

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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J.G. Ballard. Photo © 1987 Roger Robinson.

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Editorial

The View from the Back Issues

Over the past two years or so I've been building up piles of back issues of magazines and journals I use. I'd had a sizeable run of *Foundations* for a while, and filled in all but about four gaps, even the Philip K. Dick issue which sold out centuries ago; but my five years' worth of *Science Fiction Studies* expanded to cover virtually the entire run (again four issues or so missing) and I've even found most of the *Extrapolations* since the mid-1970s, leaving the first third to get. As far as I can tell, that's going to involve waving my flexible friend at some American bookdealers. (Note to Word fans – my spellchecker tells me that should be booksellers. Ho hum.)

Vector was more hit and miss. I had a patchy run of the various times I joined and fell off the mailing list, a pile I acquired off the back of a lorry, and a much larger pile I'd been given by the former administrator, Maureen Kincaid Speller, when I took the job on. But that only really took me back to issue 123 and (this is sad – I have a table telling me these things) the end of 1984. OK, so getting on for twenty years' worth, with some gaps, but still less than half the run – plus there were issues of *Focus*, *Paperback Inferno*, *Matrix* and the other, mysterious, transient BSFA magazines such as *Tangent*, *Parabola* and *Hypotenuse*. OK, I made some of those up.

But I've recently acquired two large boxes that filled many of the gaps in the collection, and pushed me at least into the mid-1960s for *Vector*, also filling most of the runs of the other magazines. This was fortuitous, as a number of recent articles I've been writing have required me to read some of the early material. To every magazine there is a time and place.

We've come a long way from typed stencils and duplicating machines to word processing, desktop publication and burning PDFs onto CD-Roms. There are indeed letters complaining about the placing of staples, and apologies for tardiness, and authors getting upset about reviews, and people saying the rot would set in if we stopped collating the magazines manually. Oh, and editors getting upset about only having six pages of letters of

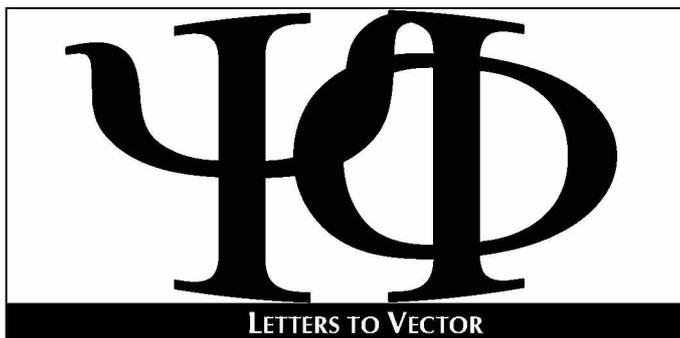
comment.

One thing struck me as I'd been in a reflective mood and taking stock of my life, counting how many issues I've edited, how many I've got left: the recurring commentary on the rôle of the editor of *Vector*. It is made clear by contributors, chairs and editors alike, that the job is one held in trust. The magazine is not the mouthpiece of the editor, but the mouthpiece of the BSFA. Any decisions and tone should reflect the feelings and opinions of the BSFA.

I'm not sure how far this is the case today – I don't think there is the same sense of ownership and stakeholding. It is clear that personalities have been reflected in the magazines, and priorities have altered over the years. I've largely been allowed to get away with what I've wanted to do, as long as I've kept to schedule and not gone on too long. Certainly when Gary S. Dalkin and I took over as feature editors in 1995, we were given instructions about the party line and told not to frighten the horses. Perhaps the horses are beyond frightening now. Perhaps the editorial structure – Tony Cullen as layout/production/general editor, Gary and I and then just me as features editor(s) and the various reviews editors – has meant that a single voice has not dominated, that we balance each other. There is no editor of *Vector* as such.

Perhaps we're just too close to it – and in 2024 the editor of the holographic interactive *Vector* will laugh about how that old guy, Whatsisname, used to go on about stuff and the old days; this is *sf*, ferchryshakes, it's meant to be about the *future*. And as she searches for some inspiration for the topic of her next editorial, there is a bleep from her mobile phone to indicate a txt msg has been received (she knows it's archaic, but there are still some members who prefer to receive *Vector* that way. OK, so they lose a bit in boiling it all down to 256 character chunks, but the highlights can be digested). Apparently the virtual staples are in the wrong place.

Andrew M. Butler – Spring 2004, Canterbury



We couldn't squeeze the letters into the last issue, so we go back in time to the November/December issue first, and the articles on *Doctor Who*.

From Jack Deighton

I've just read your *Doctor Who* article from the last *Vector*. I don't know about *Doctor Who*'s representation of British national identity (because there isn't one – there are several). I certainly would not necessarily conflate it with a distinct Englishness *per se*, as opposed to something more general to these islands; but it was clearly not American. Yet it always struck me that the character of Davros was an undoubted allegory of Mrs Thatcher. I particularly liked the way his representation and her *Spitting Image* puppet grew to be so like each other. And the memorable

Dalek quote, 'Pity. There is no such word in our vocabulary,' was entirely apt in her case.

AMB: I wonder if that is entirely fair – all Davros did was create the Daleks whereas Mrs Thatcher... Perhaps that sentence is best left incomplete. When 'Genesis of the Daleks' was broadcast in 1975, she'd been education minister and stolen milk from children (unless that was the Humphries...) so would she have been prominent enough to be an inspiration? The later adventures, perhaps.

Meanwhile Martyn Taylor shares my doubts about the series' resurrection.

From Martyn Taylor, Morpeth, via post

Can we please stick the cross on the top of *Doctor Who*'s grave and stop pretending the old fart is coming back? He's dead, he's gone and he's never coming back.

Doctor Who vanished when Tom Baker metamorphosed. After him the stories were plain tired for the most part and larded with toe-curdling 'irony' (neither ironic nor funny). Anyone who understood *Doctor Who* could never have cast Sylvester McCoy as *Doctor Who*. He was always an intelligent, humane, funny actor – just never the Doctor. Like any fable, *Doctor Who* has to be played straight, with tongue pressed against clenched teeth, rather than poked into cheek. How the hell d'ya think *Star Wars* worked? *Doctor Who* was a product of different times and those times are gone in a mess of veins that got thick and brave young things who believed their own publicity, along with the Mary Quant peekaboo

hairdos, The Beatles and the notion that a penguin on the spine meant a good read. He was the week that was, he's over, let him go.

Trust me. I was there. I saw William Hartnell peer round the corner of the junkyard. I can still hear the Stereophonic Workshop's haunting theme. I saw a tv show transcend production values that made the first series of *Star Trek* resemble a James Cameron movie. *Doctor Who* was – literally – magic. It perished when producers who understood this were replaced with Oxbridge graduates who imagined they could make good tv while scorning the form, the genre and their audience.

If it has to be exhumed, just pray it ain't the BBC. Auntie hates sf. Auntie hasn't produced any decent sf or fantasy since *The Demon Headmaster*. I don't think Auntie has produced any decent drama at all in years, and I think I know why.

I was in a meeting with Mal Young once (the boss of serial/series drama at the BBC) and he voiced the opinion that *Brookside* was the zenith of British television drama. *Quatermass!* *Blue Remembered Hills!* *Talking to a Stranger!* *The Forsyte Saga!* No. *Brookside*. Which is why Auntie drama is soapy melodrama that would make Mr Proctor turn to Mr Gamble and cry, 'My God, what have we done?' And the producers still have a contempt for the form and their audience, only now they call it 'postmodernism', and imagine Jacques Derrida justifies their arrogance. (Not that they've ever read him, of course...)

No, stop dreaming a dead dream. Let the old guy rest in peace, or, if you must, just pray that someone with a bit of talent, a bit of respect and an understanding that'll never be the toast of Islington dinner parties gets his hands on the rights (Joss Whedon... Tony Head as the Doctor. Now there's an unoriginal thought. He's got just the right blend of relentless, unpleasant, superior righteousness. Nick Brendon as The Master, Alyson Hannigan as anything you care to mention. Servalan, perhaps... oh sorry, that's just an old man getting overexcited).

They're coming to take me away, ha ha, to the funny farm, where life is beautiful all the time, those nice young men in their clean white coats.

Oh yes, and to paraphrase an excitable young Welshman who was whiling away the odd hour before Iron Maiden came on stage, the Soup Dragon fuckin' rocks!

I think the notion that the series' time has passed was the point I was trying to make. Still, we'll see. But it seems too close to the joke about how science fiction fans it wakes to change a light bulb.

In V233 (January/February) we started our year-long examination of the New Wave, which continues in this issue. L.J. Hurst takes issue with Brian Aldiss – and with David Curl's dissection of M. Night Shyamalan.

From L.J. Hurst, via email

Brian Aldiss recalled the New Wave and wrote 'Norwegians and Americans came over to join in the fun'. We can all identify some of the Americans – Norman Spinrad is mentioned and Pamela Zoline was active, too. But who were the Norwegians? Or is Brian Aldiss mis-remembering the nationality of Jamnick Storm? Storm's participation meant that he was able to publish the world's first edition of J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* when his Danish translation was published in Denmark in 1969, the year before it first appeared in Britain. Don't the Norwegians say that Danish is not a language, but a throat disease?

David Curl should be careful of the beam in his own eye when he criticises the editing of M. Night Shyamalan. David Curl says 'Graham Hess begins to clean up, at one point holding a soaked cloth. (This never happened to Mad Max)' – unfortunately for David it did. Not in *Mad Max*,

but in *Mad Max 2* it happened to Mad Max. In fact, this is a seminal scene of the first few minutes of the film as we see Max's desperation as he tries pathetically to save some petrol soaking into the road from a crashed car, squeezing his rag into a dirty hub-cap. Nothing reveals Max's plight (and by extension all hope for innate goodness) so fully as the incongruous desperation of what should be a competently Robinson Crusoe-like figure reduced to struggling on the tarmac for his fuel. J.G. Ballard said that *Mad Max 2* was the best film of its decade, and it is scenes like this that would have led him to his belief.

If Mel Gibson's character in *Signs* is cleaning up with a cloth then it is likely a back-reference to Max's struggle. No director of Shyamalan's strengths could be unaware of George Miller's originality in *Mad Max 2*.

David Curl responds:

I'll come clean, and state that I've not actually seen the Mad Max films; I was commenting on what sort of films I thought that they might be, which is admittedly risky, and rather bad form. Still, as I said to my libel lawyer the other day, surely you're not asking me to check everything.

It seems to me, though, that reading this scene in *Signs* in terms of infantile guilt still works, and that an awareness of the *Mad Max II* scene could add resonance to this (adult masculinity is, after all, often constructed in terms of the ability to be resourceful, to provide). I'm not aware that I was criticising Shyamalan's editing at any point in my article. In listing what I call inconsistencies and omissions (we all make them; the trick is to invite one's unconscious mind to the party), I'm also fairly clear in my view that Shyamalan, a master craftsman, is committing these mindfully as part of an immensely fertile play with form, and with the Platonic unities that I cite Iris Murdoch as describing.

Finally we seem to have upset one reader:

From Brigadier-General Phillips-Ross (Retired), via email with a bloody large attachment

I was absolutely flabbergasted to see *Vector* reproduce within its esteemed pages the disgusting filth of James Barclay's *Shadowheart* cover illustration. Your reviewer Ms Vikki Lee's description of it as 'vaguely pornographic' was a huge, pulsating understatement. The throbbing grey shapes and spermatozoic dark splotches must surely be an affront to your members (of whom I count myself a particularly upright one). I would ask Ms Lee to refrain from wantonly displaying such pictures in future which could easily leave an inedible mark on the impressionable minds of your tender, moist readership.

Of course, Vikki Lee has no control over layout and what covers appear against her reviews – but having looked at the cover in question I'm not sure it resembles any pornography I've seen. Perhaps I'm looking at the wrong stuff.

Letters to *Vector* should be sent to Andrew M. Butler, Dept of Media, Canterbury Christ Church University College, Canterbury, CT1 1QU or emailed to ambutler@enterprise.net and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.

Genetic Politics: Hive Minds in Science and Science Fiction

by Stephen Baxter

BASED ON TALKS PRESENTED TO THE H.C. WELLS SOCIETY WEEKEND CONFERENCE ON 'WELLS AND FANTASY', UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER, LONDON, 14/9/02; NEWCON 2, NORTHAMPTON, 4/10/03; UTOPIALES: FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DE SCIENCE FICTION DE NANTES, FRANCE, 9/11/03.

The 'hive mind' is one of the classic tropes of sf. A colony of social insects is the most famous biological example, with a queen, the only 'mother', served by sterile workers. In sf the term is used to imply a situation in which beings are linked some way so that the whole dominates the parts – and very often the 'drones' are intelligent. I've been exploring the idea of human hives in my novel *Coalescent*.¹

In this essay I want to talk about the history of the idea in sf

and in science, and present some speculation about human hives. But to do so I have to go back to H.C. Wells, for, in sf, all roads begin and end with him. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* (1901)² was the first attempt to show an alien hive-mind society, and Wells depicted sinister insect hives in 'Empire of the Ants' (1905).³ Since Wells's day the scientific understanding of how hives work has moved on hugely. But I will argue that Wells, at least intuitively, managed to foresee some of our modern fears.

The science has moved on, but Wells's dark imagination endures.

When discussing an sf idea there's no better place to start than the 1993 *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*: 'A hive-mind is the organising principle of the community in those insect species of which the basic reproductive unit is the hive, organised around a single fertile female, the queen. The term is used more loosely in some sf stories, often referring to any situation in which minds are linked in such a way that the whole becomes dominant over the parts'.⁴

I want to narrow that a bit. Here I'm meaning to exclude 'gestalts', or 'group minds', in which a single consciousness is effectively distributed over several bodies (for example Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* (1953)⁵). I'm concerned with any situation in which individual creatures are linked in some way so that the whole dominates the parts, as in social insect colonies, but there is no literal joint consciousness. 'Hive mind' isn't actually a very satisfactory label, but it will serve.

Wells's *First Men in the Moon* is great science fiction, of course, but it's also a horror story, and the way Wells unravels his horror tells us a great deal about our reaction to the notion of the hive.

There's nothing subtle about the shock of our first encounter with the Selenites, herding their mooncalves during the lunar morning. '[The Selenite] seemed a trivial being, a mere ant, scarcely five feet high [...] a compact, bristling creature, having much of the quality of a complicated insect, with whip-like tentacles and a clanging arm projecting from his shining cylindrical body case' (67). Why was H.C. Wells writing about bugs? Because we don't like them. For mammals like us there are surely no more alien creatures on our planet than the insects. And as Wells knew, creepy-crawlies are even worse when they are huge.

This idea has been mined relentlessly by the horror-movie industry. Wells's 'The Empire of the Ants' is of course a wonderful story – but what one element would you add to make it perfect? Hollywood's answer was Joan Collins. Bert I. Gordon's low budget 1977 movie was billed as *H.C. Wells's Empire of the Ants* (Bert I. Gordon, US, 1977). Joan plays a dubious realtor trying to sell lots of Florida swamp land, but ants made huge by radioactive mutation start picking off the prospects. The special effects are a mix of blown-up images of real insects and giant rubber ants hurled at the actors. No doubt the Wells estate in its renowned wisdom knew what it was doing in sanctioning this horror, in every sense of the word, but it doesn't have much to do with Wells's short story.

But it's a popular theme. A survey in the August 2002 issue of *SFX Magazine*⁶ found no less than ten big-bug movies, spun out over the years, starting with the fairly superior *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, US, 1954), in which atomic tests in the US desert create a giant species of ant. The sub-genre even evolved its own set of conventions, as such things do: the midwestern desert locale, the mutating toxic spill, the peaceful opening, the hints of gathering menace, the running and the screaming, and the close with a defeat of the bugs but a hint that the war has just begun ...

There have been more cerebral studies of humans pitted against giant insects, however. In Keith Roberts's *The Furies* (1966)⁷ extraterrestrial aliens infest wasps and induce them to grow to giant size. Overwhelmed by these 'Furies', human civilisation duly falls. But in the manner of what Brian Aldiss has called the 'cosy catastrophe', though on page 26 'London was drowned', by page 37 the characters are brewing up for passing soldiers. Eventually the whole country will be covered with nests: 'just nests, a porridge of them, bellowing and booming everywhere, the black and yellow of the wasps' (182).

But maybe we shouldn't worry. The big-bug premise was neatly skewered in a 1979 story called 'giANTS' by American

writer Edward Bryant,⁸ in which the experts destroy an invasion of driver ants by making them gigantic. As an animal grows larger the biologists' 'square-cube law' comes into play. 'If an insect's dimensions are doubled, its strength and the area of its breathing passages are increased by a factor of four. But the mass is multiplied by eight. After a certain point [...] the insect can't move or breathe.' In the end, 'The grotesquely enlarged bodies of [the ants ...] litter the [...] tropical soil'.

You might think 'giANTS' would have killed off Hollywood's enthusiasm for this particular sort of creature-feature – but no, as witness 2002's *Eight Legged Freaks* (Ellyory Elkayem, US, 2002). The movie pays homage to the clichés of the genre, at a cost of a mere \$30 million.

I think Wells understood the square-cube law qualitatively, for his giant Moon bugs have some justification: 'The largest terrestrial insects, living or extinct, do not, as a matter of fact, measure six inches in length; but here, against the lesser gravitation of the Moon, a creature certainly as much an insect as a vertebrate seems to have been able to attain human and ultrahuman dimensions' (159).

But Wells passes briskly on from the big-bug horror, for he has worse to show us. It's not just insects we don't like, but the way they live their lives.

It's not just insects we don't like, but the way they live their lives.

Wells's Moon is one great hive. As the travellers look into the great pits in the Moon they see only darkness, but 'out of this darkness came a sound, a sound like the angry hum one can hear if one puts one's ear outside a hive of bees' (115) and 'The whole of the Moon's substance for a hundred miles inward [...] is a mere sponge of rock' (155).

It gets worse. The captured travellers encounter 'specialist' Selenites. 'There are [...] extremely swift messengers with spider-like legs, and "hands" for grasping parachutes, and attendants with vocal organs that could well-nigh wake the dead' (168).

Cavor says explicitly that 'the Moon is, indeed, a sort of vast ant-hill, only, instead of there being only four or five sorts of ant, there are many hundred different sorts of Selenite' (160).

But the Selenites do not grow with their specialisms in place, as the ants do; they are engineered – like cyborgs. Cavor glimpses this transformation process, as 'machine-minders of a special sort' are 'confined in jars from which only the forelimbs protruded [...] The extended "hand" [...] is stimulated by irritants and nourished by injection, while the rest of the body is starved [...] In the earlier stages these queer little creatures are apt to display signs of suffering in their various cramped situations, but they easily become indurated to their lot' (p169).

This specialisation is horrific because we humans prize our individuality. It would be of no comfort to know that 'each is a perfect unit in a world machine' (167), or that we would be forced the motivation to fulfil our task. And it is worse that the Selenites, trapped in their machine society, are aware of their lot.

Perhaps because of the anti-individual aspects of the hive, giant intelligent bugs were for a time the opponents of choice in stories of interstellar war. The prototype is Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*,⁹ a rites-of-passage parable of military virtue set in a libertarian future in which the only way you can get to vote is by serving as a soldier. The perfect foils for Heinlein's individualist soldier-citizens are the Bugs, giant insectile creatures from the planet Klendathu. The Bugs serve Heinlein as none-too-subtle metaphors for some members of our own species: 'We were learning, expensively, just how efficient a total communism can be when used by a people actually adapted to it by evolution [...] Perhaps we could have figured this out about the Bugs by noting the grief the Chinese hegemony gave the Russo-Anglo-American Alliance [...]' (131).

But are hives all bad? A hive isn't for the preservation of individuality. What then is it for? Hive creatures work in harmony with the rest of nature – of course, or else they could not survive. The ants, for example, spread seeds, and actually shift more soil than all the earthworms.¹⁰ Hives, for all their strangeness to us, create and sustain life; in their intricate interdependence, indeed, they are models of Gaia. And they are certainly successful.

If hives have their positive side, perhaps it wouldn't be so bad to be in one.

In the lush far future of Robert Silverberg's 1989 novel *The Queen of Springtime*,¹¹ vanished humans have left a world peopled by races uplifted to intelligence – including the hijks, hive folk, human-sized and intelligent, but derived from ants.

And a hijk hive is a place of love. For 'every one [is] woven together in an inextricable way [...] in the service of the totality' (373), and 'over everything else there sweeps that even higher and more all-embracing force, which even the Queen Herself acknowledges as supreme, the great undeniable inescapable torrential energy that is Egg-plan, the fundamental power of life, the ineluctable universal femaleness that drives all existence endlessly forward' (159). It's a huge green love-in. And not only that, you are immersed in order: 'Without a sound the myriad dwellers of the Nest go about their tasks [...] Nothing like it exists in the chaotic random world outside; but nothing is chaotic or random here' (159). Humanoid inductees into the hive never want to leave.

And it's not just love and peace you can get from a hive, but maybe a kind of immortality.

C.J. Cherryh's 1980 novel *Serpent's Reach*¹² features the majat: intelligent hive folk, united by the chemistry of taste. The drones live only eighteen years, but for the hives, 'a billion years the memories went back, and the specific memory of [the hive] saw the hills rise and the lake form and drain several times, and form again' (21). From us they even have to learn of death: 'The concept still troubled the hive, the idea that individual death could extinguish an intelligence. It was still only dimly grasped' (21).

But for all they might offer – ecological creativity, order, immortality – hives are almost always depicted negatively. You have to give up too much, we feel. And then there's evolutionary destiny. Even Silverberg's portrayal of his loving hive folk eventually becomes negative, because hives are an end point: 'What was it they most wanted, after all? Nothing more than to dig holes in the ground and live in the dark, performing endless repetitive cycles of birth and reproduction and death [...] Perhaps the world will be [the humanoids'] after all [...] Simply because we are so uncertain in our ways' (353-4). On the whole, as a destination of a species, the hive is generally seen as something best avoided.

But so what? We don't like bugs anyway; why should we care about their problems, or their achievements? But if humans can form hives, it's a different kettle of fish, to use an entirely inappropriate metaphor. Certainly the notion of human hives has been explored in sf.

'We are the Borg. Resistance is futile.' The universe of *Star Trek*¹³ is full of humanoid aliens, and perhaps it isn't a surprise to encounter a humanoid hive. Like the Selenites this is a technological hive; drones are interconnected with cybernetic implants (writer Maurice Hurley coined the word 'Borg' from 'cyborg'). The Borg's expansion and assimilation of other species, who they refer to only by numbers, is relentless. But the Borg's motive is almost benevolent: to improve the quality of life of other humanoids by bringing them into the order of the collective. And in their early days at least, before the vision was compromised by the introduction of a Borg 'queen' and the like, the Borg were a genuine collective: Captain Picard was puzzled that a Borg ship has no bridge.

As you might expect from an American TV show, most Borg stories involve a threat to individuality in some way. Picard suffers the horrors of assimilation (in the TNG episodes 'The Best of Both Worlds I & II'). In *Star Trek: Voyager*, the glamorous drone Seven Of Nine is 'rescued' from the collective and gradually regains her identity and humanity. As the Borg were repeatedly beaten back by various Star Fleet captains, their perceived threat was slowly diluted. Still, for a TV creation they are very effective.

Perhaps the most thoughtful depiction of a human hive comes in Frank Herbert's 1973 novel *Hellstrom's Hive*¹⁴ – one of Herbert's most significant works outside *Dune* (1965). Something strange is going on in a remote farm in Oregon. It is a human Hive, dug five thousand feet deep and comprising fifty thousand people. There are specialist castes, including technical 'experts' of a design Wells would have recognised, with gigantic heads and withered arms. The ultimate horror is the 'stumps', human bodies topped and tailed to leave only the central reproductive organs. But there can be happiness: 'I remember my childhood in the Hive as the happiest period, the happiest experience a human could ever enjoy [...] I knew that all around me were people who would protect me with their lives' (182). And like the Borg, Hellstrom and the others believe that the Hive way represents a better future for mankind: 'Our adaptations aim to increase the population tolerance, to permit a human density ten to twelve times greater than is considered possible' (24).

There are also high population densities in *Half Past Human*, a 1971 novel by American writer T.J. Bass.¹⁵ Three trillion placid citizens inhabit an immense underground hive culture called Earth Society. There are prices to pay: excess infants are 'chucked down the chute' immediately on birth, and there is a high incidence of suicide and murder, driven by the tremendous crowding. Once again the hive is portrayed as a kind of danger in our future: 'It can come into being wherever your species is too successful – a product of population density' (272), and again it is an evolutionary dead end.

We continue to write about human hives. A significant recent example are the Conjoiners in the mighty future history currently being developed by Alastair Reynolds.¹⁶ The Conjoiners, communicating by 'neural linkages', make a lot of enemies, especially as, like the Borg, the Conjoiners assimilate with a forced 'neural conscription'.

So human hives have become a powerful and enduring trope, and common features are portrayed. The advantages – high population densities, order, longevity – are generally seen as outweighed by the disadvantages, notably the loss of freedom, an end to destiny, and a nasty tendency to try to assimilate everybody else.

But most of these portrayals are dated; the science of the hive has moved on.

As that *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* article noted as long ago as 1993, 'the actual genetic politics of hive organisation – revelation of which has been the greatest triumph of the sociobiology of Edmund O Wilson [...] has not yet found significant reflection in sf'.

The central features of Wilson's modern analysis of hives are emergence, and genetic politics.

Consider an ant colony. Woody Allen notwithstanding (see Antz (Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson, US, 1998)) there's no one ant making decisions about the destiny of an ant colony – not even the queen. Each ant is just following the crowd, picking up on local cues to build a tunnel, shift more eggs, bring back food. But out of all those local decisions, the global functioning of the colony emerges. This is known as emergence: from simple rules, applied at a local level and with some feedback, large-scale structures can emerge.¹⁷ You don't need implants or telepathy to control your drones: local interaction and a bit of feedback will do the job.

Emergence, then, is how a hive works. But to understand why

it works we have to talk about genes (See Holidobler and Wilson).

