

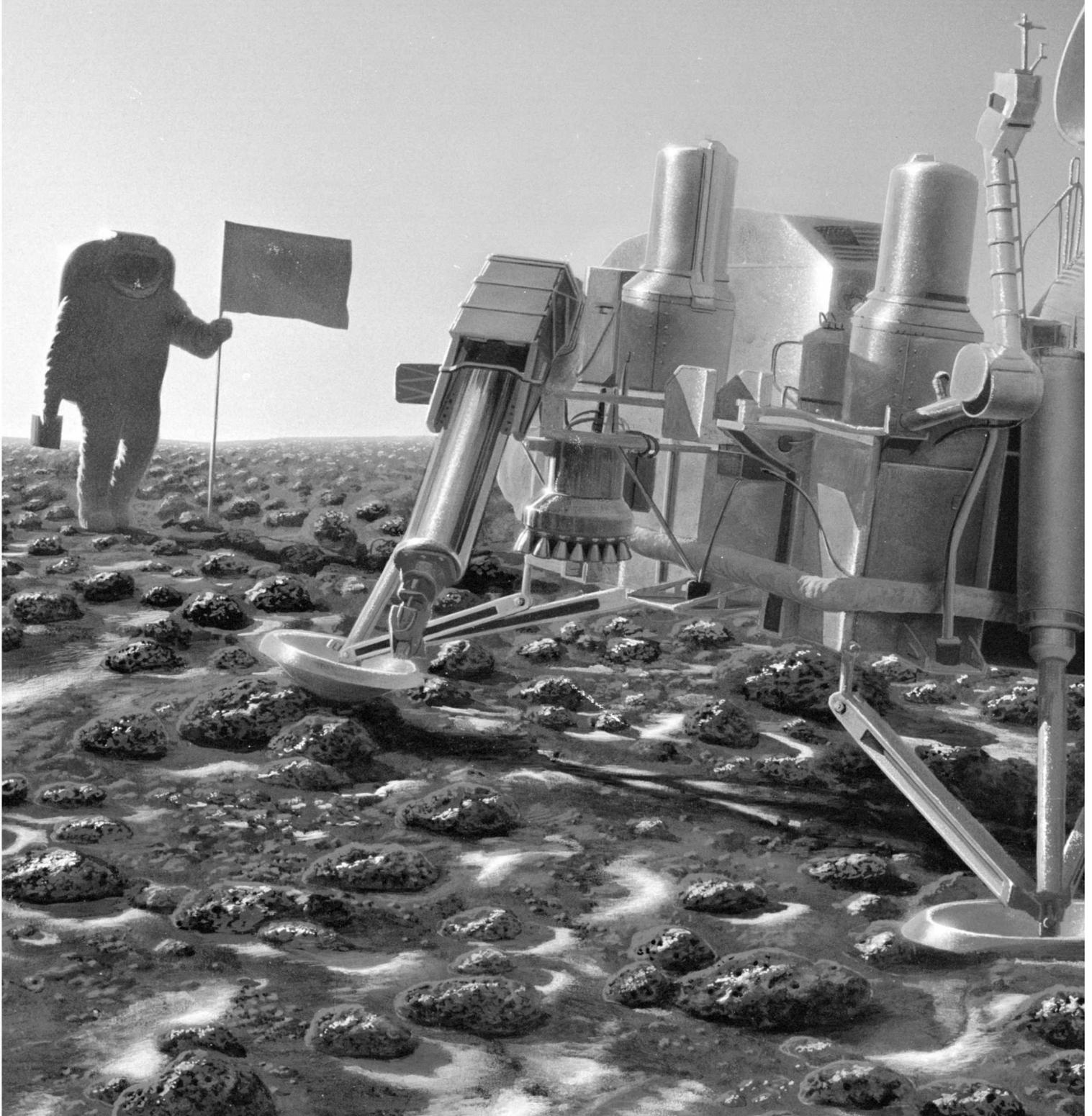
The Critical Journal

of the BSFA

#238 November/  
December 2004

# Vector

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

## CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial : The View from the View from the View from the View  
by Andrew Butler
- 4     Letters to Vector
- 5 Trouble With Lichen: A Book For Our Time  
by Mark Greener
- 8 Judge Dredd, Strontium Dog and the Dead Man  
John F. Keane on two of 2000AD'S icons
- 11 Observations from the Bookroom  
A reviews column editorial by Paul Billinger
- 14 First Impressions Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

## COVER

The first humans on Mars visit the landing site of the Viking 2 Lander. Conceptual image by Pat Rawlings for NASA  1991

## APOLOGY

The cover of Vector 237 was not a 'Composite photo of Saturn and Phoebe'. It was, of course, a photo of Karen Traviss, by Mark Wingham. Apologies to all concerned.

## EDITORIAL TEAM

- **Production and General Editing:** Tony Cullen – 16 Weaver's Way, Camden, London NW1 0XE  
Email: gummitch@gmail.com
- **Features, Editorial and Letters:** Andrew M. Butler – c/o Department of Media and Arts, Canterbury Christ Church University College, North Holmes Road, Canterbury CT1 1QU  
Email:ambutler@enterprise.net
- **Book Reviews:** Paul N. Billinger – 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry NN11 3BE  
Email: paul@everdon.enterprise-plc.com
- **Associate Editor:** Tanya Brown – Flat 8, Century House, Armoury Road, London SE8 4LH  
Email: amaranth@amaranth.aviators.net

## VECTOR

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  It should be noted that Ms Brown had no input into this particular issue – TC

## BSFA OFFICIALS

- **CHAIR(S):** Elizabeth and Paul N. Billinger – 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry NN11 3BE  
Email: billinger@enterprise.net
- **MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY:** Estelle Roberts – 97 Sharp Street, Newland Avenue, Hull, HU5 2AE  
Email: Estelle@lythande.freeseve.co.uk
- **TREASURER:** Martin Potts – 61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton, Nr Tamworth B79 0JJ  
Email: mtpotts@zoom.co.uk
- **PUBLICATIONS MANAGER:** Kathy Taylor –  
Email: kathytaylor@blueyonder.co.uk
- **ORBITERS:** Carol Ann Kerry-Green – 278 Victoria Avenue, Hull, HU5 3DZ  
Email: metaphor@metaphor.karoo.co.uk
- **AWARDS:** Claire Brialey –  
Email: awards@amaranth.aviators.net
- **PUBLICITY/PROMOTIONS:**  
Email: billinger@enterprise.net
- **LONDON MEETING COORDINATOR:** Farah Mendlesohn – 22 Addington Road, Reading, RG1 5PT
- **WEBMISTRESS:** Tanya Brown – Flat 8, Century House, Armoury Road, London, SE8 4LH  
Email: bsfaweb@amaranth.aviators.net

## BSFA MEMBERSHIP

UK Residents:  21 or  14 (unwaged) per year. Please enquire, or see the BSFA web page for overseas rates.

**RENEWALS AND NEW MEMBERS – Estelle Roberts – 97 Sharp Street, Newland Avenue, Hull, HU5 2AE**  
Email: Estelle@lythande.freeseve.co.uk

USA Enquiries – Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred Street, Detroit, MI 48213 USA

## PRINTED BY

**PDC COPYPRINT (Guildford), Middle Unit, 77-83 Walnut Tree Close, Guildford, Surrey GU1 4UH**

## OTHER BSFA PUBLICATIONS

**Focus:** Simon Morden – 13 Egremont Drive, Sherriff Hill, Gateshead, NE9 5SE  
Email: focus.editor@cablenet.co.uk

## MATRIX

**Commissioning Editor:** Tom Hunter –  
Email: matrix\_editors@yahoocoo.uk  
**News & Features Editor:** Claire Weaver –  
Email: matrix\_editors@yahoocoo.uk  
**Production Editor:** Martin McGrath – 91 Bentley Drive, Harlow, Essex CM17 9QT  
Email: martinmcgrath@ntlworld.com

## BSFA WEB

**BSFA Web page:**  
<http://www.bsfa.co.uk>

## Editorial

### The View from the View from the View from the View

Is it just me, or – pause to hear assembled cries of “Yes, it is just you” – or, is science fiction and fantasy getting awfully meta of late?

Perhaps it's tied up with the current mood of science fiction being over and done with and a told story, and there now being nothing left to do but picnic in the ruins. There's John Clute over there, opining that “It may not be the worst thing that ever happened to sf that it died” and Jeff Noon over there, suggesting that, “sf might well be dead in the same way that pop music or jazz are dead, i.e. it's reached the end of its perfectly natural cultural life”. And Margaret Atwood declaring that what she writes isn't science fiction – whilst David Mitchell and Susanna Clarke win plaudits from the mainstream for novels which a few years ago would have been dismissed as mere fantasies or science fiction, and *The Time Traveler's Wife* is reviewed without any sense of what the central conceit owes to Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*. Meanwhile various parties are celebrating (and commodifying) the margins and the interstices and the hybrid, as if science fiction was ever a pure-bred at any point of its history.

From this you might gather that I feel that reports of science fiction's death are greatly exaggerated, that the margins are in fact so wide that there is no centre and that our sense that the sky is about to fall is serving some kind of purpose. I also have the sense that we still need to do more local mapping – especially of fantasy texts – before we announce this week's theory.

But the idea of the end – which frankly feels a little too *fin de millennial* this far into the noughties – is very powerful. Just as the stock market is dependent upon a collective consensus that stocks have particular values, and prices can fall if people worry that values have fallen, so the ideal can real effects. We might be behaving a particular way because believe we are in the end times – Clute, for example, believes that (agenda or first) science fiction ended in the late 1950s. The monumental *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* can be seen as “an attempt to seal over the cracks in the Golden Age by surrounding the fissure [...] an act of healing, on the part of a thin-skinned adolescent with a tendency to mourn”. It is a funerary monument, more of a tomb than a tome. And meanwhile Jeff Noon is looking for ghosts or zombies in the afterlife.

The community around science fiction need not close down even if science fiction has ended. Conventions can probably sustain themselves indefinitely without much discussion of the genre. A critic will always be able to find something new to say – I'm fond of the line from Emmanuel Levinas where he describes the critic as someone “that still has something to say when everything has been said”.

Much criticism is ephemeral – tucked away in supplements, on websites, in newspapers, in journals – and aside from stray quotations untimely ripped to act as cover puffs, tends to be forgotten. Gathering together a selection of criticism in one place is a willful act of preservation

against the perceived forces of entropy and apathy. John Clute and Serconia brought together twenty (or twenty-one?) years' worth of selected reviews in *Strokes: Essays and Reviews 1966-1986*, and a few years later Liverpool University Press took the career up to the early 1990s with *Look at the Evidence: Essays and Reviews*. Now Roger Robinson of Becon Publications has provided a fourth decade for us in the form of *Scores: Reviews 1993-2003*. The various publishers have done us all a favour in bringing this material together in one place – or three places – tidying up the field, so to speak.

Clute is not the only critic to be collected – there were James Blish/William Atheling's reviews of course, and Damien Broderick has now been celebrated with *x, y, z, t: dimensions of science fiction* (published by Wildside – see [www.wildsidepress.com](http://www.wildsidepress.com)). I know there are at least two collections of reviews due out before the end of next year – and I hope that we accord them suitably substantial reviews. (And a few gears in my head began to turn when glancing at a bio for John Sladek in an issue of *New Worlds*: “He reviews for *The New Scientist*.” What did he review? I know he reviewed for *Foundation*, but was there anything else? Should these be gathered together? And, if so....)

The thing is, there is a gravity to collected reviews which is absent from the individual pieces. A collection reeks of purpose. It demands to be examined for the sense of the new theory of science fiction and fantasy that can only come from sustained soundings. In *Look at the Evidence*, Clute acknowledges the importance of Rob Latham's review of *Strokes* in *The Journal of the Fantastic of the Arts*, which posed the question of what was the purpose of gathering together such fugitive pieces. More recently I've written a chapter on *Look at the Evidence*, asking the same question, and another on another author – whose non-fiction also deserves collection – trying to trace the core themes. It's not just me – “Is it just me or –” – I am aware of several other people writing criticism about criticism.

This brings me to the fall out from *A Commonwealth of Science Fiction*, an event I co-organised with Farah Mendlesohn and Andy Sawyer at the Foresight Centre, University of Liverpool. This was a substantial gathering together of critics and academics, and indeed has gained reviews, largely positive I'm glad to say. Mark Plummer has things to say in *Matrix*, and Cheryl Morgan did so in the Hugo-award-winning *Emerald City* (issue 108). Both reviews contain statements that I'd love to respond to, but I hesitate because most respondents to reviews look like fools, particularly when they start being defensive. Even worse is persuading people to write in on one's behalf – I could give you a catalogue of such moments, but will merely note that one journal ran numerous letters defending a contributor from the criticism of a correspondent – who had defended a reviewer (working elsewhere) from that contributor's attack. Or put it another way, person A wrote a book reviewed by person B. Person C criticises person B's review. Person D defends person B from person C, and persons E-Q spring to person C's aid.

No one came out of the issue with any credit, save for person A who wrote in and said that, well, person B did have a point...

And yet perhaps Mark Plummer and Cheryl Morgan raise points I should respond to – and why should I do that in private when they get to make their points in public? Is having the conversation worth me looking like a fool? (“Too damn’ late for that,” he mutters under his breath.) Perhaps I should leave it at filleting out the line in which Cheryl appears to describe me as “the greatest SF critic the galaxy has ever known”, in much the same way as unscrupulous promoters fillet out “the show is fantastic” from the line “if I said the show is fantastic I would be losing my mind”. I wouldn’t claim to be, and I’m pretty sure Cheryl Morgan doesn’t think I am “the greatest SF critic the galaxy has ever known”, but her rhetorical use of hyperbole leads me to ponder whether she really means the opposite. And who am I to disagree?

Context is everything. I was persuaded to give the plenary talk at the end of *A Commonwealth of Science Fiction* (an event I was co-organising), something which took persuasion because I felt it was too self-promoting. The event would effectively be three days’ of talking about colonial and postcolonial science fiction and fantasy. Short of leaving the writing of a forty-five minute presentation to the last moment, I was struck by the fact that other people there were eminently better qualified than I to do this, and I risked saying more poorly what had already been elegantly said, and besides, people would be exhausted after three busy days. I decided that there should be some moments where I should at least try to make the audience laugh. Cheryl wrote: “It turned out to be rather more comedy than academic, which wouldn’t have been so incongruous if

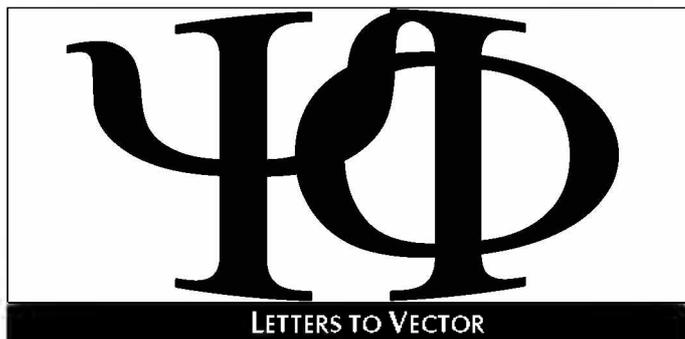
Mark Bould, in introducing the session, hadn’t given Butler such an impressive build-up. One doesn’t quite expect the greatest SF critic the galaxy has ever known to come out with comedy.”

Let’s take it away from the personal – passing over the paper I gave at New Lanark on *The Magic Roundabout* as utopia text and my exploration of *The Clangers* as nature documentary – why shouldn’t we expect “the greatest SF critic the galaxy has ever known” [whoever she is] “to come out with comedy.”? Does sercon – serious and constructive – mean that you are not allowed to get the joke? Or to crack the joke in the first place? Of course, sometimes some of the funniest phenomena occur when things are played entirely straight rather than nudging the audience in the ribs saying “I say, I say, I say”. Sometimes it’s funnier without a laugh track. It’s funnier when you realise that you are one of the few to get the joke.

We shouldn’t let academic or critical rigour slide into rigor mortis. Whilst my paper wasn’t a string of one-liners, it was a calculated risk, and I risked the comedic version of death in the process. (Having taught a couple of courses about comedy, I know the dangers of telling a joke – and especially Freud’s jokes – in a lecture. Tumbleweeds blew through the silences after each one of those. Still, the Michael Caine one seems to work, and the one about killing ants.) The point is to be serious but not too serious – or if you have to be too serious, make sure you are too, too serious.

Meanwhile I see a spot in the market for an article on critical responses to collections of criticism. Criticism of criticism of criticism, if you will. Or is that simply getting too meta?

Andrew M Butler, autumn 2004, Canterbury



The unfortunate omission of the word “not” from an editorial potentially reversed my meaning about how Gary Dalkin and I were briefed on how to run Vector, back in the summer of 1995. Gary rides in with a memory of his own:

**From Gary – “on a high horse” – Dalkin**

With reference to your editorial in the new issue of Vector.  
For the sake of clarity, I’d just like to say I don’t remember if we were ever enjoined not to frighten the horses, or actually given a brief to scare the living daylight out of our equine chums. But as a lad I did once get kicked by a pony in the New Forest. So like everything else, one

might say it all goes back to childhood. ☐

In V237 Paul Kincaid wrote a lengthy review of an anthology edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer.

**From Cy Chauvin:**

I was glad to read Paul Kincaid’s excellent review essay “The New Hard Men of Sf”. Some people might be relieved at Paul’s review, since his findings suggest that while David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer may talk a great deal of about “hard science fiction” and try to promote it via editorials and panels at conventions, their actual editorial interest is much broader. Certainly it had seemed a shift in interest for David Hartwell, who after all was the first publisher (in small press) of Delany’s *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* and an early (non-sf) novel by Philip K Dick [*Confessions of a Crap Artist*], and most of the novels in his Timescape series seemed moderately progressive science fiction. Now Greg Benford’s novel *Timescape*, that gave the title to the whole series, is almost the ultimate hard science-fiction novel, and really excellent because it’s not only about real science but has real characters. That makes it almost the opposite of traditional hard sf. And yet I do believe that I’ve heard Hartwell suggest on a panel or two that strong characterisation is not that important in science fiction. And

perhaps it's not (even Gregory Benford suggests that's it not).

I've just read *The Rose* by Charles Harness for the first time, after hearing about the book for years (I bought my copy new in the early 1970s, the Panther British paperback with the Michael Moorcock introduction). But I could just never get it started. I finally tried reading it again because it was nominated for a retro-Hugo. It certainly doesn't have strong characterisation—the characters are almost cartoon characters, but they have real style, and I do really like them. It's called a novel of "ideas", but its ideas are detachable ideas, ones taken apart and discussed at a cocktail party, rather than absolutely integral to the story's plot. Yet I love this strange poetic almost fairy tale war of art vs. science. I think it also helps that *The Rose* also has acquired an antique patina since its first publication in 1953. The background is like a stage prop (has anyone ever thought of adapting it as a play?), but somehow it all works really well. Yet I just have to wonder how comfortable a fit this book might be today into "the renaissance hard sf".

Thanks for publishing such a provocative review. ☹

I wrote in the last issue an article called "Lines and Circles: A Look at Pamela Zoline's 'The Heat Death of the Universe'". Steve Jeffery takes me to task on a detail.

"The ammonia which Boyle can smell -presumably from the chemical she uses for cleaning".

Have you never changed a diaper, Dr B? The clue is where Boyle has written that paean to the Nitrogen Cycle in Nitetime pink lipstick - on the reeking used diaper bucket. It's the nappies wot smell. (Presumably she'd clean the bucket with some sort of bleach, which would have a chlorine smell - rather different)

If, though, Zoline's HDOTU can be regarded as science fiction (it's fiction, and uses the metaphors of science as an essential part of its storytelling, so it's defensible, even though it has no rayguns and rocketships), then what about

Winterson's *Gut Symmetries*, which does the same, but with physics as the metaphor for a tangled three way relationship (the 'three body problem' indeed)? Here, Gut = GUT, Grand Unified Theory. It's quite a dense book for its size, and I haven't yet worked out whether she's managed something rather clever or is flailing around with Big Concepts. I'm tending towards the former, as this as a book length parallel to what Zoline was doing.

And then you start thinking about something like Frayn's *Copenhagen*, which exploits the implications of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle far more cleverly than (an admittedly young) Delany managed in *The Einstein Intersection*. ☹

Then there was Stoppard's quantum mechanical Hapgood and chaotic Arcadia, although his interest in mathematics goes back at least as far as the unlikelihood or likelihood of tossing a coin heads fifty or so on the trot in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. (In the film, Rosencrantz [or was it Guildenstern?] accidentally discovers or demonstrates a series of scientific principles such as steam power, the laws of gravity and the laws of motion, only for Guildenstern [or was it Rosencrantz?] to destroy the models.) Clive James wrote an article on Stoppard and quantum back in the early 1970s, and Nicolas Ruddick has written on the science plays more recently in 'The Search for a Quantum Ethics: Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* and Other Recent British Science Plays' in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 11.4 (2001): 415-431.

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](mailto:ambutler@enterprise.net) and marked 'For publication'. We reserve the right to edit or shorten letters.

AS THE TITLE OF THOMAS D. CLARESON AND ALICE S. CLARESON'S CHAPTER IN RHYS GARNETT AND R. J. ELLIS'S *SCIENCE FICTION ROOTS AND BRANCHES* (BASINGSTOKE: MACMILLAN, 1990) – "THE NEGLECTED FICTION OF JOHN WYNDHAM: 'CONSIDER HER WAYS', *TROUBLE WITH LICHEN* AND *WEB*" – SUGGESTS, *TROUBLE WITH LICHEN* (1960) IS ONE OF JOHN WYNDHAM'S NOVELS THAT IS RARELY DISCUSSED. BUT JUST AS SINCE ROWLAND WYMER'S REVISIONIST ARTICLE IN 1992 WE HAVE BEEN FORCED TO RECONSIDER THE "SAFENESS" OF *THE CHRYSALIDS* (SEE *FOUNDATION* 55), SO THIS MINOR NOVEL DESERVES MORE ATTENTION.

## ***Trouble With Lichen: A Book For Our Time***

**by Mark Greener**

It is something of a truism that the future dates rapidly. We look back with dewy-eyed nostalgia at the scientific faux pas of the golden age and silver age. The science of the past seems naïve, even attractively quaint. Of course, today's science-laden hard sf will seem just as naïve and quaint in forty-five years' time. Occasionally, however, an old book can become more relevant as science advances. Such is the case with John Wyndham's 1960 novel *Trouble with Lichen*, which remains relevant, timely and thought provoking.

