

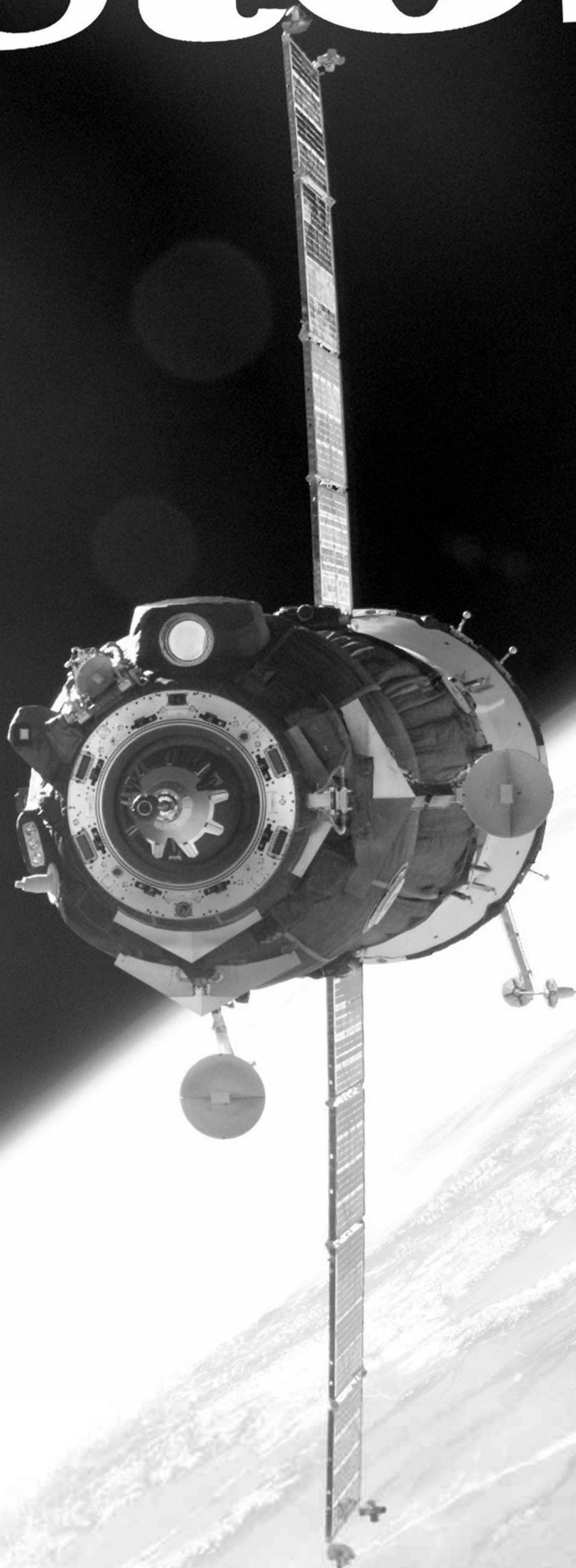
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of the BSFA

#243 Sept/Oct 2005

# Vector

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## Contents

<b>The View from the Armadillo</b> Editorial by Andrew M. Butler	3
<b>ΨΦ</b> Letters to Vector	3
<b>From Bromley to Beerlight – and Beyond</b> Steve Aylett interviewed by Claire Brialey	4
<b>Thanos as Gnostic Magus: Marvel Comics and Gnostic Cosmology</b> by John F. Keane	8
<b>Trujillo Revisited</b> Niall Harrison gives a broader appreciation of Lucius Shepard's short story collection.	12
<b>First Impressions</b> Book Reviews edited by Paul N. Billinger	18

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## Vector

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## Editorial

### The View from the Armadillo

There is a strange sense of coming full circle. Back in the summer of 1995 there was a spectre of a British Worldcon, and Tony Cullen, Gary Dalkin and myself were due to take over as editors of *Vector* from Catie Cary. I will say more about this next time.

This summer there was again a looming British Worldcon, made more daunting by the two deadlines that were pressing: two or three years ago I had suggested to the Science Fiction Foundation that we edit a collection of essays on the work of Christopher Priest, as he was to be a guest of honour there, and sometime around then we had also decided to put together a collection of M. John Harrison's non-fiction with some appreciations of his work. I acquired a co-editor, we formulated a call for papers, we sent it out to the world, and settled back with a plan, whilst Michelle Reid and Mark Bould got to work gathering together materials for the Harrison collection. We settled back into a schedule.

Of course, life has a habit of intervening, and that two years with plenty of slack schedule turned once more into a race against the clock. Everything always takes longer than you anticipate, even when – especially when – you anticipate it will take longer. But we got there, by the skin of our teeth, thanks to a lot of hard work by a number of people. It is with no thought of personal gain – all monies are going to the Science Fiction Foundation – that I thoroughly recommend you check out *Christopher Priest: The Interaction and Paratextual Games: Critical Writings on and by M. John Harrison*. There is much to chew on there, on (and by) two of the most interesting talents in British science fiction – indeed, in British fiction.

It was nevertheless with some dread that I approached another bloody British Worldcon. There'd been another unexpected intervention in what I wish would pretend to be a predictable life, and the stress of that along with the printing brinksmanship we'd engaged in was hardly going to be soothed by a Worldcon. I had too many scars from the last one – in particular being on a panel in one of the infamous topless programme rooms. You know you are in trouble when you speak into a microphone and even you can't hear yourself. Not to mention the fact that I felt distinctly unqualified to talk about "alternative fandom". And Glasgow, despite being a fair city, is a very long way away from Canterbury.

This time the rooms had roofs, and some of them even had microphones. Some people had trouble with officious security who were policing room capacity and the carriage of drinks, but despite two of my panels being overfull – programming as fire hazard – I didn't experience any of this. I can't help but feel I was surplus to requirements on a panel about drug-based and -themed

sf other than that written by Philip K. Dick; it was one of those panels where we talked past rather than to each other. Nor was the Green Room in the Moat House – actually more of a Green Corridor given its positioning – particularly conducive to relaxed pre-preparation for panels.

Meanwhile in the dealers' room – which seemed both bigger and fuller in 1995 – the BSFA tombola continued to flout all known reason and raise money for our coffers. We revamped it slightly – using playing cards rather than raffle tickets – but still people continued to take their chances. "You might win five books. If you're really lucky, you might just win one..." We also had a line in reduced-to-clear interaction t-shirts ("At prices like these, buy them and don't bother to do any laundry") and unbreakable mugs. Well, allegedly unbreakable. We failed to reckon with a couple of teenagers who managed it, but we suspect they found power tools somewhere.

I did get out to see some of Glasgow in the interstices, although the gallery of modern art was less interesting this time round. I took my masculinity in my hands and had tea (or at least lunch) in a replica Willow Tea Rooms, as Mackintosh threatens to engulf all of Glasgow. Donald Dewar has turned very green since I was in Glasgow in 2004, and they've clearly given up replacing his glasses. He stands there outside the Buchanan Galleries, squinting.

My hotel – I'd failed to get a place at the one I usually stop at through prevarication – turned out to be rather interesting. Despite an elegant lobby, it appears to be used as some kind of halfway house, although my co-tenants were fine as long as they got their methadone. One or two of the other residents looked a little startled at breakfast, mind. And there was also one of those pure comedy moments as I explained that I'd like my hotel key back now, please, and yes I know the occupier of the room is out because it's me and I'm back now. On the brighter side, we were a block down from a rather good Thai restaurant which we would not have discovered had I not been staying there. And the Glaswegian prostitutes are pretty friendly.

I guess we're not likely to see another bloody British Worldcon for the best part of a decade, and I get the impression that the function space still counts against the SECC site. That appears to leave Brighton as the only other conceivable site, unless Cardiff has an alternative to offer. But no doubt, a couple of years from now, a move will be made, and it will happen – though I cannot begin to guess as to where we will be in another decade. I'm not even convinced I know where I'll be next month.

Andrew M. Butler, Canterbury, Summer 2005.



From Cy Chauvin, via email:

I just wanted to write before I forgot, and say how much I enjoyed L.J. Hurst's review of *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame: Volume Two A*, edited by Ben Bova. I know if I had been editing the book reviews, I would probably have set aside a review copy of the *SF*

*Hall of Fame*, and thought "Why bother? Everyone already knows about this stuff?" But Hurst's fresh look at the stories, and how the future has changed around them, gives new insight. "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." Of course, so much more time has passed now; when the SFWA voted to select the stories they were comparatively recent history. For a similar 35-year perspective in 1970, an sf story would have had to have been published in 1935, and I doubt if even one of the selections had been first published that long ago.

This looking back seems an excellent idea, and I hope you consider doing more such reviews. I also wonder (since it's not mentioned in the review) if Hurst read any of these stories before?

L.J. Hurst responds:

I'm glad your correspondent enjoyed my review of the *Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, and thanks to Reviews Editor Paul Billinger who sent the book to me. I've tried to point out before how reading can be contingent (it varies according to the times in which the work is read). For instance, in *Vector* 148 February/March 1989, reviewing David Smith's *Desperately Mortal*, a biography of H.G. Wells, I wrote:

H.G. Wells, like Shakespeare, will become a man recreated every generation. At the same time, in the 1930s, as a popular reference book called Wells "a man who made his home in Utopia", Wells presented himself in *Experiment in Autobiography* as "a very ordinary brain". Socialists of all persuasions, from the Fabians in the 1900s to Orwell during the Second World War criticised him – the Fabians for being too fiery, Lenin as being too middle class, Orwell as an anachronism. Yet Wells went on undeterred in his materialism.

In the 1960s Colin Wilson found quotations in Wells that seemed a precursor of his own metaphysics. In the '70s more biographical material started to appear, especially dealing with Wells and women. It is this liberal, proto-feminist Wells that David Smith is principally concerned with, but another new Wells has already appeared – in the latest issue of *New Scientist* there is an approving reconsideration of Wells' early work as a science crammer. This H.G. Wells was a forerunner of Kenneth Baker on the curriculum."

What is original here is perhaps the recognition of the speed of these changes, but George Orwell expressed the idea of contingency much better in February 1944: "Ideas may not change, but emphasis shifts constantly. It could be claimed, for example, that the most important part of Marx's theory is contained in the saying: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." But before Marx developed it, what force had that saying had? ... It was Christ, according to the Gospel, who uttered the text, but it was Marx who brought it to life." (I've cut out a chunk about 'superstructure' which is expanded in modern

theorists such as Louis Althusser).

Your correspondent asks how many of these stories I had previously read. The answer, annoyingly, is that I cannot be sure. I had read 'The Time Machine', and I read 'The Marching Morons' in recent years, but found reading it here that I did not recognise it – I read it anew as if I had never read it before, and from that experience I have to say that I have read all or none of them before. I've never been aware of forgetting a story so completely as my forgetting "The Marching Morons".

I apologise for omitting the year of first publication of the stories, which I try to do when describing these collections, though I did write that Lester Del Rey's 'Nerves' was first published in 1942. These stories typically were thirty years old and more when Ben Bova collected them, and Wells's 'Time Machine' was twice that. Ezra Pound's dictum that "Great literature is news that stays news", and your correspondent's appreciation of that continuing relevance, perhaps proves that Ben Bova was right in his selection. Again, I recommend the book to your readers.

*The last issue of Vector caused a stir with its cover – there was Michael Moorcock inventing the New Wave at his typewriter, but who was the other party? A few names were suggested at Worldcon, but no one seemed certain.*

*From Jim Linwood, via email*

The other fan on the cover with Mike is Lang Jones. Bruce's photo was taken at the Peterborough 1963 Bullcon.

*AMB adds: Langdon Jones was the editor of The New SF, for me the seminal New Wave anthology, and was involved in the editing of the definitive Titus Alone (1970). Writing in Zenith Speculation 8 (March 1965), a young Christopher Priest noted three new British writers: "[Keith] Roberts is the most obviously talented, yet in the long run I expect Thom Key[els] and Lang Jones to outstrip him in both popularity and competence".*

## From Bromley to Beerlight – and Beyond an interview with Steve Aylett by Claire Brialey

**Claire Brialey:** I'd like to introduce Steve Aylett, whose first book *The Crime Studio* was published in 1994, and since then has published – ten more?

**Steve Aylett:** I think so.

**CB:** These were mostly novels, although there was a volume of short stories, *Toxicology*. All of these have received enthusiastic, although sometimes slightly baffled reviews, including from me. His latest novel is *Karloff's Circus*, the fourth and final book in the *Accomplice* series. From the beginning you've been compared to a range of impressively canonical writers – Damon Runyon, William Burroughs, Ken Kesey, Philip K. Dick, Kurt Vonnegut, Irvine Welsh, Edward Lear, not to mention old Warner Brothers cartoons. What are your influences as a writer and do they include any of those?

**SA:** Damon Runyon is one, because *The Crime Studio* started off with me trying to imitate Damon Runyon. The first six chapters are me basically trying to do a Damon Runyon, but then it turns into something that's a bit more me. As for the other ones: Edward Lear I've never been into because he just bores the hell out of me. The thing about Lear is he's constantly repeating things. People prefer Lear to Lewis Carroll these days because they have very short-term memories and Lear will repeat what happened at the beginning after four lines. A lot of people will have forgotten it by then. Carroll doesn't do that and I prefer him. Irvine Welsh I don't like,

Burroughs I can't really read but I like his readings of things. I think he was actually sent a copy of *The Crime Studio*, and as soon as it arrived he died. So we never got a quote from him about it. A similar thing happened when they sent a copy of *Bigot Hall* to Stephen Fry: he disappeared and was seen on a ferry threatening to throw himself into the English Channel. I like both Philip K. Dick and Vonnegut but I'm not a complete Dickhead, as the saying goes. I've read about half of what PKD did. I like Vonnegut, so that's quite flattering.

**CB:** Going back to the Warner Brothers cartoons, your novels frequently include a lot of violence, but in the supremely cartoonish sense that most people get up again afterwards, even with bits hanging off them. I sense that you're sending up violence rather than glorifying it, but it can be quite fun.

**SA:** At the beginning, in *The Crime Studio* and so on, there were a lot of people shooting each other, but I got bored with that quite quickly, which is why from *Slaughtermatic* onwards the only way I could find to make the fights interesting was to put ideas in the guns. Every gun was a smart gun and they had some kind of philosophy behind them. So a gunfight was a philosophical argument. Gunfights are quite boring to read about. At the beginning the violence was quite comical but lately I daresay it hasn't been so cartoonish. It just depends on whether you can look at things in an abstract way and whether you can tell the difference

between real life and fiction. A lot of people don't so if they see someone's arse exploding or setting fire to their trousers or inflating their head or something it would no doubt be horrific in real life. In a cartoonish way, especially in something like *The Inflatable Volunteer* – which was a funny book, completely slapstick and didn't even have any satire in it – it's just a cartoon and it's just fun.

**CB: I read *Slaughtermatic* first and one of the things I particularly remember five or six years on are the guns which are linked to thoughts or mental states, which frequently cause as many problems for the people who use them as the people who are intended to be victims. Do you think your novels are stranger than the real world, or just another way of looking at it, or something else entirely?**

SA: I think they're probably more interesting. Part of the reason why at first I was setting some of my stuff in America was because I found it very difficult to convince anyone that anything interesting would happen in Britain. Because I write satire half my work is done if I set it in America, because it's so extreme. And satire is a technique when you take things to their further extreme, to their logical conclusions. A lot of that is done in America which is why it is so absurd in many ways. But I don't do the American thing any more because I think I am a slightly better writer than I used to be and I don't really have to do that.

One of the things I like to do in my writing is showing people in very extreme circumstances – partly it's a satirical thing but it's mainly just a funny thing, partly just expressing something that I need to say. When I hear people talk about the worst thing that ever happened to them, it's something really very mild. I just like having these scenes in my books where there's something going on over here – what's happening over here is like a dinner party or something relatively normal – then I'll cut away – in the next room or in the flat above someone is trying to push a weird purple mutant elephant into a wall socket while the pope is trying to fold the person's ear into a particular very important motif which will serve as a Solomon Seal for something. And that's that person's life. Some people are not in as entertaining a situation as that, but they are in an extreme situation. I like that; it just makes me laugh.

**CB: What I found interesting about the *Accomplice* novels was the mingling of the familiar and the strange. So you have the characters working in the Sorting Office who are continually plagued by parcels and letters which arrive addressed to none of the workforce and which they are driven to hide or destroy since they have no idea else what to do with them.**

SA: They don't realise that they are addressed to other people. If you have ever worked in a post office sorting office, which I have, it's just chaos. I took it to an extreme, but they're working there and these packages arrive and it's what's this, what do I do with it? They just set fire to them or stuff them into an old early seventies Anglia and drive it off a cliff, whatever, just to get rid of the thing. And none of them ever admit to each other that they don't know what they're doing there. If you've ever been employed anywhere where on the first day, or even in the tenth year, you still don't quite know what you're doing, and no one there does, the stress levels are quite amazing. That's what that Sorting Office thing was. Nothing to do with the story but that's what people do for a living.

**CB: There's also a strong sense of pattern and progression in these novels, so every time Barney goes to visit his parents and there's a farcical incident involving their latest pet, Gregor commits a victimless act of sexual perversion which nonetheless shocks even his friends, the demon Sweeney sends a minion to destroy Barney without fully exploring its potential vulnerability to the human world, Barney's love life is unnecessarily complicated and the Mayor pursues his re-election campaign only to find the voters unconvinced and uncaring. So though there's plot progression in each of them, the sequence as a whole is a bit like an oral story – like a fairy tale or a folk myth – with repeated or similar incidents recurring to show both that you're on the right track and that you have to find the way to break the cycle.**

SA: They sort of do at the end. Apart from anything else it's a

running gag and I like running gags that get cumulatively more extreme. The thing with the parents was quite a challenge because I didn't plan those out beforehand. I can't remember what animal Barney kills off first, so I had to find one to replace it and a reason for it to be replaced and a reason for him to kill it. I had to work that out four times on the trot. That's just life, and, let's face it, that's what happens when you visit your parents.

**CB: Given that the extreme things that happen to the characters, how come the demons don't automatically win and achieve whatever they want?**

SA: I don't know. In the case of Barney it's a matter of luck. Things aren't organised that well. I think a lot of the things in life are accidents and I know that bad luck exists, so I kind of know that good luck can happen and Barney has good luck a lot of the time. It's not the worst thing that can happen; the demons end up being shown up as not being as bad as the human beings. There's that line in an old Japanese movie by Kurosawa where a character says "This world was full of demons until the human beings arrived and scared them all away". That's really what we conclude towards the end of the *Accomplice* books that the demons are quite theatrical, and they also obey certain rules, they've got big wings and they're fanged – but what's a lot worse than that is human, the rather bland evil of people who become less than human through bureaucracy and see other people as a number or an object and not as having anything inside them going on. That's the worst evil that's really portrayed in those books and that's the thing that gets to the main characters. People always think that evil will be really flagged, but it's not really like that.

**CB: Whatever the demons can come up with, it's not half as bad as anything the humans could come up with to do to each other.**

SA: Yeah, and apart from anything else, anything the demons come up with is more interesting than anything human beings come up with. Human evil is glib and it's not even adventurous or exciting. It's not like in a movie where you have a villain and all this big stuff happens. It's not glamorous. This is why people tend not to see the real evil when dealing with bad stuff in the world. When evil's in movies it's always glamorised but the real problems in the world are just not glamorous. The process of dealing with them is not glamorous. It isn't a big war and it doesn't involve big explosions and so on. It takes a hell of a long time and people can't put it in a campaign slogan. Any real progress doesn't look exciting. That's one of the problems solving it, it's a kind of marketing problem.

**CB: Do I presume from your description of politics, in particular the mayoral competitions in the *Accomplice* books, that you've no particular ambition to go into politics?**

SA: Funnily enough, no.

**CB: What about law and order? There are some absolutely stunning court scenes in many of your novels. You introduce Kafka as a character in *Atom*.**

SA: I didn't really do Kafka justice, but who did? I didn't do him very well actually, I did the usual crappy job people do when they bring Kafka in as a character. It was a bit insulting to him. There are a hell of a lot of court scenes in my books. You can almost tell what the books are like by looking at the court scenes. *The Inflatable Volunteer* one – I can't remember what the hell the guy was doing, peeling off bits of his body or something? Inflating his head or something? I don't know. But it didn't mean very much because that book doesn't mean very much. In the *Accomplice* books it's quite a long court scene and it's quite involved, and it says a lot about the law. In the *Beerlight* books, like *Slaughtermatic*, again it goes into that quite a bit. In *Bigot Hall* you have people tearing off several masks or alternatively thinking that they're wearing masks and tearing their faces off, or wearing a mask which is different from their face and then a mask of their own face over it. Intending to tear off the mask that's on the top, to reveal themselves as someone else, in order to run away, they accidentally tear off both masks. It's completely futile because they look like themselves again.

I've met a lot of lawyers and solicitors and barristers, judges, criminals and gangsters because I used to work in law publishing. In

fact one of the people I worked with was a chap called James Morton who wrote the Mad Frankie Fraser books, and he used to do those interviews in the office. Mad Frank would come in and he'd be just a bully boy really. But the judges and the barristers were really the worst, they were just unbelievable. They were disconnected from real life. I sat in on a lot of court cases and the law was postmodernist before anything else in the world in terms of being disconnected and disengaged from reality. Anyone who wins a case in court won't win because they're in the right, or because they didn't do anything wrong, but because it was argued in a certain way or because certain calculations worked out in a certain way. Reality, what happened and facts are the first things to go out of the window when you go to law. And it's been like that for a few hundred years, certainly in this country. It's just like a nightmare, it literally is just like hell in a courtroom, it's a little jigsaw piece of hell. There's no objective reality of what happened, and fact, and so on, that's just dismissed. It's all subjective argument and to me that's just a nightmare. Students of postmodernism will probably just cream themselves but I hate that.

**CB: Do I take it you're not a fan of postmodernism?**

SA: No, not really. I'm not a fan of people who don't believe there's not such a thing as a fact – that there *are* facts. These are very often people who have never been poor or starving. They think that everything is interchangeable and everything is subjective and that things can be changed by the way that you think about them. I'd say to them, this bottle, if I break it and mash it into your face, can you then decide that this isn't a broken bottle? And that this is not sharp glass that is mashing your face up? There are facts. A lot of postmodernism tends to be used to disengage from the fact that other people are real and have actual feelings. That what you do has an actual effect, an emotional impact and that things actually hurt, no matter what way you think about it afterwards. Knife someone or chop their arm off, if you think about it afterwards that you didn't chop their arm off, it doesn't change what happened because the person is hurt.

**CB: Looking at reality and causality in a different way, you mention *The Inflatable Volunteer*. The narrative structure is delightful: it's like a collaboration between Italo Calvino and Quentin Tarantino. So for the first half of the novel, each story involves the protagonist telling a story, and ends with the beginning of a new story. And then at the turning point of the novel, you finish one of the stories, and the second half goes back through the structure extricating the narrator from each of these successively bizarre story scenarios.**

SA: It's a series of framed narratives and in about ten of them you go in and come out again.

**CB: So they are stacked in an interesting sequence. What made you want to write a book like that? Was it just that it seemed like fun?**

SA: That whole book is basically a stand-up routine, an Eddie Izzard stand-up routine or something, but given some structure. It's great for doing readings when you put on the stupid voices, and I forget huge chunks of it for long periods of time, so when I read it I get surprised by bits of it. It's just hilarious. It's also lyrical, some of it's quite poetical, lyrical slapstick. That structure was just some means of giving it some structure, that's all it was. It overlapped slightly for a couple of months with writing the ending of *Slaughtermatic*, which was like having my head dipped in a bucket of battery acid or something. It was nice to just write something that wasn't making a point. As I said, that's the one book I've written that wasn't making a point.

**CB: Did you write it in sequence or did you write it as a number of pairs?**

SA: It was almost written in the order it appears, yes. There was a little bit of rearranging.

**CB You mentioned "lyrical slapstick" just then and, never mind what you've sometimes done with narrative structure, what you do with language is impressively twisted. Some characters' speech, and whole sections of the narrative, are grammatically rational**

**but use words in a way that people usually don't. I'm not saying it doesn't make sense, exactly, but it sometimes forces the reader to focus on the flow of the language rather than specifics. What are you thinking, and what effect are you aiming for, when you use language like that?**

SA: Just very, very, very occasionally I'll have someone say something to clarify what's going on. That's just for a logistical reason. The rest of the time it's almost like what the character would say at that point. The way that I write a book is that I'm presented with a whole book as a shape, and it will be just like a colourful shape hanging there. It will be like loads of bits of different coloured bubblegum all stuck together, with a few sticks pushed through it. The book is almost presented to me, like multi-dimensional dictation. Then I just have to find a way to write that book. I'll see the book in its entirety before it's written. I'll just use the colours and the textures and how it sounds, because I'm synaesthetic. It's the same thing when it comes down to the sentences, the shapes of the sentences, like bits of colour, and texture, and how warm or cold it is and then I'll just have to find the words that make that.

**CB: It's a fascinating description of the synaesthetic experience as well, which I think does add another dimension to quite a lot of them.**

**Most of your novels are quite short which is a rarity and a pleasure in the age of the ever-expanding genre blockbuster. Do you have any desire to write a blockbuster? Do you think you could write something in the same vein but much longer?**

SA: I think that if I were to sit down and try and write something of the same concentration as the other books I've written but a massive book it would probably drive me mad. And it would take ages, as well, because they're so concentrated. Probably the closest I've got to that is when the collected *Accomplice* is published, which will be thick. I don't see the point of spending more time saying something than is needed to say it. This is why I'm not very good at journalism. You know – "Can you write a thousand words on this?" – and what I've got to say I can say in two sentences, so what do I do for the other 950 words?

