

The Critical Journal

of the BSFA

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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## COVER

A radar image showing the east coast of central Florida, including the Cape Canaveral area. The Indian River, Banana River and the Atlantic Ocean are the three bodies of water from the lower left to the upper right of this false color (monochromed) image. Parts of NASA's John F. Kennedy Space Center (KSC) and the Cape Canaveral Air Station (CCAS) are visible. KSC occupies much of Merritt Island in the center of the image, as well as the northern part of Cape Canaveral along the right side of the image. The light areas on Cape Canaveral are the launch pads used by NASA and the Air Force. The two pads in the upper left of the image (light hexagons with bright areas in the middle) are Launch Complex 39 pads A and B, originally designed for the Apollo program and now used by the space shuttle. The other launch pads that dot the coastline are part of the CCAS and are used to launch robotic spacecraft, like the Cassini mission to Saturn which launched on October 13, 1997 and which also carries an imaging radar system. Two runways also appear as dark lines in the image. The runway in the upper left is part of the space shuttle landing facility and it is one of the longest runways in the world at 4,572 meters (15,000 feet) long and 91.4 meters (300 feet) wide. This image is centered at 28.5 degree North latitude, 80.63 degrees West longitude. The area shown is approximately 23 kilometers (14 miles) by 33 kilometers (20.5 miles). North is toward the upper left. This image was acquired by the Spaceborne Imaging-C/X-Band Synthetic Aperture Radar when it flew aboard the shuttle Endeavour on Oct. 4, 1994. SIR-C/X-SAR is a joint mission of the U.S./German and Italian space agencies.

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## The View from Behind the Sofa

So he's back. We're clearly pretending that that whole business with Grace Holloway never happened, and something pretty nasty has clearly happened to his home (the planet) his ship's clearly had a refit, including the fitting of a bicycle pump, for inexplicable reasons.

Yes, Saturday night is once more *Doctor Who* night, and only the death of a pope and the calling of an election has knocked it off the news pages. I've only seen two episodes so far, whereas by the time you read this the series will almost be over, and Christopher Eccleston will have departed the rôle.

The BBC seemed to lose faith in *Doctor Who* at some point, never quite repeating it in the same way as they did *Star Trek* or *Fawlty Towers*, and so I only ever saw most of what I saw once – which was pretty well every episode from the introduction of Leela to the penultimate season before the huge break. To my mind it was never quite the same after it returned from the first hiatus enforced by über-exterminator Michael Grade, but I watched it faithfully, albeit on videos as work intervened to prevent my watching them live. The underrated Colin Baker gave way to the overrated Sylvester McCoy, Peri was succeeded by the deeply annoying Mel, but that was nothing to the annoyance factor of some bird named Ace. Perhaps I had grown up, perhaps it was the wrenching of the series from its Saturday tea-time slot between Football Focus and something featuring the Krankies (happy days...), perhaps it was the shift to forty-five minute episodes. Perhaps it was the sense that bizarre casting of minor celebs had taken over from hopeful monsters. But I gave up before the BBC drove the last nails into the coffins.

There was the resurrection, with a star in Paul McGann who would be unlikely to commit to a long-running television series. Fortunately we never got a chance to work out whether he would or not, as the ninety-minute one-off was all that ever happened. I should be careful about passing judgement on that as I realised about fifteen minutes in that I had better things to do with my time.

And that, we feared, we wished, we knew, would be it.

The nostalgia that many of us feel for series from our childhoods – where two or three are gathered together they shall discuss... *Bagpuss* – meant that a taste for *Doctor Who* was a perfect character trait for Vincent (or was it Stewart, I could never keep them straight in my mind... ?) in *Queer As Folk*, and so a mumbling began... Russell T. Davies should resurrect the franchise. He'd done a couple of sf- or fantasy-tinged series for children's television, and *The Second Coming* with Christopher Eccleston seemed an sfnal idea...

Eventually Davies agreed to the project and names started to be thrown in the mix for who should play the Doctor: Alan Davies – but floppy-haired Jonathan Creek seemed rather too close to the character already; Richard E. Grant – the Withnail to McGann's I; Bill Nighy – to my ears the definitive Sam Gamgee, but always better as a scene-stealing second-string than as the lead...

Eccleston was an interesting choice – an actor with a fine track record, though one which at least one person had

missed when I tried to tell them who he was. He was the one who turns psycho in *Shallow Grave*, the lead in *Our Friends in the North*, a focus group leader in *eXistenZ*, and no doubt had the requisite appearances on *Cracker* or *The Bill*. The one thing that struck me immediately is that he hardly ever repeated himself, and that I could not see him playing a character long-term. It was with little surprise that I heard the news that he did not want to do a second series because he'd found the nine-month shoot to be gruelling and the character to be limiting to his wish to be a chameleon. Of course, at the time of writing, it's still possible I'll be glad to see the back of him.

Easter Saturday, 7pm, arrives, and the familiar music returns, remixed for the noughties. The episode had much at stake: it had to introduce us to a new version of a character that half of the audience was too young to have seen on a regular basis, it had to explain the set up, it had to introduce us to a new companion (one of those feisty southern birds, another Ace I fear) and it had to have an adventure and saving of the Earth. The episode mimicked one of its previous cold restarts: "Spearhead from Space", Jon Pertwee's debut against the Autons and the Nestene Consciousness. At least with that episode we had the faint familiarity of the men from UNIT, although that was still an early appearance.

So we have a feisty female lead, played by one Billie Piper (who is some kind of popular beat combo who had a stunt marriage to Chris Evans, a player of records by popular beat combos rather than the author of *Capella's Golden Eyes* and *Aztec Century*). We have a short-haired, leather-jacketed Doctor, who seems rather smug and definitely alien, and frankly feels like a character from *Queer as Folk*. We have a man attacked by a wheelie bin, several people pretending to be attacked by a plastic hand (oh... good... grief...), and, it has to be said, a rather neat night shoot on the Thames with some rather confusing geography.

The despair hasn't yet set in but it all seemed to be over rather quickly, although of course the story began mid-invasion. I don't like the telefantasy hour, which I guess has its origins in *Star Trek*, and enables everything to be tied up in forty-five minutes of screen time with witty epilogue and arched eyebrow. It seems so stifling. I do get the sense of a latent story arc, but the second episode was similarly self-contained with some barely explicable business about the end of the world and a hostage scam. And the introduction of a mobile which would have allowed ET to phone home.

Everyone I spoke to – and these were not fans, so they've bought the line about Daleks only now being able to climb stairs which is being peddled by the newspapers – were faintly disappointed by the first episode, but would probably tune in and watch a few more episodes because they felt duty bound. It's kind of like how a lot of us felt about *Attack of the Clowns*; we'd hated *Phantom Menace*, but, well, it's *Star Wars* so we ought to watch it, and hell, *Revenge of the Sith* is not likely to be a whole lot better but I guess we've seen all the others. This kind of senseless faith is the reason I managed to talk myself out of seeing *Return of the King* when I heard they'd botched the ending,

and will be enough to persuade me to pre-order Harry Potter 6 even though I haven't subjected myself to 5 yet...

But somehow I will keep watching *Doctor Who*, ever hopeful, because it's been a long time since I've seen the Daleks in action, and it's part of the heritage... Not only that but Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn sent me a box of videos of almost all of the earlier surviving episodes which I ought to work my way through, and fill in the gaps,

too. Thinking about it, there's that dusty box full of *Doctor Who* novelisations, and there was a point when I had a complete set; I guess there are gaps to fill there too... I fear an addiction may be about to be reborn. Who needs spare time?!

Andrew M. Butler – Canterbury, Spring 2005.

WE DON'T RECEIVE ENOUGH ARTICLES ABOUT FANTASY AT VECTOR, AND WE KNOW IT'S SOMETHING WE END UP NEGLECTING TOO MUCH. HERE MICHÈLE FRY OFFERS AN ASSESSMENT OF JULIET E. MCKENNA'S WORK.

## The Picaresque in Juliet E McKenna's *Tales of Einarinn* by Michèle Fry

For me, the picaresque is the most relevant context for discussing the character and status as a heroic protagonist of Juliet E McKenna's Livak. A picaresque novel is one in which the picaresque (masculine) picaresque character has the chief rôle; a picara is a woman who wanders, having adventures, and whose morals are, at best, suspect. The feminine equivalent of the picaro, she is nevertheless given less leeway by society than her male counter-part. Anne Kaler notes that the picara has been "reviled [...] as a sinner, condemn[ed] [...] as a wanton, and dislike[d] [...] as a woman", largely because she has dared to do what men do, and in doing so, she has refused society's restrictions (Kaler: 2). For the picara, "her magical weapons are her wits and sexuality, [and] her trip to the underworld [a common feature of male heroic journeys] is [represented by] her criminal career" (Kaler: 2).

In addition to discussing the picaresque in McKenna's *The Tales of Einarinn*, I also want to consider the issue of heroic female protagonists. Livak is not a conventional heroine, and as Kaler observes "the picara is never considered a hero", for she "consistently [...] falls short of heroism" (2). The picara "is too subjective to be a hero and too objective to be a heroine, who is at best a complacent secondary character, lending the hero moral support while waiting to be rescued. Nor is the picara an anti-hero [...] or] a female hero, an emasculated male [...]" (Kaler: 2). The picara is heroic only when she has no other choice, as Livak is forced to be by circumstances.

It is almost a cliché that the hero has a thousand faces, whilst, as Carol Christ has observed, "the heroine has scarcely a dozen" faces (9). For several years feminist critics have discussed in detail what to call heroic female characters, since many critics refuse to use the word "heroine". They believe, with Lee Edwards, that a heroine is "a secondary character", whilst a hero is a "primary character" (Edwards, "Labours": 36). Edwards observes that the hero is central to his creator, his society and himself, whereas the heroine is not only inferior to all of these, she is also inferior to the hero as well (36). Edwards says that "heroism involves both doing and knowing, that the pattern of action that characterises heroism exists to support an underlying development and growth of consciousness" (39). Action does not, then, exist merely for its own sake, but "as a support or more accurately, as a symbolic

expression of underlying psychic structures" (39). Edwards comments that this is an absolutely crucial perception as far as the existence of the female hero is concerned, for if heroism is defined by action alone, limiting those actions which are termed heroic, to those personalities who are marked by "physical strength, military prowess, or even social or political power", then any culture that limits a woman's capacities in such areas, also, by definition, denies the possibility of heroic women (39). She then goes on to stress that "the possibility of the woman hero is contingent only on recognising the aspirations of consciousness as human attributes"; but "if action is important primarily for what it tells us about knowledge, then any action – fighting dragons, seeking grails, stealing fleece, reforming love – is potentially heroic. Heroism thus read and understood is a human necessity, capable of being represented equally by either sex" (Edwards, *Psyche*: 19).

Edwards believes that "the hero must act, as the heroine cannot, to break with the past, journey into the unknown, endure hardship and privation" (Edwards, "Labours": 36 emphasis mine), but this is precisely what Livak does repeatedly in the *Tales of Einarinn*. In *The Thief's Gamble*, she travels to the Ice Islands, enduring both mental torture and physical hardship before she escapes. In *The Gambler's Fortune*, Livak travels into the Mountains, where few lowlanders (those not born in the Mountains) are allowed to go, where she endures "hardship and privation" to discover the secrets of Artifice. And in *The Assassin's Edge*, she again travels to the Ice Islands, where she risks life and limb over and over, in order to bring safety to the colony on Kel Ar'Ayen.<sup>2</sup>

Dana Heller prefers to call female quest protagonists "heroes", like their male counterparts, not, she says, in order to erase the female subject, but in order to join in the efforts which are being made to "redefine heroism from a female perspective" (9). The redefinition of women's quests has resulted in female protagonists who have refused the restrictive rôles imposed upon them as the norm by society, even to the extent of self-sacrifice "in the name of rebellion" (Heller: 15). However, as Heller notes, whilst many women writers in the past allowed their female protagonists to sacrifice themselves through death,<sup>3</sup>

madness,<sup>4</sup> or running away,<sup>5</sup> many modern women writers prefer to see their female protagonists survive, even if they do not achieve a happily-ever-after ending (Heller: 15). Whilst the male hero often goes it alone or embarks on his quest with a trusty sidekick, who is the hero's inferior in skill or social status (and who often has no idea just what he is getting himself into), "feminised quests [...] tend to be more accepting of relationships" (whether platonic or not) on a more equal footing (Heller: 24). Often, men and women are important in the process of achieving a woman's quest, and friendship between men and women "may occasion mutually-enabling quests" (Heller: 24). Heller goes on to observe that "the woman who rejects the passive term 'heroine' and adopts the active term 'hero' for her own identity", relinquishes the subservient rôles that trap her, thereby allowing her to take power for herself (1). She also "accepts the active disobedience of patriarchal law", which tells her that feeding the family, keeping the home clean, and raising the children, are acceptable rôles for a woman (Heller: 1).

Joseph Campbell has categorised the women who have a rôle in the male hero's quest for self-knowledge as "the mother whose admonitions the hero must ignore, the wife who remains silently steadfast and heedful, or the maiden who becomes a bride and trophy for the hero" (116). Thus women can never be expected to do more than help or hinder the hero's progress, notes Heller, since they are only "accessories for the male's heroic adventure" (2). As Carole Pearson and Katherine Pope observe, "Patriarchal society views women essentially as supporting characters in the drama of life. Men change the world and women help them" (4-5).

A woman is "always subordinate to the masculine quest", says Heller, and thus a woman does not achieve a quest of her own, but she make men's quests possible (2). Therefore, although women may inspire heroes, according to psychological and critical assessments they may not aspire to become heroes themselves (Heller: 2). Traditionally, then, women's only desire is believed to be the desire to be "chosen and adored" by the hero (Heller: 2). Rachel Brownstein observes that the traditional distinction between 'hero' and 'heroine' can be summarised thus: "the hero moves toward a goal; the heroine tries to be [the goal]. He makes a name for himself; [but] she is concerned with keeping her good name" (2-3). Readers of *The Tales of Einarinn* will immediately note that Livak cares little for her good name, since she is far from being a traditional heroine. Whilst she is discreet in her sexual relationship with the scholar Geris, she does not try to hide it from her other travelling companions, Shiv and Darni (*The Thief's Gamble*, hereafter TG: 111). Similarly, she lives openly with Ryshad although they are not married, and she expresses no desire to marry him, in spite of the teasing she receives from her friend, Halice (*The Assassin's Edge*, hereafter AE: 549, 33).

Whilst Livak is not a traditional romantic heroine, she is not a woman warrior (sometimes referred to as a lady hero) either. Livak refers more than once, in *The Thief's Gamble*, to wizards using others as a means to their own ends, and she observes that she has no desire to play that rôle herself

**"the hero moves  
toward a goal;  
the heroine tries  
to be [the goal]."**

(*The Thief's Gamble*, hereafter TG: 28, 78). At this point in Livak's career, her heroic potential is undeveloped. When Geris shows an inclination to make a romantic heroine of her, she snaps at him and rejects his attempts to do so (TG: 107). Later she feels concern at Geris' "nest-building" instincts and realises that she will have to find a way of letting him know that she has no intention of settling down with him as he seems to expect (TG: 151). However, when he wants to play the rôle of 'knight-protector' to Livak's romantic heroine, and she wants to go out to do some reconnaissance, she puts him off as gently as she can (TG: 155). In complete contrast to Geris' behaviour is that of Ryshad Tathel, whom Livak encounters during her reconnaissance of the town of Inglis. After Livak is attacked by the Elietimm (a few hours after her first meeting with Ryshad), she gets back to the inn where her party is staying and finds Geris is missing. She recalls that Ryshad had been interested in hearing news of blond-haired men and goes off to get some information from him. When he offers to walk her back to her inn after their conversation, she refuses, telling him she will be safe; he walks away (rather than watching her out of sight) and she is pleased that he did not make an issue out of it, but has accepted her at her word that she can take care of herself (TG: 181).

After Livak and her party learn from Ryshad just what the Elietimm have been doing in Tormalin, and after she considers what the Elietimm did to the merchant Yeniya, Livak seriously considers abandoning the men to their "quests" and returning to Emsáimin, where she knows the sort of dangers she will be facing (TG: 191). However she feels that she owes it to Geris to find out what has happened to him, and once she reaches the Ice Islands Livak's heroic potential begins to manifest itself, and she even refers to herself (in a roundabout way) as a hero, when she notes that the "ballads about great adventures leave out" a good deal of information, such as the "hero getting bored rigid waiting for something to happen, or soaking wet in a rainstorm" (TG: 308). When Livak thinks that Shiv, Ryshad and Aiten are treating her as a romantic heroine, with their proposal to send her, via magic, back to the mainland from the Ice Islands, she objects (TG: 327). However, this does not stop her from considering giving up in the hope of a quick death after she is mentally raped by Ilkehan; but her gambling nature (rather than her heroic nature) takes over at this point, and persuades her to go on hoping (TG: 343).

Jessica Benjamin, a feminist psychoanalytic theorist, has suggested that the importance of recognising that others are "subjects in their own right" and recognising that the "relationships between two equal subjects", whether woman and man, man and man, or woman and woman, are essential to the heroic development of the protagonist in feminised quests. Heroism may be defined, therefore, in the "heroic pairing of subjects" (qtd. in Heller: 31). This is a model used extensively throughout *The Tales of Eimartinn*, most notably (but not exclusively) with Livak, thus helping to develop her heroic potential. She is paired with Halice in the early sections of *The Thief's Gamble* and *The Swordsman's Oath*, with Usara in the early section of *The*

*Gambler's Fortune*, and with Ryshad in the early section of *The Assassin's Edge*. Livak later joins forces with other pairs, trios or quartets, such as when she joins up with Shiv, Darni and Geris in the middle section of *The Thief's Gamble*, then with Shiv, Ryshad and Aiten (themselves a heroic pairing) in the final section. She and Halice are joined by the trio of Ryshad, Shiv and Viltred in *The Swordsman's Oath*. Whilst Livak is initially paired with Usara in *The Gambler's Fortune*, they are joined by Sorgrad and Sorgren (usually known as 'Gren'), who represent a heroic pairing of brothers, and then later by the pairing of Darni and Gilmarten, before Livak reverts to working with Sorgrad and 'Gren'. In *The Assassin's Edge*, Livak and Ryshad are joined with Shiv, Sorgrad and 'Gren'. Other pairings include Ryshad and Temar in *The Warrior's Bond*, Halice and Temar in *The Assassin's Edge*, and Livak and Shiv in the short story, *The Wedding Gift*. The idea of such a heroic pairing is that the skills of the individuals in any pair are complementary, which enables the feminised quest to achieve its goals.

Livak expresses a preference for working with Halice at the outset of *The Thief's Gamble*, explaining:

I did not want to work the Autumn Fair alone. Lucrative as it is, it can be a dangerous place and while I can take care of myself nowadays, Halice is still a lot handier than me with her sword and her knives. Working as a pair has other advantages too; when someone feels their luck with the runes is going bad, it's much harder to see why when there are two people adjusting the odds. As an added bonus, people never expect two women to be working the gambling together, even in a big city (TG: 4).

One of the reasons that Livak is not so handy as Halice with a sword, is that she is fairly small and slight, so she has less heft for using a sword against a bigger and stronger opponent. As a consequence, Livak has learnt other skills, such as an accurate throwing arm for use with daggers, or more often, poisoned darts, or even rocks (TG: 123; *The Swordsman's Oath*, hereafter SO: 79; AE: 17, 379). Lissa Paul observes that the repression of women is easily achieved since they are, generally, physically smaller and weaker than men; but, as Paul points out, characters who are small and weak can win against "the powers that be", like David (who also had a good throwing arm) against Goliath (190-191). Their stories are "the trickster's story", but also the story of the child and of the heroine (Paul: 190-191). Paul notes that tricksters such as Bilbo Baggins (with his riddles) have previously been regarded as "culture heroes, valued for their craftiness", but deceit has not been considered a manly virtue, and therefore it has often been considered to be "a lower-order survival tactic", below the value of a man who fights for either his honour or his country (190-191). Deceit is therefore a valuable survival tactic for a heroine. Northrop Frye similarly notes that in "Homeric conditions of life – that is, the conditions assumed by Homeric poems" – the chief weapons of a woman are guile and craft, since the physical weakness of most women means they cannot rely on strength alone. The other womanly weapon is secrecy (69-70).