Hives are characterised by those sterile workers, who devote their lives to slaving for somebody else's offspring, sacrificing their chances of having their own. This is an evolutionary puzzle that troubled Darwin: why would you do this? And how can sterile worker castes evolve if they leave no offspring? The answer is that natural selection is working at the level of the gene, not the individual. Your nieces are less closely related to you than your own daughters. But if, by remaining celibate, you can increase the numbers of your nieces, you may gain overall in terms of genes passed on to the future.

So Heinlein was wrong. Hives aren't dictatorships or Communist utopias; they are families. That's why the biologists, rather chillingly, call this way of living eusociality – 'eu' meaning 'perfect'.

How does this modern vision change our view of the plausibility of a human hive?

Eusociality, it turns out, is not confined to the insects. Among hunting dogs and wolves in Africa, sometimes you'll have a pack where only one male and one female have pups, and their offspring from last year help them rear the new young, ending up with no offspring of their own. You find the same kind of thing with dwarf mongooses. Even some birds live this way, like Florida scrub jays.

And then there are the naked mole rats.¹⁸ These spectacularly ugly little rodents live in underground colonies beneath the African deserts, digging for tuber roots. In each colony of maybe forty individuals, at any one time there is one breeding pair. The others seem to be kept sterile by behaviour, by bullying from the 'queen'. The mole rats are clearly as eusocial as any ant or termite or bee – but they are mammals.

To have arisen among such divergent creatures as ants and birds and mole rats, across widely separated kingdoms of life, eusociality must be a universal template. It seems to arise as a way of easing social pressures in situations when it is better to stay home with mom than to strike out on your own. Maybe if we could make one firm prediction of what we might find among extraterrestrial aliens, it will be something like eusociality.

But what about us? Surely human societies don't show any of the characteristics of hives – the local interactions, the skewed breeding... Do they?

In our societies just as with the ants, self-organising systems do emerge from local interaction and feedback, all beyond anybody's control (See Johnson).

Traffic jams are one example. Drivers make individual decisions based on what their neighbours are doing. There's not one driver who intends to cause a jam, that's for sure, and there's not one who has a global view of the traffic. But, from individual decisions made in ignorance, the traffic jam emerges, a giant organised structure involving maybe thousands of cars. Economies are a more sophisticated example; the unplanned organisation of cities is another.

So perhaps some aspects of human society are characterised by emergence. But the other side of eusociality is genetics. And there are no traces of ant queens and sterile workers among humans – are there?

Well, history shows plenty of examples of skewed reproduction. Ever since agriculture came along and human populations started to mushroom, we have lived in large groups dominated by an elite. And the elite has the best chance to pass on their genes: everybody else, if not neuter, is subservient. It's thought that there are sixteen million men alive in Asia today genetically descended from Genghis Khan! It's quite a thought: Genghis as an ant queen?

And then consider celibacy in the Catholic Church. Here you

have nuns, monks and priests sacrificing their own reproductive chances for the sake of a 'queen' – except that the 'queen' in this case is a set of ideas, an institution. It's a uniquely human kind of hive no animal could serve, because only humans can sacrifice genes for ideas...

Imagine a human hive society, then (as I have tried to do in *Coalescent*). The hive emerges from a tightly bound group, confined, safer if they stay together. There would be some encouragement to think locally, not to look at the bigger picture, so that emergence can work. The community would probably be bound together by some idea – a god, an ideology – for which people would be prepared to sacrifice their reproductive potential. But the idea itself is a mere distraction. But the hive would not be for the idea, or even the welfare of its drones, any more than an ant colony is for the welfare of any individual ant. The hive would only be for itself.

The population would be predominantly female, for all eusocial societies are based on close-knit female groups. To criticise such a set-up may seem misogynistic. But the hive is a phenomenon not of femaleness but of biology, and male or female all the members of the collective are enslaved to it.

How do we feel about such a vision? You lose your individuality just as before, but the horror now is not that you are enslaved by some dictatorship which is at least purposeful; you are reduced to a cog in a machine which has arisen and runs without conscious purpose at all.

And you wouldn't even know you were a drone.

I claimed that Wells foresaw some of these themes, and foreshadowed how we might feel about them.

Wells frequently draws metaphorical parallels between insect societies and aspects of humanity. From an elevated viewpoint, such as from a bomber plane or an invading alien spaceship, human cities look just like hives. In *The War in the Air*,¹⁹ a devastated New York is compared to a kicked-apart ant hill. To the Artilleryman, *The War of the Worlds* 'isn't a war [...] any more than there's war between men and ants' (810).²⁰

And, says Wells – never mind metaphors and fanciful parallels – it could actually happen to us.

Back on the Moon, Cavor says, 'That wretched-looking hand-tentacle sticking out of its jar seemed to have a sort of limp appeal for lost possibilities; it haunts me still, although, of course, it is really in the end a far more humane proceeding than our earthly method of leaving children to grow into human beings and then making machines of them' (170). Cavor's complex reaction to the Moon hive brings us to the central purpose of *The First Men in the Moon*. In 1933 Wells would write that his intent, as well as an 'improvement on Jules Verne's shot', was 'to look back on mankind from a distance and burlesque the effects of specialisation'.²¹ Cavor is able to suppress his humanity and accept the cruel engineering of young Selenites in the name of such goals as industrial efficiency. And if on the Moon, so on Earth. Wells shows us the hive Moon and tells us that through men like Cavor, we could build this.

He even sketches how this might happen. In 'A Story of the Days to Come' (1905),²² twenty-second century London has been turned by a rampant capitalism into an inhuman areology of 33 million souls. The social organisation of such 'swarming unhappy cities' (360) is quite hive-like, especially regarding the labouring poor shut away from the daylight in 'tremendous [...] basements' (349). But nobody meant it to be this way: the city is unthinking, emergent, 'a vast lunatic growth' (384). Wells's protagonist Denton, fallen from the middle classes, is a particle of humanity trapped in the machinery of the hive-city: 'His little voice rose in that little room, and he shook his fist, this animalcule of the earth, at all that environed him about, at the millions about him, at his past and future and all the insensate vastness of the overwhelming

And you wouldn't even know you were a drone.

city' (387).

Note the word 'insensate' – unthinking. Wells's city operates above anybody's control, for the benefit of itself, not the individual or even the human race as a whole. Denton, a mind, is trapped in a mindless machine.

Wells could know nothing of sociobiology or emergence as we currently understand them. But I believe that Wells's intuition was deep enough to set out emotional truths that remain relevant today, even in areas where our understanding has moved on far beyond the science of his time.

And, finally, perhaps there is a deeper metaphoric level yet that ties into Wells's wider concerns.

The shock of modern science is a wellspring of sf. Wells was writing at the end of a century in which, through the work of the geologists and biologists, western civilisation had had to absorb the notion that the Earth and the wider universe have not been created for us – indeed there seems to have been no creator at all – that everything we see, even self-aware creatures like ourselves, has emerged from the blind working of natural law. A hive society is a perfect exemplar of the relentless machinery that spawned us but overwhelms us – and cares nothing for us, because it *cannot* care.

All this is speculation, of course. Perhaps there can never be hive societies among creatures as smart as us. And of course I certainly don't believe we live in a hive society now.

But as a good drone I would say that, wouldn't I?

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Bookspotting: The New Hard Men of SF

by Paul Kincaid

The Hard SF Renaissance – edited by David G. Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer (Orb, 2003, 960pp, \$21.95) ISBN 0 312 87636 X

A few years ago David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer edited a monumental anthology under the title *The Ascent of Wonder: The Evolution of Hard SF* (New York: Tor, 1994). It was a controversial book, not least because their chosen representatives of hard sf were idiosyncratic (J.G. Ballard, Gene Wolfe, Ursula K. Le Guin) and their view of what constituted 'hard' sf seemed indistinguishable from what most of us consider science fiction as a whole. Now they have re-entered the fray with a new volume, *The Hard SF Renaissance*, that is just as massive (nine hundred and sixty large pages of small print), just as extensive (forty-one stories by thirty-four writers), and every bit as idiosyncratic.

The earlier volume was intended as a survey of the history and development of the subgenre from its ancestors (Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne) to the present. This new volume posits a renaissance of hard sf in the 1990s, and confines its attention to that decade (the earliest story gathered here, and the only one to predate the '90s, is 'A Career in Sexual Chemistry' by Brian Stableford (1987); there are seven stories from 2000, and one, 'Fast Times at Fairmont High' by Vernor Vinge, from 2001). Where the earlier volume had three introductions (one each by Hartwell, Cramer and Gregory Benford) and an Afterword, among other critical paraphernalia, this one makes do with a single general introduction, though the introductions to each individual story are, if anything, more extensive than last time and peppered with lengthy quotations. These quotations are mostly from articles in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* (I crop up at one point, somewhat to my surprise) or interviews in *Locus*, though several times there are lengthy extracts from letters

from the authors. From these, it would appear that they asked a number of their contributors to provide their thoughts on the subject of hard sf in general, and on what they felt made them a hard sf writer. These letter extracts are, in their way, the most interesting part of the book, if only because they illustrate how much even those in the field disagree about what constitutes hard sf, and how certain contributors will twist and turn in order to justify their inclusion among hard sf writers. Whatever we may think, this is not a simple, straightforward, easily-identifiable thing we are talking about here.

When Peter Watts, for instance, describes hard sf writers as 'missionaries of rationalism' whose tales 'abide by the spirit of science, if not the letter' we seem to be on relatively uncontroversial ground. Until he adds that 'the science in science fiction may not, when we get right down to it, be all that important after all.' All of a sudden two things strike us: that he is talking about science fiction, not just hard sf; and that he is divorcing even hard sf from what we always considered its *sine qua non*, science.

If we take as the exemplar of hard sf Tom Godwin's 'The Cold Equations' (1954), the formula presented is of a world in which there is no villain (Hal Clement, another archetypal hard sf writer, is quoted here as saying he doesn't have villains in his stories because 'the universe was a perfectly adequate villain!'). Rather, there is a problem that is a logical consequence of the hard and fast rules of the universe, and those rules, if not fully understood, are liable to be lethal. This is the message of 'The Cold Equations': the girl must die not because she is a girl, nor because she is a stowaway, but because she is ignorant of the rules. The universe in hard sf is huge and cold and implacable, while humans are small and relatively weak though often ingenious enough to see their way around the problem they face (such ingenuity being an expression of our scientific understanding of

the rules). Such human insignificance, incidentally, may explain why the people in hard sf stories are generally so under-characterised: they matter far less in the grand scheme of things than the impersonal universe, its rules, and the ingenious way its rules might be circumvented for the story.

Peter Watts's story, 'A Niche' (1994), is one of a number of pieces in this anthology that seem to fit this pattern exactly. Two women, knowingly called Clarke and Ballard, occupy an isolated observation post deep under the ocean. As they come to terms with the icy threat of their particular universe, one of the women, Ballard, becomes paranoid and dangerously unhinged, while Clarke, who engages more thoroughly with the reality of the ocean, comes through the challenge unscathed. Superficially, therefore, this seems to belong unquestionably to the ranks of hard sf. But the substance of the story actually subverts this impression. Ballard's paranoia turns out to be justified: the two are the subjects of a shadowy psychological experiment; while Clarke's identification with the realities of the ocean turns out to be a self-destructive mania in its own right. Engagement with the implacable rules of the universe, understanding of the machinery of one or more of the 'hard' sciences (physics, chemistry, biology), everything which is normally understood to be what makes a hard sf story work turns out to be irrelevant to the mechanics of this particular fiction. 'A Niche' is a good science fiction story, but whether its structural adherence to the patterns of hard sf make it a hard sf story must be open to question.

Other stories here seem to pay lip service to the conventions of hard sf but structure themselves in ways that seem antipathetic to the whole enterprise of hard sf. 'A Walk in the Sun' (1991) by Geoffrey A. Landis, for instance, seems to be an almost pure 'Cold Equations' set-up: a ship has crashed on the moon and the sole survivor can only keep alive by remaining in sunlight to power her equipment, which means that she must walk right around the moon. As Watts says, science as such is irrelevant to the story, but it all depends upon the iron rules of the universe. Yet such a pure hard sf endeavour is compromised by the fact that on her walk our protagonist keeps herself going by talking to the ghost of her dead sister, who is walking beside her. Crude though this psychological aspect may seem (it calls to mind the members of Shackleton's polar expedition who reported sensing a third person walking with them through the snow), it seems antithetical to the deliberate eschewal of such humanising elements in most of what might be considered classic hard sf. It is also curious that the Landis and Watts stories both centre on female protagonists, as do a surprising number of the stories here ('Reef' (2000) by Paul J. McAuley, 'Marrow' (1997) by Robert Reed) while many others have prominent female characters; are the authors trying to tell us that these are no longer stories for boys? Certainly the casual sexism of something like 'The Cold Equations' generally seems to be a thing of the past.

There is also a female central character in 'Kinds of Strangers' (1999) by Sarah Zettel, another story which seems in outline to conform exactly to the hard sf norm. In this instance a ship has been damaged and it seems its crew are doomed until, responding to a curious message, they hitch a ride on a passing comet. Again we have the implacability of the universe, the rules that can kill you unless knowledge of science can provide a way around. But where 'The Cold Equations' hardened its heart against the human cost of its drama in order to emphasise its rule-driven concepts, 'Kinds of Strangers' almost ignores the implacable universe in favour of a psychological examination of a crew at the end of its tether, coping with despair and suicide in the face of their hopelessness. Even the message that brings their salvation is unexplained: does it indeed come from aliens, in which case this becomes a first-contact story whose implications are never developed; or is it from one of the crew members, in which case why is it necessary to resort to such a stratagem?

Despite such quibbles, I think 'Kinds of Strangers' does count as hard sf, and by a woman too. Despite my earlier remark about the noticeable growth in strong female characters, this does still seem to be a predominantly male subgenre. Only three of the authors featured

here are women, and of these Zettel seems to be the only one unequivocally writing hard sf. Of the others, Nancy Kress is represented by the inevitable 'Beggars in Spain' (1991), the original novelette in a series that became more and more attenuated as it grew from tightly structured story into loose and careless trilogy. Yes, there is a scientific notion at the point where this story starts, but it is not a story about that scientific notion, nor is it about the iron rules that inevitably flow from a first principle. Rather, this is a social examination of the growth and character and cost of intolerance on both sides of the divide. As such it is an excellent work, one of the better science fiction stories of the decade, but it doesn't even come within shouting distance of the borders of hard sf unless you reinterpret hard sf in such a way that the distinction becomes meaningless. Joan Slonczewski's 'Microbe' (1995) comes closer in its rigour, giving us a brief introduction to the weird and wonderful inhabitants of an alien planet where DNA is differently constructed. But even so, this is more about the strangeness and wonder of the other than it is about the inhospitability of the universe, and that still doesn't feel as if it belongs within the main body of hard sf.

Of course this prospect of hard sf is meant to survey a 'renaissance', so we might imagine that hard sf itself has evolved during the course of this rebirth. If so, and if such a mutation might allow for the influx of humanism into the technological problem-solving of traditional hard sf, we might consider where this birth lies and what the offspring is. The 'where' is clearly signalled throughout by frequent references to the infamous early-80s editorial in *Interzone* which called for 'radical hard SF', though it is interesting that, by the time Hartwell is introducing the second of two stories by Bruce Sterling, this term has become associated with cyberpunk: 'in spite of Sterling's own stance, the Movement was not received as Radical Hard SF in the U.S., nor immediately influential in

that way, though it did set the stage internationally.' This sets the whole edifice of a hard sf renaissance on dodgy ground. The original coining of 'radical hard SF' in *Interzone* was a piece of lazy phrasemaking; though repeatedly challenged on it (for the phrase certainly caught the imagination), *Interzone's* editorial collective was never adequately able to explain what the term might mean. This uncertainty carried over into the magazine, as indicated by the fact that the imagined birthplace of the new hard sf is represented by only three out of forty-one stories, at least one of which, 'Reasons to be Cheerful' (1997) by Greg Egan, stretches my notions of hard sf to their breaking point. Hard sf, in the sense of stories about a rule-driven universe, stories in which some characteristic of physics, astronomy or, more rarely, chemistry or biology, provided the entire *raison d'être*, were not then and have not been since a characteristic of *Interzone*. Moreover, *Interzone*, in line with the general ethos of British science fiction, has followed a left-of-centre political line, while hard sf has traditionally assumed a right-wing stance. If 'Radical Hard SF' actually means anything, therefore, it might well mean radical in a political sense.

This is something that Hartwell and Cramer tentatively acknowledge. The number of stories about women, if not the number by women, indicates a new awareness of gender politics, for instance. More generally, there are several casual references to left-wing stances, but this is counterbalanced by the number of stories of which they say: 'there are no overt politics here'. This is said, for instance, of 'The Mendelian Lamp Case' (1997) by Paul Levinson, a work which is not hard sf by any sort of definition I can imagine, but rather that awkward hybrid the sf-detective story, and one which raises yet again that interminable bugbear of the libertarian right: the huge and immortal secret crime syndicate hiding at the very heart of our society. There is a suggestion, therefore, that Hartwell and Cramer might see one interpretation of radical hard SF as referring to liberal politics, but they seem blind to any political influence on the right. While it is fairly easy to see a generally liberal propensity in most of the British or Australian writers featured here (I am thinking particularly of Arthur C. Clarke, Paul McAuley, David Langford, Greg Egan ...), fully half of the American authors are clearly expressing positions on the political right (Poul Anderson, Ben Bova, David Brin, Paul Levinson ...). Mind you, it is hard to see some of the left-of-centre

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stories from either side of the Atlantic as being particularly hard sf. Langford's 'Different Kinds of Darkness' (2000) is an ingenious example of that staple sf story: the discovery of the true nature of the world. But this type of story is common throughout the genre, and there is nothing here that pins this example down as hard sf. From the other side of the Atlantic, Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Arthur Sternbach Brings the Curveball to Mars' (1999) uses the science of how a ball might fly in the different gravity of Mars as part of the scene painting, but it is hardly integral to the story of an unlikely friendship. Although there may, therefore, have been some shift in the political spectrum of hard sf, it is far from universal, and far from typifying a 'new' hard sf.

As to the suggesting linkage of 'Radical Hard SF' with cyberpunk, it has to be said that only one cyberpunk author is featured here, Bruce Sterling, and neither of his two stories, 'Bicycle Repairman' (1996) and 'Taklamakan' (1998), comes close to fitting the hard sf bill. 'Bicycle Repairman' in particular, in which social organisation is shown to win out over technology, runs directly counter to even the most liberal interpretation of the hard sf agenda.

There are, however, a number of what we might consider post-cyberpunk writers here: people like Greg Egan with 'Wang's Carpets' (1995) and Ted Chiang with 'Understand' (1991), who have taken the cyberpunk ethos of a human-computer interface and developed it in ways that do move towards the hard sf end of the spectrum. Basically they are exploring posthumanity, what happens when genetic modification, computer implants and other technological developments make us no longer quite human. This can open up new scientific problems to be solved, new threats inherent in the very nature of the universe, in other words a new range of hard sf opportunities. 'Wang's Carpets', in which posthumans discover an alien planet with a very different kind of life, seems to me to fit neatly into this extended hard sf agenda by raising countless variations on the old question of what it is to be human. 'Understand' presents posthumanity as a more individual threat, exponentially increased intelligence leading to a battle for survival between two superbeings. But it is hard sf only to the extent that 'Flowers for Algernon' (1959) by Daniel Keyes, whose model Chiang follows and usurps, is hard sf. That is, tangentially so at best. Even so, it is easy to come away from this anthology with the impression that the notion of posthumanity has been the generating force behind what rebirth of hard sf there might have been in the 1990s. Certainly, story after story presents some variation on the idea of the posthuman, and seems to be included here on the strength of that scenario alone. 'Genesis' (1995) by Poul Anderson, 'Beggars in Spain' (1991) by Nancy Kress, 'Gene Wars' (1991) by Paul J. McAuley, 'Marrow' (1997) by Robert Reed, 'Fast Times at Fairmont High' (2001) by Vernor Vinge, among others, take as granted a notion of enhanced humanity; this is the central scientific thesis that holds all these stories together. Without the posthuman element, what drives these stories is social, observational, melodramatic; they are, in the main, good stories, but without the posthuman some of them wouldn't even be science fiction, let alone hard sf. It is the posthumanity, therefore, that must be seen as the reason for their inclusion here, but does that qualify them as hard sf? Anderson's 'Genesis' is a form of planetary romance which even manages to incorporate elements of pseudo-medieval fantasy; Reed's 'Marrow' is a big dumb story about a big dumb object which has no justification other than sheer scale, and which resolves the plot with a denouement so feeble as to make the attempted grandeur of the rest of it seem laughable; Vinge's 'Fast Times at Fairmont High' is a social comedy about coping with the consequences of the information age which again has a plot coupon of astounding feebleness but which carries it off with considerably more style than the Reed. Only McAuley's escalation of genetic change seems to fit comfortably within notions of hard sf. For the rest, it seems to me yet again that what Hartwell and Cramer are taking as a signifier of hard sf is no

more than what makes the story science fiction in the broadest sense.

If hard sf means anything other than science fiction, therefore, we are forced back to the same set of exemplars we have been using ever since P. Schuyler Miller first coined the term. It is something other than social satire, than big space adventures, than planetary romances, from time travel, from warning glimpses of the human cost of scientific advances, something in other words that stands apart from all the other common characteristics of science fiction. It is still being written, often by the same people who have always written it. 'Exchange Rate' (1999) by Hal Clement reads like any other Hal Clement story, long on scientific detail, short on drama, on humanity, on anything that might make you want to keep reading it. It is typical of hard sf in the fact that scientific ideas are so central to the situation and the plot that more effort has to be expended in establishing and describing these than on such extraneous detail as characterisation, setting, plot development and the like. Though hard sf doesn't always have to be so tedious, there are younger writers in the tradition who are more succinct at establishing the scientific rationale and therefore have a little more space to devote to the rest of the fiction. Stephen Baxter in 'Gossamer' (1995) has written an archetypal hard sf story in which survival is dependent upon an understanding and exploitation of the rules of the universe (I am less certain that his other story here, 'On the Orion Line' (2000), a rather lumbering and old-fashioned war-with-the-alien tale, really fits so securely in the remit of this anthology). But even the newer generation of writers associated with traditional hard sf don't necessarily write that all the time. Why Hartwell and Cramer should pick Allen Steele's 'The Good Rat' (1995) to represent hard sf is beyond me: the story's only novum is that humans rather than animals are used in experiments on medicines and cosmetics. Apart from that it is a simple and rather touching social satire that is about as far from hard sf as it is possible to get and still be in the same genre. Steele must have written far more overtly hard sf stories than this, and one has to question the editorial decision-making involved. Similarly, Michael Flynn is a fine hard sf writer of the modern school, but 'Built Upon the Sands of Time' (2000) is a limply humorous bar story (the most obvious models are Arthur C. Clarke's *Tales from the White Hart*) that hinges on the sort of alternate history game that is normally beyond the pale for the rigorously-minded hard sf writer.

It is only by distorting my understanding of what hard sf is, and always has been, about that I am able to recognise even so many as half the stories in this anthology as being hard sf at all. From that basis it is difficult to say that the editors have made any sort of a case for a hard sf renaissance. What is hard sf here seems more like a continuation (often by the same writers who have long been connected with the subgenre) than a rebirth. Let me put that another way: if these stories represent a radicalising of hard sf, a regeneration of what has gone before, then they are taking it in directions that mean the results are no longer recognisable as hard sf, while those stories which are recognisably hard sf do not seem to be doing anything radically different from what hard sf has always been doing.

In the end, as with its predecessor, *The Ascent of Wonder*, one is left with the impression that this is a hefty anthology of some fairly good science fiction (though with more duds than one would really like to see), but an anthology that bears only a tangential relationship to its title and stated aim.

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Ballard and the Sixties

by Rjurik Davidson

Introduction

The work of J.G. Ballard was at the centre of the revolution in science fiction brought about by the journal *New Worlds* under

the editorship of Michael Moorcock. Ballard embodied the main reversals and shifts that were to characterise the early British New Wave. He proclaimed a boredom with traditional science fiction,

preferring an examination of 'inner space' to outer space; he reversed or inverted the central narrative strategies of Golden Age science fiction, replacing rational cerebral heroes with troubled, isolated antiheroes. His future worlds were not the space-faring futures of Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein or Arthur C. Clarke, but crumbling worlds which were expressions of some sort of transfigured future of the psyche. This deconstruction of traditional science, with its positivist and empiricist content, and its reconstruction into something altogether more relative and contingent was to set the foundations for the later works in the New Wave. Writers such as Norman Spinrad, Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ and Harlan Ellison would later build on this foundation, seeing positivism and scientism as ideological visions of the establishment (whether that is viewed in terms of patriarchy, technocracy, the capitalist class or the more paranoid visions of some all powerful entity). It is precisely this association of orthodox science, and its accompanying 'rationality', with the establishment that was to form the essential philosophical underpinning of the sixties counterculture and an essential element of the radical left. Thus Ballard stands at the very opening moment of the New Wave movement, but also at the opening moment or the rising alternative *Weltanschauung* that was to be distinctive of sixties radicalism.

To understand his distinctive narrative reversals and operations and their relationship to the newly emerging world-view, it is useful to consider the characteristics of Golden Age science fiction.

Golden Age Science Fiction, Plot Puzzle and Ballard's reversals

A central characteristic of the dominant trend of science fiction in the forties and fifties – the Golden Age – was the narrative structure of the plot puzzle. Some sort of plot contradiction is set up using known scientific laws, which then require a resolution. Typically the protagonist of this story is placed in some sort of danger by this scientific plot puzzle and must use his (almost always 'his') wits, intelligence and bravery to overcome the odds, or whose wits, intelligence, and bravery are insufficient to the iron laws of science.

The famous example of 'The Cold Equations' (1954) by Tom Godwin² begins with an astronaut on a mission with medicine to save a group of workers stranded on a distant planet. He finds a stowaway, a young woman who is hoping to visit her brother on the planet. But there can be no room for stowaways; the ship has only exactly enough fuel to reach the destination planet. So the stowaway must be 'jettisoned'. Having set up these 'cold equations' the story goes into a number of narrative strategies designed to lure the reader into sympathising with the young woman and the pilot in their dilemma. But once the equations are set up, the reader understands there can be no option but to jettison the extra weight.

