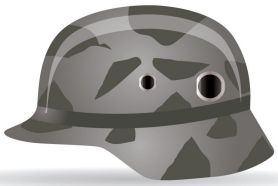
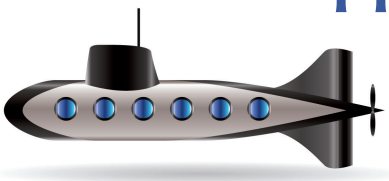
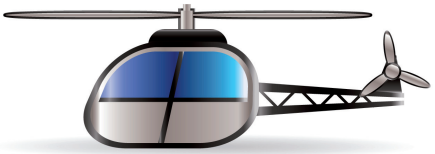
Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

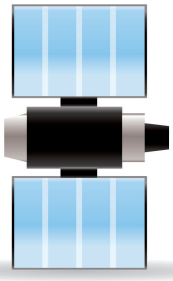


The science and science fiction of war





INSIDE: Stephen Baxter, Claire Brialey, Lara Buckerton, Felix Danczak, David Hebblethwaite, John Jarrold, Caroline Mullan, Abigail Nussbaum, Andy Sawyer



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Vector 264

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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Vector website: http://www.vector-magazine.co.uk
Editor's blog: http://vectoreditors.wordpress.com

Vector

Features, Editorial and Letters: **Niall Harrison**
73 Sunderland Avenue
Oxford
OX2 8DT

Book Reviews: **Martin Lewis**
14 Antony House
Pembury Place
London, E5 8GZ

Production: **Anna Feruglio Dal Dan**
annafdd@gmail.com

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The British Science Fiction Association

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

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Registered address: 61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton, Near Tamworth, B79 0JJ

Website http://www.bsfa.co.uk

Orbiter writing groups

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

Other BSFA publications

Focus: The writer's magazine of the BSFA

Editor Martin McGrath
48 Spooners Drive,
Park Street,
St Albans,
AL2 2HL
focusmagazine@ntlworld.com

Matrix: The news magazine of the BSFA

Editor Ian Whates
finiang@aol.com

Torque Control

I don't know about anyone else, but I've been having a good science-fictional summer. For the first time – not just the first time since 2005, but the first time ever – I found myself properly enjoying *Doctor Who*, carried along by the magnetism of Matt Smith's performance. I caught up with the first season of *Misfits*, which turns out to be not nearly as Torchwood as its ASBO-kids-with-superpowers premise suggests, and able to shift from drama to comedy to horror and back again with an agility that reminded me of nothing so much as early *Buffy*. I've just read, back to back, two interesting, ambitious books that I won't be surprised to see getting awards attention next year. Unfortunately I haven't yet managed to boil either Francis Spufford's *Red Plenty* or Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science-Fictional Universe* down to a soundbite yet, but both are well worth your time. (Ken MacLeod's blurb for *Red Plenty* is pretty good, actually: "It's like a science fiction novel by Kim Stanley Robinson or Ursula Le Guin, set in the Soviet sixties.") At the cinema, I enjoyed *Inception* as a more than averagely demanding blockbuster – and perhaps a warning never to trust stories – and am fervently hoping that *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* can live up to the joyfulness of Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novels. And the BSFA/SF Foundation AGM event, held this year at the Royal Astronomical Society's HQ in London, featuring guests Rob Shearman and Malcolm Edwards, was a great success, not least for the tour of the RAS library at the end of the day.

And for the second time, I was a student at the SFF's Masterclass in SF Criticism. For those who don't know, the Masterclass is an annual three-day course, an opportunity to explore different approaches to discussing sf, and an all-round intense, energising experience. Topics this year included: what makes a "classic"; examined an unexamined exclusions from narrative; whether there is such a thing as essentially science-fictional music; to what extent posthumanism is the central topic in contemporary sf that must be acknowledged or at least reacted to; the characteristics of science fantasy; the differences between UK and US New Wave; and in the course of the above, enthusiastic debate of a pre-assigned reading list that I have to thank for finally prompting me to read Mary Gentle's *Golden Witchbreed*, surely one of the best sf novels of the 1980s (and surely ripe for Gollancz Masterwork status). Further thanks must go to this year's tutors, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr, Roz Kaveney, and Liz Williams; and to all the other attendees for making the discussion so friendly, thorough, enjoyable and wide-ranging.

If that's whet your appetite, the details of next year's Masterclass have been announced. It will take place from 1 July to 3 July at the Hendon Campus of Middlesex University in London, and the tutors will be Paul McAuley, Claire Brialey, and Mark Bould. Delegate costs will be £180 per person, excluding accommodation, and applications should write to Farah Mendlesohn at farah.sf@gmail.com, providing a CV and writing sample.

Before that, however, there's a science-fictional autumn to look forward to. China Mieville is a Guest Director of the Cheltenham Literary Festival this year, which means there's a spate of sf-related programming to look forward to; you can browse the full programme on the festival website, but highlights for me include panel discussions of the work of Orwell (Friday 8 October, 13.00), Wyndham (Friday 15th, 12.30) and Wells (Friday 15th, 15.30), a "How to Read Science Fiction" discussion with M John Harrison, Nalo Hopkinson and Toby Litt (Saturday 16th, 12.00), a debate about British sf with Iain Banks, Gwyneth Jones, China Mieville and Michael Moorcock (Sunday 17th, 16.00), and China Mieville asking John Mullan why there's never any sf on the Booker shortlist (Saturday 16th, 14.00).

Meanwhile, at Torque Control, throughout the autumn I'll be running another series of weekly short story discussions – you can find the schedule, and links to the discussions so far, at < http://is.gd/ewAq3>.

And before *that*, there's this issue of *Vector* to keep you busy. There's no theme this time (at least, not one that I could find; write-in suggestions are welcomed). So in addition to the usual reviews and columns: Lara Buckerton takes us on a tour of the science and science fiction of warfare, in an extended consideration of Antoine Bousquet's *The Scientific Way of Warfare* and several sf texts, including Adam Roberts' *New Model Army*. Felix Danczak explores the influence of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* on the sf of Iain Banks, and finds resonances you might not immediately expect. And there's a transcript of a panel discussion from this year's Eastercon, wherein Claire Brialey, David Hebblethwaite, John Jarrold, Caroline Mullan tell me what they thought of the BSFA/Mexicon survey of British sf writers that all BSFA members should have received at the start of the year.

Last but not least, an announcement. At the end of this year, I will be standing down as *Vector*'s features editor, which means this is my penultimate issue. It's been a pleasure and a privilege working on *Vector* for the last five years – many thanks to everyone else who worked on it during that time, to everyone who wrote an article or a review or a letter of comment, and to everyone that's been reading. But it feels like the right time to let someone else have a go, and I have no doubt that the incoming editor, Shana Worthen, will take *Vector* on to new and greater things.

As to why I'm making the announcement now: next issue is going to be a special focusing on the work of Stephen Baxter, and I'm hoping it will be so full to bursting that there won't even be space for an editorial. See you then, and then goodbye.

NIALL HARRISON
EDITOR

BSFA AWARDS

I Declare These Here 2010 Awards... Open!

Donna Scott

I can scarcely believe that a whole year has passed, but it's time to officially open the nominations for the BSFA Awards once more. So, picture me wearing some kind of hat with netting on it (safety first!), standing across from the Good Ship BSFA Awards, with a bottle of something lovely bubbly, and saying, in my best Helen Mirren voice, "I hereby declare the 2010 BSFA Awards – (smash, tinkle) – open!"

So, now it's up to you. We had a very impressive number of nominations last year, practically doubling the previous year's total. In the Best Novel category, when the numbers were whittled down to the shortlist we ended up with a veritable battle of the giants, with the KO coming from China Miéville's *The City and The City* – another win to add to China's burgeoning collection.

The Best Short Fiction category had even more titles slogging it out – there were so many great pieces of work getting picked up and recommended, and many only missed the shortlist for want of a nomination or two more. What's more, 2009 was a bumper year for novella publications, particularly from smaller, independent presses, so that at times the battle seemed to be one of Davids versus Goliaths. It was certainly the closest finish of all the categories, but Ian Watson and Roberto Quaglia were the worthy winners with "The Beloved of My Beloved".

Adam Tredowski and *Interzone* must have been delighted with so many nominations for the Best Artwork category, four of which ended up on the shortlist... but Stephane Martinière's cover of Ian McDonald's *Desolation Road* won over all of them. Never mind though, *Interzone* could be proud of Nick Lowe when his Mutant Popcorn column proved to be a popular winner in the Best Non-Fiction category.

When the winners are announced at Eastercon next year, you can bet there will be online declarations and debates with people stating what they think should have won. It's a like phoning in a vote for *The X-Factor* after the lines have closed... or even while they're open: a bit pointless. This is a numbers game, and it's fan-led, so if you feel strongly about a particular piece, why not let your fellow-members know? Check out the BSFA forum, and also the BSFA Facebook group, where I've kicked off with some topics for discussion.

...and remember you can nominate more than once, so if you send me your nominations now and think of some more by the deadline, don't worry.

The deadline for me to receive award nominations is 23.59, Friday 14th January 2011. All the usual rules apply, though we've got an additional rule this year: please do not nominate your own work.

Best Novel

The Best Novel award is open to any novel-length work of science fiction or fantasy that has been published in the UK for the first time in 2010. (Serialised novels are eligible, provided that the publication date of the concluding part is in 2010). If a novel has been previously published elsewhere, but it hasn't been published in the UK until 2010, it is eligible.

Best Short Fiction

The Best Short Fiction award is open to any shorter work of science fiction or fantasy, up to and including novellas, first published in 2010 (in a magazine, in a book, or online). This includes books and magazines published outside the UK.

Best Artwork

The Best Artwork award is open to any single science fictional or fantastic image that first appeared in 2010. Again, provided the artwork hasn't been published before 2010 it doesn't matter where it appears.

Best Non-Fiction

The Best Non-Fiction award is open to any written work about science fiction and/or fantasy which appeared in its current form in 2010. Whole collections comprised of work that has been published elsewhere previous to 2010 are ineligible.

Subject to these other rules, you may nominate as many pieces as you like in any category, but you may only submit one nomination for any particular piece.

The shortlists for these four awards will be comprised from the five works in each category that receive the most individual nominations by the deadline. Works published by the BSFA, or in association with the BSFA, are ineligible for a BSFA award.

Your nominations can reach me in several ways. Perhaps the easiest is by email – I can be reached at awards@bsfa.co.uk. There's a PDF nominations form on the BSFA site; if you don't use this form, please remember to include full details for your nominations, including the award category, author or artist, title, and the source (i.e. the publisher or magazine). If you prefer to use snail mail, my address is:

11 Stanhope Road
Queens Park
Northampton
NN2 6JU

All nominations must be received in writing, and must include your name to be accepted.

Happy nominating!

Chaoplexity

The science and science fiction of warfare

Lara Buckerton

"I've died and gone to heaven and seen the first bit of net-centric warfare at work!" said General Tommy Franks, in the aftermath of the USA's lightning-quick war on Saddam's Iraq (quoted in Antoine Bousquet's *The Scientific Way of Warfare*, p. 1). What a funny man. Donald Rumsfeld said strange things too. "People are fungible." Of course, both were obliged to doff their ghoul masks to the commander-in-chief himself, whose gauche and bewildering gaffs were for a time gathered in gift books, stashed near the cashiers.

Is it possible that our appointed killing specialists know *least of any of us* the significance of life? Could, say, Adam off *The Adam and Joe Show* do a better job than Franks? Could literally *anyone* do a better job than Rumsfeld?

The steady contemplation, and implementation, of human death surely pickles any sympathetic faculty the Good Lord may have given these men. What's more, at the level of social function, routine killing selects in favour of the sociopathic and against the tender-hearted.

These factors seem to imply a necessary trade-off between military know-how and the wisdom to use it appropriately – a trade-off which in turn implies the traditional relationship between civic and military elite. The politicians keep the generals on leashes by setting high-level objectives and by drawing appropriate limits to destructiveness. "No, you can't have *that*. Put it down."

So perhaps we only feel uneasy at the emphatic tactlessness of a Rumsfeld because it reminds us that a Rumsfeld is a kind of *instrument*, with a generally nasty function?

In which case we should get over it. Rifles don't need Charisma 18+, and right now it is naive to think we can unilaterally dispense with them. The fact that Rumsfeld has terrible etiquette doesn't make him bad at what he *does*. He's the "gun" guy. He'll shoot himself in the foot, he'll put his foot in his mouth, but he's too savvy to blue-on-blue tragedy to combine those manoeuvres. Right?

Sensible as they sound, such explanations leave me unsatisfied. There's an aura of *creepiness* which attaches to chattery military personnel – and to chattery military scholars and enthusiasts – which is qualitatively distinct from the aura around a tank or a rifle. I can give two alternative reasons, both quite fuzzy.

> "There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social ideal no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy nor legality which could justify men in killing each other for this reason" (Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* [1927]).

Schmitt argued that *nothing* justifies killing – that killing is properly outside of legitimacy [1]. For Schmitt, the political antithesis of friend and enemy, based on the possibility of killing, was its Own Thing, and could not be built out of antitheses which are social, economic, religious, moral, and so on.

If killing does possess this quality of existential irreducibility, perhaps that explains why we experience unease at the foibles of military men, even when these are irrelevant to their soldiering. There is *no* sociological fact, *no* ingredient of personality, which is the appropriate accompaniment to the power to kill. But when professional killers say memorable things, they drive it home that the power to kill *is* nevertheless *de facto* knit into specific sociological formations – that it's a power within reach of an arbitrary set of hands, which stir according to their individual compulsions, according to their arbitrary system of culture and personality.

It's quite natural to want mass killing to be entrusted to the most normal person there is. Yet there is no such person. Social types like the Gentleman Soldier, the Bland Professional, and the Reluctant Freedom Fighter, have a certain dodgy aura of neutrality. They almost suffice as conduits transmitting the socio-political manoeuvres and deliberations around violence to the violence itself. But the conduits are always fractured and cluttered. When Rumsfeld opens his mouth, we get to peer into the conduit, and see the mess. The mess is, of course, Rumsfeld himself.

Bleeding-heart liberals

That's one reason. If it's correct though, Robert Gates should be at least as creepy as Rumsfeld was, and I'm not sure that's the case. So here's another.

Perhaps there are specialist knowledges corresponding with *peace-keeping*, just as there are those corresponding with *killing*. Perhaps the dismay of bleeding-heart liberals, when we are confronted with an elaborate military tract, is not directed at its masterful understanding of killing, but at its patent *ignorance* of peace-keeping.

In this view, the moments of self-loathing, hesitation, impassioned denunciation, confused hysteria, bleakness, wild heroic fantasy, knowing *grand guignol*, and vitriolic black humour, which typically are absent from creepy military tracts, are in fact enablers of deliberation. They are the spots at which the surface of the discourse about violence becomes semi-permeable, where different ideas and views can poke their noses in.

An old idea of Robert Frank's, about the role of emotions in facilitating collaboration, is pertinent here. In *Passions within Reason: the Strategic Role of Emotions*

(1988), Frank argued that unreservedly rational entities would have trouble making alliances, since potential collaborators would rightly fear betrayal. Knowing with one's heart the right moments to vacillate, to exaggerate, to verge on tears or to break out hysterically – and thereby to demonstrate the caveats to one's rationality – is a vital skill of collaboration and of peaceful living.

Where would all this leave military science fiction?

> "The sword bit deep, nearly cleaving the arm from the body. It sent out an arterial spray of bright red that shot an impossible distance through the thin air, freezing in the low pressure and cold so quickly that it fell like scarlet sleet onto the sands" (Chris Roberson, "The Line of Dichotomy," *Solaris Book of New Science Fiction Vol. II* [2008]).

I can't let it off the hook entirely. Plenty of military sf – and plenty of the violent bits of space opera, cyberpunk, etc. – is every bit as creepy as Rumsfeld in a rabbit suit, or Bush in your airing cupboard. Moreover, plenty of military sf normalises, glorifies or otherwise misrepresents killing. As Kurt Cobain nearly sang, "It's okay to disintegrate mooks cuz they don't have any feelings."

But I *do* think that, inasmuch as military sf incorporates a quality of extravagant counterfacticity, it's implicated with both expertise in killing *and* expertise in peace-keeping. Dan Graeber, in a fascinating little pamphlet called *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), points out that the imaginative lives of peaceable, quasi-anarchic peoples are frequently extraordinarily riven with bloodshed. Could the abstract resolution of violence, Graeber wonders, be the secret to their material serenity? Perhaps, although it's worth pointing out that not *all* the violence was abstract:

> "Markets were protected, and market rules enforced by charms which embodied diseases and were said to be powered by human body parts and blood. Enterprising men who managed to patch together some sort of fame, wealth, or clientele were by definition witches. Their hearts were coated by a substance called *tsav*, which could only be augmented by the eating of human flesh. Most tried to avoid doing so, but a secret society of witches was said to exist which would slip bits of flesh in their victims' food, thus incurring a 'flesh debt' and unnatural cravings that would eventually drive those affected to consume their entire families. This imaginary society of witches was seen as the invisible government of the country. Power was thus institutionalized evil, and every generation, a witch-finding movement would arise to expose the culprits, thus, effectively, destroying any emerging structures of state" (Dan Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* [2004]).

Cock-fighting etc.

I started with Antoine Bousquet's retweet of @donaldrumsfeld, from his fascinating 2009 study, *The Scientific Way of Warfare*.

Now, it is with trepidation that I open any book that takes actual warfare for its theme, specifically the trepidation which prefigures all unpleasant but necessary social engagements. But for a blood geek Bousquet is not, it turns out, bad company. His exposition is lucid and forceful, yet flexible and cosmopolitan. As well as knowing about killing and science, Bousquet knows about literature, art, architecture, philosophy and so on, and he draws judiciously from these fields, without lapsing into dilettantism or implying implausible causal connections. Here and there he perhaps permits himself, in the spirit of free indirect discourse, a "spectacular" where I'd have preferred a "terrible," or an "eternal" where I would have purred to hear a "transhistorical." But for the most part he's the sort of author from whom you could quite happily pick up a Freecycle pink sofa, and perhaps sip a cup of peppermint tea on it first. Above all, Bousquet is sensitive to the ways in which local and transient conventions can appear to participants as "natural" – as universally and transhistorically rational. He thereby skirts this terrain's most hazardous pitfall, namely the inclusion of killing within the God-given order of things.

The Scientific Way of Warfare is organised according to the changing character of military-scientific rationality. It is divided into four historical regimes, each organised by a distinct metaphor: clockwork, engine, computer, and network. In Bousquet's use, a "metaphor" is quite similar to a "paradigm," though without its bulky philosophical baggage [2]. The tone turns appropriately to and fro from the definite to the suggestive. We are never tempted to think of the regimes as sharply circumscribed, or to consider a regime fully explanatory over its respective era. It is clear too that the distinctive techniques developed under each regime are never fully retired.

From mechanic to thermodynamic killing

I'll focus on the final of the four regimes, gambling that *Vector* readers take particular interest in the future. I think I once heard science fiction defined as impatience where the appropriate emotion is anxiety. But first let's quickly run through the three antecedent regimes.

The first regime discussed is the mechanistic, exemplified by clockwork, Newtonian cosmology, Hobbesian materialism and Cartesian philosophy of mind.

The clockwork armies of early modernity were expected to precisely conform to minutely-scripted movement patterns. Organic forms could be deconstructed into functional components. Muscles and nerves were analogous to springs and cogs. Aptitude for combat was "no longer an opaque quality only to be revealed in battle" (58f), but cultivated through intensive drilling. In particular, the Prussian army expressed an obsession with neatness and regularity which, though a decisive factor in its considerable military successes, was sometimes also a fetter.

If I have one complaint about this chapter, it's that I should have liked to have heard a few more words about Smith and Darwin. Darwin and Marx are touched upon (76-77) in the context of conflict acting as the engine of human progress. But there could be more. *The Adam and Charles Show* features spontaneous self-organisation and

a cosmology radically incompatible with the Deist faith in a Watchmaker. Smith and Darwin are rather important grit in the cogs of the clockwork metaphor [3].

The steam engine and the industrial revolution inaugurate Bousquet's second technoscientific regime. The rigid choreographies of enlightenment killing were gradually replaced by more flexible deployments, closely attending to the transmission, concentration and release of energy.

Bousquet succinctly suggests how the engine metaphor or fragments thereof came to permeate diverse intellectual practices. Even Freud's model of the mind, for example, "echoes the abstract diagram of the engine with a circulation diagram between conscious and unconscious" (75). Is Dan Graeber (q.v.), in his emphasis on sublimated coercion, still stuck in the engine metaphor?

World War I was notoriously understood as a "war of attrition." Ernst Jünger, a veteran of that war, describes how it reduced soldiers to fuel, "just like charcoal, which is hurled under the glowing cauldron of war so as to keep the work going" (81).

By World War II, the killing had become industrialised and motorised. "Previously, armies essentially depended on the resources they could find in the territory they were occupying whereas increasingly they could and had to be supported by agriculture and industries located hundreds of kilometres away from the front" (79-80). The horrifying engine rapidly accelerated to "total war" as nations assimilated their entire economies to their war efforts, mustering every last spark of destructive energy to hurl at their enemies' armies, infrastructure and civilian populations.

A culmination of sorts occurred in the indiscriminate slaughters of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Bousquet quotes John Schaar: "we have finally made the engine that can smash all engines, the power that can destroy all power" (84).

Cybernetic killing

Bousquet's book is subtitled "Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity." Beneath the four regimes, entire epochs of killers have darted back and forth, like fervent blood-shot eyes, between two poles – one, the desire for perfect control of warfare, and two, the recognition of its inherent disarray and unpredictability.

Mechanistic killing, with its balletic tin soldiers and timeless ballistic equations, was driven by the desire for order. Unlike mechanistic processes, in principle reversible, thermodynamic processes were characterised by entropy, the inevitable ratcheting disorder of closed systems. Thermodynamic killing thus tilted the balance towards accommodating ineradicable chaos. "Clausewitz's emphasis on chance is to be contrasted with eighteenth-century general Maurice de Saxe's belief that 'war can be made without leaving anything to chance'" (88).

With the rise of cybernetic killing, the dread seesaw flopped once more towards the desire for perfect order. Command and control infrastructures "brought with them the hope that disorder of the battlefield could be overcome through information flows in the same way cybernetic systems stave off entropy" (129).

This regime's prototypical technology is the computer. "We may distinguish devices by the type of media content they produce or transmit or by the interface with which we interact with them, but ultimately they are all increasingly being brought together under a common architecture of digital information-processing. This is seen in the current collapsing of devices: emails can be sent through a television, photographs taken with a mobile telephone, and films viewed on a handheld computer" (101). So the computer enables technological commensurability and convergence. The computer itself is an "abstract machine" (ibid.) with in principle limitless physical realisations – in microchips, in abacus beads, in Conway's Game of Life, etc.

There is a strong conceptual affinity between such abstract machines and the idea of homeostasis or autopoiesis – the way in which a self-correcting system maintains its integrity in a fluctuating environment. This seems to be at the heart of the cybernetic metaphor. It first became manifest in the pursuit of a rationalised and self-equilibrating balance of power between the US and the USSR. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, defence wonks shifted their emphasis to total permanent control of the battle-field, through enhanced surveillance and the total integration of all intelligence and military systems. American military omnipotence was to comprise a single computerised and integrated whole, supervenient on a vast array of physical intelligence-gathering and killing machinery. Simply click and drag your prey to the recycle bin.

In its rise within the American defence analysis establishment, the cybernetic regime was articulating the relationship of part and whole in two distinct, and somewhat divergent, aspects. On the one hand, the whole was definitely considered "more than the sum of its parts," inasmuch as the emergent properties of vast interconnected systems were waaay beyond human cognition, and demonstrated the need for computer modelling. On the other, there was no feature of these complicated wholes that was not reducible, in principle, to some definite mathematical interaction. So "that which cannot be assigned a number or expressed in terms of logical relationships is necessarily excluded" (139). Bousquet admirably captures this equivocal relationship.

The success of this way of thinking was tied to the imperative that military defence become an auditable public good, amenable to economic analysis and justification. Early on, it was also shaped by the Cold War context. As the US and the USSR accumulated nukes, with "common sense" but the smurf's squeak from the candle snuffer, the vital conflict was one which could *never* be learned from, which could *only* be known from computer models because if it ever actually happened we'd all be dead – the apocalyptic "Wargasm" a.k.a. the realisation of Mutually Assured Destruction ("MAD"). So a potent scientistic discourse, with powerful institutional support, could pooh-pooh "common sense" with regard to killing, whilst simultaneously relying on various intuitions and unexamined conventional wisdoms: "the outcome of systems analysis studies or war games was heavily dependent on the assumptions underpinning their models, some acknowledged by the analysts, others largely concealed or unquestioned" (152).

With the benefit of hind legs, it's obvious that the

cybernetic regime's hubristic swagger would be shown up by the Vietnam War. Bousquet notes: "It is true that because of the ebb and flow of the conflict, the absence of a clear front, and the guerrilla tactics of the Vietcong, it was extremely difficult to gain any insight into the conflict without statistical means. Nevertheless, what manifested itself in Vietnam was an obsession with statistical evaluations and directing the war from the top, perceived as the point of omniscience. Endless statistics of enemy bodycounts, bomber sorties, and 'pacified' hamlets were circulated among policymakers and Pentagon officials and presented to the media and public as proof of progress in the war. The production of these statistics required that a regular flow of information be collected and recorded by troops before being centrally processed and aggregated for the consumption of the war managers. The pressure on troops to produce detailed reports of their operations and particularly to match their 'production' targets in terms of enemy casualties led to wildly inaccurate and overblown estimates that masked the extent to which the US strategy was failing" (155).

Chaoplexic killing

Nonetheless, the cybernetic regime persists today, in a set of only moderately chastised formulae, and the computer metaphor still captures the imagination of policy wonks at the Pentagon and sundry international Killing HQs.

We are, however, perhaps on the cusp of a new regime – a regime of chaoplexic theory (the overlapping theories of chaos theory and complexity science), whose organisational metaphor is "the network" (and by "we" I *always* mean me, my best friends Posie and Melody, and the American military-industrial complex).

Bousquet distinguishes between the Revolution in Military Affairs ("RMA") and Network-Centric Warfare ("NCW"). Very summarily, the cybernetic regime, with its phantasm of perfect control, still presides over RMA, whereas NCW – although a development of RMA, and generally under its managerial aegis – is again emphasising war's ineradicable chaos.

But this is a chaos that can be *nudged*. "While chaos control is still largely at an experimental stage, it demonstrates that chaos theory does not stand against or outside the technoscientific project of control but rather recasts it so that order is not so much imposed against chaos as made to emerge from disorder by utilising the latter's properties" (173).

Chaoplexic phenomena are still deterministic. But because of sensitivity to initial conditions, arbitrarily small causes can have arbitrarily large effects. As measurement cannot be perfectly precise – you have to round off a decimal point somewhere – this means chaoplexic phenomena are *inherently unpredictable in the long-term*. You can never be sure you didn't just round down the butterfly who'll cause the storm.

John Boyd's OODA Loop

The chapter on chaoplexity's relevance to killing starts with a discussion of John Boyd's Observe-Orient-Decide-Act Loop ("OODA Loop"). The OODA Loop is a very abstract and broadly applicable action model, distinguished from traditional cybernetic homeostatic cycles by virtue of non-linear connectivity among its "phases" (it is "not truly a cycle and is presented sequentially only for convenience" (189)), and by its open-ended anticipation of changes in its agent's analytic framework (the OODA Loop points to "the irreducibly incomplete and evanescent character of any theoretical framework seeking to encapsulate reality" (ibid.). The Oompa Loompa points to the chocolate Nile).

Another way of putting the distinction is that cybernetic homeostasis is characterised by *negative* feedback and oriented to equilibrium, whereas the OODA Loop is characterised by *positive* feedback and oriented to metamorphosis. "Positive feedback is present when disturbances are amplified and thus move the system further away from its point of origin" (165).

The distinction, although half-way persuasive, kicks up a little cloud of Common Spotted Question Marks. The "Orientation" part of the OODA Loop embraces a lot of taken-for-granted factors ("Cultural Traditions" etc.) – stuff which is only occasionally accessible in consciousness. So I wonder, can an agent ever know that a re-orientation, however subjectively radical, has crossed the threshold from "cybernetic tinkering" into "chaoplexic metamorphosis"? [4]

So can the distinction be firmed up? Bousquet refers to Boyd's "focus on the conditions of emergence and transformation of systems through information" (195), but we don't get a lot of detail. We *do* get a supplementary distinction between two practical attitudes. The cybernetic-friendly attitude anticipates a kind of linear progress, with its models hugging reality, like my cycle shorts ("not truly cycle shorts and only presented as such for convenience"), in an ever-tighter fit. It hopes to reduce ambiguity and unpredictability, which are viewed as "a function of our analytic blindness" (198). The chaoplexic-friendly attitude, by contrast, *revels* in ambiguity and unpredictability, considering them the indispensable adjuncts of true creativity.

Specifically, to do justice to chaoplexity "the components within a system should be loosely connected together with a built in redundancy and ability to reconfigure their positions within the network when necessary, allowing for the emergence of new behaviour and organisational arrangements. In other words, the military must be a complex adaptive system operating at the edge of chaos" (202).