**CB: You've been averaging a book a year, at least, since you started, so I presume you have a market niche.**

SA: I don't know who they are. When occasionally I meet them they just look at me like *this* – it's just people who want to read something that they haven't read before, different books from what's out there, which is the same reason that I write them. There are certain kinds of books I want to read and they're not being written so I have to write them. I go through this laborious process; I can't find them in the bookshop, so I have to write them, send them off, get them published, and because it's Orion I'll send them the whole book on a disk, and then they say they can't use it, "just send us a manuscript" and they send it to a typesetter, they send the physical manuscript to the typesetter, and then they send the galleys back to me, with mistakes in them which wouldn't have been in there if they'd used the disk, I have to then correct those mistakes, send them the galleys back with those mistakes corrected, finally there's a printed book albeit with a terrible cover on it, so at least there it is in the bookshop. That's the rigmarole I have to go through to find these books in the bookshop which I've been looking for for years.

**CB: Do you like any of the covers which have been produced for your books?**

SA: The Beerlight ones are quite good; the *Accomplice* ones are partly my fault because I interfered. I'm quite a good designer but because I got involved it was like the front half of one animal and the other half of another and it just totally messed it up. They said I could have input into what the covers look like and I sent them these great completed designs which were brilliant and they said that they would "tone it down and do our version of that". So they just flattened it and fucked it up. The covers are terrible. But there it is. I should have just left it alone and it still would have ended up better than what happened.

**CB: So apart from the design and the proofreading and sorting out**

the fuck-ups generally, do you write full time now?

SA: I've written full time for about four years now.

CB: **You've escaped from the legal office?**

SA: Yeah, just about.

CB: **Going back to your earlier work, before *Accomplice*, many of your novels and short stories were set in Beerlight, a less bizarre but if anything more violent place – *Slaughtermatic*, *Atom*, some of the stories in *Toxicology*. Are Beerlight and *Accomplice* part of the same place? The same country or at least the same world?**

SA: No, Beerlight is a sort of city on the East coast of America, it's a cross between New York, Chicago, and particularly Baltimore. *The Crime Studio* wasn't even set in the future but people were out of touch at the time that they thought it was all really futuristic. People over here don't understand the crime levels over there and don't see where things are going and so on. It's the same with a lot of the stories I wrote in *Toxicology*, a lot of the things which happen in there ended up happening in 2001 but everyone was like "This is very futuristic". At first I didn't think of Beerlight as being in the future, then in *Slaughtermatic* I set a little bit into the future, *Atom* is set about five years before *Slaughtermatic*, and if I finally get around to doing another one it'll be about ten years after that. It gets worse each time.

*Accomplice* is technically in England, it's kind of in the future after a big apocalyptic disaster and it's also been shunted sideways a couple of dimensions if you want a really simple explanation for it... It's totally clued in there, you see people referring back to these times but a lot of readers just think it's all nonsense anyway, but it does all mean something. People having read *The Inflatable Volunteer* may think it's just all nonsense – that it's good nonsense but it's nonsense.

CB: **I thought I'd spotted some echoes in the *Accomplice* books in a possibly twisted dimensional way to a couple of the things you'd been doing in *Atom* in particular. The slightly bizarre diseased crabs in *Atom* seemed to be a prefiguring of the floor lobsters in the *Accomplice* books. I didn't know whether this was deliberate, that you'd thought of an idea and thought of using it in a twisted way.**

SA: No, I'd just forgotten about the crab in *Atom*. Is that the one with the samurai faces?

CB: **No, they have writings on their shells.**

SA: Oh yes, it's got an accusation on its shell.

CB: **When you wrote *The Crime Studio* and *Beerlight* did you intend to use the setting again or did you just find yourself writing more Beerlight stories?**

SA: I was just writing, but I didn't know that I'd write a whole bunch more. I've got about twenty-five years of Beerlight history stuck in my head and I've only written fifteen years of it. And I've got a map of the streets, which are all named after band names. Because I started writing it in about 1992, I've got embarrassing things like Swervedriver Street, Ride Street. It's really embarrassing, it's terrible. It really dates it. I didn't know I'd write a bunch more until *Slaughtermatic*, and then I knew they'd be a whole bunch of them. There's *The Crime Studio*, *Slaughtermatic*, *Atom*, some of the stories in *Toxicology*, but some of them happen at the same time period as *The Crime Studio*, believe it or not, although no one else would probably know that.

CB: **There is a degree of crossover between your different stories: names, in particular, recur. Are we meant to read all these characters as being aspects of the same person, actual recurring characters in different circumstance – or do you just know someone called Eddie who you're not going to let escape the joke?**

SA: No, I just like the word "Eddie". I haven't repeated a name in some totally disparate thing have I?

CB: **Not a whole name, but there are lots of characters called Eddie.**

SA: No, I just like the sound of "Eddie", it's got a ring to it.

CB: **You mentioned Eddie Izzard earlier. I didn't know if that was a clue.**

SA: He's quite good as well but that's all it is.

CB: ***Bigot Hall* is conventionally structured. It's a family saga about a kid growing up. It's just that he has the strangest family in the world. Unlike most rite-of-passage novels, after everything has come to a cataclysmic ending, the narrator concludes, "There ended the happiest and most conventional phase of my life". I presume that you needed to have a remarkably normal childhood in order to write that?**

SA: I grew up in Bromley.

CB: **Your early reviewers made a lot of that – "He's just a normal lad from Bromley".**

SA: Nothing happens or has ever happened in Bromley, or ever will. People just get out of Bromley. H.G. Wells, Siouxi Sioux, David Bowie, that's it actually but they just got out and did something. But it's just that nothing ever happens there and I revisited there for the first time about a year ago and it's really peculiar because it's still the seventies, it's like taking a trip back to the seventies. It's really weird. You come out of Bromley South station and you almost expect to have newspapers with 5d on the cover. And you see late sixties, early seventies trucks driving around. Turf trucks. Nothing's changed. I was in a pub and the music they had, I think the latest it got was 1982, which was when I left. Nothing's changed since then. My childhood was a complete non-event. My whole life is really.

CB: **Maybe Bromley has to be observed for anything to progress at all.**

SA: Or for me to observe it. But I do like the suburban feel; there are colours and things. It's south London but it's also Kent, so it's like the tatty edges of the countryside and you have weird fields with nothing in them, just a wasteland with a donkey on the edge of it, and some half tubers, you don't even know what kind of plant it is. It's some kind of vegetable or a human being trying to grow in there. Things incubate there but nothing can happen.

CB: **I wanted to ask you about *Shamanspace*, which you've said is your own favourite of the books you've written. Is it about the end of the world, or about averting the end of the world, or just about how to deal with God?**

SA: It's bound to be sort of about the end of the world because, as a side effect, that's part of the end of the universe. It's about bitterness and resentment, suicidal depression, self-mutilation, drug-taking, cults and raging at God for just having dumped people here with no instruction book or anything. And south London.

CB: **Whatever we do, we can't escape Bromley.**

SA: No, it's not Bromley, it's nearer to London than that. *Real* south London.

CB: **I realise I've been asking you about your books, but I hadn't realised that there were Steve Aylett CDs until I arrived here this evening.**

SA: There's this one, *Staring is its Own Reward*, which has got me, droning on for nineteen tracks, doing bits from *Atom* and *Toxicology*, some bits from *Inflatable Volunteer*, *Bigot Hall*, and there's weird noises, music and weird stuff as well. I did this rant on an industrial album, a couple of industrial albums in fact, cut by H3llb3nt, an industrial band. After I did these rants I saw the guy doing the mixing and thought, I'd like to do that. I got this really simple mixing program and put this CD together. Some of it's a bit tatty but some of it's quite good. There's another one after that, *Lord Pin*, which is me doing an interview with an insane old man, who is also played by me putting on a weird voice. Then there's a CD after that which I've done under the band name The Wesley Kern Gun, which is just industrial music. It's like going through a howling vortex for an hour like the bit at the end of 2001 with the Stargate.

CB: **Steve Aylett, thank you very much.**

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Steve Aylett's latest book is *Lint*, published by Thunder's Mouth Press. His website is [www.steveaylett.com](http://www.steveaylett.com) — Eds

# Thanos as Gnostic Magus: Marvel Comics and Gnostic Cosmology

by John F. Keane

Jesus said, "The man old in days will not hesitate to ask a small child seven days old about the place of life, and he will live. For many who are first will become last, and they will become one and the same." - The Gospel of Thomas

## Introduction

*The Infinity Gauntlet* (like all good comic-based science fiction) deals with issues of power. Like *War and Peace*, it queries the extent to which a single individual can wield power. It can also be seen as an initiatory guide to lost Gnostic mysteries. The Gnostic elements of the story lie in the contextual background, but these are pivotal to appreciation of the story.

Other writers have incorporated gnosis into the study of comic books and science fiction, most notably Geoff Klock in "X-Men, Emerson, Gnosticism" (2004). In his examination of *X-Men* stories written by Mark Millar and Grant Morrison, Klock claims that their characteristic post-human theme is implicitly Gnostic; that is, characterised by a radical subjectivity that can swiftly lapse into inhumanity and nihilism. However, it is a mistake to consider Gnosis as simplistically defined by solipsistic subjectivity. Gnosticism has distinct views about the origins of evil and the nature of God, all of which are clearly represented in *The Infinity Gauntlet*.

## Gnosticism in History

Orthodox theology argues that Gnosticism was merely an aberration of orthodoxy. By contrast, the German biblical scholar Rudolph Bultmann (1961) claims that Gnosticism was a distinct spiritual tradition that antedates Christianity. We know that Gnostic speculation reached a peak in the second century AD. As orthodoxy developed a clearer view of theological issues, Gnosticism naturally diminished in significance. However, Gnostic beliefs later re-emerged quite spontaneously, most notably in medieval France and Italy with the sect known as Cathars, famously exterminated in Montsegur in 1244 by Papal crusaders (Ladurie 1980). With this final orthodox triumph, Gnosticism died as a mass movement, becoming the preserve of eccentric individuals such as the artist-poet, William Blake (1757-1827). All of this changed in 1945, when the Nag Hammadi manuscripts were discovered in Egypt. This lost treasure trove of Gnostic texts (some of which probably antedate the Gospels) reawakened popular interest in Gnostic theological ideas (Robinson 1977).

What, then, are the definitive distinctions between Gnosis and orthodoxy? Ultimately, they have distinct approaches to the Problem of Evil. Orthodox Christianity can only explain the problem of evil by attributing punitive qualities to God: in orthodox Christianity, punishment for Original Sin is still visited on Adam's distant descendants. By contrast, Gnosis explains evil by questioning God's omnipotence.

The theological scholar Steven Runciman gives a definitive statement of the Gnostic dilemma:

What was this Tradition? Where and when did it begin? Its birth lies far back in the days when man first consciously looked at the world and saw that it was bad; and he wondered how such evil should be, and why God, if there be a God, could permit it. "The earth is given over to the hand of the wicked", cried Job: "He covereth the faces of the judges thereof; if not, where and who is He?" This is the problem behind the Tradition, a problem that every religious thinker must face and few can solve (Runciman 1982: 171).

Most Gnostic speculation from Mani to William Blake tried to reconcile belief in a God of Love with the world's evil nature (Rudolph 1977; Kingsland 1962). A bewildering variety of different Gnostic cosmological myths emerged to explain this paradox: but all are characterised by the need to address this problem.

These distinct cosmologies explained the world in a manner very reminiscent of contemporary American comics, using tales of superhuman beings and fantastic events to explain how things came to be. Superhero comics are modern exercises in Gnostic speculation, as they contrive to describe the vicissitudes of daily life using self-created, supra-physical anthropomorphic metaphors. In this, their creators are no different from Gnostic artists like William Blake, who created his own mythology to explain the unique political and social convulsions of his age. *The Infinity Gauntlet* is so successful in its exploration of Gnostic issues because it is the apotheosis of a visual culture already intimate with Gnostic forms of self-expression.

## The Infinity Gauntlet

### Thanos the Titan

Having considered historical Gnosticism, it is now time to turn to *The Infinity Gauntlet* and its protagonist. Beyond question this is Thanos, the Mad Titan whose quest for mastery of the Universe takes place against a cosmological background rich in key Gnostic concepts. Thanos is the son of wise and gentle Mentor, ruler of Titan (in the Marvel Universe, this barren satellite of Jupiter contains a high tech wonder-world inhabited by superhuman inhabitants). The Titans are endowed with extraordinary physical and mental powers, and Thanos is no exception. Yet from childhood, Thanos is deeply alienated from life itself:

**MENTOR:** Yes, even as a child Thanos was always terribly clever. It wouldn't have been a hardship if the lad had not been so contemptibly evil, also. (*Silver Surfer* 37 [1990])

In itself, this rejection of life marks Thanos as a Gnostic icon. The Gnostic typically detests life as the creation of the evil demiurge: Thanos even murdered his own mother for imposing life upon him:

**THANOS:** Am I not Thanos! Did I not butcher the woman who gave me birth, who forced me into this hell called life?! (*The Infinity Gauntlet* 1 [1991])

Having grown to manhood, Thanos gathers a huge flotilla of space mercenaries and hatches a series of plots to rule the universe. These are usually thwarted by Captain Marvel, Adam Warlock and the Avengers, though he eventually becomes too much of a threat for even these vaunted Superheroes. When Thanos turns his attention to gathering Soul Gems, more dramatic intervention is called for. The Soul Gems have near limitless power and Thanos uses their combined power to blow the stars from the ether, one at a time. A vast force is gathered to prevent this and, in the ensuing battle, Thanos is killed.

Thereafter, it seemed the Universe was free of Thanos once and for all. He did not appear in Marvel comics for many years. Then a brilliant new story began in *Silver Surfer* 34, February 1990: "Call Him Thanos, Call Him Death", written by Jim Starlin

and drawn by Ron Lim. This classic precursor to the six-part *The Infinity Gauntlet* introduced the Dark Titan to a new generation of fans.

**The Infinity Gauntlet: Towards a Gnostic Cosmology**

*The Infinity Gauntlet* is one of the most complex and demanding stories developed in American comics in recent years. The saga begins with the dead Thanos being resurrected by Mistress Death in order to slay half the Universe. She is concerned that overpopulation threatens life altogether, confounding her need for a constant, steady harvest. Thanos goes about his task by outwitting the various current owners of the six Soul Gems and affixing them to a gauntlet – the Infinity Gauntlet. This gives him omnipotence, with which he lays waste half the universe.

The survivors gather to resist his mad schemes. But, in a series of awesome encounters, Thanos defeats Earth's greatest superheroes; then, the cosmic beings that rule this plane of reality; and ultimately, Eternity himself. For a brief moment Thanos becomes God, having usurped Eternity's place at the centre of this reality. However, his crippled granddaughter Nebula takes the gauntlet from his now-lifeless hand, pulling Thanos back into the physical world. Thanos now joins forces with the superheroes Adam Warlock and Doctor Strange, outwitting Nebula and taking the gauntlet from her. At length, Adam Warlock emerges as the wielder of the gauntlet. He resets time back to before the annihilation of half the universe and the saga concludes (somewhat oddly) with Thanos settling down to the life of a humble farmer on an uninhabited planet:

**THANOS:** Yet strangely enough though, I envy not Adam Warlock. Somehow I feel, that in the long run, Thanos of Titan came out ahead in this particular deal. (*The Infinity Gauntlet* 6 [1991])

**The Infinity Gems and the Problem of Evil**

Most Gnostic cosmological metaphors were dualist. That is, they divided experience into matter and spirit. The former was evil in itself, while the latter was a spark of pure Divinity. Most Gnostics followed the arguments of the second century prophet Mani, who split God into two principles. First of these was the vengeful God of the Old Testament, the Demiurge, the maker of the material world. Then, at some remove from this fearful being, was the True God of Love. Unfortunately, the Demiurge had little interest in the true God, whose divine spark was dispersed in matter as the souls of men. Hence the True God sent Jesus to enlighten the sparks and gather them to himself. Later, less sophisticated Gnostics openly associated the Demiurge with Satan, and argued that Satan was the creator and ruler of the world.

Just after Thanos acquires the six Infinity Gems, a demon named Mephisto visits him. Mephisto's plan is to steal the gems, but he also reveals much about the origins of evil in the Marvel Universe:

**MEPHISTO:** As you know, the gems were once an omnipotent being that was all that was throughout infinity. It was an existence it found unbearably lonely and futile.

**THANOS:** Which is why it eventually committed a form of cosmic suicide.

**MEPHISTO:** But before it opted for that drastic solution, it attempted to relieve its solitude in another fashion.

This being created me and my kind.

You see, this great entity had no concept of good and evil. It merely took a part of itself and gave it independent life. Because it didn't will us to be good, we turned out evil! Of course the demon hordes displeased our creator. So, being the simple-minded entity that he was, he chose to destroy us rather than bother with modest modifications.

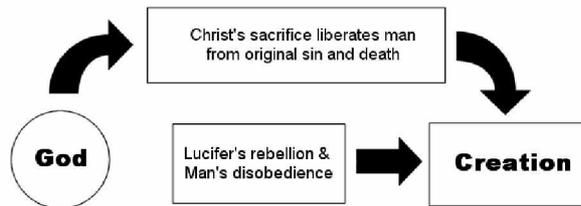
**THANOS:** But this destruction, I presume, wasn't a permanent condition?

**MEPHISTO:** No, when his existence self-destructed, it was the birth of all that exists today. I and my demon brethren were reborn amidst this renaissance.

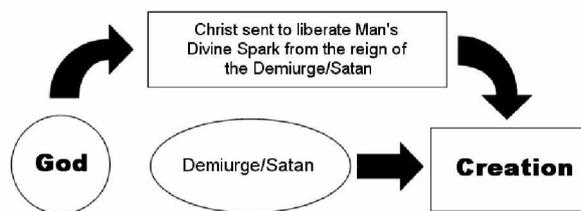
**THANOS:** To the sorrow of all sentient life.

**MEPHISTO:** Naturally. (*Silver Surfer* 44 [1990])

**Orthodox Christianity**



**Basic Gnostic Christian Cosmology (e.g. William Blake)**



In orthodox Judeo-Christianity, evil arose because of Lucifer's rebellion against God. Here, in the same manner, the first beings of God's thought displeased him, although God in this instance saw fit to destroy them. However, after the cosmic catastrophe of God's suicide, evil was accidentally revisited on

hapless sub-creation. This seems to have been a possibility for which the suicidal God made careful plans in order to limit the possibility of evil:

**THANOS:** Over the eons, were you aware of the existence of the Infinity Gems?

**MEPHISTO:** Vaguely.

**THANOS:** HAH! That long-dead entity truly was infinitely wise, was he not?

Even in death he saw to it that his soul was recast in a form your kind could not sense. He didn't want his power to fall into your foul hands.

**MEPHISTO:** Apparently. (*Silver Surfer* 45 [1991])

In the Marvel Universe, God has abdicated responsibility for creation. The schism between a Good God and a Demiurge (or Satan) is not present, since God is dead in the full Nietzschean sense. However, before his suicide, the Good (or amoral) God set certain wards in place to limit the power of Mephisto and his evil kind – for example, making the Soul Gems invisible to them. However, Thanos makes it plain that evil is a dominant force in our Universe. Hence, "To the sorrow of all sentient life."

Thus, with some caveats, the Marvel cosmology is fairly close to classic Gnosticism, in that it posits a metaphysical division between the true, Good God and the Demiurge (or Satan) who rules our Universe. There are unusual differences too, in themselves worthy of comment.

The true God of Marvel cosmology is not so much "good" as pre-moral. Concepts of Good and Evil only emerge after his "suicide". The Demiurge (Mephisto) is not all-powerful, though a decisive influence on our reality nonetheless. Above all, the Good God is "dead", not an active force in the Universe. Although He once existed, He no longer helps us save through the limitations He placed on Evil.

**The Soul Gems and the Divine Spark**

What underpins *The Infinity Gauntlet* is a curious cosmology that explains the origin of the Infinity Gems in explicitly Gnostic

terms:

**THANOS:** Nothing is beyond the power of Thanos of Titan! All the universe is but clay in my hands, waiting to be molded to my artistic fancy. Let it be known that Thanos declares himself the supreme being of this and all universes! Pity any who would challenge that claim. For mighty Thanos is the possessor of six shiny trinkets. The INFINITY GEMS!

Once they were part of an omnipotent being which lived countless millennia ago. It was all that was throughout all infinity. But it found such an existence pointless and unbearable.

And so it committed cosmic suicide. But such power does not easily die. From the ashes of this dying all-powerful being sprang...

...THE UNIVERSE! This being's death was the compost all existence percolated from! The stars generated from the depths of its decaying carcass! From those gleaming maggots came the planets! And on those satellites grew the abomination called life! (*Silver Surfer* 44 [1990])

The ancient Gnostic sage Irenaeus claimed that God, being in danger of the power of darkness, created the Eternal Man or Protoanthropos, to help him fight it. Unfortunately, this Primal Man was swallowed by the darkness, to be scattered throughout the Universe as Divine Sparks. These sparks are the supra-material moral consciences present in the Cathar *Parfaits*, and other Gnostic sages, but which are absent from the broad masses of humanity.

The catastrophic cosmologies all presupposed that the path for a Gnostic adept was to find the divine essence scattered throughout Creation. This was the path back to God, who could be reconstituted by the adept into His divine semblance. Thanos does exactly the same when he reassembles the dispersed divine sparks in constructing the Infinity Gauntlet:

**THANOS:** Yet even through all the chaos of creation, the very heart of the almighty one survived – it would not die! But to endure, it had to metamorphose.

For eons this truth lay hidden. No one suspected that the Infinity Gems were the reincarnated soul of that once-great being!

But crafty Thanos discovered and understood this secret! He sought out the Infinity Gems, made them his and gained mastery over the universe!

For I now possess the HEART of the UNIVERSE! (*Silver Surfer* 44 [1990])

The cosmology underpinning the Marvel Universe exactly resembles that of the Gnostic Protoanthropos. Thanos' despairing God kills himself, but the divine essence of his soul is scattered throughout the Universe as the Soul Gems. The sparks scattered through Creation by the fall of the Protoanthropos were also divine. Even the idea that one can liberate the Godhead by discovering these hidden sparks is precisely matched when Thanos gathers the Soul Gems and acquires ultimate power.

The Infinity Gauntlet serves as a potent metaphor for the

Gnostic spiritual enterprise. Gnosis is distinguished from orthodoxy by its view that only personal revelation is of spiritual value. Additionally, Gnosis views the conforming masses as spiritually worthless, as they supposedly lack the self-awareness

necessary to appreciate higher spiritual truth. This distinction began when the early Gnostic Christians derided literalists who considered the Resurrection to be a real event rather than a metaphorical lesson. Hence Gnosis tends towards secrecy and elitism. Unlike orthodoxy, it has always appealed to the social and intellectual elites. This is as true of modern quasi-Gnostic movements like Freemasonry as the ancient or medieval Gnostic sects. Such elitism also characterises Thanos who is, in effect, a spiritual fascist.

The concept of a Being whose physical destruction brings the Divine Spark to Creation exactly matches the cosmological scheme in the *Infinity Gauntlet*. Indeed, so integral is this cosmology that *The Infinity*

*Gauntlet* must be considered a Gnostic work no less than Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or *The Book of Urizen*.

### Thanos as Gnostic Adept

The Marvel Universe holds an elitist view of man's relationship with God, more akin to Gnosticism and post-Gnostic currents such as Freemasonry, Alchemy or Kabbalah than to organised Christianity. Since God exerts no active presence in the world, spiritual understanding can only be achieved through discipline and effort. This elitist Gnostic theme is central to *The Infinity Gauntlet*.

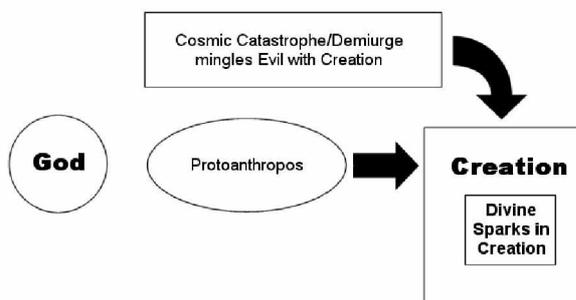
Thanos is in all respects a Gnostic Adept. In fact, the *Infinity Gauntlet* is essentially a metaphor for Gnostic initiation:

- Thanos is dead.
- Thanos is awakened.
- Thanos gains mastery of Space, Time, Mind, Soul, Reality and Power by acquiring the Soul Gems.
- After conquering the Cosmic Beings, Thanos achieves unity with the Divine, becoming One with all reality.
- Thanos renounces the material world and all hubris.

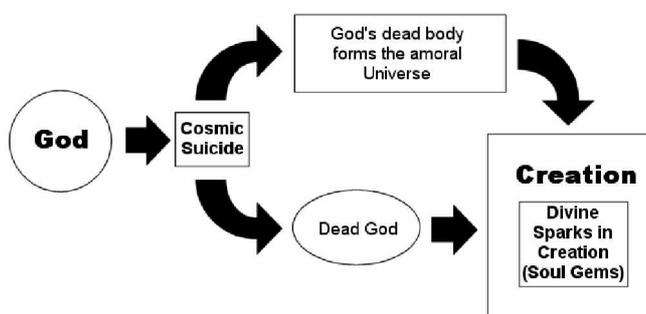
Though it might sound an astonishing claim, this comic book could be viewed as an esoteric initiation document.