To briefly recap: after graduating from Cambridge, Diana Brackley works as research scientist at a private laboratory owned by leading biochemist Francis Saxover. Many scientific advances are serendipitous and, in an observation reminiscent of Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin, Brackley notes that a speck of lichen stops milk from turning sour. Further studies show that a chemical produced by the lichen slows cell division and metabolism. Saxover eventually develops Antigerone, which dramatically slows ageing.!

Antigerone is the "greatest discovery in centuries".<sup>2</sup> It is "without doubt the greatest advance in medical science since penicillin" (TwL, p.148). However, for Saxover Antigerone is "Too big a secret [...] Too dangerous" (TwL, p.57). Saxover tries to suppress the discovery, partly because the supply of the lichen is limited, and partly because he fears the social and economic consequences.

Meanwhile, Brackley leaves Saxover, but unknown to her mentor continues researching. Taking "advantage of the same accident" (TwL, p.57), she independently isolates Antigerone and commercialises the discovery covertly as a beauty treatment. Her main ambition is not financial. Rather Brackley aims to follow in the footsteps of a suffragette ancestor and trigger socio-political change.

Brackley is fed up seeing "potentially brilliant women let their brains, and their talents, rot away [...] give them two hundred, three hundred years, and they'll either have to employ those talents to keep themselves sane - or commit suicide out of boredom" (TwL, p.155).

Brackley believes that this underhand revolution will force the government to fund treatment and engage in research to discover an alternative source. After all, she has treated the wives of the rich and powerful who had "a vested interest in fighting for [the treatment], and some influence [...] I shall be extremely sorry for anyone who tries to legislate them out of their extra years of life" (TwL, p.90). Then the press pick up on the story and begin to probe ...

#### A quietly revolutionary, proto-feminist novel

Perhaps inevitably, at times *Trouble with Lichen* shows its age. Diana's mother is against her working at all: it might get in the way of finding a husband and having children. Tellingly, Brackley does not marry during the time she is developing her business. Wyndham even skates around mentioning menstruation. Discussing Antigerone's side effects, Diana comments to Saxover's daughter "The rest are obvious - to yourself, that is" (TwL, p.84) for example.

Yet in other ways, *Trouble with Lichen* is surprising modern. It is easy to read *Trouble with Lichen* as a quietly revolutionary, proto-feminist story, for example. Feminist critics often condemn sf's literary conventions for being "steeped in the history and meanings of a male-dominated genre functioning in a patriarchal culture". Female heroes are rare: Brackley is an exception. The need to work within sf male dominated idiom leads "feminist sf" to "a confrontation between an exploration of choices and possibilities which could and should be open to women and in the in-built assumptions about society and human nature which actively deny those choices and possibilities".<sup>3</sup>

Against this background, Brackley's choice of biology as a topic is telling. One of the first molecular biologists in Cambridge in the 1950s remarked: "Biology, I am sorry to say, was a subject for girls. Bright people were not attracted by it".<sup>4</sup> However, Brackley proves that she is more than capable of working with a leading scientist. She proves she is just as bright. However, critically Diana is more than that. She is an agent for social change, empowering women to reach their potential in society. Her aim is to change society to ensure women can make the choices and realise those possibilities. She is a true revolutionary, both within

the confines of the sf idiom and within patriarchal culture more generally.

In contrast, Saxover portrays himself as a scientific maverick. He does not work, for example, as part of an established university, rather in a private lab. This was much less common in the late '50s and early '60s than today, when many more academics have gained the entrepreneurial "biotech" spirit. Yet Saxover is actually rather reactionary, a supporter of the societal status quo. He suppresses a discovery he feels the world is not ready for, without consultation. Yet hypocritically, Saxover uses Antigerone himself and on his children, without telling the latter.

#### An unlikely McGuffin?

At first sight, Antigerone may seem an unlikely McGuffin: the long sought after elixir of youth. Yet modern research raises the prospect that a version of Antigerone might be plausible, which enhances the resonances that the book conveys to a modern audience. Antigerone's pharmacology is tad naïve. It is close to a magic bullet: one that attacks pathology, but is free of adverse events. Menstruation becomes less frequent and there is an "infinitesimal slowing of the response rate [...] less than you get after one double gin" (TwL, p.84). Given that Antigerone works by slowing metabolism, such a clean side effect profile is unlikely. Nevertheless, researchers are currently examining drugs that could act as 'Antigerones'.

Over the last few years, researchers amassed a compelling body of evidence that cutting calorie intake by around thirty per cent for years on end seems to increase longevity and prolong health. This is not easy and few people are able to maintain the dietary discipline. Fortunately, numerous researchers are now working on drugs that mimic the biochemical and physiological effects triggered by calorie restriction.<sup>5</sup>

The impact on society, if the promise in the test tube and experimental models is realised could be as profound as Saxover fears. How long would we work for? Who would pay for the drug? Would we regard Antigerones as a lifestyle drug - like Viagra for some patients or treatments for male pattern hair loss - that available only those who can afford to pay? Would we descend into violence if some parts of society were excluded from receiving Antigerones?

Then there is the issue of the ethics of human experimentation that pervades *Trouble with Lichen*. Saxover treats his adult children with Antigerone, without their consent or knowledge. He assumes that it is for their good and he is within his rights. However, is he the right person to judge either for his adult children or for society more widely?

On the other hand, Brackley slips women Antigerone under the guise of a beauty treatment (itself a telling feminist point). However, the women came to her for a treatment that keeps them young. And Antigerone is just that. But it offers more, much more, than they expected. So is Brackley ethical in offering more than they expect? The limitations and power of informed consent remains a difficult ethical subject for clinicians and researchers today.

In the final analysis, Saxover and Brackley seem more concerned with society as a whole than with individual rights: the regard the former as taking precedence over the

latter. So *Trouble with Lichen* raises a key concern for scientists and society more widely: where do the rights of individuals end and those of society begin? And what happens if there is a conflict?

In particular, *Trouble with Lichen* emphasises a point that researchers often miss or ignore even today: science and scientists do not work in an ethical vacuum. It is a lesson that we need to recall as biologists explore and manipulate increasingly basic processes – gene therapy, stem cells, even the pathways underling biological ageing. The potential benefits are great. But so are the risks. Since Frankenstein, sf has often highlighted the discordance between our technological triumphs and the limitations of our ethical framework. *Trouble with Lichen* is firmly in this tradition.

### An ambivalent novel

As these questions suggest, *Trouble with Lichen* raises some important ethical questions, which Wyndham does not really answer. Matthew Moore notes that Wyndham's posthumously published novel *Web* presents an ambivalent view of progress: "Wyndham calls for a revolution, and yet does not seem to behave as a revolutionary should. Wyndham provides no alternatives to the structures that he seems to pull down."<sup>6</sup>

*Trouble with Lichen* is a similarly ambivalent novel. Wyndham implicitly calls for a feminist revolution, but feels that women need to resort to subterfuge. He calls for a more humane means of distributing science's humanitarian fruits, but offers no solution. He asks numerous ethical questions, which he leaves unanswered. I never really gained an impression as to whether Wyndham believed that Antigerone is a benefit to humanity or not: perhaps the ultimate in ambivalence.

On the other hand, this ambivalence is, perhaps, one reason *Trouble with Lichen* does not date. Wyndham deals with fundamental issues: the war of the sexes; class; ageing. *Trouble with Lichen*, exemplifies Umberto Eco's idea of an open text, one that the reader can bring his or her attitudes and ideas to. Solutions to these key questions can date. The questions, however, remain the same. As such, the book offers plenty of food for thought.

*Trouble with Lichen* is some forty-five years old. At times, it shows its age. However, in many ways, *Trouble with Lichen* is more relevant now than it was when it was published. After all, what once seemed fanciful – a simple chemical that slows ageing – now not only seems possible, it seems probable. The pace of scientific change – especially in the biosciences – raises fundamental issues that society and scientists need to address. *Trouble with Lichen* exemplifies one of sf's important strengths, highlighted by Steinmüller in a recent essay: "SF opens up vast opportunities for playful manipulation of scientific concepts."<sup>7</sup> It permits, in Darko Suvin's term "cognitive estrangement": allowing us to ponder the implications of the fantastic, rather than just diving into escapism. In other words, *Trouble with Lichen* is a perfect example of sf that makes you think.

### NOTES

- 1 Saxover reminds me of biochemist Peter Mitchell who proposed the chemiosmotic theory in 1961 and greatly enhanced our understanding of bioenergetics. Mitchell found academic life at Cambridge and then Edinburgh difficult and his health suffered. He set up the private Research Institute, Glynn near Bodmin in North Cornwall, from where he formulated and tested experimentally his theory. Given the co-incident timing, I wonder if Mitchell might have influenced Wyndham's characterisation, although I have absolutely no evidence for this. See J. Prebble, "Peter Mitchell and the Ox Phos Wars", *Trends in Biochemical Sciences* (April 2002) 27: 209-212.
- 2 John Wyndham, *Trouble with Lichen* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960; edition used: Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 57; hereafter cited as *TwL* in the text.
- 3 Jenny Wolmark, "Science fiction and feminism" *Foundation* (Autumn 1986) 37: 48-51.
- 4 Soraya De Chadarevian, *Designs for Life: Molecular Biology after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 89.
- 5 M.A. Lane, D.K. Ingram and G.S. Roth, "The Serious Search for an Antiaging Pill", *Scientific American: The Science of Staying Young Special* (August 2002) 287(2): 36-41.
- 6 Matthew Moore, "Utopian Ambivalences in Wyndham's *Web*", *Foundation* (Autumn 2003) 89: 47-56.
- 7 Karlheinz Steinmüller, "The Uses and Abuses of Science Fiction", *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* (September 2003) 28(3): 175-178.

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Mark Greener is a former research pharmacologist and is now a bioscience writer and journalist. He has contributed to *Vector* for many years, most recently including articles on Alvaro Cunqueiro's *Merlin & Company* (V233), *Remnant Population* (V224), *Barrington Bayley* (V223) and *H.P. Lovecraft* (V220) — Eds.

JOHN F. KEANE EXPLORED JUDGE DREDD A COUPLE OF ISSUES AGO. NOW HE RETURNS WITH SOME MORE MYTHIC IDEAS.

# Judge Dredd, Strontium Dog and the Dead Man: Sacred Murder in the 2000AD Mythos

by John F. Keane

"For now we see as through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I also am known."

— Corinthians 13: 12

While American Marvel and DC comics have been extensively scoured for mythic content, the numerous hours of British science fiction comic 2000AD have been largely ignored. This is easy to understand, since 2000AD's characters are typically set in a high-tech future dystopia owing much to Philip K. Dick.

This futuristic context means that the mythical subtexts infusing stories like Judge Dredd lie at a deeper level of the narrative than is the case with Marvel or DC comics. Both art and script have to be extensively studied in order to isolate the mythic sub-narrative.

This essay links Judge Dredd's activities in the epic 'Dead Man'/'Necropolis' story arc to a profound anthropological sub-theme, that of the Sacred Executioner. This link is so seamless it is impossible to doubt that Dredd's appeal lies in his subliminal status as the Sacred Executioner. Dredd is then compared to Strontium Dog, another classic character whose inverse role as the Sacred Victim completes my study of Sacred Murder in the 2000AD mythos.

## Who is the Sacred Executioner?

The Jewish scholar Hyam Maccoby has elaborated his concept of the Sacred Executioner in a variety of books. As a scholar of both Hebrew and Classics he is uniquely well equipped to quarry archaic texts for oblique references to hidden themes.

At the core of many myths outlining the foundation of cities and other features of settled civilisation is a Sacred Murder, often enacted by one brother on another. The killer, whom Maccoby calls the Sacred Executioner, has many guises – in Egyptian, Scandinavian, Roman and Greek as well as Hebrew civilisation stories. Maccoby cites Romulus, Set and Cain as classic Sacred Executioners. Always the Murderer

will be cursed, but not put to death; he will acquire special magic powers; he will be driven out of society, but special pains taken to ensure that he survives. By taking the blame for the slaying, he is performing a great service to society, for not only does he perform the deed, but he takes upon himself the blame for it, and thus absolves society as a whole completely from the guilt of a slaying for which they, in fact, are responsible and by which, in theory at least, they benefit (Maccoby 1982: 8).

The Executioner is marked (often physically) by blood-guilt. Paradoxically, these Sacred Murders procure great benefits for society. The Killer is cursed to social excommunication,

yet is exempt from punishment and, particularly in Hebrew versions of the story, old age or death. For example, the Wandering Jew is cursed to an eternity of social exclusion for his complicity in Deicide. Similarly, God banishes Cain to be

A vagrant and a wanderer on earth (Genesis 4: 13).

Cain is also 'marked' so that no man will harm him – to do so will result in sevenfold punishment for the perpetrator and his descendants.

Maccoby claims that the Sacred Executioner is a figure of vast importance. He argues that these stories (and characteristic 'cracks' in their respective narratives) point to the universal practice of human sacrifice in the founding of civilisations. For although the Executioner might be reviled, he reaps enormous benefits for his crime: Romulus founds Rome; Cain not only founds urban life, agriculture and metalworking but becomes the father of all mankind. The theme of fratricide is a distancing device introduced to disguise the theme of sacrifice. However, the benefits of the Murder reveal a 'crack' in the narrative and its true origins:

The historical reality that lies behind all these stories, I shall argue, is the institution of human sacrifice, which was practised throughout the ancient world, though usually only in times of great emergency (it is still practised in certain backward areas of the world today). Very few of the myths we shall be considering actually portray human sacrifice openly; instead, we find stories about accidental deaths on the one hand, or about murders (carried out for merely personal reasons) on the other. Both modulations are intended to absolve society of responsibility for the violent deaths that occur in the stories. For human sacrifice seems almost never to have been unaccompanied by guilt on the part of the society in which it occurred and by a consequent desire to shift the blame, despite the desperate need that was felt to accomplish the deed. (An exception is the society of the Aztecs, which seems to have been almost entirely free of guilt for the institution of human sacrifice, though even here some details are relevant to our purpose.)

Thus, the myth will rarely admit openly that the slaying in the story was performed as a ritual sacrifice. Instead, it will say that an accident occurred, or alternatively that the slaying was a wicked deed performed by a murderer who was subsequently punished. How do we know then, that ritual sacrifice is the real subject of the myth? This is betrayed by the equivocal character of the story. Some good consequence will be seen to flow from the slaying: a city will be founded, or a nation will be inaugurated, or a famine will be stayed, or a people will be saved from the wrath of the gods, or a threatening enemy will be defeated. Such good consequences are exactly the results that were hoped for by the performance of human sacrifice (Maccoby, 1982: pp. 7-8).

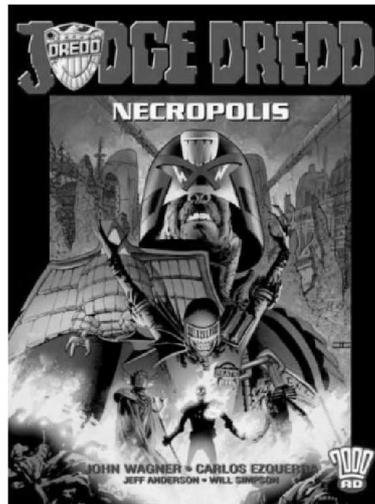
## Judge Dredd: The Sacred Executioner

Judge Dredd/Dead Man	The Sacred Executioner
Guilty of fratricide (twice)	Guilty of Sacred Murder, usually fratricide
Effectively immortal and indestructible	Immortal or unusually long-lived
Banished from Bubbletown, takes the Long Walk	Socially ostracised, shunned by his fellow men
Celibate	Often celibate
Physically scarred	'Marked' by God
Re-founds civilisation via Sacred Murder	Founds civilisation via Sacred Murder
Hardly ages	Never ageing
Endowed with superhuman abilities	Has special magic powers
Synonymous with social order	Procures the benefits of civilisation
Tended and left unharmed in Bubbletown though reviled and distrusted	Cannot be harmed as he bears society's burden of guilt for the Sacred Murder

Analysing the Dredd narrative corpus, it is plain he is a Sacred Executioner at every level. He bears a burden of blood-guilt for the murder of his clone brother, Rico ('Return of Rico', Progs 30-31 (2000AD's weekly issues are traditionally called 'Progs'. 'Prog' is short for 'Programme', a mock-futurist legacy from the comic's earliest days). Despite Dredd's omnipresent guilt, he is pivotal to the survival of civilisation (represented by Mega City One). Intriguingly, in many depictions Dredd is shown watching over Mega City One like a beneficent deity whose persona is conflated with the city's security (a good example being the Star Scan in Prog 651). He is essentially immortal and virtually indestructible. Like Cain or the Wandering Jew, Dredd hardly ages, though his body racks up ever more battle scars. He permanently wears a mask/helmet, denoting his status as Executioner. Finally, Dredd is strictly celibate, a condition often associated with Sacred Executioners. Any sexual relationship would irreparably mar his mystique. This latter point sharply distinguishes Dredd from American comic heroes – major DC and Marvel characters like Daredevil, Spider-man or Superman all have obvious 'love interests'.

Lamentably, the poor *Judge Dredd* movie mishandled the character by removing his helmet and allowing him emotional redemption. This sympathetic treatment utterly failed as it confounded the mythic essence of the character.

The consecutive storylines I will discuss, 'The Dead Man' and 'Necropolis', provide the most complete elaboration of the Sacred Executioner theme in Dredd to date.



Not only does 'Necropolis' show Dredd fulfilling the Sacred Executioner's role in (re) founding civilisation via the Sacred Sacrifice of a clone bother, 'The Dead Man' describes Dredd in terms so close to Maccoby's conception of the Sacred Executioner that it actually augments his ideas about cultural formation.

### 'The Dead Man'

Dredd's status as the Sacred Executioner is nowhere more evident than in this story.

'The Dead Man' ran from Progs 650 to 668. Initially, the story made no link between Dredd and the Dead Man. It was also drawn in black and white, not characteristic of a Dredd story for some years at that time. Only in the last episode was the Dead Man revealed to be Dredd (although some astute readers recognised this earlier).

Dredd, having wearied of his role as Judge, takes the Long Walk into the Cursed Earth, the radio-active, semi-Biblical wasteland outside Mega City One, peopled by mutants and other outcasts.

'The Dead Man' storyline initially does not tell us this, as it has to protect Dredd's anonymity. It begins with a young boy, Yassa Povey, finding a horribly-scarred figure. This is in fact Dredd, who after a hundred days bringing law to the lawless, has been attacked by supernatural entities (the Sisters of Death) and left for dead.

Dredd's superhuman survival capacities now save him:

Yassa: I could never stop calling him the Dead Man. I s'pose cos by rights he really shoulda been dead. Nobody survives the kinda injuries he had, not out here in the Cursed Earth

(*'The Dead Man'*, part 2).

It is plain that Dredd's survival capacities are superhuman, as befits a Sacred Executioner.

Back in Bubbletown, a small Cursed Earth settlement, Yassa's parents nurse Dredd back to health. At this time the community begins to harbour doubts about the newcomer. The innumerable bullet scars on Dredd's body reveal a violent past. Even (imagined) Biblical prophecy is invoked to deny the Dead Man a place in society:

Villager: See them marks on him... Bullet scars if ever I seen 'em! This feller's no stranger to trouble!

(*'The Dead Man'*, Part 2)

Holy Larry: A man of violence! A creature of evil! I can smell it in this room – spreadin' its rancid tentacles over you all! You have harboured a viper in your nest, Eartha Povey! Cast him out before it's too late!

(*'The Dead Man'*, Part 2)

The parallels with Maccoby's conception of the Sacred Executioner are remarkable.

Physical scars are intimately associated with the Sacred Executioner. Saint Paul, whom Maccoby claims identified himself as a Sacred Executioner, boasts of his God-given scars, his celibacy and his alienation (Maccoby, 1986; 2 Corinthians 12:7-9; Galatians 6:17). Of course, Cain was branded by God for his primal act of

**Sacred Murderer.**

The desire to drive Dredd from the community for some imagined crime is fascinating confirmation of his 'marked' status. Like Cain, he cannot be harmed since he bears the community's 'blood guilt'. If the people of Bubbletown wanted to kill him, they could easily do so when he lies incapacitated. But this would eliminate the major social benefit of his role as Sacred Executioner – their own abolition.

Indeed, when he has recovered, Dredd is banished from the settlement. This happens after he reveals his shooting skills, taking down eight Grunts (cannibalistic primitives) with deadly accuracy:

Yassa: I broke the news in Bubbletown, but no one seemed any too pleased about it –

Villager: Just proves he's a killer! A wicked man! That's no more'n we expected!

(‘The Dead Man’, Part 4)

Of course, as the Sacred Executioner, Dredd is indeed a fratricidal killer: but there is no obvious proof of this to the inhabitants of Bubbletown. Yet this episode precipitates the Dead Man's expulsion:

Villager: It ain't that we want to kick you out, stranger, but since you came here things started happenin'... My hens won't lay, the rains are late – I never heard of so many Grunts down from the hills, like somethin's spooked 'em.. (‘The Dead Man’, Part 4)

While the Dead Man is preparing to leave, the Sisters of Death extend their dark powers over Bubbletown, offering Yassa untold pleasures if he will only reveal Dredd's whereabouts:

Yassa: She touched me. Cold, like the fingers of a corpse..

Nausea: Where IS he.? You'll tell ME, won't you, boy?

Yassa: Wh – what? Who – ?

(‘The Dead Man’, Part 5)

Why does Yassa not reveal Dredd's whereabouts? According to Maccoby, the Sacred Executioner lifts the burden of guilt from his society by taking responsibility for the Sacred Murder. Hence the community is obliged to protect him, though they fear and revile him.

Bubbletown feels an oppressive terror associated with Dredd's presence:

Yassa: I remember the first time I felt the terror. I guess you never get over things like that. So I remember it clear as day, though it was night when it came. The first night we brung the Dead Man home. (‘The Dead Man’, Part 2)

Though the Terror is ostensibly the Sisters of Death seeking for Dredd, their need to destroy him inheres to his Sacred Executioner Status (as the Executioner maintains civilisation by his dreadful deed). There is no other explanation for their pursuit of Dredd than his talismanic status as the last possible saviour of Mega City One. If Dredd dies, the social order secured by his fratricide of Rico fails too, and the city falls.

Given minimal supplies, he takes the boy, Yassa (acting as guide) to the place he was found. There he discovers the

remains of his bike and scorched Judge badge and realises he is Judge Dredd. After surviving another psychic attack by the Sisters of Death, he sets out to wrest Mega City One from their control.

**'Necropolis'**

Nowhere do we find a clearer example of Dredd acting out the role of Sacred Executioner than in this classic story.

'Necropolis' ran from Progs 674 to 699. It was the culmination of two associated storylines, 'Tale of the Dead Man' (Prog 662-668) and 'Countdown to Necropolis' (Progs 669-673). Together, these stories describe what occurred in Mega City One after Dredd took the Long Walk, and what led to his departure in the first place.