Livak has certainly cultivated the weapons of secrecy,

craftiness and guile. She has learnt how to pick locks from her friend Sorgrad, who teaches her on the fiendishly difficult Mountain Man locks, and who presents her with her own set of lock-picks early in their acquaintance (*Win Some, Lose Some*, hereafter WS, LS: 8). She has taught herself to move quietly and stealthily (TG: 11, 276, 319, 362) and to wear charcoal grey rather than black when she is creeping about places she has no business to be (TG: 6). Livak has also mastered the art of disguising herself by hiding her tell-tale Forest red hair (TG: 159; SO: 180; *The Gambler's Fortune*, hereafter GF: 4-5) or by changing her clothes (GF: 4-5). Kaler notes that despite the fact that around four percent of the world's population is red-haired, this trait is used in literature to "symbolise the alienation of the hero or heroine from society", although in romance and in fantasy, red hair is usually "an acceptable and desirable attribute", particularly for a heroine (144-145). Both Kaler's remarks here are true of Livak: as a gambler and occasional thief, she is largely alienated from "polite society", but as a member of the Forest Folk (even though she is only a half-blood one), she is often considered sexually desirable. Livak both bemoans and uses the reputation of the Forest Folk for being sexually insatiable: "One of these days I'm going to take the Great West Road and search those unholy woods until I find someone who can tell me if the Forest Folk really are as insatiable in bed as all the stories say [...]. It's a cursed inconvenient reputation to live up to, you know" (SO: 107-108). When Ryshad suggests that Livak should use that reputation as she might find out something useful from the stable lads if they are too busy watching her "bodice buttons" to watch what they are saying, she admits that "it wouldn't be the first time" she has done this (SO: 107-108). Interestingly, although Livak does go to the Great Forest in *The Gambler's Fortune*, she is silent about whether the stories are true or not. She also tends to dress in a nondescript fashion so that her sex, age and business are difficult to determine; as she says, "being unremarkable is a talent I cultivate" (TG: 3). Kaler has observed that "the picara learns to blend into her surroundings" wherever she travels, and "as a thief, this ability to fade into the crowd allows her to escape" (161); Livak uses this ability as both a thief and a con-artist (GF: 4).

In other areas, Livak knows how to get information from others, sometimes just by looking at their appearance or manner: such as when she guesses correctly that Darni is carrying a knife up his left sleeve and probably another in one of his boots (TG: 25), or when she guesses that Geris is a scholar (TG: 30, 33), or when she spots that there is more to Ryshad than meets the eye; she notes that he is watchful and that he is used to using the sword he carries (TG: 157-158). Livak also gets information by craftiness/guile: such as when she encourages Geris, through apparently idle conversation, to tell her why he, Shiv and Darni want a particular ink-horn that she is supposed to steal from a scholar in Drede (TG: 60-63). Another way in which Livak acquires information is by close observation of her surroundings (TG: 67, 155), by acting mad or drunk (TG: 155), or by prying into locked boxes or rooms (TG: 101, 320-321, 364-369). It is also worth noting that Livak has no qualms about keeping secrets, such as when she does not tell Usara that she plans to tell the story of the Elietimm

threat to the Forest minstrel Frue, so that he can create a ballad about it, in order to spread the news in direct opposition to the intentions of Messire D'Olbriot and the Archmage, Plamir (GF: 110, 107, 53).

Heller notes that often female quests involve an abandonment at an early age of the hero, or an experience of injustice or abuse that, in one way, serves to mark the call to the protagonist to embark upon the quest (27). Livak had little contact with her wandering minstrel father when she was a child, and after her ninth year she had no contact with him at all; by the time she is in her late twenties, she has to think hard just to recall her father's Forest name (TG: 106-107; GF: 102-103). When Livak left home, she had a vague idea of tracking down her father, but by the time of the events of *The Gambler's Fortune*, she has entirely lost interest in the idea, being more interested in securing a future for herself with the man of her choice than in finding a man from her childhood past (102-103). Leaving home when she was in her mid-teens, Livak wandered the length and breadth of her home country of Ensammin, initially alone, but most often in partnership with her friend Halice, a woman of Amazonian proportions who, as mentioned before, backs up Livak with her swords, and partners Livak in their rigged gambling games (TG: 4; WS, LS: 1; SO: 48-50). Halice introduces Livak, in turn, to the Mountain Men, Sorgrad and 'Gren, brothers whom Halice knows from her time as a mercenary.

Livak, like the picara, has a fairly relaxed moral attitude: she has no qualms about stealing (TG: 12, 68; SO: 52-53, 351; GF: 132; *The Wedding Gift*, hereafter WG: 29-33); about using men to raise funds and get herself a meal (TG: 9) or to get information she believes will profit her (TG: 33; SO: 108); about cheating at games of chance (TG: 4, 36; SO: 52; GF: 3-4); or about sleeping with men with whom she has no intention of making a commitment (TG: 111). However, she reacts angrily to the assumption that she can be bought (that is, that she will do anything so long as the price is right), when it is made by Shiv and Ryshad respectively (SO: 53, 56). She also feels guilty for robbing those who are poor (TG: 12, 69), and she will not let an innocent man take the blame for a murder that he did not commit, although she would have let him take the blame for a robbery he did not do (TG: 172, 163).

Kaler notes that the picara rarely achieves "the creativity symbolised by motherhood" since her tricks serve as a creative outlet for her, which allows her to ignore "the awakening to motherhood" (2). However, whilst Livak uses the herb Halcarion's Vine to prevent herself getting pregnant, since she has no intention of allowing her fun to spoil, as happened to her mother when she fell for Livak's father (TG: 111; AE: 43), she does give up most of her tricks, insofar as she swaps her wandering, gambling life for a more settled life with Ryshad on Kel Ar'Ayen. On the other hand when the opportunity arises, Livak does not hesitate to turn thief again, although the jewellery she steals is not for herself, or even to raise funds, but for Tamar D'Alsennin to give to his bride-to-be, Allin, whom Livak

likes a good deal (WG: 2, 26). The mere thought of sneaking into the guesthouse of the shrine where the jewellery is hidden away, causes Livak to feel "the old mischievous excitement" (30), and it is worth noting that she still carries her lock-picks even though she has no real reason to expect she will need them again (29).

Kaler observes that one of the picara's chief desires is for knowledge, and the power and/or autonomy that go with that knowledge (9). This knowledge is not always "formal education": the picara "scorns learning" (Kaler: 9), and Livak clearly finds baffling the searches of scholars and mages for 'arcane' learning; she considers that "wizards are dangerous because their concerns are exclusively their own. They will be looking for something, travelling somewhere, after someone to hear his news or just to find out who his father was, don't ask me why" (TG: 28). Livak also considers mages to be ruthless in their pursuit of knowledge: "Whatever they want, they'll walk over hot

**"Whatever they  
want, they'll walk  
over hot coals to do  
it, and if you look  
handy, they'll lay  
you down and use  
you as a footbridge"**

coals to do it, and if you look handy, they'll lay you down and use you as a footbridge" (28). She considers that "the scholarly mind [is] a complete mystery" to anyone who is not a scholar, and they cause her exasperated thought: "Saedrin save me from wizards and scholars" (TG: 63, 102; SO: 165). On the other hand, as she acknowledges, "information always ha[s] value too", and Livak is sufficiently intrigued by what Shiv, Geris and Darni are doing on the Archmage's behalf to consider finding out more, in case she

can profit from the information somehow (TG: 78).

Although the picara "scorns learning" where that requires an "acceptance of responsibility" for managing a household, and where "the feeding of others is a full-time job" which means a "hampering of [the picara's] autonomy", she does pursue "an informal education in her skills as thief [and] con-artist", and she masters skills in disguise and deception (Kaler: 9). Whilst the latter skills often carry "a taint of magic", the picara's powers are usually the "development of natural abilities rather than gifts from the supernatural" (Kaler: 9). In this respect, Livak, like the picara, has natural skills in disguise and deception, and she is very observant of both her surroundings (TG: 67, 119, 154-155, 170, 172), and other people (25, 157, 160); she does nevertheless learn various of the lesser Artifice charms, such as charms to hide tracks (405), to protect herself from the Artifice used by Ilkehan (411-412), to prevent the Sheltiya from reading her thoughts (GF: 489), to help protect Allin's mind from Artifice as she does elemental magic (AE: 192), to intimidate a captive and get him to tell the truth (242), to make herself unnoticeable as she follows someone (327), to ease someone's pain (335), and to locate missing objects (383). Livak also occasionally allows wizards to make her invisible or unnoticeable (TG: 169, 324, 377; WG: 29), but this is only when the situation really warrants it from her point of view.

Livak recalls that she learnt her skills of deception, particularly that of nimble fingers, when she was "a penniless lass" in order to avoid becoming a prostitute, a "profession" for which she had "scant inclination" (AE: 325). In this respect, she has less in common with the

picara, since they are usually prostitutes (Kaler: 112-135). However, Livak is not above using her sexuality to her own advantage, as she tells Aiten: "I would have let [the guards] stuff me six ways to Solstice if I thought it would get us out of here" (TG: 246). Livak will also "dress the whore to bluff her way into a [mercenary] camp", but she prefers "not to lie down for [men]" unless she chooses to do so (SO: 63), and she prefers not to be thought of as Ryshad's whore (*Absent Friends*, hereafter AF: 6-7). It is for this reason that she goes in search of aetheric lore in the Mountains and the Great Forest: she wants to be with Ryshad, but his innate honesty means that he is reluctant for them to live on Livak's gambling gains. She knows that he will not earn sufficient money as a Sworn or Chosen Man to give them freedom to do as they choose; additionally his vows as D'Olbriot's man tie Ryshad to his service, which means Ryshad can never be his own master. Livak, therefore, heads off in search of Artifice lore, which she plans to sell to either Messire D'Olbriot or Archmage Plamir (or both for preference), whilst Ryshad tries to make himself indispensable to D'Olbriot in order to earn a preferment, such as a post as an estate manager somewhere on D'Olbriot lands (GF: 56, 59; AF: 16). Livak's search for aetheric knowledge is linked to her quest for love, as Marlene Barr mentions (63); she is starting to look at the possibility of putting aside her adventuring lifestyle for a domestic lifestyle with Ryshad. Not the domesticity of her mother's lifestyle, which involves cooking, cleaning, washing and bringing up children, but the domesticity of a long-term commitment to a man and a home of her own. Once Livak and Ryshad move to Kel Ar'Ayen, where they start to live that lifestyle, she begins looking for a means of paying her way, other than "the donkey work" she has been doing (AE: 11-12). At present Kel Ar'Ayen operates on a trade/barter system, so that, ironically, all the gold that Livak earned from her adventures in the Great Forest and the Mountains is sitting in a coffer beneath their bedroom floorboards, of no current use to her (11-12). Like the picara, inactivity does not appeal to Livak and since, as Kaler points out, the picara seldom thrives in a Utopian setting, where she is expected to work for her living (151), Livak is in a quandary. She has money to spend, but no means of spending it, and no skills besides her gambling ones, to earn trading credit (AE: 12). Then she comes up with the idea of becoming the colony's wine merchant: she realises that if she buys up all the wine that arrives on the ships that are expected to sail regularly from Tormalin, she will be able to trade the wine for the things she wants or needs, instead of having to rely on Ryshad to earn them for her (12-13). Halice asks Livak whether she is just planning to take orders from the colonists to settle as and when wine is available, or if she intends to have her own warehouse and to do the job properly (32). When Livak admits she has not worked out the details properly yet, Halice tells her it is too good an idea not to follow through on and encourages Livak to think it out properly (32). Halice has known Livak a long time, and knows her well enough to understand that Livak will never settle down to life as a mere wife and mother, and she recognises that since there is, as yet, small chance of Livak persuading people to bet on the winner of a game of White Raven or the fall of the rune sticks, she needs something to do that will occupy her time and earn

her either money or trading credit (12).

Kaler notes that while the picara "may be called a warrior for reasons of distinction, she is not truly a warrior" (150). Heroes or heroines who kill simply for the sake of killing do not tend to lead to reader identification, so whilst her "adventuring may lead to the death of the enemy", this is never the ultimate goal of the picara (Kaler: 150). For as Kaler observes, if there are no villains, against whom would the picara "pit her intelligence?" (150) In Livak's case, she usually pits her intelligence against those with whom she plays runes, White Raven or other games of chance (TG: 4, 8, 36; GF: 3-4, 11, 45), but on occasion she does pit her intelligence against an enemy – those who threaten her autonomy, such as Ilkehan in *The Thief's Gamble*; Kramisak in *The Swordsman's Oath*; the Sheltya and Eresken in *The Gambler's Fortune*; and both Ilkehan (through the pirates who are controlled by his adepts in Artifice) and Olret (after Ilkehan is dead) in *The Assassin's Edge*. In line with Kaler's comments that the "picara is not essentially a warrior, but when she takes on a warrior rôle it is for a very specific reason for she seldom kills, and then only in self-defence, not out of aggression" (152), and that the picara "compensates for her lesser strength by using her brain" (157), thus avoiding violence where possible since her skill lies in "her confidence games, which offset the grim gore of the male war game" (159), Livak kills in cold blood only once, but even then it is in defence of herself and "our people", as she calls the colonists of Kel Ar'Ayen (AE: 187). She realises that the only way that Kel Ar'Ayen is going to gain sufficient peace to prosper is if Ilkehan is taken out of the picture permanently, otherwise he will simply keep finding ways to bring chaos, death and destruction to those who inhabit the islands that he covets for his own people (AE: 214). Interestingly, it is a rare childhood recollection of her father who once spent all day digging out a pervasive weed in her mother's small garden plot, that prompts Livak's realisation that she and Ryshad, together with a very select group of others, are going to have to kill Ilkehan (214).

On other occasions when Livak has had to kill, or be party to the killing, of others, it has been in the heat of a battle or some other life-and-death situation, such as when the party she is travelling with is attacked by Elietimm en route to Inglis (TG: 123-127); or when the party she is travelling with is attacked by Elietimm en route to Relshaz (SO: 79); or when bandits attack the party of Forest Folk with whom she is hunting (GF: 227); or when the party she is with is attacked by Olret's men (AE: 484). At other times a death to which Livak is a party is a matter for grief or dismay, such as when 'Gren kills a man whom they have captured for information (245), or when the miller and his men happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, resulting in their deaths at the hands of Sorgrad and 'Gren (500). However, for Livak, the "one death too many" is when she is forced to kill Ryshad's friend Aiten, whose mind has been taken over by Ilkehan's Artifice so that he is no longer in control of his own body. Aiten attacks Ryshad and Livak notices that he is not countering Aiten's attacks, he is only defending himself, and she realises that in order to save the lives of herself, Ryshad and Shiv, she will have to kill Aiten (TG: 409-410).

Earlier I briefly mentioned that "feminised quests" both

allow room for friendships and relationships, and recognises their importance to female heroes. Livak demonstrates a high regard for the value of friendship: she only gets dragged into the Archmage's schemes in the first place because she is running low on ready money as she waits for Halice to turn up to a pre-arranged meeting (TG: 3). When Livak hears of some "merchants" who are in the market for Tormalin antiques, she decides to top up her purse by stealing one from the man who had attempted to rape her some ten years earlier (TG: 6-12). Unluckily for Livak, the merchants are in fact a mage called Shiv, an agent of the Archmage called Darni, and a scholar called Geris, and a few days earlier they had tried to buy the tankard which Livak offers them, so they recognise it is not hers to sell. With this knowledge, Darni blackmails Livak into becoming their thief, promising her financial rewards for her assistance (TG: 28-29). Despite having her plans "completely ripped up" by Darni (TG: 32), Livak is able to send Halice both financial and medical assistance for the broken leg that has delayed their meeting (TG: 35-38), and as soon as she is free of Planir's schemes, she goes in search of Halice (TG: 434-437). When *The Swordsman's Oath* opens, Livak and Halice are sharing a cottage together and Livak is still doing her best to look after her friend. She and Ryshad argue over Livak's idea of freedom and her scorn for his vows as a sworn man. She tells him: "I'm loyal to my friends, not some canting words and a tarnished kennel-tag," and she adds, "I value my freedom too highly" (SO: 58). Ryshad asks, "Freedom to die penniless in a ditch? No sworn man with an injury like Halice's would be left hanging on the charity of their friends!" (58) To Livak, however, this is not an issue: Halice, Sorgrad and 'Gren are her surrogate family since she no longer has contact with her parents, and she has no problem with spending the money she earned from Planir in trying to make Halice's life easier or a bit more comfortable (*A Spark in the Darkness*).

When Halice unexpectedly decides to join forces with Ryshad, Shiv and Viltred on their 'quest' to recover some missing Kel Ar'Ayen artefacts, Livak decides to go too, in spite of her initial reluctance (her heroic potential has left her after her rescue from the Ice Islands). Halice has made a bargain with Shiv: she will help him if he arranges for the Soluran healing lore that had been discovered the previous year to be used on her damaged leg, and Livak intends to see that Shiv sticks to his side of the bargain (SO: 61, 70-71). Kaler notes that:

the absence of a guiding mother or another protective female intensifies the picara's isolation from most feminine support groups; because of her threatening sexuality, the picara never associates well with other women as equals. [...] So] when the picara is deprived of actual parental guidance, she instinctively seeks another, older woman as her mother-figure or confidante (191).

Whilst there is no indication in *The Tales of Einarinn* of how Livak and Halice met, or if Livak actively sought out Halice as a surrogate mother/confidante, Halice (who is about six years older than Livak)<sup>8</sup> often seems to take that rôle. Halice points out to Livak that she "was the one who

got you into your first game in a hiring camp", and when she elects to remain on Kel Ar'Ayen at the end of *The Swordsman's Oath*, Livak is "sad" and does everything she can think of to persuade Halice not to stay, but she also respects Halice's autonomy and wants her to be happy more than anything else (SO: 559). It is Halice's presence on Kel Ar'Ayen that encourages Livak to suggest to Ryshad that they move there once he leaves Messire D'Olbriot's service, and she returns from her trip to the Mountains and the Great Forest (*The Warrior's Bond*: 520). Livak tells Ryshad that she misses Halice, and she is aware that Ryshad, after spending most of the summer in assisting Tamar in Tormalin, will be wondering how Tamar is getting on in his rôle as Sieur to the colonists, so she suggests that they go and make themselves useful on Kel Ar'Ayen (520).

Kaler observes that "the problem of ending a picaresque tale is simplified by having it not end" (58), and it is true that so far McKenna's picaresque *The Tales of Einarinn* have generated four novel-length sequels to the original novel *The Thief's Gamble*, one published short story sequel to the series (*The Wedding Gift*), an as-yet unpublished short story prequel to the original novel, and four other "filler" short stories,<sup>18</sup> three of which are so far unpublished (the only published "filler" story does not feature Livak). However, McKenna has also begun a second series of four books, set in the same secondary world, but featuring mostly new characters. It should be noted though, that some of the "minor" characters from *The Tales of Einarinn* have had larger rôles in *The Aldabreshin Compass* series, so although the possibility of future tales in the first series remains, it seems unlikely that McKenna will drag her major characters out of their pleasant retirement, for unlike the picara, Livak has found a measure of peace and reconciliation (Kaler: 2).

I have tried to demonstrate that whilst McKenna's Livak has a great potential for heroism within her, she is far more of a picara figure than she is either a romantic heroine or a lady hero.

#### Notes

1. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973).
2. Interestingly, Ryshad is also forced to "journey into the unknown [and] endure hardship and privation", when he is sold into slavery in the Aldabreshin Archipelago in *The Swordsman's Oath*. This could, in part, be the result of Ryshad's heroic pairing with Livak as I will discuss elsewhere in this paper.
3. For example, George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*.
4. For example, the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*.
5. For example, Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*.
6. Runes are the Einarinn equivalent of cards.
7. Artifice is an older, less showy, but often more powerful form of magic than that wielded by mages such as Shiv and Usara. It uses chants/charms to produce its effects.
8. Ice Islanders.
9. Halice gives her age as 32 in *The Swordsman's Oath* (72); Juliet E. McKenna, in an email ("exploration etc.") to the author (24 January 2005), gives Livak's age as around 15 or 16 when she left home, and since, at the beginning of *The Thief's Gamble*, Livak mentions she has been wandering Emsaimin for about a decade, this would make her around 25-26 at that point.