Thanos begins his quest in a condition of spiritual death. He is also in love with Death. This symbolises his empty spiritual state and nihilistic ennui with the dross of material existence. He is then resurrected by Death herself, in order to slay half of existence. This is the first stage of his gnosis, or enlightenment. He has "awakened" and uses Death for his own ends, instead of being her mere subject. Thanos then gains individual mastery of Space, Time, Mind, Soul, Reality and Power, through possession of the Infinity Gems. His theft of each represents mastery of distinct aspects of the scattered Godhead on the path to Gnosis or Enlightenment. After defeating the cosmic beings, including

### Protoanthropic Gnostic Catastrophism



### The Catastrophic Cosmology in *The Infinity Gauntlet*



Eternity himself, Thanos becomes one with God, achieving ultimate self-realisation. By definition, this state cannot last in the material plane, and Thanos returns to reality. However, his old hubris and hunger for ultimate power have gone and he aids the cosmic heroes in recovering the Gauntlet. He is last seen as a simple farmer, contented with his lot. He has gained Gnosis, or the wisdom of Enlightenment.

The fans found problems with this profound storyline. One letter complained,

Once, old prune face used to mutter something about "the dark side" and punch out Adam Warlock or someone. Now, he quotes UNESCO statistics...

A parable of personal Gnosis in a Gnostic cosmos, *The Infinity Gauntlet* surely represents an enormously ambitious theme for a syndicated comic strip.

#### A Unique Cosmology?

Although the cosmology in *The Infinity Gauntlet* is strongly linked to a Gnostic worldview, there are important and unique differences. The Good God is a dead, not a living, God. In fact, He ended his own life via suicide, a mortal sin. Gnosis argues that, while God might have created the universe, its base condition proves he has lost control of it.

The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, himself a Gnostic, was fascinated by how the living God of the pre-Modern world has given way to a dead God in the post-1914 world, at least among scientifically literate people in European countries. His own concept of individuation, a process of psychic maturation he claimed was expressed in the symbolism of alchemy, is also a secular Gnostic system:

Good is not only to be loved, but also to be feared. He fills us with evil as well as with good, otherwise he would not need to be feared; and because he wants to become man, the uniting of his antinomy must take place in man. This involves man in a new responsibility. He can no longer wriggle out of it on the plea of his littleness and nothingness, for the dark God has slipped the atom bomb and chemical weapons into his hands and given him the power to empty out the apocalyptic vials of wrath on his fellow creatures. Since he has been granted an almost godlike power, he can no longer remain blind and unconscious. He must know something of God's nature and of metaphysical processes if he is to understand himself and thereby achieve gnosis of the divine (Jung 1984: 163-4).

Some features of Thanos' initiation reflect the alchemical processes Jung considered essential to Individuation. For example, Thanos' outwitting the keepers of the Soul Gems to acquire the six aspects of God broadly reflects the arcane principles of alchemy. Alchemy is the search for the Godhead in matter, a scientific metaphor for the Gnostic enterprise (Jung 1995). Thanos' quest for the Infinity Gems (*Thanos Quest* [1990]) is also an alchemical search for the soul of God in the material Universe. Their liberation and unification gives Thanos union with divinity.

Individuation was a mental process that could take place without recourse to a Living God. The *Infinity Gauntlet* is close to this essentially irreligious concept of Gnostic revelation, since it presumes God is unnecessary and, as a living being, non-existent, even while the wards of his presence are still with us:

The only thing that really matters now is whether man can climb up to a higher moral level, to a higher plane of consciousness, in order to be equal to the superhuman powers which the fallen angels have played into his hands (Jung, 1984: 163).

#### Conclusion

Although orthodoxy struggles to explain the problem of evil, the

Gnostic enterprise presents complex theological issues of its own that are equally insoluble. As Steven Runciman explains:

For Dualism, for all its claims, does not, any better than Orthodoxy, solve the problem of good and evil. The Orthodox might be unable to explain how God the Omnipotent should have permitted such a thing as evil to be and enter into the world of His creation. But the Dualists only answered the question by raising a new difficulty. If Satan created the world, how and why did God allow any good to be imprisoned in it? For the Dualists had to admit that Man possesses the consciousness of Good; otherwise there could be no such thing as religion at all. To solve this problem they had to invent innumerable stories to explain the presence of good in the world. But all of them involved a definite restriction of the sovereignty of God. The strictest Dualists might answer that God is not Omnipotent, and that He was defeated by Satan to that extent (Runciman, 1982: 175).

Yet for all that, one has to consider why Starlin essentially follows a Gnostic conception rather than an orthodox one. The problem of evil has usually been advanced to support atheism rather than any form of religious belief. This is what makes Gnosis so unusual, and rather "modern" in many of its assumptions. For example, some scholars have drawn links between Gnosticism and certain branches of modern European philosophy. The philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, which exerted an enormous influence on pre-eminent artists and writers as diverse as Richard Wagner, Thomas Hardy and Thomas Mann, is undoubtedly Gnostic in all particulars. Schopenhauer believed the world was essentially evil, the expression of a universal Will to Exist. Abnegation of the Will was possible among the Elect, however: and this is the purpose of human existence. This view is identical to that of the early Gnostics.

In contemporary European society, rightly or wrongly, the greatest obstacle to acceptance of orthodox religious belief is still the Problem of Evil. This is fascinating in itself, since a casual observer would naturally think that the triumph of scientific (especially Darwinian) thought would present the major obstacle. In other words, as a civilisation we still seem to harbour Gnostic doubts about orthodox Christian claims. Modern catastrophes like World War One or the Holocaust were undoubtedly the principal catalysts behind this mass decline of literalist belief.

In fact, the mass understanding of God (insofar as it can be understood) in European countries is broadly Gnostic. The masses seem to believe in a God, but doubt that God exerts much influence on the world. This is very like the Good, New Testament God of the Gnostics: a vital source of moral guidance, but essentially powerless before the demiurge who rules the world. Scholars like Filoramo (1990) have commented on the favourable public reception of the Nag Hammadi texts. In "Gnosticism: The Coming Apostasy" (published in 1910), D.M. Panton, an orthodox critic, warned that Gnosticism had the potential to eclipse orthodoxy. The Gnostic impulse is remarkably persistent: the Cathars and other medieval gnostics developed their ideas in complete ignorance of the original first and second century Gnostic thinkers.

Though Marvel was, when *The Infinity Gauntlet* first appeared, a signatory to the CCA (Comics Code Authority), it is also a commercial enterprise syndicated all over the world. The sheer pressure of a need for commercial success exerts a subliminal effect on artists and writers. Gnostic doubts persist about orthodox religious claims at a mass level, and this probably explains why a clearly Gnostic cosmology has infiltrated *The Infinity Gauntlet*. Such a view of God and creation simply chimes with current mass opinion, at least among the consumers of comics.

In "The Myth of Superman", first published in English in 1972, semiotics expert Umberto Eco claimed comics are a new mythology and that the superhero is a new type of god in that mythology. *The Infinity Gauntlet*, however, resembles an ancient

religion rather than mere mythology.

My methodological approach to studying comic books has attracted some criticism, not unjustified. By examining the dialogue of comic books in isolation from their artistic content, one is omitting a vital semiotic dynamic that undoubtedly contributes considerably to appreciation of the whole work. Artists like Steve Ditko (*Spider Man*), Dave McKean (*Sandman*) and Carlos Ezquerro (*Judge Dredd*) are of course significant storytellers in their own right, whose contributions have had a decisive effect on the evolution of various eminent comics characters.

However, the analysis of comic books is not a well-developed discipline. Most studies seem confined to obtuse sociological speculation (Brooker 2000; Klock 2002) or permutations on the polytheistic mythology theme (Reynolds 1992). There is an advanced art-historical tradition that examines a wide range of contextual factors, including biography (Wasari, 1998), the role and influence of patronage and the limits of visual culture (Gombrich, 2002) and semiotic considerations. To my knowledge, none of these have been rigorously employed in the analysis of the comic book. Hence, the tools currently available are inadequate to the task of synthetic examination of the entire aesthetic experience associated with comics. My approach, augmented by occasional visual referents, will unfortunately have to suffice.

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BACK IN JANUARY, NIAL HARRISON REVIEWED THE NEW COLLECTION FROM LUCIUS SHEPARD, BUT HAD RATHER MORE TO SAY THAN FITTED IN A VECTOR REVIEW. WE ARE HAPPY TO SHARE THOSE FURTHER REMARKS.

## Trujillo Revisited

by Niall Harrison

It's easy to imagine that there is something about Lucius Shepard's work that only a book the size of *Trujillo*, all seven-hundred-odd pages of it, can properly capture.<sup>1</sup> His tales are often told with an air of magisterial authority; they are often works of sustained intensity, featuring dense, rich language, and moments of utter darkness as well as, occasionally, profound grace. It doesn't always work – sometimes that authority turns to pomposity, the eloquence to pretentiousness. But among his recent output, of which the thirteen stories collected in *Trujillo* represent a significant but by no means complete sample, there is far more success than failure.

The emphasis across these three hundred thousand words (six novellas, four novelettes and one short novel) is on fantasy, and occasionally horror; of the eleven stories, only three have any science-fiction elements, and two of those still carry a strong fantastical tone. The last five stories take place in and around the titular town, located on Honduras' Mosquito Coast; the first six skip around from post-9/11 New York to post-communist Russia, via Iraq, Africa and Florida. Despite the disparate locations,

however, there are similarities. Themes recur, and like all the best short-story collections *Trujillo* provides a collage portrait of the concerns and approaches of its author.

#### 'Only Partly Here' (*Asimov's*, March 2003)

My single favourite story is the first, although it sounds, when you describe it, like a disaster. If I say that 'Only Partly Here' is about September 11th – which it is – the automatic reaction is to be wary of cliché, suspicious of empty sentiment. If I say that it might be a ghost story, it just makes things worse. But it does work, and wonderfully so. With each successive reading I find it richer and more satisfying.

Bobby works in the pit. Ground Zero. He works there because he can, not because he has to. He works there because, whether he realises it or not, he's trying to understand. He collects souvenirs: black widgets of unknown function, one-half of a blue silk shoe. Other things. He's 23. After work, he goes to a nearby bar with a few of the guys. They can't go straight home; they have to decompress first. It's the sort of blue-collar place where

Springsteen and Santana are playing on the jukebox. Every night, he sees the same incongruous girl in there, in the same seat: a slim, smart brunette, yuppie-type. One night, he gets up the courage to talk to her. Her name is Alicia. She needs to understand, too. "Everybody's going on with their lives," she says, "but I'm not ready" (7).

The story has very little in the way of plot; it is, rather, a portrait of a succession of nights, encounters and conversations, between two people just trying to make a connection. At one point Alicia and Bobby are described as being like "two sketches in the midst of an oil painting" (29), and it's an apt description; for all that the story is nominally about their relationship, it's really about the looming sorrow in the background. The sense of a trauma to the city is very, very strong. Little things highlight the way that everyone is on edge, tense; around the edges of the story relationships break up, and communications break down. You feel that it's only in such improbable, stretched-out circumstances that Alicia and Bobby could even approach one another. They come from different worlds, and even now they can't quite connect. When they embrace, Bobby wonders whether they have mistaken "mild sexual attraction for a moment of truth" (16). The nature of their relationship is ambiguous in other ways as well. It ends when Bobby shows Alicia a half-shoe he took from the pit. There's a moment of seeming recognition, almost an awakening of some kind. She changes, or he thinks she does; and she leaves, and the shoe is gone, and he's left to wonder if she took it, or if it was hers to start with. Whether you read this as reality or fantasy is open to interpretation. The story is perfectly poised at the moment of choice. Previous knowledge of Shepard's writing, and the knowledge that it was published in a genre magazine, tip me over into the fantasy reading, but it could just as easily be understood as the product of Bobby's perception.

In a way, that seems appropriate to the nature of 9/11. The pit itself is a place filled with ash, emptiness and rubble, but in the story it is also described in terms of the fantastic. It's like an alien excavation from *The X-Files*, thinks Bobby; or, it's like going to work in Mordor. Such language is another way of capturing the sense of unreality of 9/11, in the same way that every news commentator shorthanded it as something out of a Tom Clancy novel. I think it works here because of what is left unsaid. The characters never discuss 9/11 directly. They acknowledge it, and they try to cope, but the event itself isn't mentioned; it doesn't need to be. 'Only Partly Here' is a story of mournful confusion, in which the power comes not from the genre elements but from the human ones: comes from the acknowledgement of what was lost. It marks the human tragedy of September 11th in a way that, for me, is more affecting than any ten acres of news coverage ("gossipy maudlin chitchat", Bobby thinks at one point) ever managed; with a subtlety and grace that you almost would not believe is possible. And, whatever you think of events since, that's a worthy story to tell. "There are legends in the pit", we are told, and this might be one of them.

#### 'A Walk In The Garden' (*SciFiction*, August 2003):

However, as if by way of deliberate contrast, the second story in the collection is one of the worst. 'A Walk In The Garden' is set in a similarly charged location – Iraq – but seems determined to do wrong whatever 'Only Partly Here' did right. It is loud where its predecessor is quiet; clumsy where the other is elegant. The jibes at George W. Bush are, even if you think them entirely deserved, ham-fisted, and they sit uneasily alongside the gung-ho military adventure that forms the meat of the story.

We're in the near future, and an explosion has opened a cave in the side of a mountain. A mysterious cave at that, filled with yellow flowers of an uncertain nature. Specialist Fourth Class Charles N. Wilson is assigned to one of the patrols sent into the cave to investigate, in part for the now-anachronistic reason that it might be Saddam Hussein's hideout. When the mission inevitably goes south, the surviving soldiers discover that they seem to be trapped in the Islamic hell (literally fighting terror). It's a colourful

backdrop – all brass forests, wolf-devils and giant pearlescent spheres – but it never cuts deeply.

Another major problem with the piece is pacing. The amount of plot doesn't match the length of the story; there isn't the punchiness that this sort of tale demands (or alternatively, there isn't the length to develop a more thoughtful story), and as a result no real tension ever develops. There are some good moments – such as when Wilson, realising that it's their belief systems that have to adapt to the new situation if they are to survive, forcibly re-educates his comrade, highlighting the doublethink involved in so much warfare – but not enough to lift 'A Walk In The Garden' above the merely average.

#### 'Crocodile Rock' (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, October 1999)

'Crocodile Rock' is the story that marked Lucius Shepard's return to short fiction after many years away, and as such is the earliest-published story in this collection. That historical note is one of the more interesting things about it; in other ways, it is almost Shepard by the numbers.

It takes us to the Congo. Central to the fairly conventional narrative is a complex quasi-friendship between Michael, an "American Negro" (108) and Rawley, a white African. The story begins with Michael receiving a call from Rawley; a request for help in a case that is causing him some trouble. There have been some murders in Bandundu Province, murders attributed to crocodile men. Nothing particularly unusual in that, given the climate of superstition and mysticism prevailing in the Congo ... except for the fact that one man, Gilbert Buma, has confessed. Rawley wants Michael to judge whether Buma is telling the truth. So Michael travels to Mogado, leaving an unspectacular life behind him. He interrogates Buma, who offers typical trickster half-answers and evasions, and he meets Rawley, who seems more worn around the edges than Michael remembers him. He sees crocodiles, a strange gathering of more than a hundred, "a great humping mass of gray-green scales and turreted eyes and dead-white mouths" (91). And a bartender tells him a story, a story about the dead, crazy dictator Mobutu Sese Seko and how his dying curse has poisoned all the waters, becoming a "cancer spreading from the heart of the world" (106).

'Crocodile Rock' has many elements that I think of as quintessentially Shepardian: an exotic location, a sustained, almost hallucinatory vividness, a lingering sense of the primitive, an uncertainty as to whether the story's black madness is in the head or in the world. In fact, it is so typical that it almost becomes unremarkable; there's a temptation to believe that because Shepard makes it look so easy, he can do it without really trying. That's unlikely to be true, of course, but it seems reasonable to judge a writer against the standards he has set for himself – and on that scale, 'Crocodile Rock' is only good, not great. In addition the framing device, which creates deliberate uncertainty (the very first sentence is, "You must not think of me as a reliable witness" (77)), is somewhat awkward. It preserves the enigma that is Michael and Rawley's friendship, but I was left wanting more in the wrong way; and too, it works against the immersive feeling that characterises much of Shepard's best work.

#### 'Eternity and Afterward' (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, March 2001)

Best work like, for example, 'Eternity and Afterward', which is one of those stories where every element fits together, like clockwork. As Shepard moves the story, from its starting block in a grey car park on the outskirts of Moscow, into the forbidding mafia-run club known as Eternity, there's something in the confident rhythms of his prose that pulls the reader easily along. Within waits a world, and more.

The place is immense. All around us the earth is honeycombed with chambers. Apartments, a casino, a gymnasium, gardens. Even a surgery. Eternity is both labyrinth

and fortress, a country with its own regulations and doctrines. There are no policemen here, not even corrupt ones. But commit a crime within these walls, a crime that injures Yuri, and you will be dealt with according to his laws (131).

Yuri Lebedev is the owner and architect of Eternity, once the most powerful crime lord in Moscow. He built the club as his insurance, his protection; and when it was complete, he disappeared into it, creating doubles to maintain the illusion of his existence. Or so the stories say, at any rate; the workings of Eternity are enigmatic and understood by few, and Lebedev has rapidly become more legend than man. Certainly Viktor Chemayev, a low-ranking hitman, has no special knowledge. He has, however, fallen in love with one of the girls working at the club, and he's the one waiting for the reader in the car park, going over the details of his plan in his mind. He means to buy Larissa's freedom from Lebedev and escape with her to America, and a new life. Of course, things aren't as simple as that. His attempts to reach Lebedev lead Viktor through a series of increasingly strange encounters in a series of increasingly dislocated landscapes. At first they seem to be simply the result of psychotropic manipulations; later they become undeniably fantastical. The transition between the two states, however, is almost impossible to identify. Viktor talks to his boss, in the club's main theatre. Wrestles with an Irish gangster in a tangled garden. Listens to a dead friend, at a party that may be the afterlife, or simply Lebedev's dream. And then the encounters repeat, in reverse, in a mirror structure that Viktor himself recognises and attempts to analyse. Through it all Lebedev is never definitely found, although there are several characters that may be him, or perhaps aspects of him. The story ends, as it began, back outside, in the cold of the car park. The whole piece has the feel of myth, and seems to me to be richly, if occasionally confusingly, symbolic. Love and power are perhaps the main themes; love is, we are told, "a kind of absolute surrender" (164), a forfeit of power. Viktor may believe he's on a quest to free a woman that he loves, but the true nature of his relationship with Larissa is thrown into question more than once. He has a talent for self-deception – is his love a vulnerability, a sign of weakness for enemies to exploit? Or, has he fallen for a woman he can never realistically attain as an unconscious method of self-protection? Or is the whole emotion simply the product of an obsessive-compulsive nature: he wants her without thought, simply because she represents a challenge? It's perhaps worth noting that Larissa herself never gains full agency. In this, in the way that she remains a symbol and never becomes a character in her own right, she is not uncommon amongst Shepard's female characters; it's a limitation that affects other stories in *Trujillo* as well. In this story, at the climax Larissa is revealed as a (literally) naked symbol – a "priceless symptom of illusion" (130) – indicating, depending on your reading, either that Viktor has wasted his chance to save her, or that the fact of his chance mattered more to him than the outcome. 'Eternity and Afterward' is a long novella, but perfectly paced. Shepard takes his time building his characters, ensuring that their reactions and reasoning utterly convince. He also takes his time building his landscapes; creating, in Eternity, a dazzling metaphysical palace where opulence and filth are never more than a hairs-breadth apart. It is masterful work and much, much more than the sum of its parts.

#### 'Hands Up! Who Wants To Die?' (*Night Visions* 11, May 2004)

In an interview from March 2003, Shepard talks about "the idea of using science-fictional or fantasy backdrops against which to set stories that have nothing to do with those backdrops, that are essentially mainstreamish."<sup>3</sup> *Trujillo*'s fifth story is somewhat of this type. It describes the intersection of two stories, and prioritises the mimetic over the science fictional. Which is not to say that the science fiction elements (UFOs, alien abductions) are completely insignificant. The narrator of 'Hands Up! Who Wants to Die?' is another small-time criminal, albeit one of a very different stripe to

Viktor Chemayev: Maceo is red (neck), white (trash), and blue (collar). He's done ten for armed robbery, and currently works shifts stacking shelves in a supermarket. Shepard handily reconfigures his prose to match this background, making it choppy and rougher-edged than usual, although still more poetic than is strictly realistic. Out one night with Leeli, his new girl, trespassing on government land somewhere in Florida, Maceo hooks up with three slightly odd strangers. Two men – Squire and Carl – and a woman, Ava, whose claim that "you can't get much more government than we are. Government's like mommy and daddy to us" (212) may be more literally true than you might normally expect. None of the five are particularly pleasant characters (they seem mostly driven by their respective libidos), so it's not much of a surprise when a diner discussion escalates into violence and the group goes on the run. The developing relationship between Maceo and Leeli then comes under some strain; and it's also at this point that the mysterious history of Squire, Carl and Ava is most prominent. There are things that are not right about them. When Maceo finally confronts Ava, however, she doesn't give him a straight answer, she gives him three separate stories. They were abducted by aliens, she says; or they're hybrid clone babies, she says; or they're just an unusual family unit, she says. In the end, Shepard suggests that none of these explanations are correct, although elements of each may be. Maceo doesn't discover the truth, largely because although the maybe-aliens themselves are important to the resolution of Maceo's story, their true nature isn't. This type of story can be a tricky thing to pull off; if the speculative elements are too far into the background, it can be hard to see the point of them. 'Hands Up! Who Wants To Die?' seems to get the balance about right. One reason, perhaps, is length. You might argue that while snail ideas can pack their punch in almost as few words as it takes to describe them, mimetic ideas need space to be developed and nuanced. Here, that space is well-used, and the foreground story – Maceo and Leeli's relationship – is interesting enough in itself to carry the reader along. Another reason it works is that Shepard makes the backgrounding of the speculative elements part of what the story is about. The characters are (like us?) so immersed in their own concerns that they are unwilling or unable to take a step back and look at the larger picture, to really see the extraordinary as it passes through their lives. In the story, Shepard has Maceo state it bluntly: "Somewhere in all that slop of life," he thinks, "was a true thing" (276). And that, for me, about sums it up. In 'Hands Up!' the narrator and the reader both have an incomplete understanding of the events they've witnessed; but (and in contrast to, say, 'Crocodile Rock') it leaves the reader wanting more in the right way.

#### 'Jailwise' (*SciFiction*, June 2003)<sup>†</sup>

'Jailwise' deals more directly than either 'Eternity and Afterward' or 'Hands Up! Who Wants to Die?' with what it means to be a criminal. It takes the relationship between prisoner and warden as its model, and asks how similar that is to the relationship between the individual and government. Exactly what is it to be free? Tommy Penhaligon isn't free, and hasn't been free for more than a year or two at a time since he was fifteen. For all that, he has one of those romantic souls with which Shepard is wont to gift his protagonists; he tries to live up to his personal myth of criminals as a group with "a working class vitality and poetry of soul" (277). And he studied art for a couple of years, which is the reason he ends up in Frank Ristelli's weekly class. Ristelli, perhaps seeing his new pupil as a kindred spirit, quickly becomes something of a mentor figure to Tommy, given to offering vague pronouncements about the nature of the carceral system. "The criminal stands at the absolute heart of the law" (281) he states, or, "each man must find his own freedom" (287).

After Tommy – in self-defence – incapacitates an art-class rival, he's put up for transfer to Diamond Bar, possibly thanks to the intervention of Ristelli. This prison, located somewhere in northern California, is not the maximum-security facility that

Tommy expects. When he arrives, he is not formally admitted or processed. Instead he is left to find his own way into the sprawling granite structure; to make his own way down the long central corridor. The other inmates are a subdued lot, given to quiet contemplation in place of normal prison rowdiness, and offer no guidance. When the strangeness overwhelms him, Tommy finds an empty cell and makes himself a bed. It becomes clear that, like *Eternity*, *Diamond Bar* is one of Shepard's metaphysical playgrounds, reflecting an aspect of the world. This one embodies Foucault's ideas on penal reform. As Ristelli explains it to Tommy (before his transfer, when he doesn't understand), "the decisions made by [the prison board] for the benefit of the population enter the consciousness of the general culture and come to govern the decisions made by kings and presidents and despots. By influencing the rule of law, they manipulate the shape of history and redefine cultural possibility" (288). In other words, this is a prison that, *per* Foucault, really does define society.

More than that, it's also a prison that turns other accepted principles of incarceration on their head. Tommy's freedom extends to more than just choosing his own cell; there are literally no regulations at all. Food and clothes – and even drugs – are provided when he needs them, at no cost. There are no guards to oversee the inmates. The only authority is exercised by the Board, composed of four of the oldest inmates. They meet on a daily basis to, as Ristelli said, make decisions for the benefit of the prison population. The purpose of *Diamond Bar*, it seems, is to offer its inmates the opportunity for self-examination. Certainly that's the effect it has on Tommy, in his case manifesting through art. He takes on the job of painting the walls and ceilings of the anteroom of the new wing of the prison, eventually becoming obsessed by it (the rest of the new wing has been under construction for some time, and it is understood by the prisoners that when it is completed, their lives will be improved. Any remaining impediments to their freedom will be removed in the new wing, they say). The work has its effect on him, though he doesn't recognise this at first. Eventually, even though he could leave, he doesn't want to. He has come to know himself, and found his place; in 'Jailwise', this is as good an approximation of redemption as any.

