

Readercon 17
A convention report by Evelyn C. Leeper
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"I believe that books will never disappear. It is impossible that that will happen. Among the many inventions of man, the book, without a doubt, is the most astounding; all the others are extensions of our bodies. The telephone, for example, is the extension of our voice; the telescope and the microscope are extensions of our sight; the sword and the plow are extensions of our arms. Only the book is an extension of our imagination and memory." ["Books", in *Twenty-Four Conversations with Borges*, page 34]

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Readercon 17 was held at the Burlington (MA) Marriott July 7-9, 2006. Attendance was probably around 500 people (no one seemed to be keeping track, and there were no newsletters).

Readercon is a literary convention, so there was no art show, masquerade, etc. However, there were panels or talks on "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "King Kong". It appears that the guideline is "literary, and anything else the committee feels like doing."

(And because it is literary, this report takes longer than usual. First, there are a lot of titles and authors to verify. And second, there are a lot of stories to read to try to figure out what the panelists meant by what they said.)

The "Dealers Room" is called the Bookshop and all the dealers sell books. This is a mixed blessing. There were several dealers selling old (1950-1980) paperbacks very cheaply (25 cents to a dollar). At the other end were dealers selling collectible books or small press editions at prices not exactly in everyone's budget. In the middle were dealers selling used paperbacks at standard used prices, or new mass market, trade paperback, or hardcover books. I bought a few old paperbacks at fifty cents each, but was fairly disappointed with the selection otherwise. Jorge Luís Borges was the featured author (and the reason I attended), yet in the Bookshop there were only a couple o copies of the latest biography of him (in hardcover, for \$35 each), one used copy of THE BOOK OF FANTASY (which he only edited), and one used copy of THE ALEPH. The latter was not even out on a table--only when I was chatting with the dealer and commented on the dearth of Borges books did he mention he had one. The other woman standing there immediately expressed an interest and he dug it out and sold it to her, but the notion that one would not even put Borges's books out at a convention where he

is featured seems odd.

There was a Con Suite (a.k.a. Hospitality Suite). The first day they seemed a bit sparse on healthy snacks, but later some did appear. They had a large selection of hot beverages--various teas, coffees, etc. Unfortunately (for me), frequently the topic of conversation there seemed to be the World Cup in soccer, rather than books.

As far as programming goes, Readercon has far fewer tracks than other conventions of similar size. At any one time, there are generally two main panel items, a kaffeeklatsch, and a couple of readings, and that is about it. Most people do not find themselves without anything to do, and the audiences for the panels they do have are substantial, rather than the panelists outnumbering the audience. As a data point, my notes for the (basically) two-day Readercon took as many pages in my notebook as for the (basically) four-day Worldcon.

The acoustics in the rooms were fairly terrible. And people seem to be ignoring requests to turn off cell phones--at least one woman had her phone ring *twice* in a single panel.

The panels are held with the panelists in armchairs around a coffee table--a set-up that makes it harder for authors to prop up a lot of their books. (It used to be that authors would bring their latest book and hold it up as part of their introduction. Then they started leaving it standing on the table in front of them during the panel. Then they started bringing their latest two books, and it snow-balled from there. Not only do they bring half a dozen books, but if they are paperbacks, they bring special stands to hold them upright. The whole thing has gotten out of hand.)

The Willing Suspension of Dissed Beliefs

Friday 3:00pm

Ellen Asher, R. Scott Bakker, James Morrow (mod), Patrick Nielsen Hayden, Ann Tonsor Zeddies

Description: "There are some novels that can seduce us with their worldviews despite our intellectual opposition to the deep authorial philosophies that inform them. One can argue that the secular humanist reading Gene Wolfe or the free-market conservative reading China Miéville becomes, for the duration of the novel, a Catholic or socialist in at least some small recess of their brain. What exactly is going on here between text and reader?"

Estimated attendance: 40 people

Nielsen Hayden began by observing, "If I only read books agreeing with me I would have very little to read and wouldn't learn very much." Two people that he named as authors he disagreed with but enjoyed reading were Poul Anderson and David Weber.

Zeddies said, "When I was a little girl, most science fiction was written by men." (This is not quite the same as disagreeing with their philosophy, at least to most people. Still, it has the notion of a different worldview.)

Asher asked, "How does this [panel topic] differ from any suspension of disbelief?" There was an era when children's books were supposed to be about the familiar world, she added, but she thought it was good that we had gotten away from this.

Bakker described himself as a "philosophy drop-out" and says that he has a "sense of how narrative tends to transcend theory. Every author brings some kind of ideological baggage," he added, but the narrative transcends it.

Nielsen Hayden pointed out that George Orwell was an extreme anti-feminist, but his novel *A Clergyman's Daughter* is nevertheless a feminist novel. In fact, Nielsen Hayden claimed, it happens frequently that conclusions actually violate an author's beliefs.

Asher said that she would make the somewhat radical statement that Ursula K. Le Guin is "so tendentious" in her later books that she is unreadable. (I would agree with this. I think it was of one of her recent books that I noted it is not that she has an agenda, but that she has *only* an agenda.)

Zeddies said that the real problem is when authors make characters do unlikely things for the sake of their ideologies.

Morrow asked if the panelists ever had the reaction of feeling disoriented by a convincing worldview that was contradictory to their own. Nielsen Hayden said that "fascism starts with knowing that valor is valuable," which sounds plausible but then carries this to extremes, so that the initial believer is left somewhat at a loss to explain what went wrong. In fact, he said, every ideology starts by knowing that something is true. Bakker added, "The cornerstone of dogmatism is certainty; the cornerstone of certainty is ignorance."

Asher suggested, "No ideology can be correct for everyone, because people are so varied." All ideologies have both good and bad, and "the bad are the negative things that the people who disagree can live with."

Morrow himself said that he "used to diss" Tolkien because of the Manichaeism in Tolkien's work. However, at some point he and his wife did a lesson plan for a course on Tolkien (at a later panel he said simply it was for the money) and he gained a greater appreciation for it even though he still disagreed with the basis of it. Morrow quoted Adam Gopnick's review of *Wittgenstein's Poker*, in which Gopnick said, "You write the book you aren't."

Morrow then asked the panelists whether any one of them had ever written anything that had offended himself. The panelists side-stepped this, though I suspect it is fairly rare.

Zeddies noted that she hated M. John Harrison's *Light*, but had to admit that it also had its virtues. She finds Robert A. Heinlein so ideological that she said he is "like a date so eager to seduce you that he has his tongue in your mouth before the hors d'oeuvres arrive."

Nielsen Hayden said that a major complaint he has about ideologies in fiction is that authors often have no idea how politics works in the real world. For example, they will show two world leaders alone in a room together, with no support staff, security guards, or anyone else. (One author he mentioned whose work he generally likes but who has this problem is John Scalzi.) Also, "everybody [the authors] disagree with sounds like an idiot." Authors with this flaw include Heinlein and Ayn Rand. Ken MacLeod, he said, at least gives his villains some good lines. (This implies, I think, that villains are better when they are not total villains, but actually have some admirable traits.)

Regarding the complaint about politics, and about characterizations in general, Asher said that it is "better to have something plausible but impossible rather than something possible but implausible." However, bringing the panel back to reality, she added, "The truly mortal sin is to be unsaleable." She made the fairly important point that we do not in general agree with Shakespeare's world view (of powerful English monarchs, a strong hierarchy among the classes, and so on), yet we can still read and admire his works.

Zeddies asked if anyone had ever written a book that portrayed a happy future in which the Nazis win. The panelists agreed that if they had, it would almost definitely have to be set in the distant future, rather than the next generation or so after the war. (I think Daniel Quinn's *After Dachau* probably qualifies.) Asher said that she turned down a book whose premise was that pedophilia was good for the children. But Morrow noted that the Salem witch trials have become kitsch and almost humorous,

a cause for tourism and festivities rather than something horrible. (I am reminded of the souvenir we saw at the Irish Famine Museum: a magnet which said "Been there, Done that, Loved it!" and then below it in a separate block, "Irish Famine Museum." Clearly these were made up in bulk and then the name of the site added after, but this was an unfortunate choice for this museum.)

Bakker asked, "Does genre fiction have a leg up in this [challenging of world views]" because people come to it prepared to suspend disbelief in general? Zeddies added that science fiction is specifically not the real world. Morrow noted, "There is a fundamental lie at the center of most detective fiction," i.e., that justice will prevail.

Asher felt that science fiction fans in particular are used to the ideas of change, and of foreigners. Zeddies said that she wanted to agree, but sees fans migrating to what they are comfortable with in the genre rather than trying something different. Nielsen Hayden added, "The field is so big, you pretty much can read in your niche."

Morrow said, "C. S. Lewis is a writer I specifically detest." Lewis, he said, presents the opposition as complete fools, and falls into the trap of thinking, "Because my point of view enjoys the virtue of being correct, that's all I have to do." Later, Morrow added that Lewis's book *The Problem of Pain* "nauseated him" because Lewis was full of fatuous advice for an emotion he had not yet fully experienced. Then after his wife died of cancer, Lewis wrote *A Grief Observed*, which Morrow felt was a more honest book. (In fairness to Lewis, I will point out that his mother died while he was still a child, so he was not entirely untouched by pain and grief.)

Morrow said that his quintessential experience with "a suspension of dissed beliefs" was with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Nielsen Hayden said that for him it was Gene Wolfe's "The Book of the New Sun". (I suspect for others it might be Stephen Donaldson's "Thomas Covenant" books.) Nielsen Hayden said that the narrator of Bradley Denton's *Blackburn* is a serial killer who starts out killing despicable people, leading the reader to sympathize with him, but gradually becomes more and more detestable himself.

Asher mentioned Poul Anderson's *Fire Time* as a great example for this panel. The story involves two races fighting to the death, and alternating chapters have narrators from the opposing sides. And while you are reading each chapter, that side's actions seem perfectly reasonable. In fact, there are no villains; both sides are right. Morrow said that the same was true of Homer's *Iliad*; it also had no villains. (Well, I might claim that the gods were the villains, but that was a different panel.)

Zeddies said that Heinlein and Lewis are authors who seem to be at war with themselves at times. Nielsen Hayden said that Heinlein is still interesting because "he is more interesting than his overt opinions."

Someone in the audience suggested a distinction between Apollonian novels such as Emila Zola wrote, and Dionysian novels such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. I am not sure exactly how this ties in to the topic. Another audience member asked if anyone on the panel had ever felt "had" by a novel. This seemed to be the same question that Morrow asked earlier (about feeling disoriented by a convincing worldview that was contradictory to their own). This time around Bakker said he had that with *Lolita*.

Libraries in Imaginative Literature

Friday 5:00pm

David Louis Edelman, Greer Gilman, Fred Lerner (mod), Paul Levinson, Sandra McDonald, Yves Meynard

Description: "Borges' Library of Babel is perhaps the best known, but the repository of knowledge

(especially the repository of all knowledge) is a common element in stories of the fantastic. They're obviously useful as plot devices, but they are attractive to writers and readers for many other reasons."

Estimated attendance: 40 people

McDonald began by saying, "My name is Sandra McDonald and I love libraries. Does anyone here not love libraries? If so, you're in the wrong room."

Edelman introduced himself by saying, "Expertise I have in libraries? I have no idea other than I frequent them." (His novel *Infoquake*, however, has an instantiation of the Library of Babel.)

The panel began with panelists reading their favorite excerpts about libraries. While the excerpts were delightful, they probably should have been scheduled as a separate reading session, rather than taking a big chunk out of the time for the panel.