10 I refer to them as "filler" stories because they fill in some of the backstory between the published novels.

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SOME YEARS AGO, IN DRAFTING THE INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION OF TERRY PRATCHETT: GUILTY OF LITERATURE (NOW AVAILABLE IN A LOVINGLY TOOLED SECOND EDITION), I TOSSED IN A JOKE ABOUT ONE POSSIBILITY FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION. NOW SOMEONE HAS TAKEN ME UP ON THE CHALLENGE.

## A Pussy in Black Leather: Greebo and the Queer Aesthetic; OR, Someone Had to Do It

by Stacie Hanes

Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels have lately been receiving the attention that many science fiction and fantasy scholars believe he deserves, from librarians, elementarily and secondary school teachers and academic critics. Pratchett's example make it harder to believe in the concept of an sf ghetto, because clearly there are many people in or connected to the academic world who find the Discworld books to be pedagogically useful or critically interesting, as well as a growing general audience. However, it is useful to consider why the Discworld books are both widely appealing and valuable. Apart from such subjective matters as personal tastes in humour and genre, the Discworld novels are successful because they are culturally resonant (Sayer: 109). It's hard enough to write fiction that appeals to a significant number of people of one culture; the simple fact that Pratchett's novels have been translated into nearly thirty languages indicates that their appeal is wider than a single culture – Pratchett has the uncommon ability to isolate aspects of psychology common to people across cultural boundaries. His characters are convincingly detailed portraits of cultural archetypes, allowing readers to grant them quasi-real status, yet they are drawn on frames of psychological strokes

broad enough not to be exclusive or reductive. This is true even of his minor characters, including one many readers appreciate, but with whom few actually identify: Greebo, Nanny Ogg's thoroughly disreputable cat.

That is, I have never met anyone who identifies with Greebo, and I hope I never do. He's described as "a fat, cunning, evil-smelling multiple rapist" (WA: 96), and his exploits include disposing of a vampire by eating it. The fact that the books mention no assaults on people does mitigate his offence to human society, but even knowing that the vampire was in bat form when Greebo ate him doesn't really make me feel better – we're talking about one tough puss. As fascinating as he is, Greebo doesn't have a large role in any of the books; he is a colourful member of the supporting cast. He's a cat, for pity's sake. Yet Greebo's experiences are quite an accurate metaphor for some of the problems of navigating queer identity, socially, culturally and personally.

I've claimed in the past that Pratchett's Discworld series is of special value for several reasons: the deadily accurate characterisation enables many readers to identify with the heroes, the satiric humour allows covert engagement with sensitive subjects, and the Discworld *weltanschauung*

models an admirable humanist morality. The last two of those factors are especially important in the context of the current social and political climate in the United States, where dissident sexualities are the subject of deep controversy. And although the central characters of the Discworld are, almost without exception, crossers of boundaries, Greebo is unique. The witches traverse age rôles and social norms; members of the Watch, especially Sam Vimes, transgress class barriers and confront notions of civic identity; the wizards of Unseen University literally cross the barriers between dimensions sometimes; but Greebo is the only recurring character who challenges the restrictions of his own form by contravening his original biological identity – even Angua, the werewolf member of the Ankh-Morpork City Watch, doesn't do that. Her lupine form is completely natural to her, and the transformation between an attractive wolf and an attractive human woman is a function of her species.

Greebo is different. When the body he was born in proves inadequate, Greebo transforms his comparatively weak and extremely repellent feline form into something large, strong, intimidating – and possessed of a dark and very powerful sexuality. As Mrs Pleasant observes in *Witches Abroad* (1991), Greebo is “a cat of no usual breed” (WA: 148). But before getting any more deeply into this, it's important to note for the record that it would be hard to seriously defend the position that Greebo is gay. Pratchett has not said that he is not, but it seems very likely that he never thought he'd need to; however, Greebo is a very queer cat, no matter how many legs he happens to be using at any given moment.

The term 'queer' encompasses not only lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, but members of the heterosexual counterculture as well, specifically including the Bondage-Domination-Sadomasochism (BDSM) community. Queer can and does refer to anyone whose erotic or amatory self subverts heteronormative society by simply being. Queer refers to “a common political or cultural ground shared by gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and all people who consider themselves, for whatever reasons, to be nonstraight” (Tyson: 356), territory shared by other sexual minorities not defined by gender, particularly the underground subcultures of sadomasochism and D/s (dominance and submission). Although straight and vanilla are not synonymous, queerness is the antithesis of both – and if you don't know what vanilla is in this context, you are vanilla.

Even though Greebo and his experiences are not an intentional extended metaphor for the experience of being queer in America or the UK, there are nonetheless some interesting parallels. The first is the relationship between straight and queer.

To begin with, the small number of Discworld folk who have heard of Greebo treat him with trepidation and distaste. Fictionally speaking, both the distaste and trepidation are justified in Greebo's case. Pratchett writes that:

To the rest of the world he was an enormous tomcat, a parcel of incredibly destructive life forces in a skin that looked less like a fur than a piece of bread that had been left in a damp place for a fortnight. Strangers often took pity on him because his ears were non-existent and his face looked like a bear had camped on it (WA: 39).

And,

This cat was its own animal. All cats give that impression, of course, but instead of the mindless animal self-absorption that passes for secret wisdom in the creatures, Greebo radiated genuine intelligence. He also radiated a smell that would have knocked over a wall and caused sinus trouble in a dead fox (WS: 83).

Martha Nussbaum suggests that many Americans see gays and lesbians as “a revolting source of contamination, a threat to the safety of (male) American bodies ...” (255); it would certainly be easy to open a discussion on fear and contagion based on the description of a nasty, smelly, filthy tomcat with an air of violence.

These descriptive passages, depicting Greebo as quite repulsive, reflect the intolerant homophobia of many members of extreme religious conservative sects in the United States; members of more radical such groups regard homosexuality and other forms of sexual expression outside the binary, male-dominated mainstream with hatred characterised by such positions as defining homophobia as being “frightened to speak out against the criminal activity of homosexuality” and citing the inseparable association between criminal characteristics and homosexuality” (Rudd: par. 3). According to psychologist Greg Herek, there is a correlation (not a causal relationship) between homophobia and certain social characteristics: strong homophobia is more likely to be observed in residents of rural

areas, the politically conservative, authoritarian holders of orthodox religious views, and those who support traditional gender roles (par. 7-9). The combination is antithetical to queer sexuality and, though far from universal, is strong enough in parts of the American South that selling sex toys is illegal. In Alabama, it's worth a \$10,000 fine and a year in jail. *Williams v. Alabama* prohibits naughty devices in order to discourage “prurient interests in autonomous sex”, reflecting the desire to enforce conformity with a narrow set of very conservative mores – a set of values that excludes gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, and the leather community.

The other side of the issue of mutual antagonism is also accessible through Greebo. Some queer activists, reacting against heterocentric society and homophobia, behave in ways that provoke the radically conservative segment of the heterosexual community. Groups like ACT UP and the Pink Pistols are vocal, demonstrative, and not at all passive. Whether their actions are justified or misguided, the other side regards itself as reacting protectively to an unprovoked attack by a militant gay movement. While such groups are defensive, formed in reaction to violence and oppression,

**Greebo is a very queer cat, no matter how many legs he happens to be using at any given moment.**

there is no love lost on either side – a situation roughly parallel to the state of animosity existing between Greebo and many of the people of the Ramtops. They are rural and conservative, he is aggressive – Greebo looks like he does because he spends his time harassing wolves. Like many humans who succumb to the temptation to taunt the opposition, his smugness is not conciliatory: Pratchett writes, “Greebo turned upon Granny a yellow-eyed stare of self-satisfied malevolence, such as cats always reserve for people who don’t like them, and purred” (WA: 39-40).

Not only does Greebo’s relationship to the rest of Lancre reflect the relationship between queer and mainstream society, his behaviour is much like that of a man, or even a lesbian, unsuccessfully dealing with internalised homophobia. Pratchett writes that “Greebo, as a matter of feline pride, would attempt to fight or rape absolutely anything, up to and including a four-horse logging wagon” (WA: 39-40). He is willing to take on foxes and hounds alike, and his pursuit of sex leads to gags about his promiscuity, notable even for a tomcat: “It was a winter of portents. [...] In the village of Razorback a cat gave birth to a two-headed kitten, but since Greebo, by dint of considerable effort, was every male ancestor for the last thirty generations this probably wasn’t all that portentous” (WS: 60). In reality, some hypermasculine gay men behave similarly:

Hypermasculinity is the exaggeration of gender-stereotyped behaviour that is believed to be masculine. Hypermasculine men, as well as some lesbian and female-to-male transgendered, exaggerate the qualities they believe to be masculine. They [...] compete with other men and dominate women by being aggressive, worldly, sexually experienced, hard, physically imposing, ambitious, and demanding (Outzone.com).

The second major parallel is Greebo’s transformative nature in the books after *Witches Abroad*. What happens to him is a fantastic conceptualisation of the social construction of human identity, and can be used to approach the sensitive issues of queer identity, the politicised body erotic, and societal pressures obliquely, perhaps without triggering reflexive homophobia or fear of psychology texts with big, hairy Latinate words in.

In *Witches Abroad*, Greebo is introduced in a way startlingly close to some American images of gay men. He is described as filthy and destructive, as gay men are described by radically conservative religious groups, but his mistress sees him quite differently, if not entirely accurately. “To Nanny Ogg Greebo was still the cute kitten that chased balls of wool around the floor” (39). Her perception of him is vastly different from that of most people in Lancre, and conforms closely to the sanitised, domesticated idea of gayness seen on *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Nanny’s view of Greebo is a reaction to what he represents to her – a companion, not a threat.

Later on, as part of a plan to disrupt an enforced Cinderella story spun by a wicked godmother, Nanny, Granny, and Magrat transform Greebo into a human man. There is no getting around the fact that he was born a cat – whiskers, tail, meow – and that the witches change him

into something else:

They concentrated.

Greebo yawned and stretched. To his amazement, he went on stretching.

[...] He suddenly believed he was human. He wasn’t simply under the impression that he was human; he believed it implicitly. The sheer force of the unshakeable belief flowed out into his morphic field, overriding its objections, rewriting the very blueprint of his self. (WA: 183)

Although it is done to him the first time, this alteration of form is a change from what he is into what someone imagines he can be:

If he was human, he didn’t need all this fur. And he ought to be bigger. [...]

...no points on the ears, the whiskers were too long...

...he needed more muscle, all these bones were the wrong shape, these legs ought to be longer. (WA: 183).

In his human shape, Greebo presents a much different image from his feline one. He’s no less dangerous, but now things are a little different: “Perhaps it was pheromones, or the way his muscles rippled under his black leather shirt. Greebo broadcast a kind of greasy diabolic sexuality in the megawatt range” (WA: 184).

His transformation, like queer body modification through tattooing, piercing, and other methods, eroticises his body (Pitts: 92). His clothing, which the witches imagine to match his personality – or felinity – is also a means of self-expression which confronts the heteronormative, vanilla mainstream with a hint of threat, something we see when Greebo crashes a masked ball “dressed like a pirate that had just raided a ship carrying black leather goods for the discerning customer” (WA: 193). The butler from whom he obtains a mask thinks of him as a “maniac in black leather”.

In that scene, we also learn that Greebo would prefer to look like something else; he was born grey, but when he is offered a mask, he chooses a ginger cat’s head, growling, “Aalwaaays wanted to bee ginger” (WA: 194). For the first time, he chooses to alter himself; he performs the kind of act Victoria Pitts calls “a temporary shift of self representation” (97). He, like young gay men who sculpt muscular bodies in gyms, transgendered persons who undergo gender reassignment surgery, queers who have obvious piercings or extensive tattooing, or BDSM practitioners who express themselves in public mainly by wearing leather and steel, alters his own appearance to become aesthetically pleasing to himself.

This sort of choice is incredibly empowering. Intellectually and emotionally, it is fulfilling to confront the mainstream society that rejects one’s personal values, and to become politically visible, challenging the privileged position of heterosexuality and gender-conformity. By choosing to become what one finds erotic, queer individuals deny societal control over the inner and outer self; the adoption of an outwardly queer persona also relieves some kinds of inner psychological pressure.

Piercings, tattoos, brands, and even what *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fans call the “leather pants of evil” mean that the wearer is already bad – there is no longer a need to try to be good, at least not by the rules of mundane society. The queer person is rejecting the aesthetic judgements of others, seeking validation from inside, rather than from an outside world which is, for the moment, unlikely to grant it.

Later on, in *Maskerade* (1995), readers learn that since the witches changed him for the first time, Greebo has had the ability to alter become human when he’s in a tight spot. When he is in trouble, frightened or threatened, he changes from an insignificant creature (a cat) into a human being who can cope better than a cat can, if only by putting his attacker so off-balance that he is able to escape without being harmed. However, he is not limited to escaping; as a tall, broad-shouldered, strong human male, he is a much better fighter, but much of it is the simple projection of personal power. As a big, sexy man, he’s fascinating and intimidating – everyone around him can see that they can’t kick him anymore, at least not with impunity.

When queer persons alter themselves in ways the mainstream finds strange and violent, whether by body modification or by dress, it is a clear indication of a refusal to be controlled. It is also, although perhaps not intentionally, a warning. Leather and steel are tough materials, associated with arms and armour; wearing them openly announces a readiness to handle harassment or violence, should they be offered. Likewise, piercing, tattooing, branding, and scarring are painful procedures; a person who has endured any of them is clearly willing and able to bear a certain amount of real pain. Describing a visit to San Francisco’s Folsom Street Fair, one researcher into the aesthetics of gay men writes that there were:

People in handcuffs, people with cat-o-nine-tails, men in leather skirts, women in only leather pants. There were spanking booths, where you pay to have someone spank you with a wooden paddle or pay to spank someone else. Some people claim this is sexually stimulating, but it also chips away at the image that gay equals weak. If you can take getting whacked, then you can take what society dishes out to you. From their actions to their clothes, others get the message, “don’t mess with me” (Reilly).

We also learn that once he has done it once, Greebo finds it easier to change himself. He “comes out” as human more easily every time, even thought it’s embarrassing and uncomfortable. Every time it happens, he is naked and vulnerable. For Greebo, this is a physical process. For human beings, it is an emotional process. It is recursive, and no matter how many times one goes through it, the risk of rejection never entirely vanishes.

Although I don’t for a moment intend to claim that Pratchett packaged all of this in a minor character, the

coincidences are convenient and illustrative. In the past, parody has allowed authors to engage sensitive subjects “in a covert manner, where direct criticism might bring down censorship (or a libel suit) onto the parodist” (Rose: 22). In Greebo’s case, I don’t believe that there is much deliberate symbolism at work, but I do see a great deal of potential usefulness for engaging one of today’s most inflammatory social and political issues, especially with young college students who may still be in an impulsive or imperial ego state. By approaching homophobia stealthily, perhaps by encouraging students to imagine the inner life of a fantastic creature as a sort of game, it might be easier to approach the reality.

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Stacie Hanes contributed a chapter to the second edition of Terry Pratchett: *Guilty of Literature* (Old Earth Books). Her proudest critical achievement to date is either winning the Hare Award for Criticism, or managing to work the phrases “Victorian secret” and “biting wind” into a paragraph about Lucy Westenra’s lingerie. Her private ambition is to be a pioneer in the field of comic literary criticism — Eds..



# First Impressions

## Book Reviews edited by Paul Billinger

☞ = eligible for the 2005 BSFA Award for Best Novel

☞\* = contains stories eligible for the 2005 BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction

**Brian W. Aldiss – *Jocasta: Wife and Mother***  
**Haruki Murakami – *Kafka on the Shore***

Rose Press, Pinner, 2004, 311pp, £24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-9548277-0-8

Harvill, London, 2005, 656pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 1843431106

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

"He was the author of his own downfall" is a phrase rarely used to mean that self-destruction was the destructee's intention. Rather we regard someone who is, synonymously, "hoist with his own petard", as being little more than an obvious victim of irony. 'Irony' and 'author' are both literary terms. There was, though, a time when life was lived, not written; indeed, human society had no history because it had no way to write its story. Those times were mythic and legendary. Those myths were great and long-lasting – they lasted long enough to become the first subjects of tragedy performed in amphitheatres. They lasted long enough to make scientists examine them for templates of human folly. They lasted long enough to become best sellers in paperback, falling into the hands of conscripts such as Brian Aldiss on his troopship back from the Orient to Britain.

Yet those myths never lost their complexity.

In Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, his protagonist, the eponymous Kafka, is threatened today with the fate of Oedipus – that he would murder his father – and by his own efforts escapes it. Brian Aldiss, in *Jocasta*, takes us back to Bronze Age Thebes where, no matter how a novelist may rework the tale, Oedipus cannot escape his fate. Nevertheless, the working out of his destiny requires

others – Oedipus, remember, would kill his father, marry his mother; on the way he becomes king of Thebes and acquires subjects. He has a relationship with all these. On the other hand, these characters all have personalities, interior lives and reasons, fallible memories, and, Brian Aldiss has realised, motives, obvious or ulterior.

'Oedipus' means swollen-footed (as in oedema and podiatrist) because as a baby he had been exposed on a hillside, staked through the feet, though he must have been rescued before he became paraplegic. Nevertheless, the woman who shares his bedroom many years later has to be aware that men of his age with crippled feet are few and far between – Jocasta, wife of the late king of Thebes, taken by Oedipus in unintentional combat, must have realised this, Aldiss argues. The guilt is not necessarily all the new king's: Jocasta, mother and wife, could have spoken and stopped the prediction coming true, but did not. She and the reasons for her silence sit at the heart of this book.

A modern novelist can stop and interpolate – Murakami throws in references to Goethe, Jung, the Czech Kafka. A novelist who wishes to be true to the past, though, must recognise other realities and accept other truths. Oedipus, on his way, solved the riddle of the Sphinx, and now the Sphinx has followed Oedipus to town and lives in the palace, an unwelcome guest. The Furies hang over the city,

ever pouncing, and Semele the witch, grandmother of Jocasta, casts spells summoning the dead. One age is ending, though, and another beginning, and Semele's magic brings a figure from the future, not the past; Sophocles, who recognises these individuals only as the name of characters in his plays, of varying importance to the production. Jocasta, her children and husband, might be no more than potential literary subjects, unable to be the authors of their own fate, subject to the whims of their writers. If we were no more than flies to the gods, we might be no more than pawns to a tragedian, but in a leaping coda, "Antigone", Aldiss covers both Jocasta's next generation and our own time, linked by horror, but also joined by the intention to fight on.

It is over a century since the reality of the Oedipus complex was first put forward, yet the reality of the Sphinx also encountered by Oedipus seems never to have been propounded before now. Brian Aldiss has suggested alternate realities, in *The Malacia Tapestry* and the *Helliconia* series, and he unbound both Frankenstein and Dracula from their fictions. While *Jocasta* arrives even as Murakami has also rediscovered Oedipus, that simultaneous appearance also allows readers to contrast the two, identifying their different, desirable originalities – you may find that Aldiss is the stronger. Proclaim it.

**Neal Asher – *Brass Man*** 

Tor UK, London, 2005, 485pp, £17.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-4050-0138-0

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts



In his 2001 novel, *Gridlinked*, Neal Asher introduced his most intriguing character, Mr. Crane. This was an unpredictable golem (robot), who would occasionally follow orders, and was capable of some fairly extreme acts of violence. In his quiet moments

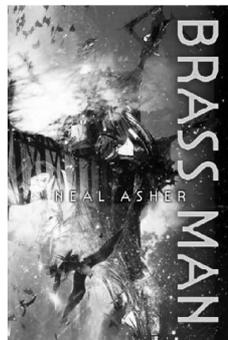
he was often to be found sitting contemplating a collection of small toys that appeared to be his only real interest. There was a definite fascination for the reader, to wonder what was really going on inside the mind of this thing. *Brass Man* takes on the challenge of going into that mind. We learn of Mr. Crane's past and how he came to be the way that he is, and what exactly he is doing with those toys.

This novel follows on from the events of *Gridlinked*, at the end of which the Golem was fairly comprehensively destroyed. It covers two periods in Mr. Crane's life – his creation, told in flashback, and his resurrection – and explores the implications of both.

