

VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

No. 255

Spring 2008

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2007 IN REVIEW

books • films • television

PLUS: Laurie J Marks & Kelly Link, Stephen Baxter, Andy Sawyer and Graham Sleight
NEW BOOKS REVIEWED: Aldiss, Asher, Banks, Baxter, Hamilton Rucker, Simmons & much more

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EDITORIAL

TORQUE CONTROL by Niall Harrison

This issue is *Vector's* traditional look back at the year just gone, so in addition to an in-depth conversation between Kelly Link and Laurie J. Marks, and our regular columns, we have the *Vector* Reviewers' Poll, Colin Odell and Mitch LeBlanc's assessment of 2007's sf and fantasy films, and an overview of the year's genre TV. We've also got the nominees for this year's BSFA Awards; by the time this issue reaches you, you should have received your ballot (please vote!).

But despite all this, I'm not really in a retrospective mood – I'm looking forward, primarily because the BSFA committee, myself included, have been beaver away in an effort to implement a whole raft of changes for the start of this year. This is the BSFA's 50th anniversary, and as well as looking backwards it seemed like a good time to look forwards, to work out where the BSFA is going and what we need to do to get it there.

Probably the first change you'll notice is that, as new editor Ian Whates announced last issue, *Matrix* is now being published online, at the BSFA website <<http://www.bsfa.co.uk/>>. Since the last mailing went out, we've received some reassuring votes of confidence in this move; but a handful of you also expressed reservations, so it's worth briefly going over why the decision was made.

The main reason is simply that online publication will help *Matrix* to remain timely and relevant. As you've no doubt all noticed, we've had some problems with the distribution of mailings over the last eighteen months or so – the last mailing, for instance, was delivered to the printers in November, but did not appear on doorsteps until mid-January. Because *Matrix* focuses on news, film, and TV, much of the content in that issue was out of date by the time it was published. For similar reasons, we're also switching the mailings to a quarterly, rather than bimonthly schedule – although *Vector* will be getting bigger to compensate.

The committee didn't make these decisions lightly, but at the end of the day the reason there is a committee is to take decisions like this. To respond to the most common objection to the *Matrix* move, we do realise that even in the 21st century, even among science fiction fans, internet use is not all-pervasive, and that some people will now not see *Matrix*; but we also have to recognise that there are a lot of new members who expect an

organisation like the BSFA to be able to provide information and features online. Until now we haven't been doing enough to engage these members.

All of which said, nothing is irreversible, and we invite further feedback. Aside from letters and emails of comment to the addresses opposite, or collaring one of the committee at Eastercon, the best ways to make your opinions known will be to come along to the AGM (which, as usual, will be in May-ish; details to follow), or to visit the shiny new BSFA forum. You can find it at <<http://www.bsfa.co.uk/bsfa/website/community/default.aspx?forum>>, or by following the 'community' link on the front page of the website. If you want more direct input, you can volunteer to serve on the committee yourself – we're all regular BSFA members, all volunteers, and (trust me) we can *always* use more help.

In addition to the launch of the forum, it's good to be able to announce that *Vector* is getting bigger – growing from 36 pages to 48, which means that even with the quarterly schedule the decrease in content overall is minimal (192 pages a year, rather than 216). Some of this space will be taken up by regular *Matrix* features which aren't as time-sensitive as reviews – notably Andy Sawyer's "Foundation Favourites" column and Stephen Baxter's "Resonances" column. Saxon Bullock's new TV column "Transmission, Interrupted" will also become a regular feature, taking a more in-depth look at its subject than reviews usually have either time or space for. The revitalised *Focus*, of course, continues on its usual biannual print schedule.

And we're looking into additional publications. The BSFA, after all, doesn't exist to publish magazines – it exists to support a variety of activities to promote and discuss science fiction and fantasy. The magazines are a crucial part of that, but so are the Orbiter writing groups, so are the awards, so are discounts on sf books such as those announced in the last *Matrix*, and so is the website. This year, look out for additional activities to mark the BSFA's 50th anniversary – in particular, an anthology of original fiction, to be launched at Eastercon, including stories by Brian Aldiss, M John Harrison, Stephen Baxter, Liz Williams, Tricia Sullivan, Alastair Reynolds, Adam Roberts, and half a dozen more.

BSFA AWARDS

2007 SHORTLIST

The shortlists for the 2007 British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) awards were announced on 21 January 2008, as follows:

Best Novel

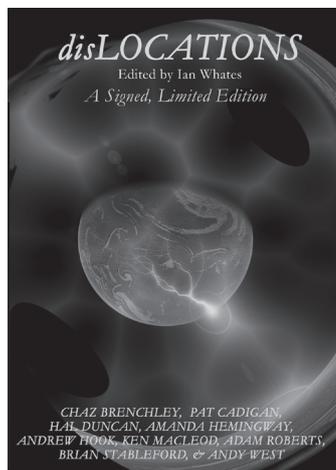
- *Alice in Sunderland* – Bryan Talbot (Jonathan Cape)
- *Black Man* – Richard Morgan (Gollancz)
- *Brasyl* – Ian McDonald (Gollancz)
- *The Execution Channel* – Ken MacLeod (Orbit)
- *The Prefect* – Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz)
- *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* – Michael Chabon (Fourth Estate)

Best Short Fiction

- 'Lighting Out' – Ken MacLeod (*disLocations*)
- 'Terminal' – Chaz Brenchley (*disLocations*)
- 'The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate' – Ted Chiang (*F&SF*, September)
- 'The Gift of Joy' – Ian Whates (*TQR*)
- 'The Sledge-Maker's Daughter' – Alastair Reynolds (*Interzone* #209)

Best Artwork

- 'Cracked World' – Andy Bigwood (cover of *disLocations*, ed. Ian Whates; Newcon Press)
- 'H P Lovecraft in Britain' – Les Edwards (cover of chapbook by Stephen Jones, published by the British Fantasy Society)
- 'Lunar Flare' – Richard Marchand (cover of *Interzone* #211)
- 'Metal Dragon Year' – Kenn Brown (cover of *Interzone* #213)



BSFA Fiftieth Anniversary Award: Best Novel of 1958

- *A Case of Conscience* – James Blish (Ballantine)
- *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel* – Robert A Heinlein (first published in *F&SF*, August – October 1958)
- *Non-Stop* – Brian Aldiss (Faber)
- *The Big Time* – Fritz Leiber (*Galaxy*, March & April)
- *The Triumph of Time* – James Blish (Avon)
- *Who?* – Algis Budrys (Pyramid)

The shortlists for the awards were compiled from nominations submitted by members of the BSFA. They will be voted on by BSFA members and by attending members of the British national convention.

Nominations were also invited for the best non-fiction of 2007, but although a number of works were nominated there was no consensus and so no shortlist could be formed. A non-fiction award will therefore not be presented this year.

REVIEWERS' POLL

BEST BOOKS OF 2007 compiled by Kari Sperring

Hello and welcome to the 2007 *Vector* reviewers' poll. I find myself in a strange space writing that — as you can see from the sub-heading, I am not Paul Billinger, and yet here I am summarising his final year as reviews editor. I'm Kari, and, as Niall has mentioned in his editorial, I'm will be taking over from Paul from this current issue, beginning, as you see, with an end. I'm sure BSFA members out there will join me in thanking him for his long service and wishing him all the best for the future. I shall hope to maintain the high standards set by Paul over the last years, and I trust he will forgive me if I am unable to summarise his final year with his customary thoughtfulness and *élan*.

As mentioned above, I'm Kari Sperring: I'm an sf fan of some years standing (I refuse to count them on the grounds that they will remind me how old I am): some of you may know me from British science fiction conventions, where I am usually to be found running around with a drinks' tray and an harassed expression helping with programme. As Kari Maund, I'm a professional historian and have been caught ranting about Celtic fantasy in print and in person. What I am not, unlike Paul, is a critic. I come from the other side of the fence: I'm a writer of both fiction and non-fiction, and my love of both sf and fantasy is rooted in my love of the craft of writing and of words. I hope I'll be able to bring some of this to my new role here. I hope very much to follow in Paul's footsteps in offering you high quality reviews, but I also hope to bring some new elements. Let me know if there is something you'd like to see more of in the reviews column. Graphic novels? Novels in translation? Foreign language novels? If you would like to review a new author or book, if you read sf or fantasy in another language than English and would like to write about it, get in touch with me. I'd be delighted to hear from you. For me, at least, 2007 was the year in which sf went truly international, with a World sf convention held in Yokohama, Japan and in two official languages (and a lot of extra ones. I heard Korean and Swedish and German and French, and held conversations myself in Chinese as well as English). Sf is flourishing worldwide, from China to Wales.

Looking at our reviewers' poll, 2007 was also the year of alternate history. The top three books all have alternate history elements, and many others are scattered throughout the recommendations, from Michael Flynn's *Eifelheim* to Hal Duncan's *Vellum* and *Ink*. While 2006 saw a clear front runner in Geoff Ryman's *Air*, 2007 has produced a far wider spread of recommendations. Between 23 reviewers, 115 books by 88 writers were recommended, with only one book gaining four votes (Ian McDonald's *Brasyl*) and only another two gaining three votes apiece, namely Ken MacLeod's *The Execution Channel* and Michael Chabon's

The Yiddish Policemen's Union. Not surprisingly, all three were nominated for the 2007 BSFA Best Novel Award; of the other novels on that particular short-list, Richard Morgan's *Black Man* garnered two votes, while Bryan Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland* and Alastair Reynolds' *The Prefect* gathered one each. A number of authors make multiple appearances for different books, notably John Scalzi, Sarah Monette, and Hal Duncan. It seems that 2007 was, as Paul predicted at the end of his Best of 2006 column, a year of rich variety and growth in both sf and fantasy. And so, on to the reviewers themselves and their commendations and thoughts on 2007.

Results

Most popular books:

- 1 *Brasyl* (4 votes)
- 2= *The Execution Channel* (3 votes)
- 2= *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (3 votes)
- 4= *The Long Price* (2 votes)
- 4= *Halting State* (2 votes)
- 4= *Black Man* (2 votes)
- 4= *Hav* (2 votes)
- 4= *Ilario* (2 votes)
- 4= *Ink* (2 votes)
- 4= *Melusine* (2 votes)
- 4= *Old Man's War* (2 votes)
- 4= *Spook Country* (2 votes)
- 4= *Stardust* (2 votes)
- 4= *Territory* (2 votes)
- 4= *The Mirador* (2 votes)

Most popular writers:

- 1= Sarah Monette (4 votes)
- 1= John Scalzi (4 votes)
- 1= Ian McDonald (4 votes)
- 1= Hal Duncan (4 votes)
- 5= Michael Chabon (3 votes)
- 5= Ken MacLeod (3 votes)
- 7= William Gibson (2 votes)
- 7= Richard Morgan (2 votes)
- 7= Neil Gaiman (2 votes)
- 7= Mary Gentle (2 votes)
- 7= Jan Morris (2 votes)
- 7= Emma Bull (2 votes)
- 7= David Brin (2 votes)
- 7= Daniel Abraham (2 votes)
- 7= Charles Stross (2 votes)
- 7= Alastair Reynolds (2 votes)

Vector's reviewers were each asked to pick their five books of the year, and to write about their reasons for picking one or more of them. As in past years, they were allowed to select books not published in the past year; nor did they have to be science fiction or fantasy, especially if they were non-genre books which would be of interest to Vector's readers.

James Bacon

Alice in Sunderland, by Bryan Talbot (Jonathan Cape, 2007)

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier, by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neil (Wildstorm Comics, 2007)

Civil War, by Mark Millar and Steve McNiven (Marvel Comics, 2007)

Batman Ego and other tales, by Darwyn Cooke (DC Comics, 2007)

The Walking Dead Vol. 1, by Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard (Image Comics, 2006)

Do not underestimate the intelligent and imaginative literature that is being produced in a sequential art format. Comics in 2007 have been thoughtful, questioning and diverse as well as damn fine fun.

Bryan Talbot has done for Sunderland what cultural grants in the hundreds of thousands would fail at, while remaining incredibly entertaining: he has illustrated the beautiful history and mythology of a city and its culture, and presented its connection with a young girl who had an adventure.

In *Black Dossier*, Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neil create a pastiche that is a pleasure for any fan of fiction to behold and wonder at. They honourably present both an original tale and a compendium of styles and deep fiction which owes as much to research as the imagination.

There's nothing like a good fight, and with *Civil War* Marvel realised a subject that has been repeatedly touched upon – what happens when the good guys are pitted against the good guys? – but never developed to this scale. Tight, ripping stuff that Millar still manages to lace with many ideas.

Darwyn Cooke is a stylistic genius: he knows how to make his characters look distinctively square jawed and iconically cartoony and he can write punchy dialogue. He pushes some boundaries with *The Batman*, and he offers the reader some close-to-the-bone visualised double meanings.

Zombies are always cool, in a spurting-jugular way, but no one else is writing in this genre at Robert Kirkman's level. In *Marvel Zombies* he was side-splitting, but with *The Walking Dead* he equally ably presents a realistic and tense story set in a post apocalyptic world, following a small group facing continually traumatic adversity, giving us an intimate view of developing relationships and characters.

Don't be afraid of the pictures!

Paul Bateman

Stardust by Neil Gaiman (Headline, 1999)

Heart-Shaped Box, by Joe Hill (Gollancz, 2007)

The Kite Runner, by Khaled Hosseini (Bloomsbury, 2003)

Mister Pip, by Lloyd Jones (John Murray, 2006)

Doomsday Men, by PD Smith (Penguin, 2007)

The book of the year for me was the first one I reviewed for Vector back in January (the review was published much later). Joe Hill's debut novel *Heart-Shaped Box* was a rip-roaring ride of horror and mayhem. The first 70 pages are a masterclass of the genre in the way that the first half-hour of Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* is a masterclass in suspense.

P.D. Smith's *Doomsday Men* is a brilliant account of the mutual dependence of science and the arts, looking at each other for inspiration but resulting in the fears and paranoia of the last hundred years and the Doomsday Machine.

Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* is enjoyable fare, and I was surprised that the film wasn't a half-bad adaptation.

There are books you read and love, and there are books you read and wish you could have written and given as a gift to world. For me, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini is one of the latter, a tragic tale and yet ultimately life-affirming.

My final choice, the Man Booker Prize-nominated *Mister Pip* by Lloyd Jones was the most personal book for me. It is one of only two books I've come across set on the Pacific island of Bougainville where I was born. *Mister Pip* is set three years after I left the island and when it was in the grip of the civil war, a war forgotten in the West even though it decimated ten to twenty percent of the population. It is a story of hope and loss, the loss of my beautiful birthplace and the only way I've returned is through this book, and by extension I kid myself that this my story too.

Liz Batty

The Yiddish Policemen's Union by Michael Chabon (Fourth Estate, 2007)

Scott Pilgrim and the Infinite Sadness, by Bryan Lee O'Malley (Oni Press, 2006)

The Night Watch, by Sergei Lukyanenko (Heinemann, 2006)

Brasyl, by Ian McDonald (Gollancz, 2007)

Black Man by Richard Morgan (Gollancz, 2007)

Ian McDonald's *Brasyl* is as exhilarating and evocative a portrait of Brazil as his previous novel *River of Gods* was of India. The three different strands, of the past, present and future of Brazil, race along filled with vivid detail and rounded characters, and it all ties together at the end.

In contrast, readers of Richard Morgan's previous novels might not be expecting *Black Man*. It's got the pacy thriller plot, the ultra-violence, and the alpha male central character that you might expect from his work. But they're all tied to a deeper investigation of the politics of gender, religion and racial issues than in his previous works, and the novel is all the better for it.

Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is barely sf at all, except in its central concept, that the European Jews of this world were relocated to the Alaskan wilderness in 1947, to live there for 60 years. While the plotting, in particular the ending, is sometimes disappointing, I was so captivated by the characters and Chabon's prose that I didn't mind knowing what was coming next.

Sergei Lukyanenko's Russian bestseller *The Night*

Watch (read in translation) uses our world as the backdrop for the constant battle between the Dark and the Light, in the form of the Others – humans with supernatural powers of all kinds. What could be a derivative and unimaginative book is lifted by the detailed vision of a Russia filled with vampires, magicians and werewolves unnoticed by the ordinary human population. The first of four books, the second and third are also available in translation and recommended.

But the finest book I read this year was Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim and the Infinite Sadness*, the third of what will eventually be a series of six graphic novels about terminal slacker Scott Pilgrim and how he must fight the seven evil ex-boyfriends of Ramona Flowers in order to win her heart. It's about love and life and growing up and finding your way in the world, and also about fighting ninjas, movie stars, and a man with secret vegan powers. How can you resist?

Lynne Bispham

The Long Price: Shadow and Betrayal, by Daniel Abraham (Orbit, 2007)

Feast of Souls, by Celia Friedman (Orbit, 2007)

Ilario: The Lion's Eye, by Mary Gentle (Gollancz, 2006)

A Feast for Crows, by George RR Martin (Voyager, 2006)

Boudica: Dreaming the Serpent Spear, by Manda Scott (Bantam, 2007)

My own particular "Book of the Year" is *Boudica: Dreaming the Serpent Spear*, the fourth and concluding volume in Manda Scott's historical fantasy about the Icenic Queen who challenged the might of Rome. The first three volumes in this series told of Boudicca's life from childhood to the outbreak of the Icenic revolt. This volume describes what is probably the best-known part of Boudicca's life, its end, but takes fact and myth and weaves them into something new, bringing historical characters to life and creating fictional characters with real psychological depth, including an entirely original and convincing depiction of the Druids. Very often writers seem unable to sustain the quality of their writing over a four volume series, but this final volume is as well-written and as gripping as its predecessors, and even if most readers will be aware of Boudicca's ultimate fate, the power of the novel comes from the way the tale unfolds.

Scott has a unique and original voice, as do the authors of the other novels that made my top five "Books of the Year". *The Long Price's* originality is found in its author's depiction of the "andat", supernatural creatures best described as ideas in corporeal form, whose existence informs the political power struggles of this subtle novel, whilst *Feast of Souls* considers what it might really mean to be an all-powerful immortal, someone who for all intents and purposes has ceased to be human, in a world of mortals. *Ilario: the Lion's Eye*, though anchored to our own historical narrative, has a fresh take on the sub-genre of alternative history, while the larger than life character of *A Feast for Crows* breathe new life into epic fantasy. The authors of these novels have taken the often formulaic fantasy genre and made it their own.

Claire Brialey

Stranger Things Happen, by Kelly Link (Small Beer Press, 2001)

The Execution Channel, by Ken MacLeod (Orbit, 2007)

Brasyl, by Ian McDonald (Gollancz, 2007)

The Prefect by Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz, 2007)

Bad Monkeys by Matt Ruff (Bloomsbury, 2007)

Usually my list doesn't come out so strongly for new fiction – which is not to ignore Kelly Link's first collection, *Stranger Things Happen* which held its own in a year overflowing with a variety of SFnal goodness.

Alastair Reynolds' *The Prefect* is best described as a good science-fictional read. In fact, within the context that it is absolutely science fiction, it's essentially a crime story, but the setting evokes sensawunda and leaves the grimness to the characterisation and the plot. It's a really good science fiction adventure, with big ideas and big spaceships, set in a world the author has already built to work.

The Execution Channel by Ken MacLeod demonstrates some of the other things that science fiction can do: near future, alternative future, speculation that holds up a mirror to the present and reminds us what human society is capable of, in this case exploring how the 'war against terror' could all too plausibly develop.

Matt Ruff also showed us what science fiction can do, with a short novel that was so compelling it even distracted me from my personal quite narrow definition of science fiction. *Bad Monkeys* deploys extremely effectively the device of an openly unreliable narrator in a situation and a story that creates and then tests sympathy and disbelief in equal measure. It pulled me in and caught me out continually.

In contrast, I spent the first fifty pages or so of *Brasyl* regretting that it was not *River of Gods*. I spent the next eighty or so pages admiring Ian McDonald for pulling off something similar again. And then I spent the rest of the book delighting in the plots unfolding, catching, twisting and reforming to build worlds, characters and stories that stand out quite on their own merits.

Tanya Brown

Territory, by Emma Bull (Tor US, 2007)

Ink, by Hal Duncan (Macmillan, 2007)

Ilario, by Mary Gentle (Gollancz, 2006)

Brasyl, by Ian McDonald (Gollancz, 2007)

The Mirador, by Sarah Monette (Ace, 2007)

Last year I struggled to name five good SF/fantasy novels I'd read: this year the difficulty was in choosing just five! I don't know whether that's indicative of a renaissance in the genre, or simply in my reading habits.

Territory, Emma Bull's reimagining of the legend of Doc Holliday and the Earp brothers, is thoroughly rooted in its Wild West setting, though with considerably more historical accuracy than most Westerns. Bull brings out the magic beneath the mundane, gradually revealing the connections between her richly-detailed characters.

Hal Duncan's *Ink* concludes the Book of All Hours duology with dazzling verbal pyrotechnics, manifold layers of meaning and densely poetic prose – all of

which sounds rather worthy and serious, so I should stress that *Ink*, like *Vellum*, is exuberantly playful and fizzy with ideas and images.

I missed *Ilario* when it was first published, and discovered it by chance: set in the same alternate history as *Ash*, it's more intimate (in several sense of the word) than epic. *Ilario* is an engaging protagonist, and this picaresque novel explores some serious questions about gender, identity and perception without sacrificing either swashbuckling playfulness or emotional credibility.

Brasyl is a tour-de-force, plaiting three narratives – past, present and future – into a tale of the polyverse that hits the ground running and never lets up. This is the SF novel as immersive experience: each thread of the plot fascinates as fiction, but it's the way they merge that engaged my sensawunda.

I'm including Sarah Monette's *The Mirador* here because it's the latest in the Doctrine of Labyrinths series, which has me hooked: mannerist fantasy with edgy and charismatic protagonists, a grimly fascinating city, and conflicting systems of magic. Monette's writing is elegant and restrained, and she has an eye for telling details (psychological and otherwise) that stick in the mind.

Stuart Carter

World War Z, by Max Brooks (Crown, 2006)
Crécy, by Warren Ellis and Raulo Caceres (Avatar, 2007)
The Execution Channel, by Ken MacLeod (Orbit, 2007)
Brasyl, by Ian McDonald (Gollancz, 2007)
The End of Science Fiction, by Sam Smith (BeWrite Books 2004)

Subtitled 'An Oral History Of The Zombie War' *World War Z* does exactly what it says on the tin – collecting oral testimony from those who managed to survive the global outbreak of zombies. The result is a brilliantly mix of street-level zombie combat with a strategic global overview, creating a narrative that powers along unstopably.

Ian McDonald's *Brasyl* is *exactly* what I read science fiction for: to be shown dazzling new things, new worlds – new thoughts, even; to be immersed in unfamiliar milieux and made aware of the potential wonder of the world around us, whether in a different dimension or merely a different timezone.

'A historical fiction with a modern sensibility,' I read somewhere else of *Crécy*. Ellis and Caceres stage a smash-and-grab on the past that vividly renders all of the foul-mouthed grubbiness, carnage and adrenaline of how it (probably) was, and still manage to convey more genuine history in just 48 pages than most writers could in a book ten times that length.

The End of Science Fiction is a beautiful piece of small press magic that deals with the end of the universe in a affecting and very English manner. Sam Smith can write little people facing big ideas like no one else I know, and *The End of Science Fiction* is probably the best book that John Wyndham never wrote.

Ken MacLeod just pipped Richard Morgan's *Black Man* onto my list because *The Execution Channel* showcases MacLeod heading off in another direction yet again, and really grasping not simply the content of

future literature, but also its possible form. That, and it seems so dreadfully informed by the present day, whilst keeping an eye very firmly on the sf horizon.

Nicola Clarke

Vellum, by Hal Duncan (Macmillan, 2005)
The Privilege of the Sword, by Ellen Kushner (Bantam Spectra 2006/Small Beer Press 2007)
The Summer Isles, by Ian Macleod (Aio Books, 2005)
Hav, by Jan Morris (Faber & Faber, 2006)
Air, by Geoff Ryman (Gollancz, 2005)

2007 was a good year for my genre reading – even if none of the books in my top five were actually published during 2007. One of my choices needs little justification in these pages: BSFA Award-winning *Air*, with its insightful sense of Central Asian place and warm-hearted approach to its characters, particularly the magnificent heroine, the clever and imaginative Mae. Another, *Vellum*, has also had plenty of attention, for good reason; Duncan's mythological mash-up and wildly creative use of different styles and genres didn't suit all tastes, but I enjoyed it immensely.

Also thoroughly entertaining was *The Privilege of the Sword*, a young girl's coming-of-age story rendered as a thoughtful but irresistibly fun swashbuckler, as full of intelligent gender subversion and meta-textuality as it is of sword-fighting and hissable villains.

On a quieter note, I found that *The Summer Isles* – which, like *The Privilege of the Sword*, has yet to get a UK publication – more than lived up to the praise heaped upon it. It's a truly beautiful novel, a portrait of an inter-war Britain in which humiliating defeat in the Great War has proven a spur to home-grown fascism, seen through the eyes of an ageing, introspective Oxford historian.

The book I enjoyed most from last year's Clarke Award shortlist was Jan Morris' *Hav*, part epistolary novel, part anecdotal travel-writing from a eastern Mediterranean land that never was (but which really ought to have been). What starts out seeming be just an interesting exercise in world-building – but what a world! – is transmuted into a tragedy by the new, second half of the story, in which Morris returns to find *Hav* changed almost beyond recognition by revolution and cultural upheaval. Wonderful.

