the quality of my *TV21* by the time it fell beneath the wheels of the *Valiant* juggernaut in 1971; and pretty much all that survived the merger was its name on the masthead and a *Star Trek* strip.

*Valiant* itself had a pedigree. Launched in 1962 as a boys' action comic of the traditional sort, it had previously devoured a short-lived title called *Smash* in 1971 – and in 1963 a much more ancient title called *Knockout*, which had survived from 1939, whose principal claim to fame was a Billy Bunter strip that had been running since 1940. After *Lion*, *Valiant* made one more meal, of a reprint title *Vulcan* (1975-76), before itself falling prey to another IPC title, a war comic called *Battle*, launched in 1975. *Battle* was one of a new generation of tougher boys' comics that would pave the way for the next wave of sf comics in 2000 AD (from 1977). In 1976 it consumed an even more bloody rag in IPC's *Action* in 1976 (a title about which Questions were Asked in the House).

And then, in 1988, *Battle* was devoured by a revival of the *Eagle* (1982-93). Thus, if he had followed the chain of comic-chomping, over a decade after the loss of the old *Eagle*, our patient reader would have found himself reading about a descendant of Dan Dare in IPC's glossy reincarnation. Supported no doubt by nostalgic dads, the new *Eagle* had a healthy initial circulation at the start of 750,000 and was to last over a decade. As well as *Battle*, it ate up *Scream* (1984), a short-lived IPC horror comic that featured early work by Alan Moore, and two more abortive titles in *Mask* (1986-88) and *Wildcat* (1989).

But its most significant snack was *Tiger* (1954-85). This venerable beast, a litter-mate of *Lion*, had given the world soccer ace Roy of the Rovers. Ultimately owned by IPC, *Tiger* had itself made meals of sister titles including the action organ *Speed* (1980), the football-themed *Scorcher* (1974) (which had consumed another soccer comic in *Score and Roar* (1970-71)), a short-lived comic called *Jag* (1968-9), another action title in *Hurricane* (1964-5), *Comet* (1946-59) which

featured another British space hero in Jet Ace Logan – and *Champion*, an ancient story paper consumed in 1955 but launched as far back as 1922.

Sorry if all that detail's a bit confusing. Drawing a picture might help! But the point is that in the end the second *Eagle* incorporated the DNA of around thirty vanished titles, not least its own predecessor launched more than forty years before, and one, the *Champion*, reaching back more than seventy years. But when in 1993 the *Eagle* itself failed, it was final – for there were no comics left standing for it to merge into.

The decline of the comics industry seems to have had complex causes. In the 1970s and 1980s sales collapsed, perhaps as children found new distractions in video recorders and computer games. There followed the rise of more new media and the penetration of the British market by American franchises, and things got even worse. Whatever's to blame, by the end of the 1990s the British weekly newsstand comics had almost entirely vanished. The last girls' comic was

the venerable *Bunty*, which expired in 2001; of the boys' comics only 2000 AD survives. Look at a newsstand today, and in the (tiny) corner devoted to children's comics you'll find only those much-transformed survivors *Beano*, *Dandy*, and 2000 AD, alongside American product and comics based on such franchises as *Barbie* and *The Simpsons*. *Doctor Who* makes a brave showing. Perhaps the creativity that once went into the weekly comics has been diverted into web-based comics, graphic novels, multimedia projects like Damon Albarn's *Gorillaz*, and so on. In a way only *Viz*, a pastiche for adults, carries on the old tradition of knockabout



irreverence.

The loss of this industry demonstrates to me how we have gone through a great discontinuity in the recent past, with the rise of new media technologies, and indeed the rise of the young-adult category in book marketing – all factors that have changed the tastes of junior consumers. In some ways Sam Tyler's 1973 had more in common with *Champion*'s 1922 than it does with 2009. The comics' environment simply vanished; and save for a handful of hardy adapters they died out.

Today, a great British industry survives only as overpriced souvenirs on eBay, or in yellowing heaps in dealers' rooms, or in white-dog-shit nostalgic scenes on shows like *Life on Mars*. But what fun it was while it lasted!

# Foundation's Favourites: Catseye by Andre Norton

By Andy Sawyer

As I moved from country to country during my childhood, there were two certainties. Somewhere locally there would be a library, and in that library there would be books by Andre Norton.

Alice Mary Norton (1912-2005), published her first novel in 1934 when she was working as a children's librarian and became one of—perhaps *the* foremost authors of science fiction and fantasy for young people in the 50s and 60s. She was still writing (although much of her later output was collaborative) when she died. Her pseudonym “Andre” (which later became her legal name), was apparently chosen as one of those “androgynous” names taken up by female writers aiming at a male-dominated market (I certainly was aware that she was female when I

was reading her in the early 60s. but I probably thought “Andre” was a female name). Possibly her best known series was the “Witch World” sequence which began in 1963 — I must have come across it soon after it was published because I certainly read it before Tolkien, Moorcock, and other fantasy classics—but her more conventional science fiction, often aimed at a young audience whose parents wouldn't dream of allowing their kids those lurid science fiction magazines but were fine

if it was a *proper book*, from a *library*, is well worth recalling.