Bousquet emphasises the embryonic and oft-misunderstood character of the chaoplexic concepts like the OODA Loop. We should expect to find cybernetic and chaoplexic ideas and practices tangled together, and in many cases will need to wait until the dust settles before we can discern whether a particular action was governed by a cybernetic or a chaoplexic logic.

Remember how much dust there was, that day in New York? One of Bousquet's most striking arguments is that terrorist networks have been far quicker to implement chaoplexic killing than the US military, despite the latter's NCW agenda. "Even in the case of a single operation such as September 11, it has become increasingly clear that its planning and execution were far more decentralised than initially supposed. The different cells in the plot, although tightly coupled internally, functioned quasi-autonomously, and although they received some financial, logistical and training support from other parts of the organisation, were not exclusively dependent on them" (207).

Of ants and men

The OODA Loop clattering around his ankles, his hips still frantically gyrating, Bousquet turns to a re-examination of Clausewitz through a chaoplexic lens, further developing the themes of predictability-unpredictability, fluidity and transformation. Then we get to a cherished concept of military sf – *swarming*.

> "And the enemy was not stupid. There was no formation that Ender could study and attack. Instead the vast swarms of ships were constantly moving, constantly shifting from one momentary formation to another, so that a space that for one moment was empty was immediately filled with a formidable enemy force" (Orson Scott Card, "Ender's Game" [1977]).

There are two different kinds of swarming. First, there's the kind where hundreds or trillions of swarm members execute bewilderingly elegant and complicated manoeuvres, coalescing to make an attack, dispersing before a counter-assault can be launched, all by virtue of bespoke information received from a centralised intelligence or "topsight," which constantly receives and processes the statuses of all members of the swarm in real-time. Then there is the kind where each swarm member acts autonomously, communicating only with his or her immediate neighbours. The organisation of such a swarm is an emergent property, although on the surface its may resemble a painstakingly-designed choreography. Bousquet takes some care in uncovering how, in defence circles, advocates of the first kind of swarming often helps themselves inappropriately to the vocabulary of the second. "Antoine" is an anagram of "I, Neo-Ant!", so.

Bousquet also quotes Yaneer Bar-Yam distinguishing these two approaches to networked operations. One "involves networked decision makers receiving information from a set of sensors and controlling coherent large scale effectors. Analogous organisational structures can be identified in the physiological neuro-muscular system." The other "involves networked action agents capable of individual action but coordinated for effective collective function through self-organised patterns. Analogous behaviours can be identified in swarming insects and the immune system." Bar-Yam adds that "there are many intermediate cases that can be considered" (227).

Bousquet states that as to the former approach, "there is no sense in which a true network has replaced a hierarchical structure" (227). Perhaps so, but what about the "intermediate cases" Bar-Yam raises? Where do Islamist terrorist networks fit in? Presumably closer to the latter, though Islamism itself could be considered a synchronising dynamic, operating along ideological channels.

Bousquet quotes Arquilla and Rofeld: "Moving to networked structures may require some decentralisation of command and control [...] But decentralisation is only part of the picture; the new technology may also provide greater 'topsight' – a central understanding of the big picture that enhances the management of complexity. Many treatments of organisational redesign laud decentralisation; yet decentralisation alone is not the key issue. The pairing of decentralisation with topsight brings the real gains" (227).

Hearts and minds

It's time to depart somewhat from Bousquet's suggestive but prudent discourse. For the following rich imagining of chaoplexic warfare, involving the "pairing of decentralisation with topsight," we'll be drawing on the resources of science fiction.

Earlier I gave two possible reasons why it creeps us out to glimpse the personalities of military men. Intriguing albeit subtle parallels exist between reason number two – that these glimpses reveal a lack of peace-keeping knowledge – and the proposal to surf on the "edge of chaos."

In Michael Moorcock's utterly luminous *Dancers at the End of Time* trilogy, Jherek Carnelian, an agreeable neo-dandy of the very final *fins-de-siècle*, sets out to acquire an obsolete oddity called "virtue." Soon after he announces his intention Jherek's mother, aka the Iron Orchid, muses:

> "Ah, I now begin to understand the meaning. If you have an impulse to do something – you do the opposite. You want to be a man, so you become a woman. You wish to fly somewhere, so you go underground. You wish to drink, but instead you emit fluid. And so on. Yes, that's splendid. You'll set a fashion, mark my words. In a month, blood of my blood, *everyone* will be virtuous." (*An Alien Heat* [1971]).

The Iron Orchid is (forgive me, "most devastating of minerals, most enchanting of flowers" (9)) wrong – but it's difficult to put our finger on just *why* she's wrong. Her misapprehension demonstrates how hard it is to convert moral knowledge into transmissible propositional form.

Jherek points his nose squarely at "virtue" and, with the aid of his side-kick and love-interest Mrs Amelia Underwood (a wonderful and kidnapped Victorian), misses it completely. At least, the transformation and deepening he undergoes never quite conforms to a template of objectives settled upon and afterwards achieved – a template of "means-end rationality," if you will. His moral education is rather inherently unpredictable and inimitable, and in many ways a by-product of his striving.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that peace-keeping, like Jherek's moral education, involves certain specialist knowledges that you can't gain by directly aiming at them, but have to acquire haphazardly whilst struggling for something else [5].

This would harmonize with the idea that the expert peace-keeper is someone who sometimes tries to do one thing, but breaks down and does another (*a la* Frank's reasonable passions). It also harmonizes with the intuition that there is something virtuous about keeping the peace, that it is mixed up with moral knowledge.

There is a flourishing descendancy to the sociologist Max Weber's distinction between "means-end rationality" and "value rationality" [6]. Bousquet tends to wave these dichotomies away from his story, and I think wisely. The fact is, the concept-cluster around "value rationality"

– for all its importance in understanding the world in which we live – is the barely-contested property of the humanities and the social sciences. These concepts are shaped by their institutional ownership. While we use them to think, we are continually seduced by the attitude that *whatever* turns out to be ultimately inassimilable by technocratic control, it's probably something the humanities and the social sciences busy themselves with on a regular basis (moral knowledge, for example, or Proust or something).

Putting that fruitful distraction on ice, we can take an ambitious look at competencies traditionally considered inherently social, communicative and intuitive, and ruthlessly explore the extent to which they might be technocratically administered.

Chaoplexity gives us an alternative way of thinking about matters which must be met with a certain indirectness. We can take the long-term perspective that killers take. You know, the ones who look at a delicate social *faux pas* and think: "How could I ruggedize this?". The Rumsfelds, all those who won't be content with Classicists' and Social Anthropologists reiterating the irreducibility of their specialisms – not if the alternative hides a military edge.

The problems dogging our lads in Iraq and Afghanistan often involve a want of proper tools. I don't just mean APCs and bullet-proof vests. I mean that, observing those theatres from afar, misgivings begin to grow that our whole edifice of military personnel and equipment, all its organisation and capacities, is fundamentally ill-suited to its objectives. The "government in a box" which was supposed to support recent offensives in Afghanistan – well, in future, that box is gonna get labelled "FRAGILE HANDLE WITH CARE."

> "And yet, and yet . . . Alpha feels that something is missing. / / QUESTION: Can he calculate it?" (Gregory Benford, "Calibrations and Exercises," in *Matter's End* [1996]).

The idea of a "battle for hearts and minds" encapsulates this incongruity very well. Petrarch and Sidney and their mincing ramifications may have accustomed our ears to a goulash of martial and amorous terminology, but it takes only a second of pure attention to discover how inappropriate the mixture is. Hearts and minds are not "won" by anything a soldier is specialised to do.

But is it necessarily so? Could some chaoplexic successor to contemporary Systems Analysis eventually learn to process cultural, psychological, and ideological activity? Could a military system perceive and respond in real-time to goings-on in these dimensions? Could a heart or a mind crystallise, hovering at the "edge of chaos," as a concrete objective, to be pursued with a mix of policy and pragmatism?

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> "A giant has brought WAR to England's heartland!" (Adam Roberts, *New Model Army* [2010], blurb).

About time, too! Roberts's novel envisions an army without any chain of command. All soldiers of the New Model Army ("NMA") vote on tactical plans, which can be proposed by any soldier. There are no specialists. The soldiers are all generalists, with specific knowledge pulled from Google as they need it. They're in constant communication with each other, and likened to a single organism. The narrator insists that his NMA, Pantegral, is the novel's real protagonist:

> "The British army has tried to destroy him but each time he has beaten them. When they bring in air support and deploy heavy weapons he simply melts away, only to form again somewhere else and deliver another devastating blow." (blurb)

What kind of blood geek is Roberts? Embedding with Pantegral on his campaign, it's not long before we're engaged by – oh, a dead child and trembling civilians:

> "It was really pretty upsetting. That is to say: I was aware of it was going to *be* upsetting, at that point in the future when I would have time to think about it properly. It wasn't upsetting there and then. I was too busy to be upset, there and then. You understand." (18)

You understand, General Reader. Or should that be Gentle Reader? Lara *does* understand, little soldier man – you're saying *you* don't have time to be upset, and so neither should I. We're not bad people, just doing our jobs.

New Model Army is canny, pellucid, and very *now*. I don't mean that synthetic, extended-shelf-life *now*-ness pioneered by William Gibson. I mean a deliberately and unapologetically contemporary frame of reference – Roberts won't make up futuristic nicknames for stuff like Google or wikis (I was kinda surprised "duplo" wasn't "Digg"); flames from rubble are likened to Bart Simpson's haircut; the Troubles are evoked with an allusion to the Cranberries; there's a long paragraph that only really makes sense if you've seen or read *300*. (Although "This! Is! Basingstoke!" doesn't have quite the same ring.) Anyway, the tongue knows when to take cover in the cheek. That tactic slakes, as required, the bloodthirst.

Pantegral's military performance is on the whole pretty convincing. Like Pantegral's modern partisan forebears – the Viet Cong, al-Qaida – the giant punches significantly above his weight (punches *to death*, obv.!). The British army can't cope with a highly-networked (albeit numerically inferior) opponent who materialises in densely-populated urban areas. Really, what *are* they to do? They can't be everywhere at once. Pantegral *can*. Here's a scene from early in the novel:

> '[They're making passes from the east,]' said a trooper called Patel whom I'd never met in person, although I knew him well enough. '[We're on the library hill, and you can see them coming in, settling into attack flightpaths. They're aiming at the ring road.]'
>
> '[They've got four cars coming in, down here,]' interrupted Capa, on priority. Cars, meaning tanks. He had two dozen comrades with him, and every one of them duploed

this. The consensus was that our cars were the targets.

'[We're moving them,]' said Capa, the sounds of the detonations around him scuzzing his transmission.

'[What were they in the fucking *open* for?]' prioritized a trooper called Thirlwell. This was poor form. He was immediately blanked by twenty men for misusing priority: cut from the wiki for ten minutes: his contribution not being constructive, a ten-minute sinbinning was the usual sanction.

Four priorities jammed the wiki, and the system ranked them and rattled through them: three from soldiers in the west and one from Patel on library hill:

'[They're sending in shock troops.]'

'[Eighty runners, give or take, crossing the ring road now.]'

'Riders?' Tucker put in.

'[All runners no riders. Wait a mo.]'

'[They are bringing up their own cars.]'

'[Why *yes* they are.]'

'[Helicopters, behind the planes.]' This last from Patel.

'[I propose we group in Mall plaza,]' said Moffett. '[Good terrain for defensive combat.]'

'[I counterpropose,]' said a breathless sounding trooper whose tag flickered before resolving – presumably a symptom of electromagnetic interference attendant upon rapid arms fire near his position. Crowley, his tag said; and he was in the west. '[We divide by location, west to fight the western incursion, those near library hill counter the helicopter drop troops.]'

A trooper would have to have an outstandingly brilliant third notion, or to have something pretty deadly urgent to report, to insert a third proposal at this point. It sometimes happened, but rarely. So we all voted. I was halfway up the second, winding stair, when I keyed in my vote. It was pretty clear, on this occasion, which way to cast. Simic and Tucker were standing beside me, voting."

(15-16)

Great! I much prefer the narrator's personality in this early phase, by the way – pert, iconoclastic and polemical. He's less appealing later on, as a war-toasted marshmallow. The fine line between delicious and delirious! Nonetheless, *New Model Army* remains compelling till the last gasp, partly because (in the spirit of democratic transparency) it's very frank with its ideas. You don't need to coax them out. They sit there calmly, awaiting comment and critique.

The story about a successful army relies on a tacit story about a successful democracy, and *that* I find less persuasive. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* supplies one of the novel's two epigraphs. That's fitting, since Tocqueville is just the thinker to poke holes in the operation of Pantegral's democracy (the other epigraph is from the Hives. Their latest album is Democratic Peace Theory in the vein of Francis Fukayama, so). Whilst Tocqueville gave some pretty deep attention to laws and institutions, he also understood that democracy must go even deeper. American democracy, Tocqueville saw, was intricately inwoven with an American way of life. It was distinctive at every level of analysis, never simply recapitulating legal and institutional forms as a substructure of veneration and support.

Pantegral's democracy doesn't go deep enough. Instead Roberts posits, with a flick of the wand and a pinch of wiki dust, near-perfect republican citizens. They are intelligent, steadfast, fiercely loyal, unprejudiced ("we don't care about your age, or your religious convictions, or your *lack* of religious convictions, or your ethnicity, or your sexual orientation, or sexual *re*orientation, or your gender, or those things the outside world considers handicaps" (87)). They are averse to disproportionate personal power or gain. They are independent-minded whilst ever-ready to subordinate their individual wills to the (Brigadier) General Will.

Where could such goodie-two-boots killers come from? It's suggested that Pantegral self-selects for suitable hearts and minds. I guess that's plausible (on the other hand, remember Rumsfeld *q.v.*). It's further suggested that the raw recruits are tempered by the battlefield (Thirlwell *q.v.* has learned his lesson, and so on). That's plausible too.

The question then becomes, how are these near-perfect republican citizens preserved against ambient antibodies? After the battles of Basingstoke and Reading, the narrator soon is having sleep-overs with his non-NMA buddies. "We all went back to our various lives" (73). In those lives, Pantegral's "off-duty" killers either cultivate various connections – emotional, intellectual, ideological, institutional, economic, cultural, religious, familial, *etc*. – or they become completely pathological, and probably go nuts. The hearts and minds which comprise the giant are necessarily shaped by circumstances external to him.

A fully plausible Pantegral would have to internalise all such decisively formative states of affairs. I can't imagine what infrastructure would keep Pantegral's citizens oriented towards the virtuous direct democracy we see throughout the novel [7]. Whatever form it took, it would certainly be irreducible to Web 2.0 architectures – which often have more to do with liberty than they do with (for example) deliberation or civic virtue [8].

Godzilla vs. King Kong

It's interesting that Roberts named his composite giant "Pantegral." It's a Continental allusion, to Rabelais's Pantagruel, perhaps with a pun on "integrated" (or on "Holy Grail of Panto horses"? Bagsie hindquarters!). Yet the English countryside has been more accustomed to another giant's shade.

Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan pops his big head up briefly:

> "[...] Hobbes had a feudal mind, and could not help but imagine that his giant would have a royal head, a guiding and directing organ. Somebody explain to him that this is not needful. The next stage in human evolution

> is *necessarily* away form the restrictions of feudalism. The next stage is the land of the headless giants: for without eyes their eyes cannot play them tricks, and without ears they cannot be lied to, and without a mouth they cannot be fed poisoned food, and without a nose they cannot smell the stink of mortality [...]" (241-2).

Roberts is right that Leviathan is anything but democratic. In Hobbes' version, obedience to the "guiding and directing organ" – the Sovereign – must be total. Obedience in return for security, that's how it goes.

But there is also a robust, if weird, strain of liberalism in Hobbes. He drops some pretty heavy hints that the Sovereign should leave people to do whatever they want, so long as their activity doesn't pose a security threat. The thing is, he is unwilling to posit a private sphere within which any activity is definitely harmless (that's what makes his liberalism weird). Responsibility for security includes total discretion over what counts as a security matter. Which *could* mean, you know. No gays.

Very roughly speaking, this organising principle can be characterised as authoritarian liberalism, cardinally opposed to the democratic totalitarianism which organises Pantegral. Authoritarian is opposed to democratic, liberal is opposed to totalitarian.

So what would a Leviathan New Model Army look like? It's one of Roberts's masterstrokes to make Pantegral so low-tech. The giant's carnage is not planned according to sophisticated composite topsight, drained from the data-streams of spy satellites. Nope, just maps.google.co.uk, together with some webcams duct-taped to toy gliders. In this respect, Pantegral resonates with Bousquet's remarks on al-Qaida. Leviathan would go to the opposite extreme. Leviathan would encourage the proliferation of technology, of expertise, and of continually finer-grained divisions of labour and of knowledge. He would encourage the proliferation of representations of specialisms, of standards and licenses, and the escalation of their interdependence and reflexivity. Security (mainly making money and killing people) would be his overriding imperative, but his centralised topsight function – his Sovereign – would fulfil it by nudging decentralised chaoplexic processes.

Could competencies traditionally considered inherently social, communicative and intuitive, which have proved resilient to traditional technical control, yet be susceptible to manipulation as chaoplexic phenomena? Could LULZ become a standard unit of measurement? The hearts and minds of his constituent killers would certainly be within the Sovereign's purview. But he wouldn't necessarily be concerned with deliberative wisdom or civic virtue, as the citizens of Pantegral are. He would be focussed narrowly on their instrumental value within the security agenda. In this respect, they would not be essentially different from the hearts of minds of the enemy, and the entire continuum of hearts and minds between.

Putting the "ap" in "apocalypse"

The squad makes a ballistic breach and storms the structure, peeling off to secure every room within twenty seconds. It's a home. There are three frightened-looking young men lying on the ground with their hands behind their heads, an older woman screaming at the commanding officer, a boy of about nine and a girl of about four wide-eyed in the door way. The killers bristle with sensors, and harvesting their transmissions, and HQ is subjecting the battlespace to psychological, emotional, cultural and rhetorical analysis. The woman's now saying that the person whom the soldiers are looking for isn't here. The CO whispers, "Line!" and in his head-set, a script begins to kindle.

Consider a "system of systems" which learns to ID enemy "signatures" with unparalleled accuracy, once those signatures are liberated from compulsory incarnation as troops or assets, and allowed to incorporate ethical, psychological, cultural and other "soft" info. No more problems with swelling the enemy's ranks with newly radicalised recruits – or at least, such problems would appear as normal problems of a military nature, susceptible to intelligence and resource commitment.

In Neal Stephenson and George Jewsbury's novel *Interface* (1994), a biochip stuck in a political candidate hooks him up to real-time polling information, so that he can effectively "feel" the effect of his actions on the electorate. Similarly, bespoke derivatives of topsight could be piped directly to the consciousness of killers on the ground.

There's a marvellous short story by Greg Egan exploiting the fact that our visual fields are largely confabulated, a patchwork of guesswork. You can prove this to yourself by finding your anatomical blind spot [9]. In Egan's "Seeing" (1995), the protagonist's perspective is rearranged, following a bit of smart brain-damage, so that his POV hovers above his own head. The top surfaces of things, and the stuff behind him, that he can't "really" see, get filled in automatically by memories and expectations.

Francis Crot's novelette *Hax* (2010) bounces off Egan's and Stephenson's and Jewsbury's ideas, proposing a technology that integrates the perceptual phenomenology of soldiers with events in the top-level system of command-and-control. "Enemies," "allies" and "civilians" are definitively colour-coded in the individual soldier's vision, although negotiations by the top brass – and market fluctuations – mean that a particular status can be reassigned at any moment. Soldiers moreover see statistical threats as tangible figures, translucent banshees squatting in bushes, aiming ectoplasmic cannons, to be banished with the sweep of a searchlight.

Have your chaoplexity and eat it

> "Within five minutes there were twenty-three of us outside, our suits bulked out with armour and antiquated weapons. There were at least thirty incoming pirates from the *Cockatrice*, and they had better gear. But they'd lost the support of their mother ship [...] They fought as well as they could, which was with a terrible individual determination, but no overall coordination. Afterwards, we concluded that their suit-to-suit communications, even their spatial-orientation systems, must have been reliant on signals routed through their ship. Without her

> they were deaf and blind" (Alaistar Reynolds, "Weather" in *Galactic North* [2006]).

Back for a second to Bousquet, who is suspicious of prodigiously expanded topsight capability. He interprets the ever-deferred promise of an over-aching "system of systems" as an excess of the still-dominant cybernetic regime, and notes that "reliance on this elaborate infrastructure and the skills and habits it will likely breed may in fact prevent troops from ever operating autonomously where only local or partial awareness is available. This point is all the more crucial when it becomes clear the information infrastructure will be the Achilles heel of any such army and that there exists a number of means to effectively disrupt both the hardware and software of electromagnetic equipment" (230).

Certainly the "heart-swarming" topsight just imagined is hardly plausible unless soldiers on the ground are treated as users receiving instruments, not instruments receiving instruction – and even then the problem remains that they may develop over-reliance. (A problem for *them*, though by then it will probably be me and Melody vs. Posie and the American military-industrial complex).

But what if the "system of systems," or certain of its features, could *also* be developed along non-hierarchical, chaoplexic lines? After all, swarming is most effective where the components are *cheap*. Human life is not, except proverbially, cheap. But once the underlying hardware is in place, virtual components – an algorithm, a speculative bit of code – are extremely cheap.

In place of a bureaucracy and hierarchical command structure overseeing a swarm of assets, let's envisage the various computer systems synthesising and analysing intelligence *literally evolving* as they do so. The over-arching "system of systems" is then not an end-point, but a complex adaptive system in constant flux, promoting its best techniques to subsequent generations of itself, and constantly experimenting with "breeding" new recombinant techniques.

Let's imagine too, in a cyberpunk vein, that topsight becomes commodified and marketized [10]. Different "central understandings of the big picture" become available for subscription, each purchasing and synthesizing intelligence from killers on the ground, various private surveillance firms and one-another. These complex adaptive systems split and merge, compete with and cannibalize each other, learn from their experience and try to trick one-another into learning the wrong things.

People, machines and systems on the ground bargain for different kinds of access to and mediation of these services. Potentially the same complex adaptive system even serves opposed forces, through the elegant use of "Chinese Walls" to separate information-holders and decision-makers. If some auxiliary contractor becomes sufficiently vital to, say, air superiority, then for either side the only access to air superiority might be through exhausting its enemy's credit rating with the contractor, via an onslaught of micro-financial pressures.

Who are we fighting for?

When an item of information moves on the net, it is split into conveniently-sized packets, and flows across multiple paths to its destination. All Net business is multiply-realisable. It's like watching a swarm of bees, except each bee can fly apart into a further miniscule swarm. If our intrepid info packet finds her first route obstructed, she has recourse to a thicket of thitherwards.

Taking things another step, what if not just intelligence and other operational support but also *mission objectives* were governed by the logic of swarms?

The level 36 liberal John Rawls (200,000 XP, blood geeks, if you think you can take him) describes an "overlapping consensus" as a situation where all parties can agree, though with diverse motives. We can contemplate the technization and militarization of consensus itself.

Taking a cue from certain once-arcane financial products, now celebrities for their part in the sub-prime mortgage crisis, we can imagine missions or entire wars which have been "bundled" together from the marginal military desiderata of diverse parties.

The answer to "Who are we fighting for?" has often been given, somewhat disingenuously, not as a *who* but as a *what* – "Freedom," for example, or "Honour" or "Empire" or "Love." Of course, every abstract noun also picks out a *who*, inasmuch as it represents a certain half-hidden constellation of interests. Very crudely, "Love" represents the interests of Lovers and so forth. But with intense and appropriately-disposed networking, battles could be fought on behalf of constellations which do not correspond to any discrete idea in language or ideology.

Shareholders, the collective owners of publicly-listed corporations, typically never meet one-another and often take only a perfunctory interest in the activities of their possessions. Pension funds and other institutional investors create even greater distance between corporations and their ultimate owners. A similar relationship could exist between a war and the coalitions funding and legitimating it.

Moreover, just as the trade in derivatives dwarfs the trade in concrete commodities, so a great deal of military activity could be determined not by *actual* conflicts, but by the multifarious and delicate interactions of speculative conflicts. Somewhere in the Urals, a missile defence system amends its emphasis. Why? Its rationale synthesises probabilistic outputs from dozens of quasi-local conflicts and millions of potential conflicts. In Scotland, a fireteam make a breach and secure a structure even before it is determined for whose "side" they act. But they are not exactly mercenaries. They just know they most effectively practice loyalty by offering a nuanced pattern of discounts, not by dogmatically yielding their bodies and equipment to some particular command-and-control locus.

"It's Aryan men, Hallelujah it's Aryan men"

Indeed, we can imagine a distributed and chaoplexic constitution of "sides" in a conflict. Let's imagine that individual soldiers must make decisions which have significance at the tactical level, at the strategic level, and at an even higher level – at the level of the socio-political framework containing the conflict. The parameters of war would be constantly negotiated by those who fought it.

I'm not talking about Pantegral enfranchising soldiers in the management of those institutions which organise their day-to-day killing. I'm talking about the extinction of those "bright-lined" defence institutions themselves. No longer would control be exercised from identifiable blocs combining strategic, technocratic, ideological, economic and legitimacy functions. The most recognisable inheritors of such blocs would be the temporary equilibriums of a mercurial network of capital, politico-military leadership, popular violence and third-party assurance. Under these conditions, "Whose side are you on?" becomes as multifaceted a question as "Who are you?".

Protocols, of course, are of the utmost importance. The choice of common language is always to the benefit of some set of material interests. My mech's an Atari. Moreover, the distinction between soldier and civilian, never the most convincing artifice, all but collapses. Standing in Wal*Mart, weighing up brands of peanut butter, you view on your phone screen how your options integrate into the funding streams of various corporate clusters and their associated ongoing military campaigns. Watching the trends, you choose Black Cat Chunky, and your inbox clogs with a message of thanks from a downed NATO chopper crew extracted by a Somali pirate drone.

In fact it's fake – this entire milieu is of course contaminated with its own terrible versions of viruses, worms, Trojan horses, spyware and spam. The dust never settles. The blood never dries.

It's worth mentioning Carl Schmitt again. There is a tension between this apparition of the future and Schmitt's work (and the Realist tradition generally) – a tension which I suspect is irresolvable. One or the other must give way.

In what we've imagined, chaoplexic warfare has been pushed to a point where it is superlatively commensurable with social and economic activity. *Every* asset, *every* territory, is "compromised" – in that its status is determined by qualitative and quantitative bargaining, as well as qualitative force. Contracts and conflicts thoroughly interpenetrate and mediate one another. Neither the contractual nor the conflictual principle has the upper hand.

For Schmitt, such a world was a highly implausible fantasy – or, the stuff of science fiction – and it promises the absurdity of people who, according to contractual obligation, go willingly to their deaths. The intricate tubes and membranes of exchange, delegation and sub-contract are brushed aside, Schmitt thought, when survival is at stake.

It's not something I can hope to answer here. The relative explanatory powers of "rational / existential self-interest" and "conventions, institutions and regimes" is a key question for International Relations, one which largely defines its dominant Realist and Liberal branches. To argue with Schmitt, you might bring up existing informal conventions which embrace mixtures of friends and enemies. Neither al-Qaida nor the US military can really "opt out" of the use of money. Arguably, both also partake in a single global regime of circulating ideologies. There are certain protocols which it is too risky to ignore, and perhaps there could some day be others, with greater and more detailed clout.

All this speculation pulls chaoplexic warfare, and the network metaphor, farther along their implicit trajectory. If we were in the business of prediction, and not the game of extrapolation, we might instead anticipate a clean break – and the emergence of entirely new type of warfare.

Flip those pink sofas over, they make pretty good fortresses. *Is fortress* the feminine of *fort*? I've gone light-headed again. What's the masculine of *tresses*? I've gone light-haired again.

There are plenty of us, who hope – intelligently hope, for all we can tell – that a future regime warfare could be so exotic, so different from everything that has gone before, that it need not even be *killing* any more.

Carl Schmitt would disagree. But then, he was a Nazi.

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Endnotes:

[1] In fact, Schmitt believed that killing can be "justified" in a sense – *politically* justified, though never legally or ethically justified, which are how we usually think of justification and the *jus belli*. In this review-essay I elide Schmitt's existential idea of "the political" with killing plain and simple, and I underplay the degree

to which he entertains the possibility of an a-political world. It's all for the sake of convenience and doesn't, I think, lose *too* much of his thought. But check out the horse's mouth, especially his celebrated molar, *The Concept of the Political*.

[2] The key difference, as far as I can tell, is that "paradigms" by default supplant one another, whereas "metaphors" by default compromise and hybridise with their antecedents. In many areas – applied engineering for one! – Newtonian physics are still used, even though they are "obsolete."

[3] Perhaps Bernard de Mandeville deserves a name-check too, for his 1705 tract on the emergent properties of swarming bee myrmidons? It is clear, at any rate, that sf swarms, and the modern-day BattleSwarm doctrine, bear some kind of durable relationship with economic *laissez faire*, but the details of the relationship are opaque. I suspect they are *not* all part of a single smoothly-operating region of ideology. As Frederic Jameson puts it, "the apparent realism, or representationality, of sf has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us 'images' of the future – whatever such images might mean for a reader who will necessarily predecease their 'materialization' – but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization" (286). Whatevs. "It is not from the benevolence of the fire-ant, the nanite, or the nano-sniper that we expect our killzone, but from their regard to their own self-interest." Perhaps the easy conflation of the two kinds of swarming (q.v. "Of ants and men") is ideologically connected with the suppression, by free market fundamentalists, of various institutional prerequisites (think, "hierarchical command structure") of the price mechanism. People like Adam Smith knew all about these prerequisites, but the folks at the free-market think tank, the Adam Smith Institute, are apparently in the dark.