The retrospective thread traces the theft of the Golem at its launch and the subsequent deliberate efforts to turn a machine that is essentially programmed not to harm people into a lethal killing machine. Golems are programmed, not to be incapable of killing, but are given an ethical response such that they choose not to harm. It is a subtle distinction, but a very important one. This retrospective thread also runs in parallel with the extensive chapter headings, which in this novel provide a potted history of the development of much of the technology, and in particular artificial intelligences. A number of key issues are raised, such as the blurring of boundaries between human, AI and augmented humans. It also reinforces the idea that the AIs have a moral sensibility. There is no logical reason why they should not have wiped out the human race, but they have chosen not to. Mr. Crane has this moral sense broken by the breaking of his mind.

The main story is on a much larger scale, with numerous plot-strands centred on the planet Cull, an almost medieval society which is attempting to reconstruct the industrial base that they seem to have lost. The

indigenous wildlife consists of giant insectile creatures with attitude, and life is a constant struggle for survival. A knight errant is accompanied on a quest by a young acolyte. While these two are hunting a dragon, off the planet there are numerous others on hunts of their own. An archaeological expedition is attempting to find physical evidence of the Jain, a race that lived millions of years previously and left almost no evidence of their existence except for their viral nanotechnology. Skellor, a maverick augmented with Jain technology, is hunting Dragon, the giant alien life form featured in the earlier book. Skellor is being hunted by Ian Cormac, the Polity agent from *Gridlinked*; and Mr. Crane, after being resurrected by Skellor, is searching for his sanity. Told with rapidly shifting viewpoints, this is once again a fast-paced and action-filled space opera that is carried off with the sort of style that we have come to expect from Neal Asher. As the story progresses, more of the various threads start to home in on Cull, and it rapidly becomes clear that there is much more to this planet than is first apparent.



Crane's search for his sanity would, at first sight, appear to be futile, as his mind, when healed, would almost certainly not be able to deal with the knowledge of what he has done. The insanity that he is trying to recover from is the only way that the conflict of his ethics and actions can be accommodated. In parallel with this is the split view of the Polity, which, while it wants to destroy Skellor as a dangerous and unpredictable maverick, simultaneously wants to keep him alive to study the Jain technology in action, which incidentally leads to some of the most exciting action sequences in which Cormac's ship's AI attempts to evade the attentions of other Polity ship AIs in a dog-fight of epic proportions.

Some might be disappointed that, in spite of the title, Mr. Crane does not actually play a leading role for much of the book. Both Crane and the novel become much more interesting as a result of this. His influence and the implications of his existence are much more far-reaching than the simple impact of his actions. This is hugely enjoyable, no-nonsense action-packed sf with a brain.

**Ben Bova (ed.) – *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame: Volume Two A***

Tor, New York, 2004, 529pp, \$29.95, h/b, ISBN 0 765 30534 8

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Chosen by the Science Fiction Writers of America, the Science Fiction Hall of Fame represents the best in sf. The first volume selected the great short stories, this volume collects 11 novellas and the companion *Volume Two B* will collect novelets (their spelling). This is, though, a reprint of a work first published in 1973, which may be why the SFWA web-site mentions *Volumes Three* and *Four* without describing their content – we have had a third of a century since these stories were collected and many new authors have appeared whose powers must be recognised.

Included here are John W. Campbell's 'Who Goes There?', C. M. Kornbluth's 'The Marching Morons', Theodore Sturgeon's 'Baby Is Three', and – feeling slightly out of place – H. G. Wells's 'The Time Machine'. So the subjects include time travel, psy-powers (in the Sturgeon), alien visitation (in the Campbell), robot threats (in Jack Williamson's 'With Folded Hands') and adaptation to alien planets (in Poul Anderson's 'Call Me Joe'). While the themes include social engineering and de-evolution (in Kornbluth), alternative politics (in E. F. Russell's 'And Then There Were None'), conceptual breakthroughs (in Robert Heinlein's 'Umiverse'), and repeated questions of what it is to be human or the equivalent of human. And one story at least – Lester del Rey's 'Nerves' – was a predictive disaster story.

The members of the SFWA put together a great selection. They could not recognise, though, even so recently as the 1970s, that every story would gain something or fail to shine so brightly from circumstances of the time in which it was read.

As 2005 was beginning I found del Rey's story the most absorbing, not because it is a story about a disastrous explosion in a nuclear processing plant, accurately showing what would later happen at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl; instead I found its significance in smaller details. Some of those details stand out for being later proved correct, others for failing to occur, and still others for just being in the news. Del Rey could not have experienced a plant like his, writing in 1942, before the Manhattan Project went on, yet he foresaw the huge size such a place must be. Within what is a small town, he concentrated on the doctors and emergency workers – he foresaw that such a huge plant would still use many

unskilled hands and he foresaw the dangers of radiation burns. He saw that doctors would want to protect their professional areas, but that 'nurse surgeons' would appear in parallel, reducing the standing of the profession – all questions in the air as 2004 turned into 2005. On the other hand, he makes no suggestion of triage in handling the injured, yet that selection process has been one of the most important developments in casualty handling since the end of the Second World War, and formed a whole sf sub-genre in the work of James White.

One of the first essays I read in *Foundation* was a demolition of the biology and IQ argument in C.M. Kornbluth's 'The Marching Morons'. Events seem to have proved Kornbluth right – whether it is politicians who have refused to clean hospitals on the grounds of cost, or TV producers who demand the right to make rubbish, or armies which conquer countries then send home the defeated with their firearms, the Morons seem to have arrived earlier than Kornbluth thought they would. The SFWA chose this story in the age of Nixon, but it is re-issued in the age of Bush and it is in this age that I have re-read it. In Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* the televisions repeat the catch-phrase "I'd buy that for a dollar". Neumeier and Miner, Verhoeven's scriptwriters, knew their classic sf, even if they had to add something for inflation. "Would you buy that for a quarter?" is the question screamed from the TV screens in Kornbluth's story.

In Heinlein's 'Universe' his universe is one of perception – a social collapse long before on a generation starship has reduced the residents to peasants and priesthood. Young Hugh Hoyland has the promise to become a scientist (i.e. an intolerant medieval cleric) when he is forced to realise that he is on a finite vessel and that it could be repaired – but he can only do so if he can persuade everyone on board to return to the mission. As the story ends his first group of missionaries have been massacred and he wonders if he will ever be able to spread the word. It is the story of St Paul turned upside down. We know that Paul, like his pale Galilean, conquered; can Hugh likewise persuade as he was persuaded?

And perhaps that is the strength of sf, exemplified in these stories. Don't they always provoke another question?

**Robert Carter – *The Language of Stones***

HarperCollins, London, 2005, 572pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-716504-8

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The world in which this fantasy takes place has many echoes of our own world's history, its geography and its literature. The story could almost be unfurling in an alternative fifteenth century in which kings and nobles not so very different from our fifteenth century monarchs and aristocracy are about to fight a war not so very different from our Wars of the Roses. However, this fifteenth century is one in which the legends and myths of Britain – in this book known as the Realm – are real.

Young Willand believes himself to be the son of simple

folk who live in the Vale and know little of the outside world. On May Day, however, the wizard Gwydion arrives in Willand's village and announces that he has come to reclaim the child of mysterious parentage that he left there years before. Having led him from the Vale, Gwydion informs Willand that long ago the folk known as the fae created the lines of power, the lorc, and the battlestones which protected the Realm from harm. Now the lorc is tainted and the battlestones are inspiring men to war, a meaningless civil war in which countless lives will be lost

for no purpose. It is for Gwydion and Willand, "the Child of Destiny" to prevent this happening. Like many heroes who have been brought up believing themselves to be ordinary folk, Willand doubts his own abilities. Gwydion reassures him by informing him that he has in fact saved the Realm twice before. It is not giving away too much of the plot to reveal that Willand is actually the third incarnation of King Arthur and the wizard Gwydion is... well, most readers can work this out for themselves.

Despite its theme of the ever-growing threat of civil war, and the presence of the evil sorcerer Maskull who wants to seize power for himself (as such sorcerers do) this is a very gentle fantasy. For much of the book, while Gwydion is off trying to avert war, Willand is left in various castles to learn about books or warfare or the nobility themselves, lessons

very much in the spirit of those given to the young Arthur in T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* – in fact the author does, at one point, refer to 'Wart', as Arthur was known in that novel. At other times, Gwydion recounts the history of the Realm to Willand or explains the dangers that they are to face in great detail. The pace of the novel is slow and descriptive, and the reader is never in much doubt that Willand and Gwydion will win through, all will be well and, despite the fact that his rival is the son of a Duke, Willand will get the girl.

This is not a book for those who look for page-turning action in their reading, but those who enjoy spotting mythical and literary allusions may well enjoy it.

## John Costello – *The Pocket Essential Science Fiction Films*

Pocket Essentials, Harpenden, 2004, 162pp, £4.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903047-44-7

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

In the introduction to *The Pocket Essential Science Fiction Films*, John Costello mentions one of my favourite books about sf films, Bill Warren's *Keep Watching The Skies*. I have shelves full of film encyclopaedias that have been rendered more-or-less redundant by the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)), but Warren's book is one I return to often. It isn't because *Keep Watching The Skies* is particularly comprehensive; the book is impressively large but covers only the years 1950 to 1962, and even then it can be idiosyncratic. However, Warren's personal perspective makes it irresistible. It is much more than facts, figures, dates and details. *Keep Watching The Skies* is as much a social history of geekdom as it is a reference guide to the glory days of sci-fi.

Which only serves to highlight a problem facing not just Costello's *Pocket Essential* but all new film reference books. With the mass of information available, and constantly updated, on the Internet it is no longer enough to provide 'just the facts'. Books like this need a unique selling point, something that sets them apart from the crowd. Ideally, all such books would be as enthralling as *Keep Watching The Skies* but there aren't many people capable of making their own engagement with film as compelling and entertaining as Bill Warren. Presumably the publishers are hoping that it is the *Pocket Essential's* portability will help them find a potential audience.

To be fair to Costello, he maintains a strong and consistent personal viewpoint throughout this book. Costello likes films that can lay claim to strong intellectual credentials, so he heaps praise on Kubrick's *2001* ("the best science fiction film ever made") and Tarkovsky's *Solaris*; but he also has a soft spot for the less cerebral John Carpenter (citing both *Dark Star* and *The Thing* in his top ten sf movies of all time). Though praising *THX-1138* he is largely dismissive of Lucas, while Spielberg's work is repeatedly rejected as childish. *Waterworld*, *Independence Day* and *AI* make it onto his list of worst-ever sf movies.

However, the book's small format, its unique selling point, necessarily limits its scope and that causes problems.

Firstly, Costello has nowhere near enough room to contextualize the films he discusses – America's fifties' 'reds-under-the-beds' paranoia gets a single, slightly confused, paragraph. Secondly, given the limited space, the selection of films sticks pretty rigidly to the mainstream and so dedicated sf fans will find little here to lead them down paths towards new discoveries. There are asides for foreign language films like *Solaris* and *Alphaville* and a section on animated movies that at least lets *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell* get a mention – though it unforgivably gives the truly dire *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* four stars – but there is little surprise in the selections.

The result is that there are times when the book feels somewhat shallow. This, of course, may purely be down to the restrictions of the format (small pages, large type) but, even allowing for this, the choices can feel lazy. It may be, for example, that *Waterworld*, *Independence Day* and *AI* are bad movies, but to list them as amongst the worst of all time suggests that Costello just hasn't tried hard enough to see really bad films. Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* is an offensive and stupid film, Marlon Brando's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is a terrible movie, and *The Creeps*, B-movie 'legend' Charles Band's worst film, is as bad a movie as most people will ever see. None of those make it onto Costello's list – and even these are not the worst. There are many, many films that make *Independence Day* look intelligent, *Waterworld* feel fast-paced and *AI* seem to be a hard-boiled action thriller. Those high profile, big-budget, blockbusters may be easy targets but they don't come close to being as bad as movies like *Recon 2020* or *Bio Hazard* or, Lord help us, Roy Chubby Brown's *UFO: The Movie*.

Despite Costello's engaging writing style, this book doesn't appear to have a purpose. There isn't enough that is new for the reader who already possesses more than a passing knowledge of sf film, but why would a non-fan choose a sf specific film guide over one of the numerous general references to film already available? *The Pocket Essential Science Fiction Films* will fit in your pocket, but it hard to imagine that anyone will find it essential.

**Mat Coward – *Success... and how to avoid it***

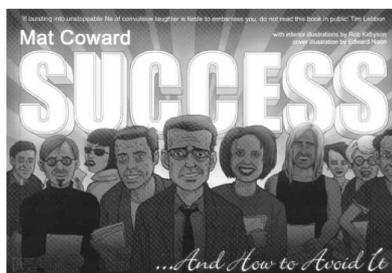
TTA Press, Fly, 2004, 175pp, £10.00, p/b, ISBN 0-9532949-1-9

Reviewed by Simon Morden



Right then: a book about writing, written by some bloke you've never heard of, issuing scholarly advice on how to earn a living at being a writer. Advice on how to deal with editors. Advice on how to negotiate contracts. Advice on submitting work. All very well, you say, but if Coward was any good, he'd be a household name. It therefore stands that he's rubbish, and so's his advice. All he's trying to do is rip off aspiring authors with recycled mumbo-jumbo. Why not nip out and get that one Stephen King wrote? At least he's made a bob or two.

If *Success... and how to avoid it* was a book like that, written by an author like that, then you'd be right. But this is not a book about how to succeed, it's one about how to survive. If you're really determined to beggar yourself and risk your house, your family and your sanity on what has to be one of the most precarious careers ever devised in the pits of hell, then this is the book to read first. Don't just read it. Sleep with it under your pillow. This is the book That Tells It How It Is And How It Will Be For You, Too. It tells you that your subs will be lost, no one will remember who you are, you'll never get paid on time, no one cares about you, and if you're too tired or ill to work, you'll starve. It tells you that luck is the single most



important factor in a writer's life.

Coward doesn't pretend to be anything but a journeyman writer, someone who picks up whatever work he can find. Neither does he pretend that relying on writing for an income is anything other than stark staring mad. He's permanently one cheque away from disaster, and often wonders why he isn't in a proper job. Something that gives paid holiday, sick leave, a pension, someone to cover for you if you're having an off-day, a heated office. Little things like that.

This is the book's strength. There's none of this flowery new-age "if you believe in it, it will sell" nonsense. Coward gives it to you straight: "You should know from the start that there really is an intergalactic conspiracy of space-vampires, Freemasons, and commissioning editors dedicated to keeping you in your place." *Success...* is an engaging, entertaining, and sometimes snortingly funny tour of everything that can go wrong for a writer, and Coward is a genial if bitingly sarcastic guide. So why isn't he rich? If he knew that, he wouldn't be writing a book like this one.

Everything he says rings with the clear chime of truth, up to and including the piece of advice I always give out: get married to someone who has a well-paid job. Mat Coward is both funny and wise. Listen to him.

**Albert E. Cowdrey – *Crux***

Tor, New York, 2004, 352pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31037-6

Reviewed by Russell Chambers

Centuries after mankind nearly destroyed itself in the Time of Troubles, survivors from the moon colony and elsewhere have built a ruthless hegemony spanning many worlds, whose capital is in the East Asian World City of Ulanor. The government is headed by the aging, self-indulgent Empress Xian Xi and its strict laws are enforced by ruthless and cruel security forces who torture and execute people at the Palace of Justice, with the help of apelike alien Darksiders. The security of the autocracy is suddenly threatened, however, when members of a secret organization called Crux steal a just-invented time-travel machine with the intent of going back to assassinate the man responsible for initiating the war that caused the Time of Troubles.

To handle the dangerous assignment of thwarting Crux's scheme, security agent Yamashita retains private investigator Steffens Alexandr, a kif-smoking ne'er-do-well former security agent who would rather spend his time with the courtesans at the Radiant Love House. Through ruthless bureaucratic politics, Yamashita becomes chief of security and establishes the Office for the Exploration of the Past, Pastplor, to guard against future attempts to change history. Hastings Maks is one of the security time surfers trained to safeguard history. Over time, however, Pastplor is used for much more than safeguarding the past, as selected humans

are secretly rescued from before the Time of Troubles and brought to the future.

After years of political intrigue, brutal bureaucratic manoeuvrings and temporal near-disasters, Maks realizes that he wants to escape his fascist world and live in the simple past, but he can't determine how to do so without eventually being hunted down by Pastplor. The opportunity appears to present itself, however, when an attempted palace coup pits the Earth's security forces against the interstellar military forces and throws all of the Worldcity of Ulanor into chaos.

Cowdrey's book suffers from many of the problems common to fix-up novels, since many of the techniques of plotting and characterization that work well for shorter works do not work as well at novel length. The result is a disjointed narrative, with occasional disorienting time gaps, and such things as viewpoint characters being summarily killed without warning, a technique that can work in the denouement of shorter works but is disconcerting in the middle of a long novel.

The concept of time-travelling security forces safeguarding the past has become a hoary cliché since Poul Anderson's *Time Patrol* stories. Cowdrey's characters are also from stock casting, although from a variety of different sources. Fascist far-future dystopias have also been

commonplace in science fiction. Yet this book feels highly original, mainly due to the fascinating juxtaposition of its many disparate elements to create a milieu that feels totally new. Cowdrey's future world and characters of *Crux* are alternately repellent and likable, and the plot in the final

section of the book even manages to become compelling reading.

Although *Crux* has many defects as a novel, it can be recommended to sf readers looking for something familiar yet startlingly different.

### Gardner Dozois (ed.) – *The Best of the Best: 20 Years of the Year's Best Science Fiction*

St. Martin's Press, New York, 2005, 655pp, \$19.95, t/p, ISBN 0-312-33656-X

Reviewed by Chris Hill

For twenty years Gardner Dozois has been producing an annual *Year's Best Science Fiction* anthology. To celebrate this anniversary he has compiled a 'Best of the Best' – his selection of the cream of those twenty volumes.

In his preface, Dozois gives his reasoning for his selections, or more correctly, why some of the obvious choices are missing. For example, despite admitting that the novella is often the best form for sf, he limits himself to a small handful (for practical reasons of length). He also avoids those stories that have frequently been anthologised elsewhere. While these are understandable decisions it does slightly undermine the stated intention of this being the Best of the Best. That aside, what of the anthology itself? Well, overall it is a very fine anthology indeed. I had read most of the stories before and it was a pleasure to re-read many of them. It is not, however, free from the occasional dud.

As you would expect from a Dozois volume, the greatest number of entries come from *Asimov's* (sixteen), with seven from *F&SF*, three from *Omni* and two from the *New Legends* anthology. Surprisingly *Analog*, *SCICOM* and (particularly disappointingly) *Interzone* score a scant one each. The remainder come from various original anthologies. Obviously I cannot give comment on all the stories in an anthology of this size (36 stories) so I will pick out the highlights and some of the lowlights.

The book kicks off strongly with the original version of Greg Bear's classic 'Blood Music', a taut, frightening tale of how the world could be transformed by intelligent colonies of cells. 'Trinity', which shows that getting positive proof of the existence of a Creator might be a mixed blessing, is a reminder that at her best Nancy Kress can write some truly scary stories.

Two stories by very different writers show how technology could change our views of death. John Crowley is represented by 'Snow', a typically thoughtful story of the importance of letting go of the dead, and William Gibson by his seminal 'Winter Market' about a man haunted by the imminent return of the dead woman he loved. 'The Pure Product' shows John Kessel in bleak mood as he suggests one possible solution to what immortals might do to stop themselves getting bored. In a similarly downbeat tale Robert Reed shows another possibility as he charts the homecoming of a specially-created space traveller. Brian

Stableford's sweeping (I suppose one cannot avoid saying Stapledonian) tale 'Mortimer Gray's *History of Death*' shows great ambition and forms a centrepiece to his long-running future history series. It is an important work, although perhaps easier to admire than to like. Ian McDonald's 'Recording Angel' is a very striking account of a very different sort of alien invasion. Tony Daniel's 'A Dry, Quiet War' seems influenced by Fritz Leiber's 'Changewar' stories but goes in a much bleaker direction.

'Story of Your Life,' by the much-celebrated Ted Chiang, leaves me with slightly mixed feelings. It has a fascinating premise: a linguist, in learning the language of an alien race who see time as one thing rather than linear, starts to view things the same way. But I found the family story he weaves throughout rather clichéd.