Here then is a paradigmatic example of the scientific nature of Golden Age science fiction. Notice the fundamental elements:

1. Iron scientific laws that cannot be altered.
2. An abstract situation designed to bring these laws into play.

Thus the only social relation is that of pilot to woman, or, as Godwin expresses it, 'girl.' (Science fiction women before the sixties tended to be pretty stupid, and thus the paternalistic attitude of the pilot towards her.) What is significant here is that the 'iron laws' that set up the dilemma are not scientific at all, but social. Society could have spent more money on building redundancies into the ship, thus avoiding the situation. Thus did much of Golden Age science fiction reduce social problems to

scientific and technocratic ones.

Such scientific rationalism was the dominant ideological mode both of science (in its public face at least) but also of the era of 'social planning', the 'conservative liberalism' that was to see social problems as problems of technique and organisation. But it was an ideological complex that was to unravel just as surely in the social attitudes of the sixties as in the science fiction of that time. Pre-eminent in the construction of an alternative ideological complex in science fiction was J.G. Ballard. Ballard's aim from the very first moment was to write a new kind of science fiction, which would invert, reverse, and transcend the dominant trend of the forties and fifties. In a piece for *New Worlds* he expressed this aim:

I think science fiction should turn its back on space, on interstellar travel, extraterrestrial life forms, galactic wars and the overlap of these ideas that spreads across the margins of nine-tenths of magazine science fiction [...] It is these, whether they realise it or not, that s-f readers are so bored with now, and which are beginning to look increasingly out-dated.³

Here Ballard is expressing his own boredom, though certainly there would be a new readership open to new styles. In this programmatic statement, Ballard rejected all the essential tropes of the science fiction of the 'Golden Age' and its positivist ideological matrix. Instead, he replaced this with an interest in psychology and psychological states. Let us look at Ballard's definitive early narrative moment: the embrace of the dissolution of the Earth, the beginning of the 'New World.'

Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) was one of the first 'New Wave' books to reveal the changing sensibility. Ballard's book illuminates all his characteristic themes and elements: science fiction as concerned with inner space rather than outer space; the 'disaster novel' in which the world is coming apart (later worked on in *The Crystal World* (1966), and *The Drought* (1965)); a literary surrealism characterised by exotic, brilliant and efflorescent language; the world dissolution as an expression of the psyche.

It is Ballard's use of language, and the images of a submerged London, surrounded by a humid jungle populated by gigantic lizards and insects signalling the regression of time, that first impresses the reader:

A giant *Anopheles* mosquito, the size of a dragon-fly, spat through the air past his face, then dived down towards the floating jetty where Kerans' catamaran was moored. The sun was still hidden behind the vegetation on the eastern side of the lagoon, but the mounting heat was bringing the huge predatory insects out of their lairs all over the moss-covered surface of the hotel. [...] In the early morning light a strange mournful beauty hung over the lagoon; the sombre green-black fronds of gymnosperms, intruders from the Triassic past, and the half-submerged white-faced buildings of the 20th century still reflected together in the dark mirror of the water, the two interlocking worlds apparently suspended at some junction in time, the illusion momentarily broken when a giant water-spider cleft the oily surface a hundred yards away.⁴

Ballard's protagonist, Robert Kerans, is a scientist documenting the Earth's regression to the climate, and ultimately to the flora and fauna, of the Triassic period. The majority of survivors have retreated to the polar icecaps where the temperature remains comfortable. Kerans lives above the submerged city of London with Beatrice, his 'partner', and a scientific group. When Colonel Riggs and the scientific group decide to leave, to avoid the coming 'rainbelts' moving their way to the north pole where the last of civilisation survives, Beatrice and Kerans choose to stay. Kerans and Beatrice are psychologically adapting to the changes,

...replacing rational cerebral heroes with troubled, isolated antiheroes

ancient inherited memories calling to them to merge with the new Triassic. This is symbolically represented by a dream shared by Kerans and the others who choose to stay in which they swim into the great lagoons and there dissolve into the water:

As the great sun drummed nearer, almost filling the sky itself, the dense vegetation along the limestone cliffs was flung back abruptly, to reveal the black and stone grey heads of enormous Triassic lizards. Strutting forward to the edge of the cliffs, they began to roar together at the sun, the noise gradually mounting until it became indistinguishable from the volcanic pounding of the solar flares. Kerans felt, beating within him like his own pulse, the powerful mesmeric pull of the baying reptiles, and stepped out into the lake, whose waters now seemed an extension of his own bloodstream. As the dull pounding rose, he felt the barriers which divide his own cells from the surrounding medium dissolving, and he swam forwards, spreading outwards across the black thudding water.... (71)

Opposed to Kerans is the crazy Strangman (hangman? Strangeman?), who arrives at the quiet steaming lagoon in a frenzy of action, surrounded by a pack of giant 'pet' crocodiles and 'natives'. Strangman represents the Old World of action, of humanity's striving to overcome obstacles, to conquer nature, and to become 'rich' in doing so – in this he resembles the traditional protagonist of Golden Age science fiction. He drains the lagoons, thus uncovering parts of London, an action that to Kerans is a violation and a transgression of nature. Strangman becomes a kind of petty dictator, reminiscent of Conrad's Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* (1898), who has also been seduced by power and control. Beatrice is taken as a prisoner while Kerans is forced into a death-ritual where he is tied to a chair and left in the sun to die of exposure. Kerans manages to escape, but is trapped trying to save Beatrice, and they are only saved from death by the fortuitous return of Colonel Riggs and his men.

Kerans finally destroys the rampart built by Strangman and allows the water to rush in and submerge London once more. In a final embrace of the New World, he heads south, in a transcendent quest towards the rainbelts and what seems like death, but is something of an ascension or liberation. He scratches these words onto a building wall '27th day. Have rested and am moving south. All is well. Kerans.' (175).

His trip is both painful and a liberation:

So he left the lagoon and entered the jungle again, within a few days was completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing rain and heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats, a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun (175).

Ballard has created two oppositional figures: there is Strangman, who represents a version of the old world; and there is Kerans, who embraces the (re)coming Triassic and its correlate changing consciousness. Here then is a radical reversal of the positivist scientific science fiction represented by Godwin's 'The Cold Equations,' for Ballard's character refuses to seek any way out of the dilemma. He refuses to head north with Riggs, who still hopes to save something of civilisation, and is opposed to Strangman, whose attitude is a similar but barbaric version, where saving civilisation means accruing lost treasures. Moreover, the 'plot puzzle' presented by Ballard is a kind of symbolic representation of Kerans's changed consciousness. That is, as Peter Briggs has claimed, Ballard 'seeks to identify things (and people made into things by the media) as external representations of the inner map of the contemporary psyche.'⁵ This point is further argued by Anthony Ryan, who claims that Ballard's landscapes 'externalize a crisis in the consciousness of the main character in terms of a disaster in his environment.'⁶

There is, in Ballard, a refusal of faith in science that, even despite its 'cautionary' tone is evidenced in Godwin. For Godwin,

the 'cold equations' are something to be reconciled to as, sadly, a matter of the way the 'world' works. There is no questioning that this will continue to be the case; rather, it is implicit that this is exactly the kind of future we are heading into. We are headed for a future of multiplying, ubiquitous, equations, cold and otherwise. But for Ballard the old humanity is finished. There will be no cold scientific future. Rather it will be a dissolution towards a new consciousness. And this is exactly the vector along which his work moves: from the disaster novels, through *Vermilion Sands* (1971), to the psychopathology of finding car crashes erotic. Ballard is signalling that in some way history is moving along an axis entirely different, tangential, to the scientific or positivist one.

Ballard's novel was so contrary to the accepted norms of traditional science fiction that an early editor, according to Ballard, initially assumed that he had written Kerans as heading south by accident, when he really meant north:

I know that when *The Drowned World* was accepted by my American publisher about twelve years ago he said: 'yes, it's great, but why don't we have a happy ending? Have the hero going north instead of south into the jungle and the sun.' He thought I'd made a slight technical mistake by a slip of the pen, and had the hero going in the wrong direction. I said: 'no, God, this is a happy story.' [...] Really, I'm trying to show a new kind of logic emerging, and this is to be embraced, or at least held in high regard.⁷

Ballard and the Sixties

How are we to understand this element of Ballard, this reversal of the tropes of the traditional dominant fifties science fiction? Jameson expresses a view that Ballard's fiction must be read against the decline of the British Empire, as a last gasp of a degenerating ruling class caught in a *cul de sac*:

Let the Wagnerian and Spenglerian world-dissolutions of J.G. Ballard stand as exemplary illustrations of the ways in which a dying class – in this case the cancelled future of a vanished colonial and imperial destiny – seeks to intoxicate itself with images of death that range from the destruction of the world by fire, water, ice to lengthening sleep or the berserk orgies of high-rise buildings or superhighways reverting to barbarism.⁸

Ballard himself undermines Jameson's argument by pointing out that China, the world in which he was formed and which has generated much of his imagery of empty swimming pools and ruined buildings, was under the American sphere of influence, not the British. He argued that 'I'd say what my stuff is about the fall of the American empire [...] what I've been writing about in a way, is the end of technology, the end of America.'⁹ Yet regardless of whether we agree with Ballard's own opinions, Jameson's argument is hardly compelling. For although we might agree that Ballard's fiction shows the imprint of the decline of the colonial world, divided as it was into 'spheres of influence,' whether they be American or British, there is the curious and disquieting aspect that Ballard's protagonists invariably embrace the coming world-dissolutions. As Briggs has argued: 'Kerans's abandonment of civilisation [...] is not a suicidal act but an acceptance of the path to wholeness.'¹⁰

Ballard himself makes this point when he states:

I don't see my fiction as disaster-oriented [...] People seem to imply that these are books with unhappy endings, but the reverse is true: they're books with happy endings, stories of psychic fulfilment. The geophysical changes which take place in *The Drought*, *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World* are all positive and good changes [...] The Changes lead us to our real psychological goals, so they are not disaster stories at all.¹¹

According to Ballard, then, these are not disaster stories but an inversion of the form, denoting a different content:

I use the form because I deliberately want to invert it – that's the whole point of the novels. The heroes, for psychological reasons of their own, embrace the particular transformation. These are stories of huge psychic transformations. [...] and I use this external transformation of the landscape to reflect and marry with the internal transformation, the psychological transformation of the characters.¹²

Roger Luckhurst's response to this problem is to argue that there can be no 'unifying explanation' (in fact this is indicative of Luckhurst's method, which relies much on an open-ended poststructuralist interpretive methodology).¹³ Luckhurst opposes any unifying method or category whatsoever, preferring to see Ballard as situated in a number of interstices: 'His fictions, it might be said, unfold in suspansive zones, in interstices whose quotidian logics and causalities are held strangely in abeyance.'¹⁴ For Luckhurst this means that Ballard is between modernism and postmodernism – with all the complexities that that implies – thus he is 'between two walls'. But though Luckhurst chooses to agree with Jameson's assessment of Ballard, he does not pursue the method that might suggest that Ballard's work embodies more historical logics than simply the decline of colonialism. That is: to understand Ballard's protagonists' embrace of the world-dissolution and the changed consciousness that comes with it, we must look towards the emergence of an alternative consciousness within the sixties itself. This consciousness begins first with disillusionment with the ideological matrix of the forties and fifties, that complex of elements that formed post-war technocratic liberalism. From this disillusionment sprang a number of alternative and radical visions. Ballard's work is a part of the same historical moment that produced deconstructions of the traditional notions of science which were propagated by an elite engaged in the programme of Keynesianism and welfare state social engineering. Ballard gives an early example of the rejection of this ideology. But in *The Drowned World*, Kerans not only reverses the traditional response of the protagonist in the disaster story (to fight, to survive, and to begin working for the rebirth of 'civilisation' as did the protagonists of Asimov's *Foundation* novels), but he actively embraces the changes, the new world.

Ballard and Psychedelia

There were many 'new worlds' emerging during the sixties: the turn to eastern mysticism, the utopian urge, political visions and the 'new world' which Ballard seems closest to – the world of psychedelia. Ballard's new world is one of phosphorescent landscapes. His disasters are characterised by a haunting and surreal beauty. *The Drowned World* is full of the heat of the jungle, steamy lagoons, the blazing sun, gigantic lizards moving slowly about the ruined buildings. *The Crystal World* is full of glittering jewelled jungles. Perhaps most instructive is the *Vermilion Sands* cycle of stories, which are united, not just by their geographical connection (the desert resort of Vermilion Sands) but also by their highly aestheticised quality. They are also important because Ballard was writing them at the same time as he was writing his disaster stories.¹⁵

These stories are filled with the surreal: airplane pilots who sculpt clouds into pictures and portraits; plants that sing and 'play' music; statues that sing and 'reflect' back the emotions of those who come close; houses which change mood and reflect the emotions of the owners; a sea composed of sand over which people sail wheeled boats. All in all the effect is a mixture of what Ballard call the 'virtues of the glossy, lurid and the bizarre'¹⁶ with

a hallucinatory beauty. Jewelled insects constantly accompany Esmerelda Garland in 'The Screen Game' (1963). The narrator recounts:

A few yards away something flickered in the bright sand, a familiar flare of light. Shielding my eyes, I found the source, the diminutive Promethean bearer of this brilliant corona. The spider, a Black Widow, approached on its stilted legs, a blaze of staccato signals pouring from its crown. It stopped and pivoted, revealing the large sapphire inset into its head.

More points of light flickered. Within a moment the entire terrace sparkled with jewelled light. Quickly I counted a score of the insects – turquoise scorpions, a purple mantis with a giant topaz like a tiered crown, and more than a dozen spiders, pinpoints of emerald and sapphire light lancing from their heads.

Above them, hidden in the shadows among the bougainvillea on her balcony, a tall white-faced figure in a blue gown looked down at me.¹⁷

Alternatively the characters themselves, most notably the women, are physically surreal. Jane Ciracylides, from the story 'Prima Belladonna', was 'a beautiful girl, even if her genetic background was a little mixed. The gossips at Vermilion Sands soon decided there was a good deal of mutant in her, because she had a rich patina-golden skin and what looked like insects for eyes...'¹⁸

Ballard insists that these stories share the same fundamental concerns as his disaster stories. He states: 'I don't really see any distinction between any of my work – between *Vermilion Sands* on the one hand, and the rest on the other.'¹⁹ Certainly, his disaster novel *The Crystal World*, shares both the psychedelic imagery of a world gradually crystallising and also the emergence of the new consciousness. Ballard himself makes the link, explaining that 'one of my earlier novels, *The Crystal World*, was about a crystallising world. A lot of people who knew I had taken acid thought I had written the book on the basis of that. I wrote the book in '64, I think, but didn't take LSD until 1967 or '68. The curious thing is that the book does convincingly, in my experience, describe what an LSD vision is like; particularly the effects of light and time.'²⁰

The background against which this moves is, of course, the 'London Underground' scene of the sixties, in which 'body paint' and surrealist images were in vogue, along with LSD and the experimental psychedelic bands such as the early Pink Floyd and the Soft Machine. The woman with golden skin and insect eyes, the glittering jewels, the gaudy colours, have resonances with exactly that counter-culture that was known as 'Swinging London', where the drug of choice was LSD. Sheila Rowbotham, in her recent autobiography, describes this scene:

Hippie London was pleasantly sociable; the dancing and the dressing up for special occasions constituted a round of engagements without any defined etiquette. At the fourteen-hour Technicolor Dream at Alexandra Palace, in North London, 10,000 of us wafted past one another, displaying our latest exotica like bizarre courtiers in a science fantasy court where there were no rules and everyone was young. Such mass gatherings confirmed the realisation that there were more and more odd people in the world. They were multiplying so rapidly that they completely detached from that dull mainland where strait (sic) ruled OK, to create variegated and decorative cooperatives where the sun always shone and everyone did their own thing.²¹

The proclaimed aim of the acid trip, at least amongst some of the Underground scene, was the exploration of their own 'inner space': the investigation of the inner landscape of the psyche, in

According to Ballard these are not disaster stories but an inversion of the form

order to come to a new understanding of oneself, to access points within that had previously been repressed, denied, ignored. Here then, is a link with Ballard's work: in *The Drowned World* the changing temperatures release access to the hidden, repressed, psyche of humanity, the cell-memory that had all along been there. Yet it is also the exact reverse of this that Ballard, at one and the same time, invokes: the outer environmental changes are reflections of the inner changes. This, of course, is the meaning of the psychedelic hallucination, where the inner psychic state is projected onto the world in hallucinatory visions. Thus a happy tripper might 'see' wondrous and fantastic visions, while the upset or anxious tripper might suffer horrible nightmares.

Yet this is an English version of psychedelia, divorced from the American version of Leary for whom the use of psychedelics was also a fundamentally religious experience. Leary was thus more obviously grounded in American culture with its distinctive religiosity. In this version, psychedelia becomes a way of perceiving a 'real' world beyond the shadowy fake that is normally perceptible, something captured in science fiction in the work of the American Philip K. Dick. Nevertheless there are important parallels between Ballard's psychedelia and the psychedelia that was to burgeon most famously in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury area. For central to the experience is still the rejection of some 'absolute' reality, and the ideology of consciousness (and science) that goes along with it. In this Ballard prefigures the work of someone like Norman Spinrad whose 'All the Sounds of the Rainbow' conjoins the psychedelia with the American New Age religiosity.²² Closest amongst the Americans to Ballard was Samuel R. Delany, whose early works are filled, just like Ballard's, with the overrun ruins of contemporary civilisation – here the wreck of an aeroplane overgrown with jungle, there an ancient underground bank of computers²³ – and written in a similar aesthetic style. Ballard's concerns are fundamentally linked to American ones.

There are more practical reasons why one might make such a reading of Ballard's fiction. Norman Spinrad, who spent 1969 in London, has claimed that Ballard and other *New Worlds* writers were part of the 'London Underground' scene.²⁴ *New Worlds* magazine itself was a part of this same underground culture which produced the magazines *Oz* and *IT*. According to Greenland it attracted many of the same readers.²⁵ Though Ballard described his LSD experience during the sixties as nightmarish,²⁶ in his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Kindness of Women* (1991), the experience is described more ambiguously. For some time the trip is surreal and, at moments, beautiful, and only turns nightmarish at the end.²⁷ In the same novel he details the protagonist's relationship with at least one friend called Sally who is from the counterculture and 'offered a key to this strange decade.'²⁸ How close these are to Ballard's actual experiences we can only guess.²⁹ What is certain is that *New Worlds* was part of a more generalised historical moment that generated new modes of expression: psychedelic music, pop art, experimental prose. Ballard summarised this moment:

I've been tremendously lucky – that was the most exciting time, there's no question about it. The late '60s was a period of totally unprecedented excitement in almost every field. I think by the time the change [of *New Worlds*] from a small to a large format magazine took place it was really the final break with the American dominated SF of the '40s and '50s – the break was complete, the battle was won. The group of writers that Moorcock published in *New Worlds*, myself included, had proved their point, and the old guard had run out of gas. [...] I think with the benefit of hindsight, it had ceased to be an SF magazine at all, even within my elastic definition of the term, and became something much closer to the avant garde experimental writing.³⁰

The writers Ballard is referring to include: 'Sladek, Disch,

Spinrad, Pam Zoline, Mike Moorcock himself...'³¹ However he probably exaggerates the extent to which *New Worlds* was to extend beyond the boundaries of science fiction. Rather *New Worlds* was to revolutionise science fiction itself, breaking its traditional narrative structures, allowing for an extension of form and then content. Beginning with the literary, it is interesting how the political was to begin to permeate the magazine. There is a definite logic to this movement: the inversion of the traditional science fiction would mean not only the creation of a new style and narrative structures, but such early strategic moves would imply a reversal of traditional character roles. Greenland has summarised the key reversals and transitions in his *The Entropy Exhibition* without explaining the political logic behind them. Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron* (1969), which was serialised in *New Worlds*, bound experimental literary prose with anti-establishment left wing politics. Spinrad had attempted to publish *Bug Jack Barron* as a mainstream novel, a move bound up with the strategic vision of breaking the boundaries between science fiction and mainstream fiction. It was an attempt that ultimately failed. It is instructive that Spinrad, Thomas M. Disch and other American writers were to have their most innovative work first published in England. It is also useful to consider the parallel between them and a musician such as Jimi Hendrix, who was discovered in Café Wha in Greenwich Village and had to move to England and 'make it' there before his triumphant return to the US. The reason for this arc was the peculiarly radical nature of the English underground scene, which in many respects was more avant garde than the US counterculture. The psychedelic music of England, for example, was more experimental than the music coming from Haight-Ashbury. Bands such as The Soft Machine and the Pink Floyd dissolved the traditional rock structures compared with the relatively traditional San Francisco psychedelia of The Grateful Dead.

But if Ballard's *Vermilion Sands* recalls the English psychedelic experience, it is also a future of leisure, in which the characters laze about through the hot summers, a kind of urban holiday playground, which he associates with America; 'its spiritual home lies somewhere between Arizona and Ipanema Beach, but in recent years I have been delighted to see it popping up elsewhere.'³² This recalls Greenland's claim that the sixties counter-culture was in fact a 'leisure' revolution, that the counter-culture has a 'broad commitment to pleasure.'³³ He argued that the 'young, with the leisure industries coming under their influence, looked forward to an extended lease of childhood, which they idealised.'³⁴ And it also marks the beginnings of Ballard's connection with the culture of postmodernism. Ballard's aesthetics in *Vermilion Sands* are a celebration of the gaudy, the neon-image, the suburban sprawl: 'I like to think, too, that it celebrates the neglected virtues of the glossy, lurid and bizarre.'³⁵ This is reminiscent of Jameson's discussion of the aesthetics of postmodernism, inspired in part by Robert Venturi's architectural vision in *Learning From Las Vegas*. Jameson argues: 'But many of the newer postmodernisms have been fascinated precisely by that whole landscape of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the Late Show and B-grade Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, of the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel.'³⁶ This reads like the interests of Ballard himself, who broke down the traditional boundaries between the 'high' art of surrealism and the popular culture of sf, merging the two into the surrealist celebration of the gaudy and kitsch.

Conclusion

Ballard stood then at the apex of this burgeoning movement in science fiction, and in central place within the artistic movement of the sixties as a whole. He was to outline the first strategic moves of the New Wave, the opening inversions of a new type of fiction. It was a fiction which, though he was to cut his own

trajectory short of these limits, was to move from aesthetic, stylistic inversions of form, which was to introduce autotelic language, efflorescent landscapes and imagery, troubled and ambiguous characters, and was to later lead others to anti-establishment and political commitment, or various forms of eastern mysticism or transcendentalism. In these opening moves, however, he was to embody a series of radical ruptures, of social and historical shifts. As Gregory Stephenson has argued, Ballard is a subversive figure whose work is aimed 'at overturning the most fundamental assumptions of our culture regarding the nature of reality and of our own identities.' His central concern is 'with the problem of exceeding or escaping the limitations of the material world, the space-time continuum, the body, the senses and the ordinary ego-consciousness, all of which are seen as illusory in nature. In various ways the themes of transcendence and illusion inform nearly all of the author's work... But Ballard's work stands as a remarkable moment of prescience, of precognition, we might say; for it is exactly at the moment of his writing that history did make a radical reversal. Like a train moving onto a tangential set of tracks, history made an unexpected shift. The faith in the 'future' perfectible society, in a gradual evolutionary progress, was about to become unhinged. The decade of the sixties was to usher in unforeseen social conflicts. By the seventies, with the economic downturn of 1974, the scientist and positivist worldview would be decisively challenged. In its place came an understanding of contingency, of the relative and provisional truth of any science, of the frailties and silences of language, of the sudden utterances of marginalised voices, antagonism to the claims of 'metanarratives'.

What would be put in the place of these lost points of reference? The psychedelic movement, which Ballard's early fictions were to be a part of, was to falter. Drugs would not lead to a new consciousness, or utopia, but rather to burnout or madness. Symbolic was the fate of Syd Barrett, lead singer in the definitive English psychedelic rock group The Pink Floyd, whose career was tragically ruined by his descent into madness. Ballard himself increasingly represented the new consciousnesses that interested him as crippled. His *Crash* (1973) embraces the alienation of his protagonists. His work embraces taboos, is interested in subverting bourgeois sensibilities, is replete with what might be called degenerations rather than transformations. Yet for that incandescent moment in the early years of the sixties he stood as the shining representative in science fiction of the new, emerging, consciousness.

Notes

1. Though not the only trend. In the fifties a second, more downbeat trend emerged in the work of writers such as Philip K. Dick, Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon or Richard Matheson.
2. Tom Godwin, 'The Cold Equations' in Robert Silverberg (ed.) *Science Fiction Hall of Fame: The Greatest Science Fiction Stories of All Time* (New York: Avon Books, 1970) pp. 543-570.
3. J. G. Ballard, 'Which Way to Inner Space?', *New Worlds* 40 (1962), pp. 2-3, 116-8, reprinted in *A Users Guide To The Millennium* (New York: Picador, 1996). The quotation is on p. 197. In another piece, 'Time Memory and Inner Space', Ballard also notes his debt to surrealism, in the form of the paintings of Max Ernst, Salvador Dali and others.
4. J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*, Millennium: London, 1999 (original 1962) pp. 10-11. Another important British 'New Wave' science fiction writer to turn to experimental or 'literary' language was Brian Aldiss. See Brian Aldiss, *Report on Probability A* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1968) and Brian Aldiss, *Barefoot in the Head* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1969).
5. Peter Briggs, *J.G. Ballard* (San Bernardino, California: Borgo Press, 1985) p.12
6. Anthony Ryan, 'The Mind of J.G. Ballard', *Foundation* 3, (1973) p. 45.
7. James Goddard and David Pringle, 'An Interview With J.G. Ballard', *J.G. Ballard, The First Twenty Years* (Middlesex: Bran's Head

Books Ltd, 1976) p.24.

