

VECTOR

THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION

TALKING HEADS



Jo Fletcher interviewed by Graham Sleight
Richard Morgan interviewed by Martin Lewis

253

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Vector website: <http://www.vector-magazine.co.uk/>

Editor's blog: <http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/>

Vector

Editors

Features, Editorial and Letters

Niall Harrison
Flat 6, Arvon House,
3 Boyn Hill Avenue,
Maidenhead,
Berkshire, SL6 4ET
Vector.editors@gmail.com

Book Reviews

Paul N. Billinger
1 Long Row Close,
Everdon, Daventry
NN11 3BE
paul.billinger@gmail.com

Production

Liz Batty
liz@urchin.earth.li

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The British Science Fiction Association

President	Sir Arthur C. Clarke, CBE
Vice President	Stephen Baxter
Chair (acting)	Tony Cullen bsfchair@gmail.com
Treasurer	Martin Potts 61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton, Near Tamworth B79 0JJ mtpotts@zoom.co.uk
Membership Services (UK & Europe)	Peter Wilkinson 39 Glyn Avenue, New Barnet, Herts, EN4 9PJ bsfmembership@yahoo.co.uk
US Agent	Cy Chauvin 14248 Willfred Street, Detroit, MI 48213, USA
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Registered Address: 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry, NN11 3BE

Website	www.bsfa.co.uk
Orbiter Writing Groups	Gillian Rooke Southview, Pilgrims Lane, Chilham, Kent, CT4 8AB

Other BSFA Publications

Matrix: The news magazine of the BSFA

Commissioning Editor	Tom Hunter Top Floor, 246 Bethnal Green Road, London, E2 0AA matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk
----------------------	--

Features & News Editor	Claire Weaver matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk
------------------------	---

Production & Media Editor	Claire Weaver matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk
---------------------------	---

Focus: The writer's magazine of the BSFA

Editor	Martin McGrath 48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St Albans, AL2 2HL focus.editor@blueyonder.co.uk
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So because I've been procrastinating about getting this editorial done, I've ended up starting it on the morning of the day the Hugo results are announced. I've got about ninety minutes to wait before the first results start trickling in, so anything between three and five hours before The Big One, as certain authors have been known to call it, is announced. And what I'm wondering is, will the winner of the 2007 Novel Hugo be available in the UK?

Of the last four winners, you see, only one is actually on UK bookshop shelves -- Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, which probably-not-coincidentally won the award at a British Worldcon. It's not as though the other recent winners have been small names, but the fact remains that the only place you're going to find Robert J. Sawyer's *Hominids* (2003 winner), Lois McMaster Bujold's *Paladin of Souls* (2004) or Robert Charles Wilson's *Spin* (last year) is in a shop that stocks imports. Or, of course, on Amazon.

The latter, as Gollancz's editorial director Jo Fletcher points out, in her interview with Graham Sleight published this issue, is both a symptom and a cause of the problem. It's a symptom because the root problem is to do with lead times -- US publishers will submit a manuscript to UK publishers three months before they publish, which isn't enough time to get a UK edition prepared and on the shelves. If there's no UK edition within 28 days, the US edition can go on sale in Australia, a market that represents a smallish share of an American print run, and a largeish share of a British print run. That's why there's no Gollancz edition of Vernor Vinge's *Rainbows End*, one of this year's Hugo nominees. And the appearance of the US edition on Amazon is a further disincentive to producing a UK edition, because pretty soon enough of the people who want it will have bought it to make a UK edition uneconomic.

Except that's not the whole story: Tor UK have just released a mass-market paperback edition of *Rainbows End*, one year and three months after the American hardback. Similarly, Charles Stross' *Glasshouse*, another Hugo nominee, was published as a paperback by Orbit at the start of March, a mere nine months later than its transatlantic predecessor. And of course, also on the ballot is one of last year's success stories, the first in Naomi Novik's Patrick-O'Brien-with-dragons series, *Temeraire*, which got a hardback release in the UK but not in the US. (Her American publisher released *Temeraire* -- as *His Majesty's Dragon* -- followed by *Throne of Jade* and *Black Powder War* as mass-market paperbacks at a rate of one a month, whereas we got hardbacks spaced six months apart; personally, I prefer the latter.) So different publishers clearly have

different models for viable publication, and if any of the above picks up the Hugo in (checks watch) about an hour, you can go out and get yourself a copy before the shops close this afternoon.

That still leaves two nominees, though -- Michael Flynn's *Eifelheim* and Peter Watts' *Blindsight*. Ironically (or perhaps just inevitably) the latter is many people's pick for the award, despite being probably the least commercially successful book on the ballot. *Temeraire* is many people's prediction for the award precisely because of its commercial success; but such logic would have picked George RR Martin's *A Feast For Crows* as the winner last year, so you never know. But I suspect that even if *Blindsight* does take the award, the bottom line might not be enough to bring about a UK edition any time soon -- it didn't help *Spin*, after all. It's one thing for Tor to put out proven sellers like Vinge, or John Scalzi, whose *Old Man's War* finally made it to this country a couple of months ago. (Though sales don't seem to have found Bujold a UK deal.) But what I really want are the novels like *Blindsight*, like David Marusek's 2005 debut *Counting Heads*, like Susan Palwick's *Shelter* or Jo Walton's *Farthing* or Elizabeth Bear's *Carnival* or Gwyneth Jones' *Life* or, hey, anything at all by Nalo Hopkinson -- all books that are, in their various ways, moving sf forward. It's not that we're short of good stuff to read, per se -- indeed, if the pile of submissions I've received for the Clarke Award so far is anything to go by, 2007 is shaping up to be a vintage year, and we haven't even been sent anything by Gollancz yet -- but it's starting to feel like we're missing big chunks of the conversation.

And speaking of conversation (bow before my mastery of the artful segue, one and all), as you'll have gathered from the cover that's what this issue is all about. In addition to the interview with Jo Fletcher, we have an interview with Richard Morgan by Martin Lewis, a short piece by Paul Raven on his experience of critical conversation at the first SF Foundation Criticism Masterclass, and in his column, Graham Sleight considers how some parts of the sf community utterly fail to talk to one another. Enjoy.

(Oh, and the results? Well, as you all know by now, *Rainbows End* took home best novel, and *Blindsight* wasn't even in the game -- it was last by some way. In other results, John Scalzi got the most first-place votes for Best Fan Writer, although The Mighty Langford hung in there to win the category by one vote in the end; Tim Pratt managed to beat Neil Gaiman to Best Short Story; and Steven Moffatt picked up another Hugo for "The Girl in the Fireplace". And there were very nearly no Japanese nominees *anywhere*.)

Best of British

Jo Fletcher interviewed by Graham Sleight

*Jo Fletcher is a poet, writer, critic, journalist and publisher. She worked in Fleet Street for 12 years; then, in 1985, she joined the fledgling independent publishing company Headline to oversee the launch of their fantasy, SF and horror list, introducing writers like Dan Simmons and Michael Bishop. She left Headline in 1988 and worked for Mandarin (1988-90), then moved to Pan to run the newly revitalized genre list. Since 1994, she has been editorial director of Gollancz. Her fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies; her non-fiction includes *The World's Greatest Mysteries* and a number of military and historical works. She has won the International Society of Poet's Editor's Choice Award (1996), the British Fantasy Society's Karl Edward Wagner Award (1997), and a World Fantasy Award (2002). The following interview was conducted at The Star Tavern in Belgravia, London, on 22 November 2006, with Graham Sleight standing in at short notice for an ill Claire Weaver. The interview was transcribed by Liz Batty.*

Graham Sleight: Publishing is traditionally perceived as a profession that's difficult to get into. What's the career path that's led you to being editorial director at Gollancz?

Jo Fletcher: As far as I know it's completely unique, and didn't involve any of the scut work that most of my poor colleagues have had to go through, or indeed are still going through. The short answer is that I was a journalist in Fleet Street, a critic and a writer, but I had grown up in the field. So when, in the mid 1980s, Headline was started up, Sue Fletcher went to Malcolm Edwards and said, Malcolm, we need a science-fiction editor, and he said, it's easier to teach a journalist who knows the field inside out how to be an editor than to teach an editor to like science fiction, take Jo Fletcher. Weird as it sounds, I was on a national newspaper but I had Mondays off. Sue said, we really can't afford to pay you much money – which was fine by me because I was earning an absolute fortune as a gutter press hackette – and we only really have space for you to come into the office once a week, and I said, that's fine because I've only got one day a week I could come in. She offered to me on a silver platter everything I never knew I wanted. It's not the way it normally happens.

GS: But you had the science fiction virus earlier than that?

JF: Oh, I'd grown up with it. My parents were sf fans, and I grew up with New Worlds and Analog lying around the house. I'm the oldest of 4, and we were allowed one comic, and I asked if I could have F&SF, and my mother said yes, if she could read it after me.

GS: So, as editorial director, how much are you responsible for? How many books a year?

JF: It varies hugely. We're supposed to be publishing around 50 new hardbacks a year, and a significant number of paperbacks, but I think this year we're up to 68 already. I run the list with Simon Spanton. We report to the managing director – we don't have a publishing director, we report to Malcolm Edwards, who keeps his finger dipped in and

obviously knows more than a little bit about the field. We try to make sure that we cover the whole field, through from epic fantasy to the hardest of science fiction.

GS: That was one of my next questions, which you've partly answered – what do you feel is distinctive about the list you're looking after compared to other peoples'?

JF: There are actually lots of things. The first is that for many years, even when I was old Gollancz before we were taken over by Orion, we concentrated on British-born or -by adoption authors. I used to be able to read almost everything that was published in a year in Britain and America, but nowadays, Tor alone put out something like 30 books a month, or so it seems. No-one can keep up with that, and even choosing the best of what was available in America left no room for what was happening in Britain. So we made a decision a long time ago that we would look primarily to British authors. Interzone was doing a very good job of nurturing young writers, and there was a lot out there for us to pick from. The second difference will mean not that much, but we buy world rights, which means rather than buying UK/Commonwealth rights and publishing in Britain and Australia, we sell translation rights all over the world. We also sell back to America, which is a lot more difficult than you would believe. And that's a bit of a pain, but our translation sales have become very important to the list. It means that we can pay an author a decent advance. If you just buy the book on what you're going to sell in the UK, I'm afraid the sales these days are not what they were. Everyone knows that, but it's still tragic.

GS: Sorry, sales within the genre or...?

JF: Well, actually, both. But especially within the genre. Where a normal print run of a paperback in 1986 was 10,000 copies and up, now a normal print run might be 4,000 copies. And there's no way writers can live on that, not even if you're generous with rising royalties, but if you include foreign sales – 800 Euros from the Czech Republic, 10,000 Euros from Germany, 20,000 Euros from Japan, well, it all adds up, to the point where they're making enough money to at least be able to eat once a week.

GS: It's a nice aspiration to have.

JF: Not eat well, obviously, not three courses.

GS: You do make occasional exceptions to that rule. You did Gene Wolfe's *The Wizard Knight* in one volume.

JF: We do. There will always be some American authors on the Gollancz list; Dan Simmons we do very well with. So we do make the occasional exception, but there has to be a very good reason. With *The Wizard Knight*, the Americans were not going to publish it as one book and yet it was written as one story. We made the decision to publish it as one doorstep of a book because it was one doorstep of a story. There is a market – science-fiction readers are much better than others at looking how long the story needs.

GS: One of the things which has come along in the American field, and I'd be interested to know whether it's happened here, is that people are saying the distribution of books is starting to fail at a certain size. I don't know if anyone here reads the blog of Peter Watts, who is a Canadian author, but he is very upset that his book before last, *Behemoth*, got chopped in two and he had to shave a bit off his previous one, *Maelstrom*.

JF: It's an enormous problem in America. One of my authors, who I won't name, delivered a book to me, and the American editor said it's too long, you can either lose 40,000 words or we chop it into two. Neither author nor agent were particularly happy with that, to the point where it hasn't been resolved whether the rights are going to be sold to a small press to do the US edition. I have a book by two Americans which, if it were published in America, would have the absolute full support of Barnes and Noble, because one of the authors was best chums with the man who owns Barnes and Noble and is now dead – but no one in America will buy it because it's too long. It's not as long as a Robert Jordan book, but as far as they are concerned, it's too long. I don't understand it, because they're the ones who pioneered this, that's where all our long books started to come from in the first place! For us, I think as long as Malcolm Edwards is involved with the list, it will be less of a problem than it might be because he's one of us. I'm "one of us". We grew up in this field and we both understand that a book is as long as it needs to be. If someone like me can't chop it down past a certain length it's probably not chopable.

Audience: What's the smallest book you can publish these days, in word length?

JF: Novellas don't get a look in, not singly, not in the mainstream. I'd say 80,000 would be average, although we've just published something that comes in around 65,000 words, which is pretty much the smallest we've done for a while.

GS: It's striking how much slimmer the Masterworks are than sf novels published these days.

JF: Yes, it's scary, isn't it? Which is why with the Fantasy Masterworks we do omnibuses. If you published, say, the Zelazny as separate books they'd be tiny. We were satisfied with so much less in those days.

GS: What are the larger reasons behind what you were talking about earlier, the decline in fiction sales? If you're saying that at one stage you could do a 10,000 print run. Is it library sales?

JF: It's to do with what you can spend your entertainment pound on. How many people in this room bought a DVD in the last month? How many people bought a computer game in the last month? How many people bought CDs? Toy soldiers? There is so much for your entertainment pound to be spent on now. When we were growing up there were books and vinyl and that was it. And toy soldiers. But nowadays, there's so much. All those films we watched and loved as children are coming out on DVD, all our sacred

vinyl is being remastered into CDs which actually sound like the vinyl, there's so much now for you to spend your money on that books are coming a sorry second in many cases – not always, and there are spikes, and there are things which give me hope for the future, but there are also audio books, audio CDs, there's also ebooks coming up, there are those bastards on the web stealing material (and if I ever catch any one of you buying from those people there really will be trouble, because those people are denying livings for authors). There's so much out there for money to be spent on.

GS: Do you see ways in which publishing books, or whatever media books are carried on in 50 years' time, can claw its way back into a bigger share of things?

JF: Yes and no. First of all, we're looking for other markets in which to sell books. We've been doing this forever and it's very difficult, but we have a very active special sales team at Orion, and they're busy packaging books with DVDs, making sure conventions are selling new books as well as old books, getting books in service stations. You mentioned distribution, and Tom Doherty, who founded Tor books, tells the tragic story of how distribution in America was killed. A major retailer on the west coast gathered together the six biggest distributors and said, we're not going to play games any more, we're bored with that, we want centralised distribution. And to cut a long story short, that's what they got – so where you used to get books in every drugstore, in every gas station, in every mom and pop store across the country, now you don't. But, things are changing, because nowadays – and I'm moving back to England here – supermarkets are selling books. Tesco are selling far more books than you would ever believe. They're not selling our books yet, but we're working on it. The day that I get a normal science fiction book into Tesco then I will sing praises to the heavens, but right now they're not interested. But maybe we'll get *The Prestige* in, because there's a Hollywood movie which is absolutely brilliant, and they even mention the writer now and then. So we'll get *The Prestige* in, and then when Chris gets round to finishing his new book we can go to Tesco and Asda and say well look, you took *The Prestige*. You sold 4,000 copies. So that's how we're looking to get through this lacklustre sales period. And also the market is cyclic, it goes up and down and it will go up again.

GS: The other aspect of your list is reissues, and the SF and Fantasy Masterworks in particular. What was the impetus behind setting those up?

JF: There were a number of reasons we did that. The first is that paperback sales were dropping, and old Gollancz had an enormous backlist. I came into this field in part thanks to Betty Ballantine – I have always looked upon the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series as an absolute masterclass in fantasy. Malcolm had always wanted to do something like that with science fiction, I had always wanted to do something like that with more modern fantasy, and because we had such an enormous backlist for which we didn't have to pay, it meant that we could experiment. We started off contacting as many people as we could in the field and asking them to give us their top ten sf and fantasy books. There were arguments, but we got through, and we ended up with a wishlist. We couldn't get all of the wishlist because some of them have

been in print from other companies – we can't get Walter Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz*; sooner or later the publisher will stumble and we'll be there, but for the time being it should be on the list and everyone knows it should be, but it isn't. It was a fan's wishlist, really, it's what makes sf and fantasy fans different – they're like readers of history, they know what's come before, so when something comes out which purports to be new and interesting, they can either say my God, it really is new and exciting, or say, hold on a minute, someone did this in 1960 and it's never been bettered. You need to know where you've been in this field.

GS: Where do you see these series going, are there more on the wishlist?

JF: We're pausing for the moment, with 75 SF Masterworks, 50 Fantasy Masterworks. The last Fantasy Masterwork comes out in January; it's a collection of Rudyard Kipling's supernatural fantasy, and it is absolutely amazing. We'll pause for a time, and do things like the "SF4U" promotion that we did last summer, to keep the backlist lively. We'll also do a few very special SF books, like *Dune*, in laminated hardback, the same size as the paperbacks.

GS: Is SF4U what I think of as the round corner books?

JF: Yes, exactly. I get asked, "are we trying to sell books to Joe Normal?", and the answer is oh God yes please! One of the biggest problems with the field is the way other people see us. Too many of my friends will say, well he sounds interesting, but covers like that? I'm not going to pick up a book like that. You all know the experience when you're reading a book with a spaceship on the cover and someone will make some sneering remark, and frankly it's wrong. But it's there, and because it's there you have to get round it, and you get round it by doing different sorts of covers. Hopefully you've noticed that Gollancz has moved away from what one might think of as the typical genre cover: we use a lot of production values – we print on foil, we use spot lamination, we will use die cutting, we will do things to make them look like just great books. With Al Reynolds we got spaceships on, and we got planets on, but they still look like really cool books. The idea behind SF4U was to take ten of the bestselling Masterworks and package them as if they were cool, iconic trendy books that 20-year-olds would pick up and not be embarrassed to read. We printed 5,000 of them, we've reprinted twice. We are doing really well with them. All the chains took them because they looked "cool". So will we do it with the Fantasy Masterworks? You're damn right we will.

You look at what people are buying, and you look at the bestseller lists and you see *Jonathan Strange* and think, that's a fantasy book, you see *Labyrinth*, that's a fantasy book, you see *Shadow of the Wind*, that's a fantasy book, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, that's a science fiction book. You see all these cool fantasy and science fiction books – and if I'd published them on the Gollancz list I'd probably have done quite well with them, because they're all great books. But I know in my heart of hearts that I could not have done what Bloomsbury did with Susanna Clarke. And that's partially because I wouldn't get the financial backing, the marketing backing – I'd get the in-house backing and believing that it's a great book, but I doubt I would have got the money that

Bloomsbury spent on it. And therein lies the rub as far as publishing goes, that to make a book a success it has to be great, but you have to persuade everyone in-house that it is great enough to treat it like a bestseller before you publish. And when every editor in the building is trying to do that, you have to pick and choose which books get that status, because it has to be a finite number.

GS: I remember Teresa Nielsen Hayden saying on her blog something of the form that she had turned down quite a few books which she might otherwise have taken because they would get lost in the shuffle within the corridors at Tor, and at another place they might find a perfectly good home.

JF: Oh yes – I turn down books all the time, and when I say this isn't right for our list that's exactly what I mean, and in a different time and place, different house, I could do something with it. But I've just come from America, from World Fantasy Convention and a meeting in New York, and one of the conversations I had was with one of my colleagues who has just paid \$600,000 for novel by someone who's been on the New York Times bestseller list for four months after her first novel was published last year; she's come out of nowhere, and he's just paid 600,000 dollars for this book. I said, great, can I see it? And he said no no no, it's not going on the genre list. I said, why not? And he said, it's not really science fiction. It's about an alien, who takes over a young girl, who doesn't integrate fully, she fights back to try and regain her mind and body. So it's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* by any other name and I asked him – how is this not science fiction? And he said, you don't understand, it's about racism and prejudice and fighting for identity! And I beat my head against the wall a few times. Then I asked him why it's being published on the mainstream list, and he said he couldn't possibly have that amount of money hanging over his genre list. The book wouldn't get the same attention, it wouldn't sell – this way, everyone treats it like a big deal and it'll be on the bestseller list next year.