In 'Tale of the Dead Man' Dredd assesses his possible replacement, a clone brother named Kraken, and finds him unsuitable. Then Dredd, disillusioned with the Judge system, tenders his resignation and departs the City. Chief Judge Silver, however is insistent that

Silver: Dredd has become a symbol to the city.. For the sake of public confidence in Justice Department I consider it essential that he remain a presence on our streets

(‘Countdown to Necropolis’, Part 3).

After a drastic test of Kraken's loyalty (faking his execution), Silver makes him a Judge and gives him Dredd's badge (see 'By Lethal Injection', Prog 670). The plan is for Kraken to take Dredd's place until he has established himself and can serve the City under his real identity. This sequence of events is described in the five-part 'Countdown to Necropolis'. At this juncture, the epic 'Necropolis' begins.

At first, Kraken performs flawlessly in Dredd's role. After all, he is Dredd's clone-brother and has enormous natural ability as a street Judge. However, Kraken is temperamentally unsuited to being the City's premier law enforcer. He falls prey to the Sisters of Death, supernatural creatures with psychic powers of possession. The Sisters are kin to the four Dark Judges from a dimension where life itself is a crime, long time adversaries of the City.

The Sisters use Kraken to create a psychic bridge allowing them to function in this dimension. He also retrieves the four Dark Judges from dimensional limbo. Thus begins 'Necropolis', the systematic elimination of the Mega City population. Law and social order disintegrate. Kraken becomes a fifth Dark Judge, taking an active part in the genocide.

Dredd, now fully aware of the threat to the City, returns from his self-imposed exile as the Dead Man. With the help of a former Chief Judge and some cadets, he is able to break the psychic bridge and return the Sisters to their own dimension. The four Dark Judges are contained. Finally, Dredd executes Kraken and social order is restored.

Dredd is synonymous with civilisation. His defection into the wilderness precipitates the collapse of social order. His return restores civilised values ('The Law' in Mega City terms). Most interestingly, the new social order is cemented by the fratricidal murder of his clone brother, Kraken, by Dredd:

Dredd: Couldn't let him live. Not now. Take it from me – he didn't want to

(‘Necropolis’, Part 25).

This action is never explained within the context of the story. After all, Dredd exonerates Kraken of all personal blame for the debacle:

Dredd: Maybe I was right about you, Kraken, maybe I wasn't. It's hard to say. But I do know one thing... I felt the power of the Sisters of Death halfway across the Cursed Earth and it almost killed me. If I'd been here... Well, who's to say I wouldn't be standing where you are...? So...no blame attached

(‘Necropolis’, Part 25).

However, if one recalls Dredd’s status as the Sacred Executioner, killing Kraken becomes the essential act of Sacred Murder necessary for re-founding civilisation. Like Cain or Romulus, Dredd inaugurates a new phase of civilisation by his act of symbolic fratricide. The blood of Dredd’s clone brother seals the bond of a new social covenant for Mega City One. Kraken is the exact equivalent of Remus or Abel, a necessary sacrificial victim whose death permits the revival of Mega City One’s social project.

Kraken is a Sacred Victim worthy of such dramatic social restitution. He actually surpasses Dredd in ability, outperforming Dredd during his judicial assessment test:

Odell: Dredd has no possible justification for rejecting Kraken! I can only assume it's motivated out of personal animosity! He's been top dog too long – he can't stand the thought of anyone coming who's actually better than he is!

(‘The Dead Man’, Part 7)

This superiority characterises the Sacred Victim – his excellence makes the sacrifice ‘worthwhile’. An aged or infirm victim’s life is ‘unworthy’. For example, Cain slew Abel because the latter’s offering pleased the Lord more than his own. Known human sacrifice victims are typically young and vigorous, seldom old or infirm (Tierney, 1989). As a youthful, vigorous (and probably virginal) individual endowed with notable physical and mental qualities, Kraken makes a perfect Sacred Victim. Indeed, Chief Judge Silver (who in time invokes Dredd’s banishment) fakes a Sacred Murder when he orders Kraken’s execution simulated after Dredd has failed him:

Silver: We substituted a harmless anaesthetic for the lethal dose – not even the staff at Resyk were told in case they inadvertently gave the game away

(‘Countdown to Necropolis’, Part 4).

Silver also hints that the social order is in decline (implying a need for Sacred Sacrifice and renewal):

Silver: He [Dredd] was a good Judge, yes... But everyone gets old. Minds dull, Judgement erodes... That's why old codgers like me get shoved upstairs – keeps us out of harm's way

(‘Countdown to Necropolis’, Part 3).

Indeed, the very name ‘Silver’ denotes physical senescence.

Kraken’s simulated suicide is insufficient to renew the social order – partly because he does not die, partly because it implicates no Sacred Executioner to absolve the community of guilt for the act. Kraken pointedly takes the poison from the executioner and administers it himself:

Kraken: Can't be much of a job... Executioner... Let me make it easy for you...

Executioner: This isn't necessary.

Kraken: Oh yes, it is

(‘Countdown to Necropolis’, Part 5).

Hence the ailing social order is ‘cheated’ of its natural victim and, after Dredd leaves Mega City One, falls prey to the Dark Judges, experiencing total disintegration. Of course, ‘Necropolis’ means ‘City of the Dead’.

Only when Dredd executes Kraken, the Sacred Victim, is the social order renewed. Dredd has donned a Judge’s uniform (including his characteristic helmet) to carry out the Execution. This underpins his primal role as Divine Executioner during the act.

Of course, Kraken is not the first clone brother executed by Dredd. Very early in the character’s history, his brother Rico returns for revenge after a 20 year stretch on the penal colony of Titan (decreed by Dredd himself). Dredd is forced to shoot him in a face-off. He is subsequently

wracked by guilt for this fratricidal act, seeking emotional redemption in uncharacteristically humane treatment of Rico’s daughter, Vienna (‘Vienna’, Prog 116). This angst finds expression when Dredd undergoes hypnotherapy:

Rheinart: You've just shot Rico. Does it... disturb you?

Dredd: Naturally. He IS my clone brother.

Rheinart: So you've never overcome your feelings for him?

Dredd: No. But it didn't stop me doing my duty

(‘A Case for Treatment’, Prog 389).

Thus Dredd has a definitive history of murderous violence towards his clone brothers in defence of the social order, entirely expected for a Sacred Executioner. The fact that there is more than one appropriate Sacred Victim is good for the story, lending the character an indefinite lifespan. Were Rico the first and last Sacred Victim, it is unlikely that Dredd would have enjoyed his long-term popularity.

The Cain and Abel theme has been recognised before in relation to Dredd, and indeed has received extensive treatment in *2000AD* as a whole. Johnny Alpha (Strontium Dog) has, for example, an illegitimate older brother responsible for his death. While Dredd is the Sacred Executioner, Alpha is his exact foil, the Sacred Victim. Hence Dredd is effectively immortal, while Alpha survives only in revisionist adventures. Alpha’s death secures enormous benefits for the mutant community, liberating them from a dimension where they are being systematically exterminated. His end is a classic blood sacrifice necessary



to secure a new social contract for his outcast people. As we shall see, his death serves exactly the same need as Kraken's in 'Necropolis'.

**Strontium Dog: The Sacred Victim**

Sacred Victim	Strontium Dog
Victim of fratricide	Indirect victim of fratricide
'Marked' for death	'Marked' for death
Sacrifice procures social benefits	Sacrifice procures social benefits (for personal rather than intended community)
Exceptional gifts that make sacrifice 'worthwhile'	Exceptional gifts synonymous with 'mutation'
Often victim of paternal sacrifice	Failed victim of paternal sacrifice
Preferably celibate/virginal	Celibate

In the present writer's opinion, Strontium Dog is the most compelling character in the whole 2000AD universe. His brooding presence appeals to the excluded adolescent that lurks in all of us. As a mutant, his eternal exclusion from the social order makes him a symbol of alienated consciousness akin to The Silver Surfer (Marvel) or Batman (DC).

That Johnny Alpha is 'marked' for death is made explicitly clear in the classic episode which sees him sacrifice himself:

Alpha: I'm not afraid of death. Sometimes, I wonder if it's what I've been looking for all these years. Every time I killed another man, I wondered - should this have been my death?

(‘The Final Solution’, Prog 686)

Alpha's father, Nelson Bunker Kreelman, is a far-right wing politician building a career based on persecuting mutants in Twenty-Second Century New Britain. When Alpha is born a mutant, it jeopardises this whole enterprise:

Alpha: My father, Kreelman - the rising politician, the man who would be king - - The man who'd have slaughtered his only son on the altar of his warped ambition

(‘The Final Solution’, Prog 686).

It may even be said that the relationship between Alpha and his father resembles that of Abraham and Isaac (discussed in great detail as a Sacred Sacrifice by MacCoby). When Abraham agrees to sacrifice Isaac at God's request, God promises him a new social contract:

Your descendants shall possess the cities of their enemies. All nations on earth shall pray to be blessed as your descendants are, and this because you have obeyed me

(Genesis 22: 16-18).

Moses (Exodus 4: 24-26) and Jephthah (Judges 11: 29-31) both offered to sacrifice their children in exchange for social/military success. Indeed, on defeating the Ammonites Jephthah actually sacrificed his own daughter and became Judge of Israel. Child sacrifice was a common method of

cementing social achievement for men of high standing throughout the ancient world (for example, Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter to ensure victory at Troy).

After leading a failed insurrection to overturn Kreelman's genocidal regime, Alpha is sentenced to death by his own father:

Kreelman: John Alpha - no known alias...

Panel: For a moment their eyes meet. Only they know that Johnny Alpha's real name is Johnny Kreelman - that they are father and son.

It suits them both that it should remain that way.

Kreelman: ...The sentence is death!

(‘Portrait of a Mutant’, Prog 216:)

Alpha, however, escapes the executioner's noose, thwarting Kreelman of his necessary sacrifice: and Kreelman's career and intended social project subsequently founder.

It is obvious that Alpha is a foil to Dredd. While Dredd patrols the claustrophobic dystopia of Mega-City 1, Strontium Dog is set against "an expanding galaxy". While Dredd is synonymous with social order, Alpha stands forever outside it (mutants are excluded from Mega City 1 by official policy). There are obvious similarities in their respective uniforms. While Dredd's judicial badge is a proud symbol of social authority, Alpha's Search/Destroy badge exposes him only to public contempt. Dredd never removes his helmet: Alpha seldom wears his. While Judge Dredd is set on the eastern seaboard of the 22nd Century USA, Strontium Dog is set in the UK. Dredd consequently embodies the ebullient confidence of the USA: Strontium Dog expresses the uncertainty of a nation that has 'lost an empire, but still not found a role'.

However, the supreme distinction between the two characters is that Alpha is a classic Sacred Victim, as opposed to Dredd's Sacred Executioner. All differences between these two stellar characters depend on this distinction.

Alpha is an ideal candidate to deliver his excluded people via the Sacred Sacrifice. His father's failed attempt to sacrifice him to inaugurate a mutant-free society marks Alpha out as a sacrificial candidate from childhood. Ultimately, he is the victim of a Sacred Sacrifice by his illegitimate half-brother, who likewise wants a mutant-free social order. However, Alpha's death liberates his people from a dark dimension and founds a new social contract inclusive of them. This is an odd subversion of the Sacred Victim theme: redefining the Sacred Sacrifice for personal ends:

Feral: He must have found out when he read the Lyran's mind. The magic on its own wasn't enough. To open the gateway, a blood sacrifice was needed. Johnny's blood. And it worked

(‘The Final Solution’, Prog 687).

Alpha is a less perfect match for the mythic archetype than Dredd, but his role as Sacred Victim is still obvious. Indeed, his name invokes the superior qualities typical of the ideal sacrificial candidate.

**The Social Significance of Judge Dredd**

The Cain/Abel theme is well developed in 2000AD. My own contribution has merely been to interpret Judge Dredd using Maccoby's concept of the Sacred Executioner. Since the well-worn tale of fratricide is a literary device to distance us from the terrible theme of human sacrifice, one would expect this underlying 'reality' to be present at a deeper level of the narrative. In the case of Judge Dredd, our study of 'The Dead Man'/'Necropolis' has certainly shown this to be the case. Indeed, the motif of the Sacred Executioner is seamlessly apparent, scarcely disguised at all.

In 'Necropolis' we are called upon to witness the primordial act wherein the Sacred Sacrifice saves an imperilled civilisation – to witness the pivotal moment when a new social contract is sealed in blood and a new social order is born. There is little need to search for the appeal of this story – it is utterly obvious.

Human nature has changed little since the earliest civilisations executed Sacred Victims to found cities, bring rains or seal victories. As sociobiology demonstrates, we are still creatures of primitive desire and yearning (Wright 1994). The Sacred Executioner theme in Judge Dredd appeals to us because it mirrors our primeval need for existential security and moral absolution. Hence its considerable influence on the best storylines.

The theme of the Sacred Sacrifice lies at the deepest level of social psychology. In *Homo Necans*, anthropologist Walter Burkert claims that, at the most primal level, human societies can only exist if participants curb their animal natures. Burkert and Rene Girard credit sacrificial ritual for society's relatively successful sublimation of primitive aggression:

Even the most violent rites are specifically designed to abolish violence

(Girard 1977: 103).

Hence sacrifice of instinct is the cornerstone of civilisation and communal life, the primary check against the animal in man. Little wonder that the three major Western religions are founded on a Sacred Sacrifice. Watching Dredd execute the Sacred Murder (or Alpha experience it) delivers the reader from existential uncertainty about the baser aspects of his/her nature.

The crucifix, symbol of the primal religious sacrifice, is used to dispel personifications of our baser natures (vampires and werewolves) in folktales and horror stories. Similarly, Dredd often defends Mega City 1 from such creatures. As the Sacred Executioner, Dredd is uniquely qualified to dispel such incursions (for example 'The Blood of Satanus', Progs 152-154; 'Cry of the Werewolf', Progs 322-328). Of course, the Dark Judges also personify the destructive impulse in man. Dredd's triumphs over these atavistic eruptions permit the reader temporary respite from instinct and bestow symbolic inclusion in the social nexus. Thus Judge Dredd is a conservative text, promoting a sense of integration among the marginalised. This is the story's great gift to its audience and society in general.

How did mere comics characters become infused with this burden of meaning? In my opinion, the answer is that, having 'existed' for over 25 years, Dredd is the work of many minds/hands. Consequently, he has become a

modern myth that can never be wholly deconstructed. Dredd takes temporary 'possession' of his artists/writers, rather than the inverse. Each creative consciousness adds to the character, of course: but the Judge retains an autonomous 'existence' uniquely his own. Dredd can no more be 'broken' and redefined than a rainbow: his identity always recedes into the realm of Nature itself. As a semi-autonomous fictional entity, Dredd has taken his place among the classic characters of imaginative fiction. Consequently, as he has accreted the psychic detritus of many creative minds, he now expresses the whole human condition, including the Sacred Executioner archetype examined in this article. This explains its presence in the Dredd narratives without conscious creative input.

My reason for highlighting the theme of the Sacred Executioner is to illuminate the Dredd mythos for its many fans. Understanding Dredd's true role redefines appreciation of his character completely. Marvel and D.C. creations have been lauded as contemporary myths by post-modern researchers in literature, cultural studies and design history (for example, see Reynolds 1994; Nevins 1996; Pyle 1994). I believe I have shown Dredd and the 2000AD pantheon to be at least as worthy of serious further study.

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John F. Keane has a Master's Degree in Technology Management and works as Research Head for a Manchester-based e-government management consultancy. In his spare time he is doing a Doctorate in online marketing. He has published articles on the use of complexity-based marketing in such prestigious international journals as the *International Journal of Advertising and Emergence* and is considered an expert in this exciting field. He was 36 the last time he dared to count. His article, 'The Meaning of Judge Dredd: Fascist Satire or Post Industrial Commentary?', appeared in V236 — Eds.



# First Impressions

**Book Reviews  
edited by  
Paul Billinger**

## Observations from the Bookroom – A *Vector* reviews column editorial

There are a few things in this reviews column for which I feel some explanation would not be amiss. Firstly, the inclusion of two substantial reviews of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is not a mistake, although to say it's deliberate wouldn't be the whole story. *Cloud Atlas* is, on the face of it, a 'mainstream' publication, so much so that it's one of the hottest favourites ever to win the Booker Prize this year (at least at the time of writing – by the time you read this we'll know if it has won), a literary prize not known for the inclusion of genre fiction. So why has *Vector* included not one but two reviews? The simple answer is that this is one of the standout novels of the year – possibly even the best – and one that is, according to Niall Harrison "probably the only novel you'll ever find that you can describe as *precisely* 34.03% science fiction".

Prior to *Cloud Atlas* Mitchell published two novels, *Ghostwritten* and *number9dream*, both critically regarded in the mainstream press and, although not genre fiction, written with a clear sense of sensibility and knowing use of genre references. Both are also brilliant books and when I heard, in late 2003, that his next novel would be partly sci-fi this was always going to be one of my most anticipated novels of the year. So a review of *Cloud Atlas* was always going to be included in *Vector* – and I planned to do this myself – but I was rather surprised when two other *Vector* reviewers contacted me. Both Niall and Paul sent me their reviews for the simple reason that they were so impressed with the book that they had to write about it and were evangelical about bringing it to the attention of others. It's rare for *Vector* to include two reviews of a book and it could be argued that I should have dropped one of these. But as you can see, I didn't. Both are great reviews, making a choice very difficult, and this is a book which must not be missed, so both went in.

And then the column started to take a very mainstream/slipstream flavour, with the inclusion of *Mobius Dick* and *The Town that Forgot how to Breathe*. This is in addition to books such as *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (with which I sure everyone will now be familiar) and the first two volumes of Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle* (the first of which, *Quicksilver*, won this year's Arthur C. Clarke Award). It is easier to argue that these two are genre publications but both have been readily accepted into the mainstream. Further commentary on the genre/mainstream divide is made in the reviews of these books.

This gives over a quarter of the column to titles outside of the supposed genre core. I make no apologies for this as I believe it is one of the functions of this column to try and bring to your attention good books which should be of interest regardless of what label they are published under. This is one of the reasons for introducing the *Vector* Recommended Reads – to highlight titles which the reviewers think are of special merit and which could be overlooked on a quick read of the column. My intention is to continue to do this, but I would be very interested in your opinion. Should I have included two reviews of *Cloud Atlas*? Should I have given this amount of space to so-called mainstream titles? Should I continue to try to cover non-core titles? Please let me know.

I must stress that my intention is to include these titles as well as more clearly genre ones. This issue, for example, includes reviews of Jon Courtenay Grimwood's amazing *Stamping Butterflies*, the concluding volume of Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series and Peter F. Hamilton's latest book *Pandora's Star*. We also have reviews of some classic reprints, small-press titles, some horror fiction, some of the latest titles from Tor America and YA titles, giving, I believe, a good balance.

**Paul N. Billinger, Everdon, October 2004.**



= eligible for the 2004 BSFA Award for Best Novel

= contains stories eligible for the 2004 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction

## **Cherith Baldry – *The Reliquary Ring***

Macmillan, London, 2003, 424pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0333-98944-9

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

Set in a fictional, but still very recognisable, Venice, this is a novel whose primary drive and focus is the degradation of those held to be inferior and subhuman and the ability of conscious beings to overcome this. Here, the beings are genics: artificially created, genetically engineered people. Originally developed by scientists in the northern empire, they are now very popular in the city. The Holy Church, which holds great power and influence, has decreed that they are not human, being not of God's making, and a large proportion of the ordinary population believe that even to touch a genic is both corrupting and sinful. There are those, not of a religious persuasion, who abuse them in horrific and perverse practises, but, in the main, genics are used for commercial labour, household chores or entertainment. Their deeds of ownership can be bought or sold, they can be given away: they are slaves.

The story follows the lives of four genics as they attempt to find some fulfilment within these narrow parameters. Serafina was once a street beggar, diving into the canals for thrown coins, but now belongs to the daughter of one of the city's most important families. While she is treated well, Serafina, being fairly intelligent, finds her spoiled, self centred and empty headed mistress frustrating and annoying. She is also trying to find the reason for her own creation. The merchant Alessandro, on the other hand, has managed to turn the tables on the system for many years. Gabriel was originally only designed for pleasure, but has discovered a love and talent for painting, which is fortunately encouraged by his master. Hyacinth has been designed purely as a musician and singer, and has a passion for music which excludes almost everything else. Their stories intertwine throughout the course of the novel as each has a part to play in the revolutionary events surrounding them. These events are primarily centred around the discovery of the eponymous ring, which is said to contain

a hair of the Christos, and which is subsequently used by the ruthlessly ambitious Count Dracone in an attempt to further his power and take control of the city. However, one of the results is a paradigm shift in the attitude towards the genics.

The sense of place within this novel is superb. The reader is transported to this city of canals with its fabulous buildings, beautifully dressed residents, highly ceremonial religious services and carnivals. The influence of both the Holy Church and the secular Ducal authority seem to hang over everything like a miasma. The treatment of the genics is also extremely effective, reminiscent of the attitudes towards real life groups deemed unacceptable by the Church, and is made all the more poignant by the reader's sympathy towards the individual characters. The suffering and the suffocation caused by the restrictions of the genics' lives are keenly felt by the reader.

Where the novel doesn't work so well is in two main areas. Firstly there are some rather stereotypical characters, in particular the leader of a group of long ignored, almost free genics living in the lagoon, whose job it is to protect the city from being overwhelmed by the sea. He vehemently refuses contact with the city's leaders and human residents, yet is persuaded in the end to save it, thus showing his inherent goodness. The shift in attitude towards the genics also seems too easy, as the ideas about them and how they should be treated are so deep-rooted. This may be because the novel concentrates to a large extent on more tolerant people including some more enlightened members of the Clergy, one of whom is prepared to go as far as baptising a genic, something which has profound consequences. What sort of place there will actually be for them in the future, and what prejudices they will continue to face, remain to be seen. That, however, is perhaps another story, one I would certainly like to read...

## **Cherith Baldry – *The Roses of Roazon***

Tor UK, London, 2004, 332pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-333-98969-4

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

My etymological dictionary defines 'Romance' as "The spirit or atmosphere of imaginary adventure, chivalrous or idealized love". This romance deals with events in the holy city of Roazon and the surrounding lands, and the antithetical dark island of Autrys. Roazon's knights would have felt at home among the companions of Arthur or Roland. Adventure comes both to those who seek it, and those who do not. And most of the main characters end up dealing with Love – a core theme is the conflict between Love and Duty, frequently found in the original 12th – 14th century romances.

