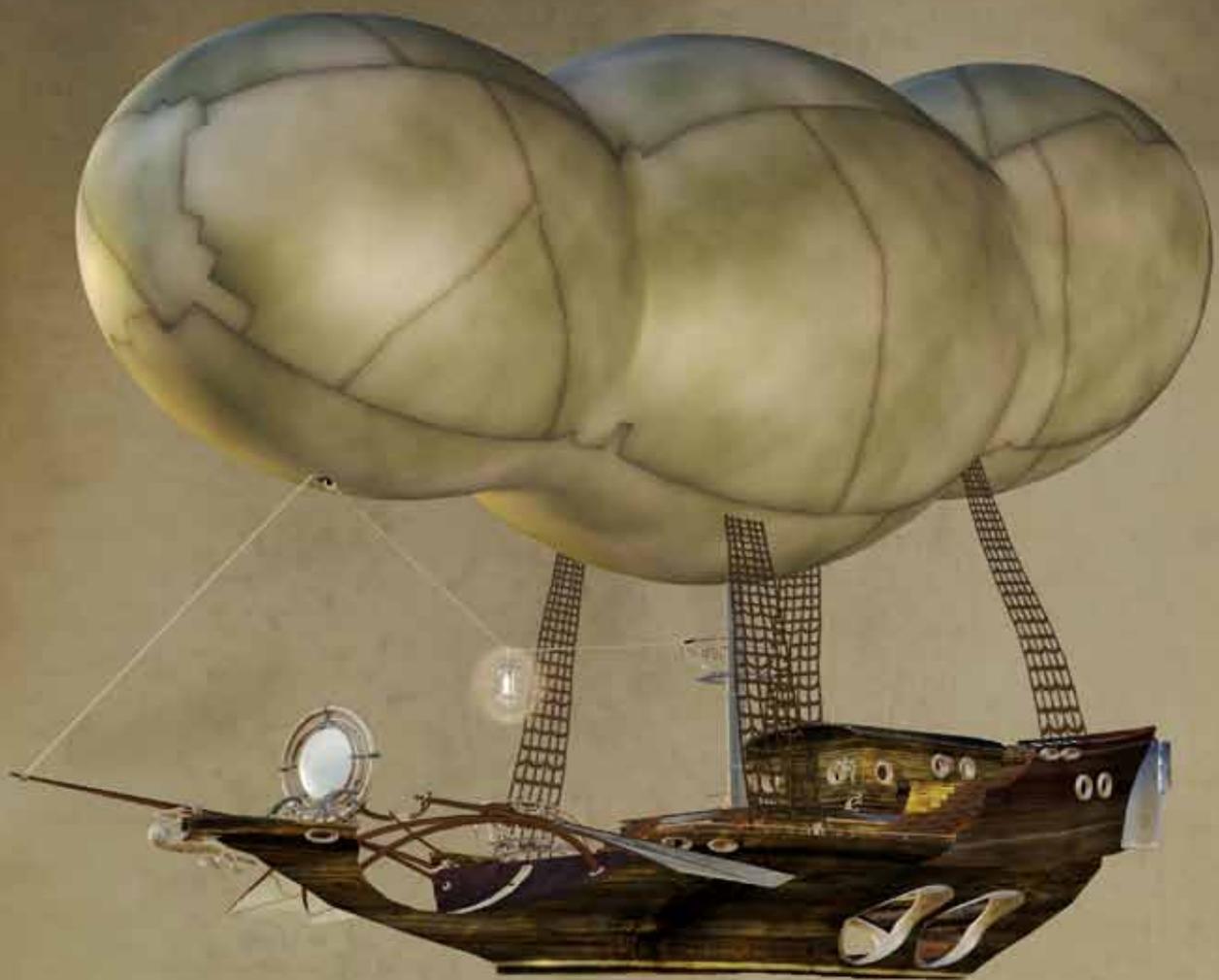


Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association



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THE BSFA REVIEW

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Torque Control

One of my New Year's resolutions was to read lots of 2012 books this year. Yet here it is, weeks later, and I'm mostly just reading books from last year. It's all those shiny award shortlists, you see, and the concomitant discussions of what were some of the most interesting books of the previous year. I'm halfway through reading the BSFA Award best novel shortlist, and want to finish in time to be a well-informed voter. Then the Clarke Award shortlist and the Hugo shortlists will be out, and so large swathes of the year slip away without ever reading the books currently coming out.

This issue of *Vector* won't help you much with material published in 2012, but it will hopefully prove a helpful to guiding your reading and watching of material which came out in 2011 (and earlier). On the next page, you'll find the results of the annual BSFA Reviewers' Poll, a top-ten of recommended 2011 publications. Top tens are a bit of a theme in this issue: Jonathan McCalmont tells what his top ten SF films of 2011 are, and in his regular column, Stephen Baxter shares his current (often-changing) top ten short stories.

Vector's reviewers reflect on the best books they read in 2011, works not always published in that year. Alison Page surveys the best of SF television which appeared on British screens last year, contextualized by how broad an audience each reached, while Jonathan McCalmont argues for what 2011 SF films he thinks are most worth seeking out.

In his regular column, Terry Martin reviews recent comics. This time, he also asks for some feedback on just what it is *Vector* readers would like to see in the way of comics advice. Should he be focusing more on "popular" comics, a guide to what's currently big in the field, to help educate BSFA members in what's happening in that field? Or are members more interested in an eclectic, wide-ranging set of recommendations which are likely to focus on more obscure comics?

There are also two thought-provoking pieces on aspects of fairy in this issue. Melanie Keene looks at the use of the term "science fiction" as it pre-dates reference to the genre we know by that name, when it referred to "fairy tales of science", a popular theme for science instruction and scientific marketing in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, as she demonstrates. Andy Sawyer, meanwhile, examines the short story collection *Kingdoms of Elfin*, by the overlooked author Sylvia Townsend Warner, who deserves as much attention as her contemporaries, Hope Mirlees and Lord Dunsany.

Paul Kincaid's exploration of a Steven Millhauser story doubles as an analysis of what the otherwise-rare use of the first person plural voice does to the framing of a story. Kincaid taught the uncomfortable story of "The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman" when he was an SFF Criticism Masterclass tutor, and revisits it now that it's been republished in a collection of Millhauser's short fiction. Hopefully those of you taking this year's Criticism Masterclass will engage at least as



deeply with the readings this!

This issue also contains the third and last installment of Victor Grech's series on human reproduction and science fiction, this time focusing on the consequences of infertility caused by bioterrorism, pollution, and other sources of disease. He speculates that the now-common appearance of terrorism in SF is a product of the "War on Terror", but it's clear from the broad trends shown by Google's ngram viewer that the term really took off after 9/11. This was also reflected, more anecdotally, in the increasing use of the concept in the best SF novels by women we read this last year on the Torque Control blog.

Finally, of course, there's the BSFA Review, with a wide assortment of books reviewed for your delectation.

None of this helps me with my project of reading 2012 books though; instead, this issue of *Vector* has provided me with an ever-lengthening list of compelling works from previous years to read and watch.

As always, your letters of comment are encouraged. We're always glad to hear from our readers, whether you'd like to comment on an article, or volunteer to write for us. You can reach *Vector* at vector.editors@gmail.com.

SHANA WORTHEN
EDITOR

BSFA Reviewers' Poll

The best of 2011

Martin Lewis

I don't think anyone was surprised by Ian McDonald's victory in the first Vector reviewers' poll last year. *The Dervish House* received pretty much universal acclaim, won comprehensively and then went on to take the BSFA Award for best novel. Some years there is a book that just seems to capture the critical and popular consensus. In 2011, however, there were two: *Embassytown* by China Miéville and *The Islanders* by Christopher Priest.

These two very different novels by much admired authors were both shortlisted for this year's BSFA Award and, as soon as I opened the poll, votes started coming in thick and fast from the reviewers. Miéville came sixth last year with *Kraken*, a novel I liked a lot but which was generally seen as the author blowing off steam. *Embassytown* was meatier fare, his first 'proper' science fiction novel, a return to the ambition of 2009's *The City and The City* (which won the BSFA Award and the Arthur C Clarke Award). As Paul Graham Raven put it in Vector #268 "*Embassytown* is good, but it is not easy; it partakes of the tools of genre, but it does so in ways that are unusual or even antithetical to the conventions of genre."

Priest, on the other hand, hadn't published a novel since 2002's *The Separation* (which also won both the BSFA Award and the Clarke). So this was an Event and, by all accounts, lived up to the decade long wait. The two novels kept swapping pole position between them and the fact they ultimately drew has some of the same cosmic justice as Paolo Bacigalupi and Miéville sharing the 2010 Hugo Award for best novel. My money is on Priest to just edge it for the BSFA Award but Miéville may take the short story award with 'Covehithe'.

From familiar faces to new blood. I wrote about *God's War* in my editorial in Vector #269 where I pointed out that it was a shame Kameron Hurley's debut novel was ineligible for UK awards (although the related story 'Afterlife' did make the BSFA Award ballot). A roiling stew of influences and ideas, it was vital and exciting and I'm sure I won't be the only person to be delighted it took bronze. *Mr Fox* by Helen Oyeyemi also sits outside of the UK genre scene and benefited from strong word of mouth but is otherwise the complete opposite to Hurley's brash melange. It is a subtle, slippery novel – "an arch, stylish feminist skewering of the narrative conventions of several genres", as Nic Clarke puts it, later in the magazine – but readers have clearly welcomed this ambiguity. Nina Allan, another writer of oblique literary fantasy, was shortlisted for the BSFA Award for short fiction last year for 'Flying in the Face of God', having previously been shortlisted in 2006 for 'Bird Songs at Eventide'. *The Silver Wind* is her second collection and demonstrates that her reputation continues to

quietly grow and grow. The title story was shortlisted this year, could she win this time?

Despite being the runner up of last year's poll for *New Model Army*, Adam Roberts missed out on a place on the BSFA Award shortlist having previously made it in 2009 for *Yellow Blue Tibia*. In 2011, he turned this on its head by securing a place for *By Light Alone* on the shortlist whilst dropping to sixth in the poll. With *Embassytown* and *The Islanders* both in contention for the award, it seems unlikely that he has a chance of winning it this year but I wouldn't bet against him for the future. Directly underneath Roberts was another BSFA Award contender: *Osama* by Lavie Tidhar. Although not Tidhar's first novel, this was definitely his breakout book and raises expectations for the future. (This also means that *Cyber Circus* by Kim Lakin-Smith - reviewed by Paul Kincaid on page 52 - was the only novel on the shortlist not to appear on the poll.)

The third edition of the *SF Encyclopaedia*, edited by John Clute, David Langford and Peter Nicholls, was made available online for free through Gollancz in October. Although still only in beta, people clearly thought the extra 1.8 million words already published deserved recognition (they've added another 200,000 since then). It is also surely likely to win the BSFA Award for non-fiction. In contrast, Eric Brown was perhaps unlucky to miss out on a place on the ballot for his best received novel in years, *The Kings Of Eternity*, having been previously shortlisted in 1994 for *Engineman*. Finally, we have this year's token epic fantasy (last year it was *Under Heaven* by Guy Gavriel Kay). Only with the BSFA could *A Dance With Dragons*, seventh instalment in George RR Martin's *A Song Of Ice And Fire*, be considered an underdog!

In total 50 different books received votes, including *The Night Circus*, Erin Morgenstern's debut novel, which just missed the cut off point. Falling similarly short was *The Weird*, edited by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. This monumental anthology is reviewed by Adam Roberts on page 56, in the BSFA Review (it's business as usual despite the two dozen best of the year pieces starting over the page). I'm particularly pleased that this issue's reviews heavily features short fiction, chapbooks, fiction in translation and non-fiction as well as a pair of debut science fiction novels by women. It is important that we cover big books like *Embassytown* and *The Islanders* but, as those 50 votes show, it is a big, big genre and I want to bring as much of it as possible to you.

REVIEWERS' POLL 2011

1. *The Islanders* by Christopher Priest
Embassytown by China Miéville
3. *God's War* by Kameron Hurley
4. *Mr Fox* by Helen Oyeyemi
5. *The Silver Wind* by Nina Allen
6. *By Light Alone* by Adam Roberts
7. *Osama* by Lavie Tidhar
8. *SF Encyclopaedia* (3rd edition beta), edited by John Clute, David Langford and Peter Nicholls
9. *The Kings Of Eternity* by Eric Brown
10. *A Dance With Dragons* by George RR Martin

Graham Andrews's Books of 2011



One of *Our Thursdays is Missing* by Jasper Fforde. Thursday Next, the literary detective – and I mean that literally – flits about all over the BookWorld, chasing her lost ‘factual’ alter ego. I sometimes wonder if fictional characters get tired if I’ve been reading ‘their’ book for too long at a time. Sad, isn’t it?

The Fear Index by Robert Harris. I don’t often agree with anything written in the *Daily Express* but I’ve got to go along with this perceptive reviewer:

“Harris is one of the very few people writing serious, intelligent thrillers which deal with the great issues of our time.”

Ghost of a Chance by Rhiannon Lassiter. I praised this novel to the skies in *Vector* 268 but I’m happy to add a jolt of positive reinforcement here.

The Hound of the D’Urbervilles by Kim Newman. The purported memoirs of Colonel Sebastian Moran, second-in-command to Professor Moriarty, who makes Harry Flashman look like Little Lord Fauntleroy.

The Death Gods by Richard S. Prather (1921-2007). The *Shell Scott*, *Hollywood Private Eye* novels sold over 40 million copies in the USA alone. *The Death Gods* has been posthumously published as an e-book by Linda Pendleton – the widow of Don, who created the *Executioner* franchise. Prather was an avid reader of science fiction, with a special fondness for Heinlein, and this opinionated rant against what he calls the ‘allopathic’ medical profession might have pleased Robert A. himself. But it eventually turns out to be a scarifying cross between *Donovan’s Brain* and *Cold Lazarus*.

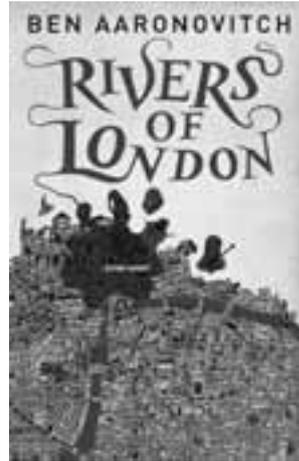
The Doll by Daphne du Maurier. These early short stories deal more with – shall we say – abnormal psychology than outright fantasy but don’t let that put you off reading them. I can particularly recommend the title story and ‘Tame Cat’.

While Mortals Sleep by Kurt Vonnegut. There’s usually a good reason why stories by a famous writer were left unpublished during his or her lifetime. The initial ideas are always thought-provoking, but Vonnegut seems to have lost interest long before the pooped-out endings. Annoying, I must say. But sparks of mad genius still remain.

The Inner Man: The Life of J. G. Ballard by John Baxter is a rattling good biographical and critical overview of the man.

Vultures of the Void: The Legacy by Philip Harbottle. This Cosmos Books edition is a much revised and expanded continuation of the 1992 Borgo Press edition (which was subtitled *A History of British Science Fiction Publishing, 1946-1956*). Stephen Holland is no longer credited as co-author.

Lynne Bispham's Books of 2011



Of the new science fiction and fantasy books I’ve read this year, three immediately spring to mind as standing head and shoulders above the rest. *The Rivers of London*, Ben Aaronovitch’s debut novel, is a very engaging fantasy set in contemporary London, whose young policeman hero finds himself working for a department of the police force specially set up to deal with magical crimes. It was definitely one of my favourite books of 2011. Kate Griffin’s *The Neon*

Court is the third fantasy featuring urban wizard Matthew Swift and also takes place in present day London. *Thirteen Years Later* by Jasper Kent continues the Nineteenth Century vampire story begun in *Twelve* and, not surprisingly, the events of the novel occur thirteen years after the end of the first volume. Although these books are very different, they are all very well-written and each brings something original to the fantasy genre that makes them memorable books for 2011. I look forward to reading the subsequent volumes in their respective series.

For me, however, the most impressive book I read last year was not written or published in 2011 but sixty years ago: George R Stewart’s *Earth Abides*. I first read this book back in the early Seventies and I remembered it as a book that had greatly impressed me as a teenager. Even though it is now an established classic of the genre, published as one of Gollancz’s SF Masterworks, I did wonder if, many years and many SF novels later, I would still find it as compelling a read as I did then. Re-reading it, I found it to be an exceptional book, just as gripping and thought-provoking as I recalled. In fact, I would describe it not just as one of the most powerful post-apocalyptic SF novels ever written but a book that transcends definition by genre and is simply a great novel. Beginning in Forties California when an unidentified pandemic wipes out most of the human race, the book focuses upon one of the few survivors, a graduate student named Isherwood Williams. Ish dreams of rebuilding the civilisation that has been destroyed in what has come to be known as The Great Disaster and the moment when he realizes that this will never happen is one of the most poignant scenes in literature. As so few people survived the pandemic, for much of the novel there are only a few characters, and yet the book is epic in scale, exploring the effects of mankind’s sudden decline in population, both upon the ecology of the landscape men once dominated and also upon the nature of the society that they form as they adapt to their new world. Although it describes all too convincingly how easily civilisation can perish, the book is actually an uplifting read. If you’ve not read it, put it on your list of books to read in 2012.

Nic Clarke's Books of 2011



As is generally the case, most of the books I read in 2011 were not actually published for the first time in that year; of the new releases I did read, many were fantasy rather than SF, due to my reviewing duties elsewhere. At any rate, the standout pair of 2011 books for me were *God's War* by Kameron Hurley (a punchy, pacey thriller that imagines several variants of future-Islam) and Helen Oyeyemi's *Mr Fox* (an arch, stylish feminist skewering

of the narrative conventions of several different genres). Adam Roberts scored again with rich-vs-poor satire *By Light Alone*, Jane Rogers's adolescent narrator convinced me (of her determination, if not her case) in *The Testament Of Jessie Lamb* and Patrick Ness made me cry with slight fable *A Monster Calls* - although I preferred his more restless and spiky work in *The Ask And The Answer* and *Monsters Of Men* (bar the very end, which ducks the implications of its own very compelling premise), both of which I read for the first time in 2011.

Staying with non-2011 books, the Arthur C Clarke Award introduced me to Lauren Beukes's wonderful *Zoo City* (which was unexpected, since the novel is clearly a fantasy of Grand Guignol magic rather than SF), a certain *Vector* reviews editor prompted me to get a move on with Catherynne Valente's sublime short fiction collection *Ventriloquism* (itself a Christmas present from a certain former *Vector* features editor) and I was spellbound by the quieter - and only borderline fantastical - charms of Shawna Yang Ryan's *Water Ghosts*, set among an immigrant Chinese community in Twenties America. Meanwhile, for the *Vector* blog, Torque Control, I re-read Gwyneth Jones's absorbing, wrenching, unflinching *Life*, about a brilliant woman scientist and the personal, professional and political upheavals she experiences over the course of decades. (<http://bit.ly/zYvVI9>)

Two debut fantasies from two new publishing imprints - Daniel Polansky's *The Straight Razor Cure* from Headline, and Mazarkis Williams's *The Emperor's Knife* from Jo Fletcher Books - showed promise and entertained me in different ways. Neither were perfect, but both were significantly ahead of the year's competition in fantasy debuts (I read two or three others that were much less successful): Polansky filters an industrial-age fantastical city through a Dashiell Hammett narrative voice, while Williams opts for the flavour of the Ottoman Empire at its harems and heir-massacring height. Finally, I can't believe it took me so long to read Maureen McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*. I have Ian Sales's SF *Mistressworks* project to thank for nudging me to rescue that one from the TBR shelves; its BSFA award nomination is well deserved!

Mark Connorton on Johanna Sinisalo

This year I discovered Finnish author Johanna Sinisalo. Two of her novels have been translated into English - *Birdbrain* and *Not Before Sundown* - and I would recommend both of them.

Not Before Sundown tells of a young gay photographer nicknamed Angel who adopts an abandoned troll cub he finds in the yard of his apartment building. In this world, trolls are wild animals living in northern Scandinavia and Russia, a sort of cross between a big cat and an ape. The scent of the troll's musk makes Angel irresistible to other men and he ends up juggling several lovers, culminating in events that result in him having to flee with the cub into the wilderness. The book is a mosaic of first person narrative provided by Angel and his acquaintances, myths and legends, invented scientific articles about troll behaviour and biology and news reports about troll incursions into towns and farmland. Through the course of the short novel, Sinisalo expertly increases the tension whilst weaving a dense cobweb of allusions and metaphors. All Angel's love interests are dark, hairy and not conventionally good looking - trolls in the parlance of bitchy gays - and his eventual fate recalls tales of changelings or fair maidens who are carried underground and forced to marry troll kings.

Birdbrain is centred on a young couple hiking through a Tasmanian national park who unknowingly find themselves menaced by the local wildlife. Hunky but pompous Jyrki takes temp jobs as a bartender to fund his travelling and is obsessed with finding untouched areas of the planet to explore. His girlfriend, Heidi, goes with him to escape an unpleasant situation with her family and work and to consolidate her tenuous relationship with Jyrki. She is unprepared for the hard work involved in the trek and finds herself increasingly rebelling against Jyrki's strict rules regarding litter and care of the environment.

As they are travelling so lightly in such a remote area, the slightest loss or damage to their kit could have life threatening consequences and as the journey progresses, they discover that someone or something is tampering with their equipment and food supplies. Meanwhile Jyrki's disgust at human damage to the environment is contrasted with sinister anonymous passages (initially we are led to believe that these are narrated by Heidi's disturbed brother) describing various acts of cruelty and vandalism.

As with *Not Before Sundown*, the book is a collage of first person narrative, real and invented scientific papers, news reports and other secondary material (including many quotations from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*). Sinisalo works wonders with a meagre page count and the book functions equally well as a relationship study, an environmental tract, a piece of brilliant travel writing and a disturbing and insidious horror. Both books examine the troubled borderlines between civilisation and the wilderness and the differences and similarities between humans and animals and both are well worth seeking out.

Gary Dalkin's Books of 2011

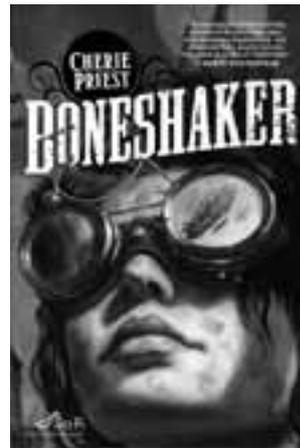
The *Map of Time* by Félix J Palma and *The Kings Of Eternity* by Eric Brown in very different ways pay homage to the classics, both of our genres and beyond. The former tells three interlinked stories all constructed around the person of HG Wells. This Victorian romp, which incorporates elements of *The Time Machine*, playfully references the literary history of time travel, taking in Jack the Ripper, the Elephant Man, Bram Stoker, Henry James and the most haunted house in London. It is a page turning ripping yarn most impressive for its labyrinthine plotting and artful misdirection.

The Kings Of Eternity takes place in 1935, 1999 and various points between. A tale of two authors, the novel is remarkable for successfully melding very different writing traditions; lurid, rip-roaring Thirties American-style pulp science fiction adventure with middle-20th Century expatriate literary introspection – effectively functioning, sometimes explicitly so, as a homage to the life and works of Laurence Durrell with a dash of Graham Greene and Paul Bowles. Skilfully characterised and ingeniously plotted, Brown's moving story escalates into a nerve-shredding thrill-ride to delight those of us whose sense of wonder hasn't been blunted by an appreciation of more respectably exotic fare.

Stephen King also spans the decades with *11.22.63*, in which his protagonist travels from 2011 to 1958 to prevent the assassination of JFK. King expertly blends historical fiction, time travel, and thriller into an epic companion piece to his 1979 novel, *The Dead Zone*. The familiar King touchstones are here: the protagonist is a teacher and writer; there is murder, horror and alcoholism; there is a semi-sequel contained within the narrative to King's novel *IT*. In lesser hands all this familiarity would be stale by now but King makes it fresh again. The book also features one of the writer's best, most touching love stories. Given that all of King's novels are these days to some degree interlinked, *11.22.63* is his best stand-alone work since *Hearts In Atlantis*. It may be fashionable to overlook King because of his immense popularity, but sometimes writers are hugely successful for good reason.

Christopher Priest's *The Islanders* also looks back to earlier works, being technically a 'fix up' – a small part of the content has been previously published in slightly different form as short stories – and a companion to the novel *The Affirmation* and the collection *The Dream Archipelago*. *The Islanders* is intended to be read straight through as a complete work and lies somewhere between novel and collection with subtle and elliptical connections echoing through the chapters of what is ostensibly a travel guide. Here there are artists and writers, murderers and lovers, secrets and deceptions (and even a Prestigious magician) but the main character is the world itself. A geographer's joy, the answer seems always over the horizon, perhaps waiting in the next port of call. Not the best place for newcomers to Priest's imagination to begin their voyage of discovery but an intoxicatingly wayward and challenging exploration of uncharitable shores.

Alan Fraser's Books of 2011



Just as 2010 led to my discovery of Martin Millar and his *Werewolf Girl* books, 2011 was the year I belatedly discovered Cherie Priest and her *Clockwork Century* steampunk novels. In Waterstone's I found *Boneshaker*, a book that not only had a great setting (a Zombie and poison gas infested walled-off Seattle in an alternate 1880s) but was also both exciting and character-driven. Apart from that, Christopher Priest's *The Islanders* and George RR Martin's

A Dance With Dragons were my book of the year, with Priest just winning on points.

The Islanders sees Christopher Priest returning to the world of the Dream Archipelago with a book that starts out as a gazetteer of the islands but evolves into a murder mystery. Overlapping, conflicting and untrustworthy narratives tell us more about the event and the people involved. The seemingly unconnected stories create an incomplete, unreliable but engrossing picture of the islanders and their varied homes. It is the detective work that Priest forces the reader to do in order to work out what might be going on in a place whose reality is questionable which makes the book so rewarding.

A Dance With Dragons also returns to a familiar setting: it has been six years since *A Feast For Crows*, its predecessor in the *Song Of Ice And Fire* series. Some have suggested the delay is because he has made the scope far too wide and thus difficult for the reader to focus on the critical aspects of the story. However, Martin is undertaking a mammoth and vivid world-building exercise here, so every detail is important in creating such a world and peopling it with believable characters, many of whom we've come to care about very much. This is a hard book to put down, even when it's finished!

I also enjoyed *Son Of Heaven* by David Wingrove, *Mardock Scramble* by Tow Ubukata and *Against All Things Ending* by Stephen Donaldson. Between 1989 and 1997, former Vector editor Wingrove published the eight book *Chung Kuo* series about a future in which the Chinese have dominated the world and rewritten history. Now he's undertaken the massive task of expanding the series into twenty volumes starting with two prequels. *Son Of Heaven* is the first of these and is a fair start to an ambitious concept. The award-winning *Mardock Scramble* was originally published in Japan in 2003 and Edwin Hawke's translation of Ubukata's prose is powerfully visual, bringing the seedy world of Mardock City vividly to life, with pumping action sequences. Finally, I decided to include the latest volume of Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant* series despite the fact it's dreadfully hard going. This would be a great book at 400 pages but, as there are over 700, there's an enormous amount of navel-gazing and deep conversations that go nowhere to wade through! Still, I have enjoyed the series in the past and remain keen to see how Donaldson will end the series.

Niall Harrison
on *The Sacred Band*
by David Anthony Durham



Epic fantasy is not what it used to be and yet exactly what it's always been. Three-quarters of the way through *The Sacred Band*, the concluding volume of David Anthony Durham's majestic *Acacia* trilogy, comes a long-anticipated moment that remains astonishing. A mine-worker and would-be revolutionary named Barad is to be given responsibility for the education of the imperial children, heirs to the empire that rules over the Known World. He cautions his king: "If I teach, I will

teach them that there is a better way than that of monarch and subject. I never believed in that system. [...] I still don't". More surprising than the topic of discussion, almost, is the fact that it's the monarch who initiates it and as only part of his vision for reform. In the real world it's hard to imagine such a selfless renunciation of privilege as is set in motion in these closing pages but this monarch is another Aragorn, a paragon, albeit with a more contemporary sense of honour. He is, shamelessly, a figure to admire.