David Marusek's 'The Wedding Album' and Walter Jon Williams' 'Daddy's World' are both fine stories dealing with what being a downloaded personality might mean to the person downloaded. If the stories suffer it is in being too similar; one of them would have sufficed (the Marusek for my money). Geoff Ryman's 'Have Not Have' deals sensitively with the way technology can forever change rural communities, and Ian R. MacLeod contributes one of his typically beautifully written novellas, 'Breathmoss', which contains more ideas than many novels.

What about the not-so-good? Well, some of the writers are not represented by their best work. A case in point: Connie Willis. 'Even the Queen' is an amusing enough little story but, frankly, time has not been kind to it and she has written far better since. Similarly, Gene Wolfe and Stephen Baxter have both written stories during this period that would be better 'bests' than those reprinted here (although one has to remember that Dozois is limited to those stories he selected for individual years). Robert Silverberg's *Roma Eterna* stories do not really do anything for me and 'Tales from the Venia Woods' is no different. Then you have stories like 'Lambing Season' by Molly Gloss which is one of those that you occasionally get as fillers in *Asimov's*: written in a deliberately 'Literary' style, but like much 'capital-L Literature' doesn't actually have much to say; it really is not the best of anything.

Overall any serious sf fan will get much that they would enjoy out of this anthology – just do not expect perfection.

### Gardner Dozois (ed.) – *The Mammoth Book of Best New SF 17*

Robinson, London, 2004, 718pp, £9.99, p/b, ISBN 1 84119 924 9

Reviewed by John Newsinger

The re-election of Bush as President of the United States has led many people to despair of America and its people. This is not a sensible response, no matter how disastrous

his second term might prove. America is much bigger than George W. and the band of international gangsters that makes up the US government. This is demonstrated in a

small way by Gardner Dozois' *Best New SF*, the seventeenth volume of which is now out. This is essential reading for anyone with a serious interest in sf and at 718 pages and 29 stories for a tenner it is remarkable value. What Dozois presents us with is essentially a collection of the best American sf with a few others – for example, Dominic Green and Terry Dowling – thrown in. It demonstrates, for the benefit of any sceptics, that American popular culture and American sf still have a lot to offer.

Inevitably the quality of the stories varies as, of course, does the taste of the readership, but while there are a few duds, most of the stories are good and some are outstanding. Dozois has included stories from John Kessel, Judith Moffett, Nancy Kress, John Varley, Walter Jon Williams, John Wright, Michael Swanwick, Paul Di Filippo, Robert Reed, Vernor Vinge, Charles Stross, M. Shayne Bell and others. Let us consider some of them.

In M. Shayne Bell's 'Anomalous Structures of My Dreams', a marvellous story of hospitalisation and nanotechnology, the narrator finds himself in the bed next to a man with something growing in his lungs, something he picked up at work. He designed nanomachines for the construction industry. They prove to be remarkably contagious. We also have John C. Wright's 'Awake in the Night', a deliciously over-written tale of the Night Lands that left this particular reader longing for more.

Best of all, though, (and worth the price of the book on its own) is Michael Swanwick's 'King Dragon', a story in the same vein as his marvellous *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*:

"Two days after those events, a crippled dragon crawled out of the Old Forest and into the village. Slowly he pulled himself into the center square. Then he collapsed. He was wingless and there were gaping holes in his fuselage, but still the stench of power clung to him, and a miasma of hatred. A trickle of oil seeped

from a gash in his belly and made a spreading stain on the cobbles beneath him.

Will was among those who crowded out to behold this prodigy. The others whispered hurtful remarks among themselves about its ugliness. And truly it was built of cold, black iron, and scorched even darker by the basilisk's explosion, with jagged stumps of metal where its wings had been and ruptured plates here and there along its flanks. But Will could see that, even half-destroyed, the dragon was a beautiful creature."

Will's developing relationship with the dragon provides the best story in the collection, marvellously written and cleverly thought out. This is a world that one can only wish Swanwick would visit more often.

Other outstanding stories are Dominic Green's 'Send Me a Mentagram', a story of a deadly new plague released by the melting of the ice caps; Paul Di Filippo's 'And the Dish Ran Away with the Spoon' which introduces 'the bleb', something the reader is not likely to forget; Terry Dowling's 'Flashmen', an excellent tale of Australian encounters with unknowable aliens; Walter John Williams' 'The Green Leopard Plague', a very well-done story of a terrible vengeance that shows the darkness that hides out in the light; and Paolo Bacigalupi's 'The Fluted Girl', a story of human instruments.

One thing that I notice of my own preferences is that they tend to be the darker tales, but Dozois has selected a range that should satisfy most palates. Another bonus is that every year his *Best New SF* introduces British readers to new American and Australian writers. Terry Dowling was new to me, although perhaps not to others, and so was John C. Wright. Both are writers to track down.

All in all then, another outstanding collection. Long may it continue.

## Francis Ellen – *The Samplist*

Ronak Publishing, Glasgow, 2004, 360pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-9548031-0-8, inc. a 12 minute music CD

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

A good proportion of music that we hear these days has been generated by computer, or at the very least it has been digitally tweaked to such an extent that the quality of the original performance is almost an irrelevance. Within the world of classical music, however, there is considerably less of this virtual fiddling. The assumption is that the performance is everything, and anything done to get that performance on record is to make it as true and real as possible. In *The Samplist*, Francis Ellen posits the idea that using the processing power available today it should be possible to create a classical performance that is entirely generated from samples of individual notes such that it is the vision of the programmer that is heard in the final recording. Not only this, but that it can be done sufficiently well to fool even the most expert ear that the recording is of a real performer.

Set in a Glasgow music academy, and well-populated with numerous well-developed characters, ranging from the obsessives who never stop rehearsing and yet never improve, through to the genius players who will always be brilliant, it succeeds in bringing to life the experience of life

as a music student. At the centre of the novel is Alex, who was a brilliant programmer but gave it all up thanks to his love of music and is experimenting with generating the above-mentioned classical performance. Along with a group of friends he sets out not only to create the recording, but also to create a history and name for the virtual 'musician' so that when the album is released, the world is fooled into believing that the greatest musician ever to have lived has been recorded.

To some extent this is an exploration into the process of making music, and the various muses that inspire the musicians. The book is at its best here and it is quite clear that the author has direct experience of it. There is a real commitment and passion that comes across to the reader. The one thing it didn't succeed in doing was make me particularly want to listen to any of it, in the way that, say, Howard Waldrop or Robertson Davies do. It does come with a CD of the music created by the characters, although I'm not a good enough judge to tell if the performances are quite so good as those described in the book.

It also questions the distinction between the

performance and the recording of music. At what point does the performance really stop when great skill is required to capture it as it sounded when heard live? The distinction between the technical skill of the performer and the artistic skill in the interpretation becomes really important when there is no actual performance and only the interpretation, as when Alex generates his recordings. The question then arises of what constitutes a performance.

Actually, much of this comes across as being only of marginal interest, and it is really a novel about life as a

music student in the modern world with modern technology. There is good deal of student humour here, some of it works but a good deal, particularly that based on the sexuality of the characters, borders on the puerile. Regardless, this is still an entertaining and intriguing read. It is the characters that make this book what it is, and in spite of the two-dimensional nature of the academy staff (it is from the student point of view after all), you do actually care about what happens to these people.

### Richard Evans – *Robophobia*

Figo Books, London, 2004, 197pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-9547521-1-2

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

If only God can create life, is the human creation of artificial intelligence and consciousness blasphemous? This forms the basis of Richard Evans' second volume of a proposed trilogy concerning the social impact of androids.

It's 2029. Society is not drastically different from the present except that robots are forming a slave class to human requirements. Edosys makes robots for intimate needs, such as sex or childcare, while BioMimetica are commencing production of androids with sophisticated emotions. Alex Sorber, BioMimetica's psychologist, is having bad dreams and is growing more wary of Kim Fox, his android companion. Matters are made worse when Edosys robots turn inexplicably against their masters. Robots are also destroyed, some through crucifixion. Alex and Kim are soon embroiled in finding the sociopath responsible for this carnage.

So far so good, and one wants to encourage someone who's received money from the Arts Council like Richard Evans has, but one feels that more deserving writers may have been left out. *Robophobia* reads as a competent thriller with a bit of a science fiction edge, but it is hardly scaling more demanding issues, although it does at least keep away from the Man versus Robot/Rise of the Machines clichés. The author's website ([www.richardevansonline.com](http://www.richardevansonline.com)) claims he has made little change to the society in the books as not to detract from the impact of automatons. One feels, however, the average science fiction reader can cope with greater changes than those described in the novel. By leaving out other social

changes (for example, astronauts on Mars are only noted in passing, not to mention the distinct lack of other forms of artificial intelligence), the author has failed to fully impress the sense of otherness that typifies the genre and which the seasoned sf reader craves. One wonders if the true reason is that the author lacks the skill or imagination to develop his line of enquiry into new territory. Perhaps it is also because this is one volume in a trilogy and all three books together will explore the social themes of mechanoids more fully (one suspects that if robots are a slave class in this book, the next volume may well concern a revolution in a bid for equal rights for Man and Mechanoid), but then again other authors have created a multifaceted thesis on the subject in little more room. Essentially, some of us prefer to get our kicks in one go rather than shelling out in triplicate to piece together a larger picture.

Despite that, I enjoyed *Robophobia* more than a lot of the dross I've reviewed over the past few months (see the Farren review that comes up next). As a knockabout, pacy thriller, this book's not bad even though you could see the twist just by reading the blurb. Possibly it has a problem with marketing and I'm not convinced this has been aimed at the right audience. Is it for thriller-readers who like things a bit futuristic? If so, fine, but for the cover to proclaim (actually for Evans' previous novel) that 'This book should become a classic among robot aficionados' may be pushing it a little far.

### Mick Farren – *Kindling*

Tor, New York, 2004, 416pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30656-5

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

In an alternative world, a century or two behind ours in technology, fourteen-year old Argo Weaver points a pistol at his sleeping stepfather, but bottles out of shooting him. Instead, he flees his Virginian town and meets Yancey Slide and his band of Rangers, resistance fighters from the Kingdom of Albany and the Norse Alliance against the invading Mosul Empire from the Middle East. The Mosul Empire has conquered most of Europe and has its sights on the New World.

Meanwhile, Lady Cordelia Blakeney is demoted from adjunct to the Albany Army and joins an officer on an airship to Baltimore, and crashes in Mosul territory. Captured, she is forced into the Mosul harems and meets Jesamine, a slave-concubine of a Mosul colonel. Elsewhere

in the Mosul Empire, Raphael Vega, a Hispanian conscript, lands in the Americas, looking for a way to escape his commanders and freely pursue his talent as an artist.

Argo, Cordelia, Jesamine and Raphael must find each other to fulfil the prophecy of the Four, a quartet of magicians destined to destroy the cruel theocracy of the Mosul Empire, a charge surely insurmountable when pitted against Mothmen, Sorcerers and 'Dark Things'. But there is little to make us think otherwise due to the lack of unexpected twists and character development, particularly as everything's predestined and undoubtedly the Four will save the day. You know it's not good when even the author makes sly comments on this and you wonder whether he's taking pot shots at other authors of this genre.

Nevertheless with pulp fiction like this you don't read it for literary greatness. What you do read it for is the guest appearances of doppelgangers of people who have populated our world, like Elvis Presley and Prime Minister Jack Kennedy, not to mention the violence and sex, including what appears to be obligatory in most books nowadays, a good dose of lesbianism and a side order of sadomasochism. If neither sex nor violence is involved, it's time for a slightly tedious info-dump on cultural differences between the Free World and the Evil Mosul Empire – which is where another problem with the book occurs. Maybe this could be read as an allegory of 9/11 and the War on Iraq, as the propaganda is pretty similar. Is it coincidence that 'Mosul' is now familiar to us as a town in Iraq and the Mosul Emperor is none other than Hassan – not Hussain – IX as well as tales of torture and debauchery in a dictatorial regime? If this is so, it falls pretty flat (unless

it's all a piss-take of the Dubya Bush Administration), as the author's research is as vacuous as a certain report on Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction.

However, as a fairly mindless guns-and-bonking romp, *Kindling* works reasonably well. Although it's not overly inventive, as it often reads like a sub-standard cross between *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Stephen King's *Dark Tower* sequence, it has its own self-knowing charm. Moreover, Yancey Slide is easily the most intriguing character and a whole chronicle could be devoted to him and his unworldly origins. It's almost a shame that the whining, naïve and immature Four have to be involved at all. It's easy to see why Farren, the former *New Musical Express* hack, has been publishing for over thirty years, but it's equally obvious why he hasn't made the Big Time. If you don't take this sort of thing too seriously give this a go.

**Barb and J.C. Hendee – *Dhampir***

Orbit, London, 2005, £6.99, 442pp, p/h, ISBN 1 84149 364 3

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Barb and J.C. Hendee are a married couple from Colorado, USA, and this is their first full-length collaborative work. Sadly, any book that is described on its cover as "a mix of *Lord of the Rings* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" starts with an immediate disadvantage for me!

Magiere is a vampire hunter in a Transylvanian type land, and demands high prices for ridding towns and villages of vampires. Unfortunately, she and her half-elven partner (business not bed) Leesil are con artists, depriving poor people of their life savings by putting on what are just cleverly staged performances. However, Magiere's father was a nobleman who only appeared at night and disappeared for good after getting a village woman pregnant – so of course we can guess what Magiere herself appears not to know, that she's half-vampire and has the potential to do for real what she does for fake.

After a lucrative sting, Magiere decides that she can't stand cheating people any more, and buys a tavern in the fishing port of Miiska. Leesil is unhappy with this, as he's spent his money instead of saving it, but goes along with her for now. Unfortunately, Miiska is home to a group of powerful vampires, who soon decide that Magiere is potentially a serious threat to them. The vampire leader, Rashed, is the wealthiest man in Miiska, and has the town's constable in his pay, looking the other way when the vampires get carried away and kill someone instead of just taking blood. Where I think the Hendees wrong-foot themselves is to take a lengthy detour to tell the story of Rashed's companion, Teesha, a beautiful and happy young

wife until she caught the attention of Corische, a vampire lord who took her to his castle, killed her husband, and made her a vampire too. The purpose of this must be to evoke sympathy for Teesha, so we're not looking at a black-and-white situation. Even Rashed isn't painted as all bad. The problem is that, however unwillingly you become a vampire, unless you deliberately fast to *real* death, you can't avoid feeding on innocent blood... Even so, this approach might work if Magiere and Teesha eventually establish some kind of deal, but the Hendees chose to take the plot in a more predictable direction.

Magiere wants to put her 'vampire hunting' days behind her, and is quite happy to leave the vampires alone. Unfortunately they don't believe this. Able to sense her vampire half, they think she'll eventually attack them. Therefore they make several attempts to kill her which causes the deaths of innocent people. Magiere then decides she has to act. This is when her true nature (and that of Leesil) becomes apparent. There's also a mysterious benefactor called Welstiel who has plans for Magiere that aren't revealed in this book. Unsurprisingly, a sequel to *Dhampir* is already scheduled, *Thief of Lives*.

Despite the botched attempt to 'humanise' the vampires, this still works well as a slam-bang good-versus-evil actioner with some genuinely poignant moments. Recommended to those who like a light read about the undead!

**Brian Lumley – *Khai of Khem***

Tor, New York, 2004, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31047-3

Reviewed by Simon Morden

Khai was the somewhat shiftless son of a master architect and pyramid overseer. Betrayed by his father's trusted colleague, forced to witness the slaughter of his family, and offered a job he hasn't the stomach for, he begins his transformation into one of Kush's greatest generals. But on the brink of victory over his former countrymen, dark arts and treachery once more bring Khai low. Only his love for

the Kushite queen and his great friend and fellow general Manek Thotak can save the day with a millennia-spanning plan to find Khai's reincarnated soul, repatriate it into its right body, and wreak bloody revenge on the mad half-alien pharaoh.

Brian Lumley is better known for his Lovecraftian-inspired *Necroscope* series: Tor have reprinted this swords

and sandals romp, first published in 1980. This is the first time I'd read any Lumley, despite my horror credentials. I didn't quite know what to expect, and I'm afraid to report I was somewhat disturbed – but not in any good way.

The plot is perfectly good. I enjoy a bit of ancient pre-Egyptian nonsense as much as the next man, and in theory, it all hangs together perfectly well. Wronged son flees tyrant king, makes useful allies, learns both state and warcraft, falls in love with a beautiful princess and returns to his homeland at the head of the most powerful army the world had ever seen. Throw in a clash between good and evil wizards, aliens, gratuitous sex'n'violence, and we should be home and dry. But by the end – it's a review and I kept reading till the bitter end – I was muttering "please God, make it stop".

Lumley's writing style is not only not what I'm used to, but it goes against many of the things I teach in Primary school. Maybe I've got it wildly wrong, but I find too! many! exclamation! marks! difficult. Likewise long expository asides and abrupt changes in point-of-view. To be fair, the battle scenes were well done, despite the !!!, and the dialogue escapes cod-fantasy archness – but it was much closer to the infamous *Eye of Argon* than the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Secondly, more seriously, is the rampant misogyny. If you've read any of John Norman's *Gor* books, you'll probably see where we're going with this, but if anything, Norman's domination fantasies were more palatable than what's served up here. Rape is a repeated theme. Rape as

revenge, rape as judgement, rape as torture, rape as an expected part of warfare. The flipside of the coin is when the woman becomes the sexual predator. Essentially, woman are available for sex, whether they want it or not. It makes for a difficult read. The rapes are shown as terrible acts, but the descriptions are lurid and sensational.

Thirdly, equally serious, is racial stereotyping. The Nubians we meet are invariably slaves or escaped slaves – though the Nubian king does exhibit considerable will in thwarting the Pharaoh. The Arabbans (follow the linguistic root) are slavers; cruel, merciless, evilly-visaged and cowardly to boot. The Khemites (that's Egyptians to you and me) are under the thrall of their mad God-king, and only the Kushites come out with any credit. Kush covers the upper Nile region, extending into Sudan and Ethiopia – but there's no real mention of their skin colour, unlike the Nubians who are adjectivised to death as 'black'. What of our hero, Khai? A Semite, surely, swarthy with dark hair and dark eyes. No: much is made of his unusual appearance as a blond, blue eyed man. Feel free to draw your own conclusions. I did.

I'm not often offended by fiction. I'm happy to tolerate a wide spectrum of political and social ideas when it serves the story – my love of right-wing military sf is a matter of record. But *Khai of Khem* hit all my 'Danger, Will Robinson!' buttons in a way that has rarely been equalled. I'm sure there's a demand for this sort of thing, but I wish there wasn't.

## Ian R. MacLeod – *The House of Storms*

Simon & Schuster, London, 2005, 457pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-7432-5672-7

Reviewed by Stuart Carter



If MacLeod's previous novel, *The Light Ages* (reviewed in *Vector* 232), was a powerful re-imagining of the Victorian era – with added magical aether – then follow-up *The House of Storms* (not really a sequel any more than, say, *Hard Times* can possibly be called

a sequel to *Great Expectations*) is a similarly re-imagined Edwardian period: more E. M. Forster than Charles Dickens. Neither book follows our history in anything more than the roughest sense, at best seeing a kind of rough inevitability in the development and experiences of a British industrial society, howsoever they might be powered. MacLeod has largely dispensed with any real claim to alternative history and is now writing a history of his own, albeit with some familiar geography.

So in a world where the magical substance 'aether' is mined from the earth itself and used to bolster everything from architecture to make-up, from drugs to the telegraph, we meet Great-Grandmistress Alice Meynell, whose teenage son, Ralph, is desperately ill with TB. Alice has earned her position in society. She is a fighter who has clawed her way up to her present exalted position as the wife of one of the most powerful men in England; she is an elemental,

animal force, with no morals to hold her back, and the driving force behind her husband's guild. And yet she loves her son as one can imagine only a psychopath might, seeing in him her own immortality, and yet taking her love to its logical (to her) but extreme limits. To this end, she brings him to the neglected stately home of Invercombe in the West Country, endlessly searching for a cure for his condition. Invercombe is a strange place: shielded from the world, it has a kind of concealed magic not entirely due to the care lavished by its staff.