[4] When some discrepancy between what is observed and what is modelled leads an agent to amend part of her model, can she confidently categorise the discrepancy as either negative or positive feedback? The agent's judgements on these matters must be supported by criteria which are *also part of her analytic framework*. We're left with old epistemological puzzle about whether an eye can gaze upon itself. Of course, reflexive knowledge in these matters *may* be possible, but we shouldn't take it for granted.

[5] These thought, by the way, are quite directly suggested by two side-by-side essays in *The Cambridge Literary Review*, vol. 1 no. 1, Michaelmas 2009. The one is Raymond Geuss's "Vix intellegitur," the other Stefan Collini's "Never Mind the Width: Understanding and Judgement in the Humanities." Both essays, and the journal, which is mostly filled with weird futuristic poetry, come highly recommended. You may also feel like comparing Geuss's admiration for poetry which "hovers on the edge of meaning" with Bousquet's preference for military systems which "hover on the edge of chaos."

[6] Jürgen Habermas's "strategic action" and "communicative action" is the most impressive example. Habermas is also influenced by the marxist distinction between reified and dialectic thought. Of course, the distinction is older than Weber or even Marx. Quite a few of the same intuitions play out, for example, in Descartes' dualism. What's more, to even talk of "the" distinction gives an extremely rude and abridged version, which necessarily bowdlerizes every impulse and every controversy which determined the concept-cluster's structure in the first place. All such shtick surfs of the edge of intellectually unforgivable. I only do it because here we're talking about habits of thought, rather than scrupulously elaborated arguments or theories, but I'm certainly woozy and probably projecting a little.

[7] How many participants in the distributed polity of Wikipedia, if tested, would put Wikipedia above the various other communities in which they are embedded? "Join me, Inclusionsists, I'm invading Slovenia!" "Buffy Fen! The Inclusionists are invading! We must come to Slovenia's aid!"

The twin principles of constitutional liberal democracy are rights and popular sovereignty, corresponding respectively to the liberal and to the democratic ingredients. (Those are the *principles* – *actual* constitutional liberal democracies make a hash of them, mainly because of two things: expert knowledge, and capital. But, as we like to say in the Forces of Counterrevolution, "anyhoo!").

Pantegral seems to practice direct e-democracy along with something like the old Bolshevik doctrine of democratic centralism. Democratic centralism means that every soldier is free to propose, discuss and criticise in the decision-making phase, but the decision, once made, is absolutely binding on every soldier. If the decision is to mass murder thousands of prisoners, then each member of the NMA, however he voted, must "pick a prisoner, dispatch him, such that it would all be over with a single boomingly multi-tracked gunshot" (42). The security of the polity, after all, is at stake.

Does Pantegral possess popular sovereignty? Probably. How about rights? Probably not. On this basis, I'm tentatively identifying Pantegral as a totalitarian democratic republic. But there are plenty of counter-indications and complexities.

For example, where does expert knowledge fit in? The narrator is ex-British army. Early in the novel, he gets picked for a team to negotiate with the British top brass. But doesn't expert knowledge have a corrosive effect on popular sovereignty? What if the narrator tried to claim he should *always* be the negotiator? Or opt out of the binding force of a collective decision on the basis that he has specialised insight into the decision's mistakenness?

Roberts gets round the problem of expert knowledge with an oblique appeal to deliberative democracy. If somebody really does have expert

knowledge, he or she should be able to articulate it in the decision-making phase. He or she should be able to *generalise* it, either by making it comprehensible, or by convincing the polity of a comprehensible (and typically extravagantly disproportionate) accountability mechanism. The soldiers are all generalists, but that generalism isn't just a default state they can chillax into. They have to *work* at that generalism. Those who cannot explain their specialist knowledge must strenuously renounce its implicit claim to power, by staking their reputations or their lives upon it. And as a whole, the polity must be ever-vigilant against specialist knowledge embodying in forms which could circumvent deliberation. Through this deliberative work, the polity can manufacture its General Will, without outlawing anything suspiciously specialist.

One problem with democratic centralism (and with the republican solidarity which the book more explicitly evokes) is that any individual can find him- or herself in a permanent minority. *Every* vote goes against you. Everything *you* do is decided by others. Never mind, for a minute, if it is *fair*. That's popular sovereignty. Do you think that it is democratic?

Well, maybe it is. Arguably, what's violated in such cases is liberty more than it is democracy. Tocqueville was deeply troubled by democracy. He saw its rise as inevitable, something to be apprehended in historical and sociological modes, rather than tinkered with in institutional modes. For Tocqueville, question was, how were *liberties* to be guarded against democracy's ascendancy?

The French liberal Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès is probably the earliest thinker to give a robust account of popular sovereignty *founded* in the exercise of private liberties, in conditions of engineered pluralist interdependence. As well as threatening their citizens' liberties, direct democracies suffer from problems you could call "inalienable *self*-representation." That is, the citizens of the polity are unequal rhetoricians and reasoners, voting and deliberating under a fiction of equality that is supremely available to special interest manipulation.

It's hard to boot the poets from Plato's Republic when we all have a poet inside us. What's to do, kick everyone's stomachs shrieking, "BEGONE, TINY POET!"? Sometimes appeals to deliberation and civic virtue are but shrieks and boots.

Representative government, Sieyès argued, can avail itself of elections as a kind of universal solvent, in which citizen's differentials dissolve as they are temporarily homogenised as electors. By such an abstraction, representative government is reasoned to *exceed* the capabilities of direct democracy as regards the maximal promotion of relevant civic minutiae into an aggregated policy form. The French liberal Benjamin Constant might emphasise another advantage of representative government: with a reduced burden of civic participation, liberties (at least, "the liberties of the moderns") are safeguarded.

Flip forward to the present day. Liberty and democracy are glued together in an uneasy *de facto* coalition, which we call constitutional liberal democracy. On a good day, liberty and democracy are complementary. But on other days, liberty and democracy want nothing more than to rip each other's eyes out – that's something Tocqueville understood well (and something Nick Clegg must gradually be learning). The value of thought experiments like Pantegral (and Leviathan, for that matter) is not that they provide an *alternative* to the maddening, messy and hypocrisy-strewn problematic of constitutional liberal democracy, but that they provide us a few more tools with which to attack that very problematic. And of course they're cool.

[8] A Wikipedia article accumulates quickly by virtue of its open invite. We're all at liberty to chip in with very little insight into one-another's methods or motives. One of the things about an edit war is that nobody dies.

To be fair, Pantegral is drawing a draught from a quite conventional description of mass online collaboration, a description which uses the language of direct democracy and republicanism. One thing which good sf does is function as a reductio ad absurdum of contemporary descriptions which, however conventional, are fundamentally mistaken. The way I'm see it, Web 2.0 technologies allow collaboration to become decoupled from communicative cohesion. This point is obscured by the fact that online collaboration often organises materials which traditionally have presupposed communicative cohesion.

[9] There's a demonstration on the Wikipedia page –<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_spot_(vision)>.

[10] The problem which Bousquet raises, that true horizontal organisation is elusive, because enhanced connectivity tempts remote commanders to "micro-managing" killing, could be unravelled by just a little flex in the hierarchy – Chinese Walls and some redundancy at the top, far short of true chaoplexity. Imagine that identical topsight capacity was given to two different double-blind remote command hierarchies, each overseeing the activities of a randomly distributed 50% of the forces. Commanders in HQ A and HQ B would be unable to micro-manage a given unit, since half the head sets would be filled with the voices of the other HQ. This would force decentralisation and horizontal organisation. Don't let it ever be said that I didn't give world militaries lots of good ideas for how to kill us!

Twenty Years, One Panel

A discussion of the BSFA and Mexicon surveys of British SF and fantasy writers

This panel discussion was arranged as a follow-up to the Twenty Years, Two Surveys *book published by the BSFA earlier this year. A selection of non-writers were asked to consider the conclusions of the 1989 Mexicon survey and the 2009 BSFA survey, and to discuss how the sf field has and hasn't changed in the last twenty years.*

The panel was held at the Radisson Edwardian Hotel at Heathrow, London, on Friday 2 April as part of the 2010 Eastercon, Odyssey. The panellists were:

Claire Brialey, judge for the 1999 and 2000 Arthur C Clarke Awards, winner of multiple Nova and FAAn Awards for Best Fan Writer and Best Fanzine, and co-editor of the Hugo-nominated fanzine Banana Wings.

David Hebblethwaite, reviewer for The Zone, SF Site *and* Vector. *He blogs at Follow the Thread < http://davidhblog.wordpress.com/>.*

John Jarrold, literary agent and past editor of sf and fantasy for Orbit, Random House, and Simon & Schuster.

Caroline Mullan, judge for the 2000 and 2001 Arthur C Clarke Awards and current Chair of the Science Fiction Foundation.

The panel was moderated by Niall Harrison, who carried out the BSFA survey.

The questions asked in both surveys were:

1. Do you consider yourself a writer of science fiction and/or fantasy?

2. What is it about your work that makes it fit into these categories?

3. Why have you chosen to write science fiction or fantasy?

4. Do you consider there is anything distinctively British about your work, and if so what is it?

5. Do British settings play a major role in your work, and if so, why (or why not)?

6. What do you consider are the major influences on your work?

7. Do you detect a different response to your science fiction/fantasy between publishers in Britain and America (or elsewhere)?

8. Do you detect a different response to your science fiction/fantasy between the public in Britain and America (or elsewhere)?

9. What effect should good science fiction or fantasy have upon the reader?

10. What do you consider the most significant weakness in science fiction as a genre?

In addition, one further question was asked in the BSFA survey:

11. What do you think have been the most significant developments in British science fiction and fantasy over the past twenty years?

Niall Harrison: One of the responses I was most struck by was John Meaney's comment that over the past twenty years British writers of sf and fantasy have grown "confident, maybe even aggressive… and good for us!" So I'd like to start by thinking about whether "confident" is an accurate description of the sf and fantasy you've been reading in, say, the last five years, more than in the past. What would you expect confident sf and fantasy to look like?

John Jarrold: British writers, of science fiction particularly, have broken through in sales terms in the last decade, so they can be more confident about getting long-term deals. Alastair Reynolds, Charles Stross, Richard Morgan, Neal Asher – these are all authors who are not just well reviewed but who sell lots of copies. Knowing you've got money coming in makes a major difference I think, it allows one to be both more relaxed and more confident. And fantasy, of course, has broadened. In 1989 I'd just taken on Robert Jordan for Orbit. He and Tad Williams were the two big new kids on the block. So you were still talking about post-Tolkien fantasy most of the time. Now it's much, much broader than that, which has to be a good thing, and I think the fact that that's worked has also allowed authors to be more confident.

Claire Brialey: Picking up on the first of the points that John made there, I don't know that it's necessarily about confidence for me. Compared to the sort of sf that I was reading and was able to read 20 years ago, as much as anything Britishness comes through in terms of presence. Just wandering into the sf section of any bookshop now there are a lot of British names alongside the Americans and Canadians, and even sometimes some other names. It is much easier, if you wander in and want to pick up an sf book, to find that you've left with one by an author who's based in Britain.

NH: And does that make a difference in terms of your expectations?

CB: I think if I were still a relatively new reader of new sf now I would be taking a very different impression of the field and of what it means to be a British sf writer, yes.

Caroline Mullan: I'd like to highlight the issue of choice.

One thing that came across from the 1989 survey was the number of authors who felt that what they had chosen to do had bound them into a place where they could do no other, without really offering rewards or credit or anything very much. Whereas when you looked at the 2009 writers, particularly the younger ones – Kit Whitfield comes to mind – they were confident they have a much wider sphere of choice about what they can do. Notwithstanding a fairly consistent complaint that it was only space opera that was actually going to make them any money, they were still able to do what they wanted – whether that was children's fantasy, urban fantasy, young adult books – in some confidence of remaining a professional writer. The sense of pessimism and being trapped that was in some of the earlier responses just wasn't there in the later ones.

David Hebblethwaite: Yes, I think there is confidence in the diversity of the work being produced. If you look at the 2009 survey there are writers of space opera, epic fantasy, contemporary urban fantasy, some writers outside the genre, and so on, and I think that range speaks of some confidence.

NH: It's interesting isn't it, because as Caroline mentioned, there were a couple of people who said they felt the market only wanted space opera, Chris Beckett was one. Claire was talking about an expectation of British sf – is space opera now one of the primary expectations of British sf in a way that it hasn't always been?

CB: I think it might be one of the things that first leaps out at you from the sf shelves in a non-specialist bookshop. But I agree with David, I think the point is that there are a lot of other things there. Diversity was absolutely one of the things that I'd written down as being a positive, that there are now so many ways of writing in the field of sf. There are a lot of ways to be an sf writer, probably to the extent that some of them swim right over my personal boundaries of what I consider sf.

JJ: Remember though that in 1989 there were around ten major sf and fantasy imprints, now there are five, and a couple of smaller ones. This goes up and down, if you go back another twenty years, in 1970 Faber and Penguin were two of the major publishers of sf in the UK, until new management that they didn't want to be involved. Whereas right now you've got companies like Quercus and Grove Atlantic coming in and being interested in genre stuff – but not doing the space opera side of things. So that's another sort of diversity. Chris Beckett, who is in this survey and indeed is one of my clients, now has a deal with Grove Atlantic for his sf which is in no way space opera. There are always ways through. One of the things several writers commented on is the greater number of smaller presses that we have now. The small press can be a way in for new writer that leads to mainstream publication, or it can simply be the way it works for that writers, if they're ploughing their own furrow and they understand – and some writers do – that it just isn't what WH Smith or Waterstone's are going to want. I'll always add that caveat. As a commercial publisher, that is what you've got to bear in mind all the time, because you are there as an editor for one reason, to make money for the company, so you are there to take on books that you think will work commercially, that the bookshops will want. You have to love them as well, of course – the first thing I was ever told as a publisher was, don't buy something purely commercially, don't buy something purely because you love it, you've got to have both, to have that balance.

NH: I knew that Faber used to publish sf, one interesting thing for me looking at the last five years is that I think Faber have started to publish quite interesting sf again.

JJ: They've had three books on the Clarke shortlist in the last three years, haven't they?

NH: Exactly. But they're usually seen as "outsider" books. Were the people who they used to publish what we would think of as genre writers?

JJ: Yes – Brian Aldiss, Harry Harrison, James Blish, Chris Priest! But under the new management they actually cancelled a book when they discovered it had won a science fiction award, that's what happened to George Turner's *The Sea and Summer*.

CM: There is that divide between what you love and

what will sell. When I was a teenager I graded my books by how much I loved them and how good I thought they were, and I only kept those that scored highly on at least one of the scales. I also think that I was probably a member of the last generation of teenagers who could read the accumulated backlist. This was from the tail end of the 1960s to the early 1980s; I could keep up with what was being published and was available to me in Belfast, and able to get a good grip on the back-story of sf. I don't think you could do that now. And the 1989 survey, which is just after this period, has 44 writers – I've read at least one book by 35 of them, and many books by 18 of them. In the 2009 survey, there were 84 writers of 148 asked – and that tells you something in itself, we don't get that figure for 1989.

NH: I think there's even more than that, those 148 were the writers I had contact details for, or could find websites for, or knew people who I could ask to pass on the survey.

CM: I do still read new writers, so can still say I've read at least one book by 37 of these 84, and several books by 16 of them. But there are only 9 authors in here who answered twice. The growth of the field here is incredible: the number of different voices, the number of different ideas of sf you can have, and by the same token the number of different ideas you can inherit.

DH: Yes, there's an interview with Jo Fletcher quoted in which she makes the point that it's not possible to read everything that's published in the genre within a year any more. I would go further than that and say it's probably even not possible to gain an accurate overview of what goes on any more. Even if you picked out two or three examples from every subgenre you wouldn't get a complete overview. I agree with the point Rhiannon Lassiter makes in the last chapter, she talks about genres becoming increasingly subdivided, you describe it as balkanisation, and I think there's a lot of truth in that. It's become harder to be a fully informed general reader. The other option is to become more of a specialist reader perhaps and say, I only want to read subgenre X, or subgenres X and Y.

CM: But if you did that, I think those subgenres would wear out. I read an enormous amount in my youth, including a large percentage of the canonical war story writers, and a lot of romance writers. All the other genres wore out sooner or later – crime had people like Margery Allingham and lasted longer than most, but sf was the only one that could still surprise and enthuse me after I'd read two or three thousand books of it. But I suspect that if you stuck to subgenres they would wear out even faster.

CB: I've been thinking about some of the answers to the first question, about whether the respondents consider themselves to be a writer of sf and/or fantasy. A number of those who said yes this time around not only specified which part of the broader speculative genre they write in – sf or fantasy or horror – but also specified the subgenre. But in some of the answers in later chapters I think there's more of a sense that people feel that although you might *want* to specialise, to build a market or because you're really excited by those ideas now, you can move around more within the broader genre. And I don't know whether that's actually true in commercial terms. Do you have to have another name?

NH: Just before John answers that, a related point that jumped out at me was that Ian McDonald – who unfortunately wasn't able to answer the 2009 survey, but is in the 1989 one – mentioned that one of the things he wants to do is write a mainstream novel. And as far as I know he hasn't done that, and I wonder whether it fell by the wayside because it just didn't come together, or whether it was something he didn't feel able to do commercially. And I don't know for how many writers that is an issue.

JJ: I think if you look at someone like Charlie Stross, obviously he moves around a fair bit. And there's someone like Richard Morgan, who after five sf novels is now writing fantasy. It's still not easy, if you're in the mainstream commercial market, because again one of the changes since 1989 is that I can just talk about Smith's and Waterstone's, and then Amazon, there are fewer booksellers. And they largely perceive sf and fantasy as two completely separate markets.

NH: So why do they shelve them together?

JJ: Because they don't want two separate shelves! In individual shops what you will sometimes find is that there are shelves separately within that one area – and of course Waterstone's now have an urban fantasy shelving area as well. So they've taken that on board as a separate market.

CB: When we were in Australia last year, we would walk into one of the refreshingly many specialist bookshops that did still seem to be doing fine, and find a really big section for paranormal romance, which is not something we've got in such a big way. Several people commented on that in the survey.

DH: In some bookshops I've seen a section for dark fantasy, and another for dark romance, and another for horror. You might see *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* in any of those three. Mind you, whether you'd want to pick it up from any of them is another question.

CM: If publishers publish the books they love and think will make money, bookshops just sell the books they think will make money. I don't think love comes into it much.

JJ: Twenty years ago there were more people who loved books working in bookshops, and I'm not just talking about small independents here, I'm talking about people like Dillons and Ottakar's. What's happened at Waterstone's under the previous management is that it's got much more corporate, the corporate image got much more important. Sometimes you wouldn't be allowed to put up posters in the window to advertise a signing, because every Waterstone's should be the same as every other. Thankfully it's changing, they've got a new MD now and he is actually a book man.

CM: OK, but the other thing here is, as a reader I am not interested in who the publisher is or who the bookseller is. I don't care, I know they are necessary intermediaries and I'm glad you're making money, but I only really care that you collectively bring me the books that I want to read.

NH: So when we were talking earlier about Faber, and Quercus, and Grove Atlantic's new Corvus imprint picking up different types of sf, that's not something you pay attention to?

CM: I don't register them as players. I can come to a convention and go to a launch party and meet some of the people, but that's separate, it doesn't make me want to read any of their books. What makes me want to read the books is the educated conversation, enthusiastic discussion – or like Catherynne Valente venting spleen all over *Yellow Blue Tibia,* making me want to read it to find out what got her goat quite so much.

NH: I want to move on to Britishness, which sort of follows on, because there's a question about whether the meaning of Britishness has changed. Claire talked about a much more visible presence on the shelves, but has the content changed as well? Of course, Britishness may not be something you ever think about when you're picking up a book. Do you look for, say, British settings? Do you prefer things that are wildly far away?

DH: My first reaction is no, of course not, I'm not that parochial! But when I think about it, unconsciously perhaps I do. The only time I can remember doing it consciously is when I'd first read a couple of Jim Butcher's Harry Dresden books, about a wizard in Chicago, and I thought to myself, I wonder what a British take on this material is like. That got me reading Mike Carey. Maybe when I used to read *The Third Alternative*, *Black Static* as it is now, I found some of the British stories more interesting than American ones. These examples are all contemporary fantasy and horror, so I think it does depend on subgenre as well. So for me there is something interesting about seeing the culture I know reflected in the material, but I think horror can be tied to single specific places more often, perhaps more easily, whereas sf and fantasy move about more.

NH: There is a tension here, because on the one hand I do have a sense that British sf is something that historically has had quite a strong sense of self identity, both among the writers and among the readers of it, and on the other hand I think we're increasingly seeing a desire to look for writers coming from outside our experience, from India or Japan or wherever.

CB: I do appreciate a strong sense of place in what I'm reading, and I'm sure that consciously or otherwise I respond to places that I know treated in a fantastic and fabulous way – alternate history or magic or anything else. But I am also looking for something that is novel, where perhaps I don't even know whether it's a real place or not, I don't know whether it's a brilliant take on somewhere that really exists or whether it's entirely imaginary. Certainly some of my favourite writers at the moment are British and contemporary, but I suspect I may be responding to or projecting on to them what I think of as a British sensibility rather than the fact that they are actually writing about Britain.

NH: OK, so what sensibility are you projecting on to them? Obviously, British sf is famously gloomy…

CB: You say that as if it were a bad thing!

CM: British sf may or may not be gloomy, but Claire mentioned place and I'd like to mention voice. I think there's a sense in which a writer's voice works better in his or her own place. Bruce Sterling's *Holy Fire*, which takes its American characters all round Europe, is a much less satisfactory book than, say, *Distraction*, in which his characters travel round the various tribes of his United States. Some of the very British writers didn't answer your questions. John Whitbourne for example is not here; he's somebody who strikes me as a very British, very English writer even. Dave Hutchinson is not here, and he's quite interesting in this connection, because he has a Polish wife, and sets half his stories in Eastern Europe – to quite striking effect, because until recently it's not a place that English writers, or writers in English, have been to much. But the stories he sets in England, where you meet the people you might meet in the pub, or travel on the tube train with, struck me as working much better.

CB: I was actually thinking about examples that worked the other way. I've recently been writing a bit about science fictional London, and I don't feel that I walk through sfnal London while I'm there, while I'm living there day to day. When I encounter London in fiction I do respond to the alternate take on it, but the examples that leapt to mind included Tim Powers and Neal Stephenson – two Americans. And thinking about some examples of overseas cities in fiction I thought of some British writers, Jon Courtenay Grimwood writing about the Bay Area, for instance. So I think it's a combination of identity with place, and not always in a predictable way.

JJ: If you look at some like Ken MacLeod – *The Star Fraction* is a very British novel in style, and personally of Ken's books I prefer the ones that are related in some way to the UK. I think his voice works best there. Although every author's an individual, of course, so it is difficult to put people into a little pot in this way.

CM: I've thought of one publisher that managed to get a voice as a publisher for me, and that's Unwin Hyman while Jane Johnson was editor. She published Geoff Ryman and Mike Harrison, among others. That's the only example I can think of, of a publisher's voice that complemented its authors' voices.

JJ: I ran three imprints over fifteen years and I never expected anybody to buy a book because it was by that imprint. I always say you publish the author, not the book, so you should be looking for the author. Word of mouth is so important, as you were saying, and publishers still understand that. You can spend as much money as you like on marketing a book but if people don't go to their friends and say hey, this is really great, the book will fail.

CB: We didn't entirely answer your question about British sensibility, did we?

NH: Not entirely.

CB: I was trying to work out what stories we now like to tell about ourselves, in terms of our national character, and I genuinely don't know. There's the small island stuff, and there's the ex empire stuff, and I think we like to think we're more interested in adversity than triumph, in what happens when things go wrong. Maybe that is gloomy. But it is quite hard to really pin down what it is that makes something British. One thing I definitely don't

get from contemporary British sf, and this is a good thing, is I don't find characters or the narrator needing to tell me that *This is Britain! This is Different!* any more.

CM: There is a quality of Britishness that can be quite straightforwardly defined as "not American", although without telling you very much, perhaps.

NH: No, I know what you mean, and yet one of the things that seemed to come from some of the more commercially successful writers like Alastair Reynolds was that the influences that they cited were very much American influences. How much American sf do you read?

DH: Not much, I certainly don't feel I've read deeply enough to be able to judge the difference. I suppose there's different ways of defining British. You could say *The Avengers* was very British, as an adjective, but that's different from something that's about Britain.

NH: I'm just interested in the extent to which we might feel that what is being published and celebrated as British science fiction is in a sense American –I think Richard Morgan raised this as well, that his work has a much greater debt to American writers of the sixties and seventies than to the British writers of that period.

JJ: But every author will siphon that through his or her own experience so you'll still get a sense of Britishness. I don't think it matters. Somebody said there are certain stories which fit a British take, and fair enough, but there's huge variation. I've published Greg Bear and David Brin – both Americans, but there's a fair amount of difference between them! So I wouldn't necessarily say this is Britishness, or this is Americanness.

NH: A couple of authors did describe their writing as transatlantic.

CM: You actually summarized the influences that were listed most frequently, and the most common ones were still British. M John Harrison and JG Ballard received 10 mentions each, and you don't get much more British than that pair. Tolkien got 9, Moorcock and Le Guin – the most cited American – got 8 each. And there's a specific point I'm interested in there, about how come she gets to be a woman who can influence men? Then after this you have Dickens, Clarke and Garner on 7 apiece, and then the Americans come in: Asimov, Wolfe and Raymond Chandler, accompanying Iain Banks with 6 mentions each. And at 5, Priest, Vance, Heinlein, Dick, Silverberg, Graham Greene, Bradbury, and Wyndham. So you're beginning to get much more of a mix, but I think it's clear that British writers can punch in the top class when it comes to influence.

NH: The point about Le Guin being the only woman on that list is certainly something I'd be interested in discussing. In the last chapter of the book a couple of writers made the point that they felt the contemporary field was becoming more masculine, that the space opera that they feel is dominant is a male subgenre, at least in the UK.

CB: Obviously as readers we will also have been influenced by good American sf, so I think there is inevitably a blending in that sort of respect. But the bits of the genre that I'm reading do not feel that insular to any particular nationality. It might be there are pockets of it out there, here and in other countries, that I'm missing and that I would be gently appalled about. Tell me later if so, I should probably find out.

NH: We've now been talking for about 40 minutes, so let's open it up to questions.

Kev McVeigh: In the 1989 survey, there were two authors now very successful in this country who were only published in America – Paul McAuley and Ian McDonald. I think their style of fiction at the time might have been seen as more American than British, whereas now British sf has expanded almost to encompass that broader field.

JJ: It's been interesting watching Ian over the years, get to novels like *River of Gods* and *Brasyl*. I was lucky enough to be the commissioning editor for *River of Gods*, and I said to him, now you've written a big one you can't go back and write little ones! This is what you'll be judged on. That's how a career can work; once you've built you can't retreat.

CM: And you need energy to go on building. I talked to John Brunner about this late in his career. He did the "big four" around the turn of the seventies – *Stand on Zanzibar*, *The Jagged Orbit*, *The Sheep Look Up*, and *The Shockwave Rider*. They were extremely influential books not just for me but for many people. They're mentioned in the survey in a way that specific books were mostly not mentioned. But he found that very hard, he went on writing the big books but never found the voice, couldn't do again what he'd done in those four.

JJ: I remember talking to John about this, he wanted to write what he wanted to write, and it was difficult once he'd had those four successes to retreat into something else. A publisher would say, this is what we now see you as John, that's where we can do deals with you.

Audience: The original question was about confidence, and for me there are two very distinct understandings of that term. One is an adopted behaviour, something you can mimic in a marketing sense. Business skills and creative skills together is an unusual mix, but the authors who succeed do seem to have that mix of skills. Then there's the confidence of quality, of a book and writing that will last for generations. That ties into the discussion about love or commerce. And I think when it comes to British sf we play out that polarisation; Waterstone's have a split personality as was mentioned. We have that romance with literature that we know needs a stable business footing. I'm not very up on sf, but I think British fantasy lasts a lot longer because we're in love with the quality of literature that goes through generations.

CM: Kari Sperring made a related point, in the survey, that 20 years is a very short time span when you're thinking about the history of story. Btu you remind me that although Niall started with confidence, he was looking generally for differences. Another difference that you picked up on that we haven't discussed is that many of the 1989 writers thought that writing sf had value in itself, beyond entertainment and making money, and the 2009 writers seem to have lost that.

CB: A possibly related point is that a number of writers responding to the 1989 survey talked about being in the

ghetto, I think the phrase did come up again in 2009, but perhaps with more regret, perhaps more anger that twenty years later sf the genre was still often used as a term of abuse. I think is something that readers feel as well, this traditional enduring sense that obviously if it's good, that means it's not sf.

JJ: I agree with Richard Morgan's point on the purpose of sf – I'm wary of being prescriptive, to say what it *should* do. I don't think it *should* do anything; each reader will take what they want to take out of it. Many of the best novels will have different levels to them, and each reader will take the levels they see there, and if what they see is a damn good story damn well written, they may not want anything else. And that is absolutely fine; you don't have to see other things.