8. Fredric Jameson, 'Progress Vs Utopia; or can we Imagine the Future?'. *Science Fiction Studies* 9:2 (1982) p. 152.
9. Goddard and Pringle, pp. 11-12.
10. Briggs, p. 46.
11. Goddard and Pringle, p. 24.
12. Goddard and Pringle, p. 25.
13. See Chapter 1 of Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J.G. Ballard* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997).
14. Luckhurst, p. xv.
15. Later Ballard's worlds move into the province of 'postmodern culture', with his fascination with media images and statements such as 'We live inside an enormous novel' (quoted in Colin Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British 'New Wave' in Science Fiction*, London, Boston Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 112.) The Ballard of *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) is no longer the Ballard of the disaster stories.
16. J.G. Ballard, *Vermilion Sands* (Frogmore, St Albans: Panther, 1975) p. 7.
17. J.G. Ballard, 'The Screen Game' in *Vermilion Sands* (Frogmore, St Albans: Panther, 1975) p. 59. 'The Screen Game' was first published in 1963.
18. J.G. Ballard, 'Prima Belladonna' in *Vermilion Sands*, (Frogmore, St Albans: Panther, 1975) p. 31. This is the earliest of Ballard's stories (1956), and shows how this work preceded the explosion of psychedelic imagery of the sixties. This however is an unusual prefiguration; the bulk of his *Vermilion Sands* stories were written at the height of the sixties, with probably the best, 'The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D', published in 1967.
19. Goddard and Pringle, p. 24.
20. Interview by Andrea Juno and V. Vale in *Re/Search: J.G. Ballard* (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1984) p. 25.
21. Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Allen Lane Penguin Books, 2000) pp. 132-133.
22. Norman Spinrad, 'All the Sounds of the Rainbow', in Norman Spinrad, *No Direction Home* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977). We also find this combination in the work of Robert Silverberg.
23. Delany's first novel, *The Jewels of Apor*, published in the same year as *The Drowned World* (1962) has just such scenes, which continue through at least to *The Einstein Intersection*. There is a good article comparing Ballard and Delany waiting to be written. See Samuel R. Delany, *The Jewels of Apor* (New York: Ace, 1962, revised 1968 and 1970) and Samuel R. Delany, *The Einstein Intersection* (New York: Ace, 1967; restored London: Gollancz, 1968).
24. Personal interview with author, August 2000, Paris.
25. Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition*, p. 12.
26. Interview by Andrea Juno and Vale, p. 24.
27. J.G. Ballard, *The Kindness of Women* (London: HarperCollins, 1991); the quotation is from the 1994 edition, pp. 198-206.
28. J.G. Ballard, *The Kindness of Women*, p. 196.
29. Ballard declined (kindly) to be interviewed. We know though that *The Kindness of Women* is not autobiography as the way in which the protagonist's wife dies differs from the way Ballard's own wife died. In *The Kindness of Women* the wife dies by slipping and cracking her head. According to Brian Aldiss Ballard's wife died of pneumonia (Brian Aldiss, *The Fwinking of an Eye* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998) p. 257).
30. Goddard and Pringle, p. 28.
31. Goddard and Pringle, p. 28.
32. J.G. Ballard, *Vermilion Sands*, p. 7.
33. Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition*, p. 5.
34. Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition*, p. 5.
35. J.G. Ballard, 'Preface' to *Vermilion Sands*, p. 7.
36. Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998) p. 2.
37. Gregory Stephenson, *Out of the Night and into the Dream: A Thematic Study of J.G. Ballard* (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 1991) p. 1.

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First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

All novels marked: [N] are eligible for the 2004 BSFA Award for Best Novel

All collections and anthologies marked: [S] contain stories eligible for the 2004 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction

Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (eds) – *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 295pp, £16.99, t/p, ISBN 0-521-01657-6

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

The *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, part of the Cambridge Companion to Literature series, appears to be structured as an undergraduate teaching resource, although one accessible to both the interested lay reader and to readers and fans with more than a basic knowledge of sf. This, in itself, is something of a feat, and that the *Companion* pulls it off admirably is a credit to its editors and contributors. As such it stands alongside such works as Edward James's *Science Fiction in the 20th Century* (Oxford, 1994), Patrick Parrinder's *Science Fiction, A Critical Guide* (Longman, 1979), Adam Roberts's *Science Fiction* (Routledge, 2000), and (because if the science fiction genre is often described as being in dialogue with itself, then so is its criticism), Liverpool University Press volumes including *Speaking Science Fiction* (eds. Sawyers and Seed, 2000), *Learning From Other Worlds* (ed. Parrinder, 2000) and Westfahl's *The Mechanics of Wonder* (1998).

Following the list of contributors, a brief Foreword by James Gunn and a chronology of works discussed (from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1501) to Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002)), Mendlesohn's introduction 'Reading Science Fiction' sets the tone. Mendlesohn (echoing Aldiss) initially describes sf more as a mode than a genre, probably "the last great bastion of Romantic literature", an internal discussion and an ongoing argument with itself, carried out both internally between sf writers and externally in the criticism of sf. To demonstrate many of these concerns, she maps them onto an exemplary text, choosing (rather than the 'traditional' sf teaching

canon of Dick, Le Guin and Gibson) a more recent work, Greg Egan's *Schild's Ladder*.

Following this, the *Companion* is divided roughly equally into three sections: History, Critical Approaches, and Sub-Genres and Themes. Brian Stableford, in 'Science Fiction Before the Genre,' traces the pre-history of sf, through the scientific romances of Wells, the technological fantasies of Verne and the sub-genre of 'future war' and invasion scare stories of Du Quesne and others between the late 1880s and early 1900s. Brian Attebury picks up 'The Magazine Era: 1926-1960' from the genesis of sf as a self-conscious genre with a specific editorial agenda in Gernsback's *Amazing* through to the Campbellian 'Golden Age' of the 1940s and 1950s. Although in terms of artistic and literary quality, it is arguable that the real Golden Age of sf was not Campbell's *Astounding* but Horace Gold's *Galaxy* (Bester, Sturgeon, Pohl and Kornbluth etc.) founded in 1950 about the time Campbell lost the plot and championed crank theories like psi and Hubbard's Dianetics, a point also picked up by Gary K. Wolfe in 'Science Fiction and its Editors'.

Damien Broderick considers the impact of literary and stylistic experimentation (and occasional lapses into pretentious silliness) of 'The New Wave and Backwash: 1960-1980' on both sides of the Atlantic, with writer and editor Judith Merrill, with her *England Swings SF*, sitting somewhere in the middle. I think Broderick's description "terminal blandness" unfairly maligns Ted Carnell's editorship of *New Worlds* before Moorcock took over in 1964, since

that period included works by Aldiss, Ballard, Brunner, Dick (*Time Out of Joint*) and Sturgeon (*Venus Plus X*) as well as more traditional sf such as James White's *Sector General* stories. The backwash of the New Wave (Broderick ascribes the coinage of this term to Christopher Priest, after the "nouvelle vague" of French cinema, although the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* credits it to P. Schulyer Miller in 1961) flows from the rise of feminist sf as a distinct sub genre in the 1970s to the first stirrings of the cyberpunk movement.

John Clute takes over 'Science Fiction from 1980 to the Present', the transformation of sf into mainstream media entertainment (examined in more detail by Mark Bould's chapter on 'Film and Television') and the marginalisation of written sf by the huge influx of sharecropped marketing product, both contributing to a crisis of confidence by the 1990s, and the gradual transformation of sf into a genre – perhaps the only genre – able to envisage and deal with a future based on information rather than hardware. This argument is also threaded through Clute's own *Scores* (Beccon, 2003) and promises to be examined further in his forthcoming *The Darkening Garden*. Somewhat contentiously Clute cites Gene Wolfe as the only sf writer of this period who can be considered "great" (with the same importance as Dick's later recognised influence on the genre). Significant writers of the period in the shaping of current sf include Bear, Baxter, Banks, Card, Gibson (whose cyberspace "is a literary metaphor of considerable brilliance"), McAuley, Swanwick, Waldrop, Shepard, Sterling, Stephenson and Robinson.

The middle section of the *Companion* examines a number of current critical approaches to sf. The role of Marxist and New Marxist critical theory, and its relationship to sf as a literature for the examination of critical utopias, is considered by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, particularly the influence of Darko Suvin in the US, with *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* and the founding of *Science Fiction Studies* with R. D. Mullen which helped establish (and some might argue, ossify) a critical 'canon' of core of texts by Dick, Le Guin and Delany. Marxist theory was also influential (at least initially) in the development of both feminist critical theory, discussed in the chapter by Veronica Hollinger, and Postmodernism, the latter largely due to the work of cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, while both these later threads come together in Donna Haraway's 1985 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' which argues that such creations in feminist sf (ranging from C.L. Moore's 'No Woman Born' to Tiptree's 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In') challenge our notions of sex and gender, race, human vs artificial and the boundaries of the body.

Andrew M. Butler, admitting that while "sf is notoriously difficult to define, and that postmodernism is (usually) resistant to any absolute definition, any account of postmodernism and sf risks collapsing under the weight of its own hesitations", takes an admirable shot at guiding the lay reader through an introduction, thankfully shorn of its more intimidating terms, to the often tricky theoretic of postmodernism. You know you are on notoriously shifting ground

when you encounter a statement from Lyotard like "if a work is to be modern, it must first be postmodern".

Extending both the decentering of postmodernism and later feminism is a set of theoretic, broadly (and provocatively) described as 'queer theory', whose application to sf lies in the genre's ability to imagine alternative sexualities. The key critical anthologies in the field are Donald Palumbo's *Erotic Universe* and *Eros in the Mind's Eye*, both dating from 1986. This, as Wendy Pearson notes, is surprisingly few, given the range and diversity of the genre's imagination into sexual possibilities that go beyond questions of male/female or homo/hetero relationships to question the biological fixity of sex and gender and challenges the notion of binary oppositions altogether (either Le Guin's hermaphrodite Gethenians or the multiple sexes in Delany's *Triton*).

'Sub Genres and Themes' forms the last section. This is necessarily rather more of a mixture with no particularly clear division between the two topics. Is utopia a theme or a sub-genre of sf, or actually a parallel but distinct genre, with its own agenda and critical apparatus?

Leading off this section Gwyneth Jones examines 'Icons of Science Fiction' from rockets, spaceships, habitats and virtual environments to the notion of 'the Other' as expressed in robots, androids, cyborgs and aliens. The section continues with sf and the life sciences (intelligence, the brain, genetics and mutation, reproduction, the biosphere and environment – considered by molecular biologist and writer Joan Slonczewski and by Michael Levy), hard sf (Kathryn Cramer), space opera (Gary Westfahl), alternate history (Andy Duncan), utopias and anti-utopias (Edward James), politics (Ken MacLeod), gender (Helen Merrick), race and ethnicity (Elisabeth Leonard) and, last but not least, religion (Farah Mendlesohn).

What is noticeable is the way themes and references recur in different chapters and different sections, partly because the science fiction community (and the critical community allied to it) is, on the whole a relatively small one, but partly, one suspects, because the contributors have taken their lead from Mendlesohn's introduction, both in the method of mapping their different theoretical subjects and approaches onto a number of exemplar texts, and in a willingness to step outside the established critical canon, to take in the works of interesting, but lesser studied, writers like Pamela Sargent and Sheri S. Tepper. Overall, there is a real sense throughout the *Companion* (which reflects on the skills of the editors as well as the inherent nature of sf) that its contributors are in dialogue with each other.

As noted at the top of this review, *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* may be positioned, at least partly, as a teaching guide. If so, it promises to be a stimulating and provocative course. I feel rather jealous, actually.

Kelley Armstrong – *Dime Store Magic*

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Orbit, London, 2004, 462pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1 84149 323 6

Dime Store Magic is the third book in what is now labelled the *Women of the Otherworld* series. The previous two books, *Bitten* and *Stolen*, told the story of Elena Michaels, the only female werewolf in the world. *Stolen* broadened the remit to include other supernatural entities such as witches, half-demons and vampires; it was here that the witch Paige Winterbourne was introduced to us. *Dime Store Magic* whisks us straight into a continuation of Paige's story but unfortunately it all seems a bit formulaic now (spoiler alert):

Step 1: Prologue introducing the baddies.

Step 2: First person narrator (Paige) introduces herself – a smart, sassy, self-assured, sensible supernatural, whose witch mother was killed in the previous book. She leads a normal life, apart from the fact she's guardian to a 13 year old potential superwitch (Savannah), whose witch mother was also killed in the previous book (those witches don't seem to have a lot of luck on the parenting front).

Step 3: Bring on the baddies and all their fiendish schemes: the half-demon who killed Paige's witch mother in the previous book (see step 2 above) and Savannah's sorcerer father, who just happens to be the head of a powerful cabal and wants custody of his little princess.

Bless.

Step 4: Introduce dodgy sorcerer lawyer bloke, who may or may not be of assistance (but probably will).

Step 5: Everything goes completely pear shaped and there's no one to help Paige or her companions.

Step 6: Inevitable sex scene

Step 7: Rapid escalation of events until all the bad guys are vanquished and normal supernatural life resumes once more.

Maybe this is a tad unfair. The story is exciting and rips along at a cracking pace proving to be as much a page-turner as its forebears. Armstrong was wise to move on from the werewolf saga too as there was very little mileage left there, though Elena does make a couple of cameo appearances for continuity. The main problem with the book is that it's virtually entirely plot-driven with very little character development. *Bitten* and *Stolen* allowed us to get to know Elena; Paige, however, was not a major character for much of *Stolen* and was fairly unsympathetic for much of its length. Her persona doesn't actually seem to differ much from Elena's – a question of differentiation through abilities rather than character traits. Perhaps

this is a result of Armstrong having to spend time building up and explaining the workings of Paige's particular brand of witchcraft and raving on with the plot, rather than taking time to let the reader understand her personality and sympathise with her predicament. *Stolen* worked well because there was a plethora of characters – some

good, some bad, some unpredictable, but the focus seems too narrow here. The next book, *Industrial Magic*, promises more supernatural shenanigans but with a larger cast list. Hopefully that will revive the series and recast its previous spells over the reader.

Steve Aylett – *Karloff's Circus* []

Gollancz, London, 2004, 128pp, £9.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07089-7

Reviewed by Claire Brialey

The first three *Accomplice* novels came out in pretty quick succession in 2002, and then there was a disconcerting gap. But many things about Steve Aylett books are disconcerting, including the narrative structure, the syntax, and the content; so the publishing schedule wouldn't be any particular cause for concern if it weren't for the fact that these books are compelling and I wanted to know how – or whether – the story was going to end.

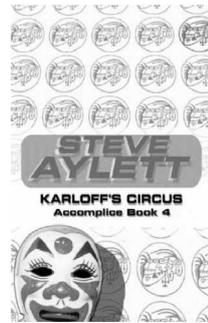
When I reviewed the third volume, *Dummyland* (Vector 228), I noted that the *Accomplice* books follow a roughly similar pattern or recurring themes, with the protagonist Barney Juno and his friend Gregor (on the side of the hapless and the well-intentioned) and the demon Sweeney and the Mayor (on the side of evil, no question there) among others needing to take a similar path through the narrative to achieve some progression by the end of the story. There's a strong resonance with folk myths in the structure of the whole sequence here, with recurring incidents showing both that the characters are on the right track and that they have to find the way to break the cycle to achieve any conclusion.

And in the final volume help is at hand to break the cycle, with a mass influx of outsiders in the form of Karloff's Circus itself. Despite

Aylett's customary distortions, the Circus is more instantly recognisable than many of the everyday features of *Accomplice*: it identifies the nightmare nature of many circus acts and simply makes them text instead of subtext. And it forces nearly all the characters to reconsider the patterns of their existence, either enticing them into the Circus itself – to remake or destroy them – or sowing dissatisfaction, provoking questions, unsettling the balance of the familiar disorder which somehow sustains *Accomplice*.

So when the Circus prepares to leave, others leave too, some of them running away to join their real lives and some even discovering what exists outside *Accomplice*. And some new faces find in the altered *Accomplice* a place to pursue their own imbalance.

All of this will make it clear that to enjoy this book you'll need to have read the first three – with *Only an Alligator* and *The Velocity Gospel* preceding *Dummyland* – and it may also have hinted that to understand this book you'll need to be under the influence of mind-altering substances like innovative language, speculative fiction, and a sideways perception on reality. Aylett's writing remains bizarre, baffling and brilliant. Do not try this at home.



R. Scott Bakker – *The Darkness That Comes Before* []

Simon & Schuster, London, 2004, 573 pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-7432-5668-9

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

At first glance this debut novel by Canadian R. Scott Bakker seems to follow some very familiar patterns. There are maps of the imagined world where the action is located, as well as a dramatis personae and a listing and descriptions of the many religious and political factions involved. It is also subtitled *Book One of The Prince of Nothing*, indicating the birth of yet one more in a very large number of very large fantasy series. Once drawn into the intricacies of the story, however, it can be seen that here is something outstanding, highly intelligent and beautifully written.

The story is complex and told from several viewpoints, from that of a prostitute to those of priests and warriors. It is set some 2000 years after what is now known as the First Apocalypse, when the ancient evil called the No God was finally vanquished. Many people's thoughts are on worldly, secular matters, but there is also religious fanaticism. The apparent appetite for a holy war is primarily instigated and encouraged by the actions and preaching of Malthanet, the charismatic and mysterious leader, or Shriah, of the Thousand Temples, who desires to cleanse the world of the perceived infidel. Drawn inexorably into this tense situation is a sorcerer and spy called Drusas Achamian. Haunted by horrific nightmares, he is convinced that the return of the No God and the Second Apocalypse are imminent. Meanwhile others naturally seek to take political advantage of the situation, and Ikurei Comphas, Imperial nephew and military genius, plans to increase the power and size of the Nansur empire,

while plotting his own political advancement. Still others, such as the barbarian chieftain, Cnaiur, and the mysterious Kellhus also have their own agendas, both obvious and hidden, but everything is overshadowed by what the future is going to bring.

This novel works extremely well on several levels. It is an excellent portrayal of religious fundamentalism and the complexities of the interactions of members of many different belief systems. This is combined with political intrigue and machination, wonderfully depicted, as people strive to improve their status, or simply keep their heads. In both cases they are forced to associate with those they would normally despise and avoid in order to achieve their aims. It is perhaps at this human level that this story works best. All the characters are particularly well drawn and will elicit reactions from sympathy to repugnance to fascination. The relationship between Achamian and the prostitute Esmenet is a particular example: religious restrictions prevent them from being properly together, and Esmenet continues to ply her trade, much to his chagrin, yet they can be sometimes as close and tender as a married couple. Cnaiur, despite extremely violent behaviour, verging on insanity, is capable, at times, of showing love and tenderness, and even compassion.

This work is a tremendously impressive debut in a crowded genre, and I'm very much looking forward to the other books in the series

K. J. Bishop – *The Etched City* []

Tor UK, London, 2004, 332pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 1-4050-4160-9

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Okay; it's a decadent, Symbolist, surreal Western, is what it is. The book opens in the Cooper Country; a ravaged, depopulated desert. Enter Clint Eastwood. He is riding a camel. He's actually called Gwynn, and he comes from the Frozen North, but he never lets that cramp his style. He picks up a sidekick, Raule, a (female) physician (actually more of a surgeon), who's vaguely bothered that she doesn't have a proper conscience any more. They have been in a war, on the losing side, and are now on the run. It's hot. Very hot. Lots of people

get shot. Shortly afterwards, a much greater number of people get blown up by having sticks of dynamite thrown at them. Gwynn and Raule (dressed as women) leave the Cooper Country for Ashamoil, a city on the Teleute Shelf.

Ashamoil has a hot, wet climate. If Gormenghast had been designed by Aubrey Beardsley (with Hieronymus Bosch subcontracted for the gardens and interiors), and sited on the Amazon, you'd have something like Ashamoil. Obviously, in a setting like this, what

happens next doesn't deign to be a *plot*. There are lots of incredibly elegant clothes, designer drugs, richly clotted language, world-weary poses, lots and lots of random violence. Raule goes to work for some nuns in a charity hospital, where her major recreation is dissecting and pickling monstrous births. Gwynn falls in love (or possibly lust... who knows? Who cares?) with Bethize Constanzin, an engraver (yes, yes, she invites him up to see her etchings) whose breath smells of blood and roses, and who may actually be the Sphinx. Or possibly she's just mad. Gwynn's major recreation is arguing theology with a debauched Reverend. Despite the Reverend's miraculous restoration of a dead man to life, Gwynn's position – not so much atheistic as nihilistic – definitely wins. The world of Ashamoil is arbitrary and pointless; style, and keeping one's cool, are the only possible escapes from the futile poverty of everyday life. Eventually, both Gwynn and

Raule leave Ashamoil, having gained... well, they've lived a bit longer, which on balance is probably preferable to the alternative.

This is definitely the world of Experience, not Innocence. Magic fails to awe, miracles are met with an ironically raised eyebrow. The seekers of sensation – and that seems to be all there is to seek in Ashamoil – search (not too keenly of course, to be seen wanting something is, well, so naive) for experience both rarified and intense, both subtle and strong. The descriptive style and language of the book reflect this. The descriptions are thick, rich, heavy; the descriptions are basically the *point* of this book. It's like trying to eat a whole cheesecake in one go. Recommended for those with jaded palates; others may end up feeling a bit sick.

Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler & Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (Eds.) – *Science Fiction Studies 91: The British SF Boom (Vol 30 Part 3 Nov 2003)*

DePauw University, Greencastle, 2003, 206pp, \$12.00, p/b, ISSN 0091-7729

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

Science Fiction Studies is one of the leading critical journals of, as the label says, science fiction studies. This issue is about us, a special issue on the 'British Boom' which seems to have had its genesis in the Science Fiction Foundation's 'Celebration of British sf' in 2001. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, one of SFS's regular editorial team, has long been a champion of British science fiction, and Mark Bould is a British academic who has contributed to *Vector*, while Andrew M. Butler surely needs no introduction to *Vector* readers. This is about us, but it's also by us. Andrew M. Butler's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom' has contributed to the 'Boom' in another fashion: it has won him the Science Fiction Research Association's Pioneer award for best essay. Mark Bould's 'What Kind of Monster Are You? Situating the Boom' locates the context for the Boom in wider traditions of the fantastic, and in the richness of British telefantasy. Roger Luckhurst's 'Cultural Governance, New Labor (sic) and the British sf Boom', in contrast, sets the overtly political sf of writers like Gwyneth Jones, Ken MacLeod, James Lovegrove and Justina Robson in the post-Blair political years and claims that the Boom is a kind of 'relational' or 'relative' opposition to mainstream culture. Stephen Baxter provides a personal view on cultural context and origins. Matt Hills considers the alternate-history stories of Kim Newman as 'alternate-stories'. China Miéville's *Pendido Street Station*, one of the 'classic' novels of the Boom, is examined by American academic Joan Gordon, who also conducts a searching and informative interview with Miéville. Andrew M. Butler provides a reading-list of Boom writers, while he and Bould convene a discussion of writers, fans and academics on the question of whether there was a Boom in the first place, during which this writer's voice seems to ring out with a resoundingly confident "Kind of. Maybe. Depends what you mean". Further down the

contents list, in the reviews, two more British names appear as Farah Mendlesohn reviews a book on Utopian and Dystopian writing for Children and Young People and Maureen Kincaid Speller reviews a book of essays on Diana Wynne Jones.

Booms are in the eyes of the beholder. It's certainly true that we are living with some of our finest *sf/fantasy* writers and the phenomenon known as the 'New Weird' is a useful (as long as you don't take it too seriously) catch-all title for some very different books which have in common only that they are written by ferociously talented people who are describing the world they live in in terms of the products of fertile imaginations. But I'm still looking in vain for some of these magnificent writers to appear in the best-seller charts. And the current issue of *Science Fiction Studies* carries a letter taking us all to task and pointing out – quite rightly – that one of the roots of the Boom (if Boom there is) has to be the comic *2000 AD* which has produced some of the most imaginative sf around and must have nourished the imaginations of many of our current crop of writers. Interestingly, it's only the writers who consider this material: China Miéville mentions role-playing games and makes a vague reference to 'horror comics' and Stephen Baxter blames it all on *TV21*. For the rest of us, it's a failure on our parts (and I certainly should have factored *2000 AD* into my set of 'Special Circumstances', particularly for its energy and oppositional stance to much of what has gone on politically over the past couple of decades).

Still, something has been happening and this issue of SFS is essential for anyone interested in teasing out just what.

[details can be found at www.depauw.edu/sfs]

John Brosnan – *Mothership*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 280pp, £10.99, h/p, ISBN 0 575 07492 2

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Mothership is an addition to the genre of generation starship novels, starting with Robert Heinlein's *Orphans of the Sky*, Brian Aldiss' *Non-Stop*, and lately continuing with Gene Wolfe's *Book of the Long Sun* series. The mothership *Urba* is nine thousand miles long, with a cylindrical living space 2,500 miles in diameter, illuminated by the same kind of 'long sun' down the centre axis (as in the Wolfe books) and as usual for these stories, the inhabitants of *Urba* live at a mediaeval level and are completely unaware that they are on a starship. But that's where any similarity with those books ends. Here, the situation is not by accident, but deliberate, as the Elite who rule *Urba* still have computer technology, communications, aircars and advanced weapons. They keep the 'mundanes' in check extremely cruelly, and have denied them knowledge of their true situation for centuries.

The story starts some time after the 'Day of Wonder', when the Elite's powers mysteriously failed completely. The first sign was the total failure of the only modern technology the Elite allowed the mundanes, their 'magic light globes'. The Elite's aircars fell out of the sky, the screens guarding their compounds disappeared, their weapons ceased to work, and most of them have now been killed by

their angry subjects. In the small country of Capelia, right against one of the end walls of *Urba*, the heir Prince Kender decides to go on a quest to discover everything he can about the Elite and their headquarters, the Citadel, some fifteen hundred miles away. With him he takes his boyhood friend and father's (incompetent) court jester, Jad, who is a most unwilling companion. Kender's motivation seems to Jad to be primarily about the putting off the day when he has to marry the beautiful but insipid Princess Petal. Jad tells the tale in a spirited and often humorous style as the two mismatched questers head towards the centre of the ship and the discovery that what has taken away the Elite's powers might be something far worse for the people of *Urba*. Our heroes also meet a spirited young refugee called Alucia, who quickly turns out to be much more than she seems. Needless to say, both Kender and Jad don't waste any time falling for her!