Miraculously, Alice's prayers are answered: Ralph is healed, and he then proceeds to make up for lost time by falling in love with a local servant girl. He spends an idyllic summer at Invercombe loving and studying his beloved science.

Of course, neither affair – head nor heart – can possibly last; class and other, more vested, social interests abrogate both. Flash forward 20-odd years and we find Alice once more at her inevitable work, caring for her son (now Great-Grandmaster of the Telegraphers Guild like his father was before him) by managing and forwarding his Guild with her trademark ruthlessness. Alice engineers her own world's aether-based equivalent of 9/11, and England collapses into a Great War no less cataclysmic for being civil, rather than between states.



*The House of Storms* sees MacLeod's already strong writing taking another notable step forward. It moves far faster and far more fluidly for the most part, sucking the reader in and whisking him along in its wake. *The Light Ages*, whilst a very fine book, had to rather drag this reader along at times, bogged down in self-indulgent prose and a distended story. While the last quarter of this book suffers somewhat from the same problem, the first three are magnificent. Beautiful, turbid and often very rich, but never stifling, prose flows from the page at a cracking rate of knots, evoking both upstairs and downstairs at Invercombe with a delightful passion. I absolutely believed in this world, despite it being based so much upon literal magic. And most of the credit for this little piece of magic belongs to MacLeod's characters, the most marginal of whom make us feel their presence. The main characters are intensely rendered; weighted with idiosyncrasies, foibles and internal

qualities that serve to bring out all the human stories inherent in the events portrayed, from the most perfect summers to the greatest disasters.

Speaking of disaster, the proofreading standard here is just that: disastrous. Considering that this is a major genre release for Simon & Schuster, and an intelligent and enthralling one too (qualities so often mutually exclusive), I couldn't believe what a shoddy job had been done.

That aside, though, *The House of Storms* is a strikingly enjoyable and well-thought-out novel, which has something for absolutely everyone. Its fast-turning pages brim with joy and pain, love and war – in short, with humanity, a bit of everyday magic that shines brightly amongst the rather less common variety. I'm reminded somewhat of Graham Joyce's recent books – yes, almost that good. MacLeod's current trajectory seems set to take him into the very top rank of modern British writers.

### Oisín McGann – *The Gods and their Machines*

Or, New York, 2004, 235pp, \$19.95, h/b, ISBN 0 765 31159 3

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This young adult novel could only have been written in the wake of 9/11. McGann has created equivalents of weapons of mass destruction, suicide bombers and chemical warfare, and examines the relationship between two groups of people, one with greater wealth and more developed technology, the other feeling themselves oppressed.

The wealthy area, Altima, has greater technological capability, notably the power of flight – the 'machines' of the title – while the other group, the Fringelands, live in a more traditional agricultural society. Altimans buy land and run businesses in the Fringelands, despoiling the natural environment, while Fringelands take menial jobs in Altima, giving rise to various forms of racism. Altima bombs Fringeland areas that protest, while the Fringelands send suicidal martyrs to carry out terrorist attacks in Altima.

The analogy with events in the real world is too obvious for this reader. While McGann's thesis, that progress will only be made if the two sides learn to understand each other, is constructive, the moral issues are too close to the surface and lead the story rather than arising naturally out of it. I felt that the characters were being manipulated to make the writer's point.

For example, the central Fringeland character is a girl named Riadni, a tomboy who cannot fit into the submissive role which her society expects. I've seen too many characters like this – girls can too be dragonriders! – though she is well handled and sympathetic. She becomes interested in Benyan, a young member of the Hadram Cassal, the local terrorist organisation, and takes risks to be

with him, yet when Benyan is seriously injured and facing prison, she is barely given time to react, as if Benyan's fate doesn't really matter. Chamus, the young Altiman whose friendship with Riadni breaks the deadlock, learns after his grandfather's death that the old man played a key role in the chemical attack on the Fringelands which he risks his life to prevent, yet what that would mean to him is never explored. The lack of interest in the destruction of these two characters calls into question the writer's whole moral stance.

McGann's world is interesting, especially in the way that the hi-tech of Altima is primitive by our standards; for example, Chamus flies a biplane made out of canvas. I'd have liked some clues as to whether this is an alternate Earth, a post-holocaust future, or a completely different world. The most intriguing aspect is the way the Fringelands prime their suicidal martyrs, by giving them the Blessing, introducing into their mind the spirits of people who died violently and demand revenge. This could have been explored in more depth, particularly the way that Chamus and his grandfather have received the Blessing as a result of narrowly escaping violent death. We never find out why, or what happened to the hundreds of other Altimans who must have undergone similar experiences.

The book is readable, with some exciting episodes, but it never entirely succeeds for me. Young readers may not be so critical, but I feel that a young adult readership is capable of appreciating the depth that the ideas and issues ask for but don't receive.

### Fiona McIntosh – *Myrren's Gift*

Orbit, London, 2004, 662pp, £7.99, p/h, ISBN 1 84149 373 2

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This novel begins with the death of Fergys Thirsk, General of the Morgravian Legion, in one of the numerous battles between Morgravia and Briavel, neighbouring kingdoms. The battles have been going on for so long – hundreds of years – that they have become a tradition: the Thirsk family have been Generals for many generations.

It is Fergys' dying wish that the warring realms cease fighting, that they discuss uniting against the threat from the north, and that his King (Magnus) protects Wyl and Ylena, Fergys' children. For Wyl, now General of the Legion, this means becoming a 'brother' to Celimus, heir to the throne. For Ylena, it means the King making a good marriage for

her. Celimus is not exactly likeable: he has been brought up by his mother to hate his father, who he believes caused his mother's death, and he also has no great liking for the Thirsk. In addition, his ambition is to conquer Briavel.

Things change radically for both of them when Celimus forces Wyl to watch the torture and execution of Myrren, a girl accused of being a witch – her only crime is that she has odd-coloured eyes. In return for giving her a drink of water, she promises to repay Wyl's kindness with a gift and asks him to use it to avenge her. She also asks him to keep her dog Knave, which he promises to do.

Years pass, Celimus becomes King, and sends Wyl to Briavel, ostensibly to sound out Valor, its King, and his daughter Valentyna about a possible marriage. In reality, he

intends that Wyl should be implicated in the death of Valor, and then killed in turn by a mercenary sent along as part of his escort. However, with the aid of Fynch, a young lad who cleans the palace privies, Wyl is made aware of this.

There are many unexpected events along the way, and a twist at the end that came as a total surprise to this reviewer, as well as to Wyl himself. This is an excellent start to the trilogy, with characters that you can believe in and sympathise with (or not).

The author has set a high standard with this intriguing novel, which I highly recommend and look forward to the forthcoming books in the trilogy.

## John Meaney – *Resolution*

Bantam, London, 2005, 405pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-593-04737-0

Reviewed by Chris Hill

*Resolution* is the final volume of the *Nulapeiron Sequence*, following on from *Paradox* (reviewed in *Vector* 213) and *Context* (*Vector* 228). The Blight has been defeated and Tom Corcorigan has finally married his beloved Elva. Officially they are still on their honeymoon, but two problems are in the front of Tom's mind. Firstly, although he is a Lord, they have no source of income and credit is getting scarce. Far more seriously, Tom suspects that before the Blight was defeated it managed to get a message to its source, the mysterious Anomaly that is absorbing whole regions of the galaxy. Tom is sure that it is only a matter of time before agents of the Anomaly come looking for them.

Meaney wastes no time in throwing Tom back into the action, briefly transporting him to another world where a deformed Pilot is being tortured. This is followed shortly by the unexpected death of an old friend which again changes Tom's place in the world. Once again, Meaney has great fun playing with some fascinating concepts that arise out of modern mathematical and physical ideas (time-reversed particles, moving objects through Calabi-Yau spaces, and so on). Some of the more outlandish ideas feel almost like magic, but in the 'sufficiently advanced technology' sense that hard sf writers have been making use of for many years.

In my review of *Context* in *Vector* 228 I commented that Tom comes close to being a Zelazny quasi-superman and this is even more true here, particularly with the Seer-like ability that he gradually reveals. Where Meaney's approach differs is that here Tom lacks the supreme self-confidence bordering on arrogance that can make some Zelazny characters difficult to like. Tom does what he does because he has to and he is made to suffer for his achievements, ending up almost as damaged as a Tim

Powers protagonist!

Like the previous volumes, the tale of the early Pilots is interwoven with Tom's own story, but this time there is a very strong link between the narratives and the stories ultimately dovetail together. There is also an extremely naughty hint dropped at the end of the pilots' narrative that there is something else going on that we do not yet know about. Keeping things open for a later sequel, perhaps? At heart *Resolution* is a good old-fashioned adventure story, as Tom and his allies fight to save Nulapeiron. If the book has one real flaw it is that this plot line is somewhat similar to that of *Context*. Because of this, at times, the Pilots' story can be more interesting than Tom's situation. But the relationships between the characters and the importance of love, friendship and loyalty are as important to the story as the adventure.

Oh yes, and being a Meaney novel, also of vital importance is being able to pull a man's testicles up through his throat and wrap them around his neck using just one finger... How much you enjoy Tom's (and the Pilots') astounding physical feats will depend on how much of a martial arts fanatic you are.

We do get a final ending to the series which makes sense and leaves a satisfactory resolution (no pun intended) to Tom's story. There are a couple of bitter-sweet notes in the last section which stops it being too sentimental.

When I reviewed *Context* I had a few reservations about the structure – in some ways it suffered from middle-volume-of-trilogy problems. *Resolution* is a smoother, more confident book and is a fitting end to the series. Tom's story certainly feels like it is over, but I hope that some day Meaney returns to this universe. There are more stories to tell.

## Christopher Pike – *Alosha*

Tor, New York, 2004, 301pp, \$18.95, h/b, ISBN 0 765 31098 8

Reviewed by Penny Hill

What does *Alosha* offer to its target YA audience? It delivers a good exciting story with a mix of real life and fantastic elements: a 'standard fantasy quest with a deadline' meets a 'modern day Enid Blyton adventure'. The group dynamics appear straightforward, however, the importance of how decisions are made is gradually revealed. It can be quite

difficult to get the level of threat right in a young adult novel – too much danger and you risk alienating parents or other adults who can still influence what people this age read; too little and an increasingly sophisticated audience will reject it as boring. *Alosha* is not as scary as Garth Nix's work but there are still some frightening images for younger

kids.

The heroine, Ali, does face real physical dangers and whilst she finds the strength to overcome them, this is part of her training and not mere 'with one bound Jack was free' plotting. Unlike Harry Potter, she does not rely on others to rescue her, for her allies are ordinary children and a mystical tree (which inspires and educates her but has its own weaknesses).

I enjoyed the subliminal references to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – Alison is faced with her destiny, becoming the Chosen one with special powers, whose friends can only help by influencing her decisions. The overt vampire references possibly strike a false note as the other fantastic elements belong to a different fantasy tradition from the gothic. In the best fairy-tale tradition, names have their own importance and this is woven through the main plot, with Ali's secret powerful name Alosha having power over magical objects. This theme is reflected charmingly in the minor plot strand of the trolls becoming allies as Ali finds new and pretty names for them.

Although this is not Christopher Pike's first novel, the weakness of the language makes it seem so. Ali's hair is described several times as maroon – and I'm sorry, that is not a hair colour that occurs in nature (it is made quite clear that she does not dye her hair). The tone is clearly that of a Young Adult novel, and I may differ from the target audience in finding some of the explanations heavy-handed, for example the explanation of the rotten egg smell as "sulphur which she knew from school". There is also a lack of subtlety about the 'smoking kills' message relayed by Cindy which may be meant ironically but comes across

as patronising. Of course it could be that some of this is more obvious to me because it is written in American English – for example our heroine never walks through the woods but always goes hiking.

The viewpoint of the narration is an 'over the shoulder' style which, while it appears to be third person omniscient, actually presents facts and opinions from Ali's point of view. This is then nicely subverted when Ali has her epiphany and gets to see her actions from a truly independent point of view. She discovers that her righteousness and special talents look like smugness and bossiness.

I enjoyed reading a fantasy quest novel in which the participants genuinely struggle with the physical aspects of the quest – in this case the children are unfit and easily tired by climbing the mountain – but it is a little worrying that Steve fulfils the fat kid cliché of subsisting on coffee and doughnuts. There is a nice hint of romantic interest with a suggested love triangle between Steve, Karl and Ali. (Whilst Ali feels herself too young to feel anything other than friendship for Steve, she is attracted to the apparently more mature Karl).

*Alosha* is a satisfactory stand-alone story. You could stop reading at the end of this volume and not feel that you were missing anything, however in the last few pages, various plot strands come together to kick off the next volume, which looks like a completely different sort of quest. Hopefully Ali's friends will stay with her to continue the interesting dynamic.

### Frederik Pohl – *The Boy Who Would Live Forever*

Reviewed by Chris Hill

Tor, New York, 2004, 380pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31049-X

On Stan's seventeenth birthday his father is killed. Initially alone in Istanbul, he quickly discovers that his father's insurance has left enough money for him to buy a ticket to the Gateway asteroid. Ultimately Stan ends up in the Core, the giant black hole in the centre of the galaxy where, until recently, the Heechee were in hiding for fear of the Kugel, who hate all organic life.

If I were to sum up *The Boy Who Would Live Forever* in one phrase it would be 'a bit of a dog's dinner'. Admittedly, it is an entertaining dog's dinner (I do not think that Pohl has ever been anything less than entertaining) but a dog's dinner nonetheless.

The first thing to note about the book is that it runs parallel to the events of all the previous Heechee novels; if you have not read *Gateway*, and preferably the other books as well, this novel is going to be a little difficult to follow. The second thing to note is that the book, although published as a novel, is in part a linked collection of short stories, three of which were previously published elsewhere. There are a number of different threads with different lead characters. The multiple plot lines do eventually come together but only towards the end and, clumsily, some pieces of information are given more than once by different lead characters.

The driver of the story is the fate of Wan, who featured in earlier books of the series. Wan was born on a Heechee ship in the Oort cloud after his parents were trapped there.

He was left alone when they died and his feelings were accidentally projected to Earth via a device found on the ship (the so-called 'Wrath of God' which indirectly caused the death of Stan's father). Since being rescued Wan has not been exactly sane and is determined to recover the Australopithecines that were also aboard his ship, as well as taking revenge upon the hated Heechee.

In the meantime we have, bit by bit, Stan's story, mainly revolving around his relationship with his damaged girlfriend, Estella. In many ways this is the weakest segment, mainly because throughout much of it Stan acts like a spoiled teenager, which gets wearing after a while. Also Stan is seldom an active participant but is predominantly driven by the desires of others (and the plot, such as it is). More interesting, if a little silly, is the story of Marc Antony, an AI who happens to be both a brilliant cook (catering to the living, machine-stored minds and AIs) and an excellent military strategist. Another significant character is Reverend Orbis McClune who falls in with Wan because of his hatred of the machine storage of minds which took his wife from him. There is also Achiever, a Heechee who is gradually being cured of his unreasoning hatred of humans after being traumatised by trying to mate with a human woman.

The problem with trying to give an impression of this book is that it is all so fragmented. You are introduced to interesting characters who then disappear off the page for

half the book, only to reappear when the demands of the plot require it. All in all, the whole thing feels somewhat inconsequential. *The Boy Who Would Live Forever* is fairly

entertaining, but distractingly fragmented and somewhat lightweight. It is not among the author's best and perhaps only has real appeal for Pohl (and Heechee) completists.

### John Scalzi – *Old Man's War*

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Tor, New York, 2005, 316pp, \$23.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30940-8

In *Old Man's War*, John Scalzi's first novel, a Colonel in the Colonial Defence Forces welcomes his new recruits by telling them that at the end of their ten-year tour of duty 75% of them will be dead. However, that isn't bad odds, because if they'd stayed back home on Earth, 75% of them would have been dead by then anyway. Why? Because unlike today, when we send our least expendable citizens to war, Scalzi envisions a future when the world's most expendable citizens go instead – people over seventy-five!

Two hundred or so years from now mankind is trying to colonise our region of the galaxy. Unfortunately we live in a region of space that is also home to many other sentient star-faring races, all of whom have the same plan. Uninhabited planets that can support life are rare, and we have to fight hard to take and keep every one. Widower John Perry from Ohio, retired advertising copywriter, enlists in the CDF and on his seventy-fifth birthday turns up at the local office to take up his place as a raw recruit. He is quickly on his way up into space, and then by interstellar troop carrier to the planet where his training will take place. From then on it's a rollercoaster ride as Perry goes through his training, bonds with his new buddies, and then takes part in ever more dangerous operations trying to win, defend or recover planets for the CDF. I was looking forward to a clever treatment of how old people could conduct warfare successfully, but Scalzi uses his invented technology to enable this in quite a different way from the one I was expecting.

This novel has been compared to *Starship Troopers* and *The Forever War*, but my assessment would be that it owes more to Heinlein than anyone else – Scalzi thanks him

specifically in his Acknowledgements. This book has been very well received in the USA – almost every CDF character is American, and apart from one spectacular disaster quickly revenged, the CDF really does kick alien butt. Obviously that's what Americans want to read.

Although Scalzi does introduce a moral perspective that challenges the 'see new worlds, meet new people, and kill them' formula, he doesn't dwell on it. The CDF way of dealing with a race which is only a prospective threat is to bomb their home world into the Dark Ages, thus ensuring they won't be spending much energy colonising in the next two hundred years. A character astutely points out that the problem with the CDF is not that it's not effective, but that it's too easy to deploy. "Why negotiate and get part of what you want, when you can hit the other guy with overwhelming force and few casualties on your side, and get everything that you want?" Unfortunately he tries to make a peaceful gesture to a group of aliens facing annihilation, and gets killed very messily. The aliens get annihilated anyway. One reason John Perry gets promoted quickly is because he realises what the CDF top brass haven't, that one race's principal reason for fighting is not economic but religious... Any comparisons with America's current foes are of course coincidental.

Moral reservations aside, the book is exciting, written well enough to induce a genuine sense of peril for the well-drawn characters, and has a hopeful if not yet happy ending for Perry when he meets someone from his past who may end up in his future.

### Allen Steele – *Coyote*

Reviewed by Russell Chambers

Orbit, London, 2005, 560pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-367-8

By the year 2070, the United States has become transformed, becoming so mired in politics and repression that the ideals it was based on have been twisted unrecognisably. The elite, hoping for an even better life, have built a ship called *The Alabama*, and imprisoned the scientists who created it with the other political prisoners. This does not sit well with Captain Robert E. Lee, who, with a band of like-minded people, steals the ship and takes the prisoners and a few guards with them. In cold sleep, they hurtle through space, to a new planet called Coyote, where they will try and establish a new life for themselves, despite the hardships they face along the way, and on the planet itself.

*Coyote* is a series of short stories, each chapter was originally published in *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. Each part is its own solid story, a puzzle piece adding to the larger work. Even though these parts tell a story with a beginning and end, they have themes woven through them that forge the story into a whole. Journals play an important

part, with the first written by Leslie Gillis, who lives a nightmare in the part called 'The Days Between'. Awakened three months after the departure, he finds himself completely alone on the ship, with no way to get back into cold sleep. Knowing that he'll die long before he sees any of his fellow passengers again, he goes mad, then, slowly, begins to create a life for himself, painting wall murals and writing a fantasy epic that will become almost a guidebook to the people who later get to read it. This part was incredibly creepy for me. If this happened, you'd be stuck, your life would encompass only what you could find for yourself in a relatively small confines; it is eerie and tragic. The idea of journals being important continues in 'Liberty Journals', where you see short events through the eyes of several different people. Wendy Gunther's voice is among them, introducing us to her writing in preparation for 'Across the Eastern Divide', which was pulled from her memoirs. These journals are sometimes recorded, sometimes written by hand, and each perspective gives us,

not only adventures, but a very complete and rounded story. We not only have the hard science and action that we expect, but also quiet times, where the action is interior as each person struggles to create some form of life for themselves.

This style of book-building gives Allen Steele a chance to play with different points of view; not just perspectives, but different ways of telling the story. Sometimes you have first person, sometimes you have second person omniscient. The first chapter of the book is a combination of espionage and action story, as Lee and his crew fight to prepare the dissidents for the flight without alerting the authorities to their doings. Then the next story is about the

man who was awakened early, making the book very quiet, very interior. There are so many different flavours to the stories; exploration tales, family dramas, and it all works well because they are separate pieces. *Coyote* makes for a very full reading experience, driven by characters who are very sympathetic and interesting, as well as plotting that takes the idea of colonization and pushes it a bit further, making it feel more plausible than ever before.