It's this mix of old and new - of classic and contemporary - that makes *Acacia* so compelling. With my critical hat on I can spend hours teasing out the myriad ways in which this trilogy, with its carefully constructed racial power structures, with its complexly inter-related societies, deconstructs the geographical and historical roots of imperial-colonial power and confronts the mechanisms by which that power sustains itself. And with my casual hat on I can be utterly swept away by a world that is not just richly fantastical - Durham is very good at monsters - but a venue for heroes, a demonstration of the human potential for good. I can't think of another series that appeals to both my readerly natures with quite such success, in which the exploits of a dragon-riding warrior princess are no more vivid and exhilarating than the struggle of freed slaves to form a new society.

The trilogy takes a little while to get going: the first volume, *The War with the Mein* takes a while to lay its groundwork, as it tells the story of four imperial children forced to grow up in exile after their kingdom is overrun by invaders, with only hints at the direction the overall trilogy will take. Durham's style is dignified, measured, explicative; capable of great cumulative emotional force, but by that same token occasionally ponderous. *The Other Lands* and *The Sacred Band*, however, are vibrant novels that harmonise narrative and argument into a Big Story as well as any fantasy I've read, choreographing a cast that comes to span continents with confidence and grace. *Acacia* is fierce, joyful, noble and in the end - despite that monarch - pragmatic and partial. We hold the world in trust; we should work at it with that in mind but true progress is the work of generations.

David Hebblethwaite's
Books of 2011



Most of my favourite speculative reading in 2011 came from that year itself, including one of the two books I read by Robert Shearman, who became the top SF author of my reading year. I read his most recent collections - *Everyone's Just So So Special* (2011) and *Love Songs for the Shy and Cynical* (2009) - and found a writer who combines the fantastic and the mundane to great effect. Whether Shearman is examining love or the place of

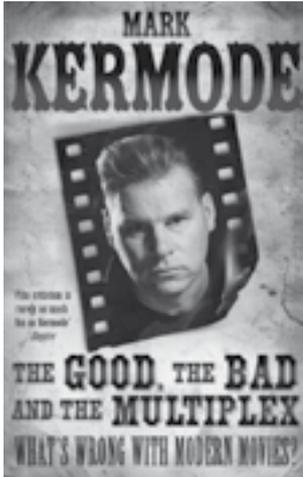
individuals in history, whether his characters don't recognise the strangeness of what's intruding upon their everyday lives or the 'everyday' is just nowhere in sight, his stories are atmospheric, insightful, and beautifully written.

Elsewhere in the genre, Conrad Williams's *Loss of Separation* contrasts four different kinds of horror - disaster-movie spectacle; the fear of creeping incapacity; the terror of imprisonment; and supernatural dread - to produce a superb character study while Nina Allan's *The Silver Wind* places some familiar stories in a new context, resulting in an intriguingly fragmented take on time travel. Splintered in a different way is Christopher Priest's elegant construction *The Islanders*, whose shards of narrative can be assembled in various ways to tell different stories about its world. Adam Roberts's *By Light Alone* was a similarly well crafted exploration of inequality, need and desire. From earlier years, sampling China Miéville's short fiction in *Looking For Jake* gave me a fresh appreciation of his concerns and approaches and Chris Beckett's *The Holy Machine* was satisfyingly complex in its consideration of the search for meaning in life and what it is to be human.

Issues of faith are a cornerstone of one of my favourite non-genre SF reads of 2011. Naomi Wood's *The Godless Boys* tells of an England where political power was seized by the Church and members of the rebellious Secular Movement exiled to an off-shore island. There's a great sense of place in Wood's depiction of the Island as a place and community somewhat out of time; even ideas about religion have changed, as children have grown up on the Island not knowing much about it, except that their parents opposed it. Characterisation and prose are both very fine and the ending is wonderfully tense.

Also published outside the genre, Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* is the story of a girl who can taste the feelings of whoever made the food she eats, which allows her to detect the problems in her parents' relationship; like many of Rob Shearman's stories, the novel works equally well whether its fantasy is taken literally or metaphorically. In Helen Oyeyemi's *Mr Fox*, the tale of Bluebeard is the foundation of a wide-ranging battle of stories between a writer and his muse. Katie Ward's *Girl Reading* is structured as a series of novellas concerning portraits throughout history, concluding with a futuristic tale which gives the rest an SF rationale. It reminds me that SF can take on many shapes and I look forward to exploring more of those in 2012.

Tony Keen's Book of 2011



In a new low for me, last year I managed to read only one of science fiction and fantasy book published in 2011 and I didn't consider that highly enough to put it on this list here. So I am going to massively cheat and, instead of talking about the most exciting SF I read last year, talk about a book that I think everyone reading this magazine should take the time to read. It's not science fiction. Indeed, it's not fiction at all, nor is it non-fiction primarily about sf, though the occasional SF or related work does get

mentioned. That book is Mark Kermode's *The Good, the Bad and the Multiplex: What's Wrong with Modern Movies?*

My first reason for recommending it is that I think many of the people who read *Vector* will like the style. Kermode writes in a personal, autobiographically-informed fashion that many *Vector* readers will recognise as 'fannish'. This was very evident in his previous book, *It's Only A Movie*, and is still to be seen here, if slightly reduced – the main reason for this is that where *It's Only A Movie* was an autobiographical account enlivened by occasional examples of movie criticism, *The Good, the Bad and the Multiplex* is a book of movie criticism enlivened by autobiographical anecdote.

The second reason is that Kermode is often bang on the money about the problems with the modern cinematic experience, where cost-cutting means there are no ushers to eject those who can't shut up or leave their phones off for the length of time it takes to get through a movie and where ticket and refreshment sales are combined, worsening the experience for everyone. I particularly learned from his analysis that the problem for the British film industry is not primarily production but distribution – lots of interesting movies (and lots of bad ones) are made but they don't get to cinema screens. Meanwhile the multiplexes serve up a diet of the same thing over and over again and then turn round and say that this is what the audience wants – an audience that has not really been given a choice. David Cameron, who recently made idiotic remarks about how the British industry should pursue commercial movies, would do well to read this book.

And my third reason for recommendation is directed at those readers who have it in mind to write themselves about popular culture for a broad audience. Because this is how you do it. I'm not saying you should necessarily imitate Kermode's style – his rants sometimes tip over into an ad hominem snarkiness that I don't always care to employ, though they often make me laugh. But you should imitate his attitude – be engaging, be witty and, above all, be honest and true to yourself.

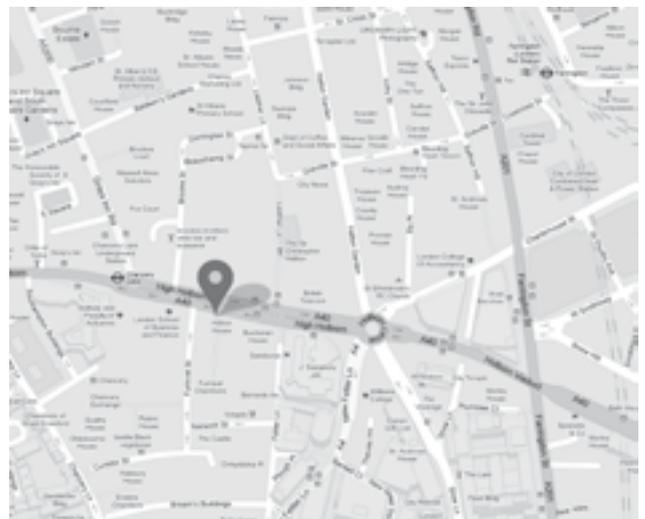
New year, new home

The monthly London BSFA Meeting has moved. From January you'll find us in the basement bar of The Melton Mowbray, 18 Holborn, EC1N 2LE

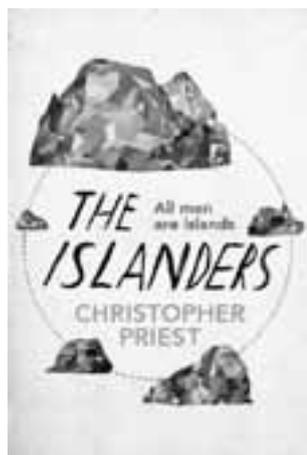
FUTURE MEETINGS:

- 28 March: BSFA Awards Discussion (guest tbc)
- 25 April: Sharyn November
- 23 May: CJ Lines
- 27 June: Tanith Lee

Meetings are open to everyone, no ticket required and no entry fee and they start around 7:00pm.



Paul Kincaid's Books of 2011



I believe that science fiction is all about making us think. Any work that is comforting and familiar isn't doing the job and there have been rather too many books this year that have received lots of praise but that seemed in the end too safe and cosy to push at what SF is supposed to do. The two books that challenged for my top spot, however, engaged me intellectually the moment I read them and seem, if anything, even more thrilling in retrospect.

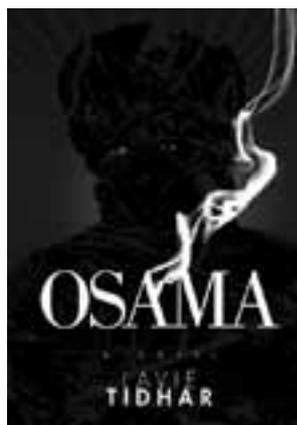
I gave the nod to Christopher Priest's *The Islanders*, in part, because I still haven't worked the book out. It is a novel (if it actually is a novel) that is going to challenge me for a long time to come. It is also one of the funniest things that Priest has written with lots of clever jokes worked into the texture of the book. The stories are all fragmented and distorted, they weave around themselves in such a way that once you think you've made sense of what is going on over here, you realise that it undermines what you thought was happening over there. It demands re-reading, except that I suspect every time I revisit the book I'll think it's about something else entirely.

Kentauros by Gregory Feeley is every bit as exciting and challenging, not least because of its structure. It combines essays of astonishing academic rigor with short stories that are fresh and engaging but what you understand in the essays changes the way you read the stories and what you read in the stories changes the way you understand the essays. And all is built around one of the most obscure of all Greek myths, the origin of the centaurs, a story to be found in only a handful of lines from one poem. That Feeley has built such a complex and wide-ranging edifice on so slight a foundation is part of the miracle of the book.

It was a good year for short stories (fine collections from Gwyneth Jones and Lucy Sussex very nearly made my list). I picked one debut, *The Silver Wind* by Nina Allan, because of the promise in the writing and also for the way the stories work together to make something greater than any individual piece. Alongside this there is a very welcome return from Maureen McHugh with *After the Apocalypse*, a very fine collection of tales, not linked as in the Allan but certainly sharing mood and affect.

The two books that seem to have attracted most discussion this year, *Among Others* by Jo Walton and *Embassytown* by China Miéville, both achieved rather less than I might have hoped but there were excellent novels from Kathleen Ann Goonan (*This Shared Dream*) and Lisa Goldstein (*The Uncertain Places*). The last place on my list, however, goes to Lavie Tidhar's *Osama* if only because of the way he uses exhausted forms (film noir, pulp fiction) to tell something that feels so fresh.

Maureen Kincaid Speller's Books of 2011



First, a couple of novels left over from 2010 which I read early last year: Charles Yu's *How To Live In a Science-Fictional Universe* and Ian McDonald's *The Dervish House*. I enjoyed the ambiguity of Yu's novel, the way it was both science fiction and a meta-fictional meditation on the nature of SF. I don't think I've ever read a novel by McDonald that I didn't enjoy and *The Dervish House* is no exception; it was particularly interesting to me for the juxtaposition of history

and ultra-modern technology, not to mention the Istanbul setting. Oh, and McDonald's immersive prose style; he always reads so well.

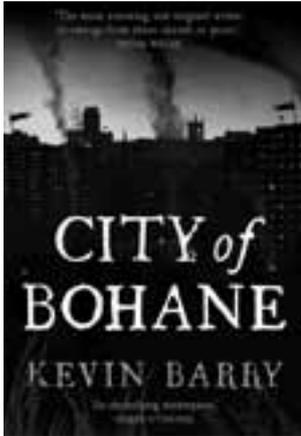
I like novels that play with traditional narrative structures and in 2011 I particularly enjoyed reading Lavie Tidhar's *Osama*, Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* and Tom McCarthy's *C*. At the heart of Kunzru's novel is an outcrop of rocks, the Pinnacles, in California's Mojave Desert, site of a number of odd occurrences over the centuries and, in the 20th Century, a magnet for counter-culturalists and lost and strayed tourists. Kunzru tells their stories in a series of layered fragments, leaving it to the reader to try to make the connections. McCarthy's *C*, although it follows a linear narrative pattern, creates endless resonances between the different sections of the novel, as it follows the story of Sergei, in search of a shape to his life. I find it hard to do justice to Tidhar's *Osama*, a tour-de-force exploration of genre and story-telling, moving in and out of what might be parallel universes, or maybe not, tracking the presence, or rather the absence, of Mike Longshott, the writer of the *Osama* novels. It needs more than one reading to fully digest but is well worth the effort.

I'm still working my way through Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's in every sense monstrous anthology, *The Weird*, but it has already given me much to think about. It contains over a hundred short stories, exploring all aspects of weird fiction. At present I'm enjoying the historical overview it provides but I'm also looking forward to reassessing my perception of weird fiction on more modern stories. It's also particularly valuable for the broad range of European fiction in translation included.

2011 saw the completion of NK Jemisin's *Inheritance* trilogy with the publication of *The Kingdom of Gods*. I admit I wasn't overly impressed with the first volume, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, when I read it but when I read the second, *The Broken Kingdoms*, and began to see more plainly what Jemisin was attempting, I was seriously impressed and *The Kingdom of Gods* rounds off the trilogy well. I like what Jemisin has done in her use of religion and manifest gods but I'm particularly keen on the way she has reassessed the portrayal of empire and colonialism in epic fantasy terms.

As ever, in 2012 I resolve to read more. There is still so much SF I need to catch up with.

Martin McGrath
on *City Of Bohane*
by Kevin Barry



The thing that strikes me about my list of favourite books of 2011 is that none of them come from the genre 'core'. This is unusual for me. Adam Roberts's *By Light Alone* probably comes closest to being a straightforward science fiction novel but, being by Adam Roberts, it's anything but straightforward. If I had to recommend one book from 2011, though, it would be Kevin Barry's *City Of Bohane*, which just edges

out Chris Priest's brilliant *The Islanders*.

Although *City Of Bohane* turns around a gangster - Logan Hartnett, the Long Fella - as he struggles to overcome a series of threats to his position at the top of Bohane's criminal underground, it is the city that dominates the book. Bound on one side by the grim, grey expanse of the wind-lashed Atlantic and, on the other, by the equally untamed Big Nothin', Bohane deserves to rank amongst the most distinctive and most thrilling creations in fantasy's prolific tradition of founding cities. The Bohane River, tainting the air, flows slow and thick past the feral Northside Rises, beneath the gentrified Beau View into Smoketown and the narrow alleys of the Black Trace, home territory of the Long Fella's gang, the Hartnett Fancy, and on to docks and the great ocean.

Onto these streets Barry drops a cast of strikingly memorable characters. Hartnett battles with the women in his life: his scheming old mother, Girly; his increasingly estranged wife, Macu; and the lithe, ambitious Jenni Ching. He gets little help from his muscle, the hapless Fuckler Burke with his Alsatian, Angelina, and the easily-led Wolfie Stanner. And then there are the external threats from the Cusacks, a Northside tribe bent on vengeance, the dangerous "Sand-pikeys" and, above all, Hartnett's nemesis, The Gant Broderick, back after 25 years across the water and a man of uncertain intentions.

But the best thing about *City Of Bohane* is Barry's writing, thick with slang and as flashy and arresting as the costumes in which his characters parade through Bohane town:

"A pale green suit, slim-cut, of thin spring cotton, a pair of burnt-orange arsekickers with a pronounced, bulbous toe, a ruffle-fronted silver shirt open at the neck, a purple neckscarf, a pallor of magnificently wasted elegance, and his hair this season swept back from the forehead and worn slightly longer, so that it trailed past the ruff of his jacket. Also, a three-day stubble. Was the Long Fella's opinion that, if anything, his suffering made him even more gauntly beautiful. He had all the handsome poignancy of heartbreak."

Barry has as created a novel that is both a futuristic vision of Ireland, wrecked and wasted, and a book that is nostalgic, redolent of the mythic Irish west. It is frequently laugh-out-loud funny and yet its cruelty is honed to a sharp point. It is, by turns, maddeningly erratic and spectacularly assured. It is also Barry's first novel and proves him "a slugger of a young dude and as smart as a hatful of snakes."

Kev McVeigh
on *Redwood and Wildfire*
by Andrea Hairston



2011 was an unusual year in my reading, very little that I considered really good came from the UK's major SF imprints, instead smaller presses and imports predominate on my shelves. Several favourite authors returned to print after long absences as well but almost all year long I was singing the praises of one book. Andrea Hairston's second novel *Redwood and Wildfire* deserves the widest possible attention.

Hairston's debut, *Mindscape*, was a dense, African take on the post-alien arrival novel that was reminiscent of Gwyneth Jones's *Aleutian* novels. *Redwood and Wildfire* is an alternative history of the early Twentieth Century, of life in the backwoods of Georgia and the growing city of Chicago. Alternative because Hairston's rich, passionate love story reveals the lives of black Americans in every detail, from the opening scene lynching of young black woman Redwood's mother and past the anguish of part-Seminole Wildfire's inability to stop it, to minstrel shows, pioneering black cinema, brothels and exploitative landlords, hoodoo and Christianity.

I read *Redwood and Wildfire* three times in nine months, each time seeing more in the story to enhance the world beyond its pages. For example, once I learnt that some of the obscure historical references were true, it gave the whole novel an air of realism that supported the gentle, occasionally angry, magic. On each read I shared the anger, fear, grief, guilt, greed, laughter, love and loss that saturates this novel until they were my feelings.

There are so many varied and wonderful things to admire about *Redwood and Wildfire*, from the vivid depictions of place (such as The World's Fair, visited courtesy of a hoodoo time travel spell) to the sensitive and sympathetic minor characters and the delightful leads. Andrea Hairston subtly works in a genuinely broad palette of race, demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of a black society that isn't monochrome. Characters may rant - particularly Redwood raging at her brother's exploitation of his tenants - but this isn't a polemical novel. Nor is it a single issue novel, unless its issue is that people and communities are not defined by a single issue. Hairston also incorporates a range of natural sexualities, all with a gentle touch. One secretive gay relationship is handled so gently that its recognition brings a genuine smile. Other non-conforming relationships are beautifully drawn, not least the struggling, uncertain and tentative affair of the eponymous lovers but also interracial and polygamous love too.

In all of this, and in its politics, history and art, *Redwood and Wildfire* reveals not just the emotional growth of its protagonists but that of an unseen, previously unsung, America making it unchallenged as the best book of 2011 and perhaps one of the very best of the century so far. Hairston is working on a sequel which is already top of my wants list.

Anthony Nanson on wanting to feel moved



I've sometimes encountered a defence of SF's alleged weakness in such literary qualities as psychological depth and emotional sensibility and the nuanced prose they require, on the basis that its strength is in the realm of ideas and in looking outwards rather than inwards. The best SF of recent decades has convinced me this view no longer holds water; it really is possible to excel on both fronts in the same work. It may be a sign of advancing age – ever fewer

years remaining in which to read! – that more and more I want the SF I read to be written with the literary skill and maturity to genuinely move me. On the strength of stories like 'The Fluted Girl' and 'The Gambler', I came to Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* with very high expectations.

It is an important novel because of its vision of the future: not cyberpunk any more, not globally apocalyptic, but a dystopian future primitive in which draconically enforced adaptation to low-energy technologies coexists with corporate capitalism that blindly refuses to learn the lessons of economic-ecological collapse and carries on raping whatever opportunities yet remain for exploitation. That Bacigalupi extrapolates not just one premise of escalating disaster but multiple intertwining factors makes this future all the more frighteningly plausible. His plotting is an exemplary performance of precision, pace, and intricacy. His rounded characters permit no facile distinctions between good and evil. There were *moments* when I felt moved. And yet I felt disappointed – that in its emotional sensibility, its unnuanced present-tense prose and its ubiquity of violent action, climaxing in the de rigueur orgasm of battle, *The Windup Girl* conforms to the boyish requirements of an action-adventure blockbuster. In doing so, I acknowledge, it has taken complex big issues of ecology and economics to a mass audience.

What I thirst for is not some impossible ideal. In Gardner Dozois's *The Best of Best New SF* I found it again and again in writing that genuinely moved me in ways that hinge upon specifically SFnal themes beyond the reach of mundane literary fiction: the impossibility of holding on to your dead beloved by means of a technology that's recorded the whole of their life (John Crowley's 'Snow'); an alien otherness that's destroying our world and at the same time points to the possibility of transformation into something wonderful and previously unimagined (Ian McDonald's 'Recording Angel'); and Ian R. MacLeod's 'Breathmoss' took me into a lyrical experience of coming of age and finding one's destiny in a sensuously imagined other world, reminding me how glad I am that SF has preserved a niche for the middle-distance art of the novella

My hope for Paolo Bacigalupi is that, having made his well-deserved breakthrough, he will get opportunity to produce novels that match the literary sophistication of his best short stories – and at the same time continue to tackle big ideas *and* carry his new readership with him.

Paul Graham Raven's Books of 2011

This year, I have relearned how to read.

Not the basic mechanics (or perhaps not so much) but how to read regularly and voraciously; how to read more than the one or two books a month to which it is so easy to dwindle when life gets busy. So there is something to be said for academic reading lists, which have also introduced me to genre classics I should have read long ago (Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*) as well as literary classics I hope never to have to read again (Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*).

I've read some of this year's more notable titles (Charles Stross's *Rule 34*, his best book yet; Neal Stephenson's *Reamde*, frustrating and brilliant all at once; China Miéville's *Embassytown*, difficult but rewarding) but probably just as many of last year's books riding the paperback wave (Adam Roberts's *New Model Army*, which should be part of the transhumanist canon for exactly the same reasons that it never will be; William Gibson's *Zero History*, whose sentences have finally and gloriously achieved the elegant interlocking precision of the mechanical watch motions he obsesses over).

Sturgeon's Law still seems to apply, however. There's no shortage of Extruded Genre Product on the shelves but equally no lack of books I want to read; as I believe the existence of the former to provide the economic foundation for the latter, this arrangement suits me fine. Furthermore, I remain unconvinced that The Ebook Self-publishing Revolution OMFG! (which is *still* dragging on, like Jack Russell that's overdue for its worming tablets) will change this statistic in any lasting or meaningful way. (I don't believe Amazon is going to destroy writing-for-a-living, either, but no one wants to hear that particular heresy right now... and by the time they do, there will be A New Enemy. It won't surprise many of you that my money's on it being Apple; if you can hate on Amazon's business methods, you'd best learn not to let aspirational hardware design and A-game marketing strategy distract you from seeing the same thing writ large elsewhere.)

I've also done some long-overdue spelunking in the caverns of the canon, hoovering up Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (which retains much of its power to shock), Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, among others. Brian Aldiss's *Helliconia* was even better on its third reading and a lingering reminder that the current debates over sustainability and the future of human life on are nothing new. The same effect inheres to Gwyneth Jones's *The Universe Of Things* which – despite its recent publication date – has a table of contents that plumbs the Eighties and Nineties and has totally sold me on Jones as a master of the short form and the genre alike.

2011 has been a troubled year in general, and the microcosm of genre fiction has seen its fair share of echoing crises, particularly growing a loss of faith in its oldest institutions and awards. I doubt we're done yet, either, but I'd far rather see dissent and deconstruction than complacent decadence and dismissal. It is the latter, after all, that has brought us to these impasses.

Patrick Mahon's Books of 2011

My sf reading pile in 2011 was a mixed bag of newly-published novels, older novels and a number of short story collections and anthologies. The following is a whistle-stop tour through the highlights.

Amongst the newly-published novels that I read this year, I particularly enjoyed China Miéville's *Embassytown* for its sophisticated investigation into the nature of language, while *The Clockwork Rocket* by Greg Egan appealed to the former scientist in me by imagining a universe where the laws of physics are rather different. Although it contains a number of explanatory diagrams and graphs, the consequences are ultimately shown to us through alien but sympathetic characters. Terry Pratchett's latest Discworld novel, *Snuff*, showed that the master of comic fantasy has lost none of his legendary powers to amuse as the Watch's Sam Vimes has to solve a terrible crime in the middle of a rare and unwanted holiday in the countryside. *The Kings of Eternity* had apparently been gestating in Eric Brown's imagination for a decade and this showed through in the authenticity of the characters in this intriguing time travel story about mortality and identity.

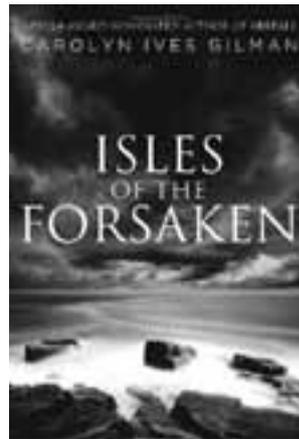
Turning to older novels, my first discovery of the year was Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* which I read after it appeared on Radio Four's *Bookclub*. This bleak, near future tale of a female community which rebels against a fascist British state is shocking and brutal but really makes you think. Having read Jeff VanderMeer's non-fiction manual *Booklife* early in the year, I sought out his fiction afterwards. I loved his first Ambergris novel, *Veniss Underground*, for its deeply weird fungus-based society.

I also spent the early part of 2011 catching up with some of 2010's award winners. I found Tricia Sullivan's *Lightborn* fascinating, even if I never quite got the hang of what was going on. *The Windup Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi portrayed a dystopian future Thailand with such realism that the images will stay with me for a long time to come. *Empress of Eternity* by L.E. Modesitt Jr won the award for the most complicated plot that I saw in 2011. It runs three very similar stories in parallel, each happening next to the same artificial canal on a far-future Earth but separated by tens of thousands of years from each other. Initially deeply confusing, the gradual integration of these three narratives produced a rewarding story which has interesting things to say about the worst aspects of war and armed conflict.

I spent a lot of 2011 reading old and new short stories, mostly in book-length anthologies and collections. The most impressive of these included Ursula Le Guin's amusing collection *Changing Planes*, Gardner Dozois's ever-rewarding anthology *The Mammoth Book of Best New SF 24*, Chris Beckett's award-winning collection of intelligent and humane stories *The Turing Test* and Ian Whates's diverse anthology of newly-published sf stories *Solaris Rising*.

All in all, I'd say that 2011 was a pretty exciting year for both long and short-form sf. I'm hoping that 2012 will be even better.

Ian Sales's Books of 2011



It's been said 2011 wasn't an especially good year for genre fiction and while it's true some mediocre works seemed to generate the most commentary, there were some excellent books published if you looked in the right places.

Unusually, my favourite novel this year, *Isles of the Forsaken* by Carolyn Ives Gilman, is a fantasy but it's one that ignores the conventions of the genre and is stronger for it. *The Kings of Eternity*, a blend of Fowlesian Greek island romance and Wellsian science fiction, could be Eric Brown's best book and it's time he got the recognition he deserves. *God's War* and *Infidel* by Kameron Hurley were together a strong, brash debut with some excellent world-building in their portrayal of an Islamic distant future, even if not everything in the books was rigorously SF. *Resurrection Code* by Lyda Morehouse is also set in a future in which Islam features heavily, and it too is not entirely convincing SF. Nonetheless, I will be hunting down the quartet for which it is a prequel. *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* by Jane Rogers was published as mainstream, though its central conceit is straight from science fiction's toolbox. The first half, in which the narrator tries to make sense of a world where pregnancy always results in death for the mother, is superb.