It won't win any prizes, but I really enjoyed the slam-bang action of this book – I found it hard to put down and couldn't wait to finish it (although one minor thing annoyed me – the ruler of Capelia and father of Kender is Lord Krader. Lords don't generally have sons with the title 'Prince'). However, my enthusiasm was slightly dampened by

the fact that, even though the imminent disaster facing Urba has been averted, the end appears to start us off on a new adventure. *Mothership* appears to be Book 1 of a series, although this is not

mentioned on the cover. OK, so I can't wait to get my hands on the next one, I admit it...

Mike Brotherton – *Star Dragon*

Reviewed by John Newsinger

Tor, New York, 2003, 352pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30758-8

Confronted with a novel featuring a starship captain called Lena Fang, who is heading up an expedition to capture a star dragon, my immediate response was despair. This was definitely a book to be read on the train, a forced labour during those long stationary episodes. The first sixty or seventy pages seemed to confirm this. The book was a chore rather than a pleasure. But, in fact, once Mike Brotherton got into his stride, *Star Dragon* became increasingly compelling until I was (almost) looking forward to my regular encounter with Virgin Trains. This is, as I am sure everyone will appreciate, no mean feat.

It is not that *Star Dragon* is a particularly good novel. The starship's crew – Lena Fang, Samuel Fisher, Phil Steam, Axelrod Henderson and Sylvia Devereux – all start out as pretty one-dimensional. They are really little more than vehicles for various obsessional traits. Indeed, the ship's AI, whose interface with the crew has the personality of Ernest Hemingway, is, at least initially, the most interesting character. This does improve slightly as the novel proceeds. Henderson's particular obsession, for example, is at times quite amusing: at one point he creates, for his amusement and self-esteem, a homunculi colony of 20-centimetre tall creatures,

ninety-one women and one male, his genetic relative, who has got all the women pregnant. Henderson cannot, of course, relate to real women. On the debit side, the affair between Fang and Fisher is pretty badly done, relieved neither by humour, pathos or eroticism.

Regardless of this weakness, the novel does become compelling as it goes on and the characterisation becomes secondary to the scientific adventure. What turns the book into a pleasure is Brotherton's enthusiasm. Now I must admit that for this reader most of the science that *Star Dragon* contains might just as well be as fake and manufactured as the average *Star Trek* episode, but that is neither here nor there. It is convincingly done. The tentative resolution of the problem posed by the nature of the star dragons is, in the end, so neat and clever as to leave a feeling of some satisfaction at having shared in something so nicely carried off. And, at the end of the book, all of the characters are working as a team. What more can you ask for?

Brotherton is, I suspect, going to become a regular feature in hard science sf. He is worth a look.

Lois McMaster Bujold – *Diplomatic Immunity*

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Larthlight, London, 2003, 367pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0 7434 6802 3

Bujold's huge *Miles Vorkosigan* saga rolls on into another volume (that's fourteen by my count) and the redoubtable soldier/diplomat hero has only reached the grand old age of 32! Better order that second shelving unit if you're a fan of the series.

This latest instalment is not the best starting point for an initiate; the densely plotted storyline makes frequent references to characters and events from previous volumes. But you can't help but admire the author's control as she adds further layers of detail to the Lord Auditor's back story without toppling the nimbly constructed mystery at the heart of this book.

The story catches up with Miles and his new bride, Lady Ekaterin, as they conclude their belated honeymoon. The happy couple have two embryos waiting in the replicator rack and are racing home to supervise the delivery when Miles gets one of his obligatory calls from the Emperor to help unravel a particularly knotty diplomatic problem. A Komarr-based trade fleet has put into space port at Graf Station for resupply. One of the officers from the military escort appears to have gone missing, or been killed, and a contingent of troops venturing into the station to clear the matter up became embroiled in a fire fight with the locals. The Quaddies (genetically engineered spacers adjusted for zero-gee) take umbrage and arrest some Barryaran

troops – or are holding them hostage, depending on which conflicting report Miles chooses to believe.

Once at the station the diplomatic situation grows ever more delicate as Miles learns that one of the incarcerated troops has asked the Quaddies for political asylum, and the Imperial intelligence source on the station turns out to be Bel Thorne, an old friend and hermaphrodite ex-mercenary. When shots are fired once more, this time aimed at Miles, he realises the situation is somehow linked to something in the Komarr cargo which leads to a potential crisis of galactic proportions.

Bujold could almost patent her unique blend of diplomacy, mystery and soap opera, and this book varies the mix enough for fans of the series to find a few new wrinkles in the formula. Personally, long-running sagas like this reach a point of information overload for me, with the backstory weighing down the character with an unfeasibly incident-packed resumé. This is not the first time in genre fiction that a huge fan-base has dragged a highly skilled and imaginative writer down a decreasingly interesting furrow. But for the many thousands of sf fans who disagree with me there's no denying *Diplomatic Immunity* is a class above most of the anodyne space opera crowding the bookshelves in Waterstones.

Ramsey Campbell – *The Darkest Part Of The Woods*

Reviewed by Mark Greener

Tor, New York, 2003, 400pp, \$24.95, h/d, ISBN 0 765 30766 9

Academic Lemnox Price investigates a moss growing in the local woods that seems to be a potent hallucinogen. Several years later, he's admitted to a mental hospital, where Lemnox becomes the focus of a group of patients obsessed with the woods. One of Lemnox's daughters stays locally – even splitting from her husband to do so – the other travels. When the prodigal daughter returns pregnant, she won't name the father. Meanwhile, local children begin to tell stories of an apparition emerging from the woods...

For centuries, writers used woods as, firstly, places to evoke terror and, secondly, as metaphors for our tangled psychological and emotional undergrowth. So, the heroes in myth often traverse woods to attain their personal grail. Apart from making the narrative a compelling yarn, the journey through the wood symbolises the character's development.

Campbell invokes both aspects of this iconic fantasy image. On

one level, the wood is a place of fear, evoking the primeval terrors sanitised in fairy stories. It's a place where manifestations of ancient evil lurk that can, despite our veneer of positivist modernity, ensnare us. Campbell creates an ambience that is all the more evocative because, for much of the book, he offers only tantalising glimpses of the 'lurker in the wood'.

On another level, the wood symbolises the Prices' dysfunction. Their emotional and psychological lives seem as tangled as the bramble. Some of their mental places seem as black and impenetrable as the pathways in the densest wood on a moonless night. The wood becomes almost totemic for the Prices, explaining their father's mental breakdown, for example. And they can't keep away. Lemnox's artist wife re-interprets and re-evaluates her relationship with the wood, almost as if she cannot come to terms with either the effect on her husband or her relationship with nature.

The totemic wood serves the same purpose as the jungle in *Heart of Darkness*. It represents the Prices' struggle to live in the midst of a world they cannot fully comprehend, despite their seeming sophistication and urbanity. The Prices seem fascinated by the abominable, to paraphrase Conrad, that lurks in the wood and their psychology. Tellingly, the evil exploits any psychological weaknesses or immaturities. Children, the Prices, the mental patients experience the evil. However, it leaves the small adult minds in the small town largely alone.

Trudi Canavan – *The Magicians' Guild*

Orbit, London, 2004, 465pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1 84149 313 9

Reviewed by Andrew A. Adams

It is quite rare to find a first novel by a fantasy author which manages to contain new twists on the concepts of magic (creating truly new concepts is probably impossible by now) and be well-written (including both a well-drawn world and believable characters). I was lucky enough to be asked to review such a work by Juliet McKenna a few years ago and now *Vector* has provided me another such gem with Trudi Canavan's *The Magician's Guild*.

We start with an annual event, the purge, in which the magicians of the city of Imardin use their magical powers to drive the poor outside the main city walls to the shanty towns beyond. During this event a slum girl, Sonea, brings forth her burgeoning magical powers to attack the magicians. Skillfully interweaving the viewpoints of Sonea and her would-be boyfriend Ceryni in a contrast to those of Rothen and Danyl, two of the magicians, we are led through an exciting, though slow-motion, chase through the city as the magicians try to find Sonea before her powers 'burst their banks' and kill not only her but a large number of people around her. Mixed in with this there is a great deal of exposition, but none of it seems strained or out of place. This is not an 'As you know, Bob...' infodump but a seamless information presentation driven by and around the action.

Starting in the background of the chase of Sonea, the pressures

Campbell builds his story around a strong emotional centre. In the first part of the book, Campbell focuses on the family dynamics between the Prices – and, to a lesser extent, their relationship with the locals. Any of us can identify with these dysfunctional relationships, illnesses and minor tragedies. This grounds the book in a shared naturalistic reality, which makes the fantastic all the more potent, all the more evocative. And throughout the book Campbell reminds you the darkest part of the wood isn't between the trees. It's inside us.

within the Magician's Guild of the title come to light. As the initial phase of the story of Sonea's discovery and pursuit draw to an end, there is a subtle shift to set up the longer-term thriller that the trilogy seems destined to become. This is deftly done in terms of both pace and building tension. The thriller aspects are drawn very much from the characters, their relationships and the political situation, rather than being the 'plot in search of characters' and the 'characters in search of a plot' that are too often thrown together and called a novel.

The viewpoint characters are very engaging and the dilemma of a pre-industrialised post-agrarian phase of society are suitably interwoven into the story as a backdrop to the personal adventures of Sonea, Cery, Rothen and Danyl.

At just over 450 pages, this is now no doubt categorised as of medium length for fantasy fiction. It has a page-turning quality that eludes so many and which means that one is always surprised at how much has been read in a session. This book has a detailed and believable backdrop with an intense storyline and is peopled with some delightful characters, and I'm definitely looking forward to the rest of the series.

Michael Cassutt – *Tango Midnight*

Forge, New York, 2003, 384pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0 765 30645 X

Reviewed by Peter Young

Michael Cassutt's third novel is a particularly timely work, about as bang up-to-date as a novel set in the international space program could be: post-9/11, post-Columbia, though hopefully not prescient.

In the very near future the world is scourged with a deadly biological weapon of terrorist origin, X-Pox, with millions dead and no cure in sight. The ambitious multi-millionaire biologist/venture capitalist Tad Mikleszewski – aka Tango Midnight – buys himself a place on the next Russian Soyuz to the International Space Station where he will, in secret, single-handedly work on a cure. Also along for the ride is Hollywood actress Rachel Dunne who will be the first actress to make a movie in space, though this unusual mix of ISS occupants is given a sharp wake-up call when the X-Pox virus escapes and Mikleszewski is immediately infected. With this sudden danger to the ISS and its crew, what should be done, and how can NASA send in the cavalry?

Setting aside the doubtful position of whether the Russians would ever truly jeopardise the forty billion dollar International Space Station in such a way – all in return for a mere thirty million dollar cash injection from Mikleszewski to the Soyuz programme – we're left with the question of how such a nightmare scenario could actually be resolved. Cassutt, a space programme aficionado of the first order, clearly enjoys playing to the gallery. He knows his subject inside out, from NASA's many bureaucratic levels that incorporate all the personal empire-building and *Top Gun* lifestyles of the astronauts, down to the institutionalised corruption that somehow makes the wheels turn at Russia's Star City, and there are some particularly well-

drawn comparisons of just how differently the two operate. But the resulting plan of action is arrived at rather too unilaterally, as if the other partners in the international space programme are denied any real say in the course of events and need to be told what to do. Cassutt also lets his eye for technical detail get the better of him too often, and what rankles is the surplus of space programme jargon mired in far too much acronymic alphabet soup (Mikleszewski himself is reduced to acronym throughout), much of which seems redundant to the narrative and is often left unexplained, such that even a small glossary would have been helpful.

It's an almost believable story, though what would have grounded it more is some detail on how X-Pox came about, and some more personal motive for Tad Mikleszewski in finding a cure for it other than the ego-gratification of having single-handedly saved the human race. Also rather difficult to believe is the lack of initial curiosity of the world's media to the purpose of Mikleszewski's 'Experiment A', as he is clearly no mere space tourist. Rachel Dunne seems little more than a cipher for sexing-up the dossier when needed, with some dialogue either too self-centred or deliberately cruel to her fellow astronauts to be believable; however, the more personal relationships between the rest of the characters are much better drawn and Cassutt is rather adept at providing an unexpected twist now and then. *Tango Midnight* has faultlines, though not major ones, and is a good read to see just how much work goes into putting a single astronaut into space, the final sequence of events being particularly well choreographed.

Arthur C. Clarke – *Tales of Ten Worlds*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 245pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07496-5

Arthur C. Clarke – *The Wind from the Sun*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 193pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-60052-7

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

It seems strange to think that a number of *Vector* readers may have been introduced to Arthur C. Clarke and possibly to the entire genre of science fiction by one or both of these anthologies. And on either

account it's not a bad place to start if you're going to start anywhere.

The first collection, *Tales of Ten Worlds*, consists of fifteen stories written between 1957 and 1962, while *The Wind from the Sun* covers

eighteen works from 1962 to 1972. Each volume tends to have stories of five to twenty pages before ending with a forty to fifty page novella. The tales cover a multitude of subjects such as the use of satellite television to bring down foreign governments, to underwater leviathans, to the dangers of asteroid mining. Others from *Tales of Ten Worlds* concern a genetically enhanced chimpanzee housemaid, scuba divers finding a Soviet re-entry vehicle, a South American football game, and biologists exploring Venus. Stories from *The Wind from the Sun* include an interplanetary yacht race, the creation of a global brain, climbing Mount Everest, exploring Jupiter and, of course, "The Longest Science-Fiction Story Ever Told".

It's difficult to distinguish which is the better of the two anthologies if one had to choose. *Tales of Ten Worlds* seems to have the more substantial and satisfying stories. However, it also has a more blatant pro-American tone that can become grating. *The Wind from the Sun* seems to have more snippets of ideas, almost slogans of ideas, rather than fully fledged stories. It also has the more groan-worthy jokes ("Star-mangled spanner", indeed!).

One criticism of both collections is that of characterisation, never a strong point with Clarke. His characters are not exactly wooden or cardboard cut outs of clichéd archetypes, it's just they seem as though they have tracing paper for flesh. And his characters are nearly always men, if not men then aliens or some other creature, robot, or something, but rarely women. Certainly women never play any important role except in one story when one fills the role of housewife. Despite the number of stories concerning pioneers of

scientific exploration not one of them is female (the original phrase that sprang to mind was that "none of the explorers had tits" though I get the impression some of them are a bit flabby) even though women such as Marie Curie and Rosalind Franklin had already left their mark in science. These stories are obviously born out of a more misogynistic age which is a shame considering how visionary Clarke can be about the future; yet this is a future in which women appear to play virtually no part other than what was dictated before the sexual revolution and the rise of feminism.

The other criticism I have is that occasionally, very occasionally, the prose can make me squeal ever so slightly as his sentences seem to lack a certain sophisticated edge to go along with the sophisticated visions.

But let's be honest: who reads Arthur C. Clarke for characterisation and witty, sharp sentences? I for one don't. I'm sure many others don't either. Clarke is read for his ideas. After all, why shouldn't we have a look at what's going on in the mind of someone who revolutionised telecommunications and thus the world we live in? His sentences will never win favour with Booker judges, but he has a talent for explaining complex concepts with simplicity and clarity that few ever achieve. And that's why these collections are still with us over thirty or forty years later. These are stories to inspire and question the world around us. These stories are the essence of what science fiction is all about. Sometimes they may lack class but they never lack genius.

Cecilia Dart-Thornton – *The Battle of Evernight*

For UK, London, 2003, 467pp, £10.99, £p, ISBN 0 333 90758 2

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

Imrhien, the eponymous 'Ill-made Mute' of the first volume of the *Bitterbynde* trilogy, through a succession of cures and name/identity modifications, has, in this concluding volume, become the beautiful Tahquil/Ashalind, holder of the key to the Gate of Faerie, the opening of which would enable the return to the Fair Realm of its locked-out exiles, the High King Angavar (revealed as the immortal alter ego of Thorn, Tarhil's chivalric lover) and his darker brother, the Crown Prince Morragan. It is this mission that impels Tahquil to travel to the Arcdur peninsula in the far north of Erith's great island of Eldaraigne, a progress which is eventually diverted to the eastern island of Namarre (site of the crucial Evernight Battle) in quest of her companions, abducted by the Wild Hunt acting for the Crown Prince.

Questing journeys are the very fabric of fantasy, and they are progressed in various forms, variously motivated, throughout this trilogy. Here there are basically three: northwards to Arcdur, eastwards to Namarre and then the concluding sea voyages. Pleasurable reading, the accounts of these comprise much of the book, and, as fantasies require, there are maps to go with them: good maps for easy reference, indicating, at points semi-pictorially, terrains and trails. The land route to Arcdur passes through successive zones of forest, pastoral meadow, scrubland and aridity, each with its problems and dangers. The only safe mode of traversing the huge forest of Khazathdaur is by way of its canopy, a world of webs,

catwalks and flying foxes, wonderfully described. In the diverted journey there is a transitional passage of the shrub maze of Firzenholt, and then through the Wastelands on to the very antithesis of leafy forests, the mineral and plutonic chaos of Namarre. When, late in the story, Angavar gives Ashalind a levitational flight over Erith's territories, she says: "I would like to remain in levity always. Gravity is too grave a condition." To this he replies: "Alas, thy race is not designed for constant lightness...", an exchange literally and metaphorically expressive of certain of the trilogy's many tensions.

The final chapters recount Ashalind's time-warped sojourn within the Gate of Faerie, the seeming loss of her faerie lover, and her marriage to Erith's King-Emperor. The Epilogue, however, contains as neat a twist as you could wish for. Original as this is, it is related to the myths and folklore of metamorphosis. In more specific borrowings from mythical and historical sources, Dart-Thornton is an eclectic gleaner, but most of such appropriations do seem to fit – the Tam Lin ballad fits here, just as did the Pied Piper legend in volume two. An Appendix identifies such sources, some surprising, but mostly very apt; for instance, authentic medieval menus for the King-Emperor's coronation feast, and details of the Crusades for the Evernight battle. *The Bitterbynde* is no Tolkien derivative: it is *sui generis*, and worthy to be considered a rival.

Charles de Lint – *Dreams Underfoot*

Orli, New York, 2003, 414pp, \$15.95, £p, ISBN 0 765 30679 4

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

The title of this collection of stories, first published some ten years ago, derives, as epigraph and text confirm, from a line in an early poem of W. B. Yeats's: "Tread softly because you tread on my dreams". The reason this book is subtitled 'The Newford Collection' is that the invented city of Newford is the constant locale for the stories, which appeared in various magazines between 1987 and 1993. Brought together in one volume, they do not add up to anything like a novel, but because the same characters, a casual fellowship of streetwise artists and musicians, are created along with their enduring abodes and haunts within the city, there is a novelesque continuity of relationships between various individuals, and between them and the city.

Newford has many commonplace features of an imagined large town; a university, a lake shore, a cathedral, pubs, shops, burger bars,

a subway. It has, however other and stranger dimensions. Beneath the subway, as we discover in 'The Stone Drum', are the dark and cavernous ruins of the Old City, long ago sunk by an earthquake and now sheltering a kingdom of goblins. From Newford's river and lake emerge evanescent mermaids ('Our Lady of the Harbour'). If within Newford there is a reality/fantasy border, de Lint's cluster of friends live on the reality side, but are often tempted or impelled to cross over. The bridges (in the story 'Bridges'), which appear to access a fantastic Escher-like city, but end in hidden drops, are fateful attractors to those whose lives hover between crisis and dead-end, as does that of Moira, the lost girl central to this story. The collection is full of comparable encounters, not all traumatic, but many transformative and bestowing a task or a responsibility. Such, in 'The Conjourman', is the destiny of empathic poet Wendy. She is conscripted/inspired by

the eponymous mysterious *savant-cum-vagrant* to re-grow a ruthlessly destroyed oak, the symbolism of which is revealed to her. When, in 'That Explains Poland', an urban myth is circulated of Bigfoot walking the rundown Tombs area, La Donna, out for a laugh, joins the hunt for him. She manages clandestinely to photograph a fake; but then she meets, eye to eye, the real (?) thing, and its prehuman grin and laughing glance is lastingly life-enhancing.

Of his leading protagonist, the artist Jilly, who is always befriending and taking in strays, animal, human, and the

unclassifiable, de Lint has the busker Geordie say that she had "a heart as big as the city, with room in it for everyone and everything." In the closing tale, 'Tallulah', the story-writer Christy has an idyllic and passionate affair with this 'Tally' who comes and goes from nowhere but forever dwells in his mind as a redeeming anima figure. In recollection, Christy says; 'I don't know whether she was here first, and the city grew around her, or the city created her. She just is'. That is, in fact, a just summation of the nature of Newford and its denizens.

Charles de Lint – *Spirit in the Wires*

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

Tor, New York, 2003, 448pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-87398-0

Spirit in the Wires is the latest offering in Charles de Lint's enchanting series of stories set in the imaginary North American city of Newford. These tales contain strong elements of urban magic and fantasy, as well as the classic notion of there being gateways to alternative worlds and dimensions, if you only know where to look for them, or can find somebody to show you.

As the title suggests, this novel has to do with the idea that sentient beings or spirits inhabit cyberspace, making their homes in the numerous sites and electronic pathways between them. A small group of Newford residents have developed a site called the Wordwood, which primarily deals with literary archiving and research. This site, however, rapidly takes on a life of its own, and they find that it keeps growing, seemingly without human intervention. Eventually, in an effort to learn more about our reality, known as the consensual world, the Wordwood sent out agents to pass as human and gather information. Saskia, one of these, developed a relationship with Christy Ridell, a Newford resident, and they now live together. The real problems start when Aaron, an acquaintance of Christy's, knowing of Saskia's interest in this particular site, blackmails a computer expert into infecting it with a virus, simply because he has a grudge against her. This is the cue for large amounts of vile black gunge to emanate from destroyed computers, and the disappearance of anybody who happened to be logged on to the site at the time, including Saskia. A motley crew then sets out on the mission to find the Woodward's physical presence,

rescue those who have vanished, and prevent further harm. This group includes Aaron himself, full of remorse and seeking redemption, Christy and his shadow, Christiana – an entity created when a child shuns personality traits that they feel to be unnecessary or harmful to social interaction – as well as people involved with the site's development. They do, of course, have help from others with unusual and mysterious origins.

In many ways, the attraction of de Lint's work does not lie in originality of ideas; many fantasies are based along broadly similar lines. His development of character, however, is excellent, and, as a reader, you do empathise with many of them. Saskia, for example, felt alienated when she first entered this world, both because it was strange and new, but also because she suffered rejection from many people who subconsciously realised that she was very different from them. Some of his characters, while they have derivative origins – for example a guitar player who struck a deal at the crossroads – are still very much his own. The way that the supernatural combines with the everyday in Newford, sometimes almost as a natural extension of it, is also extremely effective. His descriptions are powerful and evocative, drawing in the reader.

Spirit in the Wires is a very enjoyable addition to de Lint's *Newford* series and indeed his work in general, which will appeal to many fantasy readers.

Ty Drago – *Phobos*

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Tor, New York, 2003, 431pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30544-5

There is no entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* for Phobos, a fact that suggests Ty Drago's debut novel may be the first to take the larger moon of Mars as its backdrop. Sadly, as debuts go it is not particularly impressive – not for the moon, and not for the author.

Our hero is the distractingly named Lieutenant Mike Brogue. On a Mars ruthlessly exploited by Solar Exploration and Development, Inc. he's the only native Martian to be a commissioned officer in the Peace Corps. After Brogue successfully resolves a hostage situation involving the Mayor of one of the planet's larger colonies, his profile becomes a little higher than either he or his superiors are comfortable with and he's shipped off to a research station on Phobos to investigate a series of mysterious deaths. What he finds is a whole gaggle of clichés just full of pulpy goodness: miraculous (and so topical!) nanotechnology, artificial gravity, a secretive multi-millionaire and his equally secretive but significantly more attractive daughter, a labyrinthine conspiracy and, last but not least, a terrifying space monster. Yes, the elusive Beast of Phobos is stalking the dust sea that surrounds Agraria Station... and the death toll is rising.

What follows is an energetic police procedural in which Brogue puts a lot of noses out of joint, wims the respect of a bunch of roughnecked soldiers, works out (via several impressive leaps of logic) which of the clichés are connected, battles the Beast, brings his man to justice and, finally, sets things up for the inevitable sequel.

The book, despite the cynical synopsis above, has some strengths. *Phobos* demonstrates that Drago has a flair for worldbuilding; his Mars is an interesting place, if a little dry of wonder. The political situation he describes is resonant with both current and past real-world concerns, although his good work is undercut somewhat by the simplistic motivation of the villain. There are perhaps one too many convenient technologies thrown into the mix, but for the most part Drago juggles them well, and at least the genies are still largely out of their bottles at the end of the story. And though several key plot twists are far too obvious, and the clunky lumps of exposition are a little too frequent for comfort, in general the pacing is strong, the writing is clear, and the pages fly easily by. As militaristic, testosterone-rich, ostensibly hard-sf but actually Hollywood-esque detective stories in space go, it could be a lot worse.

The main problem with *Phobos* is simply that there's nothing here that hasn't been done before, and done better. Peter F. Hamilton was updating the near-future detective almost a decade ago, in his Greg Mandel trio, and the game was a little empty then. These days, with books like *Singularity Sky* doing the fast-paced-space-adventure rounds, *Phobos* just feels obsolescent.

Charlaine Harris – *Dead Until Dark*

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Orbit, London, 336pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-299-X

Introducing our plucky heroine Sookie Stackhouse, a real stunner. Now, Sookie works as a waitress in a local bar in Louisiana, but before you accuse her of being some retarded Southern chick you'd

better know that there is nothing ignoble about her chosen profession and she's very intelligent actually. We know this because Sookie re-emphasises her mental faculties, drop-dead gorgeous looks and

quality employment, at every opportunity. Oh and she has sex on her mind. Sometimes it's because some hunky male makes her heart go a-flutter and sometimes it's because a bloke imagines having sex with her. Sookie, you see, has a gift. She can read minds. This creates an internal conflict in that she wants sex, looks like a million bucks in her lavishly described skimpy outfits but can't get any. Sex that is. It's because she can read her potential partner's mind and knows what he wants. Sex, normally.

