War in SF
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The British Science Fiction Association

President    Stephen Baxter
Chair        Tony Cullen
Treasurer    Martin Potts
   61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton
   Near Tamworth
   B79 0JJ
   mtpotts@zoom.co.uk
Membership
   Peter Wilkinson
   39 Glyn Avenue, New Barnet
   Herts., EN4 9 PJ
   bsfamembership@yahoo.co.uk

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Orbiter writing groups
Contact    Gillian Rooke
           Southview, Pilgrims Lane
           Chilham, Kent
           CT4 8AB

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           Park Street,
           St Albans,
           AL2 2HL
           focus.editors@blueyonder.co.uk

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Editor    Ian Whates
           finiang@aol.com

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Vector website: http://www.vector-magazine.co.uk
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Vector
Features, Editorial and Letters: Niall Harrison
   73 Sunderland Avenue
   Oxford
   OX2 8DT
Book Reviews: Kari Sperring
   19 Uphall Road
   Cambridge
   CB1 3HX
Production: Liz Batty
   emb51@cam.ac.uk
   Anna Feruglio Dal Dan
   annafdd@gmail.com

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Torque Control

First, an apology that I’d been hoping I wouldn’t have to make again quite so soon: sorry that this issue and the last have been late. The cause has been that usual catch-all, real life getting in the way of BSFA commitments. As I write, things appear to be getting back on track — the next issue, which will be Vector’s review of 2008, is shaping up nicely — but I don’t want to tempt fate by promising anything. Those of you who are online can, of course, get some updates from the forum on the BSFA website [1], or by posting a query on the blog incarnation of Torque Control [2] — and at the latter you can also find regular (ish) reviews, link roundups, and discussions, such as a recent debate about Stephen Baxter’s latest novel Flood, with Adam Roberts, Graham Sleight, and Karen Burnham [3] — but we do appreciate they are not a full substitute for the magazine itself.

On to the issue at hand, which you’ll have noticed has an extra twelve pages to fit everything in — thanks to Anna Feruglio Dal Dan for helping out with production of this one. We’re tackling war in sf — which is, for better and worse, one of the genre’s central topics. Stephen Baxter examines the many and varied heirs to The War Of The Worlds, and considers the extent to which it can provide a controlling metaphor for the twentieth century. (One that he doesn’t mention, for entirely understandable reasons, is a play that I saw as a student: Sherlock Holmes Against the Martians, which is exactly the sort of proto-League of Extraordinary Gentlemen it sounds like from the title, and written, I believe though I haven’t verified, by the Jonathan Barnes who has now had two novels published by Gollancz. Stay Loyal! Remain Pure! Become Martian!) James Holden, meanwhile, seeks a new way to understand Wells’ original novel, taking a brief correspondence between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud on the nature of war as a starting point. Skipping forward some, Martin McGrath explores the politics — and heritage — of the “Green Soldier Universe” seen in John Scalzi’s novel Old Man’s War and its sequels, while Nick Hubble provides a detailed and compelling reading of Sarah Hall’s Tiptree-winning (and Clarke-nominated) novel The Carhullan Army. In his final column, Saxton Bullock looks at the revamped Battlestar Galactica alongside what for my money is now the best science fiction TV series going, Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles. In his column, Stephen Baxter (him again) looks at the history of the “Hitler wins” novel; and we have reviews of various war stories (and other books, of course) in this issue’s First Impressions, including Paul McAuley’s widely-praised The Quiet War.

That’s a lot of ground covered, but it hardly scratches the surface of the topic. War crops up everywhere in sf: one of my formative encounters with the genre, in fact, was through the lens of Games Workshop’s futuristic wargame Warhammer 40,000, with its (to me as a teenager, at any rate) grimly enticing promise that “In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war!” This year I’ve encountered war in novels as different as Nick Harkaway’s The Gone-Away World, and Paul McAuley’s aforementioned The Quiet War, and always accepted it without pause. But perhaps we should be a bit more aware of the implications of sf’s reliance on conflict. At any rate, for an additional perspective, I enthusiastically refer you to Gwyneth Jones’ essay “Wild Hearts in Uniform” [4] which looks at the mass-market literary end of the subgenre, in particular the novels of David Weber, David Feintuch, Elizabeth Moon and — of course — Lois McMaster Bujold. “The science fiction that sells,” Jones argues, “and therefore must be accepted as deeply, truthfully representative of the genre ... is a literature of arousal, of guilty passion and violent emotion, secured by any means necessary”; which chimes interestingly, to my mind, with the sentiment expressed by Bujold in her Guest of Honor speech at this year’s Worldcon, that many sf novels are “fantasies of political agency” [5]. The popularity of war within sf, in this view, is not just about explosions, nor is it just about providing a familiar stage on which to perform a plot; it is that it’s an obvious way to dramatise change, to show a society in motion rather than at rest, and to plausibly (perhaps) set up a moment in which an individual action can have enormous repercussions.

And don’t forget to nominate for the BSFA Awards! Send your nominations for Best Novel, Best Short Fiction, Best Artwork and Best Non-Fiction to Donna Scott at <awards@bsfa.co.uk> by January 16th 2009, then look for the shortlists soon after.

Endnotes
To the editors —

After reading and re-reading Mr. Ludlow’s piece in the last issue of Vector, I was left in a state of confusion and irritation. I freely admit that Mr. Ludlow’s tone and style rubbed me up the wrong way, but when I sat down and started to think about it, I realized that my irritation stemmed most of all by the fact that while I understood that Mr. Ludlow was very upset about something, I was far less sure what this something was. To the best of my understanding, he seems to be concerned that Somebody on the Internet is Wrong. To which I can only say, welcome to the club! Been there, written the rant, survived the resulting flamewar.

I can venture that Mr. Ludlow hasn’t survived the same number of flamewars I have gone through, or he would have learned a few things, to wit:

1. Not only is it the case that on the Internet everybody has an opinion, the irritating fact is that a lot of people can and will defend that opinion with surprisingly good arguments. It is then that it starts to dawn on you that a lot of people who go to the trouble of articulating them actually do have opinions worth listening to. (I will never forget the moment when, bemoaning the absence of good literature in post-war Italy, I was enthusiastically regaled with a pretty hefty and certainly well-thought out list of high-caliber authors by somebody who, if I recall correctly, lived in Minnesota and did not have a literature degree.)

2. If you are wailing and tearing your hair out because of something, it is useful to provide some specific examples. Mr. Ludlow starts by pointing out the dreadful, dreadful problem of reviews that are written for base and unworthy motives (“The reviewer could be completely ignorant (in the general sense), completely biased, have an axe to grind, or simply out to make a name for herself through outrageous, insulting or controversial reviews.”), but then fails to provide examples of the same. This is a pity because it robs me of the opportunity to contradict him on facts, as opposed to his own word that such things exists (let alone that there are so, so many of them around).

3. Since we’re at it, I will point out the problem with alternating male and female pronouns in an effort to achieve gender-neutral prose — when it happens that the turn of the female pronoun falls on the villain of the piece, one starts thinking that all outrageous, insulting and controversy-seeking reviewers are female.

4. If you don’t know why something happened, and you go to the trouble of saying so (“I don’t know the exact details behind the Emerald City and The Alien Online decisions.”), it is really clumsy to then not trot out your own interpretation of what’s happened (“but I can’t help wondering if, other considerations such as time and personal life aside, some thicker skins on the part of the reviewers and their hosts wouldn’t have hurt”), but even reproach people for it (“Reviews, no matter the original intention or quality, will always get occasional angry responses. Get over it. Deal with it.”)

5. The world in general and fandom in particular are full of smart people who resent being patronized. (“And as we all know, everyone has an opinion. That’s just human nature. If you disagree with me, then certainly you’ve demonstrated you have an opinion on this at least!”) Being critical does not automatically mean being negative. Look up the word in the dictionary.”

6. There’s a lot to be said for humility. After having been outsmarted enough times, you learn that conceding that something is your opinion and not a Natural Law or the command of the Divine Providence is not a fault. And this is, more generally, my complaint. Mr. Ludlow seems to suggest that reviews should be more than “some random guy’s opinion.” Well, what should they then be? The opinion of some non random guy? How is this non-random guy chosen? Or are they supposed to be more than opinions? I was ready to be treated to a general theory of literary worth while reading the piece, but did not find it. This did not overly surprise me, because as far as I know, nobody has been able to agree to a standard objective way of measuring the goodness, significance, worthiness or literary merit of a piece of fiction. Everybody including Harold Bloom has to content themselves with giving their opinions. Even a suggestion of what makes that opinion more or less reliable would have been welcomed, but all I got from Mr. Ludlow was a series of vague complaints against unnamed villains. At the end of the piece, I was irritated and not much enlightened.

Of course, if one wants to take the responsibility to say that a review is a bad review, one has to point a finger and either end up calling names or tone down the rhetoric. I think the second path is perfectly possible. For example, one can pick a review I did not particularly approve of in the last issue of Vector, Martyn Taylor’s, and point out as politely as possible that categorizing the readership of Planet Stories and Tales of Wonder, as well as the audience of Flash Gordon, as “geeks with thick glasses, bridgework and questions about acne” is rather insulting to teenagers, geeks and fandom alike. It is a facile and superficial categorization that relies on a wink-wink expectation of complicity for a cheap laugh at the expense of the stereotypical class nerd. Since most of the readers of Vector are, or were, or have good friends who are or were, that kind of nerd, this strikes me as not a very clever move. See? I pointed out a specific example, given my reasons, tried not to be insulting, signed my name to my opinion. Not so difficult, surely?

Anna Feruglio Dal Dan

To the editors —

I won’t respond to most of James Bacon’s letter because it seems to boil down to a disagreement with my tone and presumption. However, it was interesting to be reminded that it was Patrick Ness who was the reviewer allegedly sneering at SF. Since Stephen Baxter published his article, Ness has published The Knife Of Never Letting Go, an award-winning science fiction novel. I will leave it as an exercise for the reader to decide whether this is a man who disdains the genre but, beyond that, I would recommend that James picks up a copy because it is the best SF novel I read this year. If Baxter’s The H-Bomb Girl can make the Clarke Award shortlist, I’d like to see this on next year’s shortlist. Or — who knows? — maybe even the BSFA Award shortlist.

Martin Lewis
H.G. Wells's *The War Of The Worlds* as a Controlling Metaphor for the Twentieth Century

By Stephen Baxter

This paper is based on a talk given to the H.G. Wells Society seminar on 'Wells and Science and Philosophy' at Imperial College, London, 28th September 2007.

**Introduction**

The continuing relevance of H.G. Wells's 1898 novel *The War Of The Worlds* [1] is illustrated by Niall Ferguson's *The War of the World* (2006) [2]. This is a history of the 'age of hatred' of the twentieth century, showing how the Second World War was the climax of decades of savage warfare which scarred the globe from the 1930s to the 1950s. And Ferguson takes his title, and indeed his controlling metaphor, from Wells's novel, calling it 'a work of singular prescience. In the century after the publication of his book, scenes like the ones Wells imagined became a reality in cities all over the world ...' (xxxiii-xxxiv).

How does a book written at the end of the nineteenth century come to stand, in a book published in the twenty-first century, as a metaphor for the entire twentieth?

The purpose of this essay is to trace Wells's influence as exemplified through a century of reactions to this single work in non-fiction and in fiction, in restagings, reimaginings and fresh explorations of Wells's novel, and in sub-genres deriving from it. These are mirrors that expose the themes of the work itself. My survey includes a fictional response by the older Wells to his own early work.

**The Movies**

The highest-profile reimaginings of Wells's *The War Of The Worlds* (WOTW in the following) have been the Hollywood movies, which explore the book's most central theme: the invasion of the homeland.

I suspect that George Pal's magnificent 1953 Hollywood movie, reshown on TV many times during my 1960s childhood, was my own first introduction to H.G. Wells and his works. Pal relocated the Martian invasion to 1950s small-town middle America, though we are shown glimpses of a world-wide war: a cracked Taj Mahal, a twisted Eiffel Tower, global tactical planning in Washington. The viewpoint character, Clayton Forrester, is no Wellsian small man but a scientist who is central to the fightback, in true Hollywood tradition. But in 1953 audiences were able to accept a tough message. Even nuclear weapons fail against the Martians, and Forrester's efforts to develop bioweapons are broken up by panicking mobs. The invasion of Los Angeles is oppressive and intense.

Steven Spielberg's 2005 version, relocated once again into then-present-day America, is another dark reworking. This time the aliens don't come from space but erupt from beneath the earth, like almighty suicide-bomber sleeper cells. Spielberg deliberately echoes 9/11 imagery – the wall of notices pleading for news of the lost, people fleeing from walls of smoke billowing between buildings. Tom Cruise's everyman hero lands a few punches, almost turning himself into a suicide bomber, but he is far more helpless than Clayton Forrester ever was. There can have been few more powerful depictions of ordinary people under attack in their homes – indeed in their cars, a strikingly American motif. There's also a strong contrast with similar movies made only a few years earlier. In *Independence Day*, for instance, (1996, dir Roland Emmerich), humans beat off the alien invaders.

A less familiar restaging is *War Of The Worlds: New Millennium*, published in 2005 by Douglas Niles, an American writer of military fiction [3]. The Martians disable our Martian rovers and orbiters, and come equipped with tripods, heat rays, black dust, and some upgrades: they set off a nuclear bomb above the Earth to disable our communications. This is a fairly straightforward war story, exploring how it would be if the Martians had a go in the present era.

The prototype of such adaptations was Orson Welles's 1938 radio dramatisation, which famously caused widespread panic by relocating WOTW to New Jersey (*Mercury Theatre of the Air*, CBS, October 30th 1938). Welles's piece frightened a population ready to be alarmed, given
the gathering crisis in Europe. People drove to the village where the Martians were supposed to have landed, while evacuations were reported in some parts of New York. Wells complained about ‘rewriting’ and about how Welles and CBS had ‘overstepped their rights’. But the parties were reconciled when Wells met Welles in America in 1940 [4].

This strategy of restaging the Martian invasion in the then present demonstrates that the dramatists understood Wells’s central theme: the invasion of the homeland. At a time when the British exported war to faraway shores, Wells launched his alien forces into the cosy environs of southern England itself. And through these relocations, successive reworkings have encapsulated the paranoia of successive ages. Wells wrote the book in the first place to prick the paranoid guilt of the imperial British. He says in Book 1 Chapter 1, ‘The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martianswarred in the same spirit?’ George Pal’s 1950s movie used the Martians as a metaphor for the (apparently) monolithic, merciless might of the Soviet Union, while Spielberg’s 2005 film attempts to capture the paranoid post-9/11 mood of our times.

**Tales of Invasion**

Apart from direct remakes of WOTW itself, a legacy of Wells’s book is the extensive alien-invasion subgenre of science fiction, including Heinlein’s *The Puppet Masters* (1951) [5], Jack Finney’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1955) [6], Niven & Pournelle’s *Footfall* (1985) [7] and many movies including Emmerich’s *Independence Day* (1996). An invasion from beyond the atmosphere was a new idea by Wells that has been explored many times since.

One example of a very Wellsian invasion story is John Wyndham’s enjoyable *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) [8]. A ‘meteor’ shower delivers invaders not to the land but to the ocean’s abyssal depths. Though there are faint hopes that we can coexist with the ‘xenobaths’, as our respective realms barely overlap, conflict is seen as inevitable in a bleak Darwinian sense: ‘Any intelligent form is its own absolute; and there cannot be two absolutes’ (180). At last the polar ices are melted and our world flooded. It’s commonplace to be unkind about this sort of book, but American apocalyptic fear was hard to come by.

Against this backdrop we encounter the enigma of the first Martians to land on Earth. A ‘giant human’ is broken free from the induced trance and given the task of reporting to the authorities. He finds a world still reeling from the war. The central theme is not whether we can coexist with the ‘xenobaths’, as our respective realms barely overlap, conflict is seen as inevitable in a bleak Darwinian sense: ‘Any intelligent form is its own absolute; and there cannot be two absolutes’ (180). At last the polar ices are melted and our world flooded. It’s commonplace to be unkind about this sort of book, but American apocalyptic fear was hard to come by.

Wells’s English setting inspired a peculiarly British substrand of invasion stories set in the Home Counties, for example the popular 1950s BBC television serials featuring the exploits of Professor Quatermass. This reflects a memory of a time when the south of England really was the hub of a global empire, and was worth attacking in a world invasion. And since *Doctor Who* drew heavily on *Quatermass*, the south of England continues to be the focus of exotic alien attacks on BBC television every Saturday night, a strange legacy of Wells’s great tale.

**Sequels and sidebars**

WOTW has at its heart an extraordinarily detailed account of a military campaign, which lends tremendous narrative conviction. But many readers have longed for answers to the inevitable question – what might have happened next? It was a question Wells himself never answered, but to which other authors have responded.

Garret P. Serviss’s *Edison’s Conquest of Mars: How the People of All the Earth, Fearful of a Second Invasion from Mars, Under the Inspiration and Leadership of Thomas A. Edison, The Great Inventor, Combined to Conquer the Warlike Planet* [9] was the first direct sequel to WOTW. It appeared immediately after the first serialisations of the original novel in America in the Boston Post, and ran during spring 1898 in the Post and the New York Evening Journal. Serviss, the Post’s science editor, was an astronomer and popular science writer who would go on to write rather good original science fiction of his own. To develop his serial Serviss sought the cooperation of Thomas Edison, then a great popular American hero, who would become the hero of a number of wish-fulfilling ‘edisonades’, of which this tale is a prototype.

In the aftermath of the Wells invasion, the American government leads an international effort to mount a counter-invasion of a hundred ships. Among Edison’s companions are Lord Kelvin, the great physicist, and Roentgen, the discoverer of X-rays. The ships, powered by static electricity and armed with ‘disintegrator weapons’ (which work by manipulating subatomic vibrations) have been developed by Edison after studies of the Martian war machines. The fleet reaches a Lowellian Mars laced by canals. But the besieged Martians throw up a planet-girdling smoke cloud, and the Earthmen’s losses are heavy. The speculation about how a whole planet can be subdued is interesting; like Alexander assaulting the Persian empire they understand they must strike the heart. Edison hits on the solution. On this Mars there is too much water, not too little, and by blocking a key dam the Earthmen cause a global flood. This is genocide, of course: ‘in front of [the advancing flood] all life, behind it all death’ (221), but the Earthmen do show some remorse about the fate of those ‘innocent of enmity’ (222).

There are many niggling inconsistencies with Wells, which may be explained by the haste with which the serial must have been composed, based on pirated copies of Wells’s own serialisation. Most notably, the Martians are giant humanoids, rather than Wells’s tentacular monsters.

And the tone of the work is entirely different from Wells’s. The Americans beat the Martians! Serviss and his editor evidently believed that the Bostonians of 1898 were an exuberant lot who were not ready for Wells’s hubristic-busting: ‘Even while the Martians had been upon the Earth ... a feeling – a confidence had manifested itself in France, to a minor extent in England, and particularly in Russia, that the Americans might discover the means to meet and master the invaders’ (12).

But Serviss does dramatise a theme embedded in Wells’s novel, that of defiance. Even against an overwhelming foe we long to fight back, to land at least one blow. This is shown in the *Thunder Child* episode of WOTW (Book 1 Chapter 17): ‘The whole steamer from end to end rang with a frantic cheering that was taken up first by one and
then by all in the crowding multitude of ships and boats that was driving out to sea’. And indeed the US was to fight off other sorts of tyranny in the twentieth century.

Another sort of defiance is dramatised in a comic-book spin-off of WOTW, Marvel Comics’ ‘Killraven’ series [10], published from 1973. This shows a reoccupation of the Earth by the Martians a century after the Wells invasion, with their bacterial problems resolved. We survive as food stock and vermin, and the Martians set us to fight each other for sport. The hero, Killraven, is a survivor of these gruesome gladiatorial contests, and a killer of Martians; he is a superhero among the rats. The series was created by an American comic writer called Roy Thomas, who said he drew his inspiration from the visions of the artilleryman in Wells’s book (Book 2 chapter 7), with his visions of farmed people, fattened and stupid, of collaborators who would hunt their own kind for the Martians – and of men living in the sewers and fighting back, like the resistance movements of the wars to come.

Wells’s account focuses on events in southern England, but the Martian invasion was a global attack. What effect did the invasion have in other parts of the world – America, China, India? In Howard Waldrop’s 1987 story ‘Night of the Cooters’ [11] the unfortunate Martians land in Texas and come up against a no-nonsense Sheriff: ‘You mean to tell me Mars is attacking London, England and Pachuco County, Texas? ... This won’t do. These things done attacked citizens in my jurisdiction, and they killed my horse.’ ‘Cooters’ is a poised and very funny story, gently guying both WOTW and robust American responses of the Serviss kind.

War Of The Worlds: Global Dispatches [12], edited by Kevin Anderson and published in 1996, builds on Waldrop’s idea (and indeed includes Waldrop’s story). Various historical and fictional characters from around the globe detail their different perspectives on the Martian incursion. The book is flawed by variable quality and a lack of central consistency, but the best pieces are gems.

Anderson himself contributes a piece showing astronaut Percival Lowell hopefully building vast eight-legged ‘spider cabs’ clatter in an afterword, ‘Verne’ sketches a post-Martian world: the invasion ‘led to a far better [future] for humanity than might have been, had the tripods never come’, a future of technological advancement, nationalism giving way to global unity, and a general belief in progress. By 1928 humans are mounting a reverse expedition to Mars, but ‘we should go to learn, even from the defeated’.

Another post-Martian future is depicted in Scarlet Traces, a graphic-novel sequel to WOTW, published in 2003 by writer Ian Edginton and artist D’Israeli [13]. Ten years after the fall of the Martians, Britain has been transformed by the acquisition of Martian technology. There are flying machines, heat-ray technology is used for domestic heating, and eight-legged ‘spider cabs’ clatter along London’s streets. But there are dark sides to the triumph. The plot concerns the uncovering by a survivor of the Thunder Child of a scheme to drain young girls of their blood to feed a last captive Martian, who has proven the ‘Rosetta Stone’ in unravelling the secrets of Martian technology. The British Empire has become ‘the envy of the world ... or rather feared by it’. The hero wonders if, ‘while the Martians are thwarted, we have in some insidious way succumbed to a form of conquest by proxy’ (quotes pp10-11). While Wells’s concern was to show Britain how it feels to be on the receiving end of superior power, Scarlet Traces shows how even a successful war can transform and corrupt a society, how war delivers jolts of technological change that can harm as much as benefit, and how war can be used as an instrument of social control.

A more recent sequel is David Cian’s Megawar, 2005 [14]. Cian writes novelisations and computer game tie-ins under various pseudonyms. Megawar is set in the near future, in a world in which both Wells’s 1890s invasion

James who goes on to write WOTW.

Political and social transformations would surely follow the Martians’ devastation. Walter Jon Williams shows a China already reeling under invasion by one sort of ‘foreign devils’ actually liberated by the invasion of another lot. Similarly Mark Tiedemann has Tolstoy and Lenin witnessing a Russian assault that will lead to an acceleration of the march to revolution.

One of the most interesting ideas is developed by Dave Wolverton, who has Jack London witnessing a fight between a captive Martians and huskies in Alaska. Wolverton observes that the Martians might have been better suited to the poles, which are cold and arid like their Mars, and far from the ranges of the great tropical diseases which killed them. Perhaps, even when the rest of the invasion has failed, the Martians might live on there, and Earth would become a shared world.

The pick of the bunch is a tale by Gregory Benford and David Brin. As the Martians scale the Eiffel tower, which they think is one of their own, Jules Verne turns electricity on them (‘Loose the hounds of electrodynamics!’). Later, in an afterword, ‘Verne’ sketches a post-Martian world: the invasion ‘led to a far better [future] for humanity than might have been, had the tripods never come’, a future of technological advancement, nationalism giving way to global unity, and a general belief in progress. By 1928 humans are mounting a reverse expedition to Mars, but ‘we should go to learn, even from the defeated’.

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A more recent sequel is David Cian’s Megawar, 2005 [14]. Cian writes novelisations and computer game tie-ins under various pseudonyms. Megawar is set in the near future, in a world in which both Wells’s 1890s invasion
and Orson Welles’ 1938 invasion actually happened. Now the Martians come for a third crack, landing in the middle of the continental United States. A military team is sent in to contain them; this time we start firing as soon as the cylinders unscrew. Megawar is a wish-fulfilling game-like shoot-'em-up of dubious taste.

A more gentle sequel is ‘Ulla, Ulla’ (2001) by British writer Eric Brown [19]. NASA astronauts on Mars stumble across an underground cavern containing cylinders, fighting machines and dead Martians. Back on Earth one of the astronauts is invited to a manor house in Dorset, where are stored the remains of a failed Martian ‘invasion’ of the 1880s.

The theme explored by these writers, implicitly or explicitly, is the great dislocation of a world war. Nothing is the same after the Martians, just as nothing was the same after our own world wars. Innate pressures are released; old empires collapse, new ones rise up. Wells sketches this sort of possibility in his own final chapters. The dead Martians and their weapons are examined, men prepare for another attack – and it appears the Martians have made an assault on Venus. And the consciousness of mankind is transformed. [The invasion] has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonwealth of mankind’ (Book 2 chapter 10).

Mash-ups: Wells and his Universes

Christopher Priest’s rather wonderful The Space Machine [15] goes one step further than the above sequels, in an affectionate ‘mash-up’ of two Wells novels, WOTW and The Time Machine [16]. Amelia Fitzgibbon is the amanuensis of Sir William Reynolds, who will become the Time Traveller. She falls in with a young commercial traveller called Edward Turnbull, and in a tipsy lark they take a ride on the Time Machine, which translates them to a Lowelian Mars, where the ‘monsters’ are preparing for their invasion of Earth. (The Time Traveller does claim that his machine can travel ‘indifferently in any direction of Space and Time, as the driver determines’ (The Time Machine, Chapter 1).) Amelia and Edward kick-start a revolution among the enslaved, cattle-like humanoids of Mars, but it is too late to stop the invasion fleet being launched by a mighty steam-driven cannon, and Amelia and Edward stow away back to Surrey on a cylinder.

In the middle of the War Of The Worlds, they find that Reynolds has disappeared into futurity – but they meet a young Mr Wells, who assisted Reynolds with details of his work. The three strap fragments from the Time Machine workshop to a bedstead, making a ‘Space Machine’ which flies around southern England bombing the Martians, before the earthly plagues win the war. The book is terrific fun, with at its heart a touching love affair between Amelia and Edward, who must struggle against their own confining social inhibitions as well as against the Martians. And the intricate dovetailing of the two source books pleasingly fleshes out details. For instance, the Martian invasion fleet should have been thousands of cylinders, but was restricted to just ten because of the revolution kick-started by Amelia and Edward. It is a fine homage to Wells.

There have been many such explorations of Wells’s fictional worlds by other hands, including my own The Time Ships [17], set in the universe of The Time Machine. Characteristically these are nostalgic homages to Wells and his times. Another example comes from Kevin Anderson, who expanded his contribution to Global Dispatches into a novel called The Martian War as by Gabriel Mesta [18]. Here the familiar characters of the Wells multiverse, Griffin, Cavor and others, are gathered in an ‘Imperial Institute’ by T.H. Huxley to prepare to make war against the Germans.

The earliest example I know of this sort of fiction, and therefore perhaps the archetype, is Brian Aldiss’s 1965 novella The Salvia Tree [20], written, I believe, as a centenary tribute to Wells. This is a kind of reworking of the essence of WOTW, in which aliens come by ‘space machine’ to a farm in East Anglia, and turn the livestock and people into monstrous overgrowths, useful only as foodstuffs for themselves. There is a collision of many Wellsian elements here, including a ‘food of the gods’ and invisibility. The story serves as a parable, perhaps, of the corruption of agriculture by industrial practices. The young protagonist, middle-class Gregory, is a sort of neo-Wells, with socialist and utopian principles constantly challenged. Indeed Wells himself is Gregory’s hero; Gregory writes to him, and as the story closes Wells turns up in person to see it all for himself: ‘One of the greatest men in England is here!’ This very popular story won a Nebula award.

Like Priest, what Aldiss expresses here is nostalgia for Wells himself and his times, an age when young men like Gregory and Wells dreamed up big, marvellous ideas. This innocence was to be punctured in the twentieth century, just as in the pages of WOTW: ‘With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire
over matter’ (Book I Chapter 1).

Recursive fictions

Wells’s text has also served as a source in a branch of science fiction characterised by stories that can be described as ‘recursive’. This involves treating the matter of popular fictions as a sort of common resource out of which new narratives may be constructed. This is motivated by nostalgia, of course, a longing to see more of much-loved worlds and characters. But it can result in some enriching contrasts. Some of the tales in Anderson’s Global Dispatches [12] fall into this category. George Effinger shows Wells’s invasion being launched from Burroughs’ Barsoom, egg-laying princesses and all; the cylinder launchings stop after ten because hero John Carter wrecks the great cannon.

