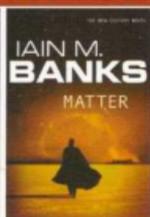
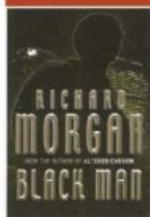
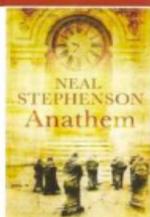


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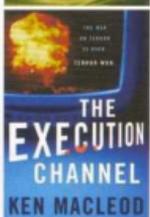
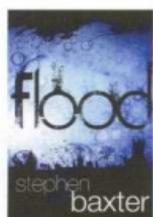
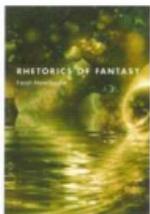
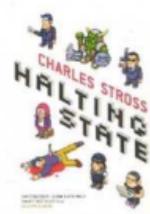


2009 Vector Reviewers' Poll



The SF Films of 2008

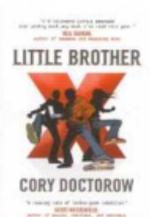
Colin Odell & Mitch Le Blanc



2008 TV in Review

Abigail Nussbaum

Steph Baxter
Andy Sawyer
Graham Sleight



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- UK** £26p.a., or £18 p. a. (unwaged),
or £28 p.a. (joint/family memberships)
- Outside UK** £32

The BSFA was founded in 1958 and is a non-profitmaking organisation entirely staffed by unpaid volunteers. Registered in England. Limited by guarantee. Company No. 921500

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Torque Control

This year, for me, 2009 starts on the first of March – that being the day after the nominating deadline for this year's Hugo Awards. Finances permitting, I'm hoping to head off to Montreal this summer to attend Anticipation, the 2009 Worldcon, and as a result I've been spending the last few weeks trying to read, watch or otherwise consume as much 2008 Hugo-eligible material as possible.

As I say in my contribution to this issue's Reviewer's Poll, 2008 seems to me to have been a very solid year filled with very good, if perhaps not outstanding, books, and it was hard to narrow them down to just five. I won't repeat my choices here, but I will note some of the books that nearly made my list: Stephen Baxter's *Flood*, which I think is his best book since *Evolution* (2002); Adam Roberts' *Swiftly*, which may be his best book to date; Neal Stephenson's *Anathem*, of course (though I feel absolutely no need to re-read it any time soon); Patrick Ness' *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, whose sequel I eagerly await; Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, reviewed elsewhere this issue; and KJ Parker's *The Company*. It seemed a less notable year for short story collections, although there were several good anthologies published in the US that are worth seeking out – Lou Anders' *Fast Forward 2*; Ellen Datlow's *Del Rey Book of Science Fiction and Fantasy*; and Jonathan Strahan's *Eclipse 2*, from which Ted Chiang's BSFA Award-nominated story "Exhalation" is taken.

Speaking of the awards: as you'll have seen if you've rifled through the rest of this mailing already – or as you'll discover shortly if you haven't – this year, thanks to the generosity and helpfulness of the nominated authors and their publishers, we have been able to make the nominees for Best Short Story available to all members. And, as they say, if you liked these ... details of where to get *Eclipse 2*, and how to subscribe to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (where M. Rickert's story was first published) and *Interzone* (original venue for Greg Egan and Paul McAuley's stories) are in the Awards booklet.

The booklet also includes a ballot paper. Don't forget that you can also vote electronically, by sending your ranked preferences to the Awards Administrator, Donna Scott, at <awards@bsfa.co.uk>; and if all else fails, and you're going to

Eastercon, you can vote there – up until about 5pm on Saturday, there'll be a ballot box on the BSFA table in the dealer's room.

As for the rest of this issue: Colin Odell and Mitch LeBlanc once again supply their staggeringly comprehensive run-down of the year in film; and Abigail Nussbaum looks at the TV of 2008, and in doing so inaugurates a new TV column, Progressive Scan. Graham Sleight considers the purpose of year-in-review jamborees like this one, Stephen Baxter tackles some unusual historical turning points, and Andy Sawyer picks Edwina Currie's *The Ambassador*, no less, as this issue's Foundation Favourite. Plus, of course, there's all the usual reviews – and more letters; do keep them coming.

So what's next? 2009, of course, which from where I'm sitting looks to be a good year for fantasy: UK editions of Ursula K Le Guin's *Lavinia* and Margo Lanagan's *Tender Morsels*, major new novels from established writers such as China Mieville (*The City and The City*) and Robert Holdstock (*Avilon*), and promising-looking books from newer writers including Joe Abercrombie (*Best Served Cold*) and Kit Whitfield (*In Great Waters*, which, according to at least one person I trust, is "stunning"). So next issue we'll be focusing on fantasy; see you there.

Letters

To the editors —

I can't let Ben Jeapes' sly dig at Heinlein pass without comment. Jeapes writes, in his review of Stross's *Saturn's Children*, "Stross can match Heinlein's strengths and beat him on his weaknesses. His depiction of women shows signs of actually having met some from time to time."

Heinlein as a person was very popular indeed with women. He liked them, they liked him (talk to Pat Cadigan who knew him personally). Heinlein's writing, also, was very popular with female readers, and his short story "The Menace from Earth" is frequently anthologised and is used by a number of librarians of my acquaintance. There's a reason for this: Heinlein wrote women who were interesting, independent, and mostly didn't marry the man or boy in their life. The female protagonists of the juveniles, while they play second fiddle, went off to be professional amazons, engineers, corporate CEOs, reigning monarchs, and scientists. They were almost always depicted as being smarter than the male POV character. *Podkayne of Mars* may be terrible, but that shouldn't wipe away the memory of Heinlein's other girl characters. The female protagonists of the adult novels, while never as satisfying, were allowed to enjoy sex (revolutionary at the time) and even had conversations with other women which weren't about men. Heinlein wrote the first sf novel about the psychology of an abuse survivor that I know of (*Friday*: he wrote it not necessarily well, but clearly) and probably the first real transgender fantasy in sf (*I will Fear No Evil* resembles the on-line trans fantasy fics of the early 2000s very closely). Until I was in my mid-teens, Heinlein was one of only a handful of male writers in the field writing anything like plausible women (the protagonist of *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* may be excruciating, but she's a fair representative of my grandmother's generation and their reaction to modern feminism).

Heinlein's work was quickly passed by the second wave feminists, but he offered more than one challenge or subversion of the status quo, and was for a long time one of a handful of male writers who realised that the future of the human race rather depended on having some women around. If Ben Jeapes wants to stand up for the portrayal of women—in fact the existence of women—in science fiction, he might want to consider the paucity of active female protagonists in his own work.

Yours faithfully
Farah Mendlesohn

To the editors —

It was a pleasant surprise to read that you welcomed

letters; one had assumed that only alpha fans fluent in authentic Clutespeak and with trope-detectors set at ultra-sensitive were allowed anywhere near *Vector*.

As an epsilon fan I was a little bothered by Jonathan McCalmont's (very interesting) article on the laws of physics. Surely scientists ("natural" philosophers) are more pragmatic than (un-natural) philosophers — have to be more pragmatic — on the nature of physical "law"? They observe what looks like regularity and pattern in nature, model what they believe they see with statements in mathematical or ordinary language, test (ie, try to falsify) their conjecture and if they can't break it, say, look, guys, that seems to work, let's call it a law for now and run with it. The more theoretical they are, the more they try to generalise — to look for mathematical models which subsume other models, to head towards the hoped-for "theory of everything".

That language, with its constraints and logic, is itself ultimately physical, appears (so far) to have caused no problems (other than to the likes of Russel, Gödel, Church, Chomsky and the computer scientists). Also, paradoxes like "before time began", "beyond the universe", "parallel/alternate universe" are largely set aside in the hope that one day ... The Hume worlds that McCalmont discusses appear, in SF, to be a license to write what you damn well like. At one extreme you get Greg Egan's clever logical pursuit of a single what-if; at the other, Alan Moore playing the game outrageously for laughs and satire.

If some SF writers are running out of conventional scientific ideas to use in their stories, then Hume worlds will appeal to them, but the vile postmodernist brainvirus is a dreadful example of what can happen when literary fashion is dressed up as philosophy.

Yours sincerely,
Bob Ardler
Jonathan replies:

Bob,

On the issue of pragmatism I think it genuinely varies from scientist to scientist and generation to generation, as well as according to which type of scientific activity the scientists spend their days engaged in. For example, Richard Feynman was famously instrumental about the theoretical apparatus of science but Hugh Everett literally believed that a version of him would live on after his death in another possible universe. If anything, I suspect that there's even less consensus about natural law among scientists than there is between SF authors.

As for Hume Worlds, I do not think that they are postmodern. One of the central pillars of postmodern thought

is the idea that the world's meta-narratives are socially constructed, but in order for this to be true, you need quite a well-heeled metaphysics in which people exist, interact, and create this thing called 'reality'. But a Hume World would lack any kind of stable metaphysics at all. Even if a Hume World resembled the densely structured moral cosmology of the likes of Dante, it would only ever be an illusion, a chance conjunction of recognisable shapes no different to the face on Mars. The absolute unpredictability and chaos of a Hume World provides a meta-narrative so strong that it is quite at odds with the world-views of the likes of Foucault or Derrida.

To my mind, a better example of people writing what they "damn well like" might be Steven Moffat's *Jekyll* (2007) or Pratchett's *Thud!* (2005) in which the laws of the mind and the universe bend to meet the demands of the story. But that's not so much postmodernism as it is lazy writing.

Dear Vector,

At the risk of being accused of creeping fuddy-duddyism – increasingly a worry of mine in my 50th year – I thought I should correct a few misstatements (or misapprehensions) in L. J. Hurst's review of *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame Volume Two B* (Vector 258).

To begin, Hurst seems to be under the impression that the current editions of Volume Two A and Two B (not Volume Two and Two B) are new to 2005 or later. Of course that is not so – these books were first published in 1973, and reflect the results of voting that occurred in the late '60s. (Silverberg's Volume One appeared in 1970.)

Hurst is correct to note the preponderance of stories from *Astounding* and *Galaxy* – it is more pronounced than I would have thought. In the two volumes there are 13 stories from *Astounding* (none from *Analog*, note), 6 from *Galaxy*, and 1 from *F&SF*, in addition to the Wells and Forster stories, which appeared outside the genre. I might have expected more from *F&SF*, and perhaps at least a token representative of some of the non-Big 3 magazines – perhaps Damon Knight's "The Earth Quarter", from *If*, to make just one suggestion.

Hurst wonders why the Two B volume didn't include novelettes. Well, the subtitle announces that the book will include novellas, and so too does the introduction (unless it has changed from my mid-70s SFBC edition). Now the definition SFWA used for novellas and short stories in the Hall of Fame books is a bit fuzzy. I suspect they simply asked the voters to list stories in the category they remembered the stories fitting in. Which leads to such oddities as Cordwainer Smith's "The Ballad of Lost C'Mell", which is no more than about 8100 words, appearing in the novella volume, while the same author's "Scanners Live in Vain" is over 13,000 words long but is in the short story volume.

At any rate, the SFWA for these books chose only to divide between "short story" and "novella" – no novelettes! – which for what it's worth is in my opinion

a pretty sensible divide. (i.e. I think two categories of short fiction makes more sense than three.) And the dividing line, though ill defined, is probably at about 10,000 words on average.

A couple of minor points – Budrys's "Rogue Moon" didn't "become" a novel – rather, Budrys cut the novel so that it could be published in *F&SF*. (But that's not something one would be expected to know.) And there is a typo – or a cut&paste error – in identifying Wilmar Shiras's story – in one place it is called "E for Effort".

Finally, Hurst's discussion of "precurion" opens an interesting topic, which of course would require much more space than was available in that review. But the examples suggested don't seem that interesting to me – the tie between "Rogue Moon" and 2001 is little beyond "alien artifact on the Moon" – and at any rate Budrys had surely read the original story featuring that artifact, "The Sentinel", which predates "Rogue Moon" by some years – but Budrys probably didn't even think the stories particularly related. And, yes, *The Prestige* is quite interestingly following on from the questions of identity and teleportation raised by "Rogue Moon" – but there are many other such stories, such as Pohl and Williamson's "Farthest Star", and, much more interestingly to me, James Patrick Kelly's "Think Like a Dinosaur". (Which Kelly wrote, he says, in part in explicit response to another *SF Hall of Fame* (v. 1) story: "The Cold Equations".) Meanwhile, surely "In Hiding" is in dialogue with countless stories of atomic mutation and superintelligence – perhaps *Slam* above all.

All best,

Rich Horton

LJ Hurst replies:

Dear Rich,

Thanks for the useful corrections and expansions in your analysis of and response to my review of *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame Volume IIB*. You are correct that this volume is a new edition, not a first edition, something I pointed out when I reviewed Volume IIA in issue 241. Why the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America (I think they had not then added "and Fantasy" to their name) chose the stories they did thirty five years ago is now unlikely to be solved.

I'm sorry that you did not find my examples interesting. However, if you wish to study how I have looked at matters such as precurion in SF, and in one of your preferred works, "Think Like a Dinosaur" by James Patrick Kelly, you will find my 1998 Foundation review reprinted on my website (<<http://www.hurstportal.net>>). That goes into more depth than I can here.

I am sure, though, that you will agree that these classics deserve to be read and re-read because that re-reading reveals them not to be static, but continuing to enhance new works, constantly opening new trains of thought and investigation, constantly revealing new depths. I think one of the responsibilities of a reviewer is to make that clear.

2009 Vector Reviewers' Poll

Edited by Kari Sperring

Welcome to the 2008 Reviewers' Poll. As ever, it's a very broad church, with books ranging from the Anglo-Saxon period (*Beowulf*) to, naturally, the very far future (*Winterstrike*). A total of 104 different authors have been listed for a goodly mix of sf and fantasy, fiction and non-fiction, genre and non-genre. We're all reading and we're reading widely and, it appears, voraciously. The top picks, with three votes each, are Richard Morgan's *Black Man*, Ian McDonald's *Brasyl*, and Iain M. Banks' *Matter*. This is perhaps unsurprising: the former won the Arthur C. Clarke award, *Brasyl* was the BSFA Best Novel of 2007, while Banks is a consistent favourite. Just behind, with two votes each are Lou Anders, ed. *Fast Forward 2*; Christopher Priest, *The Magic*; Greg Egan, *Incomprehension*; Paolo Bacigalupi, *Pump Six and Other Stories*; Hal Duncan, *Escape from Hell!*; Charles Stross, *Halting State*; Chris Beckett, *The Turing Test*; Neal Stephenson, *Anathem*; Ken MacLeod, *The Execution Channel* and Ian R MacLeod, *Song of Time*. So, without further ado, happy reading in 2009 and on to the reviewers themselves.

Graham Andrews:

Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton: An Autobiography, by J. G. Ballard (Fourth Estate, 2008). Ballard's matter-of-fact, almost reportorial tone makes the – well – Ballardian story of his life all the more moving. He could never be accused of being an atrocity exhibitionist.

Now and Forever (HarperCollins, 2008), by Ray Bradbury. Two new-old/old-new novellas. 'Somewhere a Band is Playing' is vintage Bradbury wistful thinking about a young man finding a timeless town in the Arizona desert. 'Leviathan 99' is an oft-times rewritten take on *Moby Dick*. Christopher Lee once starred in a BBC radio version. I can only hope that the Beeb didn't wipe the tape...

The Word of God or, Holy Writ Rewritten (Tachyon, 2008), by Thomas M. Disch. One gathers from this delightfully acerbic 'fictional autobiography' that Disch didn't get along too well with Philip K. Dick – even in their shared Afterlife! Disch's last short-story collection, *The Wall of America* (also published by Tachyon), is no less highly recommended.

The Victoria Vanishes (Doubleday UK, 2008), by Christopher Fowler. The sixth recorded case of the Peculiar Crimes Unit (located above Mornington

Crescent Tube Station!). I've been a fan of those matchless detectives, Bryant and May, ever since I reviewed *Darkest Day* (later rewritten as *Seventy-Seven Clocks*) for Vector in 1994. How's that for declaring an interest?

The Magic: The Story of a Film (GrimGrin, 2008), by Christopher Priest. Does what it says on the film can – I mean, book cover. *The Prestige*, adapted from literary novel into cinematic movie. GrimGrin of Hastings, East Sussex, is also to be congratulated for publishing *Ersatz Wines* (twelve prentice Priest short stories) and *Real-Time World* (his first collection, issued by NEL in 1974).

Rick Random, Space Detective (Prion, collected 2008). General Editor: Steve Holland. These "10 classic interplanetary comic book adventures" were originally published by Super Detective Library in the 1950s. Illustrated by Ron Turner. Harry Harrison was one of the regular writers, which gives this retro tome some added historical interest.

Paul Bateman:

I start this selection with two works of poetry: Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* (Faber and Faber, 1999) and Simon Armitage's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Faber and Faber, 2007). I haven't read other versions of these ancient tone poems so I can't really compare them with older translations. I can just say they are a joy of language and an indication of why the original poems had such an impact on the fantasy genre. After all, the Riders of Rohan in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* have been called Beowulf on horses, and Tolkien himself had also translated *Sir Gawain*. From a more scholarly (and perhaps pretentious), linguistic point of view, it's interesting to see how important the choice of words and their origins impacts on the reader. Both works are rich in alliteration and words of Germanic origin, harking back to their Old English roots. It occurs to me that part of the reason a number of books, particularly genre fiction, fail is a lack of thought over the words used, their origins and whether more appropriate ones could be used instead. Perhaps, if you're considering writing a Dark Ages style fantasy, it would be worth using more Germanic language and reducing the number of words with Latin origins.

The mind does peculiar things. It plays tricks on us. We have difficulty remembering things in some instances but not in others. Rita Carter's *Mapping the*

Mind (Phoenix, 1998), covers a number of these things and much, much more, detailing how technological advances in brain scanning are revealing indications of how the brain and mind work.

The last two choices are the result of reading previous *Vector* Reviews of the Year, highlighting the things I've missed.

From a few years ago I missed Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver* (Arrow, 2003), so now I've had a chance to catch up his tale of the time of Newton and the Restoration. It's certainly the case that Stephenson does his home work, the text being rich in historic and scientific detail from that age – some may say at the sacrifice of pace and plot. It's a book that requires a lot of investment, and I'm hoping that with the next two equally weighty parts of *The Baroque Cycle* are worth it.

From last year I missed Michael Chabon, but out of the works of his I've read this year I'm picking *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (Harper Perennial, 2000). Probably every year I say some book or another is the best I've read in years. In this case it's actually true, honest. This book does everything. It does character, plot, world-building, intrigue, history, power, glory, and so on and so forth. It reads a bit like a Jewish take of *Citizen Kane* with comic books instead of newspapers, and was a deserved winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

Lynne Bispham:

Two very different books are at the top of my list for 2008: Kelley Armstrong's *Bitten* (Orbit, 2001), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (Picador, 2007). Highly entertaining and very readable, *Bitten's* depiction of its feisty independent heroine Elena, the only female werewolf in existence, and her Pack of werewolves, who retain certain lupine personality traits and patterns of behaviour even when in human form, is utterly convincing. It may not be great literature, but it is very well-written, and with its page-turning plot involving a threat to the Pack's existence, it is certainly great fun. I am very much looking forward to catching up with Armstrong's other supernatural thrillers. Totally different in tone is the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Road*, in which a father and son travel through a burned, ash-covered America, scavenging for food in ruined cities and farms. It's unremittingly bleak, and McCarthy's unique style might be an acquired taste for some, yet the book is totally compelling – I read it in one sitting.

The remaining three novels in my top five are all superior fantasies which depict totally convincing imagined worlds. In Jennifer Fallon's *The Immortal Prince* (Tor, 2007), the Tide Lords, god-like beings who most people believe to be a myth, behave as badly as would most humans given immortality and virtually limitless powers, destroying civilisations on a whim. In Robert V S Redick's *The Red Wolf Conspiracy* (Gollancz, 2008), various political machinations come to fruition in the

enclosed world of a Great Ship where little is as it first appears, whilst in Pamela Freeman's *Blood Ties* (Orbit, 2008), ghosts walk among the living and revenge is sought for a centuries old massacre. With the exception of *The Road*, these five novels may not win any literary awards, but they capture the reader's attention from the start and are books that you just can't put down until you've read them from cover to cover.

Tanya Brown:

Nicola Barker's *Darkmans* (Fourth Estate, 2007) is blackly funny, layered narrative with vivid characters and deliberate evasion on the part of the author. I'd been meaning to read this since it was shortlisted for the Man Booker, and for an 800-page book it's a remarkably quick and engrossing read. Though published as literary fiction, there's a strong element of the fantastic: a vivid collage of medieval imagery, underpinned by some serious discussion of the medieval mindset and its reflection in the modern era.

Sheri Tepper's *The Margarets* (Gollancz, 2008), for me, had the joie de vivre and the humour of her early novels. It's the story of Margaret, who is (well, may be) split into her component possibilities: seven lives lived in very different settings as a result of each Margaret's choices. Eventually, of course, all the Margarets are pulled together to oppose a pseudomystical nasty. Tepper's perennial themes are here – ecology, population control, tolerance and compassion; the economics of slavery; the need for rescue. There's also a thread that a cynical reviewer might dismiss as whimsy, but which I found heart-warming: and there's a fairy-tale feel to the story. What goes around comes around, kindness is repaid, malevolence rebounds.

I'd bounced off Karen Joy Fowler's *Sarah Canary* (Henry Holt, 1991) several times in the last decade: on finally reading it, I began to understand why it's a book that provokes strong opinions and passionate argument. I like the subtlety of the sfal elements (yes, I do think it's sf) and the ways in which Fowler explores various aspects of the Other – women, Chinese, aliens, non-humans. Fowler's prose – precise and full of detail – is a pleasure to read.

Elizabeth Bear's *Blood and Iron* (Roc, 2006) is a riff on Faerie and folk-tale, especially Tam Lin and the tithe to Hell, set amid an eclectic blend of myth, history and occult lore. Elaine, the protagonist, isn't an especially likeable character, but her dilemmas and her pain are compelling, and she provokes fascinating reactions from those – human and supernatural – she encounters. I'm still not sure about the narrative trick in the middle, but it certainly got me thinking!

In some respects *The Company* (Orbit, 2008), KJ Parker's first standalone novel, was a disappointment: I do feel that s/he works better at trilogy length, with ample space to develop and twist the plot. But Parker has the knack of creating compelling characters, and

despite an irritating habit (noted in Parker's other work) of faking suspense by referring to characters solely by pronoun, I was fascinated by the world-building (this is another novel without magic or weird beasts that's still very firmly in the realm of the fantastic) and by the interaction of the characters, veteran survivors of a war who find themselves at a loss when peace breaks out.

Nic Clarke:

I haven't managed to get through as many books this year as I usually would. Nonetheless, there were still plenty of sfnal treats, many of them supplied by the Arthur C Clarke award shortlist (as were some of the year's least satisfying reads, but as this is a place to celebrate, rather than to moan, I'll keep quiet about those).

Top of the list, and my personal pick for the Clarke, was *The Execution Channel* (Orbit, 2007) by Ken MacLeod: tightly-plotted, tense, and probably the best example I've ever encountered of a stunning twist ending that feels, in retrospect, utterly organic to both plot and theme – and which, on looking back, was being hinted at throughout. Marvellous. This is not to say that the actual winner was undeserving, of course. While it lack the finely-tuned unity of purpose that I appreciated so much in *The Execution Channel*, Richard Morgan's fast-paced, bold, and challenging *Black Man* (Gollancz, 2007) presents a robust science fictional near-future, interrogating the present without ever losing the balance between message and story.

Also from the Clarke shortlist comes Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (Faber & Faber, 2007), a slim, beautifully-written, and quite grim fable about a group of women who fight back when resource shortages and social breakdown in a near-future UK lead to a rollback of their rights, and the various ways in which their experiences are both brutalising and liberating. Adding to the sense that feminist visions of the future are alive and well in the twenty-first century, and as necessary as ever, is Gwyneth Jones' *Life* (Aqueduct, 2004). Global in scope, but focusing largely on a couple of closely-examined characters, it is an emotionally-brutal tale of how lives, loves, and society as a whole are affected by advances in research into sex, gender and genetics.

Finally – and one of the few 2008 publications I've read so far – Ian R MacLeod's *Song of Time* (PS Publishing, 2008) sees a world-renowned concert pianist looking back over her extremely eventful life as she prepares for death. Her recollections take us through a century or so – her past, our future – of social convulsions, scientific developments, and personal triumphs and tragedies: devastating climate change, religious fascism in France, the possibility of a sort of digital afterlife, a tumultuous marriage, and above all her music.

Mark Connorton:

Peter Watt's novel *Blindsight* (Tor, 2006) is a fantastically bleak and original tale of first contact between an Earth spaceship crewed by post-humans and some extremely alien aliens. As well as being very tense and taut, *Blindsight* is packed with invention and asks provocative questions about what makes us human, and whether those traits would be any use to us in the vastness of space.

