

# Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

Paul Kincaid on Robert Holdstock

Hal Duncan interviewed by Tony Keen

Tony Keen on Hal Duncan

Gwyneth Jones interviewed by Tanya Brown

plus Nussbaum, Sawyer, Baxter, Sleight

# Vector 260

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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# Torque Control

I think we might need another award. Or, perhaps it would be more honest to say, I want there to be another award. Specifically, I want there to be a fantasy award equivalent to the Arthur C. Clarke Award: a juried award, to be presented for the best fantasy novel published in the UK in a given calendar year.

I realise this may seem an unlikely thing to say, in a field as blessed (or cursed) with awards as ours already is, but I'd argue that there is no existing award that does the job that this award could do. Consider: the World Fantasy Award for best novel, which is juried, has on current form about a one-in-three chance of going to a book that's not available in the UK. This is less of a problem for consumers now than ever before, perhaps, but I (parochially, I admit) want an award that maps the state of the field in this country. The British Fantasy Award for best novel, meanwhile -- the August Derleth Award -- slants heavily toward dark fantasy and horror. Nothing wrong with that in itself, but I want an award that maps the whole field.

Of course, fantasy novels are eligible for the BSFA Award for best novel, and there is something to be said for an award that considers the whole field of the fantastic as one; but in practice, fantasy novels make the BSFA ballot only rarely, and the last unambiguously fantasy novel to actually *win* was Terry Pratchett's *Pyramids*, published in 1989. (Mary Gentle's *Ash*, published in 2000, also won, of course, but I tend to count that as sf; and even if you don't, one fantasy winner per decade is not a terribly high strike rate.) Moreover both the BFA and BSFA Awards are membership-vote awards. Again, in and of itself this is a good and valuable thing, but

I'm greedy: just as I like having the BSFA Award *and* also the Clarke Award, I want to keep the existing popular-vote awards and add a juried award.

These thoughts are sparked, in part, but the new kid on the fantasy awards block, the David Gemmell Legend Award. When it was launched, last year, the Gemmell appeared to be the best of both worlds: an initial public-vote stage, in which anyone could nominate a book for the award, followed by a second stage in which a panel of experts consider the shortlist and decide the winner. However, the process was changed, "after receiving lots of feedback from fans, readers and industry alike", to make the second stage also a popular vote. There's also the fact that the award's criteria state that it is for books "in the spirit or tradition of David Gemmell's own work" and, as noted, I'm greedy: I want my hypothetical award to be as broad-ranging in its selections as the Clarke Award; in other words, while I want it to recognise the best of what's published as genre fantasy, I also want it to seek out and bring to my attention excellent fantasy titles published outside the genre.

Just a thought, anyway. If anyone has thoughts in response, please send them to the usual address.

This issue, not entirely coincidentally, we focus on fantasy, with essays by Paul Kincaid on Robert Holdstock, and Tony Keen on Hal Duncan. We have interviews with Duncan, and also with Gwyneth Jones (whose latest novel, *Spirit*, is a space opera; but the Bold as Love sequence blurred fantasy and sf, of course); plus reviews, and the usual columns from Abigail Nussbaum, Andy Sawyer, Stephen Baxter, and Graham Sleight. Enjoy.

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# Letters

Dear *Vector*,

I haven't quite finished the mag, but I did a double-take at something in Tanya Brown's review of *The Company*: "previously s/he (the publicity material indicates a female author, but there is something masculine about the style)" – would that be *ineluctably* masculine, by any chance?

Regards,  
Susan Francis

Tanya Brown replies:

Susan Francis references Silverberg's comment about Alice Sheldon (James Tiptree Jr): as John Clute writes, "To deny that Tiptree did in fact sound "like a man" is to deny one's clear sense that male hegemony utters itself in recognizable terms; it also scants the masterly uses to

which Tiptree put that artifactual language which owns the world 'and tells it': tells it what it is, tells it what to do."

I'm at a loss to point to any defining characteristic in Parker's prose that signifies 'masculine': but it's not impossible that I'm picking up on the same cues as the Gender Genie, an online application which "uses a simplified version of an algorithm developed by Moshe Koppel, Bar-Ilan University in Israel, and Shlomo Argamon, Illinois Institute of Technology, to predict the gender of an author." I ran a couple of sample chapters from Parker's recent work through the Genie (<http://bookblog.net/gender/genie.php>) and the prose scores higher for male signifiers than for female.

This proves nothing, of course, except that Parker's style is closer to typically masculine prose than to typically feminine prose – more 'informational' than 'involved', to use Moshe Koppel's terminology.

## Congratulations to the winners of the 2009 BSFA Awards

### Best Novel

*The Night Sessions* by Ken MacLeod (Orbit)

### Best Short Fiction

"Exhalation" by Ted Chiang, first published in *Eclipse 2* (Night Shade Books)

### Best Non Fiction

*Rhetorics of Fantasy* by Farah Mendlesohn (Wesleyan University Press)

### Best Artwork

Cover of *Subterfuge*, ed. Ian Whates (Newcon Press), by Andy Bigwood

# Of Time and the River

By Paul Kincaid

Later, time would flow so sinuously that it affected the very landscape through which it passed, changing the ecology along its banks, leaving behind curious abandoned ox-bow lakes. But at first, for Robert Holdstock as for many another writer, time progressed as a more or less coherent chronology, with the occasional backward glance of memory.

All fiction is about time. Anything that records the way we change, the way events happen, the parade of cause and effect, is inescapably bound to time. But different writers look at time differently. For most realist fiction time is presented in a basic beginning-to-end chronology, pretty much the way we seem to experience it. What breaks the flow, for us and for the realist author, is memory; but even this dive back into the past tends to follow the same temporal structure.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the fantastic is that time stops being an irreversible momentum from the past into the future. Rather, time becomes a medium through which one can travel as one travels through space. In fantasy, this might be by means of dream (Rip Van Winkle falls asleep and wakes twenty years hence; the 19th century Yankee is hit on the head and wakes in the court of King Arthur) or by magic. The innovation of science fiction is the invention of a mechanical device to control this journey, though the end result tends to be much the same: in sf, Rip Van Winkle would be in a cryogenic chamber, and the Connecticut Yankee would board a time machine.

Time is still linear, but the fantastic allows us to move back and forth along that line, and in science fiction we are in control of time rather than being controlled by it.

The protagonist of Robert Holdstock's first novel,

*Eye Among the Blind* (1976), was called Zeitman. 'Zeit' means time in German. It suggests an interest in time right from the start of his career; and that first novel did involve the appearance of supposedly mythical figures from the distant past of the alien world upon which it is set. Nevertheless, this novel did nothing unconventional with the notion of time.

In Holdstock's second novel, *Earthwind* (1977), we glimpse the first eddy in the timestream. It is set on the planet Aeran where time's "behaviour is oscillatory. It fluctuates cyclically about the normal time flow" (160). Again, however, this is really little more than a statement of interest in a non-traditional timescape.

With Holdstock's third novel, *Where Time Winds Blow* (1981), a non-standard timestream begins to weave its way into the architecture of his writing. At first the representation of time seems conventional. Indeed, the novel opens with an image that clearly calls to mind the dead beach, the dark and unidentified creature at the end of the world that is the most haunting image in the first novel to present time as an explorable dimension, *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells. Our first sight of one of the artefacts thrown up by the time winds is described as:

some gigantic sea beast, stranded on the shoreline of this inland ocean ... It had crawled there, perhaps, from the unfathomable depths of this dark and dying sea, and had expired in the red heat of the planet's day. And yet this thing, this rounded beast, was no beast at all, but a machine, an artefact of some other age, cast adrift on more than just the shores of a moon-torn ocean. (14)

Yet Holdstock's invention takes us far beyond the linearity of the Wellsian conception of time. For Wells, and for most science fiction writers, time is



somewhat neutral, a progression from past to future or, more recently, a fanning-out from some quantum digression. However complex it might be, it remains a shape to be explored. But already Holdstock was beginning to see the complexity of time as something that gets into us as much as we get into it. We see this early in *Where Time Winds Blow* when Lena and Faulcon (not coincidentally, a name Holdstock had already used as a pseudonym) describe to the newcomer, Kris, how the odd temporal nature of VanderZande's World has affected them. "We've lost something very precious, something intrinsically human. I don't worry about it, it doesn't hurt, or ache ... but it's gone, and I wish I could remember how it felt", Lena says, and adds a moment later: "Every time it changes it changes you, every time a wind blows through time it blows through your skull, and upsets things, changes things" (24).

The wind, the actual and metaphorical representation of time, presents us with something more sinuous, more natural, more threatening than we have seen elsewhere. On VanderZande's World the phenomenon of the time wind sweeps along a steep-sided rift valley, carrying away objects caught in its path and depositing others from who knows when. It is challenging, exciting, mysterious, and above all dangerous. As human explorers cluster along the edge of the rift or venture down to recover whatever strangeness has been left behind they run the risk of being caught up in a sudden gust, never to be seen again.

Below it the valley was changing faster, more confusingly than the eye could follow – the land and the structures upon the land rippled and distorted, twisted and vanished as they were swept into some unimaginable future. Faulcon watched as white towers winked out of existence, to be replaced by moving spiral shapes that radiated redly as they turned. He watched as an immense spider's web of girders was torn from vision, flickering a moment as a time squall knocked it into Othertime and back, and then it was gone and a hideous shape stood there, the carved, gargoyle-decorated gateway of a primitive era. Then that too had been swept away and its place taken by bulging domes, then decayed

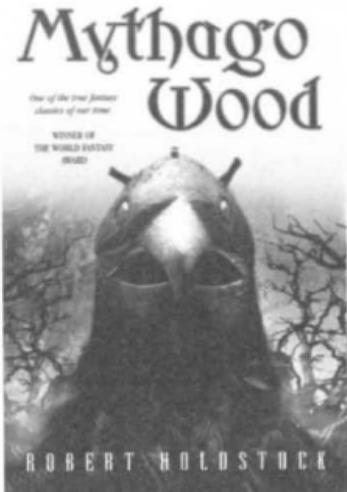
concrete block-houses, then a vast tree-like plant, its branches laden with green and juicy fruit. (185)

Time has already stopped being out there, a landscape to be explored, and has become something that interacts, that changes and is changed by the people it encounters.

*Where Time Winds Blow* presents a radically different conception of time to that normally encountered in science fiction, but it remains a very science-fictional conception. Time is a part of nature with which the human characters must interact and come to terms. But already in that novel Holdstock was starting to think of time as something more than a physical effect.

What makes *Mythago Wood* (1984) and all his subsequent novels fantasy, and why, as it turns out, they are the ideal form in which to develop his continuing fascination with time, is that they are about story. Having touched in his science fiction on the notion that time gets inside people, Holdstock now turns his attention to time as a psychological manifestation. If time changes people, what are the nature and the machinery for that change? The answer that comes across in both the *Mythago Wood* novels and *The Merlin Codex* (the two series on which I will concentrate in the remainder of this essay) is that time interacts with the imagination.

The myth imagos ("mythagos") of the first sequence of novels, and the more solid mythological characters of the latter trilogy, inhabit the landscape of time, a landscape that shifts and changes as we imagine it into being. To explore the storied landscape we have imagined into being we constantly have to backtrack and leap forward, and the result is that the stories we tell to make sense of the world contain elements from all time. Thus in *Mythago Wood* pre-human figures and various avatars of King Arthur or Robin Hood or, in the later books, Jason, can all be present and interact; indeed the deeper penetrations of Ryhope Wood recounted in *Lavondyss* (1988) and *The Hollowing* (1993) suggest that layer after layer of such characters can be encountered, representing different stages in the development of the myth. Similarly, while *The Merlin Codex* might be set at a specific historical point, the sacking of Delphi



by Celtic tribes in 278BC, the story itself involves mythological figures from different cultures and, more importantly, times, most notably Merlin, Jason, Medea and, in the final volume, Daedalus. Time in this context cannot therefore be linear, it must turn upon itself, loop and curl. The metaphorical representation that Holdstock comes up with in *Mythago Wood* and pursues in all his subsequent novels is of time as a river.

In terms of its co-option of time, fantasy is one of the most conservative of genres. The intrusion of the supernatural into our world, the journey through a doorway into a land of magic, or the straightforward heroic quest through lands or peoples unknown, are already strange enough that they normally require a coherent chronology if they are to work. Yet *Mythago Wood*, which incorporates elements of all three of these fantasy structures, continues Holdstock's experiments with the fluidity of time.

The river of time is an old and hoary metaphor, but Holdstock makes it work by making it concrete. It is no accident that our first encounter with the twisting of time that goes on within Ryhope Wood is through the stinklebrook, the stream that weaves its way through the woodland. Most of *Mythago Wood* is set just after World War Two. Steven Huxley (a name that recalls T.H. Huxley, Darwin's bulldog and H.G. Wells's mentor at the Normal School of Science) has returned home to Ryhope after his brother, Christian, has disappeared into the ancient woodland that borders their land, following their father who had spent years investigating the wood before he, too, disappeared. But there is a significant flashback to pre-war days, when the two boys, Christian and Steven, set a model ship, *HMS Voyager*, sailing along the stream one late July day, then race around the woodland to wait for it to re-emerge. Only it doesn't appear. It is six weeks later, on a damp September day, that the ship finally sails into the open once more. As their father records in his notebooks:

Even in the more peripheral zones of the forest, time is distorted to a degree... In a way, the boys have conducted an experiment for me, by releasing their model ship on to the brook that flows – or so I believe – around the edge of the woodland. It has taken six weeks to traverse the outer zones, a distance, in real terms, of no more than a mile. (58)

The model ship, it is worth noting, is "a wooden ship, which Chris had fashioned from a piece of fallen beech, and which I had painted" (56). It has, in other words, the feel of something primitive, much like *Argo* in *The Merlin Codex*, but even more like the full-sized embodiment of *HMS Voyager* that later emerges from the wood.

A boat came sailing from the trees, moving

steadily along a stream far too small to contain its width. The boat was painted with bright colours, but the glowing light came from the figure which stood upon its prow, peering intently towards me. Boat and man, both were among the strangest things I have ever seen. The boat was high-prowed and high-sterned, with a single sail set at an angle; no wind took the grey canvas or the black rigging; symbols and shapes had been carved upon the wood of the hull; bizarre figurines surmounted both prow and stern, and each of those carved gargoyle seemed to twist to watch me. (65)

A boat larger than the stream that carries it, an intrusion from some more mysterious, more threatening time, it is clear even so early in the novel that the stream doesn't just wind through time but serves as a point where all times come together. Indeed the proximity within the novel of the two boats upon the stinklebrook suggests that the carved and painted model grew upon its journey along the river and through time into the carved and painted ship that appears so mysteriously.

This is, I suspect, though the boat is never named, our first glimpse of *Argo*; or at least, our first glimpse of the avatar that will develop into *Argo*. *Argo*, whose raising at the beginning of *Celtika* (2001) sets the story of *The Merlin Codex* in motion and which is even more central to the events of the trilogy than Merlin, is a boat out of time that sails streams too narrow and convoluted for it; consider, for instance, the underground waterways that allow it to travel at magical speed between Greece and Britain. It is also the boat that will ferry Merlin and Urtha across to the land of the dead, taking on the role not just of Charon's boat but also the boat that will ferry Arthur to Avalon. (One wonders, in passing, if there isn't also an echo of this boat in the ghostly white city that rises out of Dartmoor in one of the most curious scenes in *Ancient Echoes* (1996), only to sink into the earth again like some behemoth carrying off its prey lashed to its flanks, like Captain Ahab tied to *Moby Dick*.) More importantly, as we discover in *The Broken Kings* (2006), the last part of the sequence, *Argo* is a boat whose heart is a model carved by the infant Merlin, just as the unnamed boat in *Mythago Wood* seems to have been born from the model carved and painted by our narrator, Steven, and his brother. The relationship between the dark and mysterious boat fleetingly present in *Mythago Wood* and the ancient, near-sentient boat at the core of *The Merlin Codex* will stand as representative of many similar linkages between the two works. The masks that play so important a part in *Lavondys* are the same masks that mark Merlin's entry into the Scandinavian forest at the start of *Celtika*. Ideas raised in one series are worked out in the other; ideas explored in one are

the unquestioned skeleton of the other.

One of the things that interests me about the relationship between the *Mythago Wood* stories and *The Merlin Codex* is that though they stand at an angle to each other, it is clear that one feeds on the other. The fluid, riverine concept of time he had begun to develop in the novels leading up to *Mythago Wood* allows Holdstock to present us with a whole host of atavistic mythic figures from different times, indeed, as I have suggested, the structural imperative of the novel demands such a view of time.

*The Merlin Codex* takes exactly that mingling of archetypal mythic figures from across cultures and times, but in effect freezes them in one place, at one stage in their development. The story involves an immortal Merlin who raises a cryogenically preserved Jason from slumber and sets out on a quest to find Jason's former lover (and Merlin's immortal sister) Medea, and, more urgently, the children of Jason and Medea who were not killed, as in legend, but hidden in time. Their quest also involves a British Celtic war prince, Urtha, whose realm is being threatened by the kingdom of the dead just across the river. Although this is set at a specific historical time, it is a refusal of chronology – all times are become one – a refusal that would be impossible without that sense of achronological ur-mythology already explored in *Mythago Wood*.

*Mythago Wood*, in other words, might be considered the theory – that figures from different mythologies emerged from the same cultural sources and might therefore co-exist – while *The Merlin Codex* could be the practice – how would the developed mythological figures interact if they were indeed brought together? The time structures laid out in *Mythago Wood* provide the framework upon which *The Merlin Codex* is built; the latter, idiosyncratic as it is in historical terms, can only make sense in the frame of reference established by *Mythago Wood*.

At the heart of it all is time. Lavondyss, as Steven comes to understand in *Mythago Wood*, is "[t]he place where the spirits of men are not tied to the seasons" (196), and that is an understanding that underlies everything in Holdstock's work. The myth imagoes are shaped by the imagination:

From the darkness and pain of my father's mind a single thread had emerged in the fashioning of a girl in a green tunic, dooming her to a helplessness in the forest that was contrary to her natural form. But if she were to emerge again, it would be with Christian's mind controlling her, and Christian had no such preconceived ideas about a woman's strength or weakness.

It would not be the same encounter. (55)

At this early stage in his (and our) understanding of mythagos, Steven still thinks in terms of control by the maker. As we come to realise over the course of the novels, though shaped by the mind they are independent of it. There are too many contributors to this form of collective unconscious for there to be one readily identifiable "maker" of any mythago. But just as the imagination can range across time, so a creature of the imagination has a similar freedom. The quest for mythagos, therefore, inevitably becomes a quest for "the realm beyond, the no-place where time ceased to have meaning" (236). Though it might be better to say this no-place where the seasons, where chronology ceases to have meaning, for all time is here.

The girl shaped by George Huxley's mind is Guiwenneth, but Guiwenneth is also Guinevere and her story is also the story of Arthur (and of Merlin, of course), and many minds have gone into the shaping of that myth and into the making of the woman that Huxley and both of his sons fall in love with.

One particular shaping of the mythago is the story of Guiwenneth, told in the fortified village of Cumbarath, "the most powerful myth *landscape* in the wood" (115); and it is a story that deliberately and specifically takes us to a place outside time. Guiwenneth's origins lie in the story of Peredur and the Jagad. Peredur gathers around him a circle of companions, like Arthur's circle of knights, but these are carefully described as "hunters from times past and times yet to come" (118). Again and again there is this emphasis on beings from outside time, an emphasis that will be repeated in *The Merlin Codex* with its the immortal Merlin, children of Jason hidden in time, and ghostly armies from across the river that threaten Urtha's kingdom.

This story of Peredur and the Jagad contains another echo of *The Merlin Codex*. The Jagad is described as "the fallen daughter of the earth, the hateful, vengeful child of the Moon" (118) and goes on to describe herself thus: "I am the daughter of Moon and Saturn; sour herbs cure me, bitter juices sustain me, bright silver and cold iron gird me. I have always been in the earth, and the earth shall ever nourish me, for I am the eternal huntress" (119). She is, in other words, Medea. Later in *Mythago Wood* we learn the story of Sorthalan, the first boatman, who led his people across the sea to a new land:

It was a journey into the dark ghost places of the world, a journey more terrifying than any that had ever been contemplated ... But Sorthalan ... absorbed the malevolent spirits into his body, and controlled them.

Soon only the first boatman remained upon the river, and he sailed north, the land's ghosts with him. He sails the rivers always, waiting

for the call from his tribes, and he is always there to help, with his entourage of these ancient forces. (212)

There is something of Arthur (and of Peredur) in Sorthalan, the great personage from times gone by ready to arise again at his people's hour of need. But there is even more of Merlin in him. In *The Broken Kings*, when we learn of Merlin's background, he is the first boatman, someone who travels always with an entourage of ancient forces, someone whose entire journey throughout the Codex is into the ghost places of the world.

It is, of course, inevitable that we should encounter earlier forms of Medea and Merlin, not to mention Argos and other key figures from *The Merlin Codex* among the constructs of Ryhope Wood. This is not Holdstock recycling material, or returning yet again to the same limited set of tropes; rather it is a consequence of the temporal and mythological structure of his books. The whole thrust of *Mythago Wood* and its sequels is the story of how we shape the world by telling stories about it. The stories become our myths and the mythagos grow out of those myths, out of our imaginations. But the myths also shape us; the mythagos swept up by time along the shores of the sticklebrook mark the stages at which they have changed our imaginations. All myths, *Mythago Wood* tells us, are the same myth, a story, our story, that grows and changes over time; but the differences in the myths are the differences in the ways we perceive it. So Medea and Merlin, Peredur and the Jagad, Sorthalan and Arthur, Guiwenneth and Guinevere, are always there along the shores of the sticklebrook, along the shores of the river that runs between Urtha's kingdom and the land of the dead, because they are integral to time and the story that time tells.

There is no straightforward route through Ryhope Wood. When Steven and Keeton begin their expedition:

We found ourselves walking back the way we had come. At times it was almost possible to experience the switch in perception. We felt dizzy; the underwood became preternaturally dark; the sound of the river changed from our left to our right... The ground seemed to writhe at times, and split open. We smelled fumes, fire, a stench like decay. (163-4)

Later, fire will be encountered again, as a defence around the "no-place" outside time. This is the time dislocations and distortions becoming manifest in the landscape.

Similarly there is no straightforward way through the stories told here. In *The Broken Kings*, the last and perhaps most extreme of the three volumes

that make up *The Merlin Codex*, we constantly find ourselves having to walk back the way we came in order to make any progress through the novel. We travel through Cretan caves that seem to take us into earlier times; we sail underground between Britain and the Mediterranean; we cross a river in Britain and find ourselves in the realm of the dead. Always there are journeys, but always the journeys take us through constructs of time and reality rather than through geography. Our understanding of the shape of this book, of all of these books, depends on our understanding and appreciation of the way time, like a meandering river, flows through the heart of it all. We can cross between Celtic Britain and Minoan Crete because time is not a straight line, and because, as Holdstock first started to explore in *Where Time Winds Blow*, time is in us and changes us as much as we are in it and change it.

Take Holdstock's riverine concept of time out of these books, the *Mythago Wood* stories and *The Merlin Codex*, and there is nothing there: a mishmash of atemporal elements blown willy-nilly across the landscape by the time winds of his last science fiction novel. But add this fluid, curving sweep of time and the novels acquire a strong and flexible spine. It is time that links the stories, that makes sense of a conflation of Merlin and Jason, that allows a model boat to take six weeks to sail a mile, because it must travel through more than a landscape to grow into the story of a boat too big for its stream, of Argo with a model boat at its heart. If time is confined to straight lines, as it is in most science fictional tales of time travellers, then all things are kept apart except by the experience of the time traveller. For Holdstock time runs a very different course, and hence all things are brought together, all affecting and affected by the perceptions of the observer. It's a course we all choose to follow through story, and it is the Holdstock's conception of the river of time that allows him to pursue the question underlying all these books: what shapes the stories that shape us?