The best book I read in 2011, irrespective of year of publication, was also a fantasy. I bought David Herter's *Evening's Empire* in 2002 and I'm sorry I left it so long to read. What feels like a beautifully-written Crowley-esque fantasy takes an unexpected turn halfway through and becomes something entirely unexpected and strange and wonderful. A close second is DG Compton's *Synthajoy*, one of the most effortlessly cleverly-structured novels I have ever read. Compton's books have all been re-released as ebooks by the SF Gateway and every self-respecting sf fan should immediately buy them all. It's astonishing that such a good author wrote genre fiction and it's criminal that he's almost forgotten.

Because of its presence on the BSFA Award for Non-Fiction shortlist, I had mistakenly believed Francis Spufford's *Red Plenty* was science fiction. Rather than, as I'd imagined, describing a USSR that had survived into the 21st Century, a planned socialist society that actually worked, it provides a human view of life in the real-world USSR, focusing on its attempts to build a utopia, and not on the usual aspects cherry-picked by Western media to demonise the Soviets.

Finally, some honourable mentions: *Zoo City* by Lauren Beukes was a worthy winner of the Clarke Award; *Women of Wonder: The Contemporary Years*, edited by Pamela Sargent, is an excellent showcase of stories by women sf writers; *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ, released in 2010 in Gollancz's SF Masterwork series, remains a powerful and affecting read; and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Icehenge* is surely a contender for the Masterwork series given that it is, after Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, the second best SF-novel-formed-from-three-linked-novellas ever written.

Andy Sawyer's Best of 2011

The most exciting SF published in 2011? For much of the past year, I was (thanks to A Certain British Library Exhibition) working with SF published much earlier than that or catching up with everything that had been put aside. I did manage to read last year's Clarke award-winner, Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*; an advance on her excellent first novel, *Moxyland*, in its beautifully murky picture of a changed world. I also settled down to read Zoran Zivkovic, in the form of the two-volume English-language 2009 collection of novels and stories published by Zavod za udzbenike (but available individually from PS Publishing), and he blew me away. Zivkovic has been likened to Borges and Kafka which is a pretty strong comparison but it holds because like them he is a man on his own, a very individual writer of odd and strangely funny stories about – well, often they are about that thing we all do, reading, writing and collecting what we read and write. The ordinary and the extraordinary swim about each other. The title of one collection, *Impossible Encounters*, says it all but *Twelve Collections* may be the best introduction: a series of encounters with collections of days, dreams, emails, autographs, fingernails and so on, ending with a story about a collection of collections. He may be the best writer of the fantastic that we have.

Helen Oyeyemi's *Mr Fox* is a mosaic novel playing with a character who appears in British folktale and folk song as the suave predator upon young maidens whose teeth (in the words of Fairport Convention's immortal song) "did brightly shine/As he led her over the mountains... that sly bold Reynardine". In Oyeyemi's novel he appears as St John Fox, successful American writer with a penchant for tales which involve the slaughter of young beautiful woman: an Edgar Allan Poe for the Thirties. His muse, Mary Foxe, however, has different ideas. A dark story about glamour and gameplaying.

Not exactly SF but the stuff of which SF is made: Norman Davis *Vanished Kingdoms* is a collection of historical essays about European countries which no longer exist from the Visigothic kingdom of Tolosa (5th-6th centuries) to the USSR (1924-1991). Davis resists (mostly) the temptation to play with alternative history but this is a fascinating source of speculations. The account of Burgundy (whose disappearance from the historical record is part of the story of Mary Gentle's *Ash*) is alone worth the price of this large book but there are others, such as Rusyn, which lasted for one day in March 1939.

With *The Islanders*, Christopher Priest returns to the 'Dream Archipelago' in a novel (is it a novel?) which is both a gazetteer and a murder mystery. As usual with Priest, careful reading is demanded but, as usual, it is rewarded. There's a temptation to rush China Miéville's *Embassytown* but it is best taken slowly. A proper science fiction novel from China Miéville? This certainly has spaceships, hyperspace, aliens and the like but it also explores language in an inventive and astounding way. Perhaps the best science fictional exploration of language since Samuel R Delany.

Finally, this is not SF but sometimes feels like it and was the book which most fascinated me in 2011: David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* presents a meeting of cultures (18th Century Holland and Japan) which outclasses in imagination all but the very best science fiction.

Donna Scott on *Lightborn* by Tricia Sullivan



Shortlisted for last year's Arthur C Clarke and BSFA Awards, Tricia Sullivan's *Lightborn* was clearly a book that made readers think. I got around to reading it ahead of the BSFA Awards and was blown away by its engaging narrative, intriguing setting and deft, lyrical prose.

Lightborn, otherwise known as *Shine*, is a mind-altering technology that enhances and binds social reality for anyone who has surpassed puberty. The story centres on the experiences

of Xavier and Roksana, two survivors living within the quarantine zone of Los Sombres after a localised corruption of *Lightborn* that has driven its users insane. Xavier is older and wiser than his body tells, having become dependent on the drug *Kiss* to suppress his oncoming puberty and prolong his immunity to the corruption. Meanwhile Roksana is somehow immune to *Shine*'s effects, which may have something to do with her father having been one of *Shine*'s major riders, and serves as a figure of rebellion: the voice behind the pirate radio broadcast that tempts Xavier into the heart of the city away from the relative safety of his reservation sanctuary. Not only is the pair's friendship threatened by Xavier's potential to succumb to bad *Shine* but the military powers who want to do away with the city and its inhabitants – corrupted and uncorrupted alike.

Lightborn is a novel that can be enjoyed on several levels. Set in an alternate present, the novel sets up a strong narrative that at first appears to be a debate on the morality of over-reliance on technology and social media that has resulted in a city full of 'zombies'. But there is a greater intertextuality at play, with many elements drawn from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: Xavier as Adam; Roksana as both Eve and the tempter with her radio persona, Fall3N; the *Lightborn* being the angels who fell after the war in heaven. There is also a connection with JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*, as children in the ruined city give out imaginary food from abandoned fast food restaurants, and the drug, *Kiss*, is rendered symbolic as Xavier longs to grow up to answer the call of his burgeoning sexuality.

As with William Blake's poetry, the distinction between innocence and experience (the states of Paradise and the Fall from Milton) is blurred, and Los Sombres is both a place full of victims of corruption and one of free will threatened by powers of authority. The characters are plausible, sympathetic and – written post *RaceFail*, as it was – carefully considered. Some incredibly interesting questions are raised about where we are now with how we approach and consider each other, both with and without technology, and, as with Milton, there are unpredictable sympathies and double readings to consider. But above all this is a very good story, expertly written. Sullivan's prose is distinctive, crisp and new, but with such classical themes she ensures the durability and debate-worthiness of her work for years to come.

Jim Steel's Books of 2011

It may just have been lucky last year but I had the impression that 2011 was generally a good year for speculative fiction. I don't even have space to mention several fine titles.

China Miéville's *Embassytown* was the stand-out novel for me this year. It's right up there with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an examination of language and morality and his alien society is truly alien, which is a much rarer thing than it should be in this field of ours.

Langdon Jones's anthology *The New SF* was once cited as the best example of Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds*. Similarly, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's anthology *The Weird* is the ultimate example of *Weird Tales* and, with over a thousand pages, it is also much more. It spans the globe in its search for weird writers and it turns up some very strange stories indeed. There may be ideological reasons for only featuring contributions from the past century but space (even in this massive volume) must also have been a contributory factor. *Everyone* is in here. Many of the stories are old friends but it will be an uncommon reader who knows more than half of them.

Juliet E. McKenna's *Dangerous Waters* is the first volume in *The Hadrumal Crisis*, which is the latest series from her world of Einarinn. This is epic fantasy as realpolitik; epic fantasy in a civilisation that is not in stasis. The motivation behind the complex characterisation comes in many shades of gray and I still haven't made my mind up about some of them.

Jesse Bullington's *The Enterprise of Death* is a superb blend of black humour, nerve-shredding horror and secret history. The plot hangs on a gruelling form of necromancy from a time when this evil art was regarded as being just as valid as science. Coincidentally set at very nearly the same time as Bullington's novel but on a different continent, Aliette de Bodard's *Harbinger of the Storm* and *Master of the House of Darts* gives us the culmination of her fantastical history of the late-period Aztec Empire. What if the religion and magic were real? All of a sudden the colossal cruelty of this society can be justified and, after all, this is how the Aztecs saw themselves. An intense and startlingly vivid series.

Gregory Feeley's *Kentauros* (copyright 2010 but not actually released until last year) is an exploration of the centaur myth conducted through a masterful blending of non-fiction and fiction. Years ago this sort of gem would have been hard to find but the wonder of the internet means that, while bookshops may be withering, discovering books has never been easier. Conversely, Chris Beckett's *Dark Eden* only officially came out this year but I got my hands on it in 2011. I'm not going to say much about it except to state that it is very, very good. So good, in fact, that it will be going on my recommended list for this year as well.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING & MINI CONVENTION

Saturday, 9 June 2012
10:00 am - 4:30 pm

GUESTS OF HONOUR

Aliette de Bodard

BSFA Short Story Award Winner
Author of the Obsidian and Blood trilogy

Marek Kukula

Public Astronomer at the
Royal Observatory Greenwich

Location: The Royal Astronomical Society, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London. W1J 0BQ.

Cost: Free!
Membership is not required.

Updates: www.bsfa.co.uk
www.sf-foundation.org

The day includes panel discussions, interviews with the guests of honour and the Annual General Meeting of both the BSFA (13:45) and the Science Fiction Foundation (noon).



Sue Thomson's Books of 2011



The five best books I read this year are given in fairly arbitrary order as they are all very different and I found it hard to compare them directly, although they've all engaged, delighted and challenged me.

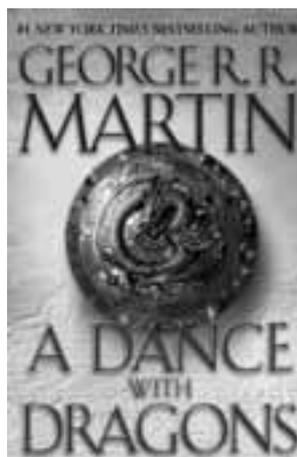
The Night Circus by Erin Morgenstern is a lush and richly descriptive fantasy in a Nineteenth Century setting, juxtaposing materials from a variety of sources without ever doing violence to their original context; strong on depth,

wonder and sensitivity – and I was particularly delighted to discover that it had its genesis in NaNoWriMo, the National Novel Writing Month challenge. *I Shall Wear Midnight* by Terry Pratchett digs deep into English myth, archetype and self-reliance; published as a Young Adult fantasy, it is easily tough and complex enough to be an effective, if sugar-coated, ethical training manual for many older adults. *Birdbrain* by Joanna Sinisalo is somewhat more 'literary' in flavour: it's a travel journal, a quest narrative, an in-depth study of an intimate relationship under pressure, an ecological-environmental horror story, a homage to Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* and a very, very weird and unsettling piece of speculative fiction right on the cusp of mimetic realism. *How To Live Safely In A Science Fictional Universe* by Charles Yu is an engaging blend of fannish joy, cosmologico-Buddhist philosophy and ethics and time-travel paradox. The nerd-as-hero does eventually redeem himself in my eyes - it's all done by empathy. *Zero History* by William Gibson is like Ian Fleming only better: a caper thriller, a dry critique of modern values and social mores and a glorious celebration and praise of Stuff – the objects, the packaging, the brand names and gadgets and styles that we infuse with Value. This is Romanticism as defined by Robert M Pirsig's *Zen And The Art Of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

The other two books I first read in last year that deserve special mention are China Miéville's *The City and The City* – a very good detective story, a wonderful distillation of European cityscape and a disturbing but completely logical extrapolation of the standard urban behaviour of "unseeing" people who aren't One of Us - and *The Adventures Of Unemployed Man* by Erich Origen and Gab Golan, a superhero comic about the USA's economic crisis, full of clear explication, biting satire, sight gags, and, yes, unemployed masked defenders of The American Way. These are both slightly older books but they were nonetheless excellent and new to me.

None of these books are overly violent, reliant on cliché or stereotype or packed with pointless action as a substitute for thought. All of them encourage and delight me, feed my imagination, give me new information and challenge me to perceive reality in a clearer, deeper, richer and more thoughtful way. All of them helped my mind to grow and I am deeply grateful to their authors for providing me with such a wonderful and varied set of experiences.

Sandra Unerman's Books of 2011



A Dance with Dragons, the fifth book in the *Song of Ice and Fire* sequence, provides a welcome chance to learn more about George RR Martin's rich cast of characters and to visit some new places. It is a gripping read but I doubt it would be a satisfactory starting point for new readers.

The Night Circus by Erin Morgenstern is a debut novel about a contest between magicians in a Victorian setting. It explores themes of perception and observation through a

borderline between conjuring and the kind of magic that can change reality. The characters are engaging and the plot is well worked out. But the strengths of the book lie in the bittersweet atmosphere and the fantastical settings, including the different parts of the circus itself. This is more like a funfair than a traditional circus but the encounters described are mostly solitary and poetic, so that they can be appreciated by readers who would not be attracted by the prospect of a visit to a real funfair.

Among Others by Jo Walton is a coming of age fantasy, set in England and Wales in the Seventies and narrated by a teenage girl, Mor. At the beginning, she is recovering from a serious accident as well as coping with bereavement and family breakdown. She takes refuge in books, reading in enormous quantities, and her reactions allow us as her readers to revive memories of our own teenage enthusiasms. Mor is a likeable and complex character, whose troubles are convincingly portrayed and, through her eyes, we receive a picture of other complex characters. Jo Walton succeeds in evoking the atmosphere of the Seventies and of particular places as they were then. The fantasy element of the novel seems slight at first, although it drives the plot. Mor is uncertain about the nature of the beings she meets and communication with them remains difficult. But her encounters with the uncanny are increasingly important to the decisions she makes about her life and their oblique nature gives the novel a strange and memorable flavour.

Twilight Robbery is a sequel to Frances Hardinge's *Fly By Night* but I think this one would work as a standalone. It is published as a children's book but deserves a wider audience. Mosca Mye, the heroine, has to deal with treachery and kidnapping in a world where powerful guilds battle for the control of rival cities and nobody can be relied on. In this world, you are born under the patronage of one of many small Beloved gods and are given a name accordingly, which is believed to express your true nature. Mosca herself has to cope with the patronage of Palpitattle (Who keeps Flies out of Jams and Butterchurns) and other Beloved include Jayblister (Master of Entrances and Salutations) and Sylphony, Queen of Butterflies. Mosca's adventures can be enjoyed by anyone who takes pleasure in the invention of strange places and customs and, especially, of names.

2011 in Pictures

Jonathan McCalmont

A number of approaches are available to anyone attempting to provide an overview of a particular area or timeframe. One way is to write about its patterns. Another way is to break the field down into a number of sub-fields and write about each of them in turn. While I can understand the appeal of hiding behind these kinds of critical artifices, I think there comes a time and a place for critics to stop hedging their bets and decide what it is that they actually like. For me, that time comes at the end of the year so rather than attempting to describe the evolution of the cinematic medium over the last twelve months, I'm just going to give you a list of my ten favourite genre films of the year. Well... I say 'just' but I would like to offer a couple of caveats before getting stuck into the recommendations:

Firstly, I did not see every genre film that came out in 2011. I say this with some sadness as while I love genre and adore the medium of film, there is only so much popcorn I can metabolise before my body begins to implode. As a result of this very human weakness, my top ten list does not include Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion*, Mike Cahill's *Another Earth* or Mamoru Hosada's *Summer Wars*. The exclusion of these films from the list is in no way intended as a comment on any of them; I simply did not get round to seeing them in time to write this article.

Secondly, while my list features ten really excellent genre films, they were not the only excellent works of genre cinema to appear in 2011. For example, Joe Johnston's *Captain America: The First Avenger* was as delightfully earnest as it was eye-catchingly steampunky, Zack Snyder's *Sucker Punch* was an ambitious but ultimately problematic attempt to explore the allure of escapism, J.J. Abrams' *Super 8* was a well-observed homage to 80s kids films that flew a little too close to the sun of postmodernity, Matthew Vaughn's *X-Men: First Class* was the smartest super hero film of the year (ahem), Patrick Lussier's *Drive Angry* was delightfully silly, Hiromasa Yonebayashi's *Arrietty* was beautiful to look at but felt like half a film, and Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte* was the best film you will ever see about goats, roman soldiers, reincarnation and magical realism but it simply cannot be described as genre. All of these films are wonderful and entirely deserving of your time

and attention but they simply did not make the final cut. I would also like to be able to include Kenneth Branagh's *Thor*, Duncan Jones's *Source Code* and George Nolfi's *The Adjustment Bureau* but I can't because they were all staggeringly dull.

With these two caveats in mind, here is my list of the ten best genre films of 2011 in no particular order:

Joe Wright's *Hanna* tells the story of a genetically engineered teenage girl who is trained as a spy by her adoptive father. Upon reaching physical maturity, Hanna is offered a choice between remaining in the arctic wasteland of her youth and joining the world of men. Unsurprisingly, Hanna decides to enter human society but in order to do so she has to confront her father's old CIA handler who wants to either kill or recruit her. Ostensibly a high-energy action movie, *Hanna* is also an intensely humane and cinematic coming-of-age story that deals with the difficult transition out of childhood's fabled realm and into the ugliness of the real world. Despite never having directed an action movie before, Wright proved to be the perfect choice for this project as his ability to combine sensationally choreographed action sequences with fairy tale visuals and moving character moments produced one of the most satisfying and visually impressive films of the year.

2011 also saw the directorial debut of Joe Cornish. Best known as half of the radio and TV comedy duo Adam and Joe, Cornish began his directorial career with a low budget British alien invasion movie. Given its simple plot, youthful cast and action beats, *Attack the Block* could easily have resembled such optimistic Spielbergian kids' movies as *The Goonies* and *Super 8*. However, rather than emphasising the uplifting and heroic elements of his story, Cornish opted instead to emphasise social realism. The result is a compelling account of an armed encounter between a hostile alien species and the hoodie-wearing inhabitants of a Kennington housing estate. Though neither as funny nor as scary as it could have been, *Attack the Block* nonetheless impressed me with its smooth direction and the absolute integrity of its characterisation. What I mean by this is that when a filmmaker opens the film with the suggestion that his protagonists are scumbags, he generally winds up spending the rest of



Widescreen drama in (from the top)
Take Shelter, *Attack the Block* and *Redline*

the film rowing back from that suggestion and trying to prove that, deep down, his characters really are good guys. However, rather than compromising the integrity of his characters, Cornish devotes all of his character-building moments to explaining why it is that his characters might feel the need to mug a nurse or deal drugs. The result is not a softening of the characters but a softening of the audience's attitude to the kind of kids that tabloid journalists describe as being 'feral'. Smart, slick and socially aware, *Attack the Block* is precisely the kind of low-budget genre film that British filmmakers should be producing.

Received wisdom tells us that British science fiction tends to be more downbeat than American SF because while Britain has seen its empire dry up and blow away, American culture retains the optimistic belief that America can keep getting richer and more powerful. If we accept that received wisdom is correct about the historical optimism of American culture then Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter* may well prove to be one of the most significant films this decade as it is an American film about the collapse of the American dream of empire. Set in small town Ohio, *Take Shelter* tells the story of a blue-collar worker who begins experiencing horrifying visions of an impending storm. Initially the protagonist attempts to explain away these visions as either tiredness or encroaching mental illness, but the stronger the visions become, the more he comes to see them as signs of imminent disaster. Increasingly terrified for his family's safety, the protagonist takes out a series of risky loans in order to fund the building of a bunker in his back yard. The more loans he takes out, the more imperilled his family's future becomes. At heart, *Take Shelter* is a horror film and as such it is built around a series of terrifying set pieces. However, once you move beyond these exquisitely directed set pieces, you will find a genuinely thought-provoking film about the role of fear at the end of American global hegemony.

Also fearful of impending doom was Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*. Thanks to his recent remarks about Hitler and a track record of producing controversial films such as *The Idiots* (1998) and *Antichrist* (2009), von Trier has come to be seen as something of an art house troll. Indeed, many argue that von Trier's skills as a rabble-rouser vastly outstrip his skill as a director. If nothing else, *Melancholia* should put an end to these whispers as it is a beautiful, thoughtful and intensely personal film about depression. The film opens with a pair of newly weds attending their wedding reception. At the beginning of the evening, the mood is warm and the dialogue is witty but tinged with just enough bitterness to make it feel almost overwhelmingly realistic. As the bride begins acting in an increasingly erratic manner we first believe her to be upset at her family, then we suspect she might be high and finally we realise that she is struggling with depression. Having opened with such warmth and happiness, *Melancholia*'s journey into misery and alienation feels almost unbearable. As we survey the wreckage of the bride's life, von Trier drags us forward in time to a point where the bride's family reconvenes in order to observe the passage of a rogue planet through Earth's atmosphere. Now obviously clinically depressed, the bride fully expects this planet to hit the Earth while her brother-in-law trusts the scientists when they say

that the two planets will pass in complete safety. Stuck in the middle of these two extreme views is the bride's sister who struggles to cope with feelings of anxiety. Brilliantly, von Trier treats the arrival of the rogue planet with absolute scientific rigour and this only reinforces the cataclysmic beauty of the film's ending. Who is better equipped to deal with the end of the world than someone who is clinically depressed? To live one's life trapped under feelings of impending doom is to be liberated by the knowledge that the end is indeed nigh.

Altogether less personal was Michael Bay's *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*. Many people reject Bay's work out of hand as racist, sexist and thoroughly mindless garbage but to do so is to completely miss the point of his approach to filmmaking. *Transformers 3* marks the culmination of Bay's on-going attempts at creating a film that by-passes the brain's higher functions and acts directly upon the more primitive and atavistic elements of human cognition. In order to maximise the effectiveness of this radical approach to filmmaking, Bay avoids using such traditional elements as coherent narrative, likeable characters or engaging dialogue. Instead, his films comprise a succession of disconnected images drawing upon broad racial and national stereotypes as well as the iconographies of fascism, pornography and organised religion. Holding this torrent of images together is a series of astonishingly complex action set pieces in which an array of robotic aliens shift between human and vehicular form while repeatedly punching each other in the face. The result is a work that is both a stroke of genius and the cinematic equivalent of a boot stomping on a human face forever. To see a Michael Bay film in the cinema is to be demeaned, insulted, exploited and humiliated, but also entertained.

Equally kinetic but a good deal less de-humanising was Takeshi Koike's anime *Redline*. Originally released back in 2007, it took until 2011 for *Redline* to find a UK distributor but this film is undeniably worth the wait. Set in a distant post-human future, *Redline* tells the story of a 50s greaser who races against a coterie of colourful and ruthless aliens while trying to both seduce an attractive female driver and keep his treacherous mechanic from fixing the race by blowing up his car. As with Bay's *Transformers*, *Redline*'s chief pleasure lies in the skill of its animation and the majesty of its visual imagination. However, unlike *Transformers 3*, *Redline* comes with a number of interesting characters and a plot whose charm is in no way diminished by its absolute simplicity. To describe *Redline*'s race sequences as spectacular would be to do them a grave disservice. Indeed, a better way of putting it would be to say that *Redline* starts off gonzo before progressing to outright insanity before ending with what can only be described as an enormous space orgasm. I think I may have drooled on myself around the point where the cars began weaving between mutant squids, naked magical princesses, mountain-sized energy beings and orbital weapons platforms.

One of the year's more surprising offerings was Rupert Wyatt's *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. Many of us will be familiar both with Pierre Boulle's original novel and the films and TV series that first appeared in the late 1960s. However, younger fans will be more familiar with Tim Burton's thoroughly disreputable 2001 reboot

of the franchise entitled *Planet of the Apes*. Given the extent to which Burton's reboot devalued the brand, few people expected Wyatt's film to be anything other than cataclysmically stupid. People, it turned out, were wrong. *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* is set in contemporary San Francisco where a human scientist stumbles across a potential cure for Alzheimer's. Desperate to reclaim his father but deprived of corporate funding, the scientist decides to adopt a chimp and use him as a test subject. Initially, the tests are successful and the chimp is soon displaying uncanny levels of intelligence but because humans are unprepared for sentient apes, the chimp winds up being mistreated both by the scientist and the human civilisation he represents. Embittered and frustrated by his inability to find acceptance among the humans, the chimp stages an all-out simian rebellion culminating in a heroic charge across the Golden Gate Bridge. *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* was neither the best directed nor the most elegantly written film of the year and many of its human actors left a lot to be desired. However, what the film did manage to achieve is to get cinema audiences all over the world to agree that the eradication of humanity is now an absolute moral necessity.

No less countercultural was Neil Burger's *Limitless*. At first glance, *Limitless* is the story of a lowly science fiction writer who stumbles upon a pill that turns him into the smartest man alive. Once he downs the pill, our hero finishes his novel in a matter of hours and then goes on to tackle Wall Street where he is forced to match wits first with a hedge fund manager and then with a local mobster who has somehow gained access to the same store of pills. Taken at face value, *Limitless* is a nonsensical thriller held aloft by science fictional stilts. However, peer beneath the surface and you will find the heart-warming suggestion that anyone can become President as long as they have a ready supply of cocaine. At any other point in American history this accusation might have seemed crass but I suspect it contains more than its fair share of truth. Indeed, Charles Ferguson's Oscar-winning documentary *Inside Job* (2010) famously revealed that a number of high profile US brokerage houses allowed their traders to pay for hookers and blow using their company credit cards. Given the number of US politicians with ties to the banking industry and President Obama's admission that he once tried cocaine, the suggestions made by *Limitless* stop seeming crass and begin looking a lot like an astute satire on the mores and values of America's ruling classes. In fact, I might even go so far as to say that American political culture starts making a lot more sense once you assume that everyone is high on coke.

Just as depressing as the suggestion that America runs on Columbian marching powder is the decline of American cinematic horror. Once creatively vibrant, politically engaged and visually innovative, the genre is now dominated by an endless series of remakes and pastiches aimed at audiences too young to remember the genre's 1970s heyday. One unexpected beneficiary of Hollywood's short attention span was Tom Holland's *Fright Night* (1985). Though relatively popular at the time of its release, Hollander's film is now best remembered for its subversively homoerotic subtext. Sadly, Craig Gillespie's remake drains a lot of the queer out of *Fright Night* but replaces it instead with an astutely observed



Paranormal Activity 3: Underappreciated

commentary on the terrors of adult masculinity. Set in Las Vegas, *Fright Night* tells the story of a teenaged boy who is trapped between the predatory masculinity of his vampire neighbour and the nerdy perpetual adolescence of a stage magician. Despite some reasonably slick direction and an amusing script by *Buffy* alumnus Marti Noxon, *Fright Night*'s real charm lies in a pair of wonderful performances by the unsettlingly male Colin Farrell and the spectacularly geeky David Tennant who spends most of the film pretending to be Russell Brand.

My final slot goes to a film that is part of one of the least appreciated franchises in recent cinematic history. Back in 2007, the Israeli-born Oren Peli spent \$15,000 of his own money making a film about a haunted house. He then sold this film to Dreamworks who used it to make something in the region of \$200,000,000. The film in question was *Paranormal Activity*. Often dismissed as a *Blair Witch Project* copycat, *Paranormal Activity* actually used a very different cinematic technique. Indeed, while the *Blair Witch Project* 'captured' supernatural goings on using hand-held cameras, *Paranormal Activity* kept the cameras in one place and allowed the supernatural events to simply wander into shot. The result was a heightened sense of reality and the impression that what we were watching really was 'found' footage. Unsurprisingly, Dreamworks commissioned a sequel which, though perfectly decent, really did little more than revisit the techniques of the first film. Come 2011 and another sequel was required but rather than remaking the film a second time, the producers decided to hire Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, the directors of the controversial social media documentary *Catfish* (2010). The result was a film that refined the techniques of the original *Paranormal Activity*, thereby re-invigorating the not just the franchise but the found-footage horror genre as a whole. *Paranormal Activity 3* is set in the late 1980s and is supposedly a prequel to the other films (though in truth you do not need to be familiar with the first two films in the series in order to appreciate the third). This time, a wedding photographer who attempts to make a sex tape stumbles across evidence that his house may well be haunted and he is absolutely right. *Paranormal Activity 3* is light on plot but heavy on cinematic technique and the scares it offers are some of the best conceived and executed of any recent horror film. While there is some clearly some CGI and post-production trickery at work, you will be amazed at what can be accomplished with little more than an old video camera strapped to a motorised fan.