Sherlock Holmes has encountered the Martians several times, facing mysteries posed in its aftermath, for instance in the theft of a Martian fighting machine [21]. Sherlock Holmes’s War Of The Worlds by father-and-son team Manly W Wellman and Wade Wellman [22] describes the adventures of Holmes and Professor Challenger, that other great Conan Doyle creation, as the Martians invade. The heroes’ actions don’t actually make much difference to the invasion or its outcome, but their new perspective on the familiar events of Wells’s novel is always interesting.

Perhaps the most dramatic war of the fictional worlds comes in Volume II of the comic-book series The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen [23] by Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill (2004). The eponymous league is a team of fictional Victorian-age superheroes all gathered into the same reality, including H Rider Haggard’s Allan Quatermain, Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde, Verne’s Captain Nemo, O'Neill (2004). The eponymous league is a team of fictional Victorian-age superheroes all gathered into the same reality, including H Rider Haggard’s Allan Quatermain, Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde, Verne’s Captain Nemo, Mina Harker from Bram Stoker’s Dracula – and Hawley Griffin, H.G. Wells’s own Invisible Man. These heroes are controlled by British military intelligence; their ‘M’ is Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s brother. When the Martians land, Nemo’s Nautilus enjoyably takes on Martian war machines in the Thames. Mister Hyde wrestles a tripod to the ground, and eats a Martian! But Griffin betrays the human race. In the end the bacteria that defeat the Martians are an anthrax-based biological weapon cooked up by Doctor Moreau. The moral is perhaps that we sometimes need to draw on the evil in us, personified by Moreau, to defeat greater threats.

The Rainbow Mars of Larry Niven’s 1999 novel [24] is a recursive fantasy world, peopled by creatures and architectures from the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, C.S. Lewis, Stanley Weinbaum – and H.G. Wells, whose Martians are known as Softfingers. This motley assemblage mount an invasion of Earth using a ‘beanstalk’, a living space elevator.

In another recursive experiment, Wells’s Martians land on the outskirts of a fictitious American city called Metropolis. The year is 1938, which was significant not just for Orson Welles’s famous radio dramatisation, but for the birth of the original superhero – Superman. The graphic novel Superman: War Of The Worlds, published in 1999, and written by Roy Thomas of ‘Killraven’ fame [25], shows the Man of Steel battling the Martian invaders. The plot thickens when Superman’s perennial enemy Lex Luthor collaborates with the Martians and tries to use a serum derived from Superman’s bloodstream to make the Martians immune to terrestrial bacteria. Superman overcomes this, and the Martians are driven away, but at the cost of Superman’s life. Interesting parallels are drawn between Superman and the Martians. Both, after all, came to Earth from dying worlds. In the end there is a feeling of unease that Earth has served as a battleground where one alien force has been pitched against another. ‘If the Martians hadn’t come, the people of Earth might have been running from me,’ says a dying Superman. Even Lois Lane turns away.

It was the possibilities of alien life that drew Wells himself to re-explore his own earlier fiction.

Star Begotten

Wells’s 1937 novel Star Begotten: A Biological Fantasia [26] is a kind of reworking of the materials of WOTW, and is an explicit reflection on that novel and on the genre it helped to spawn.

Star Begotten is the story of Joseph Davis, a writer of popular histories, who has spent his life plagued by odd doubts about himself and the society in which he finds himself. He is in a ‘world ... floating on a raft of rotting ideas’ (117). These doubts come to a head as his ‘fey’ young wife Mary carries their first child, from whom Joseph feels alienated.

From a random conversation in a London club comes the idea that a new sort of invasion might be underway: that Martians, or aliens of another sort, might be meddling with the destiny of humanity, by tinkering with our genomes using ‘cosmic rays’. This is not a physical invasion like that of WOTW. We will be the invaders’ offspring; we will be the Martians.

But this invasion might be benevolent. There is speculation that ‘Martians’ already born have inspired the scientific revolution, and will in the future advance social reforms. In a time fearful of a ‘world-wide war-smash’ (114), we glimpse a future of a ‘world gone sane’ (124) under the control of the Martian children. A ‘Pax Mundi’ will follow, set on a garden world full of ‘busy, laughing people’ (130) – even if there may have to be a few acts of assassination and sabotage to get rid of the dead wood. Joseph begins to fear that his unborn son might be one of the new types of people, and therefore in a sense not his son at all. When the child is born Joseph’s doubts are washed away – but only because he comes to believe that he himself is one of the Martians.

Star Begotten sparkles with wit. Wells shows a grasp not just of the latest science but developments in science fiction as well. But it is a complex and ambiguous work. The characters are never sure what is real, and nor are we. We are never shown evidence of the invasion; this time no cylinders plummet into the English countryside. Even the central conceit about ‘cosmic rays’ is developed purely through conversations between Joseph and other characters, one of whom is a psychologist. We are left to wonder if the whole thing is actually a delusion on Joseph’s part, perhaps driven by anxiety over his virility.

As for WOTW, Wells’s earlier novel itself exists in the universe of the later book, but its elements are considered and dismissed. ‘Some of you may have read a book called The War Of The Worlds — I forget who wrote it — Jules Verne, Conan Doyle, one of those fellows ...’ (62). A physical
invasion was always a non-starter: ‘Hopeless attempt. They couldn’t stand the different atmospheric pressure, they couldn’t stand the difference in gravitation; bacteria finished them up. Hopeless from the start.’ (62) The notion that the Martians might be monstrous is born of a fearful prejudice. Surely it is more likely that the Martians, born of an older world, will be benevolent, not malevolent: ‘If there is such a thing as a Martian, rest assured ... he’s humanity’s big brother’ (81).

Similarly Wells rather dismisses the still-new genre of science fiction on which he had been such an influence; it is full of ‘progressive utopias’ which suffer from ‘imaginative starvation’ (126).

But there is one exception. Wells’s thinking at this point in his life seems clearly influenced by the work of Olaf Stapledon, particularly Last and First Men (1930) [27]: ‘You know that man Olaf Stapledon has already tried something of the sort ...’ (79). Wells seems to have been impressed by Stapledon’s speculations about alien life, which were, and remain, extremely sophisticated. In fact Wells and Stapledon became firm friends, and Stapledon wrote that he had been very influenced by Wells’s writings.

So Wells’s own reaction to his novel was to dismiss it as a young man’s preliminary, implausible work, but to use it a starting point for richer speculations on alien life.

Surely, if Wells’s Martians had come, the greatest transformation in human consciousness would have derived from the certain knowledge that we are not alone in the universe – even if our closest neighbours were malevolent. For much of the twentieth century a longing to find life beyond Earth has been expressed in movies, TV series and novels. We have even sent spaceprobes to look for life, and have suffered crashing disappointment when it seemed that the other worlds were sterile.

In Wells’s novel, of course, alien life does not merely exist but is cousin to us. That is why the Martians can drink our blood – and why our bugs can assail them. Indeed Wells hints, in his glimpses of the Martians, that they were once like us, and we may one day be like them.

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The idea of a commonality to all life may have seemed plausible in the 1890s, when comparatively little was known about life’s chemical basis. Indeed the notion of Martian life being vulnerable to terrestrial infection was foreshadowed in Percy Greg’s revealation of possible habitats for life either now or in the past on worlds like Mars, Europa and Titan, and by new models of ‘panspermia’, mechanisms by which living things could be transferred by natural means between the planets [29]. The notion of a cousin biosphere underpins much modern Mars-based fiction, such as The Secret of Life by Paul McAuley (2001) [30], Gregory Benford’s The Martian Race (1999) [31], and my own short story ‘Martian Autumn’ (2002) [32].

And all of this is foreshadowed in WOTW: ‘The broadening of men’s views can scarcely be exaggerated ... Dim and wonderful is the vision I have conjured up in my mind of life spreading slowly from this little seed bed of the solar system ... But that is a remote dream ... To [the Martians], and not to us, perhaps, is the future ordained’ (Book 2 Chapter 10).

A Metaphor for a Century

It is Wells’s extraordinary achievement that in the pages of WOTW he set out themes that would define the coming century: homeland invasion, defying the tyrant, the convulsive shock of world wars, the loss of innocence, and the possibilities of life in the universe. It is no wonder that Niall Ferguson was able to call the book ‘a work of singular prescience’ [2].

But Ferguson’s focus is the Second World War, and it is remarkable how in the 1890s Wells appeared to foresee not only the first of the world wars but the more remote second. Here is Wells’s vision of the advancing Martians (Book 1 chapter 12): ‘Their armoured bodies glittered in the sun as they swept swiftly forward upon the guns, growing rapidly larger as they drew nearer ... At the sight of these strange swift, and terrible creatures the crowd near the water’s edge seemed to me to be for a moment horror-struck ... ’Much might have been the reaction of the populations of the invaded countries to the Blitzkrieg, or later the flight of the Germans from their own cities. And Wells’s vision of the flight from London (Book 1 chapter 17): ‘It was a stampede – a stampede gigantic and terrible – without order and without a goal, six million people, unarmed and unprovisioned, driving headlong. It was the beginning of the rout of civilisation, of the massacre of mankind.’ It is impossible not to see this as a forward echo of the flight from the cities of the Low Countries and France, or of Berlin as the Russians advanced. When researching my own recent novel of the war [33], I found many eyewitnesses referring to the novel as a comparison for their experiences: ‘It’s like something out of H.G. Wells.’

But as Ferguson writes, ‘When such scenes became a reality, however, those responsible were not Martians but other human beings – even if they often justified the slaughter by labelling their victims as “aliens” or “subhumans”’. (xxxiii-xxxiv). Ferguson points out that it wasn’t just the grim reality of technological warfare launched against civilian cities that Wells foresaw, but a still colder application of science against humanity, seeing a parallel between the Martians’ bloody pits and the concentration camps: ‘It is its efficiency that makes Auschwitz so uniquely hateful ... You feel ... that the Germans did everything conceivable to those whom they killed except eat them. No other regime has come so close to H.G. Wells’s nightmare of a mechanised sucking out of human life by voracious aliens’ (506-7).

The talent of the early Wells lay in his unflinching ability to reject comforting lies about mankind’s position in the universe, as revealed by late Victorian science. In The Time Machine, he rejected the complacent idea that evolution will be an upwards progression. And in WOTW he rejected the notion that change in the future will be orderly and comfortable. In a sense he was writing in a tradition that dates back to the Book of Revelations, in his
picture of the coming days when all will be swept aside in a time of disaster and battles, and a new world order instituted.

Wells's insights must have been a comfort of a sort for the generation who lived through World War II; they must have helped make sense of unprecedented horrors – and they must have helped keep hope alive in a dark age. I firmly believe that just as Wells's work has been an inspiration throughout the twentieth century, so it will continue to be in the twenty-first.

Endnotes
1. Correspondences

It is common knowledge that, with the advance of modern science, this issue has come to mean a matter of life and death for civilization as we know it.

(Albert Einstein in ‘Why War’) [1]

The summer of 1932 promised to be an important moment in the history of ideas: two of the most influential and controversial figures of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, entered into a very brief and somewhat unusual theoretical correspondence.

In the preceding years these men had completely changed how we understood ourselves and the universe in which we exist. As most readers of Vector will no doubt be aware, in 1905 Einstein had published a paper in which he outlined his ‘Special Theory of Relativity’; then just over a decade later he proposed his ‘General Theory of Relativity’. In these works he presented a strange new vision of the cosmos. The universe, he suggested (in an affront to intuition and reason), is a place of dips and curves in which time can be stretched and squashed and where your point of view counts for everything. Freud, on the other hand, was at the same time asking us to radically rethink our identities – our sense of ourselves. In his psychoanalytic writings, including most notably The Interpretation of Dreams (dated 1900, but actually 1899) and The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1901), he had developed a vision of the self that was both unfamiliar and deeply disturbing. As he saw it, we simply couldn’t say exactly who we were – that was largely unconscious.

Given the relative positions of these interlocutors, it’s easy to imagine how important their correspondence stood to become. It’s also easy to imagine the value of such epistles to us, the readers and critics of SF in 2008. We know that, like all the products of culture, our genre cannot help but be informed by the intellectual currents of its time – SF is bound to its context, even when it seeks to challenge it. I would argue, then, that it has been indelibly shaped by the work of the twentieth-century science, psychology and philosophy. In this particular case, though, it’s clear that we’re dealing with more than just a silent influence. The genre has repeatedly and quite explicitly engaged with the work of Einstein and, increasingly since the New Wave of the 1960s, Freud. It has consciously explored the outer reaches of theoretical physics in its search for novel narratives, and has considered at length the ways in which identity might be re-shaped by advances in technology and by alternative ideological perspectives. As such, the letters between these two key theoreticians might be able to provide us with one way of making sense of some key SF texts.

Actually, although it is not without interest the correspondence between Einstein and Freud in 1932, which in fact amounts to just two letters, one by each writer, fails to live up to such expectations. James Strachey, the translator and general editor of The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, where the letters are now most easily obtained (volume XXII if you’re interested), explains in detail how it came about in his prefatory note:

It was in 1931 that the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation was instructed by the Permanent Committee for Literature and the Arts of the League of Nations to arrange for exchanges of letters between representative intellectuals “on subjects calculated to serve the common interests of the League of Nations and of intellectual life”, and to publish these letters periodically. Among the first to be approached by the institute was Einstein and it was he who suggested Freud’s name. Accordingly, in June, 1932, the Secretary of the Institute wrote to Freud inviting his participation, to which he at once agreed. [2]

Strachey also briefly sets out the broader history of the relationship between the thinkers, noting at one point that
‘the two men were never at all intimate with each other’ [3]. In the light of this it seems surprising to me that Einstein chose Freud to be his correspondent on this particular occasion. Roger Highfield and Paul Carter’s The Private Lives of Albert Einstein (1993) leaves me feeling even more surprised. These authors point out that one of Einstein’s sons was actually a fervent believer in the psychoanalyst’s ideas: ‘Eduard displayed the same passion for psychology that his mother had shown in her youth, and had begun expounding the theories of Sigmund Freud to his friends at around the age of fifteen’ [4]. However, they immediately go on to record the physicist’s own scepticism, explaining that ‘he told Eduard that he had read Freud’s writings but was unconverted, and believed his methods dubious – even fraudulent’ [5].

If Einstein’s decision to correspond with Freud was slightly surprising then so too, perhaps, was his choice of subject matter. In his letter, which is dated 30th July, 1932, he establishes this as follows: ‘This is the problem: Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?’ (Strachey, p.199). No sooner has he proposed this problem than he starts to suggest a number of possible solutions to it and to analyse the various issues that might undermine them. He begins by saying that he ‘personally see[s] a simple way of dealing with the superficial (i.e. administrative) aspect of the problem: the setting up, by international consent, of a legislative and judicial body to settle every conflict arising between nations’ (pp.199-200). For Einstein, however, the sticking point in this regard is the question of power. He declares: ‘at present we are far from possessing any supranational organization competent to render verdicts of incontestable authority and enforce absolute submission to the execution of its verdicts’ (p.200).

From this point onwards, the scientist turns his attention to the ‘strong psychological factors... at work’ (p.200). Of the various ideas he raises, the most interesting are those in which he attempts to outline some kind of innate drive in us all. He argues: ‘man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction. In normal times this passion exists in a latent state, it emerges only in unusual circumstances’ (p.201). This in turn leads him to ask: ‘Is it possible to control man’s mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychoses of hate and destructiveness?’ (p.201).

Freud’s response to Einstein is, like all of his later works, huge in its scope (despite weighing in at just over twelve pages). It is also wildly speculative. He begins by exploring the problems of power that his correspondent had raised. In his opinion, these have been at work since the beginning of human society. In order to explain this he sets out what might loosely be described as a socio-anthropological myth: ‘To begin with, in a small human horde, it was superior muscular strength which decided who owned things or whose will should prevail’ (p.204). This original situation, he continues, was eventually challenged by the realisation that ‘the superior strength of a single individual could be rivalled by the union of several weak ones. “L’union fait la force.” Violence could be broken by union’ (p.205). And it is with this development, Freud contends, that society or ‘civilization’ comes into being – a point that allows him to survey the problems of politics and colonisation, and in particular the unequal power relationships within any society.

Having got this far, Freud returns to a more recognisably psychoanalytic terrain. Following Einstein’s own tentative discussion of psychology, he sets out a brief summary of his own ‘theory of the instincts’ (p.209). He writes:

According to our hypothesis human instincts are of only two kinds: those which seek to preserve and unite – which we call “erotic”, exactly in the sense in which Plato uses the word “Eros” in his Symposium, or “sexual”, with a deliberate extension of the popular conception of “sexuality” – and those which seek to destroy and kill and which we group together as the aggressive or destructive instinct (p.209).

Predictably enough, it is the second of these two drives that concerns him most in the remainder of his letter. Glossing over a complex series of arguments and ideas, he explains that ‘the [individual’s] death instinct turns into the destructive instinct when, with the help of special organs, it is directed outwards, on to objects. The organism preserves its own life, so to say, by destroying an extraneous one’ (p.211). Here, then, is a psychoanalytic explanation for violence and war, and one that our thinker believes is extremely hard to get around. ‘There is no use in trying to get rid of men’s aggressive inclinations’ (p.211), he declares. This is, I’m sure you’ll agree, an extremely bleak vision.

At the end of his letter, Einstein writes: ‘I have so far been speaking only of wars between nations; what are known as international conflicts. But I am well aware that the aggressive instinct operates under other forms and in other circumstances. (I am thinking of civil wars, for instance, due in earlier days to religious zeal, but nowadays to social factors; or, again, the persecution of racial minorities)’ (p.201). If he had ever turned to that field of literature variously known as scientific romance, sciencefiction or science fiction, he would have found evidence of authors dreaming up still other, stranger ‘forms’ and ‘circumstances’ under which such an instinct might operate. In particular, he would have discovered people imagining wars between worlds. It is to such literature that I now turn.

2. The Death Instinct

‘Death!’ I shouted. ‘Death is coming! Death!’ and leaving him to digest that if he could, I hurried on after the artilleryman.

(H. G. Wells, The War Of The Worlds) [6]

I would argue that this brief correspondence between Einstein and Freud can serve as a theoretical framework through which to read both Military SF and the genre’s depiction of war more generally. In this section I will begin to see what kinds of sense it can make of arguably the most famous science fiction text of all, H. G. Wells’ The War Of The Worlds (1898).

There is a moment towards the beginning of this seminal novel when the narrator recalls leaving his cousins’ house in Leatherhead. At this point he declares:

For my own part, I had been feverishly excited all day. Something very like the war-fever that occasionally runs through a civilised community had got into my blood, and in my heart I was not
so very sorry that I had to return to Maybury that night. I was even afraid that that last fusillade I had heard might mean the extermination of our invaders from Mars. I can best express my state of mind by saying that I wanted to be in at the death (p.136).

This strikes me not only as an interesting passage with which to start a reading of the text, but also one upon which our two thinkers’ letters might shed some light. Take, for instance, the idea of a ‘war-fever that occasionally runs through a civilised community’. Einstein points towards something similar in his epistle when he asks how a society at large might be inspired to fight in a war in which they, as he puts it, ‘stand to lose and suffer’ (p.200). He argues that ‘the minority, the ruling class at present, has the schools and press, usually the Church as well, under its thumb. This enables it to organize and sway the emotions of the masses, and make its tool of them’ (p.201). Of course, this theoretical point doesn’t fully explain our fictional hero’s own personal war fever. Nevertheless, it might still be a step in the right direction. After all, it’s the Martian within the hood, was slain’ (p.155). Then, during the first of these alien death scenes the narrator writes: ‘For the moment I heeded nothing of the heat, the wind, the rain, I was even afraid that that last fusillade I heard might mean the extermination of our invaders from Mars. I can best express my state of mind by saying that I wanted to be in at the death (p.158).

There is also, I think, a much broader point to be made here. You may recall the moment when, describing the panicked exodus from London, Wells’ narrator declares: ‘It was the beginning of the rout of civilisation’ (p.197). The artilleryman makes a similar point to our hero whilst setting out his plans to live in the London sewers: ‘Cities, nations, civilisation, progress – it’s all over. That game’s up. We’re beat’ (p.249). When read alongside Freud’s letter to Einstein, these claims raise new and potentially troubling questions about events. I’m particularly thinking here of the moment when, at the end of his epistle, the psychoanalyst explains that it is precisely ‘the progress of civilisation’ that works against the aggressive instincts in Man:

The psychological modifications that go along with the process of civilization are striking and unambiguous. They consist in a progressive displacement of instinctual aims and a restriction of instinctual impulses… Now war is in the crassest opposition to the psychic attitude imposed on us by the process of civilization, and for that reason we are bound to rebel against it (pp.214-215).

This contentious idea makes me wonder, amongst other things, whether the Martians’ (temporary) destruction of human society in Wells’ novel results in an explosion of human aggression. It is, of course, practically impossible to say.

I must admit that, having come this far, I’m not sure how convincing I find any of these literary analyses. After all, this is probably Freud at his most extreme. Perhaps, then, it’s time that I changed tack.

3. Man and Machine

[‘]What are these Martians?’

‘What are we?’ I answered, clearing my throat.

(H. G. Wells, The War Of The Worlds) [7]

In order to pursue my analysis of Wells’ novel further I feel I should stop and consider the very nature of the beings it depicts – the Martians and the humans. This is to say that I need to consider the questions posed by the Curate and the narrator in the text itself. If I do so I think I’ll be able to interpret their motives and anxieties more confidently and will be better placed to read them alongside Freud and Einstein’s correspondence ‘Why War?’

It’s not until the second half of the novel that we get a detailed description of the Martians. When we do, it’s as follows: ‘They were, I now saw, the most unearthly creatures it is possible to conceive. They were huge round bodies – or, rather, heads – about four feet in diameter, each body having in front of it a face… In a group round the mouth were sixteen slender, almost whip-like tentacles, arranged in two bunches of eight each’ (pp.218-219). If the Martians’ outer appearance is terrifying to our narrator then so too is their internal structure. He continues: ‘Strange as it may seem to a human being, all the complex apparatus of digestion, which makes up the bulk of our bodies, did not exist in the Martians. They were heads – merely heads. Entrainls they had none’ (p.219).

At the same time as being ‘the most unearthly creatures’
of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men... it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind’ (p.273). Here, finally, it would seem, is something of that ‘community of feeling’ (p.212) that Freud believes may help to reduce the threat of war.

4. Why?

The result, as you see, is not very fruitful when an unworldly theoretician is called in to advise on an urgent practical problem. It is a better plan to devote oneself in every particular case to meeting the danger with whatever means lie to hand.

(Sigmund Freud in ‘Why War?’) [10]

The questions that Albert Einstein posed in his letter to Freud are, of course, extremely complex. The answers and explanations provided by the psychoanalyst in his reply are no less challenging. They are also amazingly speculative and controversial. If we are going to use these letters to explore the depictions of war in genre fiction we are going to have to remember these facts.

It is fair to say, of course, that the depiction of war in modern and contemporary SF, and especially the subgenre known as ‘Military SF’, is usually unlike that in Wells’ seminal narrative. Take, for instance, Lois McMaster Bujold’s ‘Vorkosigan’ novels, and in particular the first text published in the sequence, Shards of Honor (1986). This work makes very different demands upon the reader to The War Of The Worlds, operates in a very different mode and would seemingly warrant a very different form of interpretation to the earlier text. For instance, in the furious onrush of action there is little by way of extended philosophical discussion.

Here, too, though, there are moments where the letters between Freud and Einstein, and indeed psychoanalytic theory more widely, could be an important reference point for an interpretation. In Shards of Honor, for instance, we are presented with a war that, if not exactly an external manifestation of any internal destructive drives as Freud speculated, certainly is a family drama played out in a bloody and interstellar arena. The invasion of Escobar by Barrayar is, we eventually learn, actually an elaborate plan through which the Emperor hopes to have his son and heir, together with all of his political allies, killed. It was, we are told in a passage focalised through Cordelia Naismith, ‘the most wasteful political assassination plot in Barrayaran history, and the most subtle, the corpses hidden in a mountain of corpses, forever inextricable’ [11].

Then there is the fact that psychology becomes an explicit issue in the second half of the novel. Whilst travelling back to her home world after the invasion and her interment in the PoW camp, Cordelia has to deal with ‘psych officers’ [12]. Then, on her return she is suspected of having been programmed by their enemy, Lord Aral Vorkosigan, to operate as a spy or a sleeper agent [13].

(p.218), however, there’s something paradoxically earthly about these Martians. More, there’s often something human about them. I’m not the first to have critically commented upon this. Simon King, for instance, has felt moved to ask: ‘are the Martians in Wells’ novel really alien at all? Where do they really come from?’ [8]. His response to this question is to argue ‘that Wells’ Martians represent the working classes... a radicalized class who usher in a revolution of sorts’ [9]. I certainly have no intention of going so far in my own analysis. Indeed, I really want to do no more than highlight the few key observations that the narrator makes after describing the physiognomy of the invaders. He recalls that ‘a certain speculative writer of quasi-scientific repute, writing long before the Martian invasion, did forecast for man a final structure not unlike the actual Martian condition... The brain alone remained a cardinal necessity. Only one other part of the body had a strong case for survival, and that was the hand’ (p.221).

Remembering this, our narrator goes on to make the following remark: ‘To me it is quite credible that the Martians may be descended from beings not unlike ourselves, by a gradual development of brain and hands... at the expense of the rest of the body’ (p.221).

Perhaps I can cite another relevant moment here – an episode from the Artilleryman’s adventure. Here, we read that ‘the monster had risen to its feet, and had begun to walk leisurely to and fro across the common among the few fugitives, with its headlike hood turning about exactly like the head of a cowled human being’ (p.145, my emphasis).

However we choose to interpret these particular passages it is clear that, for Wells’ narrator at least, there is some kind of symmetry between the human body and those of the Martians. You could almost say that there’s a kind of ‘identification’ at work in his narrative. This term occupies a key place in the theory of psychoanalysis. Freud returns to it in his response to Albert Einstein in 1932. He notes that ‘an instinct of the one sort can scarcely ever operate in the actual Martian condition... The brain alone remains part of the body had a strong case for survival, and that was the hand’ (p.221).

After all, in his ‘Epilogue’ Wells’ narrator makes the following observation: ‘It may be that in the larger design
This kind of plot line is thoroughly science fictional, rooted in a long tradition in the genre. It also relies upon a certain conception of the mind – in particular, it depends upon the notion of an unconscious that can cause us to act in certain ways. Any sustained reading of the text would need to consider this at length.

In conclusion, it’s worth commenting on Freud and Einstein’s letters’ immediate cultural context. As we’ve seen, Einstein signed his letter to Freud, in which he asked for a ‘way of delivering mankind from the menace of war’, on the penultimate day of July, 1932 (p.199). As part of their argument in The Private Lives of Albert Einstein, Roger Highfield and Paul Carter draw our attention to an important political event that took place that same month: ‘The Nazis became the Reichstag’s largest single party in July 1932’ [14]. Such a fact cannot help but be vital to our understanding of the written text. Of course, the Jewish physicist would soon leave Germany for good [15]. Sigmund Freud, another Jew, also fled the Nazis, although not until 1938. He died in London on 23rd September 1939.

For all of the problems that they raise, and for all that we might dispute the conclusions the two thinkers reach, the letters between Einstein and Freud on the subject of war remain extremely helpful to us readers and critics of science fiction.

Endnotes

[1] Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, ‘Why War?’ in Sigmund Freud, The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXII, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964; repr. 1973), p.199. This unusual text, which will be the central theoretical reference point in this essay, is actually comprised of two letters: the first, from Albert Einstein to Freud, dated 30th July, 1932; the second, from Sigmund Freud back to Einstein, dated September 1932. All of the quotations from these letters in this paper are from this edition. References will be placed in parentheses immediately following the quotation.


[12] Ibid., p.171.
After Heinlein: Politics in Scalzi's Green Soldier Universe

By Martin McGrath

Introduction

The publication of his first novel, *Old Man's War*, brought John Scalzi both critical and commercial success. His work was widely praised for its fast-paced action and for its updating of classic science fiction tropes, but the novel was also controversial and attracted considerable criticism. This article is not the place to rehash the extensive online debates about *Old Man's War*, but those interested can still find perhaps the prime example on Nicholas Whyte's blog [1]. The criticism – from what might be called “liberal” commentators – can be summarised in three broad categories:

1. That *Old Man's War* was crudely right wing – at best a poorly conceived rehashing of the out-of-date dogma of Robert A. Heinlein;
2. That it promoted a violent, jingoistic and militaristic world view; and
3. That it provided no political insight into the universe in which it was set [2].

Throughout that argument, Scalzi defended his work by arguing that *Old Man's War* should not be read in isolation, that it was just the first part of a much bigger story and that it would become clear as the series progressed that the protagonist of the first novel, John Perry, was an unreliable narrator with a poor grasp of the wider workings of the universe in which he lived. It is now almost four years since the first publication of *Old Man's War*, and in that time Scalzi has published three further novels, a novelette and two short stories set in what I call the Green Soldier Universe (GSU – because the soldiers of the Colonial Union are reborn in bodies with green skin) [3].