#### **Books discussed:**

- Ancient Echoes*. London: Voyager, 1996.
- Celtika*. London: Earthlight, 2001.
- Earthwind*. (1977). London: Pan, 1978.
- Eye among the Blind*. London: Pan, 1976.
- Lavondyss*. London: Gollancz, 1988.
- Mythago Wood*. London: Gollancz, 1984.
- The Broken Kings*. London: Gollancz, 2006.
- The Hollowing*. London: HarperCollins, 1993.
- The Iron Grail*. London: Earthlight, 2002.
- Where Time Winds Blow*. London: Faber, 1981.

# Across the Dickian Multiverse

## Hal Duncan interviewed by Tony Keen

Hal Duncan's first novel, *Vellum* (Macmillan, 2005), was nominated for a host of awards, including the British Fantasy Society and World Fantasy Awards. The second half of the story, *Ink*, appeared two years later. His latest book is *Escape from Hell!* (*Monkeybrain*, 2008).

This interview took place in the Star Tavern, at the March 2007 London meeting of the BSFA. The interview was transcribed by Kate Bodley and Tony Keen.

**Tony Keen:** I've been led to believe that all I actually need to do is say "So, Hal, what have you got to say for yourself?" and sit back for the next hour and a half, but I think I probably have to do a bit more to earn my crust. So, lead author interview and lead short story in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Interzone*, ahead of stories by Mike Harrison, Gwyneth Jones, Al Reynolds – how chuffed are you then?

**Hal Duncan:** Pretty fucking chuffed. What can I say? I did a little happy dance. It's *Interzone*. I think I said in that interview that the first issue I ever bought was way back, I think the date was maybe '86 or '84, and the first story that I read in that was Ian Watson's "Jingling Geordie's Hole" [TK: 1986]. Holy fuck! From then on I read it for a while, and *Interzone* to me defined what fucking science fiction is. I didn't even know that the title came from William Burroughs. I discovered William Burroughs after reading *Interzone*. But the name is just so appropriate. To me that was a major force in starting to think about writing weird shit; not just space opera, not just fantasy, but that weird ass stuff which is just fucking anything. So being in the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Interzone*, that was just fucking cool.

**TK:** I've noticed from reading stuff on your blog that you do think about what it is that you're doing an awful lot, and very articulately.

**HD:** As some people say, an awful, awful lot.

How many thousand words is *this* entry? There's not ten, there's only five. I can't help it. I went to Uni, did English. And the blog is great displacement activity. If you've got a deadline for, say, January, just as a hypothetical example, for a novella, which is only forty thousand words, and you happen to feel the urge to write forty thousand words of something else entirely, the blog's a good way of doing that.

But I'm fascinated by what's actually going on, what's actually happening in this type of fiction. And I like talking shit. It's a Glaswegian pastime, to just sit in the pub and talk about stuff. The great thing is that these days you can have that conversation with anyone in the world. And I've had some great conversations; a conversation about theology with Ben Rosenbaum, a conversation on post-humanism with R. Scott Bakker. It's great. Of course, it does mean that you get to March, and go "Shit!"

**TK:** Are you very self-conscious about what you're writing when you're actually writing it?

**HD:** No, it's all after the fact. Certainly not on the theoretical level that I go into [in the blog].

I don't sit down and go, "Ah yes, I'm going to invert the subjunctivity of this sentence." I think there's two stages, for me anyway, in terms of the way I write. There's one stage, which if it works properly, you get into what other writers call "the zone", where you're channelling, and it's all coming out, and you don't actually think at all about it. Your brain's switched off. There's some other part of your brain, which is where the book's been sitting, developing over the period of, say, January to March, where you're going, "Ah, I'll get round to it eventually." Meanwhile, the book is actually writing itself. My theory anyway is that a lot of it is the fiction working away in the back of your brain unconsciously. You sit down, you get into the zone, and that's when that comes in. You tap



Hal Duncan (photo by Kathleen Bolton)

into that, and it starts pouring out. And then there's a second stage where you go back through. I do think very consciously [then], but it's largely structural. It's an editing process. I tend to have a spurge and then a radical getting up to the elbows in the gubbins of it, ripping this out, ripping that out. And at that point there's a more conscious kind of thing. But certainly in terms of the theoretical level, no. I tend to not find myself from working on something thinking "okay, this is part A, part B", and working through it slowly, very consciously. That part is switched off.

**TK:** One of the things I really want to ask you about is mythology. You make very strong use of mythology all the way through *The Book of All Hours*. You do it slightly differently to the way somebody like Neil Gaiman does it in *American Gods*, where he's retelling myth. You're more embedding actual stories and actual previous tellings of the myths in the way that you write your novel. How did you come to that as an approach?

**HD:** I remember years and years back there was a BBC version of *Prometheus Bound*. I think it was BBC. [TK: It was *Seize the Fire*, a version of *Prometheus Bound* by Tom Paulin, commissioned by the Open University in 1988 for broadcast on the BBC and published by Faber & Faber in 1990.] I'd seen Shakespeare done this sort of way. Live presentations, of Shakespeare or operas had this technique of updating, or presenting the text itself, but with the costume design, the stage design updated it to a certain period. This *Prometheus Bound* had a simple stage, and Prometheus in this kind of dusty grey greatcoat, bound to what could actually be concrete, by a twisting steel girder twisted rounded him. The way it was presented, you suddenly realise, this is the Russian revolution. What they're doing is taking Prometheus as Trotsky. In the original text, you've got Prometheus, a guy who's fought with Zeus, to overthrow the old regime, and then suddenly gets fucked over. And I'm watching this and thinking actually yes, that technique is a great way of making these old stories really immediately accessible. But one of the things that I think is quite important is that with something like the Prometheus story, it's retold and retold in a lot of ways, and often what you get is the actual story of the theft of fire. What you don't get is what comes after, like in Aeschylus's trilogy. And to me, that's a more interesting story. The theft of fire, that's great for a heroic story. This hero sneaks in, steals fire, and brings it to humanity and a god smites him for it. But hey, humanity's got fire! But the more interesting story is that humanity crushed Prometheus. Humanity, they're not grateful for the gift that he's given. Nobody likes Prometheus for what he's done. People turn up in the original play; you've got Ocean, you've got Io, and eventually Hermes, and everyone says you've

done wrong, you've been stupid here. And that strikes me as having much more scope, much more to deal with. And part of it is in the same way that those presentations of Shakespeare plays or operas are updating that as a way of translating it, as a way of taking it and presenting it to a modern audience, of telling a story, and presenting it in a way that's understandable.

So I look at some of the stuff that I've done in *Vellum* and *Ink* as translation. I try to be faithful. The Sumerian texts of the Inanna and Dumuzi legends in *Vellum* are very much as faithful as I could get. There's a few tiny little bits of poetic licence here and there, but it's fundamentally my attempt to do a poetic translation of it. Partly because I think the original stuff has a power and a truth that means I don't want to just use the tropes, use the bare bones of the thing. It's why I have afterwords saying these are the texts, because I'd like for people to go away and read the original text, spark their interest, start reading this sort of shit, because Aeschylus is fucking brilliant! The *Oresteia* is a great story about the transition between a system of vendetta and a system of justice. And that's a beautiful, it's got so much to say about any culture, present or past, and how any society and transition between the punishment based on vengeance, on payback and punishment based on real concepts of justice.

**TK:** I really, really enjoyed the way that you put *Prometheus Bound* in. I remember as I was getting into the second book of *Vellum* thinking Slaughter, Powers, they're nailing somebody to a wall, somebody called Smith, hang on, this is the *Prometheus Bound*, and then once I'd picked up on that I was able to sort of spot all the bits where the bitmites are in the Chorus and all of that stuff, and to spot where you went back into it. Why did you pick the two plays that you go for? You've sort of explained why you picked *Prometheus Bound*, why *Bacchae* as well?

**HD:** Philip K. Dick, is the simple answer. He turned me on to the *Bacchae*, through his late fiction, his exegetic fiction, where he mentions Euripides's the *Bacchae*, and the story of Dionysus being captured by Pentheus, the king of Tears, and Pentheus basically being fucked over big time by Dionysus, because, as Phil Dick phrases it, do not trap the god of small trapped animals. For me, the *Bacchae* follows on from *Prometheus Bound* in some respects, archetypally. The whole thing about *Prometheus Bound* is that he's bound to the rock, but Hermes offers him his freedom if, as the man with the ability to see the future, he will tell Zeus who the woman is who will have a son who is greater than the father. Zeus is fucking shit-scared, because Zeus is a philandering, rapist motherfucker. And he doesn't want to run the risk of shagging some

woman then having a son who throws him down, in the same way that Zeus overthrew Chronos, in the same way that Chronos overthrew Uranus.

To me, the *Bacchae* follows on from that. Because Pentheus is an archetypal King figure. He's a tyrant. He is like Zeus, the person who is trying to cling on to power. Pentheus is all about reason. He disdains the Dionysiac, the wildness of the cult, the freedom, the libertine nature of it. That's wrong. He's an über-rationalist. Which is perfect for the Zeus figure, and in some respects perfect for the classic Judeo-Christian God figure. The *Bacchae* is the story of that god, that emperor, in the Phil Dickian term, the empire. To me, that's what he's talking about. He's talking about this system of the eagle, reason, logic, rationalism, taken to extremes, taken to excess, taken into this kind of repressive, oppressive regime, and how [it breaks on] the spirit of freedom, this kind of absolute, unbindable force, which, to me, is humanity. And my interpretation of the Prometheus myth, as you get in *Vellum*, is that what Zeus doesn't know, what Prometheus knows, is that humanity is the son that will cast off God. In the *Bacchae*, what you've got is Dionysus; he's not the word, he's not reason, he's the flesh. He's everything that being human is; he's joy and sorrow. And you've got the King of Tears. There's a recurrent theme in the *Bacchae* that what Dionysus offers is the solution for sorrow. Pentheus is the King of Tears. He is sorrow personified, and Dionysus is like, what's the solution for sorrow? Drink! Party! Live! Fucking enjoy life! And to me, that's a real humanist message. And the *Bacchae*, as far as I'm concerned, shows God being fucking overthrown, revealed as the mad idiot that he is, decapitated, and held up as a spectacle. Which is quite cool.

TK: I very much like the way that you spin the *Bacchae*, and spin it into being the play within a play in *Hamlet*, and the way that the Duke is tricked reminded me of the end of *The Wicker Man*.

HD: There is that. *The Wicker Man* is perfect. *The Wicker Man* is exactly the same fucking story. It's your man of reason right through to the very end going "Oh Jesus Christ! Oh Jesus Christ!" To me that's an archetypal story. I think there's a power of the human - I don't want to talk about the mass unconsciousness, because I'm not sure I believe in it in the full Jungian thing, but I think you put down those layers of impression, and stuff tries to bubble up. And for me, your Jack Flash, Harlequin, Dionysus character is the part that goes "Nah! Fuck you! You can't control me, and if you try, it's gonna blow your fucking head apart."

TK: The other thing that you bring into the presentation of the *Bacchae* is the whole Harlequin thing, which set me thinking of an author who you have cited quite a lot, which is Moorcock, in

particular the Cornelius Quartet and the novels that spin off that. There's a lot in *Ink* and *Vellum* in the way that the same characters keep coming up again and again and again ...

HD: I make no bones about it. I'm hugely in debt to Moorcock. One of the ways to look at these books is they're riffing off of Moorcock's Eternal Champion and saying "okay, you've got an Eternal Champion, who else've you got? An eternal villain, an eternal rogue", and so on and so forth. The Cornelius Quartet I absolutely fucking loved when I first read them. Absolutely fucking adored them, and I could see what he was doing in terms of linking everything together in the Eternal Champion thing. I wanted to take that and boil it all down to a couple of books. And give a sense of more of a story that takes place across [the multiverse], taking a couple of chapters out of each of the Eternal Champion books. That's the story!

TK: If only Moorcock had done that!

HD: The thing about Harlequin, if you go back to where Harlequin comes from, the original Harlequin has this myth around him where his original costume is not what you think of as the skin-tight black and white diamonds of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. The original Arlecchino is a bastard child clothed in scraps. The reason for that costume is that his clothes are made by the person who adopted him, who can only afford rags. So you've got this ragged figure, who's a wanderer. Harlequin's staff is totally in sync with Dionysus's thyrsus. Arlecchino goes back to the mediaeval, possibly Dark Ages period. To me, it's quite possible that there's a hangover of those type of pagan [gods], if not Dionysus then the Western European equivalent of Dionysus. But it's certainly got that kind of figure.

TK: So the connections are already there, you're just pulling them out?

HD: Absolutely. It seemed very much obvious to me, more when you're writing it, finding the thyrsus, and mapping this character to that character. This is perfect. Like Pentheus, as the King of Tears, and you've got Pierrot, who is black and white, with the tear; the King of Tears, character of sorrow. The mappings all seemed to be there. There quite possibly are core archetypal figures that have this dance that goes on through fiction and mythology from the very earliest era right through to the present day. You've got a set of characters having this dance. Again, Moorcock uses that in the Cornelius Quartet, the idea of the imagery of the dance, of characters circling around each other, and their relationships changing.

TK: Have we seen the last of Jack and Puck and Joey and the like, or are you going to return to them at some point?

HD: I can't fucking escape them.

**Audience:** When's the musical coming out?

**HD:** The plans for that have been shelved at the moment. We were talking about an Edinburgh Fringe show. That would be brilliant. I would fucking love this. I've got the music in my head.

**TK:** This is "Nowhere Town"?

**HD:** This is "Nowhere Town", yeah. Jack and Puck continually rebelliously jump out of my head at various points and go "Oh we wanna do this". I've got a lot of short stories which feature them. Partly, they're a lot of fun to write. I think Seamus Finnegan, Phreedom, their stories are pretty much told. Their stories are encapsulated in the books. I guess Jack and Puck are the Id and the Self in some respects. You've got the Id, which is that fiery libidinous passion as a symbol, and the Self, personified in the *puer aeternus*, the eternal child, actually in his case eternal adolescent. And those archetypal figures are fun to play with. You open up and let them loose, and you get great stuff coming out.

Neil Williamson has musical talent, which I don't have, and we do have some of the songs for "Nowhere Town" scored. 'Cos I know what it sounds like. It's just a matter of translating that through my croaky Tom Waits growl. Which doesn't really work if you're trying to do soprano [TK: Since giving this interview, Hal has revised the libretto and worked more on the music, which can be found here: [http://www.4shared.com/dir/12675148/e391e918/Nowhere\\_Town.html](http://www.4shared.com/dir/12675148/e391e918/Nowhere_Town.html)].

**TK:** You say that all the characters are archetypes. Yet you play with the individual archetypes a lot as well. Jack in particular has lots of different facets to him. There's the really out there completely wild Jack Flash, and on the other hand you've got the person who's described as "Mad Jack Carter", but is in fact a lot more restrained and sensible ...

**HD:** Buttoned-up. Yeah. A proper archetype is not just a plain hero. The Campbellian hero's a stereotype. The point about an archetype is it's a symbol whose actual nature changes. You can put that into a relationship with another archetype. Their values in terms of positive or negative can change completely. From a Jungian point of view, the *anima* is a great case in point. The *anima* can be positive or negative, it can appear as the virgin or the whore. Simply presenting one aspect of that is not presenting the full picture. What I wanted to do was, by setting up all these different perspectives on the one thing, create more of a sense of that archetype itself, and also create more of a sense of a real character, in the sense that if you have this point here and this point here defined, the negative space in the centre is where the character is. Jack, he's the point in the centre that all of these other things are around

**TK:** And you do the same with Joey. Sometimes he's the villain, but sometimes he's not the villain, he's the anti-hero.

**HD:** Joey's a good example of that. Joey's basically the shadow, and the shadow is, almost inevitably – it's Darth Vader. "I'm the Big Bad Guy. I'm Bad. And you know me because I am capital-E Evil". Okay, yeah, but what is evil about it? The Jungian theory of individuation is all about reconciliation with the shadow. So I'm trying to revise, represent the shadow, the villain as possibly, actually, not that bad a guy. In *Ink* you've got the Kentigern section where Joey is hunting Jack, and coming out with some fairly valid reasons, as far as I'm concerned, for why Jack is just a dangerous fucking idiot; as Joey describes it, that hero, bent on rebellion, revolution. As far as Jack is concerned, every common person is complicit in the evil empire, the evil conspiracy; complicity is a damning crime. As far as Joey's concerned, that kind of burning fevered idealism is the sort of thing that leads you into dangerous water. What I wanted to get across in another strand, in the alternate Berlin, where you see Jack as a Fascist, is that Jack *has* bought that idealism. Because in '30s Germany, a young blond-haired blue-eyed person who believed in traditional values, in the heroic ideal, could easily buy into that classical [ideal]: heroes are Sparta, heroes are Athens, heroes are Frank Miller's 300. It's all about slaughtering the evil decadent Persians of this world. That classical view is in some ways anti-Semitic. The Greek hatred for the Persians fits perfectly well.

**TK:** That leads into talking about some of the politics behind the novels, and what is in some ways, a crap question to ask, talking about being "a gay writer". You wouldn't say to a straight writer "how has being a heterosexual actually affected the way you work?" But nonetheless, anger about acts of homophobic violence, either individual or collective, informs *Vellum* and *Ink*, and a lot of the other stuff; it really informs "Nowhere Town".

**HD:** Certainly, "Nowhere Town" is a full-on queer punk Orpheus musical. It's difficult, because there's a point where you don't want to be polemical about it. Probably the point where that comes through strongest is the Faerie chapter in *Vellum*. That's based strongly on Matthew Shepard, who, if anybody doesn't know, was a college student in Wyoming in the States, who went to a bar, got picked up by two guys, who took him off. He thought he was going off for a threesome, which a certain aspect of gay life can be about, and ended up getting crucified, bound to a split-rail fence, beaten to a pulp, left for sixteen hours, and discovered by passing cyclists, who thought at first he was a scarecrow. It's a horrific story. There are two things that make my blood boil about it. One is that while he was lying comatose for a week, the

local college had a homecoming parade in which there was a float that had a scarecrow with a shirt on with the words "I am gay" written on the back. The other thing is that the Reverend Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptists to this day has a website which has a little gif animation of Matthew Shepard burning in the fires of hell and a little counter of how long he's been there. I'm not a huge political activist, I don't get involved in politics in the way China Miéville does, but I look at it as, "Okay, I've got a skill, if I want to make a fucking point then I'm going to try and fucking make a point." This is something I can maybe do something about, maybe at least fucking rant about this, if nothing else. And if it doesn't change people's minds, if it doesn't filter through, if it doesn't make somebody that doesn't think about these things, think about it, at least what it might do is reach a kid out there who's in Wyoming, or for me it was Kilwinning, and give them a fucking novel where that story, that reality, that existence, is there for them. To actually have a book where, for a change, the gay character is not the vampire fucking Lestat in some other form, some pony fucking frilly-cuffed pouting sensitive person: "Ah yes, I look lingeringly across a crowded room, with my big blue eyes." Or the gay best friend, the Rupert Everett of the fantasy world. But [a novel in which the gay character] is the fucking central focus. That's another strong drive in a lot of my fiction. But then the danger is, I don't want to be polemical about it, particularly with the Matthew Shepard thing. What I didn't want, especially with that, is to appropriate that story, appropriate that person's death, simply to the end of making a political point. Because it still concerns me, I still think about it. My American editor asked if I wanted to send a copy to his mum, who is very active in the anti-homophobic movements over there. And I said, I don't know. If she discovered it, if they find it, that's OK. But I'm too chicken, because I'm so scared that they'd read it, and go you're using this, you've not done justice to it. And all I could do, at the end of the day to try and avoid that was to say explicitly in the story, that actually this [situation] was real. Don't read this, it's a fairy story. It's done as a fairy story. And then you rip that away and you go, it's a fairy story. In the real world, that's what it is. Go off and look at that, don't fucking buy this fictionalised version, don't listen to me. Go and fucking check it out yourself.

TK: So has the novel been banned anywhere in America yet?

HD: Oh, I'm hoping. I'm hoping.

TK: Glasgow. Glasgow and Edinburgh. Sodom and Gomorrah?

HD: In my mythology Glasgow would be Sodom and Edinburgh would be Jerusalem. Edinburgh's a tartan-clad tourist trap biscuit tin whore of a

city. And Glasgow's cool. Glasgow's huge in my reckoning because I love it. I moved up to Glasgow. And basically I think it's the West End, the West End is, I guess, the East Village of Scotland. It's just a little cosmopolitan...

TK: That area with the University, the Hunterian museum, Alasdair Gray's church?

HD: Yeah, the Óran Mór. Which is absolutely brilliant. If any of you are ever up in Glasgow, go to Oran Muir. This is something you should not miss. You would be shamefully reprehensible if you did not go and see the Alasdair Gray mural, the inside of what used to be a church, it's now a restaurant and bar called Óran Mór. It's done out in Alasdair Gray style, absolutely fucking gorgeous. But Glasgow, that whole area, yes.

Audience: Up to Glasgow from where? North, south, east, west, country, city?

HD: Where did I move from? Kilwinning, about 30 miles south west. A little town called Kilwinning.

TK: The sense of place of Glasgow does come through, certainly in the Kentigern sections of both novels, it's very like the sense of place that Ken MacLeod and Iain Banks have got when they write about Glasgow.

HD: I'm richly connected with [Glasgow], I mean there's no reason why you can't [write about Glasgow as a character]. Apart from Alasdair Gray, I don't think anyone's really done that. I mean Moorcock uses London, or Peter Ackroyd. You read Peter Ackroyd and London comes through. It's got its own character. And I'm not sure that, as much as I love *Lanark*, I'm not sure it's quite my Glasgow. For me, it doesn't come through as Moorcock's London, Ackroyd's London, Joyce's Dublin. Different cities have character, and I would like to at some point write the book which is purely set in Glasgow, and is purely about Glasgow, where Glasgow can be a character in the book in the same way that Dublin is for Joyce, or London is for Moorcock.

Audience: One of the criticisms that's levelled at you is lack of editing, or lack of editing down, and looking at those books from this angle I can certainly see that one is thicker than the other (that's the second one is thicker than the first). Tell me about editing. How much you edit your own work, how much you expect your editor to edit your work, and why or why not it's a good idea.

HD: I firmly agree with editing. *Ink* is more edited than *Vellum*. I edit my own stuff, seriously. I have to watch my words because my editor's over here. Part of that criticism is that there's a tendency to misread some of what I'm trying to do in these books, and think this'd be great if they'd just taken out this story, this strand, and just boiled it down to this. Rip out that, that and that, and just boil it down to a simple story. It's like looking at the *Guernica*,

and going wouldn't it be better if it just looked like an actual painting, of a bull, and a horse, in the street. I'm trying to take different types of story, different ways of approaching the same story, and cut them up, apply them. The story is as much in the juxtapositions of those sequences as it is in the sequences themselves. So the way you're meant to read it is to take a step back, and if you're standing at the correct distance, that confusion should look balanced and harmonious. I probably spent more time on the editing of the books, cutting down, ripping out, hacking and slashing to get it into the shape that I wanted, than I spent writing – well maybe not quite, because I spent a long time writing, but the editing took the best part of two years.

**TK:** In length, let's face it, you're no Neal Stephenson yet.

**Audience:** I heard that, in a sense, *Ink* completes *Vellum*, and you've said earlier that these are characters you couldn't escape from. Does that mean that they're going to appear elsewhere, in a different tale? Are the characters repeated, in a different way?