CM: Morgan was also interesting on significant developments. He talked about Harry Potter and *Doctor Who* which I think is addressing the populist end of the genre, which is how many people first come to our conversations. He then went on to say Iain Banks reinvented the space opera, and China Mieville reinventing fantasy as the two big things in literary. But of course those guys aren't entry level sf; they're at least graduate level, aren't they? They're the people who are writing out of the genre as something they internalised long ago.

JJ: If Iain Banks was going to write one thing it would be the sf. He's said this, he would give up the mainstream and write sf. It's still his first love.

NH: And China Mieville has a large, or largish, mainstream readership, doesn't he? The last time Granta did their promising young British novelists, he wasn't on the official list but he got a mention in the introduction for being very interesting. Which you raise an eyebrow at, but you know, they're aware of him, in a way that they're not aware of a lot of sf writers.

CM: Is that relevant to where he sits in the genre? What I'm talking about is the body of people who genuinely can't read this stuff because they haven't got the hooks, who won't get what Terry Pratchett, for instance, is riffing on.

NH: A couple of the authors did say they felt there is a larger readership than there used to be that did have at least some of those hooks, I think Mieville was one, actually.

David Moles: I was wondering if you really need more than, say, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and *Hitch-Hiker's* to read the Culture novels – as compared to something like Peter Watts' *Blindsight*.

NH: I think you're right you can come to the Culture novels with that level of background and get a lot out of them, and I think a lot of readers probably have and then gone on to other writers, such as Watts. But to bring it back to the survey, people have talked quite a lot over the last few years about the need for quote-unquote "entry level science fiction". Is that something that we are lacking?

DH: What's the definition of entry-level, though? You could say it's something that's easier for a mainstream reader to come into, which has those "literary" qualities. So it might be something which is only tangentially science fiction, as opposed to something like *Old Man's War*, which came up in that discussion. Whose entry point are we talking about?

Damien G Walter: I'd just like to go back to the point that in the previous survey British sf writers had an idea that they were doing something more than entertaining, that there was more of a mission. I would tend to agree with the idea that perhaps it doesn't have that sense any more. Do you agree with that, or do you think there is something more than entertaining, more than selling books?

NH: And there's a related question; even if the writers aren't writing sf with that sort of larger goal, larger project, as readers is it something we look for? Do we go to sf for something specific?

CM: Yes.

DH: I think more and more when I read sf I want the same things from it that I want out of any other book.

NH: But what is that? In answer to the question about what effect good sf should have, there were a large number of writers this time around who said it should have the same effect as any other good literature. Great! Except – most of them then went on to qualify what good literature should do and had completely different ideas about that.

Audience: So what's next for British sf?

CM: More conversation, in more different places, with more different people bringing in more perspectives.

NH: So you think it's just going to get bigger and better … we're not in a bubble of British sf at the moment, we're not going to have a market crash?

JJ: You never know. I mean people used to say epic fantasy would last for ten years. That was in 1977.

CM: When we have Ian McDonald and Ian MacLeod and Adam Roberts and Dave Hutchinson addressing the state of the world from their British seats, that's real. How would you know if there was a problem?

CB: If there is a bubble it's not just British. Many of those writers are writing in a context where sf is not just British and are having a variant of a broader conversation. That makes me think it's not a bubble, and makes it harder to define where it's going next.

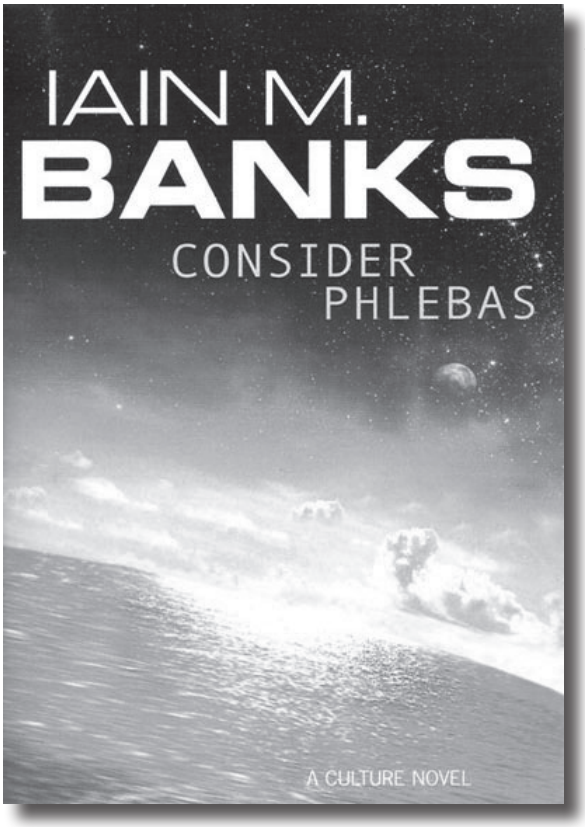
JJ: And that's a wonderful thing. I think if I could tell you what it was going to do next, that would mean we were talking about baked beans and we're not, we're talking about individual writers, in a genre but still individual writers. I'm delighted to say I can't tell you where British sf is going next!

Look to Wasteland

T.S. Elliot's The Waste Land as a template for the sf of Iain M Banks

Felix Danczak

In 1922, T.S. Eliot, writing in a society wrenched apart by the Great War and delving deep into humanity's history in an attempt to reconstruct the social and personal identities lost as a consequence of that conflict, published *The Waste Land*. Split into five distinct sections, the poem explores a landscape of physical and spiritual decay, crumbling apart – a world of fragmentation. It begins with nostalgic memories of a golden age interspersed with images of a blasted empty reality in 'The Burial of the Dead', before presenting dichotomic representations of social class, all equally sterile and empty, in 'A Game of Chess'. The third section, 'The Fire Sermon', continues these themes in its depiction of metropolitan activities and locations, and the futile nature of modern humanity's deeds and accomplishments is elegantly demonstrated in the fourth part, 'Death by Water'. The final section, 'What the Thunder Said', perhaps introduces an element of hope to the wilds of Eliot's wasteland as he searches for, and possibly finds, a way to end the sterility and futility of man's existence.



This dystopian vision of then-contemporary society has become one of the most influential works of the twentieth century, such that even the Oxford English Dictionary references Eliot in its entry on "wasteland". The fragmented 'now' that it portrays has called alluringly to many writers since its publication in 1922, and in particular its influence can be traced in the work of writers of science fiction, many of whom have since envisioned dystopian futures inhabited by controlling, secular societies whose aim is the effacement of the individual [1]. These authors are writing to initial conditions imagined by Eliot in 'The Burial of the Dead' – to the 'stony rubbish' (ln 20), occupied by a faceless crowd in which 'each man fixed his eyes before his feet' (ln 65). Other writers have looked beyond these worlds and engaged with *The Waste Land* in its entirety, probing the sterility of 'A Game of Chess', examining the fragmentary form of 'The Fire Sermon', and questioning the answers Eliot seeks and appears to find in the spirituality of 'What the Thunder Said'.

One writer whose work has been overtly engaged in this manner is Iain (M) Banks. He has publicly stated that Eliot's poem is his favourite – 'Phlebas is the drowned Phoenician sailor in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which is my favourite poem if you exclude Shakespeare ... he was a genius and *The Waste Land* is his masterpiece' [2] – and it is therefore plausible to suggest that Eliot has had a strong influence on his work.

Banks entered the public eye with his first novel, *The Wasp Factory* (1984), controversial for its graphic depiction of violence against children and animals. Banks built on this success and his work bifurcated into Scottish realist novels such as *Espedair Street* (1998), and science fiction such as *The Algebraist* (2006). His science fiction can be further subdivided, with the major group being his 'Culture' novels, works dealing with individuals in an ostensibly utopian meta-civilisation. Banks, who includes the invented initial 'M' in his science fiction works purely to mark them apart from his mainstream works, tends to publish alternately – writing mainstream, then science fiction – and it is his science fiction that owes most to Eliot's work. Two of his novels – *Consider Phlebas* (1987) and *Look to Windward* (2002) – take their titles from *The Waste Land*, while others – in particular *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *Excession* (1996) and the non-Culture *Against a Dark Background* (2000) – can be understood as embodying some of the same ideas and themes as Eliot's work, despite at first glance appearing so dissimilar.

This essay will concern itself with these novels, and focus a little more on *Consider Phlebas* as an exemplar

of the parallels between Banks and Eliot's work. A little précis is perhaps necessary for the links to be understood in context. *Consider Phlebas* tells the story of Horza, a 'Changer' (an important concept that we will return to) and his search for a 'Mind' (a prototype AI of immense power). This search takes place in the greater context of a galactic war between the Culture and the Idirans, both of whom want the Mind; the war is fundamentally one of identity, as each faction attempts to impose its values on the other. On his search, Horza joins, and eventually leads, a band of pirates who provide him with support (both compassionate and military) as he hurtles towards a Planet of the Dead to find the Mind. The novel is, on one hand, the 'space opera' of the blurb – but also asks more complex questions over the nature of identity, and also comes to question the conclusions of *The Waste Land* itself.

In both Eliot and Banks, this lack of fluidity and movement appears dangerous and frightening, and extends to the cultures of the societies themselves.

Part 1: A Defeat of Echoes

'Burial for the Dead' is dominated by a wasteland of stasis, sterility, and a removal of concrete identity. Eliot opens with an intimation of the static, sterile natural world of his wasteland: 'April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land' (ln 1–2). There is an implication that nature is a vengeful entity, 'cruel' being indicative of a conscious desire to cause harm and suffering, and the 'dead tree gives no shelter' from its brutality (ln 23). All that is left are 'the roots that clutch' (ln 19), the stark image of desperation followed by the bleak question, 'What branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?' (ln 19-20).

This image is elaborated upon by Banks, who opens *Consider Phlebas* with his own barren landscape: 'It was Schar's world, near the region of barren space between the two galactic strands called the Sullen Gulf, and it was one of the forbidden Planets of the Dead' (*Phlebas*, 5). This passage, which ends the novel's confusing prologue, provides a point of certainty – the landscape is both sterile and melancholic, and, like Eliot's landscape, dead. The cruelty of nature is also paralleled by Banks, who writes of 'the cloudless, pitiless skies of a dead and alien world' (*Phlebas*, 246); 'pitiless' acts in the same way as 'cruellest', implying some active consciousness in nature with the desire to not help those in need. Banks, like Eliot, uses natural imagery to return to the stasis inherent in his wasteland: 'There were no clouds in the light blue sky, no wind to move the snows' (*Phlebas*, 302). We can also see this stasis in 'Burial for the Dead', as the speaker finds themselves unable to act in any way, so powerful is the ennui of the wasteland: 'I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing' (ln 38-40).

In both Eliot and Banks, this lack of fluidity and movement appears dangerous and frightening, and extends to the cultures of the societies themselves. Moving momentarily away from *The Waste Land* to Eliot's other early work, the women who 'come and go / Talking of Michelangelo' in *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* (1915) demonstrate an abstracted lifestyle that simply 'talks' about staggeringly powerful artwork (Prufrock, ln 13-14), existing in a sterile atmosphere that is unable to connect emotionally with that art. This principle, which spans Eliot's early work, is expanded by Banks in his presentation of the Culture, which 'clung to its absolutes: life/good, death/bad; pleasure/good, pain/bad' (*Phlebas*, 23; Banks' punctuation). By retaining an idealised value structure, the people of the Culture, suggests Banks, exist in a culturally sterile environment because they cannot perceive concepts outside of this structure, and so, like the ladies in the tea-party, simply 'come and go', talking abstractly about sensations which they are unable to understand.

The inability to discuss sensation results from the removal of any individualised existences. The loss of concrete identity is hugely important in 'Burial of the Dead', as those left behind in the physical wasteland find a spiritual wasteland within. The title has connotations of cleansing the present of hangovers from the past and starting afresh that are borne out by the content. Marie, the initial narrator, states: 'Bin gar keine Russin, Stamm' aus Litauen echt deutsch'*[I am not Russian, I was born in Lithuania but am German]* (ln 12), illustrating the milieu of confusing identities thrust upon central Europe by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. There is a failure to recognise any one cultural origin in Marie's statement, leaving a lasting uncertainty over any national identity.

The same confusion is found in *Consider Phlebas*, as Fal 'Neegstra ponders what her identity of 'Culture' means:

> All she was, each bone and organ, cell and chemical and molecule and atom and electron, proton and nucleus, every elementary particle, each wave-front of energy, from here... not just the Orbital (dizzy again, touching snow with gloved hands), but the Culture, the galaxy, the universe. (*Phlebas*, 221)

There is much similarity here to Marie's statement. Fal 'Neegstra cannot readily identify with any one single locational identity – she has no reference point – and ends up expanding her understanding of her identity as being from 'the universe' which hardly allows for any notion of identity at all, as it contains within it every imaginable object, living, inanimate or dead. Ambiguity over the physical and temporal status of the narrator finds expression in a different way in Banks' *Use of Weapons*:

> 'I once...' he began, then hesitated. 'I once knew some-one who was... nearly a princess. And I carried part of her inside me, for a time.'
> 'Say again? You carried...'

> 'Part of her inside me, for a time.'
> Pause. Then, politely: 'Wasn't that rather the wrong way round?'
> The young man shrugged. 'It was an odd sort of relationship.'
> He turned back to the city again [...]
> 'See anything?' rumbled the voice under the table (*Use of Weapons*, 6).

The removal of context from the conversation, the uncertainty over the number of speakers, their social positions, and the lack of any identifiers save 'the young man', echoes the vague pronoun usage in 'Burial of the Dead', 'we stepped out [...] I was frightened [...] for only you know' that ensures we lack any secure footing in terms of narrator (ln 28-9). The fragmented conversation, augmented by touches of absurdist humour, resonates with Madame Sosostris' incongruous message after her prophetic tarot reading – 'Tell her I must bring the horoscope myself/ One must be so careful these days' (ln 58-9) – in both cases ripping away the gravitas of the situation (the voice under the table turns out to be drunk) to reveal it as affectation.

The Waste Land, in setting up a physical and psychological wilderness, provides Banks with a model, in both content and form, from which to create his futuristic landscapes, and narrators like Marie who consistently repel attempts at identification, constantly shifting under the reader's gaze.

Part 2: A Trophy of Past Dispute

The fragmented structure of parts of 'Burial for the Dead', which serves to remove concrete identities and create the series of abstracted voices that inhabit Eliot's wasteland, is extended in 'A Game of Chess.' Fragmentation of the poem's voices continues until they become only paranoid thoughts. Echoes of Eliot's presentations of thought and dreams can be seen particularly clearly in Banks' work, especially in *Consider Phlebas* and *Excession*, providing a form through which he can discuss the psychological impacts of his wasted universe on his characters.

The paranoia over the lack of individuality is presented as a series of neuroses by Eliot, partly demonstrated by the break with normative line length:

> Nothing again nothing
> Do
> You know nothing? Do you see nothing?
> Do you remember
> 'Nothing?'
> I remember
> Those are the pearls that were his eyes
> 'Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?' (*ln* 120-6)

The disconnected fragments of questions that have no answers represent the splintering of the narrator's thought, but also create it in our own heads as we are forced to confront our lack of understanding as to who is speaking. Banks uses comparable breaks in line length:

> *Who are you? (Who am I?) Who are you?*
> Slam, slam, slam: the sound of the barrage falling, the sound of doors closing; (Phlebas, 203)

The repeated, jerky questions that lack context, the indentations, and the stringent rhythm – echoing 'O O O that Shakespeherian rag' (ln 128) – are, as in Eliot, used to raise fears about the loss of identity. Banks subsequently goes further, allowing a breakdown of language as well as form to illustrate the plight of those in his wasteland:

> Yes? No? — screamed from down the deep, dark pit, as it fell: *Changer ... Changer ...Change — ...(eee)...*
> The sound faded, whisper-quieted, became the wind-moan of stale air through dead trees. (*Phlebas*, 204)

The name of this character's species, which we might define as a basic identity, '*Changer*', loses definition and becomes simply '*Change*', which is reduced to a scream, before fading entirely, and we are left only with the sound of the wasteland itself, evoking the 'the wind under the door' (ln 118), and the 'dead tree' that gives no shelter (ln 23).

Eliot's discussion of sexual sterility in 'A Game of Chess' forms part of his greater belief in the destruction of the individual in *The Waste Land*. Sex in the wasteland has become dull and disappointing: 'her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass/ well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over' provides a damning indictment of what should be a glorification of our humanity as a chore (ln 251-2). The new prevalence of contraceptives ensures that there isn't even any chance of new life (and therefore any progress or evolution) that might justify the act in the absence of pleasure.

Similar motifs inform the relationships in Banks' science fiction. The relationship between *Consider Phlebas*' protagonist Horza and the pirate Yalson in *Consider Phlebas* is described in similar terms: 'theirs – they both knew – an almost inevitably barren cross-matching of species and cultures' (*Phlebas*, 82). They have become 'species' rather than individuals, and are therefore unable to truly communicate, having lost their individuality. Reproduction is possible, but it ceases to contain any feeling, leaving it dully sterile: 'you must all strive to claw your way over the backs of your fellow humans during the short time you are permitted in the universe, breeding when you can' (*Phlebas*, 375). Granted, this view is presented by an Idiran, an enemy of the Culture, and so is not wholly reliable, but it has wider implications for humanity as a whole. The Larkinesque pessimism describes a lifestyle of competition lacking any enjoyment, so much so that sex has become disconnected 'breeding'.

Abortion, and the destruction of the child, ends any hope of rejuvenation in the landscape of 'A Game of Chess', serving to prolong the stasis and sterility of the wasteland:

> You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look to antique
> (And her only thirty-one.)
> I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
> Its them pills I took, to bring it off, she said

(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.) (*ln* 156-60)

The unborn baby is 'it', and is aborted without a thought – a simple pill is all that is required – and the main issues at stake are the visible marks that leave the mother ugly.

There is an infamous conscious decision to prevent reproduction in Banks' *Excession* that offers an interesting comparison. The main character, Genar-Hofoen, previously had a relationship with a woman named Dajeil, in which they both decided to have a child at the same time. However, when the relationship breaks down Dajeil kills Hofoen's child in the womb and decides against having her own child, stating, 'she would halt its development' and remain pregnant indefinitely (*Excession*, 355). Although the child is not harmed, it is a conscious decision to prevent birth, and a subplot follows a third party encouraging Dajeil to have the child, which would then (metaphorically) end the sterility of the wasteland. Elsewhere in Banks, the inability to procreate does lead to total death – Horza's failure to do so with Yalson in *Consider Phlebas* gives a bitter taste to the final line of the Appendix: 'the Changers were wiped out as a species during the final stages of the war' (*Phlebas*, 467).

Part 3: The Incandescence

Stasis defines the two first section of *The Waste Land*. However, with 'The Fire Sermon' we begin to see that, underneath the explicit fragmentation and empty sensuality, there might also be hints of movement and change that suggest there is a way out of the wasteland. We can see Banks employing both these traits in his work, notably in *Consider Phlebas*, *Excession* and *The Player of Games*.

There is a recognition in 'The Fire Sermon' that old identity has been washed away – the narrator is found 'musing upon the king my brothers wreck' that we saw referenced in 'Burial of the Dead' – and an understanding that we must search for a new one if we are to survive, something that Eliot picks up elsewhere in his work: in *Portrait of a Lady* (1915), for example, he states he must 'borrow every changing shape/ to find expression' (*Lady*, 109-110).

With the applications of a technologically advanced future, Banks is able to take this to its extreme in Horza, who is a 'Changer' and can take on the physical form of another. His physical identity as the book begins – an old man – is wiped away in a matter of days – 'there was no longer any trace or sign left on him' (*Phlebas*, 106) – and he then begins to change his shape to resemble another: '*For my next trick* [...] *my impression of Captain Kraiklyn!'* (*Phlebas*, 65). But this identity fails as well, and he finally settles on a last shape, 'two thirds of a compromise between Kraiklyn and the self he had been' (*Phlebas*, 188), in which he is later able to come to terms with an identity he is comfortable with.

This mutability finds its peak in Eliot through the confusion of Tiresias' gender, 'old man with wrinkled female breasts' (ln 219), highlighting a fluidity of shape. In Banks this fluidity is literalised: citizens of the Culture can change gender at will, via 'the semi trance that the average Culture adult employed, when they needed to and could be bothered, to check on their physiological settings' (*Excession*, 218). Genar-Hofoen, one of the few characters in any of Banks' works to be comfortable in his spiritual identity (if not totally his physical one – he would like to become an alien), has to actively force his 'settings' to remain static, noting with resignation that 'his subconscious was only doing its job' (*Excession*, 218), such is the inherent desire for continuous modification in the Culture psyche.

It is not just physical identity that Eliot begins to search for in 'The Fire Sermon', but a spiritual one with roots that do more than 'clutch', and that regains for protagonists the right to a past which they can draw upon for new identity. Eliot does this through constant amendment of place and location:

> Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
> Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
> [...]
> 'My feet are at Moorgate and my heart
> Under my feet.
> [...]
>
> To Carthage then I came (*ln* 293-307)

But this search is far from complete. The persistence of fragmented changes, followed by the positioning of his heart, a metaphor for where identity resides, still 'under his feet', demonstrates that Eliot's protagonists are far from achieving salvation. The emphasis on the past perhaps also ties them to the wasteland – it leads eventually to Carthage, the epitome of a wasted land.

This obsession with place and its effects is evident in Banks not just in the planet-hopping scope of his stories but also in the explanation of Culture names, which are lengthy and provide potted histories of their bearer.

This obsession with place and its effects is evident in Banks not just in the planet-hopping scope of his stories but also in the explanation of Culture names, which are lengthy and provide potted histories of their bearer. In *The Player of Games*, for instance, Gurgeh is 'Chiark-Gevantsa Jernau Morat Gurgeh dam Hassease' (*Player*, 30), which includes a birth-place, a home, a career, job or hobby that defines the person (in this case 'Morat', meaning 'game player'), as well as a chosen name for social purposes. The desire to delineate and individualise is ostensibly a good thing in a society of thirty trillion – but characters actively choose not to exercise their full names, often asking them to be discarded whenever they are used, as if they recognise

that this nomenclature simply circumscribes their past, much like Eliot's lines, and allows them no space to find a new path in the wasteland.

Part 4: 'Nothing had changed, only him...'

Part IV of *The Wasteland* is short. Within its ten lines is contained the titles of two of Banks' works, but 'Death By Water' has a greater significance to Banks' novels than serving solely as a source for titles. The section fulfils a prophecy made earlier in 'Burial of the Dead', the 'drowned Phoenician Sailor' coming into reality as 'Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead'. 'Death by Water' warns of allowing ourselves to remain passive; 'A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell' has the water as the active participant, controlling the dead sailor. The passage then appears to speak directly to us, the only time the poem does so – 'Oh you who turn the wheel and look to windward' – emphasising that we must take control of our fates. We must 'turn the wheel' for ourselves to survive.

In *Consider Phlebas*, this is what Horza does. He escapes death by drowning at the beginning of the novel, and does so again towards the middle of the plot, at which point he changes his physical shape. Although he changes physically again later on, the mental change he undergoes lasts for the rest of the novel – for the first time, he takes control of his own fate. He takes off his suit 'the abandoned cocoon of some metamorphosed animal' (*Phlebas*, 144), and swims for the shore, 'entering the whirlpool' of currents, and realises '*still got your teeth and your nails...and your brain*' (*Phlebas*, 150). The seemingly last-minute addition of his brain perhaps shows that he has finally decided to apply his own consciousness to the situation around him. This idea, of grasping one's own fate, creates the conditions for the final part of *The Waste Land*, 'What the Thunder said', as well as providing the means through which Horza, Genar-Hofoen, Gurgeh and many others in Banks' universe might find a new identity in their future, and with it, salvation.

...his themes have inspired a range of science fiction writers that continue to 'make it new' even today, from the Culture of Iain M Banks to the Sprawl of William Gibson and the post-apocalyptic wasteland of Cormac McCarthy.

Part 5: Returning to Leave, Recalling Forgetting

In the final section of *The Waste Land*, Eliot ceases to look for his identity in culture and instead looks at the wasteland around him. 'Rock and no water and the sandy road/ The road winding above among the mountains' (ln 332-3), links back to the 'Burial of the Dead', except that a road has now appeared – a pathway that signifies a movement away from the wasteland. In this way identity is found in conjunction with the wasteland rather than in spite of it. When the road is taken Eliot notices that 'when I look up ahead.../ There is always another walking beside you' (ln 361-2). This is the identity we find in the wasteland – it moves and changes with us, although we never see it because we have this assumption that our identity has some fixed itemisable quality.

Banks echoes this in *Consider Phlebas* through the final identification of Horza. Having found the Mind, there is no exultation – the war that has created the wasteland continues in microcosm between the humans and Xoxarle, a rogue Idiran soldier. Nothing changes. The Idiran bets his escape on the fact that Horza will have some 'pan human compassion' (*Phlebas*, 290), implying that Horza's personality is set, a series of predictable paths based on cultural identity. But Xoxarle is mistaken and Horza leaves Balveda (another human) to die:

> Horza...Kraiklyn...that geriatric Outworld minister on Sorpen...no piece or image of the Changer, nothing and nobody the man had ever been could have any desire to rescue her. (*Phlebas*, 435)

The ellipses link the experiences that Horza has had and the places he has passed through together into his identity – it is his experiences and surrounding that have created his personality, not some inherited cultural paradigm. As he dies, Horza grasps for his identity: 'My name!...What's my *name*?' The only reply, from Balveda – 'It's Horza,' she said gently. 'Bora Horza Gobuchul' – implies that our identity has no fixed position other than our name. Everything we are, our values, our personalities, is subject to where we are and what we have done and Horza, in his final act, agrees, sighing, 'Yes... Of course' (*Phlebas*, 441).

Images of rejuvenation that arrive with the destruction of the wasteland can also be found in Banks' work. Rain appears in *Consider Phlebas* as the fire-safety systems activate – 'the false rain fell on his gashed face, cleaning the blood from his nose and mouth' (*Phlebas*, 439) – washing away the destruction that has occurred in the wasteland of Schar's World. *Against a Dark Background* features purifying rain as the Sea-House is destroyed:

> She lifted her face to the drizzle and the evening greyness, staring into the flat expanse of dull sky, as though listening for something. [...] Her muttered curses accompanying this undertaking were snatched and flung away by the stiffening breeze (*Background*, 487).

That the wasteland is fading away, 'flung' by the new wind, is best expressed in *The Player of Games*. Gurgeh returns home having won the game of Azad, causing the destruction of the empire representing that novel's wasteland and, ill at ease with his new understanding of

the dystopias the universe might contain, stands outside:

> Gurgeh looked up and saw, amongst the clouds, the Clouds, their ancient light hardly wavering in the cold calm air. [...] He looked up from it at the stars again, and the view warped and distorted by something in his eyes, which at first he thought was rain (*Player*, 307).

He mistakes his tears for rain in what can be read as a tribute to Eliot's revival of life: 'Co co rico co co rico / In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust / bringing rain' (ln 392-94). The dampness of Gurgeh's eyes heralds emotions that will, Banks and Gurgeh hope, renew the world.

Part 6: Fate Amenable to Change

'Make it new' advised Pound, as the Modernists tried to break away from the confines of the 19th century – and Eliot's poetry, including *The Waste Land,* did just that. But Eliot's work has had effects far beyond the Modernist movement – his themes have inspired a range of science fiction writers that continue to 'make it new' even today, from the Culture of Iain M Banks to the Sprawl of William Gibson and the post-apocalyptic wasteland of Cormac McCarthy. The content and structure of the wasteland imagined by Eliot is mirrored by the universe of the Culture – the sterility and stasis of relationships and nature is reproduced, and the loss of identity is dealt with in an analogous manner. Beyond this loss, the reconstruction of a new identity to provide a way out of the wasteland is similarly comparable, focusing on the understanding that our characters are in fact malleable to the point at which we need no identity other than our continually changing experiences.

Famously, Eliot wrote that 'immature poets imitate; mature poets steal [...] good poets make it into something better, or at least something different' [3]. This is what Banks achieves with his science fiction. Through the borrowing of Eliot, he makes something new, something different – taking Eliot's themes and structures and applying them to situations far beyond the imagining of *The Waste Land*, involving email, signal sequences and truly alien species. Most interestingly, we should take note of the fact that the Culture is, at least superficially, presented as a utopian civilisation. Banks, in an essay introducing the Culture, writes that the society is based around the idea of 'minimally wasteful elegance; a kind of galactic ecological awareness allied to a desire to create beauty and goodness' [4], a place where no one is ill and everyone is happy. Many would probably like to live there – and this is not something that can be said of *The Waste Land*. Banks, in linking his work to Eliot's, is perhaps suggesting (and here is a topic beyond the scope of this essay) that fundamentally we should be a little careful of what we wish for. A society in which no-one has to die is ostensibly utopian. But it is, by its very nature, static – something demonstrably unpleasant and dystopian in Eliot's work, leading to the effacement of the individual.