The young Joscelin's induction as Duke of Roazon is the pivot-point around which a series of interlocking stories unfold, involving both knights and commoners, women and men. Their choices and actions unleash demonic forces against Roazon, and also heroically resist those forces. The conflicts they face are not simply political power-struggles or ethical dilemmas, but also religious. A visionary painter, Morwenna, is inspired to create a new image of God, not in His familiar aspects of Warrior or Judge, but as a Healer who bears a remarkable resemblance to Duke Joscelin. Eminent Churchmen wrestle in prayer – is this a new Divine revelation, or the worst kind of heretical blasphemy? Members of the holy

Order of Knights Companions, sworn to chastity, must decide whether to keep their vows or follow their hearts. And what of the woman pledged to a dishonourable man? Or the ugly youth of noble birth, raised as a peasant with no courtly manners or polish? Or the young man whose lover's rejection drives him into dissolution and despair? What chance of a good life do these people have?

So far, so very good; it's an engaging, well-written, thoughtful and interesting story. But... there is always a but, and I have two. My first problem is with the character of Duke Joscelin, who comes perilously close to being portrayed as a Cardboard Good Guy – neither an engagingly flawed human, nor a numinous archetype, but a white-hat (okay, white-robe) stereotype.

My second problem is the not-quite-overt identification of the book's religion with Christianity – it's not Christianity that's the problem, it's the not-quite-overtness. Christianity formed chivalry, the original chivalric romances are overtly Christian, and I suspect that it would be impossible to write a chivalric romance that wasn't at least covertly Christian – there is no getting away from the ethics and devotion that underlie knightly honour. Christianity is a wonderfully fertile seedbed

for fantasy (MacDonald, Lewis, Tolkien, etc.), and the Masters deal with faith in a variety of ways. One is to let the religion of the subcreated world be implicit rather than explicit, as in *Lord of the Rings*. Another is to let Christianity be itself. What doesn't work for me is to present an apparently unique 'subcreated religion', and then whip away the handkerchief on

the penultimate page to reveal that *really* it's been Christianity all along. When authors do this to me, I don't feel enlightened, I feel cheated. Baldry doesn't quite go this far, but she comes close enough to make me grit my teeth and mutter a bit. However a little muttering is a small price to pay for an otherwise very satisfying story.

### Alice Borchartd – *The Raven Warrior*

Bantam, London, 2004, 624pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-553-81513-X

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The besetting sin of Arthurian fiction at present is the claim of each writer to present the 'real truth' about Arthur while ignoring the fact that we know very little about a possible historical Arthur, and at the same time including many elements which properly belong to the literary development of the legend, and not history at all. The results are painfully repetitive.

Alice Borchartd avoids this pitfall, and her take on the Matter of Britain, here and in the first volume of the sequence, *The Dragon Queen*, is full of original ideas. Unfortunately, in my view, she moves so far away from the core of the legend that her books are scarcely Arthurian at all. She succeeds in finding something new to say in what is by now very well-trodden ground, but there are slim pickings for a reader in search of specific insights into Arthur and his world.

The movement of the plot demonstrates this. By the end of this novel, the second of two very long books, Arthur is in the process of joining with Guinevere and assuming the kingship. There's a long way to go before the Battle of Camlann. This isn't to say there's no action in the novel. There is: lots of it. It just hasn't got a great deal to do with Arthur. For example, more than one character is taken into a parallel world in which they have to face tests. There's also a very large cast of characters, most of whom are inventions of Borchartd herself. However effective they may be, they distract attention from the Arthurian themes.

Another well-mined area in Arthurian fiction is the

portrayal of the women of the legend as powerful figures in their own right. Borchartd certainly does this in her depiction of Guinevere. However, in the first volume Guinevere acquired so many supernatural abilities or artefacts that she has become too powerful to be an engaging protagonist. When someone is almost indestructible, it's hard to put them in any real danger, especially when we already know that Guinevere must survive her various trials in order to become Arthur's Queen.

The fantasy settings are vividly described and there are some moments of real wonder. I especially liked Uther's devotion to music. However, the occasional Americanism in the style really grates – for example, introducing the young Lancelot, through the eyes of a Dark Age warrior, as 'a good-looking kid' – and the streetwise argot of the Lady of the Lake just won't do. As Ursula le Guin wrote: 'Their gods and heroes keep turning aside to look out of the book and whisper at you, "See, we're really just plain folks".'

When I reviewed the first volume of this series, in *Vector* 226, I said that I thought it would have worked better as an original fantasy with completely invented characters, rather than an attempt to rework the Arthurian legend. I feel the same about this second volume. Read it, but don't expect much enlightenment about Arthur, and don't begin here. *The Dragon Queen* sets up a very complex situation; it would be hard to follow this book without reading it.

### Ramsey Campbell – *The Overnight*

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2004, 414pp, £35.00, h/b, ISBN 1-902880-96-X

Reviewed by Simon Morden

Out-of-town retail park Fenny Meadows boasts many fine outlets: there's a travel agent, a supermarket, a children's clothes and toy shop, and then there's Texts, the latest UK branch of an American chain of bookshops. It's even got its own enthusiastic American manager, Woody, who ensures his sometimes less-than-dedicated British staff are happily smiling, unfailingly polite, and always, always on top of their sections. Woody's not pleased with conflict between his subordinates, and decidedly frosty when it comes to untidy shelves and unstacked books.

So it's a real shame that Fenny Meadows is the centre of some serious supernatural activity, having been built on the site of not one, but two vanished villages, literally consumed by the underlying marshes. Then there's the fog... not just any old North-west murk, but a perpetual wall of mist that sometimes hides and sometimes reveals the shapes lurking within. With paying customers thin on the ground and the store going belly-up, the parent company is sending in managers from the States. Woody compels his staff to stay after hours – 'the overnight' – in order to make Fenny Meadows' Texts the best bookshop their overseas visitors have ever seen.

All the ingredients for a classic haunted house book are in place: an isolated location, a handful of people already at each

other's throats, a clearly unhinged man in charge, and malevolent spirits bent on destroying the living. Campbell's eloquent prose is written in an edgy present tense, each chapter dedicated to a particular staff member's viewpoint which allows us to get into the mind of all the characters involved.

So why did this not scare me? With everything that had gone before, and being in the hands of a master of suspense and terror, why did I find myself struggling to the end when it should have been a breathless, nail-biting ride? It wasn't that the old trope of Building Something Where Things Ought Not Be Built was obvious from the start – it's on the inside jacket leaf. Neither was it that the characters were too distant to care about. Far from it: Campbell is a veteran of detailed character studies.

It took me a long while to work out why, and it came down to this: up to, and sometimes including, the moment of death, the protagonists were not afraid. They simply put everything that happened to them and the store down to a series of unfortunate, sometimes strange, but never inexplicable, natural events. The ever-present fog that shows shadows and shapes. The slime and mud marks that start outside and gradually work their way in. The water-damaged

books and taped-over videos. The ghastly lift with its 'going down' prophecies. The two ever-present men who never buy anything and never read the children's picture books they pick up. Nothing. Not even when the electricity fails and the locks seize and they're all alone in the dark. If it were me, I'd be soiling my trousers. The staff of Texts, made of sterner stuff, treat it like any other of the bizarre coincidences and happenings, and it becomes a lottery who lives and who dies. Because they don't realise how much danger they're in, they behave in a rational, non-fearful way and consequently they don't take any deliberate action that might actually save their

skins. This is what ruined it for me. I wanted to empathise with these people, to live their anxieties and feel their fear. It didn't happen, and I was so disappointed.

There are scary moments, especially as Fenny Meadows reaches its malevolent worst, but these were too little, too late. The writing is superb, the characters solid, the set-up faultless. It just failed to frighten me which, for a ghost story, adds up to a bit of a problem.

[Available from [www.pspublishing.co.uk](http://www.pspublishing.co.uk)]

**Susanna Clarke – *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell***  Bloomsbury, London, 2004, 782pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 07475-7055-8

Reviewed by Tom Hunter



This is a book of moments. One such moment involves gentleman English magician Jonathan Strange, temporarily on loan to Wellington's war effort against the French, casually rearranging major portions of the Spanish landscape (shifting rivers, moving towns, summoning swift roads across wild terrain etc) all in the

name of aiding his master's campaign.

A suitably dry (witty not dully historical) footnote, one of 180 plus scattered throughout the novel, informs us that despite repeated strong letters of protest from the Spanish government, Strange never does quite find time in his busy schedule to set this particular corner of the world to rights. The general consensus seems to be that this is no bad thing.

I suspect that the impact of this novel on the landscape of genre fiction, and the wider shores of fiction full stop, may be of a similarly epic scale. However, I suspect that with Susanna Clarke's scrupulously imaginative gift for mining the magical out of the mundane, and *visa versa*, that this will be no bad thing either.

All of which is praise indeed for a novel that goes out of its way to suggest that the practice of magic is dull at best, and certainly not an activity becoming of a *proper* gentleman.

The book is divided into three sections, one for each of the title characters with the third named for John Uskglass, The Raven King and England's greatest ever magician. A man raised by faeries who disappeared, the legends say, to a mysterious land that lies on the far side of Hell (a territory he is said to rent from Hell's ruler at a most agreeable rate). Although this is undoubtedly a book belonging to *Misters Strange and Norrell*, there is never any doubt that the true ownership of English Magic lies elsewhere, if not with the Raven King then within the heart of land itself.

Our first introduction to Norrell describes him as a man who "hardly ever spoke of magic, and when he did it was like a history lesson and no one could bear to listen to

him."

Hidden away in a remote Yorkshire house to better study his precious texts and, of course, ensure that no one else has access to them, Norrell is tempted into the public eye by the unmissable chance to discredit a rival society of amateur 'theoretical' magicians. Word of Norrell's wager in which he successfully demonstrates an act of practical magic and forces his competition to renounce their magical credentials, attracts the attention of fashionable society and prompts his move to London's Soho Square, the better to promote his own vision of English Magic.

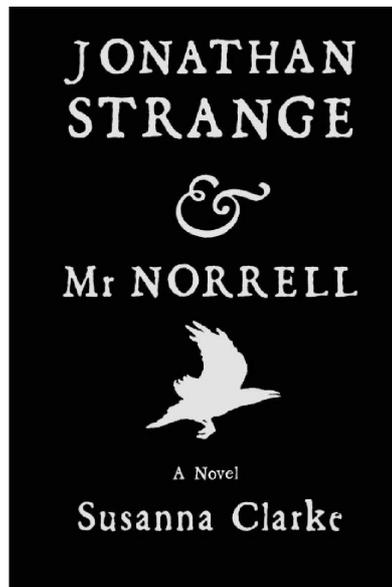
Norrell recruits the 19th century equivalent of a crack PR team, publishes his own periodical *The Friends of English Magic* (noted more for its fervent discrediting of any viewpoint other than Norrell's rather than any magical content) and secures a wealthy political patron via a second great feat of magic. Yet it still takes the arrival of Jonathan Strange of Shropshire (two thousand pounds a year, once frightened a cat belonging to the Master of Corpus Christi college) to fulfil the public's perception of what a *proper* magician should be like.

This is, perhaps, the true heart of the novel. Beneath its comedy of magical manners exterior, its witty asides and enjoyably quotable epigrams, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is a book concerned with perceptions of magic: English, Faerie or Other.

That Susanna Clarke has given deep thought to the portrayal of her system of magic is undoubted, but any number of fine writers could claim the same. What makes this a stand out novel is the way that she has matched the practice of her magic to the everyday while still employing some truly spectacular effects. The magic in Clarke's world is as powerful now as it was back in what genre readers will find a familiar (but welcome) iteration of a past magical 'golden age.'

If magic has lost its way since then, the blame is entirely with a mankind increasingly content to enjoy the limits of its domesticated landscape and never cross over into the wilds on the edge.

Clarke makes it clear that magic has never really left England, far from it. Society has simply become more adept at convincing itself it's in control. In this way even the most



spectacular set-pieces in any other book are viewed by the majority of inhabitants in this book as on a par with the Duchess of York's latest hat and something they could well do themselves if they were so disposed. Cities are moved, the dead raised and spectral armadas summoned with little more than a carefully raised eyebrow and a well-placed footnote to note their occurrence, while closer to home the old magical fires are burning fiercer than ever, if only people had the wit to notice.

This is a theme that runs throughout the book, offering scenes by turns hilarious and subtly disturbing. The conversion of one female character into a wife who quite literally can be seen but not heard (at least when she attempts to say anything of more consequence than commenting on the weather) is a particularly vivid creation.

### Steve Cockayne – *The Seagull Drivers* 📖

Reviewed by John Newsinger

After *Wanderers and Islanders* and *The Iron Chain*, we now have the third volume of the *Legends of the Land* Trilogy, *The Seagull Drivers*. How much of an achievement is the finished work? Has Steve Cockayne written something exceptional, something capable of shaking up the fantasy genre? This certainly seemed a possibility with the first volume, less likely with the second, and, for this reader at least, definitely not the case with the third and final volume. Certainly the trilogy is a fine piece of work (I have recommended it to friends and family and hope to get my copies of the first two volumes back one day), with an accomplished writer exploring a very different fantasy world, but... The problem seems to be that while aspects of the trilogy are really outstanding, taken as a whole it does not have the same impact; the parts, so to speak, are more impressive than the whole. Cockayne chronicles the predicaments of particular characters to considerably greater effect than he chronicles the predicament of his fantasy world as a whole. Less this should seem too critical, what I am trying to understand here is why the trilogy is merely extremely good and just important rather than great and very important.

The characters we have met in the earlier volumes return with Leonardo Pegasus, Rusty Brown, his daughter, Ashleigh, and others, finding personal resolution at the same time as playing their part in the restoration of the land. The rule of the Wolf Boys is ended and the demonic Lee is finally exorcised

Both Norrell and Strange are as guilty of this as any. The former convincing himself that collusion with wild magics when it suits his purpose in no way undermines his zeal to stamp them out in public, while the latter is so drawn to the glamorous face of magic that he fails to recognise when those same glamours are worked against him.

That *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is a magical book of moments, I have no doubt. It is also a book of some 782 pages (slightly more than one word per page for this review), so any attempt to cover them all here is happily impossible.

Fans of genre fiction would do well to read it now before the rest of the world wakes up and claims it for its own.

Orbit, London, 2004, 328pp, £12.99, h/p, ISBN 1-84149-157-8

from the Network, but this is not really convincing. The restoration of the legitimate King by a conspiracy led by a wealthy businessman, Charles Bannister, all seems much too New Labour.

At the level of a whole society Cockayne's myth-making falters, is unconvincing, tired and hackneyed, whereas as far as individual characters are concerned it is really quite marvellous. Indeed, his very success in making ordinary characters compelling and their mundane fates of interest undercuts his grand resolution. It is no accident that King Matthew, Charles Bannister and his wife (Princess) Sarah, who becomes Queen when the King abdicates, are the least interesting and most underdeveloped characters in the novel and yet they are so important to the grand resolution. Cockayne would have been better served by either avoiding a grand resolution altogether or coming up with something more convincing than 'businessman restores monarchy'.

Nevertheless, the *Legends of the Land* trilogy is essential reading for anyone interested in and concerned with British fantasy. And, of course, one can hopefully look forward to visits to future lands of Cockayne, where the promise of this fine writer will be more completely realised.

### Andrew Crumey – *Mobius Dick* 📖

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

After being named as one of the best British novelists under forty in 1984, Christopher Priest thrived, one of the Ortygia House literary mafia. Each novel gained critical respect and mass market sales, whilst his opinions were sought by the broadsheets and Radio 4 discussion programmes. The Booker still eludes him, for reasons to do with professional jealousy. There was some cynicism about the deal negotiated by his überagent for *The Separation*, and its massive publicity campaign. Meanwhile one of his fellow young novelists, Martin Amis, languishes in genre hell, failing to receive the attention he deserves for the astonishingly original *Time's Arrow*.

At least, if we take the many-worlds interpretation of whether Schrödinger's cat is alive or dead, all of the above could be true. Each quantum event branches off a new

universe – I (don't) hit the letter j right now, I (don't) get this review written on time, I (don't) assassinate someone... The assumption is that we don't know of the other choices because our conscious self is only aware of the choice actually made, although science fiction has long offered alternate world narratives in which the alternate course of events can be glimpsed. Sometimes – and Gregory Benford's *Timescape* is one example, the film *Frequency* another – communication between such worlds can become integral to the plot. On the other hand, alternate world fiction such as Phillip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* managed to play with such connections without needing pages of "As you know, professor, the Copenhagen interpretation..." dialogue.

All of this is preamble to saying that in another universe, *Mobius Dick* is a novel I can recommend. There's a pleasing

Picador, London, 2004, 312pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 0-330-41991-9

playfulness in the title that alludes to *Moby Dick*, with its first line proper (after preamble about whales) of "Call me Ishmael" being echoed in this novel's opening gambit of "Call me: H". John Ringer is a theoretical physicist (as was author Andrew Crumey, before becoming literary editor of *Scotland on Sunday*) who receives this cryptic text message on his brand new singing and dancing mobile phone, and presumes it is a note from his old-flame, Helen. After attending a dreadful public lecture on Melville, he heads up to Scotland to visit a research establishment which is developing a quantum computer. Alternatively, John Ringer does not exist (he's a ringer), being the product of creative writing therapy imagined by Harry Dick. Harry is in a Scottish hospital, suffering from amnesia, uncertain about many things, but clearly being lied to by his doctors. Unless, of course, Harry is a fictional character, imagined by John as part of *his* therapy. Gosh, it's as if in this universe Christopher Priest's *The Affirmation* hadn't been read by all right-thinking people.

This is intercut with extracts from various books featuring people we may or may not know, the composer Schumann, the physicist Schrödinger, and discussions about Thomas Mann (a failed novelist) and ETA Hoffman (he of various tales of the doppelgänger). The books within the books are translations published in the 1950s in the British Democratic Republic, a Britain (or possible just a Scotland) once ruled by Germany, but now apparently Communist. How things could be different is pointed out in an afterword from one of these

books – imagine a Britain with a female prime minister. Unthinkable. Better not open the box. Personally I failed to be convinced by the tone of the extracts as being from the periods the book assigns them to, but then perhaps prose styles were different in this alternate world.

Crumey takes several opportunities to debunk bad science – the English literature lecture provides a cheap opportunity for satire, and Jungians and Freudians are hoist by their own petards at various points – but I was not convinced by his performance. An attack on holocaust denial points the way to Crumey's rejection of moral relativity typical of such EngLit/Cultural Studies people. The book's jacket blurb also points this up. Except the holocaust can't have happened in all possible worlds (although there's some double talk about attractors suggesting that certain things are likely to happen), and to my mind the many-worlds interpretation does look suspiciously like consciousness is arbitrary and events thus seem rather relative rather than absolute.

This novel has interesting enough ideas, but it's as if *The Affirmation*, *The Separation*, *The Man in the High Castle* and *New Scientist* have been shuffled into the same novel. We don't need a long discussion of whether light is wave or particle to create doppelgängers, or universes next door. It's old hat. Stoppard resorted to lectures within his quantum espionage thriller *Hapgood*, but that was nearly twenty years ago and he did it with a wink. Rewatch that, or reread Priest, instead.

### Philip K. Dick – *The Simulacra*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 220pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07460-4

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

*The Simulacra* was first published as an Ace paperback original in 1964; it did not appear in Britain until the late '70s. The mid-sixties were not Dick's most successful years, either creatively or in sales terms. *The Man in the High Castle* had appeared in 1962, while it would be 1968 before *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* showed him returning to such a level of originality.

Who are *The Simulacra*? Well, most probably the series of robots who take the role of President of the United States of Europe and America, though they always take the form of benevolent, elderly German gentlemen. Meanwhile, Nicole Thibodeaux in the White House justifies the ways of government to man, and Nicole is human even if she is eighty years old yet has never aged.

Stressed junior executives worry about their homes in apartment blocks – committees vet potential residents and then subject them to continuous vetting for suitability, but then those executives go off to jobs in multinational companies, whose names suggest they have foreign origins – A.G.

Chemie, for instance, or E.M.E (a musical company echoing E.M.I. – Dick worked as a classical DJ, remember). On the way to work (will your company or another get the next Presidential building contract?) you might well find an advertising bug jingling into your vehicle. No wonder you might want to escape to Mars. Or is the prospect of escape to another planet just another false illusion, another simulacra?

Dick presented all these. Then he slipped in a time machine that has grabbed Hermann Goering. The airman is being asked to go back and change history – if he can depose Hitler he might not die on a cell floor in Nuremberg. The Nicole who intercedes with Goering is an actress – Nicole has been played by a sequence of actresses those stressed executives discover, though they never find whether their time stream or another is the real one. So all of Dick's themes are here – reality, time, paranoia, work. Perhaps there are just too many of them for comfort, though.

### Stephen Gallagher – *Out of His Mind*

PS Publishing, Harrogate, 2004, 412pp, £35.00, h/b, ISBN 1-902880-98-6

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

*Out of his Mind* is Stephen Gallagher's first collection of short fiction. He has gathered together 21 stories, originally published mainly between 1985 and 1997, and it includes one previously unpublished piece. The afterword makes it clear that he has assembled a collection

that he has long regarded as a coherent body of work. It is a very powerful collection of horror and suspense stories. Individually, they range in tone from the subtle and moving to out and out horror, and none of them could be described as fillers. The weakest of the stories is merely quite good.

Stephen Gallagher has always had a knack for really getting under the skin of his characters and these stories showcase just how well he does this even at the shorter length. Some of these people are thoroughly unpleasant,



yet strongly compulsive. The inner thoughts and self justification of the hit and run driver in 'Not Here, Not Now' makes for particularly worrying reading. The stories of children in the collection effectively evoke the dark side of childhood, 'Magpie' recalling rather too well the dread that school sports held for those of us who were the least able in that department and 'The Drain' pointing up that not all childhood adventures are exciting and fun escapades. They also effectively point out that unpleasant character traits are not the sole domain of the school bullies. It is this depth of character that makes the horror of these stories so effective.

All too often supernatural horror comes across as being used purely to create an emotional effect where none would normally be. Although the supernatural plays a significant role in many of these stories, rarely does it feel that it is there just to create this effect (except possibly in the case of 'Driving Force', in which a professional car thief finds himself on the wrong end of a strange new motive power). More often it will act to sharpen the focus of the natural horror, exaggerating the emotions felt in extreme situations. In 'The Horn' the snowbound drivers' situation is bad enough to start with, or 'Lifeline', in which a man struggles with his grief after his girlfriend is killed and he, never having seen the body, cannot accept that she is really dead.