**HD:** There's a few stories out there already.

**Audience:** I was referring more to your next "novel".

**HD:** They won't be in the next one. They might be somewhere down the line. I've got a couple of novels planned. The next one doesn't feature them. I wanted to try to get away from them for a break. But I'm sure they'll come back.

**Audience:** Two questions, one of which you've partly answered. It struck me, reading *Vellum*, that it's a very Modernist text in the way it's built. It reminded me of people like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, how they worked, and it was interesting hearing you mention *Guernica* in that context. So I was wondering to what extent you were writing directly out of that aesthetic?

**HD:** Absolutely.

**Audience:** Secondly, and kind of related, having read the poetry as well, it's really interesting, because the books feel like an organic construction that you've got to work through, taking all the different material and thinking "What can I find in this?" but the poetry is very formally constructed; you write sonnets, a lot of rhyming couplets, stuff like that. I was wondering how the two things formally related?

**HD:** Actually, think about it: *Vellum* and *Ink*, it's in four volumes, there's a prologue and epilogue in both books, every volume has seven chapters, every chapter has twelve sections, and every section has four parts. I'm a formalist. I dig those types of formal constraints. I like to play around with them in the poetry. I like the sonnet form because of that, because it's so constrained, so formal – but I fuck

around with the rhyme schemes and the metricality of it. I will tend to use long lines and short lines and mix and match to try and get a more naturalistic kind of feel. And that is completely Modernist. My favourite writers are Joyce, late Yeats, and Wallace Stephens. Stephens has one of the poems that sum up that aesthetic, which I see as a blend of Rationalism and Romanticism, which is something that science fiction is the real inheritor of. Where Modernism died, when Modernism went out of fashion, in one respect it went off into Post-Modernism. "We'll be arch and ironic. We'll live in our ivory towers. We'll be safe. And don't worry, don't take us seriously, we're just playing a game." On the other hand you've got Alfred Bester, doing stuff like, in *The Stars My Destination*, using a rhyme, "Gully Foyle is my name, And Terra is my nation, Deep space is my dwelling place, The stars my destination," which gives the title of the book, but that rhyme is a direct paraphrasing or reinterpretation of James Joyce, from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Stephen Dedalus is my name, Ireland is my nation, Clongowes is my dwellingplace, And heaven my expectation." And then Bester goes on to use cut-up and fold-in text play there, he uses it in *The Demolished Man* as well. To me, science fiction is the real vibrant Modernist strain of fiction. Absolutely I see myself as wanting to bring back the accessibility of Modernism.

**Audience:** Letting the material retain its original integrity, but bending it into interesting new shapes at the same time.

**HD:** Yeah.

**Audience:** You've mentioned fantasy influences, and science fiction influences. When you set out to write, did you set out to write fantasy, or science fiction, or did you just set out to write?

**HD:** There is no difference. I don't believe in the difference between science fiction and fantasy.

**Audience:** You set out to write then.

**HD:** Have we got another two hours? The way I look at it is, it's all strange fiction. China Miéville talks about New Weird. I don't go for the label "New Weird". It's setting out as a subset of the genre. You've got science fiction and fantasy and then you've got the subset. I'm more interested in the idea that there's something that this type of fiction does, all of it does, something in common between science fiction, fantasy, horror. I've got a blog entry where I rattled off ten or so different possible expansions of the word sf. People talk about "science fantasy", you can talk about "scientific fiction", you can talk about "soul fiction". The symbolic formulation of the pulps, where it's simply Romanticism, set tropes locked into set plots. All of that stuff for me is just the same thing.

**TK:** That's probably a good point at which to end. Thank you, Hal Duncan.

# Euripides Bound: Hal Duncan's use of Greek tragedy

By Tony Keen

In recent years, there has been a considerable amount of attention given to the Canongate Myth series and their retellings of Greek, Roman and other mythological tales. At the same time, in a less lauded section of the literary world, Scottish author Hal Duncan has been retelling Athenian tragedy in a fashion no less remarkable than that of the Canongate authors [1].

Unlike Canongate authors Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson, who have both written science fiction whilst distancing themselves from the genre, Hal Duncan is an unashamed author of science fiction; even though his work drifts across the loosely defined boundary between sf and fantasy, to Duncan it's all "strange fiction". *The Book of All Hours*, published in two parts as *Vellum* (Macmillan, 2005) and *Ink* (Macmillan, 2007), is a single thousand-page novel. The Vellum is an infinite canvas, in which an infinite variety of worlds can be found. These worlds are run behind-the-scenes by the Unkin, the "angels". The multi-stranded and fractured narrative follows seven characters, who are or become Unkin themselves. They recur in different forms and in different settings throughout the novel. In this respect *The Book of All Hours* is heavily under the influence of the ideas of Michael Moorcock [2]. There are seven characters who are encountered again and again: the "action-man" Jack Carter, his lover Thomas Messenger, his sister Anna, the helper Don MacChuill, the "brains" Guy Renard, the older man Seamus Finnian, and the anti-hero Joey Pechorin (the roles that each plays in the different narrative strands, and the exact characterization of each, varies widely).

This article is concerned with volumes two and three of the four that make up the whole novel. Both these volumes are given a large part of their structure through appropriation of ancient Athenian dramatic literature. Volume Two features Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, and Volume Three showcases Euripides' *Bacchae*. Duncan does not simply retell the mythological narratives; nor does he take a "tracing-paper" approach, whereby a Greek myth is retold against a science fiction background, often using anagrams or incomplete anagrams to name characters [3]. Instead he embeds the structure of

a particular telling of a myth (Duncan being well aware that there is no "correct" or canonical version [4]) into the architecture of his novel. Before he tackles the Greek dramas with which this paper is concerned, he has already done something similar in volume one, in sections featuring the character Phreedom Rider (a version of Anna); her search for her brother Thomas is intertwined with the Sumerian goddess Inanna's descent to the underworld.

### Prometheus

Hal Duncan is widely read in Greek and Roman literature [5]. Volume two of *The Book of All Hours* begins with an "Eclogue" rather than a prologue, which, according to the "Acknowledgments" at the end of *Vellum* (p.527) [6], is based upon the Latin poet Virgil's *Eclogues* 4 and 7 [7]. The first chapter proper is entitled "The Hammers of Hephaestos" [8]. The setting is the trenches of the Western Front in the First World War. Two military policemen, Powers and Slaughter, are dragging a prisoner. Behind them is another man, Smith. The prisoner is revealed to be Seamus Finnian, or at least a version of him, whom the reader has met in the previous volume. He is someone who, in the earlier text, has become Unkin. The reader is at first lead to believe that they are seeing events from Finnian's past, where he achieves Unkin status.

Smith manacles Finnian to a rock, and then fixes him with a bayonet through the chest. All the while he expresses uncertainty about the rightness of his task and disquiet with what he is asked to do. Powers engages him in dialogue, arguing that Finnian's fate is deserved. By two or three pages into this narrative, a reader familiar with Greek tragedy should be aware of what is being done. The characters are re-enacting the opening scene of Aeschylus' fifth-century BCE tragedy *Prometheus Bound*. This play begins with Prometheus being shackled to a rock, and continues with various individuals visiting him. In *Vellum*, Smith is Hephaestus, the smith god. Powers and Slaughter are Cratos (Greek for "power", a personification of an abstract concept) and Bia ("Force", another personification). Prometheus is Finnian himself.

Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire for Mankind,

in defiance of Zeus, is a name with strong resonances in the history of science fiction. The associations of human progress with the figure, first brought to this malleable myth by Aeschylus, together with the idea of the dangers that advancing human progress can bring, appeals particularly to the sf writer. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818, revised 1831), identified by Brian Aldiss as the first science fiction novel, is subtitled *The Modern Prometheus* [9]. The Prometheus Award is given annually by the Libertarian Futurist Society to the best work of libertarian science fiction. It is perhaps therefore somewhat surprising that Duncan's is one of the most direct confrontations of the myth in sf literature. Though the *Prometheus Bound* could be argued to be the most science-fictional of all Greek tragedy (though that is, of course, a subjective opinion), I know of no retelling of the play in an sf style before Duncan [10].

The play appeals to Duncan for many reasons. One he has identified is that where many people would begin the story with the theft of fire and Prometheus' initial defiance of Zeus, Aeschylus begins after this has all happened [11]. Duncan finds the aftermath to the theft of fire to be more interesting. In particular he identifies humanity's ingratitude for what Prometheus has done for them as being a key point that he wishes to work with.

Duncan layers many nuances upon his retelling. Finnian hears Smith and Powers speaking Aeschylean words, though this is not what they are actually saying. Finnian finds himself uttering, almost against his will, a version of Prometheus' opening speech from Aeschylus' play, a lament for the torment inflicted upon him (*Prometheus Bound*, lines 88-127). Then the scene shifts to a basement in the early twenty-first century, where Finnian is secured in a similar fashion to in 1916, prior to being interrogated. Subsequently the scene slips again to a recuperation hospital in 1917, and then 1920s Glasgow, where Finnian is a union organizer and activist, as Duncan maps the Prometheus story onto early twentieth-century history.

With the retelling of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* I wanted to actually fuse the ancient poetry and the modern prose completely, to overlay them rather than intercut them. And I'd constrained myself to following Aeschylus's actual words as closely as possible, to having Seamus in the trenches of WWI or in the Glasgow of the Red Clydesiders actually voicing the sentiments that Aeschylus puts in his Prometheus's lips. [12]

Duncan's portrayal of Prometheus has been influenced by poet Tony Harrison's 1998 film *Prometheus*, where the Titan is similarly used as a symbol of working-class defiance against capitalism [13]. But there are further layers of meaning. Seamus

is Samuel, and Samuel is the Angel of Death Sammael, of Jewish mythology. Sammael is a fallen angel, and so becomes associated with Satan, and hence Lucifer. Lucifer is, of course, literally "the bringer of light", which then maps back onto Prometheus (following the lead of Milton in *Paradise Lost* [14]).

The second chapter introduces a new strand. One version of Jack Carter, who may have been Finnian's commanding officer in the trenches, is part of an archaeological expedition in search of a lost Sumerian city. Eighty years later, his grandson, another Jack Carter, is reading his grandfather's journals, and those of a second expedition in 1942. This narrative is heavily influenced by the works of H.P. Lovecraft (a debt acknowledged by references to Lovecraft's fictional Miskatonic University). But it also sets up a dialogue with the Prometheus strand. The chapter is called "Prometheus Found", and Carter's expedition is into the Caucasus, where Prometheus was in legend imprisoned (*Prometheus Bound*, line 422). Carter's quest can be likened to the early stages of the Prometheus myth (those not covered directly in Aeschylus' play), in that he is engaged upon a search for knowledge that has previously been kept hidden, just as humans knew nothing of fire before Prometheus brought it to them – and there is a sense that this knowledge will be dangerous. Space does not allow further discussion of this thread, or the third thread in volume two, that of a terrorist Jack Carter in a futuristic yet imperial 1999 (or of the threads from volume one that recur in the "Errata" sections). However, it should be noted that Duncan feels that the story he wishes to tell is related as much by the gaps between the narrative strands and their interaction as by the texts themselves.

Duncan returns to the Prometheus myth, and follows it through to its conclusion. Don MacChuill appears to Finnian as one of his soldiers, O'Sheen (i.e. Oceanus, the Titan who personifies the sea that surrounds the known world, and who has a scene with Prometheus in the Aeschylus play). The Oceanus scene elides from Finnian's 1920s memories into the twenty-first century version, repeating the identification of O'Sheen and Don, and revealing that this is part of an attempt to extract information from Finnian, by imposing the Prometheus archetype upon him. Anna, who in this strand is Finnian's girlfriend from before the war, is placed in the play's role of Io, the object of Zeus' affections who was transformed into a heifer and then driven across the world by a gadfly sent by Zeus' jealous wife, Hera; this maps down to the level of Anna repeating the wanderings of Io. As Hermes, the messenger god who appears in Aeschylus at the point where a messenger's speech reporting offstage events is part of the typical structure of tragedy, but who does not in *Prometheus Bound* deliver a messenger's speech,

we get not Thomas Messenger (the pun would perhaps be too obvious), but another type of *angelos* (Greek for "messenger"), the angel Metatron, one of the senior members of the Unkin (the "dukes").

Duncan cites two translations of *Prometheus Bound* that he used, both of which are quite old; those of Henry David Thoreau (which he used through Van Anglen's edition) and of George Thomson. These influence the language that Duncan uses for the Prometheus scenes, explained in story terms as the "Cant", the mystical language of the Unkin.

But neither of these were his first exposure to the play. This came from a television production, not of the *Prometheus Bound* itself, but of Tom Paulin's *Seize the Fire* (1988). *Seize the Fire* is itself a version, what classical scholarship describes as a "reception", of the *Prometheus Bound*, attempting to get through the story in under twenty-five minutes, as opposed to the seventy the full text would require. It deliberately employs modern, and often coarse, language and seeks to find contemporary political relevance. This production clearly influences Duncan's portrayal of the Prometheus figure. Reading Prometheus as a Trotsky figure is a development of the view of Prometheus as Romantic hero, epitomized in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), and of Prometheus as a symbol of the working man. Duncan has not mentioned, as far as I am aware, John Lehmann's pro-Communist account of the Caucasus, *Prometheus and the Bolsheviks* (1937), or other Soviet attempts to appropriate Prometheus, such as Ivan Kavalieridze's suppressed film *Prometheus* (1935). But he clearly does know the overall shape of the tradition.

This reading of Prometheus as socialist and Romantic hero leads to Duncan's final conclusion about the nature of the information that Metatron and his fellow dukes are attempting to extract from Seamus. That information is, in the end, the answer to the prophecy of the child that will be stronger than its father.

So who's the son – the child – that's greater than its father? I'll tell ye who it is, Anna.

Humanity.

(*Vellum*, p.468)

Such an optimistic and positive reading of the Prometheus myth, one imbued with faith in the human spirit, stands in marked contrast to the pessimistic approach of Tony Harrison, where Mankind futilely defies the power of the gods (though Harrison clearly believes that though defiance is a futile gesture, it is one that must be made). It is, however, closely related to Paulin's view of Promethean fire as a force for anarchistic freedom; but it needs to be noted that Paulin rejects Percy Shelley's romanticism in favour of an approach that

seems to owe more to Samuel Beckett. All of these influences go to mould Duncan's Prometheus.

The other way in which *Seize the Fire* particularly influences *Vellum* is in the presentation of the Chorus. In *Seize the Fire*, the Chorus are represented by a single voice, which is disembodied and invisible; there the invisibility is intended to increase the identification between Chorus and audience (when addressing the Chorus Prometheus often speaks directly to camera). In *Vellum*, the role of the Chorus is taken by bitmites, sentient pieces of nanotechnology that are introduced into Seamus Finnian's body as a means of aiding his assimilation to the Prometheus archetype. The bitmites speak with a single voice, but they too are invisible, being too small to be seen. But where they differ from the Chorus in both *Prometheus Bound* and *Seize the Fire* is in their role in driving the action. In Aeschylus, the Chorus are, as they often are in tragedy, observers. They are sympathetic to Prometheus' cause, but they can do nothing to aid him, though they choose in the end to share his fate. This disengagement is emphasized in *Seize the Fire* (which, needing to reduce the length of the piece, minimizes the Chorus as one method of achieving that aim). In Duncan, on the other hand, the bitmites drive the plot along. The cataclysm at the end, the equivalent of the end of Aeschylus' play, where Zeus splits the rock on which Prometheus is bound, is in *Vellum* the Evenfall, when the bitmites burst out of Prometheus/Finnan and rewrite the Vellum, destroying the order that the dukes have sought to impose.

The end result is nonetheless something that follows the dynamic of Aeschylus' play much more closely than some receptions, for example Harrison's film. Yet it never seems to be lacking in imagination or merely parroting the myth.

### Bacchae

Twenty years elapse between the end of *Vellum* and the second part of *The Book of All Hours, Ink*. The structure of the second part is the same as that of the first – different versions of the characters are seen though various story strands. One of those in Volume Three concerns a travelling troupe of players, performing in the various independent kingdoms that dukes have established across the Vellum. But this troupe has an ulterior motive, which is to destroy these petty dictatorships where possible. There are clearly deliberate echoes here of the Players in *Hamlet*, though the Players are pawns of Hamlet's schemes, rather than conspirators [15]. And the play Duncan has his troupe perform is based upon the *Bacchae*, the last play of the last of the three great Athenian tragedians, Euripides.

*Bacchae*, which is more often staged than

*Prometheus Bound*, is one of the most horrifying plays in Greek literature. Pentheus, King of Thebes, rejects the new cult of Dionysus. The god himself comes to Thebes, disguised as one of his own priests, and then manipulates Pentheus to the point where he is torn in half by his own mother [16]. Duncan provides a pyrotechnic rendition of the play, which has similarities to the staging employed by the National Theatre of Scotland in their 2007 production (which Duncan cannot have seen at the time of writing *Ink*).

*Bacchae* and *Prometheus Bound* make an interesting couplet. Both lie outside the normal cycle of subject matter for Greek tragedy, the Trojan War and its aftermath. Both deal with primal forces, and, unusually, have a deity rather than a human as the protagonist. Both, incidentally, appear to be very late in their author's *oeuvre*.

Duncan sees a direct thematic link between *Prometheus Bound* and *Bacchae*. He regards both as "humanist" plays. As noted above, for Duncan the child that will be stronger than the father is humanity, and humanity will outgrow the need for the gods. His reading of *Bacchae* is that Pentheus represents divine and/or rationalistic power, with all its restrictive and repressive elements, whilst Dionysus represents romantic humanity, and the urge to get out and enjoy life through drink and sex. Humanity, on this reading, clearly wins, utterly destroying Rationalism [17]. Such a reading is drawn from the works of noted sf author Philip K. Dick, and in particular his 1978 essay "Cosmogony and Cosmology".

Duncan adds further layers of identification. He makes a connection with the characters of the Commedia dell'Arte. The Commedia dell'Arte was a form of improvised comedy drama that emerged in Italy in the late mediaeval period. It was notable for its stock characters, who always wore the same costumes and masks, and the stock situations that allowed productions to be successfully improvised. It is thought by some to date back to ancient Roman dramatic arts [18].

In Duncan's version of the *Bacchae*, he maps the characters of the Commedia onto both his own characters, but also those of the *Bacchae*, seeing links and parallels between them all. Jack Carter is Dionysus, but he is also Harlequin. Joey is Pentheus is Pierrot – the link is between Pierrot's tear make up and Pentheus, named for sorrow (*Bacchae*, line 367). Guy is Teiresias is Scaramouche. The old man Pantaloons becomes Cadmus, and is played by Don. Anna is Columbine is Agave. This links Duncan's work once again with that of Michael Moorcock. Pierrot, Columbine and Harlequin are recurring motifs in Moorcock's *Cornelius Quartet*, especially in the final two novels, *The English Assassin* (1972)

and *The Condition of Muzak* (1977, revised 1979). Thomas, meanwhile, plays the Chorus – "kouros, darling koré of our comedies" as Duncan writes (*Ink*, p.52), punning across the Greek language with serious intent. The typical male Greek statue is described as a *kouros*, and the female equivalent a *kore*. So Thomas is commentator, but also the sexualized subject of male gaze, in both male and female form. The masks of the Harlequinade exist in an interactive relationship with the masks that were worn by performers in Greek tragedy.

Duncan also sees links between the *Bacchae* and the Sumerian myths that feature strongly in *The Book of All Hours*. "Enkidu at his watering hole is Pan in the forest, Dionysus and his Bacchae up on the hills. Enkidu ensnared by the hunter's plan is Dionysus bound by Pentheus, Romance trapped by Rationalism, bound by a King of Tears whose great crime is to refuse to pay this god of passion the honour that he's due, to deny the revels, the wild moments of Byronic existence," he writes elsewhere [19].

The final layer that Duncan brings in is that of the English horror story. The players are using their drama to trap and kill a duke. He is lured into performing Pierrot's role in the final scene. In a sequence similar to Robin Hardy and Anthony Schaffer's film *The Wicker Man* (1973), where Edward Woodward's policeman ends dressed as a fool before sacrifice, the duke takes on the role, and the death of Pentheus/Pierrot is then enacted for real. Duncan may not have had *The Wicker Man* directly in mind, but he certainly recognizes the similarity – as he says, *The Wicker Man* and *Bacchae* are in many ways the same story.

References back to the use of Prometheus in Volume Two are scattered through Volume Three. Duncan links the two plays through the use of "io". In *Prometheus Bound* Io is the name of a character. In *Bacchae*, it is instead a cry of ecstasy (*Bacchae*, line 578); nevertheless Duncan underlines the link between the two words. And as with the Prometheus myth, the story of *Bacchae* spills over into other threads in the novel. We see Phreedom/Anna leading her Maidens across the land of Themes, and another Phreedom bears a child in New York that she then kills. And is the duke really another incarnation of Jack, who is both Anna's child and the lover of her brother? By this point in the novel, Duncan is interested in raising such issues, but not concerned to answer them. This is not a novel where narrative follows a consistent linear path. But Duncan reads the original Euripides play as itself ambiguous: "Is he Dionysus masquerading as his own priest, or is he the Dionysus within every priest, waiting to be revealed?" [20]

## Conclusion

I've tried to give a flavour of the ways in which Hal Duncan uses these two tragedies in his novel. As *The Book of All Hours* is over a thousand pages long in total, it is impossible in an article of this length to give full in-depth coverage, and there are other classical allusions, such as his use of Virgil, that I have barely touched upon. Nevertheless, I hope I have shown that Duncan's use of Classical mythology is exciting and challenging. Indeed, good though the books in the Canongate Myths series are, I would argue that none of them are as innovative in their use of mythological narrative as Duncan.

## Endnotes

- [1] I have no wish to belittle the Canongate series, merely to point out that this is not the only place where one can find fresh retellings of classical myths. I have not read Michael Faber, *The Fire Gospel* (2008), Canongate's version of the Prometheus myth.
- [2] For the influence of Moorcock on Duncan, see his own comments in Williamson, *Interzone* 209, p.9.
- [3] I have borrowed the term from an unpublished paper by Nick Lowe, "The past is an alien planet: classical literature as science-fiction universe", delivered at the SF and the Canon conference at Anglia Ruskin University, March 24th 2007.
- [4] <<http://www.bookspotcentral.com/2006/05/on-the-spot-interview-at-bookspotcentral-hal-duncan-2006/>>.
- [5] Note, for instance, his Scots idiom translation/version of the fragments of Heraclitus <<http://notesfromthegeekshow.blogspot.com/2009/04/kings.html>>.
- [6] Page numbers from the 2005 Macmillan hardback edition. The 2006 Pan paperback has different pagination.
- [7] Duncan uses the titles given to the individual poems by Rieu's translation, "The Golden Age Returns" and "The Song of Silenus".
- [8] Possibly deliberately, this is a mixture of a direct transliteration of the original Greek name, "Hephaistos", and the Latinized version, "Hephaestus".
- [9] Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree*, pp.7-39. Duncan himself refers to this title in an essay on the character of sf <<http://notesfromthegeekshow.blogspot.com/2005/03/modernist-prometheus.html>>.
- [10] I will happily be proved wrong on this point, and would invite anyone who knows differently to contact me.
- [11] Duncan follows the generally-accepted view (see, e.g., Thomson, *Prometheus Bound*, pp.32-3; Dougherty, *Prometheus*, p.70) that *Prometheus Bound*

was the opening play in the *Promethia* trilogy, of which it certainly formed a part.