From Outcasts to Black Mirror: British science fiction TV 2011

Alison Page

Little science fiction television is produced in Britain. Programmes which are expensive to make – and conventional SF is relatively expensive to make – must justify their expense in either viewing figures or prestige. For commercial broadcasters, raw audience size (not share) is the bottom line, and the key ratio is that of production costs to advertising and subscription revenue. In America the SF-watching audience is large enough in absolute terms to support traditional science fiction shows on commercial television. But the British SF audience is not that great in absolute numbers. ITV's only original SF show, *Primeval*, was cancelled in 2009. Two final series were made by the digital Channel 'Watch', with funding from BBC America and German broadcaster Pro7 and they were broadcast this year, to low audiences.

In contrast the BBC and the Channel 4 family (including E4) are public services and must justify their existence by achieving audience share and supplying creative and challenging content¹. It is no surprise therefore that most original SF made for British television is shown on these channels.

For these broadcasters SF shows are part of the portfolio by which they seek to demonstrate their service to the viewing public, and their contribution to an elevation of national standards. The strengths which SF adds to the portfolio are distinctiveness, originality, and outreach to audiences (particularly young and relatively well educated viewers) who are not well served by most other content. This is great for SF; its idiosyncratic cultural capital literally justifies its existence on our screens, but it does mean that when it fails to achieve credibility it falls hard and fast.

And that brings us to *Outcasts*.

Outcasts: A kind of grinding badness

For a few weeks in 2011 it seemed like *Outcasts* might be a new dawn of SF on British TV. Those would be the weeks before it was broadcast.

Outcasts was written and directed by successful and experienced TV professionals, with multiple episodes of *Spooks*, *Torchwood* and *Life on Mars* to their credit. The BBC was willing to invest substantial money in an SF show. They built two massive outdoor sets in South Africa,

and shipped the entire cast out there for five months of filming.

The first few episodes were shown on Mondays and Tuesdays at 9pm, the BBC prime time slot. But audiences were disastrous. The show was moved to late on Sunday night where audiences dwindled further, and after the final episode the BBC confirmed that there would be no second series.

David Chater, TV critic of *The Times*, spoke for the kingdom when he wrote:

“Not since *Bonekickers* has the BBC broadcast such an irredeemably awful series. Sometimes catastrophes on this scale can be enjoyed precisely because they are so dismal, but this one has a kind of grinding badness that defies enjoyment of any kind”.

So what went so badly wrong?

The premise was OK. *Outcasts* is set on the planet Carpathia, five years' journey from Earth, in the year 2060. Straggling human colonists - survivors of environmental destruction on the home planet - arrive intermittently. Forthaven is the only town. The rest is planet-wide wilderness. During the series the colony discovers evidence of an extinct native hominid species, and a disembodied alien presence. The emphasis throughout is on human politics and personal conflict between the humans.

And perhaps that was the problem. Perhaps if you set a story on an alien planet, it should be a story which can only unfold on that planet. Instead this was fundamentally a non-SF story, perhaps better told as a Western, which was forced to establish and maintain an SF context which didn't matter, to the story, the writers, or to us.

The director's comments before the show aired indicate that an alien planet was perhaps not his first choice of venue:

“It was originally conceived as a pioneer story, and as the one place left for pioneers is space we put the two ideas together,” Richards says. “It is something that it not necessarily about aliens and spaceships, but about human relations.”²

We SF fans love to take offence at being disparaged by the mainstream. I know I do. But come on. 'Originally



Doctor Who: She's behind you!

conceived as a pioneer story'? Then make a straight pioneer story. Set it in British colonial history perhaps.

But they had to be *space* pioneers. This meant there had to be an extra-terrestrial context, and so this background was dutifully supplied, via dull implausible exposition ('As you know, all our children died a few years ago due to a space plague', 'Yes, now you mention it.'). But I don't think the problem was 'too much exposition'. The clunking script was a symptom of the overall attitude to the SF element, as something which had to be provided or even 'got out of the way', not valued by the creators of the show.

No doubt the BBC genuinely wanted to make something which SF fans would love. But that was the trouble. The SF fans were all outside the show, looking in. One did not get the impression that the creators were as thrilled with the premise as they wanted us to be.

Doctor Who: Carry On Camping

Doctor Who, in contrast, is made by people who love it. 2011 saw Season Six of the 'New Who', featuring the eleventh Doctor, played by Matt Smith. It was shown on BBC 1 on Saturday night, in two half-seasons, and audiences were good throughout. The most watched episodes were 'Let's Kill Hitler', on the August Bank Holiday weekend, which was seen by 8 million viewers, and the Christmas Special, seen by more than ten million.

Those very phrases – 'August Bank Holiday Weekend', 'Christmas Special' – root *Doctor Who* in British culture, in a heart-spot analogous to The Grand National, the royal

wedding, or *Carry On Camping*.

Like a pantomime each episode is the performance of a communal ritual rather than the delivery of a meaningful story in dramatic form. We are pleased to watch ourselves watching *Doctor Who*. 'Is that Bill Bailey?' Yes, he is participating in the pantomime, in good humour, and to the enjoyment of all parties. He's not really portraying an alien soldier on a forest planet; he's appearing in *Doctor Who* on Christmas Day.

Matt Smith fits well into this context. He's young/old. He's the whole family audience from grandparents to baby in one body. And the companions reflect well on us too. Amy is like Pan's People: she's not just 'something for the dads' – she's a celebration of dads who like that sort of thing. And we like to think warmly of all the mums and dads watching *Doctor Who*, and the kids behind the sofa. We are the kind of people who like this kind of thing. Sometimes the most cynical viewer is charmed. Sometimes it all collapses into narcissism and self-congratulation.

All the aliens know 'who the Doctor is' now, just like we do. The good aliens love the Doctor, and the baddies are frightened of him. Almost every part of space and time has been saturated by the prior attendance of the Doctor. It's like the end of a chess game, where there aren't very many logical moves left.

I am nostalgic for the old black and white Doctor, who had to hide from the Time Lords because he did a bad thing. I'd like the whole edifice of *Doctor Who* to be destroyed, and the Doctor naked of reputation and resource to make his way quite unrecognised in a new

space-time. I'd like it to be a bit sparser and more stripped down.

I think it would be a better series, but perhaps not so much like *Doctor Who*.

Spin-Offs: Are you being served?

Two *Doctor Who* spinoffs were shown in 2011: *The Sarah Jane Adventures* and *Torchwood*. If *Doctor Who* is like an affectionate mirror in which we see and admire all our generations, these are little looking glasses, for children and for young adults respectively.

The Sarah Jane Adventures was shown on the children's channel CBBC. The first three episodes of a new season had been filmed when Elisabeth Sladen (who plays Sarah Jane) became too ill to continue, and she died in April 2011. The three episodes were broadcast in October. Elisabeth Sladen is an exemplar of the warmth of *Doctor Who* at its best, in which characters, actors and audiences participate. Although I never watched *The Sarah Jane Adventures* I am sorry it has finished. I hope it continues to be shown over the years, as the young audience renews itself.

Torchwood is the other *Doctor Who* spinoff. The fourth series 'Miracle Day' was a British-American co-production between BBC Wales and the US subscription channel 'Starz'. An accompanying web series called *Torchwood: Web of Lies* is available as an iTunes app. *Torchwood* has a devoted audience, but its charm is elusive to others. This series felt like an increasingly trans-Atlantic product, but the US audience dropped by 30% following the pilot. *The New York Times* described it as 'a let-down' and the *Los Angeles Times* as 'repetitive'. There is an American appetite for saucy good humour with a British accent – think of *Benny Hill* or *Are You Being Served*. Perhaps this audience is no longer well served by *Torchwood*.

The Fades: Invisible to the rest of us

A strikingly different young adult show from the BBC was *The Fades*. It was made on a low budget, shown on BBC3, and reached a small niche audience of around half a million viewers. The premise blurs a number of existing genre conventions. Paul, a 17-year-old loser, can see the dead walking about, invisible to the rest of us. These dead people are at first like intangible ghosts seeking only oblivion, and then become more like zombies or vampires which acquire corporeal solidity by eating the living. In the last episode they began to replace the living, a bit like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

Because the premise of the story wanders across the genre, its fantasy logic is a little opaque and confusing. It is not always clear what the monsters want, or how we can kill them, and whether that's doing them a favour or not. On the other hand Paul is discovered to be the chosen one, who must die and be reborn to save us all, and that aspect of the story is perhaps a bit too familiar.

Very much on the credit side, the writing and acting are lovely. The lead actors are Iain De Caestecker as Paul and Daniel Kaluuya as his best friend Mac – a fantastic self-deprecating performance. The dialogue and the prickly/affectionate relationships are authentic and enjoyable throughout. It is funny, and the effects are done in an intelligent way so that it is genuinely gruesome and icky

in places. The writer Jack Thorne has previously worked on *This is England 86* and *Shameless*, and this show is set in a similar social milieu – among social failures who have a way with words and nothing much to lose.

Misfits: I don't know whether that's a happy ending

Misfits is the story of six young people - doing community service for various petty crimes - who acquire superpowers, and proceed to accidentally on purpose kill quite a lot of adults, though their hearts are basically in the right place.

The first season, in 2009, won a BAFTA. The second season shown in 2010 was even better; it was coherent and confident, expressing the idiosyncratic and energetic vision of its only begetter – Howard Overman.

The third season is weakened in three ways compared to its predecessors. A key character, Nathan, was lost because the gifted actor Robert Sheehan has deservedly gone on to bigger things. The writing was diffused over a team. And, although many episodes were exciting and dynamic, the overall arc of the plot lost momentum.

Specifically, *Misfits* is about young people learning to exercise power. What is interesting is seeing the characters mature and grow. But that means the most interesting characters grow out of being in *Misfits*. In Seasons 1 and 2, Simon and Alisha came into their powers, and fell in love, and grew up. It was a great story. But in Season 3 they are now two adults living with a group of kids. Their powers are 'being able to see through other people's eyes' and 'being able to predict what happens next' - pretty much the normal mental powers of any intelligent adult human. And they don't need to use their superpowers to live successfully. At the end of the series these two alpha *Misfits* get caught in a time loop, always on the verge of adult life, repeatedly falling in love with each other, and dying to save one another. As new character Rudy says 'I don't know whether that's a happy ending or a sad ending'. But it is an ending. For Simon and Alisha it was either get stuck in a time-loop or buy a house and get married.

This season, despite that loss of imperative momentum I have described and the loss of Nathan, was still very good. It was well written and acted, with no poor episodes. It had a 'Let's Kill Hitler' episode, just like *Doctor Who*. *Misfits* was better than *Who* in the way it handled that topic, and the overall issue of how people with personal power interact with the stupidity of fascism. The gender politics of the show has improved, perhaps because there are women writers on the show now, and Lauren Socha won a BAFTA for her portrayal of strong-minded under-appreciated Kelly.

Misfits is joyful, vicious and sexy, but it has fallen off a little, and I expect it will fall further in season 4.

Black Mirror: The horrified watching faces that did not look away

Charlie Booker's three part SF series, *Black Mirror*, was shown on Channel 4 during December. It was made by TV production company Endemol, creators of *Big Brother*.

In *The Guardian*, Charlie Brooker wrote:

"The black mirror of the title is the one you'll find on every wall, on every desk, in the palm



Misfits: Happy endings?

of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, a smartphone.”³

Each episode climaxed in a person watching an un-simulated sexual act via such a screen. In each case we did not see the act, we saw the person watching the act. Each person was horrified and upset, but could not look away. This is the inverse of the *Doctor Who* effect, where we see ourselves in what we watch, and are pleased by being that watcher. Here we do not see what is watched; only ourselves, degraded by it. Not because sex is inherently degrading, but because in each case the act was degraded by being watched.

I say ‘sex is not degrading’, but in the first episode (‘The National Anthem’) the onscreen show was extremely degrading. Rory Kinnear played a PM not precisely unlike David Cameron who is blackmailed into having sex with a pig on live TV. The appalled British public tune in to watch in their millions. The streets are deserted. It’s the FA Cup Final and the royal wedding rolled into one. I would have been very happy to see Cameron ruthlessly lampooned, but in the event the PM character was sympathetically portrayed, and the British public were shown as prurient and childish, but basically decent in their reception of his sacrifice. This episode was written by Brooker, and directed by Otto Bathurst of *Hustle*. It sparked 253 complaints, making it Channel 4’s most-criticised programme in December. But you did not see anything; you only saw the horrified watching faces that did not look away.

The next episode (‘15 Million Merits’), was written by Brooker and his wife Konnie Huq, and directed by Euros Lynn of *Sherlock*. It is about love in an Orwellian

far future state, where everyone pedals on stationary bikes, watching the *X Factor*, trying to earn merits so they can appear on the *X Factor* and stop pedalling a damn bike. Its conclusion is taken from the film *Network*, where Peter Finch’s ranting Charlie-Brooker-style social critic becomes just another neutralised TV celebrity.

The Brooker-esque character is played by young Daniel Kaluuya (also seen in *The Fades*) who is likeable and rather tragic in every role. At the climax of the episode he watches the woman he loves, drugged senseless, being deflowered on the porno channel. She has achieved the celebrity she wanted, and not by presenting *Blue Peter*.

The final episode (‘The Entire History of You’) was less immediately striking than the previous two, but I thought it was the most interesting. It was not written by Brooker, but by Oscar and Bafta nominated Jesse Armstrong (*The Thick of It*, *In the Loop*, *Peep Show*, *Four Lions*) to Brooker’s overall theme.

‘In the future, thanks to the Grain, a chip which can be implanted on a hard drive in the brain, every single action that a person makes is recorded and may be played back...’⁴

We are SF fans; we know where this leads. The people of this future spend their lives obsessively re-watching their experiences, fretting at imperfections, scrutinising details which they missed the first time. Not really living. And worst of all, you can plug the damn thing into the telly, so your friends can see your memories, turning every experience into a social performance. At the climax of the story, the protagonist Liam (well played as both vulnerable and a git by Toby Kebbell) forces his wife to show him a playback of her adultery. He is not made

Series	Channel	Broadcast dates	Indicative UK audience ⁵
<i>Primeval</i> (Series 4) (Series 5)	ITV Watch (digital)	Jan 1 st to Feb 5 th 24 th May – 28 th June	3.3 – 4.5 m Highest audience 850,000 lowest below 500,000
<i>Outcasts</i>	BBC 1	Feb 3 rd – March 13 th	4.5m viewers for the pilot episode. Audiences fell sharply, ending at just over 1.5m.
<i>Doctor Who</i> (New series 6)	BBC 1	Two half-seasons: 23 rd April to 4 th June 27 th August to 1 st October Christmas Special 25 th December	Lowest audience 'The almost people' (28th May) 6.7m Highest audience 'Let's kill Hitler' (27th August) 8.1m Christmas Special: 10.7m (3 rd most watched program in the UK on Christmas day)
<i>Torchwood</i> (Series 4, Miracle Day)	BBC 1	14 July - 15 September	First episode 6.6m (8 th most-watched programme on UK television that week). UK audiences remained fairly good, placing it in the top 20 each week (US audiences fell by 30% after episode 1).
<i>Sarah Jane Adventures</i> (Series 5)	CBBC	3-18 th October	Around 700,000
<i>The Fades</i>	BBC 3	Sept to Oct	Highest audience 870,000 (ep 1) – Audiences for subsequent episodes varied, with the lowest just over 500,000
<i>Misfits</i> (Series 3)	E4	30 th Oct to 18 th Dec	Over 1.5m for each episode (counting E4+1). <i>Misfits</i> was the most-watched program on E4 every week that it was broadcast.
<i>Black Mirror</i>	Channel 4	Dec 4 th , 11 th , 18 th	According to the C4 press release 'Charlie Brooker's new satire <i>Black Mirror</i> was Channel 4's biggest drama launch of the year with a total audience of almost 1.9 million viewers.'

happier by this experience.

I liked this episode the best because it did not just extrapolate a controversial issue of modern society – 'gadgets' as Brooker claims – but dealt with an immovable feature of the human psyche. I mean, the tendency to watch our own experiences, to value records of experiences over experiences, to value events in our lives as social tokens, all in preference to living those events as they happen.

Black Mirror provides a good contrast to *Outcasts*. The story of *Outcasts* was a human one but it had nothing to do with its SF context, so the SF business was wasted screen time, delaying the forward motion of the plot, and subtracting emotion. The stories in *Black Mirror* were integrated into their contexts, so the SF was not some additional business, but what enabled the story to unfold.

Conclusion: Always becoming new

The audience for *Black Mirror* at its best was no bigger than for *Outcasts* at its lowest. But one show met the needs of its channel – to be distinctive, to annoy older viewers, to be talked about, to extend the range of television. The other show made its channel look stupid, and that is an unforgivable failure.

SF TV in the UK exists in tension between the need to spend money, and the lack of broad audience appeal. Mass audiences watch SF (for example in the cinema) for brute awesome spectacle. British telly cannot deliver this. It cannot get enough audience to pay for big special effects. It may be that *Outcasts* has destroyed the possibility of

extra-planetary drama being produced in the UK for the foreseeable future.

However, programmes like *Misfits* and *Black Mirror* show that low budgets can be spent intelligently to create domestic SF. Its cultural space will always be marginal, and relying on the credibility and prestige of SF among the arbiters of broadcast standards is almost as weak a guarantor of investment as relying on audience share. Science fiction must constantly change because it can only continue to exist if it is always becoming new.

[Endnotes]

- 1 The Communications Act 2003 states that: "The public service remit for Channel 4 is the provision of a broad range of high quality and diverse programming which, in particular: demonstrates innovation, experiment and creativity in the form and content of programmes; appeals to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society;... and exhibits a distinctive character."
- 2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-12336474>
- 3 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/dec/01/charlie-brooker-dark-side-gadget-addiction-black-mirror>
- 4 IMDB episode summary
- 5 Indicative audience is based on information provided in the public domain, on number of viewers at the time of first broadcast. This is intended only as a guide to relative popularity. Total/eventual viewing figures across all media could be higher than this.

Gaia Beware:

Infertility in SF due to Bioterrorism, Pollution and Accidental Iatrogenic Events.

Victor Grech
with Clare Thake-Vasallo
and Ivan Callus

SF has widely depicted eschatological scenarios of all types since we seem to willingly 'accept the lure of annihilation, only to discover that it is a temporary condition, a gateway to renewal and rebirth', an omnipresent theme in legend, myth and ritual.¹

Of these scenarios, infertility in particular is a crucial issue that afflicts many individuals, and epidemiologists estimate that the number of European couples who struggle to have children will double within a decade. One in three couples is likely to suffer infertility in ten years' time, compared with one in seven today, and this is thought to be due to the rising age at first attempt at pregnancy when fertility naturally declines, an increase in sexually transmitted diseases which damage the reproductive organs, a huge increase in obesity which is known to adversely affect fertility, and a declining level of male sperm count and overall sperm quality.²

This paper will limit itself to the intersection of infertility in SF with bioterrorism, pollution, and accidental iatrogenic events, all potentialities that may affect our fragile biosphere. These depictions are common in the genre, and perhaps this is because 'catastrophism evidently makes for more compelling fictional narratives than gradualism'.³

Real-life parallels will be highlighted, where and when appropriate and available, by the author, who is a medical doctor. Errors that go beyond the pale of poetic licence will also be pointed out, since 'error-free science fiction is an ideal [...] impossible of achievement [...] not that [...] the author can be excused for not trying; unreachability is, after all, what ideals are for'.⁴ A wide variety of narrative forms are included, in a comprehensive attempt to include all such narratives, and these include not only novels, short stories and films, but also computer games and comic books.

Infertility as a Result of Bioterrorism

Warfare on a mass scale between various groups of humans, or between aliens, or sentient machines, or any of these combinations has repeatedly been described in SF. However, warfare may also be waged by small groups of individuals on the rest in acts of terrorism.

Terrorism is now common in SF, a metaphor perhaps, for the current 'War on Terror'. Interestingly, SF has responded in a variety of ways to terrorism, including a satirical work edited by Farah Mendlesohn that knowingly tests the UK Terrorism Act of 2006 through the deliberate assembly of an anthology of works that break the restraints of this law.⁵

Bioterrorism is the intentional release of naturally-occurring or human-modified toxins or biological agents. In Greek mythology, the Telchines (who were either malicious daimones or malicious men) had the evil eye and were proverbial for their malice. Indeed, they sprinkled the island of Rhodes with water from the Styx in order to render it infertile.⁶

Certain properties of biological agents may make them ideal terrorist weapon, such as ease of procurement, simplicity of production in large quantities at minimal expense, ease of dissemination with unsophisticated technology, and the potential to overwhelm medical systems with large numbers of casualties. The dissemination of a biological agent can be silent and the incubation period allows a perpetrator to flee before the first symptoms of disease. General countermeasures to combat biological warfare and bioterrorism are inherently problematic and include intelligence gathering, physical protection, and detection systems. Medical countermeasures include laboratory diagnostics, vaccines, and medications for prophylaxis and treatment.⁷

For example, the devastating effects of such attacks were readily demonstrated by the Aum Shinrikyo sect attack in the Japanese subway system in 1995. This particular religious cult is obsessed with the apocalypse and in an attempt to hasten doomsday, released sarin nerve gas into the Tokyo subway system, killing twelve people and hospitalising 5,000 others. Sarin is a highly toxic and volatile nerve agent developed by Nazi scientists in the 1930s, and is some 500 times more toxic than cyanide gas. The attack was timed to hit the peak of the Monday morning rush hour in one of the busiest commuter systems in the world. This was the most serious terrorist attack in Japan's modern history, causing massive disruption and widespread fear in a relatively crime free society, and demonstrated just how easy it is for

a discontented minority with limited means to engage in chemical warfare. Sarin is difficult to produce but can be created using publicly available chemicals, and so the sect recruited science university graduates.⁸ Sarin also causes long term pathological effects including fatigue, asthenia, shoulder stiffness, blurred vision, neurophysiological and behavioural alterations.⁹ Ironically, the current war on terror has actually created fertility problems, such as the toxins used during the Gulf War which may have decreased fertility in its male veterans.¹⁰

In bioterrorism in SF, brave (or psychotic) individuals are depicted as taking matters into their own hands for a variety of reasons. A common one is that governments and states make no attempt to curb rampant population growth that overcomes finite natural resources with irreversible ecological damage and pollution, leading to massive multispecies extinction and loss of biodiversity. In the same way that natural viruses have been synthesised *de novo, in vitro*, such as the recreation of the polio virus from commercially available materials, SF also describes manmade viruses specifically tailored to curb humanity's overfecundity.¹¹

In Blake Sterling's short story *A Desperate Calculus* (1995) a small group of scientists create a modified 'superflu' that ravages the globe, a virus that interacts with the female hormonal system inducing all of a woman's ova to mature and be released simultaneously.¹² The author is effectively assuming a process of extreme ovarian hyperstimulation, analogous to, but far more severe than, the technique of controlled ovarian hyperstimulation that is currently used in assisted reproductive techniques. In this process, part of infertility treatment, several ova are induced to mature by a combination of drugs and hormones before being harvested for use.¹³ However, this story posits a most extreme and hitherto unseen form of ovarian hyperstimulation, a condition that only affects 1-2% of women in infertility treatments, mainly those who produce a large number of ova, which then result in grossly elevated hormone levels. This initiates a fluid leak from the bloodstream into the rest of the body, especially the abdominal cavity, leading to abdominal swelling, dehydration, shock and increased blood viscosity with the risk of thrombosis including stroke. Death is possible.¹⁴ In this story, intercourse would also have risked multiple pregnancies.¹⁵

The narrative leaves humanity with a modicum of fertility, as in fifteen percent of women the virus does not destroy all ova. Yet another complication of this epidemic would have been premature menopause in eight-five percent of the surviving female population, as these would have no ova left with which to have menstrual cycles. Complications of premature menopause include osteoporosis (weakening of the bones with the predisposition to fractures), ischaemic heart disease with angina and myocardial infarction, hot flushes, vaginal mucosal atrophy with painful intercourse and weakening of the muscles that support the genitourinary tract, possibly leading to incontinence or urinary tract infection, thus leading to the premature demise of millions of women.¹⁶ The virus unfortunately kills weak and elderly individuals, as does the true influenza virus. The scientists who engineered the virus are said to have been inoculated against the disease, but are still vectors,

carrying the disease all the over the globe thanks to air travel.¹⁷

In contrast, a story that does not ignore the importance of the female menopause is Thomas Disch's *Things Lost* (1972) wherein immortal women have a supply of ova frozen so as to stave off the menopause, a self-contradiction in that ova are depleted regularly, and a finite supply, however large initially, will eventually become depleted given a sufficient – and potentially infinite – amount of time.¹⁸

Wolbachia parasites engineered to infected humans are released to create widespread global sterility in Ejner Fulsang's *A Destiny of Fools* (2000). Wolbachia are one of the world's common and successful parasitic (gram-negative) bacteria, and live inside cells (endosymbionts), specifically, in testes and ovaries. These bacteria are rampant in the invertebrate world, affecting up to seventy percent of all insect species, and many species of nematodes (parasitic worms). The effect of bacterial infection may include (depending on the species infected) the death of infected males, the feminization of males to females or male conversion to infertile pseudo-females, the stimulation of parthenogenesis (reproduction without sexual contact with a male of the species) and cytoplasmic incompatibility resulting in the inability of Wolbachia-infected males to successfully reproduce with uninfected females or females infected with a different Wolbachia strain. Some researchers suspect that Wolbachia may even be important in speciation (the formation of new species) in affected species.¹⁹

Similarly, in Blanche D'Alpuget's *White Eye* (1994), a manufactured virus sterilises humans without destroying their sex drive. This virus is engineered from another virus that causes a painful death, and almost predictably, the original killer virus escapes.²⁰ In a more comic vein, the German film *Killer Condom* (1996) features condoms that are actually genetically mutated creatures, a conspiracy on the part of a religious group that attempts to rid the world of homosexuals by having these creatures attack and kill by biting off penises.²¹

Comic book SF has also dealt with infertility in the mad scientist trope, and since comics typically excel in goshwow heroes and stories, it comes as no surprise that *The Avengers* (Marvel Comic heroes) thwart the evil plans of the 'Yellow Claw' who planned to eliminate humanity as we know it by rendering all of humanity sterile through the release of a gas, while keeping a fertile set of women within his gas-proof base. The Yellow Claw planned to repopulate humanity by fathering children from women chosen for their superior genetic traits.²² Similarly, in AH Johnson's *The Thunderer* (1930), a scientist threatens environmental catastrophe if he is not given a work force, money, power and the total control over marriages, along with the right to sterilise any as he sees fit in his attempt to create a perfected humanity.²³ More altruistically, in John Taine's *Seeds of Life* (1931), a scientist who has become highly evolved and intelligent as a result of accidental exposure to radiation, decides to sterilise humanity in order to prevent useless suffering.²⁴

In a more egalitarian vein, a deranged scientist in *The Brains of Rats* (1986) develops a virus that can transform all unborn babies into males or females.²⁵ More recently, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) simultaneously

indulges several themes by positing a scientist who uses his trusted position in a biotechnology corporation to genetically engineer 'Crakers', a physically beautiful and perfectly proportioned but dull, peaceful and herbivorous version of humanity, who only have sexual intercourse during limited breeding seasons and who die suddenly in their thirties. Since they are not products of natural selection, they have no inbuilt subconscious drives that encourage evil. Simultaneously, the same ingenious scientist creates a Viagra-like pill (BlyssPluss) which heightens sexual pleasure, increases libido, provides a general sense of energy and well-being, prolongs youth, and is supposed to prevent users from contracting sexually transmitted diseases. However, BlyssPluss unknowingly also sterilises both males and females with a single use, while simultaneously infecting users with an AIDS-like virus called 'JUVE', that is quicker in action and more lethally painful than AIDS. Crakers are naturally created immune.²⁶

Marc Platt's *Doctor Who: Cat's Cradle, Time's Crucible* (1992) explains the absence of children on the Time Lords' home planet through a curse that managed to kill all unborn children and rendered the entire planet sterile.²⁷ And Sanders's *The Sterile World* (1932) depicts a terrestrial colony on Venus based on altruism and fostering of the arts and sciences, where a throwback with the old human tendencies of egotism and selfishness turns a lethal ray on Earth, sterilising all animal life, including humanity.²⁸

Infertility Due to Pollution

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) envisages a future wherein chemical pollution and nuclear accidents widely contaminate the environment and drastically reduce fertility.²⁹ The protagonist is a 'Handmaid', a slave in a fundamentalist society where women have no right to have property, occupations or literacy, and their sole function is to provide a child for a military officer and his sterile wife, a woman-as-breeder theme that will be re-mentioned. She is a valuable commodity in that she had had a child in the past, thus proving her fertility, a trope that was also used by Aline Boucher Kaplan in *Khyren* (1991).³⁰

Severely reduced human and animal fertility and a greatly increased risk of malformation is inherently unavoidable in a highly polluted future Earth in John Varley's *Millennium* (1985). 'Snatch teams' return to the past in order to remove fertile people who are about to die in accidents (typically airplane accidents) and whose disappearances will not be noticed (and so will not affect the timeline), and who are then used to colonise extrasolar planets.³¹ Realistic breathing but brainless mannequins that approximate the appearance of each and every snatched passenger are herded onto the planes as substitutes. This would naturally not work with current DNA technology being able to identify each and every biological fragment in a plane crash.