It was certainly Norton's books, rather than the juveniles of Heinlein which, like many British sf readers I did not come across until rather later, that shaped my view of science fiction as an essentially *liberal* literature: one which focussed on resourceful young people struggling to free themselves.

*Catseye* (first published 1961) is fairly typical of Norton in this period. It's the story of Troy Horan, a refugee from a world which is the part of the spoils of a war between the “Two Sectors” — the Confederation and the Council. Refugees from Troy's world of Norden, and other worlds, have settled on the planet Korwar in the limbo district known as the Dipple. Now on his own, Troy

survives through his wits and a series of low-status, short-term casual work. He is assigned on a short-term contract to Kyger, a high-class animal dealer supplying exotic pets to Korwar's elite. Among these pets are a pair of Terran cats with whom he discovers that he has a mental link, and Troy discovers that there are other such animals as well—a pair of foxes, a kinkajou owned by one of the Council aristocrats who died in mysterious circumstances. When Kyger is in turn murdered, Troy finds himself embroiled



in a plot with far-reaching consequences for both Sectors, fleeing from an enemy who has decided his new companions expendable.

The beginning of the novel is uncannily reminiscent of the status of refugees and "asylum seekers" today. When Troy meets Nerne and the Hunters, the conservation experts who preserve the forest and wilderness of Korwar so the aristocracy can have safe recreation in the carefully organised Wilds, we are reminded that environmentalism was not something that was invented a few years ago. Other parts are rather delightfully old-fashioned—when was the last time you read a science fiction novel in which people travelled around in "flitters"? The somewhat stilted formality of having Troy address his superiors as Gentle Homo/Gentle Fem is less successful (never mind the unfortunate double entendre, which passed me by when I was eleven, Latin "homo" means "human being" not "male") and there are, unlike the case with Heinlein's novels for teenagers, no women at all in major roles and virtually no indication that women exist at all (something with Norton addressed with later novels like *Foreunner*.) That apart, it's a pacy and excitingly written

novel with the kind of message of tolerance which much sf of that period did rather well. Norton set many of her sf and fantasy novels in loosely-organised series (some of which interrelate), and there's a sense of space here—an assumption that this future is *larger than we know it* and coherently explorable—which I think is part of her appeal. The Nortonverse is neither utopia nor dystopia but a setting in which our own problems are extrapolated and examined in a way which made sense to young readers. Other novels—*Star Man's Son* (as *Daybreak: 2250 A.D.*, [1952]) and *Galactic Derelict* (1959) come to mind—make the kind of essentially liberal assumptions about, say, race which other elements of popular culture (and I'm thinking about the story-papers I was

reading at the time) had yet to grapple with. These assumptions are sometimes clumsy (such as the use of the "primitive Bushman" stereotype in *Catseye*) but they are clearly the work of a writer taking seriously what she sees as her responsibility to present clear moral values to her readership.

This flavour of didacticism—not of course an unfamiliar flavour in science fiction – is perhaps one of the reasons why, while one recognises Norton as one of the major figures in the sf of her time it is difficult to pinpoint specific examples of greatness. In the end, we're better off searching for the typical rather than the exceptional. In the Nortonverse, talented but fairly ordinary characters engage with many of the generic images of science fiction: the rebuilding of a kind of civilization after nuclear holocaust, the echoes of lost "forerunner" civilizations, the problems inherent in "colonising" the galaxy, and the encounter with the alien (often in the guise of animal-like or in the case of *Catseye* straightforward animal Others.) What I, and I think many others, got out of novels like *Catseye* was the feeling of authority in all this. It was as if she was putting her own spin on something which existed out there in imagination-space (which

of course she was). Norton was showing us the common property of science fiction, showing us that behind the exciting constructed world of individual story there was a shared background which was interesting in itself. This was a universe in which you travelled in flitters and where Confederations and Councils settled the destinies of planets in ways which affected entire populations and where knotty questions of Otherness had to be encountered as a matter of course. And it was not wholly a question of escapism but an aesthetic construction which could be appreciated on its own account and a locale where moral dilemmas could be debated.

In Andre Norton we met the science fiction megatext.