- [12] <<http://www.bookspotcentral.com/2006/05/on-the-spot-interview-at-bookspotcentral-hal-duncan-2006/>>.
- [13] Hal Duncan, pers. comm.
- [14] Even this just scratches the surface of Finnans construction. He is also "a huge homage to the character of O'Sullivan Beare from Edward Whittemores *Jerusalem Quartet*" <<http://www.bookspotcentral.com/2006/05/on-the-spot-interview-at-bookspotcentral-hal-duncan-2006/>>.
- [15] Duncan is not the first to see a thematic connection between the *Bacchae* and *Hamlet*; Ted Hughes saw one (see Reid, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, p.117).
- [16] The translations of *Bacchae* that Duncan used were Murray, *The Bacchae*, and Vellacott, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*.
- [17] <<http://notesfromthegeekshow.blogspot.com/2007/03/eternal-moment-of-modernity.html>>.
- [18] Bellinger, *A Short History of the Drama*, pp.153-7.
- [19] <<http://notesfromthegeekshow.blogspot.com/2007/03/eternal-moment-of-modernity.html>>.
- [20] <<http://notesfromthegeekshow.blogspot.com/2007/04/halls-of-pentheus-part-one.html>>.

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# Other Views: Gwyneth Jones interviewed by Tanya Brown

Gwyneth Jones is the author of more than twenty science fiction and fantasy novels, including those written for younger readers as Ann Halam. She has won two World Fantasy Awards, the Arthur C Clarke Award, the Philip K Dick Award, the James Tiptree, Jr Award, and the BSFA short fiction award. The following interview was conducted at the Star Tavern, on 27 August 2008, for the BSFA's London Meeting.

**Tanya Brown:** You have a new novel coming soon. Why's it called *Spirit*?

**Gwyneth Jones:** Because Collancz didn't like *The Princess of Bois Dormant* – maybe they thought it was difficult to pronounce. I'd just finished reviewing Iain Banks's *Matter* so I said the first thing that came into my head: *Spirit*. Luckily it just so happens that there is an Aleutian pod in this book, which is called the *Spirit* of '89, and it gets called "Spirit" for short. As some of you may vaguely remember, Aleutian artifacts are sentient, so it's a person. And so *Spirit* it is, though I shall try to rescue *The Princess of Bois Dormant* when I get to proofs.

**TB:** Perhaps Collancz thought that title sounded like a fantasy novel – but this is sf, isn't it?

**GJ:** Yes. I think so. It's got spaceships, starfighters...

**TB:** A princess?

**GJ:** It's certainly got a princess.

**TB:** And Aleutians: what are the Aleutians doing here?

**GJ:** Not to mention Li Xi-Feng. Ever since I wrote *Escape Plans*, a bit more than 20 years ago, I've been thinking about the problem of getting out of here. It's a common science fictional theme, and I do not believe that conventional space travel can do it. If you have a lot of money and thousands and thousands of years, maybe you can terraform Mars. So I've been thinking about how to traverse those ridiculous distances, and trying to come up with a fantasy mechanism that would do that, and a series of events that would explain why and that would cover the how: how do we get there from here. I was brought up by cyberpunks, and cyberpunks taught me that you must not write science fiction that does not have a conceivable backstory. So I had to think of a way. I started in *Escape Plans* and then I worked on it through the Aleutian trilogy, *White Queen* and *North Wind* and *Phoenix Cafe*, figuring out the ideas of instantaneous transit which are invented by somebody called Peenemunde Buonarotti. Having figured out how it would operate, I wrote *Bold as Love*. In the *Bold as Love* sequence, I track through all five books the development of mind/matter tech. The main scientific

idea in that sequence is breaking the mind/matter barrier. After writing the Aleutian trilogy, I'd always intended to go on and describe the world after the Buonarotti transit, but I didn't have to make it continuous with the previous books. It could have been some completely different future with instantaneous transit that was the Buonarotti transit under another name.

There are many things that have from time to time annoyed me about space opera, but the one thing that has always got me down as a reader and as a prospective writer is that gap. It's not the foreseeable future, it's way over the horizon: hundreds of years away, sometimes thousands of years away. There's this massive discontinuity, and I can't pretend it's not there. You could invent a potted history – this is the *Dune* solution, pages and pages of italics explaining what happened in the 300 years between here and there. I didn't like that, and neither did I like the thing where there's a discontinuity but nobody in the book recognises it: they're all quoting Bob Dylan and A level physics from the 20th century.

When I came to write the Buonarotti book, after having done a little suite of Buonarotti stories to get myself into the frame, I decided that hell, I've got this backstory, I'll use it. Nobody who hasn't read the Aleutian books or the *Bold as Love* books will even notice, they'll just get a few names which are unfamiliar to them because they're the history of these people. But I'll know and it'll save me from falling into that gap or getting niggled by having to quote Bob Dylan. So when you read *Spirit* (or *The Princess of Bois Dormant*) you will find that the history of the Aleutians ruling Earth is in the background, the Human Renaissance, and how humans first invented the Buonarotti transit; and then 300 years later rediscovered it. You'll find that further back in the past the Earth – which is known as the Blue Planet for obvious reasons – was united by the first emperor, a woman called Li Xi-Feng who is possibly still living at the time of Bibi's adventures.

And that's why the Aleutians, not to mention a few *Bold as Love* references, are in the book.

**TB:** You mentioned the suite of stories: one of those generated a certain amount of controversy, didn't it?

**GJ:** "The Fulcrum", yes. "The Fulcrum" is set on the Kuiper Belt station called the Panhandle, which will eventually become Speranza. It hasn't got Aleutians in it, because I decided that was too much weight for a short story, but it's set at the changeover between conventional spacers who have been struggling along – asteroid miners, B-movie actors doing virtual avatar stuff on Mars – they've been struggling along through

the Aleutian empire and the Aleutians' disinterest, and now the Buonarotti transit is being developed and all the conventional spacers are doomed. They're slaves of microgravity, they can't afford to go back to Earth because they can't afford the hospital fees to get them up and running again. "The Fulcrum" is the story of that tradition. I think of it as a Dashiell Hammett story but I also think of it as a *Light* sort of story. If I'd had the nerve I would have dedicated it to Mr Harrison, because I read *Light* and I thought of "The Fulcrum". The story was quite popular and it appeared in lots of venues. Then one day I found a review of it on a site called gangstersandguns, which is a UK gun lobby site, which spooked me considerably. (There was another review on a porn site, but the review was all about oral sex and I didn't think it was that offensive.) But the gangstersandguns review was tearing into "The Fulcrum" because it didn't have any guns in it. It spooked me because I thought, "this has to be a science fiction fan who is also a gun lobbyist and who got annoyed enough at my story – which isn't exactly non-violent – that they reviewed it at length on this non-sf site": and so, as I said in my blog, I took to sleeping with my water pistol under my pillow. After I wrote that blog post the review disappeared.

**TB:** That leads us on to a more expansive question about the new space opera: whether or not space opera does support the big military machine. It's something you discussed in your review of Iain M. Banks' *Matter* [1].

**GJ:** As I said in the review of *Matter*, people now think that Iain Banks' Culture novels were an immediate critical and popular hit. They were not. They were unfashionable, unrecognised. But the thing about space opera coming back into fashion is that I saw it as very much a retrograde step. The conventional space opera certainly takes as its premise, in most cases, an environment of permanent warfare. The characters are either shiny military or mercenary, or they are on the cynical fringes of the military / mercenary world. I didn't like that view of the distant future. I'd previously concentrated on the near future; I didn't want science fiction to return to the Gernsback continuum, where the world is perfect and wonderful and run by Nazis (you must know the Gibson story) ... For a while I didn't take to it and then, y'know, everybody's doing it. It's like miniskirts. When miniskirts first came out I thought "never in a million years", and then, despite your justified reservations about the legs in question, the hem of your skirt starts creeping upwards because everybody's doing it. In the end, I was thinking, "I'd quite like to write space opera". Of course the Buonarotti device meant that eventually I would have to write a space opera, but it wouldn't have been such a full-on space opera, if space opera had not become fashionable in the meantime. If you should come to read *Spirit* (or *The Princess of Bois Dormant*) you'll find out what I mean. There's no pretending that it's anything else.

**TB:** You're addressing the inherent themes of space opera in *Spirit*, but you're also reinterpreting them, approaching them from the non-fiction side as a critic. This year the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA) recognised your criticism by conferring the

Pilgrim Award. Congratulations! As you said on your blog, you hadn't really expected any sort of critical acclaim for your criticism.

**GJ:** I don't know when I became a respected critic!

**TB:** Do you see the fiction and the criticism as two ways of addressing issues in science fiction? What's the relation between the two?

**GJ:** In a recent SFX poll I was described as a hippie, and I think that's the politest thing they could think of to say about what I am. What I am is an intellectual. Whatever I was doing I would be thinking about it, thinking hard and getting deep into it. So naturally since I write science fiction, I also think about science fiction, and occasionally I write about what I'm thinking about. I didn't ever set out to write criticism, it was always triggered by something that interested me as a fictioneer. I've often wanted to be a fly on the wall at conferences where things interesting to science fiction are happening, and a good way to do that is to present a paper. So I've presented papers at a Computers and Writing conference; at a conference about the governance of cyberspace; at a conference about biopolitics. This is the way you get to sit there and listen, and if you're lucky you get to hear the corridor talk as well. There was always something like that behind my critical work: somebody gave me a nudge and I wrote something. But sf reviewing has changed a good deal, since my heyday. When I did my notorious review of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, back in 1994, as I said in my Pilgrim acceptance speech, I didn't know that I was breaking any boundaries. Nowadays it's well-nigh impossible for a science fiction writer to pick up a significant new novel and not know what they're supposed to think about it: and that's the internet explosion for you. You can turn off your broadband and shut down your email and be pure, but if you're living in the internet world you're bound to know what other people think because, to a great extent, that's where science fiction and the science fiction community happens now – on the internet. My review of *Snow Crash* may have poked fun at certain aspects of the novel, and I suppose I knew it was a cat among the pigeons review, but I really didn't know I was being wildly non-conformist. Not until the reaction.

**TB:** You've said that criticism and fiction come from exploring the same areas. What do you think is the difference between criticism and reviewing?

**GJ:** Reviewing is part of the publishing machine. It's a means of promoting and selling books. That's what publishers believe, that's what a great many writers believe, and that's what the public tacitly accepts. Criticism is a disinterested commentary on the genre. It lives in the chinks of the reviewing machine.

Reviewing books is a shockingly corrupt business: it always has been and it always will be. You can't blame the publishers and the writers. The gateway to success is very narrow and many writers and many publishers take it for granted that schmoozing the reviewer, trashing the opposition, c'est la guerre. You try to be as honest as you possibly can. You try to be clean. But I think to see yourself as a saviour, cleaning the Augean stables, that's an error. Reviewing will go on being corrupt whatever people do. Some people, equally, will

always love writing critical studies of novels, and they will be honest because it's what they enjoy. If you've got a reviewer or a critic who really likes the sound of their own voice then that's the public's best defence: they're going to have more respect for the integrity of their own writing than they have for the commercial interests involved. All reviewers are biased. If you are a person who likes to read reviews then *pick a good writer*, discover your chosen critic's bias by reading a few of their reviews, and then you'll be pretty much getting the good stuff.

**TB:** There's fiction and there's criticism: there's also a strong thread in your work of science.

**GJ:** I've been a long-time science groupie. If I'd been able to pass my Maths O-level I would probably have gone into plant biology. That's the trade I gave my scientist heroine in *Life*, because I knew something about it and I could lead her through the first steps of it without killing myself with research. I'd have been a scientist, and by now I'd probably be some sort of administrator, pushing paper around. I'm good at it. Since I didn't go into science I remained a groupie. I still read scientific papers and books for pleasure. I like thinking about the next big thing; and this is where I have a disagreement with Geoff Ryman and his Mundane sf, because anybody who has the slightest acquaintance with modern beliefs about cosmology ... I mean, mundane just does not cover it. The things that people believe about how the universe was formed, whether it was formed, are just completely bizarre. As I discussed in the *Bold as Love* books, the weirdness of new science gets buried in the applied technology and we never think about it. If you actually thought about what a *transistor* is and does, you'd be spooked. Strangeness seems to me to be unavoidable in science. Of course you don't have to think about it. You can just use quantum mechanics or whatever as cookery; put the ingredients, shake 'em around, see whether you've got the right kind of particles. But if you actually think about it then it's very bizarre. I like science for that reason, and I like trying to think about fantasy-science things like mind/matter tech, because it's as wild as the reality. The state of high-energy physics at the moment is ludicrous, it seems likely that it's ripe for a revolution. My imaginary version of this revolution is breaking the mind/matter barrier, getting to a point where there's some kind of experiment that will prove that our perception of the universe and the material universe itself are, on some level, continuous. The real revolution will be totally different, but I bet it will be equally disorienting.

**TB:** Can you say a bit about the "When It Changed" project?

**GJ:** I don't actually know much about it yet myself. Geoff Ryman works for Manchester University now, and this summer he started a project: the net result is supposed to be an anthology of stories which are triggered by several different science fiction writers shadowing several different scientists. I'm not sure yet who else is in it apart from Geoff himself, but I would assume all the usual suspects. If you're a fan of the Aleutian books, or you've read the Buonarotti stories, you'll see it makes sense for me to have picked on

the chap that does particle accelerators, Dr Kai Hock. Whether he'll think my instantaneous transit is even a good joke is a very big part of the question! But that's the way it had to be. You couldn't really expect the scientists to choose their science fiction writers – most of them may have read Asimov, and they may like *Doctor Who*, but modern print science fiction isn't likely to take up much of their time.

Each of the writers picked a scientist we liked (Geoff moderated somehow so that nobody got scrappy) and the idea is that you study your scientist's work insofar as your tiny brain allows you to do so, you take a trip to visit your scientist and then you write a story. Your scientist in some way moderates this story – I don't know how that's going to work – and then it goes into this anthology. That's all I know so far. I haven't made second contact with my particle accelerator chap yet; we're still at first contact. He's got a lot of stuff, PowerPoint presentations, on the web, I am going to look at them and see if I can make anything of them, see if I can pick up a few key words before I go and see him. And then we'll see what happens. I haven't got a story in mind. I feel that in this instance it would be a mistake to have a story in mind, especially since I don't know why Geoff called the anthology "When It Changed". "When It Changed" is a highly significant ancient feminist science fiction story (when I say ancient, ooh, a bit more than five years ago): I wonder if that's meant to be on our minds? I don't usually write short stories quickly: it can take me a year to write a short story. But I'll think of something: a wing and a prayer.

**TB:** What else do you have in progress?

**GJ:** I've got a short story collection called *Grazing the Long Acre* with PS Publishing. "*Grazing the Long Acre*" is the title of a story that was in *Interzone* about 20 years ago, and it involves whores on the roadsides of one of the great roads of Europe. It's an expression, sort of a proverb, that I know from Ireland, but it's also known in pretty much the same words – Polish words – in Poland; which is where the story is set. What it means is, if you've got a cow and you ain't got a field then you take her out to graze the long acre, the verges of the road. It's like "living in the chinks of the world's machine" only different, possibly less whiny. I was going to call the collection *Gravegoods* because that was the most ancient Buonarotti device story, but "*Gravegoods*" is such a conventional name it started to annoy me, so I changed it. That's supposed to come out at the end of 2008 too, but

**TB:** What about non-fiction, and critical works?

**GJ:** I keep a blog intermittently. It isn't a proper blog, actually it doesn't have anything remotely blog-like about it, it's just occasional diary entries. Every now and then I take a book for review from *Strange Horizons*, and that's about it. As far as I can remember I haven't got any non-fiction I'm working on at the moment. The fiction I'm working on is an Ann Halam novel, a Gothic novel with a spooky house and happenings which may be supernatural but really they aren't.

**Audience:** You referred to an extraordinary novel you wrote a few years back, *Life*, which had a bit of a problem finding a UK publisher despite winning

awards in America. Yet suddenly you're releasing a space opera which seems very far removed from what you normally write.

**GJ:** I haven't found a UK publisher for *Life* and I think it's too late now, it'll never be published here. Writing a space opera is ... what can I say, it's all the same to me. Literary or full-on genre, I like writing both. I'd come to like the idea of writing a space opera so I wrote one. My last project was a rock'n'roll fantasy: before that it was the Aleutian trilogy, and before that, *Kairos*, *Escape Plans*, *Divine Endurance*, which were thematically connected, to my mind but I don't expect many people noticed! All my books are different, I don't have a specialism: I suppose in some ways I'm a dedicated follower of fashion. Space opera's fashionable, write space opera.

**Audience:** One of the things I like about the Aleutian trilogy and the *Bold as Love* sequence was how tightly bound they were to the present, to this planet Earth now, the ways people think and live on this planet now. Are you trying to escape from that in *Spirit*?

**GJ:** The second book I wrote was called *Escape Plans*: I'm always trying to escape! But I spoke earlier about establishing continuity. To be comfortable writing *Spirit* I needed social continuity. When you read it, you will (or should) find it mentally continuous with the worlds that I'd imagined, with the futures I'd imagined in the Aleutian trilogy and in the *Bold as Love* sequence – in reverse order of course.

**Audience:** Some scientists believe there isn't a continuity, that we can't get there from here

**GJ:** To the stars from here? Maybe not, in real life (though it's a sad thought); but we're talking about fiction. Okay, I've made myself more comfortable as a writer by using my previous fiction to give myself a fictional continuity.

**Audience:** When you were last here talking about *Bold as Love*, you admitted committing trilogy or worse. Are you doing the same for *Spirit*, or is it a one-off?

**GJ:** It won't necessarily be a one-off. This is a space opera. There won't be a sequel to *Spirit* but there could easily be books set in the same universe. It's got legs, as an experimental space. There's five worlds, so far: I could write a book set on each. I could do Culture-style sideways continuity!

**TB:** Are you planning on writing any more stories in the *Bold as Love* series?

**GJ:** Good question. Originally I thought that I would write a four-volume novel and the fifth volume would be long afterwards, a reprise, in a different style. *Bold As Love* ended up a five-volume novel, because the fourth book got too long and I had to split it. I don't know if I'll ever get the chance to write the "long afterwards" story. But there's a long short story that I probably will write called "Stone Free", featuring the same characters and some new ones.

**Audience:** How independent is Ann Halam from Gwyneth Jones?

**GJ:** Not really independent at all. I can't tell the difference between the books. But I know one way in which they are very different. I haven't had much editorial input with Gwyneth Jones books, since Rayner Unwin and I spent a really long time – before some of

you were born – duking it out over the body of *Divine Endurance*. The Ann Halam books, on the other hand, are committee books. It's a cooperative venture. I pitch an idea, and we go to and fro with it, and at every turn I'm saying "what d'you think, shall I do this?" and my editor, my American editor, my agent – on one occasion my American editor's cleaning lady, I tell no lie – say "but why don't you do this?" and I say "I'll think about it". I'm very happy writing that way, it's very interesting, but that's the difference, and if the difference between the voice of Ann Halam and that of Gwyneth Jones is small then maybe it's because I have multiple personality disorder and all my books are written by committee anyway, I'm just not aware of it except with the Ann Halam ones.

**Audience:** Back in 2003 you said you thought sf was "claustrophobic": do you still believe that?

**GJ:** I can't remember saying it, but science fiction can be claustrophobic because it's such a small world. "Sci-fi" is a major part of mainstream culture. Everybody loves "sci-fi". But sf is a very small world and it's got this oppositional relationship with sci-fi, and I think that's probably what I meant: it's a ghetto mentality. Writing the *Bold as Love* books I didn't feel claustrophobic at all, because I didn't feel I was constrained by "the difference between science fiction and fantasy", or "the rules about writing about the near future". Writing *Spirit* – well, there is something, I hate to have to admit it, about those wide open spaces between the stars that's very liberating. People flying around ... not really all over the galaxy, much less all over the universe, but there's a lot of space, and space opera is a place where you can play and not feel constrained.

**Audience:** One of your talents as a writer is showing other ways of looking at what's happening.

**GJ:** This is something that has dogged my footsteps or my typewritten words since *White Queen*, at least: when I decided that I would make the Aleutians speak with my voice, and I found them called the most alien beings that had graced science fiction in years. So that maybe answers your question: I don't make it up, I do see the world differently, and asking me how to calibrate how exactly I see the world differently – well, that's why I write the novels, to try and find out for myself.

#### Endnotes

- [1] Reviews for *Strange Horizons*, 14 April 2008. <[http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2008/04/matter\\_by\\_jain\\_comments.shtml](http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2008/04/matter_by_jain_comments.shtml)>

# First Impressions

Edited by Kari Sperring



**Elizabeth Bear - All the Windwracked Stars**  
Tor, 2008, 368pp, h/b ISBN  
9780765318824

**Reviewed by Penny Hill**

I feel I have to start this review in a different place than I normally would. Before I let the work speak for itself, some background has to be established.

A reaction to one of Elizabeth Bear's works has recently been the starting point of a huge debate on LiveJournal on the subject of cultural appropriation. This has come to be known as "RaceFail '09". It is not a debate that can be easily summarised – I leave it to the reader to decide how much more they want to find out. However, in light of the discussion, it is especially unfortunate that the opening line of *All the Windwracked Stars* is "He was born white before *sie* burned him".

I hope that this will not prevent readers from continuing with this novel. The cultural heritage that is being re-used (or appropriated) is that of a dominant culture. The examination of power relationships is key to this novel and I believe Elizabeth Bear's exploration is worth reading.

I did enjoy the high concept. We're in a post-apocalyptic world. The apocalypse that has taken place just before the beginning of the novel is Ragnarok. The Fenris wolf has swallowed the sun and the angels and Valkyries are all dead. All except one, who fled due to cowardice.

Muire, our viewpoint character, is constantly rebuking herself for her cowardice and diffidence. Her unwillingness to become involved with others provides a strong starting point for the story. Unfortunately, it also makes it difficult to empathise with her during the course of the novel.

The Fenris wolf was beautifully presented as a shadowy, menacing figure, whose own part in the plot is not that which I expected. However, the fascinating development of his story arc is something I don't want to reveal too much about in a review.

One thing I don't feel Bear handled very well is the time structure. There are at least three separate timelines. Two of them are handled through flashbacks interwoven with the main thread of the narrative, but not differentiated from each other in any way. As a result, I found myself wondering why two groups

of people didn't seem to know each other, given that they both knew the protagonist Muire. This also meant that we lost the sense of the timescale of the novel. The events take place over a thousand or so years, but the significant events do not seem to be placed in their own time period and it is only towards the end of the novel that we realise that some of them occur hundreds of years apart. This, combined with the emotionally reticent heroine, does occasionally make the book feel cold and distant.

On a personal level, I found the use of the Old English spelling of wælcyrge to be a mental trip hazard every time I came across it, together with the hero's name of Cathoair, which I just kept sub-vocalising as "Cat Hair".

One theme that was handled well was the cost of magic. Using magic to restore a balance or make a difference is seen here as both dangerous and costly. I find that fantasies that use this trope feel more grounded and realistic than those which use magic as a shortcut.

Overall there were some great ideas in this novel but I don't feel the execution quite matched up to them. I feel this book needed one more re-working before publication in order to really tell the story in the best way possible.

**Alex Bell - Jasmyn**  
Gollancz 2009, £18.99, 304pp, h/b, ISBN  
9780575080287

**Reviewed by Myfanwy Rodman**

Two months after her husband's sudden death, Jasmyn is still grieving. It seems monstrously unfair that her beloved Liam should be gone and buried while Jasmyn remains so miserably alive, and she fights to shut out the rest of the world.

But then strange things start to happen. Dead black swans fall from the sky onto Liam's casket at the funeral; strangers threaten Jasmyn and invade her home, claiming to be her husband's friends. And worse still, Liam's estranged and antisocial brother Ben, who knows more than he is telling, is the only one she can turn to for help.

Frustrated and determined, Jasmyn sets off on a journey that will take her from the Neuschwanstein in Germany to the Catacombs of Paris. Bit by bit



**Alex Bell  
JASMYN**

she will unravel mysteries, glimpse a secret world that exists parallel to our own and finally find herself facing the most shocking secret of all.