Fortunately there is a solution to this sorry state of affairs because it turns out that vampires' minds can't be read. Even better a really fit-looking, undead smoocher called Bill has just moved into the area. He's eligible and sooooo dreamy and what's more she saved him from being drained by a couple of hicks who wanted to sell his elixir blood on the black market. Vampires, you see, have been recognised as bona fide citizens although they find it difficult to vote because most polling booths only operate during daylight hours. But they are still regarded with suspicion, especially when a number of fang-bangers (groupies who hang around vampires for sex, oh, there's that word again) are found brutally murdered. With the police floundering it's down to the resourceful (and incredibly good looking) Sookie to solve the mystery, because dating hot romancer Bill has put her very

much in the firing line.

Dead Until Dark is another entry in what is becoming a burgeoning sub-genre – the Violent Femme Kinky Supernatural Romance Novel. It's a natural extension of the dark romance of *Dracula* but infused with contemporary culture and not a little Buffy post-modern ethos. As with its contemporaries (Anita Blake, the Kelley Armstrong books) we're in page-turner territory and not high art, indeed *Dead Until Dark* tends to wear its pot-boiler tendencies with pride. It's this defiance that is the book's main weakness; if it would just get on with the tale instead of ranting about the nobility of working class America we could all just enjoy what is, after all, a fun light read. There are lots of neat ideas, a real sense of community and, in contrast to many of the VFKSRN's, Sookie has a family history that drives her character motivation. Her on-off relationship with Bill is at times infuriating, but has a sense of plausibility that is notably absent during the occasionally hilarious sex scenes. Whether Sookie can develop remains to be seen, but for the moment she is a diverting, if somewhat guilty, distraction. Oh, did we mention sex? You must have read our minds...

Robert Jordan – *New Spring*

Orbit, London, 2004, 334pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-260-4

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This is an expansion of a novella, and to some extent it shows as I found it rather disjointed (though this may be because I am not familiar with the series). The main event – a quest to find a boy-child who will fulfil an ancient prophecy – is set against a backdrop of a war which seems to have been going on for a long time, but which ends rather oddly when the enemy simply back off from fighting and return home. This serves to introduce us to Lan, a king in exile, who decides to return home with his two companions.

In counterpoint to this, there is the story of Moiraine and Suian, women in training to become Aes Sedai – women who are able to channel the elements (Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Spirit) and use the skills they learn for the benefit of the world as a whole. When we first meet them, they are approaching the test which will determine whether they join the sisterhood, but things are about to change. One of the senior sisters, who has the gift of foretelling, announces that the prophesied child has been born, and then she dies. For Moiraine and Suian and their companions, this means a chance to leave the Tower

where they live and study, and gather information on all the boys born in the region. In addition, Moiraine is regarded by her superiors as the next queen of her country, something she does not want, and this results in her actually absconding from the Tower to pursue the search on her own and find the child of the Prophecy, ahead of the other sisters who have been sent legitimately on the same errand.

She discovers on her travels that there are two different factions after the child, each with its own aims, and her Quest takes on an entirely new dimension, which ultimately involves Lan. The novel's ending is inconclusive, and therefore we may not have seen the last of Moiraine and Lan: for one thing the said child has yet to be found. An additional twist is that the actual date of the birth is not known. I came to this novel at something of a disadvantage, not having read any previous *Wheel of Time* stories, and this seems to be a book for those familiar with the series.

David Langford – *Different Kinds Of Darkness*

Cosmos Books, Holicong, 2004, 286pp, \$17.95, t/p, ISBN 1-59224-122-0

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin



As the blurb says, "A major fiction collection from multiple Hugo Award winner, David Langford... besides the acclaimed Hugo-winning title piece the 36 stories include the BSFA Award winner, 'Cube Root' and eight 'Year's Best' and 'Best Of' anthology choices, sf, fantasy, horror and unclassifiable Langford weirdness ranging from 1975-2003." Or "All human knowledge is

supposed to be here, a labyrinth worthy of Borges..." ('Waiting For The Iron Age', 1991), and the fractal on the cover hints at the paradoxical puzzles which lie within.

This anthology complements last year's Cosmos Books anthology of Langford parodies, *He Do the Time Police in Different Voices*, and between them the volumes reportedly collect all the author's published short stories. The current volume is divided into four sections. 'Gadgets and Glitches' arranges in chronological order 19 sf stories, while the 'Questing Beast' gathers four fantasy tales and 'Irrational Numbers' groups nine pieces originally published, for want of any better definition, as 'horror'. Finally 'Basilisks' presents a sequence of four stories from a future history which climaxes with the titular 2001 Hugo short story winner.

'Basilisks' begins with the 1988 story, 'BILT', an influential account of images so paradoxical they can overwhelm the mind with deadly consequences. Originally published in *Interzone* 25, 'BILT' is typical of the magazine and British sf of the period, and archetypal

Langford; wry, elliptical, enigmatic and unsettling. The central meme would recur in Neal Stephenson's *Snowcrash* and many other places over the following decade-and-a-half. The implications are further explored through the ingenious prequel, 'What Happened at Cambridge IV' (1990), 'comp.basilisk FAQ' (1999) and finally in the children's adventure, 'Different Kinds of Darkness', by which time the treatment had become rather too cosy. The story is clever, but too readily evokes a certain young wizard, such that it's interesting Langford comments in his afterword 'Tanya Brown brought me down to earth with her insistence on calling it 'Harry Potter and the BILT''. Spot on, and one can only conclude the story deserved its Hugo if *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* was likewise worthy of a Hugo the same year.

The rest of the book is far superior. The typical Langford tale is built on a solid foundation of either an ingeniously original idea, or a refreshingly new spin on a familiar notion. And sometimes Langford has a novel idea which he extrapolates in an exhilaratingly unexpected direction. Hence 'Waiting For The Iron Age' was written for the anthology *Tales Of The Wandering Jew* (1991), yet far from the expected sort of yarn, tells a remarkable story of damnation and memory spanning 101500 years in just four pages. This story is undyingly (rather than deadily) serious and demonstrates another aspect of the Langford yarn – erudition. Here he cites Einstein, William of Occam, Ahasuerus, Cartaphilus, Bishop Berkeley, Borges, Freeman Dyson, William Paley, Littlewood, Archimedes and others, all to accurately support the narrative. Langford's knowledge is wide-

ranging, and the way he weaves it into the fabric of his stories constantly impresses.

I've mentioned Borges twice now, or is it three times? And there is a clear influence. In 'Accretion' (*Andromeda 2*, 1977) it may be most obvious – a tale of a man searching for a great city which nonetheless is only a hypothetical creation, yet which may become real through the power of imagination. The story works as a metaphor for the creative act of writing, and plunges deep into the heart of SF and fantasy's obsession with the power of 'The City'. Many writers have followed this quest, right to the present with China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, and Langford evokes by name that '70's generation of British writers post Borges and Ballard, addressing the enigmatic in an unknowable world: Chris Evans, Gary Kilworth, Robert Holdstock and more.

And I've yet to mention Langford's most famous characteristic. His humour. From dry satirical wit and intellectual puns through farcical slapstick, these stories hurdle the gamut with considerable panache. 'Heatwave' (*New Writings in SF 27*, 1975) offers knockabout spy

spoofery and satire of institutional bureaucratic idiocy while 'Encounter of Another Kind' (*Interzone 54*, 1991) brings a very wry perspective to the standard clichéd alien abduction scenario. Some stories will make you laugh out loud, others conjure pleasurable ironies, even the most serious contain wit in the truest sense.

Reading so many stories together by one author is never the best way to appreciate each tale individually, but it does bring out the common themes. Here satire of institutions and the mindsets they inflict is never far away, and if Langford is often concerned about the dangers of new technology it is not because he is a reactionary, but because he knows how flawed human beings are. There's also a regular questioning of the nature of reality, and again humour, often counterbalancing a melancholy poetic cosmic-metaphysical romantic angst. Read the book, it will entertain you, make you think and laugh as the world falls apart. There are different kinds of darkness.

[Available from www.wildesidepress.com]

Mercedes Lackey and James Mallory – *The Outstretched Shadow*

Tor, New York, 2003, 604pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30219-5

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

I have very mixed feelings about this collaboration. It starts off promisingly enough, with Kellen Tavaddon, son of the Arch-Mage Lycaelon, living more or less happily in Armethaliah, the Golden City, where life is regimented by the High Council. In fact, every aspect of life had to be approved by the Council, even down to the nature of items sold in the market: this also extends to the arts – any new musical instrument or work of fiction has to be inspected by the Council members, and a vote taken.

Kellen's life is equally regimented: his father intends him to be Arch-Mage one day, and his education is tailored to that end. Kellen, however, is a typical teenage rebel – at seventeen, he has no real idea of what he wants to do, but succeeding his father is not on his agenda, and he is an indifferent student. One day, he comes across a trio of books on magic, which he buys, and discovers something he did not know: in counterpoint to the High Magick he is meant to be learning, there is such a thing as Wild Magic, and he takes to this like a duck to water. Even the fact that he has to pay a price each time he casts a Wild Magic spell does not deter him, as an example, when he loses the key to the back gate of his home and uses a Finding Spell to locate it, he ends up rescuing a young girl's kitten from a tree: in doing so, he dislodges a jackdaw's nest, and in the nest is the key.

Inevitably he gets found out, and when summoned to answer for his actions, he openly rebels against the rules. The sentence passed on him is one of Banishment from the City: he has twenty-four hours to get beyond the lands owned by the City before the Council sends its hounds after him. As Kellen is ignorant of how far the lands extend, like everyone else, it is assumed he will not manage this. But his father has reckoned without the Wild Magic. Kellen uses it to help him escape, and finds himself in the company of a talking unicorn, who helps him fight off the hounds – stone magical constructs.

After this, the story turns into a standard quest. Kellen has to trigger a spell created by his sister to reverse the drought besetting the Elven lands, and he is accompanied by a lovelorn Elf (who is enamoured of his sister). In so doing, he finds his true destiny. There is also a subplot concerning the Demons who want to take over the world; the interludes describing their activities worked very well, and I found myself wishing for a few more of them to counteract the frequently repeated descriptions of places, people and their emotions. Having said that, it's a promising start to a new series (this is book one of *The Obsidian Trilogy*) which could be quite enjoyable, given some judicious pruning.

Ken MacLeod – *Newton's Wake* ☐

Orbit, London, 2004, 369pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-175-6

Reviewed by Peter Young



Newton's Wake might be the kind of book that we wish would come to us more often in science fiction, and had MacLeod not almost single-handedly raised the bar of political writing within the genre there could be more than the scant few British sf writers who can keep up with this kind of artistic and very literate satire. And gosh, it's science fiction too. This is MacLeod's first

proper standalone novel and that is essentially a good thing, for if he added much more to the *Newton's Wake* universe it might dilute this book's strengths, which are considerable.

MacLeod kicks off in combative mood. We are given the story of 'the bloody Carlyles', the wayward but prominent New Glasgow crazy gang, told through the adventures of their 'combat archaeologist' Lucinda Carlyle, an engagingly straightforward woman perhaps loosely modelled on Lara Croft. Travelling between worlds via a series of artificially created wormholes, her team stumbles upon an already inhabited planet, Eurydice, where they inadvertently awaken a dormant technology that produces mysterious self-replicating war machines. This sudden arrival of the Carlyles roughly coincides with an unexpected encounter with orientals from another colony world, the Knights of Enlightenment, and Lucinda's escape gives her a further encounter with the curious DK, a space-settling communist society. Meanwhile on Eurydice itself, amongst a society

of European descendants from man's first hurried colonization of the solar system, the notable playwright Ben-Ami is working on a new masterpiece and enlists as his actors the re-embodied personalities of two twenty-first century musicians, Winter and Calder. There is a history to tell of Eurydice's divided population, the Reformers and the Returners, those who wanted to continue into space and those who wanted to return to Earth. But in all this, conspicuous by its absence there is a major player missing: what is America's place in history, and what was the Hard Rapture that took so many of Earth's best minds?

Not giving much away, MacLeod more or less summed up the plot of *Newton's Wake* to me almost a year ago as "Something nasty happens to the Americans and the rest of the world has to continue the space programme". How I subsequently envisaged the possible result says as much about my own lack of imagination as it does about MacLeod's ability to constantly surprise us. *Newton's Wake* is no *Tomb Raider* meets *Stargate*, and similarly, the temptation to describe it singularly as a 'political science fiction novel' would also be doing it an injustice. As expected from MacLeod there is far more here than just dry politics, AIs, spaceships and situational minefields; in upbeat style plus some rigorous treatment of many current tropes that provide a variety of colourful threads, MacLeod has pulled together a story with a very tight, multi-layered weave. His emphasis is most definitely on 'culture', which draws the suspicion that the inclusion of the words 'A Space Opera' on the book's title page might

be loaded with more than just a hint of irony.

Whereas MacLeod's *Engines of Light* trilogy played with a specifically polarised Cold War theme, *Newton's Wake* takes in a wider assortment of conflicting ideologies. The friction and fun comes from where MacLeod lets these incompatible mind-sets rub up against each other, reminding us that humanity can often be alien even to itself, though when playing with this particular kind of fire there is a danger of reducing individual people merely to ciphers and functions of their proscribed politics. It is only really the Carlyles who exhibit much freedom of thought: the Eurycleans are necessarily ironic, the Knights typically eastern, the DK somewhat enslaved to sanctioned ideology. MacLeod may be suggesting that any human presence in space cannot avoid being informed by some kind of political slant, such that we will never be able to shake off ingrained cultural influences when venturing into space, but singling out America as the fall guy was perhaps necessary for the book (and some of its best jokes) to work: it is not long before one realises that MacLeod is not telling *Newton's Wake* with an entirely straight face. Giving the language a (sometimes perplexing) literal twist when spoken with a

Glaswegian accent often makes this a specifically Scots adventure, which is refreshing, but it is the emphasis on culture of a distinctly European flavour that seems to infuse the book. The playwright Ben-Ami's loose interpretations of Earthly political history are cleverly contrived and root the book largely in the satirical political present, a much-needed anchor without which *Newton's Wake* would probably be cut adrift without a compass. Which means that, above everything, this book is fun.

Divided into two parts, the first part of the book sets up the intellectual dynamic while the second half is a more physical read, and some fast-paced action sequences involving some more especially colourful characters emerge to propel the plot in the direction of an entirely unexpected conclusion. The reader is rarely left behind despite the large amount of information MacLeod imparts. On this form it's hard to see how MacLeod can put a foot wrong, and it is difficult to add more without spoiling MacLeod's good humour which should arrive fresh, but suffice to say any writer who can make perfect literal sense with an abstraction such as 'I swim around the trousers of Mao' just might deserve our undivided attention anyway.

Paul McAuley – *The Eye Of The Tyger*

Telos, Tolworth, 2003, 84pp, £25.00, deluxe h/b, ISBN 1-903889-23-1 (£10, standard h/b, ISBN 1-903889-24-3)

Robert Perry & Mike Tucker – *Companion Piece*

Telos, Tolworth, 2003, 100pp, £25.00, deluxe h/b, ISBN 1-903889-27-8 (£10, standard h/b, ISBN 1-903889-26-X)

Tara Samms – *Frayed*

Telos, Tolworth, 2003, 134pp, £25.00, deluxe h/b, ISBN 1-903889-23-5 (£10, standard h/b, ISBN 1-903889-22-7)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

These new Telos *Dr Who* deluxe editions all look absolutely gorgeous – although *The Eye Of The Tyger* gets a special mention for looking like it's sleeved in worn steel – but these are books (novellas, technically) and though having a cool cover never hurts, it should be what's on the inside that counts.

I loved *Dr Who* as a child and stayed with the series from Tom Baker through Peter Davidson to Colin Baker, enjoying all the incarnations. However, when the series took its hiatus we kind of grew apart, and by the time Sylvester McCoy took over I had found another lover.

Watching those old episodes again now, much of the lustre has obviously faded but the core idea remains one of genius: the Protean hero living in a world that despite some sf trappings is actually a gloriously rich fantasy, a tapestry of disparate ideas stitched together with some very strong thread.

Reading these three books reminded me of the wonderful impossibility of forming a single coherent timeline from the Doctor's adventures. Not only is there no single Doctor but there doesn't seem to be a single universe that he inhabits either; instead he flits around a multiverse (I recommend reading the article at www.edge.org/3rd_culture/susskind03/susskind_index.html to better appreciate this), thus allowing for anything to happen. Part of the continued relevance and success of the Doctor is, I think, this fluidity of movement within multiversal reality.

Anyway, hark at me babbling on when all you want to know is are the books any good!

The good news is that all three of them are not bad at all. *The Eye Of The Tyger* has, as you might expect from the pen of Paul McAuley, generation starships, nanotechnological werewolves and black holes. His depiction of the eighth Doctor is of a calm and dignified man, very calm, clever and in control – instantly likable. There is a rather savage change of scenery mid-story that jarred with me for a while until I remembered what (or should that be 'Who?') I was reading.

Tara Samms's *Frayed* is very much a horror story that should instantly bring to mind the days when Dr Who was really scary. This isn't a book you'd want to let a young child read because it's deeply unpleasant – in a good way – and chockfull of blood and horror. Genetic experiments gone horribly awry, a base of stranded humans

besieged by savage aliens on a distant world and a dark mystery at the heart of it all. Oh, yes. All this and the first Doctor, too, in an adventure set before *An Unearthly Child*. Tara Samms presents him as entirely unsympathetic, but all the more fascinating for that.

Companion Piece features the seventh Doctor and Cat (whom I confess to being entirely unfamiliar with) tangling with not the Spanish Inquisition but their big brothers in the Intergalactic Inquisition. I was somewhat surprised to find that I 'got' the Sylvester McCoy Doctor in this story; the way Perry and Tucker present him makes sense in this context and it's possible to see some potential for the series with McCoy at the helm if it hadn't been cancelled. The story is, once again, an interesting one, touching upon religious issues in science fiction. Nothing that hasn't been done elsewhere with more sophistication, but some interesting questions are at least asked of a resurgent Catholicism set loose in the wider universe.

The real test of these books for me was always going to be whether I could imagine them as being actual 'proper' adventures broadcast on TV – and I could. It was easy to visualise all three (right down to the slightly wonky special effects that would be used). The authors have obviously thought about the Who universe and how it works, they've noted what makes it different to any other sf format and have managed to reproduce this magic on the page.

If £25 for these deluxe editions seems to you a little steep for such relatively small pleasures, then Telos have also released them in eminently more reasonable standard editions for just £10. Each book does contain a painted frontispiece too, although these vary a little in quality. Chris Moore's one for *Frayed* is truly excellent: his artwork is of a near photo quality and adds significantly to the overall effect of the story. Jim Burns' effort for *The Eye Of The Tyger* and Allan Bednar's *Companion Piece* are not quite as necessary to the stories they illustrate but it's still nice to have them there.

OK, so these books might not be quite right for the analytical lover of bleeding edge hard sf in your life, but they ought to briefly brighten a cloudy day for less rigorous readers with fond memories of the Doctor.

[Available from www.telos.co.uk]

Paul McAuley – *White Devils*

Simon & Schuster, London, 2004, 521pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-7432-3885-0

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

White Devils is a near-future bio-tech thriller packed with all the things you would expect from this type of novel. It has conspiracies, advanced science running out of control and corruption aplenty. It also has a very human feel to it.

Set in The Congo, there is a significant back history. The whole African continent has had a very rough deal. Half the population has been wiped out by the black flu. This has been followed by the inevitable civil wars and vicious military dictators. The landscape has

also been shaped by the uncontrolled release of genetic material. At its worst this has led to the Dead Zone, a large area which as the result of a terrorist attack on a laboratory has been turned into a sort of plastinated goo. Large parts of the continent have been bought up and are 'supported' by a number of allegedly environmentally-oriented multi-nationals.

Against this backdrop, Nicholas Hyde is an ex-soldier working for a humanitarian charity that is investigating the atrocities of a recently overthrown dictatorship. Whilst investigating what appears to be a particularly brutal attack on a village, his group is attacked by vicious ape-like creatures, the White Devils of the title, that kill everybody except Nicholas, a government observer, a baby and the helicopter pilot. A large number of the genre's clichés seem to be dispensed with early on. The White Devils are officially described as children who were drugged to be soldiers, the corpse of a recovered White Devil disappears, and people who were involved or just been in contact with Hyde start to die at an alarming rate.

The first half of the novel is largely concerned with developing this aspect, whilst simultaneously the reader is provided with an enormous amount of information, which is skilfully threaded into the story. The complex back stories are developed quite naturally without interfering with the flow of the narrative. We are introduced to Elspeth Faber and her father Matthew. He lives in a reserve where he is studying another group of ape-like creatures referred to as The Gentle People. The behaviour of these creatures has been controlled by use of an engram that removes the natural resentment of outsiders. The flipside of this is that if this resentment is enhanced, you end up with an animal that will attack anything that is not exactly like it. The

gentle people and the white devils are quite clearly closely related.

The second half of the novel has a quite different feel to it. Hyde's quest to find the truth behind the white devils becomes mixed up with the aims of other characters. All of these are now heading for the Dead Zone for their own various reasons. We are now firmly in *Heart of Darkness* territory, with each of them having to face down their own personal demons. They share a common belief that some answers to not only what is going on now, but to past events that have shaped all of them in various ways, lie in the Dead Zone. The title is more than simply a reference to psychopathic apes. One of the strengths of this book is that, although events are somewhat extreme, all the characters remain real and very human, and all of them have a past.

The way the biotech science is used in this book is interesting. We are not shown the science going wrong, we are simply left with the results of it. Animals created for a Pleistocene Park are still around, the Dead Zone is a reality and local people have started to come to terms with it, even taking advantage of certain aspects of it. It is not the science directly that we are interested in, but the implications of its long term effects. What becomes apparent is that the science itself is not necessarily at fault, but the use to which the controlling powers want to put it. It's bad politics that cause trouble here much more than bad science. Whatever the root cause, we still have the fallout from what went wrong. *White Devils* works extremely well as a thriller, but to just describe it as such is really underselling it. This is a novel with real depth that lingers in the mind long after the book is finished.

Andre Norton – *The Solar Queen*

(or, New York, 2003, 382pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0 765 30054 0

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

These two novels – *Sargasso Of Space* and *Plague Ship* – were written in 1955 and 1956 respectively, and have been combined here in one volume. They tell the story (in part) of Dane Thorson, newly-graduated apprentice-cargo-master, who (when we first meet him) is about to be advised of his future by the Psycho – a machine which uses graduates' ID cards to decide their destinations. In Dane's case, he is assigned to the *Solar Queen*, a Free Trader, in a universe where two trading Companies, Combine and Inter-Solar, vie with each other and the Free Traders to gain contracts.

For Dane, this is a mixed blessing: to some, Free Trade is romantic, but he knows that this may not be the case – in fact, it can be downright dangerous. However, his life has been mapped out for him, and he has to live with it. The fact that the *Solar Queen* is the most battered ship at the spaceport does not help to boost his confidence.

During the course of the first novel, the crew of the ship bid for trading rights in an auction, and end up with the rights for a planet which ostensibly has no profit in it for them, until they get chartered by an archaeologist who wants to visit the planet in question. But the archaeologist and his people are not what they seem, and the scene is set for Dane's first voyage, and an exciting one it is.

In *Plague Ship*, Dane's adventures (and misadventures) continue.

In this case, the *Solar Queen* is investigating a planet where a deceased trader had a contract with its inhabitants, who are evolved from felines: the contract has eighteen months to go. For a while all goes well, despite the attempts of Inter-Solar to gain the rights to the precious jewels native to this planet. But then a mysterious illness hits the crew of the *Solar Queen*, and they are driven to desperate measures to escape being shot down on sight, the fate for any ship designated as having plague on board.

These two novels are something you don't see very often these days (more's the pity): here are characters you can believe in and sympathize with, along with cleverly-thought out storylines and (in *Plague Ship* particularly) a well-constructed alien society. The result is a recipe for success that deserves to be showcased in the way it has been. These particular novels have not seen the light of day for twenty years, and they have made a welcome return as far as this reviewer is concerned. Granted that the technology may seem a bit old-fashioned to modern readers, but this does not detract in any way from the stories.

I was delighted to see that there are plans to bring the next two *Solar Queen* novels out in a similar omnibus, and I look forward to this event. I would definitely recommend these novels as an excellent read for old and young readers.

Frederick Pohl & C. M. Kornbluth – *The Space Merchants* Philip K. Dick – *Time Out of Joint*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 186pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0 575 07528 7

Gollancz, London, 2003, 220pp, £6.99, ISBN 0-575-07458-2

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

The fifty-fourth and fifty-fifth Masterworks came at the end of 2003. 'Masterwork' does not just mean the work of a master; its original meaning was the work to be presented to a master (of a guild) to show that an apprentice-turned-journeyman could produce work worthy of the guild. *Time Out of Joint* satisfies that condition almost perfectly, because in 1959, it was the first book Philip K. Dick sold to a hardback publisher, after years of short stories and paperback originals. *The Space Merchants*, published seven years earlier, was being hailed as the first work of sf to stand in its own right by Kingsley Amis in *New Maps of Hell*.

Reading them today, they still justify their place.

There would have been no *Truman Show* if there had been no

Time Out of Joint. *Time Out of Joint* is about the construction of reality: the reality that Ragle Gumm needs to live by in small-town America. Ragle Gumm lives with his sister, brother-in-law and nephew, supporting himself by winning newspaper competitions, or rather one competition 'Where Will The Little Green Man Be Next', talking walks out and about in the town, until one day the ice cream stand before him vanishes leaving only a piece of paper bearing the words 'ice cream stand'. And when he takes it home Ragle adds it to others he has collected. Nothing in this view of America has prepared the reader for this collapse. Ragle is only slowly prepared to investigate.

Mitch Courtney, rising man in Fowler Associates, an advertising

agency, knows the value of illusion. He also knows what is necessary to support it: states of dependency. When the company gets the contract to publicise the colonisation of Venus Mitch becomes one of *The Space Merchants*. In the 22nd century the world is overgrown, overpopulated, driven by advertising, and living on GM foods. Mitch is close to the top of the pecking order and the food chain, until a little old-fashioned backstabbing sends him down to the bottom of the tank. It's only then that he appreciates what is going on, and even then he hardly has a solution.