Gilman read, not too surprisingly, from Jorge Luís Borges's "The Library of Babel":

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. The distribution of the galleries is invariable. Twenty shelves, five long shelves per side, cover all the sides except two; their height, which is the distance from floor to ceiling, scarcely exceeds that of a normal bookcase. One of the free sides leads to a narrow hallway which opens onto another gallery, identical to the first and to all the rest. To the left and right of the hallway there are two very small closets. In the first, one may sleep standing up; in the other, satisfy one's fecal necessities. Also through here passes a spiral stairway, which sinks abysmally and soars upwards to remote distances. In the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances. Men usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite ... Light is provided by some spherical fruit which bear the name of lamps. There are two, transversally placed, in each hexagon. The light they emit is insufficient, incessant.

Like all men of the Library, I have traveled in my youth; I have wandered in search of a book, perhaps the catalogue of catalogues; now that my eyes can hardly decipher what I write, I am preparing to die just a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born. Once I am dead, there will be no lack of pious hands to throw me over the railing; my grave will be the fathomless air; my body will sink endlessly and decay and dissolve in the wind generated by the fall, which is infinite. I say that the Library is unending. The idealists argue that the hexagonal rooms are a necessary form of absolute space or, at least, of our intuition of space. They reason that a triangular or pentagonal room is inconceivable. (The mystics claim that their ecstasy reveals to them a circular chamber containing a great circular book, whose spine is continuous and which follows the complete circle of the walls; but their testimony is suspect; their words, obscure. This cyclical book is God.) Let it suffice now for me to repeat the classic dictum: The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible.

(She chose the Yates & Irby translation, since she prefers that one. She particularly liked the image of the dead librarians falling through space: "humans are leaves falling through the mind of God.")

McDonald read from Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*:

We'll pass the books on to our children, by word of mouth, and let our children wait, in turn, on other people. A lot will be lost that way, of course. But you can't *make* people

listen. They have to come round in their own time, wondering what happened and why the world blew up under them. It can't last.

How many of you are there?

Thousands on the roads, the abandoned railtracks, tonight, bums on the outside, libraries inside. It wasn't planned, at first. Each man had a book he wanted to remember, and did. Then, over a period of twenty years or so, we met each other, traveling, and got the loose network together and set out a plan. The most important single thing we had to pound into ourselves is that we are not important, we mustn't be pedants; we were not to feel superior to anyone else in the world. We're nothing more than dust-jackets for books, of no significance otherwise. Some of us live in small towns. Chapter One of Thoreau's *Walden* in Green River, Chapter Two in Willow Farm, Maine. Why, there's one town in Maryland, only twenty-seven people, no bomb'll ever touch that town, is the complete essays of a man named Bertrand Russell. Pick up that town, almost, and flip the pages, so many pages to a person. And when the war's over, some day, some year, the books can be written again, the people will be called in, one by one, to recite what they know and we'll set it in type until another Dark Age, when we might have to do the whole damn thing over again. But that's the wonderful thing about man; he never gets so discouraged or disgusted that he gives up doing it all over again, because he knows very well it is important and *worth* the doing. [*Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury, pages 136-137]

Lerner read from Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan*:

The evening on which he sent Flay to have Titus brought to him found Lord Sepulchrave free at seven in the evening and sitting in the corner of his library, sunk in a deep reverie. The room was lit by a chandelier whose light, unable to reach the extremities of the room, lit only the spines of those volumes on the central shelves of the long walls. A stone gallery ran around the library at about fifteen feet above the floor, and the books that lined the walls of the main hall fifteen feet below were continued upon the high shelves of the gallery.

In the middle of the room, immediately under the light, stood a long table. It was carved from a single piece of the blackest marble, which reflected upon its surface three of the rarest volumes in his Lordship's collection. Upon his knees, drawn up together, was balanced a book of his grandfather's essays, but it had remained unopened. His arms lay limply at his side, and his head rested again the velvet of the chair back. He was dressed in the gray habit which it was his custom to wear in the library. From the full sleeves his sensitive hands emerged with the shadowy transparency of alabaster. For an hour he had remained thus; the deepest melancholy manifested itself in every line of his body.

The library appeared to spread outward from him as from a core. His dejection infected the air about him and diffused its illness upon every side. All things in the long room absorbed his melancholia. The shadowy galleries brooded with slow anguish; the books receding into the deep corners, tier upon tier, seemed each a separate tragic note in a monumental fugue of volumes. [*Titus Groan*, Mervyn Peake, pages 216-217]

Levinson read an excerpt from his own book, *The Plot to Save Socrates*.

Edelman read from Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*:

From the vast store of human knowledge, only a few kegs of original books and a pitiful collection of hand-copied texts, rewritten from memory, had survived in the possession of the Order by the time the madness had ended.

Now, after six centuries of darkness, the monks still preserved this Memorabilia, studied it, copied it and recopied it, and patiently waited. At the beginning, in the time of Leibowitz, it had been hoped--and even anticipated as probably--that the fourth or fifth generation would begin to want its heritage back. But the monks of the earliest days had not counted on the human ability to generate a new cultural inheritance in a couple of generations if an old one is utterly destroyed, to generate it by virtue of lawgivers and prophets, geniuses or maniacs; through a Moses, or through a Hitler, or an ignorant by tyrannical grandfather, a cultural inheritance may be acquired between dusk and dawn, and many have been so acquired. But the new "culture" was an inheritance, wherein "simpleton" meant the same thing as "citizen" meant the same thing as slave. The monks waited. It mattered not at all to them that the knowledge they saved was useless, that much of it was not really knowledge now, was as inscrutable to the monks in some instances as it would be to an illiterate wild-boy from the hills; this knowledge was empty of content, its subject matter long since gone. Still, such knowledge had a symbolic structure that was peculiar to itself, and at least the symbol-interplay could be observed. To observe the way a knowledge-system is knit together is to learn at least a minimum knowledge-of-knowledge, until someday--someday, or some century--an Interrogator would come, and things would be fitted together again. So time mattered not at all. The Memorabilia was there, and it was given to them by duty to preserve, and preserve it they would if the darkness in the world lasted ten more centuries, or even ten thousand years, for they, though born in that darkest of ages, were still the very bookleggers and memorizers if the Beatus Leibowitz; and when they wandered abroad from their abbey, each of them, the professed of the Order--whether stablehand or Lord Abbot--carried as part of his habit a book, usually a Breviary these days, tied up in a bindlestiff. [*A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Walter M. Miller, Jr., pages 69-70]

Meynard read from Gene Wolfe's *The Shadow of the Torturer*:

"We have books here bound in the hides of echidnes, krakens, and beasts so long extinct that those whose studies they are, are for the most part of the opinion that no trace of them survives unfossilized. We have books bound wholly in metals of unknown alloy, and books whose bindings are covered with the thickest gems. We have books cased in perfumed woods shipped across the inconceivable gulf between creations--books doubly precious because no one on Urth can read them.

"We have books whose papers are matted of plants from which spring curious alkaloids, so that the reader, in turning their pages, is taken unaware by bizarre fantasies and chimeric dreams. Books whose pages are not paper at all, but delicate wafers of white jade, ivory, and shell; books too whose leaves are the desiccated leaves of unknown plants. Books we have also that are not books at all to the eye: scrolls and tablets and recordings on a hundred different substances. There is a cube of crystal here--though I can no longer tell you where--no larger than the ball of your thumb that contains more books than the library itself does. Though a harlot might dangle it from one ear for an ornament, there are not volumes enough in the world to counterweight the other." [*The Shadow of the Torturer*, Gene Wolfe, pages 60-61]

(These readings triggered memories of other libraries and books. The passage from *A Canticle for Leibowitz* called to mind Hari Seldon's plan to shorten the galactic Dark Ages with his "Encyclopedia" (really a complete library in itself) in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*. And the descriptions of books by Wolfe reminded me of the books in Peter Greenaway's film *Prospero's Books*. And the idea of libraries itself reminded me of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and scenes from Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *The Club Dumas*. In fact, Eco has not only a library, but a blind librarian named Jorge de Burgos.)

Gilman said that libraries evoke the themes of eternity, vulnerability, and the preciousness of

knowledge. She also mentioned Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* as having a memorable library.

McDonald talked about the role of people in libraries. Without them, libraries would be meaningless: "Some has to be there to observe it." She also noted that biblio-mysteries are an entire sub-genre (though she implied that they always involve libraries and librarians, ignoring the ones involving book dealers or authors).

Lerner talked about Peake's "portrayal of the dead hand of tradition" and described the library in *Titus Groan* as "the monument of the Old Weird."

Edelman said that Miller demonstrates that the knowledge preserved in libraries is not necessarily the real knowledge. And it conveys a combination of hopefulness and hopelessness. Lerner later observed that historians would rather have shopping lists, etc., than more histories than merely repeat what other books say. (Josephine Tey illustrates this quite nicely in her mystery, *The Daughter of Time*.)

Meynard said that Wolfe's Citadel library extends indefinitely, much as Borges's Library of Babel does. The Citadel library also has a blind librarian, another reference to Borges. (The books with drugged paper reminded me of Eco.) Talking of the Library of Babel, Meynard said that because you can find everything--any combination of letters--then nothing meaningful can be found. Lerner modified this, saying, "You can't *find* anything in the Library of Babel, but you can *encounter* anything." Meynard's own book *L'heritage de Lorann* has a library as well.

Levinson was also reminded of Asimov's "Foundation" series, but of the library on Trantor, which he said made him realize that you can find the answer to anything in a big enough library. Lerner agreed, but pointed out that all libraries (not just the Library of Babel) contain a lot of wrong information.

Gilman related a description of trying to recover severely damaged books as investigating a "briccalage (sp?) of pages mixed together." She suggested that she was put on this panel out of "sheer perversity," saying, "I seem to write [mostly] about oral cultures." But she does admit to being obsessed with the image of the Sybil's leaves. (I assume she means the Sybylline Books.) She said that "[Terry] Pratchett does a damn good monstrous library--the books are always trying to make a break for it."

Lerner said, "If I could have one book from an alien culture, it would be there library classification system." I assume he thought the topics would tell him something about the culture, but what if they classification system was that of most ancient libraries here--chronological by acquisition date?

An audience member said that when she visited the Long Room (and the Book of Kells) in Trinity College in Dublin, she concluded that most of the tourists there were as clueless about what they were looking at as the monks in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

[And I will add one more fictional library description, from Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (letters 133 to 137 are all about the library):

I returned at the appointed time; and my friend led me to the very spot we had left. "Here," he said, "are the grammarians, the glossers, and the commentators." "Father," said I, "have not all these people been able to dispense with common sense?" "Yes," said he, "they have; and yet it does not appear, and their works are not a penny the worse, which is very convenient for them." "True," said I; "and I know plenty of philosophers who would do well to occupy themselves with sciences of this kind."

"There," continued he, "are the orators who can convince people without employing reason; and the geometers, who compel a man to be convinced in spite of himself, and conquer him by sheer force.

"Here are metaphysical books, which deal with very lofty concerns indeed, and in which the infinite meets one at every turning; books of physics, which detect nothing more marvellous in the economy of the vast universe, than in the simplest machine of our craftsmen.

"Books of medicine, those monuments of the frailty of nature and of the power of art, which when they treat even of the slightest disorders make us tremble by bringing the idea of death home to us; but which when they discuss the power of remedies make us feel secure as if we were immortal.

"Near these are the books of anatomy, which do not so much contain descriptions of the parts of the human body, as the barbarous names which have been given them – neither likely to cure the patient of his disease nor the physician of his ignorance.

"Here are the alchemists, who inhabit now the hospital, now the madhouse, dwellings equally suitable for them.