In 'What the Thunder Said', Eliot arguably appears to find a way out of the dystopian vision of *The Waste Land*, a way to escape the static, empty landscape through renewed emotion and identity. And this is something Banks seems to question in his novels: what exactly will Eliot escape to? For on closer inspection (as this essay has detailed), a utopian ideal has the capacity to be just as limiting and denying to the individual as its dystopian opposite. Banks' work 'makes it new' most dramatically by questioning our beliefs – of our 'absolutes: life/good, death/bad; pleasure/good, pain/bad' (*Phlebas*, 23), of what is 'good' and what is 'bad' – and finally our assumptions about our desired utopias, our dreams, and our own identities.

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS

THE BOOK REVIEW COLUMN

> "At the level of high culture with which this book is concerned, active bigotry is probably fairly rare. It is also hardly ever necessary, since the social context is so far from neutral."

That is from *How To Suppress Women's Writing* by Joanna Russ and it is worth bearing in mind every time awards season rolls round or another anthology with no women in the table of contents is published. It is tiresome to have to constantly rebut the same talking points from those who 'just care about good writing' and, besides, you probably couldn't do it as succinctly as Russ. Her chapter on bad faith – just two pages long – says it all:

> "Conscious, conspiratorial guilt? Hardly. Privilege groups, like everyone else, want to think well of themselves and to believe that they are acting generously and justly... Genuine ignorance? Certainly that is sometimes the case. But talk about sexism or racism must distinguish between the sins of commission of the real, active misogynist or bigot and the vague, half-conscious sins of omission of the decent, ordinary, even good hearted people, which sins the context of institutionalized sexism and racism makes all too easy."

How to Suppress Women's Writing is small and imperfectly formed; Russ herself calls it "oddly-sized and oddly-shaped" and, although it is passionate and powerful, it is also sloppy and repetitive. It is showing its age as well. Written in 1978, it wasn't published until 1983 and the British edition didn't appear until 1994. At over forty years old, many of its examples seem outdated and, despite the fact the issues Russ is addressing certainly haven't gone away, this can make it easier to dismiss. It would be nice if there was slightly fresher edition available for a new generation of readers. I can think of plenty of people who would benefit from one.

Another book of Russ's that could do with a new edition (although not on grounds of age) is *A Country You Have Never Seen: Essays and Reviews*, published – in rather desultory fashion – by Liverpool University Press in 2007. Despite the subtitle, the book is divided into three sections (the third is letters) and without any pause for niceties such as an introduction we are plunged into the first review. It is from 1966, originally published in F&SF and sets the tone for the book. You will see what I mean if I quote the first and last sentences of the review:

> *Strange Signposts* is a bottom-of-the-barrel anthology... This is one of that damned flood of anthologies that do nothing but cheapen the market, exasperate reviewers and disappoint all but the most unsophisticated readers.

Russ is utterly merciless, as well she might be since that is the role of the critic. It seems like it was a bit too much for F&SF, it was a year before she was invited back. Soon she was writing more frequently and at longer length though, her final column appearing fourteen years later. Like *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, it is scrappy, wonderful stuff; ugly knots of "i.e.", "e.g." and "italics mine" giving way to devastatingly precise judgements. As Nic Clarke says in her review of *On Joanna Russ*, edited by Farah Mendlesohn, Russ is "a sharp, eloquent and intellectually restless critic and often a very funny one".

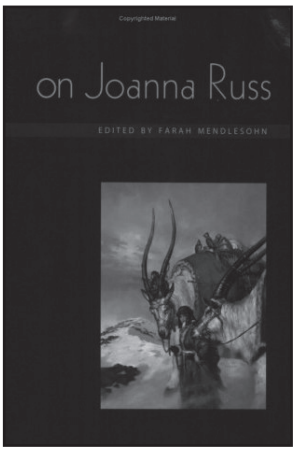
It can be a frustrating reading experience though. The back cover claims the book compiles Russ's "most important essays and reviews" but it isn't clear what the selection criteria are which makes for a frustrating reading experience. For example, on page 126, in the course of one of her reviews, she footnotes one of her own essays, 'Someone's Trying To Kill Me And I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic'. One might reasonably expect this essay to be re-printed here but no. There is a reason for this – it is already collected in *To Write Like A Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, published by Indiana University Press in 1995 – but the reader is only alerted to this possibility by a passing mention on page 267. Another flaw in the production of the book is that it doesn't contain a proper index. This means I can't check my impression that Russ makes a reference to George Bernard Shaw once every three pages or so. You forgive Russ these repetitions because regrettably the message that SF needs to look beyond its limited horizons does need to be hammered home: "Outsiders mean bad and stupid things when they say "science fiction," but sometimes the bad and stupid things are unfortunately accurate." Plus ça change.

That quote also gets at another truth: reviewers review out of love, not hate, it just isn't unconditional love; Russ wants what we all want:

> All books ought to be masterpieces. The author may chose his genre, his subject, his characters, and everything else, but his book ought to be a masterpiece (major or minor) and failing that, it ought to be good, and failing that, it at least ought show some sign that it was written by a human being.

Is that so much to ask?

MARTIN LEWIS
REVIEWS EDITOR



On Joanna Russ, edited by Farah Mendlesohn (Wesleyan University Press, 2009)
Reviewed by Nic Clarke

For reader and critic alike, Joanna Russ is an intimidating writer to approach. Her anger – at injustice, at wilful stupidity, at the patriarchal lines along which so much of the world is organised – is palpable in her writing. Reading her is never less than bracing. Her portrayal of women characters who respond to the patriarchal world with open aggression was taboo-breaking on publication in the Sixties and Seventies and remains arresting today. These characters are not (just) victims, striking out desperately; they are powerful agents who revel in their capacity for violence and there are few who do not see the necessity of it. Any other response, any hint of conciliation, only strengthens the forces ranged against them. As Farah Mendlesohn puts it, in her insightful introduction to this scholarly essay collection, for Russ "niceness is not a mitigating factor in the structures of oppression. [...] Niceness merely pads the cell."

It is no coincidence, then, that the word which recurs in so many of these essays about Russ's work and her place in the SF field as both reader and writer is 'fierceness'. It is no surprise, either, that the sharp-witted fierceness of Russ and other feminist authors met with hostility in some quarters. (It still does, albeit from less distinguished sources, if the letters page at feministsf.org is anything to go by.) These early reactions are charted – lucidly and entertainingly – by Helen Merrick in 'The Female "Atlas" of Science Fiction? Russ, Feminism and the SF Community'. Poul Anderson was not unusual when he declared, in response to Russ's 1972 essay 'The Image of Women in Science Fiction', that a feminist perspective on SF brought only bias and distortion to the table. In his view – entirely logical and objective, no doubt, him being a man and all – it was perfectly natural for there to be few female characters in SF since most SF writers composed "cerebral plots" that did not require love interests. But Russ's words did not fall on entirely stony ground; Merrick quotes Philip K Dick, for one, acknowledging the importance of anger in critiques of a dominant group, as making it harder for the dominant group to simply disregard them.

While there is fun to be had with kneejerk reactions like Anderson's – and satisfaction when Russ sharpens her pen in return – it is fascinating to see how far we have come and what a towering figure Russ was and is. Merrick's analysis of this instance of the debate over feminism's place in SF brings into focus the broader theme of the first part of *On Joanna Russ*: Russ as a committed participant in the SF field and a serious challenge to the field's shared assumptions. Merrick's argument – that Russ's feminism represented a substantially new approach to genre criticism – is complemented in 'Russ on Writing Science Fiction and Reviewing It' by Edward James. In a wonderful advertisement for Russ's non-fiction writing, he examines her tenure as a reviewer for the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* between 1966 and 1980. He shows us Russ as a sharp, eloquent and intellectually restless critic and often a very funny one (on *The Day of the Dolphin*: "M. Merle writes like this, by the way, it is very modish and experimental, it is called "run-in sentences", she flung herself down on the bed, I will kill all publishers, she thought"). She values "utter conviction" in genre writing – SF that does not shy away from its SFnality – without giving a pass to substandard or unambitious work; a reviewer's opinion, she argues, is not arbitrary simply because no objective standards of quality exist. As her time as a reviewer goes on, her aspirations for the genre develop; she believes that SF can (and should) be better, that there is no reason for it to shy away from the challenge of diversity – not least, in the form of herself.

Lisa Yaszek's 'A History of One's Own: Joanna Russ and the Creation of a Feminist SF Tradition' looks at another aspect of the developing conversation of feminist SF, Russ's interactions with women authors and her attitudes to writing that explores women's concerns. As the title suggests, Yaszek seeks to set Russ in the context of feminist canon-forming with the result that some of the piece – while interesting to a reader like me, who did not know the history in much detail – is only tangentially about Russ. Dianne Newell and Jenéa Tallentire's 'Learning the "Prophet Business": The Merril-Russ Intersection', meanwhile, feels like it is part of a specialised debate that never quite comes into focus; that it spends so much space interrogating the "rivalry" between Russ and Judith Merril, before reaching the rather obvious conclusion that Russ's ideas changed over time, does not enhance its appeal.

When it comes to the essays on Russ's fiction, those that concentrate on a single work or a limited body of stories are, by and large, the strongest offerings. In 'Extraordinary People: Joanna Russ's Short Fiction', Graham Sleight offers a characteristically perceptive close reading of several stories (notably 'When It Changed', 'The Zanzibar Cat', 'Souls' and 'Bodies'), interspersed with brief but insightful comments on how a Russ story works. Russ, he suggests, builds new narrative frameworks before the reader's eyes, offering not simply argument – although there is always and ever that – but an exercise in how to argue. Unfortunately, after a strong start, Sleight's article winds down rather abruptly; it could easily have been half as long again. Gary K. Wolfe's 'Alyx Among the Genres' greatly enriched my reading of the *Alyx* stories, in particular the elegy for escapist reading that is 'The Second Inquisition'. (In general I would like to have seen more of this sort of piece in the book: ones that set Russ's work against the backdrop of her contemporaries' work.) I was much less convinced by Jason P. Vest's take on Alyx in 'Violent Women, Womanly Violence: Joanna Russ's Femmes Fatales'; while Alyx can and does kick ar$e when necessary, I would rank self-reliance and quick wittedness rather higher among her many skills.

The novels are better served in terms of attention, although the quality of the exploration is more variable. There are a strong pair of discussions of *The Two of Them*, each concerned with how we can read Russ today. I found

Sherryl Vint's 'Joanna Russ's *The Two of Them* in an Age of Third-wave Feminism' the most stimulating, for its interest in how women of different cultural backgrounds experience oppression differently (and how Western feminists have tended to forget or disregard this), although Pat Wheeler makes an interesting if unfocused return to the theme of fierceness with '"This Is Not Me. I Am Not That": Anger and the Will to Action in Joanna Russ's Fiction'. Some of the other single-work studies are less successful. Tess Williams makes some good points in 'Castaway: Carnival and Sociobiological Satire in *We Who Are About To...*', but the piece as a whole is a little uninspired – seeking the carnivalesque feels somewhat old hat – and never quite touches what makes the book so compelling: the brutal glee of the first half followed by the complete psychological breakdown of the second. Sandra Lindow goes for a heavily symbolic reading in 'Kittens Who Run With Wolves: Healthy Girl Development in Joanna Russ's *Kittakinny*'; the result is unsatisfying and a touch humourless, although it does once again raise the issue of how being trained from birth to be 'nice' hampers rather than helps women and girls. Andrew M. Butler's free-associative 'Medusa Laughs: Birds, Thieves and Other Unruly Women', meanwhile, induced head-scratching but little enlightenment in this reader.

It says much about how we read Russ's work – for idea, for argument, for short sharp shocks – that so few of the authors here treat with Russ as a prose stylist, as a writer on a sentence-by-sentence level rather than one whose words are there to serve her themes. Samuel R. Delany's 'Joanna Russ and D.W. Griffith' is an exception, if a somewhat eccentric one, since it pivots on a thesis – that some of Russ's narrative structures were shaped by watching D.W. Griffith's films – which the author admits is wrong (following a conversation with Russ herself) at the end of the essay. Brian Charles Clark, in 'The Narrative Topology of Resistance in the Fiction of Joanna Russ', goes for something similar but spends as much time discussing other critics' theories as he does applying them to Russ, which is fine if you like that sort of thing but not immediately compelling for readers not versed in the scholarly debates.

Any edited volume such as this is bound to have a few misfires or, at the very least, entries that work more or less well for different readers. This is, nonetheless, a very welcome collection, an expansive and thought-provoking look at Russ that demonstrates the importance of seeing the various aspects of her career as a whole: fiction, criticism, activism, persona. That it does so in several different registers – a few pieces tend towards the esoteric but most are perfectly accessible to the general reader – is equally to be welcomed. For anyone interested in how SF became what it is today, this is well worth the read.

The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms by N. K. Jemisin (Orbit, 2010)
Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

I know someone whose taste in imaginative fiction is precisely circumscribed: it must be secondary-world fantasy with a female protagonist and easy to read. Might then she enjoy this first book of *The Inheritance Trilogy?*

From her late father's rustic kingdom of Darr, young Yeine arrives in Sky, city of the Arameri who lord it over all the kingdoms and to whose power even the gods are in thrall. There her maternal grandfather, monarch of the world, names her one of his three heirs in a *Stardust*-style competition to survive. Yeine, who narrates the story, never really seems to feel the urgency of this situation. She's more interested in investigating the mystery of her Arameri mother's recent death and grappling with her ambiguous feelings towards Nahadoth, 'the Nightlord', who's actually one of the unholy trinity of gods who made the world but comes across more like the stock sexy animus figure of a fang opera. Yeine is self-obsessed and rather vacuous, as perhaps befits her tender years. In the end the novel is really about her discovering her own true nature – a coming-of-age rite dressed up in metaphysics – and will likely have more appeal to younger readers, even though it's packaged as adult fantasy.

Not only does the writing lack tension but it lacks any captivating evocation of the secondary world. Here is Jemisin describing a library: "Both cases and pillars were covered by shelf upon shelf of books and scrolls, some accessible only by the ladders that I saw in each corner. Here and there were tables and chairs, where one might lounge and read for hours." The secondary characters need more substance too; many were just names to me rather than people I could picture in my mind's eye.

Most of the author's imaginative work has gone into the metaphysics, whose complications are gradually revealed as the story goes on, partly through jump-cutting between the main narrative and glimpses of mythic events on some higher plane of consciousness. The metaphysics are treated in a rather mechanistic way, such as you might expect from a fantasy role-playing game, and thereby made devoid of moral significance. Much is made, for example, of the danger of saying anything to Nahadoth in the imperative mode because he might carry out a lethally literal interpretation of the inferred command. Any sense of the numinous is further undermined by the facile – but not comic – adolescent voice:

> This was going to be fun.
>
> The first blast of power that I sent through the palace was violent enough to stagger everyone, even my quarrelsome brothers, who fell silent in surprise. I ignored them and closed my eyes, tapping and shaping the energy to my will. There was so much!

Would my friend who likes easy-to-read female-protagonist secondary-world fantasy enjoy *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*? To be honest, I doubt it. But maybe she would if she were quite a few years younger.

The Folding Knife by KJ Parker (Orbit, 2010)
Reviewed by Stephen Deas

The Folding Knife is, for the most part, the biography of its central character: Basso the Magnificent. Basso the Great. Basso the Wise. Basso the Murderer. Basso the First Citizen of the Vesani Republic, Ruthless, cunning and, above all, lucky. Well, mostly.

Personally I have a lot of time for KJ Parker. I really do think the *Fencer* and *Scavenger* trilogies were some of the first works to bring grit and wit to a fantasy genre in dire need of both at the time. Parker writes prose that's easy to read, the story moves along swiftly and if, like myself, you're a fan, or you liked the more recent *Engineer* trilogy, we can cut this whole review short. Its tone is quite familiar and you'll probably like it. However, for the rest of you...

The backdrop for *The Folding Knife* is fictional but it's hard not to see something Italian in it: a bit of ancient Rome perhaps but a lot more renaissance Venice or Florence. The Vesani Republic owes its wealth to trade and sea power, it uses mercenaries to fight wars, it has no ambition to empire and a lot of ambition to control trade routes. At the same time there are some interesting (and presumably deliberate) parallels with the real world. Basso engages in questionable military adventures. He plays fast and loose with the finances of both the state and his own bank, intertwining the two and generally messing with the currency and the banking system. As biographies of fictional characters go, it's fascinating, entertaining, moves at a fair lick and has streaks of typical Parker dark humour.

Secondary characters have their parts to play and are interesting but largely unexplored; everything revolves around Basso, what he does and why he does it. He's a clever man, a lot cleverer than most of those around him it seems. He does what might be some good things because they happen to suit his purpose and he does some bad things for exactly the same reasons. And in the end, his flaw isn't so much about one great mistake as that he has a blind spot. People. About a third of the way through the book, Basso's mother dies. Basso's reaction to this, in his own words, sums him up:

> "...it's annoying, it's frustrating, it itches where I can't reach but it's not *grief*. Unless I lie to myself, the most I can come up with is, it's a loss of information, like a library burning down."

That's Basso. He simply has no real feelings. He doesn't even seem to understand them. As with most biographies, *The Folding Knife* doesn't judge its central character – that is left very much to the reader. However, if you're looking for any kind of emotional connection to Basso or his story, you might come out the end wondering what on Earth the point was supposed to be.

Blood in the Water by Juliet E McKenna (Solaris, 2009)
Reviewed by Penny Hill

This novel is the second in the *Chronicles of the Lescari Revolution.* It requires you to have read the first volume, *Irons in the Fire*, which I thoroughly enjoyed and I was pleased that *Blood in the Water* provides a satisfying deepening of plot and characters. Events now have a wider impact on the world and where the first volume was confined to six dukedoms, this novel draws in more remote authority figures such as the emperor and the Arch Mage, both understandably unhappy that their hegemony is coming into question.

As before, we only have Litasse, powerless wife of a minor duke, as our viewpoint character from the ducal side. Due to her pragmatic sanction of torture she loses our previously-earned sympathy. This is not what I wanted to happen, but it is enthralling to see the new plot possibilities that McKenna's choices open up. I really appreciate the fact that the human relationships shown are complex and realistic including seeing the effects of war on our key conspirators. After the evolving relationship between two of the rebels, Failla and Tathrin was threatened in the last volume, it is good both to see them reconcile and to see that this is painful for their co-conspirator Aremil, whose relationship with Branca is now even more fragile. It is also refreshing to see that Aremil doesn't take the obviously dramatic option of striving to be become acknowledged as a ducal heir. It is fascinating to see the impact of this choice on his allies. I anticipate this theme of consequences will be explored more deeply in the next volume.

I enjoyed the complexity of McKenna's world and social hierarchy. In particular, I liked the naiveté of the aristocrats who still believe the existing social order works and that they can manipulate it. My inner proletariat rejoiced when a duchess discovered the downside of feudalism. I had the feeling I was reading the inner workings of the strategy game *Warrior Knights* as the importance of ducal bloodlines and viable heirs was played out, and as the logistics of attacking or besieging a castle were evaluated by both sides. These battle scenes felt realistic with a strong sense of each group gathering around its banners, working under the fog of war unaware of the full picture.

I appreciated the further exploration of magic in this volume, particularly the difference between Aremil's telepathy (he is restricted to always appearing in one mental space) and Branca's much stronger abilities (she can create mental spaces and draw others into them to protect them). The only aspect that I felt didn't work as well, was the question of the safety of our rebels. I would have preferred a stronger sense that anyone could be killed than that given by the death of one minor character. This didn't detract from an impressive, pacy novel that left me eager for the third volume, *Banners in the Wind*.

City of Ruin by Mark Charan Newton (Tor UK, 2010) Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

City of Ruin is the second book in Mark Charan Newton's *Legen*ds of the Red Sun series. The first book, Nights of Villjamur, was set in the titular capital city of the Jamur Empire and readers looking for major developments in the story of Randur, Eir and Rika may be disappointed, in that they are kept essentially on the side lines, taking a long journey, having a few 'stand-alone' adventures and learning a bit more about the grand scheme of things while never becoming involved in the main action.

Meanwhile the new novel moves the story to the northerly city of Villiren, a more liberal and anarchic port. War is expected. The mysterious Okun, seven foot tall, almost insectile, giant black crustaceans, have appeared in the far north and are moving south, waging a genocidal campaign against any humans in their path. Consequently people are fleeing to Villiren and Night Guard Commander Brynd Lathraea has arrived to oversee the defence of the city. Lathraea tries to recruit two of Villiren's gang leaders in aid of the city, not aware that the same two gangsters are also in the pay of the corrupt Portreeve. One of the gangsters, Malum, is half-vampyr (as are his men, the Bloods) and is having marital problems with his human wife, Beami. Meanwhile Beami's great love of her teenage years, Lupus, has returned to the city as a soldier in the Night Guard. It's not long before he is proving he doesn't suffer from the sexual difficulties afflicting her husband whilst Malum is further concerned when a spy reports the albino Commander Lathraea is a customer at a gay brothel.

Inquisition Investigator Jeryd, a reptilian Rumel, has also arrived from Villjamur, relocating after making himself unpopular with the new emperor in the author's debut novel. With his new assistant, Nanzi, Jeryd finds himself investigating the disappearance of a Night Watch soldier, abducted and killed by a giant spider. He discovers almost 500 people have been reported missing in recent months, many of them political activists. When the mystery is resolved it seems highly implausible that so many people could have disappeared in the way described in so short a space of time and that no one investigated the matter sooner. Narrative logic aside, these storylines and others gradually come together in a novel which begins with intrigue and develops through increasingly surreal twists to total war. The strangeness comes in part due to the use of ancient technology so comparatively advanced it might as well be magic, in part due to plot revelations which hint at whole other dimensions to be explored in further instalments in the series.

City of Ruin reads like a very British far future Dying Earth novel. The series title evokes a dying world, from the red sun at the end of *The Time Machine* onward, while the coastal city torn apart by unrest and surrendering to a new ice age specifically seems to evoke Michael Coney's *Hello Summer, Goodbye.* You may be reminded variously of Jack Vance, Gene Wolfe and Mark S. Geston. The novel is also very much in the tradition of left wing British SF. Villiren is a brutal free-market free-for-all, with the Portreeve using every resource in his power to make the rich richer are the expense of the poor. The ancient city has undergone recent rapid re-development, nothing is to get in the way of making a profit.

Mark Charan Newton can tell a story, even if this one is far from complete and the death of one major character is dismissed so quickly as to make the reader consider how permanent that demise really is. He makes one want to know what happens next and has mustered some memorable variations on generic fantasy characters. It takes a brave new author to put an albino warrior centre stage in a fantasy epic and to Newton's credit Brynd Lathraea is a very different character to Michael Moorcock's Elric of Melnibone. The book can be read without having knowledge of its predecessor but, though set in a different city with some new characters, does essentially continue the previous saga. And here I must argue with the series title. *Legends of the Red Sun* suggests, well, something more legendary. It also implies separate tales set in the same fictional universe. What we have is a very contemporary feeling single epic narrative divided into 400-500 page chunks. There is no sense of the 'legendary' at all. No sense of something remembered from the distant past, something mythologised. Quite the opposite, this is science fantasy stripped bare of romantic illusions, steeped in savage realpolitik and sociopathic violence, told in a modern day street language in which a character can be "gagging for it". With the combination of far future urban setting, strange creatures and technologies, unblinkered political vision, uninhibited sex, strong language, raw violence and nauseating horror, *City of Ruin* sits firmly in the New Weird camp. Fans of China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station* may wish to explore these mean streets.

Except there is a problem. Like its predecessor, for all its 'adult' content and themes, Newton's book reads like a badly written YA title. Many major SF and fantasy writers will never be read for their style but Newton lacks any subtlety, offering prose which is awkward, confused and occasionally laughable. This novel alone could supply Thog's Masterclass for years:

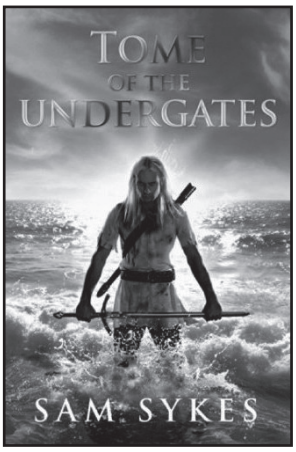
> "Few citizens were loitering at this hour. The last figure he'd seen was a hooded man picking at his teeth assiduously as he ran through the passageways."

> "The previous evening's murders: there had been four reports of dead bodies found with puncture wounds in the neck, the corpses shrivelled, but they had never gone missing for long – and were usually found round the back of which ever tavern they'd been drinking in the night before – and no one was too surprised at them ending up dead."

> "People were crowded into cuboid rooms that adjoined exactly similar rooms..."

> "He was aching to get away from here, trying desperately not to look at the dead corpse of his friend."

However, the tale just about triumphs over the telling and the final quarter builds to such a fever of nightmarish invention and apocalyptic slaughter that the mere massacre of the English language becomes irrelevant. Imagine the Siege of Leningrad directed by Clive Barker with a James Cameron budget. There is an exhilarating splendour to the awfulness of it all.



Tome of the Undergates by Sam Sykes (Gollancz, 2010) Reviewed by Jim Steel

When Alan Moore inserted superheroes into the real world in *Watchmen*, he conjectured that pirate stories would fill the publishing gap created by the absence of a demand for fictional superheroes. At the time it seemed to many of us that this was one of his more unlikely inventions but who would guess that *Pirates of the Caribbean* lay ahead? The first couple of hundred pages of *Tome of the Undergates* take place on board a ship that is under repeated attacks from a pirate vessel and, onboard, a mismatched band of adventurers of the Dungeons & Dragons variety squabble amongst themselves while they fight off the enemy. The baroque dialogue (and there is plenty of it) is weighed down by irony and there are frequent sightings of 'said' used as a definite article which is something that clears up once the band sets foot on dry land. The modern anachronisms manage to hang on to the end.

The characters, too, are familiar. We have a geeky wizard, a cowardly thief, an unworldly priest, a dragonman who may be the last of his species, a sword-wielding adventurer and a feral, elf-like archer. The last two, Lenk and Kataria, are also responsible for what may very well be the worst case of unresolved sexual tension in literature. Kataria, curiously, cannot merely be described as a man with breasts as it is pointed out that she is fairly flat-chested. They hit each other a lot. Kataria also goes through a couple of pages where she thinks of the others as 'characters' and wonders about an 'epilogue' which is something that shouldn't have made it to the final draft for a character who doesn't read. Of the lot, it is Gariath the dragonman who turns out to be the most interesting which is surprising as he initially appears to be merely a one-dimensional killing machine. The viewpoint tends to drift alarmingly throughout the book, sometimes even alighting on minor characters for a couple of paragraphs, but, while this leaves the reader somewhat detached, it doesn't confuse the plot although it does detract from the emotional impact that the scenes of torture and dismemberment should have. This is, it must be noted, a fairly violent book.

The plot is simple; a magical book is stolen from the priest during the pirate assault and the adventurers have to retrieve it from the demonic creatures who now hold it. New species turn up unannounced in a manner that suggests an inexperienced Sykes was just winging it in this, his first novel, but he attacks his story with vigour and it improves noticeably towards the end. It has plenty of flaws that should have had an editor calling for a rewrite but it isn't dull and I can say, with all honesty, that I have absolutely no idea what he is going to do in the next volume.

Wolfsangel by MD Lachlan (Gollancz, 2010) Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite

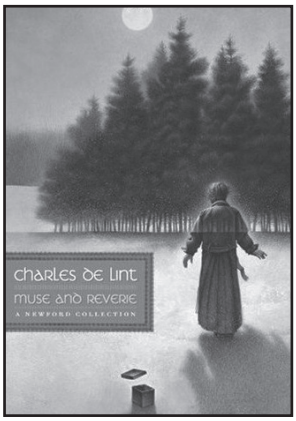
Acting on the prophecy of the witch queen Gullveig, King Athun takes twin boys from an Anglo-Saxon village during a raid. One, he names Vali and raises as his own; the other, Feileg, is kept by Gullveig to serve as her protector and sent to be schooled in the wolf-magic of the berserkers. Over the years, the twins become pawns in the complex game of magical subterfuge that is the eternal war between Odin and Loki. To say that *Wolfsangel* is a Viking fantasy with werewolves would technically be accurate but it would do a disservice to author Mark Barrowcliffe, whose debut fantasy (published under the name 'MD Lachlan') is a much richer book than that bald description suggests.

Wolfsangel pays its dues as a fantasy adventure story: the plot is suitably eventful, with twists and turns a-plenty, and Lachlan is a deft writer of action. But, while the violence in this novel may be brutal, it is not gratuitously so; the author brings home that violence plays a key part in the world of his story and he shows how harsh and restrictive it makes life for his characters. Vali is a prince who refuses to play the role expected of him by his society – he abhors fighting and his true love, Adisla, is a farm girl (who is far more resigned to the status quo than he). Perhaps his ultimate quest in *Wolfsangel* is to break free of those social strictures.

But Vali (and other characters) are bound in even deeper ways than they can imagine – and this is where magic comes in. Lachlan's treatment of magic is interesting and distinctive, depicting a mysterious force that not even its ablest users understand fully ("a puzzle not a recipe" as one character puts it). Particularly striking is the way that this magic consumes and distorts those who wield and come into contact with it: the witch queen might have power enough to make her a goddess of sorts but the price she has paid is that her body will forever remain that of a child. Similarly, the magic of the berserks grants Feileg immense physical ability but it also twists his personality into something not quite human ("I am a wolf" he repeats, as though it were a mantra). The struggle to avert the destinies laid down by magic parallels Vali's fight against society.