My major reservation about the story concerns the changelings that inhabit the lower levels of the prison, known as plumes. It is Tommy's relationship with one particular plume, Bianca, that starts his journey of self-examination in earnest. As she tells him, "Whatever the man wants, that's how I am. It's like that with all the plumes ... until you find the right person. The one you can be who you really are with" (323). The suggestion, then, is that as inmates can find themselves through incarceration in *Diamond Bar*, plumes can find themselves through their relationship with others. The reservation arises because, although their precise gender is ambiguous, it is strongly suggested that the plumes are primarily female, or evolving towards a female ideal that will be reached when – you've guessed it – the new wing is completed. By contrast, the prisoners are almost exclusively male. The implication is therefore that women are defined by their relationships with men. To be fair, I think Shepard fully intends for this to be viewed negatively. If *Diamond Bar* is a model for society, the inmates and the plumes represent dominant and dominated social groups. The fact that the groups are split largely along gender lines is meant as a social comment, but the fact that there is some crossover underlines that the split is social, not biological. And when the new wing is created, the imbalance will be undone. Until then, the plumes are journeying towards their own self-knowledge, but by a somewhat different route to that of the inmates. In addition, Bianca is – unlike, say, Lamissa – clearly her own woman; she eventually, and justifiably, judges Tommy unworthy. Still, this type of role for female characters – mysterious, symbolic – keeps cropping up in Shepard's stories. Not all of them; GRob in 'A Walk in the Garden' is certainly tough and straightforward as nails, as to a large extent is Leeli in 'Hands Up!'. Alicia in 'Only Partly Here' is at least Bobby's equal,

in all respects save corporeality. But there are no stories in this book with female protagonists; they are almost all firmly rooted in a masculine view of the world. Given this viewpoint, in some ways it's not surprising that the women in his stories are as they are; and given that his criticisms of masculinity are frequently so astute, I'm not sure that it's entirely fair to characterise this bias as a limitation of Shepard's work. One thing I do know, however: I'd love to read a Shepard story that *does* have a female protagonist.

'Jailwise' may not be one of Lucius Shepard's very best stories – quite apart from my slight uncertainty about the plumes, it's a little too obviously moralistic to be that – but it's one of my favourites. It also neatly marks the half-way point in the collection. The remaining five stories, all set in and around Trujillo itself, form a distinct group.

#### 'The Drive-In Puerto Rico' (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, October/November 2002)

We circle: the first of the final five is set in Honduras, but Trujillo here is in the background, part of the scenery. 'The Drive-In Puerto Rico' is about the character of a nation, and about a hero, of sorts. Colonel Mauricio Galpa shot down three enemy jets in a war nearly twenty years ago, and has been The National Hero ever since, travelling the country, promoting pride in his nation, and living off the hospitality of his hosts. At first, he enjoyed the gravy train; over the years, however, the thrill has faded, and he's become tired. All he wants now are the "ordinary consolations of an ordinary life" (350), but the government denies him rest – there's an uncertain election around the corner, and they need the political capital that they think Galpa can provide. So it is that in August 2000 Galpa arrives in Puerto Marada, on the Caribbean coast; a holiday destination for bureaucrats, who are followed by whores, who are followed in turn by journalists in search of a story.

It's also home to Galpa's favourite place, a bar-restaurant called The Drive-In Puerto Rico despite the fact that it's not a drive-in and it has little to do with Puerto Rico. The owner, Tomas, just liked the name. Out one night Galpa encounters Colonel Felix Carbonell, one of the most brutal figures in the established regime. He also bumps into two American journalists, a friend by the name of Jerry Gammage, and his colleague Margery Emmons. When the journalists dig up some dirt on Carbonell, they need a way out of the country, fast, and they turn to Galpa for help. This far into Trujillo, certain patterns to Lucius Shepard's writing are becoming clearer. In 'The Drive-In Puerto Rico', for instance, the supernatural is present in the small things; it's in the moments when "sometimes out of all the mess and clutter and sadness, [the world] says something" (379). This is a sentiment similar to that evoked in 'Hands Up! Who Wants To Die?' – and, appropriately, the magic in the story, like that in 'Crocodile Rock', is the voice of the land. When Colonel Carbonell meets Colonel Galpa, the scene is described as being like a "confluence of past and future" (359). The two are opposites, standing for the country-that-was and the country-that-is, such that when the inevitable mystical confrontation arrives the battle is for the character of a nation, not just for the life or death of individuals. What elevates 'The Drive-In Puerto Rico' above the two stories mentioned above is that the moral choice here – whether Galpa will help the journalists – is more fully developed. At the start of the story, the colonel is young but tired, worn down by so many years on the road. He questions his actions constantly. Gammage is a friend, he thinks, but not a great friend, so is it really worth the risk to help him? Can you force the world to change? By the end of the story the colonel is old, but he has found his place, and come to an understanding with it. He has reached a peace born of experience; a peace born of the realisation that the small acts, the ones that the outside world may not even notice, can sometimes be the most worthwhile.

#### 'Señor Volto' (*SciFiction*, February, 2003)<sup>3</sup>

We move closer: Trujillo features as a setting for the first time in

this story, but it's a second-hand report of a time past. Aurelio Ucles, a carnival showman, was born there, and lived there for a while. He's a Señor Volto: with a car battery strapped to his chest and paddles on his hands, he challenges people to step up and endure an electric shock, as a test of bravery. His story describes how he became who he is – why he's the *real* Señor Volto. Ucles inherited a hotel in Trujillo and lived there for some years, though never making as much money as he might out of the arrangement because the town – a centre for violent crime and drug trafficking – never attracted that many tourists. Indeed, most of his income is provided by the staff of the local prison. Ucles blames Tito Obregon, the local mechanic, for the circumstances that led him to become Señor Volto. Of course a woman was also involved, although (possibly in a moment of self-awareness) Shepard has Ucles insist that “it would be nearly as accurate to claim it was a woman, but I am appalled by clichés” (408). The woman was Sadra Rosales. With a showman's flair, Ucles introduces her by saying that “she suited the moment, she pleased my heart, she excited my body, and she was grounds for divorce”. She was also Tito's woman, and the mechanic's jealous reaction is to dress as Señor Volto and goad Ucles into being electrocuted. Thereafter, Ucles is strangely disconnected from reality; he looks around and sees “a mingling of the past and possibilities” (417). Much of the second half of the story takes place in this hallucinatory state, which enables Ucles to discover that not only has he been cheating on his wife, but she's been cheating on him (it is a curiously soapy story by Shepard's standards). Eventually Ucles' visions expand to reveal elusive creatures of electricity and light flying in the air around and above humans. ‘Señor Volto’ is one of the less successful stories in the collection. It fails to fully engage, in part because it lacks a clear focus. Ucles' story is unreliable – as he himself admits, he may simply be spinning his audience a yarn to tempt them up to challenge Señor Volto – and it's hard to find rhyme or reason in any of it. The story itself remains as beautiful, but as oblique, as the creatures of electricity and thought that inhabit it.

#### ‘The Same Old Story’ (*Polyphony 2*, April 2003)

We arrive; and if nothing else, ‘The Same Old Story’ is the most self-aware tale in *Trujillo*. The very first paragraph tells us exactly what to expect:

This story begins around six o'clock in the evening at the Bahia Bar, in Trujillo, Honduras, on the Edge of Nowhere, and meanders through a succession of bars before achieving a total lack of resolution (443).

And, indeed, that's pretty much what we get. Our narrator is Pete. He served with the 11th Engineers back in '83, helping, amongst other things, to build Trujillo's airstrip; now he's suffering from blackouts, though whether these are the result of illness or an excess of drinking is unclear. The latter is certainly a strong possibility, as the largest portion of ‘The Same Old Story’ follows, as promised, an increasingly drunken trail through the clubs and bars of Trujillo. Along the way Pete attempts to tell his story. He tries to tell a group of teenage Christian charity-workers in one bar; he tries to tell some punkish Brits in another. Every time he tries, he fails. Something is holding him back, and it's not clear what. Is it that nobody wants to hear his story? Is it that he doesn't really want to tell it? Is it that everyone's simply heard it before?

The night wears on; more drinking, some fighting. His old commanding officer, Munoz, reappears, either as a drunken hallucination or a genuine spirit, and warns Pete that he promised never to talk about what he saw. Eventually Pete winds up at a table with Delmy Jerome, a prostitute. Somehow he can tell her his story, the whole unhappy affair; it turns out that he was a passive witness to a wartime atrocity, and he doesn't know what his inactivity means. Did he somehow like it? In telling it he gives the story more life, and in the end, it becomes a dark, possessive thing. This is not a story with a happy ending.

I've mentioned that there are certain narrative patterns in Shepard's work. There are thematic recurrences, too, human and political issues that tie many of his stories together. ‘The Same Old Story’ can be read, I think, as a defence of what might otherwise be uncharitably described as a lack of variation. In his description of the dirty, messy Mosquito Coast, for instance, as the final and most impactful clause in an extremely long sentence Shepard writes that it is the place “where the privileged world in which we live has the reality of a science fiction film” (462). Perhaps one reason why so many of his stories are set in this and similar locations is that they are in deliberate pursuit of that particular perspective. Or another example: at one point, if his brain wasn't so fogged by alcohol, Pete thinks he would have argued that his story mattered because “even if it wasn't news, it was important to remind people where they were, in what greater context their love affairs and vacations and baby-making were taking place” (459). In the same way, many, arguably all, of Shepard's stories are political in some respect, but they are rarely the politics that appear on the six o'clock news. ‘The Same Old Story’ is excellent – intense, absorbing, aware; one of the best stories in the collection – even when taken straight. That everything I might want to say about the story is already said by the story about itself (it has “the slick reality of a hardboiled metafiction” (464), for instance) is just the icing on the cake. To call this the same old story would be a disservice; this is Shepard at the top of his game.

#### ‘The Park Sweeper’ (*The Third Alternative 36*, November 2003)

‘The Park Sweeper’ is an example of a story that gains resonance from its position in a collection. Read alone it is good but unspectacular; read in this context, it helps Trujillo to come alive. We move from the underbelly of the town we saw in ‘The Same Old Story’ to a tourist's-eye view. An artist's-eye view, in fact, examining the details of daily life in Trujillo directly. Richard is a painter, sometimes a musician, and as we first meet him he's observing the titular park sweeper, noting the way he seems to be engaged in a running battle with a park tramp. The battle, we learn, is magical in origin. One of the pair is trying to protect a miniaturised Mayan city hidden in the park trees, the other trying to destroy it. It's not completely clear which is the good guy. The evidence favours the sweeper over the tramp, but in one of the few clumsy moments in the story, it is suggested that they may be equally wrong in the same way that, in the background of the story, George Bush and Saddam Hussein are equally wrong when it comes to the developing mess in Iraq:

Every TV in town was tuned to rumours of war. As I passed windows and open doors I caught glimpses of tanks and troops massing. Iraqis looked worried, Bush and Saddam posing for history. I thought there must be a magic to war for it to have so many fans worldwide, and I hoped that, if magic there was, it would prove sufficient to create a little corner of the new world order in which Bush and Saddam could eternally contend, growing old, impoverished, increasingly insane, victor and loser united in a crummy, dusty hell (523).

As nice as that image is, it seems somewhat out of place in a story that is more fundamentally a portrait of an affair. The reason Richard is in Trujillo at all, it transpires, is that he's involved with Sharon, who is married (though we are left in little doubt that her marriage is unhappy, if not actively damaging). Probably the most important thread in ‘The Park Sweeper’ is that in which Sharon finds the courage to pursue her own happiness. Along the way, her relationship with Richard is acutely observed; not a grand romance, but an everyday companionship, complete with the half-jokes and wrong words and spontaneous kisses and sudden insecurities that that brings with it. When Richard realises that there is hope for the relationship – that Sharon might actually leave her husband – he's thrilled, but becomes suddenly much more worried that something could go wrong. He notices himself becoming increasingly attentive, almost obsessively so; soon after,

Sharon also picks up on it, and Richard offers a more scathing, but familiar, self-diagnosis. "To Shakespeare [love] was a malady. To a post-modern guy it's fucking Ebola" (510).

In many ways, 'The Park Sweeper' is one of the most straightforward stories in *Trujillo*. Certainly after the raw intensity of 'The Same Old Story' it feels refreshing, the day to that story's night. There's a sense of certainty here that few other stories in the collection have – the Mayan trees are almost certainly genuinely magical; Richard himself is almost unambiguously a Good Man (we are told as much). And a sense of familiarity, too – here again is the importance of the magic of the land, and the heroes of the land. Perhaps the fantastic and mundane aren't as neatly integrated as they are in some other stories in the collection, but it's still an excellent refreshment before the book's final, novel-length offering.

### 'Trujillo'

I mentioned earlier that a number of the stories collected in this book examine masculinity in some way – 'Jailwise', for instance, or 'Eternity and Afterward'. The most direct, and darkest, engagement with the subject, however, has been saved for last. 'Trujillo' asks what it means to be a man, and does not offer comforting answers. For the only time in the collection, two distinct voices coexist within the same story.

The first-met, and more likeable, belongs to an overweight, middle-aged psychologist, Dr Arturo Ochoa. He's lived in Trujillo for some years, supported by the income from a well-received book on sports psychology. Life has not always been kind to him; his wife, Merced, vanished four years earlier after an evening out at one of the local bars. Common wisdom has it that she was murdered, though in his more self-critical moments Arturo suspects she ran off with a visiting American. He still has his daughter, although that relationship is not as close as it once was. Lizabeth is growing up fast, testing her boundaries, caught on the cusp between girl and woman. Arturo doesn't have a bad life by any means (he's even running for town Mayor), but his latest patient – the story's second voice – is enough to give anyone an inferiority complex.

William Stearns is young, wealthy, confident, and "handsome nearly to the point of prettiness" (530). He attracts women with ease, whereas Arturo has lived alone since his wife vanished. On the other hand, Stearns' life is more turbulent than his doctor's; as the only survivor of a boating accident that killed two men, he lies under suspicion of murder, a suspicion not helped by the fact that the only things he can remember about the accident are clearly parts of a delusion: a strange, wrong-way whirlpool and a mysterious stone statue. In some measure, it's tempting for the reader to believe that Stearns deserves these misfortunes. He's not a nice person; he's arrogant, and takes advantage of women with callous contempt. We're told that Trujillo's "meanness and poverty and insignificance might have been tailored to the contours of his spirit. It comforted him in the way of a warm bath" (564).

Interestingly, his father, Nathaniel Stearns describes to Arturo a quite different person. That young man is kind, enthusiastic, and shy around women. At first it seems that Nathaniel may just have been blinded to his son's true nature; as the story wears on, it becomes more likely that something in Stearns' experiences has changed him. Arturo speculates he may have developed multiple personality disorder. The new Stearns sees everything around him in terms of sexual power – he even describes Trujillo, the town with which he has fallen in love, as being like his perfect woman. And when you meet the perfect woman, "you just know" (582), he tells Arturo. Against the backdrop of William's therapy sessions, both men embark on new relationships. Stearns finds himself drawn to a young bar-owner called Suyapa; Arturo becomes involved with an older woman called Maria.

The two are, in many ways, as opposite as Stearns and Arturo. Suyapa is mysterious, enigmatic (a typically Shephardian woman). In her, it seems that Stearns has met his match, for she is quite

capable of running rings around him, something he finds extremely disconcerting – disempowering, even. With Maria, the situation is quite different. "Men are men," she tells Arturo at one point, matter-of-factly. "They have instincts, reflexes. The good ones control their instincts" (593). The doctor, in her eyes, is a good man, although he can't understand why – as they become closer, he finds himself increasingly nervous, and has to be calmed. "I know about men," she says, "and if there's one thing I've learned, it's how to overcome their worries" (596). She encourages Arturo to dominate; she plays a submissive rôle. And, at first, it works. Indeed, compared to the Suyapa-Stearns power-play, the developing relationship between Arturo and Maria seems kinder, and more loving. Gradually things change, however. The situations invert. Stearns finds himself confused by Suyapa, but it's the confusion of waking from a bad dream. When he's with her, he no longer seeks constant control. It's enough that she's there. Arturo, on the other hand, perhaps enjoying the power Maria gave him a little too much, perhaps influenced by Stearns himself, gradually adopts the sort of behaviour patterns – and worse – that he so deplored in his patient. Eventually Maria's submission is unwilling, damaging.

Two different liaisons, with two different sorts of power balance, lead to two very different reactions. Arturo, ever analytical, is not unaware of the change in his attitudes; he theorises that it's come about by association with Stearns, maybe even that it's some demonic force infecting him. If Stearns' attitude towards Trujillo is not his own – "Trujillo would be lost without its oppressor" (625) he opines at one point – but is instead the attitude of a dark thing riding his soul, then a jump from the younger host to the Mayoral candidate, the potentially more powerful, makes sense. Certainly it's not too long before Arturo has adopted the philosophy as his own. And again, he's not unaware of what's happening; he just doesn't care. And by the time the reader realises just how bad things are going to get, it's far too late to do anything but watch, helplessly, as the drama plays out to an inevitable conclusion. Several sections of the story, as Arturo falls fully from grace, are extremely hard to read. By the end, the voices the reader knows have changed completely; Arturo is more degenerate than Stearns ever was, and Stearns is at peace, relaxed, even to be married.

This is a dark story. The reader desperately wants to believe that what is happening to Arturo is being done to him by a demon, not the result of something in him, or in all men, but the story refuses to commit to an answer. Oh, it is a fantasy, and it's hard not to be thankful for that fact. Everything points towards a demonic explanation; something corrupting first Stearns, then Arturo. That doesn't stop the doubts. The two men share a weakness, a weakness that something exploits. Is it in all men? In me? My friends? If there wasn't the chance that the story is wrong, 'only' a fantasy – if it was certain that men are this way, deep down – then reading it might simply break your heart. 'Trujillo' is an eloquent, disturbing, at times incredibly sad examination of how sex, love, power and intimacy can become confused and dangerous. It's a fitting conclusion to a largely superb collection.

### Notes

1. Lucius Shepard, *Trujillo and Other Stories* (Harrogate: PS Publishing, 2004).
2. 'A Walk in the Garden', *Sci Fiction* 20 August 2003 ([http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals\\_archive/shepard6/](http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/shepard6/)).
3. Lucius Shepard interviewed by Nick Gevers; *Sci-Fi Weekly* #314 (<http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue314/interview.html>).
4. 'Jailwise', *Sci Fiction* ([http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals\\_archive/shepard5/](http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/shepard5/)) 4 June 2003.
5. 'Señor Volto', *Sci Fiction* ([http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals\\_archive/shepard4/](http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/shepard4/)) 12 February 2003.

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# 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

**Douglas Adams and Dirk Maggs – *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Radio Scripts: The Tertiary, Quandary and Quintessential Phases*** Pan Books, London, 2005, 364pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 0-330-43510-8  
Reviewed by Martin McGrath

The dramatization of the Tertiary, Quandary and Quintessential phases of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was a remarkable technical achievement and, more importantly, thoroughly entertaining. The work of Dirk Maggs in taking the later *Hitchhiker* novels and shaping them into scripts for radio was unreservedly successful, the production values were of the highest quality and the casting was perfect.

So, as I sat down with these scripts, I could hear the voices of the characters, the music and the special effects playing along in my head. I was reliving the radio adaptations as I read. Which, sadly, was when I realised that this book – despite its many qualities – was entirely superfluous.

If you want to read these stories on the page then surely the original novels are the place to go. The characters are better fleshed out, the jokes are more perfectly realised and you can become fully immersed in the minute attention to detail that is Douglas Adams's trademark.

If, on the other hand, you want to enjoy the dramatizations, then surely you should listen to them on CD. You can enjoy the perfect timing of the jokes, revel in the reassembling of much of the original cast, marvel at the excellent job done by the newcomers and be stunned by the technical quality of the productions.

But I can honestly think of no good reason why anyone would want to read these scripts off the page.

I feel rather guilty criticising this work, because the quality of the writing is high and it has obviously been undertaken with a great deal of love both for the stories and for Douglas Adams. And Adams himself is probably the closest thing sf has to a universally honoured saint – a gifted, sometimes brilliant, writer who seemed to command the affection of everyone he met.

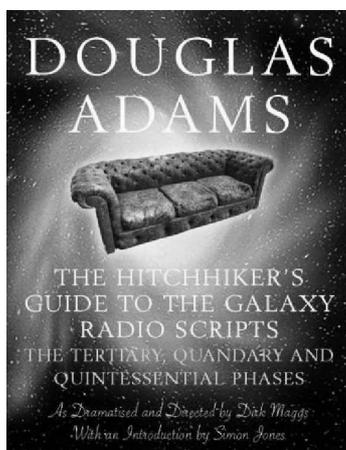
And yet the truth remains that I can't imagine what joy anyone would get out of reading these scripts.

The scripts themselves are, it must be conceded, excellent. Unlike the recent, dismal, movie adaptation, they serve to remind the reader/listener exactly why Adams's quirky, witty and intelligent writing has gathered legions of fans all around the world.

It's just that reading a script, especially when you've already seen/heard it produced is an entirely unsatisfactory experience. Like a play or a movie, the words may exist on the page but they only really come to life when

you hear them performed. Reading a script is a little like visiting the Grand Canyon with a blindfold on; you can say you've been there but you'll never really understand why you went.

No doubt there will be fans who will have to own this book simply because it exists. There may even be some who sit at home and reenact the radio dramas (it's unlikely, I know, but



fandom is a wide and woolly beast) for whom possessing the definitive scripts will be useful – and no doubt somewhere in academia, someone will, even as I write this, be launching into a minutely detailed comparative analysis of the original radio plays

versus these new adaptations.

Everyone else, however, should read the novels and buy the CDs. It is surely how these things were meant to be enjoyed.

## R. Scott Bakker – *The Warrior-Prophet*

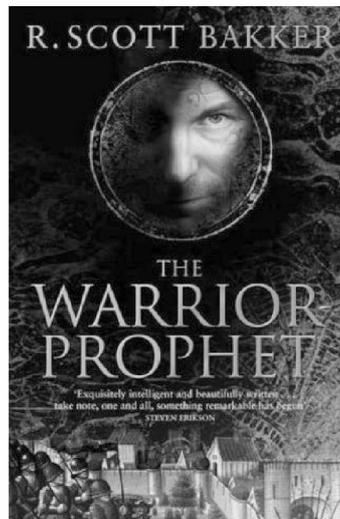
Orbit, London, 2005, 615pp, £12.99, 1/p, ISBN 1-84149-409-7

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts



The second novel in The Prince Of Nothing series has all of the same qualities that recommended its predecessor, *The Darkness That Comes Before* (see Vector 235). It is extremely well written, highly intelligent and complex, and also develops well the characters introduced in the first book.

The story arc continues with the much-desired Holy War finally getting underway. The crusaders march, but rivalries – political, religious and personal – shifting alliances and the highly disturbing presence of inhuman ‘skin spies’, whose facial appearance can be made to resemble anybody, soon have their effect. Obsession, bordering on madness, continues to be the driving force of Cnaiur, the tribesman whose despisal and hatred of his fellow humans does not wane even as he reluctantly becomes the war’s military strategist. Add to this the effects of plague, and of running out of water whilst crossing a vast desert – necessitating the slaughter of many slaves, certain lower-caste people and beasts – and of the fighting itself, and morale naturally becomes dangerously low. The main split comes eventually between those who believe that the preternaturally charismatic, but extremely enigmatic, Kellhus is destined to be their saviour (a belief helped by apparent miracles). Orthodox believers, of course, consider this to be absolute heresy, leading to a clash culminating in his vicious ritual scourging. The



various factions are also not above using torture to achieve their aims, either believing that the ends justify the means or simply requiring no moral justification. The threat of the Second Apocalypse and the return of the feared No God, believed in by some, but by no means all, and actively worked for by others, still overshadows all their actions.

The story is furthered very effectively in this book, which also shows in hideous detail the horrors of even divinely inspired war, as Bakker continues his examination of the effects of religious belief both on individuals and social groups. Some characters

wrestle with the harsh conflicts of love, duty and belief, and undergo events which change both their lives and their perceptions of themselves. There are those, however, who remain an enigma both to the reader and the other characters, but are, of course, all the more fascinating for that. It is also very positive that in a novel that deals with war, often seen as primarily a male concern, that two of the main characters, both of whom featured in the first book, are female. Their relationship with each other and with certain men is one of the more interesting plotlines in the narrative.

*The Warrior-Prophet* is not a stand-alone novel, and it is certainly beneficial to have read the first book. However, this series continues to be one that will appeal to readers looking for original and intelligent fantasy. It will be extremely interesting to see how Bakker will go on to develop the story in future novels, and the

signs that this will continue to be a very high quality series are, at the moment, very positive.