GS: Working on the assumption that there are people out there who are aspiring authors, let's look at that side of things. You say on your website that you don't take unagented submissions, what's the rationale there?

JF: Well, no one has time. My day job: look at emails, look at mail, look at the pile of submissions, answer emails, write cover copy, check cover copy, write catalogue copy, check catalogue copy ... you're doing a million jobs before you even get to look at the delivered manuscripts. The very last thing you do 30 seconds before you fall a sleep is you look at the manuscript behind your bed, and you read two pages, and your ever-loving husband takes it away from you because you've fallen asleep on it. And you've got two pages read, and you can't remember what they are ... so the reason we say that we don't look at unagented material is that agented material has been through at least one set of eyes, someone thinks it's good enough maybe to be published, and if you sort some of the slush you would realise ... well, people like me sit here and we write guidelines and we tell people what to do, and it makes no difference. You'll get something in big red crayon with a cover blurb and a picture of them, and their prison number. Yes, Al Reynolds was technically a slush pile author, Roger Taylor who I published at *Headline* and went on to do 14 books, I found on the

slush pile, we have a couple of other authors on the Gollanz list that were found on the slush pile – but that's only four authors in twenty years. Even if one of them is Al Reynolds.

GS: And he had ten years' experience of publishing short stories.

JF: But don't forget the manuscript sat beside my bed for two years and it was another eighteen months before we published. I do firmly believe that if you are good enough then you will get published in the end, because there are plenty of excellent small presses, independent publishing houses out there, winning the wheat from the chaff for us, doing a very good job of training writers how to write before they're accomplished enough for the mainstream, and I don't mean to be mean to anyone who is published by a small press because some of them are doing an excellent job. PS, for example, publishing splendid books – I found Joe Hill thanks to PS Publishing.

GS: Are you doing *Heart-Shaped Box*?

JF: I am doing *Heart-Shaped Box*, and I didn't have to fight that hard to get it despite the fact that we don't do horror, despite the fact that no one knew who he was, including me. We bought it on the strength of the story, which is just amazing.

GS: Moving on a step, when you get a manuscript and you've accepted it, what's the manuscript's eye view of what happens to it next? What does the actual being an editor bit involve?

JF: Well, the first thing to do is actually buy the thing, and every publishing house works slightly differently. In Orion, and also Weidenfeld, you write what's either called an Advance Information sheet, an AI, or an NTIS, a New Title Information Sheet. On that you have a keynote, a one-line "what this book's about," you have a target audience, you have a couple of paragraphs of description, you have sales points, why you should buy this book, you have any other books written and if the biography's interesting you shove that in. You do a rough profit and loss sheet, a P&L, where you say, if we sell X many copies we will make this much money, and it's going to bring in a royalty of this amount – very rough rough. Then you go to your publishing meeting, and you stand up and you say, well I want to buy this horror writer that no one has ever heard of because he's the best thing since sliced bread, and he's young, he's up for all these awards, you only have to read this story out of this collection to know that he's superb, no one else has got a chance at this yet because I got in first, and if you don't I'll stamp my feet and cry. And most of the time – this is partially to do with Gollanz and it's not the same for all other publishers – because not many people read my field they tend to accept that if Simon or I have a book then there's a reason for us wanting to do it, and more often than not we get permission – possibly not always at the amount that we'd like to pay, but permission nonetheless.

So then, having made the offer, having had the offer accepted, the next thing to do is to brief the cover, although

you may be publishing a year or eighteen months in advance. So you brief the cover, which is not always as easy as it sounds, you write the cover copy, then you write the catalogue copy because you start selling the rights as soon as you've got the damn thing, and the rights catalogue is the most important tool that they have other than their own unique intelligence (we have a superb rights department). Because we sell the books so far in advance, at Orion we produce a monthly catalogue which has all the books for the entire company; it's a sales tool, and a very effective one. So you have to write that copy, you have to go to marketing meetings to discuss if you're going to have any money and if not how you're going to scrape money out of something else to do it.

Eventually you realise that you're running out of time and you have to edit the thing, so that's done evenings and weekends because there's never any time in the week. I tend to edit a lot of my authors myself; others will use copy editors but they've still got to read the damn thing even if they don't edit themselves. So you edit and that takes a month, then it goes back to the author for rewrites and then it comes back, then it goes for copy editing, and then it's marked up either on paper or on screen, more often on screen, for it to go down to production. Meanwhile the cover rough has come in, been rejected, started again, the cover copy has been too long, the art department, who are very, very good at visuals but not so good on words, have spelt everything wrong and got the wrong ISBN, it's all been proofed and gone out with the wrong spellings and the wrong ISBN, and if anyone tells me that the foreword is written wrong on the George RR Martin *Dreamsongs* then I really will get very upset because we only changed that three times ...

Where was I? Oh yes, we've sent the book off to production, we've got the typesetting back, we've done proofs – that's formatted it for proofs, written proof cover copy, briefed it for a proof jacket because it's not always the same as the final jacket, that's gone out, the typesetting comes back so you send it to the proofreader and the author, both sets come back so you collate them to check the author hasn't rewritten when you weren't paying attention, and guess how often that happens? You tell them every change costs a pound and do they care? Do they hell! Send the pages back to production, then you get the revisions back – these are called various things in different houses: second page passes, revised galleys, final galleys, voucher proofs – you get them, check them, and put all the changes back in that production took out because they didn't think they were important ...

What I haven't mentioned is probably the most important part, which is the presentations. It's no good having the best book in the world with the most beautiful looking jacket, and the most poetically written jacket copy, if you don't sell it. So we have the key accounts meeting, where we're selling our books to Gardeners, Bertrams, Waterstones, Smiths, all the people who do the major accounts, plus the export sales director and his team. Then you've got the sales reps, because we still have a team of reps who go round to individual bookshops and bump up the key accounts orders. And then you've got to present to the whole company twice a year at the bi-annual sales conferences – you can end up presenting the same book four or five times. But the thing is

that it's horribly important, because if you don't present then your book's in the catalogue and it looks lovely but nobody's buying it. And even though often you're just repeating what's already on the system, it seems to have an effect. If they read "Won the Arthur C. Clarke Award", it doesn't mean anything, but if you stand up at a sales conference and say, this book's just won the Arthur C. Clarke Award! at least they can think oh wow, it's really quite good! So the presentations are almost the most important part of what we do.

I didn't mention the marketing meetings, I didn't mention the publicity meetings, I didn't mention the monthly meetings sitting with the managing director because authors are not perfect beings and sometimes deliver late – I know this comes as a shock to many of you, and I hate to burst your illusions but sometimes books don't run on track, so we have to move things around in the year, and oh, did I mention doing budgets and valuations? Well, there's the money side to it too: we do budgets and valuations, making sure that we have the right number of copies making the right amount of money, and once a month we sit down and say we've lost this, this and this which leaves a £250,000 hole next year, how are we going to fill it – which goes back to your very first question which was how many books will we publish in a year, and the answer is I have no idea. Depends how big the hole is this week.

GS: And this is why there's a lead time, and people don't always understand why you don't get a manuscript and then publish it next month.

JF: Absolutely. It's impossible. That's leaving aside the actual mechanics of printing – they are better than they used to be, and we can turn a reprint round pretty quickly, but the quickest I've ever done a book is two months, and Al has promised he'll never do that to me again. You've got to shift everything else aside. It's very difficult to just say I've bought this book and I'm publishing it in two months' time, because apart from anything else the bookshelves themselves, they're buying May titles now. So if I go to all the bookshops and say hey, we're doing this really cool book in January, they'll turn round and say well I'm sorry, but we're buying July books now. It can be done, I won't pretend it can't, but it's got to be something amazingly special and wonderful to make everyone stop what they're doing, because of course it has a bump-on effect and everything else gets backed up.

GS: You talked about the mechanics of buying paper and printing, which leads me on to the world of electronic books. How do you feel about getting books out to people other than as ink on paper?

JF: I'm a collector. I grew up in a house of books. My grandpapa was a collector, my great grandpapa was a collector. To me a book is not a book unless it can sit on a bookshelf and I can take it down and flip through and smell the pages and smell the ink. I know that this is the way things are going for some people, but I find it very difficult to read books on screen, and we are an ageing population. Now, I am an iPod gal – I have no problem listening to music on my iPod, which has a good quarter of my record collection on it, but reading a book on it I couldn't do. I can edit on screen now, I've taught myself how to do it and it's

got to be done, but it sure takes it out of the eyes. I really will be very surprised if in twenty years' time all we have is eBooks.

GS: And there are people experimenting with crossovers – I'm thinking of people like Charles Stross and Cory Doctorow, who give away their books online and seem to do perfectly well with them in print. Neither of them are Gollancz authors: how would you feel about a Gollancz author doing that?

JF: Personally I would think they would be mad. We just got an email from our colleagues at Orbit, warning us of yet another website which has ripped off thousands of books and turned them into e-content and are offering it for free, and it's theft, it's just theft. If my Gollancz author puts his work out for free, his choice, then what is there to stop it being ripped off by any Tom, Dick or Harry who happens to have a print-on-demand capability? Publishers have spent years trying to make Eastern European publishers not pirate books but pay up, to make Vietnamese and Cambodian publishers pay for the books that they print, and we are succeeding, funnily enough, but I'd rather be paid 200 euros for an author than have the books out for free. It worries me – I understand why Charlie has done it, and I understand why Cory has done it, and it's a brave experiment, and it isn't affecting their sales, but it worries me. But then our field, we like books, we want books physically. If I'm doing a project for *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* and I'm doing something on a certain author I will go to my bookshelves and I will pull down all the books by that author, and I'll get from the library any I don't have, and sit down with them all around me and I'll dip in and out so that I can remind myself of this and that. If you're doing it on screen, yes you've got Google, yes you can pull up anything you want but it's much more difficult than sitting there with half a dozen books around you. Readers are also very author-led in the UK, they go into bookshops and ask for the new Al Reynolds, the new Geoff Ryman, whatever. Oddly, in America they tend not to do this. I don't know why, but they tend to ask if they can have something like, say, Laurel K. Hamilton – are you going to ask about Gollancz Romancz?

GS: If you'd like to talk about it, go ahead.

JF: Well, I need to talk about why we're doing it, just in case you're all gritting your teeth and saying has this woman gone mad? Gollancz Romancz – this is not just fantasy, this is fantasy with bite, this is fantasy to appeal to your deepest senses; this is not just romance, this is romance with supernatural overtones ... [stage direction: Imagine the M&S voice!]

OK, you all know what I'm talking about. I went to America last year, to World Fantasy, and when Ian and I did our normal tour of the bookshops, all we saw were Laurel K. Hamilton, Charlene Harris, and any number of paranormal porn books. It goes back to what we were saying earlier about selling books to the normal Joe, and I said OK, this is an opening, I can publish books. There are two drivers. The first is, they have to be good enough to be on the Gollancz list; I'm not going to publish tripe because that's what killed the horror field, and I'm not going to be party to that for as long as I can possibly hold it off. The

second thing is, if I package these books to appeal to twenty- to thirty-year-old women who read *Bella*, and *Heat*, and *Cosmo*, if I can get these women in reading fantasy with romance – and they are overwhelmingly fantasies, the romance part is a lesser but important part of what they are – then what's to say I can't then get them reading, say, Gwyneth Jones, because *Bold as Love* is one of the most romantic novels I've ever read. So that was the driver behind it. We went to America last week, and we went round the same bookshops in New York, and this year we were in Austin, Texas, there are shedloads of this stuff. They're being published as mystery crossovers, they're being published as crime crossovers, they're fantasy, science fiction romances, and they are taking over bookshops. That's worrying – too many people are jumping on the bandwagon. They're seeing what's selling – sensible, they're saying we can do that – sensible, but are they saying we need good stuff? No, they're saying we just need stuff. We need product. And they're putting it out like there's no tomorrow, and that is what killed horror. Too many people started publishing horror without knowing what they were doing, without knowing where they'd come from – what we talked about earlier – and you can fool some of the people some of the time but you can't fool all of the people all of the time, and I think it's going to fall over big time. I just hope that we can get a few people sucked in and discover the magical literature that is out there before it does.

Audience: One of the things I've noticed, looking at what's been published in the UK over the last few years, is how few US writers get published over here – even big writers like Vernor Vinge, Robert Charles Wilson, Lois McMaster Bujold. And there are UK writers who've had books published in the US but not over here, such as Gwyneth Jones' *Life*, which won the Philip K. Dick award. I was just wondering if you could talk about why?

JF: There are reasons for all of those – not necessarily good, but reasons. As I mentioned earlier, there's very little space for American authors on the Gollancz list. American publishers do not understand, despite the fact that I tell them every month, that if a book comes out in America, then unless I get my edition out within a month – 28 calendar days – then the American edition can go on sale in Australia. Or rather, they don't understand why that matters. For an American publisher, that's a very few copies out of their total print run: for me, it's up to a quarter of the copies of the print run. On top of that, these days we've got Amazon and any number of internet bookshops. They're there, we live with them, that's fine, but if I don't have my edition out then you're all going to be buying the American edition. Everyone is, because it's out first. Now, America will get around to submitting a manuscript, in proof, three months before they publish – and as I said, lead times are horrendous. I can't see a proof of a Vernor Vinge book that they're going to publish in March and fit it in. It's not possible. That's why – that's exactly why – we're not publishing Vernor Vinge, despite the fact that the book is terrific. As for British authors published in the US – Charlie Stross falls into this category. He was published first by Tor and Ace, and they didn't submit to Britain until too late. I can't afford to publish a book that's already been published in America unless I'm going to hit a different market, as I am with Gollancz Romancz. The audience for those books is not you guys. So thank God for the small presses, really. They're doing a spectacular job of

picking people up. There are far fewer genre lines in this country than there were when I started – we've lost Arrow, we've lost Headline, Simon Taylor at Transworld does a few books, Hodder do a couple of genre authors. So you've got HarperCollins, who do almost entirely fantasy, you've got Orbit, which does a lot of straight-from-America paperbacks, you've got Macmillan, including Tor, which does a lot of literary fantasy, and you've got us. And of course half a dozen other publishers who do the odd book and pretend it's not fantasy or sf – which is up to them, if they can sell the books that way that's great. So thank God for PS and Elastic and Subterranean and all the others. They're getting lots of writers in print, and keeping lots of writers in print. And every now and then there'll be a gap and we'll pick up a writer from the small press – which is what happened to Joe Hill.

GS: One last question – I didn't realise until I was frantically Googling at 4.30 this afternoon that you have the whole parallel career, and SciPedia says poet, writer, critic, journalist. Would you like to tell us about the parallel career?

JF: Poet is really not a good thing to be, it pays absolute peanuts – really, just don't go there. Sadly it wasn't something I was able to avoid, for reasons that aren't entirely clear. If you're a writer you're a writer – someone asked me the other day, why does Terry Pratchett keep writing? He's a multi-millionaire, probably a billionaire, and I said, because he's a writer. You can take everything away from Terry but his pen and he'll be scribbling, because he's a writer and that's what they do. Sadly for me it didn't come out as epic fantasy that I could have sold in the '80s and made an absolute fortune from; I ended up as a poet. I was a journalist, but all my friends were in the field, I grew up in the field, I've been going to World Fantasy Convention since the third one, I'm on the board of directors and one of the administrators of the World Fantasy Award. It's not really surprising that the writing side of my life would also come from that. But I did some ghostwriting in the 1980s, working on books that were completely divorced from what my everyday life was. It's absolutely fascinating. To be a good editor, to be a good publisher, you need to read outside your field. You need to know what everyone else is doing because it all impinges on what you're doing. I wouldn't have known about Gollancz Romancz had I not in my misspent youth written for Mills & Boon, for example. I was an editor, I was a writer, I was a poet, I was a writer, I was a ghostwriter, I was a writer. I think you make a better editor if you are also a writer, because you know how far to go with an author. You know when you're pushing boundaries that you just shouldn't push, it makes you a better editor. I am grammatically very sound, and I'm also grammatically very uptight, and I'm very well aware of that, but too many people today grow up knowing no grammar at all. And if there aren't people like me, who the hell's going to correct it?

Ice by Anna Kavan An introduction by Christopher Priest

Anna Kavan was born in 1901, and first published in 1929 under her married name, Helen Ferguson. After her second marriage collapsed, she had a nervous breakdown and emerged from her treatment as Anna Kavan - named after a character in one of her novels. She was addicted to heroin for many years, and died in 1968, but not before producing a substantial body of highly praised and original fiction. Ice is perhaps her best-known novel; this introduction appears in the most recent edition from Kavan's publisher, Peter Owen <<http://www.peterowen.com/>>, ISBN 0-7206-1268-3.

Anna Kavan's *Ice* is a work of literary slipstream, one of the most significant novels of its type. It was the last of the novels she wrote (it was published in 1967, a year before her death - although two other novels, whose manuscripts were found in her papers, appeared later). It's serious, evocative and surprising, unique in its obsessive images of encroachment. It is also unusual for its virtually plotless story, told in scenes of happenstance and coincidence.

The idea of slipstream literature arose in the USA at the end of the 1980s. It was originally an attempt to identify a certain kind of ambitious science fiction, which lay outside the familiar pulp-magazine tropes of space travel, alien invasions, time travel, and so on. Science fiction writers whose work qualified as slipstream included J. G. Ballard, John Sladek, Thomas M. Disch, some of Philip K. Dick, and several others. At the same time, other writers, who were outside the SF genre, but whose work could conceivably fit into the wider definition allowed by slipstream, were summoned in support. So Angela Carter, Paul Auster, Haruki Murakami, Jorge Luis Borges and William S. Burroughs were some of the writers invoked in this cause. Another notable inclusion was of course Anna Kavan.

The trouble with slipstream in this early sense was that its American advocates were in effect trying to create a new marketing category, a niche in the trade into which books that were traditionally difficult to sell might be channelled to find a market. The ways of the bookselling trade are slow to change, though, and nothing much came of that.

However, there was a real perception behind the label, and the idea of slipstream has taken hold, and is still a rewarding way to approach a complex and intriguing writer like Kavan.

The best way to understand slipstream is to think of it as a state of mind, or a particular approach, one that is outside all categorization. It is in essence indefinable, but slipstream induces a sense of 'otherness' in the audience, like a glimpse into a distorting mirror, perhaps, or a view of familiar sights and objects from an unfamiliar perspective. In general it imparts a sense that reality might not be quite as certain as we think. It's therefore possible to find elements of slipstream outside literature: music, films, graphic novels, installation art, and so on. Slipstream often deals with science, or the effects of science, but not in a mechanical or exact way. Thus it reflects the feelings of many people in the real world, who move in an increasingly science-dependent society without fully understanding how things work. (How many people can describe exactly how a cellphone works, for example? Yet

mobile phones are transforming the way we live our ordinary lives.)

Ice by Anna Kavan is a prime example of slipstream, but other examples might help define this virtually indefinable subject.

In literature, slipstream stands above genres of fiction. In this way, some of science fiction can certainly be recognized as slipstream (but by no means all). So too can many examples of magic realism: Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is slipstream, for instance. Some television drama - *The Singing Detective* by Dennis Potter, and a recent BBC series called *Life on Mars*, about an ordinary detective who travels back in time to police procedural work thirty years earlier, are both examples of popular slipstream. In cinema, recent slipstream films include Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's *Intacto* and Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich*.

All these works present the images of the ordinary world through shifting mirrors and distorting lenses, without attempting to explain. *Being John Malkovich*, for instance, is about an unsuccessful puppeteer whose speed and skill with his hands get him a job as a filing clerk. One day, while working in the office, he discovers a hole hidden behind one of his filing cabinets - on exploring it he finds it is a portal of some kind, that leads into the mind of the actor, John Malkovich. Nothing is given a pseudo-scientific explanation (which would make it science fiction), but the strangeness is laid plainly before the audience so that they, like the characters in the drama, take everything at its face value without questioning it further than the initial curiosity.