Gary Dalkin

The Long Price: Shadow and Betrayal, by Daniel Abraham (Orbit, 2007)
Eifelheim, by Michael F. Flynn (Tor, 2006)
The Shining, by Stephen King (NEL, 1977)
The Floating Book, by Michelle Lovric (Regan Books/HarperCollins, 2003)
Cloud Atlas, by David Mitchell (Sceptre, 2004)

The Shining (a re-reading) stands out as the best of the four Stephen King novels I read this year. A horror masterpiece. Daniel Abraham's *The Long Price: Shadow and Betrayal* is a repackaging for the UK market of the first two novels of the author's Long Price Quartet, *A Shadow in Summer* (2006) and *A Betrayal in Winter* (2007). Each book is set in a particular city in an ancient pseudo-Chinese world – with one fantasy element, discreetly yet significantly employed

– two hundred years after the fall of an empire. Each book has well developed characters, whose actions inform the plot. Beautifully written, these are poetic, compelling and very human thrillers about the enduring price of our decisions. Michelle Lovric's *The Floating Book* is not fantasy, but the evocation of romance, politics, religion, business, ambition and betrayal in a Venice undergoing a technological revolution (the dawn of printing) achieves many effects comparable to *The Long Price*. And a century or so earlier in the German forests between Strasbourg and Basel, *Eifelheim* is the setting for Michael Flynn's meditative first contact saga, a thoughtful, demanding sf epic set in a richly detailed world.

Which leaves David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. The hype this book originally received put me off reading it for years. But the hype was justified. This is a dense, complex, utterly absorbing and exhilarating science fiction novel. And it is an sf novel, despite comprising six interwoven novellas, only two of which are explicitly sf. I loved this book so much the next three novels I read were Mitchell's *number9dream*, *Ghostwritten* and *Black Swan Green*. I'd have read more, but he hasn't yet published anything else. I haven't been so excited about an author since first reading Iain (M.) Banks in 1989. Don't make my mistake, read these brilliant books now.

Chris Hill

The Green Glass Sea, by Ellen Klages (Viking, 2006?)
Affinity, by Sarah Waters (Virago 1999)
The Hallowed Hunt, by Lois McMaster Bujold (Eos, 2001)
Melusine/The Virtu, by Sarah Monette (Ace, 2005, 2006)
Nekropolis, by Maureen F. McHugh (Avon, 2001)

My choices this year mix and match several themes and sub-genres, but although I have read science fiction that I have enjoyed this year, there is little that has really stood out.

The Klages and the Walters are both (very different) historical novels (the former about a young girl whose father is working on the Manhattan Project and the latter about a Victorian prison visitor who becomes fascinated by a supposed psychic being held in the prison), but they both have elements that would engage many readers of the sf genre.

The Bujold and Monettes avoid the tired clichés of generic fantasy and feature interesting protagonists in well-realised worlds, although both writers put quests of sorts at the heart of their books. They also partake of the political thriller (and I am a sucker for fantasy-as-political-thriller), and are also about the exercise and restraint of power. Monette rates special mention as being a new writer to me who has greatly impressed me with the first two volumes of this four-volume series. Alas they have not published in the UK, but are well worth seeking out.

Only the McHugh is actually science fiction, necessarily so as the sf elements are required to make the story work. Ultimately it is about the desperation that drives people without hope to ignore the truths of their relationships; the reader knows that the main character has horribly misunderstood the realities of her situation and her own wilful naivety regarding this is what make this such a painful tragedy.

Penny Hill

Stay, by Nicola Griffith (Nan A. Talese, 2001; Vintage, 2002)
The Glass Harmonica, by Louise Marley (Ace, 2000)
In the Night Garden, by Catherynne M. Valente (Bantam, 2006)
Melusine/The Virtu/Mirador, by Sarah Monette (Ace, 2005, 2006, 2007)

By my counting that's either four books or six, so it averages out to five.

This year, Sarah Monette's novels really blew me away. I loved her intricate urban political fantasy. She has peopled a world with the best kind of fictional characters – a compelling and fascinating cast that we want to spend time with and find out more about, even while acknowledging that they are not people we'd like in real life. They are brilliant examples of the kind of fantasy I enjoy most: stories where overall the focus is on power politics and relationships. Magic exists and comes with a price and it has a complicated place within the power structure of this world.

I read *In the Night Garden* after it won the Tiptree award and I thoroughly enjoyed the way Valente played with ideas of story and fictionality. I found myself waiting with baited breath to get back to the suspended narratives, picturing them almost as different levels on a sleeper's encephalograph as they move between the different states. This was a much more impressive, coherent and fun example of broken narratives than David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*.

Stay by Nicola Griffith is her best work yet. It marries the cold clarity of her earlier works with a new humanity that looks at the consequences of violence and assumed responsibilities. Lastly, *The Glass Harmonica* was simply a deeply satisfying read.

Tom Hunter

Crooked Little Vein, by Warren Ellis (William Morrow, 2007)
Dead Men's Boots, by Mike Carey (Orbit, 2007)
Soon I Will Be Invincible, by Austin Grossman (Michael Joseph, 2007)
No Dominion, by Charlie Huston (Orbit, 2007)
A Princess of Mars, by Edgar Rice Burroughs (Gutenberg Project, originally published 1912)

At the time of writing there are something like 50 novels currently submitted for this year's Clarke Award, with the chance of a last few stragglers making their way over the doorstep in the final days. That's a pretty big list, and I mention it here to say thanks again to this year's judges.

Of course, as the Award's current administrator I personally enjoy no influence whatsoever in the selection of its shortlist, which means I'm free to go off and read all kinds of other stuff. These are just some of my favourite genre reads of the year that you won't see on the Clarke Award shortlist, but that would certainly gain my vote anywhere else.

Warren Ellis is definitely a 'proper' science fiction writer (he said so himself on his blog, so who am I to argue). That said his first 'proper' book isn't sf, but it is funny – gross-out, laugh-out loud funny in places – and a neat little intro to many of his main themes.

Mike Carey is another comic book guy doing some of his best work in prose. There's a load of stuff out there these days that's not exactly horror but still has much of the same dress sense, and for me Mike's series is certainly one of the best, which is probably why I've read all three this year.

Still sticking with comics and also with modern horror, it was great to see comic book superheroes themselves continuing to crossover into prose fiction in Austin Grossman's first, and equally while I'm theoretically tired of vampire detectives Charlie Huston's pared down undead noir still works a certain magic.

Finally, aside from keeping up on my contemporary reading list, one of my main pleasures of the year has been working backwards along the genre timeline. I started Burroughs' first Barsoom novel with a certain kind of pulpish postmodern self-awareness but ended it hooked as his surprising complicated hero brawled across the red planet to claim his princess.

LJ Hurst

Voices From the Street, by Philip K Dick (Tor US, 2007)

Roadside Picnic, by Boris and Arkady Strugatski (Gollancz, Masterworks Edition, 2007)

Old Man's War, by John Scalzi (Tor US, 2005/Tor UK, 2007)

The Ghost Brigades, by John Scalzi (Tor US, 2006, Tor UK, 2008)

The Last Colony, by John Scalzi (Tor US, 2007)

John Scalzi was unknown to me when I reviewed *The Android's Dream*, but his black humour there made me search for his other material and find this trilogy (or more, there's another book, *The Sagan Diary*, which I have not seen) about John Perry and his contemporaries. Some readers may find it alarming that Scalzi has set his fiction so far in the future, but fans of militaristic fiction, and possibly of the current US government, may be relieved to learn that someone has been thinking of a way to deal with both the American Social Security deficit and the struggling Medicare system, but the old timers are going to have to fight for it.

Paul Williams, Philip K. Dick's literary executor, once told me and everyone else in the hall when I asked the question at Mexican, that he would not publish *Voices From the Street* – he did not consider it good enough, but I am glad to have it now. This is one of Dick's 50's realist novels, but in the story of Stuart Hadley, a struggling sales engineer, Dick was reflecting a much wider world. Oddly, it is one that has struck an extra relevance since I began it in the same week I began a delayed reading of Colin Wilson's most recent autobiography *Dreaming to Some Purpose* (Century, 2004), and it was astonishing to learn that Californian Dick and Leicester-born Angry Young Man Wilson, were concerned with the same things. What is more interesting is that both with their interest in science and philosophy should find themselves sinking deeper into theological morasses. There may be a couple of lessons here: firstly, the western world may have just one world view, which may change as do fashions, but secondly, as Dick and Wilson, four thousand miles apart at the time and unaware of each other, seem to indicate, those changes are felt near-instantaneously. Is that how an ansible works?

Steve Jeffrey

Oryx and Crake, by Margaret Atwood (Bloomsbury, 2003)

Lint, by Steve Aylett (Avalon, 2005/Snowbooks, 2007)

Territory, by Emma Bull (Tor US, 2007)

Generation Loss, by Elizabeth Hand (Small Beer Press, 2007)

Black Juice, by Margo Lanagan (Gollancz, 2006)

Actually, my best read of the year is Peter Weston's *With Stars in My Eyes: My Adventures in British Fandom* (NESFA Press, 2004), which is definitely science fictional and good fun, but I'm not sure quite how much (even allowing fannish exaggeration) can be counted as fictional, so unfortunately, given our editor's stern dictat, I've had to leave it off the list.

Top slot, then, goes to Elizabeth Hand (possibly one of the genre's finest modern stylists) with *Generation Loss*. (The title is a barbed double pun). Compared to her previous novel, *Mortal Love*, the fantasy elements are downplayed, but the result is a tight and –despite being largely set on a remote bleak island – almost claustrophobic thriller, with overtones of Peter Hoeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*. I don't think I'll ever look at photographs in quite the same way.

Emma Bull, as befits a member of the Interstitial Arts Foundation, is another writer who constantly hops genres, and *Territory* is somewhere between fantasy and a magical realist western, with a touch of romance thrown in. Featuring a splendidly independent-minded heroine and an enigmatic drifter, the setting is Tombstone in 1881, just prior to the legendary gunfight at the OK Corral between the Earp brothers and 'Doc' Holliday vs. the Clanton brothers.

Aylett's *Lint* is just strange and gonzo. It's the fictional autobiography of the switchback career of Jeff Lint, science fiction writer, maniac, transvestite exhibitionist, cult hero and pariah. Aylett further extended the joke with a follow-up volume, *And Your Point Is...?*, of reviews and essays on Lint and his work, and even a Jeff Lint website, with extracts, covers, comics and other marginalia.

Lanagan's *Black Juice* is a fine little collection of short stories, the highlight of which is probably the opening story 'Singing My Sister Down', in which a family picnic on a tar pit as the eldest daughter is slowly sucked down as punishment for murder.

Tony Keen

Ink, by Hal Duncan (Macmillan, 2007)

Vellum, by Hal Duncan (Macmillan, 2005)

Stardust, by Neil Gaiman (Headline, 1999)

Soldier of Sidon, by Gene Wolfe (Tor US, 2006)

Girl Meets Boy, by Ali Smith (Canongate, 2007)

I have to leave out Ian McDonald's first-rate *Brasyl* (Gollancz, 2007), as 31st December found me only 200 pages through. Hal Duncan's *The Book of All Hours*, in two parts as *Vellum* (2005) and *Ink* (2007) is daunting, complex, sometimes opaque, but ultimately extremely enjoyable. I read Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* in the run-up to the film; though, as often with Gaiman's work, echoes of his work in *Sandman* are strong, the end is both beautiful and true (sadly the film sacrificed much of this

for a more traditional narrative). Gene Wolfe's *Soldier of Sidon* appeared at the end of 2006; wholly outside the north-west European tradition that influences much fantasy, it is a worthy World Fantasy Award winner. Finally, I caught up with some of the Canongate Myth series. Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* is the best; exuberant and engaging, though nothing this series has done with myth is as innovative as Duncan.

Paul Kincaid

One for Sorrow, by Christopher Barzak (Bantam, 2007)
The Yiddish Policemen's Union, by Michael Chabon (Fourth Estate, 2007)
Endless Things, by John Crowley (Small Beer Press, 2007)
The Execution Channel, by Ken MacLeod (Orbit, 2007)
Resistance, by Owen Sheers (Faber, 2007)

It has been an extraordinary year for science fiction. I could easily have chosen five or even ten other books to appear on this list, and it is a very rare year indeed when that happens. Of the ones I did pick, John Crowley's triumphant conclusion to his 20-year *Aegypt* sequence, which both brought the whole thing to a satisfactory conclusion and opened it up in new directions, could so easily have been a disappointment, but wasn't. Michael Chabon's entry into alternate history, which was both comic and disturbing, was matched by the lyrical brilliance of Owen Sheers's stunningly original take on the old idea of Hitler Victorious. The alternate history element of *The Execution Channel* was the least satisfactory part of what was otherwise Ken MacLeod's best novel in years. And I just have to pay tribute to the superb debut by Christopher Barzak which combines *Catcher in the Rye* with a touchingly-handled ghost story.

Martin McGrath

The Yiddish Policemen's Union, by Michael Chabon (Fourth Estate, 2007)
JPod, by Douglas Coupland (Bloomsbury, 2007)
Spook Country, by William Gibson (Viking, 2007)
Old Man's War, by John Scalzi (Tor US, 2005/Tor UK, 2007)
Halting State, by Charles Stross (Ace Books, 2007/Orbit, 2008)

Take three stories. Story One: In an alternate timeline the Holocaust never happened and the politics and the geography of Europe, North America and the Middle East are entirely changed, a detective uncovers the threads of a plot that reveals venality and corruption at the heart of the world order.

Story Two: A former rock-star turned reporter finds herself working for a mysterious entrepreneur on a story about an artist working with technologies that don't yet quite exist and finds herself drawn into the post-Cold War world of spies and corruption.

Story Three: A few years in the future a policewoman, and insurance investigator and a computer programmer investigate a crime in a multi-player online role-playing game. The crime, however, turns out to be simply the first layer in a complex conspiracy.

All three stories, it seems to me, are clearly science fictional. Yet Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (story one) was widely (but wrongly) dismissed

as using genre trappings as window dressing by both mainstream and genre critics. William Gibson's *Spook Country* (story two) was called the point where an author with a significant mainstream following moved beyond the "restrictions" of genre. And only Charles Stross's *Halting State* (story three) – the one with the smallest amount of speculation per ounce of paper – was passively accepted as straightforward sf.

We live in strange times, my book reading friends. Luckily the process of branding does not change the fact that all three books were immensely enjoyable, astute and intelligent.

John Scalzi's *Old Man's War* (and, indeed, its sequels) was the best pure splash of science fiction I've read in ages. Douglas Coupland was, with *JPod*, as funny, sharp and precisely observed as always.

I might easily have also included Ken MacLeod's *The Execution Channel*, *Sixty Days and Counting* by Kim Stanley Robinson, Jed Mercurio's *Ascent*, Ian MacDonald's *Brasyl* and *Glasshouse* by Charles Stross. I think that means 2007 was a good year.

Kev McVeigh

Whiskey & Water, by Elizabeth Bear (Roc, 2007)
The Carhullan Army, by Sarah Hall (Faber, 2007)
Butcher Bird, by Richard Kadrey (Night Shade Books, 2007; revised from Blind Shrike, publisher 2005 on The Infinite Matrix)
American Whiskey Bar, by Michael Turner (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004)
Farthing, by Jo Walton (Tor US, 2006)

I seem to have spent most of 2007 re-reading short fiction (particularly almost every word Howard Waldrop has published.) Time was devoted to biographies and the works of Romantic era essayists and radicals, Hone, Hunt and Hazlitt. I happily proclaim Waldrop the greatest short story writer active within sf and Hazlitt the greatest essayist this country has produced and urge you all to read them. But this is about the best books I read in 2007.

There was an alternate history crime novel involving Judaism and anti-semitism that charmed and gripped until its gut-punch ending. Jo Walton's *Farthing* embodies the strengths of its genre, a dramatic story, provocatively evoking reality in its fantastic elements.

Elizabeth Bear's Promethean Age series is shaping up to be a major work of fantasy with its delicate meshing of Faerie and Human relationships. *Whiskey & Water* depends a little too much on knowledge of the earlier *Blood & Iron* but does much to progress the characters and the world from that book.

Richard Kadrey's third novel *Butcher Bird* has the best cover art of the year, around a vivid, dramatically witty adventure tour of Hell that is both Dante and Blake yet equally Indiana Jones.

Michael Turner's *American Whiskey Bar* is a post-modern puzzle, a possibly fake screenplay and related essays that is odd, disturbing, nasty at times but poetic and potent too. Is it real, fiction, both, who knows? That's the point.

Best of all was Sarah Hall's stark, brutal tale of climate change, political and social oppression and the

personal strength gained by those women who resist. *The Carhullan Army* is a slim book written in spare prose, echoing its harsh landscape, its minimal language reflecting the bare lives of the rebels in the Cumbria mountains. A strong contender for Clarke and Tiptree Awards, surely.

John Newsinger

Spook Country, by William Gibson (Viking, 2007)
Cowboy Angels, by Paul McAuley (Gollancz, 2007)
Pushing Ice, by Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz, 2005)
City of Pearl, by Karen Traviss (Eos, 2004)
Rainbows End, by Vernor Vinge (Tor US, 2006; Tor UK, 2007)

I'm still reading Ken MacLeod's *The Execution Channel* which will certainly figure in any list of favourites for 2008. As for 2007, well this is the year I discovered Karen Traviss and her Wess'har war series. I cannot understand why this British writer is not better known over here. I have read three of the series so far, but the first, *City of Pearl*, will do for the list. Last year I also rediscovered a writer who had slipped off my radar. I have not read a Paul McAuley novel since *Shrine of Stars* some years ago. He was one of those writers whose books I used to wait on, reading them as they came out, but for some reason I seem to have lost sight of him. His new novel, *Cowboy Angels*, is a tremendous read. The notion of an American attempt to establish American domination throughout alternate universes was irresistible. The book does not have the stylish brilliance of his earlier stuff, but it is still a great read. A high class sf political thriller. Next is William Gibson's *Spook Country*. Beautifully written, although it is not perception-shifting in the way *Neuromancer* was. Whereas once the punk singer would have been the protagonist, now it is the retired punk singer. Still a wonderful book. This brings me to Vernor Vinge's *Rainbows End*, a delight like all his work, clever, witty and wise. And last but not least, Alastair Reynolds's *Pushing Ice*. I always feel a bit guilty about enjoying and admiring his books, unable to really accept that Space Opera can be this good I suppose. Still Reynolds has yet to put a foot wrong as far as I am concerned.

Martin Potts

Brightness Reef, by David Brin (Orbit, 1995)
Infinity's Shore, by David Brin (Orbit, 1998)
The Dreaming Void, by Peter F Hamilton (Macmillan, 2007)
To Hold Infinity, by John Meaney (Bantam, 1998)
The Interpretation of Murder, by Jed Rubenfeld (Headline, 2007)

Few of 2007's books found their way to me until the back end of the year, and thus the majority of my five are older novels. One 2007 book, however, was the first of Peter Hamilton's sequels to The Commonwealth Saga. We all know the potential for sequels to just revisit the themes of the original but Hamilton is cleverly setting this sequence so long afterward that its only the "consequences" and a few characters which flow through, so we are presented with a fresh new storyline which could stand alone. The use of a distinctive split narrative makes it almost feel like two novels in one,

whetting the reader's appetite for the clever convergence which will occur in later instalments.

I have attempted to catch up with David Brin's Hugo winning Uplift sequence and read *Brightness Reef* and *Infinity's Shore* (books 4 & 5); I loved the way he conveys a sense of "alienness" from his non-human characters, and the exploration of psychological and physiological factors have made these books a joy to read. I expect that the final instalment, *Heaven's Reach*, will be in my 2008 choices.

To Hold Infinity was the first John Meaney novel I have read and I was not disappointed. It's a first rate futuristic, off-world thriller with good pace and interesting characters has encouraged me to seek out more of his work – which is how it should be.

Finally I read and enjoyed the generally popular *The Interpretation of Murder* by Jed Rubenfeld. I considered it on the fringe of alternative history given its conjecture on events surrounding Sigmund Freud's brief visit to New York in 1909. The murder mystery elements unfold at a decent rate, Freud's basic theories are explored but also the use of the construction of the Manhattan Bridge in the plot was superb, all elements combining entertainingly.

Paul Raven

Nova Swing, by M John Harrison (Gollancz, 2006)
Black Man, by Richard Morgan (Gollancz, 2007)
Halting State, by Charles Stross (Ace, 2007/Orbit, 2008)
The Queen of Candescence by Karl Schroeder (Tor US, 2007)
Dark Space by Marianne de Pierres (Orbit, 2007)

Picking the best books of the year is a tricky process – how do you define "best"? So I've made my choices to reflect what I see as the great variety of work being produced in the sf market.

For example, contrast the scintillating prose and deep symbolism of Harrison's award-winning *Nova Swing* with the hard-boiled social commentary of Morgan's *Black Man* – two fantastic novels, both surely sf by any definition you care to use, but as different as chalk and cheese.

Schroeder and de Pierres highlight just two of the multitudinous approaches being taken to the space opera form. *The Queen Of Candescence* combines sensawunda world-building with great adventure plotting. *Dark Space* introduces stunning characterisation into a complex political set-up, and sees de Pierres challenging the traditionally male practitioners of the subgenre on an equal footing – while packing some uniquely feminine punch with the bargain.

Charlie Stross continues his relentless bid to out-produce and out-geek the entire scene. *Halting State* takes the spies-and-conspiracy plot arcs he knows and loves, and weaves them into the plausible future of massively multiplayer gaming with his trademark wit. Again, undoubtedly science fiction – but another new flavour to add to the menu.

There are plenty of other fine books out there – some of which I read this year, some of which I have yet to read. There's just never enough time, is there? But it's also great that there were scores of other books that I *didn't* want to read. That may sound crazy, but I theorise that diversity is a sign of vigour – and if that is true, the sf ecosystem is in fine fettle.

Dave M Roberts

More Than Melchisedech, by RA Lafferty (United Mythologies Press, 1992, as *Tales of Chicago*, *Tales of Midnight and Argo*)
Retro Pulp Tales, edited by Joe R. Lansdale (Subterranean Press, 2006)
The City of Dreaming Books, by Walter Moers (Vintage, 2006)
The Book of Dave, by Will Self (Penguin, 2006)
Twelve Collections and The Teashop, by Zoran Zivkovic (PS Publishing, 2007)

Another year and another wonderful collection from Zoran Zivkovic. *12 Collections and The Teashop* consists of 12 thematically related stories about some rather unusual collections and collectors, rounded off with the short story 'The Teashop'. These are all fascinating vignettes individually, and together they form themselves in the mind of the reader into something far greater which resonates long after finishing the book.

Will Self's *The Book of Dave* is another book greater than the sum of its parts. The two intertwined stories, one in modern day London, about a taxi driver and his attempts to leave a memoir for his estranged son from a failed marriage and one in a post apocalyptic future where his ramblings have been taken as a guide for the society, play against each other in a way that manages to be both affecting and rather disturbing.

The most fun read this year was Joe R. Lansdale's anthology *Retro Pulp Tales*. An attempt to recreate the feel of the pulps, with a couple of exceptions this was very successful and particular kudos goes to Stephen Gallagher for his haunted flight simulator tale 'The Box'.

Walter Moers returned to his somewhat whimsical world of Zamonia in *The City of Dreaming Books*. This story of extreme book collecting is a more satisfying and somewhat darker read than the previous books, and is also an absolute joy.

The final book in R. A. Lafferty's Argo sequence, *More Than Melchisedech*, is remarkable in many ways. It tells of Melchisedech Duffy and his multiple lifetimes, and the final (?) voyages of The Argo, under whatever name. A complex and frequently disorientating series of adventures, this is easily the best book in the sequence and arguably his strongest novel. The great tragedy is that this, along with much of his work, is now so difficult to find.

Sue Thomason

The Empty Chair, by Diane Duane (Pocket Books, 2006)
Hav, by Jan Morris (Faber, 2006)
If the World Were A Village, by David J Smith and Shelagh Armstrong (A&C Black, 2006, updated edition)
Blindsight, by Peter Watts (Tor US, 2006)
Precious Dragon, by Liz Williams (Night Shade Books, 2007)

If The World Were A Village will be the book that most of you don't know, as it's marketed as a children's "world development" title. In fact it's a classic thought experiment, giving us an understandable picture of something otherwise too big and complex to grasp. Imagine the world is a village. 100 people live in the

village. 9 speak English (22 speak a Chinese dialect, of whom 18 speak Mandarin). 30 people always have enough to eat (the others do not). 76 people have electricity; most use it only for light at night. 25 people have televisions. 10 have computers. 40 do not have access to adequate sanitation. 17 cannot read. If all the money in the village were divided equally, each person would have about £3,600 per year. But in fact the richest 20 people each have more than £5,600 a year. The poorest 20 people each have less than 65p a day.

The teaching notes at the back of the book explain that it's a basis for Utopia: "the global dream includes adequate food and housing, safe and affordable energy supplies and universal literacy for all, as well as the elimination of unhealthy water supplies. These goals will only be realised if we can find a way to stabilise the world's population ... However what we need is not just facts, but a way of looking at the world that tells the story truthfully." This book is both truthful and hopeful, and I am in need of truth and hope. It contains exactly what I'm looking for in science fiction: perspective, a way of looking at the world that tells the story differently, and a place to stand from which to change the world.