Brasyl by Ian McDonald (Gollancz, 2008) is a dazzling and highly entertaining tale of colliding alternate Brazils, featuring such vivid and memorable characters as a bisexual wheeler-dealer drag queen and an ambitious, capoeira fighting TV producer. The book was a sheer pleasure to read and the verve and energy effortlessly carried me over the weaknesses in the plot and sent me hurrying to dig up more of his back catalogue.

Liberation by Brian Francis Slattery (Tor, 2008) uses the setting of a near future USA ruined by financial collapse to meditate on the birth of America, and the slavery, genocide, land theft and colonial wars that attended it. The plot revolves round a gang of (almost) super-criminals reuniting to get the country back on track, but the book is looser and more relaxed than that might sound; warm and affectionate, with some beautifully written passages and strongly reminiscent of Pynchon, but without the bloat.

After reading about it for years, I was delighted to stumble across an English translation of Argentine writer Adolfo Bioy Casares' 1940 novella *The Invention Of Morel*; a Wellsian tale of a fugitive washed up on a mysterious island who takes desperate measures to join a party of glamorous socialites. Despite its rather Edwardian tone, the story sets out a hilariously cynical parable of human relationships and is highly resonant in today's media landscape of reality TV and internet avatars.

Daniel Abraham's *The Long Price* (Orbit, 2007) compiles the first two volumes of a fantasy quartet set in a vaguely far eastern society, where poet/wizards create powerful genie-type beings from platonic concepts. The books describe the slow-burning conflict between two nations and are very well written and plotted, with strong characters and a sharp eye for economic and social forces. I can't wait for the second half of the series.

Gary Dalkin:

In alphabetical order by author, my five choices for 2008 are:

Greg Bear, *City At The End Of Time* (Gollancz, 2008). Bear's return to hard sf plays homage to William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land* while incorporating elements of Clarke's *The City and the Stars* and Clive Barker's fantastical horror. Written in wonder-filled language, this is a book about storytelling, a love story, an epic adventure, a dazzling slice of sf and probably the best

novel Bear has yet written. If the ending falls short the journey amply compensates.

Christopher Evans, *Omega* (PS Publishing, 2008). Evans' first novel in over a decade finds the author still exploring questions of identity, perception and the nature of reality. Set partly in our 'real' world and partly in a world in which WWII turned out very differently, this complex and finely characterised thriller is as good as anything Evans has written. Consider it an alternative world to Christopher Priest's *The Separation*.

Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Penguin, 2007). Finding a master narrative which makes sense of 50 plus years of US foreign and economic policy, Klein writes the most vital political-economic history I have read. It may sound dull, but is riveting. The light bulb comes on, the dots join, and seemingly disconnected pieces of modern history fall into place to provide the best explanation of the state we are in since Orwell.

Christopher Priest, *The Magic* (GrimGrin, 2008). A short book from Christopher Priest's own imprint, *The Magic* is Priest's account of the writing of *The Prestige* and his experience of and thoughts about the novel's transformation into Christopher Nolan's film of the same name. A unique insight into the process of a book becoming a film from the original author, who is both the ultimate insider, and in the film-making process almost as much an outsider as any other film fan. Illuminating non-fiction from our finest novelist.

Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (Viking, 2003). Nominally a biography of one of the pioneers of the moving picture, Eadward Muybridge, Solnit offers an intricate meditation on many subjects. Muybridge himself, the birth of San Francisco and the American West, the development of photography and motion pictures and the spread of America's railways, Man's relation to landscape, the conflict between the USA and the native Americans, the perception of time... Elegiac and profound, in this astonishing achievement Solnit weaves her themes together and makes them one beguiling tapestry.

Mark Harding:

Hal Duncan continues his extraordinary career by taking a break from novels, fables, sea shanties and lit crit to write a film script (it's not really, but you get the idea). Needless to say, no script writer on Earth would dare write in Duncan's technicolour prose. The pitch for *Escape From Hell!* (MonkeyBrain, 2008) is a misotheistic Dante meets John Carpenter. The pitch for Hal Duncan is anything could happen next.

Halting State (Ace, 2007/Orbit, 2008) is like a series of mad, funny, ideas-sparky conversations in the pub, which Charles Stross has combined with a procedural detective thriller. Joy. The only thing you could possibly complain about is having to wait for the next Laundry book.

Ian M Banks' *Matter* (Orbit, 2008) is witty, intelligent and entertaining. Each Culture novel is a favourite box of Xmas chocolates you've been waiting all year to gorge on.

After what seems like a long long wait, at last Gary Gibson's *Stealing Light* (Tor, 2007) is out in paperback. Buff with good stuff; fast, confident, daring, skillful. This is not a novel you'd pick a fight with. A big book in scope and imagination, without an ounce of fat.

You can tell things are tough in bookland when debut novels have to be as good as Jaine Fenn's *Principles of Angels* (Gollancz, 2008). It's the sort of book Dickens would have written if he had included explicit sex scenes. And had lived a thousand years in the future. And on another planet.

Niall Harrison:

More than most years, I find 2008's crop of books – or at least those which I read – hard to narrow down to a mere five. The word of the year seems to be “solid”, with a large number of very good, but not quite exceptional, works seeing print.

The best science fiction novel I read was probably Ian R MacLeod's *Song of Time* (PS Publishing, 2008), which is in equal measure a novel about how we imagine the future, how we remember the past, and how we live in our present. Narrated by an aging concert violinist, *Song of Time*'s episodic structure sketches out a twenty-first century as marked by war and disaster, and individual joy and sorrow, as the twentieth. It is ever the best of times and the worst.

Given its author, it's not a surprise if I say that atmosphere is one of *Song of Time*'s strengths; but two other novels I read this year nearly matched it for intensity of affect. Mary Doria Russell's *Dreamers of the Day* (Doubleday, 2008) is a historical novel touched by the fantastic: its narrator is dead, and in an unusual afterlife. But most of the novel is about the pain of remembering events – specifically the 1921 Cairo Conference at which the modern map of the Middle East was drawn up – that have irrevocably shaped the geopolitics of the present, and not for the better. Samantha Hunt's *The Invention of Everything Else* (Harvill Secker, 2008), on the other hand, is a historical novel touched by the science-fictional: an evocation of the last few days in the life of Nikola Tesla, it may or may not feature actual time travel, but is throughout gripped by the potential of science-fictionality as a way of conveying the distance between how the world should be, could be, and is.

The exception to my generalisation about the strength of 2008's crop, perhaps, is short story collections; although there were a number of notable anthologies, memorable single-author books were thin on the ground. But the exception to my exception is a jewel indeed. Paolo Bacigalupi's debut, *Pump Six and Other Stories* (Night Shade Books, 2008), is a collection of densely textured, very grubby, globalised futures

which is often stunningly unsentimental. Highlights include Hugo Award nominees "The People of Sand and Slag" and "Yellow Card Man"; but there are no real lowlights.

Last but not least, the best – or at least the most enjoyable – first novel I read was Nick Harkaway's *The Gone-Away World* (William Heinemann, 2008). The characterisation can be broad-strokes, and structurally it wouldn't be unfair to say the book is a bit of a mess, but this tale about an unusually fluid apocalypse and after is told with a great and convincing enthusiasm which stubbornly refuses to settle for conventionality. And that is to be admired.

Penny Hill:

We returned from Oz yesterday so I'm still pretty jet-lagged! This means I've not attempted to write words to go with my choices for the most enjoyable books I read last year, which are:

Ilario by Mary Gentle (Gollancz, 2006)

Brasyl by Ian McDonald (Gollancz, 2008)

Runemarks by Joanne Harris (Doubleday, 2007)

Nation by Terry Pratchett (Doubleday, 2008)

The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman (Bloomsbury, 2008)

Steve Jeffrey:

I suspect I'm not allowed just to say *Anathem* five times (Neal Stephenson, Atlantic Books, 2008) but it is – as we've come to expect from Stephenson – a remarkable book, although not without its flaws. As with the Baroque Cycle, it's quite likely to divide opinion, not just between those who think Stephenson is the best think since sliced bread and those who find him impenetrable, but for those who prefer the measured and digressive world-building of the first half of the book and see the high adventure antics of the second half a jarring change, and those who think the opposite is equally true.

Ian MacDonald's *Brasyl* (Gollancz, 2007) is, if anything, better than the impressive *River of Gods* and a worthy winner of the BSFA Award. I put off reading this for a long while, partly because I worried it couldn't fulfill the promise of *River*, but it does. About the only criticism I can make is the fancy cutout cover of the paperback edition, which gets far too easily damaged. (Mine was torn even before I bought it).

Michael Swanwick's *The Dragons of Babel* (Tor, 2008), set in much the same world as, but not a direct sequel to, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1993), doesn't just set out challenge the conventions of genre fantasy, but bulldozes them into a new and twisted landscape. If Dickens and Voltaire had overdosed on *Orlando Furioso* and then collaborated on a steampunk novel, it might look a little like this. Dark, subversive, inventive, outrageous and in places very funny.

Mark Dunn's *Ibid: a life* (Methuen, 2004), subtitled 'a novel in footnotes', takes the playful and subversive use

of footnotes by Terry Pratchett, Susannah Clarke and Jeff Vandermeer to its logical conclusion, by presenting a biography in which the entire text of the original manuscript has been lost, leaving only the footnotes to reconstruct the life of Jonathan Bashette, three-legged circus attraction, philanthropist, entrepreneur and chairman of Dandy-odor-oo, manufacturer of the first deodorant for men ("You'll never get a job if you smell like a slob").

Finally, I'm torn between two excellent biographies Peter Weston's memoir *With Stars In My Eyes: My Adventures in British Fandom* (NESFA Press, 2004) and Julie Phillips's *James Tiptree, Jr: The Double Life of Alice Sheldon* (St.Martins Press, 2006). The latter is an impressive piece of scholarship of both a dazzling and challenging sf writer and of an extraordinary and complex life, and one that succeeds in laying out of the mythology and controversy that built up around Tiptree's secretive identity and eventual unveiling as Alice Sheldon.

Tony Keen:

As is often the case, my reading last year was mostly made up of books not published in 2008. I did tackle a couple of last year's novels, but those I read I mostly didn't like. I shall catch up in the early months of 2009 when I read the awards shortlists, as I did last year. The shortlist for the 2008 Clarke Award caused some controversy, but there were a number of splendid novels on it. Ken MacLeod's *The Execution Channel* (Orbit, 2007) pulls off a couple of dazzling sleights of hand that redefine the book you thought you were reading. The final twist divides readers, but I loved it. *The H-Bomb Girl* (Faber & Faber, 2007) is a splendid YA yarn that it's hard not to like. It's a time-travel/alternate history tale that would make an excellent television series. (I liked the eventual Clarke winner, Richard Morgan's *Black Man*, less, though I can see why it won.) The prolific Baxter showed that he was consistently back at the top of his game with *Weaver* (Gollancz, 2008), an excellent end to his *Time's Tapestry* series that made me reassess my previously lukewarm attitude to the series as a whole (see my review in the last issue of *Vector*). I'm looking forward to *Flood* now.

I also got around to Stapledon's ambitious and impressive future history, *Last and First Men* (1930; I read the 1999 Gollancz Masterwork edition). It's hardly a novel as we'd recognize it, but the account of humanity's evolution grips throughout. And finally, a revisited delight. Terrance Dicks got many of us into reading sf, and *Day of the Daleks* (Target, 1974) is him at the top of his game, improving on the original serial. My battered, much-read 34-year-old copy is now signed by the man himself.

Paul Kincaid:

The Angel Maker by Stefan Brijs (2005; Orion 2008, trans. Hester Velmans), set at the point where Germany,

Belgium and Holland come together, combines cloning and Asperger's syndrome and is one of the most moving and humane novels I've read in a very long time.

Zeroville by Steve Erickson (Europa, 2007) would have made my list for 2007, except I only got around to reading it at the beginning of 2008; simply one of the best novels he's written.

The Quiet War by Paul McAuley (Gollancz, 2008): if you want your sf unequivocal, this is for you, it makes life among the moons of Jupiter more tactile and real than is generally the case, and has some quietly interesting points to make about the nature of war.

I've come to develop a great deal of affection for Barzak's writing, and *The Love We Share Without Knowing* (Bantam, 2008), a novel about how everyone, including the Japanese, is an alien in Japan, has some very subtle delights.

I have to recommend *Dangerous Laughter* by Steven Millhauser (Vintage, 2008), because he's one of the very best short story writers working today.

I'd also say it's been a good year for non-fiction, but I've got an interest so I shouldn't say too much, except to mention that I argued with every single page of *Rhetorics of Fantasy* by Farah Mendlesohn (Wesleyan, 2008), and that is important.

Martin Lewis:

When I reviewed it, I described Neal Stephenson's *Anthem* (Atlantic, 2008) as "a unique, impressive but fairly mad novel: one part hubris to one part taking the piss to one part gnarly geek awesomeness." I don't think I can improve that. To those of us who sensibly dodged the Baroque Cycle this was the Stephenson we knew and loved. In its 900 pages it can sometimes be slow, dull and even badly written but you won't read anything else like this, well, ever.

It might not have been published last year but 2008 was the year of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (Fourth Estate, 2007); it won nearly every award going and quite rightly so. Michael Chabon is sometimes too long (*The Amazing Adventures Of Kavalier And Clay*) and sometimes too short (*The Final Solution*), but this is just right. Alternative history can often seem like a stale subgenre, this is astonishingly vivid and more alien than most set on other planets.

I bought *The Knife Of Never Letting Go* by Patrick Ness (Walker, 2008) without knowing anything about it, on the strength of its Guardian Children's Book Prize win. It turned out to be so good that it rivaled *Anthem* as the best science fiction novel published in 2008. In many ways it is that books' opposite – fast, direct, emphasising character – and it is driven by both a brilliantly explored novum and the wonderfully realised voice of its young protagonist.

The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Traitor To The Nation: The Pox Party (Candlewick, 2006) is another winner of a children's book prize, despite the fact it isn't

actually children's book. MT Anderson is known as a writer of children's sf, but this is neither. It is, however, a sustained, varied and compelling act of historical prose mimicry, a fierce but touching portrait of an introverted and alienated child, a history of science novel in the manner of Stephenson or James Morrow, and a classical education in its own right. The second and concluding volume was published last year and I look forward to reading this too.

My final book has no connection whatsoever to the genre but was my favourite book of the year: *House of Meetings* by Martin Amis (Jonathan Cape, 2006). This is a real return to form from a ludicrously talented writer who has spent the last couple of years producing sloppy fiction and offensive non-fiction.

Anthony Nanson:

Forty Signs of Rain, the first volume of Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy about global warming, ends with the catastrophic flooding of Washington, DC. A year later, in the real world, came the flooding of New Orleans. The third volume, *Sixty Days and Counting* (HarperCollins, 2007), begins with the election of a charismatic US president who means to take radical action against climate change. A year later, America elected Obama. What exactly President Obama will do about climate or anything else remains to be seen, but there's no denying that Robinson has his finger on the pulse of events.

Whereas Robinson narrates the struggle to stall global warming, Ronald Wright shows us how things are when the warming has happened. *A Scientific Romance* (Anchor, 1997) takes us, care of the prototype on which Wells supposedly based his time machine, five hundred years on, to a Britain overwhelmed by tropical rainforest and where civilisation – if we can call it that – lingers only in the far north of Scotland. It's a superb novel, enigmatic, moving, erudite, funny; as engaged with the mystery of how exactly civilisation has collapsed as with the metaphysics of death and the mourning of a lost love.

It took me a while to get round to Robert Charles Wilson's *Bios* (Millennium, 2000) because I'd been disappointed by the crude zombie battle at the end of his acclaimed *Darwinia*. Though *Bios* has a slower start, I thought it a much more powerful book, both in the awesome inexorability with which the alien planet's biology breaks down the human scientists' technological defences, and in the profound questions raised, both scientifically and symbolically, about the interface between consciousness and ecosystem.

It might seem to require a very special interest to read an author's collected letters. (Dear knows what's going to happen to this genre in the age of email; I've already lost several years of my own correspondence, thanks to an error of judgement by my IT consultant.) But Tolkien's *Letters* (HarperCollins, 2006) are a far more enjoyable read than, say, the interminable volumes of

his son's *History of Middle-Earth*. They are beautifully crafted: painstaking literary gifts to his sons and other correspondents. They reveal much about the man (what a fine father he was; how intolerant he was of publishers interfering in his creative work) and much insight into the thinking behind his mythmaking.

My wild card this year – Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* (Canongate, 2006) – is a study of gift exchange: how it works in traditional societies, how it differs from trade, and what light it sheds on the plight of art when creative gifts are subordinated to commerce: 'The more we allow ... commodity art to define and control our gifts, the less gifted we will become, as individuals and as a society. The true commerce of art is gift exchange, and where that commerce can proceed on its own terms we shall be heirs ... to a storehouse of works that can serve as agents of transformation, and to a sense of an inhabitable world.'

Martin Potts:

As predicted in last year's review the final instalment in David Brin's Uplift trilogy, *Heaven's Reach* (Orbit, 1995), was as enjoyable as I hoped. This was a fittingly wide scope finale as the Jijo renegades escaped their exile to galaxy wide effect. Rich in alien characters and settings, this trilogy positively progresses the Uplift universe concept. Let's hope there will be more at some stage.

In 2008 I caught up with my Iain Banks backlog and certainly enjoyed his latest Culture offering, *Matter* (Orbit, 2008), which provided a fascinating situation and arrived at a satisfying conclusion. Whilst the middle section of the novel trod water a little, the final quarter provided a thrilling race-against-time climax which was worth waiting for. Banks doesn't make his narratives overlong and has that rare ability to return to his particular creation semi-frequently with independent narratives – pleasing returning and new readers alike.

Richard Morgan's brooding and at times uncomfortable Clarke winner, *Black Man* (Gollancz, 2008), requires no additional praise by one such as me but certainly now has another fan and I am looking forward to reading *The Steel Remains* which arrived with Santa.

The *Vector* review of Natasha Mostert's modern day gothic tragedy *Season of the Witch* (Headline, 2007) piqued my curiosity. It proved to be a fascinating study in intrigue and subterfuge, with the psychological effects of a highly intense memory technique providing the catalyst for the characters to experience their ultimately tragic relationship. The novel had me hooked from pretty early on, didn't overstay its welcome at 423 pages and again, was a book with a satisfying conclusion.

Finally, Stephen Donaldson's second novel in his latest Covenant trilogy for me was the unexpected gem of the year, particularly as the first novel, *The Runes of the Earth*, had left me a little disappointed. *Fatal Revenant*

(Putnam, 2007) was a total contrast. Donaldson's now trademark high drama, intricate plotting and merciless use of his characters returned in spades and made this a truly great read with tight plotting, perfect pacing has left me hungry for the final instalment. Storytelling at its very, very best.

Paul Graham Raven:

As I seem to remember saying this time last year, the worst thing about the past twelve months (as far as books are concerned, at least) is how few of them I seem to have gotten round to reading. Thankfully, most of those I *did* read have ranged from passable to excellent, with the latter rating exemplified by Lou Anders' *Fast Forward 2* (Pyr, 2008). I've heard it said that genuinely liking more than a third of the stories in an anthology is the sign of a great TOC; if that is the case, *Fast Forward 2* is at least doubly qualified, containing a stimulating selection of original stories that cover a lot of stylistic and thematic ground.

I could make you a list of 2008 novels I *wanted* (and still want) to read, and it would be alarmingly lengthy (*Anathem*; *Spook Country*... no, no, I must not!), but their time will come. Best save my words for Iain M Banks's return to the Culture universe, *Matter* (Orbit, 2008); a bit more pop than the earlier titles and with a damp squib ending, but still a weighty slab of typically manic Banksonian fun), Charles Stross's *Halting State* (Ace, 2007); a novel I appear to have enjoyed for exactly the same celebratory geekiness and today's-tomorrowness that put off a number of other reviewers) or Rudy Rucker's *Postsingular* (Tor, 2007); a book which burgeons with crazy drugs, mad science and beach-hipster gnarl... and cephalopods). That's not to say those three are necessarily any more deserving of praise than anything else I read this year... but they were the first three to leap to my mind as I sat down to type this out, and that's got to count for something.

Last but not least, I'll mention a collection by a British writer who has been delivering solid short stories for well over a decade, but who still lacks the recognition and profile he so sorely deserves. So it's kudos to the recently-defunct Elastic Press for publishing *The Turing Test* by Chris Beckett, a collection that delivers a stiff poke in the eye to anyone who says that the UK scene has forgotten how to do serious science fiction that has something to say, as well as the heart to say it like it matters.

And at this point I might cheat and mention that Elastic Press simultaneously launched the first collection from Gareth L Powell, *The Last Reef*, which is equally worth your time and money... but then you might point out my friendship with Gareth and accuse me of favouritism, and I don't have the space here to explain why I'd praise Gareth's fiction had I never met the man... so we'll just pretend I didn't say anything while you go and seek out a copy of your own volition, OK?

Adam Roberts:

The best of 2008:

Novel: *Lavinia*, by Ursula LeGuin (Harcourt) is wise and haunting; it flies straight as an owl and its song will haunt your dreams.

Short fiction: Lou Anders's collection *Fast Forward 2* (Pyr) approaches the Platonic form of the ideal collection: varied and consistently brilliant.

Criticism: There was quite a lot of high profile genre criticism published this year, which is a good thing, although I had some problems with some of it. But Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint's new scholarly journal, *Science Fiction Film and Television* (Liverpool University Press, launched in '08) was very good indeed; the quality of articles is high and the reviews are detailed and perceptive.

Poetry: Not exactly a reprint (since it contained many previously unpublished work), the genre poetry I most enjoyed reading this year was Mervyn Peake's *Collected Poems* (ed Robert Maslen, Carcanet 2008). Despite one or two clunkers most of the poems here are striking, potent, weird, jagged: distinctively Peakean, in other words.

Slogan: Heath Ledger's Joker's 'why so serious?' That's going to last, I'd say.

Dave M. Roberts:

The Turing Test (Elastic Press, 2008) is a long overdue collection of Chris Beckett's short fiction. With moving characterisation and frequent explorations of what it means to be human in an increasingly technological and virtualised world, this is a collection with a uniformly high standard.

The SFWA European Hall of Fame (Tor, 2007) is a largely successful attempt to present the best sf published in continental Europe over the last twenty years or so. Whether these are genuinely the best stories is a matter for debate, but those selected are strong by any standards. With commentaries from James and Kathryn Morrow placing each story into some sort of context, and a clear emphasis on obtaining high quality translations, this gives a small taste of just how good some of the sf published on the continent can be.

Richard Morgan's *Black Man* (Gollancz, 2007) is a solid sf thriller that picks up the idea of what you do with those trained only to fight when they are no longer required and turns it a serious meditation on the nature and politics of identity. The resultant novel, if slightly overlong, is both a stimulating and exciting read.

On a more historical note, there is Iain Pear's *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (Vintage, 1997). Four long documents from the key protagonists describe the events surrounding the death of a fellow of New College in 1660s Oxford. Presented in sequence, each narrator is aware of the preceding documents and makes comment upon them. Each one adds layers of complexity, but in such a way that there is a degree of illumination rather

than obfuscation, and the interpretation of the actions and motivations of the characters shifts dramatically as the book progresses. Using the birth of science as its backdrop, this is an ingenious and engrossing historical crime thriller.

David Crystal's *The Stories of English* (Penguin, 2004) is the most comprehensive popular history of the English language I've encountered. From the foremost authority on the language, it traces it from its earliest roots right the way through the modern plethora of variants that exist today. As the title suggests, this is far more complex than the traditional linear view would have us believe. Recommended for anyone with an interest in how our language works.

Myfanwy Rodman:

Luck in the Shadows by Lynn Flewelling (Bantam, 1996) is an action packed fantasy novel with rich characterization and a subtle and intriguing same sex love story. This was a brilliant read for me, so much so that I went right out and bought the sequel. The combination of coming of age and heroic partnership was particularly well done; with the younger Alec bring credible skill, courage and resourcefulness to his relationship with the older Seregil. It was very nice to see the luckless innocent thrown in at the deep end as not so luckless after all.

To Hell and Back by Lilith Saintcrow (Orbit, 2008) is futuristic urban fantasy with bite! Many of the ideas in this book were fresh and the world building was imaginative, definitely a plus for me. And with three or four prequels to back track through, Saintcrow might well become a top writer for 2009 too.

The Even by TA Moore (Morrigan, 2008). This novella is a little gem: it has a stunning main character, and demons, angels and fantastical creations abound. I will be looking out for more of Moore's work in the future.

The Summoner by Gail Z. Martin (Orbit, 2008). If you can cope with the often atrocious writing (a hero who sets out on his quest in slacks - anyone?) then this debut from Gail Martin is worth a look. I'm glad I did, hugely enjoyable characters, good pacing and competent world building, though also a very predictable and safe quest plot. I practically read it in one sitting and, despite the painfully one-dimensional bad guys and the goody two shoes heroes, I am now after book two.