In similar vein, FM Busby's *Islands of Tomorrow* (1994) depicts humans also travelling back in time and abducting humans into the future for breeding purposes, and one of the women has a contraceptive implant and hence, initially, fails to become pregnant.³² And in Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang* (1969), toxic environmental conditions lead to a high birth incidence of children with

severe physical handicaps and intact brains.³³

This trope is repeated in Nancy Kress's *Maximum Light* (1999), set in the 2030s where environmental synthetic chemicals disrupt the endocrine system and cause sperm counts, and therefore birth rates, of all species to plummet. Humanity consists primarily of people over the age of fifty, children are considered precious resources and the search for a solution to this infertility is given top priority. Children are generally found to suffer from slower and more limited brain development than previous generations. The protagonists eventually uncover a conspiracy to create hybrid human/animal 'substitutes' for couples desperate for a child.³⁴

Declining fertility due to falling sperm counts, coupled with the rapid onset of a new ice age in the year 2050, with societal decline into anarchy and chaos is portrayed in Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998). Mass emigration from the former rich north to the more congenial south is unwelcome and the fabric of society changes into a pattern such that women flock around the rare children while men congregate together.³⁵

Robert Silverberg's *The Wind and the Rain* (1973) depicts a most extreme scenario, with human archaeologists excavating and restoring Earth, a planet that had been devastated by pollution, and where the few remaining human survivors on the planet have had to exist in special suits to prevent death from toxic pollution, with understandable reluctance to shed said suits in order to copulate.³⁶

The environment may be habitable but may not permit reproduction due to some form of chemical contamination that is not man made, and this is envisaged in the film *Unknown World* (1951),³⁷ loosely based on Jules Verne's *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864).³⁸ In the film, scientists drill deep into the Earth's crust uncovering a large underground space that renders their experimental rabbits, and by extrapolation, other animal life, sterile.

Accidental Iatrogenic Infertility

Widespread infertility may also be a completely accidental and involuntary iatrogenic event in SF, a flawed cure as depicted by Llewellyn-Thomas in his three books *The Douglas Convolution* (1979),³⁹ *The Bright Companion* (1980)⁴⁰ and *Prelude to Chaos* (1983)⁴¹. This trilogy is set in a 22nd century Earth suffering from widespread female infertility brought on by the use of a contraceptive agent. Similarly, in Tung Lee's *The Wind Obeys Lama Toru* (1967), fertility and sterility drugs act and counteract, driving human population levels up and down in a chaotic fashion.⁴² Likewise, in HF Parkinson's *They Shall Not Die* (1939), a drug is available that prevents all disease but sterilises all those who take it.⁴³ Radiation too has been implicated in this trope, and Piper's satirical *Operation RSVP* (1951) refers to the State irradiation of rats in order to render them sterile, followed by the same treatment to human criminals and the mentally defective, only for scientists to find that this results in a venereally contagious sterility.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Our anxieties are unalloyed by technological advances that may have far-reaching consequences, particularly when well known scientists also sound a warning clarion

call to this effect. Sir Martin Rees, the former Astronomer Royal, estimates mankind's odds of surviving the end of the 21st century as even. He lists as mankind's biggest threats the possibilities of nuclear or biological terrorism using engineered viruses, rogue machines including nanotechnological devices, and genetic engineering that could alter humanity out of all recognition. Natural events also threaten the entire Earth's biosphere and these include impacts by large asteroids or comets and super-massive volcanic eruptions. Rees argues that the risk has never been greater, not even during the peak of the Cold War. He advocates a renewal of the space programme with the intention of establishing self-sufficient extraterrestrial colonies of humans or intelligent machines who would be humanity's designated descendants, such that an Earth-destroying catastrophe would not terminate mankind.⁴⁵

Virtually all of the narratives included in this reading echo this. They are closed, quasi-eschatological scenarios, in that humanity somehow survives, having been taught a lesson, providing a 'narrative "escape" (the conventional Hollywood happy ending), by suggesting the possibility of communal rebirth'.⁴⁶ They also vividly illustrate one of SF's prime aspirations, that an SF author may

make my life a little more exciting for the next couple of days. He might even get me wired up to learn more about [...] science, [...] to reveal some truth to me—an insight that would make me think "By gosh, you're right, that's the way things are" or "I never thought about it that way before".⁴⁷

These narratives also adhere to '[t]he SF dictum that stories ought to be postulated on scientific concepts extrapolated from the existing data',⁴⁸ a convention that 'has not always been an easy standard for the genre's writers to maintain'.⁴⁹

Moreover, since all of these existential risks involve human meddling in Earth's fragile biosphere, with consequences that are likely to impinge on humanity in more ways than simply infertility, SF's admonition is that it behoves us to care for our entire ecosystem lest we destroy our own race. 'Some of these new threats are already upon us; others are still conjectural',⁵⁰ which is where SF's unbridled imagination may be helpful, by *gedanken experiments* that might help us plan how to avert or deal with possible catastrophes or even eschatological scenarios.

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**TAKE YOUR WRITING
TO THE NEXT LEVEL**

Modern Marvels: The Fairytale of Victorian Science & Technology

Melanie Keene

Here is a fairy tale founded upon the wonders of electricity and written for children of this generation. Yet when my readers shall have become men and women my story may not seem to their children like a fairy tale at all.

Frank L. Baum, *The Master Key*, preface

The novel technologies and scientific discoveries of Victorian Britain were often compared with the magical devices, wondrous transformations, and curious creatures of fairy tales. Who needed seven-league boots when you had the railway train? Surely the electric telegraph provided more reliable means of communication than rubbing an enchanted ring, and could send a message around the world faster than Puck? Reflecting telescopes showed the face of distant worlds far better than any magic mirror; antediluvian monsters clashing in primordial seas supplied a gorier tale than the fiercest dragons of lore. Used as a rhetorical flourish, a statement of superiority, and a familiar reference, these frequent comparisons also betrayed a serious claim: that, far from driving away the supernatural and fantastical, scientific and technological developments provided better fodder for the imagination, and more modern marvels. In this short article I shall analyse how fairy tales were used in discussions of the nineteenth-century sciences and technologies; and ask what they can tell us about the shifting relationships between facts and fancy, reason and romance, and early works of science fiction.

Victoria's Laureate, Alfred Tennyson, had coined the resonant phrase 'the fairy tales of science' in his 1835 poem, *Locksley Hall*. A meditation on time and love, an evocation of place and envisioning of the future, in its lines Tennyson infamously misunderstood the mechanism by which the railway worked, hailing the 'ringing grooves of change' down which his train carriage thundered. Such 'fairy tales of science', claimed the poem's narrator, rendered 'youth sublime'; alive to a deeper knowledge of the past, the inventions of the present, and the limitless possibilities to come. Tennyson was just one of many figures in the period who reached for fairyland when confronted with novelty. Indeed, fairy-tales in general were in the ascendant in Victorian Britain, as the nineteenth century witnessed a flurry of activity in and around the literary



Locksley Hall illustrated
by John Everett Millais

form: new translations were made of classic works such as *The Arabian Nights*; collections of tales and legends were made at home and on the continent, following the Brothers Grimm; and new stories were written, famously by Hans Christian Andersen. Fairies were converted into our modern diminutive ideal, and disported themselves in painted scenes of fantastical worlds, in periodical discussions of mankind's development, and on the stage, when the stars of Gilbert and Sullivan's latest operetta,

Iolanthe, illuminated the Savoy Theatre by wearing costumes bedecked with the first fairy-lights, supplied by the Swan United Electric Lamp Company. It is even said that Prime Minister Disraeli referred to the monarch as the 'fairy Queen'.

For some, including Charles Dickens, the collision of modern society and imaginative writing was a spurious attempt to dress-up dull moralising, and ruin fantastical stories: notoriously, he derided a rewriting of *Cinderella* as a temperance tract as one of these dreadful 'frauds on the fairies'. The fairy tales of science could similarly have been attacked for their combination of detailed technical knowledge and imaginative presentation; yet Dickens himself lauded the magical discoveries of the sciences. Scientific stories, he claimed, provided 'ample compensation' for the gnomes and genies they had supposedly chased away. But why were the sciences and technology different from other sources for new fairy tales? And how did authors such as Charles Kingsley feel able to make the claim in the early 1860s that 'fairy Science' would be 'queen of all the fairies for many a year to come'?

The sciences have a long tradition of magical and wondrous associations, from alchemical transformations of substance and hue, to optical illusions that split light into rainbows, or made objects shrink and bulge alarmingly. New technologies of the nineteenth century deliberately played on these older connotations, such as in David Brewster's choice of title for his 1832 riposte to Walter Scott's 1830 *Letters on Demonology* for John Murray's Family Library: *Letters on Natural Magic*. Brewster had invented the kaleidoscope early in the century, and contemporary satirical prints showed how peering into this seemingly innocuous tube could 'astonish' unlearned observers who were not aware of the optical principles and angled mirrors that lay behind its shifting prismatic colours. Another common instrumental revelation revealed the 'Monster Soup' of microscopic animalcules lurking in every water-drop; arguably the real nymphs and naiads of classical lore. Hans Christian Andersen himself based his 1848 fairy-tale on the increasingly common domestic experience of looking down a microscope: red carmine dye was renamed 'witches' blood', and used to stain a specimen of 'puddle water'. With this specimen, Andersen's magician protagonist, Kribble-Krabble, could trick a visitor into believing he was peering at a magnified microcosm; a teeming and violent city that resembled in miniature the uprisings occurring across Europe's streets in that year of revolutions.

For John Cargill Brough's 1859 *Fairy-Tales of Science*, 'Modern Alchemy' was achieved every day in the laboratory, as metals were extracted, and colours created, by 'analysis and synthesis'. Chemistry itself was the 'philosopher's stone', making money and curing diseases; and the alchemist now looked 'for all the world like an ordinary person', wearing 'a most unpicturesque black coat'. Aladdin's lamp could be equated with the 'lamp of science'; steam power one of its 'attendant genii' willing to be summoned and serve Victorian Britons. As Brough claimed, 'the miracles wrought by this slave of the lamp transcend all the wonders conceived by the Oriental romancists [sic]'. From such marvels as the Leviathan steam ship, to the printing and manufacture of *The Fairy-*



Modern Alchemy: From John Cargill Brough's 1859 *Fairy-Tales of Science*

Tales of Science book itself, the objects and processes of modernity were lauded as superior to the devices and narratives of old.

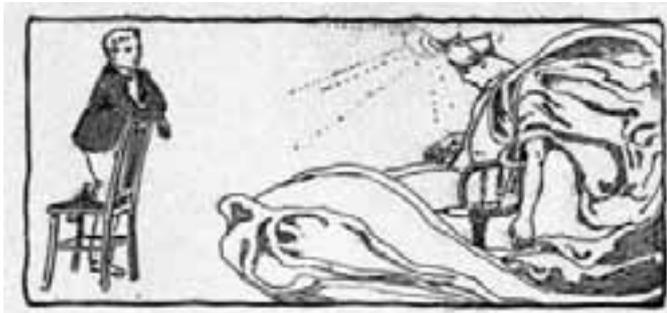
Nonetheless, however indebted they were to fairyland tropes, Brough's tales were mostly non-fictional, lecture-style introductions to the various scientific disciplines. It was through fanciful comparisons and references, rather wonderful illustrations (by Charles H. Bennett) – and not to mention that Tennysonian title – that introductory factual expositions were enhanced. A similar strategy was used by, for instance, Arabella Buckley, whose 1879 *Fairyland of Science* in which forces were fairies, and gravity a great giant, encouraged using 'the wand of imagination' to enliven details of scientific practices and domestic experiments. Other writers, however, decided to write new stories themselves about the sciences. At mid-century, Henry Morley's periodical article for Dickens' *Household Words* narrated the aquatic adventures of the 'Cloud Country People': in a familiar scenario, various suitors from the land of Nimbus for the hand of Princess Cirrha (daughter of King Cumulus) travelled the London sewerage system in 'The Water-Drops: A Fairy-Tale'. This work skilfully blended medico-scientific reports on the state of communal drinking facilities ('Report of Dr. Gavin'), as well as meteorological terminology (those names), into a wider fairytale-like story.

Another incorporation of newfangled ideas or devices into a fairytale narrative was to be found in 'The Master Key' by Frank L. Baum, better-known for writing *The Wizard of Oz*. In this 'Electrical Fairy-Tale' of 1901, Rob,

an American boy, inadvertently conjured the 'Demon of Electricity' whilst messing around in his bedroom with currents and wires. The supernatural creature bestowed on the boy a series of electrical gifts (including a weapon, a travelling device, and sort of proto-television), with the aid of which Rob embarked on a series of daring deeds around the world, from visiting a cannibal island in the Pacific to meeting a cockney policeman and a rather unscrupulous French man of science. His travels did not have the Demon's desired effect, however, in advancing the knowledge of mankind. Instead, they got the boy into trouble, and upset his mother; thus, upon the Demon's return, the story ended when Rob relinquished the power of these new technologies. Living ahead of his time was not so fantastic after all. Such stories, then, both applauded and condemned new scientific theories, objects, and practices: Baum's ambivalence over the potential benefits but also dangers of electrical technologies played throughout his story. Indeed, electricity was particularly contested ground in the later nineteenth century, and its personification as a fairy, sprite, imp, genie, or Demon, was used both in place of a coherent expert theory of how electricity actually worked, and to attenuate concerns and advertise products.

The first use of the term 'science-fiction' is usually credited to William Wilson's 1851 *An Earnest Little Book Upon a Great Old Subject*. Yet at mid-century, scientific romance and technological fantasy had yet to develop into a coherent genre; in fact, the kinds of works that Wilson was discussing were exactly these fairy tales of science. Another passage from his *Earnest Little Book* made this clear, claiming how the 'modern discoveries and applications of Science, throw deeply into the shade the old romances and fanciful legends of our boyhood. The Arabian Night's Entertainments – The Child's Fairy Tales – Oberon and Titania – The Child's Own Book – are all robbed of their old wonder by the many marvels of modern Science.' However, Wilson went on to claim that though old wonders were no longer marvellous, new technologies including the 'almost Omnipresent Electric Telegraph' had 'more magic' in their 'reality, than the wildest creations of child-fiction and legend have in their ideality'. In an echo of my opening quotation in which what was, once upon a time, a fairy tale becoming a quotidian occurrence, Wilson concluded the passage by marvelling at what could be achieved using this new technology: 'The Fairies never fancied anything more wonderful than holding conversations thousands of miles apart, and they only effected such things in Story; yet such conversations are now every-day common-places'.

Wilson's commentary asserts a confidence in the superiority of scientific understanding; or, as Brough put



Above and bottom left: illustration from Baum's "electric fairytale" *The Master Key*

it, that 'truth is stranger than fiction ... the revelations of science transcend the wildest dreams of the old poets'. However, the very reliance on and comparison to fictional entities demonstrated that these novel scientific productions – be they animal, vegetable, or mineral; phenomenon, substance, or property – themselves had a rather precarious existence. Out-of-sight in time and space, or only rendered visible through specialist instruments, practices, or rational processes, it was in fact the closeness of invisible forces and monstrous beings to their fairytale forbears, rather than their difference, that was striking, and that needed to be acknowledged and superseded. And, as Brough's lines demonstrate, this superiority was granted on the grounds of 'strangeness', or of 'wild dreams' as much as by morality or veracity: truth-to-nature was advocated as the most impressive source of wonder, spectacle, and imagination; facts were more fictive than fiction. By 1912, another commentator claimed that if he wanted fairy-tales, he now went to the 'geologist, the chemist and the astronomer': the sciences were the best source of wondrous tales about the surrounding world, and provided 'a vast store of food for the imagination'. Scientific objects, theories, and personages were points of departure for fantastical voyages that posed questions about contemporary society, and speculated as to its future development. Ideas, of course, that would find their clearest expression in the burgeoning genre of science-fiction.

recurrent:

KINCAID IN SHORT

Paul Kincaid

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ELAINE COLEMAN

In the year that I taught at the Science Fiction Foundation Masterclass, I asked the students to read four pieces of fiction: *Light* by M. John Harrison, *The Translator* by John Crowley, 'Magic for Beginners' by Kelly Link and 'The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman' by Steven Millhauser. These are all works that I admire by writers I admire (if I can't indulge myself in those circumstances, when can I?). More significantly, they are linked by the fact that they are all genetically unstable, they are open to be read in different ways, and what I particularly wanted to deal with during the session was what we, as critics, bring to the work being criticised. For instance, one of the students saw nothing fantastic in Crowley's novel, another hated *Light* as science fiction but when I showed how it could be read as psychological realism found he liked the book.

Of the four stories, however, 'The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman' was easily the most problematic. Only one of the students liked it when we began the session, and I'm not sure any more of them did when we ended. Given how highly I rate this story, along with everything else by Millhauser, this in itself was interesting. I don't suppose it was entirely coincidental that, as far as I am aware, none of them had previously read anything by Millhauser.

If we as readers change the story we are reading, then no text is entirely stable. We all have different knowledge and experience to call upon, and that affects the way we read. Even if I read a story twice in succession, the second time it is a different story because I have been changed by the experience of the first reading. And surely familiarity with an author's work is going to be one of the key factors affecting the way we read subsequent works by the same author. The reprinting of 'The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman' in Millhauser's recent collection, *We Others: New and Selected Stories*, gives me a chance to reassess this story within the context of his other work.

'The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman' was first published in the *New Yorker*, a magazine in which quite a lot of Millhauser's fiction has appeared, and was collected in *Dangerous Laughter* (2008), both venues where readers are likely to be familiar with Millhauser's work. So what do we find in this story that resonates with

his other work?

For a start, it is not a story in which suspense about what happens has any part to play. The very first words of the story tell us we are already after the event: 'The news of the disappearance disturbed and excited us. For weeks afterward, the blurred and grainy photograph of a young woman no one seemed to know, though some of us vaguely remembered her, appeared on yellow posters displayed on the glass doors of the post office, on telephone poles, on windows of the CVS and the renovated supermarket.' (336) This is typical of Millhauser's prose style, specific about certain things – 'the glass doors of the post office', 'the renovated supermarket' – that don't need to be specific (these places play no further part in the story), but unspecific about others (where is this place? We aren't even told the name of the town). Time and again we find this in his stories: a listing of details that suggests a solidity into which something numinous or extravagant or fantastic will appear. In his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Martin Dressler* he spends a lot of time establishing what appears to be a realistic account of a hotelier in turn-of-the-century New York, but once we enter his great creation we find a place that is extraordinary, impossibly extensive and magical, though the solidity of the detail makes it difficult for us to realise at what precise point the real gives way to the unreal. Similarly his short story 'Eisenheim the Illusionist' tells us a lot about stage magic in late 19th century Europe so that right up to the end we almost believe that the tricks Eisenheim is performing might almost be possible.

But it is not just solidity we find in the first paragraph of 'The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman', because the paragraph ends: 'Gradually the posters became rain-wrinkled and streaked with grime, the blurred photos seemed to be fading away, and then one day they were gone, leaving behind a faint uneasiness that itself dissolved slowly in the smoke-scented autumn air.' (336) Again we notice the specificity, but to numinous effect. But what we may not notice at first is that this first paragraph has given us the entire story, from the original disappearance of Elaine Coleman to the way the fading posters recapitulate her fate. The whole of the story that follows is not aftermath, but rather a restating,

a questioning of and hypothesizing about all that we have learned in this first paragraph. This is an extreme example of something we find in possibly as many as half of Millhauser's stories, from his first novel, *Edwin Mullhouse* to such recent stories as 'We Others': they are less concerned with plot than with examining the moral and emotional consequences and implications of what happened.

What is most immediately distinctive, and perhaps most disturbing for many readers, is the voice: 'The news of the disappearance disturbed and excited us.' The first person plural is not a common voice in fiction, we don't know who we are or where we are within the story, but it is a voice that Millhauser persistently uses. Perhaps a third of his fictions are told from the rather nebulous perspective of 'we'. Sometimes, as in 'The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman', the 'we' resolves into an unnamed 'I'. Sometimes, as in the ghost story 'We Others', there is a named narrator, though he keeps slipping into the plural as he speaks on behalf of all his fellow ghosts. More often, however, as in 'The Slap' or 'The Barnum Museum', the narrative voice remains resolutely plural throughout. The central perspective of these stories is less an individual than a collective, a town (and it always is a town rather than a city or village or any other such grouping). They are stories of a community collectively affected by or involved in the occurrences or experiences at the heart of the fiction. In 'The Slap' someone begins to slap the faces of returning commuters as they make their ways to their cars at the end of the day; the attacks are minor and never escalate, but they are unexplained and the perpetrator is unknown. What we see are explanations, theories, plans, doubts and guilts echoing inchoately throughout the town; and when the attacks stop, as inexplicably as when they started, the people of the town find themselves changed in ways they can never quite admit to. In 'The Barnum Museum', one of a number of Millhauser stories in which impossibly vast museums, amusement parks, hotels and department stores merge seamlessly one into the other, we watch how the people of a town respond to an endless and ever-changing collection of wonders in their midst. The thing about the first person plural is that it can never be an actor in the drama, whether protagonist, victim or villain, but is rather a greek chorus of observers, distanced from events but still affected by them and, generally, suffering a form of collective guilt. Because we don't see a first person plural narrator in many other stories we are lost. How can we know where to look or what we are seeing when the perspective is not individual but universal? The effect is alienating, we are doubly distanced from the events of the story. Doubtless this is intentional on Millhauser's part, but that does not make it any easier for us to read ourselves into the fiction if we have not encountered such a voice before. (Though, of course, you are having no problem coping with the first person plural voice I have adopted throughout this column: it is not really difficult, just unfamiliar.)

The implication of collective guilt is what hangs over 'The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman', but at first that is not obvious. As in so many of Millhauser's stories, we start with the specific and move into the numinous, start with the facts before we move on to theories. It seems, instinctively, as if this is the wrong way round, which



would be true if this were a story about story, a story in which plot and incident are primary. But that is rarely the case in Millhauser's fiction, whose interest is in the disturbance left by the plot, the sense of dis-ease rippling out behind the incident. It is not that he is uninterested in plot and incident: 'Cat 'n' Mouse' recapitulates 'Tom 'n' Jerry', 'The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad' revisits the Arabian Nights. Stories such as these are full of incident and colour, but the interest in 'Cat 'n' Mouse' is on Jerry's philosophical musings about the nature of his relationship with Tom, the interest in 'The Eighth Voyage of Sinbad' is in the unreliability of Sinbad's memory as he approaches death. In 'History of a Disturbance' we get a taste of the terror that awaits when we can no longer trust the words that create everything we know and experience and are; but all of Millhauser's fiction is built upon this untrustworthiness of words, how the solidity of what they create leads us to what we do not know, what we cannot experience, what we are not. Once we get used to this progression in Millhauser's fiction, we recognise that the specificity that opens 'The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman' is there precisely to underline the non-specific hypothesizing that will follow.

The facts are quickly stated: Elaine Coleman returned to her rooms on the evening in question and the next morning she was not there. The door is locked on the inside, the windows are closed, there is no sign of a struggle or a forced entry, her keys and wallet and all her possessions are untouched. But it is actually quite surprising how quickly Millhauser undermines the solidity of the facts. The last person to see Elaine was a neighbour, but 'it was almost dark and ... she couldn't make her out "all that well"' (336, my ellipses); her landlady, who lived in the rooms below Elaine, heard her walking about, but

'did not actually see her, on that occasion' (337). All we have, therefore, is speculation: 'we studied the posters, we memorized the facts, we interpreted the evidence, we imagined the worst' (337). Even our sense of Elaine is imprecise: the 'bad and blurry' photograph shows 'a woman caught in the act of looking away, a woman evading scrutiny' (337), though that 'evading' suggests something rather more active than anything else in the story.

Our nameless narrator, who has taken on the personality of the whole town, tries to remember the girl: 'Some of us recalled dimly an Elaine ... though none of us could remember her clearly' (337, my ellipses). He finds photographs in his old high school yearbook, in which she has turned away from the camera, 'her eyes lowered, her features difficult to distinguish' (338). It is as if Elaine is denying herself, almost willing non-existence, 'the dim girl in my English class who had grown up into a blurred and grainy stranger' (338). Later, when returning to these photographs, the narrator notes: 'It was as if she had no face, no features. Even the three photographs appeared to be of three different people, or perhaps they were three versions of a single person no one had ever seen.' (342) This is a woman made out in every way to be the precise opposite of the specificity of the town, when someone remembers her 'he couldn't summon up any details' (339). This is a life lived not so much on the edge as out of sight.

Slowly, as the story progresses, as is the way with Millhauser's stories, the communal becomes personal. He (we assume it is 'he', though the plural voice allows Millhauser to avoid any gender-specific words) starts to recall his own encounters with her, a quiet girl at a party, a half-familiar face in the street: 'I noticed her without looking at her ... Only after her disappearance did those fleeting encounters seem pierced by a poignance I knew to be false, though I couldn't help feeling it anyway, for it was as if I should have stopped and talked to her, warned her, saved her, done something' (341, my ellipses). Again there is that interplay between the specific and the non-specific; the more precisely our narrator recalls his own encounters with Elaine Coleman, the more inchoate the sensations evoked. But then, this fleeting poignancy is a sensation that Millhauser's stories pursue again and again. In one of his more overtly science fictional stories, 'The Wizard of West Orange', an inventor working for Edison tries to create a device that will record and transmit touch in the same way that Edison's phonograph records and transmits sound. But for the young librarian who gets to be the guinea pig in these experiments, what makes the haptograph exciting is when it creates sensations he has never previously experienced, for which he has no name. It is that striving for the subtle and indescribable that seems to be one of the guiding spirits behind Millhauser's work, it is a reaching for the transcendent but it is often, of course, what makes the stories delicate and intangible. The Elaine Coleman who is never there throughout her story leaves behind a sensation that we can never quite name, and that is part of the point of the story.