THREES & 2007

THE FILMS OF 2007 by Colin Odell & Mitch Le Blanc

2007 was the “Year of the Threequel”, an unwieldy term that referred to the bewildering number of sequels churned out by the major film studios, many of which had reached the magic “trilogy” point but also included head starter *Harry Potter 5* and catch-me-up wannabe *Fantastic Four 2*. An optimist could allude to increasing box office revenue producing better films. A pessimist would point out a dearth of imagination within the studios turning successful products into factory franchises, aware that, providing enough money is hosed at the special effects, the punters will gleefully turn up in droves. It’s easy to moan about vacuous tat, until you remember that film is primarily a forum for entertainment – intellectual themes and solid dialogue are welcome extras in the greater scheme of things. Then you look at the unadulterated tedium of *Ocean’s Thirteen* and suddenly your critical faculties are reduced to desperate levels as the nicest thing you can say about this criminal waste of time and celluloid is that it wasn’t as bad as *Ocean’s Twelve*. A similar damnation with faint praise could be levelled at *Resident Evil: Extinction*, the third in the series of films loosely based upon the popular Capcom franchise. Saying it’s better than part two is not really helpful given that *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* was the worst zombie film of all time. *Extinction*, directed by Russell (Razorback) Mulcahy, is at least a passable film as Alice (Milla Jovovich) hooks up with a group of survivors looking for a quiet life in zombie-free Alaska. But dastardly corporate meanies Umbrella Corp want Alice dead so they can experiment on her DNA. Although there’s plenty of zombie action to enjoy, the film lacks tension. Better, but not a patch on the taut original, was *28 Weeks Later*, where zombies (who aren’t really zombies but they do a really good impersonation) terrorise what remains of Britain after the US military have declared London to be free from contagion. Which of course it proves not to be. Plenty of gore, although some of it (yes, the helicopter bit) doesn’t sit easy with the serious tone of the film and its themes about loss of love, humanity and self-control. Still, it’s an interesting piece with a British backdrop that manages to hold its own.

There was more zombie action in Robert Rodriguez’s jaw-droppingly tasteless *Planet Terror* where an experimental airborne virus turns a community into flesh hungry maniacs. What sets *Planet Terror* apart is its impish glee, as it piles on each new atrocity to hysterical levels. Rodriguez simply puts as much mindless fun as he can muster onto the screen, with zombies spraying gallons of blood, chowing down on victims or being pulled into pieces. Hilarious for gross-out fans, the humour is simplistic but hits the mark – “This case is a no-brainer,” declares a mortuary attendant as he turns

over a corpse, revealing the back of the victim’s head is missing. The film even goes as far as to degrade the stock, skip frames and, in one audacious move, miss an entire reel! The only fault is that, due to a disastrous turn at the US box office, this was not released as a double bill with Quentin Tarantino’s *Death Proof* under the title *Grindhouse*, meaning that we had to pay twice to see what should have been a three-hour programme of irresponsible fun, complete with guest director trailers including *Werewolf Women of the SS* featuring Nicolas Cage as Fu Manchu. Extended by half an hour and overlong by, oh, about half an hour, *Death Proof* is a far talkier affair, with Kurt Russell playing Stuntman Mike whose death proof car allows him to engage in a peculiar pastime of deliberately causing fatal road accidents.

Back with the threes, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* was probably the year’s most anticipated film, coming on the heels of the stupendously (some might add “inexplicably”) successful *Dead Man’s Chest*. Our swaggering semi-anti-hero-villain Cap’n Jack Sparrow is having a tough time having been swallowed by the Kraken in part 2 and finding himself in Davy Jones’ Locker. Meanwhile the regular crew, including a reanimated Barbossa, are seeking a way of releasing Jack, against their better judgement. Having written themselves in a corner at the end of part two it seems as though the only way out for the film-makers was to create a whole pantheon of gods and artefacts to give the film a sense of gravitas and mythmaking, something which was almost absent from the refreshing original. It’s all strangely reminiscent of that other “back to back” self-satisfying clunker *The Matrix* trilogy. Admittedly the visual design is impressive but overall the effect is that of a pudding so over-egged it may as well be called an omelette. Coming in early in a packed season of tentpole flicks *Spiderman 3* initially appeared a touch disappointing but Raimi’s sure-footed and exhilarating direction coupled with his ability to include, shock, characters with emotions that aren’t limited to love or anger alone makes for superior entertainment. The *Spiderman* films have always challenged the boundaries between good and evil, fate and design and this time round is no exception. Peter has not only to wrestle with his conscience, he also faces the wrath of former buddy Harry Osborn, now re-inventing himself as the vengeful New Goblin, as well as Uncle Ben’s real murderer – transformed into the Sandman. Compounding his problems is some alien goo that turns his powers up to eleven but makes him a narcissistic idiot. When he finally realises the error of his ways his rejection of his dark sides leads to the birth of his most evil foe yet: Venom. *Spiderman 3* suffers from a case of too many

crooks spoiling the plot, almost as though they had decided that this was to be the last film in the series and that they might as well roll out their favourite bits from the comic books in one big bundle. The result is a bit muddled – the comic relief sections either helping to balance the dark tone of the film or stop it in its tracks depending on your point of view, but at least it has some coherence and the action is superbly staged throughout.

Coherence was sadly lacking in the dreadful *Shrek the Third*. Dreamworks have finally got their render engine to sing but sadly they seem to have lost any ability to animate their characters resulting in individual shots looking fabulous... until they move. Shrek faces

becoming the heir to the land of Far, Far Away but still prefers the quieter life so tries to arrange a replacement. Meanwhile Fiona is belatedly paying homage to McG's *Charlies Angels* films by setting up a trio of "not meant to be like Disney Princesses gone hard-ass" kung-fu fighters to prevent the smarmy Prince Charming pulling off a coup d'état. The end result is a film entirely devoid of humour, bar some lazy post-modernism that was wearing thin last time around. Be warned, a fourth outing and a *Puss In Boots* spin-off are in the pipeline. Still it's not as though other animation companies can rest on their laurels. Disney produced *Meet the Robinsons*, a bizarre, lifeless cross between *The Jetsons* and *The Time Machine* in which orphan inventor Lewis is dragged to the future by William Robinson (Will Robinson – how clever!) to see a world of "zany wonder" that is under threat from Bowler Hat Guy – a pantomime villain with ill-fitting trousers, an outrageous cape and handle-bar moustache who appears to have wandered in from a Penelope Pitstop cartoon. Sadly the maudlin orphan scenes sit uneasily with the *Futurama*-for-kids future world and the "wacky humour" falls as flat as my soufflés. Remember, Disney ditched its 2-D department to make films like this over *Lilo and Stitch* or *Beauty and the Beast*. At least temporarily (see *Enchanted*). Far better for being cell animated was Goro (son of Hayao) Miyazaki's *Tales from Earthsea* which, complete with all the exquisite background paintings and Ghibli animation we've come to expect, was surely destined for greatness. Sadly the end result, while sporadically exciting, is unevenly paced and relies too much upon understanding details from the books. Adherence to the text is, of course, not crucial for creating a good film but Goro was a first time director trying to live up to the reputation of the greatest living cell animator and there is a sense that the film is "Greatest Hits of My Dad". It has the feeling of buying a classic album and finding out it's been re-recorded by a cover band. *Tales from Earthsea* doesn't balk at showing fantasy violence, something western animations are still a bit wary of doing. So it's nice to see the re-birth of those *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* in a CGI extravaganza which goes to show that fighting in films can be fun again although there's no

“ the result is a strange but compelling mixture of ancient and modern – exciting, visceral and raw, steeped in atmosphere and surprisingly refreshing in sticking to the morbid tragedy of the story ”

way that the gore of the original comics is likely ever to be realised. A more bizarre concept is *Beowulf*, made with the same motion capture technique used in, of all things, *Polar Express*, a retelling of the millennium old Anglo-Saxon poem scripted by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avery. It's hard to imagine how this got green-lit, a state of the art \$150million CGI fantasy featuring people being skinned alive, ripped into little pieces and massacred by psychotic deformed monsters. Add to that the sight of a computer generated naked Ray Winstone poking a deranged Crispin Glover in the eye or Angelina Jolie propagating her race through metamorphosed seductions (including fashionable 8th Century high

heeled heels) and you wonder not only "what were they thinking?" but "how on earth did they get a 12A rating for this?" The answers are academic, the result is a strange but compelling mixture of ancient and modern – exciting, visceral and raw, steeped in atmosphere and surprisingly refreshing in sticking to the morbid tragedy of the story. The script makes modern sense of the classic poem without overly dumbing down, while the salty talk among the soldiers, the foetid air of decay and the ever increasing tales of (unlikely) bravery all follow the testosterone-fuelled tradition of heroic epics, as much about bravura as actuality.

Recently animation has been steering away from cell to CGI but there is one branch of the animated film that has been less conspicuous in recent years – the live-animated mix, a hybrid that started as far back as *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) with pioneering animator Winsor McCay interacting with the delightful titular dinosaur. This year two films took different approaches to the way this sub-genre could be adapted to a modern family fantasy, one using CGI, one cell animation (oh, and a pile of CGI too, just in case). *Arthur and the Invisibles* (*Arthur et les Minimoys*), directed by everyone's favourite genre maverick Luc Besson and based upon his books, takes Arthur (Freddie Highmore) on a journey deep into the garden of his grandmother to recover treasure buried there by his missing grandfather and save the family home from an evil property tycoon. Arthur must engage in a moonlit ritual ceremony to shrink himself to the size of the Minimoys, tiny environmentalists. While miniaturised, our hero finds time to fall in love with a feisty princess called Selenia and, armed with a magic sword, sets out to set things right. Arthur turns into a CGI version of himself when joining the Minimoys, blurring the lines between real and fantasy in a deliberate way. This is a charming film, a simple and diverting adventure with a good heart and much to enjoy, even if the voice acting (in the UK dub) is a touch variable. Even more unexpectedly enjoyable is Disney's *Enchanted*, the Mouse House's answer to the hip *Shrek* films, which sees the studio partly return to its cell animated roots.

The premise is a plainly generic combination of fish-out-of-water meets pre-teen rom-com with the added twist of being a “Disney Princess” franchise piece – not an inspiring prospect, but somehow it pulls it off by being feelgood, yet cynical enough to be plausible. Having fallen in love at first sight, Princess Giselle is to marry a handsome prince, after much singing and a day of strictly chaste courting. It is not to be, for an evil queen dumps the gullible princess into a well... that leads to modern day live action New York. Where *Enchanted* works is in the total belief in the Disney-verse as separate from our reality and what happens when the two clash together. The opening animation is a pitch perfect distillation of all the woodland clichés from their classic output. When the action moves to New York this ethos is turned on its head with deliberately unlikely live action musical numbers. Admittedly once the resolution is under way everything becomes a little by-numbers but this safe *Pleasantville*-in-reverse is diverting uplifting fun nevertheless, proving a family film can be engaging and charming to most ages. This is something the makers of the \$200million travesty *Evan Almighty* would have done well to have thought about when planning mirthless, charmless, turkey sequel to the tolerable Jim Carrey vehicle *Bruce Almighty*. This time Steve Carrell takes the lead as an congressman who’s given the task of building an ark, old school style. And that’s it. As funny as the plague (every joke is laboured), its anaemic take on religion is pretty much insulting to everyone, and ultimately it is just plain bad film-making. And no, we aren’t even going to say nice things about Morgan Freeman because, frankly, he chose to do it and presumably got paid. *Night at the Museum* was a more satisfactory affair in which Ben Stiller gets a job as a security guard in the Museum of Natural History and discovers that the exhibits come to life each night. Only Ricky Gervais’ irritating performance put a damper on what was a generally amiable fantasy. Similar shenanigans could to be found in the less frenetic *Mr Magorium’s Wonder Emporium*, where Dustin Hoffman plays the 243-year-old eccentric owner of a magical toystore.

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer is not about internet savvy grannies but a return to the day-glo squabbles of our four superhero chums as they take on board another bout of relationship issues while trying to save the world, oh, and maybe Reed and Sue could finally get married? This time the apparently indestructible Silver Surfer, pawn of snack-on-a-planet bad dude Galactus crashes in on the party, partly invited by a mashed up Dr Doom. It’s moderately exciting with bigger effects sequences and at least some attempt at moral dilemma but again Ben is miserable, Reed is boring, Johnny is annoying and Sue is either invisible or looks constipated. There’s even more Marvel in the air as Nicolas Cage finally got to become *Ghost Rider*. When Peter Fonda offers to cure his father’s illness in return for his soul, reckless stuntbike performer Johnny Blaze takes the bait and becomes the demonic ghost rider whenever the devil bids him. But there’s an even badder boy in town, Blackheart, who plans to find a contract that will unleash the power of 1,000 souls and give them power over Hell and Earth. Unwittingly Johnny has become

the executor for Mephistopheles. Cage is in his element hamming up these kind of roles, adding a touch of Elvis (a la *Wild At Heart*) and a completely bizarre sweet fetish to his range of quirks but it’s not enough. Rather like the original comics, it feels that the film’s premise of damned souls and flaming skulls is totally at odds with its Comic Code Seal of Approval. Cage also appeared in *Next* as a Las Vegas magician who has the vaguely useful but marginally silly ability to see a few minutes into the future. There should be loads potential for the film to play with time and create something interesting but it’s completely blown away by an all-too-linear plot and an “is that it?” ending.

Never one to blow up one car when you could blow up ten, the hyperactive and much maligned director Michael Bay seemed like a good choice to do *Transformers*: after all what can possibly go wrong with big robots that change into cool stuff beating the living daylight out of each other while trashing lots of cities and military hardware in the process? a) mecha are cool b) metamorphosing mecha are cooler and c) throwing a & b around is even cooler still. Add a blistering amount of carnage and the results are an 84 minute energetic whoop out loud action romp. Except. Except that it runs at 144 minutes. Sadly in the midst of the action is one of the most cringe-worthy geek bonding stories since *ET* and a truly horrible teen-fantasy romance. It is achingly bad, like they had spliced that Citroen advert with *Weird Science*. Cheaper and far better for it is Timur Bekmambetov’s *Day Watch*, the sequel to the wonderful *Night Watch*, which provides more eclectic and eccentric thrills, the innovative effects once again proving that a bit of imagination can often produce something as spectacular as Hollywood’s money-hose. We await *Twilight Watch* with eager anticipation.

Back to numbers yet again but not in a threequel way. *1408* sees another in the endless stream of Stephen King adaptations, where the titular room number is investigated by a doubter of the paranormal. Genuine creeps give way to a disappointing conclusion but it’s a worthy ride. Joel Schumacher’s *The Number 23* has the hilarious premise of a man being persecuted by a recurring number, a paranoia he gets from a small publication strangely prominent at a local bookshop. Is this just a psychotic quirk (he is, after all played by the ever variable Jim Carrey, here in not-at-all-over-the-top mode, well at least compared with the film), or is there some “dark secret”? Well of course it’s the latter as the plot spirals into murder, hallucination and madness culminating in dark revelations. Utter hokum from start to finish but it holds the attention as it tries to grasp the convoluted plotting with both hands and run with it straight faced. *Mr Brooks* tried a similar feat with Kevin Costner having conversations with his alter-ego trying to curtail his passion for serial killing. This alter-ego (William Hurt) is on screen and refreshingly free of special effects trickery or cheesy voiceover – the effect is startling in its bare-faced simplicity. Brooks’ “one last” job is marred by a voyeur who wants to get in on the action. Like *Spiderman 3* a bewildering class of additional villains makes the whole feel more like professional wrestling minus the lycra but there’s enough inventive

material to keep you engaged and the performances are nicely balanced. Balanced is not something you could accuse *300* of, a breathtaking, hilarious exercise in overindulgence and bombastic excess. Indeed it is so full of machismo that some cinemas handed out testosterone repellent to worried customers. No-one can talk when shouting will do as Gerard "airbrushed pecs" Butler leads his Spartans to certain doom, leaving piles of corpses in his wake in order to prevent the Persians taking their land. But these are no ordinary corpses, oh no, these are a deranged assortment of masked ninjas, gimps and trolls, armoured elephants and treacherous freaks butchered with super-spraying CGI blood and limbs, all ruled by the campest villain in cinema history (yes, even camper than the one in *Bride with the White Hair*). Loud, brash and without irony the sheer pace carries this stylistic interpretation of Frank Miller's comics to its inevitable climax. That said at least it lacked the pretensions of the tedious *Gladiator* or the nihilistic übermensch trappings of Mel Gibson's lovingly crafted grimfest *Apocalypto* – a strange experiment in brutality where the bare-bones plot – man goes from A to B and back again while bad shit happens – makes for an almost fableistic tale of the decline of civilisation through the eyes of a "real man". Gibson's insistence on shooting his epic in Mayan keeps an otherworldly distance from the frequently intense scenes of utter carnage on show. Also in the same subgenre was the slightly unhinged *Pathfinder*, where the rejected son of a Viking grows up in a native American tribe, spearheading escape and rebellion against future Scandinavian oppressors. Brief strokes of visual inventiveness can't hide the loopy premise and the foreshadowed "guys chained together trying to tiptoe over dangerous mountain passes" scene is just hilarious.

Harry Potter's status as grim 12A goth-lite again had many younglings turned away from cinemas or desperately seeking adult accompaniment. *Order of the Phoenix* still suffers from a script that just condenses Rowling's sprawling novel rather than adapts it, a sort of visual Reader's Digest. Rather than cut chunks out of the book we gloss over them, removing some repetition but also character and depth. Still this fantasy manages to retain a politically anti-authoritarian edge as the increasingly totalitarian wizarding authorities oust Dumbledore from Hogwarts and instigate a grand Inquisitor Dolores Umbridge (an unnerving performance from Imelda Staunton) to quell any dissent. Indeed some of the Hogwarts declarations look like they crept in from Ripping Yarn's *Tomkinson's School Days*. Sadly the climax is over too quickly to take in Harry's loss and Helena Bonham Carter's terrifying Bellatrix

Lestrane is underused to make way for the increasingly wide net of regulars they need to squeeze into the running time.

A decade ago the idea that a fantasy film would make any money would be laughable but how times have changed. With *Lord of the Rings* over and the Potter lad rapidly approaching graduation the search is on for the next fantasy torchbearer. Last year's *Eragon* and this year's *The Dark Is Rising* proved you couldn't just throw a popular book at a film studio and hope to make anything from it, whether the quality of the original is debateable or excellent. Although integrity to the spirit of the book is something a film-maker should strive for it is impossible to recreate something in a completely different medium. The big contender for the early Christmas season was undoubtedly *The Golden Compass*, a stupidly expensive adaptation of a fair chunk of Philip Pullman's preachy, polemical but sporadically exhilarating *Northern Lights* (apparently the budget didn't stretch to naming the film correctly in the UK). Glossy, impressive visuals and a menacing performance from Nicole Kidman make for a lean and exciting adventure. The break-neck pacing and tight scripting follows our insolent



and feisty heroine Lyra as she journeys North to free kidnapped children, aided by the last remaining Alethiometer and her ever changing daemon. Her adventures take in magical flying machines, ageless witches and, best of all, hard-rucking polar bears. By ignoring the wearisome sections of the book and getting on with the adventure *The Golden Compass* manages to make a stab at restoring faith in the tentpole flick with its sheer pace and bravura. There was more from Neil Gaiman this year with Matthew Vaughn's adaptation of *Stardust*. Despite a (relatively) modest budget this turned out to be a real treat as lovelorn Tristan ventures beyond the wall that mysteriously separates his village from a dangerous fantasy world in order to retrieve a shooting star for the undeserving focus of his amorous intentions. *Stardust* maintains its own internal logic that makes it an eminently satisfying romp in the spirit of *The Princess Bride*. After an unspectacular start the film throws a bewildering array of witches (Michelle Pfeiffer in a career topping role), camp pirates of the air (Robert de Niro, would you believe) and assorted ghosts, curses and magic into a feelgood pot of celluloid fun.

Similarly there was a time when the horror film was dead and buried but recent years have seen a huge resurgence of interest in the genre. The result? Well we're beginning to see the cracks once more – horror films follow trends more quickly, aggressively and cheaply than virtually any other mainstream genre so

it doesn't take much for the marketplace to become saturated with apparently indistinguishable product. This year the litany included *Hostel 2* (*Hostel*, with chicks!), *Paradise Lost* (*Hostel* in South America!), *The Hills Have Eyes 2* (a sequel to a re-make), *The Hitcher* (Sean Bean plays Rutger Hauer) *Saw IV* (the *Saw* trilogy is over... let's start another one) and, of course, *Halloween*. Or should we say "visionary director Rob Zombie's re-imagining of *Halloween*"? Another woeful attempt to re-make a John Carpenter film (we await *Escape From New York* with utter dread), *Zombie* replaces 100% of the tension with boring violence and completely destroys Michael Myers' unexplained bogeyman persona by giving him a massive backstory about childhood hardship. Like we care.

Others had a stab at originality – *Black Sheep* saw two rival brothers at their family homestead battling over more than inheritance as a new breed of genetically altered sheep prove not to be the money spinner anticipated when it turns out they have a taste for flesh. The sheep that is. This New Zealand film has more than a nod to early Peter Jackson in its range of genre caricatures, slapstick and OTT gore and while it's always entertaining it's never quite as funny as a film about killer sheep really should be (although using mint sauce as an acid substitute is pure genius). Also notching up points for trying something a bit out of the ordinary *30 Days of Night* places its roaming nosferatu in an Alaskan outpost where, cut off from the outside world and a month in arctic darkness, the inhabitants stand little chance against the undead. Surprisingly effective direction, including a superbly detached overhead massacre that recalls, of all things, Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen*, *30 Days of Night* uses its comic book origins as a striking jump-board for the on-screen bloodletting. Scary stuff made enjoyable with an air of the fantastic and some John Carpenter style sieges. *I Am Legend* replaces the pompous self-righteousness of *The Omega Man* as Military scientist Robert Neville (Will Smith) seeks a cure to a virus that has decimated humanity and turned pretty much everyone into light-sensitive beings with an insatiable appetite for blood. Neville is immune and his only companion lies with his dog Sam and a collection of shop dummies at the local DVD emporium. Although the film spares graphic blood-letting its deliberate build up and nihilistic tone make for a refreshingly solemn blockbuster which, despite its upbeat conclusion, really does offer its hero a desolate fate.

Perhaps the most surprising sf film came in the shape of *Sunshine* – British made, with a half-decent budget and a cast you actually have heard of. What's more it generally treated its audience with a modicum of intelligence. When the sun shows signs of sputtering out a team of scientists are sent to jump start it but mysteriously disappear. Seven years later a new team aims to repeat the mission – with less catastrophic results – and save the planet from eternal night. Okay, so *Sunshine* is basically *Alien* meets *2001* (with, dare we suggest, a hint of *The Core*?) but frankly it's been so long since we've had a big screen existential sf blockbuster that we'll forgive it. Yes the film is left wanting a prologue and some of the action is incongruous but

generally the tension is palpable, the acting believable and the cinematography is simply stunning.

Also a big screen must see is *Curse of the Golden Flower*, Zhang Yimou's latest martial arthouse film, which is very different film from the Rashmon-inspired *Hero* and the convoluted melodrama *House of Flying Daggers*. Sumptuous sets and lavish visuals add sheen to this tale of lust, hatred and betrayal. Rot beneath the surface threatens to plunge the country into ruin and bloodshed as the Empress plans a coup d'état over her husband, who is in turn arranging to have her slowly and painfully poisoned. Each is aware of the other's plans (in part) but neither can lose face by admitting it. Some truly spectacular martial arts sequences pepper this almost Shakespearean tragedy and there's no denying the audacity at merging two such apparently disparate genres to such ravishing effect.

Still more threes in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*, the director's third film, in which we follow the attempts of Hugh Jackman's Tom to save his dying love across the ages. Set in (you've guessed it!) three separate time strands – 16th century, present day and 26th century – the film linked through the ages by its protagonist, rendered immortal by an ancient tree. This dense, exquisitely designed romance is a visual treat, the by-product, paradoxically, of a tortuous pre-production history. The result is a glowing, sumptuous feast for the eyes that is astonishingly free from CGI (save in compositing), relying on old-school micro-photography effects to realise its psychedelic extremes. Maybe it is not as profound as it would like to think but it is undeniably an intense, surreal and thought-provoking cinematic experience. A similar charge could be levelled at *Southland Tales*, Richard Kelly's follow-up to *Donnie Darko*. SF is only one element of this comedy, musical, drama set so near in the future it's probably the past by the time you read this. Is it a work of genius or madness? Only you can decide.

Overall 2007 has been a disappointing year for genre with only a few lights desperately twinkling out of the darkness. Even the likes of David Cronenberg's *Eastern Promises*, a perfectly solid, decent film, or the sporadic raw genius of David Lynch's *INLAND EMPIRE* felt just a little lacklustre. It's difficult to see where the market is heading – clearly there is still a huge interest in the blockbuster film but the ubiquity of CGI is increasingly looking like the Emperor's Not-So-New Clothes, a way of justifying budgets for films that really need better scripts. Ironically there is hope in two of this year's major, if heavily flawed, releases – *Beowulf* shows that new technology can be used to create something bizarre and yet still turn a profit while *Enchanted* shows that there is still merit in solid film-making and old school techniques. Maybe these will sow the seeds of a refreshed industry, striving to provide something new but in a way that acknowledges what worked in the past. Otherwise we're going to be stuck with *Shrek 17* and the next 5-hour *Pirates* movie. Now that is scary.

TV OF 2007

1: FALL OUT by Saxon Bullock

Your eyes are not deceiving you – *Vector* has acquired its own TV column. In an era where some of the best screen science fiction and fantasy is regularly to be found on television channels rather than the cinema screen, *Transmission*, *Interrupted* is aiming to be entertaining trawl through these sometimes bewildering waters, and one that'll hopefully throw light in some unexpected directions. I'll be your guide on these trips – Saxon Bullock, curiously monickered freelance writer, regular contributor to *SFX*, and irregular blogger with a habit of kicking the hell out of *Torchwood* at the drop of a hat.

The world of cult genre TV is one that I'll be exploring for as long as *Vector* is foolish enough to allow me, and I'll be looking at material from both sides of the Atlantic while – most important of all – I'll also be dealing heavily in spoilers, so anyone not wanting to have any major surprises blown should probably look away right now ...

But, before we advance forward into the future, it's time to look back at the twelve months of 2007, a time during which the science fiction and fantasy genres proved to once again be in robust health. They may go in peaks and troughs, but all throughout 2007, both genres have had their claws firmly into the TV zeitgeist, and show no signs of letting go. In a year of Weeping Angels, dinosaurs, unexpected flash-forwards, ageing pulp heroes getting seriously embarrassing makeovers and old-school Cylons, there was a ridiculous variety of highlights and lowlights to choose from, but if there's one thing 2007 will be remembered for, it'll be the spectacular rise (and abrupt fall) of *Heroes*.