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell by Susannah Clarke (Bloomsbury, 2004). This year I finally cracked open the big book. This masterpiece, which took ten years to write, re-imagines the history of Britain and brings to life all the folk lore and fairy stories of the Isles. The history geek in me loved this book with its two and three page footnotes and its attention to detail. Clarke's voice was spot on; Charles Dickens meets The Brothers Grimm and the descriptions of the fairy realms were creepy and unnerving, just as they should be, nothing cute here. Not to be missed.

Kari Sperring:

I found Marie Brennan's *Midnight Never Come* (Orbit, 2008) a refreshingly different take on the Faerie theme: well researched, well-written and with a genuine sense of the ways in which Elizabethan England differed from our modern assumptions.

Jessica Rydill's *Children of the Shaman* (Orbit, 2001) is a wonderfully inventive fantasy of another nineteenth century Europe, riven with prejudice and war, challenged by new technologies and at odds with its past. I don't understand how Rydill has stayed below the critical radar: this was probably my favourite book of the year.

Liz Williams' *Winterstrike* (MacMillan 2008) is another imaginative *tour-de-force*, this time of a far-future Mars, richly textured and fascinating.

Diana Pavlac Glyer's *The Company They Keep: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien as Writers in Community* (Kent State University Press 2007) is a double award-winner, and a study of the Inklings as an active, mutual engaged writing group. Readable, scholarly and completely engaging.

Miyuki Miyabe's *The Devil's Whisper*, trans. Deborah Stuhr Iwabuchi (Kodansha Europe 2007; first published in Japan 1989) is a dense and dark thriller based around subliminal advertising, this isn't quite *sf*, yet is laden with many of the same resonances.

Jim Steel:

The problem with reviewing is that you spend too much of your precious reading time on material that isn't very good. However, I have managed to come up with five titles that I can wholeheartedly recommend. Greg Egan's *Incandescence* (Gollancz, 2008) is quite wonderful. His portrayal of humanity's future is so well drawn that it looks inevitable, and that's only the start of his novel. He then takes us to a mind-bending world that is being twisted apart by relativistic forces and high-energy physics, and he doesn't lose us on the way. Paolo Bacigalupi's *Pump Six and other Stories* (Night Shade Books, 2008), unfortunately, feels like an equally plausible look at our future. Most of the stories are set with the lifetime of some who are alive today and they serve as bleak ecological warnings. The horrific 'Pop Squad' is one of the most harrowing stories that I have ever read, but it still manages to express a basic humanity at the core of its protagonist. Your task is to read this collection and then go out and prove Bacigalupi wrong, people. Hal Duncan's *Escape From Hell!* (MonkeyBrain, 2008) is an out-and-out fantasy, and its linear plotting makes it an ideal entry point for those who were worried by the cubist structure of his *Book of all Hours*. It's a fast, exiting read, and his Hell really does exude a feeling of despair and helplessness.

There are three types of exclamation used when reading good criticism and, in ascending order, they are, "Why didn't I notice that?" "I wish could write stuff like

this," and "Wow!" I needed all three at regular intervals when reading Paul Kincaid's *What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction* (Beacon, 2008). Priest and Wolfe get their own sections, but Kincaid covers a surprisingly large area in the rest of his book. It's an essential purchase for anyone who is serious about the genre.

Can I have Andrew Humphrey's Alison (TTA Press, 2008) for my last choice? It's not science fictional (or even fantastical) although it does successfully evoke a feeling of horror. The novel's structure is as carefully put together as a watch, and its short little chapters tick-tock their way through a flashback plot that gradually reveals the monsters who walk and talk just like us. The amount of planning that must have gone into the architecture of this novel is simply astounding.

Martin Taylor:

This was not a good reading year for me, recovering from a depression induced inability to read novels. Much of what I did read was well thumbed old friends, comfort reading, if you like. Re-reading Sir Terry Pratchett's *Witches Abroad* (Gollancz, 1991) reminded me what a sly, observant writer he can be. Laughter is good medicine. Iain Banks' *The Steep Ascent to Garbadale* (Little, Brown, 1997) felt like Banks-lite compared to such as *The Crow Road*, but even so there was enough good, sly, observant stuff to keep me turning the page. Michael Cobley kept me turning the pages of *The Seeds of Earth* (Orbit, 2009), and put money aside for the next one. It might not be great space opera (yet) but, again, it is sly and observant and there is more to it than meets the eye at first glance.

I guess 'sly' and 'observant' are my watchwords here.

My final two choices would have graced any year of publication, both intimidating me as a writer and putting a great, big grin on my reader's face. Graham Joyce, masquerading as William Heaney, gave us *Memoirs of a Master Forger* (Gollancz, 2008), a densely layered tale of despair, loss of faith and redemption that reads light but tows along an iceberg of observation and insight beneath the water. This is a book brimming over with passion and compassion. It reminded me of Vonnegut and Jonathan Carroll. It is that good.

It is invidious to say Chaz Brenchley's *Bridge of Dreams* (Ace, 2006) is better than *Memoirs...* because they are such different tales, so differently told. *Bridge of Dreams* is much more within the mainstream of fantasy novels, but is taken far outside that mainstream by the characterisation and the gorgeous language. In a time when we are seemingly required to write as plainly as tabloid journalists, Chaz Brenchley makes full use of our language, making it sing. It is not an easy read but, like Crowley's *Little Big*, I feel very much enriched by having read it.

Sandra Unerman:

The Bell at Sealey Head by Patricia McKillip (Ace, 2008) is a fantasy about books and story telling, full of charm and humour but also vivid details to stir the imagination. By way of contrast, *The Bone Key* by Sarah Monette (Prime, 2007) is a collection of interconnected ghost stories, heavily influenced by M.J. James and H.P. Lovecraft. I found these stories much more compelling than their predecessors, the ghosts more intriguing and disturbing, their human characters more quirky and alive. I particularly like the narrator, Kyle Murchison Booth, and the museum where he works.

Chords and Discords by Roz Southey (Creme de la Crime, 2008) is the second of a series of murder mysteries set in Newcastle in the 18th Century. But this is an alternative Newcastle, where ghosts are part of daily reality. The narrator is a musician and the story evokes a lively, gritty world where people take different things for granted from today and where love and music matter in different ways. *Ha'penny* by Jo Walton (Tor, 2007) is also the second in a series, in this case her alternative history trilogy about life in a world where pro-Nazi forces take over in England in the 1930s. This is a peculiar combination of a light-hearted surface with plenty of action and much darker emotions and implications underneath. Finally, *The Age of Wonder* by Richard Holmes (HarperPress, 2008) is non-fiction, a group biography of the scientists of the Romantic Age, including William and Caroline Herschel and Sir Humphrey Davy. This is full of material to feed the imagination and provide inspiration for writers of fantasy or science fiction, including theories subsequently disproved, such as Herschel's belief that there might be circular cities on the moon.

Anne F Wilson:

I've been working my way through Trollope's Palliser novels. *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871) is a good place to start, as it stands alone (although Pallisers do appear in it fleetingly). It's also tremendously entertaining. The novel opens with Lizzie, Lady Eustace, inheriting a tidy fortune from her noble and generous husband. This fortune includes a castle in Scotland and (possibly, or possibly not) the Eustace diamonds. Lizzie has the diamonds in her possession, but her husband's family believe them to be a family heirloom which should be safely locked away in a vault, and take legal advice. Lizzie Eustace is (to make no bones about it) a vain, venal, shallow, ignorant, social-climbing liar. Although extremely beautiful, she has neither moral character, nor any self-knowledge, nor indeed an ounce of human kindness to recommend her. I couldn't help but admire her hugely entertaining machinations as she tries to get her own way in a world and society where all the cards are stacked against her. Trollope actually has enormous sympathy for the social position of women, and contrasts Lizzie with Lucy Morris, a governess and a

'good girl' who fulfils the passive role allotted to women, and Lucinda Roanoke, a woman in straightened circumstances who is being pushed into marriage with a man who is repellent to her simply because she has no alternative financial support. Underneath the comedy is an awareness that women who try to better themselves are only cast as 'bad'.

The Bull Calves by Naomi Mitchison (1947) is set in June 1747, as Scotland tries to recover from the effects of the '45 rebellion. It starts off slowly, with a lot of introductions to a house party of family and friends. After that, however, it takes off, and before you know it there are Jacobites and witches and Red Indians and traitorous cousins, and it's great. The prose style is fluid and easy to read, and the author has made a huge effort to invent a language that gives an impression of the way the characters might actually have spoken.

Midnights by Scott Westerfield is actually a trilogy of young adult books (2004-6). Our heroes are a group of teenagers living in Bixby, Oklahoma, who discover that there is an extra hour at midnight. It is inhabited only by people who were born at midnight, and ancient and terrible shadows that take the shape of the humans' nightmares. This has got everything – good writing, a gripping plot, excellent characters and a story that gets denser, darker and more interesting with each novel.

I've actually spent the year reading most of Phil Rickman's Merrily Watkins books, of which *Wine of Angels* (Macmillan, 1998) is the first. They're occult mystery novels, but the occult is mostly offstage, glimpsed or imagined out of the corner of the eye. In the foreground are corrupt councillors, enthusiastic pagans and drug dealing farmers, and the plots are generally driven along by fear and loathing in Herefordshire. The great strength of these books lies in the characters, starting with the heroine, Merrily Watkins, the vicar of Ledwardine and diocesan exorcist, whose internal dialogue is one long conversation with doubt. She has a rebellious teenage daughter Jane whose job it is to get involved in any cults going. Then there is Gomer Parry the local plant hire supplier and Lol Robinson, a musician with an institutionalised past, and others too numerous to mention here. The novels blend the realities of rural Herefordshire with crime and the occult in a charmingly gothic brew.

I think the best book I read in 2008 was *Day* by AL Kennedy (Jonathan Cape, 2007). Alfie Day is a tail gunner in a Lancaster bomber in WW2. After an unpromising childhood with a brutal father, Day finds his feet in the war, but this sense of having found his place dissolves when he is shot down and imprisoned by the Germans. After the war he decides to try to sort his head out by taking a role as an extra on a prisoner of war film. In this beautifully written book Kennedy delicately dissects what it means to be a man, and through that, what it means to be human.

You Sound Like You're Having Fun Already

The SF Films of 2008

By Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

In 2008 the box office was topped by the most preposterous and overblown science fiction fantasy ever committed to celluloid. No, not *The Dark Knight* (which topped the US box office but not the UK), but the hilariously inept *Mamma Mia!* – a film so shockingly amateur it defined a whole new anticinema aesthetic. Things, as that irritating song goes, could only get better...

Except for a few exceptions it was more of the same in 2008. Hollywood retreated into safe genre films and PG-13/12A friendly bubblegum pictures, despite the seemingly endless quest to become 'darker' to reflect our times. Maybe the credit crunch will see the

chickens coming home to roost with the film nervously anticipating tightening budgets and a potential slew of strikes that recently affected the television industry. The

currently accepted 'wisdom' (if there is such a thing in the world of the blockbuster) is that mid-budget dramas and musicals are the feel good solution to everyone's ills – not just *Mamma Mia!*, but the sleeper mega-smash of the year *Twilight*. The roaring financial success of this modestly budgeted, shot in painstaking angst ridden goth-lite close-up, is initially difficult to understand. Huge swathes of 'repeat what the audience has just seen five times in case they nipped out to get popcorn' dialogue, much pained pouting and a virtual absence of action until the final showdown pad out the two hour running time. But somehow the central premise is so audaciously simplistic (girl loves vampire), the passions so bubbling hot yet rendered as chaste as *LazyTown* that it comes across as quaint. The lack of fangs and the sudden need to

introduce conflict because the film really didn't have any plot do go against it, but *Twilight* does point to genre films being more character led. Vampire films often go through phases of popularity. They've been a bit sparse recently, so expect a revival of more toothsome bloodsuckers in the coming years.

Hollywood's ongoing affair with all things comic book showed no signs of abating although some cracks are beginning to show. Not, mind you, are there any cracks to be found in the remarkable, record smashing returns from *The Dark Knight* – the second highest grossing film of all time in the US. Director Christopher Nolan provides a thinly

veiled allegory for our current time and predicament – questioning responses to terrorism, the surveillance society and the disintegration of individual morality in the face of increasingly anarchic brutality. Heady stuff for a 12A superhero film (indeed the rating became an issue with irate parents complaining that their 5 year old



kids were freaked out by the menace on show) and for the most part it succeeds. Christian Bale returns as Batman and, like most incarnations post-Adam West, is less important to the film than the villain, with Heath Ledger's truly frightening performance as the Joker forever banishing that dreadful Jack Nicholson pantomime. It's so easy to become enthralled by the performances, the spectacular cinematography and the political/moral subtext that you miss the film's failings – it's far too long and edited on autopilot, the final pay-offs happen too late and are way too convenient. A set-up for a sequel seems to mark the further decline into cynicism that

the rest of the film is so eager to avoid. A similar set-up can be seen in the similarly overlong but enjoyable *Iron Man*. Robert Downey Jr is in career-reviving form as Tony Stark, a scummy weapons dealer who, following capture in the Middle East, gets himself out of a tricky scrape by building a metal suit of awesome destructive capability. Back home he refines it, gives it a lick of maroon metallic paint and is reborn as high-flying super-techno-dude Iron Man. For the most part the film succeeds on its own rollercoaster terms, getting credible love interest Gwyneth Paltrow involved once it's done with its political fudging. Far less successful, either commercially or artistically, was *The Incredible Hulk*. We were promised a whole different film from Ang Lee's superior but inexplicably derided *Hulk* (2003), but in many respects this was more of a semi-sequel remake, with an increasingly hysterical Tim Roth camping it up as a Hulkier-than-thou opponent to brooding Bruce Banner (Edward Norton). The wildly fluctuating scenes of 'meaningful' introspection, lost love, and doomed heroics contrasted with hyperbolic action as various CGI hulky things bashed seven bells out of each other and chewed the scenery. It was amiable enough while it lasted but its memory, like its box office returns, swiftly faded away. Taking no prisoners and eschewing the trendy need for comic book introspection or its relations to US foreign policy, *Hellboy 2: The Golden Army* galloped out of the stalls to deliver the most enjoyable of the year's comic book films. The irony that the word 'enjoyable' be used in the context of a film whose lead character is not only a demon from Hell but, gasp, smokes tobacco is not lost on anyone. Guillermo del Toro brings the visual imagination of his arthouse work into the blockbuster arena and blows a raspberry in the face of his earnest rivals. An uneasy truce between the magical realm and the human world is about to be broken when evil Prince Nuada (Luke 'Bros' Goss) seeks the pieces of a broken crown that will give him control over the mighty Golden Army of robotic human killing machines. Only the red faced, wise cracking Hellboy (Ron Perlman) can stop the plan through outrageous punch-ups and against-the-odds battles. Mayhem ensues. Naturally.

In a further portent for 2009, the first trickle of 3D films started to reach the silver screen – a trend that will inevitably increase in anticipation of James Cameron's long awaited return to the big screen with *Avatar*. Gone are the green and red lenses and in come custom-made glasses. Unfortunately two rival systems and the expense of new equipment means many cinema chains have yet to invest in the technology necessary to project 3D (certainly outside of London) resulting in a number of flat prints being released to impoverished outreaches. *Journey to the*

Centre of the Earth was a mildly diverting version of the Jules Verne favourite with Brendan Fraser taking the kind of physical pratfalls he is most famous for. Viewers watching the flat version were perplexed by the unfathomable shots of 'stuff' being waved at the screen but the simple arrive-escape story featuring dinosaurs, a kid and a love triangle was an easy way to pass an hour and a half. All the in-your-face effects work in the world could not rescue the truly lame *Fly Me To The Moon*, wherein a plucky trio of juvenile flies attempt to sneak onto Apollo 11 and get to the moon. Bad jokes are repeated ad nauseam ("oh my lord... of the flies") and the kid-friendly bodily emissions scenes (including having a fly covered in snot sneezed directly into your face... in 3D) wear very thin, very quickly. The final live action appearance of Buzz Aldrin insisting that the film you've just watched is made up (no shit, Buzz) and that there were, in fact, no flies on him is just bizarre.

Regular readers of our annual round up will know our thinly veiled disdain for hastily remade versions of normally superior films that just happen to be made in a language other than English. Although the pace is beginning to slacken a touch (the height of the J-Horror boom having long since passed) Hollywood's audacity is jaw dropping. So this year we've had *One Missed Call*, a remake of a Miike Takashi film that is not, in all honesty, his best (we await the big budget remake of *Visitor Q* with eager trepidation), Jessica Alba in a deeply unnecessary remake of the Pang Brothers' glossy shocker *The Eye*, and a toned-down-to-the-point-of tedium rerun of the superior Thai shocker *Shutter*. If that were not enough Austrian bad boy Michael Haneke remade *his own film* in a photocopier version of the classic *Funny Games*. Why Michael, why? But the biggest insult of all was yet to come. April saw the release of *[REC]*, a Spanish horror film that did something very few horror films have done recently – scare. A taut, white-knuckle ride that actually used its shaky first person camera to logical and terrifying effect *[REC]* follows a low budget film-crew filming a television documentary about a fire crew. They follow the team into a building where an old lady is apparently trapped in her room, but soon find themselves imprisoned inside the complex. Very bad things start to happen. Now, *[REC]* may not be original, indeed it steals from a huge variety of sources – but makes those sources its own with ruthless efficiency. Quite clearly the horror film of the year. More horrific though is the unnerving sign of *Quarantine* – a lazy remake that cropped up with indecent haste in November *the same year*. Madness.

We sometimes say with these reviews: "we watch them so you don't have to" but in the case of the

remake of Robert Wise's peerless *The Day The Earth Stood Still* we didn't see it. Some sacrifices are too great, even for Vector. I mean what next? Remake *West Side Story*? *The Sound of Music*? *The Haunting*? Oh, wait...

There were a fair number of CG films that hit the big screen last year, and they ranged from the sublime to the substandard (Dreamworks, please stop with the *Madagascar* thing, it was rubbish first time around). Best of the bunch (and a contender for best film of the year) was Pixar's *WALL-E*, a delightful tale of the last functioning waste disposal robot on earth, dutifully going about his job of cleaning up the planet which has become basically a giant rubbish tip (the human race has cleared off into deep space to let him get on with it) until he falls in love with super-robot Eve. A charming tale, the first half hour of which is told virtually entirely visually, proving that cinema doesn't need to rely on dialogue to tell a story. Yes, it had the usual heartwarming message at the end, but it was a good story, supremely told and with great characterisation. To get an audience to empathise with a solitary character who isn't even alive is a great achievement; to make that character so appealing to all ages is nothing short of a miracle. In future they will teach this film as an introduction to arthouse cinema. Trust us on this one.

Kung Fu Panda was very silly indeed and no bad thing. The laziest creature in the village, Po the panda, suddenly ends up joining an elite fighting squad in order to fulfil a prophecy. Cue lots of training sequences and fat panda jokes. Yes, it has the usual heartwarming message in the end, but Dreamworks seem to have realised here that a good story, combined with well-executed action and comedy sequences in addition to the voice talent, makes for a superior experience. For martial arts buffs there were even enough references to films from the seventies and eighties to keep them happy (Five Venoms anyone?), a departure from the usual one-year old cultural myopia that prevails in Dreamworks' post-modern output. Keeping with the Occupation Animal title theme *Space Chimps* was best left well alone (although it was marginally better than *Fly Me To The Moon*.)

The surprise treat on the CGI calendar (after all, Pixar only produces surprises when the film isn't good) was *Igor*, a modest film which told the tale of a hunchbacked assistant who aspires to be a mad scientist and create an evil being. One for all the family, even its heartwarming message was a little bit sick and therefore much funnier than all the other heartwarming messages that are *de rigueur* in this field. *Igor* cunningly relied on strong visual gags and used its more limited resources to create an angular and stylised environment that exactly

suit its subject. Think Ren and Stimpy make a Tim Burton film. With songs. To top it all, it even had gloriously over-the-top supervillains – which, frankly, was exactly what *Quantum of Solace* could have done with, instead of relying on corporate non-entities, moping around like an angst ridden teenager and a slew of increasingly irrelevant action sequences. Tips for Bond #3: Lighten up, get a proper villain and, for grief's sake, get a plot.

Horror films diversified a bit this year, and the best moved away from the overt gore (we were bored with the *Saw* franchise after the first one, no. 5 really didn't push any buttons... other than the off one) that has typified the genre for the last few years and replaced it with tension. Some did both. Did we mention how good *[REC]* is? Anyway, Frank Darabont seems to have gained himself a reputation as the director who makes decent versions of Stephen King stories (no mean feat given the track record) and this year saw *The Mist* hit the big screen. For no readily apparent reason, although it's bound to be military, a small town in Maine becomes engulfed in a mysterious mist. And nasty things lurk within – deadly creatures capable of tearing a person apart or infecting them with deadly poison. A group of survivors camp out at the local supermarket and attempt to see off the threat, but soon they start splitting into rival factions, creating as much tension inside as out. *The Mist* is basically a monster movie – big splattery effects coupled with lots of tension – which also conveys a serious message about fanaticism and the lengths people will go to in order to survive. The combination of high horror thrills and pessimism is a sure-fire winner. Another cracker of a horror lay in the Guillermo del Toro-produced *El Orfanato* (*The Orphanage*), a slow burning, creepy and fascinating film. Laura (Belén Rueda) buys her childhood orphanage in order to re-open it as a facility for disabled children. Once there, her son begins to play games with invisible friends and becomes increasingly disturbed. The orphanage seems to develop a life of its own. Laura seeks parapsychological help but does she really want to uncover the secrets of the past? With only brief moments of gore *The Orphanage* relies on frisson and melancholy to weave its eerie magic – the number one film of its year in Spain, it shows the appalling lack of diversity at the UK box office by being the only non-English language film in the top 100 of 2008. At number 97. Sigh. Speaking of unexplained events, *The Happening*, M Night Shyamalan's 'creepy movie with a twist' was unusual in that it didn't have a twist this time – unless you count Mark Wahlberg interrogating a plastic plant as a twist. Although heavily derided, there are a number of stand out moments that make the film worthy of your time –

notably the serenely unnerving opening sequences. In *Black Water* a small family group go for a river trip in the Australian outback and get attacked by a giant crocodile. The end. Actually, *Black Water* is okay – it's fairly tense, and does a good job of getting across the boredom of waiting to be rescued. Even though the scares are obvious and signposted, the croc is well executed – hidden for much of the time but delivers when it's required to attack. *P2* was very similar to *Black Water* but it replaced the river with a car park, the crocodile with a serial killer, and the tension with a solitary scene of extreme gore. And if all this seems a bit, well, tame, Tim Burton's version of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* had enough gushing blood to satisfy the most hardened of gore-hounds. If they could stomach the music, *Sweeney Todd* aka Benjamin Barker returns to London to take revenge upon Judge Turpin, the man who stole his wife and daughter from him and banished him to certain death. He opens a barbershop above Mrs. Lovett's shop which sells 'the worst pies in London.' With the help of Mrs. Lovett, Todd means to rid London of the corrupt aristocracy, and hopes to be reunited with his daughter, Johanna, who is now Judge Turpin's ward. As is to be expected from Burton, the set design is stunning and the performances are terrific. Bonham Carter is fabulous, as is Depp, and even Sacha Baron Cohen doesn't upset the apple cart (Ricky Gervais take note) in this tale of bloody revenge, a dish best served, presumably, encased in pastry.

In a case of 'you-wait-years-for-a-hand-held-horror-to-come-along-then-three-come-along-at-the-same-time' [REC] (horror film of the year)

was joined by the virally marketed hype machine *Cloverfield* and Romero's dead-cam *Diary of the Dead*. *Cloverfield*, on the crest of immeasurable buzz, proved an adequate, taut horror about an (alien?) invasion that causes chaos and death. The 'one tape recorded over another' conceit helped iron out the characterisation and it was undoubtedly tense at moments. The short scenes of match-moved monsters were eerily realised even if the actual monster itself was a bit dubious. Even lower on the budgetary scale, *Diary of the Dead* shows how far cheap effects technology has come. Effectively a pumped up student project (it is rough around the edges), *Diary* squeezes every cent out of its budget and proves once again that Romero is as much about politics and criticising society as he is about horror. The almost throwaway ending (the reason the film received an 18 rating) is casually chilling, its political and humanitarian implications all too real and all too much to contemplate.

One of the highlights of the year came out of nowhere. Admittedly it's one of the highlights of the year 1981 but that's not a bad thing (it was a good year for low budget science fiction). Neil Marshall, of *Dog Soldiers* (2002) and *The Descent* (2005) fame, returned with the hugely enjoyable if disreputable *Doomsday*. If last year's Tarantino/Rodriguez films were an homage to their mis-spent youths then Marshall has clearly relished returning to his – in this case the post-apocalyptic joys of *Mad Max 2* and John Carpenter's peerless *Escape From New York*. Eden Sinclair has to go to Scotland on a mission. Problem is, Scotland has been cut off to prevent the virulent Reaper virus infecting the rest of the UK. But now the virus has cropped up in London and the only

hope seems to come from a land that everyone thought was inhabited only by corpses. Scotland, it turns out, has developed into a violent tribal society of cannibals and freaks. Non-stop action and excessive violence make *Doomsday* a high-fun, high-octane thrillride of the highest B-Movie order (that's a compliment!), also finding time for a soundtrack that includes Frankie Goes to Hollywood



and Adam and the Ants as well as a sequence that looks like Duran Duran's *Wild Boys* video set in an abattoir.