The strangeness of *Ice* is apparent from the first paragraph.

Someone driving late at night in bad weather calls in at a filling station. He (because of the author's gender we might assume at first that the narrator is female, but it soon becomes apparent that he is male) talks to the pump attendant. They speak of ominous events: the weather is remarkably cold. The roads are frozen and the village the driver is heading for is remote and difficult to reach. Much is left undefined. We learn almost nothing about the driver, and we don't know in which country the scene is set, or even the time of year. 'Never known such cold in this month.' It seems an unnaturally vague way of chatting about the weather, but for the reader of a novel the strangeness, even awkwardness, of the phrase 'in this month' raises an extra uncertainty. Which month are they talking about? Is it early or late winter, when snow might be unusual? Or is it a summer month, when nothing at all like this should happen? We never find out.

In fact, the cryptic quality of the opening paragraph sets the tone for the rest of the novel. There are three principal characters: the narrator, a young woman and a man who is probably her husband. None of them is ever named. The woman's husband seems to be an official of some kind (he is sometimes described as a warden, although at others he is a painter or a dilettante), while the narrator is a military man, perhaps in an intelligence role for a government.

There follows an extended *pas de trois* across the landscapes of a world rapidly freezing over. The narrator appears to move on whim, or at hazard: he accepts lifts, follows his instincts, follows orders. Wherever he turns up,

the young woman and her husband are there too. Sometimes he only glimpses the woman, but she eludes him. At other times he manages to speak to her, and at one point even manages to escape with her in his car. The husband is sometimes compliant, sometimes aggressive.

Because of the way Kavan describes her nameless characters, and because she is so apparently intent on physical and emotional uncertainty, the reader is frequently left stranded, if only momentarily. Her prose is beautifully measured, sometimes fey, sometimes muscular.

Dreams and memories (or are they flashbacks?) obtrude into the main story, without warning, without explanation or even without being given a rationale within the context of the other events.

Clearly, *Ice* is not a realistic novel, in which the conventions or formulas of popular fiction are adopted. Approached with the usual kind of expectation, *Ice* will seem crudely constructed, even arbitrary, because the story lacks cause and effect. At the same time, the background is not realistic. Kavan's depiction of a new ice age owes nothing to current fears about global warming, which she might well have known about, since although the concept of climate change has recently entered common parlance, it is in fact a process that has been monitored scientifically since at least the beginning of the 20th century. Nor even does it show any realistic relation to the opposite fears: re-glaciation theories were fleetingly in vogue in the decade in which she was writing, but they were nothing like Kavan's world of towering ice mountains, steep valleys blocked by snow, and so on.

Her icing-up world is one of encroachment: the ice creeps towards you, surrounds you, invades you, captures you. Even flight to equatorial regions provides only a temporary relief: the ice inevitably catches up.

Slipstream shifts science (and its effects) into the realm of the unconscious mind, into metaphor, into emotion, into symbols. Slipstream literature is a response to science (and scientific effects), an exercise of human feeling about science, if not an understanding of it. But it is not allegory.

It's tempting, for instance, to take the known fact of Anna Kavan's years of heroin addiction and suggest that the white ice that engulfs the characters is a literary device, a symbolic representation of the pure-white crystals whose solution she injected daily into her veins. Maybe that comes into it, and maybe that was even in her mind as she wrote, but to work as allegory there has to be an exactness that the reader can grasp. In *Ice* the symbols are more elusive, mysterious, captivating. It ends as it begins, with nothing that is practical or concluded. The man of action is united with the passive young woman, but their destiny is nowhere near resolved. The encroachment of the ice continues.

'Anna Kavan' was a pseudonym for Helen Ferguson, the married name under which the author wrote and sold her first few novels between 1929 and 1937. She continued to write through World War 2, but mostly short stories, and many of these dealt explicitly with her unhappy and unstable psychological life. She made attempts on her life after her second marriage failed and when her son was killed in the war. She spent two long periods in mental hospitals. Some of her most disturbing stories can be found in *Asylum Piece*,

published in 1940. She suffered from a painful spinal disease, and began taking heroin for pain relief.

But she also lived an active life. She travelled around the world, and lived at different times in New Zealand, Australia, Burma, Switzerland, France and the USA. She eventually returned to London, where she was living at the time of her death. She was a renowned interior decorator. She bred bulldogs. She was an excellent painter. Towards the end of her life she became a small-time property developer, buying, renovating then reselling houses in London. She was fascinated by cars and racing, and in her stories her fictional characters frequently drive around in powerful cars (as they also do in *Ice*).

Anna Kavan was under-regarded in her lifetime, and was just starting to gain critical recognition when she died. *Ice* has been out of print for too long, and it's a great pleasure to introduce this wonderful, compelling and extremely influential novel to a new generation of readers.

Note: a roundup of links to other discussion of "slipstream" and slipstream works can be found on the Vector blog at <http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com/2006/09/07/now-all-slipstream-until-the-end/>



Politics is What Humans Do

Richard Morgan interviewed by
Martin Lewis

*Richard Morgan is the author of five acclaimed SF novels, including the Takeshi Kovacs series of military cyberpunk novels starting with *Altered Carbon* (2002). His latest novel, *Black Man*, is set in a near future where the USA has fractured into three independent states. Carl Marsalis is the titular black man, a genetically engineered "variant thirteen". Thirteens were created to be super-soldiers but it is not long before a backlash starts. Shurred as "twists", as the novel opens they are no longer the heroes of Middle Eastern wars but monsters to be feared and hated. Marsalis operates under license, satisfying this fear by hunting down others of his kind. Abandoned by the UN he instead employs his services for the vast corporation colonizing Mars, helping them hunt down an escaped serial killer. Clearly inspired by contemporary events, *Black Man* is a fast-paced action novel that still manages to grapple with meaty political and social issues. This interview was conducted by email in August 2007.*

Martin Lewis: You are one of those overnight success stories who was plugging away for ages before suddenly making a splash. On your website you describe the rapid process of publishing your debut novel, *Altered Carbon*, as: "Gollancz published it, Hollywood bought it, I gave up my day job. Eight months. Just like that." What did that feel like?

Richard Morgan: Initially, fantastic. Fourteen years of trying (without anything at all to show for it), and then a three book deal out of nowhere. You can probably imagine. But then, as the good news piled up, the reviews, the enthusiasm, the film interest, I got increasingly numb to it all. There's only so much life-fulfilling good fortune you can take at any one time, only so much adrenalin you can secrete. By the time the film deal rolled around and I quit my day-job to write full time, I'd been living on full spectrum delight for about a year non-stop, and I was pretty much beyond feeling anything but slightly dazed.

ML: Were you still writing during this period?

RM: Yeah, I was banging steadily away at the word processor all that time, not to mention still holding down my day-job at Strathclyde University. Thing is, I was initially picked up by Gollancz at the end of 2000, but *Altered Carbon* wasn't published until February of 2002; meantime, they told me to go away and start in on a second novel, and I did, in something of a disbelieving trance, but steadily, as I said. I think during that period, if anything, the headiness of having finally found a publisher acted as a supercharger on my writing. There wasn't really any sense of pressure either, because for the vast majority of the time I was working on *Broken Angels*, *Altered Carbon* hadn't yet hit the shelves – all the accolades and hype were still to come. And by the time that did hit, I was pretty much done with the *Broken Angels* manuscript so it was too late to worry.

Then of course, the film deal went through by the end of the year, and I was able to quit my day-job. That was very helpful at the time, because a lot of people reacted badly to *Broken Angels* when it came out the following Spring – they

objected variously, to the shift away from future detective story towards space opera/military SF, to the more static, conversational sections and deeper character work, or in some cases simply to the darker tone and ramped up amorality. And the film deal basically gave me the freedom to say so what? I'll write what I damn well like, rather than feeling under pressure to do a crowd-pleasing *Altered Carbon* copy. And I remain very grateful for that Hollywood money, because it allowed me to maintain that stance while I built up a back catalogue of work I could feel proud of, rather than just one that would pay the bills.

ML: Hollywood might have bought the rights but given how these things work I'm not holding my breath waiting for it to appear. Presumably you'd love to see your novel on the big screen though?

RM: Well, I'm ambivalent – obviously, you want the impact of a movie version, the widescreen thrill of it, and that's without even mentioning the publicity and the increased book sales that will inevitably follow a movie. But at the same time, there's always the sneaking suspicion that not enough of your original vision is going to survive the translation to the big screen medium, that you're going to end up with *Johnny Mnemonic*, not *Bladerunner*, as an end product, and that would be a great shame. Perhaps fortunately, the whole thing is out of my hands anyway, so I just keep my fingers vaguely crossed, and try not to give it too much thought day to day. Got to live in the now, y'know.

ML: Film is obviously a big influence on the novels. Is it right that *Market Forces* originally started off as a screenplay? Would you still like to write a film?

RM: No, I really wouldn't. *Market Forces* the screenplay – written long before the novel, yes, bulked up from an original short story I'd failed to find a publisher for – was a miserable experience for me. In the end, it felt like being stuck in that garbage compressor in *Star Wars*. Struggling to keep your head above water, flailing about looking for something to brace against an ever-tightening sense of constriction as control of the project slips from your grasp. That wasn't anyone's fault, it's just the nature of the beast. A movie script is never a finished product, at best it's only ever a working template, and you never really own it the way you do a book. Screen-writing requires you to be pragmatic, amenable to compromise, endlessly sociable and a good team player. I score very low on all of those, which is why I write novels.

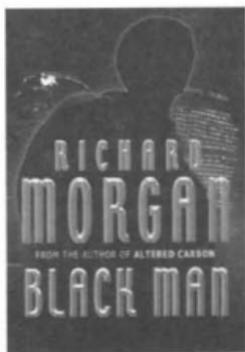
ML: What have you been watching recently?

RM: Very little on the big screen, to be honest. There seems to have been a great dearth of decent movies on general release this summer. The last really good thing I saw at the cinema was probably *The Last King of Scotland*, and that was ages ago. On the small screen, I've been working my way through the third season of *The Wire* on DVD, which suffers from a certain amount of long-term series sag, but is still far and away the best TV drama around right now.

ML: They aren't in the same league as *The Wire* but SF TV is experiencing a bit of a boom at the moment. Do you watch

Heroes or the new *Battlestar Galactica*?

RM: I don't really watch a great deal of TV, so the majority of this stuff is under my radar. I think I did catch a glimpse of *Heroes* a few weeks back, but I have to confess I wasn't all that impressed. Despite all the good things I'd heard about its humanity and grayish moral tones, this still seemed fundamentally to be about Good Guys and Bad Guys and Big Abstract Struggles between Good and Evil (in the segment I saw, a magical sword that can only work for Good, or something? Super-powered bright young things under horrible duress from evil black helicopter backed governmental types?), and that's not a dynamic I have a lot of time for in fiction. Like I said, it was just a glimpse, and I haven't seen *Galactica* at all, so I'm more than happy to be convinced that I've misjudged this new wave on too little evidence. But as you say yourself – this stuff just isn't in the same league as *The Wire*. The question we ought to be asking ourselves as genre practitioners and fans is *Why Not?*



ML: Moving back to your novels, *Black Man* has had a pretty positive critical reception. What responses have you had to the novel from fans?

RM: In general, the readership have responded more or less in line with the critics – which is to say there's a consensus that this is the best thing I've written so far, by some considerable margin. And of course, that's very gratifying – you always hope that you get better with each book, but I think as an author you depend on that outside opinion to fully gauge what you have or haven't achieved; basically, you're standing too close to ground zero to assess the novels you write with any degree of objective honesty. And enough people whose honesty I trust have told me this one is something special, so I'm starting to believe that maybe it is. Of course, there is a certain small but vocal contingent among the fans who hated *Black Man*, but what their complaints seem to boil down to is *this book isn't Altered Carbon*. Well, no – that's why there's a whole other title on the front cover. And as I think I mentioned above, I've been dragging that critique with me ever since my second novel came out. It would appear that there are readers out there who just want the same thing duplicated over and over

again, like a baking tray full of Big Macs. I really can't help those people – they need to go back to reading tie-in novels.

ML: You appear as Richard Morgan in the UK and Richard K Morgan in the US. Iain Banks has said in the past that he regrets using his middle initial but am I right in thinking you prefer the "K"?

RM: Well, there's a venerable genre tradition, isn't there – Ursula K Le Guin, Philip K Dick, Robert A Heinlein, Peter F Hamilton, Robert E Howard, Vonda N McIntyre, Maureen F McHugh, and that's just off the top of my head sitting here. Must be something to do with the rhythm of the thing. In fact, while I really don't like my middle name, I do quite like the bare initial, and I had originally asked to be Richard K Morgan on both sides of the Atlantic. But then Gollancz decided to go with a logotype-led cover, and said the K would get in the way and did I mind dropping it? And not being a prima donna about these things, I said sure, why not. So now, just like Iain there, I'm stuck with the difference.

ML: On a slightly more contentious issue, it is titled *Black Man* in the UK and *Thirteen* in the US. I assume *Black Man* is your preferred title. What necessitated the trans-Atlantic change?

RM: To be honest, that's still a matter for some debate – I'm not sure if it was fear that black interest groups would react badly to a book called *Black Man* written by a white guy, or fear that a white-bread American SF readership would feel alienated by a science fiction novel called *Black Man*. Certainly, the various African-American readers I've spoken to on the tour I just got back from seem to feel it's the latter. I'm really the wrong guy to ask – you'd need to speak to my US publishers to get a certain answer.

ML: As a white writer did you have any concerns about tackling race in the novel?

RM: Not really, no. I mean, obviously you want to get the detail right, you want to be convincing, because when all is said and done, that's your job as a writer. But there's really no reason why, with a reasonable degree of sensitivity, someone white shouldn't be able to write black characters (or vice versa). And it was a lot easier for me than for a more mainstream writer, because this book was never going to be about existing racial contexts anyway – it deals with issues of racism and xenophobia in general, but in the end it's set in a future I invented, and that makes me the biggest resident expert on any contexts that future entails. And that's a nice position to be in.

In fact, beyond that obvious need for writerly sensitivity, I don't have a lot of patience with the kind of identity politics that says no white writer can (or should) deal with black character context. Because the obvious corollary to that is that no black writer should be writing white characters. And that neither black nor white writers should write Asian characters. And that male writers shouldn't attempt female characters, and that women can't write men. And that no-one under fifty can write about old people. And... It's a ludicrous progression, and it flies in the face of the whole

enterprise of literature. Writing fiction is an exercise in the use of imagination – you can be better or worse at it, make a better or worse job of it, but this political off-limits stuff is bullshit.

ML: Along with race, gender plays a huge role in the novel. How much is this informed by your own life experience?

RM: I think I had a relatively standard (lower) middle class British upbringing, which is to say my mother and father both fulfilled fairly traditional gender roles for the times. My father was the breadwinner, my mother was a home-maker and worked part time as I and my sister got older. Parenting was a shared thing, but my mother was quite headstrong and my father quite easy-going, so I guess they met in the middle perhaps more than some extremely traditional parental models might have. Later in life, my mother discovered feminism, joined a women's group and started volunteering at the local women's refuge. By that time, I was in my mid-teens and I'd taken to borrowing a lot of what she was reading, so with that and the things she told me about the refuge, I got an early and forceful introduction to feminist theory and practice. That's something that never really goes away, it's like going to live in a foreign culture – once you've opened your head that way, seen things from that other perspective, the world never looks the same again.

ML: So your time in Turkey and Spain was helpful to you as a writer?

RM: Yes, very. It's a powerful shock to the system to go and live in a place where millions of people exist day-to-day on a set of cultural assumptions markedly different from your own. As with seeing the feminist (or more simply the female) perspective on things, you are forced out of your accustomed world-view, forced to consider its validity as against any other. The result is ultimately very empowering – you come away with a far better sense of what is of real value in your own culture, and of what could really do with being changed. Plus (if you can beat your own nasty knee-jerk prejudices) you get an overwhelming sense of common humanity, a (one would think fairly obvious) understanding that at basic levels people are similar wherever you go – but you get that understanding at an emotional rather than an intellectual level. And then of course, there's the wealth an experience like that brings to your life in terms of getting to know different food, different music, different languages, different kinds of humour ... and all of those will feed into your fiction, and make it correspondingly richer, more human and more textured.

ML: We've just touched on a couple of major social issues. There seems to be a bit of a split between the Takeshi Kovacs novels and the standalone novels. Are *Black Man* and *Market Forces* deliberate attempts to examine political and social questions in a way you couldn't with Kovacs?

RM: Not at all. That's to say, I didn't consciously set out to write a political novel with either *Market Forces* or *Black Man*, or for that matter to avoid politics in the Kovacs books. All my novels start out from roughly the same point – I spin them up out of character interaction, brief scenes and

confrontations, and then look to see what direction I can roll the material in. In some cases, that's going to involve a more overt political context than in others. *Market Forces* went from being a duel between two savagely competitive City types to a full dress portrait of the society that would allow such confrontations to be its defining characteristic. Along the way, it ended up becoming a critique of macho neoliberalism and the American Business Model. Similarly, *Black Man* started with a disaffected bounty hunter trawling the Mars Prep camps on the *altiplano* for fugitives, and a disaffected ex-cop wrestling with a ghost-ship-makes-port scenario borrowed from the Bram Stoker tradition. The political contexts came later, as the story opened up. But you could also say the same thing about the third Kovacs book, *Woken Furies*, which is among other things a pretty extensive examination of revolutionary politics, but started life as a scene of violent confrontation in a wharf-front bar. Or we could talk about the political context of the war in *Broken Angels*, and Kovacs's attitude to it. In fact, the truth is that with the possible exception of *Altered Carbon* itself, there's a pretty strong political current running in all my work – and even there, in *Altered Carbon*, I think my politics came through pretty clearly for anyone who was paying attention. The thing is, as far as I'm concerned, politics is a part of life, and any novel which has any hope of describing human existence in a halfway decent fashion will have to have a political context. If your characters and situations are apolitical, then they just aren't realistic. Politics is what humans do, it's practically our defining characteristic as a species.

ML: Have we seen the last of Kovacs?

RM: For the time being, yes. That's not some kind of Conan Doyle sulk, it's not a Never Again thing. It's just that right now I can't think of anything fresh or interesting to do with the character. And I have a real horror of turning into a series hack, churning out endless, soulless clones of the same basic book. That's not for me. I'm lucky enough to be making a good living from my writing now, and with that comes, I think, a responsibility not to abuse the privilege. That means pushing the envelope a bit, taking some risks, looking for something fresh to do each time. Otherwise, I might as well be laying out those trays full of Big Macs I mentioned earlier. It wouldn't be writing then, it'd just be a job packaging product.

That said, if I ever come up with a way to do another Kovacs that does offer something fresh, then of course I'll do it. I miss the old bastard as much as anyone.

ML: The acknowledgements to *Black Man* show someone who reads in wide range of subjects. Do you think this is important for a writer? Or is it just important for any human being?

RM: The latter, definitely.

ML: To pick an example, you quote the philosopher John Gray as an epigram to *Black Man*. What drew you to him and would you recommend that I read him?

RM: I wouldn't exactly recommend Gray – he's a miserable, misanthropic bastard even at the best of times, and reading his stuff is definitely going to spoil your day. He's also a great one for laying down the law about things, which is a bit rich coming from someone who was a cheerleader for the Thatcher revolution in the eighties and now affects to despise neo-liberalism. I mean, a bit of humility perhaps, John? Would that be too much to ask?

That said, he's a smart, well-read guy and he makes some interesting points (one of which forms that quote at the beginning of *Black Man*). And I've found that as I get older I enjoy reading erudite non-fiction by people I disagree with almost more than I do the stuff written by authors whose viewpoints I share. It makes you think more, because you're looking for the holes in the argument, rather than nodding along with the flow.