Extrapolating from post-bellum America, *Time Out of Joint* and *The Space Merchants* are about dictatorships. They are aware also of how other orders have invaded the American dream. It takes a second look before some of these clues can be found. For instance, Mitch Courtney describes a morning briefing from the chief: "he began in the dithering, circumlocutory way... he called our attention to the history... [and finally the speaker ends] with passion". The whole speech takes three quarters of a page. What is the significance of it? Compare Big Brother in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Big Brother asks questions and immediately answers them - Orwell was parodying Stalin's speaking style, learned from the catechism as a young seminarian. It was Hitler who began with a "party narrative",

hypnotising his audience with this long build-up before his climax much later. Pohl and Kornbluth bury this satirical resonance deep in the story; some readers might never notice it, but in fact there is some sort of allusion on almost every page for the first half of the book - it is tremendously dense, no wonder the literary critics could appreciate it.

Neither Pohl and Kornbluth or Dick, though, would have thought they were writing pure political satire. And they must have felt a need to satisfy another strand of sf readership of the time - both books turn into chases with thrills and spills. Perhaps Dick also appreciated Pohl and Kornbluth's solution to Mitch's problems - the underground Consies (conservationists who oppose advertising, GM and all other horrors) will resist the earthly dictators by basing themselves on Venus. In Dick's later reality rebels have planted themselves on the moon - it is their rocket attacks that Ragle is being used to predict. Neither earth can support an opposition - perhaps like President Eisenhower's then or President Bush's USA today.

Just as there are many resonances, some of which are still with us today, in *The Space Merchants*, so there are many implications in *Time Out of Joint*. It could be an introduction to philosophy. Both books are welcome back.

Robert Reed – *Down the Bright Way*

Orbit, London, 2003, 358pp, £6.99, pb, ISBN 1-84149-255-8

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Mankind is not alone. A pathway, created by an unknown ancient race, links together millions of worlds, populated by humans. The Wanderers along the Bright have reached our Earth...

"I'm part of a mission...I came from a different Earth and I'm a Wanderer...I'm following the Bright until I find its Makers, whoever and whatever they might be. And as I follow I pledge to help knit together all flavors of Mankind. To the best of my ability. By purely peaceful means. Always."

Against all this moves a disparate cast of characters; an alien wannabe, a girl fascinated by the visitors, a pair of terrorists and Jy, the leader of the Wanderers. As this group converges, Reed uses their individual viewpoints to gently unfold the background, explaining here, hinting there, until the full, grand sweep of the past meets the present head on and gives us the startling revelation of the terrorists' motives.

Reed shows us these characters in a variety of styles, Kyle, the Earthman who want to be an alien, is highly detailed; Billie, his human girlfriend is a little less so; the terrorists are shadows, and Ky is

drawn slowly, fine lines contributing more and more, until she emerges from the pages fully-formed. These are characters that we have very little trouble identifying with, we all know people like this, we can understand their motives (most of them...)

Reed also uses a variety of styles to tell the story. Events are described as they are happening. Then these events trigger a flashback for the characters involved, which fills in the story background or develops that character and leads into the story of the other interdependent characters. The whole thing weaves together and pushes the reader on towards the climax and the eventual fulfilment of each person's hopes.

Given all this detail, I was left with the impression that this story isn't finished. Like real life, we come in after things start, and leave before they finish. But I was left dissatisfied and with the feeling that there are still many areas that are crying out for detailing or expansion. I am well aware that there comes a point where an author just has to say, "right, that's it" but really, to round this out properly needs some snakes' legs. Lots of them. In my opinion...

Laura Resnick – *The White Dragon*

Tor, New York, 2003, 495pp, \$25.95, hb, ISBN 0-312-89056-7

Laura Resnick – *The Destroyer Goddess*

Tor, New York, 2003, 480pp, \$27.95, ISBN 0-765-30875-4

Reviewed by Pamela Stuart

This saga is the sequel to another book, *In Legend Born*, and readers who start with *The White Dragon* may find the many references to events and characters from the previous book extremely confusing.

The story takes place on a large island kingdom, Sileria, in the middle of an inland sea. The island is inhabited by a number of warring races; the peasant-shallaheen, the Guardians who practice fire-magic and the Waterlords who have taken over the water-magic from the aborigines and misused it. Living on a fleet of ships off the coast are the Sea-bound tribes who never set foot on land, on pain of banishment from the tribe. The island has a series of gods and goddesses of whom the most powerful is Dar who inhabits the volcano Darshon. One of the peasants becomes her chosen Firebringer, but is killed by the White Dragon, a manifestation of one of the Waterlords, Kiloran.

As this book starts, a sea-bound youth, Zarien, comes to grief during his initiation-rites and is saved by the sea-goddess, Sharifar, who sends him ashore to find and bring her chosen Consort. As she does not tell him plainly who this is, he mistakenly choses Tansen, the Firebringer's brother, who refuses, forcing Zarien to join him in the hopes that eventually, when his work is done, he will join him. Zarien himself shows some strange powers of healing, but attributes them to Tansen whom he is convinced is the Sea-king. The man

suspects that Zarien himself is the chosen one, but by then both are embroiled in the violent happenings of war, earthquake, and volcanic eruption, which prophecies declare will end with the birth of a child combining the powers of Fire and Water, who will be the new Ruler. The book ends when Tansen makes Zarien his blood-son.

And on to the second volume, *The Destroyer Goddess*. The Waterlords have now almost completely overpowered the whole of Sileria. As the prophecy of the coming of the new ruler spreads, along with increasingly violent earthquakes and eruptions from the volcano Darshon, many pilgrims feel called to the crater in search of him, convinced that he will come from Dar's fiery home.

Mirabar, one of the Guardians, and Elelar, the wife of a Valdani aristocrat, Ronall, whom she loathes, become pregnant; one by a Waterlord, the other by a renegade Guardian. They know that one child is to be the new Ruler and the other his protector. The waterlord is dying but knows he must survive long enough to save his child from Kiloran, who has already killed one pregnant woman, mistaking her unborn child for the new Ruler.

The books live up to their description as an Epic Saga but they make a heavy read in more ways than one. Not recommended, even as a light holiday-read.

Alastair Reynolds – *Absolution Gap*

Gollancz, London, 2003, 565pp, £12.99, hb, ISBN 0 575 0434 5

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

In his loosely linked *Inhibitors* series, now brought to a sort of conclusion in *Absolution Gap*, Reynolds provides one possible answer to the Fermi Paradox: if, in an infinite and ancient universe, there are other beings and civilisations, why haven't we heard from them? The answer Reynolds posits is that there is something out there inimical to life, a machine intelligence, dubbed the Inhibitors, that seeks out and exterminates any race that shows signs of developing a spacefaring technology.

The first clue is provided by the human colony in 2551 on Resurgam, who uncover evidence of an ancient civilisation, the Amarantin, wiped out nine hundred thousand years earlier by a solar flare just as they were on the verge of discovering spaceflight. In doing so, they trigger an ancient alarm system and the Inhibitors, long quiescent, are about to make a return. And this time, it may be humanity's turn to share the fate of the Amaratin.

Absolution Gap is set some hundred and seventy years on from the fateful discovery on Resurgam. Humanity, or what it has become (which, somewhat akin to Bruce Sterling's *Shaper/Mechanist* universe, is divided between competing factions of 'real humans' and post-human Conjoiners and Ultras) is now engaged in a struggle for survival which, despite the dwindling supply of Hell-class cache armaments and the new, barely understood and even less controllable, hypometric weapons, seems more a postponement of the inevitable than a hope of victory.

Into this falls Quaiche, chancer and con man, who has been unfortunate enough to become infected with an indoctrinal religious virus, and fall into the employ of the psychotic Ultra 'Queen' of the lighthugger ship *Gnostic Ascension*. Quaiche needs to bring in a big find to keep his acquisitive mistress happy (or what passes for it, in someone addicted to serial self-mutilation of a series of vat-grown clone bodies). He has already been shown the instruments of torture if he fails. On a moon orbiting a gas giant, he thinks he may have found his answer, an impossible bridge, a sliver spanning an immense chasm. But Quaiche's flyby triggers a dormant defence mechanism. His crippled shuttle, at the bottom of the chasm sends a distress message which impossibly, is answered by his ship, safely parked on the far side of the gas giant, Haldora. It appears that Haldora was, for one moment, not there at all to block his distress call.

A century later, Quaiche has turned the impossibility and tragedy of his rescue into a religion, propagated through the colonists of Hela. Further momentary 'vanishings' of Haldora have been recorded over the years and Quaiche has had himself modified to neither sleep nor blink so he can observe Haldora constantly. But because of Hela's oddly lagging orbit around the gas giant, Quaiche and his followers must traverse the moon's surface at a constant one third of a meter per second. This leads to one of *Absolution Gap's* most splendid creations, the caravan of immense, ponderous cathedrals which trundle slowly around the circumference of Hela along the Permanent

Way, and down and up the zig-zag stairs of the chasm, the site of Quaiche's forced crash-landing and rescue, known as Absolution Gap. Deliberately or not, this arresting visual image inevitably reminds the reader of the ever-moving cities of Priest's *Inverted World*, Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* and Constantine's *Calenture*.

Meanwhile, on the Pattern Juggler planet of Ararat, the survivors of the Resurgam evacuation require another last-minute evacuation. Unfortunately the evacuation ship, *Nostalgia for Infinity*, is sunk a kilometre in the silt of Ararat's ocean, whilst Anna Khouri's stolen unborn child, Aura, believed to be the key to victory against the Inhibitors, must be recovered from the surface of Ararat. The price of Aura's rescue is appalling (Reynolds wisely moves this offstage, leaving the reader's imagination, and its effect on the remaining characters, to complete the gruesome details).

The *Nostalgia's* journey will take it, eventually, to Hela, where, at the same time, a young girl, Rasthmika Els, absconds from her home in the badlands to find out what happened to her brother, who some years before had set off to find work in the cathedrals. These three threads inevitably come together as the full extent of Quaiche's madness, born equally of guilt and virally-induced religious fervour, become apparent.

Absolution Gap has all the elements you could wish for the New Wave of British Space Opera: a galaxy-spanning war for survival; spectacular set pieces, ships and weaponry, alliances and bitter rivalries, strange posthuman futures, and god-like intelligences. But taken as a whole, and as a conclusion to the *Inhibitor* sequence, it has to be said it feels oddly constructed and not quite what might have been anticipated. There are also a couple of rather glaring plot glitches towards the end: one that strains credulity and the other an apparent oversight. Perhaps deliberately (as with China Miéville's *The Scar*) it breaks the rules and refuses conclusion. On the wider stage, victory is a respite only, a stopgap and a breathing space. The future of humanity still hangs precariously in the balance. Perhaps there are, after all, more novels or stories to come – although it will necessitate a largely new cast of characters.

And this sense of indeterminate outcome, won at huge cost, is echoed on a personal scale in the elegiac framing Prologue and Epilogue. "Inhibitors. Cache weapons. *Nostalgia for Infinity*: they are like the incantations of a childhood game, forgotten for years. They sound faintly ridiculous, yet also freighted with a terrible significance." And there, perhaps, with *Dune*, *Foundation*, the Culture, all the way back to E. E. 'Doc' Smith's Grey Lensmen, we have both the appeal and guilty pleasure of the genre.

Fred Saberhagen – *Empire of the East*

Tor, New York, 2003, 512pp, \$17.95, tp, ISBN 0-765-30742-1

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Fred Saberhagen is perhaps best known for his *Berserker* series of military sf. *Empire of the East* dates from 1979, and was assembled from three rewritten novellas that appeared between 1968 and 1973. The book is portrayed as a 'seamless splicing of sf and fantasy' and takes place in a ruined America, centuries after the fall of our civilisation. The Broken Lands, on the edge of the Western Sea, have been colonised and are now ruled by the evil Empire of the East, which is situated beyond what are now known as the Black Mountains, and ruled by the seemingly immortal John Ominor. This Empire is maintained not only by its armies but also by sorcery, which plays a large part in this story. Sixteen-year-old Rolf is ploughing in the field when his parents are murdered by soldiers and his sister abducted. Swearing revenge, he stumbles across and then joins a small band of rebels fighting against Empire rule. These rebels of the West are sustained by a legend of a god called Ardneh and a powerful weapon or steed called Elephant, which dates from before the time of wizards and magic, and which was created by something called

'technology'. In fact Rolf soon finds Elephant preserved in a mountain cave, it's a tank of the US Army's 426th Armoured Division (a private joke for military buffs – the current highest number is 50th), whose badge is an elephant holding a spear in its trunk. This tank is nuclear-powered and still in working order – a reminder that in 1968 we still thought nuclear power would be used in the future for powering almost everything! Also fighting with them are the men of the Out Islands, presumably the remnants of California and its Coastal Range.

Ekuman, the ruler of the Western lands, has a breathtakingly beautiful, but selfish and unscrupulously ambitious, daughter called Charmian. Ekuman marries her off to Lord Chup, a satrap from the East. Chup is a man whose path crosses with Rolf's several times before he finds out he's married to a viper, and eventually he and Rolf find themselves on the same side. As the Westerners defeat the Easterners and drive them back with the help of Ardneh, the Emperor's chief wizard decides his only (but very risky) hope is to release the imprisoned evil god Orcus.

The cover of the book has several contemporaneous testimonials, including one by Larry Niven saying that he prefers it to *Lord of the Rings*. Considering just how huge a global phenomenon that book has become, such a comparison today seems fatuous. *Empire of the East* is certainly a great read with a satisfying conclusion, but I wouldn't place it in the same league – that 'seamless blend of sf and fantasy' is

actually rather forced. That said, there is certainly scope for filming it; not only does the book have lots of battles and sorcery, but also human interest with several characters with whom the reader can identify. There's also the smug enjoyment of the reader in knowing things the characters in the book don't, such as the true nature of Ardneh.

Mark Samuels – *Black Altars*

Mark West – *Strange Tales*

Stuart Young – *Spare Parts*

Reviewed by Simon Morden

Rainfall Books, Calne, 2003, 85pp, £8.00, p/b, ISBN 0-9540877-8-X

Rainfall Books, Calne, 2003, 82pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-9540877-9-8

Rainfall Books, Calne, 2003, 98pp, £8.00, p/b, ISBN 0-9546178-0-0



These three slim collections of dark tales from indie horror press Rainfall Books show three different currents in modern horror. Stuart Young's *Spare Parts* dwell on the fantastic which grows from the ordinary: if this wasn't genre, posh reviewers in mainstream magazines would call it magical realism. Young serves up six stories – atmospherically illustrated by Bob

Covington and Dave Bezzina – on the theme of love and loss, and the quiet desperation of ordinary lives suddenly transformed by accidental magic.

'Boxes' is about memory: Peter is ditched by girlfriend Elaine for a newer model, and all he's left with are his memories. An experimental drug leaves him with total recall, but being able to remember everything he's ever seen or said or done has a catastrophic effect on his sanity. 'Midnight in a Perfect World' is a classic story of destructive co-dependency, made possible by a mantelpiece clock that is able to keep a relationship new and exciting, just so long as the hands on the face are set right. 'Spirits of Darkness and Light' is a ghost story – a dead Royal Flying Corp pilot appears to a colleague, asking him to finish what he started. But just what is the ghost's mission? When the life expectancy of a new pilot is measured in minutes, taking deliberate risks is the kiss of death. 'Swamp Gator Blues', 'Face at the Window' and the title story 'Spare Parts' complete the collection – not quite as strong as the other three, but still fine stories in their own right. Perhaps Young has yet to find his own unique voice, but his range and depth of storytelling is already well crafted.

Mark West's *Strange Tales* are stronger, more gristly meat. His simple, unembellished style belies the often visceral subjects, imparting compassion and logic to a series of abnormal psychopaths and deranged souls. If you're at all squeamish, look away now...

'Empty Souls, Drowning' finds two desperate and distraught people washed up in a winter seaside resort. He has lost his wife in a car-crash when he was driving: she has lost her toddler, drowned at the beach when she was distracted for only a moment. Their shared predicament brings them together, but only death will heal them. 'Dead Skin' is about necrophilia: a Goth girl seizes the chance to live out her fantasies but the cost to her and others is great. This tale is so lovingly and carefully told that it has a perverse beauty all of its own.

'Together Forever' has a suicide finally reunited with her lover – no clichéd ghost story here, just a chilling last line and an unforgettable image. As with Young's collection, not all the stories are of the same high standard: but most out of the eleven hit the mark. West excels at empathy, even with the most disturbed of his characters: he writes of scenarios where morality has ceased to function and Nietzschean logic breaks through.

Worshipping at Mark Samuels' *Black Altars* is a different experience again. If Young's characters obsess about love and West's are concerned with extremes, Samuel's stories see life as an aberration, a cosmic accident just waiting to be erased. Lovecraft and Poe are the fathers of the weird, and we pay homage to them as well as to newer writers Thomas Ligotti and Matt Cardin. Samuels often intertwines the new with the old: science and learning are the ways by which we discover we are nothing.

In 'The Lichen', a scientist confronted with a terrifying message from outer space tries to warn an indifferent world before he succumbs himself. 'Nephelium' mixes the power of dreams and the Rite of Communion to chilling effect. Patient 704 appears all day, every day on the television screen of Glanville Private Psychiatric Home. The effect is so compelling that none of the other patients want to leave – but what happens when he reveals his hidden face? 'Mysteries of the Abyss' considers the fine line between genius and madness, and that True Knowledge is the preserve of the insane. Cats of all shapes and sizes feature in 'The Ailuromorph', as an insomniac discovers parts of his town he never knew. 'Dedicated to the Weird' tells in a series of increasingly unbelievable emails the story of Justin Voors, failed horror writer. Voors escapes his critics to stay in a bizarre village inhabited by glass-eyed zombies – he starts writing the best story of his life, only to discover that the story will cost him his life. Samuels is unfailingly sharp, with lucid prose and unflinching coolness. There is none of Young's aching devotion or West's deviant passion. Samuels views the universe as cold and dark, and the better for it.

All the books are produced to a high quality, with no obvious typographical or layout errors: full marks to proprietors John Ford and Steve Lines for their quality control. Rainfall have brought out three fascinating, diverse collections, worthy of space on any horror fan's shelves.

[Available from 95 Compass Crescent, Old Whittington, Chesterfield, S41 9LX]

Robert Silverberg – *Downward to the Earth*

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Gollancz, London, 2004, 213pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07523-6

The first Masterwork of 2004 is this Silverberg novel from 1977. The title is misleading – the Earth has little to do with the planet Belzgor, or Holman's World as it used to be known before the colonial power withdrew, recognising the sentience of the elephant-like nildoror. 'Downward' is perhaps another misleading item in the title, as this is another of Silverberg's sensawunda fantasies with religious overtones.

However, there is another overarching influence on *Downward to the Earth* – Gunderson, the protagonist, is a former administrator who has returned to the planet and is going through the jungle in search of Kurtz. *Downward to the Earth* repeats the tropes, almost repeats the plot, of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (*Apocalypse Now* as it reappeared on screen). As Gunderson also meets his former girlfriend, Seena, on the way, there are hints of Graham Greene along with it.

Belzgor is a near-jungle planet, on which the nildoror are happy

to do little more than graze. Where necessary they use the yahoo-shaped sulidoror for any manipulation and hut building they need. It is the sulidoror who control the mist country where the nildoror undergo rebirth, though it cannot be entered without permission of a reborn nildoror as well. And it is the mist country that is Gunderson's ultimate destination. Why is not clear as he cannot explain his true motives.

The jungle is alien but fortunately not of extreme hostility (with the exception of an *Alien* type hatchery). Silverberg has always seemed capable of producing this wonderful xenobiology without repeating himself from novel to novel – each forward step of Gunderson's journey introduces him to something new. It does mean, though, that this is not an adventure story. However, in the last few chapters, after Gunderson has met Cullen, a renegade explorer,

Downward to the Earth becomes an explicitly religious work. Gunderson wants to share the rebirth undergone by the mildoror even after Cullen has revealed the true nature of the pachyderms to him, and the last couple of chapters can be read as justifying the Christian heresy that only sinners can know salvation. Those chapters really

have no other purpose.

So enjoy this addition to the Masterworks series for its sensawunda. Read it in more depth along with Conrad and Greene. And cry "The horror. The horror."

Martin Sketchley – *The Affinity Trap*

Simon & Schuster, London, 2004, 306pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-7432-5734-0

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Alexander Delgado is an out-of-favour Military Intelligence officer. He agrees to go on a mission on behalf of Earth's leader, General William Myson, to recover an alien child-bearer, Voumias Lycern. Myson had agreed to father a child with the alien Serriatt to ease tensions between the two races but Lycern disappears to the Affinity Group, a pseudo-religious order. Delgado sees this as an opportunity to make a move against Myson but does not anticipate the effect Lycern will have upon him.

The Affinity Trap is decidedly a book of two halves. The first involves Delgado's mission to find Lycern and the consequences of the biochemically addictive relationship he develops with her (although the Serriatt has three sexes, Lycern is referred to as 'she' throughout). Delgado is by no means a likeable man. A ruthless officer in the pursuit of his duty, he has been made bitter by the direction he sees Earth politics taking and the virtual dictatorship Myson is creating. Although you can see that he wants to do the right thing his experiences have left him incapable of a normal emotional reaction. One result of this is that he deals ruthlessly with everyone around him, not hesitating to take innocent lives to achieve his ends. I found it a little difficult to tell if we were supposed to be on his side or

not; certainly I found some of the incidental damage a little difficult to stomach.

I can say little about the second half of the book without giving away major plot points but I will say that in many ways it becomes more interesting as Delgado starts to interact more with people and recover his humanity.

The background of the novel is fairly broadly drawn and I did think that Sketchley missed an opportunity to broaden it out. As it was, it felt like the places that were visited were well drawn but did not feel part of a coherent whole. Maybe he will fill this out in later novels, as the ending certainly leaves room for more stories in this background.

To be frank, as a first novel from a British author, I really wanted to like this a lot more than I did. But I found two main problems: firstly the book, as noted above, is very broken-backed, almost feeling like two stories joined together; secondly the ruthlessness and coldness of the main character made it difficult to empathise. When I was a teenager I would probably have found him 'cool' but I want a little more personality in my heroes these days.

Sheri S. Tepper – *The Companions*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 452pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-578-07566-X

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Sheri Tepper's latest novel revisits some of her earlier concerns, in particular care for the environment and the fragile balance of an ecology. On an overpopulated Earth, new legislation demands the death of all animals – humankind's companions – whose only hope of survival is deportation off-planet. At the same time, human and alien intervention on the newly discovered world of Moss threatens to damage its unique ecology. The protagonist, Jewel Delis, is influential in the movement to save Earth species – specifically, dogs – and it is ultimately her care for them which leads her to make fundamental discoveries about the new planet.

Another important theme of the book is communication: the way that humans and animals communicate, and changes in this communication on Tepper's future Earth. A vital part of the plot is concerned with the question of whether there is intelligent life on Moss, and the attempt to resolve this by learning the language of the Mossen.

There's also a hint of a perennial theme of Tepper's: the way in which men can dominate women, and a reminder of *The Gate to Women's Country* in the way that men on Moss have nothing to do but be warriors, yet these ideas are of minor importance here and presented with more balance than in some of her previous work.

The title of the novel also refers to the 'cones': artificial humanoids whose origin is uncertain and who are used – or misused – by humans. Their official name is 'companions', but the slang 'cones' is short for 'concubines', which gives a truer picture of their general function. In a way they parallel the animals in the novel, both being in a sense 'pets', yet the function of the cones is undeveloped. Their significance is dealt with quickly and their status remains unresolved at the end of the book.

This lack of development is evident in other aspects of the book. Tepper creates not one but three races of evil aliens, all of whom have different and conflicting agendas, and all of whom threaten humankind, yet in two of the three cases the manifestations of their evil and the plots they hatch against each other have the air of being manufactured in order to produce a confrontation. I am in any case unhappy about the concept of evil races as opposed to evil individuals, and feel that the situation as Tepper has set it up does not allow for any depth of character development.

In contrast, the human characters of the book are portrayed in much more depth and with a greater degree of realism. Jewel herself is an interesting protagonist, her brother Paul compels through sheer awfulness, and the more minor characters all work on various levels. In particular I liked Gavi, one of a group of humans stranded generations before on Moss, who has taught herself to work with the local ecology and has an engagingly straightforward way of using what she has learnt to manipulate those around her for their own and the greater good.

The strengths of this book spring from the gradual discovery of the secrets of Moss and what humans must do to interact successfully with the world. It comes across as a real and complex environment and the plot moves swiftly through misunderstandings to a genuine appreciation of the truth. The novel comes to a climax in what would be the opening of a destructive interplanetary war; the way this is prevented is both moving and unexpected. This is, ultimately, a powerful and interesting book, though it does have flaws. However, I wouldn't have wanted to miss it.

Harry Turtledove – *Gunpowder Empire*

Tor, New York, 2003, 288pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30693-X

Reviewed by Penny Hill

This is an enjoyable romp set in a future extrapolated from our present. We have discovered alternate worlds and the technology to move between them. Traders do this covertly from 'our' world for resources which are becoming scarce, such as food and oil. This is a juvenile novel; the viewpoint characters are adolescents and the plot

and language are clear and simple. The underlying ideas are explained up front in a history revision lesson – the alternate-present concept is explained together with many wonderful examples. I found the underlying politics naive. They assume that their culture is best, despite their inability to manage their own resources. They will trade

with alternate worlds for the equivalent of shiny beads and this will work to everyone's benefit and is not exploitation.

Jeremy and Amanda's summer holidays are spent with their parents in a world where the Roman Empire never fell. I enjoyed the world-building premise that a society with slavery and little outside competition wouldn't need an industrial revolution. Industrialisation is therefore in its infancy and gunpowder is the most advanced form of technology. Other social history details were rushed – there's a sideways mention of public baths and Amanda missing shampoo, but no mention of what they used instead.

Living in a besieged city, accidentally separated from their parents, should have given us a sense of danger, yet Amanda and Jeremy felt protected, perhaps because they were isolated from the other citizens. We saw deaths, but they were of strangers, with whom we felt no involvement.