A number of fantasies were aimed squarely at family audiences, although everyone missed out on the 6th part of the Potter franchise in 2007 for reasons known only to Warner Brothers. Still, *Prince Caspian* heralded the second of the Narnia franchise. Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy are back in Narnia, summoned by Susan's horn blown by a desperate Prince Caspian, who is trying to escape assassination. Over a thousand years have passed since the siblings were last there and Narnia has become a more barbaric place. The Telmarine want to destroy the magical creatures – and Caspian too. Can the kings and queens muster an army big enough for the fight ahead and where's Aslan when you need him? An epic adventure for all the family but with a less enchanting or engaging plot than the first film, with a greater emphasis on impressive battle scenes than on relating to the characters.

The Spiderwick Chronicles starred Freddie Highmore and Freddie Highmore as good twin/bad twin who, with their mom and sister, begin a new life in their great aunt's house. But little do they know that when Jared (bad twin) opens a magic book he finds, their world will be turned upside down as they become aware of magical creatures in the garden, including an ogre who will stop at nothing to get hold of the book and destroy the creatures it chronicles. *The Spiderwick Chronicles* is one of the better fantasy offerings this year, enhanced by truly excellent performances by Highmore. The protagonists feel more realistic – the parents have just split up and the kids are having a hard time – which lends an air of plausibility to the fantasy world. Superior effects and a brisk running time made for a genuinely exciting adventure – far more engaging than the books it was based upon. *Penelope* was a contemporary fairy tale about an heiress (Christina Ricci) born under a curse which makes her resemble a pig. The curse can only be broken when she finds true love with "one who will love her faithfully." It's sweet and romantic, funny and engaging without being too cloying – the rom-com re-imagined as a contemporary fairy tale. Hyperactive, eye-searingly bright and utterly barking was *Speed Racer* from the Wachowski brothers, based on the Japanese cartoon *Mahha GoGoGo*. *Speed Racer*, for that is his name, is born to race fast cars, but it's clear that the championship he's driving in is full of evil cheating corporate sponsors. Realism is not a word in *Speed Racer's* dictionary; it's a film so bright you need sun factor 40 to prevent burning. Revolutionary use of editing and sugar-rush visuals make this very much an acquired taste.

In *Inkheart*, this year's busiest genre lead Brendan Fraser (John Hurt was busy in a number of roles but not for leads) is Mo 'Silvertongue' Folchart whose unusual ability is that he can read aloud fictional characters into the real world. Unfortunately, in a sort-of-physics way each action has an equal and opposite reaction so someone from our world ends up wandering inside the fictional lands – often not very pleasant ones at that. This is a fate that has befallen his own wife, which is why Mo and his daughter are searching the land for a copy of *Inkheart*, the inexplicably rare book his wife has fallen into. But wouldn't you know it, the nasties from *Inkheart* (led, in a supremely gurning turn, by Andy Serkis, whose penchant for excess suited him well in the muddled but enjoyably tasteless splatter comedy *The Cottage*) want world domination – something they intend to achieve by taking the reluctant Silvertongue out of retirement. A fantasy of the old school (plenty of prosthetic and in-camera work here) with a cast clearly enjoying itself (Jim Broadbent, Paul Bettany in typically top form, and even Helen Mirren) *Inkheart* passes by admirably and enjoyably but without the verve it really needs to raise it that little bit higher. Meanwhile in *Bedtime Stories* Adam Sandler finds he is able to read aloud fictional characters into the real world...with far less enjoyable results. There are more 'comics' in fantasy films when a near death experience causes Ricki Gervais to see dead people in the annoying *Ghost Town* – a sort of *Sixth Sense* meets *Topper* without either of those films' charm. Still, the supreme irony that Mr Gervais (last seen trying to ruin the otherwise excellent *Stardust* and managing to wrestle any vestiges of enjoyment from *Night at the Museum*) plays a dentist here at least means that we get to quip that this film was as funny as having teeth pulled.

Back out of retirement came monosyllabic killing machine Rambo and wise crackin', whip wieldin', grave robbin' Indiana Jones. In *Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull* we've moved on to the cold war era and a pitch-perfect camp performance from Cate Blanchett heralds a new 'race to the artefact' mission for Indy – this time involving crystal skulls of an unknown origin that can send a man insane (John Hurt, here as a crazy professor). This sets up the standard run of action set pieces and comedy asides which, in the main, are refreshingly tactile but lose their charm when the CGI becomes more obvious. While it's good to see the return of Karen Allen, less welcome are the addition of Indy jr (although he's nowhere near as bad as he could've been) and a widely fluctuating Ray Winstone. And let's not talk about the ending. Or the fridge. John Hurt has had a bit of a type-cast year, being a professor of some idiosyncrasy in both

Indiana Jones and Hellboy II, as well as in *Álex de la Iglesia's* barking mad modern giallo *The Oxford Murders*. A series of bizarre murders (or are they?) are connected by obscure mathematics (or are they?) with reluctant amateur sleuth (or is he?) ... well, you get the idea. Prof. Seldom begrudgingly teams up with a mathematics wunderkind played by Frodo Baggins. Increasingly hysterical and convoluted, *The Oxford Murders* manages to be insane enough to allow its most macabre and offensive elements appear to be another normal part of a what is basically *Inspector Morse* meets *Freaks* or Dario Argento's *A Beautiful Mind*. And while we are talking implausible and convoluted what words can describe the lunacy of 10,000 B.C.? A bunch of warlords are capturing folk to build the pyramids. D'Leh finds his hottie Evolet is captured by the brutal builders so he sets about getting her back (there's some mythical gubbins here, but we'll gloss over that for the moment). This involves following them on foot from tundra to rainforest (in the space of about half an hour walking!) to desert, befriendingly initially hostile tribes along the way, and earning the trust of a sabretoothed tiger. Yes. Really. The fact that the score and direction point to some epic and worthy statement picture make the event all the more hilarious for their attempt to be worthy. Sort of like *Apocalypse*. For kids.

The X-Files: I Want To Believe The Franchise Has Finally Sputtered Its Last Breath reunited the star of the excellent but naughty *Californication*, David Duchovny, with Gillian Anderson – as Mulder and Scully. This time the duo (Scully now a catholic nurse, Mulder a shabby recluse) are investigating claims by a bleeding eyed defrocked priest (played by Billy Connolly) that he has visions that could help them on a high profile kidnapping case. Please no more. This is also a plea that can be directed at the makers of the irritatingly titled *AVPR: Aliens vs Predator – Requiem*, a further kick in the egg sacks for the venerable franchises, although at least it doesn't go the PG-13 route of *AVP* (or whatever it's called). *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* comes in-between episodes 2 and 3, a spin off of the TV series of mini-CGI episodes. Despite the expansive palette offered by the big screen and some clever design touches, the film all but disappeared in the swamp of summer tentpoles.

That man Fraser again in the belated sequel *The Mummy: Tomb Of The Dragon Emperor*, in which we find that Rachel Weisz has wisely jumped ship to be replaced by Maria Bello, and that this time round the 'mummy' in question is cursed Emperor Han (Jet Li) who will, as legend dictates in these films, be undefeated if certain conditions are met. It's exciting enough in a seen-it-all-before kind of a way, and at least the injection of hostile yeti brings a (probably

unintentional) smile to the face, and Anthony Wong is on form as the ruthless General Yang. But there's an 'is that it?' denouement and a criminal under-use of Jet Li exacerbated by an even more criminal under-use of Michelle Yeoh. A waste of opportunity and talent. Jet Li fared better in *The Forbidden Kingdom*, an East-meets-West fantasy in which a bullied American boy called Jason finds himself transported to ancient China, where he becomes the owner of the Monkey King's magic stick. The stick could revive the Monkey King and hopefully defeat the evil Jade Warrior who has trapped the regal simian. Helping (and occasionally hindering) Jason on his journey are Lu Yan (Jackie Chan reprising his drunken master style roles) and Silent Monk (Jet Li), occasionally joined by Golden Sparrow (Crystal Liu). For newcomers to the martial arts film this is an ideal introduction (and a good companion piece to *Kung-Fu Panda*), although Jason is a bit young to be watching that copy of *Bride With the White Hair* that's lurking in the background. For older viewers this is the once-in-a-lifetime chance to see Chan and Li fight on-screen – it's enjoyable enough given the limits of the family-friendly rating.

You've got to admire Hollywood's desperation at trying to tap into the lucrative gaming market, but surely the constant attempts at bringing interactive entertainment to a distinctly un-interactive big screen have shown that the results can be messy. At best. So here we find *Max Payne* (the studios wanted a PG-13 rating in the US so *Moderate Payne* might have been a better title), played by Mark Wahlberg, the tale of a cop out to avenge the death of his wife and daughter. Except it's not that easy because there's some heavy duty drugs on the street and blah, blah, blah. Some nice visual touches can't save the garbled plot and sagging narrative. At least some superhero films tried to escape the tried and tested formula and offer a different slant on matters. We'll ignore the by numbers 'comedy' tedium of blink and you've forgotten it spoof *Superhero Movie*, and concentrate on two very different films with strikingly similar premises. In *Hancock*, Will Smith plays a hard drinking superhero whose his acts of chivalry inevitably end in chaos and destruction, and who has as a result become hugely unpopular. Inevitably the cynicism and dark humour give way to a lighter film (there's a bit of a schism going on here), but it's enjoyable while it lasts. Bizarre is the word for *Dainipponjin* (Big Japanese Person), the debut feature from writer-director-comic Hitoshi Matsumoto, one half of comedy sensations Downtown. Matsumoto is the titular character, a dour middle-aged guy who's being interviewed for a documentary. Every once in a while he's juiced up by electric power stations and grows in size to fight an increasingly deranged

selection of aliens and monsters. A combination of ultra-low-key and ridiculous camp makes this is a clear contender for oddest film of the year.

In the old days the word 'jumper' meant something rocking chair crooner Val Doonican habitually wore, but over the years this functional, cosy but fashionably dubious item of clothing has become more acceptable, particularly following its prominence in *The Matrix* trilogy. And now we have *Jumper* – not a comfy piece of knitwear but a science fiction film from Doug Liman (he of *Go*, *Bourne Identity* and the slightly unhinged *Mr and Mrs Smith*). David Rice (Hayden 'youngling killer' Christensen) finds out that he is a jumper – that is, someone who is able to teleport anywhere. Great. Free money from banks and the life of Riley awaits. Except that he's not the only one and his kind are not tolerated by paladins, part of a centuries old secret organisation, who will do anything to eradicate them. And paladin Roland (Samuel L. Jackson) has got Rice in his sights ... The film starts with a lot of potential, but the ideas quickly fizzle out and Liman's decision to use Greengrass-inspired shaky camerawork drains any sense of excitement from the action – crazy given his previous competence in that area. A missed opportunity that just ends and then has a hasty tacked on 'room for a sequel' epilogue. In their dreams. Once great hope Mathieu La Haine Kassovitz saw a further career blooper with garbled nonsense *Babylon A.D.* – a messianic sci-fi future *Transporter 3*, with Vin Diesel an over earnest man-for-hire transporting the potential saviour of the world along with her guardian, Michelle Yeoh playing a nun. We're not making this up.

Quirky? Bonkers? Hilariously violent? It's all good stuff. In Timur Bekmambetov's *Wanted* Wesley's (James McAvoy) boring life (cubicle job and cheating girlfriend) becomes a lot more exciting when he finds he has inherited his dead father's assassination skills and starts working for the Fraternity, a clandestine group of killers whose credo is 'kill one, save many'. Tough training follows courtesy of scary pouting Angelina Jolie, and a deadly game is to be played out between rival assassins. This, then, is madder than a bottle of stupid pills... but in a good way. It's so bonkers that it features the Loom of Destiny – where assassination orders are woven out in some weird da Vinci code telex manner. Bullets curve. Cars apparently fly. Much goes bang. Still, the action setpieces are so astonishing and the pace so breathtaking that you have to conclude that the raw stupidity isn't there to be derided, it's there to be embraced. In *Be Kind, Rewind*, Jack Black becomes magnetized when attacking an electricity substation (don't try this at home, folks) and unintentionally destroys every tape in his friend's video store. In order to satisfy the store's most loyal customer (Mia



Farrow), the two men set out to remake the lost films, which include *Ghostbusters*, *The Lion King*, *Rush Hour*, *Back to the Future*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and *Robocop*. Like much of Michel Gondry's output (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *The Science of Sleep*) *Be Kind, Rewind* has a great premise that matures on subsequent viewings. The remakes of the movies put you into film geek heaven; they are pure inventiveness and very funny but also quite inspiring – you too feel you could create your own masterpiece. There's also an underlying story about the nature of the local community as the video store is under threat from the developers, just in case you need a heartwarming message, as well as a questioning of hard line corporate tactics against fan homage to copyright material.

All in all, a mixed bag of a year. What is perhaps encouraging are the signs of an emerging confidence in mid-budget films, providing they get adequate distribution, over the increasingly familiar eye-candy of the blockbusters.

Films of the Year:

Best SF: WALL-E

Best Horror: [REC]

Best Fantasy: The Spiderwick Chronicles

Progressive Scan: 2008 TV in Review

by Abigail Nussbaum

It was the year of quirk. The biggest genre television event of 2008 was never even screened on television. In the middle of the summer doldrums, in the wake of a writers' strike which mandated a premature ending to almost all the year's American television seasons, and therefore a long dry period of boredom, reruns, and episodes of *Stargate: Atlantis*, the internet was swept off its collective feet by Joss Whedon's return to the televised format, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-a-Long Blog*. A 45 minute musical, released online in three parts, *Dr. Horrible* is the story of the title character's (the omni-talented Neil Patrick Harris) attempts to win over the girl of his dreams while avoiding the clutches of his nemesis, Captain Hammer (a wonderfully hammy Nathan Fillion) and attempting to pull off a heist daring and wicked enough to gain him admittance into the Evil League of Evil. Driven by winning performances by all three leads (Harris and Fillion were joined by *Buffy* alumna Felicia Day as the object of both their characters' attentions) and by Whedon's witty lyrics and hummable tunes, *Dr. Horrible* quickly established itself as yet another entry in Whedon's long history of subverting genre conventions—Billy, the supervillain in training, is geekishly adorable, while Captain Hammer is a narcissistic jock—before delivering a shock to its audience's systems with a tragic ending that reminded us that, as fun and transgressive as it is to root for the bad guy, he is a bad guy for a reason. *Dr. Horrible* was a distillation of Whedon's exceptional career over the last decade and change: clever, impeccably well-made, funny, playful, frustratingly flawed (viewers were justifiably up in arms over the passivity of the story's only female character), and a reminder that a light, comedic touch is in no way inconsistent with pathos or a staunch moral message. This point, however, had already been made in the fall of 2007 with the premiere of *Pushing Daisies*, Bryan Fuller's (*Dead Like Me*, *Wonderfalls*) fantasy series about a pie-maker (Lee Pace) with the power to raise the dead, the childhood sweetheart he resurrects but can never touch again (Anna Friel), the private detective who uses these unusual skills to solve crimes (the fantastic Chi McBride) and the waitress with an unrequited crush on her pie-making, dead-

raising, crime-solving boss (an even more fantastic Kristin Chenoweth). *Pushing Daisies* burst onto the screen with a style and verve unlike anything seen on TV before: its stylized, minutely-detailed sets, its richly textured, elaborate costumes, and most of all its rapid-fire, witty, double-, triple- and quadruple-entendre laden dialogue. The show seemed like a highwire act destined for a long plummet into an abyss of cuteness, but week after week it maintained its loopy charm, and in 2008 returned for a season that was (after a few shaky first weeks) even smarter and more engaging than its first. The mystery of the week format established in the show's first season was expanded upon when it began delving into its main cast's histories—Ned and Chuck's fathers and their mysterious connection to one another; the secrets of Chuck's parentage; Emerson's search for his daughter; Olive's quest to find a place for herself away from the man she loves but can't have—and the stories that resulted surpassed even the first season's best offerings, such as when Ned, having discovered that his abandoning father fathered and abandoned two other boys, is thrust into a parental and proactive role when their surrogate father, a stage magician, is killed the middle of his act. *Pushing Daisies*' secret is its whole-hearted commitment to its characters' humanity even as it surrounds them with over the top plasticity. Love, fear, anger, jealousy, grief, comfort—these emotions are never downplayed or played for (merely) a laugh, but neither are they allowed to overwhelm the show's emotional register. There's always a laugh around the corner to defuse a melodramatic moment, and always a core of genuine emotion at the heart of every absurdly witty story. Maintaining a similar balance was *The Middleman*, a delightful summer treat that seems to borrow its geekish sensibility from Whedon and its visual sensibility from Fuller. Based on the comic book series by Javier Grillo-Marxuch (who is also the series's creator), *The Middleman* is the story of Wendy Watson (the effortlessly winning Natalie Morales), an out of work art school graduate who finds herself in the middle of an out-of-this-world crisis when an accident at the genetics lab where she's been temping pits her face to face with man-eating gelatinous blob. Her quick thinking and

level head in the face of this unbelievable crisis impress the title character (Matt Keeslar, acquitting himself admirably in the tricky role of the clean-cut, clean-living, clean-spoken straight man with a bit more going on beneath his placid surface), the latest in a long line of superheroes protecting the world from comic book villains and monsters, who promptly offers Wendy the position of his sidekick. What follows is one part geek love-in, featuring callouts to everything from *Die Hard* to *Doctor Who* (and including an appearance by ubiquitous genre character actor Mark A. Sheppard as a potential supervillain), one part a television lover's dream come true, with emphasis on plot and character continuity, on developing the show's secondary characters (including Wendy's bohemian roommate and stoner neighbor, her charming boyfriend, the Middleman's android assistant, who takes the form of a cranky middle aged woman who wears horribly patterned house-dresses, and a reformed succubus who supplements her income by keeping the Middleman apprised of supernatural happenings), and on hinting at and revealing mysteries from the main characters' pasts. In a television landscape that is increasingly infatuated with 'realism,' by which is usually meant the very narrow emotional spectrum between angst and misery, shows like *Pushing Daisies* and *The Middleman*, and indefinable experiments like *Dr. Horrible's Sing-a-Long Blog*, refreshingly toss realism out the window and embrace imagination, whimsy and wit. In so doing they demonstrate that having a style of one's own is not an impediment to telling meaningful stories about believable people. Unfortunately, the lesson does not appear to have been learned. *Pushing Daisies* was cancelled near the end of 2008, its remaining episodes unaired and likely to remain so. *The Middleman* scored abysmal ratings even in the dead of summer, and a second season seems unlikely. Only the vague promise of *Dr. Horrible* sequels remains to tide over those of us who have fallen in love with quirk.

It was the year of the terminator. At the other end of the emotional scale from *Pushing Daisies* and *The Middleman* is *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. Another entry in the franchise spawned by James Cameron's 1984 movie, the series, which premiered in the winter of 2008 and returned for a second season in the fall, picks up several years after the end of the second film in the series, then fast forwards, quite literally, to the present by transporting Sarah and John Connor (Lena Headey, doing an acceptable job taking over from Linda Hamilton, and relative newcomer Thomas Dekker doing his best in the thankless role of the callow future savior of humanity) and their new terminator protector (played with impeccable alienness by genre royalty Summer

Glau) to the present day in an attempt to elude their Skynet pursuers (and thus mercifully negating the existence of the third, miserable *Terminator* film). In 2008, the Connors once again set themselves the goal of preventing the human-machine war, and quickly discover that that war is being fought in the present, as both sides use time travel to secure assets for themselves or keep them out of their opponents' hands. Other time travelers soon show up to help or hinder the Connors' cause, most notably John's uncle, Derek Reese (Brian Austin Green, in a performance guaranteed to permanently sear his role in *Beverly Hills 90210* from your memory). In a lot of ways, *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* is the series *Battlestar Galactica* should have been but never quite managed to be. It is the story of a war between humans and machines, sparked by incomprehension on both sides of the others' fundamental nature. Like *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* focuses less on human-machine interactions (though, following in the second film's footsteps, it establishes an eerily compelling friendship between John and his machine protector, and the second season in particular focuses on that character's halting growth into something that is beginning to resemble, but is not quite, a person) and more on inter-human conflicts. Unlike *Galactica*, which attempted to justify this focus on humanity with ever more hysterical depictions of human depravity, and through them a forced and unsupportable equivalence between the humans' crimes and the machines', *Sarah Connor* trusts that its audience understands the rules of the game—that the machines, though incapable of cruelty, have committed an unspeakable act, and that humans, though nominally the good guys, have the capacity for evil as well. Consequently, though only very few of the human characters we meet in *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* are evil or in league with the machines, many of them oppose Sarah and her goals simply because of the chaotic and ungovernable nature of the human animal—because they don't believe her, or think they can do a better job fighting the machines, or have an agenda that clashes with hers. It's a more subtle, more intelligent treatment of the same dilemma *Battlestar Galactica* boils down to: emotionless conformity versus dangerously unpredictable individuality. It's unfortunate, therefore, that *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* is so flawed from a technical standpoint. Its cast is strong, but the main characters in particular have unsatisfying and limited emotional arcs. The most obvious problem is John, an impossible character to write, as making him too heroic and well-adjusted would downplay the importance of the series's main character (a problem which the third and, if its previews are to be trusted, fourth installments in the film series could only get around by killing Sarah off), while focusing on his

understandable angst and ambivalence towards his role as humanity's future savior carries the risk of making the character seem whiny and self-involved. The show's second season in particular has struggled with this problem, sometimes finding the middle ground but often devolving into a forgettable teenage soap. Even this partial success, however, is preferable to the treatment of Sarah, who is still, by and large, the character she was at the end of *Terminator 2*—horrified by the future but determined to fight it; bitter about the life she lost but committed to making the one she has a good one; accustomed to violence but not inured to it. In more than twenty hours of television, Sarah hasn't changed a bit from this person, hasn't grown or shown us new facets of herself. On the contrary, as the series progresses and its other characters change and grow, Sarah becomes an ever-greater blank at its center, a performance rather than a person. She is our window to the story and the other characters, but at the cost of her own three-dimensional humanity. In terms of its story, too, *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* disappoints. Individual episode plots are nonsensical, often relying on characters' stupidity (in a flash to the future, we learn that the machines copied human resistance members and interrogated them in order to infiltrate the resistance's ranks, conveniently ignoring the fact that the impostor with its metal skeleton could be easily detected with the use of a set of scales) or on a plain contravention of facts (Sarah, whose blood type is O-, is told that she can't transfuse Derek, who is AB+). The overarching plot that these episodes are allegedly building up to is, at the time of this essay's writing, slow to coalesce, often involving leaps of logic (for much of the first half of the second season, Sarah has been obsessed with a symbol made up of three dots which came to her in a dream), and very rarely arousing a genuine desire to know what happens next. Both of these failures—in characterization and plotting—derive from the same core flaw, the series's emotional flatness. *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* is a show about people who are trapped, desiring a normal life but knowing that they are committed to a terrible war. This, however, is not a story, and by its very nature it isn't a starting point for a story either. Which is why the show is at its best in individual episodes or even scenes, in which it delivers repetitions of this emotional tone, whether through the main cast or one-off guest characters, and at its worst when it tries to tie those repetitions into a greater story. There's much to admire about *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*—it is, for example, one of the only shows on TV featuring a female main character who is neither defined nor constrained by her femininity—but the more one watches it, the less substantial, the less like a television series, it seems.

It was the year Russell T. Davies said goodbye to Doctor Who. Though Davies will write and produce four one-hour *Doctor Who* specials in 2009, 2008 saw his last full season as the show's head writer and producer. It was also David Tennant's last full season in the title role (baby-faced Matt Smith has since been announced as Tennant's replacement, while Davies is making way for Steven Moffat). As a final statement on Davies's tenure, *Doctor Who*'s fourth season was ambiguous, neither exceptionally bad nor exceptionally good, and serving as evidence of both Davies's genius and his fatal flaws. New companion Donna (Catherine Tate) was a breath of fresh air as the first New Who companion to express absolutely no interest in getting in the Doctor's pants. Her brusquely affectionate, quasi-sibling relationship with the Doctor made for the most pleasantly relaxed yet appealing TARDIS atmosphere since Christopher Eccleston's departure, and finally forced the Doctor to contemplate the possibility of not feeling quite that sorry for himself all the time. On the other hand, *New Who*'s fourth season was the first in which Steven Moffat failed to produce a standout episode, ending his three-year streak with the two-parter "Silence in the Library"/"The Forests of the Dead," which, though featuring the intriguing character Dr. River Song, the Doctor's future lover, had none of the clever plotting with which Moffat has become synonymous in *Who* fan circles. The closest thing to exceptional stories in the fourth season were



Russell T. Davies

by Davies himself: "Midnight," a chamber piece in which the Doctor is trapped with an unseen menace and a group of terrified and increasingly paranoid civilians who may pose him an even greater danger, and "Turn Left," in which an alternate universe Donna suffers terribly in the wake of the Doctor's death and finally makes the ultimate sacrifice to bring him back. Both of these episodes, however, feel a little underbaked—"Midnight" is a 42 minute episode with enough story for perhaps 30, and "Turn Left" is in many ways a retreat of Donna's growth over the course of the preceding season. It is further cheapened by the subsequent season-ending



episodes, which continue to bash the audience on the head with the central theme of Davies's reign as showrunner—the Doctor's ability to inspire heroism in others—while featuring his trademark use of bombast to draw attention away from the absence of plot logic (or of plot, period) and wasting the talents of nearly every one of the new series's companion characters. Like the fourth season as a whole, these episodes are a demonstration of why Davies has been good for *Doctor Who* (besides, that is, bringing it back to life) and why it's a good thing that he's handing the reigns over to someone else.