In others, it is considerably more subtle. On the surface 'Jigsaw Girl' is the story of a man attempting to find a jigsaw puzzle he remembered from his youth which belonged to a girl that he had let down rather badly. What transpires gives us a glimpse both of his lack of understanding of what he did and of where his life is

heading. This, along with the last piece in the collection are, for me, the two strongest stories in a very strong collection. The other story, 'In Gethsemane', is the tale of an unlikely pairing for a theatrical show of a medium and a medium debunker shortly after The First World War. The Medium simply holds an object and says what comes into his mind, normally relating to the donor of the object, with unerring accuracy. The debunker shows how the tricks of the medium are done and has set as his task to expose the medium before the end of the tour. There is almost a reversal of roles here as it is the debunker and not the medium who approaches the performance with an almost evangelical zeal. The medium just does what he does, and yet is the dominant partner in this relationship. Once again, the depth of the characters shines through, and the resolution is both shocking and moving. It is left up to the reader to decide whether or not there is anything to the medium's powers.

It is unusual for me to read a short story collection (especially when reading it in one go) and to realise when looking down the contents page that I can remember the details of all the stories quite so vividly. Stephen Gallagher has written a new afterword for all of the stories describing the circumstances of how the story came to be written and the inspiration behind them. Given the nature of these stories a disturbingly large percentage seem to have been inspired by or even contain real personal experience. This may be partly why he sees them as a coherent whole. This is a reasonable view of the book, not only are all the individual stories very effective, the way in which stories balance each other make this a potent collection overall. It is also the best horror collection I've read in a long time

### John Gardner – *Grendel*

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Gollancz, London, 2004, 123pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0 575 07582 1

Dating from 1971, *Grendel* retells the first third of *Beowulf* from the monster's point of view, some incidents being changed and others experiencing a change of emphasis. Living in a cave at the bottom of a boggy pool, Grendel is not happy, and aware of the pointlessness of his existence he is doubly unhappy. He is also aware that animals are not conscious, that humans are, and that he is somewhere in-between. In one of Gardner's interpolations he finds himself trapped in the cloven fork of a tree, where humans encounter him for the first time and he becomes aware that they impose an order on the world as they categorise him – 'tree spirit' may not be a perfect Linnaean order but it indicates intention. Intention is something that Grendel lacks on the conscious level until he gives himself over to one activity only – raiding Heorot, the meadhall of King Hrothgar.

Gardner's Hrothgar is much more mercenary and grasping than the *Beowulf* original, Queen Wealtheow more queenly and forgiving, and Unferth his defeated champion is less

heroic. *Beowulf* himself is on the scene for a much shorter time than in the original – but when you think that Grendel was raiding Heorot for twelve years before rescue arrived it is only natural that he should give more of his account over to the totality of his life. Unfortunately, that totality is mostly given over to other people's body parts, dragged down through the firesnakes to the lair of his demented mother.

It was back in 1970 that Penguin Classics dumped David Wright's prose translation for what was then a controversial verse adaptation, which must have been the same time John Gardner was writing in the U.S.A. There was something in the air about reconsideration, which has helped keep *Grendel* in print over there as schoolteachers have used it as a companion piece to the Old English, but this fantasy is more interesting than that and something of an epic in itself.

### Jim Grimsley – *The Ordinary*

Reviewed by Kev McVeigh

Tor, New York, 2004, 353pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30528-3

A title like *The Ordinary* tempts a glib review comment, and to be honest there are moments in this novel that justify it. Elsewhere however are a host of ideas and subsequent elaboration on those ideas that make Jim Grimsley's latest

novel worthy of more than glibness.

Two societies, two worlds even, co-exist either side of The Twil Gate. This mysterious portal appeared a generation ago and links the high-tech, high density Senal and Irion, a land of

myth and feudalism formerly ruled by powerful wizards. Jedda is a linguist selected to accompany a high-level diplomatic mission from Senal which goes wrong and leads the two cultures to the brink of war. Suddenly Jedda finds herself a key player in events which seem sure to change everything she ever knew forever.

At this point, some fifty or so pages in, Irion is strongly reminiscent of Mary Gentle's *Orthe*, with similar cultural ambiguities, societal depth and, in Jedda's relationships with the local people, a wry view of imperialism. Then it changes, Jedda is taken away from her own people and into the company, first of the powerful mage-woman Malin, and then that of the original Irion himself, the mightiest wizard of all. She learns the true history of Irion and the Twil gate, and its importance to both Irion and Senal. For Senal is at war in space with Als light years away, and Irion faces a challenge from an equally powerful mage Jessex.

Within all of this relatively straightforward plotting, Grimsley introduces the real meat in his elaborations on the nature of Irion's magic, the evolution of society and the role of language in both. It is as though he has taken Arthur C. Clarke's dictum about any sufficiently advanced technology being indistinguishable from magic as a challenge. The differences are not in the acts of magic or the inventions, but in the societal view of these and the subsequent consequences. Notably the world with magic, Irion, is apparently more living than the technological world of Senal. There are multiple references to place names changing over

time in the language of the Erejhen people of Irion, Sha-Nal becomes Senal, Frejhen is corrupted to Irion, over the centuries. What little we see of Senal, in contrast seems sterile.

It is in this neglect of Senal that *The Ordinary* fails, its sparse elaboration compared to the lavish and complex depictions of Irion defeats some of the contrast between the two worlds. Elsewhere, Jedda has a totally irrelevant and somewhat banal relationship given more attention than a much more significant later affair.

In his afterword Grimsley explains why, although sharing some setting and history with his earlier novel *Kirith Kirin* this is a stand alone novel. He also asserts his intention to return to both Irion and Senal in further stories and novels. *The Ordinary* offers many possible routes for these explorations: the nature of the war with the Als (echoes of Dan Simmons' *Hyperion Cantos* perhaps); the other races of Irion, met briefly then left; and the origins of Irion himself. All of these diversions and more are left unexplored by Grimsley. Had he developed all his ideas herein, *The Ordinary* might have tripled in size, but in the process become Extra-Ordinary. Instead, an interesting read, thoughtful and mostly well-written, that many will find enjoyable on its own terms.

## Jon Courtenay Grimwood – *Stamping Butterflies*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 390pp, £12.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-575-07613-5

Reviewed by Paul N. Billinger



*Stamping Butterflies*, Grimwood's first novel since completing his glorious *Arabesk* series, is not, at least on first viewing, a radical departure. He again utilizes a multi-stranded narrative, populated by amazingly

convincing characters, to tell a tale which reflects as much on our real world as it does on his fictional creation – one which shows the author railing against the injustices of our contemporary political situation. But this is no mere polemic: Grimwood controls his anger to produce a quite amazing novel.

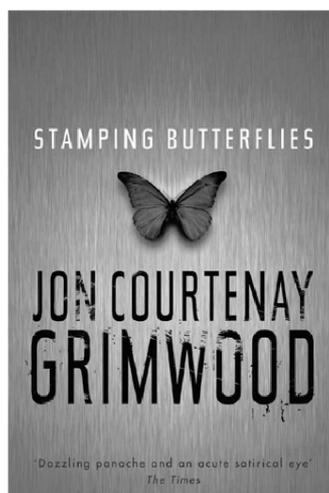
Three timelines are used in *Stamping Butterflies*: the past, Marrakech from the summer of 1969; the present, never explicitly stated but contemporaneous with today; and the far-future, 2023 artificial worlds surrounding a distant sun. In the past we follow Moz, a young boy growing up surrounded by the temptations of a life of crime, but more interested in his possible girlfriend Malika and the somewhat dubious pleasures of associating with a famous rock star on retreat in Morocco. The present is centred around Prisoner Zero, a man with no past who has just failed to assassinate the President of the United States and is held captive in what is

clearly the Guantanamo Bay of his present. And on into the far-future where the 2023 worlds are ruled by fifty-third Chuang Tzu, living a life based on that of ancient Chinese Emperors in a recreation of the fabled Forbidden City.

At least that's how it first appears, but any preconceptions about what these are and how they will interact – as surely they must? – are soon overturned. We come to realise that some, or even all, of these strands may not even exist. Is Prisoner Zero dreaming of the life of the Chuang Tzu? Or is the Chuang Tzu observing the past? And what does Moz have to do with either? The relationship between the present and the future is brilliantly handled with a very light but assured touch: a relationship which is

perhaps best described using the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, since for one to observe the other both the observed and the observer must change. That the past is our past can be seen from the musical references, but the present is not our present, for example President Gene Newman is the antithesis of President Bush, very much the literary incarnation of *The West Wing's* President Bartlett. Depressingly, even with such a strongly liberal President the politics have all too obvious parallels.

Characterisation has become one of Grimwood's (many) strengths and this reaches new heights here: the relationship between Moz and Malika is heartbreaking –



but at times beautifully tender – and the pain and tragedy felt by Prisoner Zero is difficult to endure. Control of the many characters is equally assured, with even walk-on roles fully realised. The author has the confidence to successfully switch view-points and introduce major characters at a late stage in the novel without unbalancing the overall direction and vision.

It will come as no surprise that with the title *Stamping Butterflies* quantum mechanics and the effects of even minor events on possible futures become important, although perhaps the key theme relates to the consequences of individual choices and actions, and the

regret that can result. Or as Prisoner Zero describes it “it had something to do with history”. As the book heads towards a resolution – of sorts – I found myself reading slower and slower: the relationship of each word to the next was vital in fitting the whole together and I wanted to think about the implications that each individual word had on the preceding ones. In unskilled hands this could have been unintelligible, but Grimwood has become so assured that this is nothing less than a monumental achievement. This is a novel to which you willingly and joyfully devote your whole attention and which is even more satisfying on multiple readings.

### Peter F. Hamilton – *Pandora's Star*

Macmillan, London, 2004, 882pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-4050-0019-8

#### Reviewed by Martin Potts

Hamilton is best known for his *Night's Dawn* trilogy space epic but with this novel he commences a totally new story of which *Pandora's Star* is the first of a two novel sequence described as *The Commonwealth Saga*.

This story is set in the 24th Century where a number of classic science fiction elements are allowed to combine – a method of faster than light travel has been discovered which makes space ships redundant; technology provides memorycell inserts allowing a lifetime's memories to be stored; rejuvenation procedures exist, which, combined with the memorycell, allow practical immortality; enigmatic alien lifeforms have been encountered; genetic selection has allowed the development of individuals bred for certain specialisms; to mention but a few elements in this melting pot.

Hamilton's narrative depicts a future where these advances in technology are allowing humanity to gradually expand across the galaxy, (in an unhurried way given the new extended lifespans) providing individuals with opportunities to find a society which matches their own aspirations. Sounds idyllic? Of course. However, terrorist action, political intrigue and the lust for power dog this new society as certain characters feed their personal greed and ambitions. And Hamilton introduces more than one serpent into this new Eden as society propagates a conspiracy theory that humanity's actions are being somehow directed by an alien force, the objective being the destruction of the human race – paranoia or brilliant insight? Hamilton has great fun playing his characters off against each other as evidence and red herrings to prove and disprove the ‘machievellian alien’ conspiracy theory are uncovered through the course of the narrative.

The star of the title is in fact two stars in excess of a thousand light years from Earth which suddenly vanish from view – their emission spectrum changing completely to non-visible infra red – which become known as the Dyson Pair. An astronomer from an uncelebrated university investigates this anomaly and makes a discovery which prompts sufficient

alarm for the hitherto unthinkable to be considered – the construction of a spaceship to investigate the apparent unnatural cause of this event, to discover whether there is a threat to humanity.

Despite the obvious reference to Pandora's box I found myself really enjoying Hamilton's extrapolation of current technology and the socio-economic impact FTL and longevity, in particular, could have in the future. I wasn't missing one of Hamilton's hallmarks – pure menace – at all. The *Night's Dawn* trilogy was riddled with it, and it made for some uncomfortable reading and so I should not have been surprised when it came, and it was all the more effective for the delay when it did. I will not spoil the story by being too specific, but it is a classic sf tool used in an intriguing way, requiring all the other sf elements mentioned above to work, which of course it does brilliantly.

Readers of Hamilton's *Night's Dawn* trilogy will be familiar with his technique of running a number of plots simultaneously which meet and divide again at tantalising intervals and it becomes self evident that the novel needs to be in excess of 800 pages to cope with the lattice created. In this way Hamilton fleshes out his characters gradually and to a sufficient depth to support his various plot elements, generate empathy for certain characters, and to keep the reader turning the pages. One sub-plot, which I found particularly enjoyable, was a perplexing murder mystery. In addition, the British elements of this novel were refreshing, for example the mention of his local Rutland Water and use of Soccer as the preferred sport.

The scale of this novel is huge; the characters are as diverse as the various sub-plots and it all occurs at a pace that keeps the pages turning nicely. A very enjoyable read and I am looking forward to the forthcoming publication of the conclusion, *Judas Unchained*.

### David G. Hartwell (ed.) – *The Mammoth Book of Twentieth Century Science Fiction Volume Two*

Robinson, London, 2004, 617pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1 84119 514 6

#### Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

'Volume Two' here has the sense that this is the second half of David Hartwell's enormous *Science Fiction Century*, published whole in the USA in 1997, which may be regarded as the companion reader to his critical *Ascent of Wonder* where he emphasised the essential role of hard sf in the history of the genre. The possibility also exists that the full work

(published by Tor) was a rival volume and spoiler to Ursula Le Guin and Brian Attebury's equally large *Norton Book of Science Fiction* (1993) which included a high proportion of female authors and coverage of the soft sciences. However, Le Guin and Attebury restricted themselves to “North American Science Fiction 1960-1993”, while Hartwell's reach is far more

inclusive – mostly North American but he has translations from the Russian, German and Italian, too, and he covers the full century.

Hartwell's seventeen selections tend to novella length rather than short story. One of them, 'The Rose' (1953) by Charles Harness, is sometimes considered a novel. All editors have special reasons for the selections they make, but choosing novellas means that if readers do not like one particular work they have lost a larger proportion of the whole. And, of course, novellas are not typical of sf publication.

Of the English language authors here there was only one I did not know – Michael Shaara – but I realised that I had read only one of the stories in this collection ('The Rose'). On the other hand I felt a sense of shock in reading Philip Jose Farmer's 'Mother' (1953) and realising that I had not read it before – it is one of those stories in which Farmer controversially applied perverse Freudianism in alien surroundings that got a lot of coverage in the first full sf encyclopaedias of the late 1970s – the memory of encyclopaedic coverage was a false memory of the work itself. I had to adjust myself to what Farmer had actually written rather than somebody else's interpretation. In 'Enchanted Village' (1952) A. F. Van Vogt manages to show how the same thing can happen anywhere, though it was in the dry deserts of Mars that Van Vogt chose to set his story. There Bill Jenner, sole survivor of a crash, finds an automated Martian village still serving food and drink. Unfortunately it serves it for the palate of the long-gone Martians, things completely inedible to Jenner as he struggles to exist. Gradually the exuded supplies become more tolerable – the machine seems to be trying to satisfy Jenner, but only seems. As the story finishes we realise that Jenner is going more than native, he likes Martian food because he is metamorphosing without realising it. Whether the living machine could have produced more tolerable food or not, it changes Jenner instead.

In just the suggestion of food becoming more tolerable you can start to see tropes that run all the way through sf – it is a

self-reflective genre. Douglas Adams' spaceship that makes something almost but not quite tea continues the idea. Adams may not have known this story, but he knew others like it. Farmer's 'Mother', in which his protagonist is swallowed by an entity and ends by choosing to live as a symbiote within it, calls up memories of many other stories about the horror of being consumed while consciousness continues.

Now to the contrary literary argument: both Hartwell and Le Guin and Attebury argue for the role of sf as the defining literature of the twentieth century. Hartwell, at least, includes stories which provoke arguments against that; arguments that suggest sf was one response to the twentieth century but not the only one. For instance, the first story here is James Blish's 'A Work of Art' (1956) in which the composer Richard Strauss is re-created in 2161. Strauss can live and compose again. The story ends with the revelation that Strauss has been not created from DNA, but that his character has been imposed on a living person – he is someone who has been made to think he is someone else; made to live a lie while everyone about him knows the truth. That is the sf treatment of the idea – there is a comparable non-sf story: Jorge Luis Borges' 'Pierre Menard, Author of the QUIXOTE' about a twentieth century figure who recreates the mind-set of Cervantes. And a similar comparison can be made between Frank Herbert's 'Greenclaves' (1965) and Daphne Du Maurier's 'The Birds', one is written from an sf-conscious perspective and the other is not, but they arrive at the same position about group brains. There must be more works to compare and contrast.

A final word of warning – do not trust the copyright and acknowledgement page for bibliographic information. On the other hand, there is so much in this *Mammoth* volume that you may never look at it.

### Kenneth J. Harvey – *The Town that Forgot how to Breathe*

Secker & Warburg, London, 2004, 473pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-436-20638-2

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid



It is tempting to imagine that we have forgotten the difference between so-called mainstream and so-called genre fictions. A few years ago we had to invent terms like magic realism and slipstream to account for those books that employed fantastic effects though they felt

mainstream, or that felt fantastic though they bore no overt genre influence. Nowadays we don't need to bother, books criss-cross the literary borders as the story takes them, and it may even be that the Canadian author Kenneth J. Harvey recognises nothing unusual in the way his superb novel shifts across literary boundaries as easily as he portrays the supernatural slipping into mundane reality.

These days we are only too aware of the crisis in the fishing industry as shortages of fish stocks and international regulations deprive ancient communities of their industry and their purpose. Exactly the same strictures are affecting the industry across the Atlantic, and especially in the small Newfoundland fishing community of Bareneed. Stripped of

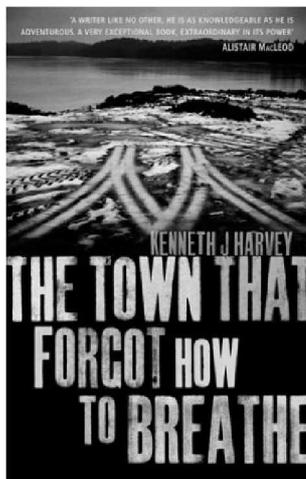
everything that has held their community together, the proud inhabitants of this little village succumb, one by one, to a mysterious breathing disorder. Some simply stop breathing altogether and die, others survive precariously in an iron lung and, in odd moments of lucidity, ask such questions as: 'What am I?'

So far, so existential; but then stranger things start to happen. At first these are like flickers of light caught out of the corner of the eye. Harvey is in enviable control of his material, keeping us guessing for well over half the book: did I really see that? Is that actually what's happening? Joseph Blackwood is, of all things, a fisheries officer: he comes to Bareneed with his daughter, Robin, for a holiday in the town he came from. They rent an old house on the edge of town; meet an old lady, Miss Lacey, who used to see fairies but does no longer; and Robin makes friends with a slightly older girl called Jessica. But Jessica, the daughter of the fey artist who lives next door, has been dead for a year, killed by her own father.

When Joseph takes Robin fishing off the town jetty they catch a strange fish which disgorges a doll's head. Not long after an albino shark is caught, and in its belly is a full

human head. Joseph's uncle, a doughty old character who doesn't have time for these official restrictions on his lifelong occupation, takes his boat out fishing and meets a mermaid. Then the sea starts to give up its dead, the first of them a well-preserved man in 17th century dress. With the ancient dead lying in a makeshift morgue and the modern townspeople struggling for breath in the hospital, it is Miss Laracy who sees the connection between them, observing the spirits hovering above the bodies desperately trying to reach their modern descendants. The long tradition by which the very life of the town is tied to the sea is thus made manifest.

The military arrive to close off the town. Their commander believes he has historical evidence that such psychological phenomena presage a major tidal wave. Miss Laracy, meanwhile, is convinced that the microwave radiation emanating from military installations overlooking the town are slicing through the spirits of the dead, which is why she has been unable to talk to the fairies for so long. On the other hand her friend Tommy, an idiot-savant whose paintings have predicted all the wonders that have been visited upon Bareneed, seems to be operating on



the belief that the coming tidal wave can be deflected by reuniting the souls of the afflicted with their historical links to the sea. Thus three explanations, the psychological, the science fictional and the supernatural, interweave. None on its own is sufficient to account for the events we witness, yet somehow together they make a sort of sense. And as these greater forces build towards the spectacular tidal wave of a climax, on the human level Robin is brought near to death by her ghostly friend and Joseph finds himself savaged by a supernatural dog as he fights to bring her back into the land of the living.

For perhaps its first third, *The Town that Forgot how to Breathe* reads like a fairly straightforward mainstream novel, then, without any noticeable shift in gears or change in tone, the fantastic starts to pour into the book so that by the end it is almost overloaded with the supernatural. Yet never once does Harvey betray, by even the slightest change in his voice, that this is not a conventional realist novel. And it is that sure narrative voice which allows him to control the abundance of fantastic invention and make this such a stunning achievement.

### Jason Hightman – *The Saint of Dragons*

Collins, 2004, 350pp, £12.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-00-715906-4

Reviewed by Penny Hill

There is one phrase in *The Saint of Dragons* that gives me hope that Jason Hightman will develop into an interesting author: describing a dragon's books as "sometimes they would bleed black ink" (p226). There is a sense that this is an author to watch, though possibly not yet an author to read. However, we've seen other authors whose writing has improved dramatically since their first published work so hopefully Hightman's will too.

The publicity information on this uncorrected proof says Hightman is currently turning this novel into a screenplay and I can see this making a good film – especially if they get someone charismatic enough to play Aldric – say Viggo Mortensen if he's not too busy. It has that quality of 'thinness' that makes a poor book and potentially a good film because it leaves space for visual information, and this book has some striking images: Simon cleaning the lighthouse windows, the fog on the Coast of the Dead, the dragonfire in Venice.

The novel has some of the usual faults of a first novel. There is a little too much telegraphing of the plot in advance, the nature of the spy on the boat is only going to surprise a very inexperienced reader. The key relationship between Simon and his father Aldric feels clumsy and heavy-handed. Aldric is the archetypal unlikeable father and Hightman has succeeded too well in making him distant and

unapproachable. This makes Simon's desire to impress him seem weak and unconvincing. It also quickly becomes irritating that Simon's attempts to help keep going wrong. Aiming at the dragon and hitting his father with the crossbow is permissible once but loses dramatic tension when repeated, especially as it's not supposed to be funny. And why are Americans so obsessed with father/son relationships? The novel never quite came to life for me, partly because of this cliché. As this is central to the book, the fact that it falls flat means the whole arch collapses.

However, there are also some good ideas here. There is a nice variety of types of evil as the dragons fit their cultural settings (such as the water dragon from Venice) and the unexpected ambiguity of the Chinese dragon is more than just a plot device to divide the heroes. On the other hand, I'm not sure blaming the dragons for the Inquisition is a culturally sensitive idea.