Over the last twelve months, Tim Kring's comic-book inspired ensemble drama has gone from being the most promising newcomer of the US 2006-2007 TV season to the kind of global smash that it's alright for mainstream audiences to like. Of course, it's also managed to screw everything up in record time with an underperforming and frankly dull second season, but even if you look at the 2007 run of *Heroes*' first season (from episode 12 on), it's a blend of storytelling that's always had its problems. The show's biggest advantages are its well-thought out

and practical approach to *X-Men* style super powers, along with its fast, intertwined ensemble plot, and some of the most joyfully insane, 'what-the-hell-just-happened' cliffhangers under the sun. Unfortunately, this isn't always enough to disguise the major weaknesses, from the wheel-spinning plots (with the scene-stealing character Hiro spending massive sections of Season 1 running in circles), to the less impressive members of the cast, especially Ali Larter as angsty multiple-personality case Nikki, and the permanently gormless Milo Ventimiglia as power-sponge uber-hero Peter Petrelli.

When playing to its strengths, it was amazing how gripping the show could be, and even the creakier patches of episodes 12-16 could be forgiven when we were presented with crackerjack instalments like Episode 18: 'Company Man', where the ambiguous Horned-Rimmed Glasses-wearing Mr Bennet's past history was finally exposed, or the shameless pastiche of the *X-Men* storyline "Days of Future Past" in 'Five Years Gone', which also delivered one of the most pointed twists on the legacy of 9-11 that's yet been seen in a US mainstream show.

Unfortunately, it couldn't last – like *Babylon 5* before it, *Heroes* is marvelous at the build up but rarely good at

the pay-off. It might reward its audience with frequent revelations rather than *Lost*'s ever-expanding enigmas, but more often than not, the end result is an empty sugar rush, and a show that isn't anywhere near as deep or well-written as it thinks it is. The rambling last three episodes of Season 1 dropped the ball, leading to a finale that was both badly staged (one thing *Heroes* is in desperate need of is a decent action director) and massively disappointing – and yet, hard as it was to believe, things actually got worse in Season 2. Despite the engaging nature of Season 1's origin stories, *Heroes* only ever functioned once its plot arc built up momentum and things actually started happening – so why the production team thought that slowing Season 2's story to a crawl was a good idea frankly beggars the mind. Added to this, the show started hitting the reset



button like it was going out of style, recycling massive swathes of plot that we'd already seen (Claire clashing with her father, a mysterious killer offing the Heroes), and plunging into new realms of absurdity.

At the least, it seems like US audiences haven't swallowed it. The show plummeted to its lowest recorded ratings, reviews were bad, and even series creator Tim Kring came out and admitted that they'd messed up. However much we're promised a 'reboot' for "Volume Three", however, (a reboot now delayed by the Writer's Strike), it's hard not to think that *Heroes* is going to need serious help if it's not going to end up simply treading water and running in circles to try and recapture the fresh, comic-strip entertainment of its first eleven episodes.

One of the biggest symptoms of *Heroes*' success has, naturally, been the traditional "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" method by which a large proportion of the Autumn 2007 US Network pilots managed (by pure coincidence, of course) to revolve around the idea of ordinary

people suddenly having extraordinary powers thrust upon them. The highest-profile of these was the heavily hyped update of *Bionic Woman*, but giving this particular Seventies cheese-fest a coating of New *Galactica*-style grit didn't go as planned.

It didn't help that while Michelle Ryan did a commendable job in the lead role, she was blown off the screen every time *Galactica* star Katee Sackhoff turned up as psycho bionic woman Sarah Corvus. However, what really sunk the series and resulted in a massive ratings dip was its incredibly muddled approach. The dark and serious outlook which worked so well for *Galactica* doesn't play on what's essentially a goofy feminist fairy tale, and in the absence of any self-deprecating humour, we got an ungainly amalgam of other, far superior shows (most notably *Alias*), and a production team that seemed to change their mind every week as to what the show's tone should be. As with *Heroes*, a major reboot is rumoured once the Writers Strike is resolved – but with only eight below-par episodes under its belt, *Bionic Woman's* future is looking distinctly shaky.

More conventional in execution was *Journeyman*, with *Rome's* Kevin McKidd as a San Francisco journalist who suddenly finds himself bouncing across time to help people, a problem that plays merry havoc with his work and family life. Not quite the shameless *Quantum Leap* rip-off it appeared, *Journeyman* owed a far greater

debt to *Life on Mars* and *The Time Traveller's Wife*, with the deeply routine 'missions' McKidd carried out never carrying as much weight as the soapier yet weirdly engaging melodrama surrounding them. At times horribly sentimental and never escaping the feeling of nostalgia-laced televisual comfort food, the series did at least pull off some interesting and imaginative twists on the time travel theme (such as McKidd having to reverse-engineer the moment when he fell in love with his wife) but the lack of real inspiration meant the plug being pulled at episode 13 didn't surprise anyone.

Fluffier series like spy romp *Chuck* and the near-identical (but fantasy-based) *Reaper* did better at carving

out an audience, although while *Chuck's* mix of silly espionage and heartfelt melodrama coasted entertainingly along thanks to a fine cast, *Reaper's* Buffy-meets-Kevin-Smith vibe (a feeling increased by Smith directing the pilot) soon led to repetitive gags and diminished returns. For nostalgic *Angel* fans with an astoundingly low quality threshold, there was the hilariously



creaky vampire detective saga *Moonlight* (a show that's somehow escaped cancellation and built up an audience), but the finest drama of the new season came from *Wonderfalls* and *Dead Like Me* writer Bryan Fuller, who created a world so off-kilter and stylized it was like nothing else on television.

Mixing the Coen Brothers, *Amelie*, Terry Gilliam and Tim Burton, *Pushing Daisies* is a wonderfully bizarre blend, a forensic fairy tale about a piemaker (Lee Pace) with the ability to bring the dead back to life, and his subsequent team-up with a private detective to quiz murder victims about how they were killed. It's even built in a well-constructed example of the traditional 'love story that can never be consummated' between Pace and Anna Friel, the childhood sweetheart he resurrected but now can't touch without killing her again, and for good. What's most remarkable about the show, however, is the way in which its fast-paced, hyper-stylised and fluffy exterior acts as a cunning disguise for a tremendously dark and tragic story all about death, unrequited love, loneliness and abandonment. Without the fast-paced humour and the atmosphere of cute playfulness, it'd be almost too painful to watch, and while the sweetness level occasionally verges into diabetes-inducing levels, the first nine episodes of *Pushing Daisies* have been masterful stuff – so hopefully the Writer's Strike-enforced hiatus won't prevent the show from at least getting to run out

it's initial 22-episode season order.

Elsewhere on the US airwaves, HBO once again flirted with the world of genre with *John From Cincinnati*, a truly offbeat mix of fantasy and drama overseen by *Deadwood* creator David Milch, which asked the question, "what would happen if an official, true-blue Messiah turned up in a South California surfing community?" The kind of drama that tetered on the razors edge between absorbing and frustrating, *John From Cincinnati* was too self-consciously bizarre and rambling to ever stand a chance of getting beyond its first ten episodes. And yet, for those patient enough to stick with pacing that made HBO's legendarily slow *Carnivalé* seem like an action movie, there were fantastic performances, some rich, memorable dialogue, and some of 2007's most bizarre and transcendent TV moments.

While *John From Cincinnati* reached a premature end, the inexplicably long-lived *Stargate SG-1* also finally came to a halt at its tenth season, although its spin-off *Stargate Atlantis* shows no sign of running out of fanbase-driven momentum anytime soon. Both shows aired on the Sci-Fi channel, whose output varies massively from brilliant to near-unwatchable – and while the channel's December mini-series *Tin Man* was a fitfully watchable but heavily flawed dark fantasy take on *The Wizard of Oz* (a take which somehow failed to feel as nightmarish or transgressive as 1984's surreal film sequel *Return to Oz*), Sci-Fi really pulled out all the stops with its other re-invention of 2007, delivering possibly the worst piece of science fiction television to hit the screen in years.

It takes a certain talent to drain every ounce of pulp energy and style from a concept like Alex Raymond's comic strip hero Flash Gordon – and considering how ingrained in the world of cult movies the ferociously camp 1980 version (and its accompanying Queen soundtrack) has now become, any TV show was going to have to try hard to compete. As it turns out, however, the producers of the Sci-Fi channel's *Flash Gordon* didn't even want to try, instead stripping out the rocket ships and the idea of Flash being stranded on an alien planet (the whole *raison d'être* of the original's pulp flavour) and substituting a *Smallville*-style set up, and a version of the planet Mongo that redefines the word drab. Cheap and nasty in the worst possible way, with a bland Ming, a henchman gliding around on casters, 'Hawkmen' running around in flappy cloaks, and execution-by-disco-lighting, the show doesn't even qualify as a 'so bad it's good' entertainment, instead showing exactly how low the quality threshold can go if people put some effort into being truly dreadful.

In comparison to this televisual agony, even the weaker moments of *Battlestar Galactica's* third season on Sci-Fi were near-genius, but despite some fine moments, the show that was once the Great White Hope of SF TV is still showing some dangerous wobbles. The third season never seemed to recover from blowing most of its budget on the (admittedly spectacular) New Caprica storyline, and followed its 2006 run of impressive but heavily flawed episodes with yet another late-season slump, serving up some of the least interesting material they've yet explored. From the eternal boredom of

the Kara/Lee/Anders/Dualla Love Quadrangle to the dreary medical drama of 'The Woman King' to the teeth-grindingly awful sequences featuring Adama's imaginary chats with his ex-wife, the lion's share of *Galactica's* 2007 run was shockingly dull stuff, taking the downbeat atmosphere of the show and applying a sledgehammer, until even dedicated viewers couldn't help but wonder what the frak was going on.

Galactica's Executive Producer Ronald D. Moore is refreshingly open and honest on the show's podcast commentaries when it comes to episodes that didn't work, and it's been long known that the show really needs a wider canvas to function properly, with either heavily stranded standalones as in Season 1, or the full-scale serial that paid such fantastic dividends for the first seven episodes of Season 2. Nevertheless, a parade of bad decisions and unexpected rewrites hobbled most of episodes 11-20 of Season 3, with an entire subplot concerning the Sagittarons (the seeds of which were laid in 'The Woman King') that was supposed to impact on the finale being unceremoniously dumped, and other plotlines (such as the handling of the original Cylon



version of Boomer) showing little of the thought and character that made the first two years of the show such a treat to watch.

Even the 'death' of Starbuck came as something of a relief, in that it actually meant significant traction in the plot, but thankfully the show managed a small recovery towards its finale. The class warfare and labour disputes in 'Dirty Hands' were far from perfect in their execution, but the episode harked back to the first season's brief of taking realistic looks at the kind of problems you don't normally see in SF shows. Then, while the 'Trial of Baltar' thread never escaped feeling desperately talky and theatrical, the monologue from Lee Adama in "Crossroads – Part 2" still managed to be one of the finest moments of the show, addressing themes that had been ignored for most of the season, and reviving the

'anything-can-happen' feeling that *Galactica* has at its best. On top of that, we also had the reveal of four of the Final Five Cylons, a Jimi Hendrix-driven plot twist that may have divided the audience between whether it was genius or heinous nonsense, but certainly earned Moore a salute for sheer, barmy audacity.

The lack of Cylon-mashing action in Season 3 was slightly made up for by November's 90 minute special 'Razor', which packed in plenty of old-school adventure, spectacular special effects and effective character moments. Given that this was the most purely entertaining *Galactica* had been in a long time, 'Razor' was almost fast and energetic enough to make up for the fact that the much-vaunted flashbacks to Admiral Cain's time on the Pegasus didn't really tell us more than what we already knew. The kind of fill-in-the-blanks storytelling that sometimes blights *Lost*, it brought back some good memories of the pacier second season (as well as giving nostalgia freaks a chance to goggle in joy at Seventies-style Cylon fighters and centurions), but Ronald D. Moore and his writers are going to have to pull out something devastating for the fourth season if *Galactica* is going to shake itself out of what feels like a downward curve.

Speaking of *Lost*, the show that's never quite been forgiven for being what it essentially advertised itself as – an ever-expanding, character-led mystery on an enigmatic island – also finished its third season in 2007. It's interesting to contrast the reaction to the show's evolution and the support it's receiving from the ABC network with the similar ABC show *Twin Peaks*, where the creative team bowed to pressure to solve what was supposed to be an ever-evolving murder mystery (which, if co-creator David Lynch had his way, would never have been solved), and arguably killed the show in the process. *Lost*'s sluggish and gloomy second season resulted in the departure of a lot of viewers, not without good reason, and Season 3 didn't exactly get off to the best start, with a 'mini-season' of six episodes that focused too strongly on the Jack-Kate-Sawyer love triangle. Even the opening of the 2007 run was weak and badly focused – and yet, from episode 10 onwards, the show began to get its mojo back, remembering it was allowed to be entertaining as well as crammed to the brim with angst, and whirled through plots which could potentially have stretched for the entire season in a paltry handful of weeks.

The quality rollercoaster was still in play (especially in the misfiring fourteenth episode 'Expose'), and the show has all but given up on trying to present the castaway's life on the island as remotely realistic, but there was also a sense of momentum and progress, and an absence of easy reset buttons. Even previously dull storylines like the long-running saga of Sun and Jin's unexpected pregnancy were suddenly feeding back into the main plotline in a way that harked back to the smart interconnections of the first season, and it all built up to a finale that was dangerously close to the best the show has ever been.

'Through the Looking Glass' was thrilling, violent and pitched *Lost* in some surprising directions, as well as pulling one of the most genuinely mind-warping twists of the year in the form of the flashback-that-turns-

out-to-be-a-flashforward, showing that Jack's desire to get off the Island is going to have major and negative repercussions. With the end-point of the show officially declared (in 48 episodes time), it only remains to be seen what the production team can pull off in the interim, but regaining the popularity of the first season seems very unlikely. A mystery like *Lost* was almost doomed to be a cult, rather than an all-out smash, with a structure that can only really lose viewers in the long run, and it's also hard to tell exactly what effect the twist in 'Through the Looking Glass' will have on the show (although it's alleged new episodes will mix flashbacks with flash-forwards). However, for now, *Lost* has pulled another major "what the hell just happened?" moment, and when at its best, it's reaching the kind of quality levels that *Heroes* can only dream of.

Meanwhile, despite all the effort from the US shows, if 2007 belonged to any other series on this side of the Atlantic, it was *Doctor Who*. In UK television, the influence of New *Who* can be felt everywhere – from BBC spin-off series *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, which managed the not-at-all-difficult task of being better than *Torchwood* (even if it never quite balanced the emotive storytelling with its action), to ITV's silly but rather entertaining Saturday-night dinosaur romp *Primeval* (the first major genre success from the network for a very long time). After a first season climax that came out firmly in favour of time travel, *Life on Mars*' finale did a virtual U-turn into more mystical, ambiguous territory, but still managed to maintain a sense of surreal freedom and adventurousness in what could easily have been a flat Seventies pastiche. Even *Jekyll*, from New *Who* writer Steven Moffatt, felt like the kind of genre-hopping, daring drama that would have been impossible to imagine happening five years ago, and despite some major issues (wild tonal shifts, improbable American accents) found new angles and twists in some very familiar material, as well as showcasing Moffatt's knack for adventurous story structures.

Who still ruled the roost, however, even if the show itself is still capable of suddenly veering from awesome highs to spectacular lows – and nothing showcased this quite as well as the return of the Master. For five minutes, at the end of 'Utopia', Derek Jacobi brought the Master to life and provided one of the finest 'geek' moments of the entire series, as well as the joyful feeling that – as with the Daleks in Season 1 – the production team were actually getting the character *right*. Of course, it only took seven days to go from one of the show's finest moments, to a cackling and gurning John Simm leaping around like an over-hip geography teacher, and deciding that dance track "Voodoo Child" by Rogue Traders would be a great soundtrack for the end of the world.

Painfully disappointing doesn't even cover it, but while Season 3 has arguably had more extreme highs and lows than previous seasons – the biggest culprit being the dull runaround that was the Dalek 2-parter, which answered the rarely asked question "Is a man with a prosthetic squid on his head scarier than a Dalek?" with a resounding "No" – when it peaked, it was arguably the strongest material the show has ever seen in its forty-four year history.

Top of the list were episodes 8, 9 and 10. Paul Cornell's two-parter 'Human Nature/The Family of Blood') adapted his earlier *Who* novel into a tale that perfectly matched the emotion-based storytelling of New *Who* with the 'anything-can-happen' ethos of the traditional series, while also bringing the horrors of World War One to a timeslot that's usually reserved for embarrassing talent shows. This was immediately followed by Steven Moffatt's 'Blink', a dazzlingly constructed standalone story that flushed away all memories of the previous Doctor-lite episode 'Love and Monsters', being simultaneously smart, sexy and genuinely terrifying. A pilot episode for the finest *Who* spin-off we never had (and featuring possibly the greatest ever one-off companion in Carey Mulligan's Sally Sparrow), it's also one of the episodes this year that marked a small shift away from the slightly heightened reality that New *Who* often deals in. Unlike most of its predecessors (and virtually all of *Torchwood*), it was actually possible to believe that the characters in 'Human Nature/Family of Blood' and 'Blink' were real people, and it felt for the first time like the show was actually prepared to treat its audience like grown-ups, balancing the scares, fun and adventure with wit and intelligence, and not feeling the need to play to the cheap seats with weak slapstick.

Of course, it turns out we were only a couple of weeks away from yet another "Dimensional Rip opens up and billions of CGI monsters pour out" finale, along with an almost painfully unwatchable sequence that turned the Doctor (who'd already been transformed into a CGI House Elf) into a mythical amalgam of Jesus and Tinkerbell. It's very easy to criticise the weaknesses in Russell T. Davies' writing (especially the way that almost all of his villains end up sounding like bad boy character Stuart Jones from Davies' *Queer as Folk*), and yet it also has to be admitted that a massive proportion of New *Who*'s success is down to various decisions that he made – but the question has to be, "What now?"

Davies has already stated that Season 3 was, in his opinion "too dark", and the decision to bring Catherine Tate's Donna back for a frankly unwelcome 13-week run as a companion suggests we're in for less angst and more happy-go-lucky romps. And yet, the blockbuster approach to *Who* episodes is already starting to get repetitive, and over the last three years, the bigger, more OTT stories have usually turned out to be the disappointments. It's the darker, quieter stories like 'The Empty Child', 'The Girl in the Fireplace', and 'Human Nature' that people will be talking about in ten years time. Yes, it can be argued that you need the blockbusters to grab the audiences so they'll stick for the quieter episodes, but it doesn't suggest what Davies is going to do when he runs out of recognisable London landmarks to blow up, or when even the casual viewers start thinking: "Oh, god – not another semi-industrial spaceship that conveniently looks just like a Power Station"?

The decision to put the show on hold for a year, with three 'specials' in 2009, might make sense from the perspective of keeping Davies and Tennant (who's unconfirmed past Season 4) onboard, but the one thing that kept *Doctor Who* alive for so long was its capacity

for change, and the fact that the show simply had to go on. The main reason its popularity dwindled in the Eighties was that the production team got locked into a specific idea of what *Doctor Who* was, and didn't try to significantly change it. Now that it's back, and such an important part of the BBC schedules, there's a different kind of fear involved – nobody wants to be the one who killed the goose that lays the golden eggs, and with Davies arguably having the biggest profile of any creative influence in the show's history (at the moment, he's almost at the same level of indispensable association with *Who*'s success that Tom Baker reached), it looks like the BBC will do everything within their power to keep *Who* the way it is.

In many ways this is a good thing – even after four years, Davies still has a huge passion for the series, and is arguably one of its finest salesmen – but it's now inarguable that the man with the most control over the show (and averaging five episodes a season) delivers some of the weakest writing, and his desire for big, tabloid-style ideas is also being combined with a dangerously perfunctory "that'll do" attitude to storytelling. New *Who* has already started to self-consume and develop a sense of sameness, an aspect full in force during the throwaway Christmas 2007 special 'Voyage of the Damned', which spent so long pastiching *The Poseidon Adventure* that it forgot to include anything truly memorable (beyond some utterly hilarious Michael Bay-style slow-motion). The top-tier villains have all been done (with only Davros due for a rumoured and probably unavoidable comeback), and while the best episodes are forging a new identity for the show, too much of New *Who* is simply refining and improving what Davies laid down in 2005.

For the moment, *Who*'s future has never been safer, and it's arguable that SF TV has reached a point where it's certainly more popular and accepted than it has been in years – but it would be wise for New *Who*, and for the rest of the SF TV firmament, not to rest on their laurels. It's the capacity for change, for invention, and for sheer, out-of-nowhere wonder that keeps the genre going – and the minute you start taking your audience for granted, that's when the downward slide begins. There's no substitute for imagination, and whether the genre continues its climb in 2008 or does an almighty bellyflop, it'll be the level of imagination that'll decide where the next must-see SF TV will come from.

LOGIC & LOVING BOOKS

IN CONVERSATION: Laurie J Marks & Kelly Link

Kelly Link is the author of two short story collections, Stranger Things Happen (2001) and Magic for Beginners (2005), the latter of which appeared for the first time in the UK earlier this year. Stories in the collections have won the Hugo, Nebula, World Fantasy, and James Tiptree Jr Awards. With her husband, Gavin J. Grant, Link manages the small publishing company Small Beer Press, and edits the fantasy half of The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror for St Martin's Press. Laurie J. Marks has published eight novels, including the "Children of the Triad" series comprising Delan the Mismaid (1989), The Moonbane Mage (1990) and Ara's Field (1991). The first book in her current "Elemental Logic" series, Fire Logic, appeared in 2002 and won the Spectrum Award, while the third and most recent, Water Logic, appeared earlier this year from Small Beer Press. This conversation was recorded at Wiscon 31, where both Link and Marks were Guests of Honor, in May 2007, and transcribed by Niall Harrison.

LAURIE J MARKS: Would you care to tell people how it happened that you ended up being the editor of my book when a year ago we hardly knew one another?

KELLY LINK: Sure. I knew Laurie's "Elemental Logic" series as a reader. I'd really loved the first two books, and we had talked to Laurie at some point about how much we loved the books. We knew there had been a holdup in bringing the third book out, and wanted her to realise that we would love to publish the books, but we may have said it in such a way that it sounded as if we were merely being polite. Although publishers are never polite about that — when they offer to buy a book, they mean it. But there came a point where Laurie got back in touch with Gavin, and we realised the book might end up published without us being as involved as we wanted to be, so we reiterated our keen interest in publishing the book. And we published it. As the editor of the book, I would like to hear a bit more about the process of writing a series, and also how you feel that this series is different from the kind of novel you were writing before. What sort of progression is it?

LM: First of all I didn't want to write a series. I think that's because I did write a series before, and I discovered by the second book that the world that was perfectly adequate for one story was not adequate for two. And I didn't want to be like everybody else, writing a series. So I set out to write *Fire Logic* to stand all by itself.

KL: Which it does.

LM: Sort of. And that's because even when I had a

publisher for it I still wasn't planning on writing a series. But as I worked on *Fire Logic* for what seemed like forever — it was only five years, but that's a long time to work on one thing — I gradually figured out what elemental logic was, and it did start to seem pre-ordained that in fact there would be four books. As soon as I thought I was finished with *Fire Logic*, *Earth Logic* popped up in my head, inadvertently. There it was! And the same thing happened when I was finished with *Earth Logic*, which I also intended to be The End. There had to be four.

KL: Maybe I can describe the series a bit, and then you can redescribe it since you probably know it better than I do. But one of the great things about editing books is that you are still reading as a reader, but you also are reading much more closely. As you go through a book a second or third time, you are thinking about coherence and connections that the writer is making. You're in this privileged position that I'm sure most readers would love to be in — not only do you get to see the book before anyone else does, but you get to ask questions of the writer. So, the series. It's fantasy, but it has extremely complicated community dynamics of a kind you don't always see in fantasy narratives. It's not a quest story, although there are elements of a quest. But the novels are really about people having to work together to solve problems — and when I say that it sounds as though these books might not have the large-scale exciting things that people want when they read for pleasure, and yet they're incredibly pleasurable books in those ways as well. Part of that fact comes from the way the characters are involved in conversations — one of the things you don't see often enough in genre fiction, I think, are the sort of pleasurable conversations where people are helping each other solve problems, and moving the narrative forward by talking as well as by doing. Kim Stanley Robinson does it, you do it, Laurie, a few others, and it's a very satisfying kind of read. In the novels, as you can gather from the titles, there are different kinds of "logic", and there are characters who possess certain powers associated with each kind of logic — which again sounds like it's a familiar trope, but it also involves ways of thinking as well as ways of doing. I'd like to hear you describe the books, Laurie, and see how your description varies.

LM: I've been asked to do this a few times, and I truly can't. It must be the dilemma of being the person who's really on the inside of the series, that with every attempt I make to explain what happens or what it is, I immediately start floundering in uncertainty. Whatever I say can't possibly be true because there's so many things

I'm not saying. I also feel that in order to talk about one of my books I really have to tell the whole book, and I've already written it ... so, really, you should all just read it. Is the series defiant of summary? Maybe on one level. People rescue each other, from all kinds of things — there's a summary.

KL: Over the course of the series, events in the real world have started to mirror some of the events in the books. At least that's how it seems to me as a reader. When you've read a book that matters to you a great deal, you interpret the things that are going on in the real world in ways that begin to make connections with what you've read. For example, I will mangle the pronunciation, but the Cyanites are people who have come into a country that is not their own country — they have been forced out of their own country — and they take over the place they arrive in. They kill many of the people, they make demands, they build garrisons. And the people being taken over begin to fight back. You can see the parallels.