It was the year *Battlestar Galactica* came (some small way) back from the brink. After a third season characterized by melodrama, over the top plot twists, soap-opera character arcs, and a whole lot of nonsensical Cylon mysticism, *Battlestar Galactica* returned for the first half of its fourth and final season with a mission to regain some semblance of the show it used to be. At this, it achieved a measurable, but by no means complete, success, but it did so mostly by rolling back or ignoring away much of what happened in the show's universe since the middle of its second season. Many of the developments in *Galactica*'s 2008 episodes—Lee Adama leaving the Colonial Fleet and going into politics; a civil war between Cylons who value individuality and believe in reconciliation with humans and those who desire neither; President Roslin's looming death from cancer—could have followed the events of its mid-second season three-parter, and thus made for a stronger show. Instead, in the third season we did get, many of the show's characters were placed in stasis—Lee, for example, relegated to an embarrassingly bad domestic storyline and an even more embarrassing fat suit—while others were allowed to run rampant—Starbuck, transformed from a damaged but compelling and competent maverick to a nervous wreck, obviously suffering from some sort of borderline personality

disorder and a danger to herself and others. The fourth season couldn't fix these problems, and so tried to sweep them under the rug, but without the foundation that ought to have been constructed by that missing season and a half, there's no way to justify, for example, Lee's lightning-quick ascension to the position of President. The result is a great deal better than *Galactica* has been in a long time, but still a disjointed, unpersuasive piece of storytelling.

It was the year *Heroes* failed to come back from anywhere. The once fan favorite stumbled heavily in its second season, losing its ineffable charm in heavy-handed attempts to recreate, note for note, its enjoyable first season. Fans rebelled, ratings plummeted, and the producers immediately responded with apologies and the promise to do better. The result of all these promises, *Heroes*'s third season, is a marginal improvement over its second, but still a leaden, confusing, dull piece of storytelling that is nothing like a return to form. Titled "Villains," the show's third volume focused on shifting loyalties and morality among the show's characters, but did so in such a haphazard manner that rather than depicting genuine transformations and changes of heart, it seemed to reflect nothing more substantial than a roll of the dice: this week Sylar is good and Peter is evil, next week the opposite, and for no discernible reason. Add to this the writers' stubborn refusal to kill off any number of characters for whom they have run out of stories to tell, their insistence on sidelining and infantilizing Hiro (for one unbearable stretch of episodes, quite literally, as the already immature young man is mentally regressed to the age of ten), the introduction of a new villain in the form of the Petrelli brothers' father, and his quick disappearance once it became clear that his motives and aspirations were even murkier and more self-contradictory than those of the putative good guys, the continued reliance, in the absence of any meaningful overarching storyline, on the

vague menace of a dystopian future to motivate the characters, and the ever-increasing mistreatment of female and non-white characters. When I first wrote about *Heroes* I called it a forgettable series elevated by impeccable plotting and pacing. These latter qualities have been lost, and what's left is an unholly mess. Though fans pin great hopes on the return of Bryan Fuller (who penned some of the first season's best episodes) to the *Heroes* production staff in the wake of *Pushing Daisies*'s cancellation, it's doubtful that his influence can save this sinking ship, or even that a fourth season is on the cards.

It was the year of the *X-Files* retreat. What was it about 2008 that made it seem ripe for a return to this seminal yet ultimately failed series? The summer saw an ill-judged and justly unsuccessful attempt to restore the show's glory with a second entry in its film franchise, *I Want to Believe*. Steering clear of the drawn out alien conspiracy storyline whose self-contradictions and evident lack of internal logic eventually drove away even the series's most devoted fans, the film instead presented a standalone supernatural story, with Mulder and Scully called back from retirement to investigate the allegations of a pedophile priest (Billy Connolly, giving what is quite possibly the worst performance of his career) that he is having psychic visions of a kidnapped FBI agent. Unfortunately, none of the clever writing that made *The X-Files*'s best standalone episodes such a delight is one display in *I Want to Believe*, and Mulder and Scully themselves have lost their spark, both as individuals and as partners. They spend the film gazing soulfully at one another or into the middle distance, running the emotional gamut from 'melancholy' to 'annoyed.' Which, incidentally, is roughly where anyone who pays money to watch this movie will find themselves. Meanwhile, not one but two new television series premiered this fall which blatantly draw upon *The X-Files* for their inspiration, telling stories about a male/female, septic/believer team who investigate strange happenings. The worst of the two is *Eleventh Hour*, featuring Rufus Sewell as an expert in Weird Shit, and Marley Shelton as a hot girl who beats people up. Its pilot episode was so howlingly awful that not even the pleasure of yelling at the characters when they did something incredibly stupid (which is to say every scene) was enough to compensate for having watched it. Slightly more tolerable is *Fringe*, television wunderkind J.J. Abrams's latest series, but it too fails to ignite, and certainly to capture the spark that characterized at least the early seasons of Abrams's previous successes, *Alias* and *Lost*. *Fringe* front-loads its conspiracy element in the form of The Pattern, a series of unexplained, seemingly supernatural events being investigated by a team

made up of one FBI agent (Anna Torv), one mad scientist (John Noble, the show's main draw) and his son and caretaker (Joshua Jackson, playing not one but two thankless roles: the straight man to Noble and the love interest to Torv, with whom he has not a shred of chemistry). Unfortunately, *Fringe* just isn't very interesting. Individual episodes are predictable and slack, and there is no hook to interest us in the overarching mystery of the Pattern but for Torv's character's personal involvement in it (in the pilot episode, her lover commits treason and is later killed for some Pattern-related reason). As the series has progressed, however, it's become clear that what had at first seemed like a refreshing low key quality to Torv's performance is actually the absence of a performance. Her Olivia is a personality-free zone, and her dullness infects the entire series. We are, in other words, 0 for 3 as far as *X-Files* retreats are concerned, which will hopefully prove a deterrent to any more attempts being made.

It was also the year in which: *Stargate: Atlantis* was cancelled, only for its producers to announce yet another entry in the franchise, *Stargate: Universe*. Those of us who crave formulaic, mediocre space-set shows can rest easy. *Lost* and *Torchwood* returned for, respectively, a fourth and a second season which, by all accounts, massively improved on previous efforts, but I've long ago given up on both so I couldn't say one way or another. *Life on Mars* sequel *Ashes to Ashes* premiered, only to definitively prove that the show's writers have no desire to tell a genre story, and are merely interested in coming up with as many excuses as they can to trot Gene Hunt out on our screens. Meanwhile, the American remake of *Life on Mars* proved as preachy and unsubtle as the original was charming and well-made. The landscape of genre television continued to expand into small niches and corners—the BBC's *Merlin*, USA Network's *Legend of the Seeker*, HBO's *True Blood*—most of which probably aren't worth a look. 2008 was not a great year for genre television, nor a particularly good year for television in general—most of the truly interesting, ground-breaking series of the last few years, in or out of genre, have died a quick and ignominious death and been replaced by nothing but more doctor and lawyer shows, with the occasional hint of brilliance—a *Dexter* or a *How I Met Your Mother*—to tide over those of us who love TV. Still, 2009 is upon us, bringing with it *Dollhouse*, *Kings*, a new (non-genre) series for Nathan Fillion, and perhaps other surprises as well. We live in hope.

First Impressions

Book Reviews edited by Kari Sperring

Brian Aldiss – *Harm*

Duckworth Overlook, 2007, 228pp, £14.99/£7.99,
ISBN 9780715636992 (h/b) 9780715637623 (p/b)

Reviewed by George Newberry

In a world not too far advanced from our own, Paul Fadhil Abbas Ali is imprisoned by his government in the Hostile Activities Research Ministry. Paul, a British Muslim, made the mistake of writing a comedic novel in which two characters flippantly joke about assassinating the Prime Minister. For this crime he is subjected to brutal and dehumanising torture by a minor government official and his henchmen. But Paul escapes the degradation by flitting mentally into a world called Stygia. In this alien world Paul



becomes Fremant: a bodyguard of the despot ruler Astaroth, who has seized control of the fledgling human colony and has pursued genocide against the dominant native species, the Dogovers. Both narratives unfold in parallel: the Paul story is told in clipped and purposeful sentences, the Fremant story in more elaborate and playful prose. On near-future Earth, Paul's treatment is repetitively punishing and he is utterly powerless to the whims of those who exercise their authority so cruelly over him: On Stygia, Fremant contradicts Astaroth to his face, pursues a relationship with the dictator's concubine, and is forced to flee from Stygia City to Haven, a secluded religious community.

First and foremost, *HARM* is a book about authority. The novel begins with the lines, 'Authority ordained it. Lesser authoritarians carried out its orders. No nation ever lacks those who will carry out orders.' This line could apply to either of the nations explored by Aldiss: Paul is both the victim of, and on Stygia is one of, these lesser authoritarians. The book is also a character study of the Paul/Fremant entity; one individual placed into two extreme situations. And yet, despite his intimate knowledge of the suffering totalitarian authority can cause, garnered through his visions of Paul, Fremant's

token resistance to Astaroth ultimately fails.

Fremant, Paul as a free man, eventually succumbs to his animal passions. He becomes a rapist, he instinctively kills curious alien creatures, and he finally comes through inaction to take an implicit role in the genocide of an intelligent but strange species. Although the book seems to be advertised primarily through the topical issues surrounding the portrayal of a British Muslim being victimised by a corrupt police state, this section of the book is largely undeveloped compared to the Stygia narrative. Regardless of this disproportion, the examination of Paul's psychologically and culturally split nature is fascinating, and the conclusions the character draws about his own identity are morally complex and challenging. The more realised world of Stygia, however, is the medium through which Aldiss' most profound observations on human nature are conveyed. There is a throw-away line from a minor character, spoken sixty-four pages in, which seems to encapsulate Aldiss' opinion of humanity: 'My old gran was one who saw into men's minds. She'd say them as are tortured are the torturers.' Aldiss was already almost twenty the last time there was a concerted attempt at genocide in 'civilised' Western Europe, and as one of the most politically aware science fiction writers Britain has, he has offered a vocal social commentary to pretty much everything that has gone on since. So when after a lifetime of observation he tries, through *HARM*, to tell us something about intrinsic human nature, we should probably listen.

Lou Anders, ed. – *Fast Forward 2*

Pyr, 2008, 360pp, £10.99, t/b, ISBN 9781591026921

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

'Science fiction ... can say what it likes and get away with an examination of truly radical and subversive ideas because no one takes it seriously,' says Paul McAuley in the epigraph to this anthology. The Robocop-space-ape cover art looks designed to confirm the prejudices of those who think sf has nothing serious to say. In his introduction, on the other hand, Lou Anders declares sf's capacity not only to entertain but also to help save the world. To do that, it needs to be taken seriously.

It also needs to be comprehended – something I

was alerted to by the opening story. In 'Catherine Drewe', Paul Cornell takes us into an alternative future in which the pre-1914 imperial powers have extended the great game into space and a British agent is sent, 007 style, to assassinate a Russian agent on Mars. The climax deploys a novum, of unexplained high physics, which raises cryptic metaphysical questions. For this story to work as *sf*, rather than merely an exotic resetting of Fleming's 'The Living Daylights', the reader must comprehend the significance of that novum. Not every reader will.

The semiotic challenges of Cornell's prose are child's play, though, compared with Benjamin Rosenbaum and Cory Doctorow's 'True Names'.



This story (the longest in the book) makes big demands on the reader's ability to tolerate estranging language – 'Surely elsewhere, outside this Beebe- instance's lightcone, the bloom of Beebe was transpiring as it should; surely there were parts of the universe where it had achieved Phase Three, optimal saturation, where every bit of matter could be converted into Beebeswarm, spilling outward,

converting the ballooning sphere of its influence into ubiquitous-Beebe' (114) – and to empathise with a protagonist who's an interstellar collective consciousness.

Easier to empathise with is the protagonist of Jeff Carlson's 'Long Eyes', a gene-crafted woman wired in as brain and sole crew of a starship. Partly it's that Clara is human and has the vulnerability of a flesh body; also the jargon is simpler to decode: 'She twitched within her box of gel and wire, lighting up all systems. There were no antipersonnel defenses, but if she could outfox the ship she could lift off and that would kill the little monsters ... And she had the nanoforge. She could build a cat's claw if she just had the time' (326). The ratlike scavengers Clara encounters on a wrecked planet read like a metaphor of swarming humankind on earth. The ethical questions about how to treat them thereby parallel those raised in Nancy Kress's 'The Kindness of Strangers', which opens with the earth's major cities being vaporised in a matter of seconds by invading aliens. Given the awesomeness of what's happened, I was surprised by the composure of the refugees the story follows as they cooperate to survive. In fact it's crucial to the story's point that they do so cooperate. The denouement left me buzzing with thought.

In Ian McDonald's 'An Eligible Boy' we have to cope with the lexicon not only of future tech but of the Indian cultural setting. The breathless pace of

McDonald's prose keeps us going. He extrapolates the trend of selective abortion into a scenario in which middle-class men outnumber women four to one, and really makes us feel for young Jasbir who, against such desperate odds, so wants a woman. There are no semiotic barriers, however, to reading Kristine Kathryn Rusch's 'SeniorSource': much of the story is taken up with her infodumping the socioeconomic circumstances that compel her geriatric narrator to work for a space-station-based detective agency, under constant threat of being thrown on the refuse pile earthside if he fails to perform. In the spirit of American individualism, he manages to improve his lot, but the general plight of the elderly in this future remains unchanged. That McDonald does not let his protagonist off the hook like this makes 'An Eligible Boy' much more moving – and thereby more potent as warning.

In 'Mitigation' Karl Schroeder and Tobias S. Buckell paint an interesting future in which ambitious efforts are being made to address ecological problems – carbon sequestration, safehousing the seeds of rare plant species – but the anarchy of amoral free enterprise continues as self-serving rogues exploit the opportunities thrown up by new circumstances to make a quick buck. Sadly the story is too riddled with plausibility holes to mean as much as it might.

Chris Nakashima-Brown's 'The Sun Also Explodes' depicts a desert idyll where privileged bohemian types have retreated from the hurly-burly of the world. The Gibsonsque rhythm of the prose – 'She moved on me, and the room breathed with us, through the crazy beautiful attack asanas of Elkin's improvised private yoga' (70) – seems a mite pretentious till you realise the novum is a cyberpenis, the penny drops about the origin of the story's title, and you start to smile.

But the political agenda in the elegant final story, by Paolo Bacigalupi, is deadly serious. 'The Gambler' is not only about the marginalisation of important ecological issues by ratings-driven media obsessed with celebrities, but itself exemplifies how readers may be moved to care about such issues: Bacigalupi makes us care about a flower in danger of extinction by making us care about his narrator, who wants to write about that flower but is in danger of losing his job as an online journalist because he'll only write about news that he thinks matters. This story, like McDonald's and Kress's, truly does offer a contribution to the game of saving the world – something these stories are able to do because of the empathy they elicit.

With work too from McAuley, Kay Kenyon, Jack McDevitt, Jack Skillingstead, and Mike Resnick plus Pat Cadigan, *Fast Forward 2* is a diverse and intelligent anthology. Roll on, volume 3. But please, Lou, put a decent cover on it – so more people will

take the book seriously enough to bother reading it.

Allen Ashley, ed – *Subtle Edens*

Elastic Press 2008, £7.99, 218pp, t/p, ISBN 9780955318191

Reviewed by Martin Lewis

My space is limited, so I don't want to spend too long rehearsing the arguments about what slipstream may or may not be.

This is perhaps fitting, since editor Allen Ashley doesn't really bother to go into details. Contributor Jeff Gardiner has more of stab in an article that is (bizarrely) hidden away half-way through the anthology but doesn't manage to pin it down either. For our purposes though, let's just say it isn't quite sf or fantasy or horror or any other genre we might recognise.

The opening story 'And Zero To The Bone' by Mike O'Driscoll, adheres to this idea, but elsewhere this is very much a standard pick and mix collection of the usual genre suspects from the usual small press suspects. Joel Lane's 'Alouette' is a shorter, less interesting version of O'Driscoll's story and more typical of the fare on offer. It gets off to an inauspicious start:

So when my new Nokia phone burst into song before dawn, with Monday morning just a few hours away, I shook off whatever dream of unrealised sexual opportunity I was having that night and grabbed it. The phone I mean, not the opportunity. (33)

The first sentence has twice as many words as it needs, the second sentence should never have been committed to paper. 'Alouette' is a short horror story about a group of kids who beat up passers-by whilst filming it on their mobile phone. This is the sort of thing the papers call happy slapping and we know this because on page 34 Lane writes "Happy slapping, the papers call it" and on page 36 Lane writes "What the papers call happy slapping". By mysterious means these kids send these videos live to the whole world causing a ratcheting up of terror in the narrator and the rest of the population. Since this is a horror story, we are supposed to ignore whether its contents are plausible in favour of the fact they convey a vague sense of the *unheimliche*.

Some stories don't even pay lip service to the supposed remit of the anthology. David A Sutton's 'Mind-Forged Manacles' – the worst story in the collection – is a science fiction story that doesn't pass within a light year of anything that might be considered slipstream or, indeed, good. It reads like one of Eric Brown's romantic peans to primitivism

but bereft of even Brown's meagre talents.

So – who would have thought it? – slipstream is a slippery beast to pin down. Even when explicitly asked to produce such a story the results vary wildly. Slipstream stories are easy to get wrong and perhaps, counter-intuitively, deliberately setting out to write one is the worst thing you can do. In terms of showing any coherent thread that links the collected stories in a unique way *Subtle Edens* is a failure. Instead it reads like a bumper issue of *The Third Alternative* but with far less in the way of quality control than Andy Cox ever managed.

Ray Bradbury – *Something Wicked This Way Comes*

Orion, 1962, £7.99, 266pp, p/b, ISBN 9780575083066

Reviewed by Shaun C. Green

October, and a storm is coming. A travelling lightning-rod salesman arrives and alerts two young friends to what he senses on the horizon. Throughout the town, others feel the tension in the air. Something is coming. And that night, 3 am, that something is come. Cooger and Dark's *Pandemonium Shadow Show*: a travelling carnival, promising rides, freaks, wonders and delights. But Will and Jim watch the carnival arrange itself outside town, and what they see unfold that night is not the rosy funfair that the townsfolk find the following day. Soon enough the carnival folk, the twisted slaves captured by Mr. Cooger and Mr. Dark over their timeless centuries, are led by their masters in a hunt for the boys who alone grasp at the truth. Alone, that is, but for Will's reclusive father Charles, a man half-lost in his own past.

Although *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is a powerful novel with resonant themes of youth and aging, for me its strength lay in the prose that effuses from every page. Vivacious is the right word for it. Bradbury has carefully crafted a style that mirrors in words what Jim and Will live and experience:

Like all boys, they never walked anywhere, but named a goal and lit for it, scissors and elbows. Nobody won. Nobody wanted to win. It was in their friendship they just wanted to run forever, shadow and shadow. Their hands slapped library door handles together, their chests broke track tapes together, their tennis shoes beat parallel pony tracks over lawns, trimmed bushes, squirrelled trees, no one losing, both winning, thus saving their friendship for other times of loss.

I found it difficult to read this novel without a

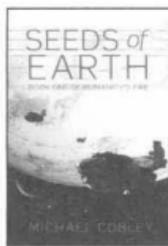


grin of pleasure spreading over my face every few pages as another laughing turn of phrase tickled me. If writing could ever be said to seize at life, then this is it.

Of course, the tale that Bradbury so presents is no mean thing either. As the author admits in an afterword, the story is spun from his own youthful experiences of the carnival: the sense of magic and of the fantastic, and the seduction thereof. He fuses these experiences to a story of American-gothic horror and the timeless themes that constitute any coming-of-age story, themes exemplified by the central quartet of characters. Jim and Will are childhood friends, growing up and experiencing everything life offered together. But when the carnival arrives, promising change, one friend reaches out, eager to experience what his future offers, while the other recoils, afraid to lose what has constituted their shared past. Similarly Charles Halloway and Mr. Dark are two sides of a coin. Halloway spends his adult years wishing he could reclaim his youth, whilst Dark is eternal, using time to remain the same and make others his servants. The carnival's power draws all four to it, but it is their reactions to this seduction that make them.

Unavoidably, some aspects of the novel have dated, though these are as much a product of its setting (I struggle to identify the decade, but I imagine it hearkens back to Bradbury's own youth in the 1920s) as the time of its writing (the 1960s). My own youth, in the 1980s and '90s, was a very different thing to what is presented here, characterised as much by rock and pop music, videogames and television as inquisitive self-made adventure. But the novel is a delight to read, its themes are as timeless as its antagonists, and at its core it's a highly entertaining tale of friendship, fear and triumph. This Orion edition is well-presented and if, like me, you've not encountered *Something Wicked This Way Comes* before, I recommend it unconditionally.

Michael Cobley – *Seeds of Earth*
Orbit; London, 2009, £10.00, 486pp, t/p ISBN 978
841496320



Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Michael Cobley is very much a rider on the New Wave of British Space Opera. Even before anyone realised the old one was drying into the sand, when he was wearing mirror shades and wanting to be Bruce Sterling, his stories always had that thrill of the encounter with the unknown (and possibly unknowable)

about them. His more recent longer work has strayed from that path, but in *Seeds of Earth* he has tipped all

his favourite toys out of the box.

The story begins with an homage to Heinlein that make even SM Stirling gulp (it could have been lifted almost entirely from *Starship Troopers* – or maybe *Starship Troopers – The Sequel*), and then humankind flees to the stars. The seed ships are, of course, lost, but that doesn't prevent Humanity and its children wanting to play on the beach with the crocodiles. There are two types of crocodiles in his universe – those that want to eat us now, and those that want to befriend us before eating us at their leisure. Not all of them give humans the choice.

One of the three lost ships has founded a colony, Darien, in a region of space that is the object of contention between two blocs of the hugely more powerful alien species, on a planet they share with the gentle arboreals, the Uvovo. We are introduced to a culture of productive symbiosis and exploration in the knowledge that the Sendrukan Hegemony's hammer will soon squish it flat. Only things aren't quite as they seem, and the wheels within wheels of the unknown past begin to spin out of control. Maybe the junkyard dogs – sorry, Sendrukans – haven't quite got the bite they believe they have. At which time, the descendants of the other two seed ships from Earth arrive on Darien, neither exactly as might have been expected.

And this part of the story ends.

As with most of the NWBSA, there aren't many American accents to be heard – Scots, Finnish, Chinese to be sure, but no Americans (not unless you count the Sendrukans) We are definitely not in Kansas anymore. Which doesn't stop 'My enemy's enemy is my friend' being hung out to dry as a policy pretty comprehensively.

On the face of it, Cobley appears to be just playing with his toys, bought ready made from the shop, and for quite some time reading this book was an irritation because I know he can do very much better than *Seeds of Earth* appeared to be. Then it grew clear that, while he was using familiar tropes, there was more going on than met the eye. Expectations were subverted with manic enthusiasm in the final quarter.

At the end I was still disappointed. The writing is prosaic, as though the book is a novelisation. However, I did not know what happens next to this scenario, and I want to know. I might not vote this for a Hugo, but I will buy the next instalment with my own money.

Daniel Fox – *Dragon in Chains*
Del Rey, New York 2009, \$15.00, 416pp, t/p, ISBN
9780345503053

Reviewed by Kari Sperring

Between a country that is, and is not China, and an island that is, and is not, Taiwan, a dragon sleeps beneath the sea. Feared by those who know

the waters, she is held captive through the magic and craft and determination of a sect of blacksmith monks who dwell on a small islet in the sea lanes. But events are in motion that may release the dragon from her long duress. A fisherman finds himself rescuing the young emperor, who is in flight from a rebellion, and his granddaughter finds herself transformed from fisher-girl to concubine and political player. A scribe's boy falls into the hands of pirates and ends up himself wrapped in – and responsible for – the dragon's chains. Another boy, born to life as a jade miner, finds himself first a slave, then an addict, and then the emperor's mirror. The world in which all of them find themselves is as shifting, as dangerous and as unpredictable as the dragon herself. Densely plotted and lushly written, *Dragon in Chains* draws the reader into a world that is at once magical and real, familiar and strange, engaging and terrifying.