The whole world of *Wolfsangel* is suffused with the unknown. Gods are present in both divine and mortal aspects but aren't necessarily aware of who they are. Magic floats through the narrative, with many seemingly unsure of where its reality stops and superstition begins. Even the geography, the very extent of the world, feels only half-known to most of the characters. It lends the book a real sense of strangeness, which runs alongside and rounds out the more conventional adventure story.

Wolfsangel is the first novel in a series that will move forwards through history; I'll be interested to see how that works but, if the rest are a good as this one, it will be a series that needs reading.



Muse and Reverie by Charles de Lint (Tor, 2010)
Reviewed by Amanda Rutter

Muse and Reverie is a collection of thirteen short stories set in Charles de Lint's Newford universe. As with most collections, some of these tales are of better quality than others but, it being Charles de Lint, there are more hits than misses.

The collection opens with 'Somewhere In My Head There Is A Painting Box', which sets the tone nicely, dealing with a situation where the worlds of human and faery collide. There is nothing new here but the descriptions of the woodland are graceful and show as genuine a love for the natural wonders around us as Robert Holdstock did in *Mythago Wood*. The real diamond in the collection was 'Riding Shotgun' – it presents a haunting tale of loss, alcoholism and how the choices that we make determine who we are and the passage of our lives. At a couple of points it became a little obvious but overall it has immense impact, especially since it was written in the first person. 'Sweet Forget-Me-Not' was another highlight for me: a wistful and poignant story about first love and loss. Here de Lint deals in his usual sensitive manner with bullying and racism. Ahmad and Neenie – the human and the faery, respectively – were a compelling couple to read about and the ending left me feeling more than a little sad. I also enjoyed 'A Crow Girls' Christmas'. This story was brief but very festive (even read in the height of summer!) and incredibly enchanting. Maida and Zia – the eponymous Crow Girls – are delightfully kooky and amusing. Long time readers of de Lint will recognise these two from his novels and will no doubt enjoy catching up with these "fierce, candy cane-eating outlaw girls."

My particular misses were 'Refinerytown' and 'Newford Spooks Squad'. In the former, there was still much to enjoy but I found it a little disjointed and hard to engage with. Diesel, the eight inch oil refinery fairy, is ravishing and mysterious – however, her presence in the story was introduced thanks to the slimmest of reasons and I found it hard to suspend my disbelief. The latter simply stood out like a sore thumb, considering it is a tale about Hellboy. In any other collection it would have been an effective and tense story but here it was so far removed from the fairytale quality of the other stories that it actually jarred with me.

I am a huge fan of de Lint and have read many of his novels and other collections with great enjoyment. Sitting down to *Muse and Reverie* was like joining a friend for a gossip with a hot chocolate – warm and cosy, familiar yet always magical. De Lint's writing is comical, absurd, lyrical and never less than beautiful. If you just want to dip in and tackle one tale at a time, your experience will be as rewarding as reading the book from cover to cover.

The Left Hand of God by Paul Hoffman (Penguin, 2010)
Reviewed by Lalith Vipulananthan

Being an acolyte at the Sanctuary of the Redeemers is not what you'd call an enjoyable experience: a bland diet, a brutal training regime and the possibility of sudden death at the hands of sadistic priests. Thomas Cale is one such acolyte, a quiet boy who happens to be gifted in the art of killing people. When he is talked into exploring the Sanctuary by two other acolytes, they stumble upon a dark secret and are forced to escape to the city of Memphis where they find adventure, vice and romance. The Redeemers are not yet done with Cale though; he is the key to their ultimate victory over their enemies and perhaps the harbinger of Armageddon itself.

With two novels behind him, Paul Hoffman's first foray into the fantasy world appears to be aimed at the young adult demographic but has been pushed quite hard at the adult market as the next big thing. Unfortunately, its deployment of epic fantasy clichés, thin characterisation and ill-judged worldbuilding makes for a poor showing against other recent fantasy. Spending pages and pages laying out your world in unnecessary detail is a charge often levelled at the genre, pithily summed up by M. John Harrison as "the great clomping foot of nerdism". On the other hand, it is necessary to develop a believable setting that holds veracity for the reader and Hoffman fails to achieve this. Perhaps detail was kept to a minimum to avoid scaring off non-genre readers but it is not the level of detail so much as the lack of consistency that frustrates.

The novel is scattered with a number of jarring references to real-world places and historical figures: Memphis, Odessa, Norway and Poland are mentioned alongside Gypsies, Jews and Jesus himself. This mix-and-match approach is also taken with prose to an equally discordant effect. We have such modern idioms as "I could care less", "living the life of Reilly" and "playing possum". I'm not usually a stickler for correct language usage in historical fiction or fantasy but this really did destroy any sense of immersion from almost the very beginning.

Hoffman isn't going to win any awards for style but he maintains pace throughout the book. Sticking to swords rather than sorcery, the fantastic elements are virtually non-existent, perhaps in keeping with the minimal worldbuilding. Some actual character development would have been a nice way of balancing this out but that is something else that this book is missing. The acolytes don't grow in any way as a result of their adventures and Cale finds himself back where he started with nothing to show for it.

The Left Hand of Darkness is a confused mess, not knowing which demographic to go for and not having the confidence or quality to appeal to both. I'd still like to see where Hoffman plans to take the series but, based on this first instalment, I will happily live in ignorance unless things drastically improve.

The Unlikely World of Faraway Frankie by Keith Brooke (Newcon Press, 2010)
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

The story about the teenager who finds the world of the imagination into which they escape is *real* is not exactly a new one but Keith Brooke adds extra flavour to it, partly because Frankie is such a sympathetic character, partly because at the heart of the story is a profound moral question. Frankie Finnegan is the class clown, making himself the butt of the joke before the more serious bullying starts. If he is lucky, he succeeds. Fat and getting fatter ("Finnegan—he'll never be thinagain") with a semi-present father and a mother who is drinking her way out of her own problems, Frankie takes refuge in daydreams and tall stories. Overshadowing the whole dysfunctional family is the tragic accident which robbed them of Frankie's sister Grace but also in the background is the precarious economy of Nereby-on-Sea the seaside town in which they live. Frankie's dad works on the pier in charge of the amusement arcade, reporting to a mysterious "Owner" increasingly dissatisfied with the meagre takings.

Brooke handles Frankie's isolation with a deft touch. When his class puts on a presentation at the school assembly about the evil of bullying, Frankie, of course, is cast as the victim. The scene is both hilarious and disturbing. Then Frankie finds that Faraway, the world of his daydreams in which he is in control and can be who he wants to be, is leaking into the world he inhabits. Faraway is not exactly a "fantasy" world; it is the strictly mundane Nereby-on-Sea made better for *him*. The teachers are stereotypically strict with the bullies but believe Frankie when he says he has "already been punished". The street scenes and the environment are variable; when Frankie needs a "deep creek full of churning white water" to cut him off from his enemies Barking and Stu, it is there. And Grace survived the accident.

There's an old saying (quoted by Adam Roberts in his introduction): "Be careful what you wish for: you might get it." What happens afterwards is complex and at times unsettling and needs to be read rather than described. All that should be said is that while this is Frankie's world, it too has an Owner, and that it is all very well to rewrite the world so that it is better for you but there are other issues to consider.

Keith Brooke's novel, as a story, has nothing at all in common with E. R. Eddison's *Zimiamvia* trilogy but the way it engages with levels of the imagination reminds me strongly of the way Eddison's Lessingham is also imagining a world in which he *fits* so much better than in his everyday one. Frankie is a more sympathetic character than Lessingham but the central problem is there. Brooke keeps control of the moral issues and, as Roberts's introduction suggests (though with a very different set of comparisons), he makes us look more closely at what we do when we *want* the world to be different.

Fun with Rainbows by Gareth Owens (Immersion Press, 2010)
Reviewed by Chaz Brenchley

Things change, fiction not excluded. The *shapes* of fiction not excluded.

When I was young and making serious efforts to read all the genre fiction then extant (a project that was almost tenable in the Seventies: not so now), most canonical SF novels were still short enough to be serialised. In the intervening generation, length has crept in and become standard. As a corollary or else as a contrast, we have the phenomenon of flash fiction: short stories become shorter, if not quite short enough to be Tweetable. Oh, there was always Fredric Brown -- but the reason we remember Fredric Brown is that there was only one of him. These days, everybody's doing it. Hell, even the journal *Nature* is publishing short-short SF in every issue...

Which is where we come in because several of the stories collected in *Fun with Rainbows* appeared first in *Nature*, whose fiction editor has supplied the introduction to this volume. There are sixteen stories here, not to mention the novella, and most of the shorts are short-short. It's a difficult form to get right. The briefest flash fiction needs to be more than a joke, it needs more than a twist ending to justify itself; you can't hang a narrative from a punchline. Flash *science* fiction also needs more than a neat idea, for the selfsame reason. Extrapolation is not equal to storytelling. It's a fallacy to suppose that as long as the science holds up, the fiction doesn't have to.

The best of these ('The Revenge of Schrödinger's Cat', for example) could serve as exemplars; others perhaps as an illustration of the problems. Fewer than half of these stories have appeared first elsewhere, which always leaves me wondering about the others: how many were written for this collection and how many have come from the reject pile? Owens might have been wiser to wait until he had a book's-worth of stories that had already passed editorial scrutiny. In any collection, there will always be a proportion of weaker stories set against the stronger; here it feels more like a disproportion.

And then there's the novella. Which is of course another difficult form, needing to balance the detail of a novel against the single-minded purpose of a short story. 'The Cloth From Which She Is Cut' bids fair to find that balance, only to fail at the last. There is a long tradition of SF/horror stories which pit humans against ancient, stronger powers and while I would never argue for the happy ending *per se*, I do think some kind of achievement is imperative or the story loses any point. For the protagonists to struggle through fifty pages and then simply to fail utterly... Well. It may be that this piece is sailing under false colours, that it's only the opening to something longer, but it presents itself as is and as such the ending deflates the entire work.

The Orphaned Worlds by Michael Cobley (Orbit, 2010)
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

The Orphaned Worlds is the second volume of Michael Cobley's *Humanity's Fire* trilogy, taking the story straight on from the end of *Seeds of Earth*. This is space opera on the grandest scale; a galaxy-wide, dimension-hopping, time-travelling adventure in which insignificant, impotent humanity is tossed on the storms of ambition and war between civilisations past, present and future (not to mention animal, vegetable and mineral).

Three seedships left Earth a long time ago. One, crewed by Scots, Scandinavians and other citizens of the North European countries ended up on the twin planet-moon Darien system inhabited by the ethereal Uvovo (no, they aren't blue) who exist in a somewhat symbiotic relationship with a planet spanning Gaia-type intelligence, the Segrana.

Long before there was a great war between the "soft" intelligences – humans and other organic lifeforms – and the mechanical intelligences of the Legion of Avatars. A dormant weapon on Darien's moon, watched over by the Uvovo, played a pivotal part in the confinement of the Legion to a safe lower level of hyperspace. Except one legionnaire remained at liberty, dormant, and – by the beginning of *The Orphaned Worlds* – it has rediscovered itself and a sense of purpose. A purpose which might be best expressed in the words of a Dalek. It, and the various contending civilisations, head towards Darien to put that rediscovered superweapon to their own use, and all that seems to stand between them is a raggle taggle army of humans – some of whom sometimes break out in Harry Lauder-style Scots dialect – Uvovo and the Segrana.

Guess who wins.

If anything, there is too much going on here, too many threads to follow, too many dramatic reveals, too many wheels within wheels within invisible wheels. Anyone coming to the genre without immersion in its tropes and histories would probably reel away, terminally bewildered, after half a dozen chapters. Anyone with that immersion will recognise the sign posts, the references, the commonalities of the language of the New (Scottish) Space Opera. The reader is best advised to go with the flow rather than think too much because the whole sequence appears to be following the structures of the horse operas that predated space opera and which provided so many of its rules. In its own way, this is as formal as a Noh play and, as long as you understand this, *The Orphaned Worlds* works well. The story is a skeleton bob ride: it starts at the top and accelerates to the bottom with an inevitability that requires the reader to keep their head down and extremities inside. You know where you're going and you can trust Cobley to deliver you there safely, breathless and satisfied, reaching for the third volume.

Humanity's Fire is a single story and, although the component books can be enjoyed for themselves, I suspect the whole will be more than the sum of the parts. I eagerly await the final novel and will buy it with my own money.

Brain Thief by Alexander Jablokov (Forge, 2010)
Reviewed by Tony Lee

Bernal is a new kind of travelling salesman, persuading neo–Luddite communities to accept his employer's wholly eccentric schemes such as a resurrection project to create herds of mammoths (chosen because bison are "the most boring mammals ever evolved") for the de-populated Great Plains region. Problems arise when Bernal's wealthy boss Muriel goes missing with a stolen car, leaving only cryptic messages to meet him later. Meanwhile, he is investigating rumours that a new space probe developed by maverick scientist Madeline Ungaro – and partly funded by Muriel – has also mysteriously vanished, along with its creator, whilst evidence surfaces suggesting that Muriel has fallen victim to a local serial killer.

After publishing five novels in the 1990s, *Brain Thief* is American writer Alexander Jablokov's first book for 12 years (although in the last five years he has resumed contributing short fiction to Asimov's and F&SF). This comeback novel skilfully blends an engagingly detailed detective story with noir plotting and various keynote cyberpunk tropes. Hard SF elements are deployed almost casually with references to SQUID tech, automatic decapitation devices, human heads stolen from sabotaged cryonic storage and the vigilante notion of 'social protection' meaning busybodies armed with HERF guns conscientiously "delaying the singularity since 2005". These nifty genre ideas are woven so cleverly into the fascinating crime drama there's hardly any need for infodump paragraphs.

Undercurrents of coincidental weirdness and black comedy ensure that even the most chilling events are never particularly grisly. Humour abounds in the brisk and diverse characterisation with prickly eccentrics and desperate criminals clashing with the driven Bernal. His mission is also hampered or encouraged by various women along the way and the reader is kept guessing as to which of these potential lovers Bernal will end up staying with. Zest is added by witty dialogue such as this amusingly throwaway contribution to the famous Turing test: "Slacking off is an undeniable sign of intelligence. It's only the non-self-aware devices that uncomplainingly do everything you tell them to."

There's an impressive level of exacting description here that gives this near-future storyline many solidly realistic settings for drama or comedy, even if this precise attention to detail sometimes fails to extend to chases or fights. As such, the writing is often cinematic in style but the author's vividly filmic imagination is foiled occasionally by jittery camerawork, while action thriller moments in particular are plagued by clumsy editing. So, although we might well be immersed in fascinating locations and prompted to admire the set dressing, it's not always perfectly clear what happens when the lights go out and who's attacking who in the dark. These largely forgivable faults are nonetheless a disappointing lapse in storytelling judgment and a failing of novelistic technique.

Still, if you enjoy SF packed with subtle jokes that is nonetheless grounded in a convincingly speculative realism, building to a dizzying crescendo of revelations which capture the soaring imagination of a rocket launch, *Brain Thief* is a splendid read that invites you to standby for blast-off.

Veteran by Gavin Smith (Gollancz, 2010)
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Veteran is set a couple of centuries hence when the world we know has mostly gone to hell. Humanity is at war with an alien race known only as Them and has been losing that war for 60 years. Earth is a mess, ruined by war and ecological collapse, and most of humanity seems to live a *Mad Max*-style existence, scrabbling to survive on abandoned oil rigs or rooftops poking out of a landscape flooded by global warming.

Through this unpromising milieu strides Jakob Douglas, a former soldier in the war on Them (hence the title). Modified, enhanced, improved and replaced literally up to his eyeballs, Jakob has been recalled to active service out of a drink- and drug-filled haze to find one of Them that has managed to break through Earth's defences, landing here for reasons unknown – but presumably not to return a library book. I liked the aliens in *Veteran*, they're really not human *at all*, and the derogatory name they're given is suitably, erm, de-humanising and ambiguous.

Having been hopelessly adrift since leaving the army, Jakob gets all his old guns and fancy military enhancements back; he gets given a cool motorbike, an armoured trenchcoat, a pack of cigarettes and orders to fuck some shit up. Unsurprisingly however, Jakob's own shit gets fucked the hell up and he's sucked into a wild global chase to find person A who can perform action B thus opening up level C which allows... well, to be brutally honest, it doesn't really matter.

Veteran contains just about every classic cyberpunk trope ever imagined thrown into the mix with wild abandon from the cyberspatial god to the evil corporation, the deadly lady assassin to the prostitute with a heart of gold (wait, is that last one a cyberpunk trope?). It also contains way more than your RDA of booze, drugs, guns, explosions, blood, sweat and swearing. But it never feels *real*, it feels more like a video game. This Michael Bay version of cyberpunk could be hugely entertaining in a video game but it takes more than an endless succession of cool and deadly technological marvels flicking past like a 23rd Century Argos catalogue to make an involving and exciting story (regardless of what Michael Bay may think).

So *Veteran* tries very hard, and there are occasional flashes of excellent writing and story-telling such as the discussion about what the man-made god of cyberspace should be for; what should it *do*? Some of the violence is also well portrayed, à la Richard Morgan, but unlike in Morgan's work, its impact is diluted because there's such an overwhelming amount of it: characters only seem to stop fighting to be patched up ready for some more fighting! The seemingly endless violence eventually makes it an effort to keep pushing on through *Veteran*, rather than whipping you along in its turbocharged wake – the kiss of death for a hyperkinetic action-adventure story like this, I'm afraid.

Yukikaze by Chōhei Kambayashi (Haikasoru, 2010)
Reviewed by Ian Sales

Second Lieutenant Rei Fukai is a pilot in the Special Air Force of the Faery Air Force. Thirty years ago, enigmatic aliens called the JAM invaded the Earth through a hyper-dimensional passageway in Antarctica. Earth beat back the invaders and now fights them on the world at the other end of the passageway, Faery. The SAF's role is the collection of all frontline electronic intelligence and, as a result, its pilots are known for their aloofness. If FAF fighters go into battle against JAM fighters, the SAF must lurk outside the combat area, gathering data. They are not permitted to fight and thereby jeopardise the intelligence they have collected.

Fukai flies a Super Sylph FFR31 jet fighter called Yukikaze (judging by the cover art and the descriptions in the text, it is some sort of science-fictional F-14 Tomcat). *Yukikaze* is about Fukai and Yukikaze, their missions and how they are changed by their situation. Faery, the FAF, the JAM are merely setting. The JAM are never revealed; their appearance and motives remain unknowable at the end of Yukikaze. According to three afterwords, this is because Yukikaze is about Fukai losing his humanity; the war, his role as Yukikaze's pilot, his isolation from Earth are turning him into a machine. A perceptive reader might well have spotted this for themselves since the prologue helpfully explains it, Fukai's superior, Major James Booker, openly worries at Fukai's increasing lack of emotion and almost every introspective passage remarks on Fukai's growing attachment to Yukikaze...

In fact, very little in *Yukikaze* convinces. If a SF story can be moved to a realistic setting and the story is unaffected, then it is not SF. Fukai flies a sophisticated fighter jet but it's not that different to a F-14; for all the reader learns about Faery and the JAM, Fukai might well be fighting in Northern China. Yukikaze is allegedly sentient but does nothing a well-programmed computer could not do and the SAF's role makes no sense an aircraft to witness engagements with the enemy, but which is not allowed to fight Why not simply radio back data from the fighters

Perhaps Japanese science fiction operates using different rules to Anglophone SF. *Yukikaze's* story is put together from a series of episodes, none of which actually constitute a narrative arc or offer a resolution. One episode concerns a driver of a snowplough who is awarded a combat medal, to the mystification of his fellows and himself. Another sees a journalist from the US visit Faery and be given a flight in Yukikaze only for him and Fukai to find themselves in a strange parallel world. Which remains unexplained.

Yukikaze was first published in 1984. This Haikasoru edition, its first English appearance, is a translation of the 2002 revised edition. That same year an anime of eight episodes was made of *Yukikaze*, which is hardly surprising given that the novel's descriptive passages seem designed for anime. Perhaps the story's lack of resolution is better suited to that medium; it certainly makes for an unsatisfactory novel.

The World Inside by Robert Silverberg (Orb, 2010)
Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Urbmons are 999 floor high-rise blocks, constructed to hold enormous populations, with new buildings being erected on a continuous basis. There is no stopping the need for new accommodation because the religion of the residents worships reproduction and the social standards of the society mean that couples start reproducing in their early teens, with women in particular suffering stigmatism if they are barren. In addition, social mores encourage men to go "nightwalking", in which they wander into anybody else's apartment and sleep with the woman resident. No one seems to worry that this means nearly every family must be raising some other man's children.

The seven chapters of *The World Inside* (which were originally seven short stories, this is a fix-up) introduce us to a small number of characters who know or are related to each other. More detail of the world comes in the first chapter – originally published as 'A Happy Day In 2381' in 1969 – as Charles Mattern introduces a visitor from Venus to this part of Earth. Within the Urbmon, life is organised in collections of floors known as cities; people have or want very little but tend not to travel far and even have no wish to explore, nor to relocate to one of the new Urbmons. There has been, using Mark Adlard's term in his similar British *Tcity* arcology novels, a "denaissance" and not only is the theology of the Urbmonians shallow so is everything else in their thinking, apart from their engineering ability to construct Urbmons.

There are only two ways of escape from such a claustrophobic atmosphere. One is madness, which is quickly ended, as victims are hurled down the garbage shutes. The other is something like a prison-break. There is a world outside, where the food for the residents is grown, as Michael Statler finds out in chapter six when he engineers his exit. The world has been flattened for fields and the farmers have developed a completely different philosophy or religion, personified in unattractive rituals made to keep their population low, which Statler finds make relations between men and women so very different to the Urbmon that he is driven back to suffer inside.

First published in 1971, *The World Inside* only appeared in Britain five years later, after the success of *Tower of Glass*, set in a similar environment. Despite the fascinating new introduction written for this edition, explaining the origins of the novel and the contemporary discussions of "arcologies" by architects and sociologists, Silverberg never seems to have smoothed the inconsistencies of his original stories. Why are the extra-terrestrial developments which feature in chapter one not explored further, for instance, by allowing trouble-makers such as Michael Statler to depart for another planet? How did the farmers and insiders become so separate? On the other hand, within the last forty years not dissimilar religious developments have encouraged reproduction, leading to population doubling in significant parts of the world, even migrating to the USA as the Quiverfull movement. Never a pure prophecy, *The World Inside* remains a frightful what-if.

This Is Not A Game by Walter Jon Williams (Orbit, 2010)
Reviewed by Shaun C. Green

In the near future, ARGs (Alternate Reality Games) get big. Some – such as those produced by Dagmar, lead writer and planner for Great Big Idea and fondly nicknamed "the puppetmaster" – are so big that they are played by hundreds of thousands of people across the world. As the book opens she is in Jakarta for the climax of one such game. She is trapped when Indonesia's currency abruptly collapses; the government soon follows leading to widespread civil disorder.

Dagmar's story is at the heart of this novel but is also interwoven with the tales of her college acquaintances, friends who bonded over pen and paper role-playing games. Foremost among them is Charlie, a self-made billionaire who funds Great Big Idea. The first act describes Dagmar's escape from Jakarta, a story in which Charlie's limitless funds and a professional mercenary group are pitted against the contacts and ingenuity of Great Big Idea's thousands of players. It's a tense thriller with a well-envisioned setting, juxtaposing the precarious luxury of the Royal Jakarta Hotel with the poverty and violence outside. The hotel soon becomes a prison and Dagmar is forced to choose whether she should follow the instructions of a military professional, or put her life in the hands of individuals who may believe her plight is only a game.

The book has an interesting premise and it's pleasing to see a thriller engaging with relatively new technologies and concepts like ARGs, social networking and cloudsourced knowledge. This also represents its Achille's Heel: technology enthusiasts and players of ARGs may not find some aspects of Williams's novel wholly convincing, exacerbated by the fact the novel is self-consciously imprecise about when it is set. For example, the first chapter describes laptop "turbines" which supply power and extend battery life; this sits anachronistically alongside a custom-made PDA that sounds less impressive than the latest iPhone.

Similarly the design of the ARG that is entwined with the novel's other narratives feels dated and claustrophobic. Aspects of this game, supposedly played by hundreds of thousands, operate on a first come, first served basis. Thus only one player gets to participate, under the assumption that they will then share what they have learned with other players. It's understandable that the game design is structured this way in order to work within the book, but it doesn't convince as a game that would be played by more than a few hundred devotees. Williams does attempt to justify this by stating that many of the 'players' are observers rather than active participants, but compared to ARG projects like *Superstruct* the fictional game design feels lacking in imagination.

This Is Not A Game is a novel that is somewhat let down by its lack of intimate familiarity with the concepts that underpin it and this will be obvious to readers who are drawn to it by way of these concepts. However, it remains a highly entertaining speculative thriller that attempts to engage with the modern world, rather than ignoring the aspects of it that are inconvenient to plotting.

Blonde Bombshell by Tom Holt (Orbit, 2010)
Reviewed by Simon Guerrier

George Stetchkin is a brilliant programmer and a not so brilliant drunk. He's on the trail of some bank robbers who've used teleport technology – which, of course, hasn't been invented. Lucy Pavlov is the mega-rich inventor of world-changing technology but she keeps having dreams about unicorns. And Mark Twain is the impenetrable alias of a very smart bomb. He's been ordered to destroy the Earth by a planet of dogs.

Blonde Bombshell is a rich, dizzy adventure chock-full of big ideas, all fighting for the readers' attention. That desperate effort to dazzle and amaze makes it pretty hard going. There are plenty of jokes but few that make the reader really laugh. Instead, you can hear the arched eyebrow all the way through, a comedy more droll than funny. There are the painful puns and word plays: the neolithic period on the planet of the dogs is called the Bone Age and they've got a 'T'erier class' of space ship. There's lazy stuff about George being drunk or hungover at the wrong moments. Characters wilfully misunderstand simple statements and events. Then there are the tortuous analogies, such as "harder to swallow than a nail-studded olive", "like trying to build a sandcastle out of semolina pudding" and "memories limped home like the survivors of a decimated army." I quite liked "weird as two dozen ferrets in a blender" but the "two dozen" blunts its simple, vivid effect.

The writing is often too fussy, the jokes too awkward and contrived. Though Mark Twain is as nicely inconspicuous a name as Ford Prefect, the arched style is more Robert Rankin than Douglas Adams. (I've never got Rankin's appeal, either.) The characters are all rather generic: the drunk and rude but brilliant programmer, the icy, super-rich heroine, the machine that wants to live. There's some nice stuff between Mark and Lucy as they realise they fancy one another but their own autistic behaviour and the arched tone of the writing makes it difficult to empathise with either of them. The book is big on ideas but leaves the reader rather cold. Which is a shame because the story itself is often rich and surprising and Holt keeps the plot moving quickly. There are some great ideas – the dog catching a stick that then lifts it off into space, the fresh, dead octopus that's so much more powerful than the aliens' computers. There are plenty of fine set-ups and revelations.

I didn't like the book at all to begin with but, having persevered for the first 100 pages, the plot then engaged my attention. The disparate strands and concepts are all neatly brought together by the end. But it could be – it ought to be – so much better, and would have been with a firmer editorial hand. As it is, too many bad and overworked gags stop the story from really blowing our brains.

Retromancer by Robert Rankin (Gollancz, 2009)
Reviewed by James Bacon

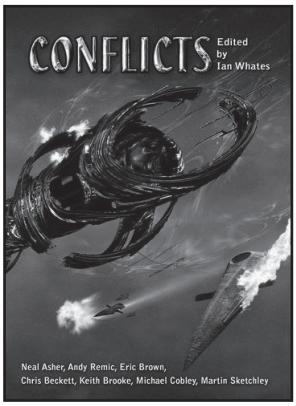
Robert Rankin has the ability to capture certain aspects of humanity that other authors fail to, whilst at the same time making you guffaw out loud to some slightly rude but hilarious joke.

I really felt for our protagonist, poor, simple Rizla, as he woke up in a very different and disconcerting Brentford. Many things have occurred in this borough which Rankin has mythically made his own but the oppression and changes that a Nazi invasion of Britain brings, as portrayed decades after defeat, are some of the most extreme. It is the Sixties and, with surprising ease, people have just gotten on with life, regardless, and yet how amusingly alien it is to have jack booted storm troopers patrolling the streets, with horrendous marching music coming from the radio, swastika bunting and, wurst of all, pale white sausages in the cafe. My Lords.

Retromancer follows a similar path to *The Brightonomicon* (2005), Rankin's previous instalment in the nine book *Brentford Trilogy* series. Once again, our 'heroes' are the incongruous Rizla and the imperturbable Hugo Rune. They need to travel considerably more than last time, including through time, and again they have twelve distinct dilemmas to deal with. On this adventure, as well as the truly evil Count Otto Black, they are up against men in trench coats with lugers, hellhounds from Mons and Evil Nazi Robots, not to mention a mile-long zeppelin powered by the spirit of Wotan, atomic weapons and death rays. At stake is the future of both Britain and real breakfasts.