"Here are the books of science, or rather of occult ignorance; of such are those which contain any kind of sorcery – execrable according to most people; in my opinion contemptible. Such also are the books of judicial astrology." "What do you say, father? The books of judicial astrology!" I cried with enthusiasm. "These are the books we make most of in Persia. They rule all the actions of our lives, and determine us in all our undertakings: in fact, the astrologers are our spiritual fathers, and more, for they take part in the government of the state." "If that is so," said he, "you live under a yoke much heavier than that of reason. Yours must be the strangest of all governments: I pity from my heart a family, and above all a nation, which permits the planets to have such ascendancy over them." "We make use of astrology," replied I, "just as you make use of algebra. Every nation has its proper science, according to which it guides its policy. All the astrologers together have never committed so many follies in Persia, as a single algebraist has done here. Do you think that the fortuitous concourse of the stars is not as sure a guide as all the fine reasoning of your system-monger? If the votes on that subject were counted in France and in Persia, astrology would have good reason to triumph; you would see the schemers properly humbled, from which how disastrous a corollary might be deduced against them!" [*Persian Letters*, Montequieu, Letter 135]

The Pre-History of SF, or, It Didn't All Start with Gernsback

Friday 8:00pm

Ellen Asher, James L. Cambias, John Costello, Darrell Schweitzer (mod), Allen Steele, Jean-Louis Trudel

Description: "We know that SF as a distinct publishing genre started in 1926 with the introduction of Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing*. But *Amazing* began as a reprint magazine. What did it reprint? How many of our familiar tropes and cliches were already present, at least in embryonic form?"

Estimated attendance: 20 people

One problem with this panel was that the panelists did not seem to agree on what period they were covering--one wanted to talk about 17th century works, while another focused on 1920s pulps.

Cambias said he had a background in the history of science. Asher said that she has been the "editor of the Science Fiction Book Club since some time in the Cretaceous." Schweitzer said he was currently writing a series of articles about science fiction a generation before Hugo Gernsback.

As noted, Trudel began by saying he has been looking at 16th and 17th century science fiction, but then moved to a more recent period. He noted that 1920s *Amazings* had a lot of reprints of earlier authors: twenty-nine pieces by H. G. Wells, sixteen by Jules Verne, five by Edgar Allan Poe. (A "piece" here is either a short story, or a chapter of a serialized novel.) All the themes of science fiction appear: mad scientists, alien invasions, would-be masters of the world, etc.

Steele said that one difference was that a story was not called science fiction, but a "fantastic", a "scientific romance", or even a "different story". Another difference was that before Edmond Hamilton and E. E. Smith, most science fiction was contemporary in setting (although someone from the then-present might find themselves in their future through suspended animation or some such.) Cambias disagreed, giving Poe's "Melonta Tauta" as a counter-example, and Steele himself gave the counter-example of Rudyard Kipling's "With the Night Mail". Trudel mentioned Verne's "A Day in the Life of a Journalist in 2087", and even a 1657 story, "Epigon", which is primarily utopian rather than science fictional. but seems to have a late 18th century setting. However, the claim of contemporary settings was true for the vast majority of the early science fiction.

Schweitzer pointed out that a contemporary protagonist or narrator provides an expository basis, whereas a futuristic setting would require a lot of explanation. He also described "With the Night Mail" as a "Heinlein story written by Geoffrey Chaucer."

Cambias said that we see the same phenomenon today with the "techno-thriller", which is science fiction with a contemporary setting. Asher said that Stephen King writes in this mode, and Steele added Michael Crichton's name to the list.

Schweitzer said the techno-thriller dates back to Morgan Robertson's book *Futility*, an amazing prescient book about a gigantic ocean liner named "Titan" which hits an iceberg in the month of April and sinks, killing many because of an insufficient number of lifeboats. Steele said that in Germany after World War I there was a lot of science fiction written in which Germany rises from its defeat in that war. Thea Von Harbou and Fritz Lang are perhaps the best-known names from this period.

One notable sub-genre of the science fiction of those early years, according to Steele, was that of a comet passing by the earth. (I wonder if this was not inspired by the recent passage of Halley's Comet.)

Schweitzer said that many, if not most, of the early authors are forgotten. William Wallace Clark, for example, was the leading science fiction author of a hundred years ago.

Schweitzer said that Gernsback printed a lot of translations, but that successful science fiction authors of the time wrote for *Argosy*, not for Gernsback. Asher said that Gernsback's real contribution was the creation of fandom, brought about when he decided to publish a letters column (which I suppose is a good reason to call the awards voted by fans "Hugos").

Schweitzer mentioned another "pre-science-fiction" author of that early period, Ray Cummings.

Someone in the audience asked whether something or other was good, to which Steele said that in this area, "'good' is often beside the point." But Schweitzer said that, for example, "Finis" by Frank L. Pollack (in *Science Fiction by Gaslight* edited by Sam Moskowitz) is good.

Inevitably, someone in the audience asked when science fiction started. Cambias said 1634, with "The Man in the Moone" by Francis Godwin. Schweitzer said that it was commonplace by the second half of the 19th century. Trudel said that Johannes Kepler and other wrote science fiction of a sort, but they did not have substantive differences. The period for 1840 through 1860 is when progress, technological change, etc., start to show up.

Schweitzer said that there was even a "19th century Douglas Adams" (unfortunately anonymous),

who wrote a story in the July 1853 issue of *Knickerbocker* with a table of contents entry as "The Planet. Found in the portfolio of a lunatic", and the title on the actual story as "THE PLANET. How I Was Induced to Leave the Earth and Become One."

Other notable early works include Mark Twain's "From the London Times, 1904", Fitz-James O'Brien's "The Diamond Lens", E. M. Forester's "When the Machine Stops", Robert H. Goddard's "The Last Generation", and George Eliot's "Shadows of the Coming Race".

The Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award Friday 10:00pm

Description: "The Smith Award, honoring a writer worthy of being rediscovered by today's readers, is selected annually by a panel of judges that include longtime Readercon stalwarts John Clute and Scott Edelman (together with Gardner Dozois and Robert Silverberg.) Past winners include Olaf Stapledon, R. A. Lafferty, Edgar Pangborn, Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore, and Leigh Brackett."

This year's choice was William Hope Hodgson (chosen by judges John Clute, Gardner Dozois, Scott Edelman, and Robert Silverberg). As part of this, next year's Readercon will have panels and readings featuring Hodgson's work. The judges for next year's choice will be David Hartwell, Martin H. Greenberg, Mike Resnick, and Van Gelder.

I will point out that there has been one film based on a William Hope Hodgson story: *Matango: The Attack of the Mushroom People* was based on Hodgson's "The Voice in the Night".

Meet the Pros(e) Party Friday 10:15pm

Description: "Each writer at the party has selected a short, pithy quotation from his or her own work and is armed with a sheet of 30 printed labels, the quote replicated on each. As attendees mingle and meet each pro, they obtain one of his or her labels, collecting them on the wax paper provided. Atheists, agnostics, and the lazy can leave them in the order they acquire them, resulting in one of at least nine billion Random Prose Poems. Those who believe in the reversal of entropy can rearrange them to make a Statement. Wearing labels as apparel is also popular. The total number of possibilities (linguistic and sartorial) is thought to exceed the number of bytes of data in George W. Bush's brain which correspond to objective reality."

I was too tired to last through this, but I did want to mention that Eric Van put his heart's blood into planning this. Literally. When he was getting the supplies for this, he tried to open one of those awful hard plastic shells, but it slashed his hand and he had to go to the hospital for a large number of stitches. As a result, there was no waxed paper, but the party went on without it.

Why the Choir Likes the Preacher: The Value of Satire Saturday 10:00am Paul Di Filippo, Barry Malzberg, James Morrow (mod), Jim Munroe, Kit Reed

Description: "While every satirist likes to think that his work will change the minds of the wrong-thinkers by exposing the limitations of their views, the fact is that the vast majority of the audience for any successful satire is people who already agree with the argument. It's also true that we value great satire as art, above and beyond its ability to entertain us with grim laughter. So what exactly do the

already-converted get out of great satire? There seems to be something about the nature of a satirical argument that connects to us in a way that a straightforward one doesn't."

Estimated attendance: 50 people

Morrow began with the famous definition by George S. Kaufman: "Satire is what closes on Saturday night."

Malzberg said of writers in general what Sigmund Freud said is true of psychotherapists: "Our job is to convert human misery into ordinary unhappiness."

Di Filippo mentioned his satiric work *Ciphers: A Post-Shannon Rock 'N' Roll Mystery*, which Morrow described as "Pynchonesque". Reed said the satire that she is best known for is "The Attack of the Giant Baby". Her current novel *The Baby Merchant* is being reviewed as satire, but was intended to be serious.

Morrow said that "in the grand tradition of Readercon," he would attack the premise of the panel rather than support it, and asked panelists whether they thought that they might change people's minds.

Malzberg talked about writing the "Lone Wolf" series for Berkley books in 1972. (He wrote them under the pseudonym "Mike Barry".) They were about a vigilante New York City cop, and he said that even though he spilled outside the expected audience, "I have reached that audience. It hasn't done much good."

Morrow said his satire arose when "Voltaire spoke to me--my inverse 'Road to Damascus' moment--[saying] 'James Morrow, there is no God.'"

Munroe said, "I think it's important to preach to the choir." Morrow added, "Readers expect you to reinforce their world view." If you do not, he said, you are not keeping up your end of the bargain."

Speaking of satirists with whom he disagrees, Di Filippo said that P. J. O'Rourke is still funny even though Di Filippo wants to say to him, "Your main thesis is still crap." Morrow said that Walker Percy was a staunch conservative, but his satire was still worth reading.

Reed said (of the premise of the panel), "I have a serious problem with the verb 'preaching'." She said that in her novel *Thinner Than Thou* (about diet culture replacing religion), she found herself "an accidental satirist." "Evelyn Waugh taught me how to write," she added. She also said that many authors looked down on satire. For example, she said, John Gardner claimed, "A work like *Gulliver's Travels* is not fit to kiss the hem of a garment like *King Lear*."

Di Filippo said that Woody Allen expressed many people's attitude as, "When you're writing comedy, you're not sitting at the grown-up table."

Malzberg talked about whether his satire has had any lasting effect. He pointed out that the Kirk Poland competition at Readercon took its name from a character in his novel *Herovit's World*, and that "this may be the only large-scale effect my work has had." *Herovit's World* is about an unsuccessful writer, though, and Malzberg added that Harlan Ellison reported that of the five hopeful writers-to-be that read it at Ellison's house, four quit the field. However, Malzberg seemed discouraged by the lack of effect his works had: "I wrote these books to change the world, or at least Teaneck, New Jersey, but they couldn't even change me." On the other hand, he later said that he was heartened that his novel *The Remaking of Sigmund Freud* could be published at all.

On the other hand, Munroe pointed out that George Orwell's *1984* was *really* effective. In part this was because Orwell knew how to have a visceral effect, he said, giving as an example, "All-pervasive

database' is not that scary, but 'Big Brother' is."

Di Filippo cited Horace Walpole's statement, "Life's a tragedy to those who feel and a comedy to those who think."

Reed said that it is true that her books seem to reach mostly a specific audience (people who are overweight for *Thinner Than Thou*; people who are infertile for *The Baby Merchant*).

Di Filippo asked, "What makes science fiction such a rich medium for satire?" Reed thought it was because science fiction writers "push everything just a little bit harder." Morrow said, "Satire is about world-building, as is science fiction." Some works that are thought of as satire do not quite qualify in his opinion. For example, he said, "Monty Python' is not interested in creating a consistent global world view." He added that in terms of changing the world, his British agent mailed copies of his novel *This is the Way the World Ends* to Margaret Thatcher and the members of Parliament. (It does not seem to have had much effect.)

Someone in the audience mentioned the problem with satire of the "number of people who don't get it, who have no real sense of irony." (As in Steve Martin's line from *Roxanne*, "Oh, Irony! We don't get that here. No, the last time we had irony was '82, when I was the sole practitioner of it and I got tired of being stared at.")