*Jasmyn*, Alex Bell's second novel, is a cracking read from start to finish. One third mystery, one third fairy tale and one third romance, at its heart lies the tale of Swan Lake, beautifully and eerily evoked in both its fairy tale and historical aspects. The involvement of the Swan King, Ludwig II of Bavaria, was particularly interesting. The supernatural occurrences connected to this theme help to add to the tension as they become increasingly more dangerous and disturbing. And the romance is well handled in the usual girl hate boy, girl hate boy, girl love boy way.

The plotting is tight; while I saw some twists coming, others were a complete surprise. The baddies are perhaps a little thinly sketched out, and the middle of the book meanders about a bit, but the pace picks up again near the end. Though the supernatural is well described, some aspects of it are never really explained which gives the novel a visual, cinematic feel. And I'm not sure how much I like the fact that the main character, Jasmyn, is an albino. Though it links in nicely with the Swan Lake theme, and affects the development of her character, it also feels a little contrived to me. As if it has been put in because it is 'cool' rather than integral to the overall plot or feel of the book. I also found the 'introduction' at the beginning of the book completely unnecessary.

This novel does take a little getting into, the first few chapters being largely about Jasmyn's general grief at her husband's death. But once grief gives way to spookiness and Jasmyn begins to interact with other characters, most notably her husband's brother, Ben, it becomes much more involving. There are some clumsy sentences but these are balanced with beautiful, atmospheric descriptions.

I very much enjoyed *Jasmyn* and would certainly read more of Bell's books. It contained many original elements, and has a good pace and a sense of artistic control. Bell also deserves much kudos for making were-swans sexy. Buy, Open and Enjoy.

**Andrew M. Butler, and others – An Unofficial Companion to the Novels of Terry Pratchett**  
Greenwood, 2007 472pp. £25 h/b ISBN  
9781846450013; £13 p/b ISBN 9781846450433

**Carrie Pyykkonen and Linda Washington – Secrets of the Wee Free Men and Discworld: the myths and legends of Terry Pratchett's Multiverse**  
St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 2008 269pp. £6.50 p/b  
ISBN 9780312372439

Reviewed by Jessica Yates

Why should we need an Unofficial Companion when there is already an authorised Discworld Companion? The latter's third edition came out in 2003, and Mr. Pratchett is so prolific that, five years on, there is more material for discussion. More to the point, the official Discworld Companion is an internal reference guide to Discworld, with entries restricted to characters, places and customs in this long-running series, while the Unofficial Companion stands outside the works and

covers all Pratchett's fiction including non-Discworld books and TV adaptations, with thematic entries on Fairy Tales, Narrative, Musicals, Hollywood Films, Shakespeare, Tolkien, and many more.

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

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

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

The entry on Detective and Noir Fiction and Films could have benefited from a paragraph on that sf noir movie, *Blade Runner*: I have found several parallels in the City Watch series. Deckard and Vimes are both



Bogart figures. Nor do they reference James Bond, whose visit to the College of Arms in London surely lies behind Vimes' visit to the College of Heralds in *Feet of Clay*.

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

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

While I am sorry to see so many misprints resulting, I assume, from pressure to publish, there are many appropriate illustrations to enhance the entries, such as photos of Marty Feldman as Igor, and costumed fans. Entries are readable, not loaded with jargon, and certainly show you how to better appreciate and admire the books. As Jacqueline Simpson said at the 2008 Discworld Convention, to enjoy Terry Pratchett's books one must appreciate his sources.

I add a review of an American book on Pratchett. *Secrets of the Wee Free Men* is a follow-up to the authors' book on Narnia, *Inside "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe"*, and like that, was planned to coincide with a movie – except that there is no fresh news of a film of *The Wee Free Men*. The book is structured in three overlapping parts: themes and sources of parody; characters, ranging across the books and compared with counterparts in other fantasy fiction; and places, power and technomancy. It's written by two avowed enthusiasts, out to please Pratchett's American fans and make new converts, and they write in an engaging colloquial style, though after a while I found it as irritating as overmuch structuralist jargon would be. Here are some examples: "Since this is not a short chapter, maybe you should send out for pizza"; "Tiffany, Magrat and Agnes all had the benefit of hanging with Granny and Nanny and learning from them"; "In Discworld, Pratchett will sometimes throw a curve in regard to the villain".

They have researched their sources, provided footnotes, an index and a bibliography with websites, and bring their own discoveries to the table including a new Tolkien reference, from *Wintersmith*, varying

their presentation with charts comparing Vimes with other fictional detectives and Ridcully with other fantasy wizards. They have a good section on Chaos linking chaos theory with the opening of a Discworld book which presents the problem to be solved by the end, and they quote appositely from Machiavelli. (The painting *Waggon Stuck in River* is probably based on Constable's *Haywain*, not Bosch's.) It's a wide-ranging popular guide to Discworld from a mainstream publisher, and I couldn't find any misprints or serious errors, apart from attributing *Dr. Moreau* to Jules Verne; their relentless buttonholing irritates me, but may however "hook" the American readers.

**Orson Scott Card – *Ender in Exile***  
Tor, New York 2008, 377pp, h/b, ISBN 9780765304964  
Reviewed by Graham Andrews.

"Our judgement of an established author is never simply an aesthetic judgement. In addition to any literary merit it may have, a new book by him has a historic interest for us as the act of a person in whom we have long been interested" (W. H. Auden). Ergo: reviewers should not critique such a volume in boxed-off isolation, but as a further working out of the author's oft-expressed personal themes.

Andrew – never Andy – Wiggins has become a nice little earner for his creator, with fans the whole gameboy world over. I must admit to



considering the original novella "*Ender's Game*" to be a wet-dream power fantasy for adolescents of all ages. Nicolas Pelletier of Montréal (chronological age unknown) sent this earnest encomium for *Ender's Game* to *The Guardian*: 'Everybody can fall in love with this little boy who is the hero of this story and then enjoy his ascent to the leadership of the space navy' (Reviews section, 21/2/09). This 'little boy'

used his 'heroic' VR abilities to wipe out an entire race of admittedly nasty alien 'buggers' (later referred to as 'formics'). Genocide, made simple.

*Ender in Exile* is the ninth sequel to *Ender's Game* – the tenth if we count the short-story collection entitled *First Meetings in the Enderverse* (2003). Well, it's actually a kind of 'bridgework' between *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead* (1987). The front cover blurb actually reads 'AFTER BATTLE SCHOOL... THE LOST YEARS' (just as J. M. Dillard plugged the gap between 'classic' *Star Trek* and *Star Trek: the Motion Picture*). The world-saving but now loose cannon Ender Wiggins is summarily packed off to be the governor of a colony world called Shakespeare:

I accepted the title. When I get to the colony, then we'll see just how much of a governor I'll be. The Constitution you came up with is good, but the real constitution is always the same: The leader only has as much power as his followers allow him.

A feature-film version of *Ender's Game* has been whizzing around Development Hell circles for at least

twenty years. But it's been pre-empted by *The Last Starfighter* (1984): "Sci-fi for kids, about a youngster whose video-game prowess makes him a prime recruit to help real-life planet under attack" (Leonard Malin's *Movie Guide*). Unpretentious fun – two words I can't imagine myself using about any possible movie based upon the 'Enderverse' as written. (Alan Dean Foster turned it into one of his better tie-in novelizations.)

*Ender in Exile* isn't a bad book, because Card is never less than a smoothy-chops writer. It's just a well-enough-written *unnecessary* book. Enderphiles will lap it up, of course, and why the hell not? But, to paraphrase what Pauline Kael said about well-enough-made movies: these inoffensive make-work books are all over with the reading. The product is completely consumed. There is not even any roughage. There is no memory of reading the book, not even an aftertaste.

**Mike Carey – Thicker Than Water**

Orbit, 2008, £7.99, 480pp, p/b, ISBN 9781841496566

Reviewed by Michael Abbott

Felix Castor is a freelance exorcist in London. He's used to handling ghosts, werewolves, zombies and even demons. He's friends with some of them, too. By his own admission, he's a bastard sometimes – and the story here bears that out – but he also tries to do the right thing: a sort of Philip Marlowe of the supernatural. This is the fourth Felix Castor book in a planned series of six, and it cranks up the action a stage higher. Castor's private life has got mixed up with his cases before – most notably before the first book began, when he helped his best friend become possessed by a demon – but in this one an old enemy from his childhood turns up. Castor's in trouble with the police again, an entire housing estate is falling under an evil influence, the Catholic Church Paramilitaries have turned up in strength, and everything is connected. It's impossible to explain further without giving spoilers, and I'm not going to do that for a book with so many stunning twists and reveals.

The Castor books hover on the edge between fantasy and horror, and in some ways *Thicker Than Water* moves further into horror than its predecessors. But although some very nasty things happen, none of it is gratuitous, and Carey and Castor both maintain sympathy for ordinary people and the pain they can go through. Despite his failings, Castor is an interesting and sympathetic narrator – possibly because he is well aware of his failings, and possibly because of the dry black humour he shows. There are a few places in the story where he misses things he ought to spot, but it doesn't really matter. Castor is at the centre of a gritty world of believable characters, with a well-thought-out supernature underlying it.

If you haven't read any of the others in the series, should you start with this one? Well, ideally not. Carey is very careful to avoid spoilers for the previous books,

and to give all the background you'll need. So you certainly won't be lost. But if you can read the previous three books first – and they're all good reads too – then the dramatic impact of this volume will be much higher. I think it's worth going to the extra trouble.

Due warning: the story in *Thicker Than Water* is wrapped up completely, but then we move straight on to a kicker setup for volume five, leaving the reader of a bit of a cliffhanger. To be honest, I can barely wait.

**Storm Constantine – Mythophidia, a Collection of Stories**

Immanion Press, 2008, 345 pp, £12.99, h/b, ISBN 9781904853572

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman



The title promises stories about snakes, and there are some memorable serpentine characters here but other images resonate as strongly: poisons; water in all its manifestations; and women. So we are invited to consider the symbolic connections between these things and snakes.

There are twelve stories in this collection and a brief introduction by Constantine which provides some background to the writing of each one. Together they provide a good taster of her style and themes, though some are more powerful than others.

I found the stories with a contemporary setting the least effective. Two, 'An Old Passion', and 'Such a Nice Girl' are told from the point of view of bystanders and I never felt properly drawn into the sensations and emotions depicted. 'The Oracle Lips' is more striking, about a woman who transforms herself, told with some lively images, but without opening up the world to wider strangeness and sensation as other stories do.

'Curse of the Snake' is one of Constantine's earliest stories and that may explain the faint echoes of Dunsany or other sword and sorcery tales. But this depiction of a doomed city and the fate of its inhabitants is enjoyable in its extravagance and unexpected turns.

'Sweet Bruising Skin' is a variation on a fairy tale, the Princess and the Pea, and is one of the strongest stories here. Hans Andersen's original version of this story is very brief, a two-dimensional satire on 19th century notions of aristocratic breeding and worth. This is a darker, fuller story, narrated by the mother of the prince, in which we feel the pain of bruised skin and the vulnerability as well as the pleasure of beauty. We also discover that the appearance of weakness may hide unusual powers, even if it takes a disturbing level of suffering to draw them out.

'Poisoning the Sea' has another female narrator, Circe who can turn men into beasts. In this and in 'Remedy of the Bane', Constantine allows women to express their dissatisfaction with their traditional role in society and men's perception of what they do and are capable of doing. Circe has an interesting antagonist, a man who wants to reduce the power of women by understanding them, but the end of this story falls a

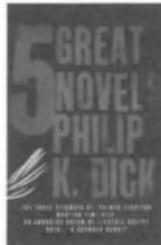
bit flat, for once not living up to the expectations of the reader. 'Remedy' has the closest thing in this collection to a traditional hero, an earnest young man faced with a sharp dilemma resolved in a satisfying and far from traditional end. In other stories weak young men find strength in unpredictable ways.

In 'Night's Damozel', the symbols that flicker in and out of the other stories come together powerfully. Here we have serpents, poisonous plants, the need for water, desire and the difficulties in the way of love between a man and a woman, resolved in a dark ending that is nevertheless fruitful.

The characters and moods in these stories have a limited range characteristic of Constantine's work but within that range they are intense and intriguing. Her style is full of sensual detail and heightened emotion and the more exotic the setting, the stronger the impact.

**Philip K Dick – 5 Great Novels by Philip K Dick**  
Gollancz, 2008, 842 pages, £14.99, t/p ISBN 978-0-575-08463-6

Reviewed by Martin McGrath



There's something about being faced with a volume whose cover proclaims in large and luridly pink lettering that it contains *5 Great Novels by Philip K Dick* – a book five centimetres thick (that's two inches in old money), cumbersome and gaudy – that makes you wonder whether anyone in the publishing industry ever reads anything they put onto paper and, if they do, whether they ever feel the slightest hint of shame.

It's not that the novels behind this garish covers aren't good, but so much of the writing here deals with the issue of the commoditisation of human life and culture, and the consequent hollowing out of meaning, that the presentation of these novels in this bumper "value for money" packaging, like so many toilet rolls or packets of cereal, might be the very definition of irony.

Inside are *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *Martian Time-Slip*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, *UBIK* and *A Scanner Darkly*. It's perfect for those who buy their books by the yard to fill shelf space. But, for practical reading purposes it's unwieldy, and I confess I dug out my old paperback copies of the novels to read on the train rather than lug this weighty tome around.

Ignoring the packaging, it is still hard to pick up a Philip K Dick story or novel without facing up to the baggage that now accompanies his work. There is Dick the Artist: his transformation from pulp hack to author of literary significance and his subsequent adoption as the acceptable face of sci-fi for those who normally frequent more rarefied literary environs. Then there's Dick the Cultural Phenomenon: with ten Hollywood movies already released (plus adaptations of *Radio Free Albemuth* and *King of the Elves* in the works and a biopic, *The Owl in Daylight*, on the way) there are

few other science fiction writers who have had such a profound influence on the popular imagination. Dick has become a brand as much as he is a writer.

It's a commonplace but nonetheless accurate assertion that Dick is best described as a competent stylist. Even judged against the most pulpy of his contemporaries Dick's prose hardly distinguishes itself. On occasion – especially when encompassing female characters – his writing can be downright chunky. It's not how Dick said things but what he said that seems to have caught the zeitgeist.

Dick once said his "grand theme" was "who is human and who only appears (masquerades) as human. Unless we can individually and collectively be certain of the answer to this question, we face what is, in my view, the most serious problem possible. Without answering it adequately, we cannot even be certain of our own selves, I cannot even know myself, let alone you" (*Collected Short Stories Vol. 3*, 1987, p424). Identity is the theme most often associated with Dick and it is, of course, evident in some form in all the novels in this collection. Barney Mayerson struggles to work out which thoughts are his own in *The Three Stigmata...*; Jack Bohlen scrabbles to hold on to the threads of reality in *Martian Time-Slip*; Deckard fights to tell android from human in *Do Androids Dream...*; in *UBIK* reality literally falls apart around the cast of characters so that they can no longer be sure what to trust or what they have become; and in *A Scanner Darkly* Bob Arctor loses the battle to hold together his multi-stranded personality and is reduced to a blank slate.

Since, to an outsider, America can look obsessed with picking at the scabs of personal and collective psychoses, Dick's fascination with what defines us seems a perfect match. It clearly chimes in a culture (and perhaps specifically in a West-Coast subculture) that is deeply invested in masturbatory levels of self-analysis and "medicates" five million children every day with Ritalin.

But issues of identity are not the only recurring themes in these five novels.

Dick's characters are almost universally miserable. There are no moments of unalloyed joy in any of these novels and even brief interludes of happiness are tainted with the knowledge that they are at best fleeting.

And the misery of Dick's characters is compounded by their desperate but futile attempts to find some escape through the dubious pleasures of consumerism. In *The Three Stigmata...* the Martian settlers in their hovels buy Can-D and experience an ersatz, second-hand version of the American dream realised in the virtual, plastic world of PP Layouts. But the moments of escape no longer satisfy. The fake pleasures of the PP Layouts world are always undermined by the knowledge of what awaits back in their Martian hovels. In *Martian Time-Slip* all the illicit black-market goods and wealthy extravagance of live as a petty king cannot hold back Arnie Kott's restless dissatisfaction. Ownership of an animal – as a status symbol, as a desirable object and as a confirmation of their connection with the "real world" – obsesses Rick Deckard (and all around him) in *Do*

*Androids Dream...* but the consummation of that desire leads only to guilt and further, deeper unhappiness. And, perhaps most painfully, the characters in *A Scanner Darkly* are burnt up and destroyed by their attempts to purchase an escape through drugs.

Whether through luck or a stroke of genius, the themes Dick seeded through his novels have become ever more relevant as time has passed.

As for the novels contained here, *A Scanner Darkly* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* stand out as moments where Dick manages to combine both plot and thematic concern to deliver deeply satisfying novels. *Martian Time-Slip* has many interesting ideas and characters but the stylistic tic of repeating scenes from many different viewpoints slows the middle section fatally. *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* aims exceptionally high, attempting to address the nature of reality and god, but it doesn't quite deliver – getting bogged down in its own complexity and the shallowness of its central characters. *UBIK* does a better job of playing games with reality while maintaining a narrative drive but is, I think, let down by a ending that comes close to invoking *deus ex machina*.

All of these novels offer something – and at least three (*A Scanner Darkly*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and *UBIK*) should form part of any well-read science fiction fan's mental furniture. My selection of "great" Dick novels would have included *The Man in the High Castle*, *Valis* and, perhaps, *Flow My Tears the Policeman Said*.

Whether this volume is for you, however, probably depends on whether you can put up with its bulk and cumbersome nature, and the lurid pink lettering on the front.

**Bob Fischer – *Wibble Lever to Full***  
Hodder and Stoughton, 2008, £12.99, 324pp, p/b,  
ISBN 9780340962015

Reviewed by Simon Guerrier

In November 2005, Bob Fischer braved a *Doctor Who* convention in his home town, then spent a year at events related to his other favourite TV shows and films.

Having not been wowed by *Dalek*, *I Loved You* (see Vector 257), I didn't expect much of another memoir about watching TV. Fischer seems to model his book on those of Dave Gorman and Danny Wallace: a silly quest that lets him get drunk with new people to his girlfriend's despair. Yet despite these misgivings, I was quickly engrossed. Fischer has a keen eye for detail, describing a panel of *Doctor Who* guest actors discussing their other work on *Bergerac* and *Tenko* as "like watching a touring stage revival of *Pebble Mill at One*." It's exactly what a *Doctor Who* convention is like.

The book really hits its stride when Fischer attends his second convention – for *Star Wars* – and starts comparing fandoms. There's the attendees themselves

and the proportion who've come in costume. We learn which fandoms are most commercial, or the heaviest drinkers and which have the most pretty women. There's the different strategies for meeting your heroes: mumbling, gabbling or slapping them on the back.

You sometimes feel he's trying too hard with the jokes, but I loved his description of the James Bond film *Moonraker*: it "somehow managed to bridge the cultural gap between 2001: A Space Odyssey and *Carry On At Your Convenience*".

He's good at providing background on the films and shows in question, the history of conventions and of viewing habits, too. Having watched *Star Trek* as a child in the late 1970s, he realises how strange it is that "a generation of seven-year-olds could be intimately familiar with a programme first broadcast almost twice their lifetimes ago." He explains the passivity of watching telly in an age of three channels before videos and remote controls.

It's also fun seeing Fischer's girlfriend and family get more involved with his quest. As he says early on, "It's great to have a passion for your favourite films and programmes, but you have to accept that the rest of the world is unlikely to give a toss." Yet, later on he has to wonder, grudgingly, "whether there's anyone left in the country who hasn't emerged from the sci-fi fandom closet ... and begin to feel as if some of my exclusive right to geeky cult-TV absorption is being unceremoniously chipped away."

Between each new fandom experience there's an excerpt from "The Battle to Save Earth", a story Fischer wrote when he was nine. It's a thrilling mix of his school friends, footballing heroes and bits nicked from *Star Wars* and *Flash Gordon*, hanging on the discovery of "a speical (sic) laser called Bombpower. It can destroy anything." The book is largely an attempt to recapture this wide-eyed, care-free delight. But Fischer's intelligence and insight are what make it so effective.

At one point Fischer quotes Camus: "A man's worth is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened." He might well have been justifying his *Dangermouse* DVDs.

**Kate Griffin – *A Madness of Angels***  
Orbit, 2009 472pp £7.99, p/b, ISBN 978-1-84149-733-4

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson



Matthew Swift died two years ago, but now he's back. Well, he's a sorcerer, so maybe that's not entirely a surprise. But is he who claims to be? His eyes have changed colour, to an electric shade of blue, and sometimes he can't help referring to himself as "we". In any case, none of his friends is around to identify him, as in the interim they've died too, only rather more permanently.

In electric prose, Griffin creates a gripping tale

of witches, warlocks and sorcerers, as Matt tries to find out who killed him, and why. Matt's allies are untrustworthy and disunited, and his enemies keep insisting that they have his best interests at heart. His young apprentice has defected to the enemy. Stalked by a being that he calls Hunger, Matt has to come to an alliance with the blue electric angels before Hunger consumes him utterly.

What's great about this novel is the way the author uses the familiar settings and mechanisms of London to create magic. Matt uses the eyes of pigeons to see, dabbles his senses in rats' memories, enters the thoughts of urban foxes. The oyster card regulations become a spell that keep the Hunger out of the tube (it doesn't have a ticket), and he gets money from cash machines by scribbling arcane sigils on a call girl's card.

*A Madness of Angels* is a joy ride through the underside of London, the forgotten corners, disused underground stations, the playgrounds of the supernatural that Neil Gaiman first set out to explore in *Neverwhere*. Griffin extends the territory to the embankments, the nightclubs and electricity substations, the big stone built blocks of Holborn Kingsway, the warrens of Lincoln's Inn. As a Londoner myself I recognise this city in all its grit and grime, its derelict and decaying charms. "They entered the old forgotten Post Office train tunnels at the Mount Pleasant sorting office". I go past this on the bus every day. Griffin doesn't just stay in the centre, but wanders around the inner suburbs, from Dulwich to Streatham to Willesden to Muswell Hill, and takes us from the depths of the Kingsway telephone exchange to the heights of Centre Point.

In the thirteen years since Gaiman wrote *Neverwhere* we've had to plough through an awful lot of derivative and unimaginative urban fantasy. Thankfully, this isn't one of them. *A Madness of Angels* comes as a huge relief to anyone who, like me, was about to give up on the genre. It's inventive, it's original, and it's an enormous amount of fun.

**Harry Harrison – The Stainless Steel Rat Omnibus**  
Gollancz, 2008, £10.99, 436pp, t/p, ISBN-13: 978-0-575-08171-0

Reviewed by L J Hurst



Harry Harrison invented the Stainless Steel Rat in the 1950s, though the character stayed in the shadows as two short stories until they were melded and became the fix-up *The Stainless Steel Rat* in 1961, escaping British traps until a first appearance in paperback here in 1966. The two sequels collected in this omnibus appeared first in 1970 (*The Stainless Steel Rat's Revenge*) and 1972 (*The Stainless Steel Rat Saves The World*). Of the seven more novels since, three of them collected as *A Stainless Steel Trio* account for the early years of Harrison's anti-hero. However, on his first appearance in that 1957 short story in *Astounding*, the Stainless Steel Rat, James DiGriz, is an adult, well

established in a criminal career that has taken him across the galaxy, and hoping to continue in his mischievous ways. It is not to be – in the first three chapters DiGriz finds himself captured and turned – a poacher turned gamekeeper – joining the Special Corps as another special agent. When Harrison brought back DiGriz in another short story, "The Misplaced Battleship", three years later, *Astounding* magazine had become *Analog*, and Harrison identifies the woman who is to become Venus to the Rat's Mars, Angelina. The first Stainless Steel Rat novel, which came the next year, sees DiGriz chase and hunt down the psychopathic woman on behalf of the Corps and law and order as she takes a stolen spaceship across the universe.