As with his other Brentford books, it is outstandingly brilliant in its own right, and Rankin again manages to pull off revisiting the same characters and similar pace and structure of plot. I thought some of the descriptions of war time Brentford, an era our adventurers travel to, were particularly apt and insightful. It's this content, the magical hilarity, Rune's fresh indignations, Rizla's latest embarrassments and adventures and, of course, those jokes – the gags, the footnotes, the continual play on continuity and language – that make this book stand on its own legs. For example, when the question of whether a dog or a good woman is man's best friend, Hugo Rune has the insight as to how to find out: "Lock both your wife and your dog in the boot of your car for an hour. Then open up the boot and see which one is the most pleased to see you." Jesus, I'm even laughing as I write this.

Until I contemplate the ending, that is. For all the wonderful science fictional ideas and jokes, it is the deeper meanings and significance that may fly past in the moments of humour Rankin slips in that I most value. The ending is just such an example of fine and poignant writing, as the partnership comes to an end and we are offered the chance to reflect upon the importance of friendship and the comradeship that can exist between adventuring men. A touching end to an excellent book and I hope that, as with *The Brightonomicon*, it will soon be adapted into a BBC radio play.



Conflicts, edited by Ian Whates (NewCon Press, 2010)
Reviewed by Ben Jeapes

Conflicts is a themed collection of thirteen short stories. It is also unashamedly a book with a spaceship on the cover. Editor Ian Whates states the aim in his introduction: "brazenly, almost *defiantly* Science Fiction, not subtly, whimsically or deceptively so; the sort of book where you can smell the sweat and the engine oil, as muscle-bound marines heft huge death-dealing guns in the face of impossible odds ..." In other words, it is meant to be a collection of the kind of stories that got many of us into SF in the first place and it succeeds in spades. It satisfies on a deeper level too, however, because Whates has ordered the stories not only to show how we got into SF but also to map our subsequent development. As he admits later on: "there *is* subtlety ..."

Before considering the stories themselves, it has to be said that a variable degree of copy editing can be discerned. Most of the stories don't need much but typos leap off almost every page from Andy Remic's contribution. It is doubly depressing because this is the first story of the collection and gives the reader a sinking feeling for what might follow. Calling it 'Psi.Copath' and putting 'Psy. Copath' in the running header can be laid squarely at the feet of the publisher; however, 'court marshal' (ouch) is presumably all the author's work. Thankfully none of the others suffer nearly as badly but we are forced to wonder: do all these stories essentially appear as the authors supplied them? And did no one notice?

With that out of the way...

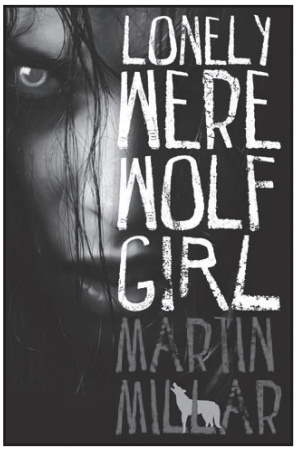
There are no overt lines of demarcation but the collection breaks down into three distinct phases. Part 1: the splody spaceships. Part 2: stories for readers whose tastes have broadened out – closer to home in time and space, more reflective, dealing with the human condition. Part 3: a gradual increase in intensity and scope until we're back in deep space and deep time again – because deep down we still want the exploding spaceships, don't we? Thus the collection kicks off with a quartet of tales from Andy Remic, Michael Cobley, Keith Brooke and Neal Asher that are all high space opera of the grandest kind: WMDs on a planetary scale; futuristic, arcane societies; and the requisite muscle-bound marines hefting huge death-dealing guns. However, look beyond the effects and you also get varying degrees of actual characterisation and reasons to care about the outcomes. Cobley ('The Maker's Mark') and Brooke ('Sussed') do it best as each deals with sympathetic, even likable low-lives who are each making good in their own ways. The soldiers of Remic's 'Psi:Copath' start by seeming to be pure *Aliens*-type cannon fodder but it becomes clear that for all their faults they are actually professionals and very good at their jobs. Their mission to rescue an imperial galactic princess sounds like it has all the SFnal depth of *Star Wars* but the revelation of the princess's actual predicament is a clever, pure science fictional development involving artificial intelligence implemented in a manner that this reader didn't see coming. By contrast, Asher's 'The Cuisinart Effect' maximises the action-to-plot ratio with pure, pointless videogame violence: an interesting set-up implying trans-dimensional travel to other realities turns into high-tech soldiers being massacred by dinosaurs, and the sole survivor only makes it by luck. Meh.

The book's quieter middle movement kicks off unexpectedly with Roseanne Rabinowitz's 'Harmony In My Head'. From Asher's soldier-munching dinosaurs we suddenly get a poignant story of loss and missed opportunity set much closer to home, in a café in London on 7 July 2005. This is immediately followed by Chris Becket's 'Our Land', in which the Celtic nations displaced 2000 years ago return to reclaim the British Isles. It is tempting to dismiss this one as just *too* implausible – what fool would let this situation arise? – but then you remember that with a quick find-and-replace of names it exactly describes the present day situation of two adjoining nations at the far end of the Mediterranean. With that mental filter in place it suddenly becomes a powerful tale of seething injustice, saying and telling us everything that needs to be said and known about the real-world situation.

Martin McGrath's 'Proper Little Soldier' deals with that most implausible of Earth-based scenarios, the alien invasion. (Why would invading Earth ever be the most resource-efficient course of action for an alien race to take? We just have to assume they had their reasons.) Against a background of totally trashed civilisation and alien life forms playing with us for sport, McGrath actually manages to find an optimistic note to end on.

And then we're back into large-scale future space again. Una McCormack's 'War Without End' shows the difficulty of establishing exactly what is and isn't a war crime, especially when you can't decide who the victor was either. Eric Brown's 'Dissimulation Procedure' works well but has no particular payoff – it's a typical Eric Brown story of burnt-out, cynical independent space trader meets free-spirited young thing on a pastoral world with fantastic, album-cover views.

The final story – Martin Sketchley's 'Songbirds' – is unexpected as it takes us back to the present day and a typical English schoolgirl with typical girl issues of friends, homework and Facebook. Even more unexpected is that it soon becomes clear this is *another* alien invasion story. Isn't having two of these in one book really pushing your luck? The difference is that while both involve the total rout of humanity and destruction of everything we know and love, there is no optimistic ending in 'Songbirds' at all. It does however take the book full circle back to where it started as that suburban little girl's adventures expand quite plausibly into the unknown future and battles on far-off planets. The range that the story covers encapsulates the amazing thing about SF: that it can be set next door in the present day or it can be set amongst fleets of spaceships dropping genetically engineered troops on an alien world and *it's all equally SF*. That is what makes it such an astonishing genre and it is why this is the perfect closing story for an already impressive collection.



Lonely Werewolf Girl by Martin Millar (Piatkus, 2009) Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

I wasn't quite sure what to make of *Lonely Werewolf Girl* when I started reading. Unusually for "urban fantasy", the style is ironic and detached. Once I had got used to it though, I enjoyed the book hugely. The style doesn't mean that we don't care for the characters but we are conscious that the author is making us no promises about a happy ending for all.

Kalix is a teenage werewolf and she's in trouble: bulimic, depressed, addicted to laudanum and on the run from her Scottish family who are trying to kill her. Most of them. The others just want to lock her up for her own good. Kalix's native ferocity as a werewolf has helped her survive on the London streets but she's been attacked by agents of her brother and is dying when she is rescued by a pair of well-meaning students, Daniel and Moonglow, who persuade the Fire Queen Malveria (a friend of Kalix's fashion designer sister Thrix) to heal her. Kalix isn't sure she wants to be rescued, but reluctantly moves into Daniel and Moonglow's spare room, enticed by the lure of Daniel's Runaways CDs and (strictly rationed) episodes of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. Werewolf politics get tangled with Malveria's desire to outshine her hated rival Kabachetka in the fashion stakes and Kalix's cousin's attempts to arrange a comeback gig for their party girl werewolf cousins. The plot shouldn't be taken too seriously though, it's simply a rather ramshackle stage on which the characters display their various absurdities.

It's difficult to pin down exactly where the book's charms lie. Partly it's the gyrations of the characters in their search for power, true love, and fashion supremacy. Partly it's the lightness of the writing; there is plenty of snappy dialogue which is nicely judged to the characters and it's written in a lot of short scenes that move the action along fast. *Lonely Werewolf Girl* first came out in 2007 and I had been meaning to read it for a while, but kept putting it off as I haven't got on that well with Millar before. I had read *The Good Fairies of New York* but found it just too frivolous and inconsequential. The werewolf in-fighting, however, gave this book a darker edge that made it much more involving. There's a lot of silliness but the silliness is balanced by the knowledge that it could all tip over very easily into tragedy and we care about the characters enough that we really want that not to happen.

The ending is a little unsatisfactory, in that while some plot threads are (temporarily) resolved others are left hanging. Nevertheless by the end Kalix has made some steps towards becoming a better functioning werewolf, and in particular has some friends. I understand that there is to be a sequel later this year so I guess I'll just have to contain my impatience to read more until then.

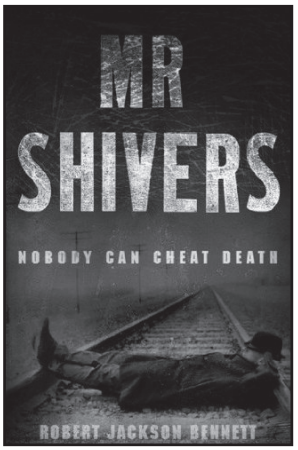
The Midnight Mayor by Kate Griffen (Orbit, 2010) Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Matthew Swift is a sorcerer. An urban Twenty First Century sorcerer, who calls down electricity rather than fire on his enemies and who draws a magic circle with a can of spray paint rather than salt. He is also the blue electric angels who are the thoughts and feelings that human beings have poured into the phone lines and sooner or later had to live (how he became this entity or entities having been related in Kate Griffin's previous novel, *The Madness of Angels)*.

On the first page of *The Midnight Mayor,* Matthew wakes up to find himself lying on the pavement in the rain, wounded and in pain. Immediately the reader is plunged into the mystery of how and why he got there. Attacked by spectres and sought after by the "true" Aldermen who are the protectors of London, Matthew discovers that the city itself is threatened with destruction. The supernatural defences that have warded it for centuries are falling. The ravens in the Tower of London have died, the London Wall has been desecrated with graffiti and the Stone of London destroyed. He is also told by the Aldermen that the legendary Midnight Mayor, whose responsibility is it to guard the city, has been murdered. And Matthew is his heir.

Seeking to avert the catastrophe threatening the capital, Matthew crosses and re-crosses London and it is in the wonderful evocation of the different areas of the city that this book starts to come into its own. Here is the London of the underground and night buses, of seedy hotels and council estates and "the time space vortex" that is the walkways of the Barbican. Here also is the London of cafes and theatres and "bright lights that drove away shadows and imagination." Blended seamlessly with the atmospheric yet cartographically accurate descriptions of Matthew's travels – a tourist would find them useful – is a London of myth and legend. Not only traditional legends such as the dragons who guard the City but other, newer legends that take account of how magic itself has evolved and adapted to contemporary urban life.

From the beginning of the novel when the spectres who attack Matthew appear as hoodies and he traps them with a cigarette in a beer bottle sealed with sellotape, it is clear that this book is refreshingly original. It is not without humour, such as is revealed when a binding spell takes the form of an Asbo rather than a Latin chant or when Matthew is offered a cup of PG Tips from a witch's cauldron, but it also manages to convey the horror that Matthew experiences when he is threatened. The image of a very modern and very ghastly monster emerging from a drain is the stuff of nightmare. Above all, it is the author's re-interpretation of older ideas, re-moulding them into new legends that capture the zeitgeist of Twenty First Century London, that makes this novel an outstanding urban fantasy.



Mr Shivers by Robert Jackson Bennett (Orbit, 2010)
Reviewed by Mark Connorton

This debut novel is reminiscent of both Cormac McCarthy and Steven King with its minimalist prose, frequent brutality and horror-tinged Americana. It tells the story of Marcus Connelly, who leaves his home and wife to hunt down the title character, a hideously scarred hobo who murdered his daughter. During his quest, Connelly meets others who are also hunting the tramp in revenge for the deaths of their loved ones, and soon begins to suspect that Mr Shivers is not entirely human.

The novel is set in the dustbowl during the Great Depression and the devastated landscape of dust storms, dying crops and empty towns provides an evocative and suitably apocalyptic setting for the action. The description of hobo life – jumping trains, brutal railway guards and encounters with vagrants in the lawless Hoover Camps – is also well done. The writing style aims to be laconic and stripped-down but is rather variable in quality with moments of both clumsiness and excellence. Connelly is your typical strong silent type and the characterisation of the rest of the cast is somewhat perfunctory. At one point, he is travelling in a large group and there aren't quite enough personalities to go round to make all the characters memorable.

As you're reading this review in a BSFA publication, it's not giving much away to reveal that the supernatural rumours surrounding Mr Shivers turn out to be true and Connelly soon finds himself on a mythic quest. As is often the case in books like this, the author's attempts to aim for 'archetypal' sometimes land closer to 'stereotypical' and some parts are a bit predictable and hackneyed. I couldn't help rolling my eyes when Connelly attends a tarot reading where the Death card is revealed with great drama and later on when he meets some wise old black women with mystical powers of exposition.

There isn't much that is groundbreaking or amazing about the book but it is a good read, with a strong start and enough narrative drive to make me finish it in nearly one sitting. There's enough variety along Connelly's journey to keep it interesting but towards the end the author makes a couple of choices that somewhat derail the narrative. Firstly, he moves the action from the Dustbowl to a very generic mountain region thus robbing the book of one of its main strengths: its atmospheric setting. Secondly, when I discovered Mr Shivers' supernatural nature, my reaction was mainly bafflement as to what a character based on Roman mythology was doing in the southwest of the USA and in a novel that seemed so determined to construct an American mythology. By the time these problems arose, however, I was on the home straight and more than happy to overlook them in my rush to reach the climax, which did succeed in reaching the mythic resonance that the author was aiming for.

Neverland by Douglas Clegg (Vanguard, 2010)
Reviewed by A.P. Canavan

For as long as Beauregard Jackson can remember, his family has vacationed in his grandmother's run-down Victorian house on Gull Island, off the Georgia coast. This particular annual pilgrimage, to spend time with the extended family, seemingly begins as normal but soon descends into horrific chaos, as family secrets and supernatural agency combine to threaten them all.

Neverland is a story told from Beau's perspective. While the adults drink and bicker, Beau and his elder twin sisters become enmeshed in the make-believe games of their cousin, Sumter. Their clubhouse is a near derelict old shed which Sumter christens Neverland and the first rule of Neverland is "No Grown-ups". It is the children's secret place where they are in control. It is their world, their dream, their nightmare. As their innocent games become more macabre and sinister, the children unwittingly uncover the dark mystery of the family's past and unleash a supernatural reckoning on the island. This holiday marks the moment that Beau's innocence is lost and his childhood ends.

Douglas Clegg's *Neverland*, a reissue of one of his earliest novels, strips away the nostalgia of childhood memory to create a chilling tale of twisted innocence and the complicated reality of family histories. Through Sumter's games, Clegg evokes the underlying darkness of J.M. Barrie's make-believe world in *Peter Pan* and combines it with the modern techniques of the Southern Gothic. Clegg recreates the casual cruelty of children's games and their appetite for the forbidden and dangerous by allowing their imaginings to intrude into the real world and examining the repercussions of such make-believe.

The strength of this novel lies in the resonance created by Beau's matter-of-fact account with aspects of the reader's own experience. The family tensions and squabbles, the bickering amongst the children and the refuge of a secret place made magical in a child's imagination strike a chord within the reader's mind, imbuing the story with a veracity and authenticity that cannot be denied. This very reality draws the reader deeper into the story and makes the events more compelling and frightening. The escalation of Sumter's macabre obsessions becomes that much easier to believe because Clegg has firmly rooted the story in the reader's own childhood memories and continues to utilise Beau's childlike perspective.

While the first half of the book focuses on the family, the second half of the narrative becomes increasingly involved with the supernatural elements of the story. This creates a satisfying and suitably paranormal conclusion but at the same time seems to retread the familiar territory of a terrible evil intruding into real space. Despite the supernatural elements being deftly tied to the family's past, they move the story from the compelling horror of the family to more traditional fare. The chilling supernatural aspects of *Neverland* will please readers of Gothic horror, while the disturbing portrayal of ordinary family life will engage readers of more mainstream fiction. As coming-of-age stories go, this has to be one of the darkest and one of the best. Childhood has never been so frightening.

Chronic City by Jonathan Lethem (Faber & Faber, 2009)
Reviewed by Dan Hartland

"Behind the illusion there is nothing," one character insists a short way into Jonathan Lethem's new paranoid fantasy, *Chronic City*. It is a thought which haunts the rest of the book, echoing in New York's most vacuous spaces (socialite soirees, regenerated neighbourhoods, a pothead's apartment), encouraging the reader to question the reality of everything they are told.

Lethem recently edited the Library of America's collected novels of Philip K Dick. Dick's influence on *Chronic City* is obvious but the novel's science fictional elements – the alternate world in which it appears to be set, the persistent grey fog that hangs over New York, a huge tiger which intermittently emerges from nowhere to wreak architectural havoc – are more metaphorical than the genre usually allows. The world of *Chronic City* is, after all, less an alternative reality than a satirical one: though it has a Mayor Armitage rather than a Mayor Bloomberg and Gnuppets rather than Muppets, its denizens also have such unlikely names – our narrator is one Chase Insteadman – that Lethem's Swiftian purpose becomes rapidly clear. He writes a New York in which the Times publishes a 'War Free' edition for squeamish readers and a concept artist named Laird Noteless fashions almost bottomless chasms in run-down areas of town. In our own world, the American media is routinely free of stories from the front, whilst Doris Salcedo's 'Shibboleth' has been exhibited in the Tate Modern. The satirical intent of the novel trumps its speculative content at every turn.

Chronic City, for all its pot-fuelled mistiness, is a sharp-eyed vision of an information age in which almost all the data is irrelevant. "What did anything in the city have to do with what was real?" the novel's counter-cultural critic, Perkus Tooth, demands. Insteadman is a former child actor living off residuals and a renewed fame occasioned by the fate of his astronaut wife, trapped in orbit on a space station blockaded by a Chinese minefield. He is, however, betraying the many who believe him to be a man of fortitude and fidelity, carrying on with a mysterious ghostwriter named Oona Laszlo. The fourth member of Lethem's central quartet, Richard Abneg, encourages Perkus in his assiduous pursuit of precious items known as chaldrons, which are in fact unique artefacts of value and reality only within the popular MMOPRG, Yet Another World.

Perkus comes to believe that there is a grand conspiracy afoot, in which the city's inhabitants are encouraged to pay attention to anything – celebrities, narcotics, the tiger – rather than the very nature of the lives they lead, which he believes to be simulated. But this concept, the basis of many a common genre novel, is kept almost as background to a more interior examination of authenticity and reality. *Chronic City* is a novel which, in conversations between its principals, makes explicit any clever-clever subtext, genre or mode you might wish to apply to it. It is very much more than the sum of its confounding, confused and contradictory parts.

Sunshine State by James Miller (Little, Brown, 2010)
Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont

In what would come to be seen as one of the most influential pieces of criticism ever produced, the Nigerian author and critic Chinua Achebe accused Joseph Conrad of being a "bloody racist" whose *Heart of Darkness* (1899) reduced the entire continent of Africa to the role of props in the break-up of one petty European mind. While you may disagree with this assessment, you can see his point. But what if it was not colonial Africa that was serving as a prop but a near-future America?

This is the question asked by James Miller, who sets his second novel in just such an America. An America battered by apocalyptic storms and torn asunder by political tensions that have given birth to an authoritarian theocracy in the North and a lawless, swampy, psychotropic no-man's-land to the South. Into this devastated landscape comes a British spy sent to kill his Kurtz-like brother-in-law at the end of a Conradian journey into madness that arguably owes less to the original novella than it does to such cinematic adaptations as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969).

Sunshine State is a book with many interesting elements to it, though none completely satisfy. Indeed, where Conrad's psychological implosion was vague and amorphous, Miller brings specificity by tying his protagonist's break-down not only to his role in fighting the Bush regime's imperial wars but also to the myriad daddy issues underlying his relationship with his brother in law.

The madness is driven home by such stylistic tics as transcriptions from psychological evaluations, typographical changes and the use of run-on sentences that sometimes last for pages at a time. However, while Miller displays a designer's eye for typographical stylisation, his prose frequently lets him down as the occasional lovely phrase and image are lost amidst a swamp of tired images and symbols that makes *Sunshine State* feel oddly insubstantial.

The underlying problem is a disappointing lack of political and psychological focus. For all of Miller's digging into his character's childhood and relationships, his problems never feel anything other than generic. A spy who lost his father and whose desire for an authority figure lead him into the embrace of the brutal security services. Ho hum. A former spy whose quest for freedom has lead him to be embraced by America's outlaws, outcasts and outdoorsmen. Yawn. These themes interweave but they are ultimately too familiar to captivate, much like the book's depiction of America as a country poised on the edge of theocracy – a clapped out liberal wet dream (familiar to readers of Richard Morgan and Stephen Baxter) no less strident and naive than those of right-wingers who screech about 'Londonistan' whilst decrying multiculturalism.

Miller is an ambitious writer but, for now, his ideas and skill are not up to the task his muse has set him. Maybe next time.

Other Forms of SF

The Last Pixel Show by Graham Andrews (New Theatre Publications, 2010), *Mistaking the Nature of the Posthuman* by Steve Sneyd (Hilltop Press, 2008) and *Time Grows Thin* by Lilith Lorraine (Hilltop Press, 2009)

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

These days, the forms of SF and fantasy most people encounter will be fiction, film and television. However, I have been recently reminded that it also exists in other forms, though they are often far less visible. I wondered why this might be. Is it that some narrative forms are better suited to SF than others? Is it actually possible to create science fiction poetry or drama, to take two examples?

In February 2010, on the *Guardian*'s Theatre blog, Natasha Tripney posed a similar question, asking: "Shouldn't there be more sci-fi on stage?"[1] Tripney speculated that contemporary playwrights were afraid of looking silly if they did try to bring science fiction into the theatre: "playwrights who choose to stray into sci-fi territory often do so almost apologetically – creating plausible near futures, recognisable worlds that differ from ours in only minor details." This seems hardly surprising, not least because SF on film has undoubtedly raised expectations about how SF drama should look. Tripney herself noted that "what might be acceptable on screen and paper can look absurd on stage". I think it's telling that the book-to-theatre adaptations she cites – Blind Summit's version of *1984* and Poul Ruders's opera of *The Handmaid's Tale* – adhere to the "recognisable world" model. Perhaps the closest the stage can get to "proper" science fiction is through the portrayal of androids or robots; Tripney mentions Alan Ayckbourn's *Comic Potential* and Tamsin Oglesby's recent *Really Old, Like Forty Five*, and we should also recall Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* Reading the comments on the post, it seems that for many people, science fiction in the theatre means spectacle or something deeply outré, preferably both. Ken Campbell's huge productions of *Illuminatus!* and *The Warp* from the 1970s were invoked again, the implication being that science fiction theatre also means weird and unwieldy performances, something that is clearly *not* going to suit a West End theatre audience.

If we have a particular idea of how science fiction *should* look, it becomes too easy to miss stage productions that aren't obviously presented as SF. I'd argue that J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* – revived by Stephen Daltry at the National Theatre in 1992 to great acclaim – is as much science fiction as it is social critique. Priestley was interested in J.W. Dunne's theory of time and this is reflected in all the Time Plays, *An Inspector Calls* among them. I don't doubt that a sophisticated SF reader would surely appreciate Priestley's arguments. More recently, the National Theatre has returned to Priestley with a well-received production of *Time and the Conways*, though his fascination with time is, in this play, less immediately obvious and it inclines more towards drawing-room drama. However, T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*, produced at the Donmar Warehouse last year, played with ideas of time and identity in ways that seemed entirely familiar to me as an SF reader.

However, to return to Tripney's blog post, a number of comments suggest that the real SF theatre action arises in smaller, regional venues and in places where – and it seems odd to say this – the suspension of disbelief becomes a more self-conscious exercise. One commenter talked about "leaving room for the audience/reader to do some of the imaginative work for themselves", which I had naively supposed was what theatre was actually about. This suggests that there is a received idea of what a stage production ought to be like. Without an elaborate West End-style set, how can one put on a play set on an alien planet? If one understands that one is in a theatre with a limited budget for sets and so on, it becomes suddenly possible. Anecdotal evidence suggests that all over Britain small theatre companies are putting on all kinds of adventurous productions that most of us will never ever see because of their inevitably limited outreach. I wonder what we are missing.

Which leads me to the play script for *The Last Pixel Show* by Graham Andrews. Produced by New Theatre Publications, a publishing house owned by the Playwrights' Cooperative, it is a one-act drama clearly aimed at a small (presumably amateur) theatrical company. The plot revolves around a scientist who has run into a problem with his computer which has been subjected to a power surge from a supernova and is now behaving oddly. The scientist suspects that this is evidence of artificial intelligence having achieved autonomy. Unfortunately, no one will listen to him, and the bulk of the drama revolves around a set of almost incomprehensible interactions between various people who seek first to understand and then dismiss his claims.

Why, one might ask, are the characters so desperate to reject the notion of the existence of an autonomous artificial intelligence? It is clearly not out of fear, nor out of scientific ignorance. Despite its curious 1970s feel in terms of character portrayals and gender attitudes, this is a world where such things as holographic communication are normal, to the point of being annoying when they don't function properly. However, by the same token, there is a lot of curiously unnecessary explanation of computers and how they work, couched in language that once again takes us back to the 1970s. In the end, I feel the science-fictional element of this playlet is included for rather ham-fisted comic effect rather than as a contribution to the genre.

Two recent publications from Hilltop Press – *Mistaking the Nature of the Posthuman* by Steve Sneyd (described by Ian McMillan as "the best science-fiction poet in the land") and *Time Grows Thin*, a collection of the work of Lilith Lorraine, compiled by Sneyd –reflect the beginnings and current state of SF poetry, and raise similar questions. There is no way of knowing how many science fiction poets there are in the world, but clearly enough exist to sustain the Science Fiction Poetry Association which gives two annual Rhysling Awards (named for the blind poet Rhysling in Heinlein's "The Green Hills of Earth"). Many well-known names are featured among the winners but how many of them are known primarily as poets? Conversely, how much does science fiction poetry impinge on the consciousness of the average science fiction reader, let alone those outside the genre? In the same way that I wonder whether theatre can be a

1. www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2010/feb/11/theatre-science-fiction

successful medium for science fiction, I question whether poetry and science fiction are suited to one another.

There is a long history of the fantastic in poetry, stretching as far back as *Beowulf*. My favourite medieval poem is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; it is clearly a favourite of a lot of present-day poets, with Simon Armitage the latest to recast it in modern English. Coleridge had more than a passing taste for the fantastic ("Christabel", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" are three that spring to mind). Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" and Browning's "Childe Rolande to the Dark Tower Came" shouldn't be overlooked, while across the Atlantic, Edgar Allan Poe was as much poet as short-story writer. In modern times, perhaps the nearest we come to something science fictional is the Martian poetry movement, active in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in which poets – most notably Craig Raine – sought to defamiliarise the familiar by describing ordinary things as though they were being seen by a Martian. I doubt whether it was science fiction in the strict sense of the term but it chimed with the desire to unsettle the perceptions that seemed to emerge in post-New Wave SF. And more importantly, it was visible and discussed outside the genre.

Although Lilith Lorraine was at one time well-known among genre readers, her work was probably not that visible to outsiders and even within the genre she had been forgotten until Steve Sneyd began to promote her work. A good half of *Time Grows Thin* is taken up with the results of his biographical research and Lorraine's story is undoubtedly fascinating. Lilith Lorraine is the pen name of Mary Maud Dunn Wright who was a newspaper reporter and radio announcer as well as an early SF fan and a writer who produced science fiction poetry during the first half of the Twentieth Century. However, while we should rightly honour Lorraine as a pioneer, I am not convinced that her poetry has worn that well in the last sixty years. It is difficult to get any sense of how her work was originally received, though Sneyd suggests that her work was much admired. Encountered as individual poems in magazines, I can see that her poems may well have seemed strange and exotic. Read now as a collection, it is difficult to avoid noticing a sense of sameness about them. She does not seem to have experimented with form to any significant degree and such structural variation as there is seems to come about as much by accident as by intent. She favoured traditional rhyme schemes wherever possible; the science-fictional content emerges from her choice of image and vocabulary. The poems themselves rely heavily on a post-apocalyptic nostalgia for a long-dead past, frequented by wise and ascetic aliens, not unlike Ray Bradbury's Martians. The mood is almost invariably dark while the brooding intensity of so many of the poems now seems rather angsty and adolescent.

Perhaps the biggest problem is that while Lorraine seems to be constructing some sort of internal narrative history – referring to named characters and so forth – it is impossible to get a broader sense of her universe. She saw her work as "inspiring the heroes who will face the last frontier. Let us only hope that they will lead an ape shambling into the Pleiades armed only with the club of the atom, but one who is more than man, armed with divinity and glorified with humanity", which positions her among the writers who saw the potential of science fiction to promote an expansionist agenda in space, and yet this sits oddly with the sense of disappointment in so much of her writing. I do think Sneyd has done an important piece of work in bringing together these poems; what I would like now is to see her work compared with that of other writers working in the same period, to see if any useful connections might be made.