Munroe said that when one sees satire on television shows owned by conglomerates who actually oppose the views espoused, one is reminded of the position of court jester in royal courts, who was the only person allowed to criticize the king. Di Filippo saw it as a way of co-opting the comedian into the institution.

As for specific satires, Di Filippo mentioned a Charles Stross novel where they re-create the twentieth century based on records that do not give an accurate picture. (I had thought maybe he was thinking of Alastair Reynolds's *Century Rain*, but then I read a review of Stross's *Glasshouse* and realized that was the book to which he was referring.)

Reed mentioned *Galaxy Quest* as a popular satire. Morrow suggested Walker Percy's "The Last Phil Donohue Show". Someone in the audience mentioned "Futurama", but said that with this and other satires, there is a real "risk of the work becoming instantly dated." Morrow said, he would love to know what "Futurama" looked like to our descendants' descendants. However, he pointed out that a lot of satire does age well, noting that Jane Austen was a satirist. Di Filippo said, "Satire often has the connotation of topicality." He gave the example of Stephen Leacock, some of whose work is dated, and some is not. Morrow said it becomes like the people that Dante stick in Hell that you now need footnotes to identify.

An audience member claimed, "Satirists are cultural critics." Someone (Morrow's wife?) was quoted as saying that that is why historians love them.

Morrow said that even when the details change, the big picture is the same. To outsiders, he said, the dispute between the Shiites and the Sunnis resembles the one between the Big-Enders and the Little-Enders of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Someone in the audience said that satirists such as Gilbert and Sullivan endure more, but Malzberg noted, "Sullivan's music had a bit to do with it."

Reed suddenly asked why she was the only woman on the panel. This led to a list of woman satirists: Jane Austen, Maragret Atwood, Shirley Jackson, Connie Willis, Evelyn E. Smith, and Margaret St. Clair, among others. Reed, however, was the only one at Readercon.

An audience member asked, "Does irony ever die?" Di Filippo said this question seemed to come

from the claim that "post-9/11, the culture of irony is dead." He disputed this, and particularly the implication that the ironists brought on 9/11.

Morrow closed with a mention of Di Filippo's semi-regular satirical column in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, "Plumage from Pegasus", of which he said, "Plumage from Pegasus-- that's horsefeathers!"

The Year in Short Fiction

Saturday 12:00pm

Adam Golaski, David G. Hartwell, Sean Wallace, Gary K. Wolfe (mod), Brian Youmans

Description: [no description given]

Estimated attendance: 25 people

Youmans edits an anthology called *The Best of the Rest*, consisting of works which appeared in small press publications. Hartwell edits a "best-of-the-year" anthology. Wolfe reviews short fiction for *Locus*. Wallace is an editor at Wildside Press (among others).

Wolfe started by saying it seemed that there are more "best-of-the-year" anthologies than there are professional publishing venues. (This is true, I think, only if you exclude original anthologies.)

Hartwell noted that he is both the oldest editor (at sixty-five) and the one with the most Hugo nominations (thirty-one, with no wins). (He also said he was the one with the most years editing, but I think he forgot Ellen Asher.)

[For most of the panel, the panelists seemed to be talking about hot new writers, instead of the best writers.]

Hartwell mentioned Darryl Gregory ("Second Person, Present Tense" in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*) as the most interesting new writer. Wolfe added that Gregory seemed to be writing in the tradition of Daniel Keyes, but Hartwell thought he was more directly in the tradition of Greg Egan.

Youmans recommended Holly Phillips's collection *In the Palace of Repose*, Sandra McDonald (in *The Best of the Rest* and elsewhere), and Constance Cooper.

Golaski asked about magazines. Youmans had a long list of recommendations (some of which are on-line subscription magazines: *Aeon* (<http://www.aeonmagazine.com/>), *Andromeda Spaceways In-Flight Magazine* (Australian, <http://www.andromedaspaceways.com/>), *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* (<http://www.lcrw.net/lcrw/>), *Electric Velocipede* (<http://members.aol.com/evzine/>), *Say ...* (with different continuations each issue), *Tales of the Unanticipated* (<http://www.totu-ink.com/>), *Not One of Us* (<http://not-one-of-us.com/>), *On Spec* (<http://www.onspec.ca/>), *Lone Star Stories* (<http://literary.ericmarin.com/>), and *Lenox Avenue*.

Hartwell said that he was surprised that *Postscripts* (from PS Publishing) was included in *The Best of the Rest*, as he did not think of that as small press. Youmans said that it was similar to *Interzone*. Hartwell asked whether Youmans recommended staying away from "big" webzines that seemed to publish an enormous amount of material. Youmans said that these did not seem to exercise any sort of editorial control or judgement, and of one site he finally concluded, "I'll eat my shorts if they ever put up anything good." Any site putting up ten stories a month, he said, is using their slush pile.

Wallace suggested *Strange Horizons* as a good small-press zine, but Youmans said he considered it

professional. Wallace also mentioned *Fly Trap*.

Golaski recommended Tim Pratt ("Impossible Dreams" in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, a story I recommend as well). I think he said that Pratt was also the editor of *Lenox Avenue*.

Wallace recommended *Chizine* (<http://chizine.com/>), but also collections by Joe Hill (*Twentieth Century Ghosts*), Holly Phillips, and Margo Lanagan. He said that Hill will have several stories in various "best-of-the-year" anthologies, and noted in passing that editors try to avoid overlap in these anthologies.

Hartwell said there are many constraints on "best-of-the-year" anthologies. Length is one; usually there is room for (at most) one novella. So if one includes Connie Willis's "Inside Job" or Kelly Link's "Magic for Beginners", no one else's novella has a chance in that anthology. Wolfe said that another notable novella of the last year was Ian McDonald's "The Little Goddess". Another limitation on novellas is (ironically) the small-press market: Wolfe said that if an author has a novella published as a small-press volume, their contract generally rule out any appearances in anthologies for some period of time. Subterranean Press, for example, buys exclusivity, so Willis's *Inside Job* will not be in any "best-of-the-year" anthologies. (Thank Ghu my library buys Subterranean Press books!)

Wolfe said that by Mark Kelly's count in *Locus* there were three thousand short fiction pieces in 2005, meaning that there is a huge range to look at for anthologies. He also said, "The 'Year's Best' are not the year's best; they are the year's better-than-most, or the year's not bad, or the year's pretty good."

Getting back to specific recommendations, Golaski named Glen Hirshberg ("The Devil's Smile" and others in *American Morons*). He said that he finds the various "best-of-the-year" anthologies a good way to keep track of good small press collections.

As for original anthologies, Hartwell said that the best ones were *Nova Scotia: An Anthology of Scottish Speculative Fiction* (edited by Andrew J. Wilson) and *Constellations* (edited by Peter Crowther). The latter, he said, did not get the notice it deserved because it was lost in the flood of monthly DAW original anthologies. (Oddly, though DAW usually sends these to me as review copies, they did not send this one, so one wonders if it had less distribution as well.)

Hartwell also mentioned *Adventure #1* (from MonkeyBrain Books), edited by Chris Roberson. Youmans mentioned an anthology he had seen called *Daikaiju* (edited by Robert Hood and Robin Pen) about Japanese monsters that he said was not that good, but Hartwell thought that the Garth Nix story in it ("Read It In the News!") was good enough that Hartwell chose it for his "best-of-the-year" anthology.

Youmans suggested another collection, Jay Lake's *Tel: Stories*.

Golaski recommended Brian Everson's collection *The Wavering Knife* and Mary Caponegro's collection *The Star Cafe*. He also recommended the magazine *Conjunctions* in general. Wallace recommended Stephen King's "The Things We Left Behind" (in *Transgressions* edited by Ed McBain).

Hartwell said that another good anthology was the Canadian annual, *Tesseracts*.

Wallace said that there were no good or excellent horror or fantasy anthologies in 2005, but Wolfe suggested *The Fair Folk* edited by Marvin Kaye.

Wallace named some more recommendations: Theodora Goss's "Pip and the Fairies" (in *Strange Horizons*), Gavin J. Grant's "Heads Down, Thumbs Up" (at scifi.com), M. Rickert, Yoon Ha Lee, Jay Lake (again), Tim Pratt (again), and Chris Barzak. Wolfe added Paolo Bacigalupi. (Ironically, this is one of the names that I *can* spell without having to check later. For many authors, my hearing is just

not up to interpreting the sounds.)

Golaski recommended Jan Wilt (who writes what Golaski called "long short fiction"), Don Tumasonis (from the Netherlands), Christopher Harman, and Peter Bell.

Hartwell said that we should not forget the people who were not new writers, but were still turning out excellent work: Robert Reed, Ramsey Campbell, Stephen Baxter, Bruce Sterling, Michael Swanwick, Vonda McIntyre, Joe Haldeman, R. Garcia y Robertson, Ted Chiang, Bud Sparhawk, and Cory Doctorow.

Wolfe seconded this, saying, "The presence of a familiar name does not mean a familiar story."

Youmans added the name of Sarah Monette to the list. He also made what he described as a provocative comment--that this was "the beginning of a bright new era of short fiction, because science fiction is very appropriate for on-line, for the Internet." The only problem is that people need to get used to paying for it.

Hartwell noted that in this regard, the highest paying market for authors on- or off-line is the weekly magazine *Nature*, which pays \$130 for 800 words (their standard length). Subscriptions to this are \$200 a year, which means that no one subscribes for the one story per issue. (I wonder if I can get these through inter-library loan from my library.) [About a month after this, *Nature* announced they were no longer taking submissions--the 800-word stories were a one-year experiment and they had filled all the remaining slots.]

Wallace said that in his opinion webzines are not sustainable business models; original anthologies or collections are the new thing. (Maybe so, but the same was true in the 1970s, until the glut killed them for three decades.)

**The Fiction of Jorge Luís Borges
Saturday 1:00pm**

John Crowley, Jeffrey Ford, Lissanne Lake, Rachel Pollack, Mary A. Turzillo (mod)

Description: [no description given]

Estimated attendance: 40 people

Turzillo introduced herself by saying that she had won a Nebula in 1999, and that part of her Ph.D. dissertation was on Borges. Crowley said that he had been reading Borges since the mid-1960s (which is when Borges was first translated into English).

Turzillo asked if Borges was a magical realist, and whether Crowley had called him "slipstream"? Crowley said that the term "slipstream" had never passed his lips, and that Borges was not part of any movement, but *sui generis*. (He admitted, though, that Borges's early works might fit into such categories as the gaucho genre.)

Pollack thought that Borges's fiction had a certain resemblance to midrash and kabbalistic texts. Lake thought they were not really stories, but more blank verse poems. (I can see this for the shorter ones, but I don't think it applies to "Death and the Compass", for example.) Crowley pointed out that in Spanish, Borges is known primarily as a poet. Ford just said, "I wouldn't try to apply any of these terms."

Ford said that one characteristic of Borges's fiction is that his "sense of humor is incredible." He said that authors are often told "show, don't tell," but Borges told (as did Anton Chekhov and Rudyard

Kipling) with great success. Crowley added that Stanislaw Lem is "another teller, not a shower." Some stories of Lem's, he said, have no characters at all. (He described one with an artificially constructed universe, but did not mention the title. My Lem expert suggests it might be either "Non Serviam" from *A Perfect Vacuum*, in which "beings simulated in a computer discuss the creator". or "How Trurl's Perfection Led to No Good" from *The Cyberiad*, in which "Trurl builds a simulated kingdom in a box for an exiled king. But since he is such an excellent constructor, his simulation is no different from reality. This story inspired the game 'SimCity'.") In fact, Crowley said that the best part is often the idea itself, not the story. (I think that he was referring both to Lem and to Borges.)