## Joshua David Bellin – *Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation*

Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 2005, 240pp, \$30.00, p/b, ISBN 0-8093-2624-8

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Genre film criticism has often tended to focus on science fiction or horror as subjects worthy of analysis leaving fantasy films somewhat neglected – either because the term fantasy is perhaps considered too far reaching or, conversely, too specific. It could be argued, for example, that the main feature film of this book, *King Kong*, is a horror or even a romance film. *Framing Monsters* is a selection of essays exploring various facets of the fantasy film and its author, Joshua David Bellin, has a clear, almost over-defensive love of *King Kong* and the fantasy genre as a whole. Great pains are made to highlight his adoration of what is still the *ne plus ultra* of the monster movie. However, there are reasons for these guilty protestations because Bellin comes not to praise Kong but to bury him, or at very least machine gun him off a famous New York landmark with a symbol of white male phallic potency. Similarly the marvels of Ray Harryhausen's Sinbad trilogy (Harryhausen's stop-motion work is lavished with gushingly adulatory adjectives sprinkled throughout the essay) are admired in order to criticise them. At times the hostile condemnations appear to contradict what the author actually enjoys about the films he discusses.

This conflict of interests is, however, one of the few things that makes *Framing Monsters* a bearable read – a detached, academic, democratic liberalism tainted by knowingly guilty personal vice.

Kong, you see, is not a primeval force of nature unleashed on a modern world, felled by the love of the delectable Faye Wray. No, Buddy Bob. Kong is in fact the rapacious black man, a sign of the times when public hangings and lynchings were part of American society. The image of the lustful, primitive, uncontrollable negro on rampaging raping sprees violating wholesome white women is transferred onto the shape of Kong. He represents the white man's fear of the black male. The fact that the model of Kong himself was operated by the decidedly Caucasian animator Willis O'Brien is just another shameful example of minstrelsy by proxy. One wonders, if *King Kong* is one of the author's favourite films, why he ventures into the cinema at all. This is not to say, of course, that *King Kong* is devoid of such interpretations or that it doesn't contain elements that are racist (any more than one can deny the racism inherent in Kong's predecessor *The Lost World*). However, the explicit link between acts of KKK-fuelled barbarism and Kong as symbol of what that organisation promoted as 'the black man' is, one feels, preposterous. Similarly, stating that the Sinbad films depict declining US opinion regarding contemporary attitudes towards Middle Eastern politics and the Arab-Israel situation by noting the progressive evil and 'otherness' of Sinbad's adversaries, whilst noting Sinbad himself is basically an all-American in Eastern clothing, may have some cursory interest but does not sustain

30+ pages of historical analysis. He fights a giant Roc, for goodness' sake! *The Wizard of Oz* espouses a Luddite rejection of industrialism in order to continue blissful subjugation of the (deliberately) mentally restricted agricultural worker community. The phrase "there's no place like home" is simply an order to know your place on the social ladder.

The basic premise of *Fanning Monsters*, that fantasy cinema is not produced in a vacuum and relates to contemporary opinions and attitudes, is a sound one, as is the assertion that fantasy films tend to be in some way reactionary. One could easily, for example, view *Conan the Barbarian* as indicative of the rise in Reaganist consumerism or *Lord of the Rings* as middle-class fear of the proletariat uprising and the death of country idyll through

rampant industrialisation. The problem lies with taking these premises to extremes without an overriding appreciation of the genre's conventions and its roots in sensationalist literature and phantasmagoria. Whilst there is much food for thought here (the essay on freak shows in relationship to *Edward Scissorhands* and the televisual representation of the other, the monstrous female archetype in *Species* for example) one is left with the nagging doubt this is analysis for the sake of pontificating on the issues *du jour*. Ultimately this book serves little purpose beyond academic publication for the sake of academic publication. It's interesting, alternative and occasionally insightful, but file either on the shelf marked 'why bother' or 'life's too short'.

## Michael Bishop – *A Reverie For Mister Ray*

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 611pp, £25.00, h/b, ISBN 1-902880-87-0

*A Reverie For Mister Ray* has travelled along a triangle of roads with me for the last month. I knew it was on my bedside to return to each evening, but I worried about the damage transport might do to this volume, because I received it inviolate and physically superb – from the dust jacket by Michael Bishop's son Jamie to the design and typesetting inside.

Michael Bishop, despite setting his best-known novel *No Enemy But Time* in east Africa, is a regional author ('Pine Mountain, Georgia', his home, appears at the end or is mentioned in nearly all his writing) so he might not recognise the reference when I say that *A Reverie For Mister Ray* is a Tardis of a book, though it is. And it's also an Escher of a volume so that when I thought I was reading it sequentially I realised that I had no idea of how I had reached a section; when I read it thematically, following the index, I found that I was looping backwards and forwards through the different sections. This is partly Michael Hutchins' editing, and partly because this volume collects Bishop's non-fiction from thirty years, and he has returned to some themes throughout his career. It also means that some subjects can be followed into new fields, and that others are dead-ends – subjects tantalisingly offered which are never followed through.

For an author who has been a semi-academic for a large part of his adult life, Michael Bishop began unpromisingly as a military brat moved around the USA and Spain as his father's career required, later moving with his mother and step-father. He was put through college by the US Air Force, staying in uniform as a lecturer to the enlisted men. The shaven-headed ones (or is that only the US Army?) must have felt some surprise as they came to English class only to be told to read sf.

Bishop himself discovered sf quite late – at the back of the Hallmark shop in Denver, Colorado – though he had been prepared by his childhood taste for Jonathan Swift and Ray Bradbury. The 'Mister Ray' of the title is that Ray, and the 'Reverie' is one of six essays in the first section describing Bishop's principal influences – those two authors; Le Guin and Sturgeon; Clifton Fadiman, the US broadcasting polymath; Flannery O'Connor, the southern writer; and Classics Illustrated comics. Michael Bishop would not understand the howls of derision that still echo in Britain at Tommy Steele's admission that he read most of his classics in comic book form. Classics Illustrated opened the world of literature to the military brat.

Bishop started to participate in fandom in Denver where DASFA met in the basement of a bank. (It's surprising how easily US fans obtain property: NESFA, based in greater Boston, have a double-fronted shop as their HQ and publishing base). Through fandom Bishop met authors (Harlan Ellison was hardly impressed when he was asked if he had ever written a novel) and started to contribute articles and reviews, both to fanzines and the mainstream press. He describes how seminal David Hartwell's editing was to his career; he includes the proposal he wrote for *No Enemy But Time*; and elsewhere describes how Hartwell and

he took the novel apart – literally, on a kitchen table – and reassembled it.

He includes an article here on the world of blurbing and puffery, while some of his profiles, though profiting from his personal knowledge of the authors, come close to advertising copy. On the other hand he shows himself a master of empathy in following the life of Englishman Brian Aldiss through *The Twinkling of an Eye*, whose years of minor public school/war service/bookselling/age of austerity could have had few American corollaries.

Bishop was an early and appreciative critic of authors who had yet to establish themselves. Reviews of Gene Wolfe's *Fifth Head of Cerberus* or, more especially, *The Shadow of the Torturer*, before its succeeding three volumes had been published, are an example of this appreciation, making explicit the science fictional nature of the world of the *New Sun*. Bishop was also an early fan of Haruki Murakami.

Some of these articles gain new introductions, or are collations of several essays on a subject, to make one longer work, sometimes re-edited for continuity. Others are as submitted, though not as published – 'All that glitters is not Golding', written for *Omni* in 1984 when Golding won the Nobel Prize for Literature, is an example of Bishop saving his work in this way. On the other hand, because Michael Hutchins' editing produced thematic chapters, some work is separated. For example, two reviews of J.G. Ballard are collated in the eighth section, but the review of *Myths of the Near Future* is found 220 pages earlier, while Bishop's Ballard pastiche 'Nine Prescriptions For My Funeral' appears only fifty pages from the end of this thick book.

Surprisingly, some of Bishop's weakest works are his semi-academic introductions, either to reprinted classics (such as Sturgeon's *More Than Human*) or actual academic works. 'Children Who Survive: An Autobiographical Meditation on Horror Fiction' (which introduced Garland Publishing's *Horror Literature* and companion *Fantasy Literature*) is 350 pages away – that editing problem again – from his long review of Brad Leithauser's *Norton Book of Ghost Stories*, which is much more satisfyingly detailed, even if he drops his references. In his opening essay on Swift he talks about Gulliver and bodily functions without referring to earlier works such as Norman O. Brown's 'The Excremental Vision' or Orwell's 'Politics Versus Literature'. Fortunately, there are only a few of these weaker articles.

So welcome to the Episcopal palace – perhaps you will read on not knowing where you are going, not knowing where you are being taken. I did let this work, though, take me into cyberspace and <http://www.michaelbishop-writer.com>, where more of Bishop's ephemera is being fixed. I have not yet returned by that door within which I went.

**Gregory Benford – *The Sunborn*** 

Orbit, London, 2005, 424pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-176-4

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

*The Sunborn* follows on directly from Benford's *The Martian Race* (1999), and also tangentially from a novella called *Iceborn* co-written with Paul Carter in the 1980s. Benford is planning to write a third novel in this series, set during the twenty years between *The Martian Race* and *The Sunborn*.

In *The Martian Race*, which I don't think you need to have read (but see the review in *Vector 212* by Stuart Carter for information), married couple Julia and Viktor were the first astronauts to land on Mars courtesy of the Axelrod Consortium, and here they still are twenty years later, venerated as 'the Mars couple'. They discovered life on Mars underground in interlinking caverns where there is water and warmth. This takes the form of a lichen-like mat that is itself interlinked, perhaps planet-wide, called the Marsmat. The Marsmat appears intelligent in that it appears to be able to influence magnetic fields, and can shape parts of itself into human forms just like the ocean in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*. So far, however, humans have not been able to establish meaningful communication. Regarded as reckless and out-of-date by the bureaucrats now running Mars, Julia and Viktor are facing enforced retirement to the Moon and a life handling publicity for the Consortium, a fate which they dread.

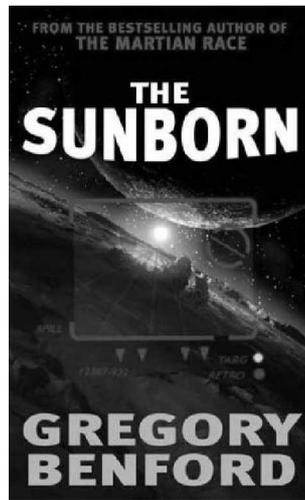
Meanwhile, an expedition from the Axelrod Consortium to the outer solar system led by John Axelrod's daughter Shanna has discovered life on Pluto, in an environment where it definitely should not exist. That life form called the zand is under threat from creatures they call Darksiders, which originate out in the Oort cloud. Julia and Viktor are sent off to

Pluto by Axelrod to investigate and pull Shanna out of a hole. Needless to say she resents this greatly, and a series of conflicts ensue, especially between Shanna and Julia. The Darksiders and the zand themselves turn out to have been engineered by a race of huge and highly intelligent Beings made up of magnetic forces who live outside the solar system, and who regard interfering humans as hostile. Julia, Viktor and Shanna must work together to establish communication and co-operation with the Beings and

prevent both expedition ships from being destroyed. Not only this, but they discover a magnetic phenomenon known as the bow shock is moving inwards towards the Sun, and threatens to destroy all life on the inner planets. Only knowledge held by the Beings could help them avert this crisis. Solving these problems also throws up an amazing link with the Marsmat.

Gregory Benford is a plasma physicist by profession, and this book is heavily scientifically orientated, including a long description of our solar system's heliosphere, central to the clever and often exciting plot. I can't claim to have remembered much physics from my A-level days, but once you accept magnetic creatures everything here seems to have been extrapolated reasonably from current scientific knowledge. Even Benford's zand, living at temperatures just above Absolute Zero, are convincing. Where Benford falls down is his characterisation and

dialogue – the two main women characters are dangerously close to stereotypical, and generally people just serve to advance the plot and solve problems. The book will be very entertaining for those who like hard sf but those who like more people-orientated work will find it much less appealing.

**James Clemens – *Shadowfall*** 

Orbit, London, 2005, 470pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 1-84149-304-5

Reviewed by Susan Peak

In many ways, this is a fairly standard fantasy. It has a map, an ancient language with its own script, references to an ancient history which includes a battle between gods, an appendix (only one page though) and is the start of a series, the First Chronicle of the Godslayer. The story is told through three different viewpoints which eventually converge, and enough is tied up in this first volume to make a complete story while still leaving some material for the next. The writing style ranges from readable to somewhat clunky, with a tendency towards rather melodramatic, staccato phrasing without using pronouns, and a tendency also towards cliché. The plot, essentially, is that of a renewed battle between the gods in which, finally, men claim their part.

The gods have some unusual aspects. They are incomplete, from the earlier battle, having 'higher' selves (the aethryn) and 'lower' selves (the naethryn), each in different dimensions. In this world, many of the gods rule lands, while some are rogue. The gods who rule are in a way bound to the lands; their bodily fluids of all kinds can be used to feed the land as well having many other uses, being both blessings and curses. The bodily fluids are called 'humours', an interesting application of the medieval concept. Originally taken to indicate a person's health (whence 'out of humour'), they are used here as sources of power and grace – all of them, from blood to sweat, tears, sperm, saliva. In this, the gods are served by handmaids and handmen, who draw

off or otherwise manage the fluids. Myrillia also has Shadowknights, not apparently serving any one god but in service to various of them, and deriving their power from grace.

The three viewpoints here are: Tylar, an ex-Shadowknight, disgraced through what turns out to be a plot, who apparently kills one of the one hundred gods; Dart, a mysterious child who becomes a Handmaid of the god Chrism and who has an invisible but powerful companion; and Kathryn, another Shadowknight who was also Tylar's lover.

The story starts with Tylar's killing of a god (in fact done by one of the naethryn, as a key act in the start of a new battle of the gods). Tylar is possessed by, it seems, the naethryn of the god who was killed; at the same time, he is also blessed by the dead god, and restored to full health. His story is one of trying to find out what has happened, both to him and his world. Kathryn, still a Shadowknight, has to deal with plots and betrayals amongst the other Shadowknights, some of which are also manifestations of the new battle. Dart's role is comparatively passive – she is a mystery, and some of the story is about what exactly she and her companion are.

Although I found the story quite interesting, I wasn't gripped, and the writing tends to the pedestrian, as does the characterisation: very average.

Hal Duncan – *Vellum* 

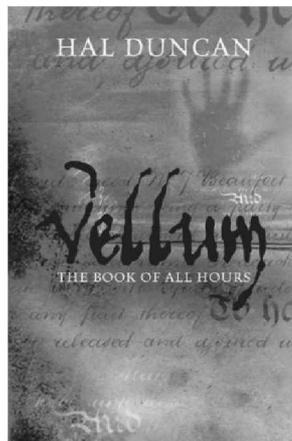
Macmillan, London, 2005, 528pp, £17.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-4050-5208-2

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

We are all postmodernists now. At least in the literary sense, where familiar postmodern techniques of intertextuality and word play and unstable realities are casually crafted onto familiar fantasy tropes of the ultimate battle between good and evil. *Vellum* occupies that suddenly hip Mieville-esque hinterland between fantasy, science fiction and horror, but more than that it gathers within its capacious girth elements of Mesopotamian and classical mythology, liberal helpings of authors as varied as William Shakespeare, W.B. Yeats, Pat Barker and H.P. Lovecraft (at one point referred to as 'Liebkraft' to let us know we are in an alternate reality), and snatches from more pop songs than I could possibly list. The scene shifts, often within the space of a single sentence, from contemporary Glasgow to near-future America to ancient Sumer to the First World War to the Spanish Civil War to the Caucasus during World War Two to heaven to a variety of strange worlds stretched out across the vellum (I'll come to that later). And as the landscapes shift, so do the characters. A leather-clad biker chick is also Inanna is also an upper class Anglo-Irish single mother just after the First World War; a rough-tough Irish sergeant in the trenches is also Prometheus bound to his rock is also Satan; a homosexual student in present day Glasgow is also an archaeologist who makes a dreadful discovery in the 1920s is also hired muscle for an angel. And so it goes. You need to keep your wits about you as you try to disentangle the myriad strands of story and character and setting, but even that won't really help; it is a world where anything can happen, which allows for impossible situations to be casually tidied away by authorial fiat, or sudden leaps of time and space with no real explanation for how situation A could possibly have led to situation B.

If that makes it sound like a mess, it is. An engaging, clever, witty and at times gripping mess, told with sufficient verve that you do not notice too many of the gaps and contortions of the plot, but a mess nevertheless. Even so it will be, I suspect, a best seller; it flatters the reader with its ingenuity, the plotting is audacious enough to take the breath away, and there is genuine storytelling swagger here that keeps you reading even while it makes no sense.

As to what actually is going on: there is a scene, around page 200, when we see that the throne of heaven is empty. It is a brief scene, quickly over, because this is a long novel made up of brief scenes quickly over, which makes it feel like it is even longer. There is no rhythm to the book, just this staccato stop-start shifting of gears, and some thread that looks as if it might constitute part of the plot can disappear for scores of pages before re-emerging at another place and another time with a different cast of characters. But hold on to that idea of the empty throne. It



seems there never has been anyone occupying the throne, but rather in the dim and distant past certain men and women achieved a state somewhere between immortality and godhood. Some of these became mythic archetypes, recurring in the same role throughout history, eternally returning to the same actions and relationships. Others took on a different aspect, what we might call angels or demons. More, even up to our own time, can join these 'unkin', usually as a result of experiencing a sort of timeless horror during warfare. Under Metatron some of the unkin formed a sort of heavenly bureaucracy known as the Covenant (a significant choice of name for a Scottish author), others broke away and became the opposition. Whether you want to gift one side with the name 'angel' and the other with the name 'devil' implies a value judgement irrelevant to the situation, and even some of the unkin have resolutely not chosen sides. But now war is brewing, and it is important to gather all the unkin for one side or the other, because the war is going to change past present and future, and might actually decide who sits on that empty throne.

But that is only part of the story, because there is also the vellum. There is a scene very early in the novel which sets up the vellum. We are shown a book, the Book of All Hours, which is really a sort of atlas. As you turn each page the detailed map of a locality becomes a tiny portion of a city map, which in turn becomes a tiny portion of a country map, which in turn becomes a tiny portion of a world map, and the pages keep turning on and on. The vellum is a sort of infinity which stretches out as a continuous landmass co-terminus with our own world, and within the vellum are any number of minute variations on our world. How this geographical infinity belongs with the historical eternity of the heavenly war story is never exactly clear, but throughout the novel we keep switching to an exploration of the vellum, which may in some interpretations, be the realm of death. And there is another story going on here, the discovery of a written language which predates human civilisation by millennia (and which allows Duncan to employ that hoary old cliché of the translator who begins with a message saying: this is a joke, and ends crying: burn this message ... aaarghhh!). Although one of the discoverers of this language is one of the archetypes who populate this novel, this strand of plot feels to be completely at odds with everything else going on in the book. Mind you, this is the sort of time-shifting, world-shifting epic which allows any inconsistency, so it may all belong there after all. And there is another volume still to come.

Maybe it will all make sense, but at the moment this is extraordinarily entertaining nonsense.

Hal Duncan – *Vellum* 

Macmillan, London, 2005, 528pp, £17.99, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 1-4050-5208-2

Reviewed by Martin Lewis

"The Vellum. Like giving it a name makes it any more comprehensible, any more sane. A world under the world – or after it, or beyond it, inside, outside – those ideas don't even fucking apply."

Guy Reynard Carter is searching for The Book of All Days in the bowels of Edinburgh University library. It is a book that plays a key part in his family's folklore; semi-mythical but bound to their name throughout history, and finding it is the sole reason he has enrolled at the university. This is because the Book is the gateway to the Vellum and the Vellum is everything, not just the universe but every universe. *Vellum* opens with Guy discovering the Book: but this is not the simple portal fantasy it initially seems

to be. After crossing over Guy fades out of the novel, whilst all the time remaining a presence behind it, and instead his friends – Thomas Messenger, Jack Carter and Joey Perchorin – take centre stage. Or at least certain aspects of them do, since Duncan takes a tricky approach throughout.

Although it first appears to be, the book, just like the Book, is not rigidly structured. It swings back and forth through time, across multiple universes, the narrative built up of brisk crosshatching, layering over and over itself. Duncan is a clever and instinctive writer and he has allowed himself pretty much free rein. This can be more than a little confusing at first but it does mean *Vellum* always has the capacity to surprise. Just when you

think you have a grasp of the main threads of the story the main characters reappear in an entirely new world. Here the central relationships are not only reconfigured but the world itself becomes a critique of a certain type of epic fantasy. Everything becomes explicit; whites are elves, blacks are orcs, Jews are gnomes, fairies are fairies. The heroics of fantasyland become the tragedies of history. Then this new world is forgotten as quickly as it appeared.

The master narrative imposed over all this is the traditional one of Good versus Evil but there is no attempt to say which is which. In fact there is a strong refusenik sentiment in the novel suggesting neither side is worth fighting for. (It is no accident that this view is chiefly voiced by an Irish veteran of World War One.) These two sides are made up of different factions of unkin: angels and demons, separated only by their chosen political philosophy. These unkin are ripped from across the entire spectrum of mythology; Sumerian, Greek, Roman, Old Testament. Just like the other characters in the novel they have multiple aspects and the disparate mythologies that produced them shade into one great melange.

At one point, deep in the heart of the novel and deep in the wilds of the Vellum, Reynard Carter, accompanied by an aspect of Messenger, come across a monstrous tell. A tell is an

archaeological accretion formed by towns being built on the ruins of towns being built on the ruins of towns over the course of millennia: and this is a perfect metaphor for *Vellum*. Duncan makes no hard choices about what to include in his novel, he simply throws it all in, mixed with the bones of myriad cultures.

The writer this most brings to mind is Neil Gaiman, and *Vellum* will undoubtedly find favour with his many fans. Duncan's publishers certainly think he is capable of similar levels of success. However, whilst *American Gods* is a fat novel this work is even fatter; its ranging, roaming scope is more like the vast sweep of the Sandman comics but without the benefit of being able to tell the wider story episodically.

This is not the one great, insurmountable problem with this book, though. That problem is simple: it is not a novel. As is increasingly common these days it is instead half a novel, a single work that has been arbitrarily cleaved in two. There is no need for this and, as I have suggested above, it is not as if Duncan doesn't provide ample opportunity for cuts to be made. Indeed, so long and knotted is the book that what is initially a delight to read starts to drag in its final quarter. Once we have struggled through the bewildering, disorienting text with its multiple cul-de-sacs we are rewarded with... nothing. Merely the promise of more to come.

### Steven Erikson – *The Devil Delivered*

### Juliet E. McKenna – *Turns & Chances*

Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 158pp, £10.00, p/b, ISBN 1 904619 14 2

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2004, 118pp, £10.00, p/b, ISBN 1 904619 06 1

These are two very different novellas from PS Publishing: both beautifully presented, signed, numbered and containing excellent introductions, the McKenna is a fantasy along fairly classic lines, the Erikson, a surreal and heartbreaking journey into the heart of an environmental meltdown.

*Turns & Chances* bursts with political intrigue and dynastic machinations as ruling lords attempt to maintain or expand their territorial boundaries through war and alliance, while mothers plot children's marriages to secure diplomatic friendships. What the reader also gets to see, however, is the effect that these decisions have on the little people, the ordinary members of society, and the attitudes of both those who will have to enlist for military service and those they will leave behind. Juliet E. McKenna shows a genuine warmth towards her characters, particularly the female ones, and they are distinctive and well drawn. The story is told from the point of view of several people, prominent among them the lord's mistress, practically banished to her rooms because of his wife's return, and very unsure of the security of her position. You also get the feeling that McKenna enjoys the intensity of the shorter literary form, and she has written a very engrossing story, which should be enjoyed by a wide readership of more than stalwart fantasy fans.

*The Devil Delivered* is an absolutely stunning and original piece of work, despite thematically following in the footsteps of John Brunner and others. The narrative makes use of internet conversations, poetry and data files, as well as more conventional

styles, to tackle head on the massive subject of the consequences of complete environmental catastrophe brought about by depletion of the Earth's resources. This major plot thread is combined with the story of the conflict between the North American Lakota tribe, who are trying to realise a bold initiative to save and cleanse their land, and the viciously repressive economic power holders. The most fascinating part of the narrative, however, involves a young scientist, who, in the course of his research, discovers the extraordinary adaptation by certain flora and fauna to the ultra-violet rays pouring through the depleted ozone layer and the poisoned earth, and who finds himself guided by native spirits, thereby becoming an almost messianic figure. Contrapuntally, and almost a polar opposite, is Jack Tree, who makes much of his native heritage but has all but sold out to the economic establishment. This novella is fast-paced, it is very intense, and it is, unfortunately, all too believable. There is a logical progression from the actions of our present to this near future hell, where the cost of our consumer-driven, resource-guzzling society has to be paid. It is a novella that those who are environmentally aware will, of course, particularly appreciate. but that everybody should read, several times.

PS Publishing has earned a reputation for bringing out a highly eclectic range of very interesting work by diverse authors, which can only be enhanced by both of these offerings.

### Ian Cameron Esslemont – *Night of Knives*

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2005, 285pp, £35.00, h/b, ISBN 1-904619-18-5

This book's plot is, depending on how you look at it, either very complex or very simple. The complex version contains a large number of groups, organisations and individuals struggling to survive, and influence the course of, a single night of power which may or may not turn out to be The End Of The World As They Know It. The simple version is: they fight. For this is a book written by a dedicated wargamer, set in the world he co-invented with fellow gamer and author Steven Erikson. (Erikson has already published numerous books set in Malaz, the eighth of which, *The Bonehunters*, is due out early in 2006.)