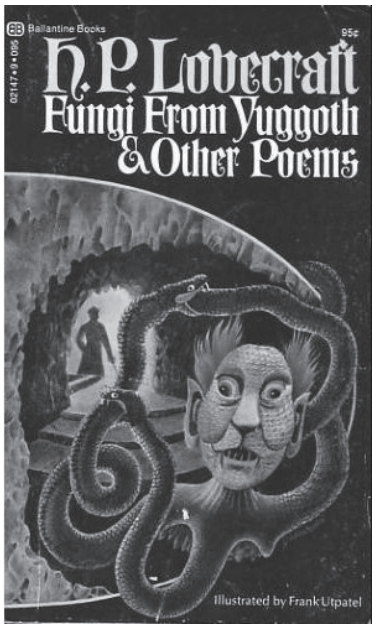
Looking at Sneyd's own collection of poems, *Mistaking the Nature of the Posthuman*, I return to the question of what makes an SF poem. Sneyd is clearly much more adventurous in his writing, in terms of form, structure, language and even punctuation. His choice of subject is also much more varied than Lorraine's and his poems are littered with references to the work of earlier poets. Sneyd's science fiction is certainly not tinged with nostalgia for something that hasn't happened yet but faces the future squarely and pragmatically. Indeed, his subjects and images are often unexpectedly mundane, reflecting the fact that science fiction is now very much part of everyday life. And yet, on occasion I could not help thinking there was something a little too self-consciously science-fictional about individual poems, as though he were trying slightly too hard to make the point.

I doubt SF poetry will achieve a wider currency in the immediate future. There is a gap, not easily bridged even among readers who are familiar with a wide range of SF, between a genre that is fiercely narrative and a form that seems better suited to contemplation than to action. The broader cultural awareness of science fiction is still focused on a limited range of tropes and images drawn mainly from cinema and TV and it is difficult to see how SF poetry for the general reader can work easily once one moves beyond the hackneyed cliché. This suggests that SF poetry and SF drama are unlikely to ever to enjoy the same popularity as novels or films, and that there will not be a clear body of poetic or dramatic works that can be pointed to as examples of SF. Conversely, this suggests that SF poetry and drama can exploit an element of surprise in ways that novels and films no longer can, and that they will always turn up in unexpected places, challenging people's perceptions.

FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

BY ANDY SAWYER

Fungi From Yuggoth and other Poems



H. P. Lovecraft's poetry rarely gets the same attention as his short stories, and possibly for good reason. While his stories at their best are powerful fusions of the weird/supernatural and the rationalist/scientifictional, and his immense body of letters show fascinating insight into his fiction and the mind that created it, Lovecraft's verse frequently struggles to rise above the level of pastiche. The mock-Georgian tone in his letters suggests a man who wearily (but sometimes amusingly) charts his disillusion with the early twentieth century. The same tone in his poetry often betrays his influences in poets such as Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Gray, Alexander Pope, and Edgar Allan Poe. Lovecraft's diction seems quaint at best and frequently forced and wooden, his verse-forms and rhyme-schemes old-fashioned, and his subject-matter (always excepting his more deliberate satires, when his use of Augustinian models can be very funny indeed) weakened by the second-hand pastoral he imitates from his favourite sources. Part of this is simply because Lovecraft's self-conscious archaism meant that *quite naturally* he would dislike modern poetry. Self-revelation and free verse in the T. S. Eliot mould was anathema to him.

But part of it is that Lovecraft was not a very good poet. No poet after the sixteenth century who uses the word "fain" *and seems to mean it* is worthy of the name …

However, there is a difference between "not very good" and "bad", and *Fungi From Yuggoth* (the SF Foundation's copy is the 1971 Ballantine Books paperback, formerly titled *Collected Poems*) suggests that Lovecraft is by no means a bad poet.

Certainly, August Derleth, introducing the collection, suggests that the majority of Lovecraft's verse really is "painfully dull", and even in this selection there are pieces which warrant the blue pencil. However, there are suggestions of ambition and flashes of skill, and given that Lovecraft's pastoral models are actually much more subtle than modern readers give them credit for, I think that Lovecraft himself ought to be at least attempted as a poet, in order that his undeniable gifts can be appreciated. If you read him sympathetically, two very strong pieces of evidence suggest that you *can* get pleasure out of reading him.

When he has his tongue in his cheek, as in "To a Youth" (for his young friend Alfred Galpin", whose abilities as a student Lovecraft respected and admired) the pastoral references to "the green Thessalian bay", the Muses and the Dryads, are clichés he knows are clichés and he is quite clearly teasing. In "My Favourite Character", he is where we all stand – undecided – whenever someone asks about our favourite reading. Some go for the classics, others "such spic'd themes as lurk behind lock'd portals", others stick to their childhood reading and some go for the "shapeless" moderns. But he – well rather than make up his mind, he decides to vote for himself!

Some, at least, of Lovecraft's occasional verse is witty and amusing.

His second strength is when he attempts to write "weird" verse. "Nemesis" ("Through the ghoul-guarded gateways of slumber,/ Past the wan-mooned abysses of night") is perhaps too reminiscent of Poe's ballad "Ullalume" ("It was down by the dank tarn of Auber/In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir"). But "The Ancient Track", which Lovecraft's biographer S. T. Joshi regards as his most successful poem, while also using Poe-esque rhythms (those of Alone" and "The Sleeper"), is relatively restrained and focuses upon one of Lovecraft's most unsettling themes: the narrator who knows that his curiosity will bring him to doom but who cannot prevent himself from following the path. "Psychopompos" is a long narrative poem in rhyming couplets which gives us a medieval werewolf tale that may have struggled to work successfully in prose form but which is convincingly weird as verse. And, of course, there is the "Fungi From Yuggoth" sonnet sequence itself.

This sequence of 36 sonnets is like another, more celebrated sonnet-cycle only, perhaps, in that seeing it as a unified work may not be correct. Certainly, Joshi argues that there is no actual plot to be found in "Fungi". The first three sonnets certainly tell a story of the narrator's theft of a book and how, thinking himself safe as he sits down to unlock its secrets, "The attic window shook", but the others seem to be condensed stories, exploring Lovecraft's "Mythos" territories of Arkham, Innsmouth, etc. and describing typically Lovecraftian figures like night-gaunts, Nyarlathotep, Azathoth (the positioning of the three sonnets which deal with these together suggest that someone, but not necessarily Lovecraft himself, thought that they belonged together thematically at least). Pointing out that some sonnets seem to rework ideas in previous stories and anticipate others, Joshi suggests that "Fungi" is "a sort of recapitulation of what he had written before and a presage of his subsequent work".

Furthermore, if we can read Shakespeare's sonnets as meditations both on aspects of his life (the "Dark Lady"/"Youth" linkages) and the poet's art, it's maybe not too far-fetched to consider the "Fungi" sequence as records of some of Lovecraft's nightmares and a kind of series of snapshots of the weird. The sonnet form, with its concluding couplet, lends itself well to the sudden appalled glimpse of the unimaginable which so many of Lovecraft's stories lead up to: a number of his friends and colleagues wrote sonnets and sonnet-sequences. "Yuggoth" is generally regarded as the (recently-relegated) planet Pluto, discovered in 1930 – Lovecraft himself greeted its discovery with amusement, claiming that Yuggoth had actually been found – but it is also, and more accurately, the chaotic realm from which springs the fruits (or in this case, *fungi*) of Lovecraft's mind. The "Fungi from Yuggoth" are a kind of equivalent of Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal".

This reading doesn't promote Lovecraft to the status of Shakespeare or Baudelaire, but it suggests (or at least, so I think) that the "Fungi" poems are essential to Lovecraft's work. They are evocations of the weird in which we can see Lovecraft's structural facility. The strictness of the sonnet form made Lovecraft focus upon language and rhythm, and in at least one poem (Sonnet XXX: "Background") we have a moving reminiscence giving us Lovecraft's strength and weakness as a writer. "I never can be tied, to raw, new things," he writes: the ancient buildings and landscapes of New England shape his dreams. "They cut the moment's thongs and leave me free/To stand alone before eternity". We can forgive much for that couplet.

FALLING FROM

Twenty-nine years after its first flight to orbit the space shuttle is being retired. At time of writing the final mission, by Discovery, is scheduled for September 2010 – after which the three surviving orbiters will be destined for the museums.

After the expensive heroics of the Apollo Moon-landing era the shuttle was supposed to be a space truck, its goal to make access to space safe and routine. It never worked out that way. Many missions were flown and the International Space Station got built, but the shuttle, probably always too ambitious technologically, never achieved its strategic objective of drastically reducing the costs of manned spaceflight. And some would argue that the flaws that doomed two shuttles (Challenger in 1986 and Columbia in 2003) were inherent in the compromises involved in its design at the inception of the programme forty years ago.

In February 1969, even before the first moon landing, Apollo was doomed to be scrapped. President Nixon appointed a Space Task Group, chaired by Vice President Spiro Agnew, to develop goals for the post-Apollo period. The programme envisaged was visionary, to lead to a 1980s Mars mission. The shuttle would be a reusable spaceplane, to replace the one-shot Apollo-Saturns which were seen as too expensive.

But in January 1970, a Harris poll reported that 56% of Americans believed the Moon programme was too costly. Nixon could not make an expansive space programme a priority. Eventually Nixon chose to approve only the shuttle, with the key objective of bringing down the costs of space transportation. In Agnew's plan the shuttle had been meant to be a ferry to support the orbital assembly of space stations and nuclear Mars rockets. Now it would be a space truck with nowhere to go.

The shuttle configuration as we know it today is a compromise, shaped by the tight fiscal constraints and agency in-fighting that followed Nixon's decision. At the beginning of the design process at the end of 1969, the base assumption was that the shuttle would be a two-stage, fully reusable system with both stages piloted; it would have looked like one aeroplane piggybacking on another. But the development costs were frightening. The idea of a flyback first stage was soon dropped, leaving a much smaller single-stage spaceplane with a smaller payload, and a throwaway propellant tank and strap-on solid-rocket boosters - cheaper to develop, but more expensive to fly.

Meanwhile the US Air Force exerted a lot of pressure on the design teams, for the spaceplane was supposed to have military applications, such as orbital surveillance missions. There were even proposals for the capture of enemy satellites and orbital bombing runs. The final compromise design was capable of lifting great weights into low earth orbits, but clumsy for anything else. And though no USAF flights have been flown since the Challenger disaster, the military flavour is obvious; the shuttle's low orbits are ideally suited to USAF missions.

Those early compromises had long-term consequences. From the beginning the astronauts were unhappy about riding solid rocket boosters which, once lit, can't be put out – and, unlike all previous American manned spacecraft, the shuttle had no system to allow the crew to escape in case of a launch mishap. It was a solid booster fault which doomed Challenger.

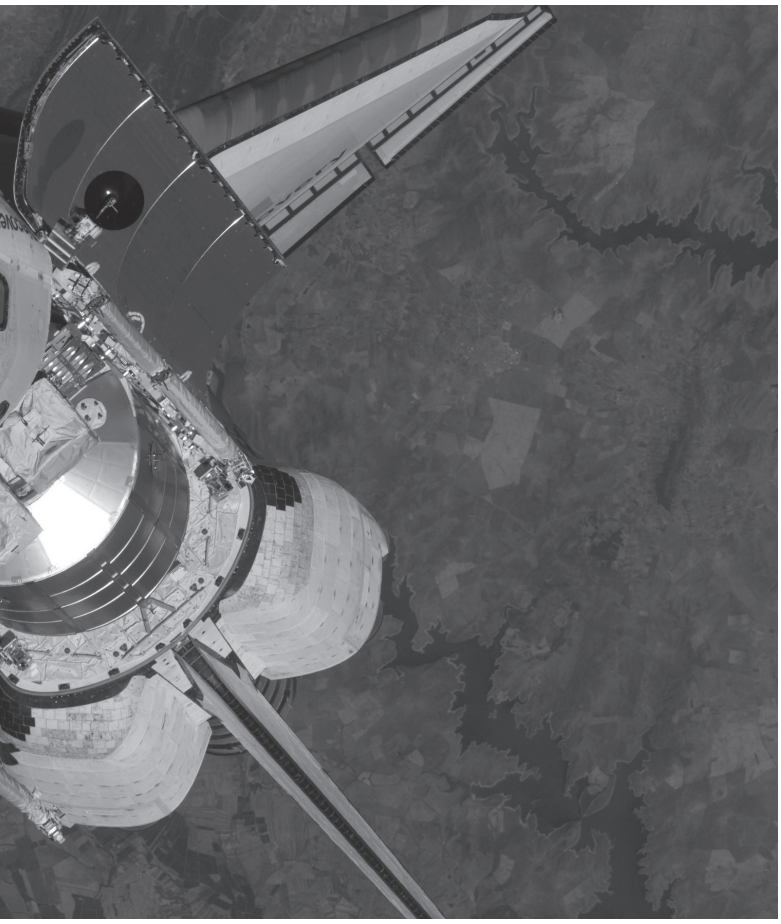
Columbia was destroyed by a complex sequence of faults relating to carrying a tank of cryogenic fuel strapped to the spaceplane's belly; falling ice damaged fragile heatshield tiles during the launch.

The shuttle as a space truck has never seemed glamorous, but it has inspired some fictional depictions. Some early portrayals accepted the designers' projections of routine fast-turnaround missions. In the film Starflight One (1983, directed by Jerry Jameson) the shuttle flies three rescue missions in 48 hours: 'Columbia has lift-off, after a record turnaround time of two hours!' In 'War Birds' (Interzone 126, 1997, and in Phase Space, 2002) I look at the way the shuttle programme was supposed to turn out, orbital bombing runs and all.

The shuttle has had some romantic uses. In Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven's Footfall (1985) shuttle orbiters are carried into space on an Orion nuclear rocket, and heroically hurled against the invading aliens. In Back to the Moon by Homer Hickman (1999) Columbia is hijacked and flown to the Moon – and in my own Titan (1997) I sent Discovery all the way to the moons of Saturn.

But many shuttle stories have been disaster-oriented; Titan opened with Columbia crashing. Moonraker (1979, directed by Lewis Gilbert), the eleventh James Bond movie, featured the shuttle being hijacked from atop its 747 carrier. Shuttle Down (1981) by G Harry Stine (as Lee Correy) shows an orbiter making an emergency landing on Easter Island – and in fact the shuttle did have a series of emergency landing sites around the world, including Easter Island. Clive Cussler's endearingly daft Dirk Pitt adventure Cyclops (1986) saw

ORBIT



Soviet agents attempt to force the shuttle Gettysburg to land on Cuba. A fictional crash of the Endeavour kick-started a new space push in a book by a real-life astronaut, Encounter with Tiber by Buzz Aldrin and John Barnes (1996). In Ignition (1997) by Kevin J Anderson and Doug Beason terrorists attack the Atlantis on the launch pad. Even an episode of The West Wing screened in 2000 featured a shuttle trapped in orbit.

In the real world, in the wake of the loss of Columbia the US manned space programme was rethought from the ground up. In January 2004 President Bush announced a new space exploration strategy which would depend on a new manned spacecraft system. The Ares/Constellation design would have had a manned 'capsule' mounted on top of an expendable rocket – just like the old Apollo/Saturn design paradigm, abandoned in 1969. But this plan, accused of being technologically backward, over budget and behind schedule, was cancelled by the Obama administration in early 2010. In the longer term there will be a new heavy-lift vehicle to carry humans to the asteroids and Mars, but for now this leaves US astronauts without a way to reach orbit once the shuttle is retired. The gamble is that NASA will be able to buy rides to orbit for its astronauts on commercial launch vehicles.

Maybe this is a wise decision. Space launch technology has hardly evolved since the 1940s; the shuttle was like a V2 with wings. We are overdue a revolution in this area. What we need is a true spaceplane capable of taking off unaided from a runway like a conventional aircraft, reaching orbit, and then gliding back to land – 'single stage to orbit'.

This is an old dream. Before the development of Project Apollo the US Air Force dreamt of spacecraft with wings. It flew the famous X-15 rocket plane, and it did extensive research into 'lifting bodies', capable of very high speed flight. Some of this research fed into the space shuttle programme, and even today the USAF is experimenting with a scaled-down spaceplane known as the X-37B.

Today there are technologies on the horizon that could be developed to achieve single-stage-to-orbit flight. The trick is not to carry all the oxidiser you need to burn your fuel on board the ship. A conventional jet airliner doesn't need to carry liquid oxygen; it draws in oxygen from the air. Similarly a 'scramjet' rocketplane would extract its own oxidiser from the Earth's atmosphere, achieving huge weight savings. A compromise design with some potential is Skylon, being developed by a company called Reaction Engines Ltd. based in Bristol. Skylon is a hydrogen-powered aircraft that would take off from a conventional runway, use atmospheric air to accelerate to five times the speed of sound at twenty-six kilometres altitude – and then switch to an internal liquid oxygen supply to complete the climb to orbit. As of February 2009 ESA (the European Space Agency) announced that it was funding a million-euro development of the engines, planning to produce a demonstration engine in 2011.

Flawed or not, to see a shuttle launched, as I did while researching my novel Voyage, was an unforgettable experience. One very early Florida morning in July 1995 my wife and I sat in the Cape Canaveral press stand, looking out at the launch gantries on the horizon some three miles east. Discovery sat on pad 39-A , the old Apollo launch gantry. In the mist the launch complexes looked like bits of an oil refinery, but we could see the gleaming white of the orbiter against the orange external fuel tank and the battleship grey of the gantry, like a von Braun 1950s vision of a spaceplane.

The launch was just 55 seconds late. At main engine start, a bright white light erupted at the base of the orbiter, and white smoke squirted out to either side. Then the stack lifted off the ground, startlingly quickly, trailing a column of white smoke that glowed orange within, as if on fire. The plume of yellow light from the solid rocket boosters was incredibly bright - almost dazzling, like sunlight, liquid light. After maybe ten seconds the shuttle threaded through an isolated thin cloud. The sound started to reach us after ten or fifteen seconds, a cracking, thundering sound from the sky. We all applauded; it was a very physical, immense event, and a very joyous moment, even for the battered old hacks covering this routine mission. The smoke column was still there, slowly dispersing, when we drove away.

By the time this is published, if all has gone to schedule Discovery has made the last shuttle flight of all. Flawed, too expensive, too risky it may have been, but over three decades the shuttle did carry hundreds of people into orbit, many of them far removed from the military-pilot paradigm of the Apollo days, and it managed to deliver some magical spectacles for space buffs like me.

When you see the surviving birds, downed forever in some air and space museum, look on them with affection.

TO GO BOLDLY

PROGR

STAR TREK: THE
by

Let's set the scene: it's December 1990. My brother and I are visiting my mother's cousins in St. Louis, the first time for him, the first time that I can remember for me. The Hanukka candles have been lit and the adults are making much of the two of us, when someone – my mother, perhaps? – mentions that I like *Star Trek*. By this she means the original series, which crops up with little regularity on the national TV's afternoon schedule, wedged between reruns of ancient, black and white movies and no less ancient educational programs. Well, my cousins exclaim, there's a new *Star Trek*! Perhaps the children would like to see it?

In a few weeks, I will celebrate my tenth birthday, and a week later my world will change. The Gulf War (the first, and much shorter, one) will start and Saddam Hussein will begin bombarding Israel with Scud missiles, placing a significant portion of Israeli population under effective house arrest. Schools will be ordered shut, and hundreds of thousands of frightened, confused children will be left to entertain themselves indoors. A nation that for more than a decade has resisted the siren call of commercial entertainment – there is still only one, state-sponsored, television channel, and the proposal to launch a commercial counterpart has languished in its pilot stages for most of the 80s – will suddenly discover the West's favorite babysitter. After the war, the floodgates will prove impossible to close. Within a few years, commercial channels, cable TV, and the internet will irrevocably change the way Israelis discover and consume entertainment. For a young, geekish teen, the significance of these changes lay mainly in how they affected one's ability to get hold of new episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Would the local channels buy the show? How long – months, years – would we have to wait for the next season? My cable carrier has dropped the channel that was screening the fourth season, but picked up a new one screening the fifth – how will I bridge the gap?

At the other end of that revolution, with technology at my fingertips that renders laughable the very notion that my television habits might be curtailed or controlled by others, this enthusiasm, perhaps even obsession, seems hard to credit. Or maybe it's always the case that one's first fannish love seems incomprehensible in hindsight. When I returned to original flavor *Star Trek* in my teens I found it unendurably cheesy, and it was the fear of a similar reaction that caused me to hold off from revisiting *The Next Generation*.

There's a famous story that *Star Trek* fans like to tell about the genesis of the spin-off. With a suitably derisive tone of voice, they recount how the character of Wesley Crusher, the boy genius who is quite literally given the keys to the spaceship by the otherwise sensible Captain Picard, and who rewards the faith placed in him by repeatedly saving the the ship and its crew from dangers that its adult and fully qualified officers are too dim to recognize, was invented as a identification character for children and a way of drawing them into the show. I always feel like slinking off in shame when this story is told because, well, that was me. When I started watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* I was at exactly the age of those children that Gene Roddenberry and his writers wanted to win over, and it worked. I loved Wesley because I wanted to be him, to pilot the Enterprise and save the day. It was years before I discovered that I was supposed to hate him, and even though as an adult I recognize how flawed the writing for him was, especially in comparison to other, more realistic child characters in *Star Trek* such as *Deep Space Nine*'s Jake Sisko, I find myself wanting to defend him from his detractors. I didn't want to return to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* only to end up hating him, or the show in general. In the end, however, curiosity won out. I returned to *Deep Space Nine* several years ago and found it an unexpected delight – to my mind not only the best of the *Star Trek* series but one of the seminal science fiction shows of the last two decades. I couldn't help but wonder how *The Next Generation* – my first love, and the one to which, in its early seasons, I couldn't help but compare *Deep Space Nine* unfavorably to – would hold up, and thus my project for the summer doldrums became to revisit the series.

Happily, I did not end up hating Wesley Crusher. In fact, going by the show's first season, the problem with Wesley isn't the writing for his character – which is, yes, a little more clean-cut and capable than a real child, even a genius, would be, but no more so than any of the adult characters, who all suffer from the show's tendency to idolize them and their abilities – but the adults around him, who on the one hand make much of his abilities, and on the other hand ignore and shout down his warnings whenever the writers want to make Wesley look good by proving him right, which is to say nearly every episode. Or, at least, that's the problem in the first season, and I'm not sure that my reactions to this season are in any way a reliable indicator of how my ultimate judgement, as an

BACK

ISSUE SCAN

NEXT GENERATION, SEASON 1

Abigail Nussbaum

experienced adult viewer, on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* will shake out, because the first season of this show isn't really the first season of *The Next Generation.* It's the fourth season of the original *Star Trek*.

You see this most clearly in the show's visual sensibility and its costuming – the go-go dresses, of course (extended, in this iteration of the franchise, to male Starfleet officers in a misguided attempt to pretend that they were ever anything more than a bit of sexist fan service in the original series), but also the costumes worn by the 'alien' races encountered by the Enterprise in this season (much scorn has been heaped on *Star Trek*'s habit of creating aliens who are nothing but humans with a bit of latex glued to their nose or forehead, but in this season the show wasn't even up to putting in this much effort – at the beginning of the season Picard's log entries make a perfunctory reference to the strangeness of encountering an alien race that looks so entirely human, but after a few episodes both he and the writers have given up the pretense). Taking full advantage of the costumer William Ware Theiss's theory of titillation – the sexiness of an outfit is directly proportional to the likelihood that some of it might fall off – which informed so much of his costuming for the original series, guest stars – mostly, it must be noted, women – on *The Next Generation*'s first season wear flimsy, diaphanous, precariously fastened and just plain scanty clothing more often than not (in the episode "Justice," the aliens-du-jour are quite literally wearing napkins), and usually of a variety that bears a closer resemblance to robes and togas than to anything futuristic. Set dressing is, similarly, gaudy, colorful, and 60s-inspired. Just about the only 80s touch one finds in *The Next Generation's* look is the ubiquitous use of spandex in the main character's costuming – the rest of the series looks like a transplant from twenty five years in the past.

Even more wrongfooting is the show's conception of itself and of the universe it takes place in. When I think of *Star Trek* in 2010, I don't think of a particular series, setting, or character. I think of the universe as it's been constructed in twenty eight seasons of television and a dozen films, a universe in which the Federation operates as a huge, cross-cultural umbrella binding together various races – Humans, Vulcans, Betazeds, Trill, Bajorans – while interacting with others – Ferengi, Klingons, Romulans, Cardassians – and defending against enemies – Borg, Jem'Hadar, Founders – all of whom have well-known and recognizable attributes, and established relationships, sometimes friendly and sometimes not so much, with one another. It's easy to forget that at the time that *The Next Generation* was just beginning its run, very little of the groundwork for this universe had been laid. In "Encounter at Farpoint" (a truly risible pilot brought somewhere near watchability only through the combined efforts of Patrick Stewart and John De Lancie) Picard describes the Enterprise's mission as an extension of the original ship's mandate – to seek out new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before. Those words have been repeated so often that it's easy to lose sight of them in light of what the *Star Trek* universe later becomes – a political matrix in which well-known civilizations stay put and try to hold on to the places they've already gone to.

In the first season of *The Next Generation*, however, exploration really is the point of the series, and there is much to explore. The universe, as the series presents it in this season, is a strange place, full of mysteries and wonders, in which the sum total of what is already known is dwarfed by what has yet to be discovered. When the Enterprise encounters alien races they are sometimes shrouded in mystery and legend, sometimes complete unknowns, but always foreign. This extends to established *Star Trek* races – the episode "Heart of Glory" sees Picard and Riker mystified by the customs and culture of Klingons, whose love of violence they dismiss as nearly incomprehensible, and the season finale "The Neutral Zone" centers around an encounter with the Romulans, who have been out of contact with the Federation for so long that everything that's known about them is said to be

"I loved Wesley because I wanted to be him, to pilot the Enterprise and save the day. It was years before I discovered that I was supposed to hate him..."

exciting and romantic about this view of the franchise's universe, so much bigger than it becomes in later seasons and series, and that romance is clearly felt by the characters. Picard is repeatedly described as a 'great explorer,' and his excitement and joy in seeing something he's never seen before – whether it's an alien race, or the distant galaxy to which the Enterprise is transported through the interference of the Traveler in "Where No One Has Gone Before," or even the view through Geordi's visor, transmitted to the Enterprise in a throwaway scene in "Heart of Glory" – is not only infectious but, if you've grown accustomed to later seasons' construction of Picard as the reserved and measured counterpart to Riker's Kirk-ish boisterousness, a delightful surprise.

There is, therefore, something a little sad about the experience of returning to the first season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as a fan who has watched the entire series, as well as *Deep Space Nine* and *Enterprise* and bits of *Voyager*. This is not the show as it will become and as it will go on to influence the franchise, and though for the most part that's a good thing – no one, I'm sure, misses the abortive attempts to position the Ferengi as the franchise's new Klingons (in fact, the best scene in the two Ferengi-centric episodes actually hints at the more interesting places that the franchise, and particularly *Deep Space Nine*, will take the species, when Riker contacts the first officer on the Ferengi ship whose captain has targeted Picard, whose loyalty to his captain is tempered and finally defeated by his disapproval of the pursuit of something as unprofitable as revenge) – there are also hints in the first season of directions the show might have taken, which it is difficult not to regret. The most obvious example is Tasha Yar, who had a lot of potential as the spiritual precursor of kickass *Star Trek* women like Ro Laren and Kira Nerys, potential that the show's writers, who foreground her ahead of characters like Worf, Dr. Crusher, and even Data, were clearly interested in developing, but there is also a well-developed sub-plot over the course of the season involving Geordi's growth as a bridge officer, culminating in charge of the ship and acquits himself admirably, and which is wasted in light of the decision, next season, to make him chief engineer (after which his development, both personally and professionally, is minimal). Meanwhile, characters who will become central not only to the series but to the franchise, such as Worf and Data, are often treated as one-note gags.

The first season feels like a trial run at the concept of a new *Star Trek* series, much of which will be rethought during the mid-season gap (the early scenes of the second season premiere seem dedicated to highlighting the changes wrought over this gap – they touch on everything from Geordi's new position to Ten Forward to Riker's beard). Or perhaps it's best seen as an interlude, a continuation of the original *Star Trek* that just happens to feature completely different characters. I find myself, despite the season's flaws, a little won over. It's a cheesy, often preachy and nonsensical series, but it's suffused with an idealism and a sense of wonder that later *Star Trek* seasons and series deliberately moved away from. I can't wish the franchise other than it is (and anyway, others have already done so with last year's movie, reimagining it as a *Star Wars*-esque adventure, which I found very depressing), but I also can't help lament that loss of that more adventurous, more romantic version of it.

It is difficult to gauge, after rewatching its first season, how *Star Trek: The Next Generation* will fare with me once I finish the whole show – though I look forward (still with a bit of trepidation) to finding out. Over the course of the next few seasons, I assume and hope, the show will transform into something like the series I remember, the one that laid the groundwork for the *Star Trek* universe and paved the way for its daughter shows (and the army of tie-in novels) the expand and play around in it. The rest of this re-exploration of my first fannish love, however, will take place in different venues, as this will be my last television column for Vector. Thank you for reading.

You can follow Abigail Nussbaum's writing, on Star Trek *or other topics, by visiting her blog at http://wrongquestions.blogspot.com/*