I did enjoy *Coyote* immensely. I will say that it reads smoothly and perfectly, and if you aren't in the habit of looking at the copyright page (or reading reviews) you'd never know it was a fix-up.

## Harry Turtledove – *Curious Notions*

Reviewed by Penny Hill

Tor, 2004, pp272, \$23.95, ISBN 0 765 30694 8

*Curious Notions* is the second book in Harry Turtledove's YA series *Crosstime Traffic* (the first, *Gumpowder Empire*, I reviewed in *Vector* 235). The central premise of a future in which people can travel across into alternate futures to obtain resources that have become scarce due to overpopulation and industrialisation were carefully explained in the first volume and so are just touched upon in the opening pages here as the main adventure begins. Our protagonist Paul and his father are sent into a future in which Germany won the first World War. As a consequence there was no Hitler and no Holocaust – however the German Empire still rules the world as a dictatorship, with America very definitely a subject nation.

It would be easy to dismiss this as yet another alternate history in which arrogant Germans are in charge, but the cliché is at least modified through making it a change to the outcome of World War One, instead of the more popular 'Hitler wins World War Two' scenario. This alternate reality has remained a little too static, given that we are supposed to be 150 years on from the German invasion of the USA in 1956 – would any society have remained stable enough to continue to dominate in this way?

I found the family characterisation a little off-putting. From the home timeline, it is just Paul and his father – there is no mention of his mother, not even an explanation for her absence. We see a lot of Paul and his father arguing in that irritating 'teenager with parent' way; however, neither of them are particularly sympathetic in these scenes. Paul does appear to grow up a little through the novel, whereas I'm not sure how much his father does.

The other half of the split narrative is from the viewpoint of Lucy Woo, a native of the alternate timeline. The contrast between her lifestyle and expectations and Paul's forms a good window into this alternate world. As well as embodying a convincing depiction of borderline poverty, we can see the noticeable difference between Paul and Lucy in their attitudes to newspapers and bus rides. Lucy

sees the former as an avoidable luxury and the latter as an expensive necessity, whereas Paul doesn't notice the cost of the paper or the bus. The culture clash is nicely depicted through the importance of food throughout the novel. Lucy's mother provides sustaining if unexciting food on her tight budget whilst Paul experiences the contrast between the variety of 'Mom and Pop' burger bars, versus the blandness and consistency of expensive hotel menus and the standardised flavours of brands from his home timeline.

Money is specifically different, with 'our' future having experienced massive inflation which the Germans have managed to prevent (I imagine they also made the trains run on time). There are also language differences that are pointed out only to have Paul and Lucy manage to understand each other anyway. It would have been more convincing if Paul had misunderstood a few things, or made a few verbal faux pas on a par with his cosmopolitan ability with chopsticks. Paul's American cultural imperialism is challenged by this alternative timeline and he comes to see that his attitude looks the same as the arrogance of the Germans in charge. It is through this and through the comments about the rampant inflation and standardisation that consumer society is challenged a little in this novel. The glimpses we get of the home timeline through an outsider's eyes are enough to tell us that we wouldn't be entirely at home in this future world either.

The plot was fun and fulfilling and I was glad the resolution wasn't all rosy – there were hints of flaws and a sense that not everyone is going to be entirely happy with their bright new future. One tiny flaw in the otherwise convincing plot was that despite all the interest the shop generated with its unusual goods for sale, nobody seemed curious about the other half of their business – we know the bulk quantities of produce they purchased with their profits were shipped back to the home timeline but surely someone else would have been curious?

## Peter Watts – *Behemoth: Seppuku*

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Tor, New York, 2005, 303pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31172-0

As I explained in my review of the previous volume in Watt's excellent *Rifters* Trilogy (see *Vector* 239) the machinations of the modern publishing industry required

*Behemoth* to be split into two books to be economically viable! Therefore, the only readers with the slightest intention of seeking out this book will be fans of the

previous *Rifter* books who want to resume the story of Lenie Clark which was rudely interrupted at the end of *-Max*. Anyone who tackles this book without the benefit of, at least, digesting *Behemoth: f-Max* will be cast hopelessly adrift.

This volume focuses on Lenie Clark's search for redemption after causing a plague of biblical proportions by bringing the Behemoth bug up from the depths of the ocean in her search for vengeance. North America lies in ruins beneath the thumb of Achilles Desjardins, an omnipotent psychopath who controls international weapons systems. Digital monsters have taken Clarke's name, wreaking havoc throughout the decimated remnants of something that was once called the Internet. Governments have fallen across the globe; warlords and suicide cults rise from the ashes, pledging fealty to the Meltdown Madonna. Apart from that, everything's just dandy!

Lenie and her sociopathic partner, Ken Lubin, a vicious killer with his own agenda, emerge onto a devastated surface and find a doctor driving around a sophisticated

mobile surgery which they quickly co-opt so as to analyse samples of the new bug, *Seppuku*. Their purpose is to find out who is behind this threat to humanity and to prevent a new plague more potent even than Behemoth from further annihilating mankind.

This is the impressively gritty conclusion to an already pretty damned bleak series. *Behemoth: Seppuku* presents us with a series of warped characters all heading towards some kind of unpleasant comeuppance. I'm reminded of a phrase from Michael Palin: "That's black, that is. Even the white bits are black."

I was particularly taken with the author's portrayal of the mythic presence of Lenie Clarke on the internet: data dissemination creating its own unique electronic lifeform evolving and influencing opinion and behaviour from within the machine. We seem to be seeing the beginnings of such a process already with the electronic media creating 'personae' which seem more real than reality.

## Liz Williams – *Nine Layers of Sky*

Reviewed by Pete Young

For UK, London, 2005, 427pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0 330 41249 3

It has been established beyond reasonable doubt that a science fiction story is automatically improved by the inclusion of zeppelins. All science fiction writers instinctively know this, and they also know that zeppelins must never steal the show from what otherwise has to be a good story in the first place. Liz Williams appears to understand this well because *Nine Layers of Sky* is indeed a good, unusual and interesting story, with added zeppelins. While most of the other moving parts to this kind of mythological and science fictional fantasy are present and in full working order, I felt however that there are also one or two ingredients to this novel in smaller quantities than I would have liked.

Sometime in the 21st century Elena Irinovna, a former Soviet astrophysicist, is planning to escape Almaty and the urban wastelands of Kazakhstan and emigrate with her sister and mother to Canada. Her chance discovery of a mysterious artefact, one that can open portals to a parallel world, puts her in the sights of a mysterious group of people who require its retrieval. Ilya Muromyets, an eight hundred year old Russian living legend (a *bogatyri*, and currently addicted to heroin) is asked to do just that, though he does not bargain on the kind of journey it will be or where it will take him, physically and emotionally. Skirting the blurred edges of both our reality and the parallel world of Byelovodye are the mysterious creatures known as the *rusalki*, mythological sprites whose existence is more than just a Russian fable; their reputation is that of devils, though at the same time they keep Muromyets from succeeding in his long-held death wish. A strange kind of interplay between worlds is going on here, and in crossing into this parallel universe could Elena's aspirations and dreams be stolen from her, like those of so many others?

Williams obviously has much sympathy not just for her characters but for these hard-pressed people as a whole. The greyness of post-Soviet city life is something that

almost requires escape, and the breaches through reality from Earth to the parallel world of Byelovodye are not particularly welcome for those who already live there. Byelovodye itself is depicted as the Soviet dream writ large, an encapsulation of the Russian subconscious based on a functional kind of communism that so far has had the good fortune to evade confrontation with other political mindsets (well, this is escapist fiction, after all). *Nine Layers of Sky* is in this respect a direct blend of Soviet politics with Russian mythology, and the science fictional excursions are mostly outnumbered by the mythological ones. Hence it is something that 'new weird' fans would probably wish to include in their reading, though those readers may not find it quite weird enough. While there is an undercurrent that is identifiably and visibly strange – with much of the everyday scenery serving as the backdrop to the emerging drama of Elena and Ilya – it is still a gritty and realistic story and none the worse for its lesser, more everyday dramas. Williams gives much attention to the detail of Russian and Kazakh life such that the novel could also read as a kind of science fictional *Lonely Planet* travelogue: putting the reader within her chosen setting is something that Williams invariably succeeds at. A small map of the central Asian territory covered here would also have been a useful addition in the endpapers.

In spite of these obvious successes it has to be said that Williams is capable of greater complexity and entanglement of her characters than is on show here. Their inner conflicts seem somehow less interactive with each other than one could expect, and Elena and Ilya are therefore less causative in the development of the plot itself (an interplay Williams has excelled at in previous novels), their fate here seeming somehow predetermined. Those zeppelins, meanwhile, arrive and depart, their function within the story, other than as a kind of visual reference point, is left open-ended.

*Nine Layers* is nevertheless an enjoyable and informative book, sometimes difficult to pin down and one in which the journey is possibly more important than the

destination. As it stands, while clearly being self-contained it still might feel unfinished, and a sequel would certainly be worthwhile.

**Chelsea Quinn Yarbro – *Dark of The Sun***

Tor, New York, 2004, 460pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31102-X

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

*Dark of The Sun* is something like Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's seventeenth novel featuring the vampire Saint-Germain. Having not read any of the previous sixteen books, I was slightly concerned that I might be missing a significant amount of back story. This, at least, does not appear to be an issue. Apart from a couple of references to a character that died before the events of the current novel there is nothing to indicate that a new reader is missing anything. The story is set in sixth century China. Zangi-Ragozh has been living in Yang-Chau, a city on the east coast, for some time and making a (very successful) living as a merchant. This is at a time when foreigners in China are treated with enormous suspicion and frequently have to put up with arbitrary laws and taxes prejudiced against them. After being summoned to appear before the Emperor of one of the middle kingdoms, he sets out west with his noble and loyal assistant. This journey is set against a backdrop of a natural disaster on a global scale. Krakatoa erupted with great force in 535 CE, resulting in tsunami initially, and for an extended period sulphur clouds and debris in the atmosphere blocking out the sun for some years and causing famines across much of Asia. A lengthy introduction helpfully explains much of this history and the politics of China at the time.

Zangi-Ragozh begins his journey shortly after this event, and so the reactions of those he meets en route are often driven by desperation and hunger. The normal reactions he would expect, being a foreigner, are exacerbated by their dire situation. Fairly early in his journey he has all his possessions and most of his entourage confiscated and he decides to change his journey and head back to his home ground in the Carpathian Mountains to see out the emergency. So what we have is a road novel with the

noble vampire and his noble ghoul, both of great age, making their way across a hostile and frightened Asia and into Europe. My main issue with the book has to be with the character of Zangi-Ragozh himself. He is clearly a reaction against vampires portrayed as evil. This is all well and good, and it is interesting to see a vampire as a fully rounded character, but he comes across as noble and upstanding almost to the point of tedium. He also seemed to have an almost inexhaustible supply of currency, in spite of having had his possessions confiscated early on in the proceedings.

As the story of the journey unfolds, the chapters are all book-ended with letters from and to various people. These are a mixture of official edicts, personal letters and business communications. Between them, they do an excellent job of describing the world and the way that it has been affected by the volcanic explosion and its aftermath. These I found fascinating. Unfortunately they proved to be a good deal more interesting than the story itself.

There is nothing particularly wrong with this book, it is well written and the characters are all well drawn, though I did not find them as absorbing as I would have liked. It paints a picture of the world in the grip of a disaster which on occasion can be quite affecting. I am quite sure that those who are already fans of the series will buy and enjoy it and it is a good deal better than most of the long-running series I've encountered. There is also nothing particularly special about it, and certainly nothing that would make want to read the previous books. I just got the distinct feeling with Zangi-Ragozh that life's hard and then you don't die.



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*.

**Steve Aylett – *Karloff's Circus***

Gollancz, London, 2005, 128pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07625-9

Fourth and final(?) volume in the *Accomplice Books* is now available in paperback. Claire Brialey has covered the whole of the series with *Karloff's Circus* reviewed in *Vector* 235. Claire described many things in Aylett's books as being "disconcerting, including the narrative structure, the

syntax, and the content" and means this as a compliment! She also suggests that you need to be "under the influence of mind-altering substances like innovative language, speculative fiction, and a sideways perception on reality. Aylett's writing remains bizarre, baffling and brilliant". This book will make no sense at all unless you start with the first in the series, *Only an Alligator* (though it may not help).

**Ashok K. Banker – *Armies of Hanuman* ☐**

Orbit, London, 2005, 420pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-329-5

The fourth volume in Banker's series based upon the classical Indian epic *The Ramayana*, with the previous volumes in the series all reviewed very favorably by the late K.V. Bailey (in *Vector* 229, 232 and 237). Despite KVB's enthusiasm, I confess I found the first, *Prince of Ayodhya*, hard going and rather long-winded. The three earlier volumes have been republished along with *Armies of Hanuman* in matching editions with new artwork using a classical Indian theme – very appealing.

**K. J. Bishop – *The Etched City***

Tor UK, London, 2005, 467pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-42710-5

This is a puzzling book. It's been critically lauded by many luminaries, including Michael Moorcock in *The Guardian*, and Bishop is on the shortlist for this year's John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. And yet I found it utterly pointless: some of the writing is good and it is atmospheric, but nothing actually happens! Strangely, about the only other person who has been less than overwhelmed was Sue Thomason when she reviewed the book in *Vector* 235 describing it as a "decadent, Symbolist, surreal Western" concluding that the "descriptions are thick, rich, heavy; they are basically the *point* of this book. It's like trying to eat a whole cheesecake in one go. Recommended for those with jaded palates; others may end up feeling a bit sick". As it's now out in paperback you can try it yourself to see who's right.

**Claire Bott – *Time Hunter: The Clockwork Woman***

Telos Publishing, Tolworth, 2003, 85pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-39-1

**John Paul Catton – *Time Hunter: Kitsune***

Telos Publishing, Tolworth, 2004, 112pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-41-3

**George Mann – *Time Hunter: The Severed Man***

Telos Publishing, Tolworth, 2004, 137pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-43-X

The third, fourth and fifth novellas in Telos's ongoing *Time Hunter* series (a sort of spin-off from their excellent *Dr Who* novellas) described as "part mystery, part detective story, part dark fantasy, part science fiction ... original adventures in time and space". The third, *The Clockwork Woman*, is set in the nineteenth century with our heroes Honoré and Emily imprisoned by a celebrated inventor and his humanoid automaton. In *Kitsune* Honoré and Emily find themselves in Kyoto in 2020 and a haunted funhouse with much to hide. And in *The Severed Man*, they are back in England with a mystery involving a series of murders, an angel and a small boy running around 50s London. All of which sound quite fascinating.

**Ramsey Campbell – *The Overnight***

Tor, New York, 2005, 400pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31299-9

Very nice American hardback edition of this novel first published by PS Publishing in the UK last year. The UK edition of this horror story set around a bookshop on a remote retail park was reviewed in *Vector* 238 by Simon Morden who found much to praise, with "the writing superb, the characters solid, the set-up faultless" but "it just failed to frighten me which, for a ghost story, adds up to a bit of a problem".

**Cory Doctorow – *Eastern Standard Tribe***

Tor, New York, 2005, 224pp, \$12.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-31045-7

A Recommended Read from *Vector* 236, where it was reviewed by Gary Wilkinson, is now out in paperback. Set in the very near future, *The Eastern Standard Tribe* of the title is a group of like-minded individuals who live along the East coast of America, who are engaged in a cold war with the Greenwich Mean Tribe – a cold war over time itself as both groups are online communities where the correct time zone is vital. Gary found this a wonderful book, and very, very funny. Strongly recommended (and not just to net-heads).

**Laurell K. Hamilton – *Incubus Dreams***

Orbit, London, 2004, 658pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 1-84149-316-3

**Laurell K. Hamilton – *Seduced by Midnight* ☐**

Bantam, London, 2005, 506pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-553-81632-2

*Incubus Dreams* is the twelfth novel to feature Anita Blake, Vampire hunter so there is probably little I can do here to persuade anyone unfamiliar with this increasingly erotic series to read this book – instead you should go back and start with the first, *Guilty Pleasures*. The series really is one of those guilty pleasures; it's not particularly well written – just count the number of Nike-swooshes – or especially original (see my comments on Tanya Huff's *Vikki Nelson* books in *Vector* 240). What it is, though, is just great fun and recommended to any *Buffy* fan. Oh, for those of us who have been keeping up, this one has Anita investigating a vampire serial killer preying on strippers (which does rather set the tone for the series).

*Seduced by Midnight*, however, is not part of the *Anita Blake* series but is the third book featuring the Private Investigator Meredith Gentry, at least that's what she is known as in Los Angeles – others know her as Princess Merry, heir to the throne of Fairy. Despite this being a very appealing set-up I've still not made a start on the series (which has had some very variable reviews). As with the *Anita Blake* series I doubt that this is the best place to begin: better to go back to *A Kiss of Shadows* and *A Caress of Twilight* (now where is my copy of *A Kiss of Shadows*?).

**Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson – *Dune: The Battle of Corrin***

Hodder &amp; Stoughton, London, 2005, 580pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-340-82338-0

Paperback edition of the third volume of the *Legends of Dune* series. So you are going to have read the others (and probably the *Prelude to Dune* series by the same authors as well) and be eagerly awaiting this. Or not.

**Tom Holt – *Earth, Air, Fire and Custard* ☐**

Orbit, London, 2005, 410pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-281-7,

**Tom Holt – *In Your Dreams***

Orbit, London, 2005, 474pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-219-1

*Earth, Air, Fire and Custard* (yes that's really the title) is Holt's third book to feature the adventures (not my word) of Paul Carpenter as he graduates from office junior to clerk in the diabolic firm of J. W. Wells, which was chronicled in the earlier books *The Portable Door* and *In Your Dreams* (which is now available in paperback). Attentive readers will by now be very clear on my views of 'comic' fantasy – which these claim to be – so I'll stop now.

**David Langford – *The Space Eater***

Cosmos Books, Holicong, 2004, 229pp, \$17.95, t/p, ISBN 1-930997-79-5  
A return to print for this 1982 novel for which the text has been slightly corrected (only slightly mind, says Mr. Langford) and has a new (rather impressive) cover by David A. Hardy (which Mr. Langford actually likes). Described as a high-tension hard sf thriller, this is great stuff and recommended to all.

**Ken MacLeod – *Newton's Wake***

Orbit, London, 2005, 369pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-224-8  
MacLeod's first stand-alone novel now arrives in paperback trailing a string of good reviews, a *Vector* Recommended Read selection and a nomination for the 2004 BSFA Novel Award. A far(ish)-future space opera taking place after the Hard Rapture – a singularity event as a consequence of AI sentience – the book was reviewed by Pete Young in *Vector* 235 who said "on this form it's hard to see how MacLeod can put a foot wrong". I'm not quite as impressed as, although it's a good book, I found it curiously unmemorable.

**Kevan Manwaring – *The Long Woman***

Awen Publications, Bath, 2004, 243pp £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-9546137-5-9  
The first novel from a small press that specialises in Celtic-themed poetry and magical verse, Kevan Manwaring's novel is an exploration of the sacred landscapes of the past and the secret landscapes of the soul. Hardly surprising for a writer who has been awarded the Bardic Chair of Bath for his epic poetry. Despite displaying much ambitious knowledge of the supernatural and ancient the plot never manages to shake off the limiting aura of local writing group that hangs over it. Worth a look for those enamoured of rambling, real ale, folk music and the mystical notion of celebrating place (rather than character or plot development).  
(Tom Hunter)

**Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough – *Acorna's Triumph***

Corgi, London, 2005, 382pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-552-15275-7  
Publication of the seventh book in the *Acorna* series, the first two of which McCaffrey wrote with Margaret Ball (the others are all with Scarborough). Here *Acorna* does more of the same and needs to stop the alien menace once and for all (which may actually happen as this is apparently the last in the series, but we've heard that before...).