The port of Malaz is a dull, insignificant place – except for one night in a generation, when the Shadow Moon brings forth Ice Riders, giant demon hounds, the undead, Imperial Claws (think ninja), 'cultists', cadre mages, pirates, the Bridgeburners with their alchemical grenade and mortar effects, at least one and possibly two representatives of an ancient armour-wearing alien race (or races), the vanished (or possibly ex-) Emperor Kellanved and his sidekick Dancer, a no-longer-human being called Edgewalker, a soldier hero who's had a successful second career masquerading as a workshy drunk, and a cocky young girl thief. They fight.

There's a lot of detailed description of weapons and armour, and a lot of pain and blood (for major characters often followed by magical healing, so that mere minutes after being on the point of death, they're ploughing straight back into the thick of the fray). They fight to regain the vacant throne (there is A Reason why the throne is or should remain vacant, but we're not told what it is), and to gain possession of or control over the Dead House, which is apparently a gateway between realities.

Chapter One (which is the chapter after the Introduction (about the evolution of Malaz through gaming), the Prologue (which introduces a shipful of rather interesting-sounding characters and kills them all off in a close encounter with the formidable Ice Riders, who then pretty much disappear from the action), and a section titled 'A Path Within Shadow' (in which Edgewalker teases an ancient alien ruler bound to a standing stone in the middle of a desert, while sensing Something Coming)) is called 'Portents and Arrivals'. That sentence should give you a good idea of the book's structure. It's obviously a labour of great love, written with immense care and attention to detail (if the

detail you're interested in is exactly how much damage a hand-thrown dagger can do through a boiled-leather backplate). Character development? Don't be silly; there isn't time for character development when you're suddenly being menaced by a man who can wield two longswords at once.

However two things about this book annoy me. One is the instant healing, which is simply *cheating*, and the other is summed up in a brief quote from page 188: "After jogging across the bailey, he pushed open the keep's door with the tip of one sword. More dead chaff here. The Claws, and perhaps even Ash, were thinning their ranks of expendables." In other words, people (etc.) who aren't Main Characters are chaff, expendables. Their main function is to become decorative corpses. We're not even in 'collateral damage' territory here; this is *pornography*; writing in which stuff gets done to anonymised, depersonalised bodies to create a colourful background effect. My 16-year old nephew would probably love it; and that scares me.

### S.E. Hinton – *Hawkes Harbor*

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger

Tor, New York, 2005, 254pp, \$14.99, h/b, ISBN 1-4050-5130-2

Hinton has been renowned since the publication *The Outsiders*, written when she was only 16, and often claimed as starting a revolution in young adult fiction. Her output since then has been sparse – this is only the eighth book in almost forty years. Having been so significant in the young adult category, she surprised her readership in 1995 by producing two picture books for much younger children; after a nine year gap comes *Hawkes Harbor*, her first novel aimed at adults.

The novel's prologue introduces us to Jamie Sommers, an Irish-American boy living in the Bronx in 1950, born out of wedlock and orphaned at the age of eight. Abandoned in a Catholic orphanage to the none-too-tender mercies of the nuns, he is already hardened by bullying and betrayal, and able to hold back both his feelings and his tears.

Fast forward to, well 1967 and 1964 mostly, to learn of Jamie's fate. In 1967 he is an asylum patient, hyper-sensitive to pain, terrified of everything, but most panic-stricken of all at twilight. In 1964 he was a feckless con-artist partnering Kellen Quinn, a more intelligent, more sophisticated crook who was always just about to make it big. Kellen seems to have become Jamie's substitute family, looking after him, annoying and cheating him, and inspiring a kind of devotion.

The structure of the novel is clever, teasing the reader with the 'before' and 'after' versions of Jamie, tantalising with snippets that might reveal what caused this transformation. To anyone in the

least familiar with genre fiction, however, it quickly becomes clear that Jamie has become a Renfield to his very own, Delaware version of Dracula. The puzzle then quickly changes from one of guessing what could possibly have happened, to one of wondering where the story will lead.

The language is choppy, the sentences ugly, the whole novel an unsatisfying exposition – this happened, then that happened, and the other thing had happened, and someone thought this and Jamie said that – that fails to build characters or engage the sympathies of the reader, leaving only the plot to build suspense and keep the pages turning. For a while this does work, there is the question of how our Renfield and his count found each other, whether Jamie will live or die, regain his sanity, escape from the one to whom he is enthralled. Then, just at the point where a simple horror story should have paid off with some grue, or a more teasing gothic tale would have offered a plausible and non-supernatural explanation, *Hawkes Harbor* abruptly becomes a different kind of book altogether. It abandons the genre reader without any kind of pay-off at all, introduces an outrageously unexplained McGuffin, and decides that it is a simple tale of Stockholm syndrome, the restorative properties of group sex, and the possibilities of redemption for those who had a bad start in life but find an open-minded community.

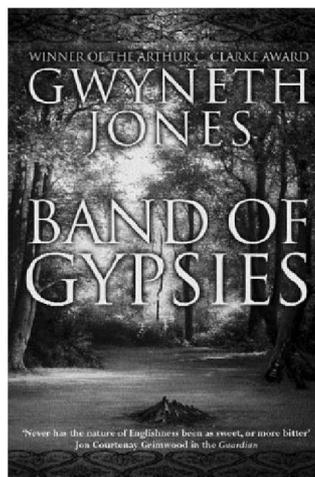
### Gwyneth Jones – *Band of Gypsies* □

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

Gollancz, London, 2005, 297pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07044-7

In this latest episode in the sequence which began with *Bold as Love* (see Vector 224), Ax, Sage and Fiorinda have returned from the US so that Ax can take up the Green Presidency. As a figurehead remote from political affiliations, he imagines that he will be able to become a positive influence for good. Instead, the Triumvirate find themselves manipulated for the sake of power.

The political story runs alongside the personal one. For me one of the delights of these books is the triangular relationship between Ax, Sage and Fiorinda; in this book it's consolidated rather than undergoing any major development; though a development is signalled towards the end, we'll have to wait for the next volume for it to be explored fully.



Like the previous books in the series, *Band of Gypsies* presents a detailed world. Jones's imaginative force is equally vivid in the various overlapping areas which make up the whole: the futuristic society, the life and work of the rock star characters, the realities of power politics, and the way all of these are laced with resurgent magic. Arthurian echoes remain, though these aren't as important as they were earlier. The style is spare and poetic at once, and impressively flexible; Jones can invoke a heartbreaking sense of loss or betrayal and almost immediately move into wry humour. There's a strong visual sense and a sensitivity in the dialogue to the rhythms of the spoken word.

This is the book I've been waiting for ever

since I read *Midnight Lamp* (see *Vector* 234). I wanted then to return to England since Englishness is such an important part of the 'flavour' of this particular world. Jones moves her society on skilfully as the Triumvirate face conflict with Government forces, then overturns all expectations with an amazing development in the later part of the book. Apologies for the generalisation: I'd ruin the book if I gave it away. Everything seems shattered, and yet the overriding feeling at the end is one of hope. Clearly this isn't the end, and once again I'm left waiting to find out what the next stage of the story will be.

I've said before in reviewing previous books that I don't think

it's a good idea to come into this series part way. Earlier events are sketched in, but I find it hard to imagine how a new reader would feel on entering the *Bold as Love* universe here. What has gone before is so complex in terms of plot and characterisation, that I think it would be almost impossible to appreciate this book fully without knowledge of the others. If you have been following this series then you probably don't need to read this review. If not, then I recommend starting at the beginning and reading the earlier books in order. You won't be disappointed.

## Kelly Link – *Magic for Beginners*

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Small Beer Press, Brooklyn, 2005, 272pp, \$24.00, h/b, ISBN 1-931520-15-1



You already know that you need to read this collection. You already know, even if, like me, you weren't as unconditionally adoring of Kelly Link's debut collection, *Stranger Things Happen*, as everyone else seemed to be. You already know, because somewhere in that collection there was a story – there may actually have been more than one for you, but there was at least one for everyone – that bewitched you like almost nothing else you've read. And now you'll pick up *Magic for Beginners*, hoping for another hit of the same drug.

The bad news is that, like the earlier book, the stories in Kelly Link's new collection are not unanimously successful. There is 'Catskin', for instance, a tale about a witch and her children and her cats, and revenge. Link's works lurk where logic fails; 'Catskin' takes a step too far into the dissonant zone, and the melange of surreality and fairytale familiarity ends up as less than the sum of its parts. There is also 'The Cannon', a story about marriage that, despite the presence of a wonderfully strange-but-believable culture, ends up too much on *our* side of the line. It is too solid, too comprehensible; not enough is left to our imagination.

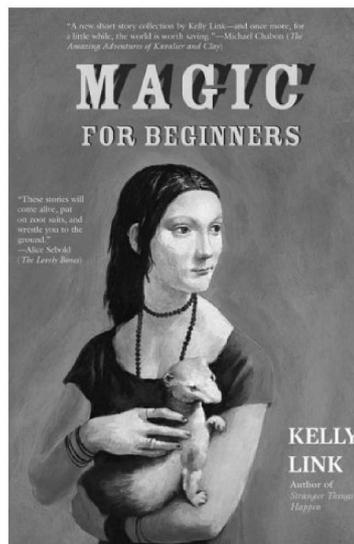
The good news, on the other hand, is that the rest of *Magic for Beginners* is excellent, memorable work. I hesitate to call these stories more *mature* than the earlier ones, because in many ways, with the staid reliability the word implies, it is an utterly inappropriate description. Link's stories are often funny, and always playful. But in some of her earlier work, there was a faint air of glibness, of experiment for the sake of experiment, or strange for the sake of strange. Here, the stories feel more fully developed. They are on average longer; they are also more complex, richer, and – most impressive of all – more emotionally satisfying, without losing the refusal of conventional narrative that so distinguishes Link as a storyteller. The hallmark of the stories in *Magic for Beginners* is that they feel *right* – even if you can't quite put your finger on *why*.

The book begins with its most straightforward story, which also happens to be the one that appeared on the BSFA award short fiction shortlist and won the Hugo Best Novелlette: 'The Faery Handbag'. It's a portal fantasy, which would fit neatly into the tradition exemplified by *Narnia* were it not for the fact that the heroine, Genevieve, never steps through into the other world. Instead, we get a story in which the fantastic largely happens elsewhere, to other people, and in which the most convincing evidence that magic has taken place is Genevieve's disingenuous entreaty that we promise not to believe a word she's telling us.

Most of the other stories are also set in what is almost our own world, but they don't distance themselves from the fantastic in the way that 'The Faery Handbag' does. Instead, they embrace it, until it is so meshed and mingled with the mimetic that the two are inseparable. When zombies visit a late-night convenience store in 'The Hortlak' they are not given any special treatment. They're just more customers, if slightly harder to understand than most. In 'The Great Divorce', a similarly matter-of-fact delivery sells the idea of marriages between the living and the dead. "It has been only in the last two decades," we are told, "that the living have been in the habit of marrying the dead, and it is still not common practice." After that, the appearance of a medium whose role seems closer to that of a therapist seems the most natural thing in the world. The deadpan tone of these stories is a promise of trust in the reader, an expectation that we'll be able to accept a different world, figure out how to react without being told. In that, at least, Link's approach resembles more traditional sf.

These are stories that resist easy allegorical interpretations – but they are not without meaning, and neither are they self-indulgently obscure. Zombies, or at least the threat of them, feature in another story in the collection: 'Some Zombie Contingency Plans'. The protagonist is this guy, who isn't really called Soap but isn't really called Will either, who goes to this party and meets this girl, Carly. But it's about finding your way in life, or about being lost in your past, or about existing in the gaps between the preceding two states, depending on how you look at it. It is also a fine example of the exuberance of Link's stories, being stuffed with details, side-stories, and dialogue full of the extrapolative logic of a 3am conversation. Which are worse, zombies or clowns? How is a zombie like an iceberg? What would you call your zombie website? How is prison like being lost in the woods? How would you know?

Three stories sing a little louder than the rest. First is 'Stone Animals', which is due to appear in the next volume of *Best American Short Stories*. It starts out as a quiet-suburbia story – Henry and Catherine move out of the city for the usual reasons, in pursuit of a better quality of life – but ends up as an elegant and devastating subversion of the same. Then there is 'Lull', a matrix of tales-within-tales that first appeared in the New Wave Fabulists issue of *Conjunctions*, which takes the notion of narrative time and ties it into elaborate and poignant knots. And there is the title story, 'Magic for Beginners', a long and wonderful novella that, if there's any justice in the world, will feature on every award ballot going, come 2006. It starts with Jeremy Mars (no relation to Veronica), on a rooftop, stargazing instead of doing his homework, and wondering when he'll see the next episode of *The Library*. *The Library* is a fantastical TV show that doesn't exist, or maybe a less fantastical TV show that Jeremy is a part of. 'Magic for Beginners'



examines how stories differ from real life, and in particular how the people we know can't be the characters we love; and along the way it captures perfectly what it feels like to love stories, and the communities that shared stories can create.

Science fiction, and to a lesser extent fantasy, seem at present to be going through a phase of self-obsession, particularly at shorter lengths. You can see the tendency in Ian Macleod's 'New Light on the Drake Equation', or William Barton's 'Off on a Starship', or Benjamin Rosenbaum's 'Biographical Notes to 'A Discourse on the Nature of Causality, With Air-Planes''. From some angles, Kelly Link could be seen as being a part of that

discussion. Her work spans the genres and bustles with their tropes; zombies and spaceships and clones and witches. Where she stands almost alone, however, is in her talent for making her stories new. Part of it is imagination; part of it is structure; part of it is something undefinable. *Magic for Beginners* is contradictory, and charming, and eerie, and beautiful, and it doesn't read like anything else you've ever come across. You already knew that you need to read this collection. You didn't need me to tell you.

## A. Lee Martinez – *Gil's All Fright Diner*

Tor, New York, 2005, 268pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0 765 31143 6

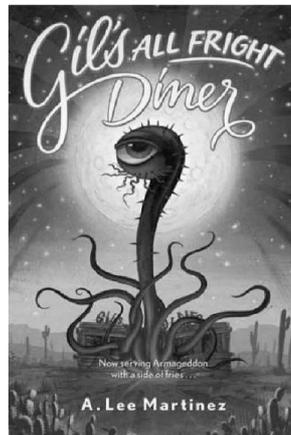
Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts



The first thing to be said is that this book has a bloody awful title. It would have been enough to put me off bothering with it had I not had it to review. This would have been a shame, as it's about the best weird comic horror I've encountered since

Joe Lansdale's *Drive-in* books. And in spite of the title it's pretty much devoid of stupid puns (I consider this to be a good thing, by the way). The problem I have with a good many supposedly funny novels is that the humour feels forced. This is not the case with this book. The humour comes not from stupid jokes, but from the author creating interesting characters and developing the story. This is a full-blown comedy rather a story with added jokes. It's also laugh-out-loud funny.

The story features Duke, a werewolf, and Earl, a vampire with a bad comb-over, as they encounter the numerous supernatural happenings centred on *Gil's All Night Diner*, which is located near a sparsely-populated small town in the Texas desert. When they arrive, the diner is suffering from something of a zombie problem as the residents of the neighbouring cemetery don't stay where they are supposed to. The formidable owner, Loretta (Gil having disappeared mysteriously some time earlier) takes them on to lay a new gas pipe. And get rid of the zombies. It all sort of escalates from there. Rapidly. The story itself is largely along the lines of two guys stop for a burger at a remote diner and end up having to save the world.



There is a plethora of endearingly bizarre characters, all of whom are fully integrated into the story. Teenager Tammy, who likes to be called Lilith, Queen of the Night, is progressing her diabolical plans to open the gates of Hell to allow in The Old Gods. She is not so ably assisted by her one and only acolyte, who is really only interested in making out with her. The local

sheriff is wonderfully down to earth and not particularly phased by the high level of supernatural shenanigans. Even the ghost of Herbert, doomed to haunt the Goofy Golf until he scores a perfect round, doesn't feel superfluous. He's just part of the supernatural furniture that makes the story so compelling. Duke and Earl themselves come across as being ordinary guys in extraordinary circumstances, their relationship having developed as a sort of grumpy mutual support arrangement.

The plot is fast moving, and given the shortness of the book, Martinez manages to pack a lot in. Not only is it a pacy action-adventure, there is plenty of back-story which gives the town and the characters a depth not normally associated with a novel of this type. There is even an effective and moving romantic subplot, which just happens to be between a vampire and a ghost. He can't go out in the day, and she can't leave the cemetery.

Sharply written, fast paced and genuinely funny, this is a terrific example of how comic genre novels should be done. Whatever Martinez does next, I'm planning to read it. He just needs to work on his titles.

## Richard Matheson – *Earthbound*

Tor, New York, 2005, 223pp, \$13.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-31171-2

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Described on the cover as 'an erotic ghost story', Richard Matheson's *Earthbound* has been around for some time in one form or another. Originally published as by Logan Swanson in 1982 and then rewritten and published under Matheson's own name in 1989, there is now a new edition available. It is the story of a middle-aged couple, David and Ellen, who have lost the magic from their relationship, and following an affair on the part of David, attempt to recapture it by having a second honeymoon in the remote cottage near to where they had their original one. The cottage, like the relationship, is cold and unwelcoming. The couple do their best to make the place liveable in, and in doing so start to rekindle the relationship.

The early part of the novel consists mainly of this delicate dance around one another's feelings, showing the two wanting to make things work, but having the spectre of David's affair as an almost physical presence that both attempt to avoid. The situation is complicated by the appearance of Marianna, a beautiful young woman whom David finds immediately attractive and becomes obsessed with. There is clearly something not right about the

presence of Marianna. The cottage is very remote and yet when she appears it is in the cottage and without warning. She also only ever appears when there is little or no danger of discovery by Ellen. She loses no time in seducing him and soon makes the relationship physical, after which the guilt sets in, and David then has to confront and fight his own desires. It is this fight that takes up the rest of the story, and even when told of her true nature by the only other character they encounter, he is unable to accept the reality of it. Although, when that reality is that a woman who he has recently had sex with is in fact a ghost then it's hardly surprising he doesn't want to believe it.

This is the type of ghost story where the ghost can be seen as a manifestation of the desires of the person seeing it and the whole setting, from the opening, portrays the state of David and Ellen's relationship. David has to come to terms with both what Marianna represents and the effect that her presence is having on his relationship with Ellen. The more that he succumbs to Marianna, the harder it is for him to pull away from her, and the more distant his relationship with Ellen becomes. This is all related effectively,

with David slowly recognising what is going on, and having to face his obsession and the fact that his short and long term desires are in direct conflict with one another. As the story progresses, the supernatural elements come to the fore and it builds to an effective and powerful climax. While *Earthbound* is not exactly

vintage Matheson, such as *I am Legend* (1954) or *The Shrinking Man* (1956), it is still a refreshingly short, effective and well-told ghost story.

## Paul McAuley – *Mind's Eye*

Simon and Schuster, London, 2005, 422pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 0-7432-3887-7

Reviewed by Pete Young

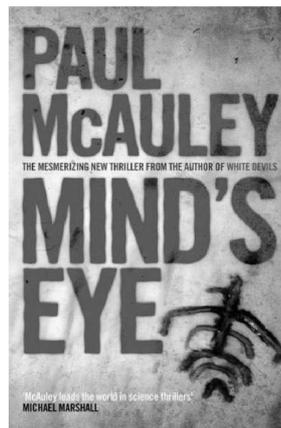


McAuley's currently-occupied niche of the mainstream science thriller has lately seen him mining a rich seam of material from a variety of scientific disciplines, almost making light of the fact that he has a better scientific pedigree – especially in the context of its believable application to

fiction – than many of his contemporaries. If that all sounds too terribly serious and business-like, McAuley is also smart enough to remind us he can also be a dab hand at the knowing wink and the meaningful nudge when he wants to: it's meant to be fun, after all, and *Mind's Eye* is most certainly that.

The plot begins as a straightforward enough London urban mystery: a number of 'glyphs' have been appearing throughout the city, graffitied symbols that have origins in ancient history and a power to unleash damaging mental demons in those susceptible to their influence. The secret services know about them, a clandestine international group wants the secret of their power for themselves, but ahead of all this a London photographer with a family secret that gave him a lifelong sensitivity to the glyphs has found his vulnerability to them unexpectedly reawakened, and he is drawn into a search for their creator and a mystery than goes deeper and further than he could ever have suspected.

The time and setting is bang up-to-date, being post-Iraq invasion, a point of some relevance to the unexpected direction *Mind's Eye* takes. There's also a *Heart of Darkness* structure to its X-Files-like plot; McAuley then pours on a heavy *Spooks* sensibility and serves it up as the Saturday night TV movie; for



good measure he throws in a group of particularly believable characters and sets them up against the kind of rakish villainy that is on show in just about any Robert Ludlum novel, though what McAuley has evidently done well (that others do less successfully) is write some distinctly British quirkiness to the characters. Combining all the foregone, the resulting mix is rather intoxicating. The strongest sense of place in *Mind's Eye* is given not so much to London itself but to those vaguely anonymous and bleakly industrialised landscapes that surround it; again, *Spooks* and *Minder* territory, the suburban sprawl of charmless English sleaze, council estates and semi-wasted lands. His narrative flowers particularly well in these locales and they are the backdrop for some good set pieces.

I'll safely put money on McAuley not having been to northern Iraq recently, and the scenes there that fill the second half of the book do not quite have the well-researched and 'embedded' feel he achieved throughout *White Devils*. But *Mind's Eye* never quite takes you to the absolute source of its particular mystery. Instead we're treated to a fun assortment of bravado, derring-do and other necessarily close calls leaving open-ended the earliest origins of the glyphs, this knowledge perhaps understandably left undiscovered and lost to the depths of prehistory but leaving a gap that one might feel needs filling to properly round out the novel completely. Nevertheless it has to be said that just as *White Devils* turned everyone's heads and had McAuley favourably mentioned in the same breathe as Michael Crichton, *Mind's Eye* provides further justification for that superior comparison.

## David McIntee – *Beautiful Monsters*

Telos, Tolworth, 2005, 272pp, £9.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-94-4

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

In *Beautiful Monsters* David McIntee claims that Ridley Scott's *Alien* is not a science fiction movie because: "Science fiction is about humanity, and how it might develop under other, usually future circumstances. It asks, will we be better or worse?" (p. 41)

*Alien*, McIntee says, does not deal with these questions because "it would work just the same if it were set aboard, say, a tramp steamer that picked up something nasty in the jungles of South America." *Aliens*, he claims however, is sf because it shows colonists terraforming an alien world. But *Aliens* isn't about the colonists, it is about the unit of colonial marines sent to rescue them. And they behave just as a unit of US Marines would have if they had encountered something nasty in the jungles of Vietnam.

McIntee's attempt to limit the scope of sf could be used to rule out almost any film or book where people behave in a recognisably human way. He has assumed that there are only two possible answers to his question, that we must be either better or worse under other circumstances. Surely it is possible that we will be neither better nor worse but the same or at least recognisably similar.

It seems to me that the idea that blue collar workers flying spaceships, making profits for a company that doesn't give a shit about their future, might act in recognisably similar ways to workers building ships or skyscrapers for companies who also

don't give a shit is as valid a piece of sf conjecture as H.G. Wells suggesting that we'll all become Eloi or Morlocks.

There are other elements in McIntee's assessment of these films that I would take issue with. He is either blinded by his own fanish inclinations or, more likely, pandering to his audience in his rating of these franchises. *Predator* is fun, but hardly merits a perfect ten out of ten. *Predator 2* is too average a film and *Alien*<sup>3</sup> suffered too much from studio interference to deserve anything like nine out of ten. While *Alien: Resurrection* and *Alien Versus Predator* both fail as films in their own right and as continuations of their franchise's heritage and surely can't deserve his generous ratings of seven and six, respectively.

Because *Beautiful Monsters* is an "unofficial and unauthorised" guide it lacks any illustrations and pictures to illuminate the text. These are sorely missed – especially when discussing cast members or hardware, when the text can be heavy going. Similarly, the chapters devoted to 'spin-offery' – books, comics, video games and memorabilia – descend into rather dry lists. As a casual reader I found it hard going, but I wondered whether there would be enough detail for the true fanatic.

A book that placed more emphasis on analysis than anecdote would, I think, have been more interesting for the casual reader but this is a book squarely aimed at fans, and so *Beautiful*

*Monsters* contains the kind of obsessively detailed trivia that fans desire. It is something of a missed opportunity to bring together these franchises, made up of seven very different films, but then refer to them only as discrete objects without meaningful reference to their relationship, similarities and contrasts.

Despite these shortcomings McIntee's writing style is engaging

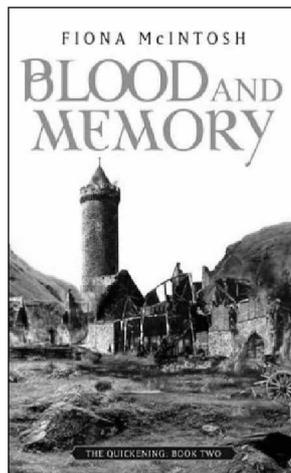
enough to keep pages turning and there were enough little nuggets of interesting stuff scattered throughout the text to keep me entertained. *Beautiful Monsters* is solidly researched, sensibly put together and an engaging read. It is more a book to dip into than consume whole, though its lack of illustrations and narrow scope probably limit its appeal to all but a hard-core of fans.