# Progressive Scan: The Sarah Jane Adventures, Season 3

by Abigail Nussbaum

*The Sarah Jane Adventures* premiered in 2007, yet another arm of what was by that point the unstoppable ratings juggernaut of *New Who*. The previous year, *Torchwood* had demonstrated that the idea of a *Who* spin-off had legs and that a well-liked secondary character could carry their own series. The same concept was therefore applied to Elisabeth Sladen's Sarah Jane Smith, who had made her triumphant return to *Who* in "School Reunion," one of the best-liked episodes of the second season, as the Doctor's former companion who finally gets closure for his casual abandonment of her, and vows to live as adventurous a life on Earth as she did in the TARDIS. The series premiere retooled the character slightly to make her a more appropriate stand-in for the Doctor himself. She was furnished with a talking supercomputer (rather creepily dubbed Mr. Smith), a direct line to UNIT, a sonic lipstick, and of course her beloved mechanical dog K-9. The cast was rounded out with a trio of juvenile assistants: Luke (Tommy Knight), a genetically engineered 'perfect human' whom Sarah Jane rescues and adopts in the series pilot, his best friend Clyde

(Daniel Anthony), and Maria, the girl from across the way, who is replaced from the second season onwards by aspiring journalist Rani (Anjali Mohindra).

Like, I suspect, many adult fans of *New Who*, I watched the *Sarah Jane Adventures* pilot when it first aired and promptly gave up on the series. There seemed to be nothing there but a kiddie version of *Doctor Who*. Which, upon further reflection, seems like a redundant description. *Who's* writers have repeatedly stated that they gear their stories for eight year olds, and what turns up on screen certainly bears that statement out – lots of bombast and shouting, silly monsters in glorious technicolor, and a hell of a lot of running. It is arguably *Doctor Who's* charm, the reason that the revived series has captured the hearts of so many new fans, that it is so gleefully and unabashedly childish. There is nothing quite like it on TV, no other series that delivers its combination of consciously silly stories delivered with dead seriousness and luxurious production values. Why then shouldn't *The Sarah Jane Adventures* have amassed, if not an audience on *Torchwood's*



scale (a series that scratched an itch for angsty, romantic melodrama that not even the tenth Doctor at his most emo could satisfy), then at least a bit more attention from adult viewers? Was I missing something by giving the series a pass?

It was with these questions in mind that I sat down to watch *The Sarah Jane Adventures'* third season (it should be noted that I haven't watched the first or second seasons, and though I doubt that this leaves me with insurmountable gap in my understanding of the series – the 30 second introduction Clyde gives before each episode more that sufficiently explains the show's characters and settings – it's possible that some of the issues I raise in this essay have been better handled in previous seasons). My conclusion remains much as it was when I watched the pilot. *The Sarah Jane Adventures* is a low rent *Doctor Who*, and I mean that quite literally – the core issue setting it apart from its parent show is money.

This is quite clearly a series being made on the cheap, and that cheapness tells on every level of the finished product. The writers seldom create their own aliens, preferring to recycle those from *Who* (no expensive design and production work), and seldom feature more than a handful (no costly crowd scenes and skyrocketing makeup and costuming costs); episodes are mostly shot indoors or on generic street scenes, never on location; not only are there no guest actors of the caliber that have appeared on *Who* (John Simm, Alex Kingston, Derek Jacobi), there are few guest actors of any type, and most episodes revolve around the main cast and an extra in a rubber suit. Despite Old *Who* fans' nostalgic reminiscences of the show's wobbly sets and cardboard costumes, a lot of New *Who*'s magic derives from its production values – it's these that are in no small part responsible for getting us over our awareness of how silly the whole exercise is. *The Sarah Jane Adventures* – perhaps because it isn't aiming for an audience that has to make that mental adjustment – doesn't put in the effort.

If the writing were up to snuff none of this would matter, but the same cheapness that infests *Sarah Jane's* look is also apparent in the care that's been put into its stories. The third

season is made up of six stories spread out over twelve half hour episodes. Given the richness that the *Who* writing room can usually deliver to more than twice as many stories in a season – if not when it comes to clever plotting, than at least to atmosphere, guest characters, and dialogue – it's disappointing to see how flat most of these stories are. The plots are standard *Who*-ish yelling and shooting stories, but *Who's* magic ingredient is missing in most of the third seasons' episodes.