In a 1997 interview Harry Harrison, when asked about DiGriz, pointed out that "there's a history in fiction, of picaresque fiction, of the villain as hero and this follows through. And I carefully arranged the plot so he does more good than bad. I came up with some baddies for him to defeat and all his crime, if you look at it, is white collar crime or it's like computer crime which nobody really seems to care about." And he has called the first book an "action adventure story". Oddly, he failed to point out that these are comedy/action stories, although the quality of the comedy varies. The far future in which the Rat works is so distant that people have forgotten they once came from the planet Earth, but their motives are just as dubious as those of the present day, their stupidity, duplicitousness and greed just as great, and, consequently, their systems of government and politics just as corrupt. A character like the Stainless Steel Rat is right at home on such worlds, in some senses unnoticeable, as he has many of the characteristics of the people about him, while he has somewhere, often hidden, his moral purpose – he will kill no one nor let anyone be killed – and, after those initial chapters, he has his police role, though that often seems forgotten. Harrison spoke of having "arranged the plot" but the series often seems to slip into a sequence of struggles, one after another – episodic rather than plotted works. But then can come a blow in which DiGriz, who has seemed to be addressing us readers rather disingenuously about his fight after fight and robbery after robbery, reveals his true plotted intent: such as the revelation in the last sentence of Chapter Fifteen of *The Stainless Steel Rat*: "Only reluctantly did I allow myself to be dragged to the place where I wanted to go".

It was eight years after the Stainless Steel Rat's first appearance that Harrison brought him back, giving him a female sidekick not obvious from the first volume, though signposted, and let him fight off a race struggling for interplanetary dominion – this seems to be the story that requires the title "saves the world" rather than any reference to revenge, because in the third volume, the Rat is sent time travelling to fight off the abominable "He", and thus saves time rather than a world or place. However, the Rat's time travel is limited to just two visits, both of them on Earth (after he corrects himself in calling the planet "Dirt"): a rather Nixonian 1984, and a much more puzzling England of the Napoleonic Wars. It is after being deposited

somewhere in middle England, and a ride on a dung cart to the walls of Oxford, that DiGriz discovers that his calls for attention might have been premature, for the guard that answers speaks French. "He" has been able to change time. In places *The Stainless Steel Rat Saves The World* seems to break the comedy-action mould of the series – the sf tropes seem stronger, such as the way that the French troops are controlled and registered, while the torturers lose their Punch and Judy slapstick. Those are huge variances compared to the earlier leaps, in which one moment the Rat might be landing from an luxury interstellar cruiser and then, within the time a short taxi ride might take, be distributing gas bombs and robbing banks of their cash, thanks to his nostril gasmask, as if he were the offspring of Bonnie and Clyde only a generation or two away from the pair.

Despite his temptations to write something harder Harry Harrison managed to turn a rather frigid form of sf into something softer and ultimately, as his sales have shown, more appealing. He was not unique among genre writers in recognising the possibilities of an anti-hero, but he was an early adopter: that eponymous first short story came only two years after Patricia Highsmith published *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), and was five years in advance of Richard Stark's Parker, to take two examples from crime writing. The Stainless Steel Rat's heirs are in thrillerdom, men such as Lee Child's Jack Reacher, who might easily find himself involved in multiple crimes and scientifically planned genocide – combinations not untypical in the ongoing adventures of James DiGriz. And there is a place for *The Stainless Steel Rat Omnibus* on the shelves with their adventures still.

**Frank Herbert – Whipping Star**  
Tor, 2008 (originally 1969), 255pp, t/p ISBN  
9780765317759

Reviewed by L J Hurst

With a wonderful cover, in trade paperback, to the same high design standards as Tor's other Frank Herbert re-prints, reappears *Whipping Star*, the first novel he set in the ConSentiency universe. Herbert used

to take his time before producing a novel – six years to plan *Dune*, allegedly, while *Whipping Star* (1969) followed the short story, "A Matter of Traces" from 1958, and a novella, "The Tactful Saboteur" from 1964, which laid out the role of his protagonist Jorj X. McKie. It was to be another eight years before he produced *The Dosadi Experiment*, his second and final novel featuring the characters and species common to these

worlds. The ConSentiency is a place where order and good government have run on so well-oiled lines that a shadow organisation has been formed to try to slow down its possible run-away trains. McKie is an agent of that organisation, the Bureau of Sabotage, and he is Saboteur Extraordinary, in the way that individuals have been Plenipotentiaries Extraordinary in our

world. He is soon to discover that he has acquired a role stranger still, as he must confront not just the physical boundaries of the world, but the nature of being and nothingness itself. That condition is summed up in one creature, the last Caleban in the universe.

There are many strange characters in the ConSentiency universe – most grotesque perhaps being the Pan Speci, who take the mythical Graeae (weird sisters who had to share one eye between the three of them) into even more bizarre realms, as they come in groups of five who have one ego between them, a consciousness they must pass on, knowing what will become of them. A Pan Speci who would bogart an ego would be a very bad being – such a being as would make a super-villainess a superb major-domo. It takes McKie time to realise that he has come across such a woman – she is the Lady Abnethie, and she has bound the universe's last Caleban into a destructive but watertight contract. As McKie knows, the Calebans have been providing instantaneous transfers across the universe, and on the disappearance of each of the others every one of their sometime transferees has disappeared too. The fear is that with the end of the last Caleban the universe might also vanish.

While the constraints of intergalactic contract law are implicit in Herbert's plotting, the attempts by speakers of two different languages to understand and be understood are the explicit strengths of this novel. For what McKie has not realised is that a being that could disregard space-time like a pan-galactic ferry substitute would probably have an attitude to existence so at variance to his own that they will scarcely understand one another. How they do – and how Herbert presents their conversation – is the heart of this book. Some of the other features – like the whip which appears to lash the Caleban, helpless under its contractual yoke – read like hack-work but readers will remember them only as part of something better.

**Ogawa Issui – The Lord of the Sands of Time**  
Viz Publications 2009 (forthcoming), £8.99, ISBN  
9781421527628

Reviewed By Colin Odell and Mitch Le Blanc

**E**T: not a nauseatingly annoying creature from a Spielberg movie, but nasty enemies of earth – Extra Terrestrials, Enemies of Terra, or simply Evil Things. They arrived in the early 22nd century and set about systematically destroying earth and much of the rest of the solar system for good measure.

Messenger Unit Eight Six Niner Eight One, aka Orville, is an AI from 2598AD whose mission is to join his AI unit and ensure the survival of humankind. Simple, really. His job is to go back in time to try to avert the impending destruction of humanity using the technology of their time. There are multiple strands of time, each offering different hopes and different fears. Maybe one of these can offer a less bleak future for humanity. It's

a slim hope, other strands are doomed to annihilation and despair. One particular timestream takes Orville to Feudal Japan where he encounters the feisty Lady Miyo who defies the protocol of her time and engages in a war with the ET, whom she believes are sacred mononoke, despite not truly understanding the nature of the conflict or indeed the vast scale of events. But things are far more complex than winning a simple war. The ETs' presence continues to be found farther and farther back through time and, as the messengers change history, what happens to the future, or futures, from which they came?

Encompassing a huge range of subjects including the nature of humanity, artificial intelligence, politics, time travel, war, love and loss, *Lord of the Sands of Time* is a narrative that, in the main, flits across time with Orville's frame of reference a constant. The story dips in and out of human history, touching on World War 2 and the American Civil War as well as considering the effects of changing human evolution 10,000 years BC. One of the key themes explores Orville as an AI who learns to experience humanity and even to love. There is a hint of the manga/anime *Ghost in The Shell*, as the book treats the AIs as living, thinking, feeling beings. Tragically Orville has to forgo his one true (human) love and knowingly travel back in time to change a future which will, most likely, result in that love never having been born – she has not just been killed but was never alive in the first place. Can he allow himself to love again? Because of these emotional conflicts it is sometimes hard to identify with Orville as completely AI – he feels more human than he should. But perhaps that is the point; is a human but a flesh machine?

This is a translation of a Japanese novel and as such there are cultural references that pervade the narrative. The feudal Japanese refer to the ET as a mononoke – a mononoke is the spirit of a thing which is responsible for unforeseen and unexplained events. The ET themselves appear in many forms and these are reminiscent of yokai – odd and varied spirits.

But although the main narrative focuses on the Japanese story the scope is far broader. Despite the complexity of the time travel plot, the story is coherent throughout and exciting enough to keep the pages turning. The epic scope of the novel could well have resulted in something long and unwieldy, but Ogawa has wisely kept the story compact and focussed, showing that page count isn't necessarily equivalent to worthiness.

#### Edward M Lerner – *Fools' Experiments*

Tor New York, 2008, 352pp, h/b,  
ISBN 9780765318261

#### Reviewed by Martin Lewis

Perhaps this is just an unfair prejudice of mine, but as far as I'm concerned any book that uses sound effects is likely to be a bad book. In this case, at least, the cracks and thwacks and blats do indeed herald a writer with very little facility with the English

language.

Edward M Lerner is a traditional sf writer in that he is an engineer who knows a lot about S and not much about F. After ghostwriting a couple of *Ringworld* prequels for Tor this is his first novel proper (with the same publisher), and only adds to my sense that something has gone badly wrong with their quality control of late. *Fools' Experiments* is a tedious technothriller doled out in 71 bite-sized (but not particularly thrilling) chapters. Although it is divided into thirds, rather than this being a classic three act structure we have a false start, the actual plot, and then a pointless retrace of the middle third. The story chiefly concerns the emergence of artificial life but the structure of the novel is so broken-backed that it is initially hard to tell where our attention is meant to be focused.

In keeping with the strictures of the technothriller form there are lots of viewpoint characters but they are all drawn so crudely that you would never mistake them for actual human beings. The main characters are initially Doug, a researcher in neural interfaces, and AJ, a researcher in artificial life. In order to differentiate between them Lerner makes Doug a lover of bad puns. He also (since Hollywood has taught him it would be unthinkable to do otherwise) pairs both of them up with hot chicks. Unbelievably in the case of the overweight, middle aged AJ this involves bagging the attractive IT reporter who is interviewing him with the line "nor do I want to know ahead of time what our children will be like." (143) These poorly realised characters only add to the sense of dislocation as they can disappear for sixty pages at a time whilst the narrative wanders elsewhere and other characters spring up in their place. Not surprisingly Lerner is better with machines than humans. The section where an artificial intelligence breaks free from AJ's lab, causing devastating to the surrounding area, actually lives up to the genre's name. Even this becomes interminable after a while though.

RUMIR is a very useful acronym that Karen Burnham invented, from an old Joanna Russ review that described a work as "routine, unoriginal, mildly interesting, and readable". In five letters it sums up vast swathes of published sf and it could, charitably, be applied to this novel. *Fools' Experiments* is not bad because it is a catastrophic failure, it is bad simply because there is absolutely nothing good about it. In some ways this is even worse: at least with a catastrophe there is a perverse pleasure in seeing what abomination the writer will come up with next.

This novel just inspires supreme indifference.

#### Jonathan Maberry – *Patient Zero*

Gollancz 2009, £18.99, 234, h/b  
ISBN 9780575086906

#### Reviewed by David McWilliam

The very manner in which terrorism is discussed, as a nebulous threat that is not based in any one group or country, has been used by politicians and the



JONATHAN MABERRY



media to generate a mass hysteria that has pushed through increasingly invasive policies in order to protect the many from the few. This forms the political backdrop for Jonathan Maberry's latest novel, which uses the scale of a proposed threat to the US to justify the use of torture and the killing of civilians. In *Patient Zero*, Baltimore PD detective, ex-military, martial arts expert Joe Ledger is recruited into a top secret government agency, the Department of Military Sciences, to combat a new terrorist threat: the deployment of zombies as biological weapons which spread their infection with the time-honoured method of the bite. It soon becomes clear that the technology involved in resurrecting the 'walkers' (zombies) is considered to be beyond the capabilities of any of the middle-eastern groups under surveillance and the DMS, correctly, come to suspect that the project has been financed by a major business concern, most likely one involved with the pharmaceutical industry. Leading Echo Team, Ledger must attempt to stop the increasingly virulent plague after several DMS squads have already been wiped out in the attempt. With next to no training as a unit, they neutralise several cells before having to guess where and when the main offensive will begin.

Despite running with a plot that is the lovechild of the 24 and *Resident Evil* franchises, Maberry opts for a straight portrayal of events, inhabiting fears about possible attacks rather than interrogating or satirising them. Dr. Rudy Sanchez initially provides a sceptical voice that appeals to Ledger, but the nature of the threat leads him to complicity with the DMS, who subsequently recruit him. In the absence of a dissenting voice, the final third of the novel follows the line of many summer blockbuster action movies, with the protagonist leading his team to inevitable victory and the antagonists to melodramatic destruction. Being the first in a projected series of Joe Ledger novels, the reader is always assured that he will survive and more than likely successfully complete his mission.

The author acknowledges the lack of originality in the plot through frequent knowing references to pop culture; from pointing out the similarities between the walkers and the infected in *28 Days Later*, to Joe's reflection that the dank corridors through which he leads his men on a particularly dangerous mission recall the clichés of many a computer game. However, despite the unoriginal plot, I found *Patient Zero* to be a highly readable and competent thriller. Maberry manages to inject some surprises as events unfold and the action sequences are exciting and tense, though they fail to be equally as horrific. The appeal of this novel is largely derived from the skill with which the author makes you want to keep turning the page; I would certainly like to read more by Maberry, but probably not from this series.

**K.E. Mills – *The Accidental Sorcerer***  
**Orbit, 2009, 488 pp., £6.99, p/b, ISBN 9-781841-497273**

**Reviewed by Anthony Nanson and Kirsty Hartsiotis**

In this, the first book in the Rogue Agent series, Karen Miller dons a pseudonym to do comic

fantasy. Gerald Dunwoody, Third Grade wizard, who learnt his craft by correspondence course, visits Stuttley's Superior Staff factory to investigate a health & safety irregularity reported to the Department of Thaumaturgy. In the ensuing debacle he manages to wield a First Grade staff without getting killed – but the factory blows up anyway and the Department fires him. Accompanied by Reg, his sarcastic bird familiar – who, like Gerald, is more than she seems – he takes a job as court wizard in remote New Ottosland, where young King Lional has grandiose ambitions of conquering the Kallarapi nomads of the surrounding desert.

Lional is impressed by Gerald's burgeoning wizardly powers, which he means to exploit more fully than Gerald has bargained for – to turn the tables on the Kallarapi by conjuring their own gods into existence. The King's young sister, Melissande, who serves as prime minister, is more sympathetically disposed towards Gerald: they might get on really well if only she didn't argue with Reg all the time, and she might look quite attractive if only she sorted out her hair. Revelation follows revelation, true character is revealed, and the pace and energy are kept high with lots of shouting. By the end, young Gerald has discovered his true calling – to be elaborated in further books.

Familiar tropes of comic fantasy are here: the failed wizard, the sarcastic talking bird, the princess with bad hair, and – quintessentially – the parodying of magic and its trappings as mundane elements of the politics and bureaucracy of a quasi-modern world. When Terry Pratchett does this, it's funny. He has an instinct for the ridiculous and the absurd. He makes us laugh and in doing so he makes us see our own world in new light. When Mills tries for humour, though, her writing falls flat. It just isn't funny, and because it isn't funny what you're left with is merely bland lightweight fantasy that, having rendered magic mundane, is equivalent to the 'Poughkeepsie style of fantasy' that Ursula Le Guin condemns in her essay 'From Elfland to Poughkeepsie': 'First Grade staffs were notoriously difficult to forge. Get the etheretic balances wrong in the split-second of alchemical transformation and what you were looking at afterwards, basically, was a huge smoking hole in the ground' (Mills, 2).

Moreover, there are moments in *The Accidental Sorcerer* that are actually quite serious, but their tension and gravity is completely undermined by the bantering tone of the rest of the book. This clash of mood is a clue to this author's true forte. Karen Miller's straight fantasies – the Kingmaker, Kingbreaker and Godspeaker series – are much better books: they deploy strong idiosyncratic characters in writing that has integrity and leavens its seriousness here and there with a modest pinch of humour.



**DAVID MOODY.**

**David Moody – *Hater***  
Gollancz, 2009, £9.99, 232pp,  
p/b ISBN 9780575084674

Reviewed by Davina Dallion.

Danny McCoyne is a bystander as outbreaks of violence begin to grip Britain. People, dubbed 'haters' by the press, suddenly attack family, friends or strangers, near them. The spread of these attacks causes society to start to break down in a week, as Danny tries to protect his family.

The first difficulty with *Hater* is David's first person narration. He is married with three children, but his constant moaning about life and his circumstances make him seem trapped in adolescence, and become irritating quickly.

Moody alternates this with third person viewpoint scenes, showing people turning into haters to violently attack people near them. By the sixth scene, a sense of repetition in waiting for the violence creeps in. As narrator and the people around him see and hear about the haters, it's debatable if these scenes were needed.

The next difficulty with the novel is that the most interesting section only starts after a hundred pages. A mob kills somebody on the grounds of being a hater. People become not only afraid of attacks but of being identified as a hater as well. So the tension builds; everybody is scared of appearing angry in case people think they've changed. This notion lifts the whole narrative.

And then Danny becomes a hater, killing for the first time, and the interest starts falling again. He escapes and meets up with other haters, and the group are subsequently captured by the army. The narrative then starts to use the imagery of death camps; this might have been intended to be profound, but is just offensively tasteless. It all ends with more violence to establish that the door is open for a sequel.

*Hater* is working in the theme of violence erupting in modern life, such as the film *28 Days Later*, or *High Rise* by J. G. Ballard. But it fails to find anything to bring to the table. It tries to find new ideas, but they are thrown away or mishandled or inappropriate.

**Geoff Nelder – *Exit, Pursued by a Bee***  
Double Dragon Press 2008, £10.00, 260pp, t/p ISBN  
9781554045945

Reviewed by Terry Jackman



"Eight centuries after proud Freemasons on wooden scaffolds shared broad smiles, and raised mugs of celebratory cider, the [Glastonbury] tower was disintegrating in front of her."

And so, soon after, is the rest of the world, as time itself becomes unstable. In Geoff Nelder's novel, an eclectic collection of modern day adventurers battle the chaos

of time decoherence, caused by the departure rather than arrival of alien artifacts. This is a seriously new take on the theme of time in sf, as attested to by the quote from John Courtney Grimwood. And the first novel, I think, to have been born from BSFA's own Orbiters, the writing groups for our own members.

**Paul Park – *The Hidden World***  
Tor, 2008, 317pp, h/b, ISBN 978-0-7653-1668-4

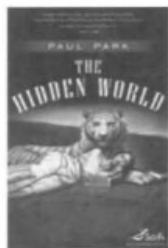
Reviewed by Tanya Brown

*The Hidden World* concludes the quartet that began with *A Princess of Roumania*, and continued in *The Tourmaline* and *The White Tyger*. Miranda Popescu, raised in our own world as an adopted orphan, is still homesick for Massachusetts – a Massachusetts that was only ever imaginary, a refuge created for Miranda by her dead aunt Aegypta Schenk. Massachusetts is lost to Miranda, and she finds a way to enter the hidden world, the ubermund that lies beyond and within the 'real' world where Miranda now lives. That 'real' world is definitively not our own, cosmologically or geographically or historically. The sun orbits the Earth (which may be flat); the planets are also gods; the British Isles have sunk beneath the sea, leaving Newton and Shakespeare refugees in an altered Europe; North America is a wilderness inhabited by savages, and Roumania is a world power. Now Miranda has ventured beyond that reality into a purer, more elemental world.

*The Hidden World* begins with Miranda recuperating in an isolated farmhouse, musing on her missing friends Andromeda and Peter, and haunted in dreams by her dead aunt, who's still determined to use Miranda as a tool to forge a better world and bring about the salvation of Greater Roumania.

Roumania is at war with Turkey, both in the real world where massive tanks roll up from technologically-supreme Africa, and in the hidden world where monstrous hybrid dogs snarl and snap at Roumania's defenders. Airships rain bombs upon Budapest: survivors of a train crash in the south of the country are afflicted by radiation sickness. The old government has been overthrown, and some still mourn the death of the infamous diva Nicola Ceausescu, rumoured to have been involved in sundry wickednesses.

Being dead is no impediment to Baroness Ceausescu, sorceress and socialite, heroine of Roumania (in her own eyes, at least), ambitious and clever and utterly determined to defeat Miranda Popescu and her aunt Aegypta's vision of Roumania's future. The Baroness is far from a cardboard character: on the contrary, she's more complex, more conflicted and more fascinating than almost any other character in the four novels. She's very much a product of her time and her world, and her fragile, careful shell of vulnerability ("the happy thing about being a woman [is that] you don't have to do anything, but only suffer for long enough") overlays an ruthlessly indomitable core.



How Nicola Ceaușescu opposes Miranda is only part of the tale in this concluding volume. Miranda's friends – in Massachusetts, they were Andromeda and Peter – both find a measure of peace with their true selves. Of the three, though, it's Miranda who sees her choices clear-eyed and determines that the price demanded of her is too bitter, too high, and never-ending. "There were a lot of books I used to read ... There was always something to be accomplished, and it was always difficult. People suffered. But at the end of the book it was all worth it, because the thing was finished and the story over. That's not true here."

The Roumania quartet is post-modern fantasy: there are no easy answers, and even the questions are trick questions. Park trusts his readers to *read*, not just what's written – in clear, elegant, unfussy prose – but what's not. *The Hidden World* gives up its secrets subtly and gradually. Details that seem insignificant (the way that the Tourmaline, Kepler's alchemical stone, feels less like stone and more like 'tough little sack of flesh'; the way that Kepler – according to Newton – imprisoned a creature of the Hidden World in a stone tower; perhaps, too, the way that photographs of Miranda's father never show his face clearly) suddenly fall into place. The last few pages of this novel are tremendously complex, packed with allusions that cast light on what's gone before. And, to return to Miranda's complaint, it is worth it: it is over.

**Kit Reed – *Enclave***

**Tor New York, 2009 – \$25.95 ISBN 0-7653-2161-0**

**pp365**

**Reviewed by Penny Hill**



The plot of this YA novel is very similar to some secondary school English teaching material I used 20 years ago – namely the fabulous "School under siege" with cartoons by "Giles" (still available on Amazon). This material was designed to get school children writing a sustained narrative by giving lots of suggestions for story ideas within one overarching plot. And this is that plot – the story of what happens when an isolated school incubates a serious illness. I was expecting rather more character and relationship development before we got into the disaster movie scenario. As a result, I think this novel plays more to the younger end of the YA market.

One flaw was that there were too many iterations of the opening – we really don't need different characters all telling us about the same setup over and over again. What was worse was that Sarge, the main protagonist, told us his opening viewpoint several times without revealing anything new or different.

Another aspect of the writing that marked this out as indifferent YA was that the teen protagonists were all seen as human with a combination of flaws and motivation, whereas most of the teachers were one-dimensional. Dave Bogardus in particular was very

irritating – would anyone have been convinced by this motivational speaker? The few adults who were multi-dimensional – Cassie and Benny – were not sufficient to balance this.

In character building, I feel that Reed really missed a trick with Sarge. Although he is the prime character and the one whose viewpoint we see most, pure repetition does not expand or deepen our understanding of his reasoning or motivation. Apart from the necessities of the plot, I could not see what was keeping him and Cassie apart. There was also such an obvious mismatch between Sarge's assessment of the people he had recruited and our assessment of them that "idiot plotting" seems the only explanation.