The book has its roots in the time author Fox spent in Taiwan and there are signs of careful research in, for example, the operation of the imperial court and army. But, unlike, say, Barry Hughart's *Bridge of Birds*, this is not intended to be simply a Chinese fantasy, and Fox is at pains to stress the fantastical elements, not least those relating to the nature of jade. The themes to the fore here are those of invasion and occupation, of servitude and forced labour, of social upheaval and rebellion. Each of the characters is constrained and controlled – the young emperor by the expectations and ambitions of his court, the fisher-girl Mei Feng by her class and status, the scribe's boy Han by the chains that bind him to the dragon: the effect is claustrophobic and menacing. Above all, Fox presents us with the difficulties and terrors faced by the powerless and the obscure in the face of the powerful, who see them as at best resources and more often simply as irrelevant. There is no safety in this world and no bond is so strong as to be able to withstand the greed of others. It is significant in this context that the bulk of the cast are young adults, who must live in the circumstances their elders create. Beyond this, many of the characters are enslaved or bound – literally in the case of Han and the jade miner Yu Shan, more subtly in that of the emperor and Mei Feng. The adults are, by and large, little better off – the old fisherman Yen is rewarded for his rescue of the emperor by having his boat and labour

reassigned without his consent to serve the imperial court and his granddaughter taken from him. The set pieces – from the great forge where the monks bind the dragon to a haunting evocation of the sack

of a city – are vivid, painful, grim. This is a nuanced, complex and challenging book which repays mindful reading.

Dave Gibbons, Chip Kidd & Mike Essel – *Watching the Watchmen*



Titan books 2088,
£24.99, 256PP, H/B, isbn
9781848560413

Reviewed by James Bacon

It is wrong for me to assume that most Science Fiction readers and therefore BSFA members will have heard of, if not read, *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons? I hope it isn't, as I feel it is one of those comics that has traversed the narrow gap between comics and science fiction readers and then this book may be of interest. As Dave Gibbons says "I had an epiphany one day when I realised that *Watchmen* was not a super-hero book as such, but rather a work of science fiction, an alternate history."

Watching the Watchmen is not just about imagery. Although it is obviously a coffee table sized book full of art, it also gives a real understanding of how Moore thinks. This book gives the insights and tells the secrets of the creation of *Watchmen*, thankfully from the horse's mouth, without too much recourse to phoney philosophical extrapolation. Dave Gibbons, artist and co-creator of *Watchmen* goes through his memories and his box of artefacts, and takes the reader on a journey of enlightenment, as he explains how the comic came about.

His explanation of the mechanics of getting the deal, dealing with editors, and of course suddenly finding himself on a tidal wave as the success of the comic exploded, are set out in a very well-paced manner. I was particularly interested in the interactions between artist and writer as they developed their ideas through telephone conversations. Not only does Gibbons talk about these, but he actually shows us the notes and doodles he took at the time.

What's immediately noticeable is that there is no shortage of beautifully reproduced images. These start with conceptual sketches, discarded ideas and moves onto comparing thumbnails and pencils to the original comic. Meanwhile we are tantalized with the odd page of script or concept, directly from the typewriter of Alan Moore. There are literally hundreds of sketches, photos of artefacts, such as Rorschach blotches that Gibbons made so there would be a randomness to the mask of one of the main characters, to pages and images that just never made the grade.

I was fascinated by the amount of effort and preparation that went into the whole artistic process.

It's one thing to read a comic, but to get a clear understanding of the sheer weight of work that goes into ensuring it is something else. This book provides a fine companion to *Watchmen*. The design element to the original is quite telling, in just a few pages we see the shop front sketches, the architectural design and a map of the intersection with the newsstand, where a lot of the story takes place. Added to these we get the quick quip from Gibbons, that adds a whole new dimension to the art: "I've since decided that the real-world equivalent of the intersection is actually 7th Avenue and West 31st St."

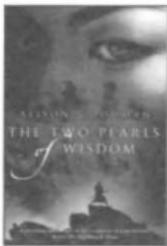
John Higgins has a section where he talks about the colouring, the selection of the colour palette, which is different than that of regular comics, and the process of colouring, which nicely compliments the rest of the book.

There is mention of what happened after the release of the comic, with photos of the limited amount of merchandise available, as well as sketches and imagery from foreign editions and role playing games. The success, the fans, the awards, all get a mention of some sort. Gibbons does not go into any salacious revelations about subsequent disagreements, although does say he may reserve that for another day. The word count is not huge, but what he does say appropriately compliments the images presented so well. If as a science fiction reader, you wonder what a comics creator makes of you reading this comic, Gibbons explains his feelings, especially about winning the Hugo Award in 1988 for 'other forms':

"Although *Watchmen* has probably done as much as any comic to break free from genre and industry constraints, comics fandom does tend to be a little insular, so it felt particularly good to be noticed in the next ghetto up, namely that of science fiction."

Alison Goodman – *The two pearls of wisdom*
Bantam Press, 2008, £11.99, 430pp, h/b ISBN
9780593061367

Reviewed by Penny Hill



I would describe this novel as a historical magical fantasy. I was disappointed to realise towards the end of the volume that this is fact part one of two, but this particular story did reach a satisfying climax, while still needing the second volume to complete the tale.

I enjoyed the theory of the magic in the setting of this novel – the tweaking of Chinese astrology to include a dragon

aspect and the way this is woven into a structured system of magic that also incorporates aspects of Yin and Yang.

I did enjoy the choices that were made about what gets translated and what doesn't. By translating yin and yang into sun and moon, we are drawn into the thought processes of this society.

Whilst the heroine disguised as a boy is one of the oldest tropes, this version was particularly enjoyable, not only in the references to *Mulan* that I spotted but also in the exposition of the idea of the male and female gaze. It was good to see the consequences of Eona taking the sun drug to boost her "male aspect". Rather than just being a convenient way to make her more convincing, she actually changes temperament and behaviour as a result. In fact, the demonstration of everyone having a male and female aspect showed a more subtle exploration of a society with highly formalised gendered gender roles than I would have expected. I particularly liked the different roles and relationships available for eunuchs who have given up their "sun" aspect to become "Moon Shadow" versus the "Contraire" or man living as a woman. Of course, in this patriarchy women do not take on men's roles apart from our concealed heroine.

The stark poverty of the servants and slaves is again not a new theme, but here I feel it is depicted without a romantic gloss. The memories of Eona's upbringing in the salt mines and the death of her childhood friend and protector do remind me of the early chapters of *Jane Eyre*, for like them, here there is no way to right the wrongs of the past. I enjoyed the exploration of the social setup of obligations conferred and owing at all levels of society – between servants and slaves as well as between the powerful.

There were suitable levels of grimness and violence: this is not a fairy tale. The imperial pearls are sewn into the throat of the Emperor and we see how painful this is. The Imperial Prince, the closest character we have to a romantic hero is dispassionately shown to be both violent and possessed of privilege to an uncomfortable level. He strikes a servant for appearing to be wrong and breaks a trainer's ribs, without questioning his own right to do so. Yet he is also the sole hope for fairness and stability.

This reminds us that this is an alien world. How much of this setting should be described as cultural appropriation is a question I feel I must raise, without being qualified to answer. It meant I enjoyed the setting as a guilty pleasure and this included being uncomfortable with the clichéd portrayal of a society where the conventional attitude towards lameness as unlucky, an attribute which is considered to be contagious and therefore to be avoided.

On the other hand, I was particularly touched by the portrayal of Eona's disability on an individual level. She recognises what is and isn't possible for her and sometimes knowingly over-extends herself,

choices for which we see her paying later.

I enjoyed guessing the plot twist of how the central conflict would be resolved.

This was a very enjoyable read, with the book being the right length for its tale. It was competently written and engaging. I look forward to reading the second volume!

Warren Hammond – EX-KOP

Tor, 2008, 320pp, h/b, ISBN 978765312743

Reviewed by Mark Harding

Let's get one issue out of the way now – don't worry too much about the title; KOP stands for Koba Office of Police, and it really doesn't grate once you get used to it.

Warren Hammond's second detective novel in this series is set in a universe that is very dark indeed. Lagarto is a claustrophobic, grimy, down at heel colony planet; it has a failed economy; awful climate, the dominant life form is reptilian (in both senses), the only industry is sex-tourism for offworlders and everyone, everywhere, on every possible occasion, is corrupt. If you like your noir extra seedy, this is the place to be.

The hero is Juno Mozambique, the ex-hard man of KOP, who was forced out of his job following a coup. This is not exactly a fall from grace, as Juno had been corrupt for many years, but the bad news is that the replacements are even worse.

Hammond shows real flair in the way he builds the story on Juno's broad shoulders – character and story fit together like well-crafted furniture. Hammond also plays very well on the conflict between Juno's moral awareness and his irredeemable corruption. And he can capture the reader's attention – I stayed up at night much later than was sensible because I wanted to finish reading the book.

And yet... to me, the novel seems so pared down for cop action it doesn't leave room for much else. I realise in detective stories glumness equals gravitas, but the background universe of KOP seems tacked on as an excuse for the gloom rather than logically creating the foreground. I don't want to be prissy about it, but when there are so many elements that don't quite gel, the cumulative effect starts to get distracting. Two examples from a very long list include: Why can't the inhabitants of Tenttown move into to all those abandoned barges that nobody wants? Why do the Lagartans insist on being uncomfortably soaked by the ever-present rain rather than wearing waterproofs?

Constantly coming across questions like these is a distraction and adds to the feeling that KOP world

has a lot of background and texture missing – at times I drifted into fantasies of an illustrator filling in the white space and turning it into a graphic novel. (And it would make an excellent one too.)

Having had my whinges, I must re-iterate Hammond's strengths: he can definitely plot, Juno's character fits seamlessly with the story, some of the minor characters are fascinating and there are moments when the settings do kick in, such as the scenes in the floating village of Floodbank.

So, for my taste, I could do with more sf plausibility and depth, but on balance, would I read the next book? Probably yes: Hammond is certainly someone to watch.

Michel Houellebecq – H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life, translated by Dorna Khazeni, introduction by Stephen King

Gollancz, 2008, £8.99, 245pp, p/b ISBN

9780575084018

Reviewed by A. P. Canavan

This is perhaps one of the most curious books I have ever been asked to review and yet, as is often the way of things, one of the most interesting and engaging. The reason for this is that I was expecting a critical book focused on the writings of H.P. Lovecraft. What I found instead was a beautifully crafted appreciation of Lovecraft and his work. Not only that, but a revealing insight into the French author Michel Houellebecq who, through his emotive and elegant prose, exposes as much of himself as his subject as he attempts to explain what he has found and gleaned of Lovecraft.

Critics and readers alike have often been divided by their opinions of H.P. Lovecraft. He seems to be the very personification of the phrase "You'll either love it or you'll hate it" and it seems that rarely do the two meet. He is hailed as both a visionary writer who refused to bow to the conventions of his time, and as one of the worst writers of phantasmagorical adolescent hyperbole the world has ever seen. Yet Lovecraft has created an enduring mythos, a radical and cultish fanbase and more importantly has been an inspiration to generation after generation of writers of the fantastic. So it is of no surprise that any work about Lovecraft will engender a similar dualistic response. People will either love this book or hate it.

The majority of Lovecraftian scholars will undoubtedly be aware of Houellebecq's essays on Lovecraft, either in the original French or in this translated edition. So trying to sell it to them is the



very essence of preaching to the converted. But this book is far more than a dry academic treatise on one of the most intriguing and perhaps influential authors of the 20th Century, this is, as Stephen King notes in his often quoted introduction, a "scholarly love letter [...] the world's first truly cerebral mash note." Houellebecq's response to Lovecraft is at once intelligent, intellectual and academic, whilst maintaining a personal and emotional connection.

The focus of this book is first and foremost Lovecraft's life and how this, in Houellebecq's opinion, affected his writing and work. Unlike many other biographies, Houellebecq unashamedly offers a personal and quite opinionated version of Lovecraft's life, rather than attempting to be unbiased or detached. This does not detract from the veracity of what is recounted, but rather adds to it. It is an emotional and passionate view of Lovecraft that creates genuine sympathy within the reader for Lovecraft who Houellebecq portrays as a tragic and unappreciated genius. As the actual biographical part of the book is under a hundred pages long, this is obviously not an intricate retelling of Lovecraft's life, and yet one is never left feeling that something is missing. The strength of Houellebecq's writing is such that the reader is carried along as if this is a novel following the exploits of a fictional hero called Lovecraft.

Despite this passionate recounting of some of the more tumultuous events in Lovecraft's life, Houellebecq doesn't forget the literature. If anything the greatest insights offered by this book are on the very nature of writing and the impetus and feeling of authors as they try to find their voice and audience. In fact the majority of the 'biographical' text is given over to showing how the events as described affected Lovecraft and how this in turn shows up in his writing. Whilst not offering huge tracts of literary analysis Houellebecq successfully links the life to the work and does this with such conviction that even the most outrageous assumptions go almost entirely unnoticed and unquestioned. His arguments seem so sound and are articulated with such verve that one does not want to question the findings. Even those critical of his approach would agree that even as a worst case scenario this inspires debate and encourages further research and analysis.

Houellebecq's connection to Lovecraft, his depth of feeling and his identification make these insights seem to fulfil a dual purpose; a knowing investigation of one author by another, and perhaps almost as significantly, an insight into Houellebecq himself. This is one of the most curious aspects of the book, as revealing and interesting as Houellebecq's insights into Lovecraft's life and work are, this book offers almost the same level of insight into Houellebecq himself. His commentary on and response to

Lovecraft offers a remarkable glimpse into this controversial and celebrated author and how he approaches writing and the world in general.

Nothing of the touching and thought provoking commentary appears to have been lost in this excellent translation by Khazeni. If anything, Khazeni has gone above and beyond in order to update, translate and rigorously source Houellebecq's original essays. She has attempted to find accurate citations and references for each and every one of Houellebecq's quotations where possible, and has listed those she could not locate accurately. This in itself has made this work even more essential to the serious Lovecraftian scholar beyond its already considerable importance.

For fans of Lovecraft, this book is essential for two main reasons. Firstly, it is a glimpse of Lovecraft's life through the eyes of a fellow fan. It is thoroughly accessible and will inspire fans to look deeper and more astutely at Lovecraft's writing and give them a greater appreciation of his work. Secondly, and no less importantly, is the inclusion of two of Lovecraft's stories; 'The Call of Cthulhu' and 'The Whisperer in Darkness'. The presence of these stories makes this an excellent edition for students and new readers, combining the literature with a critical appreci

Any scholar or fan of Lovecraft would be bereft if they did not have this book at once. They may not agree with every argument made, they may argue with some of the conclusions and suppositions drawn by Houellebecq, and yet they cannot help but see this text as a revealing insight into the man and his work.

**Marvin Kaye, ed., – *The Ghost Quartet*
Tor, 2008, \$25.95, 304pp, t/p, ISBN 978765312514**

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

Reading a book of ghost stories can be like eating a box of chocolates all at once: too much of the same basic flavour, even though the fillings are different. But this book contains four more substantial stories by different authors with very different atmospheres and themes.

Brian Lumley's 'Place of Waiting' is set on Dartmoor in the present day and told in the first person. The story builds up slowly, with plenty of detail about the landscape and weather. I did not warm to the narrator but I was gripped by his account of the hauntings he experiences and their sinister explanation, true or false. This one is a creepy tale in the Jamesian tradition about the effect of a ghostly encounter on a man's life.

Orson Scott Card's 'Hamlet's Father' tells the story of



Shakespeare's play, with a different explanation of the murder and the ghost. This reads like a historical novel but brings to life not any real historical period but the semi-legendary, anachronistic world of the play. Yorick, Horatio and others are given a chance to display their wit and motivation. Hamlet himself is a flatter, less appealing character than in Shakespeare but the presence of the ghost is more powerful than is usually managed on stage. This is a story about keeping the wrong secrets and making the wrong choices, with an atmosphere out of Jacobean revenge tragedies.

'The Haunted Single Malt' by Marvin Kaye, is set in Edinburgh. The narrator is a member of an informal group of ghost story collectors who meet in a pub. His story includes three ghostly episodes, a lecture about malt whisky and much about the history and traditions of Edinburgh and Scotland. It reads as though the author has crammed all the things he likes about Edinburgh into one story, but in a very entertaining way; and the ghostly encounters have more of the flavour of authentic folk anecdotes than the others in this book. The themes here are about the impact of history on places and people.

Tanith Lee's 'Strindberg's Ghost Sonata', my favourite among these stories, is set in a Russian city in a parallel world, a place of bitter cold and decaying civilisation. You do not need to know Strindberg's play to enjoy this. A young man is rescued from death by the occupants of a dilapidated house, who treat him with great kindness for a purpose he discovers slowly. The woman he encounters as a ghost remembers her forest childhood among a primitive tribe, her capture and imprisonment. This is a story about different kinds of slavery, about love and freedom. I shall want to read it again because of the fascination of the world it describes and the great sensual details of the way it is told, like the dark bread and cherry jam the young man eats after he is rescued and the agoraphobia of the forest people when they first see the open horizon.

Paul Melko - *Singularity's Ring*
Tor Books, April 2009, \$7.99, 336pp, t/p ISBN
9780765357021

Paul Melko - *Walls of the Universe*
Tor Books, February 2009,
£17.99, 384pp/h, ISBN:
9780765319975

Reviewed by Paul Raven

Paul Melko's first two published novels share a concern with the multiplicity of identity, as well as a utilitarian writing style; nonetheless, they are very different books.

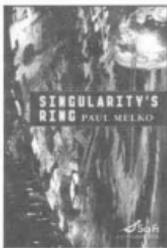
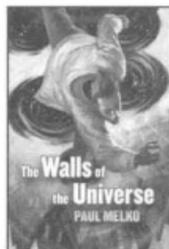
In *Singularity's Ring* the

geek rapture has been and gone, the hive-mind Community vanishing with it, leaving a small population on Earth's surface and a massive Big Dumb Object – the titular Ring – in place around it. With the exception of the 'singleton' underclass, most humans live as conglomerate entities called pods: two to five bodies melded by pheromonal communication and complementary specialisations into a manifold being that is theoretically more effective and adaptable than a singleton could ever be. Our teenage hero[es] are a pod of five, collectively known as Apollo Papadopoulos, and the novel follows [them/it] as [they/it] lose out on the chance to be the first interstellar pilot, go on the run after uncovering a plot against [themselves/itself] and – eventually – Save The World from the rise of Community2.0.

A fragmentary focal character is a bold move, and makes for tricky reading at first. Initially, each chapter is told from the viewpoint of one of the five elements of Apollo, which gives us some insight into their individual mindsets – the muscle, the communicator, the ethicist, the memory-man and the autistic mathematical genius. Perhaps to balance the confusing multiplicity of Apollo and other characters, *Singularity's Ring* is written in spare prose, and it features a linear plot, thin characters and sock-puppet baddies, none of which hold up brilliantly to enquiries beyond the scope of the story.

That said, it moves fast enough to make that a minimal problem, and Melko has salted in a decent amount of worldbuilding that examines how we might reach a Vingean singularity (and how one might go horribly wrong), as well as some interesting thoughts about the nature of posthuman personhood. Given the raw potential of Melko's imagined world, however, I can't help but wish he'd gone to town a bit more with the world beyond the immediate moment of the plot – if only for the wallpapering it might have given to the narrative cracks.

Walls of the Universe is a more traditionally sfnal story, the first section of the novel having won the accolade of Best Novella 2006 from the readers of Asimov's. Ohio farmboy John Rayburn meets his doppelgänger in the pumpkin patch one evening, and is subsequently persuaded to take a jaunt with the same universe-hopping gizmo that brought the other John (henceforth known as John Prime) to Rayburn's reality. Beware of strangers bearing gifts, even when they have your own face... as the novella finishes, Rayburn ends up stranded downstream



from his own reality while Prime settles in to the absence he leaves behind.

From here, the plot ramps up slowly in the same linear fashion as *Singularity's Ring*, with a similar climactic crescendo of Just Desserts And Justice Served. Prime's device is far from being the only temporal gamepiece on the board, and an assortment of Men With Guns (though not always literal ones, at least at first) are thrown into the mix to add obstacles and complications for our duplex hero, whose two incarnations have very different approaches to dealing with adversity – Prime's reality-hopping has left him a lot more jaded than the comparatively naïve and virtuous Rayburn.

It's a classic sf conceit handled with a modern sensibility – the Johns survive by "reinventing" intellectual properties that don't yet exist in their new universes, for example, and the moral implications of murder, teenage pregnancy and other mishaps and misdemeanours get a perfunctory airing – but there's little depth of character and theme to get lost in, nor any of the vivid description or philosophical diversions that the multiverse conceit lends itself to so well.

That said, not all readers demand that sort of writing – in fact, the majority probably dislike it. Melko's concern is to keep the pages turning, and he succeeds admirably – I was surprised how quickly I rattled through them – but I feel no urge to re-read either book. They're a fine enough way to kill a few hours (and I've certainly read novels by better-known authors that I enjoyed a lot less), but they don't meet the comparisons to Vinge and Stross with which they have been awarded (presumably on the basis of the title alone); there's not enough flesh on the bones for my taste.

However, the question remains: is this just-the-facts-ma'am writing purposefully aimed at younger readers, or is YA a newly-minted badge of convenience to separate new incarnations of such material (which is not a new style of writing by any means, either within the genre or without) from the growing body of what – for want of a less contentious term – we might label as "literary" (or, universe forbid, "adult") sf?

It's a semantic argument, of course, as well as a matter for marketing departments more than critics; Melko's work will be greatly appreciated by readers – young and old – who yearn for science fiction that "just tells a story", and its worth can (and should) be judged by each reader on their own terms. But I doubt that'll stop someone from using Melko as a poster-child for everything that every sf writer should be doing to Save The World... er, Save The Genre, I mean.

Farah Mendlesohn – *Rhetorics of Fantasy*
 Wesleyan University Press, 2008, \$27.95; 307pp,
 p/b ISBN 978819568686

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Any BSFA member who has read the Special Edition booklet published with *Vector 256*, which included the introduction to *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, will already be familiar with the broad outlines of Farah Mendlesohn's argument in this book, and may have experienced the ease with which thinking in her terms becomes intuitive. But there is much to be gained from reading the complete work. It makes clear, for starters, the extent to which her identification of four "fuzzy sets" of fantasy works – fantasy here defined as "a fiction of consensual construction of belief" (xiii; I think the "in things that exist counter to physical reality as we understand it" is implicit) – is grounded in observation of what's actually available on bookshop shelves; though it's perhaps useful to remember that while the four sets get approximately equal numbers of words devoted to them in *Rhetorics*, they are not equal in the market.

Portal-quest fantasies, in which a protagonist enters the fantastic from a familiar home base (which does not have to be our world: Mendlesohn argues for *The Lord of the Rings* as a prototypical portal-quest) and then explores it, surely still dominate bookshop shelves, which will be a concern to anyone who finishes *Rhetorics* convinced by Mendlesohn's broadsides at the ideological inflexibility of the strategies used to write them. After that the most common are probably intrusion fantasies, in which the fantastic comes calling from elsewhere; then it's probably a tie between immersive fantasies, those works set in fully separate otherworlds which assume a native reader, and liminal fantasies, works whose interactions with the reader construct a doubtful, "polysemic" fantastic. There are, of course, works that don't fit into Mendlesohn's categories; she labels these "the irregulars", although to my mind there is a recently evolved, fully regular and fairly sizable category which sits outside her map altogether. I'm thinking of paranormal romance. For Mendlesohn, who defines a successful member of one of her sets by its adherence to certain rhetorical strategies, some kinds of cross-fertilisation can be a problem, as it is a problem that "the potential horror of [Laurell K. Hamilton's] Anita Blake novels is subverted by [the use of] structures and language native to immersive fantasy" (xxi). But it strikes me that this fusion is



exactly what writers of paranormal romance have seized on and made their own, and have seen gobbled up by the market.

This points the way, perhaps, to a more general limitation of Mendlesohn's study, which is the degree to which her categories overlap and interpenetrate, and not just in the cases she labels irregular. Steph Swainston's *The Year of Our War* (2004), for instance, is considered as an immersive fantasy, yet – as Mendlesohn notes – it contains within it a portal-quest narrative, in the form of Jant's drug-driven journeys to the surrealistic Shift; and it even contains – as she does not note – an intrusion, in the form of the insects waging war against the Fourlands. In contrast, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2004) is discussed as an intrusion fantasy despite being “first and foremost an immersive fantasy” (164). And so on. Nowhere does Mendlesohn assert that her categories should be exclusionary (obviously, quite the opposite), but to my slight surprise, the more of *Rhetorics of Fantasy* I read, the more wary I became.

To be clear: I think the strategies and techniques which Mendlesohn identifies and describes are real, and I think her work in identifying and describing them is extremely useful. The positioning of reader and protagonist as naïve in a core portal-quest text, for example, is “a denial of discourse” (6), and that does have implications for how the metaphoric and moral geography of the fantastic in such a text is constructed. And, as I already said, *Rhetorics* is reassuringly practical book in its reliance on actual texts. Some of Mendlesohn's readings perhaps don't do as much establishing work as they might, but invariably if you've read the text in question and can keep up, they are intensely rewarding to think through (even if you disagree with them).