Ford said that Borges's stories have "idiosyncratic details to stick with you," but are really very spare. They are magical, but not magical realism. Ford later said that according to Alberto Manguel, Borges did not like the writing of Gabriel García Márquez (who is considered the major magical realist). Crowley observed that English-language readers often think that Latin American writing is all one thing. (He added that Eric Van seems to have coined the term "Anglolexic" to describe readers in English.)

Turzillo said that another characteristic is that many of Borges's narrators are malicious and deceitful. (This continues a trend Borges started earlier, when he wrote pieces for *A Universal History of Infamy* which purported to be true, but were in fact fictions. Pollack said that this carried through to having the humor at the expense of the reader, though Ford noted that in "Borges and Me" ("Borges y yo", a.k.a. "Borges and Myself") it is at the expense of the author.

Crowley thought it notable that Borges achieved such pathos in spite of the sparseness of his writing, and compared him to Nabokov in this regard. (I find it hard to think of someone who wrote five-hundred-page novels as a "sparse" writer.)

Pollack said that she had used Borges in a story (as "Luís the Blind Librarian"). (Other authors have done this as well, notably Poul Anderson in *Harvest the Fire* and Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose*.)

Lake said that one thing to notice about Borges's fiction is that the characters are Spanish men, rather than Latin American ones.

In response to a question, Crowley said that the first Borges he read was "El Aleph". Ford said that part of what makes the story so memorable is that access to the Aleph is so idiosyncratic. Turzillo added that at first Borges makes the rival poet despicable, but then he has the narrator act despicably as well. Pollack said that this is the story with the deepest kabbalistic references. The letter "aleph" is silent, she said, being merely an opening of the mouth. (I'm not sure this is entirely true in the spoken language today.) "Aleph" is also the unknowable God, and it is also the symbol chosen by Cantor to represent infinity.

Lake said of "The Aleph" and other stories by Borges, "His characters continuously find the limitless and the unknowable, and reject it." Crowley observed that "strivers toward mystic knowledge assume it is good," but in Borges's work it is bad.

Lake said that reading *The Book of Sand* is like surfing the Internet. (I had no idea what this meant, so I reread the book--and I still have no idea what it means.)

Ford described Borges as a "book nerd who wants to seem worldly." That is why, he said, his early stories all have knife fights and other expressions of machismo. (Borges supposedly liked "West Side Story" a lot because of the knife fights.)

Lake said that annotations made to Borges's historical fiction indicate that streets, colors, etc., all have political overtones that most non-Argentinian readers will miss.

Returning to Kipling, Ford said that in graduate school, people pooh-pooh Kipling, Ray Bradbury, and others, but Borges loved them. Crowley said that Borges also admired Chesterton, and liked sensational crime stories (as can be seen from Borges's own book *A Universal History of Infamy*).

Crowley talked about "hoax erudition." For example, in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, he says that "Melanchthon in Hell" is from Swedenborg. Melanchthon cannot leave his room after writing about being "saved by works," but gets worse, because he cannot change his mind. Crowley does not believe that this was from Swedenborg. (On the other hand, I cannot find it in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, so either my notes are wrong, or I am grossly misspelling the character's name, or Crowley was indulging in his own hoax erudition here.) One sees the same false attributions in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and other entries in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. Crowley said that in "The Precursors of Kafka", Borges even claims that Kafka's existence created his precursors.

Pollack said that she found James Joyce's *Finegans Wake* "like Borges, but completely opposite." Borges condenses everything into an Aleph, while Joyce expands everything. Crowley claims that *Finegans Wake* is what the viewer in "The Aleph" sees.

Turzillo asked about translations, saying that Borges was such a citizen of the world that there must be translations in many languages. On the other hand, she said, James Joyce (to whom Borges was earlier compared) is not translatable. (My observation is that I find Borges easier to read in Spanish than Joyce is in English.) Someone in the audience said that Borges liked *Ulysses* but after he read *Finegans Wake* he said that Lewis Carroll had done it better.

From the audience, Eric Van said it seemed symbolic that "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" was Borges's first published story, since it emphasized the connection between writer and reader, and was also a funny parody of literary criticism. Turzillo said that much of the psychology of Pierre Menard seems to have become standard these days, when plagiarizers say things like, "I *could* have written it" or, "I channeled it."

Pollack said it also raises questions like "Do authors own their own names?" Crowley related his experience, not with authors' names overlapping, but with duplicate titles, when both he and Peter Benchley had books titled *The Deep* come out at the same time. There was no intent to defraud, and you cannot copyright a title, so both books proceeded.

Turzillo said that another incident with Borgesian overtones is when Philip José Farmer asked Kurt Vonnegut if he could write a novel using the pseudonym Kilgore Trout (a character in one of Vonnegut's novels). Vonnegut thought Farmer was just kidding, so he said yes, and was quite distressed to discover that Farmer had been serious.

Eric Van noted that "The Garden of Forking Paths" starts with a note from Borges claiming that it was just a manuscript he had found, and that the first few pages of the manuscript had been lost. Lake said it made writing the story so much easier by not having to be careful to lay a good foundation for it. Pollack said that Herman Melville's *Pierre* does the flip-side of this: Pierre finds a pamphlet which is a satire on Ralph Waldo Emerson that claims to tell the reader how solve all their problems, but when Pierre turns the page, he discovers that the last section had been ripped out. Crowley gave another example, the Rosicrucian text "The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz", where the end was also missing.

Crowley said that it was notable that Borges's first publication in English was not in a mainstream literary magazine, but in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* ("The Circular Ruins"). (This is not quite accurate--it did not appear in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, but was published in Judith Merrill's *The 11th Annual of the Year's Best S-F*.)

Ford pointed out that for people who wanted more information, the English-language *The Aleph and Other Stories: 1933-1969* has a long autobiographical essay that is not available anywhere else.

I Never Metafiction I Didn't Like
Saturday 3:00pm

John Crowley, Ron Drummond (mod), Scott Edelman, Barry Malzberg, Rachel Pollack

Description: "There's a lot to say about the nature and enterprise of writing and reading fiction, and a long tradition of saying it within the text of fiction itself. One need look no further than the works of Jorge Luís Borges to find a surprisingly broad range of approaches and techniques for doing so (although there are certainly other role models). Our authors talk about their motivations for writing metafiction and for choosing their specific devices."

Estimated attendance: 50 people

Edelman said that fifteen or twenty stories out of his sixty stories were metafiction. Whether that was considered a large percentage or a small one was unclear. Pollack said that her non-fiction about the tarot is metafiction. (I do not think that non-fiction can be metafiction.) Crowley said, "I'm John Crowley and I too am a confessed metafictioner."

Drummond asked, "If God wrote the Bible, why did he make Shakespeare a better writer than he is?" He also commented on the relationship between our lived lives and the stories we tell each other.

Malzber said that this was "really deep stuff--am I on the right panel?"

Crowley said that in traditional fiction characters are not allowed to imagine their authors--if they do, it is metafiction. On the other hand, *we* are encouraged to imagine our author. And the whole gnostic conception adds another level of author.

Pollack quoted a Hasidic saying: "God created human beings because God loves stories." She gave the first example of metafiction: *Mulligan Stew* by Gilbert Sorrentino, which has a town populated by characters who have deserted their novels.

Edelman disputed some of this, saying "I don't see life as being story" until you shape it and give it meaning. Drummond claimed, "We shape it when we remember it."

Edelman said that in writing there are certain defaults: third person, no authorial asides, and so on. (In theatrical terms, there is no breaking of the fourth wall.) He gave *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino as an example of metafiction. Calvino's reasoning was that since one always has high expectations at the start of a book, he would include only starts. Later, he also suggested his own "The Suicide Artist", which is written in the second person.

Pollack returned to the tarot, saying that in Calvino's *Castle of Crossed Destinies* the characters tell stories with tarot cards. Pollack also made some comments on deconstruction (which I did not completely understand), and that "we don't know they are telling stories, or telling these stories."

Drummond talked about the oft-made claim by authors that "the characters take over the story." Crowley noted he has never made this claim, and said that Vladimir Nabokov also denied this ever happened to him. For one thing, Crowley said, "You know they are characters in a novel, and they don't." They don't go to the bathroom, or eat three meals, or sleep eight hours a day either. If the characters realized this, it would be a gnostic realization. Edelman noted, however, that then the character would know that the realization itself from the author. (Someone in the audience said that Kurt Vonnegut set his characters free at the end of *Breakfast of Champions*.)

Malzberg said that *Alice in Wonderland* is metafiction, but asked for a stronger definition of metafiction. He said, "It's kind of like the Singularity" or Damon Knight's definition of science

fiction, which do not have real definitions. He suggested, though, that "metafiction is fiction about fiction." One model he gave was, "Am I dreaming of you or are you dreaming of me?"

Crowley said that probably more than half of all world fiction ("which I have read") is self-aware that it is fiction. That is, one runs across phrases such as "there are so few pages left for me." (In that sense, any first-person narrative would be self-aware.) Drummond and Edelman both said they thought that was just part of the story-telling style.

Pollack said that metafiction had to be *about* this, not just a casual use of it. An audience member suggested that metafiction "had to include the reader in the equation."

Crowley said that one problem is that modern fiction assumes a naive reader.

Someone in the audience suggested that books such as *The Book of Imaginary Beings* and so on--non-fiction books about fictional places--might be considered meta-fiction. Edelman said that books such as *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases* by Jeff Vandermeer, Tim Lebbon, Alan Moore, and Neil Gaiman (nominated for a Hugo in 2004) might count. (He described this sort of book as a "false artifact".)

Crowley said a different sort of metafiction would be George Perec's *La Disparition*, which is an entire book written without the letter 'e'. Gilbert Adair's translation into English is titled *A Void* and follows the same rule. A more recent example of this would be *Ella Minnow Pea* by Mark Dunn. (These are called lipogrammatic works, if you want to look for more.)

Pollack disagreed, saying that these were not metafiction, but masochism. The authors are like people who enjoy being tied up "to push things to a higher level." Speaking on the general issue of constraints on writing, Crowley said that the only point of *Avoid* is the constraint, while the point of (say) a sonnet is not the form itself.

An audience member suggested John Barnes's *One for the Morning Glory* as a story in which the characters seem aware they are characters. For example, at one point Barnes writes, "Boniface was delighted again, for if the Twisted Man was not a hero but knew some of their ways, it was likely that the fairy tale, if it were a fairy tale they were in, would reveal someone already introduced as a hero--perhaps [the prince]." Or when at one point the king observes that the applicants for a post have turned up a year and a day after the last holder's death, and another character says, "Why, yes, Your Majesty, it is. And you are right. It's the sort of time that turns up in a fairy tale. I think we are about to see something remarkable."

Pollack returned to Crowley's earlier comment on gnosticism and said, "Metafiction has its roots in gnosticism, questioning the roots of reality." (This would seem to apply primarily to works with self-aware characters, rather than some of the other types suggested here.) Crowley added that in gnosticism matter is unreal, emotions are real, and metaphysical speculations are the most real--and that the same is precisely true of fiction.

Malzberg said that a different sort of unreliable reality would be Jack Vance's "The Men Return", in which physical laws change as the story progresses. ("Then came the terrible hour, when Earth swam into a pocket of non-causality, and all the ordered tensions of cause-effect dissolved.") Crowley compared this to his own *Aegypt*, of which he said, "I changed the physical laws, and now they are different--and they always were." (A similar notion can be found in some alternate histories, such as Mary Gentle's *The Book of Ash*.)