Some of the plotting really didn't pass adult scrutiny as someone working in IT, I did a sharp intake of breath when Sarge wouldn't let Stephen take a back-up of the systems. As an adult, I just knew he was going to regret that later, and his paranoid justification was not convincing. Again, once the illness breaks out, it is frankly unrealistic for Sarge not to insist on additional volunteers to help in the Infirmary. I wonder whether a teenager reading this would pick up on the same flaws?

I enjoyed the fact that everyone used technology that is clearly of today. The pupils are variously addicted to iPods, IM, texting, *World of Warcraft*, self-Gooling. The impact of their isolation from this – its benefits and drawbacks – was perhaps more lightly touched on than the publicity material implies. I think this book will date charmingly. In ten or twenty years time, people will read it and compare these obsessions with whatever replaces them.

There was a sense of possibility with the narrative that never played out. The contemporary or near-future setting had hints of more explicitly science-fictional possibilities but these were not explored. In a similar way, after engaging in a holding pattern for most of the book, the resolution was rushed and some of it was blurred enough that I wasn't clear whether the fate of one particular character was supposed to have been resolved or was being deliberately left ambiguous.

Overall I liked the potential of the setting and the setup of this story, but felt that what was delivered was pedestrian. Quite frankly, I read more exciting "School under siege stories" in the classroom 20 years ago!

**Carrie Ryan – *The Forest Of Hands And Teeth***  
**Gollancz 2009, £11.99, 320pp, h/b, ISBN 9780575090842**

**Reviewed by Mark Connerton**



This young adult novel features that classic trope – the isolated post-apocalyptic village that has reverted to religious fundamentalism. In this case the village is isolated because it's surrounded by zombies, and the religious fundamentalists are a Sisterhood who exert total control over the community to keep it viable. The protagonist,

Mary, is something of an outsider, having spent her whole life yearning to see the outside world. She is forced to join the Sisterhood after her parents are zombified, and soon discovers that the village may not be the last surviving remnant of humanity as everyone believes.

*The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (excellent title, by the way) is an entertaining, if slightly uneasy, blend of zombie action and teen romance. It doesn't stint on gore or violence and there are plenty of classic genre moments, from overwhelming but slow-moving zombie attacks, to infected loved ones who have to be decapitated before they chew your face off. There's also an amusing nod to films like *28 Days Later* and the *Dawn of the Dead* remake, when the characters are shocked to meet a new variety of zombie that can run really fast.

However, there's also a rather contrived and tiresome love quadrangle between Mary, her best friend and two dreamy but under-characterised brothers, with plenty of first person agonising and intense hair stroking in place of sex. This type of thing may appeal to teenagers, but wasn't really to my taste, and I wish the author had spent less time chronicling every twinge of emotion and more time focussing on the rather undercooked plot. Interesting elements (such as how much the Sisterhood know and what they are up to) are rapidly jettisoned, the ending probably won't please everyone, and too many developments revolve around sudden random disasters or characters doing unbelievable things for the sake of it.

The combination of classic horror tropes and YA romance might seem calculated to hoover up restless Stephanie Meyer fans with no new *Twilight* books to read, but I think this book is rather better than them. Mary frequently needs to get a grip and stop whining about boys, but she isn't a passive heroine, isn't afraid to wield an axe, and her decisions (good and bad) propel the novel. Despite the relatively young target audience, Ryan is admirably committed to her grim premise (no vegetarian zombies here!), as the characters keep finding possible signs of hope only to be bitterly disappointed (and occasionally eaten) a little later on. The ever-present zombie hordes take on real metaphorical weight as Mary compares her own lack of choices to their mindlessness and is later constantly reminded by them of her frustration when forced into domesticity. Parts of the book also have excellent narrative drive and suspense and these strengths overcome the weaknesses mentioned above and give me hope for the inevitable (and hopefully less emo) sequel.

**Chris Roberson – *End of the Century***

Prometheus Books, 2009, 485pp, \$15.00, ISBN 978-1-59102-697-6

**Reviewed by Cherith Baldry**

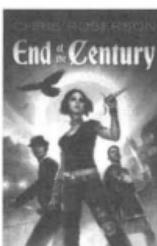
*End of the Century* follows the adventures of three protagonists each living at the end of their respective centuries: Galaad, the prototype of the Arthurian Galahad; Sandford Blank, a Victorian detective; and Alice, a young American girl visiting

London. Each of them has their own agenda: Sandford Blank is investigating a series of Jack the Ripper style murders, while both Galaad and Alice are seeking for the explanation of the disturbing visions they have received. Each of them has to face an apparently supernatural threat, and it becomes clear that their three stories are in fact one.

I enjoyed this structure and found it intriguing. Roberson makes good use of the three plot strands, breaking off each section at an exciting point to make his audience wait for a resolution while he moves on to the next. I also liked the puzzle aspect of the story; while certain elements and characters appear in all three sections, they manifest themselves differently in each one, so that the reader can work out how they relate to each other and what their significance is.

Each of the three settings comes across well: the post-Roman Britain of 'historical' Arthur; the Victorian London during the preparations for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee; and the London of a few years ago, as the Millennium approaches. In the two later sections I spotted a few places where Roberson slips up in the British background or speech, but these are minor. In general I could believe all of it and be carried on by the story.

I did have problems towards the end of the book, where the truth of what has been happening is revealed. The final conflict between Alice and the creature who has committed the murders and created the problems that have to be solved is gripping and moving, but I feel it could have been stronger still. Part of this was caused, I feel, by Roberson using characters he has written about elsewhere, so that their world and its accompanying background has to be accommodated into this story. This means that the reader has to accept



the presence of not one but two non-human intelligences, and while they are combined logically, I felt the combination was clumsy.

Again because Roberson has used these characters elsewhere, a crucial part of the evil creature's development occurs in another book entirely, and while the episode is available on his website (referenced at the end of the book), I feel it should have been incorporated here, if only in a more concise form.

The style is readable, though I found a few clunky patches and some misprints, suggesting the book should have been more tightly edited, but in the main I found it immensely enjoyable, and I recommend it.

**Hiroshi Sakurazaka – *All You Need Is KILL***  
Viz Media (21 Jul 2009), 230pp, p/b, ISBN 9781421527611

**Reviewed by Colin Odell and Mitch LeBlanc**

Earth is under attack. The enemy? Mimics. These are not xenomorphic copycats but deadly shelled creatures that have lunched from the seas and are laying the land to waste, eating the earth and excreting



toxic sand. These armoured killing machines act collectively and their armour is almost impervious to conventional weaponry. Who can stop them? The world's armed forces, bolstered by swarms of recruits and conscripts face battles daily, supplementing air strikes with brutal ground attacks that, even if victorious, end in bloody and terrible slaughter. The odds are weighed ridiculously against humankind especially if, like Keiji Kiriya, you are a new recruit. Survival is more likely if you are Rita Vrataski, the US fighter who has killed over a hundred Mimics in a single battle. Keiji meets Rita in less than ideal circumstances; he's dying on the battlefield having seen the Mimics decimate most of his companions. Rita realises his wound is mortal, and is there to relieve him of his battery once he has passed on. But Keiji wants one – final – stand against the Mimics. He manages a final charge and takes one of the ugly polluters out before dying. And then finds himself back on the day before...

If you wanted a succinct description of *All You Need Is Kill*, *Starship Troopers* meets *Groundhog Day*' would probably do the trick. Sakurazaka takes his inspiration predominantly from the gaming world, where changes in action can result in different fates for the main character. It tries to get into the head of a character whose choices result in daily death, of improving slightly or learning each time something has changed from previous experience. *All You Need Is Kill* is not so crass as to literally 'restart' the game every time Keiji dies but does so within the framework of the story, allowing him to recall skills and scenarios the way a player would. Keiji is stuck in a time loop, desperately seeking a way out that will further his life and hopefully defeat the foe.

The idea of re-reading one day in the life of Keiji Kiriya may sound like a cheap way of increasing wordcount but each significant new day expands the Keiji's world and reveals more about the characters. Parallels between quite distinct individuals and events begin to emerge and Keiji's increasing abilities (he accumulates knowledge; it's a genuine time-slip not a recurring dream) drive the story forward. Details like beverages and detective novels seem throwaway initially but play an important part in linking characters to their emotional selves – emotions tainted by the blood of comrades and the horrors of battle. *All You Need Is Kill* places the characters feelings as central to the whole story, creating emotion in a literary sense from something that is defined in terms of concept and pixels.

Sakurazaka's taut novel of future war is a fast paced read for those seeking a quick adrenalin buzz – a novel for a generation where the distinctions between literature, films, gaming, comics and music are becoming increasingly meaningless. Although by no means perfect *All You Need Is Kill* is a short shot of imaginative fiction.

**John Scalzi – Agent to the Stars**

Tor, 2008, 365pp, £p ISBN – 13: 978-0-7653-1771-1

Reviewed by Gary Dankin

*Agent to the Stars* is the debut novel by the author of *A Old Man's War* and its various sequels. The book is a 'practice novel' written in 1997. John Scalzi explains the background on his website (<http://www.scalzi.com/agent/archives/003068.html>) in frank detail. In part he says, 'In sitting down to write the novel, I decided to

make it easy on myself. I decided first that I wasn't going to try to write something near and dear to my heart, just a fun... humorous story – aliens from another world decide to get an agent – and I just let it take me where it wanted to go.' Eventually Scalzi posted the story online as a shareware novel and enough people liked it to pay for a 'laptop and a lot of pizzas'. Now Scalzi is a sufficiently big

name that the book has found its way into print. It is far removed from his post-Heinlein space opera, being a social comedy set mostly in contemporary Hollywood.

Thomas Stein is a junior agent at a powerful Hollywood agency. We meet him as he makes the biggest deal of his career, a \$12.5 million contract for star ascendant Michelle Beck to reprise her role in the sequel to sf hit *Murdered Earth*. Immediately afterwards the head of the agency gives Tom the most important assignment of his career: to prepare the introduction of a genuinely alien race to the world. The Yherajk have picked up earth's TV signals and come to visit in a hollowed-out asteroid/spaceship. Having watched decades of American TV they have decided the way to introduce themselves is via Hollywood, because US presidents are scary and only speak for one country, while everyone loves Hollywood and the global language of the moving image. So naturally they need an agent; they are well-aware there are far more movies about hostile aliens than friendly ones. The Yherajk are friendly and highly ethically advanced. They also have an image problem. They look like *The Blob*.

Scalzi takes this absurd yet essentially logical set-up and develops it as realistically as it permits, even with the sort of coincidences expected of real-life rather than fiction. Many chapters deal with Tom's travails with his clients, most of whom are either stupid, unpleasant, or both. One sub-plot involves Michelle (25, blond, beautiful, dumb but nice) and her obsession with getting the 'Meryl Streep' part – a middle-aged dark-haired intellectual Jew – in the latest Oscar-baiting Holocaust drama. Scalzi writes with a wry humour affectionately parodying Hollywood stereotypes. I don't know how accurate a portrayal of life in a Hollywood agency this is, but it feels real, if exaggerated slightly to comic effect. The dialogue is reasonably sharp, characters ditto, and the plot moves along nicely. Large parts of the novel will appeal as much to those interested in the workings of the film industry as in sf. Fortunately there is a considerable



overlap, and Scalzi exploits this as the two sides of his story weave together. Bar an Oscar night finale it is all rather low key for a first contact story. There's a little romance, adventure, comedy, spectacle, satire, and a bit with a dog. It's disposable, cynical fun with a big heart. It won't win any awards but could make a good popcorn movie. It is very Hollywood. Scalzi's agent is probably on the phone right now.

**Freda Warrington - A Blackbird In Amber Twilight**  
Immanion Press, 2009, £15.99, 484pp, t/p, ISBN 9781904853558

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham.



Planes itself. One of the questors, Ashurek, the brother of the Gorethrian Emperor Meshurek, had come to realise that the Empire was evil, and had deserted his command of the Gorethrian army, eventually killing Meshurek who had fallen under the power of a demon. Subsequently, Ashurek left the Earth, and went to live on another world, Ikonos. Gorethria and its empire were in chaos. As this book begins, a Gorethrian, Duke Xedrek, summons the demon Ah'garith, convinced that he will be able to control it. Initially, this does seem to be the case, as Xedrek is able to use Ah'garith's power to gain artificial, sorcerous power of his own, seize the imperial throne, and restore the Empire. Of all the lands of the continent of Vardav, only the land of Kristillia remains free.

Meanwhile, on Ikonos, Ashurek's daughter Mellorn grows up fascinated by her father's birthplace, the Earth of Three Planes, and his tales of Gorethria. A powerful Sorceress, Mellorn is convinced that she is destined to travel to Earth to guide and nurture those who have the latent power of sorcery, but no-one to show them how to use it. Arriving in Gorethria, calling herself by the Gorethrian name of Melkavesh, her first act, quite by chance, is to rescue Kharan, Xedrek's former mistress, from execution. Despite all Kharan tells her of Xedrek's evil, Melkavesh contrives to inveigle herself into Xedrek's confidence, in an effort to fully understand the situation on Earth, and finds herself drawn to him, for he has undeniable charm. Even when she discovers the full extent of his depravity – his artificial power is created through his experiments on human beings – Melkavesh tries to persuade him to renounce his ambitions for Gorethria. Only when Xedrek attacks her with sorcery, does Melkavesh flee, with Kharan, and attempt to inspire Kristillian resistance.

After two decades, even if it is no longer at the cutting edge of fantasy fiction, this book can still hold

its own. It is richly imagined and atmospheric, with exotic landscapes and characters – not all of them human. The author manages to portray Xedrek as both charismatic and repellent, so that the reader can quite believe that Melkavesh is reluctant to kill him, while Melkavesh's self-doubts – as Kharan warns her, she is going to be instrumental in a war against Gorethria in which many innocent people will die – make her three-dimensional rather than simply an all-powerful sorceress. Those who read this series when it was first published will find it well worth re-visiting, and those who are reading it for the first time will have an enjoyable read.

**Walter Jon Williams - This Is Not A Game**  
Orbit, 2009, £11.99, 369pp, t/p, ISBN 9781841496573

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Charlie Ruff has a problem. There's a little over \$12 billion in his secret bank account in the Cayman Islands. Exactly why this sort of wealth should be a problem is not revealed until two-thirds of the way through the novel, though there are plenty of clues scattered about. Enough clues, certainly, that when the revelation finally comes it is with the satisfaction of all the pieces falling into place, because this is an expertly plotted near-future thriller.

Walter Jon Williams has a problem. Every so often he will turn out a gem of a novel that captures the zeitgeist, as he did, for instance, with *Hardwired* back in the days when cyberpunk was still fresh and exciting, and as he does to a lesser extent with this novel. Yet he has never really had the critical acclaim or attention that such works would seem to merit. In part this is surely because the occasional gems are separated by too many novels that feel routine, unengaged. If you are trying for the zeitgeist and miss, the result can feel as opportunistic as his recent space operas. In part, also, it is because he is so efficient at constructing plots; his books start in top gear and rush you along at a breathless pace. By the end you are exhausted and exhilarated by the ride, delighted at the way everything slots neatly in place, but you'll hardly remember a character or a vivid scene or a well-turned phrase because even if they are there you whiz past too quickly to notice.

There is an ingenious and attractive idea embedded in *This Is Not A Game*, one that will, I suspect, keep this novel close to the hearts of many readers. There is a game going on, one in which the players solve clues that are on line or contained in carefully staged events, a game that attracts hundreds of thousands of players from across the globe who must co-operate, share insights, lend their expertise to the common cause, in order to win through to the climax. When Dagmar the game's designer finds herself trapped in Jakarta when the economy collapses, the army loses control and mayhem is loosed upon the city, she turns to this network of game players for help. It's a little like the



way SETI, for instance, will use a network of home computers at rest to provide the sort of computing power that would normally be way beyond its means; here all the myriad game players become part of a thrilling real-life enterprise. It also has the rather appealing effect of turning geeks into real-life heroes.

Having been rescued by this common enterprise in the superbly dramatic opening section of the novel, Dagmar calls upon the massed power of geekdom again when one of her best friends is gunned down in front of her by a Russian assassin. And this is where Charlie's billions come in.

Dagmar, Charlie, Austin and BJ were friends at university, they met through a shared fascination with gaming, and Dagmar and BJ were lovers for a while. After university, Austin became a financier, particularly successful at providing start-up funds for high-tech companies. Charlie and BJ started a software company, but their first product, a programme for playing the stock market, was not immediately successful and the company crashed. Charlie managed to find mysterious foreign backers and rescued the business, but BJ was forced out and now works in a dead-end job in an on-line call centre. Dagmar tried her hand at writing science fiction for a while, but now serves as puppetmaster for the futuristic games run by one of Charlie's off-shoot companies.

Such is the situation when assassins from the Russian mafia, would-be super spies, love-lorn Indian actors, and devastating explosions are brought into play. In many ways this is a routine thriller, and the villain of the piece is pretty obvious. (In fact the villain is so obvious that for a long time I thought Williams was playing a double bluff, which made it something of a surprise when I realised, oh, it was so-and-so after all.) But Williams orchestrates the clues, the dramas, the betrayals, the confrontations, with considerable flair. And the tribe of on-line detectives deployed in solving the puzzle (a fair number of whom refuse to believe that this is not a game) give the whole enterprise a fresh edge, and a self-referential gloss that makes the whole thing seem cleverer than it really is. At the end of it all, after the twists and revelations and hair's breadth escapes, you hardly notice that, with the exception of Dagmar, there isn't that much characterisation going on, and the plot doesn't really make much sense. You're just glad you have been along for the ride.

I don't imagine that *This Is Not A Game* is going to lift Walter Jon Williams into the critical stratosphere, but it should certainly win him yet more new fans among those who relish a well told, well constructed and gripping thriller.

**Jack Williamson – *Darker Than You Think***  
**Gollancz, London 2008 (original 1948), £7.99, 282pp,**  
**t/p ISBN 9780575083035**

**Reviewed by David McWilliam**

Does Jack Williamson's combative choice of title accurately represent a narrative that pushes horror fans to the limits of their threshold of terror? The answer is a resounding no, but *Darker Than You Think* remains an atmospheric and fun supernatural

thriller. It begins with a dramatic sequence. Will Barbee, journalist for the *Clarendon Star*, awaits the return of Dr. Lamarck Mondrick, head of the Humane Research Foundation, from an archaeological dig in Mongolia. Amongst the crowd at the airport Barbee meets a mysterious woman, April Bell, who he finds both alluring and disturbing. Together they watch as Mondrick attempts to reveal a terrible truth uncovered in the Ala-shan, a prophecy foretelling of the rise of a Black Messiah, the Child of Night, who will lead humanity's hidden enemy against it. Before disclosing the details of this plot, Mondrick suffers an untimely death, which Barbee suspects might have something to do with his new acquaintance. The novel then follows Barbee's obsessional attempts to uncover the nature of the threat identified by the Foundation, who refuse to take him into their confidence. At the same time, he attempts to rationalise his attraction to April, which comes to dominate both his waking thoughts and dreams. Each night he imagines being summoned by a beautiful white she-wolf, following her in the guise of various animals to commit acts of violence before daylight drives him back into human form.

For a modern readership, the twist at the centre of the novel is signposted incredibly early on and will lead to a sense of incredulity as to how long it takes for the protagonist to recognize it. This is perhaps due to the frequency with which it has been utilized by succeeding horror and fantasy fiction since this novel's first publication in 1948, when such sympathetic monsters were far less common within genre fiction. Despite the shortcomings of *Darker Than You Think*, the sense of menace that pervades this tale of a small town beset by supernatural forces make this an extremely enjoyable novel. The blend of conspiracies concerning a dark illuminati and the exhilaration of monstrous transformation mean that a case can be made that *Darker Than You Think* is the missing link between H. P. Lovecraft and Clive Barker. Whilst falling short of the works of either in its capacity to evoke fear, following Will Barbee's descent into madness and beyond the novel evokes the grand machinations of the Great Old Ones and foreshadows the excitement of newfound abilities, irrespective of their bloodletting conditions, savoured by the Nighbreed. Williamson's take on the lycanthropy myth attempts to explain the phenomenon in evolutionary terms, whilst also increasing the supernatural powers of those who possess the necessary genetic code. He masterfully navigates between these tendencies to lend an eerie, dreamlike quality to the prose, providing a rewarding experience to those who are willing to ignore the, now preposterous, claims of the title.



# Progressive Scan: Being Human

by Abigail Nussbaum

For a brief period this winter, it seemed that everyone in my blog and LiveJournal circle was talking about BBC3's *Being Human*, often using exactly the same introduction: a vampire, a werewolf, and a ghost walk into a house. It's hard to fault anyone for being unable to resist such an obvious hook, but as a result I formed the impression that *Being Human* was a comedy, a supernatural *Friends* or *Coupling*. From the enthusiasm with which it was discussed I also gathered that *Being Human* was quite good. Both of these impressions turned out to be less than entirely accurate. *Being Human* is much closer to a soap opera – and a rather melodramatic one at that – than a sit-com, and in terms of quality it delivers frustratingly mixed yields, being simultaneously adorable and a dud.

The series had its genesis as a one-hour pilot which aired in January 2008, and introduced us to Mitchell, a hundred year old vampire, and George, who two years ago was bitten by a werewolf and given its curse. When they rent a house together, they discover that it is haunted by Annie, the ghost of a previous occupant. The series returned for a first season this winter, slightly retooled and – for the most part mercifully – recasting all but one of the main characters. The season's main plot arc revolves around Mitchell's difficulties in giving up human blood, which are complicated when he runs afoul of his former coven and its leader Herrick (played by Adrian Lester in the original pilot and Jason Watkins afterwards, and though it is a shame to

have lost Lester it is one of the few original touches of the series's iteration on this story that the vampire king is a pudgy, unimpressive, middle aged man). In secondary plots, Annie learns the truth about her death and exacts vengeance on her murderer, and George makes hesitant forays back into the human society he abandoned after becoming a werewolf. The main focus of the series, however, and the theme it constantly returns to, is the three friends' desire to hold onto to their humanity despite no longer being part of the human race, and the triumphs and setbacks they experience while trying to do so.

*Being Human*'s one shining and undeniable achievement is its characters. Though all three leads are rooted in a fairly simplistic overturning of stereotypes – the vampire is gleeful and immature, the werewolf is bumbling and cerebral, the ghost is nurturing and eager to please – the writing and performances imbue them with warmth and wit and make Mitchell, George and Annie, and the family they form, nearly irresistible. The series' chief pleasures are its tiny moments of human connection – Mitchell geeking out to an appreciative Annie over his non-speaking appearance in *Casablanca*, George grousing about Annie's habit of making cups of tea she can't drink, Mitchell's jealousy when George befriends a fellow werewolf who threatens to take Mitchell's place as George's protector and adoptive older brother. It's the characters that kept me coming back despite the fact that in almost every other respect – plotting, character arcs, and occasionally

the dialogue, which in dramatic scenes often veers towards purple and overwrought – *Being Human* is middling to poor.

As I've said, the season's dominant plotline is Mitchell's story, but he is by far the least interesting and convincingly sketched of the three leads. Partly, the problem lies in the story's predictability. Evil vampires plot to take over the world; lone, good-yet-conflicted vampire stands against them. It's a story that's been told countless times in movies, books and TV, and this iteration is rather by the numbers, and leaves Mitchell with few places to go that haven't been thoroughly explored by Angel and his brethren. Even more problematic is the fact that Mitchell himself is entirely unpersuasive as a man who has lived for more than a century, witnessing war and revolution and leaving a trail of bodies in his wake.