**Ian McDonald – *River of Gods***

Pocket Books, London, 2005, 583pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7434-0400-9  
Winner of the BSFA Novel Award 2004, top of the *Vector* Reviewers Poll 2004 (see last issue), on the shortlist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award and now shortlisted for the Hugo Novel Award (on an all-star British shortlist – details in *Matrix*). Do I really need to say anything more about this book (other than to say it's now available in a splendid paperback edition)? Just in case anyone does want to know more, I reviewed it in full in *Vector* 237, where I concluded that McDonald "truly captures the marvellous, chaotic energy of India, which when melded with such an imaginative and original storyline has produced one of the most captivating and enjoyable books of the year". And, for a change, others agree.

**Richard Morgan – *Market Forces***

Gollancz, London, 2004, 470pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07584-8  
It's been a long wait for the mass-market edition of Morgan's third novel – the hardback was published at the start of 2004 – but if you haven't caught up with the author this is a good place to start, being a stand-alone novel. In Morgan's near-future England war has become a commodity, with large corporations investing in global conflict. Mixing (and acknowledging) *Mad Max* and *Rollerball*, Morgan creates a bleak but guiltily exhilarating vision as he demolishes – literally – the greed and corruption of the corporations. This has much more in common with his debut novel, *Altered Carbon*, than the disappointing *Broken Angels*. I reviewed this very favourably in *Vector* 234 and it has now been short-listed for the 2004 Arthur C. Clarke Award (which is a bit of a surprise).

**Larry Niven – *Ringworld's Children***

Orbit, London, 2005, 355pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-222-1

**Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle – *Burning Tower***

Orbit, London, 2005, 430pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-072-5

*Ringworld's Children* is the fourth volume in Niven's *Ringworld* series, which started way back in 1970. Andrew Adams, in *Vector* 237, found this much better than its predecessor, *The Ringworld Throne* (from 1996) but noted that it was essential to have read all the others before attempting this. Andrew was pleasantly surprised to find that "the plot was driven by character rather than by technology" and that the series is "a fun place to visit, although I wouldn't want to live there". *Burning Tower* is very different, having a traditional fantasy setting, but is also a belated sequel, in this case to *The Burning City* from 2000, which was found to be a welcome change from the standard fantasy-fare (*Vector* 212).

**Terry Pratchett – *The Last Hero***

Gollancz, London, 2004, 176pp, £6.99, t/p, 0-575-07377-2  
A new softback edition of this story by Terry Pratchett, lavishly illustrated by Paul Kidby, or as the publicity describes it: "a *Discworld* novel – but with pictures" (which is a remarkable landmark for advertising given that's precisely what it is). Beautifully produced with maps, character sketches, Leonardo da Vinci pastiches and even one based on Joseph Wright of Derby's magnificent *A Philosopher Lecturing with a Mechanical Planetary* (p116-117). This claims to have "16 all-new illustrations". The story concerns the ancient Cohen the Barbarian and his very old friends setting out on one final quest: to climb the highest mountain in *Discworld* and meet his gods. OK, if you're a *Discworld* fan then you are going to want this.

**Kim Stanley Robinson – *Forty Signs of Rain***

HarperCollins, London, 2005, 356pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-714887-7

Paperback edition of this BSFA Novel Award 2004 nominated book which was reviewed in full by Stuart Carter in *Vector* 236, where it was also a Recommended Read. Clearly this book has a lot of keen supporters – but I'm not one of them. I usually concur with Stuart (who finally persuaded me to start *Quicksilver* despite it being as thick as a brick) but here we disagree. Stuart found it "a fascinating and very beautiful short novel almost solely

about 'not much'. I found the 'not much' to be more like 'not anything'. There's clearly something here that I'm not connecting with, as many of the subjects – climate change, India, climbing – are ones I'm interested in. But I found nothing to engage with (even the fate of our planet came over as just another day at the office) which I suspect results from the lack of engagement or empathy with the central characters. And I'm confused as to why it's on the BSFA shortlist: when with my very liberal definition of sf I can't recognise any here. Think I better stop here...

#### Rudy Rucker – *Frek and the Elixir*

Tor, New York, 2005, 480pp, \$14.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-31059-7

Paperback of this rather strange and quirky novel reviewed by Gary Wilkinson in *Vector* 237. He found this a frustrating book, not knowing if it wanted to be YA or adult fiction and at times being unbelievably twee. The lead character, Frek, and his family were appealing but the novel just did not work for him.

#### Geoff Ryman – *Was*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 456pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07669-0

Fantasy Masterwork 43 is Ryman's reinterpretation of the myths and legends of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, centred around three characters: Dorothy (but not necessarily that Dorothy) in the 1870s, Frances in the 1920s and Jonathan in the 1950s. This is Ryman, so if you don't have this then you really need a copy.

#### E. Rose Sabin – *When the Beast Ravens*

Tor, New York, 2005, 288pp, \$23.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30858-4

Third in a YA series of books which started with *A School for Sorcery*, followed by *A Perilous Power* all based around the Leslie Simonton School for the Magically Gifted (so nothing to do with Hogwarts then?). This volume focuses on Gray Becq, who first appeared in *A School for Sorcery*. Elizabeth A. Billinger reviewed *A Perilous Power* in *Vector* 236 finding that this was the sort of fantasy that "comes with turgid writing style and nary a spark of originality". And that's the start of the review – it's all downhill from there. This volume looks just the same – although this one has the addition of an incomprehensible title (yes, *When the Beast Ravens* is correct).

#### Dan Simmons – *The Hyperion Omnibus*

Gollancz, London, 2004, 779pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07626-7

Bringing together the first two *Hyperion* novels, *Hyperion* from 1989 and *The Fall of Hyperion* from 1990: which is how they should always have been read since this is effectively one story, although each book has a very individual feel. One of the true masterworks of sf, being wide-screen space opera of the best kind, with a deeply human heart. The story continues in another pair of books, *Endymion* and *The Rise of Endymion*, for which Gollancz are also due to publish an omnibus edition. If I was compiling a list of my top-ten sf books there is no doubt about including this. If you have not read these before then do so. Now.

#### Dan Simmons – *Song of Kali*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 311pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07659-3

And also back into print, as Fantasy Masterwork 44, is Simmons's first novel, which won the World Fantasy Novel

in 1986. Set mostly in Calcutta, this is the story of an American writer commissioned to investigate the mysterious reappearance of a thought-to-be-dead Indian poet. The horror and fantasy elements are subtly underplayed to make this appear almost a mainstream examination of one man's experience of Indian society, with a fascinating description of late seventies Calcutta. Despite the shocking ending not being fully worked out, this is highly recommended and if you have read, or are intending to read, McDonald's *River of Gods* this will form an absorbing counterpart to it.

#### Martin Sketchley – *The Affinity Trap*

Pocket Books, London, 2005, 306pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7434-6848-1

Paperback edition of Sketchley's debut novel, being space opera with extra alien sex. Reviewed in *Vector* 235 by Chris Hill who was somewhat disappointed with it, finding it a book of two parts which were not well integrated where the "ruthlessness and coldness of the main character made it difficult to empathise". He did want to know more about the background to the society, and this may now be forthcoming as the second volume of the *Structure* series, *The Destiny Mask*, has now been published.

#### Steve Sneyd – *Opening the Ellen Files*

#### Jimmie Dickie – *A Dark Horse Fantasy*

Hilltop Press, Huddersfield, 2004, 16pp, £1.75, chapbook, ISBN 0-905262-33-6

The *Ellen Files* reprints four versions of the story of Burd (an unmarried maiden) Ellen from Robert Jamieson's collection *Popular Ballads and Songs of Tradition, Manuscript and Scarce Editions* (Edinburgh, 1806). In the best-known version of the tale, Ellen and her three brothers, children of Arthur and Guinevere, are playing ball when one of them kicks the ball over a church. Ellen goes to fetch the ball but unluckily goes widdershins around the church and fails to return. The brothers, starting with the eldest, go in search but the older two never return. The youngest, Childe (adolescent, not yet ready for knighthood) Rowland then sets out. Understandably wary, he takes the precaution of killing everyone he meets on the way before finally reaching the domain of the Elf King where he discovers his brothers dead and Ellen imprisoned (pregnant, or a young mother in other versions). He forces the Elf King to free his sister and resurrect his brothers. The tale, which inspired Browning's poem *Childe Roland*, has also been used by several sf/fantasy writers, notably Alan Garner's *Elidor*, Samantha Lee's *Child Rolande*, and Stephen King's *Dark Tower* sequence.

In Dickie's *Dark Horse Fantasy* a crippled girl, abused and sent to work as a scullery maid, escapes on a wild night-time ride. Dream, fantasy or metaphor, the poem's supernatural imagery is rooted in the ballads and folk tales of Dickie's native Scotland.

(Available from Hilltop Press, 4 Nowell Place, Almondbury, Huddersfield HD5 8PB) (Steve Jeffery)

#### Charles Stross – *Singularity Sky*

Orbit, London, 2005, 389pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-334-1

"The day war was declared, a rain of telephones fell clattering to the cobblestones from the skies above Novy Petrograd" is how Stross's first British publication starts. And the rest of the book lives up to this classically brilliant

opening line. For all of the weirdness from The Festival and the playfulness of the political posturing, Stross never forgets that you need strong, believable characters, and fortunately he succeeds with both the humans and aliens. Pete Young was just as impressed as I when he reviewed it in Vector 236 and I'd agree that possibly the weakest part is the ending, being just a little too easy. But then the sequel, *Iron Sunrise*, has just been published and I know this will go straight to the top of my to-be-read pile. Strongly recommended.

**Sherri S. Tepper – *The Companions***

Gollancz, London, 2005, 452pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07628-3  
Cherith Baldry, reviewing the trade paperback edition in Vector 235, found that this book revisits some of the author's earlier concerns; care for the environment and the fragile balance of an ecology. The book was not without merit but did have some problems, notably the lack of development for the three alien races created here, but the strengths far outweighed this as it is "ultimately, a powerful and interesting book" and one which Cherith "wouldn't have wanted to miss". Given that Tepper is constantly an interesting author who is quite stunning when she gets the right tone, for example in *Gibbon's Decline and Fall*, then *The Companions* is likely to be well worth trying.

**Harry Turtledove – *Settling Accounts: Return Engagement***

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2005, 623pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-340-82686-X  
Rapid paperback edition of what is the start of another chapter in Turtledove's huge alternate history series chronicled in the *American Empire* and *Worldwar* book sets, making *Return Engagement* the eighth volume. Reviewed in Vector 239 by Colin Bird who describes this as working to a formula that will appeal to those who are already fans, but found it very difficult to engage with.

**Gary Westerfeld – *The Risen Empire*** 

Orbit, London, 2005, 626pp, £12.99, 1/p, ISBN 1-84149-371-6  
This is space opera in the classic tradition (and remember I

like space opera) with just the kind of gosh/wow elements you would expect: corrupt empire, sinister invading force, complex political shenanigans, uplifted machine intelligences, noble space Captain; you name it, it's here. This was originally published in two parts by Tor in America, *The Risen Empire* and *The Killing of Worlds*, both of which were reviewed by Stuart Carter (in Vector 230 and 234 respectively). The publication in one volume is to be applauded as Stuart found that this was just one book split in two (due to the economics of the book business in the States). Stuart loved it, finding it so much fun that "my critical faculties were utterly helpless in the face of Westerfeld's high-tension, jet-propelled narrative" and "it's just full of straightforward, quick-thinking good guys (and gals!) giving admirable displays of stoical heroics in the midst of savage destruction" which is a "pure mainline of entertainment that will make you feel 10 years old again". Read and enjoy.

**Kim Wilkins – *The Autumn Castle***

Gollancz, London, 2005, 463pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07648-8  
This first part of *The Europa Suite* fantasy series appears to be a departure for an Australian novelist previously known for her horror novels such as *Grimoire*, but when Iain Emsley reviewed this in Vector 237 he found horror elements fitting quite naturally alongside the fantasy ones. The story has a similar premise to Laurell K. Hamilton's *Meredith Gentry* novels, discussed earlier in this column, with a real world (artists' commune in Berlin) and fairy world (the land of Ewigkreis) and revolving around the pairing of Christine (a struggling artist) and Mayfridh (the fairy queen). Iain was impressed, finding that Wilkins had "taken the essence of the fairy tale and renewed it in her own vision in what rates as her most accomplished novel yet". Certainly worth giving a try.

**British Fantasy Round-Up**

**Sarah Ash – *Prisoner of Ironsea Tower***

Bantam, London, 2004, 703pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-553-81471-0  
Second volume of *The Tears of Artamon* fantasy trilogy, following the *Lord of Snow and Shadows*. Despite this sounding just like any other traditional fantasy trilogy Lynne Bispham (Vector 236) found it to be far superior to most of what's published today, making it "a real page-turner right up to the last".

**Kristen Britain – *First Rider's Call***

Pocket Books, London, 2005, 639pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-7434-0894-2  
Sequel to *Green Rider* now out in paperback and another routine, average series (according to Lesley Hatch in Vector 232).

**Chris Bunch – *The Last Battle***

Orbit, London, 2005, 326pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-223-X  
This may appear to be just more of the same old fantasy clichés but Mark Greener is clear that the *Dragonmaster* trilogy, of which *The Last Battle* is the concluding volume,

is amongst the greatest fantasy books ever written. He does not make that claim lightly, arguing that they are the fantasy equivalent of Haldeman's *The Forever War*, and that they get better with re-reading. Mark reviewed this volume in full in Vector 239 where it was awarded a Recommended Read citation. Given the amount of routine fantasy around – just look at the rest of this column – a recommendation like this should not be ignored.

**David and Leigh Eddings – *The Elder Gods***

Voyager, London, 2004, 424pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-715760-6  
Book one of the four-volume *Dreamers* series reviewed by Vikki Lee in Vector 231. Typical fantasy fare described as being "written with all the charm and accessibility of their previous books, there really isn't anything new in here". Which says it all.

**Steven Erikson – *Midnight Tides***

Bantam, London, 2005, 940pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-553-81314-5  
Fifth chapter in the ten-volume *Malazan Book of the Fallen*

series (which at this rate will come in at close to 10,000 pages), a series which has gained high praise from some quarters.

**David Farland – *The Lair of Bones***

Pocket Books, London, 2005, 429pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-671-02951-7  
Fourth volume of *The Runelords* series, now out in paperback. No end in sight as a fifth volume has been announced and there is even a movie in development (which could mean anything – see [www.runelords.com](http://www.runelords.com) for more information).

**Raymond E. Feist – *King of Foxes***

Voyager, London, 2005, 374pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-648358-5  
Out in June is the paperback edition of the second volume of Feist's *Conclave of Shadows* series, a series that Vikki Lee suspects is going to be very, very average. Which is a shame as Feist's first novel, *Magician*, is one of my favourite fantasy works (but then again I didn't like the second volume).

**Terry Goodkind – *Chainfire***

HarperCollins, London, 2005, 667pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-00-714560-8  
Ninth (yes, ninth) volume in the ongoing *Sword of True* series.

**Elizabeth A Lynn – *Dragon's Treasure***

Tor UK, London, 2005, 407pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-35558-9  
Belated sequel to *Dragon's Winter* (published in 1998), which Vikki Lee was not impressed by, finding it a "cold book, devoid of any semblance of human warmth" (*Vector* 201). May have warmed up by now though?

**Patrick McCormack – *The Last Companion***

Robinson, London, 2005, 401pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84529-150-6  
Third volume in the *Albion* series, this is yet another

reinterpretation of the legends surrounding King Arthur.

**John Marco – *The Devil's Armour***

Gollancz, London, 2005, 746pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07629-1  
More classic fantasy, this is the sequel to *The Eyes Of God*, which Alan Fraser was not wholly convinced about, though he gamely gave this volume a try (*Vector* 236). Unsurprisingly you have to have read the first volume, and by the end of *The Devil's Armour* there is little resolution, so it's clear that a third volume is planned. The surprise here is that this volume is a much better book than the first with "an engrossing plot that's hard to predict, a couple of really nasty villains, and a muscular page-turning writing style". So that is a surprise.

**Stan Nicholls – *Quicksilver Zenith***

Voyager, London, 2005, 327pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-714152-1  
An author who managed with his earlier *Orcs* trilogy to appeal to both regular and occasional readers of fantasy, turning the genre around by setting the series from the bad guys' perspective, is now on the middle volume of a more conventional fantasy trilogy. Estelle Roberts reviewed *Quicksilver Zenith* in *Vector* 239 and found that yes, it was more conventional but she did enjoy it more than its predecessor, and is looking forward to the conclusion. So, still better than many in the genre.

**Sean Russell – *The Shadow Road***

Orbit, London, 2005, 438pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-191-8  
Third and final volume in Russell's *The Swain's War* trilogy, another series that Vikki Lee found enjoyable but nothing new.

**American Fantasy Round-Up**

**Jacqueline Carey – *Banewreaker***

Tor, New York, 2005, 432pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30521-6

I have to admit that I only got a few pages into this novel before I could go no further. The prose style is tedious beyond belief and the book appears to be written in a stylistic manner which really does not work. The plot, while admittedly sounding reasonably interesting – with gods waging war for control of the universe, while humans are their pawns – still wasn't enough to keep me reading. Others will no doubt disagree. (Estelle Roberts)

**David B. Coe – *Bonds of Vengeance***

Tor, New York, 2005, 416pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-87809-5

**Cecilia Dart-Thornton – *The Iron Tree***

Tor, New York, 2005, 400pp, £24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31205-0

**Sara Douglas – *The Wounded Hawk***

Tor, New York, 2005, 528pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30363-9

**David Drake – *Master of the Cauldron***

Tor, New York, 2004, 432pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-87496-0

**Jennifer Fallon – *Medalon***

Tor, New York, 2004, 500pp, \$7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-765-34866-7

**Jane Lindskold – *Wolf Captured***

Tor, New York, 2004, 528pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30936-X

**L. E. Modesitt – *Ordermaster***

Tor, New York, 2005, 480pp, \$27.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31213-1

**Margaret Weis – *The Dragon's Son***

Tor, New York, 2003, 384pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30469-4

**Gene Wolf – *The Knight***

Tor, New York, 2005, 432pp, \$14.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-31348-0,

**John C. Wright – *Mists of Everness***

Tor, New York, 2005, 336pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31333-2

Another selection of recently published fantasy works from across the Atlantic, most of which are mid or later volumes in ongoing series (and I'm not going to mention the artwork this time).

Of these, there are two that I'd like to expand upon, one good and one not so. The 'good' is the trade paperback edition of Gene Wolfe's *The Knight*, the first of an admirably short two-volume series (concluding with *The Wizard*). Niall Harrison has reviewed both volumes (in *Vector* 235 and 240 respectively) and this is again 'one-book-split-in-two' but one which is very, very interesting indeed. Niall concluded that they are "satisfying and frustrating: for a grand adventure tale, the climax is appropriately thrilling; for a hero's journey it is appropriately soul-testing; and for a literary puzzle, it is appropriately unifying". There is a 'but' to this as, for "all its

elegance, intelligence, and literary virtuosity it is a novel that feels, in some ways, like an evolutionary dead end". A fascinating contradiction which should convince anyone interested in the fantasy genre to read it.

The second novel I want to expand on is John C. Wright's *Mists of Everness*, the new book in the *Chronicles of Everness* (so who knows how many more there are), following on from *The Last Guardian of Everness* which was reviewed in *Vector 239*. Wright is another author that Sue Thomason and I agree on (see the comments about K.J.

Bishop above): when she reviewed *The Last Guardian of Everness* she straightaway found that Wright knows his fantasy clichés with, in the first few pages, "a Portentous Prophecy, a poem with faulty scansion, incorrect/inconsistent use of thee/thou, weird verbs and a lot of name-dropping". Her opinion didn't improve, finding the book's political viewpoint really scary and concluding with "be very afraid". Not a good sign. So, one to read and one to avoid.

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**Reviewer's Key:** AF – Alan Fraser; CB1 – Cherith Baldry; CB2 – Colin Bird; CH – Chris Hill; DMB – Dave M. Roberts; ER – Estelle Roberts; JN – John Newsinger; LB – Lynne Bispham; LH – Lesley Hatch; LJH – L.J. Hurst; MM – Martin McGrath; P – Particle; PB – Paul Bateman; PH – Penny Hill; PY – Pete Young; RC – Russell Chambers; SC – Stuart Carter; SJ – Steve Jeffery; SM – Simon Morden; TH – Tom Hunter.