Some discussion ensued on films which "break the fourth wall" in a metafictional way: *Sherlock, Jr.*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Pleasantville*, and the final scene of *Blazing Saddles*. Pollack said that *The Truman Show* is the great gnostic myth, and a parable of metafiction. It incorporated, she added, Philip K. Dick's dilemma of a created universe. (For that matter, one could

see *Flatland* as a parable of metafiction, in which characters break the third-dimensional wall.) Crowley added *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles. Someone in the audience suggested "Built Up Logically" (a.k.a. "The Universal Panacea") by Howard Schoenfeld. (Well, the audience member mentioned the story; Malzberg provided the author, and doubtless could have told us the magazine where it first appeared, down to year and month, and quite possibly the page numbers for all I know, had he been asked. His memory for this sort of thing is amazing.) The story is about an author and his characters and their interaction. Someone else added *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien, which Crowley also recommended.

In some context, Malzberg quoted a line from his own metafictional novel *Galaxies*: "Our youth and hope will be taken from us, but our failure will remain whole and pure forever." (Actually, the line is "our youth and possibility may be stripped from us, but our failure can remain shining and constant forever.")

China Miéville Interviewed Saturday 4:00pm

Description: [no description given]

Estimated attendance: 200 people

Asked about his early experiences with literature, Miéville said he was "a case of arrested development-in the best way." He was encouraged to read books like *The Little House on the Prairie*, but complained, "There was just a distinct lack of monsters." However, he added, "My mum was always very good about books." And there were school book clubs, which he said made him think of the "notion of an emergency airdrop of books." He said he even liked the colors of the books that had monsters. Now there is a crisis in libraries in the United Kingdom, but there is also more widespread ownership of books.

Miéville said he started writing earlier, but finally decided to become a writer in his mid-teens. He said he was not particularly conscious of the *craft* of writing at first. His academic background is in law and anthropology. He cannot say whether his books came from his studies or pre-dated them, but that some elements certainly came out of his studies.

Miéville had said in an earlier interview that he just tried to write "a ripping yarn that is socially avante-garde and stylistically serious." "What an insufferable twerp I was!" he added. However, people reading genre fiction tend to pooh-pooh experimentation, saying things like, "I'm not interested in language; I just want to read the story."

An experimentalist needs to locate oneself among surrealism, high modernism, ulipo, dada, and so on, Miéville said. But as you get better, writing gets harder, because you are more aware. "Like Beckett, you fail, then you fail better."

Miéville recommended Thomas Ligotti and Michael Cisco as two authors whose writing is pulps merged with avante-garde. And though Lovecraft was not consciously a stylistic high modernist, the result was the same.

The interview turned to politics. Miéville said that he wrote "Foundation" in response to an incident in Gulf War I. He said it is claimed that "any polemic makes bad art," but while this is mostly true, it is not always. He feels that his stories "Foundation" and "An End to Hunger" are counter-examples. Fiction, he said, must have more than "isn't this terrible?" And he admitted that "'Tis the Season" is a polemic, but pleaded, "All right, ... I occasionally write things that are not polemics." He added, "Mostly when I think politically I tend to get very angry."

Regarding "'Tis the Season", Miéville said he was approached by the "Socialist Review" for a Christmas story, and was tickled by the idea. "It's only a short piece," he said. He considers himself a novelist, though he has a volume of short stories out, *Looking for Jake*, which contains all his professionally published short stories. He explains this by saying, "Discipline doesn't come naturally to me." However, his books are getting shorter. He is still stunned when authors commit to writing a story for an original anthology. He is in awe of their confidence--"What if it sucks?"

His next book, by the way, is not in the same world as *Perdido Street Station*, *Scar*, and *Iron Council* (New Corbizon, Baslag). He also has a young adult book coming out in London next year. He said it is exciting and nerve-wracking when one's writing style changes. People want writers to stretch, but dislike when the new book is not like the last.

Miéville said that his political views and his fiction are both expressions of the same world view. (Miéville ran for Parliament as a member of the Socialist Alliance.) He said that he felt that Tony Blair's move to the right disenfranchised an entire group, leaving "only one position in two-and-a-half flavors." The Socialist Alliance never thought they could win, he added, but they were distressed by the continued insistence that there is no alternative. He decried the campaign asking, "Vote for us because we're not as bad as them."

Regarding the counter-argument that a third party will "split the vote," he pointed out that the Labour Party split the anti-Tory vote in the early 20th century several times before it finally became a major player. He said, "I will not take the idea that the Democrats own the progressive vote in this country." He then went into a long rant on this, ending with "this is my opinion."

(My observation is that if he does not think that votes for Nader were wasted--or worse--then he should not complain that Bush got elected.)

Getting back to his writing, someone in the audience said that one aspect of Miéville was that he does not explain the strangeness in his books. Miéville explained, "I really like culture shock." He added that a local London person who is not a trained guide will skip Trafalgar Square, but point the best butcher shop in town. He will show you things you may not be interested in, and skip what you are.

Miéville described himself as a child of 'Doctor Who' and 'Blake's 7'." In fact, he said, "One of the key plot points [in *Perdido Street Station*] was completely lifted from ['Doctor Who's'] 'The Mask of Mandragora'." There is also an influence from role-playing games and world-buildings, leading to the fantastic, dreamlike, and visionary. There is a "geeky mania for systemization," he said, that means that while the main ideas behind Cthulhu are that Cthulhu is unthinkable, unknowable, etc., games like "The Call of Cthulhu" declare things like "Strength: 100". However, it is true that an author must know the details to write the story.

Asked about music, he said that his favorite, drum and electronic bass, "has sort of, kind of, sort of died. [But] its creaking zombie shuffles on." His favorite composers are Benjamin Britten, Arthur Schoenberg, Carl Maria von Weber, and Johannes Bach.

James Morrow Interviewed Saturday 5:00pm

Description: [no description given]

Estimated attendance: 100 people

Morrow began by putting up a big poster from *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman* and saying it illustrated his talk, "Why We Still Need the Enlightenment, or Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman".

Regarding the blurb on Jonathen Lethem's *Gun, with Occasional Music*. "That was back in 1991 when I didn't know what the word postmodernism meant. Now it's 2006, and I don't know what the word postmodernism means."

Of his latest book, he said, "Triumphalist narrative is the case." It is about the clash between medieval and Renaissance/scientific thinking (the former represented by the Wolfman and the latter by Frankenstein). Before Newton, the moon had mystical meanings, but "what we now regard as incompatibility was not manifest" to the participants. He recommended *Masks of the Universe* for scientific history. He said, "In matters of creation God is marvelous, but in a rational argument you want Newton."

Harking back to the panel on satire, Morrow said, "Satirists always have to worry about whether they are merely mocking the topical."

He also said that his daughter Kathy is Holly in *This Is the Way the World Ends*, but in general, "the characters don't map onto people in my life in an easy way."

Morrow asked, "Why do we pay religion such deference? And such unearned deference, it seems to me."

He said that he had "friends who went out to Hollywood and didn't come to a good end." But he had dabbled in film, with an 8mm adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Telltale Heart" and a science fiction film called "The Futurians". (It was so long ago, he did the sound on an open-reel deck and used a variable-speed camera.) "An artist's best friends are his limitations," he explained. "I love the minimalism of theater."

Asked whether his works were fantasy, science fiction, or something else, he said, "[*Towing Jehovah*] got the World Fantasy Award and I'm not about to return it." According to *Locus*, his first three novels (*The Wine of Violence*, *The Continent of Lies*, and *This Is the Way the World Ends*) were science fiction, and the rest are fantasy or satire.

Morrow says that when people talk about this being "the best of all possible worlds," the emphasis should be on "possible": "the best of all *possible* worlds."

Blameless in Abaddon is his favorite novel, written as a riposte to C. S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain*. Lewis (according to Morrow) insisted that animals do not feel pain, that it is only a simulacrum of what we feel. Lewis assumes we suffer because we learn from it, so he could not admit that animals felt pain. "He writes this stupid, glib book. Then life kicks in, as it does even for Oxford dons." After this Lewis "writes a very different theodicy, *A Grief Observed*," which he again described as a *cri de couer*.

Morrow said was "dissing" J. R. R. Tolkien a lot, then he married a Tolkien armchair scholar. He had a background in curriculum development, and so when they were asked to create a Tolkien curriculum, they did, because, as he said, "We needed the money."

In Tolkien, he felt there was Manichaeism, which he described as "the single worst idea humanity has come up with." He also disliked the idea that "blood will tell", the notion of the rapaciousness of technology, and so on. He did say that "the character Sam is some kind of achievement." The question was raised as to why someone does not organize a Hobbit Socialist Party. "But Sam is not just a 'happy darkie'," Morrow said.

Regarding the success of *The Last Witchfinder*, he was asked, "Do you feel vindicated now?" "You bet!" What he thought was interesting was the success of that book after Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich rejected. "I don't know why I'm doing the atheist thing," he mused. "Someone is obviously watching out for me."

He also commented on the featured author, saying "[Borges] does stuff I wouldn't dare to do, like write stories without plots or characters."

The 20th Kirk Poland Memorial Bad Prose Competition

Saturday 8:00pm

Craig Shaw Gardner (mod), Yves Meynard (champion), Glenn Grant (ex-champion), Cecilia Tan, Eric M. Van (mod)

Description: "Our traditional evening entertainment, named in memory of the pseudonym and alter ego of Jonathan Herovit of Barry Malzberg's Herovit's World. Ringleader Craig Shaw Gardner reads a passage of unidentified but genuine, published, bad sf, fantasy, or horror prose, which has been truncated in mid-sentence. Each of our panelists - Craig and his co-moderator Eric M. Van, champion Yves Meynard, ex-champion Glenn Grant, and returning challenger Tan - then reads an ending for the passage. One ending is the real one; the others are imposters concocted by our contestants (including Craig) ahead of time. None of the players knows who wrote any passage other than their own, except for Eric, who gets to play God as a reward for the truly onerous duty of unearthing these gems. Craig then asks for the audience vote on the authenticity of each passage (recapping each in turn by quoting a pithy phrase or three from them), and the Ace Readercon Joint Census Team counts up each show of hands faster than you can say "Bambi pranced." Eric then reveals the truth. Each contestant receives a point for each audience member they fooled, while the audience collectively scores a point for everyone who spots the real answer. As a rule, the audience finishes third or fourth. Warning: the Surgeon General has determined that this trash is hazardous to your health; i.e., if it hurts to laugh, you're in big trouble."

Estimated attendance: way too many people

We have never liked this, but people said it had improved, so we figured we would give it a try. But the excerpts read dragged on s-o-o-o l-o-o-o-n-g that we bailed out after the first one. (I think there were supposed to be five.) I did find out that at least one professional editor does not like it either.

The Garden of Forking Borges Translations

Sunday 10:00am

Eric Van (mod), Evelyn C. Leeper, Charles Oberndorf, Jean-Louis Trudel

Description: "Is the best translation always the most faithful? Our panelists have a sufficient reading knowledge of Spanish and will compare the very different Donald A. Yates (from *Labyrinths*) and Andrew Hurley (from *Collected Fictions*) translations of the final paragraph of Borges' classic "The Garden of Forking Paths" (attendees can follow along with a handout). Which do they prefer? Which is more literal? Which is more faithful, and is that the same thing? What can we learn about the nature of translation?"

Estimated attendance: 30 people

(What would have been very useful for me to have read *before* this panel was the lecture by Borges on translation included in *Borges on Writing* edited by Norman Thomas di Gionvanni, Daniel Halpern, and Frank MacShane. Instead I read it about a month later.)

To the Yates and Hurley translations cited in the original description, we also added the Helen Temple and Ruthven Todd one, included in *Ficciones*.

Trudel said that we had to realize that the notion of perfection in translation is deceptive. (He has

done translations of his own work, and so should know. Ironically, he said he was not even sure he had been paid for one of his translations, because he did it at 3AM after a long party.) One problem is the practicality of finding translators.