Mitchell is naive to the point of being painfully stupid – when Herrick presents him with a plan to take vampires public and offer conversion to anyone looking for eternal life, it takes Mitchell the better part of an episode to do the math and realize that Herrick plans to turn the remaining humans into cattle – and his desire to live as a man and stop killing is never sufficiently explained. Instead, the writers plump for the old standby of the brooding vampire tormented by his misdeeds, which in the first season are made flesh in the form of Lauren, a woman Mitchell killed and turned, who embraces her newfound monstrousness and tries to tempt him back into his. The resulting character arc, in which Mitchell and Lauren are depicted alternately as drug addicts desperate for a blood fix, as psychopathic hunters, and as creatures who simply need to eat, is unsuccessful as an exploration of Mitchell's choice to renounce vampirism and his struggle with his dark desires. Even worse, it seems to expect us to pity Mitchell for his guilt over having killed Lauren, while reviling Lauren for becoming exactly what Mitchell made of her and not having the strength (or perhaps even purity of heart) to be a conflicted, part-time monster like him. Meanwhile, the one aspect of Mitchell's life which might explain his desire, after a century of slaughter, to go cold turkey – his friendship with George – is underdeveloped, with no information yet about how the two met and decided to band together.

The incongruity between Mitchell's dominance in the plot and his ability to shoulder it is only the most egregious expression of *Being Human*'s core flaw: the more interesting a character is, the less the writers give them to do. The most appealing characters on the show aren't even the leads. They are recurring or one-off characters such as George's girlfriend Nina, a tough as nails nurse with little patience for his attempts to protect her from the truth about himself and great reserves of courage and compassion. Or Gilbert, a ghost Annie befriends who at first seems like a pretentious hipster, but who, without losing his snobbishness, shows great kindness and generosity when he helps Annie discover the truth

about her death. Or even a sardonic priest who gives George some much needed advice in the season finale (though it is annoying, after a entire season which makes much of George's Jewishness, even stressing that his Star of David medallion has the same effect on vampires as a cross, that at a time of crisis he receives spiritual guidance from a Christian clergyman).

Of the three leads, the most interesting character is George, who has just recently walked away from his whole life and hasn't, like Mitchell, had the time to find replacements for the friends, family, and social position he's lost. At the same time, George is terrified of the monster within him, and of his ability to hurt and infect others, and so his character is constantly torn between bitterness at his lot and longing for a normal life, and the belief that he shouldn't be allowed near ordinary people. There are some nice explorations of this tension in the first season – the tentative growth of George's relationship with Nina, whom he is terrified of hurting either physically or emotionally, and the gradual wearing away, over the course of the season, of his insistence that he and the wolf are two distinct entities – and Russell Tovey is by far the strongest performer in the cast, imbuing a character who in another actor's hands might have become a high-strung caricature with depth and intelligence. But plot-wise, George is given nothing to do but act in a supporting role in Mitchell and Annie's stories, when the story I was most interested in watching was his.

Annie, meanwhile, is caught somewhere between the two men. She has a plotline, but her growth over the first season, from a Stepfordish doormat who wants nothing but to be in the presence of her still-living fiancé Owen, even going so far as to play the part of his wife – hanging up his shirts, making his favorite dishes – in the house he now shares with another woman, to a powerful and independent woman, is too sudden to be believable. The show handles well the discovery that Owen was domineering and abusive, and that he was responsible for Annie's death, most particularly in an episode in which Annie determines to torment him only to discover that Owen isn't afraid of her, because even though she's a ghost she is also still the same person he so easily controlled when she was alive. When the time comes, however, for Annie to change in her essence, to stop being cowed and submissive and fight back against Owen and the vampire cover, the writers bungle her transformation. One moment Annie is herself, the next she's Dark Willow, with no believable transition between the two states except for a few not sufficiently explored hints that, being a ghost, Annie is in contact with dark and dangerous forces.

In the end, what's most remarkable about *Being Human* is that despite the predictable vampire plot, despite the sidelining of interesting characters like George and Nina, and despite the bitterness of Annie's storyline, I found it entirely winning and am definitely planning to tune in when the show returns

next year. This is a testament to the strength of the show's characters, who consistently triumph over the indifferent, derivative plots they've been given, and it's hard not to conclude that had the writers jettisoned the vampire conspiracy plot entirely and written *Being Human* as a pure character drama, focusing on the relationships between the three leads and their attempts to make a place for themselves in human society, they would have created a gem of a show. It seems to me that there's a niche in genre television for a character driven drama which hasn't been properly filled since *Buffy*'s demise (not that

*Buffy* was as weak on plot as *Being Human* is, and in fact I strongly suspect that a great deal of the show's problems stem from its writers trying to emulate Joss Whedon without possessing even a shred of his storytelling talent), and which *Being Human* might easily have filled. Sadly, the first season finale, despite doing away with Herrick and his coven, ends by indicating that next season will also revolve around a supernatural menace rather than the characters. As much as I like Mitchell, George and Annie, I doubt that they will ever be allowed to make *Being Human* anything more than an adorable dud.

## Foundation's Favourites: *De Bracy's Drug* by Volsted Gridban

By Andy Sawyer

Let us go back fifty years or so, to a time when science fiction writers had *real* science fiction writers' names, such as Vargo Statten, Volsted Gridban, Astron Del Martia [think about it a little], or my own personal favourite, Ray Cosmic ("Well, Mrs and Mrs Cosmic, what are we going to name the little chap?" "Well, we thought about Raymond, Vicar").

Many of these names can be traced back to Scion Publications, who churned out small-format paperbacks under house-names at a frightening rate, and the small group of writers who masqueraded as the mysterious Messrs. Statten, Gridban, del Martia etc., who were probably the spiritual ancestors of 2000AD's Tharg, the greenskinned editorial overlord of the century's most zarjaz comic. Vargo Statten, indeed, had his own magazine from 1954–1956, edited for most of its short life by the "real" Vargo Statten, the stupendously productive John Russell Fearn.

One of my favourite examples of these booklets is the 1953 Volsted Gridban novel *De Bracy's Drug*. From its typically lurid two-colour (yellow and pink!) cover, showing a scapeship zooming down upon a city, to its proud boast of being "Scion Scientific Novel No 39699" ("My Raymond's a clever boy. He reads scientific novels.") it is a typical instance of the reading-matter aimed at the younger or less expert end of the sf market. We may wonder whether there *really* were 39,698 previous books in the series, but there certainly were numerous publishing houses competing with each other for the pocket-money of fans of exciting romances: the science fiction booklets were only part of a vast range of popular literature and almost certainly small beer compared to some of the long-running series in other genres such as Amalgamated Press's "Sexton Blake Library" (for which Michael Moorcock was among the writers

who made sure that a punishing twice-monthly programme of titles was adhered to). In such a cut-throat world, keeping the reader turning the pages took priority over ambitions to win the Nobel Prize for Literature or to have admiring essays published about you in the literary journals. *De Bracy's Drug* is not exceptional in its breathless rush to keep the reader going until the end of its 127 pages.

Let's take a look at it. It's a thin 18-inch high paperback, perfect for rolling up and slipping into your pocket to read on the bus (or during school). In these days of huge doorstopper tomes which break your toe if you drop them – and that's just the paperbacks! – it's reassuringly friendly. The inside front and back covers advertise the then-ubiquitous "Joan the Wad", the luck-bringing Cornish piskey who, if the numerous testimonials are to be believed, solves money and romantic problems. The back cover offers an "imitation cigarette" which enables you to conquer the smoking habit and save more of your wage packet. This suggests a wider readership than school-age children (though school leaving age, of course, was lower in the 1950s than it is now).

The story begins with three astronauts, Lanson, Bender and Burges who have returned to Earth after a Mars expedition lasting three years to find it ruled by a totalitarian regime who have eschewed messy things like emotions for "cold, inhuman logic". Through a device which Burges the physicist just happens to be working on, they escape into an alternate world. But this alternate world happens to have been invaded by the toadlike Zylien, the "Star People", and our intrepid trio hook up with a resistance movement, although any active resistance has been met by terrible vengeance from an orbiting Zylien ship. Lanson is captured and sentenced to ten years in the power rooms, where the radiation

will soon kill him off. Fortunately, the half-mad "Pop" knows how to escape, and takes Lanson with him. The half-mad, whip-scarred Lanson ends up in the Ruins, where he fortunately stumbles on the other two, who have discovered that the old man Slade knows where to find a spaceship from the pre-invasion days. After another confrontation, they take off and shoot down the Zytlen ship.

Or, to put it another way: "And then we were saved."

In 127 pages, it's very difficult to have any sort of development, and the fact that the story is essentially a lurch from one lucky coincidence to another is to be expected. There are some moments when you can almost *hear* the sounds of some very dodgy gears as the plot is beaten into shape. The first we hear of Burges, for instance, is when Bender remarks that Burges has asked him to leave him alone for as long as possible. Lanson's response "Burges? ... The physicist. I'd forgotten him" sounds awfully like Mr Gridban needed some way of introducing the third character and making sure we know he's a physicist, but wasn't sure how to do it. (resulting in something which looks like he's saying "Burgess, who's he? You mean there's been a third person on this ship for the last three years?") And isn't it fortunate that "Pop" knows how to escape and manages to die at the right time so that we needn't have another character to think about for too long? And if you were spending time enough to give two new recruits who don't know much about this world all the secret signals and handshakes, you might just remind them that the restaurants serve nothing but soya soup and yeast patties, so that when Bender asks for "Steak ... rare, and with mushrooms, fried potatoes, green peas and lots of onions. Then I'll have cheese, coffee, and finish off with brandy" he doesn't raise peoples' suspicion. But then, they'd have to find another way of getting Lanson into that radiation-soaked hellhole so that he can escape from it.

But, clumsy plotting aside, there's something about *De Bracy's Drug*. It moves. If he jettisons a certain amount of logic and the subtler analyses of the Human Condition, Volsted Gridban knows how to keep you reading. The picture of Earth under the Zytlens is authentically grim, the desire of Lanson & co for a world where they can be unregimented themselves is one which many of Gridban's readers would have sympathised with, and which still rings true today. (And before we get too smug about Bender's request for steak and all the trimmings, I'd lay odds that the joke is that your average reader of Scion Scientific Novels would find the restaurants they eat in more geared to the "vitamised protein" and water end of the market than the steak and Napoleon Brandy).

At the end of the story "a free world" waits for Lanson. He has gone through Hell to get there, and even though we almost certainly will not read his story again (unless we are intending to write about it for *Vector*), there is a little bit of us which says "Go on out there, mate. You deserve it."

In short, this is a story which gives the reader what they want – and a little more! It's not surprising to read in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* that this incarnation of Volsted Gridban was E. C. Tubb, who has known how to tell a cracking good story for decades. Later "Gridbans" were John Russell Fearn. It is so easy to blame the shortcomings of these books on the author. The fact that the story was produced at all shows the competence of these men. Frankly, it could have been a whole lot worse, and many of these Scion paperbacks were.

One thing did puzzle me, and that was the significance of De Bracy and his "drug". By the time I reached the end, I had forgotten that the whole thing had been kicked off because Lanson et.al. had escaped a transformed Earth – an Earth whose population had had their emotions removed thanks to a drug invented by De Bracy. An Earth (and a drug) which then played no significant part in the plot.

So why, then, the title? Well, many of these books were written at great speed to go with an already-decided title and cover. Could it have been that Gridban/Tubb, when presented with "De Bracy's Drug" as a title, simply inserted a couple of sentences into a story he already had waiting about a world invaded by a race of toadlike aliens in order to gain time to work on the next assignment? Could it be that somewhere out in Scion-collectors' land there is a book called something like *The Sky People* which Gridban should have supplied copy for, and which instead is largely about someone called De Bracy and a drug?

Fortunately, I shall never know.

# Resonances #55

By Stephen Baxter

One interesting aspect of British fantastic fiction has long been its willingness to confront a profoundly uncomfortable question: how would it be to meet creatures fundamentally smarter than we are? And as it happens this question is topical right now.

As I write there is a ferocious debate going on in the world of SETI (the search for extraterrestrial intelligence) about the wisdom, not just of passively listening for signals from space aliens, but of actively signalling to them (see for example the piece by astronomer David Whitehouse in the *Independent* of 25 June 2007 [1]). Of course Earth is a noisy place in the radio spectrum; we've been leaking radio, TV and radar signals for decades. But the signal strength drops off quite quickly, over a few light years – spanning a few tens of stars, say. If we send out purposeful signals we suddenly make ourselves visible to a much larger chunk of the Galaxy.

Signals have been sent before. In 1974, the Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico transmitted a series of radio pulses towards the M13 star cluster, encoding a message from humanity. But some have always been unhappy about this. While "contact optimists" like Carl Sagan believed that advanced cultures must be benevolent, others weren't so sure, and believed that drawing attention to ourselves might be a dangerous thing. Whitehouse quotes former Astronomer Royal Sir Martin Ryle, who warned that "any creatures out there [might be] malevolent or hungry". And Sir Bernard Lovell, founder of Jodrell Bank, once said, "It's an assumption that they will be friendly – a dangerous assumption." David Brin speaks of analogies of toddlers shouting in the jungle. Maybe everybody else is quiet because they know something we don't.

The current debate is actually largely about consent: who should authorise sending such a signal. The debate has parallels with public concerns about the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, with the fringe possibilities that its collisions might trigger some catastrophic event. There are also perhaps parallels with global debates such as how we handle climate change and arms control. You could argue that it is a sign of SETI growing up as a science that it is facing such debates about its public responsibility.

However I can't help but feel we're being anthropomorphic in our theorising about the alien, not for the first time. To a first approximation there are two kinds of chimps: the common chimps who wage war, and the bonobos who cooperate, and make love all day. When dreaming of the aliens we hope to find them behaving like bonobo chimps,

but fear that they will behave like common chimps. Maybe they won't behave like chimps at all!

My personal feeling is that our encounter with the aliens, if and when it comes, will be dominated not by aggression or benevolence, but simply by the fact that they will be smarter than us – perhaps orders of magnitude smarter. After all they couldn't be much less advanced than us, or else they wouldn't be signalling to us, or travelling to meet us, at all. How would it be if we encountered super-intelligence – that is, not a mere technological gap as when the Incas met the Spaniards, a gap which might be closed some day, but an order of magnitude of capability which we would clearly have no chance of closing? It's not a comfortable subject to think about. And fictional precedents aren't encouraging.

An early and chilling example of the consequences of an encounter with a superior intellect was given by Jonathan Swift (1726). Gulliver's darkest journey takes him to the land of the Houyhnhnms – pronounced "Whinnim", like a horse's whinny. This is a country where animals, horses, are smart, and humans, "Yahoos", are savage beasts. You could make a case for the Houyhnhnms being the first truly alien creatures in literature.

And they are genuinely superior intellects. Interestingly they aren't smarter so much in technology, as in much later fiction, as in society and politics, the subject matter of Swift's satire. (Lacking gunpowder, they would have been vulnerable to a surprise attack by the European nations of the day; see Adam Roberts's *Swiftly* [2008] for how that might have turned out.) Certainly they take a dim view of our blundering and confusion, and are horrified that humans make war: "When a creature pretending to Reason could be capable of such Enormities, [the Houyhnhnm] dreaded lest the Corruption of that Faculty might be worse than Brutality itself" (Book 4 Chapter 5).

Carl Sagan may have hoped that super-brains must be benevolent. Not the Houyhnhnms. They see glimmers of intelligence in Gulliver, and tragically he identifies with them, but to the horses he's just another Yahoo and they mercilessly ship him back to England. He's left traumatised: "I began last Week to permit my Wife to sit at Dinner with me, at the farthest End of a long Table ... yet the Smell of a Yahoo [continues] very offensive ..." (Book 4 Chapter 12). And meanwhile the Houyhnhnms consider the extermination of all Yahoos.

Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John* (Methuen, 1935; page numbers from the 1972 Dover edition) is another

description of an encounter between mankind and a superior kind, in this case a breed of "supermen" who are born among us, apparently descended from a sport in Asia. John, born in England, is frighteningly precocious as a child, absorbing intellectual material and supremely manipulative on a human scale. Just as the Houyhnhnms fascinated Gulliver, John fascinates us, even as we fear him. He actually calls his amanuensis, the adult narrator, "Fido". He kills when he needs to, without conscience: it is "just as you kill wolves and tigers so that the far brighter spirits of men may flourish" (121). John founds an island colony with others of his kind, but they are under threat of detection and exploitation and annihilation. And, again just like the Houyhnhnms, they chillingly calculate whether it is worth exterminating mankind: "We are young, and we should have to spend the most critical years of our lives in warfare. When we had finished the great slaughter, should we be any longer fit mentally for our real work, for the founding of a finer species, and for worship? No!" (149). In the end, as the colony is about to be overwhelmed, they destroy themselves and their works: "They would not allow their home, and all the objects of beauty with which they had adorned it, to fall into subhuman clutches" (157). But they do leave the narrator with an account of sciences and the cosmos to serve as a message to future generations of superhumans.

William Golding's *The Inheritors* (Faber, 1955; page numbers from the 1956 Faber edition) is another portrait of a collision between species, in this case between the last Neanderthals and modern humans. It is told mostly from the point of view of the Neanderthals, and has a tremendous impact. The humans do things the Neanderthals literally have no conception of, for instance crossing from an island in boats: "Lok considered [the island] as he might have considered the moon: something so remote that it had no connection with life as he knew it" (40). Here is Lok being shot at with an arrow: "By his face there had grown a twig: a twig that smelt of other, and of goose, and of the bitter berries that Lok's stomach told him he must not eat. This twig had a white bone in the end ... He smelled along the shaft of the twig. The leaves on the twig were red feathers and reminded him of goose. He was lost in a generalised astonishment and excitement" (106). He can't conceive that such a thing as a weapon. Tragically, he thinks it's a gift. The humans find the Neanderthals revolting, and effortlessly enslave or destroy them. Thinking creatures are kept as pets. The Neanderthals perceive they are being destroyed. "They have gone over us like a hollow log. They are like a winter" (198). But even as they wipe out his fellows Lok is utterly fascinated by the new people, with their gadgets and their art, towards whom he "yearned with a terrified love" (191).

These examples support my contention that British writers have always been prepared to look the uncomfortable possibility of unbridgeable superiority in the face. But of course it's not an

exclusively British trait. In Robert Heinlein's story "Goldfish Bowl" (1942) we encounter aliens as far above us as we are above fish in a tank, and as uncaring: "The human race had reached its highest point - the point at which it began to be aware that it was not the highest race, and the knowledge was death to it, one way or the other - the mere knowledge alone..."

Are these fictional examples a guide to how our encounter with a higher culture will unfold? If so, we will fail even to comprehend much of what they do, as your dog could never understand what you are doing when you play chess. We will be endlessly fascinated by them, perhaps even emulating them. And we will be subject to decision-making about our fate, even to the point of our extinction, governed by their own ethics rather than ours. Just as when we encounter some new species of animal, whether we eat, exterminate or preserve it, our independent destiny will be over.

Returning to the SETI debate, I don't think staying quiet will help. If they're *that* smart, they already know we're here.

#### Endnotes

- [1] "Meet the neighbours: Is the search for aliens such a good idea?" by David Whitehouse, Monday 25 June 2008. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/meet-the-neighbours-is-the-search-for-aliens-such-a-good-idea-454511.html>>

# The New X: Dream Countries

## by Graham Sleight

On the beach at Santa Monica once, I saw a wonderfully simple device. It was a roller, about five feet in diameter and ten feet wide, apparently used to flatten the sand into order after it was kicked around by the sunbathers, kids, and volleyballers who descend on the beach. What made it differ from an ordinary beach roller was that, instead of a flat surface, its outside was gridded with little square and rectangular bumps and indentations. So presumably, when it was pulled across the beach, the indentations it left looked like a city, its buildings only a few centimeters tall, stretching all the way down to the sea. That imaginary city, waiting to be kicked away by the next day's sun-worshippers, always seemed very science-fictional to me.

Dream places – cities or otherwise – are surely at the root of a lot of fantastic fiction. Here's William Gibson, for instance, interviewed in 1986, about the fact that he'd never been to Japan when he wrote *Neuromancer*:

*I don't remember where I got onto Chiba [City]. It was kind of embarrassing. I didn't know that Chiba existed so I had to form a fantasy about it as a sort of Detroit. They weren't proud of it. It was just a kind of ugly suburb. So I started using it, because it was a very flash effect to refer specifically to one place, which is a sort of new place in Japan.*

[...]

*Japan interests me more and more, but I'm starting to get embarrassed about having done this thing without really knowing anything about it. It's just a fantasy. I think in that way it has a weird kind of power. It's like 19th century Orientala. (SF Eye 1, 1987)*

This, to me, is a far more interesting insight into Gibson's working methods than the oft-quoted fact that he wrote *Neuromancer*, with its visions of the future of computers, on a manual typewriter. A place grows imaginatively in your mind, based on all sorts of things: what your culture tells you about it, what you've seen of it, what experiences you might have had, and so on. And there's an obvious distinction to be made between cities in the fantastic: those that really exist and those that don't claim that. In the first category, along with Gibson's Tokyo, one might list in particular Steve Erickson's dreamlike Los Angeles, Michael Moorcock's multiverse Londons, or John Crowley's New York in *Little, Big*. In the second category you have (say) Jan Morris's Hav, M John Harrison's Viriconium, China Mieville's New Crobugon, Jeff VanderMeer's Ambergris, or Terry Pratchett's Ankh-Morpork.

Ankh-Morpork is a particularly interesting example because it's been iterated through so many books, and because Pratchett has clearly chosen to show it changing across time. It doesn't remain in some time-locked state of innocence. Later books in the Discworld sequence,

with their introduction of the printing press or the Keith Roberts-derived "clacks" clearly show a kind of industrial revolution taking place, with old certainties overturned. One of the things Pratchett is playing with here is what one might call the deniability of the fantastic. Ankh-Morpork isn't London, or New York, but it winds up standing for every city: the stink, the vividness, the density. He can get away without having the development of newspapers paralleling that in our world because he can claim "This is another place, made from whole cloth."

Of course, the fantastic doesn't have a monopoly on depictions of places that seem realer than real. Dickens's London is one obvious example, made animate by the potency of the author's political views and his unique gift for depicting its memorably gargoyle-like inhabitants. And, indeed, we don't just have to talk about cities.

In the richest of these works, character is enmeshed with landscape just as style should be with content. This is one of the many rewarding things about Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*. In generic terms, it presents a fantasy landscape (the untouched English forest harbouring the roots of story) but one explored, at least initially, through a science fiction mindset. Or, to be more specific, a scientific romance mindset: the early passages in the book, where 1940s outsiders try to anatomise it in terms of an "oak vortex" or similar have always had the ring of H G Wells to me, of scientific method confronting that which is beyond its capacities. Only later in the book, when this method is set aside, can the wood fully be entered and understood.

The common thread through all of these places ("real" and otherwise) is imaginative intensification. Writing is choosing or it's nothing; the authors I've mentioned (and many others) have chosen what speaks most to their sensibilities. William Gibson, for instance, creating his fantasy of Japan that seems realer than real. We respond to them out of recognition, out of sharing the same mental landscape not yet put into words.

Of course, such places (however intensely imagined) may not exist at all. While I was writing this piece, I started googling around for photos of the Santa Monica beach roller. According to an outraged 1999 letter <<http://www.smmirror.com/Volume1/issue9/letters.html>> to the *Santa Monica Mirror*, it was actually a huge municipal cock-up. The roller the artist had delivered to the beach was far heavier than originally contracted for, and the city owned no tractor powerful enough to pull it. So, it seems, it's only used on special occasions. I reflected that I'd just seen the roller *in situ* and never, during the week I spent in Santa Monica, had I come down to the beach in the morning to find the city embossed on it. But just because something can't be seen or felt, doesn't stop it being real.



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