ML: Despite these social and political concerns would you say your primary aim as a writer is to entertain?

RM: I guess...

Oh, look, there's a lot of eloquent bollocks talked about what literature is (or should be) for, and I don't have much patience with any of it. I think in the end it's a meaningless question, rather like asking what trees are for. Trees have an enormous number of useful environmental functions, and you can make a whole lot of different things out of wood. But none of that implies *purpose* of any kind – the trees just get on and grow. I write because I like to tell stories, I just do and I always have. Necessarily, those stories are going to include all sorts of opinion, allusion and implication, because all stories do. But in the end I do this because I like it (and now because I get paid for it) – you always hope that other people are going to like it too (that's the entertainment angle, I guess), because writing, like speaking, is an act of (or at least an attempt at) communication. But that wouldn't in itself be reason enough for me to write, any more than people suddenly not liking my stuff would be a reason for stopping. You write because it's what you do – what people make of it is their call.

ML: You are currently working on a fantasy novel called *Land Fit For Heroes*. What attracted you to the idea of writing a fantasy?

Well, we've just talked about staying fresh, and switching genre like this is certainly one way to do that. But also, this is in some senses a case of putting my word processor where my mouth is; I've been talking a good fight for some time about trying to import the noir sensibility of the Kovacs books into a fantasy setting, and my publishers on both sides of the Atlantic have been kind enough to – quite literally – buy into the idea. I wrote some character vignettes, showed them to my editor in London, and that was that; three book deal, and down to work. *Land Fit for Heroes* is a working title, and as anyone who's read any of my stuff will probably have guessed, it's intended as a piece of irony about as subtle as an axe.

ML: So we've had SF noir, we are about to have fantasy

noir, what about noir noir? Would you be tempted to do a mainstream thriller?

RM: It's a possibility. I do like the noir crime form, and I have a few tentative ideas that might go to make a book in that genre. But whether those ideas will ever coalesce sufficiently to justify taking them forward and pitching to a crime publisher is another matter. As is the question of whether I'll find the time!

ML: Looking at authors moving in the opposite direction, have you read Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*?

RM: Not yet. I picked it up along with *No Country for Old Men* back in January (I'd been meaning to read some McCarthy for some time), and of the two options, it was *No Country for Old Men* that commended itself more. That turned out to be the right decision, in that I really enjoyed *No Country...* and will no doubt get round to reading some more McCarthy some time soon. Whether that'll turn out to be *The Road* or some of his earlier work, the Border Trilogy maybe, I don't know. I confess the premise of *The Road* doesn't grab me, it just doesn't seem all that promising in either narrative or thematic terms. Then again, it is one of a number of science fiction novels attracting major mainstream attention right now, so I guess I really ought to have a look, for professional reasons if nothing else. Then again, the last time I did that, I bought Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* – which turned out to be an error of truly epic proportions.

A report on the first Science Fiction Foundation Masterclass in science fiction criticism

Paul Raven

It was my great privilege to have my application accepted and be offered a delegate place on the Science Fiction Foundation's first ever Masterclass in sf criticism. Held at Liverpool University in June of this year, it was the inaugural iteration of what is apparently to become an annual event.

And 'event' is a fair term to use. To be sure, there was plenty of serious genre-orientated study involved, and that was of incredible value to me. But I would be remiss to not mention how much of a social pleasure it was, too.

Liverpool was the logical location for the Masterclass due to the presence of the SFF's archive collection, tucked deep below the bunker-like structure of the University's Sydney Jones Library. The days were divided up into two three-hour lecture sessions, morning and evening, leaving the afternoons free for delegates to make use of the SFF collections or amuse themselves as they saw fit.

The course began on Tuesday morning with the first instalment of Andrew Butler's lecture on the role of the uncanny in science fiction. Butler's talk aimed to pin down the role of the uncanny as a critical strategy by converging on it from two directions – the Freudian notion of the uncanny, and the Marxist concept of cognitive estrangement.

The second tutor was veteran sf author and scholar Brian Stableford. In sharp contrast to the more didactic format of the other presentations, Stableford's contributions took the form of a discursive narrative. His goal – an examination of the aesthetics of science fiction – was achieved in a circuitous fashion, by way of a talk that was subtle, multi-layered, anecdotal, challenging and well-researched, delivered with dry self-deprecating humour.

Stableford roamed through territories as diverse as classical philosophy, fallacious logic, the psychology of plausibility, the language of science and the history of the genre. From a personal perspective, I have never been so

close to grasping a taxonomy and structure of genre fiction as a body of work as Stableford took us during the course of his two sessions.

The third class leader was Joan Haran, who took us on a tour of seminal feminist ideas in science fiction through examinations of core texts. Feminist and queer theory are inherently structured around their own language of terms, many of which were initially opaque to me, but Haran was adept at explaining where necessary, and happy to clarify on queries from delegates.

Indeed, all the lectures were delivered in a manner that made me feel included. I had been rather discomforted to discover I was virtually the only non-academic delegate, and was worried that the whole course would be pitched in such a way as to make little sense to a person who has bootstrapped himself into literary criticism. It was a great relief to find that not only were the classes full of content that I could grasp without the benefit of an extensive literary education, but that I was able to contribute to the discussions on an almost equal footing.

Another interesting facet was the emergent interconnectedness of the subject matter. Despite the class leaders preparing their material without knowing what the others would be covering, a number of themes and subjects overlapped and joined up, with the result that during Joan Haran's final session, we were applying ideas that had been presented by Butler and Stableford earlier in the week. This may have been less of a shock for those more familiar with the study of literature, but for me it was almost revelatory.

Indeed, the week as a whole revealed to me something of the nature and purpose of literary criticism – something that had been worryingly obscure to someone who scaled the walls of that metaphorical garden, rather than entering by the more established gateways. Furthermore, it was a pleasure to find myself in an academic environment where the material was not just accessible but genuinely fascinating.

But I must return to the social aspect I mentioned before. I know practically no one in my day-to-day life with whom I can discuss science fiction literature. The few people I know who actually read the stuff have little interest in it beyond its properties as escapist entertainment – which is no bad thing, and I think no less of them for it. But attending the Masterclass, much like the few cons I have been to,



reminded me how pleasurable it is to be able to sit down with like-minded people and engage in discussion about a subject that is very dear to me. It was also a pleasure to discover that, without exception, those people were a lot of fun to be around.

And so I should take this opportunity to thank Farah Mendlesohn and the Foundation panel for accepting my application to attend; Andy Sawyer and Aidan-Paul Canavan for executing the logistical side of things (and for the loaning of wi-fi privileges – cheers, A-P); Fatima Ahad for making a great portion of the reading list available in electronic format for an incorrigible bit-head; Joan Haran, Andrew Butler and Brian Stableford for sharing their wisdom and ideas; and the other delegates for making a shabby non-academic feel like an accepted part of the group.

I commend this course to anyone who wants to extend their knowledge of literary criticism as applied to science fiction – now the inaugural event has been completed, I feel sure that the few logistical wrinkles that occurred will be

learned from, and that future iterations will only improve on an already excellent foundation (pun intended).

Paul Raven blogs at <http://www.velcro-city.co.uk/>, and has recently taken over as Interzone's reviews editor.

The Second Annual Science Fiction Foundation Masterclass.

Location: University College Dublin.

Dates: June 20th, 21st, and 22nd (that's Friday, Saturday, Sunday).

Class Leaders: Wendy Pearson, Geoff Ryman, and Gary K. Wolfe.

The Science Fiction Masterclass is held in conjunction with the University of Liverpool. However in the summer of 2008, the archive is being refurbished and is closed to researchers. It has been decided, therefore, that for this one year the Masterclass will be held in Dublin, a few days before the Science Fiction Research Association conference, to allow people to attend both with ease, should they wish. The SFF committee will ensure that supplementary reading is made available.

The aim of the Masterclass is to provide those who have a serious interest in sf criticism with the opportunity to exchange ideas with leading figures in the field, and also to use the SFF Collection.

The Masterclass will take place from June 20th-22nd 2008 at University College, Dublin. Each full day of the Masterclass will consist of morning and evening classes, with afternoons free to prepare. Class leaders for 2008 will be Wendy Pearson, Geoff Ryman, and Gary K. Wolfe.

Delegate costs will be £190 per person, excluding accommodation. Accommodation will be provided at University College Dublin: €55 per single room, per night. (The applicable rate is 55.00euro per single room per night in a shared apartment. Each apartment consists of six single bedrooms en suite with kitchen/dining area and sitting room. All bed linen, hand towel and basic breakfast crockery are provided.)

Applicants should write to Farah Mendlesohn at farah.sf@gmail.com, providing a short CV of either: academic credentials, essay/book publications, or reviews, and a writing sample (this may be from a blog); all of these will be valued equally, as we are looking for a mixture of experiences and approaches.

Applications will be assessed by an Applications Committee consisting of Paul Kincaid, Andy Sawyer and Jenny Wolmark. Completed applications must be received by 31st January 2008.

REVIEWS

Lou Anders (ed.) – *Fast Forward #1*
Pyr, New York, 2007, 320pp, \$15.00, t/p
(reviewed in proof), ISBN 978-1591024866

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

Fast Forward #1 is the first in a projected new series of unthemed anthologies. Editor Lou Anders is consciously taking inspiration from prestigious series from the past, particularly Frederick Pohl's *Star Science Fiction* and Damon Knight's *Orbit* anthologies. Given the significance of these series, Lou Anders shows no lack of ambition in wanting to emulate them. *Fast Forward #1* opens with a long introduction by Anders in which he attempts to explain his motivations and the type of story that he considers to be 'Science Fiction'. His view would seem to be that science fiction is the



literary genre that can specifically look at the effect of technology on people and society, and the implication is that his selection of stories for this anthology is based largely on this view of sf. This may or may not be a particularly helpful or useful definition, but it does allow for a framing of the anthology series and the type of story that is likely to appear in it. This means that hard sf is more likely to fall under his definition, and indeed hard sf is a phrase that Anders uses on a number of occasions in both the main introduction and also in the introductions to the individual stories. The professed intention of the anthology is to present an "unthemed anthology of high quality stories that provide a window on the future" (so not entirely unthemed then?), and for the most part it succeeds in this.

Regardless of the hard sf bias, nothing really presents itself to enable the reader to determine what constitutes a typical Fast Forward type story. It varies wildly in both theme and tone: from the whimsy of Tony Ballantine's 'Aristotle OS', with its operating system based on an Aristotelian worldview to the satire of Ken MacLeod's 'Jesus Christ, Re-animator', a take on the second coming story, through the biologically brutal future of Paolo Bacigalupi's 'Small Offerings' and the touching variant of

the time-travel tale 'p dolce' from Louise Marley. It also includes two prose poems from infamous indie musician Robyn Hitchcock, which count as his first foray into the world of sf. These are OK, but then I've always preferred his words when set to music and I do struggle when it comes to sf poetry. Given the fairly puffed tone of the introduction, it was quite a relief to find that Lou Anders is also happy to inject a fair degree of humour into the collection. A particular favourite being Pamela Sargent's 'A Smaller Government', in which the U.S. government is, well, smaller. At least in and around The White House it's smaller.

The contents page shows a significant number of fairly big names, including, amongst others, Gene Wolfe, Ian McDonald, Stephen Baxter and Larry Niven, alongside a handful of less well known authors, although there do not appear to be any completely new writers featured. The overall standard is consistently high, with little or nothing that could really be described as makeweight. There is also, conversely, little that stands out from the crowd, although given the overall quality, this level of consistency can really only be a good thing. One or two of the stories, however, can be seen as slightly sentimental. This is particularly the case in Mike Resnick and Nancy Kress' 'Solomon's Choice', an otherwise affecting story of a human scientist attempting to undo the damage done by a badly considered first contact which was spoilt for me by the sentimentality of the closing paragraph.

The only real flaw with this collection is its appalling cover, featuring the face of a small child gazing off into the depths of space, with the by-line "future fiction from the cutting edge". I really have no idea what is meant by 'cutting edge' in the context of fiction, and as none of the stories on offer could be described as being radically different, this particular pitch feels a little unwarranted. Having said that, this is a consistently strong and varied anthology, and if the series as a whole retains the general quality of the first volume, it will be a series worth keeping an eye on.

Jon Armstrong – *Grey*
Night Shade Books, San Francisco,
2007, 239pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN
1597800651

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Grey revels in luxury. Michael Rivers, the protagonist of Jon Armstrong's debut novel, is heir to the world's number one security corporation, and one half of the world's perfect couple. His engagement to Nora, the fabulously beautiful daughter of one of RiverGroup's competitors, has been arranged to complete a merger between their respective companies; as the book opens, they are on a high-speed train, being whisked away on their

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fourth date, enjoying a first-class meal of fried whale and plum sandwiches, cream coffees and pastries. Their life is as public as it gets – their first date took place “before a thousand cameras and five oceans of light” – so that when Michael is shot at the post-date press conference, the consequences extend far beyond the immediate physical harm.

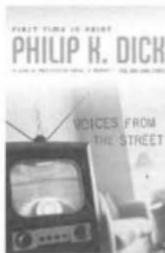
In fact, the consequences include no lasting physical harm at all, since the bullet that pierces Michael's hand was laced with healing pharmaceuticals. (The drugs in the book come very close to being indistinguishable from magic, at times.) It's the psychological and – most importantly – the economic fallout that *Grey* tracks, as RiversGroup teeters on the brink of collapse. After all, if a security company can't protect one of its own, how likely are they to be able to protect anyone else? Much to his chagrin, Michael is forcibly separated from Nora, and therefore spends a good chunk of the book trying to get back to her. It's a little hard to swallow that, despite the fact that Michael is nineteen, and despite the fact that it's an arranged and entirely artificial relationship, apparently what he feels for Nora really is, no kidding, true love – as is what she apparently feels for him, since it's largely Nora's efforts that bring the star-crossed lovers back together at all. But swallow it we do. In the background is Michael's father, who is a creature of parodic, Zaphodick excess, with outfits to match: “his jacket was an enormous thing that looked like it was covered with wet hunter-green paint. Stuffed in the breast pocket was what looked like a cut of raw pork and a black rubber glove”.

It's fashion that binds Michael and Nora together, specifically their shared obsession with the mysterious magazine *Pure H*, whose pages are filled with beautifully shot images adorned with cryptic copy (“The photo was of a close-up of a wounded woman's hand resting on wet sand. Beneath the image, the copy read: The moment became her life”). Like a high-society version of the Footage from William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, nobody knows who puts *Pure H* together, and interpreting its contents is – for a certain set – an obsession. The magazine is also the central reference point for adherents to the fashion movement that gives the novel its title. But in this future, being a dedicated follower of fashion requires some extreme measures: not only does Michael eschew all colour in his clothing, but at the age of eighteen he had all the cone cells in his right eye selectively destroyed. Through that eye, Michael now only sees black, white, and grey.

There's no denying the gusto with which Armstrong goes about creating this world. His gift for creating plausibly outrageous outfits, styles, brand names and band names seems inexhaustible; for its entire length, *Grey* is filled with inventive details, and images that move beyond the familiar furniture of cyberpunk. (Perhaps the most implausibly successful is the appropriation of competitive ironing, which is “the oldest and most prestigious sport played among the fashionable” and the source of a couple of effectively tense sequences, rather than the cultish activity it is in our own world.) But Armstrong is less successful at harnessing this imagination to either his story or his characters. The story wobbles uneasily between Paul di Filippo-style frenetic satire and something more straightforwardly dystopian. It also suffers somewhat by comparison with James Lovegrove's recent *Provender Gled* (2005). Both books are tales of rivalry between great corporate families; both focus on heirs and their loves; both invite comparison with Shakespearean structures (Romeo and Juliet in *Grey*, Hamlet in *Provender Gled*); both satirise celebrity and fame. The

costs of such societies for those caught on the outside, however, are more keenly dramatised in Lovegrove's book. When Michael visits the slubs (a rather wonderful neologism, presumably combining “slums” and “suburbs”, and a rather less wonderful actual place), it is essentially for the purpose of picking up a plot coupon he can't get elsewhere. Admittedly *Grey* is only the first in a projected trilogy, and each book will focus on a different character, but for now at least there's a sense that Armstrong wants to have his cake – the eyeball kicks, the flamboyant excess – without thinking too hard about where the ingredients came from.

Similarly problematic is Michael himself. As an observer he's first-rate, but what he sees is almost always more interesting than what he is. More than once, when Michael decides to do something, he finds his plans pre-empted by the actions of others. This keeps the plot moving at a fair clip, but leaves Michael as a character looking somewhat lost, meandering from event to event. He may think of himself as “a soft creature forced into a hard role”, but he never actually has to make the hard choices his situation would seem to imply; he buys a nitrocellulose suit, for example, with the intent of carrying out an assassination-by-suicide, only to be overtaken once more by events. As a result, the moral epiphany he reaches late in the novel feels a bit strained; obvious to us as readers, and simultaneously a bit of a leap for Michael. Perhaps the problem is that Michael is insufficiently shaped by his world. I expressed slight skepticism about his relationship with Nora above, because it sometimes seems that what Michael really loves is Nora's way with choosing the right words, images, and references, not Nora herself; but it's possible to imagine a world in which such appreciation is love, a world where the performative aspects of a media-saturated life have become real life themselves. David Marusek manages something close to this in the opening section of his 2005 novel *Counting Heads*; the characters of *Grey*, though, stay comfortably close to the conventions of our own time. It's a luxury that diminishes an interesting book.



Philip K. Dick – *Voices from the Street*

Tor, New York, 2007, 301pp
\$24.95, ISBN 0765316929

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

It is twenty-five years since Philip K. Dick died, and in that time all but one of his non-science fiction novels were finally considered publishable, as were an earlier version of *VALIS* (1981), *Radio Free Albemuth* (1985, w.

1976), expanded versions of *The Unteleported Man* (1966, 1983, 1984, w. 1964, 1965, 1979) and a rather charming children's novel, *Nick and the Glimmung* (1988, w. 1966). Limited extracts from the *Exegesis*, his eight year attempt to grapple with his mysterious theophanies of February 1974, and outlines for aborted novels have also made it into print. In his mainstream novels Dick explored adulterous relationships and mixed race affairs, described rape and contraception and domestic violence, among salesmen and teachers and disc jockeys. I've always assumed that this material was too strong for New York publishers in the 1950s, although it might be that it was not strong enough to be another Henry

Miller or Vladimir Nabokov. It was not until 1975 that *Confessions of a Crap Artist* (w. 1959) was issued, initially by Paul Williams's small press, Entwistle Books, and one by the surviving manuscripts were issued, until WCS Books published *Gather Yourselves Together* (w. 1949) in 1994. Another decade has passed, without *Voices from the Street* appearing. And now, at last, it has.

My expectations for it were low, given this delay, and Lawrence Sutin ranks it two out of ten in his *Divine Intrusions* (1989) biography. Twentysomething Stuart Hadley works in Modern TV and Sales, under the ownership of Jim Fergesson – and if you are experiencing a sense of déjà vu, that's because a similar shop appears in *Dr Bloodmoney* (1965), although Hadley has become Stuart McConchie. Dick was not afraid to recycle unused materials – a Jim Fergesson runs a car lot in *Humpty Dumpty* in Oakland (1986, w. 1960) and a Stuart Hadley appears in *The Crack in Space* (1966). This Hadley is a frustrated artist, sometimes moving in radical circles, who perceives himself to be trapped in a marriage with the pregnant Ellen. All too often he disappears off on binges and takes women back to motel rooms, spending the food money. Fergesson dangles the possibility of him managing the store, but to do this he must grow up and conform. In the meantime a charismatic, African American preacher, Theodore Beckheim is in town and Hadley considers religion as a way out of his existential crisis. One day his friends Dave and Laura Gold introduce him to Marsha Frazier, the editor of a magazine called *Succubus*, and Beckheim's mistress, giving him access to the great man.