Scalzi's green soldier universe stories follow John Perry who, aged 70 at the beginning of *Old Man's War*, takes up the Colonial Union's offer of service off-planet in exchange for the hope of an extended life, even though, thanks to the Colonial Union's policy of isolation the people of Earth know almost nothing about the wider universe. Perry enlists as a private in the Colonial Defence Force and, with his fellow recruits, he is given a new, green, body with enhancements that make him stronger, faster and more resilient and a “brain pal” implant that is both a source of information and a communication device. This universe is a violent place and war between species is the norm. Perry turns out to be a talented and lucky soldier. He has success in battle against the Consu and survives a number of campaigns even as, around him, his new friends and comrades are whittled down at a frightening rate. By the time Perry reaches the planet Coral he is a battle-hardened veteran but a Rraey ambush wipes out the human forces in orbit. Perry barely survives and is rescued by a special forces unit led by Jane Sagan – who looks just like Perry's dead wife. Because of his experience on Coral and with the Consu Perry is attached to this special forces unit and begins a relationship with Sagan while finding out more about the “ghost Brigades”. The colonial union's special forces units are even more advanced “green soldiers” based on the DNA of those who signed up for Colonial Service – as Perry's wife had done – but who don't survive long enough to be given new bodies. Unlike normal green soldiers they develop their own personality – but at a vastly accelerated rate, having been “born” with brain pals they take effective telepathy for granted, rarely speaking to those outside their units, and are bred to be loyal to the Colonial Union. They return to Coral and successfully retake the planet from the Rraey. The first volume ends with Perry and Sagan separated by their service but determined to meet again when their ten year term is complete. *The Ghost Brigades* concentrates on the activities of Sagan's special forces unit. Charles Boutin was a key Colonial Union scientist doing work on perfecting the transfer of consciousness from humans to their new green bodies. But Boutin turned traitor and is working with three alien species to destroy the Colonial Union. In an attempt to work out what he is planning and why, the CDF use a test recording of Boutin's consciousness to inhabit a special forces body – who is given the name Jared Dirac. The plan seems to fail and Dirac is assigned to Sagan's unit for further observation. We follow the unique training of a special forces unit and gain some insight into the working of the CDF. The unit lead an attack on Enesha, one of the races in Boutin's alliance and begin a hunt for Boutin – while fragments of his personality begin to reveal themselves to Dirac. Boutin has been working with the Obin, a race who had their intelligence artificially raised by the Consu, the region's most advance race, but who lack (and long for)
consciousness. Boutin has promised them a device that will give them consciousness if they destroy the Colonial Union, who he blames for not protecting his family. In the resulting conflict Boutin is killed, the alliance against the Colonial Union is disrupted and Sagan rescues Boutin’s daughter Zoe and pledges to care for her. The Last Colony and Zoe’s Tale start around a decade later – they tell the same story – the first from the adult’s point of view, the second from the teenage Zoe’s perspective – Perry and Sagan have survived their terms of service and are now bureaucrats on Huckleberry, a young human colony and live with their adopted daughter Zoe. They are approached by the CDF to lead a new colony, Roanoke, but instead find themselves struggling for survival on an isolated planet forbidden to contact the outside universe for fear of being destroyed by the Conclave – a vast new political and military union of alien races led by General Gau who desires to control all future colonisation and will destroy colonies created without the Conclave’s permission. The colonists of Roanoke are pawns in a plan to destroy Gau and his Conclave, but John Perry becomes convinced that Colonial Union have been lying to humanity and, with help of alien allies, he fights to save the people of Roanoke and bring the truth to humanity.

The publication of the latest GSU novel, Zoe’s Tale, appears to mark at least an interregnum in the stories of John Perry, Jane Sagan and Zoe Boutin, and the last appearance of new major works in that universe for the time being [4].

The obvious question, therefore, arises: Are we now in a position to judge whether Scalzi was right and whether, given the wider view we now have into the GSU universe, he was justified in arguing that the criticism leveled at his first book was misplaced. Or is the GSU just another crude piece of mil-sf designed to stroke the fetishes of a right-wing, predominantly American, audience?

It is clear that his universe remains a violent place. In the opening passages of The Last Colony he describes the background against which all the action takes place:

“The universe is vast, but the number of worlds suitable for human life is surprisingly small, and as it happens space is filled with numerous other intelligent species who want the same worlds we do. Very few of these species, it seems, are into the concept of sharing: we’re certainly not. We all fight, and the worlds we inhabit swap back and forth between us until one or another gets a grip so tight we can’t be pried off.” [5]

And green soldiers know their role, as Perry points out in Old Man’s War:

“Our job is to go meet strange new people and cultures and kill the sons of bitches as quickly as we possibly can.” [6]

In what follows I want to argue that, on the whole, Scalzi was right: the politics of the GSU is more complex that the early critics of Old Man’s War allowed. I also want to explore some of the ways it is similar to and different from the work of Robert A. Heinlein.

It is important to be clear that Scalzi has written a set of adventure stories, not a political manifesto. This article is not a critique of Scalzi’s own political views – those seeking an idea of what Scalzi thinks about modern political issues should read his blog [7] – but of the political systems he has used to construct his Green Soldier Universe. That said, Scalzi has not shied away from tackling political issues in these books and in setting out to write in the style of the most controversial of the genre’s “grandmasters”, he was plainly aware of the political and ethical debates that continue to surround Heinlein’s work. To understand the politics of the GSU, therefore, I want to first to briefly explore the politics of Robert A. Heinlein, as expressed in his novels.

Scalzi & Heinlein

Reviewers of John Scalzi’s first novel set in the GSU – Old Man’s War – were quick to identify the book’s debt to Robert A. Heinlein. Scalzi has acknowledged that debt and the GSU stories obviously borrow from, and are intended as tributes to, Heinlein’s sf. Old Man’s War, as John de Nardo points out at some length in his review in SF Signal [8], contains “purposeful parallels” to Starship Troopers (1959), and the wartime adventure setting is carried on through The Ghost Brigades. But as the series progresses and becomes more complex, the later books (The Last Colony and Zoe’s Tale) owe more to The Moon is a Harsh Mistress (1966), and to a lesser degree Red Planet (1949).

But as well as recognizing the “purposeful parallels”, I want to argue that there is more to the GSU stories than a simple restatement of Heinlein’s political position. Indeed what is most interesting about the GSU stories, from a political perspective, is the way in which they act to apply a modern lens to Heinlein’s politics and, in some instances, go further, providing a critique of the SF grandmaster’s political thought.

Obviously there is not space here for a full discussion of Heinlein’s political views, and it is worth remembering that as he was a novelist not a political philosopher, it would be a mistake to expect a coherent political vision to emerge from his works. Heinlein’s political views shifted during his own lifetime, from an early dalliance with socialism to the anarcho-capitalism that he dubbed “rational anarchy” to a more stridently nationalistic tone in his later novels. So, throughout his output, one can find Heinlein extolling the virtues of a militaristic society with tight social mores and a limited franchise (Starship Troopers) or espousing the drop-out society and hippy free love (Stranger in Strange Land, 1961) or the rough and tumble justice of the frontier (Tunnel in the Sky [1955], The Red Planet) – he even has sympathetic hereditary rulers in Double Star (1956) and Glory Road (1963).

Accepting these caveats there remain a number of themes that are constant across Heinlein’s novels and which are reflected in Scalzi’s GSU. Here I want to discuss two:
1. Disdain for liberal democratic government. An almost universal motif in Heinlein’s work. In The Cat Who Walks Through Walls (1985), one character’s (Bill) belief that government should provide free air, health care and other basic services “reflects his wrong-headedness in general ... [he has] ... the socialist disease in its worst form, he thinks the world owes him a living”. [9] In The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, Professor La Paz engages in long and detailed critiques of the failings of any system that imposes taxation and claims to represent the general public, pleading with the newly free citizens of Luna not to repeat the “mistakes” of the past. He says “government is a dangerous servant and a terrible master. You now have freedom – if you can keep it. But do remember that you can lose this freedom more quickly to yourselves than to any other tyrant... What I fear most are the affirmative actions of sober and well-intentioned men, granting to government powers to do something that appears to need doing”. [10]

2. Justifying the means. In The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, the Lunar revolutionaries bombard Earth knowing that they are inevitably risking the lives of innocent civilians and suffocate their enemies without regret. But Heinlein takes great care in establishing the special status of his protagonists – they are either justified in their actions because of provocation or they do the utmost in their power to minimise deaths. In Starship Troopers, the soldiers engage in brutal combat but bear no responsibility: “It’s never a soldier’s business to decide when or where or how – or why – he fights. That belongs to the statesmen and the generals... We supply the violence; other people – ‘older and wiser heads’ as they say – supply the control” [11]. Throughout his work – from the early gun-toting, duel-fighting, brassard-wearing world of Beyond This Horizon onwards – Heinlein’s creates societies where violence is an acceptable means of problem solving but the use of violence, at least for his heroes, is also intimately linked to notions of personal responsibility and honour, which limit what is acceptable. The means must be justified by more than the ends.

There are many other issues that might have been discussed, such as the primacy of the individual, the portrayal of women, the importance of family, the position of teenagers, the emphasis on interconnected communities, the politics of sexuality – Heinlein had interesting positions on all of these issues and there are reflections of that in Scalzi’s work.

However, the two issues I’ve picked out above probably shape the most familiar face of politics in Heinlein’s fiction – a tough, libertarian, frontier style of social organization.

The politics of the green soldier universe

In the following section I want to look at how these thematic strands are represented in Scalzi’s work and the ways in which he both restates Heinlein’s position and updates it.

The absence of democracy

Democratic in any form is notable in the GSU primarily for its absence. Some form of republican/liberal democratic constitution appears to survive on Earth (there’s certainly some form of representative government there in The Last Colony) but Earth is very much a special case, a museum preserved in aspic by the Colonial Union and the only representative of that government we meet is the blustering, self-important and ultimately doomed Senator Bender – to whom we shall return below.

Elsewhere the universe appears to be ruled by various forms of dictatorship. The Colonial Union is run by a bureaucracy, organised hierarchically and ruled by diktat. There’s no hint of bureaucracy being subject to democratic oversight – a crucial difference from Starship Troopers, where Heinlein is at pains to emphasise the ultimate power of the democratic government over the military.

The only human colonies we see running in detail are those controlled by Perry and Sagan in The Last Colony and in both instances they exercise control via power vested in them by the authority of the Colonial Union. On Huckleberry, where we find Perry and Sagan at the beginning of The Last Colony, Perry acts as judge and jury while Sagan is the strong arm of the law. There is no democratic accountability – they have been installed by the Colonial Union and they only answer to other bureaucrats.

On Roanoke, the new colony to which Perry and Sagan are appointed as expedition leaders, there is a body representing the different groups of settlers, but it has no power.

“New colonies are administered under Department of Colonization regulation... The regulations require colony leaders to wield sole administrative and executive power.” [12]

On neither Huckleberry nor Roanoke does there appear to be any mechanism for ordinary people to influence the law.

Scalzi does, within the GSU, offer a glimpse of an alternative to the bureaucratic dictatorship of the Colonial Union. The Conclave, a union of alien civilisations created by the charismatic General Gau, seems to offer a glimpse of an alternative form of government based around negotiation and formal structures of shared power. It doesn’t last long. Following humiliating defeat at the hands of the Colonial Union and an attempt on his life, Gau (despite his own misgivings) is forced to take on the role of absolute ruler. His role in the later Conclave is that of a benevolent dictator. Gau is, at least, aware of the temptations and long-term dangers of relying on such a means of governance but he accepts that there is no alternative in a time of crisis. Fortunately, everything we see of Gau leads us to believe that he is sincere in his desire...
Heinlein’s work – even in order”. These hierarchical forms of leadership appear to be the “natural need to get done, government falls by the wayside and to create a new and more stable form of government.

Nonetheless, throughout the GSU, whenever things need to get done, government falls by the wayside and decisions are taken by the exercise of authority. Such hierarchical forms of leadership appear to be the “natural order”. These dictatorships of the competent are common in Heinlein’s work – even in The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, where much lip-service is paid to anarchic freedom while the protagonists take power from and make decisions on behalf of their fellow revolutionaries because they have decided that their intelligence, abilities and knowledge make the best people to be in control. Pretences at shared power are shams designed solely to make it easier for them to get their way.

While examples of effective democratic government in Heinlein are rare, at least Heinlein occasionally presented the franchise and full citizenship of the polity as a prize worth making sacrifices and taking risks to win. In Starship Troopers citizenship and the rights it confers motivate the young people enlisting for Federal Service. By contrast in Scalzi’s Old Man’s War the old recruits give up the rights they enjoyed as citizens, without regret or a backward glance, with no prospect of their return. The prize dangled here is not the opportunity to be a full citizen but the promise of an extended lifespan.

In Starship Troopers Heinlein is able to conceive of a humanity united against an alien enemy with a good government directing a just war. It’s a view that probably came naturally to an author who had lived through both world wars and was writing in Eisenhower’s America as the Cold War ratcheted through its early stages. In the GSU universe, Scalzi reflects less certain times – post-Watergate, post-WMD – and government turns out to be fractured, scheming and just as dangerous to its citizens as to its enemies. There’s double and triple-dealing, there’s deception on grand scales and, by the end of The Last Colony, the Colonial Union has become the enemy to be overthrown.

But we shouldn’t imagine that the message of Scalzi’s GSU is straightforwardly anti-government in the crude way of some libertarians or of Heinlein’s Professor La Paz in The Moon is a Harsh Mistress. The solution he offers within the GSU, and the one which Perry pursues, is not to reject government but to seek integration into a better system. Gau’s Conclave may be imperfect but it is preferable to the alternative of the Colonial Union’s paranoid, isolationist and manipulative bureaucratic dictatorship.

And here Scalzi’s intentions are revealed: he is against a government that keeps its people in artificial isolation, that takes unilateral action without allies, that breeds fear of outside threats to keep its people under control and that manipulates communications and straightforwardly lies to its citizens.

Scalzi is not attacking the notion of government itself but the policies of specific government – the administration of George W Bush and their actions in the Iraq and the “War on Terror”.

So the fact that during the course of The Last Colony, John Perry begins the process of dragging humanity towards the possibility of an alternative form of government – one that is more open and honest, that works with its neighbours, builds alliances and that resolves its need for new resources through negotiation – suggests a writer who is actually rather optimistic about government, at least in the GSU.

Ends and Means

As we’ve seen, Heinlein sometimes portrays violence as a necessary social lubricant – to the point of extolling the positive benefits of limited, ritualised, violence (such as the duels in Beyond This Horizon, 1942) in shaping a fit society. Heinlein’s characters might, as we’ve seen, be willing to do almost anything to ensure victory, but their actions were guided by powerful notions of honour and responsibility, which places some limits on their actions. The violence is wrapped in a moral code.

Scalzi’s GSU is built on the notion that the universe is an unavoidably violent place full of species willing to do the most horrible things imaginable to get their way. Amongst those who use violence, there is little sense of honour and any moral code is infinitely flexible.

In The Ghost Brigades the reader gets a real sense of what this lack of restraint implies. The crucial moment comes halfway through the book and it is the pivot around which the reader’s perception of the Colonial Union in the GSU shift.

Jane Sagan’s unit of specially-bred and artificially-developed special-forces are sent into the capital city of the Eneshans, nominally humanity’s ally but actually one of three races building an alliance designed to crush the Colonial Union. The special-forces target is the child of the Eneshan’s ruler and heir to their throne. The human soldiers first kill the child’s father and then make the child sterile, so that the Eneshan queen must choose a new husband (one sympathetic to humanity), and then, when other’s blanche at delivering the coup de grace, Sagan cold-bloodedly murders the baby.

Sagan appears to suffer no qualms, and clearly feels that the means were justified by the threat to the Colonial Union, but it is clear from the reaction of her fellow soldiers that something momentous has happened that raises fundamental questions about the wars that are being fought.

Before the mission Harvey, one of Sagan’s soldiers, says:

“The point is we’re going to use a young innocent as a bargaining chip. Am I right? And that’s the first time we’ve done that. It’s scummy... So we get it and everyone thinks we won’t mind because we’re a bunch of two-year-old amoral killers. Well I have morals, and I know everyone else in this room does too... This is bullshit. First class bullshit.” [13]

Harvey is angry that the special forces are given jobs others don’t want but he’s also angry that they are asked to do a job that is clearly morally repugnant.
Despite recognising the validity of Harvey’s objections, Sagan doesn’t hesitate.

Scalzi places this action against a context in which aliens have murdered whole colonies and butchered humans, young and old, for food. He makes clear that the joining together of these three alien civilisations would overwhelm humanity. Nonetheless it is a shocking incident. He takes a character who, until this point, has been straightforwardly heroic, and turns her into merciless assassin of an innocent child. Sagan recognises the moral dilemma but sees no alternative – if the enemy can’t be broken militarily, they must be broken psychologically. The alternative, defeat for humanity, is unthinkable.

The attack on Enesha is a turning point in the GSU story arc. It is the point where any illusion that the Colonial Union and humanity are somehow morally superior to GSU’s aliens is cast aside. It represents the moment when the apparently consequence-free, cartoonish carnage of GSU’s aliens is cast aside. It is the point where any illusion that the Colonial Defense Force is misused and that rather than simply trying to exterminate every alien species, humanity should pursue negotiation.

However it is justified, the murder of the Eneshan heir feels wrong. It is dishonourable and for Heinlein there would be no question that the responsibility for this dishonourable act was Jane Sagan’s to bear. In The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, Heinlein states baldly:

“that concepts such as ‘state’ and ‘society’ and ‘government’ have no existence save as physically exemplified in the actions of individuals... it is impossible to shift blame, share blame, distribute blame... as blame, guilt, responsibility are matters taking place inside human beings singly and nowhere else.” [14]

But Scalzi is writing in different times. It is, today, much more difficult to imagine a straightforwardly “just war”, and the idea of honour seems an unlikely defence against depredations of violence. In a world of suicide bombers, the Bush Doctrine and waterboarding, we’ve become used to the idea that anyone – decent, ordinary people – will do vile things in the right circumstances. Sagan is born into a universe where violence is the norm and where horrible things happen all the time, her actions are part of a wider tapestry.

One might argue that Sagan is a special case. She’s an artificial creation who only knows life in the CDF. She has superhuman strength and enhanced intelligence, but only two years of conscious life. But we know she is capable of individual reason and her fellow soldiers, who express their outrage at the assassination and refuse to carry out the order, share precisely the same background as Sagan.

The strike on Enesha is an example of what the Bush Doctrine calls a “preventative war” – a pre-emptive strike against a foe thought to be preparing to attack. When the Eneshan Heirarch discovers that Sagan’s troops are holding her daughter captive, she demands to know what is going on. Sagan replies:

“You are negotiating with the person who has threatened to kill your child because you have threatened to kill our children, Heirarch. And you are negotiating with me because at the moment I am the negotiator you deserve.” [15]

In doing so she articulates the justification for preventative war – striking first to prevent an enemy from attacking you, be they aliens or terrorists, and use any means available to stop them from hurting your people – in a way that many decent people would find persuasive, even if they would baulk at the consequences of such actions, which in this case (as, too often, in reality) means the death of innocents.

In Heinlein’s writing the means had to be justified. Violence took place within a moral code, honour was paramount, and protagonists had to be provoked – and even then they respond in a controlled manner. They are better than their foes. But also, in Heinlein’s books, the consequences of violence tend to be kept at a distance or glossed over. In Scalzi’s GSU, the ends justify the means and his protagonists are no more noble or honourable than the enemies they face. In so doing, Scalzi reveals some important, unpleasant, truths about a universe or a political system where violence is accepted as a tool of persuasion [16].

Violence cannot be whitewashed, it stains everything and it has costs – and those who extol its use should be aware of the price that has to be paid if they are to make honest judgements about when its use is appropriate.

Conclusion

One of the incidents in Old Man’s War that created the most controversy was the fate of Senator Bender. Senator Bender is a former Earth politician who, like the other green soldiers, gave up his former rights and position to serve as a private in the Colonial Defense Force in response to the promise of a new life. Unlike most of his fellow soldiers, however, Senator Bender is not content simply to follow orders. His past experience leads him to believe that the Colonial Union’s policies are flawed, that the Colonial Defense Force is misused and that rather than simply trying to exterminate every alien species, humanity should pursue negotiation.

“The problem with the Colonial Defense Forces is not that they aren’t an excellent fighting force. It’s that they’re far too easy to use... Have the Colonials even attempted to reach a peace with these people? I see no record of an attempt. I think we should make an attempt. Maybe an attempt could be made by us.” [17]

Senator Bender attempts to enact his alternative policies in the middle of a battle with the Whaidians and meets a predictable but impressively brutal end cut down by a volley of 40,000 needle-like projectiles – “one of the most interesting deaths any of us had ever seen in person” as Perry notes.

There’s clearly comedy value in Bender; he’s a self-important blow-hard who gets what’s coming to him. But it’s easy to miss, in his brief life and messy death, that Scalzi takes the time to tell us that Bender’s analysis, if
not his action, was right. Viveros, the squad leader who'd constantly argued with Bender confides to Perry that she agreed with what he said but that she would do things differently; she would

"Become people who are giving orders not just following them. That's how we'll make peace when we can. And that's how I live with 'just following orders'. Because I know that one day, I'll make those orders change." [18]

And later, in The Last Colony, when General Gau describes to Perry how constant warfare has tied all the sentient species into "an artificial equilibrium that is sliding all of us toward entropy" and that the only way out of this death spiral is cooperation and negotiation, he is merely restating Senator Bender's more rashly stated assertions.

But if Bender and Gau are right, and the constant recourse to violence as the first and only tool of diplomacy is crippling everyone involved, then how are we to judge Scalzi's violent universe?

Rather than glorifying violence, promoting jingoism or pushing a dogmatic political viewpoint — as the critics of his early books had it — Scalzi is offering a warning and a critique of the right-wing policies that have seen America embroiled in unwinnable wars. Violence is terrible and it is ultimately self-defeating, because if everyone fights, no one can ever win. And, once the decision is made to use violence in pursuit of a political goal, the stain of innocent blood is inevitable.

Far from lacking political insight or being crudely one dimensional, the GSU stories offer a surprisingly sophisticated political analysis. What at first seems obvious is eventually undermined and newer, more complicated truths are revealed. Where there first appears to be just black and white, good and bad, the picture is steadily resolved into a more nuanced focus where no one is entirely pure, no cause entirely noble.

Scalzi does, indeed, use Heinlein's work as a starting point but the idea that the GSU stories simply uncritically rehash Heinlein's political philosophy is not borne out by a detailed reading of the text. Indeed, on fundamental issues, Scalzi seems to follow sharply divergent paths. In part this separation can be explained by the different eras in which the writers are working, but as the books progress it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid the conclusion that Scalzi's work is a critique of Heinlein's political writing that departs distinctly from the original's ideas.

Endnotes

[2] As James Whyte notes: "I think Clausewitz had it right when he said that war must be considered as a political act, in a political context — "Der Krieg ist eine bloße Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln". Politik is completely absent from Old Man’s War. We have absolutely no idea of who is in charge of the army, or who appointed them, or how the policy might be changed."
[3] On his blog, Whatever, John Scalzi sets the chronology of the GSU works as:
  a. Old Man’s War (novel – Tor 2005)
  b. “Questions for a Soldier” (short story published in Subterranean no. 8)
  c. The Ghost Brigades (novel – Tor 2006)
  d. The Sagan Diary (novelette – Subterranean Press 2007)
  e. “After the Coup” (short story published online by Tor 2008)
  f. The Last Colony (Tor 2007) & Zoe’s Tale (Tor 2008) (novels) (novels takes place simultaneously). [4] In regard to the future of the GSU, Scalzi notes: "...first, and as noted earlier, no further OMW universe books are currently under contract. And anyway, four novels in the same universe in three and a half years is, you know, a lot. So for the next year or two at least, anything new in the OMW universe is likely to come in the form of short stories" < http://whatever.scalzi.com/2008/08/19/an-omw-universe-chronology >.
[16] It is worth pointing out here that The Last Colony does, in fact, include a group of pacifists. One-twelfth of Roanoke’s colonists come from an Amish-like sect. Their representation is positive – they are decent, reliable people who when the colony is abandoned by the Colonial Union save the lives of their fellow colonists because they are used to living and farming without technological aids. Their leader is killed when he attempts to make peaceful contact with the primitive but intelligent species the colonists discover on Roanoke, but then the natives had already finished off a good number of more bellicose individuals, so we need not necessarily take this as a failure of pacifism.
‘My name is Sister’

Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* (2007) begins and ends with the same note of defiance: ‘My name is Sister’ (pp.5, 207). The combination of nameless heroine and resistance to patriarchal authority has inevitably led to comparisons with Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) but the similarities are superficial. Where Atwood criticises radical feminism for its complicity with the sexual repression which underlies the Republic of Gilead and implies that separatism is not a challenge but merely a means of accommodation to traditional hierarchy, Hall deliberately reinstates both tendencies at the core of her novel in order to recover the utopian impulses within them as forces for active intervention in the twenty-first century. Neither is *The Carhullan Army* a “literary dystopia” in the manner of Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) or Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) because unlike those works its driving force and moral intensity stem from an unwavering belief in human society, explicitly acknowledged by Sister towards the end of the novel: ‘… we had a duty to liberate society, to recreate it’ (196). As such, the novel eschews the playful satire of Atwood and the easy narrative pleasures of McCarthy (who, in best Tolkien style, ensures every ordeal is followed by a reassuring meal) in favour of direct engagement with the horrors it reveals, which are thus demystified and rendered subject to human agency.

Central to this project is Jackie Nixon, the enigmatic leader at Carhullan, the community which Sister joins. It is Jackie who singlehandedly transforms the women of Carhullan into ‘inviolable creatures’ immune to the horrors of civilisation. Sister says of Jackie that

She broke down the walls that had kept us contained. There was a fresh red field on the other side, and in its rich soil were growing all the flowers of war that history had never let us gather. It was beautiful to walk in. As beautiful as the fells that autumn (187).

Although communicated in a different style and tone, the valedictory outlook expressed here is reminiscent of the death speech of *Blade Runner’s* Roy Batty: ‘I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tanhauser Gate. All those … moments will be lost … in time’ [1]. Both passages acknowledge a strange beauty that is nothing to do with sanitising war and everything to do with getting beyond the limits of normal existence. Such desires appear psychopathic because they are not manifestations of the familiar death drive, but the product of a much rarer life force. It is a rejection of what Fredric Jameson identifies in *Archaeologies of the Future* as the ‘literary “reality principle”’ which triggers high-cultural ‘generic revulsion’ [2] and it clearly distinguishes Hall from those mainstream writers who deploy isolated genre tropes to spice up otherwise conventional narratives.

‘Powell’s got control of the party’

*The Carhullan Army*, therefore, is inherently science fictional and needs to be considered in relation to books written within the sf tradition. The two most significant contexts in this respect are the 1970s feminist sf of writers such as Marge Piercy, James Tiptree, Jnr. and Joanna Russ, which I will return to, and the postwar English disaster novels written by John Wyndham, John Christopher and many others. As I’ve argued elsewhere, these so-called ‘cosy catastrophes’ may be read as the expression of a progressive English opposition to the postwar British state [3]. A common feature of such works is the depiction of the circular mechanism by which deliberately created scarcity triggers a return of the wartime ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ to British society and the consequent passive acceptance of draconian social controls. The ‘Civil Reorganisation’ that we learn about from the opening page of *The Carhullan Army* is a prime example of exactly such a mechanism. Sister, like the misfit heroes of the postwar disaster novels, is one of those who can’t adjust to such a limited existence, much to her husband’s dismay: ‘Perhaps he’d thought I was depressed, like so many others, and that I wasn’t trying hard enough to find the spirit we were all being asked to conjure, like a replica of that war-time stoicism of which the previous century had proudly boasted’ (24). It is Hall’s awareness of the persistence of this tendency, which might be termed the British ideology, that guides her depiction of future authoritarian government.

Her account of life in Rith under ‘the Authority’ appears more like an identikit dictatorship from the Cold War Years than anything that might reasonably be expected to occur in the twenty-first century precisely because the responses of the British State to the challenges of the twenty-first century are unlikely to be reasonable.
For example, the dominant British response to climate change is to view it as a social problem which can be addressed by restriction and rationing, rather than as a technological challenge to build a better future. The national imagination remains trapped in the black and white myth of the Blitz, confined within the bunkers of tabloid mentality and populist politics. History is waiting to repeat itself because it is never allowed to go forward. It is no coincidence that the same tropes of emergency military control, forced evacuation and multi-billeting of families in terraced houses that Hall employs so effectively in the opening section of *The Carhullan Army* also appear as a projected British future in a recent episode of *Doctor Who*, ‘Turn Left’ (2008).