The writing is adequate and inconspicuous, with the exception of the phrase quoted above, which belongs in a different, better book. As a children's book, it probably will fill the gap while they wait for the next volume in the *Harry Potter* series, but by itself it is unlikely to convert anyone to the joy of reading. Let's wait for the film.

### Robin Hobb – *Fool's Fate*

Voyager, London, 2004, 805pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-648603-7

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This is the third novel in *The Tawny Man* trilogy, and begins with Tom Badgerlock, known as FitzChivalry Farseer, illegitimate son of a former monarch, awaiting the arrival of a young man he is to tutor in the use of the battle-axe. The

young man, Swift, is both headstrong and Witted – able to forge a magical bond with animals, as Tom can also do – and this is in part why he has been assigned the task. Swift, however, has a mind of his own.

Momentous events are about to change the lives of the

people of the Six Duchies, not least the forthcoming plans for Dutiful, the King-In-Waiting, to marry Elliania, the Narcheska of the Outislands. This event is crucial in all kinds of ways: peace treaties and trading agreements rest on the marriage, but things do not go smoothly. Elliania, product of a culture which is very much a matriarchy, demands that a member of the Farseer clan brings her the head of the dragon Icefyre to lay on the hearth of her mothershouse: if this does not happen, then the marriage will not take place, and all the carefully laid plans will collapse. So an expedition is set up for Dutiful to go and fulfil this task, and Tom is included amongst his party, as are several people possessing the Skill – another form of magic – to aid and advise him. Also in attendance are the Narcheska and her guardians, plus representatives both of her people and the Six Duchies. There are also some unexpected passengers:

Swift, whom Tom thought he had left behind, has managed to get on board the ship, and an old friend of Tom's – the Fool (though he is anything but) whose death has been prophesied if he goes to Icefyre's island. So the stage is set for the quest to begin.

From the beginning, things are not easy – Icefyre is entombed for years inside a glacier and when Tom and the Fool fall into a crevasse and end up down under the ice, they discover a secret realm and become prisoners of its ruler.

In addition the novel is full of unexpected twists and turns, and memorable new characters make their appearance, along with some from previous novels. How the Narcheska's challenge is fulfilled makes for an enthralling read, if a long one, and that is the only problem. I can, however, recommend it.

## Stephen King – *The Dark Tower*

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2004, 686pp, £25.00, h/b, ISBN 0-340-32721-1

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

*There they stood, ranged along the hillsides, met  
To view the last of me, a living frame  
For one last picture! In a sheet of flame  
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet  
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set  
And blew. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came".*

'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came' (1855), Robert  
Browning (1812-1889)

*The Dark Tower* is the seventh and final chapter in the *Dark Tower* saga, set in the alternate American West of Mid-World and various realities and times of our world, and following the fortunes of gunslinger Roland of Gilead and the three mismatched refugees from New York in various dates in our 20th Century who have joined him. The series, which started when the first story was published by 'The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction' in October 1978, was inspired by the 1855 Robert Browning poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came'. 'Childe' is defined as a young candidate for knighthood, although King defines the word in this book as meaning a knight on a quest. I was privileged to receive an advance copy, but it was sadly missing the magnificent illustrations that have graced the previous volumes – they will be in your copy. One has appeared on the *Dark Tower* series fan web-site at [www.thedarktower.net](http://www.thedarktower.net), a fan-created site with an amazing amount of information about the *Dark Tower* books. Maybe more than you ever wanted to know...

I think it goes without saying that you won't be reading this book until you've read all the others, so I shan't include any back-history. I don't have space to review the series as a whole, so I'll confine my comments to this book and how it ends it. At the end of book 6, *Song of Susannah* (reviewed in *Vector* 237), Susannah Dean gave birth to a child called Mordred (the name from Arthurian legend is deliberate) in a version of New York in 1999. Mordred is by demonic means the son of Roland of Gilead, designed to kill Roland and prevent him from saving the Dark Tower. He has the ability from birth to change into a gigantic spider and grows to maturity in a matter of days.

King is using *The Dark Tower* series to tie all his work together, and just as he introduced Father Callahan from his 1975 vampire novel *Salem's Lot* in *Wolves of the Calla* (book 5), here Ted Brautigan from *Hearts in Atlantis* joins the team, although in the film of the story the 'low men' pursuing

Brautigan for his telepathic ability were portrayed as possible US Government agents, not creatures from another reality. Not only are there links here to all King's earlier work, but King himself plays a critical role in the book. At one point we meet not one but three Stephen Kings, but they're shapeshifters and servants of the Crimson King, the King multiverse's Satan. In *Song of Susannah* King killed himself off in the 1999 hit-and-run accident that actually left him critically injured. *Dark Tower* readers will know about the role of the Tower in the King multiverse, the Beams that support it, and the agents of the Crimson King who have kidnapped people with psychic ability from all worlds to become Breakers in order to break the Beams and bring down the Tower. Because he has become the bodily incarnation of one of the Beams, Stephen King's writings about the Tower are actually bringing into being the people and events that may save it. The Crimson King himself is at the Tower, preventing access to it, but unable to enter it himself until the Beams fail. Not only do Roland and his band have to stop the Breakers and save the Beams, they also have to go back to 1999 before Stephen King's death and prevent it from happening, so he can finish the last three books in the *Dark Tower* series, including this one! Roland then must journey to the Tower and face the Crimson King whilst avoiding being killed by Mordred.

This book will no doubt both delight and infuriate King fans as it finally ties up all the plotlines and reaches the point where Roland stands at the foot of the Dark Tower. In his afterword King says "I wasn't exactly crazy about the ending myself, but it's the *right* ending. The *only* ending, in fact." (His italics.) The ending is certainly clever, and indeed logical, but you'll either applaud King's audacity or throw the book against the wall with all the force you can muster! I was reminded of how John Fowles plays with his characters at the end of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* – the film version cast Jeremy Irons and Meryl Streep as modern-day actors playing the roles in a film in order to represent this. The difference here is that the characters *know* they're in a book written by King and might be playing with him. It's either incredibly clever or incredibly bold self-aggrandisement/self-indulgence – take your pick. The exciting events, involving characters, and vivid imagery of the *Dark Tower* series and the story of Roland may be at an end, but I'm sure Stephen King's future writings will draw further from its mythology.

**Charles de Lint – *The Wild Wood***

Orb, New York, 2004, 205pp, \$13.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-30258-6

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

The tagline of the book is "You must remember...." However, within hours of finishing the novella I was left with sketches and impressions of this work, hints of something deeper, but not fully realized. Perhaps, to fans this reissue of one of Charles de Lint's early works is easily recalled, but to me this is not the case.

It is a cliché that stories are about self-discovery of the characters involved and this is no exception. Eithnie is an acclaimed artist in her late twenties, but she returns to a cabin in Canada's remote woods to reclaim some of the passion and depth lacking from her latest work. And it is among the trees that the Faerie start appearing in her sketches, unbidden, without conscious effort of her part. They are calling to her to remember a promise she made long ago and must fulfil in order to save them. Eithnie, through conversations and interaction with other characters, finds the merits of Faerie if not their reality, then their mythology and symbolism. Joe is one such character, being like the Faerie, elusive, unreadable and enigmatic. Other characters share their own opinions, giving their sides of the debate, if in more believable terms. Oddly, none of the characters are cynical about Eithnie's questions. Eithnie glides from one encounter to the next with a disturbing secret hidden in the folds of her mind. As the secret uncoils, she comes to accept her fate with little resistance. One wonders if this is a strength or, ultimately, a weakness on her behalf. However, the final outcome, although not

unexpected, is not unsatisfactory.

In many respects this novella hints at attributes similar to Robert Holdstock, however, no menace is intended here. Instead it reads like a lament for the lost as Charles de Lint has written a treatise on the ecology and its destruction by Man. Quite rightly, de Lint is concerned about the environment, and he attempts to convey the message subtly, possibly losing a wider audience. At the same time this is a brave and difficult undertaking, showing the world for its beauty rather than barking from a soapbox.

Like the short story, the novella is an art form difficult to master. Few do it justice. I was left with the feeling that this was either an outline of potentially a larger work or, more likely, lacking enough ideas to make a fully-fledged novel. There are passages of tranquillity and beauty, but they are too few and far between to be compelling. Perhaps since *The Wild Wood's* publication, Charles de Lint has grown as an author, but after finishing the book I was uncertain what to make of him. My opinion was formed within a few paragraphs of starting my next book, J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*. It was clear that the latter was a superior class of author. Neither is *The Wild Wood* in the same league as the more obvious peer, Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*. I cling to idea that de Lint's other works may be better, but I doubt this is a good place to start with *Moonheart* virgins like me.

**John R. Mason – *The Kronos Factor***

Golden Apple Books, Wallasey, 2004, 192pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-904073-51-4

**Douglas R. Mason – *Tuo Yaw: The Collection***

Golden Apple Books, Wallasey, 2004, 232pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1 904073 40 9

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

'Tuo Yaw' is of course what you see when you look back at a glass exit door after you've left (or escaped from) a building – the letters are symmetrical in most information sign typefaces. However, it was when I was reading *The Kronos Factor* that I most needed a way out!

*The Kronos Factor* by John R. Mason is a slim novel by today's standards at less than 200 pages, but they felt like many more... It's set on a world called Olympus, where a society of humans who are seemingly immortal and have great paranormal powers are apparently the descendants of the members of the Greek pantheon. Kronos or Chronos was of course, the God of Time and father of the Greek gods, and it's the disruption of time that plays a major role in this book, and which makes it so confusing. Olympus is linked to another world called Lupercal, which seems to be used as a training or proving ground for young people ('nymphs' and 'pageboys').

Two goddesses, Cappella and Ion, lead rival factions in Olympus. (Ion was actually one of the Greek Gods, son of Apollo, but John R. Mason has given him a sex change.) Invited to a conciliation meeting by Ion, Cappella is surprised when Ion's door is opened by her young friend and protégée (and occasional lover) Dee. Despite the bad blood between them, Cappella, who we're told is wearing a short sexy dress that she's toned down by fastening all the buttons, can't stop herself from being sexually aroused by Ion's appearance: "If she had been flexing a cane, Cappella would have bent over the desk without prompting."

The meeting goes badly, but it's immediately after that their world falls apart. The walls of the room start melting and they are under attack from an unknown enemy, finding

themselves in caves far below the ground. When Cappella, Dee and Ion reach the surface they find themselves outside a city that is almost entirely wrecked and controlled by mysterious green creatures, realising that they have been shifted forward in time. This enemy has attacked humanity before, and was beaten off two thousand years ago in a war that left Earth a wasteland. Now they have attacked Olympus with a weapon that causes time shifts and memory loss for the Olympians, and renders any defence ineffective. Soon after, Dee is captured by the creatures, leaving Cappella and Ion alone. In the classic *African Queen* scenario, the 'wanton' Cappella and the 'straight-laced' Ion become reluctant allies, friends, and finally unlikely lovers in their fight to survive, defeat the enemy, and drive them from Olympus.

Meanwhile, another party of gods and goddesses, including friends of both Cappella and Ion, have been living in tunnels below the city, having lost most of their memories, and all knowledge of how to use their powers. Cappella and Ion meet up with them, but are treated with extreme suspicion, since they are not remembered as being friends. The rescue of the seemingly innocuous Dee is the key to success, since she, Cappella and Ion, are the world's most powerful beings. Therefore the two women must overcome their colleagues' mistrust in order to save Dee and win.

I spent more time re-reading this book trying to find out what was going on than actually reading it. This made it possible to write a kinder review than originally planned, but I still couldn't resolve all my issues. Making the reader share the disorientation of the characters is a legitimate aim of the author, but somehow nothing ever seems to fall into place.

We're only given sketchy details of the background to the story, so we don't find out why these people have the titles or powers or society that they do. At the end I still had no idea of who the Olympians really are, how their society worked, and what they've saved after the losses of the war to allow them to rebuild.

*Tuo Yaw* by Douglas R. Mason, on the other hand, is a very satisfying collection of stories written between 1964 and 2003. (Douglas R. Mason is perhaps better known as John Rankine, author of *Interstellar One Five*, etc.) Many of them were first published in the 1960s-70s Corgi paperback series *New Writings in SF*, edited by John Carnell (I selected a 1967 issue at random from my bookshelf and found two of these stories, one by John Rankine, and one by Douglas R. Mason). Golden Apple Books is based in Wallasey, on the west bank of the River Mersey opposite Liverpool, where Mason lives, and several stories are set in modern-day Merseyside, as well as Picton in Cheshire (near Ellesmere Port), and in a future Wirral City.

In the title story (later reworked into book form as *Dilation Effect*), Bob Doogood works at Cybernat International Inc., and has designs on a co-worker called Ava Mallam (that they both have double palindromic names is significant in the story). Both of them start experiencing the same kind of time shift

experienced by Bill Murray in the film *Groundhog Day* – Bob wakes up with long hair when he had a haircut the day before, and realises he's back reliving the previous day. When he meets up with Ava her similar confusion soon makes him realise she's experiencing the same effect – are they subjects of some bizarre experiment by their bosses? 'Algora One Six' is another story set at Cybernat International, about an employee who falls in love with a female android – a well-worn plot but given a different treatment.

'The Man Who Missed the Ferry' is a matter-of-fact tale of a man who misses the ferry from Birkenhead to Liverpool and calmly walks across the mile or so of River Mersey to the other side, ignoring the attention his action generates.

The stories have larky titles: 'There was this Fella...', 'Right bloody lucky, Harry' said the straight man', 'Get a shift on, Taffy', but they are all well-written, intriguing, and have an over-riding theme of alienation and escape from a constrictive society. In contrast to *The Kronos Effect*, *Tuo Yaw* is strongly recommended.

[Both available from [www.goldenapple.u-net.com](http://www.goldenapple.u-net.com)]

## David Mitchell – *Cloud Atlas*

Sceptre, London, 2004, 529pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 0-340-82277-5



### Reviewed by Niall Harrison

David Mitchell is one of those mainstream writers who dangle their legs in the waters of genre. The difference with Mitchell, and in particular with *Cloud Atlas*, his latest novel, is that it's clear he knows what he's getting himself

into. He knows and respects the traditions he works in, and in the present case he's come up with, amongst other things, some fine pieces of science fiction.

There's no doubt that *Cloud Atlas* is a hugely ambitious novel. Some of that is simply due to the structure. Instead of a single narrative, there are six novella-length stories. Instead of placing the stories one after the other, Mitchell chops each of them in half and then arranges them into a Russian doll-like structure. So you read the first half of story A, then the first half of story B...then all of story F, then the second half of story E, and the second half of story D, and so on. And instead of tightly linking the stories, they all feature almost entirely separate casts of characters, not least because they are set on a track of historical change. Themes recur, in the manner of musical variations, but by and large people appear and are then gone. The first story, 'The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing', is set in 1850, or thereabouts. The second takes place in the 1930s, the third in the 1970s. The end result is that the reader is carried up the slope of history to the centre of the novel, and then down the other side again.

And this is where the science fiction

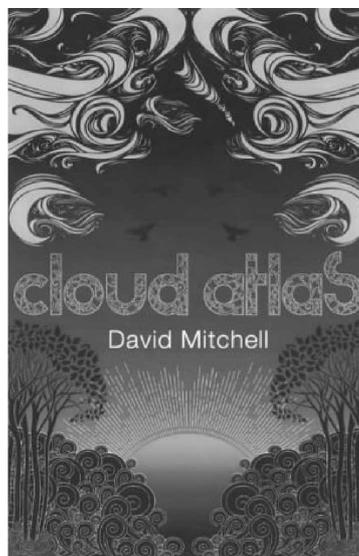
comes in, literally at the heart of the book. The two central stories – 'An Orison of Sonmi-451' and 'Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After' – are set in our future. The former is a brave no logo world, a retail dystopia in which clones are conditioned as a servile underclass: Sonmi-451 works in the local fast-food joint. The latter is a post-apocalyptic fable rich with the shadows of Russell Hoban, John Wyndham and Walter M. Miller. Make no mistake, these are pulp futures of the old school – but they are none the less effective for that.

Mitchell is ambitious in other ways. He tackles big themes to go with the big scope of his narrative. *Cloud Atlas* is primarily a novel about power, and about society. Other words you could throw around in discussion are civilisation, predation, oppression and conflict: this is emphatically not a shy work. It's also a *dark* work. The six

testimonials collected here seem to suggest a bitter historical inevitability.

Despite this, however, and despite the book's length, it never becomes intimidating. It is always smart without being obscure, and it is always easy to like. Part of this is down to Mitchell's undoubted gift for inhabiting a first-person voice; part of it is down to the structure. There's literally no slack – you're always reading a beginning, or an important plot advancement, or an ending.

*Cloud Atlas* was published with a great deal of hype; reviewers talked about it as Booker shortlist material (which it has been, as was his earlier novel *number9dream*), perhaps even as a potential Booker winner (the winner of which will have been announced by the time this issue of *Vector* is published).



Forget that. Read it, if you like, because this is how mimetic and speculative literature can and should be seamlessly blended. Read it, if you like, because it's probably the only novel you'll ever find that you can describe as precisely 34.03% science fiction – not a page more, not a page less. But read it most of all because it does what the best of all fiction does: it asks questions about the world.

### Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

We are the stories we tell about ourselves. Our experiences turn into tales which in turn become myths. And it is only our common humanity which holds it all together and makes these many and diverse stories intelligible across the centuries. Such, at least, is the story that David Mitchell tells in *Cloud Atlas*; or rather, the stories. For this is a multivalent novel, a novel in which we observe the atoms of story from different perspectives and thus see their direction and velocity anew each time. Another way of looking at it – and there are always other ways of looking at this richly diverse work – is in musical rather than chemical terms. When the composer, Robert Frobisher, describes his 'Cloud Atlas Sextet' as a piece "for overlapping soloists ... each in its own language of key, scale and colour. In the 1st set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the 2nd, each interruption is recontinued" he is describing the structure and scope of this novel as precisely and as succinctly as it is possible to get.

We move, at least at first, chronologically. Adam Ewing is a young American lawyer returning from Australia in the middle years of the 19th century whose journal records his encounter with the discordant and at times threatening cultures of the ship upon which he travels and the islands at which they call. At the same time he recounts the onset of a mysterious disease which increasingly incapacitates him. Then, in mid-sentence, his solo is interrupted and Frobisher takes over. We have jumped forward to the early 1930s and, in a series of letters to his friend Sixsmith, Frobisher reveals himself to be a ne'er-do-well would-be composer fleeing from his creditors who finagles his way into the position of amanuensis to an aged but respected composer at his remote Belgian home. There he enters into an affair with the composer's wife, and dreams of an affair with his daughter. There, also, he discovers a part of Ewing's diary; a vital life or death tale has been transformed into light bedtime reading.

We jump again: it is California during the presidency of Richard Nixon, and journalist Luisa Rey's chance encounter with a man named Sixsmith puts her on the trail of murder and corruption at a nuclear power plant. During her quest she also becomes enchanted by hearing a rare recording of Frobisher's 'Cloud Atlas Sextet'. But at the moment that pursuers force her and her car off a causeway and into the ocean, her story is interrupted. We plunge instead into the 'Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish', in Mitchell's pitch-perfect assumption of tones and voices a heady thriller is replaced by an outlandish farce. Cavendish is a vanity publisher who has, quite contrary to his own expectations, struck it rich with a low-life autobiography. Unfortunately the low-life concerned is now after his money, and in his flight Cavendish is tricked into consigning himself to a prison-like old-people's home. There, in the midst of planning a geriatric break-out, Cavendish reads the

manuscript of the first Luisa Rey mystery. The postmodern breakdown between fiction and reality is here translated into a consistent movement in which what is first real (and to some extent must remain real because of the overt links between each story) becomes, upon revisiting, fiction.

Here, as Cavendish is forced to contemplate his own mortality, we jump directly into science fiction. To an extent this is one more genre that Mitchell is weaving into his sextet, but it is also the inevitable direction in which the whole novel has been moving. We are (we will eventually discover) in a futuristic Korea where Sonmi-451 is an artificial person, carefully constructed to serve uncomplainingly in a communal dining hall. But Sonmi is somewhat different from her compatriots, and eventually escapes the drugged tedium of the dining hall for a university where, intended to be the experimental subject of a lazy student she actually becomes an able student in her own right. It is at university that she watches the rare, carefully preserved film from olden days which tells the famous story of Timothy Cavendish. Sonmi's tale is in the form of an interrogation or confession on the eve of her execution, but we don't quite grasp the nature of her crime before we shift one last time. This time we move further into the future, but also in a sense back into the past. It is an end time, a post-apocalyptic world in which a fragment of humanity clings to life on an isolated Pacific island, their primitive society much like those Adam Ewing encountered in the same region all those centuries before. 'Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After', written in a debased demotic reminiscent of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, is the only story presented whole, a tale of understated heroism and the infinite capacity of the human race to destroy itself. During the course of the story Sloosha discovers the recording of Sonmi's confession, and what was for us a dystopian horror becomes for him a glimpse of a brighter time when the human race was more perfect. Such shifts of perception are one of the most thrilling aspects of this novel.

And from this point on the novel shifts direction, we travel backwards, revisiting each story in turn. We learn the nature of Sonmi's rebellion; we witness Cavendish's escape; Luisa Rey solves her mystery; Frobisher completes his Sextet but makes a mess of his sex life; Ewing discovers the cause of his illness. But this is not just a tidying up of unresolved plot lines. Instead, as we retrace our journey, we begin to see further resonances that link the stories unexpectedly: Luisa Rey seems to recall an incident from Sonmi's life, for instance. The distinctions between past and future, reality and fiction, are subtly disturbed. There is no lumbering crashing down of boundaries here, but all our assumptions about the nature of things are questioned, and that leads us to question yet more.

Each tale would make a satisfying short novel in its own right. Each voice, each style of storytelling, is captured with such distinction, such absolute assurance, that we can and should applaud each and every constituent part of this novel. But together, linked as they are across time, across fictional boundaries, they create something greater than the sum of their parts. Allusive and haunting, *Cloud Atlas* is one of the most powerful and energising novels of recent years.

**Adam Roberts – *The Snow***

Gollancz, London, 2004, 297pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07181-8

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Adam Roberts doesn't waste any words. His novels are typically short, with vertiginous beginnings that briskly establish their sfnal credentials. Think of the prison in the heart of a star that opens *Stone*; think of the oh-so-casual biplane flight to the moon at the start of *Polystom*. No surprise, then, that his latest novel, *The Snow*, is similarly direct. It may open in what is recognisably our world – the first of Roberts' books to do so – but still it takes just four swift pages for that comforting familiarity to be removed by an all-smothering climatic apocalypse. On September 6th, it starts to snow. And it doesn't stop.