Things fall apart in Dick's mainstream novels, and this is no exception. Written in about 1952-1953, in the era of Billy Graham's early crusades, it is tempting to see this as a self-portrait of the artist as a young man. Dick and Hadley share a childhood on the East coast, although Hadley is a year older. Marsha may be identified with Dick's mother, and Sally, Hadley's beloved sister, is perhaps a version of Dick's twin Jane, who died in infancy. By 1952, Dick was on his second marriage, to Kleo, had quit his job at Herb Hollis's record store and was writing science fiction stories. Hollis is surely Fergesson, and Dick must have felt the pull between artistic endeavour and being the breadwinner. But alcohol seems to be rarely his drug of choice, as it is with Hadley. Hadley's interest in religion also echoes Dick's own.

It is difficult to imagine that Dick was ever as racist as he allows Hadley to be, but the racism is endemic to the book. The silent Negro sweeping the street is a period detail, which perhaps makes us uncomfortable fifty years on, but Hadley is distinctly unhappy when he realises that Beckheim is African American. Hadley's brother-in-law roundly abuses Dave and Laura for their Jewishness, and it rapidly emerges that *Succubus* is a neo-fascist magazine. There are also various disparaging references to queers. But this is a fallen world, and this bigotry is perhaps indicative of this.

The novel is remarkably well-written, with a sense that Dick is paying closer attention to his use of language than he was at most subsequent points: Fergesson is setting up his shop for the day: "He illuminated the luxurious Zenith poster, He brought life, being, awareness to the void. Darkness fled; and after the first moment of impatient frenzy, he subsided and rested, and took his seventh day – a cup of black coffee" (p12). And a description of San Francisco: "Behind them, the slope of the city rose, a solid cliff of white houses and buildings that kept going up. The city looked as if someday it might slide into the Bay and disappear. It looked as if it were already sliding" (p97). If

there is a complaint, it is perhaps that the book lacks the frenetic forward drive of his later science fiction novels, and it is slow paced. Some of the details perhaps overwhelm the story. There is a late rush for drama, as Hadley literally hits crisis, but we are waiting a long time for the disaster.

All that being said, it is difficult to see why it took another decade for this book to come out, aside from perhaps poor sales figures of the earlier volumes. Despite – or because of – the earliness of it in Dick's career – only Gather predates it – this would not be the place to start reading or to turn someone onto Dick. But it is a fascinating glimpses of where Dick might have gone and where he came from.

Mary Gentle – Ilario: The Lion's Eye

Gollancz, London, 2006,
663pp, £14.99, t/p, ISBN
0575076607

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Ilario is a stand-alone novel set in the universe of *Ash: A Secret History* (which I haven't read). Its first (70-page) section appeared in a slightly different form as 'Under the Penitence', published in 2004 by PS Publishing Ltd. And it's a very odd book.

It begins as alternate history, with a clearly-defined splitting point from 'our' world (Rome and Carthage sign the Treaty of Seguntum and become allies against the Persians, rather than enemies). This gives the early fifteenth-century Mediterranean, where the novel is set, a very different political and religious structure from our world. *Ilario* is partly a travelogue, touring this world's centres of power, and examining their differing cultures and ideologies.

However, *Ilario's* world also differs from ours in having working magic (or incomprehensible technology), which arouses no awe or curiosity in its contemporary witnesses. It is simply there, perhaps more of a nuisance than anything else. The city-state of Carthage is in permanent darkness, a darkness which seems outside our world's physical laws, because it has been cursed. Carthaginian craftsmen are capable of making a golem (android?) from metal and stone, and programming it to assassinate a rival ruler. And a woman living in Rome has a goat's foot, which Christian priests are able to enchant into the appearance of a 'normal' human club foot.

Ilario, through whose eyes we see the world, is an unreliable narrator, an outsider, and an unattractive personality. S/he is a true hermaphrodite, having both male and female genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics, and therefore handicapped by his odd, disproportionate appearance (a great artist, on seeing Ilario, asks if he can use him as a model for Judas because of his subtle physical 'wrongness'). As the book opens, Ilario is a recently freed slave, who has spent most of his life as 'King's Freak' at the court of Rodrigo, King of Taraco. Ilario is therefore inexperienced and immature, thoughtless and impulsive, with little empathy, poor judgement, an undeveloped decision-making capacity, and no sense of consequences. Not surprisingly, s/he quickly ends up in trouble, and is rescued through being bought by Rekhmire, an Egyptian book-buyer and eunuch (the Spock character, man of knowledge). Shortly afterwards, Ilario meets his father Honorius, a retired



soldier (the Kirk character, man of action). Both these men are reliable, dependable, and supportive. They are substitute parents in whose company Ilario begins to mature – another strand of the story is Ilario's transition from immaturity into adult personhood.

A book with a hermaphrodite protagonist will obviously deal with sexuality and gender issues, in ways ranging from farce (Ilario gets married twice in rapid succession, once as the bride, once as the groom) to quasi-modern toleration, acceptance, and respect (in that order). A range of characters explore and exemplify gender and sexuality possibilities. Honorius is a heterosexual father. Rakhmire has voluntarily given up his sexuality in order to lead a calm and scholarly life, and gain a position of power. Leon Battista, in our world, would probably self-identify as a gay man. Neferet, in our world, might be seen as a transsexual – in her own context, she is a person with the ka (soul) of a woman and the body of a man, who is socially female. There are some powerful female characters as well – the Egyptian Queen Ty-ameny (a champion of knowledge), and the Iberian noblewoman Rosamunda (a Bad Mother). The book is also a study of slavery (issues of dominance and power) and women (as a disadvantaged group, although individual privileged women have considerable access to power). Ilario, raised as a slave, treasures his freedom. However s/he buys a slave of his own, with mixed motives that I don't fully understand. The elements of power and dominance are interlaced with a someone's-out-to-kill-me theme; the paranoia reminds me strongly of *Golden Witchbreed*.

Ilario is also a book about perception, about art. Ilario is a painter, trained in the dominant style of his society, which is symbolic rather than representational. But, as in our history, a radical change is beginning: artists are starting to paint what they see, not what they know to be there. Ilario becomes the apprentice of the painter Masaccio, who in our world is regarded as one of the fathers of the Renaissance – a very different Renaissance is clearly about to remake Ilario's world. The New Art demands the use of perspective, the individual viewpoint. *Ilario* the novel is told from an individual viewpoint, and is therefore a work of the New Art, in which things are simply seen as themselves, without symbolic overlay.

I end up feeling that this is a very ambitious, wonderfully complex and well-written book, and that I've completely missed the point, perhaps because I never warm to Ilario as a person.



Nick Griffiths – Dalek I Loved You: A Memoir
Gollanz, London, 2007,
288pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN
0575079403

Reviewed by Martin
McGrath

It's hard to remember now, but there was a time before Sky and the gentrification of stadia, when talking about football was about as socially acceptable as discussing the melting point of dilithium

crystals or the genealogy of generations of Daleks.

The early nineties changed football – Gazza cried, Sky hyped it up and money softened the game – but the

contribution of Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* cannot be overestimated. The idea, in Hornby's book, that football fans were more than just thugs was almost revolutionary. But the notion that a nerdish obsessive man was still, somehow, attractive to women – indeed that his hopeless geekiness could contribute to his attractiveness – was totally astounding.

Is *Dalek I Loved You* science fiction's own *Fever Pitch* moment?

Could the return of the Doctor and the 'discovery' of Rose be the point when the public (and by this I mostly mean girls who read magazines like *heat*, *Closer* and *More* and men who read only the back pages of the tabloids) begin to realise that the nerds who enjoy sf are (mostly) just like them? Is it possible that the critical and commercial success of shows like *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Heroes* marks the movement of sf back to a place in the cultural mainstream?

It's a long shot, granted, but *Dalek I Loved You* is evidence that one publisher believes that there is room in the market for the kind of likeable but geeky memoir that made Nick Hornby famous and sold copies of *Fever Pitch* to people who couldn't have found Highbury with the help of a compass, an AtoZ and a London cabbie.

Not that *Dalek I Loved You* is as good as *Fever Pitch*, but the comparisons are inevitable and will, no doubt, play a major part in the book's marketing.

Nick Griffiths is a funny writer with a neat turn of phrase and a smart line in self-deprecating stories, but nothing in *Dalek* has the emotional impact of Hornby's best writing. Griffiths, whose life has been mostly comfortable, secure and conservative, doesn't attempt to mine the emotional potential of a youth spent boarding at private school or the break up of his relationship with his son's mother. This is a reserved, middle class and thoroughly reticent autobiography. Hornby, by contrast, dived into the baggage of his life and expose pretty much everything, including his distressingly stained underwear. *Dalek* is an altogether lighter, less brave and therefore less compelling book than *Fever Pitch*.

And, while *Doctor Who* provides a unifying thread to this modest memoir, there's nothing in the way of analysis of the programme's popularity or emotional importance. Griffiths is at pains to stress that he isn't really a science fiction fan. He knows that *Doctor Who* is a bit naff and he's not like those people in silly costumes at conventions. He doesn't even know any sf fans.

Doctor Who isn't really science fiction at all. *Doctor Who* is the comfort of childhood and innocence and simpler times – and Griffiths' rediscovery of the show as an adult and the Doctor's triumphant resurrection go hand-in-hand with the author finding fulfilment both emotionally and in his career (as a *Radio Times* journalist writing about, you guessed it, *Doctor Who*).

If this were a novel I'd be criticising the author for allowing his protagonist off too easily – where was the struggle, the suffering and the drama. But it's not, it's a memoir and Griffiths comes across as a likeable chap who I wouldn't want to wish any more discomfort upon. *Dalek I Loved You* is insubstantial (the harder-hearted might say pointless) but it is also a consistently entertaining and often funny book.

Shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award 2007
and winner of the BSFA Award 2007

Jon Courtenay
**Grimwood – End of the
World Blues**

Gollancz, London, 2006,
342pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN
057507616X

Reviewed by Claire
Brialey

In Tokyo there's a girl called Nijie who's stolen a fortune – and whose family are dead. And in another dimension there's a girl called Neku – Lady Neku – who's finding something very strange has happened to her home and her family, or at least to her memories. And now she finds herself somewhere stranger still. It seems like the end of her world, whichever one it is.

Also in Tokyo there's a man called Kit whose wife has died, only for him to discover that she wasn't really his wife and her family aren't very happy about any of it. And in another country there was a boy called Christopher whose ex-girlfriend now also seems to have died and her family, whilst unhappy, aren't coming to terms with it well. His world has ended several times already, and it's coming around again.

Around these unlikely friendships and alliances identities begin to unravel, disperse, reform and make the world – any world – seem even less straightforward than before. If you go on a journey, is it to find who you think you are or lose who you don't want to be? And what happens when you try to go back?

In Tokyo and in London, Kit Nouveau has mysteries to trace, memories to face, and some big questions about whether anyone is who they seem to be. Meanwhile, Neku believes that Kit holds the key to her own rather strange memories: memories which seem to have melded *Gormenghast* with *The Godfather* against a backdrop of far future space opera. What was her life is really at the end of the world.

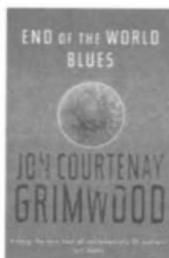
And this is the blues. Kit is, at heart, a musician, and the tangled web of his teenage romance and betrayal and loss of his best friend is played out against the soundtrack of their garage band.

You love someone, you lose someone, you lose yourself. Reset, repeat. You love someone, you lose someone, you blame yourself. You're not the only one.

As a character in this cycle, you can't escape. You can go to the end of the world, but you can't forget – even if you also can't quite remember.

As a reader, you can't look away. The pain you see will draw you in even as you recoil. And how else will you find out what happens, and how this world ends?

Jon Courtenay Grimwood regularly excels at composing a fractured narrative; in this novel, as shifting perceptions, false leads, temporary identities and timeframes spiral, the plot seems not merely fractured but fractal, with the full chaotic pattern only slowly emerging from multiple pinpoints of brightly coloured light. It's become a standard to expect such elegant complexity in his narrative



framework, along with a richly sketched cast of characters balanced across the web of the story; and it's equally characteristic to find that balance upset with a sudden savagery, the world turned over and over and upside down – the players reset, some bloodied, some unbowed, and some very and shockingly dead.

Depending on where you're standing, Grimwood's novels could appear to be noir-ish thrillers in a science-fictional setting, or science fiction novels with all the ambience of crime. Here, each story – complete and, by comparison, straightforward in itself – effectively compliments and lifts the other. The science fiction may be in another dimension, but it's intruded directly into this world; now the plot can't be resolved without it. Similarly, organised crime is not a metaphor in this novel; it's a part of everyday life. And not some mere exoticism of another dimension or a city on the other side of the world. Like the security services, like the armed forces, like the biker gangs who also circle through the mandalas of the story, the criminal cadres of England and Japan are comprised of people, with their own motivations, complexities, uncertainties and humanity – for good and ill.

There are other Grimwood trademarks to be found here. The cat that initially appears attached to Neku – some manifestation of her dimensional shift, perhaps – comes to tip the balance for Kit. Topologically, it seems like the eponymous totem of *9tail Fox*, which itself echoed the fox – which may, or may not, have existed in some form outside the protagonist's head – of the Arabesk trilogy.

And although this novel, like its predecessors *Stamping Butterflies* and *9tail Fox*, is not presented as part of a sequence, it seems to form part of a wider pattern in itself. Grimwood has played out similar themes in all three novels, despite their very different – exotic, domestic, beautiful, brutal – settings, exploring from many angles of speculative fiction ideas of alienation, atonement, displacement, duplicity, friendship, betrayal and love. Notwithstanding the strengths and the growth in the earlier two novels, this one is the variation that settles it.



**David Gunn – Death's
Head**

Bantam, London, 2007,
368pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN
978-0593058329

Reviewed by Martin
McGrath

David Gunn's debut novel, *Death's Head*, isn't going to win prizes for originality. Its galaxy-spanning setting, cast of stock characters, and plot that has a super-

powered hero planet-hopping to save damsels in distress and prop up tottering empires, rehashes every trope in the military sf armoury.

Too much of *Death's Head* feels familiar, especially the jokes. The eponymous elite Death's Head regiment, in their sharp black uniforms and skull insignias, feel like an extended riff on that Mitchell and Webb sketch where two SS Officer examine their uniforms and wonder: "Are we the

bad guys?" Then there's the spaceship so utterly black that you can't read the lettering on the controls – Douglas Adams would be proud. There's even a talking gun with a wise-cracking artificial intelligence that wouldn't be out of place in early Jon Courtenay Grimwood...

Not that the reader has time to worry about any of that. *Death's Head* moves so fast and peppers its target with so many shots that some readers won't mind that the vast majority of them scatter wide of the mark. Shit happens. Protagonist, ex-legionnaire and general tough-guy Sven Tveskoeg is dragged from a sweat box and sentenced to death, gets whipped beyond human endurance, watches his fellow legionnaires get massacred, is adopted by the fierce alien Ferox, discovers he (uniquely) can communicate with them, meets a human girl, shags her, eats her (for dinner), watches the Ferox get slaughtered, is "rescued" by elite Death's Head troops and gets sentenced to death, again. All in the first fifty pages!

Death's Head continues at a similar pace but it soon becomes wearing. In places events flash by so quickly that *Death's Head* feels more like an outline for a larger work than a finished novel. There are moments when Gunn's writing seems to fail him. He invests little energy in describing this universe at the best of times but there's a particular failure aboard the Death's Head's all black mothership (yes, he really calls it a mothership) when the word obsidian gets used a lot without real purpose.

Sven is all-but-indestructible and his hard-luck background, hard-bitten attitude and devotion to his squad draw on the blandest of mil-sf stereotypes. The 'adventure' is divided up into three, barely-linked, segments spread across numerous planets, with various people passing through Sven's life in a rush of names but with precious little characterisation. It's a fractured structure that sacrifices both tension and credulity and it is made worse by a denouement that teeters on the brink of *deus ex machina*.

There are other problems. To call the book's attitude to women Neanderthal would be a disservice to our low-browed ancestors. There really is a prostitute with a heart of gold who is amazed by the size of Sven's knob (p96) and pretty young cousins ("they could have been twins" p129) who are only too happy to leap into bed with him. Yes, there are tough women soldiers, but they're defined by how much Sven wants to shag them.

Violence is a given in this type of mil-sf, but *Death's Head's* detailed description of each act of murder or torture stand out because they're the only time Gunn's writing seems to come to life, the only time he really appears interested in language. Sadly, even here, the repetitive descriptions of bone-crunching and blood-letting soon lose their shock value.

As a first novel *Death's Head* probably deserves some slack but it is too blunt to succeed as a comedy while as an adventure it lacks both compelling characters and narrative cohesion. I was glad to finish it and the promise of sequels leaves me cold.

Winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award 2007 and shortlisted for the BSFA Award 2007



M. John Harrison –
Nova Swing
Gollancz, London, 2006,
240pp, £17.99, h/b
(reviewed in proof), ISBN
0575070277

Reviewed by Gary
Dalkin

Nova Swing is described on the cover of my 'uncorrected manuscript proof' review copy as a sequel to Harrison's *Light* (2003). It is so in

the sense that it is set in the same future, a generation later with different characters. There is no direct continuation of the story from *Light* and the book can be read independently. Where *Light* involved heavy-weight quantum physics, space battles, a serial killer and a storyline set in the present to balance the future space opera, *Nova Swing* is a smaller scale work set entirely in one city on an alien planet in the year 2444AD.

Saudade is a port both on a beach and on the Beach, an significant refuelling point for interstellar ships. On the waters edge, down by the Surf Café is the aureole of an 'event site', a reality dysfunction where artefacts fall to ground from the Kefahuchi Tract. Here "drunks, junkies, sky-pilots and entradistas" can be found scooping artefacts "up of the ground in open contravention of common sense". It is a place where time is adrift, where "They weren't even sure if inside/outside concepts had meaning" and "No perspective, no data, no count of any kind could be depended upon".

If this brings to mind Boris & Arkady Strugatsky's novel *Roadside Picnic*, or Andrei Tarkovsky's film of the book, *Stalker*, it is meant to. M. John Harrison opens *Nova Swing* with a quote from the Strugatsky's novel: "The further into the Zone the nearer to Heaven".

As M. John Harrison's *The Centauri Device* parodied space opera, so *Nova Swing* parodies the hard boiled detective novel. A second introductory quote offers; "Nostalgia and science fiction are spookily close" (A. A. Gill in *The Sunday Times*). And this is a book filled with nostalgia, set-dressed with retro recreations of the past. With old forms of fiction, with old objects, old music. Detective Lens Aschemann is nostalgic for New Nuevo Tango. The band in the Surf Café play BeBop. The radio in Len's 1950's style Cadillac plays Radio Retro. So much of the novel transpires in a trio of drinking joints it might be called Three Bar Blues. Except *Nova Swing* isn't a form of music, but the name of the spaceship Irene the Mona dreams of buying to escape the planet and live her dreams.

And in *Nova Swing* everyone dreams of escape. Edith, once a famous dancer and accordion player considers everyone washed-up and looking to reclaim a life they'd lost by the time they were sixteen. Lens, who looks like Einstein, polices artefacts taken from the event site, and spends his time in regretful reverie over the unsolved murder of his wife. Lens' ambitious young female assistant escapes into a VR recreation of the repressed life of a 1950's American housewife. Emil spends his days sick in bed, proud of his achievements having destroyed his health. Vic Seratonin

skirts the edge of the law while meeting the needs, sexual and otherwise of new client Mrs Elizabeth Kielar, who he has taken into the event site once and who is determined to return.

But something is changing. Club owner Paulie DeReed is undergoing a nightmare transformation after buying an artefact from Vic, and strange people are emerging from the event site, most of whom vanish within the hour, a few of whom survive.