The moral and emotional turning point comes, characteristically, with the narrator's most specific recollection. He and his friend Roger are walking along a street when they pass a girl tossing a basketball into

a hoop over the garage door. The ball hits the rim of the hoop, bounces out, and is caught by the narrator. 'What struck me, as I remembered that afternoon, was the moment of hesitation' (342), which he interprets as an invitation to shoot a basket, but before he can accept Roger silently mouths the word 'No.' 'What troubled my memory was the sense that Elaine had seen that look, that judgement; she must have been skilled at reading dismissive signs.' (342) From this moment, we start to doubt the rational explanations of her disappearance: 'The bafflement of the police, the lack of clues, the locked door, the closed windows, led me to wonder whether we were formulating the problem properly, whether we were failing to take into account some crucial element.' (343) He is no longer looking for an explanation of Elaine Coleman's disappearance, but rather some assuagement of his new sense of personal and collective guilt. 'What bothered me wasn't so much the disappearance itself, since I had scarcely known her, or even the possible ugliness of that disappearance, but my own failure of memory. Others recalled her still more dimly. It was as if none of us had ever looked at her, or had looked at her while thinking of something more interesting. I felt that we were guilty of some obscure crime.' (344)

As the missing posters fade, and with them all memory of Elaine Coleman, our narrator rejects notions that she was abducted or had simply run away, replacing them with a more emotionally satisfying theory: that she had literally disappeared. 'If it's true that we exist by impressing ourselves on other minds, by entering other imaginations, then the quiet, unremarkable girl whom no one noticed must at times have felt herself growing vague, as if she were gradually being erased by the world's inattention.' (346) And this girl who fades out of the world just as she faded out of our attention is not the only one, there are others who are ignored and so grow vague. 'For we are no longer innocent, we who do not see and do not remember, we incurious ones, we conspirators in disappearance. I too murdered Elaine Coleman.' (347)

And with that final, almost defiant statement of personal and collective guilt, Millhauser brings his story to an end. But how are we meant to take that ending? Are we meant to read the story as a fantasy in which Elaine Coleman really did fade out of existence? Or are we meant to read it as a metaphor for the way society does tend to ignore certain of its members? By ending at that point Millhauser does not decide for us, there is no one definitive way of reading the story. It is delicately constructed, subtly argued, beautifully written, and hesitates in a very deliberate way between possible readings. By ending with the suggestion that Elaine Coleman actually did fade out of the world, Millhauser perhaps inclines us towards the fantastic reading, but there is in fact no reason to doubt the mundane police explanations for her disappearance and all that follows is but the guilt of a man who belatedly recognises his own part in isolating her from society. How do you want to read the story? Millhauser lets us read it many different ways, it's what he does.

● Quotations taken from 'The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman' by Steven Millhauser in *We Others: New and Selected Stories*, London, Corsair, 2011, pages 336-347.

recurrent: PICTURE THIS Terry Martin

DIRTY WORDS IN COMICS

Manga. A dirty word to many comic purest yet, translated from Japanese, manga means, well, comics. So why the hatred? Why is the art style so disliked? Perhaps its popularity amongst younger readers may well have alienated the older comic fan – a warped snobbery that I believe gets in the way of a lot of literature – and I have to admit to having had a bias once myself. Reading from the back of the book to the front – that’s the correct way to experience manga (although there are Westernised versions that read left to right) – takes a little getting used to, but if you’re a comics person, and we’ll touch on that later, you’ll soon forget the difference. Manga usually comes in a nice little paperback format rather than the American comic book size that has become *the* standard despite UK independent publishers trying to push for a slightly smaller format that helps their margins – ‘A’ sizes mean diddly to the US – and if you’ve ever tried to get something printed in the UK (and Europe for that matter) that’s not your standard size you’ll know what I mean. At the Cardiff Comic Expo in February this year there were several customers at the Murky Depths table who were turned off of *Dead Girls* (the first of a series of eight comics) by the manga-ish artwork. Sure, there’s a leaning that way – after all, Leonardo M Giron has been heavily influenced being a Filipino – but take a closer look and there’s so much more detail.

As a lover of most anything that ends in punk (sorry if you don’t like subcategorising genres but it helps to give a gist of what you’re talking about) I was instantly attracted to the manga epic *Biomega* which was first published in its collected form (six altogether) by Viz Media in 2010. The story and art is by Tsutomu Nihei and his dark style has a familiarity that should appeal to “us over ‘ere”. No it’s not Gerald Scarfe or Ralph Steadman but some of the gritty art leans in that direction.

It’s a fast-moving futuristic (by a thousand years) zombie(ish) tale – with humans having fallen foul of the N5S virus. The hero, Zoichi Kanoe (a synthesised human with lightning reactions), with his AI companion Fuyu Kanoe – integrated into his motorbike – are trying to find humans who have adapted to the virus, but the Data Recovery Foundation are out to beat them to it. They believe humans need to be cleansed by the virus and that

they can use the adapted humans to create immortals. There’s a neat little three-page sequence (seven panels in all) that starts with Zoichi unholstering his pistol. The last panel not only shows Zoichi reholstering his pistol but also the exploding head of the first member of a Public Health Service’s Compulsory Execution Unit – there are five – that Zoichi has just despatched. A cool demonstration of his speed. There are lots of great pictorial moments like this that lift the dark art and neat story up enough notches to appreciate that manga is worth more than just a cursory glance, but at the end of the day it’s the story that counts . . . and I’ll definitely be buying more *Biomega*.

Should I even be talking about manga? When I recently asked one of our prolific comic writers if he was enjoying these columns he answered that I should be giving the mainstream titles, such as those published by Vertigo, more publicity. In actual fact I have covered the likes of *Fables* and *The Unwritten*, both Vertigo titles – and the later is one of my favourites. Most *Vector* readers, he claims, aren’t comic readers, and that I should be directing *you* to the ‘popular’ comics. I’d be interested to know if you read comics. If you don’t, you’re missing out.

Biomega features humans infected by a virus that turns them into zombie-like-creatures and so does Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* (not the 1995 film) which now has its own TV series. Not having seen the TV adaptation – I only have Freesat and my wife isn’t a fan of horror so no DVD boxed sets for me – I can only make judgement on the comic, and, after all, that’s what I’m supposed to be doing. It’s a typical, but enjoyable, zombie-apocalypse tale with Officer Rick Grimes awaking from a coma to find the rest of the world (well, at least the US) infected and zombified. He soon discovers he’s not the only survivor. Stories are, at their best, about how characters interact under certain circumstances and *The Walking Dead* explores the tight line between remaining civilised, in a situation where civilisation as we know it has been devastated, and becoming the animal that lurks within. The artwork in *Volume 1, Days Gone Bye* is well executed by Tony Moore who, in later volumes is replaced by our very own Charlie Adlard. Having already bought *Volume 2* suggests I might be hooked.

I try to give a broad indication of what you can



Biomega (top), The Walking Dead (left), a promotional poster for DC's new Before Watchmen range of comics and (opposite) is a detail from Alan Moore's Lovecraftian Neomonicon



find in comic shops – and the likes of Waterstones, of course – and at comic conventions. I'm trying to avoid the politics so I won't become embroiled in the *Before Watchmen* controversy, and will remain on the fence with whether or not DC should have given, or be giving, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons a slice of the profits from the *Watchmen* franchise. Just remember the big print can be just as dangerous as the small print in a contract.

The back end of last year *Avatar* (I'm never sure whether they're the small big boys or the big small press) published the collected works of *Neonomicon*, Alan Moore's twist on HP Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. Actually, this is two stories, one leading on from the other, so the first two chapters are the first, *The Courtyard*. Moore isn't afraid to weave his knowledge of magic into a frighteningly believable story set in current times. I had one uncomfortable night of dark dreams while reading this so it has the desired undesirable effect. Two FBI agents, Lamper and Brears, are sent to Salem (well, of course, it would be wouldn't it) while investigating a spate of murders by seemingly 'normal' people after one of their own top agents becomes one of the murderers. It's about the secret language Aklo that Lovecraft, among others, used in some of his stories, and the states of mind this can induce without drugs. Like all good stories the heroes have baggage. Brears's weakness is that she's just

been rehabilitated from sex-addiction (something that I seem to remember Michael Douglas suffered from) so if you're squeamish about sex scenes and aren't interested in naked bodies (heh, it's art!) then this isn't for you.

It's a disturbing story that I don't want to spoil by making comparisons, and that means Moore and artist Jacen Burrows have been able to tip the balance of expectation in the reader and somehow managed to invoke our primordial fears. So if you're looking for a comic to scare you then look no further.

By the way, if you've never read Lovecraft and would like a quick introduction then *The Lovecraft Anthology – Volume I*, edited by Dan Lockwood and published by Image, might be a good place to start. Most of the comic adaptations give a feel for Lovecraft's style and the various artists do a good job of depicting the darkness therein. For those familiar to Lovecraft's work this anthology features *The Call of Cthulhu*, *The Haunter of the Dark*, *The Dunwich Horror*, *The Colour Out of Space*, *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, *The Rats in The Walls*, and *Dagon*.

And before I go I have to tell you I've just started reading *Morning Glories* from Image, and I'm thinking, why did I ever have a midlife hiatus from comics?

recurrent: RESONANCES Stephen Baxter

SHORT STORIES

Science fiction is one of the few literary fields in which the short story form continues to flourish. In fact, some aficionados would say that it is in the short form that SF is at its best, with startling ideas polished to brilliance and presented economically, followed by a rapid exit off-stage before there's a chance to ask any awkward questions about plausibility.

In these times of convulsion in the publishing industry, perhaps opportunity is continuing to knock for short-story writers. In addition to various new online markets, the great American digests, *Analog*, *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, have all recently enjoyed subscription boosts through e-outlets like the Kindle. And in print there are enterprising new publishers working on a variety of scales. In April Newcon Press, run by BSFA stalwart Ian Whates, will publish a new collection of my own stories called *Last and First Contact*. This will be the second in a series called 'Imaginings', of which the first volume is *Cold Grey Stones* by Tanith Lee, published on 26th January 2012.

Like many SF authors I got my first taste of professional publication through the short fiction market. I remember working on what became my first sale, 'The Xeelee Flower,' in June 1986. I had stayed up late to watch a World Cup soccer/football game, which didn't involve England, and it was dull, dull. 'Don't you dare go to bed!' Des Lynam chided at half time. But I was only half-watching. With pen and paper, I was trying to work out a story. Aged 28, I had been working on science fiction stories, on and off, since the age of 16. But I had yet to be published. I'd decided I either had to take the craft seriously or else drop it altogether and find a healthier hobby. That was why I'd ploughed through a full-length novel (never published) in 1984, and why I was about to start a correspondence course in short story writing.

Now, from somewhere, I had got the idea for a gadget story featuring an energy-absorbent material – like a solar panel – but which used the energy it gathered to grow, like a flower. I tried to figure out an adventure plot against this background. Who had the problem? I imagined a human astronaut cowering under the 'flower' as a nearby star exploded; the flower would absorb the energy of the nova, but would grow hugely. I typed out a draft or two



on the old manual typewriter my mother had given me long before, and sent it in to a still relatively new British science fiction magazine, called *Interzone*. I waited for a rejection, as I had waited so many times before. But, to my astonishment and delight, *Interzone* bought the story. Then, of course, I started tearing my hair out trying to get a second sale.

The title of my new collection is of course a nod to Olaf Stapledon, but like the stories within it reflects some of my current interests, including my work with a SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Life) study group which considers the consequences of first contact, and with a

British Interplanetary Society study group called Project Icarus which is designing an interstellar probe, intended to explore the stars but carrying the faint hope of provoking first contact. And first contact is the subject of a new story called 'Erstkontakt'. 'Last Contact', meanwhile, partly inspired by my reading Nevil Shute, my father's favourite author, is one of my attempts to dramatise the cosmological through the personal. It's about eschatology and gardening.

Another of my long-standing fascinations is alternate history – I'm now a judge on the Sidewise Award – and one AH piece included here is 'The Pacific Mystery', a fantastic voyage through a non-Euclidian geometry. Some inspiration for me these days comes from specific commissions. 'Dreamers' Lake' was the outcome of one such commission, from Pete Crowther: to deliver a story as a tribute to the movie *Forbidden Planet*. It contains a nod to Shakespeare, like the movie, but unlike the movie there's also a nod to Dire Straits. In the mix there is also a very early story from not long after that World Cup brainstorm, 'Halo Ghosts', an idea I eventually worked up into a story called 'Traces' (1991). I later decided I liked the original version too and reworked it.

Of course as a reader short stories had a major impact on me. While I was putting together this collection I returned to an exercise I've toyed with from time to time over the years: listing my all-time top ten stories. Like similar tabulations of top rock songs and the like, of course the list changes with time, but then so do I. Some of these picks surely won't be a surprise to anyone – but that's why they are classics. And most of them, unsurprisingly too, are pieces which had an impact on me in my young-teen years, a reader's most impressionable time.

Of Arthur C Clarke's great and poignant short pieces I'd have to pick 'The Nine Billion Names of God' (1953). Isaac Asimov's short fiction included perhaps the most famous SF short story of all, 'Nightfall' (1941), but my pick of his is the poignant 'Eyes Do More Than See' (1965), about powerful post-humans mourning the loss of their corporeality.

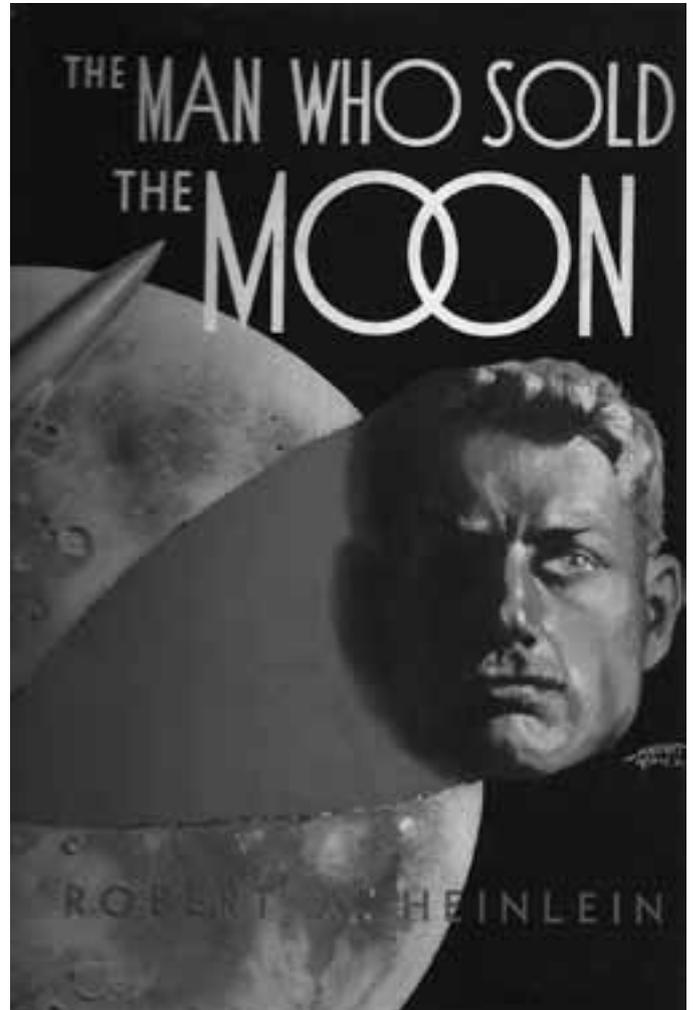
Robert Heinlein continues to cast a long shadow over the field, but at his best he was one of our finest and most ingenious storytellers. For my list I was tempted by his intricate and astounding time-travel classic 'All You Zombies' (1959), about a time traveller who becomes his own father *and* mother, but I settled on the novella 'The Man Who Sold The Moon' (1950), an almost Shakespearean saga of a visionary space entrepreneur who achieves his goals through political and financial manipulation, and in the end downright fraud. Of Philip K Dick's explorations of the fragility of reality, I've always prized 'War Veteran' (1954), whose battered protagonist mumbles of a war that has yet to be fought. I like to think of some of my own characters (such as Reid Malenfant of my *Manifold* series) that they *believe* they are can-do Heinlein characters, but in fact are closer to existentially baffled PKD characters.

Ray Bradbury's Martian stories are justly lauded, and with school groups and others I've run writing workshops based on his classic 'A Sound of Thunder' (1952). But of his work I pick the uplifting 'Frost and Fire' (1946), in which humans are stranded on a planet where their lives last just eight days. I remember reading this story over and over aged about twelve. Robert Sheckley wrote dozens of

hilarious and intricate pieces, but my choice is the poignant 'Ask a Foolish Question' (1953). A story whose influence on me I have acknowledged many times before (such as in my novel *Flux*) is James Blish's 'Surface Tension' (1952), a tale of microscopic humans struggling to escape from a shallow pond, a marvellous evocation of wonder and the human spirit – and an exemplar of how changes of scale are an essential component of much great SF. Philip Latham was the pseudonym of an American astronomer; his 'The Xi Effect' (1950) is an unforgettable depiction of the consequences of the startling discovery that the entire universe is shrinking. This is a story that is a lot more famous than its author, I guess.

Not all my picks are so antique. Of my contemporaries Ian R MacLeod has built his reputation largely on a string of intelligent and beautiful stories. A personal favourite is MacLeod's 'Snodgrass' (1992), about the fate of the Beatles in a reality where John Lennon lived on. MacLeod at his best has a kind of emotional intensity that can be almost unbearable. And my good friend Eric Brown has delivered some excellent short stories going all the way back to 'The Time-Lapsed Man' (1988), about an astronaut whose senses suffer an accumulating and devastating time delay.

All of these are listed in no particular order – and I've found no room for Ballard, Bear, Benford, Bisson, Ellison, McAuley, Newman, Niven, Pohl, Priest, Reynolds, Shaw, Sterling, Waldrop, Watson, even Wells, a host of others ... My turn for a rapid exit off-stage.



recurrent: FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

Andy Sawyer

KINGDOMS OF THE ELFIN BY SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER

I read *Kingdoms of Elfin* only a few years after the Ballantine Adult Fantasy reprints of Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* and Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-in-The Mist* and it came as rather a shock to find that it was a "new" book published in 1977, the year before her death: *Lud-in-the-Mist*, in contrast was published in 1926. Sylvia Townsend Warner was, however, born in 1893 and her first novels too were published in the 1920s, making her another of those early 20th century writers who, like Mirrlees, turned to fairy lore to inspire their fiction. Most of the stories which make up *Kingdoms of Elfin*, however, were published in the *New Yorker* in the 1970s (only part of a much larger output: a search on the *New Yorker* website comes up with 164 pieces in total).

Unlike Hope Mirrlees, Warner had a long and productive literary career. However, despite the fact that she is known for her biography of TH White, whose *The Once and Future King* is one of the great fantasy classics and who admired her work, and there are supernatural elements in her early novels such as *Lolly Willowes* (1926) in which the protagonist becomes a witch, Sylvia Townsend Warner's fiction seems remarkably under-appreciated by specialists in the fantastic. The rather sparse website devoted to her work notes quite a number of books and articles devoted to women writers of the between-the-wars era. Her first literary work was as one of the editors of the ten-volume *Tudor Church Music*, and she and her partner, the poet Valentine Ackland, were active in the Communist Party in the 1930s. She is certainly the subject of feminist literary scholarship. But despite an adulatory entry in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, Warner, and especially *Kingdoms of Elfin* seems to have had little attention from the general fantasy readership. She is not mentioned in Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James's *A Short History of Fantasy*, and I can find very few pieces about her in fantasy criticism.

This is rather sad, but she is clearly an author difficult to "place".

There's a sense of brittle sophistication about the stories in *Kingdoms of Elfin* which makes their appearance in a slick literary magazine rather than one devoted to genre fiction appropriate. Warner's Fairy folk are beautiful, heartless, literally soulless, reminiscent of



Tolkien's description of Faerie as a "perilous realm" but somewhat closer to the Fields We Know than anything in Tolkien. The relationship of Faerie to the mundane world is not always consistent through the cycle – some are set thoroughly in Faerie, in others there are intrusions into or from a world which is recognisably ours – and Warner's fairies can choose to be seen by mortals, to interact with them and exploit them sexually and economically. This is a world of glamour, in both its mundane and supernatural senses. The first story, "The One and the Other" tells of a changeling, Tiffany (do we think of Tiffany lamps and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*?) exchanged for an Elfin brought up as Adam. The aristocratic, carefree Fairies are contrasted with mortals who have to labour for their bread (although Fairies themselves have their own class system: worker fairies bustle and scurry about their talks for their betters. While all Fairies are winged, it is the workers who fly; flying, for the aristocratic set, is *infra dig*. Tiffany, brought

up to be the lover of the Queen of Elfhome, Tiphaine (there is obviously wordplay going on here), enjoys a good round of golf and a game of billiards. These are neither Tolkien's Elves, nor the rather cute fairies of Victorian fiction, despite their small stature and wings. "Miss Warner knows what she is talking about", says the jacket blurb to the Science Fiction Foundation's first (Chatto & Windus) edition of *Kingdoms*, but what exactly is she talking about?

"The One and the Other" tells how Tiffany, now old and cast out of Elfin, meets Adam, a savant who believes he can understand death by studying Fairy blood. But Tiffany's blood is poor stuff which "tasted slightly bitter". Tiffany dies, leaving Adam out of pocket but, he reflects, if the body should be got to the anatomists in Edinburgh . . . I shall break about even." This brittle, glistening cruelty is typical of the flavour of the stories. In "Five Black Swans" we read that the succession of the queens of Elfhome is determined by timing the struggles of drowning larks. The *economic* obsession is also typical. How much of a communist was Warner by then?

Warner draws upon literary sources and folklore. In Suffolk, according to "Elphnor and Weasel" (following Ralph of Coggeshall's story of the "Green Children of Woolpit), the Fairies are green. Elfhome is the region around which the Border Ballads of "Tam Lin" and "Thomas the Rhymer" were set. Shakespeare is another source. (Puck is a minor character in a couple of the stories; the name "Hamlet" appears in another ("Castor and Pollux"). There are various Fairy realms. In Broceliande the Queen keeps a royal pack of werewolves and starts a fashion for keeping eunuchs (the unfortunate changelings Ib and Rollo). The Welsh Fairies can literally move mountains by the power of song – and the comic touch offered by the English nurse who crashes her bike as a result of the movement of Mynnedd Prescelly is undermined by the way the story ends in a vision of "the end of our world . . . the end of Elfin". The Elfins of the Low Countries are great traders – and Joost from the community of Zuy goes to Persia in search of the legendary Peri, from whom the Fairy race is meant to have descended.

Less of a melancholy idyll than Dunsany, and perhaps less focussed than Hope Mirrlees' more plotted novel, *Kingdoms of Elfin* is a story-cycle aimed at a literate and self-indulgent readership at whose foibles its barbs are often aimed. It is sometimes hard not to think of American writer Dorothy Parker and her rapier-wit. (Parker's "Tonstant Weader fwowed up" comment on A. A. Milne's *The House at Pooh Corner* in 1928, incidentally, also appeared in the *New Yorker*). In his essay "The Elves of Tolkien and Warner"¹, which discusses some of the stories in the light of comments in Warner's letters, Robert Crossley writes that Warner scrutinizes the Elfins "with a mixture of indulgence and genial contempt" and suggests that one of the motives for the stories was Warner's advancing age (they were begun in her eighties, shortly after the death of Valentine Ackland), and thus, like many encounters with Faerie, they are to do with a sense of loss, "of transmuting experience through the distancing mode of fantasy".

The tone of the stories is saved from absolute heartlessness by this sense of loss which is often evoked in

stories where Faerie and the mundane are contrasted. The final story, "Foxcastle", a poignant tale of a mortal scholar fascinated by Fairy lore and determined to find evidence of their existence, who is captured by the Fairies and as suddenly returned, is perhaps atypical; though even here the ending where the ragged, confused Sutherland is seen as "one of our half-wits" by the humans who discover him, who take up a collection to clothe him but who are quite clearly not going to listen to anything he has to say, is part of Warner's capricious, feline satire.

Perhaps the best example, though, of Warner's dissection of the Elvish psyche (or the psyches of certain types of humans) is where she tells us of the Prince Ingobaldo, consort of the Queen of Schloss Dreiviertelstein, and his collection of chiming clocks:

"[H]e had a quest of his own, an indoor quest for a sublime hour when his collection of striking clocks (five of them musical) would strike the hour simultaneously and the favourite melodies of Thuringia, Bohemia, the Veneto, Switzerland, and Capri mingle as one; and he enjoyed naming cats. There was no child of the marriage."

There's something beautifully pointed about that final sentence.

Despite their appearance in the 1970s, at a time when the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series was revolutionising fantasy readership and the definition of what could be called "fantasy", Warner's stories of Faerie seem to have their aesthetic roots in an earlier time. They may well owe much to Katharine Briggs's classics *The Anatomy of Puck* (1959) and *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (1967), though Briggs (born 1898) and Warner were of the same generation and much of this knowledge and interest could have come from similar sources. (In *Fairies*, Briggs cites *Lolly Willowes* as among the best of the early twentieth-century books featuring humorous or whimsical treatments of witchcraft.) They are very different from modern genre fantasy, although one can see their rather cynical tone and political edginess in some modern favourites.

It would seem (unless I've missed something, and I hope I have), that Silvia Townsend Warner stands in the same relationship to fantasy scholarship as did Hope Mirrlees in that interim period between the rediscovery of *Lud-in-the-Mist* as a Ballantine Adult Fantasy, and citations of her as an influence and major figure by Neil Gaiman and Michael Swanwick. Perhaps if the stories in *Kingdoms of Elfin* had been published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* instead of the *New Yorker*, it would be different. On the other hand, it would be a shame to separate *Kingdoms of Elfin* off from her other work and make her a cult figure.

She seems too fascinating for that.

[Endnotes]

- 1 Published in Carl Yoke (ed.) *Death and the serpent: Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Greenwood Press, 1985).

THE BSFA REVIEW

The Recollection by Gareth L. Powell
(Solaris, 2011)

Reviewed by Abigail Nussbaum

Powell's debut, a space opera with undertones of zombie apocalypse, kicks off at points 400 years apart. In the early 21st Century, failed artist Ed Rico watches his brother Verne fall through one of the arches that have appeared in various locations on Earth. Guilt-stricken over his affair with Verne's wife Alice, he sets out after his brother with her in tow. Four centuries later, down-and-out freighter captain Katherine Abdulov is offered the chance to return to the fold of her shipping concern family by beating a business competitor, Victor - who is also her former lover - to a lucrative shipment. Powell offers a twist on the familiar complications of time dilation by positing that the technology of both the arches and Kat's spaceship transports its users to their target instantaneously, while for outside observers, years pass. This allows Ed and Alice to quickly converge on Kat and Victor, just in time for the novel's titular menace, an aggressive hegemonising swarm out to absorb all life in the galaxy, to make its presence felt.

The novel's plain language and uncomplicated structure, alternating between clearly-delineated action and infodumping passages, make for a quick and effortless read but Powell's reliance on clichés renders it inert. Too often, he reaches for stock phrases - a spatial anomaly "had driven good men insane"; a hotshot pilot has "eyes that had maybe seen too much" - and his characters are also familiar types. Both Kat and Ed are perennial screw-ups who get a chance to make good, and though it is refreshing that one of them is a woman, Powell doesn't do the heavy lifting that would justify their transition to heroism. He frequently tells rather than showing but far worse are the instances in which he tells one thing while showing something contrary. Kat is introduced as a seasoned operator toughened by hard knocks but for most of the novel her heroism is enabled by wealth and family connections. Powell, however, continues to paint her as the plucky underdog.

Powell's reliance on cliché has the effect of calling attention to the way that the plot is stacked in favour of the characters. When Kat fails to rescue her cousin Enid from an explosion, the contrivance by which she survives while Enid doesn't is so blatant that it backfires ("[Kat's] heel hit the lip of the airlock frame. Her hand jerked free of Enid's lapel, and she fell back into the waiting hands of her would-be rescuers."); rather than heroic, Kat seems craven and ineffectual. Even worse are the instances in which Powell's idea of heroism seems nothing short of monstrous, such as the rescue mission that Kat and Victor, now reconciled, mount to a Recollection-infested world whose purpose is to retrieve not survivors - whose dying screams they ignore - but the zygote that Kat placed in storage years ago. Having depicted the deaths of millions of people and the destruction of whole planets, *The Recollection* ends quite cheerfully with the main characters happily paired up and looking forward to further adventures. This is a fairly standard approach in the zombie apocalypse subgenre but Powell's inability to convince us of his heroes' heroism makes the callousness of his resolution impossible to ignore.