The particular context for the current resurgence of the British ideology is the ‘War on Terror’ and the peculiar cultural and political climate this is creating, which is one of neither war nor peace but a liminal state between. The best fictional representation of this climate remains George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), where it is memorably encapsulated in the Party slogan ‘War is Peace’. Orwell showed how totalitarian regimes depend upon an infinite prolongation of this liminal state by the continual misdirection of their subjects. By the constant portrayal of the War as the actions of far-off enemies and hidden traitors within, public attention is prevented from focusing on the fact that the real war is being waged by the state against its own subjects. The anachronistic persistence of the monarchy in Britain tends to complement this misdirection because of the deep – in an anthropological sense – ties between monarch and people. It is only necessary to think briefly about the way in which the military training of the two British princes is publicly presented, and Prince Harry’s recent sojourn in Afghanistan in particular, to appreciate the genuine complexity of the situation described in *The Carhullan Army*, in which the people’s loyalties to the King, fighting at the head of his troops on far-off battlefields, are registered as an important component of their acceptance of life under the Authority.

‘Sorting the women out’

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a key influence on the postwar English disaster novel in general – indeed, in some ways, it could be seen as the first of them – and *The Carhullan Army* in particular. Hall’s technique of portraying life in Rith under the Authority with only a handful of scenes, told in flashback, is not dependent on her readers possessing sufficient experience of Britain and the British ideology to fill in the gaps; knowledge of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* provides a useful short cut to understanding. The pain of existence under the Authority is deadened by ketamine or silverflex rather than the beer or gin consumed by the subjects of Ingso, and the lottery is now ‘baby lotto’, but it is a similar kind of life lived in a similar kind of drafty cramped quarters under similar conditions of shortage and surveillance. Because we know Britain has been Airstrip One for over sixty years we have little difficulty accepting that it is ‘now little more than a dependent colony’ (36).

In both books, repression of women and the sex drive are key components of social control. However, Hall moves beyond Orwell in explicitly linking this to the ruling power’s use of enforced scarcity. In *The Carhullan Army*, women of all ages are compulsorily fitted with visible coils simultaneously removing their control over their own reproductive rights and rendering them subject to intrusive inspection on demand. The implied governmental logic behind this particularly unpleasant form of birth control is that population levels have to be controlled for reasons of sustainability. Yet the factory where Sister works, making turbines designed for offshore energy production, merely stockpiles its produce: ‘There were enough units to power the whole of the Northern Region if they had been installed in the estuaries’ (53). Scarcity is deliberately imposed in order to justify the repression of women, which in turn is a necessary precondition for men’s acceptance of a hierarchical power structure. War between the sexes is shown by Hall to be a necessary consequence of the war of the state against its own subjects.

Sister’s starkly matter-of-fact account of her own ‘fitting’ passes seamlessly into a description of the excitement her new state affords her husband, Andrew: ‘Sex was one of the few remaining pleasures, he said; it was nice to feel me without any barriers’ (31). Andrew is reconciled to his subservient role in society and able to move from an attitude of getting by to one of active support for the rebuilding of Britain, which is further reinforced by a minor promotion. Giving men control over women makes it easier for them to accept their own loss of control to the state than to resist it. The ‘two feisty students, full of the sense that things could be better’ (24), who had married to preserve what rights they could during the suspension of democracy, end up at each other’s throats over an agenda set entirely by the Authority’s political pronouncements. These structural tensions are first revealed in the book in the scene where Sister, running away from Rith to join the women of Carhullan, accepts a lift from a male van driver. Her mention of the word ‘Carhullan’ with its implication of separatism and thus the removal of the one perk men enjoy immediately brings full-scale conflict to the surface:

We had gone to war, it seemed, over one simple word. I had declared my proclivities, as he had his. I was no longer good company for him, no longer a person he might share his food supply with or try to fuck. All these months he had no doubt been hoping to see a return of residents to his lovely wilding valley, a sign that civilisation was being reinstated, with its old arrangements, its traditional preferences, and what he’d got instead was a deviant, a deserter (18).

This passage is particularly interesting for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that the book is contesting the gender relations of ‘normal’ twentieth-century civilisation as much as those of the authoritarian society it depicts. Second, as the narrative goes on to make clear, Sister, and indeed the women of Carhullan, are not separating themselves from men but from the war of the sexes that is a structural component of traditional and authoritarian societies. It is true that Sister flees from ‘an image of the man bent over me, his broad white thighs rocking, his hands holding down my arms, smothering my mouth, blind with what he craved and unstoppable’ (21), but she
flees equally from the image of herself ‘standing over the man, heeling him in the face until it split and came apart like a marrow’ (ibid.). This line resonates powerfully with the famous sentence from Nineteen Eighty-Four in which O’Brien explains to Winston Smith how the intoxication of power will come to outweigh all competing pleasures: ‘If you want a picture of the future of humanity imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever’ [4]. The Carhullan Army both acknowledges the possibility of this future and rejects it utterly.

‘Thank God for Osterley, Dad’

So if Sister is not a soldier in the war of the sexes, why does she take up arms? In the opening pages of the book, describing her escape from Rith, she mentions carrying an old Second World War rifle in her rucksack and claims: ‘This was what I planned to bargain with at Carhullan’ (6). The implication is that she plans to hand over the rifle in exchange for her own acceptance into the community. Subsequently it transpires that this is not just any old weapon but one that had belonged to her father. This, of course, makes for very neat symbolism on one level: only by actually giving up her ‘father’s gun’ can Sister truly reject patriarchy and enter the feminist collective. However, the rifle’s history transcends any simple Freudian reading. Not only was it hidden underground for many years by Sister’s father in direct transgression of a national law against private firearms but it had formerly belonged to her great-granddad, a member of the Second World War ‘National Guard’, who had been ‘at Osterley’ (36).

This is a very specific historical reference. The Local Defence Volunteers, who soon came to be known as the Home Guard and not the National Guard (begging the question of whether this is a mistake by Hall or a marker that The Carhullan Army may be read as alternate history), were established in July 1940 and the Osterley Park training school was one of a number of schools set up on private initiative to deal with the problem of mass training. Unlike the others though, Osterley was set up by Tom Wintringham, the former commander of the British contingent in the International Brigade, and taught guerrilla tactics and street-fighting based on the experiences of those who had fought for Republican Spain during the Civil War. As such it was something of a radical alternative to official policy and, in consequence, was taken over by the Government in October 1940 and renamed ‘War Office No. 1 School’ [5]. Thus only five thousand of the Home Guard passed through Osterley making Sister’s great-grandfather the member of a relatively select band of men. One of Osterley’s most ardent supporters was Orwell, himself a Spanish Civil War veteran and sergeant in the Home Guard, who had called repeatedly for the people to be armed from early in the War and advocated developing the Home Guard into ‘a quasi-revolutionary People’s Army’ [6]. He even went so far as to argue in a centre-page article for the Evening Standard of 8 January 1941:

The totalitarian states can do great things, but there is one thing they cannot do: they cannot give the factory-worker a rifle and tell him to take it home and keep it in his bedroom. THAT RIFLE HANGING ON THE WALL OF THE WORKING-CLASS FLAT OR LABOURER’S COTTAGE IS THE SYMBOL OF DEMOCRACY. IT IS OUR JOB TO SEE THAT IT STAYS THERE.

[7]

Here we are a long way from the image provided in the popular Dad’s Army television series. The point is not just that the Second World War was a serious business – as Sister’s father points out, in the event of a German invasion, the ‘National Guard’ wouldn’t have got very far with only broom handles – but that an important element of the ‘People’s War’ was the collective struggle for a different future, directed as much against the British ruling class as the Nazis. By invoking Osterley and all it stands for, Hall is attempting to escape from the obfuscating myth of the ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ and regain connection with an indigenous radical tradition that was missing in the postwar English disaster novels. The significance of Sister’s rifle, therefore, is that it confers an historical legitimacy on the armed uprising which will subsequently be led by the women of Carhullan.

‘In a female prison’

While the authors of the cosy catastrophes had been content with the fantasy overthrow of the postwar order – by a variety of factors ranging from giant wasps to a new ice age – writers of the 1970s who sought to replace that position with something more realistic were faced with the problem that attempts to portray overthrow of the state by armed resistance always seem to get bogged down in an abstract, irresolvable, freedom fighter vs terrorist debate. Christopher Priest managed to evade this dead end with the complex temporal structure and cut-up technique of Fugue for a Darkening Island (1972) but only at the price of a marked gender imbalance. His A Dream of Wessex (1976) is largely written from a female viewpoint and generates what is still probably the most attractive future England in the genre but it is difficult to see how the two visions link together, other than as examples from different ends of the scale of a full range of alternate possibilities. On this model, achieving utopia is not a matter of conscious creative work but hunting blindfold for a needle in a haystack. Meanwhile other writers sought to challenge the freedom fighter/terrorist dichotomy by turning to the real life 1970s examples of figures like Ulrike Meinhoff and Patty Hearst and attempting to mobilise the cultural shock they generated – as a result of the apparent incongruity of women behaving in this way – into a questioning of the terms of the debate. This strategy can be seen underlying both genre and non-genre representations of female guerrillas from Michael Moorcock’s The Adventures of Una Persson and Catherine Cornelius in the Twentieth Century (1976) right up to the recent example of Hari Kunzru’s My Revolutions (2007). However, the net effect of such activity has been little more than the generation of enigmatic icons that are equally available for assimilation across the full range of competing meanings.

One book which combines all of these approaches in its own idiosyncratic manner is Keith Roberts’s Molly Zero (1980): an extraordinary book written in the face of obvious desperation as the dark unconsciousness of postwar Britain finally broke free from its remaining fetters. Here the ‘War is Peace’ world of postwar Britain
is extrapolated 200 years into a future in which the characteristically stagnant social hierarchy is partially maintained by genetic engineering. One of the reasons the rebels of the future are aware of this history is because they have an old map of Cumbria from which they learn that the towns of their present have the names that used to be given to rivers: evidence of a division of the country into military districts [8]. In this respect, The Carhullan Army would fit pretty much perfectly into the prehistory of the Molly Zero universe. However, the parallels between the two books go further. Molly Zero ends with the collapse of a revolutionary/terrorist cell led by Anna, a charismatic urban guerrilla, who not only shoots people with equanimity but also exerts a sexual attraction over the narrator, Molly. The book seems to conclude that all the options offered by this society – participating, rejecting, ruling – are somehow traps and that the only real choice is ‘What sort of prison do you want then?’ [9]

One of the core arguments of The Carhullan Army is that the women’s commune at Carhullan is a form of prison. As Sister quickly comes to realise:

There were fewer victims at Carhullan than I had imagined. Often it was the women themselves who had committed a crime or were misfits: they had been violent, outspoken, socially inept, promiscuous, drug-addicted, and aware that they needed some sort of system to bring them into line (130).

Carhullan, with its world of work groups, such as the peat-cutting group Sister joins, dorm inspections, kitchen duties and even conjugal visits, is marked out as a penal institution. And like all such institutions there is a rigid hierarchy with a top dog in place, Jackie Nixon: ‘The alpha’ (84). When a musical session is arranged after dinner to celebrate Sister’s first day of labour, it is Jackie who sings: ‘In a female prison, there are sixty-five women, and I wish to be left alone’ (116).

As I was about to leave the farmhouse Jackie swaggered in and took one of the small russet apples from the counter. She threw it up in the air, caught it in her teeth and bit into it. Then she climbed up onto the table between two of the women, her boots cracking apart the empty plates as she walked the length of the oak. She was acting crazily ….

She spread her arms out, the bitten apple in one hand. ‘The King is dead!’ she announced. ‘Killed in active service – God bless his bloody bones. Long live the revolution.’ The mouths of the women fell open. It was rare to hear news of the outside world; rarer still for it to be of such magnitude. Jackie knelt and kissed the woman nearest her, almost pulling her out of her seat. I watched as she jumped down off the table and left the room, the brown apple fastened between her teeth’ (pp.134-5).

The imagery here of Eve triumphant, with thrice mentioned apple, is hardly subtle; but then subtlety is not really called for when announcing the death of patriarchy. However, there is more to Jackie’s behaviour than that: Sister goes on to describe her laughter as ‘loose and wrong’ and comments on ‘the fumes of whisky in the passageway’ (135). Jackie’s whisky has already been discussed earlier in the novel and it is difficult, following the earlier Orwell comparisons, not to reference Animal Farm (1945) at this point.

However, there is nothing sinister going on in this passage, for what the King’s death also signifies is a release for Jackie from being the pseudo-king of Carhullan. Carhullan only works as an enclave in a hostile world secret message of all Utopias, present, past and future’ [10]; the need to break free of the prison mentality and, as expressed in Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), ‘fight to exist, to remain in existence, to be the future that happens’ [11].

Of course, the great American works of feminist science fiction such as Piercy’s novel and Joanna Russ’s The Female Man (1975) take the alternate possibilities discussed above in relation to Christopher Priest and treat them as the very condition of their own possibility. On one level, this allowed them a strategic solution to the 1970s problem of writing resistance to the state: they were able to situate the armed struggle in one of the alternate worlds as a counterpart to the situation they describe on our earth. On another level, and this is particularly true of Russ, by representing virtually the whole range of alternate possibilities, they were able to deconstruct patriarchy with such thoroughness and wit that its symbolic power will always be destroyed for those who choose to follow their lead. Hall is one of those followers but she is writing in a time when most men and many women still haven’t realised that the rules of the game have changed. All the different sets of prison walls are still in place but only because they haven’t yet been knocked over.

‘The King is dead!’

The pivotal moment of The Carhullan Army occurs two thirds of the way into the novel, after both Sister’s prehistory and the life of the commune have been fully established:

‘... we’ve more or less cracked it, haven’t we? Everyone’s employed. No one’s made to kneel in a separate church. No one’s getting held down at bayonet point. We’re breeding. We’re free. Why would anyone want to risk this, Sister?’ I gave a small brief nod, but I don’t think Jackie noticed. ‘And the government down there now? Well it was madness to interfere with it and draw attention to what we’ve got here. What possible kind of campaign could we run? Surely it’s better to just bolt the door. Hole the fuck up. And pray to be left alone’ (116).
because Jackie provides a point of identification for the women similar to that provided by the monarchy to the general population. It is precisely this ironical situation by which actually existing utopias have to mimic the world they oppose in order to survive that is satirised in Animal Farm. Because of the way that Orwell's black humour is directed at the self-deception of both the pigs and the other animals, readers sometimes miss the central point that the pigs have no choice but to become indistinguishable from human farmers if they actually want to continue running a farm. Stalin was no more evil or psychopathic than anyone else; it was simply that the logic of maintaining the Soviet Union necessitated him assuming an inhuman cult of personality. However, while Jackie's behaviour is similarly determined by the structural necessity of running her farm, she does not fall prey easily to Napoleonic self-delusions. When Sister tries to congratulate her on owning Carhullan, she is quick to point out that all land really belongs to the Crown. Likewise, her declaration that, 'There are girls here in love with me ... I only have to put my hand on them and they want to lick me out' (98), is no idle boast but a weary recognition of an unavoidable state of affairs. Jackie is aware that in the long run she will inevitably end up, like the pigs in Animal Farm, indistinguishable from the men outside. That is why she is so deliriously happy when the King's death presents the opportunity to break out of what she knows to be the unreal world of Carhullan: an unreality which imprisons her more than any of the other inmates. By the end of the novel that unreality is made plain for all to see as it is intensified by the winding-down of Carhullan: 'Every meal felt as if it might be our last, but every mouthful of mutton and venison tasted better .... We were living at the edge, and everything was amplified; it was beautiful, and it was rancid' (203).

'Life forces'

When Jackie makes the above speech to Sister about only having to put her hand on one of the women, she has her hand on Sister's shoulder. Sister is aware that Jackie wants something of her but is never clear what it is. It's tempting to see the relationship as a complex seduction in which Jackie, as she does with many of the women, plays on Sister's desire for her in order to redirect it into the military manoeuvres she runs. Jackie encourages Sister, by praising her for evading the patrol on the way back from the men's farm, but keeps her waiting, by not letting her join her military unit. The game comes to a head at the meeting when Jackie proposes to march on Rith and rally the people to independence. When one of the other women, Chloe, claims that there is no one to rally down there because they've let themselves be walked over for years, it is to Sister whom Jackie turns: 'Stand up, Sister ... Tell them you have it in you, and that you're not so different from women down there. Tell them you're willing to fight' (161). A whole range of thoughts and emotions flow through Sister's mind at being put on the spot like this, including resentment at being used as a pawn, but she knows what she wants and she knows which side she is on and, of course, her contribution carries the meeting much as Jackie knew it would. Afterwards, Sister is finally allowed to enlist in the military unit and claims that Jackie 'had made a soldier out of me without even giving me back my father's gun' (163). At one level, as previously discussed, this symbolises precisely the rejection of patriarchy that Jackie has engineered to forge her feminist soldiers. But this necessary step is as far as the engineering goes. When, near the end of the book, a distressed Chloe starts shrieking at Sister that Jackie has groomed her and got into her head and started pulling her strings, she is clearly raving. In any case, by subsequently returning the old gun to Sister, 'scoured of rust and repaired' (175), Jackie returns any agency she might have borrowed, as well as conferring the historical resonance discussed earlier in this article. Finally, the truth of the matter is that Sister is already a soldier from the moment she walks out of Rith. At every opportunity in the book, she gives her commitment to fight when the opportunity comes. It is no surprise that she ends the book 'second in council to the Carhullan Army' (207).

What Sister finally achieves through taking part in Jackie's military manoeuvres is a new sense of being:

On the hills I was aware of every corporeal movement, every circle of light. I felt every fibre of myself conveying energy, and I understood that it was finite, that the chances I had in life would not come again (184)

From being aware of 'life forces' (144), as she is in the scene where she lies in the grass evading the women's patrol, she becomes aware of herself as what we might term a life force. In direct contradistinction to the Freudian model of ego defence, which depends on keeping external stimuli to a minimum, her self is now comprised of the sum of external stimuli acting upon her. The remaining protective impulses have been shed in favour of an overriding need to embrace as much experience as possible. Life, in this intense form, becomes the only arbiter of moral value in The Carhullan Army.

In what is potentially the novel's most testing scene, in which Sister hears the gunshots denoting that Jackie has killed Chloe and Martin, we need to be aware that by the criteria of the life force they are already dead. From Jackie's point of view, they are no different to the drowned Benna, whom she gets Megan to shoot in an earlier scene. Sister fully admits complicity and a lack of guilt at the killing because 'it had needed doing' (203). On one level this seems a ridiculous claim, because Jackie probably has the resources to incarcerate Chloe and Martin until the revolution is underway and they are no longer in a position to do any damage. However, the real danger is that they might survive to give a different account of Carhullan to posterity - a different account to Sister's that is, which is why she is fully complicit with the need to eliminate them. Yes, she has nightmares in which the 'mound of newly turned earth' (203) contains all those she had ever loved, but this is just an unconscious recognition that all of that former way of life is dead because it revolved around the death drive. The parts of those loves and people that continue to live are the parts that live in her and her narration. Whether readers agree with this or not, they cannot argue that Sister and Jackie are not on the same side; or that Hall does not follow the idea of taking the side of life through to its logical conclusion.

Such an attitude to life is, of course, psychopathic when judged according to the prevailing societal norms.
However, as J.G. Ballard has observed more than once, our future will be made up of competing psychopathologies. Indeed, this is always the case when judged from the standards of any present because if those standards remained entirely untransgressed, then the present would carry on unchanged and there would be no future. Hall is not asking us to judge Jackie and Sister by the standards of western society today but to find new criteria and, by doing so, help bring a better future about. To this end, she invokes history in precisely the paragraph in which Sister admits to having developed ‘the anatomy of a fanatic’:

It was the same body the rest of the unit had fashioned for themselves. They had seemed wild to me when I’d first seen them, Corky, Megan and the others, like creatures, both natural and rarefied, but now I was no different from them. If we had stood together on the shoreline two thousand years before, facing the invading ships with fire in our hands and screaming for them to come, they would have called us Furies, and they would have been afraid (204).

Hall is telling us that how we judge these fighting women depends on the perspective we adopt, as well as inviting comparisons with the most famous fighting woman in British history, Boudicca. The fact that the publication of The Carhullan Army follows hard on the final volume of Manda Scott’s revisionist Boudicca quartet (2003-2006) suggests that perspectives may be changing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is not just that there are things worth fighting and dying for, but that the fighting, in the widest sense of the term, is itself valuable. Where Scott’s Britons find themselves within themselves by surviving the lone ordeal of the long nights, so Sister ultimately finds herself through repeated incarceration in Jackie’s dog box. These women cannot be broken because they have already broken and forged themselves inviolably anew. Comprised like the upland gorse of soft petals and ‘dark static spines’ (192), the women themselves are the flowers of war. It is this message which Sister is instructed by Jackie to communicate at all costs and it is the knowledge of its power which leads her to state, even though the women lose control of Rith after fifty-three days, that ‘this is just the beginning’ (207).

Endnotes

[8] See Keith Roberts, Molly Zero, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p.227. This is part of a section deconstructing postwar Britain that is worth the
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Reviewed by Jim Steel

Wayne Barlowe is already a respected artist in the SF and Fantasy genre and his art-books have been well received. This is his first novel, although it treads the same ground as *Barlowe’s Inferno*. He also provides the cover art so in this case, at least, we can be sure that it matches the author’s vision. It appears from Barlowe’s website that the novel started life as a screenplay based on *Inferno*. It’s also projected to be the first of three linked novels, although it stands as a completed work in its own right and not as the first part of a trilogy.

Hell is pretty much as western tradition has determined it over the centuries. Barlowe’s introduction mentions John Milton but the unacknowledged imagination of Brueghel the Younger is the inspiration that appears most relevant. Barlowe’s prose style is bland and even clumsy in places but, visually, his Hell and its denizens are fully realised and striking creations. The pace, for the first hundred pages, is glacial, but most readers will be happy to explore this world. It is exactly what one would expect from a fine artist writing a first novel.

In Hell souls are regarded as slaves or raw materials, frequently being converted into building bricks or clothing for the benefit of demons. The demons are fallen angels who have been cast into hell after Lucifer’s rebellion. Lucifer is absent and his place as Prince of Hell has been taken by Beezlebub, an unspeakably evil creature who resides in Dis. The cities of Hell are constantly squabbling and warring, although little has changed over the millennia.

The relatively benevolent city of Adamantinarx is ruled by Sargatanas, a noble demon cast much in the mould of Milton’s Lucifer. When one soul demands a reason for her punishment (demonstrating, incidentally, a recall that is supposed to be absent), it causes Sargatanas to question himself and to attempt a return to Heaven. This brings him into direct conflict with Beezlebub, and their grotesque armies clash in enormous battles. One soul, Hani, is awoken to the possibilities of redemption through the agency of Lucifer’s former consort, Lilith, and he is tasked with leading an army of souls against Beezlebub. Hani recovers his memories and realises who he used to be. You have heard of him.

Oblivion (and, therefore, hope) seems to be achievable in Barlowe’s Hell, as is redemption. It has to be said that many of the flaws and contradictions are ones that have appeared in the myths after centuries of cumulative use by theists, and Barlowe stays faithful to the legends. God’s Demon, however, is not an exploration of subjectivity or determinism. Despite all of the infernal theatrics, Barlowe is content merely to give us an epic of good versus evil, albeit a highly entertaining one in a strange land. Readers wishing to see his dozen or so artworks for God’s Demon can find them at www.godsdemon.com. They add to the experience but are certainly not necessary for the enjoyment of the novel.

Greg Bear – *City at the End of Time*

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

In *The Forge of God* Greg Bear destroyed the earth in the present day. In *Blood Music* he ended the contemporary world in a more metaphysical manner. With *Eon* Bear introduced *The Way*, an infinite tunnel offering the possibility of gateways opening to all times and universes. A novella length sequel to *Eon*, ‘The Way of All Ghosts’ (1999, first published in Far Horizons, edited by Robert Silverberg, then collected in *Sleepside Stories* with two other novellas by Bear) involved a gateway being opened into a universe based on the far future end-of-the-world setting of William Hope Hodgson’s *The Night Land*. The novella was dedicated to Hodgson. In retrospect that 60 page adventure reads like a dry run for Bear’s latest work. That said, *City at the End of Time* unfolds as the culmination of many aspects of Bear’s work, not just those already mentioned, but also the sheer density *Queen of Angels* and the intense surreal horror of *Psyclone*. Beyond that, *City at the End of Time* is Bear’s love letter to the power of words and story itself, and more specifically to certain key authors and works: Hodgson’s *The Night Land*, Arthur C Clarke’s *The City and The Stars*, Clive Barker’s *The Great and Secret Show*, various stories by Borges. (Borges and Barker are mentioned by name, the title and plot clearly allude to Clarke, and Hodgson is definitively evoked though not named). For those who care about such things the book is as much fantasy and horror as SF, both for its voyage into metaphysics and for its efficiently-advanced-technology to all intents and purposes indistinguishable from magic. Bear’s *City*, *Kapla*¹, builds on Clarke’s Diaspar to create one of the most imaginative and mind-boggling far futures yet conceived.

Hundreds of trillions of years from now, Kalpa is the last redoubt of humanity. Far beyond the heat death of the universe mankind has found alternative sources of energy and risen and fallen billions of times, eventually retreating to Earth in the face of advancing Chaos. This is
of course a classic SF narrative, a Dying Earth narrative in its own sub-genre, a tale which conjures a sense-of-wonder through immense scale, and the pitting of, rather than good verses evil, order verses chaos, intellect verses mindlessness. The scale on which Bear tells his story of the possible end of all things makes some claim for this being the ultimate eschatological genre novel. Bear makes Stapledon look like Saki.

In the City Jebassy and Tiadba become lovers while planning to go on a March to explore beyond the dome of their enclosed world. They also experience strange interludes in which they appear to be displaced in space and time, exchanging places with two young people, Jack and Ginny, in a version of contemporary Seattle. Jack and Ginny are fate-shifters, able to move their consciousness between different world-lines to find the most favourable future. Daniel is also a fate-shifter, though he is also able to move parasitically into the minds of other people and possess them, erasing the original personality. Hunting the fate-shifters are agents of the Chalk Princess, including the splendidly Barkeresque duo of Max Glaucous and Penelope, the mysterious Mr Whitlow and the bizarre Moth. Aligned against these are the near immortal Bidewell, who occupies a warehouse of 300 000 unique books, including 12 novels by David Copperfield, and a middle-aged book group collectively known as ‘The Witches of Eastlake’ (there is an area of Seattle called Eastlake).

Trillions of year hence the Kalpa is in the final stages of a siege which has lasted half of eternity, in Seattle reality is crumbling, world-lines severed as the universe approaches Terminus. Dating back to the Mass Wars, in which humanity reconfigured itself in various forms of matter, a desperate scheme unfold in the Kapla, the work of untold years by the Librarian in the Broken Tower. The power of story itself becomes vital to the last defence of humanity, particularly the complex and enigmatic recounting of the journey to rescue Polybiblos from the Shen Worlds, of his post-human daughter Ishanaxade and her mysterious exile to Nataraja.

Everything ties together in highly involved, non-liner ways, Bear combining labyrinthine plotting, sense-of-wonder science fictional ideas, elliptical evocations of the ‘alien’ and ‘other’, breathtaking scale and nightmare dissolution. Bear offers a multitude of ideas, many involving the love of words and story which will delight many readers. Individual set-pieces are alternately rich in wonder and darkness; the contrasting collapse of reality in Seattle and the March into the Chaos are filled with vivid incident. Character is at the service of story, such that while conventionally perceived deficiencies in characterisation make sense in terms of the grand sweep of Story, those who value characterisation over all else will be less easily convinced. Simply put, due to the nature of the tale, it is hard to become deeply involved with Bear’s characters. Regardless, City at the End of Time is a demanding, immensely rewarding novel filled with beauty, dread and electrifying notions of time, space, identity, and the underlying nature of reality itself.

The only significant drawback is that, due to the very nature of a story which, as becomes increasingly obvious, can only end in one of two ways, Bear writes himself into a corner whereby the journey has greater impact than the arrival. Ironc then to find on page 400: ‘The best stories start in the middle, then return to the beginning, then come to a conclusion that nobody can forsee.’ The conclusion of City at the End of Time can be foreseen far ahead, the major disappointment being that after all the fireworks Bear ultimately falters, struggling to muster the grandeur, tension and apocalyptic conflict the finale demands.

If City at the End of Time isn’t one hundred percent satisfying it is because it aims so high and doesn’t quite succeed. It is though a fantastically ambitious book and for 460 of its 470 pages ranks among the most challenging, imaginative and exhilarating works in all genre fiction, an absolutely staggering fusion of epic hard SF with majestic dark fantasy.

(‘the word, which is used in ambiguous fashion at the climax of ‘The Way of all Ghosts’, is, according to Wikipedia, a Sanskrit word meaning, ‘practicable, feasible, possible’, and also ‘proper, fit, able’. It also means ‘proper practice’, ‘ritual’, and can be used to indicate an aeon in Buddhist and Hindu cosmology.)