**Fiona McIntosh – *Blood and Memory*** 📖

Orbit, London, 2005, 536pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-374-0

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

This is the second volume of *The Quickening* trilogy, following on directly from the magical transformation of Wyl Thirsk, once a General and 'friend' to King Celimus of Morgravia, into the body (first) of a mercenary hired to kill him. At the end of the first volume (*Myrren's Gift* reviewed in *Vector 241*), Wyl, posing as the mercenary, is the subject of an assassination by a professional female killer, which goes wrong when Wyl kills her and finds himself in her body. Not only that, but he finds himself with access to two sets of memories for her – one as a whore and the other as a hired killer. For Wyl, and those who know him, life is far from simple. He has sworn to protect Valentyna, Queen of Briavel, from the attentions of Celimus, who wants to marry her and then annex her realm, with the ultimate aim of taking on Cailech, the Mountain King, who is a threat to both realms. In addition, he has his sister Ylena to safeguard. Fortunately, he has allies, in the form of Elspyth, a young woman he met on his travels, and Fynch, a resourceful young lad who travels with Knave, a dog who is much more than what he seems.



with killing his own sister. When he catches up with her, there is yet another twist in the tale. In addition, there are hidden forces at work which are set to have repercussions for several of the main protagonists.

Meanwhile, Valentyna is facing problems of her own, and is coming to terms with the idea that she will have to marry Celimus, until she meets with the family of Ylena's late husband (executed at Celimus' behest): she wants proof of this action from Ylena, who witnessed it. Cailech has his own plans, as do two other people, one close to him, and one to Valentyna. As for Fynch, he has an even greater challenge ahead of him.

Aside from all his other tribulations, Wyl is determined to find the person responsible for his predicament and secure a reversal of the 'gift'. When he does find him, he has another surprise in store, because Myrren had a plan of action for him which comes as a complete shock, and he learns that the 'gift' will remain until he has completed her plans, but it is up to him to determine how he will accomplish this task. His act of kindness on the way to her execution is paying dividends that he never anticipated.

This novel ends on a great cliffhanger, and the scene is well and truly set for the final part of the trilogy. I really enjoyed it, definitely recommend it, and eagerly await the next volume.

**James Morris – *The Escapist*** 📖

PABD, London, 2005, 165pp, £8.99, p/b, ISBN 1-905290-05-5

**Ian Hocking – *Déjà Vu*** 📖

UKA Press, Portishead, 2005, 295pp, £9.99, p/b, ISBN 1-904781-15-2

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Here we have two near-future, British sf thrillers from small publishers, both available from Amazon, both rereading fairly standard genre material.

*The Escapist* is the more bijou of the two, offering a slim tale about roguish hero Bentley Dean, a guy who has walked both sides of the line but when we join him is treading the straight and narrow, working for COSI (the Central Office for Strategic Intelligence). It appears that somebody is kidnapping famous scientists and wiping their minds, and Dean is roped in to investigate the latest of these 'Mind Invasions'. After an unsuccessful attempt on his life, the COSI agent realises that another player has entered the game and the plot seems to revolve around an artificial intelligence called the Pure Light Abacus. Dean sets out to trace this McGuffin with a host of bad guys on his trail.

It's a perfunctory cyberpunk tale, with some nice humorous touches and a distinctly *Stainless Steel Rat* feel to the wise-cracking narrow escapes (except for a kinky torture scene involving a courgette!). There's a globe-trotting plot but no sense of changing locale and it's hard to engage with the glib characterisation and clumsy info-dumps. Curious then to find several rave reviews on Amazon all using the tell-tale language of an experienced blurb writer. What can it mean?

*Déjà Vu* is by far the more professionally written of the two books, offering a complex plot, more involving characters and more readable prose. The story features two intersecting narratives

following scientist David Proctor and cop Saskia Brandt as they deal with terrorism, virtual reality and time travel.

The story is set in 2023 and David Proctor is back at the West Lothian Research Centre where his wife was killed in a bomb blast many years before. There has been another incident and Proctor is soon on the run, accused of murder and terrorism. At the same time Saskia Brandt wakes up to find her secretary's dead body in FIB headquarters in Berlin and her investigations begin to point the finger of suspicion at herself. She finds she is not the person she thought she was. Her personality has been reconstructed to hide the details of a previous life.

The two narratives begin to intersect as the story becomes more complex and the pace picks up. Hocking starts with an understated thriller then brings in more and more science fiction elements. As he does so I tended to lose interest. The standard genre elements, such as personalities trapped in a digital environment and time travel paradoxes, are not deployed or explored in a way that an experienced genre fan would find particularly fresh. However, the book is well structured and a relatively enjoyable read apart from a predictable dénouement (the clue is in the title).

Two relatively standard efforts then, although Hocking shows enough promise in *Déjà Vu* to warrant a glance at any future work. And the fact that two small press books are unashamedly in the sf genre is to be welcomed.

**Andre Norton – *Three Hands for Scorpio***

Tor, New York, 2005, 302pp, \$23.95, h/b ISBN 0-765-30464-3

Reviewed by Lesley Hatch

The story contained in this novel is told in reverse, by female triplets born in a land called Alsonia. Tamara, Sabina and Drucilla are the daughters of Desmond Scorpy, Earl of Verset: they were born on the day of a major battle against the army of Gurlyon, a land which has always caused problems for Alsonia and its Queen. Despite the introduction of Border Law, enforced by appointed Warders, raids continue from both sides of the border, and matters have been further complicated by the sudden death of the King and the disappearance of his seven-year-old heir.

It is against this backdrop that the three sisters grow up, each one possessing some form of the Talent – a form of magic inherited from their mother – in which they are tutored by her and a Wise-wife. They have also been taught to ride and use conventional weapons – initially against their will, because of their magical and mental skills, but they do comply when their father points out that the people of Gurlyon are fearful of magic.

Their story really begins when one of the Gurly lords – Starkadder – arrives to agree terms for a truce in the border areas. In his party, besides himself and his son, there are various

kinsmen and retainers and (unexpectedly) an ascetic priest whose order, the Chosen, has considerable influence at the Royal Court. Things get off to a bad start when the priest denounces the sisters as whores, and Tamara is propositioned by the Starkadder son, which causes her to insult him and potentially jeopardise the truce. As a consequence, they are left behind when their parents leave to attend the truce talks, and this paves the way for their kidnapping and abandonment in an area called the Dismals, from which no-one escapes.

All things considered, the story is an enjoyable one – it has strong characters, intrigue, not too much display of magic or warfare, and a mystery surrounding Zolan. There is also a sub-plot concerning certain artefacts found in the Dismals, which it would be unfair of me to reveal.

The novel concludes with several loose ends, which pave the way for a sequel that I would like to see. The three daughters of the Scorpy line, young ladies with minds of their own, definitely deserve to have more adventures.

**Andy Secombe – *The Last House in the Galaxy***

Tor, London, 2005, 335pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 1-4050-4618-X

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

Andy Secombe seems to have grown since I reviewed his debut novel, *Limbo*, two years ago. This one's about sixty pages longer than the other, but at least the increase in bulk is muscle rather than flab. First novels can have a spotty, greasy adolescent feel about them. They promise so much yet rarely fulfil their potential. Later novels have usually matured and exhibit the author in his or her prime. However, further into an author's career, their novels suffer from hair-loss, difficulties with vision, not to mention middle-age spread and worries about the mortgage. (The same could be said of cynical reviewers.) I'm hoping that *The Last House in the Galaxy* will begin the prime steak of Secombe's career, but I'm worrying that there are signs that the steak could be overdone all too soon.

Sticking with the rather awkward food analogy, but moving into the area of baking, if his first novel was a digestive biscuit, his latest is a triple chocolate chip muffin. Whether he moves onto the complexities of choux pastry time will tell. So what's in Secombe's latest recipe?

One Helian Cartogram, a map of the Universe's wormhole network.

Add one Galactic crusade headed by the righteous Gulgus Filch, destroying the unholy in his path, and after the Helian Cartogram, which would allow him to sweep through the cosmos.

Mix in one Major Matt Fripp, who has stolen the Helian

Cartogram, upsetting Gulgus's plans, and trying to pass it on to General Glaak Raffin, a pipe-smoking rat of the Galactic Alliance.

Squeeze in a generous portion of Mariella Schprungg (I'd prefer two portions but it really isn't that sort of book), one-time fiancée of Gulgus, but actually a Galactic Alliance agent, whom Matt has to save from Gulgus.

Top this with a glazing of Sir Percy and Lady Trenchard, struggling to keep hold of their Devon estate, Hambledon Hall.

This is all rounded off with, one butler, Whipple, whipped into a frenzy when members of the Galactic Alliance appear out of wormhole located above a rhododendron bush on the estate. Whipple is then mixed up with saving the Galaxy whilst keeping the alien guests secret from the Trenchards. The reversion of the derelict west wing to a Victorian era complete with masked ball only adds to Whipple's problems.

And if that wasn't enough, there's a theme park and a brain-in-a-jar involved as well. As usual with this sort of fiction, God also plays a cameo role, spending a lot of time in His kitchen,

which fits in with the cooking analogy – just.

Left to bake for several hundred pages, the end result is an occasionally amusing romp with sideward glances to other contemporary comic fantasy/sf writers. It's a shame that there's no cherry. Perhaps the next novel will be a trifle more fulfilling.

**Dan Simmons – *Olympos***

Gollancz, London, 2005, 690pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-575-07262-8

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

*Olympos* is not, as it says on the cover, 'The stunning sequel to *Ilium*' (though you might well be stunned if someone hit you over the head with it – God forbid, the hardback version would probably kill you (sorry, there's a LOT of violence in this book)).

*Olympos* is actually the rest of the unfinished novel begun in *Ilium* and left dangling on a mountainous cliff-hanger as reported in my original review in these pages (see Vector 234). The sum total is a gigantic 1,300 large trade paperback pages. The regular paperback will probably log in at combined 1,700 pages.

Mysteriously, eight months have gone by since the end of

*Ilium*, and the war then about to break out between Greeks and Trojans on one side, and the Greek gods on the other, is mere backdrop to the aftermath of Paris' death and imminent funeral. But the blood is soon flying as various labyrinthine machinations involving the cast of the *Iliad* conspire to reset the clock and get Greeks besieging Troy again. And then Simmons whisks us back to the future, where, since the end of the previous volume, humans are having to work for a living, as well as fight off rampaging hordes of Voynex. When Odysseus (aka Noman) is seriously injured, Harman, Hannah, and Petyr head back to the

abandoned city on the bridge near Machu Picchu in the hope of saving him, and Harman is dragged off by Ariel on a mysterious voyage around the globe in the company of Prospero. Meanwhile, as all good villains do, Caliban has impossibly survived his supposed destruction, but returns only to be reduced to an ineffectual bit part.

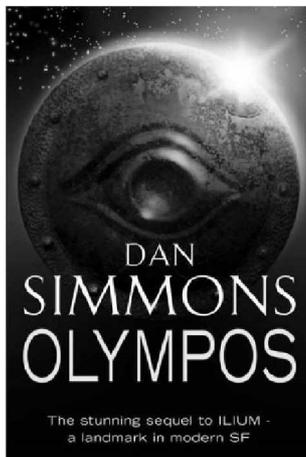
Meanwhile on Olympus the gods are warring, though they also have a lesser role this time round, and our heroic moravecs have built themselves (in a nice nod to Project Orion) an atomic-bomb-powered titanic spaceship styled around 20<sup>th</sup> century imagery, for a journey to earth to find out what is causing the quantum level disturbances that threaten the stability of the solar system (and perhaps the universe). Add to this the bizarre, frankly ludicrous, yet still chillingly malevolent Shakespearean super monster Setebos turning the threat level up several notches, much cutting between various universes and a tangled history sprawling through numerous epochs and enigmatically alluded to distant events, and the wonder is Simmons can keep control of his material at all.

The whole vast stew of a plot does constantly teeter on the very edge of becoming a completely deranged mess, yet there are many places in *Olympos* where the reader is likely to be in awe of Simmons' organisational abilities; though surely this is not a novel that could have been written without the aid of a database. The cast of characters and span of plot is simply too vast to keep track of otherwise. And for the most part keep track of it all Simmons does, with a saga ranging from the now ruined Ardis Hall to the depths of Tartarus itself – yes, complete with demigorgons and Titans – all given a passable science-fictional gloss. At its best *Olympos* is terrifically entertaining, racing by with boldly muscular prose and elaborate, often thrilling, bone-crunching violent set-pieces. The fall of Ardis Hall, Daeman's adventures in Paris (the city, not the Trojan hero), and Ada's final stand particularly come to mind. (If *Olympos* were a movie it might play like *Troy* meets *Total Recall* meets *Dawn of*

*the Dead* (2004 version) directed by John Milius on steroids with a billion dollar budget).

Simmons delivers a nice line in dry, understated humour, and while the epic is something of a romp, it also attempts to be questioningly thoughtful in places, though never approaches the complexity and depth of the author's earlier *Hyperion*. Here the literary referencing is all too much of a game.

There are more serious problems. While much becomes clear, much else is simply left unexplained, not resolved at all, or



concluded in ways that are either anti-climatic or ridiculous. For all the carefully worked-out detail and sometimes complex characterisation it paradoxically feels like Simmons is sometimes just making it all up as he goes. A late entry in the storyline casting long dead Muslims as apocalyptic terrorists seems like a sudden addition, one designed to add some extra threat to the latter stages of the story, while simultaneously pandering to the very worst of current American attitudes. Especially so when we discover the reason the planet is so under-populated concerns an Islamic-lab-made Jew-killing virus which went wrong.

Aside from this highly unbalanced anti-Islamic aspect (there are no good Muslims in the universe of *Illum/Olympos*), too much is left not just unresolved but essentially pointless. Such

that, enjoyable as much of the tale is, it is hard in retrospect to recommend it with more than guarded enthusiasm. Indeed, given the pop-culture references which pepper the tale it is hard not to think, when reaching the final scene, of the film *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, and to consider how far below the standard of the original film in the series that fifth entry was. *Olympos* is equally far below the high standard of Simmons' best work. I for one hope Simmons can now leave this hugely entertaining but ultimately preposterous and massively disappointing saga behind for something more worthy of his talents.

## Martin Sketchley – *The Destiny Mask*

Simon and Schuster, London, 2005, 369pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-7432-5680-8

Reviewed by Chris Hill

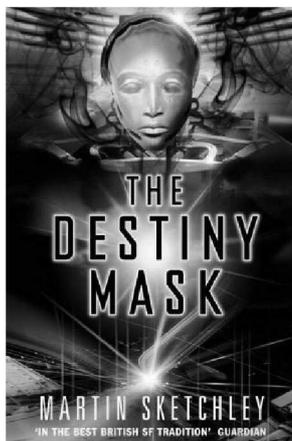
Twenty years have passed since the events of *The Affinity Trap* (reviewed in *Vector* 235) and it turns out that (explained by some narrative hand-waving in the first few pages) ex-Structure Military Intelligence Officer Alexander Delgado did not *permanently* die. Since his resurrection he has been working with the resistance against the Structure, now accompanied by his son by Voumiass Lycern, Cascari. Then the Monsiell, head of the Seriatt royal household, dies and Delgado believes that his son is the rightful heir. But Delgado's old enemy, Myson, also has a successor ready, his son Michael. Delgado sets out on a mission to assassinate Michael, accompanied by Cascari and his one time (and possibly future) lover Ashala, not knowing that Michael is actually his own son.

In the meantime, the Seriatt Oracles are experimenting with time travel and have visions of a saviour that they did not even realise they needed.

The first thing to note is that *The Destiny Mask* dives straight into the story; Sketchley makes few concessions to those who have not read *The Affinity Trap*. So if you are not sure what Delgado has against Myson, who Lycern was and what the different genders of the Seriatt are, you will not get any help here.

*The Destiny Mask* is both a great improvement on the earlier

volume and not as good as it could have been. The main improvement is that the characters seem to have developed a sense of humour in the last 20 years. The mission of assassination is enlivened by many a sardonic quip between Delgado, Cascari and Ashala. The central quest is generally entertaining in its very incompetence. Delgado is a million miles away from the multi-competent hero of space opera tradition. The gang are wounded, get knocked unconscious, captured, escape only to get captured again, and mow down innocent bystanders with carefree abandon (the book has a body count that would make a certain Mr Schwarzenegger green with envy).



The problem is that overall the book feels rather hollow. I found the peripheral events (the Seriatt time-travel experiments, the arrival of a possible invasion force through the wormhole) far more interesting than the running around by the Keystone Psychos. And while I understand the reasons for the hollow, cold heart at the centre of Delgado's being, it does not often make him pleasant company.

The central story, although fun, is somewhat repetitive and mired in cliché. For example, at one point an escape is made possible by a guard being tricked into thinking that one of the prisoners is injured. Frankly, this scenario should

only be used for humorous purposes and makes me wonder whether I just missed the joke.

In fact, sections like those described above and the callousness of the lead characters make me wonder whether the book is intended, at least in part, to be satirical and I have missed the point entirely. In any case I would be happier if there was some indication that Delgado will eventually be redeemed or even feel the consequences of his actions (and the love he feels

for his son does not count – normal human feeling does not redemption make).

The book ends on a great cliff-hanger and, despite my doubts about *The Destiny Mask*, I do want to know what happens next. But this book feels like it is just marking time before the major events of the next (final?) novel.

### Craig Spector – *Underground*

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

Tor, New York, 2005, 254pp, \$23.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30660-3

There's always a house. The house is old. It has a history. When the protagonists were younger something happened to them in the house, something terrifying, something tragic, something that haunts their lives. They escape from it for a number of years, perhaps decades. Then a series of events causes them to return, to end that terrible chapter in their lives. So it is written.

Over and over again.

So what makes this book any different from the others of this ilk? If there are only a handful of plots, there are still limitless variations. How much this differs from others depends more on what the audience has already read or seen. This is yet another.

This one concerns seven friends, who, in their late-teens, were a group calling themselves The Underground. This group were into music and drugs. They wanted to change the world, experience something that really mattered. Unfortunately, on one drug-fuelled Labour Day they did.

In the house on the Southern plantation. One of The Underground died. Another disappeared. The remaining five's lives were shattered. They were unable to cope with what had happened.

Twenty years later one of The Underground, Justin, returns to the house and passes through the mirror. The remaining four have to now face up to their past demons and confront an even greater

evil of the Great Night and set the trapped souls of thousands free.

So far there isn't much to go on for this being any different to other stories. Except that, as the house is on a Southern plantation, the great evil is entwined with the history of slavery and the merciless slave masters. This is what made *Underground* stand out for me to begin with. The issue of slavery comes up again and again, but not so often in the horror genre, at least in my limited experience. The writing was also tight, keeping to the point and not veering off at tangents and into superfluous character histories.

After reading about halfway through the book, I was unable to maintain any enthusiasm for it. I'm not entirely sure why. Perhaps it was because I thought I'd just wait for the B-movie to come out? Or perhaps it was that beginnings offer so many more possibilities than endings, so many books begin better than they end. *Underground* was no exception, particularly as I felt I'd read or seen this story many times before. Variety is said to be the spice of life, but *Underground* lacked enough Cajun ingredients to be spicy enough for me.

### Tricia Sullivan – *Double Vision*

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Orbit, London, 2005, 377pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 1-84149-337-6

'Cookie' Orbach is an almost stereotypical picture of a *sf/fantasy* fan. In her mid twenties or early thirties (there is evidence she is rather older than she appears), she lives alone with her cat, has never had a serious romantic relationship, and has a serious weight problem. She plays Dungeons and Dragons with her geeky friend Miles – she is a paladin – and reads escapist *sf/fantasy* romance novels. (Her favourite is Anne McCaffrey.)

Cookie has a very odd job. At work she is a Flier, an airborne scout in a war on an alien planet light years away. From her cubbyhole in the oddly-named Department of Extraterrestrial Hauntings in the Foreign Markets Research Division of Dataplex, her earthbound 197 pounds are forgotten as she rides the senses of Gossamer, a tissue-thin human-modified alien life-form, aloft over the fractal chaos of the voracious alien ecology known as the Grid. Cookie's job is reconnaissance, supporting and reporting to the soldiers on the ground and the hidden strategic AIs of Machine Front.

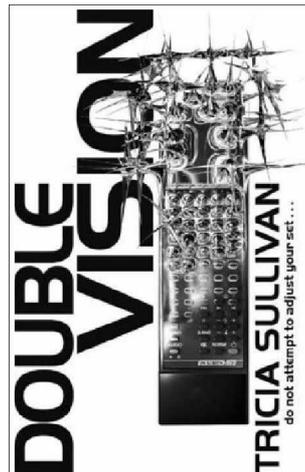
Down in the Grid, a group of soldiers, led by Capt Bonny Serge, are trying to locate a lost member of their unit, Arla Gonzalez, who has been missing for some days. Machine Front is also anxious to recover the missing soldier, who may be in possession of a vital key to the Grid's organisation, and a method for finally defeating it. Arla, though, has also found something else, and may have plans of her own.

Cookie is dedicated to her job as a Flier, but wonders why her

Dataplex boss, Gunther, doesn't appear to treat her reports and debriefing sessions with the same urgency and importance, even when lives are at stake. And pretty soon the reader starts to notice incongruities. All the cultural and technological references identify this as taking place in New Jersey in the mid 1980s, a most unlikely setting for the support of a war on an alien planet. How do the soldiers even get there? Even Cookie thinks the explanation she is given, about 'hi-torsion accelerators somewhere in New Hampshire' is unconvincing, while to us it sounds like so much technobabble.

And why is there a curious emphasis on the listing of brand name products in Cookie's reports and debriefings? (The soldiers' proscription against littering is explained as the Grid's voracious appetite for external contamination: soldiers are instructed to immolate their bodies rather than risk them being absorbed by the Grid and returned, nine-fold, as golems). Then the curious fact that all the soldiers are women (an earlier, male expedition apparently ended in disaster; Serge's team keep running across their golems), many of whom appear to be unwilling conscripts.

But when Cookie sneaks a look at one of Gunther's transcripts there is no mention of the war, just a list of product names and scores. The clincher seems to come when, in one session, she likens her experience of being spread out through Gossamer's senses as being "like a starfish. Cookie Starfish, that's me", and finding in her next visit to the supermarket a new product, starfish



shaped cookies, on display.

Everything points to the fact that Cookie is being used as a form of product marketing test bed, to exploit her hypersusceptibility to advertising. But why this particular scenario? Flying as Gossamer might be an understandable compensatory fantasy for someone of Cookie's size. However, the war on the Grid reads more like something out of a Lucius Shepard or Richard Levy novel than Cookie's preferred reading, which runs to Anne McCaffrey and Tolkien. (The dragons, when they appear, turn out to be very nasty indeed). There's more than enough evidence that Cookie has a strongly repressed capacity for violence and anger, both physical and verbal, and her inability or unwillingness to curse is mirrored in the odd, and initially grating, circumlocution of 'f\*#k's when Serge gets upset. (The danger is you start reading things into this. I started wondering if this was actually an expletive or a reference to a well-known clothing brand, but Cookie wouldn't be familiar with the latter from her

perspective in 1980s New Jersey.)

But if it's not coming from Cookie, why would a market research bureau devise such a (literally) outlandish and horrific story line in order to test the appeal of cosmetics and granola bars? (Machine Front's weapons have names like MaxFact and MFeels.)

*Double Vision* is one the most intriguing sf novels I've read in ages. It works on a number of levels. The war on the Grid is an intriguing, well-told sf story in itself. Cookie, for all her self-deprecation, is a likeable heroine who is a lot stronger and self-reliant than she thinks she is, one who doesn't suffer fools gladly and has a sharp acerbic tongue. And then there's the way Sullivan ties these two stories together, keeping the reader vacillating between alternative explanations, even as she makes some sharply observed comments about sf fans' ability and willingness to suspend disbelief.

## Steph Swainston – *No Present Like Time*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 317pp, £9.99, h/b, ISBN 0-575-07006-4

Reviewed by Carol Ann Kerry-Green

Jant Shira, half Awian, half Ryhdanne, the only winged person in the Fourlands who can actually fly. As such he is the Emperor and the Circle's Messenger and translator. Comet. Immortal. Hooked on drugs. Again.

In her first novel *The Year of Our War*, Steph Swainston introduced us to the world of the Fourlands, to the centuries-old war between its inhabitants and the invading Insects. Leading the war is the Emperor San and his circle of Immortals, fifty individuals who are the best at what they do and who have gained a place in the Circle by Challenge.

*No Present Like Time* opens with one such Challenge. Wrenn, a young soldier, has challenged Serein Gio Ami who has been the current Swordsman for four hundred years, and has won. Leaving the celebrations behind, he joins Lightning, Jant and Mist on a long sea voyage to Tris, an island newly discovered three months' sail from the mainland, to which the Emperor has ordered them. Jant doesn't want to go, he has a phobia of the sea, so he turns to the only thing that will get him through the voyage. Drugs.

When the immortals arrive at Capharnaum the capital of Tris, they find a society that is as different from their own as any could be. A utopian society, ruled by a Senate with no crime. The arrival of the delegation from the Fourlands throws the Senate and the Capharnaum into turmoil, their constitution warns against contact with outsiders.

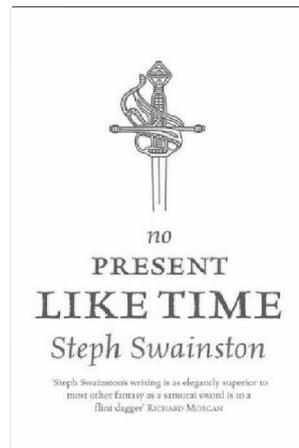
Jant begins his exploration of the language and the culture of Tris only for it to be brought to an abrupt end when the captive Insect which Mist had brought with them to prove their existence to the sceptical Trisians) escapes and causes havoc in the harbour.