The question arose as to whether it is better for a translator to be working *to* or *from* his first language. There was no definite answer, but everyone agreed that it is important to translate from the original language. Apparently the Portuguese translations of Borges were done from the English translations! Andrew Hurley tried hard to avoid this in his recent translation of *The Book of Imaginary Beings* by seeking out the original sources that Borges cites when these are not originally in Spanish, and translating from them.

Oberndorf said that another problem was that there are different words in Spanish based on region, as well as authorial style. For example, Borges places the adjective before the noun far more often than "traditional" Spanish would do. (I wonder if his early exposure to English has something to do with this.) Borges also uses "street language" or slang rather than upper-class language.

We then started analyzing the translations a sentence at a time. So first I will give you the original, and the three translations:

Original Spanish [*Ficciones*, Emecé Editores]:

"Lo demás is irreal, insignificante. Madden irrumpió, me arrestó. He sido contenido a la horca. Abominablemente ha vencido: he comunicado a Berlín el secreto nombre de la ciudad que deben atacar. Ayer la bombardearon; lo leí en los mismos periódicos que propusieron a Inglaterra el enigma de que el sabio sinólogo Stephen Albert muriera asesinado por un desconocido, Yu Tsun. El Jefe ha descifrado ese enigma. Sabe que mi problema era indicar (a través del estrépito de la guerra) la ciudad que se llama Albert y que no hallé otro medio que matar a una persona de ese nombre. No sabe (nadie puede saber) mi innumerable contrición y cansancio."

Helen Temple and Ruthven Todd [from *Ficciones*, New Directions]:

"What remains is unreal and unimportant. Madden broke in and arrested me. I have been condemned to hang. Abominably, I have triumphed! The secret name of the city to be attacked got through to Berlin. Yesterday it was bombed. I read the news in the same English newspapers which were trying to solve the riddle of the murder of the learned Sinologist Stephen Albert by the unknown Yu Tsun. The Chief, however, had already solved this mystery. He knew that my problem was to shout, with my feeble voice, above the tumult of war, the name of the city called Albert, and that I had no other course open to me than to kill someone of that name. He does not know, for no one can, of my infinite penitence and sickness of the heart."

Donald A. Yates [from *Labyrinths*, Grove]:

"The rest is unreal, insignificant. Madden broke in, arrested me. I have been condemned to the gallows. I have won out abominably; I have communicated to Berlin the secret name of the city they must attack. They bombed it yesterday; I read it in the same papers that offered to England the mystery of the learned Sinologist Stephen Albert who was murdered by a stranger, one Yu Tsun. The Chief had deciphered this mystery. He knew my problem was to indicate (through the uproar of war) the city called Albert, and that I had found no other means to do so than to kill a man of that name. He does not know (no one can know) my innumerable contrition and weariness."

Andrew Hurley [*Collected Fictions*, Viking]:

"The rest is unreal, insignificant. Madden burst into the room and arrested me. I have been sentenced to hang. I have most abhorrently triumphed. I have communicated to Berlin the secret name of the city to be attacked. Yesterday it was bombed--I read about it in the same newspapers that posed to all of England the enigma of the murder of the eminent Sinologist Stephen Albert by a stranger, Yu Tsun. The Leader solved the riddle. He knew that my problem was how to report (over the deafening noise of the war) the name of the city named Albert, and that the only way I could find was murdering a person of that name. He does not know (no one can know) my endless contrition, and my weariness."

(I took some notes, but most of what follows will be my comments, because I actually have the best notes on that.)

Of the first sentence, Oberndorf thought Temple & Todd's "what remains" too poetic. My objection was that if Borges had wanted a conjunction, he would have used one. The same is true for the second sentence. and here Hurley also makes changes that eliminate Borges's staccato rhythm. Trudel said, however, that Hurley is more accurate, because "irrumpio" means "burst into," not "broke into."

There was much discussion of whether it was better that Yates kept the term "gallows". From the audience, Fred Lerner said that one decision a translator has to make is whether to use modern English (or whatever the destination language is) or the English of the era of the author. He thought that since Borges was a fan and a contemporary of G. K. Chesterton, using Chestertonian English would be appropriate. I also argued that changing "condenado" from "condemned" to "sentenced" was presumptuous, since there was a Spanish verb "sentenciar."

I thought translating Borges's "abominablemente" as "abhorrently" did not make it any less awkward, but Oberndorf said that "abhorrently" is stronger, as is "abominablemente" in Spanish.

I wondered why Temple & Todd, and Hurley also, changed "he comunicado a Berlín el secreto nombre de la ciudad que deben atacar" and "ayer la bombardearon" into the passive voice. Oberndorf pointed out that the passive voice keeps the word "bombed" at the end of the sentence ("yesterday it was bombed"), where it is much more emphasized than in Yates's "they bombed it yesterday." Someone in the audience said that in fact both the words "yesterday" and "bombed" are both emphasized in the Spanish, and also in the passive construction.

I disagreed with Temple & Todd's implication that the newspapers were trying to solve the enigma. Also, I felt that Yu Tsun was a stranger to Albert, but not necessarily "an unknown."

Where Borges says, "El Jefe ha descifrado ese enigma," *none* of the translators retained the word "enigma". The translation of "Jefe" is more correctly "Chief", because "Caudillo" would be "Leader", though the panelists seemed to feel there was little difference. However, Hurley also changes the tense from past perfect to simple past.

"Indicar" seemed to give all the translators problems. Temple & Todd translate it as "shout", but that would be "gritar". Hurley makes it into a larger concept--a whole report rather than a pointing out a single item.

Temple & Todd again go for a passive implication in "I had no other course" rather than "I found no other course". Hurley restructures the whole sentence and recasts a negative ("no other course") as a positive ("the only way")`

As for the final sentence, Van says that Borges uses the word "innumerable" three times, and it would best be translated as "uncountable", which would imply many worlds, and many forking paths. Yates's "innumerable" is close, Temple & Todd's "infinite" further away, and Hurley's "endless" misses it entirely.

Bad God! Bad God!

Sunday 11:00am

Alex Jablovkov, James Morrow, Patrick O'Leary (mod), Paul Park, Diane Weinstein

Description: "'The Deathbird' by Harlan Ellison and 'Faith of Our Fathers' by Philip K. Dick are only two of many classic sf stories that posit the existence of a God who is malign, deranged, or incompetent; James Morrow devoted an entire trilogy to the theme. Why the need to explain the existence of evil with such a God, rather than no God at all?"

Estimated attendance: 50 people

Weinstein began with the example of the Cthulhu Mythos. (Someone later claimed that H. P. Lovecraft was an atheist.) Park added the (obvious) recent one of the God envisioned by Phillip Pullman in the "His Dark Materials" series. Jablovkov said of the latter, "I had just read that to . . . my Catholic-raised, Catholic son." He added that non-monotheistic religions often have malign gods (which is probably why the description specified "God" rather than "god"). And of course, a malign God is defined as one who is "not acting in my best interest."

O'Leary wondered why people postulate a malign God rather than just an absent one. Park said that are certainly structural reasons when writing a book: "It gives significance to bad events if you establish a will behind them." Weinstein thought it was because "we are hard-wired to want order," even if it is an order dictated by a malign God. "Most people are upset with the notion that there is nobody at the wheel."

Park said that often non-religious authors manufacture a malign God in their works. The other alternative is to decide that suffering is meaningless. But Morrow added, "We don't say there are no causes of misfortune other than the Divine." His novel *This Is the Way the World Ends*, for example, has misfortune without a malign God.

Jablovkov said that every book has a deity--the author--and this deity is usually malign to the characters in the book.

Morrow again talked about C. S. Lewis and how Lewis does not take pain seriously in *The Problem of Pain*. O'Leary talked about our general outrage at innocent suffering, and said that to him the impulse to ask the question is proof of another realm.

Morrow said that he was an atheist ("a word I don't care for at all"). He said that his reaction to Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* was not to try to analyze why God chose to kill those people on it, but "let's build better bridges in the future." In fact, he pointed out that even believers say this. (After the death caused by falling concrete in the Big Dig, believers did not try to figure out why that person was chosen to die--they tried to figure out whom to blame for building a defective tunnel.)

Morrow also said that if suffering has meaning, as believers often claim, why avoid it? He seemed to agree more with Elie Wiesel, whom he quoted as saying that we are doing the Devil's work when we justify suffering. And Morrow reminded the audience that Wiesel's writing came out of an experience of evil, not an intellectual contemplation of evil.

Jablovkov said that he thought the panel should be more focused on the literary aspects, not the theological ones. He did say that one could consider Freudian psychology as a subset of literary criticism, and that no one writes about a dream that has nothing to do with the story, so the other aspects impinge on the literary.

O'Leary said, "As authors we are tempted to create a coherence that doesn't exist in real life." Park

said that authors provide the trouble and authors provide the explanation. Someone in the audience suggested that maybe God just thinks of *us* as characters with no real existence. (This sounds like Philip K. Dick territory to me.)

Morrow claimed, "My playing God is more in the way or mode of being a parent." He said that people often put forward the ontological/aesthetic defense that most of what we see is ordered, and is not suffering. Some theologian he was reading described this as, "This is not a Lovecraftian world."

O'Leary compared the yearning for God with an analogy from the "Dog Whisperer", who says that dogs need a dominant male. O'Leary called this the "anxiety of emptiness."

Jablokov disputed this somewhat, noting that Buddhists have no God, and wondering if writers raised as Buddhists feel the need to create a God in their fiction. (Kim Stanley Robinson is the only Buddhist science fiction author I can think of off-hand, but I do not think he was raised that way.)

O'Leary suggested that the (monotheistic) believers often say, "Everything is for a purpose." (But then the Buddhists say that suffering is punishment for sin in a previous life, so eliminating a deity does not negate this claim.)

Someone in the audience asked if there are satisfying "bad God" characters. Morrow said that in his novel *Blameless in Abaddon*, God provides his own counter-argument. Someone else wondered whether the idea of a good (benevolent) God is just a modern idea, observing that the Roman gods (for example) were not beneficent. Morrow said that there is much more dualism in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Job. He said that God has great lines, but never actually addresses Job's questions. As Morrow said, "'Where were you when I made the earth?' is massively beside the point" as a response to Ob's question about why God is allowing Job to suffer.

(I am reminded of the time Mark Leeper said something negative about "Star Trek" and someone took him to task, asking, "Who are you to criticize 'Star Trek'?" Mark's response was, "Who do I have to be?")

Returning to authorship, Jablokov said, "The question of the ontological reality of our fictional characters [doesn't affect me]."

Someone in the audience suggested that such disparate works as *Dogma* and "The Gospel of Judas" were gnostic works dealing with a malign deity. Jablokov said, "I always found the modern popularity of gnosticism perplexing," since the notion of the "saved" (or the "elect", or whatever) seemed more like a high school clique than a religion. He (or someone) quoted Robert A. Heinlein as saying, "Most gods have the manners of a spoiled child."

Jablokov made the comparison to Asimov's "Three Laws of Robotics"--they are not absolute truth, but rather a narrative generation system. And other authors use that same system as well. In fact, he said that one reason that Christianity was so successful was that it was able to spin off different franchises (in the form of denominations as well as various major divisions).

Why is the New Weird Weird?