**Alex Bell – The Ninth Circle**


Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

This novel begins with an arresting image: a man wakes up on the floor of a room he doesn’t recognise. His face is glued to the floor with someone else’s blood. He has no idea how he comes to be in such a bizarre situation. In fact, he has no idea who he is at all. In an effort to, as he puts it, avoid fading ‘right out of existence’, our narrator, who quickly, and maybe a little too conveniently, discovers that his name is Gabriel, decides to keep a journal in which he records his discoveries about himself and his situation.

The first-person narrator is traditionally unreliable; we have no one’s word but the narrator’s that he or she is telling the truth, whatever that means. In daily life, if someone tells us a story we can often verify or refute it via secondary sources. In fiction, we are at the mercy of the narrator. In which case, what are we to make of Gabriel’s story? His situation is peculiar: he is in Budapest, in a beautiful flat, with a seemingly limitless supply of money, food or sleep for days at a time. All he can do is wait, convinced that sooner or later other people will return and tell him what’s happening.

The days hang heavy for Gabriel, and indeed for the reader too. As a character he tends towards the histrionic, and I wearied quite quickly of his soul-searching, which is unfortunate as the novel moves very slowly, lingering on Gabriel’s every small discovery and slight shift of mood. He is for the most part not a man of action, but a watcher, an observer, and the first-person journal obliges the reader to stick with him all the way as he roams the streets of Budapest in a suitably melancholic fashion.
Which is no kind of life, as Gabriel comes to realise, and yet he seems to find it difficult to engage with the outside world. He establishes a tentative friendship with his neighbour, the pregnant Casey March, and strikes up an acquaintance with the mysterious Zadkiel Stephomii. Casey offers him a vicarious domestic life, but Gabriel’s experiences with Stephomii, including witnessing a fight involving a burning man, seem to point towards Gabriel himself being other than human, and we gradually come to realise that we may have strayed onto a battlefield, in which the war between heaven and hell continues unabated, and the Antichrist is arriving earlier than anticipated.

Or have we? For as fast as Gabriel presents the reader with an explanation, it’s ripped away and a new, better story, the real one this time, emerges from behind it, until that in turn is discarded for another. Is Gabriel human or supernatural? Did he lose his wife and son, or are they just another layer of camouflage? One is left with a sense of Gabriel making it up as he goes along, so to speak, filling his journal with whatever comes to mind as a means of explaining his situation. Is this the journal of a madman, or someone with too much time on his hands?

By the time we reach the point where the author offers an explanation for Gabriel’s behaviour that seems marginally more plausible than the rest, the point at which I think we are supposed to feel that his histrionics are fully accounted for and to feel sympathy for him, if we did not feel it already, it’s become too much like hard work to do so. Exasperation sets in as the story then lurches back in the direction of the divine, though with an odd little twist that is intriguing but wasted at that point in the novel.

To say much more about the plot would be to give away the denouement completely. Suffice to say it is less dramatic than I think the author imagines, and the is it, isn’t it? open ending is trite rather than thrilling. This is an intensely disappointing novel; I want to like it because it has some interesting ideas, but their development is frustrated by an almost wilful refusal by the author to engage directly with the bigger picture. The possibilities remain unrealised because we are trapped by the limited viewpoint of Gabriel Antaeus’ self-absorbed journal, obliged to slope round the streets of Budapest with him as he feels sorry for himself. He is a witness to hugely interesting events but a player only belatedly; as a result, we are supposed to feel that his histrionics are fully accounted for and to feel sympathy for him, if we did not feel it already, it’s become too much like hard work to do so. Exasperation sets in as the story then lurches back in the direction of the divine, though with an odd little twist that is intriguing but wasted at that point in the novel.

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It is debatable how one might, in a post-Dawkins world, address the great Miltonic themes of paradise lost and regained. I admire Alex Bell for trying to take them on but I remain frustrated by the sense of reductio ad absurdum that leaves me in the hands of a narrator who is a lot less interesting than he needs to be to tell this story.

Danny Birt – *Ending An Ending*  

Reviewed by Mark Connorton

*Ending an Ending* is the first volume of a fantasy pentalogy from a US small press with a rather conservative bent (editorial guidelines include no bad language and no ‘alternative lifestyles!’) It concerns a man, Sanct, who suddenly appears in a forest with no memories or history and turns out to be the servant of one of the various gods who rule the fantasyland. His blank slate status makes him fall victim to some heavy duty info-dumping and predictable ‘what is this thing called love’ type comedy, and before long he is being jerked around like a puppet by various ‘feelings’ as to what his deity wants him to do next.

Eventually the author realises that it is a bit of a non-starter having a protagonist with no will of his own, and Sanct fades from view after meeting Alaris: a Mary-Sue-ish wizard who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and beset by comely elf wenches vying to get into his pants (i.e. immensely smug and annoying). There is some business about a struggle that will affect the very nature of the universe, but this is obscured through the deliberate withholding of information as to the antagonists and their motives. It seems that a lot of thought has gone into the world’s mythology and cosmology, and the ways the deities might interact with each other and the mortal world, but this is all drowned out by the moras of poor writing and derivative world-building.

The book is written in an amateurish style, full of errors that any reader of a basic ‘how to write’ guide would know to avoid. No one ever just says anything when they can ‘chide’, ‘lecture’ or ‘exclaim’; the point of view jumps around at random; redundant adverbs abound; and most pages contain at least one clunker of a sentence which totally fails in some way or else is unintentionally hilarious (a favourite: ‘his face made a sudden gymnastic move’). Everyone gets one personality trait at most, which is unfortunate for the main female character when she is downgraded from ‘feisty’ to ‘pregnant’.

The cold dead hand of fantasy RPG weighs heavily over the book (we have characters described as ‘magic users’ and ‘elf wenches’) and reading it feels like watching over someone’s shoulder as they play an interminable session of Final Fantasy; with a group of cardboard characters running around a map, having random encounters and occasionally stumbling across new transportation systems that open up the next section to explore. The story is mainly conveyed through pages of dialogue, as characters narrate events to each other as they occur, explain the plot, or spout forth the contents of the author’s world-building files. Detailed description of settings and action is generally avoided, and I think I finally gave up hope when a bloke with a flaming sword had to fight a horde of angels and the entire scene happened off-camera.

Not recommended.

Ben Bova – *Mars Life*  
Tor, 2008, $24.95, 432pp, h/b ISBN 9780765317872

Reviewed by L J Hurst

*Mars Life* is part of Ben Bova’s Grand Tour series, specifically the sequel to *Mars* (1992) and *Return To Mars* (1999). Scientific teams are now working on the
Red Planet, but unlike Antarctica, say, Mars belongs to no country but is under the control of the Amerind Navaho peoples so long as they keep a representative there. That representative since the first of the books has frequently been Jamie Waterman, scientific director and father-figure. While the other staff come from around the world, the bulk of the cash for the expedition has been provided by the US government. This singular source could be withdrawn, and with the growing threat of the US fundamentalist Christian movement that seems to be happening to Waterman's world.

The fundamentals are not only tax-paring, they resent something else: as Return To Mars closed, the expedition discovered the remnants of a long extinct, intelligent civilisation. As there is no evidence that Christ took his revelation to the deceased, the fundamentalists denounce the scientists as heretics and blasphemers who must be silenced.

In short, staccato chapters Bova swaps between individuals on Mars, with their rivalries and manoeuvres; with the remaining backers on Earth and an increasingly independent Moon base; the politicians who juggle the funds; and the officials of the New Morality movement who manipulate the politicians. A few individuals, like the Jesuit archaeologist who wangles his way to Mars, cross between religion and science, though, like Monsignor DiNardo, only to cause problems they have not foreseen. Meanwhile, the archaeological dig beneath the Martian surface goes deeper, for a long time finding nothing, and at the potential risk to all other experiments being performed, by taking away staff resources that might make the planet more habitable.

Surely Bova, in his clashes between science and religion, and between individual and collective responsibility, is not unique? He is, though, one of the first to treat them in such an atmosphere of scientific realism; something he has continued to do since he wrote Mars in the early nineties. On the other hand, even ignoring figures such as the New Morality leaders who have figuratively lobotomised themselves, individuals supposedly at the heights of their powers show surprising shallowness of thought: DiNardo, the Jesuit, is overwhelmed by the thought of a race which God allowed to be wiped out, as if no one has considered it before, when the same concept drives, for instance, the most memorable section of Tennyson's "In Memoriam" ("So careful of the type?" but no. From scarped cliff and quarried stone she cries, 'A thousand types are gone: I care for nothing, all shall go" leading to the famous lines about nature red in tooth and claw). Those, written even before Darwin published Origin Of Species, seem horribly relevant and contrasting, and not just because the cliff houses of the Martians are the centre of the discoveries. I wished Mars Life could go as far, in its own way, as that Victorian vision.

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**Ben Bova – The Science Fiction Hall of Fame Volume Two B: The Greatest Science Fiction Novellas of All Time Chosen by Members of the Science Fiction Writers of America**


Reviewed by L J Hurst

The Science Fiction Hall Of Fame Volume Two appeared in 2005 (reviewed in Vector 241) and now its companion is here. I thought that this volume would contain novelets, since the first volume contained novellas (the difference is in word length), but although mentioned in Ben Bova's short introduction the distinction disappears in the contents. Selected to recognise works of power written before the Science Fiction Writers of America introduced the Nebula Awards, this volume collects classics such as Algis Budrys's "Rogue Moon" (1960), James Blish's "Earthman, Come Home" (1953) and James H. Schmitz's "The Witches of Karres" (1949). Those three, of course, all became novels. Among the eight others are Asimov's "The Martian Way" (1952) and Jack Vance's "The Moon Moth" (1961), and authors including Frederick Pohl, Theodore Cogwell and Clifford D Simak. The magazines Astounding/Analog and Galaxy produced most of these works but the SFWA membership (whose selections were then edited by Ben Bova) also recognised a non-genre classic in E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1928). Two authors I did not know, T. L. Sherred and Wilmar H Shiras, published in 1947 and 1948 respectively, also made the cut.

While these stories are very different in subject and location, a couple of things are noticeable by their absence: there are no bug eyed monsters, but also no shape changing aliens. In fact, hardly any aliens at all. If humans have enemies it is other humans. In “The Martian Way” the Martian settlers find themselves being vilified and rejected by the politicians on Earth. In Theodore Cogswell’s “The Spectre General” (1952) the galactic commonwealth has collapsed into feudal planets while the remainder of the space fleet has split into two rival cliques, each riven by backbiting and murder. James Blish’s spindizzy city has settled on a planet whose – again semi-feudal – leadership is intent on driving it off, while back on Earth the lower classes of Pohl’s “The Midas Plague” (1954) find that they must consume or else be punished as if the classes are Dante’s descending circles of hell. “The Moon Moth” remains fascinating because it features a society so heavily ritualised that the wrong gesture can lead to duels and lawful death in which Edwer Thissell must capture an escaped criminal.

The other thing noticeable by its absence is resolution. In the strange blocks on Algis Budry’s moon men die because they cannot know what the alien blocks want. In Clifford Simak’s “Big Front Yard” (1958) a typical American home suddenly becomes another of Simak’s gateways to another world. Yet in exploring that world Hiram Taine cannot rely on the men from the government or military; only Towser the dog can be trusted. In fact, authorities – family, school, government – even in the
works of authors not known for satire (such as Frederick Pohl) – have been dubious in these characters’ pasts, and are usually malignant in their present. Few people are interested in certainty, and fewer in truth. In T.L. Sherred’s “E For Effort” political parties and the churches all try to destroy a time viewer because it conflicts with their partial views of history, while on the personal level Budrys’s Edward Hawks and Wilmar H. Shiras’s Timothy Paul in her “E For Effort”, for example, are the products of teachers and relatives as unpleasant as any met by Dorothy in Kansas before she left for Oz.

“Rogue Moon” is a fascinating example of another aspect of SF because in part it ignores its background – there are huge givers, principally that the USA and USSR are in the space race and the Soviets are slightly behind in exploring the moon; the second is that the US Navy and Army are still running their own space missions (this two years after NASA had been formed, partly because of the problems caused by this division); and thirdly – and this is huge – that the Navy would allow men to be teleported to the moon (this has arrived before space ferries) and then leave alone a project in which many men are killed exploring the mysterious blocks. So who knows what the Navy might be doing of greater interest that they pay no attention to homicide?

Discussing “Rogue Moon”, though, is an introduction to something else important in a genre such as SF: precursurion. On the one hand, Shiras’s “In Hiding”, about an apparently normal boy whose psychologist discovers he is the first of the forthcoming super-intelligent mutants, shows little recognition that counter-works such as Wyndham’s The Midwich Cuckoos would soon be coming. On the other, readers cannot read of, say, alien blocks on the moon and not think of Kubrick and Clarke’s later work. On the one hand, Shiras’s “In Hiding”, about an apparently normal boy whose psychologist discovers he is the first of the forthcoming super-intelligent mutants, shows little recognition that counter-works such as Wyndham’s The Midwich Cuckoos would soon be coming. On the other, readers cannot read of, say, alien blocks on the moon and not think of Kubrick and Clarke’s later work.

SF seems destined to be a Cassandra – warning of the need to be prepared and collaborate to meet the future – yet destined never to be paid heed to. Asimov had the paranoia of the McCarthy era in mind when he wrote “The Martian Way”, but he then found that no one noticed. The containerships filled with Chinese plastics crossing the Pacific Ocean to North America might have been foreseen in “The Midas Plague”, while one could read “The Spectre General” about collapse and think of the economic blackhole of a country such as Zimbabwe. Is it a palliative placebo to find some reassurance in Cogswell’s fiction of resurgence written long before the event? Or is it a muckraking journalist who rather cornily redeems himself in the last few chapters. Systems administrator Rayette Batiste is another well-drawn character. She gets to quote from Job: “Behold now Behemoth”, and so direly it is, too. A monstrous blob-thang begins to grow in a Mississippi backwater called the Devil’s Swamp, about six miles from Baton Rouge. It rapidly feeds on anything and everything, from mud and algae to spilled petrochemicals, bacteria-infected battery cells, and active microchips. Before long, this ‘evil water’ has become a sentient liquid neural net, inexorably moving towards the Gulf of Mexico. Nothing can stop it – nothing ordinary, that is.

The colloid indiscriminately assimilates whatever natural or manmade technologies it comes across. “Just like a fucking transnational corporation,” according to biochemist Peter Vaarveen.

C(aryl) J(oan) Reilly is the main human protagonist. A twenty-two year old drop-out from MIT, she is working on a Hazardous Waste clean-up squad in Devil’s Swamp, under the auspices of transnational corporation Quimicron. ‘Ceegie’ (as she is affectionately known) is rebelling against her late father, Dr. Harriman Reilly, who used his scientific genius to help companies like Quimicron maximize their shareholder value. Her hapless hippy mother had run away to study glassblowing.). She literally stumbles into the Watermind ‘meta-material’ and works to destroy it, assisted by her Cajun co-worker, Max Potevents. He introduces her to zydeco music – fortuitously, as it turns out.

Roman Sacony, the Argentinian-born CEO of Quimicron is her main (merely human) antagonist. He knew a lot about manipulating chemical compounds, but only through years of hard study had he learned to manipulate people. How predictably these Anglos did his job best. But don’t you judge him too harshly. Hal Butler, Editor and Publisher of the Baton Rouge Eye, is a muckraking journalist who rather cornily redeems himself in the last few chapters. Systems administrator Rayette Batiste is another well-drawn character. She gets to quote from Job: “Behold now Behemoth”, and so direly on.

I won’t reveal how the final report is written on the world-wrecking Watermind menace, apart from expressing a vague anxiety as to how final that report can be. But it might help you to have read The Kraken Wakes or Out of the Deeps (its non-Wyndham-preferred American title). There again, it might not, so where does that leave
Sly Mongoose occupies standard space opera, though with some imaginative detail and an everything and the kitchen sink approach, including politics, family conflict, high adventure, bloody mayhem, and zombies. 48 human worlds are linked by ancient alien wormhole technology. The portal to the wider galaxy has been closed following a bit of bother in one of the previous volumes (Ragamuffin & Crystal Rain). Pepper is the series protagonist, a cynical mercenary enhanced by alien technology and by this volume already several hundred years old. Each book is set a considerable period after the one before, making Pepper the only continuing character and so lending the books something of a stand alone quality. (This is actually the third volume in a series, though the cover doesn’t admit it anywhere.)

When we first meet Pepper he is entering the atmosphere of the planet Chilo with just a spacesuit and an improvised heat shield. He crash-lands into a poverty-stricken aerial city, doing considerable damage. Debris from the impact causes more destruction on the surface 20 miles below, where 15 year old Timas is attempting to repair a mining machine. Timas father is scheming for political office, and his machinations place his family at the centre of an intrigue with a delegation from a rival political office, and his machinations place his family at the centre of an intrigue with a delegation from a rival and more powerful flying city – cities are airborn due to the massive pressure, roasting temperatures and furious winds on the surface of Chilo. Timas is given the task of showing Katerina around, an attractive delegate of his own age, with whom he is immediately set at odds.

Then just as the story is getting going Buckell flashes back for 50 pages to the immediately preceding events, recounting Pepper’s adventures on a doomed spaceship which play like a cross between Alien and a zombie movie. It is an odd strategy, breaking the narrative flow for no other purpose than that it is fashionable to tell stories out of sequence.

There is a lot of action, but none of it generates any suspense or excitement because it is not recounted in sufficient detail – ‘He shot the one to his left in the head, decapitated the one on the right by sword, and kicked the one in front of him backward...’ (p84) – because Pepper is both so super-competent as to never seem to be in any danger, and so cold and selfish that we never care about him: “I don’t save lives. I don’t join causes, I’m no hero. I play to be paid. Paid well.” (p86) If this was a film, and it does often seem to be written with a summer franchise in mind, Pepper would be the anti-hero somewhere between the protagonists of Escape From New York and Pitch Black.

Once we get back to Timas things improve slightly, but the book has odd shifts of tone. The strong language and bloody carnage suggest a novel aimed at adults, yet Timas’ story would seem more suited to a Young Adult title. That said, his adventures, the typical tale of a youth on the edge of adulthood making his mistakes and proving himself in a very dangerous world, are regularly undercut by tedious political discussions from a large cast of characters who are identified by little more than name. It’s as if one went to see Star Wars and got The Phantom Menace.

Sly Mongoose is a laboured read which I would never have finished if I hadn’t been reviewing it. It is also a book badly in need of professional editing. Just one example. We are told the crew of the Professional Sheik originally totalled 26, of which 16 are now left. Except that earlier that same page Pepper killed 11 of those same crew members. Bad enough. But just a few pages before that he killed at least two others. With this level of shoddiness making it into print it is obvious Tor don’t care about this book, and therefore I see no reason why we should either.

Robert Buettner – Orphanage
Reviewed by Mark Harding

This is the first novel in the Orphan series, which Orbit are re-printing in paperback for the UK market. For anyone unfamiliar with Military SF I had better set some expectations. Orphanage includes all the ingredients familiar from Hollywood war films: the uncompromising sergeant with a secret heart of gold; the reluctant conscript who is a bit of a wise-guy maverick but who ultimately finds his home in the army; the handsome friend in the air force who gets the promotions, the fame and the girls; the grizzled war veteran father-figure; the comradeship of arms; drop ships; decadent civilians; scatty boffins etc.

Don’t worry if you think I have put some spoilers in this list – after reading the first 20 pages, these ingredients are quite predictable. (As the author intends.)

I had also better make clear that the usual elements you might expect in SF, in this first book at least, hardly make an appearance: there is no sense of wonder, no sense of ‘otherness’, no gob-smacking weird stuff, no delight in playing with ideas. Indeed, the 2 page intro aside, almost the first third of the novel is devoted to a military training story that could have been set anytime between the present and 60 years ago.

This is entirely deliberate. Despite Orbit drawing parallels with the Iraq war in the ‘Extras’ section, the real attraction of the book is nostalgia for WWII. The war in Orphanage has massive popular support (the soldiers are saving the world!), good guys and unequivocal bad guys (the baddies are mindless giant slugs – yeeuch!), battles fought between professional soldiers; where a battle can be won by a single strike, where ‘alien’ is synonymous with ‘evil’, where it is clear when the battle is won and you can go home. Frankly, a world away from the imponderables of Iraq.

Orphanage delivers what it says on the tin: a narrative that grips like a vice, a scattering of funny wisecracks, enjoyable stuff on scavenging 1960 tech for the 2040 space
race, and no requirement to think. It can be read it in a few hours, which is fortunate, because once picked up it is very hard to put down. Buettner certainly knows how to keep a reader turning the pages.

Two Apoplexy Alerts for fellow Guardian readers. One scene conflates the Orphanage war to save the human race, with the war in Vietnam, purely to take a shot at ungrateful civilians who insist on looking for complications in foreign policy. More troubling is the way the slug-induced equivalent of nuclear winter gets painfully cleared up within much less than a lifetime. Climate change? Fixed in a jiffy – what’s the problem!

Clearly veg-out material for non-vegetarians, Buettner is pleasantly direct that the aim of his books is to make people smile while on plane journeys. Orphanage meets that aim, but no more than any other airport book. It’s down to how you like to take your distraction.


Reviewed by Jessica Yates

Why should we need an Unofficial Companion when there is already an authorised Discworld Companion? The latter’s third edition came out in 2003, and Mr. Pratchett is so prolific that, five years on, there is more material for discussion. More to the point, the official Discworld Companion is an internal reference guide to Discworld, with entries restricted to characters, places and customs in this long-running series, while the Unofficial Companion stands outside the works and covers all Pratchett’s fiction including non-Discworld books and TV adaptations, with thematic entries on Fairy Tales, Narrative, Musicals, Hollywood Films, Shakespeare, Tolkien, and many more.

The Unofficial Companion is compiled mainly by the team behind Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature, a book of academic (though mainly readable) essays whose second edition came out in 2004/2005. The authors were scholars associated with the journal Foundation. Andrew M. Butler is the leading light, and has written the lion’s share of the entries himself, building on his extremely useful Pocket Essentials handbook (2001). Entries are listed alphabetically and in related groups, there is cross-referencing between entries, and a full index and bibliography at the end. Thematic entries usually provide a factual account of the topic, wiki-style, ending with an analysis of how Terry employs it.

Being myself an inveterate source-hunter, and a student of the Annotated Pratchett File or APF, a page-by-page listing of Terry’s allusions, found on lspace; and also one who has supplemented the file with a number of finds, some checked with the Creator himself, I was obviously fascinated by the Companion’s guide to real-world parallels in the entries on books and themes. Lspace is cited under Websites, and there is a brief specific reference to the many pages of the APF, “a vast collection of annotations for Discworld publications”.

I particularly appreciated the background information provided in such entries as Fritz Leiber, Technology (a useful paragraph on the real-world semaphore system), Science Fiction, Fantasy, Coming of Age, and Cats, and such Discworld specialities as the City Watch, Witches, Unseen University and the Science of Discworld. One must appreciate that with the pressure on space, entries may complement and overlap one another, but duplication must be reduced, so you have to check cross-references for the whole picture. Thus the entry on Greek Philosophy does not reference Zeno’s paradoxes of the tortoise and arrow, but the entry on Ephebe, by a different scholar, does. However, there are no references to Stoppard’s play Jumpers (nor in APF either) where a philosopher has an apparently real hare, tortoise and set of arrows. Conversely, the entry on Night Watch briefly cites Les Misérables, while the entry on Musicals is more detailed.

The entry on Detective and Noir Fiction and Films could have benefited from a paragraph on that SF noir movie, Blade Runner: I have found several parallels in the City Watch series. Deckard and Vimes are both Bogart figures. Nor do they reference James Bond, whose visit to the College of Arms in London surely lies behind Vimes’ visit to the College of Heralds in Feet of Clay.

Although this is a hefty tome I sense the pressures of space and word-counting, so that Butler has been forced to omit a number of good points he made in his Pocket Essentials, for example, noting that in Jingo Stoolie is a gnoll who grasses, and has a grassy head-dress, so relevant to the JFK motif. Moreover, where Butler writes: “Samuel Vimes is cast in the Lawrence of Arabia role” in his entry on Arabic Societies, I would argue that Vimes and Carrot share the role of Lawrence. Carrot eagerly adopts the burnous, makes friends among the D’regs, and exercises his charisma on opposing armies; Vimes plays the trick with the hot ember, and sees 71-hour Ahmed melt away into the desert, as a reversal of Omar Sharif coming out of the desert.

The entry for Dragons references Tolkien’s Smaug, but the entry for Guards! Guards! doesn’t point out the dual parody, in that both Dirty Harry and The Hobbit deal in threats from the sky. Terry even alludes to Tolkien’s source, Beowulf: “Its actual mum came right down to the hall next day and complained.” Although the team knows that Vetinari sits apparently humbly at the foot of the royal throne of Ankh-Morpork, they don’t state that Denethor, Steward of Gondor, also sits below the throne.

While I am sorry to see so many misprints resulting, I assume, from pressure to publish, there are many appropriate illustrations to enhance the entries, such as photos of Marty Feldman as Igor, and costumed fans. Entries are readable, not loaded with jargon, and certainly show you how to better appreciate and admire the books. As Jacqueline Simpson said at the 2008 Discworld
Imriel nô Montréve de la Courcel is the son of traitors and third in line to the D’Angeline throne. Having faced enslavement and torture as a child, Imriel yearns to be left in peace under the protection of his beloved foster parents. But the inherence of his bloodline cannot be ignored. His mother is the greatest traitor the country has ever known, attempting not once but twice to overthrow the rightful queen. After many years she has still not been brought to justice and there are powerful forces at court that do not trust her son. Some are even willing to brand him a traitor for his mother’s sins.

Desperate to escape his past and his future, Imriel leaves Terre d’Ange for Tiberium and its ancient University. Posing as a simple student he enters a world of philosophers, politicians and spies and finds himself drawn into intrigue and mystery. Soon Imriel is facing dangers that will get him killed far more surely then any D’Angeline plot and so far from the borders of Terre d’Ange, he must rely on training and skill to survive.

Kushiel’s Scion is the first book in Jacqueline Carey’s ‘Treason’s Heir’ Trilogy. It follows Prince Imriel as he grows to adulthood and faces the legacy of his birth. Carey captures Imriel’s voice perfectly, changing tone and attitude throughout the book to mirror his rise to maturity. The shift of viewpoint, from Phédre in the first three books, to Imriel in this one really made the novel for me. It indicates clearly that this is Imriel’s story but it also gives many well-known characters from the first trilogy new nuances and depths through their attitude to Imriel and his relationships with them. Especially interesting was his relationship with Queen Ysandre, who despite his traitorous heritage is willing to take him in, but whom he spurns to choose Phédre and Jocelyn as his foster parents. To Phédre, Ysandre is noble and queenly; to Imriel she is hard and politic.

Particularly enjoyable are the young Shahrizai, Imriel’s relatives on his mother’s side. Their wild nature and exotic appearance are a welcome change from the staidness of the other d’Angelines. They are also part of a trend for introducing the younger generations through the book. So the children of many main characters from the first trilogy become important and influential in Imriel’s life. Carey’s D’Angeline world is again enlarged with the introduction of Tiberium, a former empire still clinging to past glory. As always Carey’s dedicated research has paid off and the Roman feel of Tiberium seems historically believable and yet is different enough from our world to belong in the D’Angeline universe.

All in all Kushiel’s Scion is a great opening to a new series. Carey is a skilled and competent writer who knows her chosen world inside out, which really shows, and still seems to enjoy expanding and exploring it. The plotting is clever and neat and the characterisation spot on. Heartily recommended.

Suzy McKee Charnas – The Vampire Tapestry

Disegno. Capture. Psychoanalysis. Opera. Demise. Suzy McKee Charnas’ The Vampire Tapestry weaves five segments of her main character’s life, or at least one of their lives, into a compelling study of the vampire in contemporary (1980) society. Attempts at legitimising the vampire or removing them from their traditional gothic or romantic personas are not, of course, new ideas – the vampire is after all one of the more malleable of literary supernatural creatures – but Charnas takes a logical approach to the practicalities of being a vampire and creates a far more plausible figure than the penny dreadful creatures or immortal lovers that have had a tendency to blight the genre. The vampire in question is Dr. Edward Weyland, a respected...