Reviewed:

The Recollection

by Gareth L Powell

Reviewed by Abigail Nussbaum

Dark Eden

by Chris Beckett

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

The Weird

Edited by Anne and Jeff VanderMeer

Reviewed by Adam Roberts

Jesus and the Eightfold Path

by Lavie Tidhar

The Joy of Technology

by Roy Gray

Paintwork

by Tim Maughan

Reviewed by Shaun Green

Sky City: New Science Fiction Stories by Danish Authors

Edited by Carl-Eddy Skovgaard

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

Lemistry

Edited by Ra Page and Magda Raczyńska

Reviewed by Dan Hartland

Cyber Circus

by Kim Lakin-Smith

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Triptych

by JM Frey

Reviewed by Mark Connorton

David Mitchell: Critical Essays

Edited by Sarah Dillon

Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Science Fiction: A Very Short Introduction

by David Seed

Reviewed by Tony Keen

Auntie's Charlie: An Autobiography

by Charles Chilton

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

Dark Eden by Chris Beckett
(Corvus, 2012)
Reviewed by Martin McGrath

Chris Beckett's third novel, *Dark Eden*, is a complex thing. It draws, as the title suggests, on the ur-biblical theme of the fall from innocence but it is also the story of an isolated human community culturally (and physically) devolving. It belongs to a sfnal tradition that has its roots in works like *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and *Non-Stop* by Brian Aldiss. From this, relatively familiar, starting point, Beckett teases out an examination of how power, in its variety of forms, is exercised within groups and how history is shaped and moulded by those exercising that power. The result is a psychologically rich, morally tangled and intelligently written novel.

The story opens 163 years after misadventure and disaster stranded two humans, Angela and Tommy, on a very strange planet. Dark Eden wanders without a sun, somewhere between galaxies, but heat drawn from the core supports a compellingly weird and believably intricate ecosystem.

"... and off we went again, under redlanterns and whitelanterns and spiketrees with flutterbyes darting and glittering all round us and bats chasing the flutterbyes and trees going hmmmph, hmmmph, hmmmph like always, until it all blurred together in that hmmmhmmmmmmmm that was the background of our lives."

In this odd place lives Family, around 600 people living in six groups clustered around the site where their shared ancestors first landed. This little outpost of humanity suffers from inbreeding – high proportions of the population are described as having clawfeet and batfaces and there's evidence of mental decline. Their social order has settled into a stiflingly conservative rut, struggling to preserve handed down traditions even as they become increasingly meaningless. They survive as hunter-gatherers, reduced to relying on Stone Age technologies, while old knowledge is reshaped into myth. But change is coming. The rapidly growing Family is stressing its environment, finding food is becoming harder and more time consuming and the broadly matriarchal structure that has sustained their society is under threat.

On one side this threat is manifested in David Redlantern, who wants to respond to the new challenges with greater order and brute force. On the other is "newhair" (teenager) John Redlantern. John recognises that there is a crisis approaching and he sees that things can be done differently but he chafes against the restrictions imposed by the existing order. John becomes the focus for a discontented group of young people, including the insightful, otherworldly Jeff and the confident, smart Tina. John's vision, his sense of personal destiny and his urge for adventure will bring division, disaster and death to Dark Eden. He will also shatter the beliefs that have sustained Family.

Beckett tells this story through a variety of first person point of views; primarily we see Dark Eden through the eyes of John and Tina but a number of other characters get their say. To begin with I found the technique difficult – early in the book the narrative appears straightforward but the shifting viewpoint makes progression choppy. Beckett, however, is in control and his technique pays off handsomely in the aftermath

of John's decision to challenge the family leadership at the "Any Virsry" meeting. John's character is revealed, through the multiple viewpoints, in almost vertiginous depth as it becomes clear that there is nothing straightforward about the story being told.

Dark Eden plays interesting games with the notion of power, which operates at a variety of levels throughout the narrative. As the novel opens, Family is controlled by traditions handed down to the current generations by their ancestors and is dominated by women. Women exercise influence formally through control of key positions but also informally through domestic arrangements, social pressure, their control of access to "slip" (sex) and by knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation, including a "Secret Story" that contains the prescient injunction to: "Watch out for men who want to turn everything into a story that's all about them. There will always be a few of them, and once one of them starts, another one of them will want to fight with him."

David Redlantern is the most straightforward incarnation of male power. His ability to exercise control is based on physical strength and a ruthless willingness to use force to get his way. David's menace is most viscerally demonstrated by the way he, and his followers, threaten women in Family with violence and rape.

John's power is different. John's strength flows from his charisma and ambition. He can attract support and lead people into extraordinary achievements but, in destroying the traditions that underpinned Family, he cannot rely on precedent to reinforce his position. He is, therefore, constantly worried about threats to his leadership. The breakaway group he leads contains a number of alternative loci of power. Tina is no simple love interest, she has her own agenda and she has her own resources for creating alliances with both sexes. Jeff is shamanic and the others find him both disturbing and attractive. His disinterest in the mundane and his intelligence make him independently powerful. And then there's the passive-aggressive Mehmet, who appears most likely to challenge John's position. Beckett handles all these threads with considerable skill and creates a convincingly intricate interplay of characters and mechanisms of control.

He also makes clever use of the processes of storytelling and myth-making. John's reflections on his place in history are used to give resonance to the novel's events and Beckett re-enacts key moments of Family mythology to drive home what is at stake as the plot unfolds. It is a technique that works, adding depth to the novel's narrative and enfolding the reader in a fully realised society with a history and a future that stretches beyond the ambit of the immediate plot.

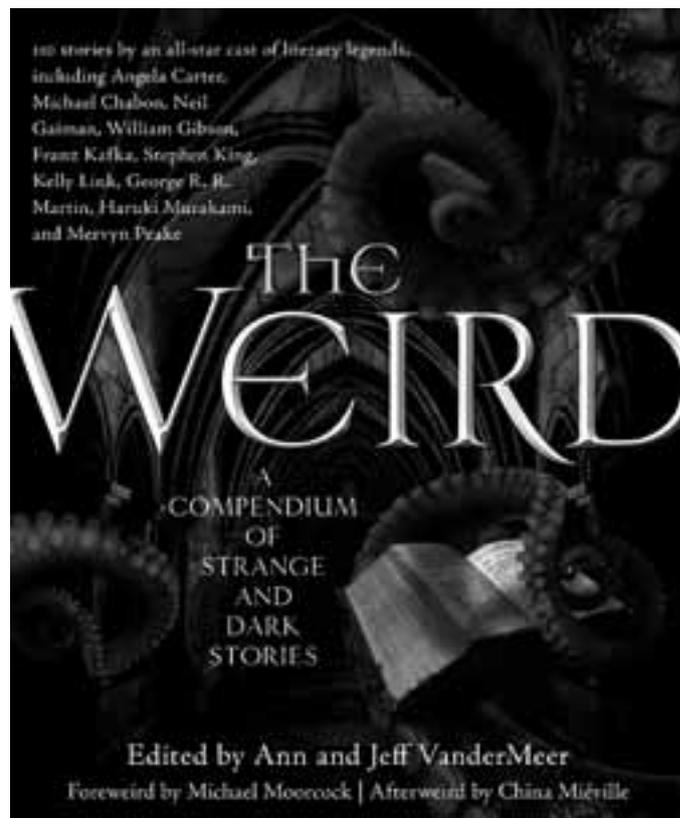
Dark Eden is an impressive piece of writing, stylistically effective and smartly constructed. The world Beckett creates is strange but convincingly developed, his characters have depth and internal lives that stretch beyond the exigencies of the plot and, with these tools, he builds a story that works on many levels.

***The Weird*, edited by Anne and Jeff VanderMeer
(Corvus 2011)**

Reviewed by Adam Roberts

1. At the risk of sounding dismissive (than which, I stress, nothing could be further from my thoughts), I'll start by getting the praise out of the way: this is a major book. Major, as you know, is Latin for 'bigger' and this volume is certainly bigger: bigger in physical size and also in conceptual ambition than almost any other collection of stories I can think of. It is a lovely piece of book-production too; splendid cover-art, good quality paper, readable type; though the large format makes it a tad ungainly for reading on the train and the double-columns are less than easy on the eye. The VanderMeers, she and he, select copiously and wisely from the myriad stories that might be called 'weird'. The introductory notes to each story are well-judged; informative without being intrusive or spoilerish. The selection manages to be representative without simply lumping in a clutch of usual-suspects and there is a pleasingly high quotient of stories from non-Anglophone writers, translated afresh for this edition and - so far as I can judge - translated very well indeed (they certainly read very well). This is a book that invites the descriptor 'definitive.' I'll come back to that, actually, in a minute.

So compendious is this volume (eleventy tales overall and some of those are *quite* lengthy) that it would be quite impossible, in a review like this, to mention every story. Quite apart from anything, doing that 'short-story-collection-review' thing of going through each piece in turn, annotating with a tick or a frowny-face emoticon, has never struck me as a very good way of tackling the task. For one thing, tabulation and point-awarding provides only a spurious sense of judgment. For another (particularly where a collection of weird tales is concerned) it gives the reader's subjective response the whip hand. Weird stories are, by and large, about generating a certain mood in the mind of the reader, trailing tendrils of dread and awe across the tender membranes of the reader's imagination. So, as I worked slowly but gladly through this enormous book, some of the stories registered powerfully with me - Saki's superbly concise fable of religious terror 'Sredna Vashtar', Jorge Luis Borges's incomparable 'the Aleph', Hugh Walpole's eerie murder story 'The Tarn', the beautiful uncanninesses of Elizabeth Hand's 'The Boy in the Tree', Margaret Irwin's eerie 'The Book', the surreal ritualism of William Sansom's 'The Long Sheet' - where others just left me cold. The haunted domicile of Robert Bloch's 'The Hungry House' did not alarm me. With Hagiwara Sakutarō's 'The Town of Cats' I felt I was missing something. Ray Bradbury's 'The Crowd' failed to convince me that people who rubberneck at road accidents have any capacity for profound terror in them. The Ben Okri story 'Worlds That Flourish' struck me as more or less inert. But for those judgements to mean anything you'd have to know quite a lot about the disposition of my mental furniture; your mileage, as the expression goes, will vary. And by any metric, the stories in this collection that work *vastly* outnumber the stories that don't. The mix between well-known and unknown stories is good and sensible decisions have been made; obviously if you're looking to be definitive, Weird-wise, a full-length Franz Kafka novel would be ideal but, given the space constraints, the superb 'In The Penal Colony' is a good compromise. The most obvious omission is Edgar Allan Poe (no Poe? oh no!) but overall the editors err on the side of amplitude. As a whole this collection is much more singing, quivering, trumpeting and humming and much less merely cranky and lame.



So, yes: it is hard to see how this astonishing volume could have been better done. It is the definitive collection of Weird. Which brings me to - two.

2. Definitions. If this is the definitive 'Weird' anthology (and I can't think of a work that has a better claim on that title) then we're entitled to ask in what way it 'defines' what the Weird is. The *word* itself is weird: hovering wrongfootingly between mono- and disyllabic pronunciation, neither quite a leering long 'e' nor a down-and-up dipping spondee. The VanderMeers, in one of the few lapses of taste in the volume, pander to this nominal distinctiveness by calling their prologue and epilogue 'foreweird' and 'afterweird' respectively. Thankfully they draw the line at 'Vanderweird'.

Michael Moorcock's foreweird is a little evasive about what weirdness is ("we all pretty much know what is meant" he says, breezily. And if we don't, he adds, we should read this collection). China Miéville's afterweird is better, although it is coloured, I say pottishly, kettle-black with pretentiousness ("things are looking at us. The Weird is neither holy nor whole-y. It is hole-y." Initial floating comma, as *sic*). The Vanderweirds themselves play straighter with the reader, quoting the patron saint of the New Weird, the old racist himself:

As Lovecraft wrote in 1927, the weird tale 'has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains.' Instead, it represents the pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane - a 'certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread' or 'malign and particular suspension or defeat of fixed laws of Nature' - through

fiction that comes from the more unsettling, shadowy side of the fantastical tradition.

That makes a pretty fair sketch of a definition but it does more than just that: it isolates something that dominated critical theory in the Eighties and Nineties. Freud's 'uncanny' is often invoked in discussions of Gothic weirdness - and with good cause - but this Lovecraftian idea has more in common with Lacan's reconfiguring of Freudian thinking, a unique confection of the brilliantly insightful and the loony. The Lacanian 'Real' is the asymptote of subjectivity and perception, the unattainable always-just-out-of-reach blissful plenitude or Kurtzian horror. Though Lacan has gone a little out of fashion lately, one of his apostles, Slavoj Žižek has published a large body of work that, in effect, argues that politics, cinema, philosophy (anything, really) *is weird*, much weirder than people conventionally think. It's weird because although it - whatever 'it' happens to be - pretends to be talking about the way things actually are, when in fact 'it' can only ever talk about the way things are symbolised, socially or individually. It's the gap between the little-o otherness of the signs and symbols that structure our consciousnesses and the big-o Other of the Lovecraftian 'actuality' to which they refer. The world's weirdness derives, fundamentally, from its otherness; or, more specifically, from the way its otherness is inapprehensible. And by 'the world' I don't just mean (or Lacan/Žižek don't just mean) the things on the other side of the walls of your house. Your own body is other, although you may not be in the habit of thinking of it that way. In Gary Kilworth's brief but marvellous 'Hogfoot Right and Bird-hands' an old lady in a futuristic care-home has parts of her body amputated and engineered with pet-life by the "welfare machine" that attends her (her feet make little piglet-like creatures, her hands birds, her ears together a kind of moth). In part this deft little fable is a metaphorical dramatisation about the way we relate to our pets as extensions of ourselves but what makes it weird is the way it so vividly renders that sense that our own limbs are, in some sense, weirdly *other*.

'Weird', as a word, takes some of its force from its vernacular punch I suppose. It's street. It's everyday ('that's *weird*', people say; where they don't tend to say 'that touches on a dark sublime'). It's a recent addition to the critical vocabulary of the Gothic and post-Gothic. The key terminology was put in place by *eminence goth* Ann Radcliffe all the way back in 1826:

Terror and Horror are so far opposite that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them... And where lies the difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity that accompany the first, respecting the dreading evil?"

'Terror', or even 'horror', translated into a similarly contemporaryese, would be, I suppose, 'scary' and 'gross'. Weird pitches itself somewhere in the middle, between the 'eew!' and the 'eek!'; between, on the one hand, body-horror and its adolescent repulsed-fascination with fluids and goo and, on the other, the tenses, nerve-shreddy, nightmare-provoking stuff. Between, we might say, *Hostel* and Hitchcock. But, having said that: if I had to characterise the VanderMeers' anthology it's vastly more on the latter side than the former. There's a touch of gross here and there but the *nouveau oueirde* that *est arrivée* on bookshelves all over the country is much more about disturbing in a thoughtful rather than a visceral sense.

Weird is a bivalve and its other chamber is called *silly*. This may sound like advice: viz. that writers who wish to achieve 'weird' effects need to steer clear of the bathos and daftness that haunts

the uncanny. But actually I mean something a little more radical: that the silly is, in a strange way, at the heart of why the weird affects us as profoundly as it does. In Algernon Blackwood's 'The Willows', two Englishmen on a canoeing holiday along the Rhine find themselves trapped on an island covered with willows in the middle of a huge stretch of marsh. This is a long story, and for most of its length extraordinarily effective: genuinely unsettling. Blackwood deftly evokes the sense of menace, of some opaque, malign something, not wholly of this world, that sets its will against the wellbeing of our two protagonists. This is in part a matter of skilful manipulation of the atmospherics of the piece: the uncanny landscape, far removed from human habitation; the willow trees moving in the wind as if with their own volition; strange noises, weird lights in the night, odd indentations in the ground. But it is not just atmosphere: there is, lurking within the body of the story, the sense that, howsoever unwittingly, these two travellers have profaned something, that a genuine force exists only thinly veiled by the epiphenomena of our world. So far, so good but in its last pages the story explains the weirdness and, with that unfortunate noise these things make, the balloon deflates. Looked at in the cold, hard light of day, the 'things' that scared us *are* daft. My theory, then, is that those delicious sensations of dread, that unnerving soursweet vibe, depend for their potency precisely upon the half-conscious sense that what scares us could collapse at any moment into the merely silly.

Silly sounds dismissive but I don't think it is (or not entirely). What I mean is: dismissal is itself a matter of extreme importance and one rendered almost life-important where the uncanny is concerned. We cross ourselves, throw salt over our shoulders, mutter warding-away rote-phrases, refuse to name *Macbeth* in the theatre, all by way of hoping to dismiss the weird power that might otherwise afflict us - to banish it, or at least reduce it. I think all I'm saying is that the New Weird is primarily an *affect*, the foliage of which conceals the bare stem of banality. For it is the mundanity quite as much as the oddity of the world into which we find ourselves thrown that unnerves us. And many of the stories here achieve their effects precisely via a sort of modulated monotony. But here's the thing: on the larger scale, the inevitable repetitiveness of so many weird stories, one after the other, corrodes the effectiveness of the mode. The same devices and narrative tricks begin to recur, the underlying methods of the conjuring tricks creep into view.

We might wonder to what extent 'Weird' constitutes a paradox. If something is repulsive, says Mr Common-Sense, then we ought to be repulsed. That it is not as simple as that - that, in fact, our response is balanced in a pleasurable tension between repulsion and fascination - is the justification for a volume like this one. More, we can at least mount the case for the defence of the weird on the grounds of its psychological verisimilitude. An attempt to reduce the mind to a matrix of rational decision making layered over the evolutionary residuum of nervous coordination for drives and appetites will miss something. The 'something' is not, I think, spiritual, least of all eternal (though of course many people believe precisely that it is). But the 'something' is *unheimlich*, uncannily not at home in the home of our skulls, uncanny in part precisely because of its hard-to-reduce supplementarity to the mundane business of mention, conscious or unconscious. In his *Novum Organum* Francis Bacon noted that "the mind of man is far from the nature of a clear and equal glass, wherein the beams of things should reflect according to their true incidence; nay, it is rather like an enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture." Rather like this superb collection.

***Jesus and the Eightfold Path* by Lavie Tidhar (Immersion Press, 2011), *The Joy of Technology* by Roy Gray (Pendragon Press, 2011) and *Paintwork* by Tim Maughan (Amazon Createspace/ebook, 2011)**

Reviewed by Shaun Green

Small presses and authors have always employed a variety of techniques to release prose and poetry into the world. Back in the Nineties, self-publishing became affordable and many wannabe novelists turned to it as an alternative to the big publishers. Unfortunately finding good or even competent - self-published authors felt like searching for needles in rotting haystacks and most reviewers took to avoiding the form entirely, exacerbating the difficulty of identifying what was worth reading. This still holds true today to a great extent. Five years ago, one popular option among small presses was to release limited runs of signed hardbacks. Good sales were guaranteed thanks to small but dedicated fanbases and book collectors hoping to make a killing on some future JK Rowling. We still see this approach today, although it is reduced. Over the past few years, chapbooks have enjoyed something of a renaissance. In New York, an annual chapbook festival has run since 2009 and the date is likely no coincidence; since the financial crisis that began in 2008, the idea of books that are cheaper to produce and purchase is alluring.

This brings me, in a roundabout fashion, to Lavie Tidhar's *Jesus and the Eightfold Path*, Roy Gray's *The Joy of Technology* and Tim Maughan's *Paintwork*. These three books represent a cross-section of the approaches to publishing I've described above. Tidhar's novella is a limited-run hardback from a respected small publisher, priced high at £10. Gray's *The Joy of Technology*, under 40 pages long and priced at £3, fits the definition of a modern perfect-bound chapbook. Finally, Maughan's collection of three short stories is self-published via Amazon's CreateSpace print-on-demand service and also available as an ebook.

Jesus and the Eightfold Path began life as an irreverent brain-nugget: the story of kung-fu Jesus. The final result is less cheeky than you might imagine, fusing classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West* with the life of Christ as recounted in the *New Testament*. Plenty of liberties are taken, of course; in Tidhar's tale Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing ("Monkey, Pigsy and Sandy") do not travel to India to protect the Bodhisattva on his quest to retrieve sacred scrolls but instead voyage to Judea to find the child who is the reincarnation of the Buddha. They are the three wise men who witnessed the newborn Christ, although in this version they eschew excessive wisdom, preferring to indulge vices: food, fighting, women, the usual heroic stuff. The story spans the life of Christ from before birth to shortly after his death, touching upon many of the most memorable Biblical fables – overturning the tables of the moneylenders, now with added kung fu; his love affair with Cleopatra, which was definitely in there somewhere; and ruining the livelihood of local farmers by filling their pigs with demons.

The book is a characteristic example of Tidhar's writing and storytelling; it repurposes the mythic with a deft touch that retains some degree of familiarity yet introduces enough difference to produce a stark sense of contrast. It also has his characteristic lightness of tone juxtaposed with gravitas and respect for his subject matter. It's rarely wildly funny but produces plenty of wry smiles. Readers who enjoy laughter lines will find this book does actually crease them up.



However, it inevitably feels episodic; a side-effect of re-telling the life of Christ in under 70 pages. We leap from one set-piece to another and Jesus rarely feels like more than the fulcrum around which the story pivots; even his kung-fu skills provide only intermittent thrills. Still, Monkey, Pigsy and Sandy prove to be fun characters, Roman-Judean agent Josephus Flavius helps lend the last act some thematic weight and the conclusion rings true to its Judaic and Buddhist roots. As a story it could have been longer but that may have led the concept to overstay its welcome. As a result we have this enjoyable compromise.

Roy Gray's *The Joy of Technology* follows a young British teenager whose father is taking him over to the continent for his birthday. Ostensibly they're off to see a football match but his dad has other plans: they're off to a titty bar! Except this is skiffy so it's actually a "Prap Club", a sort of simulated sex show. A simultaneous plot strand follows the owner of said club and the consultant he's hired to improve the show he's putting on; the debut of the new act will coincide with young Dennis Platt's visit.

The Joy of Technology is amateurishly written, replete with unconvincing dialogue: "I'm the new manager of 'Due Freuden der Technik' a prap club and I am hoping you can help me improve our show." The world never feels like more than a thin film surrounding the characters we're reading about and the setting doesn't convince. The only futuristic elements are a few bits of tech: the aforementioned "prap" and Dennis's



“Specx”, goggles for playing games and watching videos. SF short stories don’t demand extensive worldbuilding but they do require internal consistency and the paucity of futurism and the unexplored technological consequences of tech like the prap sticks out like a sore bum. The story is also a rather ugly articulation of the sex divide: its only female characters are three support structures for orifices and a young girl whom Dennis fancies. As for the men, the adults are sleazy scumbags and Dennis is a typically shallow horny teenager. Dennis is at least somewhat sympathetic – until the end of the story when he says something very ugly to his crush. It’s obviously intended to re-frame what’s gone before as dehumanising but, thanks to limited foreshadowing, the story is left feeling like a confused sequence that is 90% Bad Sex Award titillation and 10% awkward moralising. Probably much like how sex with a Mormon feels.

One moment I did find amusing was a crowd of punters with their dongs encased in VR get-up shuffling into the prap show. The mental image is hilarious and the abashed docility of the crowd is the one point where the story knowingly presents these men as pathetic. Also worthy of note is the meta-joke inherent in how the two plot strands meet at the story’s, ahem, climax. Overall though, this chapbook reads like a first draft of an at-best average story.

Tim Maughan and *Paintwork’s* three short stories may be familiar to devotees of Bristol’s SF scene. The titular first story follows an augmented reality street artist as he sets up a sequence of AR installations themed around his home city only to see them sabotaged. It’s a strong start to the anthology. Maughan draws on Bristol’s vibrant street art culture and its urban environment to paint a story that feels wholly convincing, from the environment and tone through to the characters that inhabit it and the art commenting upon it. The conclusion is somewhat unexpected with a cynical edge that fits the story’s theme.

‘Paparazzi’ follows an aspiring yet struggling documentary filmmaker who is hired to covertly film a top online gamer’s avatar. It’s a story immersed in modern gaming culture with

the massively multiplayer online game it presents feeling like something that could actually exist (plus it features a sly jab at the fascinating *EVE Online* so bonus points for that). Its narrative twist can be seen coming but is a cynical, world-weary delight all the same. The final story, ‘Havana Augmented’, moves from the UK to Cuba, following some smart teens who jury-rig a pirated game into a VR experience with their native Havana as its arena. After videos of the game leak online the Cuban authorities get involved and soon capitalist sharks from the world outside are circling. The story again nails the sense of fun and jury-rigged invention that can characterise modern gaming. Havana, too, felt convincing, with even minor characters feeling like individuals with interior lives that we only glimpse.

This was my first encounter with Tim Maughan’s fiction but it won’t be my last; his tales convincingly integrate futuristic gadgetry into their setting and his characters and their culture are built around these solid foundations.

There is little linking these three books in subject, theme or market positioning outside of the obvious genre connection. What they represent is a variety of approaches toward getting fiction into the hands of readers. They are all tailored towards the niche end of genre fiction readership and they utilise different approaches to get there: either through presentation as a quality, durable hardback to be kept and cherished; a cheap pocket-sized chapbook that can be passed on to a friend once read; or in balancing supply precisely to the level of demand. Success of individual books aside what I find most interesting here is what this strategic diversity for delivery to market suggests about the genre small press: that it is flexible and that it is exploring different possibilities. This, to me, neatly encapsulates what the best SF can be.

***Sky City: New Science Fiction Stories by Danish Authors*, edited by Carl-Eddy Skovgaard
(Science Fiction Cirklen, 2010)
Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller**



Since 2007, the Science Fiction Cirklen, Denmark's oldest fan organisation, has published a short story anthology comprising the best entries submitted to its annual short story competition. Carl-Eddy Skovgaard has now drawn on the first two anthologies, published in 2007 and 2008, to create *Sky City: New Science Fiction By Danish Authors*, a 'best of the best' collection intended to introduce Danish science fiction to an international audience.

Denmark is a small country with a population of 5.5 million people and has a correspondingly small community of active science fiction readers and writers. Niels Dalgaard's 'An Extremely Short History of the Danish Science Fiction Short Story', also included in the collection, suggests that even today in Denmark science fiction leads a semi-underground existence. The Danish publishing industry has a long history of either ignoring science fiction or else preferring to publish those foreign SF novels which appear to be mainstream. Ray Bradbury's work was widely serialised in Denmark in the 1950s and hugely popular as a result but was not presented as science fiction, while in the 1960s, the most successful science fiction writers were 'mainstream' authors who were able to use science fiction tropes as part of a broader process of literary experimentation. Brian W Aldiss and JG Ballard were particular, perhaps inevitable, influences but after this brief flourishing, science fiction once again went underground. Dalgaard's article suggests that there are few if any Danish SF writers currently working professionally. It has been left to the SF fan community to produce translations of foreign novels that use overtly science-fictional tropes. Likewise, without local professional markets for sf short fiction, fans instead publish their short fiction in their own small magazines.

Given that the Danish literary establishment is apparently so conservative in its tastes, one might expect a fan-based literary scene to be more experimental, more exuberant even, in its approach to writing sf, yet reading *Sky City*, I was surprised at how old-fashioned most of the stories were. In his preface, Skovgaard is emphatic that he has included stories that "are on the border of what you normally call main stream science fiction" but having worked my way through stories about futuristic cities under threat from out-of-control nanomachines, a time traveller coming back to encourage a researcher to work on time travel, gene engineering, tentative political allegories about physical difference, androids, confrontations with alien creatures and other tropes all too familiar to readers of English language science fiction, I found it difficult to agree. Instead, I felt the stories rested so firmly in the Anglo-American SF mainstream, it was as though the last twenty five years of SF literature had never happened.