LM: It has certain appearances of being good-versus-evil, and then somewhere in the middle it stops being that. I think the distinctions start to become ... indistinct. And that's one of the big enlightenments that came to me — the way these things usually happen, the characters figure it out and then I catch on. So when one of the characters was looking around at the good guys and wondering, "What's the difference between us and the bad guys?" and not being able to find any difference, I was like, okay! Yes!

KL: You've said that one of the places the book came from was looking at countries where the invaded people begin to resist and assimilate, and come to terms or not, with being invaded, and with living with another culture.

LM: And I think I was writing against my own romance of resistance movements, and how fantastic they are, because they're full of heroes who are fighting for the just cause, of course! And of course I imagine myself as one of those people — or did imagine myself like that in college — but as I acquired more information about the world I started to think, "Well ..." Historically speaking, the biggest acts done for the best of reasons have still had extremely bad unintended consequences. My other choice in writing these books was to examine a sense of paralysis — anything we do is going to make the world worse, so we should all go and live on an island. But then of course we'd probably blow each other up. In a lot of ways these books are working through the problem of human violence, and even more importantly, our human tendency to believe that we're right. Whether or not you're right, that can be a dangerous belief.

KL: And yet your books also provide the things the best genre fantasy provide for me as a reader and an editor. In the last decade or so I've grown tired of a lot of other traditional fantasies, because they do not seem to me to represent the complexities of the real world, and yet I still really want those narratives, the kinds of

interactions and stories that you get in a fantasy novel. And that's why I love your books so much.

LM: Can we talk about you now, please?

KL: Oh, for a little while.

LM: I've noticed about Kelly that she doesn't like talking about herself — you'd rather talk about books, right?

KL: Yes.

LM: But if it's your books, is that OK?

KL: Well, we can try ...

LM: I heard a rumour that maybe you have another collection coming out ...?

KL: Yes, I have a collection coming out next year. Sharyn November's the editor, so it'll be under the Penguin family of books, and it will be a collection of young adult stories. There will be two stories from *Magic for Beginners*, and one from *Stranger Things Happen*, and the others will be stories that have come out in the last couple of years, mostly in YA anthologies. And I will write one new story.

LM: When I was injured and ended up having to spend many tedious weeks first in the acute ward of the hospital and then in a rehab hospital — which I almost immediately started calling "prison" — people sent me things that were often incredibly insightful. One of the things you sent me was a box of young adult books, which turned out to be the only thing I could read. What is it about YA? For one thing, I don't think of your stories as being young adult stories, because I read them exactly the same as any other stories I read. So what is it about that particular group of readers that you like?

KL: There are a couple of ways I should approach that. One thing is that a YA story is just a story that a young adult will read and like. Or — and I'm cribbing from Sharyn November here — YA is a story in which the protagonist is either in their teens and experiencing things for the first time, or sometimes, and especially in fantasy novels, is an older person who is again experiencing something brand-new to them. It might be a secret power they discover, or a responsibility ... they're usually stories about people who are moving from one sphere into another sphere. I find that a pretty useful description. And then, fairly recently, I saw a panel which had a number of young adult writers and editors on it, and someone asked — what isn't YA? What can't you do? They looked at each other and eventually said, "You can't be boring, and no bestiality." So YA is a very broad category.

LM: I'm writing YA!

KL: I do think that if I'd read your books as a teenager I would have loved them, because there are characters who are moving from one sphere to another, and who

have to solve problems that are new to them. The other way of approaching this whole question is that as well as reading Tolkien, and CS Lewis, which were read to me by my parents, when I was old enough to read for myself the books that I was really drawn towards were young adult anthologies — things like EE Nesbitt's ghost stories. When I went back and looked at the children's section of the bookstore in my twenties, I started thinking about that again, and it seemed to me that the model I want for myself — I don't write like her, but the career model I aspire towards — is Joan Aiken's. She moved back and forth between categories, short work to long work, adult to picture book to young adult.

LM: I'm thinking about your stories. Those that do remain very vivid to me are those that have young people who are floundering around. I think I must find that particularly appealing because I feel that's what I'm doing — the floundering — but the experience of reading your stories, the disorientation, the struggle to make it make sense, which is sometimes both pleasant and a little frustrating, is forcing me into this mindset of a teenager. It doesn't make sense. Random things happen.

KL: Maybe, again, this is partly because of these things I read and loved as a child — I didn't understand all of it. I would digest the parts that were accessible to me at one point, and then I would mull over the stuff that I didn't understand. Or if it didn't seem interesting I'd dismiss it, but keep what I enjoyed from the work.

LM: So would someone have said you were reading things that were too old for you? "You can't read that book!"

KL: When you first begin to read, unless you are a very different kind of reader than I think most people here probably are, you read books in which you don't know all the vocabulary. So you begin to learn words because of the cluster in which they appear, you discover concepts you don't understand, but as you continue to read you pick them up.

LM: Lots of examples. This is the new thing I've learned about teaching this year — give kids lots of examples, and they'll figure it out. And you and I have very similar parents. My parents also read to me, for instance. In fact for my parents it was a requirement, you had to sit there and listen to what was being read, and it almost always was a fantasy story. I don't know why — I'd have to ask my mother, and she's not here, although your mother is and I'm very jealous. My father loved science fiction. As I recall, the first science fiction writer I read was Edgar Rice Burroughs. But I also read *The Three Musketeers* — there are three volumes about the musketeers, by the way, and I have read all of them, including all the sex that they take out of the popularised versions of the story. And this was when I had no idea what sex was, and I had no idea what the characters were so worked up about ...

KL: Talking about parents — my mom is here, but I

should say my dad and my stepmom are also here, so possibly they know more about this period in my life than I do. But one of the things I do remember is when the miniseries of *Roots* was going to be on the television, my mom said that if I wanted to watch it I should read the book first. Or she at least gave me the book so that I would appreciate it more. That was a great thing to do.

LM: I'm sure your mother had learned by that point that if she gave you a book you would read it.

KL: We would go see friends and I would pick through their libraries when I ran out of things to read. I don't know about you, but it didn't matter to me whether books were good or bad. I had other criteria. When I've gone back and read some of the books I really loved as a kid, some of them suck, and some of them are terrific, and there are the really interesting ones where I assumed they would suck, but in actual fact they have a certain amount of vigour, and life to them still.

LM: I read *Jane Eyre* when I was nine, maybe, and loved it, and I still love it to this day — but for totally different reasons. Whereas *The Chronicles of Narnia* were also really important to me, and now I find them sort of tiresome. I keep wanting different things from the world. Some books are so large and complicated that they can continue to give you new things, and some books just aren't.

KL: I need to go back. I love Narnia, I've read those books over and over again. I taught last Spring, and it was a very basic low-level English course, writing and reading, and I could make up the syllabus, and the first book that I put on the syllabus was *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. One of the things I still love about it is how much space he leaves for the reader. It's a very spare book in some ways — the thing that he spends the most time describing is meals. He will say that there's a battle, but there's not a lot of description of it. He lays out certain really beautiful scenes that stick with me. Howard Waldrop has an exercise where he asks writers to write down the scene that sticks with them from childhood, the essential thing they remember. What I wrote down a couple of years ago, and still think about once in a while, is the snow queen's sleigh, and the sound of the bells, and that landscape.

LM: As you talk about it, the entire image is coming into my head, and I know that's an image that's very old indeed. And certainly those books have a great power. The back of the wardrobe as an entrance to some surprising unexpected place ... I've always loved the backs of closets. I didn't know what a wardrobe was, I'd never seen one although I'd figured out that you hung clothes in it, but the backs of closets and me.

KL: And the sight of a row of heavy coats, you feel you could put your hand through them and feel your way into a forest.

LM: We love the same books, Kelly.

KL: One of the other things that we've talked about recently is working methods. I'm a short story writer — I like to read novels but I don't write them. And one of the things you say about your working method is one of the things that horrifies me most about the idea of writing a novel, which is that you say that you write in order to throw things away.

LM: It's all about getting to the second draft.

KL: Could you talk about that a little? In such a way that I will feel more comfortable with it and less horrified?

LM: What is horrifying about it — other than that on the surface it looks like wasted effort? Or is that it?

KL: I find writing difficult enough to start with. The idea that you are writing with the knowledge that none of that, or almost none of that, will be in what you end up with is worrying. It seems to me that it would take ten years to write a novel, and you know, in ten years I can write ten short stories.

LM: Surely more than ten.

KL: In some decades.

LM: Well, if you would give up all that other stuff you're doing, like running a business and teaching courses and travelling all over the world ... all of which I wish I could do. But what I can do is throw things away. I used to be very good at it but now I'm only good at it with my writing. I think I'm able to do it because that's the habit I formed when I started writing. I was young, I didn't know what was worth keeping — I wasn't even thinking in that way — so I would write something and think, "Oh, that's kind of cool, but if I do something else I could make it even cooler." And the doing something else would change things so much that I'd have to totally redo the whole story. And that, actually, is a definition of the difference between revising and editing that really makes sense to me. When you're editing, it only affects the particular piece you're working on, but when you're revising, if you change something it changes everything. I know there are some people in the world who can begin a project with the whole thing in their head, but my head won't hold those kind of things. So I write things down, and when they're written down it makes them real to me and I can see what I could do next. When I say I write things and throw them away, that's really a shorthand — I write things so that I can see what it is I want to do. And then I can do it. With that knowledge in mind, and knowing that I'm writing 500 page manuscripts, it's clear that I would never finish anything if I wrote slowly and threw it all away, so I write really fast. I'm that way because I don't have to worry about it — why would I worry about something I'm going to throw away? It's very freeing, and since a first draft is really hard, why make it harder by adding worry?

KL: That sounds much more attractive, writing in order to get to where you want. I have that problem, and I solve it

by not writing until I force myself to think for a while.

LM: I know a lot of writers, students, professionals, who find writing so hard that they don't do it or can't make themselves do it, and I think it's mostly because they're trying to go from nothing to a finished product in one magical moment. Like going from a clean kitchen to a baked cake in one move. That metaphor falls apart fairly quickly because you don't throw away the ingredients to get to the cake, but still. You don't want to waste your effort, but if your choice is to not write at all or write in a wasteful way, the wasteful way starts looking not totally insane. Here's another metaphor: walking on rocks across a river. Once you've stepped on the rock and have left it behind, that doesn't make that rock irrelevant. You couldn't have reached the next rock without it. I try to think of my manuscript drafts in that way — not trash, but the thing I step on to get to the next thing. And I don't actually throw them away, they just sit there. These are not small piles, I'm talking feet.

KL: How many feet, for a novel like *Water Logic*? Five feet? Eight?

LM: It depends on the novel. For *Water Logic*, since I had to suddenly finish it, it didn't have the time to acquire quite as much paper. So the *Water Logic* pile is probably only about three feet tall. It used to be that I was printing copies of all my manuscripts for people in my writer's group, and then I would get them back with comments — it's amazing how quickly that makes your pile grow.

KL: Let's talk a bit about workshops. I think both of us are quite dependent on community, on reading other writers and having other writers read our work.

LM: So tell me about your group.

KL: This has been a bad year for writing, although a great year for other things. But in a good year I meet up with a writer named Holly Black, we sit in a cafe for as many hours as we can, she works on something and I work on something at the same time, we sit across from each other.

LM: That is one of the coolest things I've ever heard. Why do you do it?

KL: Well, it works. I used to do it in Brooklyn with Shelley Jackson. I think the first time I tried it I was in California, and Karen Joy Fowler and Stan Robinson had been doing this for a while, meeting to work in the same space. I was surprised, because I thought that writers were supposed to isolate themselves. Part of it is just the feeling that someone else is working really hard, and you will look bad if you're not working hard as well. But it's also very companionable. Even the mildly competitive feeling is companionable. And then, when I get stuck in something, I can talk about it — again, there's this myth that you don't talk about something before it's finished. But Holly and I, although we're interested in the same kinds of things we don't write much like each other, and we don't necessarily think

the same way. So if I describe the thing I can't quite articulate sometimes she can put her finger on it, and say it back to me in a way that's different enough that I can see how to tackle it, and I hope I do the same thing for her. And I think workshopping does that but with a larger number of people — when I can I also workshop with Delia Sherman and Ellen Kushner.

LM: Your cafe-writing sounds similar to what happens in my writer's group, which has four people in it.

KL: And I've been to John Kessel's workshop, Sycamore Hill. And in some ways it helps me feel that this is what I'm working towards, because these are some of the writers I love to read the most, I want to hear what it is that I'm not doing, I want to hear what they have to say. And I want a chance to talk about other peoples' work too.

LM: I'm monogamous with my writer's group. But we've been together for eleven years, which is kind of amazing. I have felt as though I couldn't possibly have learned to write without them. Even though I had published several books before I met them, I feel like I didn't really start learning to write until then. It wasn't just me throwing things away any more, it was me showing these things to these people and then throwing away. They could tell me what I was doing, right away, and help me to imagine what I could be doing. As you said, diversity helps, that we are different people and writing very different things.

KL: It's that thing people say about science fiction, which is a small enough field that for many decades now it has been in some ways a conversation between writers. Writers respond to others' work with their own work. Before I realised that you were in the same group, I had read Rosemary Kirstein's books and loved them — and you're different writers, but when I read your books I saw certain similarities in the way you thought and approached some things.

LM: This is the measure of an incredibly good reader, that you can pick that up. What was it? I'm curious.

KL: I think that it was the approach towards problem-solving, and the attention to language. You're both writing novels that are in some ways very deeply immersed in traditional genre forms, but you're doing new things in those genres.

LM: I can see that. Rosemary is one of my favourite writers, and has become more so because I understand her work much more deeply because I read it repeatedly. Every time I read it I have to say something about it — I suppose this is the editor's experience, reading to respond. You seem to like that.

KL: One of the wonderful things about editing books is that I'm fairly sure my work changes depending on the work that I've been editing. So I haven't been writing, but when I begin to write there will be trace elements of the things that stuck out towards me in other work,

things I got stuck on. They will change the way that I write.

LM: I'm thinking about my relationship with Rosemary more, and I think it has been a very fertile relationship for me, because in some ways she and I are both analytical writers. Even though she is writing science fiction and I am not, I began loving science partly because of my experience of reading her books about people who love science. So I think her work has changed the way I'm living, and of course the way you live feeds into the way you write.

KL: I think of it as certain kinds of work you read change the way you see for a while. Gavin always talks about the effect of reading Stan Robinson's work, and how you begin to see the world differently for a while, the way Stan's characters see it. I think perhaps writers are especially susceptible to this, and that it comes out when you work as well. Anyway ... you have a novel that you're thinking about writing, am I right? Called *The Cunning Man*? Which I would love to read.

LM: I would love to read it too! I'm working on *Air Logic*, and also on *The Cunning Man*, and on a textbook, and I'm teaching a lot, and the problem I have with my life is obvious: there's not enough life for the stuff. How about you? I suspect you have the same problem.

KL: Yes. I haven't had a lot of time for writing in about a year and a half now, but I feel that I hit a point, maybe two years ago, where it seemed to me the kinds of stories I write and the kinds of models for stories that I started out with, which were not terribly conventional models, started to feel too much like a safety net. I think the danger, especially working in unconventional forms, is that the lack of variation becomes more apparent the more you write. And this is a thing I don't think people hear when they start to write, which is the better you get at doing certain kinds of things, the faster you have to give things up, or the work begins to lose energy. You start reaching for things because you know how to do them rather than because they're essential. So what I decided was that I would try to learn how to use more conventional tools to figure out the stuff I had skipped the first time around — because I couldn't figure it out first time around. Like worldbuilding. If I'd known that I was meant to be worldbuilding ... Holly Black said that she learnt everything she needed to know about writing from playing D&D, but I never played D&D. So I thought that by going backwards for a bit I would find new things to do.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

EDITED by Paul Billinger

Daniel Abraham – *The Long Price*
Orbit, London, 2007, 593pp, £12.99, t/p, ISBN
978-1841496115
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

This sprawling fantasy takes the reader to a world where the great City States of the Khaiem are upheld by the supernatural powers of the entities known as *andat*, best described as ideas or thoughts in material form. Human in appearance, the *andat* are brought into being by Poets, scholars who have trained for years for the task of mastering and holding these uncanny beings. They are not only the means by which the Khaiem has grown wealthy and powerful, but are also the Cities' defence against other enemy nations. Drawn from the surplus younger sons of the ruling Houses of the *utkhaiem* or nobility, boys who would otherwise be assassinated by their elder brothers and political rivals are sent away to school to begin their training. From childhood they suffer an exceptionally harsh regime for the chance to be chosen to study the secrets of the *andat* and attain the rank of Poet. Most of those who fail take the brand that shows they have relinquished any claim to be the ruler of their House, thus avoiding assassination, and make their own way in the world; some of them fail and die. Two boys meet at the school. One, Otah, revolted by the cruelty of the training chooses to leave, unprotected by the brand that would prevent his brothers tracking him down and killing him, yet his kindness to the other boy, Maati, will ensure that their destinies while very different will remain entwined.

Originally published in two separate volumes, the first part of this book, 'A Shadow in Summer,' takes place in the City of Seraykhet. Grown wealthy through trade, its prosperity assured by the *andat*, the City is yet vulnerable to the machinations of those who would destroy its wealth and power. Meeting again as young men, Otah, now a labourer, having kept his true identity hidden, and Maati, now training under Seraykhet's Poet, become involved against their will in the plots of Seraykhet's enemies. In the second part of the book 'A Betrayal in Winter', years have passed and the action has moved to the northern City of Machi, Otah's birthplace and where his remaining brothers must kill each other if one is to succeed to the throne. Once again Otah and Maati meet, and are forced to play a part in the underhand politics of their world. Discovering the plots within plots that could destroy the basis of the Khaiem's power, Otah comes to realise that he will never be able to escape his past.

This is a refreshingly different novel, with a particularly well-developed sense of place. The *andat*,

both like and unlike their human masters, summoned into being and enslaved, always struggling to escape their enslavement by seeking freedom in 'unbeing', are superbly imagined and depicted, as are the human characters and the society in which they live. Original and subtle, this is one of those novels which prove that fantasy has come of age.

Brian Aldiss – *HARM*
Duckworth, London, 2007, 226pp, £14.99, h/b,
ISBN 978-0715636992
Ballantine, New York, 2007, 226pp, \$21.95,
h/b, ISBN 978-0345496713
Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

At the start of *HARM*, a man identified only as 'Prisoner B' is suffering a brutal and unrelenting series of interrogations. It sets the tone for the whole book, which is uncomfortable and harrowing, not just to read, but in the questions and reflections it forces.

Prisoner B is a writer. His 'crime' is that he has written a comic novel in which two characters make a joking reference to blowing up the Prime Minister. This, along with his name, which we later learn is Paul Fadhil Abbas Ali, is *prima facie* evidence for the authorities that he is a dangerous Islamic terrorist, bent on the destruction of the British way of life. As such he can be detained by HARM, the Hostile Activities Research Ministry, and subjected to physical and psychological torture and racist abuse until he tells his interrogators what they want to hear. Not that there is, by this time – which could be anywhere between now and a few years down the line, in this world or a slight variation of it – very much of the British way of life left, certainly as far as human rights, justice and civil liberties are concerned, and especially if you happen to have, in the authorities' view, a foreign name (while Paul insists on his Christian name as part of his British identity, his interrogators continually overlook or ignore it), a suspect religion and non-English parentage.

Alone in his cell between interrogations, Paul finds escape in his mind to another world. The struggling colony on the planet of Stygia is ruled by a repressive tyrant called Astaroth, who has all but wiped out the native population, the Dogovers, also called doglovers due to their odd symbiotic relationship with another dog-like native insectoid species. On Stygia, Paul is Fremant, one of Astaroth's guards, and married to a woman called Bellamia. But even here, Paul is somewhat apart. Unlike the other colonists reconstructed from their DNA by the Life Process Reservoirs of the now rusting colony ship *New Worlds*, Paul's memories of Earth, his speech and vocabulary are more extensive

than the degraded language and frequent malapropisms of the other colonists. But it is his revulsion to the casual brutality of life on Stygia and Astaroth's genocide of the native species that eventually gets him arrested and, like his alter ego on another world, thrown into jail and beaten. Here he is visited by Astaroth's sister and lover, Aster, and blackmailed in a plot to assassinate the leader. The plot fails, and Paul/Fremant escapes with Astaroth's former lieutenant, Essanits, to Haven, where Essanits, in a crisis of conscience over his own part in the extermination of the Dogovers, becomes a religious preacher who believes his salvation lies in locating the last of the Dogovers and bringing them back to Stygia, to show the colonist the error of their ways. But back in Stygia City circumstances have changed, and even this seemingly innocent action will lead to unfortunate consequences.

Both worlds in *HARM*, the near future dystopia of Paul's arrest and incarceration and the sf world on Stygia, mirror and comment on each other, and neither gives much hope of an answer.

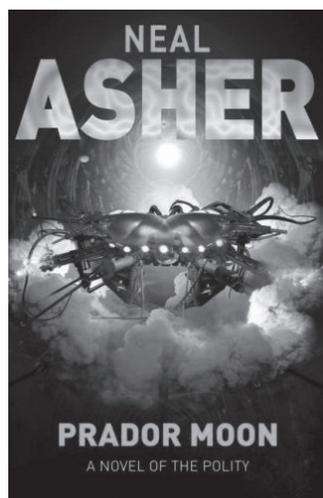
There is also a pulpishly clunky inventiveness to the descriptions of life on Stygia (I'm not entirely convinced that 3% more oxygen in the atmosphere is sufficient to support insectoid life forms the size of dogs or small children) that make one wonder if *HARM*'s aim is wider than just a sf readership.

HARM is an almost uncompromisingly bleak and angry book, although some of the episodes on Stygia are leavened with snatches of dark humour, throwaway references, and a linguistic delight in playing with language. The episodes of Paul's interrogation were, for this reviewer, uncomfortable reading, engendering a sort of frustrated and impotent anger mirroring Paul's own powerlessness against the brutal stupidity of his interrogation. It's something you don't expect, and very rarely get, from all but the most extreme polemic or dystopian sf, such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (with which it shares its sf theme of mental escape to parallel world, although Aldiss's model may be nearer to Jack London's *The Star Rover* or the bleak satire of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*) or Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. At 82, Aldiss proves he is still as provocative and uncompromising a writer as he was back in the sixties with works like *Hothouse*, *Barefoot in the Head* and *Report on Probability A*.

Neal Asher – *Prador Moon*

Tor, London, 2007,
222pp, £14.99, h/b,
ISBN 978-0230531314
Reviewed by Dave
M. Roberts

Neal Asher's novels are notable for two main reasons. The first is the strength of the gripping and almost relentless action. There



are few writers who can match the ferocious sf action adventure that Asher produces in book after book. The second is that this violent action is normally hung off an intelligent and complex plot. This brings us to *Prador Moon*, the latest novel of The Polity. Originally published in 2006 by Night Shade Press, this is the story of the first direct encounters of humanity and the brutal crab/insect-like Prador. This short novel, coming in at a little over 220 pages, is less than half the usual length of the previous Polity novels. It also plays very much to one of the strengths to the detriment of the other.

Following a number of years where The Prador are known but no contact is made, there is a meeting of ambassadors at which The Prador's plan for the extermination of humanity become abundantly clear. We are then into a rollercoaster ride through the initial conflict which, as is normally the case for Neal Asher, is intense and violent edge of the seat stuff. The action is related from multiple viewpoints, each character adding their own perspective on the conflict: the soldier on the front line who is perceived as a hero for his ability to kill Prador, the agent with a newly implanted AI, the anti-polity freedom fighter whose politics mean he is effectively fighting against humanity. We also get the perspective of a number of the Prador themselves. It is from these that we learn that the brutality meted out to humanity and in particular captured humans is also meted out with similar indifference to their own subordinates.

The Prador are a slightly curious creation. They are clearly designed as having been evolved from insect societies, where underlings are controlled by pheromones and the good of the leader is taken as the good of the race no matter what the cost. Once extrapolated into an intelligent race with these same characteristics, then they become so brutal they are almost cartoon-like and it is only really Neal Asher's skill with action narratives that means we are able to take them seriously. So under the action we have a story in which Humanity gets to discover that there is something out there which is much nastier than they are, and in order to beat them they have to approach that level of brutality.

This is, however, a slight work in the series, which beyond introducing a number of elements of other novels, such as the ship Occam Razor and its AI, and The Prador themselves, and it has little to add to the sequence as a whole. This having been said, while it lacks the depth of the other books, it works supremely well as an action thriller. If you don't stop to think about it for too long there is still much to be enjoyed, and the Tor edition has a really cool spacecraft on the cover.

Iain M. Banks – *Matter*

Orbit, London, 2008, 593pp, £18.99, h/b (re-
viewed in proof), ISBN 978-1841494173
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Is it really the first Culture novel for seven years? Where does the time go? While 2004's *The Algebraist* was full of the verve and invention that we nowadays simply expect by right from Banks' science fiction,

somehow the absence of the Culture also left it lacking the ideological thrill – the politics of utopia, as it were – that gives a Banks' novel its heart. Hence the cover of my preview copy simply says, 'The Culture is back. Nothing else matters'. A statement I didn't entirely disagree with (to the disgust of my wife). But to what, I wondered, does the cryptic title refer? What definition of 'matter'?

Only one thing is certain: this is a Banks' book so it could be any or all of them.

Matter begins on Sursamen, a Shellworld, a gigantic Russian Doll of a world, built eons ago by an inscrutable and extinct race for an unknown purpose. There are thousands scattered across the galaxy (although there used to be many more), most of which are inhabited by a glorious multitude of different races. Levels eight and nine respectively of Sursamen happen to be the home of the Sarl and the Deldeyn, human-like species both undergoing their equivalent of the industrial revolution, and at war with each other. At the moment of his greatest triumph, Hausk, king of Sarl, is murdered by his closest advisor and we thenceforth follow his surviving offspring: foppish heir to the throne, Ferbin, on the run having borne secret witness to his father's ultimate betrayal; bookish Oramen, heir apparent to the now-vacant throne of Sarl; and finally, absent Djan. Given by her father to the Culture some years ago, Djan has not merely been given citizenship of the Culture, but has become a member of Special Circumstances (or SC), its shadowy secret service.