All these various threads come gradually together in a narrative which is more a surreal puzzle wrapped in a sedate novel of character than either a space opera or the 'space noir' suggested by the marketing. There is in the sometimes sordid sometimes tender story a sense of bleak ennui, a middle-aged or elderly regret, of the passing of possibilities with the passage of time. This can be depressing, or a salutary wake-up call to the fact that life is not a rehearsal. It is a tone reminiscent of *Stalker*, though fortunately the book has rather more pace than the Tarkovsky film, and it is also entirely in keeping with M. John Harrison, from *Viriconium* onwards. When one character notes that it is not possible to know for certain if the place we come back to when we leave the event site is the same as the place we left when we went into the event site we know we are in a very British science fictional world. It is the dislocation found in many of J. G. Ballard's stories, or a novel such as Christopher Priest's *A Dream of Wessex*.

Novu Swing is a slowly paced, deliberate novel. Though it is well written it is not overtly literary. It does not necessarily proclaim its own significance. It is in places absurd, deliberately, knowingly, ironically so. Some of the character names, not least Vic Seratonin, are ridiculous. The black and white cats are a nice joke for anyone familiar with the UK sf world. It is a book which gradually gets under the skin, worms its way into the imagination and has a cumulative impact, such that I found myself thinking about it for days. It is not a likeable book, but it is an intriguing one which reserves surprises right to the final page. An unusual remake with its own strange rewards, self-aware, sour, and peculiarly romantic, *Novu Swing* is a true space oddity.

Joe Hill – Heart-Shaped Box

Gollancz, London, 2007,
311pp, £9.99, h/b
(reviewed in proof), ISBN
0575079120

Reviewed by Paul
Bateman

Joe Hill is a right git.
He's written a great book on
purpose – just to piss me off.

I'm sitting at my computer wondering what to write. If a book is rubbish – and a good few are, particularly when I have to force myself to wade through each sentence – I can usually find plenty to write about. But when a book is good, writing a complimentary review is challenging without resorting to clichés like 'gripping', 'relentless' and 'page-turning'. Given that this novel is without doubt the best thing I've ever reviewed for Vector – the sort of thing I dream of being bestowed upon me – I'm straining not to describe it as 'a no-holds-barred

roller coaster of a novel' or 'a thrilling ride'.

Bastard!

As I have a word count that exceeds the number of superlatives I can cram into coherent sentences, I might at least tell you what *Heart-Shaped Box* is about.

So, it concerns an ageing, semi-retired rock star, Judas Coyne. Half his band's dead. He hasn't toured for years. The successive pasty Goth chicks that have lived with him at one time or another, all named after American states, have marked the past decade. The latest is Georgia.

Then a website auctions a ghost. Judas buys it. After all Judas has to make sure he's seen to *still* be living the rock and roll life style, even if he's getting on a bit and doesn't drink or get high as much as he used to.

However, this is unlikely to top the chart of his all-time hundred best moves. The ghost wants him dead, mercilessly avenging the suicide of his stepdaughter, one of Judas's previous Goth chick girlfriends, Florida. This isn't a sedate, slightly creepy ghost story where each spooky incident is separated by chapters of padding; each page piles on the tension. This ghost hunts Judas down, pushing him and others round him to kill each other and themselves, and doesn't let up for a minute.

Now I've summarised as much of the plot as I can without giving too much away. This is the point where I'd usually lay into the book, heaping on the criticism and revulsion for the plot, the characters, the themes, the area the writer plainly knows nothing about, and venting my spleen at how hours of my life had been wasted, hours that I'll never get back as I hurtle towards death. (A death which, hopefully, is not a result of one of my reviews.)

But I have no vitriol for *Heart-Shaped Box*, and now I waste hours failing to find words to sell it to you.

I can't complain about the characterisation. The people are flawed and all the better for it, being full-blooded and real.

I can't even whinge that Joe Hill knows nothing about music, like I've slated other writers, because it would be a lie. He knows about rock. He appreciates it and yet is suitably cynical as well. He knows Goths, their leather, their piercings, their ashen, acned skin, their blackened hair and their jet lacquered nails. He name-checks all the major names from hard rock. After all, taking the title of a Nirvana song for your debut novel has got to be worth a whole load of street cred.

And for once, it's been a pleasure to review a book for you. But now I think I've found my words, even if they are clichéd they're my own. Well, almost:

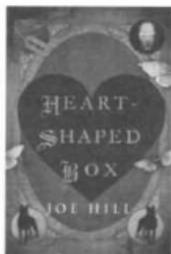
Heart-Shaped Box rocks! And it rocks hard with a vengeance!

Kelly Link – Magic for Beginners

Harper Perennial, London, 2007, 272pp, £7.99,
p/b, ISBN 0007242009

Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Neither *Magic for Beginners* (the anthology reviewed here) nor *Magic for Beginners* (the title story, and the best of the collection) are actual primers for magic, but both are very good reference texts on *writing* magic for beginners. Take one element from the real world and apply the logic of a dream. Reinsert that element into the



real world and now apply real-world logic to it. Don't have anyone think it's odd. Then write a story and see where it takes you.

Thus, in the opening and second-best story, 'The Faery Handbag', the inhabitants of a village from one of the 'stans on the edges of the former Soviet Union (Baldezivurlekistan, since you ask) made a handbag out of a dog and retreated into it to avoid pillage and an earthquake. Well, of course they did, you think, and you keep reading to see what happens. All I'll tell you is that the handbag made it to Boston accompanied by the last remaining Baldezivurlekistanian, the narrator's grandmother, who uses Scrabble tiles for divination.

In 'The Hortlak', a chasm opens to the world of the dead across the road from a 24-hour convenience store. Zombies become regular customers, wandering in to pick up bits of their former lives. The store's manager calmly switches over to a barter economy, since zombies don't have much cash.

And in 'Magic for Beginners', the nation is entranced by a TV show that, if it actually got made in our world (and it should, oh boy, it should), would have a guaranteed cult status that would sweep *Lost*, *Buffy*, *Firefly* and any other show you care to name into the trashcan. *The Library* is never shown consistently in the same timeslot or even on the same channel. It is a fantasy show set entirely in a (very large) library, where only two of the characters are ever played by the same actors from episode to episode; where 'renegade librarians had misshelved an ancient and terrible book of magic which had never been translated'; and one episode takes place 'inside the top drawer of a card catalog, in pitch dark, and it's all in Morse code with subtitles'.

'Magic for Beginners' also scores in having the most likeable and identifiable protagonist – 15-year-old Jeremy, a typical middle class WASP boy who is not entirely in control of his life, vaguely optimistic about girls and what the future might hold, and just beginning to make his own impression on the world. His dad is a writer whose home was once invaded by a fan, who left behind her manuscript of a novel about the Titanic penned from the point of view of the iceberg. It happens.

But, to get back to the writing magic for beginners thing: the magic serves a purpose and the purpose is alienation. Each tale is about people coming adrift – from the world, from their family, from their friends – and in each case it's the magic that has slipped itself between them and is slowly pushing or pulling them apart. There is always the feeling that if only they can reach across the gap, magic and all, they can bind back together again, adjusting to the new take on the world and being better off for it. Some do, some don't.

In 'Stone Animals', a real estate agent moves with his family to their dream country home and finds himself unable to break free of his commitments to work back in the city. So far, so *The Ice Storm* or *The Big Chill* – middle America in personal crisis. The fact that his home, and life, is haunted by rabbits that are slowly taking over is what makes the alienation so deadly – so banal, so inevitable.



The book is beautifully written but not an easy read. The writing flows smoothly from A to B to C, but the links between them are like a well-made Inca rope bridge; they will carry you in perfect safety across the gap but there is the unnerving feeling that they could collapse at any moment. But well worth the experience all the same.

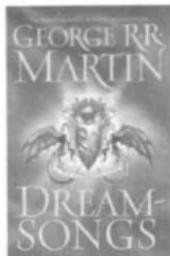
**George R. R. Martin –
Dreamsongs**
Gollancz, London, 2006,
1185pp, £20.00, h/b, ISBN
0575079053

Reviewed by Lynne
Bispham

Some years ago I read a short story by George R. R. Martin called 'Sandkings', and thought it one of the best short science fiction stories I had come across, one of those stories that linger in the mind long after the reading. With *Dreamsongs*, a retrospective of George R. R. Martin's writing over the last four decades, I had the opportunity of discovering whether 'Sandkings' was actually as remarkable a story as I remembered it.

There are thirty two short stories in this book, plus two television scripts dating from the author's time as a writer for the *Twilight Zone*. A useful introduction by Gardner Dozois describes how wide ranging Martin's achievements have been across the whole field of literature that is usually described as fantasy and science fiction, from his first sale, 'The Hero' (1971), a tale of war on an alien planet, to 'The Hedge Knight' (1998), set in the world of the on-going fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The stories are grouped together thematically, with a commentary on each section by the author discussing the influence that different episodes in his life have had on his fiction, which sheds interesting light on how an author's work develops over the course of a writing career. In the first section are very early stories, described by the author as 'apprenticeship' such as 'Only Kids are Afraid of the Dark' in which the influence of childhood reading of comic books is clearly apparent, as it is in two later stories, 'Shell Games' and 'The Journal of Xavier Desmond', written for the *Wild Cards* series, a collaboration with other writers, edited by Martin, which clearly demonstrate the maturing of the author's skill in handling the idea of the superhero.

As well as showing how the author's work has developed over the years, this collection shows the breadth of his writing, from 'The Exit to San Breta' featuring a ghostly automobile, to science fiction short stories which share a loose future history and are perhaps best represented by the Hugo winning 'A Song for Lya'. This haunting tale, which has the typical of scenario of humans trying to understand an alien culture, yet manages to find an original and philosophical slant on an old theme and is beautifully written, bringing its telepathic characters vividly to life. The *Tower of Ashes* could also be described as typical science fiction and yet its elegiac atmosphere is totally its own. 'The Skin Trade', a World Fantasy Award winner, in which the protagonist, a werewolf, has much to fear from others of his kind, is a horror story, while 'Nightflyers', in which a group of scientists on a spacecraft is menaced by a personality downloaded into the ships computers, is a blend of both the



science fiction and horror genres. In fact, the author does comment that categorising his stories should be resisted.

Often originally published in magazines such as *Analog* it is not unexpected that these stories, many of which have won major science fiction and fantasy awards, have been much anthologised. Yet I would still recommend readers to buy this book as it brings together so many amazingly well-told tales. And what of 'Sandkings': was it as good as I remembered? Again, not entirely unexpectedly for a story which won the author his first Hugo, this tale of a collector of exotic alien pets, with its growing atmosphere of horror, is still one of the best short stories I've read in or out of the science fiction genre.

Ken Macleod – *The Execution Channel*
Orbit, London, 2007,
307pp, £17.99, h/b, ISBN
978-1841493480

Reviewed by Dave M. Roberts

The terrorist detonation of a nuclear device on British soil is often portrayed as the ultimate nightmare. It is just such an event at a remote American airbase in Scotland that provides the impetus for the events of *The Execution Channel*. At least, it appears to be a nuclear detonation and, for much of the population, the difference is moot. However, for those at the heart of the novel this difference is far from insignificant. Exactly what it was that went up makes a vast difference to the determination of who was responsible and how it was carried out. A clear consequence of this uncertainty is a huge amount of political confusion. Given that at least part of the security services must know full well what happened and would prefer it were it not common knowledge, the obvious response is for these services to focus attention on a scapegoat.

This is followed by further conventional bombings, and it is assumed that all are directly linked. The public propensity for panic leads to hoarding, riots and the wholesale targeting of Moslems. The local shopkeeper, after all, clearly must have had a part in the bombing of an air base in Scotland. At least in the minds of the knee jerk mob, and you get the feeling that the security services don't find this too inconvenient an association.

The story centres on James Travis, a software engineer with a highly secretive relationship with a foreign power, whose cover is blown very shortly before the explosion and his daughter, Roisin, an activist at a peace-camp at the airbase. The efforts of his son Alex, who is in the army, to warn Roisin of potential security sweeps mean she is able to get away from the explosion. Shortly before her escape her group get pictures of what appears to be the device that exploded. All this attracts the attention of the security services. The family provide ideal scapegoat fodder, and the novel's focus is on how this affects them.

The 'Execution Channel' itself is a rolling news channel that runs continuous footage of executions from all round the world. It is something of a measure of the public numbness to the news portrayal of horrific events that this channel is so readily and easily available, even to the extent

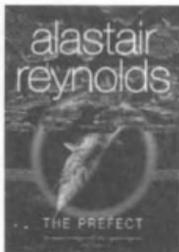
of being played in pubs. It is this, more than anything, that gives us the relationship between the world as presented in the novel and the world as we know it. It is removed from our world, but not by nearly as much as it would make us comfortable to think it is. There is a very subtle form of alternate history being played out here. The major terrorist events have taken place and the associated dates, such as 9/11 and 7/7, still have a huge resonance, but the 9/11 of the novel is subtly different from that of the real world. The resonance of these dates holds and a new one is added to the list. Even though the outcome of the 2000 election is different, the following events bear an uncanny, and for liberal readers slightly uncomfortable, parallel with real world history. This is by way of highlighting a set of forces, political and historical, that drive world events regardless of the stripe of those in power in the western world; and not only this, but that small shifts in focus can also have a significant impact. Then again, the manipulation of information is crucial in this novel: much of the way that information, and arguably more importantly, disinformation is disseminated is via the internet and political blogs. Some of these are security service fronts, others are run by individuals with a fervent belief in getting the truth out into the public domain and these are themselves manipulated by the same security services. The reliability of some of the background, where it is presented in the form of blogs, does become questionable. The internet has rapidly become a faster, but no more or less reliable, information source than any other that has been used for political ends. It also has the effect of changing the way that critical information is transferred and processed as well as who can gain access to it. Without the internet, *The Execution Channel* could not play out in the way that it does.

In many ways *The Execution Channel* can be seen as a political updating of the British disaster genre, with its focus on a small number of characters attempting to make their way through a collapsing world. In this case, it is the powers that are supposed to place order on this world that make survival in it so difficult, certainly as far as the main protagonists are concerned. It is less the terrorism that is causing their problems than the response to it, and this also holds true with regard to the back story. At its heart this is a story about individuals coping when their world collapses played out as a powerful and intelligent political thriller.

Alastair Reynolds – *The Prefect*
Gollancz, London, 2007,
512pp, £14.99, h/b
(reviewed in proof),
ISBN 978-0575077164

Reviewed by Paul Bateman

Prior to *The Prefect* I had read two books by Alastair Reynolds. I read *Revelation Space* and liked it. I read *Redemption Ark* and thought with the opening fifty pages or so he could make an alternative literary career in the horror genre, but was disappointed around halfway through as the plot started to drag. With both books I appreciated a lot of what he was doing, but for me there was discordance between the ideas, the plot and the characters. The ideas were brilliant, but the



plot was held up with chunky explanatory prose, something other writers, hard sf or ones that know their research and want to tell you all about it, suffer from. Worse, I found that the characters left me cold. There were few redeeming features to like or admire even when they appeared to be helping the future of Mankind. They were also too bloody analytical and logical for my liking, falling into the trap that right-thinking beings should be emotionally detached, when in my experience the more intelligent people I know tend to be more neurotic, paranoid and generally screwed up. I'd say creatures with less intelligence lacked emotion, so I'd expect more intelligent beings to be almost blinded by their feelings and react to others in ways beyond logic or comprehension.

Anyway, this time round I think Alastair Reynolds put these concerns to rest. *The Prefect* may not be categorised as hard sf in the way some of his previous works are, but that's not to say he's dumbing down. Rather, the plot works without laboured logical argument and hard-fought excuses. Maybe if there are plot holes, he's been more cunning by papering over them with characters that are easier to like and empathise with. So let's meet some of them.

Tom Dreyfus is a field prefect. The prefects essentially police the Glitter Band, mainly over polling irregularities. What people get up to in their own habitats is their business, unless, of course, a habitat of some nine hundred and sixty souls are torched by an Ultra starship engine. When this happens Dreyfus soon uncovers that there is more to this than first thought and is just a ploy to start war between the Ultras and the Glitter Band so that the alpha-level simulation, Aurora, one of Calvin Sylveste's Eighty used in his immortality experiments, can take over.

Thalia Ng is one of Dreyfus's deputies on a mission to upgrade polling code in various habitats before being trapped in one when the servitors turn against their masters.

Jane Aumonier is the supreme prefect, kept in a drug-induced state of perpetual consciousness. Eleven years ago, a machine intelligence called the Clockmaker, massacred a number of people or tortured them, including Dreyfus's wife. It placed a curious and deadly device in Aumonier's neck, growing microfilaments into her nervous system, waiting for a time to detonate.

With these characters and many more we are returned to Reynolds's universe of *Revelation Space*, a place of machine-human hybrid tribes, machine intelligences, alpha- and beta-level simulations of dead people and other intriguing technologies, like nonvelopes. Calvin Sylveste's work has been carried out, but his son's hasn't. The Shrouders are still enigmatic, and years previously Lascaille has returned from them deranged before dying.

There is a sense in *The Prefect* that Reynolds is trying to write for a larger audience than would have appreciated *Revelation Space*. It almost feels as though this is an earlier work he left in a drawer for later publication, like some of Stephen King's books. Possibly this is because most of the action precedes *Revelation Space*, but also the subjects aren't quite as weighty. This isn't a novel trying to make its mark on the world. It's more relaxed, but paradoxically tighter, exploring some of the cultures a bit further, but allowing the characters to dictate more of the plot. Though the danger is real enough, there isn't an all-pervading sense of doom and futility. The story revolves more around full-blooded everyday people we can identify with rather than archetypes. It's as though he hasn't set his sights so high and made a far more enjoyable book. Maybe *The Prefect* won't win as many awards as his previous work, but I had more

fun reading it. I think others will too.

Richard Rickitt – *Special Effects: The History and Technique*

Aurum, London, 2006, 384pp, £40.00, h/b, ISBN 1845131304

Reviewed By Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

Everyone knows about special effects these days – DVDs have countless extras featurettes that enthusiastically refer to NURBS or caustics before being pushed aside for one of those shots that fades from wireframe modelling to final result, all through the magic of computers. The perception is that of geeks with supercomputers doing 'stuff'. Similarly everyone knows about coffee-table books. Those gorgeous, hire-a-forklift tomes with glossy pages smelling of high-tech printing but with the intellectual depth of the *Argos* catalogue. So a coffee-table book about special effects should be a no-brainer – lots of pretty pictures of spaceships and explosions, probably with an enticing synthesian on the cover, say Jar-Jar Binks, except he's rubbish, so maybe Gollum instead. *Special Effects: The History and Technique* does indeed have the aforementioned Gollum on its trendy matte finish cover. It even comes with hundreds of gorgeous stills to admire, but offers much, much more. This is not a brief introduction to the history of effects work followed by a quick leap to post *Star Wars* cinema, but a comprehensive study of the art of illusion, from Georges Méliès onwards. This means that as well as showing us the art of the model-maker there is also room to explore make-up, prosthetics, pyrotechnics and a variety of cinematic techniques such as mattes, front projection and the Shuftan process.

After presenting a history of the effects trade Rickitt breaks his subject down into specific areas of interest – make-up, sound, animation etc. This approach spares us getting bogged down in chronology and allows the development of various processes to be seen in a wider context. Scattered throughout are landmark films that showcase a leap forward in the art, each accompanied by a double page spread. What is fascinating about many of the more recent inclusions is the number of relatively simple sleight-of-hand shots employed between the computer number-crunching – for example *The Phantom Menace*'s impressive waterfalls being realised with little more than black cloth and some salt. There are surprises on almost every page. Alongside the stills and behind the scenes footage there are numerous diagrams explaining how the various effects techniques work – and pretty devious many of them are too. It makes you itch to have a go at some yourself. This does mean that occasionally *Special Effects: The History and Technique* is a heavy book (in more than the literal sense) as there is a lot to absorb and a bewildering array of methods of achieving similar effects. In the realm of digital effects work Rickitt delves into all aspects of the standards for modern film. While you won't become an expert in Maya overnight you will begin to appreciate the level of computational power necessary to create particle systems, texture maps and fur rendering. Naturally the book is skewed towards genre filmmaking and Hollywood product, but there is some space to examine less obvious effects work in films as diverse as *Bridget Jones* and the *Godfather*, and in non-US product such as *Thief of Bagdad* and *Gojira*.