Despite heroic efforts by Jant, Wrenn and Lightning, the Insect burrows underground and though the immortals offer to hunt it down, the Senate had already decided that they did not want the visitors to stay; the escape of the Insect and the death of their citizens only exacerbates this.

On the journey back, Jant tries to distract himself, both from the Sea he hates and his dependency on drugs, by reading the history book he stole from the Trisian library. From this he begins to believe that the Emperor San, knows more about the Trisians than he's letting on. The book tells of San, a mythological figure who was 'supposed to have been given eternal life by god before it left the world; to advise on god's behalf.' (p141) and though the author of the book does not believe in his immortality, he acknowledges that it was San who united the warring tribes against the Insects. The Humans and Awians who occupy Tris are the descendents of those people who could not accept the new order and left the Fourlands.

On their return, the travellers find the world in chaos. Gio Ami, the ousted Swordsman, has ignited a rebellion against the Emperor and his circle of Immortals. Building on the resentment felt by mortals, he is leading an army on the Emperor's Castle.

Swainston builds up the tension and suspense throughout this book and leaves the reader wondering where she is going next with its intricacies of plot. Jant is a very believable flawed character, who nonetheless manages to do the job his Emperor sets him, no matter the personal cost. A very satisfying follow up to *The Year of Our War*, Swainston uses fantasy in a new and exciting manner, which will hopefully continue in her future novels.



## Gene Wolfe – *Starwater Strains*

Tor, New York, 2005, 352pp, \$25.95, h/b (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0-765-31202-6

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

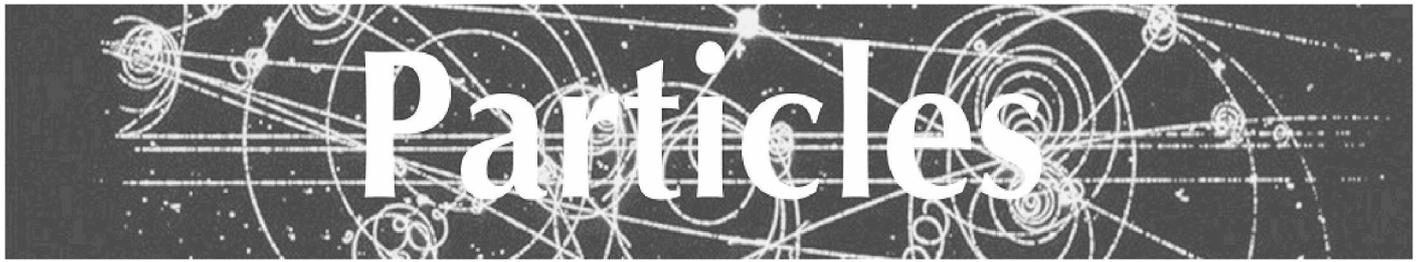
In Gene Wolfe's stories, the teller is as important as the tale. This is perhaps even more obvious in his short fiction than it is in his novels. Certainly the telling of the majority of the tales in *Starwater Strains* – which is (predominantly) a collection of (nominally) science fiction stories that date from (mostly) 2000 to 2004 – is in some ways complicated.

There are stories here, such as 'Black Shoes', that profess to be secondhand. The author may note that he heard this story from an old college friend – or, as with 'Rattler', overheard it in a truckstop. There are stories containing stories, such as 'Graylord

Man's Last Words', or the excellent 'From the Cradle'; stories in the form of letters, such as 'The Fat Magician'; and stories that aspire to myth, like 'The Boy Who Hooked the Sun'. All of these devices define, and often limit, how we understand any given story. Even in those stories that are told directly, without additional remove from the action, the narrators can be lazy, or misinformed, or confused. Wolfe's protagonists are often lost, either physically, mentally, or spiritually. They may not understand what is happening to them; it is up to us.

The predominant tone of the stories is consequently one of





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.

#### Kevin J. Anderson – *Scattered Suns* ☐

Simon and Schuster, London, 2005, 728pp, £10.99, t/p, ISBN 0-7432-7544-6  
This is the fourth volume in Anderson's *The Saga of Seven Suns*, a mammoth space opera with "war, treachery, and shifting alliances". The previous volumes, *Hidden Empire*, *A Forest of Stars* and *Horizon Storms*, have had so-so reviews from Vector but others have been more impressed. But we all know that this is not the type of series that can (or should) be started part-way through, so this volume will only be for the already convinced. For the rest, go back to volume one.

#### Tony Ballantyne – *Recursion*

Tor UK, London, 2005, 457pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-42699-0  
Ballantyne's debut novel is now out in paperback and it's well worth a try. The novel follows three sets of characters in three different time periods: England of 2051, Australia of 2119 and a ruined planet some years later and involving, well, just about everything. Reviewed by Gary Dalkin in Vector 237, where it was selected as a Recommended Read, he commented very favourably on it with "some welcome very British humour and memorable characters and the result is an exceptional first novel" and went as far as saying "a new British star has arrived to join the likes of Hamilton, Reynolds and Banks". I may not go quite that far – yet – but this is an impressive start to his novel-writing career: intriguing, well structured and a with convincing future vision. It's even blessed with an excellent cover, thanks to superb artwork from Dominic Harman.

#### Iain M Banks – *The Algebraist*

Orbit, London, 2005, 534pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-229-1  
Paperback edition of this Hugo short-listed novel. And as it's by Iain M. Banks you're all going to want this. Not a Culture novel but a stand-alone far, far future tale set amongst the Dwellers of gas giant planets searching for a secret hidden for half a billion years. Pete Young reviewed the book in full in Vector 240 concluding that it was, for the most part, "fun, and as sophisticated and detailed as the galaxy it describes, and Banks once again making it look easy". But there is a note of caution here – which I'd agree with – that parts of the book do get rather self-indulgent with just too much detail about the civilisations which tends to swamp the plotting. And although most of the characters are convincing the villain, Archimandrite Luseferous, is a (deliberate?) caricature who seems grafted onto the story just to add necessary nastiness. (Note: the British editions have both had a very elegant cover design but this has been scrapped for the American edition in favour of squids-in-space. Yes squids-in-space – go and have a look on amazon.com).

#### Ben Bova – *Mercury*

Hodder and Stoughton, London, 2005, 371pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-34082395-X  
Part of Bova's Grand Tour series where we have now reached Mercury (obviously) where a space tycoon, Saito Yamagata is using the enigmatic Dante Alexios to try to build a research station and tap the energy potential of the planet. But each has an agenda of their own... Mark Greener has been very complementary about the author's Asteroid Wars trilogy (see, for example the review of *The Silent War* in Vector 237) so maybe it's worth giving this series a try?

#### Orson Scott Card – *Shadow of the Giant*

Orbit, London, 2005, 365pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 1-84149-205-1  
Fourth volume in Card's *Shadow Saga* series, set in the world first seen in *Ender's Game* and exploring multiple views of Ender Wiggins. This volume follows Ender's former right-hand man, Bean, as he tries to escape the consequences of Ender's defeat of the aliens (way back in *Ender's Game*). I remember *Ender's Game* with great affection but just can't get on with any of the others in the sequence.

#### Arthur C. Clarke and Stephen Baxter – *Time's Eye*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 345pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07647-X  
Now this is intriguing. Starting in 1885 with Rudyard Kipling, stationed at India's NW frontier, who sees a very strange device, which turns out to be a helicopter from 2037. The timeline then gets further confused as famous historical figures, such as Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great, find themselves in a transformed world. Oh, and there are aliens as well. Claire Brialey reviewed the hardback in the last issue, finding that the book did not quite live up to the initial premise, partly because both authors have written much better novels and stories. She was disappointed by the lack of depth and challenge in a novel which seems to reduce a range of historical perspectives to their simplest elements in a story of inscrutable aliens threatening all that is great about humanity's past and future. Still, sounds worth a try.

#### Stephen Gallagher – *Valley of Lights*

Telos Publishing, Tolworth, 2005, 301pp, £9.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-74-X  
New edition of Gallagher's first novel, originally published in 1980. This is the author's 'preferred edition' and includes a number of extras such as the novella 'Nightmare, With Angel' written using his original research material from before the novel was written, a diary recounting the author's trip to America for an aborted film version of *Valley of Lights*, interview, introduction and an afterword. From the copyright details it appears that the author has also revised the text of the original novel. *Valley of Lights* starts as a police procedural, but in a world where the brain-dead check themselves out of hospital and a child killer can apparently switch bodies at will, the horror element is soon added.

Gallagher's extensive involvement in TV and film work (for example he has a new series, *Eleventh Hour*, starring Patrick Stewart, due to air in the UK in 2006) has resulted in him having relatively little published recently (his last 'new' novel was *Red, Red Robin* in 1995), which is a shame as he's a great storyteller. This new edition is to be welcomed and is strongly recommended.

#### Jon George – *Faces of Mist and Flame*

Tor UK, London, 2005, 390pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-41984-6  
Another debut novel by a British author now out in paperback and, as with Tony Ballantyne's *Recursion*, this has three strands: a Cambridge professor unravelling the mathematics of time in order to transfer her thoughts in to the past, which brings in the second strand when she goes back to a Pacific island in WWII, with the third being a retelling of the legend of Hercules. Reviewed by Chris Hill in Vector 236 he found it less successful than Ballantyne's debut as although it was an interesting idea, and worked well enough, it just wasn't convincing, suffering from

some weak characterisation and heavy-handedness and a failure of the three strands to mesh. Still, I feel any debut novel by British author shouldn't be dismissed without trying, so it's worth giving a go. (As with *Recursion* this book also has cover art by Dominic Harman, but as with the novel itself it fails to reach the same standard).

#### Ken Grimwood – *Replay*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 272pp, £0.99, ISBN 0-575-07559-7  
Essentially the book that the film *Groundhog Day* was based on. Jeff Winston is forty-three when he dies, only to wake as he was at eighteen but with all the knowledge about what is to happen and all the mistakes he made intact; and he's determined not to repeat them. But then, at forty-three, he again dies and wakes up back in college. This twenty-five year cycle (reduced to just one day in the film) repeats again. And again. And again... Regarded by some as one of the greatest fantasy novels of all time this is a very welcome return to print as Gollancz Fantasy Masterwork forty-five for this 1986 novel. One that everyone should read.

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

Orbit, London, 2005, 724pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-317-1  
The twelfth Anita Blake book is now out in mass-market paperback. Which for most of you is all you need to know as no one is going to start reading the series here (and with 700+ small print pages it is not even a light read to give the series a try). To give a flavour of this volume we have a vampire serial killer preying on strippers, psychotic shape-shifters and sexually deviant were-leopards. Which sounds typical for the series. I can't give much more detail as I'm only on about volume six (but they are the kind of books which are a guilty pleasure – the title of the first volume, so even the author recognises this – but I'll get here eventually).

#### Charles de Lint – *Someplace to be Flying*

Tor Books, New York, 2005, 384pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-30757-X  
A reprint of one of de Lint's early urban fantasies set in the city of Newford, originally published in 1998. This tells the story of Lily, a photojournalist in search of the 'animal people' and her involvement with Hank and a secret war for control of the city. Originally reviewed by Cherith Baldry in *Vector 198*.

#### L. E. Modesitt – *Ghosts of Columbia*

Tor Books, New York, 2005, 494pp, \$14.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-31314-6  
Omnibus edition of two novels, *Of Tangible Ghosts* (1994) and *The Ghost of the Revelator* (1998), set in an alternate America where ghosts and humans co-exist in a nation of Columbia, which stretches across most of what we know as the United States and Canada. Both feature Dr. Johan Eschback, college professor and secret agent for the government of Columbia. This edition comes with a new 'historical afterword' from the author. Sounds like it could be interesting.

#### Philip Purser-Hallard – *Time Hunter: Peculiar Lives*

Telos Publishing, Tolworth, 2005, 134pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-903889-47-2  
Latest in Telos's line of novellas loosely derived from *Dr Who*. This story is set in 1958 and based around Eric Clevedon, a writer of 'scientific romances' which feature the characters of Lechasseur and Blandish (our heroes in the Time Hunter series) who arrive to investigate superhuman children, known as 'the Peculiar', linked to Clevedon's fiction. Which all sounds more like Wyndham writing *Sapphire and Steel* than *Dr Who*.

#### The Robertski Brothers – *Mcatrix Derided*

Gollancz, London, 2005, 300pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07667-4  
The latest (?) in this seemingly never-ending series of 'comic' parodies is now out in paperback at a massive £1 less than last years hardback. You know what this is. You know I'm biased against them. You know that at least Dr Roberts had fun writing it. And you know there'll be another one along very, very soon.

#### Robert J. Sawyer – *Foreigner*

Tor Books, New York, 2005, 304pp, \$13.95, p/b, ISBN 0-765-30972-6  
Reprint of the third, and final, part of Sawyer's Quintaglio Ascension series, following on from *Fan-seer* and *Fossil Hunter*, with the Quintaglio being a race of intelligent dinosaurs, descendants of those from Earth's pre-history.

#### Charles Stross – *Iron Sunrise*

Orbit, London, 2005, 480pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-336-8  
The second Hugo short listed novel in this section (see Bank's *The Algebraist* above) is Stross's follow up to *Singularity Sky*, which has been keenly awaited as the first finished rather abruptly. In *Iron Sunrise* the planet of New Moscow has been brutally destroyed but the few survivors have launched a counter attack against the most likely culprit. But who was responsible and what does Wednesday Shadowmist know about it? The hardback was reviewed, very favourably by Stuart Carter, in *Vector 242* commenting that "Stross is a very fine writer, and an exceptionally clever fellow too. *Iron Sunrise* showcases both these achievements rather well". He's also great fun and although – again – the ending isn't great, this is highly recommended. His latest novel (well, fix up), *Accelerando* will be reviewed in a future issue of *Vector*

#### Timothy Zahn – *Dragon and Slave*

Tor, New York, 2005, 300pp, \$17.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30126-1  
This is the third volume (of a planned six) in the adventures of 14 year old Jack Morgan and Draycos, a dragonlike symbiont whom Jack rescues by acting as host, the first time a human has hosted a K'da. The first two, *Dragon and Thief* and *Dragon and Soldier*, were reviewed in *Vector 238*.

Jack is an orphaned thief and con artist, raised initially by his uncle Virgil and then by the shipboard computerised personality that has all of Virgil's deviousness and lack of morals. Draycos is a poet-warrior, with a highly developed sense of honour and ethics, he is also the only one who can avert the extermination of his entire species. Together they fight crime. And attempt to uncover the plots against the K'da and Jack.

Having survived some high-level thievery, and a stint as a mercenary, we now find Jack volunteering to be a slave in order to get closer to the truths that the pair seek. Danger and hardship are inevitably the result, as well as some hard lessons in ethics and the unforeseen consequences of one's actions.

The series continues to explore relationships and responsibilities, but it also continues to be intelligent, fast-paced and action-packed. Don't start here; start at the beginning with *Dragon and Thief*.  
(Elizabeth A. Billinger)

## Fantasy round-up

#### Marion Zimmer Bradley & Diana L. Paxson – *Ancestors of Avalon*

Voyager, London, 2005, 399pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-713845-8

#### Terry Brooks – *Straken*

Simon and Schuster, London, 2005, 368pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN 0-7432-5946-7

#### Jacqueline Carey – *Godslayer*

Tor Books, New York, 2005, 352pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31239-5

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

Tor UK, London, 2005, 591pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-43301-6

#### David and Leigh Eddings – *Crystal Gorge*

Voyager, London, 2005, 517pp, £18.99, h/b, ISBN 0-00-715764-9

#### Kate Elliott – *In the Ruins*

Orbit, London, 2005, 528pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN 1-84149-272-8

#### Jennifer Fallon – *Harshini*

Tor Books, New York, 2005, 496pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30988-2

Orbit, London, 2005, 615pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-328-7

#### Jennifer Fallon – *Treasons Keep*

Orbit, London, 2005, 662pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-327-9

Tor Books, New York, 2004, 464pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30987-4

#### David Farland – *Worlds of the Golden Queen*

Tor Books, New York, 2005, 556pp, \$14.95, t/p, ISBN 0-765-31315-4

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

Voyager, London, 2005, 355pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-64835-3

- Isabel Glass – *The Divided Crown***  
 Tor Books, New York, 2005, 384pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30746-4
- Greg Keyes – *Empire of Unreason***  
 Tor UK, London, 2005, 359pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-330-41999-4
- C. S. Lewis – *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe***  
 HarperCollins, London, 2005, 243pp, £5.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-720228-8
- Juliet E. McKenna – *Southern Fire***  
 Tor Books, New York, 2005, 448pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-31411-8
- Andre Norton and Sasha Miller – *Dragon Blade***  
 Tor Books, New York, 2005, 336pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30747-2
- Mel Odom – *Lord of the Libraries***  
 Tor Books, New York, 2005, 352pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-765-30724-3
- Sean Russell – *The Shadow Road***  
 Orbit, London, 2005, 520, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 1-84149-225-6
- Ellen Steiber – *A Rumor of Gems***  
 Tor Books, New York, 2005, 496pp, \$25.95, h/b, ISBN 0-312-85879-5
- Chris Wooding – *The Skein of Lament***  
 Gollancz, London, 2005, 536pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 0-575-07646-1
- Janny Wurts – *Traitor's Knot***  
 Voyager, London, 2005, 637pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 0-00-710114-7
- David Zindell – *Black Jade***  
 Voyager, London, 2005, 728pp, £14.99, t/p, ISBN 0-00-224760-7

Another large collection of recently published fantasy novels, many of which are in the very traditional high/heroic fantasy genre, and are the nth part of well-established on-going series (including the sixth – but not last – book in Kate Elliott's Crown of Stars series). Of most interest here is the UK publication of Greg Keyes' *Empire of Unreason* (the third in the Age of Unreason quartet). I can't understand why it has taken so long to come out here (it was published in 2000 in America) as this is great stuff. Set in an alternate eighteenth century Europe and America, where dark sorcery and demonic creatures have invaded our world, it is

up to our heroes, who include Isaac Newton, Voltaire and Benjamin Franklin, to oppose the oppressors. Think Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle* but at about a third the length and many times more the entertainment (as Keyes has characters and plot, not just tedious amounts of historical detail). The final volume, *The Shadows of God*, is due out early in 2006.

Also out in paperback is *The Skein of Lament*, the second volume of Chris Wooding's *The Braided Path* series. Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Billinger in *Vector 238* she described this as "wide-screen, epic battles with a cast of thousands, always maintaining a focus on the characters we have grown to know, if not to love" and Wooding as "skilfully manipulating the many threads, slowly revealing the true (or so we think) nature of things, the selfish motivations of the major players and the interconnectedness of everything". The third volume, *The Ascendancy Veil*, will be reviewed here soon.

To accompany the new film version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, due December 2005, HarperCollins have republished the complete Chronicles of Narnia. The series has been published in chronological order so *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is labelled as volume two, with *The Magician's Nephew* as volume one (which will confuse and annoy many). Audio books of the series are also available, with *The Magician's Nephew* read by Kenneth Branagh.

And finally, it's good to see a British fantasy author being published in the US, with Juliet E. McKenna's *Southern Fire* out in hardback from Tor.

## Vector 243 – Index of Books Reviewed

Douglas Adams & Dirk Maggs – <i>The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Radio Scripts: The Tertiary, Quondary and Quintessential Phases</i> [MM]... 18	Greg Keyes – <i>Empire of Unreason</i> [P]..... 36
Kevin J. Anderson – <i>Scattered Suns</i> [P]..... 34	C.S. Lewis – <i>The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe</i> [P]..... 36
R. Scott Bakker – <i>The Warrior-Prophet</i> [ER]..... 19	Kelly Link – <i>Magic for Beginners</i> [NH]..... 25
Tony Ballantyne – <i>Recursion</i> [P]..... 34	Dirk Maggs & Douglas Adams – <i>The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Radio Scripts: The Tertiary, Quondary and Quintessential Phases</i> [MM] ... 18
Iain M Banks – <i>The Algebraist</i> [P]..... 34	A. Lee Martinez – <i>Gil's All Fright Diner</i> [DMB]..... 26
Stephen Baxter & Arthur C. Clarke – <i>Time's Eye</i> [P]..... 34	Richard Matheson – <i>Earthbound</i> [DMB]..... 26
Joshua David Bellin – <i>Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation</i> [COMLB]... 19	Paul McAuley – <i>Mind's Eye</i> [PY]..... 27
Gregory Benford – <i>The Sunborn</i> [AF]..... 21	David McIntee – <i>Beautiful Monsters</i> [MM]..... 27
Michael Bishop – <i>A Reverie For Mister Ray</i> [LJH]..... 20	Fiona McIntosh – <i>Blood and Memory</i> [LH]..... 28
Ben Bova – <i>Mercury</i> [P]..... 34	Juliet E. McKenna – <i>Southern Fire</i> [P]..... 36
Marion Zimmer Bradley & Diana L. Paxson – <i>Ancestors of Avalon</i> [P]... 35	Juliet E. McKenna – <i>Turns &amp; Chances</i> [ER]..... 23
Terry Brooks – <i>Straken</i> [P]..... 35	Sasha Miller & Andre Norton – <i>Dragon Blade</i> [P]..... 36
Orson Scott Card – <i>Shadow of the Giant</i> [P]..... 34	L. E. Modesitt – <i>Ghosts of Columbia</i> [P]..... 35
Jacqueline Carey – <i>Godslayer</i> [P]..... 35	James Morris – <i>The Escapist</i> [CB2]..... 28
Arthur C. Clarke and Stephen Baxter – <i>Time's Eye</i> [P]..... 34	Andre Norton – <i>Three Hands for Scorpio</i> [LH]..... 29
James Clemens – <i>Shadowfall</i> [SP]..... 21	Andre Norton & Sasha Miller – <i>Dragon Blade</i> [P]..... 36
Cecilia Dart-Thornton – <i>The Iron Tree</i> [P]..... 35	Mel Odom – <i>Lord of the Libraries</i> [P]..... 36
Charles de Lint – <i>Someplace to be Flying</i> [P]..... 35	Diana L. Paxson & Marion Zimmer Bradley – <i>Ancestors of Avalon</i> [P] ... 35
Hal Duncan – <i>Vellum</i> [PK]..... 22	Philip Purser-Hallard – <i>Time Hunter: Peculiar Lives</i> [P]..... 35
Hal Duncan – <i>Vellum</i> [ML]..... 22	Adam Roberts (as 'The Robertski Brothers') – <i>Mcatrix Derided</i> [P]..... 35
David & Leigh Eddings – <i>Crystal Gorge</i> [P]..... 35	Sean Russell – <i>The Shadow Road</i> [P]..... 36
Kate Elliott – <i>In the Ruins</i> [P]..... 35	Robert J. Sawyer – <i>Foreigner</i> [P]..... 35
Steven Erikson – <i>The Devil Delivered</i> [ER]..... 23	Andy Secombe – <i>The Last House in the Galaxy</i> [PBB]..... 29
Ian Cameron Esslemont – <i>Night of Knives</i> [ST]..... 23	Dan Simmons – <i>Olympus</i> [GD]..... 29
Jennifer Fallon – <i>Harshini</i> [P]..... 35	Martin Sketchley – <i>The Destiny Mask</i> [CH]..... 30
Jennifer Fallon – <i>Treasons Keep</i> [P]..... 35	Craig Spector – <i>Underground</i> [PBB]..... 31
David Farland – <i>Worlds of the Golden Queen</i> [P]..... 35	Ellen Steiber – <i>A Rumor of Gems</i> [P]..... 36
Raymond E. Feist – <i>Exile's Return</i> [P]..... 35	Charles Stross – <i>Iron Sunrise</i> [P]..... 35
Stephen Gallagher – <i>Valley of Lights</i> [P]..... 34	Tricia Sullivan – <i>Double Vision</i> [SJ]..... 31
Jon George – <i>Faces of Mist and Flame</i> [P]..... 34	Steph Swainston – <i>No Present Like Time</i> [CAKKG]..... 32
Isabel Glass – <i>The Divided Crown</i> [P]..... 36	Gene Wolfe – <i>Starwater Strains</i> [NH]..... 32
Ken Grimwood – <i>Replay</i> [P]..... 35	Chris Wooding – <i>The Skein of Lament</i> [P]..... 36
Laurell K. Hamilton – <i>Incubus Dreams</i> [P]..... 35	Janny Wurts – <i>Traitor's Knot</i> [P]..... 36
S.E. Hinton – <i>Hawkes Harbor</i> [EAB]..... 24	Timothy Zahn – <i>Dragon and Slave</i> [P]..... 35
Ian Hocking – <i>Djaja Vu</i> [CB2]..... 28	Sarah Zettel – <i>Camelot's Honour</i> [LB]..... 33
Gwyneth Jones – <i>Band of Gypsies</i> [CB1]..... 24	David Zindell – <i>Black Jade</i> [P]..... 36

**Reviewer's Key:** AF – Alan Fraser; CAKG – Carol Ann Kerry-Green; CBT – Cherith Baldry; CH – Chris Hill; CB2 – Colin Bird; COMLB – Colin Odell & Mitch Le Blanc; DMB – Dave M. Roberts; EAB – Elizabeth A. Billinger; ER – Estelle Roberts; GD – Gary Dalkin; LJH – L.J. Hurst; LH – Lesley Hatch; LB – Lynne Bispham; ML – Martin Lewis; MM – Martin McGrath; NH – Niall Harrison; P – Particle; PB – Paul Bateman; PK – Paul Kincaid; PY – Pete Young; SJ – Steve Jeffery; ST – Sue Thomason; SP – Susan Peak.