Meanwhile, Ferbin sets out on a mighty journey to enlist his sister's help in avenging their father, although Djan is already returning to Sursamen for reasons of her own, and both hope to save their naïve younger brother, who is in terrible danger from his father's killers.

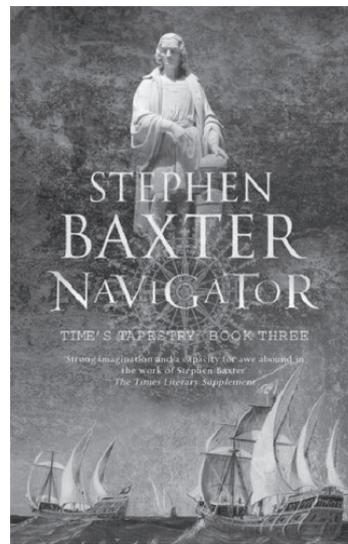
The Culture can't intervene directly on Sursamen for various diplomatic reasons, so their possessing an SC agent is perhaps fortuitous – as much as anything is ever fortuitous in the Culture (I'm thinking of the *Sleeper Service* and its deep deep cover mission in *Excession*, which is pointedly recalled here). Most of *Matter* follows characters to whom the Culture and other such advanced civilisations are distant legends, so we're very much down and dirty with the locals – readers hoping to be thrust once more into the Aladdin's cave of the Culture per se may be disappointed; this isn't another *Inversions*, but rather somewhere in-between. While there are wonders by the score, interesting characters aplenty and even a few amusing ship names thrown in for old times' sake, *Matter* feels like something of a marginal Culture novel, serving mainly to give us a better idea of the Culture's place and standing in the galactic hierarchy. The story (and especially its ending) feels a bit tenuous. All the various threads work well enough on their own, and the set-pieces are, as always, awe-inspiring, but the story doesn't pull together into a satisfying whole: simply having everyone blunder entertainingly about, incidentally visiting some marvellous places, does not a great novel make, I'm afraid.

In fact, I think there are two novels wrestling each other here – with the one featuring the Culture coming off least well. You have to ask, if the Culture wasn't here

would it make a very great difference to matters, and the answer is 'only to its fans' (of which I'm definitely one). There's also some frankly lazy infodumping – fascinating info, I grant you, about which I hesitate to complain because Banks' infodumps have in the past changed the way I think about science fiction as a genre – but info is being dumped upon you, and no mistake.

So, a slight disappointment then; but a slightly disappointing Culture novel is still a standard that many other writers should aspire to. *Matter* is a cracking read on its own, just not a great addition to the Culture canon, adding little to our understanding of everyone's favourite post-scarcity wish-fulfillment civilisation.

And what 'matter' do I finally think Mr Banks is referring to? I rather suspect it to be a little joke: that even the stupendous Minds of the Culture still depend upon matter as a stratum for their thought processes, so that, ahem, matter *matters*.



Stephen Baxter
– *Navigator*
Gollancz, London,
2007, 323pp, £10.99,
t/p, ISBN 978-
0575079915
Reviewed by Tony
Keen

Bxter's *Time's Tapestry* series continues at a fair pace – this is third volume to appear in twelve months. Baxter continues to trail through European history,

following the effects of various prophecies. In this volume, Baxter broadens his canvas somewhat. *Emperor* (reviewed in *Vector* 253) and *Conqueror* (reviewed in *Vector* 254) had almost entirely taken place within the British Isles. *Navigator* had a broader European perspective. Most of the action takes place in Spain, though there are also scenes in England and the Holy Land.

Baxter also recognizes that repeating the formula of the previous novels would lead to staleness. In *Emperor* and *Conqueror*, the reader follows generations of families, as their lives are affected by each novel's prophecy. At the end of each, the attempts to bring about their interpretation of what the prophecy means fail, and history is not diverted. In *Navigator*, Baxter introduces the notion of different people changing history, of people other than the Weaver who have managed to send messages back into the past, and changed history from what they had experienced, averting Muslim and Mongol dominations of Europe (echoes of both *The Terminator* and *The Man in the High Castle* can be found). The main plots of the three sections of *Navigator* are driven by competing interpretations of the main prophecy.

As a historical novelist, Baxter is getting better. At the beginning of the sequence (and also in

Coalescent) he displayed many of the faults of poorer historicals – a tendency to focus on what people now are interested in, rather than people then, the desire to parade the author’s research, a knowing wink to the readership when a character who would become historically significant (something which I must admit, annoys me when Neal Stephenson does it as well).

Navigator still has some of these faults (occasional historical infodumps are delivered through internal monologue), but fewer. Through much of the novel, Baxter addresses the infodump issue through placing characters in circumstances with which they themselves are unfamiliar, and therefore need explaining. And interestingly (and I think rightly), Christopher Columbus, a key figure in the last third of the novel, is kept at arm’s length from the narrative, being offstage most of the time, and even when onstage, is viewed by the main characters from a distance – they never talk to him, indeed he never gets any direct speech.

But if *Navigator* uses history better, I found it less satisfying as a novel. The three separate sections of the book, giving coverage to the four century-plus span of the novel, together with competing narratives within each section, leads to a plethora of point-of-view characters, who are not always as clearly delineated as they might be. There seems little in terms of personality to distinguish Ibrahim, the well-meaning Moslem from Spain, from Saladin, the well-meaning Christian from Palestine, or one well-meaning but slightly fanatical monk from another. Though I found *Navigator* stronger than *Emperor, Conqueror* is still the best-written of the volumes so far. It remains to be seen whether the appearance of *Weaver* in January will change that.

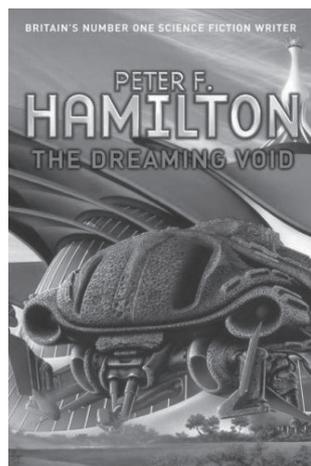
A few days ago I was asked to recommend books from my sf shelves for a friend. I unhesitatingly picked Baxter’s 1996 Clarke-nominated *Voyage. Time’s Tapestry* is okay, but I cannot unhesitatingly recommend it.

Peter F. Hamilton

– *The Dreaming Void*

Macmillan, London,
2007, 647pp, £17.99, h/b
(reviewed in proof),
ISBN 978-1405088800
Reviewed by Martin
Potts

Peter Hamilton’s *The Dreaming Void* is the first part of the Void trilogy being a second sequence set in the universe of the Commonwealth (the first containing *Pandora’s Star* and *Judas Unchained*, see *Vector* 238 and 246) and collectively known as the Commonwealth Saga. The new trilogy is set 1500 years after the first and fortunately a useful Timeline is supplied as an appendix to fill in the key events between them. The human race has continued its technical advancements, expanding into the Galaxy and increasing contact with non-human species. The



galactic civilisation is mostly recovered from the ravages of war but is now fractured by ideologies differing on the concept of where humanity’s evolutionary journey should travel next: a post-physical merged consciousness, bionomic technological enhancements or genetic manipulation? Adding to the mixture are members of the The Living Dream movement, founded by a citizen called Inigo who has experienced communication from the Void, a volume of Space with an impenetrable event horizon at its core. One alien race believes the Void contains an entire universe, fashioned by a race that lived during the dawn of the galaxy and now serves as their home. Inigo has been the catalyst for a belief in a tangible utopia within the Void and a huge pseudo-religion has been created, one which now wishes to mount a pilgrimage into this enigmatic zone. Controversy erupts over the consequences of this migration, alien races believe the attempt to enter the Void will trigger an expansion of the Void itself which would destroy the known galaxy and others believe it to be a suicide mission – either way the scene is set for turmoil and conflict on a galaxy-wide scale.

Amidst the political flux we are introduced to key characters including the mysterious Aaron and the ambitious Araminta and are re-acquainted with others from the Commonwealth Saga who have used the technology to gain near immortality. One of these is the tenacious investigator Paula Myo, a character brilliantly conceived in the original novels, and whilst her role is brief in this novel there are hints as to more involvement in the other volumes.

With his usual skill Hamilton quickly develops his parallel plotlines, using a combination of action, thriller and social commentary elements which serve to both flesh out his characters and drive the main narrative forward. I have always admired Hamilton’s use of the topical and familiar; one main character becomes a property developer and readers of Peter’s blog will not be surprised at reading how their building work spirals into its own nightmare. Speculation of future socio-economic systems is never ignored by Hamilton, nor is the impact technological developments have upon sexual interaction. The various sub-plots serve to provide colour and depth, never obscuring or circumventing the main narrative and keeping the reader guessing where the characters will lead us next.

A new narrative vehicle used by Hamilton in this tale is the retelling of Inigo’s seven dreams, at intervals throughout the book. These dreams tell the story of Edeard and Salrana, residents (real or fantasised?) of the Void, and central to the Living Dream movement. Interestingly this has allowed an outlet for Hamilton’s fantasy themed writing (which complements the Ozzie’s Walk sub plot in the Commonwealth Saga). The plot line is linear and the characters are very sympathetically written. For me the juxtaposition of this rural, telepathic culture with the hyper-technologically advanced Commonwealth galaxy worked to great effect and was the main accomplishment of the whole story.

Reading the Commonwealth Saga first would certainly help with understanding the characters and situations but is by no means essential. Hamilton fans will not be disappointed by the broad galactic canvass

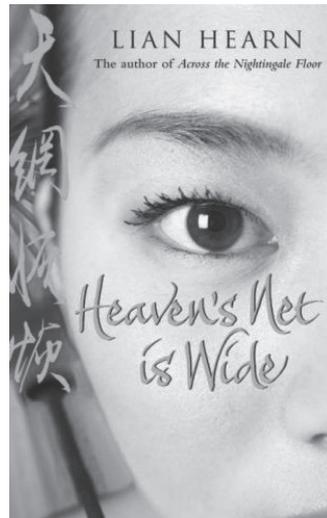
used and his trademark inter-weaving narrative which, supported by the re-telling of Inigo's dreams, certainly whets the appetite for the second and third instalments whilst providing an entertaining and intriguing route through this one.

Lian Hearn

– *Heaven's Net is Wide*

Macmillan, London, 2007, 560pp, h/b, £12.99, ISBN 978-0230013971

Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc



There are a number of things that can, for no obvious reason, strike feelings of dread in a reader. This can vary from one person to another but our personal list would include books that feel the need for a map, a dramatis personae when it isn't a play and genealogy charts. *Heaven's Net is Wide* contains all three and adds a subtle twist that would have made this list of ominous warnings even longer had we considered such a concept – yes, the book contains a genealogy of the horses. And then there's its availability in adult and junior editions which also sets alarm bells ringing, coupled with a seemingly heavily indulgent page count. However, one should never judge a book by its girth or apparently gratuitous embellishments and *Heaven's Net is Wide* turns out to be one very good reason why. Although written after Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* books, *Heaven's Net is Wide* is a prequel to these and acts as a standalone, an introduction to the trilogy and/or a closer examination of legends that are referred to in the previous books.

Shigeru Otori is heir to the Otori Clan in a feudal Japan made volatile and fragile by war and treachery. Although the clan is well regarded, with an ancient lineage, it is perceived as weak in the minds of the clan's uncles who seek to manipulate or even plan the overthrow of Lord Otori's capital in Hagi, whilst on the surface pledging their allegiance. Their reasons involve not only personal greed but fear, for the savage Tohan are seeking to expand their territory through slaughter and subjugation. Shigeru provokes the wrath of the Tohan when he kills a prominent clansman in swordfight and rescues another, Iida, Tohan heir, from death – something the impetuous youth despises, as he does all signs of weakness. Shigeru also has a headstrong younger brother to protect and must consider producing an heir of his own, although not with his mistress, the beautiful Akane. As civil war becomes increasingly likely the balance of power lies in the hands of a few clans who could tip the political situation either way. But what of The Hidden, a ragged bunch of pious pacifists who worship an alien deity, or The Tribe, mysterious unaligned warriors with

apparently supernatural powers?

Despite its junior tag *Heaven's Net is Wide* is not a book that relies on simplistic cause and effect plotting or two-dimensional characterisation – it is truly an epic tale told, at times, from very intimate viewpoints. Although never gratuitous this is a blood soaked tale of honourable combat, treacherous slaughter and the massacre of innocents set against a backdrop of possible imminent famine. Neither does Hearn balk on the harsh sexual expectations and demands of the time, mixing passion with violence, tenderness with violation in a frank but never salacious manner – the matter of factness of the tone emphasising the brutal realities of this time past. The attention to period Japan's culture, food and religion shows a clear love of the country and its history, even in a fictional context. With all books that are ostensibly based in the real world, the little details – the food, the plants, the daily ritual – give as much flavour of the society as the more obvious trappings of samurai and geisha, castles and battles. To this end a small number of indigenous Japanese terms that may be unfamiliar to people crop up in the text, but add richness regardless. Similarly Hearn's style of writing is very formalised, almost lyrical, giving the book the feel of something that has been passed down over the centuries and suitably reflecting the subject matter.

A page turner of an epic, *Heaven's Net is Wide* is an eloquent and fascinating novel full of passion and betrayal, spirituality and culture, war and lust.

Alexander Levitsky (ed) – *Worlds Apart: An Anthology of Russian Fantasy and Science Fiction*

Duckworth, London, 2007, 740pp, £25.00, h/b, ISBN 978-1585678198

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Back in the days of the Cold War, Russians were almost invariably portrayed on television in the same way, heavysset and ponderous. Unfortunately, this anthology lives up to that old cliché. It is a thick, heavy tome, and it is so ponderous to read that picking it up for each new day is a heart-sinking moment.

It shouldn't be like that. In theory this is an exciting work: a whistlestop tour of Russian fantasy and science fiction from the emergence of modern Russian literature around 300 years ago to Sputnik. Let's face it, no anthology that contains works by Pushkin, Turgenev, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Zamiatin and Bulgakov can be all bad. And one of the revelations of this book is how many of the masters of Russian literature (there are no women here) have dabbled with the fantastic. What's more, for most of the last century the majority of Russian literature has been closed off to the West, by politics as much as by language. So although occasional works have emerged (Evgeny Zamiatin's *We*, Mikhail Bulgakin's *The Master and Margarita*, both represented here) most of the contents of this book are going to be unknown to most readers. There are indeed some wonderful discoveries and charming oddities to be encountered here.

Yet the whole thing feels slow, dull, more worthy

than thrilling. This is not really the fault of the stories, although there is the old problem that nothing ages like the future. The slightly oddball decision to end this anthology at the moment that Sputnik announced the birth of the space age is understandable in historical terms, but not really in literary terms. There is no living writer represented here, which means we get nothing by the Strugatski brothers, or any of that rather exciting new generation of Russian writers who seem to be emerging, such as Eleni Aresenieva and Sergei Lukyanenko [for which see the review below]. Instead we get science fictions that (with the obvious and welcome exception of *We*) have no real imaginative currency today. I was delighted with an extract from a piece by F.V. Bulgarin variously called *Plausible Fantasies* or (*Im*)*Plausible Fantasies* (the titles differ between the contents list and the story header) which presents a society a millennium or more in our future in which people travel in private steam-powered vehicles on rails and Siberia has become hot while the tropics are now a frozen waste. It is a cornucopia of invention, quaint now but probably startling when written in 1824; yet for us, it can be no more than a curiosity, the servants, the role of women, the class structure reveal a society that has not advanced one second from the 1820s. There's nothing wrong with that, such period pieces can provide fascinating and entertaining reading. The problem is what goes around the texts.

Some of the problems can be laid at the door of the publisher: it has been dreadfully proofread. I lost count of the number of times I had to re-read sentences to get their meaning simply because important words like 'a' or 'the' were missing. And a decent copy-editor might have avoided some of the other errors. I cannot comment on the accuracy or otherwise of the translations, but I can comment on how well they have been rendered in English. And a lot of them (generally the less well-known pieces) are the work of the editor (with Martha T. Kitchen), and though Levitsky is a professor at Brown University he seems to have learned his English from a thesaurus rather than a dictionary. Their translations are often laboured and littered with odd word choices: the medieval 'hight' meaning 'named' in a story emerging from sophisticated Petersburg seems particularly thoughtless. And their translation of Pushkin's 'The Queen of Spades' doesn't manage to generate any sense of menace or even of narrative drive. By contrast, the stories translated by others, about half the book, have a grace, a drive and a sense of life about them that makes them a real pleasure to read. In contrast to the flat translation of the Pushkin, for example, 'Shtoss' by his contemporary Lermontov is a ghost story that generates an authentic chill.

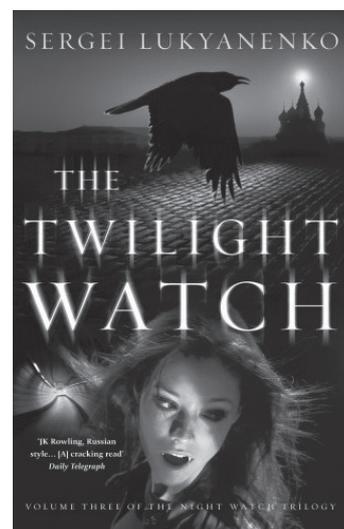
What's more, there are some curious editorial choices. Levitsky seems to feel that using an extravagant metaphor counts as fantasy. So there are works here, including most of the poems chosen, that you read without a clue as to why they might belong in this collection. And the editorial decision to include more than one contribution from every writer represented really does not make sense. It makes the book much thicker than it needs to be without adding much to our appreciation of Russian literature or our understanding

of the literary history he is presenting. Not that this particular interpretation of history seems to make all that much sense. For instance, he presents his selections from Dostoevsky as a 'response' to the futuristic utopian fiction represented by Bulgarin and by V.F. Odoevsky's *The Year 4338*. But this does not work: Dostoevsky's sweet fable about a poor child dying on Christmas morning may say things are bad now, but that does not stand in opposition to or in dialogue with fictions that say things could get better in the future.

But the biggest problem with the book is the curse of academe. We are 60 pages into the book before we come to the first of the selections, and each section is preceded by its own several pages of earnest introduction. Not only is all of this not couched in the most accessible of language, it makes sweeping and not always accurate generalisations about the nature of science fiction and of fantasy, and opaque comments about the development of Russian literature that might make more sense if you are already very familiar with the subject. In other words it hovers indecisively between being an introductory anthology for the general reader and a textbook for the student, and as is often the case it ends up being the worst of both. By all means dip into this collection, there are some wonderful and surprising stories here (even if the best of them, *We* and *The Master and Margarita*, are already widely known and available); but don't read it cover to cover unless you really are intent on studying Russian literature (in which case there are probably better introductory textbooks available).

Sergei Lukyanenko – *The Twilight Watch*
William Heinemann, London,
2007, 448pp, t/p,
£11.99, ISBN 978-0434014446
Reviewed by
Colin Odell and
Mitch Le Blanc

A welcome and timely translation of the final part of Sergei Lukyanenko's Watch Trilogy (the film of *The Day Watch* is, miraculously, in UK cinemas, subtitles and all), *The Twilight Watch* follows its predecessors *The Night Watch* (reviewed in *Vector 250*) and *The Day Watch* (reviewed in *Vector 253*) by giving the reader a value-packed three mini-novels for the price of one, all linked and building on the previous texts. The effect is to emphasise how everything in this world is inter-related, that nothing can occur in a vacuum. Seemingly irrelevant events (even from the start of the first book) can have massive consequences further down the line, placing the future of the earth, the human race and the Others in extreme jeopardy. The extent to which the ways that the familiar characters' actions are



manipulated or prophesised is always an issue in the Watch books and makes them feel like a cross between Film Noir and the military ponderings of generals, pushing models around a map, only half identifying that their strategies result in death, even if it is for their perceived greater good. Except, of course, that those genres don't tend to be populated by magicians, vampires, werewolves, witches and all manner of psychic disturbances which, through centuries of tenuous truce, have kept the presence of the Others shielded from the lives of humans.

The Night Watch monitor the activities of the Dark, the Day Watch monitor the activities of the Light, ensuring that neither violate their treaties. Anton works for the Night Watch and has been progressing through the ranks of power at quite some rate although he pales into insignificance compared with his wife Svetlana and, very likely, their daughter. Svetlana has rejected the Watches but Anton clings on, although he is beginning to have doubts about what constitutes light and dark, good and evil. What unites the two factions is their belief in their separation from the rest of humanity and their determination to keep their very existence secret in order to prevent witch-hunts, bloodshed and possible extermination. When news comes through that someone is offering to change a normal human being into an Other both Watches are riled – a human is aware of their existence and, worse, the unthinkable that is being suggested is that Others can be created. Anton is sent from the Night Watch to uncover the mystery but so too is his vampire ex-neighbour and now higher vampire Kostya. The ramifications mean Anton is given extended leave in the countryside with his wife and daughter – unfortunate in that an unregistered and immensely powerful (but seemingly benign) witch resides in the forests. The final tale takes matters to a potentially catastrophic conclusion.

The Twilight Watch is a fitting end (?) to the series, balancing matters mundane and apocalyptic. Intelligent but easy to read, the intertwined narratives never become convoluted and are always grounded in a believable modern day society that runs parallel to the supernatural forces among us. If your only experience of the Watch stories are through the films be prepared for a surprise – although the films closely follow the books in many respects, the bombast and visual excess, explosions, effects and fury have little in common with the core of moral dilemma, intrigue and emotion that make the books such a joy to read. Imaginative, believable and wholly entertaining, the entire trilogy is highly recommended for anyone fed up with unpronounceable names, needless po-mo sassiness or gratuitous sex and violence. At last a modern fantasy saga for adults.

**Robert Rankin – *Da Da De Da Da Code*
Gollancz, London, 2007, 352pp, h/b (plus CD),
£14.99, ISBN 978-0575070110
Reviewed by James Bacon**

“**F**unny man Robert Rankin does it again with running gags and humour and tall tales using

urban legends and myths to create a laugh out read. With a Free CD too, mad stuff.”

That's what you expect to hear, isn't it, when you read a Rankin review?

The story here is funny, has gags and is an adventure yet it departs from expectations by being tremendously unnerving and a little disquieting as Rankin dips into an uncomfortable subject he seems to know a lot about: the misfirings of the mind. By the second chapter it is clear that this is going to be a disconcerting read when a usually recognisable farfetched path, one where we expect that Rankin will twist into hilarious absurdity, abruptly reaches a dead end, with the protagonist realising that he had imagined it all and is quite mad. It was the Hitchcock moment, without the bomb.

Our man Johnny Hooker is quite bonkers... but in a very realistic way. If you met him, let's say on the tube, well you'd move away, he has that look, nothing overt just enough to trigger your pigeon-holing survival system that would say 'other end of the carriage'. Here he goes through a good old Rankin tale: we have a conspiracy, an unfortunate main character, both brave and cowardly and at times confused, a team of baddies projecting thoughts into the minds of the powerful, and the slapstick humour. Johnny has to save the world, but he is already dead, or that's what the police and his mom think, and he doesn't want to upset her by telling her he is alive, as she is surely happier that he is no longer such a burden as he was when alive. It's pantomime and pandemonium and there is fun and laughs and it's a good story. Some of the laughter is derivative of how Johnny deals with the monkey in his head, that pops out and dances around and makes suggestions, and is an annoyance to Johnny. It's not only Johnny who is annoyed by the monkey, interfering and making useless suggestions to Johnny, getting in the way and being a nuisance, why won't it just shut up and leave Johnny alone, little troublesome git. Though the monkey is a figment of Johnny's imagination, isn't it? So how can I hate the monkey? He is evil incarnate, obviously a disciple of the devil. Why do I hate the monkey? Is the monkey Johnny? I like Johnny though. Shit the monkey said that, Jesus. Is the monkey real at all?

Back to the story which is concerned with the Devil's music, and a theory about a great guitarist from the 30's, who is credited with influencing dozens of rock legends, including Robert Johnson, and cracking a code.

As a society we are not so good at dealing with mental instability, and Rankin really starts to mess with the reader's head. Using a variety of overtly crass and racist jokes – at times by the damn monkey – he further unsettles the reader making you uncomfortable and on edge.

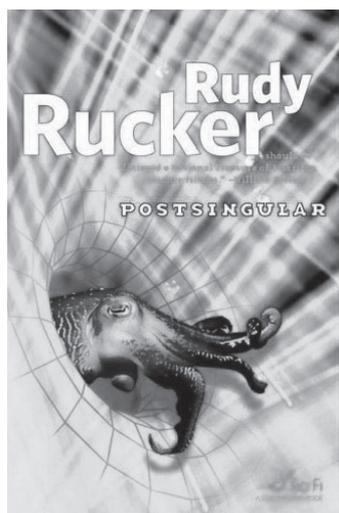
Yet all the time, up to the end, we have some sympathy with Johnny, it's just occasionally funny that he has voices in his head (isn't it?). Not so funny when the voices are nasty to us as well as Johnny or when Rankin mixes something a little raw into his tale, just to slightly put the reader out of kilter (bit like Johnny's mind).

From beneath Rankin's regular good humoured storytelling, he manages to provoke a more thoughtful underlying and jarring riff. There have always been

messages and meanings in his stories, they are not just cheap laughs, yet many will read this book and just laugh and enjoy it. There are jokes about the variety of weapons the police are armed with and about tea with the parson, but it has been said that all comedy is intrinsically sad, this story in parts points out the tragedy which can be a disturbed mind in a good person.

The ending struck a poignant note; it was a bit stunning really compared to the usual feel good factor that emanates from this author. But then there is nothing funny about insanity or normal about Rankin's writing. More to this than the cover.