Jacqueline Carey – Kushiel’s Scion


Reviewed by Myfanwy Rodman

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Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

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What makes The Vampire Tapestry work so well is the way that it treats its subject with the kind of anthropological fascination that Dr Weyland is meant to give to his own work. You learn about the vampire’s character through the people he comes into contact with. Devoid of any romanticism Charnas gets on with the process of deconstructing the vampire as a credible being in a modern society rather than a caped pursuer of buxom beauties. In this respect the book has survived nearly three decades of technological advances extremely well – bar the absence of mobile phones and the internet, it still feels contemporary in the way that its characters are rounded and developed. Weyland is a vampire in the traditional sense in that he drinks blood but, as with any novel on the subject, there are is a list of traditionally accepted vampiric traits that need to be confirmed or dispelled. Charnas does this in a very elegant way, by having Weyland give a hypothetical lecture on the subject at his university early on in proceedings. For example, Weyland does not have fangs, retractable or otherwise, but a spike underneath his tongue – which enables far more efficient feeding. He can wander in the daylight but does, occasionally, go into a form of hibernation. During these periods Weyland loses his memory (and, one presumes, identity) to emerge once more, stalker of men. His general lack of human emotion – he looks like us but is not one of us – makes him a dispassionate central character and all the more chilling as a result. There is no rationale behind his actions beyond the instinctive need to feed. In this way Weyland becomes a mirror into which society must gaze – a reflection of the mores of the humans who come into contact with him, although he himself lacks extremities of emotional behaviour. In the second section the relationship between the vampire and humans creating myths for their own purposes are examined when Weyland is captured and turned into a freakshow for a dangerous Satanist who intends to profit from him. This section examines the preconceptions that people have about vampires and their powers without actually coming to a conclusion based upon empirical evidence. Even more compelling is the next section, where Weyland finds a therapist in order to recover from his ordeal, and their relationship begins to blur the boundaries between patient and doctor. The fourth section is possibly the weakest. It is a brave attempt to juxtapose the emotion of an opera, Tosca, with the thrill of a kill, but the intricate description of the opera without the benefit of the music renders the reader swamped in detail. The final chapter winds the pace down to the conclusion of this story’s arc...

The Vampire Tapestry is an intelligent dissection of the vampire myth that is as compelling to read as it is chilling.

By removing the vampire from the fairy tale and treating the violence inherent in any such narrative as a matter of record rather than a titillating excuse for grand guignol excess, Charnas has created a truly terrifying monster, one that doesn’t elicit sympathy but, because of its nature, doesn’t garner hatred either. If there is a quibble (and it is a very minor one) the fact of Weyland’s perceived position as a unique creature is something that seems too arbitrary to fit in with the rest of the book’s methodical approach to its subject. Overall, though, an essential read and a welcome re-issue for a classic text.

Mat Coward – Soother’s Boy

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The task of a soother’s boy is to help his master soothe the animals known as ravings, after they have been ‘fired’, that is exposed to terror or danger, in order to make them give off magic. The soothing is essential to quieten the animal so that it can, in due time, be fired again.

Rill, the central character of the book, has been brought to the city from his home village because of his talent for taking care of animals, and apprenticed to a soother. In the factory where the magic is made he is bullied because of his peasant origins, finds a friend, and ultimately discovers the truth about the manufacture of magic, and how he can change things to benefit poor people like himself. It occurred to me as I read the book that I recently read another children’s novel where the central character was taken from his poor background to the big city because of a special talent, was bullied and found a friend, and ended by making changes. I’m not saying that Mat Coward plagiarised the earlier book; there’s no evidence that he has ever read it. My point is that this is a familiar scenario, and while Rill’s character and the background of the city are well-explored, I didn’t feel that this book contributes very much that’s new.

Rill is an engaging character, and there’s a lot of interest in the way he reacts to the rigid society and rules of the city. Young readers will find it easy to relate to him and to his friend Challi. There are also truly awful characters that readers can love to hate, and enjoy it when they get their comeuppance. There are also some nail-biting sequences as Rill discovers the truth about the production of magic. Children will probably find this is an entertaining and worthwhile read.

According to the writer’s website, he self-published the book after it was turned down by a major publisher because of a disagreement about the ending. However, he has published at least one other children’s book professionally, and the writing and presentation of this book are way ahead of some of the other self-published work I’ve seen. However, the story is quite slight. The writer makes a number of valuable points about compassion and responsibility, without being obviously didactic, but when the main thrust of the book deals with how the poor are being needlessly deprived of magic,
I think it would have come across more clearly if we actually saw the suffering of the poor ‘on stage’, rather than hearing about it second hand through Rill. In my view there’s scope for this to have been a rather longer and more complex book, while still keeping it accessible for a young audience.

**Gardner Dozois (Ed.) – The Mammoth Book of Best New SF 21**


Reviewed by Alan Bellingham

Firstly: a disambiguation. Although this is titled as the 21st Annual Collection, it is the British edition of a book published in the US under the Griffin imprint as the 25th Annual Collection. Both editions cover the year 2007. Gardner Dozois has been producing this annual collection of what he considers the best short SF since it first came out in 1984, and it’s something of an institution by now, having won the Locus Award in its category a staggering 16 times to date. Is it worth that recognition?

What Dozois sets out to do is to produce a single book that, if you read no other SF that year, you would still have read the best. At least, the best short form fiction: this book contains 32 stories up to short novella size in length, including a number of the Hugo and Nebula nominees in various categories. But it isn’t just a collection of stories: it contains Dozois’s report on the year, and pointers to other stories. Pages xi to liv (44 in total) contain that report on the year. This is dense, information heavy, and the majority of readers will skip this. I don’t blame them, and the fact that this all occurs before page 1 indicates that Dozois expects this too. It’s a comprehensive account of the comings and goings of the genre, listing deaths, retirements and job changes, new publishers arriving and old publishers going. It’s not limited to the print form either: he covers film and other media too (though a repeated reference to manga had me confused, until I decided he meant Manga). Then follows the meat of the book, what most readers will be buying it for: 702 pages of stories. Finally, rounding off the volume, is a 12 page list of other stories. What is it with SF and airships? They seem almost as endearing as the flying car. “Steve Fever” (Greg Egan) is what happens when self-organising nanotech tries the impossible, and how that affects people. It’s his second story in the collection, and I think the better. “The Prophet of Flores” (Ted Kosmatka) wonders what would have happened if when the Flores ‘hobbit’ fossils were discovered, Intelligent Design had been the accepted paradigm. This is a rather disturbing sight of a world where the scientific process has gone awry. The final story, “Dark Heaven” (Gregory Benford), I found a little disappointing. It has two flaws for me: firstly, a situation is raised without ever being resolved, but secondly, the central mystery will be no mystery at all to readers of Scott Card’s Capitol stories. And “Verthandi’s Ring” (Ian McDonald) then follows with an oblique approach to the, or at least a, Singularity. “An Ocean is a Snowflake, Four Billion Miles Away” (John Barnes) takes a human scale view of terraforming. “Saving Tiamat” (Gwyneth Jones) features a memorable approach to working with an alien culture, coming to an unexpected resolution. “Of Late I Dreamt of Venus” (James Van Pelt) replies to Orson Scott Card’s Capitol stories. And “Verthandi’s Ring” (Ian McDonald) reads almost like Baxter in its scale, and is one of the most extreme cases of narrative leverage (if I may coin a phrase): three characters change the large scale history of two universes.

“Sea Change” (Una McCormack) then closes the focus down to a character-driven near-future that takes current societal trends and looks at how young people will live with them. The following story, “The Sky is Large and the Earth is Small” (Chris Roberson) feels like Kafka in the Imperial Chinese court.

There’s not enough room here to provide even a short description of each story, so I’ll skip over most. “The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate” (Ted Chiang) is both a Hugo nominee and a Nebula winner, and has time portals in the ancient Islamic world, and is paired with “Beyond the Wall” (Justin Stanchfield), which has time portals in an enigmatic alien artefact. “Kiosk” (Bruce Sterling) is a Nebula nominee in the novella category, and addresses the consequences of fabbing from the viewpoint of a small trader. “Last Contact” (Stephen Baxter) is a Hugo winner. As an end of the universe tale, it mixes sadness and acceptance to come up with something melancholic and moving. “Sanjeev and Robotwallah” (Ian McDonald) shows the author back in India. “The Sky’s Song” (Michael Swanwick) Airships, again, with universe slips. What is it with SF and airships? They seem almost as popular as the flying car. “An Ocean is a Snowflake” (Ken MacLeod) then follows with an oblique approach to the, or at least a, Singularity. “An Ocean is a Snowflake, Four Billion Miles Away” (John Barnes) takes a human scale view of terraforming. “Saving Tiamat” (Gwyneth Jones) features a memorable approach to working with an alien culture, coming to an unexpected resolution. “Of Late I Dreamt of Venus” (James Van Pelt) replies to Orson Scott Card’s Capitol stories.
Christopher Evans – *Omega*, (with an introduction by Robert Holdstock)

Reviewed by L J Hurst

Christopher Evans is an author one feels must have another life, some secret overwhelming occupation which explains why he publishes so little. When a work appears, as *Omega* does now – his first adult fiction in ten years – one feels that, because it is so easily overwhelming, that something else has held Evans in thrall, diverting him from repeating his triumph with a new novel every year. *Omega*, on the surface, appears to be another alternate history novel – the Second World War has not ended; and it is also a medical mystery in which Owen Meredith attempts to recover from an accident in a London street. However, within those two strands are many others – one in which alternate time streams appear to be merging, one in which characters may or may not be real, and one in which the residents of a dystopia may be attempting to escape into the minds of our happier generation. Surrounding those events is a narrative style that is Evans’ own.

Following his accident, as television director Owen Meredith attempts to recover, wondering why his family do not come to see him, he finds himself in fugues in which he switches into the mind of Owain Meredudd. Meredudd is a major in the British army, first met travelling through a war-torn London. In irregular and unpredictable occurrences of his fugues Meredith will discover more and more about the devastated, polluted world in which Meredudd lives; one in which the Second World War did not end but broke down in blocs, though not those of Orwell’s Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia, and a world in which weapons defying all ethical control in their development and use have also, through accident and mishap, made ruin even more extreme. There is an almost throw-away line about the effects of a mutated beast in which horror is exemplified this perverted science. And meanwhile Meredudd, himself recovering from a battlefield injury, seems to be not just surviving but at times almost thriving.

Meredith tells his own story, and paragraph blanks separate it from the sections in which he finds himself in Major Maredudd’s head, describing in the third person what the major is seeing and doing. Almost without noticing that what is happening to him is happening to us, the breaks between the two narratives start to slip, finally occurring within sentences. The separation of the worlds is dissolving. Only late does Meredith realise that during his fugues, what he has done to Meredudd, the Major may do to him: exploring his world, perhaps preparatory to a permanent residence.

It can be tempting to say that an Evans novel resembles something by someone else: Christopher Priest’s *The Separation*, for instance. However, like Meredith and Maredudd their resemblance is not identity. Those flapping fugues, for instance, have a war-time precursor in Patrick Hamilton’s *Hangover Square* and if there is any similarity anywhere it is in time and in Evans’ earlier works, especially *The Insider* and *In Limbo*, and in the resolution he achieves and achieved in all three. Christopher Evans stands in contrast to his namesake and *Omega* is another of his successes, in a style unique to him.

Jennifer Fallon – *The Immortal Prince*
Tor Books, 2007, 512pp, $27.95, h/b, ISBN 9780765316820

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

For a thousand years, ever since the last Cataclysm when their battles destroyed an entire civilisation, the immortal Tide Lords have been living in hiding, their godlike powers faded with the Vanishing Tide. In the intervening centuries, most of humanity has come to view their existence as a myth, believing them to be no more than the imaginary characters depicted on the Tarot cards that are used for light-hearted fortune telling at aristocratic parties. Only the secret society calling themselves the Cabal, who know that the Tarot preserves the Lore, are aware of the threat facing humanity now that the Tide is beginning to return and the Tide Lords’ power with it.

Arkady Desean, born a commoner, but now the wife of the Duke of Lebec, is an academic who is trying to piece together the history of the world of Amyrantha and discover the truth behind the myths of the Cataclysm. When a murderer somehow survives a hanging and declares himself to be Cayal, the Immortal Prince as portrayed in the Tarot, it is Arkady who is asked to interview him to discover if he is either a madman or a spy sent to stir up discontent among the Crasii, half-human, half-animal slaves, who still believe the Tide Lords to be real. At first Arkady is determined to prove Cayal a liar, but as she interrogates him, the more difficult this becomes, until she is forced to admit that he is who and what he claims to be. With the revelation that she is in fact dealing with a Tide Lord, comes the realisation that her world and her own secrets are not as secure as she believed. Several members of her immediate circle are not who they appear to be, while others, her childhood friend Declan Hawkes, now the King’s Spymaster, among them, are working to their own hidden agenda.

The first of a four-book series, this is an extremely well-written fantasy. The reader cannot help but think that if a group of very ordinary individuals, were made immortal with almost limitless power, they would very likely behave as do most of the Tide Lords, setting themselves up as gods and goddesses, falling out with one another with dire consequences for the human beings who get in the way of their world-destroying battles, and creating a race of slave creatures with an instinctive compulsion to serve their immortal masters. It also seems likely that some of them would eventually tire of their endless lives and seek to end them. Cayal is shown to be just as capable of mass-murder as the rest of the immortals, and yet, as his past history and the truth behind all the fables unfolds during
As far as opening lines go, if 'There are one thousand five hundred and sixty seven known demons. Precisely.' doesn't get your attention then what are you doing here?

Our guide through this world so very like our own is William Heaney, a man of many parts – Quango boss, Government adviser, demented charitable giver, anonymous poet, member of a small self help group for heartbroken men and, oh yes, the boss and leading light of a gang that creates fake antique books for the cognoscenti with deeper wallets than discernment. As a student he also wrote a fake guide to the summoning of demons that turned out to work, much to his surprise when he discovers the truth.

You might have gathered that this is a playful book, yet at the same time it takes us through sloughs of doubt, self disgust, failure, rejection death and abnegation. And it has demons. Not the demons of legend, red with wings, forked tails and wicked grins but dull, grey, draining personifications of our failings – Calvinist demons, in fact. Heaney suffers appalling rejection by his estranged wife – taken the kids to live a television chef – is left by his platonic true love and undergoes agonies of doubt about his new love. He may not be being followed (although he has reason enough to expect to be followed given the strokes he pulls) but he is paranoid, and with good reason as the story unfolds. He is hardly your conventional hero. Indeed, the only heroic aspect of him is that his antagonists demonstrate the deadly sins even more vividly than he does.

The story, of course, misleads. Heaney the writer subverts just about every expectation he raises for the debasement of Heaney the character, and does so in a way that makes the disappointment of failed expectations more satisfying than their fulfilment. For 300 pages we hear the approaching avalanche, Heaney the author convincing us that Heaney the character deserves every humiliation coming his way, and knows he does. Then, at the end, things change because Heaney is really one of the good guys, he actually deserves his redemption, and the redemption he deserves is more logically compelling than the damnation he desires.

This book is not populated by heroic characters. In their flaws – pride, vanity, gluttony, excess of alcohol, hubris – they are largely unredeemed except by the humanity with which Heaney the writer imbues them. He convinces us that there is the estimable in them because if there isn't, there is none in us. This is mirror writing.

It is also tough going, and if it is well worth the effort, anyone who wants a genre sleigh ride would be advised to look elsewhere. Mr Heaney is committing literature.

Except he isn't. Because Heaney the writer is as much a fiction as Heaney the character, being the pseudonym of Graham Joyce. What is in a name? A rose, etc. Seriously recommended.

Ben Jeapes – *Time's Chariot*

Reviewed by Gillian Rooke

This young adult novel was originally published in 2003 as *Winged Chariot*. It presents a with an interesting angle on the theme of time travel. It is centred around ‘The College’, founded by Jean Morbern, the inventor of the time machines; to ensure that if his rules were followed there would be no anomalies that could alter present or future. However, the society of ‘The Home Time’ has become totally dependent on escapism into the past for all their entertainment, and in just twenty seven years the ‘bygoners’, the people of the past, will have developed sufficient technology to intercept the time machines. What will happen to the Home Time after this? It is too terrible to contemplate. But some people are trying to plan for a future.

Ben Jeapes has invented a very interesting social structure in his world which is not used as much as it might be. There are for instance a lot of implications of the conditioning of the children of the Home Time that could have been made much more of.

The plot starts off as a sort of space age whodunit, later revealing many twists and a top level power struggle, but my interest in this review, is in the style. *Time's Chariot* is described as a ‘fantasy’ but I would take issue with this description. To me a ‘fantasy’ is a book which has no foundation in science however futuristic, and this book contains mechanised time travel, space flight, and colonisation. I wouldn’t even categorise it as a ‘science fantasy’ because the characters accept all the inventions as products of science.

The book may fall between stools somewhat, because although you have a young hero and his friends, getting into scrape after narrow scrape, there is no mystery about the world, and the things in it, that I think all children love, nor any prolonged action and build up of tension. Also I think it is too plot driven for children and doesn’t give them time to get to know the characters. Sadly, most adults are content with a nice involved story line with lots of invention, which Ben Jeapes has in abundance; but the fact that it is so clearly written down for children might prevent their full enjoyment.

I must admit I did not like the beginning; where the first short chapter has a man falling to his death, and the second opens with a man killing three men, without one single qualm or backward glance. Later we see that he has learned compassion, but this does not negate the fact that the book gives a false first impression. Obviously all this violence right at the start is there to grab readers, and
I was in two minds about this, but after consideration; if young men start reading the book because of these violent scenes, and go on to read through it and find their interest held by a world less violent than that they are used to reading about, this can only be a good thing.

Russell Kirkpatrick – *Path of Revenge: Husk Trilogy Book 1*


Reviewed by A.P. Canavan

It is easy to write a review about a bad book, you just pick out some of the flaws and exploit them. However problems arise when you are asked to review a book like this. *Path of Revenge* is a study in how to write good genre fantasy.

Russell Kirkpatrick is one of the new generation of Australasian fantasists who are taking the genre by storm. This series follows on from his first trilogy, *The Fire of Heaven*, some 70 years after the events detailed there. His background as a cartographer is illustrated by the typical fantasy maps at the start (eight pages of them), but more than that it has influenced how his characters interact with the landscapes he has created around them.

His vision of fantasyland is as much a character as Noetos, the head fisherman with the secret past, Lenares the gifted ingénue and Stella the immortal deposed Queen. Each of the kingdoms possess a unique flavour and sound, from the cliffs and sea by Fossa Harbour to the roiling sands beyond the city of Talamaq, and even the more nondescript parts of Faltha manage to evoke a sense of time and place. There is a sense of a living land that has been breathing history and stories for its entire existence and we are now witnesses to the latest one.

The novel follows three separate groups of characters as their lives go through tumultuous change, orchestrated by the mysterious Husk from his dungeon cell. Noetos is the typical gruff veteran character following a personal quest to rescue his family, Lenares is the beautiful, yet troubled teen struggling to fit in to the world of court and privilege and Stella the mysterious and alluring regal Queen fighting against a power hungry priesthood. Each is accompanied by various supporting characters and this forms the elements of a great fantasy series. Each thread feels fully developed and the pace of the novel is adequately managed by switching between each adventure, engaging and re-engaging interest in the ongoing struggles of the groups.

The fact that they have been manipulated by Husk, whose plan has yet to be fully unveiled, gives the story an epic and grand feel. The vividly realised characters themselves are wonderfully flawed, plausible and interesting. Despite not being perfect paragons of virtue they are likeable and engaging and you really want to find out what happens next. This is aided by the superb backdrop of the history and landscape. The exposition, dealing mainly with the events of the previous trilogy, is carefully crafted and is fitted almost seamlessly into the main text and dialogue, so that things are hinted at and slowly developed through natural dialogue and the occasional forced description.

This book may not be going down the road of gritty fantasy popularised by authors like Erikson, or genre defying fantasy like Miéville but this is genre fantasy at its finest, a tale well told. Sit back, turn off the phone and enjoy the read.

Ken MacLeod – *The Night Sessions*


Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The *Night Sessions* is Ken MacLeod’s second novel to examine the impact of the so-called war on terror. But it lacks the passion, and hence the impact, of *The Execution Channel*.

One reason for this is that the previous novel took as its model the spy story, whereas the new novel takes as its model the police procedural. Thus where *The Execution Channel* delved into falseness and duplicity, where its world expected no truth only further lies, *The Night Sessions* follows a structure that expects truth, that breaks through the lies, that exposes falseness. The spy story is generally immediate, situated at the heart of the events as they happen; the police procedural, as a matter of course, occurs after the significant event. This structure is superb for certain types of storytelling, where we are taken on a tour comfortable in the knowledge that we will arrive at an understanding of the world; but the war on terror has no such comfortable understanding to be reached, and so here the manner of storytelling seems at odds with the story to be told.

Another problem that springs from this structural issue is that the police procedural demands a recogniseable world at the start, so that we might understand the disruption of the crime and recognise the clues as they are accumulated. But at the heart of *The Night Sessions* is a world that never quite makes sense.

The jumping off point seems to be a perception that the war on terror is at heart a religious war. This is significantly at odds with *The Execution Channel* in which the war on terror is understood to be an essentially political war, an extension of the Great Game; and that perception seems closer to MacLeod’s own reading of events which allowed him to pour more anger into that previous novel. The religious origin of the war on terror, though it is often presented as the public perception, does not convince, and it has the knock-on effect that MacLeod seems distinctly uneasy when writing about faith and personal belief, which this story demands.

This is a novel set, literally, after Armageddon; because a cataclysmic battle at the Biblical Megiddo was the climax of the wars of religion, the bloody aftermath of the war on terror. The political make-up of the world seems to have changed significantly as a result. The novel is set mostly in Scotland and New Zealand; we get no indication of the situation in England, or indeed in the rest of Europe, while America seems to be both still powerful and past its prime. But the political shape of the world hardly matters to MacLeod, which is why we don’t really see
Paul McAuley – *The Quiet War*

Reviewed by Shaun C Green

The Quiet War is a portrait of a super-state of Greater Brazil, the super-state of Greater Brazil is foremost among Earth’s players in its interactions with the Outer colonies. A last effort towards peace has been initiated by Brazilian politicians and the representatives of a high-tech, horizontally-democratic Callistan colony. Together they are constructing a secure biome on the small moon’s surface as a symbol of co-operation between two peoples. Yet among those sent to Callisto to oversee the project are bit players whose masters would prefer war to peaceful trade and co-operation, and conflict is easy to engineer between two groups of people who struggle to understand one another.

The Quiet War is billed as a space opera but, as should be obvious from the preceding scene-setting, readers expecting clashes between vast fleets of spacecraft will be disappointed. Almost from the outset McAuley’s focus is on the intrigue and power-plays among the Terran factions, as well as the more varied interactions of the atomised, argumentative and often idealistic Outers. In many ways *The Quiet War* is a portrait of a clash of civilizations as, for the most part, the people who populate the novel think in genuinely different ways. Macy, an engineer forced into exile from Greater Brazil, illustrates this perfectly as she is passed between Outer colonies who struggle to decide what to do with her. In one case Outer utopianism is demonstrably cruel and unfair, although these Outers genuinely believe that it is Macy who refuses to integrate. Then there are the genetically-engineered or modified soldiers and pilots of Greater Brazil. The former are drilled with patriotic anti-Outen fervour from birth, whereas the latter are ordinary human pilots who agree to lose something of themselves to become superior warriors. In both cases their attitudes towards the Outers are illuminating, as are their actions when war does come.

McAuley shows us the cynical manipulation that drives Greater Brazil’s politicians and top-ranking military officials, as well as how this affects the smaller players who are dragged into the Machiavellian melee through choice or accident. This damning focus isn’t restricted to the authoritarian Terran super-states; if anything, they are presented more neutrally, perhaps because everyone now knows that authoritarian and militaristic national blocs are callous, destructive and riddled with corruption. The Outers are subjected to more criticism, presumably because their lives are more unusual and thus interesting to readers of SF. Sociological considerations are paramount as the novel questions assumptions implicit in social structures and patterns of thought. Impressively this is all grounded in story and character, with authorial opinion never obviously creeping in. The many criticisms made towards the Outers are the result of career diplomats, politicians and other ambassadors drawing attention to the flaws they see in their visits to Outer colonies. No Outer ever visits Earth, and what criticism they do direct towards their Terran counterparts is usually crude enough to know whether it makes sense. What matters is that religion has lost its place in the world. Not that the entire population has suddenly become irreligious, far from it, but there is now no official recognition of any religious body. Churches have been converted into nightclubs, priests are unpaid with no vestments or title, congregations meet in secret. Immediately after the war, religions were bloodily repressed; but now an informal ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy seems to be in operation.

Then a popular local Catholic priest in Edinburgh is killed by a parcel bomb, not so long after a Protestant churchman is killed by sniper fire. Detective Inspector Ferguson, a veteran of the religious repressions, doesn’t just find himself trying to solve a murder, he is also rushing to prevent another religious war.

The situation is promising as the investigation, plagued as such investigations always are by interference from on high, takes us from Goth nightclubs to furtive congregations of extreme Scottish Presbyterians. MacLeod is always very good at telling local colour, so we discover a lot about the world just from the fleeting appearance of the Russian mafia who are associated with Gazprom. And the nitty gritty of the police investigation, the gathering and interpretation of clues, is fascinating. But something in the execution lets it down: the religious set up never quite rings true, and without that initial conviction a flare-up of international terrorism associated with Scottish religious extremism is never going to allow our suspension of disbelief.

At least the science fictional denouement, involving robot veterans of the religious wars, a lay preacher in a New Zealand theme park, and a gripping hand to hand fight on the cable of a space elevator, springs out of ideas that are an integral part of the background of the novel rather than coming as an incongruous surprise like the appearance of the Russian mafia who are associated with Gazprom. And the nitty gritty of the police investigation, the gathering and interpretation of clues, is fascinating. But something in the execution lets it down: the religious set up never quite rings true, and without that initial conviction a flare-up of international terrorism associated with Scottish religious extremism is never going to allow our suspension of disbelief.

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propaganda based on ignorance.

Two classic SF novels came to mind whilst reading The Quiet War. The first was Frank Herbert's Dune, with its feudal struggles for economic and political power and its “wheels within wheels” approach to the same. At first I found the intrigue of The Quiet War shallow – not stupid, but lacking the multiple layers and angles such a story demands. In retrospect I think it was a deliberate conceit to not throw the reader in at the deep end, and as I read on I was left simply impressed with the tale's rigorous complexity.

The second novel is Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed, with its considered exploration of two very different systems of social organisation, language, and methods of interaction. This comparison is less close as McAuley devotes less time to exploring the details of his societies, preferring instead to focus on the conflicts between them, the more abstract ideas underpinning them, and also the themes of change and social evolution. Still, I think any serious critical examination of The Quiet War would do well to turn its eyes to these classics.

The scientific rigor present throughout, in various disciplines, is impressive. I am no scientist but I found the lucid descriptions illuminating, if not always directly relevant to the story itself (for the record, I regard this as no bad thing). The prose is less impressive: it is more than workmanlike, but the emphasis is clearly on clarity above beauty. I feel that this is only worth mentioning as it exacerbates the apparent simplicity and dullness of the book at its beginning; later, this clarity is something of a boon.

Overall I found The Quiet War a highly rewarding read, with my opinion of it continually revised upwards as I read on. By the novel's midpoint the societies it portrayed genuinely felt like the confused, messy systems of social organisation and power they are. The ideas presented by the novel are interesting and the conclusions drawn by the author are differentiated. In the end, of course, he comes through: this is the journey of the Hero, and he is required to suffer so that in the end he may transcend his beginnings, and bring gifts to those who depend on him.

What is unusual is the way that this occurs. Grant isn't the usual young man of the mythic form, nor is he necessarily particularly nice. Although Thotmoses is at least partly the mentor, he's one with his own agenda. Kat is not at all what she initially appears to be: her façade may be that of an ingénue, but the reality is somewhat different, much to Grant's chagrin.

The close focus of the story (basically the three characters mentioned), and the attention to detail that makes even the dream sequences seem real work well. Everything we know is through Grant's eyes, so everything is subjective. By varying the realism, the author manages to make some parts seem more dreamlike than the actual dreams, causing the reader to question reality, finally becoming unsure as to when whatever Grant is experiencing actually is real.

There's a lot of information here. As very much a novel of ideas, there are some occasions when Grant (who is, although an intelligent man, not a technical one) has to bring gifts to those who depend on him.

The ending was always going to be difficult. This is not a story that ends with a cathartic sacrifice, nor is it triumphant. It's almost a trailing away. By the end, Grant has changed so much that his original concerns have become petty. He's transcended his origins, and like the ending of 2001, it's difficult to close a story whose concerns have shifted so far.

The biggest problem I have is with the character of Kat. The strong contrast between what she plays and what she actually is may be explained, but there are some scenes that don't work for me. Given that we're seeing this through Grant's eyes, we may be suffering a bit from an unreliable narrator.

In conclusion, although I consider there to be some
Nicholas Pekearo – The Wolfman
Tor, New York, 2008, $23.95, 286pp, h/b, ISBN 9780765320261
Reviewed by Donna Scott

The Wolfman is, sadly, a posthumously published book. The author, an NYPD Auxiliary Police Officer (an unpaid volunteer) was shot and killed while on duty in March 2007, at the same time as this book was going through the editorial process. The accompanying press release describes Pekearo as a hero, a likeable man with a talent for writing who was doing this dangerous voluntary work not only to feed his muse, but also to try to do something positive for his neighbourhood.