Special Effects: The History and Technique is an essential purchase for anyone interested in the art of cinematic

illusion. It's extensive, informative and beautifully produced. There are potted biographies of most of the major players that provide ideal introductions to their work (although these too are Hollywood biased - Eiji Tsuburaya only gets a mention in the *Gojira* section and there's nothing made of Eastern Europe's contribution to stop-frame work). Normally we'd balk at a £40 price tag but in this age of vacuous Making Of tie-ins this book offers outstanding value for money.

Patrick Rothfuss – *The Name Of The Wind*
 Daw Books, New York, 2007, 667pp, \$24.95, h/b
 (reviewed in proof), ISBN 0756404079
 Reviewed by Estelle Roberts

The advanced reading copy of this first fantasy novel comes complete with a cover on which Elizabeth R. Wollheim, the president of Daw books herself praises it to the skies. While she, I feel, does somewhat exaggerate its greatness, there is actually much to recommend this story.

The main protagonist is Kvothe, whom we first encounter as an innkeeper in an out of the way farming village. Of course, it soon becomes apparent that there is much more to the man with the flaming red hair, but it is only when Chronicer arrives and, recognising Kvothe, knows the legends that surround him and asks to write his story, that we start to learn about his background. Kvothe is, at first, extremely reluctant, and even makes Chronicer late for another important appointment by refusing to be hurried and insisting that he must stay for at least three days. The tale that most of the rest of the novel covers is that of Kvothe's earlier life.

The race to which Kvothe belongs are a fairly nomadic people, known for and very proud of their entertaining skills, but with a tendency to be condescending towards other entertainers. He grows into an exceptionally talented musician and very competent actor, but it is when a magician joins their troupe for a while that his life starts down a different path: the study of sympathetic magic – the novel's title refers to a form of this magic – which he, after many struggles, manages to pursue at the University at a remarkably young age. Naturally, his problems do not end there. A bitter rivalry with a fellow student and being tricked into disobeying the institution's rules are just two of the obstacles he finds in his way. He faces both corporal punishment and, at one point, even expulsion for his actions. Apart from basic survival and finding his tuition money, his actions are governed to a very great extent by his obsession with the mysterious entities known as the Chandrian and by his love for Denna, a highly enigmatic and self possessed young woman, prone to sudden disappearances, with whom he has a deep, but platonic, relationship, far more meaningful than the ones she has with various other, well-to-do gentlemen.

This is a highly entertaining novel written in a very readable style. It does, however, feel as though Rothfuss has used a high fantasy checklist to make sure that all the necessary elements are present and correct: evil arachnid creatures (tick), huge, extremely destructive beasts (tick), a young hero struggling against the odds (tick), an older mentor with magical powers (tick) and a beautiful, independent and talented heroine (tick), as well as another young woman, who is in love with the main character without him actually noticing it (tick). Kvothe, in particular, is well described, sympathetic and intriguing, and the reader

will be drawn to read the next book in order to find out how he became so different as an innkeeper from the young student described here. His reactions and personality traits – only partially glimpsed – suggest that much happened in between. The other characters are also well developed and colourful, if not always very likeable. The story ends on a very interesting twist, with one of the characters beginning to show his true colours, something that will, no doubt, be developed later in the series.

I am certainly keen to continue reading this series, and to see these ends tied up.

Rudy Rucker – *Mathematicians in Love*
 Tor, New York, 2006,
 364pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN
 076531584X

Reviewed by Paul Raven

Welcome to Humelocke – a sun-soaked alternate Berkeley in a California not entirely unlike the one in our universe. In their Ratvale student digs, Bela Kis and Paul Bridge are nearing graduation, and putting the finishing touches to their theses. At least, the obsessive and organised Paul is; Bela can't help but bring his surf-bum attitude to his mathematics work, and time is running short.

In fairly short order, Paul and Bela have a lot more on their minds than merely graduating and finding a job. The main catalyst is Alma, an endearingly manipulative surfer-chick who rapidly divides the loyalties of our two heroes. Also thrown into the mix are extra-dimensional aliens that look like giant flying cone-shell molluscs, an application of Paul and Bela's research that can be used to predict the future and tunnel between universes, and Bela's decision to win back Alma's affections by starting the greatest rock band ever. Before the reader gets a chance to say 'whoa, dude', the political and existential fate of multiple iterations of Earth are at stake – and Alma is still vacillating between the two hapless mathenauts.

Rucker is frequently compared to Philip K. Dick, and with some justification – his pupil-dilated take on reality has a similar surreal and humour-laden edge. But where Dick revelled in his own paranoia, Rucker instead invokes the easy indolence of the dazed and confused San Franciscan lifestyle. The more serious events become, the more lightly they are treated – more *Bill and Ted* than *Blade Runner* – and the entire novel is saturated with a sense of manic fun rarely found in contemporary sf. Rucker's approach involves adding another improbable element every time the reader thinks they have a handle on where things are going, and it is plain to see how he draws on the world he lives in for inspiration, sucking in people, places and events and pitching them back out with a hefty dose of mathematical topspin.

As a result, *Mathematicians in Love* is a loopy light-hearted adventure – the term 'romp' is a reviewer's cliché, but possibly the only word that can accurately capture the prevailing atmosphere. The entire plot is riddled with mathematical conjecture that sounds very authentic, while doing little to advance the plot *per se*. Instead, it acts more like a repeating theme or riff in a rock opera, indicating the



moments when Paul and Bela (and Rucker himself, in full transrealist mode) indulge their innermost obsessions.

This fast and loose approach to the mechanics of writing may inspire as many readers as it puts off. A distinct tang of magic realism is manifest in the sometimes vague approach to tense, which leaps from past to present and back again within a single paragraph. But this is best seen as a true capture of character; as narrator, Bela brings a certain bewildered viewpoint to the story which matches his (and perhaps his creator's) slacker-genius outlook on life. This can be jarring at times, when things get so ridiculous that suspension of disbelief is impossible. But when it works, it does so superbly, hoovering the reader into the cartoonish psychedelia of Rucker's imagination.

There seems to be a recent upsurge in comic science fiction, and Rucker is ideally placed to catch that wave and ride it all the way to the beach-bar. Readers who crave plausibility and seriousness from their sf might find *Mathematicians in Love* hard going, or even frivolous. But as Bela himself might say, they probably just need to chill out, and learn to dig the gnarliness intrinsic in the universe.

Helen Ruth Schwartz – *The Meadowlark Sings*

Harrington Park Press, Binghamton (NY), , 2006. 188pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 978-1560235750

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

The disaster has finally happened: an earthquake has split a chunk of California off from the mainland of the United States of America, creating a new island. This happens as America takes one of its periodic lurches to the right, this time for a homophobic witchhunt, aided by the discovery of the Scarpetta gene as indicator of homosexuality. Anyone who has this gene is deported from the United States to the newly named country of Cali – including “seven senators, fourteen members of the House of Representatives, the leader of the Democratic Party, eighty-three professional athletes, a bevy of millionaires (who were allowed to take their money with them), and 1,400 members of the entertainment industry [...] one justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, a member of the president's cabinet, three more senators, the wife of the attorney general” (p4), and any heterosexual born in Cali is shipped off to America. In 2055 Cara Romano is sent to a conference on ageing in New York as a way of building bridges between the two societies, in the process becoming wildly attracted to a woman who by citizenship must be straight.

Whilst a good science fiction novel could be written with this premise, this, alas, is not it. Schwartz makes the mistake that many people do when coming to the genre from the outside – we are told about everything that has taken place rather than being shown it through action. We hear about the heartbreak of the wrong test results (heterosexuals with gay children, lesbians with straight daughters) and horrific acts of queer bashing rather than being made to feel them. To be fair, after the first third of the novel, the mode is more romance than science fiction (and I don't mean to condemn it by that description), and it is some relief to see that it avoids the Gay Gothic conclusion as exemplified by the absurdly praised *Brokeback Mountain*. The resolutions are a little too convenient, but it does make a change from suicide and

despair.

On the other hand, the enforced deportation of gays is all too plausible, especially in Bush's America. I remember *The Sun* advocating that all AIDS patients should be sent to an offshore island, and lists of ten ways of spotting a pulpist poof (“likes wearing a cassock”, “likes hymns” and so forth). For all the shifts in public opinion since the Stonewall demonstrations nearly forty years ago, there are still fears about access to children, fostering or adoption, or giving gays a right to an equivalent of marriage (whilst gays are denounced for their promiscuity).

Whilst the list of who is deported has satiric value (closeted politicians are quite often those who have voted against gay rights, demonstrating hypocrisy), it also plays into the stereotype of ‘everyone’ in the entertainment industry being gay. I also have problems with the concept of a gay gene – not that I think that sexuality is a lifestyle choice, but rather that I do not understand the mechanism of information that is passed on via reproduction which leads to a type of person who by definition is less likely to reproduce than the majority population. I can conceive (so to speak) of a straight gene, but not a gay one. There must be ways around this – perhaps a gene that inhibits something – but Schwartz is clearly not interested in extrapolation. I'm not sure where bisexuals would fit in the equation – it is as if they have been disappeared.

The science fiction here is just a set of window dressing for an impossible romance which cuts across communities. In the end we spend more time in the dystopian US than the utopian Cali – there apparently being no criminals in that country – but even the dystopic elements are usurped by Cara spending most of her time in a privileged idyll. Science fiction that deals (seriously? effectively?) with issues of sexuality is relatively rare, but to praise this book for simply existing would be to do all of us a disservice.

John Scalzi – *The Android's Dream*

Tor, New York, 2006, 396pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 978-0765309419

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

I like diplomacy – it goes wrong in such funny ways. Twenty years ago I found the Retief series, and although there were only one or two books left to appear and they, unfortunately, showed author Keith Laumer's final illness was taking its toll, the earlier books were great. Today, John Scalzi could not be more vital – though *The Android's Dream* is a very black comedy, with death, mutilation and conscious dinners or dinners never far away from the machinations of the US State Department and its rival Department of Defence.

If you think that the current State Department has difficulties in justifying the ways of POTUS to the rest of mankind imagine what will happen when it has to represent all Earth when dealing with other species in the Galactic Federation, and when some of those, such as the Nidu, divide into clans and find themselves in battles for succession at home that put Somalis, Medici or Mogul emperors in the shade. Then throw in the need for a rare



sheep at that final enthronement; allow for someone else to be genocidally removing said sheep; and, finally, allow for some other, earlier degenerate to have played with genetic splicing such that the very last 'sheep' is the owner of a pet-shop in Washington DC. When she realises she is being lined up for a shish kebab she wants out. Harry Creek, veteran of alien wars and now diplomatic fixer (he would be the man who could get the US Embassy in London to pay its congestion charges today) is the man who has to pull it all together.

Anyone who has seen Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (with which Scalzi's earlier *Old Man's War* has been compared) will have an idea of what might have made Harry Creek what he is and also what he is up against. There are no androids to dream in this novel, though sheep are central. Ovinines apart, the other major strand tying back to Philip K. Dick is virtual reality – a cyber-church, which has existed for millennia undercover like Asimov's Foundation, actually has the first two disembodied entities within its neural synapses, and luckily for Creek one is his old buddy. This is a great but not overwhelming advantage, especially as the Church of the Evolved Lamb (in an allusion to the late L. Ron Hubbard) "was the first and only religion that fully acknowledged that its founding was a total scam", but has a disadvantage in that members go to their digestion without a fight. This pacifism does not, directly, help Creek.

Plotting is essential to *The Android's Dream* – first in building the incredibly confused situation in which Creek has to realise what has happened; then in the rivalries, feuds and vengeance's on earth and across the galaxy when Harry joins veterans a veterans memorial cruise.

Actually, there are other elements in Scalzi's manic imagination, too: back on earth there has been a court case – this is America even if it is Earth – in which the Nidu are demanding their property: if she has a sheep's DNA then Robin Clark is a sheep and property, not a human with rights. At least some members of the US government suffer a sense of justice and use the law, like future Perry Masons, to resist this aspect of the Nidu assault. You will not be able to use the argument with which they win in a court today. Neither are you likely to utter the words that Harry Creek ought to say: "I love ewe".

S. M. Stirling – *The Sky People*
Tor, New York, 2006, 301pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN
978-0765314888

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

I really, really wanted to like this book. After all, what's not to like: an alternate universe where Mars and Venus are temperate Earth clones inhabited by Earth-analogues and the last forty years of Earth shit hasn't happened because America and Russia have put outposts on both. The scene is set for a Burroughsian romp as we are carried away on a tide of fantastical invention, right up to the discovery that it's all...

Well, I'll not give away all his tricks.

I wish I could say that I found any compelling invention in this book, but I didn't. S. M. Stirling seems to be one of that band of authors who want to recreate the sensawunda of the Golden Age. Memo to Mr Stirling, the golden agers might have had some stupid ideas, seen from our standpoint of knowing that Venus is only marginally less inimical to human life than the space surrounding it, but they were their ideas – and so is everything in this book. John Scalzi writes in the *spirit* of Heinlein, rather than spirit writes for him.

Part of the essence of sf is getting the small, provable details right, so the reader will have the confidence in the author to swallow the greater untruth. It is a delicate act, and one false note can ruin everything. Stirling describes a semi-dirigible steered by ducted fans. So far, so late twentieth century Earth. One sentence later he refers to the 'propeller'. Okay, I'm an aviation geek. An airscrew in a shroud is a fan, not a propeller. It is similar, as a violin is similar to a guitar, but not the same. Hear my disbelief wrestling with the knots. Then he describes the hero's bête noir – the effete English Wing Commander Blair – as educated at Eaton (sic) and Sandhurst. RAF Wing Commanders are middle aged men who fly desks in political skies, growing ulcers. They don't go on demanding missions to Venus as double agents for ... well, I never did work out for whom? Neither do they take orders from American lieutenants. Most of all, they don't go to the army college.

Five minutes on Google, Mr Stirling, and you might have kept my disbelief suspended, but you couldn't be bothered. Any more than you could be bothered to create credible, coherent characters or a plot that is more than a series of arbitrary jumps from one badly described set piece to the next. I'm not dumb, Mr Stirling. I've read your book twice. I've taken notes. I've seen our hero, Marc Vitrac, change to Mark in a paragraph, and back again. I do not follow the plot of this book. I certainly don't care about any of the 'characters'.

As I said, I really wanted to like this book. I was prepared to swallow the absurdity. All Mr Stirling had to do was entertain me, divert me, surprise me. This lazy little book does none of that. To think, trees died for this.

Charles Stross – *Glasshouse*
Orbit, London, 2006, 388pp,
£6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-
1841493930

Reviewed by Chris Hill

It is the twenty-seventh century and the inhabited universe is recovering from a war in which a cult was using the ubiquitous A-gates to remodel the personality of anyone who used them. People can remove unpleasant memories by having them edited out, can take 'back-ups' of themselves wherever there is an appropriate gate and can also use them to change their basic morphology whenever they want.

Robin is recovering from having had large amounts of his past memory erased, although he cannot remember exactly why he had it done. When he realises that someone is trying to kill him he takes refuge in an experimental Polity. His body and memory remodelled, Robin is now 'Reeve', a housewife in a facsimile of a mid-late twentieth century USA. The inhabitants are limited to the technology of the time and have signed on to the experiment for at least three years and have no way of leaving.

It quickly becomes apparent to Reeve that not everything is as it appears and that maybe the war is not yet finished.

Glasshouse is a mixture of social satire and high adventure. The social satire comes in the set-up of the experimental



Polity. Because of changes in data storage technology (Stross having a bit of a dig here about proprietary data formats) much of the information about the twentieth Century has been lost and the Polity has been designed from fragments of information. This means, of course, that some of it is wrong, or at least out of place; there is a feeling of unreality to it that reminds me of nothing so much as *Edward Scissorhands*.

The members of the Polity are assigned or deducted points, depending on how well they fit to the expected behaviours and each enclave is judged as a whole and most of the community starts to conform very quickly. There is a serious point being made here about how quickly people will start to exert fairly extreme peer pressure to achieve their ends (reminding me strongly of the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment). The implication seems to be: offer people the right reward/punishment and they will quickly conform to any set of expected behaviours, however unpleasant or oppressive. Naturally Reeve struggles to fit in with this, partly due to old memories popping up and partly due to pure cussedness.

This being a Charles Stross book, the satire is not allowed to overrun the rest of the plot. It does not take much of a guess to assume that not everything is as it seems in the Polity and the engine of the plot is Reeve/Robin's attempts to 'decode' the world she is in and deal with it. Stross entertainingly wrong-foots the reader on several occasions and does not shirk in dealing with the consequences of what happens and the technology that drives it.

One of the problems of stories about post-humanity is that it is difficult to care about the people. If your body and personality can be stored and resurrected at the touch of a button then how can you feel that they are in any real peril? Much sf written around this theme has tried to tackle the problem and Charles Stross deals with this by making the technology *hackable*. If someone infects the A-gates that permit the resurrection technology, then how do you know that the person you come out of the gate as is the same person who went in? This fear of being edited runs throughout the book.

The book is not without faults. At times I felt it was unclear which of the two sides to the story Stross is most interested in, leading to a clash of tone, and sometimes the social satire is a bit heavy handed. I was not entirely convinced by how quickly the members of the Polity 'configured' as women start to act like mothers in 1950s American Sitcoms. But in the main this is a fine novel, possibly Stross' best to date.

Ian Whates (ed.) – *Time Pieces*

Newcon Press, Northampton, 2006, 101pp, £9.99, p/b, ISBN 0953819043

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

A measure of this collection can be gathered from the fact that even before this review goes to press, this volume has already managed to pick up three BSFA Award nominations, two for stories by Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Sarah Singleton, and another for the very stylish cover artwork by Fangorn (aka Chris Baker) which made it onto the shortlist.

An additional bonus for collectors is that this limited edition (500 copies) comes signed by all of the contributors.

Time Pieces, as editor Ian Whates relates in his introduction, sprang from one of those unguarded "wouldn't it be great if..." conversations between the editor and Ian Watson, joint organisers of the small and perfectly formed (but sadly not that well attended) NewCon 3 convention, hosted by the Northampton Science Fiction Writers Group and held in the echoing splendour of Northampton's neo-gothic Guildhall in October 2005.



Given the title of this anthology, it probably won't come as a complete surprise that the theme of the convention was 'Time'. Indeed, the convention was compered by Northampton's own Jester of Time and Mc'd by the 'spirit of H. G. Wells' (the latter bearing a sometimes uncanny resemblance to guest Ian Watson), whose 'NewCon 3 Opening Address' is included as a bonus item at the end of the collection.

The contents list is, like the cover, particularly impressive. Only a handful of NewCon 3's many guests were unable to contribute due to time or other commitments, while Stephen Baxter qualified on the technicality of being Guest of Honour at NewCon 2.

Liz William's 'Cold Caer' combines aspects of the Grail Quest (though references imply more of an Elizabethan setting) and a possible encounter with an alien artefact. In a land slowly dying in the grip of an eternal winter old as memory, a knight comes in search of a mysterious metal tower which may hold the key to the restoration of life and summer.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's 'State Your Name', set in a beleaguered off-world emigration office, takes a wonderfully 'Cold Equations' approach to the portal's imposed weight limits. If you weigh less than the limit, you can take with you whatever you can carry. If you are overweight, you have a choice of which of your limbs you consider most expendable.

It took me a while to get to grips with new author Sarah Singleton's 'The Disappeared' until I realised that the tone and manner of the piece were a perfect match for the 1940s setting of her noirish sf mystery concerning the disappearance of a top scientist. If it has a problem, it's that the small McGuffin about which the story revolves could have been written almost any time between the 1940s and now.

Jan Watson's 'Globe of the Genius' is a typically lunatic yarn of an obsessive and 'misunderstood' genius in pursuit of the celebrated Billy-One (one billion and one dollar) prize for a perfected time travel device. Of course, something important is crucially overlooked just at the moment he throws the switch.