What, then, am I expressing reservations about? Simply that it seems to me possible that portal-quest, immersive, intrusion and liminal may be better thought of as filters than sets, even fuzzy ones. I think it is significant that the four labels describe different kinds of structure – at the most basic level, as Mendlesohn points out, portal-quest and intrusion imply a particular plot, while liminal and immersive do not. In seeking to build on what Mendlesohn lays out here, it may be more useful to consider how all the different strategies she describes are deployed (or not) in any given text, and how they interact, than it may be to consider her four categories to be “real” in any reliable sense, or to consider any book to fully belong to one or another.

I should also note that there's more than just a series of tools for thinking about fantasy to get from this book: there is what you might describe as an admirable rhetoric of criticism, too. There's that practicality, of course, but also the simple pleasure of

reading a work of criticism so fiercely and personally engaged with its subject; more than once you get a glimpse of Mendlesohn's thinking evolving as she develops her argument. There's a sense of community, too, in that references to personal conversations with other critics and friends rub shoulders with citations of scholarly articles without feeling exclusionary (though relegating said references to endnotes, rather than including them on the page as footnotes, makes them a little more tiring to access than should be necessary). Mendlesohn's statement that her categories should be considered “powerful only to the degree that they remain arguable” (xvi) is part of the same aesthetic, as is her concluding contention that *Rhetorics* “is an expression of faith in the narratological inventiveness of fantasy authors” (273). Put another way, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* is living criticism for a living genre: and it can bring reading alive.

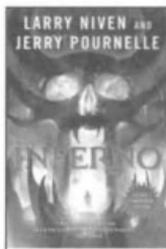
Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle – *Inferno*
Tor, New York 2008 (rev. ed.), 240pp, h/b, ISBN
9780765316769

Reviewed by Mark Connorton

Inferno is a reprint of the popular 1976 novel, I presumably reissued to whet appetites for the belated sequel, *Escape from Hell*, due in early 2009. The novel tells of a science fiction author, Alan Carpentier, who dies in a drunken stunt at an sf convention and finds himself in Dante's *Inferno*. As an agnostic who doesn't believe in hell, Carpentier initially struggles to think of scientific or science fictional explanations for his situation. He soon meets Benito Mussolini (replacing Virgil as the guide) and they set off deeper into hell, in search of the exit to purgatory.

The book sticks closely to Dante's conception of hell, with the same concentric rings each devoted to a different class of sinner, and the same red-hot iron walled cities, rivers of boiling blood, lakes of ice and sadistic demons. Dante's original had a satirical bent, describing plenty of his 13th century enemies being punished for their sins. Niven and Pournelle do the same thing; with health food nuts, NIMBYs, polluters, new age gurus and other modern bêtes noires making an appearance. However, given their reputations, the book isn't as ideological and right wing as one might imagine. Carpentier is frequently horrified by the extreme nature of the sinner's punishments and, for example, can't believe that gays are condemned to the desert of burning rain solely because of their sexuality.

There are still a couple of cringe-worthy moments



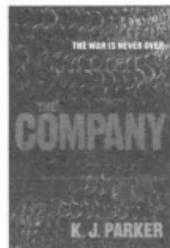
though. There are points made about issues like nuclear power and the diagnosis of dyslexia that have severely dated. At one point the writers embark on an astonishingly petty and mean spirited attack on Kurt Vonnegut (in hell for inventing satirical religions in his books), basically for having an apparently undeserved literary reputation. Their choice of guide is also rather dubious. Virgil in the original was a "Righteous Pagan" i.e. he wasn't actually a sinner but ended up in hell because he died before Christianity was invented. Mussolini was, of course, the fascist dictator of Italy. He is characterised throughout the book as being upright, noble and strong, and gets an apologetic speech in which he claims he only wanted the best for his country before things got a little out of hand (no mention of Italy's invasions of Albania and Abyssinia). Other sinners are doomed to remain in hell for not taking their sins seriously, but this bit of handwringing is apparently enough to let Mussolini off the hook.

Despite these quibbles, *Inferno* is enjoyable and makes for a brisk, entertaining read. Initially, each new location and new sinner only gets a page or two of coverage, but as the characters move deeper into hell, the book gains depth and effectively ratchets up the horror and grotesquery. It also works well as a primer to Dante's original; familiarising the reader with his work without having to wade through all the 13th century verse and obscure classical references. My appetite is certainly whetted for the sequel too, especially as I read with a mixture of horror and amusement that Sylvia Plath will be a major character. Hasn't the poor woman suffered enough without Niven and Pournelle getting their claws into her!?

K. J. Parker – *The Company*
 Orbit, 2008, £12.99, 448pp, p/b, ISBN
 9781841495095

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

“... as long as 'A' Company was still alive and together, as long as the five of them were together, the war could never end. It was part of them, their core, their reason, what they were for; they kept it alive and it kept them alive, which was why it, they, had lasted so long, against all the odds. 'A' Company could no more die in war than a fish could drown in the sea.”



K. J. Parker's first stand-alone novel – previously s/he (the publicity material indicates a female author, but there is something masculine about the style) has published the *Fencer*, *Scavenger* and *Engineer* trilogies – is distinctly Parker in its focus on the military, the practical, the psychological: and yet it's

oddly disappointing.

The war is over. General Teuche Kunessin ('the most devastating fighting man on either side of the war') returns to his homeland, intent on reuniting his comrades from 'A' Company and fulfilling the dream that kept them alive: the colonisation of an abandoned island, which he's ensured will not be of interest to the military. There'd been six of them, but one died right at the end of the war. (*The Company* is, as much as anything, a thriller about how the sixth man, Nuctos, died.) The remaining veterans, despite their arguments and objections, all leap at the opportunity. Supplies (including wives) are acquired. Sphoe is colonised, and turns out to have rather more resources than they'd been expecting.

As ever, Parker's eye for the gritty realities of a (pseudo)medieval society is impressive. When Kunessin was a boy, his family fell on hard times, because a battle was fought on their field, leaving a harvest of corpses: "we can't bury them all, not in time. Can't burn them: there's not enough timber in the valley to fire this lot ... They'll start to rot, and they'll breed worms and flukes: the stock'll pick them up and they'll die. ... It'll be three years, soonest, before this land's fit to be grazed again." And Parker's a master at showing what's said and what's not – the male characters, in particular, are men who'd sooner die than talk out loud about emotions, but nevertheless very clearly have and are driven by said emotions – and at showing us the world through an individual's eyes, coloured and skewed with their perspective. Kunessin sees the sun 'slanting down over the roofs ... like a shower of pitched-up arrows'. Aidi analyses the profit and loss of each transaction. Menin has a sharp eye for nature's bounty.

In a series of flashbacks, we slowly discover how Kunessin amassed the fortune that enabled him to buy Sphoe, a ship, supplies. There are other flashbacks, illuminating the pasts of the other colonists: early on we discover that a couple of the wives have secrets in their pasts. All rumour and conjecture of course, nothing ever proved. And – in a quintessentially and aggravatingly Parker twist – there's an account of the betrayal of Nuctos, carefully crafted using only the third-person pronoun. It's several hundred pages before we can put a name to the viewpoint character of that section, and I cannot help but feel that this is cheating.

'A' Company ('the biggest bunch of underachievers the world had ever seen') are connected by more than chance: they've survived years of war together, and the sense of 'us against the rest of the world' – something darker and more codependent than mere camaraderie – is one of the strongest threads in the novel. Given that focus, the finale is successful, but it feels hasty and unfinished, as though there might

be more going on than a bunch of soldiers surviving against all odds.

The Company, though flawed, is an enjoyable read, not least for Parker's dry humour and the careful construction of plot and backstory, and for another fantasy in which there's no magic, no music and beauty only in the eye of the beholders.

Christopher Priest – *Ersatz Wines: Instructive Short Stories*

GrimGrin Studio, 2008, 166 pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN: 978-0-9559735-4-3



Christopher Priest – *Real-Time World*

GrimGrin Studios, 2008, 165 pp, £16.99, h/b, ISBN: 978-0-9559735-2-9.

Reviewed by Graham Andrews.

Ersatz Wines, to begin with. It could well have been entitled *The Early Priest*, following those Early Asimov/del Rey/Long/Pohl/Williamson

volumes that Doubleday issued way back then. The main difference is, however, that these are mostly unpublished short stories, written as on-the-job training exercises between 1963 and 1968, when Priest was under articles as a trainee accountant. His non-literary colleagues bored him into writing sf with their incessant blether about cars, sport and beer. 'Then' and 'now' critical notes are appended to each story.

'Impasse' (*SF Impulse*, February 1967) is the kind of 650-word Terra über alles squib that Fredric Brown might have got published in a weak issue of *Asounding*. 'Conjugation' (*New Worlds*, December 1966) is a typically bad New Wave story – all sterile style and no storytelling substance. 'The Ersatz Wine' (*New Worlds*, March 1967) is, however, a typically good New Wave story that could have stood reprinting long before now.

Of the unpublished stories, 'Stranglehold' is quite good. But it's still a bit clunky in places: "... Gasken's tongue started to move easily, flowing with the childish facility of a maniac mnemonic word-wheel" (p. 55). 'Combined Operation' made me think of Woody Allen before Priest brought him up ('Everything You Didn't Want to Know About Starship Troopers' . . . ?) On the plus side, I agree with Priest that 'The Ostrich Seed' is "a proper story with a situation, a problem, a resolution and finally some kind of point. At some 3,500 words it doesn't outstay its welcome" (p. 113). And 'The Interrogator' (written in January 1968) eerily foreshadows that exceptional first novel, *Indoctrinaire* (1970).

I'm sorry for going on about the occasional

syntactical infelicity. All in all, we should be indulgent with the writing of a very young and precocious author, who had an awful lot to learn. And he did learn rather fast, as may be proved by the ten stories collected in *Real-Time World*. Bibliophiles, who study the small print on the backs of title pages, will quickly notice that this book was first published in 1974 (by New English Library, in both hardcover and paperback editions).

It contains 'The Run' (*SF Impulse*, May 1966), Priest's first-published short story. 'The Head and the Hand' is an early example of snuff fiction; performance art taken to its ultimate extreme, made all the more disturbing by the icily calm narrative voice. 'The Perihelion Man' (*New Writings in SF 16*, 1970) comes from a time when the author still wrote the occasional stave of traditional semi-hard sf. The title story, (*New Writings in SF 19*, 1972), 'anticipates' *Inverted World* by two publication-years. I also find it reminiscent of J. G. Ballard's 'Thirteen to Centaurus' (*Amazing*, April 1962), but maybe that's just me.

In car-geek parlance, the young-author Christopher Priest had too much engine for his differential gearbox. But he soon went up the gears into overdrive – and beyond! (exclamation point optional). FYI: GrimGrin Studio has also published *The Magic*, which explains how *The Prestige* evolved from the mere notion of a novel into a major (what else?) motion picture.

Mike Resnick – *Stalking the Vampire*

Pyr Books, 2008, 264pp, h/b, ISBN 9781591026495

Reviewed by Ian Whates

Long before Jim Butcher brought us the *Dresden Files*, before, even, Glen Cook started to report on Garrett PI, Mike Resnick released *Stalking the Unicorn* (1987) and introduced us to John Justin Mallory, a wise-cracking PI who is forced to contend with the bizarre and the surreal.

Cynics might suspect that Mallory's return in *Stalking the Vampire*, over 20 years later, has more to do with the apparently inexhaustible post-Buffy craze than anything else. And let's face it, the cynics may well have a point, even though Mallory has resurfaced in half a dozen or so short stories in the interim.

The frustrating thing about Mike Resnick is that he has produced a lot of dross over the years, but is fully capable of writing



significant and noteworthy science fiction. After all, here is a man who has won more awards for his short fiction than anyone in the history of sf and has been responsible, in the novels *Ivory* and *Paradise*, for two often underrated classics of the genre.

So what about *Stalking the Vampire*?

Resnick clearly has a lot of fun with this book and when said fun transmits itself successfully to the audience, all is well. Unfortunately, all too often there is a sense that the author is enjoying himself far more than the reader.

In fairness, there are some truly funny moments here, quite a few in fact. At times the one-liners, the snappy dialogue, the vampiric puns, all resonate with genuine humour. But Resnick doesn't seem to know when to stop. A joke will be cracked, causing you to smile, but then the author will strain for that extra mile, stretching the gag out by strumming the same theme for another half page or more, and your smile gradually transforms into a pained grimace. Then there is the sheer volume. Every line contains an attempt at humour or a build-up to the next gag. Clearly, if the author has ever encountered the maxim 'less is more', it's something he contemplated briefly before discarding as irrelevant.

The novel's plot is essentially a vehicle for the 'humour', but it sees Mallory, now permanently based in the 'Other Manhattan' which he first encountered in *Unicorn*, tracking down a particular vampire, Vlad, on All Hallow's Eve. Naturally, this takes in a visit to the Vampire State Building, the local mortuary – which is more crowded with the living, the dead, and the somewhere-in-betweens than your average urban train station in rush hour – oh, and a group of fiction-writing dragons. Along the way, he accumulates various companions, including the female cat-thing Felina (who suggests they return to the mortuary on Some Hallow's Eve in the hope the place would be only half as crowded).

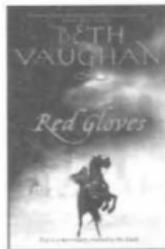
All in all, *Stalking the Vampire* is not a bad book and I'm sure there will be those who love it. It is, however, inferior to its predecessor *Stalking the Unicorn* in almost every regard, not least in its overuse of the comedic and its erratic pacing, as plot progression is frequently sacrificed on the altar of the next gag. Yet somewhere in here you sense there is a good, fun novel, which a bit of judicious editing (of, say, 90% of the jokes) may well have brought forth.

I've a feeling we may see more of John Justin Mallory in the future. If so, I can only hope the next outing is more akin to the first book than this second; but, in all honesty, I doubt it.

Beth Vaughan – *Red Gloves*

Gollancz, London, £12.99, 311pp, t/p ISBN

9780575084001



Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

On the death of the King, his Queen and his immediate heir, the High Barons of the Palins gathered at the capitol city of Edenrich to appoint a Regent until someone of royal blood could be found to ascend the throne. Dissent lead to civil war, with the High Barons turning on each other in order to claim the throne for themselves.

With the Palins in chaos, Itrus, a merchant won the support of the church to become Regent, and he now rules the war-torn land as a tyrant and oppressor of the people.

Red Gloves is a mercenary, taking her name from the leather gloves with which she conceals her hands from anyone else's sight. Travelling through the Palins with her fellow mercenary, Bethral, looking for employment for her sword, Red seeks shelter for the night under the humble roof of Josiah, seemingly a goatherd. To Red's consternation, Josiah discovers that she bears the unusual birthmark that brands her as the Chosen, her destiny to lead the people of the Palins to military victory over their oppressors, claim the throne, and restore justice, freedom and prosperity to the ravaged land.

At first Red is reluctant to become involved in the struggle to restore the Palins, but once she begins to entertain the possibility that she might take up the role of the Chosen, she is somewhat aghast to find that she is not the only one who bears the mark. The others are children, the eldest a teenage girl, Gloriana. Red must convince those who have banded together to raise these children in secret and train them for battle, that she, *Red Gloves*, already a proven warrior is in fact the one who will fulfil the prophecy. Red also discovers that the goatherd, to whom she is increasingly attracted, is actually Lord Josiah, High Baron of Athelbryght, his lands ruined, his people killed in the civil wars, and the magic he once wielded taken from him in battle. Obviously this state of affairs has left Josiah depressed. It has also resulted in his being continually followed around by five magic goats.

There are far too many occasions in this novel when the story only advances through one character updating another on what has been happening. Despite there being a strict delineation between "good" characters and "evil" characters who, we are told rather more than we are shown, behave abominably towards the people of the Palins, there is no real sense of menace and certainly no doubt

that *Red Gloves* will win through to the throne before the end. *Red Gloves* herself fails to convince as a mercenary soldier – she is just too nice. It is impossible to believe that she earns her living by killing people for money. Two dimensional characters, including an elf, a ranting and raving villainess, a Regent who is defeated in a few paragraphs, and an unconvincing imagined world do not a recommended novel make. So I do not recommend it.

VJ Waks – *Tau 4*

Authorhouse, 2007, 496 pages, £15.49, p/b ISBN: 978-1434333933

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

The temptations of self-publishing are obvious.

Every aspiring writer looks at the dross that sometimes makes it through the professional filter – in books and magazines – and thinks to themselves, *if they publish his shit, why won't they publish mine?* Self-publishing offers the hope of getting your work “out there,” bypassing the professionals’ market domination, and letting the public judge.



But sometimes those professionals have a point. For example, *Tau 4* by VJ Waks.

It is possible that there's a half decent story buried in this book. But I couldn't find it.

A clichéd plot with a mad scientist, a rogueish space pirate and an innocent girl who just happens to have been given the ability to turn into a giant, cat-like, predator rumbles along on predictable rails. Will Gerda Tau fall in love with space pirate Captain Col? [Yes] Will they avoid the clutches of the mad scientist? [Of course] Will good triumph over evil? [D'uh!]

But what really damages *Tau 4* is the appalling quality of the writing, both in detail and in overall tone.

The story is presented at an hysterical emotional pitch – the characters teeter on the edge of screaming hissy fits or furious outbursts. Which would be fine if it all built to some meaningful release, or if it ebbed and flowed to add rhythm to the story. But it doesn't. *Tau 4* is like being screamed at by a six-year-old who has attention deficit disorder and is overdosing on Sunny Delight. It quickly becomes irritating.

The pacing of the story doesn't help. Pages pass in minutely detailed recounting of the juvenile “emotional turmoil” of the main characters but, after chapters of debate and build up, the attack of the native “People” on the mad scientist's fortress is dismissed in two paragraphs (395-6).

But it is the details that really sink VJ Waks's

novel.

Like the fact that she has no control of the point of view of her writing. In Chapter 8 (chosen randomly) the character describing the action changes at least fifteen times. Sometimes the POV switches three times on the one page (320 or 328, for example). This is not deliberate style, it is sloppy writing.

Plus, there's the failure to control detail: A “mid-sized battlecruiser” (123) becomes a “dual-wing fighter” two pages later. Three men at the helm of the ship (131) become four when they are all named. And Waks seems particularly fond of adjectives, particularly “cruelly” and “violently” which she peppers liberally through passages of text. And under it all, is the desperation of a writer trying too hard, her writing becoming so convoluted that it jettisons all meaning:

But what Bereg hazarded to surmount was no mean feat. For never had the warriors of the People yet attempted a direct assault on the terrible ramparts which continued to grow every stronger in the Valley of the Rift and it was just such an assault that Bereg now proposed to make. (390)

Until, finally, we come to the eyes. Eyes “flash” and “glitter”, they are “grim” and “sharp”, they become “glowing copper orbs” and “flicker with a pale light” – in one paragraph on page 132: “Col's eyes that suddenly flashed dangerously... Teng's dark eyes glittered like obsidian... their eyes [were] on him, cold and deadly” – not only are the descriptions all hopelessly clichéd but the repetition becomes first funny, then distracting and finally infuriating.

Like the rest of the book.

Resonances: Column #54

by Stephen Baxter

From 2006 through 2008 I contributed a monthly column on 'what if?' turning points in history to the BBC's pop-science magazine *Focus* (no relation to the BSFA's worthy organ of the same name). I surveyed a number of 'jonbar hinges' familiar to fans and writers of alternate history (including myself) such as victory for the Nazis, or what might have happened if Alexander the Great had not died young (see my column in *Matrix*, July-August 2004). But since the point of *Focus* is science and technology, I tried to come up with ideas that relied less on decision-making by 'Great Men', the whims of generals and kings, and more on divergent possibilities in the history of science and technology, and on the way features of the natural world have shaped history.

Perhaps these are more profound determinants of our destinies. We know nothing, after all, of the Great Men of prehistory, but we live in a world still shaped by the legacy of whoever discovered iron-working. This sort of argument was set out clearly by the French historian Fernand Braudel, who argued for a rounder view of history taking into account the wider factors that set the parameters for our actions. 'Statesmen [are], despite their illusions, more acted upon than actors,' said Braudel.

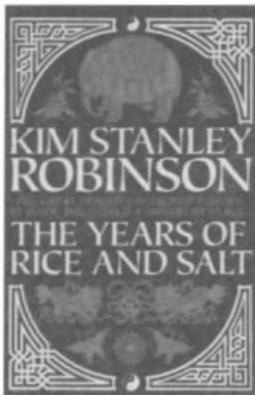
Of course there were Great Men (and Women) of science. Never mind Alexander dying young; what if Alan Turing had lived on? In June 1954 the computer pioneer was found dead at his home. He had been hounded for his homosexuality; it was probably suicide. Turing was only 41. Although mathematicians generally achieve their greatest results when young, Turing still had a world-class mind, able to span theory and application. When he died the British computer industry, though bureaucratic and fragmented, was leading the world. If Turing had survived this lead might have been consolidated, and he would surely have contributed to developments in computer design, programming and artificial intelligence (remember the 'Turing test'). By now artificial minds, running on British-made quantum supercomputers, might be capable of mourning their godfather ...

Just as the 'Great Men' theory of history is controversial, so some, I think, might argue against a search for jonbar hinges in the history of

sci & tech. Perhaps, for instance, at the turn of the nineteenth century it was 'steam engine time', and it wasn't necessary for James Watt to have existed; the technology would have emerged anyhow. But different *specific* outcomes to the history of any technology can always be imagined.

For example, even given the existence of steam engines, the railways, a foundation of modern technological civilisation, might never have been developed. The world's first inter-city open-to-all railway, opened in 1830, was George Stephenson's Liverpool & Manchester Railway. The 'L&M' was a triumph, and a global railway boom followed. But in its building Stephenson was fiercely opposed by vested interests and dogged by technical problems. If Stephenson's *Rocket* had failed its 'Rainhill trial', or if the L&M had failed to show a profit, railways might have remained restricted to specialist uses like the mines. But Britain's rutted turnpike roads were already crammed full of horse-drawn stagecoaches. Without railways, transport bottlenecks would have slowed economic growth through the nineteenth century – and the poor who could spare pennies for a railway fare could never have afforded a steam-powered automobile. Without the whistle of the *Rocket's* descendants, Britain and the world would have been poorer, and social and economic inequalities would have remained locked in place for decades longer.

Looking back further still, you get the sense that the history of western Europe must have been contingent on the precise way innovations were leaked into its consciousness from the more advanced civilisations to the east, the Islamic empires and the Chinese. Consider gunpowder, for instance. In 1240 Roger Bacon was the first European to describe gunpowder, but it had been discovered by Chinese chemists four hundred years earlier. It might have taken just one Chinese dissident to carry the technology down the Silk Road – and if gunpowder had come west earlier, the Byzantine Empire might have been best placed to exploit it. The Byzantines used Greek fire against their Arab foes; they ran a centralised, well-organised state, and knew how to develop super-weapons, and how to keep them secret. If they had got hold of gunpowder by AD 1000, when the first effective

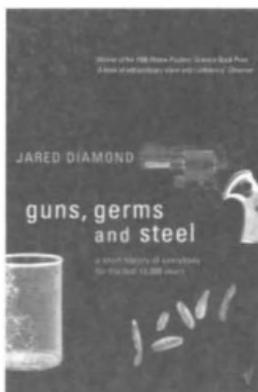


weapons were being developed in China, perhaps the Byzantines could have fought off the Seljuk Turks, who eventually took Constantinople in 1453. With the heirs of the Caesars still ruling the heart of the continent after the fifteenth century, all subsequent European history would have been different.

Looking wider yet, there are

powerful arguments that accidents of geography, climate, disease and other features of the natural world have shaped our destiny far more than the decisions of any individual human. Consider the Black Death, which in the fourteenth century slaughtered perhaps half the population of Britain. In *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), Kim Stanley Robinson explored a history in which western Europe was entirely obliterated by the plague. But what if the Black Death had never struck at all? Muslim doctors had an understanding of hygiene far in advance of western Europe. Perhaps the Death could have been stopped, or at least diluted. That sounds like a good thing – but our modern freedoms came out of the vast charnel house of the Black Death. In the emptied world after the Death, suddenly there were too few folk to do the work; a bad lord could not hold onto his employees. The old feudal systems came under great strain, and the slow opening-up of the closed medieval world had begun. All because of a killer disease.

Asforgeography, Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997) argues that the very shape of the continents, a product of geological chance, determined the way human civilisations arose; that's why Pizarro could conquer the Incas, and not the other way around. But Pizarro might have faced very different



opponents.

Thirteen thousand years ago, when Ice Age hunters walked across a land bridge from Asia into the Americas, they found continents teeming with game – but empty of humans, or pre-human hominids. There were no Neanderthals in Nevada. But could earlier hominids have spread out of Eurasia? Some two million years ago *Homo erectus* arose and walked out of Africa, following coasts and river estuaries. Theirs was not a purposeful migration but a diffusion of an animal species into a new range – but still, by some six hundred thousand years ago, they had got as far as China and the far east. (There they probably gave rise to successor species, including possibly the dwarfed *Homo Floresiensis* of the islands of South-east Asia.) *Homo erectus* never crossed over the intermittent Alaskan land bridge into the Americas – but other African animals did, including lions and elephants. It wouldn't have been terribly surprising if *Homo erectus* or a successor species had followed, perhaps given the right climatic circumstances and some cold adaptation. And if they had crossed over, for perhaps half a million years hominid evolution would have proceeded in two isolated laboratories, in the Old World and the New – and Pizarro with his band of gold-hungry conquistadors might have been in for a very nasty shock. (This kind of history was explored in Harry Turtledove's *A Different Flesh* (1988).)