This puts me in a quandary. As an outsider it is easy to sound like a literary imperialist, criticising Danish writers for

effectively not being more like English or American writers. At the same time, what might distinctively Danish science fiction look like? If I am to believe this anthology, it is self-consciously backward-looking and heavily influenced by Anglo-American SF (as Skovgaard acknowledges in his introduction). This, so far as it goes, makes some sense: given that the Danish literary establishment ignores popular cultural tropes, to embrace that which the mainstream frowns upon may be considered subversive, even though it will inevitably seem regressive to the foreign reader. However, it seems that this slavish adherence to old-fashioned SF is about as distinctive as Danish SF gets. Skovgaard notes that some stories are set in Denmark but doesn't pursue the idea any further. For the reader, it is like slipping back through time. I wouldn't advocate literary globalisation but I am genuinely surprised that these writers aren't showing more awareness of contemporary Anglo-American SF in their work, particularly when the translation activity carried out by the Science Fiction Cirklen clearly indicates that they are reading it, in English and in Danish.

Instead, we are left with a collection of peculiarly old-fashioned SF stories, many of which simply aren't that good. Skovgaard observes that they have all been chosen because they "express something" but this is a criterion so weak as to be meaningless. Too many of these stories are poorly thought through, often doing little more than setting up a situation, at which point the story ends; the writers rarely dig more deeply into the idea. Even the more experienced and skilful writers, such as Ellen Miriam Pedersen, seem reluctant to break away from the familiar. 'Leading, Feeding' combines alien autopsy with a vaguely New Wave sensibility, and feels dated as a result. Richard Ipsen's 'The White Bear' is a futuristic story of people-trafficking but its science-fictional content is incidental. Patrick Leis's 'The Tourist', while fluently written, rehashes an already weary time-travel motif without significantly improving it. However, most of the other writers appear to have had only a few stories published professionally and are not working extensively or exclusively in the SF genre. This may in part account for the retro feel of so many of the stories. On top of that, the stories suffer further because the English translations are often stilted and awkward. Some translations have been produced by the authors themselves, some by other authors in the anthology, several by the scholar Niels Dalgaard and still others by people whose role in the production of the anthology is otherwise unclear. The translations feel workmanlike but lack editorial polish. As a result, reading these stories is not a comfortable experience.

This anthology is certainly interesting for what it represents in terms of a comparatively small group of writers reaching beyond national boundaries and presenting their brand of science fiction to the world and, of course, it is good to know that they *do* exist. Nonetheless, given the quality of the fiction in *Sky City*, one wonders how successful such an enterprise will be. Danish science fiction may emerge into the wider world but, if *Sky City* is representative of Danish SF writers' work, it suggests they have some way to go in establishing a literary brand that is both distinctively Danish and essential reading abroad.

***Lemistry*, edited by Ra Page and Magda Raczyńska
(Comma Press, 2011)
Reviewed by Dan Hartland**



Is there a more canonical outsider in SF than Stanislaw Lem? The Polish writer died in 2006 at the age of 84, lauded from all corners as a visionary and one of the genre's most significant voices. Yet his most famous work, *Solaris* (1961), only received a direct translation into English this year (the previous 1970 edition is from the 1966 French translation). He is also a man who solicited significant backlash against his trenchant criticisms of science fiction in *Fantastyka i*

futurologia (1970) and who within fandom remains possibly most noted for having his honorary membership of the SFWA rather publicly revoked.

All this and more is discussed by Andy Sawyer in his excellent bibliographical essay, 'Stanislaw Lem – Who's He?', which is among the best reasons to dip into Comma Press's new celebration of Lem's work. "To a large extent," writes Sawyer, "Lem is anti everything most science fiction stands for. There is no Gernsbackian optimism, no Campbellian foregrounding of the importance of the scientific method, none of the visionary hope of a Clarke or a Stapledon". *Lemistry* compiles a picture of a writer most interested in questions of identity and reality, for whom the McGuffin or Big Dumb Object is beside the point: it might save humankind from the alien but it won't save us from ourselves.

Lemistry opens with a short introduction from the collection's assiduous editors, Ra Page and Magda Raczyńska, before launching into three new translations of short works by Lem himself. The first of these, 'The Lido' is probably the strongest: the story of a wealthy man living in a future in which virtual reality is indistinguishable from the 'real world', it is a first person narrative taken up largely by a therapy session. "A programmer could probably tell you more and do it better," the therapist admits when the narrator asks him for help in separating from the real world a virtual reality in which he might be kept hostage by thieves. The story ends with the narrator sitting alone in a prison cell, guilty of a crime but uncertain whether he has committed it for real or merely virtually.

The themes present in these original stories – though it is impossible to enclose a writer as multifarious as Lem in 50 pages of far from major work – are refracted in the second two-thirds of the book by various contemporary writers. This is an attempt, say the editors, to play "a posthumous Lego game of artistic influence". Thus Toby Litt writes in 'The Melancholy' of an Application, a sort of operating system sent to pilot ships to the stars and housed when at home in a constantly regenerating biological body, and asks why any form of life, or stream of information, might put up with so transient an existence; Adam Roberts, in 'Pied Piper', riffs on the broad, pointed humour of Lem's 'Invasion From Aldebaran' (the third of the original stories included here), inventing an unfortunate future in which every kind of monster imaginable – including

Satan himself – is defeated only by ridding mystery from a newly passionless world; and Sarah Schofield, in 'Traces Remain', presents a space station served by androids undergoing a very Lemian revolution when the human managers prove themselves unsuited to their tasks.

Other stories play with Lemian forms rather than content. Frank Cottrell Boyce's review, as Stanislaw Lem, of a fictional book by Frank Cottrell Boyce plays metafictional games of which the famed reviewer of fictional fictions would approve. Likewise, Piotr Szulkin's 'Snail' feels, in a translation by Danusia Stok, like the most authentically Lemian story in the collection: on an isolated space station built decades ago and maintained by a single human, an inspector arrives to review the plant's effectiveness; in the course of an intense, intelligent, unusually eloquent conversation, minds and ethics are swapped and changed and big, personal decisions are made. Meanwhile, in the three contributions from professional scientists, tribute is paid to Lem as an unusual kind of sfnal seer, who saw past the detail of scientific research to the ethical questions which lay beneath.

Indeed, Lem may have rejected particularly those pieces which assume it is the science fiction writer's job accurately to predict future developments. In some ways, then, this collection tries too hard to capture its subject: the themes its writers select seem oddly limited, concentrated on identity, on robots and on Philip K Dick. In 'The 5-Sigma Certainty', for instance, Trevor Hoyle's Sixties reporter interviews the reclusive Dick and is told that "Stanislaw Lem isn't a person, it's a committee of Soviet bureaucrat-hacks". That Dick really did believe this and that Lem really did write books about the fluidity of identity doesn't necessarily mean that a story in which the reporter subsequently visits Poland and discovers a story-producing machine called a Linear Electrotyping Modulator, operated by the man in Lem's author photograph, speaks any better to Lem's work.

Brian Aldiss offers a brief little curio about human interaction and adultery whilst Wojciech Orliński, again translated by Stok, produces a divertingly noirish tale set in a future of seamless virtual reality in which players of fully immersive MMORPGs take 'lemians' into the artificial environment as reminders of their real world existence, to confirm to them they have emerged from a dreamworld by, as the therapist in 'The Lido' ultimately recommends, touching and seeing something only they could know existed outside of the game.

All of which seems an oddly circular and strangely literal route for a celebration of a writer as confounding as Lem to take. This is a slim volume – not 300 pages – and it is full of excellent writing and many individually entertaining stories. It has a lovely translator's note – "The relationship you have with a book seems straightforward... however we are also there" – and a very thoughtful bent. But it seems better to conceive it as a celebration of an aspect or two of Lem's work rather than anything approaching a totalised view. If this book is a Lego house built from the bricks of Lem's influence, the man himself remains, as ever, partially outside.

Cyber Circus by Kim Lakin-Smith
 (Newcon Press, 2011)
 Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

In 1935, Charles Finney introduced us to *The Circus of Dr Lao*, which was a big influence on Ray Bradbury, who told us that *Something Wicked This Way Comes* in 1962. Since then, the circus has become a staple of fantastic writing. It's easy to see why: the circus is colourful and mobile, it is an escape from the mundane and a threat to the status quo, it is a home for the beautiful and the tawdry, the freak and the clown and the acrobat. Because a circus is never static, its arrival is always an intrusion; and because a circus performer must perform be different from what we see around us every day, then it is easy to cast those performers as heroes or villains, as promise or threat (and sometimes both at once).

However, because so many writers of the fantastic have followed the examples of Finney and Bradbury, the various forms and possibilities of the circus have become overly familiar. And, to be honest, Kim Lakin-Smith does nothing new with the form in *Cyber Circus*; she even sets it in a flat, hardscrabble landscape that echoes the Kansas of Finney's novel. Of course, we're not actually in Kansas any more; the setting is a sort of parallel world known as Sore Earth, a name that tells us everything we need to know about the setting. Sore Earth has been transformed into a replica of the Kansas dustbowl by Soul Food, a plant food that ended up rendering the soil infertile. Now the grim communities that survive are entertained by Herb and his Cyber Circus, the whole edifice a living airship.

Why it is called 'Cyber Circus' is beyond me, there is nothing cybernetic about it, no hint of a computer anywhere in the book. Rather than the cyberpunk the title might suggest, this is unadulterated steampunk, full of the sort of gizmos that have become de rigueur. Hellequin, our hero, for instance, is a HawkEye, a one-time member of a military elite who had his eye replaced by a brass device which seems to whirr and click with a great show but to little obvious effect. Opposed to our heroes in their super-dirigible, there is D'Angelus with his brass tunnelling machine.

D'Angelus runs a brothel but his star attraction, Desirous Nim, has run away to join the circus; now he wants her back. What follows is a sort of slow motion chase punctuated by bursts of violent action that occur, regular as clockwork, every couple of chapters. This regularity is part of the problem with the novel. Each episode starts with some revelation about a character or a setting that had not even been hinted at before, this leads to a confrontation which ends in a fight in which the heroes of the Cyber Circus always seem outclassed yet mostly emerge unscathed. And then the sequence begins afresh. There are coincidences galore: when Hellequin, our hero, is kidnapped by a former comrade on behalf of one of the Blood Worms of Zan City (a harvester of body parts), it turns out to be exactly the same Blood Worm who had previously done work on both Desirous Nim and Pig Face, one of the circus roustabouts. This sense of plotting by numbers, together with a cast that is more freak than character, is somewhat offset by a rich, occasionally over-ripe, writing style. You can settle back and enjoy the lushness of the prose even if you don't believe a word of what you are reading.

But the short novel *Cyber Circus* is accompanied by a novelette, 'Black Sunday', that manages to get right everything



that the novel gets wrong. The writing is much more controlled, the plotting is consistent, even the minor characters are convincing; and it works principally by not trying to be anywhere near as fantastical as the novel. The setting this time actually is Finney's dustbowl, though in Oklahoma rather than Kansas, but there is no circus to bring freakishness and colour into this staid and monochrome world. The town of Bromide has been dying for some time, most of the population have left and those who remain have mostly settled into a life of bitchiness, suspicion and lust after Carrie-Anne Nightingale. Carrie-Anne lives with her aunt, Josephine Splitz, whose garden is the only productive one in the area, partly because of Jos's ingenious irrigation system and partly because of the skills of their black housekeeper, Julie.

Jos, meanwhile, has devised a burrowing machine which, with the aid of Carrie-Anne's love interest, Virgil Roberts, she is using to seek water deep under the dry land. This is the science fictional element in the story (and a direct link with *Cyber Circus*) but it is largely irrelevant to what is going on since this intense story is primarily about the narrowness of a rural community in hard times, fuelled by racial prejudice and sexual jealousy. When things boil up to their devastating conclusion, it feels like a natural development given the character and the situation of these people. It ends with a mystery that may provide an origin story for one of the more minor and more irritating characters in *Cyber Circus* but it is a stronger story as a stand-alone.

Cyber Circus is over-wrought and underworked; it could have done with a sterner editorial input and greater attention to detail. There are suggestions of a potentially interesting writer at work here but this isn't the novel to realise that potential. 'Black Sunday', on the other hand, is quite clearly the work of a writer worth paying attention to, someone with something to say and in control of her material. We can only hope that 'Black Sunday' rather than *Cyber Circus* is the harbinger of what is to come.

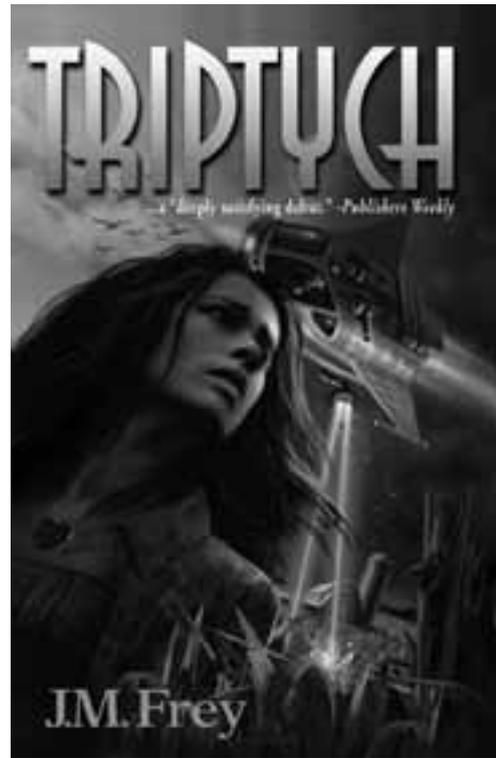
***Triptych* by JM Frey
(Dragon Moon Press, 2011)
Reviewed by Mark Connorton**

T*riptych* is a novel about a relationship (both emotional and sexual) between two humans and an alien. It's told in three sections – each from a different character's point of view – but felt more to me like a book of two parts: the part centred on the alien, which is pretty good, and the rest of it, which is less good.

In the good part, alien Kalp has arrived on Earth with other survivors in an evacuation vessel, escaping the destruction of his home planet. The aliens are accommodated in a military base and work with humans, teaching them advanced technology in return for assistance acclimatising. The early sections of Kalp's story strongly evoke his homesickness, grief at the loss of his family and his attempts to adapt to life on Earth with its uncomfortable furniture and alien humans. Although there is some effort to make Kalp's subjectivity different to humans' (mainly through his hypersensitivity to things like noise, electric currents and human skin secretions), he is something of a *Star Trek* alien (i.e. a human with a few extra bits stuck on) in both appearance and culture. One major cultural difference is that Kalp's society is based on triple marriages and Kalp's two spouses died in the planetary disaster. He is assigned to work with Gwen and Basil, respectively a linguist and an engineer, who are already a couple. They are friendly and welcoming to Kalp and let him stay in their spare room when they realise how miserable he is in the barracks. Kalp finds himself becoming attracted to them and the three eventually form a relationship. These early stages of the characters' relationship are insightfully and meticulously described but then there is a rush as all three get married, are outed and become the focus of violent xenophobia.

In the less good part, first Basil then Gwen's mother get the point of view. A conspiracy to destroy the alien liaison institute is discovered and Kalp is murdered (this takes place on the first page of the novel so it isn't a spoiler). Basil and Gwen go back in time using alien technology to prevent Gwen's murder and end up meeting her parents. Even a summary this brief suggests that this part of the book is nothing like the rest of it and it's a shame that Kalp's story is rushed and compressed to fit in what turns out to be a rather hokey space opera. The time travel is unconvincing and a key plot resolution reminded me fatally of every single episode of *Scooby Doo*. Gwen's mother's POV is interesting in that it explores her shock at having to come to terms with her adult daughter before baby Gwen is even talking but is marred by the decision to keep her as the viewpoint character throughout when we still need reams of exposition from Basil and Gwen. This results in many scenes with her basically hiding behind a door and eavesdropping on them in a manner that veers from creepy to comical.

The book has been praised for its depiction of sexuality and I was eager to read it for that reason. While I am always glad to see genre books that handle such topics in a thoughtful and unusual manner, *Triptych* turned out to be something of a disappointment on this front. Although his biology is apparently not analogous to that of humans, Kalp identifies as a "he" for convenience, giving rise to the same problem that Ursula Le Guin encountered in *The Left Hand of Darkness* many years ago: if you constantly refer to an alien with non-human gender as a "he" then readers can't help thinking of it as "male". Frey doesn't even try to subvert



our expectations as Le Guin did with lines like "The King was pregnant."

Secondly, it is hard to understand the human characters' motivation for entering into the relationship. We are totally lacking an insight into Basil and Gwen's thoughts and experiences and this unbalances the book. The sections where the relationship begins are all in Kalp's perspective and he admits himself that he is probably fixating on the humans out of loneliness. The section where the threesome decide to formalise the relationship and therefore out themselves to the world is rushed over (in order to fit in the *Scooby Doo* time travel section, sigh) and we have no idea why Gwen and Basil go through with it which is a serious omission given that many are still afraid to out themselves as being in a gay relationship and homosexuality is much less socially problematic in the UK (where the book is set) than fucking space aliens.

However the most disappointing thing about the book is the eagerness with which the status quo is restored after Kalp is murdered. Basil and Gwen grieve for him but show no sign that his passing has left a hole in their lives comparable with the death of a spouse and that the three-way marriage was so fulfilling for them that they would consider taking another partner in future. I was reminded of gay exploitation books of the Fifties and Sixties in which a straight person is seduced into an irresistible gay relationship but reverts to thankful heterosexuality when the gay character inevitably dies. For a book that supposedly explores new types of families, the book ends with the most traditional scene of patriarchal heterosexual family life imaginable – a man asking another man for permission to marry his daughter, in the absence of said daughter. It's a shame that such a promising premise was marred by such a superficial and rushed treatment and the need to try and fit in too much plot and I hope that Frey manages to write a book in future that is as consistently good as the best parts of this one.

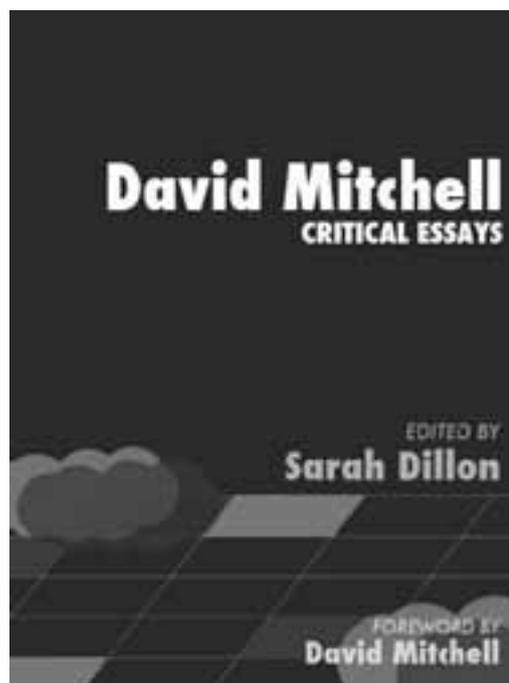
**David Mitchell: Critical Essays, edited by Sarah Dillon
(Gylphi Books, 2011)
Reviewed by Niall Harrison**

One of the contributors to this engaged and engaging volume mentions, in passing, that David Mitchell has been described as the Thomas Pynchon of his generation. Whatever you think of the literary accuracy of such a comparison, from an sf perspective there is an extra-literary coincidence, namely that both are among the few “mainstream” writers to have been nominated for a Nebula. The loss of *Gravity’s Rainbow* to Arthur C Clarke’s *Rendezvous With Rama* has famously been held up by Jonathan Lethem as a missed opportunity, a fatal wrong turn for the field. The situation is different now – after all, Michael Chabon has won his share of genre awards, including a Nebula – but among other things this collection makes a good case for why you might still see *Cloud Atlas*’s loss to Lois McMaster Bujold’s *Paladin of Souls* as a disappointment.

The introduction and nine essays are essentially the proceedings of a small conference on Mitchell’s work, held in St Andrews in 2009. The composite impression, quite accurately I think, is of a playful, creative, forceful writer, one able to make respectful and challenging use of a variety of generic modes, including sf and fantasy. And although quite densely argued, all the contributions manage to convey the intelligence of their authors and make useful arguments, if in a couple of cases rather long-windedly. Kathryn Simpson’s ‘Or something like that: coming of age in *Number9Dream*’, for instance, articulates the ways in which that novel challenges conventional Bildungsroman narratives in exhaustive, exhausting detail. Will McMorrans’ ‘*Cloud Atlas* and *If On A Winter’s Night a Traveller*’ is detailed but uninspired, save for the (new to me, at least) observation that the frequent description of *Cloud Atlas* as a matrioshka (as for example in my own review in Vector #238) is misleading: in fictive terms, each successive story contains its predecessor, not the other way around.

The most exciting contributions are those which crosslink the three posts of Mitchell’s work: postmodernism, postcolonialism, and postgenre ...ism. Baryon Tensor Posadas’s ‘Remediations of ‘Japan’ in *Number9Dream*’ is a meticulous argument that the book “performs an uncanny interruption of the fantasy of techno-Orientalism” by, on the one hand, foregrounding the interaction between internal and external images of Japan in cyberpunk, and, on the other, positioning itself as a doppelganger text to the fantastika of Haruki Murakami. The essay performed that welcome trick of enabling me to see a novel that didn’t inspire me first time around with fresh eyes. Nicholas Dunlop’s ‘Speculative fiction as postcolonial critique in *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*’ brilliantly executes a similar analysis for those two books, referencing the work of Tzvetan Todorov and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr to show how productively Mitchell interlinks the discourses of sf and fantasy to provide “a bifocal critical perspective on the ideological contradictions of the present”.

Not all the contributors are as fluent in sf criticism as Dunlop. Caroline Edwards’s ‘Strange transactions: utopia, transmigration and time in *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*’ is a good piece that convincingly argues Mitchell challenges systemic, totalising notions of utopia and suggests process-based, limited utopian moments as an alternative. But her discussion of Mitchell’s use of speculative elements situates him with Jim Crace, Maggie Gee, Doris Lessing and Jeanette Winterson – a fine list of writers,



but one that could productively be expanded with some genre names. In contrast, William Stephenson’s ‘Moonlight bright as a UFO abduction: science fiction, present-future alienation and cognitive mapping’, which closes the volume, demonstrates the value of a broad, inclusive perspective on Mitchell’s work. His essay includes the most persuasive argument I’ve seen that Mitchell’s construction of a fictive reality that includes sf but is not defined by it is the construction of an unusual version of Carl Freedman’s cognition effect and that this plus Mitchell’s constant interlinking of his stories is a vital part of what gives his stories - even the ostensibly non-speculative ones - their distinctive texture. In Stephenson’s terms, what is a novum in one story may be a datum in another and vice versa, ensuring that neither the sf world nor the “real” world are allowed to become places of “comforting certainty” (232).

It’s a shame that the timing of the conference and this volume mean that mentions of *Black Swan Green* and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* are either cursory or entirely absent. Editor Sarah Dillon’s introduction gamely attempts to address this deficiency with a lucid explanation of how Mitchell’s megatext – what he calls his “macronovel”, indicated by the transition of characters between different books – encompasses these two works, which are on the face of it more conventional and realist, and binds them to the rest of his work, but it can’t stop the collection feeling a little partial at times. (Simpson’s essay, for instance, does mention *Black Swan Green* but could clearly have used that text a lot more as a point of comparison on Mitchell’s approach to coming-of-age stories.) Such are the risks of discussing a living writer, however, and Gylphi Books and Dillon are to be commended for what they have achieved here. It doesn’t seem that Mitchell is going to leave his more experimental side behind any time soon: a footnote reports that the next entry into his macronovel will be “a collection of short stories set between 1969 and 2039”. But this collection reminds me how much I look forward to following Mitchell, wherever he goes.

**Science Fiction: A Very Short Introduction by David Seed (Oxford University Press, 2011)
Reviewed by Tony Keen**



2011 has been a good year for overall surveys of the science fiction field. There was Mike Ashley's *Out Of This World: Science Fiction But Not as You Know It*, which accompanied the British Library exhibition. The end of the year saw the online beta release of the third edition of the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, possibly the most wide-ranging treatment of the subject that will and can ever exist. And there is *Science Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* by David Seed, probably best known as the editor of

the *Blackwell Companion to Science Fiction*.

The *Very Short Introduction* series is Oxford University Press's ever-growing collection of short (usually around a hundred and fifty pages) pocket-sized volumes, intended to give a brief introduction to a subject. I have used them myself for topics in which I need to get a grounding but am ignorant, such as literary theory and art history, and recommend them to students who need to get a basic grounding in the subject areas they are about to study. I have generally found them useful, though occasionally they don't actually do what they say they will on the cover.

Science Fiction is not one of the latter category and happily lives up to the standards of the series as a whole. Seed treats the field thematically, rather than chronologically. Chapters address space voyages, aliens, technology, utopias and time travel – all the classic tropes, in other words – before a final chapter which attempts to take an overview of the field (though Seed discusses other people's definitions, he sensibly avoids trying to define 'science fiction' himself – as he says, "that way madness lies").

There is considerable overlap with Ashley's book (and indeed the *Blackwell Companion*) in terms of the themes that are worth considering and works that are addressed, especially when Seed is dealing with the earlier manifestations of SF (though *Science Fiction* lacks *Out Of This World*'s commitment to recognising the non-anglophone manifestations of the genre). There's certainly an idea that both Ashley and Seed are working around a commonly understood notion of what science fiction is. That's fine if one is roughly on the same page as Seed but if one has a significantly different perspective then *Science Fiction* might prove frustrating.

The nature of this book, of course, means that few individual works are covered in detail. Even major works – such as Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* or William Gibson's *Neuromancer* – only get a paragraph. Other works have to make do with a sentence at most.

The seasoned scholar of SF will probably find little in this book that they did not know before. But there may be the odd nugget of new information and I certainly found that new connections in the genre were being forged in my mind thanks to reading this book. For the scholar, it may well be useful to have this short overview, to point them in the direction of further investigation. For the student new to the discipline, it makes an excellent starting point.

**Auntie's Charlie: An Autobiography by Charles Chilton (Fantom Publishing, 2011)
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer**



Call me fanboy. Perhaps the greatest thrill of kicking off the recent British Library exhibition on science fiction was shaking hands with Charles Chilton and being able to tell him that it was all his fault. Now his autobiography has been issued by Fantom Publishing in a limited edition hardback (with a mass-market paperback to come in 2012) and it is another thrill to be able to read it.

Chilton, of course, was responsible for the radio serial *Journey Into Space* which began in 1953 and created or confirmed thousands of science fiction fans (including this one). Among other achievements, it was the last time a BBC radio broadcast attracted a larger audience than television and the adventures of Jet Morgan and his crew were followed by a generation who had perhaps come to science fiction via Dan Dare rather than Hugo Gernsback. When Chilton was asked to follow up his *Riders Of The Range* Western serial with a science fiction one, he knew little or nothing about SF but as part of his research joined the British Astronomical Society and met Arthur C Clarke and Patrick Moore. *Journey Into Space* kicked off with 'Operation Luna', the story of the first moon landing, and part of its appeal must have been that it was still believable that this was largely a *British* moon landing. Exciting it certainly was but there was also a strong 'take care of your planet' message and the fact that the invasion of the Martians in 'The World In Peril' was to be implemented by means of infiltrating the then-new technology of television must have been a deliberate joke from someone who had made his mark in BBC radio.

Journey Into Space was only one programme Chilton was responsible for in a long career with the BBC (known in its glory days, in case non-British readers are wondering about the title, as 'Auntie'). Chilton does tell various anecdotes about the programme but the book explores much more of his life, starting with his birth in 1917, son of a father who had been killed in World War One and a mother who herself was to die when he was six. He describes his childhood and early career vividly and unsentimentally. He talks about his days as a BBC producer, when he was responsible for Western and music programmes and is fascinating on how jazz (on which he became something of an expert, playing guitar in his own bands) was so much *resisted* by the BBC's hierarchy. Chilton's compilation of programmes based upon British and American folk and popular song were, in their field, as groundbreaking as *Journey Into Space* was in the science fiction arena. He also produced early *Goon Show* programmes. While *Auntie's Charlie* may be something of a niche production and we learn comparatively little about Chilton's achievement in science fiction, it is well worth reading for the wider background and, for serious fans of Jet Morgan and co., it's a must.



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