Sunday 1:00pm

Judith Berman, Michael Cisco, Nick Mamatas, Sarah Smith (mod), Sonya Taaffe

Description: "In an essay written for *The Third Alternative* and reprinted in *Locus*, China Miéville described the literary movement known as "the New Weird." The New Weird renounces hackneyed fantasy by taking its clichés and inverting, subverting, and converting them in order to return to the truly fantastic. It is secular and political, reacting against "religious moralism and consolatory

mythicism," and hence feels real and messy. And it trusts the reader and the genre in two important ways: it avoids post-modern self-reference, and it avoids didacticism, instead letting meaning emerge naturally from metaphor. Given such a broad agenda, it naturally has heterogeneous role models. What strikes us most about this very able description is that nowhere is any weirdness prescribed. It seems that any writer who observes this agenda ends up creating a world that is somehow off-kilter and evokes cognitive estrangement. Is this a comment on the nature of reality? Or is it more a comment on the clichés of fantasy and what's left over when you avoid them all? Is reality truly weird at some deep level, or is weird the only thing left that isn't hackneyed?"

Estimated attendance: 30 people

Berman began by saying that she did not believe in the New Weird at first, and in fact Miéville has since retracted the description. However, there does seem to be one group of writers of the weird working towards "consolation" and re-doing the familiar, while the writers of the New Weird are not. The New Weird, she said, emphasized the "relationship between the beautiful and the grotesque." You need the grotesque to counterpoint the beautiful.

Cisco thought the category was largely in terms of the market. Now, for example, long epic fantasies are in, so if you are not writing long epic fantasies, you need a label for what you are writing. "It's not just about avoiding influence."

Mamatas thought that Miéville's perspective was strongly influenced by the "Battle of Seattle" and the Socialist Labour Party, and that Miéville had also called the New Weird "Post-Seattle fiction". (The Socialist Labour Party saw it as an anti-capitalist movement.) However, the description of the New Weird as given would also apply to H. P. Lovecraft and Robert Aickman. (Mamatas also noted that no one had done introductions, and said he supposed that they were considered too bourgeois.")

Berman said she had written a standard quest novel and found it reviewed as "more alien than 'Star Trek'", as though "Star Trek" was the ultimate in alien.

Taaffe said there was a differentiation between traditional fantasy and the New Weird. When did traditional fantasy become just a kid with a sword, etc.?, she asked. Those who quested in *The Lord of the Rings* cannot stay in the world because they have been so affected by their experiences. However, if the New Weird is a reaction against traditional fantasy, she said, "I can understand why people would want to react against Terry Brooks."

Berman observed that the political and social aspects of fiction are important to Miéville, and that Michael Swanwick's "hard fantasy" has similar goals to the New Weird.

Taaffe wondered, "Where did this idea of the fantastic as comforting come from?" *Owl Service* by Alan Garner, for example, is not comforting. It has myth and epic, and is a young adult novel, but it is not reassuring.

Cisco said that "doing the opposite [of something] often becomes a mere exercise," but that Miéville's use of the political distinguishes his work. He writes, Cisco said, "fictions about the realities of human imaginings."

Smith talked about the "limitations of what the world is about." That is, religion is not interesting as a focus, but politics is. Cisco said that Jorge Luis Borges talks about stories being something not necessarily true, but plausible.

Mamatas said that to him Miéville's books seem similar to the "Dragonlance" novels, and are nothing new or amazing. (Later he described what Miéville writes as "post-revolutionary Dragonlance novels.") All the large publishers are creating sausages, and treating books as products or commodities. Berman asked, "Is the New Weird anything different?" and Taaffe wondered if the

New Weird had to be fantastic.

Someone said that "weird" is an affect, Mamatas said that it has to do with the writing, and Berman said it has to do with content. Mamatas said that Miéville has said that the New Weird is *not* about an unreliable narrator, and it is not interstitial diction. Smith thought that "interstitial" is more multi-media.

Someone in the audience asked who is writing the New Weird, and Cisco listed Miéville, M. John Harrison, and Thomas Ligotti. Mamatas said that people use the term "New Weird" to mean "recent and unusual", which made me wonder if there are any authors who would be the New Weird if they were writing now. (I guess that Lovecraft and Aickman were already mentioned.)

Mamatas said that Jeff Vandermeer is called a writer of the New Weird. He says he is not, but he accepts the label for marketing purposes. Someone in the audience said a lot of these labels seem to mean "me and my friends" or "me and people I want to be my friends."

Berman noted there was now a "mundane science fiction" manifesto, proving that just about anything can become a category. Mamatas said that one could define a category of "books with people being eaten", but it is not a useful category. Someone repeated the claim that "cyberpunk" really meant "works of Gibsonian sensibility."

Someone in the audience noted that the writing of Lovecraft and Mervyn Peake was different from J. R. R. Tolkien, and this was part of the notion of the New Weird. Berman said the New Weird often relied on "the city as a source of endless fascination and grotesqueries." Taaffe gave examples of P. C. Hodgell's *Godstalk*, Fritz Leiber (the "Lankhmar" series), and Walter Jon Williams's (?) *City on Fire*. Berman named Ysabeau Wilce; Smith suggested Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*.

Cisco said this all indicated "an interest in more surreal writing." Smith said some of this applied to Latin American writing as well. Taaffe, ignoring Miéville's statement otherwise, said that Vandermeer's unstable text and unreliable narrator was part of the New Weird, along with Vladimir Nabokov and Kaitlin Kiernan. (If all it takes is an unreliable narrator, then Christopher Priest is part of the New Weird.) Cisco added T. S. Eliot's fragmentation, mis-matching, and incompleteness in "The Waste Land" as a precursor to the New Weird. Taaffe said that this fragmentation sounds like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

Somehow everyone then got into a discussion of the Third World, and how Zunis believe their problems are due to their gods being taken away to museums, and that insanity was due to possession by dead people, and how "all this makes sense, but not to you." This seemed to have little, if anything, to do with the New Weird.

Sense of Wonder in the New Hard SF

Sunday 2:00pm

Jeffrey A. Carver, Daniel P. Dern (mod), Geoffrey Landis, Teresa Nielsen Hayden, Ian Randal Strick

Description: "'Sense of wonder,' it seems to us, is what happens in our brains when a writer shows us something we hadn't conceived of that strikes us as remarkable. Much of the SOW in classic hard sf was evoked in stories of space flight, where it seemed to come relatively easy and naturally. The SOW we get from the nanotech and man/machine interactions in Michael Swanwick's *Stations of the Tide*, the genetic and cybernetic enhancements in Bruce Sterling's *Shaper/Mechanist* stories, or the biology in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy seems both harder earned and very different in flavor. Is SOW still central to the subgenre?"

Estimated attendance: 35 people

Landis looked at Carver and suggested a panel on "Fiction by People Named Geoffrey/Jeffrey". (It worked better in spoken form.) Well, I guess the panel could talk about Carver and Landis, but also about Geoffrey Chaucer and even Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Carver said emphatically, "I *do* believe that sense of wonder [is essential for the sub-genre]." And he added, "For me, outer space is still an important part of that."

Nielsen Hayden said that science fiction and fantasy are descended from the Romantics, who talked about a sense of the sublime. This led, among other things, she said, to lots of tourism to the Alps. Strock said that he sees that sense of wonder disappearing, in part because society wants to consider itself more mature, more blasé. For example, he said, we need to know everything about a movie before seeing it.

Landis said, "Modern science fiction has been strip-mining the sense of wonder," and it is now being used as 'throwaways'. And pop culture is strip-mining the sense of wonder from science fiction. The example he gave was a video game that has ringworlds . . . as a mere background element.

Strock felt that the real space programs have never had the sense of wonder that science fiction had; the most exciting parts were the unexpected. (It does seem to be true that there is more sense of wonder in the Apollo 13 story than in hitting golf balls on the moon.) Dern responded that there had been a speech on "West Wing" that brought back the sense of wonder in the space program.

Going further, Strock said that the sense of wonder *is* the unexpected, "not knowing what was going to happen." Nielsen Hayden disagreed somewhat, saying, "Some of us get our sense of wonder without a sense of surprise." She said that there was a sense of wonder in how pachinko balls form a bell curve, or in Fibonacci spirals. (Mark Leeper would undoubtedly agree with this.)

Dern said that this sense of wonder seemed harder to achieve in nanotechnology, biotechnology, and other hot topics in the new hard science fiction, and said in particular, "The Singularity leaves me cold." Landis responded that the Singularity by definition is something we cannot write about because the premise is that we will be so changed that we cannot understand the result. Stock thought it was a factor of size: space is big, but biotechnology, and especially nanotechnology, is small.

Nielsen Hayden said that making the readers understand the science is key to a sense of wonder.

Carver suggested that the science fiction field has gotten darker, and Nielsen Hayden agreed that there are now more hard-boiled detective science fiction stories, or ones set in worlds where nothing is new. Pulp science fiction had "no kinks, no back alleys, no despair." Both types saw something true, though. It is just that science fiction needed to recognize the dark side.

As for some of the new hard science fiction that does have a sense of wonder, Landis mentioned Greg Egan, specifically "Wang's Carpets" but all of Egan's work in general. Landis warned, however, that even though he has a Ph.D. in physics, Egan sometimes goes over *his* head.

Carver confessed to spending more time lately raising kids rather than reading science fiction, but named Vernor Vinge. Nielsen Hayden agreed about Vinge, particularly *A Fire upon the Deep*, and added J. M. Ford ("Erase, Record, Play"), and Kim Stanley Robinson's "Mars" series. Strock suggested Michael Flynn's "Firestar" series.

Carver said that the audience for science fiction seems to be contracting, but Nielsen Hayden disagreed. She said that you do not get bestsellers the way you do in fantasy, but the total readership (in all categories) is growing, and the science fiction percentage is at least stable.

Picking up perhaps on Landis's claim that pop culture is strip-mining the sense of wonder from science fiction, an audience member asked whether modern movie-craft hyperrealism is making things more mundane. Carver responded that more "stuff" did not make subsequent "Star Wars" films more wonderful, implying that sense of wonder is not derived from amazing special effects. (Let's face it, the Cantina scene was a real sense-of-wonder moment, and it was really very low-tech.) Strock noted that the later trilogy of films were "bad guy wins", and not triumphal at all. The same, he said, was true of "Star Trek" and "Battlestar Galactica".

From the audience, Bobbi Fox suggested that maybe the readers need to be more educated to understand the sense of wonder in, for example, the bell curve or the Fibonacci sequence. Strock said that the term "flying car" generates an instant response, but "nanotech" requires a lot of thinking about. Jeff Hecht suggested that "our view of science grew darker" in the 1950s and 1960s and that this is just reflected in science fiction. Landis disputed this, saying that science was dark in the nineteenth century. Nielsen Hayden noted that the Columbia Exposition of 1893 started the technocracy movement that was so popular in early twentieth century science fiction.

One audience member noted wryly that people dislike current technology, but are still attracted to new technology. Carver said that so much has become commonplace: lasers, CD players, etc. (My brother wrote in a column five years ago or so that when someone asks him if he has bought a CD, he thinks of the bank first, not the music store.) Nielsen Hayden said there was a continuum--Sopwith also helped design the harrier jet. But cell phones have broken about two-thirds of the thriller plots. As she noted, "We live in an amazing universe."

Landis said, "That's why I read science fiction, for the sense of wonder. But I want the sense of wonder to be earned." He said there is also such a thing as an "anti-sense-of-wonder", and gave as the example the current spate of books about Mars. They all end, he said, with either us discovering alien intelligence or terraforming Mars. None of them accept the inherent wonder of Mars as it is.

Carver said that the panel on the solar system was "just reeking with a sense of wonder."

Landis concluded that "a sense of wonder is still there in the new hard science fiction." In fact, he said, "It's what the new hard science fiction is about." Carver said, "The sense of wonder is in your willingness to experience a sense of wonder." Nielsen Hayden said that the early sense-of-wonder writers grew up in poverty and despair during the Depression and a sense of wonder was all they had, but it is better to live in a world where a sense of wonder trickles down.

Suggested panels for future conventions:

- | Religion in SF--but the entire panel is made up of representatives of non-monotheistic religions
- | Fiction by People Named Geoffrey/Jeffrey

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