Rudy Rucker
– *Postsingular*
Tor, New York,
2007, 320pp, h/b
(reviewed in proof),
\$25.95, ISBN 978-
0765317419
Reviewed by Nic
Clarke



It may not come as a surprise to anyone who has read Rudy Rucker's work before, but *Postsingular* is a splendidly bonkers book. Built around a pair of short stories that were published last year in *Asimov's*, it tells the story of a (very) near-future singularity in computing technology, and the people who variously embrace or battle it. When they aren't too busy being reality TV stars, catching cuttlefish, hopping between parallel worlds, or doing all three at once, that is.

As is so often the case with fix-up novels, little seems to have been done to smooth the transition between original and end product. 'Chu and the Nants', now the second chapter, is an entirely self-contained tale that feels like a false start when placed in the context of a novel. The singularity happens – a swarm of nanomachines called 'nants' gobble up everyone on the planet and spit them back out as code in a CG heaven – and is reversed within a matter of hours. While entertaining, this part sits awkwardly between an effective – if, in the final analysis, slightly tangential – prologue, set some years before, and the rest of the plot, which concerns a different (but related) singularity and takes place years later. Concepts and characters are introduced, but not in a way impossible to accomplish in the main narrative. The other short story, 'Postsingular' – now divided between the third and fourth chapters – fits in much better, but the references originally required to make it intelligible as a stand-alone piece have apparently survived the editing process, leaving characters to make silly As-You-Know-Bob declarations like, "This might be the biggest day for me since three years ago when we reversed the nants".

This is not to overlook the idea that there may be

some self-parody at work here. Tonally, *Postsingular* is not so much tongue in cheek as permanently poised on the brink of hilarity. This is a book in which a pivotal piece of code – enabling people to move between the parallel worlds that the singularity has opened to them – "looks like blue spaghetti and it sounds like chimes." It is a book in which a world-eating singularity is launched by socially-dysfunctional computer geek who has never quite got over firing a rocket into his best mate's head as a teenager. It is a book in which the crisis facing humanity is summed up thus: "Our world's being nibbled to death by nanoducks, Craigor. We're nanofucked".

The same might be said of his characters. "We're in a live soap opera," one of them observes near the end of the novel. Never a truer word was spoken. Characters are not the primary concern of stories like this, and Rucker's are no exception; they seem to exist largely to gape, giggle or grumble their way through the mad dash of his ideas in action. They're bed-hopping crackpots who utter lines like "Unfortunately I'm too planktonic for fame. I transcend encapsulation". Not real people by any stretch of the imagination, but fun to spend a few hours with, nonetheless.

Rucker is not a smooth stylist. He is prone to stating the obvious, particularly when it comes to telling his readers how to parse his dialogue ("How'd you happen to notice that?" asked Craigor, seemingly genuinely curious about the specific chain of logic Jayjay had followed."), and to clumsy over-eagerness in showing off his research. Surely there are subtler ways to impart information than sentences like "Kitty pronounced her friend's name [Thuy] the proper Vietnamese way, like twee and not like thooey"?

Yet there is much fun to be had with the geeked-up-to-the-nines flow of ideas and images; the concept and execution of the orphidnet 'metanovels' work very well, for example, again largely because of Rucker's willingness to poke fun at his set-up. There is also an enjoyably lighthearted, if hardly groundbreaking, examination of how increasingly intrusive communication technology might affect human relationships and identity. Not the most well-crafted of novels, then, but a very entertaining read.

Lucius Shepard – *Dagger Key and Other Stories*

PS Publishing, Hornsea, 2007, 471pp, £25.00,
h/b, ISBN 978-1904619734
Reviewed by Paul Raven

One piece of advice that the aspiring writer hears frequently is "avoid unnecessary words". Lean prose is essential; include nothing that doesn't drive the plot or develop a character, exclude flowery language and excess description. Lucius Shepard ignores this cardinal edict – almost every single story in this collection could be told with greater brevity – but the mark of his talent is that the reader doesn't get bored or distracted; you forgive him the slow spinning of the yarns because he does it so well. It is the skill of the raconteur, the inveterate teller of tall tales... and of

the soloist musician who can extemporise on a theme without drifting off-key.

Which figures – Shepard spent a decade as a professional musician, and his passion for music manifests itself frequently throughout this collection. The opening story, ‘Stars Seen Through Stone’, is told from the point of view of a small-time small-town music producer who stumbles across one of the horribly flawed geniuses that the industry feeds upon, and is completely free of the false glamour that outsiders usually bring to such settings, as is the passing portrait of a small-time bar singer in ‘Limbo’.

Also plain is Shepard’s love of poetry. At the macro level, this reveals itself in ‘Emerald Street Expansions’, wherein a jaded self-made man becomes partly possessed by the soul of a fifteenth-century French poet-cum-vagabond. But it is at the level of words and sentences that Shepard’s poetic voice truly manifests, so ubiquitously as to appear perfectly natural. Knowingly or not, every line rings and resonates with itself, its neighbours, and the story of which it is a part.

And this is where the excess length comes from, when Shepard finds a riff that fits the theme, he’ll squeeze in as many notes as he can without bloating the flow of the piece as a whole. Take this description of a trophy fish from ‘Stars Seen Through Stone’ (pp31-32):

“It occupied a place of honour in his office, a hideous thing mounted on a plaque, some sort of mutant trout nourished on pollution. Whenever I saw it, I would speculate on what else might lurk beneath the surface of the cold, deep pools east of town, imagining telepathic monstrosities plated with armor like fish of the Mesozoic and frail tentacled creatures, their skins having the sheen of an oil slick, to whom mankind were sacred figures in their dream of life.”

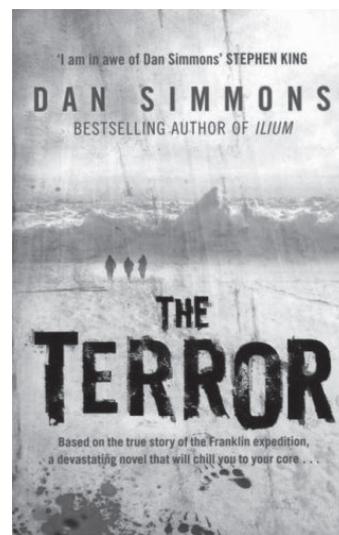
It’s not irrelevant to the plot, but it’s not entirely essential either. But as I said before, I’m inclined to believe this is simply Shepard’s natural writing voice. As the voice of Vernon, the thoughtful music producer speaking above, it fits pretty well. In other cases, it’s a little mismatched, as in the narrative and dialogue of the New Orleans criminals of ‘Dead Money’, these aren’t characters you’d expect to think or speak in the crisp muscular English which they use.

But chances are you won’t really notice, because the characters themselves are fascinating. Shepard seems to have a fondness for loser leads cruising toward their inevitable doom, and he has a way of making them end up longing for the death (or damnation, or both) that they come to, and then pulling the metaphysical rug from beneath their feet. The deeper implications of this underlying theme I shall leave to critics far more experienced than myself to discuss, but I will say that it makes for strong endings, all the more believable for the absence of happily-ever-after.

And there’s the thing – Shepard doesn’t do trite. He doesn’t do wish-fulfilment. And when he sets out to break the rules, he makes sure he does it properly – as in the second-person present-tense monologue

of ‘Abimagique’, which only disappoints in its overly ambiguous ending.

I should be upfront about one thing; I am not a regular reader of dark fantasy, to the extent that I’m not entirely sure what the term defines. I cannot place *Dagger Key* in the context of other works of the same genre. Instead, I must approach it as a reader with no preconceptions, and as a reviewer with no agenda beyond examining Shepard’s writing on its own terms. And on those terms, these gritty and subtle yarns of occult goings-on – sometimes leavened with sf-nal tropes, and all but one of them set in the real world – are the work of a man who knows the language like a blind old bluesman knows the fretboard of his guitar. And while I may not be an established fan of the genre in question, I know and appreciate a fine player when I hear one. Lucius Shepard is a writer’s writer. Read him and weep.



Dan Simmons

– *The Terror*

Bantam Books, 2007,
944 pages, £7.99,
p/b, ISBN 978-
0553818208

Reviewed by Martin
McGrath

There is something huge out there in the dark. Something vast and terrible and relentless that will not let you escape. It demands your attention. It wants you to worship it.

Yes, Dan Simmons’ new book is huge and scary.

But ignore, if you can, the irony that an object this big is published by Bantam Books (they’re laughing at you reader, really) and admire the way Simmons grabs you from the very first page of the very first chapter and demands that you read every single word – even when you’re screaming for relief from the pain of holding the damn thing up.

The Terror is the story of the Franklin Expedition, a doomed effort to discover the Northwest Passage over Alaska, through pack ice and into the Pacific. The *HMS Terror* and *HMS Erebus* become trapped, their supplies (many of which have been poorly packed and are tainted) are running low, the men are beginning to suffer from scurvy but, much worse, they are being stalked by something on the ice. This huge, cunning, voracious monster is killing men, early on it claims the commander of the expedition, Sir John Franklin, leaving Captain Francis Crozier to try and lead his men across the inhospitable ice towards safety.

The Terror is an easy and exciting book to read, but it isn’t perfect.

Taking the story of the doomed Franklin Expedition might seem a safe enough option. These men have been dead for 160 years. Who could plausibly care whether

Simmons embroiders the known facts by chucking in a murderous, ravenous monster and plays a little loose with their characters to make them more palatable to modern audiences?

Except Simmons has done his research so well and does such a plausible job of resurrecting these crews that the reader does, quite quickly, come to care whether the portrayal of them is accurate. One result is that, at times, the giant bear at the core of the book's horror plotline feels out of place. The plight of these men is so terrible that the creature hardly seems necessary to make their situation worse and everything else is so firmly grounded in highly-researched reality that this improbable beast sometimes feels that it has fallen in from a different novel. Simmons seems aware of this and devotes a number of passages to justifying the creature's existence – with varying degrees of success. That said, the monster gives the novel some of its most memorable scenes and Simmons does use it as an effective agent of terror so even though it occasionally feels anachronistic, it does serve a purpose.

Taking a true story also acts against some of the tension in the plot. We know these men are doomed from quite early on – because we know that if the story of their molestation on the ice had made it back to civilisation then this would be the most famous incident in the history of human exploration rather than a footnote in Arctic history.

Still, *The Terror* works even knowing the men's approximate fates because Simmons succeeds in creating a cast of characters we care about.

The only real disappointment in the *The Terror* is that it slips into an unnecessary and unconvincing mysticism towards the end. This allows Simmons to drop in a topical warning about the dangers of climate change but it is at the expense of the real strength of the novel, his command of the physicality of this frozen world. There are times in this book when I found myself shivering alongside the men of *HMS Terror*, and it is only when Simmons moves away from the cruelty and pain of the ice and onto more mystic plains that he leaves the reader behind. Even so, *The Terror* is a proper page-turner, offering entertainment aplenty and some truly memorable passages.

**P. D. Smith –
Doomsday Men
Allen Lane, London,
2007, 553pp, £20.00,
h/b, ISBN 978-
0713998153
Reviewed by Paul
Bateman**

In the 1950s, a Hungarian-born physicist, Leo Szilard (pronounced *See-lard*), introduced American radio listeners, and thus the world, to concept of the C-Bomb. Whether any existing government drew up

any plans or even attempted to develop such a weapon is not known, but the impact on society and popular culture was huge. The C-Bomb was the Doomsday Weapon of *Dr Strangelove*, a hydrogen bomb encased in a layer of cobalt. On detonation the radioactive cobalt would sweep around the world, annihilating all life on Earth. The C-Bomb also featured in Neville Shute's *On the Beach*, as well as in many other novels, short stories and films. In *Doomsday Men* P. D. Smith traces the history, science, popular culture and the people involved that led to the establishment of the Ultimate Weapon to the social consciousness.

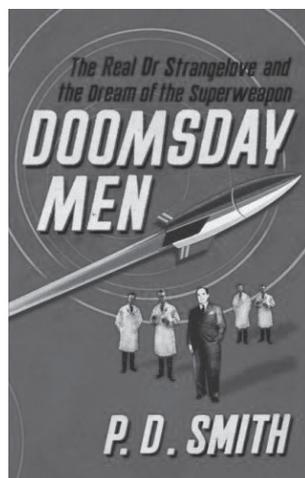
Primarily, Smith focuses on Szilard, a scientific titan of the last century, who shaped the world we live in and yet, oddly, was never awarded the Nobel Prize, while many of his colleagues from the Manhattan Project and University of Berlin were. Szilard was responsible for the joint letter with Einstein to Truman, which kick-started the Manhattan Project and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Szilard was also responsible for developing the first nuclear chain reaction in a squash court in the University of Chicago in 1939.

Szilard is an interesting character who inspired popular culture with his idea of the C-Bomb, and yet in turn, was inspired by popular culture. Being a Jew, Szilard left the University of Berlin when Hitler came to power and moved to London. It was while crossing the road at a set of traffic lights in Bloomsbury that he hit upon the idea of a sustainable nuclear chain reaction, an idea inspired, by no less than H. G. Wells's *The World Set Free*, originally published in 1913, which depicts nuclear warfare and radioactive fallout similar to the Chernobyl disaster of the 1980s, and even coins the term 'The Atomic Bomb'.

It is these ideas of life imitating art and *vice versa* that forms the foundation of P. D. Smith's book. Many authors would have kept to a stale account of Szilard or the Manhattan Project. With *Doomsday Men*, Smith traces the origins of the ideas of weapons of mass destruction through science, history and the arts.

He recounts Röntgen's discovery of X-rays and Marie Curie's discovery of radium, and how this led to the public's perception of radiation. He also tells how this helped generate the idea of Wells's heat rays in *The War of the Worlds*, and death rays in other novels, and ultimately the concept of weapons of mass destruction. Smith relates the development and use of chemical warfare in the World War I and biological warfare before describing the birth of the atomic era and its consequences. With the development of each weapon he sets this against the popular conception of weapons of the time, such as describing how Jack London predicted the US using biological weapons against 'The Yellow Peril' in his short story 'The Unparalleled Invasion', mirroring Shiro Ishii's endeavours during the Japanese occupation of China. Each time bringing home that if it can be imagined it can be done, ultimately leading to the panic of the C-Bomb and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

As readers of science fiction, we are all aware of how our beloved genre parallels the world more than probably any other. What I found refreshing with *Doomsday Men* was how in debt the modern world is to the ideas of science fiction. Most non-fiction describing



weapons of mass destruction would be little more than science and history. Where *Doomsday Men* differs so much is setting world events against the context of science fiction, which is why I'd recommend any *Vector* reader this book. In particular, I'd recommend it to those, like me, who were children in the Cold War, growing up with the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation looming over our heads. These threats haven't receded; they've just changed. By looking to the past, *Doomsday Men* shows us how we can look to the future for these signs in science fiction.

Jeff Somers – *The Electric Church*

Orbit, London,
2007, 363pp, £9.99,
t/p, ISBN 978-
1841496153

Reviewed by Stuart
Carter

I could've sworn *The Electric Church* was the title of a song by original goth legends The Sisters Of Mercy, but it turns out that that particular track was only released in my head. Still, if the Sisters are not an influence on Jeff Somers then plenty of similarly gloomy folks certainly are.

Set in a jaw-droppingly dystopian *Blade Runner*-style future (and that's *not* just a lazy comparison, there are a great many similarities between the two), *The Electric Church* takes place some 20 years after 'Unification', which seems to have been a particularly horrific realisation of the World Government model beloved of much Golden Age sf. Great swathes of cities all over the world are dilapidated burnt-out shells of their former selves following huge riots against Unification, riots that would seem to have been perfectly justified since the post-Unification world really sucks. The rich are stinking rich, the poor are dirt poor, and seldom do the twain ever meet. The only real advance made since our own present day seems to be in the area of flying cars, so it's not all bad.

Except it is. It's so bad, in fact, that its citizens are flocking to join the Electric Church and gain eternal life by having their brains rehoused in creepy plastic cyborg bodies so as to spend eternity proselytizing about the advantages of this. It shows how bad things have got when this is seen as a desirable prospect.

Avery Cates is a Gunner – a hit man – and a good one. At 26 years of age he's pretty old in general for the post-Unification world, but is a positive Methuselah for his profession. Cates is having a catastrophic week following 21 years of merely bad ones: not only is he mistakenly wanted for killing a SSF cop – the Gestapo of this Brave New World – but he's been framed by the actual murderer, one of the Electric Church's cyborg monks. This is unusual to say the least, because the

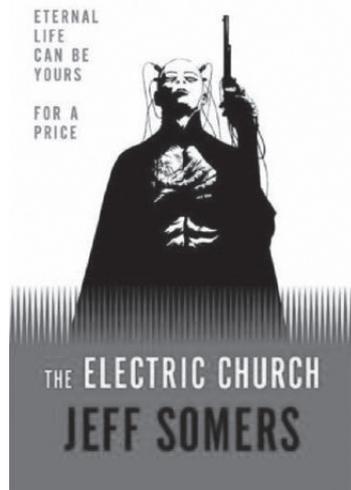
monks, whilst weird, have always been peaceful. A man already living on the edge, Cates is tipped headfirst over the precipice, before being approached by the last person he ever expected bearing him an offer of the last job he ever expected...

The Electric Church, to begin with at least, is a taut noir thriller. Cates' interior monologue of grim desperation counterpointed by a slightly ill-fitting honour is gripping and oddly appealing. It has some snappy dialogue and some appealingly flippant turns of phrase, the best of which are used for the chapter titles. Somers can obviously write, then – he certainly had me hooked! Where the book falls down is in his plotting. Once our anti-hero gets beyond trying to survive for the next few minutes and the reader is allowed to wonder about the wider implications of the world he inhabits, then things start to go downhill.

The biggest elephant in the room for me was the question: how on earth did things end up like this? There are a lot of superficial similarities to Philip K. Dick and Richard Morgan's writing, but Morgan has a finely developed political sensibility and I can understand how and why his future dystopias have come about. There's a sense of inevitability behind them that *The Electric Church* lacks, and I just couldn't suspend my disbelief over the triumph of the mysterious Unification 20 years previously; it just seemed too awful for people to have ever allowed, and continue to allow, to happen.

Speaking of things being too awful – Cates' world and his life within it starts off being grim, but the dial is quickly turned up to 'dreadful,' and then up again to 'unbearable' within a couple of chapters. Nothing good ever happens to Cates *ever*. He is subject to such an endless litany of pain, misery and abuse that just reading this book makes you want to call the Samaritans.

The Electric Church is easily at its best when up close and personal, so it's a shame that this focus is lost as things progress towards a denouement that feels both rushed and hollow. The opening vibe of scuzzy Dick-ian noir rendered through some clean, direct prose bodes well, but isn't maintained, causing the loss of both belief in *The Electric Church* and interest.



Mike Wilks – *Mirrorscape*

Egmont, London,
2007, 570pp, p/b,
£6.99, ISBN 978-
1405233491

Reviewed by Cherith
Baldry

Mirrorscape is a novel for children with the theme of art. The author is a professional artist, and it shows in his intricate illustrations and

the visual quality of his writing. His familiarity with the technical details of drawing and painting gives depth to the society he is portraying. At the back of the book is

a glossary of artistic terms, and another glossary of the specialised terms of the world of the book, so that young readers won't become confused. Though the book isn't at all didactic, I think they will learn a lot about art.

The novel is set in a hierarchical society where the majority of power rests with the Mysteries – the equivalent of trade guilds. Although there is a king and a priesthood, it is the Mysteries who run things. Ordinary people have to pay for Pleasures – that is, the right to use certain items in their work; an artist would have to pay to use colour, for example. This keeps the poor down at the bottom of the heap while the richer families hang on to their power.

The hero of the novel is a boy named Melkin Whomper, the poor son of a weaver who is also a gifted artist. Though his destiny would normally be to follow his father into the weaving trade, his local priest brings him to the attention of one of the most famous artists in the city, and Mel becomes his apprentice. In his master's house, after the fashion of the classic school story, Mel makes friends, is bullied, and falls into adventure.

Mel discovers that a whole world exists within certain paintings, and that it's possible to enter that world. What happens to him there will change the structure of his society.

Mirrorscape – the world within the paintings – is full of weird and wonderful things. Anything that an artist can imagine can exist there, which leaves Mike Wilks free to exercise his own imagination. I loved Billet, the sentient house. If I have a criticism here it's that sometimes Wilks's creativity runs away with him; in the battle scenes he spends so much time describing yet more strange monsters and evil machines that the pace of the story drops.

Mel is an engaging hero, and his friend Wren, the girl who wants to be an artist, is beautifully depicted. In contrast the villains aren't really rounded as characters. The most interesting character I thought was Mel's friend Ludo: truly ambiguous, without the guts to be really loyal to Mel or to be wholeheartedly evil, but who comes good in the end.

Though I found *Mirrorscape* a hugely enjoyable read, I don't think this is one of the books that crosses the boundary between children's and adult fiction. It succeeds brilliantly as a children's book, full of adventure and mystery and hairsbreadth escapes. The book ends with the Prologue to *Mirrorstorm*, the next book in the series. It will certainly hook young readers, and I'm looking forward to it.

Chris Wooding

– *The Fade*

Gollancz, London,
2007, 312pp, £10.99, t/p,
ISBN 978-0575076990

Reviewed by Ben
Jeapes

As well as being an exciting adventure about convincing characters in a thoroughly credible

setting, *The Fade* is one of the most realistic novels about humans that I have read for a long time. Humanity with all its strengths and weaknesses is a basic standard that you can take anywhere; tweak a few of the basic societal parameters and you're off. The stranger the society, the better the author has to be to make the characters within it as recognisable as the people next door. Chris Wooding is one of the better authors.

Orna is, in no particular order, a housewife, mother, assassin, ex-slave and bonded servant. She probably couldn't articulate the difference, if asked, between the slavery of her childhood and the life debt she owes to her clan, such that she requires her chief's consent even to have a baby and will cheat on her husband if required by a mission that the chief ordains. But she knows there is a difference. It's the same way that to a non-believer, Catholic and Protestant both look pretty similar. These are societies that are thousands of years old and they are ingrained at the most basic level of the minds of their subjects. It's a neat trick to squeeze into 312 pages.

The world exists in the small print of Clarke's Law, somewhere on the border between hard sf and fantasy. Probably settled by humans thousands of years ago – but there again, it was so long ago that it's not important how they came to be there and maybe they just are – the surface is so hostile that humans had to migrate underground. It is conveniently riddled with networks of caverns massive enough to support several competing civilisations. In a harder sf novel the caverns would be far too large to support themselves and the constant rockfalls would make them uninhabitable. But this is a novel about the people and about the society. There's magic, of a sort – or maybe it's just arcane knowledge not shared by the general populace. We never really learn exactly what the cthonomancers do. What's important is that they can do it.

Orna is caught up in a disastrous military operation that leaves her a widowed prisoner of war and has to escape, re-establish contact with her own side, find out what went wrong with the op and avenge accordingly. It helps to pay attention to the chapter numbers, as interspersed with all this is a series of out-of-sequence chapters describing her life from early childhood to just before the start of the tale. A lesser novel would be doing it just for effect; Wooding uses it to lay down details as the narrative proceeds that, just in time, support what comes after. I was reminded of Gromit laying down rails for his train, just before his train rolls over them. En route we encounter some truly gripping scenes, some unexpected twists, a good dose of redemption and an ending that can't really be called happy but which certainly satisfies – and is the only ending that could have been.

I found the biggest obstacle to getting into the novel was that the present day chapters are told in the present tense, past is past, and as the novel starts in the present day it starts in the present tense. I've never liked this narrative style before and I had a sinking feeling that the whole novel was going to be told this way. I really enjoyed being wrong.



Ken Slater

1918-2008

Ken Slater, SF veteran fan and long-time bookseller, died at the weekend. He was founder member #6 of the BSFA in 1958 and had recently celebrated his 90th birthday with family and friends in January 2008.

In 1947 Ken founded Operation Fantast, 'a very loosely organised group of fans who all wanted to "do their own thing" in various ways, and found that OF offered a sort of umbrella or shield which enabled them to do these things.' By 1950 membership had reached 800 people worldwide. In 1948 he used OF to help spread the word about the Whitcon, the first post-war British SF convention and now generally regarded as the first of the Eastercon series. Military service was to keep him away from the convention itself, although he sent along money to buy a round of drinks for everybody attending.

His fannish achievements and contributions were recognised in the UK and internationally with the Doc Weir Award in 1966 and the Big Heart Award in 1995. He was a guest of honour at the 1959 Eastercon and also, with his late wife Joyce, at the 1987 Worldcon in Brighton. At the first Hugo Award ceremony in Philadelphia in 1953, Forrest J Ackerman won the trophy for #1 Fan Personality, but Forrie said at the time that the award should have gone to Ken.

Throughout the decades, though, Ken was known to thousands of SF readers and fans as a man who sold and traded science fiction books and magazines, and along the way he was to lead many hundreds of people to science fiction fandom. His energy and enthusiasm never abated: last year he attended a convention in Poland and was still running a sales table at Novacon, although in the last two or three years he had reluctantly conceded that he needed a bit of help with carrying boxes.

His influence on British science fiction fandom is incalculable and he will be missed by many, many people within the science fiction community. The BSFA sends its condolences to Ken's family.

BSFA 50th ANNIVERSARY SHORT STORY COMPETITION

FOR WRITERS FROM THE UK & IRELAND

FIRST PRIZE £500

To celebrate 50 years of the BSFA's promotion of British science fiction, we are pleased to announce our 50th Anniversary Short Story Competition.

The competition is open to any writer resident in the UK or Ireland. The maximum length of stories is 8,000 words. The stories must be science fiction, but we're willing to take a broad definition of what that means. All entries must be accompanied by a £10 entry fee.