The story concerns a werewolf, and is written from the viewpoint of the monster who doesn’t ask the reader to either sympathise or condone his killings. Marlowe Higgins is a drifter who has settled somewhat precariously into a town on the Tennessee border, where he doesn’t even bother to change the cat-scented furniture of the old lady who lived and died in his house, and gets a job in a diner kitchen, where the boss is itching for an excuse to fire him. Higgins doesn’t like many people and many people don’t like him. However, we get the impression that for all his prickly exterior, Higgins is at least trying to improve things for himself, having given up the drinking that encourages his tendency to start bar brawls, and in discovering a capacity for friendship with his acquaintance with Pearce, the policeman he saved during one of the brawls he started. It is for this reason that he is sticking around, choosing to take out the town’s ne’er-do-wells when he turns into a werewolf. However, when a serial killer comes to town that the wolf can’t catch, Higgins’s life begins spiralling out of control again.

Although we know from the outset that Higgins is a werewolf, it is interesting to see how the symptoms of his curse manifest themselves in ways that mimic depression. He even picks up the obsessive compulsive mannerisms of his victims. The wolf too, is a manifestation of a second personality, not quite wholly distinct from Higgins’s. Higgins both embraces and is repulsed by the changes that the wolf has brought him, which are rooted in the trauma of war and the dysfunctional nature of his family as much as any curse.

Patty Garcia of Tor Books links the protagonist’s motivation for choosing his particular path to Pekearo’s: trying to protect the citizens of his neighbourhood. I would disagree that the monster is that sympathetic, but it is the depth of the author’s insight into the wolf’s alienation that adds substance to this simple story, though other characters are comparatively flat and their actions predictable. The author had plans to tell different stories with this novel’s protagonist, so future tales may well have contained more innovative twists. Pekearo’s writing style is punchy, droll, and very readable, and is particularly suited to depicting the slow pace of life in the town. Although The Wolfman is not terribly original and holds no great surprise, it is nonetheless an entertaining read.

Christopher Priest – The Magic: The Story of a Film
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Oscar Wilde once famously said that Britons and Americans were two people separated by a common language. Much the same could be said of literature and film: the common language of story requires a completely different grammar and syntax for the two media. The translation of any novel into a movie seems to necessitate wholesale destruction of the book. Characters are changed, amalgamated, introduced or deleted entirely; the plot is transformed; even the structure of the story is replaced with something different. The irony is that a too literal adaptation of the novel usually makes for a bad film.

This is a process that has been catalogued many times, but rarely from the point of view of the novelist. Now Christopher Priest has written about the process that turned his novel, The Prestige (winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the World Fantasy Award), into Christopher Nolan’s movie, The Prestige (a box office hit and already consistently rated among the best films of all time). Priest had no hand in writing the script, he was not involved in the film, he hardly seems to have had any contact with Nolan. This is, in other words and curiously, an outsider’s account of something that was very intimate to the writer.

Because he was not involved in the film making process, because he was, indeed, kept at arm’s length by Nolan throughout much of the procedure, this is a film book that actually tells us nothing about the making of the movie. We meet none of the actors, we don’t go on set, we see behind none of the scenes. What we get is the story, as seen by Priest, from his first ideas for the novel through to the reviews for the film. (He notes, for example, that the mainstream newspaper film reviewers tended to refer to the same few scenes, quote the same few lines, all of which were included in the press pack they received. This is an observation few of us would be in a position to make, since we would not normally seek out so many reviews or be involved enough to compare them so closely. Genre reviewers who, in the main, did not receive the press pack tended to produce more varied, insightful and often more positive reviews.)

What makes the book particularly interesting is the discussion of how the novel and the film differ. It is clear right from the start that Priest thoroughly approves of the film, so his criticisms are few. Nevertheless, his analysis of why Olivia’s shift of allegiance from Angier to Borden, ‘a crucial turn in the story’ (101), is less convincing in the film than in the novel is revealing. As he says, the psychology
is wrong, the motivation in the novel is the exact opposite of the motivation in the film. The film is saved by a technical trick at this point, which turns the discussion into a fascinating analysis of the difference between novel and film. It comes in a long chapter devoted to an almost scene-by-scene analysis of the film compared to the novel which repeatedly makes the point about the difference between book and adaptation. And if there are criticisms (the judge dismissing Tesla’s equipment as ‘bells and whistles’ is not only anachronistic, but runs against the experience of stage magicians that the intelligent observer is easier to fool; the judge would have seen the equipment as a complicated apparatus not a simple trick), this is balanced by straightforward admiration of so much that the film achieves. For instance, Priest spends several pages going over the on-screen trick in which Angier first replicates Borden’s illusion using his double, Root; we see the mechanical workings of the trick, but that doesn’t lessen the wonderment when we witness the trick itself, in one take, from the perspective of the audience, knowing that both Angier and Root are played by the same actor, Hugh Jackman. In other words, at roughly the centre point of the film Nolan has replicated exactly the experience of watching a stage magician.

But behind this frank admiration lies puzzlement and, as I read it, some measure of frustration at the way Nolan took possession of The Prestige. During the filming, everyone working on it had to sign secrecy agreements not to reveal the twist around which the story hinged. Nolan refused publishers the right to use stills from the film on a tie-in republication of the novel, because he simply didn’t want people reading the book so they would know what happened. Despite the fact that the book had been in print since 1995, Nolan behaved as if it was entirely his work and no-one else had any claim on it. Given that he was pleased with the result, I think Priest is more forgiving than I would have been. Nevertheless, it adds a certain frisson to the discussion.

One thing that Priest doesn’t cover, despite a long discussion of the ending of the film, is any analysis of the moral underpinning of the story. In the novel, there is a moral equivalence between Borden and Angier, they are both equally at fault. In the film this is not the case: the way Borden causes the death of Angier’s wife makes Angier the injured party, which changes the dynamic of the film. It is interesting that this is a point Priest doesn’t even seem to notice, let alone discuss. We all, I imagine, see different things, assume different levels of importance, in both the novel and the film. With that minor caveat, however, this is an extraordinarily fascinating account of the journey a story might make into print and onto celluloid.

Lucy Rogers – It’s ONLY Rocket Science
Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

This is a popular science book, part of the Astronomer’s Universe series from Springer Science + Business Media. It is an American book, written by the British scientist Lucy Rogers CEng MIMechE FRAS. The blurb at www.itsonlyrocketscience.com outlines the purpose of the volume:

‘It deals with all aspects of spaceflight, from how to leave the Earth (including the design of the rocket, mission planning, navigation and communication), to life in space and the effects of weightlessness. The book also includes sections describing how an amateur can track satellites and understand their trajectories, and on the future of spaceflight, touching on what is, and what is not, possible given present and expected future technologies.’

As the back cover notes, the author ‘describes, everyday terms and entirely without complex maths, just what is involved in launching something into space and exploring the universe beyond our small planet. If you want to understand the fundamentals of space flight, from how to leave the Earth – to live in space and the effects of weightlessness, begin your journey here.’

That really pretty much sums it up. The strapline is ‘An Introduction in Plain English’ and the text conforms to this. It is written in an easily accessible and engaging style, and could work equally as a school text book or primer for the general reader. All that grates is the pointless capitalisation of the word ‘only’ in the title. There is virtually no maths, and what there is should not test anyone interested in and capable of reading the book.

The volume begins with an introductory chapter covering such aspects as gravity, solar wind and the Van Allen belts, explains various orbits (including inclination and eccentricity) and touches on space debris and space law. The author then goes back to look at the history of rocketry (who knew the British used rockets against the Americans in the war of 1812?) and considers rockets in early science fiction before moving on to a more detailed exploration of the major aspects of rockets and space flight. Rogers reminded me of a lot I had forgotten, and taught me some things I never knew. Anyone wanting to get the technology details right, or at least have a check list of points to consider, while writing a hard SF near present day space adventure would do well to have this book on their desk.

The book is presented in large trade paperback format, beautifully printed on high quality paper. It is well illustrated with excellent diagrams and photos, some in colour. In this respect only the cover lets the side down – why use a mediocre computer generated image when there are thousands of exciting photographs of real rockets which could have been employed? Two more caveats. I was surprised to find a British author writing a book for an American publisher using kilometres rather than miles. Both countries still use miles for measuring long distances and I kept stopping to translate metric back into familiar numbers in my head. Even if astronomers now generally use metric, including imperial (perhaps in brackets) would make the book more user friendly to many of the non specialist readers the book is aimed at. Finally: American buildings count the first floor from ground level. I found one passage confounding until I recalled this fact.

It’s ONLY Rocket Science is one of those books which delivers exactly what it promises. If it is a subject you want or need to learn about it is solid introduction.

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**John Scalzi – The Last Colony**
Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

John Perry and his wife Jane, retired from military service with the Colonial Defense Forces, are recruited to supervise the planting of a new human colony on the virgin world of Roanoke. They have to contend not only with bickering among the colonists’ ethnic cliques and worries about the planet’s indigenous biology, but with the ever-present threat posed by the Conclave, a federation of 400-plus starfaring civilisations that has banned the claiming of new colonies by independent civilisations such as humankind (known in this Americanised future as the Colonial Union).

Scalzi’s strength is in handling the twists and turns of military diplomacy between the Colonial Union and the Conclave – especially in the novel’s more compelling second half when it becomes clear that the former is playing Roanoke as a pawn in its hawkish game of independent colonial expansion. His style, however, is reminiscent of American pulp science fiction of decades past: the story is told largely through inanely witty dialogue, in which subtext is made explicit and characters explain to each other information you might expect to be common knowledge; almost no attempt is made to visualise the alien beings and planetary landscapes or to engage our interest in their ecology; the depiction of human ethnodiversity goes little beyond ethnically identifiable surnames for secondary characters; and the handling of emotions is so banal that it made me cringe with embarrassment. It’s exactly the kind of work that’s likely to reinforce the literary establishment’s prejudice towards science fiction.

Is there a link, I wonder, between this literary or psychological naivety and the book’s (perhaps more troubling) political naivety? Scalzi sets up the potential to examine some interesting political questions: a Darwinian universe in which rival starfaring species ruthlessly compete for planetary resources; a human colony undermined by internal ethnic loyalties; mutual incomprehension between colonists and indigenous sentient beings. He’s keen to endorse Clintonian cooperation in foreign affairs over Bushian unilateralism: if you behave with aggressive violence, whether towards primitive natives or rival superpowers, you’ll suffer violent consequences. That’s fine. But he seems oblivious to the outrage with which the very idea of colonialism is widely judged today. He seems unaware that expansionism, however it’s conducted, must lead to conflict. After a brief violent encounter with the colonists, Roanoke’s natives vanish from the story. The implicit message is that coexistence must be brokered with the powerful, but primitive natives will, regrettably, be trampled beneath the feet of progress and a continuing impetus to colonise new resources instead of living within the means of the place one inhabits.

You might say The Last Colony belongs to a long-established subgenre of space opera and is an easy-to-read bit of fun harking back to the glory days of Heinlein and Asimov. You might also say it is humdrum, naive, and irrelevant to the imaginative needs of the era in which it has been written.

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**John Scalzi – Zoe’s Tale**
Tor, 2008, 335pp, $24.95, ISBN 0-7653-1698-6
Reviewed by Nic Clarke

Zoe’s Tale sees Campbell Award-winner John Scalzi become the latest arrival at an increasingly-crowded party: authors of adult genre fiction trying their hand at Young Adult stories. Scalzi takes a secondary character from his Old Man’s War novels – fifteen-year-old Zoë, adoptive daughter of sometime Colonial Defense Force officers John Perry and Jane Sagan – and gives us her perspective on what many readers felt was an underexplored strand (read: inexplicable deus ex machina) of The Last Colony, namely her role in the defence of the titular settlement, Roanoke (an ill-omened name if ever there was one).

As so often in YA novels, the protagonist is the sort of teenager that – depending on one’s level of confidence while growing up – many readers will either wish they had been back then, or imagined they actually were at the time. Zoë is thoughtful, capable, self-aware, always ready with a finely-tuned quip, smart, and has a sarcastic humour that anyone who has read Old Man’s War will recognise from her adoptive father. Her personable narration is peppered with adolescent exaggeration (“we all went insane”) and quite naturally focused on the activities and relationships of Zoë and her friends. But Scalzi wisely keeps the slang to a minimum and uses the teenagers’ experiences – chaveing at the unaccustomed toil and restrictions, but also tenacious and adaptable – to build up a picture of precarious, inhospitable frontier life through younger eyes. The story is told retrospectively, taking us through the entire period of her family’s association with Roanoke, in a mostly linear form and largely without foreshadowing statements, beyond the occasional worse-was-to-come cliffhanging chapter end.

Several things are refreshing about it. The first and most obvious is that our indomitable, self-described “smartass” of a narrator is girl rather than a boy, and that she gets stuck in, using her brain, initiative and her hands to take charge and make change, in a way that fictional girls rarely seemed to in the stories I knew as a child (no matter how much I shouted at the page or the screen for them to stop messing with their hair, pick up that rock and just Do Something). The second is that while Zoë has a love interest – an implausibly perfect love interest, actually, who writes non-embarrassing poetry and responds to who she is rather than how she augments his standing in the teenage boy manliness stakes – she doesn’t immediately swoon and start fluttering her eyelashes whenever he’s in the room, nor does she automatically defer to him or protect his pride when (frequently) she knows better than he does.

At times Zoë seems rather older than fifteen – she is more perceptive about the terms of her parents’ relationship than most twenty-five year-olds, for example – and at times the novel can be, much like the other Old Man’s War books, a little too glib and smooth for its own good. The gestures towards questioning humankind’s colonial impulses are very welcome, if far from hard-hitting, but the moral backflips the narrative does in its effort to justify the sacrifices required by the plot are hard to swallow, even if Zoë has more than earned our sympathy and trust by the story’s end. It is enjoyable, funny and occasionally
moving, though, even if it does leave a little too much of the serious thinking to the reader.

Robert Silverberg – Son of Man
Reviewed by Paul Bateman

What is it to be human? This is a common question in science fiction. Originally published in 1972 and nominated for a Locus Poll Award for Best Science Fiction Novel, Son of Man is yet another look at this topic. Fans of Robert Silverberg will probably greet this reprint with enthusiasm and a sense of nostalgia. My reaction was one first of interest then of disappointment.

After being caught in a time-flux, Clay wakes to find himself alone and naked in a strange far future world. Soon he meets Hamer, a descendent of our present day humans, belonging to a form of human known as the Skimmers. The Skimmers can change sex and seem to spend a great of time performing various rituals and introducing Clay to various methods of self-exploration, including changing his own form to explore this new world around him. The Skimmers also spend a great of time having sex with each other and Clay. At times, it reads as a mischievous hippy love-in, at others a New Age Spiritualism manual. Clay doesn’t spend all his time with the Skimmers, he also spends time and occasionally transforms into other Sons of Man, such as the squid-like Breathers, the sedentary Awaiters, the weasel-like Destroyers. Slowly he comes to absorb all these cultures while many of these Sons of Man explore twenty-first-century Man’s life, and death, through him. They are also curious about love, and this is where I started to have my doubts.

Love, according to Silverberg, as far as I could tell, is sexual relations between men and women. Love in its many different forms such as between parents and children, friends, and so forth are never dealt with. It’s as though love and sex are the same thing when they’re not. To further detract from the work, Clay spends little time as a woman and has sex with a Skimmer, in a male form, and doesn’t like it, feeling violated. The Clay-as-woman chapter covers less than ten pages. It was as though those pages were written because he was told what it was like to be a woman, not truly empathizing with the experience of femininity, while a few pages later he had little difficulty empathizing what it was like to be a mountain or a rock. It seems to me that Silverberg has thus failed in answering what it is to be human because he skips over half of humanity in so few pages. It’s the assumption that “Man” and “man” are interchangeable, that the philosophy – the experience – of one should be the same as the other. The premise of using a far future to look at humanity objectively has been wasted. Few authors can truly satisfy the need to investigate cultural and sexual differences between people, and Silverberg has shown that his imagination has been hemmed in by Western patriarchal society with a New Age overtone. Son of Man is very much a book of its times.

As a nostalgic trip, Son of Man is a sensual feast. As a thesis on our species and our descendents it is little more than a deviation.

Melinda Snodgrass – The Edge Of Reason
Tor Books, 2008, 381pp, h/b, ISBN 9780765315168
reviewed by Martin Lewis

Imagine if Richard Dawkins was not only American but retarded. Imagine he taught himself to read using the work of illiterate megasellers like James Patterson and Tess Gerritsen. Imagine he further fleshed out his understanding of human nature on a diet of romance novels and misery memoirs. Finally, imagine he stayed up one night getting drunk and watching piss poor police procedurals before having the sudden brainwave of re-writing American Gods by Neil Gaimen. Imagine all that and you have imagined Melinda Snodgrass’s dire The Edge Of Reason and thus saved yourself the pain of actually reading it.

Our hero, Richard Oortz, is an East Coast blueblood concert pianist turned New Mexican policeman with a Terrible Secret. You might think this sounds unlikely and you would be right. He is also an extraordinarily good looking bisexual gymnast whose DNA, unlike most of the rest of humanity, contains no magic. This last is of paramount importance because, counter-intuitively, it allows him to wield a magic sword that will save the world.

The idiotic plot revolves around the rather large co-incidence that the Devil also happens to live in Alberquerque (apparently this is because “it is a place where science and magic rub close”). In a mind blowing twist, He is actually the good guy since he represents the tyranny of God. What follows is tosh to the nth degree, Snodgrass has somehow managed to harness the worst of the blockbuster thriller and paranormal romance genres. And if the plot is bad – lacking sense, structure and interest – then the writing is even worse. To take an example:

“Lean Cuisine hefted light in the hand as if the contents of the package were as cardboard as the box. Richard hooked open the crisper drawer of the refrigerator with the tow of his shoe. Fresh bok choy, peppers and ginger flashed color and guilt at him. He would cook.” (p82)

The rest of the prose is equally cloth-eared and over-wrought and the dialogue reads like the work of Elizabots. It was solely because of professional obligation that I read all the way to the end, only to be rewarded with a limp, open-ended conclusion that paves the way for equally appalling sequels.

The book’s jacket bizarrely claims that it is as controversial as The Golden Compass or The Illuminatus! Trilogy, possibly the only time those two books have been mentioned in the same sentence. The Golden Compass was controversial (in the US) because it was marketed at kids and suggested that organised religion wasn’t that great. The Illuminatus! Trilogy was controversial because it was
an insane counter-culture conspiracy theory fuckfest. *The Edge Of Reason* is supposedly controversial because of the whole theological inversion thing but this is only going to shock you if you have parachuted in from the 19th Century (as Oortz appears to have done.) In fact, the only thing controversial about the book is that it ever made it into print from a major publisher like Tor.

**Sheri S. Tepper – *The Margarets***


Reviewed by Tanya Brown

Margaret Bain, born 2084, grows up as the only child on Phobos. Earth is over-populated, ecologically devastated and governed by draconian reproductive laws. Those who come from large families (the calculation is based on number of children and number of siblings) are shipped out to one of the colony worlds, or indentured as bond-slaves to various unpleasant alien races. Not all the aliens are bad guys: the Gentherans, small besuited bipeds who made contact with Earth in 2062, seem to feel indebted to humanity, and have provided ships, assistance and galactic good will.

Like many solitary children, Margaret invents alter egos: a spy, a queen, a shaman, a linguist. Unlike most children, though, her fantasy selves become real: they split off at critical junctures, and go off to have adventures (and narratives) of their own. At nine, a version of Margaret leaves Phobos with a woman in a red dress whose spaceship looks like a dragonfly. At twelve, multiple selves leave Earth for different fates. At twenty-two ...

Margaret ends up seven-selved, each self on a different world and usually known by a different name. One self is male. One self is much older than the others, having passed through a time anomaly to reach the colony for which she’s bound. Each self is only vaguely, if at all, aware that there are other versions of Margaret out there. And each berates herself for making the wrong choices, or bewails fate stacked against her.

Pan back from the Margarets. There’s a plan millennia in the making, and a shadowy Order of the Siblinghood to implement it: there’s a cosmic gathering-place, like an ocean or a forest or a galaxy, where the gods of all mortal races dwell. (Well, they say they’re gods, but they would, within her far more than her death. Zai is little more than a hostage situation instigated by the Rix, humans who have augmented themselves with mechanical upgrades to the extent that they blur the lines between living and artificial.

They seek to propagate planet-wide compound minds, artificial intelligences so vast that their followers worship them as gods. Such compound minds form naturally, but artificial intelligences so vast that their followers worship them as gods. Such compound minds form naturally, but the Rix have infiltrated an Imperial world, Legis XV, and are able to override the planet’s safeguards to allow one of their gods to be born within its infostructures. The politics that underpin the novel centre on concerns over the detrimental effects of these competing forms of posthumanism, with the unaugmented living championed by Senator Nara Oxham.

**Scott Westerfeld – *The Risen Empire***


Reviewed by David McWilliam

The Risen Empire is a fast-paced space opera that blends cyberpunk AI cults with galactic politics reminiscent of *Dune*. The Risen Emperor has ruled over the eighty worlds of the Empire for sixteen hundred years through monopoly of a technology that bestows undeath upon those he favours. Captain Laurent Zai is one such individual, marked for Elevation, he is charged with foiling
pawn in power politics, with compulsory suicide, an Error of Blood, awaiting any failure. Before being posted to the space around Legis XV, Zai and Oxham became lovers; her influence allows him to question his conditioning. The plot is told from a multitude of perspectives, but Zai is the key figure, all action relates to his mission and its political significance; for the Emperor makes it clear that there is no measure he is unwilling to take to prevent the nascent Rix mind communicating with others of its kind.

Reading The Risen Empire is an enjoyable experience, the prose is clear and competent, the action well delivered, with suspense being maintained through an unfolding series of reveals. It doesn’t offer any new concepts, but reformulates sf staples in an entertaining action adventure. The element that seemed most interesting, the Risen themselves, are somewhat underused. Though this maintains a sense of mystique, I would have liked a more thorough exploration of the dynamic between the living and the dead. However, it is hard to pass final judgement upon The Risen Empire, as it is the first instalment of a two-part series called Succession. It certainly feels more like half a book than a standalone novel. Ending on the cusp of a crucial battle, it doesn’t provide any closure to the narrative. This will either frustrate or motivate the reader depending upon their susceptibility to Westerfeld’s lacing of hooks throughout the novel. I would certainly read the sequel, but the plot could either raise the story to great heights or lower it to generic tedium. It all depends on how the author chooses to answer the many questions it raises.

Ian Whates, ed. – Myth-Understandings

Sue Thomason and Liz Williams – Fabulous Whitby

Reviewed by Donna Scott

Originally founded as a fundraiser to recoup some of the losses from the wonderfully bijou but poorly advertised Newcon 3 convention, Newcon Press has gathered momentum to become a tour de force in the SF anthology market. Myth-Understandings was the third output from this venture, and is no longer the baby of the collection is about all things fabulous and all things Whitby, with stories woven around some of the subjects I might have associated readily with the town (Dracula, goths, Whitby Abbey, jet), and some things which, if not tenuously linked, are certainly less obvious... at least to me – like pterodactyls.

The contributors have rendered new fables and legends and woven them into the history of the town. There are some fantastic sea-based stories, which have the best effect if they do not get bogged down in the beauty and mystery of the ocean and give a meaty story, such as Neville Rhys Barnes’s ‘Heritage Ocean’. I have no idea if Julia Rudford is a real councillor, but I hope her ideas bear fruit after battling that strange whale.

Morris dancers emerge in a couple of the stories, but most strangely in Jacey Bedford’s ‘The Whitby Jets’, where continuing with the dance is a subversive act aligned with terrorism by those too ignorant to realise the sun really can’t rise without it.

Most of the stories, though, are firmly rooted in the tradition of folklore, in both the content and style: Dayle A. Dermatis’s ‘Proof of Devotion’ explores the true bride/false bride tale in which a little blood always needs to be spilled. In Deirdre Counihan’s ‘Jetisoned’, an archaeological dig provides a modern framework
almost rude not to have a Venetian-style masked festival as the background to complex city-state politics.

I enjoyed the baroqueness of Williams’ world-building – technology ranges from space travel made possible by death ships to low-tech barges, travelling through a landscape powered by illusion.

One struggle I had had with Banner of Souls was that I kept tripping up over the all-female nature of the world. Every so often, I found I had been defining as male, people who had been described purely by their job – such as various sailors and doctors. By contrast, I didn’t find the same challenge this time around. I think that my mental attitudes have progressed in the last three years and I believe that reading Banner of Souls was one of the experiences that helped change my perceptions.

Throughout the novel, I felt the ambiguity of the characters of Shorn and Mantis. They remained resolutely alien in nature and I found it difficult to apprehend their goals. I also found the centipede queen effectively disturbingly macabre. Again this was a good example of something alien rendered evocatively semi-comprehensible.

A type of extra-human that I was glad to see revisited was the Kappa. It was good to see them being more active protagonists in this story and being more than the servant class I remembered from Banner of Souls. I see them as a parallel creation to the selk, the singing seals from Darkland and Bloodmind.

In this novel Williams, successfully presents a range of attitudes to diversity partly through the Kappas’ attitude to the Demothea. In this situation there is no easy answer as to the best way for the different groups to react to one another – should they tolerate each other, ignore and exclude the other or, like the kappa, attempt to stamp them out?

Once again, Williams’ work rewards intelligent reading. These books come highly recommended.
Transmission, Interrupted
4: We Can Build You

By Saxon Bullock

Of all the weird ironies tied up with the long saga of The Terminator, one of the biggest is the franchise’s absolute refusal to lie down and die. No matter how many seemingly fatal blows it’s dealt (angles over story rights, companies going bankrupt, a poorly directed second sequel), the metal endoskeleton shrugs off the blows, clambers out of the wreckage and keeps on coming. The scheduled date of Judgement Day – 29th August 1997 – may have been and gone, but the idea of an imminent apocalypse (and the chance to escape it) never seems to go away.

Another movie is already in production (The positive news: It’s centred on the future war, and Christian Bale is starring as John Connor; The less-than-positive news: it’s directed by Charlie’s Angels helmer McG), but a more unexpected arrival was a Terminator TV show. Developed by Josh Friedman, writer of the third film, Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles drags James Cameron’s original saga into the world of primetime US network television, and has now entered its second season with a formula that delivers a varying level of quality and impact.

Acting as a direct sequel to 1990’s T2 (T3 now stands as a narrowly avoided alternate timeline) the series recasts all the principle roles and essentially strips out the frantic chase format of the films in favour of a sometimes effective, sometimes clunky mix of slow-burning thriller, domestic character drama and sci-fi action.

The set-up is somewhat involved, having to leap through some massively contrived narrative hoops to get world-weary heroine Sarah Connor (Lena Headey) and her son John (Thomas Dekker, from S1 of Heroes) into the present day, to battle the oncoming rise of artificial intelligence network Skynet with the aid of a new protector, a reprogrammed but ambiguous female Terminator named Cameron (Firefly’s Summer Glau).

Into this mix are thrown wildcards like the Fugitive-style FBI agent determined to find Sarah and uncover the truth, a warrior from the future who turns out to be John’s uncle, and a typically unstoppable Terminator named Cromartie who’s out to track John down. Week by week, the series aims to deliver thrills and intrigue, as well as exploring the nature of what it means to be human, and how John is supposed to cope with the set-in-stone nature of his fate as a future saviour of humanity.

While it’d be easy at first glance to pass off the series as simply another in a long line of unnecessary sequels (an idea which the direct-to-dvd market now seems to thrive on), Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles is a very difficult show to assess. It gets almost as much wrong as it does right. After the highly clunky, chase-driven pilot episode that essentially acts as a new Terminator movie in miniature, the show noticeably improves and starts forging its own identity, even if it’s one that’s sometimes too low-key and dour for its own good.

One thing that’s undeniable is that T:TSCC is one of the most overtly science-fictional series to hit the American TV networks in years, even name-checking the Singularity and making a halfway decent effort to engage with the idea of artificial intelligence. Elsewhere, there’s an obvious effort to maintain a visual continuity in both the design and the photography (as well as some neat in-jokes, like the naming of Summer Glau’s character as Cameron), while Battlestar Galactica composer Bear McCreary does a fine job of aping the clanking mechanical synths of Brad Fiedel’s original movie soundtracks.

The show also makes an effort to expand the mythos rather than simply settling for easy twists like T3’s female Terminator – and most of these expansions are successful, from the running plotline of the Cromartie T-800 (Deadwood co-star Garrett Dillahunt) reconstituting its own flesh, to the presence of Brian Austin Green as Derek Reece, brother to John’s deceased father Kyle. Indeed, the Derek-centred episode ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ (S1 E06), with its Future War flashbacks, is arguably the show’s high point so far. But on too many occasions, T:TSCC doesn’t do enough with its set-up, and can’t always escape the sense that it’s struggling to present a big-scale, apocalyptic-themed story on a TV-level budget.