The opening chapters of *The Snow* describe the initial scuffle for survival as, one by one, essential services shut down. Few people make it. Tira Bojani Sahai, living in London, daughter of an immigrant, mother to an estranged daughter, is one of the lucky ones. She meets an ex-London Underground worker, Jeffries, who helps her through the early months. As the snow piles up, the pair find themselves trapped at the bottom of an office block. The sense of restriction in these chapters is powerful; and when rescue arrives, and raises Tira up into a new world, the sense of release is equally powerful. The new settlements that have been established are small, mostly descended from military bases, and struggling to stay on top of the snow. In the portrait of the society that unfolds, echoes of books by John Wyndham and J. G. Ballard are inevitable, and for a while it seems that *The Snow* will be a not-so-cosy catastrophe for the twenty-first century.

And then a few interesting things happen. The first is that it becomes clear we are reading not a simple recollection but a set of linked documents, originating with the post-snow society, that look back at the events that shaped its early years. Text from another world is a trick Roberts has used before, and it serves him well again here. It immediately makes the society more real – and, because most of the documents have been censored and classified, more uncertain.

Competing theories are offered for the origins of the snow, some by the government, some by citizens: it's an act of god, it's a man-made disaster, it's a natural environmental tipping point. An interview with a scientist who claims to know the true explanation is shown to the reader, but not the characters. Paranoia grows. The snow becomes a metaphor for suppression and oppression, on a number of different levels. For example, Tira is weighed down by her position in the new world order, and starts to exhibit symptoms of depression; the

government increases the tightness of its hold on ordinary citizens, believing (perhaps even correctly) that discipline is essential for humanity's survival. All of this is a typically Roberts use of metaphor: brazenly obvious at first glance, but shaded with fine detail when you look closely.

And then the threat of terrorism intrudes into the story, making the critique of our current political reality explicit. And then the rules of the game are changed completely (in a manner, reminiscent of *Polystom*, that is not so much genre-bending as subgenre-colliding) and *The Snow* becomes a powerful general commentary on humanity's obsession with hierarchy and authority.

It's hard to say much more about the basic plot of the novel without giving away some of its best surprises. Tira remains the primary viewpoint character for the duration of the novel, although her accounts are occasionally interrupted by those of others. She finds that her options in the military world, where there are seven times as many men as women, are limited. Before long she is married – not by her choice – to an influential figure in the new USA (which, geographically, satirically, lies above the old UK) in which position she becomes something of a privileged observer of the developing society. Roberts' view of humanity can be as harsh and cold as ever, but Tira herself is arguably his most sympathetic protagonist, something that perhaps will make this book accessible to a wider audience than earlier works.

It's an audience *The Snow* certainly deserves. If I have a reservation about the book, it's only the nagging feeling that Roberts is capable of even better. He's becoming increasingly masterful at stage-managing the props of science fiction, at revisiting the concerns of earlier writers with a modern eye, and he's producing fine novels in the process; but sometimes I can't help wishing he would spend just a little less time playing with the existing structures of the genre, and a little more time creating something that is definitively, memorably, his.

[An expanded version of this review can be found at the [www.thealienonline.net](http://www.thealienonline.net), where Niall also addresses other views of *The Snow*, notably Christopher Priest's considered and analytical, but much more critical, opinion, published in *The Guardian* newspaper (available at [www.guardian.co.uk/books](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books).)

**Robert Silverberg (ed.) – *Legends II***

Voyager, London, 2004, 774pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0 00 715436 4

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

*Legends II* is an anthology of ten previously unpublished short novels by well-known fantasy authors, revisiting the imaginary worlds of their best-selling longer novels and series. Six of these writers appeared in *Legends I*, which followed the same format (and was reviewed in *Vector* 203).

Orson Scott Card's *The Tales of Alvin Maker* is set in an alternative America, when a scientific revolution in Europe has resulted in many people with magical powers emigrating to the New World. The protagonist, Alvin, the seventh son of a seventh son is destined to be an adept of magic, a Maker. 'The Yazoo Queen' tells of a riverboat voyage made by Alvin down the Mizzippy, his meeting with one Jim Bowie, and his efforts to free a group of slaves. George R. R. Martin's 'The Sworn

Sword' is set in his world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and tells of the hedge knight, Ser Duncan, usually known as Dunc, and his squire who is actually a prince in disguise. Dunc becomes involved in a feud between his liege lord and a Lady known as the Red Widow (due to her propensity to lose husbands) and although this episode is resolved satisfactorily, Dunc and his squire's situation is left open so that the reader can hope to hear of them again. 'The Messenger', by Raymond E. Feist, tells of Terrance, a young member of the Messenger Corps, charged with carrying a vital message during the ongoing conflict between the inhabitants of his own world of Midkemia and the alien Tsurani invaders described in *The Riftwar* series. This story focuses on how Terrance overcomes his very natural

fear of being killed by the Tsurani. Anne McCaffrey's Pern, where dragons and their riders fight the destructive Thread, must be one of the most well-known worlds of the fantasy genre. 'Beyond Between' tells of a dragonrider who becomes lost when travelling 'between', and meets the first dragon and rider ever to go to that strange place. In 'The Happiest Dead Boy in the World', by Tad Williams, the teenaged Orlando Gardiner exists only in the virtual world of the Otherland network, his real-world body having died. Apart from policing the network, Orlando has to deal with problems of teenage angst, albeit in his unique situation – on the evidence of this tale, the *Otherland* series is sf that might well appeal to a teenaged reader. Robert R. Silverberg revisits the world of *Majipoor* in his contribution, 'The Book of Changes', in which the idle son of one of the rulers of this huge fantastical planet, having been captured by a poetry-loving bandit, finds his purpose in life.

Also featured in this book are four writers whose work did not appear in *Legends I*. Robin Hobb's 'Homecoming' is a haunting tale that takes place in the author's *Realm of the Elderlings* universe. The development of the heroine's character as she, a noblewoman, is faced with the deprivations of life as a colonist in a land of jungle, swamp and terrifying magic, is particularly well done. Diana Gabaldon's 'Lord John and the Succubus' takes place in 1757 during the Seven Year War between Britain and France, and is more of a ghost story than a fantasy, but a very enjoyable read nevertheless. Elizabeth Haydn returns to the world of her *Symphony of Ages*

series for 'Threshold' which describes the destruction of the Island of Serendair, a vitally important event in the complex history of this imagined world. As the inhabitants of the island flee before it is engulfed by the waves, four men and one woman remain to uphold the rule of the king, even after one last ship offers them a chance to escape the cataclysm. In Neil Gaiman's 'The Monarch of the Glen', a different sort of heroism is portrayed, as the not-entirely-human Shadow is embroiled in a centuries-long battle between man and monster, one of a number of manifestations of ancient gods and mythical beings in the modern world as found in Gaiman's novel *American Gods*. Terry Brook's 'Indomitable' has Jair Ohmsford, a character from the novel *The Wishsong of Shannara*, using his magic to complete the task of destroying a book of evil magic and discovering more about his powers in the process.

These novellas are a superb overview of some of the best-selling fantasy writing around today. Surprisingly, as most of them originated in multi-volumed series, the characters and worlds they inhabit work extremely well in a shorter format, with just enough information given to set the scene for a reader who has not encountered the work before. As an introduction to a particular author, without forcing the reader to make the commitment of time and money required by fantasy's more prolific writers, this volume is highly recommended.

**Neal Stephenson – *Quicksilver***

**Neal Stephenson – *The Confusion*** 

William Heinemann, London, 2004, 927pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 0-434-00878-8

William Heinemann, London, 2004, 815pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 0-434-00817-6

Reviewed by Stuart Carter



The first thing to strike you about these two hardback volumes is their size: 1700 pages, and we still have the final part of the *Baroque Cycle* trilogy, *The System of the World*, to come. The man himself has said online that "In my mind this work is something like 7 or 8

connected novels. These have been lumped together into 3 volumes because it is more convenient from a publishing standpoint, but they could just as well have been put all together in a single immense volume or separated into 7 or 8 separate volumes," and having read them I'm inclined to agree. There isn't a middle section of the *Baroque Cycle* that feels as though it's marking time until the next important event – most of the *Cycle* consists of important events, or at least relevant ones. In fact, I'm left wondering how Stephenson plans to wrap up his cycle because it has a refreshingly organic feel to it, a real-life roughness around the edges that suggests 'And they all lived happily after', won't come into the equation.

So we have the quantity, what about the quality? Well, to quote Stephenson's Leibniz: "I love reading novels," the Doctor exclaimed. "You can understand them without thinking too much." (*Quicksilver*, p.435) This is patently not true of these novels, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The main character, at least to begin with, is Daniel Waterhouse: Natural Philosopher, member of the Royal Society, old college friend of Isaac Newton and scion of a

soon-to-be-notorious Puritan family, bearing in mind that *Quicksilver* begins in 1655, just five years before the Restoration of Charles II. Actually, this is not quite true; *Quicksilver* properly begins in 1713, with the rather mysterious Enoch Root (who materialises throughout both books) visiting Daniel at his Massachusetts Bay Colony Institute of Technologickal Arts (number of staff: 1, students: 0), before we cut back for what must surely be one of the longest flashbacks in literature, since it has yet to conclude by the end of *The Confusion*.

Leap forward to page 339 and we meet the second of our major viewpoint characters, Jack Shaftoe (known as 'Half-Cocked' Jack due to a ruinous earlier accident in the trouser department) and his more sensible brother, Bob. Both poverty-bred Cockney 'mud-larks', dragged up rather than raised, as my mother used to say. Against all odds they have done all right for themselves; not 'well', but in this context 'all right' means merely that they are at least both alive, healthy and in the army. Fortune seems to alternately dump upon them both from a great height and briefly flash them a cheeky grin, before zooming upwards to gain more even altitude. If Daniel is our privileged eye upon the political and scientific developments of the 17th century, then Bob and Jack are our rough and horny hands upon its actual lands and people.

A vital third character, Eliza, about whom I shall remain deliberately vague, first appears in Jack's narrative roughly a third of the way through *Quicksilver*, but she eventually graduates to her own separate (though still occasionally

intertwined) plot strand, and offers a vitally bourgeois counterpoint to those of Daniel, Bob and Jack.

The *Baroque Cycle* roams across the physical, spiritual and intellectual realms of the 17th century with a hearty anarchic wanderlust that simply must be read to be believed. No possible summary of the plot can do it justice without either rendering it far too dry or spoiling much of the surprise. What is undeniable is that the breadth and depth of study and research that must have gone into creating this truly baroque 17th-century world truly boggles the imagination. No end of fascinating, startling and idiosyncratic facts come flooding from Stephenson's pen to fill these pages, from the development of the scientific method to sailing, metallurgy, courtly fashions at the court of Louis XIV and (but of course!) code-breaking and rudimentary computer programming. If nothing else, you'll come away from the *Baroque Cycle* a slightly better-educated person, more appreciative of the intelligence and resourcefulness of our ancestors, and certainly with a far better understanding of the roots of our present society.

This is not to say it's always a gripping read, for whilst my inner geek found many of the deep draughts at the font of knowledge endlessly fascinating, there were a significant number of other sections that seemed quite the contrary: long, dry missions across a desert of story. For me it was mostly those dealing with the precursors of modern commercial institutions and finance (but then, I completely failed A-level Business Studies), which suggests to me that most people will find at least some parts of these books tiresome. Which parts will doubtless depend upon your particular areas of interest and curiosity, but this reviewers' interest tended to wax and wane, sometimes quite dramatically.

Fortunately one aspect of Stephenson's writing that has remained reliably with him is his humour – still as dryly observational as ever and still as likely to have you burst out laughing when you least expect it. I was given to forgive quite a few apparent extracts from the *Financial Times* because of this!

Something I found very out of the ordinary about these two novels (and presumably, the third) is related to the lack of science fiction or fantasy elements in the story. Although Neal Stephenson has previously been known (and published) as a science fiction writer, the *Baroque Cycle* is being published by a mainstream publisher as a mainstream title; in which case you may ask why are these books being reviewed here?

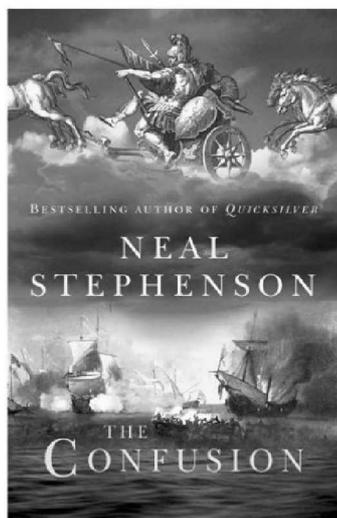
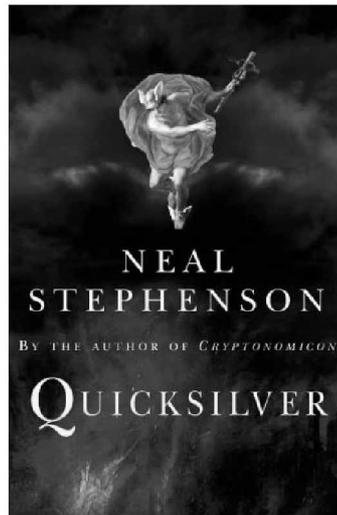
What, I think, brings these books under the remit of *Vector* is their style. They're written very much in the science fiction idiom, but without any of the genre trappings. Whether mainstream readers notice it or not I

think it's really rather important to recognise that at the moment sf seems to be filtering into the mainstream more through its literary approach rather than through its big ideas and traditional subjects. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is one of the other most pertinent examples – a very conventional story told by an alienated narrator to a wise reader. The *Baroque Cycle* reverses all of these positions somewhat; unless, that is, your knowledge of history is vastly better than the average 21st century readers', but the sf narrative style functions equally well either way.

Stephenson's novels have always been heavy on the ideas, positively creaking under their load of information. Although in the past this has mostly taken the form of speculation about the future, it was with *Cryptonomicon* that Stephenson obviously began the start of a process of turning away from the future towards the past – of a way of seeing the past differently to conventional historical fiction however, because he sees the past as an alien place that most of us know really very little about and understand even less. Stephenson shows us something about the present through the lens of the past, just as sf shows us the present through the lens of the future.

The past here is an alien place – it's as strange and complicated and repulsive and marvellous as any future or planet, and it's reported as such. Although – as with most sf – we have a human viewpoint, these are not viewpoint people necessarily like us. Stephenson's main concession to our understanding is to give Daniel and some other members of the Royal Society some decidedly modern opinions. Relativity and atomic theory are also postulated at various junctures – although, pleasingly, it is Eliza who proposes relativity, and then only as a literary device rather than a scientific theory. It is a nice 'in-joke' amidst a small handful of others that I caught on to. These books do often require a significant amount of work by the reader, but it's 'good' work, rewarding work – for example, it's not 'difficult' purely for the sake of verisimilitude. Stephenson uses some olde spellings and enjoys tossing a few archaic terms into the text here and there; 17th-century grammar (such as it was) is not rigorously adhered to, but used carefully and sparingly to gently remind us where and when we are.

But the big question about any piece of literature that has taken up almost two months of your life must be: *was it worth it?* And I think it has been – for the most part. It isn't perfect and may be rather self-indulgent; but although at times frustrating, meandering and opaque, the *Baroque Cycle* is far more often wonderfully ambitious, shamelessly cerebral and preposterously adventurous. Stephenson's skill as a writer has grown by an order of magnitude, such that



you have to wonder what his next trick will be. In terms of sheer joie de vivre, scale and density of ideas it knocks spots off any other 'literary fiction' you're likely to read this year, and possibly this decade.

[Stuart will be completing his examination of the Baroque Cycle in a future issue of Vector when he reviews the final volume in the trilogy, *The System of the World*]

### Charles Stross – *The Atrocity Archives*

Golden Gryphon, Urbana, 2004, 273pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 1930 846 258

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Here's a pub quiz question: what was Charles Stross' first published novel? Anyone answering *Singularity Sky* is wrong; in fact it was a mad, cross-genre romp of a story that combined Office Space-style bureaucracy, Lovecraftian horrors, 21st-century geekdom and the style and plot mechanics of a Len Deighton-esque spy thriller. It was serialised in the pages of *Spectrum SF* in late 2001 and early 2002; it was called *The Atrocity Archive*; and it was an awful lot of fun. Now Golden Gryphon have brought out a cunningly pluralised book, *The Atrocity Archives*, that contains not only the original novel but several tempting extras as well.

To deal with the original first, however: Bob Howard works for The Laundry, an extremely secret branch of British Intelligence that's in the front line of the war against nameless terrors. It's been around since the aftermath of World War Two, when Alan Turing's work on 'Phase Conjugate Grammars for Extradimensional Summoning' proved the link between mathematics and the occult once and for all. Suddenly certain computations became high-risk propositions – or as Bob puts it: "The many-angled ones, as they say, live at the bottom of the Mandelbrot set, except when a suitable incantation in the platonic realm of mathematics – computerised or otherwise – draws them forth." (p16)

Not that Bob sees much action himself. No, he's mostly your average tech-support dude, trapped in the lower levels of a civil service culture straight out of Dillbert's nightmares, and cohabiting with a couple of equally geeky Laundrymen by the names of Pinky and Brain. That he gets upgraded to field duty is mostly the result of some quick thinking on a training course that goes a little ka-ka, at which point before you can say 'Nyarlahotep' he's embroiled in a sticky situation involving a beautiful professor and the extra-dimensional remains of the Third Reich.

How far you consider Stross' crosswiring of magic and monsters a work of insane genius – instead of, say, merely insane – will probably depend on your geek quotient. If, for instance, you find exchanges such as "Am I making myself clear?" "Yes, for very bureaucratic values of clear" (p14) entertaining; or if you've ever used Inappropriate Capitalisation to make a point; or if you grin when you see over-elaborately euphemistic but very particular descriptions such as "An indeterminate but nonzero number of semifull vodka glasses later..." (p32) – well, then you've probably already got a sense of the idiom Stross is working in here.

Personally, I love it, from the cynical, dry tone of the narration to the esoteric references to hacker lore. I know I must be missing some of the jokes – I'm just not the right kind of geek to get them all – but there are still enough hits to make this a hugely enjoyable read.

So as far as I'm concerned, a hardcover edition of *The Atrocity Archives* was always going to be a must-buy; that it comes with the aforementioned extras is merely the icing on the cake. The book opens with a typically insightful introduction from Ken Macleod, and closes with an essay from Stross that looks at the different inspirations for the novel's backstory and development. Best of all, though, is a follow-up novella that confronts the Laundry with a thoroughly 21st-century menace.

'The Concrete Jungle' is set a short while after *The Atrocity Archives*. Bob's job would now best be described as something like 30% tech support, 70% spook, which means that – lucky him! – he's the guy who gets called out when the higher-ups want someone to count the number of concrete cows in Milton Keynes at four in the morning. This initial investigation is interspersed with a number of classified files from The Laundry's archives that describe the progress, over the course of the 20th century, of increasingly classified research into gorgonism. Here, that means a sort of quantum-mechanical medical condition in which sufferers gain the ability to turn a certain percentage of carbon atoms in anything they look at into highly charged silicon ions...a process which, if the recipient of the gaze is alive, is usually terminal. How exactly this becomes a national security issue is a very neat twist that I don't want to spoil; but suffice to say that it involves other common Strossian concerns, notably the impact of networks and of non-open software standards. It all adds up to a novella that is at least as much fun as, and arguably more thought-provoking than, the earlier story.

Combined with Golden Gryphon's typically high production standards (good paper quality, binding, and cover art), this is an extremely classy package – and a welcome reminder that whilst Stross may currently be best known for his information-dense space opera, it's far from the only string to his bow.

### Judith Tarr – *Queen of the Amazons*

Tor, New York, 2004, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0 765 30395 7

Reviewed by Pamela Stuart

A historical fantasy that could almost have happened. Hippolyta is Penthesilia, the Queen of the Amazons, a tribe of female warriors who inhabit an area to the NE of Persia. To her misfortune the daughter she bears is born 'without a soul', an empty shell, according to the priestesses. They want to kill the child, but Hippolyta, enraged, defies them all and declares the infant legally her heir.

The infant lives, without a name, called simply Elta; that

thing, devotedly cared for by Selene who acts as both nurse and bodyguard, although she has problems of her own trying to blank out her born duties as a Seer. The child cannot be taught to speak or take care of herself in any way, except that she can ride horseback and seems naturally able to copy and become expert in the warrior's training with and without weapons.

On reaching puberty she goes out one night, takes a horse

and rides away. The faithful Selene notices her absence in time to follow, and Hippolyta finds them the next day. They ride with the child from dawn to dusk each day, up through the mountain ranges until they finally come to the Empire ruled by Alexander the Great. Once there Etta is seized by a new compulsion – to be constantly at Alexander's side. She still does not speak, but simply sits at his feet, day after day, while the men refer to her as his puppy, but leave her alone. Hippolyta goes back to her tribe but Selene stays to tend Etta.

This goes on for several years, during which time Selene, against all her heritage and training with the Amazons, who

regard men as mere studs to visit once a year for breeding purposes, falls in love with a Persian prince, one of Alexander's friends.

Apart from the transfer of personality between bodies, this book is more of a historical novel than a fantasy, and an intriguing one at that. Judith Tarr manages to make it all sound completely plausible, and I certainly found it impossible to put down. If you read it on the train, do not become so engrossed by what is happening in ancient Persia that you forget to get off at your station!

## Harry Turtledove & Noreen Doyle (eds.) – *The First Heroes*

Tor, New York, 2004, 368pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0 765 30286 1

### Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

Take fourteen authors, ask them to write a story set in the Bronze Age, and you get a fascinating collection of short stories (and one poem), complete with a brief introduction about the Bronze Age and what was achieved during this period in history. Writing, the wheel, and standing armies all came into being: it was also an age of exploration, and of metallurgy, when tin was the key (literally) to cutting-edge technology. By and large, the fiction arising from this project works well, with one exception (but I will expand on that later).

The collection begins with Gene Wolfe's 'The Lost Pilgrim'. Written in diary form, it is the account of what befalls a traveller in time who was meant to be joining a particular maritime expedition but, due to a miscalculation, ends up thousands of years away from his intended destination. It's a subtly written story, which only gradually reveals the narrator's predicament, and keeps you guessing all the way along.

In 'The God of Chariots', Judith Tarr relates a story set in her own version of the Bronze Age; the tale centres around the desire of Emmerkar, the king of Uruk, to acquire chariots in order to defeat the people of the desert who have wreaked havoc in his land. When, during a discussion on what to do, mention is made of a 'god' in another land, a god of war, an expedition is mounted to gain his services. How this is accomplished results in a story that includes a good deal of hard bargaining and some treachery, but is nevertheless enjoyable.