There are two exceptions. In the season's second story, "The Mad Woman in the Attic," an elderly Rani is surprised in the attic of Sarah Jane's house by a boy looking for the infamous crazy shut-in said to live there. She tells him the story of how she lost her friends and ended up in her sad state. In a season that treats the child characters as little more than audience stand-ins, "Mad Woman" is a refreshing change for being a genuine character piece – Rani, eager



for Sarah Jane's approval and frustrated by what she takes as a dismissal of her journalistic instincts, decides to investigate some strange happenings on her own and gets into trouble. The guest characters – an old friend of Rani's from before she moved across the street from Sarah Jane who resents her new and exciting life, and an alien child with psychic powers she can't control – are a nicely done blend of sinister and sympathetic, and there are some amusing authorial flourishes (the episode begins with Rani telling her interloper about events that occurred fifty years ago; in her flashback, she meets another shut-in, the caretaker of an amusement park, who starts to tell her a story from his youth, fifty years ago). And, of course, the constant cuts to Rani's sad future, even as the story in the flashback seems to come no closer to the reason for her misery or a possible

means of undoing it, create tension throughout the episode.

The second standout is the season's fifth story, "Mona Lisa's Revenge." There's a lot less character work here, admittedly. The main conflict revolves around Luke, who is having typically teenage fights with Sarah Jane and feeling rather put-upon by her terribly unreasonable expectation that he pick up after himself, and ends up having his stropiness thrown in his face when Sarah Jane's life is endangered. Given how little Luke has to do over the course of the season – one story even excludes him entirely – this is better than nothing, but still rather weak sauce. More importantly, however, the story is a great deal of fun. The three kids are on a school trip to a museum which has secured the phenomenal coup of exhibiting the Mona Lisa (a premise that arguably requires more suspension of disbelief than every single monster and alien on *Doctor Who* put together), but their outing is disrupted when the painting's subject steps out of her frame, steals an alien gun from one of Clyde's drawings, and goes on a rampage accompanied by a worshipful museum director. The two characters are a barrel of laughs – the Mona Lisa is sarcastic and foul-mouthed, and her admirer obviously loves paintings more than people (when asked what the outside is like: "Well, it's roomier than in here, and some of it has grass on.") – and develop an amusingly twisted relationship. Eventually the museum director, having finally realized how wicked the Mona Lisa is and plumped for the mousy assistant whose affections he'd been ignoring – and whom the painting had trapped in her frame instead of her. There's a great deal of satisfaction to be had when he promptly gets dumped for being an "art tart." It's a shame that the actual main characters are so incidental to the story, but one can't help but applaud the writers trying to inject a bit of wit and idiosyncrasy into their characters, even the one-offs.

Probably the most notable story in the third season is "The Wedding of Sarah Jane," for the simple reason that David Tennant, on his farewell to *Doctor Who* tour of 2009, makes an appearance when Sarah Jane's whirlwind romance with an innocuous-seeming solicitor turns out to be a scheme concocted by her arch-enemy, the Trickster. Unfortunately, Tennant's presence turns out to not much more than stunt-casting. He has few scenes with Sarah Jane (and those he does have make it clear that "School Reunion" has left these characters with nothing more to say to one another), and his interactions with the kids don't extend beyond the by now familiar

sight of the Doctor getting terribly excited over the awesomeness of a random acquaintance. In the hands of Sarah Jane's less talented writers, Tennant's tendency to plump for wackiness over character is left unchecked, and the Doctor's role in the story is almost nonexistent – it's only his presence that's necessary, while the main cast solve the problem without him.

For all the cheapness that I've identified in *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, one would think that the one high rent item in the show would be Sarah Jane herself, Sladen being an implant from the original series, and having won old and new fans alike so completely in "School Reunion." But as series repeatedly demonstrates, Elisabeth Sladen is not only no David Tennant, she's barely even a Freema Agyeman or Billie Piper. She's a limited actress whose Sarah Jane seems to have only three expressions (bemusement, horror, steely resolve), and unlike the similarly limited John Barrowman doesn't have a stronger cast around her to elevate and prop up her performance. Her attempts at filling the Doctor-shaped void at the center of the show, at crafting a superhuman figure who can hold back the darkness through sheer force of will, verge on the pathetic. It's impossible to believe that a woman with so little presence could really take on the mantle of the defender of the Earth, and her frequent failures at this task only call into attention the fact that she's knowingly putting children, one of whom is in her care, in extraordinarily dangerous situations from which they emerge unscathed only through writerly fiat. (It's also difficult to reconcile Sarah Jane's claims to a Doctor-like persona when one considers that season 3 takes place in the same world and around the same time as *Torchwood's Children of Earth*. Especially given that the cast is made up almost entirely of children, it's hard not to wonder where all her bluster was when Earth's entire juvenile population was in danger.)

I don't doubt that children enjoy *The Sarah Jane Adventures* very much, and why shouldn't they? I watched plenty of bad TV as a kid, and the only harm it did me was the sensation of horror I experienced when I revisited some of my childhood favorites as an adult and discovered how awful many of them were. But for adult *Who* fans, there's nothing to look for here. Maybe in a few years the child actors will get too old for the series, and show up on the TARDIS as companions. With proper writing – and a proper production budget – behind them, they might easily be worth watching.

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