The winner will receive a cash prize of £500, the shortlisted runners up will receive £50, and the winning and shortlisted entries will be published in a special issue of FOCUS the BSFA's magazine for writers. The closing date for entries is midnight on Friday 5 September 2008 – the winner will be announced at the BSFA 50th Anniversary Birthday Party, 26 November 2008

For all the rules, and details on how to enter, visit:
www.bsfa.co.uk/bsfa/website/competition.aspx

Judges: Justina Robson, Stephen Baxter & Alistair Reynolds

FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

RC CHURCHILL'S *A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FUTURE* by Andy Sawyer

Let's think about that odd genre called the future history. It's often resulted in some of the most fascinating sf. There's the wide sweep of Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930), an account by a member of the far-future 18th Men, telepathically influencing the brain of some mediocre philosopher/lecturer from the Wirral who seems to believe he is making all this wonderful stuff up on his own. Or there is Cordwainer Smith's "Instrumentality of Mankind" sequence featuring the Rediscovery of Man and the liberation of the Underpeople in stories like "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard", "The Ballad of Lost C'Mell", and "The Dead Lady of Clown Town". The grand metaphysical sweep is counterpointed by a more secular "history": the stories into which we read the progress of China and the descendants of the VomAcht family. Where Stapledon gives us a single narrative account, Smith's stories are tales, fables and histories looked back on from a far future making "us", the audience, part of the story as the storyteller directly addresses us, reminding us that we know some, but not all, of the tale to be recounted.

A different version of the future-history is the kind of mock-history which weaves a tapestry out of sf itself.

The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* tells us about "recursive sf" – "Recycling material from the vast and growing storehouse of the already-written has long been a practice of sf writers." The central joke of R. C. Churchill's *A Short History of the Future* (1955) is that all fictional accounts of the future are as "true" as accounts of the past. The author, who was born in the same town as another explorer of fictional futures, H. G. Wells, reverses the procedures of "real" history to pretend that the various accounts of the future as charted by Ray Bradbury, Charles Chilton, Robert Graves, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Nevil Shute and Kurt Vonnegut (among others) are textbook accounts of one timespan.

Like genuine historical chronicles and interpretations of events, they are of course often at wild variance with each others. Churchill has much fun in attempting to "reconcile" them, gasping with scholarly exasperation as he notes discrepancies, especially among earlier historians who have quite clearly got the "future" of the 1940s wrong: "the film-makers of 1927 were mixing their periods in a most unscholarly fashion; not only were such instruments [the videophones of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*] absolutely unknown in 1940, they had not come into use as late as 1955 ... the film of 1927 appears to have confused the year 1940 with the year 2040." (That correction is footnoted by a wonderfully donnish "correction" of a 1923 novel in which Wellsian "moving pavements" are predicted for the Oxford of a decade later: "Not only did they not exist at Oxford in those days, they were unknown even at Cambridge.")

So, relying upon *Fahrenheit 451*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Seven Days in New Crete*, *Player Piano* and *Ape and Essence* (as well as referencing *Journey into Space* and a number of less well-known speculative futures of the early 1950s), Churchill gives us the real account of which his sources are partial and ideologically-driven versions. His sources are accounts written between 1949 and 1955. Some time in the late 1950s (he suggests 1957) is the Third World War which results, after an inter-Communist war, in the tripartite division of the world given in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell's description is, however, coloured by the particular circumstances of "Airstrip One" and his own political stance. *Fahrenheit 451* suggests a similar dystopia, but also suggests (as does the history of New Zealand implied by Huxley's *Ape and Essence*) that Oceania is less monolithic than Orwell wants us to believe. The all-powerful Party has crumbled by the end of the century, although remnants of its totalitarianism are still present in the accounts of Vonnegut (*Player Piano*) and David Karp (*One*). Between 1999 and 2026, the planets have been colonised, although Chilton's

claim of a 1965 moon-landing by pilots of British and Australian birth would put the origins of space travel back, perhaps, to a temporary renaissance following the inter-Communist war of the late 50s and early 60s. During the centuries following the beginning of the neo-pagan New Cretan civilization in 3000, the world changes, although the Second Christian Empire in the next millennium remembers enough of the past to bring back the custom of Test Matches between England and Australia.

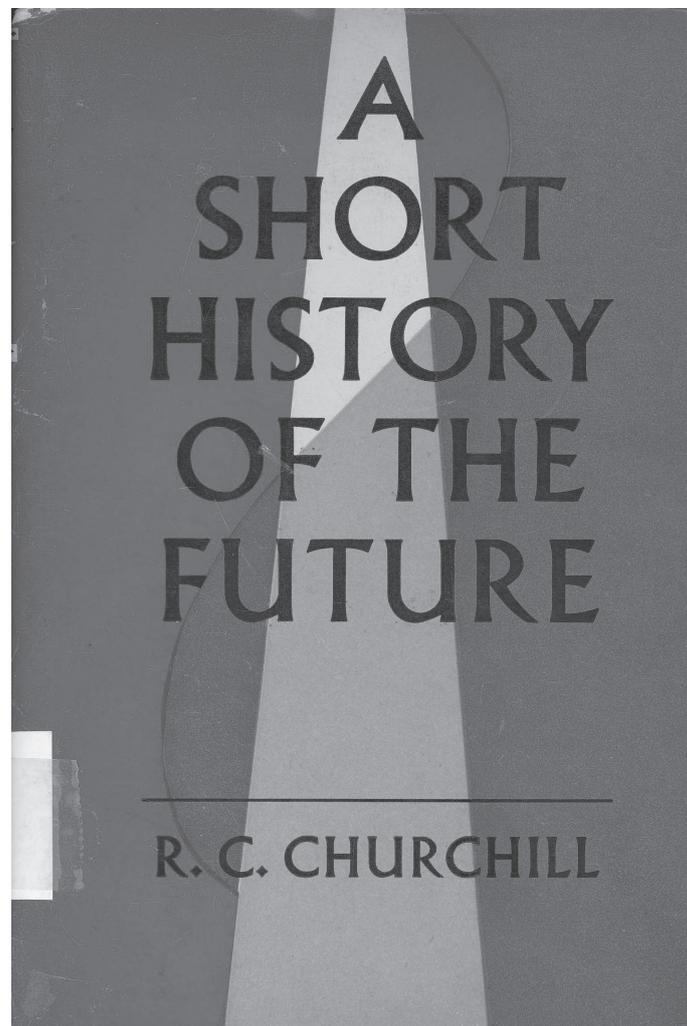
One might hope that, by then, we have selected a decent team.

The *next* millennium, beginning in the year 5000, sees the overrunning of the cricket-playing, foppish giants of the previous civilizations by the New Incan Empire led by Zahatopolk, according to the account of Bertrand Russell in *Nightmares of Eminent Persons*. Churchill's history finishes in 6001, when a new cycle of history seems to be beginning.

The game of assuming that the futures of sf are in fact one big future, or that the characters of popular fiction are all one related family, is, of course, one that has been done several times.

Churchill's version is particularly amusing because it makes fun of the way we describe and interpret the past – which is always dependent on the assumptions and scholarship we bring to it and therefore always subject to revision. However, we might criticise it in the same way as Churchill criticises some of his own sources. While the 1949 beginning solves the problem of, for example, those accounts which missed out the second World War, surely a scholar of his determination and attention to detail could have solved the question of whether the *entire* world suffered the blindness and subsequent overrunning by carnivorous plants John Wyndham shows happened in London sometimes towards the end of the 20th century?

Wyndham, in fact reviewed *A Short History...* for the journal *Truth*, and politely overlooks this point. "One must congratulate him," he writes, "on preserving throughout the scholarly detachment of the historian". We must agree, though, with Wyndham's amusement of the way these "eminent litterateurs" revel in destruction and pessimism just as much as "the more vulgar forms of science-fiction". Whether Buck Rogers or Bertrand Russell does it for you, there's *nothing* like a good invasion!



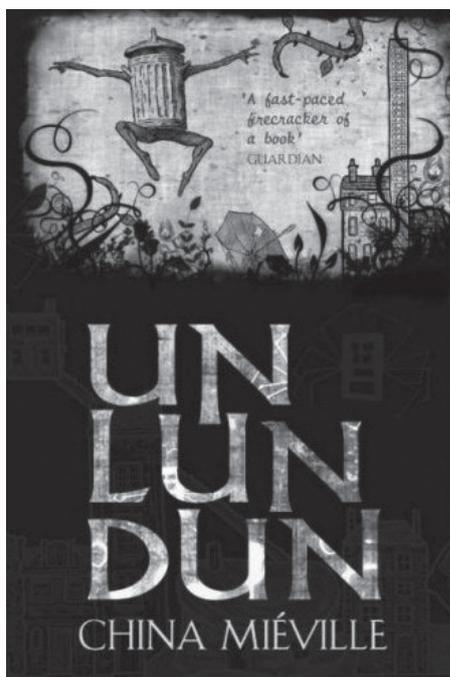
RESONANCES

by Stephen Baxter

On 5th May 2007 the *Guardian* newspaper ran a review of China Miéville's children's book *Un Lun Dun* by one Josh Lacey.

'When I've mentioned China Miéville to people over the past week or two,' Lacey begins, 'I've been surprised how few have heard of him. That's because he's a science fiction writer, I suppose, and his readers keep themselves to themselves ...' The review is generally positive: 'Miéville is constantly playful and inventive,' and so on. And yet the review ends, 'A common complaint about science-fiction writers is that they prefer ideas to people ... For science-fiction fans who don't mind the lack of characterisation, *Un Lun Dun* should provide lots of fun.' Thanks!

We're all too familiar with this kind of casual abuse of our genre, and indeed of works tainted by association like China's book – even in outlets like *The Guardian*, my own paper of choice all my adult life, and a paper with its own sf review column, currently by the estimable Eric Brown. Along with many others I've got into the habit of picking out such plums and sending them to Dave Langford's marvellous *Ansible* for his 'As Others See Us' column, an admirable catalogue of such offences (www.ansible.co.uk, and see relevant pieces in his collection *The SEX Column and Other Misprints*



[Cosmos Books, 2005]). I read AOSU, and laugh and sigh over the casual foolishness of those who assail us; we share the pain.

There are several reasons not to be too precious about this.

I have a feeling that in Britain at least this is just one aspect of the endemic 'two cultures' split, in which it is still fashionable in certain circles to proclaim one's ignorance of science.

This kind of sneering has always been with us. As the venerable Robert Conquest wrote as long ago as 1962 (in *Spectrum* 2), "'Sf's no good!' they bellow till we're deaf; / 'But this looks good ...' 'Well then, it's not sf.'"

We aren't alone. In the same issue of the *Guardian* which carried the Miéville review, a major article by Patrick McGrath on Daphne du Maurier's centenary was headlined, 'du Maurier has often been dismissed as a writer of popular romances, yet her work is infused with hidden violence ...' It's hard to know which is more dismissive, the genre label stuck on du Maurier's forehead, or that dread word 'popular' ...

There is a justifying context. I know that at times we trip up merely over definitions; to some science fiction is something with 'rockets and chemicals' in it, as Margaret Atwood once said when describing why her *Oryx and Crake* is ipso facto not sf, even though it's a future dystopia engulfed by genetic engineering.

You have to be a good sport, then.

But my own unscientific perception is that things are getting worse, not better. There seem to be more AOSU items in *Ansible* nowadays even than obituaries, and that's saying something (though Dave told me he thinks maybe the existence of the feature itself is encouraging sightings by 'sensitised readers').

And no amount of definitional mix-up or historical context can justify, for example, Patrick Ness's casual, ignorant rudeness in his review of Tricia Sullivan's *Sound Mind* in the *Guardian* of 20th January 2007: 'How frustrating to be a great writer who happens to work in sci-fi. For every Jeff Noon or Neal Stephenson who breaks out

to wider arenas, there's a Tricia Sullivan or a Jeff Vandermeer stuck on the shelves in that bit of the bookstore where most of you never wander. Hearteningly, Sullivan may be nearing escape velocity, and about time, too ... Be brave. Step into the sci-fi section. You can wear a floppy hat.' (As I noted a bit bitchily to *Ansible*, 'I'm intrigued by the floppy hat; what can he mean? And I couldn't help noticing the footnote that Ness's own new book is *Topics About Which I Know Nothing*; evidently a weighty tome.')

I think I'm getting sense of humour failure. Enough is enough, already.

But does any of this matter? I'm starting to think it does.

First: science fiction has become a major wellspring of our culture. In an interview in *Locus* in May 2004, Terry Pratchett remarked: 'Science fiction is like some big generation ship that's crash-landed on a planet, and in order to build new structures people are taking away bits of it. You can still see the shape of the thing, but everything has been cannibalised for different purposes ... I don't particularly think this is bad.' Terry's right. Science fictional tropes have become so familiar and widespread that a book like Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2002), a disaster story of the near future and so on the face of it clearly science fiction, is published without any reference to the genre at all. Science fiction has been assimilated and transformed, and sometimes the lack of acknowledgement of sf-ness isn't sinister but arises through a simple lack of perception of origins.

But all the carping and snobbery surely drives talent out of the field, or dissuades new talent from joining it. The late Kurt Vonnegut, for example, never liked being classed as an sf author because 'so many serious critics mistake [the file drawer labelled "science fiction"] for a urinal.' Who knows how many mute inglorious Miévilles have been deterred from contributing to a field they could have illuminated?

And the problem is that if there's no new talent there's no new material. Sf can only be pastiched, parodied, plundered and assimilated if there is a seam there to mine in the first place.

Second: the literature is intrinsically important, in my view. Science fiction is fiction; it is primarily entertainment. But as a literature that derives from an exploration of change, it is a way of educating

us to learn about change, to internalise it – not so much prophecy as a kind of mass therapy, perhaps. As such it has always served an educative role in accustoming its readers to think about other possibilities, other places and times – to deal with change. If you read histories of the Second World War, as I have for a recent project, you'll be struck how often people made sense of the novel horrors around them as being 'like something out of HG

Wells'. In 2007, history hasn't ended yet. In the coming few years climate adjustments alone will ensure that whatever else we run out of – oil, fresh water, clean air – change itself will not be in short supply. And we're going to have to deal with it.

I'm coming to believe it's time to challenge the way Others See Us, because it is doing us harm.

This isn't just a weariness on my part with the constant dissing of a genre I've loved all my life, and indeed have devoted my working life too. I happen to believe we need a vital and alive sf, because in the coming dangerous century, we will need minds capable of coping with change more than ever before.

So let's respond to the persistent abuse of our genre by the smugly ignorant literati. It's going to take a while to change the course of an entire culture, but I'd predict we'll see results in no more than, oh, a generation or two. I'll make a start with a stiff letter to the *Guardian* about that Miéville review. *Dear Sir ... Disgusted of Northumberland ...* That'll show them!

“ I'm coming to believe it's time to challenge the way Others See Us, because it is doing us harm ”

THE NEW X

BACON AND EGGS, PLEASE by Graham Sleight

In the retrospective spirit of this issue, I suppose I should join in with the job of looking back at 2007, trying to sum up highlights and trends. An imp of perversity, though, makes me want to try something else: talking about one 2007 book that I think *Vector* readers might not have seen, and that might be of special interest.

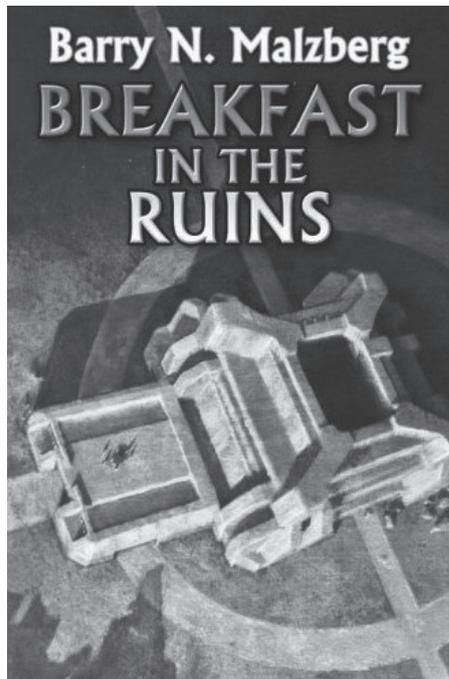
The book, Barry Malzberg's *Breakfast in the Ruins* (Baen) is not strictly a 2007 book. Its core is the text of Malzberg's landmark collection of criticism, *The Engines of the Night* (1982). That book is bolstered here by almost the same amount again of more recent criticism, plus a couple of stories about an sf writer called Ruthven. There are many things about the collection (not least the title) that reinforce the impression you could already have. That impression is that Malzberg is a curmudgeon who hates everything and thinks the world of science fiction is doomed, inconsequential, and tends to send its practitioners to madness and/or poverty. One might well think this from, say, Malzberg novels like *Galaxies* or *Beyond Apollo*, which savagely critique sf's wish-fulfillment dreams, or from his public pronouncements. But it's actually not the case. Or at least, it's not that simple.

(A personal note here: a typical Malzberg appearance was the one he made on the first sf convention panel I ever attended. It was at Readercon, in Boston in 2001. The topic was "And I alone escaped the ghetto": sf writers managing to create for themselves careers outside the genre. The panellists were F. Brett Cox, Samuel R. Delany, Jonathan Lethem, Kelly Link, Gordon Van Gelder, and Malzberg. I turned up principally on the strength of Malzberg's and Delany's names, though on that occasion, the very visible star was Jonathan Lethem. He had just won the National Book Critics' Circle Award for *Motherless Brooklyn*, but was still happy to acknowledge his past in sf and that he might well return there in future. After a couple of rounds of comments generally admiring Lethem's achievement, Malzberg delivered an extraordinary monologue. I didn't tape it or take notes, but I'd swear my recollection was accurate. *I have* (said Malzberg) *pursued a career in sf for three*

decades now. I've written works I'm proud of, and I can look back on my body of work and say it's the best I could achieve. But sitting here next to Jonathan, I realise I've failed. No-one will remember my work – at least not in comparison to his. I've failed as a writer and failed as a man. The room, as you can imagine, was pretty much silent as he delivered this obviously heartfelt speech. Lethem, with characteristic grace, replied that he didn't think Malzberg would be forgotten, that he had created works of huge importance to sf. The room relaxed, and we moved on.)

Anyhow, given this (not atypical) performance, it comes as a real shock to see how unabashedly celebratory much of *Breakfast in the Ruins* is. There's an essay called "The Cutting Edge", for instance, listing Malzberg's ten favorite sf stories; it praises, for instance, Bester's "The Men Who Murdered Mohammed" for "the many-voiced, restless, surgically probing style [which was] beyond the level of the best "literary" writers of Bester's time." (134) In another piece, he finds words of praise-with-reservations for Mark Clifton, co-author of *They'd Rather Be Right*, famously the least-loved winner of the Best Novel Hugo: "Despite the understated and occasionally clumsy style, Clifton was as innovative as Cyril Kornbluth or Alfred Bester in what he did with the field" (125). And in some places he's unequivocal in his celebration – of Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon* and Damon Knight's *Humpty Dumpty: An Oval*, for instance.

But I don't want to paint a one-sided picture. When Malzberg finds things to despair about, he heads down that road very fast indeed. A memorial piece on Cornell Woolrich begins, "At the end, in the last year, he looked three decades older. The booze had wrecked him, the markets had wrecked him, *he* had wrecked him." (106) He talks of a structural decline in the field's editorial standards, of the degree to which its great works have their plots recycled by lesser lights, of the anaesthetizing avoidance strategies embodied by the convention circuit, of, above all, *failure*. Except for a few isolated incidents, the sf field fails to live up to its promise, is satisfied with substandard work, drives those who try to earn a living from it into the ground. It's not that Malzberg dislikes science



fiction, it's that he's perennially disappointed by it.

One angle of especially strong interest for Malzberg is the economic: how sf works as a commercial enterprise, and what effect that has on its practitioners. His epigraph to *The Engines of the Night* is a quotation from Frederik Pohl in 1979: "the aggregate amount I paid out as an editor to everybody, over a period of thirty years from 1939 to 1969, as editor of *Astonishing Stories* and *Super Science Stories*, as editor of the *Star* series of original anthologies for Ballantine, as editor of more than a dozen reprint anthologies over that period, and finally as editor of *Galaxy*, *If*, *Worlds of Tomorrow* for more than a decade – the total of checks, for all of them put together, to every contributor, is probably about [a] quarter of a million" (5). Even inflation-adjusting those dollars to today's level, even multiplying by the number of outlets that might pay writers now (fewer magazines, more book publishers, I guess), you'd still get a pretty low number out. And he concludes the Mark Clifton essay I mentioned above with this: "Mark Clifton, a major writer of his time, protégé of Campbell, Hugo winner, master of psionics, envy of the fans and colleagues for his shotgun career ... Mark Clifton, that innovator and man of wisdom earned for all his science fiction in his lifetime something considerably less than twenty thousand dollars." (125) (It should be noted that Malzberg knows whereof he speaks on these financial issues: he worked for many years at the Scott Meredith Literary Agency, and had plenty of contact with that side of the field.) The lesson is this: written sf is an economically tiny field, and only a very few people can make a decent living

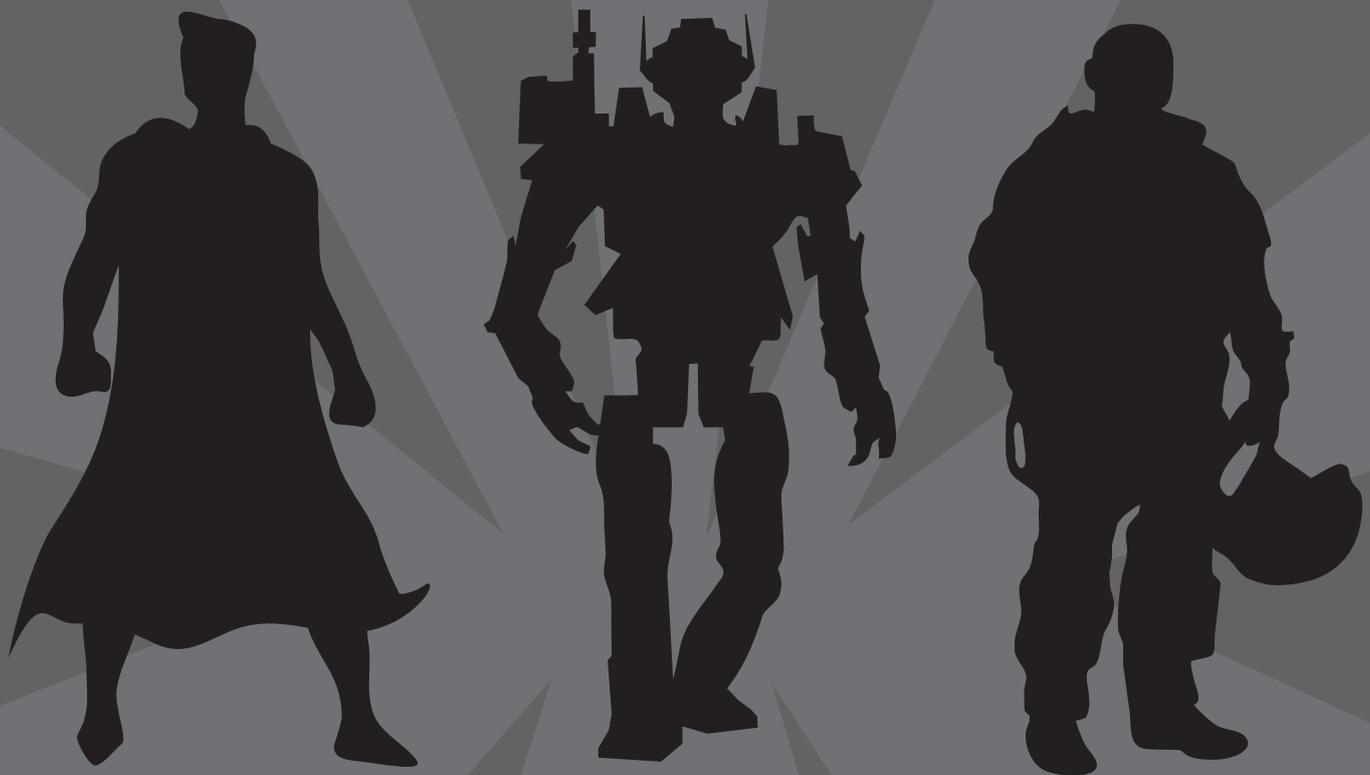
out of it. I don't see anything that's happened since the Pohl quotation that would make that assessment radically different: although there has been a boom in sf novel publishing, numbers have now stabilised, and what information there is in public about novel advances (for instance the recent survey conducted by Tobias Buckell) makes clear how punitive the financial realities still are for almost everyone.

This ties in with a recurring Malzberg theme, that the history of the field can't be reduced to a study merely of its works: "the history of science fiction must, by definition, exist truly in the interstices... by definition, the field could be explained only by material which would be in turns libellous, private, intuitive or paranoid, and that even the most lucid of scholarly works could deal only with symptomatic representations of the great underside of the field." (67). (As another sf scholar put it to me, the real history of the field could only be told by giving a comprehensive account of who slept with who.) It's clear that Malzberg knows a great deal of this underside, but that he only feels able to drip-feed a fraction of that into a public forum like this. But he's also astonishingly comprehensive in his knowledge of the overt side of sf as well: there seems to be scarcely a pulp author or magazine he doesn't know of and have an opinion on.

A final sample of Malzberg's world-view and sense of humour. He recounts a conversation with Bruce Sterling in July 1989. Sterling, he avers, said: "Fifty years old and still writing! That would be horrible! When I'm fifty I hope I won't be writing and involved in all this shit. I'd rather be dead than that pathetic." To which Malzberg replies, "Oh come on, Bruce. I'm fifty years old, well, I'll be fifty on Monday and I'm still writing or at least trying to write and I'm not pathetic." Sterling: "Oh, Barry, you're pathetic all right. You just haven't accepted it yet." (As Malzberg notes: "You'll be 50 in 2003, Bruce. We'll discuss matters then."). So that's my back-cover blurb for *Breakfast in the Ruins*: "not pathetic".

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