Next we have Harry Turtledove's 'The Horse of Bronze', which is again told in the first person, and has a memorable opening sentence: "I knew, the last time we fought the sphinxes, this dearth of tin would trouble us". The narrator is a centaur, living in a land of various mythical creatures – fauns, sirens, and so on – and the story centres around an expedition mounted by the centaurs to find out what has happened to their supply of tin. This is a delight to read.

Then we have S. M. Stirling's 'Blood Wolf', set in a Bronze Age into which the people of Nantucket have been transported, we meet Blood Wolf, a tribesman seeking fame and fortune, whose life changes when he stops a thief (very literally) and gets involved in a plan devised by the local law-enforcement to end the activities of a press-gang. The outcome of this plan results in a change in his fortunes that he could not have anticipated, but which he welcomes nevertheless.

In 'The God Voice', by Katharine Kerr and Debra Doyle, we meet Watis, guardian of a goddess' shrine, who is old, and in pain, and longs for death, which will not come until she has found a successor. How that successor arrives on her doorstep and the events which result from her arrival, turns into a well-crafted, satisfying tale.

In complete contrast to the rest of the contributions, we have Larry Hammer's epic poem, 'The Myrmidons', which takes as its basis the origins of them – and their name (ants) – as told by Ovid, but which overlooks one crucial aspect of formic biology. Hammer remedies this in a poem which is by turns serious and comic, and works wonderfully.

Now I come to the story that I feel is the weakest of the collection; Gregory Feeley and his story 'Giliad'. There are two main characters, one of whom is a field tester of computer games, and at the start he is given a game called Ziggurat, set in ancient Sumer, by which he becomes obsessed. His wife becomes involved with the development of a series of tie-in books, and the whole thing takes place in the forefront of the events of September 11th. I am not sure where this story lost its way, but somehow it did, which is a shame.

In conclusion, I have to say that this is an excellent read, for entertainment and education, and comes highly recommended, despite my misgivings about 'Giliad'. The stories I have not mentioned are by no means bad stories: had I reviewed them in detail, I would have definitely exceeded its word limit.

## Chris Wooding – *The Skein of Lament*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 405pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0 575 07444 2

### Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger

This is the second part of Wooding's *The Braided Path* trilogy, and whilst it does stand by itself, I would recommend any new readers to start with the first volume, *The Weavers of Saramyr*.

In this novel, Wooding expands his vision of a world with a complex and convincing oriental culture. More of the history and geography of the world is revealed, and oh so much more of the plotting and machinations that drive the narrative: The Weavers are tightening their grip on Saramyr and the deleterious effects of their presence multiply – the land is

blighted, more and more Aberrant children are born, and politics and corruption fuel the slide towards civil war.

We meet again characters from the first novel, Kaiku, Mishani, and Lucia the Heir Empress amongst others, see how they have grown in the interim and then watch them develop through the testing events of this second volume. As the Weavers become less cautious and more ruthless in their moves to take control of Saramyr, those who would resist must be prepared to venture from their hiding places and take great

risks. Kaiku is forced again, and repeatedly, to don her father's mask, in spite of the potential long-term consequences; Mishani has to leave the safety of the Fold to use her personal influence in the interests of rescuing a spy and brokering high-level deals; and only Lucia is able to communicate with the spirits of the world and the gods, whatever the horrors and dangers this brings.

The Weavers remain repulsive and amoral, but in this book Wooding's description of their depravities seems integral to the novel and not, as I suggested when reviewing *The Weavers of Saramyr* (Vector 229), a symbol of his move to writing for the adult market.

Wooding manages to pull off some wide-screen, epic battles with a cast of thousands, whilst always maintaining a

focus on the characters we have grown to know, if not to love. And whether or not to love any given character is one of the intriguing things about this series: nothing is black-and-white, everyone has their weaknesses and failures of judgement, and with a concluding volume still to come it is hard to be sure who is selflessly acting for the good of the majority – a theme of *The Skein of Lament* – and whose actions are dictated by enlightened self-interest.

Weaving provides an easy but apt metaphor for Wooding's writing: he skilfully manipulates many threads, slowly revealing the true (or so we think) nature of things, the selfish motivations of the major players and the interconnectedness of everything.

**Timothy Zahn – *Dragon and Thief*  
Timothy Zahn – *Dragon and Soldier***

Tor, New York, 2003, 254pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30124-5

Tor, New York, 2004, 299pp, \$17.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30125-5

Reviewed by Elizabeth A Billinger

These are the first two adventures of 14 year old Jack Morgan and Draycos, a dragonlike symbiont with access to rather more dimensions than you and I are accustomed to.

Following the death of his parents Jack has been brought up by his Uncle Virgil, a safe-cracker and con-man who has taught him much of thievery and survival, but little of morals and social responsibility. We meet Jack as he hides from the authorities on an obscure planet, though he claims that for once he is innocent and has been framed.

Draycos is the sole survivor of an ambush by a spacefleet determined to wipe out the entire population of his home planet. The dragon is a K'da, one of two species on his planet who exist in a symbiotic relationship. Draycos is a poet-warrior who cannot survive for more than six hours without a suitable host.

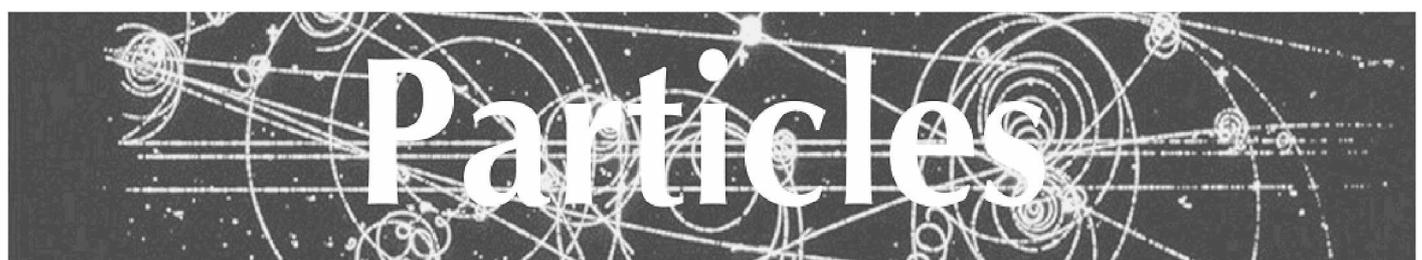
Happily for Draycos, it seems that humans are a suitable a host, and so begins the symbiotic relationship between dragon and thief. The two team up to solve their combined quests for the truth: who framed the thief, and who is it that wants to wipe out the dragon's people? The task turns out to be complex, leading the pair on thrilling adventures across space.

In the process Jack has to call upon all the skills he learned from his uncle, and Draycos demonstrates the usefulness of his talents as warrior and, more surprisingly, poet.

The journey is, of course, not just a physical one: Jack has had a very unusual and rather neglected childhood, so there is much that Draycos can teach him about relationships, morals and responsibilities. On the other hand, things are different in Jack's world and Draycos must come to terms with a necessary degree of moral relativism, as well as some bizarre food-combining.

The two are still together, still unravelling the same mysteries, in the second part of what will be a six-part series. In this adventure, Jack has signed up as a mercenary, in order to obtain intelligence that they hope will further the quest. As before, danger, action, living on wits and hair's-breadth escapes ensue. This novel is, if anything, better than the first and introduces a tough and intriguing young female protagonist, who will clearly be featuring in further episodes.

These are good, old-fashioned, sf thrillers aimed at teenagers but recommended to readers of all ages looking for a fast, suspenseful romp.



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.

**Terry Brooks – *Tanequil*** 

Simon & Schuster, London, 2004, 357pp, h/b, £17.99, ISBN 0-7432-5674-3  
Second volume in Brooks *High Druid of Shannara* series, a return to the land of his first series from way back in 1977. The first volume of this new series, *Jarka Rules*, was reviewed by Estelle Roberts in Vector 233 where she found it poor indeed, unoriginal, cliché-ridden and with most of the characters seeming to come from high fantasy central casting. The main problem was Brooks insistence on hammering his points home with a literary mallet. Not recommended. Try Stephen Donaldson's *The Rune of the Earth* instead, his return to the world of *Thomas Covenant* (which is probably responsible for what is labelled 'fantasy' today).

**Hal Clement – *Noise***

Tor, New York, 2004, 256pp, \$13.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-31032-5  
Probably the final novel from this SFWA Grand Master who died in October 2003. The story describes the voyage of Mike Hoani, a research linguist, through the seas that cover Kainui, a waterworld which has been settled by descendants of Polynesians, as he tries to re-create something of their ancient lifestyle. Reviewed in hardback by L. J. Hurst in Vector 234 he found this a poor tribute to a major figure in sf, reading like a first draft in which he tried to catch his ideas, and which he never re-worked before publishing.

**Steve Cockayne – *The Seagull Drovers*** 

Orbit, London, 2004, 388pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-304-X  
Mass-market paperback of the concluding volume of the *Legends*

of the *Land* trilogy, reviewed in full in the main column. This volume comes with high praise – for example from China Miéville – and for once this is justified. This is a strikingly different type of fantasy and should not be missed.

#### Storm Constantine – *The Wraiths of Will and Pleasure*

Tor, New York, 2004, 496pp, \$17.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-30349-3  
Constantine returns to the world of her highly regarded *Wrath* trilogy. But in *Vector* 231, reviewing the hardback, Sue Thomason found herself not liking this one little bit, no not even a tiny bit. At the end of the book she was left with a whole bunch of unanswered questions, dangling plot strands, and baffled frustrations. And before this, she had major issues with the sex, sexuality and gender as well.

#### Cecilia Dart-Thornton – *The Battle of Evernight*

Tor UK, London, 2004, 631pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-48957-7  
Concluding volume of the *Bitterbynde* trilogy which at first glance appears to be a stereotypical epic fantasy. But this has had some good reviews, not least from K. V. Bailey in *Vector* 235 describing it as original but related to the myths and folklore of metamorphosis and being no mere Tolkien derivative but worthy to be considered a rival. Praise indeed in a very crowded field.

#### David Drake – *Goddess of the Ice Realm* ☐

Gollancz, London, 2004, 496pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07570-8  
Fifth novel in the epic saga of *Lord of the Isles* – with one of the worst fantasy covers I've seen for many a year.

#### Raymond E. Feist – *Exile's Return* ☐

Voyager, London, 2004, 356pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-00-224683-X  
Penultimate volume in the *Conclave of Shadows* series, set in Feist's world of *Midkemia*. The first volume, *Talon of the Silver Hawk*, was reviewed by Vikki Lee in *Vector* 226, who liked it, but was suspicious that Feist was making too much of this world since starting with *Magician* all those years ago. (Strangely *Magician* was an epic fantasy novel that I liked when growing up – I just lost interest by volume two.)

#### Terry Goodkind – *Naked Empire*

Voyager, London, 2004, 676pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-714559-4  
Eighth volume of the on-going *Sword of Truth* series, now in mass-market paperback, which you will already be pleased about – or have already skipped on to the next review.

#### Rob Grant – *Incompetence*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 323pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07449-3  
From the co-creator of *Red Dwarf* (I think they are implying this is a good thing?) comes this sf comedy of a world pushed to the extremes by EU legislation – so that you can't be sacked for being rubbish at your job. I knew that I'd hate this – so Colin Bird reviewed it in *Vector* 234. He didn't hate it – as this would be more effort than the book was worth – but described it as "amusingly silly knockabout stuff around a tired gumshoe plot so clichéd that you skip past all the plot exposition to get to the next funny bit".

#### Brian Herbert & Kevin J. Anderson – *Dune: The Battle of Corrin* ☐

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2004, 620pp, £11.99, t/p, ISBN 0-340-82337-2  
Tor, New York, 2004, 624pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30159-8  
UK and US editions of this final volume in the *Legends of Dune* trilogy (although I somehow suspect it will not be the last visit to this universe). The original *Dune* was one of the formative books in my sf education – but another series in which I lost interest with the second volume, *Dune Messiah*.

#### Tom Holt – *Fishy Wishes*

Orbit, London, 2004, 646pp, £8.99, t/b, ISBN 1-84149-347-3  
Omnibus edition of *Wish You Were Here* (from 1988) and *Djinn*

*Rummy* (1995). See my comments on comic fantasy under A. R. R. Roberts below. May be getting to me, as I quite like the title of the second book.

#### Walter H. Hunt – *The Dark Ascent*

Tor, New York, 2004, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31116-X  
Sequel to *Dark Path* (which was reviewed in *Vector* 229) and a space opera set in the far future which continues the saga of human and zor relations, which Paul Bateman, when reviewing the earlier volume, compared to an allegory of the differences between the West and the Japanese during the Second World War. He found this series to be routine but entertaining and fast-paced though often formulaic.

#### Ian Irvine – *Alchemist*

Orbit, London, 2004, 704pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-181-0  
Third volume of the *Well of Echoes* quartet, which will be concluded with *Chimaera*, and is in turn part of the *Three Worlds* series. Even the book jacket describes this as epic fantasy.

#### Robin McKinley – *Sunshine*

Bantam, London, 2004, 476pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-553-81583-0  
Vampire novel set in an alternate Earth (well, America, as this is all we are told about) and described as "combining all the sensuality of Joanne Harris and the darkness of Anne Rice with the excitement of *Buffy*". Except that it doesn't – have any sensuality, darkness or excitement. Does have bloody cinnamon buns though. This was very disappointing as the premise, mixing vampires and magic, is good, but success rests on the relationship between the two leads, Rae, kidnapped by vampires, and Con, her rescuer and renegade vampire. But this relationship is so weak and uninteresting – with no eroticism or sensuality at all – that you just don't care. There may be a good book in here, but all the interest is in the events before those of this book or the ones to come later. Mark Greener reviewed this in full in *Vector* 233. He didn't find it quite as bad as I did, describing it as a light, diverting, competent, enjoyable read and concluding "but I prefer my vampires to bite".

#### Stan Nicholls – *Orcs*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 711pp, £7.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07487-6  
Omnibus edition of Nicholls three orc books: *Bodyguard of Lightning*, *Legion of Thunder* and *Warriors of the Tempest*, which shows the side of epic fantasy we don't normally see – where the orcs are the good guys. The separate volumes have all been reviewed in *Vector* by Kathy Taylor (in *Vector* 206, 209 and 216 respectively). And Kathy liked this series, liked it a lot, and highly recommended it (and I've heard others giving it similarly high praise). This volume includes a short story 'The Taking'. And at only £7.99 this has got to be one of the best bargains around.

#### Andre Norton – *Lost Lands of the Witch World*

Tor, New York, 2004, 445pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30052-4  
Omnibus of volumes four, five and six of Norton's *Witchworld* series, which apparently now runs to some 35 books. The ones here are *Three Against the Witchworld* (1965), *Warlock of the Witchworld* (1967) and *Sorceress of the Witchworld* (1968).

#### Robert Rankin – *Knees up Mother Earth* ☐

Gollancz, London, 2004, 376pp, £9.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07315-2  
The seventh part of the *Brentford Trilogy* (a 'joke' that wasn't funny when Adams used it) and which follows *The Witches of Chiswick*. Apparently Pooley and O'mally are back. Hope this means something to you. See also my comments under A. R. R. Roberts below.

#### Sue Rann – *Looking for Mr Nobody*

No Exit Press, Harpenden, 2004, 320pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84243-112-9  
Paperback edition of this near-future crime thriller which I

reviewed in *Vector* 232. Although this ultimately fails, it does have a lot going for it: some of the characterisation and the thrill of the chase over the frozen canals is superb. Recommended to anyone with any interest in sci/crime cross-overs and I look forward to future works from this author.

**Andy Remic – *Quake***

Orbit, London, 2004, 573pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-204-3  
Continuing the exploits of Carter, SPIRAL's toughest operative, which started (surprisingly) in *Spiral*. This is a near-future techno-thriller designed for railway station shelves (so I'd probably enjoy it).

**A. R. R. R. Roberts – *The Soddit***

Gollancz, London, 2004, 343pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07591-0

**A. R. R. R. Roberts – *The Sellamillion***

Gollancz, London, 2004, 283pp, £6.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07611-9

Two more excellent, witty, original comic fantasy parodies of the works of the obscure author Tolkien. These are great stuff and are recommended to all. No, I'm sorry, I was trying, really I was, but those two sentences are just completely wrong. I'm sure that anyone who has read any of the recent *Particles* columns will know that these are just the types of book that I really, really don't like. So I'll stop now. Go and look at the review in the main

column of *The Snow* by Adam Roberts instead. (At least there is some honesty: one of these volumes is sub-titled "let's cash in again", but I'll leave you the excitement of guessing which one).

**Jack Whyte – *The Fort at the River's Bend***

Tor, New York, 2004, 351pp, \$14.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-30905-X

Book five of *The Camulod Chronicles*, a re-imagining of the tale of King Arthur. This gives every appearance of being the first trade paperback edition – of a book published in hardback in April 1999. That looks distinctly odd.

**Walter Jon Williams – *The Sundering***

Pocket Books, London, 2004pp, 452, p/b, £6.99, ISBN 0-7434-2898-6

Second volume of Williams' *Dread Empire's Fall* series, reviewed by Chris Hill in *Vector* 234. This is traditional space opera (which I find I much prefer to traditional epic fantasy) which Chris found had the same strengths and weaknesses of the first volume, *The Praxis*, with praise for the space battles but serious concerns about the political setup. Chris concluded that at the end of this volume he is still curious to read what comes next (me, I found the first volume so deadly dull that I've not progressed further – and I do like space opera).

**Vector 238 – Index of Books Reviewed**

Kevin J. Anderson & Brian Herbert – <i>Dune: The Battle of Corrin</i> [P] ..	35	Tom Holt – <i>Fishy Wishes</i> [P].....	35
Cherith Baldry – <i>The Reliquary Ring</i> [ER].....	15	Walter H. Hunt – <i>The Dark Ascent</i> [P].....	35
Cherith Baldry – <i>The Roses of Roazon</i> [ST].....	15	Ian Irvine – <i>Alchemist</i> [P].....	35
Alice Borchardt – <i>The Raven Warrior</i> [CB].....	16	Stephen King – <i>The Dark Tower</i> [AF].....	25
Terry Brooks – <i>Tamagwil</i> [P] .....	34	John R. Mason – <i>The Kronos Factor</i> [AF].....	26
Ramsey Campbell – <i>The Overnight</i> [SM].....	16	Douglas R. Mason – <i>Two Yaw: The Collection</i> [AF].....	26
Susanna Clarke – <i>Jonathan Strange &amp; Mr Norrell</i> [TH].....	17	Robin McKinley – <i>Sunshine</i> [P] .....	35
Hal Clement – <i>Noise</i> [P].....	34	David Mitchell – <i>Cloud Atlas</i> [NH].....	27
Steve Cockayne – <i>The Seagull Drivers</i> [JN].....	18	David Mitchell – <i>Cloud Atlas</i> [PK].....	28
Steve Cockayne – <i>The Seagull Drivers</i> [P].....	34	Stan Nicholls – <i>Orcs</i> [P].....	35
Storm Constantine – <i>The Wraiths of Will and Pleasure</i> [P].....	35	Andre Norton – <i>Lost Lands of the Witch World</i> [P].....	35
Andrew Crumey – <i>Mobius Dick</i> [AMB].....	18	Robert Ramkin – <i>Knees Up Mother Earth</i> [P].....	35
Cecilia Dart-Thornton – <i>The Battle of Evernight</i> [P].....	35	Sue Rann – <i>Looking for Mr Nobody</i> [P].....	35
Charles De Lint – <i>The Wild Wood</i> [PB].....	26	Andy Remic – <i>Quake</i> [P].....	36
Philip K. Dick – <i>The Simulacra</i> [LJH].....	19	A. R. R. R. Roberts – <i>The Sellamillion</i> [P] .....	36
Noreen Doyle & Harry Turtledove (Eds.) – <i>The First Heroes</i> [LH].....	33	Adam Roberts – <i>The Snow</i> [NH].....	29
David Drake – <i>Goddess of the Ice Realm</i> [P].....	35	A. R. R. R. Roberts – <i>The Soddit</i> [P].....	36
Raymond E. Feist – <i>Exile's Return</i> [P].....	35	Robert Silverberg (Ed.) – <i>Legends II</i> [LB].....	29
Stephen Gallagher – <i>Out of His Mind</i> [DMB].....	19	Neal Stephenson – <i>Quicksilver</i> [SC].....	30
John Gardner – <i>Grendel</i> [LJH].....	20	Neal Stephenson – <i>The Confusion</i> [SC].....	30
Terry Goodkind – <i>Naked Empire</i> [P].....	35	Charles Stross – <i>The Atrocity Archives</i> [NH].....	32
Rob Grant – <i>Incompetence</i> [P] .....	35	Judith Tarr – <i>Queen of the Amazons</i> [PS].....	32
Jim Grimsley – <i>The Ordinary</i> [KW].....	20	Harry Turtledove & Noreen Doyle (Eds.) – <i>The First Heroes</i> [LH].....	33
Jon Courtenay Grimwood – <i>Stamping Butterflies</i> [PNB] .....	21	Jack Whyte – <i>The Fort at the River's Bend</i> [P].....	36
Peter F. Hamilton – <i>Pandora's Star</i> [MP].....	22	Walter Jon Williams – <i>The Sundering</i> [P].....	36
David G. Hartwell (Ed.) – <i>The Mammoth Book of Twentieth Century Science Fiction Volume 2</i> [LJH] .....	22	Chris Wooding – <i>The Skein of Lament</i> [EAB].....	33
Kenneth J. Harvey – <i>The Town that Forgot how to Breathe</i> [PK].....	23	Timothy Zahn – <i>Dragon and Soldier</i> [EAB].....	34
Brian Herbert & Kevin J. Anderson – <i>Dune: The Battle of Corrin</i> [P] ..	35	Timothy Zahn – <i>Dragon and Thief</i> [EAB].....	34
Jason Hightman – <i>The Saint of Dragons</i> [PH].....	24		
Robin Hobb – <i>Fool's Fate</i> [LH].....	24		

**Reviewer's Key:** AF – Alan Fraser; AMB – Andrew M. Butler; CB – Cherith Baldry; DMB – Dave M. Roberts;

EAB – Elizabeth A Billinger; ER – Estelle Roberts; JN – John Newsinger; KM – Kev McVeigh; LB – Lynne Bispham; LH – Lesley Hatch;

LJH = L. J. Hurst; MP = Martin Potts; NH = Niall Harrison; P = Particle; PB = Paul Bateman; PH = Penny Hill; PK = Paul Kineaid;

PNB – Paul N. Billinger; PS – Pamela Stuart; SC – Stuart Carter; SM – Simon Morden; ST – Sue Thomason; TH – Tom Hunter.