Harry Turtledove does explore some of the social differences between these two worlds. Amanda tells us repeatedly that a woman is as good as a man, but despite our American family choosing not to have servants or slaves, the men unquestioningly adopt Roman ways, which means the women do all the domestic work. Amanda grinds corn every day and eventually explodes at Jeremy for not 'helping' – yet we are not told how long this takes, nor whether they divide the

work in future. I'm surprised our alleged feminist didn't insist on Jeremy sharing the work earlier. The awkward sibling relationship between Jeremy and Amanda is well-done. However, splitting their viewpoints along gender lines, between learning facts and feeling empathy, is creakingly old-fashioned.

Disturbingly, the American characters show more violent reactions to the use of fur than of slaves. Although Christianity has evolved in the Roman alternate present as one of many religions on offer, it is still seen as top religion by our viewpoint characters. Maria, the Christian slave, is closest to Amanda's world view, but without assertiveness she is seen as limited. I was disappointed that Amanda's decision to defy her society's rules of non-interference by paying for Maria's freedom had no awkward consequences. I felt this cheapened the moral imperative on which Amanda was acting – as she had broken the 'Prime Directive' she should have suffered some penalty instead of being praised.

I wanted to read on and find out what happened next. The plot was fun and absorbing with the progress of the siege and the teenagers' struggles with Roman bureaucracy. This is a promising start to a new series, enjoyable – if not particularly profound. I look forward to the exploration of different worlds in future volumes.

Guy Walters – *The Leader*

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Headline, London, 2003, 340pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0 7553 0057 2

Crises create strange bedfellows. Afterwards someone is likely to be pushed out of the bed so that whoever is left may re-make it as they wish. That is the premise of Guy Walters' second novel, *The Leader*. The crisis in question is that of 1937 leading to the abdication of Edward VII, except that in Walters' alternative history there is no abdication, Edward overcoming Baldwin's government with the assistance of Winston Churchill and Sir Oswald Mosley. Unfortunately for Churchill, Mosley reveals himself to be of a Hitler-like cunning, takes power in a putsch, and as in Germany enemies of the party (the 'British Union of Fascists and National Socialists' in Sir Oswald's case) soon find themselves in concentration camps (the British government re-opens the old ones it established on the Isle of Man in the First World War, as it would do in the real Second World War) while the press and the man in the street begin to find the muzzle biting. It is not too long before His Majesty's Secret State Police start helping people to disappear as the Fascist electric flash banners begin to cover the streets. It is these banners mingling with the Union Flag and the Swastika that greet the German Fuehrer Adolf Hitler as he visits King Edward and *The Leader*.

What is going on? That is the question being asked around the dinner tables of all the best families in Chelsea and Kensington. It may be being asked in Golden Green and Bethnal Green as well, but Walters never takes us there for dinner. It is at such a table that we meet James Armstrong – a sometime officer with a good war record who now uses his powers of command as Chief Whip of the Conservative Party. They were not enough to help the National Government drive out King Edward, they were not enough to keep out Mosley. They are not enough to stop Armstrong's rebellion against the Fascists leading to his arrest and internment on that island in the middle of the Irish Sea. They are enough to help him escape back to

the mainland and join up with the resistance, though. And he has been thorough enough to have established a list of sympathisers throughout the country – an opposition in waiting.

As we drop in on *The Leader's* cabinet we meet his colleagues – Minister of Information, William Joyce, among them. You'll recognise the names (or should do). Mosley berates men like Armstrong as Jews and Communists, though Armstrong is neither. When we meet Armstrong's eventual East End collaborators they are probably not Communists either. However, Walters throws an international spanner into the works – what do the real Communists – that is, the Stalinists and Stalin himself – want for Britain? Walters follows Stalin's spies through their furtive meetings in Clapham, identifying them by their pseudonyms. If he told us their real names too soon perhaps we would realise who has been betraying Armstrong and the resistance.

Guy Walters is a former journalist on *The Times* and this is his horror story for old-fashioned *Times* readers. A frisson of terror may be raised when a Chief Whip of the Conservative and Unionist Party might find himself arrested and sent to live in a terraced house outside London (we're not talking barracks when we talk about the Isle of Man, did you know?), but the real Chief Whip of the Conservative Party at the time (David Margesson) probably helped inflict far more suffering on the British people through the Means Test. Modern authors from the conservative trend in politics have difficulty working with alternate history (I'm thinking here also of Niall Ferguson's essay collection *Virtual History*, reviewed *Vector* 195), and it has something to do with a failure of imagination. Guy Walters lists his sources – they make interesting reading, and a useful bibliography for sixth-form modern history students, but unfortunately, he has failed to realise their full potential.

Jo Walton – *Tooth and Claw*

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Tor, New York, 2003, 253pp, \$24.95, ISBN 0-765-30264-0

Jo Walton's fourth novel is a standalone story, completely unrelated to her previous books to date.

This is a strange story indeed. In a Victorian landed-gentry setting, *Tooth and Claw* follows the trials and tribulations of one family – starting at the deathbed of the father, Bon Agornin. Bon asks a favour of his son Penn, who is a 'Blessed' priest of the faith, and although more frowned upon by the church than openly heretical, Penn takes Bon's 'confession' in the way of the old religion. The nature of this confession leaves Penn in no doubt as to his father's wishes for his offspring upon his demise, and he intends to fulfil those wishes. It all starts to go pear-shaped, however, when a son-in-law takes more than his due for himself and his immediate family. One son resorts to law

to redress the balance, and enlists the help of his two sisters – one of whom is in a difficult position because she is married to the accused. Penn is also in a very difficult position, because were he forced to reveal that he had taken Bon's confession, he could be struck from his exalted position as a priest. The story follows the lives of the family throughout the period leading up to the court case where the only possible result will be the total ruination of one of the parties involved.

All fairly uninspiring really, until you know that all the characters in the book are dragons, and the issue for the courts to decide is whether or not Bon's body was consumed equally by the immediate family and in accord with the wishes of Bon. This is important

because dragons grow in strength and power by the eating of their dead, weak and sick.

I really don't know why Walton elected for this period drama to be enacted entirely by dragons. I've never really been a fan of talking animals – real or mythical, but given the Victorian setting, female dragons fussing about bonnets takes some getting used to. She says in her introduction that this novel owes a lot to Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage*, but I fail to see the relevance of this unless you've

read it. It's simply *Upstairs, Downstairs* with dragons.

It's an engaging story, and it's well written (as you would expect from an author who has won the John W. Campbell award for Best New Writer), but to be honest I see nothing special about it except that it's 'quirky'. I suppose fans of talking-animal fantasy might enjoy it, but I found it an unchallenging, and entirely lightweight read.

A VECTOR RECOMMENDED READ

Gene Wolfe – *The Knight*

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Tor, New York, 2004, 430pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30989-0

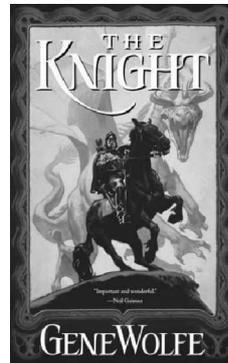


Gene Wolfe's latest novel arrives as part of a continuing fantasy renaissance – but where writers like China Miéville or Ian R. MacLeod rebel against the constraints of Tolkienesque high fantasy, Wolfe comes to reclaim the form, along with all the tropes and traditions that it carries.

The central narrative of *The Knight* (part

one of a two-volume sequence entitled *The Wizard-Knight*; *The Wizard* follows next year) is relatively straightforward. A boy from our world slips across realities to a medieval realm, filled with all the elves and giants and dragons you might expect. Once there he gains a new name (Able), falls in love with a faerie queen, is magically accelerated to adulthood, becomes a knight, and begins a quest to claim Eterne, the Mother of Swords.

Inevitably, though, the novel that flows from this setup is anything but simple. The first complication is the narrator. The text of the novel is a letter from Able back to our world, to his brother Ben, explaining how he disappeared and where he's been. Able is mostly a reliable source, but the reader is constantly aware that he is a child not only displaced to a foreign world, but also in essence to a foreign body. He is thoroughly the innocent abroad, and does not understand everything he sees. He is also a boy who does not want to relive everything he's done, and now and again he will simply refuse to relate one or another incident. Consequently, what is elided is as important as what is told, yet the directness of the language that Able uses (coloured by contemporary American idiom) inspires a belief in

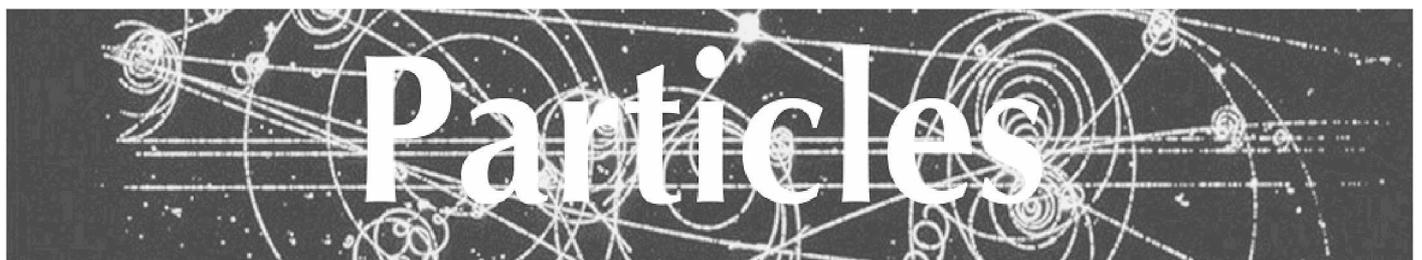


the surface simplicity of the story. Every so often the reader is tripped by this belief, with the result that one always feels the real story dangling just around the corner, just beyond understanding. Wolfe's mastery of his writing is complete.

The real world, too, feels always just out of reach. Since this is a proper fantasy novel, there is of course a map in the front of the book; but since this is a Gene Wolfe novel, what it describes is as much metaphysical as it is geographical. Able's world is divided into planes.

Movement between them is possible, but fluid and disorienting both for our knight and for the reader – not only because, as is traditional in such matters, the planes experience different rates of timeflow, but also because beings may literally become more or less real as they travel. Further complication is provided by the existence of many links and correlates between Able's world and our own, and by the fact that the book pays a great deal of attention to what defines a thing. What makes a knight a knight? What makes a world real? The nature of the link between the two realms is therefore mysterious, as are the implications of that link for Able – save to say that whatever the end of his journey (to return home?) it will be no simple feat to achieve.

All in all, this is a fascinating, challenging book, yet the single most important thing about it is that it is also a rich and wonderful adventure story. Wolfe has a lot of fun playing with fantasy clichés, and it's infectious. Analysis of *The Wizard Knight* as a coherent work will, of course, have to wait on the publication of *The Wizard* – many issues raised in *The Knight* await resolution – but at present, the signs are very promising indeed.



These are some of the other books we have seen recently. A mention here does not necessarily preclude a full review in a later issue of Vector.

Neal Asher – *The Line of Polity*

Tor UK, London, 2004, 663pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-48435-4
Paperback edition of Asher's third full-length novel (after *Gridlinked* and *The Skinner*). This is in a similar style with a well-developed future world and lots of frantic – and sometimes violent – good old space opera shenanigans, but with a modern twist. Asher does get some mixed reviews, for example Colin Bird, in *Vector* 229, praised the pace and action but felt empathy with the characters was lacking. Asher's most recent book, *Cowl*, has been viewed more favourably in *Vector* 234. Although I feel that his books need tighter control (and editing) he is an author whose work I continue to read and enjoy – well worth trying.

Terry Brooks – *The Sword of Shannara Trilogy*

Orbit, London, 2003, 1191pp, £14.99, t/p, ISBN 1-84149-287-6
Omnibus edition of Brooks' first fantasy trilogy, that is: *The Sword of Shannara* (1977), *The Elfstones of Shannara* (1982) and *The Wishsong of*

Shannara (1985). Typical sub-Tolkien quest fantasy which, along with Stephen Donaldson, gave the genre another lease of life in the late '70s. The problem here is that I doubt anyone could possibly read this due to its physical size: over 6cm thick and weighing more than 1.2 kilos!

Chris Bunch – *Knighthood of the Dragon*

Orbit, London, 2004, 408pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-219-7
Reviewed in *Vector* 230 and described as *Dragonmaster Book 2* this is in reality the second half of one book, split in two for publishing purposes (the first part is *Storm of Wings*). This sounds like conventional fantasy fare but fantasy of the best kind and an excellent example of the genre, so much so that Mark Greener included it as one of his best books of the year (*Vector* 234) describing (the pair) as "the fantasy equivalent of [Haldeman's] *The Forever War*".

Mark Chadbourn – *The Devil in Green*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 453pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07402-7

The first book of a new series, *The Dark Age*, but one which follows directly from the author's *Age of Misrule* series, has (according to Cherith Baldry in Vector 228) the premise of the ancient Celtic gods having returned to this world, with old legends come to life, and the normal functioning of modern society breaking down. Despite finding this complex and Chadbourn a good writer Baldry was concerned that there was little new here, being too similar to the *Age of Misrule* series but hoped that future volumes will develop in a different way. The next volume *The Queen of Sinister* has just been published and will be reviewed in a future Vector.

Steve Cockayne – *The Iron Chain*

Orbit, London, 2003, 486pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-215-9

This is the second volume in a loose trilogy, *Legends of the Land*, which is most definitely not your routine fantasy offering, but just the opposite, a truly original work of fiction. The work is very character-driven with no swastibuckling fantasy quest but rather follows the lives and interaction of real people, who just happen to live in a different land. The series has justifiably gained much critical praise including from John Newsinger in Vector 230 describing *The Iron Chain* as [possibly] "a significant work of fantasy that can be recommended as one of the wonders of the field" although it will take the final volume, *The Seagull Drivers*, to confirm this. Fortunately, this has just been published and John will be reviewing it in a future Vector.

Paul Cornell – *British Summertime*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 404pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07404-3

Despite slipping out almost unnoticed when published in 2002 this has much to recommend it and is, I suspect, going to be one of those 'forgotten' novels that is later rediscovered. Certainly this paperback edition is gathering more attention (for example from Jon Courtenay Grimwood in *The Guardian*). This is a very British novel with a character from Bath able to read anything – including body language and expressions – helped by a very Dan Dare pilot from the future. John Newsinger in Vector 226 was impressed, finding it very enjoyable and with considerable charm. One to check out.

Charles de Lint – *The Onion Girl*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 508pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07397-7

The onion girl Jilly Coppercom, is a young artist living in Newford, the setting for many of de Lint's urban myths. Cherith Baldry, in Vector 227, found this to be of a typically high de Lint standard although it is the series as a whole that has the greater strength. The use of the same settings and magical beings allows de Lint him to explore themes in more depth or from different angles, extending and developing his worlds and his ideas, rather than remaining static. Baldry concludes "I look forward to each new de Lint book as it appears, and this wasn't a disappointment".

Charles Dickinson – *A Shortcut in Time*

Forge, New York, 2004, 288 pp, \$14.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-30639-5

Trade paperback edition of this time-travel novel described as being in the Jack Finney or Jonathan Carroll mode – which should have already convinced most of you to track it down. Those who still need convincing are referred to Claire Brialey's review in Vector 230 which concluded with "for once, someone goes into the past prepared with the results of some horse races. If that's not progress for you, it is at least a good study in human (if not mundane) realism. It's a good time travel novel and – even more surprisingly – an original one". Strongly recommended (and as usual from Forge/Tor this is a lovely paperback edition).

Jeffrey Ford – *The Portrait of Mrs Charbuque*

Tor UK, London, 2003, 326pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-41318-X

Although a difficult novel to classify – is it fantasy, sf, historical, mainstream, new weird? – the absolute class of this work shines through. Any summary of it can only fail to do it justice – in New York of 1893 an artist is commissioned to paint a portrait of a woman he has never seen – in no way captures the mesmerizing atmosphere or intense characterization. In Vector 131 Elizabeth Billinger described this as one that "resonates with both William Hjortsberg's *Nevermore* and Alan Moore's *From Hell*. It is a book that repays rereading, revealing – like Mrs Charbuque – its truths a little at a time. This is one of the most powerful books I have read all year", a view I fully agree with. It is to be applauded that Tor UK are publishing great works of recent American sf/fantasy as well as supporting new British writing.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood – *Felaheen*

Pocket Books, London, 2004, 357pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-671-77370-4

Anyone paying even the slightest attention will be well aware that I like this book, a lot, so I'm not going to repeat myself other than to say this is one of the most enjoyable series I've read in a long time and now that this, the concluding volume, is out in paperback there is no excuse for not reading it. For a more considered – but no less enthusiastic analysis – read Claire Brialey's review in Vector 230 or have a look at the 'Books of the Year' piece in the last Vector, where Felaheen came top of the reviewer's poll. Start looking forward to November 2004 when Grimwood's next book, *Stamping Butterflies*, is due out from Gollancz.

Tom Holt – *For Two Nights Only*

Orbit, London, 2003, 671pp, £8.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-267-1

Tom Holt – *The Portable Door*

Orbit, London, 2003, 404pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-208-6

For Two Nights Only is an omnibus edition containing two earlier novels, *Overtime* (1993) and *Graillblazers* (1994). This is *Omnibus 4* of the reprinting of Holt's work, all in editions to match his more recent work such as the paperback of *The Portable Door*. I'll leave you to make your own decision on these – as I have a major block with 'humorous' genre works such as this or Robert Rankin (I did read one once, honest).

Jake Horsley – *Matrix Warrior: Being the One*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 263pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07540-6

Gary Dalkin, in Vector 231, could not decide if this *Matrix*-derived book (that's *The Matrix* film, not our news magazine) was just trying to be silly or if it was serious, given that it appears to come from the premise that the original film was 'real'. Gary found this really quite terrible with a seriously warped view of religion and some very suspect views of film history and concluded that "*Matrix Warrior* simply gives the reader a headache trying to decipher constantly contradictory, unsubstantiated and nonsensical arguments". Avoid (as if this needed spelling out).

Roger Levy – *Dark Heavens*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 389pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07406-X

Levy returns to his vision of a future England torn apart by environmental collapse, first shown in his debut novel *Reckless Sleep*. This is set some fifty years later, with a new cast but with the events of the first book influencing them. Cy Auger has the strangest job: overseeing group suicides to ensure they are truly consensual and not a cover for religious mass murder. It is during his investigation of one such event that his tragic past, which put his new wife into a coma, becomes more than just individual pain. *Dark Heavens* was reviewed in Vector 229 when I found it an accomplished work with a much better balance than *Reckless Sleep*, particularly in the virtual reality sections. It builds on the well-established tradition of the English cosy catastrophe which gives the book an understated, yet powerful, momentum.

Ian R. MacLeod – *The Light Ages*

Pocket Books, London, 2004, 456pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7434-6244-0

Regarded by many as one of the stand-out novels of 2003 *The Light Ages* has been compared to China Mieville's *Pendulo Street Station*, mainly due to the gothic, pseudo-Victorian setting. MacLeod's is, however, much closer to 'normal' although with an industrial revolution fuelled by aether, a magical element drawn from the earth and used to power great engines. Reviewed by Claire Brialey in Vector 232 this was a 'Vector Recommended Read' and she described MacLeod's turning of a new age as possibly a false dawn and the book as "maybe this could have been written at another time, but it should be read now".

Paul McAuley – *White Devils*

Tor Books, New York, 2004, 448pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30761-8

American edition of McAuley's bio-tech take on *The Heart of Darkness* reviewed in the UK edition in the main reviews section of this issue. Despite this being published by the foremost sf publisher in the States it's only on the inside that there is any indication that this is science fiction, with a cover putting it firmly in techno-thriller territory (which should hopefully increase the audience).

Caiseal Mór – *The Raven Game*

Pocket Books, London, 2004, 399pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7434-6855-4

Concluding volume of *The Watchers* trilogy, and although a classic Celtic mythology based fantasy series when the second volume, *The Song of the Earth*, was reviewed in Vector 214 it was found to be pacy and comprehensive although let down by weaker characterisation.

Richard Morgan – Broken Angels

Gollancz, London, 2003, 490pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07550-3

This, Morgan's follow up to *Altered Carbon*, continues the adventures of Takeshi Kovacs, but with none of his earlier gusto and pace. The plot, rescue an archaeologist and head off to dig up an alien space ship that might help someone to win a war, is merely the skeleton around which the shoot-'em-up is draped, very different from the classic noir style of *Altered Carbon*. *Broken Angels* was liked by many; just not by Vector (but see Stuart Carter's review at www.thealienonline.net for a very different opinion). When reviewed in Vector 229 Billinger and Mendlesohn found *Broken Angels* a 'depressing and soulless read' (but ever happy to be inconsistent, Billinger was impressed by Morgan's latest novel, *Market Forces*, when reviewing it in Vector 233). So, *Broken Angels* can't have been that bad if Billinger still continues to read the author's books?

Justina Robson – Natural History

Pan, London, 2003, 393pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-48943-7

In my review of the hardback edition in Vector 231 I described this book as 'space opera'. Having re-read it I'm not sure this is correct. It does have some of the trappings – alien intelligences, ftl drive, complex political machinations – but it's much wider and more original, perhaps closer to the New Weird than New Space Opera. What is clear is that this is a major work in both imagination and scope with some of the most intense and deeply crafted writing of recent years. One not to be missed. I'm longing

for her next work – which given the variety of her three published books could go in any direction but a direction I'll enthusiastically take.

M. J. Simpson – Hitchhiker: A Biography of Douglas Adams

Coronet, London, 2004, 394pp, £8.99, p/b, ISBN 0-340-82489-1

Paperback edition, including black and white plates, of this well received biography which Gary Dalkin, in Vector 229, described as "labour of love from the man who may be Adams' number one fan, and it is a book for fans, telling the inside story of Adams' work on *Doctor Who*, recounting in precise detail how the various incarnations of *Hitchhikers* came about" and "an honest, commendable book with much to intrigue those who grew-up with post-Python comedy".

Tad Williams – The War of the Flowers

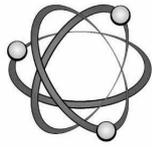
Orbit, London, 2004, 758pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-189-6

A stand-alone fantasy novel, which is intriguing just from the cover and the blurb and sounds more in the vein of de Lint than traditional fantasy, featuring parallel worlds of human and faerie and a musician discovering a manuscript written by his great uncle which appears to describe how to travel between them. Estelle Roberts, in Vector 230, generally liked its good characterisation and real depth. I'm still not sure why this appeals to me – but it does.

Vector 235 Index of Books Reviewed

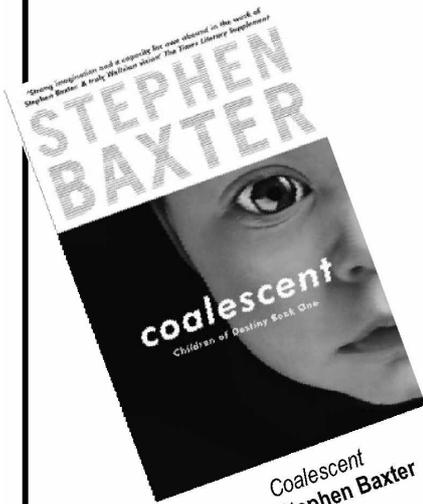
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Reviewers Key: AAA – Andrew A. Adams; AF – Alan Fraser; AS – Andy Sawyer; CB1 – Cherith Baldry; CB2 – Colin Bird; CB3 – Claire Brialey; CH – Chris Hill; COMLB – Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc; DMB – Dave M. Roberts; ER – Estelle Roberts; GD – Gary Dalkin; JN – John Newsinger; JW – Jon Wallace; KVB – K.V. Bailey; LH – Lesley Hatch; LJH – L. J. Hurst; MG – Mark Greener; NH – Niall Harrison; P – Particle; PB – Paul Bateman; PH – Penny Hill; PS – Pamela Stuart; PY – Peter Young; SC – Stuart Carter; SJ – Steve Jeffery; SM – Simon Morden; ST – Sue Thomason; VL – Vikki Lee.

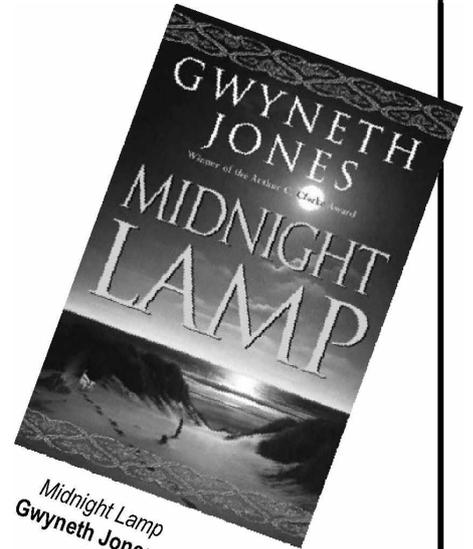


THE
ARTHUR C. CLARKE
AWARD

**Which
of these
novels
will be
chosen
as the
best of
the year?**



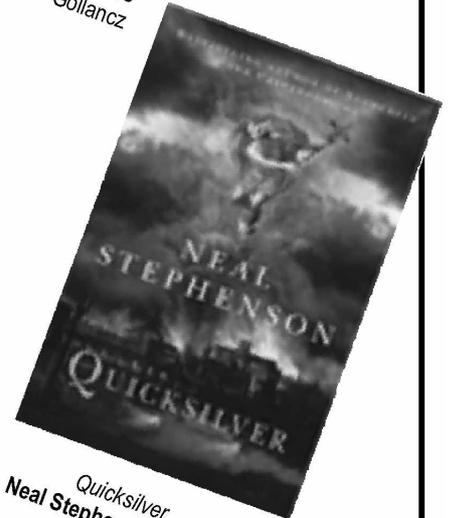
Coalescent
Stephen Baxter
Gollancz



Midnight Lamp
Gwyneth Jones
Gollancz



Darwin's Children
Greg Bear
HarperCollins



Quicksilver
Neal Stephenson
Heinemann



Pattern Recognition
William Gibson
Penguin Viking



Maul
Tricia Sullivan
Orbit

The decision of the judges will be announced in May. Read the books first and make your own mind up.

The Arthur C. Clarke Award is administered by the Serendip Foundation and judged by representatives of the British Science Fiction Association, the Science Fiction Foundation and the Science Museum.