Steve Cockayne, already acclaimed for his unique approach to fantasy in the *Legends of the Land* trilogy, makes his debut as a short story writer with 'Minstrel's Fold', after which you may want to treat pub folk-nights with a



certain amount of wary caution.

Steve Baxter ventures into the nightmare territory of bureaucratic incompetence somewhere between Charles Stross's *The Atrocity Archive* and the Midnight Rose *Temps* anthologies with 'A Very British Paranorm', and which also highlights the way in which government agencies continually miss the point when an exploitable opportunity is handed to them on a plate. Just what do you do with someone whose special Talent is for spreading disorder?

An almost Dickian profusion of fakes and doppelgangers runs through the crosses and doublecrosses behind Mark Robson's 'The Chalice', in which neither the theft (nor the thief) of a priceless artifact from Old Earth are what they seem to be.

The editor himself rounds off the stories in the collection. Ian Whates' "It's About Time" is probably the most (and self-consciously) classic time travel romp in the collection and, like Robson's story, carries through into a PhilDickian twist.

If you were at NewCon3, *Time Pieces* is rather stylish memento of the convention, but even if not, there is much here to entertain.

[Available from www.newconpress.com]

T. M. Wright – *A Manhattan Ghost Story*
Telos, Tolworth, 2006, 276pp, p/b, £9.99, ISBN 1845830482

T. M. Wright – *I Am The Bird*
PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2006, 143pp, £10.00, ISBN 1905834839

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

These two books by T. M. Wright, written nearly a quarter of a century apart, come with some pretty high-falutin' recommendations from Stephen King and Ramsey Campbell, both acknowledged masters of the horror genre. Now, I can't claim to be terribly knowledgeable about written horror – I barely know my James Herberts from my Guy N. Smiths, and I'd never heard of T. M. Wright before – but I do know King and Campbell, so I was more than happy to try something from beyond my normal reading horizons.

A Manhattan Ghost Story bears more than a passing similarity to M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*. Abner Cray arrives in New York following an unnerving encounter with a mad woman on the train; an old friend has lent him his apartment while he's out of town, and Abner arrives there to find his friend's girlfriend is also, rather unexpectedly, staying there, too. Following some unusual encounters with the inhabitants of New York, Abner realises that the mad woman he met on the train may not have been as mad as he thought, and that thanks to the unwelcome gift she has passed on he may soon be able to sympathise with her more than he'd ever imagined.

If you've seen the end of *The Sixth Sense* then you won't be surprised by Abner's revelation, but the main difference in *A Manhattan Ghost Story* is that whereas *Sixth Sense* ends with that revelation, *A Manhattan Ghost Story* only begins to get up a full head of steam when it is revealed, and manages to maintain the pressure right up to the very last page.

I Am The Bird is a rather different kettle of fish – not in terms of themes, for it also deals with ghosts and hauntings, but it's quite a confused tale of ghosts and identities, and has a similarly wilful lack of a readily coherent plot. In that sense it's almost a postmodern ghost story, asking who (or

what) is what (or who...).

Max Gorshen lives in an apartment building with a rather clever parrot called Langley, which has a remarkable taste for cryptic epigrams. Another man lives somewhere within the corridors of the apartment; he and Max don't get on, and although they seem to know a lot about each other they've never actually met, communicating only through notes left to each other. Max never leaves the apartment or opens his door to anyone, and 'interlopers' are slowly taking over the streets outside.

Whereas I read *A Manhattan Ghost Story* at a cracking pace, *I Am The Bird* took me far longer. What's interesting is that this wasn't because I particularly enjoyed the former more, but rather because I enjoyed the latter in a very different way. *A Manhattan Ghost Story* is a pretty straightforward novel, albeit with some spooky ideas in it. *I Am The Bird* is absolutely nothing of the sort. And the reason it took me so much longer to read is because much of the time I was simply in the wrong frame of mind to want to pick up such a book. In any impatient, slightly tired or grumpy state, it can seem a deliberately contorted, protracted, nonsensical read – the kind of book that my dad (a very practical man) would dismiss after barely a couple of pages. And so *I Am The Bird* sat untouched, sometimes for days at a time, while I waited to be able to do this intelligent and demanding book justice.

On the other hand, when in the right frame of mind, i.e. if you're feeling receptive, naïve even – perhaps ready for the 'cryptic' crossword rather than its 'quick' twin – then you'll find *I Am The Bird* to be a glittering bandolier of uniquely strange sentences fired straight at you from somewhere in the outlands of genius.

Does that make any sense?

If not, then I hope you'll at least agree that it is at least fascinating to see how an author develops his unique treatment of a particular subject over the decades, working out where the limits of the ghost story are to be found. Both these books deal with similar themes, but couldn't be more different, and while I found neither of them properly 'scary', *A Manhattan Ghost Story* has a more conventional spookiness to it, even if it is let down by an unsympathetic and slightly flat central character, whilst *I Am The Bird* has its own unsympathetic characters (which works rather well in this context) but is more unsettling in the long term. It's the difference between a spooky existential puzzle and a straight story.

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.

Kelly Armstrong – *No Humans Involved*

Orbit, London, 2007, 342pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 978-1841493954

More in Armstrong's supernatural series – this is volume seven – and in hardback for the first time (must be a good market for these types of series as Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake books are also now regularly published in hardback). Here, necromancer Jaime Vegas is being haunted and her investigation into the cause will take her to the underside of Los Angeles, with only the alpha-werewolf Jeremy (no, you can't have a werewolf called Jeremy!) to offer his protection "and maybe more than that". And with that quote I'm off to something – anything – else.

Richard Bachman – *Blaze*

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2007, 321pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN 978-0340952221

Now this can't be a good thing can it? Stephen King wrote *Blaze* under the name Richard Bachman in 1973 but "lost track of it" whilst writing *Carrie* and *Salem's Lot* (one of the great modern vampire novels) but in 2006 it was discovered amongst his papers in the University of Maine.

Well, Stephen King is much more honest about the novel's origins and history in his introduction to this edition. It was never 'lost', he just kept shoving it back in the trunk till, eventually, he realised how to revise it and make it work. Probably essential reading for any King fans and redeemed from my scepticism by the 'author's' introduction.

Steven Brust and Emma Bull – *Freedom and Necessity*

Tor Books, New York, 2007, 448pp, \$15.95, t/p, ISBN 978-0765316806

New edition of this ten year old book, which will, apparently, appeal to "fans of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* or *The Prestige*". The first I can understand, but the second? The publicity even throws in a reference to Iain Pear's *An Instance of the Fingerpost*, the only similarities being that they both contain vivid historical detail and that they are both really rather good (although *Fingerpost* is better).

Enough about comparisons, what about *Freedom and Necessity*? Set in a very slightly changed version of Europe in 1849 we follow the fortunes of man-about-town James Codham as he wakes in a countryside inn with no recollection of how he got there, only that he's

wanted by the government and the Chartists and by a magical conspiracy. The fantasy, magical, elements are very underplayed to give a wonderful historical romp. Very strongly recommended.

Jim Butcher – *Proven Guilty*

Orbit, London, 2007, 520pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1841495309

Another volume in the Dresden Files series – the eighth no less – following Harry Dresden, the only wizard in the Chicago phone book. Here he is looking into "rumours of black magic in the Windy City". I didn't like the first volume... or the second, which is where I gave up. I'm obviously in the minority as the TV series based on the books is now running on Sky One (but who trusts the majority?).

Alan Campbell – *Scar Night*

Tor UK, London, 2007, 550pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0330444767

The city of Deepgate has hung, suspended by chains, for a hundred generations over a seemingly bottomless abyss. Yes this is a fantasy, but fantasy which has, according to Steve Jeffrey in *Vector* 250, more in common with the claustrophobic geography of China Mieville's *New Crobuzon* and works like Steph Swainston's *The Year of Our War* and Storm Constantine's *Burying The Shadow* than most quest based heroic fantasy. Steve found the book tantalisingly close to being rather good but let down by Campbell's prose (or his editor's lack of attention) which "threatens to mar what is otherwise an intriguing and different fantasy". I'd agree, but this is still worth a try and even I'm interested in the next volume (which I can find no details of, only that the author is "working on the next volume"). Did I just say something almost positive about a fantasy novel?

Simon Clark – *London Under Midnight*

Severn House, Sutton, 2006, 214pp, £9.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0727891808

"Vampire Shark: They're coming to get you" is the graffiti spreading throughout London, and people are disappearing without trace. An investigative reporter, Ben Ashton, is sent to find out what is happening. Sounds intriguing, but only until you start reading when it all falls apart due to the terrible prose. One to avoid.

PARTICLES

EDITED
BY
PAUL N.
BILLINGER

Philip K. Dick – *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 214pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079959

Philip K. Dick – *Dr Bloodmoney*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 278pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079946

Philip K. Dick – *Flow, My Tears, the Policeman Said*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 247pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079953

Philip K. Dick – *Human Is?: A PKD Reader*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 438pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575080348

Philip K. Dick – *Martian Time-Slip*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 281pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079960

Philip K. Dick – *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 243pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079977

New, rather attractive editions, of some of Dick's best novels re-published to commemorate (that's 'cash-in on' to you and me) the twenty fifth anniversary of his death. If you have not ever read any of Dick's works these would be a great place to start (but there can't possibly be anyone reading this who hasn't read at least some Dick can there?). Those paying attention will have noticed that one of these – *Human Is?: A PKD Reader* – is not a novel but a collection of short stories. Putting 'best of' on the title is clearly too old fashioned but nevertheless that's just what this is, containing, amongst others, 'Roog', 'The Variable Man', 'The Days of Perky Pat' and stories turned into films such as 'Paycheck' and 'We Can Remember It For You Wholesale'. Again, not a bad place to start with the short stories.

Ian C. Esslemont – *Knight of Knives*

Bantam, London, 2007, 284pp, £14.99, h/b, ISBN 978-0593057810

Mass-market edition of this fantasy from the co-creator of Steven Erikson's world of Malaz, first published in 2005 by PS Publishing and reviewed by Sue Thomason in *Vector* 243. This is fantasy for those who like details, especially about weapons and armour (oh please no, don't remind me of *Ash!*). Sue had a number of problems with it, such as the lack of characterisation "there isn't time for character development when you're suddenly being menaced by a man who can wield two longswords at once", the instant healing "which is simply cheating" and the disposability of minor characters "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". For a specific market.

Laurell K. Hamilton – *The Harlequin*

Orbit, London, 2007, 422pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 978-1841494753

And out comes even more from Laurell K. Hamilton: the fourteenth in the Anita Blake series. Yes, I have a weakness for this type of book (vampires and stuff) but this is number

fourteen... So let's just move on to the next book.

Steven Harper – *Unity*

Tor, New York, 2007, 320pp, \$14.95, p/b, ISBN 978-0765316080

It's another *Battlestar Galactica* book. Why? Just why? Not And more no. This must stop now: just think of all those poor trees. Even worse Gollancz are starting to publish some of them, *The Cylons' Secret* for example, in the UK. According to TV Zone Magazine BSG is "the most influential science fiction series since *Babylon 5* and the original *Star Trek*". Just shows that I'm not a real fan as I'd rather watch *The Shield* or *The Wire*.

Lee A. Martinez – *A Nameless Witch*

Tor, New York, 2007, 320pp, \$24.95, h/b, ISBN 978-0765318687

Martinez's third novel, after *Gil's All Fright Diner* and *In the Company of Ogres*, in a loose series of comic supernatural adventures set in a version of the America of today. A series which is now being promoted as Young Adult. Dave M. Roberts had no inkling this was YA when he reviewed the first, *Gil's All Fright Diner*, in *Vector* 243 where he hated the title... but loved everything else about it: "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". *A Nameless Witch* tells the story of a witch – nameless, naturally – and the effect the arrival of a White Knight and a horde of ravenously goblins have on her simple life, helped only by her allies: a troll, an enchanted broom and a demonic duck. Strongly recommended.

Christopher Moore – *A Dirty Job*

Orbit, London, 2007, 437pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1841496030

Charlie Asher is just a normal guy, but when people start dropping dead around him and he sees giant ravens perched on his building he knows something strange is happening. And then he finds out that he has been recruited for a new job: Death. Sounds very unpromising but then I've really liked some of Moore's earlier books – *Practical Demonkeeping*, *Coyote Blue* etc – so I'll think about this one (but don't expect I'll ever get around to, you know, *actually* reading it).

Paul Park – *A Princess of Roumania*

Tor, London, 2007, 460pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0330452175

The story of Miranda: a teenage girl living in small-town Massachusetts haunted by memories of her early childhood, when she was adopted from an orphanage in Romania at the age of three, after her parents disappeared during the uprising against Ceaucescu. But is she really a princess snatched from her home to be reared by common folk until she is adult enough to claim her inheritance, right wrongs, overthrow the oppressor and free her country? Published in the US in 2005 when it was reviewed by Tanya Brown in *Vector* 244 she found it much more complex and interesting than this outline would suggest. Tanya comments on the success of the author in "the clarity of his prose, and in his careful, precise rendition of character" and compares it reasonably favourably with Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, and to the works of Jonathan Carroll and Gene Wolfe.

Recommended (but, inevitably, there are further volumes to come, for example *The Tourmaline* which Tanya reviewed in Vector 248 and *The White Tiger* which will be reviewed in Vector 254).

Nick Sagan – *Everfree*

Bantam, London, 2007, 327pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0553815993

Third in the Idlewild post-apocalyptic trilogy, the others being *Idlewild* and *Edenborn* (neither of which *Vector* received). Earth's population has been decimated by the Black Ep but a small group have survived, most by being cryogenically frozen. As more people are roused conflict grows between the utopian view of the original survivors and the newly awoken. Which sounds very familiar. Oddly, the press release makes more of the fact that the author is the son of Carl Sagan than it does of the book.

John Scalzi – *Old Man's War*

Tor UK, London, 2007, 318pp, £6.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0330452168

A welcome UK edition of this novel first published two years ago in the States and reviewed by Alan Fraser in *Vector* 241 (Tor UK are now clearly working more closely with their US imprint, what with the Paul Park above and the forthcoming Charles Stross Merchant Princes series). Some two hundred years in the future and mankind has reached interstellar space; with few planets but plenty of aliens. Earth is now defended by the 'old', or rather only experienced people over the age of seventy five can join the Colonial Defence Force. Alan commented that the book has been compared to *Starship Troopers* and *The Forever War* but that it is the Heinlein influence that prevails. Alan had some moral reservations about the book but found it "exciting and written well enough

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to induce a genuine sense of peril for the well-drawn characters". Recommended.

Walter Tevis – *Mockingbird*

Gollancz, London, 2007, 278pp, £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-0575079151

Confession time: although this an SF Masterwork (number 70 no less) I was not even aware of this book, only of his *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (and that only via the Bowie/Roeg film – which is slated for a re-make later this year. Why?). *Mockingbird* (1980) is set in a dying world where humans are drugged and lulled by electronic bliss: no art, no literature, no children. In this world is Spofforth – the most perfect machine – whose only desire is to cease to be. The book is described as having at least some hope in this bleak, depressing future. Definitely one for me to try.

Stephen James Walker – *Inside the Hub: Unauthorised Guide to Torchwood*

Telos Publishing, Totworth, 2007, 251pp, £12.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1845830137

Ah, the only thing that may be less wanted than a second series of *Torchwood*: a companion volume to the first. Contains all the excruciating detail that we have come to expect from the Telos TV companions including, in Appendix D 'Ratings and Rankings' fan ratings from online polls of the individual episodes with 'Captain Jack Harkness' getting the highest at 82.60% and 'Day One' the lowest with 69.40%. Maybe hidden in all the detail is the reason the series is so rubbish?

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 T. M. Wright – *I Am The Bird* [Stuart Carter]



Lost in Translation

A couple of months ago, Charles Stross posted on his website a long think-piece called "The High Frontier, Redux"¹. It was an examination of that cherished dream of sf, colonisation of other planets, and it wasn't very optimistic. Stross provided a number of links to back up his assertions that, although travel between solar systems isn't physically impossible, it requires such an expenditure of energy and is so risky that in the absence of some "magic-wand" technology it's a very remote prospect for humans. If you follow the link I've provided, you'll see the outraged comments that resulted (748 of them at the time of writing), expressing shock and outrage that an sf writer could ever express a less than perfectly can-do attitude about space travel, and that if Stross couldn't think of any technologies to get us to the stars, he should damn well *make some up*.

I mention this not particularly because I'm on Stross's side in this argument – though I am, and I think his essay represents exactly the sort of thinking hard sf writers should be doing. The exchange on his blog interests me because it epitomises something that had been on my mind for a while. I've gone on in past columns about my sense that sf is an increasingly fragmented field, that it consists of a set of discourses with less and less overlap. The consequence of that, perhaps inevitably, is that those discourses mostly aren't talking to each other; and when they are, they're not understanding each other. Those arguing against Stross were coming (very generally) from a Heinlein/Niven/libertarian set of axioms, that colonisation of space is the obvious next frontier for humanity, and that our activity as a species should be shaped around that. A high proportion of them were either not taking on board Stross's arguments, or seeing them as irrelevant to their point: that colonisation must happen. (And I'm sure, from their point of view, Stross wasn't taking on board that central axiom of theirs. But he has the physical laws of the universe on his side, which is often a good place to be.)

Another example: at the end of May I went for the first time to Wiscon, an annual feminist sf convention held in Madison, Wisconsin. A good time was had, good talk happened, and it was not by any means a uniformly or doctrinaire feminist event (whatever "doctrinaire feminist" means, anyhow.) Shortly afterwards, a discussion on feminism and sf blew up on the *Asimov's SF* discussion boards². Some people made points about supposed inherent superiority of men over women: after a while, the liberal sf blogosphere piled in and tried to drag the argument back; and as it stands, the last post on the thread says, "I wouldn't mind maybe so much, but these little

chickenshits [criticising the comments on the *Asimov's* board] hide out there in the blogosphere and I probably would never have stumbled across this stuff if I had not been looking for Wiscon Panel Reports (the main thing I was interested in and the thing I found the least of in nearly a week of looking). The convention, near as I can tell, appears to have been everything Madoc said it was. A Far Left Feminazi Gossip Shop." Well, the first observation to make is that the thread has passed the Godwin's Law threshold and therefore useful discussion is no longer possible. Secondly, it's always been a contention of feminists that men *just don't get it* about what they want and why. The two modes of discourse fail to speak to each other with, as here, escalatory consequences. To be clear, I'm not trying to invoke relativism here and say that just because the two sides here don't comprehend each other, an outside observer can make no choice between the two. There seem to me plenty of reasons, ethical, rational, and evidence based, why arguments for men's inherent superiority don't hold water; and why the real reason we don't have, say, a female Beethoven is because of the enormously developed ways in which society has been constructed over centuries for men's benefit. My frustration at the *Asimov's* thread was that of seeing this old, old debate played out again, with no language being found to bridge the divide.

The classic example of this for us in the field, of course, is our bafflement at why mainstream critics don't pay more attention to the quality of work being done in sf – the other side being mainstream readers not understanding why we spend all our time playing with rocket ships and space aliens. Again, this seems to me a case where the language that ought to bridge the two fields doesn't exist. Or rather, it does, but the language of value in sf isn't the same as the language of value used on mimetic literature. If, as Joanna Russ and David Hartwell (among others) have argued, sf needs a differing set of aesthetic criteria from the mimetic, then it could hardly be otherwise. When we praise, say, a Ted Chiang story for having striking ideas, we're using criteria that are nowhere near those that are used to canonise, say, Jane Austen. The question in this case – and more generally – is how to construct a language that will bridge the two worlds. (Put like that, it sounds an almost sf-nal project.) Or, to rephrase, how to translate one set of values into another. I'll offer some thoughts about that next time.

1. http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2007/06/the_high_frontier_redux.html
2. <http://www.asimovs.com/discuss/messages/4134/7140.html?1183059157>

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