It’s hard not to feel that there’s something about the Terminator mythos that simply doesn’t play right without being structured around a pulse-pounding chase. The show sometimes feels as if it’s a version of the original movies consisting of nothing but the scenes between the action sequences, and that we’re waiting for a pay-off that never truly arrives; and the action that we do get often looks weak even when compared to a show like 24. (Plus there’s the constant
to correcting), to the already messed-up film continuity the pilot episode (something S2 is finally going some way ability to impersonate a normal teenager vanishing after with glaring errors. There’s everything from Cameron’s recaps, which often trump even something like is decidedly convoluted (as shown by the massive if you don’t simply say “Terminator sequel”, the setup of addition of Garbage singer Shirley Manson to the regular and complications are the last thing the show needs. taking an absurd number of episodes to get anywhere near his target.

At the time of writing, the second-season ratings have plummeted. With episodes like the dull Eighties-style Nuclear Reactor shenanigans in ‘Automatic for the People’ (2x02), this is no surprise, yet the show has somehow managed to net a full-season order. While there’s plenty of intelligent material to be mined and it’s much better than it could have been, Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles is going to need to deliver some stone-cold classic episodes if it’s not going to end up being written off as a mere franchise footnote.

Whatever else you may want to say about it, the remake Battlestar Galactica won’t be a footnote. It’s hard to think of a TV show that’s moved out of its predecessor’s shadow with as much confidence as Ronald D. Moore’s blisteringly dark space opera. Before it hit the screens, the idea of a ‘Galactica Redux’ project was frankly laughable – and to go from a reboot of a cheesy Seventies SF space opera to one of the most brutal and adult SF TV series of modern years certainly ranks as a major achievement.

Of course, for all the plaudits that have been thrown in Galactica’s direction (many of which the show deserves), it’s also made its fair share of glaring mistakes. Dangling plotlines, bizarre leaps in characterisation, hints of self-importance, occasional bursts of purple dialogue and a tendency to go for grim-for-grim’s-sake storytelling have all, to a greater or lesser extent, afflicted Galactica from the word go, even in the largely excellent first season. Perhaps the show’s defining creative tension, however, is that between its aspiring to being a serialised, multi-stranded epic, and needing to focus on the kind of small, self-contained episodes preferred by new audiences and network executives.

Indeed, aside from S1 – where even the stand-alones were heavily wired into the longer-running plotlines – it’s a strategy that has rarely paid off, and which turned the post New Caprica episodes of S3 into a turgid mess of tiresome dramas and soap opera boredom. If it hadn’t been for the class-based episode ‘Dirty Hands’ (3x16) and the admirably barmy two-part finale – in which four of the mythical Final Five Cylons were revealed thanks to the mystical (and so far unexplained) presence of Bob Dylan’s song ‘All Along the Watchtower’ – S3 could have been written off without hesitation as a major disappointment.

Even so, however, the announcement that the fourth season would also be Galactica’s last felt worryingly timely. There was, at least, the hope that with only a limited number of episodes there’d be a minimum amount of aimless playing for time... and as it’s turned out, despite some ups and downs in quality, S4’s first ten episodes have been arguably the strongest and most consistently enjoyable the series has been since the middle of S2. It’s certainly proven beyond a doubt that complex, interwoven storytelling is what Galactica does best, while there’s also the vitally important sense – absent in most
of S3 – of permanence. With the episodes counting down to the finale, all bets appear to be off and the writers are finally prepared to make major, lasting changes to the characters, as well as cutting a swath through the supporting cast.

The absence of easy reset buttons was one of the most enjoyable aspects of the first couple of seasons, and from the moment that the show picks up from S3’s cliffhanger, there’s a renewed sense of progress and change. Weaving together a collection of plotlines – including Starbuck’s mysterious resurrection, the ‘Final Four’ trying to understand their nature as Cylons while living in secret, Lee Adama abandoning the military in favour of politics, Laura Roslin’s fresh battles with cancer, and the civil war between the Cylons – the show has regained some serious energy, and finally feels like it’s gotten back in touch with the qualities that made S1 feel like such a breath of fresh air.

The core themes are back with a vengeance, especially the conflict between the human polytheism and the Cylon’s One True God, and the debate on what exactly it means to be human. In the case of the former, we have Baltar’s strange yet oddly believable ascent to a Manson-like cult figure, and it’s to the show’s credit that such a potentially creaky idea is actually made to work. James Callis’ Baltar (who was a largely passive character for much of S3) here gets some strong material, and one of the most effective elements of this plotline is that Baltar’s gradual religious awakening isn’t a complete con. There’s still a believable amount of the character playing to the crowd and doing what’s expected of him (as well as taking advantage of the opportunities for leaping into bed with devout worshippers), and yet there’s also the sense that Baltar is sincere in his quest for redemption, pushing the story in some challenging directions.

This is even truer when looking at the ‘Final Four’ plotline, which finds new angles on S1’s running plot of sleeper agents in the fleet. Here, there’s no ambiguity – Tori, Tyrol, Anders and Tigh all know conclusively that they are Cylons, but that’s – Tori, Tyrol, Anders and Tigh all know conclusively of sleeper agents in the fleet. Here, there’s no ambiguity of plotline, which finds new angles on S1’s running plot.

What has separated S4 out from S3, however, is the fact that when it does deliver, it reaches a level of pulp poetry that few shows have managed. The fourth season, then, rides a rollercoaster of quality, mixing a handful of brilliantly jaw-dropping moments (like the coms-free Rebel Base-Star accidentally leaping straight into the middle of the fleet in ‘Guess What’s Coming To Dinner?’, 4x07), with over-extended plotlines like the interminable and predictable mutiny against Starbuck’s command. Indeed, after the surprise of the fleet’s arrival at the devastated Earth in ‘Revelations’ had died down, it’s almost hard to imagine the show not pulling a plot twist so determinedly downbeat, and if anything is going to be the show’s worst enemy, it’s the sense that it’ll always choose the grimmer of two paths. What has separated S4 out from S3, however, is the fact that when it does deliver, it reaches a level of pulp poetry and energetic storytelling that few shows have managed. The acceleration towards the final end is certainly giving the show a must-see energy, even when individual episodes don’t deliver all they could.

The decision to split the fourth season across 2008 and 2009 is certainly frustrating, and it’s going to be interesting to see what the Galactica crew finally deliver in the climactic run of episodes – but despite all the high points in S4, it’s probably wise to go into the 2009 run with realistic expectations. This may be the show that’s redefined SF TV for the new millennium – yet it’s also the show that gave us ‘Black Market’ (2x14), the supremely boring ‘A Day in the Life’ (3x15), and more Starbuck/Lee/Anders/Dualla soap operatics than anybody in their right mind could possibly want. Despite all the plaudits and acclaim, Galactica is not the single greatest SF TV show in history – but whatever happens, let’s hope that Moore and his team will at least give this barmy, ballistic and occasionally brilliant space opera the explosive send-off it truly deserves.
If Naomi Mitchison (1897 – 1999) had not written any science fiction at all, she would still have had a major influence on the field as the person who ticked off Olaf Stapledon for too close a patriarchal focus in the draft of what was to become *Star Maker*. If she had written science fiction today, she may have had literary journalists claiming that she was writing speculative rather than science fiction – although she herself would almost certainly have been happy with the label. She contributed to the series of autobiographical essays “The Profession of Science Fiction” in *Foundation 21* (Feb 1981) and *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) was reprinted in the NEL “SF Master” series in 1976. As it is she is one of the great figures of British sf, and had she written more actual sf novels (she wrote a considerable amount of fantasy for children, and many of her stories are sf or sf-like) she would be hailed as a central figure comparable to Wells, Stapledon or Wyndham.

As it is, Hilary Rubinstein in the introduction to the NEL edition of *Memoirs* celebrates its wit, irony, “extraordinary ... range of interests” and argues that “that she should have written with such open and life-enhancing enjoyment of sexual experimentation from a woman’s point of view is an even more awe-inspiring achievement when one remembers that *Memoirs* was published in 1962, before ... Women’s Lib.” How much we should rely on that “milestoming” claim may be arguable (some might certainly find it a little old-fashioned), but it’s certainly true that this is a novel of great power – Stapledonian in some aspects, but also possessing a lightness of touch Stapledon rarely achieved. It is one of the classic novels of the idea of the “alien”, of the problems of interstellar travel, or of settling back into the world after voyages. It is remarkable that it seems to be almost forgotten, and somewhat disheartening that the Science Fiction Foundation contains so little material by Mitchison. (Although as always, I am here if someone wants to donate some, or give us money to buy the relevant material.)

Naomi Mitchison came from a dynasty of social activists and scientists. Her brother was the biologist J.B.S. Haldane, who also influenced Stapledon: it was the ideas proposed by Haldane, Stapledon (and H.G. Wells) which C.S. Lewis attacked in *Out of the Silent Planet*. She herself was a campaigner for feminism, birth control, nuclear disarmament and the rights of small communities like the Islands of Scotland and the Bakgatla people of Botswana. Writing science fiction was a small part of her voluminous literary output, but an important part. *Memoirs*, her first “genuine” sf novel (so says the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*), is her best, but *Solution 3* (1975) is worth reading.

Mary, the narrator of *Memoirs*, is a communications expert, an explorer of the galaxy, and the novel describes some of her encounters: aliens shaped like starfish, which create communication problems for “binary” life-forms like ourselves, or carnivorous centipedes who prey upon the cute “Rounds” and with whom, again, human communicators have problems. Running threads include Mary’s impregnation by a Martian colleague following a disastrous expedition. (The Martians communicate largely through touch, upon the sensitive organs.) The result is the haploid Viola.

There is also the development of the “grafts” – symbiotic life-forms which may or may not be able to communicate. At one point Mary volunteers to have some of this alien tissue grafted upon her. The resulting growth is nicknamed Ariel (the Shakespearean references are deliberate). Later, she takes part in other experiments, and some of the most touchingly ambiguous parts of the book describe her reaction, and those of her Martian and animal colleagues, to them.

There are fascinating asides which make you want to know more about this society, such as the character of 513 – “one of the group that had discarded names – and indeed a great deal else. The Ministry trusted her, probably told her secrets; they were great ones for that kind of thing”. The story is full of veins of humour – early on Mary explains how the “time blackout” process, for instance, creates difficulties when parents return to earth to find their children grown. The parent/child relationship is now more strictly controlled “so we are not tempted to fall in love with our sons.” It is sometimes over-controlled: it is often hard simply to display affection to one’s offspring. “But of course there are also one’s friends’ sons.”

Throughout there’s a tension between the directive of non-interference and the actual emotional and frequently erotic relationships which Mary and some of her colleagues slip into. If that makes *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* sound a bit like *Star Trek*; well, first it predates it and second it is considerably funnier and a lot wiser. It’s a wry, ironic humour, and it’s tinged with poignant and wonder and the sheer oddity of life, but on re-reading *Memoirs* I was struck by a sense of how much Mitchison was enjoying this future. There certainly is a message about human relationships in the novel, and it’s a message which it is worth paying heed to. But like Stapledon, and like her brother in his speculative essays (but more playfully, even joyfully, than both) Mitchison seems to be revelling in the act of creation.
The fourth and last novel in my Time’s Tapestry series (Weaver, Gollancz, February 2008) is an alternate history in which Hitler invades Britain.

Of course to say that this has been done before is an understatement. The Clute-Nicholls Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction (1993) has an entire entry dedicated to ‘Hitler Wins’. Even before the war Murray Constantine’s Swastika Night (1937) showed a nightmare future in which Hitler is deified and women are kept as breeding animals. And non-fiction books like the What If? series (ed. Robert Cowley, 1999 onwards) contain many essays on how the Nazis could have run their war differently.

Perhaps the most famous of the genre’s Hitler-wins works is Philip K Dick’s Hugo-winner The Man in the High Castle (1962). But the tradition has continued into the 21st century, with Christopher Priest’s justly lauded Clarke winner The Separation (2002).

So, more than sixty years later, is there anything left to say about the Nazis? As you might anticipate, my answer is ‘yes’.

How could Hitler have won?

My own turning point is Dunkirk. On 24th May 1940 Panzer General Heinz Guderian was ordered to desist from a final assault on the trapped and exhausted British Expeditionary Force. The reasons remain obscure: perhaps to do with the generals’ concerns that France was not yet defeated, or Hitler’s hope that Britain might yet make peace. Certainly Dunkirk was a significant morale boost for Britain. Guderian himself (in his book Panzer Leader, 1952) believed that ‘only a capture of the BEF … could have created the conditions necessary for a successful German invasion of Britain’.

Even after Dunkirk, Peter Fleming in Invasion 1940 (1957) speculated, the Germans could have won by sending over even a small force in early June 1940, when Britain was reeling. Some German generals argued for this at the time. But Hitler went on holiday.

Certainly a different Dunkirk would have boosted the chances of ‘Operation Sea Lion’, the Nazis’ planned invasion. Throughout the summer of 1940 Hitler had river barges assemble in the Channel ports, while the Wehrmacht practiced beach landings, and the Luftwaffe pounded British airfields and radar stations. ’It seemed certain the man was going to try,’ Churchill wrote (in Their Finest Hour, 1949).

But the British always had overwhelming naval superiority, and the RAF, with many stations out of range of the Luftwaffe’s Messerschmitts, could not have been defeated entirely. On the German side there was inter-service conflict, and Hitler was already turning east to his planned assault on the Soviet Union. In the end the Luftwaffe switched tactics by beginning the ‘blitz’ on London on 7th September 1940, thus allowing the RAF to recover, and the invasion was postponed and ultimately abandoned. Even if the Germans had landed, victory was not assured. Richard Cox’s Operation Sea Lion (1974), based on a war game played out by veterans from both sides, post-predicted a German failure because of a lack of logistical preparation – the Panzers would have run out of fuel.

I’m not so sure. If the Luftwaffe’s resources had remained focussed on the goal, it might have achieved at least local air supremacy over Kent and Sussex – and the Wehrmacht might have managed a dash across the Channel. And if they’d landed in force, all bets would be off.

The first accounts of a Nazi invasion of Britain appeared even before the war was over, for example the novel When the Bells Rang by Anthony Armstrong and Bruce Graeme (1943). Norman Longmate’s If Britain Had Fallen (1972) is a careful reconstruction, as is Martin Marix Evans’ more recent Invasion! Operation Sea Lion 1940 (2004). In Len Deighton’s novel SS-GB (1978), the Battle of Britain went badly, and in November 1941 a British copper finds himself involved in a conspiracy to smuggle the ailing King George to America. Deighton is good on the detail of shabby, occupied London, the rationing, the fear, the reprisal executions.

Priest’s Separation springs from a different turning point: an armistice between Britain and Germany in 1941. The argument is similar to that developed in the 1990s by revisionist historians like Alan Clark and John Charmley. In early 1941 the German attack on Britain, while ferocious, was stalemated. Hitler had muttered sporadically of peace with Britain. The idea is that with a ceasefire then, Britain could have stood back as Germany and Russia destroyed each other, and emerged powerful and wealthy in a post-war world, rather than bankrupt. The revisionists argue that the deal founded because of Churchill’s lust for blood and defence of his own position.

Personally I doubt that the British would have settled, having survived 1940; the British thought of themselves as a great power and expected to win wars, not lose
them. Also there was genuine moral revulsion at the Nazis. There are many views of Churchill. I believe that Churchill, a historian himself who always took the long view, actually had about the right instinct that the Nazis had to be opposed. As he told the Commons in 1938, ‘There can never be friendship between the British democracy and the Nazi Power, that Power which spurns Christian ethics … [which] uses, as we have seen, with pitiless brutality the threat of murderous force’.

And there is no guarantee the Nazis would have kept any pact. Hitler attacked Russia despite an accord with Stalin. His pronouncements about Britain were contradictory; he would say, in October 1939, that ‘the German war aim … must consist of the final military defeat of the West’.

Even if the pact had stuck, I believe a world in which either Hitler’s Germany or Stalin’s Russia ‘won’ would have been (even) worse than the one we inhabit. But we’ll never know. Perhaps Priest’s greatest achievement is that he sets out such a troubling moral conundrum so clearly.

If Britain had fallen, what about the rest of the war? Hitler’s eventual defeat might have been less certain. Fleming speculates that without a western front the German assault on Russia could have been launched earlier and with more resources, and later without Britain as a launch platform the Allied invasion of Europe would have been much more problematical.

If the Nazis had won, their various insanities would have been unleashed. In Robert Harris’s Fatherland (1992), in a different 1964 after Hitler defeated Russia in 1943, an SS officer uncovers a conspiracy among the top Nazis to implement what we know as the Final Solution. Fatherland dramatises the Nazis’ grandiose plans for Europe: the monumental new Berlin, the racial cleansings, the vast colonisation pushes east into lebensraum. Brad Linaweaver’s Moon of Ice (1988), in which the Nazis got the atom bomb first, is an effective portrayal of the mad mysticism at the heart of the Nazi project, in which the Aryans were the product of a cosmogony in which successive falls of ice moons would eventually result in the return of a race of world-building giants. In Norman Spinrad’s The Iron Dream (1972) Hitler moved to the US to become a sf writer, and the Soviet Union conquered Europe. Spinrad gives us the whole of Hitler’s last novel, called Lord of the Swastika, a kind of sword-and-enchantment wish-fulfilment version in which Hitler’s Aryan avatar leads the last true humans to racial victory over ‘mutants and mongrels’. Dream is brilliant and bonkers; I wonder if it could be published today.

There are shameful factors in our fascination with the Nazis, such as what the Encyclopaedia article calls their ‘cheap aesthetic appeal’. I once saw a Nazi-era steam locomotive in a Berlin museum; with its shining black livery, even that looked glamorous.

But there is also a compelling drive to understand, I think. A psychological profile of a dictator must involve a sense of grievance or entitlement, ruthless ambition, arrogance – and above all a lack of empathy. Napoleon once spoke of his fallen soldiers as ‘small change’.

It is this lack of empathy that Philip K Dick homes in on. In The Man in the High Castle, defeat follows the assassination of President Roosevelt. This is a book of small lives and small humiliations, with Americans, ‘white barbarians’, unconsciously adopting the mannerisms of their conquerors. Dick writes of the Nazis in terms of insanity and violations of nature: ‘The madmen are in power … German totalitarian society resembles some faulty form of life, worse than [the] natural thing.’

It would be too easy to diagnose the Nazis as a bunch of glamorous zombies. Dick forces us to face the fact that the Nazis were human.
On the evening of Friday 18th July, I found myself in a packed meeting-room in a hotel near Boston, watching a film of Thomas M Disch reading his poem-cycle Winter Journey. Disch had committed suicide just a fortnight before, and this event had been added to the programme of Readercon, an annual event that Disch had often attended, at the last minute. Some of those who’d known him felt – and said vociferously – that it was too soon to be watching this film; but others were there, watching with the same rapt attention as everyone else.

The film had been made by Eric Solstein, a friend of Disch’s, about a year after the death in 2005 of Charles Naylor, Disch’s long-time partner, from a long and horrifying siege of cancer. By Solstein’s account, Disch had phoned him up one evening and proposed a deal: Solstein would come round to Disch’s apartment in Union Square, New York, and film the reading of the 31 poems making up Winter Journey. The film would then serve as a kind of suicide note; Disch would kill himself, and the film would earn vast sums of money on the back of the resulting publicity. Solstein said – as would anyone – that he didn’t know how to take this offer. Disch was perfectly capable of being playful about something like this, but also of being serious. So, in the same vein, he responded to Disch that he would come round and do the filming, but only if Disch would put the suicide off to a later date to be agreed between them.

A lot of Winter Journey was score-settling in Disch’s later mode: personal, bitter, and bridge-burning, though without much of the anti-Muslim sentiment that had disfigured the LiveJournal he’d kept since 2006. But it was also hugely affecting in parts, the passages about Naylor’s illness being especially deeply felt. As the last poem finished, there wasn’t the round of applause one might have expected but an intense silence. After a few moments, Solstein stood up and gracefully handled a few factual questions; we then all headed off, and I know I wasn’t the only one not in the mood for the remaining Readercon festivities that night.

Different people have different responses to death, and I can’t gainsay those who disagreed with the showing of Winter Journey. Nor can I claim to have known Disch in any meaningful way: we had spoken a couple of times at the Readercon two years before, and exchanged a couple of emails. However, I had followed his work for years, and it seemed to me a body of work of particular distinction and importance. I’m evidently not alone, as witness John Kessel saying that “no writer meant more to me in the late 60s and 70s than Thomas Disch”. He was a particular trailblazer for those sf writers who have wanted to break out of the genre ghetto into the wider arenas of literature. Other figures of his generation did so too – Ballard, Moorcock, Aldiss – but none in such a range of forms as Disch.

What seem to have been the immediate causes of Disch’s suicide have been discussed enough already, and I don’t propose to go over that ground again. It would be good, instead, to be able to get a perspective now on the work rather than the life – except that, as Winter Journey demonstrates, Disch’s later writing made the two more and more entangled. The problem with Winter Journey – the problem, I guess, that Eric Solstein had when he took that call from Disch – was knowing where performance stopped and reality started.

I think the first obstacle in understanding Disch, especially for us in the sf field, is the idea that he was a one-book or maybe a three-book author. The one book, of course, is Camp Concentration (1968), and the other two are 334 (1972) and On Wings of Song (1979). Camp Concentration is so obviously dazzling in its depiction of what enhanced intelligence would be like – not just in how it’s written, but in the range of reference that its young author (only 28 at the time) manages to pack into its fizzing pages. 334 is a more sombre book, taking for granted the very un-sf premise that it’s worth writing about the lives of the disadvantaged and dispossessed in near-future New York. On Wings of Song looks like it embraces all the Disch themes: the suffocating stupidity of America, the worth of art – and, indeed, John Clute wrote in his Independent obituary that it “has come to be recognised as his best single novel”. But, for me, it’s never quite worked, partly because it comes close to sentimentalising...
the life-lived-in-art, partly because (as Joanna Russ points out in her review, pp174–5 of *The Country You Have Never Seen*) of its weird skittishness when getting to the subject of the protagonist's homosexuality. But there's so much more to Disch's work than these three. The short stories, to begin with: “The Asian Shore”, “The Squirrel Cage”, “The Roaches”, and dozens more. Some enterprising publisher really needs to compile a best of Disch. There are the sequence of anthologies he edited (some with Naylor), setting out what would be called the aesthetic of slipstream and genre-crossing a couple of decades too early: *The Ruins of Earth* (1973), *Bad Moon Rising* (1973), *The New Improved Sun* (1975), *Strangeness* (1977). There's the poetry, again in need of some kind of definitive collection, and the criticism including the Hugo-winning *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* (1998). There are ventures into other genres, like the sweet and perfect children's book *Our Stuff Is Made Of* (1998). There are ventures into other worlds. Most of these books are out of print, but are easily findable through online booksellers. Every one of them is worth reading.

The second problem, again especially for us in the sf field, is that Disch gets filed under the umbrella of Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* in the late 60s, and thereby his later work is effaced. There's no question that *New Worlds* was an enabling forum for many of those who were around it, and that works such as *Camp Concentration* and 334 would not have been nearly so formally innovative had it not existed. But, as I hope my last paragraph suggested, Disch did not stop trying new forms and experiments after the magazine vanished, and it greatly reduces his achievement to think of him as just "a New Worlds author".

The last problem is that, given his last few years' output, he gets pegged simply as a bigot. There's no getting around the poisonousness of the diatribes against Islam that appeared periodically on his Livejournal (still online, at <http://tomsdisch.livejournal.com>). The more you read the LJ, though, the more you see this as a part of a wider view: that the whole of civilisation is going down the tubes, that there's nothing worth doing to stop it, and that any kind of optimism is just self-deception. The hatred of Muslims – to be specific, the identification of all Muslims with terrorism – is just one of several gravity-wells in that landscape. There's a comparable issue discussed in "Benefit of Clergy", George Orwell's great essay on Salvador Dali: “One ought to be able to hold in one's head simultaneously the two facts that Dali is a good draughtsman and a disgusting human being. The one does not invalidate or, in a sense, affect the other.” Substitute "fine writer" for "good draughtsman" and "bigot" for "disgusting human being", and you have many people's problem with Disch. The problem with a writer, particularly a writer such as Disch offering a moral critique of the world around him, is that he does so on the basis of his own moral standpoint. If you can't accept that, what's the worth of the work? Another example may be useful, and also characteristic of the way his viewpoint curdled in his later years: Disch's story "The Shadow" (*F&SF*, Dec 2001). The *F&SF* story note said, “it was inspired by the fire which gutted [Disch's] longtime Manhattan residence. He dedicates the story to the actress Elizabeth Ashley, whose cigarette it was that evidently started the blaze.”

Of course, anyone would be entitled to fury at someone who had done something like that. But it's something else to see that fury displayed in a story wherein a cigarette-smoking actress – clearly a surrogate for Ashley – causes a fire, is afflicted with Alzheimer’s by a malicious shadow, and consigned to a care home where she is repeatedly raped by the attendants. I don't want for a second to forgive the cruelty of this or the anti-Muslim bigotry. All I do want to suggest, though, is that the worth of a given piece of Disch's work (or anyone else's) is independent of whatever they may have said in other works. In particular, it seems to me a cardinal mistake (and our loss) if we allow the bitterness of some of his later works to cross-contaminate those from earlier in his career. In any case, I'm never sure enough about my own moral perfection to cast others irredeemably beyond the pale.

Let me, instead, try to suggest three alternative poles around which understanding of Disch's work can be organised, and which point to both his strengths and weaknesses. The first is irony. Disch said in plenty of interviews that this was something that shaped his world-view, and it's clear from the books. Take *Camp Concentration*, for instance. Its protagonist, despite having his intelligence boosted to superhuman levels, winds up being very dumb in several ways. Each of the two parts of the book climaxes with him being given a plot-revelation that attentive readers will have figured out way before.

What could be more ironic than a really smart person
drinking is to deal with sorrow.) But think for a moment about that vase of flowers. I've never seen it, and neither have you; the flowers were doubtless rotting on a dump a week or two afterwards. But there they are, preserved forever in a poem. Disch can't help but be ironic about this in the last line – “Immortal! Imperishable!” But, as so often, he's kidding and not kidding. The life lived in art is a gamble. Perhaps Disch felt, ultimately, that it was a gamble he had lost: much of his work was out of print, and he said he believed himself ignored by publishers. But a roomful of people in Boston in July showed by their attention that they thought otherwise.

A Vase of Flowers

Last night, in my cups but still sprightly, I invited Eric to come here with his camera and catch my act. Live! From New York! No one needs a reason to get drunk beyond that given in Lied von der Erde, but it always helps to have someone to blame, so I'll blame Steve Wasserman from whom I'd just received an e-mail regretting that he wasn't the right person to represent my “frenzied and exemplary” novel. A close reader might ask exemplary of what, but I will file it away as a simple, insincere compliment and think no more about it. Who gives a fuck about Steve Wasserman. Now to tidy up this doomed apartment in readiness for Eric's camera. The green market's open today. Perhaps I should get flowers. Charlie shied away from bouquets or flowers that might die in their pots while we were out of town, though who's to say that wasn't his devious way of being polite? Flowers do cost money. Still, these flowers wouldn't die unwitnessed. They can be enjoyed forever: Immortal! Imperishable! Art! –Tom Disch

Godhead, who are we to doubt him?

Finally, one has to understand Disch through the place of art and artists in his worldview. It's there from first to last. Camp Concentration's protagonist Louis is a poet; Daniel in On Wings of Song finds his way stutteringly to life as an artist; the writers and painters depicted in Neighbouring Lives are already some way along this road. In particular, there's the idea that art endures in a way that nothing else can. For an example of this, see "A Vase of Flowers", the last poem from the "Winter Journey" sequence, reprinted here by permission of Jacob McMurray of Payseur & Schmidt (who are publishing the sequence later this year bundled with a DVD of Solstein's film.) It's not the best poem in the sequence, but by this point it's built up such a head of steam that a winding-down like this feels necessary. The bitchiness in the first half towards Steve Wasserman (who had apparently backed out on an undertaking to act as Disch's agent) isn't nearly as interesting as the other stuff. The passing reference to Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde is meant, I'm sure, as a deliberate pointer that we should think of Winter Journey as a similar fade-out death song. (The reason it gives for being stupid? The same outlook is present in the meta-Minneapolis horror novels, in which the central figures represent an ironising, a twisting of their professions (doctor, priest, etc) to some kind of opposite. The problem with irony as a lens through which to see the world is that it implies a certain remove. To create or understand an irony is to place yourself above the fray; hence perhaps, Disch's reputation for chilliness and pessimism. Hence also the weird stresses in Disch's later prose work, where he found – in a book like The Word of God – that his own health and survival was very much part of what he wanted to talk about, and the self is the one thing one can't stand outside or above.

The second locus for understanding Disch is how he felt about America. He was brought up in the Midwest but moved to New York as a young man, and a dislike for the smothering hypocrisies of the heartland is present in much of his work, especially the horror novels and On Wings of Song. It's also there in his non-fiction – The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of rests on three semi-serious premises: that the US is a nation that values and rewards liars, that sf is a peculiarly American genre, and that this is because sf is a particular species of lie. So, in a sense, the central writers of the Disch sf canon are people like Whitley Streiber and L Ron Hubbard, fabulators who claimed their lies were literal truth. And The Word of God is an entry in the same genre: if Thomas M Disch claims that He Himself is the
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