You can project this game off into the still deeper past. Another Turtledove story (*Down in the Bottomland* (1999)) is set in a world where the Mediterranean is dry land (in fact it drained and refilled many times), and human evolution has been profoundly affected. The most famous of all megajonbar hinges, perhaps, occurs very long ago; Harry Harrison's *West of Eden* series (1984-88) dramatised what might have happened if the dinosaur-killer asteroid had been deflected by just a few thousand kilometres, and missed the Earth. In a world still dominated by the thunder lizards, nothing like modern humanity might have evolved.

Just as more conventional alt-hist is a way of studying the inevitability or otherwise of historical outcomes, this sort of thought experiment serves to illustrate the contingency of human destiny in the face of the turbulent history of the natural world. It's disturbing to reflect that in many of these outcomes, separated from our own reality by the smallest tweaks to chance factors, nothing like our modern western civilisation might have arisen at all – and even, perhaps, nothing like humanity.

Foundation's Favourites: *The Ambassador*

By Andy Sawyer

As far as I can remember, I picked this up at a jumble sale, saw the words "scientific thriller" and turned to read the back cover blurb. My "Bloody hell, this is another Liverpool science fiction writer!" could have been heard across the room.

Liverpool-born Edwina Currie was mildly famous in her incarnation as the flamboyant and somewhat maverick Tory Member of Parliament for South Derbyshire from 1983–1997, particularly when she was forced to resign as a Junior Health Minister in 1986 after remarking about the high incidence of salmonella in British eggs. Her greatest claim to fame, perhaps, was her acknowledgement in her *Diaries* (published 2002) of a four-year affair with then Prime Minister John Major. Those of a political disposition may remember the wave of slightly stunned queasiness which swept the country. Following the loss of her Parliamentary seat, she began a career in the media and like many ex-MPs began to publish novels, many of them with political themes, many of them steamy. *The Ambassador* (1999) was her sixth novel. Despite its setting a hundred years hence, in a European Union in which cloning is a frequent practice, *Foundation* was not sent a review copy.

My eyes had been drawn to the book because, although I'd never read any of her fiction, I'd always considered Currie to be one of those *really annoying* Conservative MPs – you know, the ones whose often libertarian views and propensity to be outspoken make them considerably more interesting than many of those politicians you actually *support*. Imagine my surprise, though, when *The Ambassador* turned out to be a genuine sf novel. "Genuine" not necessarily in the sense of groundbreaking and challenging (it isn't, particularly), but certainly in the sense that she has tried far more than many so-called "outsider-sf" writers to imagine her future and use it to propel a debate.

The "Ambassador" of the title is Bill Strether, a former cattle-rancher who is appointed by the President of the USA to represent his country in the EU. The European Union, which now seems to include Russia and several other currently non-EU countries, is the largest global super-power, in uneasy balance with China. Technologically advanced, its



Edwina Currie

lead is particularly strong in the medical and genetic fields, which are held back in the USA by the forces of religious conservatism. Nuclear explosions in the 2020s, which seem to be the collapse of the ancient nuclear power plants, resulted in severe genetic damage, which has been largely overcome (at least for the upper classes). Global warming has redrawn the geography of central London (many of the "sights" are still there, but rearranged). Parents can pick the genetic traits of their children. The ruling classes (the "Enarchy", from ENA, the "Ecole National d'Administration" founded by Charles de Gaulle in 1945 to train the higher ranks of the civil service) are a tightly-knit meritocracy – the familiar names of many of the characters are not easy references but a point about political and cultural dynasties. Strether notes how the faces of public figures of the past appear in the people he is introduced to, but they are *not*, he is told, clones – that is a dirty word. They are NTs – genetic material is introduced by "nuclear transplant".

Much of the action involves Strether being shown around and having things explained to him and, in particular, being told how wonderful things are. Of course, there are darker things going on, as he discovers during his liaison with Lisa Pasteur, a sexy medical scientist. She is, by the way, "Pasteur" because she shares genetic material with the great Frenchman Louis (via a lock of his hair). Although Currie emphasises that genetic material does not form personality, this is obviously too good an idea to let slip. Currie's technique rarely moves beyond the infodump in the manner of dear old Ralph 124C41+ showing Alice around the future New York, but it's pretty good infodumping and at times her future has a touch of ironic humour to it that takes it beyond the earnest allegorising it could so easily have fallen into. For instance, a street scene shows us a woman with a dog on a lead:

"As the animal moved to relieve itself, she nudged it to the pavement's edge with her toe. Beneath its haunches the dog drain opened automatically. Before it closed again the animal's backside was sprayed with a mildly antiseptic deodorant. The dog wagged its tail, wriggled its bottom, and, with its mistress, trotted on."

In science fiction, there have been so many wonderful "Cities of the Future", so few considerations of the problem of dog-crap!

As Bill Strether learns more about this European Union, he discovers a society which seems to be developing a stratified system similar to that of Huxley's *Brave New World*: while the genetic code of one particular caste is being tinkered with to make them more intelligent (and lighter-skinned, where necessary), that of others is being fixed to determine a *lowering* of the IQ a few points. Yet other individuals are being manipulated to make them the beginning of a loyal but ruthless army to counter the growing resistance, while the "Toy Shop" is a kind of legalised brothel where clones in the form of celebrities like Marilyn Monroe pleasure the elite. Characters like Prince Marius – and Bill and Lisa, and the Monroe-clone known as "Marty" – have to decide which side they're on.

By this point the thriller elements have overtaken everything else, and although there are some good political jokes hidden in the story, they seem to be there as in-jokes for those who remember Currie's political career. And Currie seems to fuse several popular-fiction nightmares about the potential of cloning, not altogether successfully. More importantly, few of the characters are actually interesting. Bill Strether is, in all honesty, pretty dim. There are flashes of genuine speculation about what it would *feel like* to live in this kind of world, and whether the changes that are

being moved towards are better than the alternative (the alternatives to Europe's blandness, lack of free will and political liberty seem to be a fundamentalist know-nothing America and an ill-defined but presumably totalitarian China), but they become rarer as the story's climax approaches. The most interesting characters, "Marty" and the security officer Finkelstein, who are the most "within" ordinary life and the moral choices necessary to survive, have less to say than the reader may want. However, despite its flaws, this is a book written by someone who seems to be interested in what she's writing in a way many thriller writers fundamentally aren't. I have no idea how much science fiction Edwina Currie has read, but if she's reinventing the wheel it's a much more elegant design than most. This is a future world which is more confident in its presentation than in much satirical sf and, perhaps because of Currie's political career, is built around some rather enjoyably cynical argument.

So – Merseyside's tradition of science fiction writers, which includes Eric Frank Russell, Olaf Stapledon, John Christopher, Charles Eric Maine, Douglas R. Mason and Stephen Baxter – is joined by former MP Edwina Currie. It's amazing what you find in jumble sales.

The New X: Edge Detector

By Graham Sleight

Exhibit A. The features editor of this magazine is round at my house. He leafs through a pile of magazines on the floor and picks out a copy of *Doctor Who Magazine*. A complex look of disgust crosses his face. "A whole magazine," he says, "devoted to *Doctor Who*?"

Exhibit B. George Orwell, in his "As I Please" column for 9th June 1944:

Arthur Koestler's recent article in *Tribune* set me wondering whether the book racket will start up again in its old vigour after the war, when paper is plentiful and there are other things to spend your money on.

Publishers have got to live, like anyone else, and you cannot blame them for advertising their wares, but the truly shameful feature of literary life before the war was the blurring of the distinction between advertising and criticism. A number of the so-called reviewers, and especially the best-known ones, were simply blurb-writers. The 'screaming' advertisement started some time in the 1920s, and as the competition to take up as much space and use as many superlatives as possible became fiercer, publishers' advertisements grew to be an important source of revenue for many papers. The literary pages of several well-known papers were practically owned by a handful of publishers, who had their quislings planted in all the important jobs. These wretches churned forth their praise – 'masterpiece', 'brilliant', 'unforgettable' and so forth – like so many mechanical pianos. A book coming from the right publishers could be absolutely certain not only of favourable reviews, but of being placed on the 'recommended' list which industrious book-borrowers would cut out and take to the library the next day.

Exhibit C. A presentation given by David Hepworth, *eminence grise* of the UK magazine industry, to Australian colleagues in 2001. He's trying to draw a distinction between magazines and other kinds of media such as newspapers:

The subliminal message of any magazine,

the ever present, the constant pulsebeat of magazines has always been and should always be the same one. No, there is nothing strange about your wanting to look at fifty pictures of Liz Hurley doing her shopping. You do not need treatment. There is nothing weird about being the kind of bloke who can name ten films in which Kevin Costner shows his backside. You're fit. It is not yet against the law to show an interest in reading another feature about how to brighten up your bathroom or dress yourself slimmer or climb the tallest peak in the Lake District. Case dismissed.

Magazines are there to celebrate. That is where we live, breathe and have our being and we dilute that sense of celebration at our peril. While other media spend the majority of their time trying to fashion something that the largest number can be persuaded to tolerate, we have to be producing magazines for communities of the enthused. [1]

Exhibit D. I've lost the relevant item here – I think I recycled it – so you're just going to have to trust my memory on this. A couple of weeks ago, I had pushed through my letterbox one of those free newspapers entirely composed of property adverts. (Now you see why I recycled it.) Before throwing it out, I glanced inside. On the first inside page, there was a kind of editorial from the publisher, which was really quite extraordinary. The author was an estate agent and he (I'm pretty sure it was a he) was railing against people who were talking the property market down. That kind of despair (he was saying) in the newspapers or on television made him furious. Why couldn't people break out of the downward cycle about the property market and look on the bright side?

I want to make a case that these four things are linked, that they are relevant to science fiction, and of particular relevance to a Year's Best issue. Let me start with the David Hepworth quotation. I'm sure his argument about magazines being for "communities of the enthused" is right – and it should be noted in passing that his language is very similar to that making the case for the "socially networked" internet we've seen develop over the last

couple of years. But there are some things unstated in his argument that are worth bringing to the fore. A community of the enthused is not just nice in the abstract for creating good karmic vibes; it's necessary for the continued survival of the magazine. If you're enthusiastic about, say, breeding miniature poodles, and a magazine comes along that tells you more about breeding poodles and so reinforces your enthusiasm – well, you're not only going to spend the next month breeding poodles with ever more vigour, you're going to be looking out for the next issue of the magazine that gave you such a pleasant feeling. Secondly, your enthusiasm is not going to stop at the editorial content of the magazine, but will carry over to whatever's advertised in it. (You can't underestimate the importance of advertising income to most magazines.) In many cases, both parts of a magazine are carrying a single message: *consume more (of what you're enthusiastic about)!* The difference between the two halves is that, at least in theory, the editorial content is mediated by an independent

point of view that can tell you whether something's worth your money or not. Sometimes, however, it may not be – see Exhibit B. I have to say that I regard the Orwell quotation with some circumspection because of the lack of evidence he produces. But there is a larger issue here: the way “be enthusiastic about X” and “consume more product to do with X” dovetail into each other. Clearly, Orwell felt the need to separate the two out, and so do I. (To grind one personal axe, I'm particularly grumpy about newspaper or TV features that present you with an impossibly large canon of things to consume, and add a pseudo-moral twist to it: “1000 places to see before you die” and so on. This seems a particularly unpleasant perversion of a perfectly legitimate credo, *Carpe Diem*: you are not a proper human unless you have consumed, taken in, everything on this list.)

So there is – to go back to Exhibit A – clearly enough of a *Doctor Who*-enthusiastic community to sustain *Doctor Who Magazine* in the UK. There was even during the dark days between 1989 and 2005 when there was no new regular *Who* on the TV. But the magazine has very visibly changed tone since 2005 when the Russell T Davies-scripted revival came on the air. Before then, it was (like *Who* fandom as a whole) a little snarky, a little bitter, resigned to forever being a marginal and weird publication. Since the show's return, though, the magazine has been relentlessly upbeat about its subject. Although it still retains a review section, and those reviews are sometimes critical of the show's weaker episodes, that aspect is very much subordinated to reports on the making of the show. All this is, I'm sure, an absolutely sensible editorial decision – the magazine has the chance, very suddenly, to create and maintain a much bigger community of the enthused.

The problem with communities of the enthused is this. If what you're enthusiastic about is actually in decline, the magazine about it (your community) is actually the last place you'll find that out. In the mid-1980s, *Doctor Who* was entering the terminal decline of its initial run, but you'd have had a very difficult time telling that from *Doctor Who Monthly*, as it then was. One of the earliest tipping-points in fan awareness of the problems was a 1986 interview given by the departing script editor, Eric Saward, which lifted the lid on various production tensions;



George Orwell



almost certainly the opposite, since they're likely to be fans, in some sense, of their subject. Fandom gets complicated by professionalism, of course, by having to perform it in public for money. Nor should it be taken to suggest that a magazine can't ever suggest that one instance of whatever it's covering wasn't that much good. The point is that, as a whole, it leaves you feeling good enough about your enthusiasm that you're willing to put down money for the next issue.

So, to return to the issue at hand. What's a year's best issue for? Well, to celebrate and mark enthusiasms. In a field like sf, often accorded too little respect by the world at large, we may need that internalised sense of the canon more than other fields. (Perhaps this is also one explanation for the proliferation of awards?) And in a magazine like *Vector*, reliant on subscription income rather than advertising, I think we have enough curmudgeons who'd be willing to say it was a lousy year in sf if it was. Perhaps my argument boils down to this: every community (or magazine or weblog) has an implied frame of rules and acceptable/unacceptable discourse which by definition are not talked about. It's helpful, once in a while, to step back and try to work out what they are; exhibits A and B are examples of people doing just that. I find myself imagining each community or magazine being a little like Discworld: a world unto itself, with its own laws and values, heading towards some unknown destination. The only difference is, we don't always know where the edge is.

Saward gave his interview not to *DWM* but to its sister magazine *Starburst* [2]. Hence, for instance, my friend the estate agent in Exhibit D. For him, talking down the market seemed a kind of *treason*, no matter what the objective reasons for it. Such appeals to Get With The Programme are often couched as if to say that doing otherwise is somehow overcomplicating things with unnecessary cynicism or rationalisation. If you don't like our discourse, you have no joy in your soul. Another example: on the Facebook group for *Doctor Who Magazine*, there is currently a thread about whether it's appropriate for the programme – which has, after all, been at the forefront of putting gay characters on primetime tv – to be shooting its next episode in a country as repressive of gay rights as the United Arab Emirates. Tom Spilsbury, the magazine's current editor, has posted: "We'd prefer it if the *DWM* Facebook group was used to discuss *Doctor Who* and *Doctor Who Magazine*, rather than wider political issues like this, thanks. C'mon, this is supposed to be a fun place about the popular kids' TV series *Doctor Who* – it's not *Newsnight*." [3]

Just to clarify one thing, though. I'm asserting that magazines exist to create and sustain communities of the enthused, and this tends to block out certain kinds of discourse from them. I don't take that as far as saying that, say, a magazine can't run a column by, as it were, a licensed curmudgeon. Nor do I want to suggest that people writing about their enthusiasms are necessarily doing so in any kind of bad faith –

Endnotes

- [1] <<http://www.davidhepworth.com/powerspres.htm>>
 [2] <<http://community.livejournal.com/doctorwho/3941912.html>>
 [3] <<http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=4701958740&topic=8086>>

Celebrating 30 years of Luther Arkwright

Bryan Talbot in discussion with James Bacon

Bryan Talbot's graphic novel The Adventures of Luther Arkwright has an interesting publication history. The first part appeared in 1978, but it was only completed in 1989, when Valkyrie press released the whole story in nine individual comics.

It is a masterful piece of science fiction; fans consider it to be one of the first comic works of the genre that would latter be termed as steam punk. It is also one of the first pieces of work to be intended as a graphic novel from its inception. It has been continuously in print from Dark Horse since 1989, and followed by a sequel, Heart of Empire (1999). An opportunity arose to interview Bryan for Vector, and given last year's BSFA Award nomination for Alice in Sunderland, he was only too happy to engage with fellow science fiction readers.

JB: When you first started work on *Luther Arkwright*, did you immediately understand it would be a graphic novel? How did you decide that this format was the right one for the story?

BT: When I was a young teenager in the 60s I'd read a news item in an issue of *Castle of Frankenstein* reporting on someone adapting Poul Anderson's prose novel *The Broken Sword* into comic form and I was struck by what a wonderful idea it was – a comic that was a whole novel! I immediately started making up a Tolkienesque fantasy story. I plotted it all and did a few sketches but nothing ever came of it. *The Broken Sword* comic also came to nothing as it turned out but it had given me the concept

I'd been developing Arkwright over a couple of years but, over a few months in 1978, I plotted it all out before I drew a single page. From the start it was structured as a novel, not as an episodic comic story. I scripted each section just before drawing it but the structure remained the same. It took so long to complete because I spent a year working in illustration and graphics and then spent five years working for 2000AD. Then when French aristocrat Serge Boissevan said that he'd pay me to finish the story so he could read it, I realised that it would finally come to fruition.

JB: How important is mainland Europe to you?

BT: Ever since I attended my first foreign comics festival in 1981 in Tuscany I've wanted to be a part of that scene. I've been to many since then, in every country and had exhibitions and given talks there. I

have many French, Italian and Spanish comic albums and am published in most European countries – even if, in some, it's just my DC work such as Sandman. I have publishers in Italy, the Czech Republic and France who regularly published my creator-owned books.

JB: What was the initial response to *Luther Arkwright* like?

BT: Very good, though it started small and built. When it was first serialized in small sections in *Near Myths*, many readers had no idea what it was, where it was going, because of the very nature of the experimental jump-cutting structure. By the time of the *Valkyrie* comic serialization, though, people had a handle on it. In 1988 it was nominated for eight Eagle Awards and won four.

The edition currently available is a totally rescanned version; such is the way with technology in a position to ensure the reader sees the best that this quality and detailed artwork can provide.

JB: Did you always envisage the story as sf? Were there any particular influences on the story from elsewhere in the genre?

BT: Yes, it's fundamentally sf even though it ventures into other genres such as horror, historical adventure and espionage.

Mike Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius and Oswald Bastable stories were very direct influences. The original eight-page Arkwright strip I did in 1976 had him as very much a Cornelius clone – at the time Moorcock had offered Jerry Cornelius up as a template for other writers to use. For the graphic novel I developed his character away from Cornelius's and *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* is quite a different kind of story. I'm sure that many books fed into Arkwright, such as Doc Smith's *Lensman* series, Colin Wilson's fiction and Bester's *Tiger Tiger* – the way Arkwright evokes his psychic abilities. Keith Robert's *Pavane*, Phil K. Dick's *The Man in The High Castle* and Kingsley Amis' *The Alteration* were previous parallel world stories I'd read and no doubt helped me envisage ones for myself. Another such book, Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* also inspired the Puritan motorcycle squadron, complete with leather-bound iron truncheons! Although I read them after plotting the story, Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea's *Illuminatus!* trilogy and Wilson's subsequent books were a big influence

on the writing. Of course, there's many influences from other genres and media.

JB: Why did you choose Cromwellian Britain as the primary setting?

BT: Growing up in Wigan, where one of the last battles of the civil war was fought – a massacre, actually – the war and the commonwealth were part of local history and something I was familiar with. With the rise of the far right in the UK during the late 70s and living in Preston, near Blackburn, the cradle of the National Front, I wanted to address this in the story. At the time, I did some illustrations for stickers for the local anti-nazi league. A puritan fascist dictatorship was a good way to present a right-wing threat. Alan Moore did this later with *V for Vendetta*.

JB: You've also done work for 2000 AD, including "The Gothic Empire" in 1984-5, which also has a steampunk feel to it. Did the two works influence each other at all? What do you make of steampunk?

BT: I've been told that *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* is the first steampunk graphic novel. Pat Mills was a reader of Arkwright from when it was first published and the first time I met him, he proposed that we do what later became "The Gothic Empire." He ended up, as he often did, coming up with all the backstories first and working with 2000 AD regular Kevin O'Neill, so I was the obvious choice for him for the story when Kev went off to work for the USA. I'm sure that it must have been an effect, though it was a different sort of tale, very differently told. There was a definite effect the other way around though. When we first see Torquemada's face for the first time, Pat asked me to make him look like General Standish from Arkwright.

Gothic retro-SF. For me, there has to be a Victorian component: it has to hark back to HG Wells, Jules Verne and Albert Robida. I don't think of SF stories set, say, in Roman or ancient Greek environments as steampunk.

JB: At what point did you realise there would be a sequel to Luther Arkwright? Should we expect any further sequels?

BT: Not until I was drawing the last few pages of *Luther Arkwright*, when I started to ask myself what came next and yes, I've been thinking about a further return to the world of Luther Arkwright for a while and am wondering at the moment if it should be what I do next.

JB: Do you have plans for other works like Alice in Sunderland?

BT: I think that *Alice in Sunderland* was the most experimental piece of work I've ever done, and was certainly all about stories and storytelling. You never know what ideas will surface, but I probably wouldn't have started it if I'd realised it was going to be like doing a PhD!

It all depends upon whether I can come up with a new angle. With Carroll, it was moving to the North

east and discovering that he had many links to the place I now live.

JB: What would you recommend as a good read for anyone reading this interview who might be new to comics?

BT: The best graphic novels tend to be non-genre. If someone's coming to comics fresh though, and want sf, they could do a lot worse than start with Moore and Gibbon's *Watchmen* or Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*. The Rebellion collections of *Judge Dredd* and *Nemesis the Warlock* are worth a look. Shaun Tan's surreal and touching *The Arrival* is absolutely beautiful. Fantasy readers should definitely go for Jeff Smith's *Bone*. For gothic fantasy and horror, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* GNs are still pretty damn good reads.

Hannah Berry's *Britten and Brulightly*, and Rutu Moadan's *Exit Wounds* are probably the best two GNs I read this year.

JB: Your next book is Granville, an anthropomorphic steampunk detective-thriller. Where did this idea come from?

BT: It was inspired by the drawings of the mid 19th century French illustrator Jean Gerard (aka Grandville), who did a lot of anthropomorphic animal characters in then contemporary dress and the work of the proto-sf artist Albert Robida, again French. I've never done an animal comic so it's been a challenge. It's set in the world of a Belle Epoch French empire that has automatons, steam-driven hansom cabs, flying machines and so forth and the protagonist is a large working class English badger – Detective Inspector LeBrock of Scotland Yard – in Paris on the trail of a murder squad. He has brilliant deductive abilities but, being a badger, he's also a bruiser and is quite happy to beat the crap out of a suspect to get information. I've been describing it as Sherlock Holmes meets Quentin Tarantino – with animals!

JB: And what comes after that?

BT: *Granville* should be all done by January. I have a few little commissions to do, including writing the intro to Ramsey Campbell's next book and doing a short strip for *Time Out*. After that, the project that I wanted to start work on has been postponed after the writer I was going to collaborate with became ill. She's better now but it means that the book will now only be written in about a year's time. This means that I'm currently juggling the three graphic novel concepts I've been developing to decide which is nearest to being fully-formed. It may well be the next and perhaps last Luther Arkwright book.

Granville is due to be released in October this year, and will be published by Dark Horse in the US and Jonathan Cape worldwide. More information on the character as well as sneak peeks of some pages are available online at <www.bryan-talbot.com/grandville>

BSFA Award Shortlists 2008

Best Novel

Flood by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz)

The Gone-Away World by Nick Harkaway (William Heinemann)

The Night Sessions by Ken MacLeod (Orbit)

Anathem by Neal Stephenson (Atlantic)

Best Short Fiction

"Exhalation" by Ted Chiang (*Eclipse 2*)

"Crystal Nights" by Greg Egan (*Interzone 215*)

"Little Lost Robot" by Paul McAuley (*Interzone 217*)

"Evidence of Love in a Case of Abandonment" by M. Rickert (*F&SF*, Oct/Nov 2008)

Best Non-Fiction

"Physics for Amnesia" by John Clute

Superheroes!: Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films by Roz Kaveney (I.B. Tauris)

What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction by Paul Kincaid (Becon)

Rhetorics of Fantasy by Farah Mendlesohn (Wesleyan)

Best Artwork

Cover of *Subterfuge*, ed. Ian Whates, by Andy Bigwood

Cover of *Flood* by Stephen Baxter, by Blacksheep

Cover of *Swiftly* by Adam Roberts, by Blacksheep

Cover of *Murky Depths 4* by Vincent Chong

Cover of *Interzone 218* by Warwick Fraser Coombe

There are only four nominees in the Best Novel, Best Short Fiction, and Best Non-Fiction categories due to multiple-way ties for fifth place.